



# How to move from learner to earner

As the world of work changes, futures training—or careers advice—has been stepped up a gear to help children through it, finds Lucy Higginson

Illustrations by David Stoten

**A**S we wait longer than ever to be served in shops and restaurants, have one's driving licence returned or the phone answered, today's students are also finding that landing a job in cutthroat professions such as law, the media, marketing and finance has rarely been harder. School rhetoric about 'producing resilient children who will thrive in careers which haven't even been invented yet' is all well and good, but must be supported by practical help to smooth transition from learners to earners.

University careers departments may be strapped for cash, but the good news is that independent schools have upped their game, partly in response to the Gatsby Charitable Foundation-commissioned Good Career Guidance report in 2013, which identified eight benchmarks schools should use to audit their careers-guidance provision. These days, it goes far beyond sixth-form enterprise projects and the occasional careers fair.

Children now recognise their working life is likely to involve multiple careers. 'My current lower-sixth seem far more pragmatic

after the past two years,' reflects Louise Scofield, director of professional guidance at Felsted, Essex. 'A lot still say that they're interested in finance and banking, but, when you see stats on the jobs that could be replaced by AI in 20 years, accounting and banking are right at the top. They are thinking more strategically, asking more questions, recognising the skills gap in tech and accepting that some of the more competitive pathways aren't worth the risk.'

Cathy Walker of the Girls' Day School Trust (GDST) agrees. 'As a director of sixth form, I saw girls being incredibly savvy about degrees—they would consider a less prestigious university for a course with higher employment rates.' Pupils are increasingly urged not to think what a degree in history leads to, but the jobs that could utilise the skills acquired in completing it. 'A history degree will give students research, communication or critical-thinking skills,' reasons Karen Kimura of the GDST.

Topics such as this are discussed in the LEAD diploma (Leadership Enterprise Advanced Diploma, run in partnership with

LSE) being done by year 12s in 17 of the trust's 25 schools. Girls explore portfolio careers, personality tests, flexible working, financial stability and more through pre-recordings, online sessions, personal 'bootcamps', networking and mentoring opportunities.

Shrewsbury in Shropshire does something similar with the ILM Young Leaders award, covering a gamut of topics from problem solving, seeking support, learning how to mentor and so on. 'We're one of only two independent schools to offer it and it's a point of difference on application forms,' says head of futures Chris Wain.

The best schools rarely miss an opportunity now to connect the classroom to the boardroom, provide practical training for job applications, and to get pupils thinking about work sooner. At Benenden in Kent, younger girls undertake an enquiry week—a 'Renaissance Whodunnit'—during which they'll meet a costume historian, forensic psychologist, accountant, caterers, marketers, an archivist and so on, explains Lesley Tyler, executive director curriculum and professional excellence: 'Our motto is "every



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teacher is a careers teacher”. It’s about trying to stud the normal classroom experience with real-life problem solving, linking learning to what the world actually needs. You can’t be it if you can’t see it—you need to hear from people who have made different choices.’

As sixth-formers, the girls then tackle a compulsory professional skills programme that is focused on navigating the employment market and being employable. ‘They will prepare a CV and have it reviewed by an alumna in their chosen field,’ explains Mrs Tyler. ‘They’ll go through mock interviews and psychometric testing, then we’ll show them how to use a careers service, look for a job and which sites to use.’ A regular careers bulletin advertises summer schools and internship opportunities.

At Felsted, pupils also probe High Fliers Research’s graduate recruitment data on the courses favoured by top employers and a careers programme from year 11 covers practice interviews, assessment exercises and more—combating the concern that this is a generation that doesn’t really know how to write a proper application letter.

Shrewsbury has similarly smart initiatives for its lower-sixth to shed some light on the dark art of modern recruitment: ‘They attend a mock assessment centre morning for psychometric assessments, group activities, a one-to-one interview where their CV is reviewed and we have clever video-interview software with which you



can set up practice interviews—for example, for a job in business or retail—and play them back,’ reports Mr Wain. ‘Rightly or wrongly, employers are using this kind of thing and the feedback was that 93% found it useful—it’s an eye opener about what’s to come.’

Inviting alumni or parents who are happy to speak frankly about the often bumpy working world is vital. At Felsted, ‘one parent talked brilliantly about being made redundant and setting up on his own. We look for stories like that—life doesn’t always go in a straight line’.

Work experience—a hot potato even in normal times, as anyone who’s had to occupy a keen, but clueless 16-year-old for a week can testify—obviously suffered through Covid. Although pupils speak highly of virtual work-experience courses offered through platforms such as [www.springpod.com](http://www.springpod.com), many of these last only a day or two. It’s refreshing, therefore, to hear Mr Wain call these ‘very much plan C or D for us’. Shrewsbury has upped the ante over work experience: ‘It’s not so much encouraged as mandated from the fifth form,’ explains Mr Wain. ‘We actively track what they have been doing, and ask them to reflect on it afterwards.’

As a reviewer for *The Good Schools Guide*, I’ve seen schools going out of their way to build links with neighbouring industries—City of London School for Girls has a whole section on its website about its relationship with top local →





law firm Linklaters—both to help students and alumnae and to make themselves stand out. This often dovetails with another growing trend, community engagement and partnerships, accelerated through the pandemic. Rugby in Warwickshire, for example, has built strong links with at least two local hospitals and the local Air Ambulance through its Rugby 360 public service programme.

Also helping pupils and graduates to infiltrate the industries that interest them are massively improved alumni networks, usually in the form of searchable databases of former pupils, parents and other contacts who are willing to be called upon for advice, mentoring, interview practice and work experience. Schools everywhere are investing in these—useful for fundraising, too, no doubt—and especially important for rural schools.

As more corporates focus on diversity and inclusion, the long-derided old-school-tie network becomes increasingly important for the privately educated middle-classes. ‘We’re lucky enough to have a 70,000-strong women’s alumnae network, we believe the largest in the world of its kind,’ says the GDST’s Karen Kimura ‘Teenagers don’t want to be connected with only one profession—they change their mind a lot.’ In some cases, commendably, a school’s careers service supports pupils long after they’ve left.

True to its ‘Shrewsbury for Life’ ethos, the school runs networking events in London for alumni. ‘The world of work is different in so many ways to 15 years ago,’ Mr Wain observes, ‘but what hasn’t changed is that who you know is as important as what you know. It’s not about bypassing processes, but using every opportunity.’

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### The art of networking

**Manchester High School for Girls’s Project Pankhurst gives year 12s a booklet of old girls in a variety of professions who are willing to mentor them as they explore university and career ideas**

With 25 schools under its umbrella, The Girls Day School Trust has a vast alumnae network and uses an app called Rungway to link girls at school, university or in the working world. With more than 2,500 active users, old girls will respond with advice from anything such as university accommodation to job opportunities

**Benenden, Kent, is one of many to have invested in a slick database accessible to current and old girls and their families, Benenden Connects, through which they can make contact and seek advice from others**

Shrewsbury in Shropshire recently built its own LinkedIn-style platform, OS Connect. Chris Wain explains: ‘We enrol students on it in sixth form so we can track them from point of exit, see what support they might need and truly track the impact of what they’ve done at school’