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At least 1.9 million students in England are not ready for their next stage of learning: Preparing to support girls in an increasingly complex world

The 2025 Pearson School Report is the fourth annual report produced by Pearson, one of the world's largest education companies, best known for its work in publishing, assessments, and digital learning solutions. The report provides a comprehensive analysis of how school experiences are shaping students, highlighting the academic, emotional, and systemic challenges currently faced by educators and learners. It also offers recommendations for school leaders and educators to consider as they plan for the future of teaching and learning. Drawing from responses of over 14,000 stakeholders including teachers, students, tutors, and home educators, the report's findings highlight key challenges that are directly relevant to principals who set priorities for both learning and student wellbeing. Crucially, this year's data reveals that approximately 1.9 million students in England (including 1.65 million in primary and secondary school, and over 250,000 in college) are not emotionally or academically ready for their next educational stage. This readiness gap has broad implications for learning outcomes, student retention, and future employability.

At the primary level, teachers believe that 32 per cent of students are not ready for progression. At secondary level, this figure sits at 31 per cent. It is even higher for college level, with 43 per cent of students aged 16 to 18 considered to be unready for their next stage of life and learning. The lack of readiness is consistent across phases but manifests differently by age group.

The driving factors behind these readiness gaps vary, but include special educational needs and disabilities as the largest cited reason. Younger students speak about emotional barriers including fear and feeling like they are too young to progress. When teachers were asked why they felt secondary students were not ready to progress, the commonly cited reasons were a lack of self-motivation, independence and social maturity. For those beyond secondary school, it is felt that key challenges include a lack of skills surrounding digital wellbeing, critical thinking and writing skills. Students often say they know what they want to do, but lack the knowledge to know how to put those ideas and plans in place.

Knowing that students want to progress is critical. The next step is understanding and developing ways to support them to achieve this goal. This is a significant challenge for educators, especially when students want to progress but don't yet feel equipped to do so. Given this, the report highlights four key student outcomes that educators themselves feel are priorities in approaching

this challenge: self-confidence and awareness, a love of learning, life skills, and an understanding of the wider world.

These outcomes can be supported through developing problem-solving skills, critical thinking, resilience, and confidence. These skills can help students navigate successful educational transitions. They are also important skills that can support girls' general wellbeing at a time when they are at risk of increased rates of anxiety, depression and other mental health symptoms.

Interestingly, despite these various contributing factors to this lack of readiness, secondary students were able to recognise the long-term value of learning and the usefulness of skills. This highlights an area that could become a relevant intervention to help address this challenge. This is an important observation against the backdrop of key barriers to future learning identified by the Pearson report, which included attendance, special education needs and/or disabilities, behaviour, mental health, and student disengagement.

Other barriers identified in the Pearson report include curriculum and assessment, which college students feel affects them adversely. Teachers are also seeking less curriculum volume and want more flexible assessment options. All these options respond to a key finding that recurred across the report's data: There is no one-size-fits all approach, with different students requiring different types of support and learning options.

Preparation for employment and the use of AI are two areas identified as critical to addressing student learning readiness. Only eight per cent of teachers surveyed believe students are being well prepared for employment. As students age, they are becoming increasingly concerned about navigating work and employment. Educators are also seeking resources and knowledge to support the delivery of comprehensive digital and AI-related education. Given the increasing presence and use of these technologies in post-school learning options, this is essential to support student confidence and skill development.

Based on these findings, the Pearson report provides some suggestions for school leaders to help support students as they develop interventions to address student readiness for learning. This includes prioritising both problem-solving and life skills alongside academic results, while developing an environment where students have the space to develop a "love of learning". Developing flexible curriculum and assessment options where possible can support different learning journeys. Providing access to professional development and resources to support educators to delivery training around digital technologies, including AI, will also support both staff and students. Another key area identified in the report is the need to address emotional resilience and confidence – this is crucial for all students, but has also been shown to be especially pivotal for girls who experience higher rates of depression and anxiety than their male peers.

The 2025 Pearson School Report issues a clear call to action, stating that hundreds of thousands of young people are impacted by barriers in their education. This risks affecting their progression both now, and years into the future. For school leaders and educators, the goal is clear. Focussing on holistic readiness strategies grounded in flexibility, wellbeing, relevance, and gender equity, will support students through this challenge so that all young people, especially girls, can thrive throughout school and beyond.

References

Pearson. (2025). School report 2025: Learning for life.
<https://www.pearson.com/content/dam/global-store/en-gb/schools/insights-and-events/topics/school-report/2025/School-Report-2025.pdf/>