

 Checkatrade

# **Backing Britain's tradespeople: From 'last resort' to first choice**

# Introduction

For decades, the tradespeople of Britain have too often been looked down on. The essential and skilled workers who fix Britain's homes, and turn up in the dead of night to scale ladders and sort crises have not had the respect they deserve.

While economic commentators obsess over office jobs and white-collar work, a quiet revolution has been taking place in classrooms and around kitchen tables about what it means to build a good job and a respected career in the UK today.

From young people thinking about stepping out of the school gates for the very last time to parents worried about their children's future, job security has never been more top of mind. And while fears of a job market that just isn't producing enough jobs, and of a workforce being turned on its head by the pace and scale of new technology, clearly dominate the conversation, something else is happening too.

The very definition of what makes a rewarding, fulfilling, and profitable career has come into the sharpest of focus.

The questions being asked after school and over dinner are no longer about the biggest bonuses you could get, or whether sitting in a lecture theatre is the only path forward. Instead they are about the stable life you could build for yourself and your family, which is rewarding, will lead to a good salary, a home you can afford, and which uses the skills you have.

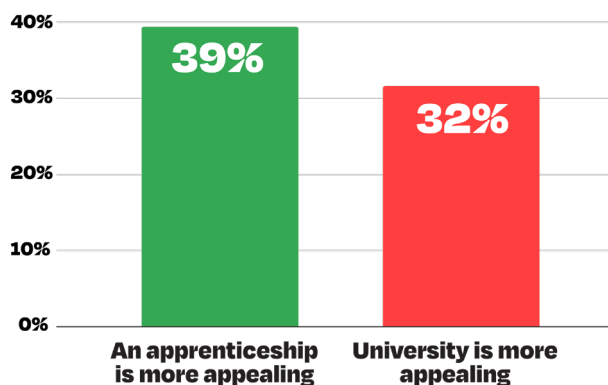
Something has changed in Britain. The idea that university is the only way to get on in life is no longer a universal view. The idea that practical, hands-on jobs are something for other people is no longer the norm. And the idea that joining the ranks of the UK's 900,000 tradespeople is no longer a last resort, but a first choice.

# The lecture hall moves to the back of the queue

When 'education, education, education' was the mantra at the top of Government, it went hand-in-hand with the idea that lecture halls and seminar rooms were the key to building a good life. And this view has persisted for decades.

Across Britain, that is no longer the case. When young people are directly asked to choose which path is right for them, more now back apprenticeships than university. **Four in ten (39%) now say that the idea of learning practical skills on an apprenticeship is more appealing than the 32% who see their future starting in one of the UK's universities.**

## When thinking about your future after school or college, how appealing is the idea of doing an apprenticeship compared to going to university?



**This is a sea change that has happened over the last decade. Ten years ago, just 3% said that an apprenticeship was their first choice, with only a third (36%) saying it was something they had considered.**<sup>1</sup> This is no longer hypothetical. UCAS, the body responsible for connecting students with universities, finds that half of all young people using their platform are now interested in apprenticeships, with hundreds of thousands every year now searching and applying for placements to become an apprentice.<sup>2</sup>

But central to young people changing their views is the influence their parents have on them. In a world of rising unemployment and the reality of a million young people left out of work, training, and education, universities are now at the bottom of the list. More than six in ten parents (62%) say rising youth unemployment has made them more favourable about on-the-job training for their children, over half (55%) say the same of apprenticeships, while one in five (20%) have become less favourable about university as a path for their children.

# Trade jobs have never been more popular, or more needed

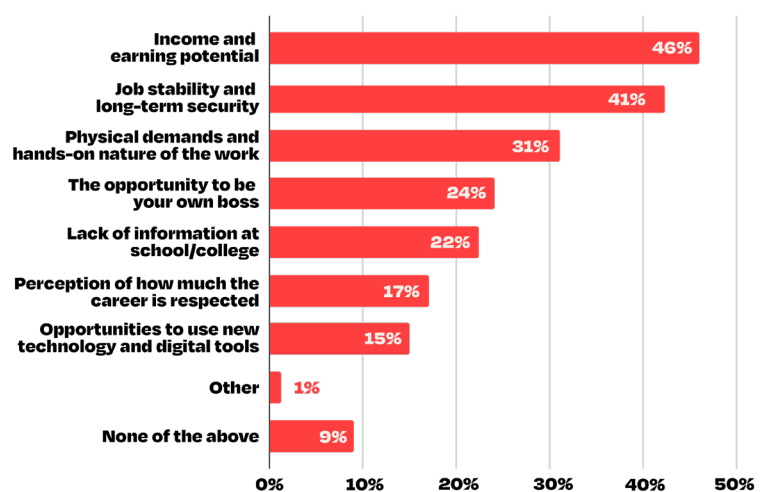
The shift across the generations towards practical preparation for the world of work isn't just about the way people train up for their careers, but about the actual careers they want to pursue afterwards.

