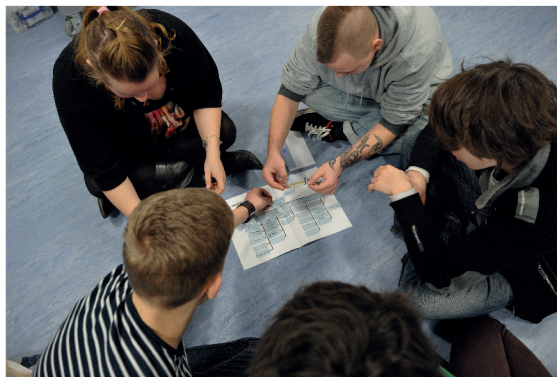




Q1.



The Student Room

2016

Conversion Report



Introduction

The Student Room's 2016 Conversion Report uncovers who and what influences students when making their all-important firm and insurance choices. Delving into what students really think about the current university offerings and communications, the report explores how students reach their decision. It reveals the best practise marketing tactics for effectively converting students at all stages of their decision-making journey.

Who we asked

We dipped into the pool of the world's largest online student community at The Student Room to survey 3,230 UK students aged 17-18 about how they decide which university offers to accept as firm or insurance choices.

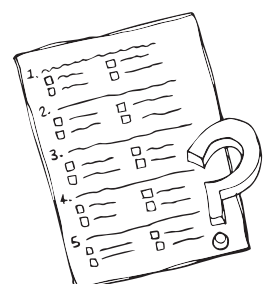
What we asked

We wanted to find out what it is that makes students choose between one university offer or another.

Our findings offer insights into the conversion triggers that affect which universities are able to win the hearts (and minds) of the next generation of students.

They offer you the opportunity to discover:

- How students feel about unconditional offers
- What the main influences are on their firm and insurance choices
- What sources of information they use to make up their mind
- How satisfied students are with the way that universities communicate with them



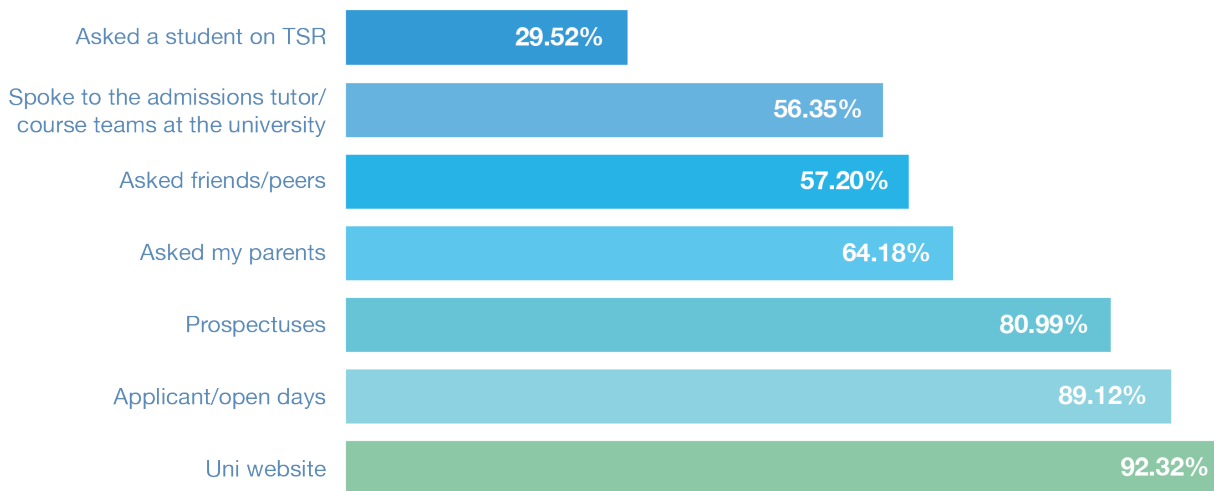


How do students research their university choices?

We wanted to find out what sources of information students turn to when they decide on which universities to apply to.

The most used source of information was the university website but it is also interesting to note how collectively important word of mouth sources are too (from other students, parents and friends).

When choosing your firm and insurance universities which of these did you use? (Multiple Choice)



N= 2,694





Hannah Morrish, education community manager at The Student Room says

“When we asked young people what they wanted from The Student Room a little over a year ago, they asked us to introduce a university course search which would not only help them to connect with current students but also fellow applicants. They also saw us as a community that could facilitate and host real-time and authentic course reviews from students, likening us to the university equivalent of Trip Advisor. Although they value prospectuses and open days, students now want to integrate student reviews of courses and university life into not only their research, but to also use when making their choices and decisions.

Fast forward three months later and we’d received over 15,000 reviews in four weeks from our university community. We’ve worked with them to deliver reviews to applicants which give information on the course, university, location, accommodation and lastly a settling in rating and these reviews are now integrated into our university forums and our new course search tool UniMatch. We’ll be continuing to work with our community and university partners to ensure we source and provide genuine, high quality reviews for future generations of applicants to help them to make the right decisions.”

