



Improving social mobility within Wales's marine conservation sector

March 2026



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Executive summary

Social mobility is the relationship between our starting point in life and where we end up as adults – usually in relation to income, occupation and status. This report explores how social mobility can be improved in the marine conservation sector for young people across South West Wales. It links to the Welsh Government’s priority of a stronger, fairer and greener economy.

The insight revealed four key areas that may impact a young person’s decision to pursue the marine conservation pathway; ocean/nature connectedness, awareness of opportunity, community aspirations and academic confidence. At the further education stage there are currently no vocational pathways into the marine conservation sector locally, making the sector ‘functionally’ middle class. For large-scale and widespread upward mobility to be possible, there needs to be more opportunities for people to move up into the sector, and not just through the graduate route.





For those young people from working class backgrounds that do take the current graduate route, they are likely to need more ecosystems of support (e.g. greater financial assistance and flexibility, mentoring, networking support) in their graduate journeys. Employers who prioritise social mobility within their HR/People strategies will give these candidates a fairer chance of success in a highly competitive job market, with a huge shortage of entry-level graduate jobs for everyone, even before overlaying social mobility. While embedding social mobility into organisations is still in its infancy, there is clear and growing momentum.

This report concludes with recommendations for a fully joined-up pilot vocational pathway into the marine conservation sector and ideas to transform the current graduate pathway.

Project background

Project background

While there has been a growing interest in the importance of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion efforts in the marine and coastal sector, efforts have thus far focussed more on ethnicity and gender, with social status, class and their intersectionality, less explored. This report starts to redress that balance by exploring how social mobility can be improved in the marine conservation sector for young people across South West Wales. The work was a collaborative effort between Pelagos and Pembrokeshire Coastal Forum and all research was carried out between January and March 2026.

This work supports the Welsh Government priority of Diversity Equity and Inclusion, in particular its economic mission of a stronger, fairer, greener economy. Against this priority the Wales National Marine Plan ties economic growth to environmental sustainability and social justice, seeking to make Wales's seas a driver of prosperity while ensuring that prosperity is shared fairly and built on a healthy natural environment.

It also aligns with the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act's ambition for a more equal Wales. While some of the insights and recommendations that follow are specific to South West Wales, other insights are applicable to those seeking to address social mobility in the the marine conservation sector across the UK.

With special thanks to the Welsh Government's Marine Resilience Fund for supporting this important work.



Project methodology

The methodology included a comprehensive desk review, a series of in-depth stakeholder interviews and a co-creation session jointly hosted with the Sea Ranger Service, exploring how to build accessible pathways into blue careers.

Twenty-six interviews were carried out with local employers, national employers (with local entry-level opportunities), colleges, universities, government departments and other enablers for change. In some organisations several individuals were interviewed from across different departments to get diverse perspectives on improving social mobility. Interviews were also conducted with twenty young people (aged 16-26) from across Pembrokeshire, Cymarthenshire and Swansea. These young people were at different stages of their academic and working lives; at college, job-seeking or in entry-level marine conservation jobs.

Thank-you to the individuals from the organisations who engaged with this work and the young people who gave up their time to share their views and experiences.



Defining marine conservation for this study

For the purposes of this study the marine conservation pathway refers to one that culminates in a job ultimately focused on creating a more *resilient* ocean.

Stakeholder interviews were nearly all conducted with employers operating in the conservation, nature, restoration, research and ocean management spaces. The work also touched on some roles in elements of offshore wind, tourism, aquaculture, maritime and fishing.



Conservation

The protection and preservation of marine environments and their resources to maintain biodiversity, restore ecosystems and ensure sustainable use

Sustainable resource use

Exploitation

Actions that lead to the damage or loss of marine ecosystems



Social mobility overview

Social mobility is the relationship between our starting point in life and where we end up as adults. Sometimes the term is used interchangeably with class, which attempts to categorise individuals into a set of hierarchical social categories, the most common being working class, middle class and upper class. Class is a multi-dimensional social structure. In policy, the UK mainly uses the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification to measure it and groups people by employment relations (job security, autonomy) and occupation.

A newer framework, the Great British Class Survey, defines class using three types of capital; economic (income, wealth), cultural (education, tastes) and social (networks, connections) – and identifies 7 different classes. Class is no longer a simple hierarchy but a complex system of stratification reflecting the changing realities of British society. For the purposes of this report we broadly refer to young people from working class backgrounds as those from lower-income households with poorer access to opportunities, recognising there are huge differences of experience within this. Where we talk about young people from middle class backgrounds we refer to those with moderate household incomes and better access to opportunities.

The UK has one of the [poorest](#) rates of social mobility in the developed world. Across a range of sectors, the UK's most powerful and influential people are five [5 times](#) more likely to have attended private schools than the general population; half of newspaper columnists, nearly half of political reporters, more than a third of BBC executives and a quarter of MPs were privately educated.

There is little consensus as to the causes of the UK's poor social mobility but it is believed to be impacted by a widening wealth gap alongside a reduction in real wages and access to the housing market. The UK wealth gap has grown significantly, while wages have stagnated. Research by the [Resolution Foundation](#) found that in 2006 to 2008 it would have taken 38 years' worth of median full-time earnings to lift a worker into the top 10% of the wealth distribution. By 2020 to 2022 that gap had widened, so it would take 52 years of earnings i.e. a typical full-time employee saving all their earnings across their entire working life would *still* not be able to reach the top of the wealth ladder.

In a recent survey by the [Co-op](#) 68% of respondents agreed that a person's background, including their accent, family income or school, affects their career opportunities, with working class respondents citing the cost of higher education (31%), bias in recruitment (28%) and a lack of confidence or professional networks (25%) as their key obstacles.

The UK also has significant geographical inequalities, with investment and skilled job creation being concentrated in the South East and London. According to [Sutton Trust](#) mapping of social mobility in England, the 20 constituencies with the highest rankings for opportunity are all located in London. While the capital is highly competitive, it also offers significantly more ladders for upward mobility. The lowest opportunities were generally found in post-industrial, coastal and rural areas.



Co-op and Demos research recently revealed that the UK economy is missing out on £19bn in GDP growth every year due to a systemic failure to promote greater social mobility in the workplace. Greater social mobility could generate 6.8 billion in yearly tax revenues for the Government from additional economic activity – enough to pay for over 170,000 teachers.

Is social mobility harder in Wales?

Wales's geographical location can make social mobility for young people a lot more challenging, especially outside urban hubs like Cardiff. Many communities are isolated and poor transport links can make it more difficult to access universities, apprenticeships, internships, or higher-skilled jobs. Transport is a key underlying structural issue.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's [UK Poverty](#) report shows that of the four UK nations, Wales consistently has the highest levels of poverty, and these levels are only slightly lower than London, and similar to those of the North East. Around [31%](#) of children in Wales live in poverty, among the highest rates in the UK. Many of these children live in households where at least one adult still works.

Poverty puts young people at a disadvantage from an early age due to poorer access to resources, lower school attendance and wellbeing and lower expectations and confidence. [Data](#) consistently shows that pupils receiving Free School Meals achieve lower GCSE results on average and are less likely to go onto further or higher education.



Pathway insights

“Britain does not have a talent problem,
it has a system that quietly filters talent
out - class, geography, race, income and
access stop people from being in the room”

