

# Fulfilling the potential of BTEC learners: from GCSEs to a graduate profession

*6th International Conference on Employer Engagement: Preparing Young People  
for the Future*

# Fulfilling the potential of BTEC learners: from GCSEs to a graduate profession



**Paper 1** presents headline findings from the research, and implications for schools and colleges, employers, universities and policy makers. *(Dr Susan McGrath, UP2UNI)*



**Paper 2** explains how Professional Pathways enhances the BTEC syllabus, producing confident learners who make aspirational post-18 choices. *(Sarah Taunton and Emily Kay, Ark)*



**Paper 3** shows how the Ark Alumni platform supports student transitions post-18, and how the alumni voice informs continuous improvement of Ark schools. *(Maia Madhvani, Ark)*





The research and findings

# Evaluating the Professional Pathways programme

## **The issue**

A widely-held perception that BTEC is inferior to A levels creates a sense of 'second best' and an assumption of poorer outcomes and fewer opportunities for BTEC students.

## **A solution?**

The enhanced programme offered by Professional Pathways aims to remove any perceived deficits of BTEC study, achieving parity with A level learners.

## **The purpose**

To evaluate how effectively Professional Pathways achieves its aim of preparing BTEC students for ambitious choices and longer-term success.

## **A bonus?**

Can the evaluation process itself be structured in a way that will maximise the impact of the research findings by embedding the findings into curriculum and practice?



# Research methodology

Five surveys (507 leavers and recent alumni, Oct 2018-Jul 2020).

Seven focus groups (33 alumni, Jul 2019-Dec 2020).

Interviews/card-sort tasks (31 students and alumni, Nov 2018-May 2020).

Longitudinal interviews (57, with 11 alumni, Sep 2019-Sep 2020).

Final interviews with 2018 leavers (Jun/Jul 2021).

## Quantitative data

Descriptive and inferential statistics to measure the effect of between- and within-group differences.

## Qualitative data

Transcripts annotated to highlight key topics and tabulated to produce themed data and personal stories.

## Merged data strands

Provide answers to the research questions.

## Research Questions

RQ1. How did the students choose five universities for the UCAS application?

RQ2. What was their experience of transition to university?

RQ3. What motivated some students to find and apply for apprenticeships?

RQ4. What was the experience of employment-based learners?

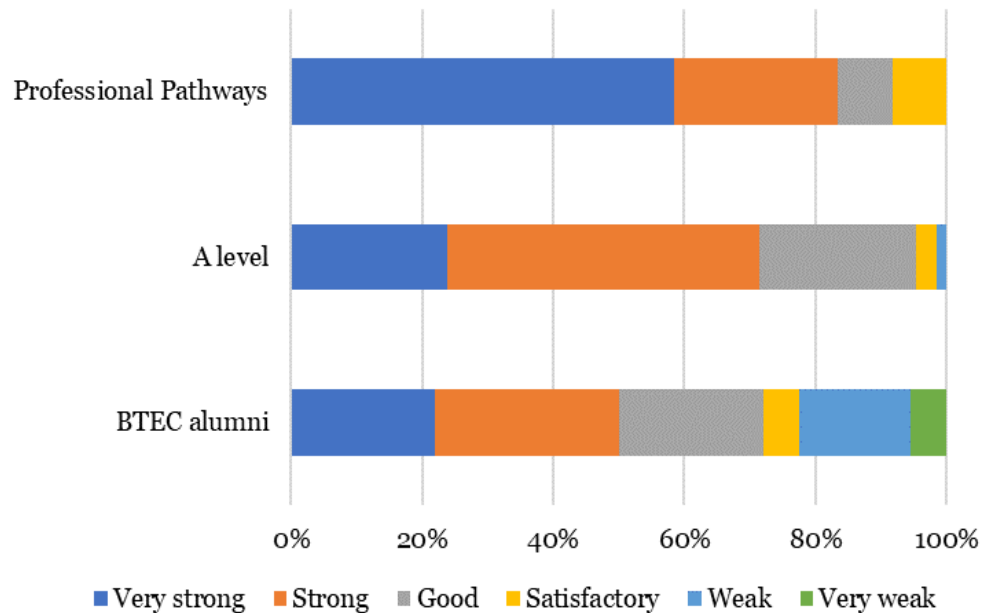
RQ5. What role did essential skills play in achieving and sustaining post-18 options?



# RQ1. How did the students choose five universities for UCAS?

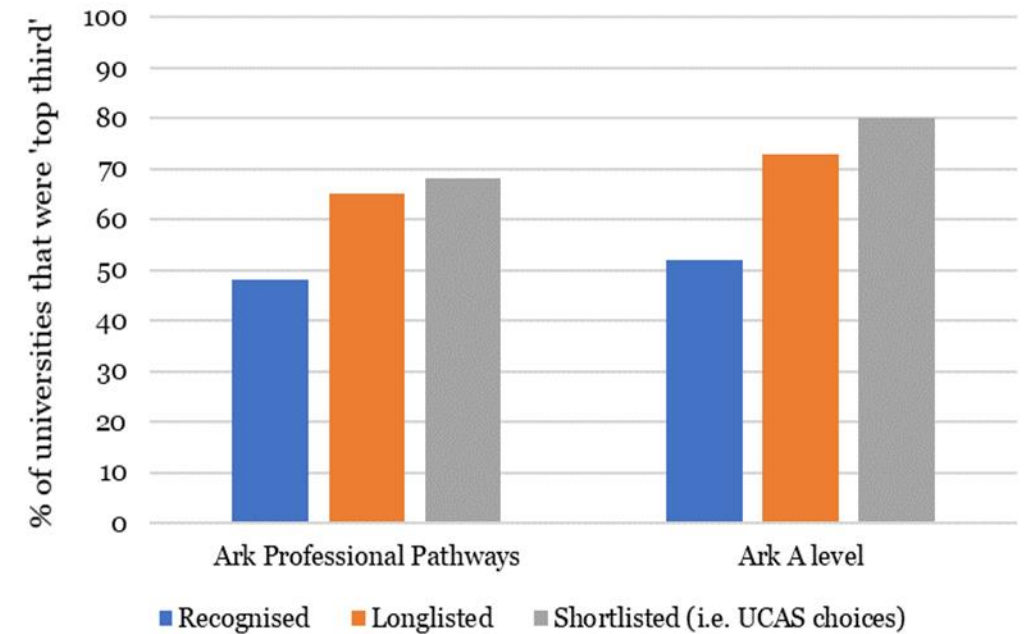
The research findings consistently indicated that Professional Pathways removes any major differences (or perceived deficits) between BTEC and A level students. For example:

