



Not for them:

Why aren't teenagers applying for apprenticeships?

September 2018

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Introduction



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When the Government unveiled its plans in 2015 to significantly increase the number of apprenticeships they were met with widespread support. Employers, policymakers and politicians of all stripes agreed that the lack of high quality apprenticeships was denying too many youngsters a meaningful career path and severely damaging economic productivity.

Since the introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy on businesses in April 2017, that consensus has broken down. Although ministers remain publicly committed to having three million apprenticeship starts by 2020, employers have become increasingly doubtful that this target could – or even should – be reached. The levy, they argue, is costly, inflexible and fails to take account of all their training needs. Policymakers meanwhile worry that the quality of too many courses is poor and that employers are training older, existing staff at the expense of younger recruits.

Their scepticism has been reinforced by official data. Apprenticeship numbers have fallen by 59% in the year to August 2017 and by a further 27% in the six months afterwards, prompting calls to overhaul the entire programme.

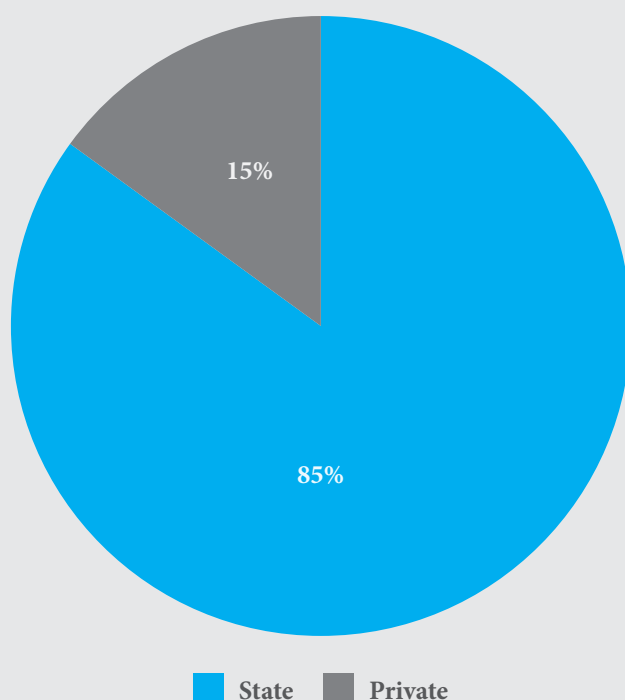
Nevertheless, support for the concept remains strong. The Chartered Institute of Management reported in April that 63% of managers believe that the Apprenticeship Levy is needed to increase employer investment in skills, with almost half (48%) expecting to see a rise in new starts over the next 12 months.

It seems likely that even if the levy is reformed, it is here to stay. In which case, what can businesses do to attract the candidates they need? There have been several surveys of employers on apprenticeships, and a recent Sutton Trust poll of teachers, which found relatively negative attitudes to apprenticeships among educators. There has been very little exploration, however, of school-leaver attitudes.

This survey is an attempt to help remedy that oversight. What do youngsters think of apprenticeships? Do they know they are available? If so, what is stopping them applying? In the final analysis, unless employers and policymakers understand what is stopping sixth-formers considering apprenticeships as a valid career path, they will not attract the candidates their businesses need.

