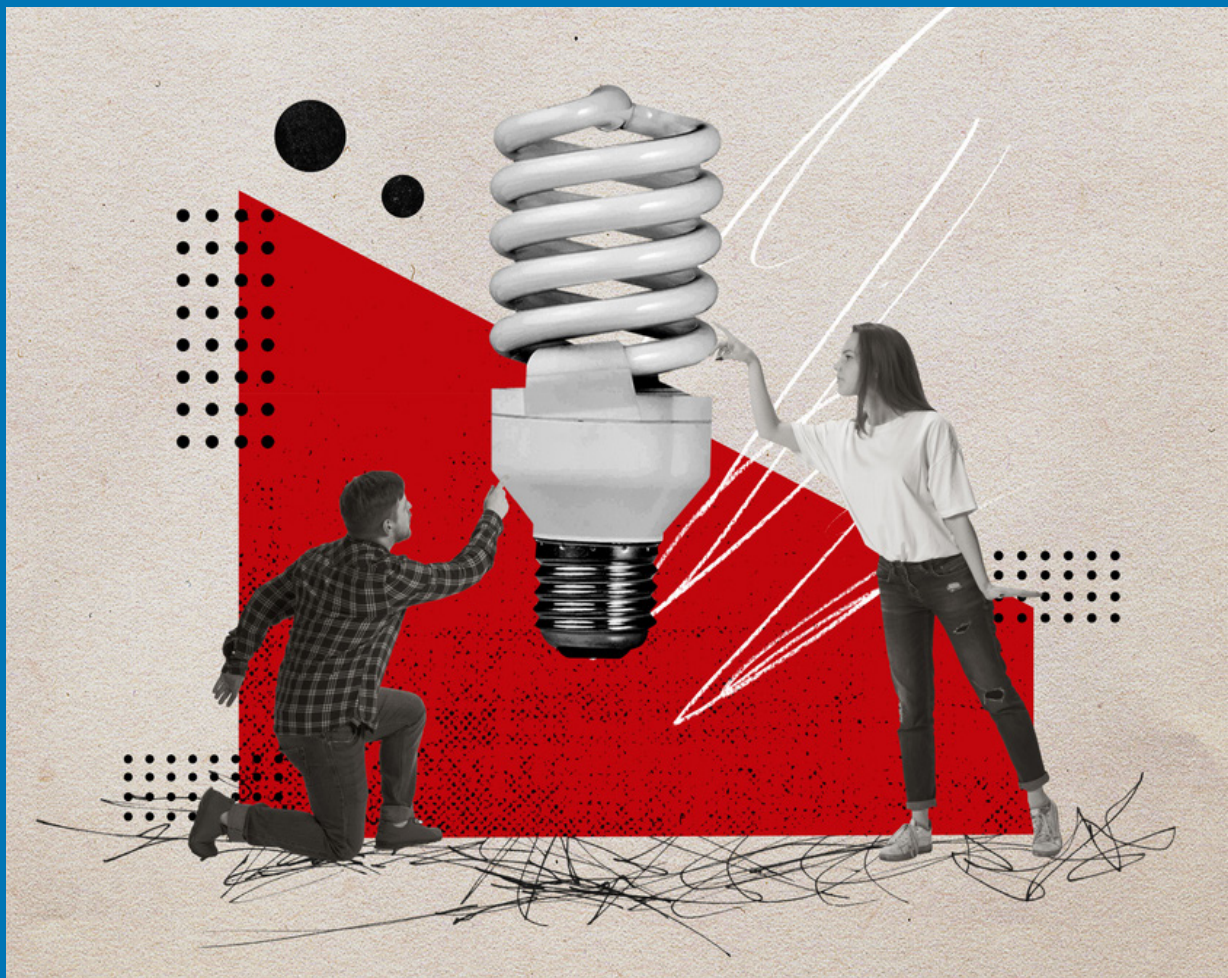# Institute *for the* Future of Work

Research Report

Motivating futures

Channelling intrinsic and internalised motivation for young people from low-income backgrounds to thrive in a rapidly changing world of work

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Contents

Executive Summary and Key Findings

We are in the middle of a series of interconnected, structural transformations of the economy, of society and of work itself. The insights from this report are focused on how young people – especially those from low-income backgrounds – can better navigate them.

Driven by new technologies, the changes we are seeing have huge implications for education, access to work, and work transitions for young people across the country. This research has drilled down into the intersection between the impact of three diverse but related areas:

- AI and automation's impact on work and skills

- motivation among young people, and

- the experience of having a low-income background.

Previous research published by the Institute for the Future of Work (IFOW) and the EY Foundation has highlighted that the interactions between these three areas could be vital – but that they are not yet well understood.

Firstly, through the Pissarides Review into the Future of Work and Wellbeing, IFOW's research has shown how the skills landscape in the UK is changing, including what is driving and mediating these transitions. This research has shown that, across occupations and sectors, AI and automation are raising demand for, and the importance of, human-centric skills such as creativity, problem-solving, collaboration, and initiative.

A growing body of evidence shows that **intrinsic motivation** is a key enabler of the development of these 'human-centric skills' that are becoming increasingly central to working life and work transitions.

Motivation: an overview of terms used

Intrinsic motivation is defined here as the drive to engage in an activity because it is inherently enjoyable or satisfying. When we are motivated intrinsically, our actions aren't driven by any desire for personal gain, or by any external factor.

Extrinsic motivation is the opposite: the drive to engage in an activity comes from an external source, such as the promise of money, in anticipation of praise by someone, or to avoid the threat of a sanction if the activity isn't done.

Between this binary, though, in lived reality, **motivation exists on a spectrum**. This is important, because a strict definition of intrinsic motivation would exclude doing something driven by values or principles and class it as 'extrinsic' because it is not done for inherent satisfaction. This could be experienced as exclusory, especially for the cohort being considered here, who may – for good reason - feel that true intrinsic motivation in the context of work is unachievable.

To avoid this, we draw out here from the rich field of motivation research a third category: '**internal motivation**'. Though not fully intrinsic, these actions are driven by internal values, or to support building an identity - not by external rewards or threats of sanction - and are more often seen in relation to work. **These positive drivers should be celebrated and encouraged alongside interventions that support intrinsic motivation**.

The Pissarides Review highlights that whether young people are able to flourish through this period of fast-paced technological transformation increasingly depends not just on what they know, but on what drives and motivates them.

Secondly, a 2023 report by the EY Foundation into potential impacts of the metaverse identified the disproportionate role of intrinsic motivation on young people from a low-income background.

Looking to make a new contribution to this area of research, the EY Foundation funded the research collaboration with IFOW that has given rise to this report on the first stage of work.

Due to the complex nature of motivation in theory and practice, this study draws on and triangulates different strands of evidence:

- Desk research composed of a detailed semi-systematic literature review of intrinsic motivation and a bibliometric map of 28,000 peer reviewed articles
- An analysis of national education datasets
- A new Future Work Lab in which 77 young people engaged in design-thinking and participatory research directed towards understanding the relationship between motivation and perspectives on the future of work. This Future of Work Lab was designed specifically for this project, and was developed and deployed across five UK regions.

What we have found is that, for some young people, a lack of intrinsic or internal motivation in relation to school or work is a barrier to building a fulfilling career. However, the picture is mixed. Some young people show strong intrinsic motivation; others are more driven by values. But even where we see extrinsic motivators (money, for example) in the responses from young people, these can be linked to more intrinsic factors (such as wanting to spend time with family).

From this, it is clear that further research needs to be done to establish how best to tackle gaps in our understanding. Encouragingly, there is clear evidence in the literature, and corroborated by our Future of Work Labs with 77 participants, that intrinsic and internal motivation is not set in stone, and that it is – to a large extent – cultivable. Given this, fostering intrinsic and internal motivation could have profoundly positive impacts on the attainment, health and happiness of the nation, and should be seen by policymakers as a form of 'meta-skill' that really does change lives.

Towards this, we have developed a **Good Work Motivation Cycle (GWMC)** - a proposed structure arising from this research which we anticipate could have important implications for identifying appropriate intervention points and intervention strategies related to developing and sustaining intrinsic motivation for disadvantaged young people in relation to school-to-work transitions.

This structure recognises that – before all else – all young people need to experience 'basic needs security', and from this secure base, bespoke interventions can be built according to context.

The next stage of this research will focused on testing the implementation of the GWMC.

Key Findings

1. **Intrinsic motivation may become more important in labour markets rapidly transforming due to technological change.**
   Intrinsic motivation is related to positive life outcomes, including wellbeing and better health. It is also associated with learning, engagement, communication and initiative, all of which are 'human-centric skills' that are likely to become increasingly important for 'good transitions' - showing resilience in labour markets that are being transformed by technology.

2. **Internalised motivation is just as important as intrinsic motivation. Motivation profiles are complex and multi-faceted and include both internal and external motivators.**
   The vast majority of young people we spoke with are intrinsically motivated in at least one aspect of their lives but may be extrinsically motivated in other ways. This project uniquely considers how intrinsic and extrinsic motivators are embedded within each other and what this implies for good work transitions - and for good transitions into work.

3. **Intrinsic and internalised forms of motivation among young people from low-income backgrounds are widespread**.
   Most participants demonstrated intrinsic motivation in at least one area of their life, and some had extraordinary passions. Many demonstrated other forms of internalised motivation, and were motivated by values such as supporting family, helping others, or gaining financial independence.

4. **However, intrinsic motivation was rarely displayed for school or work.**
   This was especially true for young people with a poorer sense of direction regarding a future career. The gap, it seemed, was in connecting the things they enjoyed to the notion of work. This suggests that one key challenge – and opportunity – may be to help young people discover, clarify and connect their existing interests and values to viable and fulfilling transitions into good work.

5. **Intrinsic motivation is impacted by socioeconomic background in three main ways, which compound each other and the adverse effects of work transitions: autonomy, relatedness and competence.**
   Young people from low-income backgrounds have fewer choices, they may feel out-of-place or 'outsiders', and socioeconomic disadvantage is associated with much less support at home and at school. This suggests that socioeconomic factors need particular consideration to counter disadvantage in the context of work transitions and futures.

6. **Motivation is malleable and can be shaped by many factors, including educational and work contexts.**
   This reinforces the importance of not only the practices and interventions that support basic psychological needs, but also the structural factors and constraints that have the potential to influence them.

7. **Positive relationships and having a strong sense of what a 'good job' means are key expressions of intrinsic motivation.**
   In particular, having a clear ambition towards a specific job as a young person tends to be linked to a stronger articulation of motivation in relation to work. We found that positive relationships are also strong internal motivators in work, expressed as wanting to support one's loved ones and having a positive impact on others.

8. **Offering many of the benefits of intrinsic motivation, internalised forms of motivation may be more achievable and sustainable than intrinsic motivation in workplaces where one faces a vast array of tasks and activities.**
   While meeting young people's basic needs for good work is crucial, there should be an ambition to strengthen internalised forms of motivation in relation to work. A priority for all in this field should be ensuring that dignified work that supports wellbeing is complemented by the development of internalised form of motivation.

9. **There are contextual and geographic variations in perceptions about the economy and prospects for good work - in particular in the dimensions of access and fair pay.**
   Several of the young people we spoke with highlighted greater opportunities in today's economy, in part due to greater mobility. However, young people in urban centres viewed fairness differently from their peers in rural coastal areas. Young people in urban centres spoke of London and the South of England as benefiting from opportunity structures.

10. **Perceptions of the economy are important for motivation profiles of young people.**
    Young people who were overwhelmingly pessimistic about the economy tended to be driven more strongly by external factors, especially money, in relation to work and life. IFOW has mapped access to good quality jobs across six dimensions of good work in 203 local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales. Work from IFOW's Pissarides Review has also identified interactions between good work scores and areas where regional innovation systems perform better. Cross-cutting this work with our research here reveals that stronger perceptions of injustice impede the relative importance of intrinsic motivation, particularly for people from low-income backgrounds. Living in a place with a low 'good work score' may therefore undermine intrinsic motivation through stronger disenfranchisement with the (local) economy.

    To summarise: if there aren't good jobs in a local area, why should a young person from a low-income background be motivated to engage in learning?

These findings suggest that a range of system-level good work and regional innovation system interventions will be required to drive greater aggregate intrinsic motivation across the economy, as well as individual interventions.

This will include skills training focused on local need, and system-level interventions such as AI Growth Zones to ensure that investment isn't concentrated solely in areas that are already well-resourced, making sure there is confidence in the economy for young people across the country.

1.   Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The word 'motivation' comes from the Latin verb 'movere', meaning 'to move or set in motion'; it is this capacity for initiating movement that is the central characteristic of motivation. To be motivated is to be moved to do something.[1] Why humans do anything, rather than nothing is a question that has interested philosophers, researchers and politicians for over two thousand years.[2]

Sometimes our motivations are clear: we may do things for love, for money, or for survival. What is more interesting are things that we do without those 'extrinsic' motivators, things we do simply because we enjoy them, because we are 'intrinsically' motivated to do them. It is these actions, and the forces driving them, that are the primary focus of this report.

Intrinsic motivation refers to this engagement in activities for their inherent satisfaction, as opposed to for some "separable consequence".[3] It involves doing something because it is interesting or enjoyable, rather than because of external rewards or pressure.[4]

Internal motivation technically contains but is not limited to intrinsic motivation, and also refers to forms of motivation driven by people's identity, value, or purpose.[5] For the purposes of this report, we separate the two, with intrinsic motivation referring only to motivations rooted in inherent enjoyment or satisfaction of the activity itself and internal motivation referring only to motivations linked to values, meaning, and identity.

