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Purposeful Progression

From Differentiated Work Experience to Work-Connected Learning
and Pathways for Every Young Person

Nicola Hall
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A full list of credits is presented at the end of the report.

Any errors or omissions remain my own.

Executive Summary

England has reached a pivotal moment in education reform

England has built one of the strongest education systems in the world for measuring educational attainment. It has invested in careers education, renewed its ambition for technical excellence and parity of esteem, and increasingly recognises the importance of education in driving opportunity, productivity and economic growth.

The challenge now is different.

It is no longer simply how young people achieve in education. It is how every young person is enabled to progress beyond it.

Work experience reform, curriculum and assessment reform, renewed ambition for technical pathways, greater devolution and growing concern about youth transitions are now converging. Together, they create an opportunity to design progression as a system rather than pursue another series of separate interventions.

Too many young people still reach key transition points without a clear understanding of their future options, insufficient opportunities to develop meaningful experiences beyond the classroom, and limited recognition for the wider capabilities that prepare them for adulthood. Whilst England recognises qualifications as the gold standard of attainment, it has no equivalent national system for recognising progression.

This report argues that the next chapter of education reform should focus on **purposeful pathways and progression**: creating an education system that develops, recognises and values successful transitions alongside academic achievement.

A Churchill Fellowship that asked one question, and discovered a bigger opportunity.

This Fellowship set out to explore how differentiated work experience could better prepare young people for successful futures.

Across Australia and Canada, it found that differentiated work experience was rarely viewed as an isolated activity. Instead, it formed part of broader systems that intentionally connected curriculum, employers, qualifications and place-based leadership to create coherent pathways into employment, further study and adult life.

The lesson is not that England should copy international systems.

The lesson is that progression can be deliberately designed.

Three connected challenges

The international evidence suggests that England's next phase of reform should respond to three connected challenges.

1| Too many young people cannot see a clear pathway to their future.

Many learners cannot yet see a clear route to their future. Opportunities to explore industries, develop employability, build confidence and experience the workplace remain inconsistent and too often present a tension to the current curriculum.

2| Schools want to prepare young people for successful futures but are not always given the conditions to do so.

Schools have limited curriculum flexibility, accountability recognition and system support to develop progression alongside attainment. Progression remains dependent upon local informal innovation rather than being enabled by national policy.

3| England recognises attainment, but not progression.

Qualifications provide trusted evidence of what young people know. There is no equivalent national approach to recognising what they can do, how they have developed or how prepared they are for successful transitions into adult life.

A different proposition for England

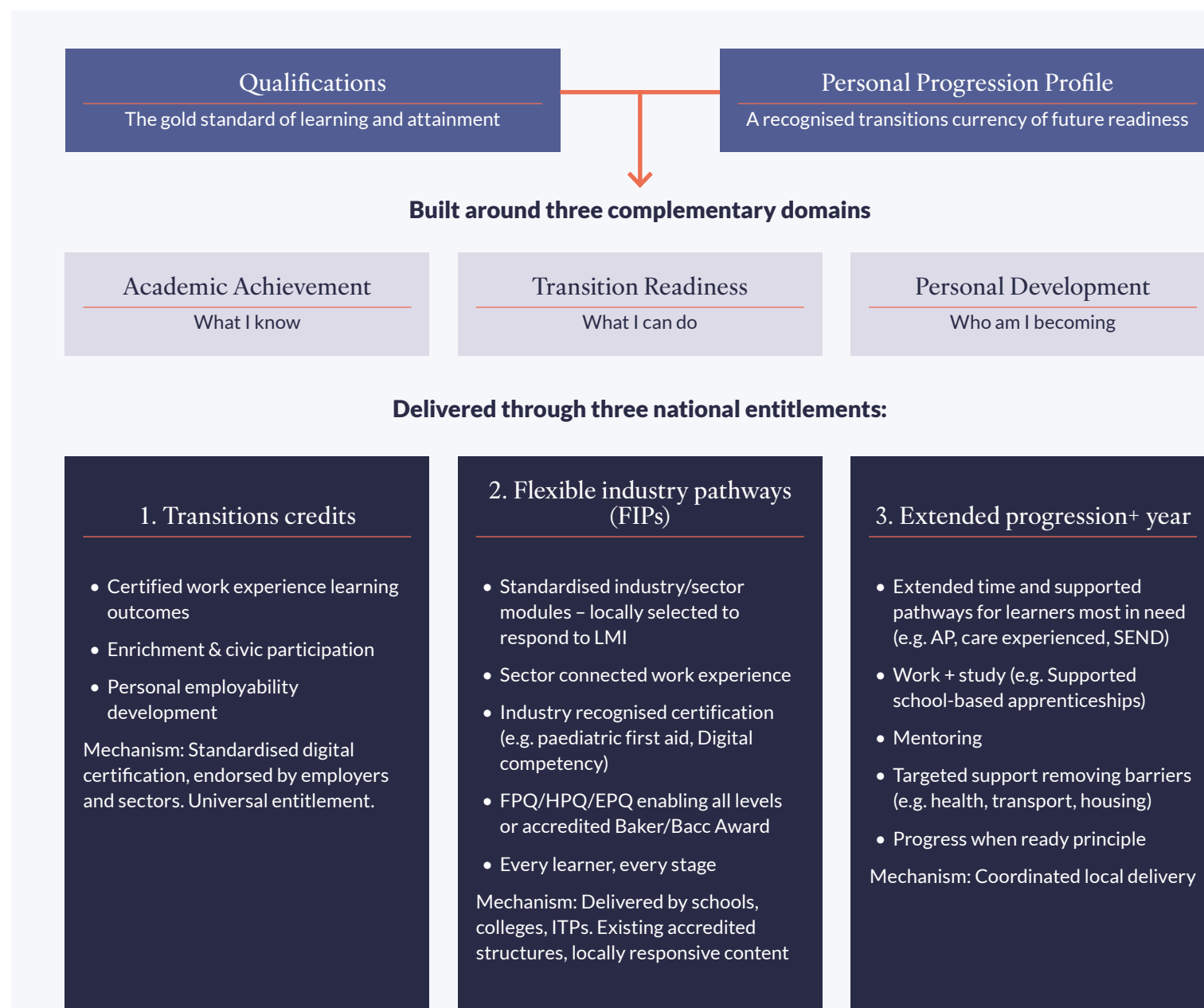
This report does not propose another initiative. It proposes a **Universal Progression Framework** that brings together qualifications, work-connected learning and personal development into a single progression architecture.

A national entitlement would provide consistency, while place-based leadership would enable pathways to respond to local opportunity, labour-market need and the circumstances of young people. Progression would become a shared responsibility across education, employers and place rather than a responsibility carried by individual institutions alone.

Qualifications remain the foundation of educational achievement. Alongside them, every learner develops a recognised **Personal Progression Profile**, reflecting progress across three complementary domains:

- **Academic Achievement** – What I know
- **Transition Readiness** – What I can do
- **Personal Development** – Who I am becoming

The Universal Progression Framework: qualifications remain the foundation while progression becomes visible, recognised and valued through a Personal Progression Profile and three national entitlements.



Progression is then recognised and enabled through three national entitlements:

- **National Transitions Credits**, recognising work-connected learning, enrichment and employability.
- **Flexible Industry Pathways**, connecting curriculum with local labour market opportunity through accredited technical learning.
- **An Extended Progression+ Year**, providing supported progression routes for learners who would benefit from additional time before adulthood.

The report offers three strategic recommendations:

- Build a national digital infrastructure for work-connected learning
- Transform work experience into work-connected learning
- Create a Universal Progression Framework

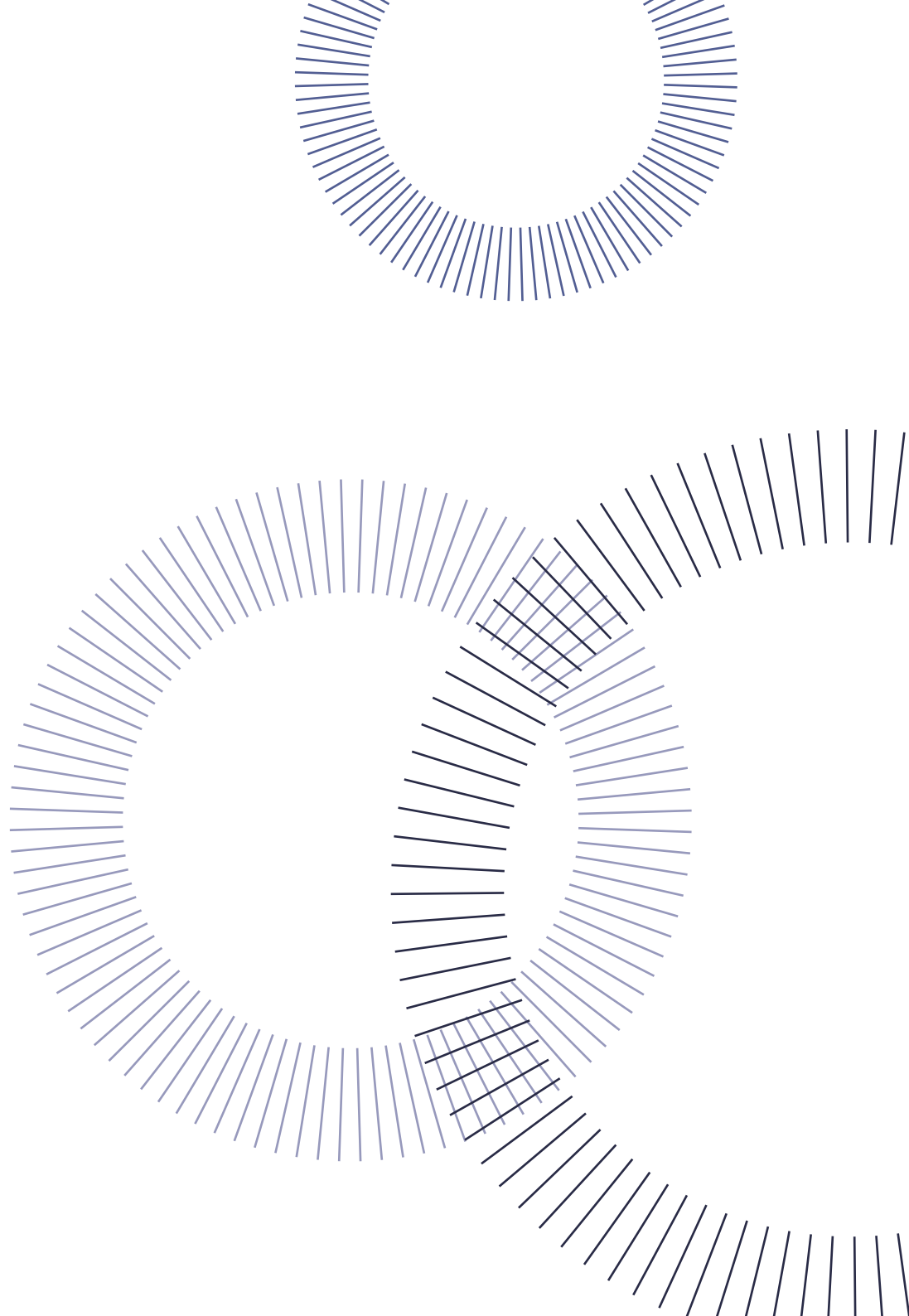
Conclusion

England already possesses the building blocks for the next phase of education reform: excellent schools, committed employers, respected qualifications and increasingly ambitious place-based leadership.

The opportunity is not to replace these strengths but to connect them around the learner.

A high-quality range of qualifications with parity of esteem should remain the gold standard of educational attainment. Progression should become equally visible, recognised and valued.

The next chapter of education reform is not choosing between academic and technical education. It is ensuring that every young person can see a future, build towards it and progress with purpose.



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Introduction

From work experience to purposeful progression

Every education system faces the same fundamental challenge: how do we prepare young people not simply to succeed in school, but to progress successfully into adulthood, further learning and meaningful work?

For much of my professional career, I have worked at the intersection of education, employers and skills, seeking to strengthen the connections between what young people learn in classrooms and the opportunities that await them beyond the school gates. Through my work with schools, colleges, employers and government, I have seen first-hand the transformative impact that meaningful encounters with the workplace can have on learners' confidence, motivation, aspirations and future choices.

Over the past decade, England has invested significantly in careers education and employer engagement. Through the Gatsby Benchmarks, Careers Hubs, the development of Careers Leaders, growing employer partnerships and, more recently, the introduction of a national work experience guarantee, England has built one of the world's strongest careers education systems. It has not lacked reform, but it has lacked an organising education architecture that connects reform into a coherent progression system.

This report begins from a position of confidence in those achievements. It is not an argument that England's careers system has failed. On the contrary, it argues that England has built exceptionally strong foundations. The question now is whether the next phase of reform should build upon those successes by focusing not only on access to careers education, but on how education systems deliberately enable successful progression, and give young people the confidence and skills to transition to any pathway of their choosing.

It was against this backdrop that I embarked upon this Churchill Fellowship.

My original research question was focused as:

How might differentiated models of work experience better support young people's transitions into employment and further learning?

My intention was to explore how different approaches to work experience might better meet the needs of learners with diverse aspirations, interests and circumstances. In particular, I wanted to understand how education systems could move beyond a one-size-fits-all model towards more personalised experiences that improved engagement, strengthened technical pathways and reduced the risk of young people becoming disengaged or disconnected from education or employment.

Over the course of the Fellowship, I visited education systems across Australia and Canada, explored curriculum reform in Ireland, considered aspects of vocational education in some Nordic countries, and considered wider European research into work-connected learning. I met with government departments, education ministries, school and college leaders, technical education providers, employers, intermediary organisations, researchers and, most importantly, young people themselves.

I expected to return with ideas about improving work experience.

Instead, I returned with broader thinking and a focus on how work experience contributes to impactful work-connected learning which in turn leads to effective transitions.

Definition

For the purposes of this Fellowship, work-connected learning refers to the planned sequence of educational experiences through which learners develop knowledge, skills, behaviours and progression readiness by engaging with employers, workplaces, industry specialists and authentic work-related contexts, interwoven with purposeful curricula and classroom learning. Work experience is one component within this broader continuum.

Across every jurisdiction, work-connected learning looked different. The structures varied. The qualifications differed. Governance arrangements reflected different histories, economies and policy choices. Yet beneath these differences a remarkably consistent pattern began to emerge.

The strongest systems were not distinguished by better work experience alone.

They had deliberately designed progression itself.

Work-connected learning was rarely treated as an isolated programme, a single placement or a discrete entitlement. Instead, it formed one component within a wider architecture that connected curriculum, technical education, employer partnerships, learner recognition and shared responsibility for successful transitions. Experiences of work were carefully sequenced across different stages of education, aligned to learner readiness and local opportunity, recognised through meaningful currency, and embedded within systems that placed progression, not participation alone, at their centre.

What became increasingly apparent was that progression itself cannot be designed in isolation. The strongest systems connected three things that are too often treated separately in England:

- the aspirations and needs of young people,
- the economic and civic priorities of place,
- and the design of the curriculum and accreditation itself.

Rather than asking education to respond to labour market needs after learning had taken place, the most effective parts of these systems designed learning from the outset to create meaningful progression for both learners and their communities.

One moment in particular fundamentally changed the direction of this Fellowship.

During my visit to South Australia, I believed I was exploring innovative approaches to differentiated work experience. Instead, I found myself observing something much more fundamental. Whether I was speaking with policy officials, technical college leaders, employers or education partners, every conversation began with the same question: **what progression and employment outcomes are we trying to achieve?** Curriculum, technical

education, employer engagement and learner support were then purposefully designed backwards from those outcomes.

At their best, what struck me most was not the quality of individual programmes, but the coherence of the system that connected them. Employer partnerships were not operating alongside education; they were helping to shape it. Vocational and technical pathways were not viewed as alternative options for some learners, but as integral high-quality components of an education system designed around successful progression into skilled employment, further learning and adult life.

In that moment I realised I had been studying too narrow a unit of analysis.

I had travelled to understand how we might design better work experience.

What I was actually learning was how education systems consciously design engagement and progression for all learners.

From that point onwards, I looked at every subsequent visit through a different lens. In Canada I was no longer simply observing dual credit programmes; I was asking how systems create recognised currency for progression. In Ireland I became less interested in Transition Year as a programme than in what it revealed about creating protected curriculum space for exploration, maturity and informed decision-making.

Whilst my Fellowship visits were undertaken in Australia and Canada, I have also drawn selectively on published evidence from Nordic, European and US education systems where it reinforces or challenges themes emerging from the fieldwork. These examples are used to provide wider international context rather than as primary case studies. Across wider European practice, I found myself looking beyond vocational structures to understand the design principles that connected learning, work, place and successful transitions.

Whilst the primary evidence presented in this report is drawn from fieldwork undertaken in Australia and Canada, the Fellowship adopted a hybrid approach to international learning. Alongside site visits, interviews and direct observation, emerging findings were tested against wider international literature and comparative evidence, including OECD research on career readiness and learner agency. These themes were further explored through discussions with international experts, including Anthony Mann (former Senior Policy Analyst, OECD), to consider the extent to which observations from Australia and Canada resonated with broader international evidence, including high-performing Nordic systems. Where European examples are referenced, they are used to provide comparative context rather than as primary case studies.

By the end of the Fellowship, I had not simply collected examples of good practice. I had begun to recognise a remarkably consistent set of design principles that transcended place-based contexts. While policies, governance and structures differed, the strongest systems shared a common characteristic: **they did not treat work-connected learning as the destination of reform. They used it as a powerful pedagogical mechanism within a much broader progression architecture.**

That realisation became the foundation of this report.

The question was no longer simply:

How do we improve work experience?

It became something much more fundamental:

How do we design an education system that builds successful transitions?

This distinction is important, because work experience is not an end in itself. Its value lies in what it enables. At its best, work-connected learning:

- provides relevance and purpose to the curriculum,
- develops learner agency in skills,
- provides a line of sight to the future,
- strengthens technical understanding,
- broadens aspirations,
- builds confidence,
- and helps young people navigate increasingly complex transitions between education, training and employment.

It is a powerful pedagogical mechanism, but it is not a progression system, neither is a tightly focused knowledge-based curriculum offer.

This Fellowship therefore evolved from a study of differentiated work experience into a broader exploration of how education systems engineer progression. How they connect curriculum, work-connected learning, technical education, learner recognition and employer partnership into coherent systems that are responsive to place while maintaining consistently high expectations for every learner.

That evolution could hardly be timelier.

England is entering a significant period of educational reform. The implementation of the national work experience guarantee, reforms to technical education and skills, increasing devolution of education and employment responsibilities, and renewed national attention on youth transitions all point towards a common strategic question:

How do we build an education system that enables every young person to progress successfully into further learning, employment and adult life?

Taken individually, each of these reforms represents an important opportunity. Taken together, they present something even more significant: the opportunity to think differently about progression itself.

Throughout this report I argue that England has reached an important point in the evolution of its education system. The past decade has rightly focused on guaranteeing access to careers education and employer engagement, but within confined and limiting conditions.

The opportunity now is to connect those achievements more thoughtfully with curriculum, technical education, learner recognition and shared accountability through a coherent national progression architecture that combines universal entitlement with genuine responsiveness to place.

This report does not advocate importing international models wholesale. Education systems are shaped by different histories, governance arrangements and cultural contexts, and no single jurisdiction provides a blueprint for the English system. Instead, the Fellowship identifies the transferable design principles that consistently underpin successful progression across multiple countries. Those principles, rather than individual programmes, provide the foundation for the proposals that follow.

Ultimately, this report argues that work-connected learning is not the destination of reform. It is the pedagogical mechanism through which young people discover purpose, develop identity, apply learning and build successful progression.

England has spent a decade building one of the world's strongest careers education systems, which is being studied by multiple countries across the globe.

The next decade should be defined by deliberately designing learner progression. The larger opportunity is to redesign the education system around progression itself.

Approach to the Study

This report is not intended as a comprehensive evaluation of national education systems or an impact study of international policy. Instead, it draws together observations of practice from visits, conversations and reflection across Australia and Canada alongside wider conversations in Europe to explore what different approaches to differentiated work experience, work-connected learning and pathways might offer England. The locations, organisations and projects included were purposefully selected because they provide perspectives that differ from England's current approach, whether through curriculum design, qualification structures, place-based leadership or the way education, employers and communities work together to support young people.

Throughout the Fellowship, I approached each visit with open-mindedness about what is possible rather than a search for a single model to replicate. I sought a breadth of perspectives from government, education leaders, teachers, employers, post-secondary providers, charities and young people themselves, recognising that meaningful system improvement is shaped by context as much as policy. The intention of this report is therefore not to prescribe solutions, but to incite openness to what is possible and practice-informed policy discussion.

I hope the examples presented through this enquiry encourage leaders to look beyond a binary debate between the value of academic versus technical education and instead consider how both can be brought together through purposeful progression. They demonstrate how sophisticated, long-term partnerships can create high-quality pathways without relying solely on major capital investment, and offer mayors, directors of education and skills, careers hubs and local leaders practical ideas as they develop place-based pathways across England.

Above all, this report asks a simple question: how might we design an education system that better captures the interest of young people, sustains their engagement and enables every learner to progress with purpose?

Part One

From International Exploration to Design Principles for Purposeful Progression

From International Exploration to Design Principles for Purposeful Progression

The education systems explored through this Fellowship differed significantly in governance, curriculum, qualifications, funding and cultural context. No single jurisdiction offers a model that England could, or should, simply adopt.

The value of the international evidence lies instead in the principles revealed beneath individual programmes and structures. School-based apprenticeships in Australia, dual-credit programmes in Canada, Ireland's Transition Year and employer partnerships across several jurisdictions appeared different in form but reflected consistent approaches to learner progression.

Viewed through this lens, five design principles emerged:

- 1| **People before institutions**
- 2| **Progression is designed**
- 3| **Experiences should carry recognised value**
- 4| **Partnership creates infrastructure and opportunity**
- 5| **Purpose is shaped by place**

Together, these principles suggest that successful progression is not produced by isolated interventions. It emerges when curriculum, experience, recognition, partnership and place are intentionally organised around the journey of the learner.

These principles also resonate with wider international evidence beyond Australia and Canada. Nordic systems, particularly Finland, similarly emphasise shared responsibility for learner progression, integrated guidance and local flexibility within a national framework.

They are all mechanisms for helping young people discover **purpose**, which in turn drives **progression**. Each of these principles has the opportunity to improve progression and

ensure it is more purposeful, but they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The more principles existing, the more impactful progression will be.

1| People before institutions

Education systems should be designed around learner journeys rather than institutional structures, enabling flexible pathways that respond to individual needs and aspirations. Successful progression to next steps requires deliberate removal of barriers and integrated approaches to enable successful outcomes. Progression, particularly for vulnerable cohorts of young people, is more effective when integrated solutions involving health, transport, housing are intentionally considered as factors towards employability.

2| Progression must be designed

Successful transitions are not left to chance. Progression is intentionally engineered through curriculum, work-connected learning, technical pathways, employer engagement and intentional opportunities for both engagement and re-engagement. It is as important to design solutions to reintegrate back into education or training as it is to ensure exiting with good qualifications. Creating safety nets to catch young people at fault lines is a vital part of purposeful progression models.

3| Experiences should carry recognised value

Learning beyond the classroom should be recognised alongside academic attainment, ensuring that meaningful experiences contribute to progression through trusted and portable learner currency. Systems which offer credited pathway exploration, dual credit programmes, and supported school-based access to apprenticeships are effective in completion of education stages.

4| Partnership creates infrastructure and opportunity

Employers, post-secondary providers and intermediary organisations are not external partners but integral components of a progression system, co-designing pathways and enabling access to opportunity at each step of learning. Co-design should be two-way; educators coordinating timetables and offering flexibility to partners. Intentionally formalising partnerships leading to formal recognition is as important as informal social value driven relationships.

5| Progression is shaped by place

National ambition should be realised through locally responsive systems in which education, employers, communities and civic leaders share responsibility for successful transitions and reflect the distinctive opportunities and priorities of place at every level of the education system.

Figure 1

FIVE DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR PURPOSEFUL PROGRESSION

A systems approach to helping young people discover purpose and achieve their next steps



1 Starts with the individual

Systems are designed around learner journeys not institutional structures. Every young person has unique strengths and aspirations. Systems must flex to meet them where they are and help them get where they want to go.

2 Intentional, not accidental

Transitions are intentionally engineered with clear pathways support and safety nets. Progression does not happen by chance. It is designed through curriculum, pathways and opportunities for engagement and re-engagement.

3 Value what matters

Accredited and certified experiences allow young people to develop a transitions currency, developing personal agency and enabling employers to recognise and value.

4 Stronger together

Partnerships create opportunity infrastructure that enables authentic work-connected learning.

5 Place gives purpose

Local context shapes pathways. When systems reflect the opportunities, needs and identity of a place, young people can see a future for themselves within it.

1.1 People Before Institutions

Stronger systems organise around people. Weaker systems organise around institutions.

The greatest impact starts with learner journeys. Curriculum, pathways, employer engagement and support services were organised around enabling successful progression for young people, rather than preserving organisational boundaries or traditional programme structures.

It feels in England as if we have reached a moment in time where “mainstream” is no longer an accurate or adequate descriptor for education for many young people. It is concerning, and potentially mirrored in outcomes, that to access a different style of educational provision, as a learner you must:

- Live in the limited proximity of a UTC, Studio School or other unique 14-19 provision e.g. The BRIT School
- Have an EHCP
- Get excluded from school

I do however acknowledge the emerging work that is developing from some trusts and collaborations working on more engaging and future ready curriculum models (for example Stoke and Staffordshire CEO Futures Forum, and The Fylde Coast Academy Trust Compass Curriculum in Blackpool).

Ultimately the problem statement is that young people in England do not have equity of access to curricula and experiences that offer them purpose and hope of positive employment in good jobs.

Systems and schools visited throughout the Fellowship approached belonging and equity of access to pathways in different ways depending on the administration and territory.

Three examples of organising structures that resulted in learner-first practice are shared in this section of the report.

1.1.1 BUSY Schools, Australia

BUSY Schools are a network of specialist assistance schools designed around employability and deliberate re-engagement. Learners from years 10-12 (equivalent to 11-13 in England) participate in structured job readiness programmes, employer encounters and accredited vocational tasters. Delivery is differentiated depending on need. Crucially, all activity carries currency towards school completion, ensuring that participation is recognised and progression is visible. This manifests in a dual purpose of improved completion of the senior certificate of education (state determined around a national curriculum spine), alongside tangible and highly effective preparation for employment. Learners and families select BUSY Schools as a meaningful and deliberate re-engagement option, and the majority of cohorts can describe “finding their fit” within education.

BUSY Schools have similar curriculum flexibilities to alternative provision institutions in England and are designated as special assistance schools, but young people can join these schools by choice, not referral.

Whilst visiting BUSY School, Salisbury Campus, their group offices and speaking to a wide range of professionals across the organisation, I learned of bespoke individual programmes that integrated health services and personal pathways to employment which focussed on student interest, removal of barriers and progressive pathways to the workplace. The schools are not positioned as a deficit model for “learners who have failed” – moreover a pathway to success, for learners who have been “failed by the mainstream system”.

