Vocational Attitudes Survey 2026

What three years of family attitudes reveal about vocational education, apprenticeships and technical pathways



Enginuity

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Executive summary

This report sets out findings from the 2026 Vocational Attitudes Survey, revealing valuable insights into how families view apprenticeships, T Levels and other vocational routes across all sectors. Drawing on responses from parents and young people aged 11–18 in around 1,000 households across England, and comparing findings across three annual waves, the report identifies where perceptions are shifting, where information and guidance gaps remain, and why these attitudes matter for sectors such as engineering and manufacturing, where vocational and technical pathways are critical to building the future skilled workforce.

In 2026, 95% of parents said they were interested in knowing more about apprenticeships that allow young people to "earn while they learn", and 91% of young people said the same. Strikingly, 90% of young people said they would consider apprenticeships over a conventional university degree, while 71% of parents said they would encourage their child to consider an apprenticeship over a degree, up from 67% in 2025. The story is not that families are turning away from university. It is that there is a growing appreciation of apprenticeships as a credible choice that combines affordability, practical experience and progression into skilled careers. The challenge of apprenticeship legitimacy is diminishing, with both young people and parents increasingly open to and interested in these pathways. The focus must now shift to strengthening high-quality careers guidance and ensuring routes into apprenticeships are clear, accessible and easy to navigate.

Affordability and paid learning are the clearest drivers of interest. "Earn while you learn" emerged as the top reason selected by both parents and young people for supporting or considering vocational routes. Avoiding university cost and debt also rose year on year for both groups. Qualitative responses reinforce the same pattern: families value university where it is needed, but increasingly question whether a degree is the only or best route into every career.

Paid learning is the top driver

No. 1 reason – "Earn while learning" is the leading factor driving interest in apprenticeships among both parents and young people.

Guidance has not kept pace

Mixed signals – Interest is high, but route information, school visibility and confidence remain uneven.

Families want both options

Choice, not either/or – Families want credible, paid and practical options alongside university. They increasingly see academic and vocational pathways as equally valid routes to success, and want access to both.

Headline findings

What the 2026 Vocational Attitude Survey tells us at a glance.