- <u>Motivation</u>: "forces within an individual that push or propel him"
  (York 1976)

- <u>Internal forms of motivation</u>: types of motivation based on values that constitute people's identity, even if those values are socially conditioned
  (Deci & Ryan , 2000).

- <u>Intrinsic motivation</u>: engaging in an activity for its inherent satisfaction rather than for some separable consequence i.e. it is an end rather than a means.
  (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Figure 1: Types of motivations and definitions

1.2.   Background and context

IFOW has undertaken extensive research focused on the changing skills landscape in the UK through the Pissarides Review into the Future of Work and Wellbeing. This includes the drivers and mediators of these changes, and their implications for 'good transitions' into work.[6]

IFOW's research has also drawn extensively on the 'Capabilities Approach' - Sen and Nussbaum's framework for understanding that quality of life is not simply about rights, income and material goods, but about the freedom that people have to pursue a fulfilling life. It is thus particularly valuable for developing deeper insights into the assessment of what structures intrinsic motivation – what allows people the freedom to pursue what they have reason to value.[7]

In the Pissarides Review, this was explored in relation to rapidly changing skills requirements and the evolving characteristics of jobs as they are transformed by automation, with research showing the increased relative importance of human-centric skills and lifelong learning.

The EY Foundation (EYF) is a UK-registered independent charity that works directly with young people and employers to create or support pathways to education or employment. EYF's programmes and initiatives are focused on supporting young people from low-income families to thrive in the workplace. EYF's ambition is to enable all young people in the UK on Free School Meals to have an employment and earnings potential that is equitable to other young people in the UK.

EYF has had a long-standing interest in research and insights focused on identifying the action needed to ensure young people from a low-income background can thrive in the future of work, which has included employability skills, how AI can enhance human potential and drive social mobility[8], and intrinsic motivation[9]. EYF is interested in understanding the less visible barriers that are likely to disproportionately impact the young people EYF support.

Through this partnership on the Intrinsic Motivation Project, IFOW and EYF are aiming to both substantially improve the evidence base on this topic, in a way that contributes positively to the UK's skills and employment ecosystem, as well as – as this project moves into further stages - designing and testing practical interventions will have direct positive impact on young people, drawing on our shared experience and capabilities related to this topic.

1.3 The knowledge gap this study addresses:

The role of intrinsic and internal motivation in enabling young people from lower income backgrounds to thrive in the future of work

Intrinsic motivation is the drive to engage in something because we find it inherently enjoyable or satisfying. From birth, humans are inclined to be curious, playful, and engaged in their surroundings without the need for external reinforcement.[10] There is a natural human tendency to seek out novelty and challenge, extend and exercise one's capacities, and explore.[11]

Intrinsic motivation is the natural expression of these tendencies, the doing of something simply because it pleases us and is an end in itself.[12] [13] Intrinsic motivation contrasts with extrinsic motivation, which refers to engaging in an activity to obtain an outcome separate from the activity itself.[14] For example, a student who studies to satisfy their curiosity and interest in the subject is intrinsically motivated, while a student who studies to get a high grade, avoid punishment, or receive praise is extrinsically motivated.[15]

Through this study, our primary aims have been to:

1. Examine the role that intrinsic and internal motivation play for young people from lower income backgrounds in terms of their educational attainment and career ambitions, drawing on the capabilities approach to also understand the way that structural factors can impact motivation.

2. Surface the role that intrinsic and internal motivation play for young people from lower income backgrounds in developing human-centric skills that will help them access labour markets that are changing rapidly due to technological transformation.

There is growing evidence pointing to the relationships between intrinsic motivation and growing up in the context of low-income, and the impacts of technological change on the labour market (see Figure 2).
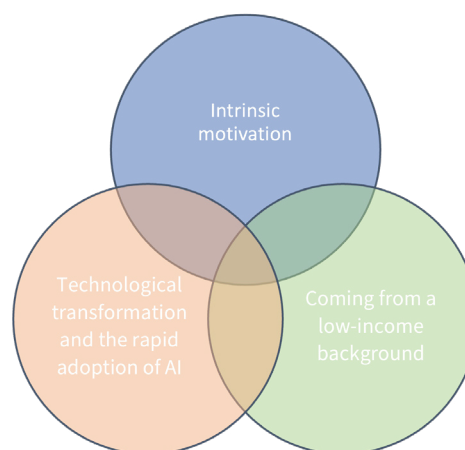
Figure 2: Overlapping focus areas for the project

However, what is currently less well understood is how these three factors interact together and, if they do, what could and should be done to enable those entering a changing labour market from low-income backgrounds have the appropriate motivation structures to access better quality jobs.

As part of our work, we have examined and synthesised a broad range of literature and evidence related to each of these areas. This included research related to intrinsic motivation more broadly, as well as in specific areas related to young people, including education, skills, employment, and cross-cutting evidence related to particular demographic groups.

We have also undertaken a bibliometric clustering analysis, which has involved analysing over 28,000 academic articles using machine learning enabled analytical approaches. As Figure 3 below shows, the distribution of research topics in our bibliometric clustering analysis indicates that intrinsic motivation research is more conceptually associated with studies related to childhood and learning and is relatively less associated with studies focused on young people and youth transitions into work.

Specifically, we see a much greater conceptual association between intrinsic motivation and topics such as 'early childhood development', 'adult education' and 'lifelong learning' than we do with youth employment', 'youth work' and 'youth engagement'.

This indicates a potentially neglected area of research at the intersection between intrinsic motivation, young people and work, especially as these areas relate to the structural constraints associated with socioeconomic disadvantage.

Our bibliometric mapping thus points to a need to bridge this research and evidence gap related to a key transitional period, namely when young people move from school into the workplace.
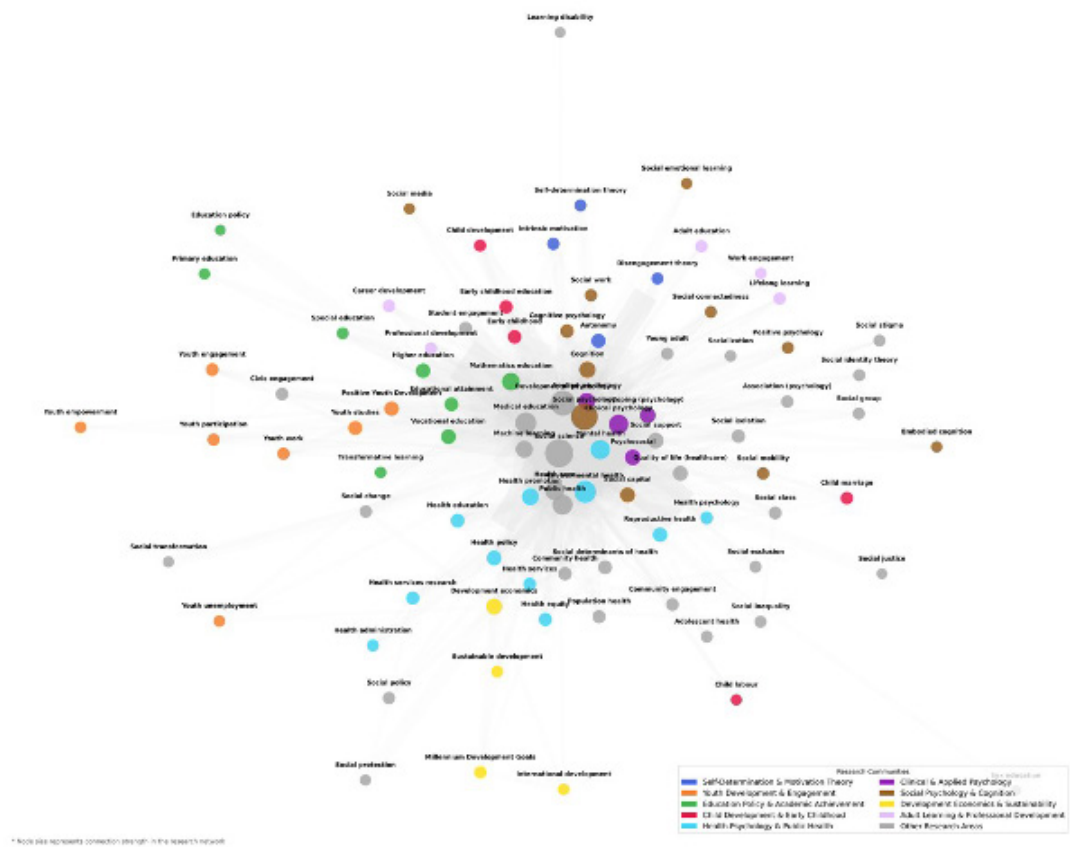
Figure 3: Intrinsic motivation and young people research: a bibliometric clustering analysis of 28,000 peer-reviewed open-access research articles

2. Research Background

2.1 The motivation continuum: intrinsic motivation, self-determination, and more 'internalised' forms of motivation

To begin to understand the landscape of motivation and the wider ideas that support it, we first zoom in on how motivation itself is structured and how this is currently understood, beginning with Self-Determination Theory (SDT).

Self-Determination Theory is a motivational and developmental theory which provides the most well-evidenced approach to understanding what motivates people to act and flourish across contexts.[16] SDT identifies three basic psychological needs essential for motivation: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (see Figure 4).

Autonomy:
Young people from low-income backgrounds have access to fewer opportunities, often due to financial constraints and care responsibilities

Intrinsic motivation

Competence:
A lack of support at school and at home means children from low-income backgrounds don't perform as well in school, undermining self-confidence

Relatedness:
Young people from low-income backgrounds may feel that certain opportunities are out of reach, through language structures into school environments that make them feel excluded, leading to low motivation
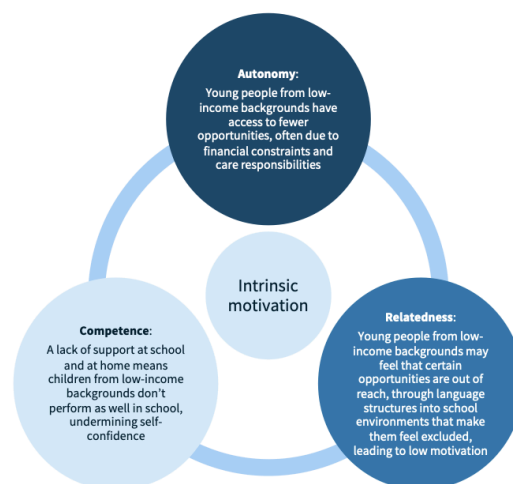
Figure 4: The Self-Determination Theory of intrinsic motivation: basic psychological needs

In SDT, motivation is understood as a spectrum of types (see Figure 5). Seen as such, although intrinsic motivation is both important and powerful, it is part of a wider spectrum of motivation structures which become gradually more internal. Indeed, Deci and Ryan (2000) argue that - rather than focusing solely on intrinsic motivation - fostering external motivation, particularly in its more internalised forms, is also important.[17] One major reason is that intrinsic motivation is highly context-dependent. This is a salient consideration for education and work settings, where the tasks and activities people engage with are often broad and varied.[18] Hence, for work and education, building broad motivation profiles that are largely self-determined is crucial to ensure persistence.

The 'continuum' of motivation types is structured around what is known as the 'locus of causality' - that is, the root of the motivation. Moving from left to right in Figure 5, the spectrum includes six different types of motivation (or regulation), ranging from the least internal (amotivation) to the most internal (intrinsic motivation).

All the types of motivation that are not intrinsic are by definition extrinsic - meaning that the drive towards the activity comes from something other than the inherent satisfaction present in the activity itself - though the driver for this can still be something internal, such as the desire to do good in the world, or deliver justice, or feed one's family.

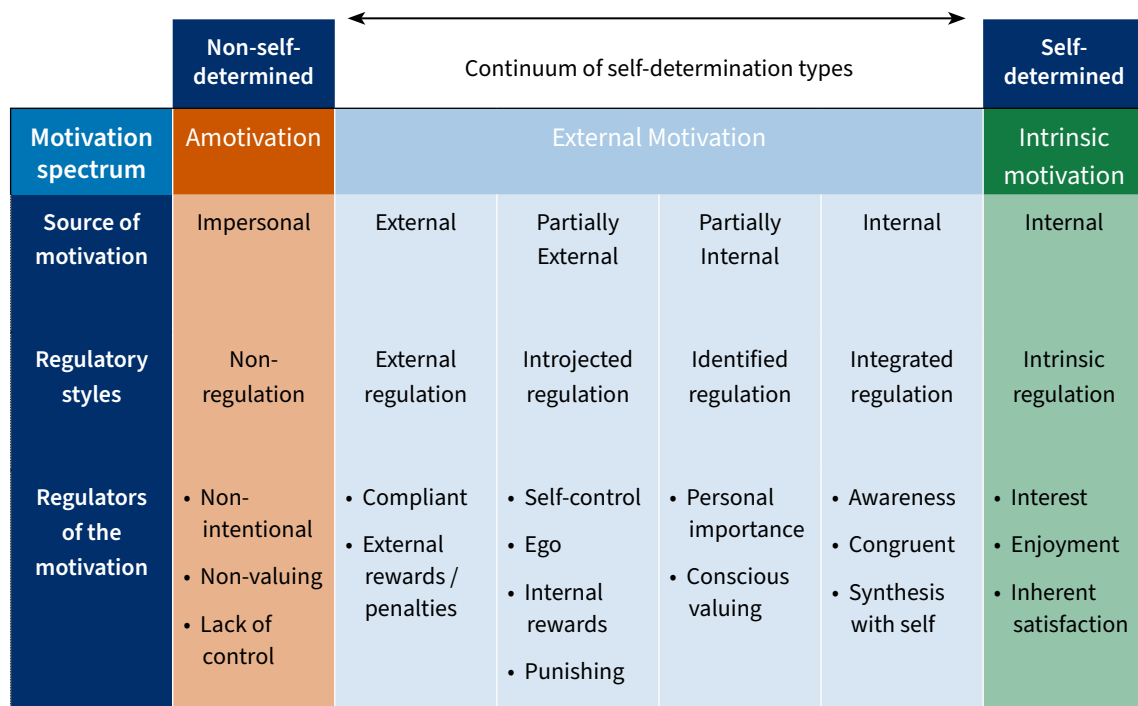| Motivation spectrum	Non-self-determined	Continuum of self-determination types				Self-determined
	Amotivation	External Motivation				Intrinsic motivation
Source of motivation	Impersonal	External	Partially External	Partially Internal	Internal	Internal
Regulatory styles	Non-regulation	External regulation	Introjected regulation	Identified regulation	Integrated regulation	Intrinsic regulation
Regulators of the motivation	• Non-intentional • Non-valuing • Lack of control	• Compliant • External rewards / penalties	• Self-control • Ego • Internal rewards • Punishing	• Personal importance • Conscious valuing	• Awareness • Congruent • Synthesis with self	• Interest • Enjoyment • Inherent satisfaction

Figure 5: The self-determination continuum. Diagram adapted based on Deci & Ryan

What we are seeing when we move along the spectrum in Figure 5 from left to right is the source of motivation becoming more and more congruent with our deepest values and our sense of identity. We are also seeing different styles of regulation:

- **External regulation** involves doing something because we are told to, or because we fear punishment.