*Figure 1: Knowledge and understanding of higher education on leaving school.*



*(Respondents to survey question = 93, of which 12 PP, 63 AL, 18 BTEC prior to Professional Pathways)*

*Figure 2: 'Top third' universities recognised, longlisted and shortlisted by Ark Year 13 students.*



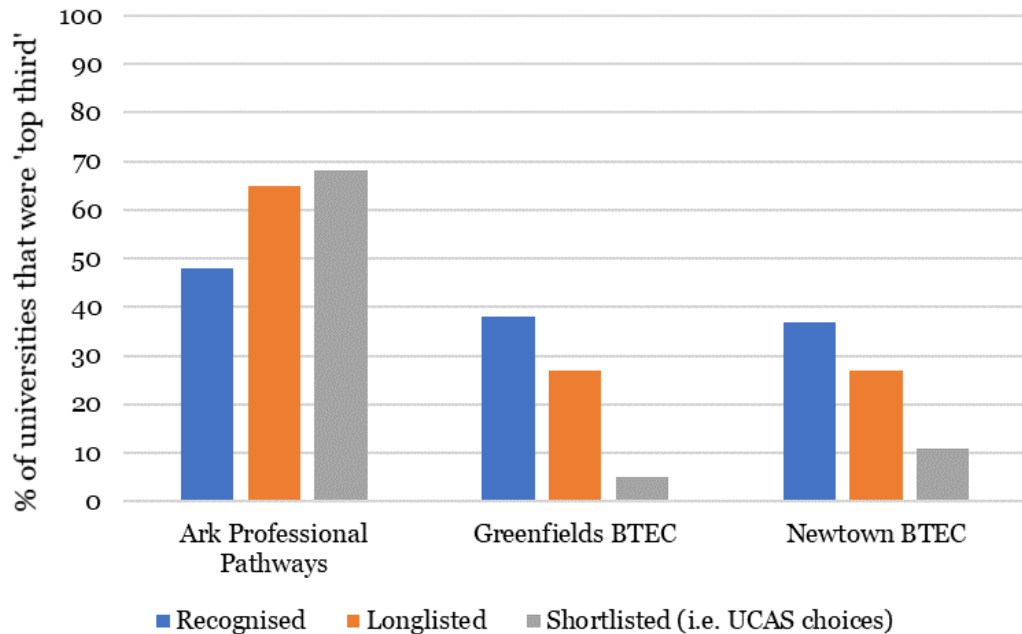
*(Data from card-sort tasks in interviews with 19 Year 13 students, of which 12 Professional Pathways, 7 AL)*



# RQ1 (cont'd)

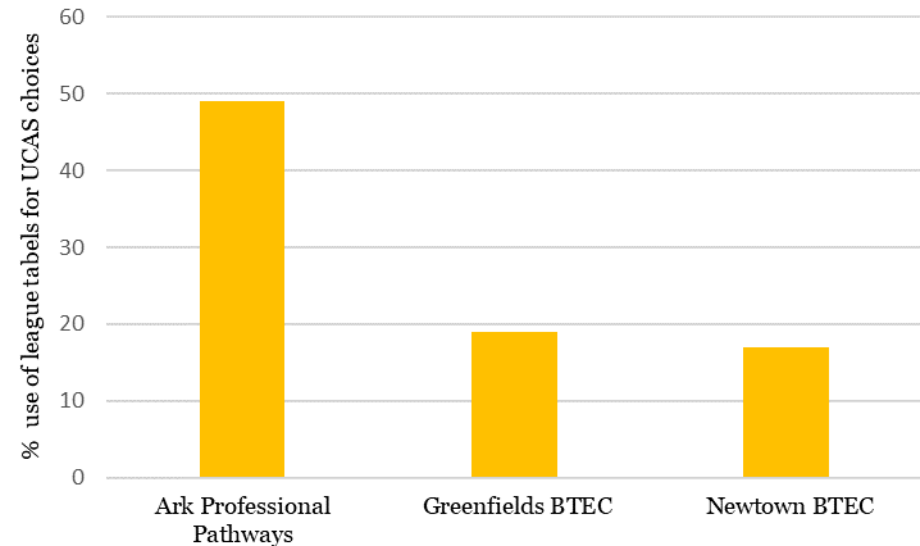
Comparing the Professional Pathways data with two comparable cohorts of Year 13 students who had taken a standard BTEC course, there were many differences. For example:

Figure 3: 'Top third' universities recognised, longlisted and shortlisted by Ark and comparison BTEC cohorts\*.



(Data from card-sort tasks in interviews with Year 13 students, of which 12 Professional Pathways, 10 Newtown, 9 Greenfields)

Figure 4: Percentage of UCAS choices checked in league tables by Ark and comparison BTEC cohorts\*.