95%

of parents want to know more about apprenticeships

+2% since 2024

91%

of young people want to know more about apprenticeships

+3% since 2024

90%

of young people would consider apprenticeships over a conventional degree

+4% since 2024

71%

of parents would encourage apprenticeships over a conventional degree

+4% since 2024

87%

of parents value hands-on experience

-2% since 2024

78%

of parents lack information about T Levels

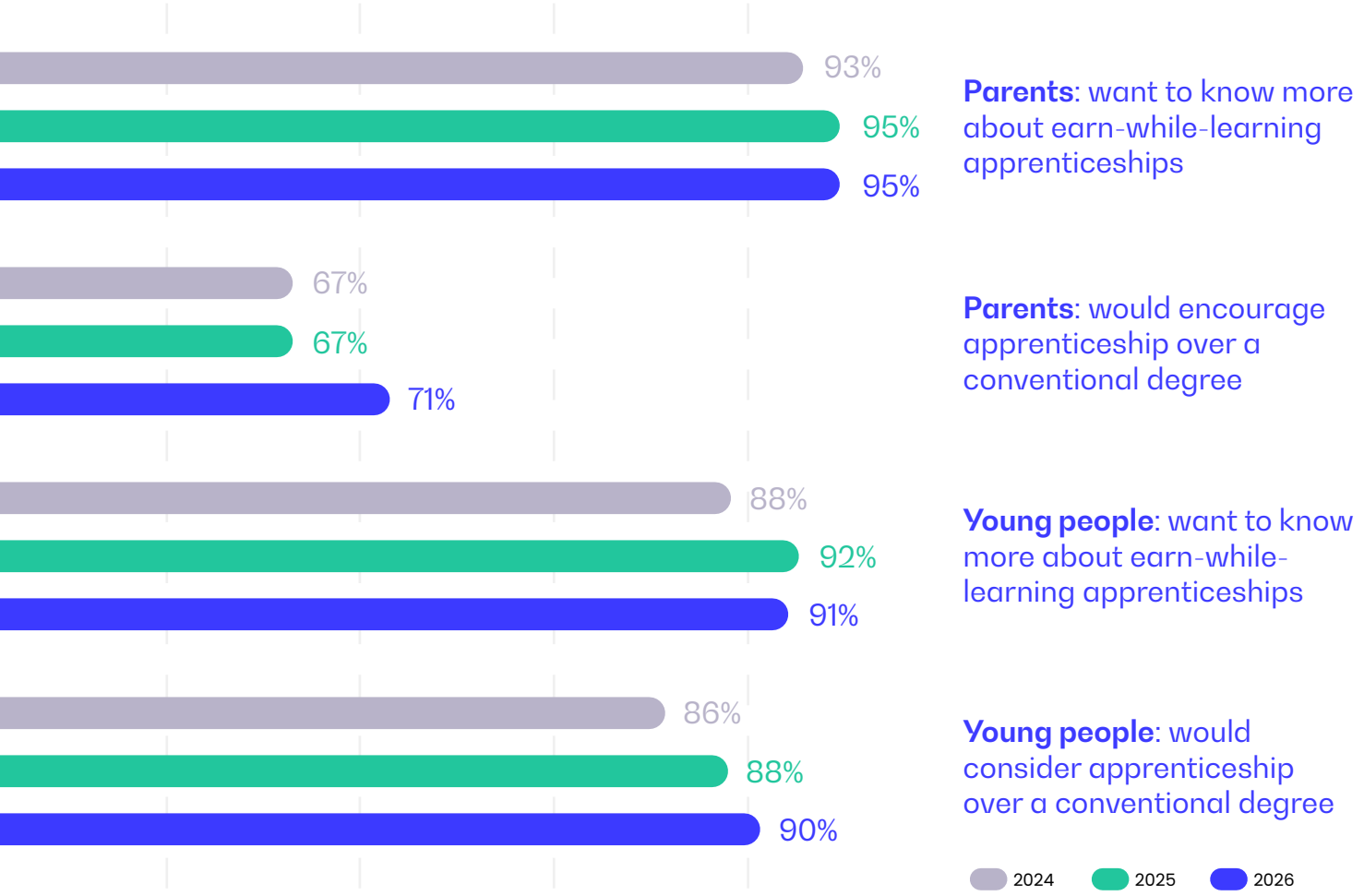
72% of young people



Together, the findings point to a system-level challenge. Positive attitudes are already in place, and perceptions of vocational and technical routes appear to be shifting in the right direction. But openness will not translate into opportunity on its own.

Schools, FE colleges and providers need the support and resource to deliver high-quality vocational education, while employers need practical encouragement to offer apprenticeships, placements and meaningful vocational experiences - especially in a wider context where apprenticeship starts have declined.

Apprenticeship interest is high among parents and young people



The strongest finding is the breadth of interest. Parents and young people are not merely aware of apprenticeships; more than nine in ten want to know more about routes that enable young people to earn while learning. Most young people would also consider an apprenticeship over a conventional degree, rising to 90% in 2026, up from 86% in 2024.

Young people's openness to vocational pathways is not a sudden shift from low awareness. Rather, it reflects a consistently high level of consideration that has strengthened over time. This is significant given the longstanding reputational challenges faced by apprenticeships and other vocational routes. The 2026 findings suggest that, for many families, the debate is no longer about legitimacy, but about having the information and confidence needed to assess quality, progression opportunities and suitability.

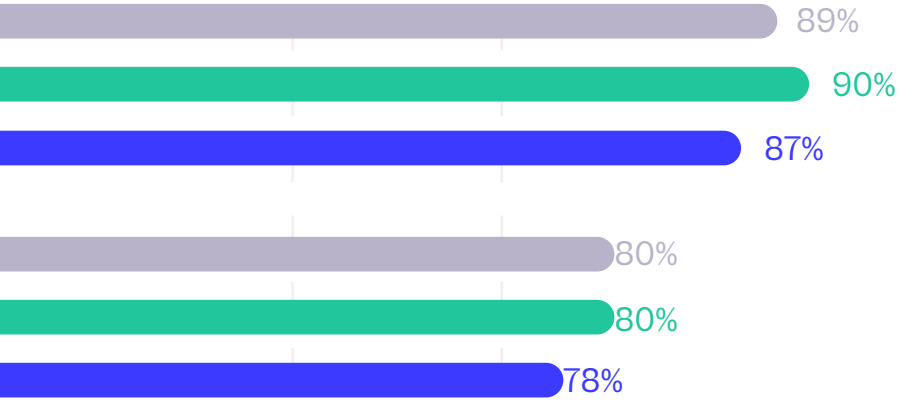
Parents remain more cautious than their children, but their encouragement for apprenticeships rose to 71% in 2026, up 4%. Encouragement was broadly stable between 2024 and 2025 - this rise points to growing confidence among parents in recommending apprenticeships as a credible and worthwhile pathway. However, a gap remains: while young people may be ready to explore, parents continue to seek reassurance about quality, progression, earnings and the transferability of technical skills.