- **Introjected regulation** involves doing something because we are afraid we may feel bad if we don't.

- **Identified regulation** involves doing something because we recognise the value of it to ourselves.

- **Integrated regulation** involves doing something because it is an important part of our identity.

By the time we have reached integrated regulation, we are taking actions because they are fully aligned with our sense of self - we believe fully in the mission. By taking external prerogatives and internalising them, we are integrating them into our identities, aligning them with our values and making them part of ourselves. The more deeply we take the value inside ourselves, the more 'integrated' this value becomes, and thus the more internal and authentic our motivation becomes. In this report, we refer to identified and integrated regulation as 'internal' or 'internalised' motivation.

Awareness of this spectrum of motivation structures is important for understanding what is driving young people as they transition into work. However, this perspective from the psychological sciences is only part of the picture; we must also ask whether young people have the freedom and structural support factors to be able to act on their motivations.

2.2 The Capabilities Approach

The Capabilities Approach provides a complementary framework for considering the relationship between internal drives and agency, and the external factors and conditions that enable young people to convert those drives into outcomes that they have a reason to value. Later built on by Martha Nussbaum, Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen's foundational work on the Capabilities Approach in developmental economics, provides a framework for understanding human wellbeing, freedoms, and agency.[19]

Sen and Nussbaum argued that human development should focus on expanding individuals' freedoms and opportunities to achieve lives they have reason to value.[20] This approach offers a framework for promoting and supporting human dignity through the pursuit of self-actualisation. Dignity is understood as including personal autonomy, the ability to construct one's sense of self, identity and flourishing, and a core idea within the Capabilities Approach is that of the human being as a dignified free being who shapes his or her own life in cooperation and reciprocity with others.[21]

However, the Capabilities Approach also recognises that individuals have different needs and opportunities - dependent on their personal, social and institutional contexts - to convert the same resources into valued utilities.[22] The Capabilities Approach thus places an emphasis on what people are able to do (their "functionings"), the freedoms they have to achieve their aspirations (their "capabilities"), their ability to shape their own life (their "agency"). In particular:

- **Functionings** are an individual's realised outcomes, or what they currently manage to accomplish and achieve. A functioning represents the doings and states of being that have been chosen or prioritised by a person and which can be achieved in practice.[23] This includes the freedoms they have to achieve their aspirations in the economy, as well as their own wellbeing, including meaningful work and social connections.[24]

- **Capabilities** represent the set of opportunities available to individuals to realise these functionings. For Sen, capabilities denote the real opportunities of a person to accomplish what they value.[25] That is, the real freedom to engage in the activities in which they want to engage, and to be who they want to be.[26] Sen introduced the concept of agency to address the challenge of selecting universally crucial capabilities.

- **Agency** here refers to individuals' ability to determine what matters to them and to take actions towards achieving those goals. In other words, shaping their own life. Through a Capabilities Approach lens, individuals are viewed as active participants in driving change, rather than passive recipients of assistance or instructions.[27]

- **Conversion factors** encompass personal, social, and environmental elements that shape individuals' ability to transform resources into real and valued opportunities.[28] These can be personal factors - such as metabolism, physical condition, and so on - or social factors such as public policies, social norms, and power relations.
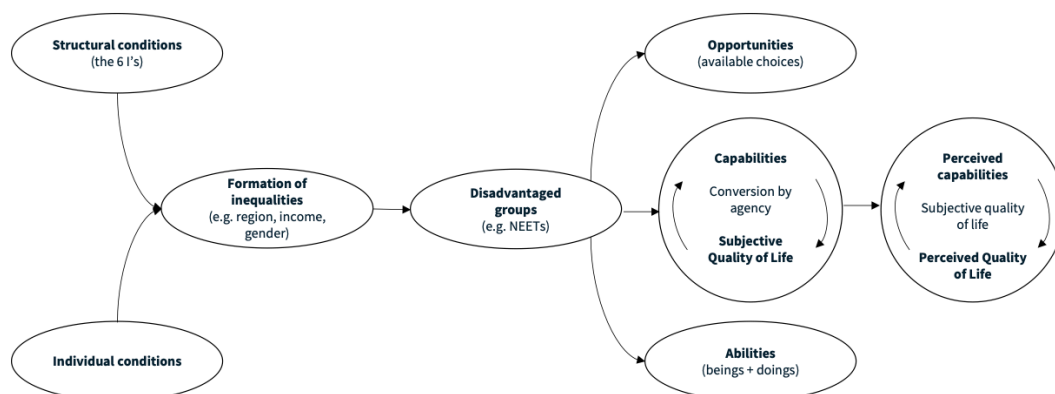

Figure 6: The Capabilities Approach model – capabilities as 'conversion factors'.
Diagram adapted based on Mäki-Opas et al (2022)

Martha Nussbaum's adaptation of the Capabilities Approach[29] outlined a specific list of central capabilities that include control over one's environment and affiliation. IFOW's research through the Pissarides Review has shown how these are becoming increasingly relevant to discussions about work, skills, and the labour market.[30] For example, the Capabilities Approach has been more recently combined with interrogations of automation,[31] skills development,[32] overcoming labour market frictions,[33] and good work transitions.[34]

In relation to intrinsic motivation and its implications for the future of work, the Capabilities Approach provides a way to understand whether and how technological transformation may be enhancing young people's freedoms, or constraining them. In this way, although the origins, focus and application of the Capabilities Approach are different to Self Determination Theory, the two frameworks complement one another, with the Capabilities Approach providing insight into how structural factors can shape individual motivation relating to work and how motivation is related to outcomes, or 'functionings'.

Importantly, both highlight the central role of autonomy, offering perspectives on why autonomy is particularly important in the context of the future of work and how it can be exercised.

2.3 The COM-B Model

Motivation research has influenced a range of practices, including in health and education.[35] The COM-B model was created in response to the fragmented and often inconsistent nature of existing behaviour change theories across these different sectors. Recognised as a foundational framework in behavioural science, it is frequently cited in implementation research and applied behavioural design.[36]
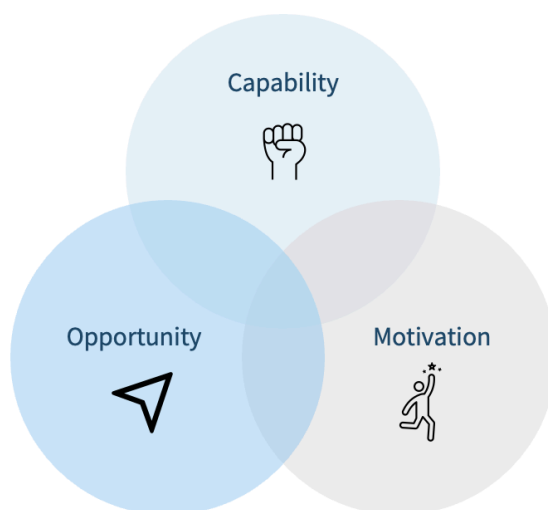
Figure 7: The COM-B model of behaviour – adapted based on Michie et al (2011)[37]

As shown in Figure 7, the COM-B model identifies **Capability**, **Opportunity**, and **Motivation** as three essential components for a **Behaviour** to occur. It serves as a concise and integrative model to help systematically understand and influence behaviour across a range of contexts.[38]

Since its introduction, the COM-B model has been applied across diverse fields such as healthcare, education, public health, and organisational development. It has been deployed in interventions targeting smoking cessation, physical activity, diet and, more recently, behavioural responses related to the Covid-19 pandemic. Its clarity and adaptability have made it a popular tool among both researchers and practitioners.[39]

Central to the COM-B model is the necessity of all three components functioning together. That is, if there is a deficit in any one component, behavioural change can be hindered or halted.[40]

As such, any intervention that focuses only on **Capability** or **Opportunity** - without considering the underlying Motivation dimension needed to express that **Capability** or realise a given **Opportunity** – is likely to be missing an important part of the picture.

2.4 The Case for Motivation

Within education, careers, and employment support policy and practice, motivation has received comparatively limited attention, in spite of a growing body of empirical evidence that points to its role in these areas. A national DfE survey showed that almost 30% of students were not motivated to learn in school.[41] However, while the UK Government's 2025 interim report of the Curriculum Review highlights inequities in the provision of education, it only makes one reference to motivation: specifically, that negative portrayals of marginalised groups can make learning 'demotivating'.[42]

We believe that this highlights the case for importance of this research and that it supports our hypothesis that a renewed focus on motivation – not in isolation, but as a key 'conversion factor' - has the potential to deliver positive changes for students from low-income backgrounds looking to enter the labour market, as well as offering important insights across other areas of social policy.

3. Young people, work, and socioeconomic status

Low socioeconomic status (SES) in the UK is closely linked to negative life outcomes, beginning in childhood and extending into adulthood. Children from low-SES backgrounds are significantly more likely to experience Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). These early adversities are associated with long-term detrimental effects on mental and physical health, cognitive development, and social functioning.[43] They also heighten the risk of stress-related disorders in childhood, which can persist into later life.[44]

3.1 Socioeconomic status and the education system

Education is a key driver of opportunity, yet low-income pupils face persistent disadvantages at every stage. By the age of five, low-SES pupils in the UK are, on average, 19.2 months behind their peers in educational attainment – with these figures representing the widest such gap recorded in over a decade.[45] IFOW's Disruption Index - created as part of the Pissarides Review to map technological transformation across England - created an aggregate measure of 'Innovation Readiness' which encapsulates human capital indicators such as the number of people with postgraduate qualifications and the amount of in-work training being undertaken. This study reveals that regions with lower Innovation Readiness scores face compounding challenges related to adapting to technological transformation. These challenges carry with them implications for long-term opportunity especially with the Disruption Index showing that regional inequalities in technological transformation are widening.[46]

The educational inequalities observed between low-SES pupils and their peers manifest themselves at every level. In 2022, only 43% of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) achieved a grade 4 or above in English and Maths GCSEs, compared to 71% of non-FSM pupils.[47] At the earliest stage of education, just 49% of FSM-eligible children met expected standards at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage, compared to 69% of their non-FSM peers.[48] These educational inequalities also persist into adulthood. In the 2022–23 academic year, only 29% of FSM pupils progressed to university by age 19, compared to 50% of their better-off peers - the widest university access gap since 2005.[49]

Regional disparities compound the issue. For example, FSM students in London are 30 percentage points more likely to pass English and Maths GCSEs than those in Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West.[50]

These disparities in education directly influence employment outcomes and follow on into measures of income. Individuals with lower educational attainment are more likely to be employed in lower-paying, less stable jobs with fewer benefits, leading to job insecurity and financial stress.[51] Moreover, childhood mental health problems are a key predictor of reduced work capacity in adulthood.[52] By the age of 30, half of individuals who received FSM earned £17,000 or less, while the top 1% earned only £63,000 - far below the £180,000 earned by the top 1% of independent school alumni, as seen in Figure 8 below.[53]

Relatedly, the Mental Health Foundation reports higher levels of anxiety, depression, and social isolation among low-income groups, often exacerbated by housing instability and financial strain.[54] This shows that low income in childhood can create severe and lasting impacts that permeate through every area of later life.
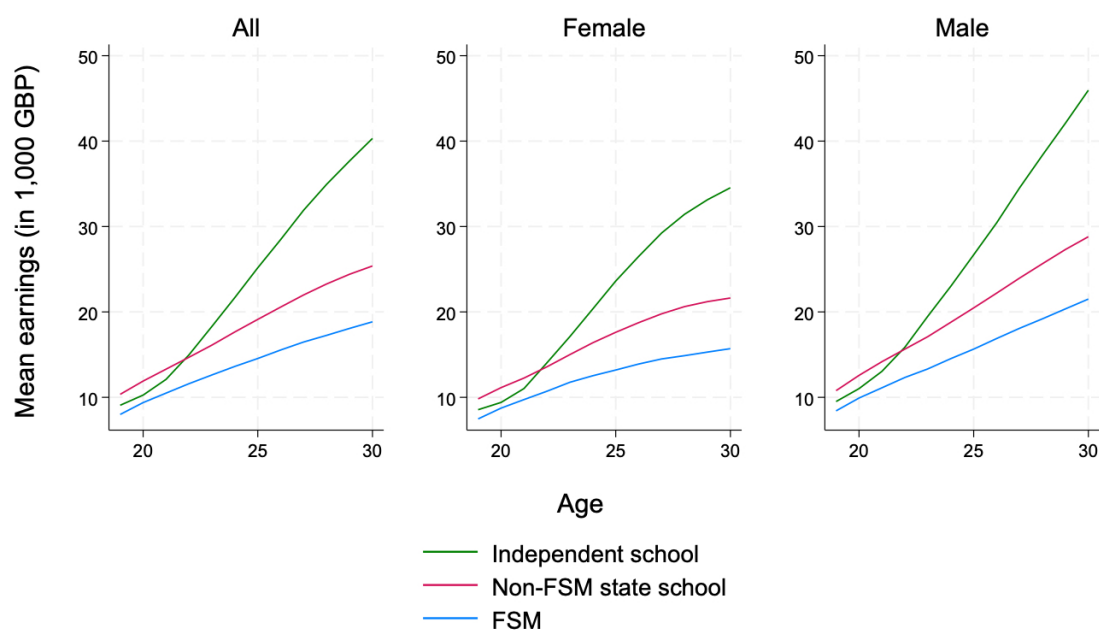
Figure 8: Difference in mean earnings by FSM status and school type.