Programmes are tailored to learner need, with varying intensity and delivery models, but unapologetically rooted in employability as their purpose. Learners access a bespoke employability led curriculum with individual pathways, and build confidence and capability through structured, supported experiences before progressing into longer placements or employment pathways.

The Salisbury Campus is co-located amongst a vast campus of multiple training providers who occupy a site delivering trade skills. This is not a pre-requisite choice for students at the school; however, the students are immersed in an employment focussed environment.

The new BUSY school in Calgary is situated in downtown Calgary, amongst the business district and well connected to the CTrain to enable ease of access to learners from any catchment area.

1.1.2 Unique Pathways Team, Calgary

One of the strongest examples of system design encountered during the Fellowship was the **Unique Pathways Team** within the Calgary Board of Education (CBE). Rather than viewing careers education, technical education and post-secondary progression as separate initiatives, CBE has established a specialist team responsible for enabling personalised pathways for every learner.

The team's philosophy is simple but powerful: **"Learning as unique as every student."** Rather than expecting young people to follow identical educational journeys, the role of the education system is to provide multiple, equally valued routes through which learners can progress towards employment, apprenticeships, further study or university.

The Unique Pathways Team works across schools, employers, post-secondary institutions and government partners to develop, coordinate and quality assure pathway opportunities. Their role extends beyond programme delivery to designing the conditions that allow schools to offer flexible progression routes while maintaining consistent provincial standards.

The Unique Pathways Team therefore acts as both a systems integrator and an enabler of local innovation. Rather than delivering careers education directly, it creates the partnerships, curriculum flexibility, quality assurance and progression infrastructure that allow schools to respond to the needs of their learners and local economy.

The team is intentionally small because it operates as a central enabling team rather than a delivery workforce. Their role is to:

- design and quality assure pathway programmes
- develop partnerships with industry and post-secondary institutions
- support all CBE high schools through their Off-Campus Coordinators and Guidance Counsellors
- supervise Dual Credit, Exploratory Programmes, Work Experience and the Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP)
- work across 23 high schools in the territory

System insight

Local education-board responsibility for progression reduces fragmentation between institutions. A dedicated team provides the strategic capacity to develop place-based pathways, co-ordinate partnerships, support curriculum innovation and ensure that learners can access coherent routes reflecting both personal ambition and local opportunity.

1.1.3 Transitions Year, Ireland – Creating safe curriculum space for exploration and belonging

One of the particularly interesting international models examined in this study, Ireland's Transition Year (TY) offers perhaps the most instructive example for England, not because it is directly transferable, but because of what it shows is possible. At its heart, TY is a system-level decision to create protected developmental space within mainstream education: a structured opportunity, positioned between Junior and Senior Cycle, in which learners engage in broader experiences of work, community and self-directed exploration before committing to high-stakes progression routes. Crucially, this is achieved not through wholesale structural reform, but through a national framework that sets clear expectations while giving schools genuine autonomy to design provision that is locally relevant and employer informed. The use of short, focused modules, combining workplace experience, project-based learning and civic engagement allows programmes to be responsive to local context without sacrificing coherence of purpose. This modular approach, and the philosophy underpinning it, is what gives TY its value as a reference point for system design in England. The analysis below draws on fieldwork conversations with colleagues at the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in Dublin, and on the NCCA's redevelopment of the Transition Year Programme Statement (TYPs) as part of a broader reform of Ireland's senior cycle.

Across education systems, the relationship between curriculum, progression and transitions is being actively rethought. Nowhere is this more evident than in the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's (NCCA) redevelopment of the Transition Year Programme Statement (TYPs), which sits within a broader reform of Ireland's senior cycle (Key Stage 4–5 equivalent, ages 15–18).

At its core, the redevelopment of the Transition Year reflects a system-level response to a long-standing structural imbalance: the dominance of academically oriented progression routes, where senior cycle has become the primary "passport" to higher education. Over time, this has contributed to the marginalisation of vocational learning and limited the visibility and perceived value of alternative pathways. The current reform programme seeks to rebalance this by embedding broader conceptions of learning, progression and success.

A system in transition: from academic dominance to broader pathways

The TYPs forms part of the first phase of a wider senior cycle redevelopment, with further phases scheduled through to 2029. This phased approach signals both the scale and the intentionality of reform: rather than incremental change, Ireland is undertaking a structured redesign of how young people experience the final years of schooling and transition beyond it.

A central feature of this reform is the parallel Pathways Project, which is explicitly examining how vocational learning and careers education can be strengthened. This includes reconsidering how "careers thinking" is integrated into curriculum design, not as an add-on, but as a core entitlement for all learners.

This aligns closely with my emerging international observations: that transitions should not be left to the end of schooling, but instead be designed progressively, with multiple opportunities for young people to explore, test and refine their aspirations.

Student-centred, flexible, and coherent

The development of the TYPs was underpinned by extensive research, consultation and iterative design, captured in work commissioned with the Education Research Centre. Two organising frameworks were central:

- **Student Dimensions** – focusing on the holistic development of the learner, including personal growth, agency, wellbeing and future orientation.
- **Curriculum Dimensions** – ensuring coherence, quality and alignment across programmes, while allowing flexibility for local adaptation.

Together, these dimensions reflect a deliberate move away from narrow content delivery towards a balanced model of knowledge, skills and dispositions, with progression understood more broadly than examination outcomes alone.

Importantly, the TYPS is not a prescriptive model. Schools are supported to be the localised unit of change in this example, through national guidance and curriculum resources to design programmes that align with the overarching framework while responding to local context, employer ecosystems and student need. This creates space for innovation, including varied approaches to work-connected learning.

Ireland's Transition Year: Protected developmental space within mainstream education

I could see that one of the most significant insights emerging from the Irish system was not simply the existence of TY itself, but the underlying philosophy that sits beneath it: the deliberate creation of protected developmental space within mainstream education.

These principles include:

- legitimised exploration before high-stakes progression decisions,
- structured opportunities for learner reflection and self-understanding,
- broader definitions of achievement and readiness,
- meaningful engagement with employers and communities,
- portfolio-based evidence of development,
- and the intentional blending of academic, civic, and work-connected learning.

In Ireland, TY provides an optional year between Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle in which learners engage in broader developmental experiences beyond the narrow confines of examination preparation. Work experience, community engagement, enterprise activity, reflective portfolio development, careers exploration and applied learning are not positioned as extracurricular additions, but as legitimate educational experiences within the formal system.

What became increasingly clear through discussions with school leaders, TY coordinators and policy experts was that the value of TY lies less in the structure of a standalone year, and more in the educational principles it enables.

At its strongest, TY functions as a developmental ecosystem rather than a programme of disconnected activities. Learners are encouraged to understand themselves not only as examination candidates, but as developing adults navigating future pathways, identities, and destinations.

A particularly important concept emerging through the Irish work was the idea of “student dimensions”. I learnt about the intentional developmental indicators that move beyond attainment alone and consider broader aspects of learner growth, participation, agency and readiness. This aligns closely with the domains explored through [equalex](#), and the subsequently developed learning outcomes for work experience, and raises important questions for England regarding how systems recognise and value learner development alongside academic performance.

Reflection and portfolio practice appears as central to this process. Across multiple discussions, global practitioners emphasised that work experience alone was insufficient. It was the combination of experience, structured reflection and developmental conversation that transformed exposure into meaningful learning. This has important implications for modern work experience design in England, reflected in the [equalex](#) model. Without intentional reflection (aligned to the definition of meaningful in Gatsby Benchmark 6), workplace experiences risk being transactional rather than developmental. However, this is a component that English schools are finding challenging to implement.

However, the Irish model also reveals important tensions and limitations.

The flexibility afforded to schools enables highly responsive, locally designed and often innovative provision. Yet this same flexibility can create inconsistency. The quality and coherence of TY provision often depend heavily on school leadership, coordinator expertise and local culture. In some schools, TY operates as a deeply embedded developmental model. In others, provision is more fragmented or activity-led without a sufficiently coherent progression framework.

This creates what several stakeholders described as a “recognition gap”. TY often develops highly valuable capabilities, confidence, career readiness, communication, collaboration, self-awareness, and adaptability. These are not always recognised consistently within formal progression systems or accountability structures.

This tension is particularly relevant for England.

The lesson from Ireland is not that England should simply replicate a standalone TY. Rather, TY demonstrates that developmental transition space can be intentionally designed within mainstream education systems. The greater policy challenge is how to create recognised learner currency for these experiences without collapsing them into another narrow, high-stakes accountability mechanism.

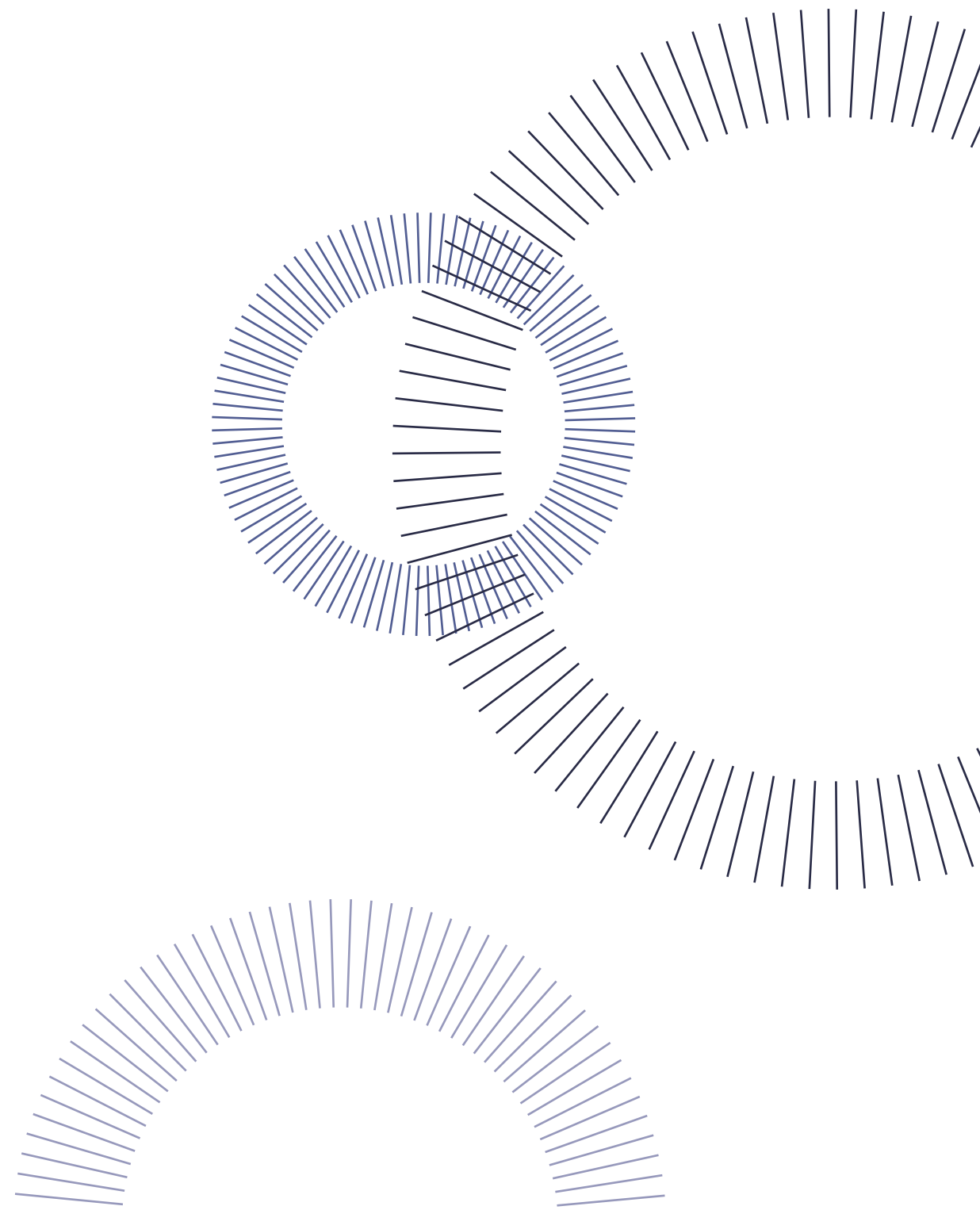
Indeed, one of the strongest emerging reflections from Ireland was that over-formalisation may risk undermining the very conditions that make developmental transition space effective: flexibility, learner agency, exploration, and relational learning.

This raises important strategic questions.

Rather than viewing progression support as a single intervention point at age 16, there may be greater value in developing a longer, sequenced transitions architecture across multiple years of education. Such an approach could combine curriculum flexibility, progressive work-connected learning, portfolio development, employer engagement, and recognised learner currency within a coherent national framework, whilst allowing for place-based responsiveness and local innovation.

In this sense, Ireland’s TY model provides less a blueprint to copy and more a powerful proof of concept: that participation, progression, and learner readiness can be designed intentionally into the education system itself, rather than treated as peripheral enrichment activity outside it.

Ireland therefore provides proof that developmental transition space can be nationally enabled while remaining locally designed.



1.2 Progression is Designed

The strongest systems didn't leave progression to chance; they engineered it. They all responded to place. They all enabled access to vocational and technical pathways.

1.2.1 Skilled Trades BC – progressive exploration before commitment

Throughout British Columbia I encountered another recurring feature of effective progression systems: they intentionally separate exploration from specialisation. Rather than expecting young people to commit to a technical pathway at a single decision point, Skilled Trades BC has developed a staged model in which learners progressively deepen their understanding of different occupations before making long-term choices.

Skilled Trades BC is funded by the Ministry of Education for British Columbia and the programmes described are available to all schools.

The early programme introduces trades through practical experiences, industry visits and exploratory activities. As confidence grows, learners can move into structured trade tasters, workplace experiences and foundation programmes before progressing into apprenticeships or technical education.

The important lesson is not simply the programmes themselves, but the deliberate structure underpinning them. Exploration is viewed as an educational entitlement rather than a by-product of careers guidance. Progression is intentionally sequenced so that each experience builds confidence, capability and informed choice.

The programmes begin from primary grades and grow progressively developing interest and skills as learners progress all the way through to a blended learning and earning model that is supported by school registration and support systems.

Figure 2 – Skilled Trades BC, a progressive pathway from discovery to employment¹



System insight

Technical pathways gain status when they are supported nationally and delivered through a progressive model that begins with early exploration and extends through training, employment and engagement with families.

¹ Diagram courtesy of Skilled Trades BC

1.2.2 Fusion Collegiate, Calgary: Designing education around pathways, not programmes

My visit to Fusion Collegiate reinforced a recurring theme emerging throughout this Fellowship: the most effective education systems begin with the individual learner rather than the institution. And then, progression is designed.

Fusion's starting point is not "What timetable do we have?" or "What courses can we offer?" but "Where is this young person starting from, where do they want to go, and how do we design a pathway that gets them there?" That shift changes almost everything about how learning is organised.

Fusion is a public charter school, funded directly by the Government of Alberta to deliver an educational model that responds to locally identified skills needs. Business cases to open new Charter Schools in Alberta must be underpinned by demonstrable skills and employment needs and employment needs to be considered. Rather than replicating mainstream provision, the school exists to develop innovative pathways that address emerging labour market demand and strengthen progression into priority sectors. This policy framework gives the school the flexibility to innovate while remaining fully accountable for learner outcomes.

The school is housed in business-style premises with three other charter schools with different specialisms. This is similar to the co-located UTC and Studio School in Liverpool.

Importantly, Fusion is also organised as a collegiate model. Rather than operating as a traditional high school, it provides a platform through which specialist pathway programmes can be developed, tested and expanded in partnership with industry, post-secondary providers and the wider education system. Innovation is therefore not an isolated project but an ongoing design principle, underpinned by employability and skills.

Rather than asking learners to fit into a predetermined curriculum model, the curriculum itself is purposefully designed to flex around progression. Timetabling enables students to combine academic study with workplace experiences, career exploration, dual-credit learning, employability development and post-secondary study. Progression is not something that happens after education; it is embedded within education itself.

Fusion runs 5 separate pathways:

- Aviation
- Animal and Health Sciences
- Business and Entrepreneurship
- Skilled Trades
- Discovery and Exploration

One particularly striking feature was the use of pathway accelerators. Rather than seeing high school, college and employment as separate stages, Fusion creates accelerated routes that allow learners to begin college, university or apprenticeship learning while still at school. Accelerator programmes enable young people to upgrade qualifications while simultaneously beginning industry or post-secondary learning, reducing the traditional cliff edge between school and the next destination.

The ethos "Calgary is our Classroom" delivers a strong emphasis on place. Not just the pathways and partnerships but underpinned by a series of Calgary-focussed experiences. The school's partnerships are fundamental rather than supplementary. Relationships with the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT), the University of Calgary, Olds College (animal care and veterinary college) and employers are built into the curriculum itself, enabling students to access dual-credit programmes, workplace learning and authentic industry experiences while still completing high school. These partnerships are not peripheral; they are integral to curriculum design, ensuring learning remains aligned with both learner aspiration and regional economic priorities.

Another distinctive feature was the evolving role of teachers. Teachers are not expected to be experts in every emerging industry. Instead, they undertake industry immersion, learning alongside students and external specialists so that expertise is continually refreshed. Over time this enables teachers to develop the confidence to co-deliver increasingly specialist programmes alongside employers and technical experts. During my visit this was evident

in learning environments intentionally designed for industry practitioners to deliver industry standard courses directly within the school, for example commercial drone pilots. The result is a model where professional knowledge flows continuously between education and industry rather than remaining confined within either.

Perhaps most significantly, Fusion sees education as an end-to-end progression system. Responsibility does not stop when students complete secondary school. The model extends into post-secondary education, apprenticeships and employment through personalised transition planning, career coaching and active matching to employment opportunities. The question is not simply whether a learner graduates, but whether they successfully transition into sustained education, training or work.

A standout programme for me was the “Gap Year”, a deliberate re-engagement programme. This pathways programme re-connected lost learners up to the age of 20 to tangible jobs and progression into the workplace, when the young person was ready and supported as an end-to-end pathway. Industry partners were only engaged if they brought direct opportunities for employment. The transition into the workplace was supported and the relationship with Fusion maintained initially for continued pastoral support to both the young person and the employer. Opportunities like these present opportunities to build high-quality employment for a diverse range of young people with different needs, not just jobs. Almost the greatest draw of this programme was the simplicity of the terminology “Gap Year” – enabling young people who had left school, with or without their high school certificate, who may have chosen the wrong pathway or who had no pathway, to step back into the employment guaranteed pathways with no prejudice, as if they had simply taken a gap year or two.

For my Fellowship, Fusion Collegiate provokes an increasingly important conclusion. High-performing pathway systems are not characterised by simply offering more vocational courses or more employer encounters. They are characterised by governance arrangements that enable innovation, curriculum flexibility that responds to local need, and partnerships that make employers and post-secondary providers genuine co-designers of learning.

System insight

The lesson is significant. If we continue to treat work experience, careers education and technical education as separate initiatives, we risk missing the larger opportunity. The real innovation lies in designing education as a coherent progression system, one that starts with the learner, responds to the needs of place, enables local innovation, and consciously builds seamless transitions into further learning, skilled employment and adult life

1.2.3 Educational Pathways Programme (EPP); Matt Dolan, Head Teacher (Careers), New South Wales, Australia

The **Head Teacher (Careers)** role in NSW is explicitly designed as a **system connector**, rather than a compliance or delivery function. The role of regional Head Teacher for Careers works across a defined group of secondary schools. This role is funded through the top slice of school transitions funding. Some similarities may be drawn to Operational Hub Leads in England.

The role is currently being tested through a two-year pilot model involving 30 schools who are co-funding the post in partnership with the Department for Education (NSW).

A further 31 schools in the same state region are funded through the standard state funding formula, enabling comparison between models.

If KPIs and outcomes continue to demonstrate impact, the co-funded regional Head Teacher model is likely to be scaled across NSW. Original participation was by school expression of interest to the Department for Education; there is presently a waiting for schools wishing to join the programme. Each Headteacher of Careers oversees the design and delivery of a suite of standardised and structured pathways and uses regional data to target programmes to institutions and their communities, cohorts and individual learners. The role sits at the intersection of school leadership and careers advisers and is monitoring participation and transitions of targeted programmes.

The New South Wales Educational Pathways Programme pilot provides a clear illustration of how a coherent, layered pathway system embedded within a single design framework leads to more informed progression.

At its core, the model recognises that learners do not move through linear, uniform journeys. Instead, effective systems provide multiple entry points, varied intensities of support, and structured progression routes, all aligned to a shared purpose: enabling sustained participation, progression and completion.

Each element of the Pathways programme pilot is deliberately designed to tackle a progression barrier.

(a) Early Exposure and Informed Choice Head Start (Pre-Apprenticeship, Year 10) and Start Your Future (TAFE Tasters with Credit)

These three initiatives introduce early, structured exposure to technical and vocational pathways before key decisions are made. They fulfil a principle of **“design once for place, apply at a hyper-local level by learner need”**, meaning in England, a whole strategic authority would have access to all the programmes, but they deploy and target more locally by need.

Learners engage in authentic experiences of work and training, including short, credit-bearing modules delivered through TAFE.

Technical and Further Education (TAFE) is Australia’s network of publicly funded vocational education providers (closest to our general FE model). They deliver accredited technical, vocational and professional qualifications that are designed in partnership with industry. TAFE offers flexible pathways from school into apprenticeships, higher education and employment, combining classroom learning with practical, work-related experience to meet regional and national workforce needs. TAFE is a cornerstone of Australia’s tertiary education system, sitting alongside schools and universities. Across several states in Australia, TAFE provides the post-school and dual enrolment destination for multiple industry pathways, allowing learners to accumulate recognised vocational qualifications while still in school.

Crucially, these experiences are embedded within the curriculum and contribute to recognised outcomes, rather than sitting alongside it.

The system purpose is twofold:

- to normalise technical pathways as equal-status options,
- and to improve the quality of learner decision-making through informed choice.

Across most of the visits in Australia and Canada, the design of models was framed by **What is the most ambitious progression route for this young person?**

A strong observation from Australia was that parity of esteem begins with parity of access. Across every state and territory, young people are able to pursue academic and technical learning within the same education system rather than being separated into different institutions. Vocational learning is available to all learners through VET in Schools, school-based apprenticeships and increasingly flexible progression routes into both employment and higher education. Yet access alone does not create parity of esteem.

Academic pathways continue to dominate learner and parental aspirations, while technical pathways, although well established, can remain comparatively under-utilised. The lesson is that policy can create opportunity, but participation depends on culture, incentives and the visibility of progression.

England therefore faces not only the challenge of expanding technical pathways, but of ensuring they are recognised, understood and valued as equally ambitious routes to success.

(b) Social and Cultural Permission Parent-Focused Technical and TAFE Ambassadors First Nations Programmes

A distinctive feature of the model is the explicit recognition that progression decisions are not made by learners alone. Parents and carers act as key influencers, particularly in relation to technical and vocational routes, programmes for parents are targeted and relational, designed to encourage parity of esteem across pathways.

This initiative provides structured engagement to build parental understanding, confidence and advocacy for non-academic pathways.

By addressing perception alongside opportunity, the system strengthens participation and progression into under-selected but high-value pathways.

Throughout Australia and Canada, I observed pathway programmes intentionally designed with First Nations communities to reflect local culture, identity and aspirations. These programmes illustrated how place-based pathways can extend beyond employment and skills development, creating opportunities for young people to develop a stronger sense of belonging while connecting education with community, culture and future progression. They served as a powerful reminder that effective pathways are shaped not only by labour market need, but also by the communities and identities they exist to serve.

(c) Re-entry and Continuation Back in the Game (Re-engagement Programme)

Rather than treating school non-completion as an endpoint, the system builds in structured re-entry routes for learners who have disengaged or left early.

A re-engagement programme for young people who have left school or not completed qualifications. Learners are supported back into structured pathways through a combination of guidance, targeted learning and employer engagement, with a clear focus on progression and completion.

Back in the Game provides supported pathways back into education, training or employment, recognising prior participation and rebuilding progression from that point.

Recognisable impact of this approach is that NEET as a “sustained destination” becomes avoidable. There is deliberate intent and a pathway to reintegrate and re-engage which is led from within the Department for Education and senior school system.

(d) Infrastructure and Brokerage School Based Apprenticeship Engagement Officer (Regional Brokerage Role)

A dedicated regional role is responsible for brokering school-based apprenticeships and coordinating employer engagement.

School-Based Apprenticeships and Traineeships (SBATs) enable young people to combine secondary education with paid employment, structured workplace learning and nationally recognised vocational qualifications, creating a flexible pathway from school into skilled employment or further training. These are available throughout Australia but vary locally by region.

These regional brokerage roles reduce system friction by:

- aligning employer demand with learner pathways,
- supporting schools to navigate complexity,
- and sustaining employer participation over time.

(e) Differentiated Learner Support Job Readiness Workshops (Tiered Delivery Model)

Provision is delivered at varying levels of intensity:

- **macro** (universal school groups all studying readiness for employment),
- **micro** (targeted groups e.g. First Nations students),
- **precision** (highly individualised, often for learners at risk of NEET).

This enables the system to match support to learner readiness and need, rather than applying uniform provision.

Importantly, all activity contributes to recognised and credited outcomes, ensuring that even highly targeted support maintains parity of esteem.

(f) Workforce Capability ICE – Innovative Careers Education (Targeted Mentoring for Careers Advisers)

The final component strengthens the capability of the professionals responsible for designing and delivering the system, from the perspective of school level careers advice and the delivery of structured programmes.

ICE provides targeted, ongoing mentoring for careers advisers based on need, including those new to role, those requiring updating, and those operating in complex contexts.

This targeted colleague mentoring is:

- bespoke rather than generic,
- relational rather than episodic,
- and grounded in practice rather than theory.

Its purpose is to:

- improve quality at source,
- ensure consistency of learner experience,
- and professionalise the role through supported development.

System Reflection: From Infrastructure to Layered Pathways

England has already established a strong connective infrastructure through Careers Hubs. They successfully convene schools, employers, and providers, enable collaboration at place level, and provide a platform for consistent improvement. No other function has this multi-layered connectivity which could be mobilised to greater purpose to support the development of regional pathways and to focus on targeted employability for young people.

The opportunity now is not connectivity, it is design. The system is well placed to evolve from connectivity to more intentional design, embedding layered pathways that respond to learner need, reduce system bottlenecks, and create a coherent progression model from early exposure through to sustained outcomes.

Specifically, on a place-based premise, the current system can evolve to support a more layered, differentiated progression system that is responsive to learner need at all ages and explicit in purpose; ensuring locally responsive support that complements curriculum design.

There is also scope to consider targeted improvement support where data identifies that young people are not accessing information or progressing equitably into pathways.

System insight

Taken together, these are not separate programmes but a coherent progression architecture combining early exposure, credited exploration, parental engagement, re-entry routes, brokerage, differentiated support and workforce development. The transferable is universality, where possible, and precision, where necessary, organised within one outcomes-led framework.

1.3 Experiences Should Carry Recognised Value

Young people quickly learn what adults choose to value.

A defining characteristic of stronger systems is that participation carries value. In Australia, taster programmes, vocational modules, and workplace experiences frequently contribute towards recognised certification. Partial completion still holds currency, reducing the risk of learners leaving with nothing.

Similarly, in Canadian provinces such as Alberta and Ontario, dual credit and pathway programmes enable learners to accumulate credits that count towards both school completion and post-secondary progression.

