THE FIRST RUNG

How the experience of a first job shapes what comes next

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SMF Social Market Foundation

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FOREWORD

First jobs are one of those formative experiences that stay etched in our minds.

Your first boss, colleagues and payslip are synonymous with the start of adulthood and independence.

Too many young people are not getting the chance to make these memories yet. With nearly a million 16-24 year-olds not in education, employment or training, national attention is rightly focused on improving access to jobs and getting people ready for them. The Government’s recent announcements to give children earlier access to work experience and contact with local employers are an important part of that effort.

Yet getting people into work is clearly only part of the picture. It’s crucial to ensure people succeed when they get there.

PwC has previously researched why people are falling out of the UK workforce and how to stem this flow, and we’re proud to be a Vanguard Employer in Sir Charlie Mayfield’s Keep Britain Working Programme. This time we wanted to support the Social Market Foundation to look specifically at first jobs and how they affect future opportunity.

Not everyone can land a role with a clear pathway, let alone their dream job. Getting a foot in the door is often rightly the target. But we wanted to see if regardless of the type of job (be it graduate or non-graduate, and whatever the sector) there are common hallmarks that influence career trajectories. The results are striking – including a clear association between supportive, confidence-building first jobs and higher future earnings.

The Government-backed review into Young People & Work highlights how good work can give people purpose, structure and contribute to the country. And when good work starts with someone’s first job, its impact can build over the course of their working life.

For business, the benefits are clear - a more engaged and skilled workforce, and a stronger economy through higher earnings and spending power.

I hope this research and the recommendations give employers pause for thought and practical ideas to make a difference. For individuals, particularly those at the start of their careers, I would emphasise that while the research finds clear patterns, individual paths will always vary and there are different routes to success. Every experience can teach us something, including what to avoid or look for next time.

I’d like to thank the Social Market Foundation for leading this insightful project and all the people who have participated. It couldn’t be more timely.

Marco Amitrano

Senior Partner of PwC UK

KEY FINDINGS

The first job is a crucial point in a young person's working life

- First jobs are often young people's first real introduction to the labour market. They are where young people learn workplace norms, build confidence and develop skills. But this is also a vulnerable transition point: a poor first experience can leave young people unsupported, stuck, or at greater risk of disengaging from work altogether.
- This is particularly important in light of the growing crisis of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET). A good first job can help attach young people to the labour market; a poor one can weaken that connection.
- Young people may also need additional support in their first role. Employers, educators and policymakers increasingly recognise that poor mental health, lower confidence and weaker workplace readiness can make the transition into work harder.
- First jobs matter to businesses and the wider economy too. They are a crucial part of how employers build the skills and talent they need for the future. As jobs evolve and expectations of new hires rise, employers cannot simply expect young people to arrive fully work-ready: first jobs have an important role in developing capable, adaptable and productive workers.
- In a labour market where employers receive hundreds of applications from similarly qualified candidates, the skills, confidence, networks and evidence of progression gained in a first job may become increasingly important.
- Crucially, it is not just about getting in, but whether that role allows them to get on, too. For social mobility, getting into work is only part of the story: whether a young person can develop and progress once they are there matters too. For employers, that same progression is how entry-level recruits develop into the skilled and experienced workers they need.
- We surveyed 3,000 and interviewed 200 UK adults aged 20-40 to understand what their experience of their first job was, and how it has impacted on their career trajectory.

Not all first jobs offer the same route forward

- **First jobs vary substantially in quality**, in both graduates and non-graduate roles**.** Some offer training, structure, confidence, networks and clear routes to progress. Others offer work, but little support or development. Some are stable but limiting, while others leave young people underutilised or unclear where to go next.
- **Most first jobs built skills and confidence, but fewer offered clear progression.** More than three-quarters of respondents said their first job taught them important skills, but only half said there were clear progression routes, and a substantial minority felt overqualified and underused.
- **Training was common, but often informal.** Only a third received formal internal training, a quarter received a formal performance review or appraisal, and only a small minority had access to formal mentorship.

We identify five main first-job pathways

This report develops a typology of first-job pathways (from most to least developmental):

- **Accelerator pathways** provide strong support, stability, development and progression.
- **Stepping-stone pathways** are imperfect but useful platforms for moving forward.
- **Underemployment pathways** provide some value, but leave people feeling overqualified or underused.
- **Comfort-trap pathways** are stable or tolerable but offer limited growth.
- **Low-mobility pathways** provide low support, weak development and limited routes forward.

What most clearly distinguishes these pathways is not just how enjoyable or secure the job is, but whether it helps a young person build the necessary skills and experience to move forward.

Different pathways are associated with vastly different career trajectories and salary outcomes

- People whose first job was an accelerator pathway earn an average of £55,000 by age 35, compared with £28,000 for those whose first job was a low-mobility pathway and £30,000 for those in comfort-trap pathways (prior to controls for an individual's background or prior experience etc).
- The gap is not simply because accelerator pathways start people on higher salaries: they are also associated with substantially faster year-on-year earnings growth, putting workers on a steeper earnings trajectory over time.
- Jobs with formal mentorship are associated with 7.7% higher later earnings, even after accounting for background, prior experience, starting pay and other first-job characteristics. Respondents scoring higher on whether their first job built confidence and readiness for more senior work had 23.7% higher later earnings.

The first job is not really the starting line

- Many young people enter the first-job market with prior experience that is likely to give them an advantage in accessing the workplace. Respondents who had completed an internship before their first proper job were more than twice as likely as those with no pre-work experience to be in an accelerator pathway, at 22% compared with 9%.
- But these career-accelerating opportunities are not equally built into different routes into work. Graduates were much more likely than non-graduates to have undertaken some form of pre-work activity, at 86% compared with 71%, and more than three times as likely to have completed an internship, at 29% compared with 8%.
- Internships and other structured pre-work experiences are often designed as part of graduate recruitment pathways, but this highlights a wider gap: young people taking non-graduate routes are less likely to have equivalent

structured opportunities to build experience, networks and routes into progression before starting their first proper job.

Access to good first jobs that enable progression is socially patterned

- Graduates, respondents from more advantaged backgrounds and private-school respondents were more likely to access stronger first-job pathways. They were more likely to enter accelerator or stepping-stone pathways, while non-graduates and those from working class backgrounds (C2DE) were more likely to start in low-mobility or comfort-trap pathways.
- Access to good first jobs were also highly variable by place, both in terms of region and in terms of urban/rural divides. Respondents in major cities were more likely to be in accelerator and stepping-stone pathways, while those in villages or rural areas were more likely to be in low-mobility or unclear pathways.
- Disabled respondents experienced some of the weakest first-job outcomes. Almost one in four were in a low-mobility pathway, compared with around one in ten non-disabled respondents, while they also reported weaker management support, belonging and progression.
- This means inequality does not end once someone gets through the door: young people already in work also have unequal access to the training, networks and progression infrastructure that determine what happens next.

The first rung can compound inequality

- Good first jobs can help young people build momentum. They provide skills, confidence, workplace knowledge, professional contacts and clear progression pathways.
- Poor first jobs can slow people down before their career has properly begun. Those who might benefit most from high-quality first jobs are often more likely to start in roles with weaker support, fewer networks and less progression.
- The policy challenge is not just getting young people into work, but making sure their first job gives them somewhere to go. Good first jobs need structured training, supportive and inclusive management, fair pay, clear progression routes, and workplaces where young people can access the support and flexibility they need to belong, learn and move forward.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our research shows that first jobs can play an important role in shaping young people's future employment, skills and progression. **Good first jobs share a number of common hallmarks: they provide supported development pathways, opportunities to learn and develop new skills, clear routes for progression, and the chance to build confidence, networks and workplace experience.** But access to these jobs is uneven, and too many young people start work in roles that offer little development or route forward.

Our recommendations therefore focus on two priorities: **making sure more first jobs provide meaningful development** and progression, and **making access to those opportunities more equitable**. This means both raising the quality of entry-level work itself and tackling the financial, educational and geographic barriers that determine who is able to access the best opportunities.

For government:

Establishing a Good First Job Guarantee

Our research shows that not all first jobs offer the same route forward. Some act as accelerators, providing support, training, confidence and progression, while others offer little development or route forward. To address this, we recommend:

- **Government should work with employers, trade unions, combined authorities and youth organisations to establish a voluntary Good First Job Guarantee.** This should be a voluntary standard setting out the minimum developmental offer that young workers should receive in their first proper job.
- **A Public Service First Jobs Programme should be established,** for young people beginning entry-level roles in public services and organisations delivering a public mission. Building on the approach taken by UK Year of Service, the programme would combine paid employment with a shared package of wraparound development support.
- **Government should use the new Social Value Model to reward suppliers that provide high-quality first jobs.** As the revised model is implemented from January 2027, the Good First Job Guarantee should provide a practical benchmark for the quality of relevant entry-level jobs, apprenticeships, internships and placements – ensuring procurement rewards not only the number of opportunities created, but whether they provide support, development and routes to progression.

Enabling access to the workplace

- **Schools should be adequately supported to offer high-quality work experience placements.** The government's commitment to offer two weeks of work experience to all pupils is welcome - but it is vital schools are given support to ensure those placements are high quality, including being resourced to provide help to students who cannot rely on family contacts to find a placement.

- **A 16–19 Student Premium should be introduced.** Extending targeted disadvantage funding beyond age 16 would allow colleges, sixth forms and training providers to support attendance and attainment, but also successful transitions into sustained education, apprenticeships, training or good work.
- **Government should stick to their manifesto pledge and ban unpaid internships.** Unpaid internships are one of the clearest examples of unequal access to early labour market opportunity. They provide experience, networks and signalling value, but are much easier to take up for young people who can rely on family financial support. All unpaid placements over 4 weeks in length should be clearly banned, with action taken under existing minimum wage legislation for shorter placements.
- **Government should consult on requiring employers with 250 or more staff to collect and report socioeconomic background data** across their workforce and early-career recruitment pipeline. Better data would help employers understand who applies, who is hired, who progresses and who gets stuck, but any new requirement would need to account for the practical challenges of collecting data that relies on voluntary disclosure. A consultation should establish how reporting can be standardised, proportionate and sufficiently robust to identify inequalities in recruitment and progression.

Providing support for SMEs

- **Government should also introduce a First Job Training Credit,** to subsidise paid training time, backfill costs and management training. This support would help SMEs release young workers and managers for training.

For combined authorities:

Supporting SMEs to provide better first jobs locally

- **Combined authorities should establish Local First Job Networks** to provide shared first-job infrastructure for SMEs. Funded through devolved skills budgets, these should help smaller employers access recruitment support, training, mentoring, manager development, disability and adjustment support, peer networks and progression guidance that they may struggle to provide alone.

INTRODUCTION

Policy debates about young people's transitions into work tend to focus on two big questions: whether young people gain the skills and qualifications they need, and whether they are able to find employment. Both matter for social mobility, but also for the UK's wider economic performance and employers' ability to build the workforce they need. Between education and long-term career success sits another crucial – and often overlooked – stage: someone's first proper job.[i]

For many people, their first proper job outside of compulsory education is their first real introduction to the labour market. It is where they start to learn workplace norms, build resilience, and begin to think about their longer-term career ambitions and how they might work towards them. It is also often where they may first build key workplace skills, receive support from managers, develop professional networks and gain confidence that allows them to progress and move forwards.

But not all first jobs provide this. Some give young people training, structure, encouragement and clear progression routes, while others offer work without the supportive structures around it. Some leave people feeling underused, overqualified or unsure where to go next, while others provide a platform on which to build a strong career. For some, this is where they build momentum; for others, where they stall.

This matters to employers as well as young people. First jobs are where organisations help new workers turn what they have learned into practical workplace skills, understand how organisations operate and develop the technical and human skills needed to take on greater responsibility. Employers cannot simply assume that another part of the system will produce experienced recruits for them. At a time of changing skills needs and concern about workforce readiness, first-job quality is both a social mobility and workforce development question.

This report seeks to answer three key questions:

1. What impact does someone's first job have on their later career progression?
2. What are the characteristics of a good first job?
3. Who gets access to these roles?

Using new polling of 3,000 UK adults and qualitative AI chatbot interviews with 200 respondents, we identified five types of first job – accelerator, stepping-stone, underemployment, comfort-traps and low-mobility pathways. We model the financial returns associated with different first-job experiences and the extent to which later progression is associated with employer practices such as professional development support. We then examine access to different first-job experiences by region, socioeconomic background, educational pathway and other demographic characteristics. Finally, expert interviews with policymakers, academics and employers informed case studies of employer best practice and recommendations for government and business to create a new social contract for youth employment.

[i] Defined in this research as "your first main job after finishing your studies - not casual, holiday, or part-time work you did while studying."

CHAPTER ONE – POLICY BACKGROUND

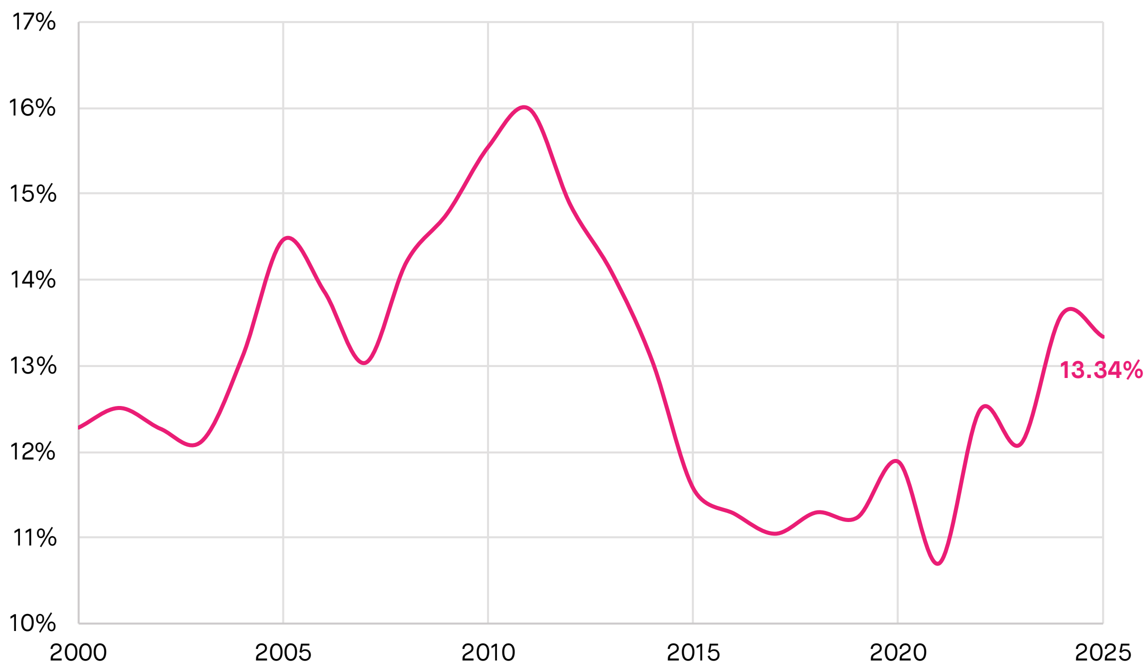
> *"We appear to have a **major structural problem in the youth labour market**. Employers feel that they are not getting what they need from the education system, while at the same time showing much less interest in hiring young people, developing them or keeping them on." - Academic*

There are growing concerns about young people's experience – or lack thereof – in the labour market

In May 2026, the Department for Work and Pensions published the interim report of the Independent Review into Young People and Work, led by the Rt Hon Alan Milburn.[1] It set out a stark warning: nearly one million people aged 16 to 24 in the UK are not in education, employment or training – around one in eight young people – and the review estimated the cumulative annual cost to the country at £125 billion. The report warned that Britain faces not simply a short-term youth unemployment problem, but a deeper crisis of youth detachment from the labour market. Nearly 60% of young people who are NEET are economically inactive, meaning that they are not looking for work, and 6 in 10 people who are NEET have never had a job, up from four in ten in 2005.

Data released shortly after the interim report showed that the NEET rate in England remains high, at over 13% for the calendar year 2025, a slight dip from 2024 but at levels otherwise not seen in thirteen years (Figure 1). For 18 to 24 year olds, the group most likely to be fully exposed to the labour market, the NEET rate stood at 16%.

Figure 1: Percentage of young people aged 16-24 who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) in England, by year.



Source: Department for Work and Pensions NEET data release

Disengagement starts early: students who are persistently absent from school are 3.9 times more likely to end up NEET, and in England persistent absences have increased more than 70% since the pandemic, accelerating.[2] Alongside this, the number of young people out of work due to poor health has grown by 70% over the last decade. Mental health has become one of the key barriers to participation in education and work for young people: one in five of all NEETs reported a mental health condition, more than two and a half times the rate in 2012.[3]

The consequences of this are profound, both to the country and to the individual who is NEET. Time spent detached from education or work can damage confidence, health and future income, with the Interim Report estimating that today's 24 year old NEETs who re-enter the labour market could still lose up to £300,000 in earnings over their lifetime than if they had not been NEET.

Crucially, the review argued that this is not a problem necessarily with young people's ability or motivations: 84% of 400 NEETs surveyed by the Review stated that they did want to find a job, education or training opportunity. However, it found that "the first rungs on the old career ladder have weakened": there are fewer entry level opportunities, entry-level jobs are becoming more demanding, recruitment is becoming more remote and automated, and apprenticeship starts for young people have fallen by over 40%.[4] In short, it is harder for young people to get a job than before and the jobs themselves are often harder too, especially for those who also have a mental health condition, are neurodiverse, or report other health and wellbeing challenges.

This diagnosis is central to the motivation for this report. If young people's first steps into work are becoming harder to access, more demanding and less supported, then the quality of first jobs becomes even more important. For many young people, a first proper job is their first real introduction to the labour market. It is where they learn the habits of work, build confidence, develop skills and begin to carve out a career path for themselves. For those at risk of becoming NEET, or of moving in and out of insecure work, that first experience can be make-or-break. A good first job can help attach a young person to the labour market, providing structure, confidence and support. But if someone's first experience of work is unsupported, underpaid, insecure, badly managed or offers no sense of development, it may weaken rather than strengthen their connection to the labour market.

> *"The workplace has become more complex and hybrid, with different ways of communicating and interacting. **We need to be much more intentional about guiding people through all of that**." - Occupational psychologist; early careers specialist*

Alongside this, concerns from both educational institutions and employers that young people are not 'work ready' has been growing. In interviews undertaken for this project we heard from dozens of experts reinforcing the belief that young people need much more structured support than previous generations. We heard from further education providers who were having to change the structure of their courses to reduce independent learning, academics concerned about the rise in poor mental health and the impact on the extent to which young people are ready for independent work, and employers reporting a substantial lack of confidence and resilience in young hires. Research from the Institute for Public Policy Research in 2025 found that fewer than half of young people felt ready to progress into work after education.[5] There is a clear imperative both to improve early support for these young people to boost their confidence moving into the labour market, and to ensure that there is appropriate support ready for them in that crucial first role.

> *"Employers say they want young people with experience, but too often they do not want to provide the work experience themselves.* ***Each employer is effectively expecting somebody else to make young people work-ready."*** *- Academic*

Structural changes in the labour market make the quality of someone's first job even more important

Alongside broader concerns about the rise in the number of young people who are NEET, there are also several significant structural shifts in the labour market that are both reducing young people's confidence in work and making that first job experience even more important.

As highlighted by the review, competition for roles is rising. Analysis by the Institute for Learning and Work of the most recent labour force data found that for every vacancy there are now 5.5 people wanting to work, up from 4.7 in the previous year. The contraction in employment opportunities seems to be particularly high in sectors that are known for often offering young people that first route into work: previous ONS analysis found that young workers age 16-24 made up 10% of the total workforce, but around half of workers in some hospitality occupations.[6] In retail and hospitality, there are more than 150,000 fewer people employed than in the year prior, a drop of 3.7% and 1.7% in employment respectively. Vacancies in health and social work have also fallen by 6.7%, and across all sectors movement in the labour market has slowed: fewer people are leaving roles, and therefore fewer roles are opening up to potential new hires.[7]

Alongside this, there is growing concern, albeit with mixed evidence, that AI may reduce the number of entry-level roles available to young people, particularly in sectors where junior staff have traditionally carried out routine, administrative or analytical tasks. If those tasks can be partly or fully automated, employers may have fewer incentives to hire and train junior workers in the same way as before.

Some early evidence supports this concern. A recent study of UK labour market outcomes found that firms with higher exposure to large language models reduced employment, with the effect concentrated in junior positions. The authors found that highly exposed firms reduced total employment, with particularly sharp reductions in new hiring and in junior roles, especially in technical and creative occupations.[8] Similar concerns have been raised in the US, with one Stanford study finding that early-career workers aged 22 to 25 in the most AI-exposed occupations experienced 16% relative employment declines, even when controlling for other factors.[9]

However, the evidence is still mixed. Some employer-side evidence points to a more gradual reshaping of entry-level work, as opposed to immediate large-scale automation. The Institute of Student Employers, for example, found that most employers expected entry-level hiring to remain broadly stable over the next three years, with no major AI-led job exodus expected within their period.[10] It is also hard to distinguish between the potential impacts of AI on the labour market alongside other forces such as the pandemic, working from home, changes to minimum wages and employer national insurance contributions, as well as other factors raised in the NEET review such as youth mental health.

> *"Those kinds of graduate-scheme experiences do not exist in the same volume anymore.* ***We have therefore got to be very intentional about how we support young people*** *- but it has to work for businesses that are reorganising themselves dramatically as well." - Social mobility policy expert*

AI is also changing the recruitment process itself. Indeed, the NEET review interim report raised concerns about the automation of recruitment processes, with young people commonly applying to dozens of jobs, often using AI themselves, that they would then be rejected from before a human has even read their application. On the employer side, utilising AI to help sift candidates makes sense, as the volume of applications received per vacancy booms. In 2024, the Institute for Student Employers reported that the average employer received 140 applications per graduate role, a 59% increase on the previous year.[11]

> *"Employers increasingly expect applicants to be fluent in using AI effectively and ethically, while simultaneously placing more weight on communication, judgement and other human-centred skills.* ***Yet there are substantial class inequalities in what employers recognise as interpersonal skill*** *and in who gets access to opportunities to demonstrate it. [...]* ***There is still a tendency to imagine that interpersonal and leadership skills are developed by captaining a school sports team****. But working-class students may have spent years in paid work or combined several jobs with their degree. That also develops maturity, resilience, communication and the ability to manage competing demands." - Social mobility policy expert*

Whether AI is or isn't causing a reduction in junior hiring, experts interviewed as part of this project were in agreement that it is certainly shaping employer expectations of young workers. Interviewees commonly raised concerns that as more menial tasks could be automated or supported by AI, that employers are increasingly wanting young hires to be more work ready – capable of doing the things that AI cannot, such as confident and empathetic human interaction, and balancing a number of different roles and tasks within one job – and experienced than before.

> *"We are seeing the early career landscape really change as a result of AI... Expectations from employers are definitely rising, in terms of what a graduate should be able to do and their workplace readiness. It's entirely different than a few years ago****. In some ways some of these firms are expecting graduates to come in and look like someone who has already been there for three years, because AI can do a lot of the earlier work****." – Social mobility policy expert*

There is also a risk that rising expectations around AI could reinforce existing inequalities in access to good first jobs. Young people are unlikely to enter the labour market with equal exposure to, or confidence in using, these technologies. Sutton Trust research has already identified an emerging socioeconomic divide in how AI is being adopted in schools: teachers in private schools are considerably more likely to have received formal AI training than those in state schools, while within the state sector training is more common in schools serving more affluent intakes. If familiarity with AI increasingly becomes part of what employers mean by being ‘work ready’, unequal opportunities to develop these skills before entering employment could give already advantaged young people another head start.[12]

Some have also suggested that entry-level roles may become less focused on rote “grunt work” and more focused on using judgement, communication, creativity and AI-enabled productivity from the start.[13] But this creates a new risk: if AI removes some of the routine tasks through which junior workers traditionally learn the basics of work, then employers may need to be much more intentional about training, supervision and development.

Degrees no longer allow graduates to walk into high paying roles, but those without one face far narrower options

At the same time, the relationship between education and work is becoming more contested. For several decades the mass expansion of higher education was underpinned by the belief that a degree would provide a reliable route into secure, well-paid employment, and that expanding places would help reduce socioeconomic disparities in access. However, over the last few years there has been increasing public and political scrutiny around whether the financial returns to university degrees are holding up.

In 2023 the former Conservative government under Rishi Sunak launched a crackdown on “rip-off university degrees”, stating that “a minority of the courses on offer leave students saddled with debt, low earnings and faced with poor job prospects”.[14] In the same year the then Education Secretary Gillian Keegan stated in the Commons that there were “pockets of higher education provision where the promise that university education will be worthwhile does not hold true”, citing an “unacceptable” number of students who are not able to find a good job after graduating.[15] While the recent Labour Government has been broadly more positive about the value of universities, the former Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson set out five key priorities for universities, with one being for institutions to play a stronger role in improving outcomes for disadvantaged students.[16] She also announced a crackdown on franchised provision that “treated students as a route to fast cash, not as people investing in their future”.[17] Recent data from the British Attitudes Survey found that the belief that people who go to university end up being better off financially has fallen from 50% of the public to just 36% in fifteen years, while the belief that a university education isn’t worth the amount of time and money it takes has risen from 14% to 34% over two decades.[18]

Recent analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that the graduate premium does seem to be holding up: the average graduate can expect to be around £100,000 better off over their lifetime from going to university, and that this is fairly steady over time. However, it also found that around a quarter of graduates can expect to be financially worse off, and that there are substantial variations by subject studied.[19] Interestingly, the Department for Education press release contained an accompanying quote from the Minister for Skills, Jacqui Smith, saying "As well as the variation by subject, too many franchised and poor-quality courses do not offer a good deal to young people [...] my message to those thinking about university: choose carefully. Don't walk into a degree by default."[20] A degree many improve someone's chances, but there are both increasing public confidence and growing political rhetoric that it no longer guarantees easy access to high-quality first jobs. Furthermore, although the mass expansion of higher education has allowed more people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to go to university overall, they are still less likely to get a degree than their more wealthy peers. And while university attendance increases their chances of being socially mobile, they are still less likely to become high earners than graduates starting from more advantaged backgrounds.[21]

This is particularly important because the graduate labour market is becoming increasingly crowded: more and more young people are graduating with degrees, and this is expected to rise until at least 2030 due to a demographic boom in 18-year-olds.[22] At the same time, employers in some sectors report very high numbers of applications per vacancy, and where AI tools may make it easier to produce polished CVs, cover letters and applications. Together, these factors are making it increasingly difficult for employers to tell people apart at application stage. In this context, employers are increasingly looking for reassurance that young people can apply what they know in practice. This includes whether they have workplace experience, communication skills, confidence, judgement, resilience and the ability to work well with others. Some universities are already responding to this by placing greater emphasis on employability, work placements and professional experience within degree programmes. For example, the University of Manchester recently announced that they are planning to offer real-world work experience to all students, in every subject area.[23]

For those without a degree, however, the challenge is different. Non-graduates often face a narrower set of routes into secure, well-paid work that enables professional progression. And while a lot of focus has been on the graduate job market and the one in ten NEETs who hold a degree, it still holds true that the biggest protective factor against becoming NEET remains having a higher level of education.[24]

Apprenticeships should provide one of the clearest routes for young people into work who do not wish to go to university, but starts for young people have fallen substantially, weakening an important pathway into skilled employment. In England, apprenticeship starts among under-19s declined from around 130,000 in 2014/15 to approximately 75,000 in 2024/25 (compared to 289,200 18-year-olds accepting a university place in 2025)[25], while the proportion of all starts taken by under-25s fell from over 57% to just under 49%.[26] Traditional non-graduate routes into stable work have also contracted. Manufacturing employment has declined markedly since the 1960s, with manufacturing's share of UK employment falling from around a quarter during the inter-war period to an average of 9.5% between 2000-2016.[27] Workers without higher-level qualifications are now more likely to be found in sectors including wholesale and retail, accommodation and food services, administrative support and construction, while hospitality and social care are among the UK's largest low-paying sectors.[28] [29] These sectors can provide valuable first jobs, but many roles are characterised by relatively low pay and limited opportunities for sustained pay progression. Training provision is also uneven: the government's Employer Skills Survey found that employers in the wholesale and retail sector saw the largest decrease in total training expenditure between 2017 to 2022.[30]

This is not only an economic issue, but a political and social one. The divide between graduates and non-graduates has become one of the most important dividing lines in British politics and society. In many ways, educational pathways now appear to be creating sharper divides than some traditional measures of class background alone. While education previously did not have a significant influence on voting patterns, since 2018 the graduate/school leaver dividing line has become one of the most predictive factors in voting behaviour, and more recently the share of graduates in a constituency was the biggest predictor in their share of votes for Reform.[31] [32] More broadly, our research investigating the impact of assumed knowledge in youth transitions into the workplace found that whether their parents had gone to university or not often had a bigger impact on their understanding of education and employment systems than other measures of socioeconomic disadvantage.[33]

The result is a difficult dual challenge. Graduates may find that a degree is no longer enough to distinguish them in a highly competitive labour market, while non-graduates may have fewer high-quality routes available in the first place. Both dynamics increase the importance of the first proper job. For graduates, it may be where they prove themselves beyond their qualification. For non-graduates, it may be one of the few routes through which they can build skills, confidence, networks and progression outside higher education.

Not just getting young people into any work, but getting them into good work

Taken together, these trends point towards a more competitive and more demanding early labour market. Young people are entering work at a time when more of their peers are highly qualified due to the mass expansion of higher education, when employers are receiving growing numbers of applications, and when AI may make it easier for candidates to produce polished CVs and cover letters at scale. When employers are receiving hundreds of seemingly well qualified applicants per vacancy, the first job may become an even more important way for young people to distinguish themselves.

A degree or qualification may help someone get considered, but there is a declining confidence in whether that is enough on its own. Employers are looking for evidence that young people can apply skills in a workplace, communicate well, work with others, learn quickly and adapt. For young people, it is often their first job in which they learn and demonstrate these competencies, and build up the examples that help them compete for the next role. But this only works if the first job provides a genuine foundation, one that is supportive, provides training, professional development opportunities and progression pathways.

While it may be tempting in the face of rising NEETs to focus on getting young people into just any role, there is a risk that a bad first job could also have negative labour market consequences: that the academic literature on underemployment show that negative early labour market experiences can stick. Young people who spend time NEET or unemployed face worse later outcomes,[34] and graduates who begin in underemployment are more likely to remain underemployed years later.[35] In that context, "any job" is not always enough. A poor first job may provide short-term employment, but if it offers little support, weak development and no route forward, it risks potentially weakening that tie between a young person and work.

> *"There is much more of an understanding that **it's not just about getting in; it's about getting on** and achieving true belonging in the workplace." - Social mobility policy expert*

The importance of focusing on good work – and not just any work – is increasingly recognised in wider policy debates. The 2024 Labour manifesto committed to creating "more good jobs", reforming employment support and making work pay so that more people could benefit from the "dignity and purpose of work".[36] In their wider *Plan to Make Work Pay* they argued that work should provide security, fair treatment and decent wages, and that stronger rights were part of both raising living standards and improving productivity.[37] The Starmer Government's focus on good work was taken forwards into the Employment Rights Bill, now the Employment Rights Act 2025, which included a broad package of employment reforms including day-one employment rights, protection against unfair dismissal, stronger family leave rights, ending zero-hours contracts and expanding rights to flexible working arrangements.[38] The Government said that the reforms were intended to help more people stay in work, improve job security, boost living standards and support employers to create a fairer, more modern labour market.[39]

They had also pledged to end unpaid internships, although they stopped short of an outright ban, instead opting to focus on updating and expanding National Minimum Wage guidance and increasing enforcement, with government citing concern that an outright ban could have unintended negative consequences for work experience and genuine educational opportunities. [40] However, previous work by the Sutton Trust has argued that by limiting an outright ban to four weeks in length, government can both crack down on unpaid internships while also still protecting short, genuine educational opportunities.[41]

This focus on good work has continued with Andy Burnham's arrival as Prime Minister in July 2026. In his first speech outside of Downing Street he argued for a "new economic model", and a state that "invest[s] in people's success, rather than paying for failure". He specifically said that the government would do more to help young people into work by changing the education system and giving them more support, including more mental health support, and separately pledged a "massive expansion" of apprenticeship places for young people.[42] [43] This is consistent with Burnham's record in Greater Manchester, where as Mayor he backed the Greater Manchester Good Employment Charter (see Box 1).

This wider policy agenda marks an important shift: away from treating employment as sufficient in itself, and towards recognising that work needs to provide security, dignity, fair pay and a route forward. This agenda has particular importance for young people entering the labour market for the first time. For them, good work is not only about conditions in the present; it is about whether their first job helps them build the confidence, skills, networks and progression that allow them to stay attached to the labour market and move on. A poor first job risks doing the opposite, particularly for young people already vulnerable to disengagement, poor mental health or weak labour market attachment. The challenge, then, is not simply to get young people into work, but to ensure that their first experience of work is good enough to function as a foundation.

Box 1 – Example of good practice: Greater Manchester Good Employment Charter

The Greater Manchester Good Employment Charter provides a model for how local government can encourage employers to improve job quality across an entire city-region. Developed jointly by the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, local authorities, trade unions, employers and employees, it is a voluntary membership and assessment scheme open to organisations of any size and across the private, public and voluntary sectors.

The Charter defines good employment through seven characteristics: secure work; flexible work; fair pay; employee engagement and voice; inclusive recruitment; effective people management; and health and wellbeing. Equality, diversity and inclusion are intended to run through each of these areas, including through fair access to employment, development and progression.

Employers initially join as Supporters, committing to improve their practices across all seven characteristics and setting out their existing approach and plans for further action. They receive free access to resources, events and a network through which employers can share both challenges and best practice. Supporters that can provide evidence that they meet the Charter's criteria across every characteristic can progress to full Member status. Employers' progress is subsequently reviewed annually.

The criteria translate broad aspirations about "good work" into practical employment standards. Members are expected, for example, to provide contracts that reflect the hours people ordinarily work, avoid exclusive zero-hours arrangements and offer a guaranteed minimum of 16 hours a week unless an employee requests otherwise. Recruitment expectations include transparent job adverts, inclusive and anonymised processes, and removing unnecessary barriers for disabled applicants and people with criminal records.

More than 2,500 employers have engaged with the Charter, with the initiative reporting that participating organisations collectively employ over 800,000 people.

Analysis of 50 Charter-affiliated businesses found that most experienced real-terms growth in turnover per employee between 2019 and 2023. However, the research did not establish that participation in the Charter caused these improvements. Employers interviewed for the study also associated good employment practices with higher morale, stronger retention and reduced sickness absence.[44]

CHAPTER TWO – LITERATURE REVIEW

The next section looks at the existing literature on first jobs, alongside wider research on how young people are prepared for the workplace, and what shapes their subsequent career progression.

In schools

Previous research has looked at the teaching and development of broader life skills in schools (including for example communication, confidence, motivation and resilience), outside of typical academic and subject specific knowledge. These skills are highly valued by employers, with 94% of employers saying these skills are as or more important than academic qualifications for a young person's future success.[45] Research has also found an earnings premium associated with the development of these wider skills.[46] However, 1 in 5 teachers in state schools report their schools do not provide good opportunities for pupils to develop these skills – with a much lower proportion, just 1 in 10, saying the same in private schools.[47]

Looking at communication skills specifically, the recent curriculum and assessment review included recommendations on oracy (speaking), with the government's response committing to introducing a new oracy framework for primary school teachers "to ensure their pupils become confident, fluent speakers and listeners by the end of key stage 2", and embedding oracy within a wider oracy, reading and writing curriculum in secondary schools – although these changes have not yet been implemented in schools.[48]

Work experience is another key way in which schools help young people to prepare for the workplace, with research finding that work experience can reduce the chances of a young person becoming NEET by as much as 80%,[49] with other work finding a positive impact on both academic outcomes and earnings.[50] However, previous research has highlighted the need to ensure schools are properly resourced to support students to organise good quality placements - with this support particularly important for young people from lower income families, who are less likely to have external contacts in professional fields to draw on for potential placements.[51]

More widely, while the situation is improving, career support is still lacking in many schools. The Career and Enterprise Company found on average schools hit only 6 of the 8 "Gatsby Benchmarks", a framework of standards for career guidance including areas like having a stable careers programme, learning from career and labour market information, giving young people experiences of workplaces and helping them have access to Further and Higher Educational providers.[52] Research has found young people from less advantaged backgrounds are less confident than their better off peers when talking about their skills when applying for courses or jobs, with disadvantaged girls particularly impacted.[53] There are also difference between the state and private sector, with 38% of state school students saying they have not taken part in any career related activities at school, compared to just 23% of privately educated students.[54]

Access to and progression in the workplace

Preparing young people for work within the education system is only the first step. The next section looks at the existing evidence base on what happens as they first enter the labour market, through to their progression and subsequent earnings.

Employment outcomes differ substantially for different groups of young people. Young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds are much more likely to be NEET (at 22%) than those from higher professional backgrounds (the rate for which stands at just 9%). Black, African and Caribbean young people have the highest NEET rates of any ethnic group, at 15.2% - compared to 13.2% of White young people, 12.6% of Pakistani and Bangladeshi young people and just 8.7% of Chinese young people. NEET rates are higher in some parts of the country, with the highest proportion of NEETs in the North and the Midlands. And NEET rates are also much higher for young people with a disability, at 29.6% compared to just 8.7% for their non-disabled peers.[55]

Across graduates, school leavers and those who have taken apprenticeship routes, previous research from academics at UCL has found that employers disproportionately filter out candidates from less advantaged backgrounds during the application process, as well as those from ethnic minority groups. While these groups are well represented within application pools to employers, they are less likely than their peers to actually receive job offers.[56]

Recent research by the Sutton Trust looked in detail at academic and later career outcomes by ethnicity, free school meal (FSM) status (a commonly used proxy for socio-economic background), and region. The work highlights many of the important nuances often missed when examining employment outcomes, for example with gaps in earnings at age 28 by ethnicity at least partly driven by geography. White British FSM students have the lowest earnings amongst ethnic groups, but this is not consistent across all regions – and in some areas their earnings are comparatively much higher. The report also found only a small proportion, 8%, of Black Caribbean or White British FSM students are socially mobile by income, compared to 19% of Indian and 20% of other Asian pupils eligible for FSM.

And the research found that attainment levels do not translate into workplace outcomes in the same way for all ethnic groups. For example, while attainment for Bangladeshi FSM students is 5% higher than pupils on average, their earnings are 12% lower than average – and this figure is even worse when looking only at female Bangladeshi pupils, who have 11% higher attainment but 20% lower earnings. White British FSM pupils have attainment 35% below the average student, but their earnings are only 26% below the average.[57]

Much of the evidence base on workplace outcomes has been reviewed separately for non-graduates and graduates. The two groups enter the labour market by different routes, at different ages, and often into different segments of the market. The research studying these pathways has also largely developed in parallel, with graduate pathways having received sustained attention with evidence on non-graduate pathways more fragmented, as data is pulled together from across apprenticeships, vocational routes, and youth employment work more broadly. While common issues have been highlighted where relevant, examining the two routes together risks obscuring these differences, and in practice tends to default to the graduate evidence base – which is both larger and more visible.

Throughout, we have paid particular attention to how these issues differ across different groups of young people, for example by socio-economic background, gender, ethnicity or the part of the country they live in.

