

“Career advice gives people the confidence and knowledge they need to find work”

Encouraging take-up of affordable childcare

Making sure everyone has access to affordable childcare is one way the government aims to help working families. Tax-Free Childcare (TFC) allows parents to manage their childcare costs, while also receiving a contribution from the government. For every £8 parents pay into their TFC account, they receive an additional £2 from the government.

Following a series of interviews with parents, we developed four letters to address common concerns and boost application rates. One letter sought to counteract present bias – the tendency to focus only on immediate costs and benefits – by encouraging parents to think about the long-term benefits of a return to work. Another highlighted the advantages for children, the third encouraged parents to tell their friends and family about the offer, and the fourth included a checklist of items needed to complete the online TFC application form.

We compared these variants against one another, no communication at all, and the standard letter sent by the government. The results suggest that providing parents with a checklist of items needed to fill out the online form is most effective. This practical information increased the number of completed applications for TFC by 13.2 per cent, when compared with families who received the standard letter. If everyone in the trial had received the best performing letter, an extra 1,784 parents would have completed an application for TFC.

Increasing attendance at careers appointments

Career advice can give people the confidence and knowledge they need to find work. The Education Development Trust provides face-to-face careers advisory services to adults in the UK as part of the UK Government’s National Careers Service. Unfortunately, around 30 per cent of people who book appointments do not attend, meaning valuable resources are wasted.

We worked with the trust to increase attendance at career advisory appointments, using text messages because of their low cost and accessibility.

We compared three different text reminders to each other and to the status quo of receiving no message. One reminder was an information-only message. The other two were behaviourally-informed messages, one focused on attendance planning and the other on self-efficacy, aimed at helping recipients believe in their own ability to achieve their goals.

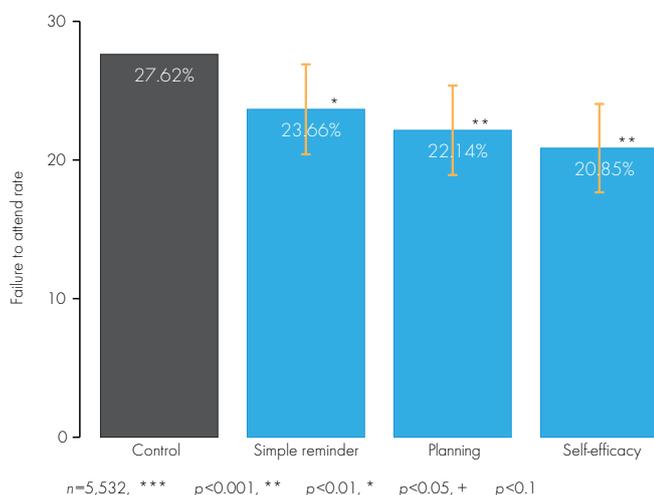
‘Hi Sarah, no one is born with a perfect career. Time & effort can boost your skills & CV. We’ll help you get started tomorrow at 10:00. Tom (National Careers Service)’

We found that all three text messages significantly increased attendance, but the most effective message was the self-efficacy message (Figure 8). Compared with those who received no message, the self-efficacy group were 24 per cent less likely to miss an appointment; a seven percentage point decrease from approximately 28 per cent to 21 per cent.



We estimate that the texts prevented 254 appointments being categorised as 'Failed to Attend' over this two-month period. Over the course of a year, this could mean that about 1,500 more people show up to career appointments to receive potentially life-changing advice.

Figure 8: Failure to attend career appointments



Tackling teacher shortages in rural areas

It is a constant challenge to attract teachers to rural and remote Australia. However, teachers are more likely to work in rural schools if they have already completed a rural placement during their teacher training.

Alongside the New South Wales (NSW) Department of Premier and Cabinet Behavioural Insights Unit, NSW Department of Education, and three universities, we ran a set of trials to encourage trainee teachers to apply for teaching placements in rural New South Wales.

To overcome some of the 'friction' in the application process, we made it easier to apply for rural placements by replacing the paper application with a partially pre-filled online form and increasing the number of rural schools that could be selected for students' placements. We also tested a series of prompts, including: extra information about rural schools; encouragement to discuss the idea with family and friends; and a timely reminder before applications closed.

Three times as many trainee teachers applied when these prompts were introduced. The online application process is now the standard and the School of Education at the University of Wollongong is using the lessons learned to trial new communication tools and framing. As teachers are the biggest influence on students' outcomes, this could make a real difference to the lives of learners in rural Australia.

What next

Next year we will run interventions at all stages of education. We will test a preschool curriculum for parents, delivered via SMS, to promote early reading, maths and socio-emotional skills. At GCSE level, we are testing software to diagnose the root causes of students' maths mistakes and help teachers tailor support.

Fewer girls take STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) at A-levels than boys. We are testing interventions to boost the perceived value of STEM subjects and tackle barriers that young women may encounter.

