Young leaders can help solve the NEETs crisis

by Ella Robertson McKay, City AM 10th November 2026

Amid the NEETs crisis, many young leaders are creating new routes into employment

The next generation are ready to lead

Last week I was in Cape Town for the One Young World Summit. We brought together more than 2,000 young leaders from over 190 countries, alongside FTSE bosses and global campaigners.

Amid discussions on regional food security and democratic backsliding, one issue kept resurfacing above the rest: the future of work.

The scale of the challenge is staggering. Roughly 250m young people remain shut out of work and education. Employers face acute labour shortages while freezing out fresh graduates.

Workplace tech is moving faster than lecture halls can adapt. In financial centres like London, automated tools now write code and crunch balance sheets. Junior hires used to learn the business by doing those very tasks. By cutting early roles to lift margins, boardrooms quietly starve their future leadership pipeline. We risk stranding a generation burdened by debt and left with nowhere to start.

The interim Milburn Review into the NEET crisis sounded the alarm on this trend, warning of a generational fault line. Entry-level posts are drying up, while technical training remains disconnected from the commercial world.

What struck me at the Summit was how many young leaders were already tackling these challenges, from helping their peers develop digital skills to creating new routes into employment. But they cannot do it alone. UK businesses have a role to play, working with schools, universities and training providers to give young people the skills and experience employers actually need.

Businesses cannot automate their way out of developing people. They need to invest in the next generation, not simply expect them to arrive ready for work. The talent and ambition were in abundance in Cape Town. The message to London's boardrooms was simple: the next generation is ready to lead. We need to let them in.

Lessons from the elders

Delivering this year's Mandela lecture from our Summit, former Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos shared hard-won lessons from ending his country's 50-year guerrilla civil war. He spoke candidly about how student movements push him toward peace. Across the bay from Robben Island, his message hit home with young delegates facing state oppression.

As young people challenge entrenched power across the globe, it was a reminder that reconciliation demands relentless grit and established leaders willing to risk political capital on behalf of the next generation.

Lessons to take back to London

Professor Muhammad Yunus made a powerful point at the Summit that we should be empowering young people to be job creators, not just job seekers. It's a message that resonates back home in London, where young entrepreneurs are already building businesses and creating opportunities. But turning an idea into a successful business isn't easy. We need to support young founders to access finance, build networks and get their ideas off the ground. London has no shortage of entrepreneurial ambition. We need to make sure it has room to grow.

Quote of the week: *"It always seems impossible until it's done."*

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