



Department
for Education

Post-16 education: pathways and outcomes for disadvantaged learners

England

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1 Introduction

This report contains three pieces of experimental analysis that present insights into post-16 education pathways and outcomes in England – and how these vary by learner disadvantage status.

Section 2 explores how the highest level of attainment varies by the disadvantage status of learners and how many progress to high-earning employment by age 25. It looks at learners in England who were aged 15 at the start of academic year 2012/13.

Two measures are used to define disadvantage in this section. The first part focuses on learners eligible for free school meals (FSM) at any point between ages 11 and 15. The second part focuses on learners identified as having special educational needs (SEN) at age 15 only. This part is split out further for learners with an education, health and care (EHC) plan¹ and those receiving SEN support/SEN without an EHC plan².

Section 3 presents an analysis of different routes through post-16 education, capturing educational achievement at age 15 (GCSE's) and then highest level attained at ages 18 and 25. It looks at learners in England who were aged 15 at the start of academic year 2013/14. This is then presented separately by FSM and SEN status of the student.

Section 4 presents the results of experimental analysis that uses administrative data to identify individuals that are not in education, employment or training (NEET) from age 16 to 21. It looks at three cohorts of learners in England who were aged 16 at the start of academic year 2015/16, 2016/17, and 2017/18, and follows them to age 21. The characteristics of the NEET group are explored, as well as the education and employment destinations when these individuals transition out of being NEET.

The research is based on the Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) Study³. The LEO study links information about individuals, including:

- personal characteristics such as age, sex and ethnicity
- education, including schools, further education colleges and higher education institutions attended, courses taken, and qualifications achieved
- benefits claimed
- employment and income

¹ A local authority may issue an EHC plan for a pupil who needs more support than is available through SEN support.

² SEN support means support that is additional to, or different from, the support generally made for other children of the same age in a school. A pupil with SEN support will not have an education, health and care plan.

³ The privacy statement explaining how personal data in this project is shared and used is published at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/longitudinal-education-outcomes-study-howwe-use-and-share-data>

The analysis included in this report is exploratory. We will continue to develop the underlying data and so the methods, measures and results presented here are likely to change over time.

All numbers in this report are rounded to the nearest 50 while percentages are rounded to the nearest percent. Where a figure would be rounded to zero, it is instead shown as “low”. Percentages are calculated using the original, unrounded data to ensure accuracy, so they may not exactly match values derived from rounded figures.

We welcome feedback on the content of this report – please contact:

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2 Post-16 education outcomes for disadvantaged learners

2.1 Summary

- Learners eligible for free school meals (FSM learners) are less likely to progress to higher education, with 22% holding a Level 6+ qualification at age 25, compared to 42% of non-FSM learners.
- FSM learners are less likely to progress to high earnings by age 25 compared to non-FSM learners, and this persists regardless of the level of attainment held. 21% of FSM learners earned over £30,000 by age 25, compared to 38% of non-FSM learners.
- Even for those FSM learners with a Level 6+ qualification at age 25, non-FSM learners are 8-9 percentage points more likely to progress to high earnings, while holding the same level of attainment.
- While female FSM learners are more likely to hold a higher level of attainment than male FSM learners, they are still the least likely group to progress to high earnings, at all qualification levels. This could be related to part-time earnings.
- Learners with special educational needs (SEN) are less likely than non-SEN learners to progress to higher-level qualifications by age 25, with 15% of SEN learners achieving a qualification at Level 6+ by age 25, compared with 42% of non-SEN learners.
- SEN learners are less likely to progress to high earnings by age 25, with 19% earning over £30,000 compared with 38% of non-SEN learners.
- Even among those with Level 6+ qualifications, SEN learners are still less likely, by 10-12 percentage points, to earn over £30,000 by age 25 than their non-SEN peers.
- Female SEN learners have the weakest earnings outcomes, with only 13% earning over £30,000 by age 25 compared with 22% for SEN males, despite being more likely than SEN males to achieve higher-level qualifications. Similar to the findings of FSM and non-FSM learners, some of the observed earnings gap between SEN and non-SEN learners may reflect part-time work, which cannot be identified in the data.
- Learners with an education, health and care (EHC) plan are less likely to progress to higher-level qualifications by age 25, with only 8% of learners with an EHC plan achieving Level 6+ by age 25, compared with 17% of learners with SEN support/SEN without an EHC plan.

- Education, health and care (EHC) plan learners are less likely to progress to high earnings by age 25, with 8% earning over £30,000 compared with 21% of learners with SEN support/SEN without an EHC plan.
- Even among those with Level 6+ qualifications, learners with an EHC plan are still less likely, by 14 percentage points, to earn over £30,000 by age 25 than learners with SEN support/SEN without an EHC plan.

2.2 Background

This chapter provides an update to [experimental analysis published by the department in 2018](#). It describes the difference in progression to high earnings at the age of 25 for a cohort of learners, based on their disadvantage status. The results presented here are not compared to the previous paper as the figures are not directly comparable due to changes in methodology, however the results follow similar trends seen in the past report.

The analysis is based on the Young Person's Matched Administrative Dataset (YPMAD) and the Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) Study and uses linked datasets from the Department for Education and HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) to identify the learner cohort, FSM eligibility, SEN status, highest level of attainment at age 25 and earnings at the age of 25.

Progression to high earnings in this report is defined as earning more than £30,000 in the tax year in which the learner cohort is aged 25. The previous paper used a threshold of £25,000 and this was uplifted by 20% to account for inflation between the two periods. For context, the new threshold of £30,000 is the same as median earnings in April 2023 (£30,000), as measured by the [ONS using the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings \(ASHE\)](#).

2.3 Coverage

The cohort of learners used for this analysis were aged 15 at the start of academic year 2012/13. Their highest level of attainment at age 25 is based on their learner records up to and including academic year 2022/23, while their earnings at age 25 are based on earnings records from tax year 2023/24.

Free school meal eligibility and special educational needs status comes from school census records in academic year 2012/13. A learner is flagged as an FSM learner if they were eligible for free school meals at any point from the age of 10 to 15. A learner is flagged as a SEN learner if they were recorded as having SEN at age 15 only. This part also includes analysis of learners with an EHC plan and those receiving SEN support/SEN without an EHC plan.

Both sections that look at disadvantage based on FSM status and disadvantage based on SEN status use a cohort of 579,750 learners. This excludes learners in privately funded education at age 15, and any learners with missing FSM or SEN data.

The highest qualification at age 25 is split by academic or vocational qualification types. Academic qualifications are defined here as any GCSE (Level 2), A-level (Level 3) or International Baccalaureate (IB) qualification (Level 3), while vocational qualifications are anything outside of these qualification types. The 'Level 6+ via academic' and 'Level 6+ via vocational' categories additionally look at the highest qualification that a learner achieved before achieving their Level 6 qualification, with academic and vocational defined in the same way as described above. For example, this means that a learner that has a 'Level 6+ via academic' qualification as their highest achievement at age 25 may have completed A-levels or an IB before going onto higher education.

It is important to note that this analysis does not aim to establish a causal relationship between FSM eligibility or SEN status at school and progression to high earnings later in life. The analysis presents descriptive statistics focussed on identifying any differences in outcomes. Lastly, it has not been possible to identify part-time earnings, and this may drive some of the disparity seen between male and female earnings progression for both FSM and SEN learners.

2.4 Post-16 education outcomes for learners eligible for free school meals (FSM)

2.4.1 Characteristics of the cohort

Table 2.1 presents summary statistics for learners who completed their GCSEs in the 2012/13 academic year and were aged 25 in the 2023/24 financial year.

Looking at the whole cohort, 34% earned more than £30,000 by age 25. This differs for FSM and non-FSM learners, where 21% of FSM learners earned more than £30,000 by age 25 compared to 38% of non-FSM learners.

There are also differences by sex and FSM status. Female FSM learners are the least likely to be high earners, with 17% earning over £30,000 compared to 25% of male FSM learners.

Table 2.1: FSM status of learners aged 15 in academic year 2012/13 and their progression to high earnings by age 25, by sex

Sex	Total learners	FSM learners	% of learners earning over £30k	% of FSM learners earning over £30k	% of non-FSM learners earning over £30k
Male	297,050	25%	38%	25%	42%
Female	282,700	25%	30%	17%	34%
Total	579,750	25%	34%	21%	38%

Source: Young Person's Matched Administrative Dataset (YPMAD) and the Longitudinal Educational Outcomes (LEO)

2.4.2 Highest level of attainment at age 25

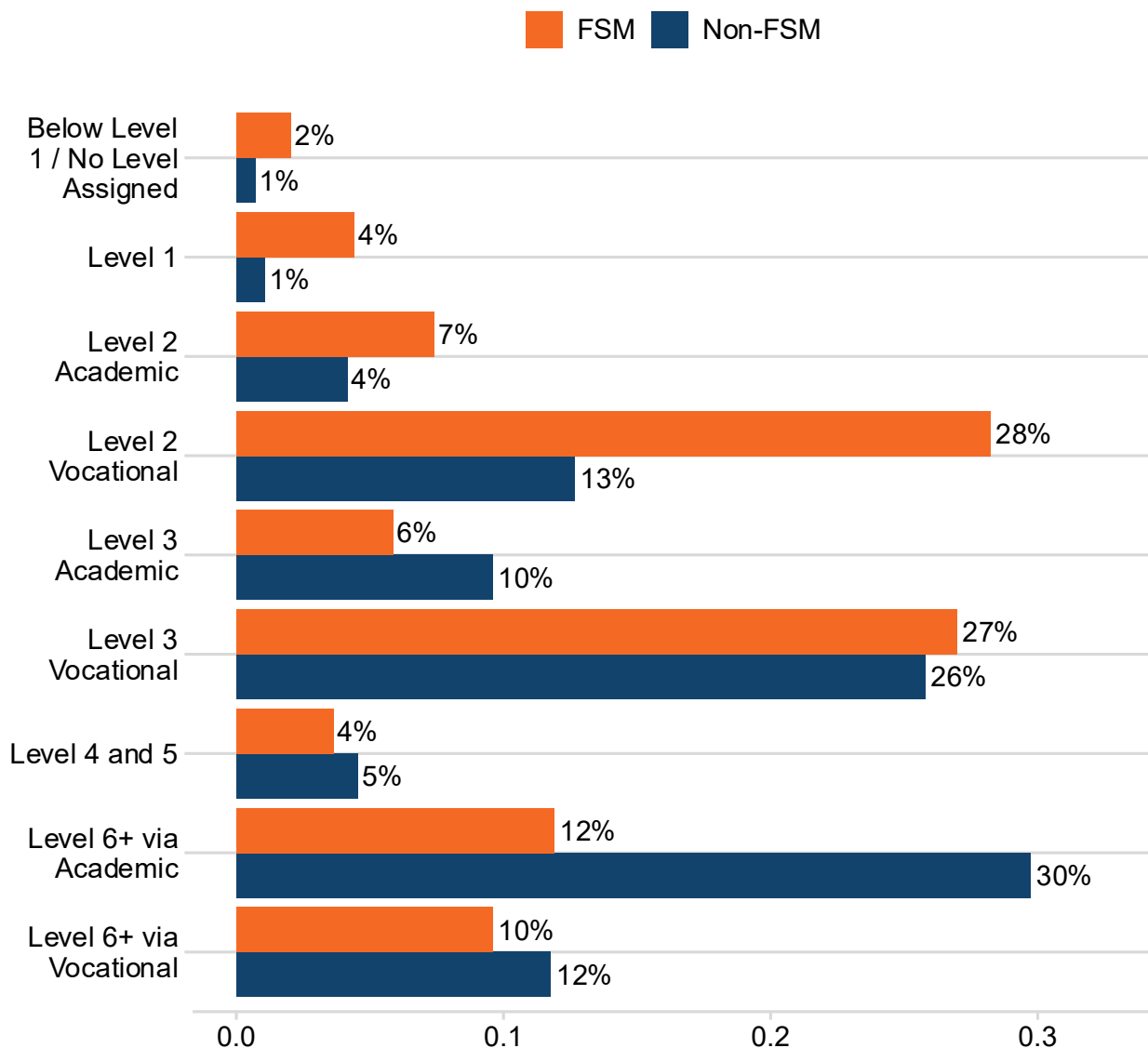
This section looks at the highest qualification held by the age of 25, split by vocational or academic qualification types.

Figure 2.1 shows the distribution of FSM and non-FSM learners by their highest qualification at age 25. FSM learners are more likely to have achieved a Level 3 or below as their highest level at age 25 than non-FSM learners (74% compared to 55% respectively). On the other hand, non-FSM learners are 20 percentage points more likely to hold a Level 6+ qualification at age 25 compared to FSM learners.

Vocational qualifications are more common than academic qualifications for FSM learners with a Level 2 or 3 as their highest level attained at age 25. 55% of FSM

learners hold a Level 2 or 3 vocational qualification compared to 13% with an academic qualification at the same level.

Figure 2.1: Distribution of FSM and non-FSM learners (aged 15 in academic year 2012/13) by highest qualification held at age 25



The disparity in progression to higher levels of learning between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged learners is also shown in statistics that are already published by the department, notwithstanding some differences in time periods and definitions. For example, statistical releases that look at the learning destinations of those who completed 16 to 18 study in academic year 2021/22⁴ and 2022/23⁵ show that there is a gap in progression to higher levels of learning for disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged learners, although it may be narrower than what is shown here. Looking at those who completed a Level 3 qualification and defining “disadvantaged” learners as those eligible

⁴ [Progression to higher education or training - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

⁵ [16-18 destination measures - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

for the pupil premium, the first release shows that disadvantaged learners were eight percentage points less likely to sustain a degree destination in the two years following 16 to 18 study. The second release shows that disadvantaged learners were five percentage points less likely to be in a UK higher education institution in the year following 16 to 18 attainment at Level 3.

Figure 2.2 shows the distribution of male and female FSM learners by highest qualification at age 25. Female FSM learners are more likely to hold a Level 6+ qualification than their male counterparts (27% compared to 17% respectively). On the other hand, male FSM learners are more likely to hold a Level 2 or below as their highest qualification, compared to females (48% compared to 36% respectively).

