Discussion paper

A feature or a recent bug? Employers, schools and the curriculum

A historical perspective on the relationship between employer expectations and the school curriculum in England

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June 2026

Confederation of School Trusts

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Introduction

Former Health Secretary Alan Milburn was asked by the Government in November 2025 to investigate and report on the drivers of the increase in the number of young people who are not in education employment or training (NEET).

His initial report shares findings of his Young People and Work review. The report warns that the proportion of NEETs could rise from one in eight to one in six within five years, and argues that addressing the issue would require what Milburn described as a 'system reset' encompassing the welfare system, the school system, the skills system and the health system. His diagnosis is serious, and the concerns it raises are legitimate.[1]

However, as this paper seeks to show, the solutions to the problems facing the employment opportunities and work readiness of young people likely go beyond what the school curriculum alone can achieve. While this point might seem platitudinal, it's important because there is a tendency for the commentary around this issue to fall into an overly simplistic focus on the school curriculum as the primary root, and thus solution, to the problem.

Some of this was evident in Milburn's earlier remarks on schools. In April 2026 he criticised English schools as "exam-obsessed" and argued that England had built "an education system that is brilliant at sorting young people by academic ability and poor at equipping them for adult life". He added that "time and again employers say young people are not work ready".[2]

Although such claims attract attention whenever they are made, what is striking historically is not their novelty but their persistence. Employer dissatisfaction with the school curriculum is one of the most enduring themes in the history of English education. Similar concerns can be traced back at least to the mid-nineteenth century and have resurfaced repeatedly under very different curriculum regimes.

Successive generations of employers and employer organisations have argued that the curriculum was insufficiently aligned with economic needs. Those concerns have repeatedly prompted reform, yet employer dissatisfaction has reappeared under Victorian elementary schooling, the tripartite system, comprehensive education, and the modern National Curriculum alike.

This paper places current debates in that longer historical context. It argues that the tension between employer expectations and schooling reflects structural features of the relationship

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[1] Milburn, A (2026) *Young People and Work: Interim Report*. London: Department for Work and Pensions.
[2] Toth, A (2026) 'Labour's youth unemployment tsar hits out at exam-obsessed British schools', *The Independent*, April 2026.

between education and the labour market that curriculum reform is unlikely to resolve fully on its own. The historical record suggests this is not simply evidence of a uniquely broken curriculum. It may instead represent a recurring tension within the English education system and labour market.

It is also worth considering whether some degree of tension between employer expectations and schooling may itself be productive in certain ways. The fact that schools do not align perfectly with immediate labour-market demands may help ensure that education serves purposes beyond short-term economic utility alone.

This is not to minimise the importance of economic considerations, or the issues Milburn highlights, but a system designed mainly or solely around current employer demand could risk narrowing the purposes of education too far. Some degree of misalignment may therefore carry benefits as well as costs, preserving space for broader intellectual, civic and personal development alongside economic preparation.

The Victorian origins of the complaint (1850s–1900)

Employer concern about the adequacy of English schooling for economic purposes emerged alongside the development of mass education itself. The issue became especially prominent following the international exhibitions of the mid-nineteenth century. At the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1867, British manufacturers and commentators expressed anxiety that competitors in Germany and France were producing technically educated workforces that England lacked.

The government response included the Royal Commission on Scientific Instruction and the Advancement of Science (the Devonshire Commission, 1870-75), followed by the Royal Commission on Technical Instruction, established in 1881 under the chairmanship of Bernhard Samuelson.

The Commission was tasked with examining "the instruction of the industrial classes of certain foreign countries in technical and other subjects for the purpose of comparison with that of the corresponding classes in this country; and into the influence of such instruction on manufacturing and other industries at home and abroad".[3]

Its reports concluded that English schools provided insufficient science, drawing, mathematics, and practical instruction for a modern industrial economy. Among its recommendations were that drawing should become part of elementary education and that local authorities should have greater powers to establish technical and secondary schools.

[3] Royal Commission on Technical Instruction (1882; 1884) *Reports of the Royal Commission on Technical Instruction* (The Samuelson Commission). 2 vols. London: HMSO.

The pattern was already familiar: industrial employers complained that education was not meeting economic need; government established a commission; reform followed. The Technical Instruction Act 1889 was one result. Yet the underlying complaint persisted.

The early Twentieth Century: A new system, the same diagnosis (1902–1938)

The Education Act 1902 created local education authorities and significantly expanded secondary education in England and Wales. Part of the political case for reform rested on concerns about national economic competitiveness, especially in comparison with Germany.

