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New directions:

Young people's and parents'
views of vocational education
and careers guidance



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Centre for Skills Development

Organisation overview

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About the authors:

Jon is a mixed methods researcher with more than 14 years' experience working in market and social research agencies. He has extensive experience of conducting research for policy makers and communications professionals in government, and across the public and commercial sectors. Jon is highly experienced in working with education professionals to develop policy, interventions, communications campaigns and product propositions.

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Acknowledgements

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Foreword

This year, the number of 16-24 year olds not in education, employment or training in England reached 938,000. This is more than three times the number of people who work in the City of London. Imagine how many more young learners feel overwhelmed by choices, or feel like they are working towards the wrong profession and not building their future.

I am currently working towards finishing my apprenticeship and I am very aware that the lack of understanding of vocational pathways contributes to this problem. People sometimes believe that vocational education is an 'easy' option with less worth than a general qualifications route. I have realised that vocational education is entirely different to what I perceived it to be. Day-to-day tasks such as time-keeping, keeping the standard of work consistent and balancing work have all proved to be mentally challenging. Working while learning has helped me to gain invaluable skills that I would not have acquired had I remained in full-time education. I feel like I am always gaining new skills and acquiring experience that will be useful in future employment. In my case, the perceptions of vocational education being 'unchallenging' and not beneficial in the long-term derived from the lack of information, advice and guidance provided in schools.

This report indicates that over 70 per cent of young people speak to someone about their choice of career or qualifications and two-thirds of them visit a careers advisor at school. My experience was that careers advice was primarily focused on general qualifications. Vocational education and training was never mentioned, which meant that I did not place much value on it when I did hear about it. It was only after an unsatisfying year at university

that I started investigating this option for myself. I know many young people are in the same situation and would benefit from understanding the range of pathways they can take.

This report highlights how young people and their parents view vocational education and the role of information, advice and guidance. More young learners could be made aware of the long-term benefits of vocational qualifications to ensure there is little room for misconceptions and misunderstandings. There needs to be more balanced provision of guidance in schools, and teachers and careers advisors need to take time to discuss other educational routes, not only options that will help the students that want to go in to higher education. A personalised approach to information, advice and guidance would also be beneficial, as the report shows that 80 per cent of young learners based their career choices on what they were most interested in, and may need help connecting their interests with viable job prospects.

Each young learner is an individual and will be motivated to achieve their best in different ways. We need to understand what these ways are, and provide a range of quality educational pathways to allow them all to prosper.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "A. Sheppard". The signature is stylized and written in a cursive-like font.

Antonia Sheppard

*Apprentice in Business Administration Level 3,
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1.1 Background

City & Guilds Centre for Skills Development (CSD) commissioned Chrysalis Research to conduct research into young people's and parents' views of vocational education, and the role of information, advice and guidance (IAG) on influencing education and career choices.

The research explored themes identified during an earlier, exploratory study by CSD and Nottingham Trent University of young people's experience of vocational education¹.

Our research involved an online survey of 1,620 young people aged between 15 and 19, and 1,693 parents of children in this age group. Within this sample, 1,231 young people and their parents completed a paired questionnaire, whereby the parent completed the first half of the survey before the child completed the rest. This approach enabled us to directly compare the responses of parents and their children, and to assess the impact of parents' perceptions and circumstances on their children's views and experiences.

The young people were classified as following vocational qualifications routes or general qualifications routes, based on their current or previous studies.

Following the quantitative research, we conducted online qualitative discussion groups with two groups of survey participants: four young people following vocational courses and seven working towards general qualifications. The groups provided greater insight into young people's perceptions of the different qualifications pathways and the reasons behind their choices.

1.2 Choices and transitions

Young people's choices

Young people weighed up a combination of personal preferences and external factors when making decisions about their education and future employment.

Young people felt that information linking their courses with career routes and university courses was limited. This made it difficult for them to make informed choices about qualifications.

The young people we surveyed mainly based their choice of course on their personal preferences: 74 per cent said they chose subjects they were interested in and 59 per cent chose subjects they felt they were good at. Smaller proportions (one-quarter to one-third) chose subjects they felt would help them enter a particular career or get on a particular course.

Despite the link to employment offered by vocational qualifications, only 23 per cent of young people on vocational routes chose their course because it would help them get a job and 31 per cent because they needed a particular qualification.

Most young people (61 per cent) had decided on the type of job or career they wanted to pursue. More young people on vocational routes (67 per cent) had decided than those on general qualifications routes (58 per cent). Young people based their career choices on a combination of personal preferences and pragmatic considerations, such as the skills needed and the career prospects.

¹ Atkins, Flint and Oldfield (2011), *Practical matters: what young people think of vocational education in England*, Nottingham Trent University.

However, despite making choices about careers, many young people may ultimately have little control over the job they end up in: 29 per cent of young people who were working revealed that they took the first job they were offered and 27 per cent said they took the only job they were offered.

Sources and effectiveness of information and advice

Parents are the most widely accessed and the most useful source of information and advice, but young people also need to be able to access to other sources, such as advisers and tutors. This type of support is particularly important for young people considering a vocational route and those whose parents have lower level qualifications.

Well under half (42 per cent) the young people we surveyed found it easy to get information and advice that was relevant to their situation. A quarter claimed they did not receive information and advice from anyone about their choice of career or qualification. This figure rose to 28 per cent for the vocational group compared with 22 per cent of young people on general qualifications routes.

The most widely accessed sources of information and advice were parents (68 per cent), school careers advisers (67 per cent) and teachers/tutors (60 per cent). Parents were considered the most useful source of information and advice by 33 per cent of young people. Parental advice was more valued by young people whose parents had higher levels of qualifications: 45 per cent of children of parents with Level 6 qualifications found their parents

the most useful source, compared with 30 per cent for parents with Level 2 qualifications.

Parents played less of a role for young people on vocational routes: 62 per cent of vocational students had received information and advice from parents compared with 71 per cent of students taking general qualifications.

Most parents (60 per cent) stated that they were confident about giving their children information and advice about education and employment. Parents with lower levels of qualification were less confident about providing advice, reflecting the young people's responses.

Transition into employment

Young people need to be better prepared for the realities of working life through work placements or prior contact with employers.

Most young people who were working (57 per cent) felt it was easy to adapt to working life. In contrast, only 8 per cent of parents felt that this was the case for young people, and two-thirds (67 per cent) felt that it was difficult. The young people felt the most difficult aspect was adjusting to the new lifestyle, in particular the routine of the working week. Parents felt that young people struggled to change their mindset when they started work, and that they were not sufficiently prepared for the need to take responsibility and to follow orders at work.

Young people felt that it was important for them to have qualifications (89 per cent felt it was important) and practical skills (88 per cent) when entering the workplace. Young people on general qualifications

routes were more likely than their peers to view qualifications as very important when entering work (55 per cent vs 42 per cent), while those on vocational courses were more likely than others to see practical skills as very important (37 per cent vs 29 per cent).

Parents and young people agreed that work experience, better information and advice at school/college, and time to speak to employers would be helpful in easing the transition to work. In online discussion groups, young people emphasised the need for more specific information about the necessary skills and qualifications and the working conditions of jobs they were considering.

Views were divided about the change in the law that will require young people to stay in education or training until the age of 18. There was more support for the change among young people in the vocational group and their parents compared with those on general routes.

1.3 Awareness and understanding of vocational education

Awareness of vocational qualifications is high, however parents are less confident offering information and advice about vocational options than about general qualifications. It is therefore particularly important that schools and careers services offer timely, good quality information and advice.

The majority of people we surveyed (77 per cent of parents and 72 per cent of young people) had heard of the term 'vocational education'. Awareness was consistent across different groups of young people.

For parents, awareness of the phrase was highest among those who had higher level qualifications and those whose children were following a vocational route.

Respondents viewed vocational education as a skills-based and practical approach to learning and felt that qualifications were designed to provide a way into trades, generally manual ones.

Only 37 per cent of parents were confident giving their children information and advice about vocational qualifications, while 60 per cent were confident advising on education and employment in general. This suggests that parents offer advice about vocational routes less frequently and effectively than for other options.

1.4 Attitudes to, and take-up of, vocational education

The quantitative and qualitative findings suggest that parents and teachers did not challenge young people's perceptions of vocational qualifications. As a result, relatively few young people taking general qualifications had actively considered vocational options. A campaign challenging young people's and parents' perceptions of vocational qualifications is needed to encourage young people to assess their suitability more objectively.

Young people, particularly those on general qualifications routes, saw general and vocational qualifications as two distinct and very different options. They viewed general qualifications as a route to university and a means of gaining transferable skills, and believed vocational qualifications linked to specific industry sectors and skill sets. Parents' views of vocational qualifications closely matched those of their children.

Some young people taking general qualifications felt that vocational qualifications could limit options for higher education and later employment. In contrast, students on vocational courses valued this specificity, the links to employment sectors and the development of skills for the workplace.

Parents with higher level qualifications tended to be more negative about vocational qualifications and less likely to see them as suited to their child than those parents with lower level qualifications (21 per cent of parents with a Level 6 qualification agreed vocational routes suited their child vs 29 per cent for Level 2).

When asked which words are most strongly associated with each type of qualification, parents and their children gave similar responses. Vocational qualifications were most strongly associated with the terms *skills, training, practical* and *job related* while general qualifications were associated with *education, academic* and *university*. Young people on general qualifications routes were more likely than those on vocational routes to associate the terms *high quality, education, academic, valuable, employment* and *university* with general qualifications. Participants on vocational pathways were more likely to associate those words with vocational or both types of qualification.

Young people had very different reasons for choosing their courses. Young people chose vocational qualifications over general qualifications because they felt they were better at practical work (30 per cent) and that vocational qualifications gave them a better chance of getting a job (27 per cent). Young people chose general qualifications over vocational because they felt they were the best choice for university (41 per cent).

They were also, in comparison, much more likely to consider advice from teachers (37 per cent vs only 23 per cent for students taking vocational courses) and parents (35 per cent vs 19 per cent).

1.5 Encouraging take-up of vocational options

Information and advice is needed that emphasises the transferability of skills and knowledge gained through vocational qualifications and the routes they open up for further study. This would help address young people's concerns about the limitations of vocational options.

When parents and young people were asked how to promote understanding and take-up of vocational qualifications, the most popular choices were:

- work experience (60 per cent of parents, 52 per cent of young people)
- information and advice (59 per cent of parents and 53 per cent of young people)
- information from employers (53 per cent of parents and 36 per cent of young people)
- taster sessions in colleges (52 per cent of parents and 42 per cent of young people).

They were less likely to believe that positive publicity would make a difference. Instead, they favoured more direct information and experience that would enable young people to make a more informed judgement about vocational courses.

2

Introduction

City & Guilds Centre for Skills Development (CSD) commissioned Chrysalis Research to carry out this research to explore what young people and their parents think about vocational education, the choices they make about education and careers, and their needs for information, advice and guidance.

The research involved a quantitative online survey with 3,313 participants and two follow-up qualitative online discussion groups. This report outlines the findings and draws conclusions and recommendations from the research.

2.1 Research context and aims

The far-reaching changes within the education system at the current time make the research particularly pertinent. For example, the government has accepted and is implementing the recommendations of a review of vocational qualifications, and schools are being encouraged to adopt a new English Baccalaureate, which may influence the advice learners receive about their choice of qualifications. Meanwhile the requirement for schools to provide impartial careers advice and guidance has been replaced by a general requirement for careers education.

The research builds on earlier, exploratory research conducted for CSD by Nottingham Trent University into young people's perceptions of vocational education². The research described in this report was designed to test and further develop hypotheses from this exploratory study.

We were able to robustly test the findings by using large, randomly selected groups of young people and parents.

Our research covered four main areas of enquiry:

Influence on young people's choice of career/qualification path

We explore the influences behind the choices and ambitions of young people. The exploratory study found that social structures and poor advice could lead to gender and class inequalities being reflected in students' choice of course. The financial downturn and university fees threaten to exacerbate this situation.

Awareness and understanding of vocational education

Our research looks at how the term 'vocational' is understood and the perceived role and value of vocational in comparison to general qualifications. The exploratory study had found that 'vocational' was poorly understood as a term, even by those studying vocational courses. Although vocational students valued their course and were optimistic about their employment chances, they thought that vocational options were sometimes poorly perceived.

Attitudes to, and take-up of, vocational qualifications

We also assess how young people were advised about vocational options and what encouraged or prevented take-up. Again, we used the experience of young people taking general qualifications as a point of comparison. Young people on vocational courses told researchers in the exploratory

² Atkins, Flint and Oldfield (2011), '*Practical matters: what young people think of vocational education in England*', Nottingham Trent University.

study that they had got there by accident rather than as a result of an informed choice.

Future needs: advising young people on vocational options

The quantitative research looked at what is needed to encourage wider and more informed take-up of vocational courses. We tested some of the options raised in the previous research, as well as asking young people for their suggestions. According to the exploratory study, young people needed a better understanding of vocational pathways linked to realistic employment opportunities. The authors made a series of suggestions including more effective information, advice and guidance, taster sessions and earlier work experience opportunities.

2.2 Methods

The research involved a quantitative online survey of 3,313 parents and young people, followed by two qualitative online discussion groups with young people.

Quantitative online survey

The online survey was completed by 1,620 young people who would be aged between 15 and 19 on 31 August 2011, and by 1,693 parents of young people in this age group. The survey was hosted and managed by YouGov, using members of YouGov's research panel of more than 280,000 people. We sent invitations to panel members with children in the desired age range, and asked them to participate in the survey together with their child. We chose panel members with particular demographic characteristics in order to achieve a representative sample.

The survey had two distinct aspects:

Paired surveys

1,231 young people and one of their parents completed a 48-question survey. The parent answered the first half of the questionnaire before their child completed the rest. Many of the questions asked of the parent and child were the same to allow direct comparisons between the responses of the young people and their parents. We used this approach to identify the impact of parental circumstances, behaviours and views on their children's choices and perceptions.

Separate surveys

We also surveyed an additional 389 young people aged 15 to 19 and 462 unrelated parents of children in that age range after the paired survey took place. This was to ensure that the total sample contained a good representation of the target age groups, different educational routes, and ethnic profiles. These surveys contained the same questions as the paired survey, and their responses have been analysed in the same way except where we make direct comparisons between young people and their parents. In these cases, the results from the separate surveys are excluded.

Throughout the report, we specify whether the total or the paired sample is used. We highlight differences between sub-groups only when they are statistically significant.

The survey took place between 11 July and 1 August 2011. The detailed profile of the online survey participants is outlined in Section 2.3.