Figure 2.2: Distribution of male and female FSM learners (aged 15 in academic year 2012/13) by highest qualification at age 25

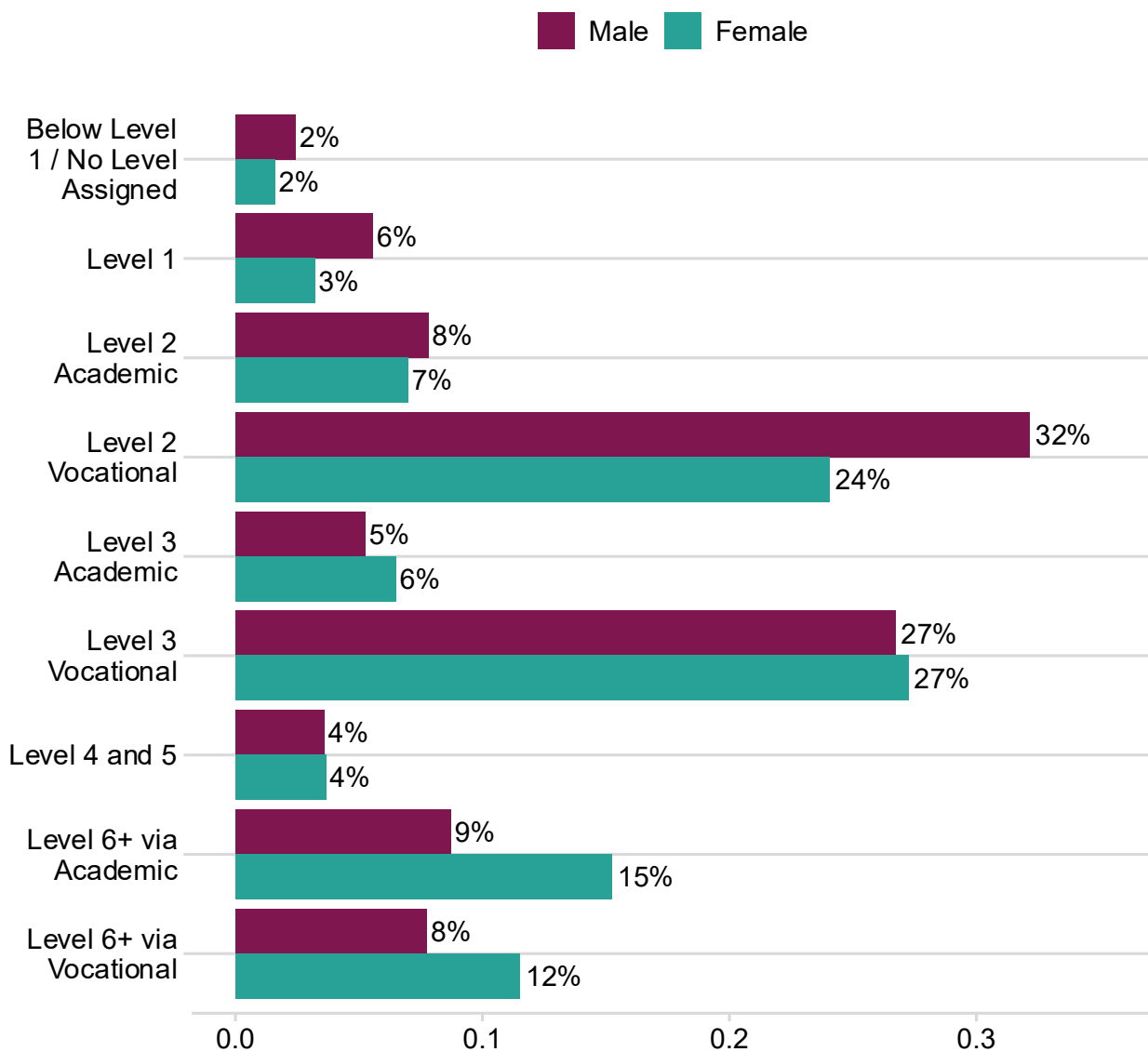
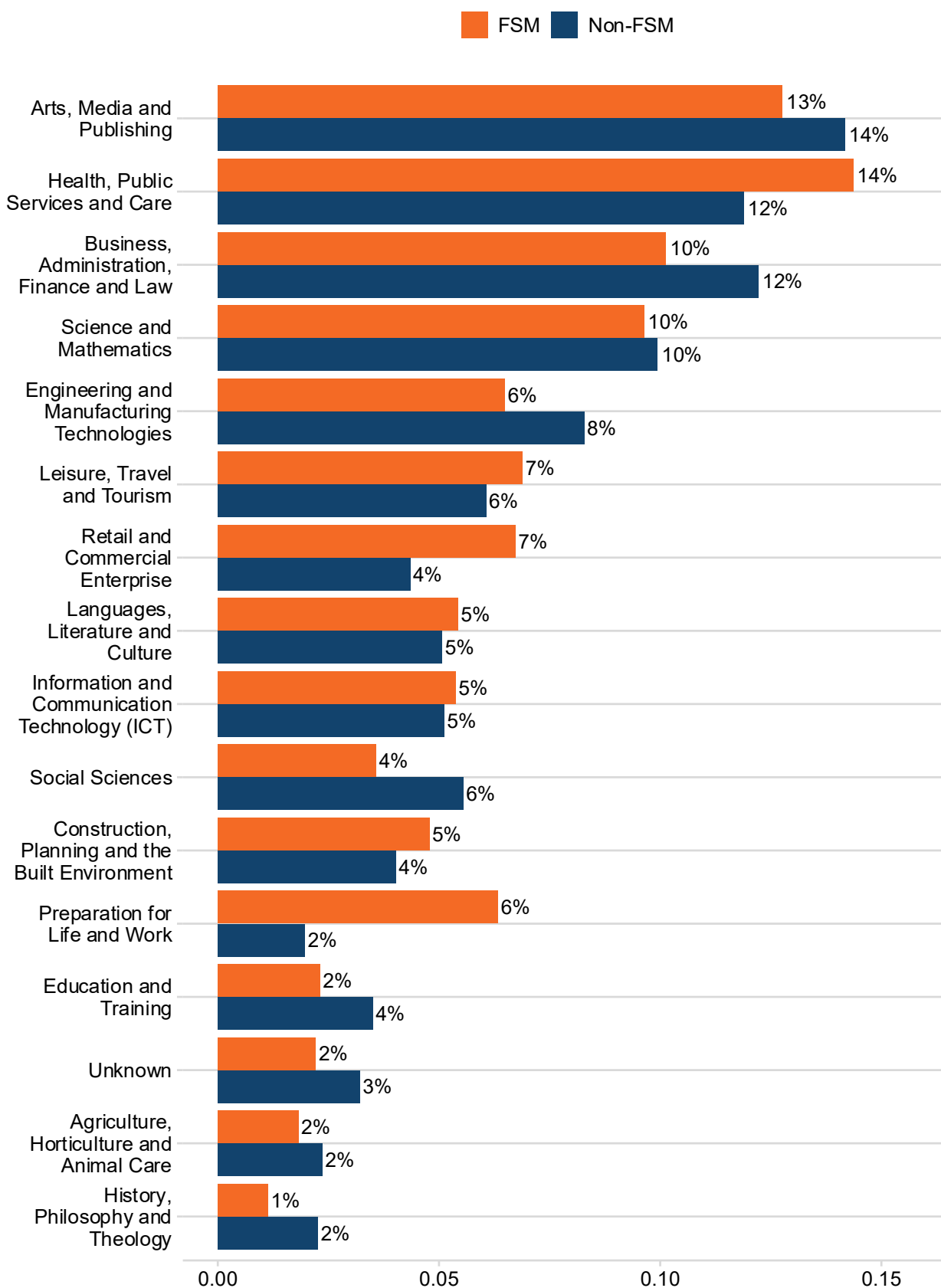


Figure 2.3 shows the distribution of FSM and non-FSM learners by the sector subject area (SSA) of their highest qualification at age 25. There are greater proportions of FSM

learners than non-FSM learners with qualifications in preparation for life and work (6% compared to 2%) and retail and commercial enterprise (7% compared to 4%). The distribution is similar across other subjects.

Figure 2.3: Distribution of FSM and non-FSM learners (aged 15 in academic year 2012/13) by the SSA of their highest qualification at age 25



2.4.3 Progression to high earnings at age 25

This section looks at those learners that progressed to high earnings at the age of 25 and earned over £30,000, split by their FSM status and highest level of attainment.

Figure 2.4 shows the percentage of FSM and non-FSM learners that are high earners at age 25, based on their highest level of attainment. There are consistently greater proportions of non-FSM learners that progressed to high earnings compared to FSM learners, regardless of level of attainment.

Figure 2.4: Percentage of FSM and non-FSM learners (aged 15 in academic year 2012/13) that are high earners at age 25, based on their highest level of attainment

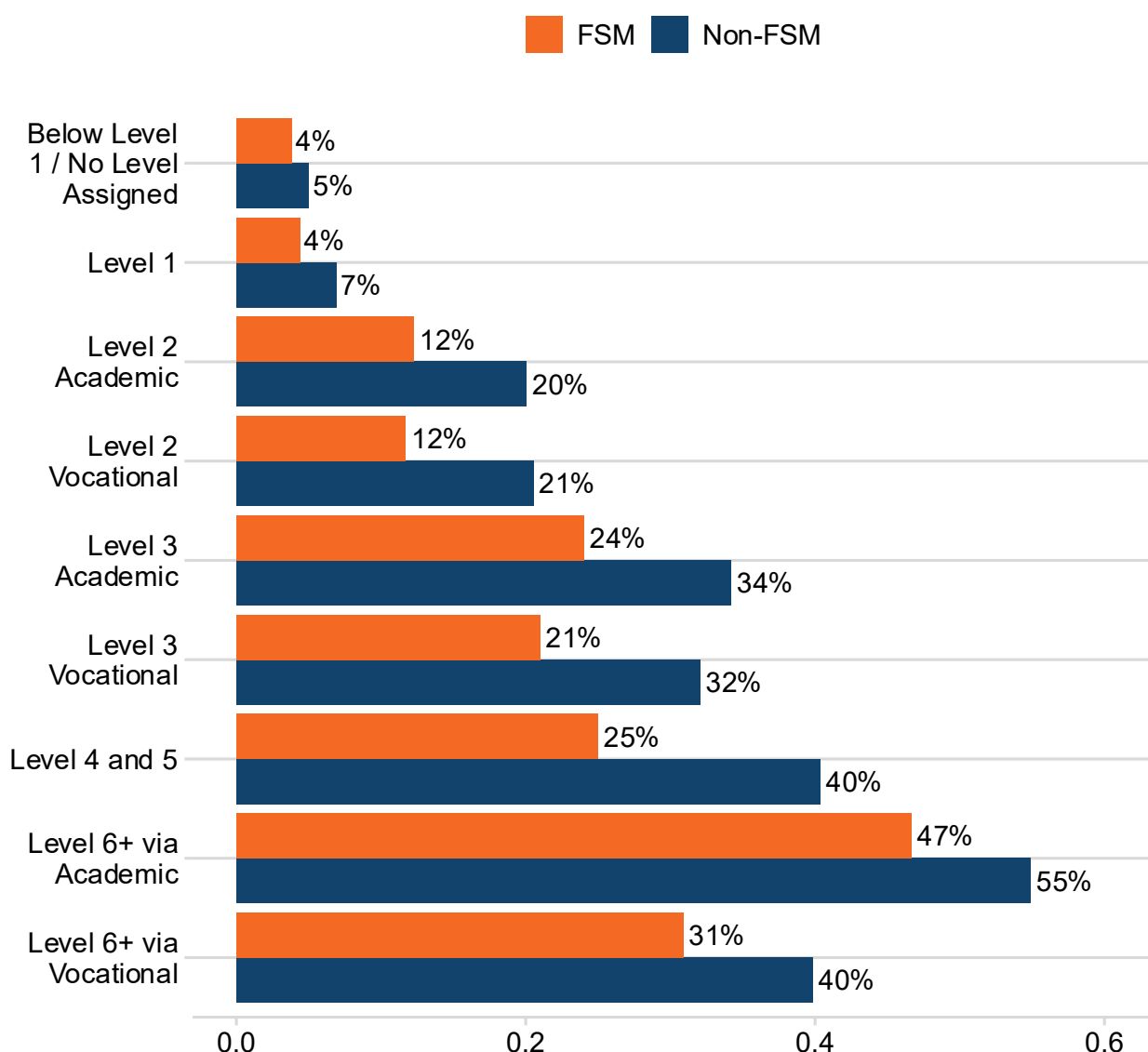


Figure 2.5 delves further into Figure 2.4 and shows the percentage of male and female FSM and non-FSM learners that are high earners at age 25, based on their highest level of attainment at 25. FSM females are the least likely to progress to high earnings, across almost all levels of attainment. This analysis has not been able to identify part-time

earnings, and this may explain some of the disparity in earnings progression between male and female learners (both FSM and non-FSM).

There are differences in earnings progression for female FSM learners with vocational versus academic qualifications. Female FSM learners with an academic Level 3 qualification as their highest attainment at age 25 were more likely to be high earners than those with a vocational Level 3 qualification (20% vs 13%). This pattern at Level 3 is not observed among male FSM learners.

Figure 2.5: Percentage of male and female FSM and non-FSM learners (aged 15 in academic year 2012/13) that are high earners at age 25, by highest level of attainment at 25