The respondents

Respondents school type



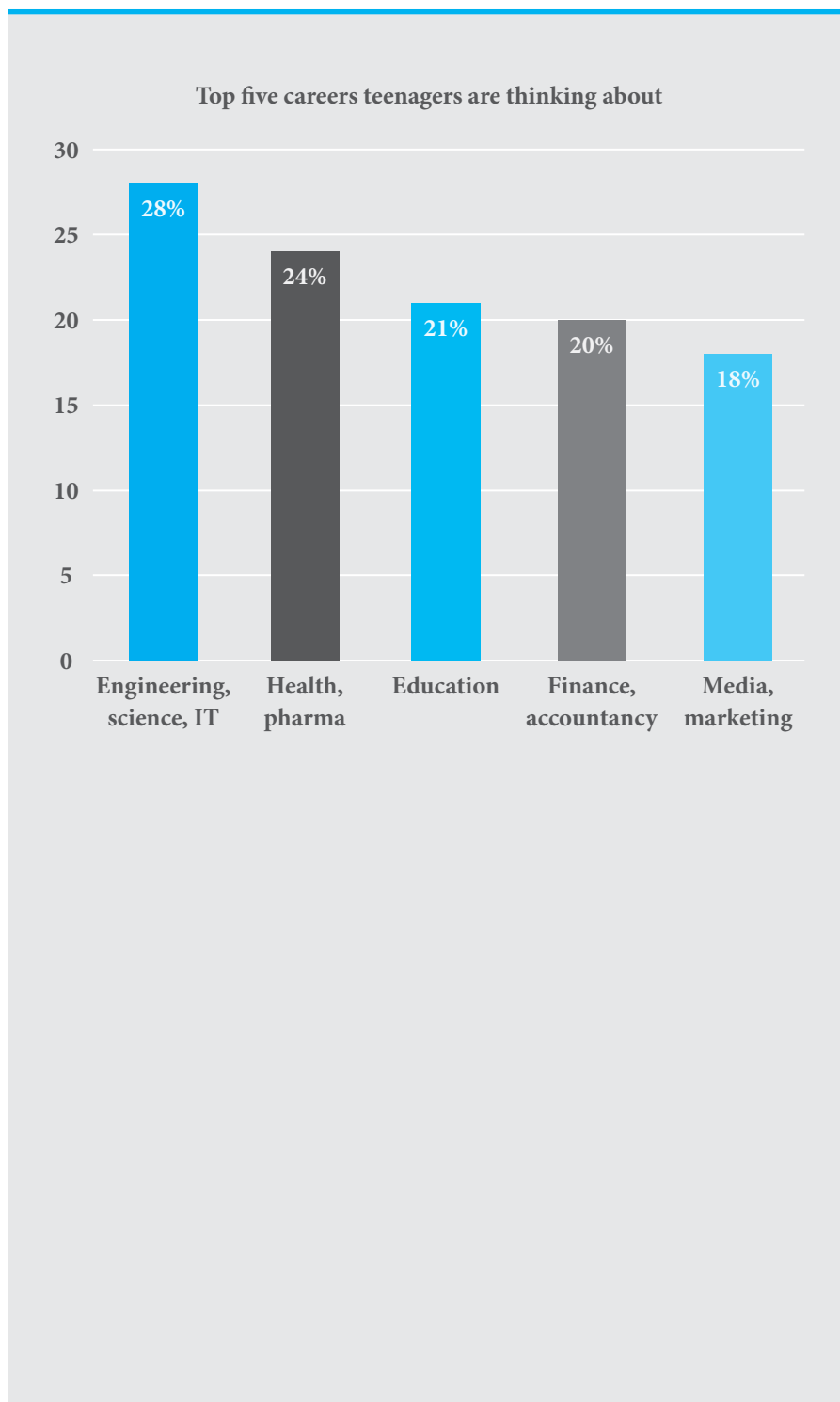
YouthSight surveyed 1,051 16-18 year olds in school or college in June 2018.

- We surveyed more than 1,000 youngsters between the ages of 16-18
- All are either in school or college, none is employed, unemployed or at university
- 15% are being privately educated, which is in line with national figures (14% of sixth-form students in the UK are at independent schools and colleges)
- Virtually all respondents (96%) are considering going to university
- But only one in six youngsters (16%) is thinking of applying for an apprenticeship (respondents could choose more than one option)

96% thinking about applying for university vs. **16%** thinking of applying for an apprenticeship

What careers are teenagers thinking about?

