

Careers & Employability: What students want and how employers can respond.

UCAS & The 5% Club webinar, 15 April 2026.

Introduction

UCAS and The 5% Club webinar brought together the UCAS research team and employer guest speakers to explore how young people think about careers, employability, and future work. The session combined original UCAS research with real-world employer perspectives from the NHS and EY, offering a comprehensive view of how career decision-making is evolving, and where employers can make the greatest impact.

Speakers were:

- **Shona Taylor**, Business Engagement Manager, UCAS (Moderator)
 - **Barbara Bradshaw**, Student Insight Lead, UCAS
 - **Ruth Auton**, Head of Education, Learning & Organisational Development, Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust
 - **Rebecca Buck-Sinclair**, Early Careers Manager, EY
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Research methodology

The insight comes from an online survey of 1,692 students aged 16–19, registered with UCAS but not yet applied, planning to start higher education in 2026.

KEY FINDINGS (PRESENTATION)

Employability as a Core Decision Driver

Higher education has long been linked to better career prospects, but what has changed is the emphasis. While previous generations may have had the luxury of choosing their path mainly based on personal and academic interests, for today's young people future employability is embedded at the earliest stages of decision-making.

- **95% of students** said employability prospects were important when choosing a course
- **87% said the same** when choosing a university itself

Students with clearer career plans and higher predicted grades were even more likely to prioritise employability, particularly when selecting institutions. For high-achieving students, employability is increasingly a differentiator, not a bonus.

Unequal Clarity: Many Students Lack a Clear Career Pathway

While employability is very important, the route from education to work isn't equally clear for everyone:

- **Only 36%** of respondents had a clear career vision and pathway to get there
- **38%** knew the field they wanted to work in but not had a plan
- **25%** were uncertain about both role and route

For many young people, the challenge is not ambition but visibility. Outside of a small number of highly visible professions and household-name employers, students struggle to imagine the steps between education and employment.

Employer Awareness: Brands Over Sectors

When asked to name organisations they wanted to work for, young people overwhelmingly cited household names, particularly the NHS, which stood apart as the most recognised employer. This reflects awareness of brand rather than understanding of sector breadth.

The NHS Example

While widely known, the NHS is often understood narrowly. Most young people associate it primarily with doctors and nurses, despite the existence of 350+ distinct career routes, spanning numerous non-clinical careers (digital & IT, finance, estates, administration) and community, mental health and social care roles.

Careers Advice: Access Exists, but Quality Varies

Most respondents had received some form of careers advice:

- **66%** from friends and family
- Over **50%** from universities or visiting speakers

However, the impact of careers advice differed sharply depending on whether a student already had a career plan.

- Students with clear plans were more likely to:

- Receive work experience (59% vs 50%)
- Visit employers (12% vs 7%)

- Students without plans were far more likely to find advice overwhelming or confusing
 - Just **11%** felt they received adequate support
 - **44%** described careers advice as overwhelming

This highlights a key gap: those who most need structured guidance are least well served by current approaches.

Timing Matters: Advice Comes Late for Many

While **82%** received careers advice during secondary education, timing was uneven:

- Advice was most common **post-16**, after GCSE choices
- Only **54%** recalled advice during GCSE subject selection
- Just **26%** received guidance earlier than that

This creates a risk that students inadvertently close off pathways before they understand their long-term implications. Earlier employer engagement could play a critical role here.

What Young People Want from Employer Engagement

When asked **what they** want from future career support and how employers could help, students prioritised:

- Practical help with career discovery
- Opportunities for work experience

These preferences reflect a strong need for practical, realistic relatable information – something that brings different careers to life and helps them understand what roles actually involve. Opportunities to gain work experience are also key – both real and virtual.

What Young People Want from Future Work

When imagining future roles, students highlighted:

- Fair pay and job security
- Opportunities to help people
- Progression, learning, and variety

When considering employers, the most important factors were:

- A supportive environment
- A positive workplace culture

Today's students are selective. They want to work with employers they can believe in, who are transparent about their purpose, culture and values.

Conclusion: Where Employers Can Make the Greatest Impact

Young people would welcome more information and more direct engagement from employers, especially at early stages of career discovery.

- They want more clarity on potential career paths.
- They want to be introduced to careers and industries they may not have considered before.
- They want opportunities to build their skills and experience for future employability.

Such employer engagement is clearly beneficial for young people, to help them make more informed choices.

But it also presents a huge opportunity for employers, to raise awareness of their employer brands, build familiarity and trust and through that to enable a long-term sustainable pipeline of future talent.

PANEL DISCUSSION (Q&A)

Q: How important is early engagement with young people?

Ruth Auton (NHS):

Early engagement is essential. The NHS actively works with primary schools and communities because career aspirations are shaped far earlier than many people realise. By using career ambassadors, volunteering links, and partnerships with schools and colleges, the NHS helps young people see how meaningful employment connects to improved life chances, wellbeing, and health outcomes. Representation matters - young people respond best when they hear from people "like them," not just senior professionals.

