ACS
INTERNATIONAL
SCHOOL
EGHAM

TOO SOON TO DECIDE

HOW EARLY SUBJECT SPECIALISATION MAKES CAREER PATHS HARDER TO CHART

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FOREWORD

I taught drama for many years before moving into school leadership. One thing theatre teaches you is that there's rarely just one right way to interpret a character or tell a story. The best performances come when actors have the freedom to explore, to make bold choices, to discover something unexpected.

Education should work the same way, but England's current system does the opposite. It chips away at young people until they conform to an outdated ideal of what success looks like. By 14, students must choose. By 16, they narrow further. By 18, many have been carved into a shape that fits university entrance requirements but doesn't necessarily fit them.

What troubles me most is how we measure success. When I speak with prospective parents, many are still fixated on grades as the ultimate metric, a set of numbers that supposedly captures a young person's worth and potential. But evaluating success through grades alone is dangerously narrow-minded for 2025 and beyond. The world needs people who can think, not just people who can memorise. It needs collaborators, innovators, problem-solvers, people comfortable with ambiguity and change.

To be clear. Our school is academically rigorous. Our students progress to top universities and excel there. But there's a persistent misconception that breadth somehow compromises depth, that you must choose between developing the whole person and achieving academic excellence. The evidence shows the opposite is true.

This report presents some uncomfortable findings. Half of working adults were pushed down career paths they didn't choose. Two-thirds of parents believe the system narrows options too early. Yet many of these same parents still default to traditional choices when it comes to their own children's education, sometimes because they don't realise alternatives exist, sometimes because familiar feels safer than different.

But here's what I know from almost 30 years in education, including teaching Theory of Knowledge on the IB programme. When you give young people the space to explore broadly, to question deeply, to connect ideas across disciplines, they don't just perform well academically. They develop confidence in their own thinking. They become more open-minded, more curious, more capable of carving out their own image rather than fitting into someone else's predetermined mould.

The question isn't whether we should let young people specialise. It's when. And the evidence suggests we're forcing that choice far too early.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Less than half of working Brits have achieved what they set out to do. Only 46% say they're working in their dream career. The rest are living with compromise, and many carry lasting resentment. One in five adults feel resentful that their parents forced them down a particular job path. When asked whether schools helped them make good choices, 62% found their advice unhelpful.

Working adults - dream career achievement

This generation is now raising teenagers, and they're determined to do better. More than half (57%) say they will be much more open to their children's career choices compared to how their own parents handled these decisions. They've learned from experience. Forty-three per cent wish they'd done something more creative, and 40% regularly think about changing careers but feel trapped by financial constraints.

Yet the system they're navigating hasn't changed. Both generations identify the same structural problem. Among parents, 66% believe the English exam system requires pupils to narrow their subject choices too early, limiting future study and career options. Their children agree, with 62% sharing this view.

This matters more now because the career landscape is transforming. An overwhelming 90% of parents believe AI means young people will need to rethink what counts as a "good job", with roles requiring human interaction becoming more valuable than traditional high-paying professions. Their children see it too. Eighty-nine per cent of young people agree that AI and automation is changing the idea of what a "good job" is.

The urgency becomes clear when you consider timing. While the English system forces specialisation at 14-16, 36% of the young people we surveyed aren't, understandably, clear about their exact career direction. They're being asked to narrow their options before they understand what those options are.

Career clarity among 16-21 year olds

When young people think about work, 80% say enjoyment matters most, far above pay, security, or progression. They're drawn to diverse fields spanning technology, creative arts, medicine, engineering, and entrepreneurship. Many of these roles either didn't exist a decade ago or have been fundamentally transformed by technology.

The pattern is clear. A generation shaped by premature choices, trying not to repeat it, but facing a system that forces the same decisions, now in a world where the future of work is more uncertain than ever.

About the research

This research was conducted online by Perspectus Global in September 2025 on behalf of ACS International Schools. The study surveyed 3,527 people in the UK across three groups:

1,519
working adults

1,004
parents with children aged 16-21 (at school, college, or university)

1,004
young people aged 16-21 (children of the parent respondents)

The sample was predominantly from England, where the GCSE and A-level system applies.

In this report, 'young people' refers to those aged 16-21 at school, college, or university.

Due to rounding, percentages may not always total 100%.

1. Today's workers: Living with regret

The numbers tell a stark story. When working adults in our survey were asked whether they felt forced or encouraged down a certain career path despite having doubts, half agreed or strongly agreed. This means half of today's workers were pushed in the wrong direction, either by parents, careers advisors, or both.