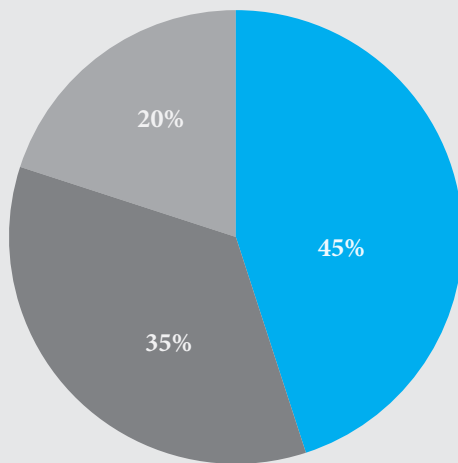
- The most popular options for teenagers is engineering, science and IT (28%)
- Followed by health and pharmaceuticals (24%), education (21%), finance and accountancy (20%) and media and marketing (18%)
- Only 7% say they are yet to consider a career
- The biggest gender disparities are in engineering and science (considered by 42% of boys and only 19% of girls); finance (30% of boys; 15% of girls); education (16% of boys; 24% of girls); and law (9% of boys, 15% of girls)



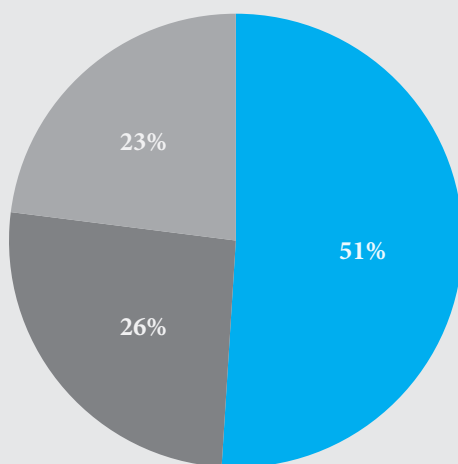
42% of boys are considering a career in engineering, science, IT vs. just 19% of girls

Is a perceived lack of status or pay stopping youngsters applying for apprenticeships?

I worry that apprenticeships are too low status



I worry that apprentice starting salaries are too low



■ Agree ■ Disagree ■ Neither agree/nor disagree

- Youngsters don't think apprenticeships are just for people who don't get the grades to go to university. Just over a fifth (23%) think that
- But 45% do worry that apprenticeships are too low status and are not valued by employers (35% disagree)
- This is particularly true of those who are contemplating careers in the public sector (57%), law (56%), hospitality (55%), and finance (51%)
- Pay perceptions could also be a problem. Over half (51%) think apprenticeship starting salaries are low and only 26% disagree. Would-be lawyers are particularly sceptical, with 64% of them thinking apprenticeship starting salaries are low

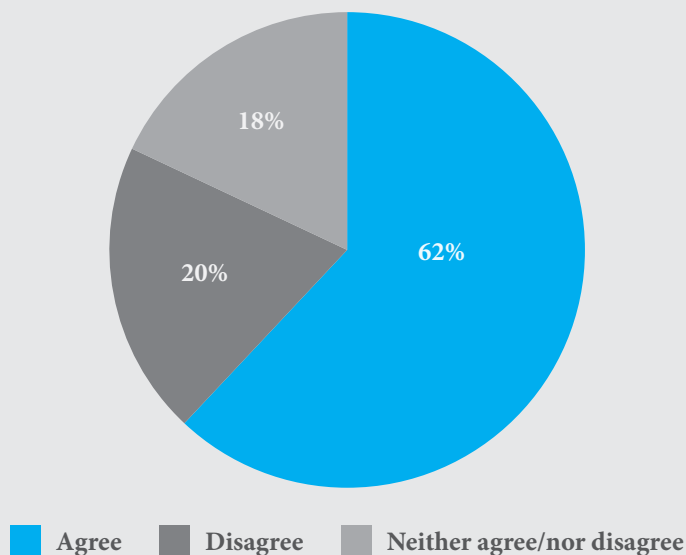
64% of would-be lawyers think apprenticeship starting salaries are too low

Is a lack of information about apprenticeships deterring teenagers?