Data from card-sort tasks in interviews with Year 13 students, of which 12 Professional Pathways, 10 Newtown, 9 Greenfields)



# RQ2. Transition from school to university

## The wrong choice

Some felt they had chosen the wrong course or university, and should have done more research

Some found that course content or facilities were not as advertised

## A different teaching and learning environment

The teaching and learning environment was often described as lacking support

Feedback was sometimes felt to be inadequate to enable improved performance

Some students had insufficient contact with staff, who could seem unapproachable

## A different social environment

Students who stayed at home sometimes described difficulties in making friends

Students who moved away from home sometimes described difficulties in 'settling'

Most students had not joined clubs or societies and did not appear to see the potential benefits

These concerns were frequently expressed in both interviews and focus groups, but there was only one student whose academic performance meant they could not yet proceed to the next year of their course.

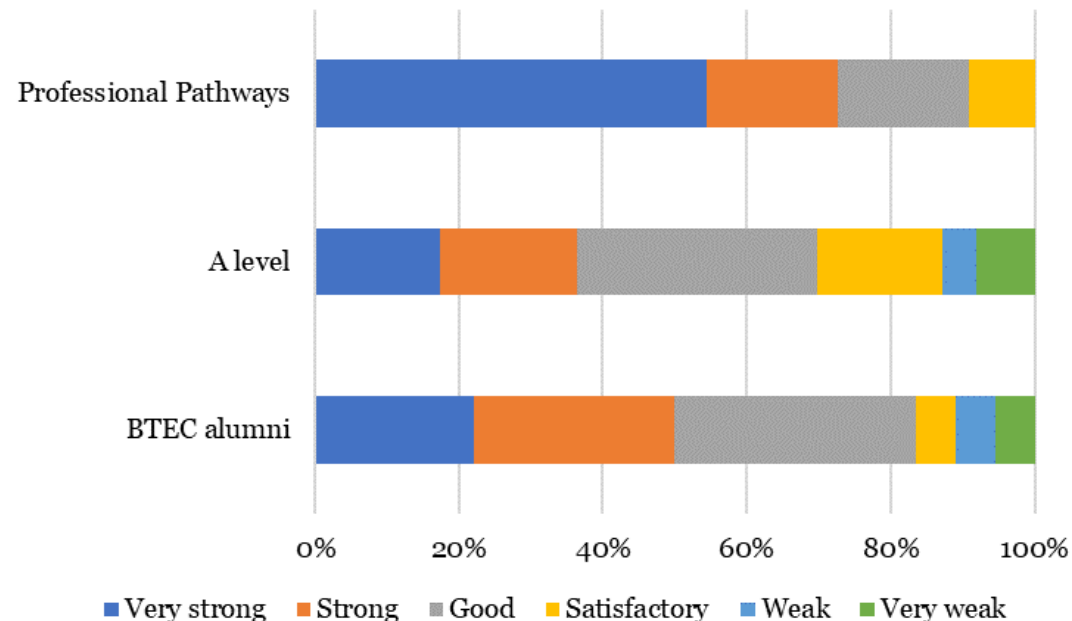




# RQ3. What motivated students to apply for apprenticeships?

Strong knowledge of employment-based routes and high quality work experience contributed to some Professional Pathways students making an apprenticeship their first choice, with university a reserve option.

*Figure 5: Knowledge and understanding of employment-based routes on leaving school*



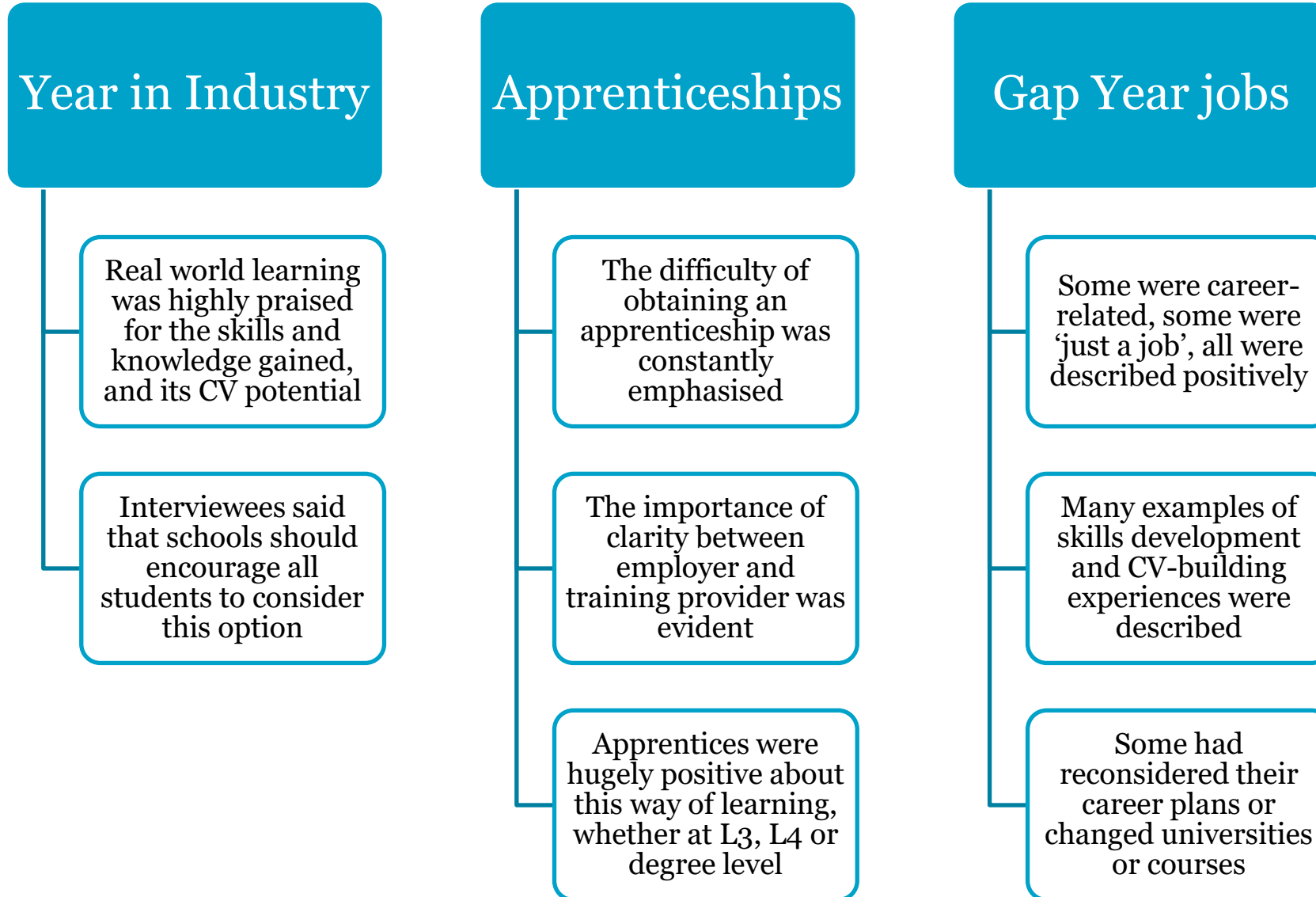
*(Respondents to survey question = 92, of which 11 PP, 63 AL, 18 BTEC prior to Professional Pathways)*