This creates a system where experience is not peripheral, but central to progression, and where learners can see a clear line of sight between participation and future opportunity.

Throughout four years of engaging with the national Youth Advisory Group at The Careers and Enterprise Company in England, young people have consistently fed back they would like to be recognised for their efforts. Employers consistently reflect that they are interested in skills, experiences and how young people have seized opportunities. Qualifications only take you so far. The cream rises to the top through participation and breadth of experiences which layer essential skills, character, and aptitude.

In respect of education systems, this can manifest in multiple different ways, but for the purpose of this Fellowship, a lens on work-connected learning as a fundamental component of a progression architecture may consider this as including:

- Credited pathway exploration, valued in accountability systems.
- Recognised achievement of work experience learning outcomes.
- Employer co-design projects
- Digital literacy accreditation as opposed to “learning a bit about AI in tutor time.”
- An entitlement to access qualifications which facilitate technical learning in a project-based format.
- Recognised development of human skills including communication, teamwork, problem solving, and self-management.

In too many situations, learners are not able to access all of these facets to their education, nor do they receive any employer recognised credits for their participation and completion.

The curriculum should be structured to enable learners to add value through exploration, experiences and accredited added value options and pathways.

1.3.1 Calgary Board of Education – Building Flexible, Credited Pathways into Work

One of the strongest impressions from my visit to the Calgary Board of Education was how strategically flexibility has been designed into the education system. During my visit, Ken Weipert, Director of Complementary Curriculum and Pathways, and Carolyn Mahovich, Specialist Leader of the Unique Pathways Team, described their philosophy as “Learning as unique as every student.” It quickly became apparent that this was more than a strapline; it was reflected in the way curriculum, guidance, funding, and employer partnerships had been intentionally organised around the diverse ways young people progress.

Every learner is still expected to achieve the provincial requirement of 100 credits to graduate with an Alberta High School Diploma. What differs is how those credits can be earned. Rather than expecting every learner to follow the same route, Calgary has created multiple recognised pathways that allow young people to combine academic study with technical learning and work-connected experiences.

A particularly interesting feature is the use of Locally Developed Courses (LDCs), described in more detail in PART 2 of this report. School boards are able to identify emerging local needs and design new curriculum through a rigorous provincial approval process. Once approved, these courses become available for adoption by other school boards across Alberta, avoiding duplication while allowing curriculum to remain responsive to changing economic and community priorities.

Career exploration begins well before students make post-16 choices. Learners are introduced to pathways during the middle years before progressing into Career and Technology Studies, Dual Credit programmes, Registered Apprenticeship Programmes and other work-integrated learning opportunities in Grades 11 and 12. Importantly, these are

not viewed as extracurricular opportunities but as recognised components of secondary education, contributing credits towards graduation alongside mandatory core academic credits.

As I visited schools and discussed delivery with the Unique Pathways team, it became clear that this flexibility depends upon equally flexible school organisation. Secondary schools operate what staff described as “toggling timetables”, enabling students to move between school, college campuses, training providers, and employer workplaces while continuing their academic studies. Some programmes operate over a semester, others across a full academic year, while intensive summer programmes compress substantial technical learning into holiday periods, allowing learners to accelerate progression without displacing their core curriculum during term time.

The infrastructure supporting these opportunities is equally significant. Dedicated Guidance Counsellors, Off-Campus Coordinators and Learning Leaders work alongside colleges and employers to match students to appropriate programmes based on their interests, readiness, and aspirations. Practical barriers are explicitly removed through funded transport, personal protective equipment, specialist equipment and mandatory health and safety preparation before workplace learning begins. This level of coordination contributes to consistently high completion rates.

What struck me most was that none of these elements existed in isolation. Flexible timetables, curriculum design, funding arrangements, employer partnerships, and learner support had all been developed to serve a common purpose: enabling young people to build individual pathways while ensuring their achievements carried recognised educational value.

For England, the lesson extends beyond introducing more technical programmes. Genuine personalisation requires a coherent system in which work-connected learning is intentionally designed into curriculum structures, recognised through credits, and supported by the infrastructure needed to make participation equitable. It makes the case for a **National Transitions Credit System** in which work-connected learning, technical education and employer engagement become recognised components of every young person's educational journey, widening routes to success without lowering academic expectations.

1.3.2 British Columbia – Work Experience 12A and 12B: Crediting Workplace Learning

British Columbia offers an elegant illustration of how workplace learning can become recognised educational currency, particularly for post 16 learners. Rather than positioning work experience as an enrichment activity sitting outside the curriculum, Work Experience 12A and 12B are provincially recognised elective courses that contribute credits towards high school graduation.

Learners can contribute to the requirements of this certification through their pathway experiences, undertake structured workplace learning alongside clearly defined learning outcomes, employer supervision and school-based reflection. The emphasis is not simply on hours completed, but on demonstrating learning, employability, health and safety, personal responsibility and career development.

Importantly, the courses sit alongside other senior secondary electives rather than outside them. Work experience therefore carries equivalent educational status to other curriculum options, signalling that learning acquired through employment and workplace participation has recognised value.

An important query is rather than viewing work experience solely as an entitlement delivered within existing programmes of study, could accredited elective modules in post 16 phases provide recognised progression currency? A model similar to Work Experience 12A and 12B could offer post-16 learners structured opportunities to combine employer engagement, reflection and assessment within a nationally recognised framework while preserving local flexibility over delivery. For example, intentionally vocational project qualifications (HPQ, EPQ) such as those offered by ASDAN already exist in the English landscape.

British Columbia illustrates that work experience can operate as a rigorous, credit-bearing elective within mainstream education. England could adapt a similar model within a Universal Progression Framework, creating recognised learner currency without requiring wholesale curriculum reform.

Appendix 1 of this report describes the Indiana Graduation Pathways Model, illustrating how a state can redesign graduation requirements so that young people demonstrate readiness for life after school rather than simply accumulating academic credits.

Recognition changes behaviour: when workplace learning contributes to formal achievement, participation becomes purposeful rather than peripheral.

1.3.3 Australia and Canada: School-based and Registered Traineeships and Apprenticeships – The Safety Net of Continued School Registration

Across Australia, school-based apprenticeships and traineeships offer an example of how secondary education can become more systematically connected to employment, skills, and progression.

Not necessarily new from the perspective of the English policy, but an area open to impactful conceptual design if we consider from the perspective of early apprenticeship non-completions, supporting both young people and employers through different cultural transitions and ensuring safety nets are in place if pathways falter.

The model enables young people, from age 15 onwards, to remain enrolled at school while beginning an apprenticeship or traineeship with an employer. Students combine school study, paid employment, and vocational training, working towards both their senior secondary certificate and a nationally recognised qualification. In South Australia, for example, students can begin an apprenticeship or traineeship from 15, earn a wage, train with an employer and work towards an accredited qualification while completing the South Australian Certificate of Education.

School-Based Apprenticeships and Traineeships remain a relatively small but highly strategic pathway. Around 21,500 Australian students participate nationally. Despite their modest scale, they demonstrate how employment, accredited learning and school attendance can be successfully integrated within mainstream education enabling the right programmes for the right learners.

The Registered Apprenticeship Programme (RAP) in Canada particularly caught my attention. Learners can accumulate up to 1,000 hours of workplace learning while still in high school, with apprenticeship credits recorded alongside academic achievement on their school transcript (high school graduation certificate). The model closely mirrors the school-based apprenticeships I observed in Australia, reinforcing the value of recognised workplace learning as part of mainstream education rather than an alternative to it. Delivery is equally collaborative, with programmes provided through post-secondary institutions such as SAIT alongside co-designed provision delivered directly with employers including Teatro Group, a high-end restaurant and events company in Calgary. Students are encouraged to explore different sectors before committing to a particular occupational pathway.

In each system, intensity of workplace activity grew as young people passed core elements of their academic studies (adding an additional motivator into the system) and as they got older.

We discussed how easy or hard it is to engage employers with school-based apprenticeships. Colleagues shared an appetite from SMEs in particular who are interested in a part-time workforce and larger businesses with the capacity for multiple young people who are able to view the part-time working as fractional.

What makes this distinctive is that the workplace experience carries recognised value. It is not simply exposure, inspiration, or a short placement. It is paid employment, structured training and accredited learning that contributes to future progression. In Victoria, school-based apprenticeships and traineeships combine part-time employment, school, and training, with the vocational component contributing credit towards the senior secondary certificate. In New South Wales, school-based apprentices must undertake relevant “HSC VET” study, which is the associated vocational or technical content and then contributes unit credit towards the High School Certificate.

This matters because it reframes work experience as part of a progression system. Young people are not asked to wait until they leave school before entering technical education or the labour market. Instead, the boundary between school, training and work becomes more porous. Students can test an occupational pathway, build confidence, develop employability, earn money,

and accumulate recognised learning while still supported by school. Students told me the value of being able to then increase their hours in the holidays and at weekends, in some cases reducing pressure on family finances.

The model also depends on shared responsibility. Employers provide paid work and supervision; registered training organisations deliver the formal vocational qualification; schools coordinate curriculum, timetabling, and pastoral support; and governments provide the policy framework that allows the components to count. The young person is therefore held within a partnership system rather than being passed from one institution to another.

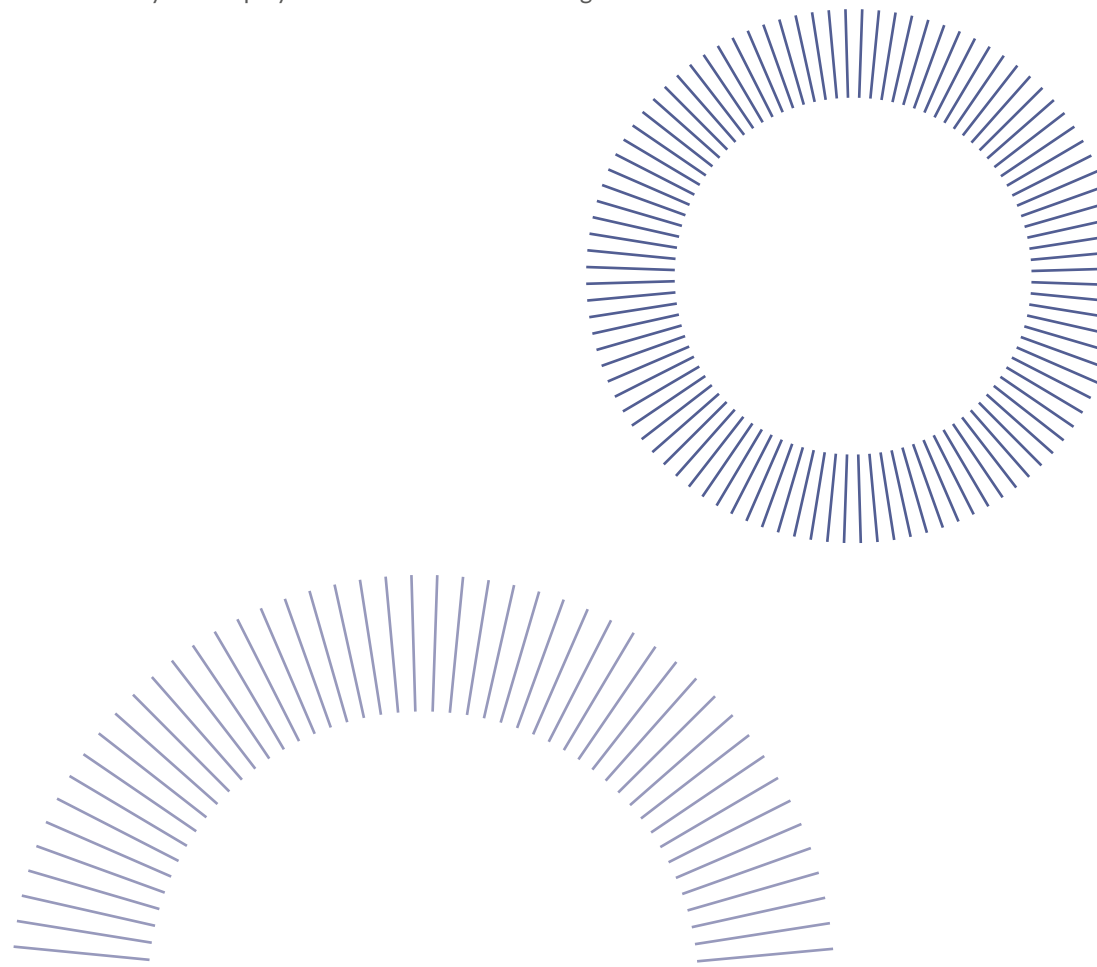
In South Australia, this approach aligns closely with Flexible Industry Pathways. School-based apprenticeships and traineeships are often linked to industry-endorsed pathways designed to help students move from school into employment or further education in priority sectors. This means the apprenticeship is not an isolated opportunity secured by an individual learner; it sits within a wider regional skills strategy shaped by labour market need.

For this Fellowship, the significance of school-based apprenticeships is not simply that Australia offers technical routes earlier. It is that these routes build early currency i.e. giving learners “experience” whilst still supported by school. The system does not view these opportunities as dead ends, if a learner were to change their mind at 16 or 17, they are still part of the school system, still enrolled and can complete that element of apprenticeship study, regroup and start a new pathway. Simultaneously, young people are strengthening their likelihood of effective transitions into the workplace. Students gain credit, qualifications, workplace evidence, employer relationships and often a clearer route into full-time apprenticeships, employment, or further training. In Victoria, guidance notes that many students move into a full-time contract with their employer after leaving school, while others continue education and training through a Regional Training Organisation or university.

The lesson for England is important. Too often, work experience is still treated as a temporary activity, detached from curriculum, assessment, or progression. The Australian model shows what becomes possible when work-based learning is formally recognised as part of the learner’s education journey, starting early and building progressively.

It also raises a challenge. If workplace learning is to serve those who are currently missing out, it cannot rely only on individual family networks, employer goodwill, or traditional short placements. It needs infrastructure: brokerage, employer partnership, accredited training, timetable flexibility, safeguarding, transport, learner support, and recognition within the senior phase of education.

School-based apprenticeships therefore offer more than an alternative route for a small number of young people. At their best, they demonstrate a principle: experience should carry value. When learners contribute to real workplaces, build real skills and complete real qualifications, work experience becomes progression currency and employment outcomes become tangible.



1.4 Partnership Creates Infrastructure and Opportunity

In strongly curated progression models, employer engagement is not an activity. It is infrastructure.

From targeted employer engagement to workforce infrastructure, partnerships seen tended to be organised into three distinct categories:

- **Strategic partnerships** (South Australia - Technical Colleges, Flexible Industry Pathways)
- **Sector partnerships** (Alberta and British Columbia, Sector based Training)
- **Operational partnerships** (schools, employers, careers guidance brokers, placements)

I concluded through observation, that each has value, but in different dimensions. These categories may also be a useful indicator to how employer engagement may be more usefully organised, structured, and supported.

1.4.1 Technical Colleges, South Australia: outcomes-focused partnerships and recruiting talent by place

One of the clearest examples of employer partnership functioning as progression infrastructure was evident in South Australia's relationship with BAE Systems and the state's new Technical Colleges.

The partnership is not built around a series of isolated employer encounters. It is formalised through agreements setting out a shared commitment to learner progression and regional workforce development. These agreements can include employer encounters, curriculum development, work experience placements, industry projects, apprenticeship and traineeship opportunities, and direct progression into employment, through a commitment to jobs and accelerated recruitment processes for learners who have followed the pathway through the Technical College.

What distinguishes this model is the depth and intentionality of the relationship. Rather than seeking large numbers of light-touch employer partnerships, the South Australian Government has elected to prioritise a smaller number of high-value strategic relationships capable of generating measurable impact in place. The aim is not simply to increase employer engagement activity, but to connect education more directly to youth employment, skills demand, and long-term economic development.

This approach is particularly visible within South Australia's Technical Colleges. Similar to our excellent University Technical Colleges in England, but these institutions are designed even more explicitly around identified labour market demand and regional skills gaps. Employer partnerships are fewer per institution (12 maximum per TC), go further and expectations are defined through memoranda of understanding between the South Australian Government and the employer. Their curriculum models are developed in close partnership with employers and combine senior secondary education with technical learning, workplace experience and clear routes into apprenticeships, further training, and employment.

BAE Systems' relationship with the Technical Colleges reflects this model. Employer involvement begins well before recruitment. Industry expertise informs curriculum design, helping ensure that learners develop the technical knowledge, workplace behaviours and wider capabilities required in advanced manufacturing, engineering, and naval shipbuilding. Work experience and employer-led activity then allow learners to test their interest, build familiarity with the working environment, and begin to establish relationships with potential future employers.

At the Osborne Naval Shipyard, Adelaide, the scale and longevity of the workforce challenge make this pipeline especially significant. BAE Systems is building Hunter-class frigates and developing the long-term skills base required to support Australia's future nuclear-powered submarine programme. The shipyard includes infrastructure of exceptional scale, including some of the largest submarine construction facilities being developed anywhere in the world.

The associated employment opportunity is therefore not short term. It requires a sustained talent pipeline extending across generations of learners, supported by schools, Technical Colleges, training providers, government and employers acting together.

This place-based commitment is reinforced through government expectations attached to key apprenticeship and traineeship programmes. For priority entry routes, recruitment is focused on South Australian residents, ensuring that major public investment translates into local skills development, youth employment and economic benefit. The purpose of the partnership is therefore wider than meeting BAE Systems' immediate recruitment needs. It is to build the technical capability of a place and enable local young people to access the opportunities being created within it.

BAE Systems is not positioned as an external contributor invited into education at occasional points. It is a long-term partner in curriculum design, learner development and progression. Equally, the Technical Colleges are not simply supplying recruits. They are co-designing a talent pipeline that combines educational purpose, economic strategy and individual opportunity.

System insight

Strategic employer partnerships become infrastructure when they connect curriculum design, meaningful workplace learning and recruitment to the long-term skills needs of place. Success is measured not by the number of employer interactions, but by whether relationships create credible progression and employment outcomes for local young people.

The lesson is important. Employer engagement is most powerful when relationships are selective, reciprocal and connected to clear outcomes. More partnerships do not necessarily create greater impact. In some places, a smaller number of deeply embedded employer relationships may be more effective than a broad network of transactional activity, particularly where they are aligned with local labour market priorities and offer visible routes from curriculum through experience and into employment.

1.4.2 Local Union Training Centres, Alberta – growing the talent pipeline through collective industry investment

One of the most distinctive examples of employer partnership observed during the Fellowship was Alberta's network of industry-led union training centres. Rather than individual employers working independently to recruit future apprentices, entire sectors collaborate to develop the next generation of skilled workers through shared investment in education.

During visits to the Electrical Industry Training Centre of Alberta and the Piping Industry Training Centre, I met learners (year 11 equivalent) participating in intensive, credit-bearing summer school programmes delivered in partnership with local education boards. These programmes provide young people with an authentic introduction to skilled trades, allowing them to develop technical capability, experience industry-standard equipment and gain recognised high school credits before making decisions about apprenticeships or post-secondary study. Learners must apply and prove readiness for acceptance to these intensive programmes. Previous work experience may contribute well to applications. Early learner commitment is structured through school led exposure to different pathways.

These particular learners were funded through The Educational Partnership Foundation (TEPF), a charitable organisation supported through philanthropy to widen participation and remove barriers to access. By funding learner participation and working alongside education partners, industry is investing collectively in the long-term health of its future workforce rather than competing for talent only at the point of recruitment. TEPF is dedicated to supporting young people from Western Canada to explore, prepare and succeed in careers within skilled trades. They partner with government, industry and philanthropists.

The training environments themselves reinforce the authenticity of the experience. Learners work in commercial-standard workshops under instructors with extensive industry backgrounds, developing practical skills alongside an understanding of workplace culture, health and safety, teamwork and professional expectations. Importantly, the programmes are exploratory rather than selective. Young people are encouraged to discover whether a trade is the right fit before committing to an apprenticeship, reducing the likelihood of poor career choices and early attrition.

This collaborative model represents a significant departure from traditional employer engagement. Rather than expecting schools to generate interest in construction and engineering through occasional careers talks or short workplace visits, industry has created shared infrastructure through which multiple employers contribute to a common talent pipeline. The focus is not on promoting one company, but on strengthening an entire sector.

The approach also reflects Alberta's wider philosophy of progression. Technical exploration carries recognised educational value through accredited learning, while flexible timetabling and dual-credit arrangements enable young people to build progressively towards apprenticeships, further education and skilled employment without creating unnecessary barriers between school and work.

In England we see outstanding provision in pockets through providers such as [CATCH](#) in Grimsby who have partnered with Healing Academy to design an engineering pathway for year 10 learners. Through their outreach and engagement work alongside CATCH and local partner schools, Healing Academy identified a concerning regional gap: a growing reduction in practical, high-quality engineering pathway opportunities for young people. In direct response to this challenge, they now have 30 students actively engaged in this engineering pathway at CATCH's industry-leading facility starting this September. Interestingly this opportunity was offered to every school in the area and only one took it up, a signal of the scale of task ahead and need for recently announced educational reform.

This raises an important question. **Could major sectors facing persistent skills shortages move beyond individual recruitment activity and instead co-invest in regional progression infrastructure?** Industry-led training centres, working alongside schools, colleges and strategic authorities, could provide high-quality technical exploration at scale while creating stronger, more sustainable talent pipelines for priority sectors. This model is elective and additive to the curriculum structure. The remit of Construction Centres of Excellence or Institutes of Technology may be expanded to incorporate school partnership programmes, alongside the mobilisation of Independent Training Providers to support development at scale.

Collective industry investment via sectors can create a shared talent pipeline rather than leaving employers to compete individually for recruits.

1.4.3 Summer partnership pathways: Creating time for progression

One of the most striking examples of curriculum flexibility I encountered was Calgary's extensive funded Summer Pathway Programme offer. During my visit, I spent time observing learners participating in programmes including industry-standard film production, cyber security, IT networking and electrical trades. Although each pathway was different, they shared a common philosophy: creating meaningful opportunities for young people to participate, explore and progress.

Each programme comprises approximately 120 guided learning hours delivered intensively over just three and a half weeks during the summer break. Successful completion attracts five credits towards the Alberta High School Diploma, representing around five per cent of the credits required for graduation. Rather than creating separate qualifications, the programmes enable learners to accumulate recognised credits alongside their mainstream education, allowing technical learning to become an integral part of their overall educational journey.

Participation is not automatic. Learners apply for places and are expected to demonstrate both readiness and commitment before being accepted, this process contributing to skill development. During the summer of my visit, around 12,000 young people across Calgary were enrolled on pathway programmes, illustrating the scale at which this approach has become embedded within the education system. Calgary is close in economic scale, labour market complexity and strategic ambition to Greater Manchester.

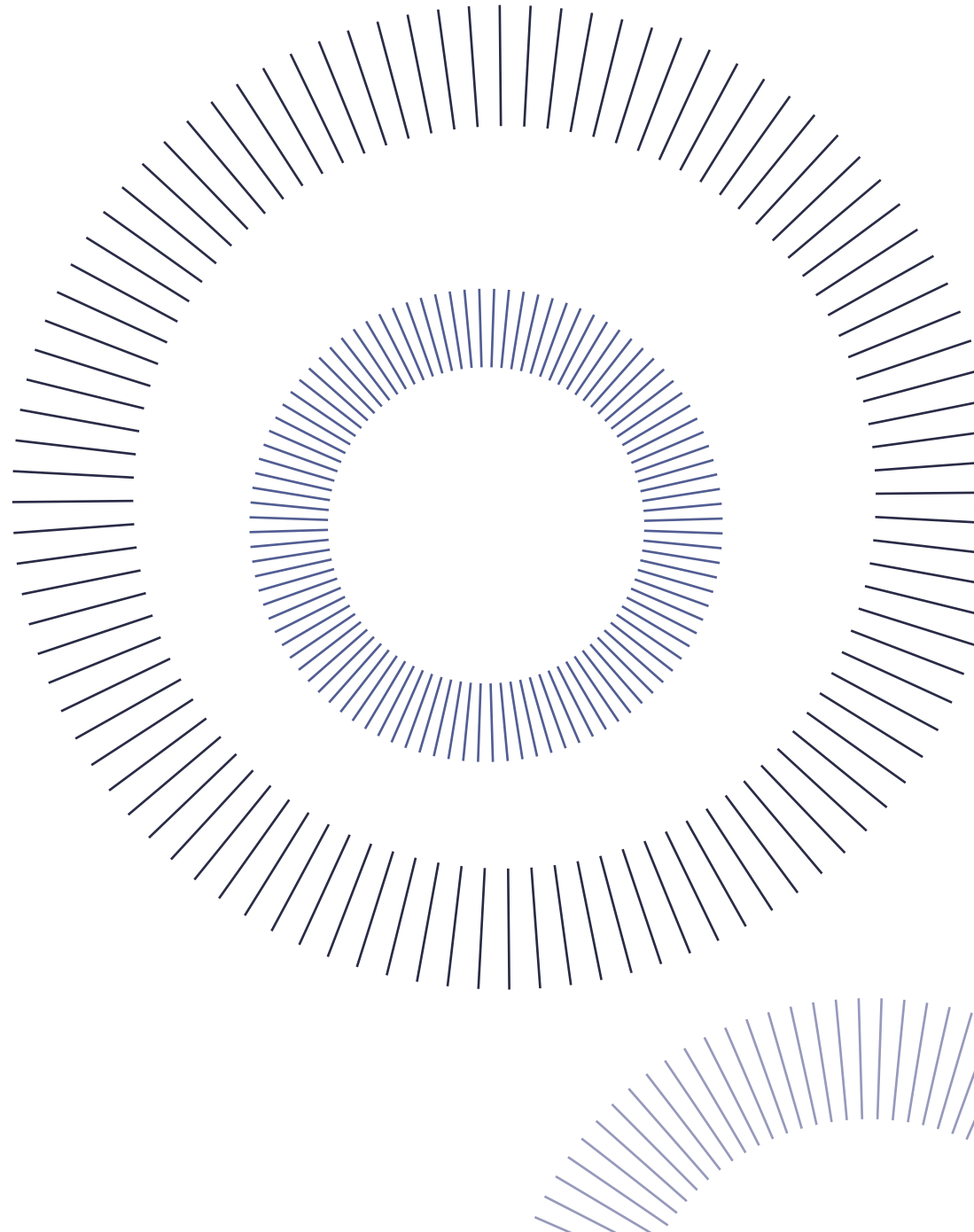
What was particularly noticeable was the diversity of learners' motivations. For some, the programmes offered a low-risk opportunity to explore an industry before making future education or career decisions, reflecting Alberta's "no dead ends" philosophy where early choices do not close off later opportunities. Others were building experience before progressing into college or university, while many were seeking a competitive advantage for apprenticeship recruitment or post-secondary applications. Some programmes also provided opportunities for learners to recover credits or strengthen aspects of their academic profile through intensive intervention.

Across every programme I visited, the atmosphere was notably different from traditional classroom learning. Students had chosen to be there, engagement was consistently high and learning was purposeful, practical and collaborative. Industry-standard equipment, specialist tutors and authentic project work reinforced the expectation that learners were developing genuine occupational capability rather than simply experiencing careers.