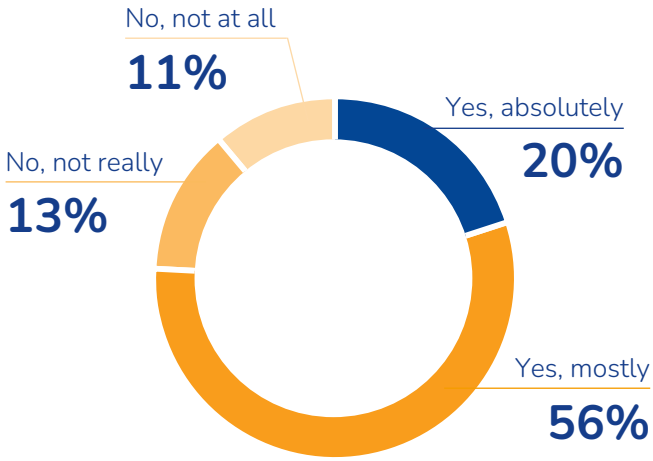
How workers were pushed into careers

For those who were pushed, the drivers were clear. Half cited earnings, a quarter pointed to parental pressure, and another quarter blamed careers advisor guidance.

This is precisely why high-quality school and college counselling matters. Good counsellors work with both students and their parents, helping families make decisions together rather than allowing well-meaning parents to inadvertently push children down the wrong path. Almost a quarter of those pushed cited careers advisor guidance as the driver, showing how professionals meant to help can inadvertently steer people in the wrong direction.

The emotional cost shows up years later. When asked whether their current job makes them happy, the picture is troubling. While 56% said yes, mostly, and 20% said yes, absolutely, 24% say their job makes them unhappy, comprising 13% who said no, not really, and 11% who said no, not at all.

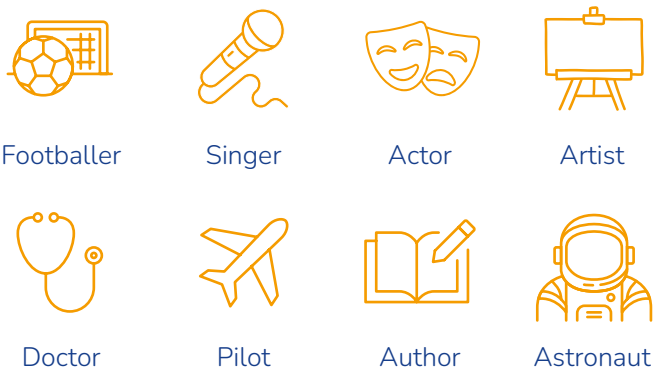
Job happiness levels – "Are you happy with the job you do?"



The rest describe feeling frustrated (26%), resentful or angry (19%), or even depressed (15%) when thinking about their careers. This isn't just dissatisfaction, it's lasting damage from decisions made too early.

Schools failed to guide them properly. Just 38% felt the advice their school provided was helpful. That means 62% found it unhelpful. This failure wasn't just passive neglect, it was active discouragement. When workers reflected on the advice they received, many recalled being told simply that their dreams were impossible.

What career advisors said was impossible



When workers reflected on the advice they received, many recalled being told their dreams were unrealistic or financially unviable, from creative careers like acting and music to demanding professions like medicine and aviation. The issue isn't whether those specific warnings were justified at the time. It's that if the adults making predictions in the 1980s and 90s couldn't accurately forecast which careers would flourish, how can we confidently predict which combinations of skills will matter in 2035 or 2045?

This failure has lasting consequences. When reflecting on their careers, today's workers say 43% would have liked to do something more creative, 18% envy people who seem to love their job or career, and 20% feel resentful that their parents forced them down a particular job path.

The creative dreams that died

The careers that were abandoned before they had a chance to develop reveal what was sacrificed. Many are creative, human-centred roles that early specialisation might have made difficult to pursue.

What's interesting is the pattern. Not all of these dreams will have been unrealistic fantasies. They were careers requiring sustained commitment, often needing early foundation-building in arts, sciences, or physical training. But when schools asked 14-year-olds to choose between creative subjects and sciences, or between arts and the "serious" academic path, these dreams became structurally harder to pursue. A student who dropped music at 14 to focus on sciences was more likely to have found the door to performing arts closing. Someone who chose arts subjects couldn't later switch to medicine without starting over. The system didn't just discourage these careers through advice, it made the practical pathway more difficult through subject combinations that couldn't accommodate breadth.

The choices made at 14-16 continue to constrain options decades later. Financial pressures, retraining costs, and time constraints make career changes difficult for many.

Barriers to career change

When reviewing generational differences, 39% of those working believe children today are given more encouragement to follow their dreams. But their own experience tells a different story. Only 18% say their parents encouraged them to follow their dreams. And just 38% say their parents were happy for them to follow whatever career they wanted.

2. Today's parents: Determined to break the cycle

Having experienced career regret themselves, today's parents are approaching career guidance very differently. The shift is dramatic. Over half say they will be much more open to their children's career choices compared to how their parents handled these decisions, with another quarter saying they'll be somewhat more open.