*“I’ve got five offers but I don’t really want to go to university. I’ve done a lot of part-time work, and I’ve had lots of work experience with top companies. An apprenticeship is the best route for me because it opens doors...and I’d just prefer to be working.”*

*“I’d rather do an apprenticeship and they do keep coming up, but if I wait and still don’t get one, I’ll have wasted a year. I don’t like the uncertainty, so I’m thinking it’s best just to take my place at university.”*



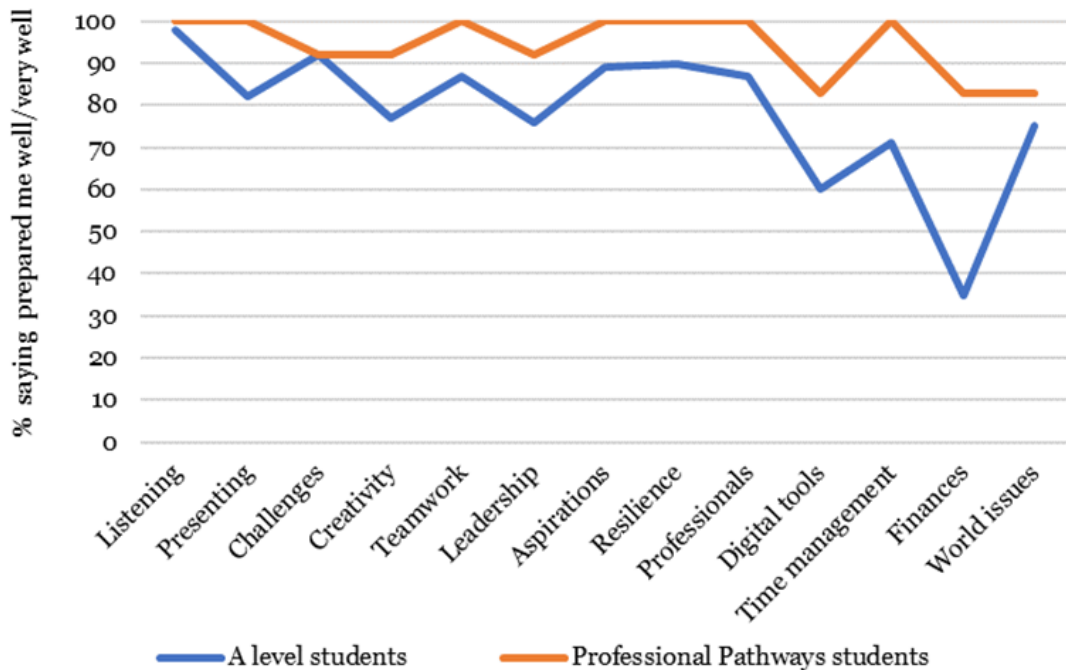
# RQ4. The experience of employment-based learners



# RQ5. The role of essential skills in supporting post-18 choices

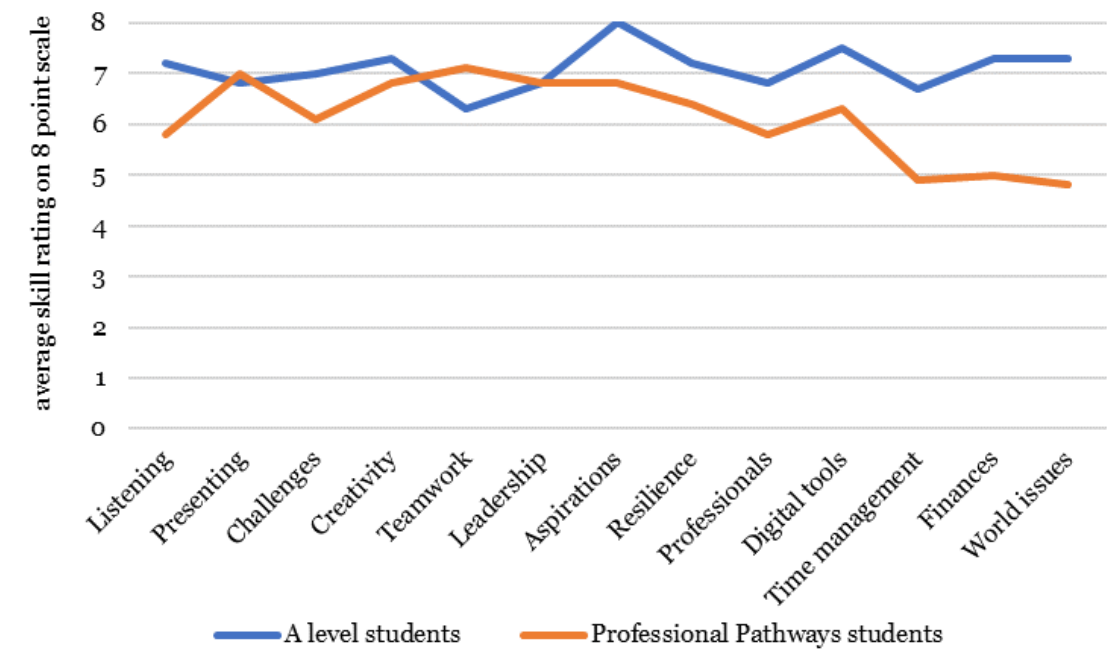
At first glance, self-assessment of essential and professional skills data might suggest that Professional Pathways students are over-confident when they leave Year 13, but this would be a simplification...