Practical experience carries real esteem



In 2026, 87% of parents and 78% of young people agreed that hands-on experience is becoming more important than purely academic qualifications for certain technology-based careers. Although agreement has eased slightly since 2025, responses remain overwhelmingly positive.

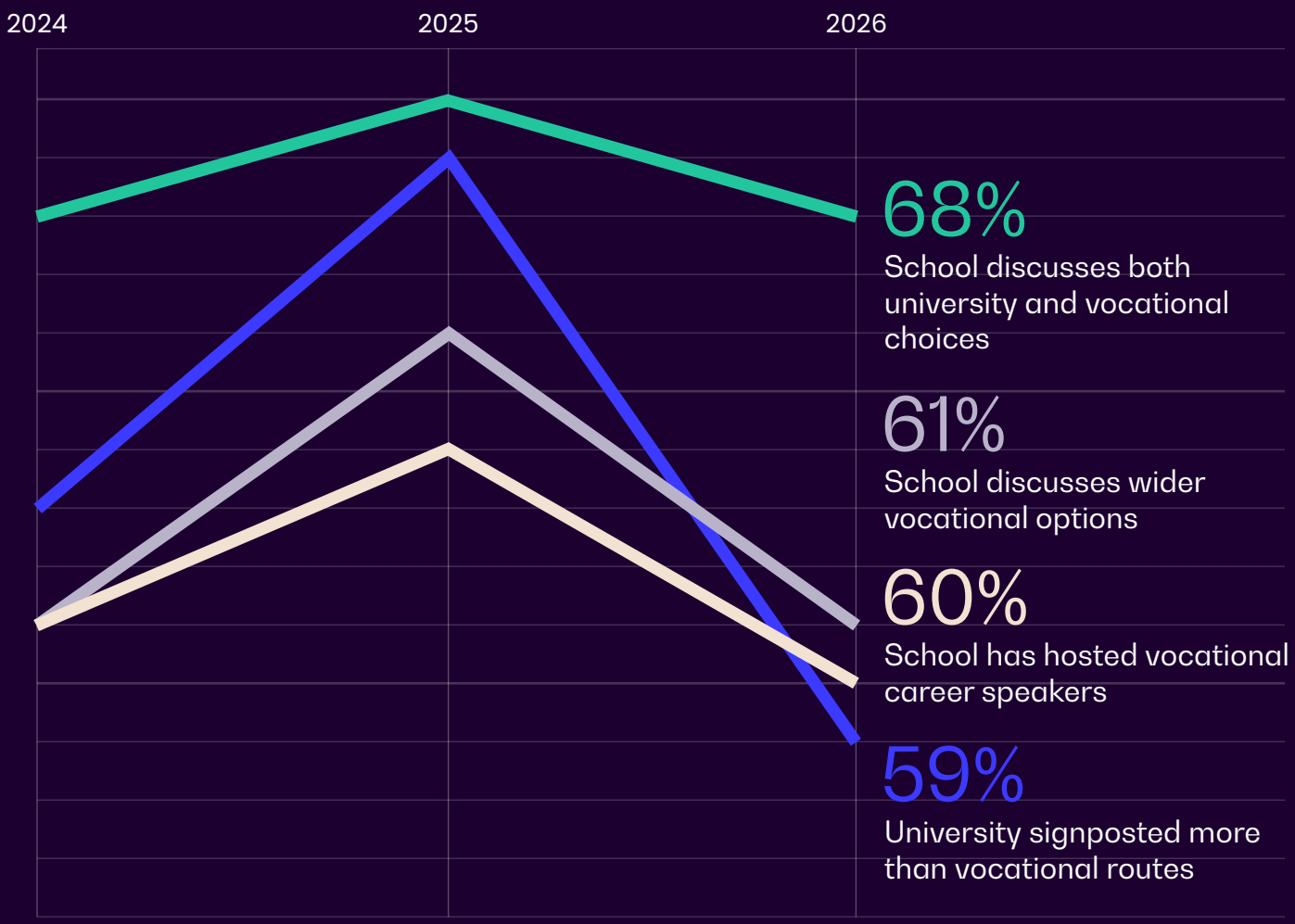
Importantly, this should not be interpreted as a rejection of academic qualifications. Rather, it reflects a sustained belief that practical experience plays a vital role in developing skills and improving career readiness.