Parents' openness to children's career choices

Their priorities have shifted too. When faced with a choice, 46% of parents would prefer their children take a job aligned with their interests even if it pays less. Only 10% would encourage a higher-paying job their child wasn't interested in. The earnings-driven thinking that shaped their generation is being replaced by a focus on fulfilment.

This philosophy extends to supporting unconventional choices. More than two in five (42%) would support their child if they started a prestigious course (e.g. medicine, law, engineering or IT) but later wanted to switch to an arts or creative degree. Only 13% would try to prevent such a switch.

Parents are also opening up to alternative pathways. Nearly half (49%) would encourage non-university routes if their child had a clear plan. The priorities have shifted too. Starting a small business and building portfolio or freelance careers now sit alongside apprenticeships as viable options.

Only 5% would try to persuade their child to attend university if they didn't want to go. This represents a significant shift from previous generations, when university was often seen as the only acceptable path for academically able students.

Yet openness has boundaries. When children pursue unfamiliar career paths, practical constraints reveal limits to this support. Among parents, 46% would support their child for a maximum of one year before encouraging them to reconsider if things weren't going to plan. A third (30%) would extend support for up to two years, and 23% would give them three or more years.

This suggests that even supportive parents feel uncertain about paths they don't understand, particularly careers that didn't exist when they were making their own choices. The challenge is that parents may be applying traditional timelines to new or non-traditional careers. Building a portfolio career, establishing a consultancy, or growing a social media presence will often require longer runway periods than securing a graduate training scheme. What looks like "not working" after 12 months might simply be the foundation-building phase that precedes success.

But on one thing, both generations agree. The system itself is the problem. This is perhaps the most striking finding in our research. Two-thirds of parents (66%) believe the English exam system requires pupils to narrow their subject choices too early, limiting future study and career options. Only 22% disagree. This isn't abstract concern, it's rooted in their own experience of a system that closed off possibilities before they understood what opportunities existed.

Does the English exam system narrows options too early?

Parents agree	**66%**
Parents disagree	**22%**
Young people agree	**62%**
Young people disagree	**23%**

3. Today's young people: Facing the same obstacles

Young people share their parents' frustrations about the system. When asked how well school and college helps them get ready for work beyond exams and grades, only 23% said very well, 43% said quite well, and 32% said adequately or not very well. This means roughly one in three teens feel their schools are not preparing them properly for the world of work.

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Yet they experience parental guidance very differently from how their parents were raised. When asked to describe how their parents or carers approach career advice, 62% said "encourage me to follow my interests, whatever the route", while only 3% said "prefer I choose something stable or secure over what I enjoy". This confirms the generational shift parents reported.

When it comes to career direction, 23% say they are already clear about the kind of career they want, and 39% are quite clear. Another 36% are still exploring their options – a healthy developmental stage where curiosity should be encouraged, not cut short. Yet the English system forces specialisation through GCSE choices at 14 and A-level narrowing at 16, demanding potentially irreversible decisions when only a quarter are truly clear about their direction. Even the 39% who are 'quite clear' may discover new passions if given the space to do so.

The careers that interest them span both traditional and emerging fields, revealing a generation with remarkably broad curiosity. Technology (software, AI, data and cloud) tops the list, followed by creative and performing arts, medicine and clinical careers, media and communications, engineering, gaming and esports, business and law, entrepreneurship, education and public sector, and cybersecurity.

What's notable is how many of these fields increasingly overlap and how naturally young people grasp this. Gaming requires both creative storytelling and technical programming. Medicine needs data literacy alongside clinical skills. Even traditional business roles now demand digital fluency. These students instinctively understand what the evidence confirms. The most interesting work happens at intersections. Yet the system asks them to choose sides before they've had time to explore these connections.

Top 10 career interests

1. Technology (software, AI, data, cloud)
2. Creative and performing arts
3. Medicine and clinical careers
4. Media, marketing, communications
5. Engineering and manufacturing
6. Gaming, esports, immersive media
7. Business, management, law
8. Entrepreneurship/own business
9. Education and public sector
10. Cybersecurity and digital trust

When asked what matters most in their future work, young peoples' priorities are clear. Four in five say enjoyment is most important when thinking about work, far above good pay and job security (two-thirds), work-life balance (almost half), career progression (just over a quarter), positive impact (more than one in five), or the chance to be creative (one in five).

This generation has learned from watching their parents' regrets. They understand that sustainable careers come from genuine interest, not forced choices made for financial security. Yet they face a system that asks them to narrow options before they've had time to discover what truly engages them.

What matters most in work

Enjoyment	**80%**
Good pay and job security	**66%**
Work-life balance	**46%**
Career progression	**26%**
Positive impact or purpose	**22%**
Chance to be creative	**20%**

Young people also see the workplace transforming and they're already thinking strategically about their place in it. When asked about AI and automation changing the idea of what a "good job" is, 89% agree (with 36% strongly agreeing). Rather than panicking, they're adapting. Eighty-eight percent say they would choose careers emphasising human interaction. This is not out of fear, but from smart recognition that uniquely human capabilities become more valuable, not less, as AI handles routine tasks. This generation isn't running from technology. They're positioning themselves to work alongside it.