Figure 6: School leaver ratings of preparation for 13 skills



(Respondents to survey question = 74, of which 12 PP, 62 AL)

Figure 7: Alumni self-assessment of first year at university



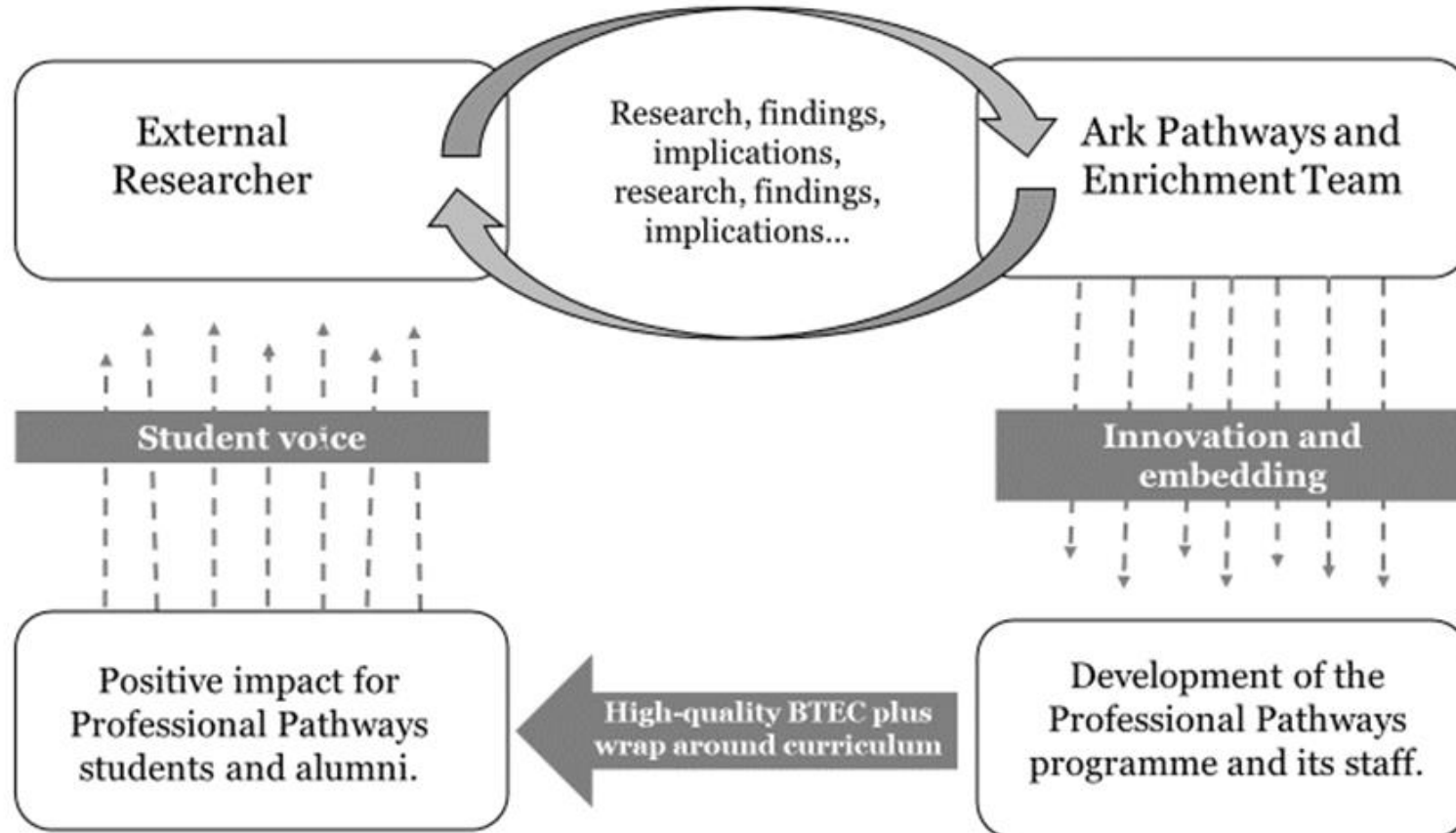
(Longitudinal study interview data: 6 PP, 6 AL)

Professional Pathways alumni often demonstrated a highly developed understanding of the relationship between skills and context; their skill *performance* may have been higher than A level alumni.



