



**SPEAKERS**  
for schools

# Assumed Knowledge – A Hidden Barrier to Social Mobility



## SUMMARY

**Where you are born and who you are born to can play a pivotal role in determining your life chances in this country.**

Ours is a system where the cream does not naturally rise to the top. Raw talent and academic ability is not always enough for young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds to overcome the barriers they face to future success.

**New evidence shows that young people from more privileged backgrounds and those with graduate parents appear more confident and adept at navigating their way through the education system into careers,**

compared to their less well-off peers. Speakers for Schools commissioned the Social Market Foundation to undertake a detailed study of the forms of knowledge that boost education and employment success. They found that access to 'assumed knowledge', that is, the things that some might assume everyone instinctively knows about 'how the system works', is heavily skewed towards young people from more affluent families, and those with parents who have been to university themselves.

**This report found significant differences between socio-economic groups** in: ability to make informed choices at key transition points in education; knowledge of how to set and achieve career goals; knowledge of how to identify and apply for jobs successfully; and knowledge of how to integrate into workplace culture and develop professionally.

**Weaker understanding of how the system works is compounded by lower levels of confidence both in applying knowledge, and self-belief.** Less advantaged young people report lower confidence than their more well-off peers, despite often having had to demonstrate greater grit and determination to achieve similar levels of attainment.

**More limited access to advice and support is another significant contributing factor.** First generation applicants to university have significantly fewer people to offer advice, guidance and support to help them make informed choices, on everything from choosing subjects to study, to career paths to follow. They are less aware of the range of potential careers available to them, and the relative rewards associated with different jobs.

**High quality experiences of the world of work help level the playing field by demystifying careers and building awareness, confidence and networks.** Our impact evidence demonstrates that work experience can help to fill in the gaps in assumed knowledge, identify future opportunities and build confidence to take the first step onto a career ladder.

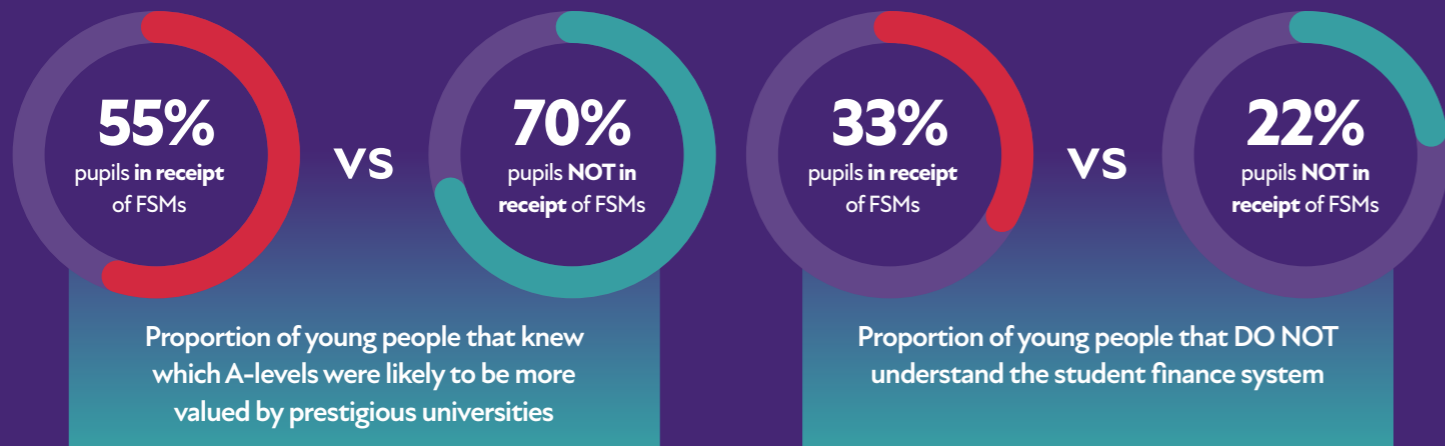
**On its own though, this will not be enough.** We need to ensure that young people without the benefit of extended networks *outside* of school have access to the support and guidance they need *in* school. Currently, there is far too little investment in careers advisers in school. Until this changes, it is likely that the odds will remain firmly stacked in favour of the well-off, through education to employment.

