Things worth knowing

The role of assumed knowledge in youth transitions from education to employment

Dani Payne
Jamie Gollings

SMF | Social Market Foundation

SPEAKERS for schools

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Despite decades of effort to close education and employment gaps across socioeconomic backgrounds, these disparities persist. Research suggests the issue lies not only in academic abilities but also in access to "Assumed Knowledge" – unspoken, untaught knowledge crucial for successfully transitioning into adulthood.

- This report examines how access to Assumed Knowledge varies among young people based on socioeconomic background. Differing levels of assumed knowledge threaten equality of opportunity because some groups benefit from access to certain unspoken, untaught information that helps them 'get ahead' in the race to the top.

- Assumed Knowledge, categorized into six areas (education system, career planning, job applications, work culture, high culture, and confidence), was identified through interviews with 150 young people aged 20-29.

Figure 1: SMF Simplified Assumed Knowledge Framework
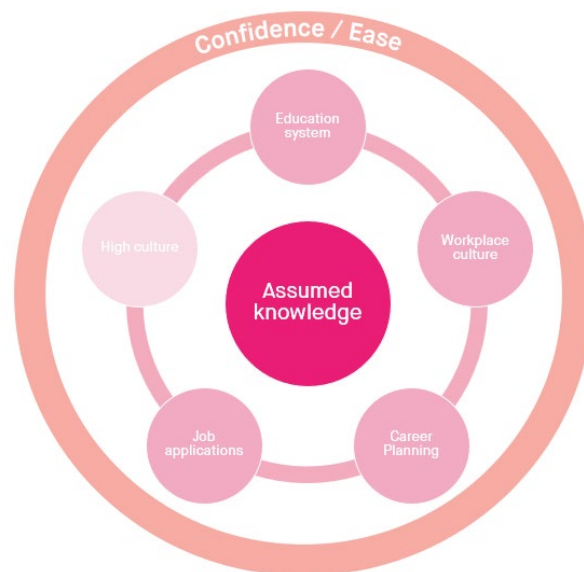
Source: SMF

- **Education system:** Knowledge to make informed educational choices.
- **Career planning:** Knowledge to set and achieve career goals.
- **Job applications:** Knowledge to identify and apply for jobs successfully.
- **Work culture:** Knowledge to integrate into workplace culture and develop professionally.
- **High culture**: Knowledge about certain cultural subjects such as art, sport, theatre and others. Those we interviewed did not feel that this was an area important to their transition, despite its prevalence in the literature (so it is presented in a lighter shade of pink).
- And a cross-cutting theme, which is not knowledge in itself but was critical in allowing young people to effectively utilise the knowledge that they did possess: **Confidence in using assumed knowledge**

- Using the above framework, proxy metrics were developed to measure assumed knowledge. Through a survey of about 1,000 young people aged 15-21 the level of awareness was gauged and responses broken down by socio-economic factors to explore gaps.

Key findings

Disadvantaged young people have poor understandings of the education system, and are making uninformed decisions that impact them into adulthood

- Knowledge about different vocational and academic pathways:
  - Only 44% of young people with non-graduate parents understand degree apprenticeships (vs 51% with graduate parents); only 55% understand traditional apprenticeships (vs 60%).
  - 27% of those eligible for free school meals (FSM) believe getting a degree is always better than a vocational qualification.
  - This is concerning as our interviews indicated that vocational pathways may particularly help disadvantaged young people.
- Knowledge about A-level choices:
  - Young people eligible for FSM are more likely to wrongly think that business studies is more useful when applying to a high-tariff university than further maths.
  - Half (49%) of those eligible for FSM incorrectly believe that critical thinking is one of the top three most useful A-Levels to study for university, despite some leading providers not counting it as an A-Level subject in admissions.
  - Misunderstanding the value of different A-levels can negatively impact which providers and courses students can access, potentially impeding their future career path.
- Knowledge about the higher education system:
  - Disadvantaged young people find the higher education system opaque and do not have the adequate knowledge to navigate it.
  - A third of those eligible for FSM did not understand the student finance system, and they are more likely to believe that you could go bankrupt from these loans, which risks putting them off pursuing higher education.

Incomplete knowledge of options available and understanding of long-term goals can result in poor early career planning for disadvantaged young people.

- Those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds lack knowledge about different career pathways and what they need to do to follow them.
  - Nearly two-thirds of young people incorrectly believe that you needed a law degree to become a lawyer, whereas conversion courses like the GDL or LPC are sufficient.

- Young people eligible for FSM are less likely to understand salary distributions by role – they are more likely to underestimate the salary of lawyers and overestimate the salary of travel agents.
- Disadvantaged young people also have less access to advice, guidance and mentorship, exacerbating existing inequalities in knowledge.
  - Only 67% of 15-18 year-olds eligible for FSM ask friends or family for career planning advice, vs 95% of those with post-graduate parents.
  - 53% of more academically-successful students, based upon having attained or being predicted mostly 7-9s at GCSE, have spoken to careers advisors compared to 46% of pupils on grades 4-6 and 32% of those with lower attainment.
    - This is concerning because utilising a greater number of advice sources was correlated with having higher levels of career-related assumed knowledge.
  - 31% of those at state schools do not know anyone working in prestigious fields such as medicine and law who they could ask for career advice, vs only 8% of those from private schools.
  - A lack of assumed knowledge on this topic, compounded with a lack of sources of advice and guidance, leaves disadvantaged young people making uninformed decisions about their career pathways.

Assumed knowledge of job application processes was a common theme in our interviews of 20–29-year-olds. 40% expressed that they lacked sufficient knowledge on this topic.

- Those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds had poorer levels of knowledge at each stage of the job application process.
  - 21% of those with non-graduate parents believe job salaries couldn't be negotiated, vs 16% of those with graduate parents.
  - 29% on FSM wrongly think it's pointless to apply for a job if they don't meet all 'desirable' criteria, vs 20% for those not eligible.
  - Those on FSM are less likely to know they should dress smartly for an interview (77% vs. 84%) or ask questions at the end (62% vs. 70%) to make a good impression.
- **Disadvantaged young people do not always have the necessary knowledge to integrate successfully into workplace culture.**
  - Disadvantaged young people are less likely to know how to set themselves apart, interact with senior colleagues, or network.
  - In workplace meetings, it is important to balance making useful contributions with not dominating the conversation or disrupting others. Those eligible for free school meals are less likely to speak if they have something less useful to say (47% vs 53% for non-eligible).
  - Young people without graduate parents are less likely to know the importance of networking. 13% believe it is a waste of time, and 4% do not know what networking is.

- This is particularly concerning because our older interviewee cohort commonly identified networking as key to their successful transition into the workplace.
- **High culture**
  - Despite its prominence in the literature, high cultural knowledge was not seen as important for young people's education-workplace transition.
  - Young people overwhelmingly felt that practical work experience and career guidance trumped exposure to or knowledge of cultural activities.
  - Given that this is out of line with previous research on the topic, which generally found that having access to cultural objects and experiences was beneficial for social mobility, it would be a worthy area of further research.

Our polling and interviews showed that the confidence to use knowledge is as crucial as the knowledge itself. Without the confidence to apply knowledge —such as the ability to take initiative and believe in one's capabilities—it has limited impact.

- 65% of those with graduate parents feel confident speaking with senior individuals, compared to 49% of those with non-graduate parents. Similarly, 61% of private school attendees feel confident in this area versus 53% of state school attendees.
- Confidence in developing and defending their own opinions on academic, political and social issues follows similar trends: 73% of private school students feel confident compared to 66% of state school students, and 74% of those with graduate parents feel confident versus 62% of those whose parents did not attend university.
- Policies seeking to target inequalities in outcomes by increasing levels of assumed knowledge will also need to consider how we can address disparities in confidence.

Recommendations for policy

Our recommendations are aimed at increasing the level of assumed knowledge, especially among those from less affluent backgrounds, and making the system less disadvantageous for those who lack it. More are presented in Chapter Ten, but major suggestions, arranged by the domains on which the recommendations focus include:

- **Education System – Greater flexibility and transparency are to reduce the stakes of decisions made, minimising the potential for a lack of assumed knowledge to set young people on the wrong path**
  - Embed Assumed Knowledge into the curriculum, for example by using data on average salaries in maths classes
  - Keep the education system broader for longer, meaning that young people make key decisions later
    - Shrink A-level syllabi so pupils can take two more subjects

- ▪ More flexible first years of university, with students able to gain credits for taking classes across disciplines
- **Career Planning – Reform careers education advice and guidance (CEIAG) throughout the education system, and beyond**
  - Guarantee each school leaver 3+ one-to-one careers advisory sessions
  - Proactively offer career 'check-ins' through the National Careers Service at 4-year intervals, and promote the service more strongly
  - Have careers provision as an important part of the reformed Ofsted 'report cards' for schools
  - Charge the National Careers Service with persuading industry bodies to set up national mentoring schemes for young people, and promote existing schemes
- **Job Applications – There needs to be minimum standards on the job application support provided to students, and chances for the more career-minded to learn from each other.**
  - Commission the development of an AI CV checker tool, to be hosted by the National Careers Service
  - All school leavers should take part in a CV writing workshop, including industry-specific guidance, as well as a mock interview
  - Schools should facilitate peer to peer networks for discussing job applications and careers. These should follow the structure of academic societies common at many universities.
- **Work Culture – giving young people a taste of working practices in school or through placements will help to equip them with the assumed knowledge necessary to settle well into working life.**
  - Universal two weeks' of work experience (minimum) in years 10 or 11
  - Integrate key workplace practices into the school environment, such as more project-based working, networking style challenges and feedback sessions for older pupils that mirror performance reviews
- **Confidence to apply knowledge – provide other interventions to practise applying assumed knowledge, whilst the government plans to strengthen mental health support**
  - Younger people from more deprived backgrounds were found to have lower confidence in relation to assumed knowledge and workplace matters in this study. The opportunity to practice applying assumed knowledge should help all young people to gain confidence in this area. Across the recommendations above, we have provided suggestions on how to make this more accessible, such as by incorporating it into school curriculum, providing more work experience opportunities, or running mock interviews.

CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

It is estimated that an average adult makes approximately 35,000 decisions every day.[1] Some of these will be unconscious, some conscious, and some more informed than others. From the ages of 14 to 21, young people have to make a number of important decisions about their educational and career pathways. These decisions will shape their early adulthood, and possibly the direction of their entire life. What we hope is that these young people have adequate resources, support, and – crucially – knowledge to make good and informed decisions.

Adults (parents, policymakers, teachers and so on) make judgements about what young people need to know, and also assumptions about what they already know. Things we believe young people *need to know* but *assume they don't already know* are formally taught, either through the curriculum or other forms of structured teaching, by teachers and by parents and guardians.

But what happens if we assume a young person already knows something that they do not know? Knowledge is not equally distributed, and assumptions can be mistaken. Despite decades of work to narrow the educational attainment and employment gaps for young people from more disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, these gaps persist and in some cases are widening.[2] There are likely many contributing factors, and inequalities in non-academic knowledge will be one of them.

There are many unwritten and untaught rules, quirks and conventions within the education and employment systems that young people navigate through. Sociologists have theorised about these for decades, often under the label of "cultural capital", a concept developed by Pierre Bourdieu; or the "hidden curriculum", first defined in 1970 as the non-academic aspects of learning.[3]

Those who have more of this knowledge will find navigating systems easier and will face fewer barriers through key transitions. For both cultural capital and the hidden curriculum, the assumption is that young people from more advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds will possess more of this knowledge, leading to "exclusive advantages"[4] which preserve privilege and social hierarchy.[5]

Academics have attempted to quantitatively measure these differences in privilege. However, most studies to date have measured access or resources: how many books there are in the house, how often a parent reads to a child, whether they have exposure to 'high culture' such as the arts, museums, travel, and so on. These studies tend to look more broadly at cultural capital, something which encompasses knowledge but also the behaviour, access and possessions of the upper and middle class. Studies focusing on the hidden curriculum tend to be qualitative in nature and small in sample size.

To the best of our knowledge, no one has attempted to, firstly, separate what we call *assumed knowledge* from other forms of class privilege and, secondly, to measure levels of assumed knowledge in young people in the UK. Whilst there are many studies detailing unequal access to resources and experiences, we have very little understanding of exactly what it is that disadvantaged young people don't know and

what impact that has on their transition from education to employment. Stubborn gaps in educational and employment outcomes will continue to persist until we better understand what young people do and do not know, and confront our own assumptions about their knowledge.

Theoretical background

Assumed knowledge

For the purposes of this paper, we define assumed knowledge as:

Knowledge that young people need to have to successfully navigate their transition into adulthood, that we do not explicitly teach as part of the curriculum or other formalised education.

Assumed knowledge is not a well-defined, understood, or commonly used term. For the purposes of this report, we have defined it as knowledge that young people need to have to successfully navigate their transition into adulthood. It is knowledge that we do not explicitly teach as part of the curriculum or other formalised education. It is knowledge that we often assume young people already possess or will learn without formalised teaching on the topic. Often the assumption is that they will learn this information simply through being around others who have that information, or through their life experiences, which becomes problematic when certain groups are not exposed to such experiences and people.

Assumed knowledge can encompass knowledge about how to act in different situations (social and cultural rules); knowledge about 'high culture' such as art, certain types of sports, literature, travel and political and current affairs; practical knowledge such as how to apply for a job or what qualifications you would need for certain career paths, and so on. Every young person will embody their own forms of assumed knowledge, but we hypothesise that the type of assumed knowledge a young person does or does not possess will differ depending on socioeconomic background and likely contribute to socioeconomic inequalities. For example, a young person from a working-class family may possess types of assumed knowledge about manual and service jobs, but lack other forms of assumed knowledge such as knowledge about the higher education system and 'white collar' careers. For the purposes of this report, we are particularly interested in types of assumed knowledge that relate to or impact a young person's transition from education into employment, and their early career progression.

The concept of assumed knowledge is informed by, but distinct from, concepts of cultural capital and the hidden curriculum

There is very little literature on the topic of assumed knowledge, and no previous research attempting to measure it. Therefore, for the purposes of informing our hypotheses and developing our framework, we explored literature on cultural capital and the hidden curriculum. Both of these concepts are distinct from assumed knowledge, and it is important to note that this piece of research is neither

measuring cultural capital nor the hidden curriculum. However, there is some overlap (discussed below) that is useful for placing this piece of work in the broader context of other research carried out on class-based inequalities in education and the workforce.

The concept of cultural capital was developed by Pierre Bourdieu in the late 1970s alongside concepts of social and economic capital. Exact definitions of cultural capital can vary, but the underlying concept was that more privileged members of society (the 'elite') had certain cultural advantages which contribute to one's success in society, including educational achievement. As described by Lareau and Weininger:

> *"Cultural capital is widely recognized as one of the late Pierre Bourdieu's signature concepts. [...] The concept of ''capital'' has enabled researchers to view culture as a resource - one that provides access to scarce rewards, is subject to monopolization, and, under certain conditions, may be transmitted from one generation to the next. As a result, emphasis on cultural capital has enabled researchers in diverse fields to place culture and cultural processes at the centre of analyses of various aspects of stratification. In Bourdieu's own work, the concept was used most prominently in research on education and consumption and taste."* [6]

These cultural advantages, which could be how someone acts (such as confidence, and types of accents) or what cultural goods they have access to (such as certain books or instruments), are unequally shared, leading to "exclusive advantages" for those part of the elite class.[7]

The hidden curriculum was also first defined in the 1970s by Philip Jackson, an American education scholar from the University of Chicago. Jackson wrote about hidden curriculum within schools and defined it as the non-academic aspects of learning.[8] As described by Koutsouris et al:

> *"The hidden curriculum is about unintended messages, underpinning norms, values and assumptions that are often so unquestioned that they have become invisible. This is because educational institutions operate based on policy, guidelines and expectations that reflect widely accepted principles about what a higher education institution represents, what it means to be a learner, what counts as knowledge etc."* [9]

Our definition of assumed knowledge is informed by both cultural capital and the hidden curriculum. The idea that certain groups of young people have exclusive access to certain experiences, resources and networks (and therefore, for our purposes, knowledge), and that this access makes their journey through education and transition into adulthood easier, is central to the concept of assumed knowledge. The fact that this knowledge is "hidden", not formally taught, often "unquestioned" e.g. assumed, is also central to our definition.

It is distinct from cultural capital in that it does not just consider cultural knowledge, but also practical knowledge and skills (sometimes referred to as human capital). Unlike the hidden curriculum it is also not limited to educational institutions but also employment and other aspects of life.

Differing levels of assumed knowledge between socioeconomic groups poses a risk to equality of opportunity

Although the research on assumed knowledge, as we define it, is limited, studies on cultural capital and the hidden curriculum provide relevant insights. Many sociologists believe that cultural capital contributes to educational and economic inequalities, though they often differ on how it operates.

Some argue that cultural capital enhances educational attainment by imparting valuable knowledge and skills. [10] Others suggest it's more about signalling; for example, playing an instrument or having a particular accent may signal academic brilliance to teachers, who then favour more advantaged pupils. In this view, teacher bias, rather than actual knowledge or skills, drives the link between cultural capital and educational success. [11] A similar bias may influence employers during recruitment or promotion.

Several studies have attempted to quantify cultural capital's role in explaining or exacerbating inequalities. The literature supports the idea that cultural capital benefits children from advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds:

- Cultural capital significantly boosts exam grades and the likelihood of completing upper secondary education. A small increase in cultural capital could raise this likelihood by 12.5 percentage points. [12]
- Objectified (e.g., books at home) and embodied cultural capital (e.g., body language, speech) have a stronger impact on literacy than institutionalized cultural capital (e.g., parental education). Home cultural resources also have a stronger impact than participation in highbrow cultural activities, such as exposure to fine art, classical music and opera performances. [13]
- In the UK, higher cultural capital positively impacts GCSE results, driven more by the children's actions (e.g., reading more, watching specific TV shows) than by teacher perceptions. This suggests cultural capital genuinely enhances skills and knowledge that contribute to educational success, rather than being solely about signalling or teacher bias. [14] Other studies also support the idea that cultural capital directly fosters skills that improve educational outcomes. [15]

Initiatives working to address disparities in assumed knowledge are limited in their success, partly due to the lack of literature on the topic

Policy initiatives aimed at addressing disparities in cultural capital often focus on access to resources and experiences, rather than knowledge or skills, reflecting the emphasis in sociological literature. Typically, these initiatives expand co- and extra-curricular activities for disadvantaged students, such as museum visits, music lessons, and certain sports, aligning with the traditional concept of cultural capital. However, inadequate funding often results in poor imitations of private school activities, potentially widening the disadvantage gap. [16] Scholars also warn that some initiatives may unintentionally adopt a deficit model, pushing lower socioeconomic students to emulate middle- and upper-class behaviours. [17] This approach risks

narrowing opportunities rather than expanding them. Instead, policies should target the structural conditions that reward higher cultural capital.

Additionally, there is a significant lack of studies measuring inequalities in non-academic knowledge or 'assumed knowledge' as we define it. While many studies focus on cultural exposure, they seldom measure the knowledge gained, limiting our understanding of effective policies to equalize knowledge across socioeconomic backgrounds. Addressing this gap is a key aim of this paper.

The concept of cultural capital underpins the knowledge-rich curriculum in England, but assumed knowledge has been ignored

The term cultural capital is one that will likely be familiar to educationalists and policy researchers in the UK, having been a focus for previous education ministers and for Ofsted.

Policymakers and politicians in England have interpreted cultural capital differently from Bourdieu. They've often seen it as curriculum content, knowledge, or activities within schools that promote social mobility. For instance, in a 2013 speech at the SMF, Michael Gove, then Secretary of State for Education, described cultural capital as the "acquisition of knowledge," calling it the "key to social mobility." He argued that disadvantaged young people were excluded from the "best" knowledge—particularly in literature, art, and science—which he believed was essential for intellectual enlightenment. [18] To address this, Gove reformed the English school curriculum to be 'knowledge-rich'. Similarly, Ofsted require schools to consider cultural capital. Notably, in early years, Ofsted adopts a broader view of cultural capital, focusing more on cultural diversity.

This broader perspective may reflect criticism of a narrow interpretation of knowledge and cultural capital. Some scholars argue that determining what constitutes the "best" knowledge is inherently subjective. They contend that English educational policy has been designed to promote a particular kind of Britishness, excluding diverse narratives related to race, gender, sexuality, disability, and ethnicity. [19] Bourdieu himself was sceptical that education could counter or redistribute cultural capital, viewing the education system as a key mechanism for perpetuating it.