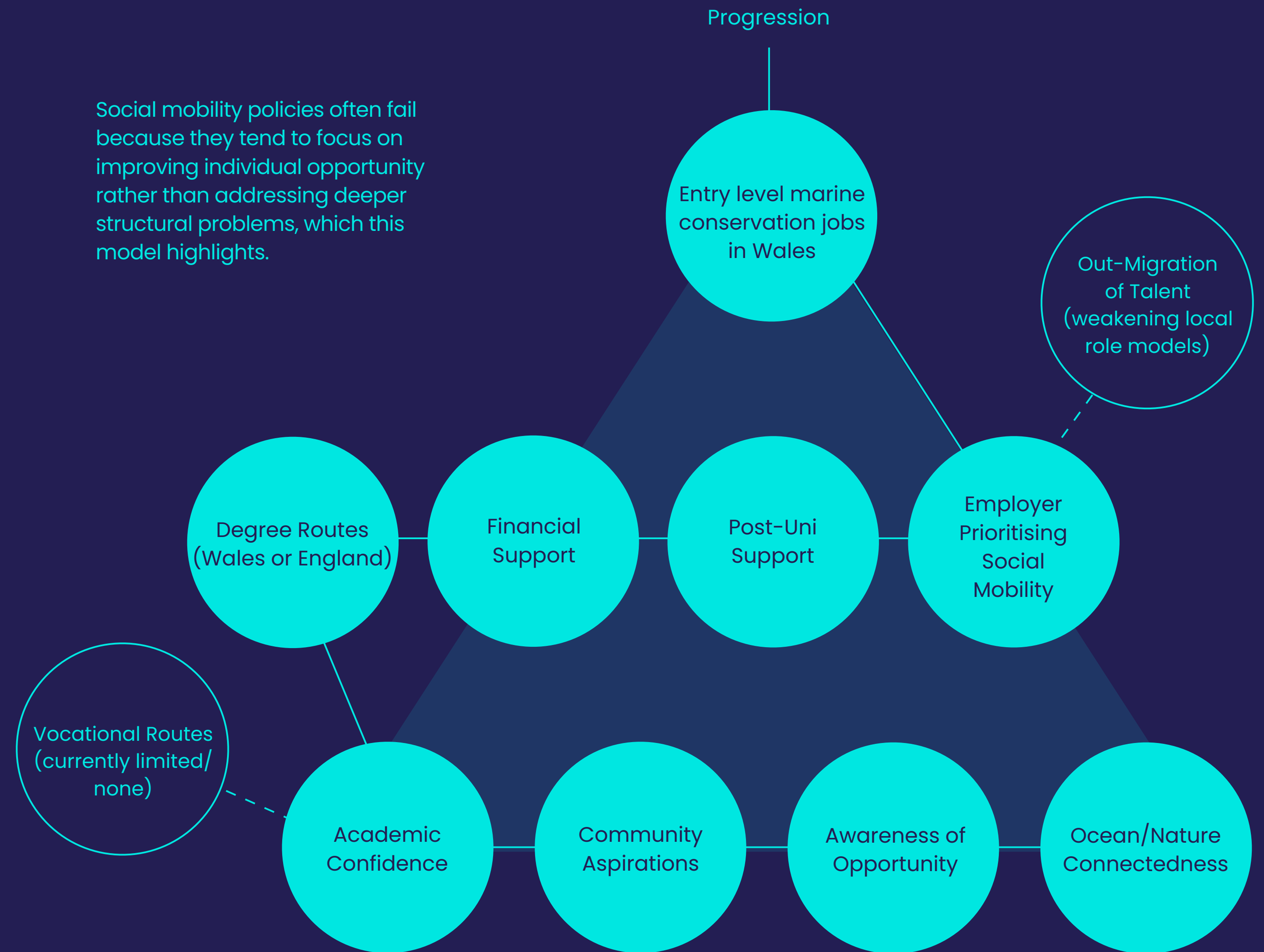
Nazir Afzal, Chancellor of University of Manchester
(reviewed working class participation in the arts)

Model of system change

This model attempts to outline some of the key elements that need to be in place to widen access to the marine conservation sector for young people from working class backgrounds and stop talent being *quietly* filtered out. The insight revealed four key elements that may initially impact a young person's decision to pursue the marine conservation pathway, as well as a number of other 'ecosystems of support' that would be required during and after further education, in order to maximise the chances of success into entry-level roles and beyond.

While this model of system change is not exhaustive it attempts to clarify and highlight the key areas that need to be considered to meet policy aims.

Social mobility policies often fail because they tend to focus on improving individual opportunity rather than addressing deeper structural problems, which this model highlights.



A shortage of entry level jobs

Before exploring this model in detail, it is worth noting that there is a huge shortage of entry-level marine conservation jobs for everyone, even before overlaying social mobility. While government policy emphasises education, skills, training and widening access, the lack of jobs in the sector means that middle class individuals will also have limited opportunities locally. Employers describe being inundated with applicants for marine roles and young people, with significant qualifications and experience, describe feeling 'stuck'.

This problem is playing out at both a local and national level and makes giving careers advice complex, when considering the ethics of promoting roles in a precarious sector, to people who need secure employment the most. **This structural economic issue needs addressing and the sector needs more entry-level jobs.**

A shortage of entry level jobs

"I'm now totally stuck. I've been applying for 6 months. All jobs come back with a 'dear candidate, we have had so many applications...' Most jobs require a Masters degree. I know so many people getting one but then being in the same position. I think it will be PhDs they ask for next"

"It highlights what an awful situation this is for young people trying to enter the sector and how desperately it needs funding"

"In the marine area we have been inundated with applications when we have been advertising roles. The last role received 293 applications"

"I always feel like I'm selling tickets to a gig that is oversubscribed"



No/limited vocational pathways into sector

There are also limited or no vocational pathways into the marine conservation sector currently. While this research was not exhaustive, no stakeholders interviewed could cite a local vocational pathway into the marine conservation sector. While Level 2 & 3 Apprenticeships in Environmental Conservation do exist, the research could not identify any opportunities to undertake these for young people in Pembrokeshire, Carmarthenshire or Swansea. This already makes the sector 'functionally' middle class.

For large-scale and widespread upward mobility to be possible, there needs to be more opportunities for people to move up into it, and not just from the graduate route. According to the [Social Mobility Commission](#), the historical emphasis on securing top-tier university placements for disadvantaged students is too narrow.

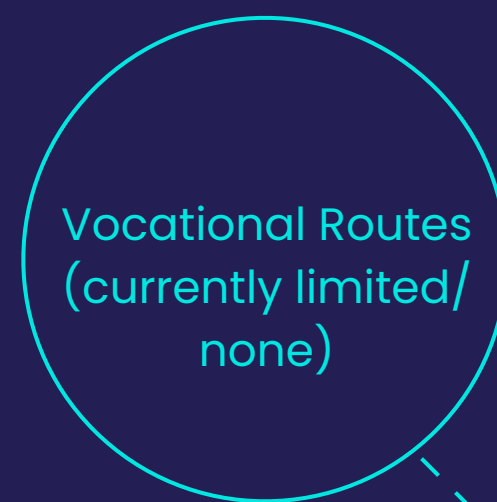
This approach overlooks broader vocational potential and ultimately benefits only a small minority. More attention should be given to those people with the least training and qualifications to give them a better chance of finding a good job.

No/limited vocational pathways into sector

"I think it's really lacking, isn't it, in conservation anywhere that you can go without the university route. Most of the people that we see, most of the internships and the young volunteers are volunteering with us to go to university or volunteering with us alongside university because they want that experience"

"Our big bugbear is local government and national government, they all talk about apprenticeships. You know, it's the way forward. But trying to get them apprenticeships is virtually impossible"

"I don't actually know of any apprenticeships in the marine conservation sphere outside of University. Yeah, I don't think I've heard of one"



Growth in the marine conservation sector

Despite this poor backdrop in terms of the volume of entry-level jobs currently, there was room for optimism about growth from many stakeholders:

“I feel hopeful there will be growth in restoration and conservation for the first time. The last few years have all been doom and gloom but since NRW launched their official assessments that things are in a poor state, I think the ‘officialness’ is driving action”

“I would imagine that alongside the growth of offshore wind there will be opportunity. I know someone who had to move away from Pembrokeshire when he was a youngster to work. He's got a marine biology degree. For 10, 15 years of his career, there were just no options around here. But now, because of this growth area that's coming, he has been asked to do work. He works down here now and he's getting enough to start employing people so it's building. I think it will come hand in glove with a sort of planning and development process with the offshore wind that there will be more opportunities”

“So currently the figures that we have, we are looking at 27 apprenticeship roles to be launched within the next four weeks and 68 graduate roles within the next four weeks. So that equates to around about 3% of our entire workforce. Our strategy by 2030 is to be a 5% employer”

MARINE Fund Cymru (MFC) announced a £500k commitment from Crown Estate in January 2026 – MFC is a long-term mechanism that invests in programmes and projects that enable, maintain and enhance the resilience of Wales's marine and coastal ecosystems.





Ocean/nature connectedness

The first element that needs to be in place to avoid quietly filtering out talent in the marine conservation pathway is some sort of emotional connection to nature and/or the ocean that inspires a desire to work somewhere in the sector. This connectedness can come through numerous channels including family life, schools and the media. Regular time in nature in childhood, an inspiring teacher, rock pooling with a grandparent or an early obsession with insects eventually leading to the ocean, all featured in the stories of those who had subsequently pursued the pathway.

Connection doesn't have to equal access but access can be a very important aspect of connection. Despite proximity to the coast, some young people in South West Wales are not visiting the coast. While there is lots of positive work going on improving access to blue spaces, some communities and schools aren't being reached and some organisations trying to improve ocean connectedness say they can sometimes operate in echo chambers.

Structural barriers like transport and access to public toilets are also believed to be hindering progress with access. Some stakeholders said increased closures of public toilets made it impossible to take groups to the beach in some areas.

Where people are accessing the coast and enjoying the water they can sometimes be doing so at a surface level. Some organisations are trying to bridge that gap by connecting people with the incredible marine life under the surface. The broader field of nature connectedness has shown that it is noticing nature, not time in nature, that leads to the greatest levels of connectedness.