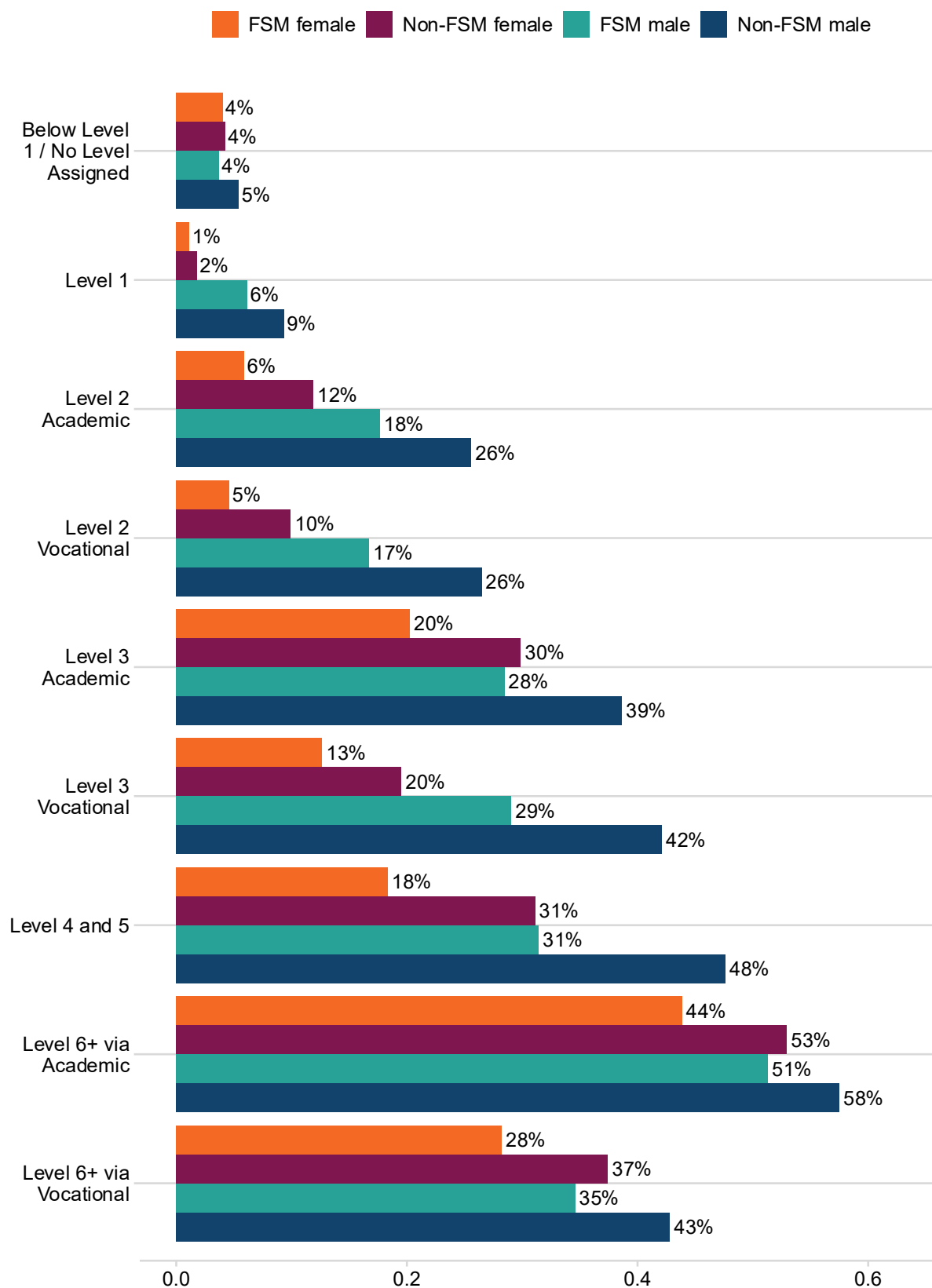
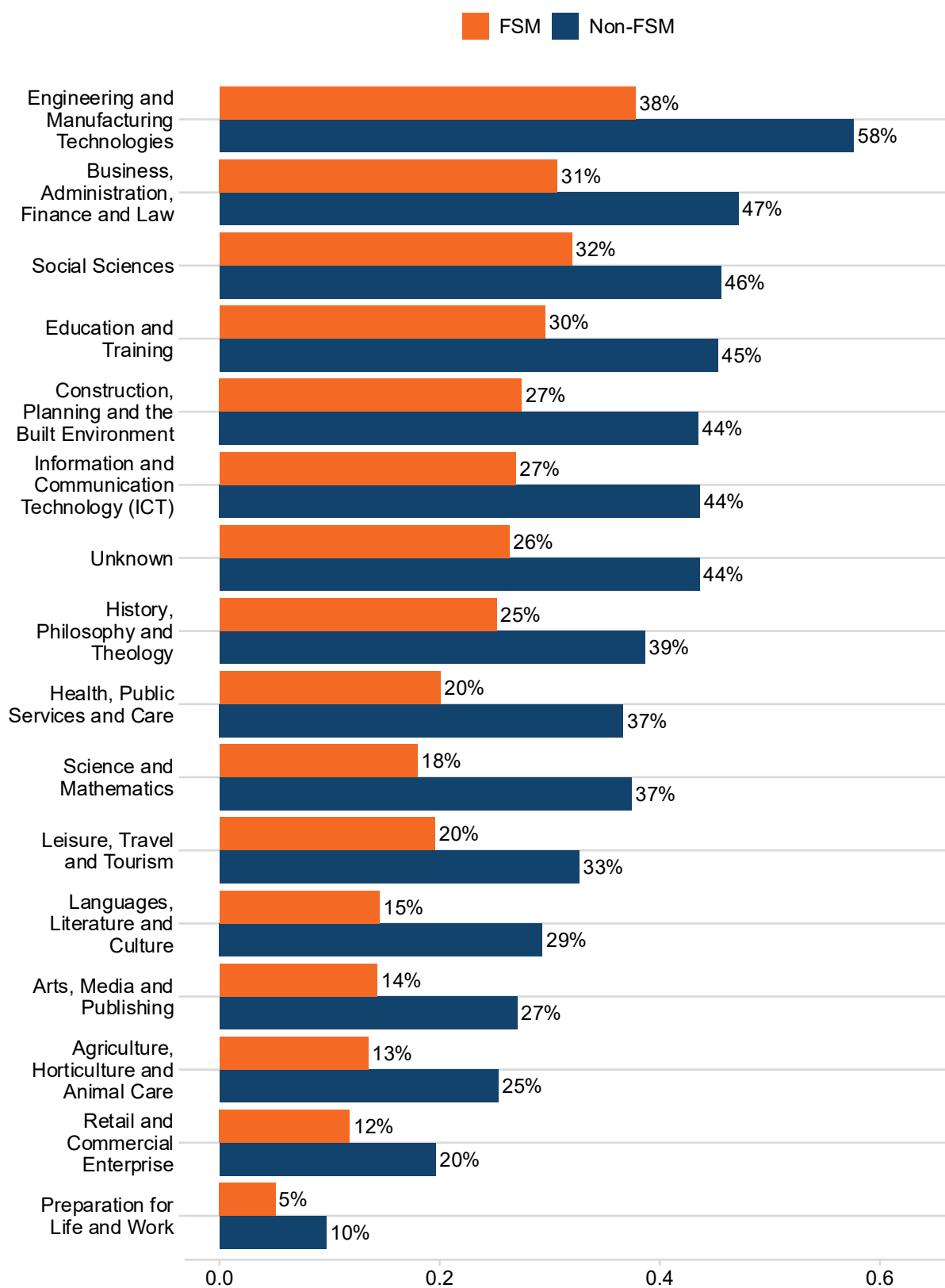


Figure 2.6 shows the percentage of learners that are high earners at age 25, based on the SSA of their highest qualification at 25. The greatest disparity exists between the

learners with their highest qualification in engineering and manufacturing technologies, where the proportion of non-FSM high earners is 20 percentage points higher than the proportion of FSM high earners. However, similar to the previous figures, there remains a disparity between FSM and non-FSM learner progression to high earnings, regardless of the subject of the highest qualification at 25.

Figure 2.6: Percentage of FSM and non-FSM learners (aged 15 in academic year 2012/13) that are high earners at age 25, based on the SSA of their highest qualification at 25



2.5 Post-16 education outcomes for learners with special educational needs (SEN)

2.5.1 Characteristics of the cohort

Table 2.2 presents key summary statistics for learners who completed their GCSEs in the 2012/13 academic year and were aged 25 in the 2023/24 financial year.

Overall, 19% of learners with special educational needs (SEN) earned more than £30,000 by age 25, compared with 38% of learners without SEN.

When comparing by sex, SEN learners are more likely to be male (27% of males compared to 17% of females), unlike FSM where the split is more evenly balanced (25% for both males and females). Female SEN learners are the least likely to be high earners, with only 13% earning over £30,000, compared to 22% of male SEN learners and higher proportions among non-SEN males and females.

Table 2.2: SEN status of learners (aged 15 in academic year 2012/13) and their progression to high earnings by age 25, by sex

Sex	Total learners	SEN learners	% of learners earning over £30k	% of SEN learners earning over £30k	% of non-SEN learners earning over £30k
Male	297,050	27%	38%	22%	43%
Female	282,700	17%	30%	13%	33%
Total	579,750	22%	34%	19%	38%

Source: Young Person's Matched Administrative Dataset (YPMAD) and the Longitudinal Educational Outcomes (LEO)

Table 2.3 presents a further breakdown of SEN learners by whether they had an EHC plan or were receiving any SEN support/SEN without an EHC plan, alongside their progression to high earnings by age 25.

Learners with an EHC plan include those with some of the most complex needs, which should be considered when interpreting attainment and earnings outcomes.

Overall, 8% of learners with an EHC plan earned over £30,000, compared with 21% of those receiving SEN support/SEN without an EHC plan.

When comparing by sex, male SEN learners are more likely than female SEN learners to have an EHC plan (23% compared with 13%).

Learners with an EHC plan are less likely to progress to high earnings, regardless of gender. Among male SEN learners, just 10% of those with an EHC plan earned over £30,000 by age 25, compared with 26% of those with SEN support/SEN without an EHC plan. For female SEN learners, the high-earning rates were 4% and 14% respectively.

Table 2.3: SEN learners (aged 15 in academic year 2012/13) by SEN provision and their progression to high earnings by age 25, by sex

Sex	SEN learners	% of SEN learners with an EHC plan	% of learners with an EHC plan earning over £30k	% of learners with SEN support/SEN without an EHC plan earning over £30k
Male	79,950	23%	10%	26%
Female	46,700	13%	4%	14%
Total	126,650	20%	8%	21%

Source: Young Person's Matched Administrative Dataset (YPMAD) and the Longitudinal Educational Outcomes (LEO)

2.5.2 Highest level of attainment at age 25

Figure 2.7 shows the distribution of SEN and non-SEN learners by their highest qualification at age 25. Vocational pathways play a significant role for learners with SEN whose highest level of attainment at age 25 was at Level 2 or Level 3. By age 25, 62% of SEN learners had a vocational qualification as their highest level of learning, compared with 37% of non-SEN learners.

Attainment of higher-level learning is less common among SEN learners. 83% of SEN learners held a Level 3 or below qualification as their highest level of attainment by age 25. In comparison, 53% of non-SEN learners held a Level 3 or below as their highest level of attainment at this age.

Only 15% of SEN learners in this cohort achieved a qualification at Level 6+ by age 25, compared with 42% of non-SEN learners.

Figure 2.7: Distribution of SEN and non-SEN learners (aged 15 in academic year 2012/13) by highest qualification held at age 25

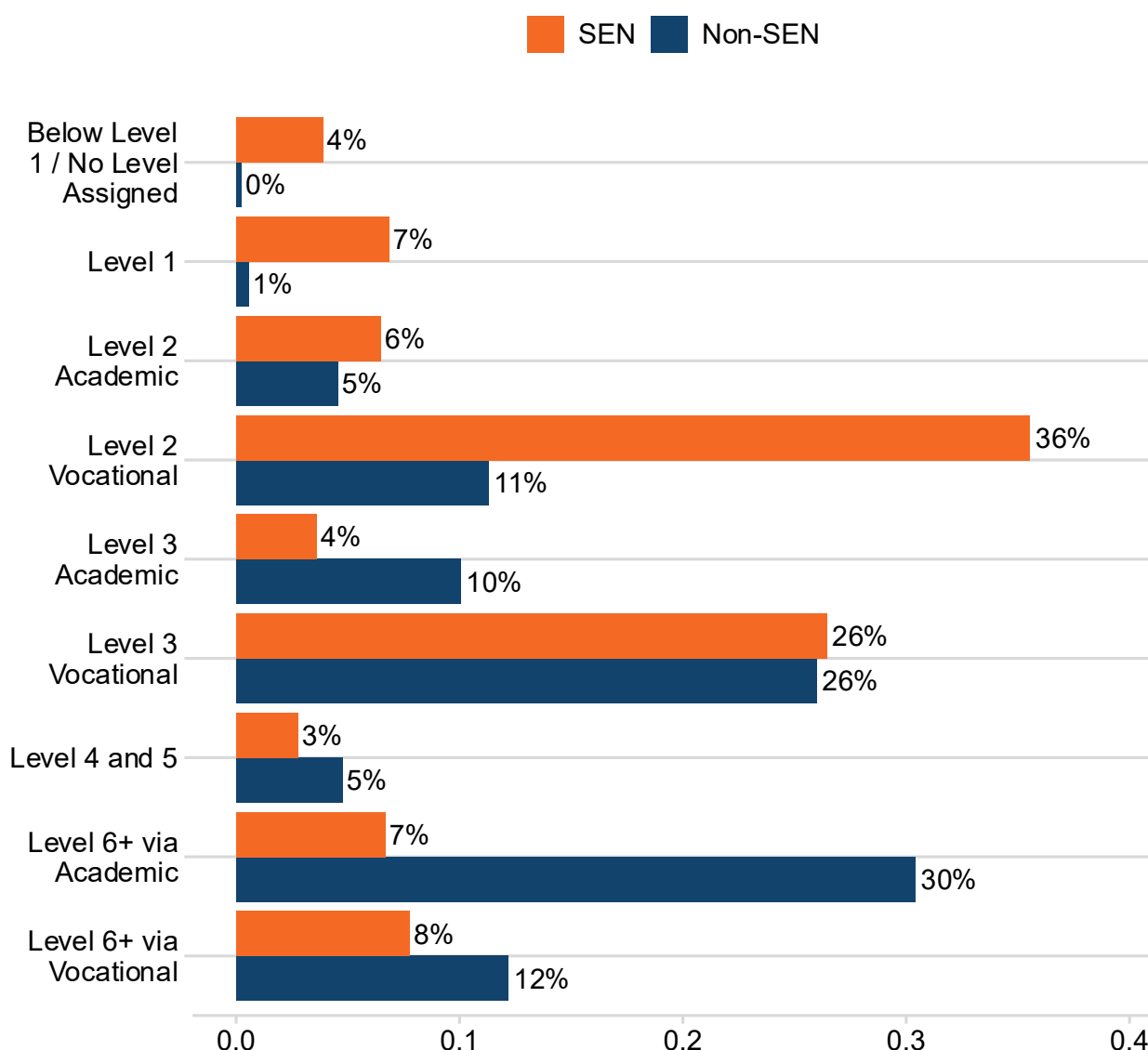


Figure 2.8 shows the distribution of highest qualification attained by SEN learners at age 25, and separately for those with an EHC plan and those receiving SEN support/SEN without an EHC plan.

Learners with an EHC plan are more likely to have lower-level qualifications as their highest attainment at age 25, with 16% below Level 1 and 18% at Level 1, compared with much smaller proportions at these levels among those receiving SEN support/SEN without an EHC plan.

Vocational pathways are common across both SEN provision groups, particularly at Level 2 (34% for those with an EHC plan and 36% for learners with SEN support/SEN without an EHC plan) and Level 3 (16% compared with 29% respectively).

Attainment of higher-level qualifications is less common for learners with an EHC plan. Only 8% achieved Level 6+, compared with 17% of those receiving SEN support/SEN without an EHC plan.

This disparity in attainment at higher levels of learning between SEN and non-SEN learners is also shown in departmental statistics that look at the destinations of learners who completed 16 to 18 study in academic year 2022/23⁶. The publication shows that those with no identified SEN were 18 percentage points more likely to be in a UK higher education institution following 16 to 18 study than those with SEN support/SEN without an EHC plan, and 27 percentage points more likely than those with SEN and an EHC plan⁷.