The hope is there. Young people have confidence their parents understand the new world of work. More than seven in ten (71%) felt their parents have good awareness of changing work patterns, and 67% felt the same about their schools. But the structural obstacle remains. A system that forces them to narrow their focus at 14-16 when the jobs they'll eventually do may not yet exist.

THE AI REVOLUTION: WHY THIS MATTERS NOW

The career landscape young people face today is fundamentally different from the one their parents navigated. An overwhelming 90% of parents believe AI means young people will need to rethink what counts as a "good job", with roles requiring human interaction becoming more valuable than traditional professions. Young people agree: 89% see AI changing what a "good job" means.

AI changing what counts as a "good job"

Parents agree	**90%**
Parents disagree	**10%**
Young people agree	**89%**
Young people disagree	**11%**

This shared recognition makes England's early specialisation system even more problematic. How can students narrow their focus at 14-16 when the work they'll eventually do may not yet exist?

The evidence of change is already visible in the job market[1]. Entry-level and graduate job postings in England have fallen approximately 32% since late 2022, with multiple analyses pointing to AI adoption as a contributing factor. The impact has been particularly severe in specific sectors. IT positions are down 55%, and accounting and finance roles have fallen 51%. Entry-level posts now account for just 25% of the job market, down from 29% in 2022[2].

Even degrees once considered safe bets are proving vulnerable. Business and management courses have surged in popularity, up 44% from 413,000 to nearly 600,000 students between 2019-20 and 2023-24. Meanwhile, the Big Four accounting firms (Deloitte, EY, PwC, and KPMG) posted 44% fewer graduate jobs in 2025 compared with 2023[3]. Computer science graduates, once guaranteed employment, now struggle to find junior software developer and engineering positions as AI tools boost senior productivity and reduce the need for entry-level roles.

The financial reality has shifted too. Graduate salaries have converged dramatically with minimum wage. In 2001, the average graduate starting salary of £15,500 was 115% higher than the minimum wage equivalent. By 2023, the graduate starting salary of £25,900 was only 30% higher than minimum wage[4]. Some graduates are responding by choosing flexibility over traditional career paths. Recent research found that 46% of van drivers under 35 now hold degrees, with many citing work-life balance and time for other pursuits as their reason for the choice[5].

Graduate salary convergence with minimum wage

2001 Graduate starting salary **115%** above minimum wage

2023 Graduate starting salary only **30%** above minimum wage

Source: Higher Education Policy Institute, October 2024

Research from McKinsey shows that roles with high AI exposure have seen larger declines in job advertisements (around 38%) compared to low-exposure roles (around 21%)[6]. Preparing children for this landscape is critical.

A study by the Sutton Trust[7] shows that independent schools are leading in AI integration. Independent school teachers are more likely to use AI tools daily (18% versus 11% in state schools), nearly twice as likely to have received formal AI training (45% versus 21%), and independent schools are three times as likely to have a school-wide strategy for AI use (27% versus 9%). This matters. Students who understand how to work with AI, rather than compete against it, will be better positioned in a transforming job market.

The shift goes beyond recognising change, it's affecting career choices now. More than half of parents (58%) would support their children choosing a career relying on human interaction because of concerns about AI and automation. Their children are thinking the same way.

1. The Guardian, "Number of new UK entry-level jobs has dived since ChatGPT launch", June 2025. 2. The Times, "Entry-level jobs plunge by a third since launch of ChatGPT", June 2025. 3. The Times, "Can you AI-proof your career and your children's future?", October 2025. 4. Higher Education Policy Institute, "The fall in graduate salaries shows the argument for mass entry to higher education has failed", October 2024, 5. Mercedes-Benz Vans research, February 2025. 6. The McKinsey UK Blog, "Not yet productive, already disruptive: AI's uneven effects on UK jobs and talent", July 2025. 7. Sutton Trust, "Artificial Advantage?" report, July 2025,

Almost nine in ten (88%) of young people agree they would now choose a job based on human interaction because of the risks AI poses to other careers.

Yet this creates a tension. If 90% of parents believe human-centred roles will become more valuable, and 66% believe the current system narrows options too early, why do so many still choose schools that enforce early specialisation? The answer probably lies in inertia. The system they know, even if flawed, feels safer than alternatives they don't understand.

Young people themselves show what they're drawn to. Technology sits at the top of their career interests, but creative and performing arts comes second, followed by medicine, media and communications, engineering, and gaming. These are fields where human judgement, creativity, and interpersonal skills remain central, even as technology transforms how the work gets done.