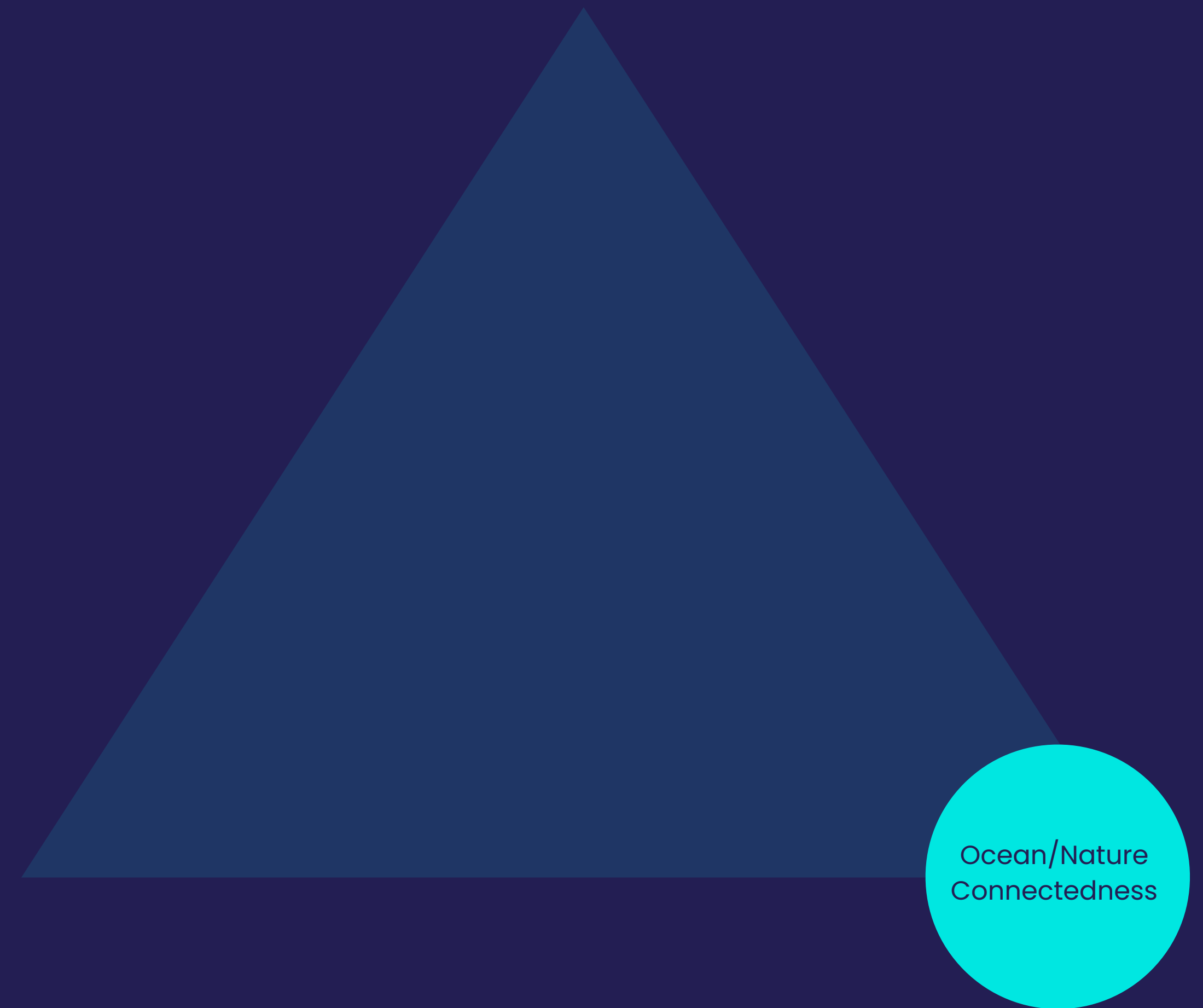
Ocean/nature connectedness

"I grew up in a single parent family in a council estate and from an ethnic background. I think for me it would have seemed a very, very far stretch to consider anything in marine conservation"

"For me it was having those really enthusiastic and passionate teachers that brought the subject to life. Big landscapes, exciting places. It was nice escapism for me, coming from a difficult background. I think it could have been very different if I had had less enthusiastic geography and biology teachers, just by chance"

"You've got some of the highest levels of child poverty here in Pembrokeshire and some of those children, I'd say, do you go to the beach? And they've never been"

"The big limitation here, the thing that everyone's hitting their head against the wall about, is where there's a lot of public toilets being closed and that makes it less accessible to everyone".



Awareness of opportunity

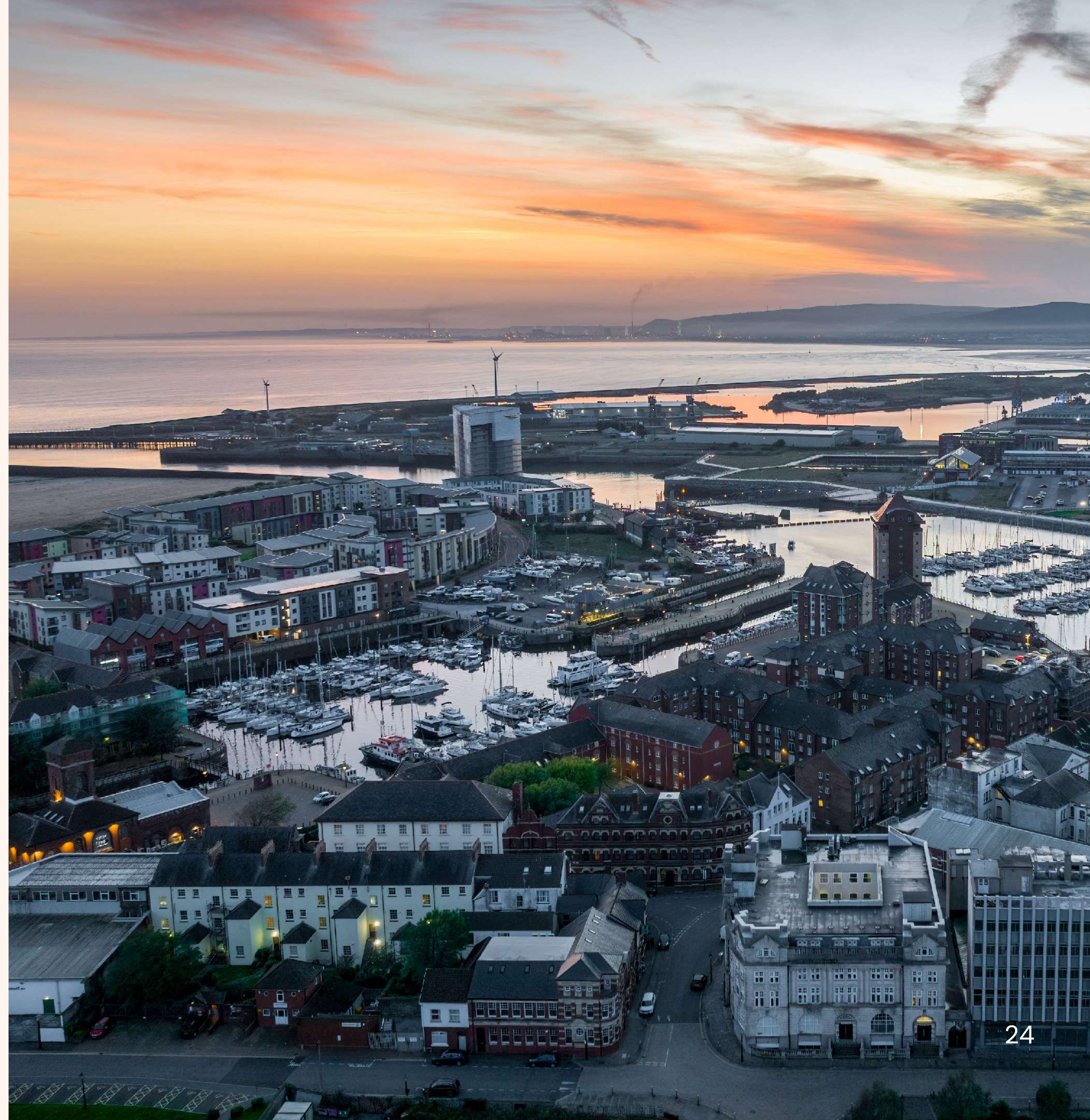
If young people develop a sense of ocean or nature connectedness, they then need to understand the opportunities that are available to them to work in the field. There is a poor understanding of jobs in the sector currently. 'Blue jobs' often get lumped in with 'green jobs' and some stakeholders describe a 'sea blindness' to the opportunities available, despite many acknowledging the coast is unique to the area. It is believed the sector struggles with a number of key issues.