⁶ [16-18 destination measures - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

⁷ [16-18 study leavers national level destinations in England for 2022/23 by SEN status](#)

Figure 2.8: Distribution of highest qualification held at age 25 for SEN learners (aged 15 in academic year 2012/13), by SEN provision

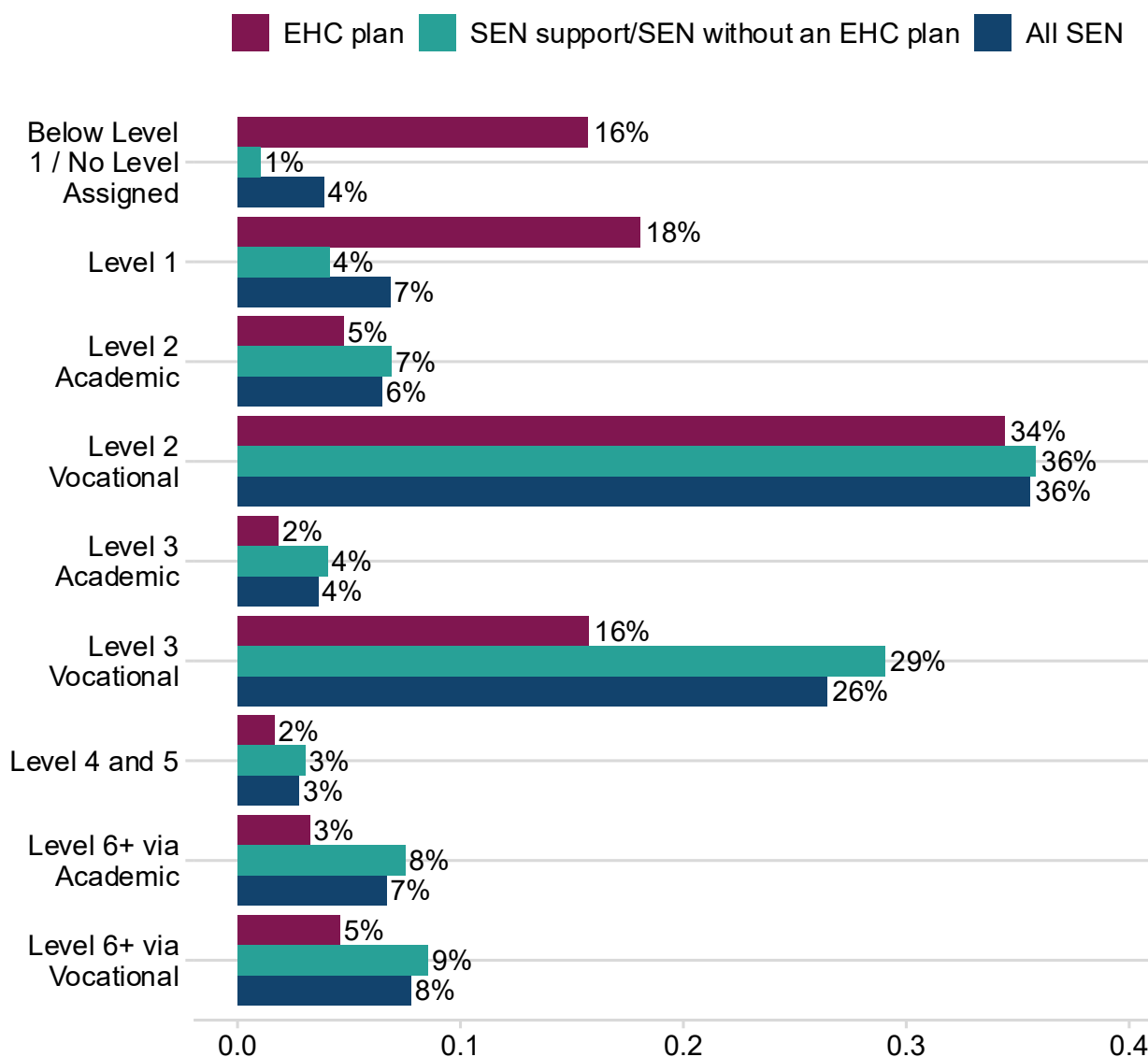


Figure 2.9 shows the distribution of male and female SEN learners by highest qualification at age 25. A greater proportion of SEN males hold Level 3 or below as their highest qualification compared with SEN females (86% of males compared to 80% of females).

SEN females are also more likely to achieve a qualification at Level 6+ than SEN males (18% compared with 13%).

Figure 2.9: Distribution of male and female SEN learners (aged 15 in academic year 2012/13) by highest qualification at age 25

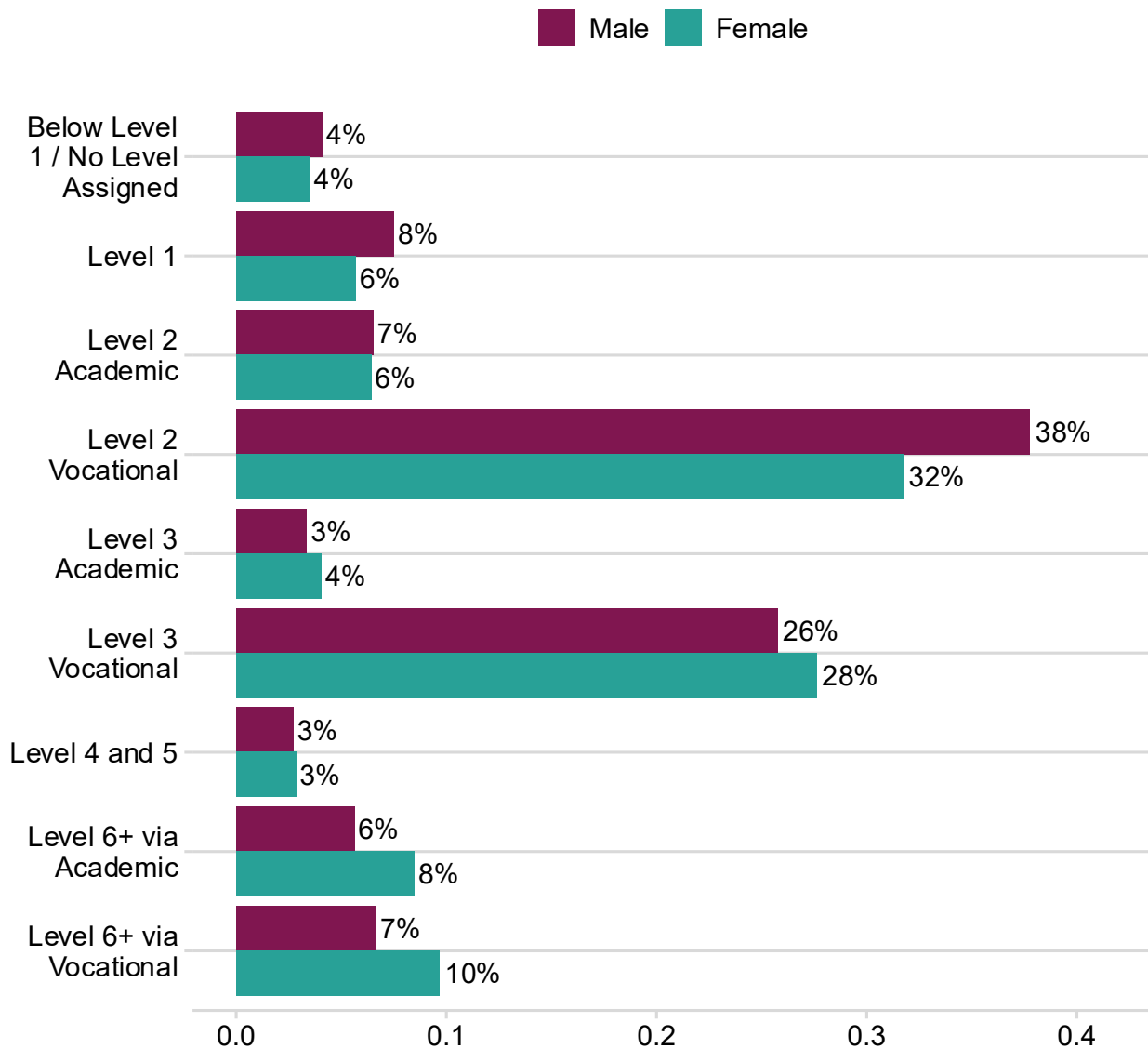
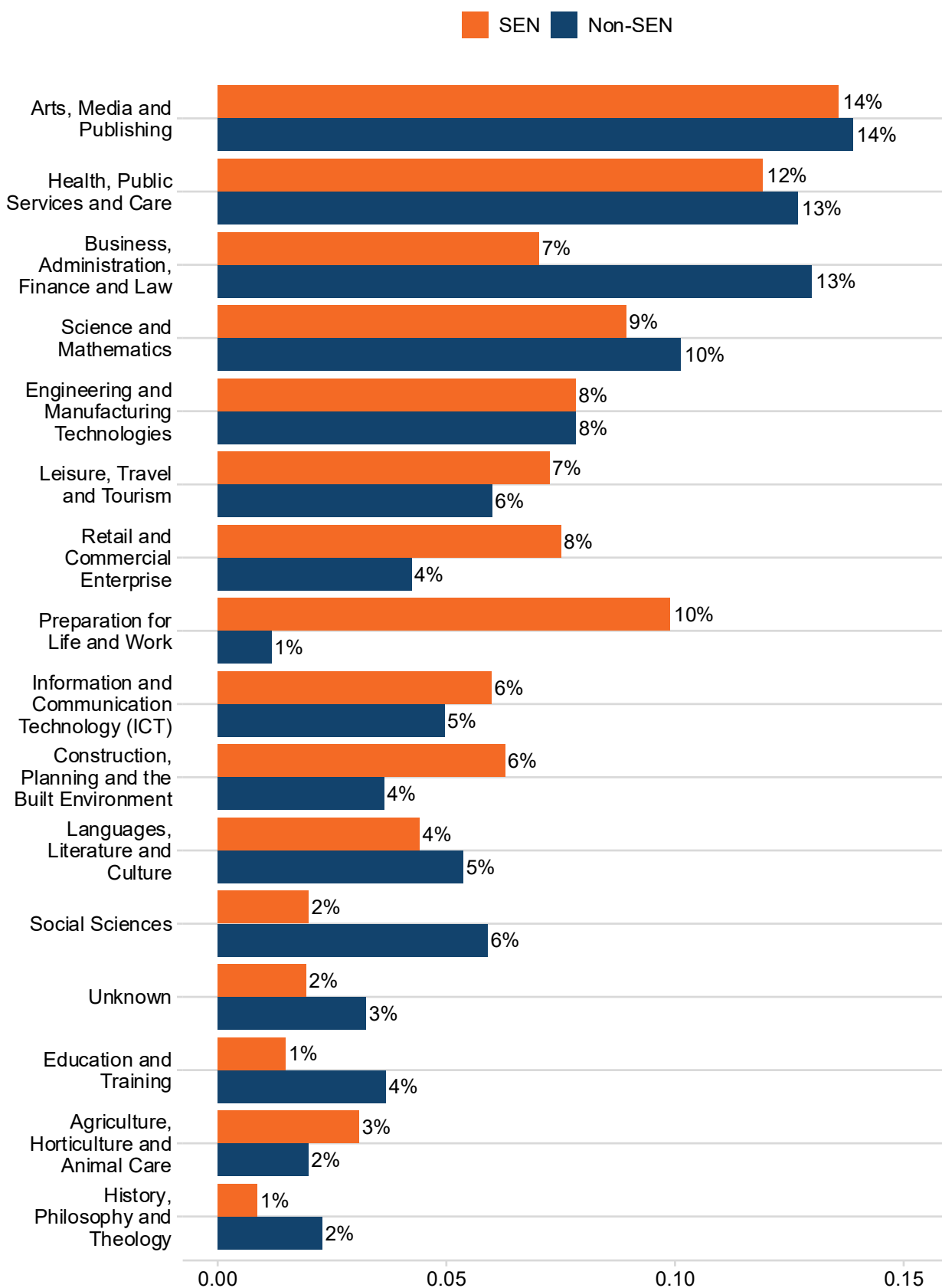


Figure 2.10 shows the distribution of SEN and non-SEN learners by the sector subject area of their highest qualification at age 25. Non-SEN learners are more likely to hold qualifications in the business, administration, finance and law and social sciences SSAs, whereas SEN learners are more likely to hold qualifications in the preparation for life and work and the retail and commercial enterprise SSAs as their highest qualification. For many other subjects, the distribution of SSAs is broadly similar between SEN and non-SEN learners.

Figure 2.10: Distribution of SEN and non-SEN learners (aged 15 in academic year 2012/13) by the SSA of their highest qualification at age 25



2.5.3 Progression to high earnings at age 25

Figure 2.11 shows the percentage of SEN and non-SEN learners that are high earners at age 25, based on their highest level of attainment. There is a clear disparity in earnings progression between SEN and non-SEN learners, evident across all qualification levels.

Learners who achieve higher levels of learning by age 25 are more likely to earn £30,000 or more by that age. However, the gap between SEN and non-SEN learners persists even among those with qualifications at Level 6+.

Figure 2.11: Percentage of SEN and non-SEN learners (aged 15 in academic year 2012/13) that are high earners at age 25, based on their highest level of attainment

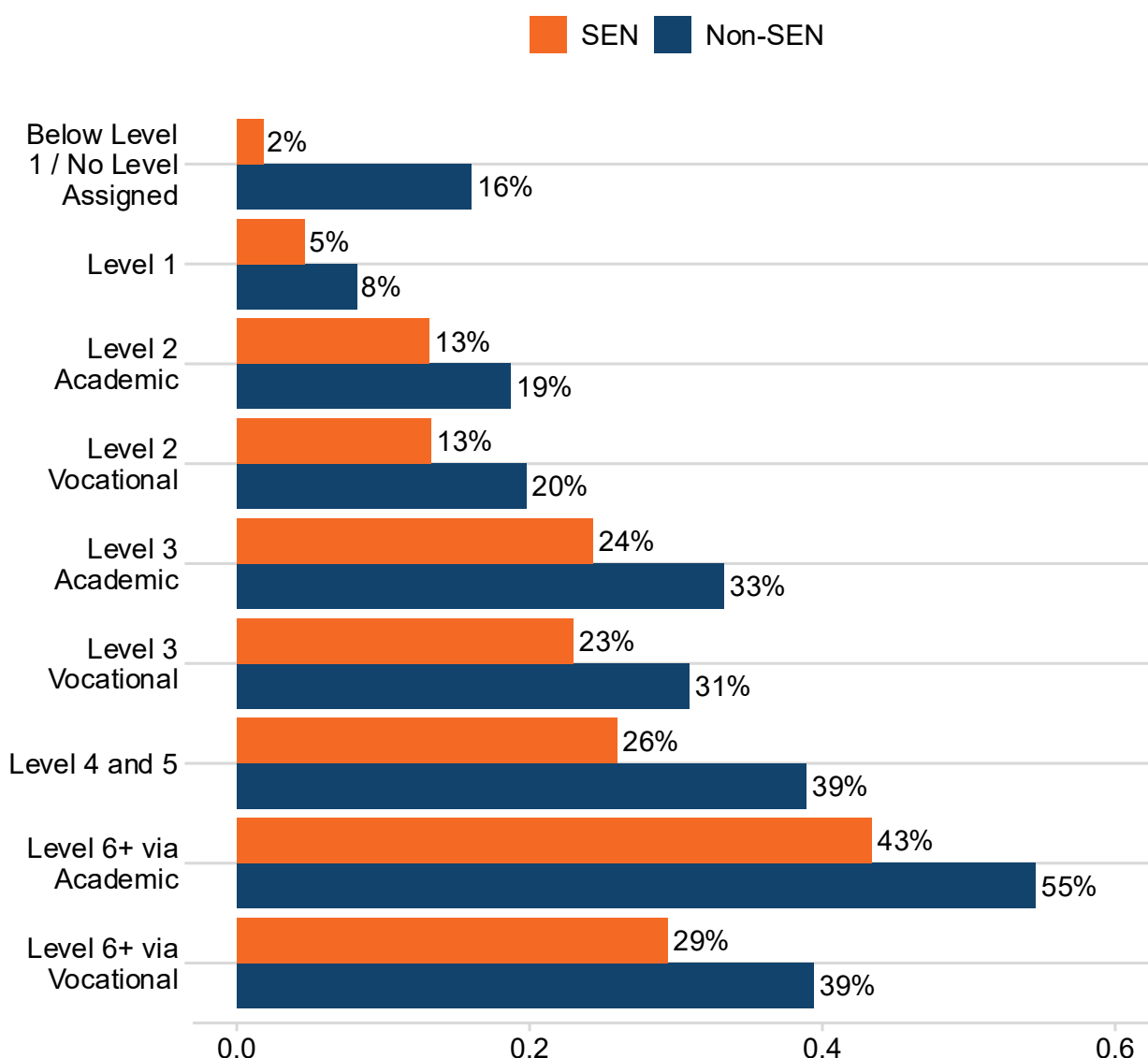


Figure 2.12 shows the percentage of SEN learners (including those with an EHC plan and those receiving SEN support/SEN without an EHC plan) who are high earners at age 25, by their highest level of attainment.

