

# BECOMING AN EMPLOYER OF CHOICE

How companies can reach, engage and secure a long-term pipeline of future talent.

UCAS





# HOW CAN EMPLOYERS ATTRACT AND SECURE THE RIGHT YOUNG TALENT?

We surveyed 1,692 16–19-year-olds planning to start higher education in 2026 about how they make career choices, and their responses paint a clear, and urgent, picture for employers.

Every year, more than 500,000 students begin their higher education journey, many of whom have already spent years thinking about their future career path – researching options, forming preferences and shaping ambitions.

And yet, as this whitepaper reveals, they're doing so with little support from the very people they may eventually work for.

This means **an employer that engages early, communicates well and offers young people what they've been missing can effectively position themselves as an employer of choice.**

## In this whitepaper, we explore:

- Key findings from this research.
- What employers should do to make themselves more desirable and sought after by young people.
- Provide actionable advice to help employers build a sustainable high-quality future talent pipeline.



**1,692** PRE-APPLICANTS

students looking to start university in September 2026 and registered on UCAS Hub



**AGED 16-19**

of which 78% were in Year 12 (or equivalent)

Fieldwork completed April-May 2025. 81% UK students, 19% International students.

# EMPLOYABILITY HAS NEVER BEEN MORE IMPORTANT TO YOUNG PEOPLE.

Higher education has long been linked to better career prospects, but what has changed is the emphasis.

While previous generations may have had the luxury of choosing their path mainly based on personal and academic interests, today's young people place their future employability front and centre.

Similarly, apprenticeships and degree apprenticeships, being an 'earn and learn' pathway, have seen a significant rise in popularity in recent years.

In fact,

**95%**

say employability prospects are important when choosing their course.

while,

**87%**

say the same when choosing the university itself.

## HOWEVER →

Despite this intense focus on their future career, **only 36% say they have a clear plan for what they want to do** and how to get there.

Meanwhile, **38% know the general field they're interested in**, but not much beyond that.

The remaining **26% are even less certain.**





# SO WHY THE UNCERTAINTY?

Not everyone receives enough or the right kind of support at career discovery.

Of 1,692 students asked, **30% said their career advice has been overwhelming**, while **28% said it has been inadequate or limited**.

And when it comes to employers, most simply don't know what they don't know.

Outside a group of well-known professions or sectors (healthcare, law, finance, accountancy), and household names (NHS, BBC, Google, Apple), it's hard for students to see a clear pathway from a course to a job.

So, while we may have a generation who are ambitious, hungry for direction and actively seeking a clear path from course to career, not everyone receives enough information to help them make major decisions that will shape their futures.

**WHICH BRINGS US TO OUR FIRST KEY INSIGHT.**



# 16-19-YEAR-OLDS WANT MORE FROM EMPLOYERS. AND THEY WANT IT EARLY.

Young people researching careers want more from potential future employers – more contact, more clarity, more real-life examples and more practical support to help them make the big decisions that will set the course for the rest of their lives.

If there is one message you take away from this research, make sure it's this.

## INSIGHT #1

### THEY WANT DIRECT CONTACT WITH EMPLOYERS.

# 79%

of young people want more opportunities to engage with employers directly, for example, through detailed role information, one-to-one conversations, live Q&As or careers fairs.

- The rise of remote work, online applications and digital recruitment has turned employers from offices you can walk into and shake a hand into an endless array of names and logos on a screen.
- Students want to speak to real employees, hear real career stories and understand what life is really like working at your organisation.
- These face-to-face interactions matter more than ever – and are crucial for building credibility and trust.





## INSIGHT #2

# THEY WANT THAT CONTACT EARLY.

By showing up early when aspirations begin, employers can inform subject choices and help guide career pathways.

- Most students (82%) receive career information at secondary school, usually when they're considering and making their post-16 choices.
- That's when employers should engage directly, to help them make more informed choices.

**66%**

recall receiving careers information when deciding what to do after GCSEs.

**61%**

recall receiving careers information when choosing their A level subjects

- Early engagement is also crucial for employers offering an apprenticeship pathway. It helps young people make more informed choices about the routes available into their preferred careers, and ensures employers don't miss out on potential talent.

## INSIGHT #3

# EMPLOYER REPUTATION IS IMPORTANT.

- Two thirds of students surveyed say an employer's reputation is extremely or very important to them, with top attributes being a **supportive environment (70%)** and a **positive workforce culture (67%)**.
- Today's students are selective. They want to work with employers they can believe in, who are transparent about their purpose, culture and values.



#### INSIGHT #4

## THEY WANT PRACTICAL HELP WITH CAREER DISCOVERY.

At the discovery stage, young people want access to practical, relatable information – something that brings different careers to life and helps them understand what those roles actually involve.

**58%**

want to be introduced to careers they haven't yet considered.

**50%**

are interested in virtual work experience opportunities.

**47%**

want real stories and 'day in the life' examples.

This is a generation that is open-minded, curious and eager to explore their options, but they need practical help.

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#### INSIGHT #5

## THEY NEED ONGOING OPPORTUNITIES FOR WORK EXPERIENCE.

As well as informing their choices now, young people are already looking ahead for opportunities to gain work experience whilst studying and improve their employability prospects after graduation.

