

# The 5% Club

## 21<sup>st</sup> Century Winners Briefing Paper



### PARENTAL INFLUENCE ON CAREER CHOICES – THE IMPORTANCE OF ENGAGING WITH PARENTS TO INFORM THEM ABOUT APPRENTICESHIPS

#### Briefing purpose

Parents are the most important influence on a young person's career choice. From advice, opinion on various career choices, and indirectly through their own career and lifestyle choices, parents can be pivotal in encouraging young people to apply for apprenticeships.

This article explores the strength of parental influence, how informed (or not) are their opinions on career choices, and recommends effective engagement activities.

#### Influencing the Influencers

Research<sup>1</sup> shows parents are increasingly the most important influence on a young person's career choices. While parents' educational attainment, life experience, values, work ethics, and aspirations for their children may differ widely, it is shown that if students perceive parents to be happy and fulfilled with jobs and lifestyle, the students may opt for a similar route; the opposite holds true if they feel parents have made the wrong career choice.

Young people's career aspirations are also influenced by the hopes and advice of other people they talk to about the future, especially where someone has a particular job or the idea for the job comes from parents' aspirations.

The increased parental influence may be due to several factors: the void left in school's careers provision, parents' need to see money well spent in the face of increasing higher education costs, and a higher proportion of university-educate parents. In general, parents feel confident giving their child careers advice and information, despite a (sometimes acknowledged) lack of awareness and information of the alternatives to university.

Therefore, gaining parents' support for apprenticeships will largely dictate whether a young person chooses the pathway. A dedicated website for parents, explaining the various study and employment choices, could be a single, comprehensive source of current information.

It is essential to provide easy access to current information, thereby influencing a positive change in parents' attitudes towards apprenticeships, and removing negative stereotypes.

#### Informing Active Encouragement

In general, parents are influencing without being adequately informed. Unfortunately, the major disconnect between children's aspirations and the predicted jobs of the future, means parental influence is not helping guide children to a successful career destination.

School careers events are not giving parents sufficient information to advise and guide their child, being predominantly weighted towards university degrees. Few parents discourage their child from attending university, citing a degree to be in their child's best interest for long-term career prospects, needing qualifications for a chosen career path, or for more successful career and opportunities than experienced by the parents.

Parents may be unaware of the various types of apprenticeships, or that a Higher Apprenticeship is a university-level qualification, or that doing a Higher Apprenticeship boosts a young person's lifetime earnings.

Yet, industries considered by parents to offer the most opportunities for school leavers – engineering and manufacturing, construction, health and care, information and communication technology, business and law – are also sectors in which many apprentices are employed. The science and maths sector is under-rated, despite offering many employment opportunities.

However, students choosing an apprenticeship are often encouraged to do so, with the most active encouragement comes from parents who have personal knowledge or experience of apprenticeships, irrespective of whether or not parents are in professional/managerial occupations.

Perhaps trying to find objective guidance when seeking job opportunities (as opposed to career advice) most students' main source of information ranges from Google and careers advice/jobs websites, to subject teachers and companies attending school/college. Parents also value information from Internet searches above targeted materials or employer-specific information.

However, parents also consider more young people doing apprenticeships straight out of school is a good thing for the UK as a whole. Better information and advice about career options would give parents the confidence to encourage their child to consider non-university career path, such as an apprenticeship.

## Re-educating Parents

There is some evidence of a stigma associated with apprenticeships, with parents thinking their child too smart to do an apprenticeship, reinforcing the perception that apprenticeships are more about gaining skills in a 'blue-collar' trade than using intellect. In general, parents want their children to find work in the managerial, professional, and technical professional occupations.

Negative sentiment surrounding apprenticeships could be largely driven by attitudes to Intermediate Apprenticeships and the requirement to leave full time education at 16. It is important to note that many parents may aspire to their child completing their 6<sup>th</sup> Form or college education.

Other misconceptions about apprenticeships included:

- Geared more towards boys rather than girls
- For less academically able young people
- A career in construction mostly involves manual labour and being on a building site

Parent's knowledge gap is further evidenced by their rating of the most important factors to young people securing employment, with good GCSE and A-Level exam results ranking above experience of a workplace environment, while a Higher Apprenticeship (which provides workplace experience and a professional qualification) was ranked a very low option. The Higher Apprenticeship option even lagged behind extracurricular activities such as music lessons or volunteering, and holiday jobs. However, having a 'foot in the door' through existing industry contacts was rated more highly than a university degree. Some parents mistakenly believe that a university degree is viewed as the most employable qualification by all employers, and are unaware of employers' positive response to Higher Apprenticeships.

However, more than three-quarters of parents agreed that an apprenticeship would be a great opportunity for their child to learn valuable new skills, and are good alternatives for school leavers looking for a new

challenge. If parents knew that an apprenticeship could result in an aspirational career with managerial or professional status, it would be seen as an attractive option.

Re-educating parents about current options and progress paths would result in informed, active encouragement for student to consider routes into careers other than academic qualifications and university degrees, including Higher Apprenticeships.

## Summary and Recommendations

Parents are the most important influence on a young person's career choice, and generally actively engaged in supporting, advising and guiding their child. Cultural and racial identity and attitudes towards education are significant.

However, information provided by schools is heavily weighted towards continuing with full-time education. And, in general, unless a parent has personal experience, there is a lack of awareness of the different apprenticeship levels, various roles, remuneration, and the combination of work-based skills and classroom-based knowledge.

Most parents have high aspirations for their child and may assume that university is the best route to achieve a good employment outcome. Therefore, employers and schools must work together to ensure parents are well informed about all available options, and ensure apprenticeships are recognised and promoted as a viable first choice for young people.

Actions that employers can take to ensure parents form positive opinions about apprenticeships include:

- Participation in school-based career events, and engagement with parents could be effective in explaining the pathways for all post-school options, not solely further education. Attending staff could include current apprentices and ex-apprentices to share personal stories and current information about apprenticeships. This is particularly important for employers in lesser-known, perhaps unimagined, occupations, as young people make career choices based on people they meet or see in the media.
- Innovative social media aimed at parents can explain apprenticeships, remuneration, job roles, practical and theoretically learning combinations, and progression opportunities.
- Open days (run by employers at weekends or in the evening) can provide answers to parents' questions; it can be promoted to parents in conjunction with schools or posted in social media. Gaia Innovation finds that seeing 'behind-the-scenes', meeting business staff, seeing the facilities of the training academy is reassuring, especially to girls' parents.
- An online single point of contact for careers advice for both further education and apprenticeships would be extremely useful for parents – and will be more useful with the introduction of a third career pathway in the form of T-levels.
- Employers and schools can work together to explain to young people and their parents what needs to be done to improve chances of getting to university or securing an apprenticeship.
- Promote apprenticeships as a recognised and often preferred route to a successful career in management, professional or senior technical occupations.
- Employers could consider offering more Advanced, Higher and Degree Apprenticeships, and employ youngsters as Intermediate Apprenticeships only if the apprentice does not have the qualifications required to stay on in further education or who has a very strong desire to leave full-time education
- In-person engagement, short films, and simple language in written materials can overcome barriers of low literacy levels and lack of English as a first language among a percentage of parents.

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<sup>i</sup> Research used for this article: All About School Leavers 2016 and 2017, GTI Media 2014 and 2015, The 5% Club member Redrow, EY, AAT, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF), the Centre for Vocational Educational Research, and Education and Employers.