Options 2014

The Student Room

Contents

Foreword

47% of students said work experience or talking to people in industry is most effective at convincing them to choose a certain career.

Welcome to Options 2014, the second of our now-annual student opinion series.

Every year we talk to thousands of UK students to get a unique insight into their decision-making process. Here, in this in-depth report, you have the results.

This year, we've made Options even more comprehensive. The introduction of Widening Access (WA) indicators identify those from backgrounds where university progression is lower than others.

Our data has shown WA students report being almost **twice as likely** to be seriously worried about going to or remaining at university compared to non-WA students.

That's cause for concern, but there's positive news too. Students who attended Aim Higher events or were offered bursaries report these to be effective in influencing their HE decisions.

The message is clear: where students lack the support to encourage them to go to university, it's all the more important that schools, colleges, universities and resources like The Student Room step in.

Beyond the WA cohort, Options 2014 reinforces the story we uncovered last year, showing that the quality of careers advice remains in the doldrums. Students rated the advice they received at, on average, just 5.5/10.
Nonetheless, some institutions are getting it right. These stand-out institutions should be commended and looked to as role models.

For The Student Room, the student voice is telling us loudest that:

- In a world without a government-funded careers advice structure, as a sector we need to standardise pathway advice for all Key Stage 4 and 5 students, looking to those institutions already doing it well for the template.
- For WA students, a focus on outreach and events like Aim Higher, combined with a personal sense of stability where it may be lacking in family life makes positive differences.

As we move towards the new academic year and a general election in May 2015, there is undoubtedly more change to come. I encourage the government and our friends throughout the education sector to get behind our call for real change in tackling these important issues.

I hope you find the many different findings in Options 2014 useful and we look forward to hearing your thoughts and shaping future waves with you.

Jason Geall
CEO
The Student Room Group

Executive summary

This report presents insights from an online survey of school and college leavers and current university students on the subject of post-Level 3 options and the information and influences that affect them.

Respondents were recruited via The Student Room's online community in the period from 26th June to 10th July 2014. A total of 6,371 respondents met the target sample profile.

Responses were explored in relation to a number of respondent characteristics: UK and Non-UK domicile and, for UK respondents, whether they identified themselves as meeting certain widening access (WA) criteria.

The insights generated by this research suggest the following conclusions:

a. The key motivation for those going straight into employment was to earn money (71%). Interest in their chosen job and Improved long-term career prospects were ranked joint-second (44%).

b. Only 60 respondents indicated they were going into vocational training or an apprenticeship and Improved long-term career prospects was the most important motivation (70%). Earn money was ranked second (52%).

c. The key reason given for not going to university was "Too expensive / Don't want to be saddled with debt" (65%). Earn money was second (42%) and Can go back to university later if I need it; third (40%). Don't want to study anymore (28%), Not relevant to career (25%) PT study was identified by 15% and Not being able to find the right course by 14%.

d. Improved Career Prospects (85%) and Interest in Chosen Subject (82%) were the leading motivations for going to university. Gaining independence (28%) is a distant 3rd.

e. Respondents indicated there was a strong expectation (77%) that they would go to university and this was primarily influenced by parents (45%). Subject teachers (19%) were ranked second with Friends & Social Networking third (8%).

f. Attitudes to tuition fees and the associated debt were relatively relaxed although some respondents (13%) indicated they had serious concerns over their ability to afford the university experience. Fees were a major influence, or choice factor, for only 3% of respondents. The most common view was a pragmatic one: "Just deal with repaying them once I start earning" (36%). Almost one third (30%) indicated they are not looking forward to having the debt 'hanging over them'.

g. The most useful source of information and advice was identified as university open days (54%), followed by university websites (51%), Prospectuses (41%), The Student Room (37%) and UCAS website (30%).

h. Career plans were well formed (an average rating of 6.9 on a scale of 1 (Totally undecided) to 10 (Totally decided) on future career.

i. The most important influences on career choice were Talking to people in industry (24%) and Work Experience/Internships (23%). Careers advisors/tutors were ranked joint-third with Talking to students/recent graduates (both 13%).

j. A majority of respondents (66%) had considered studying abroad. Life experience (42%) was the main benefit with Cultural Experiences (17%) a distant third. Deciding on which country to study in was the key issue considered (64%).

k. The USA was, by a large margin, the most popular potential study destination (31%) for UK respondents. The UK was the most popular destination for non-UK respondents.

l. The majority had enough information to select their subjects but those that felt they did not believed that their schools/colleges tended not to consider their personal needs and preferences and there was a lack of advice on what was most relevant to their university and career aspirations.

m. Information provision on alternatives to university was variable. A majority (55%) indicated they felt they had enough information, but more than one quarter of respondents (27%) did not.

n. The quality of career advice was judged as moderate (scoring an average of 5.5 out of 10) but 47% rated it at 5/10 or below.

o. Confidence on their chosen course leading to a secure job was high (scoring an average of 7.6 out of 10)

p. Gender balance was slightly skewed towards Female (59%) and Male 41%.

q. The proportion indicating neither parent went to university was 49% and 37% indicated their household income was below £25k. 20% were from ethnic minorities, 14% inner city and 11% attend schools or colleges where relatively few go on to university.

r. Only 19% were aware of a 'compact' agreement between their school/college and a university.

s. Where 'Widening Access' criteria applied; 37% had attended an Aim Higher event; 35% had been encouraged to apply for a bursary; 30% had been offered a bursary; 21% had attended a 'grade improvement' summer school; 16% had a guaranteed interview or a reduced offer and 6% had been offered a preparation course or additional tuition.

t. Aim Higher events appear to be most effective in influencing decisions of whether or not to go to university and the choice of a specific university. Bursaries also had an effect.

u. The Student Room was the most useful social media channel. YouTube and University Facebook pages were ranked 3rd and 4th. University Twitter feeds were moderately useful.

v. A higher proportion of non-UK respondents were worried about whether they could afford to go/ remain at university (24% v 11%)

w. More UK respondents indicated they would just deal with repaying fees once they started earning (38% v 24%)

x. More UK respondents indicated they were not looking forward to having a debt hanging over them than non-UK respondents (32% v 20%)

y. 'Widening Access' respondents were almost twice as likely to be seriously worried about being able to go to, or remain at, university than non-WA respondents (12% v 7%)

z. More Non-'WA' respondents felt they would just deal with repaying fees once they started earning (40% v 36%).

aa. Non-UK respondents were more likely to have engaged in the following activities, compared to UK respondents:

- Finding out how much tuition fees would cost (54% v 45%)
- Identifying a specific institution at which to study (50% v 32%)
- Finding out what support there might be for overseas students (38% v 34%)
- Speaking to other students (41% v 24%)

- Consulting prospectuses (37% v 22%)
- Applying for courses (48% v 12%)

ab. Non-UK respondents appear to be more committed to studying abroad than UK respondents.

ac. UK 'Widening Access' respondents were more concerned about the financial implications of studying abroad and a higher proportion had explored available funding than non-'WA' respondents (36% v 29%).

Scope, Objectives & Methodology

Explaining the reasons why we conducted this research, what we wanted to find out and how we did it.

Scope, Objectives and Methodology

The scope of the research was limited to members of The Student Room online community. The target group was those completing Level 3 courses in 2014 or 2015.

The research objectives were to explore:

- motivations for choosing three key options, post Level 3applying for a university place
- the impact of influences on option-related decision making
- the availability and quality of information to support decision making
- the impact of university tuition fees on decision making
- the extent to which alternatives to university are considered.

The methodology was an online survey. Respondents were directed to the survey from links featured on the Student Room web site. Response was incentivised by a free draw with prizes that included a first prize of new PlayStation 4, Xbox One or iPad and five runners up prizes of £10 Amazon vouchers.

The survey was open from 26th June to 10th July 2014 and attracted a total of 7,566 responses. Of these, 1,195 were screened out as they did not meet the target respondent profile, giving a useable sample of 6,371.

The useable response to the majority of survey questions was very high; delivering insights with very low margins of error. The following points explore the issue of data accuracy and the level of caution that needs to be exercised in making inferences based on it.

Data accuracy is largely dependent on the number of respondents that answer each question. The response, or base, for each question/chart is given on each figure in the report. Accuracy is improved with more extreme responses (i.e. towards 0% or 100% rather than 50%)

The following example sample sizes illustrate how accuracy can vary in relation to the response levels achieved to particular questions in this survey. The figures relate to responses at the 50% level:

6000: a single percentage is accurate to +/- 1.06%. Two percentages need to differ by 1.8% before there is a significant difference

4000: a single percentage is accurate to +/- 1.39%. Two percentages need to differ by 2.2% before there is a significant difference

1000: a single percentage is accurate to +/- 3.02%. Two percentages need to differ by 4.4% before there is a significant difference

The overall accuracy of the sample can be illustrated as follows: the total useable sample was 6,371; giving a margin of error of +/- 1.01% at the 95% confidence level. The minimum response level, excluding questions restricted to those going into employment or vocational training, was 1,445 giving a maximum margin of error of +/-2.48% at the 95% confidence level.

The numbers of respondents who planned to go into full time employment or vocational training were much lower than those going to university and data accuracy is, consequently, lower. For example, the maximum response from those going into full-time vocational training was 60; giving a margin of error of +/- 12.6% at the 95% confidence level.

The above differences should be borne in mind when the issue of data accuracy is considered in relation to this survey; especially when looking for differences in results and percentages between different subgroups. Unless otherwise stated, any differences identified in the report are statistically significant.

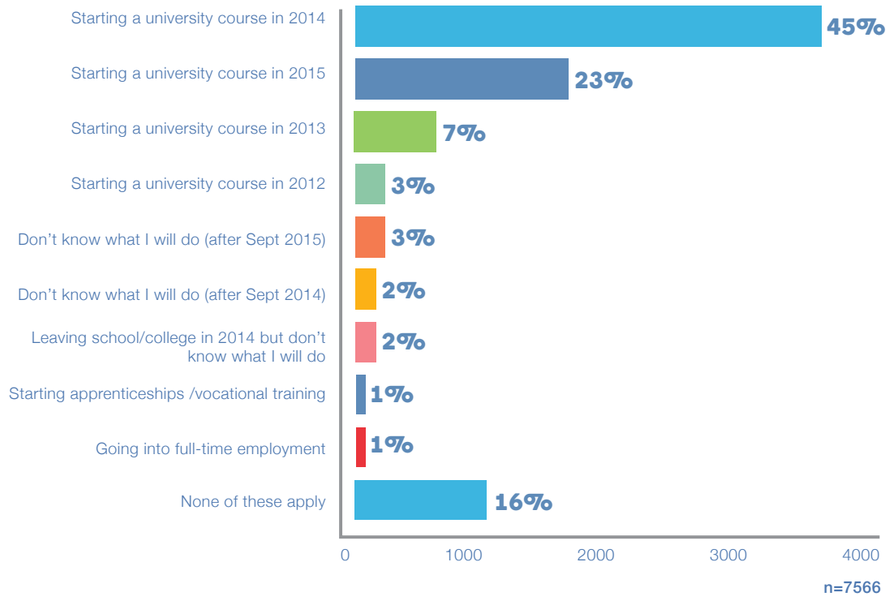
Data labels in figures and those quoted in the body of the report are rounded to the nearest whole number; except where percentages are lower than 1.