As Burnett notes: "the rising tide of Germanophobia in the wake of the South African War impressed Conservative politicians with the need to improve England's educational system in order that she remain competitive in the world".[4]

Yet within a generation the new secondary system was itself criticised for being overly academic and insufficiently connected to industrial and technical need. The Spens Report of 1938 concluded that: "the existing arrangements for the whole-time education of boys and girls in England and Wales have ceased to correspond with the actual structure of modern society and with the economic facts of the situation".[5]

The report recommended the expansion of technical high schools alongside grammar and secondary modern provision in the hope of creating a system better aligned with industrial requirements. In practice, however, technical schools remained comparatively underdeveloped and underfunded. A different educational structure had been introduced, but the underlying diagnosis remained remarkably similar.

Post-war expansion: New schools, persistent concerns (1944–1960s)

The Education Act 1944 gave legislative form to the tripartite system of grammar, technical and secondary modern schools. In theory, this arrangement was intended to provide technical and vocational education with greater status and institutional support.

In practice, however, secondary technical schools remained relatively few in number and educationally marginal. By the late 1950s, concerns were again emerging that the education system was not adequately preparing young people for the needs of modern industry.

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[4] Burnett, Jason K., "*Building a Better Briton: Parliament's Push for State-Funded Secondary Schools, 1901-1903*" (2000). University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations.
2120. https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/2120

[5] Board of Education (1938) *Secondary Education with Special Reference to Grammar Schools and Technical High Schools* (The Spens Report). London: HMSO. Available at: https://education-uk.org/documents/spens/spens1938.html

The Crowther Report of 1959 observed that England did not in reality operate a balanced tripartite system at all, but one dominated by the grammar school model. The report expressed concern about the educational experience of pupils for whom a more practical or technical curriculum might have been appropriate.

At the same time, post-war Britain saw major expansion in employer-supported technical day-release and workplace training. Yet commentators continued to note weak integration between schools and vocational preparation, alongside uncertainty about where responsibility for workforce development should properly sit.

The government's response included the creation of employer-led Industrial Training Boards under the Industrial Training Act 1964, reflecting an implicit recognition that schools alone could not be expected to meet all technical and industrial training needs.

The great debate: Callaghan and the formalisation of the complaint (1976)

It was James Callaghan who, in October 1976, delivered the most politically influential articulation of employer dissatisfaction with the school curriculum in modern English educational history.

Speaking at Ruskin College, Oxford, he argued: "I am concerned on my journeys to find complaints from industry that new recruits from the schools sometimes do not have the basic tools to do the job that is required."[6]

The speech also argued that: "There seems to be a need for more technological bias in science teaching that will lead towards practical applications in industry rather than towards academic studies."

Callaghan questioned why girls continued to leave science education early and why vacancies in science and engineering remained unfilled.

These themes reflected wider contemporary concerns. Silverwood and Wolstencroft, drawing on Chitty, report that a 1974 National Youth Employment Council survey found that many businesses believed young people entering employment lacked satisfactory skills.[7]

Callaghan's intervention was politically important because it signalled a stronger central government interest in what schools taught, helping to shape the climate from which later curriculum reforms emerged.

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[6] Callaghan, J. (1976) Speech at Ruskin College, Oxford, 18 October 1976 ('A rational debate based on the facts'). Available at: https://education-uk.org/documents/speeches/1976ruskin.html

[7] Silverwood, J. and Wolstencroft, P. (2023) 'The Ruskin Speech and Great Debate in English education, 1976–1979: a study of motivation', *British Educational Research Journal*, 49(3), pp. 766-781. The article cites Chitty (2009) regarding a 1974 National Youth Employment Council survey; the original survey report has not been independently verified for this paper.

Historically, however, the speech is equally significant because the comprehensive system of the 1970s was being criticised for broadly the same underlying failures previously attributed to grammar schools, tripartite schooling, and the Victorian elementary system before them.

Silverwood and Wolstencroft further argue that Callaghan's intervention was motivated at least partly by a desire to defend comprehensive education from political attack rather than simply to initiate curriculum reform.

From the National Curriculum to today

The Education Reform Act 1988 introduced the National Curriculum in English schools. Yet employer dissatisfaction did not disappear.

When the English Baccalaureate was introduced in 2010–11, some employer and sector organisations argued that a stronger emphasis on traditional academic subjects risked marginalising vocational and applied learning. During the same period, business organisations including the CBI criticised what they saw as an increasingly exam-driven school culture and called for schools to develop broader employability attributes alongside academic attainment.

Successive governments also pursued structural reforms aimed at the academic-vocational divide. The Tomlinson Report proposed a unified diploma framework intended to give vocational and academic routes parity of esteem.[8] The 14–19 Diplomas introduced from 2008 attempted a more limited version of the same idea but were largely discontinued after 2010. Following the 2011 Wolf Review, low-value vocational qualifications were removed from school performance tables.[9] T-levels were introduced from 2020 as a technical alternative to A-levels, with V-levels announced for 2027. Each represented a serious attempt to address the relationship between schooling and employment. Each was followed within a few years by renewed employer criticism that young people were insufficiently prepared.