3.2 Local opportunity structures, regional innovation systems, and good work

Disadvantage is often expressed in 'intersectionally',[55] with different factors compounding to create disproportionate barriers, e.g. in relation to labour market entry. The experience of being from a low-income background, specifically when talking about chances in the labour market, differs by location (see Figure 14). Local opportunity structures describe the collection of opportunities that are (or are not) available to people because of where they live. They can be understood as the 'regionally unequal availability, accessibility and quality of institutionalised opportunities' across four areas – namely job opportunities, public and private services, community participation, and the environment (both natural and built).[56] Local opportunity structures do not necessarily refer only to access to opportunities. Experiences of employment are not binary (whether you have a job or not) but have qualitative elements - whether a job can be considered 'good' work. As defined by IFOW, good work is work that promotes dignity, autonomy and equality; work that has fair pay and conditions; work where people are properly supported to develop their talents and have a sense of community.[57]

The Disruption Index[58], and the survey of 1000 UK firms conducted as part of the Pissarides Review, demonstrated that where investment through R&D and venture capital support stronger regional innovation architectures and this is overlaid with human capital factors such as support for skills and capabilities, then firms in that area are far more likely create and sustain good work. Similarly, in places lacking this ecosystem and where there are pronounced 'local innovation bottlenecks', this has negative implications for the availability of good work for young people, and can deepen local disadvantage.[59]

Where local opportunity structures are weak, young people face two combined challenges:

1. structural deficits in the form of limited job opportunities and a lack of key services

2. social disadvantage – including lower skills and poorer health outcomes - reinforcing what has been termed 'disadvantaged-and-disadvantaging regions'.[60]

Research focused on young people in these regions has shown that place appears to shape the translation of aspirations into outcomes, rather than limiting aspirations per se.

A UK study involving a survey of young people in deprived local areas in Glasgow, Newcastle and Nottingham found that most young people held 'very high' educational and work ambitions, yet the trajectory of those ambitions differed by local opportunity structure - in particular by perceived access to good work and credible role models.[61] Earlier studies, including longitudinal studies in the UK, have found that 'transitions' between school and the workplace are shaped by a complex interplay of family resources, educational qualifications and local business practices – which has been described as local and enduring 'opportunity structures'.[62]

IFOW research shows that access to good work delivers health, social, and economic benefits. However, this access is unequally distributed in England. For example, areas around the Humber provide, on average, some of the lowest quality employment in the country.[63] As outlined by the COM-B model, increasing the amount of good employment can only be achieved by combining greater access to opportunities, strengthened capabilities and motivation. Motivation is therefore crucial to ensure that good work is not only provided, but actively pursued and gained by young people across the country.

4. Technological transformation and a changing skills landscape

4.1 Changing skills demands from technological transformation

Drawing on over 42,000 skills from online job advertisements across 351 occupations, IFOW carried out an in-depth analysis of the changes taking place in the demand for skills in the UK. These findings, published as part of the Pissarides Review in 'Old Skills, New Skills'[64], reveal a labour market undergoing significant transformation marked by rapid turnover of skills, the emergence of new technical capabilities, and the continued relevance of foundational human-centric skills.[65]

One of the report's central findings is that the pace of change has accelerated significantly. Job postings in 2022 were three times more likely to demand new or emerging skills compared to 2016.[66] However, this acceleration is uneven across occupations. High-skilled and knowledge-intensive sectors - particularly science, technology, engineering, and health care - show the greatest rate of change, with substantial growth in demand for skills such as cloud computing, cybersecurity, machine learning, and AI. IT in particular has seen substantial changes in the composition of skills within roles in recent years, will new skills emerging and then falling into obsolescence comparatively frequently.[67] In contrast, sectors such as education and construction have the most enduring skills profiles, reflecting the (comparatively) limited influence of emerging technology on these industries.

4.2 The growing importance of interpersonal 'core' skills

Despite the high flux in many sectors, the need for fundamental human-centric and cognitive skills remains stable, as shown in Figure 9.

Figure 9: Changes in mentions of core common skills (% of job postings)

Across virtually all sectors, employers are consistently seen to be seeking competencies such as communication, teamwork, customer service, and attention to detail.[68] In addition, skills such as initiative, leadership, critical thinking, and social intelligence are identified as increasingly important, particularly in roles that require autonomy, problem-solving, and collaboration in complex environments. These foundational abilities remain among the most frequently requested, demonstrating that, while the demand for technical skills is increasing, and is also turning over quickly, the human skills that support effective collaboration and adaptability are enduring.

Perhaps most important to note is the increasing importance of 'core' skills such as initiative and critical thinking, which points to a growing need to understand how to best support the development of the metacognitive skills (such as planning, reflecting and strategising)[69] that enable them. This would mean emphasising the development of skills such as socialising, learning and adapting alongside more role-specific or technical skills.

5. Intrinsic and internal motivation

5.1 Benefits of intrinsic motivation

Our review of the literature shows that intrinsic motivation is consistently linked to a range of positive psychological, cognitive, and behavioural outcomes. When individuals engage in activities out of genuine interest and enjoyment, they tend to experience greater wellbeing, improved performance, and increased persistence.[70]

One of the most well-established benefits of intrinsic motivation is its contribution to psychological wellbeing. When individuals engage in intrinsically motivated activities, they report greater vitality, positive affect, and life satisfaction.[71] The evidence indicates that environments that support autonomy, competence, and relatedness are associated with improved emotional and social functioning.[72]

Intrinsic motivation is linked to higher levels of academic and professional performance. Research focused on educational and workplace settings has consistently shown that intrinsically motivated individuals demonstrate greater creativity, problem-solving ability, and conceptual learning.[73] When individuals engage in activities out of interest rather than obligation, they are more likely to approach challenges with flexibility and persistence, leading to improved learning outcomes and task performance.[74] This is supported by meta-analyses related to intrinsic motivation and school achievement, which have found that intrinsic motivation is significantly predictive of higher academic performance across various educational levels.[75]

Studies have indicated that intrinsic motivation increases resilience and the ability to sustain motivation even in the face of failure or setbacks.[76] This persistence is particularly evident in educational and professional contexts, where intrinsic motivation has been shown to predict long-term goal attainment and career satisfaction.[77] Persistence appears to be particularly strong when individuals feel competent and autonomous in their actions.[78] This manifests itself in work-related contexts – for example, individuals who experience intrinsic motivation are more likely to persist in creative and professional fields.[79]

5.2 Limitations of intrinsic motivation

While intrinsic motivation is a natural tendency, research shows that it tends to decline over time, in that a narrower set of activities brings inherent enjoyment.[80] This decline is especially high in educational settings, attributed to increasing external pressures, such as grades, performance evaluation, and societal expectations. In addition, intrinsic motivation is most effective when tasks are inherently interesting or meaningful, but it tends to weaken when individuals are faced with routine or uninteresting tasks.[81] Finally, intrinsic motivation is inherently fragile and context-dependent - it requires consistent support to be maintained, and is easily diminished when individuals encounter under-resourced or unsupportive environments.[82]

5.3 The importance of internal motivation

Internal motivation, that is, motivation anchored in values, meaning, and identity, can provide a form of motivation that is not subject to the limitations of intrinsic motivation outlined above, whilst retaining many of the benefits. This form of motivation involves us autonomously choosing projects and pursuits that align with our values, and taking them

into ourselves. By taking external prerogatives and internalising them, we are able to expand our internal drive to a dramatically wider range of pursuits. In doing this, we can ground our actions in our own values, and thus have access to a sustainable, nourishing source of motivation that shares many of the beneficial characteristics of intrinsic motivation. For example, self-endorsed behaviours have been found to contribute to better wellbeing, performance and persistence across domains such as education, health and relationships.[83] Internal motivation produces outcomes similar to intrinsic motivation because the activity is experienced as consistent with one's sense of self.[84] In a sense, actions motivated by integrated regulation are self-expressive, and thus deeply rewarding.

Autonomy:
Young people from low-income backgrounds have access to fewer opportunities, often due to financial constraints and care responsibilities

Intrinsic motivation

Competence:
A lack of support at school and at home means children from low-income backgrounds don't perform as well in school, undermining self-confidence

Relatedness:
Young people from low-income backgrounds may feel that certain opportunities are out of reach, through language structures into school environments that make them feel excluded, leading to low motivation

Figure 10: How socioeconomic disadvantage can impact intrinsic motivation.

5.4   Socioeconomic disadvantage and motivation

Large-scale empirical studies have shown that low-SES students are more likely to experience amotivation and external regulation, and less likely to report intrinsic or identified regulation, even when the overall motivational structure remains consistent across SES levels.[85] These disparities are partly driven by reduced access to 'autonomy-supportive' and 'competence-enhancing' environments, both at home and in school.

Socioeconomic disadvantage can frustrate all three basic psychological needs related to more integrated forms of motivation (see figure 7). It can limit autonomy by restricting real choice and agency in decision-making. It may also undermine competence, particularly through reduced access to academic, pastoral, or extracurricular support. Lastly, it can affect relatedness, including through lower levels of trust in institutions.

Complementary research has confirmed that psychological need satisfaction is more likely among high-SES students, who benefit from stronger parental, peer, and institutional support.[86] These conditions not only foster intrinsic motivation but also enable the internalisation of external goals - a key pathway toward internal motivation.

While Self-Determination Theory highlights the central role of need satisfaction, other studies have shown that SES also indirectly shapes motivation through differences in self-efficacy and perceived task value.[87] High-SES students are more likely to view academic activities as useful for future goals - a crucial factor in supporting identified regulation.

Conversely, low-SES students can be more reliant on interest value (i.e., how enjoyable a task feels in the moment) to sustain motivation, which may become increasingly difficult to maintain over time as academic demands grow less inherently engaging.[88]

Given the varied benefits of strong intrinsic and internal motivation, the consequences that accompany low levels of these forms of motivation are hard to overstate. Children with low levels of intrinsic and internal motivation suffer both in terms of external and internal metrics.

- They tend to do worse in school, both in terms of academic attainment and sporting performance.[89]

- They also tend to enjoy life less, since low levels of intrinsic motivation are associated with increased anxiety, depression, and stress.[90]

- Individuals with lower intrinsic motivation also report lower levels of vitality, life satisfaction, and positive affect.[91]

- These effects can persist into adulthood, with low intrinsic motivation continuing to be associated with reduced performance, enjoyment, and wellbeing.[92]

- Lower intrinsic motivation is also associated with poorer conceptual understanding and lower long-term retention of information.[93]

In summary, motivation is closely shaped by socioeconomic background, with students from low-SES environments consistently reporting lower levels of intrinsic and internal motivation. Over time, individuals with low intrinsic and internal motivation show lower persistence, reduced resilience, and are less likely to sustain engagement in the absence of external rewards.[94] These differences appear to be primarily driven by disparities in psychological need support and access to motivational resources, making SES a powerful but modifiable determinant of motivational development.[95]

6.   Intrinsic motivation and transitions into good work

6.1. Motivation and the transition into work

The term transition into work refers to the period when a young person moves from full-time education or training into sustained employment. Recent longitudinal evidence shows that this passage is often not straightforward or linear for young people, especially those from low-income backgrounds and/or with complex needs - often involving a combination of short courses, work placements, and temporary work contracts before securing a stable job.[96]

The youth transitions literature has examined the way in which economic uncertainty and recessions can impact achievement motivation and aspirations for young people, increasing risks related to NEET status and delayed adulthood.[97] This has been found to be particularly the case "when the pathways to employment are opaque and the returns to effort uncertain".[98] With a lens on structural opportunity, a comparative review of school-to-work programmes for young people with complex needs in the UK found that "multi-agency, person-centred approaches are essential if initial placements are to convert into sustained jobs," yet it found that such approaches remain inconsistent and often inadequate.[99]

Whilst the youth transitions studies share an emphasis on structural opportunity – identifying the institutional and labour market factors that shape young people's routes into work – they rarely examine the way in which different types of motivation shape young people's journeys, including the impacts of these structural factors on motivation. A cross-European study of 'motivation in transition' highlights that contemporary educational pathways into jobs are often "prolonged, fragmented, insecure and, in many respects, reversible," and that re-engagement hinges on "increased possibilities of participation" that let young people regain a proactive stance towards their job search.[100]

6.2 The importance of intrinsic and internal motivation to the future of work

The UK skills landscape is now marked by rapid turnover of task requirements and rising demand for 'human-centric' skills and capabilities.[101] As already noted, analysis of over 65 million UK job adverts as part of the Pissarides Review found that there had been significant growth in job skills requirements related to areas such as initiative, leadership, critical thinking, problem-solving, communications and social interaction.[102]

Many of the occupations experiencing the highest level of changes in skills requirements – such as software engineers, designers and sales professionals - are often well-compensated and good quality jobs. At the same time, entry-level roles in some sectors are being hollowed out by automation and, increasingly, by Generative AI. These trends have several important implications for skills and the future of work.