Non-graduates

The evidence base on non-graduate transitions into work is more fragmented than for graduates. As the Social Mobility Commission has previously pointed out, policy attention has often focused either on university graduates, or on people with no qualifications, despite a large share of the workforce sitting between these two groups. Young people taking non-university routes may enter through further education, apprenticeships, vocational qualifications or directly as a school-leaver, meaning that there is no single transition point or pathway comparable to graduation. Previous research has consequently drawn together evidence from across vocational education, youth employment and the wider labour market.[58]

This is important because routes directly from education into skilled work appear to have become less structured over time. The UK has been characterised as having a relatively flexible and fragmented school-to-work transition, with fewer clearly defined pathways for young people who do not continue into higher education. Further education colleges play an important role in providing vocational qualifications and giving 'second chances' to young people who struggled in school, but wider labour market changes have also reduced some of the traditional routes through which non-graduates could progress. As Schoon (2020) describes, "While the pathways to college are well signposted and supported through state subsidies, the route into work for 16- to 20-year-olds is more like an unmarked minefield, where young people have to fend for themselves without institutional support." Furthermore, the decline of skilled manual and clerical employment, alongside the growth of low-paid service-work, has contributed to a labour market in which young people without degrees can face a narrowed set of opportunities.[59]

Previous research has described this as an increasingly "hourglass" shaped labour market, with growth at the top and bottom of the occupational distribution alongside a hollowing out of many jobs in the middle. Internal labour markets – where a young person may have previously entered an organisation in a relatively junior role and progressively moved upwards – have also weakened. For workers entering lower-paid occupations, particularly those without graduate qualifications, some of those immediate rungs that previously enabled progression has been reduced or removed.[60]

However, it's also important to be clear that non-graduate routes do not lead inevitably to poorer outcomes. Evidence suggests that where someone works, and the opportunities available once they are there, can be at least as important as the qualification they hold. Previous analysis by the Social Mobility Commission found that non-graduates with academic qualifications tended to earn more than those with vocational qualifications, but qualification type itself was not the strongest determinant of earnings. Outcomes were shaped by how well an individual's skills matched their sector and by their subsequent workplace experiences. For men, working in larger firms, gaining managerial experience and participating in employer-funded training were all associated with stronger routes through the labour market. For women, participation in work-related training was similarly associated with better outcomes, although their concentration in low-wage, insecure sectors and the impact of having children had particularly large effects on earnings and progression.[61]

There are also important differences in outcomes by ethnicity. TASO analysis of long-run education and labour-market outcomes found that, among people with no known qualifications after Key Stage 4, those from Minority Ethnic backgrounds earned around £1,700 less than their White peers 16 years later and were around 10 percentage points less likely to be in employment (56% compared with 66%). These gaps narrowed among those progressing into higher education, suggesting that the risks associated with lower-qualified routes are not evenly distributed across groups.[62]

There is also evidence that low-paid work can become persistent, with employees struggling to break out of a low-pay cycle. Research tracking people who were on low pay in 2002 found that almost three-quarters had not escaped this in a sustained way a decade later. While almost half (46%) had at some point moved above the low-pay threshold, they had subsequently fallen back below it by 2012, and more than a quarter remained low paid in every year in which they were employed. Persistent low pay was particularly common at that time in sectors including retail, sales and customer service, manufacturing and care, while public-sector employment was associated with stronger opportunities for pay progression.[63]

The academic literature also shows that negative early experiences in the labour market can have consequences beyond the first few years of work. Youth unemployment has repeatedly been shown to leave long-term "scarring" effects, impacting employment rates and earnings for decades. UK longitudinal evidence found that spells of unemployment when workers were young were associated with substantial wage penalties for men as late as their early forties, which earlier work by the same author found that unemployment during the ages of 16-23 increased the amount of unemployment subsequently experienced in adulthood.[64] Further evidence from young people leaving vocational high schools during a recession in Sweden similarly found that poor initial labour market experiences increased the risk of unemployment for several subsequent years, although the effects did diminish over time.[65]

Importantly, it is not only unemployment that can create a lasting disadvantage. Underemployment – including working fewer hours than desired or in roles that make insufficient use of someone's skills – has become an increasingly prominent feature of young people's labour market experiences. Skills mismatch early in a career can affect subsequent progression, earnings, job satisfaction and employment prospects, meaning that entering work does not always provide a strong route to better later life outcomes.[66] While research specifically isolating non-graduate underemployment is more limited, longitudinal research on early-career underemployment generally also supports the idea of path dependency, whereby an initially poor match between worker and job can have lasting consequences that accumulate over time.[67]

Graduates

Development of non-academic skills at university

Work has also looked at the development of wider life skills at university, with the majority (62%) of graduates reporting their university course helped them to develop their communication skills, and over half (53%) saying it helped them to build resilience. However, graduates self-reported that their time at university performed less well when it came to motivation (with only 43% saying they developed this), and much less well for leadership skills (at 24%). Many skills not developed well by a student's university course were however developed by wider activities outside it, but access to these activities were found to be limited for some groups of young people. For example, 32% of those not taking part in extra-curricular activities at university could not do so due to paid work commitments, and students from working class backgrounds were more likely to not have been able to take part in a student society due to cost. The research found that 43% of students had completed work experience during their time at university, but participation was more common for better off students (46% vs 36%).[68]

Internships

Internships are often an important first step for many graduates looking to enter the workplace, with over half completing at least one – a proportion that has been rising over time. Recent graduates also report these placements are useful, with 62% of those who completed an internship saying it was 'very helpful' to their early career, and 31% of those currently in work saying they were only able to get their job because of their internship.[69]

Research has also found that completing an internship is associated with higher salaries, for both middle- and working-class graduates. This is particularly true for those from working class backgrounds, for whom completing an internship is associated with upward mobility - 74% of those who completed one moved into higher-paid roles, compared with just 66% of those who had not, a slightly larger impact than that seen for better off graduates. This benefit is not universal however; with completion of multiple internships associated with lower employment rates and earnings.[70]

Internships can however vary considerably in quality. Previous research has looked at five indicators of quality - adequate training and mentoring, on the job rotation, having a designated mentor or supervisor, a workplace learning plan and post-internship follow up – and found that just 2% of graduate interns report their internship had met all five of these criteria. Notably, this is much lower than the 18% of employers who report their internships met all of these criteria. The average number of criteria met, as reported by interns, was found to be just 1.6. Unpaid internships were also found to meet far fewer criteria than paid placements, potentially reflecting less investment of any type from employers in these opportunities. Working class graduates were also found to be more likely to have completed low-quality internships.[71]

Access to these opportunities is also heavily skewed by socio-economic background. Grads from working class backgrounds are much less likely to have completed an internship than their better-off peers, with 55% of better-off graduates completing one compared to just 36% of those from poorer homes, with signs this gap is growing over time.[72] Internships are also much more common for recent graduates in London (at 64%) than for those in areas including Yorkshire and the Humber (47%), Scotland (41%) and Wales (35%), likely reflecting a higher supply of internships in the capital.

Access can be restricted by roles being unpaid - with 35% of graduates having completed one that was un- or under-paid (either having no pay, or some pay or expenses at less than the minimum wage) – or by roles being unadvertised, with just 1 in 10 internships found through an open advertisement.[73]

The job search and early labour market outcomes post-graduation

After completing formal education, the decisions graduates make about their next steps are often shaped by their wider circumstances. Research has found 45% of recent graduates report needing to go into paid work immediately to support themselves (and a higher proportion, at 51%, of those from working class backgrounds), whereas 53% said they could stay with family or friends for a period while they worked out what to do next.[74] Moving immediately into paid work could narrow the options available to those graduates, limiting their ability to select a first role on the benefits it could have for their future career. And once in paid work, the time available to research and apply for more relevant roles will then be limited.

Research looking at outcomes immediately post-graduation (three and a half years, reflecting someone's early labour market experiences) using data on around 49,000 graduates from the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey found early labour market outcomes differ between private and state educated graduates, with a state school graduate still 2.5 percentage points less likely to be in a top occupation even when they grew up in the same type of neighbourhood, had parents with similar types of jobs, studied the same subject at the same type of institution, and had the same grades at both degree and A level as a privately educated peer. Controlling for use of networks was also found not to explain these differences, with the report’s authors suggesting other potential explanations including stronger non-cognitive skills, greater cultural capital assisting in job interviews, and greater access to financial capital to lengthen their job search period.[75]

Initial employment outcomes can have long term impacts for graduates. Research examining the labour market outcomes of 67,000 graduates found that compared to being in a graduate level job at six months post-graduation, early experiences of underemployment (defined here as graduates working in jobs classified as non-graduate based on their occupational skill requirements) increase the chances of being underemployed three years later by 24 percentage points. The authors note that early underemployment is both more common and more persistent than early unemployment, with similarly negative consequences for later labour market prospects.[76]

Disruption during the COVID-19 pandemic has also illustrated the importance of recent graduates' entry into the labour market and the impact when this is disrupted. Research looking at young people graduating in summer 2020, during both widespread labour market disruption and early on in the shift to remote working, found widespread concern about both job opportunities and employer support.[77]

Progression and longer term outcomes

Research has found that starting your time in the workplace in a larger firm is associated with better long-term outcomes,[78] and that higher initial earnings are associated with higher wage growth.79 Wage growth has also found to be higher for those starting out in roles with a higher concentration of non-routine analytical skills, as well as in roles where interaction and communication with others is common.[80]

Workplace progression is also strongly related to background characteristics. For example, research using the Labour Force Survey (LFS) has found that even when young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds enter high-status occupations, they still earn on average 17% less than their peers from better-off backgrounds.[81]

CHAPTER THREE – METHODOLOGY

This report draws on two main sources of new primary data collection: quantitative polling of UK adults and qualitative interviews conducted using a purpose-trained AI chatbot, allowing us to carry out this type of interview at scale. These methods have been designed to be complementary and this is an approach we have used in previous reports.[82] The polling provides a broad UK-wide picture of first job experiences, their characteristics and their relationship with later career outcomes, as well as detailed demographic details on who gets to access them. The qualitative interviews provide richer insights into how people experienced their first jobs, how those roles shape progression, and why some roles acted as accelerators while others became comfort-traps or low-mobility pathways.

This report then develops a typology of first-job pathways. This typology was informed by the qualitative interviews, and then validated using the polling data, allowing us to examine how different kinds of first jobs are distributed across the population. We then model the associated labour market outcomes.

Quantitative polling

The quantitative analysis is based on polling of 3,000 UK adults, with survey work conducted by Focaldata. The sample was split, with half of respondents aged 20-25 to provide insight into current and most recent labour market experiences and half of respondents aged 35-40 to give insight into mid-career returns. All respondents had to have had at least one job in their life. The survey asked respondents about their first "proper" job, defined as their first job after leaving compulsory education. Respondents were asked not to include informal, casual or part-time work done alongside studying.

The polling covered several areas, including:

- The characteristics of respondents' first job, including contract type, sector, industry, employer size and location
- The support, training and development opportunities they received
- Workplace culture, belonging, confidence and skills development
- Progression routes, promotions, pay rises and professional networks
- Whether respondents felt their skills and qualifications were well used

This allowed us to get a detailed picture of the quality and nature of respondents' first roles.

We then asked respondents for a limited amount of data on their second and most recent role, including salary, seniority, sector and region. This gave us a 'mini CV' in which we could track respondents' career progression following their first role.

We also collected detailed demographic information including age, gender, region, socioeconomic background, current income level and socio-economic group, ethnicity, disability status and care experienced status.

Qualitative interviews

Alongside the polling, we conducted 200 qualitative interviews using a purpose-trained AI chatbot, also via Focaldata. Respondents had to have had at least one prior job, and the sample had an equal split of graduates versus non-graduates. The purpose of these interviews was to capture richer accounts of respondents' first jobs: what those jobs felt like, what support they received, how they understood progression, and how their first job shaped their confidence, expectations and later career decisions.

The AI chatbot was trained ahead of the interviews being carried out on the purposes of this project and the research goals. It was then tested by SMF researchers, with a small number of in field test interviews carried out and reviewed before full deployment. It was provided with a structured interview guide covering the key themes of the research, including:

- the nature of the respondent's first proper job;
- why they took that role and what options were available to them at the time;
- the training, support and management they received;
- whether they felt they belonged and were able to learn;
- whether they could see routes to progression;
- how the role affected their confidence, skills and expectations;
- whether they felt the role helped or held back their later career.

The chatbot was designed to conduct semi-structured interviews, following a consistent set of core questions and then asking follow-up questions where respondents gave answers that required clarification or further details. For example, if a respondent said they felt unsupported, the chatbot could ask what kind of support was missing; if they said the role helped them progress, it could ask what specific skills, networks or opportunities made the difference.

This format allowed for a substantially larger number of qualitative interviews than would usually be feasible through traditional one-on-one interviews, while still generating detailed narrative responses. This also allowed us to see initial demographic differences, due to the larger sample size, which could be validated by the quantitative polling.

The qualitative material was then analysed thematically. Initially, a purpose-trained AI analysis tool analysed responses and identified common themes across the transcripts. This was repeated by two other AI analysis tools to ascertain reliability. We then validated the findings in two ways: 1) manually re-analysing a subset of transcripts and assessing to what extent our results were consistent with those of the AI tool, 2) manually cross-checking every quotation used to ensure both accuracy and that the analysis was drawing from the full range of interviews.

The qualitative findings were used in four main ways. First, they helped inform the broad conceptual categories used in the first-job typology. Second, they helped draft the polling survey questions, identifying areas of development or support that would be helpful to dive into in more detail in the quantitative data. Third, they provided examples and explanatory detail to support the interpretation of the polling findings. Finally, they helped identify aspects of first-job quality that may not be fully captured by standard employment measures, such as confidence, agency, belonging and whether respondents could imagine a future for themselves in that workplace or sector.

Developing the first-job typology

A central output of the research is a typology of first-job pathways. This was developed to move beyond a simple distinction between “good” and “bad” first jobs. The polling and qualitative interviews both showed that first jobs vary across several dimensions at once. A job might be stable but offer little progression, or provide skills but poor pay; it might be supportive but poorly matched to someone’s qualifications, or it might be insecure but still provide useful experience that helps someone move forward.

The typology was therefore designed to capture how different features of first jobs work together holistically. The broad categories were first developed through analysis of the qualitative interviews. Respondents’ accounts suggested several recurring types of first-job experience:

- jobs that accelerated progression through strong support, development and clear routes forward;
- jobs that were imperfect but still helped people build skills and move on;
- jobs that were comfortable or stable but offered limited growth;
- jobs where respondents felt overqualified or underused;
- jobs that offered little support, development or future opportunity.

These broad qualitative categories were then validated using the polling data. Survey questions were grouped into several dimensions of first-job quality, including support, stability, progression infrastructure, development value, progression experience, negative experiences and overall foundation. These indicators were used to classify respondents into one of the first-job pathways above.

The final typology contains five substantive categories, plus a residual mixed/unclear group.

First-job pathway definitions

Accelerator pathways are first jobs with strong support, stability, development and progression infrastructure. Respondents in these roles were more likely to report supportive managers, senior staff who championed them, clear routes for progression, opportunities to grow and a strong overall foundation for later work. These are the jobs most clearly associated with early career progression.

Stepping-stone pathways are jobs that may not have offered the full structure or support of an accelerator pathway, but still provided useful skills, confidence or experience. They may not align with the respondents’ future career goals exactly, but they still helped respondents gain the transferable skills or experience to move forward.

Comfort-trap pathways are jobs that offered some stability and enjoyment, but limited progression. Respondents in these roles may not have described the job as wholly negative, but the role lacked the development, challenge or progression infrastructure needed to support longer-term career growth.

Underemployment pathways are jobs where respondents reported some value or development, but also felt that their skills or qualifications were not well used and that they were overqualified for that role.

Low-mobility pathways are first jobs with low levels of support, weak development, limited progression and poor foundations for later work. These roles were most clearly associated with respondents feeling unsupported, underdeveloped or unclear about where they could go next, and were associated with poor labour market outcomes.

Mixed or unclear trajectory roles are cases where responses did not clearly fit one of the above pathways. These jobs may have contained a mixture of positive and negative features, or may have reflected more ambiguous early career experiences.

How respondents were classified

The typology was built from a set of composite measures derived from responses to the survey questions. These were designed to capture different dimensions of first-job quality and progression.

The key dimensions used were:

- **Support**, including line manager support, senior staff support and employer willingness to invest in development;
- **Negative or mismatch experiences**, including receiving less guidance than needed, being overqualified, or feeling that skills and qualifications were not well used;
- **Stability**, including indicators of security and whether the job provided a stable base;
- **Progression infrastructure**, including clear routes for progression, development goals, mentoring, appraisals and senior relationships;
- **Development value**, including skills, confidence and opportunities to grow;
- **Progression experience**, including promotion, increased responsibilities, role moves or significant pay rises;
- **Overall foundation**, based on respondents' rating of their first job as a foundation for their career or future work.

Respondents were classified using a hierarchical approach. This means that each respondent was tested against the criteria for each category in a fixed order, and then excluded from subsequent categories when they met the criteria for a category.

This was important because some first jobs had mixed characteristics, and may be positive in some areas but negative in others. This hierarchical approach allowed us to identify the clearest categories first, rather than allowing respondents to be counted in multiple groups.

Low-mobility pathways were identified first. These were first jobs that appeared to provide a weak foundation for future work, either because respondents rated them very poorly overall or because they combined multiple negative features.

Respondents were assigned to this category if they had a very low foundation rating, or if they had a combination of negative or mismatch experiences, no progression within the role (e.g. a pay rise, promotion), a weak overall foundation, and limited development or progression infrastructure.

This category therefore captured both respondents who explicitly rated their first job as a very poor foundation, and respondents whose answers showed a broader pattern of low support, low progression and weak developmental value.

Accelerator pathways were identified after low-mobility pathways had been removed. These were the strongest first-job pathways: jobs that combined support, stability, development and progression.

Respondents were assigned to this category if they had:

- relatively high levels of in-work support;
- few negative or mismatch experiences;
- high stability;
- a strong overall foundation rating; and
- at least one strong indicator of progression infrastructure, development value or actual progression in the job.

This meant that accelerator pathways were not defined by a single positive feature in isolation. To be classified as an accelerator, a job needed to have a wider package of positive characteristics: support, stability, a strong foundation and clear developmental or progression value.

Comfort-trap pathways were intended to capture jobs that were relatively stable and not necessarily a strongly negative experience, but which offered limited progression or development. In interviews, respondents often discussed these as roles where they'd made friends, perhaps the job was local and easy to get to, but did not offer developmental value and they found it hard to apply for other jobs or consider another path.

Respondents were assigned to this category if they had:

- a reasonable level of stability;
- at least a moderate foundation rating;
- little or no progression in the role;
- weak progression infrastructure or limited development value; and
- no more than moderate levels of negative or mismatch experiences.

Underemployment pathways captured jobs where respondents reported signs that their skills, qualifications or potential were not fully used, but where the role still had some developmental or progression value.

Respondents were assigned to this category if they had:

- a high negative / mismatch score;
- at least a moderate foundation rating;
- some development value; and
- either some progression infrastructure or some actual progression in the job.

This category was important because the qualitative interviews showed that some first jobs did not fit neatly into a good/bad distinction. Some respondents described roles where they learnt skills, gained confidence or later progressed, but still felt overqualified, underused or insufficiently supported. The underemployment category captures roles with some value, but where the respondent's skills or potential were not fully utilised.

Stepping-stone pathways were jobs that offered useful development or progression, without meeting the higher threshold for accelerator pathways.

Respondents were assigned to this category if they had:

- some development value;
- at least a moderate foundation rating;
- either some progression in the role or some progression infrastructure;
- either some in-work support or a stronger foundation rating; and
- no more than moderate levels of negative or mismatch experiences.

Stepping-stone pathways may not have provided the full package of support, stability and progression associated with accelerator pathways, but they gave respondents skills, confidence, experience or opportunities that helped them move forward.

Respondents who did not meet the criteria for any of the five substantive categories were assigned to an unclassified group. This represents respondents whose answers did not clearly fit one of the defined pathways. Some may have had genuinely mixed experiences, while others may have had weaker or less consistent responses across the measures used in the typology.

The typology was examined against later labour market outcomes, including salary by age 35 and salary growth, to ensure that these were meaningful beyond respondents' own self-reflective responses. The results were broadly as expected: those in accelerator and stepping-stone pathways had higher salaries and higher salary growth, whereas those in low-mobility and comfort-trap pathways had lower salaries and minimal salary growth.

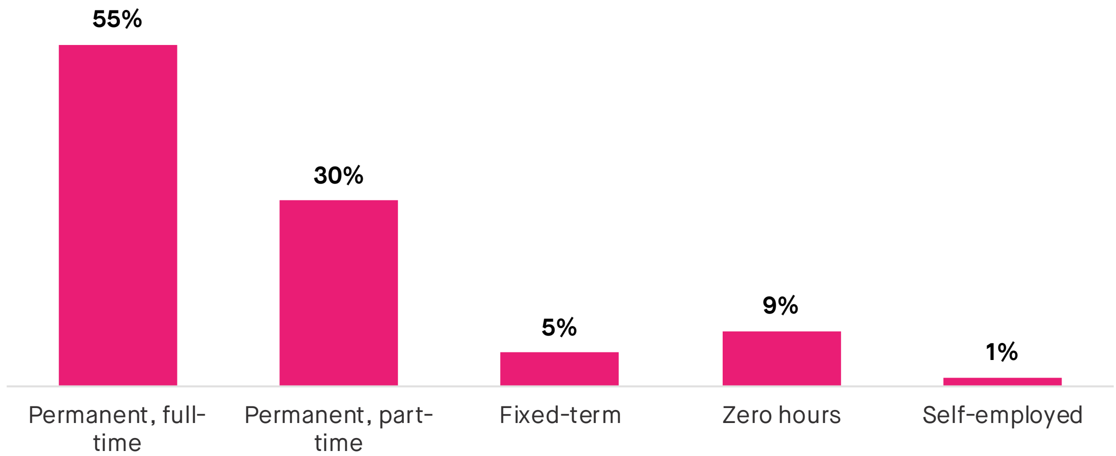
CHAPTER FOUR – MAPPING THE FIRST RUNG

Our survey offers a varied picture of the characteristics of someone's first job and employer. First jobs differed substantially by contract type, sector, industry and employer size, meaning that young people's careers can begin in very different work contexts.

Most first jobs were permanent, but insecure work remained common

Most respondents reported that their first job was a permanent role. As shown in Figure 2, for more than half (55%) it was permanent full-time employment, while for 3 in 10 it was permanent part-time work. It's important to note here that we asked them to provide details of their first *proper* job after leaving compulsory schooling, and to not include part-time work done alongside studying such as paper-rounds or babysitting.

Figure 2: What type of contract did you have in your first proper job?



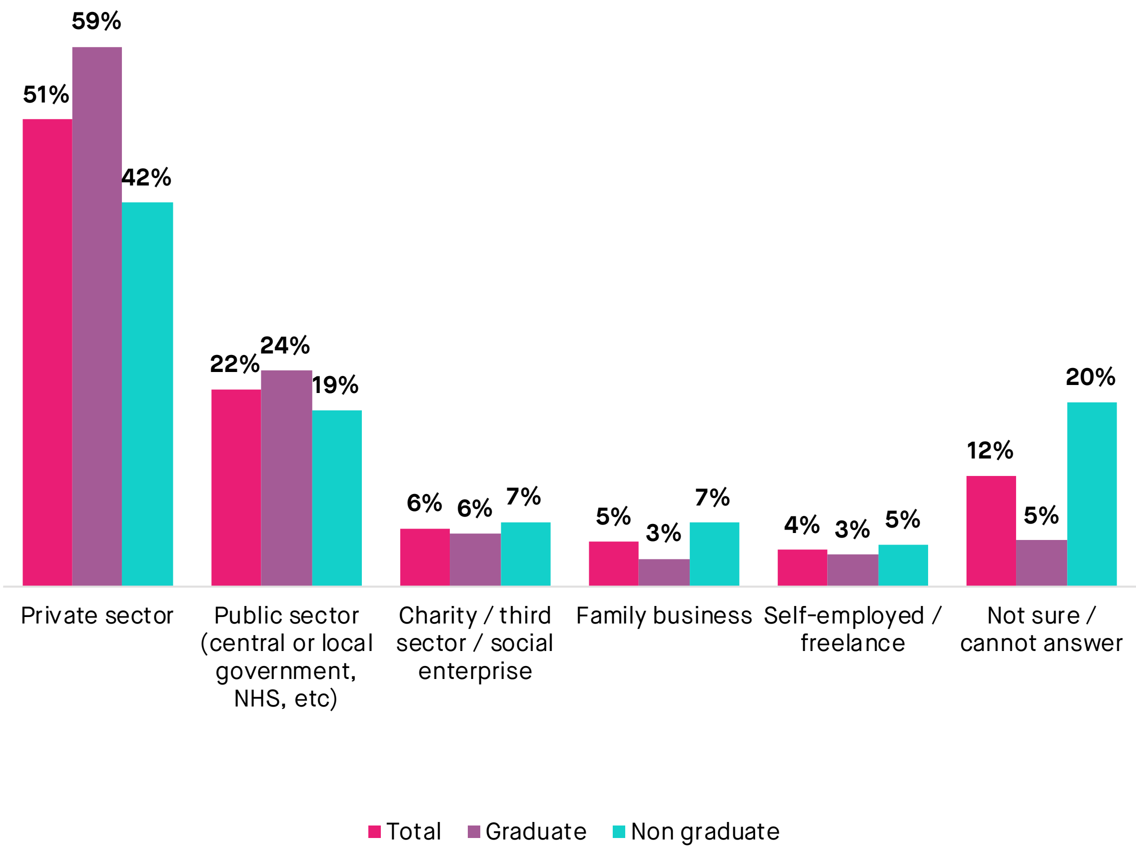
Source: Focaldata polling; n=2412

Despite this framing, a substantial minority still began their working lives in less secure forms of work. Almost 1 in 10 (9%) reported that their first job was on a zero-hours contract, while smaller proportions were in fixed-term roles (5%) or were self-employed (1%).

First jobs were concentrated in the private sector

First jobs were heavily concentrated in the private sector, which accounted for just over half (51%) of respondents' first roles (Figure 3). More than 1 in 5 (22%) started in the public sector, while a much smaller share (6%) began in the charity or third sector. A minority reported starting in a family business (5%) or as self-employed/freelance (4%). This represents a slight overrepresentation of the public sector compared with employment across the economy as a whole, with ONS figures showing that 18% of people in employment work in the public sector.[83] Graduates were more likely to work in the private and public sector, whereas non-graduates were more likely to work in family businesses, be self-employed or have been unable to answer.

Figure 3: Which sector is/was your first proper job in?



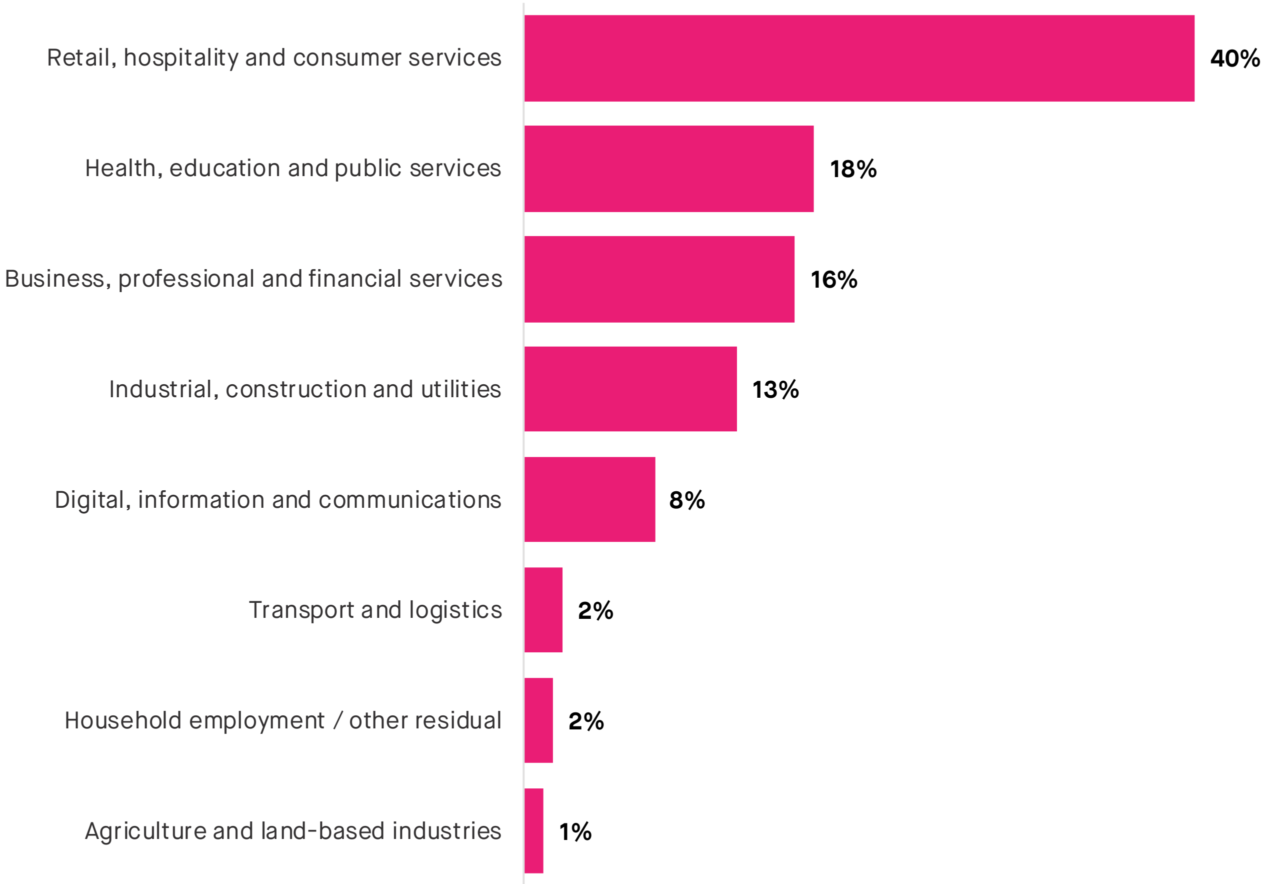
Source: Focaldata polling; n=3000

And they were predominantly concentrated in consumer-facing and service industries

The industry profile of respondents' first jobs show how heavily early labour market experience is concentrated in a relatively small number of sectors. As shown in Figure 4, the largest group by some distance was retail, hospitality and consumer services, at 2 in 5 of all first jobs. This is unsurprising given that these sectors often have large numbers of entry-level roles, relatively low formal qualification requirements and high turnover.

However, a substantial proportion of respondents also began in more professionalised sectors. Almost 1 in 5 (18%) started in health, education and public services, and a similar share began in business, professional and administrative services. A smaller proportion began in industrial, construction and manufacturing roles.

Figure 4: Which industry is/was your first proper job in?



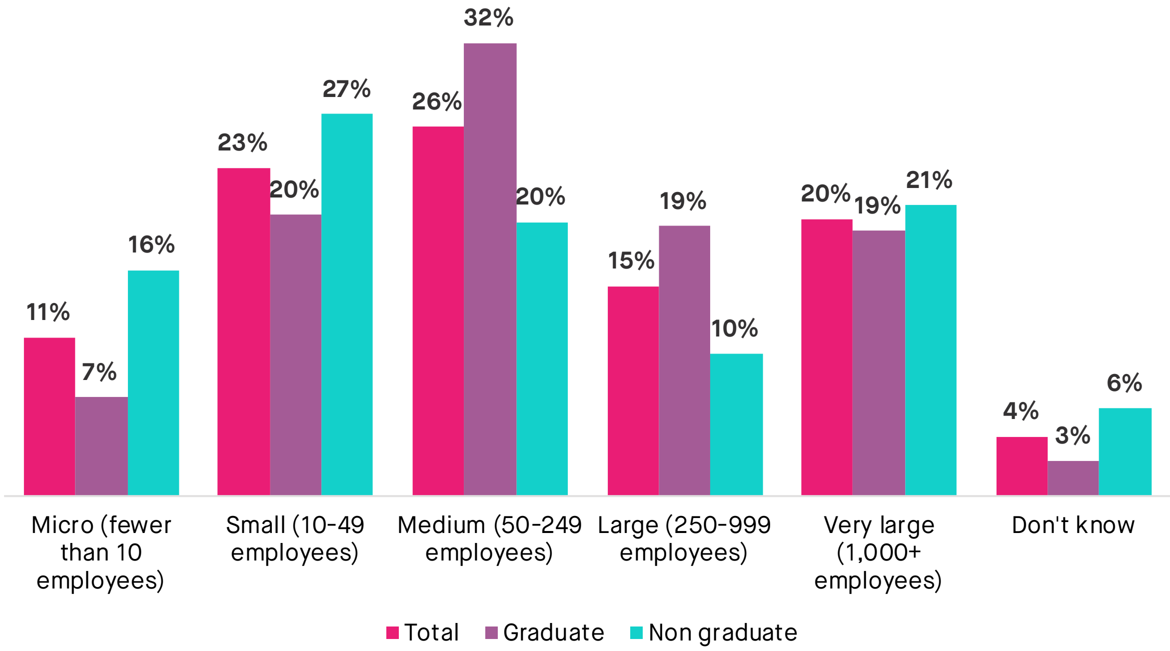
Source: Focaldata polling; n=3000

Respondents' first roles were in a variety of different employer sizes

As seen in Figure 5, there was large variation in the employer size of respondents' first jobs, with a spread of experiences ranging from micro employers who employed fewer than ten employees all the way to very large organisations with thousands. The largest shares began in small and medium enterprises, with approximately a quarter in small (10-49 employees, 23%) and medium (50-249 employees, 26%) respectively.

Larger employers also played an important role. 15% of respondents started in large (250-999 employees), and 1 in 5 began in very large organisations (1000+ employees). Here there were larger splits seen based on educational background, with those without a degree more likely to start in a micro or small employer and graduates more likely to have their first role in medium or large organisation.

Figure 5: Which of the following best describes the size of the organisation of your first proper job?



Source: Focaldata polling; n=3000

First jobs differ in form – contract, sector, industry, employer size – but they also differ in function, in terms of the support, training and networks they give young people

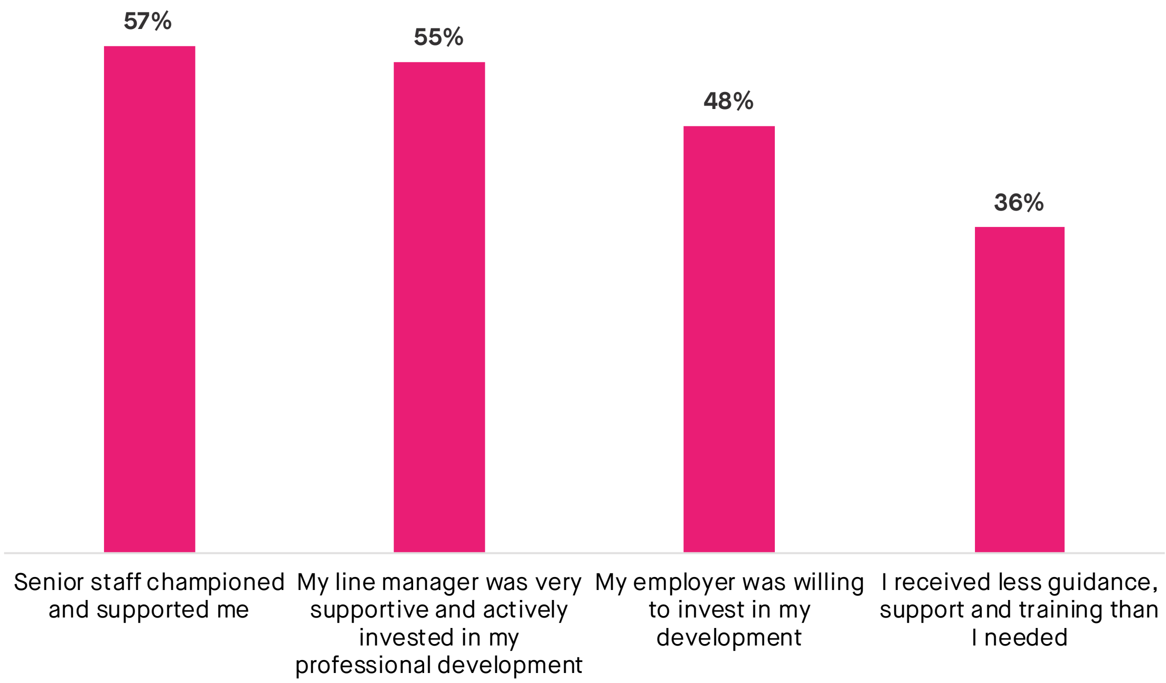
As well as the variations in contract type, sector and industry and employer size documented above, we found substantial variations in what young people got out of their first job. In our polling we asked a range of questions including support provided in their first role, access to training and development, workplace relationships and networking, and experiences of progression.

First jobs often provided some form of training and development support, but this was uneven and often informal rather than structured

Training and development are central to whether a first job acts as a platform for progression or simply a source of income. Encouragingly, many respondents reported that their first job offered them some form of support. As shown in Figure 6, more than half (57%) said that senior staff championed and supported them, while a similar proportion (55%) said that their line manager was very supportive and actively interested in their professional development.

However, this support was far from universal. In terms of whether employers were actually then willing to invest in an employees' development, agreement to this question was slightly lower at under half of respondents (48%). More than a third (36%) also said that they received less guidance, support and training than they needed.

Figure 6: Percent of respondents who reported access to training and development support in their first job.



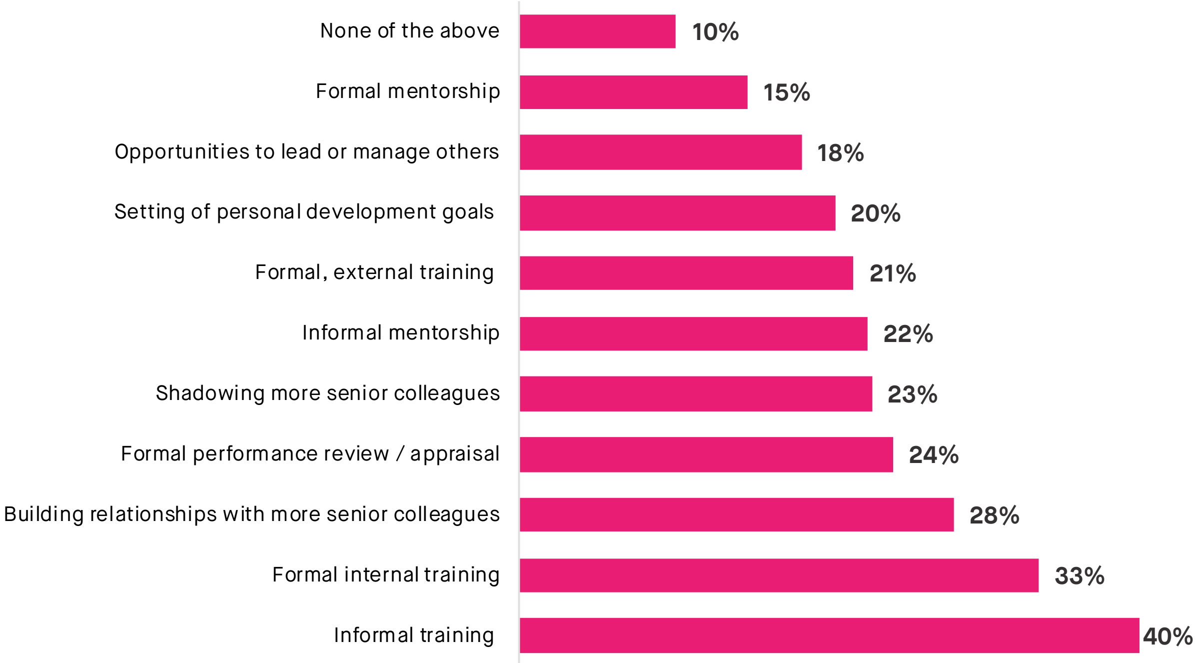
Source: Focaldata polling; n=3000

> *"In terms of training, there is the technical side, but there is also so much around how you navigate a new workplace. **Everyone still needs that guidance early on.**" Social mobility policy expert*

Respondents were most likely to report receiving informal or workplace-based forms of training. As shown in Figure 7, 2 in 5 received informal training and a third received formal training within the organisation. Opportunities to build relationships with more senior colleagues was also common at almost 3 in 10 respondents (28%).