Parents: agreeing hands-on experience is increasingly important

Young people: agreeing hands-on experience is increasingly important

How vocational education is presented in schools

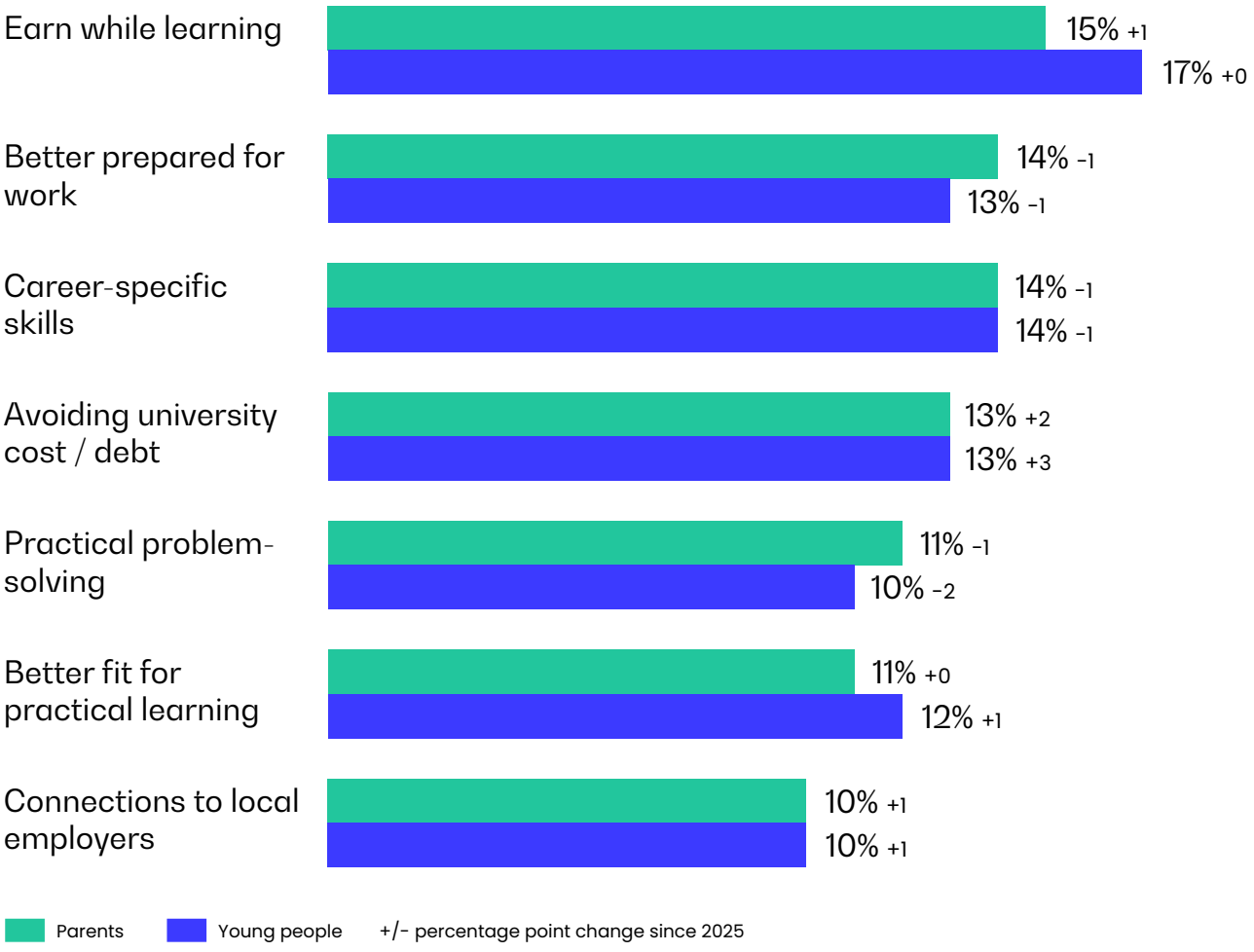


In 2026, 59% of young people agreed or strongly agreed that students at their school are signposted towards university courses more than vocational routes, down from 69% in 2025. This represents a 10-point decline since 2025, although university remained the route most commonly perceived as receiving greater signposting.