**91%**

say work placements are an important factor when researching universities.

**86%**

want their university to have strong links within their chosen industry.

**85%**

want direct employer engagement during their studies.

In other words, they're looking for you long before you've even advertised a vacancy.

# THE MESSAGE FROM STUDENTS IS CLEAR:

**MORE  
INFORMATION.**

**MORE  
ENGAGEMENT.**

**MORE  
REAL-LIFE EXPERIENCE.**

- They want clarity on potential career paths.
- They want direct engagement from employers to help career discovery.
- They want opportunities to build their skills and experience for future employability.

**AND THEREIN  
LIES YOUR  
OPPORTUNITY.**



# A COMPANY THAT ENGAGES YOUNG PEOPLE EARLY CAN BECOME AN EMPLOYER OF CHOICE.

16-19-year-olds are crying out for more from employers to help them make informed career choices.

By supporting young people while they are making their post-16 choices, employers can lay the foundations of an effective, sustainable future talent pipeline.

The lack of employer interactions at the career discovery stage means that organisations that do engage can position themselves as preferred future employers.

## BY ENGAGING EARLY, EMPLOYERS GAIN TWO COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGES:

### YOU CAN INFLUENCE CAREER ASPIRATIONS

- Many employers only interact with students once they've already formed strong preferences, at which point you're competing for their ambition rather than shaping it.
- By engaging early, when students are making their post-16 choices, you can grow their interest years in advance, rather than fighting for it in application season.
- If you offer an apprenticeship pathway, by engaging early and making it known you can secure the right talent.

### YOU CAN BUILD FAMILIARITY AND TRUST

- Young people are drawn to companies they know – brands that feel approachable, human and supportive.
- If students don't know who you are, they can't aspire to work for you. And if no one aspires to work for you, your early-career recruitment becomes an uphill battle.
- Early engagement builds recognition, credibility and the sense they're valued by your organisation. And the earlier the connection, the stronger this relationship can be.



**YOU CAN ATTRACT  
THE BEST CANDIDATES.**

Companies that engage early, shape aspirations and build trust, become employers of choice, translating directly into a stronger, higher-quality future talent pipeline.

# SO WHAT SHOULD EMPLOYERS BE DOING NOW?

## SHOW UP BEFORE CAREER PLANS ARE FULLY FORMED, NOT AFTER

By reaching students while they're still exploring, curious and open-minded, you can shape their ambitions and position yourself as their preferred future employer through university and beyond.

## EDUCATE STUDENTS ABOUT CAREERS THEY DIDN'T KNOW YOU OFFERED

Industries (and, by extension, employers) require an infinitely greater variety of roles than many students realise. By providing clarity and insight into the specific careers you offer, students can better understand the breadth of opportunities available, greatly expanding your potential talent pool.

## RAISE AWARENESS OF YOUR APPRENTICESHIP OPPORTUNITIES

Often misunderstood, apprenticeships are a fantastic pathway into the world of work. If you offer an apprenticeship route, tell young people all about it. Explain how apprenticeships work, their pros and cons, and how to apply.

## BE BY THEIR SIDE FROM SCHOOL TO ENTERING THE WORLD OF WORK

The most effective early talent pipelines are based on a long, consistent relationship built across many years. Introduce yourself early, be present throughout their journey and build loyalty and trust through long-term support and guidance.

## FORGE CLOSE PARTNERSHIPS WITH HIGHER EDUCATION PROVIDERS

With so many students wanting strong industry connections and work placement opportunities embedded within their university and course, employers should seek to form close relationships with higher education providers to build trust and familiarity and offer a clear path from course to career.

## DEMONSTRATE YOUR CULTURE EARLY AND CONSISTENTLY

Culture is now a clear deciding factor when shaping career decisions. Share authentic stories, real employee journeys and transparent insights into working life to showcase your work culture in a positive, supportive light.

## OFFER A MIXTURE OF TOUCHPOINTS

Students want to meet you where they are, in formats they find accessible and human. Blend digital and in-person engagement, such as virtual sessions, short videos, one-to-one chats, campus and school visits, insight days and virtual work experience.



# HOW CAN UCAS HELP BUILD YOUR LONG-TERM TALENT PIPELINE?

At UCAS, we know students better than anyone.

Every year 1+ million young people register with UCAS, encouraged by their schools and colleges, to research and take next steps into their future careers. They proactively come to us to discover, decide and apply.

**No one understands their choices like us.  
And no one has their attention like us.**

**This uniquely positions UCAS to help you:**

- Reach the right students at the right time.
- Build brand awareness and trust.
- Showcase your culture, opportunities and real stories.
- Introduce students to career paths they haven't considered.
- Promote your apprenticeship opportunities.
- Lay the groundwork for long-term engagement.

We offer a unique combination of rich data and addressable insights for an audience that trusts our voice, and who we can target for your requirements.

Want to find out more about how we can elevate your brand to become an employer of choice?

**Get in touch today and we'll be happy to have a chat!**

**[earlycareers@ucas.ac.uk](mailto:earlycareers@ucas.ac.uk)**