Concerningly, although the fourth most commonly cited, the vast majority (76%) of respondents did not receive a formal performance review or appraisal in their first role. 4 in 5 also reported not having personal development goals set, and only a very small minority (15%) had access to formal mentorship. 1 in 10 reported not having access to any of the listed types of training and development support.

Figure 7: Percent of respondents who reported receiving different types of training and support in their first job.

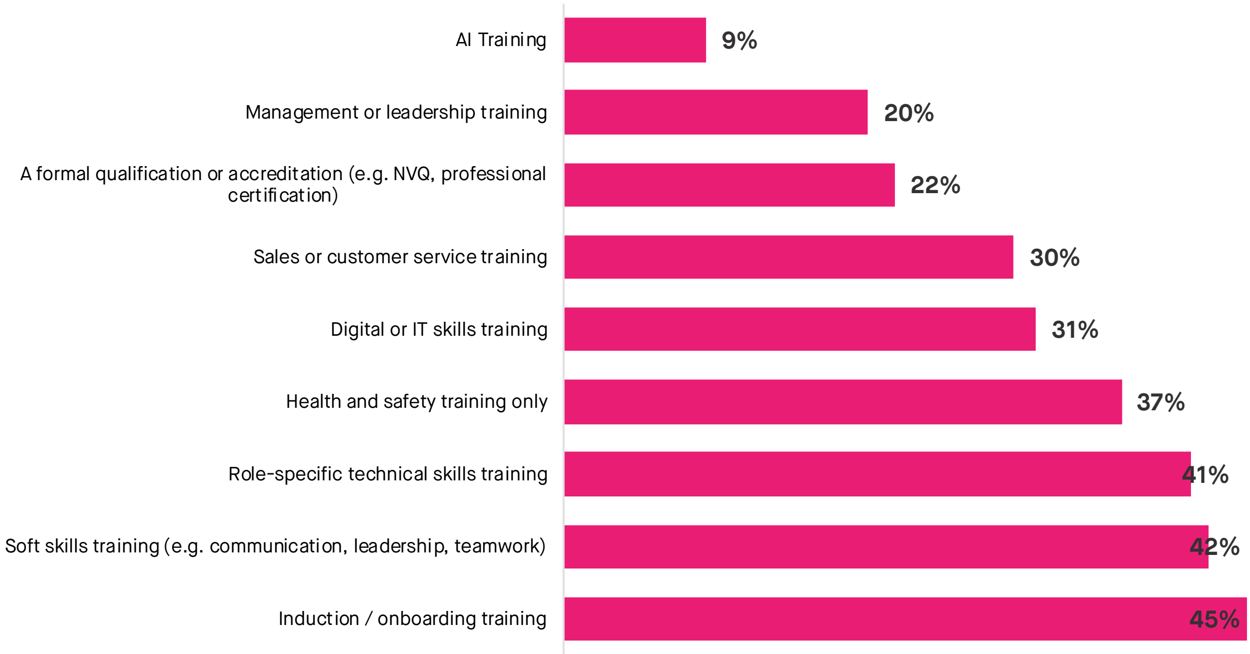


Source: Focaldata polling; n=3000

Of those who received either formal or informal training in their first role, these were often either role-specific or to develop soft skills rather than types of training we might more commonly associate with preparing for progression. Respondents were most likely to report receiving induction or onboarding training, soft skills training, role-specific training and health and safety training (Figure 8). These are important foundations, helping young people understand the workplace, perform their immediate role and develop confidence in professional settings.

However, fewer respondents reported gaining more transferable or progression-orientated forms of development support. Only around 1 in 5 (22%) had access to external training that helped them gain a formal qualification or accreditation, or had access to management or leadership training (20%).

Figure 8: Percent of respondents who had received training in their first role, by type of training.



Source: Focaldata polling; n=1,535

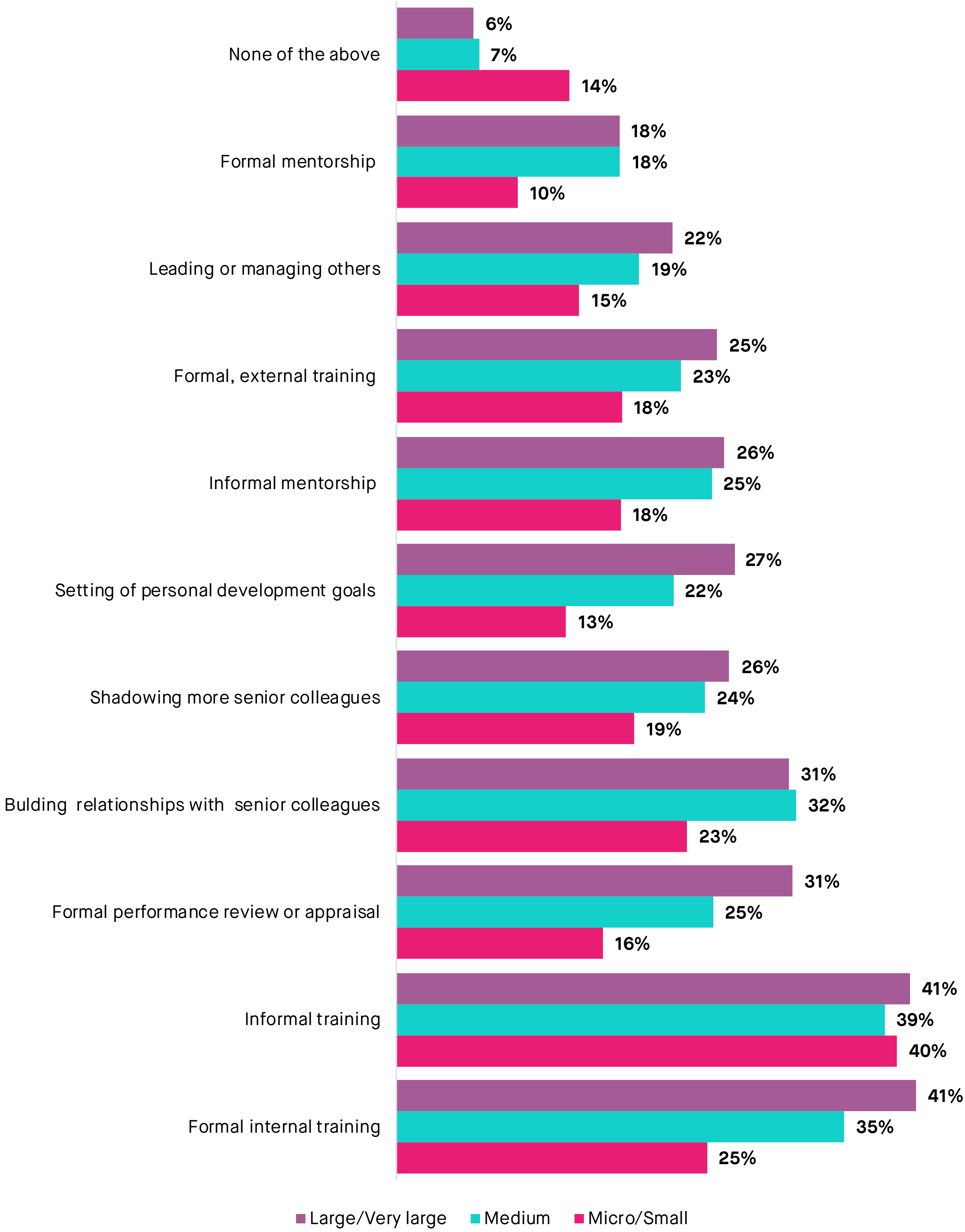
Larger employers were more likely to offer structured development and formal training

Employer size was one of the clearest dividing lines in access to structured development and formal training. Young people who started their careers in large or very large organisations were more likely to have access to almost every single type of training and development support than those in micro/small or medium employers.

The largest differences were seen in access to more formalised forms of training. Respondents in large or very large employers were much more likely to report formal internal training (41%), performance reviews (31%), setting of development goals (27%) and formal external training (25%). In contrast, there were minimal differences by size in terms of access to informal training.

Across most areas there were large differences between micro/small and large/very large employers, but a less substantial difference between medium and large/very large. For example, for having opportunities to build relationships with more senior colleagues or for accessing formal mentorship, there was almost no difference between medium and large. Similarly, 7% of respondents who started in a medium employer and 6% in a large/very large reported that they hadn't received any of the listed types of training or development support, whereas a higher proportion at 14% of those in a micro/small organisation reported this.

Figure 9: Percent of respondents who had received different types of training and support in their first job, by employer size.



Source: Focaldata polling; n=3000

Box 2 – Case study: PwC – building progression into early careers

PwC UK is one of the UK's largest early-career employers, with around 1,300 people joining through early-career pathways in 2025. They offer a range of entry routes, including apprenticeships, school-leaver and graduate opportunities across accountancy and finance, legal, strategy, advisory and consulting, and technology. This reflects a wider effort to allow people to develop through different pathways as their skills and interests evolve. PwC described its approach less as a single career "ladder" and more as a "jungle gym", with opportunities to move laterally as well as upwards.

Recruitment is designed to focus on skills, strengths and potential rather than simply previous opportunities or academic background. Candidates do not submit CVs as part of PwC's early-careers recruitment process, with assessment instead focused on qualities including curiosity, adaptability, collaboration and problem-solving. The firm also seeks to widen the pool of young people who have exposure to professional work before applying, offering more than 400 paid summer internships annually and over 200 paid work-experience opportunities in summer 2026.

Once people join, the focus shifts to development and progression. PwC runs an Associate Academy, combining technical learning with the human and technological skills people will need as work changes. Phillippa O'Connor, PwC's Chief People Officer, described the importance of helping young people recognise the value they already bring: *"There's a habit when you first join an organisation to think you know nothing and you can't add any value. Actually, that's not how we see the people that join our organisation."*

Technology is increasingly important, with PwC seeking to develop early-career employees' ability to use AI alongside technical expertise and broader human skills. O'Connor argued that the opportunity is not simply to automate junior work, but to allow younger employees to contribute at a higher level sooner: *"Everything that we see about technology isn't about replacing roles, it's about elevating them more quickly through our pyramid."*

Structured support is also intended to prevent junior employees from becoming lost within a very large organisation. PwC provides coaching, mentoring, peer support and networks, and has introduced dedicated coaches for its most junior cohorts. They focus on development as well as performance, helping identify where people need additional support and where talent can be accelerated. O'Connor acknowledged that scale creates both an advantage and a challenge: *"There's a huge advantage of scale in terms of the investment that you can make. How you ensure that lands at an individual level requires disciplined focus."*

For PwC, widening access and supporting progression is not framed solely as a social responsibility. O'Connor described it as *"of course, a moral imperative […] but really importantly, it's a commercial imperative"*. Attracting talent from a wide range of backgrounds and developing diverse perspectives is critical in a rapidly changing professional-services market.

PwC also sees a role for large employers beyond their own workforce. The firm is exploring closer partnerships with universities around work readiness, with O'Connor arguing that *"expecting the universities or the schools to have all the answers here doesn't feel right."* This suggests that large employers can use their training capacity and expertise not only to support their own early-career recruits, but to help strengthen the wider infrastructure connecting education and employment.

Sector differences were present, but less stark than employer-size differences

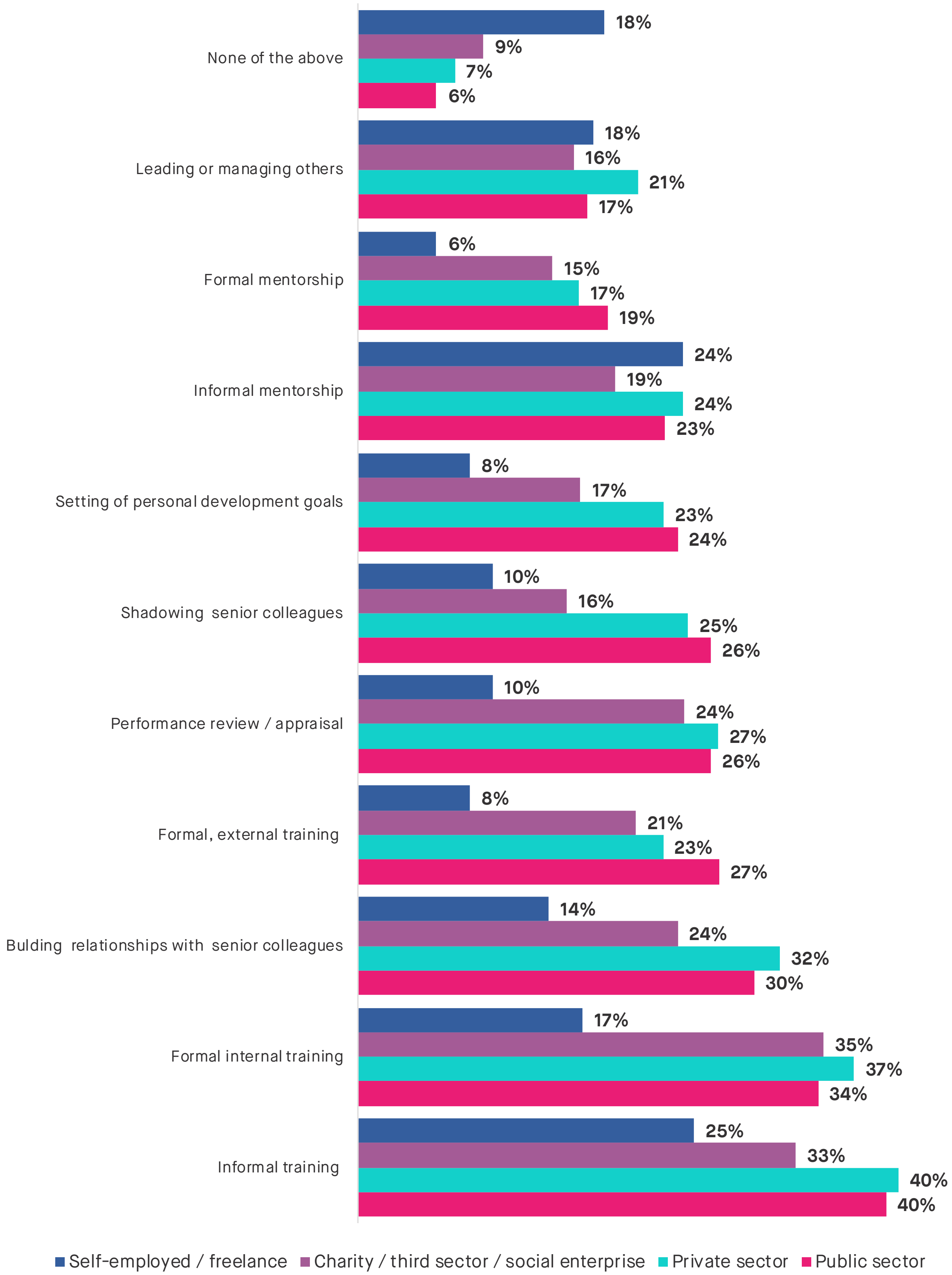
Access to training and development also varied by sector, although the differences were generally less pronounced than the gaps by employer size (Figure 10). Public and private sector jobs looked relatively similar on many measures. Around four in ten respondents in both sectors reported informal training, while just over a third received formal training. Respondents in both sectors were also similarly likely to receive formal performance reviews, opportunities to shadow senior colleagues and support to build relationships with more senior staff.

There were some differences in the type of development offered. Public sector respondents were slightly more likely to report formal external training, such as external courses or qualifications, while private sector respondents were somewhat more likely to report opportunities to lead or manage others.

The charity, third sector and social enterprise group showed a somewhat weaker profile overall. Respondents in these roles were less likely than those in the public or private sector to report informal training, opportunities to build relationships with senior colleagues, shadowing, personal development goals or mentorship. This likely reflect capacity constraints: smaller, mission-led organisations may offer meaningful work, but have fewer formal structures for developing early-career staff.

Self-employment and freelance work stood out most clearly. Respondents who started in self-employed or freelance roles were much less likely to report formal internal training, external training, performance reviews, development goals, shadowing or formal mentorship. They were also more likely to say they received none of the listed forms of training or development. This is unsurprising, because these roles often sit outside conventional employer-led development structures.

Figure 10: Percent of respondents who had received different types of training and support in their first job, by employer sector.



Source: Focaldata polling; n=3000

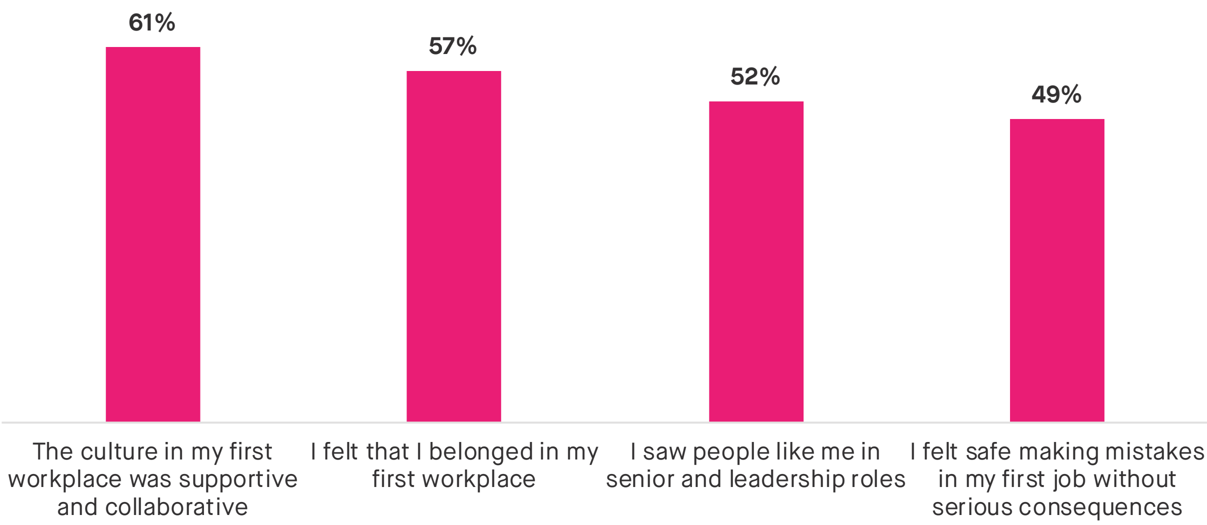
While workplace culture was generally positive, there was a substantial minority of respondents who did not feel that they belonged and were not supported in their first role

Overall, most respondents described their first workplace culture positively. Just over 3 in 5 agreed that the culture in their first workplace was supportive and collaboration, and a similar share (57%) said that they felt that they belonged (Figure 11), suggesting that many first jobs did provide a broadly welcoming environment.

However, responses were slightly less positive to whether respondents saw people like them in senior and leadership roles (52%), and lower still for agreeing that they felt safe to make mistakes without serious consequences (49%). This matters because first jobs are often where young people learn to behave at work, test their confidence and build a sense of whether progression in that field or organisation is for people 'like them'. A supportive and welcoming culture is valuable, but it is also important that young workers feel represented, psychologically safe and able to learn through making mistakes and learning from them.

> *"**People may look at the most prestigious parts of an organisation and conclude that this is not a world in which they would feel welcome**, or that the way they present themselves would not be rewarded equitably because the organisation is looking for a different type of person." Academic*

Figure 11: Percent of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed to questions about workplace belonging and culture.



Source: Focaldata polling; n=3000

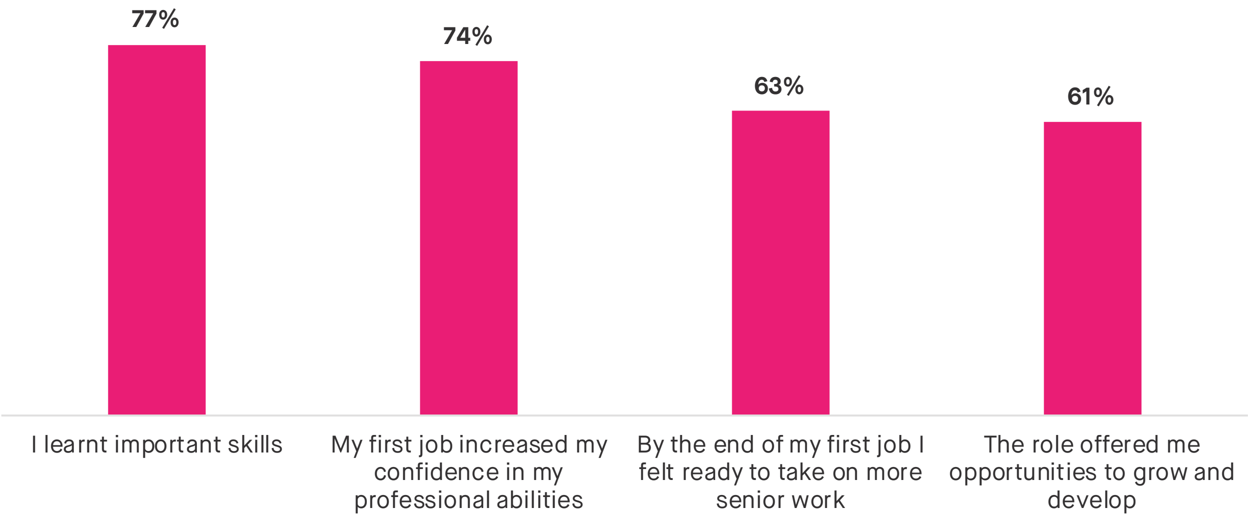
Differences by sector were relatively modest. Public, private and charity/third sector workplaces all scored similarly on supportive culture and belonging, while self-employed and freelance respondents reported slightly weaker belonging. Similarly to training, the largest differences were by employer size. Medium and large employers tended to report the strongest workplace culture and belonging scores, while micro and small employers were weaker on most measures, particularly representation in senior roles. Only 40% of respondents in micro-employers said they saw people like them in senior or leadership positions, compared with 58% in medium and large employers.

Most first jobs built skills and confidence, but fewer created readiness for progression

First jobs were generally more positive when it came to the extent to which they built skills and confidence in young workers. More than three-quarters (77%) of respondents agreed that their first job taught them important skills, and a similar proportion (74%) agreed that it increased their confidence in their professional abilities (74%). This is important because it suggests that even if first jobs aren't 'perfect' – perhaps they lack formal training, or clear progression routes – the majority still play a role in building people's confidence in themselves and their abilities.

Fewer respondents felt that their first job prepared them for progression, although it was still the majority who did agree with these statements. Around 3 in 5 said that, by the end of their first job, they felt ready to take on more senior work, and a similar proportion agreed that the role offered them opportunities to grow and develop (Figure 12).

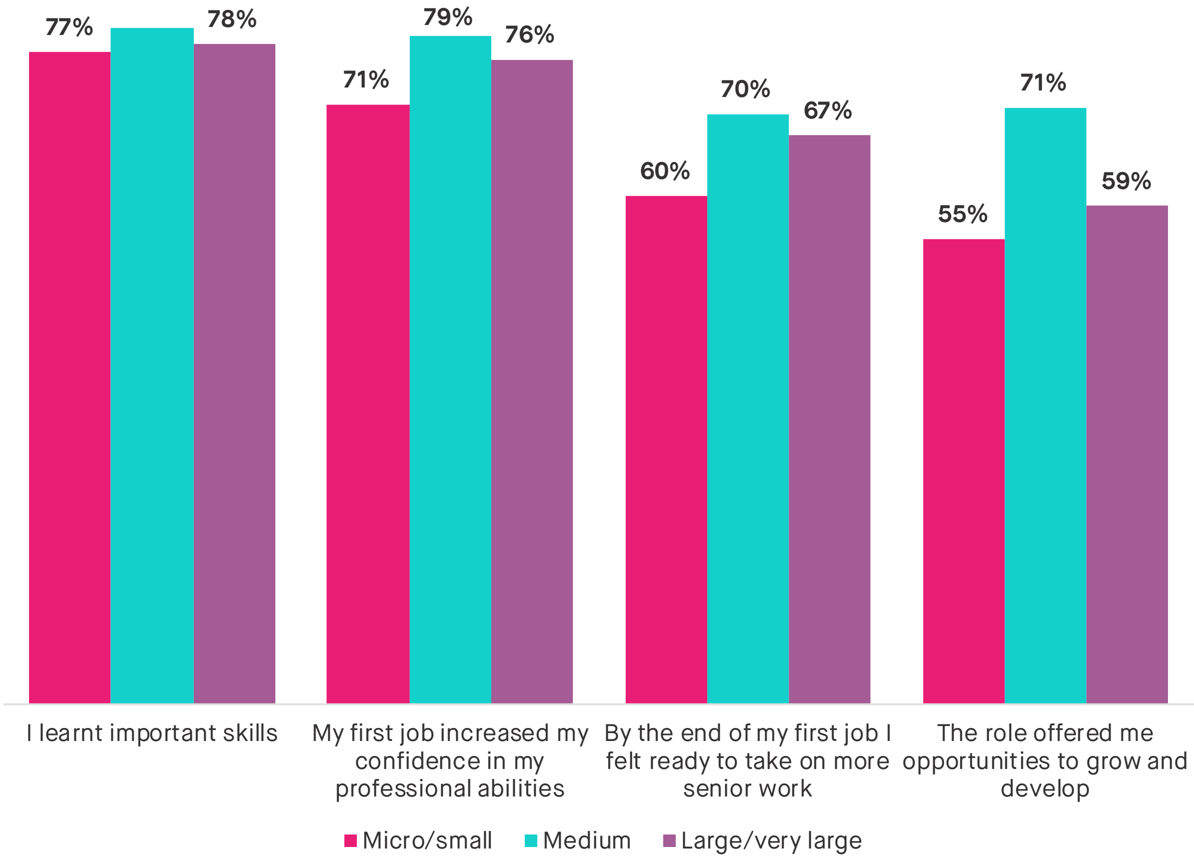
Figure 12: Percent of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed to questions about skills and confidence.



Source: Focaldata polling; n=3000

Sector differences were relatively modest, but public and private sector roles again showed a stronger profile than charity/third sector and self-employed/freelance routes. Respondents in public and private sector first jobs were more likely to say that they learnt important skills and gained confidence, while private sector respondents were particularly likely to say they felt ready for more senior work by the end of the role. Charity/third sector and freelance roles still offered development for many respondents, but were less likely to translate that experience into confidence for progression.

Figure 13: Percent of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed to questions about skills and confidence, by size of first employer.



Source: Focaldata polling; n=3000

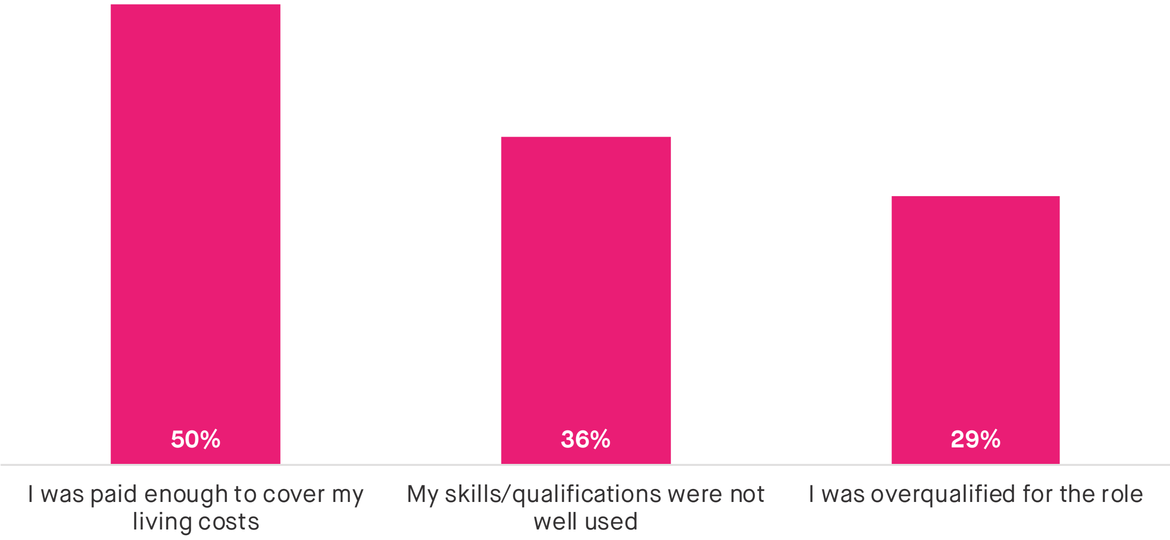
Employer size also showed small differences. All were strong on teaching young workers important skills (Figure 13), however there were larger variations when it came to progression. Micro and small employers were less likely to increase confidence (71%) compared to medium (79%) and large/very large (76%) employers. They were also less likely to have respondents who agreed that they felt ready to take on more senior work at the end of their role, with a particularly large difference between micro/small and medium employers (60% vs 70%). Interestingly, on whether the role offered respondents opportunities to grow and develop medium organisations outperformed others by a substantial amount: 71% of respondents who worked for a medium employer agreed to this, compared to 59% for large or very large and 55% for micro or small employers.

A substantial minority of early career workers felt that their skills were not well utilised in their roles, or that they were overqualified

The picture was more mixed on job quality, fit and security. Overall, only half of respondents said that their first job paid enough to cover their living costs (Figure 14).

There were also signs of perceived mismatch between respondents and their first roles. More than a third (36%) said that their skills or qualifications were not well used, while almost 3 in 10 (29%) felt overqualified for the role.

Figure 14: Percent of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed to questions about job quality, fit and security.

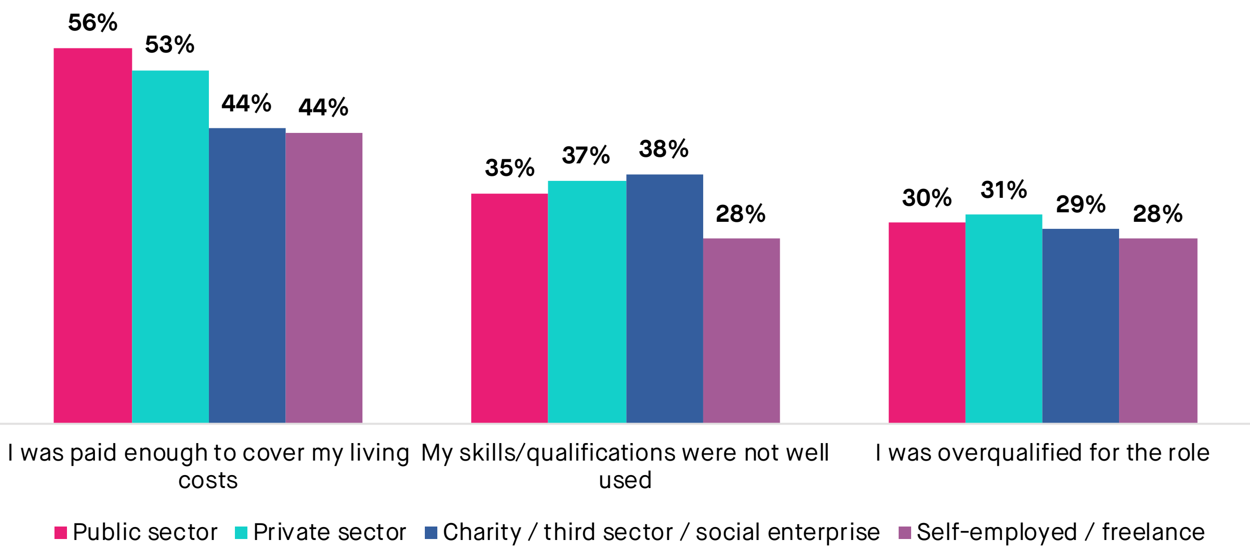


Source: Focaldata polling; n=3000

Respondents whose first role was in the public sector were more likely to agree that the pay was sufficient to cover their living costs, with 56% agreeing to this question compared to 53% of those in the private sector, 44% in the charity and third sector, and 44% of those who were self-employed or freelance (Figure 15).

Interestingly, whether early career employees felt overqualified for a role didn't seem to meaningfully differ by sector, and whether their skills or qualifications were underutilised only showed modest differences, with the exception of those who were self-employed or freelance.

Figure 15. Percent of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed to questions about job quality, fit and security, by sector of first role.

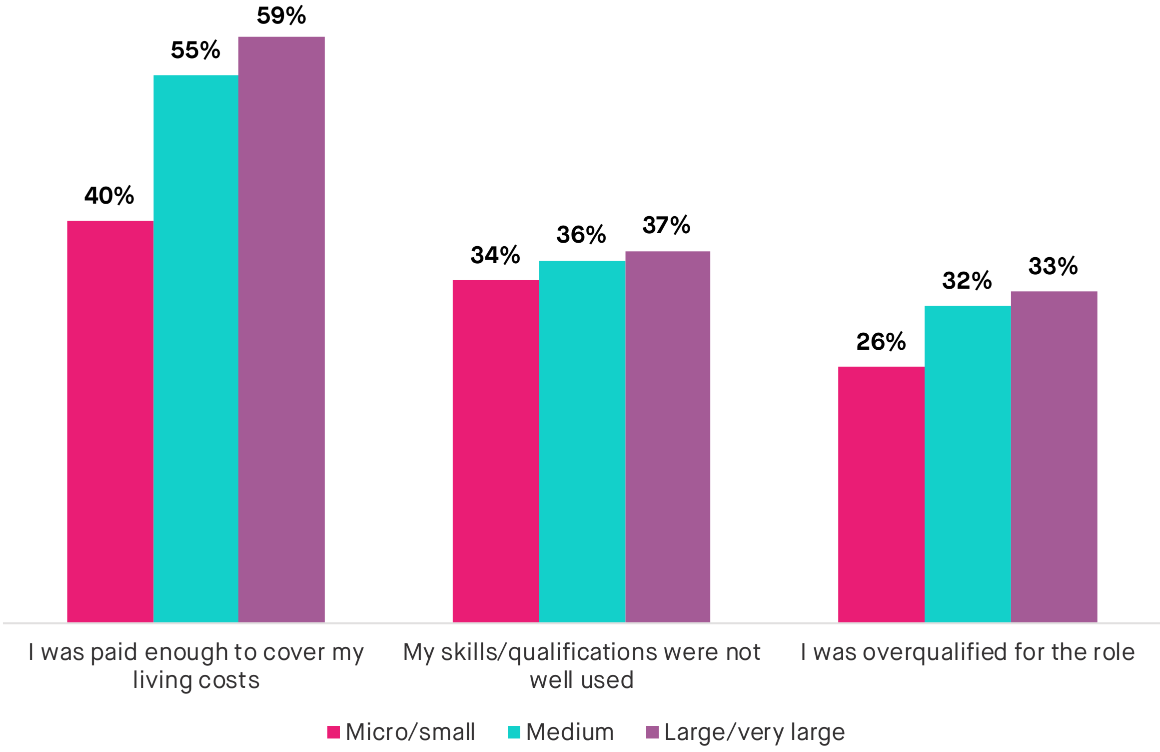


Source: Focaldata polling; n=3000

The extent to which respondents felt that their pay was sufficient to cover their living costs similarly showed substantial variations by size of first employer (Figure 16). For those in a large or very large organisation, the majority (59%) of respondents agreed, compared to just over half (55%) for those in a medium employer and only 40% of those in a micro or small employer.

While there were only small differences in whether respondents agreed that their skills and qualifications were not well used, this was slightly higher in large and very large employers at 37%. Similarly, those in large and very large employers were slightly more likely to agree that they were overqualified for the role.

Figure 16: Percent of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed to questions about job quality, fit and security, by size of their first employer.

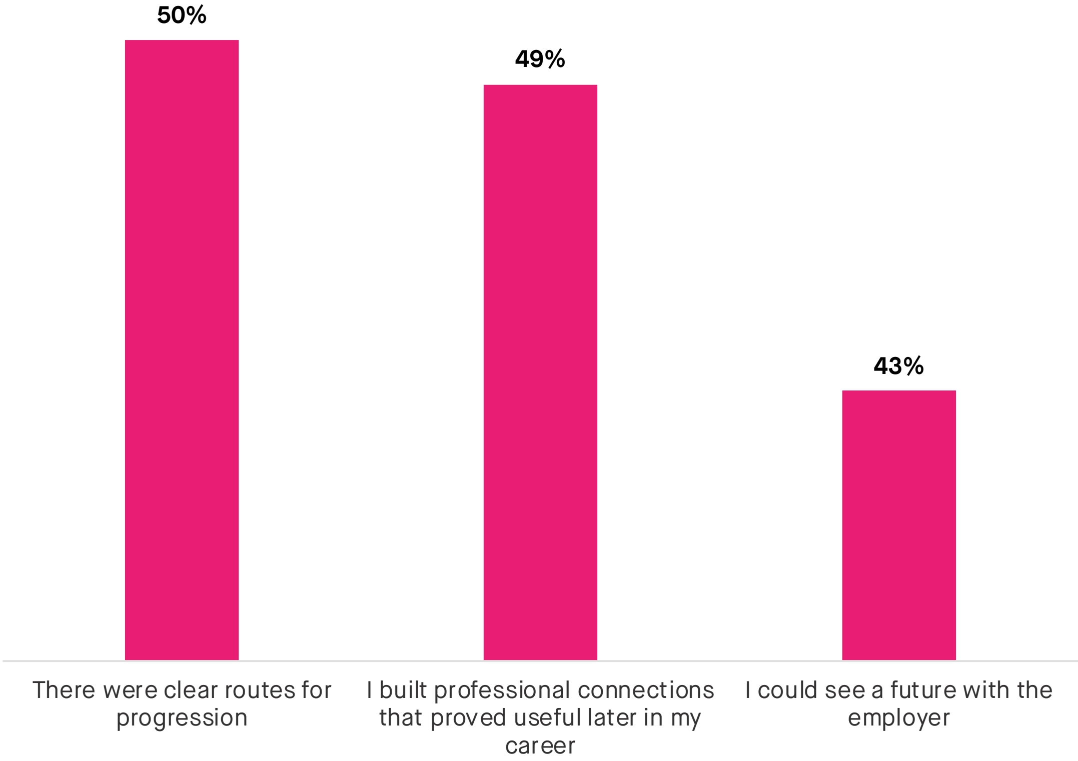


Source: Focaldata polling; n=3000

Progression was visible for some, but not built into all first jobs

Our final set of indicators asked respondents questions about progression, future prospects and to what extent they felt that their first role was a good foundation for their later career. Overall, these findings show the limits of many first jobs as platforms for later progression.

