

SOCIAL MOBILITY AND APPRENTICESHIPS

A PRACTICAL RESOURCE FOR CHANGE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Led by the University of Sussex and developed in partnership
with the Sussex Council of Training Providers



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FOREWORD

University of Sussex
Sasha Roseneil
Vice Chancellor, University of Sussex

Higher education has the power to transform lives - but pathways to progression can often be uneven and obstructed. We held three thought-provoking events to explore degree apprenticeships and social mobility from diverse perspectives - including careers professionals, providers and employers, all of whom play crucial roles in widening participation.

This series of events brought together colleagues and partners from across the region, united by a shared commitment to increasing opportunity, access and success in degree apprenticeships. What emerged was a collective ambition grounded in practical expertise and open, reflective dialogue.

This resource brings together insights, useful information and shared discussions from the events, as well as the commitments delegates made towards action and change within their own practice. It weaves together common themes and recommendations, serving both as a record of shared learning and a springboard for continued progress.

The challenges of equal opportunity and access are longstanding and far too complex for any one organisation to solve alone. That is why I am proud that the University of Sussex has supported this work in collaboration with our university partners and regional stakeholders.

As a sector, our responsibility is clear:
to ensure higher education is not only open to all, but actively inclusive.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Why Social Mobility and Apprenticeships Matter

Apprenticeships hold potential to unlock talent, promote equity and drive social mobility. They offer a route into skilled employment and continued learning for individuals from all backgrounds, particularly those who may not follow a traditional academic path to university. Yet, despite the expanding availability of higher and degree apprenticeships, access to these pathways is still not equally distributed. Too often, barriers relating to awareness, support, affordability or employer engagement continue to limit opportunity for underrepresented groups.

The Social Mobility Commission has long highlighted apprenticeships as a powerful lever for change. Research has shown that well-supported apprenticeships can lead to **enhanced lifetime earnings, greater job security and increased social capital for workplace learners**. In particular, Level 6 (degree-level) apprenticeships are seen as a key opportunity to level the playing field and provide high-quality alternatives to full-time university study.

As Robert Halfon, Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education (2022 – 2024), stated in 2023:



“ Degree apprenticeships offer an opportunity for those who might not normally go to university to get started in a profession. This is real social mobility. ”

ABOUT

THE RESOURCE

The resource document has been developed to support stakeholders across the apprenticeship ecosystem - careers professionals, training providers, universities and employers - to strengthen their contribution to social mobility through apprenticeships.

It has been produced following a three-part event series funded by the [Office for Students \(OfS\)](#), led by the [University of Sussex](#) (in partnership with the [University of Brighton](#) and the [University of Chichester](#)), and developed and delivered by the [Sussex Council of Training Providers \(SCTP\)](#).

The events, held in July 2025, explored how different parts of the system can work together to increase awareness, improve uptake and retention, and expand employer engagement. This will support more equitable access and progression through apprenticeship pathways.

Each event engaged a distinct audience and focus:

- **Careers Support, Raising Awareness and Reaching Potential** brought together careers professionals and careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) stakeholders to examine how to widen participation, raise aspirations and address barriers faced by underrepresented groups.
- **Retention, Achievement and Supporting Learners to Succeed** focused on training providers and support organisations, considering how inclusive practice, learner wellbeing and proactive support can improve retention and progression.
- **Engaging Employers in the Conversation** centred on employer perspectives, highlighting both the benefits and barriers to offering apprenticeships, and the importance of inclusive recruitment in supporting diversity and social value.

A distinctive feature of the events was the invitation for delegates to make pledges. Collectively, these highlighted a strong commitment across the system:

- Careers professionals pledged to **raise awareness, embed social mobility into practice, and collaborate more effectively** with schools, parents, providers and employers.
- Training Providers committed to **enhancing learner support, adopting inclusive approaches, and enabling progression from Level 2 to Level 6**.
- Employers pledged to **promote apprenticeships more widely, embed inclusive recruitment, review internal processes, and build new partnerships** to expand access and impact.

These event insights and pledges reinforce the shared recognition that advancing social mobility through apprenticeships requires coordinated action at every stage. This progresses from careers guidance and programme delivery through to employer engagement and workforce practice.

Each chapter of the **Social Mobility and Apprenticeships Resource Document** corresponds to one of the events, offering insights from keynote presentations, panel discussions and facilitated workshops. The document captures emerging themes, good practice examples and practical recommendations tailored to the specific focus of each session.