Across both SEN provision groups, higher levels of attainment are associated with higher earnings. However, learners with an EHC plan consistently have lower rates of high earnings at age 25 than those receiving SEN support/SEN without an EHC plan. For instance, among learners whose highest level of attainment at age 25 is a Level 3 academic qualification, just 15% of those with an EHC plan are high earners, compared with 25% of those with SEN support/SEN without an EHC plan.

This gap persists at higher levels of attainment, where 31% of learners with an EHC plan with a Level 6+ via academic route are high earners at age 25, compares with 45% of those receiving SEN support/SEN without an EHC plan. For those with a Level 6+ via vocational route as their highest level, the high-earnings rates are 17% compared with 31% respectively.

Figure 2.12: Percentage of SEN learners (aged 15 in academic year 2012/13) that are high earners at age 25, based on their highest level of attainment, by SEN provision

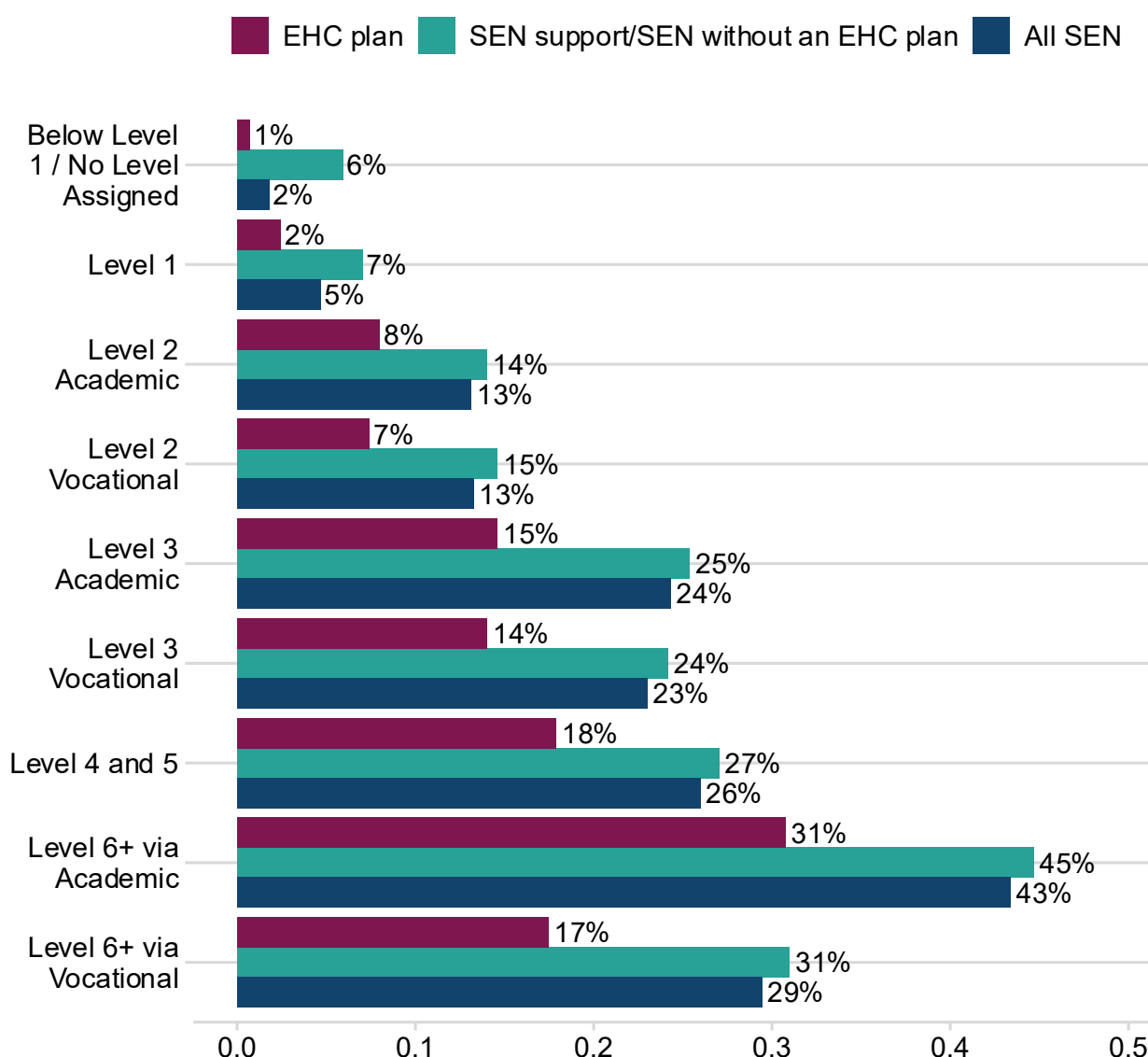


Figure 2.13 shows the percentage of male and female SEN and non-SEN learners that are high earners at age 25, based on their highest level of attainment at 25. The difference in outcomes for females with vocational versus academic qualifications is particularly clear at Level 3, as shown in Figure 2.11. Among SEN females, 21% with an academic qualification at this level progressed to high earnings by age 25, compared with 12% with a vocational qualification.

This pattern is not observed to the same extent among SEN males, where earnings outcomes are similar for academic and vocational qualifications at Level 3. This finding is also consistent for FSM learners as shown in Figure 2.5.

Figure 2.13: Percentage of male and female SEN and non-SEN learners (aged 15 in academic year 2012/13) that are high earners at age 25, by highest level of attainment at 25

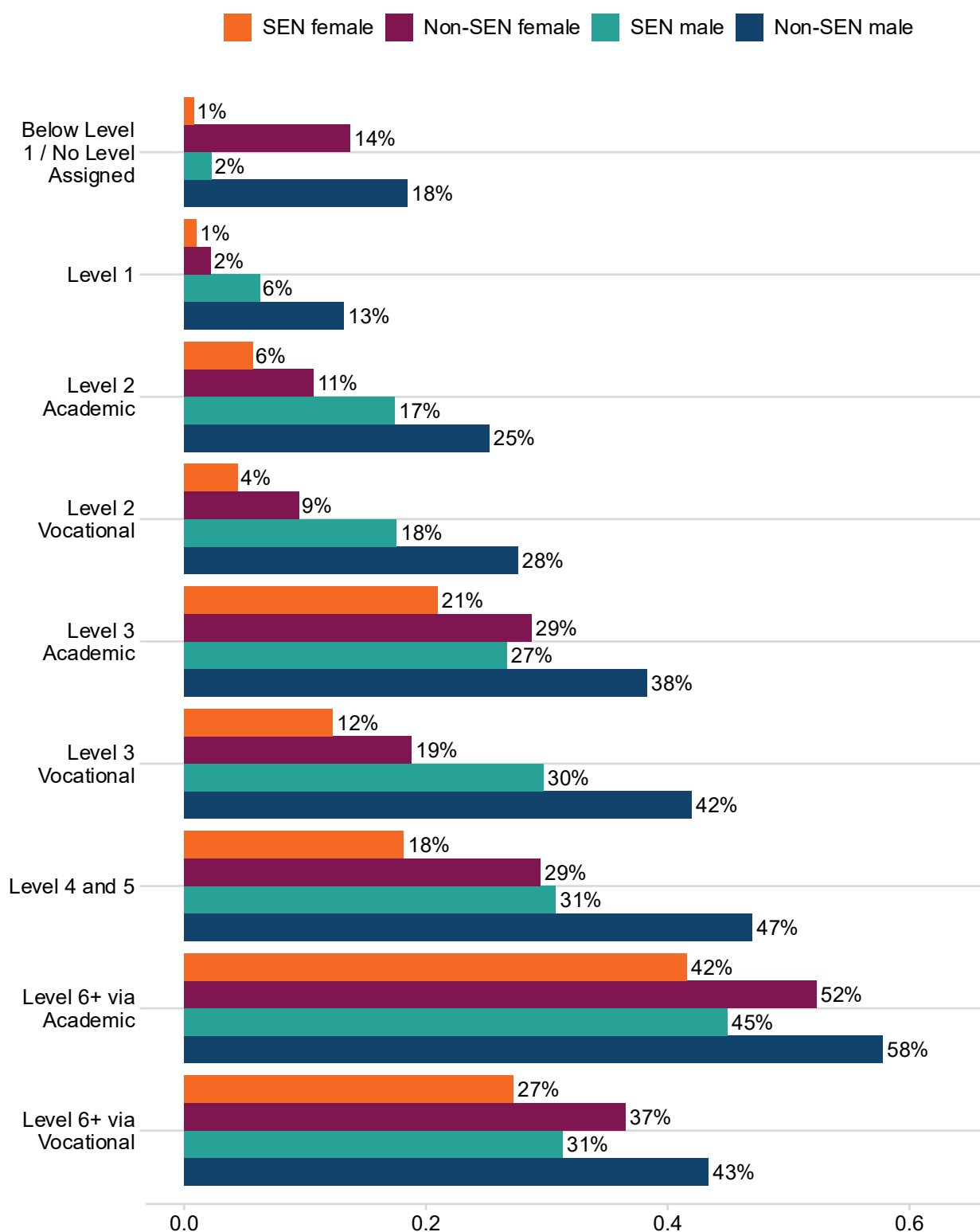
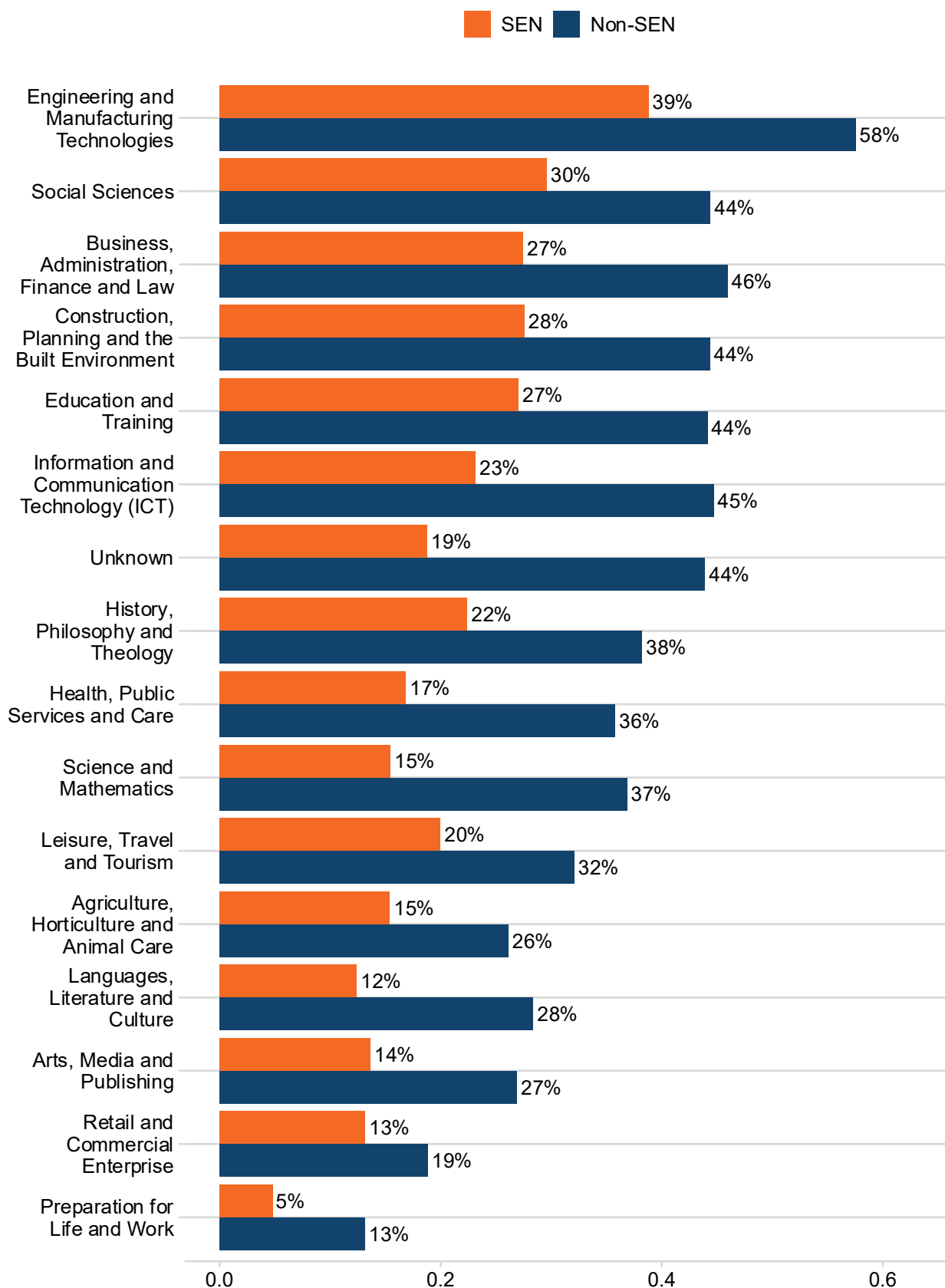


Figure 2.14 shows the percentage of SEN and non-SEN learners that are high earners at age 25, based on the SSA of their highest qualification at 25. The greatest disparity in progression to high earnings is observed in the 'unknown' category as seen in Figure 2.14, where the proportion of non-SEN high earners exceeds that of SEN learners by 25 percentage points. This category often includes Level 6+ qualifications in higher education that could not be matched to a sector subject area. Following this, is the information and communication technology SSA, where the proportion of non-SEN high earners exceeds that of SEN learners by 22 percentage points.

Figure 2.14: Percentage of SEN and non-SEN learners (aged 15 in academic year 2012/13) that are high earners at age 25, based on the SSA of their highest qualification at 25



3 Post-16 education pathways - progression from GCSE to highest level of attainment by age 25

3.1 Background

This analysis presents describes the different pathways learners take through post-16 education in England. It updates [experimental analysis previously published by the Department for Education in 2018](#). The data illustrates the progression of individuals from GCSE attainment through to their highest qualification level by age 25. These flows capture transitions from GCSE outcomes, highest attainment by age 18, and highest level of learning by age 25.