Figure 17: Percent of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed to questions about progression, networks and future prospects

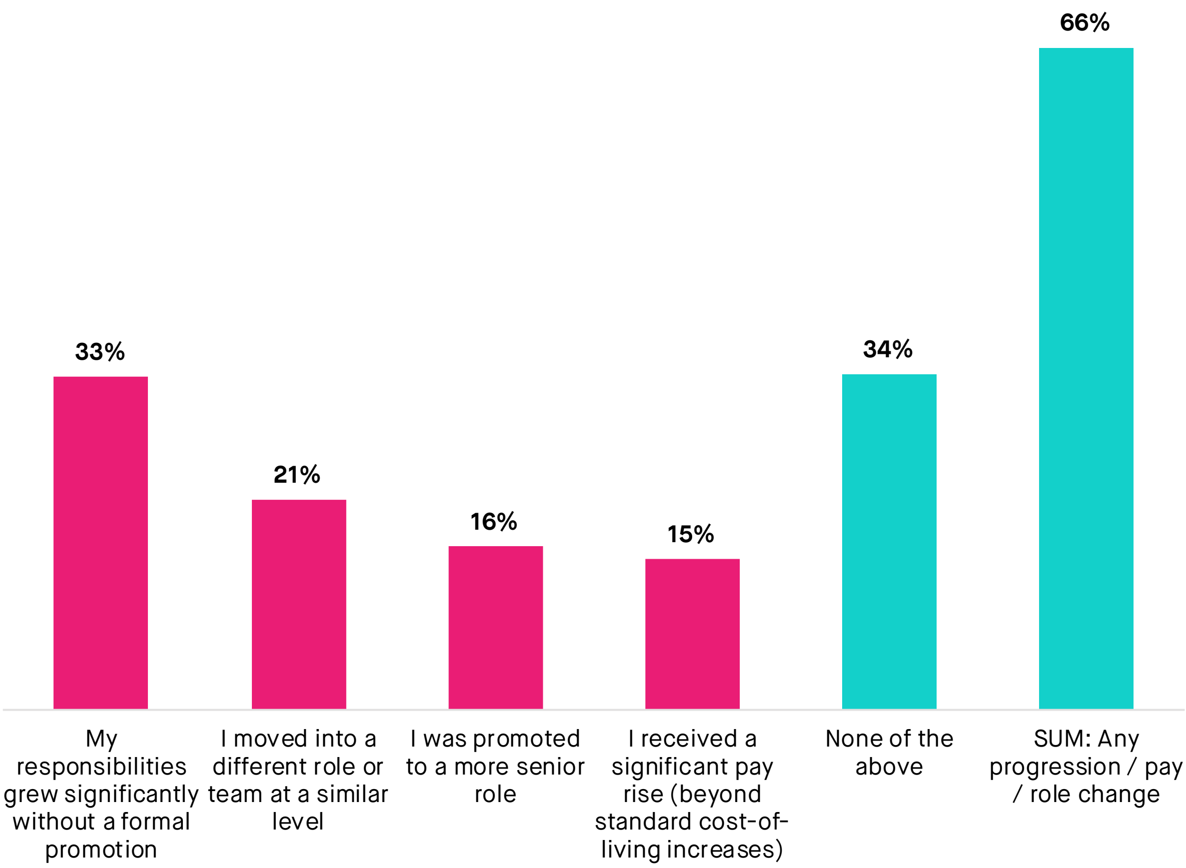


Source: Focaldata polling; n=3000

Overall, half of respondents agreed that there were clear routes for progression within their first role, and a similar share (49%) agreed that they built professional networks in that role that proved useful in their later career (Figure 17). Fewer, at around 2 in 5 (43%), agreed that at the time, they could see a future for themselves with their first employer.

Actual progression while working for their first employer was also mixed. Positively, two-thirds (66%) of respondents experienced some form of progression, pay increase or role change, however the most common form was not a formal promotion. A third (33%) said that their responsibilities grew significantly without a formal promotion, compared to only 16% who were formally promoted into a more senior role and 15% who received a significant pay rise beyond standard inflationary/cost of living increases. While taking on additional responsibilities may help early workers gain important exposure, experience and skills and therefore support later progression, it is also important that they are fairly compensated for this, and long-term additional responsibilities without recognition may harm employee motivation.

Figure 18: Percent of respondents who had experienced different types of promotion within their first role.



Source: Focaldata polling; n=3000

Box 3 – Case study: The Co-Operative – creating progression from frontline roles

Co-op employs around 52,000 colleagues across food stores, logistics, funeral care, legal services and central functions. Almost half of its hires in the first half of 2026 were under 25, with many joining in what will be their first job. Rather than operating a traditional graduate scheme, Co-op has historically focused on apprenticeships and creating opportunities for existing colleagues to learn and progress.

Recruitment increasingly focuses on skills and experience rather than formal qualifications, while apprenticeships provide routes for colleagues to gain qualifications while working. These range from Level 3 programmes to degree-level management and leadership apprenticeships and specialist qualifications in areas such as law, funeral care and finance. One example given was of an employee who began working in a store while completing her A-levels, moved into a business support role and subsequently completed two HR apprenticeships, enabling her to move into senior roles.

Progression can be both vertical and lateral. Store employees can move from team member to team leader and store manager, while frontline colleagues can also move into central functions through entry-level roles, secondments and internal vacancies. Co-op actively values the experience of employees who have worked directly with customers.

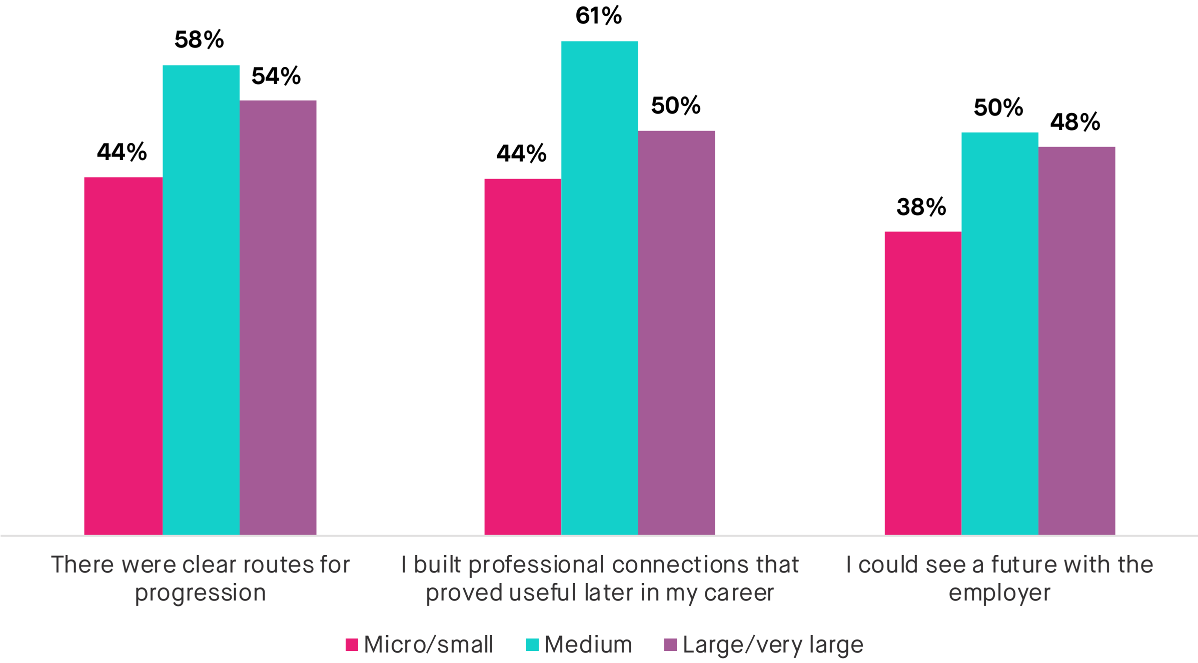
Support extends beyond formal training. Colleagues can access an internal coaching network, new starters in stores are typically paired with a buddy, and apprenticeship cohorts provide peer networks and access to mentors or sponsors. Co-op's young colleague network, Strive, also helps younger employees build connections, particularly those working in stores where they may have few colleagues of a similar age.

Co-op also collects socioeconomic background data across recruitment and employment, with more than 80% of existing colleagues providing this information. This enables the organisation to track who applies, progress through recruitment, moves through the organisation and leaves, and to target support where disparities emerge. One interviewee described having access to this data as "a bit of a game changer", allowing Co-op to move beyond "hearsay" and identify more precisely where barriers to progression sit.

Employer size again shaped the quality of progression infrastructure (Figure 19). Respondents whose first role was in a medium or large employer were more likely to report clear routes for progression: 58% of employees who worked for a medium size organisation and 54% of those who worked for a large or very large organisation agreed with this question. Interestingly, those who worked for a large (250-999 employees) were more likely to report this at 59%, whereas the average was pulled down by a lower score (49%) for those who worked for a very large firm (1,000+ employees). For employees of micro and small organisations, this was substantially lower at 34% and 48% respectively.

A similar pattern was seen for whether respondents agreed that they built professional connections that proved useful later in their career. This was lowest for those in micro organisations (38%), followed by very large (43%), indicating that there may be disadvantages both to working for particularly small and particularly large organisations early in your career. The majority (61%) of those working in medium organisations and 57% of those working in large organisations agreed to this question.

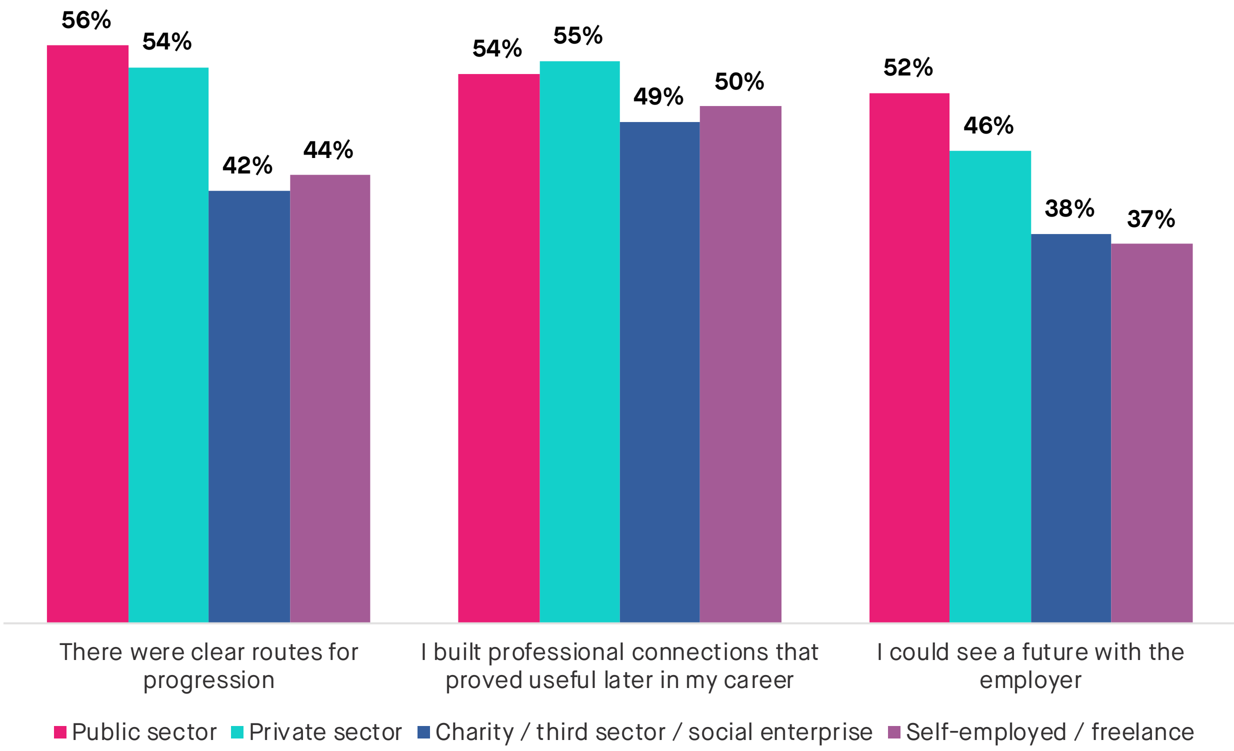
Figure 19: Percent of respondents who had agreed or strongly agreed to questions regarding progression, by employer size.



Source: Focaldata polling; n=3000

Sector differences were present but these were less stark than employer size. In both the private and public sector, agreement that there were clear routes to progression were similar, at 56% and 54% respectively. Agreement was lower and similar between those in the third sector (42%) and those who were freelance or self-employed (44%). Across different sectors, agreement on whether they built progressional connections that proved useful in their later career varied from 49% in the third sector to 55% in the private sector. Whether respondents felt that they could see a future with that employer varied more substantially by sector. 52% of those in the public sector and 46% of those in the private sector agreed to this question. Self-employed and freelance respondents were the least likely to report this at 37%, potentially reflecting weaker institutional structure around these kinds of first roles.

Figure 20: Percent of respondents who had agreed or strongly agreed to questions regarding progression, by sector of first employer.

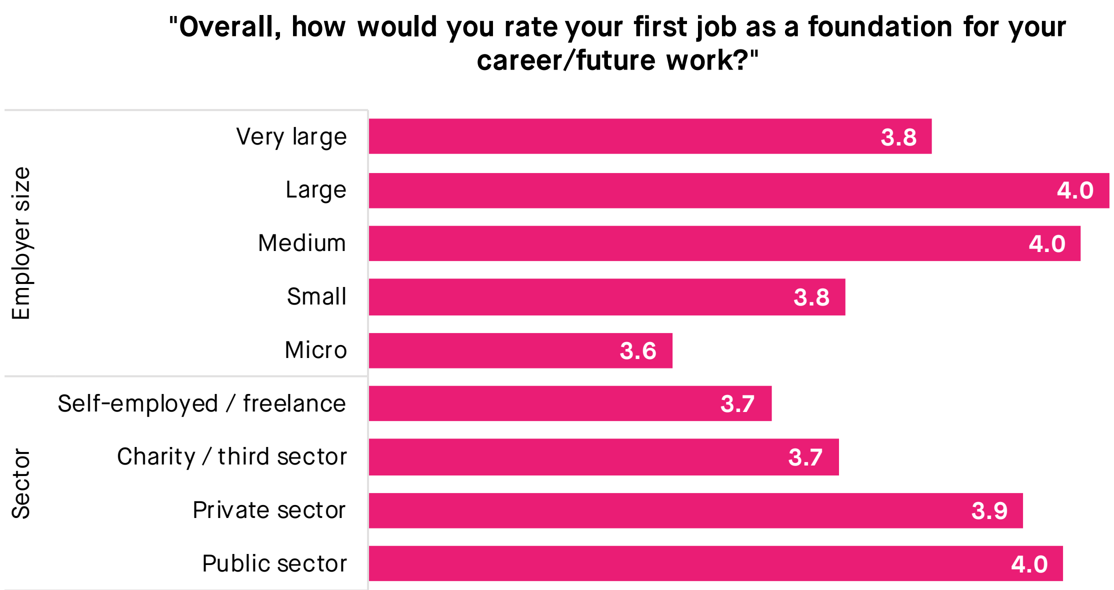


Source: Focaldata polling; n=3000

Overall, respondents were often fairly positive in assessing the holistic impact of their first job. When asked how they would rate it as a foundation for their career/future work, the majority (67%) rated it as either 'Excellent – it gave me a strong start' or 'Good – it gave me a reasonable foundation', with an average ranking across respondents of 3.8 out of 5. A minority rated their first role as either 'Very poor – it actively held me back' (3%) or 'Poor – it did not prepare me well' (6%).

However, there were substantial variations across both sector type and employer size (Figure 21). Those who worked in the public or private sector rated their first role more highly on average, at an average score of 4.0 and 3.9 respectively. Similarly, those who worked in a medium or large employer also had higher scores, both scoring 4.0. Respondents who rated their first role the lowest were in micro organisations with an average score of 3.6. They were also more likely to agree that it gave them a poor (8%) or very poor (7%) start in their career.

Figure 21: Average score for respondents', on a scale of 1 (very poor – it actively held me back) to 5 (Excellent – it gave me a strong start), by first employer sector and size.



Source: Focaldata polling; n=3000

Not all first jobs offer the same route forwards

A typology of first-job pathways

Taken together, these polling results show that first jobs vary substantially across multiple dimensions: the security of the contract, the size and sector of the employer, the support provided by managers and senior staff, the availability of training, the quality of workplace culture, whether skills were used well, and whether progression routes were visible. Looking at these indicators individually starts to provide some interesting insight into the potential characteristics of a 'good' first job and how common they are, but does not capture the holistic experience of a job where multiple of these factors may interact together, either undermining or reinforcing each other. A role could be supportive but offer little progression; stable but matched poorly to someone's skills; low-paid but developmental; or insecure but a useful route into something better.

To understand how these features combine, we used the survey indicators, alongside the results of 200 qualitative interviews discussed in Chapter 7, to identify five substantive types of first-job pathways. These categories are not intended to capture every detail of an individual job, but to distinguish between different kinds of early labour market experiences: those that accelerate progression, those that provide a useful stepping-stone, those that are comfortable but limiting, those that underuse people's skills, and those that offer little support or direction. This is also distinctly about labour market *experiences* – these categories are not fixed, attached to specific roles, employers, or industries. A role may be developmental for one person but limiting for another, depending on their background, support needs and future career goals.

Accelerator pathways were the clearest positive pathways. These were first jobs with relatively high levels of support, stability, development and progression infrastructure. Respondents in these roles were likely to report supportive managers, clear routes for progression, opportunities to grow and a strong foundation for later work. They made up 13% of the sample, but were associated with the highest average salary by age 35 and the strongest average salary growth.

Stepping-stone pathways were the largest group, accounting for 29% of respondents. These jobs were not necessarily ideal in terms of someone's long-term career goals, but provided useful skills, experience or confidence that were transferable and helped people move forwards. They may not have offered the full structure of an accelerator pathway, but they still functioned as a meaningful platform for future work.

Underemployment pathways were more complex. These were roles that often had some developmental or labour-market value, but where respondents strongly felt that their skills and qualifications were being underutilised and/or that they were overqualified for the role. This group made up 17% of respondents. Their relatively high average current salary and salary growth suggest that underemployment in a first job is not necessarily a long-term trap, but that a substantial minority of respondents were experiencing this early mismatch.

Comfort-trap pathways were stable and often even enjoyable roles, but roles that did not provide strong opportunities for progression. Respondents in this group may have some security or belonging, but weaker routes into development, promotion or career movement. These roles accounted for 13% of respondents and were associated with relatively low current salaries and the weakest average salary growth.

Low-mobility pathways were the clearest negative pathway. These were first jobs with low levels of support, weak developmental value, limited progression and poor foundations for future work. They made up 13% of the sample and were associated with the lowest average current salary.

Finally, mixed or unclear trajectory roles accounted for the remaining 15% of respondents. These were jobs where the indicators did not point strongly in one direction. Some may have had a mix of positive and negative features, which others may reflect more ambiguous or uneven career experiences.

Table 1: Share of respondents in each job type, as well as the average current salary per job type (annual FTE, £), and average salary growth (£) per year.

	Share of full sample	Average salary by age 35	Average salary growth per year
Accelerator	13%	£55,000	£4,100
Stepping-stone	29%	£47,000	£3,100
Underemployment	17%	£54,000	£3,200
Comfort-trap	13%	£30,000	£2,000
Low-mobility	13%	£28,000	£2,900

Source: SMF analysis of Focaldata polling; n=3000

The distribution shows that only a minority of first jobs were clear accelerator pathways. The largest group were stepping-stone pathways, suggesting that many first jobs may be imperfect in terms of the support they provide or the extent to which they align with a young person's future goals, but they can still be useful and be associated with positive labour market returns.

The underemployment category shows that this is not always a simple "good job/bad job" distinction. Respondents in this group had relatively strong later salary outcomes but described mismatch in their first job: skills not being fully used, qualifications exceeding the demands of the role, and often insufficient support. However, the relatively high levels of qualifications for this group may explain the stronger later-life salaries regardless of this early mismatch.

However, a substantial minority began in roles that were low-mobility, comfort-traps or unclear pathways. This matters because, as shown in Table 1, these typologies of roles are associated with specific labour market outcomes in our sample. Respondents whose first jobs were accelerators reported the highest average salaries by age 35 and strongest annual salary growth, while low-mobility and comfort-traps were associated with much lower current pay. Low-mobility pathways were associated with slightly higher per-year salary growth than comfort-trap pathways, but started on much lower salaries originally. And, as discussed in Chapter Five, there are also substantial variations in who actually gets to access these developmental roles, versus who are more likely to end up 'stuck' in low-mobility or comfort-trap pathways, which risks reinforcing cycles of labour market inequality.

CHAPTER FIVE – INEQUALITY IN ACCESS

It's clear that first jobs are not equal; that having a good first job matters, not just during employment but in terms of your longer term career prospects too. Some first jobs give young people the training, confidence, networks and support, allowing them to utilise clear progression routes and accelerate their career early on. Some are stable – perhaps enjoyable – but fail to facilitate progression or upskilling. And others leave young workers underused, unsupported or unclear about where they can go next.

This matters because the first job is not simply a starting point, or a holding job until something better comes along. It can shape long-term how people feel about work and their role in the labour market, how confident they feel in professional settings, whether they build useful connections and how quickly they are able to move into better-paid or more secure roles – or if they can at all. As we've seen, this has material implications not just for the experience of that young person but is also associated with their later earnings too. The typology developed in previous chapters distinguishes between accelerator pathways, stepping-stone pathways, comfort-traps, underemployment and low-mobility pathways, and sets out what characteristics are associated with each.

This chapter asks a different question: **who gets access to each of these pathways?**

If good first jobs were evenly distributed, we would expect young people from different educational, socioeconomic and personal backgrounds to be similarly likely to enter accelerator or stepping-stone pathways. But if access is unequal, first jobs may become an early mechanism through which existing advantage or disadvantage is reinforced. Those who start in roles with training, support and progression may therefore be perversely the ones least likely to need it, while those who start in weaker roles may be left unable to catch up.

> *"Certain roles are absolutely pivotal if somebody wants to move onto a leadership trajectory.* ***But it is often opaque which jobs provide that acceleration, how somebody gets access to them, and how those opportunities are distributed****. In practice, they can be heavily gatekept." Labour market academic*

The first job isn't really the starting line

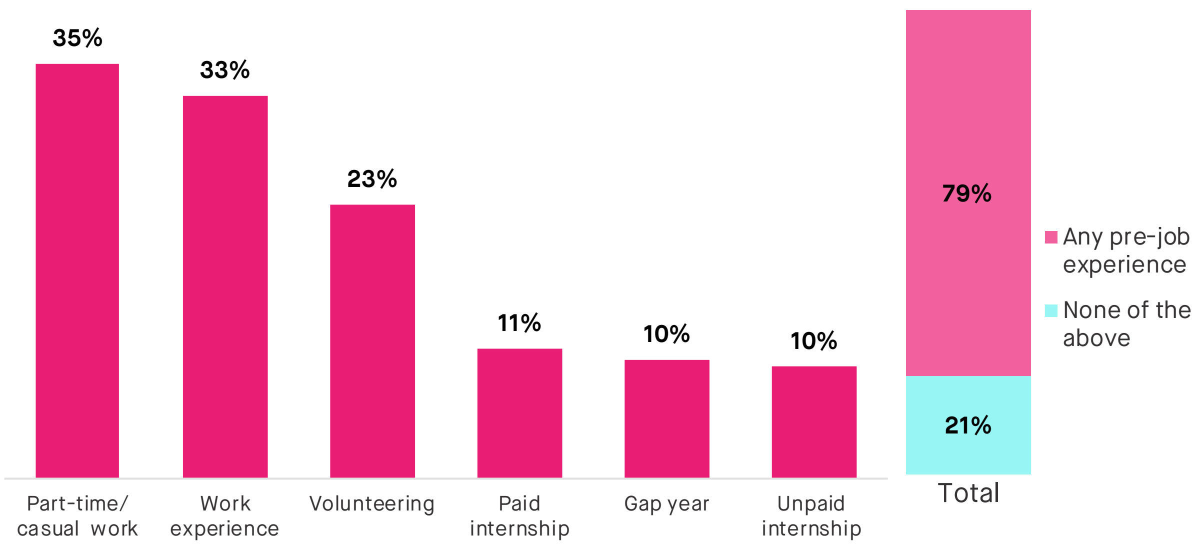
> *"For students who are the first in their family to attend university, arriving at university may already be the biggest transition they have experienced****. It can then be a huge shock to discover in their first term that some of their middle-class peers are already securing spring-week placements through knowledge and connections they have gained from their families****." Social mobility policy expert*

By the time a young person comes to apply for their first proper role, many have already accumulated experiences that will give them an additional advantage during recruitment. They may have had a part time or casual role that gave them exposure to the workplace, taken a gap year to travel and become more confident in the process, or perhaps had family support that allowed them to take advantage of unpaid internships related to the field they are interested in. Others will arrive to the first-job market with much less – sometimes no – prior exposure to work, or none that is relevant to the field in which they wish to build a career.

> *"Many of the stepping-stone opportunities that lead into graduate careers - insight days, spring weeks and informal work experience - are unadvertised, unpaid or circulated through existing networks.* ***That creates a substantial barrier before formal recruitment has even begun.****" Social mobility policy expert*

Our polling found that the majority of young people did have some form of work-related or developmental experience before starting their first proper job (Figure 22). The most common form of prior experience was having undertaken part-time, casual paid work, reported by 35% of respondents, followed closely by work experience or shadowing at 33%. Almost a quarter had volunteered, while smaller proportions had completed a paid internship (11%), unpaid internship (10%), or taken a gap year (10%).

Figure 22. Before starting your first proper job, had you done any of the following?



Source: Focaldata polling; n=3000

Whether a young person had had any of these experiences prior to their first role was strongly associated with whether they ended up in a role that progressed them or not (Table 2). Respondents who had completed an internship prior to their first proper job were more than twice as likely as those with no pre-work experience to be in an accelerator pathway, at 22% compared with 9%. In contrast, respondents with no experience at all were four times as likely than those with internship experience to be in a low-mobility pathway, at 20% compared with 5%. Having any kind of pre-job experience narrows the gap, but does not eliminate it. The largest divide is between those with some form of pre-work experience and those with none at all, however internships appear to be associated with an additional advantage, particularly in access to those accelerator pathways.

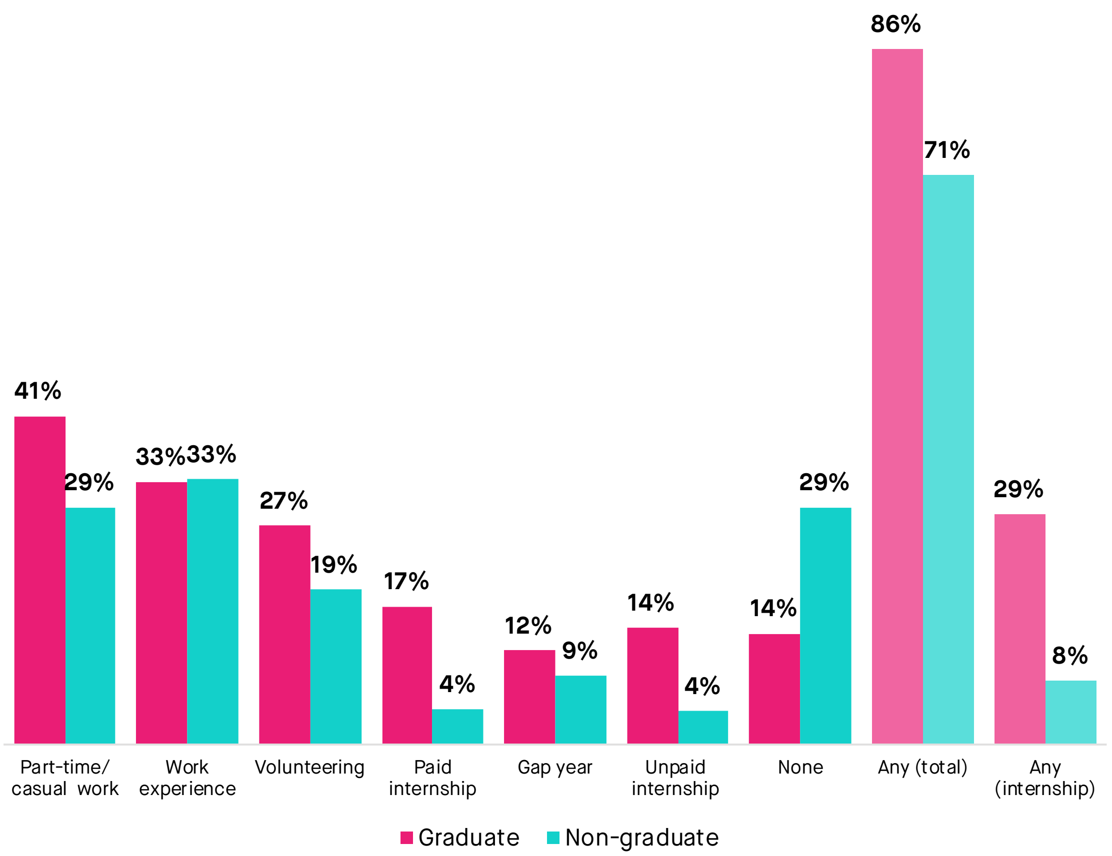
Table 2: Table showing the proportion of respondents who had either had prior internship experience, any pre-work experience, or no experience in different job pathways.

	Had internship experience	Had any of the listed experience	No pre-work experience
Accelerator	22%	15%	9%
Stepping-stone	32%	30%	26%
Underemployment	24%	19%	10%
Comfort-trap	9%	12%	15%
Low-mobility	5%	11%	20%

Source: SMF analysis of Focaldata polling; n=3000

However, access to these pre-work experiences were highly uneven. Graduates were much more likely than non-graduates to have done some form of activity before their first proper job: 86% compared with 71%. The gap was particularly stark for internships, with graduates more than three times more likely to have done one at 29% compared with 8%. Work experience was the only area where a gap wasn't present, likely because this is often organised through schools or other educational institutions themselves.

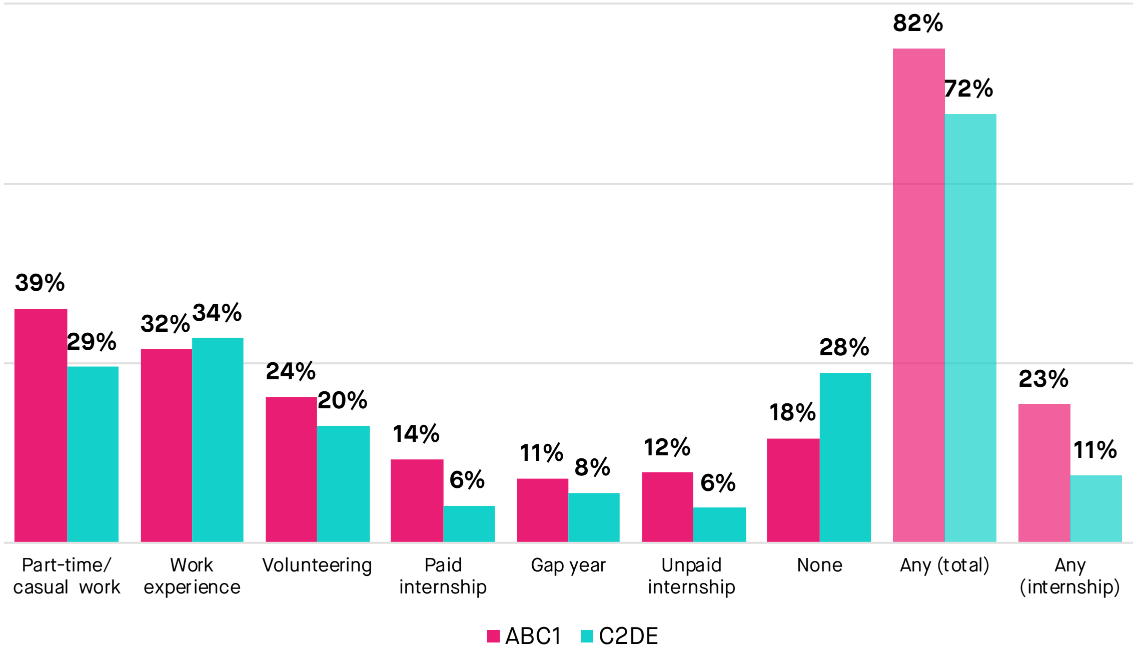
Figure 23: Responses to "Before starting your first proper job, had you done any of the following?", by graduate vs non-graduate levels of education.



Source: Focaldata polling; n=3000

There was a similar divide by socioeconomic background. Respondents from more advantaged backgrounds (ABC1) were more likely than those from disadvantaged backgrounds (C2DE) to have done any pre-work activity, at 82% compared with 72%. They were also twice as likely to have completed an internship, at 23% compared with 11%. By contrast, less advantaged respondents were more likely to have done none of the listed activities before starting their first proper job (Figure 24).

Figure 24: Responses to "Before starting your first proper job, had you done any of the following?", by socioeconomic status.



Source: Focaldata polling; n=2670

Access to good first jobs is socially patterned

Just as access to pre-work experience is highly unequal, access to good first jobs is also socially patterned. Respondents with more educational and socioeconomic advantage were more likely to begin their working lives in accelerator or stepping-stone pathways, while those without these advantages were more likely to begin in low-mobility, comfort-trap or unclear pathways.

> *"There was very little difference in who was applying. This was not an ambition or aspiration problem: **working-class candidates did want to access these jobs**. The inequality arose because they were more likely to be screened out as they moved through the recruitment process." - Labour market academic*

Those from more advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to start in stronger first-job pathways. Respondents from more advantaged backgrounds were more likely than those from C2DE backgrounds to be in accelerator pathways, at 15% compared with 11%, and stepping-stone pathways, at 30% compared with 26%. Disadvantaged respondents were more likely to be in low-mobility pathways, comfort-traps and mixed or unclear trajectories.

Socioeconomic differences persist even when the analysis is restricted to graduates. Graduates from C2DE backgrounds were almost twice as likely as ABC1 graduates to begin in a low-mobility job (15% compared with 8%), while ABC1 graduates were more likely to enter accelerator pathways (18% compared with 14%) and underemployment pathways (23% compared with 19%). This suggests that obtaining a degree narrows, but does not remove, inequalities in access to stronger first-job pathways.

Table 3: Table showing the proportion of respondents in different job pathways, by socioeconomic background.

	ABC1	C2DE
Accelerator	15%	11%
Stepping-stone	30%	26%
Underemployment	19%	13%
Comfort-trap	12%	16%
Low-mobility	10%	16%
Mixed / unclassified	14%	18%

Source: SMF analysis of Focaldata polling; n=3000

A similar pattern can be seen based on educational background. Around 1 in 6 graduates were in accelerator pathways, compared with 1 in 10 non-graduates. Graduates were also more likely to be in stepping-stone pathways, at 31% compared with 27%. By contrast, non-graduates were more likely to be in low-mobility pathways, at 16% compared with 10% for graduates.

Table 4: Table showing the proportion of graduates and non-graduates in different job pathways.

	Graduate	Non-graduate
Accelerator	17%	10%
Stepping-stone	31%	27%
Underemployment	22%	11%
Comfort-trap	11%	15%
Low-mobility	10%	16%
Mixed/unclassified	9%	21%

Source: SMF analysis of Focaldata polling; n=3000

School background also mattered. Respondents who attended private school were slightly more likely than state-education respondents to be in accelerator pathways, and almost half as likely to be in low-mobility pathways (Table 5).

Table 5: Table showing the proportion of respondents in different job pathways, by school background.

	Private	State
Accelerator	17%	13%
Stepping-stone	32%	29%
Underemployment	22%	15%
Comfort-trap	12%	14%
Low-mobility	7%	13%
Mixed / unclassified	10%	14%

Source: SMF analysis of Focaldata polling; n=3000

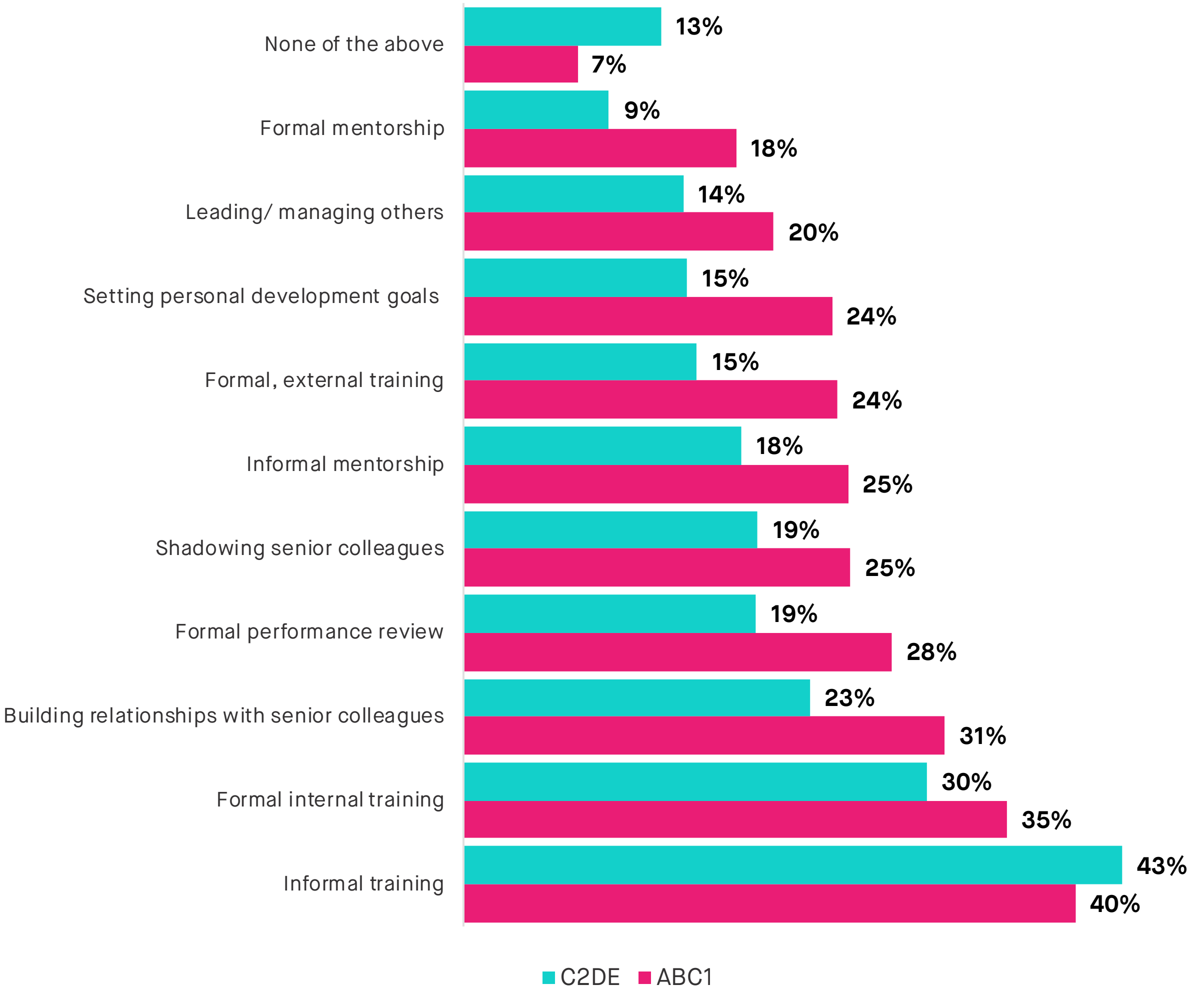
However, graduates, those from more advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds and private school respondents were also all more likely to be in an underemployment role. These are roles that may have some support and developmental value, but where the respondent is overqualified and their skills underutilised. For example, 22% of graduates were in these roles compared to 11% of non-graduates. While they may be more likely to access top jobs, they are less likely to feel that their skills and potential are well matched to their first role.

These differences in access are also visible in the specific forms of support, training and progression that respondents received in their first role. Respondents from more advantaged backgrounds were more likely than those from less advantaged backgrounds to report access to structured forms of development. They were more likely to have a formal performance review or appraisal, opportunities to build relationships with senior colleagues, informal mentorship, formal external training, personal development goals and formal mentorship. For example, 28% of more advantaged respondents had a formal performance review or appraisal, compared with 19% of less advantaged respondents. Formal mentorship was twice as common among advantaged respondents, at 18% compared with 9%.

By contrast, access to informal training was slightly more common for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, at 43% compared to 40%. They were also almost twice as likely to not have had access to any type of training or support in their first role.

Figure 25: Access to training and development support in first job, by socioeconomic status.