Interestingly, the skills that matter most may not be purely technical. Dr Henry Shevlin from the University of Cambridge's Leverhulme Centre for the Future of Intelligence points out that many skills taught by humanities courses, such as research and source-checking, are precisely what's needed to use AI effectively.

The assumption that STEM subjects alone will protect against AI disruption may be misplaced. As Shevlin notes, "It's not necessarily about subjects any more... Students need to think about cultivating higher-level working skills, having flexibility, being able to adapt"[8].

Interdisciplinary approaches may offer more resilience than narrow specialisation in either arts or sciences.

The skills that matter in this new landscape are different from what previous generations needed. Adaptability, the ability to learn new tools and pivot when markets shift, has become more valuable than deep but narrow expertise. Communication skills matter more than ever, as AI handles routine analysis but humans must still persuade clients, lead teams, and explain complex decisions. The ability to work hand in hand with emerging technologies, using AI as a tool rather than competing against it, will separate those who will thrive from those who will struggle.

The problem with early specialisation becomes clearer in this context. Choosing sciences over arts at 14, or dropping languages at 16, once meant closing off access to specific university courses or professions. Now it means potentially limiting careers that don't yet exist but will require unexpected combinations of skills. The technology sector needs humanities graduates who understand human behaviour. Creative industries need technical skills. Healthcare needs data literacy. Engineering needs communication skills.

> Adaptability, the ability to learn new tools and pivot when markets shift, has become more valuable than deep but narrow expertise.

While some schools' timetables allow students to combine arts and sciences at A-level, this flexibility remains uncommon. Most school timetabling structures still reflect traditional assumptions about arts versus science students, creating barriers even when students want to maintain breadth.

When 36% of young people aren't yet clear about their career direction, forcing them to make subject choices with long-term consequences means gambling on a future they can't see. A decade ago, sustainability consulting, AI ethics, user experience design, and renewable energy engineering were niche or non-existent. Today they're growth sectors. What will the growth sectors be in 2035?

The evidence suggests that maintaining breadth for longer isn't just about personal fulfilment, it's about practical preparation for a world where adaptability matters more than narrow expertise. When almost all parents and young people agree that AI is redefining good jobs, an education system that forces irreversible choices at 14-16 is solving the problems of yesterday's labour market, not tomorrow's.

8. The Times, "Can you AI-proof your career and your children's future?", October 2025

OPINION: THE FALSE CHOICE BETWEEN BREADTH AND DEPTH

Robert Harrison, Director of Education & Integrated Technology, ACS International Schools

The debate about breadth versus depth in education often presents a false choice. Parents regularly tell me they worry that maintaining more subjects means sacrificing rigour, that specialisation is the price of excellence. The evidence tells a different story.

My view is built on a different premise – that young people need to be ready for an uncertain future, not simply qualified in today's subjects. This distinction matters. Being qualified means you can demonstrate mastery of specific content at a specific moment. Being ready means you can adapt when that content becomes obsolete, pivot when careers transform and apply learning across contexts that don't yet exist.

> "The world facing our students is defined by three urgent challenges – managing rapid social change, living sustainably on a planet under threat, and working ethically and productively with emerging technologies.

The world facing our students is defined by three urgent challenges – managing rapid social change, living sustainably on a planet under threat, and working ethically and productively with emerging technologies. None of these challenges respect disciplinary boundaries. Addressing climate change requires scientific understanding, economic literacy, policy knowledge, and the communication skills to build consensus. Working with AI demands technical capability, ethical reasoning, and insight into human behaviour. Managing social change needs historical perspective, cultural awareness, and the ability to collaborate across differences.

England has been unable, or perhaps unwilling, to develop baccalaureate-style secondary education since the 1960s. This is precisely why the IB Diploma gained traction internationally. The current emphasis on maths and English, while important, risks cutting the heart out of a truly balanced education.

It prioritises narrow literacy skills over the human pursuits found in arts, languages, humanities, and social sciences. Not to mention the creative and technical dimensions of science, technology, and design. The question isn't whether students need strong maths and English. It's whether achieving that should require sacrificing everything else at age 14.

This is why effective curricula maintain breadth until 18 while still achieving depth. The International Baccalaureate requires students to study six subject groups: two languages, mathematics, sciences, humanities, and arts. Students still achieve depth through three higher-level subjects while maintaining breadth through three standard-level subjects. Similarly, the Advanced Placement system allows students to build flexible combinations of deep study across multiple disciplines without being forced into predetermined tracks.

Students discover unexpected strengths through this approach. A student convinced they were "not a science person" discovers a passion for environmental systems, leading to studies combining biology, economics and policy. Another student, headed confidently toward computer science, maintains economics and realises their interest lies in the intersection of technology and markets. These discoveries happen precisely because breadth is maintained. They happen because breadth is maintained long enough for students to be ready to forge new pathways using critical thinking, collaboration, and adaptability gained through interdisciplinary exploration.