Given that workers are being asked to adapt more often, and more quickly, to technological change, thriving in a quickly changing labour market is likely to hinge on two overlapping sets of attributes, namely:

- workers will increasingly need the foundational cognitive, personal and social skills that employers increasingly view as important 'employment skills' or prerequisites;
- they need the meta-skills of self-directed learning and adaptability, which will enable workers to refresh their technical or domain-specific knowledge through the course of their working life.

Intrinsic and internal motivation is likely to be important on both fronts. Decades of research link higher levels of self-determined motivation to stronger problem-solving ability, more effective collaboration, and more developed interpersonal skills.[103] Intrinsically and internally motivated learners invest more effort, persist longer when faced with setbacks, and retain knowledge more deeply - traits that map directly onto adaptability in the labour market. Early evidence also suggests that leaders whose 'drive' is rooted in intrinsic or identified regulation are rated as more transformational, which reinforces the value of self-determination for those aspiring to positions with increasing levels of management and leadership responsibility.

Taken together, the advantages that higher levels of intrinsic motivation confer on individuals appear to be diverse and significant. To begin with, intrinsic motivation is strongly associated with many of the skills highlighted as fundamental, such as problem-solving[104] and interpersonal skills.[105] In addition, there is a growing body of evidence linking intrinsic and internalised motivation with improved learning, persistence, and adaptability.[106] There is even some preliminary evidence that leaders driven by more internalised forms of motivation may be more effective leaders.[107] As such, higher levels of intrinsic and internalised motivation are associated not just with specific in-demand skills - themselves composite and contributory to other skills - but also the 'meta' skills and capabilities that enable individuals to thrive across many different domains.

7.   Data and evidence considered

The previous sections have provided an overview of the different knowledge areas relevant to young people's motivation and the future of work. To integrate the knowledge from these different areas, we relied on complementary methodologies.

7.1 Methodological triangulation to address a multifaceted research question

Addressing the knowledge gap identified for this research requires a combination of methods, as it integrates perspectives from psychology (e.g. Self-Determination Theory), sociology (e.g. impacts of socioeconomic status on career perceptions), and labour market economics (e.g. changing skills demand). Combining different (usually qualitative and quantitative) research methods is called methodological triangulation, and is particularly useful in socioeconomic studies,[108] where the goal is to understand the relationship between social and economic factors. Using both quantitative and qualitative methods can enable a richer understanding of a problem, including the potential reasons for a given pattern, how individuals interpret their circumstances, and how broader social conditions shape observed outcomes.
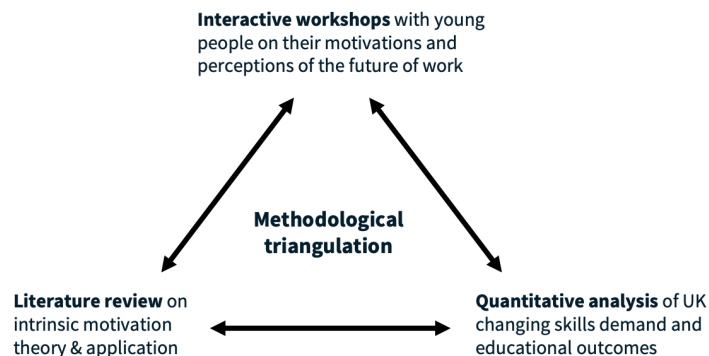

Figure 11: Methodological approach

The different methods used for this project were

1. a semi-systematic literature review and bibliometric mapping,

2. analysis of administrative data and

3. interactive Future Work Lab workshops with 77 young people across the UK.

Other evidence was considered, as highlighted in section 7.2.

7.1.1 Review of the literature and bibliographic mapping

The initial desk research involved scanning the literature on motivation research, thereby laying out the theoretical foundations of the project. To address the knowledge gap, we devised sub-questions, looking for papers on

- intrinsic motivation,

- intrinsic motivation in education,

- intrinsic motivation of young people from low-income backgrounds, and

- intrinsic motivation in relation to changing skills demand.

This provided an overview of the existing knowledge base, and, importantly, what knowledge is missing. While most studies were drawn from psychology journals, studies were included from educational and organisational research journals. Based on this desk research, we refined the material which was used in the workshops (see Section 7.1.3) and for Sections 2 to 5 of this report.

While there is plenty of research on intrinsic motivation in different educational and employment contexts, its importance relating to the future of work has not yet been studied. The clustering analysis of existing literature, grouped into disciplines, confirmed the knowledge gaps observed in the literature review; while plenty of research exists examining elements of the research question, no research had been done on intrinsic motivation in the future of work. This has been visualised in Figure 3.

7.1.2 Data analysis

To better understand the potential impacts of intrinsic motivation on life outcomes, we analysed publicly available data from the Department for Education (DfE) related to school attendance, educational attainment, and incomes of free school meal eligible (FSM-eligible) children compared to their peers.[109] While the existence of inequality based on family income is well established, the focus and segmentation of our analysis provides new insight into the size and distribution of this challenge, as well as correlating factors. This has surfaced new (and complementary) approaches to potentially addressing the attainment gap.

7.1.3 Future Work Lab workshops

Most of the primary data collected for this project comes from workshops conducted with over 70 young people in Birmingham, Bournemouth, Cornwall, Oldham, and Preston. The design of the workshop was informed by previous IFOW research,[110] the literature review, and the team members' considerable experience of working in education. It was also informed by the views and perspectives of young people, specifically members of EY Foundation's 'Youth Advisory Board', who provided valuable input and feedback on this[111].

The questions included a mix of qualitative (open-ended) data collection and survey responses. It included a range of activities for participants, covering their perception of the (changing) economy, and in particular, technological change, their motivation in relation to work and leisure, as well as what they would value most in a job, based on IFOW's Good Work Charter.[112] The workshop material was analysed using thematic analysis principles from psychology.[113] This involved coding responses inductively (i.e. not guided by focus of research), grouping them into themes, and analysing them deductively based on the research question guiding the project. The names of codes were aligned closely to the wording of participants to mirror youth voice as much as possible.

The workshops were led by members of the IFOW team, with support from researchers at IFOW and EYF staff. Workshop leaders brought over forty years of classroom teaching experience to the leadership of these sessions, which we consider central to the integrity of the project. Having pedagogical expertise in managing groups of young people was essential to opening space for students to be able to offer their opinions and stories during the workshops.

7.2 Other evidence considered

Most research engages in some form of data triangulation, such as drawing on literature and conversations or quantitative data. Unlike methodological triangulation, data triangulation refers to using different data sources to generate insight. Beyond the range of methods used, we also referred to a broader set of data than captured by those methods.

First, we reviewed existing evidence on effective interventions aimed at supporting intrinsic motivation, particularly for young people from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds. This provided an initial view of 'what works', and helped to situate our findings within the wider literature and in relation to the breadth of current interventions.

Second, we engaged with frontline practitioners and employment support organisations. Conversations with teachers, youth charities, and careers advice professionals offered valuable and grounded perspectives on how motivation presents and is currently supported in real world settings. In addition, a structured stakeholder engagement session with youth organisations, local authorities, research institutes, government departments, and other delivery partners - provided valuable insight into the practical and policy-level challenges of understanding and designing for intrinsic motivation in the current system.

8.   Research findings

8.1 The vast majority of young people we spoke with are intrinsically motivated in at least one aspect of their lives

Of the 77 young people we engaged with, only six did not express intrinsic motivation in any part of their life. Even if young people are not intrinsically motivated in relation to their career, most can refer to some activity in their life that gives them inherent enjoyment. When articulating their intrinsic motivation, young people often spoke of the process of making and enjoying art, learning and engaging with new ideas, or being active.

One interesting example is gaming, which illustrates the diversity through which intrinsic motivation can be experienced and articulated. For example, while one participant said: "I love gaming because it's time for me and my friends to have fun" – which is clearly linked to the concept of inherent enjoyment. However, another participant spoke of it as a means to escape reality, e.g. "I love doing gaming, the VR is my most [favourite] as I get so engaged that I sometimes forget where I am, this is like a temporary escape from the hard world we live in".

This highlights the complexity of intrinsic motivation as a concept and in practice, which, despite its many benefits, is not a silver bullet to overcoming the structural issues that young people face. This links to the capabilities approach introduced earlier, as the social and structural environment influences how individuals experience their intrinsic motivation, even for the same activity (in this case, as a freedom from reality or a freedom to have fun).

Nevertheless, viewing intrinsic motivation through the lens of access to work in an era of rapid technological transformation, the prevalence of intrinsic motivation is an important finding. Existing research highlights that young people from low-income backgrounds tend to have lower intrinsic motivation than their peers,[114] and this finding challenges this narrative for this observed group. While young people from low-income backgrounds may experience low intrinsic motivation in school (where they feel a lack of autonomy, competence, and relatedness), almost all the young people who participated in the study experienced intrinsic motivation in some domain of their lives, such as their hobbies. Many of these activities often involved high levels of skill and complexity - and in some cases the focused application of social and meta-cognitive competencies - such as making art, playing an instrument, fixing a car, and a range of other activities. The prevalence of these interests and skills in our participants is highly encouraging. If supported and harnessed appropriately, they could become avenues into exciting and fulfilling careers.

Relatedly, we found 'amotivation' to be largely absent, even in relation to work. The proportion of young people who showed engagement with the idea of work (in other words, they expected to be in work in their perceived future) was high – several participants knew what job they wanted to do, and most articulated clear values in relation to work. While the young people we spoke with were by no means all intrinsically motivated in relation to work – motivation profiles were extremely diverse, as discussed below – no participant expressed that they did not see any value in work. This tells a positive story: the challenge is not motivating children in relation to their career, but rather to channel their motivation from the activities they enjoy and the values they hold. It is about helping young people reflect on what they inherently enjoy and value and then supporting them to access work that integrates at least some elements of that, regardless of their family's socioeconomic status.

8.2 Motivation profiles are complex and multifaceted, and include both internal and external motivators

While practically all research participants displayed some level of intrinsic motivation, this does not mean that they were not externally motivated (around 64% of participants expressed some form of external motivation). However, as supported by other areas of research, we observed that young people often combine external and internal motivators, including in relation to work.

Figure 12: Word cloud of associations with work based on a topic analysis

Internalised motivation, e.g., values important for work, made up about 47% of coded references (that is, the frequency with which this type of motivation came up throughout the entire workshop material) relating to motivation, compared to 40% referencing intrinsic motivation, and the remaining 13% for extrinsic motivation. Thus, while participants expressed a range of factors that motivate them, internal motivation was the most prevalent of all the motivational types. This is highly encouraging, since this motivational type is both sustainable and nourishing, and associated with a vast array of positive outcomes.

However, the most frequent first association with work was money – present for about one third of participants (see Figure 12; question asked to participants: "What is the first word that comes to mind when you think about work?"). Money is commonly described as an external motivator, as it is a means to an end. Yet while some participants said they wanted a better lifestyle - which may be viewed as a material (and hence extrinsic) motivator - most participants referenced internal values - such as taking care of their family, exploring the world through travel, or financial independence - to explain why money motivated them. This is strong evidence of internalised motivation.

One participant with clear intrinsic and internalised motivation said:

"I have chosen career paths based on what I love. At the end of the day, you work to earn money for housing, food, etc. but I want my job to be what I love and work hard for. Also, I believe that this path will allow me to spend time with family and do what I love. Given the amount of work in your life, I believe it should be what you love."

The apparent incongruity of motivation profiles is illustrated by a participant who frequently brought up money as what motivated them, but also said:

"[I'm energised by] the opportunity to learn with an open mind. It's thrilling."

In addition, we found that young people with a negative first association with work were relatively more likely to cite money as something they are looking forward to in their career than participants with positive or neutral associations with work. This may indicate that these individuals had little concept of work beyond an unpleasant (and necessary) means of funding existence.

For example, one participant said:

> "I want to make sure I get paid enough to live well."

Many of the job aspirations of young people were not driven by money at all but solely by values, i.e. internalised motivation, such as having a positive impact on the people around them and their community, as well as what they enjoy. Other internal motivators were bringing positivity into the world, and creating art as a facilitation to self-expression.

For example, when asked what they want to contribute to the world of work, one said:

> "To build a community where everyone can feel safe and have fun, because everyone is going through a tough time in their lives."

Characterising money, and extrinsic motivation more generally, as a means to an end is accurate, but existing research generally does not probe into what those ends are. If money is desired as a way of pursuing an internal motivation, e.g. supporting loved ones, we may question whether the person is internally or extrinsically driven. While there is no easy answer, these responses demonstrate that people are driven by multiple factors, which may be arranged in innumerable constellations.