Rebecca Buck-Sinclair (EY):

Early engagement has become increasingly important as young people apply earlier, apply more widely, and often use AI to explore career options. EY focuses on helping students understand roles before they apply, so decisions are informed rather than speculative. This includes providing early role insight, clear explanations of pathways, and multiple touchpoints over time, rather than relying on one-off interventions.

Q: Are you seeing changes in how young people transition into apprenticeships and early careers roles?

Ruth Auton (NHS):

Yes - there are noticeable changes. Many young apprentices struggle with full-time working patterns, confidence, communication skills, and adjusting to workplace expectations. There is also increasing neurodiversity among entrants, often identified only after joining. In response, the NHS is adapting recruitment and interview approaches and investing more in pastoral support to help young people develop safely and sustainably, particularly in healthcare settings where communication and patient safety are critical.

Rebecca Buck-Sinclair (EY):

The transition from education to work can be a significant adjustment, especially for those used to highly structured environments. EY places strong emphasis on reassurance - being clear about what working life looks like, offering wellbeing and coaching support, and maintaining regular communication throughout recruitment. This approach helps reduce anxiety and prevents candidates, particularly from underrepresented backgrounds, from disengaging due to uncertainty.

Q: How do apprenticeships and progression pathways work in your organisations?

Ruth Auton (NHS):

Apprenticeships are a core part of NHS workforce planning rather than a stand-alone entry route. Individuals can progress from entry-level apprenticeships into senior clinical or professional roles, with clear internal pathways to support long-term development. Flexibility is key, and Ruth stressed the importance of challenging rigid delivery models to ensure apprenticeships remain accessible and sustainable for a diverse workforce.

Rebecca Buck-Sinclair (EY):

EY is very clear that apprenticeships and graduate routes lead to the same long-term outcomes, including permanent roles, progression, and professional qualifications. Neither pathway is positioned as better than the other - they serve different individuals. Making this parity explicit helps reduce anxiety, challenge stigma around non-traditional routes, and allow young people to choose the pathway that is right for them.

Q: What advice would you give employers on engaging with schools and colleges?

Ruth Auton (NHS):

Employers should take a partnership-led, co-design approach with schools, colleges, and communities. Engagement should focus on areas with lower access to opportunity, align with long-term workforce needs, and use relatable staff as ambassadors. Employers should also empower their workforce to engage externally and recognise outreach as part of professional development, not an add-on.

Rebecca Buck-Sinclair (EY):

Engagement works best when it is interactive rather than purely informational. Activities that help students understand skills, recruitment processes, and real examples of work are particularly effective. Many young people underestimate their strengths, so employers should focus on building confidence and helping students recognise the skills they already have, rather than expecting polished candidates.

Q: What challenges do application processes present, and how can barriers be reduced?

Ruth Auton (NHS):

NHS application systems can feel complex and outdated because they operate nationally, and this can act as a barrier for some candidates. To mitigate this, local trusts are creating supported application events and open recruitment days to guide candidates through the process. Ruth encouraged employers to simplify wherever possible and to challenge inflexible systems, particularly where they limit part-time or flexible apprenticeship routes.

Rebecca Buck-Sinclair (EY):

Clarity and communication are essential to reducing application anxiety. EY makes recruitment stages transparent, encourages early disclosure of support needs, and keeps candidates informed throughout the process. Honest messaging about timelines and application volumes helps maintain trust and reduces the risk of candidates disengaging due to uncertainty.

PANEL HIGHLIGHTS (SUMMARY)

Early engagement matters more than ever:

Both speakers stressed that career aspirations form early. Sustained engagement with schools, colleges, and communities - sometimes from primary age - is essential to widening opportunities and informing realistic career choices.

Representation and relatability are key:

Young people respond best to hearing from employees and apprentices who are closer to their own age and background. Seeing “people like me” helps break down assumptions about who belongs in certain sectors or roles.

The transition into work is changing:

Employers are seeing growing challenges around confidence, communication skills, neurodiversity, and readiness for full-time work. As a result, recruitment and support structures must adapt, with greater emphasis on pastoral and wellbeing support.

Apprenticeships is a credible and valuable pathway:

Both organisations highlighted apprenticeships as credible, high-quality routes leading to the same long-term outcomes as graduate pathways, with clear progression into permanent and senior roles.

Flexibility and inclusion are key:

Whether through adjusted recruitment processes, clearer communication, or challenging rigid training models, employers must actively remove structural barriers to participation.

Clarity reduces anxiety:

Transparent information on roles, career pathways, application stages, and available support helps young people make informed choices and stay engaged throughout recruitment.

Engagement works best when it's interactive:

Activities that help students understand skills, strengths, and real working life are more effective than traditional talks. Confidence-building is just as important as careers information.

Early engagement benefits employers:

Meaningful, inclusive engagement helps organisations build awareness, trust, and sustainable long-term talent pipelines aligned to future workforce needs.