Qualitative online discussion groups

In addition to the survey, we conducted two online discussion groups, each lasting 75 minutes, with 11 young people who had taken part in the survey. The group discussions covered the same areas as the survey but the format gave participants the chance to elaborate on their responses. It also allowed us to probe for more details about the young people's perceptions of the different qualifications pathways and the reasons behind their choices. Holding the groups online allowed young people from different parts of the United Kingdom to take part in the discussions.

The group composition and participant profiles were as follows:

Group 1, vocational qualifications pathway

- › Female, aged 17, studying for Diploma in Childcare (Level 2)
- › Female, aged 17, studying for Applied Business Award, and A-levels in Psychology and Sociology
- › Female, aged 16, studying for BTEC in Performing Arts
- › Male, aged 18, studying for Applied Double Business Award and A-level Politics.

Group 2, general qualifications pathway

- › Male, aged 16, studying for A-levels in Triple Science and Maths
- › Female, aged 18, finished A-levels and going to study Psychology at university
- › Female, aged 18, finished A-levels and going to study Law at university
- › Male, aged 18, finished A-levels and going to study Linguistics with Japanese at university
- › Female, aged 17, studying for Advanced Highers in Maths, Chemistry and Gaelic
- › Female, aged 18, finished A-levels and going to study English at university

- › Female, aged 17, studying for A-levels in Biology, Chemistry, Geography and French.

The groups took place on 3 August 2011.

We have presented findings and quotes from the group discussions alongside the data from the quantitative survey in order to illustrate and illuminate the quantitative findings. Where appropriate, we have also compared our findings with insights from the earlier exploratory study for CSD.

The questionnaire and qualitative discussion guide are both available from CSD on request.

2.3 Quantitative sample

We chose a representative sample to allow us to make comparisons as follows:

- › between young people and their parents
- › between young people across the 15 to 19 age range
- › between young people on vocational and general qualifications routes.

The sample also ensured there was representation of young people and parents from black and minority ethnic (BME) groups and from young people who were not in education, employment or training (NEET).

Sample breakdown

Age

There was a relatively even distribution of young people across the age group as shown in Figure 1. The survey took place at the end of the academic year 2010/11 and the profile is based on respondents' age on 31 August 2011 to align with school year groups. Consequently, those in year 10 (for example) at the time of the survey will be designated as 15 year olds, although some were 14 at the time of the survey.

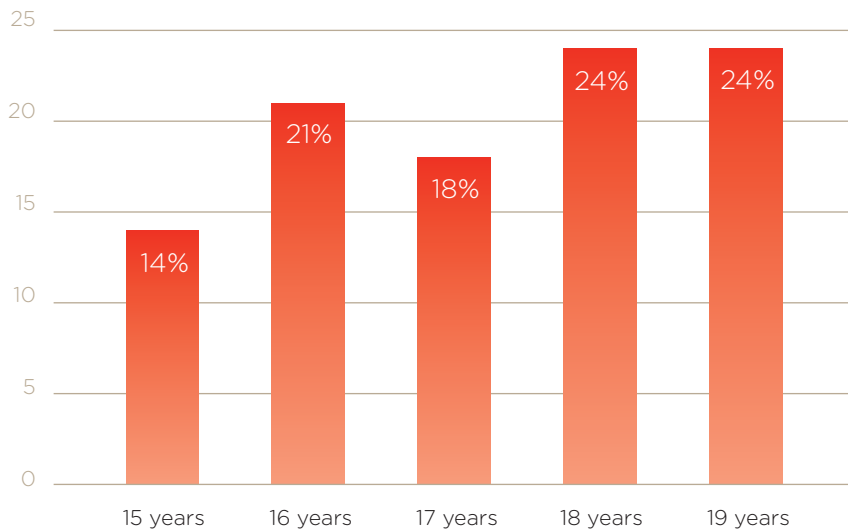


Figure 1: Young person's age at 31 August 2011

Base: All young people (n = 1,620)

Gender

53 per cent of the young people's sample was male and 47 per cent female. Among the parents' group, 47 per cent were fathers and 53 per cent mothers.

Ethnic profile

14 per cent of the young people and parents came from black and minority ethnic (BME) groups. This compares with 12 per cent³ nationally. BME groups were evenly spread across the age categories.

Region

The sample comprised young people from across England (85 per cent), Wales (5 per cent), Scotland (9 per cent) and Northern Ireland (1 per cent). This corresponds well with the population distribution across the United Kingdom: England (84 per cent), Wales (5 per cent), Scotland (8 per cent) and Northern Ireland (3 per cent)⁴.

Across England, young people were drawn from the North (30 per cent of the young people living in England), South (27 per cent), East (11 per cent), Midlands (19 per cent), and London (13 per cent). This regional breakdown was closely matched in the parents' sample.

Young people's education/working status

Of the young people we surveyed:

- 65 per cent were in full-time education at school or college
- 12 per cent were at university
- 12 per cent were working part time
- 12 per cent were not in education, employment or training (NEET)
- 4 per cent were working full time
- 3 per cent were taking an apprenticeship
- 2 per cent were following a training programme.

Educational route

80 per cent of the young people we surveyed were studying or had recently completed qualifications, mainly GCSEs and A-levels, and 31 per cent were studying or had recently completed vocational qualifications, including City & Guilds, BTECs, apprenticeships and diplomas.

³ *United Kingdom Census 2001.*

⁴ *Office National Statistics 2006 population estimates.*

Figure 2: Which qualifications have you been studying towards?

Base: All young people currently in education (n=1,077):
 15-16 year olds (n=519)
 17-18 year olds (n= 450)
 19 year olds (n=108)

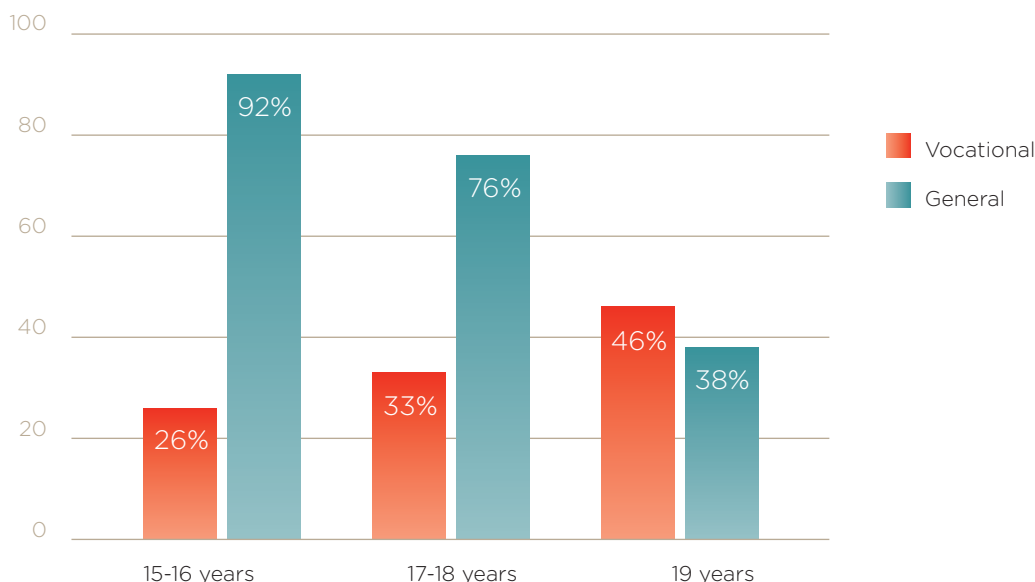


Figure 2 shows that the proportion taking vocational qualifications increases with age, with most 15-18 year olds taking GCSEs or A-levels.

For the purposes of analysis we classified young people as following either a 'vocational' (35 per cent) or 'general' (58 per cent) qualifications route, based on the qualifications they had achieved or were working towards. The young people who were taking both vocational and general qualifications were classified into the 'vocational' route. A small proportion (6 per cent) who did not know or did not state their qualifications were not allocated into either group.

Parents' working status and educational level

71 per cent of the parents we surveyed worked full time, 13 per cent part time, 6 per cent did not work, 4 per cent were retired, and 4 per cent were unemployed.

Their educational level was as follows:

- 4 per cent had left school without any formal qualifications
- 3 per cent had qualifications below Level 2 (eg GCSE grades A-C)
- 26 per cent had qualifications at Level 2
- 18 per cent had qualifications at Level 3 (eg A-level, NVQ level 3)
- 8 per cent had qualifications at Level 4/5 (eg higher education certificate, higher education diploma, foundation degree)

- 18 per cent had qualifications at Level 6 (eg bachelor's degree)
- 7 per cent had qualifications at Level 7/8 (eg master's degree, doctorate)
- 14 per cent had other technical, professional or higher qualifications.

2.4 Report structure

The remainder of this report details the research findings, which are presented in four distinct themes.

- Section 3 looks at the choices young people have made and the role played by parents, schools and careers services in influencing these choices.
- Section 4 assesses awareness and understanding of the term 'vocational education'.
- Section 5 examines how vocational qualifications are perceived and what encourages young people to choose vocational study.
- The final section looks at what is needed to help young people take a more informed approach to choosing vocational qualifications.

3

Young people's choices and transitions

This section looks at young people's choices and how they were influenced, before discussing the effectiveness of support provided by schools/colleges, careers services and parents.

3.1 Young people's choices and ambitions

80 per cent of the young people surveyed had been working towards a general qualification and under a third (31 per cent) were pursuing a vocational one (Figure 3). More than half (57 per cent) of young people taking vocational qualifications were also taking a general qualification.

A smaller proportion of young people from black and minority ethnic (BME) groups were working towards a vocational qualification compared with their peers from white ethnic groups (18 per cent BME vs 34 per cent white).

Figure 3: Qualifications young people were working towards

Base: young people in education (n=1,077)

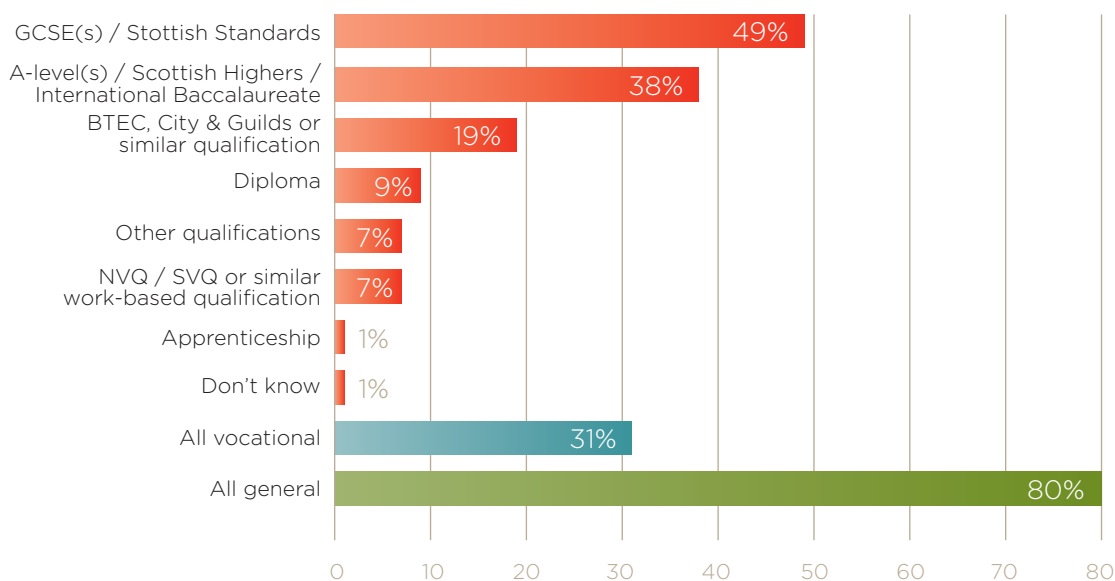


Figure 4: Young people's plans on finishing Year 11 (S4 in Scotland)

Base: young people in Y10 and 11 /S3 and S4 (n=561)

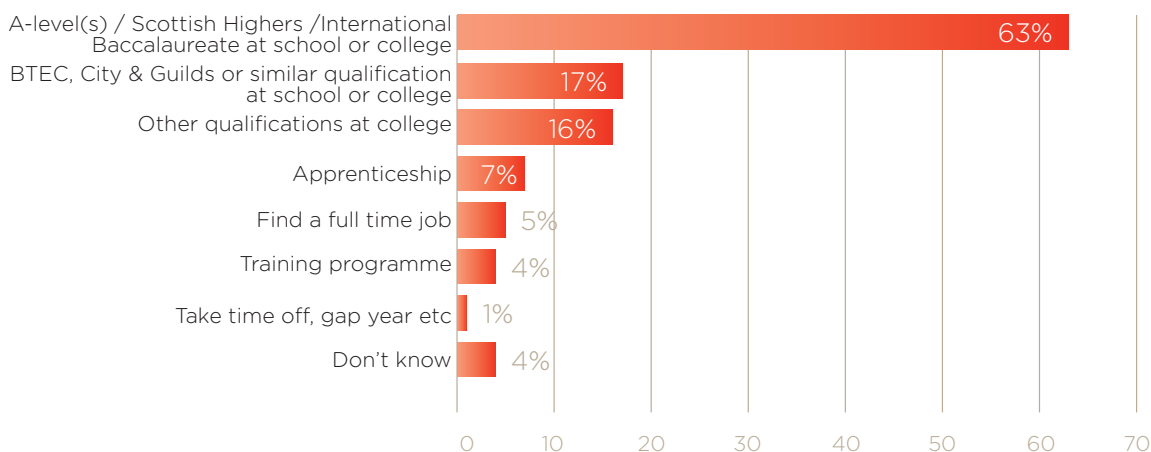
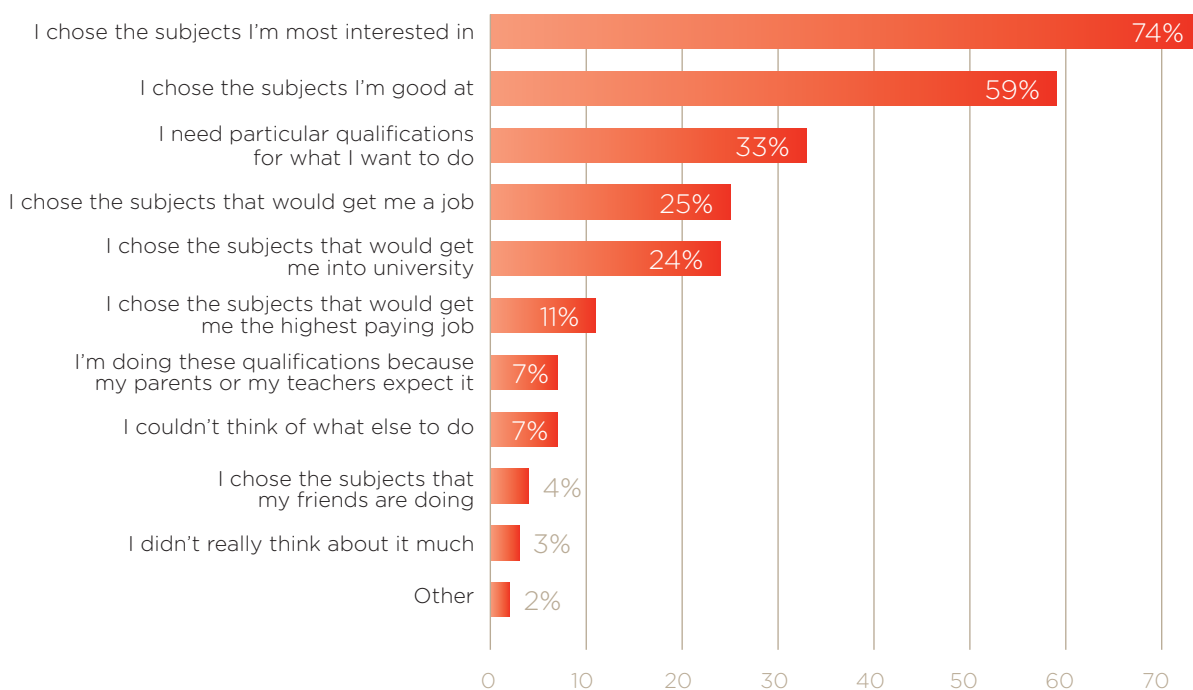


Figure 5: How did you decide the subjects/qualifications you are now taking?