Sample Profile

The link to the survey was visible to all users of The Student Room web site and community members include students at all stages of secondary and tertiary education. It was important, therefore, to ensure respondents could be profiled in relation to both the stage of their education and their future plans. This was done via one question, the results of which are shown below.

Figure 3.1 – Sample Profile

Please select the statement that most clearly reflects your current situation

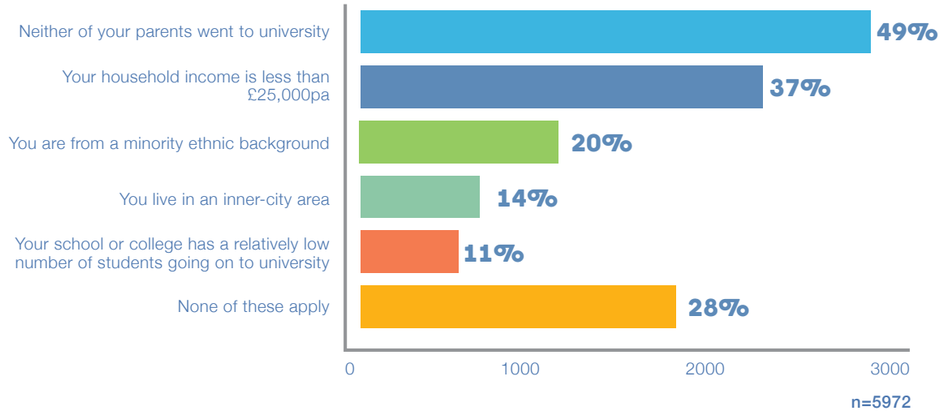


Those that selected 'None of these apply' (16%) were primarily students who will be applying for university entry in 2016. A smaller group (10%) had already started a university course but the majority (67%) intended starting a university course 2014 or 2015. Those going into full-time employment or vocational training represented a very small minority (2%). Those that were due to leave school or college in 2014 or 2015 but had no clear plans were also in a small minority (5%). This possibly reflects the high proportion, reported below, that indicated an expectation that they would progress to university (61%).

Respondents, excluding those screened out as shown in Figure 3.1, were asked to indicate if any of a number of Widening Access (WA) indicators were relevant to them. The indicators were not intended to replicate official WA criteria rather to be indicative of those who come from backgrounds where university progression may be lower than others.

Figure 3.2 Relevance of Widening Access Indicators

Which of the following factors apply to you?

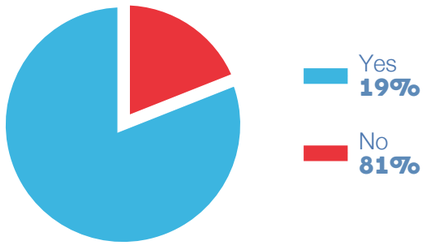


A relatively high proportion of respondents (72%) indicated that at least one factor applied to them. The most frequent was that neither parent had attended university (49%). When considered in context this, it can be argued, is a relatively low figure. In 2013 the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills published a report on the Higher Education Initial Participation Rate (HEIPR) for 17-30 year olds and this indicated that the rate had increased from 46% in 2010-11 to 49% in 2011/12. The HEIPR is, however, not a definite figure for participation but more a reflection of the probability that a 17 year old will progress to university at some point before they reach 30. The implication is that current participation rates are lower than 49% and, historically (when the parents of respondents to this survey were aged 17 to 30) they were much lower. The data in Figure 3.2 suggests that 51% of respondents had at least one parent that went to university, which would mean a minimum parental participation rate of 25.5%.

Respondents that indicated at least one WA criteria was relevant to them were asked if they were aware of any official arrangement between their school/college and universities in relation to reduced entry grades, guaranteed interviews or other improved access provisions. Such 'compact' arrangements are a common feature of university strategies to encourage applicants from less-advantaged backgrounds. The results are shown in Figure 3.3.

Figure 3.3 Awareness of school/college 'compact' arrangements

Are you aware of your school/college having an agreement with any universities that offer reduced entry grades or access to financial support?



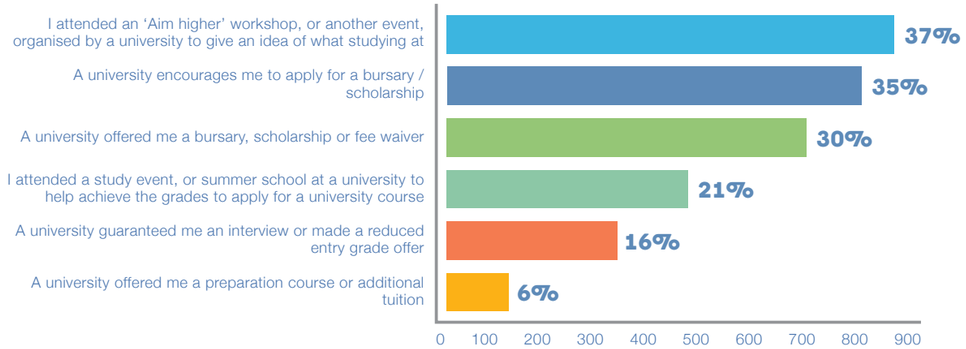
n=4251

Given that 158 universities, 123 HE institutions and 35 FE colleges have approved compact agreements in place for 2013-14, the fact that only 19% of respondents were aware of them appears low but the proportion of UCAS applicants from disadvantaged neighbourhoods was 17% in 2013 which suggests the figure of 19% is realistic.

Respondent involvement in a selection of WA, or Outreach activities is shown in Figure 3.4

Figure 3.4 Involvement in Outreach Activities

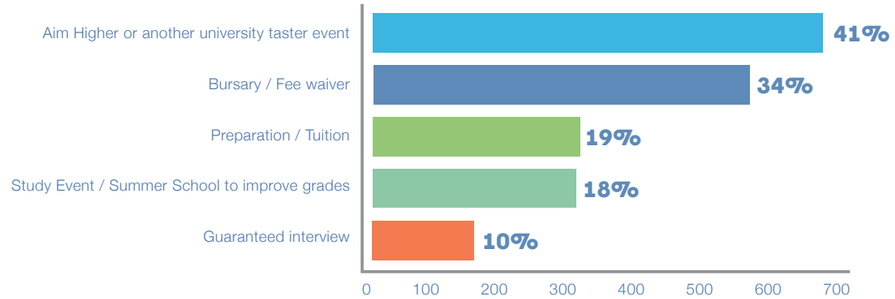
Have you received any of the following types of university access support?



n=2322

Figure 3.5 Effect of Outreach Activities on Decisions to go to University

Which, if any, of these activities made a difference to your decision of whether to go to university

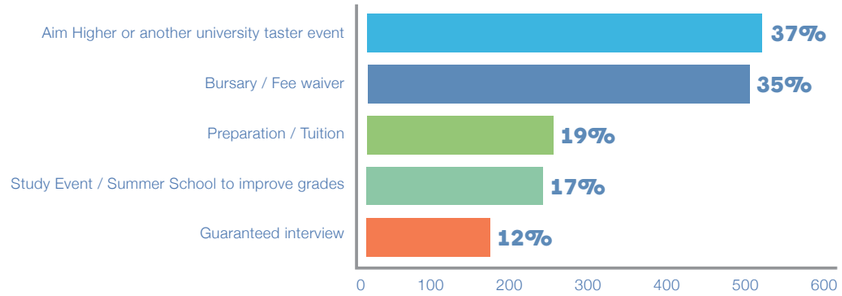


n=1722

Respondents were asked about the influence of outreach activities on their decision to go to university (Figure 3.5) or to a specific university (Figure 3.6, below). Events that give an impression of the university experience have the greatest impact on respondents' decision making. Statistically, the impact of Aim Higher or other taster events is greater on the general decision of whether to go to university.

Figure 3.6 Effect of WA-related activities on decisions to go to a specific university

If relevant, which of these activities made a difference to your decision to go to a specific university?



n=1445

The Appendices give other details on sample profile in terms of Age, Gender, Location and Type of School Attended.

Findings

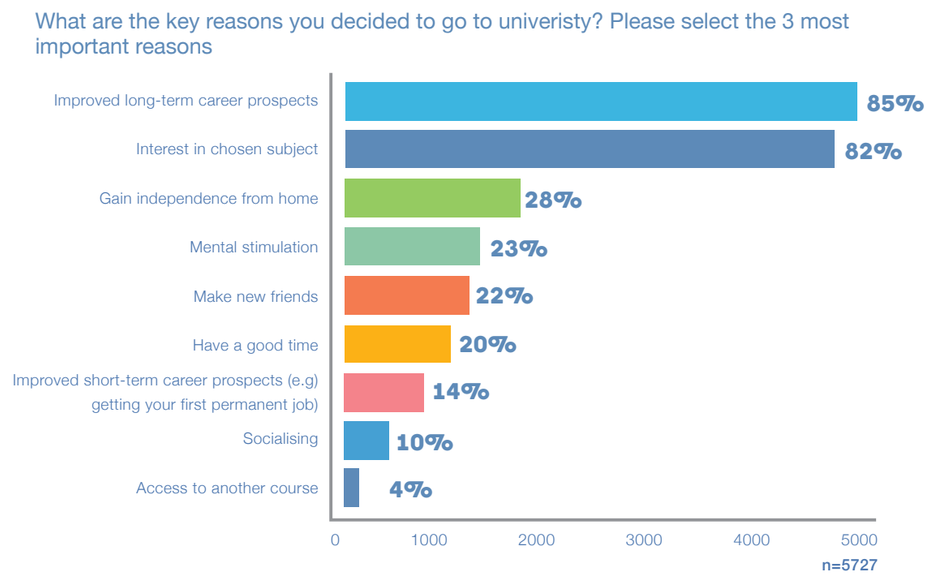
This section provides details of the insights on each of the issues explored in the survey. The responses described, unless otherwise indicated, are from those intending to start a university course in 2014.

Motivations for Chosen Route

This section of the survey was designed to explore the nature of respondents' motivations for going to university, into employment or vocational training. The proportion of respondents taking the latter two routes was very small in comparison to those intending to go to university which makes comparisons difficult.

Figure 4.1.1, below, shows the distribution of responses in relation to motivations to go to university. Respondents were able to select up to 3 responses.

Figure 4.1.1 Motivations for Applying for University



Two factors are clearly considered to be significantly more important than the others: 'Improved Career Prospects' (85%) and 'Interest in Chosen Subject' (82%). This indicates the desire to improve career prospects is stronger than the interest in the chosen subject but only by a small margin. This is an important message for universities in that those that can convince prospective students that they deliver good subject quality and good career preparation will have a powerful marketing message.

'Gaining independence' is ranked 3rd (28%) with a smaller but still significant gap to a group of factors: 'Mental stimulation' (23%), 'Make new friends' (22%), and 'Have a good time' (20%). 'Socialising' (10%) and 'Access to another course' (4%) are very minor concerns in relation to the others.