Source: Focaldata polling; n=3000



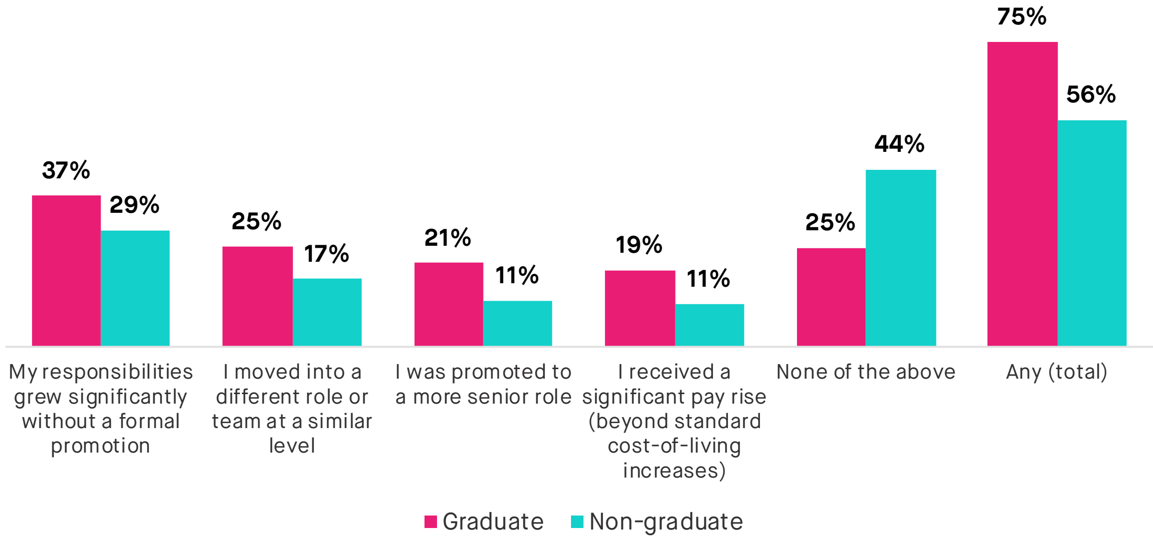
The same pattern holds in wider measures of skills, confidence, belonging and progression. Those from more advantaged backgrounds were more likely to agree that their first job taught them important skills, increased their confidence, made them feel ready for more senior work and offered them opportunities to grow. The gaps were particularly large on progression-related measures. 68% of more advantaged respondents said they felt ready to take on more senior work by the end of their first role, 14 percentage points higher than those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. ABC1 respondents were also much more likely to say they built professional connections that proved useful later in their career, at 56% compared with 38%.

> *"As people move through their career, there is often a growing premium on less tangible qualities: relationships, networks and self-presentation.* ***The danger is that a particular form of middle-class self-presentation is misrecognised as a natural ability to lead or influence."*** *- Labour market academic*

Graduate status showed a similar divide. Graduates were more likely than non-graduates to report almost every positive feature of a first job. They were more likely to say that they learnt important skills, gained confidence, felt ready for more senior work, had opportunities to grow and develop, and saw clear routes for progression. The largest differences again related to progression and networks: 3 in 5 graduates said they built professional connections that proved useful later in their career, compared with less than 2 in 5 non-graduates. 58% of graduates said there were clear routes for progression, compared with 42% of non-graduates.

These differences were associated with actual progression while respondents were with their first employer. Three-quarters of graduates experienced some form of progression, pay rise or role change in their first job, compared with 56% of non-graduates. Graduates were nearly twice as likely to have been formally promoted into a more senior role, at 21% compared with 11%, and were also more likely to have received a significant pay rise. By contrast, 44% of non-graduates experienced none of the listed forms of progression, compared with 25% of graduates.

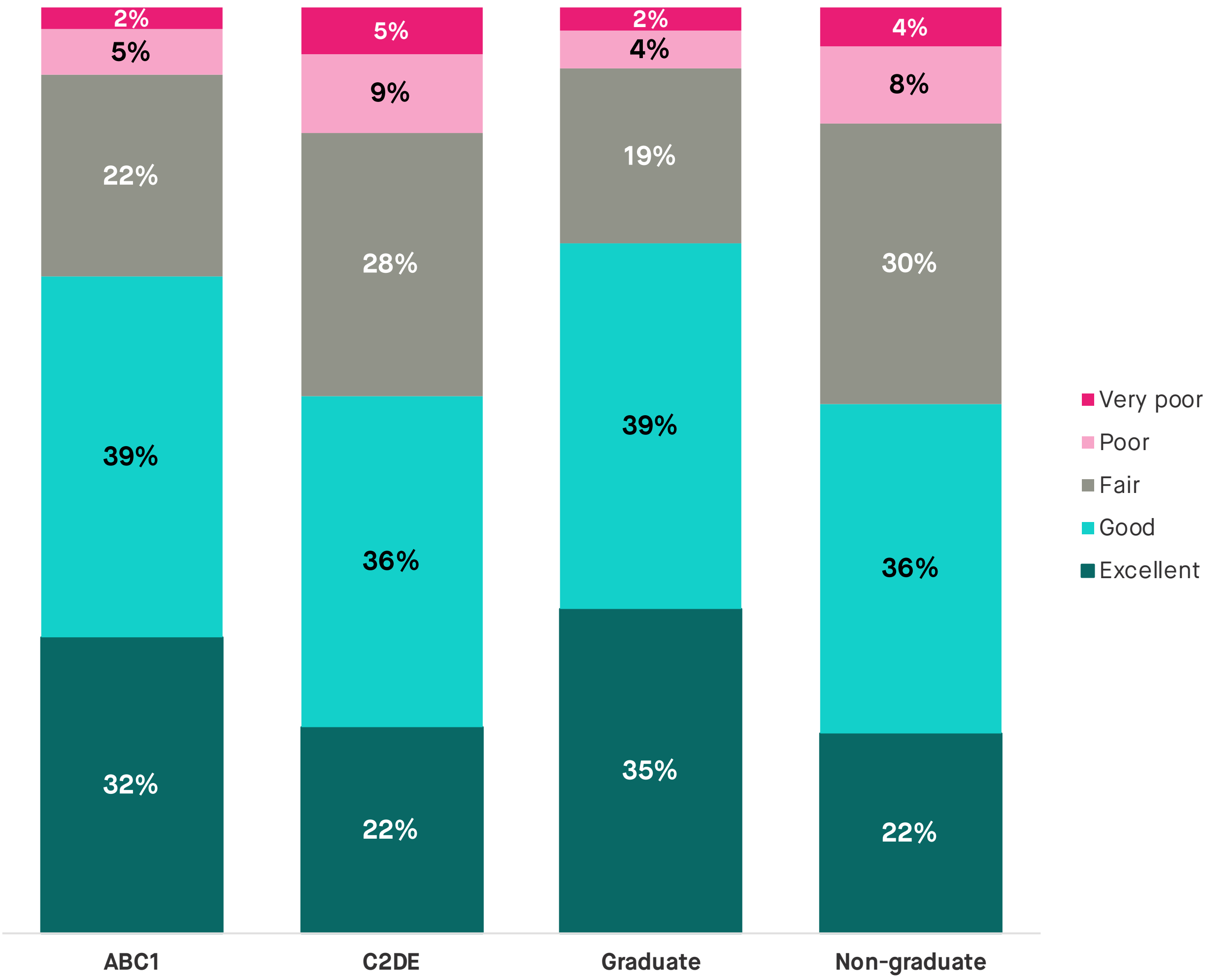
Figure 26: Experiences of progression in first role, by graduate and non-graduate education level.



Source: Focaldata polling; n=3000

Finally, respondents' overall assessment of their first job as a foundation for later work followed the same pattern. The vast majority (74%) of graduates rated their first job as either excellent or good as a foundation for their career, compared with 57% of non-graduates. Similarly, 71% of respondents from higher socioeconomic backgrounds rated their first job as excellent or good, compared with 58% of working class respondents. Non-graduates and working class respondents were almost twice as likely to say their first job was poor or very poor as a foundation.

Figure 27: "Overall, how would you rate your first job as a foundation for your career/future work?", by socioeconomic background and graduate/non-graduate status.



Source: Focaldata polling; n=3000

These findings highlight the particular risk that non-graduates enter jobs offering less training, support and scope for progression. However, this is not inevitable: some employers are deliberately designing entry routes that prioritise potential and give non-graduates the qualifications, pastoral support and visible progression pathways they need to build a career (Box 4).

Box 4 – Case study: London Early Years Foundation

London Early Years Foundation (LEYF) is a charitable social enterprise that runs 40+ nurseries employing over 100 staff across London. The organisation has a comprehensive approach to development and progression of early career staff, including an in-house apprenticeship academy, delivering a Level 3 early years qualification. Cohorts have 25+ people, placed in nurseries across the network. LEYF's Director of People and Culture, Mel Wright, said ***"there aren't enough qualified Level 3***

teachers coming through the system, if we don't grow our own – it becomes a big issue for us later on for recruitment".

Their selection process focuses on attitude and potential, rather than qualifications, and this year the organisation has seen a large number of applications from young people not in education, employment or training (NEET). *"These young people are looking for employers able to equip them with the basic life and work skills they need, as well as helping to figure out if a career in early years is right for them. We know we can teach high-quality education and care –* ***what we're looking for is adaptability, flexibility, resilience and a passion for working with children****. You can't teach that passion."*

Because many of LEYF's recruits are entering the workplace for the first time, pastoral support is a core focus for the organisation. Every new joiner is paired with either an apprentice coach or a buddy who they are in contact with before or on the day of joining, with regular catch-ups for at least their first three months in the organisation.

Managers are another crucial part of the support provided, both for initial settling-in, and for long-term development and progression. *"Day to day, the support provided really depends on the individual. Particularly initially, this can include explaining the importance of arriving on time for staff ratios or looking at how to cope with stress and expectations - either from work or their qualifications. Our managers and our Apprentice and Degree Teams work closely together and need to be able to flex a lot, to say – this may help, try this person, look at these benefits we offer which might be of help."*

Development continues well beyond the initial qualification. Alongside the apprenticeship, staff receive behavioural skills training covering communication with parents, financial literacy, managing multiple priorities and reflective practice. Those who want to go further can continue to progress - including the opportunity to work their way up to a Level 6 degree. Progression routes are clearly defined, from unqualified to qualified, then room manager, deputy manager and nursery manager. The scale of the network means staff can move between sites rather than waiting for a vacancy.

There are also lateral routes for progression into their central office roles, such as billing and invoicing, and specialist pathways such as SENCO or pedagogy coach roles. Pathways are communicated from pre-boarding onwards, through supervisions and webinars featuring staff sharing their own journeys.

LEYF tracks how well its support is working through their retention rates, apprenticeship completions, the conversion of apprentices into internal roles, an engagement survey, a recruitment check-in at 6-9 weeks and an onboarding survey at 12 weeks. Wright notes LEYF and some others across the sector has a retention "sticking point" at around 18 months to two years – staff who pass it often stay for decades.

The organisation offers real routes for social mobility - "People often say to me, 'I'm the first in my family to get a qualification – LEYF gave me the chance I never thought I would have. Others turned me away.' And we really benefit too, because they're amazing people." But Wright is clear that employer effort alone has limits, pointing to low sector pay constrained by government funding and a lack of careers support in schools: "employers will always do the best for their people, but we can't do that without wider support."

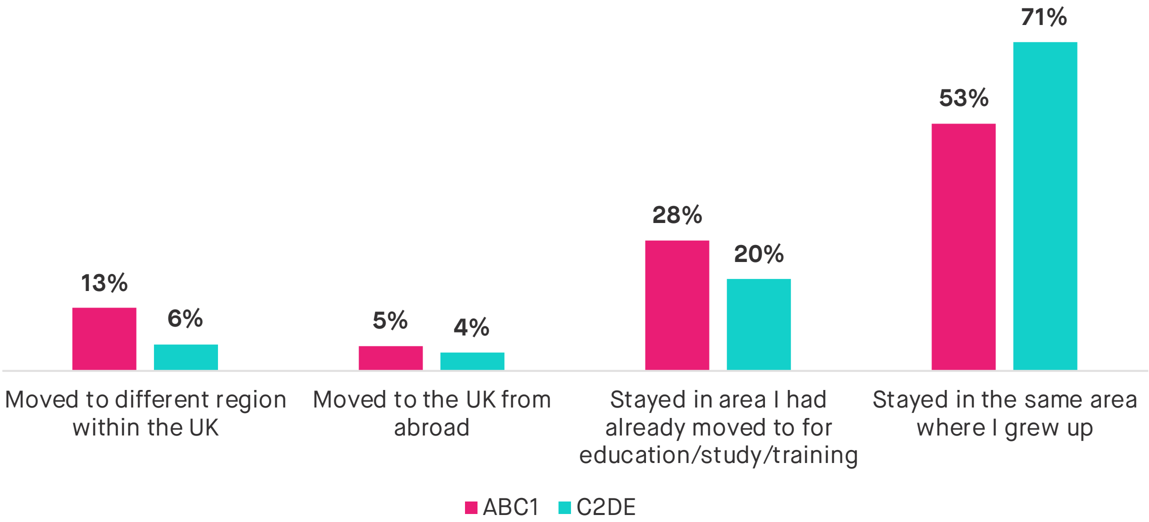
Place shapes the first-job market which people can access

Access to a good first job is also shaped by place. Some of this will be interacting with socioeconomic status and broader forms of disadvantage, for example some regions having higher levels of deprivation that others. But some of this will also be about the strength and composition of the local labour market, as well as whether the young people in it are able to easily travel to where better jobs are located.

Most respondents did not move to take up their first proper job. Overall, 58% stayed in the area in which they grew up, while a further 26% stayed in an area they'd already moved to for education, study or training. Only just over 1 in 10 (11%) specifically moved to a different region to take up their job.

However, moving was not evenly distributed. Respondents from more advantaged backgrounds were more likely to have moved, either for education or for their first job. Advantaged respondents were more than twice as likely to have moved to a different region within the UK to take their first proper job, at 13% compared with 6% of respondents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. More advantaged respondents were also more likely to have stayed in an area they had already moved to for education, study or training, at 28% compared with 20%. By contrast, working class respondents were much more likely to have stayed in the area where they grew up: 71%, compared with 53% of advantaged respondents.

Figure 28: Graph showing proportion of respondents who had moved either for education or first their first role, by socioeconomic background.



Source: Focaldata polling; n=2670

This matters because geographic mobility can widen or constrain the range of first jobs available. Young people who are willing and able to move for education, training or work may be able to access broader labour markets, larger employers, graduate schemes, internships or sector-specific opportunities that are not available locally. Those who remain in the area where they grew up may still access strong first jobs, but their opportunities are more dependent on the quality of local employment.

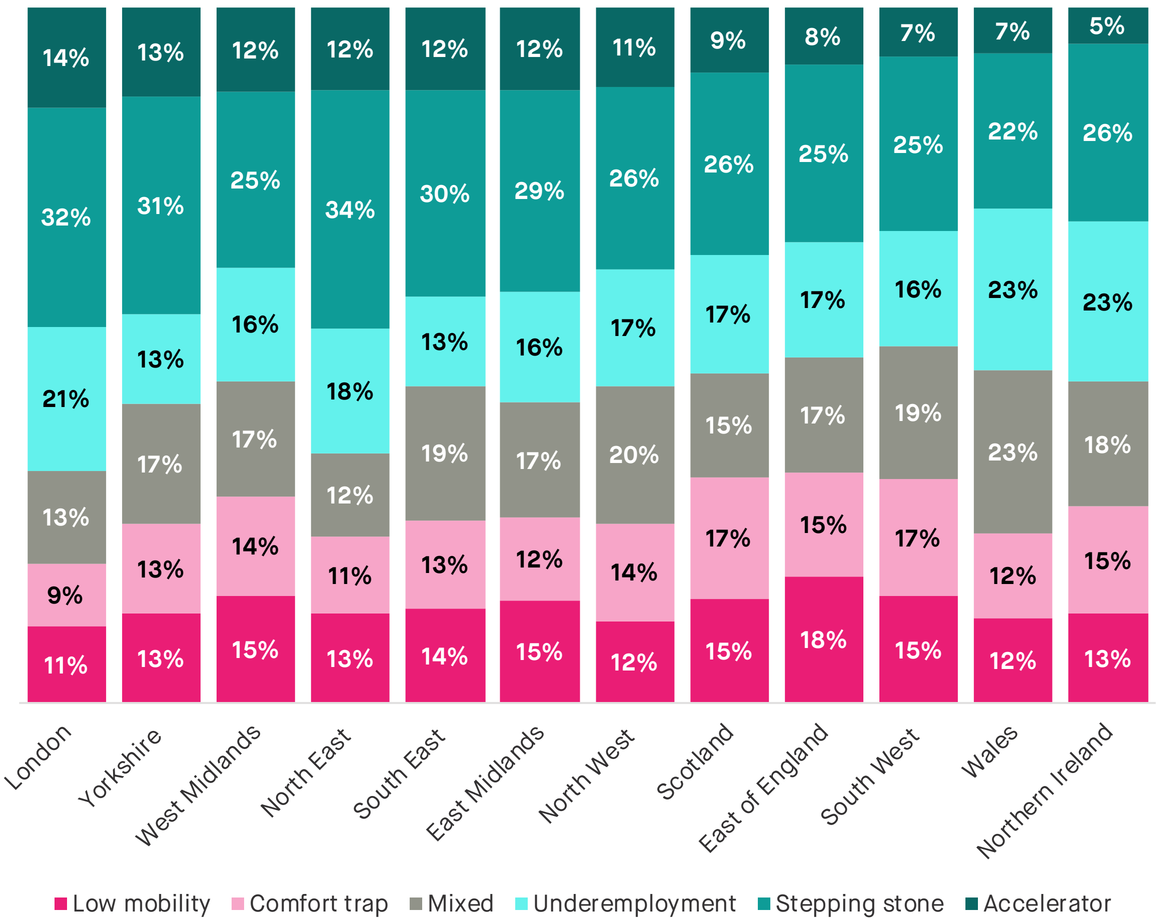
> *"What is sometimes described as self-sorting may be a **perfectly rational response to how opportunity is geographically distributed**. If progression in a prestigious profession requires somebody from Bradford to move to London, they are being asked to move away from their family, networks and identity in exchange for status, salary and career progression. **It is entirely rational for some people to decide that the things pulling them home matter more.**" Labour market academic*

Regional differences in first job pathways suggest that the mix of opportunities available varies across local labour markets. London had one of the strongest profiles overall: respondents whose first job was in London were more likely than the national average to be in accelerator pathways, at 14%, and stepping-stone pathways, at 32%. They were also less likely to be in comfort-trap pathways, at 9%. This is consistent with London's larger and more diverse labour market, with greater concentrations of professional, corporate and public policy roles, although these figures may also reflect people moving to London to access particular types of work rather than just the effect of the London labour market on those already living there. It is also notable that London had a relatively high share of underemployment pathway, at 21%.

Some regions had a weaker first-job profile. Respondents in the East of England were the most likely to be in low-mobility pathways, at 18%, and had one of the lowest shares in accelerator pathways, at 8%. The South West also had a relatively low share of accelerator pathways, at 7%, and a higher share of comfort-trap pathways, at 17%. Wales and Northern Ireland had particularly low shares of accelerator pathways, at 7% and 5% respectively, and relatively high shares of underemployment. In Wales, almost a quarter of respondents were in the underemployment pathway, and a similar share were in mixed or unclear trajectories.

There were also some regions where first jobs appeared more likely to function as stepping-stones, even if they were not always accelerators. In the North East, 34% of respondents were in stepping-stone pathways, the highest of any region. Yorkshire and the Humber also had a relatively high share in stepping-stone pathways, at 31%. This suggests that access to a useful first job does not only depend on being in London or the South East. Some regional labour markets may offer roles that provide skills, experience and a platform for moving on, even if they are less likely to provide the full package of support and progression associated with accelerator pathways.

Figure 29: Proportion of respondents in different job pathways, by region of first job, ordered by highest proportion of accelerator pathways to lowest.



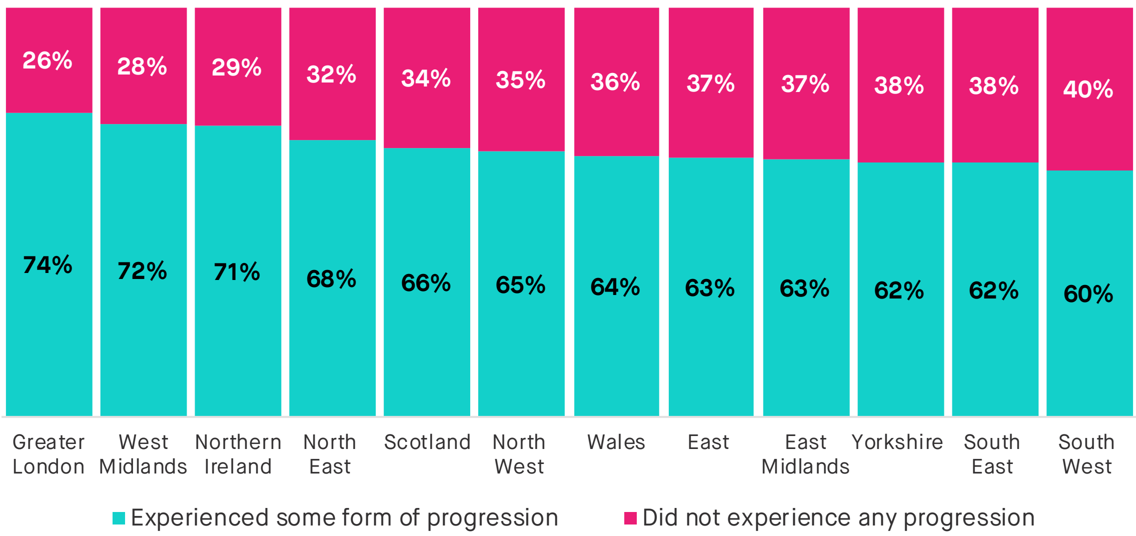
Source: SMF analysis of Focaldata polling; n=3000

Regional differences were also visible in respondents' experiences of progression while working for their first employer. Respondents in London were particularly likely to have experienced some form of progression, pay rise or role change, at 74%. This included higher-than-average rates of responsibility growth, formal promotion and significant pay increases. The West Midlands also had a relatively high share reporting any progression, at 72%, while Northern Ireland was similarly high at 71%.

By contrast, respondents in the South West were least likely to report any progression, pay rise or role change, at 60%, followed by the South East and Yorkshire and the Humber, both at 62%. In the South West, 40% of respondents reported none of the listed forms of progression while working for their first employer.

> *"If organisations are serious about widening progression, **they need to change the geographical distribution of high-status and progression-enabling roles**. The answer cannot always be to ask individuals to move to London; **organisations also need to move opportunity**." Labour market academic*

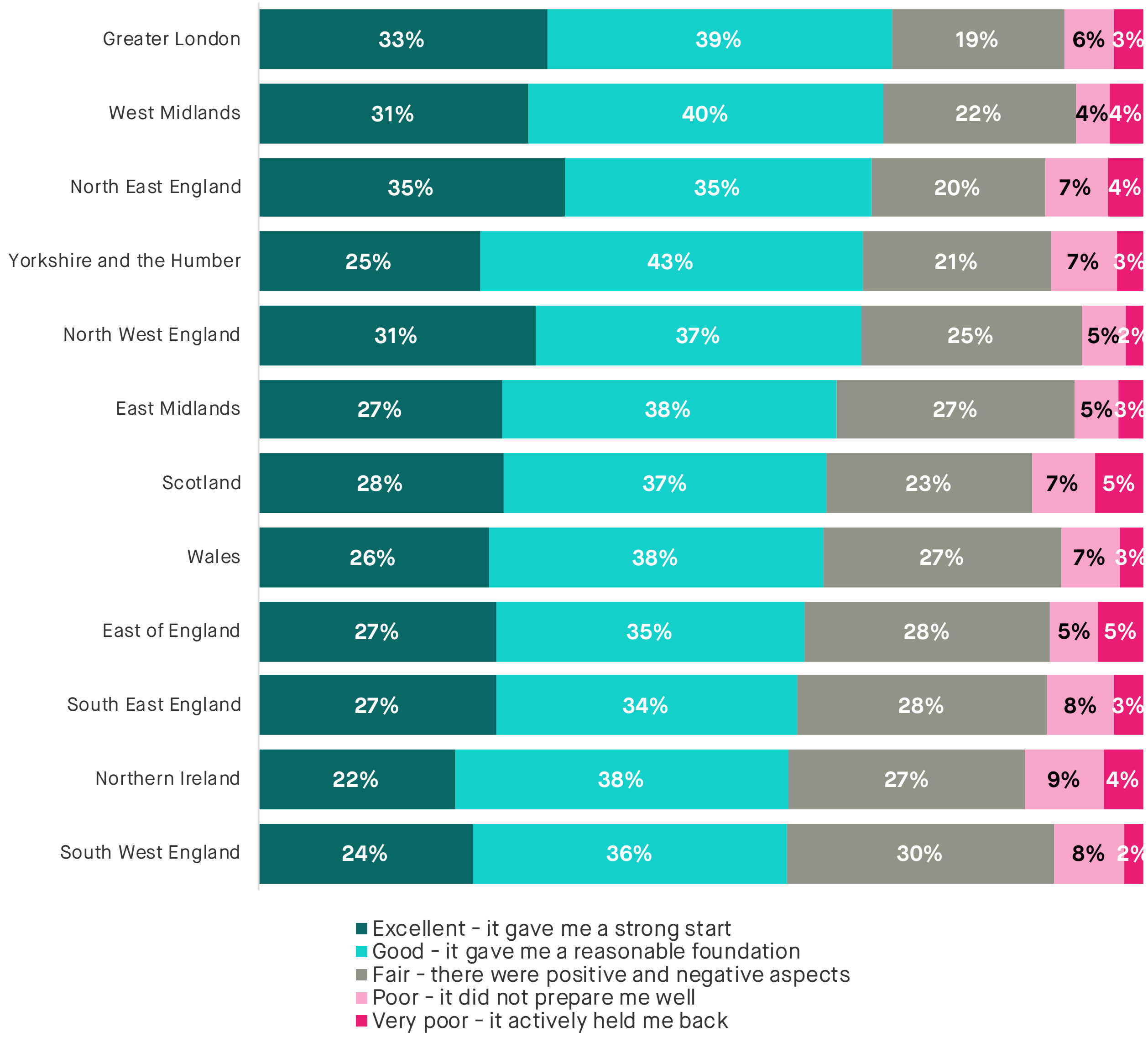
Figure 30: Proportion of respondents who experienced progression in their first role, by region.



Source: SMF analysis of Focaldata polling; n=3000

Despite these differences, respondents' overall rating of their first job as a foundation for their career was positive across most regions (Figure 31). London again had one of the strongest profiles, with 72% rating their first job as excellent or good. The West Midlands was similar at 71%, while the North East, Yorkshire and Humber and the North West also had relatively high ratings. The South West had the lowest share rating their first job as excellent or good at 60%, followed by the South East and East of England.

Figure 31: "Overall, how would you rate your first job as a foundation for your career/future work?", by region, ordered by overall excellent + good scores.



Source: SMF analysis of Focaldata polling; n=3000

Urban and rural areas also shape the quality of first jobs

As well as the region someone lives in, the type of area they live in was also important to the kinds of first roles that they were able to access. Respondents living in major cities and metropolitan areas had the strongest first job profile overall, while those living in small villages or rural areas had weaker outcomes across several measures.

Respondents living in major cities were the most likely to have been in accelerator pathways, at 18%, and stepping-stone pathways, at 33%. They were also the least likely to be in low-mobility or comfort-trap pathways, both at 9%. By contrast, respondents in villages or rural areas were almost twice as likely as those in major cities to be in low-mobility pathways, at 17% compared with 9%, and were much less likely to be in stepping-stone pathways, at 23% compared with 33%. They were also the most likely to be in mixed or unclear trajectories, at 22%.

This isn't surprising: major cities tend to have greater concentration of large employers, professional roles and entry schemes. Rural areas may still offer valuable and meaningful first jobs, but the range of employers and structured progression routes availability locally is likely to be more limited.

Table 6. Table showing the proportion of respondents in different job pathways, by urban/rural split.

	Major city	Small city or town	Suburbs of a city	Rural villages / countryside
Accelerator	18%	11%	14%	11%
Stepping-stone	33%	28%	23%	23%
Underemployment	21%	16%	13%	13%
Comfort-trap	9%	15%	14%	14%
Low-mobility	9%	9%	14%	17%
Mixed / unclassified	10%	21%	22%	22%

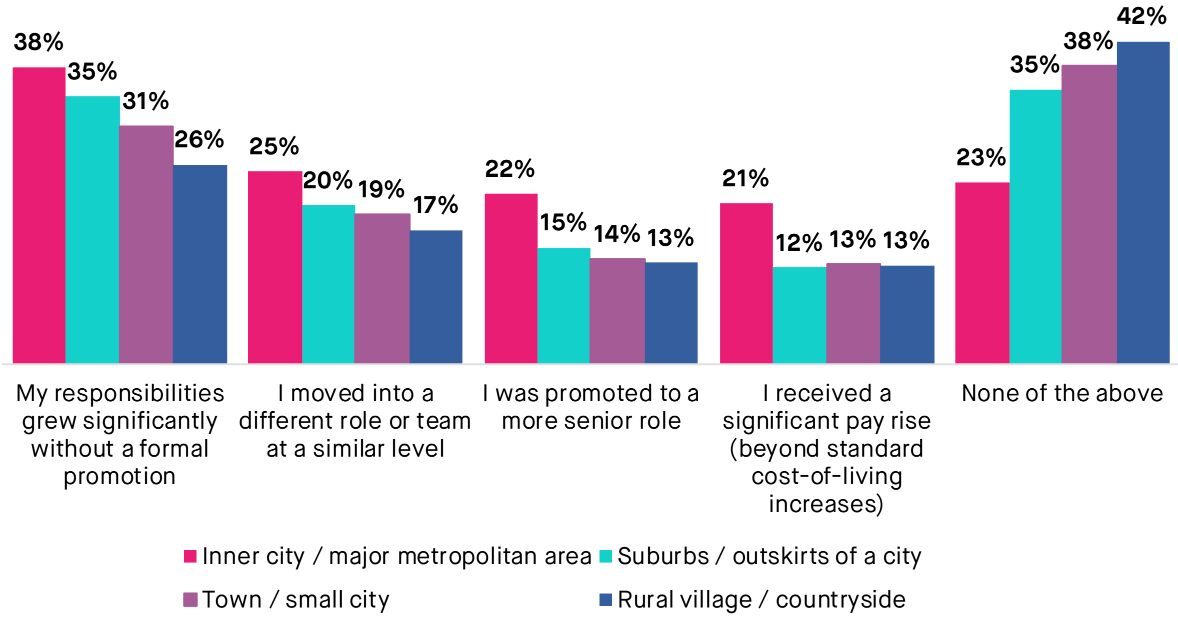
Source: SMF analysis of Focaldata polling; n=3000

This was also reflected in access to training and development. Respondents living in major cities were more likely than those in villages or rural areas to report having had most forms of structured support. Half of respondents in major cities had received some form of formal training, compared with 36% of those in villages or rural areas. Formal mentorship was also almost twice as common among those in major cities, at 21% compared with 11%. Major city respondents were also more likely to have had opportunities to build relationships with senior colleagues, access formal external training, set personal development goals and lead or manage others. By contrast, respondents in rural areas were more likely to have received informal training, similar to the pattern seen by socioeconomic status.

Respondents in major cities were also more likely to say that their first employer had been willing to invest in their development, at 58% compared to 38% for those in rural areas. They were also more likely to report that there were clear routes for progression, that they built networks useful to their later careers, that the culture in their first workplace was supportive, that they felt safe making mistakes and that they saw people like themselves in senior roles.

Experiences of actual progression during their first job followed a similar pattern. More than three-quarters of respondents in major cities experienced some form of progression, pay rise or role change while working for their first employer, compared with 58% of those in villages or rural areas. Major city respondents were also more likely to have been promoted into a more senior role, to have moved into a different role or team, and to have received a significant pay rise. By contrast, 42% of respondents in villages or rural areas experienced none of the listed forms of progression.

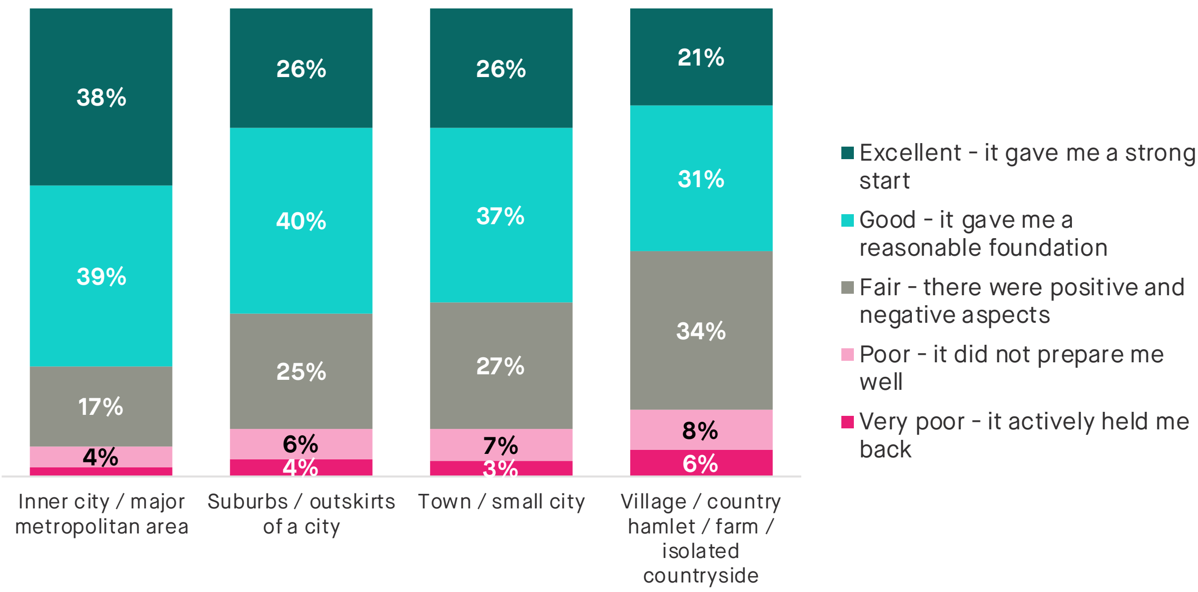
Figure 32. Proportion of respondents who experienced progression in their first role, by type of area they live in.



Source: SMF analysis of Focaldata polling; n=3000

These disparities translated into respondents' overall assessment of the extent to which their first job was a good foundation for their later career. More than three-quarters of respondents in inner city or major metropolitan areas rated their first job as excellent or good, compared with 66% of those in suburbs, 63% of those in towns or small cities and only 52% of those in villages or rural areas. Respondents in villages or rural areas were also more than twice as likely as those in major cities to say their first job was poor or very poor as a foundation.

Figure 33: "Overall, how would you rate your first job as a foundation for your career/future work?", by type of area they live in.



Source: SMF analysis of Focaldata polling; n=3000

Certain groups face additional barriers to entry

While education and qualification pathways, socioeconomic background and school type all shape access to good first jobs, some groups face particular challenges in their first experiences of work. This is especially clear for disabled respondents, who were much more likely to start in low-mobility pathways and less likely to access jobs that helped them build confidence, networks and progression. The picture by ethnicity and care experience was more mixed, but point to important differences in how first jobs are experienced across characteristics and what they provide.

There were differences in first-job pathways and experiences for different ethnic groups

Differences in responses to questions across training, support, progression and satisfaction were seen across different ethnic groups. Within our sample, Black respondents were more likely than White respondents to fall into accelerator or stepping-stone pathways, and less likely to fall into low-mobility pathways. They were more likely than White respondents to be in an accelerator pathway, at 22% compared with 12%, and also more likely to be in stepping-stone pathways, at 37% compared with 27%. They were also much less likely to be in low-mobility pathways, at 4% compared with 15% of White respondents.

These findings sit alongside a much wider evidence base showing persistent ethnic inequalities in the UK labour market. Research has found substantial barriers to entering work, as well as persistent differences in employment and pay outcomes for Black workers, including graduates. For example, the Youth Futures Foundation found that 48% of young people from an ethnic minority background experienced prejudice or discrimination when trying to enter the workplace, while analysis from the Resolution Foundation identified a particularly large adjusted pay penalty among Black male graduates.[84] [85] Our findings should therefore not be interpreted as evidence that Black workers generally experience better labour-market outcomes; they describe descriptive differences in first-job experiences among respondents of this survey.

Asian respondents were less likely to be in an accelerator pathway (Table 7), but had a high proportion of respondents in stepping-stone pathways and were unlikely to be in a low-mobility pathway (8%). More than 1 in 5 were in an underemployment role.

There were also differences in the distribution of pathways among White and Mixed ethnicity respondents. White respondents had the lowest combined share in accelerator and stepping-stone pathways and the highest share in low-mobility pathways. Mixed ethnicity respondents similarly had relatively high levels of low-mobility pathways and lower access to accelerator pathways.

Table 7: Table showing the proportion of respondents in different job pathways, by ethnicity.

	White	Black	Asian	Mixed ethnicity
Accelerator	12%	22%	10%	14%
Stepping-stone	27%	37%	32%	27%
Underemployment	16%	20%	21%	16%
Comfort-trap	13%	10%	14%	14%
Low-mobility	15%	4%	8%	14%
Mixed / unclassified	17%	7%	15%	15%

Source: SMF analysis of Focaldata polling; n=2964 (White n= 2147; Black n= 410; Asian n= 279; Mixed ethnicity n= 128; Other/Prefer not to say (excluded) n=36)

Some of the differences appear to be associated with geography. Black respondents in our sample were much more likely than White respondents to live in major cities, where first-job outcomes were generally stronger. Adjusting for respondents' current urban/rural location narrowed the differences between Black and White respondents but did not eliminate them. However, this adjustment cannot fully capture differences between regional labour markets - in particular, it does not distinguish London from other major cities. We therefore cannot determine how much of the remaining difference reflects ethnicity itself, geography, or other characteristics associated with where people live and work.

There were also differences in the educational profile of respondents: Black respondents in our sample were more likely to be graduates, although controlling for graduate status again reduced rather than eliminated the disparity.

These findings should nevertheless be treated with some caution. Our sample only allows us to analyse broad ethnic categories, which may conceal substantial variation within them. Evidence from education, for example, shows marked differences in outcomes between different Black ethnic groups, which we are unable to distinguish here. Furthermore, our survey captures the experiences of people who have already secured a first job, and therefore cannot tell us about inequalities in who obtains that first opportunity, how long it took for them to do so or the quality of opportunities available for those who struggle to enter employment.

There is also evidence of unequal access to employment. In April to June 2026 the unemployment rate for people from a White ethnic background was 3.9%, compared to 8.3% for people from an ethnic minority background.[86] Experimental research has also found substantial ethnic discrimination in recruitment, with minority ethnic applicants needing to send around 60% more applications than White British applicants to receive the same number of positive responses.[87] The Black respondents in our survey may therefore in some respects be a selected group of people who had already successfully navigated barriers to labour-market entry.