With the labour market in disarray, not least for young people facing entry-level jobs being displaced and disrupted by AI and automation, disparaging views about being a 'white van man' are receding.

**From becoming a plumber to an electrician or a carpenter, two-thirds (66%) of young people in the UK believe a career in the trades is a respected profession that offers a strong pathway into the world of work.**

This isn't just leading to a huge upswing in the number considering jobs that can't be replaced by AI, or where using their hands is vital, but half (48%) now say they are actively considering whether to pursue a job in Britain's trade industry. When asked to consider the factors why they would choose, or not choose, a career in the trades, almost half of young people consider the earning potential (46%) and job stability (41%) as key factors. This strengthens the idea of trades being seen as "AI-proof" as well as an attractive career path financially.

## What factors would most influence your decision to choose, or not choose, a career in the trades?



The conditions for joining the trades have never been more ripe, and the data couldn't be clearer. There are currently 900,000 trades across the UK, but over the next decade, demand for jobs to build, improve, and retrofit homes is expected to require 1.3 million additional tradespeople.<sup>3</sup> That is a golden opportunity for young people on the precipice of a labour market that the Government's own review into youth unemployment calls an urgent national crisis.<sup>4</sup>

# Becoming a trade isn't easy - and schools, young people, and Government all need to act

While a golden opportunity in the trades clearly exists, this isn't an easy answer to the NEETs crisis engulfing the country.

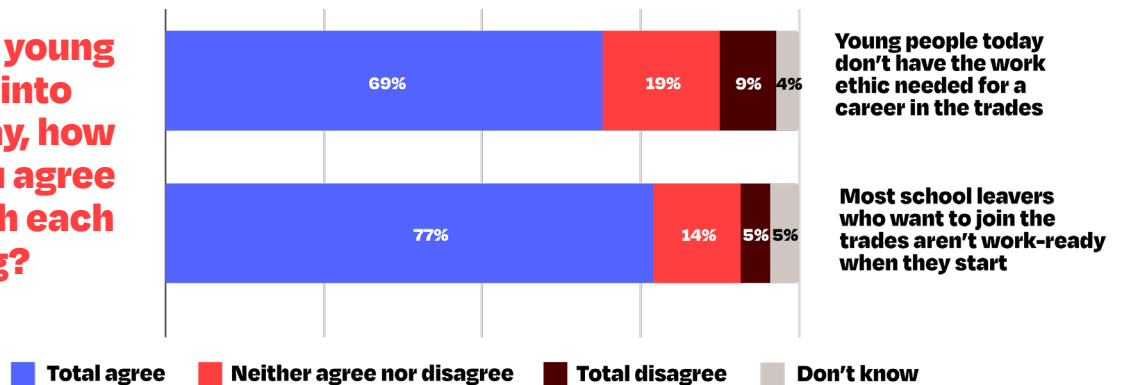
This starts with young people themselves. Tradespeople's own experiences of working with school leavers show that major barriers exist. **More than three-quarters (77%) just do not think young people are ready for work when they leave school, and seven in every ten (68%) warn that too many haven't developed the work ethic required for a job that is hard, physical and requires long, unsociable hours.**

But schools and colleges have a key role to play too. Until the age of 18 they don't just develop students' knowledge and their love of learning; they prepare them for life beyond the classroom too. And in this, trades think too little is being done.

**Nearly nine in ten (87%) tradespeople believe schools and colleges need to better prepare students for the working world. Young people themselves, as well as their parents, have raised the issue in different ways.** 60% of 16-to-24-year-olds say no one at school or college has talked to them honestly about how AI could affect their future job prospects, while more than three-quarters (77%) of their parents need to do more to prepare young people for practical careers.

But perhaps the most concerning fault line stopping young people from pursuing a good job in the trades is the mechanism for training up the next generation with the skills required to do the job.

