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The Persuadables

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Should I do an apprenticeship or go to university?

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jeanieb67

Thread Starter



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I'm by no means a practical person, I am quite academic and have been predicted As in my A levels, though of course this may not necessarily happen! I don't have my heart set on any one course like many people I know. I've applied for degrees in law, arts, journalism, marketing...so clearly keeping my options open! I think having good grades makes you automatically think of going for what sounds prestigious e.g. law, but that is obviously not the right way to go about it. Though I also applied for apprenticeships such as marketing with sky lasting 2 years. I think it'd be good to get experience in the real world and become more independent but I'm not sure if not going to uni is taking a gamble. Would really appreciate insight from someone who can relate / has chosen either option! I'm very stuck! Thanks! 😊



Jeanieb67 is a persuadable: she is unsure whether she should do an apprenticeship or go to university. She can do either: with predicted As in A Levels, both employers and universities would welcome her with open arms. Indeed she has applied for both universities and apprenticeships. She is attracted to the idea of getting experience in the real world, but not going to university feels like “taking a gamble” - especially with predicted good grades, we may add.

What would persuade jeanieb67 to follow her heart, and not base her decision around the fear of “taking a gamble”?

This paper is about the Persuadables.

Researching the Persuadables

This year, we introduced a special module on the Persuadables in Havas People's own longitudinal research *Student Tracker*, which has surveyed more than 15,000 Year 12s and 13s, and 100 parents in the past five years.

We undertook the research in April 2015 and surveyed 1,729 Year 12s and 13s in England, and conducted nine focus groups with parents and students. The majority (60%) of the students were expected to achieve 300+ UCAS tariff points, the equivalent of BBB or above in A Levels.

Three quarters of the respondents said they were only considering university.

Eighteen per cent (316 students) were considering either employment or both university and employment. These students are of particular interest to us, as they are effectively the potential talent pool for apprenticeships and school leaver programmes.

Guess what: in this potential talent pool, **four out of ten** said they **had changed their mind from initially more in favour of university, to thinking more about employment now.**

To be exact, we are speaking about 40% of the 316 students who were considering either employment, or both university and employment, so a total of 126 Persuadables persuaded. They amount to only about 7% of the sampled population.

Nonetheless, if we can better understand just what persuaded these outliers, then perhaps we will see five out of ten Persuadables persuaded, or even some more of the 185,000 students who achieved B or above in their A Levels or equivalent becoming a Persuadable.

We shall attempt the analysis from the perspective of the Persuadables.

The world of the Persuadables

Stigma

“My children are **too clever for an apprenticeship or school leaver programme**,” said 11% of parents and guardians surveyed by All About School Leavers’ research 2015 . There is also anecdotal evidence from our *Student Tracker* suggesting that even school leavers considered themselves “not clever” enough for university and hence could only settle on employment options.

Stigma is particularly an issue for high-achieving students, who by definition are recognised by their strong academic performance at school, amongst their peers, by their family and possibly beyond their core social circles. Stigma becomes parental, peer and social pressure for high achieving students, and threatens to strip them of the recognition that they have enjoyed. Remember what jeanieb67 said: “having good grades automatically makes you think of going for what sounds prestigious”.

Halo effect

On the other hand, it’s only 11% of parents and guardians who said their children were too clever for an apprenticeship or school leaver programme. Even if we allow for statistical errors and unconscious bias, this still leaves a good majority of parents and guardians in theory unbiased.

We have anecdotal evidence from our Student Tracker that they can be pleasantly surprised by the opportunities certain apprenticeships can offer:

Parent A

My second son will be doing an apprenticeship with KPMG as part of his degree. KPMG will be paying for everything and will also pay him whilst he is learning.

Parent B

Ooh, I did not know that KPMG did apprenticeships! That sounds great.

Parent A

It’s an awesome package. You get paid around £18k plus they pay your university fees as well. During the time you are at university, they will also pay for accommodation. It’s an awesome package but it was very, very hard to get selected.

Parent C

A friend of ours is doing an accountancy one, wages are poor but they do pay her course fees and give day release. Not even minimum wage.

Parent A

My son will be paid around £18k plus accommodation, plus a very heavily subsidised company car and university accommodation. He will also get a laptop and a mobile phone worth £600.

Moderator

Did you encourage your son to apply for the KPMG apprenticeship?

Parent A

I definitely did!