Base: all young people in education or training (n=1,261)



Almost two-thirds (63 per cent) of 15-16 year olds said they intend to study a general qualification after they finish Year 11 (or S4 in Scotland), compared with 17 per cent who intended to study a BTEC, City & Guilds or similar qualification and 16 per cent who planned to study another qualification, as shown in Figure 4.

15-16 year olds from BME groups were far more likely than their white peers to be planning to take a general qualification (90 per cent vs 58 per cent).

There was no significant correlation between parents' level of education and whether students were currently studying vocational or general qualifications. However there was a connection with young people's intentions: 83 per cent of 15-16 year olds whose parents had a Level 6 qualification intended to go on to take a general qualification compared with 53 per cent with parents with Level 2 and 64 per cent with Level 3 qualifications.

Young people said that they chose the subjects that they were interested in (74 per cent) or good at (59 per cent), as shown in Figure 5.

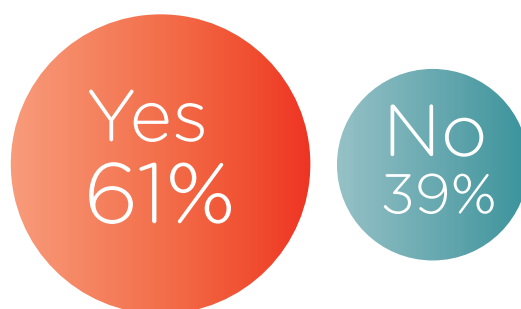


Figure 6: Have you decided on what type of job or career you'd like to do in the future?

Base: all young people in education or training (n =1,261)

Despite the link to employment and sectors offered by many vocational qualifications, only 23 per cent of young people on vocational routes chose courses to help get them a job, and 31 per cent because they needed a particular qualification – these proportions are not significantly different from young people on general qualifications routes. The main reason for vocational students taking a qualification was that it was something they were interested in (73 per cent) or good at (54 per cent). This reflects the conclusion, drawn by the exploratory study, that young people often did not choose vocational courses with a concrete next step in mind.

The older groups were most likely to choose qualifications that would help them make the next step: 38 per cent of 17-18 year olds chose qualifications that they needed for what they wanted to do (compared with 29 per cent of 15–16 year olds) and 31 per cent of this age group chose subjects that would help them get into university.

Young people from BME groups were also more likely to choose their qualifications based on their future plans, with 37 per cent choosing subjects that would help get them into university (compared with 22 per cent of white young people).

The online groups showed that young people often bear a number of factors in mind when choosing their course, as this quote illustrates:

'I thought about what would most likely keep my options open and was 'academically acceptable' to top universities and kept in mind also what I would find interesting. I also chose Chemistry AS (I dropped it at A2) because I thought about being a doctor. I took Psychology because it sounded interesting. I took Biology, Chemistry and Geography because I was good at them at GCSE.'

Male, aged 18, general qualifications route

A few young people in the vocational group felt they had a limited choice of courses. This reflects the finding from the exploratory study that young people choosing a vocational course did not always have complete ownership over the decision.

'I was forced into it by a teacher. I'm very annoyed. I hated the course I was given as I felt it wasn't very challenging and it was also very dull.'

Male, aged 18, vocational qualifications route

Less than two-thirds of young people (61 per cent) had a type of job or career in mind (Figure 6). This rose to 67 per cent for those on vocational routes compared with 58 per cent for those on general qualifications routes.

Participants in the general qualification online group described how their career choices had affected their choice of university course.

'I want to become a writer in some capacity, as well as an English teacher, so my course took into consideration both.'

Female, aged 18, general qualifications route

'I was encouraged to call up various law firms to see whether they would accept a degree at a particular university.'

Female, aged 18, general qualifications route

Figure 7 shows that young people considered intrinsic factors, such as interest and satisfaction, more than extrinsic factors, such as jobs that had the best prospects and pay, when deciding on the job or career they would like to follow in the future.

These findings and the feedback in the qualitative research showed that young people liked to make their own decision about their future career based on what they consider important rather than having their choice dictated for them.

'I just went with what I'm good at and what I enjoy because I'll be doing it for the next 40 years.'

Male, aged 18, vocational qualifications route

'I have always had a passion for caring for others, especially children. It just made sense that I should educate myself in this field as much as possible since I clearly enjoy it.'

Female, aged 17, vocational qualifications route

There were, however, interesting variations in the factors different groups of young people bore in mind when deciding on a type of job and career:

- The older participants seemed to make more pragmatic decisions: more than a third (36 per cent), of 19 year olds considered the job with the best career prospects (compared with 26 per cent of 15-16 year olds).
- Males were more likely to choose a job or career path based on higher pay (23 per cent compared with 16 per cent of females). Females were more likely to choose something based on their skills and qualifications (60 per cent compared with 54 per cent) or something satisfying and worthwhile (55 per cent of females vs 44 per cent of males).
- Young people from BME groups were significantly more influenced by family (17 per cent made their choice based on what their family think vs 3 per cent of white young people) and future career prospects (38 per cent vs 28 per cent).

Figure 8 demonstrates that interest and satisfaction was much less of a factor in choices young people made about the job they eventually took. The top reasons for deciding on the job were given as 'I choose the first job that I was offered' (29 per cent) and 'It was the only job that I was offered' (27 per cent). 'I chose the job based on my skills and qualifications' was only given as a reason by 15 per cent of working young people.

Young people who were NEET made up 12 per cent of the sample. Figure 9 shows they had been engaged in a wide variety of activities since leaving school. The fact that 27 per cent had previously had a job reflects the rates of 'churn' between NEET status and employment, usually in unskilled jobs and jobs without training.

Figure 7: How did you decide what career to take?

Base: all young people in education and training (n=1,261)

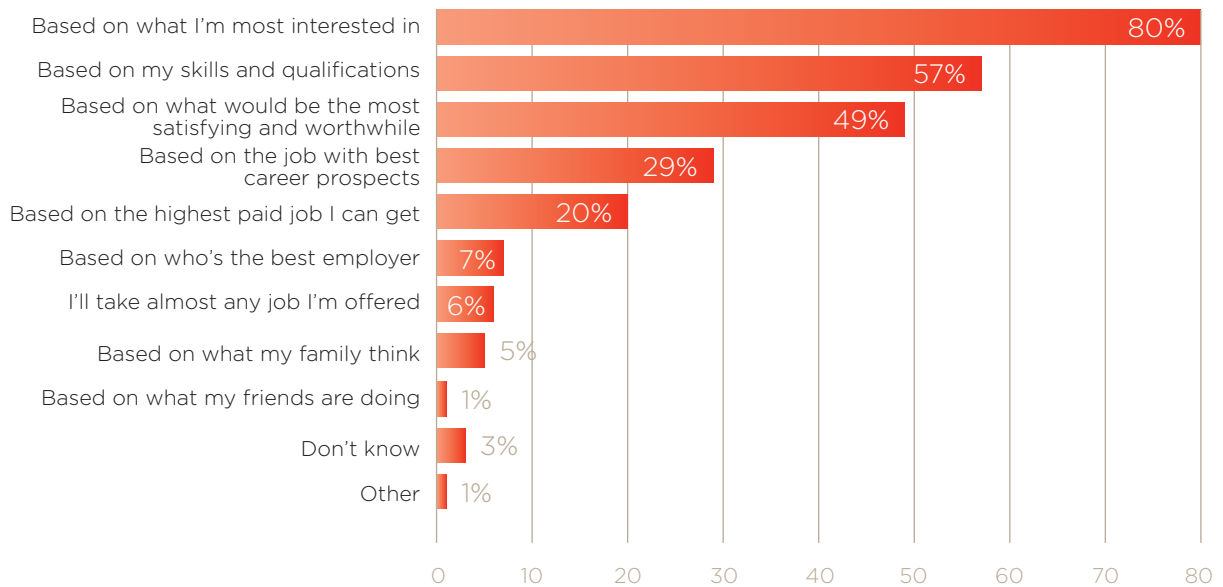


Figure 8: How did you decide on your current job?

Base: all young people who were working (n=252)

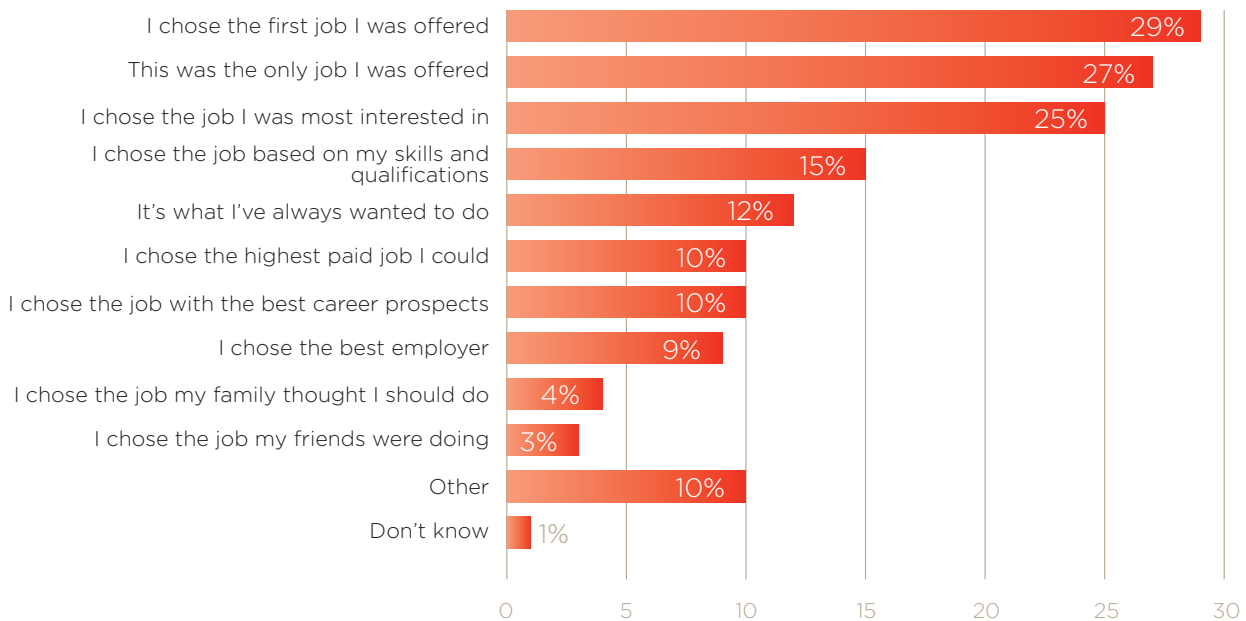
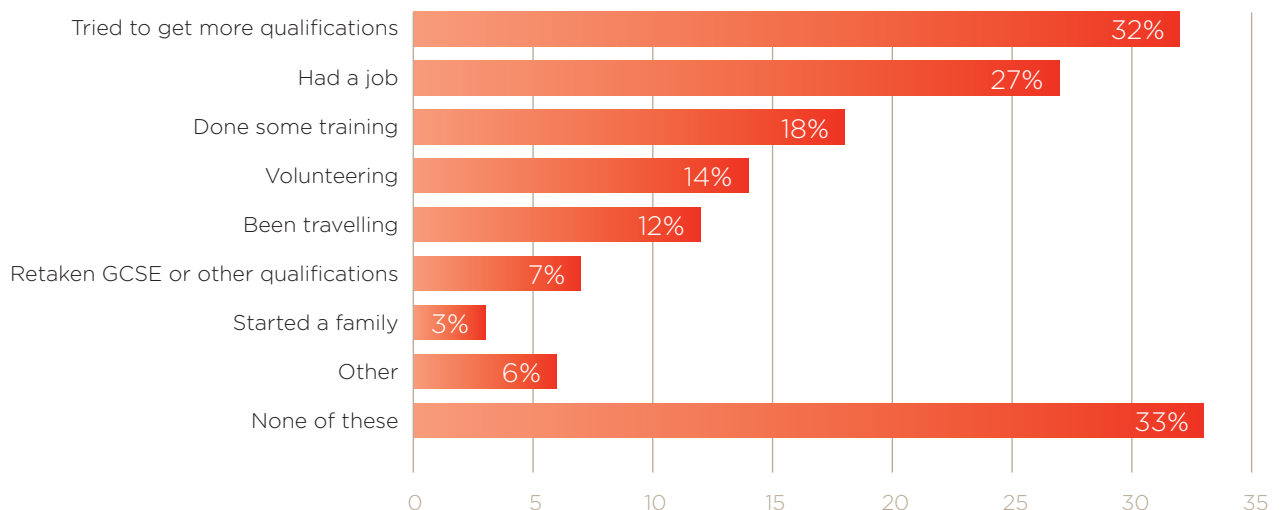


Figure 9: Since leaving school, which of these have you done?

Base: all young people who were NEET (n=188)



Of the young people who were NEET, those who had been on vocational routes were more likely than those on general routes to have done some training (33 per cent vs 11 per cent) and tried to get more qualifications (45 per cent vs 27 per cent). This was potentially due to the links that exist within vocational routes to work-based training.