In comparison, assumed knowledge does not feature in the political and policy vocabulary. It is a poorly understood and neglected factor in explaining equality gaps for young people. However, if assumed knowledge was better understood, this concept could play a key part in the government's mission to "break down barriers to opportunity". [20] This report seeks to understand and measure assumed knowledge and hypothesises that we cannot eliminate equality gaps in attainment and outcomes without tackling these disparities in knowledge. In order to successfully "break the pernicious link between background and success", the government's opportunity mission should focus on this key area of inequality. Our aim in this report is to identify key areas of assumed knowledge that disadvantaged young people lack, and that are holding them back in their success – these areas should become a key focus of both the review of the national curriculum and the post-16 education review.

CHAPTER TWO – METHODOLOGY

The project sought to understand what elements of assumed knowledge are important in young peoples' transition from education into employment, and how levels of assumed knowledge may differ between different groups. There were four key research questions we explored:

1. **What are the different types of assumed knowledge?**
2. **Which are most significant for social mobility?**
3. **How does awareness of the most important forms of assumed knowledge vary between young people of different backgrounds?**
4. **What can policymakers, educational institutions, employers and charities do to address inequalities in assumed knowledge?**

To answer these questions, we developed a mixed-methods research methodology combining a mixture of primary and secondary research, and utilised a novel AI data collection tool to enhance the scale of the qualitative research.

Literature Review

We reviewed over 40 pieces of literature covering cultural capital, other forms of capital, and assumed knowledge. We aimed to:

- Explore the current understandings of what assumed knowledge is, and how it relates to other concepts such as cultural capital
- Build understanding of existing taxonomies of assumed knowledge (and lack thereof)
- Understand the current state of the policy discussion in this area

The literature review took a six-stage approach:

1. **Created search terms, and criteria**. We developed search terms, balancing breadth and depth (e.g. ~5 terms per research question). In order to keep the literature review manageable, we restricted our searches primarily to publications in the last ten years and focused on UK samples (with the exception of literature on the original conception of cultural capital and related theories, dated from the 1970s).
2. **Conducted a full search**. We accessed sources and conducted a full search to identify the relevant papers and reports from a full range of academic, grey and white literature.
3. **Assessed relevance.** Here we removed duplicates, checked relevance and chose sources for the review.
4. **Review of material**. We reviewed sources and assessed these against prioritisation criteria, for example: more recent publications, quantitative evaluations and randomised controlled trials, or high-quality qualitative evaluations. Summaries of key findings were captured.
5. **Snowball using sources**. We used bibliographies from the most relevant sources to snowball for other helpful sources and to highlight common key terms we may have missed.

6. **Assess the quality of the sources.** We categorised evidence against a quality criterion to judge which are the most important.

AI-led Interviews of 20-29-year-olds

Due to limitations in the published literature – mainly, that there was little in a UK context and little explicitly measuring non-academic knowledge – it was necessary to carry out qualitative research. This was primarily used to answer research question 1. We wanted to find out:

What are the different types of assumed knowledge that impact young people in the UK workforce in 2024?

The wide range of life experiences of young people meant that we needed to do qualitative research at scale to understand the range of forms that assumed knowledge can take. Traditionally, interviews would be human-led, limiting their number to a couple of dozen on a typical research project.

We utilised an innovative methodology with the research company Focaldata that could achieve mass scale qualitative research.

Using an AI chatbot, we interviewed 150 young adults in their twenties, asking them to reflect on their transition from education and into employment. To train the chatbot, we provided a series of key questions to cover, as well as explanations of the key things we are trying to get out of each one. We also trained it on how to prioritise its time, for example to try to gather two or three examples for each question, but to make sure there was enough time to cover all questions.

Although each interview followed a slightly different path, the broad question themes we were interested in were as follows:

1. What **knowledge or information** do you think is important for someone coming to the end of their time at school? Were there things you knew that helped you succeed, or things you wish you had known?
2. What **didn't you know** or understand about entering the world of employment as you left education?
3. How have you found settling into the world of work, and have you faced any challenges or barriers? **Was there anything that you didn't know about this that you wish you did?**
4. In what ways do you feel things you engaged in (or didn't engage in) outside of academic teaching have impacted on your educational or career journey? Or what have they taught you? For example, sports, extra-curricular activities, volunteering, travelling, etc.
5. Reflecting on how you got to where you are today, **what do you know now that you did not know when you embarked upon your career?**

We also asked the chatbot to prompt respondents to consider how their backgrounds may have impacted their transition and levels of knowledge, positively or negatively.

The sample was restricted to people aged 20-29, with the expectation that this would give us a broad range of experiences from those who had entered the

workforce relatively young, to those who had embarked on further study and were only recently entering employment.

The transcripts from the interviews were then outputted and analysed. Key recurring themes were identified, and eventually allowed us to develop a framework of assumed knowledge which included four main domains presented in this report (Chapter Three). The interviews were coded based on which domains were mentioned by the respondent, and whether that was because they had had that assumed knowledge, or lacked it. This provided a sense of which domains are more or less common, aiding prioritisation in the survey.

Interviewees were also asked what kind of interventions they would have benefited from to increase this form of knowledge. This could then be input into the development of policy recommendations, as per research question 4.

Quantitative Survey of 15-21-year-olds

Our assumed knowledge framework allowed us to identify the most important domains of knowledge that impact on young people's transition from education into employment. Following this, we created a series of proxy measures for each domain and sub-theme.[i]

These proxy measures formed a representative survey completed by 1,030 young people aged 15 to 21, allowing us to measure levels of assumed knowledge across different groups of young people. Respondents were aged from 15 to 21, with half of the sample in full time compulsory education aged 15-18, and the other half in full time higher or further education aged from 18-21.

Respondents were also asked about their approach to gathering assumed knowledge, for example the sources that they used and who they have gone to for advice. These features were looked at alongside the demographics to infer what might be driving disparities in the levels of assumed knowledge across groups.

Assumed Knowledge Index

The survey of 15-21-year-olds includes a combination of proxy measures for the domains of assumed knowledge, and more contextual questions. The proxy measures under each domain had objectively or near-objectively correct answers, such as relating to how the student loan system works in England, or which universities were considered more or less prestigious.

The Assumed Knowledge Index worked by allocated points to answers to these proxy measures. There were 20 such questions, so the maximum score is 20. In some instances, negative points were assigned to responses that were wrong. The allocation of these points to question responses can be found in appendix 1.

Questions were asked across each of the domains of assumed knowledge, except for high culture which the interviews with 20–29-year-olds had indicated was less of a

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[i] A full set of themes and their associated proxy measures can be found in the appendix.

priority. Confidence to apply assumed knowledge was also tested through proxy measures.

There were more survey questions for some domains, such as on the education system. The Assumed Knowledge Index therefore weights the points, such that each area tested (education system, career planning, job applications, work culture, confidence to apply knowledge) contributes a fifth each to the overall score.

CHAPTER THREE – THE ASSUMED KNOWLEDGE FRAMEWORK

Chapter summary

This chapter outlines the assumed knowledge framework developed in this project.

We identified five domains of assumed knowledge that impact young people's transition from education into employment: the education system, career planning, job applications, workplace culture and high culture.

We also identified an enabling domain: the confidence to apply knowledge. This is not knowledge as such but a set of behaviours critical in enabling young people to use the knowledge that they possess.

Assumed knowledge

For the purposes of this paper, we define assumed knowledge as:

Knowledge that young people need to have to successfully navigate their transition into adulthood that we do not explicitly teach as part of the curriculum or other formalised education.

The qualitative interviews enabled us to identify five domains of assumed knowledge: the education system, workplace culture, career planning, high culture and job applications. We were also able to identify an enabling domain, of the confidence to apply knowledge. This was not a knowledge domain but a behavioural one, and critical in allowing young people to transform their knowledge into cultural advantages in education and employment.

This allowed us to create a novel framework of the domains of assumed knowledge significant for young people transitioning from education into employment in the UK in 2024:

Figure 2: SMF Detailed Assumed Knowledge Framework

The Five Domains of Assumed Knowledge				
Education System Knowledge to make informed educational choices	**Career Planning** Knowledge to set and achieve career goals	**Job Applications** Knowledge to identify and apply for jobs successfully	**Work Culture** Knowledge to integrate into workplace culture and develop professionally	**High Culture** Knowledge about certain cultural subjects such as art, sport, theatre and others
Knowing the **different educational pathways** available, and which would best suit you	Knowing **what career options are possible** for you and being able to make informed decisions on which to pursue	Knowing **how to identify suitable roles** based on your experiences and qualifications.	Knowing what **acting professionally** in the workplace means in your specific industry	
Knowing the **different subjects and qualifications on offer**, and how choices over which to study may impact your future pathways	Knowing **what different careers require** in terms of qualifications and experiences	Knowing how to **write CVs and cover letters**	Knowing how to **form positive professional relationships** and networks, and that this is important	
Knowing how the **university system** works	Knowing **the different characteristics of different careers** such as salaries, work life balance and employee satisfaction	Knowing how to act in and **prepare for interviews**		
Enabling Domain: Confidence to Apply Knowledge				

Education system

Having the knowledge necessary to make informed decisions about your education pathways.

Knowledge about how the education system works and how to effectively navigate it was one of the most common domains identified in the interviews. This included things such as:

- Knowing the different educational pathways available, and which would best suit you.
  - *"When I was coming to the end of school, it seemed like A-levels followed by university was the only option. I wish I had known about the other career paths like apprenticeships."*
- Knowing the different subjects and qualifications on offer, and how choices over which to study may impact your future pathways.
  - *"I wish this information [about different careers and jobs] was discussed earlier, before you needed to make your A-Level choices. […] I would have been able to make an informed choice on what subjects would be relevant or useful for further education based on careers I felt I would enjoy or be good at."*
- Knowing how the university system works.
  - *"I had to figure out the university process entirely on my own. I had no career advice, application tips, financial support or help with school work."*

Career planning

Having the knowledge necessary to set, and achieve, career ambitions in your chosen industry or sector.

Interviewee respondents commonly felt that they lacked adequate knowledge to plan their careers. Examples of types of knowledge included:

- Knowing what career options are possible for you and being able to make informed decisions on which to pursue.
  - *"Upon entering the workforce, I realised that there were countless opportunities across various industries that I hadn't explored or even known existed."*
- Knowing what different careers require in terms of qualifications and experiences.
  - *"I chose [psychology] as an A-Level subject and as a degree. There's definitely not enough information on how long it may take to become a clinical psychologist and it can take a lot of time to get there."*
- Knowing the different characteristics of different careers such as salaries, work-life balance and employee satisfaction.
  - *"I left school very uncertain and at times confused, because none of my parents held a degree there was very little knowledge of professions and what they actually do at home. I wish I knew better that certain jobs are much better paid than others."*

Job applications

Having the knowledge necessary to successfully identify and apply for relevant jobs.

For our interviewees the job search and application processes were often filled with unwritten and unspoken rules that some felt unequipped to successfully navigate. For example:

- Knowing how to identify suitable roles based on your experiences and qualifications.
  - *"I worked as a bookkeeper for the charity Oxfam, which allowed me to look at some entry finance roles straight away without any specific entry qualifications"*
- Knowing how to write CVs and cover letters.
  - *"I was using Word templates to put together colourful, short, and 'stand out' CVs - and I heard nothing back from internships I was applying for."*
- Knowing how to act in and prepare for interviews.
  - *"Asking relevant questions in an interview is important to have a better understanding of what they're looking for. [I wish I'd known] that an interview is an opportunity for you to get to know the company as much as it for them to get to know you."*

Work culture

Having the knowledge necessary to integrate into workplace culture; to know how to act and work professionally and develop yourself.

Transitioning from education into the workplace requires young people to learn a whole new set of social norms, behavioural expectations and often unspoken rules. This can be particularly challenging if they do not have adults in their life who can advise and mentor them. Interviewees specifically identified:

- Knowing what acting professionally in the workplace means in your specific industry.
  - *"I did not know what a workplace would want or expect. I have significantly struggled to fit into a workplace to the point that I don't want to do it. I don't feel I have the interpersonal skills that school could have helped with."*
- Knowing how to form positive professional relationships and networks, and that this is important.
  - *"When I first entered the job market, I underestimated the importance of networking and didn't fully appreciate how it could help me in my job search."*

High culture

Having knowledge about certain types of cultural activities such as art, theatre, opera, travel, and political affairs; signalling membership to more 'elite' groups.

Whilst the concept of high culture is prominent in the literature, there was not a widespread sense from interviewees that having or lacking this type of knowledge impacted on their transition from education into employment. *(This has therefore been shaded in a lighter colour in the graphic.)*

Confidence

Having the confidence to *use* your assumed knowledge, essential for having the ability to convert knowledge into educational or career capital.

As well as the four knowledge domains identified, our interviews revealed an enabling domain that was not knowledge in itself but was crucial for young people to be able to use the knowledge that they did have.

- *"I didn't understand how much confidence would play a part into getting pretty much any job. Coming from school, where grades would speak for themselves, I had thought it would be the same for the job market. But selling yourself is a big part of it."*
- *"I think I struggled with being confident in my abilities as I have always been someone who slides into the background."*

- *"I feel that I was hesitant to ask for salary review, or felt nervous to negotiate on starting a new job, whereas my boyfriend at the time had much more confidence, perhaps being male."*
- *"I have gained confidence through experience, the more that I have worked the more I have realised how capable I am, and I can see how I fit in to a team to fulfil my role."*

Confidence, in this context, is the idea that people from certain backgrounds will have a level of ease through which they navigate the world. They feel comfortable in different social situations and comfortable to use advantages (such as advantages in knowledge, or resources) to further themselves. This was a common theme across all domains. For example, knowing which job would best suit your knowledge and qualifications is not much use if you do not possess the confidence to apply for such a job.

The concept of confidence/ease is therefore considered in relation to all five domains in the following chapters.

CHAPTER FOUR – DOMAIN ONE: THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

Chapter summary

- Disadvantaged young people have a poor understanding of the education system and are making uninformed decisions that impact them into adulthood.
- In particular, they do not know what educational pathways are available, how to choose between them, and what the potential benefits and drawbacks are of different pathways.
  - 45% of young people eligible for FSM incorrectly thought that Business Studies was a more helpful A-Level for university applications than Further Maths.
  - Over a quarter do not understand how student finance works in England, and those entitled to free school meals are more likely to believe that you can go bankrupt from student loans.
  - 36% of those whose parents did not attend university were not able to identify the University of Cambridge as the most prestigious university in a list of institutions.

This lack of knowledge led to interviewees being "stuck" on an educational pathway that did not align with their career and life aspirations, firstly due to making uninformed and unconscious decisions, and secondly due to the inflexibility of the education system.

4.1 – Knowing the different educational pathways available, and which would best suit you

One of the first decisions a student will have to make is whether they want to pursue a more academic, or a more vocational, pathway. However, our older cohort of interviewees commonly reflected that this was an area in which they lacked the necessary assumed knowledge to make informed decisions. Interviewees had poor knowledge of the vocational systems and often felt pushed towards a "traditional" university pathway. This is concerning because it suggests that young people may be making major decisions about their educational pathways without adequate knowledge on what they are choosing between, and without an understanding of which pathway may best suit their future career and life aspirations.

A lack of understanding of the vocational pathways on offer is of particular concern for equality of opportunity because our interviews indicated that vocational training may help disadvantaged young people transition into the workplace. Interviewees early in their career who had undertaken more vocationally-focused courses were more positive about their journey and were less likely to report facing barriers transitioning into employment. This view was echoed in a previous SMF study on how the public viewed vocational education[21]. In fact, interviewees felt that there wasn't a large difference in assumed knowledge or preparedness for the workplace between

them and their peers who came from more privileged backgrounds. They attributed this to the focus on standardised professional competencies and the opportunity to learn on the job through work placements, which helped put them on a more equal footing. Similarly, some interviewees who followed the university route felt that they would have been more prepared for the world of work if they had pursued a vocational qualification instead.

Interviewees also found that once on a specific pathway, the rigidity of the education system made it difficult to change direction or switch pathways.

"I felt rushed into going to university as I don't feel the other options available were made clear to me. I did well at school so it felt like the logical next step would be to continue in academia, but in hindsight I think an apprenticeship would've been a better place to start. I don't feel university prepares you for the working world."

Male interviewee, 23, White, State school

"[I wish I'd had] access to information on the options available post-school. The only option really presented to me at the time was going to sixth form and then university. Had I been aware of options such as apprenticeships I might have done one or looked to get into a trade. As I was "more able" I was directed towards further education rather than looking at options to guarantee a career."

Male interviewee, 29, White, State school

"Because I was in an apprenticeship, I found the transition [into employment] easy because I was slowly integrating it into my life anyway. [My apprenticeship] taught me how to act professionally in the workplace, it taught me different behaviours in the workplace and how to communicate in negative situations."
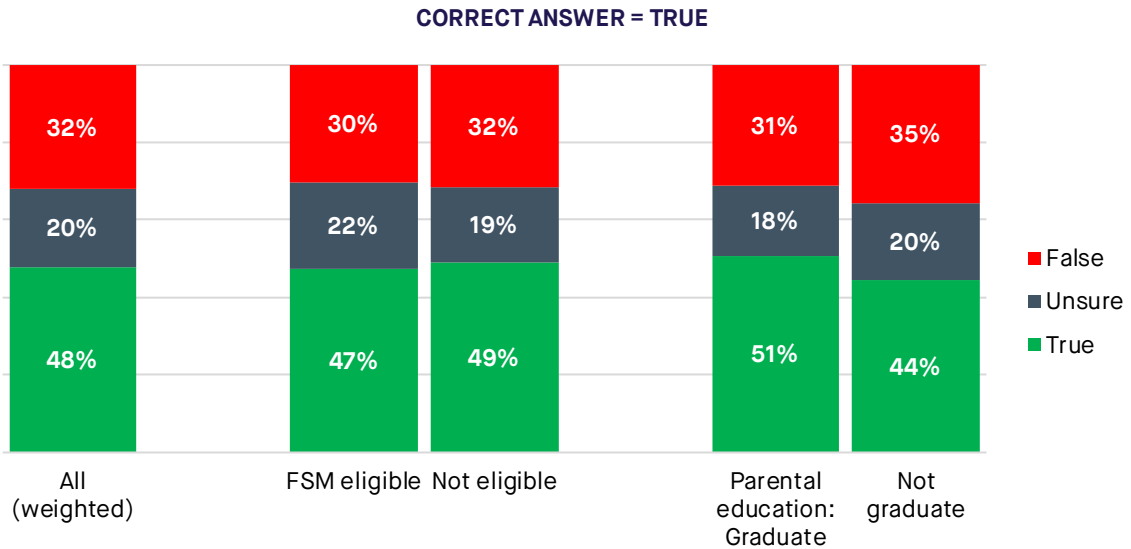
Female interviewee, 27, Mixed ethnicity, State school

In order to test levels of assumed knowledge about different education pathways, we created two proxy measures. One tested respondents' knowledge on degree apprenticeships, and another tested their knowledge on apprenticeship pay and conditions. We also polled respondents' attitudes towards vocational training, asking whether they felt that getting a university degree was better than pursuing a vocational qualification.

4.1.1 – Knowledge of apprenticeships: Levels of assumed knowledge of the apprenticeship and higher apprenticeship pathways was significantly lower for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds

Young people whose parents had a university degree were more likely to understand apprenticeships and degree apprenticeships than those whose parents did not go to university (Figures 3 and 4). Knowledge of these systems was low amongst all respondents: policy interventions should seek to increase knowledge for all making these decisions, with a particular focus on those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to address this disparity.

Figure 3: "Someone who does a degree apprenticeship graduates with the same level of qualification as someone who does a traditional degree."