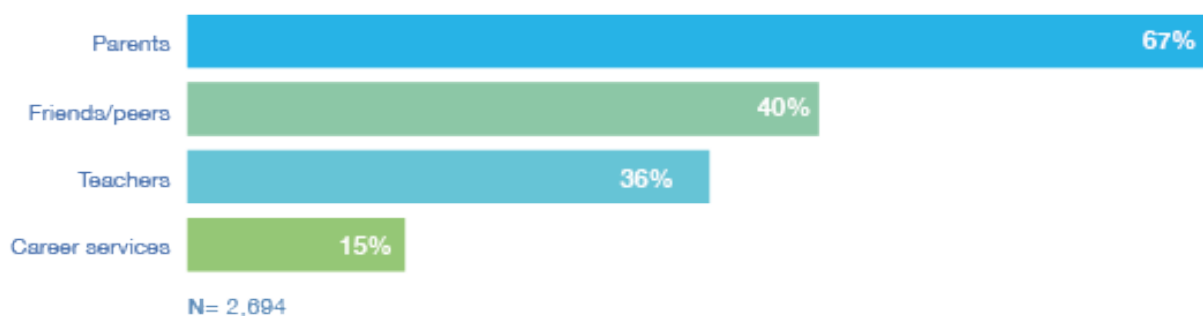
Who are students influenced by when making their university choices?

We also wanted to delve into who had the most influence on students when making their decision on which university offers to firm or insure.

67% of students stated that their parents were the most influential when choosing their firm and insurance choices, rating them as their first or second biggest influence.

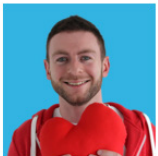
Second after parents were friends and peers with 40% of students rating them their first or second biggest influence. The results show that the people closest to them – and therefore the opinions they hold about universities – have the most influence over prospective students.

Who had the most influence on you when choosing your firm and insurance choices?





Reducing dropout rates – smart conversion



Jack Wallington is The Student Room's community director. He has been working at the Student Room for more than four years and has seen hundreds of thousands of applicants go through the decision-making journey. Here he presents his expert advice on how you can be smart when converting students and reducing application dropout rates.

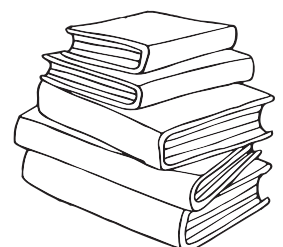
"In recent years we've seen that year 13 students are still busy forming new opinions about each of their preferred universities during the exam season and summer break, despite having already made their firm and insurance choices.

"Through The Student Room, their discussions and findings are being keenly read by next year's applicants in year 12 who are researching their own options and correct uni matches.

"This is a key period in the year when year 13s are most informed and year 12s are about to go into magpie-mode, picking and choosing nuggets of info online from their peers.

"Use The Student Room to make the most of these important months to keep reassuring your applicants that they made the right choice. Address concerns head-on now so they don't rear their head after students have started."

1. Read what YR13s are saying about you, your courses, your communications and what they're saying about others too. Most importantly, look for conversations between YR13s and YR12s. Do they recommend you? What did they like? What didn't they like? Is there one concern that a number of students had?
2. Adapt communications on The Student Room to address any concerns that have come up during this year's application cycle. It's not too late to address perception issues through messaging and threads on the site.
3. Share conversations with other departments at your uni. If a number of applicants raise the same issue or concern about a course, accommodation etc, it's worth trying to address this before they start in September/October.





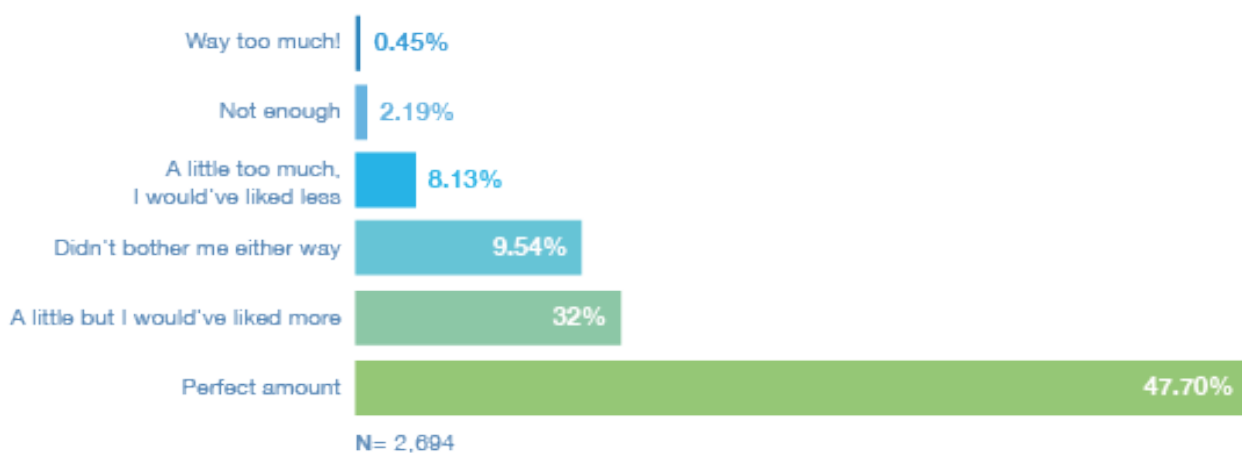
How well are universities communicating with students?