These examples show that people's different types of motivations may either be i) embedded within each other, with intrinsic and internal factors driving the commitment to an extrinsic factor and ii) combined with each other, and where it's not clear which one should dominate, or whether they are linked. This also has implications for 'good transitions' – being aware of the diversity in one's motivational profile is crucial to articulate one's motivation in relation to a job (application), beyond pay.

8.3 Pessimism about the economy and work is linked to more extrinsic motivational profiles

We found evidence that the way young people perceived structural economic factors may link to their motivation profile, and in particular, their weight on extrinsic factors. Not a single participant had nothing negative to say about the economy or work, but around 38.9% (30 participants) had nothing positive to say. Generally, pessimism about the economy was expressed by referencing the government and high taxes, class inequalities, and the cost of living.

For example, one participant said, in response to who is benefitting from the current economy:

> "government because they use the money for themselves".

Building on this, young people whose first association with work was negative (as asked in the workshops) were relatively more likely to cite money as something they are looking forward to in their career than participants with positive or neutral first associations with

work. Similarly, young people with nothing positive to say about the economy or work at any point during the workshop were substantially more likely to be extrinsically motivated (by money) than those who had at least one positive association with work or the economy. In numbers, 27% of all participants were motivated by money and had nothing positive to say about the economy or work.

One participant (with only negative perceptions of the economy and work), said, in response to what energises them about their future of work:

> "the money - accountants get paid a lot, and I want financial security and to be able to afford what I currently cannot."

This demonstrates how views of opportunity structures and the economy at large may influence what young people strive for in their career. If they believe that making a living in the economy is nothing but struggle ("[work is] monotonous and draining due to the forced need of survival"), they may be more driven by extrinsic factors, particularly earning money. Yet encouragingly, young people with only negative perceptions of the economy and work, were still expressive about their intrinsic motivations. Only two participants with only negative views of the economy did not list any intrinsic motivators, though those two participants were still motivated by their values, i.e. internalised motivating factors (e.g. "showing kindness and sympathy through my work").

8.4 Knowing what job you want to do is linked to stronger articulation of motivation

Several students expressed high confidence in – and specificity about - the type of role they wanted to work in: a lawyer, a tattoo artist, a doctor, or a teacher. For those who knew what they wanted to become, their intrinsic motivation was linked much more closely to their job ambitions.

For example, the aspiring tattoo artist felt that practising art allowed them to lose track of time. For obvious reasons, it is difficult to entangle causality in these cases: does having higher intrinsic motivation make you more likely to know what kind of job you want, or does knowing what job you want help you figure out what it is that intrinsically motivates you?

Many of the job aspirations of young people were driven by values such as having a positive impact on the people around them and their community, as well as what they enjoy. Other motivators were bringing positivity into the world, or creating art as a facilitation to self-expression.

For example, when asked what they want to contribute to the world of work, one participant said:

> "To build a community where everyone can feel safe and have fun, because everyone is going through a tough time in their lives, so making the community is to help them and can support each other."

One important consideration is that these are stated preferences. While we only spoke with young people undergoing some form of education or training, conversations about current part-time work came up in discussions, but we are not able to establish in any detail the nature of this part-time work, or their experience of it. Without having any experience of work, it may be that young people's career preferences change substantively after a period of work experience or part-time employment.

8.5 Positive relationships are important internal motivators

Positive relationships were a recurring theme in what motivated young people in relation to their work. Firstly, participants often said that they wanted to use their work to have a positive impact on people. Second, there were numerous references to respect and support (see Figure 12).

For example, one participant said:

> "the support of others encourages me to do well and strive for better"
>
> "if you don't feel supported you won't try your best"
>
> "being treated right is important as it could motivate me to work more and better"

Additionally, around two-thirds of participants said that wellbeing and fair conditions would be the most important factors for them in a job, and a recurring theme was feeling safe (see Figure 12). For example, one participant said:

> "I believe the workforce you work in must respect you and not judge you so that you feel safe and happy in the work environment".

Another said:

> "Having a great wellbeing will make other factors that make a good job enjoyable and helps you feel safe".

These demonstrate the importance of positive relationships for motivation. This is supported by research in SDT which argues that our relationships with others (relatedness) are critical to motivation. In SDT, positive relationships are seen as a common starting point for developing intrinsic and internalised motivation, and as essential for sustaining these forms of motivation into the long term.

As many of the young people we spoke with were from low-income backgrounds, a lack of access to opportunities (for example being able to travel to a work experience, but that it is "difficult to get a job when you have no experience") may manifest itself in a greater emphasis on relationships to help facilitate access to opportunities. This brings about potential criticism of SDT beyond its cross-cultural applicability[115] to its cross-class applicability in assessing the relative importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

While middle- and upper-class children with access to a range of opportunities may most value being able to choose which opportunities to pursue (autonomy), children from low-income families might be more reliant on positive relationships that can enable access to opportunities in the first place (relatedness).

This reflects what effective interventions have shown: having relatable role models, particularly for minority groups, can have a substantial impact on people's confidence in their ability to succeed.[116]

8.6 There are noticeable gender differences in perceptions of work, the economy and money
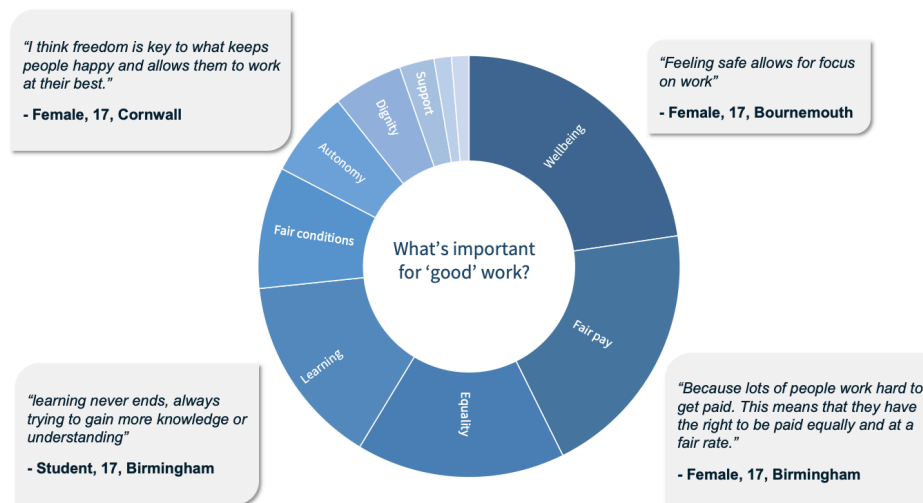

Figure 13: Young people's priorities related to 'good work', out of the principles in the IFOW Good Work Charter[117]

Out of the 77 participants, 11 had a negative first association with work. Participants with a negative first association with work (e.g. "abyss", "hard", "tiring") were more likely to be women (8 participants) than men (3 participants), as were participants with a positive association with work (e.g. "helping others", "fun"). Men were more likely to have a neutral association with work, most often, money.

We did not observe greater pessimism around the economy by gender: for example, both men and women cited the government as an actor benefiting from the economy similarly, and around the same proportion could not think of anything positive about the current economy.

Men were more than twice as likely to think about money than women as their first association with work. However, when asked about what makes a good job, the pattern switches, with women almost twice as likely to cite fair pay as the most important element in a job than men. (see Figure 13) This suggests that, while money was important to both genders, it may be in different ways.

For women in the study, money may not be directing their decision on what kind of work to do, but the job they do would have to be fairly paid. For men, money may be more often a driver rather than a condition for job choice.

8.7 Internal motivation in a range of activities may be more beneficial for a career than intrinsic motivation alone

Of the three male participants with a negative first association with work, two of them cited gaming as what intrinsically motivates them. While gaming can bring benefits as a highly intrinsically motivating activity,[118] its immersive nature can lead to it being used as an 'escape', such as the participant referenced in section 8.1. If something is used as an "escape", even if inherently enjoyable, it may hinder young people from engaging with other aspects of their lives such as school or work.

Moreover, with many young people pessimistic about the economy and by extension often driven more by extrinsic factors, it is important to not only promote intrinsic motivation or inherent enjoyment, which can be narrow, but also of promoting a balanced interest in a range of activities, including school and work. Again, much of this lies in bringing about systemic changes that address this very legitimate pessimism, e.g. by promoting good

quality work across the country and for everyone. This reflects insights from the literature: intrinsic motivation, while being a very powerful driver of motivation, generally applies to a narrower set of activities, while internal motivation, i.e. alignment with personal values, is more malleable to a broader range of activities, and hence potentially more appropriate for directing young people towards a sustainable career.[119]

8.8 Young people are informed about how technology is changing society and the labour market

Many of the young people we spoke with showed evidence of being knowledgeable about how technology is changing the labour market and had an informed and nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play. Several participants acknowledged that greater use of technologies could lead to increases in efficiency, both in their own lives (e.g. writing a CV) and in the wider economy (e.g. tablets used for diagnostics by car mechanics).

One concern brought up by a few participants was that humans were increasingly dependent on technology, and that we risked becoming lazy. One participant said:

> "Some students overuse AI and do […] not balance in what situations would be suitable to use AI in and not. For example, it's good as a source of research to find out information but not good for making AI write school work for you as you are not learning anything."

The reference to learning may present an interesting link with intrinsic motivation, as their statement indicates that over-reliance on technology may, in their view, erode our intrinsic motivation (curiosity).

The risk of job displacement was also prevalent, referenced 43 times. Participants were aware of the jobs less likely to be automated, i.e. those with high levels of in-person interaction, such as teaching and care work. This was linked to a perception that the value of humans cannot be replaced.

> "However, AI lacks emotional awareness and self-consciousness [of] humans [and] therefore struggle to make decisions and substantial judgements."

However, one participant expressed openness for that to change:

> "For now, I think that AI lacks human touch, but who knows what it will be capable of in the future".

Yet some participants moved beyond the narrative of quantity of jobs and spoke about how technologies may affect job quality. In particular, some participants were sensitive to the risks that the adoption of new technologies could present, particularly to low-skilled professions, which some perceived would in turn increase inequalities. One person working with young people not in employment, education or training (NEET) said that automation had reduced the availability of some 'entry-level roles', making it harder for young people to break into the labour market.

This was also noted by some participants, with one person saying:

> "Even if more jobs arise to look after AI, most likely the jobs that were taken used [to be for] people not suitable to look after the high tech."
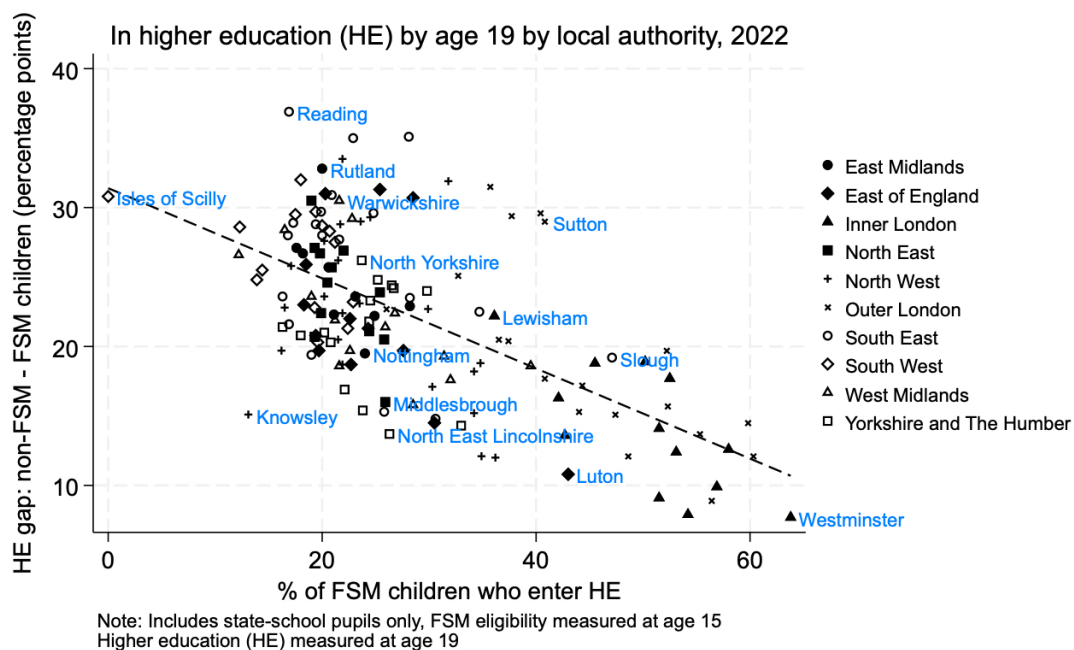
Another said:

> "I think it will take away a lot of jobs but maybe create new ones."

8.9 There are localised perceptions of the economy, and in particular, fairness.

While perceptions of the economy were similarly negative in different places (e.g. around inflation or the government), there were local perceptions of injustice too. For example, when participants in Cornwall were asked about what was bad in the current economy, two participants cited the fact that homes were being built on farmland ("Too many houses are being built over farm land") and that ("In Cornwall specifically, tourists buying holiday houses […] has led to a housing crisis").

Notably, six participants in urban centres said that the economy and opportunities are skewed towards the south of England ("Wealth distributions in the north compared to the south is poor – [there's a] lack of investment in north England and Scotland."). Participants in Birmingham also mentioned the bin strikes that were going on at the time of the workshop, and the gender pay gap (a very major payout has been imposed on Birmingham City Council by a court ruling to compensate women working for the council who had been discriminated against), suggesting some localised perceptions of fairness.