CORRECT ANSWER = TRUE

	False	Unsure	True
All (weighted)	32%	20%	48%
FSM eligible	30%	22%	47%
Not eligible	32%	19%	49%
Parental education: Graduate	31%	18%	51%
Not graduate	35%	20%	44%

Source: SMF survey of 15–21-year-olds 2024; Note: Parental education: Graduate and Not graduate data only for 15-18-year-olds

Figure 4: "Apprentices get paid a wage and get holiday pay whilst they are studying."
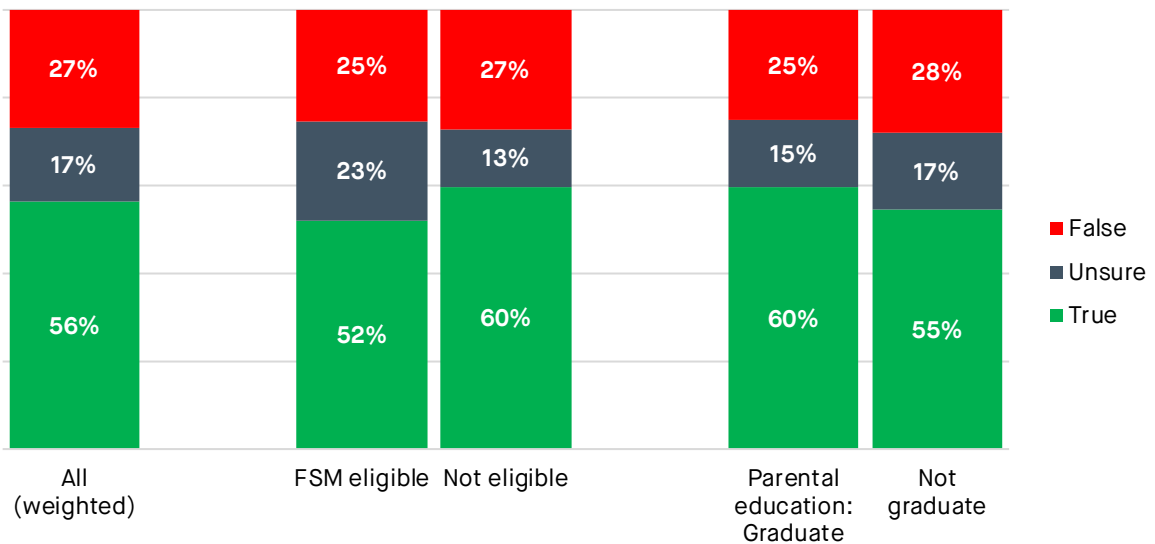
	False	Unsure	True
All (weighted)	27%	17%	56%
FSM eligible	25%	23%	52%
Not eligible	27%	13%	60%
Parental education: Graduate	25%	15%	60%
Not graduate	28%	17%	55%

Source: SMF survey of 15–21-year-olds 2024; Note: Parental education: Graduate and Not graduate data only for 15-18-year-olds

Parental education was a key indicator of levels of assumed knowledge for these topics. 51% of young people whose parents had gone to university correctly understood that someone who completes a degree apprenticeship graduates with a degree. For those whose parents did not go to university this fell to 44%. 60% of young people whose parents had gone to university correctly understood that

apprentices get paid a wage and holiday pay whilst studying. This fell slightly to 55% for those who did not have a parent who went to university.
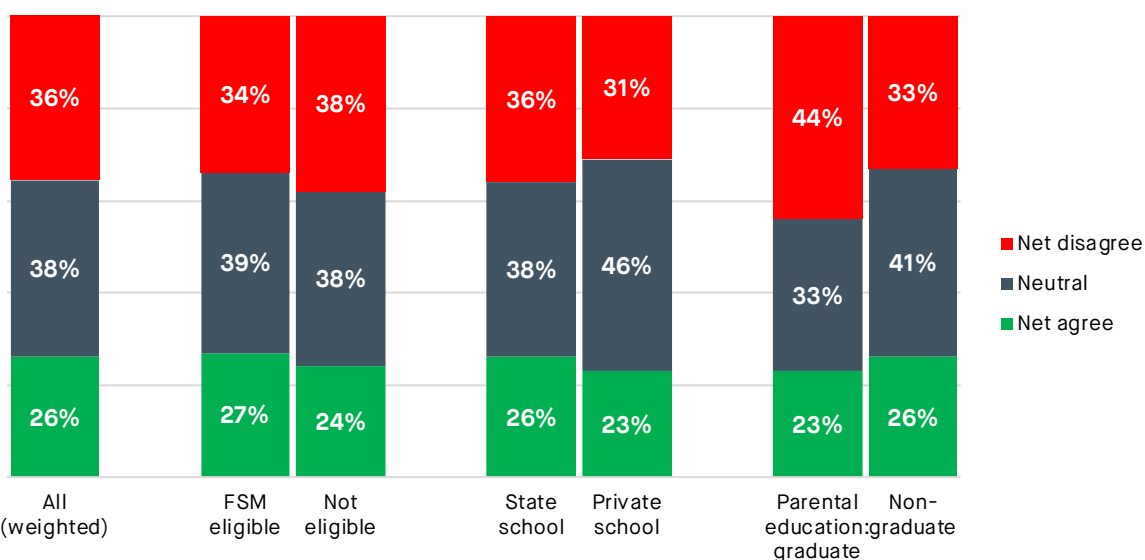
Similar disparities were seen between young people who had been entitled to free school meals, and those that hadn't: 47% of free school meal students correctly answered the question on degree apprenticeships versus 49% of those who were not entitled to free school meals. 52% of free school meal students correctly answered the question on apprenticeships versus 60% of those who were not entitled to free school meals.

4.1.2 – Value of vocational pathways: Young people are uncertain about the benefits of vocational versus academic pathways

Vocational and academic pathways both have their own benefits, and which will be best for an individual student will depend on many factors including their career aspirations. Crucially, there is not one that is "always better" than the other.

However, a significant minority (25%) of young people in our polling thought that getting a university degree is always better than a vocational qualification such as an apprenticeship (Figure 5). Just over a third disagreed (36%), and a similar proportion were unsure (38%). Young people entitled to free school meals were slightly more likely to agree (27% versus 24%), as were those who went to state school rather than private school (26% versus 23%). Those whose parents attended university were more likely to disagree (44% versus 33%), whilst those whose parents did not attend were more likely to be neutral (41% versus 33%). These views could lead young people to not properly consider all of their options, and leave them set on a path that is not right for them.

Figure 5: "Getting a university degree is always better than getting a vocational qualification such as an apprenticeship."

	All (weighted)	FSM eligible	Not eligible	State school	Private school	Parental education: graduate	Non-graduate
Net disagree	36%	34%	38%	36%	31%	44%	33%
Neutral	38%	39%	38%	38%	46%	33%	41%
Net agree	26%	27%	24%	26%	23%	23%	26%

Source: SMF survey of 15–21-year-olds 2024; Note: Parental education: Graduate and Not graduate data only for 15-18-year-olds

Combined with low levels of knowledge, it is concerning that young people least likely to understand the vocational system are also least likely to feel that it is as

valuable as university. Whilst our study does not examine causation, there are a number of potential interacting factors at play that warrant exploration in future research. It may be that the lower level of understanding and knowledge makes it less likely that someone would value a vocational qualification as highly. For our question testing knowledge of apprenticeship pay and conditions (see Figure 4), that certainly seems to be the case. 44% of respondents who thought that getting a university degree was always better answered this question correctly. This rose to 61% for those who did not believe that a university degree was always better. The same trend existed with our question on degree apprenticeships (see Figure 3), although the knowledge gap was less significant (3%). Similarly, if disadvantaged young people are concerned about the value of a vocational qualification and are not receiving information from careers advisors or parents about these routes, they may be less likely to seek the information out themselves.

4.2 – Knowing the different subjects and qualifications on offer, and how choices over which to study may impact your future pathways

Once students have decided on their broad education pathway, they will then face choices about which subjects and qualifications to study. However, our interviewees identified that they had often lacked sufficient assumed knowledge in these areas. They often did not understand the range of subjects and qualifications on offer, nor how these decisions could impact their future options.

If students do not have adequate levels of knowledge about their options and potential impact of their decisions, then they may not make choices appropriate for their career and life aspirations. Interviewees often fell back on picking subjects or qualifications based on what they got the highest grades in, or what they felt their school or parents wanted them to pursue, as opposed to making informed decisions towards a certain career or educational pathway. Later in life, they would often find that these uninformed decisions had shut off certain options for them, for example not being able to study a certain university course because they didn't take the required A-Levels.

> *"I wish this information [about different careers and jobs] was discussed earlier, before you needed to make your A-Level choices. […] I would have been able to make an informed choice on what subjects would be relevant or useful for further education based on careers I felt I would enjoy or be good at."*
>
> *Female interviewee, 28, White, Private school*

Many university courses will require specific A-Level subjects at a specific attainment level. Some of the more selective universities make explicit judgements about how 'useful' certain subjects are for a student who wishes to study there, although this information is not always known by the aspiring student. The University of Cambridge, for example, published on their website a list of A-Levels that they deem particularly useful for a student to take if they wish to apply to study there, and a list of those that are "less helpful". Some subjects they do not even count as an A-Level, such as critical thinking.[22]

To test levels of assumed knowledge in young people today, we used one proxy measure about A-Level choice. Utilising the list provided by the University of Cambridge, we told participants that a "leading university [had] revealed which A-Level subjects are helpful to get a place on one of its courses" and asked them to rank a list of subjects from the most to least helpful.

Young people in our polling had very poor understanding of which A-Levels are considered more useful for getting into a top university than others (Figure 6). 64% of all respondents incorrectly identified business studies as one of the top three most useful subjects. Only 39% knew that History was one of the top three most well-regarded subjects out of the provided list.

Figure 6: "A leading university has revealed which A-Level subjects are helpful to get a place one on of its courses. Please rank the following subjects from the most helpful, to the least helpful (with 1 being the most helpful)."

	Free school meals		School type		Parental education	
	Yes	No	State	Private	Graduate	Non-graduate
Correctly placed in top three						
Further maths	72%	81%	78%	70%	78%	76%
History	35%	42%	40%	37%	42%	37%
Psychology	50%	51%	50%	53%	57%	46%
Incorrectly placed in top three						
Media studies	27%	18%	22%	22%	18%	24%
Business	67%	62%	65%	60%	57%	67%
Critical thinking	49%	46%	46%	58%	49%	49%

Source: SMF survey of 15–21-year-olds 2024; Note: Parental education: Graduate and Not graduate data only for 15-18-year-olds

The trend for young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds was even more concerning, especially for those eligible for free school meals or those whose parents did not attend university. However, attending a private school had minimal benefit in this area.

- 69% of young people who were entitled to free school meals incorrectly selected business as more useful than history, compared to 62% of their peers who were not eligible.
- Young people entitled to free school meals were more likely to think that business studies was more useful than further maths compared to those not eligible, at 45% compared to 30% for those not eligible.
- 67% of those whose parents did not go to university placed business studies ahead of history, and 36% placed it ahead of further maths.
- Young people who attended private school were less likely to select businesses studies in their top three, but were more likely to overestimate the usefulness of critical thinking.

Not all students will want to study at a "leading" university, and of course all these A-Level choices could be useful to an individual depending on their career aspirations. However, the disparity in knowledge about what high-tariff institutions may require by socioeconomic status threatens equality of opportunity. A young person from a lower socioeconomic background aspiring to attend one of these providers could receive outstanding A-Level results, but if they have not picked the "correct" subjects they may not be able to apply to their desired course or institution. This can also have a knock-on impact on which careers will be open to them when they graduate.

4.3 – Knowing how the university system works

For many of our interviewees, particularly for those who did not have parents who attended university, lacking appropriate assumed knowledge of how the systems work was a barrier to access. They did not have adequate knowledge to make an informed decision about whether to go to university and, if so, which provider to study at. Similarly, it was often assumed that they understood how the student finance system worked, yet misconceptions were common.

> *"I applied to university to do teaching as when I chose that at 17 I didn't know what jobs were really out there. Now out of university, I am spotting jobs that I like the look of but I'm not qualified for. If I could go back in time, I may have studied something differently."*

Female interviewee, 22, White, State school

> *"I chose [psychology] as an A-Level subject and as a degree. There's definitely not enough information on how long it may take to become a clinical psychologist, and it can take a lot of time to get there."*

Male interviewee, 26, White, State school

For many students about to leave compulsory education they will be making decisions about whether to apply to university at ages 16 to 17. For most this will also be their first significant financial decision, given that the average graduate leaves with over £40,000 worth of student debt.[23] Equally, if they make an uninformed decision about what and where to study, the inflexibility of England's higher education system makes it hard to change your mind later. Being able to transfer

course credits between institutions is not common, as each provider sets their own curricula and courses may not be comparable between institutions.[24]

These decisions will also impact on a young person's transition into the workplace after graduation. Whilst multiple factors will feature in a person's decision to attend university, many graduates do benefit from their degree helping them find their desired job, and teaching them industry specific skills and knowledge.[25] Some interviewees who felt that they had picked the wrong degree for their desired career path due to lack of knowledge said that their degree "fe[lt] wasted", as their industry specific skills and knowledge may not be as useful in other sectors. Equally, not knowing what transferable and soft skills they had learnt through participating in higher education was an area of assumed knowledge in itself (and discussed in Chapter Six).

4.3.1 – Knowledge about how the application and finance systems works

To measure knowledge of the student finance system we provided young people with a series of options of how it works, and asked them to identify the correct answer.

Over a quarter (27%) of young people in England did not know how the student finance system works.

- 7% correctly identified that tuition is paid via loans but thought that the repayments were time rather than income-based, and that you could face bankruptcy if you do not repay it all.
- 6% thought that you pay for your studies via a graduate tax that you pay for your entire working life.
- 5% thought that you had to pay the whole amount upfront, with no loan.
- 1% thought that university is free in England.
- 9% reported that they had no idea how the financing system works.

Young people were less likely to understand the system if they were eligible for free school meals. Only 67% of young people eligible for free school meals correctly understood the financing system, compared to 78% of their peers who were not eligible. They were more likely to believe that they could face bankruptcy from student loans (9% vs 5%), or that it worked via a graduate tax (9% vs 4%), then their peers.

This disparity in knowledge by socioeconomic status is particularly concerning given that it is people from these backgrounds that have to pay back more in student loans on average over their lifetime, and who make payments for a longer period of time.[26] Furthermore, the fact that almost 1 in 10 students eligible for free school meals believed that you could go bankrupt from student loans in England is a concern for access, risking putting off this group from applying due to lack of assumed knowledge.

4.3.2 – Knowledge about how different institutions differ from one another and how to pick a provider

When deciding what and where to study, young people will take many factors into account. The courses on offer at a specific institution, the reputation/prestige of an

institution, the location, financial and other support on offer, and what the entry requirements are may all play a role in shaping decisions.

The reputation or prestige of a course or institution is important for many prospective students.[27] League tables are published ranking universities in the UK on various metrics each year, and many institutions put significant resources into trying to improve (or maintain) their ranking. The ranking of an institution can also be important to employers, with some roles requiring not just any degree, but a degree from a "high tariff" or "top" university.

However, our survey found that knowledge on which universities were considered more prestigious than others was not equally distributed. We provided respondents with a list of institutions and asked them to rank them by how prestigious they are considered to be. The institutions we asked them to rank are below, in the order they are placed in the most recent Times Higher Education World Reputation Rankings:

1. University of Cambridge
2. University College London (UCL)
3. The University of Edinburgh
4. University of York
5. University of Liverpool
6. Cardiff University
7. Nottingham Trent University
8. University of Hertfordshire
9. Bath Spa University

Using league tables to assess the prestige of an institution is an imperfect science. An institution could, for example, be lower in the league tables but perform very highly for the specific subject a student wants to study. Therefore, young people were scored holistically on their overall ranking; they were not expected to get the position of each institution identical to the league table rankings.

Young people without parents who had attended university were less likely to be able to correctly identify prestigious institutions. Similarly, young people eligible for free school meals performed more poorly than their peers.

- A quarter of young people were not able to identify the University of Cambridge as the most prestigious university listed. 13% did not even put it in their top three.

- The higher the level of education attained by their parents, the more accurately respondents were able to rank institutions. For those whose parents had no qualifications only 83% identified the University of Cambridge in their top three, versus 96% of those whose parents had a graduate degree.

- The difference between those eligible for free school meals who correctly identified the University of Cambridge in their top three versus those who were not eligible was 8 percentage points (81% vs 89%). The state/private school gap was 4 percentage points (86% versus 90%).

- There was not a clear distinction between those from the North, the South, and the Midlands. However, those from Greater London did markedly better. There was also an interesting local element for some respondents, with a quarter of those from the East Midlands incorrectly ranking Nottingham Trent University in the top three.

There are many factors that a prospective student may consider when deciding which institution(s) to apply to. For some students, the overall 'prestige' of a provider may not be the most important factor or relevant at all in their decision. However, this inequality in knowledge suggests that not all applicants are applying with equal levels of information to inform their decisions. Previous research has found that more disadvantaged students tend to apply for less prestigious and lower tariff universities or courses compared to more advantaged students with the same attainment levels.[28] Existing hypothesises have often centred around risk-aversion and confidence, arguing that disadvantaged students may underestimate their own abilities. Our polling indicates that there may be other factors at play here too, including that disadvantaged students simply do not know which institutions are considered more or less prestigious.

4.3.3 – Knowing the benefits (and potential drawbacks) of going to university versus pursuing other routes

When reflecting on their educational journey, interviewees noted that a lack of knowledge about the pros and cons of attending university versus pursuing other paths, such as vocational training or immediate employment, prevented them from making informed decisions. This gap in understanding affected both those who attended university and those who did not. Some university graduates realised they were unaware of the time, commitment, and delayed entry into the job market that a degree required, as well as its potential benefits. Many expressed that university no longer seemed "worth it," citing difficulty in securing jobs or higher earnings. However, they appeared unaware of the significant graduate wage premium that still exists. Similarly, those who chose not to attend university did not fully grasp which careers would benefit from having a degree when making their decision. It was clear that neither those who aspired to attend university, nor those who wished to pursue other routes, had adequate levels of knowledge when making these decisions.

> *"I wish I had known that an undergraduate degree doesn't get you as far as you think, but it's an essential stepping stone."*
>
> *Female interviewee, 21, White, State School*

> *"I first tried to gain as much experience as I could, and I really thought that I could have made it in my field without a certificate or a degree. I realised quite late that, unfortunately, nowadays without a degree there is little chances to get what you want."*
>
> *Male interviewee, 29, White, State school*

> *"I did not feel like I had any other option than going to university as I come from a very low-income household, and I wish I had considered the level of commitment and level of study that would be required of me at university."*

To measure levels of assumed knowledge about the benefits of a university degree we tested 15–21-year-olds on their understanding of the graduate wage premium. In 2023, the median graduate salary was £40,000, £10,500 higher than for non-graduates.[29] However, our polling found that half of young people do not understand the financial benefit of a university degree.

Only half (52%) of young people knew that university graduates, on average, are paid more. 23% believed that graduates do not earn any more than non-graduates at all, and 25% reported that they didn't know. Women, young people entitled to free school meals, young people whose parents did not attend university, and young people who attended state school were all less likely to know that university graduates' benefit from an earnings premium.

Even for those that did know of the earnings benefit, the majority struggled to identify how large that benefit is on average. 24% of respondents correctly identified that graduates are paid, on average, approximately £10,000 more per year. 14% underestimated the premium and 14% overestimated the amount more a graduate can expect to earn on average. Respondents entitled to free school meals were less likely to be able to identify the correct wage premium, at 19% versus 27% for those not eligible. They were more likely to overestimate the premium, with 13% believing that it was about £20,000 per year and 3% believing it was about £30,000 per year. Those whose parents attended university had the highest accuracy, with 31% correctly identifying the level of the premium.