Figure 10 shows what young people who were NEET hoped to do next. Understandably, most young people who were NEET were focused on getting a job (69 per cent). It is also encouraging that over a third (35 per cent) were hoping to get more qualifications and over a fifth (22 per cent) were hoping to undertake some training.

3.2 The role of information, advice and guidance

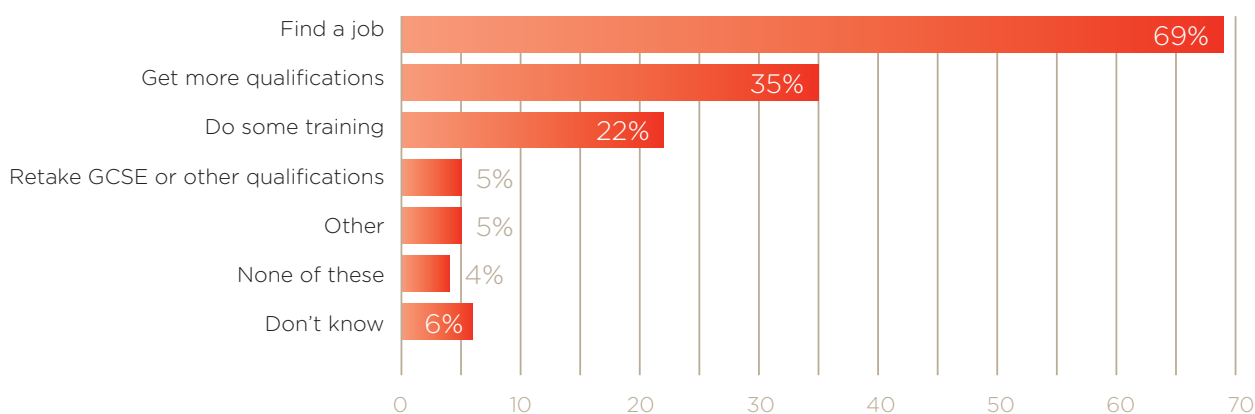
A quarter of young people claimed not to have had any information and advice about their choice of career or qualifications (Figure 11). This rose to 28 per cent of young people on vocational routes compared with 22 per cent of young people on general routes.

The role of the parent was important: just 17 per cent of young people whose parents were confident giving advice on education and employment claimed that they had not received advice from anyone compared with 32 per cent of young people whose parents were not confident.

We asked the young people where they had received their advice from (Figure 12). School career advisers, teachers and parents were the most widely accessed sources of information and advice, each mentioned by around two-thirds of respondents. There were some interesting variations across the sample:

Figure 10: Which of these do you hope to do next?

Base: all young people who were NEET (n=188)



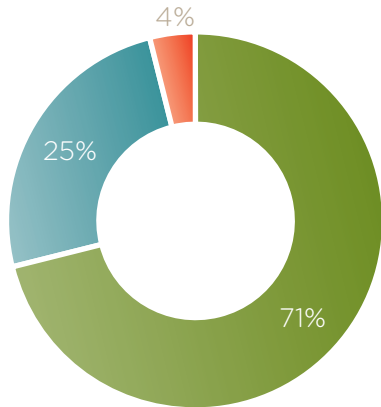


Figure 11: Did you get information and advice from anyone about your choice of career or qualifications?
Base: all young people (n=1,620)

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

- Older respondents more readily accessed teachers and tutors for information and advice (65 per cent of 19 year olds and 62 per cent of 17-18 year olds vs 55 per cent of 15-16 year olds).
- Young people in work were more likely than those studying to get advice from friends (29 per cent vs 21 per cent).
- Young people on a general qualifications route were more likely to get information and advice from parents than those on vocational routes (71 per cent vs 62 per cent)
- Young people whose parents stated they were confident giving advice on employment and education were more likely to get information and advice from parents (75 per cent compared with 49 per cent whose parents felt less confident).

Figure 12: If yes, where did you get that information and advice?
Base: all young people who received information and advice n=1,156)

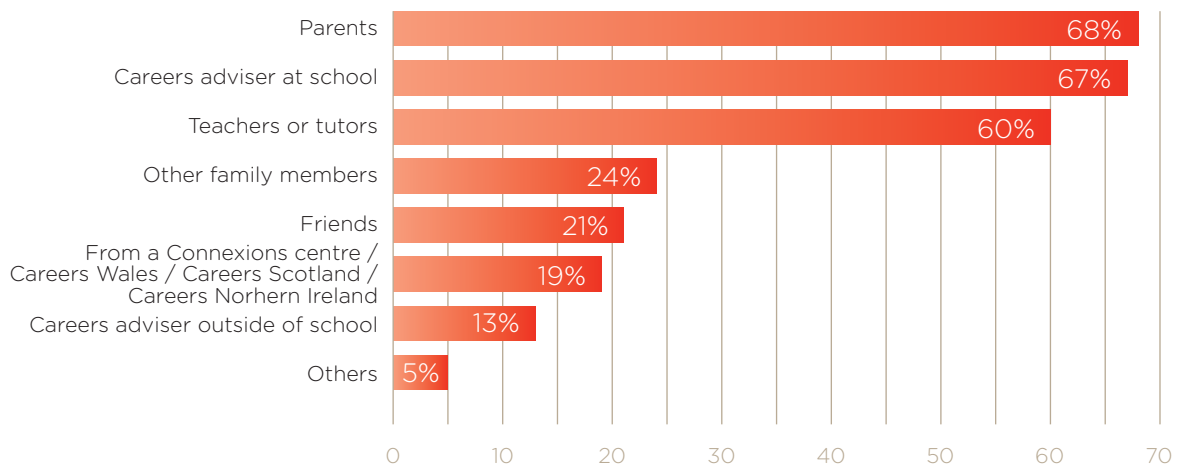


Figure 13 shows that young people considered their parents (33 per cent) and teachers or tutors (25 per cent) to be their most useful source of information and advice.

The findings from the online groups were consistent with the quantitative results, showing that young people often preferred to go to people who they felt knew them and had their interests in mind. The young people interviewed qualitatively trusted their tutors' or teachers' judgement, but felt that their experience could be narrow and lead to a bias for their subject area.

(Referring to subject teachers) 'Aside from pleading with you to do their subjects? They've done the prospective course before, and I trust them to work out from how I perform whether the subjects, course or whatever is right for me. Parents or friends can be a bit idealistic.'
Male, aged 17, general qualifications route

'Some teachers are quite pushy about you doing their subject, rather than what you'd enjoy. They give advice, but I wouldn't say it's impartial, such as guidance counsellors, etc.'

Female, aged 17, vocational qualifications route

Young people saw their parents as useful sources of advice on broader, non-course related issues, such as finance and the value of different qualifications. More generally, the qualitative research participants saw them as being good for support and reassurance. However, they were not trusted on specifics, such as the suitability of a course or a particular job.

(On parents) 'Not so good at advising on careers because they always focus on the salary of what you want to do but good at advising on what to do when I go to uni, like whether to stay at home or not.'

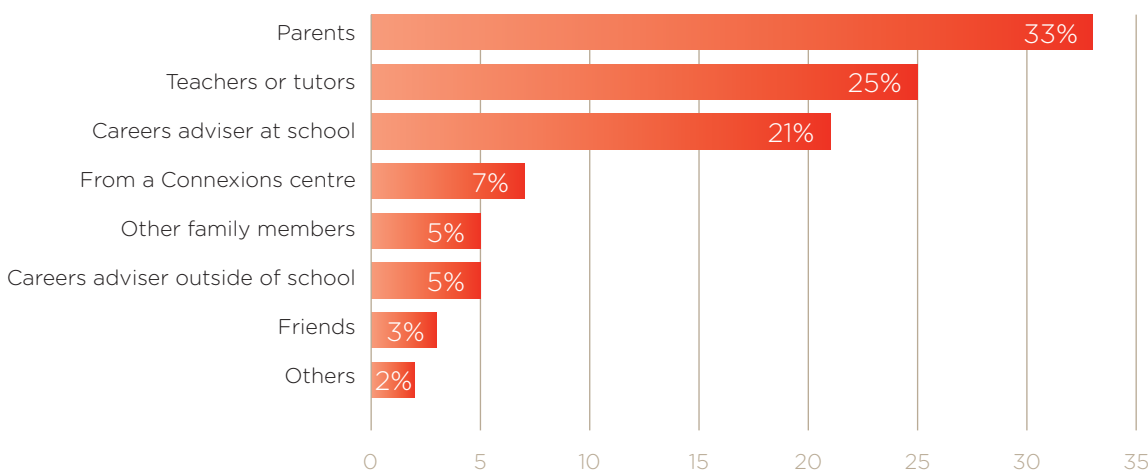
Female, aged 17, vocational qualifications route

(On parents) 'Good at advising me about how valued courses are for unis and what opportunities there are for me, such as studying abroad but not so good at advising me about how to get there/what subjects would be best for that career.'

Female, aged 16, vocational qualifications route

Figure 13: Who gave you the best information and advice?

Base: young people who received information and advice from more than one source (n=936)



The survey responses showed that parents' level of education was a significant factor in how useful young people found their parents' advice. Parents holding a Level 6 qualification were more likely to be considered as the most useful source of advice by their children (45 per cent compared with 30 per cent for parents who had a Level 2 qualification and 28 per cent with a Level 3). This finding was reinforced by the online groups: young people said they trusted their parents most when they had direct experience of a career or qualification route.

(On trusting parents' advice) 'Not a lot. They haven't been to university and don't know anything about A-levels. They pretty much let me do what I want anyway.'

Male, aged 16, general qualifications route

'Not much for my mother, but my dad put himself through university a few years ago, so he knew a lot about which universities had better reputations, though for choices neither really had anything to offer.'

Female, aged 18, general qualifications route

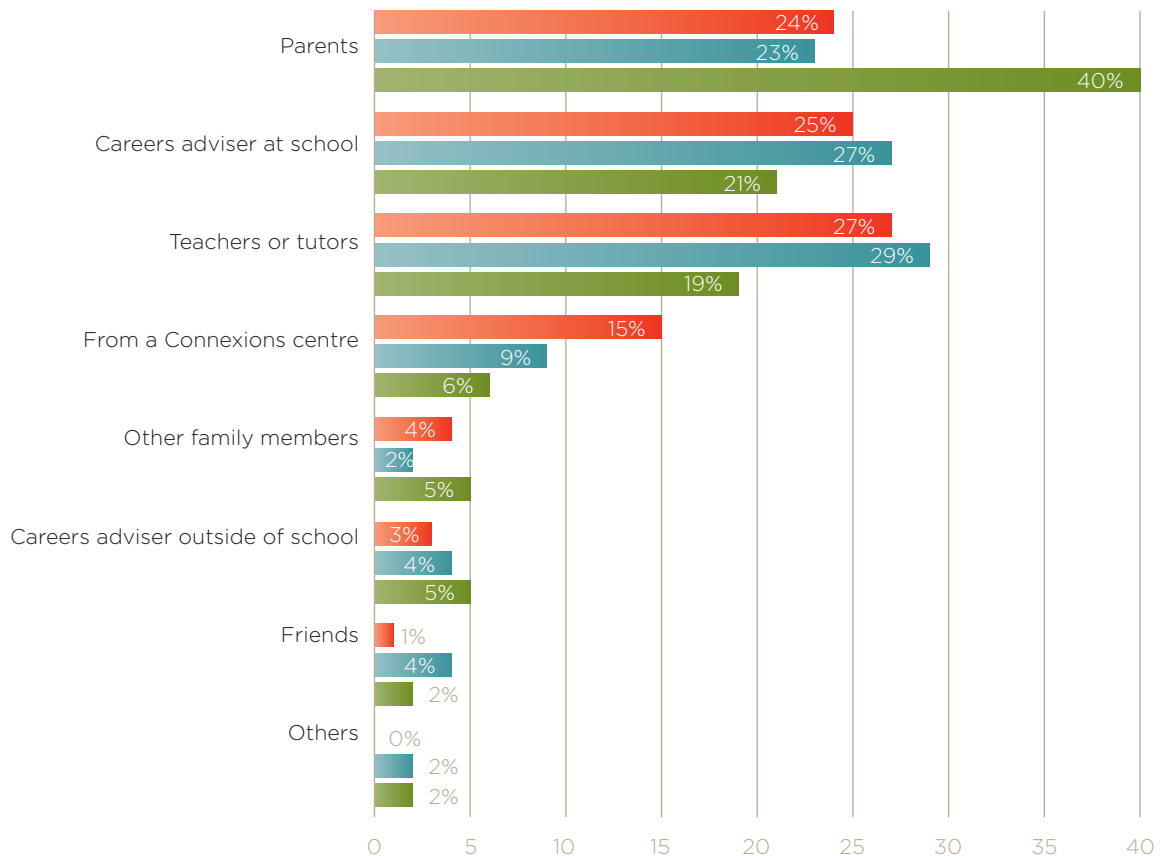
Teachers and careers advisers were more important for young people whose parents were not confident giving advice, as Figure 14 shows.

Figure 14: Who gave the best advice? (segmented by parents' confidence in giving advice about education and employment)

Base: paired sample, young people who received information and advice from more than one source (n=736); with parents who were confident (n=489), unconfident (n=67) or neither (n=180)

Parents' confidence in giving advice about education

- Unconfident
- Neither confident nor unconfident
- Confident



The findings about the relative value of advice from parents and teachers reflect the conclusion from the exploratory study that family and social circumstances often play a role in young people's choices. This demonstrates the need for targeted support particularly for young people whose parents do not, or cannot, offer advice on employment and education.

Just over a third (34 per cent) of young people who were NEET had received advice from a Connexions centre. This was significantly more than any other group other than those in training (which, at 29 per cent, was not a significant difference) and would be expected due to Connexions' role in targeting this group. Young people who were NEET saw the Connexions centre as an important source of advice, with 24 per cent of this group ranking it as the most useful source – second only behind their parents (34 per cent). This shows the value of continued support from advisers for this group.

As Figure 15 indicates, less than half of young people (42 per cent) found it easy to get information and advice linked to their situation and just under a third (30 per cent) found it difficult. Young people who were NEET found it particularly hard (47 per cent said they found it difficult vs 28 per cent of those in education, employment or training). Again parental confidence made a difference: 47 per cent of young people whose parents were confident about providing advice found it easy compared with 27 per cent of young people whose parents were unconfident.

In the online discussion groups, some young people on vocational routes felt that there was not much information available that reflected their circumstances. They tended to be dismissive of the information available and expressed an interest in any advice that could help them pinpoint information relevant to them.

'They all have leaflets with information that is outdated; that's about as good as it gets.'

