



# Apprenticeships findings from The Big Ask

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## Findings from The Big Ask on Apprenticeships

### Introduction

In April 2021, the Children's Commissioner for England, Dame Rachel de Souza, launched The Big Ask: a national consultation exercise with children in England to ask them about their lives and their priorities, aspirations and worries for the future. The purpose was not only to provide a large-scale 'state of the nation' assessment of the views of children on these issues, but also to help inform the Commissioner's priorities and longer-term strategy for her term in office, and to help ensure that children's needs and interests could be placed at the forefront of policy measures to recover from the impacts of the pandemic.

The Big Ask ran for approximately 6 weeks and gathered more than 550,000 responses, making it the largest ever survey of children anywhere in the world, to our knowledge. The 9+ 'Big Ask' surveys included one free-text question, 'What do you think stops children/young people in England achieving the things they want to achieve when they grow up?' This paper explores the responses to this question that relate to apprenticeships and vocational training.

Children and young people wrote about how good quality apprenticeships are crucial for the success of young people. They emphasized the importance of practical learning outside of the classroom. However, children and young people brought up several barriers to the take-up of apprenticeships or further vocational training including stigma around not going to university, a lack of information on apprenticeships, a lack of vocational classes offered in school and lack of apprenticeship opportunities in their local area. Young people want to see apprenticeships more widely available and more encouragement in schools to pursue these opportunities.

Of the approximately 250,000 respondents to the free-text question on barriers to success, about 500 or 0.2% mentioned about vocational training or apprenticeships, compared to 1.6% of responses that mentioned university.<sup>1</sup> Young people aged 16 or 17 were more likely to bring up apprenticeships (0.6%) and university (4.6%) than those aged 9-15.<sup>2</sup>

### Why children think apprenticeships are important

Some discussed how young people have a range of learning styles, some which aren't suited for exams and university, emphasizing the need to promote other options like apprenticeships.

- 'The exam system, which does not suit many people, especially those wanting to do vocational subjects, as people may not get high enough grades as they struggle with exams like GCSEs.' - *Girl, 17*
- 'Exams aren't for everyone so other ways of getting a job like apprenticeships and

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<sup>1</sup> This includes "apprentice", "Apprentice", "vocational", "Vocational", "trade", "training". This includes "uni", "Uni", "university" and "University"

<sup>2</sup> See Table 1 in the appendix for more information on the free-text responses

- programmes should be more accessible.' - *Girl, 15*
- 'And the style of teaching at uni might not be how they learn best and therefore might not do as well if they had gone for an apprenticeship.' - *Girl, 16*
- 'Also more apprenticeships which can be accessed age 16 as for many young people the best or only way to learn is outside a classroom in a real job.' - *Boy, 17*
- 'Not enough apprenticeships / vocational courses for people who do not want to go to university but learn on the job.' - *Boy, 16*
- 'Apprenticeships are a good route for those wanting to leave formal education post 16 and I feel there needs to be more workplaces offering this because, at the moment, I think it is very difficult to get a job and start lives of our own.' - *Girl, 15*

Young people emphasized the need for vocational training in schools.

- 'The lack of important school subjects, in many schools across England schools only teach academic subjects and there are not many, if any, vocational subjects that are needed for many important jobs and careers, this would set back many young peoples education as they would have to wait until college to start vocational studies.' - *Boy, 14*
- 'Education system which may put too much pressure on students to learn things that are not necessarily necessary for [future] life. Students would be better off if time was spent on vocational skills rather than compulsory academic subjects that may be too hard' - *Boy, 14*

### **Barriers to Apprenticeships**

Some young people, particularly girls, discussed the stigma around not going into university and how this affects their choices. Many suggested that vocational training was "not valued" as highly as university or "not recognized", suggesting that apprenticeships are "looked down at" or "generally frowned upon".

- 'I know for myself personally I felt thrown aside in my education the minute I voiced that my career path were to be vocational (dance), I was told that due to my all A\* I should be going down a different career path & that dance wasnt for smart girls.' - *Girl, 16*
- 'Schools often put pressure on students to pursue academic careers, not viewing more creative/ vocational subjects as a proper choice especially if a student is very good at academic subjects.' - *Girl, 16*
- 'Were all constantly being pushed, either explicitly or implicitly, to go to university and get a widely applicable degree so that throughout our life we can fit into any mediocre white collar job. Blue collar work is always labelled as vocational, as if it were some lesser pathway, why? It takes just as much cognitive ability to do such work, and in fact many individuals would suit such career paths.' - *Boy, 17*
- 'There is little to [no] talk about the option of apprenticeships and instead teachers and advisers talk as if there is no option but university, this can make it feel like there is less support for students like me who are most likely going into a apprenticeship after sixth form.' - *Boy, 17*

Some young people suggested that not knowing about the variety of routes available (apprenticeships, university, education) is a barrier to success. These young people discussed a lack of information and education about apprenticeship opportunities and vocational training provided in school, especially compared to the information provided on applying to universities.

- 'Ask secondary school students what they want to be when they grow up and you'll probably get a list of around 15 different answers. Ask college students and maybe you'll 30. We only know what the system tells us and, apparently, there are only 30 jobs in the whole world.' - *Girl, 17*
- 'Not enough information in schools for future careers/options for higher education. Only a few choices for education e.g. have to do GCSEs when that doesn't suit everyone, should be offered more vocational courses.' - *Girl, 17*
- 'As much as it is spoken about more than it used to be, things like apprenticeships and other options other than university are not given as much attention so students who may achieve what they want through apprenticeships instead of having to go through university (which may seem daunting to some people) don't always realise that there are apprenticeships for what they might want to do.' - *Girl, 15*
- 'Education doesn't teach you actual stuff like.. [how to] get an apprenticeship.' - *Boy, 13*
- 'Unless you want to go to university, apprenticeships, and jobs are very limited for young people. There is no career advice at school to make meaningful decisions.' - *Boy, 17*

A lack of information in school on apprenticeships meant some young people had to do their own research about apprenticeships or went to university when it may not have been the best choice.