The significance of Calgary's model lies not only in the quality of the programmes, but in the way the education system has created additional time and funding for progression. Rather than asking schools to remove curriculum content or reduce academic expectations, Alberta has developed a flexible mechanism that allows learners to stack recognised technical credits alongside their core studies. It demonstrates how curriculum flexibility can increase opportunity, accelerate progression and strengthen technical pathways without requiring a fundamental redesign of the school curriculum.

This provides one compelling example of how accredited technical learning could become an additional entitlement for young people. Creating structured opportunities during holiday periods, linked to recognised qualifications and progression routes, would enable many more learners to explore pathways, build technical capability and strengthen transitions while preserving the integrity of the mainstream curriculum. An unintended but positive consequence of this strategic approach is wider participation, an opportunity to mitigate against the void which may be created by a social media ban.

Additionally, due to the mixed cohort nature of the summer pathways, young people are networking with other young people and adults that they may not ordinarily meet. The Calgary Board of Education are the responsible body for safeguarding and behaviour concerns throughout the programme. However, throughout the programmes I visited, engagement was high and palpably positive.



1.5 Purpose Is Shaped By People And Place

National entitlement succeeds with greater impact when it becomes locally meaningful.

This means incorporating strategic authorities, employers, education, families, health, youth futures, economic development and community into integrated partnerships and cohesive regional pathway facilitation boards to ensure effective change.

1.5.1 South Australia: Flexible Industry Pathways – designing curriculum around place

One of the most significant policy developments I encountered during my Fellowship was South Australia's approach to **Flexible Industry Pathways (FIPs)**. Rather than viewing careers education, vocational learning and industry engagement as separate initiatives, South Australia has created a framework that aligns curriculum with the economic priorities of place.

The starting point is not simply what subjects schools wish to offer, but what industries are growing, what skills are required locally and how education can become an active contributor to regional economic development.

Each Flexible Industry Pathway has been developed in partnership with employers, industry bodies, training providers and government around priority sectors including defence, health, construction, advanced manufacturing, agriculture, digital technologies, early childhood, tourism and hospitality. As labour market priorities evolve, so too can the pathways. Curriculum is therefore designed to remain responsive rather than static.

This represents a fundamental shift in educational thinking. **Labour Market Information (LMI) is not treated as information that is shared with young people during careers guidance. Instead, LMI becomes a design tool for the education system itself.**

Schools are then able to organise learning around these pathways, combining academic study with vocational qualifications, workplace learning, industry projects, work experience and school-based apprenticeships. Rather than asking employers to fit around schools, schools increasingly organise themselves around opportunities created through industry partnership.

During my Fellowship I saw how this creates a much stronger relationship between education and place. Employers are not invited into schools simply to inspire learners; they become co-designers of curriculum, helping shape the knowledge, technical skills and professional behaviours that young people will require for future employment.

Importantly, Flexible Industry Pathways are not about narrowing young people's aspirations. Instead, they broaden opportunity by making future industries visible much earlier. Learners gain a clearer understanding of emerging occupations, access authentic workplace experiences and accumulate recognised learning that supports progression into apprenticeships, higher education or employment.

Perhaps the most significant lesson is that Flexible Industry Pathways demonstrate how **curriculum can become place-responsive without becoming locally fragmented**. The state government provides a coherent framework, quality assurance and recognised pathways, while regions and schools adapt delivery according to their own economic context and employer partnerships.

This has important implications for England's evolving devolution agenda. As strategic authorities take greater responsibility for skills and economic development, there is an opportunity to move beyond simply sharing LMI with schools. Instead, local growth priorities now become one of the design principles underpinning curriculum, work-connected learning and progression pathways. Calgary has a similar educational footprint to Greater Manchester, a similar scale of secondary learners, urban economy, multiple colleges and universities, diverse labour market, strong devolution ambitions and South Australia a comparable population, city-region plus regional communities, advanced manufacturing focus, significant FE and apprenticeship infrastructure makeup to West Midlands.

For this Fellowship, Flexible Industry Pathways illustrate that effective progression systems are not simply learner-centred; they are **place-centred**. They connect educational design to economic strategy, ensuring that young people experience learning which is both personally meaningful and regionally relevant.

How prevalent in England is a situation where A-level programmes in particular, the predominant academic pathway for young people aged 16–18 in England, bear no resemblance to the local or national labour market? Too often these programmes have no dynamic link to employability, are designed by teacher capability, availability and personal preference. Taken alongside missing work experience programmes and access to exploratory pathways, this remains a significant area of concern.

The lesson is clear: labour market intelligence should not sit in isolation in careers guidance, or towards the end of the careers process. It should sit at the beginning of curriculum design, in every institution.

Whilst we are seeing significant positive policy intent towards this type of development with 14-16 technical pathways, it is also important to ensure learners in post 16 academic programmes also have meaningful access to high quality workconnected learning as an expectation.

Figure 3: Flexible Industry Pathway Design Comparison



1.5.2 Beacon Foundation, Tasmania

Beacon Foundation was founded in Tasmania 35 years ago because of a simple problem: young people were leaving school without meaningful connections to employment, while local employers struggled to recruit. Their response was not simply careers education, but acting as an **intermediary between schools, employers and communities**. That intermediary role remains central today. The role of Beacon Foundation sits between the role of a careers hub and a careers delivery provider in England. Their purpose is similarly driven by place, but also by community.

Success is measured as much by strengthened community capacity and improved local outcomes as by what happens inside an individual school.

In England, Careers Hubs are increasingly moving in this direction, particularly where they sit within mayoral strategic authorities or local skills improvement structures, but the accountability framework for careers still largely centres on education improvement through institutions.

The organisation intentionally works in schools serving communities with greater socio-economic disadvantage (typically Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage ICSEA provides an indication of the socio-educational backgrounds of students below 1000), recognising that geography and background should not determine opportunity.

Beacon is still largely programme led but does reinforce the power of local intermediaries to connect young people with opportunity. Calgary is a strong example of what happens when those opportunities become embedded within the education system itself. Together they suggest England's next step is not simply delivering more programmes, but creating locally convened progression systems in which schools, employers and post-secondary providers share responsibility for purposeful transitions with place.

Supported through conversations with Nick Humphreys and Ebony Bridle from the Beacon Foundation, I found two particular examples where work-related learning in Tasmania is driven by place.

Growth Industry Preparation Programme (GrIPP)

This is probably Beacon's strongest example of place-based delivery.

Rather than exposing students to generic careers, GrIPP is built around Tasmania's identified growth sectors. Depending on where it is delivered, learners spend a day immersed in industries such as:

- Advanced manufacturing
- Construction
- Food production
- Tourism and hospitality
- Aged and community care
- Renewable energy

The programmes are hosted by employers in those sectors and combine workplace visits, practical activities, employer interaction and employability skills. The intention is to connect young people with industries that are both strategically important to the state and experiencing workforce shortages. The approach is almost identical to the workplace experiences that we are seeing emerge through early modern work experience practice in England in cases which have aligned the delivery of **economic development through education**, using employer engagement to strengthen future local workforce supply.

Local Futures Project

Beacon recognised that demand for programmes exceeded capacity, so instead of relying solely on central funding from the Tasmanian Government they created a community co-investment model.

The funding is deliberately hyper-local:

- \$10,000 from the local council
- \$10,000 from local businesses
- \$10,000 from Beacon Foundation

The combined \$30,000 (AUD) funds approximately:

- six Beacon Short Courses
- around 150 student places

The principle is powerful: Communities invest in their own future workforce; places take shared responsibility for engaging young people. Rather than waiting for government grants, local government, employers and Beacon each become shareholders in improving transitions for young people.

Beacon doesn't rely on a single funding stream. It operates a blended funding model comprising:

- Tasmanian Government contracts (particularly for statewide work-based learning services as part of the Youth Jobs Strategy)
- Corporate partnerships aligned to the purpose of the place
- Industry sponsorship
- Philanthropic funding
- Fee-for-service and direct contracts
- Significant in-kind employer contributions, particularly through volunteering and hosting workplace experiences.

System insight

Tasmania now has the highest participation in school-based apprenticeships and traineeships in Australia. Over approximately six years, participation increased from around 4% to approximately 18% of senior secondary learners. The significance lies not simply in the growth itself, but in how it was achieved. Rather than creating a separate vocational system, Tasmania embedded apprenticeships within mainstream secondary education through curriculum flexibility, employer partnerships, recognised qualifications and coordinated state leadership. The lesson is that participation follows system design, not individual school effort.

1.5.3 Career-Led Collegiates – Media and Technology and Construction Trades

In Calgary, I experienced a modernised approach via career-led collegiates. These were smaller sector-based pathway provisions, where a need emerged in place and then housed either within a High School or the local Institute of Technology. Staffed by industry expert instructors or qualified industry experienced teachers, concentrated exploratory programmes followed by Dual Credit Pathways were offered either through semester-based delivery or concentrated into summer pathways.

I visited two distinct collegiate developments where Calgary Board of Education had identified a need and developed place-based industry led offers for learners. The Board of Education have invested in an infrastructure around each of these Collegiate programmes, using existing spaces in high schools, high-quality industry standard teaching spaces have been developed. Each semester programme is worth 5 credits towards the secondary certificate of education.

Semester programmes are delivered within the school funding formula, summer programmes are funded via payment by results to either the school or training provider.

Media and Technology – programmes included Film, Cyber Security and Networking plus pre-electrical engineering. Calgary Board of Education invested in the development of an industry standard film studio with courses developed and delivered by an industry expert.

Figure 4 – Different mechanisms. One common principle

Different mechanisms. One common principle.

How three education systems deliberately design progression

South Australia Flexible Industry Pathways

- Industry-led curriculum
- Regional labour market responsive
- Integrated academic + technical learning + workplace experiences
- Multiple recognised destinations

Alberta Dual Credit

- School + post-secondary partnership
- Simultaneous high school & college credit
- Flexible local pathway design
- Employment, apprenticeship or further study

Fusion Collegiate Timetable Architecture

- Protected curriculum time for experiences
- One dedicated pathway day
- Employer & post-secondary immersion
- Personalised progression

COMMON PRINCIPLE: Progression is deliberately designed rather than left to chance.

Adapted from observations during the Churchill Fellowship and publicly available South Australian and Alberta pathway resources.

In summary

Collectively, the five design principles illustrated in this section point towards a different way of thinking about education reform. None of the systems explored relied on a single programme or policy to improve transitions. Instead, they consciously aligned curriculum, employer partnership, learner recognition and local leadership around a shared purpose: enabling successful progression. While the structures differed, the principles remained remarkably consistent.

The challenge is therefore not whether these international models should be replicated. It is whether these design principles can strengthen an education system that already possesses many of the necessary foundations.

The following section builds upon those principles to consider how we consider the capabilities required to build a coherent place-based work-connected learning and progression system.

Part Two

Building The Conditions For Pathways And Successful Progression

The international systems explored throughout this Fellowship differed significantly in structure, governance and curriculum. Some operated within highly devolved education systems, while others were centrally coordinated. Some prioritised technical pathways from an early age, while others placed greater emphasis on broad exploration before specialisation.

Despite these differences, the same enabling conditions emerged repeatedly.

Strong progression did not happen because of a single programme or qualification. It was enabled by education systems that intentionally created the conditions for young people to explore, experience and progress through meaningful pathways.

Three conditions appeared consistently across every jurisdiction visited:

- Space
- Capability
- and Stewardship.

Together they created the foundations upon which flexible pathways, meaningful employer engagement and successful transitions could flourish.

2.1 Creating Space for Purposeful Progression

Across every jurisdiction visited, progression was treated as an integral purpose of education rather than an activity delivered alongside it. Rather than viewing technical learning, employer engagement and career development as additional demands on already crowded curricula, systems created space within programmes of study for learners to explore future pathways alongside academic learning.

This flexibility took different forms. In Alberta, intensive summer pathway programmes enabled learners to complete substantial accredited technical learning without disrupting their core studies. Locally Designed Courses (LDCs) provided schools with the flexibility to respond to regional labour market priorities while maintaining rigorous provincial approval processes. In South Australia, Flexible Industry Pathways combined existing qualifications into coherent sector-based programmes that connected curriculum, industry experience and progression. In Ireland, senior cycle reform similarly recognised the importance of providing greater flexibility for schools to design programmes that support wider learner development alongside academic achievement.

Although organised differently, Norway's vocational pathways similarly demonstrate how nationally recognised progression routes can coexist with local employer partnerships.

Although the mechanisms differed, the underlying principle remained remarkably consistent. Systems did not seek to reduce academic expectations; they created opportunities for learners to broaden them. Existing qualifications, curriculum time and local partnerships were organised differently to enable exploration, technical learning and progression without diminishing academic standards.

This distinction is important because the international examples demonstrate that reform is not necessarily dependent upon creating new qualifications or entirely new curriculum structures. More often, it involves creating sufficient flexibility within existing systems to allow learning to happen in different places, at different times and through different combinations of experiences.

Purposeful progression therefore begins with creating space, within curriculum design, accountability and school organisation for young people to engage meaningfully with their future while continuing to achieve academically

Flexi-timetabling

In multiple examples, a recurring theme emerged where schools had flexi-timetable models to enable access to a much broader curriculum than any individual school can offer. Some of these were unique to institutions, others centrally mandated.

BUSY Schools have a maximum student cohort of 250 and as seen in Salisbury, Brisbane a very lean teaching staff model which enabled small group teaching of core English and maths in two cohorts rotating across Monday/Tuesday and Thursday/Friday with an employability day on Wednesdays and a progressive work experience -> paid employment model dependent on learner readiness. This model had multiple identifiable benefits:

Teacher well-being: 6 teachers rotating English and maths teaching all had a full day for preparation on a Wednesday, alongside small but diverse teaching groups

Students experienced a personally progressive journey to employment not defined by a universal curriculum offer.

Bespoke curriculum teaching was delivered through commissioning Regional Training Organisations (the equivalent of ITPs) to deliver programmes in school as part of the Wednesday employability days. Over 20 RTOs were delivering in the Salisbury School.

A staffing structure which enables a holistic service to remove barriers to employability, including health and employment coaching. In BUSY Schools, employability coaches triangulate support between employers, students and parents.

High schools in the Calgary Board of education have mandated "toggling timetables". This model applied to 23 senior high schools all structuring learning into morning and afternoon blocks – 4 extended lessons per day. This enables a 'travel to learn' approach from grades 10-12 (equivalent years 11-13). Guidance counsellors and off campus coordinators (similar to Careers Leaders if the two roles were conjoined) are responsible for helping learners identify off campus learning and facilitating this within personal scheduling. Schools have delegated accountability for the distribution of these resources and how large the roles are in relation to the needs of the cohorts.

In both models, learners also had access to school-based apprenticeships (Registered Apprenticeships in Canada) where learners can increase their time in paid employment, whilst still on role at school.

In all of the flexi-models, what I observed was a triangulation of support between school, the employer and the learner (plus parents) which enabled each party to feel supported.

2.2 Building Professional Capability

Curriculum flexibility alone is insufficient. Across every jurisdiction visited, innovation was sustained because educators were supported to work differently.

Where schools successfully connected learning with industry, teachers, careers practitioners and school leaders were not expected simply to implement new programmes. They were given opportunities to understand industries, develop new pedagogical approaches and work alongside employers as partners in curriculum design.

In New South Wales, structured teacher industry experiences enabled teachers and careers professionals to develop a deeper understanding of contemporary employment and emerging sectors before translating this learning back into classroom practice. South Australia similarly invested in professional learning that strengthened collaboration between schools, Technical Colleges and employers. At Fusion Collegiate in Calgary, teachers worked alongside industry specialists within flexible programmes, positioning themselves not simply as subject experts but as facilitators of authentic, work-connected learning.

Finland illustrates how sustained investment in teacher professionalism and guidance capability creates the conditions for locally responsive pathway design.

These examples reinforced an important lesson. Educational innovation depends upon workforce development innovation.

If schools are expected to design increasingly personalised, place-responsive pathways, the professional capability of teachers, Careers Leaders and wider education staff must also evolve alongside curriculum reform. This requires sustained investment in professional development, collaborative planning and opportunities for educators to build confidence in working across organisational boundaries.

Progression therefore depends not only upon curriculum reform, but upon developing the professional capability required to deliver it confidently and consistently.

2.3 Place-Based Stewardship

The strongest international systems shared another important characteristic. Responsibility for progression did not rest solely with individual schools. Instead, place-based organisations acted as system stewards, bringing together schools, employers, post-secondary providers and communities to design pathways that reflected local economic opportunity while remaining connected to national priorities.

Although these organisations varied considerably in structure, their purpose was strikingly similar. Calgary Board of Education's Unique Pathways team coordinated pathway development across schools and industry. Beacon Foundation in Tasmania worked with employers, communities and schools to develop place-responsive programmes that strengthened aspiration and belonging. In New South Wales, regional and cohort targeting supported coherent implementation across multiple schools while maintaining consistency with state priorities.

These organising structures did far more than broker employer encounters. They convened partners, identified emerging workforce needs, facilitated collaboration, supported curriculum innovation and created the relationships through which progression systems could continually evolve.

This distinction matters.

Careers Hubs and individual schools can develop excellent partnerships. However, designing coherent pathways across an entire locality requires multi-stakeholder forums with the capacity to understand local labour markets, understand pedagogy, convene multiple partners and sustain collaboration beyond individual projects or funding cycles.

Progression systems therefore become a shared civic responsibility rather than the responsibility of individual institutions alone. National ambition to enable local delivery establishes consistency and entitlement, while place-based stewardship ensures those ambitions become meaningful within local communities and economies.

Taken together, these three enabling conditions, **Space, Capability and Stewardship** provide the foundations upon which progression systems are built. They are not policy solutions in themselves, but the conditions that consistently enabled successful practice across every jurisdiction visited. The following chapters build upon these foundations to consider how these international insights might inform the development of a coherent progression framework for England.

Part Three

Designing for Progression

Education systems are designed for learning – but are they designed for progression for all?

Perhaps the most significant insight to emerge from this Fellowship was not about work experience, technical education or careers guidance in isolation. It was something more fundamental.

What I have observed throughout my international exploration is that designing for work-connected outcomes requires three deliberate conceptual shifts in thinking:

- 1| **From attainment to progression**
- 2| **From programmes to architecture**
- 3| **From institutional success to learner success**

3.1 From Attainment to Progression

The most significant shift is not introducing more work experience, more qualifications or more careers education. It is recognising progression itself as a legitimate and foundational educational outcome.

Across Australia and Canada, and through discussions with Ireland and European research I found education systems that differed considerably in governance, curriculum, accountability and funding. Yet despite these differences, they shared a common characteristic: they had given deliberate thought to how young people progress.

Education systems are meticulously designed for learning, but comparatively little attention has been paid to how they are designed for effective transitions and progression.

That observation prompted an uncomfortable thought.

This distinction may appear subtle, but it is profound.

For decades, educational reform has been focused on improving what and how young people learn. Curriculum has been refined, assessment strengthened, teaching quality improved and accountability systems developed to raise standards. These reforms have transformed educational outcomes for many learners and remain essential to delivering high-quality education, but equally this approach has faltered for many young people, starkly seen in England's current NEET statistics, and prevalent in large numbers of unemployed graduates.

Viewed in reverse, many young people now leaving university have travelled an almost entirely academic pathway: a degree with limited structured employability development, preceded by A-levels with little meaningful exposure to work

or industry, preceded by an EBacc curriculum offering few opportunities for technical learning or sustained workplace experience. Add the disruption of the Covid years, and it should not surprise us that this cohort now represents a fast-growing group of young people who are NEET.

Yet progression has often been treated differently or not considered fully as part of a coherent journey for a young person.

Rather than being designed as a system feature, successful transitions have frequently been assumed to emerge naturally from educational achievement itself. Careers education, work experience, technical pathways, enrichment, employer engagement and post-16 transitions have evolved as important, but largely separate, components of the wider education landscape. Responsibility has become distributed across institutions, agencies and programmes, often with limited alignment around a shared understanding of what successful progression actually requires.

The consequence is not a lack of activity. Indeed, England has invested significantly in careers education, employer engagement and technical reform over the past decade. The challenge is that these initiatives have largely developed alongside one another rather than as parts of a designed progression system.

My observations and findings from this Fellowship exploration suggest that there is another way to think about the challenge.

The systems that appeared to produce the strongest progression outcomes were not necessarily those with the greatest number of programmes or the highest levels of investment. Rather, they demonstrated a shared philosophy: progression itself was viewed as something that could, and should, be intentionally designed.

This was evident in different ways across every jurisdiction visited.

In South Australia, flexible industry pathways connected curriculum, technical learning and labour market demand within a coherent regional strategy. In Alberta, locally developed courses, dual credit programmes and flexible timetabling enabled young people to navigate multiple routes through education while accumulating recognised value along the way. Across both countries, employers, post-secondary providers and communities were positioned not as external contributors to education but as integral partners in young people's progression.

Although these systems varied considerably in structure, they consistently organised themselves around a common purpose: enabling every young person to make successful transitions into adulthood.

Importantly, this was not achieved by lowering expectations or creating parallel systems for different groups of learners. Academic achievement remained important. High standards remained non-negotiable. What differed was the recognition that academic success alone does not guarantee successful progression, neither does careers guidance as a separate standalone entity.

Progression was therefore designed as an outcome in its own right.

3.2 From Programmes to Architecture

This realisation also changed the direction of the Fellowship itself.

The original question explored how differentiated models of work experience might improve outcomes for young people facing the greatest barriers to progression. As the Fellowship developed, it became increasingly clear that this question, while important, was too narrow.

Work experience is not the system. And, just as in the UK, work experience is treated differently by institution type and programme purpose. What struck me over and over again is that in some jurisdictions, systems are developed to systematically enable student choice.

Work experience is therefore one minor mechanism, one of many experiences that contribute to successful progression – none of which are measured in England.

Likewise, careers education, technical qualifications, enrichment, mentoring and employer engagement each make valuable contributions, but none is sufficient in isolation. Their impact depends not only on their quality but on how intentionally they are connected together throughout a young person's educational journey.

The challenge, therefore, is not simply to improve individual programmes. It is to design the architecture that connects them.

This represents a shift from asking: How can we improve work experience? to asking: How should an education system be designed so that every young person progresses successfully?

This is the question that sits at the heart of this report.

The international evidence presented in Part One identified five recurring design principles that appeared consistently across the strongest examples of practice. These principles provide the foundations of a progression system rather than a collection of disconnected initiatives.

Taken together, they point towards a broader conclusion.

If successful transitions matter as much as successful learning, then progression deserves to be designed with the same degree of intention as curriculum, pedagogy and assessment.

3.3 From Institutional Success to Learner Success: Introducing The Universal Progression Framework

The remainder of this chapter therefore proposes a conceptual model, the Universal Progression Framework, which brings together the evidence gathered throughout the Fellowship into a coherent architecture for designing progression. It is offered not as a prescriptive blueprint, but as a framework for thinking differently about how education systems prepare every young person for their next step.

Progression is more than movement

Progression is not simply reaching the next destination, nor is it synonymous with attainment. Instead, progression describes the process through which a young person develops the knowledge, experiences, confidence, agency, relationships and recognised achievements that enable increasingly successful transitions throughout education and into adulthood.

Successful progression therefore has three characteristics.

It is:

- developmental
- cumulative
- relational

It happens over time and it builds through experience. It is strengthened through purposeful relationships with employers, educators, families and communities. This takes the concept of progression further than simply passing examinations. For young people to progress through the system to meaningful employment, they must be able to blend an education journey which is made up of a suite of progressive activity. So, what is the central metaphor presented through this report?

It is that progression is the connective tissue between learning and adulthood. Experiences are important, but their organising structure and collective value is more so.

As young people then navigate a progressive learning journey, the systemic dots must be joined. Typically, the education system follows this simple model:

› **Schools measure learning.**

Through curriculum, assessment and qualifications, schools have become increasingly sophisticated at understanding what young people know and can recall. Inspection frameworks, accountability measures and performance tables focus attention on educational standards and academic achievement.

› **Universities, colleges and training providers measure completion.**

Retention, continuation, qualification achievement and progression into higher levels of study provide evidence that learners have successfully completed a chosen pathway. Again, these measures are both appropriate and important.

› **Employers recruit based on capability.**

Rarely do employers recruit solely on the basis of examination grades. They seek individuals who can collaborate, solve problems, adapt to new environments, communicate effectively and continue learning throughout their careers. Increasingly, they recruit for potential as much as prior attainment. They frequently say that they are interested in skills not grades.

Each part of the system therefore measures what it has been designed to value, yet between these stages lies something invisible:

Nobody deliberately measures the journey, but the journey matters.

The transition from one stage of education to the next is not simply an administrative event. It is a developmental process. Young people gradually learn to navigate increasingly complex decisions; they build confidence through experience. They discover interests they did not know they possessed and they develop professional behaviours, social capital and networks. They experience success and failure, and they begin to understand where they belong. These experiences profoundly influence future destinations.

Yet few education systems recognise them as deliberate outcomes of education. Instead, they are often regarded as fortunate by-products of schooling, or as a result of social capital. We have the capability to measure some of this journey through national tools such as Future Skills Questionnaire which measures career readiness, but we don't hold schools to account on any of these factors, therefore they are secondary in value.

This Fellowship has repeatedly challenged the assumption that progression is not accidental. At its most effective, in institutions or cohesively constructed in jurisdictions across Australia and Canada, progression was not left to chance. Curriculum models were intentionally organised to expose young people to different pathways consistently from the age of 15, through the years of higher secondary or what we would determine as further education and up to the age of 20 in some cases. In the best examples deliberate progression and access to pathways was seen from primary upwards and through each stage of education, ensuring no closed doors and no dead ends.

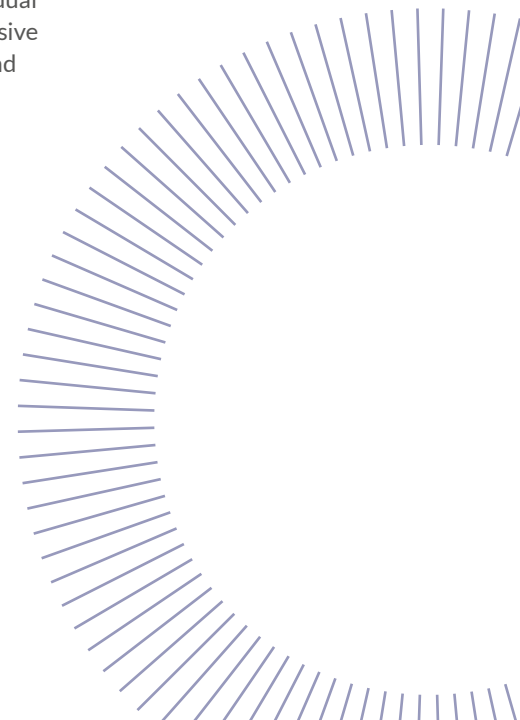
An important feature of this Fellowship was the convergence between field observations and wider international evidence. Although the primary fieldwork was undertaken in Australia and Canada, many of the themes identified including learner agency, integrated guidance, professional trust, curriculum flexibility and shared responsibility for transitions are also reflected in OECD comparative research and in the design of several Nordic education systems. This broader consistency provides greater confidence that the principles identified are not unique to individual jurisdictions but represent wider characteristics of education systems that support successful progression.

Technical education carried recognised academic value, in small bite sized opportunities which could be added alongside larger core learning programmes, as exploration and adding experience and value. And then, in some instances, learners chose to major on vocational and technical pathways but maintained a core spine of essential subject development. Employers became co-educators rather than occasional visitors and flexible timetabling enabled authentic workplace experiences and pathway crediting.