**READ ON FOR THE KEY FINDINGS  
& RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS**



# KEY FINDINGS

## Ability to make informed choices at key transition points in education

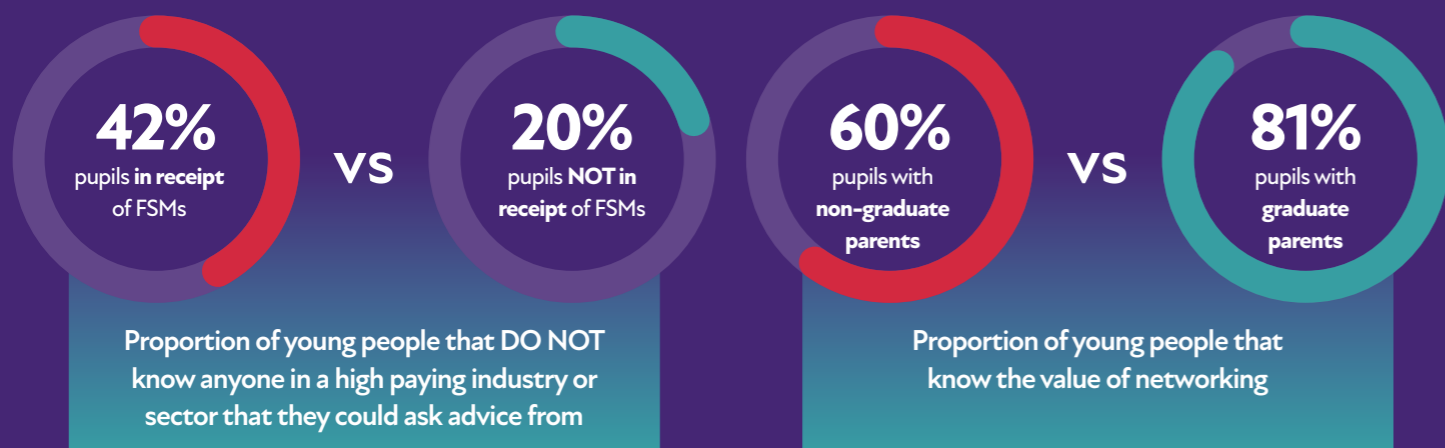


 **35%** of young people in receipt of FSMs DID NOT identify University of Cambridge as the most prestigious university in a short list of institutions

- Pupils from more affluent backgrounds were found to have a greater understanding of which A-level choices can give a competitive advantage in applying to prestigious universities.
- Young people with non-graduate parents are less likely to know which universities are the more prestigious.
- Disadvantaged students are less likely to understand the student finance system.

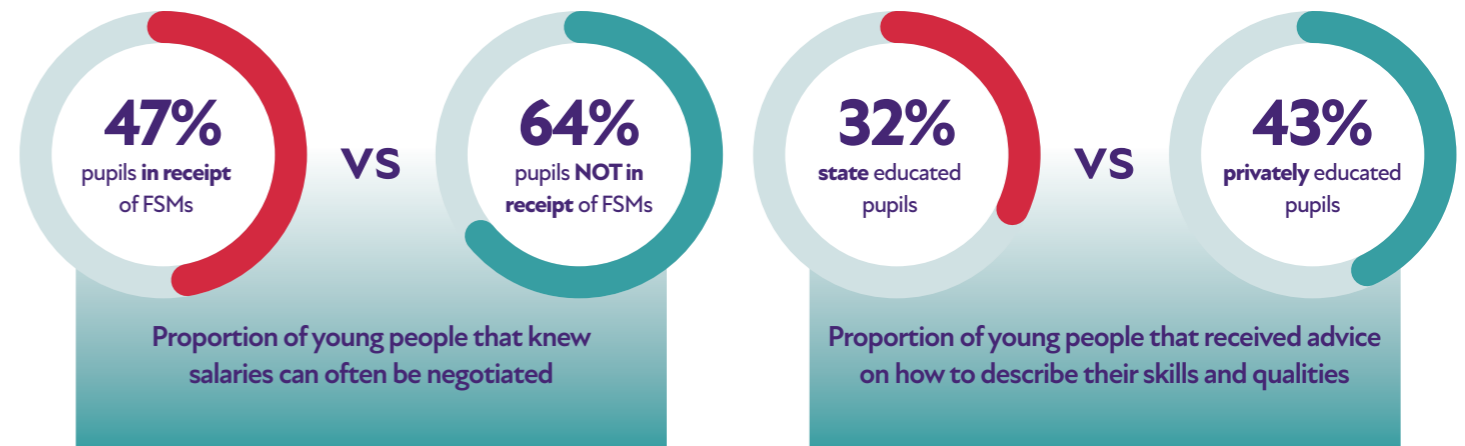
## Knowledge to set and achieve career goals

- Pupils from less affluent backgrounds are less likely to accurately assess earning potential within different professions – for example, more likely to underestimate the salaries of lawyers and over-estimate the salary of travel agents.
- Less advantaged pupils report less access to advice, guidance and mentorship. The more sources of advice drawn on, the better the young person 'scored' on measures of assumed knowledge.



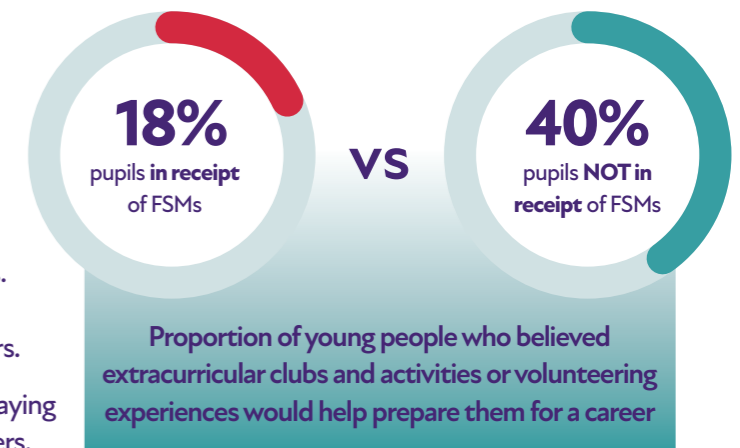
## Knowledge to identify and apply for jobs successfully

- Young people from less advantaged backgrounds had lower levels of knowledge at each stage of the job application process, compared to their more well-off peers.
- The survey found lower levels of awareness that salaries could be negotiated; that you could apply for a job even if you did not fully meet all criteria; and the importance of making a good impression at interview, by dressing smartly and asking questions.