The current make-up of the sector means young people from working class backgrounds are less likely to see role models who have pursued this route already and are thus unable to see themselves in these roles. There are also few peer networks - learners are strongly motivated when they see friends succeeding through pathways but many skilled young people will leave Wales for jobs in marine conservation.

Unlike teaching, accountancy, law, or nursing where pathways are quite linear and clear, there is often a lack of clarity about what a marine biology/science degree leads to. Pathways into the sector can often be much more 'wiggly' with many stakeholders interviewed describing their own side-stepping to get into it. This lack of clarity means parents might often need reassuring about what a marine science degree will lead to and some have poor perceptions of it e.g. seasonal work.

Perhaps one of the biggest issues the sector has in terms of awareness is the more visible 'charismatic' roles (e.g. tagging dolphins) compared to the much larger proportion of less visible desk-based roles, particularly in the ocean management space. The story of these sorts of jobs, which make up a large proportion of roles, needs telling better. There is also much less awareness of the non-science pathways into the marine conservation sector e.g. digital, arts and storytelling, marketing etc. A workforce survey on current jobs and required qualifications, as well as all jobs that may be needed in the blue economy, would be very useful to strengthen understanding of the current landscape as well as future opportunities and skills.

The new Curriculum for Wales is also believed to be a positive opportunity for improving awareness. As it is focused on a more personalised and engaging learning experience and creating ethical and informed citizens, it is believed to have the potential to connect more with local contexts, skills and jobs.



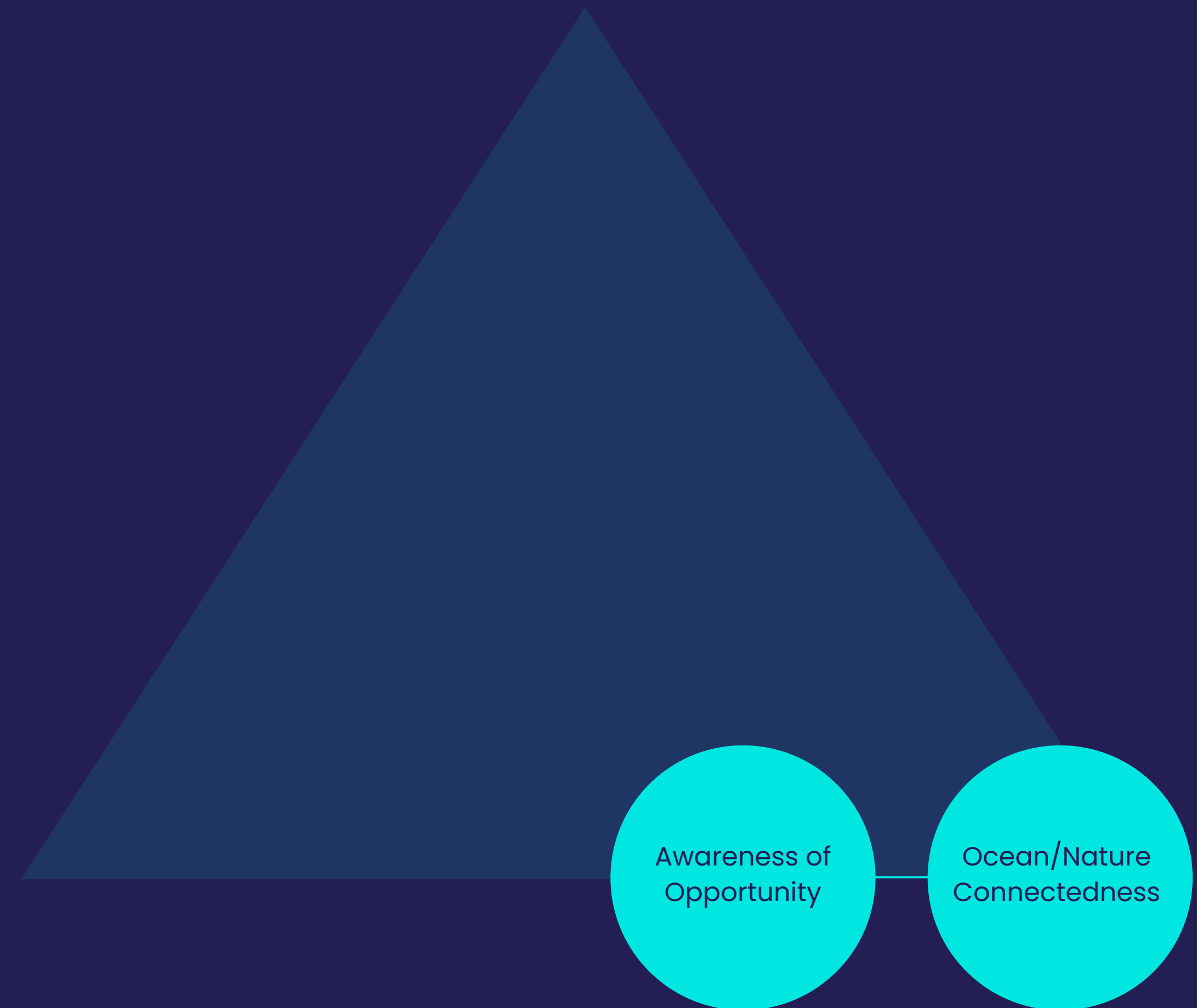
Awareness of opportunity

"I would say they don't know what the jobs are in that field. So they might have an interest in conservation or in renewable energies, but they wouldn't know what that looks like, you know"

"I mean, I've loved my whole career. But basically, you're paid to talk and think! It's quite difficult to explain that. You're like, I'm trying to get electricity for everybody in the sea in a way that doesn't screw up the marine environment, but also might make jobs for people locally. And I think that's quite hard for a child to understand, and even for a teenager"

"I didn't even realise that the consultancy world existed until I finished my PhD"

"I've worked in this sector for over 20 years and I haven't been on a boat for work"



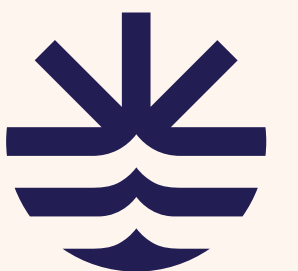


Community aspirations

If young people develop a sense of ocean connectedness and understand the opportunities available to them, their community's aspirations may play into decision-making too. For some, particularly in tight-knit communities, they will need to feel their choices are supported. Are they going against the grain? Is the community around them supportive and enabling of a marine conservation career?

To pursue the marine conservation pathway currently, a young person will have to follow the graduate route. This in itself can be problematic and mean you are going against the grain. While supportive, some communities can reinforce expectations to stay local and discourage risk-taking or pursuing unfamiliar pathways.

It is also important to consider what other competing narratives for talent there may be from more well-known and familiar sectors. In Pembrokeshire, for example, oil and gas is a key and visible employer that has been embedded in the area for a long time, offering stable and often well-paid jobs with a strong presence and influence.