Ten students talked about the economy having greater opportunities or career pathways available today than in the past, though these were distributed equally across urban and coastal areas. Within Cornwall, we experienced conflicting perspectives. Students at one college highlighted the increase in opportunities in Cornwall, including in more niche sectors such as e-sports.

Note: Includes state-school pupils only, FSM eligibility measured at age 15
Higher education (HE) measured at age 19

Figure 14: Higher education entry of FSM vs non-FSM children by age 19 by local authority

As shown in Figure 14, young people are correct in identifying the gap in opportunities between non-London urban centres and other parts of England. Young people who receive FSM at age 15 in inner London are substantially more likely to enter higher education (HE) by age 19 than in other parts of England, at almost 60%. In comparison, only around 20-30% of FSM children in the West Midlands enter higher education by age 19. However, in the South

West (which includes the coastal areas where workshops were conducted), entry into higher education is even lower, and generally below 20%. It raises the question of why this gap in opportunities between London and other parts of England is perceived more sharply for those we spoke with in non-London urban centres than for those in coastal, more rural parts of the country.

8.10 A 'failure-persistence' paradox and its implications for learning and work

The findings from our workshops indicate that failure was experienced as being embarrassing (rather than empowering) by young people (M = –0.34 on -5 to 5 point scale), yet at the same time, this was also associated with students "trying harder" (M = +1.68).

One participant said:

"Sometimes your mistakes are your biggest successes."

Other students explained that they viewed it through a business lens, asking why they should try to do something again if it did not work the first time. Perceptions of failure differed by gender, with women on average expressing stronger embarrassment from failure and a lower drive to try harder than the men who participated in the research.

As such, negative associations with failure, such as embarrassment, are not inherently associated with indicators of lower intrinsic or internal motivation - indeed, they can be associated with determination and having high standards around work or other activities. One way to interpret this is that a stronger sense of failure may at times be linked to activities to which one assigns more value, i.e. which participants are more intrinsically motivated to do, or which they perceive as a core part of their identity.

However, the evidence also indicates that this is likely to be conditional on having relevant 'support structures' at school or at work, that are designed to leave "a central portion of student activity unstructured, thus allowing for productive failure".[120]

9. Implications for policy and practice

Our findings suggest that, while the young people in our study exhibit both intrinsic and internalised motivation, these forms of motivation are limited in scope and direction. Specifically, intrinsic motivation appears to be present but is generally not oriented toward school or career-related activities or goals. As we have seen, there is evidence of internalised motivation towards a range of admirable ends, such as providing for one's family, or helping people, or building positive communities. However, only a small number of participants reported any form of concrete plan to achieve these goals. Furthermore, for many participants, internalised motivations seem to function as means to ends, most often driven by the desire to meet basic needs, such as financial security.

These patterns highlight three critical limitations that any proposed intervention must address:

- the need to broaden the domains in which intrinsic motivation is experienced, particularly toward educational and long-term developmental goals
- the need to support young people from low-income backgrounds to harness and channel their motivation into concrete plans of action, that is, to help them translate their motivation into plans, and thus into outcomes
- the importance of supporting young people to move beyond purely instrumental forms of internalised motivation.

Establishing effective principles for practice and policy will require interventions that not only acknowledge these motivational constraints but actively work to transform them.

It is important to acknowledge that - drawing on the Capabilities Approach, the COM-B model, and our findings - focusing on motivation alone is insufficient to address the full set of adversities that young people from low-income backgrounds face in the labour market. This is because structural factors - and perceptions of them - are crucial for how young people articulate their motivations (see Key Finding 8.4), as well as the opportunities they have to act on those motivations (i.e. access to a job they have reason to value). For example, while one may have the motivation to become a tattoo artist, getting the necessary equipment to establish oneself is expensive, and therefore a real barrier to accessing that opportunity. Hence, while fostering intrinsic and internal motivation is crucial to improve outcomes and subjective experiences of young people from low-income backgrounds, it should not be seen as a substitute for other systemic changes that enable social mobility.

9.1 Principles for supporting intrinsic motivation and more internalised forms of motivation in relation to work

9.1.1 Supporting autonomy, competence, and relatedness

In line with existing academic consensus, fostering intrinsic and internal motivation for work requires attention to all three core psychological needs identified in SDT: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Each plays a critical role in enabling individuals to engage with work in meaningful and self-directed ways. Relatedness offers the emotional grounding and social connection that often initiates motivation, competence fuels the belief that success is possible, and autonomy empowers individuals to make sovereign choices that align their work with their values and their values with their work.

As discussed previously, for young people from low-income backgrounds, relatedness may carry particular weight. When access to opportunity is uneven, relationships may serve as a bridge and provide encouragement and validation as well as practical pathways into work. Research has shown that exposure to role models with whom one can identify can have a measurable impact on confidence, aspiration, and sense of possibility with regard to educational, vocational, and career options.[121] Role models who share similar backgrounds or challenges can help shift self-perception and show that purposeful work is not out of reach, reducing self-limiting beliefs that many young people – including the ones we spoke with - have of themselves.

This does not mean relatedness should be emphasised to the exclusion of autonomy or competence. Yet a recurring theme of wanting to be respected and supported in a workplace, for example, supports the notion that positive relationships can be a motivation-enabler, allowing young people to feel confident about their abilities (competence) and, in turn, about their choices (autonomy) in relation to school and work. In other words, there may be a sequencing that should be emphasised when integrating SDT into practice, especially when working with marginalised groups by focusing on relatedness as a foundation to fostering motivation.

This points to the importance of supportive environments, role models and relationships, as well as 'autonomy-supportive' environments in schools and 'good job design' within organisations, all of which can support motivation by empowering individuals to feel confident, take initiative, and pursue their interests.

9.1.2 Highlighting purpose and values

Emphasising values and purpose in relation to work is crucial for fostering deeper, more meaningful motivation among young people. When work is seen only through an instrumental lens – as a means to earn money or meet basic needs – it can feel disconnected from one's identity or aspirations. However, when young people are encouraged to reflect on their personal values and how these might align with different forms of work, they begin to see work as a space where they can express who they are and contribute to something they care about. This shift can lead to more sustainable motivation, rooted in an understanding of why the work matters.

This is particularly relevant considering the evidence that intrinsic motivation alone, i.e. doing something for pure enjoyment, often covers a fairly narrow range of specific activities of interest for each person – not all of which may be that directly relevant to the demands of a job. However, drawing on the capabilities approach can support a shift from 'access to work' alone, to an approach that focuses on providing the conditions for young people to have the agency to identify and prepare for employment-related opportunities that they have reason to value.

Getting young people to relate to their work in this way does not only benefit them. While motivation is not a silver bullet, increasing the engagement of employees is also beneficial to employers (with a more committed workforce), as well as the economy and society more widely (with the blossoming of more good work in a local area). This highlights the importance of access to good jobs at a local level as a key complementary part of interventions in this area.

9.1.3 Creating environments that support intrinsic motivation through participation: The Good Work Motivation Cycle

Together, our evidence points to what we introduce here as a '**Good Work Motivation Cycle**', which we anticipate could have important implications for identifying appropriate intervention points and intervention strategies related to developing and sustaining intrinsic motivation for disadvantaged young people in relation to school-to-work transitions.

This represents an attempt to synthesise insights from this report. The model looks to integrate Self-Determination Theory, the COM-B behaviour change wheel, and Sen's Capabilities Approach to illustrate how structural opportunities relate to good work, psychological need satisfaction and real freedoms and agency can interact in a self-reinforcing cycle. The GWMC can be viewed as a theory of change and agenda for future research and practical test-ing. Illustrated in Figure 15, it builds on the cyclical or 'sequence-based' structure of existing conceptual models.[122] However, it is important to note the following:

- Though entry points would vary from person to person, and intervention points would differ in scale and form, **this initial representation starts with enabling conditions**, such as (regional) good work ecosystems. This highlights the importance of structural conditions for motivation.

- Within those structures, **it is important to create need-supportive environments** (e.g. schools, families) that ensure young people are provided with autonomy, competence, and relatedness as outlined by SDT.

- **Need-supportive structures enable people to satisfy their basic psychological needs** and realise their freedoms

- **Satisfying basic psychological needs paves the way for the development of intrinsic and internal motivation**

- **Greater motivation creates engagement**, which enables young people to develop mastery of skills

- **Persistent engagement and skills development allows young people to achieve the better outcomes for which they strive**.

- Achieving outcomes they desire **allows young people to experience agency**.

- **Experiencing agency creates a positive reinforcement loop** between motivation, engagement, outcomes, and agency. In aggregate, reinforcement links back to enabling conditions through reduced skills mismatches, higher retention rates, a workforce with strong human-centric skills.
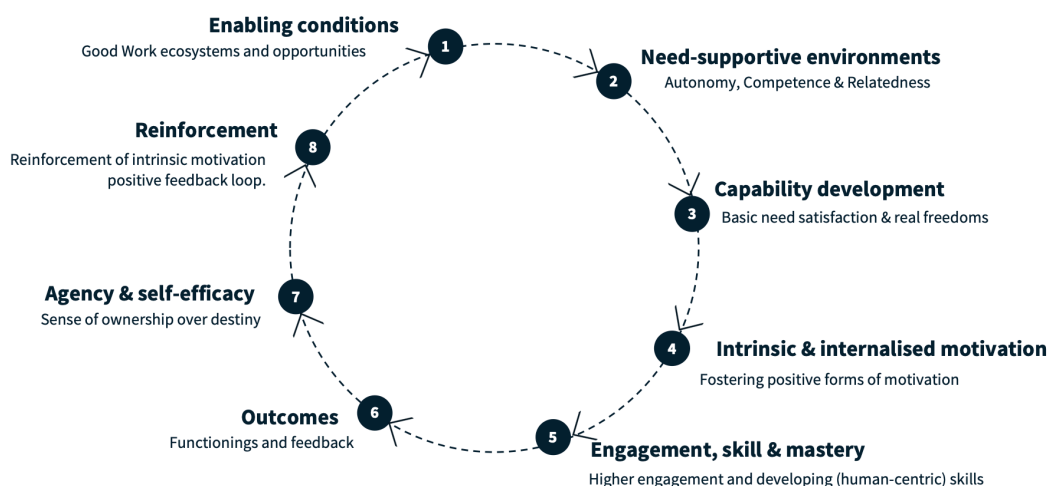

Figure 15: The Good Work Motivation Cycle (GWMC)

This framework could be used to determine what the focus of an intervention should be to ensure that people are put on a positive track in their motivation journey. It highlights that, while there are common principles in fostering internal forms of motivation in young people, the relevance of each at a given point in time may differ from person to person. For example, one person may require a sense of belonging before they can feel confident making a decision autonomously, while another would need to feel that they are responsible for their successes and failures (causal attribution[123]), to experience a sense of competence.

9.2 Implications for education, career guidance, and employment support practice

Interventions to encourage intrinsic and internalised forms of motivation in low-income individuals will be most effective if they address the specific needs of these individuals, at the appropriate time, in the appropriate context. As discussed, there is strong evidence that children from low-income backgrounds are often in situations where core human needs are not met, or where they experience great uncertainty. We hypothesise that until such fundamental needs as safety (in physical, emotional, psychological and material terms), food supply, housing, and support (in manifold forms) are present and secure, any attempt to foster intrinsic motivation or internalised forms of motivation (for anything beyond these needs) will be of limited use. Where there is a need to earn money for basic necessities, consideration of the relative merit of various careers must be understood as a privilege.

As such, the provision and security of the means to satisfy basic human needs should be the primary policy goal upon which these further interventions are proposed. These are presented with an understanding that the level of basic needs insecurity will be variable, and that, for many, at least some of these needs will be met to a certain degree.

1. Access to Good Work and 'basic needs security'

Our workshops revealed that many young people primarily associated 'work' with 'money' in the first instance. They also revealed that for many of our participants, this was more likely driven by a desire for financial security for themselves and their families than anything else. The need for safety was also prevalent in the views that were shared.

As such, the first intervention strategy we propose is to address gaps in basic needs provision and perception for low-income people. The notion of meeting basic needs is not a novel one, but it would be amiss if we did not point out its continued and fundamental importance based on our research. The impacts of basic needs security are profound and various, with studies showing improvements in a range of factors from diet diversity to depression.[124] Therefore, basic needs security can be seen as a foundation stone that underlies all three elements of the COM-B model; that is, having our basic needs secured unlocks our capabilities, enables us to see and capitalise on opportunities, and facilitates profound changes in the structure of our motivation.

However, we also believe it is important to address the notion of perceived needs security. We hypothesise that, when it comes to motivation, the perception of need insecurity itself is a powerful thing. This is demonstrated by the fact that participants with more pessimistic views of the economy tended to be more driven by extrinsic factors than those with both positive and negative views. Ensuring that the perceived insecurity in a system does not undermine intrinsic or internal motivation requires shifting mindsets around basic needs insecurity, for example, through stronger assurances to low-income children. For example, providing reassurance of own abilities, especially through critical transitions in life such as when leaving school, has reduced the grade gap between African-American and white students in the United States.[125] Hence, fostering confidence in one's abilities to navigate systems, even those that feel broken or set up to fail you, is a valuable asset to maintain motivation beyond survival.