**Thinking about young people coming into the trades today, how strongly do you agree or disagree with each of the following?**



Since medieval times, apprenticeships have been synonymous with the trades. When you think of an apprentice, you think of honing a craft and using your hands. But that link has been broken, and fixing it has never been more vital.

Nearly nine in every ten (88%) trades haven't hired an apprentice in the last year, against a backdrop of hundreds of thousands fewer young people starting an apprenticeship over the last decade. In 2011, more than 522,000 people began their journey as apprentices. But by 2025, this had dropped to just 354,000<sup>5</sup>

**“Over the years I've spent time and money taking on apprentices who are either not cut out for the role or leave as soon as they are qualified.”**

**Joe Pickering, JMP Plumb**

**“Taking on an apprentice is not just a financial risk, it's an operational challenge. If I decide to take on an apprentice, I become personally responsible for their development right down to their welfare. This is why I wouldn't take on an apprentice right now. It's too much of a risk.”**

**David Hodgson, Jackdaw Building & Roofing**

**“For a small company, an apprentice isn't just a wage - it's a loss of productivity.”**

**James Noll, Expressions Group Ltd**


Despite significant Government action to get more young people into on-the-job training, it will take time for businesses to feel the impact on the ground. Nearly three in five (58%) trade businesses say that Government reforms have not encouraged them to take more apprentices on, and the number of apprentices not even completing their training is stubbornly high. Less than a third of those who start trade apprenticeships go on to complete them, making the current process both inefficient and costly.<sup>6</sup>

Trade jobs have never been more popular, the job market has never been more fertile for the trades, and the growth of new trade jobs has never been higher. But the barriers holding back trades from hiring the next generation, and for young people to move into high-skilled, well-paying jobs in the trades, remain significant.


## A clear path to get more young people into the trades

To meet the moment and make sure the trade skills gap is closed with a pipeline of young people who have never been more excited to enter the profession will require concerted efforts across industry, Government, schools and colleges. If we don't act, it won't just be Britain's economy which will be harmed, but the incredible potential of hundreds of thousands of young people with their whole lives ahead of them.

## Five actions to get more young people into the trades




**Help young people meet the cost of starting out.** Tools, travel and protective kit all fall due before the first pay packet, so Government should offer apprentices from low-income households a starter grant, ensuring the cost of doing the job isn't the thing that stops them taking it.




**Reward young people that see apprentices through.** Government should offer a National Insurance break for apprentices who complete their training and stay on.



**Put practical skills back at the heart of the apprenticeship.** Apprenticeships should be stripped of the paperwork and off-the-job requirements that do little to build competence, so time is spent learning the trade where it matters: on site, with tools in hand.



**Deliver the Work Experience Guarantee in full.** The Government's Work Experience Guarantee should be implemented in full across schools and colleges, so that every young person gains first-hand experience of a range of businesses, including the trades.



**Help trades understand the support on offer.** Businesses that work alongside the trades should help them understand the reforms to apprenticeships and the funding available to hire and train new recruits.

**Our first Trade Nation report made the case that Britain is a nation built on its trades, and that the tradespeople who keep the country running deserve far more respect and support than they have been given. What has changed since is striking: young people now agree. For the first time in a generation, more of them would choose an apprenticeship than university, and half are actively weighing up a career on the tools.**

**That is a real opportunity at a moment of real urgency, with a million young people out of work and the trades needing 1.3 million more people over the next decade. But it will be wasted if getting into the trades stays as hard as it is now. Too many young people leave school without the grounding employers are looking for, too few who start an apprenticeship ever finish it, and the smallest firms have yet to take advantage of the support on offer to help them take someone on. Closing that gap is now a shared task for industry, schools and government, and our five actions set out where to start.**

**Jambu Palaniappan, CEO of Checkatrade**

<sup>1</sup> FE News, Which? survey reveals gap in understanding about apprenticeships compared to university, 2017

<sup>2</sup> UCAS, Apprenticeships: establishing parity of opportunity, 2026

<sup>3</sup> Checkatrade, Trade Skills Index, 2024

<sup>4</sup> Department for Work and Pensions, Milburn Review Interim Report, 2026

<sup>5</sup> Parliament, Apprenticeship statistics for England, 2025

<sup>6</sup> Checkatrade, Trade Skills Index, 2024

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## Methodology

This research was based on nationally representative polling with 2,935 members of the public, collected between 27 April and 19 May 2026.

This included 750 young people aged 16-25, 933 homeowners, 758 parents of school-aged children, and 400 tradespeople working across the UK.