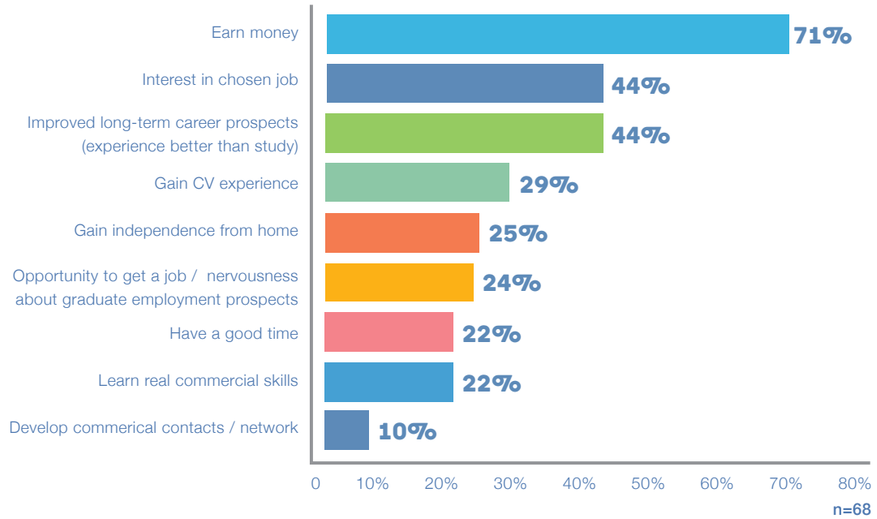
Non-UK respondents displayed a lower priority for long term career prospects (80% v 86%), as did UK non-'WA' respondents in comparison with 'WA' respondents (84% v 87%). Although applicable to a

minority, non-'WA' respondents were more interested in making new friends (25% v 22%) and having a good time (24% v 20%).

Improved Career Prospects and Interest in Chosen Subject were the leading motivations for going to university in both studies. Gaining Independence was a distant 3rd. The response levels on motivations to go to university on this study were almost identical to those is a similar study conducted in 2013 (Career Prospects 85% and Subject Interest 82% in both studies. Independence was 32% in 2013 and 27% in 2014).

Figure 4.1.2 Motivations for going into Employment

What are the key reasons you decided to go into employment? Select the 3 most important

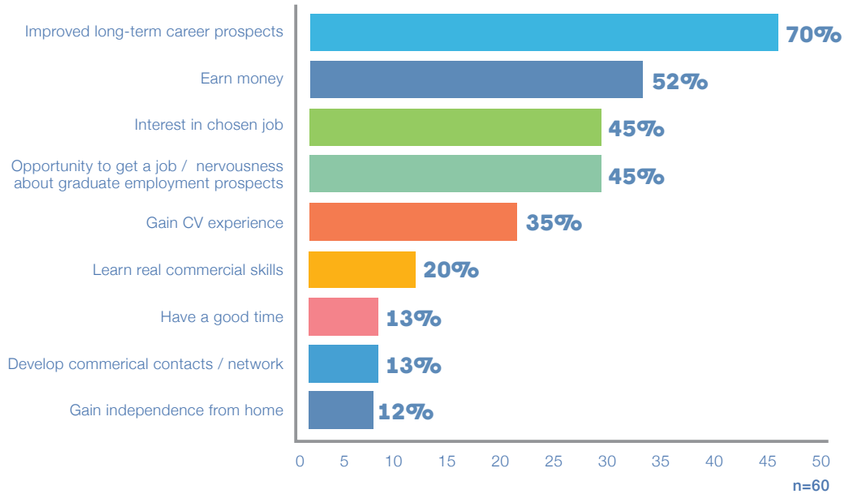


The motivation to 'Earn money' (71%) was clearly the most important factor for those choosing to go into employment. 'Interest in the chosen job' and 'Improved long-term career prospects' (both 44%) recorded moderate levels of response.

Given the low number of respondents it should be noted that the margin of error on 'Earn money' is +/- 10.8% and those ranked joint second, is +/-11.8% but, even at these levels, the differences are statistically significant. The differences between those ranked joint second and 'Gain CV experience' (24%) is not statistically significant.

Figure 4.1.3 Motivations for going into Vocational Training

What are the key reasons you decided to go into vocational training or an apprenticeships? Select the 3 most important

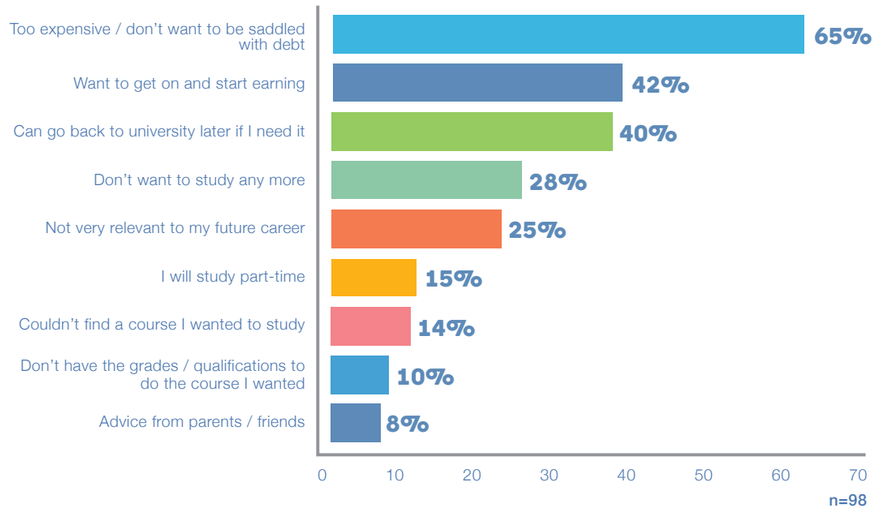


The main motivation for going into vocational training was 'Improved long-term career prospects'. The difference between this and the other factors was statistically significant but the differences across those ranked second to fifth were not significant.

Those respondents not intending to go to university were asked to identify the main reasons for that decision. The outcomes are shown in Figure 4.1.4, below. Although the desire to start earning money was a strong reason (42%), the leading factor was the desire to avoid the cost/debt associate with university (65%). The total number of respondents was only 98 but, even at this level of response the difference between the two factors is significant.

Figure 4.1.4 Motivations for not going to University

What are the key reasons you decided not to go to university? Select the 3 most important



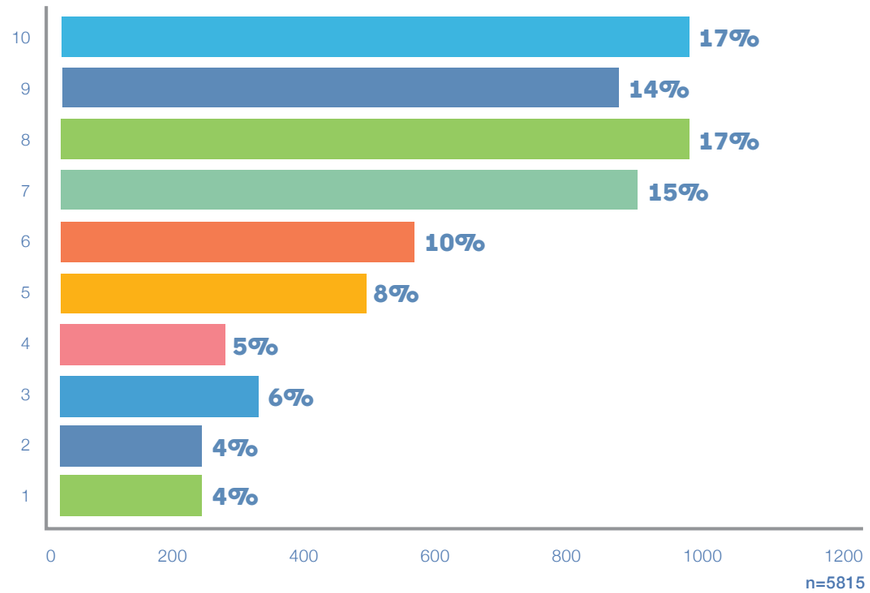
Career-Related Issues

Those respondents intending to go to university were asked a series of questions on their career preparation. This section presents the insights that were generated.

Respondents were asked about the extent to which they had formed firm career plans. This was done by asking them to record a position on a ten-point scale between 'Totally Undecided' and 'Totally Decided'

Figure 4.2.1 Career Plans

To what extent have you decided on the career you will pursue?



The extent to which career choices had been made was surprisingly high. The joint-highest level of response was against point 10 'Totally Decided' and 8 (both 17%) although a high proportion of these respondents could be embarking on courses of, for example, medical, architectural or legal training. The average rating across all respondents was 6.9, indicating that a high proportion of those going to university in 2014 and 2015 are quite clear on the direction they wish their careers to take. A total of 63% recorded responses of 7 or higher and only 19% recorded ratings of 4 or less.

Non-UK resident respondents and UK 'WA respondents had clearer ideas of what career they would pursue. The average rating for Non-UK respondents was 7.1, with 66% recording their level of 'career certainty' at 7 or higher. UK 'WA' respondents averaged 6.94 with 63% scoring their 'certainty' at 7 or higher. UK non-WA respondents averaged 6.43 with 58% scoring their 'certainty' at 7 or higher.

Career plans were well formed in 2014 and 2013. Rating the extent to which they were decided on a future career; respondents recorded an average rating of 7.7/10 in 2013 and 7 in 2014. Despite this fall in the average rating; those recoding a score of 7 to 10 increased (61.8% v 65.4%) by a significant margin.

Respondents were asked to identify factors that had influenced them to pursue their chosen careers. The results of this question are shown in Figure 4.2.2, below.

It is clear that there are a number of influences that affect career decisions but the two leading factors are very strongly linked to direct experience of the career in question. Experience that comes either from working in a sector or the insights gained from those who do were the key influences for almost half of the total number of respondents (47%).

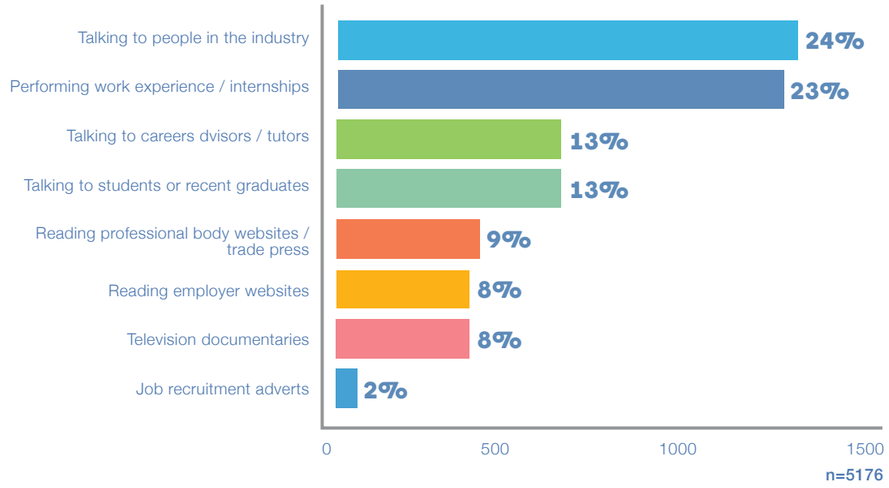
Other 'first-hand' accounts are also important and were ranked joint-third. Talking to careers advisors/ tutors and students or recent graduates both attracted 13% of responses. As the difference in ratings between these and the leading factors was significant they are clearly of a different order of importance but, together, they accounted for more than a quarter of responses (26%).