This approach also builds workplace agility and resilience. When students tackle challenging subjects outside their comfort zones, for example a humanities student grappling with calculus or a scientist writing a persuasive essay, they develop confidence that extends beyond any single discipline. They learn that struggle is part of growth. That discomfort signals learning. And that they can adapt to unfamiliar contexts. These are precisely the qualities that separate employees who thrive from those who stall when their roles inevitably transform.

The workplace increasingly demands this cross-disciplinary thinking combined with distinctively human capabilities. Technology companies need people who understand human behaviour, not just code. Healthcare needs data literacy alongside empathy and clinical judgement. Creative industries need technical skills married to originality. The traditional separation between “arts” and “sciences” at 16 no longer reflects how work happens or what it means to be ready to thrive with technology by working with it rather than competing against it.

Critics worry about cognitive overload. Can students really study six subjects well? The answer lies partly in how learning is assessed. The IB’s approach goes beyond recall. It requires individual research, a collaborative demonstration of understanding, and the making of connections across subjects. These are precisely the skills universities and employers value.

Universities have also answered this question too. Students who’ve maintained breadth through IB or AP programmes arrive at Cambridge, McGill, Erasmus and other leading institutions as prepared as their A-level peers, often more so. They haven’t sacrificed depth. They’ve gained something equally valuable: the capacity to learn, unlearn, and relearn as contexts shift. They’ve practised thinking across domains.

They’ve learned to connect ideas from different fields. They’ve kept asking “what if?” rather than committing irreversibly to a single track at 14.

This matters particularly now. The careers young people will enter are being reshaped by forces we’re only beginning to understand. Preparing them for this uncertainty doesn’t mean teaching them more facts. It means ensuring they’re ready. Ready to lead into the future with the capacity to investigate global issues and understand diverse perspectives. Ready to think generationally about the legacy they’ll leave. Ready to connect across boundaries by navigating ambiguity and collaborating across differences. Ready to engage the world by tackling real problems beyond the classroom. And ready to be fully human, using kindness and compassion alongside skills and knowledge to forge a fairer and more caring world.

Maintaining breadth for longer isn’t a compromise on standards. It’s a recognition that we don’t know what combinations of knowledge the next generation will need. When 36% of 16-year-olds aren’t yet clear about their career direction and 90% of parents see AI redefining good jobs, education must prioritise readiness alongside expertise. The 16-year-old choosing between history and physics shouldn’t have to. Both will matter, just not in ways we can predict. Our responsibility is ensuring they’re ready for whatever comes next.

THE ACS APPROACH. THREE PATHWAYS, ONE PHILOSOPHY

At ACS International Schools, students can choose between approaches that share a common principle: breadth is maintained until 18. The International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme requires students to follow a broad and balanced curriculum, studying six subject groups throughout their final two years. Students work at higher level in three subjects and standard level in three, maintaining breadth without sacrificing depth. The Advanced Placement system offers a different kind of flexibility. Students can build their own combinations of deep study across multiple disciplines without being locked into predetermined tracks. The IB Career-related Programme (IBCP) provides a third option, combining academic study with career-focused learning for students who have already identified a professional direction.

These pathways lead to top universities. Our students study everything from engineering to international relations, from medicine to film production and SFX, from computer game design to philosophy. The breadth hasn't held them back. It has prepared them for the interdisciplinary thinking that leading universities increasingly value and that future careers will demand.

The key difference from the GCSE and A-level system isn't quality, it's timing. Rather than narrowing to three or four subjects at 16, students maintain six. Rather than making irreversible choices at 14, they explore while maintaining a range of subjects for longer. A student interested in medicine keeps studying history. A future engineer continues with economics. This means, for example, that students planning on pursuing sciences continue to study arts, humanities, or social sciences throughout. The structure ensures that breadth across disciplines isn't optional or extra - it's foundational.

This matters because career clarity develops at different speeds. For the 23% of students who already know their direction, the broad curriculum doesn't slow them down, they achieve depth through their higher-level subjects while building the cross-disciplinary connections that make them ready to forge new pathways when opportunities emerge. For the 36% who aren't yet clear, it means more time to discover their strengths without closing off future options.
They develop the capacity to learn, unlearn, and relearn rather than committing to a single track before they understand what tracks exist.

Building human-centred skills that AI cannot replace

Our Education Strategy is designed around a fundamental insight: the future belongs to those who can work with technology to surpass what humans or machines achieve in isolation. This means developing capabilities that remain distinctly human even as AI transforms the workplace.

Service learning and community engagement are also required components across all three of our schools. Students don't just study issues abstractly - they investigate them locally, work in diverse teams to address real challenges, and build the communication, leadership, and cross-cultural competencies that no algorithm can replicate. This connects them directly to the world outside the classroom, giving them valuable experience exploring real problems, tackling real issues, and creating real value. It's how students become ready to engage with the world.