Figure 7: "On average, how much more a year do you think workers with a university degree get paid than those without"? *Correct answer = burgundy, about £10,000 more*
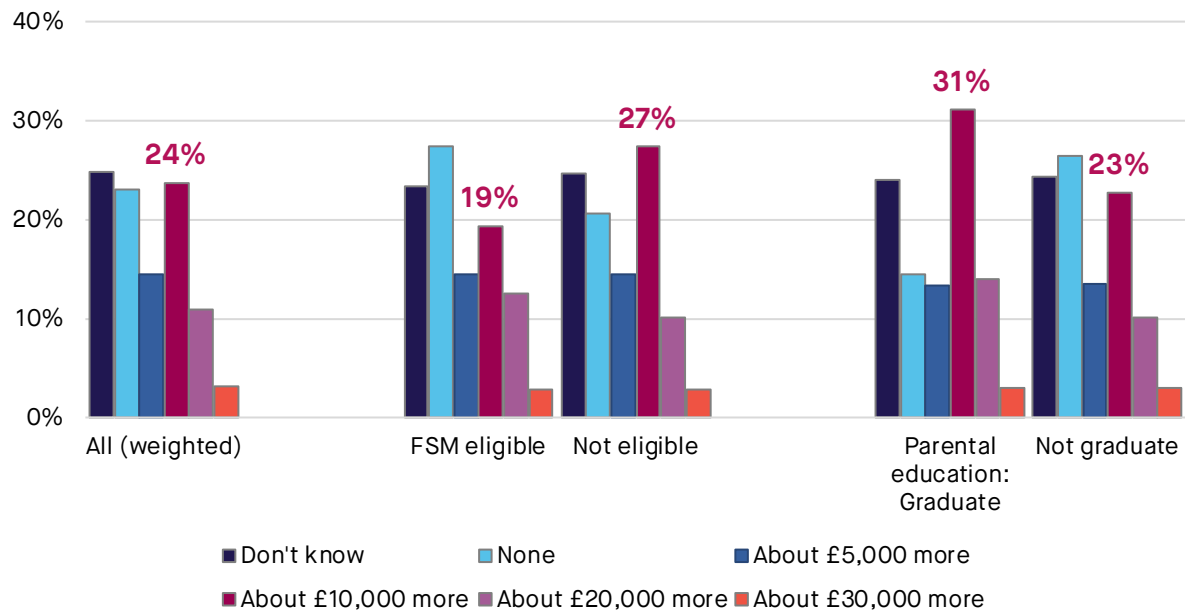
Source: SMF survey of 15–21-year-olds 2024; Note: Parental education: Graduate and Not graduate data only for 15-18-year-olds

CHAPTER FIVE – DOMAIN TWO: CAREER PLANNING

Chapter summary

- Good career planning means that young people do not end up making decisions that they regret, either by choosing the wrong path, or failing to gain prerequisite experience or qualifications.
- This domain of assumed knowledge has been divided into three areas: young people need to know what their options are, what the requirements are for those roles, and what the pros and cons are of different paths.
- We found that young people from less affluent backgrounds, or worse academic performance, reach out to fewer sources of advice, limiting their appreciation of possible career options.
  - The more sources of advice that people had used, the better they scored in our Assumed Knowledge Index.
  - 95% of 15-18-year-olds who have a parent/guardian with a post-graduate degree asked their friends or family for advice, compared to 67% of 15-18-year-olds who were on free school meals.
  - 53% of those expecting/with mainly 7-9s at GCSE had spoken to careers advisors compared to 46% of pupils on grades 4-6 and 32% of those with lower attainment.
- Students from private schools had much better networks of people in high-paying industries to speak to about careers.
  - 31% of state school pupils knew no one to ask for advice in the listed industries, compared to just 8% of private school pupils.
- In terms of assumed knowledge relating to career requirements, there are widespread misunderstandings of which professions require a specific degree.
  - 64% think lawyers need a law degree and 42% think teachers need an education degree.
- Those from more deprived backgrounds had a worse sense of what salaries different professions engender.

The decisions being made by young people as they transition from education into the workplace will have a lasting impact on their employment prospects, and the nature of their work. In order to make these decisions well, young people need to understand the options available to them, the trade-offs between different career paths, and what is required to pursue them.

SMF has done work previously in this space. We argued that "there is little benefit in creating pathways and opportunities for personal, social, and economic advancement if people lack the skills and knowledge to navigate them well". Access to good careers guidance lowers unemployment and makes young people more

career ready, whilst "help[ing] millions to achieve their potential by finding the route best suited to them".[30]

Career planning is clearly a consequential domain of assumed knowledge that interacts with understanding of the education system and job applications. It is also one of the areas where understanding was weakest among the 20–29-year-olds interviewed. 55% of them said they didn't know enough about career planning, more than for any other domain.

There are three key areas of knowledge in the career planning domain, which will be explored in more detail in this section:

- 5.1 – Knowing what career options are possible for you and being able to make informed decisions on which to pursue
- 5.2 – Knowing what different careers require in terms of qualifications and experiences
- 5.3 – Knowing the different characteristics of different careers such as salaries, work-life balance and employee satisfaction

5.1 – Knowing what career options are possible for you and being able to make informed decisions on which to pursue.

Young people are needing to make decisions all the way through their educational journey that will open and close doors to different career options. They can only make these decisions in a conscious way for possible paths that they are aware of.

BBC Bitesize surveyed 4,000 13-16-year-olds about what their favoured career would be. The top 10 consisted of the kinds of roles which have existed for a century – doctor, engineer, teacher, lawyer, nurse, vet, footballer, artist, police officer, builder.[31] These longstanding job roles are visible to young people in their lives and wider culture. However, the world of work continues to evolve. The World Economic Forum estimates churn of 23% in the global workforce from 2023-28, with new roles being created and older ones being lost. [32]

Young people feel that they are not being exposed to a wide enough range of career paths during their education. One of the 20-29-year-olds interviewed reflected that it was only "…upon entering the workforce, [that they] realised that there were countless opportunities across various industries that [they] hadn't explored or even known existed". Another cited that list of classic professions:

> *"I feel that careers explored at career fairs etc are always the generic ones like doctor, accountant, vet, engineer etc – but it is amazing to find out how many people have jobs you never would have even considered."*

Female interviewee, White, 28, Private School

We tested levels of this type of assumed knowledge indirectly rather than directly in the survey of 15–21-year-olds. Rather than asking whether they had heard of certain professions, which would be hard to test honestly, we looked at ways in which they could be exposed to information on possible career paths. Respondents were asked

about who they had gone to for career advice, and also which industries they knew someone in that they could ask for advice.

5.1.1 – Sources of career advice: Young people with better qualified parents were more likely to go to friends and family for career advice

Young people seek advice from a range of sources when thinking about their careers. This should provide them with knowledge about the kinds of jobs that they could do and would be suitable for. In the survey, we asked respondents which sources they had taken advantage of, from career advisors to social media.

As Figure 8 shows, over two-thirds of respondents have relied on family and friends for assistance, making it the most common source of help. Parental circumstances influenced the extent to which family and friends were relied on. 95% of 15–18-year-olds whose parent/guardian has a post-graduate degree asked family or friends for advice, compared to 84% for undergraduate degree and 69% for those whose caregivers' highest attainment was GCSE or equivalent. Just 67% of free school meal eligible 15-18-year-olds relied on family and friend guidance.

Figure 8: "Which of these sources have you used to gain information or ask questions about choices you've had to make in regards to your education or career path?"
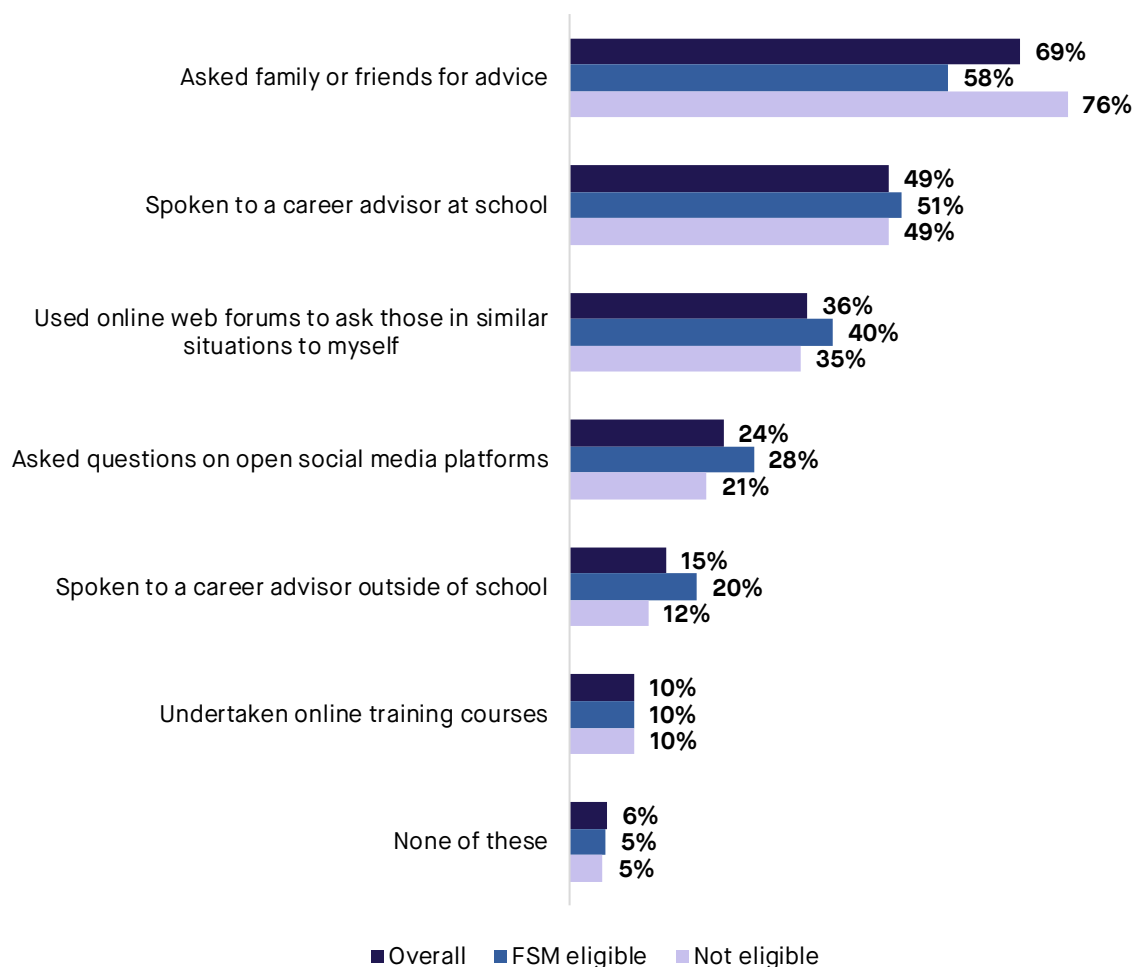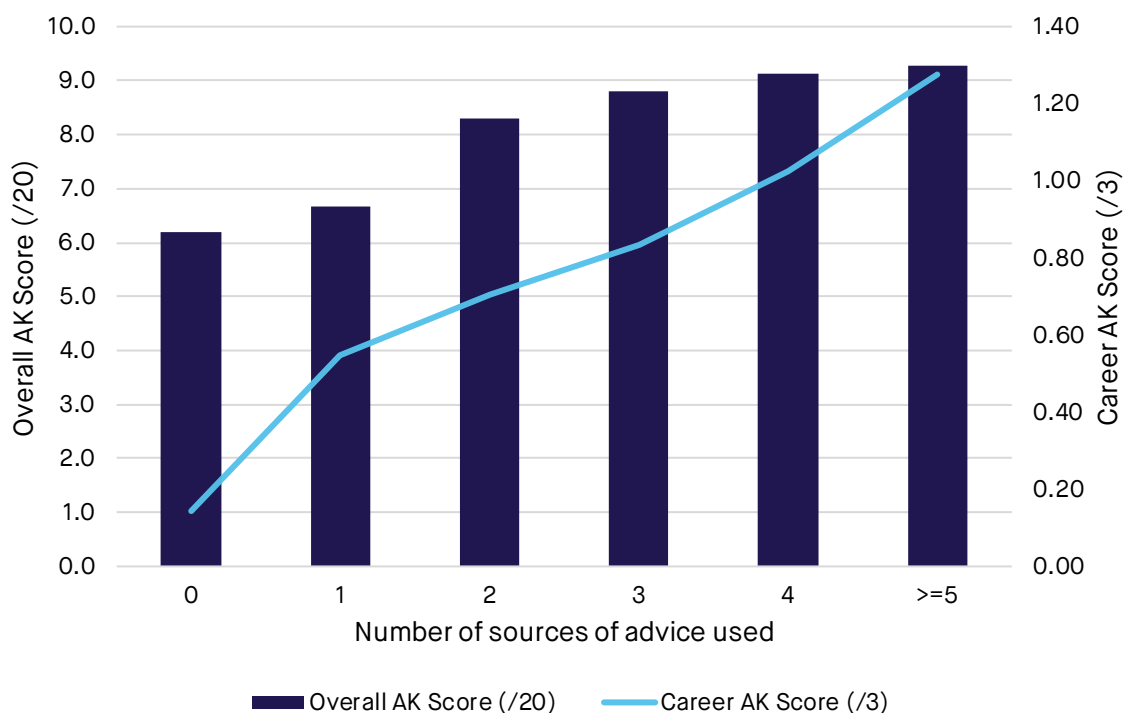

Source: SMF survey of 15–21-year-olds 2024

Just under half had spoken to careers advisors. Some of those who "unfortunately… did not attend" sessions with careers advisors came to regret it, as "others said it was beneficial and I wish I would have used [the service]". Women were 8 percentage points more likely to do so, and those at private schools were 11 percentage points more likely to than state school pupils, perhaps reflecting greater accessibility.

53% of more academically successful students, based upon attained or being predicted mostly 7-9s at GCSE, had spoken to careers advisors compared to 46% of pupils on grades 4-6 and 32% of those with lower attainment. This could reflect a more proactive approach by the students, or could indicate that schools are targeting these services more strongly at their strongest learners. Arguably, it is those with the lowest grades that have the fewest options, and are therefore in the greatest need of support in thinking through their career plans.

Respondents who had drawn on more sources of advice had overall higher levels of assumed knowledge across domains, based upon our Assumed Knowledge Scoring Index. They also did better across the three questions in the Index related to career planning, which will be also covered in this chapter. This is not to suggest causality – those with more assumed knowledge could be more likely to seek out advice, or those who have support could be correlating with other factors. This would be an interesting area for further study.

Figure 9: Overall average Assumed Knowledge score out of 20, and career related Assumed Knowledge score out of 3, by number of sources of advice used[ii]

Source: SMF survey of 15–21-year-olds 2024

[ii] 5 sources and 6 sources combined due to lower response levels (12 each)

5.1.2 – Contacts in high-paying industries: Young people from a wealthier background are far more likely to have access to people in well-paid industries

We asked young people in the survey whether they had connections across six well-paid occupations who they could ask for advice relating to their career. These contacts could essentially work as conduits of assumed knowledge to the young person. In a career planning context, they would be able to reveal more about the kinds of roles that are available in these industries, and their relative merits and requirements.

A third (34%) of 15–21-year-olds knew someone working in medicine, and around a quarter (27%) knew someone working in legal professions, finance (26%) or academia (24%). 29% knew no one working in any of the fields.

Figure 10: "Do you personally know anyone who works or has worked in the following fields, that you would be able to ask for education or career advice and guidance from, regardless of whether you are interested in entering that field? Please tick all that apply."

	All	School type	
		State	Private
Medicine	**34%**	34%	42%
Law	**27%**	26%	46%
Finance	**26%**	25%	41%
Academia	**24%**	24%	26%
Politics	**11%**	10%	15%
Consultancy	**9%**	8%	21%
None	**29%**	31%	8%

Source: SMF survey of 15–21-year-olds 2024

Looking at these results by characteristic, as Figure 10 demonstrates, there are stark differences in the expansiveness of young people's advice networks based upon their background. Those from private schools were far more likely to know someone working in law (46% vs 26%), finance (41% vs 25%) and medicine (42% vs 34%). Only 8% of private school pupils knew no one from any of these industries, compared to 31% of state school pupils.

There are clear differences based upon respondents' socio-economic background as well. 42% of those from a lower socio-economic background knew no one, whilst less than half that rate (20%) from a higher socio-economic background did.

Having a strong network seemed to impact on the levels of assumed knowledge for respondents. The more connections a respondent had to those in well-paid industries, the better they performed on our Assumed Knowledge Scoring Index. Respondents who had no contacts in the listed industries scored on average 6.4 out of 20 on the index. Those who had contacts in five or more of these industries, however, scored 10.9 out of 20. As with the strong correlation with respondents'

usage of sources of advice, it is not possible to deduce causation here. Again, it would be an interesting area of further exploration.

Figure 11: Overall average Assumed Knowledge Index score out of 20 by number of industries where respondents have contacts
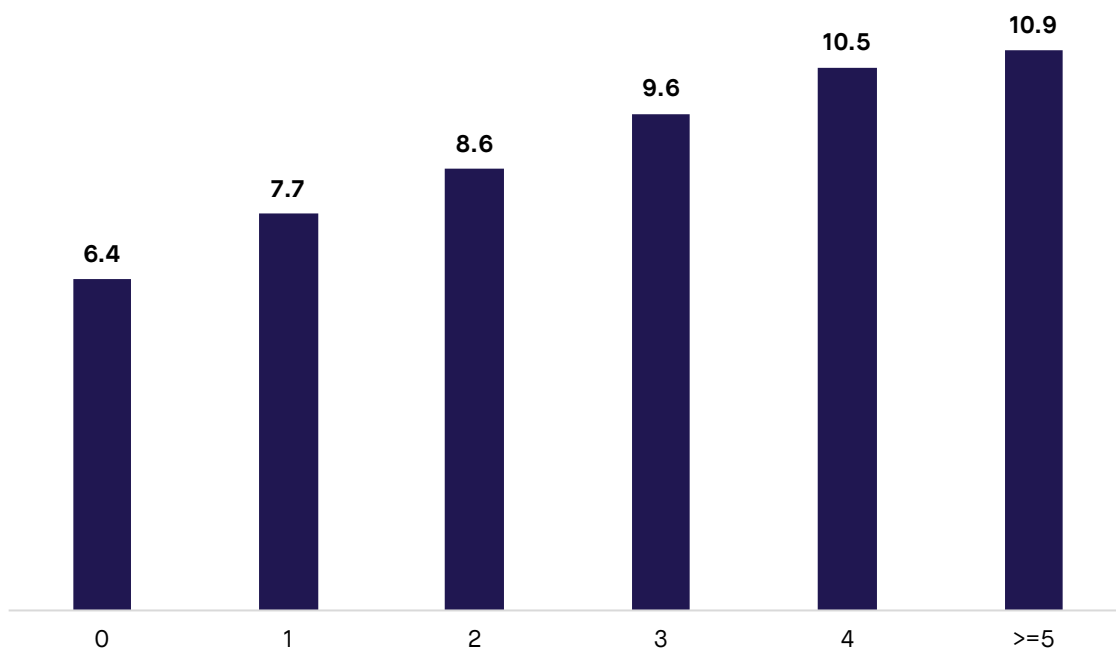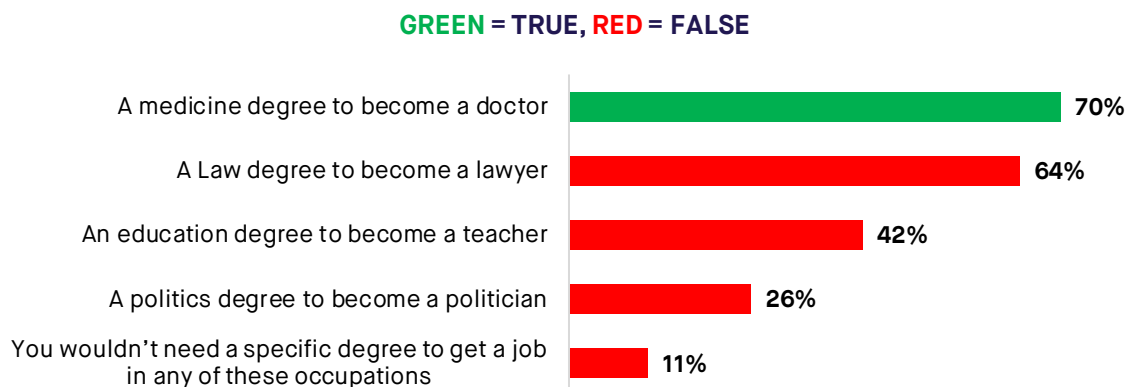

Source: SMF survey of 15–21-year-olds 2024

5.2 – Knowing what different careers require in terms of qualifications and experiences

One of the most directly impactful areas of assumed knowledge is around the qualification and experience requirements for different professions. If a young person has their heart set on a career path, but chooses the wrong A-levels, or misinterprets the degree requirements, then those routes can close. Conversely, they can assume that certain jobs are not an option because they lack a specific qualification. One interviewee in their 20s reflected that they were "under the impression that specific degrees lead to specific careers/industries" in their youth, before becoming more aware of the ability to forge different paths as they grew up.

This area of assumed knowledge was tested by asking whether certain degrees were required for a selection of career paths. The survey of 15–21-year-olds demonstrates a widespread overestimation of the extent to which professional careers have prerequisite degrees, as Figure 12 shows. Of these, only doctors require a particular degree (medicine) to practice. 70% of respondents correctly selected this, but nearly two-thirds incorrectly believed that you needed a law degree to become a lawyer, whereas conversion courses like the Graduate Diploma in Law or Legal Practice Course are sufficient. 4 in 10 thought that you needed an education degree to become a teacher.

Figure 12: ""You must have a degree in [blank] in order to get a job as a [blank]." Please tick the options for which you believe this is true."