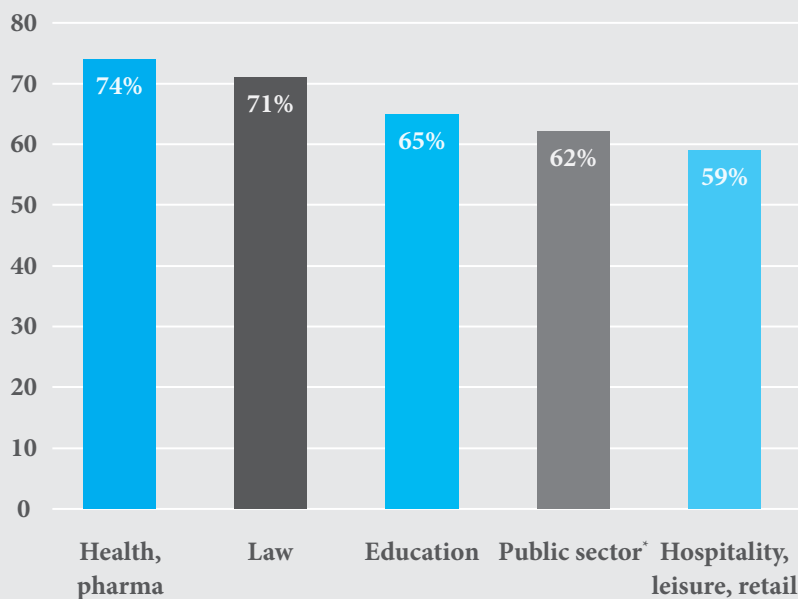
- Lack of information does seem to be an issue. Over three-fifths (62%) think they don't have sufficient information about apprenticeships (20% disagree) – with those considering law feeling particularly strongly (70% agree)
- Almost three-fifths (59%) believe an apprenticeship isn't suitable for the career they have in mind (20% disagree). Those who want to work in health, the law, education, the public sector and hospitality are most sceptical, with 74%, 71%, 65%, 62% and 59% respectively agreeing
- 44% think they are too young to focus on a specific career just yet – although a similar proportion (37%) disagree

59% think an apprenticeship isn't suitable for the career they have in mind

I don't have sufficient information about apprenticeships



Top five careers felt unsuitable for an apprentice role



*Excludes health and education roles.

Employers must get teachers onside if they want to make a success of apprenticeships, argues Ann Mroz

One of the most enduring features of the past few years is the emphasis schools have placed on the benefits of a university education. To a large extent, this has been a reflection of teachers' understandable desire to raise the aspirations of children, particularly those in disadvantaged areas who may have little family experience of higher education.

Yet it's likely that it also reflects unconscious bias. Almost every teacher in the UK is a university graduate. Most went from school to university and back into school again when they qualified. Even those who tried an alternative career before opting for teaching invariably have a degree. University was a necessary stage on the route to becoming a professional and a teacher. So it is hardly surprising that on the whole teachers believe university to be 'a good thing' and an essential passport for career success.

This prejudice has been reinforced by another: that students who opt for a vocational career do so because they aren't sufficiently academic. There is very little recognition that school-leavers may choose this route because they actually want to do it, let alone any appreciation that most vocational qualifications involve quite a bit of academic study.

Unfortunately, as the numbers of school-leavers going into higher education have expanded to close on 50% in the past decade, those prejudices have been reinforced.

Anyone remotely academic goes to university therefore, the implication goes, anyone who isn't doesn't.

In this context, is it so surprising that so many school-leavers feel compelled to apply to university and relatively few – only 16% according to this survey – are considering applying for an apprenticeship? What's also clear from this survey, however, is that it doesn't have to be this way.

When youngsters are given more information, when they realise that they can earn and learn and if, crucially, the application process were made simpler, then a large majority say they would consider apprenticeships.

Teacher attitudes also remain an issue – with over half of sixth-formers saying they thought their teachers would prefer it if they went to university. Those perceptions may of course be wrong, but who, given the university pedigree of the teaching profession, would be prepared to bet on it?

If the government and business want to change young hearts and minds about apprenticeships then they have to do a better job of convincing teachers that they are a valid career option in their own right, and not a consolation prize for academic-also-rans. I suspect most teachers would be open to persuasion. But as things stand, very few companies, with some notable exceptions, seem prepared to make the effort.



