



ON THE FLOOR

THE APPRENTICE EDITION

With apprentice numbers in freefall across many industries, the government is in the throes of implementing a 'radical rethink'. Employers have been given a direct role in designing new qualifications, funding for sub-standard qualifications is being scrapped, and when it comes to careers advice, schools are being told in no uncertain terms to give equal priority to both academic and vocational routes. As plans go, it sounds pretty good for hairdressing. But of course, it's no good talking the talk without walking the walk.

Last month, Creative HEAD spoke to a range of young people (including some career-changers) currently undertaking a hairdressing apprenticeship. We wanted to know: how had they come to hairdressing? Had they felt supported in their decision? Were they fully prepared for apprenticeship life? And did they feel an apprenticeship was a better option than college-based learning? Their answers may – or may not – surprise you!

OUR KEY FINDINGS INCLUDE:

- **There is no encouragement from schools towards a career in hairdressing.**

Schools persist in promoting A Levels or college – even when the student is not academic and would be better served by a more technical option.

- **The gulf between college and apprenticeships in terms of quality of training is huge.**

It was widely agreed that the college experience is neither as enjoyable nor as rewarding as being trained on the job in a salon.

- **The value of an apprenticeship extends beyond practical skills-building.**

It's about confidence-building, the growth of interpersonal and communication skills, the benefits of being in a real salon environment with real clients and real hair! But it's a massive transition from classroom to the salon floor, and not enough is being done to inform and prepare students for the change.

THERE IS NO ENCOURAGEMENT FROM SCHOOLS TOWARDS A CAREER IN HAIRDRESSING

Despite the government's Baker clause – which states that schools must act impartially and not show any bias towards any route, be that academic or technical – having been in force since January 2018, it is clear that schools persist in promoting A Levels and university to students – even when students are clearly not academic and would be better served by a more technical option.

There is no encouragement from schools towards a career in hairdressing (in fact, one apprentice was actively discouraged from following that path), and zero information about hairdressing as a career option.

"When I was at school, it was very university-focused, which is probably why I initially ended up going down that route. I remember we had to write personal statements for university, and people in my group would say they didn't want to go to university, but the teachers would ask them to write one anyway."

"When I was at secondary school and I said I wanted to be a hairdresser, the teachers were quite judgemental, and not very supportive because all their focus was on people who wanted to go to university. I wish they had paid more attention to people who wanted to pursue more creative careers."

There is little or no promotion of apprenticeships – on a show of hands, only 5 per cent of our group had been told about apprenticeships at school – and when they did get mentioned, hairdressing was rarely included.

"We had people coming in to talk to us, but it was always police officers, the military, doctors, nurses – people who'd gone through university. Never once did I see a hairdresser come in, or a bricklayer for that matter – because that's how they lump us together."

Hairdressing salons are sometimes given access to school careers events, but even then they are not always taken seriously.

"Whenever we had a career day, all the tables were set out and you'd go to each one, to the doctors, the nurses, the firemen – and then you'd get to the hairdressing table. And all the girls would rush over to get free samples of hair products, and then run away again. Teachers would see the bags and say, 'Oh, you've been to hairdressing, but you're not actually going to do that, though, are you?' And you'd say no, because you were embarrassed to go over and talk to the hairdresser. That was the kind of attitude I experienced."

"I remember being in school and you had to choose your options to take before you left. And I chose hairdressing. And the teachers were like, 'No, that's not an option you can take – your grades are too high. Pick something else'. That was an eye-opener for me."

CASE STUDY

HOPE GOHOREY

19, YOKE, Plymouth

“At my school the kids were a bit more challenged and not particularly suited to sit in a classroom. We were very quickly pushed down the vocational route – it felt like kids who weren’t smart or good enough to go to college or university would instead do hairdressing, bricklaying and things like that.

“People always say hairdressing is easy and for those who aren’t very clever. You have to be brave to stand up and say it’s not easy, it’s something I’m passionate about. Because there’s so much you can do with hairdressing. I’m making a lot of money. It’s fun. I can take it anywhere. And I think that should be recognised just as much as going to university.