But what might feel in the current moment to be a problem anchored in the specifics of the post-2010 curriculum in fact has its roots in a much longer debate. Importantly, however, the specific skills said to be lacking have changed over time. Victorian industrialists had emphasised technical drawing and applied science; post-war employers frequently focused on craft and technical competence; late twentieth-century debates centred on literacy, numeracy, and IT capability; more recent discussions have stressed communication, resilience, creativity and collaborative problem-solving.

The language changed with the economy, but the broader pattern of dissatisfaction remained strikingly consistent.

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[8] Tomlinson, M. (2004) 14–19 Curriculum and Qualifications Reform: Final Report of the Working Group on 14–19 Reform. London: Department for Education and Skills.

[9] Wolf, A. (2011) *Review of Vocational Education: The Wolf Report*. London: Department for Education.

In April 2026, Alan Milburn stated: "We have built an education system that is brilliant at sorting young people by academic ability and poor at equipping them for adult life… Time and again employers say young people are not work ready."[10]

The curriculum under discussion was very different from those criticised in 1884, 1938, 1959 or 1976. Yet the underlying concern remained recognisable.

A feature, not a bug?

Taken together, this history suggests that tension between employer expectations and the school curriculum may be structural rather than temporary.

The issue does not appear to arise from any single curriculum model. Similar concerns have surfaced under locally determined curricula, tripartite arrangements, comprehensive systems, and highly centralised national frameworks alike.

Several factors help explain this persistence.

First, employer expectations are not static. Each phase of economic development generates new concerns about the skills young people are perceived to lack. By the time curriculum reform is implemented, labour market expectations may already have shifted.

Second, schools are expected to fulfil multiple purposes simultaneously. They are asked to prepare young people for employment, but also for citizenship, further study, cultural participation and personal development. These aims overlap but do not always point in the same direction.

Callaghan himself acknowledged this tension in the Ruskin speech: "The goals of our educational system are to equip children to the best of their ability for a lively, constructive place in society, and also to fit them to do a job of work. Not one or the other but both."

Third, the employer voice is neither neutral nor uniform. Different sectors value different forms of preparation, and expectations of 'work readiness' vary substantially across industries and over time.

Finally, the history of these debates suggests a recurring transfer of responsibility toward schools. Employer criticism has often prompted curriculum reform, whereas wider labour-market structures, including patterns of employer investment in training, have tended to receive less sustained attention. Government policy on apprenticeships has become more prominent in recent years, but it has also been subject to repeated changes – this may have harmed understanding and effectiveness of potentially positive interventions like the apprenticeship levy.

One challenge to this structural reading is the international comparison. Several other countries have achieved more durable alignment between schooling and employer

[10] Toth (2026).

expectations, most notably through the German and Swiss systems, which better integrate vocational education. In these settings, employer criticism of schooling exists but does not seem to display the same recurring intensity found in the English case. This suggests the tension described here may not be a universal feature of the relationship between education and the labour market, but a more specifically English pattern. The persistence of the complaint across very different English curriculum regimes still suggests that curriculum design alone is unlikely to resolve it. But the argument is more precisely that the tension is structural within the English society more generally, rather than inherent to schooling itself.

As Alison Wolf and Ewart Keep have both argued in different ways, the relationship between education, skills and economic performance cannot be understood solely through curriculum design.[11]

[11] Keep, E. (2006) 'State Control of the English education and training system: Playing with the Biggest Train Set in the World', *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 58(1), pp. 47–64.

Conclusion

When Alan Milburn argues that schools are not adequately preparing young people for employment, he is participating in a debate with a very long history.

Similar concerns can be found in Victorian discussions of technical education, in the Spens and Crowther reports, in Callaghan's Ruskin speech and in more recent criticism of examination-driven schooling.

That continuity should prompt caution about claims that curriculum reform can fully resolve the issue. The persistence of the debate across very different educational systems suggests that the relationship between schooling and employer expectations is inherently difficult to reconcile completely.

This does not mean curriculum design is unimportant. But it does suggest that discussions of 'work readiness' need to take account not only of schools and qualifications, but also of wider labour-market structures, patterns of employer investment in training, and the multiple purposes schools are expected to serve.

The relationship between employers and the curriculum is therefore best understood not as a temporary policy failure awaiting a definitive solution, but as a longstanding tension within English education. Arguably, this has implications for any proposed solutions to the problem.

The publication of the Milburn review's interim findings underscores this point. The NEET figures it sets out are striking and the concerns it raises about young people's transitions into adulthood are real. Yet Milburn himself frames the issue as a whole-system failure spanning welfare, skills, health and employment as well as education. That framing is consistent with the argument advanced here. If the persistence of employer dissatisfaction across nearly two centuries suggests anything, it is that the school curriculum is rarely the whole story, and that durable improvements in the transition from education to work are unlikely to come from curriculum reform alone.

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