Apprenticeships risk failing some young people

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In a blog for National Apprenticeship Week the CEO & Founder of the social mobility charity Urban Synergy, Leila Thomas, talks about the barriers some people still face when it comes to the workplace.

Apprenticeships are great, the opportunity to earn while you learn is fantastic. However, imagine you're an 18-year old without parents who work in the City who've already got you some work experience or helped with your CV? Or you can't afford to travel to your apprenticeship interview.

The government's new Youth Guarantee, is a long-term plan promising access to overhaul and boost apprenticeships and offering work experience for everyone who needs it. That is most definitely a step in the right direction.

This National Apprenticeship Week, we applaud the intent behind this proposal. For years, our charity has worked to empower underrepresented people starting with 9-year olds in primary school by connecting them with mentors, relatable role models, and career opportunities.

Everyone deserves a fair chance

It's easy to assume that offering work experience or apprenticeships automatically levels the playing field. **But that's not the full story.**

Many young people from disadvantaged backgrounds face barriers long before they step into a professional environment. They may lack the soft skills, awareness of apprenticeships, confidence to network, the financial means to present themselves professionally, or the understanding of workplace conventions — elements that more privileged peers often take for granted.

Young people need long-term support to cope with rejection, boost life skills to tackle negative cultural or situation biases or stereotypes, to make sure they're resilient.

Through 1:1 mentorship sessions, we focus on building their confidence and ensuring they are truly ready by giving them the skills to thrive in a professional setting. This preparation doesn't just happen—it requires funding, expertise, and commitment.

Why early years support is vital

The cost of creating a work-ready candidate straight out of school is significant. A mentoring programme or work experience facilitated by Urban Synergy costs over £1,000 per young person, accounting for training, safeguarding, DBS checks, travel, and multiple phone calls, texts and reminders to young people.

Some are shy and withdrawn and need a lot of coaxing to enter the polished foyer of a big company with any confidence. We give them a sense of belonging through a series of supporting programmes from the age of 9.

Without these resources, the Youth Guarantee risks being a well-intentioned policy that fails to deliver meaningful change - as do some apprenticeships.

We need to recognise that access to work and apprenticeships alone does not equal equity. Bridging the gap requires a long-term commitment, special education and collaboration between government, businesses, schools and charities like ours.

How do we position ourselves to succeed?

Policies should be accompanied by investment in the education needed to prepare young people—Relatable Role Models, mentorship, skill-building workshops, and ongoing trusted networks of support to ensure they're not just placed but positioned to succeed.

Let's not stop at promises. If we're serious about economic growth, transforming lives and communities by bringing young people into the workplace, we need to ensure every young person is not only given a seat at the table but is equipped to make the most of it.

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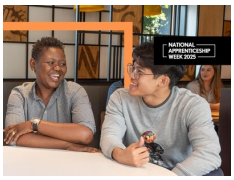



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Leila Thomas is CEO & Founder of Urban Synergy. Read her bio.

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Company Contact:

Urban Synergy

T. 07711331127
E. victoria.silverman@urbansynergy.com
W. https://urbansynergy.com/

Additional Contact(s):
Contact CEO Leila Thomas at ceo@urbansynergy.com

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