The final group of influences comprised what can be termed 'secondary' sources: these included publications, websites, TV documentaries and advertisements. The difference in response level between these and the factors ranked joint-third was significant although, collectively, these secondary sources also accounted for a quarter of respondents (27%).

Anecdotally, the influence of TV drama has often been debated in the HE sector (the growth of Forensic Science courses having been thought to have been one of the main effects) but there was no evidence from 'Other' responses that such programmes have had an effect. It is possible, however, that TV programmes raise awareness of career options but may not be a significant influence in choosing to pursue them.

Figure 4.2.2 Career Influences

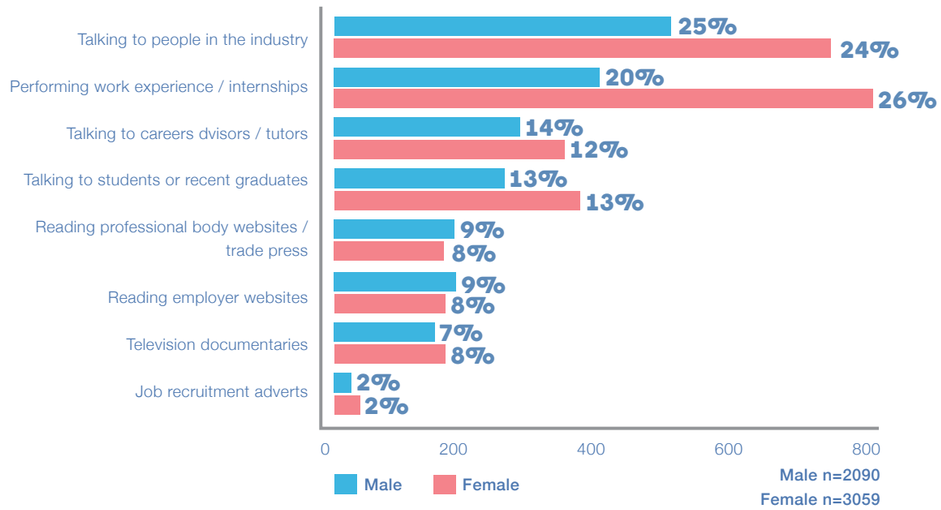
What has been most effective in convincing you to pursue a particular career?
Select one response



Female respondents were significantly more likely to have been influenced by 'Performing work experience/internships' than Male respondents. This was the only significant gender difference in relation to influences on career choice (see Figure 4.2.3).

Figure 4.2.3 Career Influences: Gender Differences

What has been most effective in convincing you to pursue a particular career?
Select one response

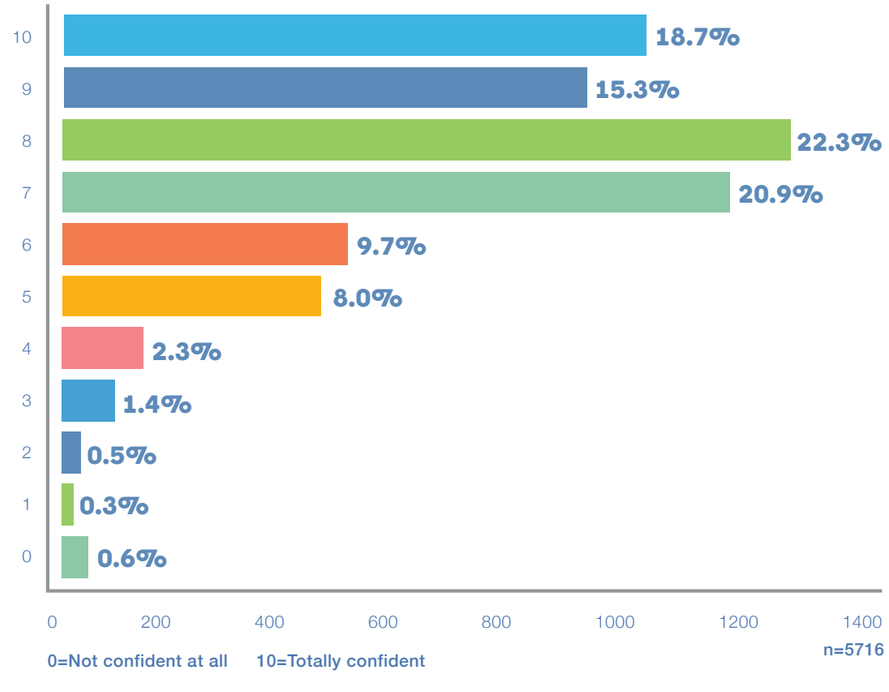


UK 'WA' respondents were more likely to be influenced by professional body and employer websites than non-'WA' respondents (9% v 5% and 9% v 7% respectively). They were less likely to be influenced by work experience (22% v 28%).

Respondents, going to, or having started a course at university, were asked about their confidence in securing a job following graduation.

Figure 4.2.4 Courses Leading to Jobs

How confident are you that your chosen course will help you secure a job?



The responses to this question indicated a high level of confidence (an average of 7.4/10) that a job will be secured. Only 6% recorded a response of 4/10 or lower.

Of respondents based in the UK, those that indicated no WA factors applied to them were more confident that their chosen course would lead to a job after graduation (80% v 76%). The percentages were relatively close but, at the response levels achieved, the difference is statistically significant.

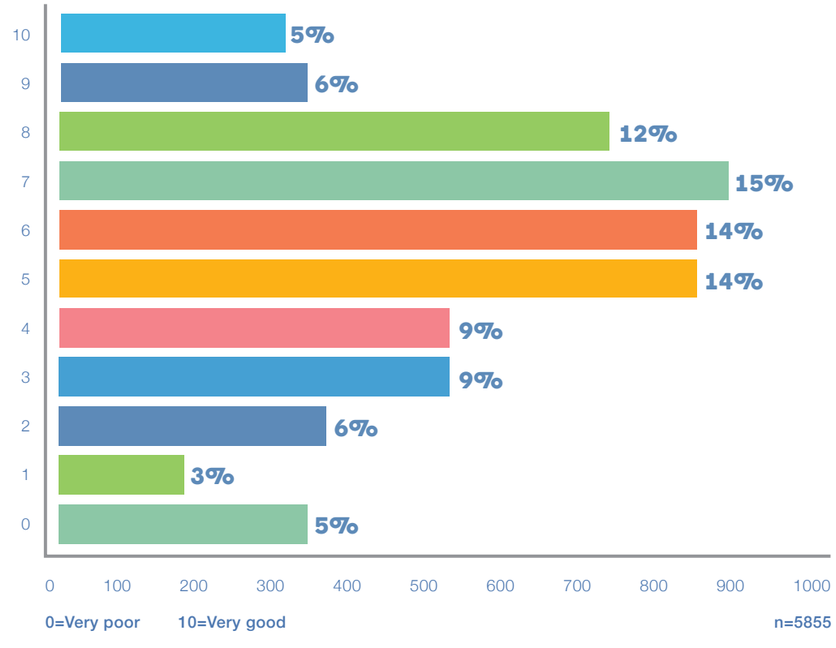
Confidence that courses would lead to securing a job was high both in 2013 and 2014 although there was an increase in 2014 (average ratings of 7.4/10 v 7.7/10). The proportion rating their confidence from 7 to 10 actually fell by a significant amount in 2014 (71% v 66%) but increases in the mid-range of the distribution produced the higher average.

Respondents were asked to rate the quality of career advice to which they had access during their time at school or college. The picture that emerged was mixed. A total of 39% recorded a response of 7 or higher whilst 32% recorded a response of 4 or lower. The average response was 5.5.

The provision of careers advice has become a concern over recent years. The results of this question suggest some respondents have a much better experience than others. Whilst any individual's experience of career advice may be influenced by a number of factors; the fact that one third of respondents recorded very low ratings suggests that, in some places, the system of provision is in need of support and development. The response to this question reflected that to the question regarding advice and guidance on alternative progression options to university (Figure 4.3.2): i.e. information and advice provision was weak.

Figure 4.2.5 Quality of Careers Advice

How would you rate the qualty of the career advice you have had access to (excluding your family or friends)?



The quality of career advice was judged as moderate in both 2013 and 2014 (scoring an average of 5.5 v 5.4 out of 10).

Quality & Availability of Information

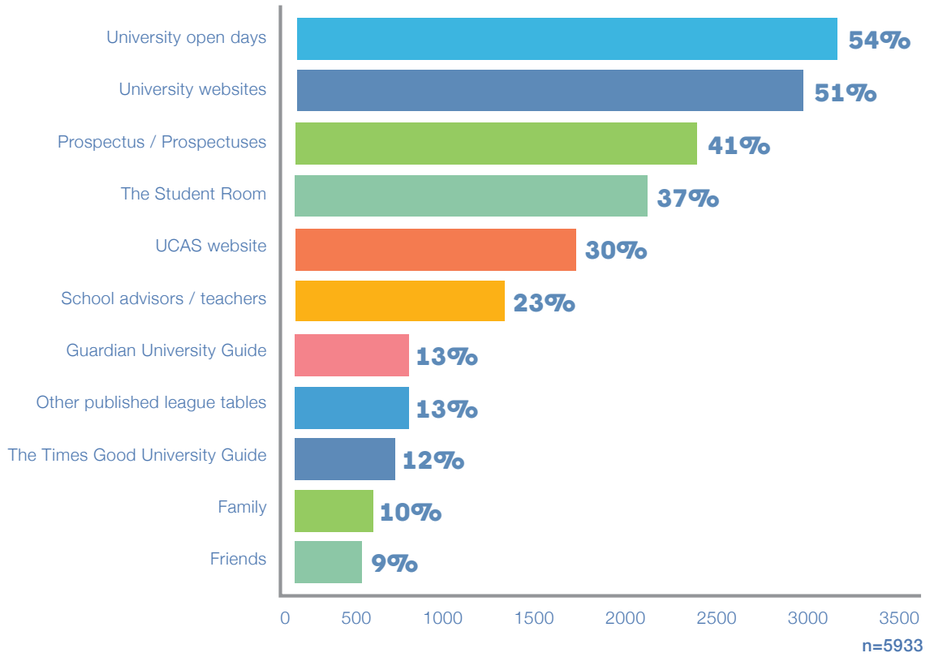
This section is concerned with information sources used by respondents in relation to university and other options.

In relation to information and advice to support decision making in relation to 'University open days' and 'University web sites' were identified as the most useful information sources. Each of the leading factors, it can be argued, perform slightly different roles in the decision process but open days are critical in developing prospective students' 'feel' for institutions in which they are interested. University web sites and prospectuses play a slightly different role as they provide basic information on what is offered, as well as a range of associated details and they start to develop an impression of the nature and character of an institution.

The opportunities that electronic media offer in relation to improved engagement and interaction with audiences are significant and, for several years, there has been an expectation that the lifespan of prospectuses may be limited so, in that sense, it is surprising that they are ranked third.