The analysis is based on the Young Person's Matched Administrative Dataset (YPMAD), which links together education records across schools, further education (FE), and higher education (HE). The 2013/14 GCSE cohort, which includes 621,700 learners, is used to track learners' attainment up to the age of 25 using 2023/24 data. The analysis is presented firstly for the full cohort and then split by i) eligibility for FSM and ii) SEN status of the learner.

3.2 Measures

- GCSE attainment at age 15: Describes whether individuals have achieved at least 5 or more GCSEs at grades A*-C/9-4 at age 15 which equates to achieving a Full Level 2.
- Attainment at age 18: Describes an individuals' highest level of qualification up to Level 3 by age 18 (i.e. Full Level 3, Full Level 2 or Below Level 2). Those holding Level 4+ qualifications by age 18 are therefore classified according to their next highest qualification achieved (this applies to fewer than 1% of the cohort). Additionally, the measure shows whether the individuals undertook academic (which include only AS-levels, A-levels, GCSEs and International Baccalaureate), apprenticeship or other vocational qualifications when achieving a Full Level 2 or Full Level 3.
- Highest level of achievement by age 25: Combines post-16 data across schools, FE and HE to show the highest qualification level individuals achieved by either age 25. The levels of education used to categorise the cohort are:
 - Below Level 2 – education below GCSE level
 - Level 2 – equivalent to GCSEs
 - Full Level 2 – equivalent to 5 or more GCSEs at grade A*-C/9-4
 - Level 3 – equivalent to A-levels
 - Full Level 3 – equivalent to 2 or more A-levels

- Level 4 and 5 – sub-degree higher level education
- Level 6 – degree level higher education
- Level 7+ – post-graduate level higher education
- Age is based on academic age, which is the age at the start of the academic year, 31st August. For this analysis, the 2013/14 cohort has been used, this means that they undertook GCSEs in 2013/14 academic year and were age 15 on 31st August 2013.
- A learner is classed as an FSM learner if they were eligible for FSM at any point between ages 10 and 15. A learner is identified as a SEN learner if they were recorded as having SEN at age 15 only. However, not all learners have FSM or SEN data available in YPMAD, so only those with data are included in the FSM and SEN breakdowns shown in Figures 3.2 and 3.3.

Sankey charts: reading Figures 3.1-3.3

These show the routes through post-16 education to the highest level achieved by age 25. The rectangles (nodes) show the proportion of the cohort that fall into each of the categories at each point in time (GCSE attainment at age 15, level achieved by age 18 and highest level achieved by age 25). The taller the rectangles, the greater the number of people within a category. The routes, or links, between nodes show the proportion of learners who move between the categories at each point in time. The thicker the link, the greater the number of people transferring between categories. Figure 3.1 shows this for the entire cohort, figures 3.2 and 3.3 shows this for FSM and SEN learners from the cohort.

The Sankey charts are intended to provide a broad overview of the flows of learners through different levels of attainment at each age.

The Sankey diagrams are scaled independently. As a result, flow sizes should not be directly compared between diagrams.

The data behind the Sankey charts in this section and in Section 4 is available in the [Excel document published alongside this report](#). These provide the underlying counts and proportions and should be used when making detailed comparisons between the groups.

3.3 Headline findings

- There is a clear difference in the education outcomes of the cohort based on performance in GCSE examinations. Learners that achieved five good GCSEs (i.e. at least 5 or more GCSEs at grades A*-C/9-4) are far more likely to progress

to Level 3 qualifications by age 18, most commonly through academic routes such as A-levels. These pathways provide the greatest opportunity for progression to Level 6 and above by age 25.

- Learners who did not achieve five good GCSEs are much less likely to progress beyond Level 2 by age 18, limiting their chances of achieving higher-level qualifications later.
- FSM and SEN learners do not reach the same levels of attainment as the overall cohort, particularly SEN learners. Lower rates of achieving good GCSEs among both groups are associated with lower attainment rates above Level 2 by age 18, which is, in turn, less likely to lead to attainment of higher-level qualifications by age 25.

Figure 3.1 illustrates that learners achieving good GCSEs are most likely to progress to Level 3 qualifications by age 18, with 82% doing so. Almost two-thirds (62%) of learners with good GCSEs followed academic routes at Level 3 by age 18, such as A-levels. Of all learners who attained a Level 3 academic qualification at age 18, more than three-quarters (77%) progressed further to attain at Level 6 or above by age 25.

For learners who did not achieve good GCSEs, the two most common outcomes at age 18 were attainment at Below Level 2 (43%) and Level 2 vocational qualifications (26%). Only 22% progressed to Level 3 by age 18, and this was mostly through vocational Level 3 qualifications (18%). Progression to higher-level study by age 25 for this group is less likely given their low attainment at age 18 - just over a third (38%) of those who achieved a vocational Level 3 qualification by age 18 progress to Level 6+, only 5% from vocational Level 2 qualifications and 2% from Below Level 2 qualifications.

Figure 3.2 illustrates that FSM learners are much less likely to achieve good GCSEs (38%) than learners in the overall cohort (61%), with lower progression rates to higher levels observed at each stage of their post-16 pathway. Among learners who achieved good GCSEs, 72% progressed to Level 3 qualifications by age 18. Almost half of all FSM learners with good GCSEs (46%) followed academic Level 3 routes by age 18, such as A levels. Progression from academic Level 3 remains relatively strong, with 71% of FSM learners who attained this level by age 18 going on to reach Level 6 or above by age 25.

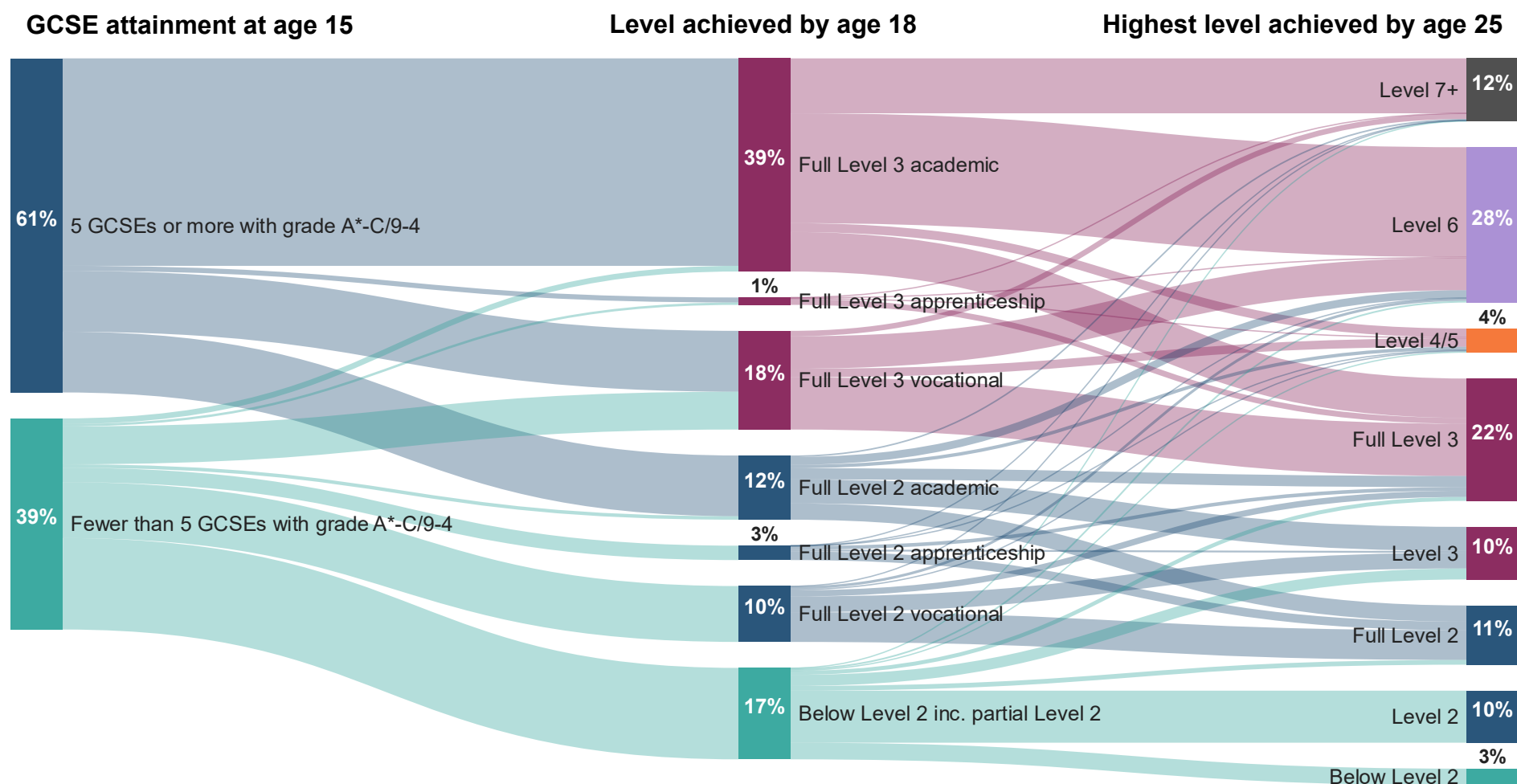
Outcomes are notably weaker for FSM learners who did not achieve good GCSEs. By age 18, the most common outcomes were attainment below Level 2 (51%) and Level 2 vocational qualifications (27%). Fewer than one in six (16%) progressed to Level 3 by age 18, and this was mostly through vocational Level 3 qualifications (14%).

Figure 3.3 illustrates that SEN learners are also much less likely to achieve good GCSEs (23%) than the overall cohort (61%), with higher level attainment by age 25 being lower than both the overall cohort and FSM learners. Among SEN learners who achieved good GCSEs, 73% progressed to Level 3 qualifications by age 18. Of all SEN learners with

good GCSEs, fewer entered academic Level 3 routes, with 43% following this pathway, compared to higher proportions in the overall cohort (62%) and among FSM learners (46%). Progression from academic Level 3 remains relatively strong, with 72% of these SEN learners attaining Level 6 or above by age 25.

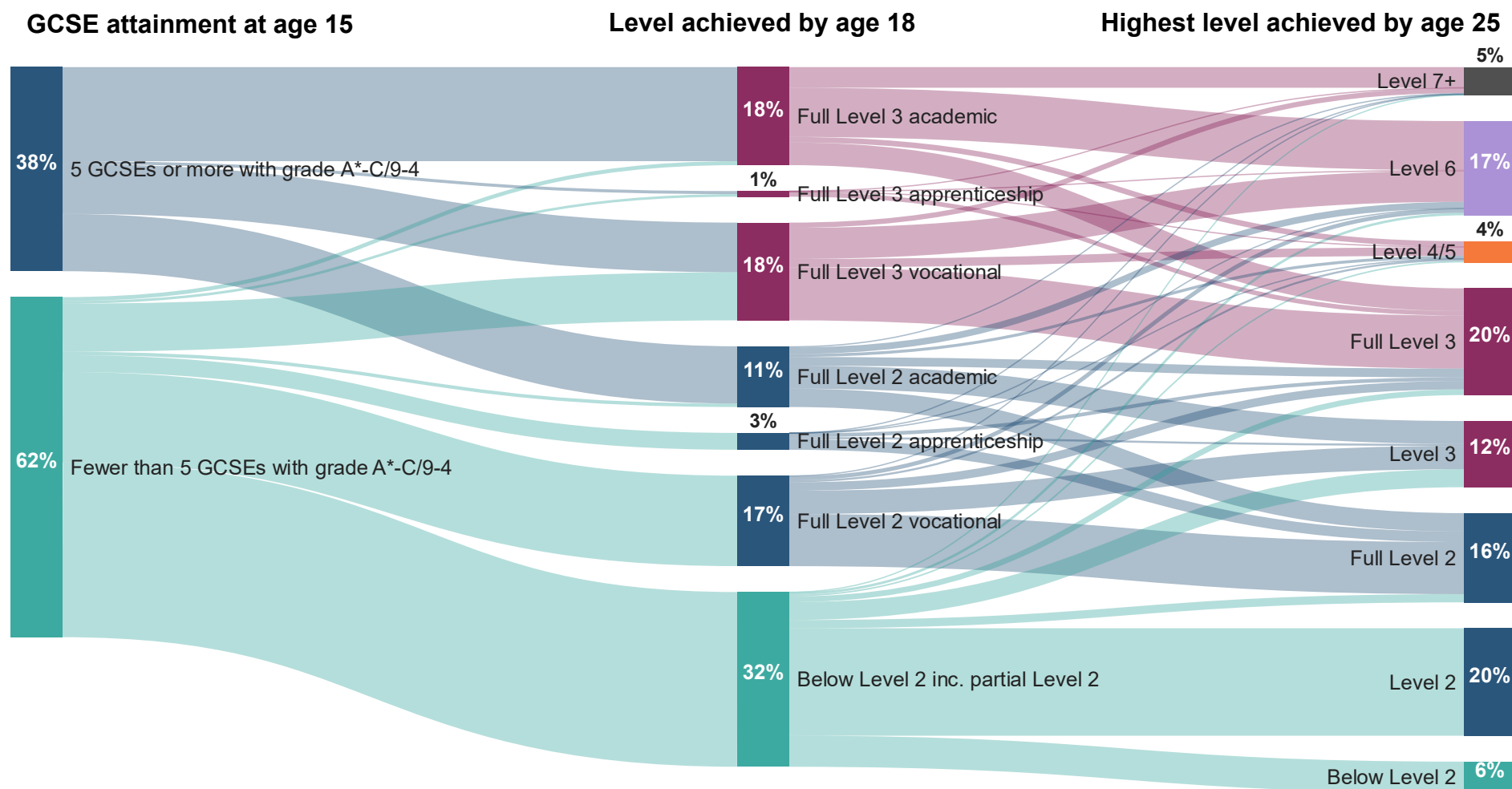
Outcomes for SEN learners who did not achieve good GCSEs are similar to FSM learners. By age 18, the most common outcomes were attainment below Level 2 (52%) and Level 2 vocational qualifications (27%). Only 14% progressed to Level 3 by age 18 , and this was mainly through vocational Level 3 qualifications (13%).