GREEN = TRUE, RED = FALSE

A medicine degree to become a doctor	**70%**
A Law degree to become a lawyer	**64%**
An education degree to become a teacher	**42%**
A politics degree to become a politician	**26%**
You wouldn't need a specific degree to get a job in any of these occupations	**11%**

Source: SMF survey of 15–21-year-olds 2024

The youngest respondents, aged 15, were in general the most likely to get these questions wrong, which is unsurprising as they would have had the least exposure to different professions, and are further away from having to make these decisions. Even so, more than one in five (21%) 21 year olds thought that politicians required a politics degree.

5.3 – Knowing the different characteristics of different careers such as salaries, work life balance and employee satisfaction

As well as knowing the requirements of different roles, knowing the benefits and trade-offs of them is also important when young people are planning their careers. Therefore, how career paths compare on salaries, how happy people are in those roles, workers' rights, and work-life balance feature as an area of assumed knowledge, and one that some of our older cohort of interviewees lacked:

> *"I did not know what a standard salary was, and this led to some anxiety and jealousy with people who worked in different sectors."*

Female interviewee, 24, White, State school

> *"I left school very uncertain and at times confused, because none of my parents held a degree there was very little knowledge of professions and what they actually do at home. I wish I knew better that certain jobs are much better paid than others."*
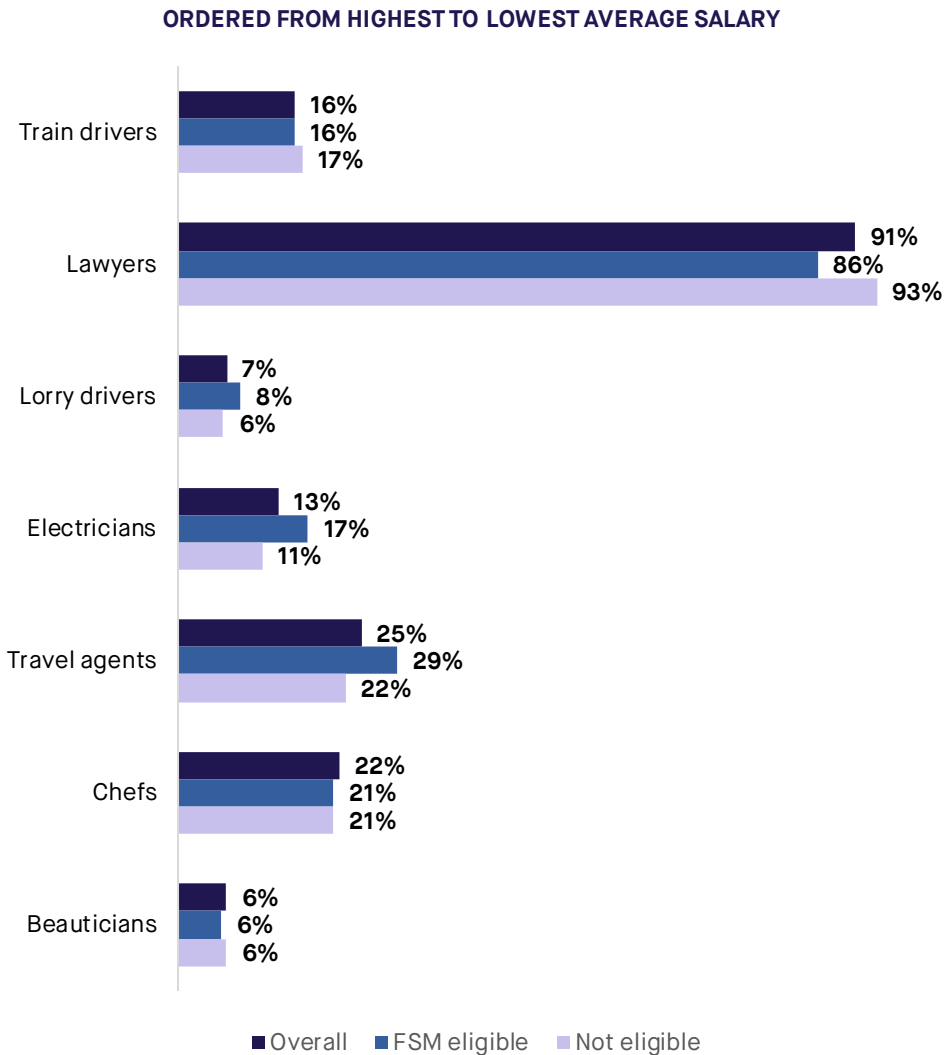
Male interviewee, 24, Ethnicity given as "other", State School

In the survey, we asked 15–21-year-olds to rank different career paths based upon their average salary, as a proxy measure to test this area of assumed knowledge. Pay is not the only thing that is important when choosing a career path – salaries are the second most popular reason for selecting a career among our respondents, with 66% ranking it in their top 3, underneath "passion". It is, however, something with good data availability, and that can be measured objectively.

The vast majority of respondents, 91%, correctly ranked lawyers in their top two highest paid roles, as shown in Figure 13. Around 6%, meanwhile, placed beauticians in their top two, despite them being the lowest paid of the professions listed.

Young people who were on free school meals at school were somewhat worse as identifying higher and lower paid jobs. 86% ranked lawyers in their top 2, compared to 93% of those who were not on free school meals. Travel agents were the third worst paid role, but 29% of those who had been on free school meals put them in their top two, whilst 22% of those who were not on free school meals did.

Figure 13: "Please rank the following jobs in terms of which ones you think have the highest average salary, from highest to lowest." % ranking in their top two

ORDERED FROM HIGHEST TO LOWEST AVERAGE SALARY

Job	Overall	FSM eligible	Not eligible
Train drivers	16%	16%	17%
Lawyers	91%	86%	93%
Lorry drivers	7%	8%	6%
Electricians	13%	17%	11%
Travel agents	25%	29%	22%
Chefs	22%	21%	21%
Beauticians	6%	6%	6%

Source: SMF survey of 15–21-year-olds 2024, BBC

CHAPTER SIX – DOMAIN THREE: JOB APPLICATIONS

Chapter summary

- Applying for a job is a multi-stage process, typically requiring research to find and understand the role, written applications (e.g. CVs) and interviews.
- Many of the young people in their 20s interviewed felt like they lacked the assumed knowledge necessary by the time they entered the job market.
- This is especially true of less advantaged young people, with them being less equipped to find jobs and determine whether they are a good fit for them.
    - Young people from private schools are more likely to try creative tactics such as emailing current employees (by 19% to 13% for state).
    - Only 47% of respondents on free school meals knew that they were able to negotiate salaries on job descriptions vs 64%.
- More privileged young people have also accrued more assumed knowledge on how to apply successfully to jobs, although having a part-time job may go some way to mitigating this.
    - 32% of private school pupils have been advised on how to tailor their applications to specific employers, compared to 23% of state pupils.
    - 43% of those at private school have been advised on how to describe their skills and qualities, compared to 32% of state pupils.
    - Young people from higher socio-economic groups were more familiar with the terms 'soft or transferable skills', perhaps making it easier for them to sell themselves in interviews.
    - Young people who had had a part-time job were 6 percentage points more likely to have had advice on tailoring their applications or describing their skills and qualities.

Once young people have determined their career paths and finished their journey through the education system, succeeding in the job application process is the next step. Discrimination in CV screening and interviews is well-documented, with ethnicity, age and class all potentially impacting success rates. Disparities in assumed knowledge levels are another potential driver, and one that will be explored in this section. [33] [34] [35]

Assumed knowledge regarding the job application process was a common theme in our interviews with 20–29-year-olds. 40% expressed that they lacked a sufficient knowledge on this topic, whilst only 15% reflected on the experience positively.

Many young people felt insufficiently prepared to find the right roles and navigate the process well.

> *"I didn't understand how to be in interviews, it was so hard writing CVs, practicing interviews and just being rejected because I wasn't given the right information for the jobs I wanted, everything I was taught was so vague and unrelatable and non-realistic"*

> *Female respondent, White, 25, State School*

The discussion in the interviews centred around several elements of the application process. The following sections of the report step through each of them, drawing on insights from the interviews and the survey:

- Knowing how to identify suitable roles based on your experiences and qualifications
- Knowing how to write CVs and cover letters
- Knowing how to act in and prepare for interviews

This chapter closes with a section looking at what types of support young people have sought to help them with their applications, and how people's backgrounds affect their likelihood to have done so. This is not an area of assumed knowledge in itself, but the levels of support received are shown to correlate with the Assumed Knowledge Index.

6.1 – Knowing how to identify suitable roles based on your experiences and qualifications.

To find a job, young people need to seek out job adverts, and determine whether they are suitable for the role. This entails assumed knowledge, including knowing what sources to use to find roles, how to determine whether they are a good fit for the company and how to interpret the job descriptions. This research period is not just about finding the right jobs, it also helps to strengthen the application according to the 20–29-year-olds interviewed for the project, as shown in the first quote below. The second quote illustrates the help that the older cohort found strong networks to be.

> *"Before this interview I thought I was well prepared. However, as the interviewer started asking questions, I realised I had not researched the company as well as I should have."*

> *Female interviewee, 22, Asian, State School*

> *"Some students had family that were already working in the NHS and could advise them strategically where to apply and what to do [...] they know which trusts are better paid, have better training opportunities and progression, which trusts have a better working culture and team etc."*

> *Female interviewee, 27, White, State School*

Another interviewee "had no idea it would be good for [them] to learn more about the company [they were] interviewing for". At their first job interview, they were asked about the company and what they and the role offer. The interviewee "didn't know

how to answer them" and was ultimately rejected because they sounded "uninterested and unprofessional". Clearly there are some young people who are going into the job application process unaware of the importance of research.
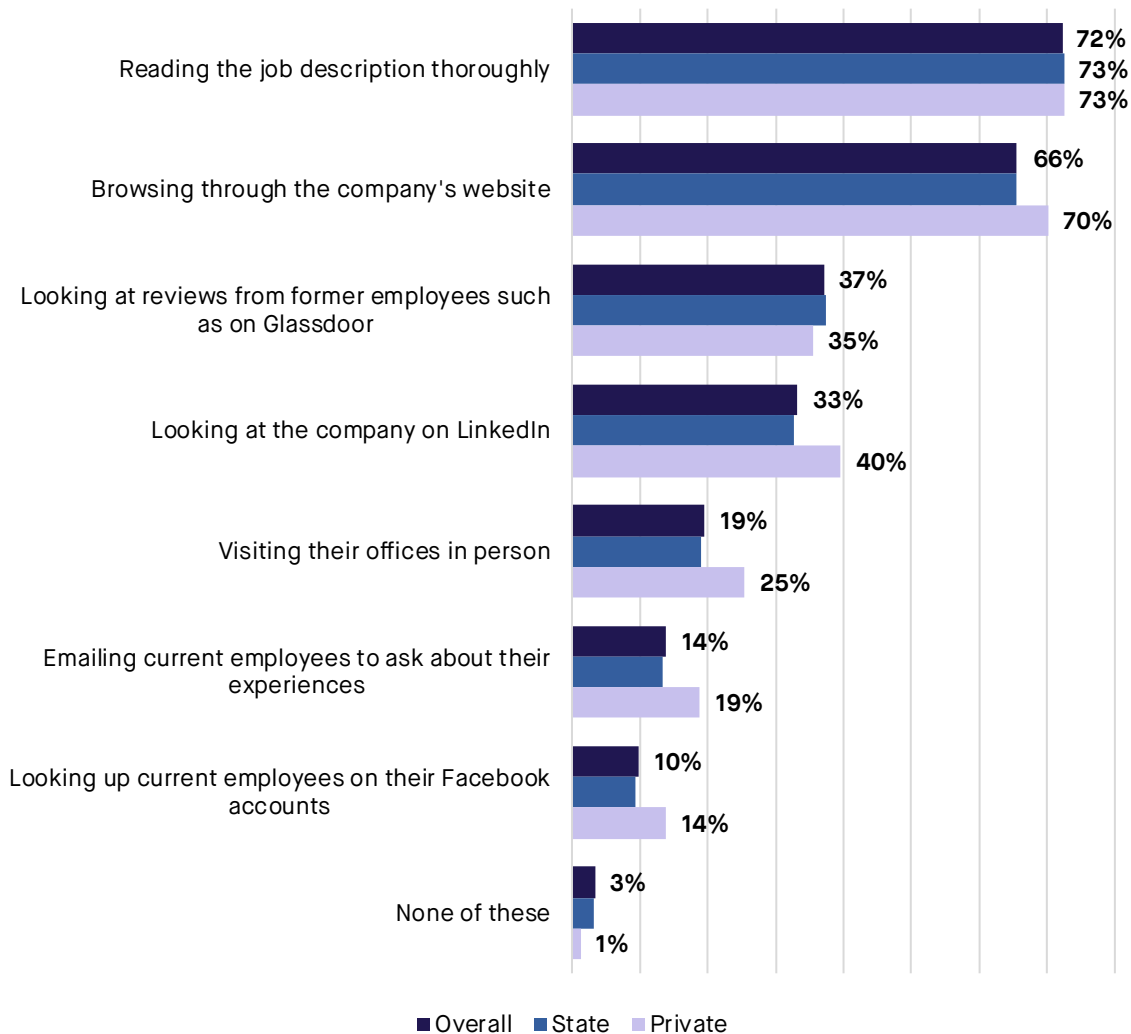
There were three questions in the survey of 15–21-year-olds that related to this sphere of assumed knowledge. One looks at the sources that would be used by young people, the second asks about how to interpret the desirable criteria on job adverts, and the third tests whether people know that salaries on job adverts can be negotiated. These results are presented in the following subsections.

6.1.1 – Sourcing information on specific roles: Private school pupils are more likely to use creative ways of researching job roles

Respondents to the survey were asked what sources of information they would use if they wanted to find more about a job that they were interested in. Some of these are more obvious, such as browsing a company's website, but the more creative methods can be considered a form of assumed knowledge.

Most young people know to read the job description thoroughly when coming across a role that interests them, but a significant minority (over a quarter) do not. Two-thirds would look at the company's website. This rises to 72% of those who are in university, or who are aspiring to attain a degree, in comparison to 53% of those who do not wish to. Private school pupils are more likely to deploy alternative (and assertive) tactics: for example, 19% would email current employees at the company, whilst 13% of state school students would. This could reflect inequalities in how pupils are taught about job hunting in schools, or in their home lives. It could also be about confidence, something shown in Chapter Nine to be higher among private school students.

Figure 24: "Which of the following information sources would you use to obtain information about a company or job that you are interested in applying to?"

Reading the job description thoroughly — Overall 72%, State 73%, Private 73%
Browsing through the company's website — Overall 66%, Private 70%
Looking at reviews from former employees such as on Glassdoor — Overall 37%, Private 35%
Looking at the company on LinkedIn — Overall 33%, Private 40%
Visiting their offices in person — Overall 19%, Private 25%
Emailing current employees to ask about their experiences — Overall 14%, Private 19%
Looking up current employees on their Facebook accounts — Overall 10%, Private 14%
None of these — Overall 3%, Private 1%

■ Overall ■ State ■ Private

Source: SMF survey of 15–21-year-olds 2024

6.1.2 – Interpreting job descriptions: Most young people understand that they do not have to meet all of the desirable criteria on a job description, especially those from advantaged backgrounds or who went to state schools

This survey question tested whether young people believed that, if they did not meet all of the desired criteria on a job description, that they should not apply for the role. That is not correct – the desired criteria are not 'essential' criteria, so applicants without all of them would still have a chance if they applied.

A majority of young people (68%) understood that meeting the desirable criteria on a job advert is not mandatory. Those from more affluent families, who had not been on free school meals, are more likely to get this right than those who had been on free school meals by 70% to 61%. Interestingly, pupils at private schools were less correct than their state school peers here, with 62% selecting the correct answer versus 68% for state pupils.

Misconceptions on this point could end up restricting young peoples' job options. If they only applied for roles where they meet all of the essential criteria and desirable criteria, that could severely limit their opportunities.

6.1.3 – Negotiating salaries on job descriptions: Worryingly, young people from less affluent backgrounds are less likely to know that salaries on job descriptions can be negotiated

A slim majority of respondents were aware that the salaries on job adverts can be negotiated. Around 1 in 5 (19%) thought that this was false, whilst 24% were unsure either way.

Worryingly, young people who were on free school meals were far more likely to get this one wrong. Only 47% knew that they were able to negotiate salaries on job descriptions, as opposed to 64% of better off young people who were not on free school meals. A misunderstanding on this could hold young people back from applying to suitable roles, and leave them ultimately not extracting as much as they could from their employers – opening up or perpetuating pay gaps that are difficult to close as one's career progresses.

However, this is not just about the assumed knowledge that you can negotiate on salary. The confidence to apply this knowledge is also important, as will be explored in more detail in Chapter Nine. A quote from one of the interviews illustrates this well:

> *"I wish I had more confidence to negotiate a bigger salary for my skill. I feel I'm being underpaid"*

> Male interviewee, 26, Black, Private school

6.2 – Knowing how to write CVs and cover letters

6.2.1 – Writing a good CV: Most young people are aware of what the structure of a CV should be, but being able to tailor it is a rarer quality

The first step in many job application processes is sharing a CV, and possibly a cover letter, with employers. Knowing how to create a good one is a key area of assumed knowledge. Without guidance and the right assumed knowledge, young people can produce CVs that are inappropriate, or insufficiently tailored to roles, as we heard from our interviews with those in their 20s. This can hamper their success rates.

> *"I was using Word templates to put together colourful, short, and 'stand out' CVs – and I heard nothing back from internships I was applying for - which by the way, I knew nothing about until I started at university. I went to the university careers coach who told me to elaborate, add detail, quantify, and format it as plainly as possible. I started hearing back"*

> Female interviewee, 24, White, State school

> *"I didn't know how to make a good CV...I would have had a very basic CV that contained information that wasn't really necessary for the employer"*

> Female interviewee, 28, White, State school

> *"I really struggled to write [sic] an adequate CV, I applied for 30+ jobs in the space of 2 months before I even got an interview and I fully believe this*

is due to my CV not being 'right'... I found it difficult as I wasn't sure how much/how little information I should include in the CV. Also the layout I feel is quite important, I struggled quite a bit as I feel like whatever I tried it didn't look right. It was either too wordy or the layout looked not professional enough"

<div align="right">Female interviewee, 24, White, State school</div>

We tested the 15–21-year-old panel's knowledge of what makes a good CV by asking a free text question, where they describe "what a good CV looks like". A majority had a good idea of the kinds of areas that should be covered, and some respondents described the kind of formal tone that it should take. There were some mistakes ("an itemized list of a person's entire education") and some that did not know, but it seems that a cursory amount of assumed knowledge on CVs is widespread.

6.2.2 – Advice on CV writing: Those from more affluent backgrounds, private schools, or who have had part-time jobs have had richer advice on improving their CVs

However, good CVs are not just about having the right elements in place. As the interviews with those in their 20s demonstrated, having good advice is crucial.

The 15–21-year-olds were also asked about what elements of application processes they had received advice on. Most respondents (60%) had received some advice on how to construct a CV. Much smaller shares had been supported on more advanced areas, such as "how to describe [their] skills and qualities in written form" (32%) or "how to tailor their experience to appeal to employers" (24%).

Figure 15 demonstrates inequalities in access to support. State school and private school pupils are as likely to have been told about how to write CVs, but privately educated pupils are significantly more likely to have been coached on the more advanced topics. One respondent outlined the advice that they had received at their private school in detail:

"I learnt to write a CV in year 11, we had several classes on it over the course of a month. It helped me understand what should go on a CV and how to appear more professional, we did mock up CVs for different industries as there are important differences between a legal CV and a financial CV. I have a base CV upon which I edit for whichever job I apply for, typically roles look for management skills, organisation skills and passion for the role. I usually look at the skills listed in the job spec and ensure at least three are listed in my professional summary, with either an example or where I learnt/developed the skill"

<div align="right">Female interviewee, 23, Black, Private school</div>

Having a part-time job increased respondents' likelihood of having been advised across all of these areas. This could be because, having been through part-time job applications, they have been pushed to seek out advice earlier in their lives, or perhaps because their part-time employers have been sources of advice.

Figure 15: "Which parts of the job application process have you received advice or guidance on, perhaps from a careers advisor, a teacher, or other adults in your life?"

