



Institute for the
Future of Work

Policy Brief

Channelling Motivation

How intrinsic and internalised motivation can support new pathways for young people from low-income backgrounds to thrive in a rapidly changing world of work

February 2026



Produced in partnership with


EY Foundation

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Introduction

We believe that motivation is a critical but often overlooked component of attainment, health and happiness, in school, work and wider life.

A focus on motivation is not just crucial to addressing the increasing numbers of young people at risk of becoming ‘NEET’, but could also be key to improving rates of school absence, filling skills shortages and, ultimately, building towards better productivity and growth.

In a labour market seeing rapid technological change, the case for a focus on motivation is becoming more urgent.

Conducted in partnership with the EY Foundation, the [Channelling Motivations project](#) focuses on how to cultivate intrinsic motivation (doing things because they are enjoyable) and internal motivation (doing things because they fit one’s values and identity).

Why? Because research has shown that these are foundations for developing agency and human-centric skills - the very things that research also tells us young people increasingly need in this rapidly-changing labour market.

In short, if we can nurture motivation, we can improve receptivity of the brilliant work that organisations are already doing on employability and skills, directing those who are most at risk of falling into the NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) category towards training and employment that aligns with their motivations and values.

To reiterate: a focus on motivation improves young people’s receptivity to the inputs already on offer – whether that be careers guidance, or free AI skills courses. This work does not seek to replace existing skills interventions, but enables them to land more effectively, rather than ‘bounce off’.

This brief summarises the findings of the Channelling Motivations project and sets out research-driven policy recommendations on how a focus on motivation can support young people to make a more effective transition from school into training and employment.

[Read the full suite of reports from the Channelling Motivations Project:](#)

[Final Report](#)

[Working Paper](#) (analysis of the pilot intervention)

[Channelling Motivations Framework](#)

Context: Capabilities, Skills and Motivation

Labour markets are transforming rapidly due to technological change, with major implications for young people. These shifts – driven by new technologies such as AI – are fundamentally transforming the skills and capabilities that young people need to successfully navigate transitions from school into training and on into good jobs.

Young people Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET)

Nearly a million young people are finding themselves in the NEET category. This has significant impacts on young people's wellbeing and comes with associated impacts on productivity and growth.

Support for young people in the NEET category has failed to meet the full spectrum of internal and external factors that have led to that place. Creating a new narrative to address this should be a key national priority.

Research via our groundbreaking [Pissarides Review into the Future of Work and Wellbeing](#) revealed a labour market undergoing significant transformation marked by rapid turnover of skills.

Two factors are key to this paper:

1. **The pace of change of skills requirements in labour markets has accelerated.**
For example, job postings in 2022 were three times more likely to demand new or emerging skills compared to 2016.
2. **There is a rising demand for 'human-centric' skills and capabilities,** including initiative, collaboration, critical thinking, learning, engagement, and communication.

Taken together, these factors point to a growing need to understand how to best support young people to develop skills and capabilities to adapt to these changes, especially as they navigate points of transition.

Though largely focused on an internal state – motivation - this work acknowledges the importance of external contextual, structural, and institutional factors - including varying educational provision, differences in access to and quality of careers guidance, and unequal local opportunity structures – that interact to shape young people's motivational development.

As such, it is situated within Sen and Nussbaum's **Capabilities Approach** - how people can 'live a life that they value'. Rather than a narrow focus on skills, the Capabilities Approach understands that different people experience different personal, social, and environmental factors that influence their agency to convert their capabilities into realised achievements. Individual motivation – the energy to act towards a particular goal – forms one internal conversion factor, but the external dimensions of education provision and access to good careers guidance necessarily form another.

It is our contention that if we are to address the increasing numbers of young people at risk of becoming 'NEET' (Not in Education, Employment or Training) and in the NEET category, we need a Capability Approach that addresses both of these internal and external factors in an integrated way.

A growing body of evidence shows that intrinsic and internal motivation are key enablers of the development of these skills and capabilities.

Encouragingly, our work shows that these forms of motivation are widespread among young people from low-income backgrounds. However, they are often expressed towards activities outside of school or work, especially for children with a weaker sense of their future of career. Importantly, the work also shows that motivation is not fixed – it can be cultivated.

The key challenge, and opportunity, is to help young people discover, clarify and connect their existing interests and values to good futures of work.

By directing their motivations towards these futures, receptivity to the excellent external inputs on offer is increased – whether that be careers guidance, apprenticeships, work experience or free AI training courses.

Supporting access to 'good work'

This research supports IFOW's commitment to promoting 'good work'. Our research has shown that access to good work is a crucial driver of future prospects for people and places across the country. To prevent technological transformation further entrenching existing inequalities, young people from low-income backgrounds need to be supported in cultivating the key skills they need to access good work.

Good work is more than employment. It 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.

Past IFOW research shows that access to good work confers protection for people and communities against health, social and economic shocks and helps them adapt to the technological transformations of AI and automation.

Channelling Motivation

Stage 1 - Motivating Futures

This project, led by the Institute for the Future of Work in partnership with the EY Foundation, began with the [Motivating Futures](#) research, which was published in October 2025.