Ann Mroz

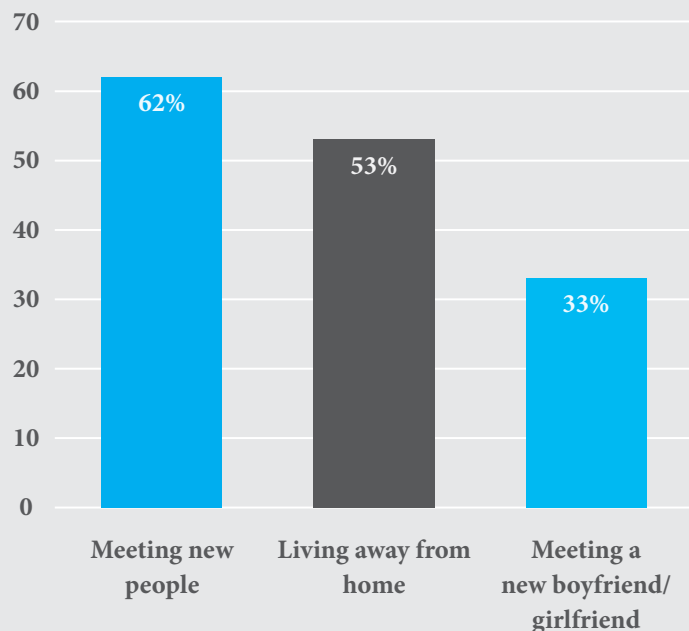
Editor of the Tes magazine
(formerly known as the Times
Educational Supplement)

Is there a social dimension to teenagers' post-school expectations?

- Teenagers appear to associate apprenticeships with lost social opportunities
- Over three-fifths of sixth-formers (62%) worry that they will lose out on the opportunity to meet new people at university if they did an apprenticeship (only 22% disagree)
- And a third (33%) believe that by doing an apprenticeship they will lose out on the opportunity to meet a future girl/boyfriend that university would provide. Those considering a career in finance are particularly worried, two-fifths of them (40%) say it is a concern
- Over half of respondents (53%) also think that they will lose out on the opportunity to live away from home (23% disagree)

40% of those considering a career in finance think they'll miss the chance to meet a new boyfriend/girlfriend if they take an apprentice role

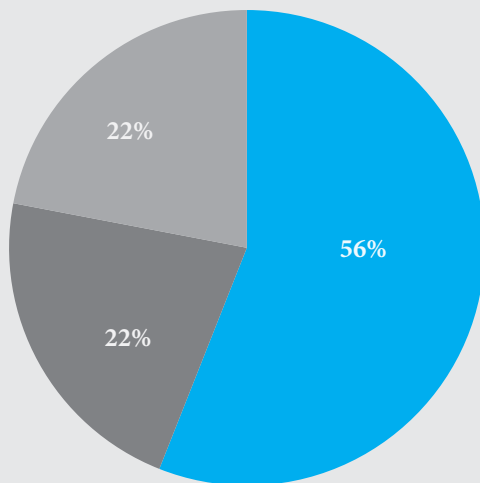
Main social opportunities 'lost' by not going to university



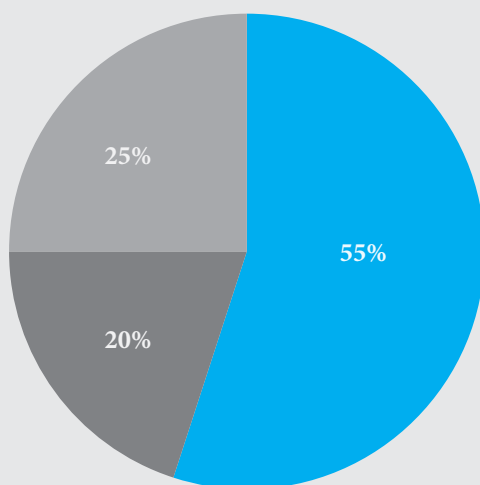
What role do influencers play?

