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## Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

# Better Learning: Enhancing Mentoring and Support for Work-Based Learning

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### KESS Policy Briefing

*...is a forum that encourages debate on a wide range of research findings, with the overall aim of promoting evidence-informed policy and law-making within Northern Ireland*

## Key points:

- Proposed legislation to require participation in education, training or apprenticeships to age 18 aims to improve outcomes for young people in Northern Ireland.
- Around three in four young people already participate in education or training, but engagement declines by age 18, indicating challenges in sustaining participation.
- **Effective implementation of participation policy depends on strengthening workplace support systems and coordination across wider apprenticeship ecosystems. Extending participation to age 18 will not improve outcomes on its own; workplace capacity/employer readiness, mentoring structures and support systems are required to sustain young people in learning.**
- The policy aligns with wider developments across the four UK Nations, including the raising of the participation age and Youth Guarantee in England and the Young Person's Guarantees in Wales and Scotland, respectively, which aim to increase participation, including by reducing the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET).
- Evidence from our British Academy-funded research project, *Better Learning*, highlights the central role of line managers and mentors in formalised workplace learning.
- Line managers are key actors in supporting apprentices, providing skills development, coordination of learning opportunities, and pastoral support. However, line managers often face challenges including workload pressures, unclear expectations, and limited support, particularly in smaller organisations.
- Apprentices' experiences are shaped by multiple interacting factors, including workplace demands, access to support and mentoring, and individual circumstances.
- Younger apprentices may require additional workplace readiness support and pastoral care to sustain engagement.
- Policy considerations include recognising the role of line managers, improving access to mentoring and resources (for example, through interlinked national information and guidance hubs), and enhancing coordination across the apprenticeship system, including employers, educational institutions and training providers, intermediary organisations (such as professional bodies) and policymakers.

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## The Policy Context

The Northern Ireland Executive is progressing legislation to require all young people to participate in education, apprenticeships or training until the age of 18. This policy aims to improve outcomes for young people, enhance social mobility, and strengthen the skills base of the economy. Consultation findings highlight strong support for these aims, alongside recognition of challenges relating to engagement, support and access to appropriate pathways (Department for the Economy, 2025). This builds on the Independent Review of Education (2023) and aligns with TransformED NI's Ten Point Plan.

The proposed legislation sits within a wider policy context involving all four UK Nations. In England, Raising of the Participation Age (RPA) requires young people to remain in education or training until age 18, while the Youth Guarantee aims to ensure young people are 'earning or learning'. In Scotland and Wales, Young Person's Guarantees similarly aim to connect all young people with opportunities in education, training or employment. Together, these policies reflect a broader emphasis on increasing participation and reducing disengagement among young people.

## The Better Learning Project

This briefing draws on evidence from *Better Learning*, a British Academy-funded research project examining how learning is supported in work-based contexts, alongside a wider body of research from The Open University's [Work-Based Learning and Skills for the Future Research Cluster](#). The evidence base includes over 30 qualitative interviews with line managers, apprentices, and sector stakeholders, and builds on wider insights from more than 100 participants across multiple sectors (Myers et al., 2025; Reid et al., 2026).

Our findings raise an important question for policy: what does supporting participation well look like in the workplace? While policy frameworks often focus on access and participation, our findings highlight the importance of how learning is enacted in practice.

## Work-Based Learning as a System

Apprenticeships operate within a complex system involving employers, educational institutions and providers, apprentices and intermediary organisations. Although often described as a 'tripartite relationship' within employer/education contexts, responsibility for apprentice learning is not always clearly defined in practice. Given that apprentices typically spend around 80% of their time in the workplace, much of their learning is shaped by their workplace conditions and employer context. Within this system, line managers play a central role in supporting workplace learning, guiding development, enabling access to opportunities and providing pastoral support (Reid et al., 2025).

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## Evidence from Practice

Findings highlight pressures on line managers, who must balance apprentice support with operational demands. Many report limited clarity around expectations and insufficient support structures. At the same time, strong motivation and commitment are evident, particularly among those with prior apprenticeship experience.

Younger apprentices often require additional support in developing workplace behaviours, confidence and communication skills. This can involve sustained coaching and encouragement in everyday work tasks, placing additional pastoral and work-readiness demands on line managers. As one participant explained:

*'One of the girls I had, she was terrified to answer the phone at first, so that took lots of coaching... that took so much for her to get over that first hurdle... it's really giving them skills for working life'* (line manager, travel & tourism).

Workplace learning relies on ongoing, *often unseen effort* to support apprentices' development in practice. Overall, apprentice outcomes are shaped by multiple interacting factors, meaning participation alone does not guarantee positive outcomes.

## Supporting Mechanisms

Mentoring programmes can strengthen workplace support by providing additional guidance, expanding access to resources and supporting both apprentices *and* line managers, for example, as one of our participants noted:

*'[Young apprentices] that don't have access to a mentor are very quick to say, do you know what, if we had have done it, it would have helped us because it's really hard to talk to my line manager about how I want to take some time to...do some study and write an assignment or whatever it might be. And particularly when you're a young person, that conversation is even more challenging because that line manager feels even further removed from you as an individual.'* (CEO, apprenticeship intermediary)

Intermediary organisations also play an important role in supporting work-based learning in Northern Ireland. For example, initiatives developed with industry partners such as Manufacturing & Engineering Growth & Advancement (MEGA) in Mid-Ulster highlight how mentoring and employer-facing support can help to bridge gaps between employers, providers and learners. These approaches demonstrate the value of locally grounded support in enabling apprentices and line managers to navigate workplace learning more effectively. Strengthening local networks and employer learning contexts also help to build skills and retain knowledge within regional ecosystems.

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## Recommendations for Northern Ireland

- 1. Recognise and support the role of line managers.** Line managers play a central role in delivering formalised workplace learning, yet this role is often insufficiently recognised in policy and practice. Supporting line managers through structured training, clear guidance and dedicated time allocation would help ensure that they can effectively balance operational and developmental responsibilities.
- 2. Strengthen mentoring provision.** Structured mentoring programmes can provide an important additional layer of support for both apprentices and line managers. By extending the support network beyond the immediate workplace, mentoring can help address gaps in knowledge, confidence and capacity, particularly for younger apprentices or those in smaller organisations.
- 3. Develop accessible resources for those supporting learning in practice.** While employers are recognised within the apprenticeship system, those *directly* responsible for supporting learning—particularly line managers and mentors—often have limited access to clear guidance and support. Developing accessible resources, such as interlinked national information and guidance hubs, could help make expectations more visible, support consistent practice, and reduce the burden on individuals undertaking this often ‘invisible’ work that is critical to the delivery of apprenticeships in practice.
- 4. Enhance coordination across the system.** Apprenticeship systems involve multiple actors, including employers, education providers, intermediary organisations and policymakers. Strengthening coordination across the Northern Ireland ecosystem would help ensure more coherent learning pathways and reduce fragmentation, particularly where responsibilities for supporting apprentices are not clearly defined.

## References

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