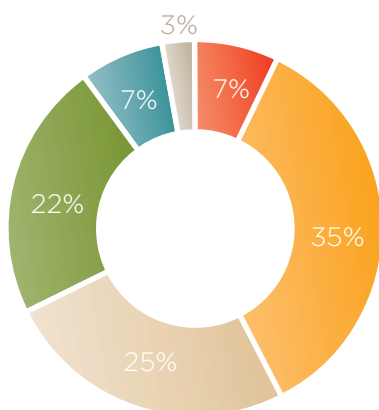
Female, aged 16, vocational qualification route

'There's quite a good section for careers in our school library but it can be a bit overwhelming especially when you don't really have any idea what you want to do.'

Female, aged 17, vocational qualification route

Figure 15: How easy or difficult is it to get careers information and advice that is relevant to you and your particular situation?
Base: all young people (n=1,620)

- Very easy
- Quite easy
- Neither easy nor difficult
- Quite difficult
- Very difficult
- Don't know



In contrast, young people in the online groups who were planning on going to university found it relatively easy to find useful information. However, they often sought verification as they did not always trust the information they found.

'[I did] independent research on the career path I could take with any of my A-level choices, and then used the school careers office for more books and leaflets.'

Female, aged 18, general qualifications route

'A mixture [of information and advice]. I do research courses etc online, but someone's experience tends to be more valuable because it's not biased, they are just telling you their experience, not trying to sell you the course.'

Female, aged 16, vocational qualifications route

They did, however, find it difficult to get information and advice on how their choice of course would affect their future employment or their chances of getting into university.

'I think more advice about how A-level choice may affect which areas you can work in would be more helpful. ...I would be a bit stuck if I didn't choose the right ones.'

Male, aged 18, general qualifications route

Overall, the online groups indicated that students on both general and vocational routes needed advice along with reliable information sources. In the quantitative research there was no significant difference between young people on the general and vocational routes in terms of the ease of finding information or advice relevant to them.

3.3 Parental input

The research identified the importance of parental influence on young people's access to information and advice. This section looks at the parental perspective and how equipped parents feel to offer advice to their children.

Figure 16 demonstrates that parents made choices in their own careers based on their interests (50 per cent) and what they were good at (49 per cent). These responses suggest that parents have had more control over their choices than young people in work (see Figure 8), although just over a quarter (26 per cent) of parents admitted to a fairly random approach.

An unplanned, random approach to career choices was more prevalent among parents of young people who were NEET (38 per cent compared with 24 per cent for parents of young people in education, employment

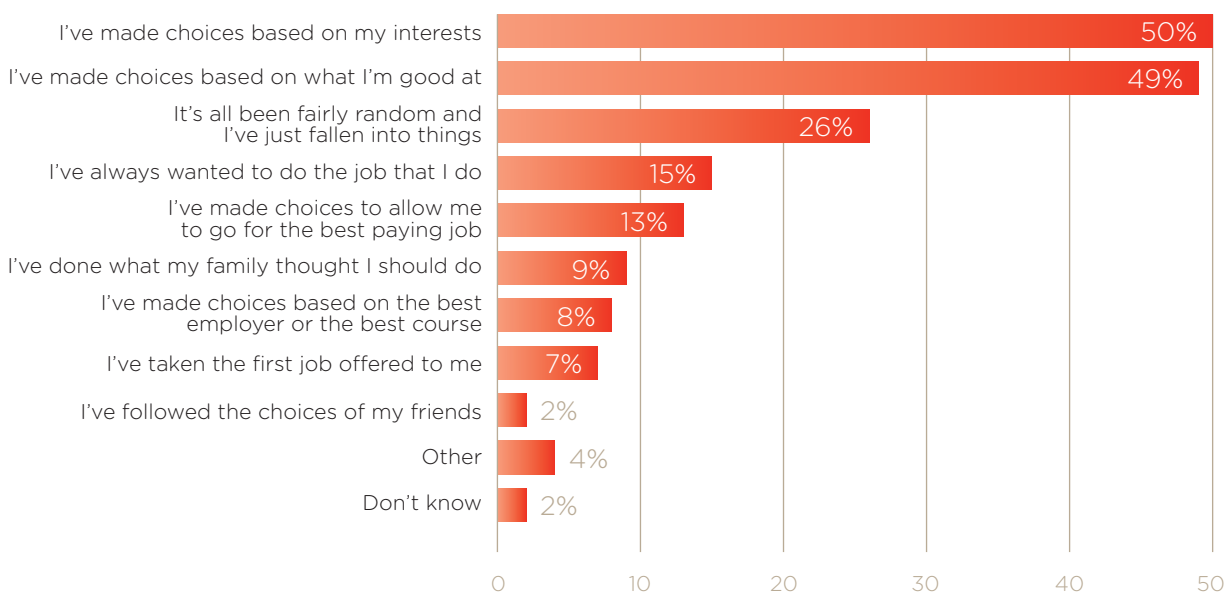
and training) and for parents from white ethnic groups (27 per cent compared with 17 per cent from BME groups).

Figure 17 shows that most parents (57 per cent) would not encourage their children to make the same choices as they made.

The earlier exploratory qualitative research carried out with Nottingham Trent University highlighted the value of parents and siblings acting as role models and inspiring similar choices. However, the fact that less than a third of parents (31 per cent) in this research would encourage their children to make the same choices suggests that many parents did not feel they were in a position to do this. This was particularly the case for parents with a Level 4 qualification or lower: 21 per cent of parents with a Level 2 qualification would encourage their children to make similar choices compared with 44 per cent of parents with a Level 6.

Figure 16: Parents' choice about their careers, including education, training, qualifications and jobs

Base: all parents (n=1,693)



Most parents (60 per cent) were confident about giving their children information and advice about education and employment (Figure 18). However, 38 per cent said they were not confident (11 per cent) or gave a neutral response (27 per cent).

As discussed throughout Section 3.1, parents' confidence had a real impact on young people in terms of their access to information and advice, the choices they make and the availability of support. The responses indicate that parents who were most confident giving information and advice about education and employment were more likely to:

- have a higher level qualification (66 per cent of parents with a Level 6 qualification said they were confident compared with 50 per cent with a Level 2)
- have children who were in employment, education or training (61 per cent were confident, compared with 51 per cent of parents of young people NEET)
- be from BME groups (67 per cent compared with 59 per cent of parents of white young people).

Mothers were less confident than fathers: 14 per cent of mothers said they were unconfident compared with 10 per cent of fathers.

The findings indicate that it is important to empower parents who are less confident to support their children's choices and to ensure that young people have access to careers advisers and pro-active teachers and tutors.

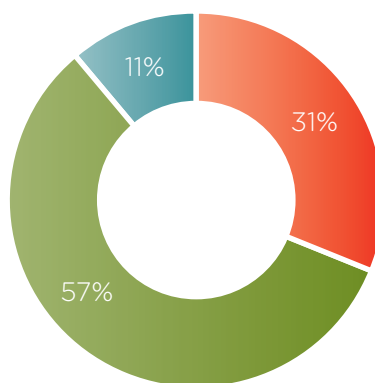


Figure 17: Would you encourage your children to make the same choices as you?

Base: all parents (n=1,693)

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

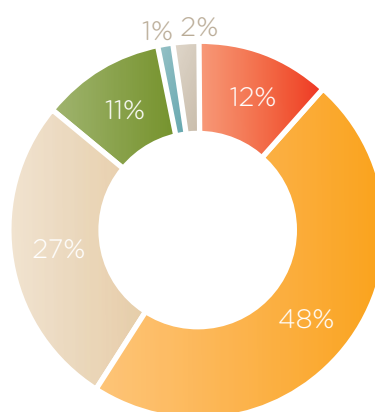


Figure 18: How confident would you feel about giving your children information and advice about education and employment?

Base: all parents (n=1,693)

- Very confident
- Confident
- Neither confident nor unconfident
- Unconfident
- Very unconfident
- Don't know

3.4 Young people's transition into employment

Parents and working young people had very different opinions on how easy it is for young people to adapt to working life. Figure 19 shows that 68 per cent of parents felt it was difficult, compared with only 24 per cent of young people in work.

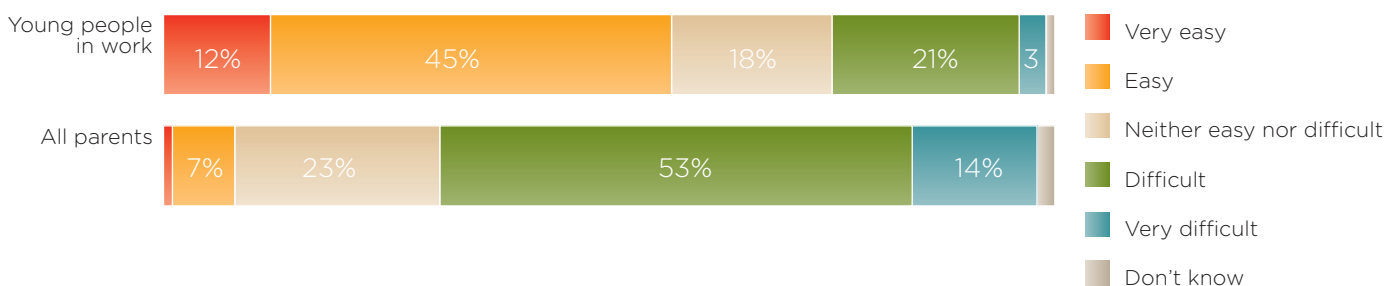
Parents of young people in work were just as likely to see the transition into working life as difficult as those with children in education (65 per cent vs 67 per cent). Parents of young people who were NEET were particularly likely to see it as difficult (78 per cent felt it was difficult compared with 67 per cent of parents of children in education, employment or training).

Parents and young people focused on different aspects when asked an open question about what they consider the hardest thing for young people about adapting to working life, as Figure 20 shows.

Young people in work struggled most with the change in lifestyle with 60 per cent mentioning this as the hardest aspect of adapting to working life. In particular, young people found the hours difficult to get used to (31 per cent said this was the hardest thing) and getting up in time for work (14 per cent). Young people were used to a less structured studying routine and many mentioned finding it difficult to work in eight-hour blocks over a five-day period. They found it tiring and regretted having to forego social commitments to get through the working week. Many parents (35 per cent) concurred that the lifestyle changes might be the hardest thing for young people.

Figure 19: How easy or difficult is it for young people to adapt to working life?

Base: all parents (n=1,693) and young people in work (n=252)



The largest proportion of parents' responses (41 per cent) focused on the difficulty of young people developing the right mindset for work. Some parents felt that education did not prepare young people well for working life, with indiscipline and tolerance of failure given as reasons why young people found it hard to adapt to a structured work environment where they had to take responsibility and follow orders. This is illustrated by the following quotes.

'The education system avoids responsibility for a child's actions if at all possible (non-competitive sports days, lots of pointless 'interest only' subjects, lots of resits). Work requires them to be reliable and productive, failure to perform is treated immediately and harshly.'

Parent, online survey response

'Self-discipline and accepting authority aren't instilled sufficiently at school and so young people think they have the right to express themselves exactly as they please and not to respect authority.'

Parent, online survey response

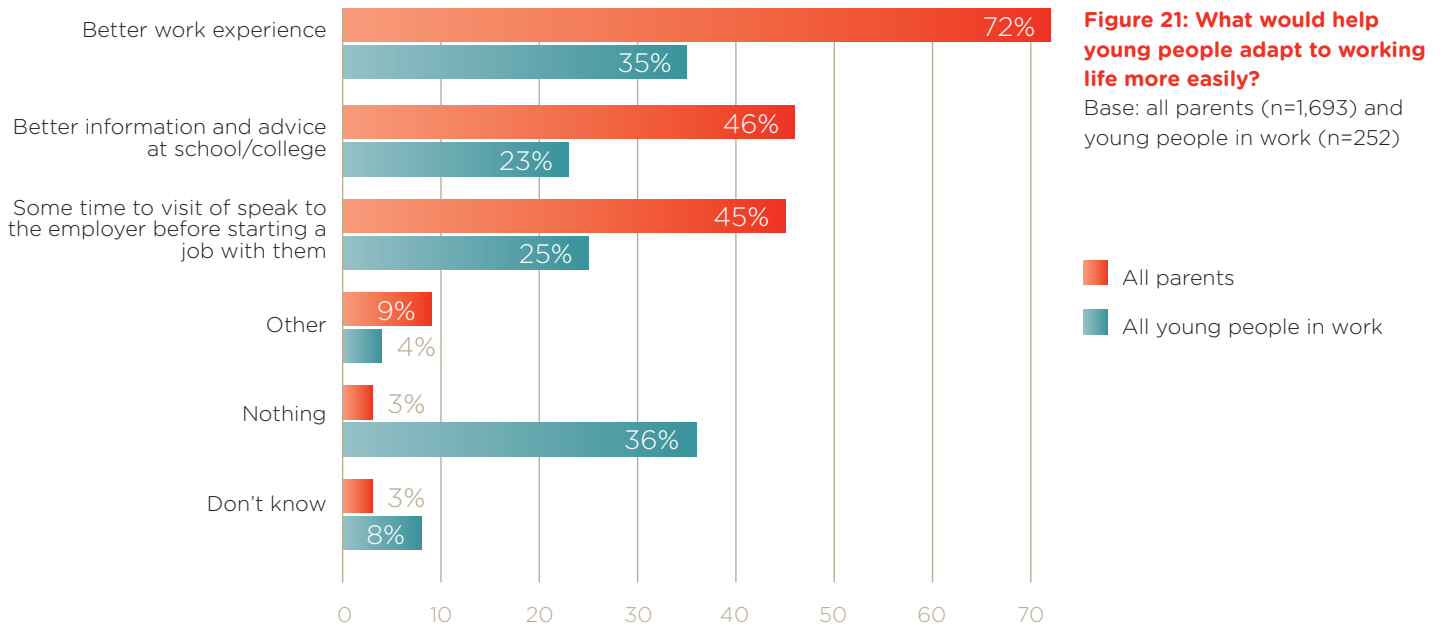
The working young people did not focus on this aspect as much although some acknowledged that it was difficult to act differently in work.

'I have to behave in a different way than when I was at school. I have to act in a more mature and responsible way.'

Working young person, online survey response

Figure 20: What is the hardest thing about adapting to working life? (open question)

	All parents	Young people in work
Adapting to the new lifestyle	35%	60%
Having the right mindset	41%	10%
The workplace	12%	9%
Financial aspects	8%	7%
Acquiring the skills to do the job	5%	5%
Securing work	14%	4%
Negative aspects of the work	3%	2%
Don't know/positive	3%	8%
Base (total making comments)	1,693	251



When asked to choose what factors could help young people adapt better to working life, the most frequently chosen option was better work experience, which was chosen by 72 per cent of parents and 35 per cent of young people who were working (Figure 21). Better information, advice and guidance was also considered useful by just under half (46 per cent) of parents, as was an opportunity to visit employers before starting a job with them (45 per cent).

