

Edge Foundation poll exposes stagnation in workplace preparedness over last two decades and points to popularity for ‘Advanced British Standard’ approach.

Submitted by: Edge Foundation

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An extensive new poll commissioned by the Edge Foundation to mark its 20th anniversary suggests we’re not preparing young people for the workplace much better than we were 20 years ago. The poll conducted by Public First in February 2024 explores the views of over 2,000 adults in England and tests for the first time in some detail attitudes towards 16-18 education reform, parity between ‘academic’ and ‘vocational’ pathways, and how well the system is preparing young people for life and work.

The polling also put Government plans to bring together “the best of A Levels and T Levels” into a new baccalaureate-style qualification, the Advanced British Standard, to the test, finding overwhelming support for young people to be able to mix and match ‘academic and ‘vocational’ subjects to a greater extent, and to study numeracy and literacy to age 18.

The headline findings from the poll are:

1. Voters think the current education system is not fit for purpose. But more than that, they think we’re not actually preparing young people for their futures any better than 20 years ago. A majority of respondents (52%) think the current education system prepares young people poorly for the world of work. 37% think a person leaving the education system today is worse prepared for the workplace today than someone leaving 20 years ago (1 in 10 say “much worse”).

2. There is growing public demand for schools and colleges to focus on developing essential skills for life and work, and technical skills to prepare them for vocational pathways. Gaining life skills (e.g. household budgeting, cooking, etc.) was seen as the most important priority of the education system in England. But large majorities think education should focus more on teaching young people skills that will be useful for the workplace (88%) or for everyday life (90%), and there’s overwhelming support (82%) for encouraging more young people to explore technical or vocational options.

3. Technical and vocational pathways are popular – and perceived to be better preparation for life after school or college – but respondents feel they are not as respected as they should be. Despite vast majorities thinking that technical and vocational qualifications should be as respected as ‘academic’ ones (81%), just under a third (32%) of respondents agreed that technical and vocational qualifications are actually as respected as academic ones, in practice. The positive? Respect is on the up. We see an age trend here - with younger respondents more likely to say technical or vocational qualifications are already as respected as academic ones than older respondents.

4. The Advanced British Standard is a popular proposal, in principle and in practice. 78% of respondents said they would support a proposal to reform the education system in line with the ABS proposals, compared to just 10% who would oppose. Driving that support is the proposal for majors and minors, allowing for breadth and the all-important ability to mix and match ‘academic’ and ‘vocational’

subjects.

The Edge Foundation is launching the full report on Monday 22 April 2024, with an in-depth look at the poll findings and reaction from a high-profile line up of guest speakers working across the education sector in a webinar event chaired by The Guardian's Fiona Millar, from 2pm. The Government's new Minister for Skills, Luke Hall MP, has been invited.

Alice Barnard, CEO of the Edge Foundation, said: "Since Edge was founded 20 years ago, we can see a clear positive shift in perception and value of vocational and technical skills. The days of negative public opinion around 'non-academic' pathways are gone, and Government policy is finally catching up.

"With a general election looming, Edge will be calling for a truly broad and balanced education for all young people- one that is academically rigorous and equips them with the skills for life and rapidly changing world of work."

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Notes to Editor:

For all media enquiries, please contact Susan Higgins, Director of Communications at the Edge Foundation via shiggins@edge.co.uk or 07867 502515

- Edge's CEO Alice Barnard and Executive Director Olly Newton will be available for media requests, as well as a young apprentice and headteacher.
- The nationally representative poll was conducted by Public First on behalf of the Edge Foundation between 23rd-28th February 2024, and surveyed 2,007 adults across England. All results are weighted using Iterative Proportional Fitting, or 'Raking'.
- The report and full poll tables will be made available on the Edge Foundation website on 22 April 2024.