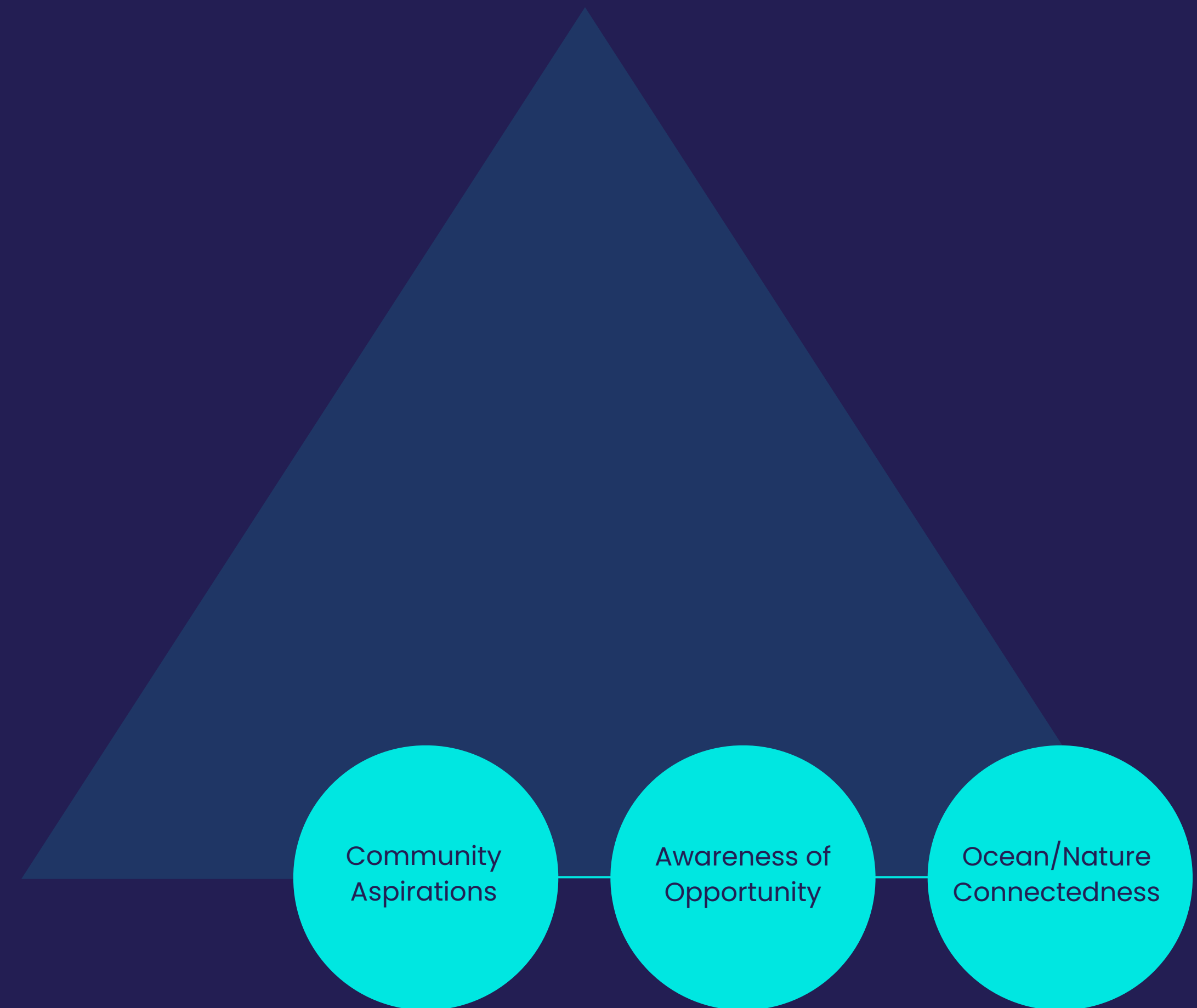


Community aspirations

"I think I was quite lucky in some ways in that, in a rural sense, there is still that thing of once you go to university 'oh you're one of them'. But my parents are builders and there was still a good enough link in the community that I wasn't seen as an academic coming back. I didn't ever feel like I was betraying community but I think there would definitely be the potential for that for some"

"We get lots of youngsters coming to do engineering at college because Uncle is at Valero and they want to be like him because he's got a nice car. There's a lot of them queuing up and they all understand that industry because it's been deeply embedded in Pembrokeshire for a long time"

"I was the only of one of ten in my friendship group that went to Uni"



Academic confidence

Young people will then need to end the schooling system feeling academically confident. Currently the only option to pursue a role in the marine conservation sector is through the graduate route, so young people from working class backgrounds will need to feel confident that it's worth the financial risk to take it. University used to be a reliable social mobility mechanism but its outcomes are now less certain.

Socio-economic deprivation is linked to worse educational outcomes in children and some of the brightest young people will not leave the schooling system feeling academically confident. Perceptions that marine jobs/pathways are for 'clever' people can then act as a further barrier to pursuing pathways. Young people consistently described people in marine conservation jobs as 'driven', 'smart' and 'highly intelligent'.

It is a particularly tricky time to be giving careers advice. While careers advisors will want to inspire confidence and aspiration in young learners, they're also acutely aware they're doing them a disservice if they aren't being honest about the current marketplace and prospects.

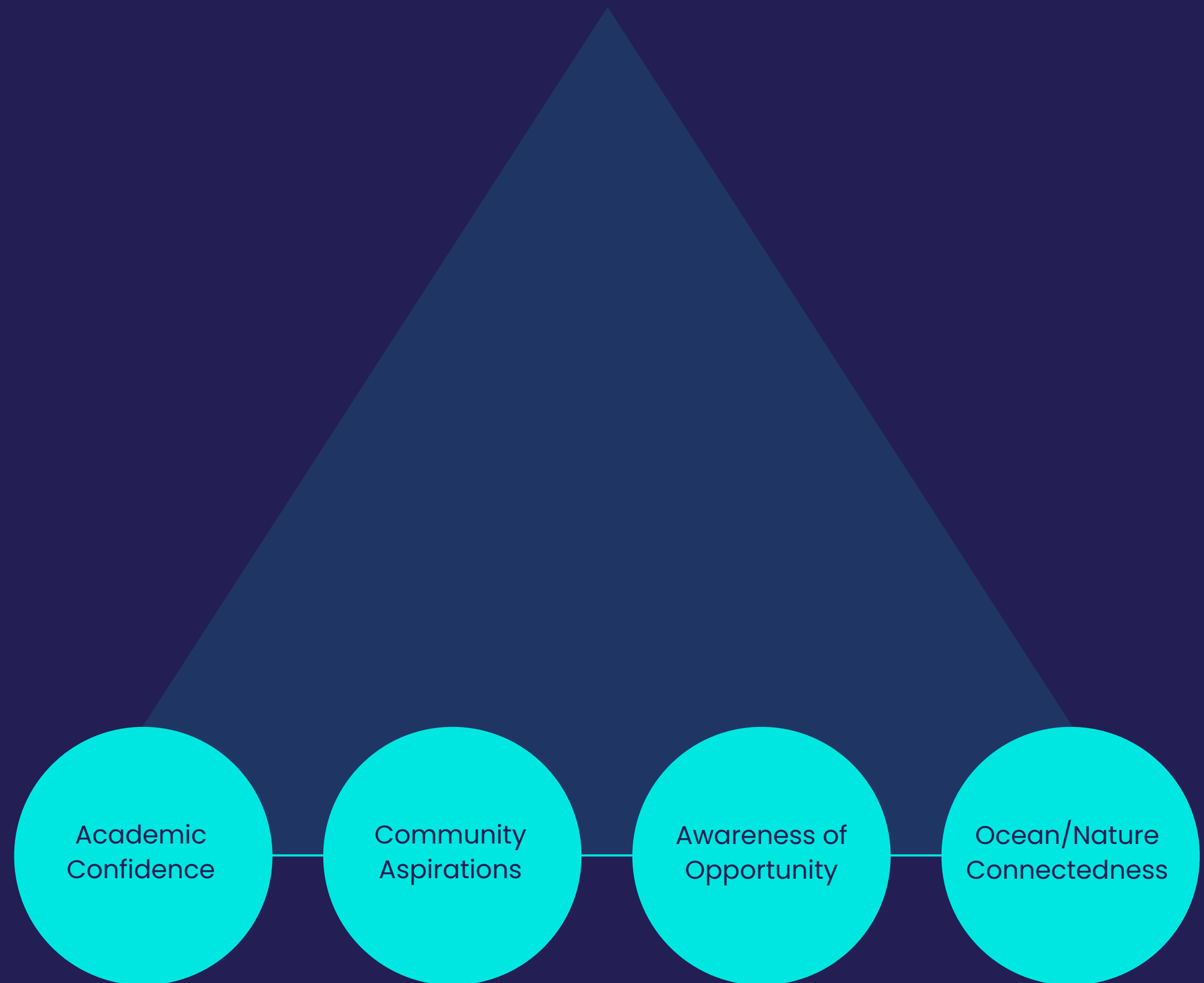


Academic confidence

“If a marine conservation job is getting 300 applications, that needs to be fed back somewhere to the schools and to us. We need to be saying to these pupils, look, it's a bloody tough industry. You know, don't expect to do three years in college and just walk into a job because then we're doing our pupils a disservice if we don't tell them what it's actually like and we just tell them, yeah, oh yeah, it's brilliant, yeah”

“I think if I look back now to my friendship circle growing up, I think I'm the only one of us that went on to university. I remember one friend in particular doing her A-levels and just didn't think she would be able to do them, even though she was very clever”

“You get a lot of kids leaving school thinking that they're useless and dumb and it's like, no, you probably have a different brain and that's why school isn't working. And so it's, yeah, trying to kind of scoop some of those guys up”





Financial support

For young people from working-class backgrounds pursuing marine science degrees, universities must understand their financial realities to ensure they thrive. They are likely to need more financial support and flexibility than their middle class peers.

Unpaid sandwich placements/internships are often a key feature of marine conservation pathways and have been very much normalised in the sector. While university finance can be obtained during this sandwich year, many young people still need to additionally carry out paid work to support themselves. This can be challenging when they are asked to sign forms to say they will not undertake paid work during a placement year, or when placement years are an inflexible 12 months and they want to work during the summer holidays.

Some young people described errors being made on their financial support which saw funds withdrawn midway through a placement year, making the experience hugely stressful.