Figure 3.1: Routes through post-16 education: highest level achieved by age 25 for learners aged 15 in the 2013/14 academic year⁸



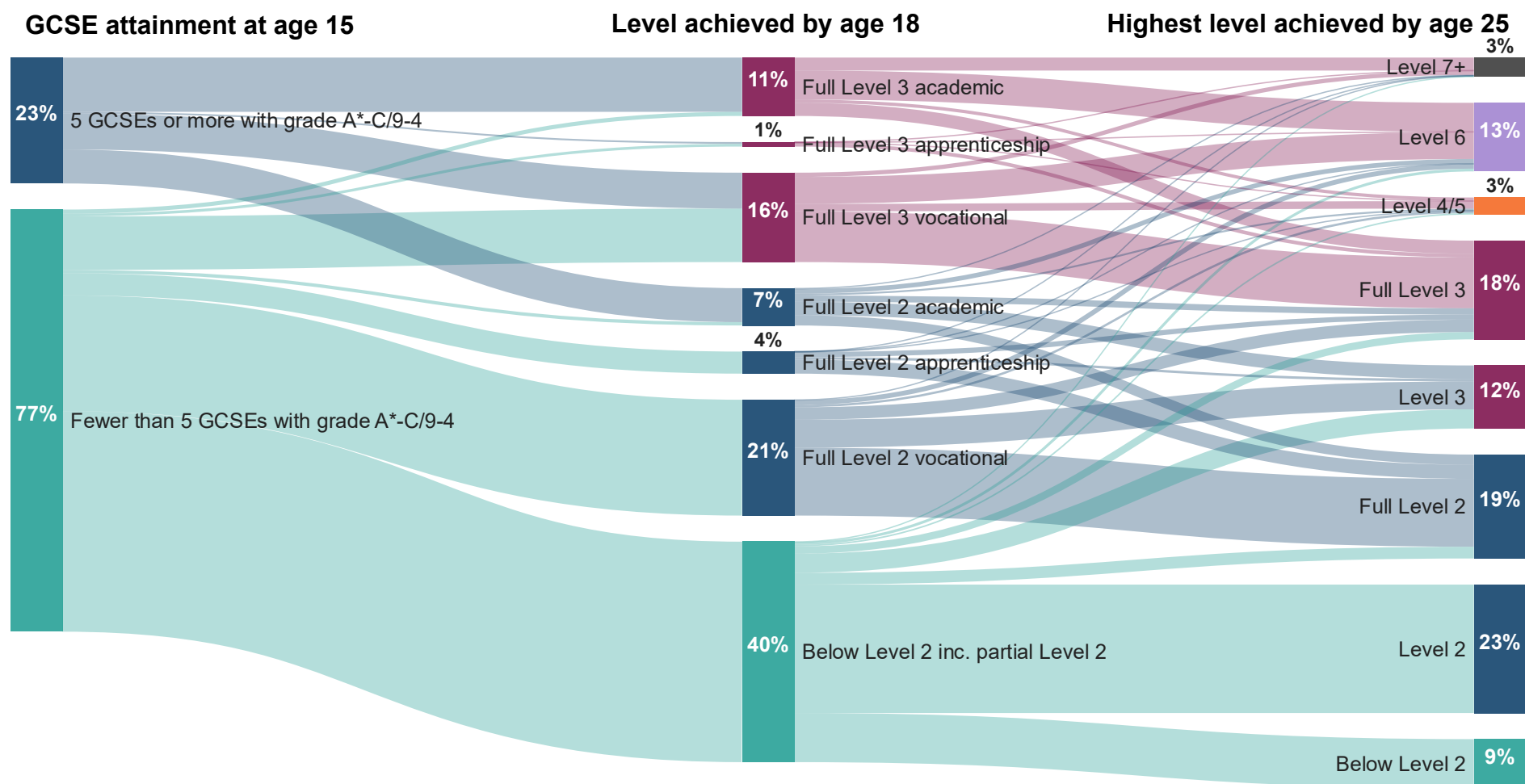
⁸ See Table 3.1 in the [Excel document](#) for the underlying percentages and counts.

Figure 3.2: Routes through post-16 education: highest level achieved by age 25 for FSM learners aged 15 in the 2013/14 academic year⁹



⁹ See Table 3.2 in the [Excel document](#) for the underlying percentages and counts.

Figure 3.3: Routes through post-16 education: highest level achieved by age 25 for SEN learners aged 15 in the 2013/14 academic year¹⁰



¹⁰ See Table 3.3 in the [Excel document](#) for the underlying percentages and counts.

4 Characteristics of NEETs aged 16 to 21 and their transitions into education and employment

4.1 Summary

- Most young people who are NEET in one year will remain NEET the following year. Around 65% of those NEET at ages 16, 17, or 18 remain NEET in the following year. This increases to 70% for those NEET at ages 19 or 20.
- NEETs are more likely to have been eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) than non-NEETs. Over half (54%) of those that were NEET for four or more years between the ages of 16 to 21, were eligible for FSM at any point from age 10 to 15, compared to 19% of those who were never NEET.
- NEETs are more likely to have had special educational needs (SEN) at school than non-NEETs, with 43% of those NEET for four or more years between the ages of 16 to 21 reported as having SEN, compared to 10% of those who were never NEET.
- NEETs have lower attainment at age 15 than non-NEETs. Under a fifth (18%) of those who were NEET for four or more years between the ages of 16 to 21 achieved a Level 2 in English and Maths at age 15, compared to over two thirds (69%) of those who were never NEET in the same period.

4.2 Background

This section summarises experimental analysis that uses administrative data to estimate if a person is not in education, employment or training (NEET) from age 16 to 21. NEET individuals are segmented into groups to identify differences in characteristics, and information is presented on the employment or education destinations of NEETs that are no longer NEET.

This analysis is not directly comparable to other NEET statistics published by the department¹¹ or the Office for National Statistics (ONS)¹², as these both use survey methods based on a point in time, while this analysis uses administrative data sources and an experimental method for identifying NEET status for specific cohorts over a period of time.

¹¹ [Statistics: NEET and participation - GOV.UK](#)

¹² [Young people not in education, employment or training \(NEET\) - Office for National Statistics](#)

4.3 Data and Definitions

The analysis uses data from the Young Person's Matched Administrative Dataset (YPMAD), which links education records across schools, awarding organisations, further education (FE), and higher education (HE), as well as employment records from HMRC, and benefit records from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), which are combined to create the Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) datasets. Three cohorts of individuals are used:

1. Those aged 16 at the start of academic year 2015/16 (aged 21 at the start of academic year 2020/21)
2. Those aged 16 at the start of academic year 2016/17 (aged 21 at the start of academic year 2021/22)
3. Those aged 16 at the start of academic year 2017/18 (aged 21 at the start of academic year 2022/23)

This is a total of 1.7 million individuals, as shown in Table 4.1. These cohorts were chosen as they were the most recent cohorts with complete education and labour market data available up to age 21.

Table 4.1: Cohorts in scope for this analysis

Academic Year Aged 16	Individuals
2015/16	573,650
2016/17	560,000
2017/18	549,450
Total	1,683,100

To get to these cohorts, individuals are identified at age 15 in the YPMAD attainment data, HMRC employment data, and DWP benefits data, for the relevant academic years. This provides a starting point of a group of individuals that are definitely in England at age 15. Their education and employment statuses are then followed for the next six years, up to age 21, using YPMAD participation and attainment data, and HMRC employment data. Learners in private schools at age 15 and anyone that enters the English education system after the age of 15 are excluded, even if they would have been aged 16 to 21 in the relevant academic years. Learners with no attainment data in the YPMAD at age 15 are also excluded, unless they appear in employment or benefit data at the same age. These learners represent around 1% of a total cohort and will be individuals that did not sit exams in year 11. It is unlikely that their exclusion from this analysis would change the findings presented here.

Start and end dates for education and employment spells are used to identify if an individual is in education or employment for each month of the academic years they are aged 16 to 21. Those that are self-employed are assumed to be employed for the entire tax year in which they declare self-employment. An individual that attains a qualification through an awarding organisation, often privately funded learning, is flagged as being in education based on the start and end dates of learning spells recorded in the awarding organisation data.

A person is identified as NEET for an academic year if they do not have an education or employment spell for six consecutive months of an academic year. This is not a perfect assumption because, while the individual may be NEET, they may also have gone abroad or passed away. This definition also excludes those that are NEET for shorter periods of time in a year, e.g. someone that is NEET for three months out of the year will not be flagged as NEET in this analysis.

Attainment of Full Level 2 or 3 qualifications at different ages is included in this analysis. For the purposes of this section, this is based on the achievement of either fully academic, fully vocational, or a mix of qualifications in England. For a Full Level 2, this could be achievement of five GCSEs at grade 4 to 9 or achievement of a vocational Level 2 qualification with at least 325 guided learning hours, or a mix of both. For a Full Level 3 this could be achievement of three A-levels or another Level 3 qualification with at least 595 guided learning hours, or a mix of both. Apprenticeships at either level are considered “full” levels.

The “main enterprise of employment” refers to the industry sector of the employer rather than the type of employment. This is provided for those who come out of NEET and into employment and is based on the tax year rather than academic year. As tax years overlap with academic years, the main enterprise is shown for the tax year with the highest earnings between the two that overlap the academic year of interest.

The SSA of study that is shown is based on the highest level and latest learning aim that the learner participates in during the relevant academic year.

4.4 Results

This section presents the results of the analysis. The results are based on all three cohorts of learners at each relevant age. This means that age 16 refers to those aged 16 in academic years 2015/16, 2016/17, and 2017/18 together, and age 17 refers to the same individuals in the following academic years, and so on. Further breakdowns are available in the [accompanying data tables](#).

4.4.1 Segmented groups

It is possible to segment the types of NEET individuals into groups and table 4.2 presents five different groups of NEET individuals, alongside the group that are never NEET (70% of the in-scope population).

The “Gap year NEET” group are those that are likely to be taking time out of education or employment before going onto higher education. They are defined as those participating in a Level 6+ qualification in the year after being flagged as NEET. The group is limited to those who are only ever NEET for two or fewer years between ages 16 and 21 and represents 7% of the NEET population.

The “Cycling NEET” group are individuals that are intermittently NEET. They have two or three years that they are NEET from age 16 to 21, but these are not consecutive NEET years. They represent the smallest group of NEETs at 5% of the NEET population.

The “NEET 1 or 2 years” group are those who are NEET for one year or two consecutive years from age 16 to 21. They do not fall into the “Gap year NEET” group as they don’t participate in a Level 6+ qualification in the year after being NEET. They also do not fall into the “Cycling NEET” group as their two-year NEET spells are consecutive rather than intermittent. They make up the largest group of NEETs, at 49% of the NEET population and around 83 thousand people on average per cohort. 72% of this group are NEET for one year between age 16 to 21, while 28% are NEET for two consecutive years.

The “NEET 3 years” group are those that are NEET for three years and don’t fall into the “Cycling NEET” group. This means that they will either have one NEET year with a non-NEET spell and then two consecutive NEET years (or the other way around), or three consecutive NEET spells, at any point from the age of 16 to 21. On the other hand, the “Cycling NEET” group will always have at least one year of not being NEET between NEET years. The “NEET 3 years” group represents the third largest group of NEETs at 14% of the NEET population.

Lastly, the “Persistent NEET” group are those that are NEET for four or more years. They are the second largest of all NEET groups, and 25% of all NEETs fall into this group. In an average cohort of learners, this is around 43 thousand people.

Table 4.2: In-scope population segmented into types of NEETs

NEET group	Individuals	% of total population	% of NEET population	Average number in each cohort
Never NEET	1,171,400	70%	-	390,450
Gap year NEET	35,900	2%	7%	11,950
Cycling NEET	25,500	2%	5%	8,500
NEET 1 or 2 years	248,600	15%	49%	82,850
NEET 3 years	74,050	4%	14%	24,700
Persistent NEET	127,700	8%	25%	42,550

Table 4.3 shows the characteristics of these NEET groups and their attainment of a Full Level 2 or Full Level 3 at different ages. The “Persistent NEET” group has the highest proportion of FSM and SEN learners, as well as the highest average IDACI score (Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index) at age 15. On the other hand, the “Gap year NEET” group has the lowest proportions of FSM and SEN learners, and the lowest average IDACI score.

The “Persistent NEET” group has the lowest levels of attainment at Level 2 and Level 3 by different ages. At age 15, 29% have achieved a Full Level 2 (equivalent to five GCSEs at grade 4-9), compared to 83% of the “Never NEET” group. While this increases by 10 percentage points to 39% holding a Full Level 2 at age 19, other groups see greater percentage point increases. For example, the percentage of people in the “NEET 3 years” group holding a Full Level 2 at age 15 is 41%. This increases by 21 percentage points to 62% by age 19. Similar patterns can be seen when looking at Full Level 3 attainment.

Table 4.3: Characteristics of different types of NEETs

NEET group	Average IDACI at age 15	% Ever FSM	% Any SEN at age 15	% Level 2 English and Maths at 15	% Level 2 English and Maths at 19	% Full Level 2 at 15	% Full Level 2 at 19	% Full Level 3 at 19
Never NEET	0.19	19%	10%	69%	82%	83%	96%	76%
Gap year NEET	0.19	19%	9%	84%	92%	93%	98%	91%
Cycling NEET	0.25	44%	30%	28%	39%	43%	66%	26%
NEET 1 or 2 years	0.23	34%	23%	42%	56%	59%	81%	46%
NEET 3 years	0.25	45%	37%	26%	36%	41%	62%	26%
Persistent NEET	0.27	54%	43%	18%	23%	29%	39%	10%

4.4.2 Average length of NEET status

Table 4.4 presents the average number of months NEET in an academic year by age NEET, while table 4.5 shows the distribution of NEETs based on the number of years NEET between ages 16 and 21.

The average number of months NEET in an academic year is roughly the same regardless of age NEET, and the majority of those identified as NEET were NEET for more than one year (60%). The number of months NEET will be influenced by the definition used here, where a person is defined as NEET when they have six consecutive months with no education or employment spells.

Table 4.4: Average number of months NEET in an academic year, by age NEET

Age NEET	Average number of months NEET in academic year
16	10.4
17	10.5
18	10.6
19	10.7
20	10.9
21	10.8

Table 4.5: Distribution of NEETs based on the number of years NEET between 16 and 21

Number of years NEET between ages 16 and 21	% of all NEETs	Average number of NEETs in each cohort
1	40%	68,250
2	20%	34,550
3	15%	25,200
4	11%	19,300
5	7%	12,250
6	6%	11,050
Total	100%	170,600

4.4.3 Status of NEET population from age 16 to 21

Figure 4.1 shows the education, employment and NEET status of an average cohort from ages 16 to 21. Figure 4.2 shows the same information but is limited to those who were ever flagged as NEET from age 16 to 21. The level of study refers to the highest level that an individual is participating in at that age, and they may have been in employment alongside studying.

Young people who experience at least one year of being NEET are more likely to be studying at lower qualification levels between ages 16 and 21 than the full cohort. At age 16, 37% of the group that were NEET for at least one year were studying a Level 2 or below qualification, compared to 27% of the full cohort. The NEET group were also less likely to be studying at Level 3, with this accounting for 37% of activity at age 16 and 38% at age 17, compared with 64% and 67% respectively in the full cohort.

Figure 4.2 shows lower rates of progression to higher-level study for the NEET group, with 17% studying at Level 4+ at age 20, compared to 43% of the full cohort in figure 4.1. Similarly, the NEET group are less likely to progress to employment only, with 30% in employment only at age 21, compared to 46% of the full cohort.

Those that experienced being NEET for at least one year between age 16 to 21 are also more likely to remain NEET from age 18 onwards, where being NEET becomes the dominant status for this group. There is a group that are NEET for the entire period and they represent 6% of the NEET population, as shown in table 4.5. More information related to NEET status throughout the period is available in the [accompanying data tables](#).