Our Home Language Enrichment and English as an Additional Language (EAL) programmes recognise that multilingualism is itself a career asset in an interconnected world. The ability to communicate across languages and cultures, to understand different perspectives and build relationships across boundaries are precisely the human skills that become more valuable as AI handles routine tasks. Students develop the capacity to navigate ambiguity, understand different worldviews, and collaborate - skills fundamental to surviving and thriving in an era defined by complexity, conflict, and rapid change.

The traditional school model prepares students to be qualified, certified in specific subjects at specific levels. But in an unpredictable labour market, young people need to be ready instead. Ready means being equipped with creativity, critical thinking, resilience, and global competence to adapt regardless of how careers evolve. It means developing the confidence to work with advanced technologies as they emerge. It means building durable personal skills that remain valuable across contexts. And it means gaining the capacity to address complex challenges that span disciplinary, cultural, or generational boundaries.

This isn't about lowering academic standards. Students can still achieve depth through rigorous study. But it recognises that education must prioritise adaptability alongside expertise. The goal is confidence without rigidity, effectiveness without narrowness, and the ability to work across disciplines, cultures, and contexts while using kindness and compassion as well as skills and knowledge to forge a more just and caring world.

Beyond grades and qualifications, young people need the emotional and social skills that will make work fulfilling and sustainable. They need self-awareness to recognise what they're good at and what matters to them. They need emotional resilience to bounce back from disappointments and handle workplace conflicts. And they need the confidence to try new things, make mistakes, and learn from them.

> "These skills don't compete with academic achievement. They make it possible. More importantly, they help young people do more than just earn a living. They help them build careers that feel meaningful, make contributions that matter, and develop the courage to navigate an unpredictable world.

They also need empathy to work well with people different from themselves, the ability to build genuine relationships, and a sense of belonging in diverse teams. These skills don't compete with academic achievement. They make it possible. More importantly, they help young people do more than just earn a living. They help them build careers that feel meaningful, make contributions that matter, and develop the courage to navigate an unpredictable world.

At ACS, this philosophy – preparing students to be ready rather than simply qualified – shapes everything from curriculum design to career guidance.

CAREER GUIDANCE: BEYOND THE "BIG FIVE"

Career guidance at ACS looks different from the traditional approach because the career landscape looks different. The "Big 5" careers (law, engineering, medicine, finance and accounting, technology) still exist, but they're precisely the fields being most disrupted by AI. Our careers programme also exposes students to fields that didn't exist a decade ago: AI ethics, sustainability consulting, user experience design, renewable energy engineering, digital health.

The IB Career-related Programme provides a concrete bridge between academic breadth and professional focus for students who have identified clear interests.

At ACS Hillingdon, the Careers Pathway (IBCP) pathway in creative media skills connects directly with Pinewood Studios, giving students authentic industry experience in digital and theatre arts while maintaining academic study.

At ACS Egham, the IBCP supports students who already know which industry interests them. Their chosen field becomes the lens through which they approach their studies, combining hands-on learning in entrepreneurship and enterprise with complementary IB Diploma courses. A student interested in fashion might study art and design. Someone focused on sports takes sports science or biology. Business-minded students choose economics or psychology.

All IBCP students explore the practical side of their chosen careers through real-world challenges: marketing a sports management business, creating proposals for investors, launching a fashion startup. This learning is supported through sustained partnerships with local, national, and global businesses who provide mentoring, internships, and industry expertise.

At ACS Cobham, our Film and Media students are using industry level equipment as they learn all aspects of broadcast journalism including livestreaming events, commentary and interviewing.

These are real world opportunities that prepare students for careers in the media. Middle School students are partnering with global corporations in design, advertising and marketing schemes including a Dragon's Den-style pitch to industry and finance experts.

> "These opportunities provide hands-on experience for the students and to explore non-traditional pathways.

We approach career uncertainty as healthy rather than problematic. When students say "I don't know yet", our response isn't to push them toward a decision,

it's to help them explore more broadly. A student interested in "working with technology" might shadow professionals in software engineering, digital marketing, product design, and health tech before narrowing their focus. Someone drawn to "creative work" might look at architecture, game design, brand strategy, and content creation.

The university and careers counselling team provides systematic support – one-to-one consultations, university fairs bringing admission officers directly to our campuses, essay and application support, work experience and volunteering. This matters because our survey showed that 62% of working adults found their school's career advice unhelpful. When 25% were pushed down the wrong path by parental pressure and 23% by careers advisor guidance, quality counselling that works with both students and parents becomes essential.

This approach reflects what the data shows. When 80% of young people say enjoyment matters most, career guidance can't just be about matching interests to existing job titles. It's about helping students understand emerging patterns, develop adaptable skills, and build the confidence to change direction when opportunities emerge.