Parent B

*I don’t really know anything about them to be honest. The KPMG one sounds amazing. I don’t think our children’s school encourages or publicises them. **How did you hear about them?***

-- Extract from Havas People’s Student Tracker, focus group with prospective Russell Group students’ parents

Notice how Parent B was pleasantly surprised by the fact that KPMG offered apprenticeships, and the comprehensive package offered. Also note that in spite of Parent C's comment about an apprenticeship that doesn't pay "even minimum wage", Parent B was so intrigued by what Parent A was saying that they asked how they heard about the degree level apprenticeships.

Parents of high-achieving students – even those like Parent B, whose children were studying at grammar schools, where an "apprenticeship was never mentioned to them"– are not necessarily turned off by the mention of "apprenticeship". It is true that Parent B was attracted to the idea of degree level apprenticeships, and parents with a similar mindset are probably more likely to seriously consider these. What this extract highlights is the "halo effect" prestigious employers and excellent packages can bring to apprenticeship. It can stimulate interest in the unaware, encourage them to see past stigma and even investigate further.

Concern

Stigma is not all there is, however. There is evidence from *Student Tracker*, suggesting that even though some parents and students are positive about how an apprenticeship is a useful stepping stone in career development, they have their limitations:

"I feel that apprenticeships are aimed at one type of career with a few possibilities - but some degree courses, Media and Journalism for instance, can be very broad and allow you to work in a variety of fields after uni[versity]."

Parent, Havas People Student Tracker Spring 2015

"If you want [a career] such as Lord Alan Sugar['s], then University is the wrong route. If you want to be Stephen Hawkings, then it is."

Parent, Havas People Student Tracker Spring 2015

"I feel that apprenticeships are a great idea considering how many options they can offer to people, especially those who struggle academically, but at the same time they seem very unidirectional, and once you take up an apprenticeship there doesn't seem to be much freedom in choosing your career."

Student, Havas People Student Tracker Spring 2015

There is an underlying concern that apprenticeships may limit the range of career options school leavers may have. This is further evidenced by All About School Leavers' research 2015: when asked why parents would like their children to go to university, about 55% said that "it will give them the best opportunity to progress in their career", and over 25% said they "didn't go to university and would like [their] children to take advantage of the opportunities [they] didn't have [themselves]".

Effective door opener

Now let's take a look at what this Persuadable said when asked what made them change their mind, from university to employment (straight after leaving school):

*"I feel that if you are going into an area of work where university degrees are not necessarily required for employment then it is an advantage to go straight into employment as you will already have learnt and progressed in a company by the time university graduates apply for similar roles, and it will be an **effective use of time**. It also means that you have a **good amount of work experience** which will help if you decide to apply for university later or **when applying for other employment in the future** as it shows you will have practical experience in the world of work. It is possible that after working at a company for a year that you realise that you do not want to do work in the same field anymore and that if you had gone to university to study for such a field it would have been a waste of time."*

Persuadable, Havas People Student Tracker Spring 2015

Effective use of time and perhaps more importantly how apprenticeships open up employment opportunities are two key marketing messages which merit considerations. They are especially relevant to employers who start offering more flexible school leaver programmes whereby apprentices are able to rotate between different teams before deciding on which specialism they want to settle on. For those who don't already, it is certainly worth considering a school leaver programme that is initially broader in scope, and specialising at a later stage. Even if such a programme takes six years, this is still likely to be an effective use of time. The three years that school leavers would spend at university are instead used to learn, earn and above all explore career options through hands-on experience.

Anxiety

Yet, there is also "low earner" anxiety :

*"**Graduates on average have better employment prospects and can expect to earn at least £100,000, net of tax, more than non-graduates across their working lives.**"*

David Willetts, on The Push National Debt Survey, 13 August 2010

This much quoted headline has perhaps captured the anxiety surrounding non-graduates' earning potential. Tera Training's report on *Varsity Blue* confirms this : school leavers were more than twice as likely to associate university, rather than apprenticeships, with providing a good long-term earning potential and good job prospects.

More anxiety

There is also anxiety surrounding graduate unemployment and salary drop, though. Some notable ones include: according to ONS data, one in five UK university graduates who entered the labour market failed to find a job in 2010, as graduate unemployment reached its highest level since 1995, government figures show . Some more recent studies suggest that the situation has perhaps improved: The Higher Education Careers Service Unit (Heccsu) analysed the destinations of 256,350 new graduates six months after they left university. Some 7.3% were unemployed in January 2014, down from 8.5% in January 2013 and the lowest level since 2008 .