Working young people were less enthusiastic about the options for easing transition into employment with the highest percentage (36 per cent) feeling that nothing could help.

The young people taking part in the online group discussions felt that their work experience was limited. There was a feeling that there was limited choice of placements and that they were not given much responsibility.

'All I really learned was that work experience people are treated as something like a slave - I was only given tasks that they didn't want to do. I think I spent most of one week laminating in a school.'

Female, aged 17, general qualifications route

'[It could be improved by] being given real responsibility, such as actually having a role in marketing/whatever the field is, rather than being there just to watch and observe.'

Female, aged 17, vocational qualifications route

Despite criticism of their work placements, the qualitative research participants felt they had gained a lot from the experience. Benefits included putting subject knowledge in context, assessing their suitability to particular working environments and developing teamworking skills. For some young people the work experience helped confirm or initiate interest in a particular career path.

'[I learnt] that I want to do something with children/want to help people in my job. I also learnt that older people can be fun, too. I also learnt I can do things on my own.'

Male, aged 18, general qualifications route

'I realised that I may also enjoy something more in retail where I can meet customers on a daily basis.'

Male, aged 18, vocational qualifications route

'I learned about the whole career path that is ahead of me and also the day-to-day life in a law firm (I was told I need to prepare myself for a lot of writing - I'm prepared).'

Male, aged 18, general qualifications route

These comments demonstrate the value of work experience in helping young people know what to expect in the workplace and giving them the chance to see whether careers suit them. The responses to the question about adjusting to work (see Figure 21) suggest that young people would benefit from more experience of workplaces before starting their career.

The participants in the online group discussed the need for more information about specific workplaces or careers. A few wanted specific advice from employers on what they were looking for in prospective employees.

'[I want to know employers'] exact requirements and also if you can move up in the career ladder whilst working for them, for example how to get a promotion, or advance into different fields.'

Female, aged 17, vocational qualifications route

'[I want to know] what they expect from us. There's a lot of mixed messages from employers. Some say they like apprenticeships, some say they want those with university degrees and some say that university graduates lack common sense, etc.'

Male, aged 18, general qualifications route

The views of young people and their parents on the importance of qualifications were closely aligned, with 89 per cent of parents and their children saying it is important for young people to get qualifications (Figure 22).

Young people on general qualifications routes felt more strongly than those on vocational routes about the importance of qualifications (55 per cent saw them as very important compared with 42 per cent of young people on vocational qualifications routes). There was also variation by gender (91 per cent of females felt that qualifications were important vs 87 per cent of males), ethnicity (BME 94 per cent vs white 88 per cent) and education and employment status (91 per cent in education, employment or training vs 72 per cent NEET, and 93 per cent in education vs 85 per cent in employment).

In the online group discussions, students taking A-levels saw their qualifications' primary value as demonstrating achievements to employers and, more specifically, universities. They saw the type of qualification and what it signified as more important than the knowledge and skills gained. In contrast, vocational students focused not so much on the qualification but on what they got out of the course.

'It shows an employer I've got the substance to make it through a challenging course.'

Male, aged 17, general qualifications route

'I think employers appreciate going anywhere beyond GCSE. I went to hand in a CV for a job and they seemed really interested that I took A-levels.'

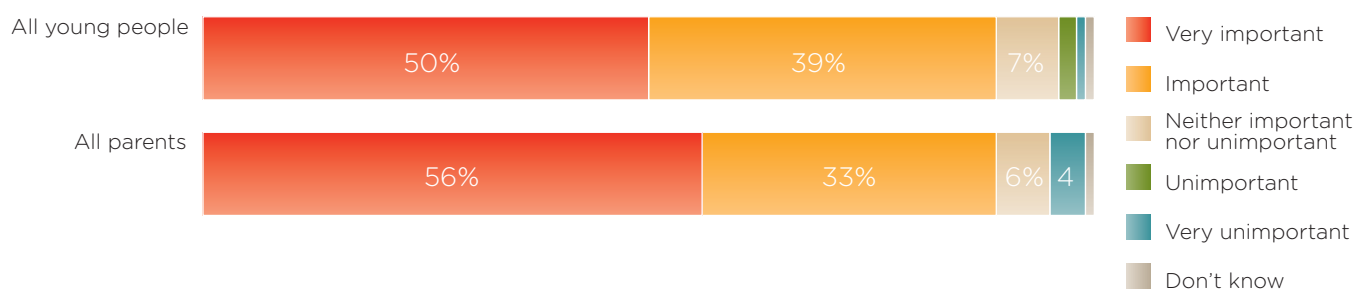
Male, aged 18, general qualifications route

Parents and their children also agreed that it was important to get practical skills for the workplace. Parents felt more strongly than their children about it, with 48 per cent of parents seeing it as very important compared with 31 per cent of their children, as shown in Figure 23.

Young people on a vocational route were more likely to see practical skills as very important compared with those on general qualifications routes (37 per cent vs 29 per cent). This difference was reflected in the views of parents – 53 per cent of parents of children on vocational routes saw practical skills as very important compared with 46 per cent of those whose children were on general qualifications routes.

Figure 22: How important or unimportant is it for young people to get qualifications?

Base: paired young people and parents (n=1,231 each group)



In the group discussions, young people saw practical skills as important but did not always feel they could be developed through their studies. Many would like their courses to remain distinct from employment and felt that specific practical skills should be developed later through work placements and training programmes. Young people did, however, recognise the value of general work skills, such as team work, communication and research skills, and some thought them more useful than knowledge gained through qualifications.

Participants in the survey were asked about the proposed change in the law in England that will require, from 2015,

young people to stay in education or training until the age of 18. This change is also being discussed as a possibility in Scotland and Wales. There were similar levels of awareness of this change between young people (55 per cent were aware) and parents (62 per cent). Young people on vocational pathways were significantly more likely to be aware of this change compared with those on general qualifications routes (62 per cent vs 52 per cent).

In general, parents were more positive than young people about the change with 40 per cent agreeing compared with 28 per cent of young people, as Figure 24 shows.

Figure 23: How important or unimportant is it for young people to get practical skills for the workplace?

Base: paired young people and parents (n=1,231 each group)

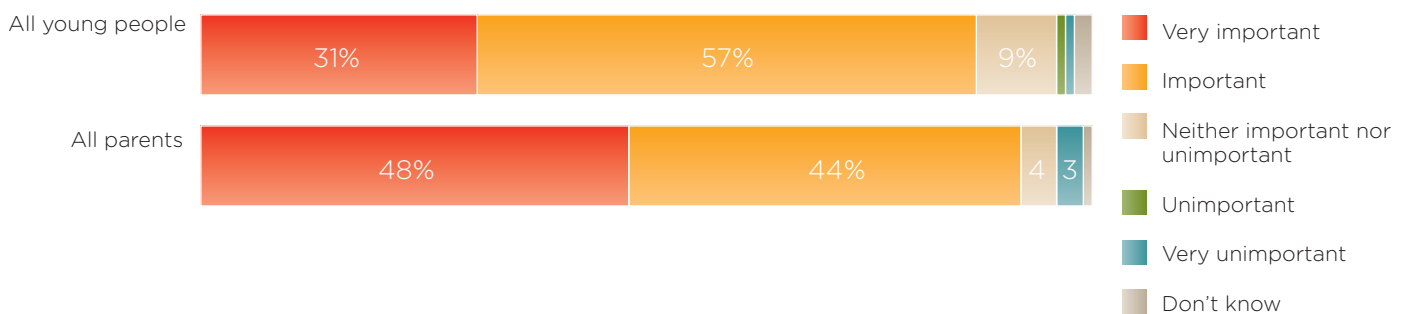


Figure 24: Do you agree that the law on leaving age should be changed?

Base: all parents (n=1,693) and young people (n=1,620)

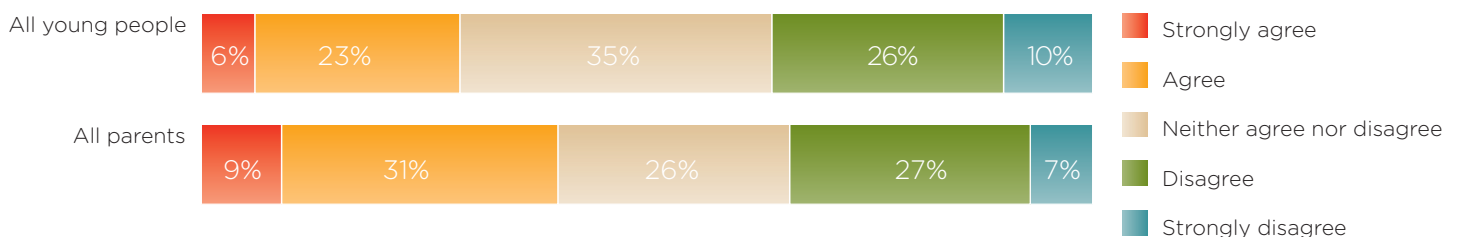


Figure 25: With which, if any, of the following statements do you agree?

Base: all parents (n=1,693) and all young people (n=1,620)

Statement	% agree (all parents)	% agree (young people)
It will force people to stay in school when they don't want to	47%	54%
It's OK as long as they have the right courses on offer	56%	46%
You can't make someone stay in education or training if they don't want to	39%	45%
It won't make any difference to most young people	14%	27%
It will encourage more people to study and get qualifications	31%	26%
I wish I'd had the chance to study or train for longer	15%	4%

There was more support, in line with increased awareness, among parents of children on vocational routes (45 per cent vs 39 per cent of parents whose children were on general qualifications routes) and the young people on vocational routes (32 per cent vs 27 per cent). Young people who were NEET, who will be potentially most affected, were particularly negative: only 16 per cent of them agreed with the change of the law while 50 per cent disagreed (30 per cent of young people in education, employment or training agreed with the change while 34 per cent disagreed).

Respondents' views on the change in the law were divided, although parents and young people responded similarly, as Figure 25 shows. Negative statements, such as *'It will force people to stay in school when they don't want to'* (with which 47 per cent of parents and 54 per cent of young people agreed) had comparable levels of agreement with positive ones, such as *'It's OK as long as they have the right courses on offer'* (56 per cent and 46 per cent).

Only 26 per cent of young people and 31 per cent of parents believed the change in the law would have the desired effect and encourage more people to study and get qualifications.

Responses to these questions reflected the patterns of agreement for the change in the law. 50 per cent of young people on vocational routes thought it was 'OK provided the right courses were on offer' (vs 43 per cent for those on general qualifications routes). Young people who were NEET were sceptical, with 56 per cent (vs 43 per cent for young people in education, employment or training) agreeing that *'You can't make someone stay in education and training if they don't want to'* and only 11 per cent (vs 27 per cent) feeling *'It will encourage more people to study and get qualifications'*.

Key points

Influencing young people's choices

- Young people weighed up a combination of personal preferences and external factors when making decisions about their education and future employment.
- Parents and teachers/tutors played an important role in guiding and supporting young people's choices. Since many parents were not confident or able to provide advice, teachers and advisers need to ensure that young people have access to the information and advice they need.
- Young people need to be better prepared for the realities of working life through work placements or prior contact with employers.
- Young people recognised the value of gaining qualifications and practical skills. They felt qualifications to be particularly important to demonstrate achievement to employers or to universities.

4

Awareness and understanding of vocational education

This section explores how parents and young people understand the term ‘vocational education’

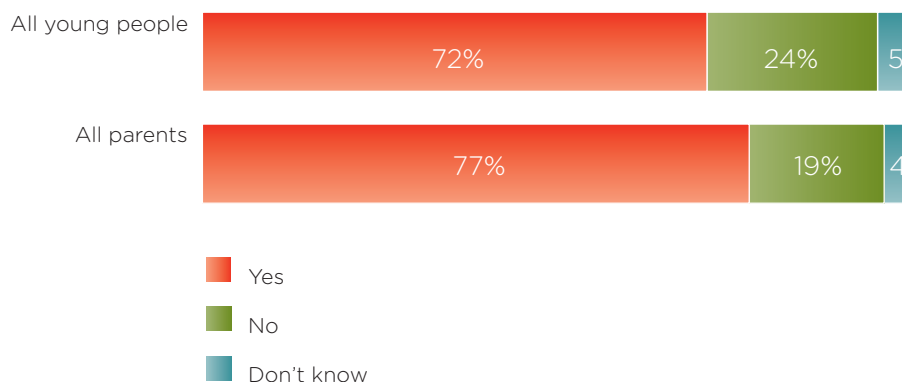
Figure 26 shows levels of awareness of the term ‘vocational education’. It demonstrates that parents and young people have similar levels of awareness, with most claiming to have heard of it.

17-18 and 19 year olds were more likely to have heard of the term (75 per cent and 74 per cent had respectively) than 15-16 year olds (66 per cent). There was no real variation in awareness by ethnicity, gender or educational route among young people. Young people in Scotland (62 per cent awareness) and Wales (61 per cent) were least likely to have heard of vocational education, while those in the East (77 per cent), South (75 per cent) and Midlands (74 per cent) of England were most likely.

Interestingly, parents were more likely to have heard of the term vocational education if they had a child on a general qualifications route (79 per cent had heard of it) compared with those with a child on a vocational route (74 per cent). Parents with a higher level of education were also more likely to have heard of it (91 per cent of those with a level 4 qualification were aware vs 66 per cent of those with a Level 2 qualification).

Figure 26: Have you heard of the term ‘vocational education’?

Base: all parents (n=1,693) and young people (n=1,620)



We also asked what respondents understood by the term vocational education. There was a close alignment between the way parents and young people defined the term ‘vocational education’, although 17 per cent of parents and 23 per cent of young people struggled to define it, as Figure 27 shows.

This was an open question, and responses were clustered into groups of similar responses as follows:

Skills-based learning and training

This group of responses focused on practical and general employment skills.

Linking to a career/trade

These respondents saw vocational qualifications as providing a route into particular trades. Around a quarter of parents and one-eighth of young people’s responses in this category referenced particular trades. These tended to be manual ones with hairdressing, building, plumbing, bricklaying, childcare, nursing and beauty mentioned most frequently.

Teaching and learning style

These responses referred to practical learning or learning while doing, with a different assessment style and an emphasis on coursework.

	Parents	Young people
Skills-based learning and training	36%	31%
Linking to a career/trade	29%	23%
Teaching and learning style	17%	18%
Non-traditional/less academic route	8%	5%
Reference to qualification name	5%	6%
Negative comparison made to general qualifications	3%	2%
Preparation for work	3%	2%
Don’t know/unsure	17%	23%

Figure 27: What does the term ‘vocational education’ mean to you? (open-ended question)

Base: all parents (n=1,693) and all young people (n=1,618)

A non-traditional/less academic route

These comments emphasised the differences between vocational and 'academic' learning. Vocational education was described by these participants as more practical/non-academic/non-traditional.