Figure 4.3.1 Most Useful Information Sources

What are the most useful sources of information / advice when researching university choices? Select up to 3



Historically, the UCAS web site has been a very significant information source for prospective students but its rating in this survey was lower than expected. Excluding the application service, this may reflect it being regarded as more of a signposting service rather than providing information itself.

The higher rating of 'The Student Room' (37%) was likely to have been influenced by the survey sample being drawn from its community but, in comparison to 'official' information sources this is still an interesting outcome. The UCAS web site is the prime focus of the application process and, effectively, all university applicants have to use it. Usage of The Student Room, however, has no compulsion associated with it.

The Student Room also combines 'official' university-provided information with informal community discussion threads. The high rating here is, inevitably, influenced by the survey link being published via The Student Room. As such, its prominence is likely to be overstated in relation to the total university applicant population but, by what margin, is difficult to estimate without wider respondent recruitment.

'School advisors/teachers' (23%) are ranked in 6th place; significantly ahead of general, secondary information sources. Secondary sources (guides and league tables, 13%) are ranked ahead of Family and Friends. The rating of the latter two sources (10% and 9%) is low in comparison with their importance on advice on post-school/college options (See Figure 4.3.7 below) but Figure 4.3.1 is concerned with the value of information sources in researching university options and whilst Family and Friends may be very important in discussing the pros and cons of university options, they are likely to have a much lower value in the research process.

The information sources used by non-UK respondents were very different to UK respondents. This was largely due to the irrelevance of university open days to many of those intending to study outside their home country as, naturally, there are much greater logistical issues in attending such events. Open days were rated at 19% by non-UK respondents compared to 61% by those within the UK. A related difference was the greater importance of university web sites to non-UK respondents (66% v 48%).

There were some statistically significant differences between 'WA' and non-'WA' respondents in the UK but these were not large enough to imply that universities should treat the two groups as separate audiences. For example, 'WA' respondents placed greater reliance on the UCAS web site (33% v 26%), university web sites (33% v 26%) and The Student Room (38% v 31%). Non-'WA' respondents placed greater emphasis on university open days (66% v 59%).

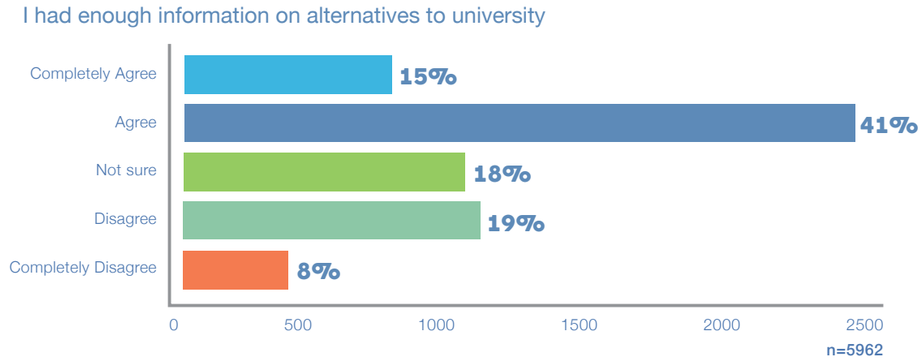
The comparison of 2014 results with those in 2013 was complicated by three additions to the response options on this question for 2014: University Open Days, University Web Sites and Prospectuses.

In 2013 the ranking results were as follows: UCAS Web Site (55%), The Student Room (52%), and School Advisors/Teachers (37%). The 2014 rankings were very different with the three added options taking the three top positions: University Open Days (54%), University Websites (51%), and Prospectuses (41%). These were followed by The Student Room (37%) and the UCAS website (30%).

The 2014 results suggest that The Student Room has overtaken the UCAS website and, although it is ranked 4th and its response level fell by 15%; this is a modest reduction considering the strength of the three additional response options. When the response levels were re-calculated with the 2014 additional options removed; The Student Room still emerged ahead of the UCAS website whilst the rank order of the other options remained as they were in 2013.

To assess the range of information available to school and college leavers, respondents were asked if they had enough information on alternatives to university.

Figure 4.3.2 Information on Alternatives to University



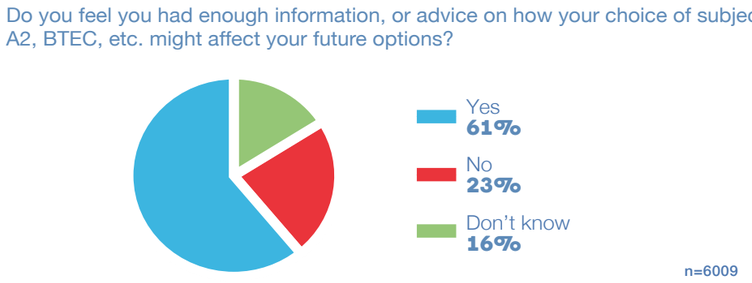
A majority responding to this question (56%) indicated they did have sufficient information on alternatives to university but a significant minority (27%) indicated they did not. The latter figure indicates there is still an issue around some schools and colleges concentrating on university progression as the 'default' route for any student that is able to follow it.

From 2013 to 2014 there was a significant fall in the proportion of respondents that felt they had enough information on routes that did not involve progression to university (63% v 58%).

In relation to information and advice regarding A2/BTEC subject choices and how they might affect university options (Figure 4.3.3 below): there was an approximate two thirds/one third split between those that felt they did have enough information (61%) and those who felt they did not (23%). The higher overall response to this question was due to it being open to all respondents, including those going into employment and vocational training. This picture was very similar to what emerged in 2013.

Within the UK, fewer 'WA' respondents indicated they felt they had sufficient information on subject choices (61% v 68%).

Figure 4.3.3 Information on Subject Choices



A total of 931 comments were made explaining what information or advice respondents felt was missing.

One key point made by respondents was that they were not clear on the relative advantages and disadvantages of specific A level subjects in relation to degree requirements.

> "I was told to choose the subjects I enjoyed and did best at. But I never realised how many doors I closed by picking humanities subjects rather than sciences."

> "It wasn't made clear which subjects were needed for which university course. Since I didn't know which degree I wanted to do I wish teachers had helped me to choose A-level subjects which would allow me access to the most courses as now I am slightly limited."

> "I feel that my A level subjects seriously limited my options when it came to choosing a course for uni, and so should've thought it through better."

The full list of comments is included in the Appendices.

Figure 4.3.4, below, shows there was a clear, strong expectation that respondents would go to university rather than following any alternative path following completion of their school or college courses. More than three quarters of respondents indicated that this was the case.

In the UK more non-'WA' respondents indicated there was an expectation of their progression to university than 'WA' respondents (83% v 76%).

There was a strong expectation that respondents would go to university in the 2013 study but the 2014 figure increased over 2013. (76% v 72%)

Figure 4.3.4 Expectation of Going to University

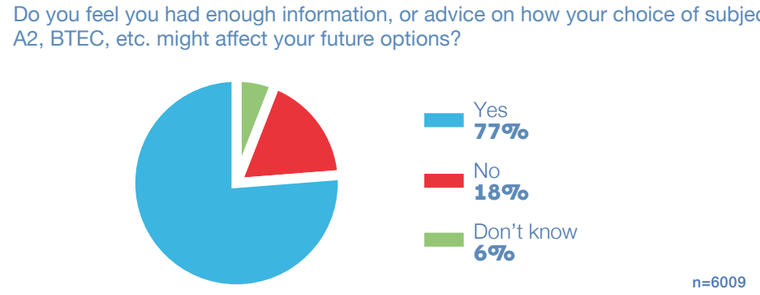


Figure 4.3.5 gives an impression of the main influences on respondents in deciding what they would do following school/college. Respondents were asked to select only one response so the outcome should represent the order of importance across these influences.

The strongest influence, by a significant margin, was 'Parents' (45%). 'Subject teachers' (19%) were ranked second, followed by a close grouping of 'Friends' and 'Social Networking' (8%), 'Heads of Year/6th Form' and 'Employers/Potential Employers' (7%).

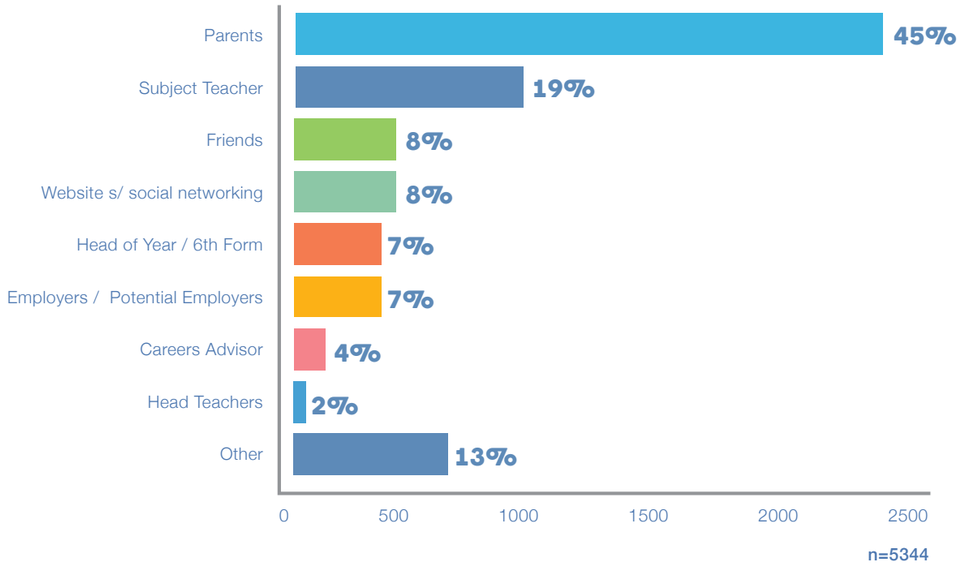
'Careers Advisor' (4%) and 'Head Teacher' (2%) attracted the lowest levels of response.

Those indicating that another influence was most important totalled 682 and, of these, approximately half (or 6% of the total response) indicated their choice was entirely their own. The next category (but much smaller than 'Myself') was those who were influenced by family members other than their parents.

The full list of 'Other' responses is included in the Appendices.

Figure 4.3.5 Influences on Post-School/College Choices

Who made the strongest impression on you are to what you should do after school / college? Select 1 response



Female respondents were more likely to be influenced by their parents. 47% of females indicated their parents made the strongest impression on them, compared to 42% of males; a difference that is statistically significant.

Non-UK respondents were more influenced by their parents (51% v 44% for UK respondents) and they were less likely to be influenced by subject teachers than UK respondents (12% v 20%).

Within the UK there were some differences between 'WA' and non-'WA' respondents:

- non-'WA' respondents were more influenced by their parents than 'WA' respondents (56% v 40%)
- non-'WA' respondents were less influenced by subject teachers (15% v 21%) and by employers or prospective employers (4% v 8%).

The strongest influence on progression options from school or college was Parents in both studies (2013 and 2014) although the response level fell from 54% in 2013 to 45%. This could have been due, in part, to the inclusion of two additional response options in 2014 (Subject Teachers 19% and Employers 8%). Other influences that saw a fall in their response levels were Heads of Year/6th Form (15% v 7%) and Friends (14% v 9%).