However, research for the Complete University Guide says graduate starting salaries in professional posts dropped 11% in real terms,

in 2007-12 . In addition, evidence from Office for National Statistics (ONS) suggests that more than a quarter of graduates were paid less than the £11.10 average for those on work-based training schemes last year. It also emerged that low-earning graduates are more likely to find themselves in part-time jobs .

Uncertainties on graduate employability remain.

To add to the list, there are the £9,000 fees, which are set to increase in line with inflation for the universities which demonstrate “high quality teaching” (which may be linked to the proposed “teaching excellence framework”) .

Furthermore, maintenance grants are to be scrapped and replaced with loans, which will leave students from lower income families up to £53,000 in debt upon graduation .



Security

In sharp contrast, apprenticeships and school leaver programmes guarantee employment, without student debt. There is also positive evidence suggesting that graduates do not necessarily earn more than apprentices. According to *Varsity Blue*, 75% of ‘New University’ media and information graduates earn less than their apprenticed counterparts. Since 2005, young apprentices have increasingly enjoyed more favourable prospects and reduced unemployment in comparison to graduates.

Indeed, for some Persuadables, **the underlying concern over graduate debt and employability were precisely the game changer in their decision making:**

“The fear of being in debt[ed] to a student loan, when and if I start earning money over the limit where you don’t have to pay.

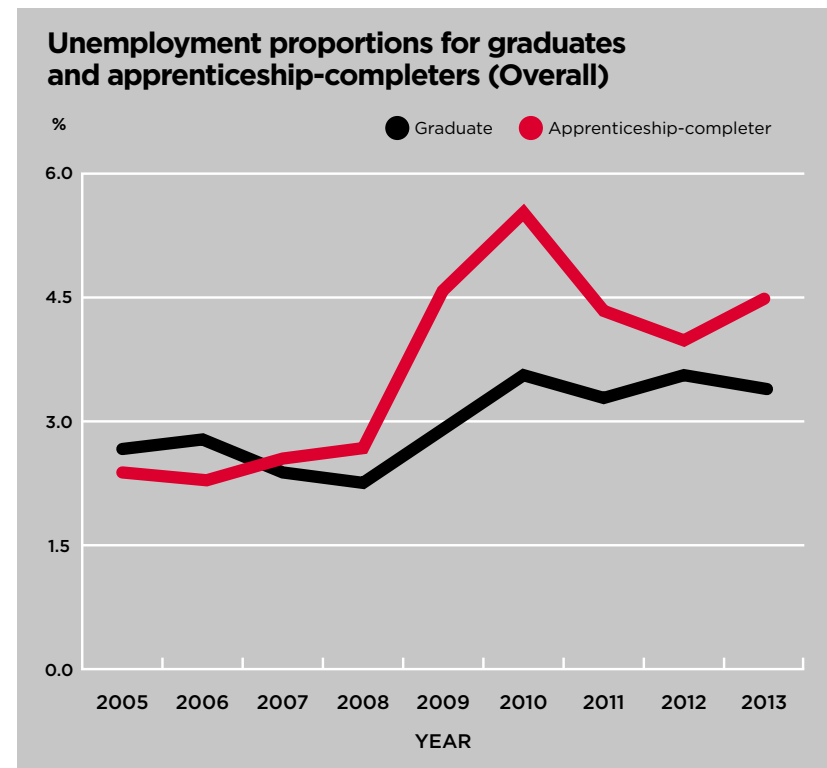
Seeing people that have already gone through the university process and they are now struggling to find a job in that sector.

You learn on the job and are earning straight away. Also sometimes when coming out of university there isn’t a guaranteed job at the end of it, you don’t have this problem as much going straight into employment.

University isn’t always the best option, some people come out of uni[versity] and can’t find a job in their qualifications, eg they end up working at ASDA. I see too many negatives which outweigh the positives.”

Persuadables, Havas People’s Student Tracker Spring 2015

In addition to promoting the financial benefits of “learning whilst earning”, it is certainly worth amplifying the message on the employment security that apprenticeships and school leaver programmes bring. **It is security that speaks to the anxious mind.**



Source: Varsity Blues 2014

Lack of quality advice

What's more: since 2012 the responsibility for delivering careers guidance has been passed from local authorities to schools. The National Careers Service – a combination of predominantly web and helpline-based provision – was established to offer careers guidance to people of all ages, as well as Plotr, a government-supported website. At the same time Connexions services – local authority-based provision which previously led the delivery of much careers guidance to young people – continue to decline.