- 'I don't want to go to college but have not been taught about other options and have had to do all of my own research on apprenticeships.' - *Boy, 15*
- 'My school did not promote apprenticeships or alternative paths other than university to me in careers meetings. My application to a degree apprenticeship was independently researched and developed.' - *Boy, 17*
- 'Young people being pressured into going to university when it might not be the best option for them. For many people a massive amount of student debt and a high chance of dropping out mean that other options such as an apprenticeship or going straight into work would be a better option.' - *Boy, 16*

Some young people outside of cities discussed the lack of apprenticeship opportunities in their local area and the challenges of taking up an apprenticeship outside of their area, such as transport.

- 'Living in a small town often means there are less creative college courses or apprenticeships. If you found a course such as floristry you would have to travel very far.' - *Girl, 15*
- 'Where are the apprenticeships I wanted to do? Personally, I want to work in the

media industry, which feels near impossible living in East Yorkshire. If people actually had more opportunity and more choice, maybe they would be choosing the right path and actually find fulfilment within life. But no. Tesco supermarket here I come.' – *Girl, 17*

Some young people, mostly girls, discussed the need for a wider range of apprenticeships to meet their career objectives.

- 'Also the lack of opportunities for apprenticeships and other things for options children actually want to do for example doing a film apprenticeship not a plumbing one.' - *Girl, 15*
- 'Lack of apprenticeship in my chosen field of Marine Biology/Oceanography.' – *Girl, 17*
- 'Support to do what they want (especially in the apprenticeships for the emergency services).' – *Girl, 17*
- 'There is unequal attention for each of the career paths, even if a person comes into school and does an in depth explanation of their apprenticeship, its usually about engineering.' - *Girl, 16*

Young people also discussed the impact of covid on apprenticeship opportunities, some sharing their personal experience of apprenticeships being cancelled or unavailable during Covid.

- 'For me its the opportunities because of covid I may not be able to do apprenticeships because those places will be shut.' - *Boy, 15*
- 'Less opportunities during these times (COVID and all). For example, when I applied for Apprenticeship last year I got to the interview process but in August (when they were supposed to say if they will offer or not) they emailed saying that the programme was cancelled due to coronavirus.' – *Boy, 17*

### **What children want to change**

Some of the young people also wrote about their policy suggestions. Young people want to see apprenticeships in a wider range of careers and more encouragement in schools to pursue these opportunities.

- 'Make apprenticeships widely available and actively encourage young people to engage with them.' – *Girl, 16*
- 'More education based around apprenticeships, or going straight into work needs to happen.' – *Girl, 17*
- 'Teach young people its okay not to go to college and to want to do an apprenticeship instead!!!' - *Girl, 16*
- 'Promote more vocational jobs in school and make the education system fairer for more people by including more vocational education or training.' - *Boy, 17*
- 'Government should sponsor companies to offer paid apprenticeships alongside studies.' – *Boy, 16*
- 'I also think that more apprenticeships or workshops with people in our desired careers would be extremely helpful.' – *Girl, 14*

## Annex

*Table 1: The number and share of children who mentioned apprenticeships*

	Respondents to the questions: 'What do you think stops children/young people in England achieving the things they want to achieve when they grow up?'	
	Number and share of children and young people that mention apprenticeships <sup>3</sup>	Number and share of children and young people that mention university <sup>4</sup>
All Young People	467 (0.2%)	4,036 (1.6%)
<i>By Age</i>		
9-11	126 (0.1%)	959 (1.0%)
12-15	180 (0.1%)	1,954 (1.6%)
16-17	151 (0.6%)	1,078 (4.6%)
<i>By Gender</i>		
Male	210 (0.2%)	1,135 (1.1%)
Female	230 (0.2%)	2,706 (2.0%)
<i>By school type</i>		
Academies	244 (0.2%)	2,302 (1.8%)
Colleges	16 (1%)	75 (4.7%)
Free Schools	9 (0.1%)	102 (1.3%)
Independent schools	41 (0.2%)	384 (2.1%)
LA maintained schools	114 (0.1%)	992 (1.2%)
Special school	5 (0.4%)	7 (0.6%)
<i>By SEN support</i>		
Receiving SEN support	59 (0.3%)	298 (1.4%)
Not receiving SEN support	408 (0.2%)	3738 (1.6%)
<i>By IDACI quintile<sup>5</sup></i>		
Quintile 1 (most deprived)	49 (0.1%)	473 (1.2%)
Quintile 2	81 (0.2%)	625 (1.5%)
Quintile 3	95 (0.2%)	785 (1.7%)
Quintile 4	108 (0.2%)	925 (1.8%)
Quintile 5	114 (0.2%)	1,133 (2.0%)

<sup>3</sup> This includes "apprentice", "Apprentice", "vocational", "Vocational", "trade", "training"

<sup>4</sup> This includes "uni", "Uni", "university" and "University"

<sup>5</sup> IDACI refers to Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index. Note these share only include children and young people with non-missing data on their LSOA.



Children's Commissioner for England  
Sanctuary Buildings  
20 Great Smith Street  
London  
SW1P 3BT

Tel: 020 7783 8330  
Email: [info.request@childrenscommissioner.gov.uk](mailto:info.request@childrenscommissioner.gov.uk)  
Visit: [www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk](http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk)  
Twitter: @ChildrensComm