There's also been a growing appetite for entrepreneurial pathways. Recent research shows record-high entrepreneurial engagement among English working-age adults, with around one in four 18-24 year olds planning to start a business in 2025[9].

> "Recent graduates share their journeys – the unexpected pivots, the skills that transferred across sectors, and the ways their broader education created opportunities they couldn't have predicted as teenagers.

Our alumni network reinforces this possibility and shows students the reality that careers rarely follow straight lines. Recent graduates share their journeys – the unexpected pivots, the skills that transferred across sectors, and the ways their broader education created opportunities they couldn't have predicted as teenagers. These conversations show that careers aren't linear, that skills transfer across sectors, and that maintaining breadth through education creates flexibility for adapting as opportunities emerge.

9 Virgin StartUp, "Founder Barometer Report", January 2025

CONCLUSION

A generation was shaped by premature choices, pushed toward careers they weren't certain about, often driven by earnings rather than interest. Many now carry lasting regret. One in five feel resentful about the path their parents forced them down, wishing they'd done something more creative. Fewer than half ended up in their dream career.

That generation is now raising teenagers, determined not to repeat the pattern. Three in five of today's parents will be much more open to their children's career choices than their own parents were. They're prioritising happiness over earnings. Almost half would prefer their children take lower-paid work they enjoy. They recognise that AI is changing what counts as a good job. They want to support exploration and uncertainty.

But the system hasn't changed. Two-thirds of parents and their teenage children identify the same structural problem – an English exam system that narrows options too early. This matters more now because 36% of teenagers aren't yet clear about their career direction when forced to choose, and because the careers they'll eventually enter are being reshaped by forces we're only beginning to understand.

What needs to change starts with questions parents can ask schools. Does the curriculum maintain breadth until 18, or force irreversible choices at 14-16? Can students study both sciences and humanities, or must they choose? Does careers guidance expose young people to emerging fields, or default to traditional professions? How does the school support students who aren't yet clear about their direction? And most importantly: is the school preparing students to be ready for an unpredictable future, or simply qualified in today's subjects?

> Schools need to update careers advice beyond the "Big 5", exposing students to the reality that technology needs humanities, creative industries need technical skills, and the fastest-growing sectors often sit at disciplinary intersections. Treating career uncertainty at 16 as healthy rather than problematic would be a start.

The timing of this report matters. In October 2025, the government announced plans to withdraw IB funding from state schools, citing a need to prioritise A-levels. This may make the IB available primarily through independent

schools. Whatever the policy rationale, our research suggests this moves in the opposite direction to what both parents (66%) and young people (62%) say they need: more time to explore broadly, not earlier narrowing.

> “Students from these systems progress to top universities without sacrificing rigour. What many parents don’t realise is that English universities actively welcome students from IB and AP backgrounds, they’re not at a disadvantage.

Policymakers should examine international evidence. The International Baccalaureate operates in 159 countries. Advanced Placement is used across the United States. Students from these systems progress to top universities without sacrificing rigour. What many parents don’t realise is that English universities actively welcome students from IB and AP backgrounds, they’re not at a disadvantage. Oxford, Cambridge, Imperial, UCL, and other leading institutions regularly admit students from these programmes. If maintaining breadth until 18 works internationally and English universities recognise its value, the barrier is perception rather than reality.

The world needs graduates who are ready for change. People who can think across disciplines, adapt when markets shift, bring human judgement to work that technology is transforming, and work hand in hand with emerging technologies rather than competing against them. Being ready requires maintaining breadth for longer and focusing on skills development as well as subject knowledge.

The answer isn’t making students more qualified earlier through increased specialisation. It’s making them ready for uncertainty: preserving breadth while building adaptability, communication skills, and the ability to learn continuously. Not because specialisation doesn’t matter, but because we don’t know what combinations of knowledge the next generation will need.

Today’s parents learned the hard way that choices made at 14 or 16 echo for decades. Their children deserve better. Not fewer choices earlier, but more time to understand what those choices mean.

ACS International Schools

Founded in 1967 to serve the needs of global and local families, ACS International Schools educate around 2200 students, aged 2 to 18, day and boarding, from more than 100 countries. Our schools in Greater London are all non-sectarian and co-educational.

At the heart of our approach is the idea of readiness – we empower our students with the skills and knowledge to thrive in a world that is changing fast. Our world-renowned curriculum includes all International Baccalaureate (IB) Programmes, and top US programmes including Advanced Placement (AP) courses and the AP Capstone and International Diplomas.

Our students leave ACS as well-rounded global citizens with the academic and emotional intelligence to empathise and engage with tomorrow's big issues, turning compassion into action as they stand ready for a future full of opportunity.

ACS is a registered UK charity (1179820). ACS undertakes a wide number of programmes to further its charitable aim to advance education, including partnerships with other organisations and offering financially assisted places to students who otherwise would be unable to attend ACS schools.

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