# Research with impact: embedding the findings into practice

The methodology was designed to facilitate an ongoing iterative dialogue that could feed into development as the research was taking place. A series of innovations have been embedded into the programme, for example:



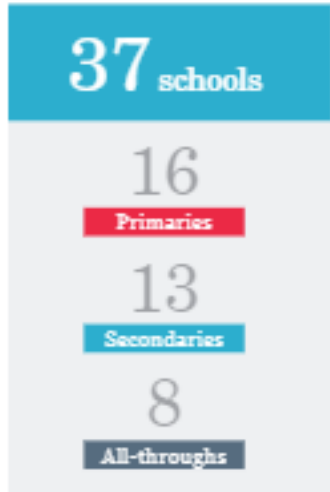
McGrath and Millen, 2020





# The Professional Pathways programme

# Our network



## Our mission:

To create outstanding schools that give every pupil, regardless of their background, the opportunity to go to university or pursue the career of their choice.



**Our Ventures**

- EdCity
- English Mastery
- Mathematics Mastery
- Education Partnerships Group
- GLOBAL SCHOOLS FORUM
- NOWTEACH

**Ark Family**

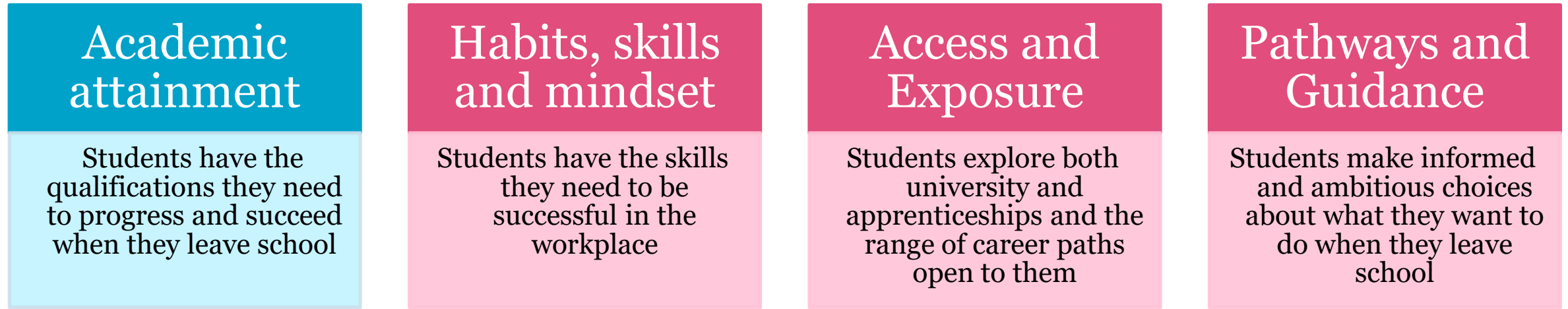
- Ambition Institute
- FRONTLINE CHANGING LIVES
- assembly.
- peepul
- STIR education

# The rationale behind Professional Pathways

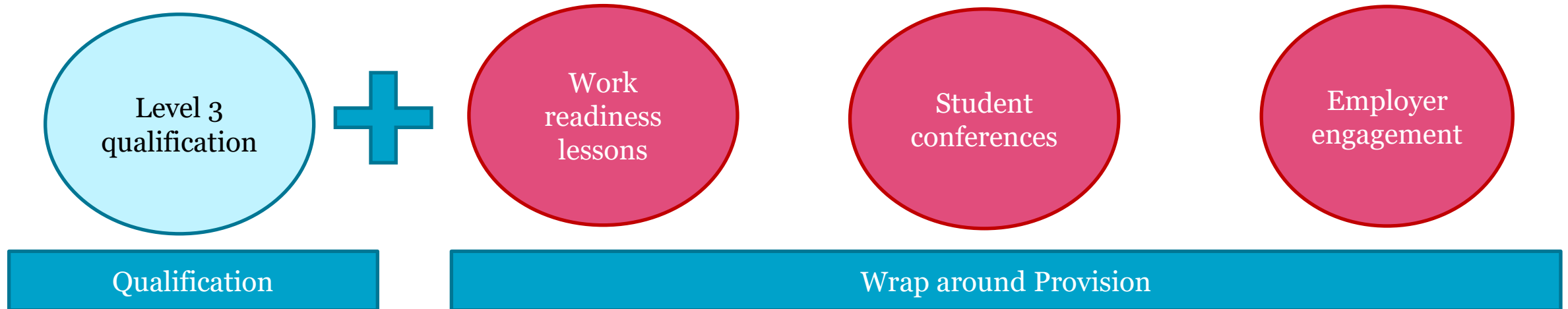
- Professional Pathways is Ark's approach to providing a more inclusive curriculum pathway through our schools, ensuring our mission is achievable for all
- The programme is aimed at students whose potential is not being realised through a traditional, purely academic, linearly assessed curriculum
- Professional Pathways aimed to respond to the challenges levelled at BTEC courses and enhance delivery
- Professional Pathways aims to develop outstanding vocational teaching, learning and assessment practices across the network, as well as supporting students to gain the skills and experiences to help them make informed choices about their next steps.