It also seems important to recognise that in Australia in particular (and New Zealand), significant national investment in supporting parents to understand pathways and emerging choices was made. National media campaigns and TV commercials consistently underpinned ministerial messaging.

Community organisations contributed to learner development and post-secondary providers collaborated with schools to deliver credited bridges to pathways as opposed to waiting for learners to arrive. Health and transport were considered as fundamental and early integrated approaches contributed to removing barriers to employability. For instance, in timetabled employability programmes in BUSY schools, learner needs were identified, the journey to employability experience than catered directly to individual needs. For some learners this meant straight to placements and immersive workplace experiences, for others, employability day was used to attend health appointments to unlock the potential for future success.

Each component strengthened another. The systems were not simply delivering experiences. They were intentionally designing progression and leveraging pathways.



Why attainment alone is no longer enough

This Fellowship and its findings are not about criticising GCSEs or A-levels, but it is saying that whilst academic achievement remains vital, alone it is not sufficient. Qualifications remain the gold standard for recognising academic attainment; they were never designed to recognise progression.

They cannot do it in isolation.

For instance, it is easy to find comparative examples, from the same schools where:

Two learners. Same GCSE profile. Very different outcomes.

Why?

Because progression isn't solely determined by grades.

It is influenced by:

- experience
- networks
- confidence
- identity
- opportunity
- place
- timing

That is what I have observed internationally and indeed exists in pockets of outcomes in some institutions in England, where outcomes are intentional, however this is far from coherently embedded across every institution and for every young person.

My observation and concern are that, until we systematise progression as a tightly focused outcome for all young people, subsequent employment outcomes will not change.

But all exist as separate policy domains. Work experience is a classic example of disconnection both in Level 2 and 3 programmes. The curriculum and its measured accountability says "that's interesting, but we don't have the time or space to fulfil something that is important to learners, parents and employers". Therefore, the natural and simplest inclination is to either bolt on, disregard or treat as a compliance exercise.

Internationally, the strongest schools focused less on improving individual components and more on connecting them into coherent learner journeys, as we see in effective provision here in England in UTCs, some alternative provision and some schools, but again not systematically as an inherent strategy.

Successful progression appears to depend on the deliberate connection of five system components:

- curriculum
- recognition
- experience
- relationships
- transition support

When these components operate independently, progression becomes fragmented. When they are intentionally connected, progression becomes a system property rather than the outcome of individual programmes.

The architecture of purposeful progression

All systems need architecture to define the logic model and its intended outcome. So, progression cannot simply be defined through programmes.

Every effective system I visited appeared to answer five common questions.

- Who owns progression?
- What is recognised?
- How is learning applied?
- Where does place influence design?
- How are learners supported when they fall behind or fall out of the system?

These formulate a series of design questions. No one system that I visited had a perfectly formed and finished solution that served every learner, but they did all have choices; institutional choices for families, sophisticated programme choices for learners.

A progression system has to do three things, and these should be recognised as fundamental design functions:

Create opportunity through:	Recognise achievement:	Support successful transitions through:
Flexible curriculum	Beyond examination results alone	Shared place-based responsibility
Applied learning	Through recognised experiences	Targeted support
Employer and partnership engagement	Via a credited progression currency	Focussed on completion and destinations

Towards a Universal Progression Framework

If these characteristics are common across the strongest international systems, the question becomes: How might they be brought together within a coherent framework?

The following chapter proposes one possible answer.

Curriculum tells us what young people should know, and progression determines what they are able to become.

The next phase of education reform is not primarily about changing curriculum or qualifications, neither is it about adding extras in such as work experience. It is about designing progression with the same rigour and intentionality that we have applied to learning.

Learning and qualifications rightly remain fundamental to our education system and continue to underpin much of its accountability. However, the purpose of education extends beyond academic achievement alone. It also carries a responsibility to equip every young person to navigate successful transitions into further learning, employment and adult life.

Once progression is viewed in this way, different questions begin to emerge.

Not	But
How many learners completed work experience?	How has this learner become more ready for their next step?
Which qualification did they achieve?	What evidence do we have that they are better prepared to progress?
Who delivered this programme?"	How does every component of the system contribute to successful progression?

Those are fundamentally different questions, and they lead to fundamentally different system design.

We place enormous value on the point at which a young person leaves education. We devote far less attention to the experiences that enabled them to arrive there. Yet it is those experiences: the accumulation of knowledge, relationships, confidence, identity and opportunity, that shape whether learning can be translated into meaningful progression, and into the workplace with sustainability.

If education systems are designed to enable young people to thrive beyond school, then those experiences should no longer remain invisible. They should be intentionally designed, explicitly recognised and collectively owned.

So as a bridge from what I have observed to a potential solution, let me position this metaphor as a thought point:

The English education system is very good at measuring **stations**.

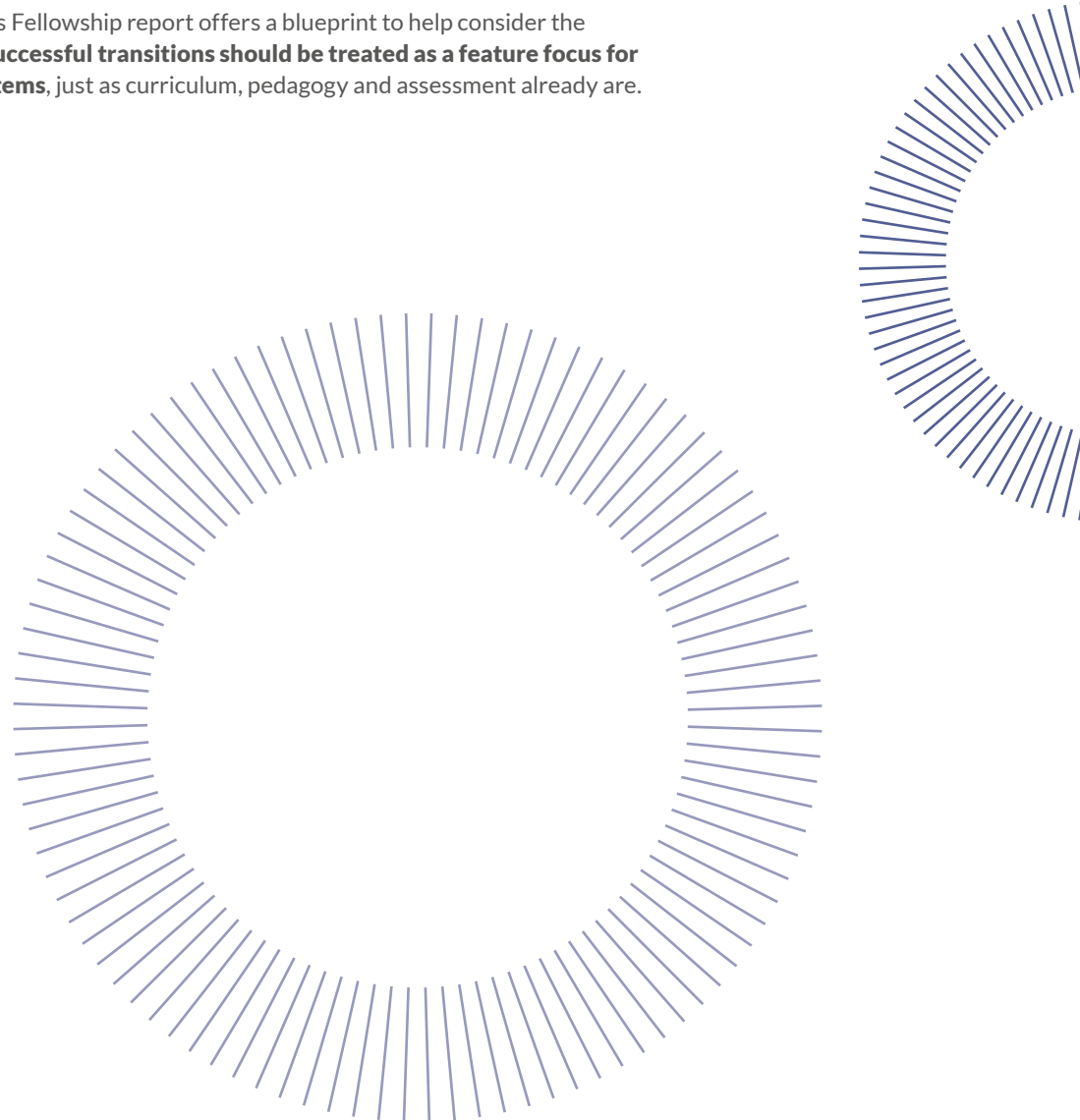
- Primary school
- GCSEs
- A-levels
- University
- Employment

But young people don't live their lives at stations. They experience the **journey between them**.

And that journey is where confidence, aspiration, agency, identity and opportunity are either built or quietly lost.

This Fellowship has convinced me that the next stage of development is to design the journey itself. The evidence presented so far explains **what** stronger systems do. The following chapters explore what these observations might mean for the future design of England's education system.

Part four of this Fellowship report offers a blueprint to help consider the implications. **Successful transitions should be treated as a feature focus for education systems**, just as curriculum, pedagogy and assessment already are.



Part Four

Implications for Work-Connected Learning and Progression in England

4.1 Change to Strengthening England’s Work Experience Infrastructure (short-term action)

Across the systems I visited, I observed that work experience was not treated solely as an activity for individual schools to arrange. It was supported by wider system infrastructure: common procedures, shared documentation, clear expectations for employers, standardised agreements and, in some jurisdictions, central insurance arrangements.

The significance of this was not simply administrative. By reducing duplication and uncertainty, these systems made it easier for schools and employers to participate while creating more space to focus on the quality of the learner’s experience.

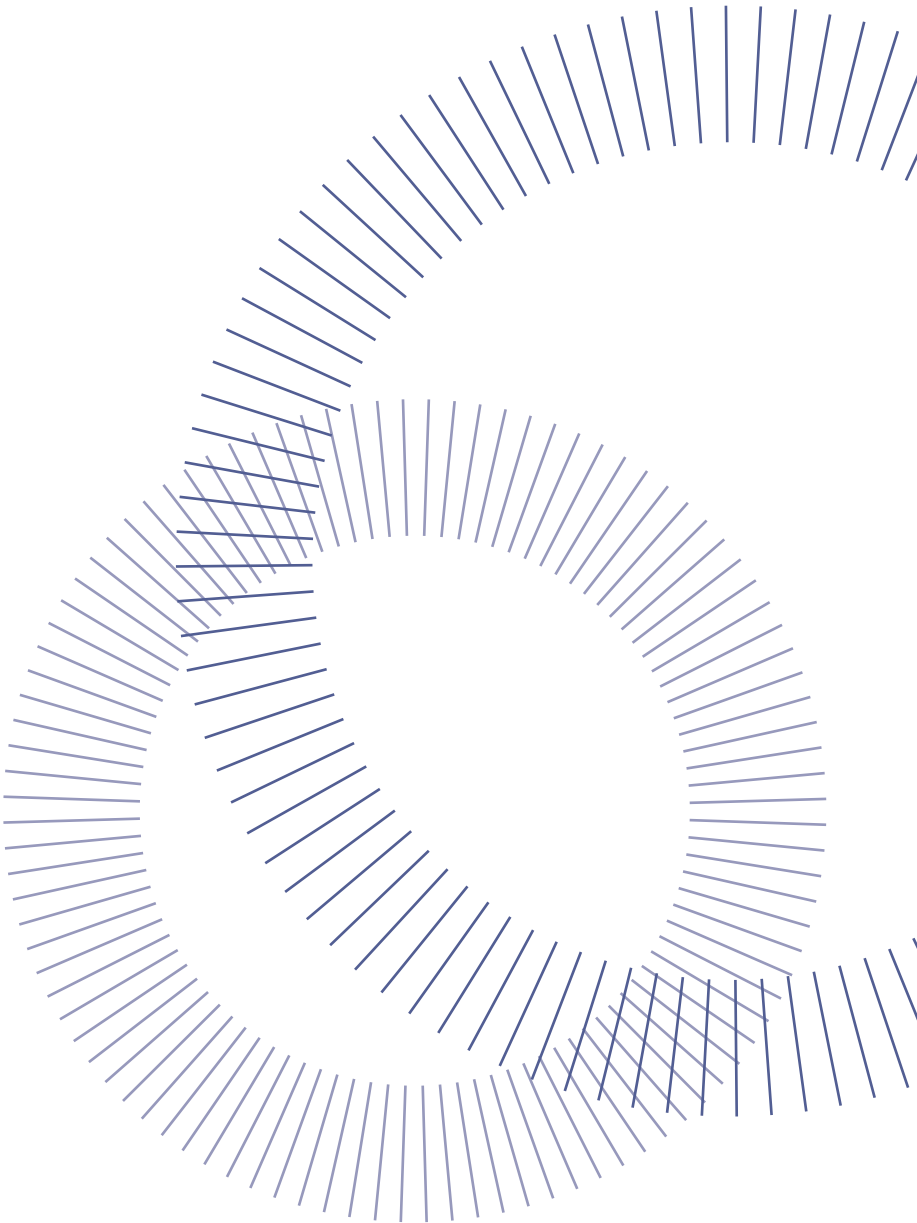
In England, by contrast, schools and employers are often required to navigate different forms, repeated insurance checks and locally determined approval processes. This creates avoidable friction for all stakeholders.

These observations lead me to conclude that England’s next step is not simply to increase work experience opportunities, but to strengthen the enabling infrastructure around work experience that supports them.

This part of the report shapes the following narrative arc to enable concise policy thinking, taking Fellowship learnings on a journey from differentiated work experience to work-connected learning, to effective transitions:

- Stage One** **Enable it: remove friction**
- Stage Two** **Educate through it: deepen learning**
- Stage Three** **Recognise and build from it: purposeful progression**

The recommendations that follow are organised according to the level at which change is required: national infrastructure, regional enabling systems and school practice. Together they form an integrated assurance model that reduces bureaucracy while improving educational quality.



4.1.1. National infrastructure for employers

A. Develop a national work experience assurance framework

Rather than every school interpreting guidance differently:

- one nationally approved employer assurance standard
- one risk assessment methodology
- one safeguarding standard (applied locally via school safeguarding procedures)
- one workplace agreement
- one monitoring template
- one incident reporting framework

Created as an editable suite of tools sitting within national policy framework of DfE and delivered locally.

Careers Hubs could be allocated a place-based funding formula to support the administrative model and remove direct burden from schools and employers.

B. Centrally validated employer work experience credentials

An employer would complete assurance once, not 20 times for 20 schools.

The validation could contain:

- Employer details
- Public Liability Insurance
- Employer Liability Insurance
- DBS requirements (where appropriate)
- Health & Safety declaration
- Named workplace supervisor
- Safeguarding declaration
- Equality and inclusion declaration
- Accessibility information
- Previous placement history

Schools would simply verify that an employer assurance record remains current. This has potential symmetry to how some apprenticeship systems operate.

A national organisation should hold one centralised data system, and white label for use in a place-based perspective. Ideally, effective data sharing agreements would be made to link together a centralised work experience employer data system with the EVOLVE system used for trips and enrichment activities. Schools are all familiar with EVOLVE, it is one standardised system used across every local authority and by every institution.

For efficiency and public value, this system should build on the infrastructure that the Government has invested to create over the last decade.

The centralised system should be expansive and be designed to streamline processes beyond pre-16 work experience.

C. National work experience insurance scheme

Insurance uncertainty is a commonly cited source of employer concern and can reinforce the perception that hosting placements is complex or risky.

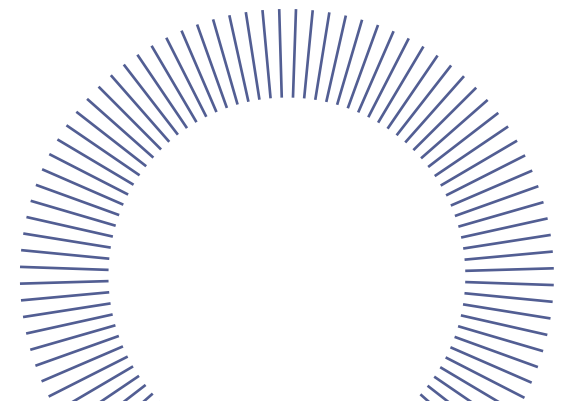
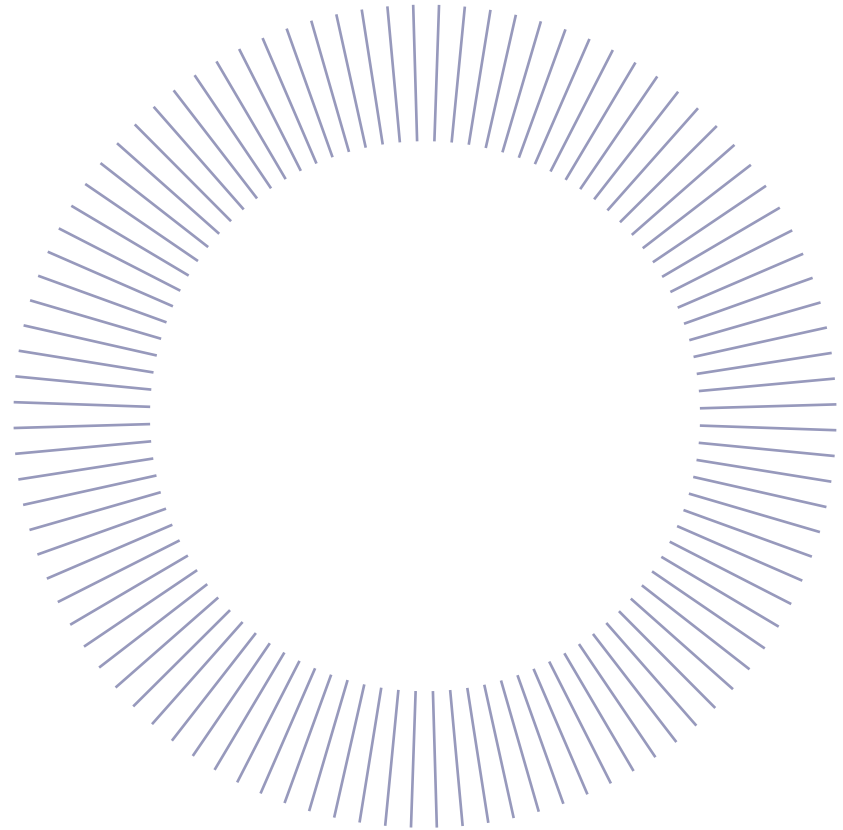
South Australia removes much of this concern because government provides central personal accident and public liability arrangements for students.

England could consider:

- centrally funded student personal accident insurance
- public liability backstop
- clear claims process
- nationally published insurance FAQs

Employers would no longer wonder:

- “Are we insured?”
- The system would ensure they are, and with confidence.



4.1.2 Regional infrastructure connecting employers and education administratively

Careers Hubs could genuinely become an enabling infrastructure.

Rather than schools individually checking employers, regional teams supported by the sophisticated appropriate digital infrastructure could maintain:

- employer validations
- approved employer database
- insurance validation
- risk categorisation
- funded safeguarding checks
- quality reviews

Schools would have confidence in approved employers. This mirrors how Australian jurisdictions support schools. Employers are additionally supported through significant reduction of burden which becomes cumulatively valuable if engaged for multiple years or for multiple programmes.

Regional approval brokerage

When approvals are met, then approved employers become available to every school, so instead of:

- › School A approving Atkins/Lloyds/Tesco
- › School B approving Atkins, etc
- › School C approving Atkins, etc

The Careers Hub administers an “Approve once. Use everywhere methodology”, reducing burden for all schools, colleges and all employers. A genuinely connected place-based system would reduce burden at every stage of education. However, it is key that this is informed by partnerships and existing systems in the marketplace to ascertain the level of new and additional investment required.

From a system simplification perspective, if the Department for Education were to standardise administrative expectations, then the administrative burdens would be diminished. This would drive efficiency, reducing the costs applied to schools who commission work experience checking.

4.1.3 Learner preparation and educational quality

Schools still retain duty of care but spend their time on educational quality rather than paperwork. The purpose of simplifying assurance is not simply to reduce bureaucracy. It is to release schools, employers and Careers Hubs to focus on the educational quality of the experience: how it is prepared for, connected to learning, differentiated around the learner and reflected upon afterwards. This creates the conditions for a wider shift from episodic work experience towards work-connected learning.

The Fellowship observed opportunities to standardise elements of a learners work experience journey, whilst adding value to the overall readiness for employability for all young people participating. The sections below outline opportunities for considering how this may be approached.

Student readiness assessment

Both Canadian territories and South Australia require schools to consider the following before placements begin and in England these features would support schools and employers to co-design well and allocate longer placements appropriately:

Workplace health and safety preparation (mandatory components delivered through e-learning modules)

- Workplace health and safety preparation (mandatory components delivered through e-learning modules for all young people accessing work experience)
- maturity
- learning goals
- functional needs
- reasonable adjustments
- communication arrangements

England should consider introducing a simple national readiness checklist aligned to the equalex framework of learning outcomes to ensure work experience assumes a quality first approach. Student facing readiness assessments should contribute to co-design principles but also be shared with employers at the appropriate point to ensure their preparation to host and support learners.

Mandatory preparation

Every learner should complete nationally produced and standardised online modules before placements. These factors may be introduced as young as KS3 but become essential when extended style placement activities take place into KS4 and beyond.

- workplace expectations
- safeguarding
- health & safety
- professional behaviours
- reporting concerns

These should be graduated in level to accommodate for stage appropriate completion. Mandatory health and safety and readiness modules will also enable young people to demonstrate preparation and will in turn contribute to readiness for employment beyond school.

Pre-workplace experience modules should be aligned to the equalex learning outcomes and formally credited for learner benefit. This practice would also serve as preparedness for wider work readiness, mirroring processes that happen routinely in the workplace as mandatory employee compliance training.

Collective preparation agreement

One national digital agreement template including:

- learning objectives
- agreed activities
- supervision details
- emergency contacts
- adjustments
- signatures

could be developed to ensure schools are able to prepare learners effectively ahead of workplace experiences removing duplication of effort or lack of any preparation as is too often the case. This will raise the overall quality of workplace experiences and enable young people to understand their focus on the equalex learning outcomes and skill development.

As a consequence of undertaking workplace experiences, schools and learners should be equipped to facilitate appropriate reflection. The Department for Education may consider funding a universal digital progression portfolio which:

- 1] Enables reflection and provides learner agency in skill development.**
- 2] Links to a nationally recognised skills taxonomy (e.g. Skills Builder).**
- 3] Facilitates crediting workplace experiences and award of digital badging which is clearly understood by learners, educators and employers.**
- 4] Is place-based but transportable with equity to ensure learners can transport learning and national/global employers recognise one standard.**

The above features become the educational dividend of work experience but further linked into Part 4.2 and 4.3 of this report. The development of a digital learner facing progression portfolio system should now be mapped to accredited qualification frameworks to ensure that all experiences carry value.

Whilst this work may be commissioned by place, this leads to substantial duplication of effort and deployment of funds. Also contributing to lack of consistency for employers and young people. Multiple different approaches make it more complicated for employers to recognise success.

The resulting infrastructure should be designed so that participation, learning and reflection can later be recognised within a wider progression framework. This is explored in Parts 4.2 and 4.3. The Fellowship has consistently observed that when differentiated work experience is credited then it is valued. This is relevant to employers, learners and long-term employability.

We frequently hear young people say they don't have enough experience; we hear employers say that young people don't have experience, it needs to be credited, recognised and understood at every level.

One central lesson from the systems I observed is that in order to generate additional scale and capitalise upon the flexibility of the equalex model which is enticing for employers the next step comes from designing shared infrastructure that makes participation easier. When assurance is standardised nationally and organised through place, schools and employers are released to focus on what matters most: preparing young people, designing high-quality learning and supporting successful transitions.

Removing administrative barriers is necessary, but it is not sufficient. Once participation becomes easier, the next challenge is educational. If work experience is to contribute meaningfully to progression, it must first be understood as learning. The next chapter therefore explores what work experience becomes when viewed through an educational rather than administrative lens.

One central lesson from the systems I observed is that in order to generate additional scale and capitalise upon the flexibility of the equalex model which is enticing for employers the next step comes from designing shared infrastructure that makes participation easier. When assurance is standardised nationally and organised through place, schools and employers are released to focus on what matters most: preparing young people, designing high-quality learning and supporting successful transitions.

4.2 Developing Work-Connected Learning

This chapter of the Fellowship starts to unpick how we really think about work experience from a learning perspective. Considering the purpose and value of work experience at different stages of learning and in different contexts.

Strengthening England's work experience infrastructure creates the conditions for greater participation, but participation alone is not the goal.

Throughout the Fellowship I have chosen to observe systems that had moved beyond asking whether young people had undertaken work experience. Instead, I have focused on three different questions:

- 1| **What is the point of this type of work experience?**
- 2| **What are young people learning through their experiences?**
- 3| **What are the organising systems doing to prepare young people for their next steps and ensure employers have mutual value?**

This represents an important shift in educational thinking.

Work experience becomes one component of a broader work-connected learning ecosystem in which employers, educators and post-secondary institutions all contribute to curriculum, technical education, employability and progression.

Rather than viewing workplaces simply as destinations for short-term placements, they become learning environments in which knowledge, skills, behaviours and aspirations are intentionally developed.

Until the intention is defined and then the workplace experiences are designed to meet that intention, then the effort in organising work experience is disproportionate to the value gained by young people and employers alike. Educators then view it as an inconvenient, box ticking exercise of logistics.

The Department for Education in England has taken steps to introduce flexibility for employers and schools through enabling different types of workplace experiences and by piloting and supporting the introduction of a learning outcomes framework – [equalex](#).

These steps are reflected in Careers Statutory Guidance for schools updated in June 2026, however, an organising structure must go much further than this for it to be purposeful for person, place and enhanced participation.

I have made five clear observations across continents regarding the conditions which aid work experience being as purposeful as possible. These overlay yet interact with the Gatsby Foundation's definition of meaningful identified in [Gatsby Benchmark 6](#).

- 1| Learning purpose is identified
- 2| Learning should be coordinated by place
- 3| Learning extends through progressive experiences
- 4| Learning happens in different places with different “tutors”
- 5| Learning becomes visible

But ultimately, the point is: **work experience is learning**.

The most significant observation from the Fellowship was that the systems achieving the strongest learner outcomes had stopped treating work experience as an event and had instead designed work-connected learning as a continuum running throughout a young person's educational journey.

It should be regarded, planned, sequenced and valued in the same way as any other learning. When we regard work experience as learning then it becomes much bigger than placements.

Taking each of the five key observations in turn:

4.2.1 Learning purpose is identified

Before any work experience is planned, there are three key fundamental points which need to be recognised. Why is the work experience activity taking place for the learner (purpose), then what is the need by place (LMI connection and skills needs) and what is the value to the employer (opportunity).

There are many schools of thought that indicate the development of any skills is a valid reason to undertake some work experience. Indeed, that may be true if the only purpose is to try out what a workplace feels like. If we were to translate this to a meaningful outcome for all learners, then we'd be operating all experiences at an entry level purpose. The education system is not pre-disposed to think in that way. The rest of the system is progressive, learning is sequential, it is designed to inspire and challenge.