Tuition Fees

The introduction of higher tuition fees, and the increasing level of student debt that has accompanied them, have attracted much comment and speculation about their impact. There has also been concern that there would be a significant fall in university applications from those with low household incomes.

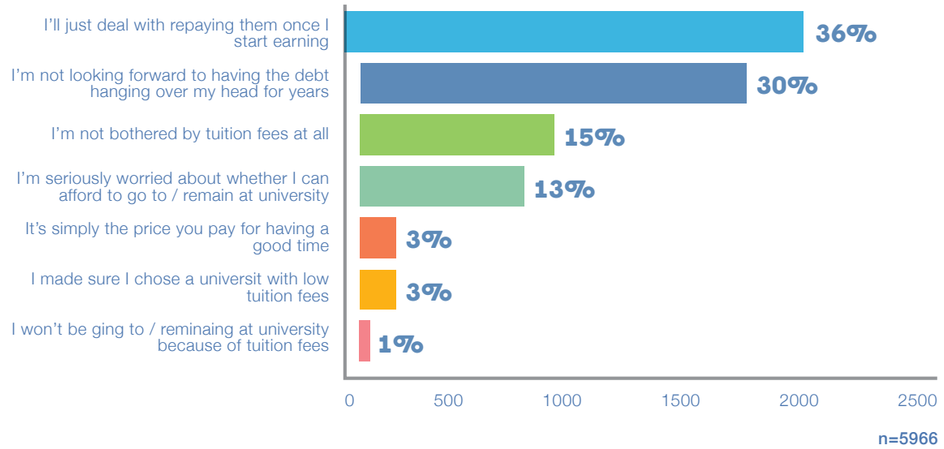
The insights from this research suggest that attitudes towards tuition fees are relatively relaxed in that only a small proportion of those going to university in 2014 or 2015 indicate a serious concern with fees and the level of student debt that they will generate.

The most frequent response was "I'll just deal with repaying them once I start earning" (36%). Many respondents selected a statement that indicated they are not happy about the fees situation, but only 17% expressed serious concerns about their ability to go to, or remain at university. Of those with serious concerns only 3% indicated they used low tuition fees as a decision factor when making their application. Almost all the others in this group (13%) expressed the concern that they may not be able to afford going to/remaining at university.

It may be that this group of respondents, prior to applying for a university place, had decided that fees were not a problem whereas those going into employment or vocational training decided the financial issues were insurmountable as they indicated that the costs of going to university and the debt associated with it was the leading factor in their decision (see Figure 4.1.4 in Section 4.1, above).

Figure 4.4.1 Attitudes Towards Tuition Fees

How do you feel about university tuition fees? Please select 1 statement



Some significant differences in attitudes towards fees were identified between UK and non-UK respondents. These were:

- a higher proportion of non-UK respondents were worried about whether they could afford to go/ remain at university (24% v 11%)
- more UK respondents indicated they would just deal with repaying fees once they started earning (38% v 24%) and
- more UK respondents indicated they were not looking forward to having a debt hanging over them (32% v 20%).
-

A number of differences were also identified between UK-based 'WA' and Non-'WA' respondents. These were:

- although figures were relatively low; 'WA' respondents were almost twice as likely to be seriously worried about being able to go to or remain at university (12% v 7%)
- more Non-'WA' respondents felt they would just deal with repaying fees once they started earning (40% v 36%).

Attitudes to tuition fees and the associated debt were almost identical across the two studies. They were a major influence, or choice factor, for only 13% and 14% of respondents respectively (not a significant difference). The most common view was a pragmatic one: "Just deal with repaying them once I start earning" (37% in both studies). The same proportion, around one third, indicated they are not looking forward to having the debt 'hanging over them' (32% 2013 v 30% 2014).

Overseas Study

In 2013, the well-publicised increase in UK university tuition fees prompted a wave of interest in alternative options outside the UK that avoided tuition fees of £9,000pa and offered an improved level of value.

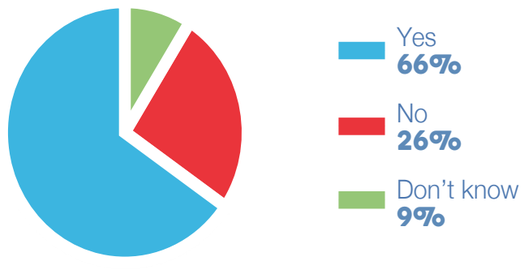
Evidence, from other sources, suggests the take up of such options has increased. In 2009 the OECD published a figure of 22,000 UK students (1.7%) choosing to study overseas each year. In 2012 a survey by Prospects UK found that 24% were planning to study overseas and 73% were considering it. The total number of respondents indicating they would consider studying abroad in this study (66%) does support this view.

For UK respondents in this survey, the overseas study destination that recorded the highest level of interest was, by a large margin, North America. The USA (16%) was the main focus of interest but there was also some interest in Canada (4%).

Respondents from outside the UK were primarily interested in studying in the UK (56%) rather than the USA (12%).

Figure 4.5.1 Consideration of Overseas Study

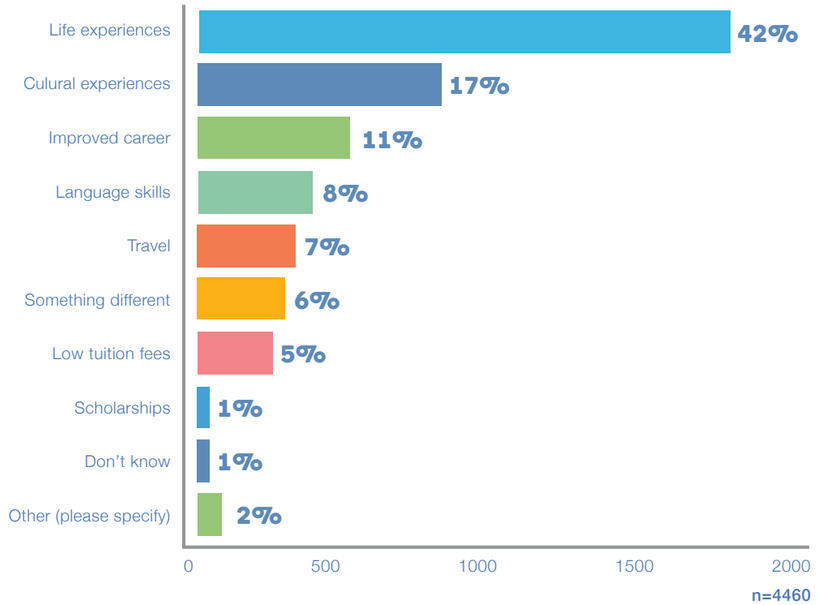
Did you consider, or would you consider, studying abroad?



For all respondents, the attractions of studying abroad focused on the 'Life experience' (42%) that it would offer. More-pragmatic benefits of 'Improved career prospects' (11%) and 'Low tuition fees' (5%) were ranked 3rd and 7th respectively.

Figure 4.5.2 Attractions of Overseas Study

What do you think is the main attraction of studying aborad? 1 response



A number of differences were identified between UK and non-UK respondents. UK respondents found the Cultural experience of studying abroad more attractive (18% v 13%). Non-UK respondents were more attracted by the improved career prospects they felt it would generate (23% v 8%). Although minor factors; UK respondents were more attracted by Language benefits (9% v6%) and Travel itself (8% v 4%).

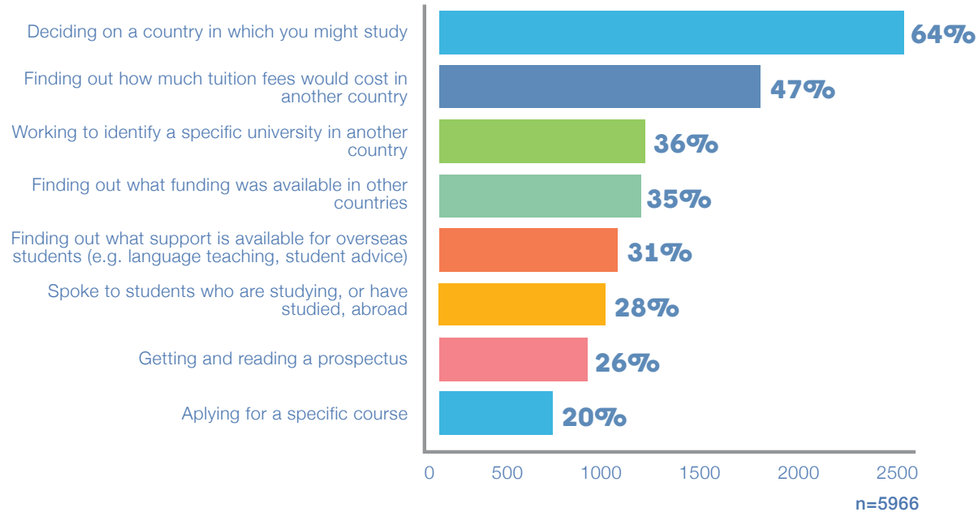
The proportion of respondents indicating they had/would consider studying abroad was 68% in both years) and, despite a non-significant reduction in response level, Life Experience was identified as the main benefit (46% v 42%).

Respondents were asked about the actions they had carried out in relation to studying abroad.

All respondent groups had very similar levels of consideration of which country or countries they wished to study in (64%). Figure 4.5.3, below, shows the responses for all students but a number of differences were identified between UK and non-UK respondents.

Figure 4.5.3 Activities Regarding Overseas Study

Which of the following steps did you carry out in relation to studying aborad? Select any that apply



Non-UK respondents were more likely to have engaged in the following activities, compared to UK respondents:

- Finding out how much tuition fees would cost (54% v 45%)
- Identifying a specific institution at which to study (50% v 32%)
- Finding out what support there might be for overseas students (38% v 34%)
- Speaking to other students (41% v 24%)
- Consulting prospectuses (37% v 22%)
- Applying for courses (48% v 12%)

The implication of the above is that Non-UK respondents are likely to have been more committed to studying abroad than UK respondents.

UK 'WA' respondents were more concerned about the financial implications of studying abroad and a higher proportion had explored available funding than non-'WA' respondents (36% v 29%).

Social Media

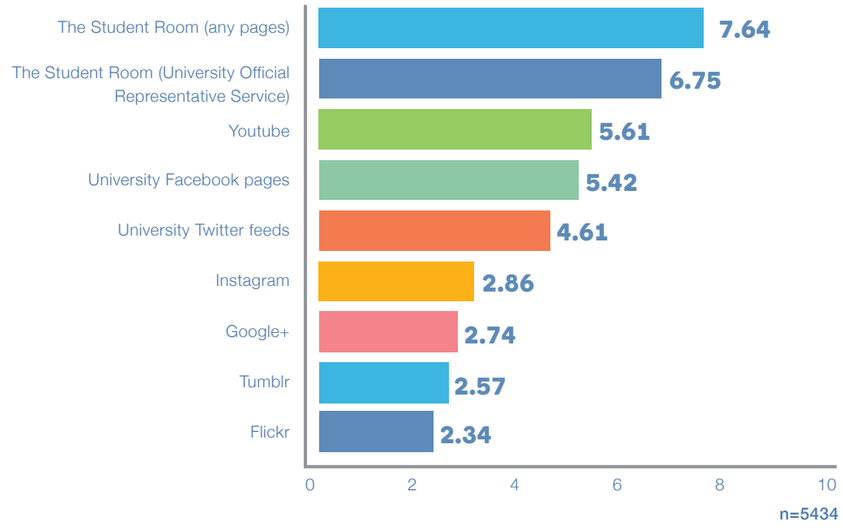
All respondents were asked about how useful they had found a range of social media channels in terms of university-related content. Impressions of 'usefulness' were recorded on a 10 point scale and an average rating for each channel calculated (see Figure 4.6.1 below).