State school ■ **Private school** ■ **No part-time job** ■ **Had part-time job**
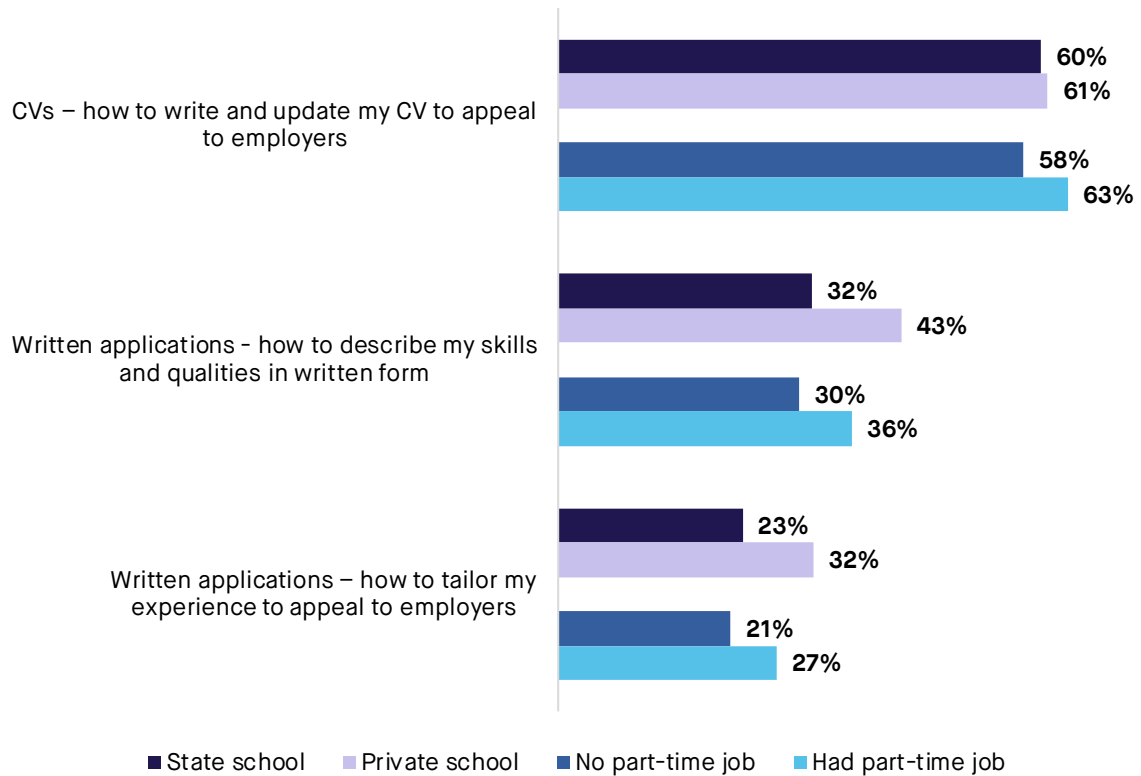
Source: SMF survey of 15–21-year-olds 2024

6.3 – Knowing how to act in and prepare for interviews

Young people do not tend to experience something like an interview until their first job or, in some case, applying for higher education. They can be daunting and carry an element of mystique. Doing them well is often essential for securing a role, so inequalities in how people prepare and perform in them can have repercussions on career progression and income levels. There is evidence that 'cultural matching' can occur between elite employers and applicants, with interviewers looking for people who share lifestyles with themselves.[36] There are also discrepancies in assumed knowledge – in knowing how to dress, what to say, what tone to use and whether to ask questions, for example.

In our discussions with young people in their 20s, a number reflected on their struggles with the interview process. Some felt that they were ill prepared by their schools for what to say or how to present themselves.

"I did not know how to get a job, how to be good at interviews. We were never taught this, it seemed to be only about grades"

Female interviewee, 28, White, State school

"I didn't understand how to be in interviews, it was so hard writing CVs, practising interviews and just being rejected because I wasn't given the right information for the jobs I wanted, everything I was taught was so vague and unrelatable and non-realistic"

Female interviewee, 25, White, State school

"I went into it expecting the interviewees to be like speaking to a teacher at school, whereas it was a lot more professional and was the first time I was treated like an adult which was daunting"

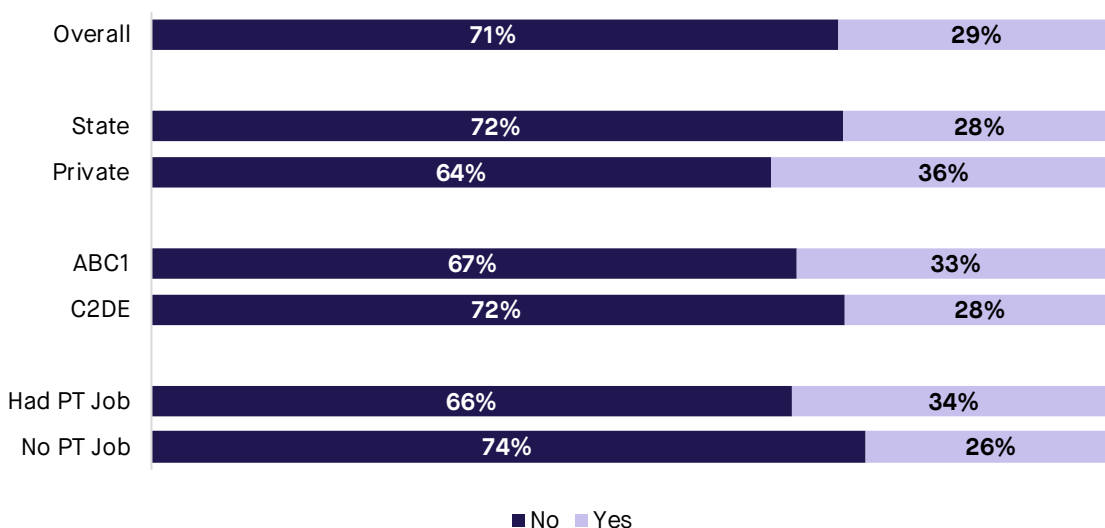Female interviewee, 24, White, State school

Assumed knowledge on interviews was probed in the survey of 15-21-year-olds by testing whether they understood what soft or transferable skills are. Fluency with different kinds of skills is key to evidencing them in interviews. Respondents were also asked whether they would ask questions at the end of an interview or not, and whether they would dress smartly.

6.3.1 - Understanding soft skills: Only a third of young people know what soft/transferable skills are, raising questions about how well they will be able to 'sell themselves'

Interviews most typically focus on 'competencies' and ask participants for examples from their previous experience to evidence how they have demonstrated a certain characteristic or skill. Some of the skills tested are often known as 'soft skills' or 'transferable skills'. Knowing what these skills are, and how to tie their own experiences to them, is a form of assumed knowledge within the job application domain.

In the survey of 15-21-year-olds, we probed whether respondents were aware of the term 'soft or transferable skills'. Only 29% of young people were familiar with these terms, calling into question their fluency with thinking and talking about their own skill set. There was a greater awareness of the idea of 'soft skills' among those from more affluent backgrounds, and who had gone to private schools. Having a part time job, however, may act as a bit of a leveller, with 34% of that group knowing the term compared to 26% of those who had not had a part time job.

Figure 16: "Do you know what is meant by the term 'soft skills' and 'transferable skills'?"

	No	Yes
Overall	71%	29%
State	72%	28%
Private	64%	36%
ABC1	67%	33%
C2DE	72%	28%
Had PT Job	66%	34%
No PT Job	74%	26%

Source: SMF survey of 15–21-year-olds 2024 (note ABC1 and C2DE refer to higher and lower socio-economic status respectively, and PT is an abbreviation of part-time)

The 29% of respondents who knew the terms soft skills or transferable skills were asked to give examples. Communication was by far the most commonly cited, with 39% of this subgroup using it as an example. Teamwork was the next most common, at 15%. Leadership, IT skills, people skills, problem-solving and adaptability were mentioned by 3-5% of this subgroup.

6.3.2 – Ask questions in interview: Most young people know to ask questions at the end of an interview, but more affluent respondents were more likely to

In most situations, interviewees should be prepared to ask questions at the end of the interview. This is a chance to show what they have learned about the company, find out more about the role, and demonstrate their interest in the position.

Two-thirds (67%) of the 15-21-year-old interview sample said that they would ask questions at the end of an interview. The assumed knowledge that this would be beneficial, or perhaps the propensity to do so, is more likely to be found in more advantaged groups. Young people on free school meals were 8 percentage points less likely to say they would ask questions than those who were not on free school meals (62% vs 70%). When a parent was a graduate, there was a 10-percentage point greater chance of asking questions (73% vs 63% for non-graduates).

6.3.3 – Dressing smartly: Four in five young people know to dress smartly for interviews, but the share was smaller among disadvantaged young people

There is more to interview performance than whether you have the 'correct' answer to the questions. As Hays, a major recruitment consultancy says, "the way you act and the manner in which you answer questions and build rapport is just as important as the words you use when answering the interviewer's questions".[37] Part of this is down to personality, but some of it relates to assumed knowledge.

It was challenging to test manner and personality through a survey, but we could ask about their presentation. Four in five of those surveyed (81%) knew to dress smartly for an interview. This is complicated by evolving dress-codes in some industries, such as tech, but still holds true across many sectors, even if the definition of 'smart' has shifted.

This clear majority held across all demographic segments studied, however, some disparities between segments existed. Those who had not been on free school meals were substantially more likely than those who had been to know that they should 'dress smartly' for interviews, by 84% compared to 77%. There were smaller differences for those with graduate parents (3 percentage point advantage vs non-graduate parents), and private school pupils (3 percentage point advantage vs state school pupils).

Knowledge about interview dress codes, and strategies to work out what would be suitable for a given industry (e.g. staff photos on company websites), should therefore be equalised in order to give young people the chance to make a more positive first impression.

CHAPTER SEVEN – DOMAIN FOUR: WORKPLACE CULTURE

Chapter summary

- Making a good first impression can have lasting impacts on career progression.
- The definition of professional behaviour varies by industry, but workplace meetings are a common and well-studied practice.
  - Young people from more affluent backgrounds, private schools, or families with graduate parents are more likely to be productive and vocal in meetings, aiding their progress at work.
- Interpersonal relationships and networking are also vital to ensure young people get off to a good start in their careers .
  - 81% of 15-18-year-olds with graduate parents saw networking as valuable for enjoying and progressing in work, as opposed to 60% of those who did not have graduate parents.

This fourth and final area of assumed knowledge focuses on young people's transition into the workplace. Studies reveal the importance of first impressions to subsequent career progression, so a successful transition can have lasting impacts.[38] Assumed knowledge that relates to adapting to the workplace environment is therefore of great importance.

The 20-29-year-olds interviewed for this project reflected on their transition into the workplace. Of the domains covered, the responses here were more balanced between negative and positive views of how assumed knowledge had impacted their transition. 33% spoke positively about the assumed knowledge that they had for joining the workplace, whilst 44% were more negative.

> *"Settling into the world of work has been a mix of excitement and challenges. The transition from education to full-time employment came with its own set of hurdles."*

Female interviewee, 27, White, State school

The norms of the workplace vary substantially between and within industries. However, these interviews showed that all industries require assumed knowledge defining what 'professional behaviour' means in that sector, and all will necessitate assumed knowledge about how to effectively build relationships. This chapter therefore contains two sections, looking at both of these areas. For each, proxy measures were selected to test levels of assumed knowledge about the workplace among the 15-21-year-old survey sample.

- Knowing what acting professionally in the workplace means in your specific industry.
- Knowing how to form positive professional relationships and networks, and that this is important.

7.1 – Knowing what acting professionally in the workplace means in your specific industry

Professionalism spans a broad range of workplace behaviours. It includes how people present themselves, communication styles in formal and informal settings, and their abidance by the expectations of their role, such as working times.

The interviews with our older cohort revealed how some young people lacked knowledge about what professionalism entailed in their new workplaces:

> *"I did not know what a workplace would want or expect."*

Female interviewee, 28, White, State school

> *"Each workplace has its own unique culture, norms, and dynamics. Navigating company culture and building relationships with colleagues required observation, adaptation, and effective communication. Understanding unwritten rules, social cues, and organizational hierarchies was essential for fitting in and building rapport with coworkers."*

Male interviewee, 28, Black, Private school

The specifics of these vary by industry, but in the survey of our younger cohort, we focused on experiences that would be more general. The concept of a meeting is a familiar one to young people from popular culture and would form a part of most jobs. In many jobs, they will be an early way of gaining exposure to senior people in their organisations, and shape how they are perceived.[39] We therefore used meeting behaviour as a proxy measure for this area of assumed knowledge around professionalism.

Their ubiquity as a method of communication means that they are also well studied. One recent study introduced the 'productive conversation matrix'. It features four quadrants, reflecting whether someone is speaking up or remaining silent in a conversation/meeting, and whether their contributions are productive or not. Each quadrant was labelled based upon its behaviour, such that someone speaking up productively is 'contributing' whilst someone speaking upon unproductively is 'disrupting'. The diagram is shown in Figure 17.[40]

Figure 17: Productive Conversation Matrix
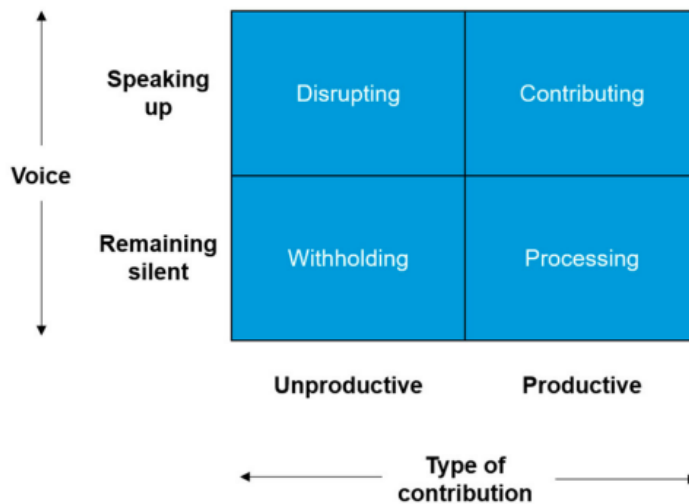
We tested the young people on our 15-21-year-old survey respondents based upon four prompts that describe these behaviours, so that they can be mapped to a quadrant. In the question, they were prompted to consider what their approach in class, online classes or part-time work had been, if helpful. The 'correct' behaviours here are those that are deemed productive in the matrix, so 'contributing' or 'processing'. A significant majority of young people selected one of these two behaviours (87%), with 8% of respondents in the 'withholding' segment and 5% is the 'disrupting' segments. These responses will reflect a mixture of their assumed knowledge about what the correct meeting behaviour is, and what their level of confidence is in such settings. It is therefore encouraging that most young people indicated 'productive' behaviour.

Figure 18: "Imagine you are in a workplace meeting. Which of these best describes what your approach to speaking would be? You may wish to draw on your experiences in the classroom, such as attending in person or virtual Zoom seminars/classes, or experiences in a part time job or work experience placement."

	Quadrant	Correct?	Overall
I will speak if I have something useful to say	Contributing	Yes	52%
I speak when spoken to, for example if I am asked a question, but otherwise I stay quiet	Processing	Yes	35%
I try to avoid speaking where possible	Withholding	No	8%
I will speak a lot, even if it is not particularly relevant, because it is important to stand out and be confident	Disrupting	No	5%

Source: SMF survey of 15–21-year-olds 2024

Certain groups tended to choose one of the productive behaviours more frequently. Young people aged 15-18 whose parents had gone to university were 10 percentage points more likely to choose the 'contributing' or 'processing' option (94% vs 84%).

Figure 19 focuses on the 'contributing' quadrant, which is both productive and more outspoken. This behaviour is more likely to get people's contributions recognised in meetings, improving their standing. People with a more affluent background, who had graduate parents or who had gone to private school also tended to be more likely to be found in this quadrant. This is another example, then, of how disparities in knowledge of correct behaviours and confidence can reinforce existing disparities in economic status.

Figure 19: 'I will speak if I have something useful to say' by selected demographics
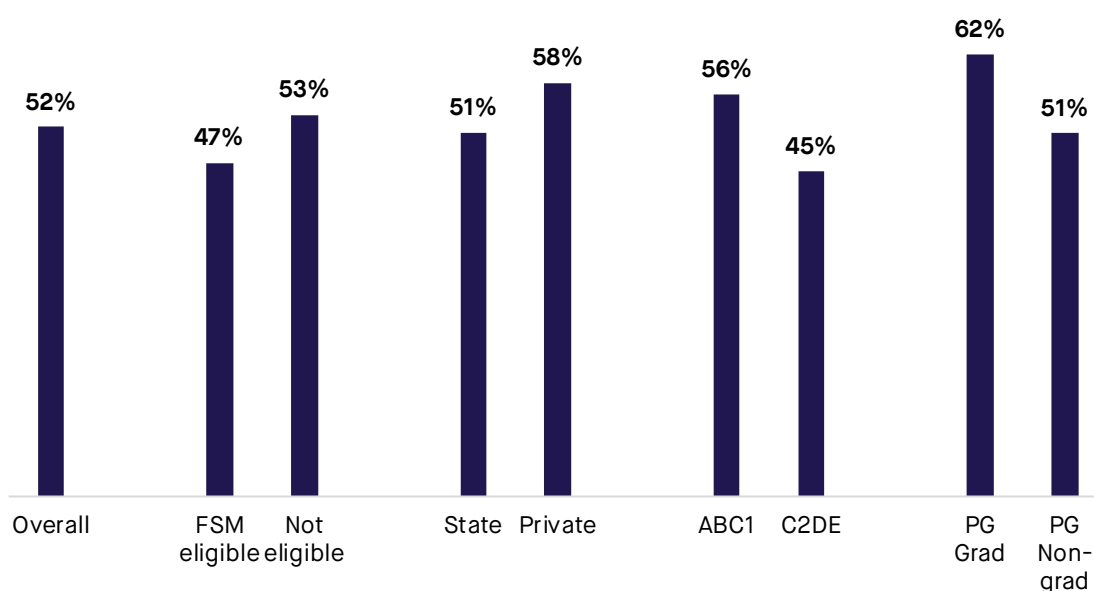
Source: SMF survey of 15–21-year-olds 2024; **Note: PG Grad (parent/guardian is a graduate) and PG Non-grad (parent/guardian is not a graduate) data only for 15-18-year-olds**

7.2 – Knowing how to form positive professional relationships and networks, and that this is important

Forming relationships is another key part of settling into the workplace. Relationships help workers to learn, progress and better enjoy their working lives. Assumed knowledge in this area includes knowing the importance of such relationships and networking, as well as how to go about it. It is an aspect of employment that some of our 20-something interviewees reported struggling with:

> *"I have significantly struggled to fit into a workplace to the point that I don't want to do it. I don't feel I have the interpersonal skills that school could have helped with"*

Female interviewee, 28, White, State school

> *"Working with people much older than me was nerve wracking as I didn't know what to talk to them about"*

<div align="right">Female interviewee, 24, White, State school</div>

To test this aspect of assumed knowledge, we focused on the concept of networking as it was more specific than general relationship building. Networking can benefit job progression as well as job seeking, as shown in academic studies and as illustrated in the quotes below.[41] Knowing its importance and potential applications is therefore something that young people should learn as they are transitioning out of education.

> *"I've gotten valuable advice, job leads, and lifelong friendships through networking. It's all about who you know!"*

<div align="right">*Female interviewee, 27, White, State School*</div>

> *"One thing that has helped me is networking. During my time in school, I was able to build an impressive network. This was extremely beneficial to my job search and admission to my masters program. I greatly appreciated the assistance I received from others."*

<div align="right">Male interviewee, 24, Black, State school</div>

> *"I did not know that building a network can be very beneficial and help your progress and even help when wanting to change jobs as you do have those contacts"*

<div align="right">*Female interviewee, 28, White, State School*</div>

The younger cohort of survey respondents were asked about their attitude to networking, and where on the scale from being "the only thing that matters" to "a waste of time" they considered it to be. A more moderate position, that networking is valuable for both progressing and enjoying a career, is likely to be the most helpful attitude to hold. This answer was awarded 1 point on the Assumed Knowledge Index, with the majority of respondents holding this view (67%). Half a point on the index was awarded to respondents who believed that networking is good for enjoying work but not for progressing in it. These point allocations would not be true in every scenario and industry, but were deemed to work effectively as proxy measures for assumed knowledge here. Only 2% think that networking is a waste of time, whilst 9% are not aware what it is.

People with more educated parents were more likely to be aware of and appreciate the value of networking, as shown in Figure 20. 81% of respondents aged 15-18 with graduate parents saw networking as good for both enjoyment and progressing their career, compared to 60% of respondents whose parents were non-graduates.

Figure 20: "Which of the following best describes your view on 'networking' or building relationships with people in an industry that you might wish to work in?"