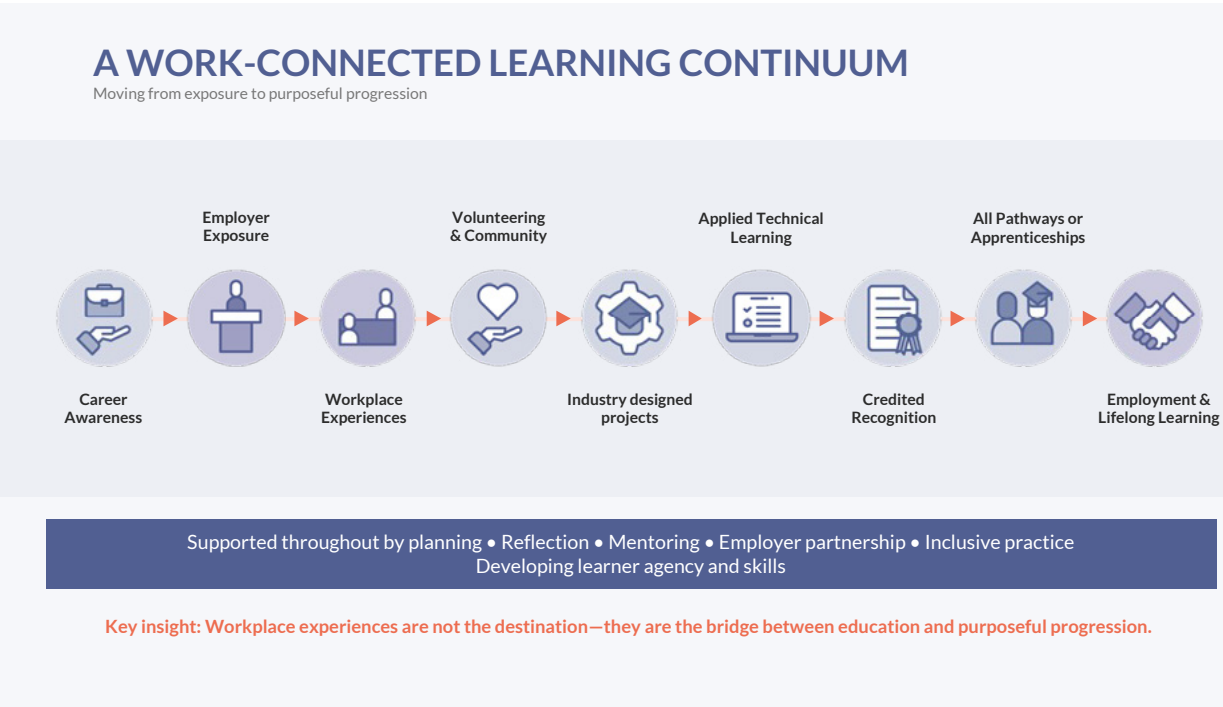
The purpose of work experience is not simply to expose young people to workplaces, nor to provide a short-term insight into a particular occupation.

I have observed that the most effective systems had moved beyond viewing work experience as a discrete event. Instead, they designed work-connected learning as a continuum of experiences that progressively developed career readiness, technical capability and employability over time.

Workplace experiences became one component of a broader educational journey, deliberately connected to curriculum, employer engagement, reflection and recognised achievement. This shift in thinking reframes work experience from an end in itself to a catalyst for successful progression, where every experience contributes to a learner's growing understanding of themselves, the opportunities available to them and the knowledge, skills and behaviours required to succeed.

At its best, work experience is an embedded educational entitlement, designed in, that helps learners connect classroom learning with the realities of work, confidence and agency, apply knowledge in authentic contexts, and make more informed decisions about their future.

Figure 5 – A work-connected learning continuum



4.2.2 Learning should be coordinated by place

Across the Fellowship, I recognised that work experience is most effective when it is coordinated at a place-based level rather than left solely to individual schools or employers. Regional leadership brought together labour market intelligence, economic priorities, education providers and employers to design opportunities that responded both to the aspirations of young people and to the future workforce needs of the region. This was not about directing learners towards predetermined careers but about ensuring that every young person could access meaningful experiences connected to genuine opportunities for progression and employment. A key underpinning factor to this being that at all stages young people had choices, doors to learning stayed open and they retained the opportunity to change their minds.

In South Australia, employer partnerships with Technical Colleges are specifically aligned to priority growth sectors, creating clear pathways from school into apprenticeships, further study and skilled employment. Work experience, industry projects and technical learning are designed together so that young people begin developing sector-specific knowledge, skills and professional behaviours well before they enter the labour market. Similarly, in British Columbia, progressive exploratory programmes enable learners to move from broad career awareness and practical tasters through increasingly specialised technical experiences, culminating in dual credit programmes, apprenticeships and recognised trades qualifications. In both systems, workplace experiences are not isolated activities; they form part of an intentionally designed pipeline into employment.

These observations suggest that effective regional coordination requires more than matching employers to schools. It requires regions to be explicit about the purpose of different workplace experiences and how they contribute to wider economic, educational and social objectives. Some experiences will broaden horizons and challenge assumptions, while others will support informed decision-making, develop technical capability or prepare learners for direct progression into priority sectors. Clarifying this purpose, albeit hugely layered and challenging enables regions to coordinate opportunities more intelligently, ensuring that employer capacity is deployed where it delivers the greatest value for learners, employers and local economies.

A practical mechanism for achieving this is through **intelligent pipeline planning**: a simple planning matrix that aligns **purpose, place** and **intent**. By mapping the educational purpose of workplace experiences against local labour market priorities, industrial strategy and the developmental needs of learners at different stages, regions can build coherent pathways that progress from exploration through to employment. Rather than viewing work experience as a collection of disconnected placements, it becomes part of a coordinated progression infrastructure that strengthens both individual opportunity and regional economic resilience.

By taking this matrix and applying five filters for effective commissioning, wants and needs can be translated into a structured pipeline:

As an overarching principle, before asking who, where or how, systems should ask:

Why are we offering this experience?

Is the purpose to

- inspire?
- explore?
- apply learning?
- recruit?
- re-engage?
- transition?

Figure 6 – Employer engagement mapping matrix

Mapping Matrix

A place-based framework for matching learner readiness, employer capacity and labour market need. It enables schools, colleges, employers and combined authorities to design sequenced, differentiated experiences that build aspiration, readiness, progression and ultimately stronger talent flow into local opportunity.

Learner stage	Aim	Typical learner need	Best-fit employer activity	Progression value
Early awareness	Broaden horizons	Build aspiration, challenge stereotypes	Talks, workplace stories, virtual encounters, career panels	Awareness, motivation, sector visibility
Exploration	Help learners test interests	Compare pathways, understand roles	Workplace visits, employee Q&A, job shadow tasters	Informed choices, option confidence
Applied exposure	Connect learning to work	Build relevance and self-belief	Employer-set projects, challenge days, team problem solving	Skills articulation, engagement with curriculum
Technical / vocational immersion	Deepen occupational understanding	Experience real tasks and standards	Extended placements, simulations, workshops, tasters in specialist settings	Readiness, competence, occupational fit
Transition decision	Support concrete next step	Make decisions on FE/HE/ apprenticeships/ work	Interviews, mentoring, application support, mock assessment, pre-apprenticeship tasters	Confirmed destinations, reduced drop-off
Progression and sustainment	Keep young people attached to pathway	Reduce fallout after transition	Supported internships, apprenticeships, traineeships, in-work mentoring	Retention, completion, progression

FIVE FILTERS: (i) Learner readiness (ii) Inclusion and support need (iii) Employer capability (iv) Labour market relevance (v) Progression Currency

IMPACT: transactional employer engagement to transformational

The five identified filters listed out below become five commissioning questions which ensure employer activity is not requested without good quality purpose. In turn this means combined and local authorities can make judgements about how they develop and stimulate appropriate pipelines to serve multiple complex system needs. The missing link is effective codification.

a) Learner readiness

Is this experience appropriate for where the learner currently is?

Not every learner should undertake the same experience at the same time.

b) Inclusion and support need

Which learners will benefit most and what additional support is required?

Place uses intelligence to reduce inequality rather than simply distribute opportunities equally.

c) Employer capability

Is this employer best placed to deliver this type of learning?

- › Some employers inspire
- › Some develop skills
- › Some recruit
- › Some mentor

Not every employer should offer everything.

d) Labour market relevance

Does this contribute to local and national workforce priorities?

This is where Industrial Strategy and Local Skills Improvement Plans become operational.

e) Progression currency

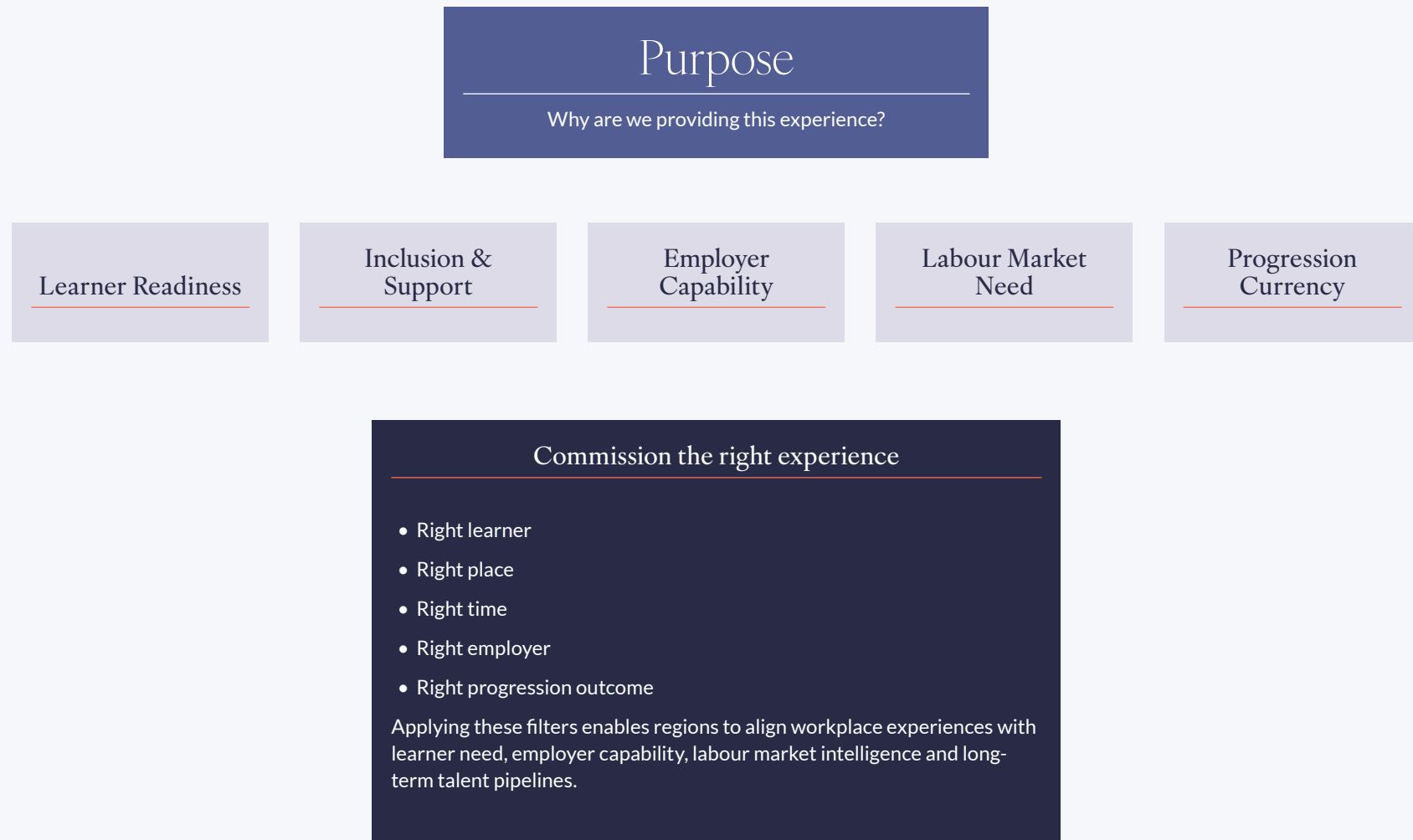
What recognised value does the learner leave with?

- › Reflection?
- › A micro-credential?
- › A technical certificate?
- › A guaranteed interview?
- › An accredited qualification?
- › Apprenticeship entry?

Every experience leaves the learner closer to progression.

Using this type of approach switches the thinking from how many placements did we deliver, to **did we intelligently commission experiences that improve progression and serve employability priorities and outcomes.**

Figure 6 – A place-responsive work experience commissioning model



4.2.3 Learning extends through progressive experiences

One of the clearest observations from the Fellowship was that the most inspiring examples no longer viewed workplace experiences as singular events delivered by individual employers. Instead, learning was intentionally designed as a sequence of progressively richer experiences that enabled young people to build knowledge, confidence, technical capability and professional identity over time. Each encounter with employers, workplaces or industry added something different, broadening horizons, testing interests, developing practical skills or preparing learners for increasingly authentic participation in the world of work.

This was particularly evident in British Columbia, where learners begin with broad exploration as early as primary through career awareness, workplace visits and introductory technical programmes before progressing into specialist trades exploration, dual credit opportunities and apprenticeships. The emphasis is not on asking learners to make early career decisions, but on gradually increasing the depth and authenticity of their engagement as their interests and confidence develop. Similarly, South Australia's Flexible Industry Pathways and Technical Colleges combine curriculum, industry projects, workplace learning and technical education to create coherent journeys rather than disconnected interventions.

As seen in piloting of flexible work experience programmes in England, perhaps the most significant reminder is that no single employer, placement or activity should be expected to achieve every educational outcome. Different experiences serve different purposes. Some inspire aspiration, others develop technical competence, strengthen employability or enable informed progression decisions. Recognising this enables schools, colleges and regional partnerships to curate a portfolio of complementary experiences, ensuring that learning accumulates rather than repeats. The educational value therefore lies not in the quality of any one experience alone, but in how experiences connect together to support progression for all young people.

Educational excellence and quality are determined not by the setting in which learning takes place, but by the clarity of its purpose, the quality of its design and the expertise brought to its delivery.

This reinforces the need to move beyond measuring participation in individual activities towards understanding the cumulative learning that young people gain through sustained engagement with employers and the wider world of work. The question therefore extends beyond whether a learner has completed work experience, to whether their journey has progressively expanded their capability, confidence and readiness for their next stage of education, training or employment. Building then from singular episodes to a work-connected learning continuum which is applicable to every stage of learning and every programme of study in different doses depending on the level and mode of course.

4.2.4 Learning happens in different places with different “tutors”

Throughout the Fellowship, I observed that the most effective systems had moved beyond traditional assumptions about where learning should happen and who should deliver it. Instead, they began by defining the intended learning outcomes and then selected the environment and expertise best suited to achieving them. This represents a significant shift in thinking.

This approach expands the role of employers beyond hosts of work experience to become active partners in education. Across Australia and Canada, employers were routinely observed acting as tutors, mentors, coaches and technical specialists, introducing learners to authentic workplace practice, emerging technologies and occupational standards that could not easily be replicated within schools. Their contribution was educational rather than transactional, supporting learners to develop technical understanding, professional behaviours and confidence through real-world application.

Equally, high-quality work-connected learning was not confined to workplaces. Schools and colleges increasingly brought industry into the classroom by engaging employers, technicians, apprentices and sector specialists to deliver authentic learning experiences within educational settings. This enabled exploratory learning about careers, industries and pathways to begin much earlier, ensuring that young people developed informed aspirations before

progressing to more immersive workplace experiences. The location of learning therefore became secondary to its authenticity and educational intent.

Perhaps the most important implication for England is that work-connected learning should be understood as a distributed educational model rather than a single activity. Learning can occur in schools, colleges, workplaces, community settings and specialist training environments, delivered by teachers, employers, apprentices, technicians and industry experts working together. What matters is not where learning happens or who delivers it, but whether each experience is intentionally designed to contribute towards clearly defined progression outcomes.

The above point encapsulates much of what I observed in:

- Fusion Collegiate's industry specialists, particularly delivering flight technician capabilities from specialist classrooms
- South Australia's Flexible Industry Pathways blending classrooms and workplaces to design cohesive multi-faceted programmes of study
- Technical College employer delivery in the workplace
- British Columbia's trades instructors delivering both in school workshops and workplaces
- BUSY Schools delivering the entire school model through an employability ethos
- Employer mentors built into school structures to intentionally blend workplace concepts into preparation for work.

This is also significant because it challenges the implicit assumptions which still exist in England (despite introduction of new policy) that workplace learning is only valid when it occurs during a traditional placement. This Fellowship argues instead that authentic work-connected learning can take place wherever the right expertise meets a clearly defined educational purpose.

4.2.5 Learning becomes visible

The final observation from the Fellowship was that learning has greatest value when it becomes visible. Across Australia and Canada, and indeed in the Transition Year in Ireland, workplace experiences were rarely viewed as valuable solely because they had taken place. Instead, systems increasingly sought to recognise, accredit and celebrate what learners had achieved through those experiences. Whether through certified industry credentials, accredited units of learning, dual credit programmes, apprenticeship credits or recognised technical qualifications, learning gained tangible value that could be understood by learners, educators and employers alike.

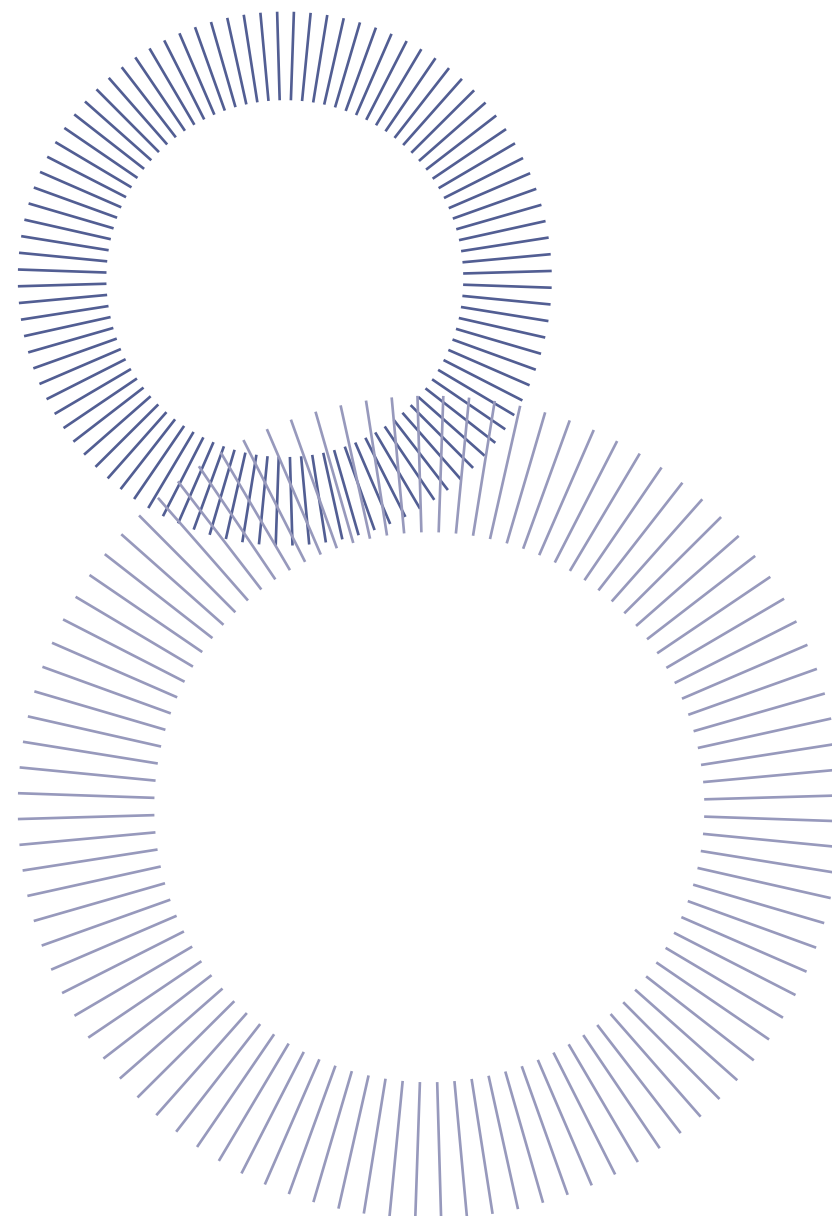
This recognition serves two important purposes. For young people, it provides visible milestones that celebrate progress, builds confidence and demonstrates capability beyond traditional academic attainment. Learners can evidence what they know, what they can do and the experiences they have successfully completed, creating a richer and more complete picture of their readiness for future learning and employment. Equally, employers consistently value recognised evidence of experience and capability when making recruitment decisions. Experiences that carry credible recognition therefore strengthen employability by providing trusted signals of achievement that extend beyond a curriculum vitae or personal statement.

Perhaps most importantly, the systems observed during the Fellowship demonstrated that this recognition can evolve over time. Experiences that begin as exploratory activities can progressively accumulate recognised value through micro-credentials, digital badging, accredited learning, sector certifications, technical qualifications and apprenticeship credits. Rather than viewing workplace experiences as isolated interventions, they become part of a coherent progression system in which every meaningful experience contributes towards a recognised body of achievement. This creates what might be described as **transitions currency**: a shared language through which learners, educators and employers can recognise capability, reward participation and support progression.

The implication is significant. As work-connected learning becomes more diverse, there is an increasing need for a common framework that recognises achievement wherever learning takes place. A national approach to recognising workplace learning would not only raise the status of these

experiences but also strengthen parity between academic, technical and experiential learning. By giving visible value to all forms of purposeful participation, England has the opportunity to create a progression system in which every learner can build recognised evidence of readiness for their next destination.

If work-connected learning is to become a fundamental component of England's education system, then the learning it generates must be recognised with the same intentionality with which it is designed. This requires a coherent progression architecture capable of recognising learning wherever it occurs. Part 4.3 therefore explores what such a framework could look like.



4.3 Implications for Purposeful Progression in England

The preceding chapters describe what was observed internationally. This chapter draws those observations together into a proposed progression architecture for England.

Throughout this Fellowship I set out to explore a deceptively simple question: **how might we approach differentiated approaches to work experience?**

In Part Three this report established that successful progression should be treated as a deliberate design challenge, so the question becomes:

What would a progression architecture for England actually look like? A Universal Progression Framework is offered as one possible response.

As opposed to viewing work experience, technical education, careers guidance, employer engagement and transition support as separate initiatives, the visits and subsequent case studies brought them together within coherent progression systems that recognised multiple forms of achievement, responded to local opportunity and shared responsibility for successful learner transitions.

This does not mean that existing structures should be replicated. England has significant strengths, including an excellent academic curriculum, an established careers infrastructure and growing collaboration between education and employers. The Fellowship suggests that these strengths could be brought together more coherently through a single organising framework for progression.

However, it simultaneously also seems that in England there are too many challenges in the education system which enable young people to fail:

- The bell curve of achievement that meaning only a certain number of learners can be “above average” by statistical default
- A binary choice at 16 as to whether to follow academic or vocational/technical pathways
- Choices determined and limited by geography not opportunity
- Apprenticeship non-completions with no tangible safety net
- School accountability measured on knowledge-based success as a singular measure as opposed to completion and shared responsibility for progression and successful destinations
- Lack of place-based coordination to ensure learners have access to an adequate range of pathways at an adequate level for their personal journey.

This report therefore proposes a blueprint for A **Universal Progression Framework for England**.

The Universal Progression Framework is built around three interconnected layers.

- › **Philosophy** -> Why progression matters.
- › **Architecture** -> The connected components, organised as five pillars
- › **Delivery** -> How this may be approached in practice

How England could implement them

The Framework is not a new qualification, programme or institution. Instead, it provides a determined way of designing progression so that academic achievement, technical learning, a work-connected curriculum and personal development are recognised as complementary components of successful transitions into further learning, employment and adult life.

The Framework is underpinned by the five design principles presented earlier in the report. Collectively these principles suggest strategic implications for the future development of England's education and skills system. Together they provide a coherent blueprint for strategically designing purposeful progression.

The five design principles are:

- People before institutions
- Progression is designed
- Experience carry recognised value
- Partnership creates infrastructure and opportunity
- Purpose is shaped by place and people

The diagram on the next page presents a high-level illustration of a connected progression system, underpinned by effective transitions for all young people.

Equality gives every learner the same transition. Equity ensures every learner has the support they need to achieve one.