My parents and teachers would prefer it if I went to university than started an apprenticeship

Parents



Teachers



■ Agree ■ Disagree ■ Neither agree/nor disagree

- Teenagers overwhelmingly think their parents are unlikely to want them to do an apprenticeship
- Well over half (56%) say their parents would prefer it if they went to university rather than started an apprenticeship (only 22% disagree)
- Those considering careers in the public sector, finance and law (65%, 63% and 62% respectively) are most likely to believe this to be the case
- A similar proportion of all respondents (55%) say the same of their teachers and only a fifth (20%) disagree

65% of those considering a career in the public sector and 63% of those thinking of finance believe parents wouldn't want them to become an apprentice

Companies need to connect with parents to improve apprenticeship recruitment, Ben Marks argues



Ben Marks

Managing Director,
YouthSight

For students looking for a practical, work-based method of learning, apprenticeships should provide a hugely compelling alternative to traditional academic routes. But it's not turned out that way. In recent years the numbers of young people starting apprenticeships have either plateaued or fallen. Why? I believe that the problem lies as much on the 'demand side' as the 'supply side' and that if providers were able to take a leaf out the book of university marketers, and aim more of their marketing fire-power at parents, they might do a lot better.

The failure of the apprenticeship system is a bit of an enigma. After decades in the doldrums, the structure for delivery of a coherent system seems to be in place. The National Apprenticeship Service and the Apprenticeship Levy should provide coordination and funding; employers have been able to develop many new 'standards' (subjects) – around 350 are now on offer. And there is a good range of levels, from the entry-level Intermediate apprenticeship right through to degree-equivalent apprenticeships. So why did the number of young people starting apprenticeships nose-dive last year?

Part of the reason has to do with employer incentives in adopting the schemes – something I'm not really qualified to write about. But part of the problem may also rest on the demand-side and, as a market researcher, that is something my company tends to get more involved with.

Could it be that those who provide and promote apprenticeships could attract more high calibre candidates – the ones employers are crying out to train – if they spent more time thinking about the influence of parents?

Parents set the tone and tempo of family life and, inevitably, influence their kids' aspirations and ambitions. They affect the information their children get exposed to and the options they become positively disposed to. During the 1990s and 2000s, higher education won a communications war. Universities stopped being considered an elitist choice and instead became an aspirational choice – something for the many not the few. Part of the breakthrough came when universities started setting up sophisticated marketing programmes aimed directly at parents.

When I went off to university in the late 1980s, the open days I attended and the choices I made were largely in isolation from my family. That was the norm then. Today our research tells us that university choice is far more of a family discussion. Our long-running Higher Expectations tracking survey shows that by 2007 over 42% of applicants on open day visits were accompanied by their mothers. And the trend has grown. By 2017 the figure was 53%.

When parents turn up to open days they don't just tag along and fend for themselves. There is a huge array of targeted resources; from special prospectuses to well-crafted parent talks by the vice-chancellor, through to walkways plastered in six-foot high logos of the prestigious companies that recruit from the university – walkways aimed exclusively at parents! For university marketing professionals, parents are a critically important stakeholder group.

At YouthSight as well as conducting a lot of quantitative research, we also conduct much qualitative research. And we have learned that the style of parental involvement in HE decision-making is generally collaborative. It is most strongly manifested when prospective students seek help in narrowing down their final choices of institution and course. The help provided by parents is rarely authoritative. It's generally about facilitating their child's happiness. We've a nice video of young people describing how their parents help them here blog.youthsight.com/he-research-snippet-26-to-what-extent-do-parents-effect-uni-choice.