In the qualitative research, many of the young people on general qualifications routes admitted that they knew very little about vocational qualifications, had not made an effort to find out about them, and they did not consider them a viable option.

'I don't really know anything about them except for they are never portrayed as being as valuable for getting into university as Highers are.'

Female, aged 18, general qualifications route

'I haven't been through them and I barely know anything about them so, no, I'd recommend A-levels.'

Male, aged 18, general qualifications route

A-level students in the online groups saw vocational qualifications as linking to particular industries rather than university courses. They associated vocational education with a practical learning style and with perceived lower-level occupations, and felt that this style of learning would not suit them.

'Academia is divided into disciplines, various sectors, as in psychology, where vocational is like hairdressing - nothing wrong with it, but you can't study hair and work in a huge office, hospital or research.'

Female, aged 18, general qualifications route

'I always knew that I learned better in an academic environment, as opposed to 'hands on'. I also knew that A-levels were looked upon better by universities than vocational courses.'

Female, aged 18, general qualifications route

Young people on both vocational and general qualifications routes saw vocational study as narrower than A-levels. Those studying general qualifications felt that taking a vocational course would have limited their options and committed them to working in a particular industry. They saw knowledge and skills gained through general qualifications as more transferable. Students on vocational qualifications routes tended to agree but felt that the occupational focus of vocational qualifications was actually a strength.

'If you know what career you want to do in the future, then I feel vocational is the way to go because it's more specific.'

Female aged 17, vocational qualifications route

'It gives you an advanced knowledge on a subject that probably won't help you as much [in the workplace], although languages will definitely be useful when applying for a job. However, the majority of jobs out there are specific and probably train you before you start, so A-levels really don't have much to do with it.'

Male, aged 17, general qualifications route

The majority of parents (60 per cent, see Figure 18) felt confident advising their children about education and employment, however only 37 per cent of parents were confident giving their children information and advice about vocational qualifications (Figure 28). The fact that parents find it more difficult to offer support and advice on vocational education might mean they are unlikely to advise their children to pursue vocational qualifications.

Parents' confidence about advising on vocational qualifications did not differ by age of child, ethnicity or educational level

of the parent. Levels of confidence were higher among parents with a child in employment (44 per cent) or training (51 per cent), compared with those with a child in education (36 per cent).

Parents of children on vocational routes were more confident than parents of children on general qualifications routes about providing information and advice (43 per cent vs 34 per cent said they were confident). However, even in this group, a higher proportion (60 per cent) were confident about advising on education and employment in general than about vocational qualifications (43 per cent).

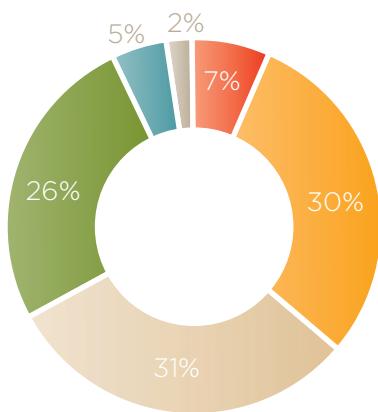


Figure 28: How confident would you feel about giving your children information and advice about vocational qualifications, including apprenticeships?

Base: All parents (n=1,693)

- Very confident
- Confident
- Neither confident nor unconfident
- Unconfident
- Very unconfident
- Don't know

Key points

Awareness and understanding of vocational qualifications

- High levels of awareness of the term ‘vocational education’ did not reflect a good understanding of what it involved.
- Vocational education was seen as a skills-based and practical approach to learning. Qualifications were felt to be designed to provide a way into generally manual trades. Young people felt that taking vocational courses would narrow the employment and education options open to them.
- On the whole, parents lacked the confidence to advise their children on vocational qualifications, despite high levels of confidence advising on education and employment. This suggests that parents are not able to support their children taking vocational options as effectively as for other routes.
- Low levels of parental confidence make it particularly important that timely information and advice are provided for young people considering vocational options.

5

Attitudes to, and take-up of, vocational qualifications

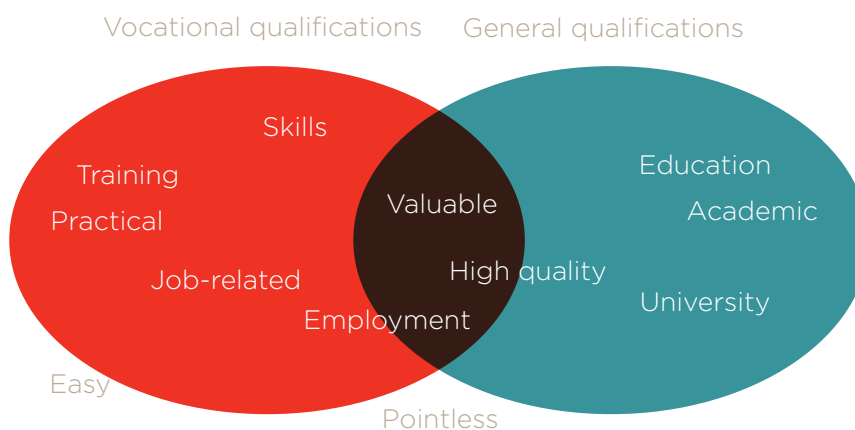
This section examines how vocational qualifications are perceived and what encourages young people to choose them.

Survey respondents were provided with a list of words and asked to associate them with either vocational or general qualifications. Parents' associations with vocational qualifications were slightly more positive than their children's but, on the whole, young people's views were more or less in line with their parents'. For example, the words *skills*, *job-related*, *training* and *practical* were all associated with vocational qualifications by 89 to 92 per cent of both parents and young people in the paired surveys. Similarly, *education*, *academic* and *university* were associated with general qualifications by 88 to 92 per cent of parents and young people.

Valuable was associated with both general (85 per cent) and vocational (82 per cent) qualifications by parents but young people tended to associate *valuable* with general (83 per cent) more strongly than vocational (74 per cent) qualifications.

Figure 29 shows the words most strongly associated with each pathway, showing that the two types of qualifications were seen as having distinct strengths: vocational qualifications were strongly associated with skills development and job-related training, while general qualifications were linked to higher education. Both were seen as *valuable* and neither as *pointless*.

Figure 29: Parents' and young people's associations with vocational qualifications (VQs) and general qualifications (GQs)



Some of the more negative associations with vocational qualifications that were uncovered in the group discussions were reflected in the relatively low numbers of young people associating vocational qualifications with *high quality* (56 per cent vs 80 per cent who saw general qualifications as *high quality*) and the relatively high proportion seeing them as *easy* (35 per cent vs 17 per cent for general qualifications).

In the online groups, young people admitted that vocational qualifications often had a stigma and were seen to be aimed at less intelligent students. People taking up vocational qualifications could be derided as a result. This negative view of vocational qualifications was felt to be endemic within the education system.

'This may sound ridiculous, but where I'm from originally, vocational courses were sort of 'frowned upon', so I just grew up with thinking it's either university or nothing.'

Female, aged 18, general qualifications route

'Because there is always going to be prejudice within the educational system, and that seems to be prejudice against vocational education.'

Female, aged 18, general qualifications route

This was considered unfair by vocational students who saw their course as demanding and requiring highly developed skills.

'People think BTECs are for those who aren't clever enough for regular GCSEs, but that's not true, it's just a different way of working, for people with different needs.'

Female, aged 17, vocational qualifications route

There were some significant differences between the associations made by the two groups of young people, as highlighted in Figure 30.

Young people on general qualifications routes were as likely as their peers on vocational qualifications routes to associate general qualifications with *skills, training, employment, job-related* and *practical* aspects.

However, young people on vocational qualifications routes were more likely to associate vocational qualifications with the terms *high quality, academic* and *university*.

'Vocational courses are looked upon as non-intellectual compared with A-levels, (but) the A-level course has no coursework whilst the applied had over 120 pages and the exams were almost identical.'

Male, aged 17, vocational qualifications route

Young people on vocational qualifications routes associated vocational qualifications more with employment than they did general qualifications (83 per cent vs 64 per cent), reflecting their perception that vocational qualifications are job-related and practical.

'I think I will be very prepared since I am also going to do a level 3 [qualification] which will give me even more experience and knowledge. After this I feel I will be very capable in the working environment.'

Female, aged 17, vocational qualifications route

Figure 30: Words associated with general and vocational qualifications by young people on different pathways

Bases: young people on general qualifications route (n=945) and vocational qualifications route (n=581)
 Figures in bold indicate statistically significant differences between the views of young people on vocational and general qualifications routes.

	% of young people associating each word with general qualifications		% of young people associating each word with vocational qualifications	
	Young people on VQ route	Young people on GQ route	Young people on VQ route	Young people on GQ route
Most strongly associated with VQs				
Training	33	33	88	92
Practical	31	30	88	91
Skills	47	49	88	90
Job-related	41	42	88	89
Most strongly associated with GQs				
Education	91	92	60	52
Academic	88	92	31	22
University	86	91	38	26
Associated equally with both				
High quality	78	83	64	52
Employment	64	70	83	83
Valuable	78	87	76	72
Not strongly associated with either				
Easy	19	16	36	37
Pointless	15	10	17	15

As previously discussed, young people taking A-levels did not see their qualifications as providing a direct link to employment. University was more an immediate priority for these students.

'A-levels, it seemed to me, were more about studying and acquiring the knowledge to get into university – learning about parametric equations, chances are, won't help me at a wide variety of jobs.'

Female, aged 18, general qualifications route

Young people on vocational qualifications routes found it easier than those on general qualifications routes to identify skills they had gained from their courses that might benefit them in the workplace.

'With the BTEC we did a whole business unit which gave us knowledge of how a company is run, what skills you need – punctuality, teamwork, etc.'

Female, aged 18, vocational qualifications route

'Very [useful], as I learnt the laws of business, then had some experience of setting up and running our own business.'

Male, aged 18, vocational qualifications route

'I get the opportunity to gain knowledge in many aspects of my course – not just the obvious. For example, first aid and health and safety are also there for me to learn.'

Female, aged 18, vocational qualifications route

Some of the students on vocational routes would have liked more opportunity to apply their skills in the workplace.

'It's helped me in that the course did outline requirements of certain jobs – eg what we would need to know, but it was all theoretical and we never had any real life experience of it which would be more helpful.'

Female, aged 18, vocational qualifications route

While young people on vocational routes tended to be positive about their vocational qualifications, they were also aware that vocational qualifications were not always held in the same regard as general qualifications, as Figure 31 demonstrates.

Less than half of students on vocational routes (48 per cent) agreed that general and vocational qualifications were as valuable as each other and that vocational qualifications were valued by people their age, while 38 per cent agreed that 'You need A-levels/Highers to get anywhere these days' and only 22 per cent agreed that 'Employers prefer vocational qualifications to A-levels'. Young people on vocational routes appeared uncertain about their employment prospects and recognised that employers might prefer qualifications seen as more academic. This evidence challenges the finding in the exploratory study that students on vocational options could over-estimate their chances of getting a job following the completion of their course.

The differences between the views of young people on general qualifications routes and those on vocational routes are all statistically significant, and reveal that the young people on vocational routes value vocational qualifications more than young people on general qualifications routes do and vice-versa.

Parents and children appeared to have broadly similar views, with parents being slightly more positive about vocational qualifications, as shown in Figure 32.

Figure 31: Here are some things that people say about vocational qualifications. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Bases: young people on general qualifications route (n=945) and vocational qualifications route (n=581)

	% of young people agreeing with each statement	
	Young people on general route	Young people on vocational route
Universities prefer A-levels/Highers rather than vocational qualifications	78	66
Vocational qualifications give you the knowledge and skills you need to do a job	69	75
You need A-levels/ Scottish Highers to get anywhere these days	56	38
You only do vocational qualifications if you can't do A-levels/Highers	35	25
Vocational qualifications are as valuable as A-levels/Highers	34	48
Vocational qualifications are valued by people my age	31	48
Employers prefer vocational qualifications to A-levels/Highers	15	22
Vocational qualifications are better than A-levels /Highers for someone like me	14	34

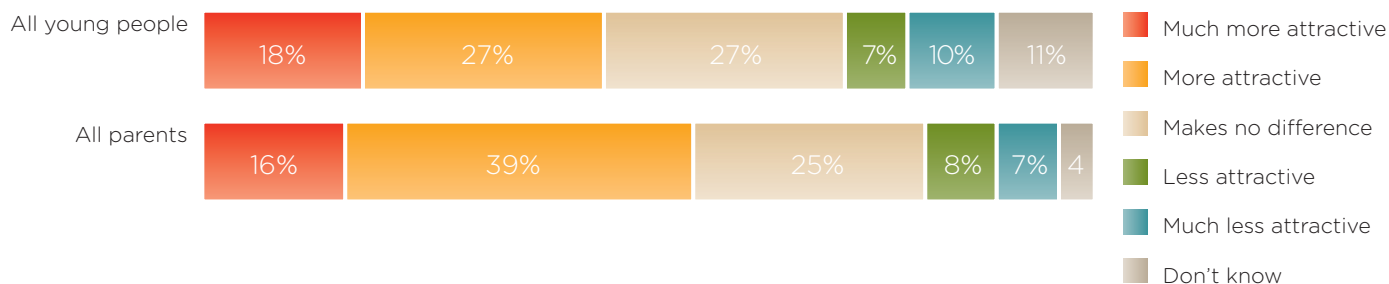
Figure 32: Paired young people and parents' views about vocational qualifications.

Base: paired young people and parents (n=1,231 each group)

	% of participants agreeing with each statement	
	Parents	Young people
Universities prefer A-levels/Highers rather than vocational qualifications	78	74
Vocational qualifications give you the knowledge and skills you need to do a job	78	71
You need A-levels/Scottish Highers to get anywhere these days	43	49
You only do vocational qualifications if you can't do A-levels/Highers	26	34
Vocational qualifications are as valuable as A-levels/Highers	49	39
Employers prefer vocational qualifications to A-levels/Highers	16	18
Vocational qualifications are better than A-levels /Highers for someone like my child/me	26	24

Figure 33: Does the rise in tuition fees make vocational qualifications more attractive?

Base: paired young people and parents, England only, (n=1,044 for each group)



Parents of children on vocational qualifications routes were more positive about vocational qualifications than were parents of children taking general qualifications. This was in line with their children's views. Ethnicity and the parents' level of education also made a difference in their attitudes, as follows.