# The approach



**Aspirational and ambitious destinations**





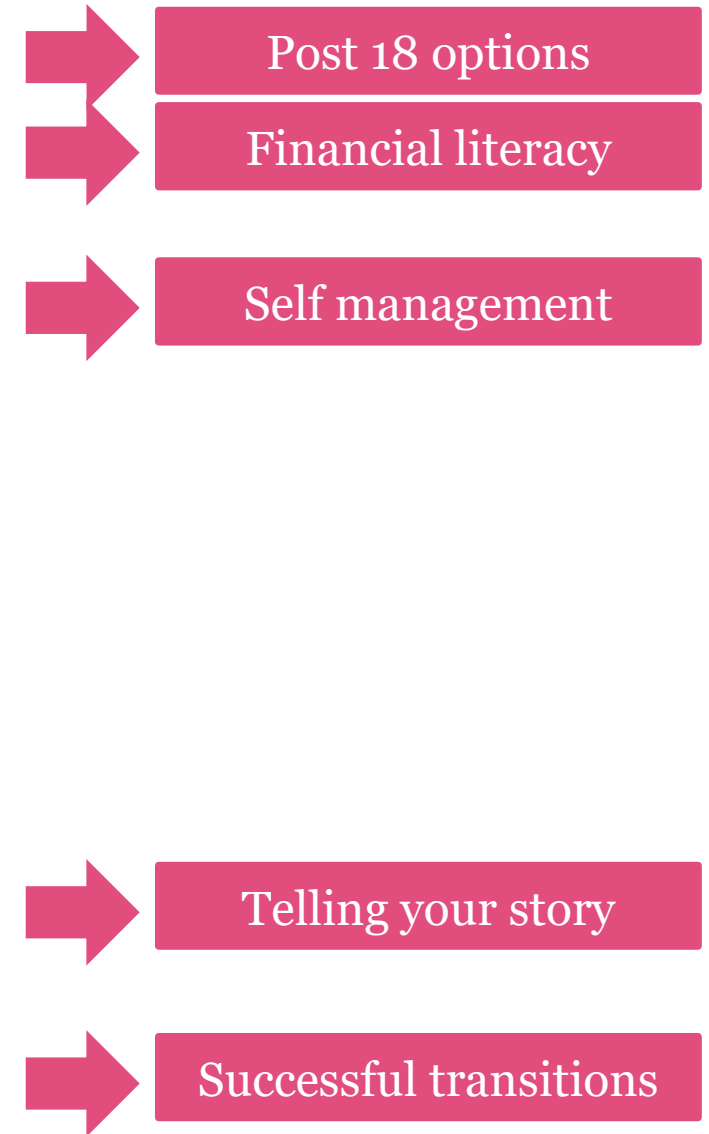
# The wrap around curriculum

	Y12			Y13		
	Autumn	Spring	Summer	Autumn	Spring	Summer
Question & Topic	<b>Who am I?</b>	<b>Where am I going?</b>		<b>How do I get there?</b>	<b>How do I succeed when I get there?</b>	
	As an individual, in a team and as a leader?	Labour Market Information and careers	Selecting and securing post sixth form destinations: independent research	Recruitment processes	Financial literacy	Preparing for results day and transitions
	Self-management and motivation	Post sixth form options		Making your applications stand out		
	Telling my story					
Skills	Staying Positive & Aiming High	Speaking & Listening	Problem Solving & Creativity	Speaking & Creativity	Problem Solving & Aiming High	Staying Positive
	Leadership & Teamwork	Problem Solving & Creativity		Speaking, Listening, Leadership & Teamwork		
Student Conferences	Who am I?	Careers and post sixth form destinations		Making your applications stand out		Making successful transitions



# Embedding the findings into the wrap around curriculum

Research finding	Ark's response
Some alumni had picked the wrong course or university.	PP curriculum and student workbooks constantly evolving to encourage better research of options and maximise informed decision making by year 13 students.
Alumni say financial skills were not developed at school.	Financial Literacy module developed for PP wrap around curriculum. Online finance course requirement for all Ark Bursary students.
Alumni suggest BTEC did not prepare for reality of university.	Presentation/discussion at Network Day on achieving balance between supporting BTEC students and stepping back to prepare for independent study at university.
Alumni identify poor time management as an issue.	Specific lesson on time management developed as part of PP 'wrap-around' curriculum, reiterated by teachers in BTEC classroom.
Alumni emphasise value of L3/4 apprenticeships.	More nuanced approach to apprenticeship levels. PP wrap around curriculum confirms L3/4 apprenticeships can also be an ambitious choice.
Self-assessment of skills is fluid; confidence levels vary.	New self-assessment tool for PP students includes a 'confidence rating'. Network Day encourages staff to reference skills in BTEC lessons
Students may lack a supportive network to aid transition.	Ark Alumni network introduced to all Ark students at an earlier stage to encourage sign ups to the alumni platform, creating links with current university students.
Students/alumni frequently say mentors had a valuable input.	Next Steps: structured mentor/mentee scheme that can link alumni by subject of study, university attended or career plans, and includes industry mentors.
Alumni describe a range of transition challenges	Beyond Ark: launch of enhanced support for alumni at critical transition stages, including entering university or employment and early career entry.
Positive endorsement of gap year employment.	Ark Gap Year: year 13 leavers become tutors in Ark schools to support English/Maths catch up and complete a Professional Development module.
Conversations with employers highlight need to 'tell a story'.	New lesson developed to help PP students 'tell their story' when applying for apprenticeships or other employment routes.
Narrow range of year 13 extra-curricular achievements.	Wrap around curriculum aligned with the Prince's Trust Personal Development and Employability Skills (PDE) Qualification.
Negative impact of Covid on student experience.	New PP content on mental and physical wellbeing, tips on where to find help at university or in apprenticeships, reminder of the Ark Alumni support offer.



## Professional Pathways student panel video



# Student voice

Professional Pathways far exceeds a generic BTEC, and in my biased way I feel it's way better. The programme had us actively connecting with professionals, going out to companies and networking events.

We complete work readiness which enables us to understand what employers are looking for in an ideal candidate, we get that support more during Professional Pathways than on other such as A-Levels. We are supported with opportunities to progress such as through internships or apprenticeships.

At Lendlease, we learned how to create our CVs, which helped me to make serious changes to my CV. There were some key things that they told us not to do, and I had done them. So I was able to fix these and it helped me to get a job.