2. The importance of autonomy at school and in work

Autonomy-supportive practices are widely recognised in the literature as a central factor in fostering intrinsic and internal motivation.[126]

A core principle that emerges from SDT is that individuals cannot internalise values or goals unless they are afforded a meaningful sense of choice. Autonomy, therefore, is essential for the development of internalised forms of motivation. This insight is especially salient when considering evidence from the current study, in which many individuals demonstrated intrinsic motivation, but not necessarily in relation to school or career-related pursuits. If the goal is to help learners cultivate a genuine passion for their future work, it may be crucial to support them in developing the autonomy to explore, clarify, and ultimately choose values and career paths that resonate with their sense of self.

This has significant implications for educational practice, particularly with regard to students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, for whom autonomy may be more constrained. In such contexts, autonomy-supportive teaching becomes even more vital, as it has been shown to increase student engagement, collaboration, and teacher wellbeing.[127] These practices include taking a student-focused approach that acknowledges and respects the learner's needs, preferences, interests, beliefs, and desires.[128] They also involve using an understanding and respectful interpersonal tone, inviting students to pursue activities that interest them, presenting tasks in engaging ways, and demonstrating patience. Teachers who adopt a collaborative rather than controlling stance - working with students rather than imposing upon them - can create the psychological conditions necessary for intrinsic and internalised motivation, which in turn improves outcomes.

In addition, IFOW's Good Work Charter provides an organising framework for alignment on good practices related to better work, which can be applied within organisations and as a policy framework. One of the ten principles of this framework is 'autonomy':

> "This is the right for an individual to exercise autonomy and independence in decisions about their life and future. It is about an individual being empowered to make informed choices; and having a right to a private life." – The Good Work Charter (IFOW)

3. Motivation architecture

Our workshops revealed that intrinsic and internal motivation were present in young people from low-income backgrounds. Intrinsic motivation was generally displayed towards activities not directly related to school or work, and internal motivation was shown towards ensuring basic needs security or towards a more altruistic goal such as helping others, or providing for one's family. There was a gap, however, in specificity, detail and 'planfulness'.

These findings regarding both intrinsic and internal motivation highlight a need for greater 'motivation architecture', that is, helping young people explore, reflect on and ultimately harness their motivation. This could be done in multiple ways, such as cognitive reframing (changing the way they see an activity), and connection with purpose and values, as mentioned above. The key would be to help young people to see their work in ways that they find more inspiring, and to connect their work to a vision they see as both ambitious and achievable. In this way, we would help young people develop the structures to fully capitalise on their existing motivations.

4. Good work role models

In our workshops, there was evidence that the participants had intrinsic motivation, but struggled to link it to school or work. Furthermore, individuals had very negative views about social class and their own environment. Finally, given evidence from the literature and

some of the workshop responses, we would hypothesise that awareness of possible career opportunities is limited in low-income groups.[129]

Role models can fill this gap. In SDT, relatedness is often seen as the spark that ignites many of our motivations, primarily through the influence of our peers and mentors. In one intervention, hearing stories from people from a similar background who had gone through the same experience helped increase the GPA of ethnic minority students in the USA.[130] In other words, knowing that someone else could and had done something, increased people's confidence that they could succeed as well. Similarly, we may get involved in an activity, such as a hobby or job, that we started because the people we look up to do them. This is the starting point for pursuits that ultimately become important to us and thus develop into intrinsic and internal forms of motivation.

 In addition, role models:

- provide new visions of what we could become, thus helping low-income individuals to overcome some of the pessimism about themselves, their environment and their country observed in our workshops

- give access to tried-and-tested experience-backed information,

- encourage intrinsic motivation and internalised forms of motivation through helping people develop feelings of competence

- encourage intrinsic motivation and internalised forms of motivation by helping people develop their own voice, that is, autonomy, especially if these mentors are adept in autonomy-supportive practices.[131]

5. 'Capabilities-focused' mentoring

Mindset mentoring is another promising intervention based on our synthesis of the evidence, including relevant empirical studies and our findings. Our research revealed high levels of pessimism and negative views surrounding the economy, government, and country, as well as the specific social class and region of our participants. Individuals from low income backgrounds also have lower self-esteem.[132] These factors combined can act as a significant barrier to life progression, which may then lead to a range of maladaptive behaviours. In our workshops, for example, we saw evidence of potential correlation between pessimism and the use of online gaming as a form of escapism, though further work with a larger sample would need to be done.

Helping young people see themselves and the broader landscape differently - to recognise their potential and identify meaningful opportunities - is therefore essential to helping them develop intrinsic and internalised forms of motivation for productive activities, as well as the 'capabilities' that can act as conversation factors for this motivation to be applied to opportunities. In one example, teaching young people about growth mindset, i.e. that abilities are not fixed but can be developed over time through effort, has been shown to increase students' performance at school and increase enrolment in math, a subject often perceived through a 'fixed' mindset of abilities.[133] Programmes such as *People and Their Brilliance[134]* adopt a multi-pronged approach to this challenge, combining mentoring (relatedness), experiential learning (competence), and training to build confidence, shift mindsets, and encourage a more optimistic, opportunity-focused outlook.

6. Awareness and understanding of good work opportunities

While not directly related to intrinsic motivation and its related forms, raising awareness of opportunities could help overcome one of the possible constraining factors observed in the young people who participated in our research – pessimism and a perceived lack of agency related to the economy - and also help individuals convert their motivation into behaviours that support their transition from school-to-work.

As outlined in the COM-B model section, and by drawing on the capabilities approach, improvements to motivation and capability will be blunted if the requisite opportunities are not both available and known to the individual. Given the comparatively more limited networks of individuals from low income backgrounds, the awareness of opportunities such as job vacancies and training schemes is inevitably diminished.

However, resources for career guidance are very stretched, particularly since it was transferred as a responsibility to schools and colleges in 2012, with some schools spending £2 per student on career guidance.[135] Operating in this environment, it is perhaps not surprising that the average school is meeting just over half if the Gatsby Benchmarks for good career guidance. Importantly, there are large variations, with schools in more deprived areas often being in an even worse position to provide career guidance. While the National Career Service is available to students for reference outside of schools, it has been noted that many students don't know about it.

Therefore, beyond increasing the resources allocated to schools to deliver quality career guidance that meets all the Gatsby benchmarks, it is important that interventions can be used at low- to no-cost to schools. This largely applies to motivation interventions.[136] For example, the National Career Service provides an e-pack for schools to deliver on the Gatsby benchmarks through career guidance, employability skills training, and CV training, with the only resource being printing and a facilitator (which itself is an issue given that many schools share career guidance professionals). While this should complement, rather than substitute, immersive activities such as employer visits and work experiences that can make the prospect of a career exciting, providing such material is crucial to ensure some standardisation of career guidance.

9.3 Policy and systemic change implications

There are encouraging signs that the new UK government has started to recognise the 'motivational dimension' of policy related to skills, employment and the future of work. The government's recent 'Get Britain Working' White Paper, which lays out how to increase the employment rate to 80%, highlights "keeping people motivated and engaged to find work, rather than focused on checking compliance with benefits requirements" as a way to increase long-term employment, for example through more personalised career guidance.[137]

This White Paper also outlines the Youth Guarantee for all young people aged 18-21 in England to ensure that they can access quality training opportunities, an apprenticeship or help to find work. As part of the Youth Guarantee, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Education are working closely with the eight Mayoral Strategic Authorities in England, which began mobilising the Youth Guarantee Trailblazers in April 2025.

In addition to the need to improve the evidence base through evaluations and piloting interventions related to the areas covered in this research – for example ranging from career interventions in schools to employment support in job centres – there is also a need for practical frameworks, toolkits, principles, and learning materials that could be utilised by educators, youth charities and employment-support practitioners and adapted for their specific contexts. Research organisations, civil society, foundations and governments also have an important role to play in regard to understanding how best this type of activity and cross-sector collaboration can be enabled and supported.

10. Future research directions

This report has made the case for several principles - and potential applications of those principles - based on a range of evidence. Beyond application, we believe to have identified several implications for future (academic) research.

Firstly, we observe that some young people from low-income backgrounds may experience the importance of SDT components in a different sequence than usually described in the literature. For the young people we spoke with, positive relationships were front and centre in what motivated them in relation to work. Even where extrinsic factors (e.g. money) were mentioned, this was often as a means to supporting one's loved ones. Exploring this hypothesis, that the relevance of different SDT components may be experienced in different ways for young people from low-income backgrounds – and at different stages – could be one important avenue for further research.

Secondly, while we collected data from different regions on gender, and spoke with some children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), there may be further heterogeneity in both the type of motivation (internal and external) and the articulation of motivation in relation to work. Future research may therefore benefit from segmenting participants based on other characteristics, to understand if there are particular factors or barriers related to work that may impact intrinsic motivation - for example, young people with Special Education Needs (SEND). Developing a better and more in-depth understanding of the contexts in which these elements apply will be crucial for developing inclusive motivation interventions that benefit all.

Thirdly, our findings point to the need for more holistic research approaches. As shown in Section 8.2, having external factors as primary (expressed) motivators does not indicate the absence of internal forms of motivation. Combining quantitative with qualitative insight could help uncover not only what motivates people, but why it motivates them. Doing so in this report has enabled the development of a complex and nuanced picture of motivation, in which people are motivated by several factors, in a layered form.

Further research should also assess the validity and viability of the principles outlined in the previous section in practice - for example, in educational and employment support-related settings - including through the practical intervention options laid out in this report. Based on our review of effective interventions that apply 'motivational insights', the majority test a specific type of intervention, such as reflecting on purpose before the start of a course, or fostering autonomy-supportive teaching.[138] [139] Given rich evidence of the effectiveness of motivation interventions, particularly in education,[140] there is a pressing need to understand whether, and to what extent, different contexts (e.g. career guidance and job centres) could benefit from a broader motivation programme – one which more holistically integrates different elements of motivation research.

Fourthly, and connectedly, further research on the application of the Good Work Motivational Cycle should be done to develop this proposed model and how it could be applied in practice in different settings such as schools, job centres, and workplaces.

Given the significance of the findings in this project for disadvantaged young people, we hope that this further work can be done and that the insights offered here can be applied in ways that help them develop their motivation structures and access good jobs.

11. Conclusions

This report has examined the nature of intrinsic and internalised forms of motivation, as well as the pivotal role of motivation in shaping how young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds study, work and live. Drawing on a range of sources, including direct engagement with young people across the UK, our findings highlight both the promise and the fragility of motivation as a driver of positive outcomes.

Drawing on the literature, we have shown that intrinsic and other forms of internal motivation have the power to bring benefits to virtually every domain of life. These range from higher academic attainment to personal fulfilment, to 'good transitions into work', to physical and emotional health, to happiness. However, socioeconomic disadvantage systematically undermines the psychological and material conditions required for internalised forms of motivation. Young people from low-income backgrounds are more likely to encounter environments that frustrate these needs, leading to lower self-efficacy, reduced opportunity awareness, and higher levels of pessimism.

Encouragingly, through our workshops, we found that intrinsic and internalised forms of motivation among young people from low-income backgrounds are widespread. Most participants demonstrated intrinsic motivation in at least one area of their life, and some had extraordinary passions. Many demonstrated other forms of internalised motivation, and were motivated by values such as supporting family, helping others, or gaining financial independence. However, rarely was intrinsic motivation displayed for school or work, especially for children with a lower sense of direction regarding their career. The gap, it seemed, was in connecting the things they enjoyed to the notion of work. This suggests that one key challenge – and opportunity – may be to help young people discover, clarify and connect their existing interests and values to viable and fulfilling transitions into good work.

This report also shows that motivation is not fixed - it is malleable and can be shaped by many factors, including the educational or workplace context. This reinforces the importance of not only the practices and interventions that support basic psychological needs, but also the structural factors and constraints that have the potential to influence them. Many young people we spoke with most valued wellbeing in the workplace, demonstrating the importance of transition into good work. Hence, especially for young people from low-income backgrounds, having work that honours dignity may be a need even more fundamental than the intrinsic motivators that drive them in other parts of their lives.

It is encouraging to note that just as these forms of motivation can be undermined, they can also be effectively supported. Good work that meets people's basic needs, security, autonomy-supportive teaching, mindset mentoring, access to relatable role models, and enhanced awareness of opportunities are all practical strategies that can help foster intrinsic and internal forms of motivation, as well as provide the necessary conversion factors to enable this motivation to drive outcomes. As the COM-B model makes clear, motivation does not exist in a vacuum, and any strategy focused on intrinsic motivation should also consider the capabilities and opportunities, and, more generally, the structural conditions that surround it.

While meeting young people's basic needs for good work is crucial, there should be an ambition to strengthen internalised forms of motivation in relation to work. Offering many of the benefits of intrinsic motivation, internalised forms of motivation – where external goals

become integrated with one's values and identity – may be more achievable and sustainable than intrinsic motivation in workplaces where one faces a vast array of tasks and activities. Hence, a priority for all in this field should be ensuring that dignified work that supports wellbeing is complemented by the development of internalised form of motivation.

As the UK labour market evolves in response to technological change, the need for adaptable and self-directed workers with human-centric skills is growing. Supporting young people to build these capabilities will require a renewed focus on the individuals themselves - not only their skills, but their capabilities, values, beliefs and sense of purpose, as well as the opportunity structures they face, and the milieu in which they live.

If young people are to be supported to develop more internalised forms of motivation - which there is robust evidence to support as an achievable aim - then there is a need to understand these challenges and the perspectives of young people on this topic more deeply and holistically. This will pave the way to providing ways to provide young people with the voice, agency and support structures to identify opportunities in their own futures of work that they have reason to value.

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