- 54 per cent of parents from BME groups agreed that *'You need A-levels/Highers to get anywhere'*, compared with 41 per cent of parents from white ethnic groups.
- 35 per cent of parents from BME groups also agreed that *'You only do vocational qualifications if you can't do A-levels/Highers'* (vs 24 per cent of parents from white groups).
- Just 21 per cent of parents with a Level 6 qualification agreed that vocational qualifications were better for someone like their child (compared with 29 per cent of those with a Level 2 qualification).
- 38 per cent of parents with a Level 4 qualification disagreed that *'Employers prefer vocational qualifications to A-levels/Highers'* (vs 27 per cent of parents with a Level 2 qualification).

Respondents in England were asked whether the planned increase in tuition fees would make vocational qualifications more attractive. They were reminded that universities could charge up to £9,000 per year from 2012 for an undergraduate degree course, and that most universities had chosen to charge the maximum amount or close to it. Figure 33 shows that 55 per cent of parents and 45 per cent of their children agreed that these higher tuition fees made vocational qualifications more attractive. There was particularly strong agreement among groups of parents who had demonstrated a preference for general qualifications in earlier questions. For example:

- 66 per cent of parents from BME groups agreed that the rise in tuition fees made vocational qualifications more attractive (vs 53 per cent of white parents)
- 59 per cent of parents of young people on general qualifications routes agreed (vs 51 per cent of parents of vocational students)
- 62 per cent of parents with a Level 6 qualification agreed (compared with 47 per cent of parents with a Level 2).

Young people in the online discussion groups had just finished their A-levels and other qualifications and were focused on getting into university before the tuition fees rise took effect. Many had planned to go to university for a while and the funding changes increased the pressure on them to achieve their goal quickly but did not put them off.

'To be honest, it just made me feel a bit more stressed about getting in this year. I think we could cope, but either way I would still go to uni and deal with the consequences AFTER getting my degree.'

Female, aged 18, general qualifications route

Only one of the students in the general qualifications group looked at vocational and training options as an alternative to going to university.

'It made me consider apprenticeships if I don't get into uni this year. However, I think I would go to uni anyway since you pay off fees gradually.'

Male, aged 18, general qualifications route

The economic climate and the clear link to employment emerged as a reason for students on general qualifications routes to reconsider their views of vocational qualifications.

'I think at GCSE I wanted to avoid [vocational qualifications] like the plague because they weren't 'academically challenging enough'. But I think as the recession isn't getting any better, I think many employers are regarding vocational qualifications in a better light.'

Female, aged 18, general qualifications route

'My sister took a vocational qualification and she's now a nursery nurse and she's progressed from Level 2 to Level 3 in her area, all paid for by her employer.'

Male, aged 18, general qualifications route

Young people had different reasons for choosing their particular route of study, as Figure 34 (overleaf) shows. Students on general routes were mainly influenced by the desire to go to university (41 per cent), and advice from teachers (37 per cent) and parents (35 per cent). There was a different focus in the reasons vocational students gave for choosing the vocational route, with just under a third (30 per cent) saying they were more suited to practical work and 27 per cent considering it the best choice for getting work.

Information and advice played less of a role for vocational students than those on general qualifications routes. Only 23 per cent of students considered advice from teachers (vs 37 per cent of students on general routes) and 19 per cent took advice from parents (vs 35 per cent).

Younger people on vocational routes were more likely to consider advice from teachers (37 per cent of 15-16 year olds vs 21 per cent of 17-18 year olds and 13 per cent of 19 year olds). 30 per cent of young people on vocational routes whose parents were confident advising on vocational options considered parental advice when choosing their course (vs 15 per cent for young people whose parents were not confident).

In the online discussion groups, young people on both pathways said they chose their qualifications after considering the next step and their likely chance of success.

Figure 34: Why did you choose a vocational rather than academic course/an academic rather than a vocational course?

Base: all young people on a general qualifications route (n=1,414) and those on a vocational qualifications route (n=581)

	% of young people agreeing with each statement	
	Young people on general route	Young people on vocational route
I thought it was the best choice for getting to university	41	9
Advice from teachers	37	23
Advice from parents	35	19
I thought it was the best choice for getting work	31	27
I'm better at academic than practical work /practical than academic work	21	30
I don't think a vocational course/A-levels would suit me	16	8
There isn't an vocational course/A-level in the subject I wanted	14	10
I didn't really think about it	12	11
Don't think a vocational course/ A-levels are as valuable	11	3
Wasn't told about vocational options/A-levels	8	1
I think vocational courses/A-levels are too difficult for me	1	5
Other reason	6	14
Don't know	10	15

'I chose my specific BTECs rather than a GCSE equivalent because for that certain field, which is performing arts, vocational learning is better than academic – because it's not theoretical, it's practical, which is what the performing arts business is like.'

Female, aged 18, vocational qualifications route

Students with university in mind felt that vocational qualifications would have limited the options for going to university or for changing direction in the future.

'[I considered vocational options]...but in the end I didn't take it because I didn't want to be 'pigeon holed' into a specific career.'

Male, aged 17, general qualifications route

Key points

Attitudes to, and take up of, vocational qualifications

- Links to employment, skills and practical working were seen as real strengths of vocational qualifications. Young people on general qualifications routes and their parents questioned the value of vocational qualifications in enabling access to university and higher skilled jobs. Vocational qualifications were associated with particular industry sectors and skill sets. Young people saw them as being for people who had already decided on a particular career path.
- Low levels of involvement of teachers and parents in young people's choice of vocational qualification meant that young people relied instead on their own judgement of the course's suitability.
- The quantitative and qualitative findings suggest that parents and teachers did not challenge young people's perceptions of vocational qualifications. As a result, relatively few young people on general qualifications routes had actively considered vocational options.
- A campaign challenging young people's and parents' perceptions of vocational qualifications is needed to encourage young people to assess their suitability more objectively.

6

Encouraging take-up of vocational options

This final section looks at what is needed to enable young people to take a more informed approach to choosing vocational qualifications.

Survey participants felt that a range of measures would help promote vocational options (Figure 35). Work experience, information and advice, information from employers and taster sessions were all picked out by just over half the sample of parents. These aspects were also considered important by significant numbers of young people, and a quarter (25 per cent) also felt it would help to meet students already pursuing vocational courses. Despite recognition that vocational qualifications were often misunderstood and poorly perceived, there was less support for positive publicity as a way of promoting vocational options (only 14 per cent of young people selected this option).

Direct experience of a workplace or a particular course emerged in the qualitative research as particularly important for young people considering vocational options. Young people felt that vocational qualifications were very specific and were most valuable for people who were certain about the career they wanted to pursue. The findings from the online survey reinforced this point: 67 per cent of young people on vocational qualifications routes had decided on a career path compared with 58 per cent of young people on general qualifications routes.

Young people in the online discussion groups wanted to learn more about the range of options available for vocational qualifications, and the implications in terms of progression onto university and employment.

'More awareness that universities do value them and accept them.'

Female, aged 18, vocational qualifications route

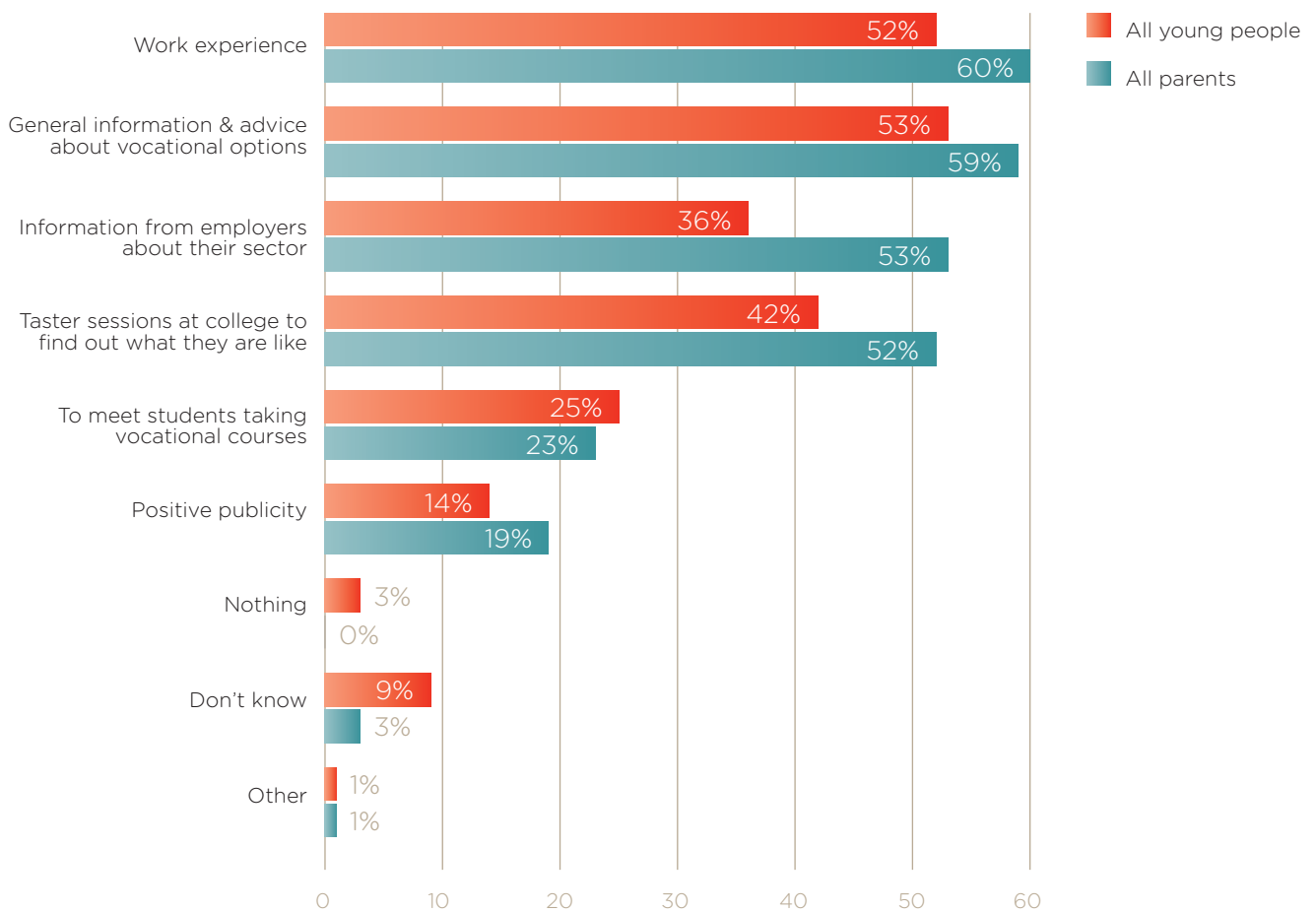
'Information on where those courses will get you, eg what jobs you can get with a vocational qualification.'

Female, aged 18, vocational qualifications route

The fact that students on vocational routes were unsure how their qualifications would be accepted by employers and universities suggests that there is currently a dearth of information and advice.

Figure 35: What would help raise understanding and choice of vocational options?

Base: all young people (n=1,620) and parents (n=1,693)



Students on general qualifications routes wanted information and advice that would enable them to properly weigh up the value and suitability of vocational qualifications.

'More information about them in general as well as teachers actually weighing up the pros and cons of it.'

Female, aged 18, general qualifications route

'More positive publicity about them and the chance to maybe have a day studying a vocational course to see what is involved and whether it is the right choice for you.'

Male, aged 17, general qualifications route

Ultimately, for these students, they needed to know that vocational qualifications would enable them to go to university and would not restrict their options.

Key points

Encouraging take-up of vocational options

- Survey participants tended to favour measures that would enable young people to more accurately gauge their interest in and suitability for vocational qualifications, as well as their prospects should they choose to take them.
- Job placements and taster sessions would enable young people to see if they would take to a particular industry or style of learning before committing.
- Young people felt that there was limited information about how vocational courses linked to career routes and university courses. This made it difficult for them to make informed choices about qualifications.
- Information and advice is needed that emphasises the transferability of skills and knowledge gained through vocational qualifications and the routes they open up for further study. This would help address young people's concerns about the limitations of vocational options.

7

Recommendations

There needs to be an informed debate on the role of education in preparing young people for working life.

Much of the current debate focuses on the skills of young people entering the workplace with particular concern expressed about numeracy and literacy skills. The evidence from this research, however, suggests the role of education in helping young people develop the right characteristics, as well as skills, for the workplace also needs to be considered. Many parents felt that young people left school and college ill-equipped for the demands of workplace. Young people were felt to struggle to adapt, since they were not used to taking responsibility for completing tasks to a required standard and working in a structured way within a team.

The requirement for young people to stay in some form of education or training until the age of 18 from 2015 offers an opportunity to ensure young people enter the workplace with the right skills, mindset and levels of maturity. At the moment, the majority of parents and young people do not support this change in the law and struggle to see the benefits. There is, as a result, an opportunity for a debate on how this additional time can be usefully used.

This should include:

- how courses can link better to the workplace
- how assessment should focus on young people's ability to work independently
- how work experience and input from employers can expose young people to the realities of the workplace prior to starting employment.

Publicity campaigns should challenge negative perceptions of vocational education and emphasise its value.

The research showed that vocational education was perceived as playing a narrow role preparing young people for a career in, mostly blue collar, trades. General qualifications were regarded as the better option for young people who were either aiming for university or had not decided on a particular career path.

Rising university tuition fees were felt by parents to make vocational courses more appealing. However, this is likely to result in more young people taking vocational qualifications only if they are considered to extend rather than limit their employment options. Young people and parents need:

- positive evidence of the value universities and employers place on vocational qualifications
- to be convinced that vocational education will suit the student
- assurance that the skills and knowledge gained will be transferable.

The primary objective of campaigns to promote vocational education should be to encourage more young people to see vocational qualifications as a viable option. Publicity alone is insufficient. Young people are likely to benefit more from the involvement of employers and universities, providing opportunities for young people to find out more about how vocational qualifications can provide currency for, and progression towards, work and higher education.

Awarding bodies and learning providers should equip parents, teachers and advisers to support young people's vocational education choices.

The research showed that young people who chose vocational options had less support when making their decision than those taking general qualifications and, as a result, were more likely to rely on their own judgement. Careers advice resources should be targeted to redress the balance of resources available to young people on the different routes.

The transfer of the responsibility for careers advice to schools, together with parents' low confidence advising young people about vocational options, means that school teachers, college tutors and, where possible, trained advisers need be much more actively involved in supporting young people's choice of vocational course. To help them do this, learning providers and awarding bodies will need to make more information available to young people and their parents on the specifics of vocational courses and the opportunities they offer for progression into employment or further study. Opportunities to speak to tutors and students, as well as to sample the course, would also help young people and their parents assess a course's suitability before committing to it.



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