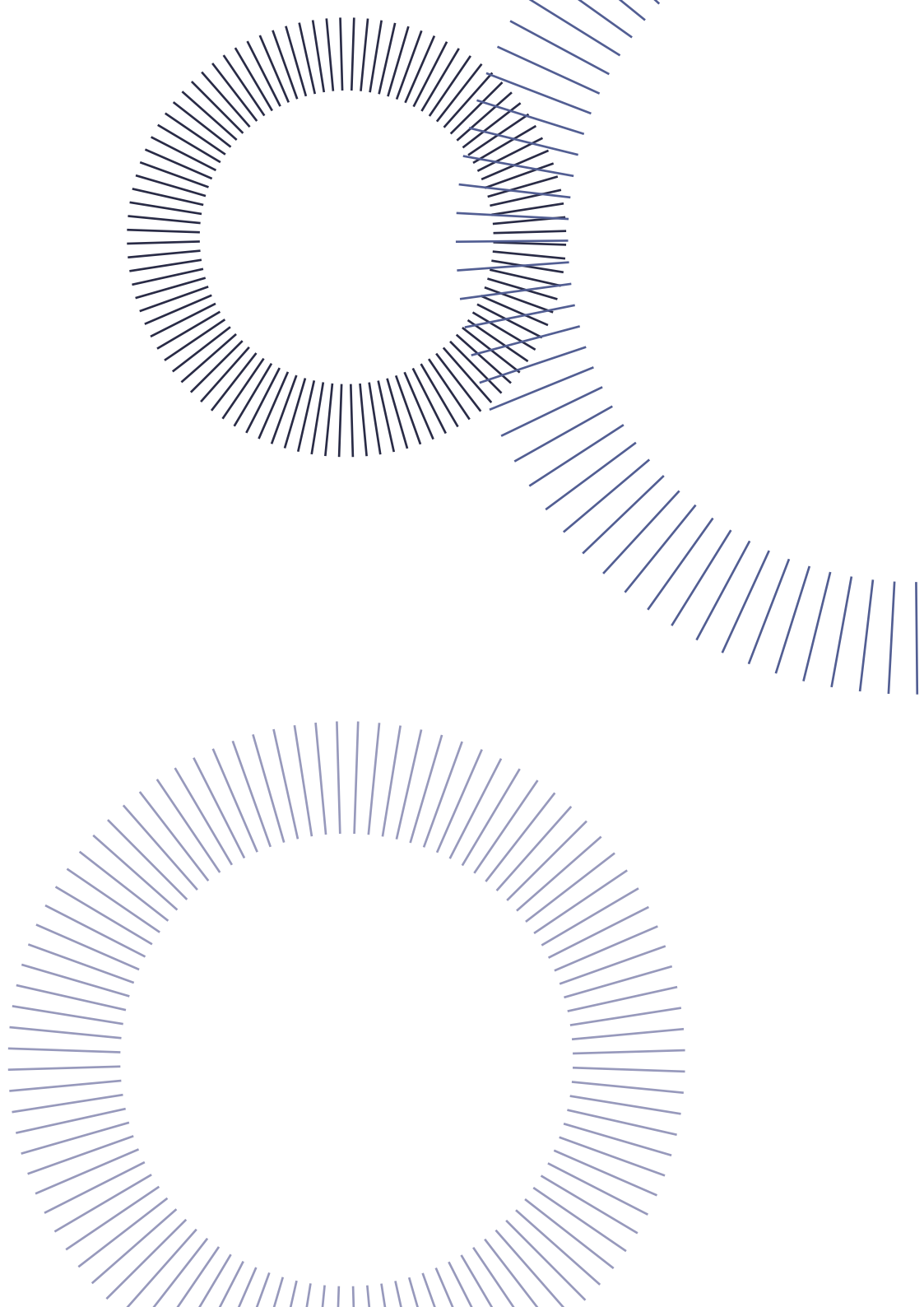
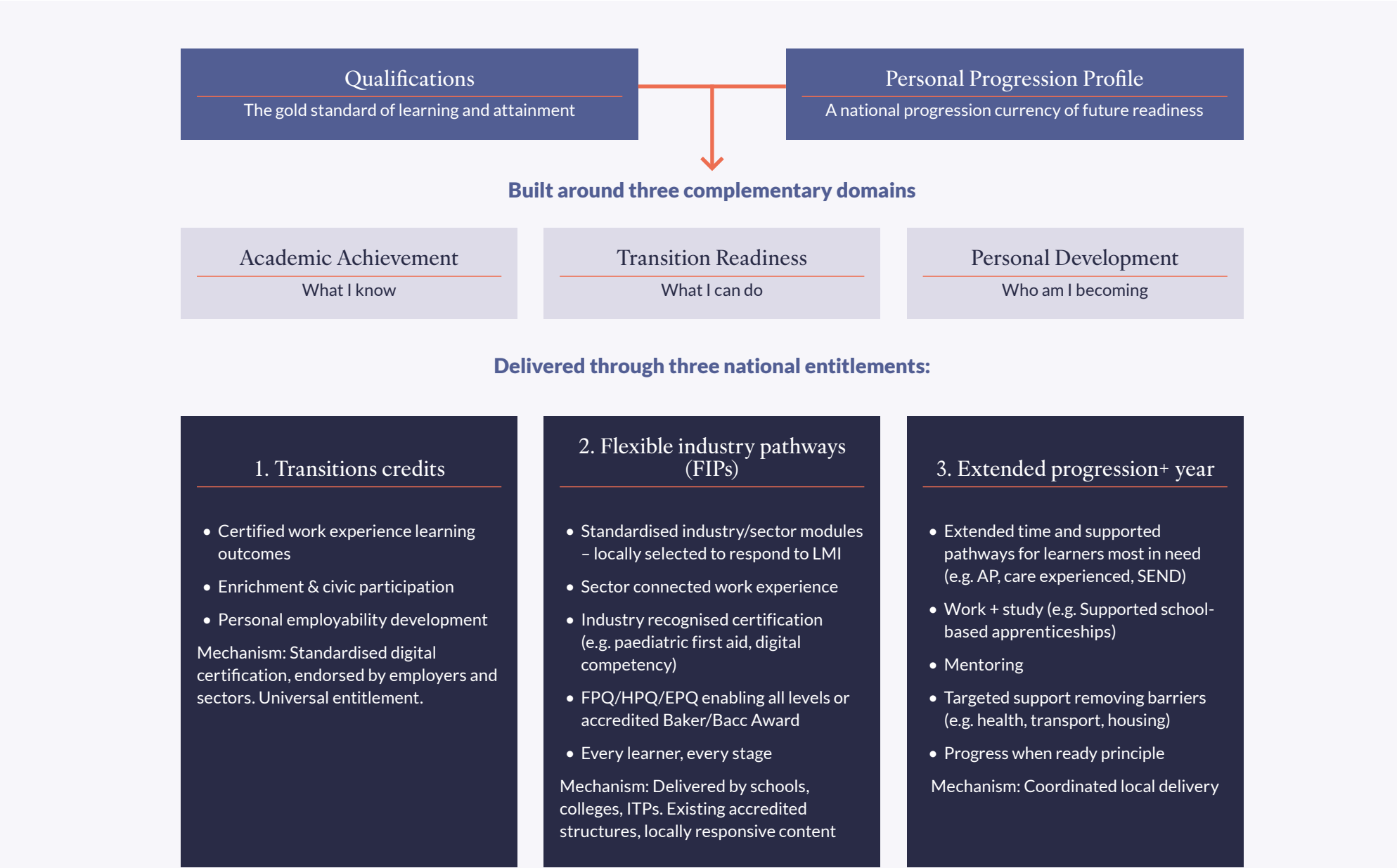


Figure 7: A Universal Progression Framework



4.3.1 Build a national progression currency

The Fellowship consistently demonstrated that high-performing progression systems recognise more than examination outcomes alone. Meaningful workplace experiences, technical learning, accredited projects, enrichment and personal development (including the integrated removal of barriers related to health, transport and housing which all have a part to play in a rounded view of for employment) all contribute towards successful transitions because they are recognised, valued and understood by education providers and employers alike.

England has developed sophisticated approaches to recognising academic achievement. England does not need to lower expectations in order to broaden opportunity. Instead, there is an opportunity to redefine excellence by recognising a wider range of achievements that prepare young people for successful progression. Academic attainment remains fundamental, but it should sit alongside recognised progression currency that values technical capability, work-connected learning, personal development and readiness for employment.

A National Progression Currency would enable young people to build recognised evidence of readiness throughout their educational journey. This could include Transition Credits, accredited technical and employability experiences, a learner progression record and stackable credentials that collectively recognise progression excellence alongside academic attainment.

The implication is not to reduce the importance of qualifications, or their rigour and quality but to broaden what excellence means and ensure that the experiences which prepare young people for successful transitions are consistently recognised and collectively valued by all stakeholders; Government (national and local), educators, employers, parents and young people themselves.

4.3.2 Enable flexible, place-based pathways²

Across the Fellowship, the most innovative systems began by helping young people understand themselves before expecting them to make significant educational choices. Through enabling continuous and progressive approaches to pathway progression offering access to technical education. This should be available for all learners within a mainstream pre-16 curriculum and up to the age of 19 (25 for young people with SEND) to enable enhanced exploration and learner agency in pathway choice.

Successful progression systems create structured curiosity. They provide time, space and opportunity for young people to explore themselves, their community and future pathways before asking them to make high-stakes educational choices. However, at their most effective, Flexible Industry Pathways (FIPs) were explicitly constructed to respond to LMI, local sector skills and tangible employment outcomes.

Whether through the standardised early pathway exploration seen in Tasmania's Beacon Foundation or New South Wales career learning modules or through to more sophisticated Flexible Industry Pathways in South Australia and partnership lead collegiate models in Alberta, learners were given structured, and formally credited opportunities to explore, experience and understand future possibilities.

Pathway integration is a key component of a successful progression framework at 14, 16 and then 16-19 education depending on the selected programme of study or pathway at each point. It is important to track backwards through the key NEET data points, from the fastest rising cohort at 21, through undergraduate study and into academic A-level programme study to recognise that technical pathway exposure and work connected learning are vital at every stage of education.

Rather than differentiating support only after young people disengage, greater flexibility should be introduced earlier within the learner journey.

Flexible, place-based pathways would enable curriculum innovation whilst maintaining national standards. Localised curriculum design, Flexible Industry Pathways, collegiate partnerships and work-connected curriculum models could provide young people with meaningful opportunities to explore sectors, develop aspirations and make informed progression decisions linked to local opportunity and national economic priorities.

² (By the time of publication this recommendation has already been outlined as education reform by the Prime Minister, Andy Burnham)

4.3.3 Design differentiated transitions

Whilst every young person should benefit from a universal progression entitlement, the Fellowship also demonstrated that equity requires different levels of transition support.

Successful systems recognised that learners become ready for employment and further learning at different times and for different reasons. Rather than expecting every young person to transition at the same pace, support was graduated according to readiness.

England already has emerging evidence through The Careers & Enterprise Company’s [Effective Transitions Fund](#), demonstrating how locally tailored approaches can improve outcomes for young people facing the greatest barriers to progression, including care experienced young people, learners with SEND and those attending alternative provision.

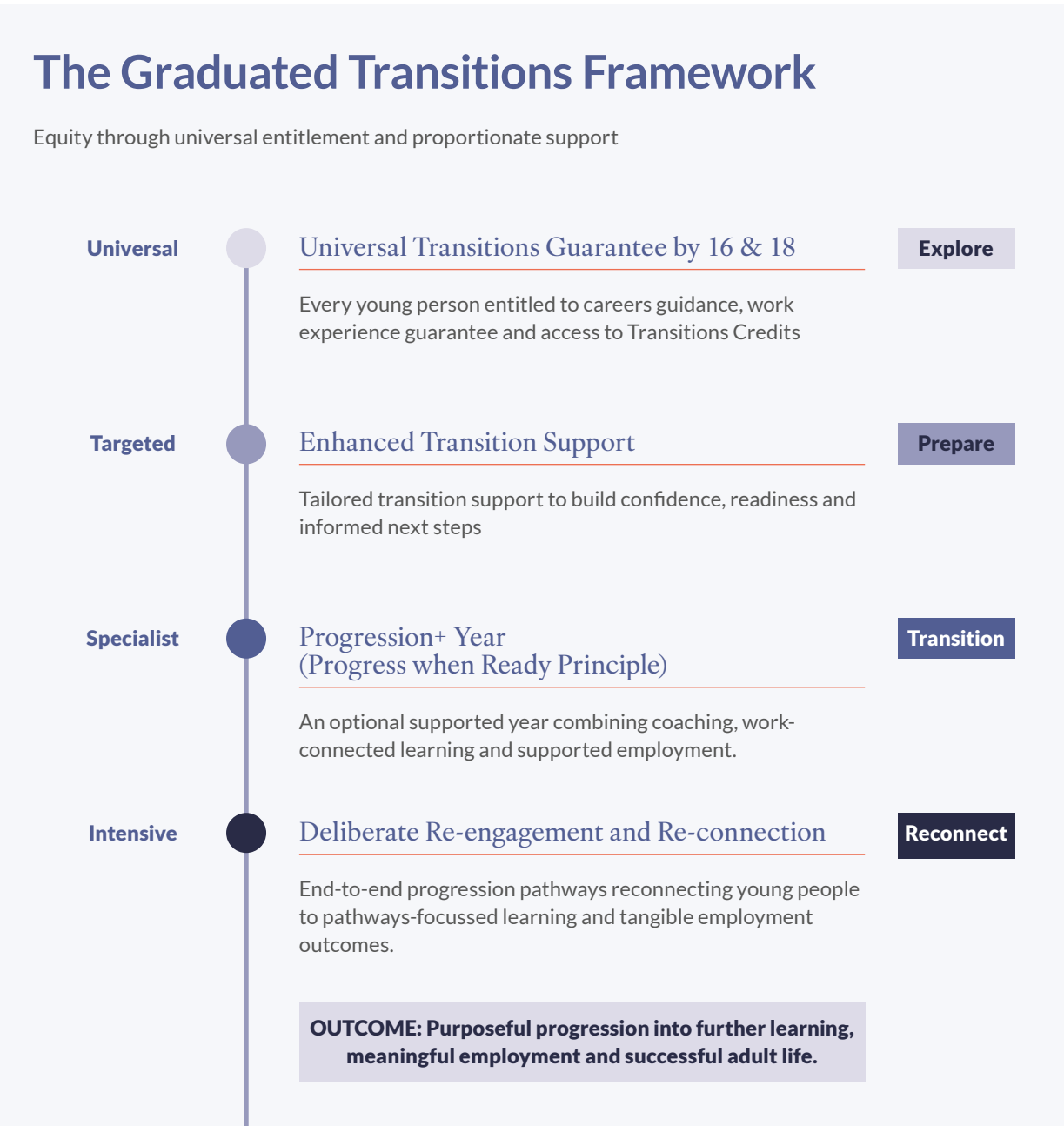
Building on this evidence, England should consider a graduated transition framework.

Universal entitlement should be complemented by enhanced transition support for those requiring additional guidance, an optional Transition+ Year for identified learners who would benefit from extended preparation through coaching, work-connected learning and supported school-based apprenticeships, and deliberate re-engagement programmes for young people who become disconnected from education or employment.

The objective is not simply to reduce NEET figures but to create progression pathways that enable every young person to achieve a purposeful transition with parity of opportunity and excellence as a design principle.

A current progression journey for young people in England includes too many cliff-edges, too many opportunities to fall between support systems and not enough opportunities to re-connect in a structured and safe way through pathways that provide end-to-end support from pathway to employment.

Figure 8 – The graduated transitions framework



4.3.4 Build workforce capacity for progression

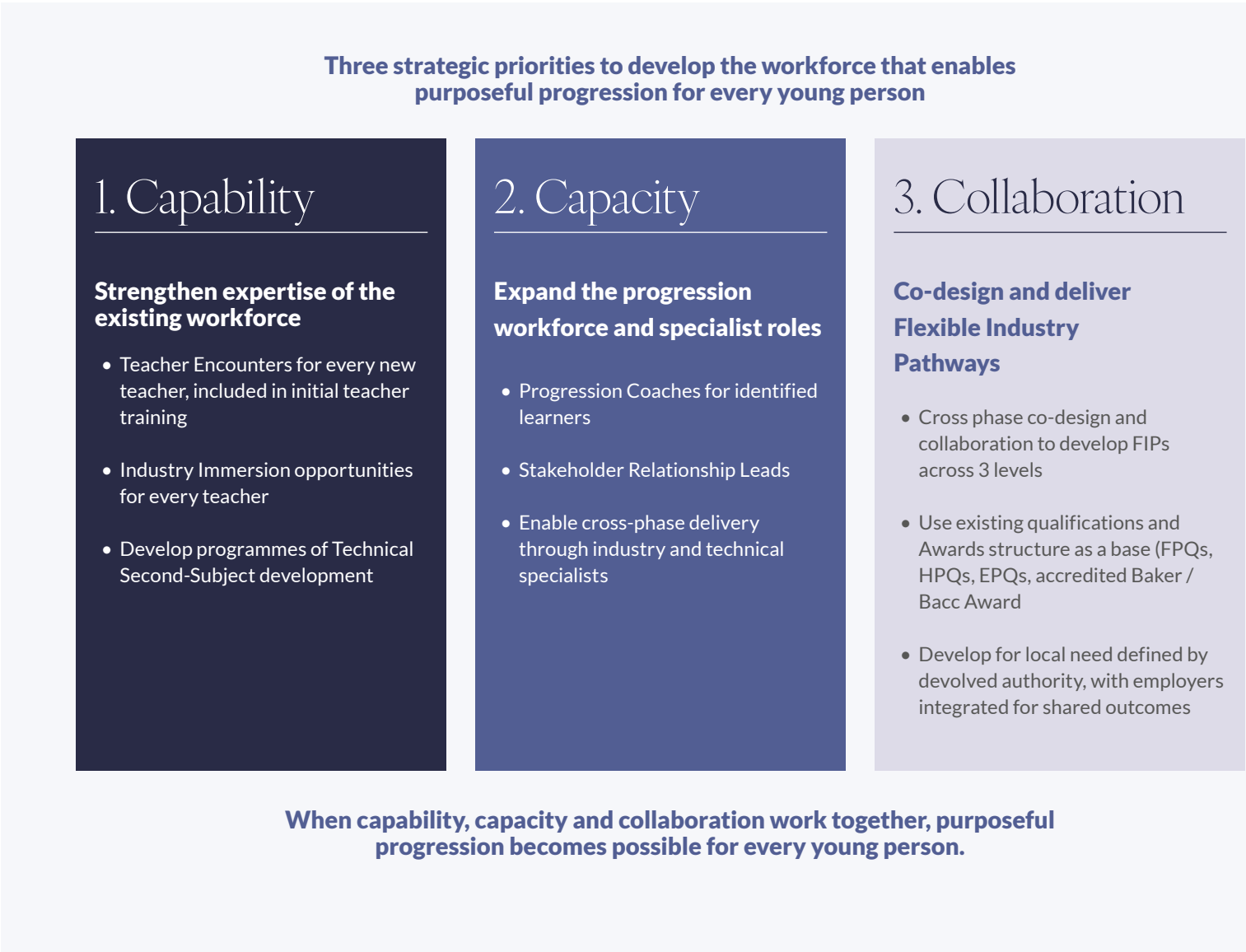
One of the clearest lessons emerging from this Fellowship is that successful progression systems do not simply invest in programmes; they invest in professional capability.

Across Australia and Canada, progression was recognised as a professional discipline requiring specialist knowledge, dedicated capacity and strong partnership working. Rather than expecting teachers to deliver every component of progression, systems built a broader workforce capable of connecting education, employers and learners around shared progression outcomes.

The ambition to strengthen work-connected learning, technical education and successful transitions cannot be achieved simply by placing additional expectations on teachers and school leaders. Existing workforce models were largely designed around curriculum delivery and pastoral care. As expectations around employability, employer partnership and progression have expanded, workforce capacity has not always evolved at the same pace.

The Universal Progression Framework therefore points towards a broader conception of the progression workforce, built around three strategic priorities: Capability, Capacity and Collaboration.

Figure 9 – Building a workforce for pathways and progression



Capability

Every teacher shapes how young people understand the purpose and relevance of their learning. Yet many enter the profession with limited exposure to contemporary workplaces, technical pathways or the wider education and skills system.

England has already established the foundations of this approach through Edge Foundation's Teacher Externships, which subsequently evolved into The Careers & Enterprise Company's national Teacher Encounters programme. There is now an opportunity to move beyond standalone encounters towards a more systematic model of industry immersion embedded within Initial Teacher Training, leadership development and ongoing professional learning.

England should therefore strengthen the progression capability of the existing workforce. Structured Teacher Encounters with employers should become an expected component of Initial Teacher Training or Early Career Teacher phase, supported by ongoing industry immersion and professional development throughout a teacher's career.

Alongside this, England could explore technical second-subject pathways, enabling trainee and serving teachers to develop expertise in applied and technical learning that complements their primary subject specialism. This would strengthen curriculum flexibility whilst expanding access to technical education without requiring every school to develop specialist provision independently.

The objective is not to turn teachers into careers advisers; it is to develop a workforce that can support pathway delivery and progression to ensure it becomes an integral part of excellent teaching.

Capacity

Successful progression systems recognise that teachers should not be expected to provide every aspect of progression alone.

Across Australia and Canada, specialist roles such as pathway advisers, employer engagement specialists, transition coaches and industry experts complemented the work of teachers by bringing dedicated expertise and sustained partnership capacity into schools and colleges.

England should therefore consider developing a broader progression workforce that includes employment readiness coaches, progression coaches and employer partnership specialists. These roles would provide the relational capacity needed to support learners whose pathways require greater coordination, while strengthening relationships between education providers, employers and post-secondary institutions.

Building workforce capacity is not simply about creating new roles. It is about recognising progression as a specialist discipline that requires dedicated expertise if every young person is to experience high-quality transitions. This does not negate the specialist roles of trained careers advisers and careers leaders – schools need a distributed leadership approach to progression and specialist transitions teams to enhance support where it is most needed.

Collaboration

Perhaps the greatest difference observed throughout the Fellowship was not structural but relational.

The strongest systems did not expect schools to become experts in every pathway or employment sector. Instead, they built collaborative progression ecosystems in which schools, colleges, universities, independent training providers, Institutes of Technology, employers and community organisations each contributed their expertise towards a shared progression ambition. Local services were part of integrated partnerships.

This requires a shift from schools delivering progression in isolation to schools coordinating progression through partnership. Leaders should be supported to convene expertise beyond their own institution, creating locally responsive progression systems that reflect economic opportunity whilst maintaining national expectations.

This also requires progression leadership to become a recognised professional capability. School and college leaders, Strategic Authorities, Careers Hubs, employers and post-secondary providers should be supported to lead collaborative progression systems built around shared learner outcomes rather than institutional success alone.

Building a Universal Progression Framework is not simply a question of creating new policy. It requires sustained investment in the professional capability, workforce capacity and collaborative leadership needed to deliver it.

Teachers remain central to that ambition, but they should be supported by a wider progression workforce that brings together education, employers and communities around shared progression outcomes. England should therefore view workforce development not as a supporting action, but as essential progression infrastructure.

4.3.5 Build progression through partnership

Perhaps the strongest message that emerged from the Fellowship visits is that progression should become a shared responsibility.

Across Australia and Canada, schools, colleges, universities, employers, civic leaders and local partners worked collectively to improve progression outcomes. Employer engagement was not an additional activity but an integral part of regional infrastructures.

As with England, multiple models were seen and some more impactful than others. The key features for me were **choice and access** for all learners to pathways. Not constrained by which school has the available technical facilities.

This suggests strengthening place-based progression infrastructure through deeper collaboration between education providers, employers, employers, Strategic and either national or regionalised skills structures. Shared accountability, local governance and long-term partnerships should become defining characteristics of a progression system that is responsive to place whilst maintaining national ambition.

4.3.6 From framework to implementation

The Universal Progression Framework is intended as a strategic framework rather than a prescriptive implementation plan. It provides a coherent way of organising future policy development around a shared ambition: enabling every young person to experience a purposeful transition.

The accompanying considerations set out within this report identify potential areas for future development at national, place and provider level, including redefining educational excellence, measuring what matters, supporting localised curriculum design, investing in workforce capability, creating opportunities to innovate and test new approaches, and embedding deliberate re-engagement within progression systems.

Taken together, the Framework represents an invitation to think differently about progression. England has already built many of the individual components. The challenge now is not simply to improve each part in isolation, but to connect them within a coherent progression system that is intentionally designed around the needs, aspirations and futures of every young person.

What success looks like

Success would not be measured simply by improved destination statistics or reduced numbers of young people becoming NEET, very important though those outcomes are. It would be reflected in a system where every young person experiences purposeful exploration before making significant educational choices; where progression is recognised alongside attainment; where employers become active partners in education; where transition support is matched to individual readiness; and where movement between education and employment is enabled through connected pathways rather than disconnected programmes.

Ultimately, the ambition of a Universal Progression Framework is not to create another initiative. It is to redefine what it means to prepare every young person for adult life, ensuring that progression is designed with parity, purpose and possibility at its heart.

Part Five

A Blueprint for Purposeful Progression in England

A Blueprint for Purposeful Progression in England

The Fellowship began by asking how differentiated approaches to work experience might better support young people. Across Australia, Canada and Ireland, that question evolved into a broader consideration of how education systems design transitions support and progression. The recommendations that follow therefore move from enabling participation, through improving learning, to recognising progression. Together they provide a coherent framework for strengthening transitions into further learning, employment and adult life. The recommendations include opportunities for short, medium and longer term development actions.

Recommendation One: Build a national digital infrastructure for work-connected learning

England should establish a coherent national infrastructure that removes unnecessary barriers to employer participation while improving the educational quality of workplace experiences.

Priority actions

1| National Assurance Framework

Standardise nationally through the principle of “approve once, use everywhere”: One employer approval process, one safeguarding framework, one centralised insurance approach, one digital employer record.

2| Place-based delivery

Careers Hubs become the regional infrastructure for employer assurance and quality to enable work experience to scale effectively.

3| Learner readiness and quality

Develop a national learner progression portfolio which enables national online preparation modules and reflection of equalex work experience learning outcomes.

Recommendation Two: Transform work experience into work-connected learning

England should move beyond viewing work experience as a placement(s) and instead develop a coherent work-connected learning continuum that progressively develops learner skills, technical capability and readiness for employability.

Priority actions

1| Delivering learning with purpose

Every workplace experience should begin with clearly defined educational intent ensuring purpose before activity. Formal leadership, teacher and wider school staff development pathways and qualifications should track and reflect policy development and build workforce knowledge of work-connected learning and pathways.

2| Place-responsive commissioning

Strategic Authorities and regional partnerships should commission differentiated employer experiences using labour market intelligence, industrial strategy and learner need.

3| Progressive learning

Develop a national work-connected learning continuum supported by

- employers
- technical specialists
- schools
- community settings
- recognised progression currency.

Recommendation Three: Create a Universal Progression Framework

England should create a coherent progression architecture recognising academic achievement including work-connected learning, transition readiness and personal development.

Priority actions

1| National Progression Currency

Develop a national progression currency through a Transition Credits framework as part of the national curriculum, with space formally built into accountability measures. Supported by the digital learner record and built upon stackable credentials. Formal credentials should then feed through to the Education App.

2| Flexible Industry Pathways

Introduce nationally recognised and accredited Flexible Industry Pathways responsive to place and Industrial Strategy, building on existing qualifications such as the Project Qualifications suite.

3| Graduated transition support

Ensure a graduated approach to transitions to ensure readiness for employment through:

- › A universal entitlement to a good transition
- › Enhanced support for those who need it most
- › An intentional Progression+ year for identified young people
- › End to end deliberate re-engagement pathways to good quality employment

Taken together, these recommendations represent a shift from viewing work experience as a discrete activity to recognising progression as a deliberately designed educational entitlement. England has many of the component parts already in place. The opportunity now is not simply to strengthen each part individually, but to connect them through a coherent progression architecture that enables every young person to experience a purposeful transition into further learning, meaningful employment and successful adult life.

Appendices

Indiana - Graduation Pathways Model

Switzerland – Designing Purposeful Transitions

Flinders University - Redesigning Transition to Higher Education

Appendix 1: Indiana – Graduation Pathways Model

Why Indiana?

While Australia and Canada demonstrate how flexibility can be embedded within education systems, Indiana illustrates how a state can redesign high school graduation requirements so that young people demonstrate readiness for life after school rather than simply accumulating academic credits.

The model is relevant because it recognises that successful progression requires a broader evidence base than examination performance alone whilst retaining high academic expectations.

The Indiana Graduation Pathways Model

Indiana requires every young person to complete three complementary elements before graduating from high school:

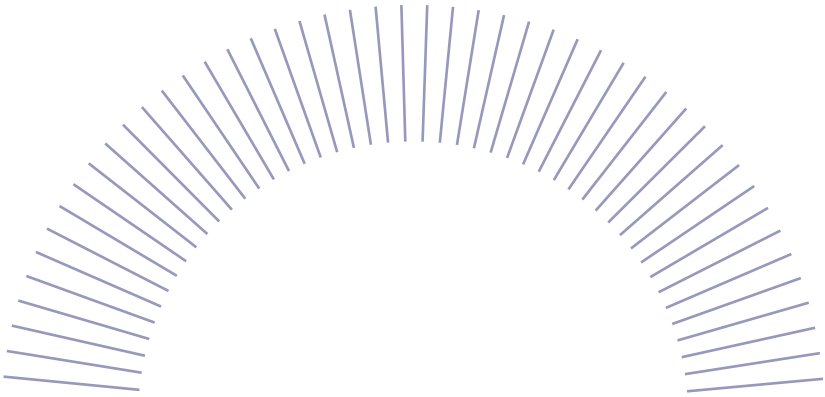
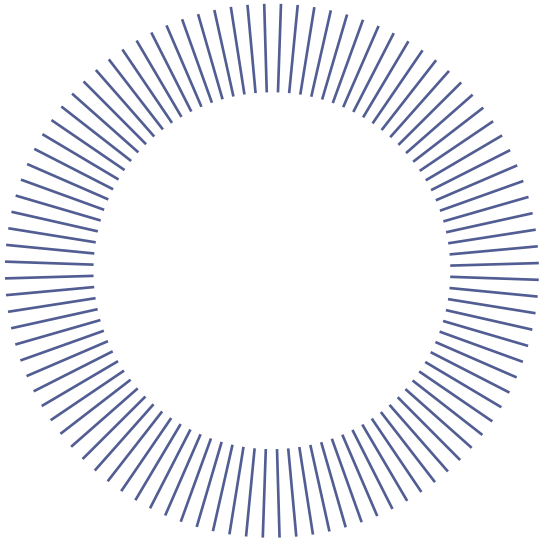
The key shift is that graduation becomes evidence of readiness, not simply completion.