Other school-guidance measures also declined. In 2026, 61% of young people reported that their school talked about wider vocational options after exams, down from 66% in 2025.
60% reported that their school had speakers come in to talk about vocational careers, down from 64% in 2025. This points to a growing gap between attitudes and information.

While young people are increasingly open to vocational pathways, school-based careers guidance appears to be making less progress in providing the visibility and exposure needed to support informed choices.

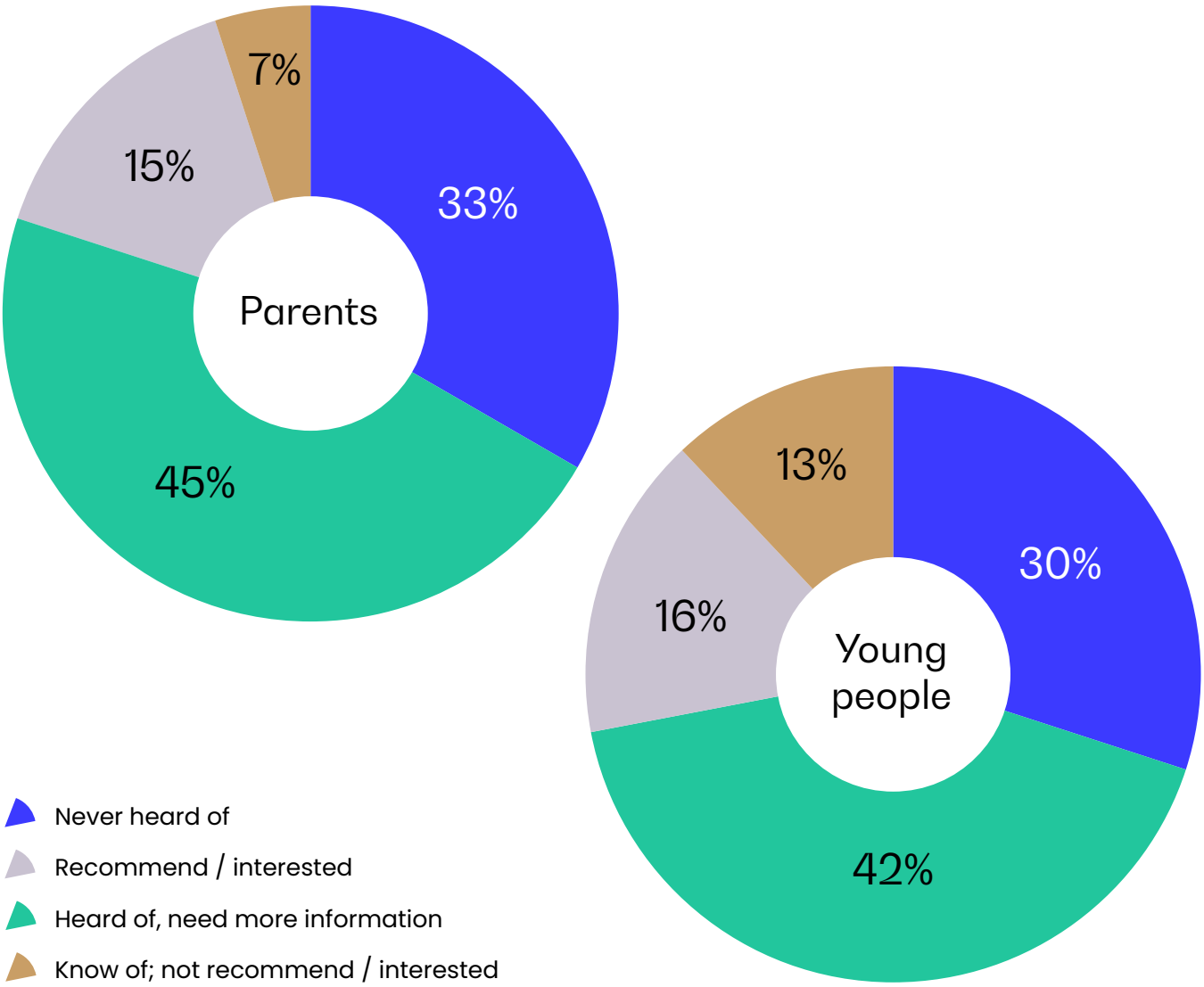
“Earn while learning” is the leading reason for considering vocational routes



In 2026, “earn while learning” was the leading reason selected by both parents and young people for considering vocational routes. Parents also highly valued developing skills for the workplace and career-specific skills. Among young people aged 11–18, gaining career-specific skills and avoiding university debt followed closely behind “earn while learning”.