“I started my training in a college, just after lockdown, but it was just blockheads, doing your bog-standard blow-dry, things like that. And I got through that pretty quickly, because I was good at it. I got some work experience at YOKE and then I ended up switching to an apprenticeship because I learn better being hands-on, and everyone around me was at a high standard already. I learn better from them.

“I don’t think colleges have the capability to teach you as well as people who do it every single day. I’m not saying the college teachers are rubbish, but there’s a big difference between being in a salon and going off to shoots and things like that and being taught in a classroom – you miss out on so much.”



THE GULF BETWEEN COLLEGE AND APPRENTICESHIPS IN TERMS OF QUALITY OF TRAINING IS HUGE

Hairdressing employers often complain that applicants who have qualified in a college lack basic cutting and styling skills. This was reinforced by the apprentices we spoke to – many of them had started off doing their hairdressing training at a college of further education – and without exception they mentioned the huge difference in training approaches and standards.

"I went to college first and it was mistake. It was like being at school again, kind of like a muck-about really, and a waste of time because I didn't really get anything out of it. I didn't gain any skills beyond when I was 14 and doing my Saturday job."

"I don't know if I just went to a rubbish college but I was taught to put foils in the wrong way, and they wouldn't let us cut hair dry, which obviously we do in the salon. Things didn't add up. In college,

you're taught to do things only one way, but in a salon you personalise everything to each client. When I started my apprenticeship, I decided to forget everything that I did in college and started again."

"The amount of training I get in the salon, compared with when I went to college full time, is crazy. Here, I'm doing cutting and colouring. At college, it was just basic hair washing, straightening and curling. It was very simple, nothing that could really benefit me now."

"I was doing a Level 2 course at college and I didn't feel like the training was very good. They kept changing the information, which wasn't helpful. Over time, you could see students dropping out because they didn't find it very inspiring. Since I've moved over to my apprenticeship you can see how structured training can really help you on your hairdressing journey. I think that's so important, but it was never mentioned at college."

EVIE HEATON

16, En Route Hair & Beauty,
Wakefield

"I've been at En Route since I was 14, initially just doing Saturdays, but then I was struggling at school a bit, so they put me on some work experience. I was here three days a week and then also on Saturdays, so I was actually at the salon more than school. And I've never felt so much in my own world, and so content.

"I absolutely love my job – it's so different to how they spoke about it at school. We had careers meetings and I'd tell them, 'I've got everything set out. I know what I want to do'. But they would try to divert me into doing something else. It was like they wanted to make the decisions for me.

"I enjoyed college, where I did my Level 1, but I think because I'd been at the salon so much, it was too basic for me. I just wanted to get into the salon as much as I could and do as much training as I could. I want to do everything that I can to be ready for employment.

"The group of girls I work with are probably the reason I'm so ready. Any opportunity they get to train me, they take it! There's never a moment where we're just sat doing nothing. The other day, we did blinding techniques and I practised balayage with one of the stylists – it's things like that which make me feel very included in the team, even though technically I'm not there yet!"



CASE STUDY

THE VALUE OF AN APPRENTICESHIP EXTENDS BEYOND PRACTICAL SKILLS-BUILDING

Apprenticeships are important for both businesses and learners, providing a blended learning experience. For the business owner, apprenticeships are important for long-term sustainability, while for the student it's about confidence-building, developing soft skills and learning how to cope in a commercial environment – and that's as rewarding as learning the skills themselves.

"College courses don't even scratch the surface. It's an introduction to hairdressing, but nothing more. The only way to do it is to immerse yourself within your apprenticeship – that's the only way it starts to piece together. There are so many other things as well, such as salon timings and working to 45-minute appointments."

"The apprenticeship route was more attractive to me because you're getting paid but you're also getting that insight and experience you don't get at a college. You learn to deal with problems and you get to work on real hair, not just blocks!"