There is strong evidence suggesting a lack of quality careers advice about alternatives to universities. Ofsted inspected 60 schools in 2012 and was very critical of the careers service at schools :



*“ The **information** students received about careers **was too narrow**. Too many students were unaware of the wide range of occupations and careers that they might consider. About half the schools used their own staff to inform students about careers but these staff often had insufficient training and did not provide students with up-to-date information.*

Schools did not work well enough with employers to provide their students with direct experience of the world of work, which would help to broaden students' minds about possible future employment. Vocational training and apprenticeships were rarely promoted effectively, especially in schools with sixth forms. The A-level route to universities remained the 'gold standard' for young people, their parents and teachers.”

There is further evidence from All About School Leavers Teacher Survey 2015 that over 95% of teachers were aware of university being an option for their pupils when they left school, but only about a third aware of school leaver programmes .

Quality face-to-face guidance

More importantly for the Persuadables, face to face guidance, the most ideal form of careers advice, is not directly funded. MyKindaFuture's research suggests that more than half of young people want to meet **face-to-face** with employers to obtain careers advice and guidance, while only 14% prefer to get this kind of information online . Barnardo's research which focused on disadvantaged students has similar findings.

For some Persuadables, it was quality face to face guidance that persuaded them to consider employment instead of university:

*“Attending **higher education conferences and careers fairs** made me more aware of the options available and their different advantages and disadvantages.*

*A **citizenship class** I was in when we were learning about apprenticeships and I found out you could do them in accountancy.”*

Persuadable, Havas People Student Tracker Spring 2015

Personal and influencers' experience

To this, we can also add personal and influencers' experience as well:

*“Doing **work experience** and finding out about the different school leavers programmes available at certain companies. This increased my interest and led to further research.*

*I want to work in something to do with design or media; it would be easier to get into this field through experience rather than a degree. Both of my design **teachers** got a degree in design and said they could see no other option but to become a teacher, which I don't want to do. Therefore I would like to get a job, apprenticeship or do a course to try and get into the design/media field.”*

Persuadable, Havas People Student Tracker Spring 2015

Triggered to action

More importantly, quality guidance, personal and influencers' experiences triggered the Persuadables to find out for themselves the benefits of apprenticeships and school leaver programmes as opposed to university:

*“I started to **research** into employment opportunities, and I started weighing up the cost of university and **realised** is it really worth £9,000.*

*The **fact** that I can get a degree level apprenticeship (part time at a uni or college) in which I am paid £380 a week, rather than paying £9,000 a year for the same thing (with worse career opportunities afterwards) at a university.*

*Suitability for career in mind - **research** showed apprenticeships would likely help me more than university (particularly practical experience).”*

All Persuadables, Havas People's Student Tracker Spring 2015

It is their own research that convinced them of the **tangible** benefits of an apprenticeship, creating a **realistic alternative** to university, which persuaded these Persuadables.



What would persuade the Persuadables?

What the Persuadables need are triggers, which help them bypass stigma, concern and anxiety, and above all, stimulate enough interest in them to find out for themselves the tangible benefits of an apprenticeship, and how it makes a realistic alternative to university for them.

So instead of blanket advertising, employers may want to consider marketing activities that are based around triggers.

The incentive trigger

Incentive marketing is about using incentives to motivate targeted audiences to take action. Imagine for instance a competition targeted at Year 12s and 13s, on “why school leaver programmes/apprentices are better than university?”. Students are encouraged to do their own research, such as browsing websites or even getting in touch with employers which offer school leaver schemes to gather information. Or it could take the form of an online game, through which students discover apprenticeships. Either way, as long as there is a prize on offer, there is an incentive that triggers students to start their journey of discovering the tangible benefits of apprenticeships and school leaver programmes. **If done right, a one-off campaign may suffice to motivate targeted students to start their research into apprenticeships.**

The influencer trigger

Employers can influence the influencers by supporting them in giving careers advice to students. CV workshops and careers fairs are good ways to get into schools, but they don't necessarily connect employers to the Persuadables. Persuadables need to be triggered to go to these events in the first place.

So instead, employers may consider developing simple, engaging and factual materials that teachers and careers advisors can trust and are happy to use when giving careers advice to students. Better yet, **perhaps some easy and fun to use careers decision-making tools** that students, schools and even parents can use **to weigh up the benefits of an apprenticeship vs university**, highlighting for instance student debt vs the earnings that can be gained during a university degree.