# Outcomes

Academic	
Student satisfaction	
Teacher satisfaction	
Destinations	
Skill development	





The alumni network

# The background and rationale

A student from a disadvantaged background who gains a first-class degree from a top university is less likely to secure an elite job than a more privileged student with a 2.2

upReach

**1 in 5** working class graduates didn't take up a work experience placement during university because they couldn't afford to

Covid-19 and the University Experience, The Sutton Trust

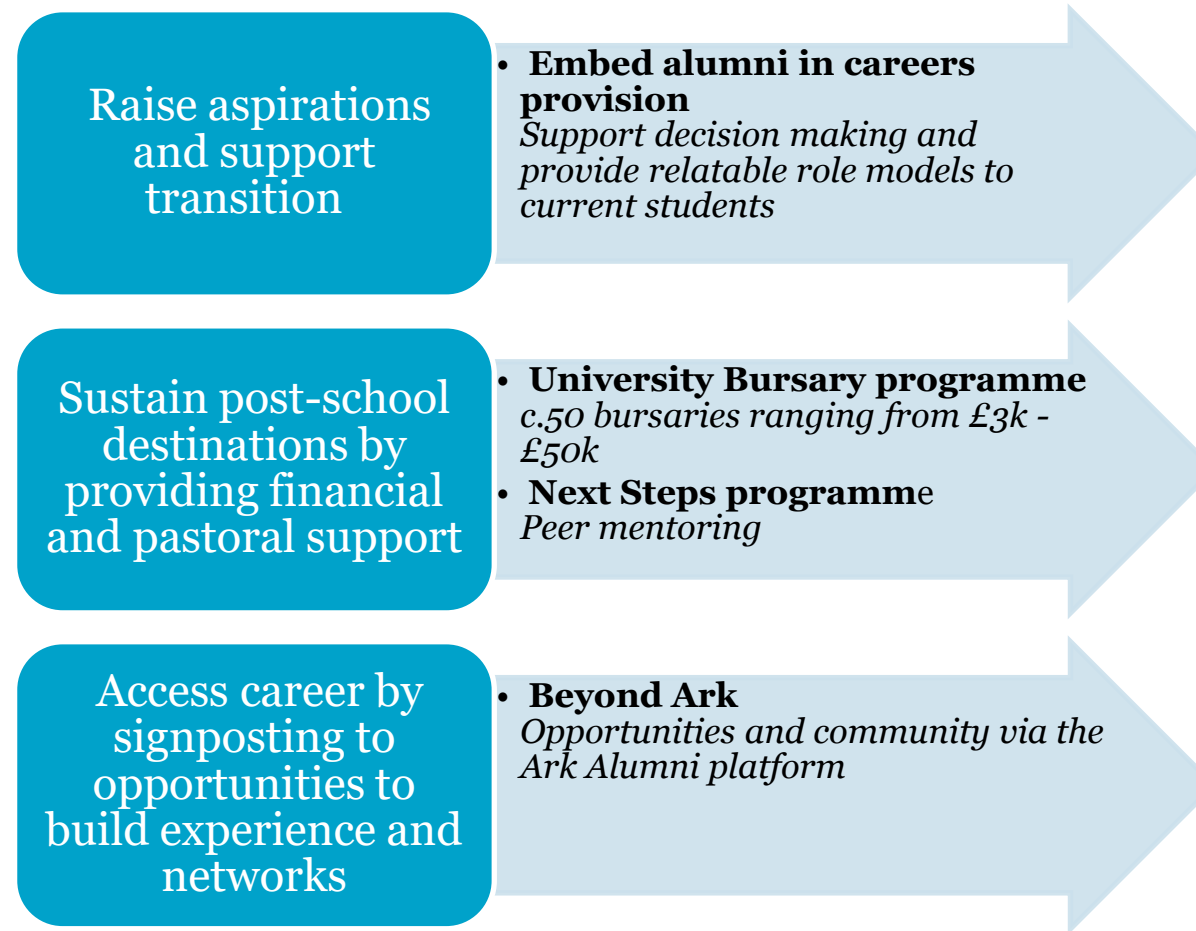
**10%** of working class students said it was unlikely they would complete the year

Covid-19 and the University Experience, The Sutton Trust



# The vision and approach

Ark aims to continue supporting our students once they've left school to minimise the challenges they may face.





# How has the Ark Alumni platform enabled this research?



Since Spring 2019, **over 7,500** alumni have provided consent for us to continue tracking and contacting them

→ Since Spring 2020, **+200%** in students regularly visiting platform to access opportunities

→ Students can sync their profile with LinkedIn



# Embedding the findings into the alumni programme

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"It has allowed me to connect with various people from different areas of the country that are a part of the Ark Alumni network and expand my network."

"It has really helped me reflect on my journey through university and navigate the ups and downs of university life!"

"With [my mentor's help] I'm more marketable and have had loads of assistance with opportunities for placements and work experience."



# Benefits of utilising your alumni network

Relatable role models for current students to support 'best fit' destinations

Evaluate and showcase impact of work

Support and staffing pipelines to influence future direction



Ark Alumni

PP Being part of the Ark community has really helped me grow into the person I am today. Through Ark, I have been able to gain access to a range of different opportunities such as the Ark Bursary and an internship which has lead to me expanding my network and deepening my interest in my chosen industry PP





Recommendations

# Recommendations

## Schools and colleges should aim to:

- check that post-18 options are well-informed choices and aligned with career aims.
- provide CEIAG for employment-based post-18 routes that has parity with their UCAS provision
- support transition by strengthening links with alumni and drawing on their experience.

## Universities should aim to:

- make information about course content, teaching and assessment current and accessible
- ensure that all students understand how to access support if they encounter difficulties.

## Employers should aim to:

- make the application process for apprenticeships more coherent
- explore ways of increasing employment-based learning opportunities available to school leavers.

**Policy makers** must maintain post-16 options for students who may not show their full potential in linear exam-based courses such as GCSE or A levels.