Why have parents become such a key group in the last couple of decades? It can be explained - at least in part - by the megatrends around wealth. Thanks to the way property prices skyrocketed in the past 20 years, there has been a massive transfer of wealth towards older people. This makes it very hard for either party, the children or the parents, to expect the levels of independence and separateness that they did in 'my day'. Simple economics means parents are going to have to remain involved and 'helpful' to their children for far longer. For example, those born in the 1980s were the first post-war cohort not to start working life on higher real incomes than their parents when they started their careers. And the disparities have only worsened since. In terms of overall assets, Millennials and Gen Z are far worse off than Baby Boomers and Gen Xers were at the same age. And then there's the "Generation Rent" crisis. Those born in the 1980s spend three times more of their income on housing than their grandparents and enjoy the lowest levels of home ownership (compared to earlier cohorts at the same age) since the 1930s. Add to that very high tuition fees and ever-growing debt and it shows how tough it's going to be for young people. They will need help from their parents, and HE recruiters know it.

Of course, parents didn't engineer this situation. It just happened. And with the growth in more child-centred parenting it's understandable that parents take a closer role in their kid's career choices.

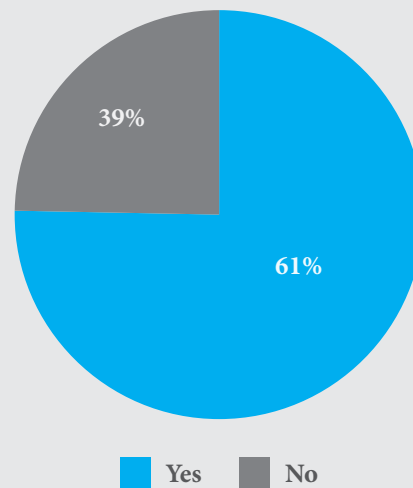
So, what are apprentice providers doing to cater for parental involvement in decision making? Are they doing enough? Many of the pieces of the puzzle are already in place. The popular press seems to understand the value of apprenticeships (if anything they're rather hostile to university degrees, especially those they perceive as offering 'Mickey Mouse' courses). And there's huge hostility among both parents and young people to the debt they are being forced to take on as part of a university education.

But the communications battle that universities won in the 1990s and 2000s - that the degree is a passport to success - seems to have gone unchallenged. Perhaps it's time apprentice providers changed tack and took the fight to parents.

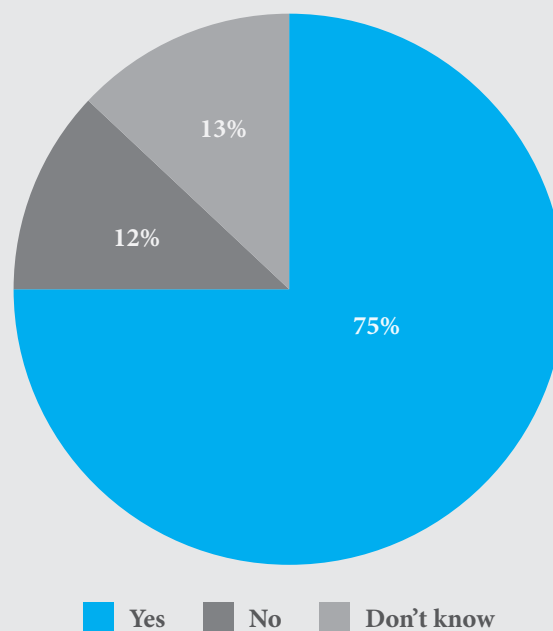
What would make sixth-formers more likely to consider an apprenticeship?

- Over three-fifths (61%) have heard of degree apprenticeships and understand that course fees will be paid for them, they will earn a salary straight away and they will get a degree but no student debt at the end. Only 39% have not heard of them
- However, there appears to be a perception gap between the generic and the specific
- Three-quarters of sixth-formers (75%) say if degree apprenticeships are available in their chosen career they would consider an apprenticeship more seriously. Only 12% say they would not
- While almost two-thirds (63%) say if they could apply for apprenticeships using an UCAS-style format they would

Do you know about degree level apprenticeships and what they offer?