The channels that emerged as being the most useful were The Student Room (any TSR pages were rated above TSR university official guide pages); YouTube was ranked third and this was followed by university Facebook pages, university Twitter feeds. A group of other social media channels (Instagram, Google+,Tumblr and Flickr) were considered least useful of those presented.

Although university Facebook and Twitter feeds attracted moderate ratings the proportion of respondents that recorded a rating was relatively high (77% and 68% respectively of the total number who responded on at least one of the channels listed). This suggests that whilst a high number of students and prospective students might access these channels they do not regard them as being particularly useful (5.4/10 and 4.6/10 respectively). Universities are generally committing greater resources to their social media activity but this finding suggests there may be a need for the evaluation of users reactions to what is featured rather than simply the number of users or hits.

Figure 4.6.1 Usefulness of Different Social Media Channels

If you have used university-related social media channels please indicate their usefulness



The rating of The Student Room will be influenced by the sample being sourced from its community but the differences in ratings between it and YouTube (ranked third) is more than marginal. The differences in the proportions rating any TSR page and TSR university official guide pages at 7 or higher, compared to YouTube, are statistically significantly at the 99% level (the 95% level is normally accepted as the test 'threshold').

Across the main sub-groups of the sample, social media was rated in very similar ways. The one exception was that UK 'WP' respondents rated university twitter feeds as being significantly more useful and UK Non-'WP' respondents. This was based on the proportion rating each channel's usefulness at 7 or higher.

Conclusion

The insights generated by this research suggest the following conclusions...

The insights generated by this research suggest the following conclusions:

α. The key motivation for those going straight into employment was to earn money (71%). Interest in their chosen job and Improved long-term career prospects were ranked joint-second (44%).

β. Only 60 respondents indicated they were going into vocational training or an apprenticeship and Improved long-term career prospects was the most important motivation (70%). Earn money was ranked second (52%).

χ. The key reason given for not going to university was "Too expensive / Don't want to be saddled with debt" (65%). Earn money was second (42%) and Can go back to university later if I need it; third (40%). Don't want to study anymore (28%), Not relevant to career (25%) PT study was identified by 15% and Not being able to find the right course by 14%.

δ. Improved Career Prospects (85%) and Interest in Chosen Subject (82%) were the leading motivations for going to university. Gaining independence (28%) is a distant 3rd.

ε. Respondents indicated there was a strong expectation (77%) that they would go to university and this was primarily influenced by parents (45%). Subject teachers (19%) were ranked second with Friends & Social Networking third (8%).

φ. Attitudes to tuition fees and the associated debt were relatively relaxed although some respondents (13%) indicated they had serious concerns over their ability to afford the university experience. Fees were a major influence, or choice factor, for only 3% of respondents. The most common view was a pragmatic one: "Just deal with repaying them once I start earning" (36%). Almost one third (30%) indicated they are not looking forward to having the debt 'hanging over them'.

γ. The most useful source of information and advice was identified as university open days (54%), followed by university websites (51%), Prospectuses (41%), The Student Room (37%) and UCAS website (30%).

η. Career plans were well formed (an average rating of 6.9 on a scale of 1 (Totally undecided) to 10 (Totally decided) on future career.

ι. The most important influences on career choice were Talking to people in industry (24%) and Work Experience/Internships (23%). Careers advisors/tutors were ranked joint-third with Talking to students/recent graduates (both 13%).

φ. A majority of respondents (66%) had considered studying abroad. Life experience (42%) was the main benefit with Cultural Experiences (17%) a distant third. Deciding on which country to study in was the key issue considered (64%).

κ. The USA was, by a large margin, the most popular potential study destination (31%) for UK respondents. The UK was the most popular destination for non-UK respondents.

λ. The majority had enough information to select their subjects but those that felt they did not believed that their schools/colleges tended not to consider their personal needs and preferences and there was a lack of advice on what was most relevant to their university and career aspirations.

μ. Information provision on alternatives to university was variable. A majority (55%) indicated they felt they had enough information, but more than one quarter of respondents (27%) did not.

ν. The quality of career advice was judged as moderate (scoring an average of 5.5 out of 10) but 47% rated it at 5/10 or below.

ο. Confidence on their chosen course leading to a secure job was high (scoring an average of 7.6 out of 10)

π. Gender balance was slightly skewed towards Female (59%) and Male 41%.

θ. The proportion indicating neither parent went to university was 49% and 37% indicated their household income was below £25k. 20% were from ethnic minorities, 14% inner city and 11% attend schools or colleges were relatively few go on to university.

ρ. Only 19% were aware of a 'compact' agreement between their school/college and a university.

σ. Where 'Widening Access' criteria applied; 37% had attended an Aim Higher event; 35% had been encouraged to apply for a bursary; 30% had been offered a bursary; 21% had attended a 'grade improvement' summer school; 16% had a guaranteed interview or a reduced offer and 6% had been offered a preparation course or additional tuition.

τ. Aim Higher events appear to be most effective in influencing decisions of whether or not to go to university and the choice of a specific university. Bursaries also had an effect.

υ. The Student Room was the most useful social media channel. YouTube and University Facebook pages were ranked 3rd and 4th. University Twitter feeds were moderately useful.

ϖ. A higher proportion of non-UK respondents were worried about whether they could afford to go/ remain at university (24% v 11%)

ω. More UK respondents indicated they would just deal with repaying fees once they started earning (38% v 24%)

ξ. More UK respondents indicated they were not looking forward to having a debt hanging over them than non-UK respondents (32% v 20%)

ψ. 'Widening Access' respondents were almost twice as likely to be seriously worried about being able to go to, or remain at, university than non-WA respondents (12% v 7%)

ζ. More Non-'WA' respondents felt they would just deal with repaying fees once they started earning (40% v 36%).

αα. Non-UK respondents were more likely to have engaged in the following activities, compared to UK respondents:

a. Finding out how much tuition fees would cost (54% v 45%)

b. Identifying a specific institution at which to study (50% v 32%)

c. Finding out what support there might be for overseas students (38% v 34%)

d. Speaking to other students (41% v 24%)

e. Consulting prospectuses (37% v 22%)

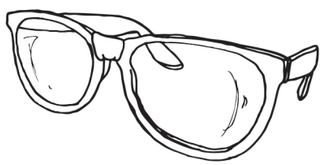
f. Applying for courses (48% v 12%)

αβ. Non-UK respondents appear to be more committed to studying abroad than UK respondents.

αχ. UK 'Widening Access' respondents were more concerned about the financial implications of studying abroad and a higher proportion had explored available funding than non-'WA' respondents (36% v 29%).

Appendix

This section contains a range of additional and further information related to the findings presented in the main sections of the report. This include details of the sample profile and the open ended responses

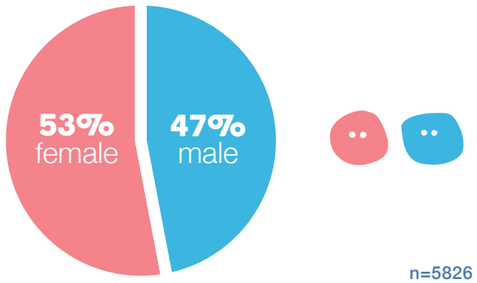


Sample Profile

This section contains a range of additional and further information related to the findings presented in the main sections of the report. These include details of the sample profile; open ended responses and the questionnaire that was used to generate the data.

Figure 6.1.1 Gender

Please indicate your gender

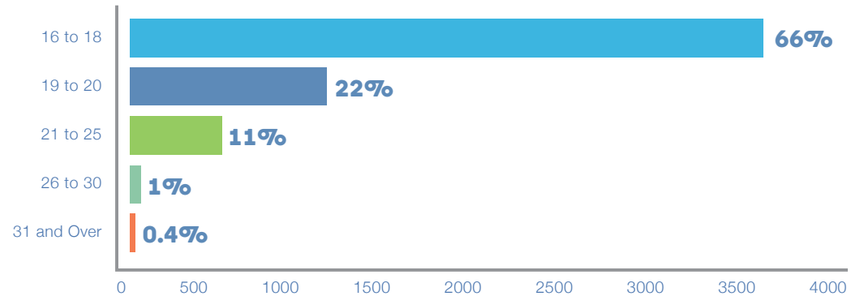


n=5826

In the 2013 study, the gender balance of respondents was close to matching that of all UCAS applicants in 2012 (UCAS: 56% Female and 44% Male v Study: 55% Female and 45% Male). Gender balance in the 2013 sample was good and very close to that of UCAS applications in 2012 (). The 2014 split was more polarised towards Females (59% v 41%).

Figure 6.1.2 Age

Please indicate the age range into which you fall



n=5786

The age distribution of all respondents (Figure 6.1.2 above) was heavily skewed towards those who were

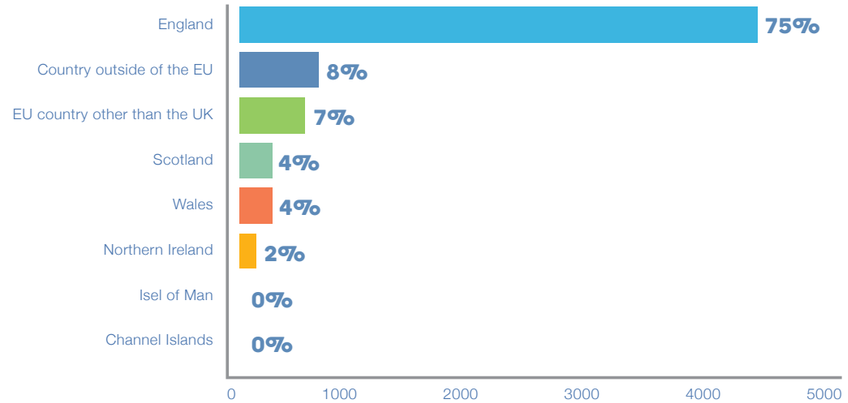
aged 16-18 (66%). Respondents from outside the UK (n= 869) were the oldest group as the 16-18 range represented 48%. Of these, EU respondents were older than Non-EU respondents (46% v 54% 16-18 years).

Amongst UK respondents the Non-'WP' group was the youngest (76% 16 – 18 years) whilst 67% of UK 'WP' respondents were 16 – 18 years old.

Respondents' country of domicile was heavily skewed towards England.