"I feel confident about my skills in the salon because I've been trained in the salon. I feel confident speaking to customers and helping out with the technical stuff, such as mixing colours. I know that if we took on someone from college we'd have to retrain them so we know what skills they've got and how they do things. We would want to know that they can actually do things, and that it's not just been ticked off on a form."

But apprenticeships aren't all a bed of roses, and unsurprisingly the issue of pay came up, especially from older apprentices, although low rates of pay can also impact on whether or not to

continue training at Level 3 or go straight out on to the floor.

"The pay has been a bit of a struggle and for a while I was on Universal Credit because I had rent and bills to pay and I'd spent all my savings during lockdown. So it was a massive challenge and it's physically knackered too – especially in the first year. I came home exhausted most days!"

"I'm not sure whether I'm going to do Level 3. We do a lot of training with our product supplier and to be honest I can't really afford to stay on an apprenticeship wage for another year. I've spoken to my manager about it and I'll probably go down the route of getting Level 2 done then working on the floor, supplemented by separate training courses in extensions and so on."

"I've loved the hairdressing side of my apprenticeship but to be able to sustain myself financially I had to have a pub job at the same time. So I was working two jobs, one finishing late and the other starting early, often going straight from one to the other. I did that for about a year and half... I was knackered!"

Perhaps as a result of the lack of promotion of apprenticeships in schools, people are often unprepared for the transition from classroom to the salon floor; not enough is being done to inform and prepare students for the change.

"I was working as a Saturday girl at my salon for two years before I started my apprenticeship, so I knew how they worked. I knew I'd be rinsing colours before I could start applying them. But if I hadn't had that Saturday job, I think I'd have gone into an apprenticeship believing I'd be cutting someone's hair right away. There is just nothing out there that tells you what to expect."

CASE STUDY

CHLOE WARRINER 19, Collinge & Co, Liverpool

"At school I didn't know what I wanted to do. I couldn't see myself going to university, so I left when I was 15 and everyone was like, 'You're making the worst mistake ever'. All the usual stuff. I came to an open day at Collinge & Co to have a look around and I loved it.

"Quite a few of my friends would probably have done better if they'd left school too, but now they're finishing degrees because they were pushed through, and they're never going to use those degrees because they don't want to do those jobs. That's why you end up with so many people coming out of university with all these degrees and then working jobs they don't want to be in.

"Starting my apprenticeship was quite scary. I went into it blind because I'd never done anything like it before. I was used to sitting in a classroom all day. I remember I was horrified because my first shift was 9am to 6pm and I was like, 'I'm used to finishing school at 2.30pm!' You're definitely not pushed to take that jump, but it's so worth it when you do."



LUKE FOREMAN

28, Russell Eaton, Leeds

"I'm a little bit older than the average apprentice. I came into hairdressing just over two years ago. I was looking for a new job and wanted to go into hair – the apprenticeship was the best route to go into.

"I had been working full time as a manager in a coffee shop but thanks to lockdown I lost my job so I was doing anything I could – driving, restaurant work – just to pay my bills. And then I saw a college in Leeds advertising a short course in hairdressing and I thought it was a great opportunity.

"After a few months I was looking for work experience and I got an interview at Russell Eaton. The team made it clear it was an apprenticeship or nothing. Very quickly I realised the college course I'd been doing was similar content, but it wasn't anywhere near as in-depth as an apprenticeship.

"I have more appreciation for apprenticeships now and how they work. They're really intense and they don't deserve the stigma that's attached to them. I went into mine quite naively, perhaps because of the college course I did. I was thinking, 'if they can condense a Level 2 into eight months in college, why is this apprenticeship taking so much longer?' But there's a reason for that and I can see it now.

"Being older, I do find it hard. It's a lot longer route, I still need to earn money. I still need to pay bills. I got lucky with my salon in that it is able to pay me more than the relevant apprenticeship wage, but I know that's not always the case."