This included a detailed literature review and bibliometric mapping of 28,000 peer reviewed articles, an analysis of national education data sets, a review of 'what works' in terms of promoting intrinsic motivation in career contexts, and a specially designed 'Future Work Lab' action-research workshop, which was deployed with 76 young people in schools from Cornwall, Birmingham, Bournemouth and Manchester, exploring motivation and their conceptions of their futures of work.

Stage 2 - Channelling Motivations

Using the insights from the Motivating Future stage, the team developed a pilot intervention aimed at cultivating intrinsic and internal forms of motivation among young people from low-income backgrounds.

This intervention - delivered as a one-hour workshop focused on reflective activities - focused on three key elements. Firstly, it explored neuroplasticity and the growth mindset - helping young people understand that change is possible. Secondly, a motivation mapping exercise, and thirdly, a values reflection.

These were deliberately chosen to develop the three key dimensions of Self-Determination Theory:

1. **Relatedness** - the fundamental psychological need to feel a sense of connection, belonging, and caring within social relationships.
2. **Competence** - the quality not just of being good at something, but feeling confident in our ability because of a supportive social environment.
3. **Autonomy** - our basic need to feel in control of our actions and choices, and being given the freedom to act rather than feeling pressured or coerced by others.

The intervention was piloted in programmes delivered by the EY Foundation in the summer of 2025. Details of this multi-part trial can be found in a full working paper devoted to analysis of the results, which can be found [here](#).

Results should be taken as provisional, but participants in the intervention group reported an average of 35% larger self-assessed improvements across motivation-related items than the comparison group, with statistically significant differences for 'talking to new people', 'teamwork', 'sharing ideas' and 'interview technique.'

Written reflections were largely positive, describing gains in confidence, clearer priorities and a stronger sense that meaningful work could be attainable.

The team are currently exploring partnerships for a much larger trial.

Framework for use in Careers Support

A Framework has been published as part of this work, to support those working in schools, or firms or careers support organisations, to apply the principles of this work to programmes that they are running. This framework, and associated resources, can be accessed [here](#).

Case for importance

Intrinsic and internal motivation are vital for young people as they seek to adapt to transforming labour markets. Fostering it is especially important to support those from low-income backgrounds, as socioeconomic disadvantage is often associated with less support at home and at school.

Regional disparities compound the issue. IFOW's [Disruption Index](#) revealed that regions with lower 'Innovation Readiness' scores are less likely to be able to offer good work, impacting career possibilities for young people in those areas.

We welcome many of the Government's recent initiatives focused on employability, including the AI and the Future of Work Unit, the Youth Guarantee, the Get Britain Working white paper, the Milburn Review, apprenticeship reforms and new AI training courses.

However, the focus of much work remains provision of 'external' inputs, such as improving AI literacy and skills. The core conclusion of this research is that this will not see results unless it is matched by policy focused on improving receptivity of these inputs by investing in internal factors and intrinsic motivation.

The priority for government should be a system-level drive towards better integration of careers support provision across young people's experiences, grounded in concepts of developing intrinsic motivation and leading the policy focus away from one solely on 'external' inputs such as skills bootcamps.

Below, we set out our policy recommendations, aimed at three levels: system-level recommendations for government; regional-level recommendations for local bodies; and organisational-level recommendations for education and training providers.

Broadly, these are structured around connecting-up careers support provision, centring intrinsic motivation approaches to careers support, and resourcing and supporting careers support professionals.

Policy Recommendations

System-level change

Recommendations for the Government

1: Further integrate the careers guidance, skills and jobcentre systems

Young people would benefit from a stronger sense of coherence across their transitions from in-school careers guidance to training and on into work. With the National Careers Service merging with JobCentre Plus, and learning from the model of Skills Development Scotland, deeper integration should be pursued.

Currently, there is too much fragmentation, with the number of different bodies and agencies causing confusion – both for young people, and adults tasked with helping them.

2: Invest in integrated life-long careers guidance

Careers advice is a skilled profession, but young people have highly divergent experiences of support. Careers guidance specialists must be better resourced and have better pathways to professional accreditation, whichever context they are working in.

The Government should adopt the recommendations in the Work and Pensions Committee's Get Britain Working report (September 2025) of developing a strategy for protecting and resourcing this profession.

3: Strengthen and support the reflective dimension in the Gatsby Benchmarks

The Gatsby Benchmarks function well in schools, and recent updates give greater emphasis to the importance of offering 'a variety of encounters and experiences', and 'giving young people time to prepare and reflect'.

Time to reflect should be given even greater priority, with autonomy supportive practices woven through programmes in an integrated way. Best practice in some schools should be shared more effectively across local authorities and nationally.

To avoid delivery becoming a 'tickbox exercise' for schools, more resourcing will be needed. Funding raised through efficiencies of the merger of NCS and Jobcentre Plus should be ringfenced to provide this.

4: Embed reflective practice in the National Curriculum

Reflective practice should be taught through PSHE as part of the National Curriculum. This should then be modelled in the 'Living in the Wider World' Core Theme of the PSHE Programme of Study, in relation to reflecting on motivations, hopes and futures of work.