Figure 6.1.3 Country of Domicile

Please indicate where you live



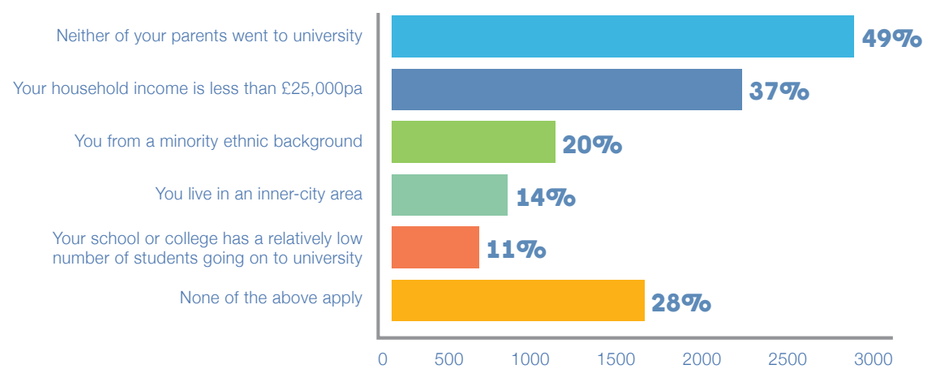
n=5826

Respondents were asked to identify which, if any, of a range of factors applied to them in an attempt to gauge the extent to which they might be regarded as being eligible for 'Widening Access' activities or support.

The most frequent factor was that neither of the respondent's parents studied at university (49%). Only 28% indicated that none of the factors applied to them. The results are shown in the following figure.

Figure 6.1.5 Relevance of 'Widening Access' Characteristics

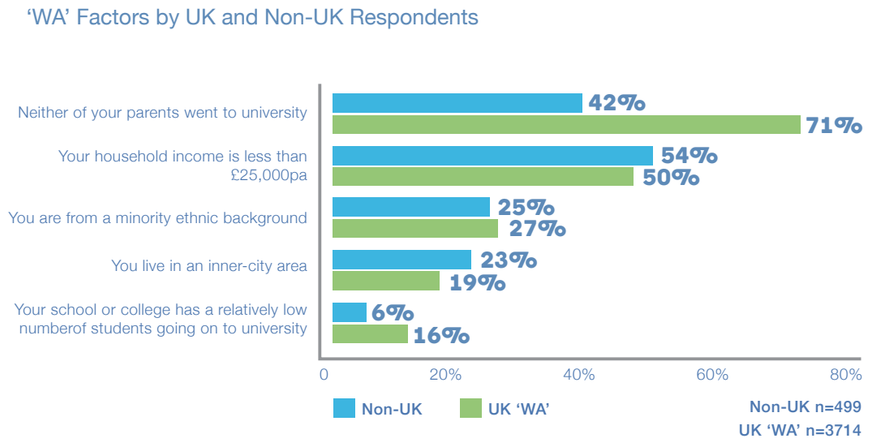
Which of the following factors apply to you?



n=5826

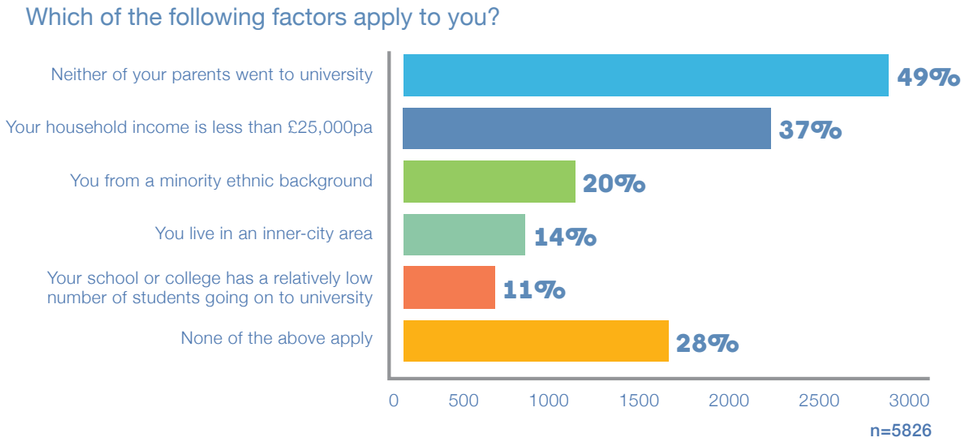
The 'all-respondent' picture in Figure 6.1.4 masks a number of significant differences between UK and non-UK respondents. The segmented view is shown below.

Figure 6.1.6 'WA' Factors by UK and Non-UK Respondents



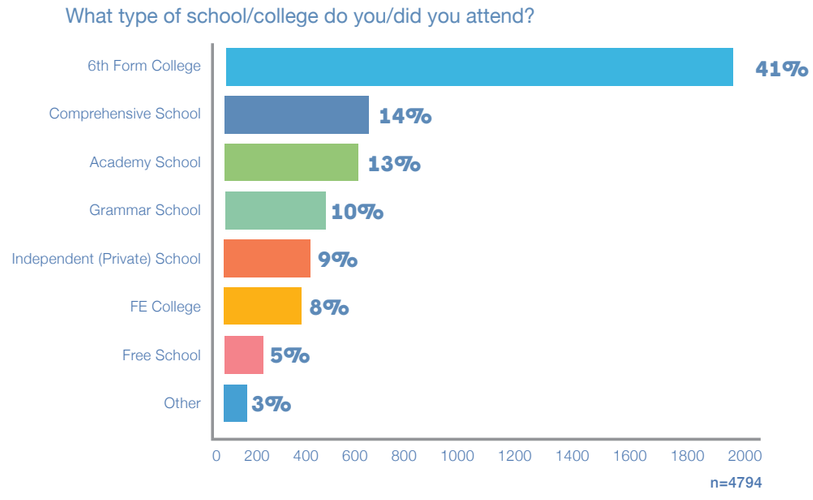
The regional distribution of respondents across England was as follows:

Figure 6.1.5 Regional Distribution of Sample Vs UCAS Applicants 2013



Representation of the South East region was slightly high (18%) compared to UCAS (13%). There was an underrepresentation of Greater London and the North West, Yorkshire & Humberside, Wales and the North East were exactly the same. The South West and West Midlands were slightly overrepresented and other regions were underrepresented.

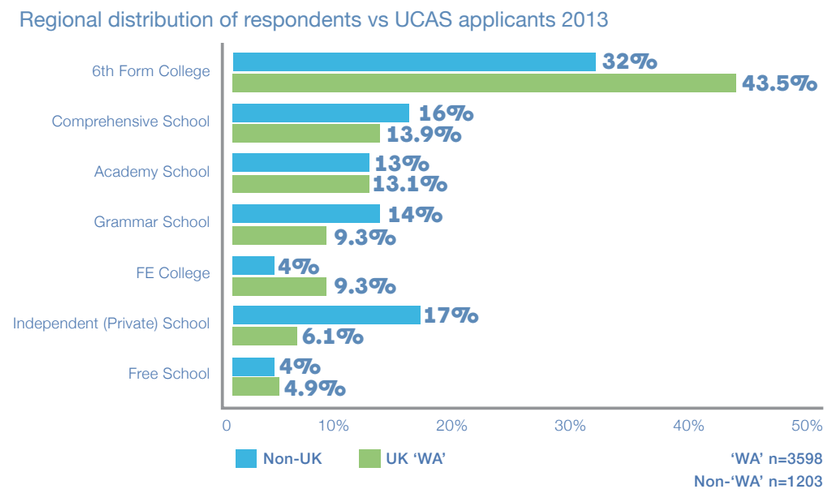
Figure 6.1.4 Institution Type



Differences in the type of institution attended were identified between those UK respondents that indicated that one of the 'Widening Participation' criteria applied to them (i.e. Neither parent went to university; Household income under £25,000; Attended an institution with relatively low university progression; Inner city domicile or Ethnic minority background) and those that did not.

The following figure shows the institutions with significant differences identified between all institutions with the exception of Comprehensive Schools and Free Schools.

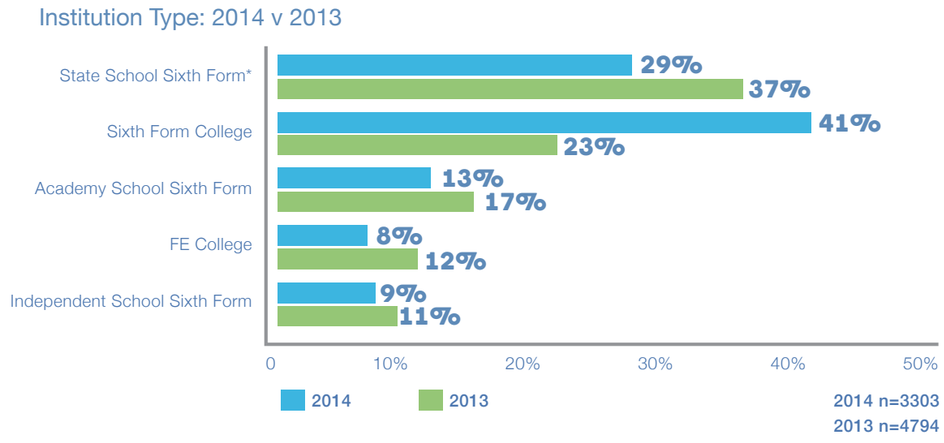
Figure 6.1.5 Institution Type: 'WA' respondents V Non-'WA'



The main point from this figure is the significant difference between the proportions of WA and Non-WA respondents that attended Independent schools. Differences were also present on 6th form college, Grammar schools and FE colleges. Although it is not possible to confirm the 'WA credentials' of those respondents that indicated at least one of the criteria presented was relevant to them, this data suggests there is some WA 'authenticity' in the group, as defined in this study.

The type of institution at which respondents had studied featured one significant change in 2014 compared with 2013 (Figure 6.1.6 below). Those studying at sixth form colleges increased from 22% in 2013 to 42% in 2014. The main movement of respondents was from state school 6th forms (37% v 27%).

Figure 6.1.6 Institution Type: 2014 v 2013



*In 2014 this category was subdivded into Comprehensive, Grammer and Free Schools

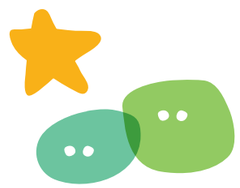
Respondents intending to progress to university were asked to identify the subject they wished to study. As some respondents had made their applications and others won't do so until 2015 this list is a combination of some firm and some less-firm aspirations. The leading subjects were:

i.	Medicine	8.4%
ii.	Engineering	6.9%
iii.	Psychology	5.1%
iv.	English	4.7%
v.	Law	4.2%
vi.	History	3.8%
vii.	Computer Science	3.7%
viii.	Economics	3.4%
ix.	Management	3.3%
x.	Mathematics	3.0%
xi.	Physics	2.9%
xii.	Business	2.8%

The leading universities identified as the intended study destinations of respondents were as follows:

i.	Cambridge	5.6%
ii.	University College London	4.4%
iii.	University of Manchester	2.3%
iv.	University of Birmingham	2.2%
v.	University of Nottingham	1.8%
vi.	University of Leeds	1.6%
vii.	University of Sheffield	1.4%
viii.	Oxford University	1.3%
ix.	University of Edinburgh	1.1%
x.	University of Bath	1.1%

The point made, above, in relation to intended subjects of study applies to intended study destination: as some respondents had made their applications and others won't do so until 2015 this list is a combination of some firm and some less-firm aspirations.



Thank you to **Chris Taylor**
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