BLUES = CORRECT
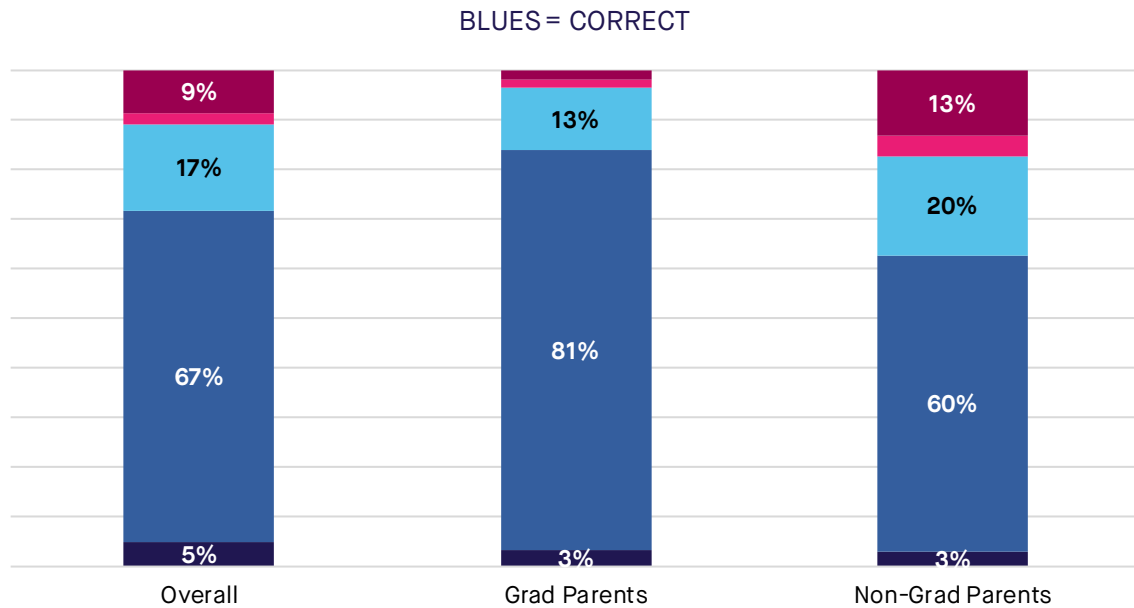
- I don't know what networking is

- Networking is a waste of time and not helpful to your career

- Networking is valuable for building friendships and enjoying your time at work, but it is not helpful for getting new jobs or promotions

- Networking is important both for enjoying work, and progressing in your career. Having the right relationships, as well as relevant experience and qualifications, can accelerate your progress

- Networking is the only thing that matters in your career. It is all 'who you know' not 'what you know'

Source: SMF survey of 15–21-year-olds 2024, Note: Grad parents and non-grad parents data is only for 15-18-year-olds.

CHAPTER EIGHT – DOMAIN FIVE: HIGH CULTURE

Chapter summary

- Despite its prominence in the literature, high cultural knowledge was not seen as important for young people's education-workplace transition.
- Young people overwhelmingly felt that practical work experience and career guidance trumped exposure to or knowledge of cultural activities.
- Given that this is out of line with previous research on the topic, which generally found that having access to cultural objects and experiences was beneficial for social mobility, it would be a worthy area of further research .

High cultural knowledge has dominated the policy and political conversation

The concept of 'high culture' has been central in much of the existing literature. This is the idea that more privileged young people have access to certain types of cultural knowledge about literature, the arts, opera, museums, theatre, and so on. These are often called 'highbrow' activities that act as expressions of a family's socioeconomic status, and which are shared by parents with their children.[42]

It is this type of knowledge which has dominated political and policy discussions in England, with a focus on ensuring that all children, regardless of background, have access and exposure to these types of activities and knowledge. Policy initiatives aimed to broaden young peoples' access to this have predominantly focused on expanding provision of extra- and co-curricular activities, both within and outside of formalised education[43]. It also led to England's current 'knowledge-rich' curriculum, brought in under Michael Gove[44].

However, young people do not seem to recognise its importance

Despite receiving more political and policy attention than other forms of assumed knowledge, and the evidence that things like sports clubs and music lessons do impact social mobility[45], our older cohort of interviewees largely did not feel that exposure to or knowledge about traditional 'high culture' activities impacted on their transition from education into employment. Unlike common assumed knowledge domains such as job applications and the education system, high culture did not come up organically within questions about how they found this transition and what might have helped their transition be easier. When prompted to think specifically about co- and extra-curricular experiences such as travel, volunteering, clubs and sports, most interviewees reported that they did not feel that partaking, or not partaking, in these activities gave them any substantial advantage or disadvantage. A minority of interviewees reported that travelling abroad or volunteering was useful in

their transition in that it widened their understanding of different cultures and helped them develop transferable skills such as time keeping, budgeting, and so on.

Due to this not being identified in the interviews as a significant area of assumed knowledge for young people, we were unable to create robust proxy measures for this type of knowledge as we did in other domains. However, we were able to poll young people on their opinion of certain cultural activities that may foster high cultural knowledge.

8.1 Volunteering is seen as more important than extra-curricular activities, but still ranks behind practical career support activities

The survey panel of 15-21-year-olds was asked to select up to three things from a list of options that would most help them in their careers. 19% of young people felt that volunteering or community service would be helpful to prepare them for their future career, and 9% felt that extra-curricular clubs would be helpful. This positive sentiment towards volunteering was consistent with the qualitative interviews, although careers advice, work experience and support from family and friends still ranked above any of the cultural activities listed.

Those eligible for free school meals were more likely to report that volunteering would be helpful (22% versus 17% of those not eligible), and less likely to select employability support (38% versus 51%). There were minimal differences between those who attended state school and those who attended private school, which is surprising given that those who attend private schools tend to have better access to these types of cultural and extra-curricular activities.

8.2 Young people think employers value work experience and grades, not extra- or co-curricular activities

This trend was also seen when young people were asked the top five things they think employers value. 11% thought employers would value a candidate who played a competitive sport, 8% selected playing an instrument, and 13% selected having travelled to other countries. They felt that employers would look more favourably on volunteering experience (41%), but this still fell significantly behind having done work experience in the same industry (68%), having good GCSEs (68%) and having had a part-time job before (53%).

Those eligible for free school meals were less likely to think that volunteering and extra-curricular experiences were important to employers. Those who attended state school were less likely to think that playing a competitive sport or an instrument was important. Interestingly, those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to think that going to a private school or having parents who have worked in the same industry were valuable to an employer.

Given its prevalence in the literature, it is interesting that high cultural knowledge did not feature highly on young people's minds, either in interviews or in polling. The idea that participating in these kinds of activities imparts advantage to children and young people is not just a theory within cultural capital. Internationally, research has shown that participating in extra-curricular activities positively correlates with better

academic success and wellbeing, and imparts important soft skills for employment and further study.[46]

There are multiple possibilities for why young people may not feel high cultural knowledge is important to their transition from education to employment.

- It could be that it is genuinely not as significant as the other areas measured, such as career planning and the education system.
- It could be that initiatives to broaden access to these types of activities and knowledge have been successful, and the socioeconomic divide therefore no longer feels as acute to those young people.
- It could be that knowing that these experiences and knowledge are important is assumed knowledge that those we interviewed did not possess. However, in that case we would expect to have seen those who did hold this knowledge (those from more advantaged backgrounds) mention how these experiences helped them when prompted. Instead, we saw low sentiment of importance for this type of knowledge across all demographics.
- It could be that young people simply struggle with the kind on introspection required to identify what experiences have shaped their development.

Whilst this is out of scope for this project, it is an area worthy of further investigation for future research.

CHAPTER NINE – CONFIDENCE TO APPLY KNOWLEDGE

Chapter summary

- Young people need confidence to put some elements of assumed knowledge into practice
- A quarter of those who believe that networking is important for enjoying and progressing in a career nevertheless lack confidence conversing with people in senior positions
- Levels of confidence are lower for disadvantaged young people. Less than half of those eligible for free school meals feel confident engaging in conversation with people in positions of authority.
- Initiatives seeking to increase levels of knowledge will also need to focus on giving young people the tools to confidently use this knowledge, if they wish to successfully impact on educational and employment outcomes.

Equity of knowledge and understanding is an important goal, but young people also need the confidence to be able to use that knowledge

It was clear from both interviews and polling that the confidence that young people feel (or do not feel) has a significant impact on their transition through education and into employment. As shown below confidence was lower in polling for those from less advantaged backgrounds. In interviews, even when those from disadvantaged backgrounds possessed the 'correct' knowledge, low levels of confidence and high levels of anxiety often held them back. One could know that they could (or should) negotiate salary, for example, but not have the confidence or ease to do so successfully.

Previous chapters outlined significant disparities in knowledge based on socioeconomic status. These disparities pose threats to equality of opportunity, because some can 'get ahead' with this insider knowledge whilst others are left behind. However, disparities in confidence pose just as significant a threat. It means that, even if we were able to address these knowledge disparities, impact on educational and employment outcomes may be limited.

Practically, this means that policy interventions seeking to increase knowledge will be limited in their effectiveness without also addressing confidence. It would not be enough to simply create a list of knowledge that all young people need to know, regardless of background, and distribute this information. Young people need to have the confidence to use this knowledge to their own benefit. Taking the example of salary negotiation, it would be beneficial if we could reduce socioeconomic disparities in knowledge that salaries listed on job adverts can often be negotiated. It would be better if we could ensure that all young people understand *how* to negotiate these, and increase their confidence to do so.

Other studies also support this. A study from Denmark found that access to these types of knowledge and assets correlated with academic success, but only for the

more advantaged students. The researchers hypothesised that the more advantaged students are better at converting this type of knowledge into educational benefits.[47] Therefore, initiatives to increase access in disadvantaged students will be limited in their success if they don't also focus on giving disadvantaged students the tools to transfer knowledge into achievement.

Of course, even with the assumed knowledge and the confidence to use it, some young people may still face unconscious or conscious bias that would impact their progress.[48]

9.1 – Measures of confidence

Two proxy measures have been deployed to test the confidence of respondents to the survey of 15-21-year-olds. These are not pure confidence measures, and have been framed around education or workplace-related topics, as these are the contexts in which this confidence is relevant. People may, after all, be more confident in some environments of their life than others.
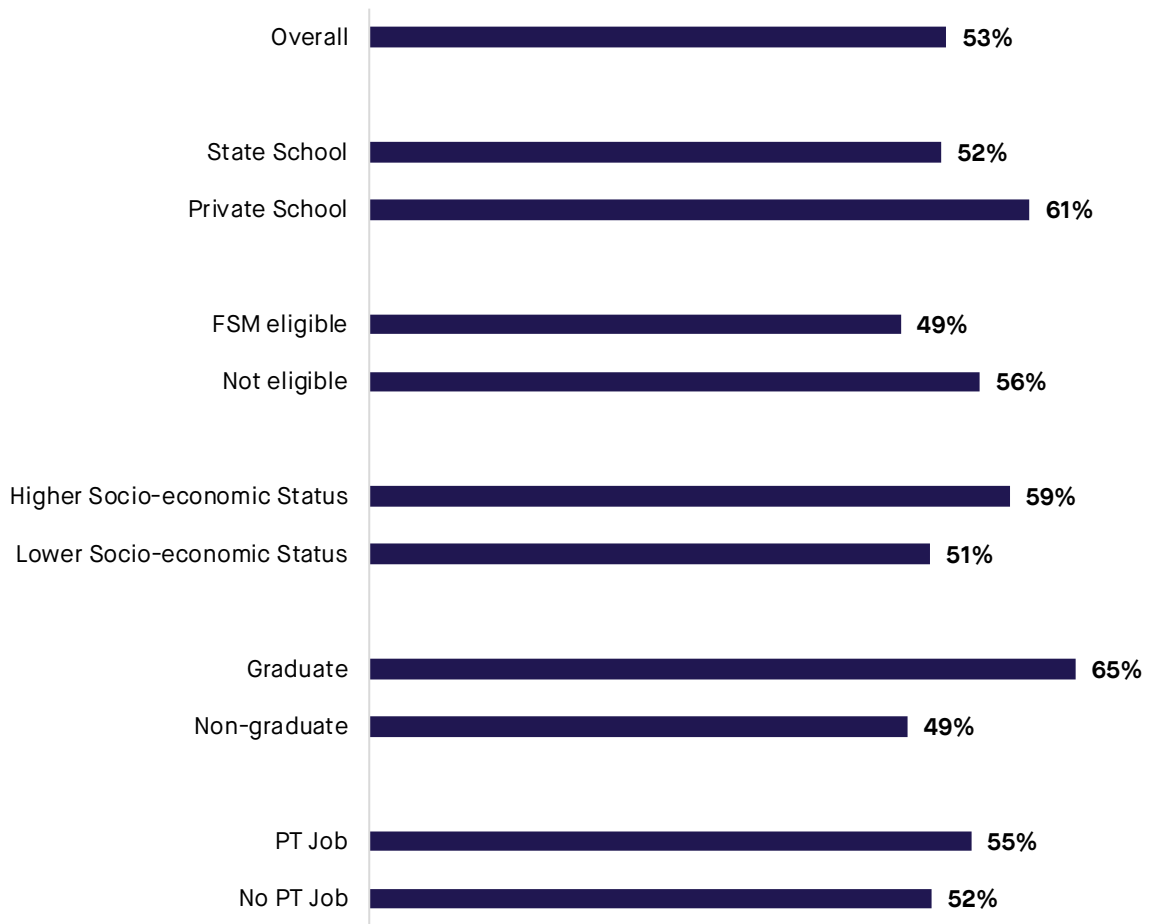
9.1.1 – Confidence with their seniors: Confidence with people in positions of power is lower for those from less affluent backgrounds, which could hold them back when building relationships

A slim majority (53%) of young people were confident joining in conversations with people in positions of authority. Without these conversations, new joiners will be less able to successfully network, and leverage opportunities that can arrive through it. Speaking more is associated with being perceived as more of a leader, so lacking the confidence to do so would inhibit development of their 'personal brand'.[49]

Confidence was lowest for those whose parents were non-graduates (49%), and free-school meals students (48%). It was highest for those who went to a private fee-paying school (61%), and whose parents were better educated (e.g. 65% for those whose parents had going to university).

Confidence grows as young people get older, but socioeconomic disparities remain – with confidence still much higher for those whose parents were better educated.

Figure 21: "I feel confident joining in conversations with people in positions of authority, such as teachers or employers." % somewhat agree or strongly agree

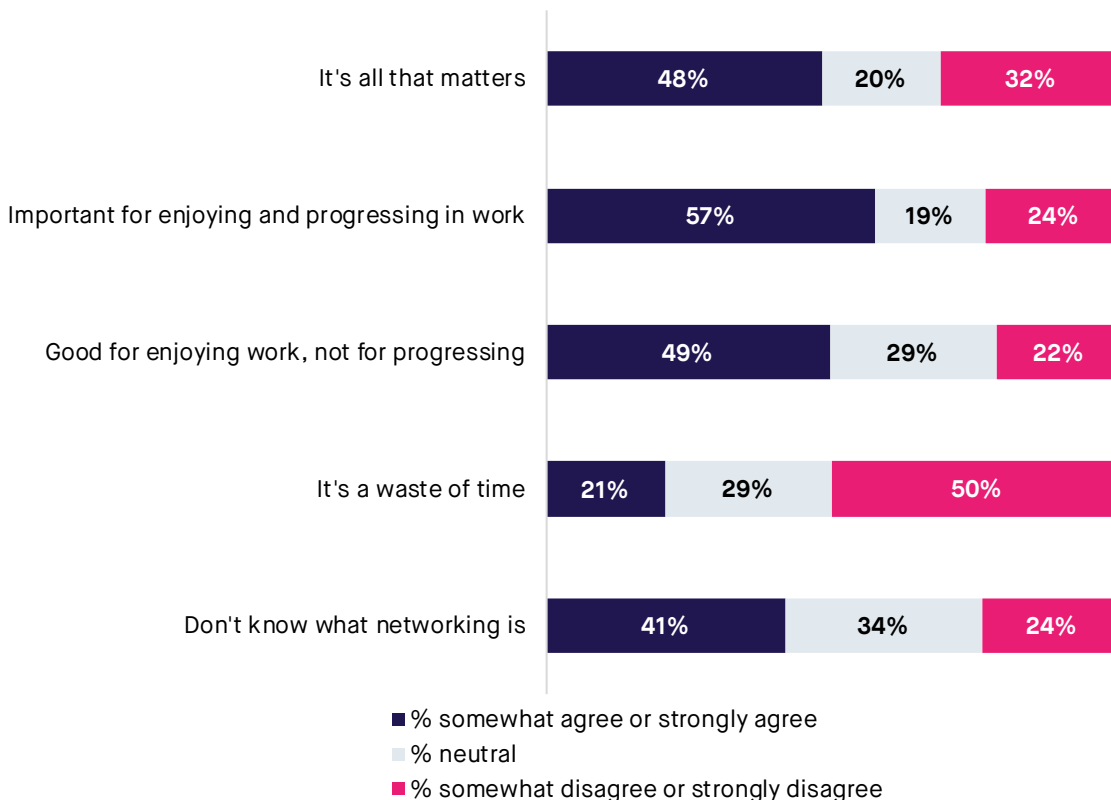|	
Overall	53%
State School	52%
Private School	61%
FSM eligible	49%
Not eligible	56%
Higher Socio-economic Status	59%
Lower Socio-economic Status	51%
Graduate	65%
Non-graduate	49%
PT Job	55%
No PT Job	52%

Source: SMF survey of 15–21-year-olds 2024

The confidence to converse with those in authority would be important to apply certain areas of assumed knowledge. For example, even if a young person knows that networking is important, if they do not have this kind of confidence, then they may not be able to do it effectively.

Figure 22 illustrates how there are significant shares of those who are aware of networking's importance, but who lack confidence joining in conversations with those in authority. Of young people who believe that networking is important for enjoying and progressing in work, a quarter (24%) lack confidence in speaking with figures of authority. This could hold them back from putting their assumed knowledge about networking into practice by building those relationships.

Figure 22: "Which of the following best describes your view on 'networking' or building relationships with people in an industry that you might wish to work in?" divided by the respondent's level of agreement to "I feel confident joining in conversations with people in positions of authority, such as teachers or employers."

	% somewhat agree or strongly agree	% neutral	% somewhat disagree or strongly disagree
It's all that matters	48%	20%	32%
Important for enjoying and progressing in work	57%	19%	24%
Good for enjoying work, not for progressing	49%	29%	22%
It's a waste of time	21%	29%	50%
Don't know what networking is	41%	34%	24%

■ % somewhat agree or strongly agree
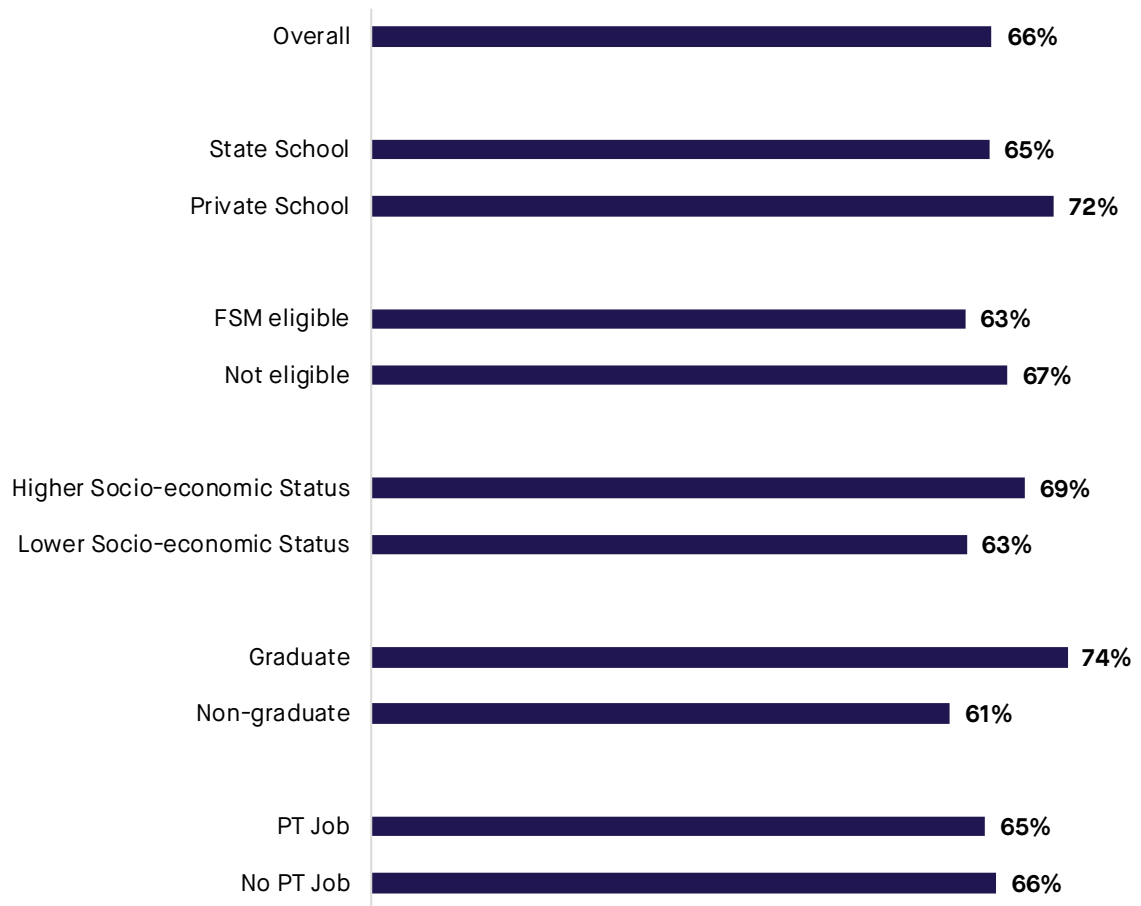■ % neutral
■ % somewhat disagree or strongly disagree

9.1.2 – Confidence expressing opinions: Young people who were on free school meals, or whose parents were not graduates, are less confident to express their opinion

Communication is a vital skill for employees.[50] Young people benefit from having the confidence to express their opinions early on in their careers, creating a good impression with employers and colleagues.