Avoiding university cost and potential debt recorded the largest year-on-year increase in perceived importance, up 2% among parents and up 3% points among young people. The findings also highlight the growing appeal of paid learning, workplace preparation, career-specific skills, practical problem-solving and employer connections.

Most families lack enough information to recommend or choose T Levels



T Levels are not yet well understood by families. In 2026, 45% of parents had heard of them but did not know enough to decide whether to recommend them, while 33% had never heard of them. Among young people aged 11–18, 42% had heard of T Levels but did not know enough to judge whether they could be an option, while 30% had never heard of them.

The findings show that awareness has yet to translate into understanding or confidence. Just 15% of parents said they knew about T Levels and would recommend them to their child, while only 16% of young people said they knew about T Levels and were interested in them as an option.

Location and inclusion shape the experience

Regional insights

Momentum regions

Parental encouragement to follow vocational routes

- South West +18
- Greater London +11

Balanced school guidance on university and vocational routes

- West Midlands +16

Parental interest in vocational routes despite weaker school guidance

- North East 95%

Demand-versus-guidance gap

North East and **East Midlands** show strong appetite, but weaker visibility of vocational options in school.

National trends should be understood alongside local context. Some areas show growing parental confidence and engagement, while in others interest may be constrained by lower levels of awareness, guidance and exposure to vocational opportunities.

The regional picture shows variation rather than uniform progress. Some areas show stronger momentum in parental encouragement or school guidance, while others combine high appetite for apprenticeships with weaker reported school visibility.

The South West recorded the largest uplift in parental encouragement, rising from 60% in 2025 to 77% in 2026. Greater London also increased, reaching 75%. The West Midlands saw a sharp rise in young people reporting balanced discussion of university and vocational choices, alongside higher parental encouragement.

Other regions show signs of untapped potential. In both the North East and East Midlands, strong interest in apprenticeships sits alongside weaker reported exposure to vocational pathways in schools, indicating that growing demand is not always matched by careers guidance and awareness.

SEND and neurodivergent learners

90% of neurodivergent and SEND young people want to know more about earn-while-learning apprenticeships in 2026

88% of neurodivergent and SEND young people would consider apprenticeships over a conventional degree

These findings show strong interest in apprenticeships among neurodivergent and special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) respondents. In 2026, 90% wanted to know more about “earn while you learn” routes and 88% said they would consider an apprenticeship over a conventional degree.

Why this matters for engineering and manufacturing



Recent UK policy reforms have put technical and vocational education back at the heart of the national skills agenda. New technical pathways from age 14 aim to give young people earlier access to technical learning, work experience and employer connections, shaped locally by schools, colleges, local leaders and employers.

This is particularly significant for engineering and manufacturing. The priority sectors that underpin these reforms include advanced manufacturing, clean energy, defence and digital technology, which sit at the core of the UK's Industrial Strategy and rely on a stronger pipeline of people progressing into skilled technical careers.

Enginuity's Mind the Gap research estimates that skills challenges cost UK engineering and manufacturing £5 billion annually, constraining productivity and growth. This survey provides an encouraging signal from the talent pipeline: families are increasingly receptive to routes that combine earning, learning, practical experience and progression into skilled careers.

Interest alone will not close the skills gap, and vocational routes should not be presented as a single solution. The greater opportunity lies in creating clearer, better-supported pathways that enable more young people to see engineering and manufacturing as attainable, attractive and rewarding careers. Employers can support this by providing greater visibility of progression routes, pay, workplace support and career prospects.