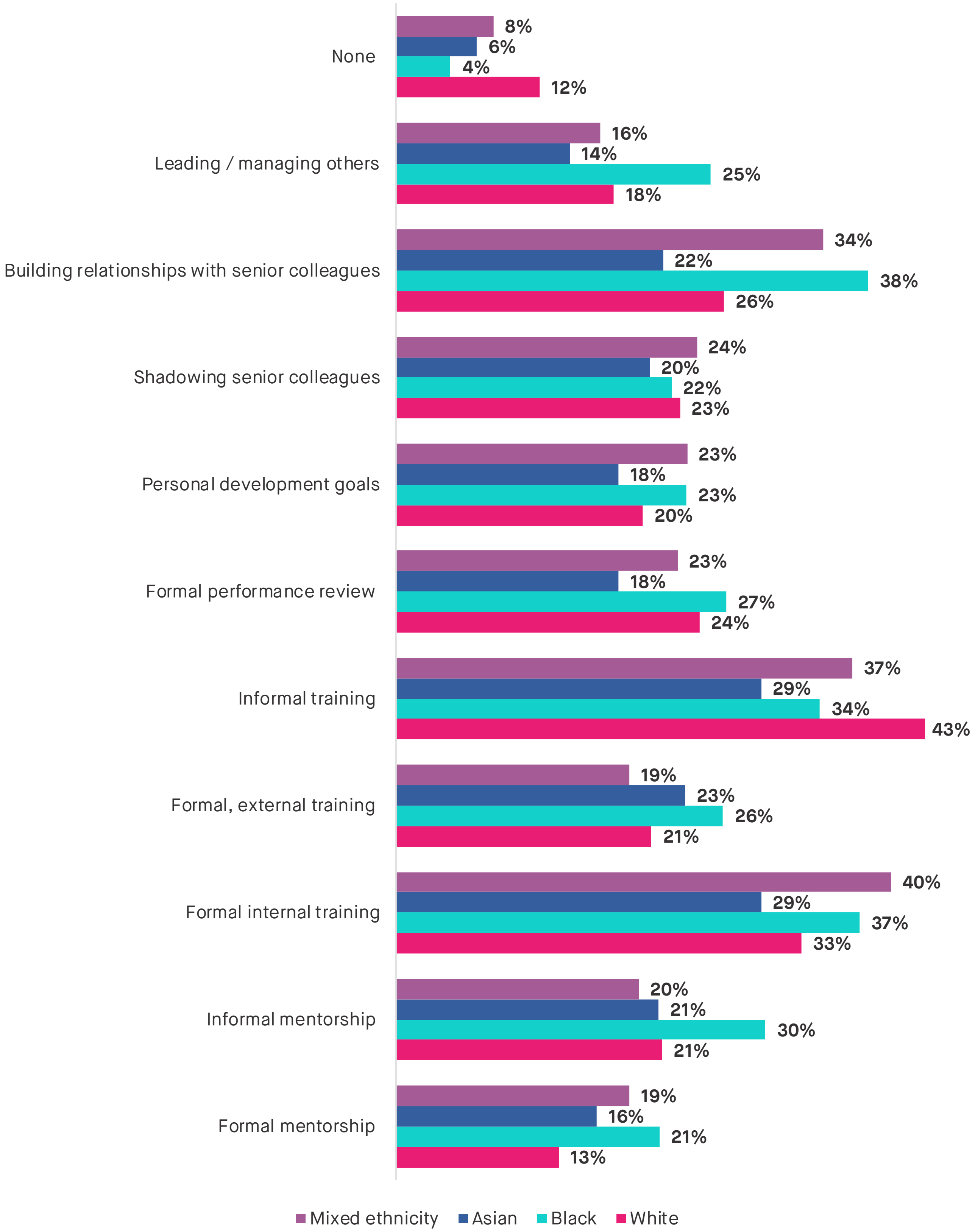
Differences were also visible in access to training and development. Black respondents were more likely than other groups to report several structured or relational forms of support, such as building professional relationships with senior colleagues (38% compared to 26% of White respondents and 22% of Asian respondents). They were also more likely to have experienced formal mentorship, informal mentorship, formal external training and opportunities to lead and manage others.

By contrast, informal training was more common among White respondents than among Black or Asian respondents. Almost half (43%) of White respondents reported informal training such as learning from colleagues, compared to 34% of Black and 29% of Asian respondents.

Experiences of Mixed ethnicity respondents were more varied. They were more likely to have had opportunities to build relationships with senior colleagues, and to access both formal and informal internal training. However, they were less likely to access formal external training, such as training that came with additional qualifications or credentials.

Our survey cannot establish why these differences arise. They could reflect differences in employer practice, differences in how actively employees seek out support and professional networks, selection into particular roles or workplaces, or some combination of these factors.

Figure 34: Access to training and development activities in their first role, by ethnicity.



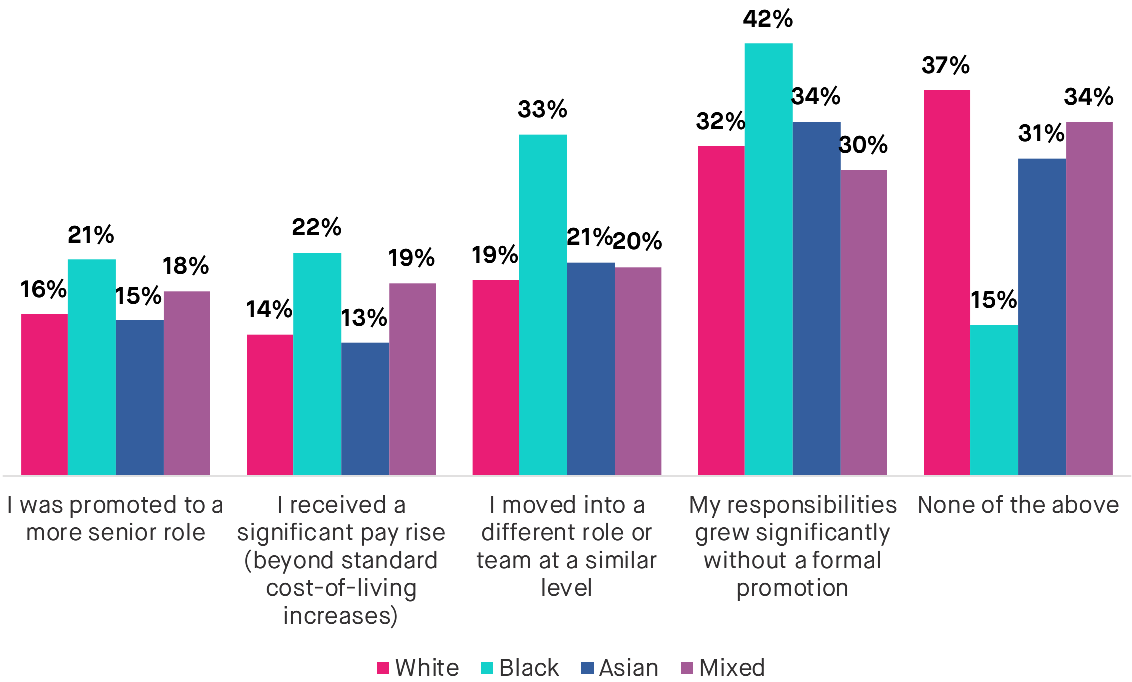
Source: SMF analysis of Focaldata polling; n=2964 (White n= 2147; Black n= 410; Asian n= 279; Mixed ethnicity n= 128; Other/Prefer not to say (excluded) n=36)

The differences observed in first-job pathways were also reflected in some wider measures of workplace experience within our sample. Black respondents were more likely than other groups to agree that their first job increased their confidence, made them feel ready to take on more senior work, offered opportunities to grow and develop, and had clear routes for progression. For example, 78% of Black respondents said they felt ready to take on more senior work by the end of their first job, compared with 60% of White respondents, 65% of Asian respondents and 65% of Mixed ethnicity respondents. Similarly, 72% of Black respondents said there were clear routes for progression, compared with 46% of White respondents, 56% of Asian respondents and 47% of Mixed ethnicity respondents.

However, the findings also point to some more mixed experiences. Asian respondents were more likely than White respondents to report clear progression routes and useful professional connections, but were also relatively more likely to be in underemployment pathways. Mixed ethnicity respondents had a more uneven profile, with rates closer to White respondents on some measures and lower confidence scores than several other groups. These differences should be interpreted cautiously, especially where subgroup sample sizes are smaller, but they reinforce the point that broad ethnic categories can mask varied experiences of early work.

Experiences of actual progression while working for the first employer followed a similar pattern. Black respondents were the least likely to say that none of the listed forms of progression happened in their first role, at 15%, compared with 37% of White respondents, 31% of Asian respondents and 34% of Mixed ethnicity respondents. They were also more likely to report that their responsibilities grew significantly without a formal promotion, that they moved into a different role or team at a similar level, and that they received a significant pay rise. Those from Mixed ethnic backgrounds were both more likely to have received a pay rise, and to have experienced none of the listed progression metrics, again highlighting disparate experiences within this group.

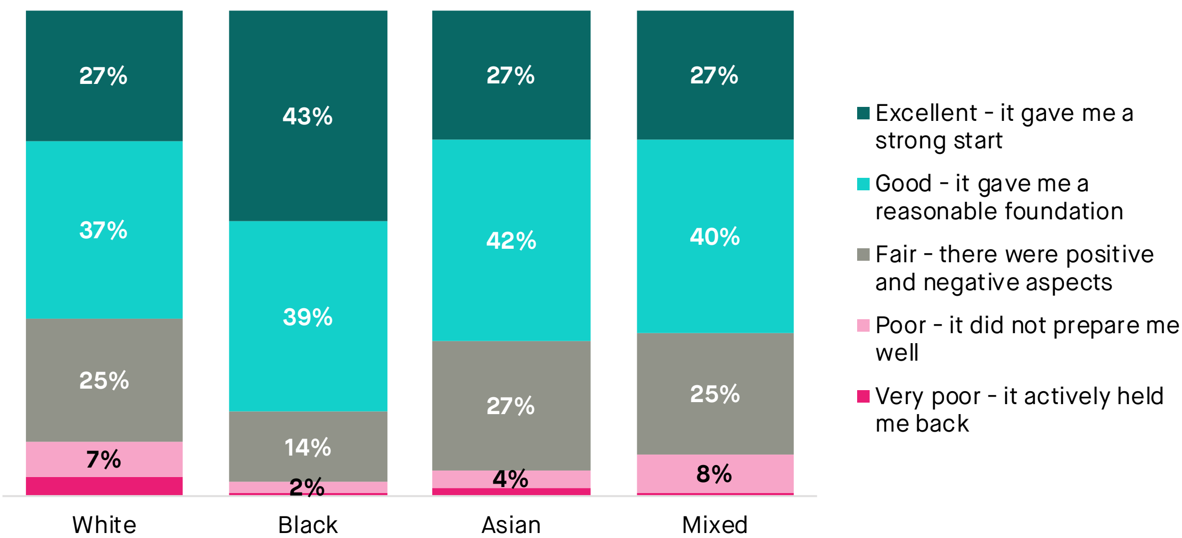
Figure 35: Proportion of respondents who experienced progression in their first role, by ethnicity.



Source: SMF analysis of Focaldata polling; n=2964 (White n= 2147; Black n= 410; Asian n= 279; Mixed ethnicity n= 128; Other/Prefer not to say (excluded) n=36)

Within our sample, Black respondents were the most likely to rate their first job as a good or excellent foundation for their later career, at more than four in five. This compared with 64% of White respondents, 69% of Asian respondents and 67% of Mixed ethnicity respondents.

Figure 36: "Overall, how would you rate your first job as a foundation for your career/future work?, by ethnicity



Source: SMF analysis of Focaldata polling; n=2964 (White n= 2147; Black n= 410; Asian n= 279; Mixed ethnicity n= 128; Other/Prefer not to say (excluded) n=36)

Taken together, our findings suggest that Black respondents whose first jobs were captured by our survey were particularly likely to report some of the characteristics we associate with a good first job: structured support, useful networks, opportunities to develop and visible progression. That is noteworthy, but it does not imply that these advantages characterise the wider labour-market experience of Black workers.

Wider evidence shows persistent inequalities in access to employment, pay and progression. One possibility is therefore that positive first-job experiences provide an important platform but are insufficient to overcome inequalities that emerge or persist elsewhere in people's careers; another is that our survey captures a selected group who have already overcome barriers to securing employment. Our data cannot distinguish between these explanations. The narrower conclusion is that access to a good first job can matter considerably, but cannot on its own overcome wider structural inequalities in the labour market.

Disabled respondents experienced some of the lowest opportunities for progression, and were often lacking appropriate support

Our polling revealed concerning inequalities for disabled respondents, in terms of access to support, progression, and long term outcomes. Disabled respondents were more than twice as likely as non-disabled respondents to be in low-mobility pathways, at almost 1 in 4 (23%) compared to 1 in 10. They were also less likely to be in accelerator pathways, at 9% compared with 14%, and less likely to be in stepping-stone pathways at 22% compared with 30%.

Table 8: Table showing the proportion of respondents in different job pathways, by disability status.

	Disabled	No disability disclosed
Accelerator	9%	14%
Stepping-stone	22%	30%
Underemployment	14%	17%
Comfort-trap	14%	13%
Low-mobility	23%	11%
Mixed / unclassified	18%	15%

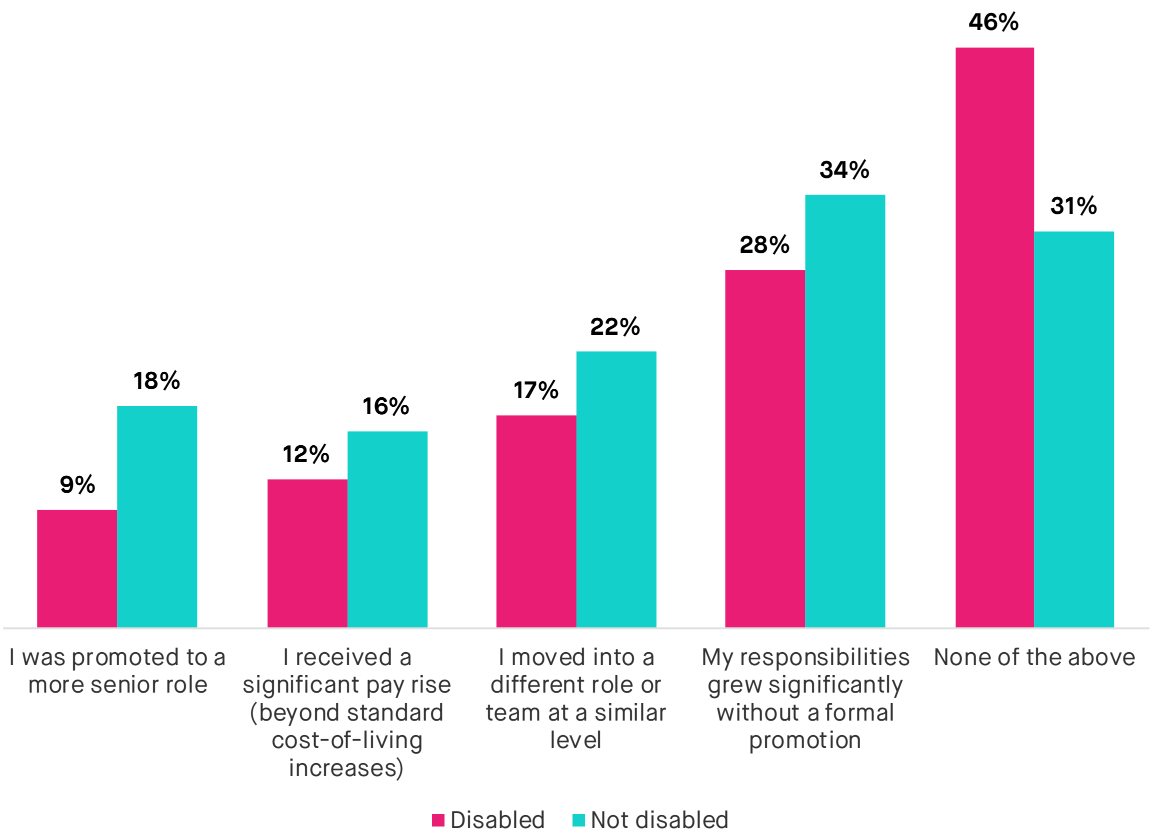
Source: SMF analysis of Focaldata polling; n=3000 (disabled n= 374)

This pattern held for almost every measure of job quality. Disabled respondents were less likely to say that their first job increased their confidence, made them feel ready for more senior work, offered opportunities to grow and develop, or had clear routes for progression. Only 39% of disabled respondents said that there were clear routes for progression in their first job, compared with 52% of non-disabled respondents. Similarly, 41% said their line manager was supportive and actively invested in their development, compared with 57% of non-disabled respondents.

Disabled respondents were also less likely to feel that they belonged in their first workplace, less likely to feel safe making mistakes without serious consequences, and less likely to see people like them in senior or leadership roles. Only 38% said they saw people like them in senior roles, compared with 54% of non-disabled respondents.

These disparities also translated into progression while working for their first employer. Disabled respondents were 15 percentage points more likely to not have experienced any listed forms of progression, and half as likely to have been promoted into a more senior role. They were also less likely to have received a pay rise beyond inflationary/cost of living increases.

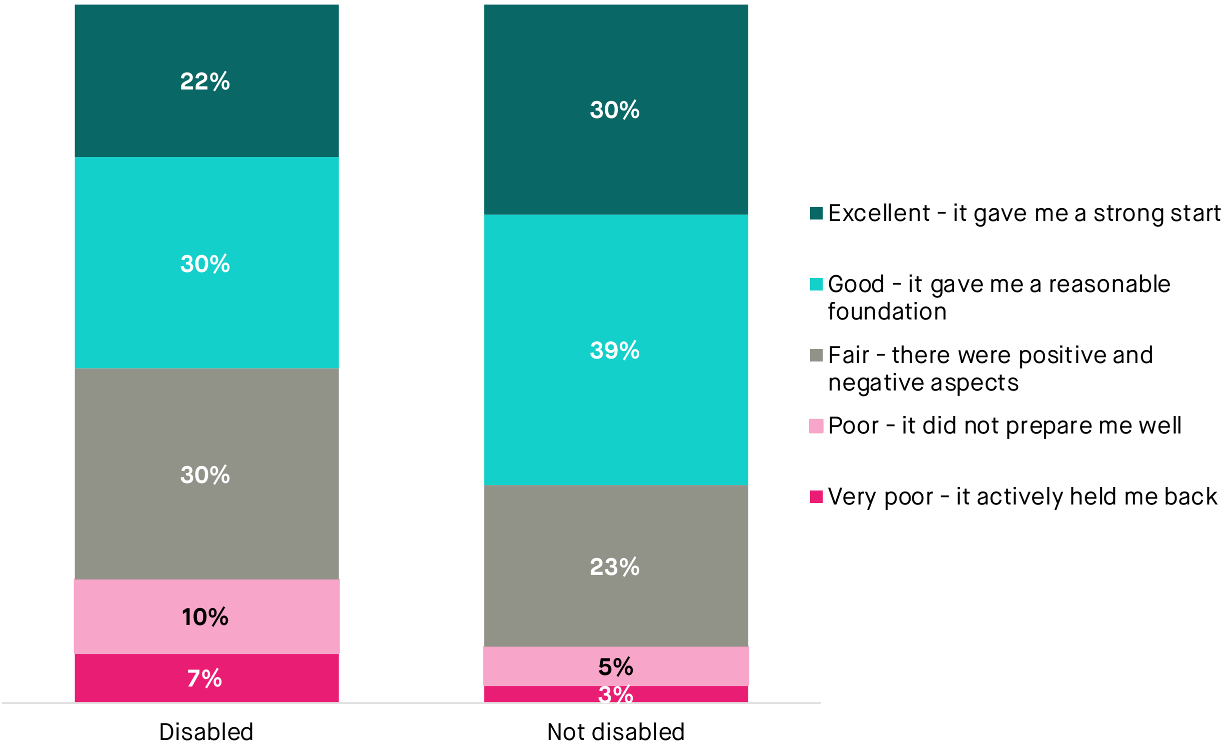
Figure 37: Proportion of respondents who experienced progression in their first role, by disability status.



Source: SMF analysis of Focaldata polling; n=3000 (disabled respondents n=374)

Disabled respondents' overall assessment of their first job was also substantially weaker. Only 52% rated their first job as excellent or good as a foundation for their career, compared with 69% of non-disabled respondents. They were also much more likely to say their first job was poor or very poor, at 18% compared with 8%.

Figure 38: "Overall, how would you rate your first job as a foundation for your career/future work?", by disability status.



Source: SMF analysis of Focaldata polling; n=3000 (disabled respondents n=374)

Taken together, these findings suggest that the challenge for disabled young people is not only accessing employment, but being able to thrive and progress once they are there. Disabled respondents reported weaker outcomes across management support, belonging, development and progression – several of the features that distinguish a good first job elsewhere in this report. This suggests that improving first-job quality must also mean making entry-level work more inclusive: ensuring recruitment is accessible, managers are equipped to support disabled workers, and young people can access appropriate adjustments and flexibility where they need them.

Care-experienced respondents were more likely to be underutilised in their first job, but reported positive experiences of support

The picture for care-experienced respondents was more mixed. They were not more likely than non-care-experienced respondents to be in low-mobility pathways. However, they were slightly less likely to be in stepping-stone pathways, at 23% compared with 29%, and much more likely to be in underemployment pathway, at 28% compared with 16%. They were also slightly less likely to be in accelerator pathways.

This suggests that, for care-experienced young people, the issue may be mismatch and underuse of potential. It's worth noting that nationally care-experienced young people are far more likely to be NEET and unemployed,[88] whereas our sample only includes those who have had some history of employment. It may therefore disproportionately capture care-experienced people who have already overcome some of the barriers to entering work, potentially including those who have received additional support during their transition into employment.

Table 9: Table showing the proportion of respondents in different job pathways, by care-experienced status.

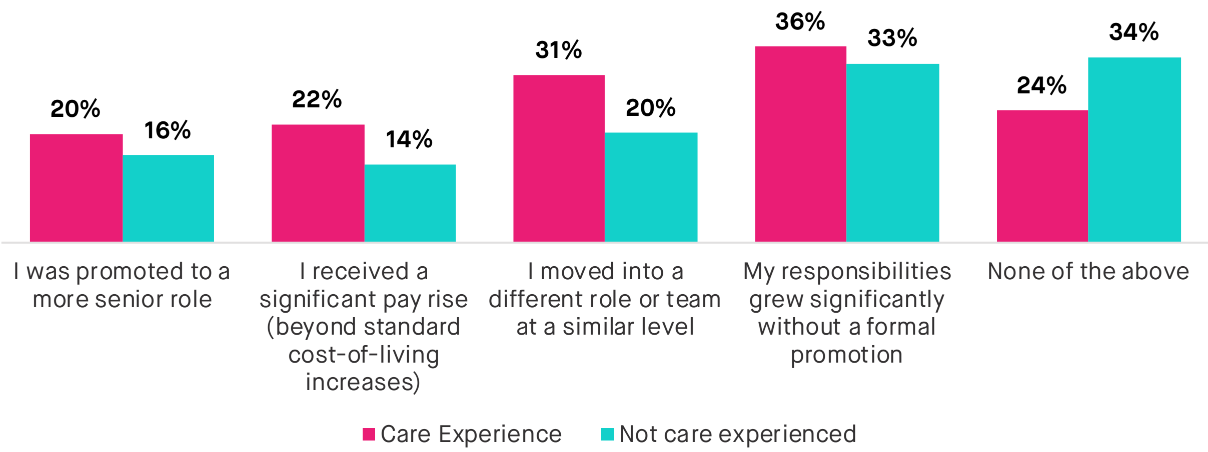
	Care-experienced	Not care-experienced
Accelerator	12%	14%
Stepping-stone	23%	29%
Underemployment	28%	16%
Comfort-trap	7%	13%
Low-mobility	13%	13%
Mixed / unclassified	17%	15%

Source: SMF analysis of Focaldata polling; n=3000 (care- experienced n= 229)

At the same time, care-experienced respondents reported some relatively positive features of their first jobs. They were more likely than non-care-experienced respondents to say that their employer was willing to invest in their development, that their line manager was supportive and that they built professional connections that proved useful later in their career. They were also more likely to say that the role offered them opportunities to grow and develop.

Progression outcomes were also relatively strong. They were more likely to have been promoted into a senior role, received a significant pay rise or moved into another team. Only 24% reported that they did not experience any progression, compared to 34% of those without care experience. Again, it's important to note that this is likely to be a group of young people who have overcome substantial barriers throughout education and into employment, and who are unlikely to represent the full care-experienced population.

Figure 39: Proportion of respondents who experienced progression in their first role, by care-experienced status.



Source: SMF analysis of Focaldata polling; n=3000 (care-experienced respondents n=229)

Unequal access to the first rung of the ladder compounds over time

Taken together, the findings in this chapter show that access to a good first job is not evenly distributed. The patterns described here are based on differences in observed outcomes between groups and do not, by themselves, tell us whether a particular characteristic is independently associated with first-job quality once other factors are taken into account. The modelling in the next section tests how far these gaps persist after controlling for differences in characteristics such as education, socioeconomic background and geography.

Before young people even think about applying for their first proper role, some have already had opportunities to build experience, confidence and networks through internships, volunteering, work experience or prior casual/part time paid work. Others arrived at their first job with much less exposure. These early differences matter because the polling suggests that those with internship experience are much more likely to enter accelerator pathways, and that this advantage often overlaps with other inequalities based on education or background.

The same pattern continues once young people enter work. Graduates, those from more advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds and private-school respondents were more likely to access roles that offered support, development and progression. They were more likely to have formal appraisals, mentorship, development goals and opportunities to build relationships with senior colleagues, and clearer routes to move forwards. Non-graduates and respondents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, in contrast, were more likely to start in low-mobility, comfort-trap or unclear pathways, and less likely to say that their first job gave them a good foundation for the future.

Place also shaped access. Most respondents did not move specifically to take their first job, but those that did were more likely to access accelerator and stepping-stone pathways and were more likely to already have additional advantages, such as being from a higher socioeconomic background and having a degree. Those who could not move were constrained by their local early labour market, with those outside major cities and metropolitan areas less likely to be able to access good first jobs.

We've also seen that certain groups of young people face distinct barriers. Disabled respondents had some of the weakest outcomes across almost every measure, including access to accelerator and stepping-stone pathways, workplace support, belonging, progression and overall ratings of their first job as a good foundation for their later career. Care-experienced respondents reported some positive experiences of support and progression but were much more likely to be in underemployment pathway, suggesting issues around mismatch and the underuse of potential. Findings by ethnicity were more complex but still showed that different groups experienced first jobs in different ways, with variation in access to training, progression, networks and job fit.

This is important firstly because, as shown in Chapter Four, these high-quality first jobs are associated with higher salaries and higher salary growth. They also provide young people with confidence, workplace knowledge, professional contacts, references and clarity around their career goals and direction. A young person who starts in an accelerator pathway is more likely to build momentum early on, and yet the descriptive evidence suggests that those who would most benefit from these roles that provide additional support and structure are often those least likely to be able to access them. Instead, those from less advantaged backgrounds are more likely to start in low-mobility or comfort-trap pathways, that can leave them with limited support, progression or salary growth long term.

The risk therefore is that the first rung of the labour market reinforces existing inequalities rather than reducing them. Those who already have more educational, social or financial advantage are often better placed to access first jobs that provide structure, training and progression. Those who might benefit most from a high-quality first job are more likely to start in roles that offer less support, weaker progression and fewer opportunities to build the networks and confidence that help careers move forward. The modelling that follows allows us to test how much of these unequal outcomes can be accounted for by respondents' different characteristics, and whether differences in first-job experience remain once those factors are held constant.

CHAPTER SIX – WHAT DRIVES CAREER PROGRESSION?

The previous chapters showed that access to a good first job is uneven, with graduates, people from more advantaged backgrounds and those entering larger employers generally more likely to receive training, support and opportunities to progress.

However, these differences are closely connected - a young person's background may shape the qualifications and experience they bring into the labour market, which in turn influences their first job, also impacting their experience, training, mentoring, and networks.

Looking at each of these factors separately can therefore only take us so far. This chapter brings them together to ask: **what is most strongly associated with later career progression once the other differences between people and jobs are taken into account?**

In particular, the analysis looks at three broad sources of advantage:

- **employee background**, including education, age, geography and family circumstances;
- **employer characteristics**, including sector, size and contract type; and
- **employer behaviour**, including training, mentoring, development support and opportunities to build confidence and networks.

Earnings are used as a measurable proxy for career progression. However, it should be noted that this does not capture every dimension of progression, but rather allows us to test which parts of a person's background and first-job experience remain associated with their longer-term labour market outcomes.

The findings we present here suggest that all three matter, but their contribution to later earnings are not equal. Background explains a substantial proportion of the differences in later earnings, with the structure of someone's first job adding further explanatory power. But the strongest single predictor is where they start out financially, with people who begin their careers on higher salaries tending to remain ahead later.

Employers nevertheless do also have an important role - formal and informal training, mentorship and helping young workers develop the confidence to take on more senior work are all associated with higher later earnings, even after other characteristics are taken into account.

Methodology: Bringing the different factors together

We use regression analysis to examine which parts of a person's background and first job are associated with their current or most recent salary.

In simple terms, the model allows us to compare people who are similar in some respects but had different first-job experiences. For example, it can examine whether people who received mentoring went on to earn more than otherwise similar respondents who did not.

The analysis adds different groups of factors in stages:

1. the respondent's background and education;
2. experiences before their first job, such as internships or work experience;
3. the characteristics of the first employer and role;
4. the support, development and workplace experience offered; and
5. first-job salary.

This allows us to see how much additional information each added group contributes to explaining differences in later earnings.

The analysis entered groups of variables (factors) into the model sequentially, allowing us to assess how much additional variation in current pay was explained when each new "block" of factors was added to the model. The results (summarised in Table 10) therefore show both the cumulative explanatory power of the model at each stage and the additional contribution of each block. Further detail of the modelling is provided in the methodology appendix (Appendix 1).

Table 10: Explanatory power of each block of variables

Sample	Factors considered	Share of pay differences explained by this factor(s)	Additional explanation provided by this factor(s)
All respondents	Background controls (education, age, geography and family background)	26.7%	–
All respondents	Pre-first-job experiences (internships, work experience etc)	27.6%	+0.9pp
All respondents	Objective/structural first-job features	33.0%	+5.3pp
All respondents	Subjective first-job experience	33.6%	+0.7pp
All respondents	First-job pay	54.1%	+20.5pp
Graduates	Background controls	17.8%	–
Graduates	Pre-first-job experiences	20.9%	+3.2pp
Graduates	Objective/structural first-job features	28.7%	+7.8pp
Graduates	Subjective first-job experience	29.6%	+0.8pp
Graduates	First-job pay	54.2%	+24.7pp
Non-graduates	Background controls	14.0%	–
Non-graduates	Pre-first-job experiences	15.2%	+1.2pp
Non-graduates	Objective/structural first-job features	21.5%	+6.3pp
Non-graduates	Subjective first-job experience	22.1%	+0.6pp
Non-graduates	First-job pay	41.6%	+19.5pp

Source: SMF analysis of Focaldata polling.

The analysis cannot prove that a particular feature of a first job directly caused higher earnings - as people are not randomly allocated to employers, training opportunities or starting salaries, and there will also be other differences between respondents not captured by our survey. The results should therefore be read as associations, but they do nevertheless show which elements of a first job remain linked to later earnings, when the other measurable differences between respondents are considered at the same time.

Finding 1: Background matters, but it is not the whole story

> *"Socioeconomic background has become a fairly standard part of organisational diversity and inclusion strategies, and there is now much greater recognition of inequalities in progression. But **I am not sure that anybody has yet worked out how to tackle those inequalities particularly well**." Labour market academic*

A person's background explains a substantial share of the differences in later earnings. Indeed, education, age, geography and family circumstances together account for 26.7% of the variation in earnings across the full sample.

This reflects a wider pattern identified throughout the report - that young people do not enter the labour market from the same starting point. Their qualifications, financial resources, location and family networks can all influence both the opportunities available to them and the first jobs they are able to accept.

But background is also importantly not destiny – and adding information about the first job improves the model considerably. The objective characteristics of the role and employer -including employer size, sector, contract type, training, mentorship and progression structures - account for an additional 5.3 percentage points of the variation in later earnings.

The contribution is even greater when graduates and non-graduates are considered separately. First-job characteristics add 7.8 percentage points among graduates and 6.3 percentage points among non-graduates.

This suggests that where someone starts working, and what that job provides, is associated with their later trajectory over and above the characteristics they brought into the labour market.

Finding 2: Pre-work experience matters, but it matters more for graduates

Experiences before entering a first job, including internships, volunteering and work experience, add relatively little to the model across the full sample. They increase the proportion of variation explained by 0.9 percentage points.

However, the relationship is stronger among graduates, where these experiences add 3.2 percentage points, compared with only 1.2 points among non-graduates (note that these figures are calculated on entirely separate models - run for both graduates and non-graduates).

This is consistent with the descriptive findings, with internships and other forms of pre-work experience more common among graduates – as well as being associated with entry into accelerator and stepping-stone pathways. These opportunities may therefore operate as an additional route through which graduates gain access to stronger first jobs, but they have minimal impact for those who do not have a degree.

Finding 3: What employers do is associated with later earnings

Formal training, informal training and formal mentorship are all positively associated with later earnings in the final model. By contrast, respondents who reported receiving only health and safety training, and no other type of training and development support, had lower later earnings.

While almost every employer needs to provide some basic instruction, basic induction or mandatory training is not the same as investing in someone's development. The positive associations are clearly concentrated among forms of support that help young workers to build skills, learn from more experienced colleagues and to prepare for greater responsibility.

The results suggest approximate associations of:

- 8.0% higher later earnings for respondents who received informal training;
- 7.7% higher earnings for those who received formal mentorship; and
- 7.4% higher earnings for those who received formal training.

These figures should not be interpreted as guaranteed financial returns from introducing a single programme, as employers that provide training and mentoring may differ in other ways that the model here cannot fully measure. However, the consistency of these findings does suggest that structured development is one of the features that distinguishes first jobs with stronger longer-term outcomes.

This is especially relevant for non-graduates, for whom formal mentorship remains significantly associated with later earnings even once starting salary and the other features of their first job are included. Mentoring appears therefore to be particularly important for young workers who do not enter the labour market through graduate schemes or other structured early-career routes. Expert interviews also suggested that the value of senior staff support may depend on whether it extends beyond advice and into active advocacy:

> *"Sponsorship is not just providing a mentoring role; it is advocating for you in terms of the projects you might get put onto, because that early exposure is so important." Social mobility policy expert*

Finding 4: Confidence matters when it is linked to progression

Respondents whose first job increased their professional confidence and made them feel ready for more senior work had higher later earnings.

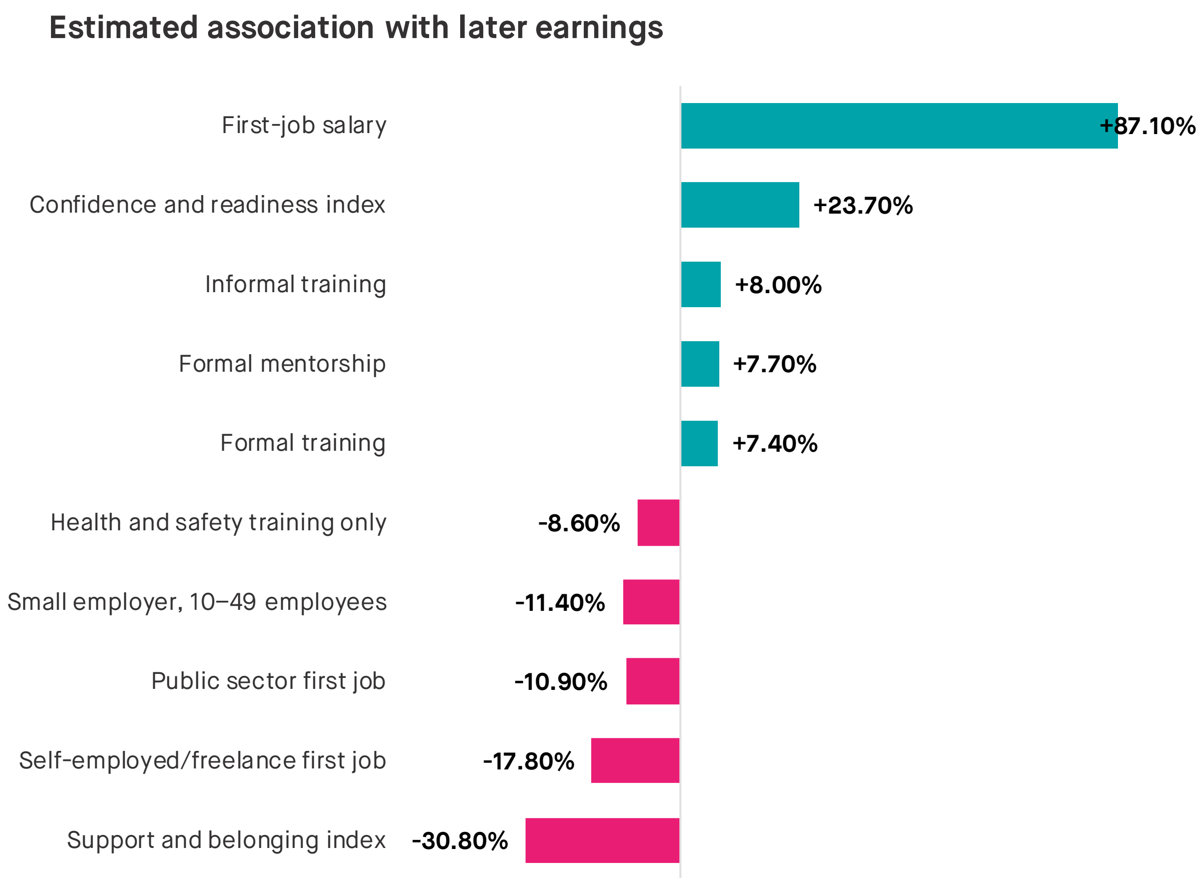
A higher score on the confidence and readiness measure was associated with approximately 23.7% higher later earnings in the full model, and was one of the strongest associations beyond starting salary itself.

The finding is not just that feeling positive at work produces higher pay. The measure captures whether respondents felt more capable of taking on responsibility and progressing into more senior roles. A first job that develops this kind of confidence may make it easier for example for a young worker to apply for promotion, negotiate for greater responsibility or to move to a better opportunity elsewhere.

This also helps distinguish confidence from comfort, a first job can also feel supportive and familiar without necessarily preparing someone to progress. What appears most strongly associated with later earnings is not simply whether someone liked their first workplace, but also whether it equipped them to move forward.

Finding 5: Employer characteristics matter, but partly because they shape access to opportunity

Figure 40. First-job variables significantly associated with later earnings in the final all-respondent model.



Source: SMF analysis of Focaldata polling. Notes: Dependent variable is log current or most recent salary. Figures show approximate percentage associations from the final all-respondent model, which includes variables for background, pre-first-job experiences, objective first-job features, subjective first-job experience and first-job pay.

Employer size remains associated with later earnings even after other factors are included, with respondents whose first job was with a small employer of between 10 and 49 staff having later earnings around 11.4% lower than those who began with a large employer.

This does not though mean that small employers cannot provide good first jobs. It might be that smaller organisations can offer greater responsibility, or closer contact with senior staff and broader experience. However, they may also have less capacity to provide formal training, mentoring, peer networks and established progression routes.

The descriptive analysis also showed that larger employers were more likely to offer performance reviews, development goals and structured training. The modelling suggests that these differences are not only features of the immediate employee experience, but that these factors are also associated with later earnings.

Sector also matters, with public-sector first jobs associated with lower later earnings than private-sector first jobs - while self-employed or freelance first jobs were associated with a larger negative difference.

These results are likely to reflect differences in occupational mix, pay structures and longer-term earnings patterns between sectors. They should not however be interpreted as showing that public-sector work provides lower-quality development. Indeed, the earlier descriptive analysis found that public- and private-sector employers performed similarly on many measures of workplace support. Rather the regression result relates specifically to later salary, not to job quality in its broader sense.

Finding 6: Where you start influences where you end up

Before starting salary is added, the model explains 33.6% of the variation in later earnings. Once first-job salary is included, this then rises to 54.1%. Starting pay therefore adds more explanatory power than any of the other blocks of variables examined here.

The pattern is similarly strong for both graduates and non-graduates, with starting salary adding 24.7 percentage points to the graduate model and 19.5 points to the non-graduate model.

This does not mean that starting salary alone determines someone’s career, as higher first-job pay may reflect the occupation entered, the employer, the local labour market, qualifications and other advantages that are not fully captured in the data here. However, it does suggest that early pay differences are persistent through someone’s career. Young people who start ahead financially tend to remain ahead later on, while those who begin on lower salaries face a greater risk of following a slower earnings trajectory longer term.