The cohort of 15-21-year-olds was surveyed about their confidence to express their own opinion. Two-thirds of young people are confident (66%) developing and defending their own opinions on academic, political and social issues as a whole. However, the socioeconomic differences remain as with section 8.1.1. 61% of young people whose parents were non-graduates agreed with this statement, versus 74% for those whose parents were graduates. 63% of free-school meals students agreed, versus 67% of those who were not eligible. This might lead those from these backgrounds to be quieter in meetings and conversations, and limit the pace of their network building.

Figure 23: "I feel confident to develop and defend my own opinions on academic, political and social issues." % strongly agree or somewhat agree

Category	%
Overall	66%
State School	65%
Private School	72%
FSM eligible	63%
Not eligible	67%
Higher Socio-economic Status	69%
Lower Socio-economic Status	63%
Graduate	74%
Non-graduate	61%
PT Job	65%
No PT Job	66%

Source: SMF survey of 15–21-year-olds 2024

CHAPTER TEN – CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This report has, for the first time, been able to develop a framework of assumed knowledge that is based on the experiences of present-day young people preparing for and entering the workforce. The most significant domains in which young people lack appropriate knowledge are:

- The education system
- Career planning
- Job applications
- Workplace culture
- High culture

Levels of knowledge broadly corresponded to traditional measures of socioeconomic disadvantage. Those eligible for free school meals and those whose parents had lower levels of educational qualifications tended to have lower levels of knowledge. The state school/private school divide was less apparent overall, however private education had a particular benefit for levels of confidence and for personal networks.

As well as having lower levels of knowledge, disadvantaged young people also had reduced access to career advice and were less likely to know people in professional industries to whom they could go for guidance.

This research has shown that most young people would benefit from more support, but disadvantaged young people in particular are struggling. They are navigating the education system and trying to transition into employment without adequate levels of understanding, knowledge, or help. They are making high-stakes decisions about what, where and when to study, and when career paths to pursue, without having the knowledge necessary to make these decisions in an informed way.

These decisions are particularly high stakes because we do not have a sufficiently flexible education system which would allow learners to easily move between study types, subjects and providers once already pursuing a certain pathway. Therefore, one uninformed decision at aged 16 or 18 can impact young people into adulthood, and young people find it particularly hard to change direction at this stage, as we found through the interviews. In their subsequent career, assumed knowledge also equips them to change tack where required. This is a significant threat to equality of opportunity and should be a major focus for policymakers and government wishing to narrow gaps in outcomes for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Labour has promised a series of reforms to the education and skills system, but none that would promote that kind of flexibility to the system. The most pertinent changes proposed from an assumed knowledge perspective revolve around the skills and vocational education system. These changes should help to raise awareness of vocational routes and which job roles are in demand for the economy, helping supply and demand of skills to match better. Measures will include the creation of Skills England, which will connect questions of labour shortages with the training of people to fill those roles. Technical Excellence Colleges will do similar things at a local level, connecting further education with local employers.

Although these changes should help to promote non-university options, this is only a subset of assumed knowledge. Below, we step through each domain of assumed knowledge, except for high culture, which we did not identify as a priority for reform:

Education System: Greater flexibility and transparency are needed in the education system to reduce the stakes of decisions made, reducing the potential for a lack of assumed knowledge to set young people on the wrong path

We found that a number of young people, especially those from less affluent backgrounds, were not well informed about some post-18 options (e.g. degree apprenticeships) and what qualifications and institutions were likely to be more valuable and prestigious. A minority of young people also failed to understand the student finance system, which could put them off from considering the university route. Once these decisions are made, it can be hard to adjust life paths, as our panel of interviewees confirmed.

As well as raising awareness of options (see career planning recommendations), we recommend increasing the breadth and flexibility of the UK's education system to reduce the impact of making decisions which young people come to regret, and which can often be driven by a lack of assumed knowledge.

1. **Embed Assumed Knowledge into the curriculum:**
   a. As part of the curriculum review, the government should incorporate assumed knowledge into a range of subjects
   b. For example, during maths students could analyse data from job descriptions, and be given a sense of the relative pay of different careers
2. **Keep the education system broader for longer:**
   a. A-Level syllabi should be reduced to enable students to take an additional two subjects to 18.
   b. Universities should, as standard, offer more flexibility in the first year of study to allow students to attend and sit exams in a wider array of topics, before narrowing down to a particular specialism. This could be built off of the 'minor' and 'major' system in the United States.
3. **Increase understanding of the student finance system:**
   a. The government should take the opportunity of the post-16 review to rebrand student loans/tuition fees. Naming them a 'Student Contribution' would be more accurate to how the system functions and help reduce confusion regarding repayment terms and concerns of bankruptcy.
   b. This should be accompanied by an awareness programme driven through schools about how the updated system works, and why it does not function like household debt.

Career Planning: The National Career Service needs to be strengthened to mitigate the lower levels of support that lower attainment and lower income young people receive

Young people from less affluent backgrounds, or who were performing worse at school, had less access to sources of career advice and more limited networks of

people from high-paying careers. As we saw, there were huge disparities in the help that people of different backgrounds were able to access. Only 67% of 15-18-year-olds who were on free school meals went to their friends or family for advice on careers, compared to 95% of 15–18-year-olds who have a parent/guardian with a post-graduate degree. Young people with/expecting 7-9s at GCSE are much more likely than those expecting mostly 1-3s at GCSE to speak to school careers advisors (53% vs 32%).

Reforms to career planning support are therefore needed to ensure that all young people are aware of, and have help to pursue, a full range of life's options.

4. **Reform careers education advice and guidance (CEIAG) throughout the education system, and beyond:**
   a. As recommended previously by the SMF[51]:
      i. Ensure every school leaver receives a minimum level of personalised careers support by offering an entitlement to three one-to-one sessions.
      ii. Add careers provision to part of the new 'report card' judgements that Ofsted will be issuing to schools, following the government's reforms.
      iii. Prioritise reducing inconsistency in the level and quality of CEIAG and make it an objective for the Careers and Enterprise Company, for example by including it in their grant agreement with the Department for Culture, Media and Sports and giving them the funding to expand their Careers Hubs to all disadvantaged schools.
      iv. Aim to ensure all apprenticeship opportunities are listed on the UCAS system, perhaps by establishing and integrating local platforms.
      v. Engage in a large-scale outreach programme promoting adult education and careers services.
   b. Provide more proactive support through the National Careers Service as people are establishing their careers:
      i. Young people should be offered 'career check-ins' roughly every 4 years after leaving the education system with the National Careers Service. This is to align with the typical 3-4 year period that people stay in their first jobs.[52] These would to help people think through their career goals, their path to achieving it, and what qualifications/skills they may require.
   c. Increase transparency about how educational decisions impact upon career options
      i. UCAS should publish data on which A-Levels are being taken by people doing which courses.
      ii. The National Careers Service should compile data on typical A-Level and higher education qualifications for a range of career paths. They should also track type of university by career path.

    iii.   The National Careers Service should combine this information and publish it in an accessible manner, such that schools can provide this to young people deciding their A-Level choices.

5. **Support mentoring and enrichment programmes to widen young peoples' exposure to people from different industries:**
   a. Invest in mentoring programmes
      i. As revealed in the report, young people from less affluent backgrounds were much less likely to be able to seek advice from people in high-paying industries.
      ii. The National Careers Service should work with industry bodies like the ICAEW for accountants and the BMA for doctors and help them to set up a mentoring scheme.
      iii. The National Careers Service should then promote these to interested young people, as well as better promote existing schemes, such as those for more specific groups (e.g. the Black Solicitors Network).
   b. Encourage schools to bring in external speakers
      i. Assemblies or classes can be enriched by bringing in people from certain industries to discuss their career paths
      ii. This can act as a forum to share assumed knowledge to people who may not personally have connections with people from those sectors

Job applications: There needs to be minimum standards on the job application support provided to students, and chances for the more career-minded to learn from each other.

Young people from state schools, and especially those from less affluent backgrounds, were less likely to receive good advice on how to find and apply to jobs. This showed in their weaker ability to interpret aspects of job descriptions (such as the salary) and talk about 'soft skills'. The following suggestions attempt to make access to this kind of support fairer, by providing direct support and fostering a culture of mutual support between peers. Initiatives such as using job descriptions to test English comprehension could help to embed assumed knowledge into the curriculum, as per recommendation 1.

6. **Widen access to CV and interview advice:**
   a. All school leavers should attend a CV writing workshop, which should include industry-specific guidance.
   b. Each school leaver should take part in a mock interview, for example as one of the three one-to-one personalised career advice sessions (as in recommendation 4ai)
   c. The National Careers Service should invest in its digital resources. For example:
      i. Commissioning the development of an AI CV checker tool, which would allow users to upload their CV. The tool would provide general feedback on clarity, length, and style, and

> signpost users to advisors if they require industry-specific guidance.

7. **Encourage peer-to-peer support among young people to improve applications and share advice:**
   a. Schools should facilitate peer-to-peer networks for discussing job applications, life planning and careers. These should follow the structure of academic societies common at many universities.

<u>Work culture:</u> Giving young people a taste of working practices in school or through placements will help to equip them with the assumed knowledge necessary to settle well into working life.

Upon entering the workplace, young people encounter new settings and norms from those they experienced in school. There is more that schools can do to give students a preview of these things, and the assumed knowledge that they require. Young people who had graduate parents were more likely to, for example, know about networking and its potential value. Greater access to quality work experience, or part time work, can also help to close disparities in assumed knowledge.

8. **Schools should integrate key workplace practices into the school environment:**
   a. e.g. networking-style challenges could be enacted to help young people practise engaging with new people in their schools, neighbouring ones, or the wider community.
   b. e.g. joint, project-based work would help to develop teamwork and leadership, and learn about what kind of behaviours are better or worse in team meetings.
   c. e.g. 'Dragon's Den' style workshops would help young people to develop their public speaking.
   d. e.g. feedback sessions for older students could be made to feel more like a performance review session they would face in employment.

9. **Expand access to work experience:**
   a. A minimum of two weeks' worth of work experience should be universal for those in Years 10 and 11. The SMF has argued this before[53], and Labour has pledged to implement it[54]. This would require the establishment of local brokerages tasked with engaging employers, with a single organisation assigned responsibility for coordination in each local area. They should also establish a single platform to collate work experience opportunities available to young people across the country, with a particular focus on digital placements.
   b. As well as coordinating work experience opportunities, the platform should also host local part- time job opportunities for those in secondary school.

<u>Confidence to apply knowledge:</u> Other interventions will provide the chance to practise applying assumed knowledge, whilst the government plans to strengthen mental health support

Younger people from more deprived backgrounds were found to have lower confidence in relation to assumed knowledge and workplace matters in this study.

The opportunity to practise applying assumed knowledge should help all young people to gain confidence in this area. Across the recommendations above, we have provided suggestions on how to make this more accessible, such as by incorporating it into school curricula providing more work experience opportunities, or running mock interviews.

The confidence to apply assumed knowledge will also be impacted by the young peoples' mental health. The government has promised greater support in this area, such as by having a mental health professional in every school, and cutting waiting times for therapy. These measures should also help more young people to make the most of their assumed knowledge.

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Education System

Edu1	To the best of your knowledge, please rank the following universities in terms of how prestigious they are considered to be, from most prestigious to least.

Note: Uses 9ths as there are 9 possible options, so the max that can be achieved is a total of 1 point, or the min is a total of -1 points; 18ths used to give a 'half mark' for some options

a	Bath Spa University	-1/9 if ranked top 4, 1/9 if ranked bottom 3
b	University College London (UCL)	1/9 if top two, 1/18 if 3rd-6th, -1/9 if bottom 3
c	University of Hertfordshire	-1/9 if ranked top 4, 1/9 if ranked bottom 3
d	University of Liverpool	1/18 if 3rd-4th, 1/9 if 5th-6th
e	Nottingham Trent University	-1/9 if ranked top 4, 1/9 if bottom 3
f	University of York	1/18 if top 2, 1/9 if 3rd-4th
g	University of Cambridge	1/9 if top two, -1/18 if 5th-6th, -1/9 if bottom 3
h	The University of Edinburgh	1/18 if top 2, 1/9 if 3rd-4th
i	Cardiff University	1/18 if 3rd-4th, 1/9 if 5th-6th

Edu2	A leading university has revealed which A level subjects are helpful to get a place one on of its courses. Please rank the following subjects from the most helpful, to the least helpful (with 1 being the most helpful)

Note: Uses 6ths as there are 9 possible options, so the max that can be achieved is a total of 1 point, or the min is a total of -1 points

a	Further Mathematics	1/6 if ranked in top 3, -1/6 if ranked in bottom 3
b	History	1/6 if ranked in top 3, -1/6 if ranked in bottom 3
c	Psychology	1/6 if ranked in top 3, -1/6 if ranked in bottom 3
d	Media Studies	-1/6 if ranked in top 3, 1/6 if ranked in bottom 3
e	Business Studies	-1/6 if ranked in top 3, 1/6 if ranked in bottom 3
f	Critical Thinking	-1/6 if ranked in top 3, 1/6 if ranked in bottom 3

Edu3	Which of the following do you believe about this statement? Someone who does a degree apprenticeship graduates with the same level of qualification as someone who does a traditional undergraduate degree.

a	True	1
b	False	0
c	Unsure	0

Edu4	Which of the following do you believe about this statement? Apprentices get paid a wage and get holiday pay whilst they are studying.

a	True	1
b	False	0
c	Unsure	0

Edu5	Which of these best describes how you perceive that different employers value someone having a GCSE pass grade in Maths?	
a	You would need a GCSE in Maths to get any kind of job	0
b	There are certain professions where you would need a GCSE in Maths, such as nursing, policing, or in the Civil Service	1
c	You will only need a Maths GCSE if the job is related to Maths (e.g. being a Maths teacher, being a data analyst)	0
d	Employers do not care at all about whether you have a Maths GCSE or not	0
e	Don't know	0

Edu6	To the best of your knowledge, which of these is closest to describing how students pay for their University education in England?	
a	You receive a student loan. You only have to start paying it back once you are earning above a certain threshold. If you don't pay the whole loan back within 25-30 years then it is written off.	1
b	You receive a student loan. You have to pay it back like a normal loan, and could face bankruptcy if you are unable to pay it all off.	0
c	You have to pay a Graduate Tax after you finish your course, right up until you retire	0
d	You have to pay for it all up front, so most people either save up for it or their parents pay	0
e	University is free in England for all citizens.	0
f	I have no idea.	0

Edu7	Which of the following do you believe about this statement? Workers with a university degree are paid more on average, or have higher earning potential, than workers who do not have a university degree.	
a	True	1
b	False	-1
c	Unsure	0

Edu8	On average, how much more a year do you think workers with a university degree get paid than those without, on average?	
a	About £30,000 more	0
b	About £20,000 more	0.5
c	About £10,000 more	1
d	About £5,000 more	0

Career Planning

Car1	"You must have a degree in [blank] in order to get a job as a [blank]." Please tick the options for which you believe this is true.	
a	A Law degree to become a lawyer	0
b	A medicine degree to become a doctor	1
c	An education degree to become a teacher	0
d	A politics degree to become a politician	-0.5
e	You wouldn't need a specific degree to get a job in any of these occupations	-1

Car2	**Please rank the following jobs in terms of which ones you think have the highest average salary, from highest to lowest.**	
a	Lawyers	1/7 if top 2, -1/7 if bottom 3
b	Electricians	1/7 if 3rd-4th
c	Train drivers	1/7 if top 2, -1/7 if bottom 3
d	Chefs	-1/7 if top 2, 1/7 if bottom 3
e	Lorry drivers	1/7 if 3rd-4th
f	Travel agents	-1/7 if top 2, 1/7 if bottom 3
g	Beauticians	-1/7 if top 2, 1/7 if bottom 3

Car3	**Do you personally know anyone who works or has worked in the following fields, that you would be able to ask for education or career advice and guidance from, regardless of whether you are interested in entering that field? Please tick all that apply. | Politics**	
a	Politics	1/6
b	Finance	1/6
c	Medicine	1/6
d	Law	1/6
e	Consultancy	1/6
f	Academia	1/6
g	None of these	-1

Job Applications

App1	**Which of the following do you believe about the following statement? The salary on a job advert cannot be negotiated.**	
a	True	-1
b	False	1
c	Unsure	0

App2	**Which of the following do you believe about the following statement? If I don't meet all the desired requirements, there is no point in me applying for that job role.**	
a	True	-1
b	False	1
c	Unsure	0

App3	**In your opinion, what are the best ways to make a good impression when you go to a job interview?**	
a	Arrive 10 minutes before the interview	1/3
b	Dress smartly	1/3
c	Ask questions at the end of the interview	1/3
d	Have a prewritten speech to give about yourself and your experiences	-1/3
e	Take notes throughout the interview	-1/3
f	Arrive exactly on time for the interview, rather than early	-1/3
g	Bring a printed version of your CV to give to them	0
h	Don't know	0

App4	**Do you know what is meant by the term 'soft skills' and 'transferable skills'? What is an example?**	
a	No - I don't know what these terms mean	0
b	Yes - please provide an example of a 'soft' or 'transferable' skill	1

Workplace Culture

Wor1	Imagine you are in a workplace meeting. Which of these best describes what your approach to speaking would be? You may wish to draw on your experiences in the classroom, such as attending in person or virtual Zoom seminars/classes, or experiences in a part time job or work experience placement.	
a	I try to avoid speaking where possible.	0
b	I speak when spoken to, for example if I am asked a question, but otl	0.5
c	I will speak if I have something useful to say.	1
d	I will speak a lot, even if it is not particularly relevant, because it is in	0

Wor2	Which of the following best describes your view on 'networking' or building relationships with people in an	
a	Networking is the only thing that matters in your career. It is all 'who you know' not 'what you know'	0
b	Networking is important both for enjoying work, and progressing in your career. Having the right relationships, as well as relevant experience and qualifications, can accelerate your progress	1
c	Networking is valuable for building friendships and enjoying your time at work, but it is not helpful for getting new jobs or promotions	0.5
d	Networking is a waste of time and not helpful to your career	0
e	I don't know what networking is	0

Wor3	Please try to be honest. How do you tend to respond to criticism of your work or things you do?	
a	I like it because it helps me to improve	1
b	I don't mind it, as long as it also comes with some praise	0.5
c	I try to avoid it where possible	0
d	I find it really upsetting	-1

Confidence

Con1	Q9 To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? I feel confident joining in conversations with people in positions of authority, such as teachers or employers.	
a	Strongly agree	1
b	Somewhat agree	0.5
c	Neutral	0
d	Somewhat disagree	0
e	Strongly disagree	0

Con2	Q10 To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? I feel confident to develop and defend my own opinions on academic, political and social issues.	
a	Strongly agree	1
b	Somewhat agree	0.5
c	Neutral	0
d	Somewhat disagree	0
e	Strongly disagree	0