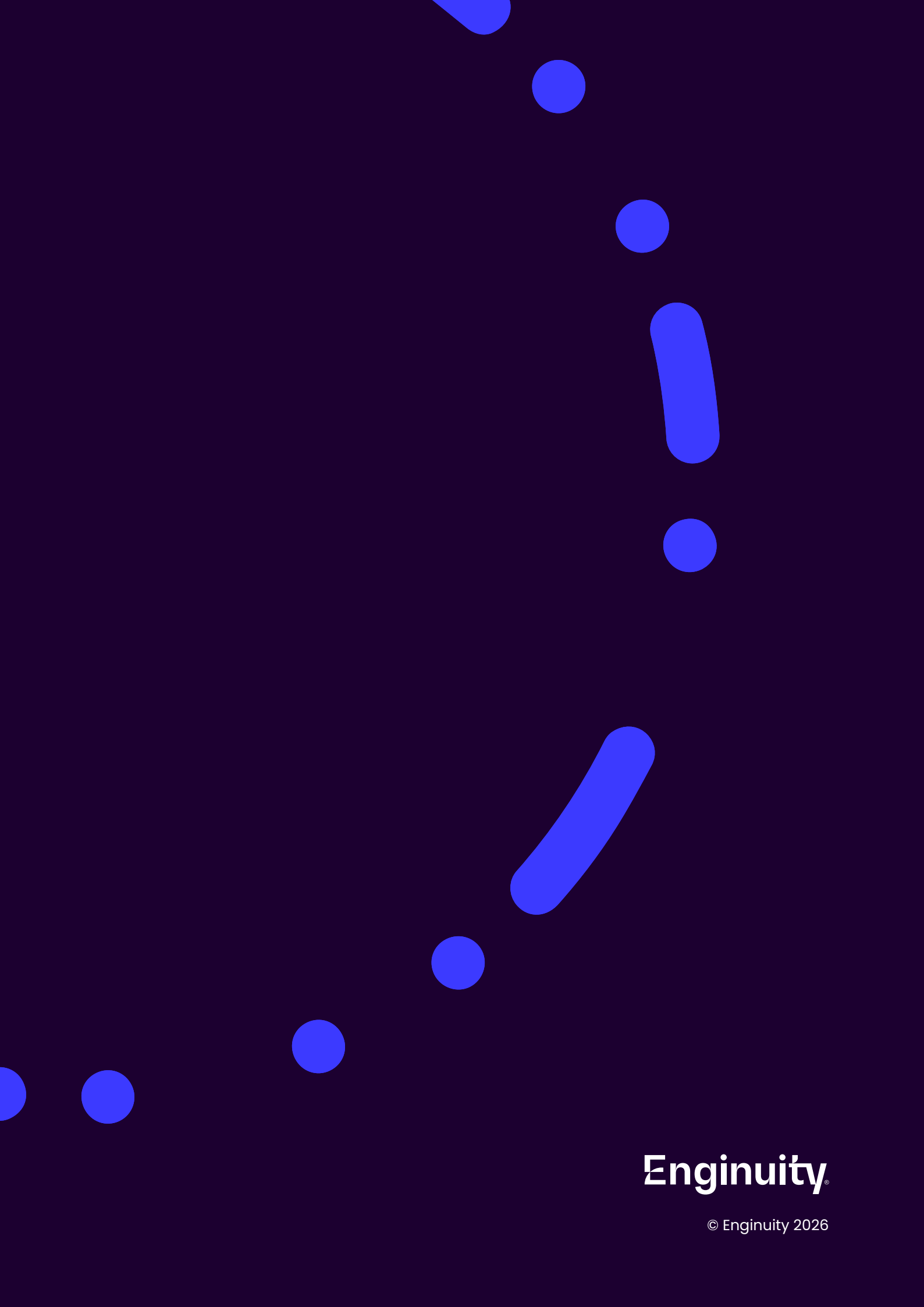
Methodology and limitations

The Vocational Attitudes Survey draws on three annual waves of responses from approximately 1,000 families per year between 2024 and 2026. The analysis compares parent and child responses across recurring questions on vocational routes, apprenticeships, university, school guidance and T Level awareness. Percentage movements are reported as percentage-point changes.

Findings should be interpreted as perception-based evidence, not causal proof. Regional and SEND subgroup results are useful for identifying signals and local stories, but smaller sample sizes mean some movements should be treated as directional rather than definitive. The strongest claims in this report are based on high-level parent and child findings and larger subgroup patterns.

Technical notes

- Results are unweighted and comparisons are descriptive. Percentage-point movements have not been tested for statistical significance.
- The achieved sample was concentrated in England; findings describe the families surveyed rather than the UK population.
- Q4 and Q9 allowed respondents to select all that applied. Figures are shares of all valid selections, not the percentage of respondents choosing each option.
- Core attitude measures span all three waves; T Level findings are from 2026 and SEND comparisons cover 2025 and 2026.



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