A separate **Comprehensive Recommendations** report brings together the collective insights from all three events in the Social Mobility and Apprenticeships series.

CONTEXT AND EVIDENCE BASE

This resource is underpinned by evidence and insights from the [Social Mobility Commission \(SMC\)](#), a statutory body established to monitor and promote social mobility in the UK. The SMC's research provides a clear case for how apprenticeships, when designed and delivered inclusively, can help break cycles of disadvantage and open new pathways to skilled employment.

Their research [Apprenticeships and Social Mobility: fulfilling potential](#), reveals:

- Participation in higher-level apprenticeships has grown, but **individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds are still less likely to access or complete these programmes** – particularly at Level 4 and above.
- There are **persistent gaps in information, guidance and progression routes**, particularly for learners navigating from intermediate or advanced levels into degree apprenticeships, meaning progression is limited.
- **Learners from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to achieve English and maths qualifications**, which often prevent them accessing apprenticeships. This is especially the case at higher levels, even when learners have the motivation and potential.
- **Employers play a crucial role** in shaping access, yet smaller businesses often lack the confidence, capacity or clarity to engage inclusively.

- **Wraparound support, coaching and mentoring** are proven approaches that improve retention and progression, especially when embedded early and maintained throughout the programme.

The Commission calls for stronger employer incentives, improved support for learners from low-income backgrounds, and clearer accountability measures to close these gaps.

To support providers and employers in addressing these challenges, the Social Mobility Commission also developed the [Apprenticeships that Work for All Toolkit](#). This is a practical guide with checklists, case studies and prompts to embed equity, inclusion and social mobility into apprenticeship delivery.



SHARED REFLECTIONS FROM STAKEHOLDERS

Across the three events, participants were invited to reflect on **what social mobility means to them**, and why it matters in the context of apprenticeships. The collective view was clear: social mobility is about **ensuring everyone has the opportunity to reach their potential**, regardless of background or starting point. Attendees described it in terms of **fairness, aspiration, progression and access**, and emphasised its importance not only for individuals, but for wider social and economic benefit.

When asked **why social mobility matters**, respondents highlighted several common themes:

- **Unlocking Potential:** many attendees felt that talent can be held back because people lack the networks, support or confidence to access opportunity. Apprenticeships can provide a structured, supported pathway to realise that potential.
- **Reducing Inequality:** participants recognised the role apprenticeships can play in addressing long-standing disparities in education, income and access to professions, particularly for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds or under-served communities.
- **Creating a Fairer Society:** several contributors described social mobility as central to building a society where success is determined by ability and effort, not circumstance.
- **Improving Life Chances:** from mental health to career fulfilment, attendees spoke of the wider life benefits that come when individuals feel empowered to progress, belong and contribute.
- **Enabling Business and Economic Growth:** participants also recognised that supporting social mobility is not only a moral imperative, but an economic one, enabling a more diverse, resilient and skilled workforce for the future.



These reflections set the tone for each event. They reinforced a shared belief in the power of apprenticeships to act as a genuine engine of opportunity when they are well understood, well supported and well promoted.

HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE



The Social Mobility and Apprenticeships Resource Document is intended as **a practical tool to inform policy, shape delivery, and inspire collaborative action.**

Whether you are:

- A careers professional looking to embed social mobility into guidance practices
- A training provider reviewing learner support strategies or
- An employer considering how apprenticeships align with your diversity and workforce goals

You will find relevant **event insights**, information on **good practice approaches, and actionable recommendations** within this resource. Each chapter concludes with a set of summary recommendations. You are encouraged to share this resource with colleagues, partners and stakeholders as a basis for discussion and action planning.

This resource can be read in full or explored by chapter depending on your focus or role, and readers can click directly on any section in the Contents page to navigate to the relevant part of the toolkit.

We have also developed a separate **Comprehensive Recommendations** report that brings together the collective insights from across all three events in the Social Mobility and Apprenticeships event series.

All resources are available on the SCTP Social Mobility and Apprenticeships Resource webpage: www.sctp.org.uk/social-mobility-and-apprenticeships-resource

Together, we can ensure that apprenticeships work for everyone and that they serve as a true catalyst for social mobility in Sussex and beyond.

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