5: Embed Autonomy-Supportive Practices into teaching

Autonomy-supportive practice supports the development of intrinsic and internal motivation, leading to better health and wellbeing outcomes, and better work futures, for young people. These practices should be embedded in teacher training, included in teaching standards, and assessed by Ofsted.

6: Redesigning Job Centres as 'Job, Skills and Capabilities Centres'

In line with Recommendation 1, Job Centres should be repositioned with offers of skills development, capabilities building and job-matching, underpinned by an offer that emphasises internal reflection practices.

This would serve to see job centres destigmatised and support young people to experience coherent transitions from school-based careers guidance to continuing support in the transition from school to further education, training or work.

7: Introduce a Skills and Careers Enterprise Credit

A targeted, enhanced tax credit scheme should be introduced to incentivise businesses to invest in workforce development.

Building on the welcome announcement that the government will cover the full cost of apprenticeships in SMEs for eligible young people under 25, a further 'super-deduction' scheme for SMEs should be introduced, allowing them (and startups) to deduct up to 130% of eligible workforce training costs from taxable income.

This credit could be used towards apprenticeships, link work in local schools, and other types of workforce training.

Regional-level change

Recommendations for local authorities

1: Regional authorities should convene regional networks of careers support professionals from across schools, colleges, firms and other organisations

Regional bodies such as Mayoral Combined Authorities should take an active role convening and solidifying networks of all those involved in delivery of careers guidance, training or support in their local areas. Organisations that provide mental health support should also be connected into these networks.

These bodies should look to improve the coherence of how young people experience careers guidance and support, and look to promote autonomy-supportive practices across delivery, especially in careers guidance and support. This should include supporting training, disseminating resources and sharing best practice across organisations.

2: Implement Growth and Capabilities Zones

Regional bodies such as Mayoral Combined Authorities should encourage the establishment of, and investment in, new 'Growth and Capabilities Zones'.

These will be sites for convening networks of all those involved in delivery of careers guidance, training or support, and be places with a focus on a well-functioning local innovation ecosystem, linking technology incubation, skills and capabilities development and generating social capital.

Once established, regional bodies should offer strong leadership of Growth and Capabilities Zones, helping networks that arise within them to be accommodated in attractational spaces which link job search and matching, start-up support, networking, and reflective careers support.

3: Forefront autonomy-supportive and reflective practices

As part of this convening role, regional bodies should lead on highlighting the value and purpose of autonomy-supportive and reflective practices in careers guidance and support. This should include supporting training, disseminating resources and sharing best practice across schools, colleges, training providers, careers support organisations and firms.

4: Support tangible, hands-on, 'good work' experiences

As they look to help schools deliver on new statutory guidance to offer 'a variety of encounters and experiences', regional bodies should use their convening role to support programmes that showcase 'good work', rather than just experience of 'any work'.

To aspire to and access good work, young people need to understand and experience it. Regional bodies should use their leverage across the local innovation ecosystem to make sure that young people have a good understanding of where good work is happening in businesses in their local area.

Organisational-level change

Recommendations for education and employment support providers

1: Allocate and protect time to embed reflective practices into careers programmes

Schools, colleges, and employment support organisations should allocate protected time for reflective practices before and after careers-related activity to support young people to identify their motivations so that they can make more informed and active choices about their future of work.

2: Embed autonomy-supportive teaching practices into school-based Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

Schools and colleges should embed autonomy-supportive teaching practices into school-based continuing professional development (CPD) to equip educators with the skills to foster a classroom environment that facilitates student agency, motivation, and wellbeing.

3: Resource Careers Guidance specialists

Careers Guidance specialists should have access to ongoing, high-quality training that deepens their understanding of labour market trends, youth development, and the evolving nature of work. In line with our recommendations for Government, engagement in a robust and widely recognised accreditation framework would help raise the professional status of Careers Guidance specialists.

Careers guidance specialists should be supported to expand their social capital by participating in the local innovation ecosystem, for example sitting on organisations' boards, attending employment-related events, and having regular opportunities to visit workplaces and engage directly with employers across different sectors to build strong and trusted relationships between business, schools and colleges. This will help careers guidance specialists better understand what 'good work' – work that offers fair pay, autonomy, and supports wellbeing – looks like.

4: Integrate local firms / start-ups into curriculum delivery

Schools and colleges should enhance careers-related activities by building links to local firms and start-ups. This will help young people build confidence in engaging with employers, begin to build their social capital, and connect classroom learning with the world of work.



Institute for the Future of Work

IFOW is an independent research and development institute dedicated to transforming working lives for the better, co-founded by former employment barrister Anna Thomas MBE, Nobel prize-winning economist Sir Christopher Pissarides, and technologist Naomi Climer CBE.

Our core team at Somerset House works with a growing network of strategic partners striving for systems change.

Our vision is a future in which everyone flourishes in work they shape.

Our mission is to understand together how to transform working lives for good.

Our belief is that creating and sustaining good work is the best way to achieve this mission and ensure that innovation and social good advance together.



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