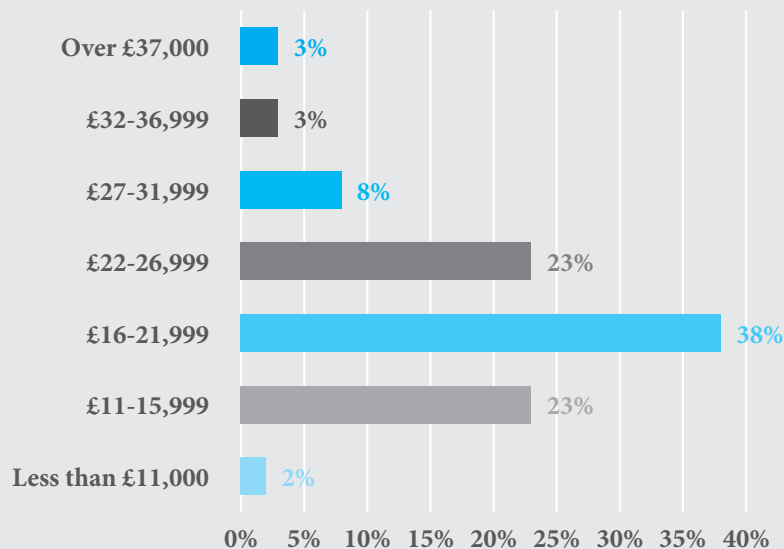


If degree level apprenticeships were available in your chosen career would you consider an apprenticeship more seriously?



How much would teenagers hope to earn as an apprentice?

If you were going to consider an apprentice role over a place at university, what would you want to earn as your first year annual salary?



- Almost two-fifths (38%) would hope to earn between £16-22,000 as an apprentice, which is a lot more than the legal minimum (apprentices aged 18-20 earn a minimum of £5.60 an hour – just over £12,000 per annum)
- And almost a quarter of respondents (23%) would want significantly more – between £22-27,000. But the same percentage would be satisfied with between £11-16,000
- Travelling to work appears to be less of a problem. 44% of sixth-formers would tolerate up to an hour's commute, and 18% say they could cope with between one and a half hours and two hours. Only a quarter (25%) say that their commute to work should be less than an hour

£20,531

the average salary a 16-18 would want to consider an apprentice role over a place at university

Conclusion

- Youngsters do not think apprenticeships are for people who don't have the grades to get into university
- But they aren't convinced they are valued by employers or that starting salaries are sufficiently high
- They also think they don't know enough about apprenticeships, that they aren't suitable for the career they have in mind, and that they would limit their social options
- Youngsters also believe that parents and teachers are a big stumbling block. By two to one they think these key influencers would prefer them to go to university
- However, youngsters are open to persuasion
- If they could apply for apprenticeships using a UCAS-style system and if they knew degree-level programmes were available in their chosen careers, large majorities would consider applying for them



Recommendations



- There will always be a large proportion of youngsters who want to go to university for the experience and who prefer to only start thinking of career choices once there. They are unlikely to ever consider apprenticeships at 18
- But the percentage of sixth-formers who could be persuaded of the virtues of an apprenticeship is likely to be much larger than the 16% who have indicated they are currently thinking of applying
- These are most likely to be those youngsters who have already started to think about what career they want to pursue, who are already contemplating vocational degrees and who could be attracted to an apprenticeship if they were aware of a degree-level programme in their preferred field
- They might be persuaded if information were more readily available, if it were easier to apply and possibly if annual starting salaries were nearer £20,000 than £10,000
- Crucially, they would probably apply in greater numbers if parental and teacher opposition to apprenticeships was reduced and if they could be persuaded of their benefits
- In short, employers need to start focusing their apprenticeship message on schools and parents

Gerard Kelly & Partners is a public relations and communications consultancy specialising in education.

We help organisations deliver their message and enhance their reputation among teachers, students and their families. Our services include sector intelligence, communications consultancy and media and project management. Our clients range from school groups to universities, school suppliers to edtech providers, and companies looking to promote their apprenticeship offer.

Our knowledge of the education sector is second to none, our contacts are excellent, and we're never afraid help our clients to think bigger and go further.

For an in-confidence conversation about how Gerard Kelly & Partners can help deliver your communications objectives please contact mark.cooper@gkandpartners.com

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