Component	Purpose
Academic Requirements	Complete the required high school diploma credits.
Employability Skills	Demonstrate workplace and transferable skills.
Postsecondary Readiness Competencies	Show readiness for the next destination through recognised experiences or achievements.

Employability skills

Schools assess learners against recognised employability competencies including:

- Communication
- Collaboration
- Responsibility
- Work ethic
- Problem solving
- Self-management
- Initiative



Professional behaviour

Assessment is undertaken locally using common state guidance, allowing schools and employers to contribute evidence over time.

Postsecondary Readiness Competencies

Students demonstrate readiness through one or more recognised progression routes:

- Apprenticeship acceptance
- Employment with recognised training
- Completion of a work-based learning placement
- Industry-recognised certification
- Dual credit college courses
- Military enlistment
- SAT/ACT or other entrance benchmarks
- Career and Technical Education concentrator status
- Locally approved readiness evidence
- Different destinations are recognised as equally valid outcomes.

Why this matters for England

Indiana	Purposeful Progression Framework
Academic diploma	Academic Achievement
Employability Skills	Personal Development
Postsecondary Readiness	Transition Readiness
Multiple recognised pathways	Flexible Industry Pathways
Evidence accumulated over time	National Transitions Credits
Readiness required for graduation	Purposeful Progression recognised nationally

Strengths

- Recognises multiple progression destinations.
- Values workplace learning alongside academic achievement.
- Makes employability visible.
- Encourages personalised progression planning.
- Creates greater parity between academic and technical pathways.

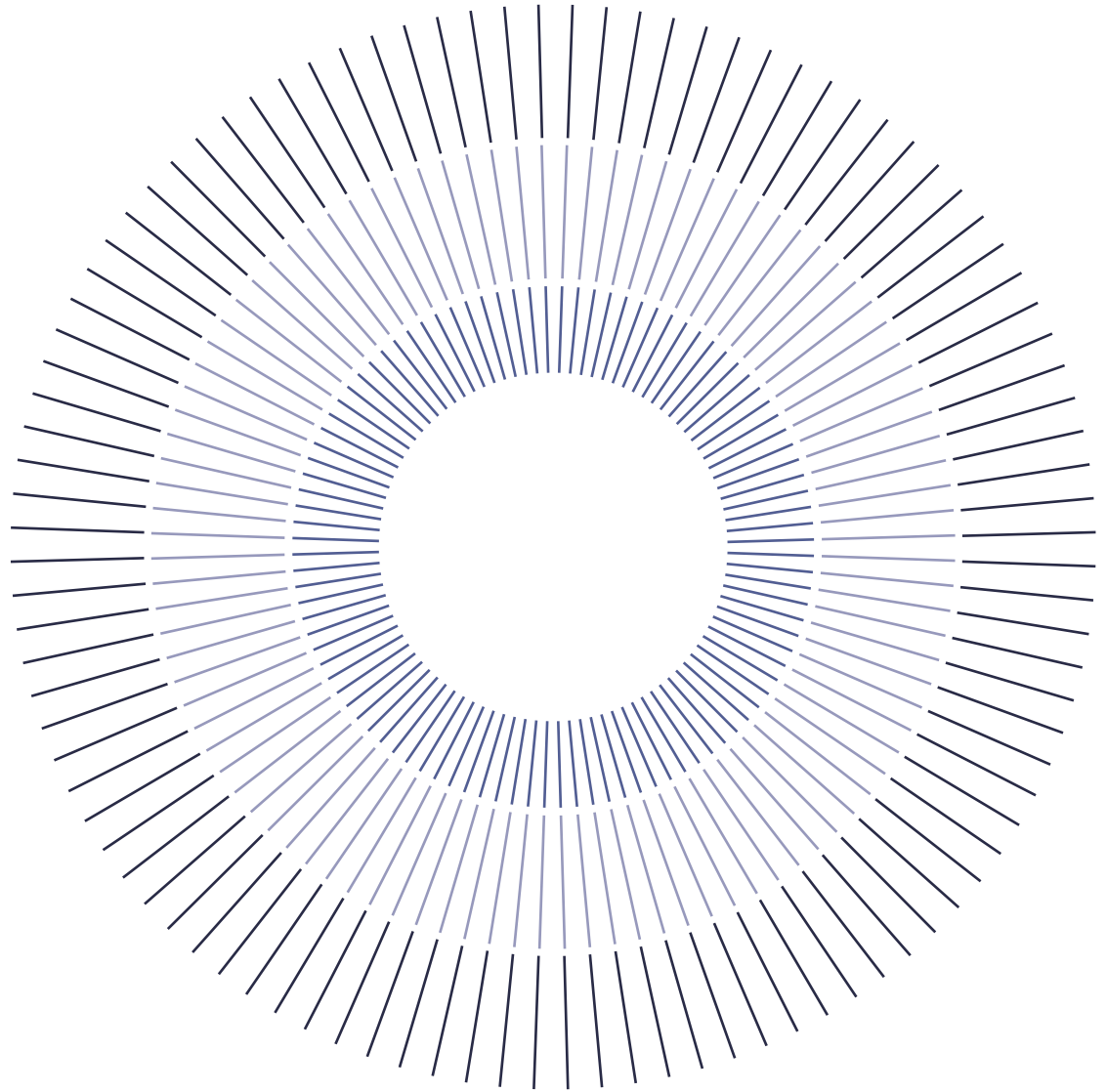
Limitations

- Focuses primarily on graduation at age 18 rather than progression across ages 11–19.
- Does not explicitly create place-based pathways linked to local labour markets.
- Places less emphasis on progressive employer engagement throughout secondary education.
- Does not integrate enrichment and wider personal development as systematically as the proposed Universal National Progression Framework.

Reflection

Indiana demonstrates that education systems can formally recognise readiness for the future alongside academic achievement. Rather than lowering standards, it broadens the evidence used to demonstrate successful progression. This reinforces the central proposition of this Fellowship: that England should move beyond measuring educational attainment alone and instead recognise purposeful progression through a balanced framework of academic achievement, transition readiness and personal development.

Further reading: Indiana Department of Education, Graduation Pathways and Diploma Requirements.



Appendix 2: Switzerland – Designing Purposeful Transitions

This reflection draws on consideration of the Swiss education system. Although the structure of upper secondary education differs significantly from England, Switzerland offers a perspective on how education systems can design successful transitions. Rather than treating work experience as a discrete intervention, workplace learning is intentionally connected to careers guidance, progression planning and pathway choice, enabling young people to make informed decisions before leaving compulsory education.

The Swiss system asks a fundamentally different question to England: **How do we ensure every learner makes an informed progression decision?** Rather than **How many days of work experience should every learner complete?**

Switzerland's education system is organised into 26 autonomous cantons, each responsible for the planning and delivery of education within a nationally agreed framework. This creates a balance between local responsiveness and national coherence, allowing pathways to reflect regional labour market needs while maintaining consistent qualification standards across the country. To support this, The **Federal Vocational and Professional Education and Training Act requires cantons to provide:**

- access to educational and vocational guidance;
- smooth transitions;
- pathways into upper-secondary education;
- cooperation between education providers and employers.

In Switzerland, expectations for successful transitions are established nationally, while delivery is organised locally through the cantons.

Because learners make significant pathway choices at around age 15, transition planning begins well before compulsory education ends. Throughout lower secondary education, learners progressively explore occupations, understand labour market opportunities and consider future pathways. Careers guidance, employer engagement and workplace experiences are therefore designed as a connected transition process over several years rather than isolated episodic activities.

A distinctive feature is the use of **Schnupperlehre**, or trial work placements. Rather than being a single placement undertaken to satisfy a curriculum requirement, these short workplace experiences enable young people to explore different occupations before making significant progression decisions. Learners may undertake several placements in different sectors, using each experience to test their interests, understand workplace expectations and reflect on their future choices. Employers similarly use these experiences to observe qualities such as motivation, curiosity, reliability and willingness to learn, creating a process of mutual exploration rather than one-sided assessment.

England's new Work Experience Guarantee begins to move towards this more developmental approach, reducing the need for young people to make high-stakes decisions based on limited information and instead allowing aspirations to evolve through repeated exposure to different occupations and learning environments.

Importantly, these experiences sit within a wider framework of personalised transition planning. Schools continue to play a central role in supporting learners through careers guidance, application preparation, reflection and progression discussions, working alongside families, employers and publicly funded careers services. Responsibility for successful transitions is therefore shared rather than resting solely with schools or employers.

Parental engagement is also a defining feature of the Swiss approach to transitions. Parents are expected to play an active role throughout their child's progression journey, working alongside schools, careers guidance services and employers to explore pathway options, discuss aspirations and support informed decision-making. Rather than viewing progression as a choice made at the end of compulsory schooling, the system encourages ongoing dialogue between home and school, recognising that successful transitions are most effective when young people are supported by a shared partnership around their future.

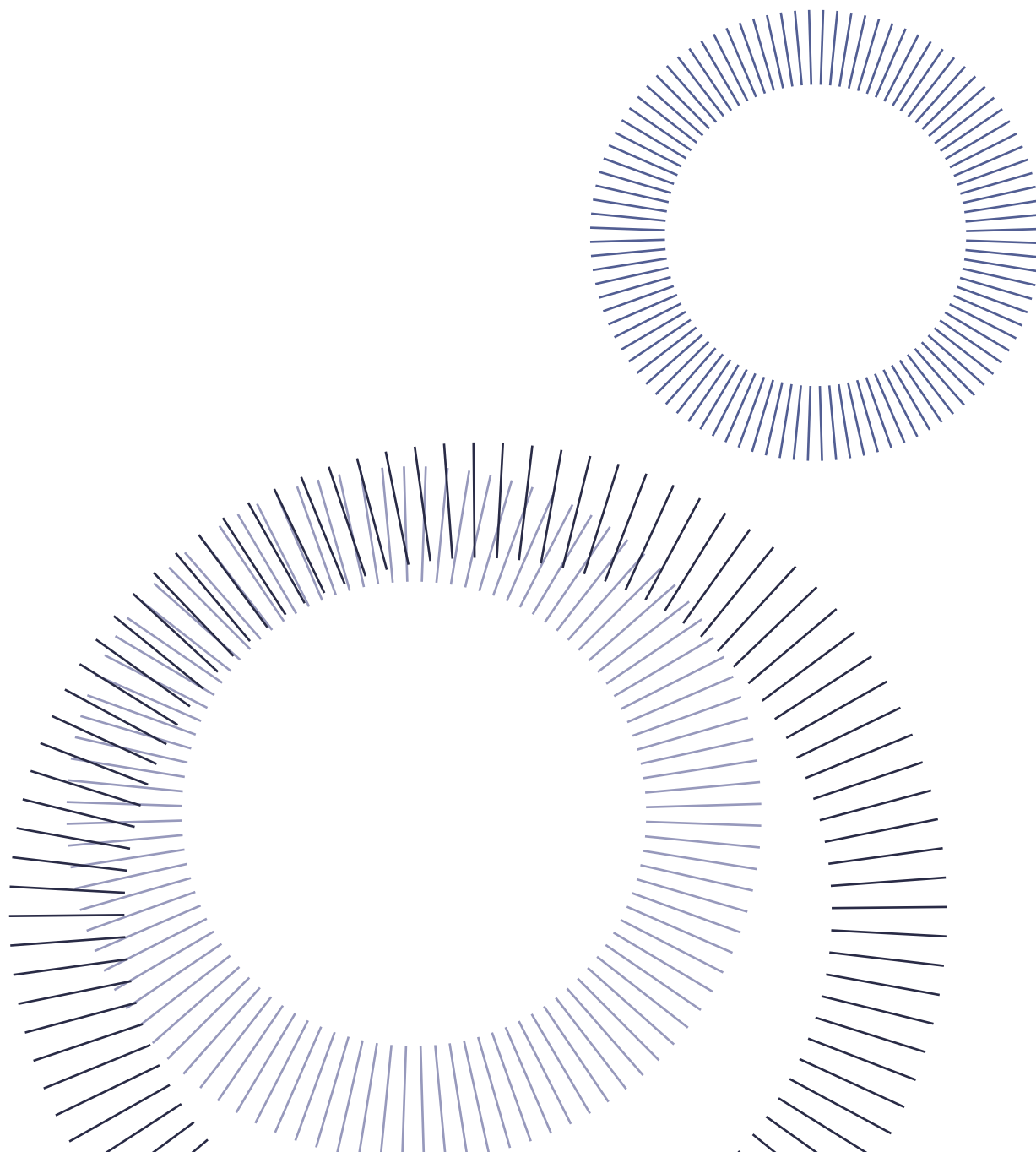
Although Switzerland is widely recognised for its apprenticeship system, the more transferable lesson for England lies elsewhere. The system does not seek to prescribe a fixed number of days of work experience. Instead, it creates the conditions in which work-connected learning naturally becomes part of a young person's educational journey. Workplace experiences are

intentionally connected to career guidance, curriculum, employer engagement and progression planning, enabling learners to make informed choices through repeated exposure rather than a single high-stakes decision.

Switzerland demonstrates how a progression framework can intentionally make these connections throughout compulsory education. For England, this reinforces an important distinction. The challenge is not simply to increase opportunities for work experience but to establish a coherent Universal Progression Framework in which workplace learning, careers education and progression planning operate as one connected system.

The Swiss experience reinforces one of the central propositions of this Fellowship: workplace experiences are most powerful when they are intentionally connected through a coherent progression framework that helps every young person make increasingly informed decisions about their future.

Further reading: OECD (2025) **Vocational Education and Training Systems in Nine Countries**; State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI), **The Swiss VPET System – A Brief Guide**.



Appendix 3: Reimagining the transition to higher education

Findon Technical College and Flinders University, South Australia

Traditional education systems often expect young people to complete school before navigating a separate transition into higher education.

South Australia's partnership between Findon Technical College and Flinders University reimagines this process by creating a supported transition in which school, technical education and university intentionally overlap.

Students complete their South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) during Year 11 alongside Flinders Foundation Studies, enabling eligible learners to progress to university without relying on a traditional university entrance ranking (ATAR). During Year 12 (year 13 in England) they remain enrolled at Findon Technical College while simultaneously beginning the first year of selected Flinders University degrees. Learners study up to eight undergraduate subjects alongside their technical programme, industry placements and mentoring, supported by educators from both institutions. Teaching is delivered through a combination of Technical College facilities, online learning and university campuses, allowing students to experience higher education gradually rather than through a single point of transition.

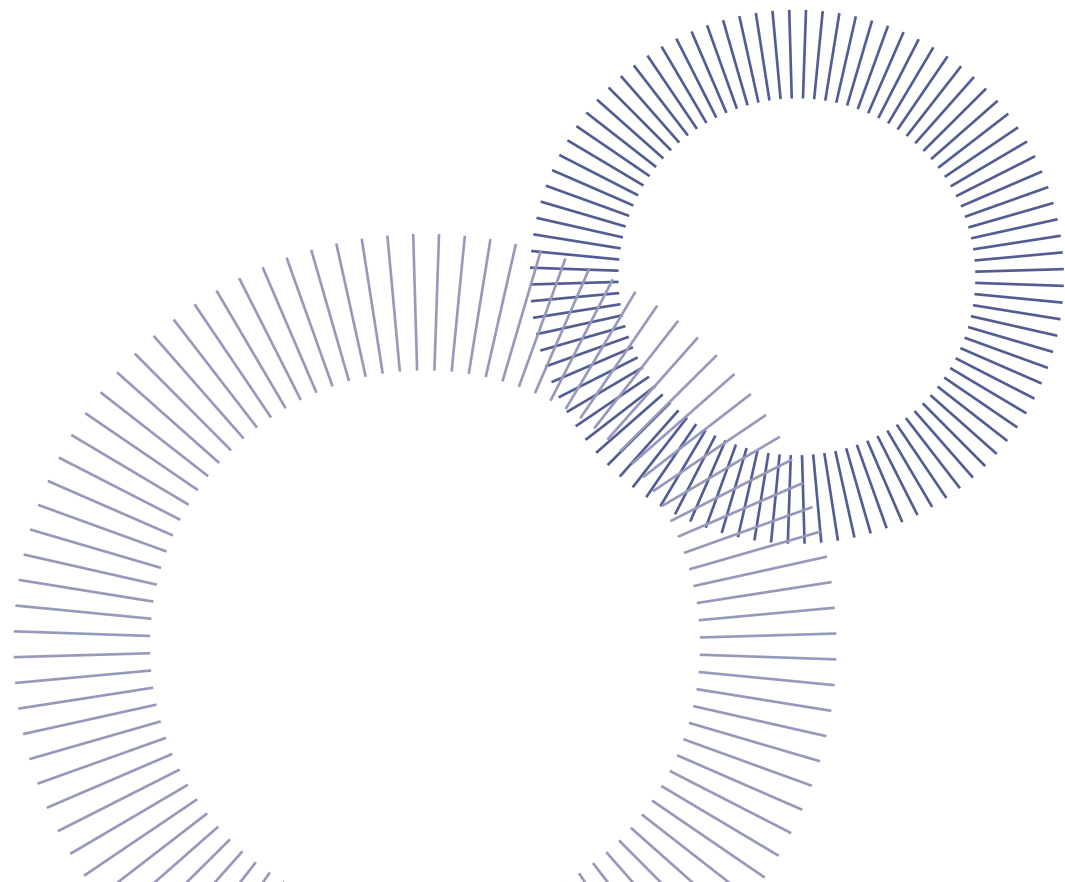
The programme currently supports progression into engineering, early childhood education, nursing and a range of allied health professions, with technical learning directly aligned to undergraduate study. By the time students complete Year 12 they have achieved their school qualification, substantial industry experience and the equivalent of the first year of an undergraduate degree, significantly reducing both the time required to qualify and the uncertainty often associated with progression to higher education.

Although still in its early stages, the pilot demonstrates how transition architecture can intentionally connect technical education, higher education and regional workforce need.

System reflection

In England, since the introduction of higher education fees, and the rapidly increasing rates of graduates who are NEET, selecting university programmes may now be considered as a high-stakes decision for a young person.

Rather than asking young people to navigate a series of disconnected transitions, education providers can design progression as a continuum. By overlapping school, technical education and university, learners experience a supported transition in which confidence, belonging and academic success are developed before they leave compulsory education.



Glossary of Terms

This glossary explains both established international terminology and the original concepts developed through this Fellowship. It is intended to help readers navigate both the international evidence and the original policy concepts presented throughout the report.

ATAR (Australian Tertiary Admission Rank)

The national ranking used by Australian universities to determine admission to undergraduate programmes. Similar in purpose to UCAS entry requirements in England but expressed as a percentile ranking rather than tariff points.

Career and Technology Studies (CTS)

An Alberta curriculum framework that enables secondary students to study technical and occupational subjects alongside academic learning, earning credits towards graduation.

Careers Hub

A locally coordinated partnership in England that brings together schools, colleges, employers and other organisations to strengthen careers education, employer engagement and local collaboration.

Dual Credit

A programme enabling learners to gain credits simultaneously towards their secondary school graduation and a post-secondary qualification.

Employer Brokerage

The coordination of relationships between education providers and employers to secure meaningful workplace experiences, projects, apprenticeships and progression opportunities.

equalex

A quality framework of learning outcomes for reformed modern work experience in England, piloted over two years and introduced to support updated Statutory Guidance for Careers in June 2026.

Flexible Industry Pathways (FIPs)

A South Australian model that enables learners to combine academic study with industry-focused learning, technical education and employer engagement through structured pathways linked to priority sectors.

Guidance Counsellor

A Canadian school professional responsible for supporting learners' academic, career and personal progression through advice, planning and pathway guidance.

Locally Developed Courses (LDCs)

Curriculum developed by Alberta school boards to meet emerging local industry or community needs. Once approved by the provincial government, these courses can be adopted by other school boards.

Labour Market Information (LMI)

Covers data, statistics, and trends on employment, pay, job vacancies, and in-demand skills at local, regional, and national levels

NEET

Young people who are Not in Education, Employment or Training.

Off-Campus Coordinator

A Canadian school role responsible for organising and supporting learners undertaking education with employers, colleges or other external providers while remaining enrolled at school.

Parity of Esteem

The principle that academic and technical or vocational pathways should be equally valued, respected and supported.

Pathway

A planned sequence of learning, experiences and progression opportunities that supports a learner towards employment, further study or another intended destination.

Pedagogical Equivalence

The principle that learning taking place beyond the classroom should be designed, taught and assessed with the same educational rigour as classroom learning, even when delivered in different settings.

Place-Based Pathways

Progression routes deliberately designed around the economic, social and civic opportunities within a locality, connecting education to local employers, industries and communities.

Registered Apprenticeship Programme (RAP)

An Alberta programme allowing secondary school students to begin an apprenticeship while completing their school education.

School-Based Apprenticeship or Traineeship (SBAT)

An Australian programme enabling learners to combine school with paid employment and nationally recognised vocational qualifications.

Schnupperlehre

A Swiss 'trial apprenticeship' or structured work placement, typically lasting several days, enabling young people to experience occupations before making post-compulsory education and career decisions.

Shared Accountability

A principle proposed within this report whereby responsibility for successful learner transitions is shared across schools, colleges, employers, local authorities, higher education and other partners, rather than resting solely with individual institutions.

TAFE (Technical and Further Education)

Australia's public vocational education and training system, delivering technical qualifications, apprenticeships and higher-level vocational programmes.

Technical College

A specialist secondary institution in Australia that combines academic study with industry-focused technical education in partnership with employers and higher education providers.

Transition Architecture

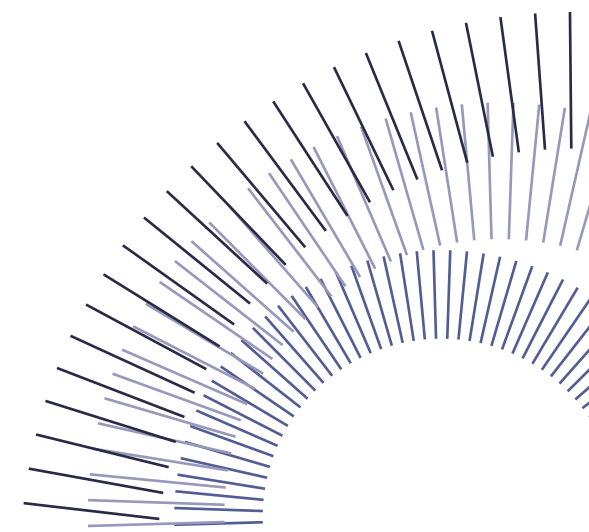
The structures, curriculum, partnerships, policies and support systems that collectively enable young people to move successfully between education, training and employment.

Transition Readiness

The combination of knowledge, skills, experiences, behaviours and confidence that enables a young person to make successful transitions into further learning, employment and adult life.

Work Experience Guarantee (pre-16)

Every young person in England has access to two weeks' worth of work experience, as outlined in DfE Statutory Guidance for Careers (June 2026)



Lower and higher/senior secondary education in Canada and Australia: In both Canada and Australia, secondary education extends broadly to age 18. In Canada, terminology varies between provinces, but secondary or high school generally covers the years leading to Grade 12, with students typically completing school at around age 18. In Australia, secondary education is commonly divided into lower/early secondary (generally Years 7–10) and senior or higher secondary (Years 11–12), with Year 12 normally completed at age 17–18. In both countries, these later years remain part of the school phase but can include increasingly differentiated academic, vocational and work-connected pathways. After completing secondary school, young people may progress into differing models of tertiary or post-secondary education, including universities, colleges, technical or vocational institutions and apprenticeship or employment-based routes.

Original concepts developed through this fellowship

Purposeful Progression

The central concept developed through this Fellowship. An approach to education that intentionally combines academic learning, work-connected learning, personal development and recognised progression experiences to help every young person navigate successful transitions into further education, employment and adulthood.

Work-Connected Learning

For the purposes of this Fellowship, work-connected learning refers to the planned sequence of educational experiences through which learners develop knowledge, skills, behaviours and progression readiness by engaging with employers, workplaces, industry specialists and authentic work-related contexts, interwoven with purposeful curricula and classroom learning. Work experience is one component within this broader continuum.

Transitions Credits

A recommendation arising from this Fellowship. A nationally recognised credit system that records, recognises and values meaningful progression experiences beyond qualifications, including work-connected learning, technical education, enrichment and personal development. The aim is to make transition readiness visible alongside academic achievement.

Universal Progression Framework

The principal policy recommendation of this report. A national framework that complements the qualifications system by recognising three equally important dimensions of learner success: Academic Achievement, Transition Readiness and Personal Development. It provides a common language for recognising progression throughout compulsory education while supporting more successful transitions into further study, employment and adulthood.

About the author



Nicola Hall is an education leader with more than 25 years' experience of school leadership, system reform and national education policy. At the time of the Churchill Fellowship she was Director of Education at The Careers & Enterprise Company, leading national programmes to improve careers education and work experience for young people across England.

Throughout her career, Nicola has been driven by a belief that every young person deserves an education that inspires ambition, develops capability and opens meaningful pathways into adult life. Leading an original national Studio School pilot, and as a founding Principal of one of England's first Studio Schools, she helped pioneer employer-engaged education that combined academic learning with authentic workplace experiences. Further to this role was a headteacher of an inclusive 11-16 mainstream secondary school. Since then, she has contributed to the development of national careers education and modern work experience and policy, working with government, education providers, employers and sector partners to improve opportunities for young people.

In 2025, Nicola was awarded a Churchill Fellowship to explore differentiated approaches to work experience, work-connected learning and pathways across Australia and Canada. Through visits to schools, governments, employers, colleges, charities and community organisations, she examined how education systems create more flexible, engaging and locally responsive routes from education into employment and further study.

This report reflects her belief that the future of education is not defined by a choice between academic and technical learning, but by how effectively systems enable purposeful pathways and progression for every young person. It is intended as a contribution to the continuing conversation about education reform in England and as an invitation for policymakers, education leaders, employers and communities to work together in designing pathways that better reflect the aspirations of young people and the needs of place.

Nicola serves on a number of national education advisory groups and governing bodies and is Chair of Governors of an alternative provision institution in the North West and a trustee of Drive Forward Foundation, a charity supporting care experienced young people to high-quality and sustainable careers. She remains committed to supporting practice and evidence-informed reform that improves outcomes for young people across England.

Open Corridors is an emerging community established to share learning from this Churchill Fellowship and to encourage discussion about purposeful progression, work-connected learning and pathways for every young person. Please do reach out with reflections and for further information.

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/nicola-hall-careers/>

Email: hello@opencorridors.uk
nicola@purposefulprogression.uk

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