Some roles will also require driving licenses as a prerequisite but it is becoming increasingly expensive to obtain one, adding a further financial barrier. These financial realities all need to be acknowledged and recognised to avoid quietly losing more talent at this stage of their journey.

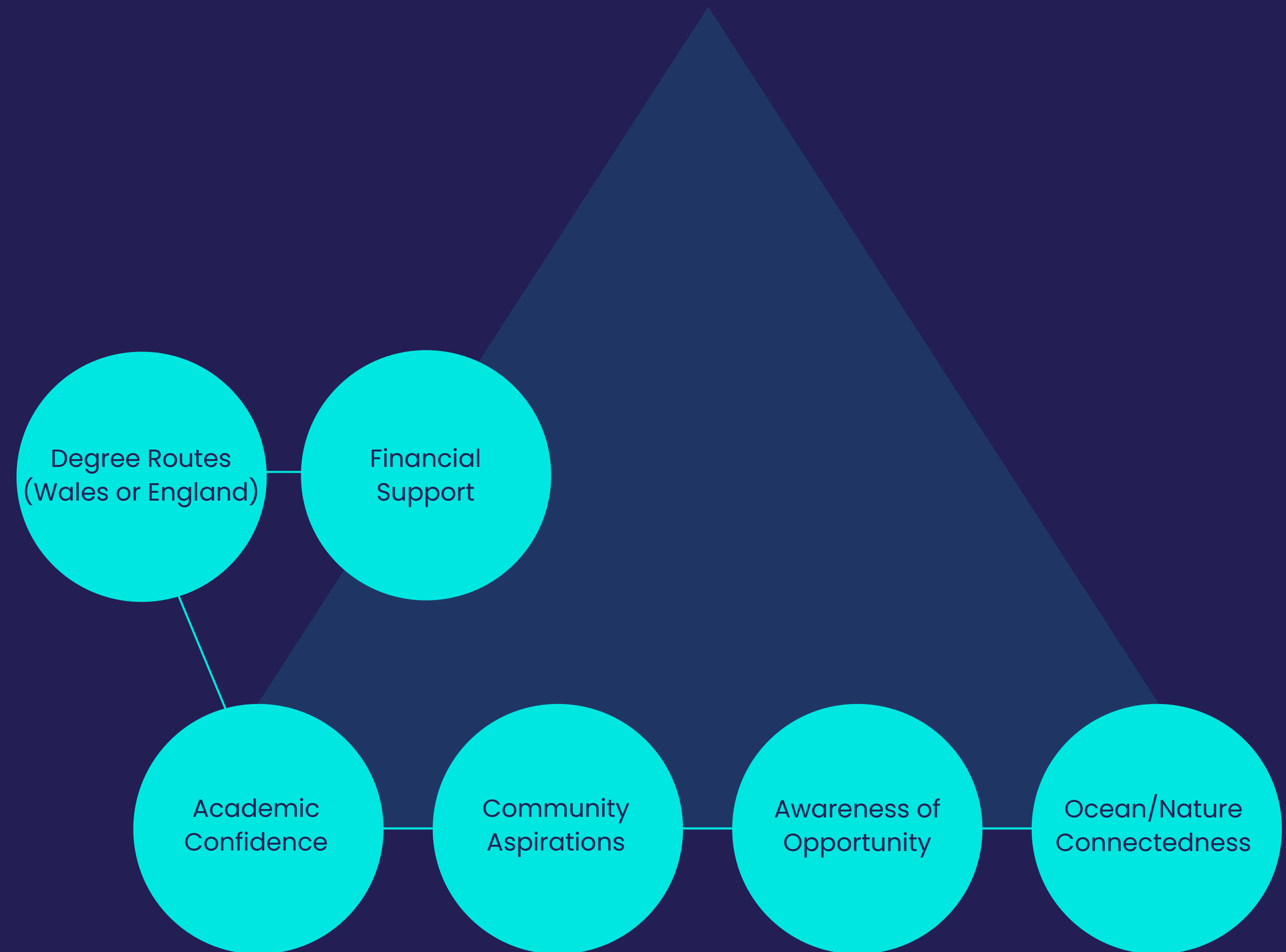
Financial support

"It is becoming increasingly expensive to pass a driving test - making this a class issue for those whose parents cannot afford to support lessons. And it is even harder for those with some disabilities"

"I know I was lucky to be offered it but the lack of pay made that year really, really hard. I wouldn't have been able to finish it if my grandad hadn't stepped in"

"I told my friends I was doing an unpaid internship and they were like you're a mug"

"I have my doubts about it all the time"



Post-University support

Many young people find the post-university period to be the most challenging part of their journey; it is often when the gulf between those with networks and finance, and those without, becomes most apparent.

Another normalised feature of the marine conservation pathway is the need for voluntary experiences to bolster a CV and stand out amongst the crowd. For those without finance, the option of undertaking voluntary experiences overseas, further unpaid internships, a masters degree, or getting diving qualifications etc are all much less feasible.

To ensure more young people are not quietly lost at this juncture, they will need more support with networking, mentoring and signposting as well as opportunities for additional experiences that directly target them.

[Sharkademy](#) in Pembrokeshire offers a residential shark fieldwork experience for early career biologists from lower socio-economic backgrounds, levelling the playing field here.

Some stakeholders suggest there is now a critical six month period to keep young people on track and into an entry-level position in the sector, or they may be lost to other sectors. The cost of living crisis means young people need to work and can't bide their time before going into the sector, unless they have supportive parents. This landscape is believed to have shifted a lot over recent decades.

It was also flagged there is a real lack of support for young people post-25. Given the wiggly nature of career pathways into the sector and the fact some young people will feel the need to undertake a masters to stay ahead, it stands to reason that young people will need support for a longer period of time.

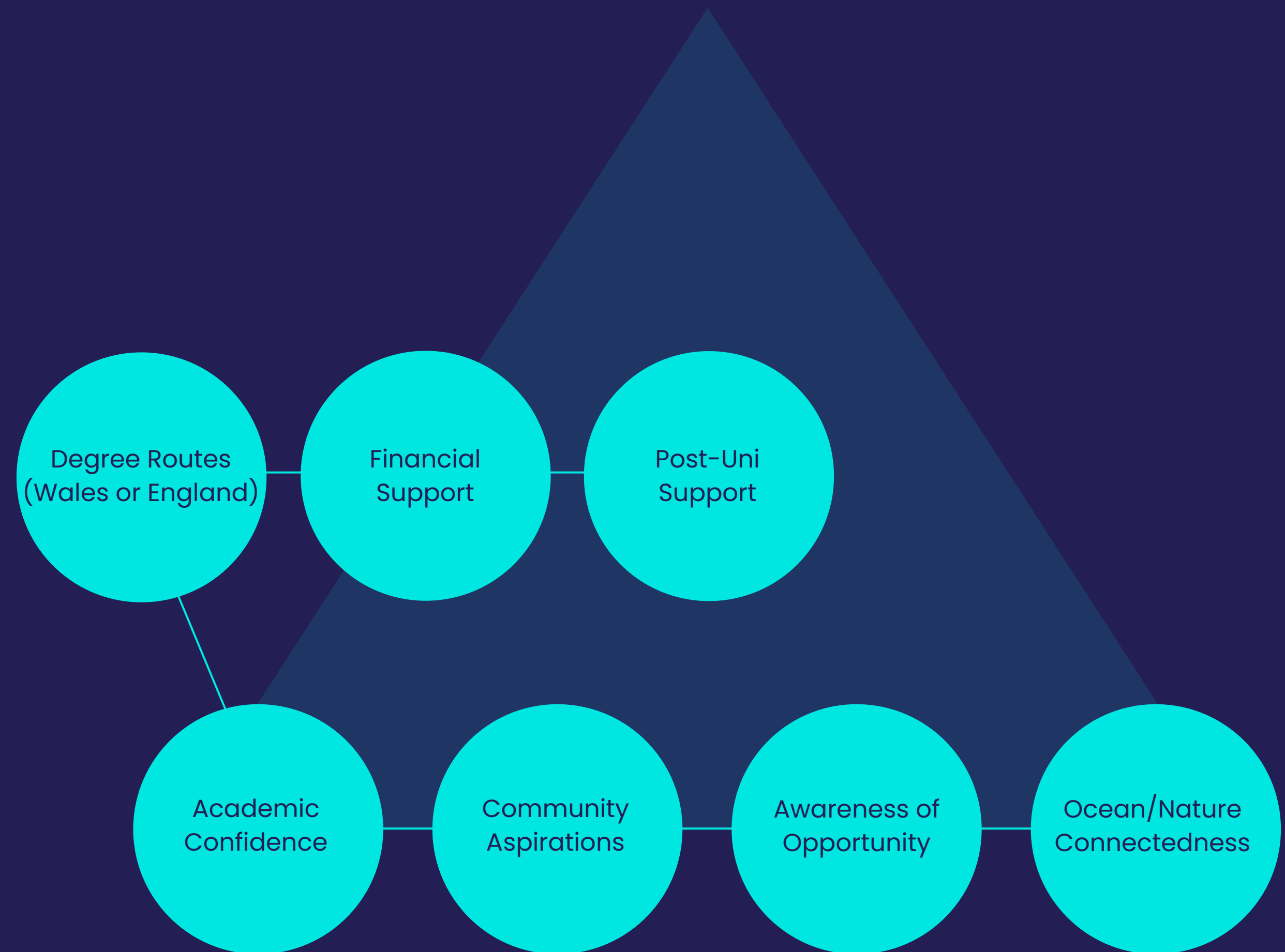


Sharkademy: the UK's first shark specialist residency for early career biologists and conservationists.