Finding 7: A positive workplace experience may not always be enough

One result from our modelling was particularly counter-intuitive - that the measure capturing support, belonging and whether respondents could see a future with their first employer was actually negatively associated with later earnings in the final model.

It would however be wrong to conclude that supportive workplaces reduce pay, as the result is more likely to reflect the overlap between this measure and the other factors included in this model. For example, some respondents may have felt secure, valued and comfortable in their first job while having relatively few opportunities to progress. These jobs resemble the “comfort-trap” identified in the previous chapter - with roles that provide stability and belonging not necessarily leading to higher pay or greater responsibility.

The wider lesson is that a supportive culture is necessary but not sufficient for career progression. A good first job should make young workers feel valued, but it should also help them to develop, take on greater responsibility and subsequently to move forward.

What matters the most?

Our analysis here shows that career progression is shaped by a combination of background, employer characteristics and employer behaviour.

The impact of an employee’s background is substantial, with young people entering the labour market with different qualifications, resources, networks and opportunities. We find that these differences explain more than a quarter of later salary variation.

The type of first job they enter also matters, with employer size, sector, contract type and the structure of the role adding to the model’s ability to explain later outcomes. This suggests that first jobs are not simply temporary stopping points, but that their characteristics remain associated with earnings later on in someone’s career.

But importantly, employers are not powerless within this picture. Training, mentorship and opportunities to build confidence and readiness for more senior work are all associated with stronger earnings later. These are all practical features of job design that employers can influence.

Starting salary is nevertheless the strongest individual predictor within the model, with the financial advantage or disadvantage attached to a first job appearing to persist over time. Good first jobs therefore need to provide both decent pay and also developmental value.

Taken together, the results suggest that career progression is cumulative. Background shapes access to opportunity; employers shape what happens once someone enters work; and early differences in pay, training and confidence can go on to widen as careers develop.

CHAPTER SEVEN – EXPERIENCES OF PROGRESSING AND STALLING

To better understand the lived experience of early career progression, we utilised a purpose-trained AI chatbot to carry out 200 interviews with adults across the UK, including both graduates and non-graduates, about their first substantial job after leaving education or training. The interviews explored how people found and entered their first role, what the job offered in terms of pay, training, support and progression, and how it shaped their later confidence, skills and career trajectory.

What was clear from these interviews is that first jobs really do matter to individuals, as well as to their later career trajectory. Good first jobs provide both practical opportunity to gain skills, experience and exposure to the workplace, as well as opportunities to deepen their self-understanding – what are they good at? what do they enjoy? what career might they want to pursue? – and also their own self-confidence. On the other hand, a poor experience in one's first job narrowed respondents' options for their next steps, and could leave them feeling demotivated, anxious, and stuck. This chapter investigates how individuals experienced these different pathways, in their own words.

Developmental first jobs did not always map neatly onto long-term career goals, but they gave people skills, confidence and direction that they could use later

Learning and development opportunities were one of the most important features of a good first job, mentioned by over a quarter of respondents. People valued roles that helped them acquire practical and transferable skills, including technical knowledge and skills but also often more importantly soft-skills such as communication, confidence working with colleagues, managers and clients/customers, problem-solving, team-working and an understanding of how workplaces function.

For some respondents, this learning was directly related to their long-term career goals. One respondent described the value of their first job: *"I felt positive about working in a job that was related to my long term career goals, that it didn't just pay the bills but was also giving me a good foundation and work experience. I was proud of myself and excited for the future".* Another valued the chance to understand the profession from the inside: *"Being able to see behind the scenes of a veterinary practice, getting to learn the flow of a practice and the sort of treatments that happen there"*. In these cases, the first job was particularly foundational because there was a clear connection between their day-to-day work and their future career trajectory. These roles helped young people gain exposure to a workplace and sector, understand what the work involved and imagine themselves progressing further.

However, roles did not have to be a perfect career match to be viewed as developmental. Some respondents described early jobs as useful because they helped clarify what they did not want for their career, or because they produced transferable skills they could utilise in other sectors or employers. One respondent who had worked as a kitchen porter said their early roles helped because *"they just made me aware that isn't what I wanted to do long term and that I needed to focus on* *getting more education"*. Others described first jobs as useful foundations even when they did not see themselves staying in the sector. As one respondent put it: *"I never saw a long-term career there. However, the skills I learnt are so transferable I knew [they'd] build the foundations for a good career elsewhere"*.

The type of learning that was important for respondents to gain in early roles varied substantially by sector and role. In technical and scientific jobs, respondents often emphasised specialist knowledge. One respondent in a scientific role said: *"I learnt [about] a lot of techniques and background science which helped me to develop a better understanding and progress towards a higher paying job".* In technical roles, learning could also be self-directed rather than formally structured: *"On the engineering side, there was no structured training program. My learning came from digging directly into core open-source documentation"*.

In customer-facing sectors such as retail, hospitality and care, respondents were more likely to describe the development of transferable interpersonal and workplace skills. These roles often built confidence interacting with customers or clients, working in teams, solving problems and handling responsibility. One respondent reflected: *"Just generally learning how to work in a team, organisation, problem solving. My management were good at helping me with this and explaining things to me so I got more confident over time"*. Another respondent, reflecting on a first job that later informed work in private security and policing, said: *"I followed into private security and the police, they are perfect transferable skills in my opinion"*. Lower-paid or lower-status roles should therefore not be automatically dismissed as lacking developmental value – with the right support and conditions in place they can build durable skills that enable further progression, either internally or externally.

But the interviews showed that access to valuable learning and development was not guaranteed. The same sectors that could help respondents build transferable skills could also become limiting where work was repetitive and responsibilities were too narrow. One respondent contrasted a narrow contact-centre role with later roles that offered more variety: *"In all of the other roles I had a wider variety of work to carry out, this meant I developed wider skills. The contact centre did not offer the same opportunity."* They described the role as difficult to progress from because of *"limited opportunities [...] Everyone was focused on taking calls, which made it hard to stand out from the crowd."* Here repetitive work may have helped them build basic competence in call handling, but without variety or a route into wider tasks it did not help them progress into other roles or build a wider skillset. In expert interviews the importance of work allocation for career progression was commonly raised, as opportunities to learn through doing were often just as, if not more, important than the opportunities to learn through formal training.

> *"What you get to work on is just as important from day one as it is later in middle management. [...]* ***You can get into a vicious circle: you don't get put on a good project, you end up with bench time, and that becomes an inference that you're not as good*** *as somebody who has had repeat work."*
> *Social mobility policy expert*

Whether progression pathways were clear and visible was one of the strongest divides between accelerator pathways and roles that left people feeling stuck

When respondents described positive first job experiences that contributed to later progression these were not always necessarily the highest paid roles, nor the most prestigious or even necessarily directly aligned with their long-term career goals. What mattered most was whether the role gave people a credible sense of moving forwards – both in terms of learning and development described above, but also importantly in terms of understanding what their next step might be, what skills or behaviours would be rewarded, and whether people like them had moved up before. Whether routes for progression were clear and visible was one of the defining characteristics of a great accelerator pathway.

For some respondents, visibility of progression pathways came from being inside a large organisation with multiple departments, grades and internal routes. One respondent described the Civil Service as valuable precisely because the structures there were visible: *"The Civil Service is a huge employer and has a variety of departments and within those departments are a multitude of roles and grades. Having so much choice and potential roles made it seem I could strategically plot my career through a variety of roles and promotions once I got inside*". For this respondent their first role mattered hugely, because it placed them in an organisation with huge scope for growth and progression. Once inside, they could see different roles, understand how progression worked, and begin to imagine their own career path.

Box 5 – Good practice example: Civil Service Fast Stream

The Civil Service Fast Stream is an accelerated development programme designed to develop future leaders and managers. It currently offers 17 specialist schemes, with participants taking on roles across government alongside structured learning, on-the-job coaching and mentoring. The Civil Service describes each scheme as providing a clear career path within a government profession. Fast Streamers currently receive a starting salary of £31,554, with advertised earning potential of £45,000–£55,000 on completion.

One of the programme's notable features is the visibility of the progression pathway. The Civil Service explicitly describes the Fast Stream as fast-tracking participants towards more senior roles, although the precise route varies between schemes. For example, the three-year Government Policy Fast Stream is designed to build professional and leadership capability progressively across different postings, with support tapering as participants move into Grade 7 policy roles. On the three-year Human Resources scheme, participants undertake an end-of-scheme assessment which, if successfully completed, enables them to apply for Grade 7 opportunities.

Development is deliberately combined with workplace experience. All Fast Streamers undertake a universal training offer covering foundation, leadership and management skills alongside scheme-specific development. The programme also uses residential learning, small-group sessions, online learning and Action Learning Sets. Participants have a Personal Development Plan and portfolio through which they can track their progress and reflect on how they are applying their learning in their roles.

Individual schemes then add professional development relevant to the career pathway. On the Government Policy scheme, for example, participants combine different postings with an induction to policymaking, annual professional development, leadership and management training and an externally accredited Postgraduate Award in policymaking. The Human Resources scheme combines placements with a professional HR qualification and ongoing assessment, with participants receiving development support from an Activity Manager and the wider Fast Stream team.

The Fast Stream therefore provides a useful example of how employers can make progression more visible and purposeful. Rather than relying solely on employees to work out how to advance, its public programme design connects workplace experience with structured development, professional expectations and, in a number of schemes, a clearly identified destination at the end of the programme. The precise model will not be appropriate for every employer, but the underlying principle is transferable: early-career workers are more likely to understand how to progress when they can see what they are developing towards and are given structured opportunities to build the skills and experience needed to get there.

Source: The Civil Service Fast Stream / Government Policy scheme

Other respondents emphasised the importance of seeing people who had previously been in their position progress. One said: *"I had spoken to a few people who were once in my position and had found themselves promoted multiple times, so I knew it was possible"*. Another described how watching peers and more senior colleagues progress gave them confidence in the pathway: *"I met people much senior to me who I would have shared background or interests with. Some of them became friends. I also saw friends who started the same role as me achieving promotions and job moves*". It was common for respondents to describe how progression being visible – not just in terms of knowing the hierarchy of job roles but in actually seeing people like them move through them – made the career ladder seem more credible and in-reach.

This was especially important for early-career workers because many respondents entered their first job with limited or no knowledge of how workplaces function. They did not always know what counted as good performance, how promotion decisions were made, or what kind of development and learning would help them move forward. Good workplaces made these things explicit: respondents could see what was rewarded, learn from people slightly ahead of them and could therefore see the connection between putting in effort in their day-to-day role now and their later progression. One respondent captured this clearly: *"people who started a year before me were already being promoted and there was a very clear progression path, available for everyone"*.

By contrast, roles without a visible ladder often created rapid stagnation. Several respondents described becoming competent in their role quickly but having nowhere to take that competence. One respondent working in support work explained: *"There was no sense of progression, the set up was a manager and then support workers. There was not a need for anything else but also as I said, when looking at the bigger picture, I couldn't see any scope for progression."* Another described a similar problem in retail: *"there are not many job roles in a retail environment, you are either entry level, or management".*

Respondents who felt this absence of progression opportunities commonly described boredom or feeling like they were drifting in their role and career. One respondent said the one thing that would have made the biggest difference to their experience in their first job was "*A pathway to career progression*. [...] *I would have had something to work towards and a goal, in that job I felt that within a month of working there I had achieved my goals and then it was just coasting".*

> *"There can be a catch-22 in career progression. To reach the next level, people need experience or skills that they were not recruited for and cannot easily gain in their existing role.* ***They reach a bottleneck where they need to move into another area to develop, but cannot make that move because they do not yet have the required experience.****"* *Labour market academic*

Unclear progression routes also created uncertainty about what they should do to improve their prospects. Some respondents were willing to work hard, but did not know what hard work would lead to, or whether the right behaviours were being rewarded. Particularly where respondents felt that advancement was more about informal judgements, personality or relationships with management then progression within that organisation felt less realistic. One respondent said: "*[progression] had nothing to do with your ability and everything to do with how well you got on with the management*". Another described favouritism as a direct barrier*: "There was certainly favouritism for certain employees, making it harder to be regularly placed on more desirable stations. This did make me feel somewhat stuck and made it harder to progress"*.

Regular feedback was critical for early career employees to be able to contextualise their performance and progress

Feedback that was clear, specific and regular, as well as clear expectations were both central to whether respondents felt their first job had helped them develop and progress. Many respondents, particularly those from less advantaged backgrounds, entered work with limited knowledge of how organisations functioned, what good performance looked like, how to improve, who to ask for help, or how to navigate workplace expectations.

This chimes with previous SMF research on "assumed knowledge": the unspoken, untaught information that helps young people navigate transitions from education into work.[89] That research highlighted how young people often do not enter the labour market with equal knowledge about how careers work, how to present themselves or how to get ahead, and our interviews here suggest that this knowledge gap continues once people are already in their first job. Employers can sometimes take for granted that new workers already understand many of the unwritten rules of work, when many early-career employees are still learning how workplaces operate and how to navigate them.

> *"Once you're through the door, in theory your background shouldn't determine what you get to work on – you're an employee like everyone else.* ***But people don't necessarily arrive with the same confidence*** *about speaking up in meetings, challenging senior colleagues or making their views heard. Those differences can still shape how easily people navigate the workplace." Large employer*

> *"If you have been somewhere for a long time, you just know things. Being able to impart that institutional or assumed knowledge to new joiners is so important.* ***[...] If no one is telling you the unwritten rules, how are you supposed to know?"*** *Social mobility policy expert*

For respondents in good first jobs, managers and colleagues made expectations explicit. Feedback gave people reassurance when they were doing well, corrected them when they needed to improve, and helped them to identify their next steps. This was particularly important for early-career workers, who were often not just learning a task but how to behave, communicate and assess themselves in a professional environment.

The strongest accounts were those where structured responsibility came with feedback. One respondent explained: *"It was the combination that made it work. Being thrown in meant I had real stakes in getting it right, which focused my attention. But knowing there was guidance available if I got stuck meant I wasn't afraid to try. If it had been just sink or swim with no support, I would have been too scared to take risks. Having someone to check in with, review my work, and point out what I could have done better turned those experiences into real learning rather just stressful memories."* Another described a manager who "*spent time in me, trusted me to make my own choices and let me make mistakes so I could learn from them*". Responsibility and challenge were developmental when workers knew what was expected of them, and when they had someone to help them learn from mistakes. Without that, the same challenge can become stressful, demotivating or anxiety-inducing rather than formative.

By contrast, lack of feedback left some respondents unsure whether they were performing well or how to improve. One respondent said: "*I think it would have helped me figure out if I was on the right track, but I kept getting told by one of the coaches that no feedback tended to mean I was doing good work. I just wish I'd had more* *structure*". While for the manager no feedback may have genuinely signalled good work, but for the respondent it resulted in uncertainty, anxiety and a lack of direction.

Others described workplaces where expectations shifted or were poorly communicated. One respondent said: "*it meant that their goalposts changed quite often and you were sometimes unsure if you were doing a good job*". Another described the effect of poor communication more directly: "*communication was poor and they never asked me for anything, they just expected me to know what to do so I was mostly just left to learn on my own with little support*". The absence of feedback could also block progression. One respondent explained: *"the lack of communication and feedback made it harder to progress [...] I realised I wouldn't be moving up or going anywhere within the club."*

Some respondents responded to weak communication by trying to create their own structure. One said: "*it helped me have a sense of personal discipline, like I was left to my own devices so I had to take initiative and listen more so I could adjust to what was needed. I developed good skills in this area, I just wish I'd gained more feedback*". Another said: *"[having more feedback] would have mattered a great deal, but with how poor the communication was I never felt like I was being encouraged to progress. In the end I searched the internet and made my own development plan so I could give myself that structure that they weren't giving me*". These examples show initiative, but they also reveal a failure of employer practice. Early-career workers should not have to reverse-engineer the expectations of the job or build their own development framework from scratch.

Good first jobs provided access to relevant training that developed employees' skills and gave them additional opportunities to learn

Across the interviews respondents described the benefits of being able to access various forms of training – whether this was formal or informal training, and whether it was training provided in-house or external courses. Training could help respondents do their current job better, but was highlighted as being particularly important for preparing them for their next role, especially when early career roles were largely comprised of tasks that were quite menial, and where the next step required them to have different skills before moving up.

Formal training was important when respondents moved into roles with more responsibility. One respondent described how, after becoming a supervisor in retail, they were given training plans to help them understand both technical and managerial responsibilities: "*Just generally learning how to work in a team, organisation, problem solving. My management were good at helping me with this and explaining things to me so I got more confident over time. Then when I became supervisor I had training plans to help understand GDPR and people management*". Throughout the interviews it was clear that training was important not just upon entry, but to help support later progression and through transition points.

In technical roles self-directed learning and training was common, with employees often using specialist resources rather than formal training programmes. One respondent said: *"On the engineering side, there was no structured training program.*

My learning came from digging directly into core open-source documentation". Another described a mixed model of independent learning and access to expertise: *"Quite well supported. I mainly taught myself with books, which is my favourite way to learn, but there was someone very skilled on hand to help me if I needed it"*. These examples show that self-directed learning can be productive, but if not formalised at all there is a risk that self-teaching will be easier for workers who already know where to look, how to judge the quality of information and when to ask for help.

External training also appeared in the interviews, but their value depended heavily on whether the workplace itself supported learning and progression. One respondent working in football analysis said: *"there was no training, I was just told to give it a go. I did some courses with the SFA though and they were incredibly useful and educational, but within the club itself I had nothing to help me learn how to do the job."* This shows both the potential and the limits of external training: the courses were valuable, but they could not compensate fully for an organisation that was lacking internal structure and support. External training may build knowledge but the impact will be limited if the workplace does not give people opportunities to use it in their role.

Workplace networks helped early-career workers find community and mentorship, and helped them feel less alone in navigating progression

Workplace networks were another important feature of a good first job. These networks could take different forms: peers at the same career stage, more experienced colleagues, formal mentors, senior contacts or informal advisers.

> *"If you haven't got that visibility early on to test, experience or learn lots of new and different things with a variety of people, that can really limit your choice about where you might go next - or even your visibility of what you could choose to do." Social mobility policy expert*

Alongside explicit expectations and feedback about their performance and the role, networks were a great way of helping early career workers understand how their workplace functioned. Watching how colleagues behaved, hearing how they had progressed, learning who to ask for help and understanding what different career routes looked like could all be achieved through the informal learning of just being around a range of people at different stages in their career who were generous with their time and knowledge, as well as through formal feedback and structured training. In this sense, workplace networks often helped fill some of the "assumed knowledge" gaps that can otherwise make early careers challenging to navigate.

For some respondents, peer networks were a source of confidence and belonging. One respondent described the value of their first job in terms of the relationships they built: *"it was long hours but that was voluntary. I really enjoyed it and made great relationships that I still have. It improved my confidence and gave me good experience"*. Another, reflecting on what a good start in work meant to them, said: *"it was great at the time, I met new people, new friends and started earning my own money. I was proud that I can be self sufficient. I was not afraid of hard work"*. For these interviewees good colleagues and peer relationships helped them feel part of a workplace, build confidence and develop a more positive sense of themselves as workers.

Cohorts could be particularly valuable in larger early-career schemes or organisations where respondents were surrounded by others at a similar stage. A peer group gave people others to compare experiences with, learn alongside and progress through the organisation with. Where respondents could see peers learning, moving teams or progressing, it helped them visualise their path forwards even if the routes were not stated explicitly.

> *"As people move into leadership, we expect them to demonstrate how they have contributed to the wider office, not just what they have delivered for clients. That might mean interviewing new joiners, mentoring colleagues or supporting wider initiatives.* ***Those contributions help create the fabric of community that people learn from when they first join – and we hold leaders accountable for playing their part in it****."* *Large employer*

More senior workplace contacts were also important parts of employee's networks. In some cases, senior colleagues acted as examples, informal advisers or role models, helping early-career workers better understand their sector, workplace and what different roles look like from people much further ahead in their career journey. One respondent described how access to senior people changed their confidence: *"I think that the good thing about the role was that I got to sit in with a lot of executives who could walk me through how they did and share advice. That really changes your confidence knowing how it is possible*." One respondent described how senior staff "*[offered] coffee hours, for mentorship and to learn how their careers have progressed and to give me advice as someone starting*." Another reflected on the lasting value of a mentor from a graduate scheme: "*The mentor I had on the grad scheme was particularly helpful, I reached out to them a few years later for guidance when I was considering a bigger career move*.", showing that workplace networks can have effects beyond the first role itself.

Networks created in first roles also proved important later on, with some respondents described colleagues or workplace contracts providing advice or referrals. One respondent said: *"I stayed in touch with a few people from that first job, and a couple of them became useful contacts later on, mostly for advice or referrals*.", indicating that networks and contacts formed in someone's early career can become important social capital later on. Especially for those from less advantaged backgrounds who may not have access to pre-existing professional networks, their first job may be one of the first opportunities to develop this.

In comparison, the absence of networks also at times hindered job progression, as well as giving those who had them a boost up. Where respondents felt isolated, or where there was no peer group, mentor or knowledgeable colleague to learn from, they were more reliant on their own judgement. This could be especially difficult in small organisations or roles where the respondent was the only person doing that kind of work, with employees left to not just figure out the day to day work largely alone but also their wider career pathway.

The role of the line manager was often ‘make or break’ in someone’s first job

Line managers played a substantial role in whether interviewees felt that their first job was one in which they grew and developed, or one where they stagnated. While explicit progression pathways, training and workplace networks all mattered, managers were often the practical mechanism through which these opportunities were accessed and through which hard work and development was rewarded. They decided when early-career workers were trusted with more responsibility, whether mistakes allowed them to learn and grow or were punished, whether effort was recognised and rewarded and whether someone’s potential was noticed and nurtured.

The most valuable managers did more than supervise and instruct on day to day tasks, they also helped push respondents to consider their future growth potential. One respondent captured this clearly when they described the person who mattered most to their early career: “*The manager who gave me the job because she took a chance on me and believed in me and it made me believe in myself more*”.

Managers also mattered practically because they often controlled access to opportunities that allow employees to develop. Several respondents described becoming more confident because managers gave them responsibility before they felt fully ready but did so in a way that made the challenge manageable. One respondent said their employer *“trusted me with real work early, gave feedback, and let me try new things, which showed someone keen could grow skills fast*”. Another described the value of a manager who *“spent time in me, trusted me to make my own choices and let me make mistakes so I could learn from them*”. Done well, additional responsibility was received by the employee as a sign of trust, but only when the manager created enough safety for the respondent to learn through doing.

This was particularly important for early-career workers who were still building confidence in professional settings. One respondent described how a manager supported them when they first became a supervisor: “*When I first became supervisor, I was struggling a bit and a manager came over and helped me and talk to me through everything and the different scenarios so I felt so much more confident in how to respond and what was the right procedure. Just knowing there was people willing to help me I felt less afraid*”.

Good managers also gave signals about potential. For early-career workers, being given more complex work, asked to take on extra responsibility or encouraged to apply for progression often acted as evidence to them that someone senior believe they were capable in the role and to progress further. One respondent explained: *“The responsibilities they give out suggests how they think of you. For example, I was given manager jobs to do when I was just a retail assistant”*. Another described the emotional effect of being actively supported: “*It made me feel valued as they were so caring about my progression and wanted to see me succeed”.*

The interviews suggest that the emotional tone set by managers was also important. Even if someone had a broader network of peer support, it was their manager that they often spent the most time with, or whose opinion and guidance was perceived to matter the most. One respondent described the importance of managers who stayed calm: "*Many things happen in an office, good or bad, but people who can keep calm do not make negative events bigger*." They explained that this helped them learn from mistakes rather than fear them: "*First of all, I could always feel comfortable and relaxed in the office. Then if something bad happens, I could get over it quickly. If I made a mistake, I could see the event more directly and carefully and learn from the mistake.*"

While good managers were a defining aspect of a good first job, the opposite was also true. Poor management could turn otherwise promising roles into experiences that damaged respondents' trust, confidence or motivation. Some respondents described managers who hinted at progression without making anything concrete: "*The manager would mention occasionally that they'd make a more senior role in that area, as he was also manager of another area. He did hint that I would be in the running. [...] The manager again mentioned it when I told him I was leaving but nothing was ever concrete*." In more negative accounts, poor management made respondents feel exploited or unsafe, although this was a minority of experiences.

Good first jobs provided enough financial security for people to make choices, not just enough income to get by

Financial independence was one of the most commonly mentioned features of a good start in work, cited by more than a quarter of respondents. For many the value of a first job was immediate and material, regardless of later progression – earning their own money, becoming less dependent on family, paying rent, saving for the future or simply having more control over everyday life featured prominently in interviewees responses. One respondent summed this up directly: *"a good start in work meant a healthy paycheck, my own money and a job with little responsibility where I felt comfortable.*" Another explained: "*Honestly I wanted to make my own money and have a viable say in how I spent it instead of relying on my parents. I also was meant to be saving up for university so I needed some sort of employment*". In these cases it was often less important whether the job aligned with a specific career path or desired vocation, as a core purpose of the job was simply to have more independence and autonomy.

However, further discussions within interviews revealed that the financial dimension should not be treated as completely separate from career progression. Income, savings and secure hours shaped whether respondents could make later career moves, and indeed whether they felt 'stuck' or like they were able to progress forwards. Money influenced whether people could travel further for a better job, learn to drive to access roles in areas with poorer public transport, move area, retrain, leave a poor job or wait for something better. One respondent described the link between early earnings and later opportunity: "*I could then gain savings and start to learn to drive which then opens a lot more opportunities within the working aspect as I could then drive and then work further away*." Another explained that work mattered because it enabled life goals that required money: "*buying a car, going on holiday, saving for a house deposit, all things that need a lot of money*".

For some respondents, financial security also affected their ability to take risks. People with savings, family support or a job to fall back on were more able to leave roles that weren't working, try something new or make a move without immediate certainty. One respondent explained: "*Made it hard to take a risk as there was no savings to support*". Another, contrastingly, described the advantage of having a safety net: *"It wasn't freedom it was more a safety net that gave me more chance to take a risk*". This is important because career progression often requires some degree of risk: applying for a different role, accepting a short-term opportunity, moving location, reducing hours to retrain, or leaving a workplace that is no longer developmental. Interviewees who had a financial buffer – either because their first job provided sufficient income and stability, or via family support – were better able to make those more risky moves.

In contrast, low pay and insecure work had the opposite impact. Respondents in unstable or poorly paid roles often described having to prioritise immediate income over longer-term progression. One respondent described the pressure of zero-hours work: "*not many because on the one hand zero hours meant I could do whatever I wanted and decides whether I'd work or not, but on the other I felt pressure that if I didn't take a shift I wouldn't be considered for the next one so I ended up working 60 hours a week just to ensure I made enough to pay rent*". While in theory zero-hours offered flexibility which can be useful in the early career phase, in reality the need to secure enough shifts reduced their freedom and increased anxiety, leaving them with less time and energy to plan their next steps.

First jobs were often less a strategic career choice than the best option available within a narrow set of options shaped by finances, place and employee background

Our interviews showed that first jobs can play very different roles in people's early careers. Some expand skills, confidence and options; others provide useful experiences that enable a lateral move; some offer stability but fail to facilitate progression; and others leave people with little learning, recognition of route forward.

However, most respondents did not enter the labour market from an equal starting point of choosing their first role from a wide field of options. For many, their first job was not the product of long-term strategic career planning; it was rare for respondents to report being able to purposefully pick a specific role because they felt it would enable later progression or provide better support. Instead, first roles were often the most workable option available to them at that time. As one respondent put it: "*It felt purely about what was just workable at the time. My partner was doing her Masters, so she could only work so much. It felt we really had to settle for whatever we could find."*

The roles available to respondents were filtered by a combination of qualifications, family background, finances, networks, geography, transport, confidence and health. These factors compounded, giving some respondents a wider set of opportunities, more room to take risks and more ability to wait for a better role, while leaving others with a much narrower set of realistic choices.

Qualifications widened access to opportunity, but they did not guarantee a good first job or remove the need for experience, networks and structured routes

Overall, graduates were more likely to describe progression and less likely to report feeling stuck in roles that weren't developing them than non-graduates. Non-graduates often described being screened out before they could demonstrate their capability.

Some respondents described degree requirements as a formal barrier, particularly in competitive or professionalised sectors. One said: "*It was all automated applications. So I'd be screened out before a human even saw [my application]*". Another explained the emotional effect of this exclusion: "*Not feeling good enough. Like a failure*". For some, lacking a degree narrowed the opportunity substantially. One respondent said: "*It actually felt hard to get another job as I don't have a degree. I ended up moving into finance as it was the only real job that would take me without a degree at the time*". Another interviewee wanted to progress into nursing, but said that they "*couldn't be a nurse without further education*".

However, in some sectors and roles it was possible for non-graduates to prove their capability once in employment and progress through internal pathways from there. Some respondents described sectors where they could benefit from internal progression and gain experience in the role or through later upskilling and retraining facilitated by the employer. This was particularly common in fields where a degree was not the standard route in, or where employers had structured entry-level roles with scope to move up. Retail was one example where this was common. One respondent described being given higher-level responsibilities before they formally held the role: "*The responsibilities they give out suggests how they think of you. For example, I was given manager jobs to do when I was just a retail assistant*". They later described becoming a supervisor and receiving training to support that transition: "*Then when I became supervisor, I had training plans to help understand GDPR and people management*".

Similarly, higher level qualifications did not guarantee a good first job, nor did they automatically translate into progression once people were in work. Graduates commonly noted that a degree did not overcome the demand from employers for prior experience. Several described being qualified on paper but unable to enter their chosen field because of this. One respondent explained: "*A lot of jobs felt out of reach, I had my qualifications but no real experience, I was lucky to get into the Civil Service as that was one of my preferred employers. I wanted certainty and a place I felt I could build a career.*" They went on to describe the compromise this required: "*The job market was competitive and the jobs I wanted often asked for experience, I had to lower my aims to find a role that would help me build experience and progress from there.*"

This experience was particularly frustrating for respondents whose qualifications were closely tied to a field that they then struggled to gain employment in. One graduate said: "*I have a science based degree and did apply for science based jobs but didn't seem to get shortlisted and so they felt out of reach. Basically jobs that were* *paying minimum wage and required no qualifications felt open to me, everything else felt out of reach*". The emotional impact of this could be significant. As the same respondent put it: "*Confidence-wise I would say it did knock my confidence and self worth as it felt like I spent 4 years studying only for it to not count for anything*".

Throughout the interviews we encountered this "experience trap". Graduates commonly found themselves overqualified for the roles they could get, but under-experienced for the jobs they wanted. One respondent summarised this clearly: "*I felt like I was inexperienced in work and they would want someone with more work experience*". In these cases, qualifications alone were insufficient because employers were looking for additional signals of readiness: work experience, contacts, sector knowledge or evidence that someone could already perform well in a workplace.

Just as for graduates the transition through their early career was not always smooth, for non-graduates it was also not always poor. The interviews also showed that some non-graduates benefitted from progressing through structured work-based progression routes despite not having a degree. Apprenticeships were a particularly strong example of qualifications and development being embedded into work rather than separated from it, with interviewees who followed this route often describing the value of having access to structured support and being able to learn while gaining work experience at the same time. As one apprentice described: "*As an apprentice in a fashion school, I benefited from mentors who were patient and supportive. They took the time to teach me practical skills, gave constructive feedback and encouraged me to keep moving. Their support played an important role in shaping my confidence and approach to work*".

Family background and support gave some respondents the safety net to take risks, while others had to prioritise what was financially sensible

We previously highlighted how the financial security provided by a first job could shape later mobility, by giving respondents more ability to travel, save, retrain or move on. But the interviews also showed that the impact of financial security did not begin with the first job itself. Some respondents entered the labour market with family support, savings or a familiar job to fall back on, while others had to make their first move with little or no buffer, impacting not just later progression but the kinds of first jobs they could realistically access in the first place.

Family support made it easier to take risks early on in their career, for example by spending longer in the job searching process and being more discerning about the type of job or career they wanted to pursue. One respondent described this clearly: "*As I've mentioned me having savings and a supportive family made it easier for me to take a risk I was able to start a new job decided I didn't like it and then quit without having another job lined up which a lot of people wouldn't be able to take that risk*". Another respondent described a similar combination of family support, savings and a previous job to fall back on: "*I was very lucky I had savings and a supportive family. I did take a new job on and didn't like it, so I left*". For these respondents having family support didn't just allow them to be more selective in which jobs they took and kept, it also meant that the consequences of making the wrong choice was less severe. They were able to treat a new opportunity as something to test, rather than something that they had to endure regardless of fit.

This mattered because first jobs are rarely perfect matches. Finding a developmental role often involves trial and error: applying for uncertain opportunities, accepting a role that may or may not lead somewhere, moving sector, or leaving when a workplace turns out to have limited progression. Respondents with family support were better protected from the downsides of this experimentation: "[family support] wasn't freedom, it was more a safety net that gave me more chances to take a risk".

As well as helping people progress once in work, networks helped widen access to good first jobs by helping people navigate the employment landscape

Networks and contacts shaped access to good first jobs both directly and indirectly. For some respondents, personal connections help them get a job in the first place. For others, networks provided information on what roles existed, what employers were looking for and what routes would be best for them. In both cases networks were important because they gave interviewees access to opportunities and knowledge that were not equally available through formal applications or public information.

Some respondents described getting their first job directly through relatives, friends, previous part-time employers or informal contacts. In some cases this made the route into their first proper job very simple and direct. One respondent said: *"a relative was the manager and she got me the job."* Another described returning to a workplace where they were already known: "*I already knew them from when I worked in the [market] before, so I went in and spoke to them and got the job right there and then*." A third said: "*My friend was a manager in the store and it was a new store so they were hiring for lots of vacancies*."

This was not limited to retail or local employment – networks also helped some respondents access more specialised and professional opportunities. One respondent said: "*It came down to a bit of luck and networking. A friend of mine who knew I was fresh out of training and looking for a start mentioned that their company was looking to hire someone for an entry-level spot*." Another described a referral into a design role: "*My first role was referred by a friend's friend, it was a design job working for an e-book project funded by the university*." In these cases, networks did not necessarily guarantee progression, but they helped respondents find out about openings and become visible to employers.

Conversely, a lack of networks could make sectors feel closed off from the outset. One respondent said: "*With just A-levels and no connections or family in professional fields, big corporate graduate schemes or highly competitive industries (like big ad agencies or journalism) felt pretty out of reach at first*." Another reflected: "*No one in my family had worked in those sectors [law and finance], so they felt like worlds I didn't have access to. Tech felt more like a level playing field where your skills mattered more than your background*."

Networks acted as a form of early-career social capital, particularly for fields that felt competitive and opaque from the outside. They helped respondents get noticed by employers, hear about opportunities and practically understand how to get their foot in the door. But because access to networks is uneven, this reproduced advantage and often overlapped with respondents who also benefited from family financial support.

Box 6 – Case study: Making elite law careers more accessible

One major UK commercial law firm has developed a highly structured approach to early careers, alongside a longstanding focus on widening access to the legal profession for people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Its approach to early careers combines highly structured routes into the legal profession with a longstanding focus on widening access for people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The firm runs outreach programmes for 16–18 year-olds and university students, helping young people access work experience and navigate applications for training contracts. It also provides student scholarships and bursaries, with some receiving up to £3,000 annually during university.

Alongside its traditional graduate route, the firm has recently introduced legal apprenticeship routes, recruiting directly from sixth form and combining exams with learning on the job. The programme is intended both to widen access and to find talented young people who may be considering alternatives to university. A representative from the firm explained: "***We're just looking for talent. We're trying to widen how we define talent. Where do we look for talent? And are we appealing to that talent?***"

Making routes into the profession visible is an important part of this work. Graduate recruits can be hired around two years before joining, with the firm covering further study and professional qualification costs. Once there, trainees rotate through four legal "seats" before specialising. While this progression route is highly structured, they recognise that understanding how to access a career in the legal profession can depend heavily on background. Young people without connections may be less likely to know, for example, how important work experience is, so its outreach programmes seek to make this "assumed knowledge" explicit.

Support begins before recruits arrive. Future trainees can be matched with a buddy already working at the firm, including, where requested, someone from a similar background. The firm also operates a discreet hardship fund and provides support with costs such as work clothing, helping to remove some of the financial and practical anxieties associated with entering a professional workplace.

Once trainees join, they can have a trainee buddy, an associate buddy and a supervisor within each seat, alongside a senior "continuity partner" who remains a consistent point of contact as they rotate between teams. ***"The idea is we try and anchor people into the organisation outside of just their immediate cohort. There's people above you who can help you, and equally you have peers around you who can help you as well."*** Mentoring and one-to-one coaching are also available for additional support.

The firm sees this investment as a business issue as well as a social mobility one. Training new lawyers requires substantial investment, creating a strong incentive to help recruits succeed: ***"We have invested a lot of money in these people, and so we want to see them succeed."*** But belonging also matters: ***"If you don't feel like you fit in, you're not going to do your best work."***

Crucially, the firm tracks socioeconomic background beyond recruitment, monitoring entry, progression and promotion. Its internal analysis currently finds no significant difference in progression between colleagues from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and their peers once they have joined. The firm believes its structured development model, investment in recruits and organisational culture may contribute to this, and recognises that the recruitment stage is key in identifying talent.

Place shaped access to good first jobs based on job availability in the local labour market and quality of public transport

Geography and transport repeatedly shaped who could access good first jobs. Respondents were not making their early career decisions in an abstract national labour market – they were making decisions from particular places, with specific transport options and local employers, constrained by commuting costs and personal finance. For some, this meant that jobs which were technically available were not practically accessible.

Local labour markets shaped the range of options respondents felt they had. For some, in major cities, there may be a range of employment options spanning different sectors and professions. For others, the local labour market may be more constrained. One respondent explained: "*There weren't many jobs or employers available. Finding an employer felt harder as I didn't want to move too far away from home*". Where local employers were limited, people were more likely to take what was nearby or familiar, even if it offered less training, progression or alignment with their goals, especially if they did not want to, or could not, move away from home.

Where local transport was limited, jobs being in close proximity or the respondent having the ability and means to drive was a prerequisite for employment. One respondent said: "*I thought my first job was brilliant because it was around the corner from where I was living and it only took me 2 minutes to walk to work. I didn't drive, I didn't have quick access to the internet to look for jobs and I only had A-Levels so everything I would have applied for would have been minimum wage anyway*." Another described driving as something that could widen their future opportunity set: "*I could* *then gain savings and start to learn to drive which then opens a lot more opportunities within the working aspect as I could then drive and then work further away".*

The importance of place was one of the reasons why first jobs were often more practical than strategic. Respondents were often not "choosing" a low paid or low progression route, but found themselves in one because it was what was nearby, affordable and reachable. For those with limited savings and family support, roles that offered greater future opportunities for progression were not always realistic.

Disability, health and anxiety narrowed the roles that felt realistic and made progression more fragile once people entered work

Disability, health and anxiety played a substantial role in who could access good first jobs and how developmental that role could be once respondents were in them. While disabled respondents were a smaller subsection of our interviewees, three fifths of them reported feeling 'stuck' in their career, substantially higher than non-disabled interviewees. These experiences were rarely about explicit discrimination or employer policy, and more often about how confident respondents felt in entering work and being able to sustain themselves in employment.

For some respondents, disability narrowed the range of jobs that felt possible from the outset. One respondent said that only "*entry level jobs felt realistic to me due to my disabilities*". Another stated that "*not many paths felt open to me. I have social anxiety, which severely limited my prospects*". For some respondents, anxiety and neurodiversity made the social demands of work, interviews, networking and customer-facing roles significantly harder to navigate: "*communicating with others was extremely difficult to me compared to other people, so I was never going to be ahead of the queue [for jobs and promotion]*".

Disability could also be a particular barrier in early careers, when respondents sometimes did not yet have a diagnosis or understanding of their conditions, nor support in place to navigate those barriers. One respondent said: "*I struggled to start working, as I had a disability that I only got diagnosed much later in life (autism spectrum) and I didn't know what I could do. It took me a while to get a job, before which I was only doing casual or one-off work*".