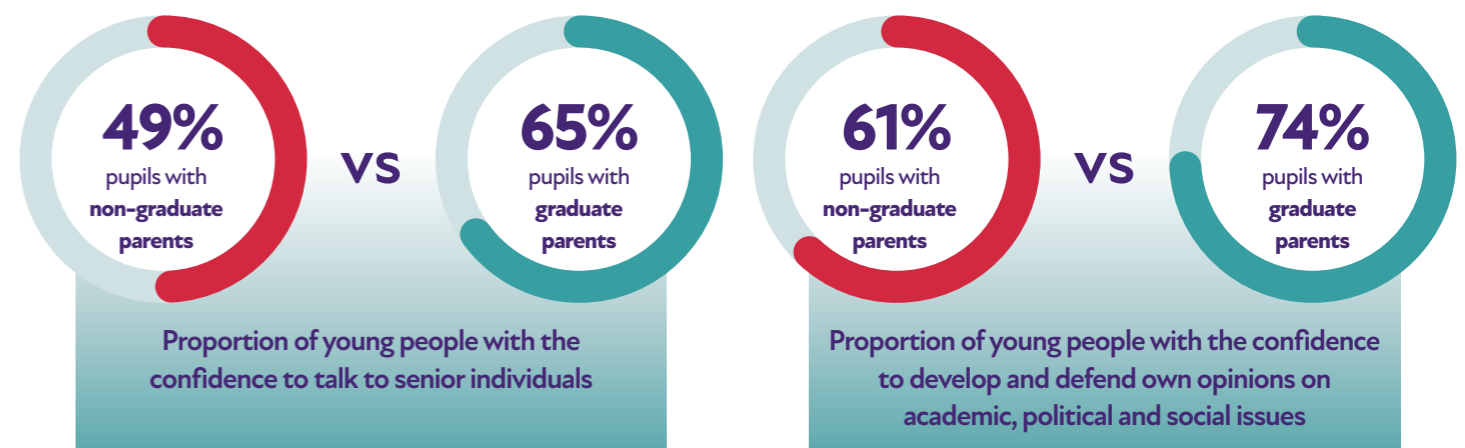
## Knowledge to integrate into workplace culture and develop professionally

- There is universally poor awareness of the potential benefits of participation in volunteering and extra-curricular activities. However, those eligible for Free School Meals were even less likely to think that these activities were valuable to employers.
- Those who attend state school are less likely to think that playing a competitive sport or instrument was important to employers.



## Confidence to apply knowledge and believe in oneself

- Confidence in applying knowledge in different settings is not distributed equally across socio-economic groups.
- Confidence to talk to people in positions of power is lower for those from less affluent backgrounds.



 **45%** of young people from low socio-economic group have the confidence to speak up in a meeting if they have something useful to say vs **56%** from higher socio-economic backgrounds.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## How can we drive policy change to equip young people for success in adulthood and work?

Speakers for Schools' recommendations for the Government to tackle the disparities in access to privileged knowledge, networks and experiences:

1

### GUARANTEED WORK EXPERIENCE

Government must ensure that the rollout of guaranteed work experience, as included in the Labour Party manifesto, helps level the playing field by **building on best practice to deliver high quality, high impact experiences** that are equitably distributed throughout the UK and accessible to all young people. We urge Government to focus on **supporting those in the highest need** of support to maximise the benefits of participation.

2

### CAREERS ADVISORS IN EVERY SCHOOL

To strengthen the existing dedicated support for careers advice, Government should ensure dedicated, full-time careers advisors are funded in every secondary school to **ensure sufficient capacity and resource to provide guidance and assistance to all young people**. We recommend placing immediate emphasis on providing **additional guidance to young people without strong parental support** and networks to ensure equitable access to opportunities around careers advice, regardless of background.

3

### MENTORING PROGRAMMES

With a particular emphasis on supporting young people to build personal networks and broaden experiences, we urge Government to support mentoring programmes to **ensure young people have rich insights beyond the school curriculum to draw upon**. By participating in mentoring programmes, young people can have access to expert, tailored, practical and emotional support during CV and interview preparation, **thereby supporting their transition into the labour market with confidence**.

4

### INSPIRING YOUNG PEOPLE

Through programmes such as Speakers for Schools, Government can **connect young people to successful, aspirational figures and role models who can demystify careers and build confidence**. In turn, this will create independent young people who are not reliant upon family networks to meet successful, inspirational people from a wide range of backgrounds and sectors, as well as young people who are empowered to understand the range of pathways available to them and how they can **achieve their future goals**.