Post-University support

“There is the cost of living, so they've got to get a job. And, you know, their passion is marine or could be architecture or whatever. And if they don't get a job within 3, 4, 5, 6 months, they then end up falling into something else. And then they end up then needing money. They're used to earning money. We're losing them because you've got that critical time where if they don't get a job, they get despondent, they go and find something else, and then you've lost them”

“There's a real lack of support post-25. A lot of the youth focus is until 25. While this is wonderful, there is a big gap for support for 25-30 in a sector where it can take a long time to get going. There are so many great youth things but then they drop off a cliff”



Employers prioritising social mobility

If a young person gets to the point of applying for an entry-level role, it will then be hugely beneficial for them to be met by an employer prioritising social mobility, to give them a better chance of success in a highly competitive marketplace.

While it is early days for many organisations tackling social mobility, there is momentum in this space. Employers prioritising social mobility are taking various approaches, depending on their size and available resources. These include:

- Collecting baseline data on class;
- Prioritising local people in applications;
- Deeply rethinking prerequisites for roles and what qualifications are really needed;
- Rethinking practices about how to choose the 'best' candidates e.g. values and passion over qualifications;
- Rethinking sector norms e.g. unpaid internships and seeking funding collaborations;
- Growing talent pipelines internally;
- Creating opportunities for additional experiences on CVs that directly target lower socio-economic groups;
- Recruiting new roles to more systemically approach volunteering, placements, apprenticeships etc;
- Creating more entry-level opportunities including those aspiring to be a [5% Club](#) employer - a dynamic movement of employers committed to earn & learn as part of building and developing the workforce they need as part of a socially mobile, prosperous and cohesive nation;
- Considering transport options to avoid driving licenses being a prerequisite e.g. car-pooling.

Employers prioritising social mobility

“Think twice about putting down ‘graduate’ or even ‘A-levels’. Even with the ubiquitous ‘or equivalent’ these still assume a series of life options open to a few. It is not to dumb down requirements to exclude these qualifications. Rather it means thinking more clearly about the actual skills and experience needed for the person specification. This is not just an inclusion measure – it is likely to end up with a better fit”

“We’re really questioning why things are a certain way and whether that could change. We’re also thinking a lot about the audiences we’re trying to reach”

“We rarely get local people applying but if we do, we’ll always give them an interview”



Challenges in targeting social mobility

It is a tricky time for many employers, particularly smaller NGOs, with an economy that isn't buoyant and a very poor funding landscape. Where organisations have struggled with embedding social mobility initiatives, this has often been due to lack of finance or resources. For smaller and larger organisations strategic partnerships may be key to moving things forward.

There can also be a cultural aversion to exploring class in some organisations. This can additionally create problems with trying to collect benchmark data if there is a lack of trust about why data is being collected.



Challenges in targeting social mobility

“We'd love to have more staff members and we'd love to have more opportunities like that to be able to grow our team. But the biggest barriers for us as a charity is always funding and time. So lack of funding to be able to increase our roles and take on new goals and kind of put those opportunities out there”

“I think as an organisation, we have got highly focused on racial diversity, LGBT, quite understandably, but it has really, I think, actively avoided social mobility, because I think if they opened the lid, they would be quite shocked”

“We are thin on the ground, we need strategic partnerships to unlock and facilitate change”

“We want to collect data to drive strategy but we have struggled – I think there is lack of trust about *why* we're asking these questions. People don't want to rehash things, especially if they have been socially mobile, and they think it will go against future opportunities”

“I think class challenges the concept of merit and I think people feel uncomfortable about that”

Progression in organisations

While this study was not able to delve into organisational progression in much detail, it did come up in stakeholder interviews. Social class has been proven to be one of the strongest barriers to career progression within organisations and this can be due to a number of factors including; unequal access to opportunities, cultural capital and fit, confidence and self-presentation, unconscious bias in managers and financial constraints.

Where there is a high level of technical competency required to progress (e.g. in accountancy or law) social mobility can be greater because it could be argued that anyone can learn that competence. However, in the conservation sector it is often 'softer skills' that are needed to progress and therefore cultural capital has numerous advantages.

In organisations trying to embed social mobility into Diversity Equity and Inclusion strategies, attention should be given to progression within an organisation, and the unique subtleties at play here.



Progression in organisations

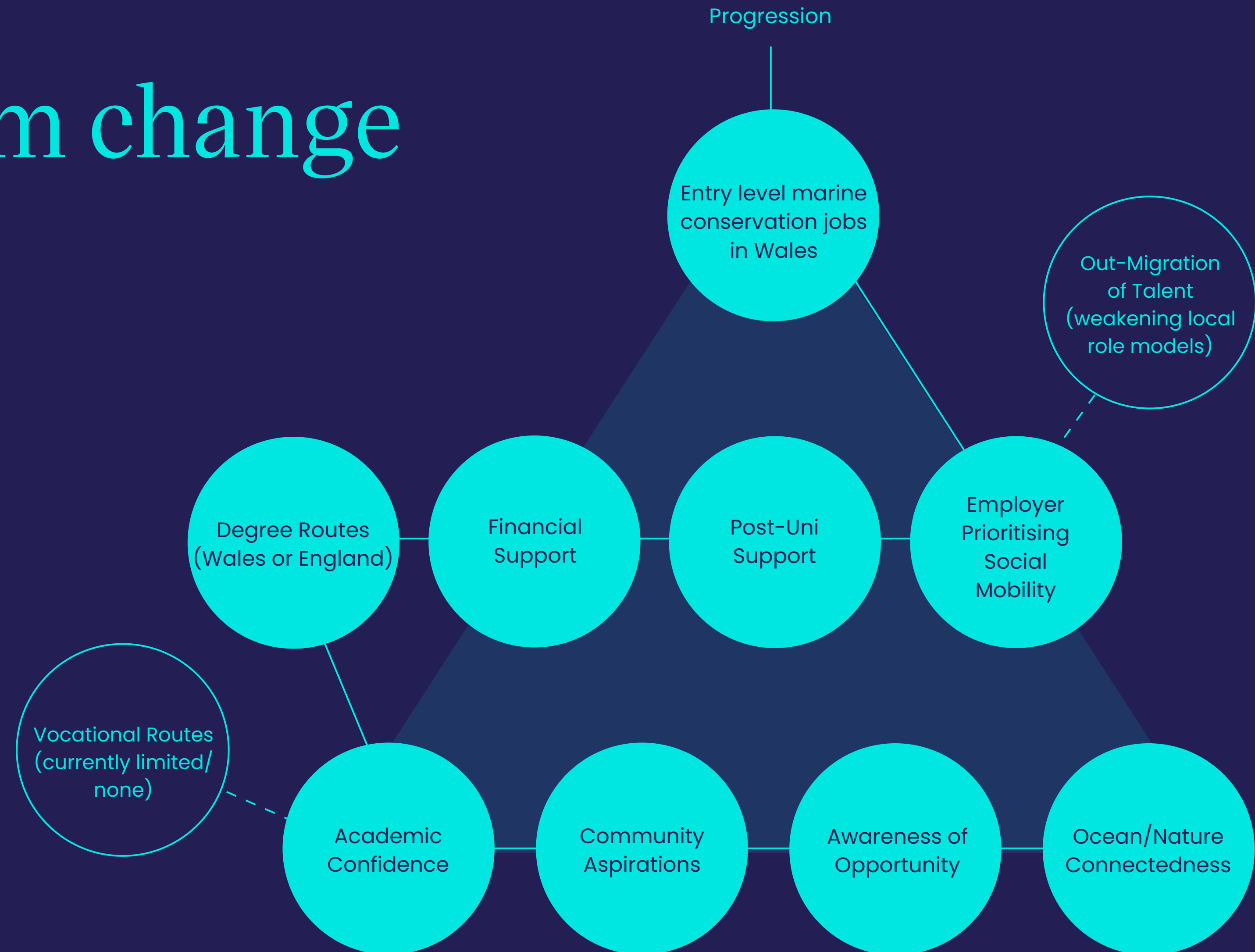
“None of this gets verbalised. because it is hard to articulate. And what I've learned is that you do need a high level of political skill to get to the upper echelons of the organisation and a high level of relationship building. An understanding of the implicit way of getting things done that is not then articulated to our junior staff. What these people need is effectively power and politics courses, because that's what it is, but no one will put the language to it”

‘So I think what you would see is middle class or privately educated will make those plays. I think occasionally the working class, there's a moral quandary about that, about the behaviour of putting yourself forward, bragging, showcasing, networking and how do you bridge that gap?’