For others, health disrupted routes that initially looked promising. One respondent described being unable to continue towards a career they cared about: "*sadly I wasn't able to pursue a career as a vet because my health declined and I became disabled, but I think if my health hadn't declined I would have made an excellent vet*".

The interviews also suggested that disability and health interacted with other constraints. Respondents experiencing poor health, anxiety or disability may have needed jobs that were nearby, flexible, supportive or compatible with fluctuating needs. However, these were not always the same jobs that offered the best training, progression or pay.

These accounts reinforce that disability can shape not only whether someone is able to access work, but which jobs are realistically sustainable and how easy it is to progress once they are there. A good first job for a disabled young person may therefore require more than providing the same training and progression opportunities available to everybody else. Inclusive recruitment, timely workplace adjustments, flexibility and managers who are confident supporting different needs can all be important to ensuring that disabled young people are able to stay, develop and progress.

These issues are also reflected in the wider evidence on disabled people's experiences of work. Research by Scope[90] has identified difficulties securing reasonable adjustments, problems accessing the Access to Work scheme and inflexible working patterns among the factors contributing to disabled people leaving employment. Business Disability Forum has similarly highlighted long delays and difficulties in securing adjustments and recommends simpler adjustment processes alongside better support for line managers.[91]

A first job can build momentum towards a fulfilling career, or it can teach people to doubt their value and lower their ambitions

The impact of a first job was not just practical or financial, it was also deeply psychological. Across interviews, first jobs shaped how respondents understood the world of work and their place within it; their goals and future career aspirations; and their own confidence and sense of self-worth.

Good jobs helped people feel proud, capable and independent. They gave respondents experience of learning workplace norms, handling responsibility, being recognised and rewarded for hard work and seeing progression as something they could realistically work towards. Less developmental first jobs had the opposite effect. Roles with little learning, unclear expectations, blocked progression or poor management created uncertainty, self-doubt and anxiety. This was especially acute where respondents felt underused or unable to convert their education into meaningful work. For respondents in low-mobility pathways, this felt not just like a reflection of the labour market but a judgement on their own value, potential or past choices.

Poor experiences in the workplace early on also damaged trust. Where respondents experienced broken promises, favouritism or lack of support from management, they became sceptical of employers' and the realistic chance of their own progression.

Finally, respondents did not only become stuck where first jobs were wholly negative. Some became trapped by familiarity, security or relationships. Comfort could make stagnation feel safer than taking a risk on change, with respondents aware that they were not progressing but scared to apply for new opportunities.

CHAPTER EIGHT – POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

A new social contract for youth employment

This report has outlined how first jobs matter financially, professionally, and psychologically, while also reflecting the wider advantages and disadvantages that young people bring with them into the labour market. For many, a first proper job is where differences in background begin to translate into tangible differences in employment opportunity: shaping access to training, supportive managers, professional networks and visible routes for progression. It is also a formative introduction to working life, where young people learn workplace norms, build confidence, develop skills and begin to understand what their next steps could look like.

But not all first jobs provide this. Some act as accelerators, giving young people structured support, confidence, training and clear routes forward. Others are stepping-stones: imperfect, but useful. Some are comfort-traps, stable but limiting. Others represent underemployment, where young people's skills and qualifications are not fully used. And some are low-mobility pathways, offering little support, weak development and limited routes forward.

These different pathways are not evenly distributed. Graduates, respondents from more advantaged backgrounds, private-school respondents and those with prior work experience were more likely to access stronger first-job pathways. Non-graduates, young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and disabled respondents were more likely to start in weaker roles. Place also mattered: young people in major cities were more likely to access accelerator and stepping-stone pathways, while those in villages and rural areas were more likely to start in low-mobility or unclear pathways.

The stakes are high. People whose first job was an accelerator pathway now earn substantially more, on average, than those whose first job was a low-mobility or comfort-trap pathways. First jobs that built confidence and readiness for senior work were associated with higher earnings later, as were first jobs that included formal mentorship and training. But many roles did not have these features, and interviews highlighted the scarring effect that a poor first role can have on a young person's career momentum. A good first job can be a great platform, but a bad one can risk weakening someone's attachment to the labour market and to work.

The policy challenge is therefore not simply to get young people into work, but to ensure that their first experience of work gives them somewhere to go next.

This is particularly important in the current context. Rising concern about young people becoming NEET, growing mental health and confidence challenges, more competitive recruitment, AI-driven changes to entry-level work and weaker non-university routes all point towards the same conclusion: early work needs to be better supported. If the first rungs of the labour market have weakened, government and employers need to work together to strengthen them.

But this is not only about NEETs. Youth labour market detachment is the sharpest warning sign, but there is a wider problem of young people being in work without feeling that work is helping them build a future. Many are employed but stuck in roles that make limited use of their skills, offer little development, or provide no clear route towards higher pay and progression. The recommendations in this chapter are therefore about both prevention and progression: reducing the risk of young people falling out of work, while also helping those already in work to build the skills, networks and confidence they need to get on.

This means creating a new social contract for youth employment. Young people should be expected to engage seriously with work, build skills and take up opportunities, and educational institutions have a role in building up those early capabilities. But employers and government also have responsibilities. Employers should not expect young people to arrive fully formed, and Government should not treat any job as automatically good enough. A first job should provide fair pay, structured support, decent management, opportunities to learn, and a credible route into progression.

A renewed social contract for youth employment needs to be concerned with both getting in and getting on. Widening access matters, but social mobility is not achieved at the point of hire if young people then have unequal opportunities to build skills, networks and experience or to progress. For employers, the same challenge is about developing entry-level recruits into the skilled and experienced workforce they need.

This chapter sets out a series of recommendations which, taken together, form the basis of a renewed social contract for youth employment: one in which government and educational institutions equip young people to access good work; employers provide supportive, developmental and rewarding first jobs; and young people are able to build fulfilling careers and contribute to a more productive workforce.

These recommendations cover two key areas:

1. **Improving the quality of first jobs,** so that more young people receive the support, training and development they need once they enter work.
2. **Improving access to good first jobs**, so that young people from less advantaged backgrounds are not locked out of the roles most likely to help them progress.

For Government: A new social contract for youth employment
Improving the quality
Recommendation 1: Government should work with employers to establish a Good First Job Guarantee
Recommendation 2: Government should become a model first-job employer and establish a Public Service First Jobs Programme.
Recommendation 3: Government should use public procurement to reward employers that provide good first jobs
Recommendation 4: Combined authorities should build shared first-job infrastructure for SMEs through Local First Job Networks
Recommendation 5: Government should introduce a First Job Training Credit to help SMEs release young workers and managers for training
Improving access
Recommendation 6: Government should introduce a post-16 Student Premium to support disadvantaged young people on non-university routes
Recommendation 7: Government should stick to their manifesto commitment of a full ban on unpaid internships
Recommendation 8: Government should consult on requiring large employers to collect and report socioeconomic background data on their workforce and early-career recruitment

Recommendations for government: a new social contract for youth employment

Recommendation 1: Government should work with employers to establish a Good First Job Guarantee

The central finding of this report is that not all first jobs offer the same route forward. Some provide support, confidence, skills, networks and progression. Others only provide employment, with very little development. As part of this, some young people are becoming increasingly detached and disillusioned with the world of work, feeling that they have done ‘everything right’ but see no path forwards. A new social contract for youth employment should therefore include a clear expectation of what a good first job should provide.

Government, employers, trade unions, combined authorities and youth organisations should work together to establish a **Good First Job Guarantee**. This should be a voluntary standard setting out the minimum developmental offer that young workers should receive in their first proper job, and should establish the principle that an entry-level job should not simply provide work today, but help someone become better equipped for their next step.

The Guarantee should include the following principles:

- **Fair pay and secure work:** young workers should be paid fairly, receive a written contract and have predictable hours wherever possible.
- **A proper induction:** young workers should receive an introduction to the organisation, their role, workplace expectations and their rights at work.
- **A named line manager:** every young worker should have a manager responsible for their development, not just their output.
- **Structured training:** young workers should receive role-specific training, including support to use AI and emerging technologies effectively, alongside the human skills that are becoming increasingly valuable as jobs evolve, such as adaptability, resilience, judgement and communication.
- **Regular feedback:** employers should provide scheduled check-ins, feedback and at least one formal review within the first six months.
- **A development plan:** young workers should have clear goals and an agreed plan for building skills and experience.
- **Mentoring and networks:** young workers should have access to a mentor, buddy or peer network, especially where they are the only young worker in the organisation.
- **Progression conversations and guidance:** employers should be clear about what progression could look like, even where promotion is not immediately available.
- **Supportive and inclusive management:** managers should be trained to support young workers' development, recognise when additional support may be needed, and have confident and appropriate conversations about mental health, disability, adjustments and other barriers to progression.
- **Accessible and flexible work:** recruitment and onboarding should be accessible, young workers should have a clear route to request and review reasonable adjustments, and employers should offer appropriate flexibility where this is needed to enable someone to perform their role, remain in work and progress.
- **Fair recruitment:** entry-level recruitment should be transparent, workers should be paid where work is being done, and not rely on unpaid experience or informal networks.

Participating organisations would first commit to working towards the standards, before progressing through an assessment process requiring them to demonstrate how these were being met in practice. This would create a clear and practical benchmark for employers, helping them understand what good looks like, while giving young people greater clarity about what they should expect from a first job, modelled off the Greater Manchester Good Employment Charter scheme.

For disabled young workers, these principles are particularly important. Our findings show substantially weaker experiences of management support, belonging and progression among disabled respondents, while our qualitative interviews highlight the importance of flexibility and support in sustaining employment. The Guarantee should therefore treat disability inclusion as an integral and universal part of first-job quality, rather than as something to consider if a disclosure is made.

The scheme would be voluntary, recognising that small businesses in particular may not be to offer many of the above aspects without additional support (which we address in recommendations 4 and 5). However, we do think that many larger organisations could be doing more to support young workers, and for those who are already advanced in this area, the scheme would also provide recognition and a way to share best practice between and within sectors.

There is precedent for this kind of voluntary standard helping to shift employer and institutional behaviour. In higher education, for example, equality charters such as Athena Swan and the Race Equality Charter have been used to give institutions a structured framework for assessing practice, identifying gaps and committing to improvement. These schemes have not solved inequality, and their impact varies, but they have helped create a common language around what good practice looks like and given institutions a process through which to examine their own performance. Retrospective analysis has found that Athena Swan has been associated with higher levels of gender representation across all seniority levels.[92]

A more directly relevant precedent is the real Living Wage accreditation. The Living Wage Foundation has shown that a voluntary employer standard can shift practice in the labour market by creating a clear benchmark alongside public recognition. More than 16,000 UK employers are now accredited Living Wage Employers, and recent assessment of the scheme estimates that more than half a million workers have received pay increases as a result.[93] [94] At a devolved level, the Greater Manchester Good Employment Charter, developed under Andy Burnham's mayoralty, sets out what good employment should look like across areas including secure work, flexible work, engagement and voice, recruitment, people management, and health and wellbeing. A Good First Job Guarantee would apply the same logic to a specific and particularly important group: young people entering the labour market for the first time.

This should not be seen simply as a compliance exercise, but as a mechanism for building a shared social contract around youth employment. While we want to increase access to top accelerator pathways, we also think that there should be a minimum bar for all roles, to ensure that new entrants to the labour market are properly supported and fairly compensated. The aim should not be to reproduce elite graduate schemes across the whole employment market, but to ensure that the basic components of a good first job are available much more widely.

> *"**Accelerator programmes can be extremely powerful, but they are finite by design**. They identify a relatively small group and propel them forward. The risk is that this creates a two-tier system between those who have been selected for accelerated development and those outside it." Academic*

For young people, this Guarantee would help clarify what they should reasonably expect from a first job. For employers, it would provide a practical framework for improving early-career roles. For government, it would offer a tool for raising the quality of youth employment opportunities (see recommendations 2 and 3). And it would help move the debate beyond whether young people are in or out of work, towards whether their first experience of work gives them a genuine foundation for progression.

Recommendation 2: Government should become a model first-job employer

The Government should commit to applying the principles of a good first job across the public sector, including central government departments, local government and publicly funded bodies. Entry-level recruitment should focus on potential rather than unnecessary prior experience, while roles should provide secure employment, fair pay, structured induction, regular management support, protected training time and clear routes for progression.

Alongside this, the Government should establish a **Public Service First Jobs programme** for young people beginning entry-level roles in public services and organisations delivering a public mission. Building on the approach taken by UK Year of Service, the programme would combine paid employment with a shared package of wraparound development support. Participants working for different employers within the same region could be brought together for professional development, peer support, cross-sector networking and opportunities to learn about careers across public service.

This regional infrastructure would be particularly valuable for young people employed in smaller organisations, where employers may be unable to provide extensive training, large peer cohorts or formal progression programmes themselves. Funding could support a regional coordinator and a common programme of mentoring, skills development, networking and careers guidance during participants' first year in work. Employers would remain responsible for providing a good-quality job, rather than using the programme as a substitute for adequate pay, management or training.

The scheme could initially focus on occupations where government has both significant recruitment needs and a clear public-service mission, including local government, health and social care, early years, education support, housing, environmental services and the voluntary sector. It could also be attached to public procurement and grant funding, enabling government to create more high-quality entry-level opportunities through its wider supply chains.

This would allow government to lead by example while addressing an important weakness in current youth employment policy. Support is often concentrated on helping young people obtain a job and falls away once they enter employment. Yet evidence from existing employment programmes demonstrates the role that wraparound provision can play in building confidence, addressing barriers and helping young people sustain work.

Recommendation 3: Government should use public procurement to reward employers that provide good first jobs

Government should use public procurement to increase the supply of high-quality first jobs. This should not mean making every contract or youth employment scheme conditional on a full accreditation process, which could risk discouraging some employers from hiring young people. But it is reasonable to expect firms benefiting from public contracts to show how they are contributing to good employment, skills and progression.

Andy Burnham has argued for a much stronger role for social value in public procurement, including using government contracts to support British industry, strengthen local economies and create more work placements and apprenticeships for young people. In his first speech as Prime Minister, he said the government would reindustrialise Britain by "using public procurement to back British industry"[95]. During his leadership campaign, he also pledged that public contracts should be subject to "proper social value weighting", with firms expected to deliver greater benefits for young people and communities, including more work placements and apprenticeships.[96] The Government has subsequently begun to put this approach into practice through a substantially revised Social Value Model, published by the Cabinet Office in August 2026.

The new Social Value Model will apply to in-scope central government procurements commenced from January 2027. It is explicitly focused on two outcomes: 'Good Jobs' and 'Skills'. Its award criteria include creating and retaining high-quality jobs, fair working conditions and pay, training and retraining, in-work progression and developing talent pipelines. For contracts worth £1 million to under £5 million, social value will carry a minimum 10% weighting, rising to 20% for contracts worth £5 million or more.[97]

This represents an important shift towards the argument made in this report: that employment policy should be concerned not only with whether opportunities are created, but with whether those opportunities provide good work and routes for development and progression. The new model is also particularly relevant to young people. Forthcoming implementation guidance is expected to identify those transitioning from education into employment and those who are NEET as target cohorts, alongside disabled people and care leavers.

Government should now use the implementation of the revised Social Value Model to ensure that the quality of entry-level opportunities is properly recognised in public procurement. As the **Good First Job Guarantee** is developed, its principles should provide a practical benchmark for what high-quality entry-level employment looks like under relevant Social Value Model criteria. Where a contract creates or supports entry-level jobs, apprenticeships, internships or placements, bidders should be encouraged to demonstrate not only how many opportunities they will provide, but how those opportunities will support young people to learn, develop, remain in work and progress.

This should be applied proportionately. The aim should not be to create a bureaucratic barrier that only large firms can meet, or to exclude SMEs from public contracts. This is consistent with the revised Social Value Model itself, which requires contracting authorities to consider market conditions, including the ability of SMEs and voluntary and community organisations to meet the criteria. For larger contracts, bidders could make measurable commitments around apprenticeships, paid internships, entry-level roles, training and progression. For smaller suppliers, expectations could include participation in Local First Job Networks or other shared training, mentoring and skills infrastructure. Government should work closely with employers, particularly SMEs, as the new model is implemented to ensure that raising expectations around job quality strengthens rather than restricts smaller firms' participation in procurement.

Recommendation 4: Combined authorities should build shared first-job infrastructure for SMEs through Local First Job Networks

Employer size was one of the clearest dividing lines in access to structured development and support, and starting in a small employer, with 10 to 49 employees, was associated with 11.4% lower later earnings than starting with a large employer. We don't believe that this is the fault of the small employer nor that small employers don't wish to provide strong training and development routes for their staff. Working for a small employer can also provide other benefits, such as closer working relationships, faster growth in responsibility and varied experience. But they may also lack the capacity to provide the structured training, mentoring, cohorts and progression infrastructure that young workers need.

The answer should not be to assume that young people need to start their careers in large employers. Many SMEs can provide good first jobs, and many SMEs will benefit from having passionate young workers, but they should not be expected to recreate the infrastructure of a large employer scheme alone.

> *"Could young people be seen more like a cohort across organisations, so that the richness of the learning is not borne by one organisation but spread across that investment?" Social mobility policy expert*

There are clear precedents for a shared model. In Ireland, Skillnet Ireland supports businesses through around 70 sectoral and regional business networks, co-funding training and workforce development with industry. It works through employer-led networks rather than expecting each individual SME to commission training alone.[98] In Germany, inter-company vocational training centres form part of the vocational training system and exist specifically to supplement training in small and medium-sized enterprises where individual employers cannot cover the full range of required skills.[99]

There are also domestic precedents. The UK's Flexi-job Apprenticeship Agencies recruit and employ apprentices and arrange placements with host businesses, reducing the burden on employers in sectors where work is project-based, short-term or less predictable. The Government's Help to Grow: Management programme provides SME leaders with structured learning, one-to-one mentoring and peer learning through a network of business schools, which was found to have successfully increased the confidence of SME leaders as well as their skills, knowledge and understanding of management and leadership.[100]

Combined authorities should build on these models by **creating Local First Job Networks** for SMEs: shared local infrastructure through which smaller employers can access recruitment, training, management and progression support that they may struggle to provide alone. The Networks would support both young workers and the employers recruiting and managing them.

These networks could include:

- shared recruitment support, including help designing entry-level roles, advertising vacancies and reaching young people through local colleges and employment services;
- shared induction and workplace-readiness training for young workers across several SMEs;
- peer cohorts, so young people are not isolated as the only early-career worker in their organisation;
- mentoring from experienced staff across local employers;
- short courses in communication, confidence, digital skills, workplace norms and professional development;
- training and practical support for line managers, particularly those managing young workers for the first time;
- disability inclusion and workplace-adjustment support, including helping smaller employers understand and implement reasonable adjustments and navigate external support;
- progression planning and careers coaching; and
- links to local colleges, training providers, chambers of commerce and larger employers.

Large employers should also be encouraged to act as anchor partners within these networks. Larger organisations often already have training infrastructure, experienced mentors, established progression frameworks and early-career programmes that smaller employers may not have the resources to develop themselves. Working through Local First Job Networks, they could open up elements of this infrastructure to young workers in local SMEs, for example by contributing mentors, providing access to selected training or networking opportunities, sharing expertise on job design and progression, and helping to create cross-employer early-career cohorts. This would allow large employers to play a wider role in strengthening local skills pipelines, while helping smaller businesses offer high-quality first jobs without having to build the same infrastructure from scratch.

This would allow young workers in SMEs to access some of the benefits usually associated with larger employers: structured training, cohorts, networks, mentoring and visible development support. It would also make it easier for SMEs to offer good first jobs without bearing the full cost or administrative burden alone. For this to work, it must be adequately funded. The NEET crisis creates a strong case for investing in local infrastructure that helps young people not only enter work, but stay in work and progress. Shared first-job infrastructure for SMEs should therefore form part of any further devolution or expansion of skills funding to combined authorities, giving local areas the resources to provide recruitment support, training, mentoring, manager development, disability and adjustment support, peer networks and progression infrastructure that individual small employers often cannot provide alone.

> *"Better pathways require coordination across education and employment within a local area. **Devolution may offer the missing layer through which schools, colleges, training providers and employers can be brought together**." Academic*

Local First Job Networks could also provide a practical route for strengthening disability inclusion in SMEs. Smaller employers may have limited internal HR or occupational health capacity, making it harder to navigate reasonable adjustments and external schemes. Networks should therefore provide access to specialist advice on inclusive recruitment and workplace adjustments, and practical support for employers and young workers navigating schemes such as Access to Work.

Recommendation 5: Government should introduce a First Job Training Credit to help SMEs release young workers and managers for training

It's clear from this research that structured development support matters, especially for young workers who may be coming to the workplace for the first time, perhaps with additional support needs and little knowledge of professional norms, behaviours and skills. Our modelling showed that first jobs which included formal training were associated with higher earnings later in careers, even after controlling for starting salary and other first-job characteristics.

However, access is uneven: only 25% of those whose first role was in a micro or small business had access to formal training within the organisation, compared to 41% of those in a large employer. Small employers often face a practical capacity problem. Where teams are small, releasing a young worker for training can mean losing someone needed on shift, on site, with clients or in day-to-day delivery. Releasing a manager for training can be even harder, particularly where that person is essential to keeping the business running. Respondents whose first job was in a small employer were also less likely to have accessed external training and in interviews small employers commonly raised constraints on having the capacity to release staff for training - even if they had the funding - suggesting that the employers least able to provide structured development internally also had the least capacity to utilise external resources.

> *"A large employer may have a team dedicated to recruiting and supporting apprentices. In a microbusiness, **one person may be doing HR, leading the apprenticeship and carrying out their ordinary job** as well." Vocational training policy expert*

Employers already receive some support for investment in training. Employer-funded work-related training can generally be deducted from tax as a business expense, and apprenticeship funding also already covers most formal training and assessment costs for many employers, with government paying 95% of these costs in many cases. However, SMEs in particular would benefit from support with the time cost and backfill cost associated with releasing staff for training.

Government should therefore introduce a targeted First Job Training Credit for SMEs, subsidising paid training time, backfill costs and management training. This should be available to SMEs that employ young workers aged 16-24 in entry-level roles, and should be tied to participation in approved developmental activity. This could include paid time for young workers to attend training, backfill costs where an employer needs cover for shifts, site work or service delivery, management training for line managers of young workers and participation in local shared training, mentoring or cohort programmes. This already exists in other jurisdictions, such as Singapore, where their SkillsFuture programme includes employer funding for course fees as well as absentee payroll support where employees attend approved training.[101] Similarly, Austria's qualification funding for employees provides public co-funding that can be used to subsidise wage costs for time spent in training, with support targeted at workers who may otherwise have lower access to development.[102]

Recommendation 6: Government should introduce a post-16 Student Premium to support disadvantaged young people on non-university routes

One of the clearest findings from this research is that access to good first jobs is socially patterned. Young people do not enter the labour market from equal starting points, and those who follow non-university routes often face a narrower and less well-supported set of pathways into secure, well-paid, developmental work.

Our polling found that graduates were more likely than non-graduates to report almost every positive feature of a first job. They were more likely to say that their first job taught them important skills, increased their confidence, made them feel ready for more senior work, offered opportunities to grow and develop, and had clear routes for progression. The largest differences were around progression and networks: 3 in 5 graduates said they built professional connections that proved useful later in their career, compared with less than 2 in 5 non-graduates, and 58% of graduates said there were clear routes for progression, compared with 42% of non-graduates. Non-graduates were also less likely to experience actual progression in their first role, and more likely to be in low-mobility or comfort-trap pathways.

It's clear that the transition from education into work is not only unequal at the point of recruitment: these inequalities are present before young people enter the labour market. And for young people who do not go to university, these inequalities may be particularly acute. Apprenticeships should provide one of the clearest routes into skilled work, but starts for young people have fallen substantially. Many non-graduates instead enter sectors where pay is lower, training is less formal and progression routes are less visible.

To help tackle this, alongside the measures outlined above, Government should introduce a **16–19 Student Premium**,[103] modelled on the Pupil Premium, to support disadvantaged young people through the final bridge between education and work. This should be additional to existing post-16 funding, targeted at students who are or have been eligible for free school meals, and available to colleges, sixth forms and training providers.

The purpose of the funding should be to prevent the sharp drop-off in targeted support at age 16, just as young people are preparing for high-stakes transitions into further study, apprenticeships, training or work. Disadvantage does not end at 16, yet the current funding system risks withdrawing targeted support at precisely the moment when young people are making decisions that will shape their early labour market outcomes, and this report highlights how a lack of support during this transition period can have long-term career and financial consequences.

The 16–19 Student Premium should support evidence-based interventions that improve attendance and attainment, but also help disadvantaged young people make successful and sustained transitions into further education, apprenticeships, training or good work. This could include additional tutoring, support to secure English and maths qualifications, careers guidance, mentoring, employer engagement, transition support, and help with applications to apprenticeships, further study or work. The funding should be flexible enough for providers to respond to local need, but its purpose should be explicitly tied to both participation during post-16 education and progression into high-quality destinations afterwards.

Recommendation 7: Government should stick to their manifesto commitment of a full ban on unpaid internships

> *"Graduate recruiters are being inundated with large numbers of highly similar, AI-written applications. One response is to recruit more heavily from the pool of young people they already know through internships and work experience.* ***It is not straightforward nepotism, but it risks recreating many of the same inequalities.*** *" Social mobility policy expert*

Unpaid internships were one of the clearest examples of unequal access to early labour market opportunity. Those from the most advantaged backgrounds were twice as likely to have undertaken an unpaid internship than those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, and that gap was even larger for graduates versus non-graduates. In other areas of pre-work experience the disparity was not nearly as sharp, with respondents having had similar levels of exposure to work experience, and much smaller gaps in access to part time work and volunteering.

Not only is access to unpaid internships highly unequal, but being able to access one also seems to give young people a substantial advantage in the early labour market. Those who had accessed an internship were twice as likely to be in an accelerator pathway than someone with no pre-work experience. Internships may provide experience, networks and signalling value, but unpaid ones are much easier to take up for young people who can rely on family support, live near major labour markets or afford to work for free.

Government previously committed to tackling unpaid internships as a manifesto pledge, but the current approach does not go far enough. Clarifying National Minimum Wage guidance and improving enforcement are useful, but they leave too much ambiguity in the system – with too much of the burden still left on interns themselves needing to report employers. Employers that offer genuine jobs should not be able to avoid paying young workers by calling them internships, work experience or opportunities.

Government should introduce a clear ban on any unpaid internships or placements of over four weeks, except where the placement is genuinely part of a formal education or training course, has clear learning objectives, is time-limited and is overseen by an education provider. Any internship of over four weeks that involves productive work for an employer should be paid at least the National Minimum Wage, with placements shorter than this still covered by existing minimum wage legislation.

This would not prevent young people from accessing short work experience, shadowing or educational placements, but it would draw a clearer line between learning opportunities and long periods of unpaid labour.

Recommendation 8: Government should consult on requiring large employers to collect and report socioeconomic background data on their workforce and early-career recruitment

Access to good first jobs is socially patterned, but many employers still do not collect the data needed to better understand who gets into their organisation, who progresses, and who gets stuck. Without better data, it is difficult for employers to know whether their recruitment and progression systems are widening or narrowing opportunity.

All employers should seek to collect socioeconomic background data where possible across both their workforce and recruitment pipeline, including for apprenticeships, graduate schemes, internships and entry-level roles, so that they can understand who applies, who is recruited, who progresses and who leaves.

It is important to recognise that successful collection of socioeconomic background data depends on employees and applicants choosing to disclose information, and employers can face challenges achieving sufficiently high and representative response rates. Smaller organisations may also face particular capacity and data-quality challenges where workforce numbers are low – although this can be combatted by combining several years' worth of data.

We recommend that Government consult on requiring large employers with 250 or more employees to collect and report socioeconomic background data. The consultation should consider how a reporting requirement could operate in practice, including appropriate measures of socioeconomic background, how employers can support voluntary disclosure, minimum response rates and data-quality standards, how small subgroup numbers should be handled, and the administrative burden on employers. It should also consider what information large employers should ultimately be required to publish, including whether reporting should include socioeconomic pay gaps alongside representation across recruitment and progression.

A threshold of 250 employees would be the appropriate starting point for consultation because it is already familiar from other large-employer reporting requirements (for example diversity data on gender or ethnicity), while also focusing any new requirement on organisations more likely to have the capacity and workforce size needed to produce meaningful data.

Any future reporting framework should build on established socioeconomic background measures and guidance, such as that developed by the Social Mobility Commission in consultation with several other major social mobility organisations, rather than requiring employers to develop their own measures. Because disclosure must ultimately depend on individuals being willing to provide this information, employers should also be supported to explain clearly why the data is being collected, how it will be used and how confidentiality will be protected. Existing employees should have regular opportunities to provide or update their information voluntarily.

Recommendations for employers: Being a good first employer

Government has an important role in improving access to good first jobs, but employers ultimately shape what young people experience once they are through the door. A new social contract for youth employment therefore requires employers to treat first jobs not simply as entry-level labour, but as developmental roles that help young people build skills, confidence, networks and progression. As this report has shown, the quality of the first job matters for later outcomes, and many of the features associated with better progression are within employers' control: management, training, mentoring, feedback and whether young people can see a route forward.

Employers should:

- **Design entry-level roles as developmental roles.** First jobs should have a clear learning purpose. Young workers should understand what skills they are expected to build, how they will be supported, and what progression could look like. They should support broader work readiness, developing transferable skills such as time and project management, coping with stress, teamwork and communication.
- **Ensure young workers have access to appropriate training,** whether that is internal training schemes or external accreditation. Where possible, train young workers as part of cohorts, partnering with other businesses where there are not sufficient numbers within the organisation.
- **Pay young workers fairly and end unpaid internships.** Employers should not use unpaid work as a filter for access to competitive sectors. Internships and placements should be paid, advertised openly and accessible to those without family financial support.
- **Recruit transparently and inclusively.** Entry-level roles should be openly advertised, with clear criteria and realistic expectations. Employers should avoid requiring unnecessary prior experience for genuinely junior roles, and should review whether recruitment processes privilege those with informal networks or unpaid experience. Employers should not default to requiring a degree, but instead look at what is actually needed for the role. Recruitment processes should also be accessible, with candidates given a clear and straightforward route to request adjustments at application and interview stage.
- **Provide proper induction and regular feedback.** Young workers should receive a structured introduction to the organisation, their role, workplace expectations and their rights at work. They should also receive regular check-ins and at least one formal review in the first six months.
- **Train and support line managers.** All early career employees should have a named line manager that they receive regular support from, meeting to discuss progress at least monthly. Managers of young workers should be

equipped to give constructive feedback, set clear expectations, support confidence, and recognise when additional support may be needed. They should also be trained to recognise and respond to additional support needs, including having appropriate conversations about mental health, disability and workplace adjustments.

- **Make adjustments and flexibility part of good job design.** Disabled young workers should have a clear route to discuss and request workplace adjustments, with agreed support reviewed as their role or needs change. Employers should also consider flexibility in working hours, location or working practices where this can help a young person remain in work and progress.
- **Offer mentoring and networking opportunities.** Employers should look to provide wider networks for young employees outside of their immediate line management chain. For example, access to a mentor, and/or a peer or buddy support network.
- **Collect and use socioeconomic background data.** Employers should seek to collect socioeconomic background data across their workforce and early-career recruitment pipeline. All employers should use available data to examine who applies, who gets hired, who progresses and who leaves. For small employers we'd recommend pooling data across multiple years.
- **Provide visible routes to progression**. Employers should be clear about what progression can look like within their organisation, including the skills, behaviours and experience needed to move forward. Where possible, they should showcase people who have progressed internally, so that young workers can see what is possible, while also being honest about the limits or challenges of progression in smaller or flatter organisations.

While the above represents what employers can do to be a good first employer, we recognise that smaller organisations will not be able to meet many of those expectations alone. SMEs should engage with local shared training, mentoring and networking programmes where available, and government should support them to do so. But the principle remains the same: a good first job should give young people the chance to learn, build confidence and move forward.

For employers, this is not only a social responsibility, but a productivity and retention issue. Young workers who are supported, trained and well managed are more likely to contribute, stay and progress. Improving the quality of first jobs is therefore good for young people, but also good for employers who want a motivated and capable future workforce.

Ultimately, progression is where the interests of young people and employers most clearly align. Young people need first jobs that build skills, confidence and routes into better opportunities; employers need workers who continue to learn, take on responsibility and develop into the talent they will need in future. A stronger first rung should do both.

METHODS ANNEX (APPENDIX I): REGRESSION MODELLING

Overview

This annex describes the regression modelling outlined in Chapter Six, which uses ordinary least squares regression to estimate the association between a respondents' first-job characteristics and their current or most recent annual salary.

The dependent variable is the current or most recent annual salary, which has been reported on a full-time equivalent basis. Respondents selected salary bands rather than providing exact salaries - so each band was converted into an approximate midpoint, with the salary variable then logged. This means coefficients can be interpreted approximately as percentage differences in later earnings.

The analysis is descriptive and associational. It should not be read as estimating the causal effect of individual first-job features. This is because the data are cross-sectional and retrospective, and also because first-job characteristics are themselves likely to be affected by a respondents' background, education, geography and their prior opportunities.

Model structure

The models were built using a block structure, with each block adding a new group of variables into the model. This made it possible to estimate how much additional variation in later earnings was explained by each of these groups of variables.

The five blocks were:

Table 13: Blocks used in the regression model

Block	Variables included	Explanation
Block 1: Background controls	Graduate status, age, years since first job, gender, region, area type, parental graduate status, private school attendance	Major background characteristics associated with later earnings
Block 2: Pre-first-job experiences	Work experience/job shadowing, paid internship, unpaid internship, volunteering, part-time or casual paid work while studying, gap year/time out, no listed pre-work experience	Captures experiences accumulated before entering the first proper job
Block 3: Objective/structural first-job features	Contract type, sector, employer size, formal mentorship, informal mentorship, formal training, informal training, performance review, development goals, health and safety training only, movement to a different role/team, clear progression routes, senior support/networks, progression/responsibility	Captures observable features of the first job and employer
Block 4: Subjective first-job experience	Support and belonging index, confidence and readiness index, development support index	Captures how respondents experienced the first job
Block 5: First-job pay	Log first-job salary	Captures starting pay as a possible channel through

		which first-job advantage persists

Source: SMF analysis of Focaldata polling.

The all-respondent model includes graduate status in Block 1, with the graduate and non-graduate models excluding graduate status - because it does not vary within those groups.

All models use a common complete-case sample within each group, which means the same respondents are included across all five blocks for the all-respondent model, the graduate model and the non-graduate model respectively. This avoids changes in R-squared being driven by changes in the sample between blocks.

Construction of indices

Several survey items were combined into indices, as many of the first-job experience questions measure closely related concepts. Including all of them separately would make the model harder to interpret and could create problems with overlapping variables.

Each item was converted to a 0–1 scale. For agree/disagree questions, strongly disagree was coded as 0, disagree as 0.25, neutral as 0.5, agree as 0.75 and strongly agree as 1. For selected/not-selected questions, selected responses were coded as 1 and all other responses as 0. Where relevant, negatively worded items were reverse-coded.

Table 14: Indices used in the regression model

Index	Survey items included	Interpretation
Support and belonging index	Supportive and collaborative workplace culture; felt that they belonged; could see a future with the employer	Captures whether the first job felt supportive, comfortable and socially embedded
Confidence and readiness index	First job increased confidence in professional abilities; felt ready to take on more senior work by the end of the first job	Captures whether the first job built confidence and perceived readiness for progression
Senior support and networks index	Saw people like me in senior or leadership roles; senior staff championed and supported me; built useful professional connections; opportunities to shadow senior colleagues; opportunities to build working relationships with senior colleagues	Captures access to senior role models, sponsorship and career-relevant networks
Development support index	Employer was willing to invest in development; line manager was supportive and invested in development; received enough guidance, support and training; role offered opportunities to grow and develop; learnt important skills	Captures whether the employer and manager provided practical developmental support

Progression and responsibility index	Opportunities to lead or manage others; responsibilities grew significantly without formal promotion; promoted to a more senior role; received a significant pay rise	Captures whether the first job involved realised progression, growing responsibility or recognition

Source: SMF analysis of Focaldata polling.

Salary variables

Current salary and first-job salary were both reported in bands, and these were converted into approximate midpoints. For example, the £25,000–£29,999 band was converted to £27,500. The top-coded salary band (£100,000 or more) was coded as £110,000, so that extremely high salaries did not distort the model. Respondents who selected "prefer not to say" were treated as missing for salary modelling.

Both current salary and first-job salary were logged, as is standard in earnings models - because it reduces the influence of very high salaries and also allows coefficients to be interpreted approximately as percentage differences.

Subgroup models

The analysis was run separately for all respondents, as well as for graduates and non-graduates (because first-job features may operate differently across educational pathways). In should be noted that a formal training opportunity, first-job sector or first-job salary may not mean exactly the same thing for a graduate entering a professional labour market as it does for a non-graduate entering work through a different route.

The explanatory power of some blocks is larger in the graduate and non-graduate models than in the pooled model. This is not however a problem – as the pooled model estimates one average relationship across all respondents, while the split models allow the relationship between first-job features and later earnings to differ across both graduates and non-graduates.

Interpreting coefficients

Because the dependent variable is logged salary, coefficients are presented here as approximate percentage associations with later earnings. For binary variables, this can be read as the approximate difference between respondents with and without that feature, while holding other variables in the model constant. For categorical variables, it is the approximate difference from the reference category. For indices, it represents movement from the bottom to the top of the 0–1 scale.

The reference categories in the main first-job variables were whether someone had a permanent full-time contract, if they had a private sector first job and if they worked for a large employer with 250–999 employees. This means, for example, that the public sector coefficient is interpreted relative to private sector first jobs, and that the small employer coefficient is interpreted relative to large employers.

Robust standard errors and warnings

Robust standard errors were used to reduce sensitivity to heteroskedasticity. During estimation, the robust covariance calculation produced warnings about high-leverage observations in some models, indicating that a small number of respondents had unusual combinations of characteristics. Leverage checks suggested that these were not severe enough to invalidate the analysis, but they reinforce the need to interpret individual coefficients cautiously.

The main findings are therefore based on broad patterns - the additional explanatory power of each block, the consistency of associations across models, and whether coefficients are substantively plausible. Isolated coefficients, especially where they are counterintuitive or arise from sparse categories, should therefore not be over-interpreted.

Caveats

The analysis does have several limitations which are important to consider, as outlined below:

- The model is not causal. The models estimate associations between first-job features and later earnings, not the causal effect of any single feature.
- The survey is retrospective. Respondents may not perfectly recall the details of their first job, especially if it took place many years ago.
- Salary was asked within banded rather than precise figures – while this is because banding is likely to have helped with recall, it does also limit the specificity respondents were able to provide.
- Some first-job features end up overlapping conceptually. For example, confidence, development support, belonging, clear progression routes and senior networks are all likely to be related. Indices reduce this problem, but they do not remove it entirely.
- It is important to keep in mind that first-job pay is both an outcome of earlier circumstances and also itself a predictor of later salary. Including it in the final block is useful because it shows how strongly starting pay is associated with later earnings, but it may also absorb part of the effect of earlier first-job features.
- Some of the results are counterintuitive – for example, the support and belonging index is negative in the final model, while confidence and readiness is positive. Some contract-type coefficients also change direction after first-job pay is added.

Overall, these results are best read as conditional associations in a complex model.

Summary

The modelling strategy is designed to answer the specific question of whether first-job characteristics remain associated with later earnings, once background and pre-work experiences have been taken into account. The answer is yes - objective first-job features add meaningful explanatory power for both graduates and non-graduates. Subjective experience adds less overall, but confidence and readiness are strongly associated with later earnings. First-job pay is the strongest predictor in the model, suggesting that early earnings are one of the main ways in which first-job advantage persists into the longer term.

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