The testimonial trigger

A different but related trigger is testimonials. Jeanieb67 reached out to students who were in the same shoes. It mattered little that she never met those students before. In fact, the anonymity serves as both a protection to Jeanieb67 and some form of a reassurance, as students can say what they want on the anonymous online forum with little fear of repercussion.

So perhaps employers may **consider building an online community where potential Persuadables can ask honest questions** about their own experiences of apprenticeships and school leaver programmes. Or, they may task their own school leaver ambassadors to join existing forums, and respond to threads like the one Jeanieb67 started.

Don't forget however to offer face to face opportunities, too. There is clear evidence about the power of face to face, authentic testimonials.

So perhaps employers can consider bringing their apprentices to careers fairs and other occasions where the Persuadables can speak **face to face** to those who have "been there" before, and understand from them how they were persuaded to join an apprenticeship.

Tangible benefits

Whichever trigger employers choose to build their recruitment activities around, it is important that the tangible benefits for the Persuadables are highlighted as a result. The benefits include: **employment security** (in addition to the financial benefits of "learn and earn") and **effective use of time to progress in their career**. For those who have yet to decide on their specialisms, the transferable employment skills of school leaver programmes, which are designed to allow them to rotate from team to team in initial phase of the scheme, **open up future employment opportunities**.

Finally

The Government is rolling out 9 new industry-designed Degree Apprenticeships which include Russell Group universities as well as Schneider Electric, Rolls Royce, Accenture and many other high-profile employers. This is likely to create a halo effect on apprenticeships in general.

With an increasingly favourable environment, if the right triggers are deployed effectively such that the Persuadables discover for themselves all the tangible benefits of an apprenticeship, then perhaps, we can also persuade Jeanieb67, and many more to follow the footsteps of this Persuadable:

"[I] realis[ed that] I can make my own decisions and not feeling as pressured by family to go to university. I discovered all of the other options which seem equally appealing."

Footnotes

- 1 Havas People co-run the Student Tracker with Callen Associates.
- 2 We have excluded those with unknown predicted tariffs in this calculation.
- 3 The rest were considering other options such as a gap year.
- 4 http://filestore.aqa.org.uk/over/stat_pdf/AQA-A-LEVEL-STATS-JUNE-2015.PDF
- 5 All About School Leavers (2015): The School and College Leaver Careers Market
- 6 which is perhaps more widely used within a graduate employment market context, but is appropriate here as well.
- 7 To be fair, David Willetts was really trying to say a degree is a good investment for (what a time considered to be) £25,000 student debt. He wasn't trying to mislead either: his comment was based on a comprehensive analysis conducted by the experts in London Economics (report published in 2011). The problem is: the projection of £100,000 additional earning is calculated using the using Labour Force Survey 1996 to 2006, hence including a disproportionately large number of graduates from pre-1992 universities (which include nearly all of the Russell Group universities). The study also focuses on an era where around a quarter of the population were graduates (using 2005 as a base year), which is now estimated to be 38% (as of Q2 2013; source: Office for National Statistics: http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171776_337841.pdf).
- 8 An associated poll in Pera Training's Varsity Blue: <http://www.peratraining.com/varsity-blues.pdf>
- 9 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-12286264>
- 10 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-29327590>
- 11 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-26992728>
- 12 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/10578118/Graduates-earning-less-than-those-on-apprenticeships.html>
- 13 <https://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/osborne-signals-rise-9k-fee-cap-tef>
- 14 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-33595267>
- 15 Ofsted (2013): <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/careers-guidance-in-schools-going-in-the-right-direction>
- 16 To be fair, the government itself is partly to be blamed for a lack of quality careers advice. They are one of the champions for the "graduate premium" for over a decade. (See BIS report, *ibid*) Also, the government budgets for almost £4 billion for English universities alone , but only £770 million for all apprenticeships in the UK for 2015/16. Source: House of Commons Briefing Paper: www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN03052.pdf
- 17 It was branded under "MyKindaCrowd" when this research took place.
- 18 MyKindaCrowd: <http://www.mykindacrowd.com/Blog/Details/have-you-heard-the-news>
- 19 Bernado's (2013): http://www.barnardos.org.uk/helping_the_in_betweeners.pdf
- 20 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-rolls-out-flagship-degree-apprenticeships>

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