“My husband's much more middle class than I am. So I always compare us in this way. Just the sort of general chit chats that him and his parents have about current affairs, about, you know, they travelled a lot and the little things that he's learned and experienced from coming from that more privileged background. He's just got a higher sort of base knowledge and I find that they often have chats around stuff like that and I'm not really as sort of in the know”

“We say there isn't a dress code, but oh there is a dress code!”

Model of system change





How does intersectionality play out?

Intersectionality with social class seems to be extremely complex. Some intersections, such as disability and social class, can be experienced as a 'double disadvantage' with both factors independently reducing social mobility. With regards to ethnicity there is quantitative data that suggests if you are from a black background and a lower socio-economic background then that also compounds the disadvantage that you may experience in the workplace, with black women from lower socio-economic backgrounds getting promoted most slowly.

However, relative mobility, the strength of the link between a child's occupation and their parents, has also been shown to be more 'rigid' among white Britons than ethnic minorities where there is more 'fluidity'. The most 'disadvantaged' group in terms of reaching higher education is also white working class boys; only 10% of the most disadvantaged white working class boys will make it into higher education.

In London, progression can be stronger for visible minority ethnic groups with the city's diversity and networks supporting better outcomes than other regions.

Some people of colour who additionally come from working class backgrounds, would say it is their class that they have found the greater challenge to navigate. However, being 'working class' is also sometimes less associated with people of colour and needs greater visibility.

Due to a complex picture, interventions tackling social mobility will do well to include a variety of different target segments in any work e.g. white working class boys and working class women of colour, to ensure the breadth of experiences are covered in solutions.

How does intersectionality play out?

"I grew up in a single parent family in a council estate and obviously from an ethnic background. I hadn't really reflected on that until we just spoke about it. But yeah, it is a missing section, isn't it, of that support? And obviously all of the other protected characteristics make a massive difference to your experience, but actually sometimes face to face interactions, it can be that different social background that is sort of the most difficult to overcome"

"I don't think that there's a wider national understanding of blackness as working class. I think when a white person thinks about a working class person, they think about say northerners working in the mines. If we want to progress things from a racial perspective, we have to acknowledge that a lot of the working class population is black. And I don't think that connection is necessarily being made at the forefront of people's minds and that's to their detriment"

Shifting the dial

Overarching recommendations

1. JOINED UP VOCATIONAL PATHWAYS

For large-scale and widespread upward mobility to be possible, there needs to be more opportunities for people to move up into it, and not just from the graduate route. Social mobility efforts are believed to have failed when there has been too much focus on the academic route of getting young disadvantaged people into top jobs via elite universities, favouring the lucky few.

More attention needs to be given to those people with the least training and qualifications to give them a better chance of finding a good job.

The need, number and long-term funding for new vocational opportunities needs to be identified before a fully joined up vocational marine conservation pathway pilot is developed to target known pathway barriers.

2. TRANSFORMING GRADUATE PATHWAYS

There is a huge shortage of entry-level graduate marine conservation jobs for everyone, even before overlaying social mobility. While government policy emphasises education, skills training and widening access, the lack of jobs in the sector means that middle class individuals will also have limited opportunities locally.

This structural economic issue needs addressing and the sector needs more entry-level graduate jobs. The need, number and long-term funding for new graduate opportunities needs to be identified.

Young people from working class backgrounds will also need more ecosystems of support in their graduate journeys and to be met with employers embedding social mobility into People/HR strategies.



1. Joined up vocational pathways

Once the need, number and long-term funding for new vocational opportunities has been identified there needs to be joined-up early exposure to oceans, coasts and blue jobs in schools involving multiple stakeholders. This could involve ocean days, field visits (seagrass sites, harbours, aquaculture farms etc), talks from local practitioners in varied roles (not just scientists), show and tells and more [storytelling](#) of local contexts (e.g. sea lore, maritime heritage). Critically sessions should all include a clear local pathway map (in development by [Sea Ranger Service](#)) and signposting to other resources and guidance (e.g. development of a [Blue Jobs for Nature](#) resource). Inspiration could be drawn from the [Morecombe Bay Curriculum](#) and [Project Siarc](#) and funding would be required for organisations delivering this joined-up outreach and transport. Potential key partners could include: schools/colleges, coastal partnerships, local and national NGO's, the [National Nature Service for Wales](#), CIEEM, global 'blue schools'.

Increased ocean connectedness and blue pathway awareness should be met by joined-up opportunities for paid work 'tasters'.

Two to six week summer work experience placements could target 16–18 year olds and offer them a living wage, CV experience, sector exposure and direct contact with employers. It could be a crucial element of confidence building and a stepping stone to work readiness. Placements in restoration, monitoring, ocean management and community engagement could be offered. Potential key partners could include: schools/colleges, coastal partnerships, youth clubs, local and national employers, Antur Cymru.

There needs to be more opportunities for 'pre-apprenticeships' available.

These could include 6–9-month paid programmes combining fieldwork and training akin to the Sea Ranger Service model, creating work-ready candidates with accredited skills. These could be delivered in partnership with further education providers and include rotations across restoration, marine industries and outreach.

The first marine conservation apprenticeships need to be developed offering stable employment in the sector and specialisation.

Targeting 18–25 year olds apprenticeships could be delivered through collaboration with several key partners including: colleges/further education providers, Medr, Local Authorities, Welsh Government, local and national employers, industry partners, community enterprises and universities.

Funding is required in both fixed and flexible formats to resource this joined-up vocational pathway.

Flexible fund pots could be drawn on by local and national employers for placements, transport costs etc while fixed funding could deliver the apprenticeships framework. Funding blends required could include: public funding (skills and climate/nature budgets), private funding (e.g. large employers) and philanthropy.

2. Transforming graduate pathways

Employers are encouraged to consider the following in their Social Value and People Strategies to better support the success of graduates from working class backgrounds. We recognise that an employer's size and funding will dictate what they can realistically achieve:

- Collect data on social class for benchmarking purposes (including impact data on any social mobility interventions);
- Consider becoming a [5% Club](#) employer to open up more entry-level opportunities;
- Consider the financial realities of young people from working class backgrounds in job specifications e.g. needing a driving license/car, relocation packages etc
- Deeply rethink prerequisites for roles and change the 'rules' where possible e.g. masters-level qualifications;
- Try values-led recruitment practices;
- Rethink practices about how to choose the 'best' candidates e.g. values and passion over qualifications;
- Create opportunities for additional experiences that directly target lower socio-economic groups e.g. residential fieldwork in the [UK](#);
- Offer more mentoring opportunities for young people from working class backgrounds. Key partner: [Mullany Trust](#)
- Consider internal progression for people from working class backgrounds, including offering training for 'soft skills';
- Talk about social mobility class more/share stories;
- Influence other employers on social mobility.





Additional measures to better support young people from working class backgrounds along this pathway include:

- Acknowledgement that the journey into the marine conservation sector can be wiggly and extended and support will most likely be needed for longer. Organisations supporting 'young' people/youth voice in the sector could widen opportunities to include 25-30 year olds too.
- Improved and more frequent communication among stakeholders
 - specifically between employers, colleges, and regional skills partnerships
 - regarding labour demand, required skill sets, and application trends.
- Evolving the unpaid internship with collaboration. Developing more strategic partnerships between those organisations that can offer local internships and those who have resources and funding to make them paid. Considering shared internships and flexible fund pots.
- Supporting innovation - allowing young people to create their own jobs by accessing micro-funding and mentoring. Creating innovation support packages for graduates to develop marine businesses and co-ops (e.g. seaweed, shellfish, eco-tourism etc)
- Funding is required to transform graduate pathways, in both fixed and flexible formats. Flexible fund pots could be drawn on by local employers for paid internships and fixed funding could support innovation packages in developing marine businesses. Funding blends required could include: public funding (skills and climate/nature budgets), private funding (e.g. large employers) and philanthropy.

Get in touch

Want to take this conversation further?

Want to get involved or collaborate?

Want to be kept in touch about next steps?

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