Figure 4.1: Education and employment status of individuals in an average cohort from age 16 to 21.

Level of study is shown when an individual is in education, including where they may be in education and employment. A small number of qualifications with no level assigned are included in the level 0-1 category.

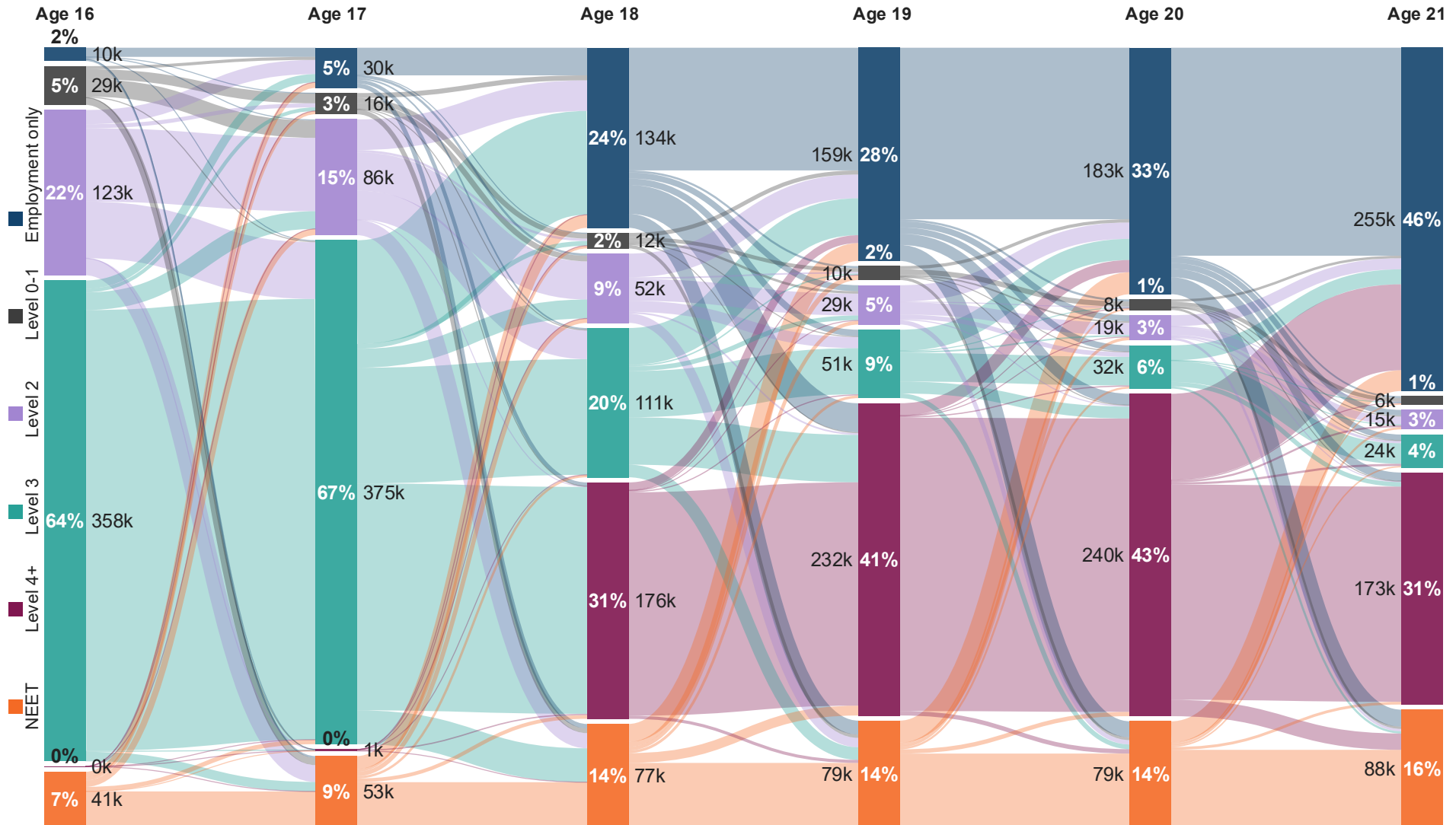


Figure 4.2: Education and employment status of individuals that were ever NEET in an average cohort from age 16 to 21.

Level of study is shown when an individual is in education, including where they may be in education and employment. A small number of qualifications with no level assigned are included in the level 0-1 category.

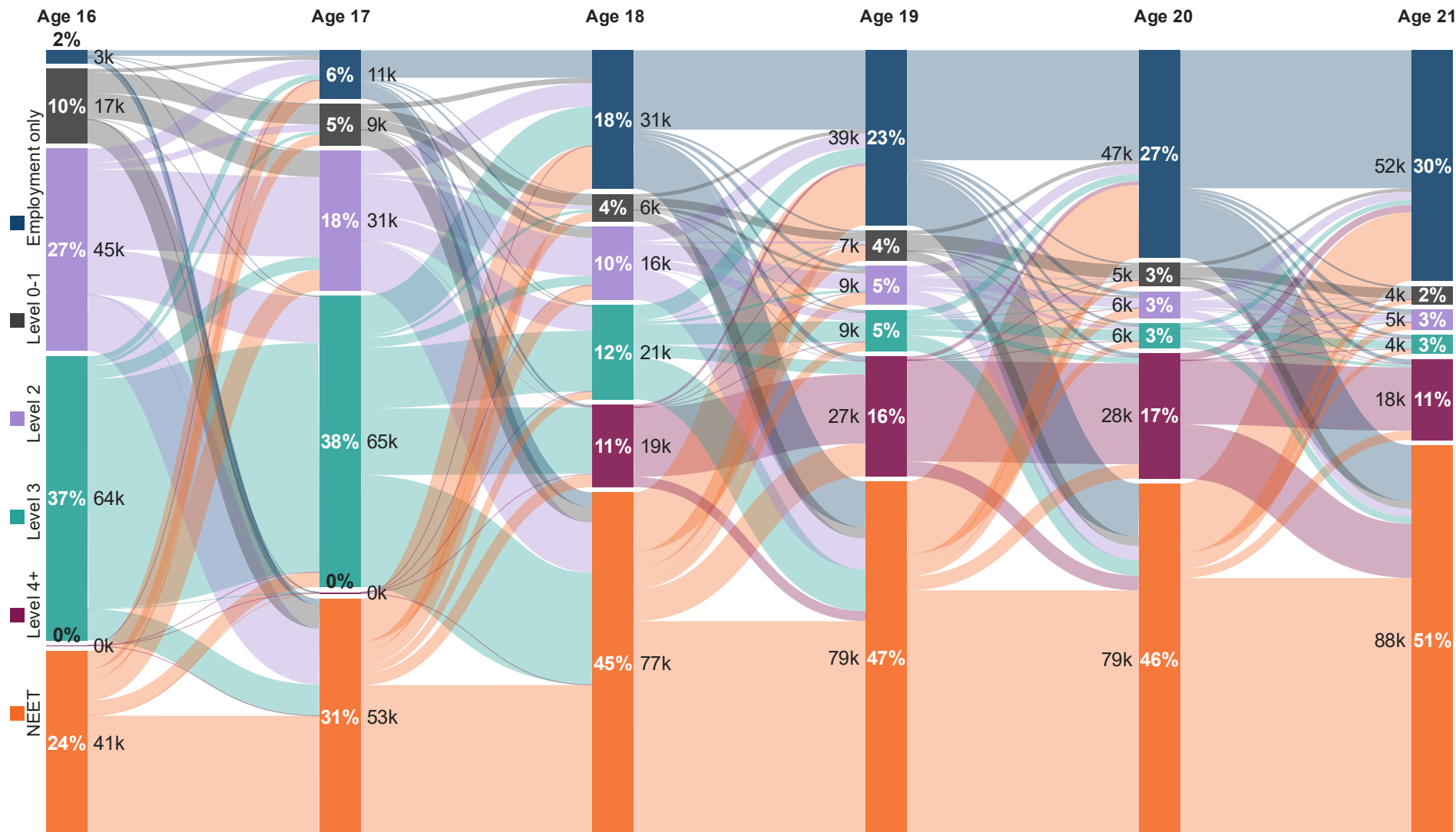


Table 4.6 shows the percentage of individuals that are in education, employment, and NEET from age 16 to 21, as well as the percentage that remain NEET in the following year. Most young people who are NEET in one year remain NEET in the next year. The proportion that remains NEET in the following year is lowest for those NEET at age 18. This is likely influenced by individuals taking a gap year as this group has the highest proportion of “Gap year NEETs”, at 9%, compared to between 1% and 5% in the groups NEET at other ages.

If someone is NEET at ages 16 or 17, there is a 71% chance of being NEET in at least one year between age 18 and 21, compared to 21% if not NEET at 16 or 17. This rises to 82% if someone is NEET at both age 16 and 17.

Table 4.6: Percentage in education, employment, and NEET at each age from 16 to 21, and the percentage that remain NEET in the following year

Age	% Education	% Education and Employment	% Employment	% NEET	% remaining NEET in following year
16	42%	49%	2%	7%	65%
17	26%	59%	5%	9%	63%
18	15%	47%	24%	14%	62%
19	12%	45%	28%	14%	69%
20	10%	43%	33%	14%	73%
21	7%	32%	46%	16%	Not in scope for analysis

4.4.4 NEETs that go into education

Table 4.7 presents the level of study for those who were NEET at ages 16 to 20, and participating in education in the following year, at ages 17 to 21. This includes all types of NEETs, regardless of the segmented group.

Level 2 is a popular level of study for those who are NEET in one year and in education in the next, particularly for those NEET at age 16 and 17, although less so at age 18. 17% of the group of individuals who are NEET at age 18 and in education at age 19

study a Level 2, compared to 26-45% of those NEET at other ages and in education in the next year. At the same time, a greater proportion of those NEET at 18 and in education at 19 are studying a Level 6+ (44% compared to between 1% and 35% of those NEET at other ages). These individuals make up 77% of the “Gap year NEET” group.

Just over a quarter (27%) of those NEET at 17 and in education at 18 are studying a Level 6+. These may also be individuals that were on a gap year.

Table 4.7: Level of study for those who were NEET at ages 16 to 20, and participating in education in the following year at ages 17 to 21

Level of study	NEET at 16 and in Education at 17	NEET at 17 and in Education at 18	NEET at 18 and in Education at 19	NEET at 19 and in Education at 20	NEET at 20 and in Education at 21
Total population	31,350	29,350	46,950	24,550	17,350
Average per cohort	10,450	9,800	15,650	8,200	5,800
No level assigned	1%	2%	2%	4%	3%
Entry Level	6%	7%	14%	3%	3%
Level 1	15%	11%	8%	10%	11%
Level 2	45%	33%	17%	26%	28%
Level 3	32%	18%	13%	18%	18%
Level 4/5	low	1%	3%	4%	5%
Level 6+	1%	27%	44%	35%	31%

Table 4.8 shows the SSA of those who are NEET in one year and in education in the next. Preparation for life and work is a popular subject for every NEET age group that is in education in the following year, particularly for those NEET at age 16 to 18. The “unknown” SSAs are often Level 6+ qualifications in higher education that could not be matched to a sector subject area.

Table 4.8: SSA of study for those who were NEET at ages 16 to 20, and participating in education in the following year at ages 17 to 21

Sector Subject Area of study	NEET at 16 and in Education at 17	NEET at 17 and in Education at 18	NEET at 18 and in Education at 19	NEET at 19 and in Education at 20	NEET at 20 and in Education at 21
Total population	31,350	29,350	46,950	24,550	17,350
Average per cohort	10,450	9,800	15,650	8,200	5,800
Unknown	6%	18%	37%	45%	39%
Preparation for Life and Work	26%	23%	22%	15%	16%
Science and Mathematics	13%	9%	4%	2%	2%
Languages, Literature and Culture	10%	6%	2%	1%	1%
Health, Public Services and Care	7%	7%	6%	8%	10%
Arts, Media and Publishing	7%	6%	4%	3%	3%
Business, Administration and Law	6%	7%	5%	6%	6%
Retail and Commercial Enterprise	4%	4%	3%	6%	6%
Construction, Planning and the Built Environment	4%	4%	3%	4%	4%
Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies	4%	4%	3%	4%	4%
Leisure, Travel and Tourism	4%	3%	1%	1%	1%

Sector Subject Area of study	NEET at 16 and in Education at 17	NEET at 17 and in Education at 18	NEET at 18 and in Education at 19	NEET at 19 and in Education at 20	NEET at 20 and in Education at 21
Information and Communication Technology	3%	3%	2%	3%	3%
Agriculture, Horticulture and Animal Care	2%	2%	1%	1%	1%
Social Sciences	2%	3%	2%	1%	1%
History, Philosophy and Theology	1%	1%	1%	low	low
Education and Training	low	1%	1%	1%	1%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

4.4.5 NEETs that go into employment

Table 4.9 shows the main enterprise of employment for those who are NEET in one year and in employment in the next. The top three main enterprises remain the same, regardless of age NEET and age in employment. These are administrative and support service activities, accommodation and food service activities, and wholesale and retail trade/ repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles. The [accompanying data tables](#) provide further detail on the main enterprise of employment for those who were not NEET in the year before, and the distributions are similar to the NEET group.

Table 4.9: Main enterprise of employment for those who were NEET at ages 16 to 20, and employed in the following year at ages 17 to 21

Main enterprise of employment	NEET at 16 and employed at 17	NEET at 17 and employed at 18	NEET at 18 and employed at 19	NEET at 19 and employed at 20	NEET at 20 and employed at 21
Total population	27,450	44,500	61,850	64,000	57,350
Average per cohort	9,150	14,850	20,600	21,350	19,100

Main enterprise of employment	NEET at 16 and employed at 17	NEET at 17 and employed at 18	NEET at 18 and employed at 19	NEET at 19 and employed at 20	NEET at 20 and employed at 21
Wholesale and Retail Trade/ Repair of Motor Vehicles and Motorcycles	21%	19%	20%	20%	19%
Accommodation and Food Service Activities	19%	16%	14%	14%	14%
Administrative and Support Service Activities	16%	19%	17%	18%	17%
Human Health and Social Work Activities	7%	8%	9%	10%	10%
Construction	5%	4%	3%	4%	4%
Manufacturing	5%	5%	5%	5%	5%
Arts, Entertainment and Recreation	4%	3%	3%	3%	3%
Education	3%	3%	4%	3%	3%
Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities	3%	4%	4%	4%	4%
Other Service Activities	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%
Public Administration and Defence/ Compulsory Social Security	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%

Main enterprise of employment	NEET at 16 and employed at 17	NEET at 17 and employed at 18	NEET at 18 and employed at 19	NEET at 19 and employed at 20	NEET at 20 and employed at 21
Transportation and Storage	2%	3%	3%	4%	4%
Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%
Financial and Insurance Activities	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%
Information and Communication	1%	1%	2%	2%	2%
Real Estate Activities	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%
Water Supply/ Sewerage, Waste Management and Remediation Activities	low	1%	low	1%	1%
Self-Employed	2%	3%	4%	4%	5%
No main enterprise data	5%	6%	4%	2%	1%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

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