While it is clear that the single most important factor in determining students' perceptions of universities is the open day, followed by information contained on the website or in the prospectus, there is still a considerable amount of weight placed on the experience of communicating with universities.

We asked students to rate their experience of this communication.

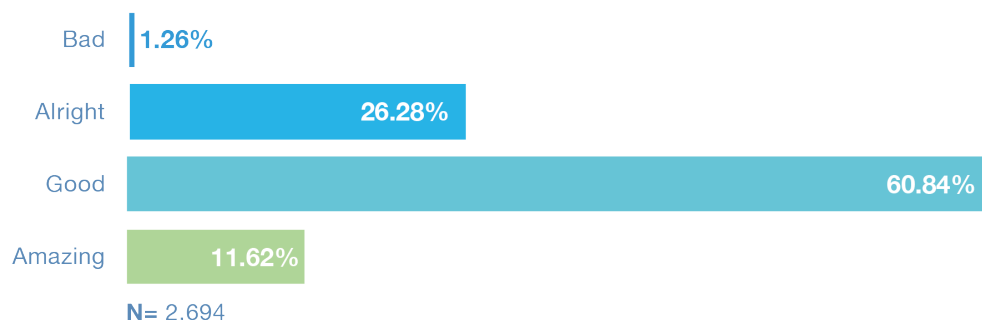
Nearly half of all students (48%) felt the communication they had received was perfect in terms of the amount of information received. However, there is still a third (32%) who felt they were not getting enough information to base an informed decision on.

How would you rate the amount of communication you've had from universities during your application process?



In terms of satisfaction with the quality of information received, 72% felt this to be of good (or even amazing) quality but just over a quarter (28%) felt it was below this.

How would you rate the quality of communication you've had from the university during the application process?



Story telling – students are wanting more.



Ed Layt, education marketing strategist from SMRS, has more than 11 years' experience in HE and has worked with universities across the UK helping them build innovative and effective marketing solutions.

Here he presents his key insights around how students have more of an appetite than you think on universities telling their story.

“For me, a key takeaway from this timely piece of research is the continued importance of experiential and story-telling – open days, current student views and direct communication with institutions - yet almost a third of applicants are left wanting more...

“There is a real opportunity for institutions to get their content marketing in order, provide value to their applicants and meet this demand. At SMRS we are increasingly working with clients to do exactly this, by developing their content strategies to maximise the impact of content outputs, based on audience requirements, to get it right first time.

“It's also important to consider the wider impact of conversion activity – the objective over the next few weeks is to maximise firm acceptances, but inevitably a proportion of your applicants won't do that, instead choosing competitor institutions.

“However, the contact you have now has the potential to leave a lasting impression, something that come Clearing could mean the difference between them re-considering or rejecting you! UCAS research showed last year that 42% of placed Clearing applicants only contacted one institution – so previous awareness and engagement with you (i.e. around this conversion period) is bound to feature in their decision-making.

“Therefore, targeted and value-driven conversion communications are not only crucial to the success of your conversion strategy, but potentially also your Clearing strategy.”





Where are universities going wrong in their communication?

From the responses we received a clear picture emerges of exactly where communication from universities can go wrong. The following five themes cropped up time and time again and have been illustrated with representative quotes direct from students.

Lack of personalisation

- “Would like to receive more to feel like a part of the university already”
- “Some of the communication was vague/impersonal”
- “It wasn’t personal or as helpful as I would have thought. It was just straight to the point about my offer and most of the help/service came from the UCAS website itself”
- “Very impersonal and general”

Irrelevancy

- “Not all of it was necessary, didn’t need huge amounts of communication- it was just brochures etc
- “Not all of the information I was sent seemed very relevant to my application and some universities repeatedly sent me emails saying almost exactly the same things”
- “I felt like some of it was just spam!”
- “Kept sending me thank you emails for applying to a course I didn’t apply for”
- “Generic and often aimed at other campuses etc”
- “A lot of it wasn’t helpful, such as just random info about the uni, I wanted to know about the unis strength in my department



Response times

- “Waited a long time for updates from the university”
- “Not often enough and slow responses”
- “Decision process is too long and worrying with no updates of process”
- “Whenever I called the uni they just didn’t pick up. Replying to my emails took forever”

Lack of structured communication

- “They tried to give information in small doses which was annoying because in order to compare everything I needed all the information in one place”
- “Didn’t give enough detailed information”

Means of communication

- I didn’t like unis insisting I used the portal, I would rather they told me news direct
- “I felt the “applicant portal” which most unis communicate through just wasn’t enough - they could have directly emailed or at least set up email notifications to the portal”





Communicating excellence – it’s all about getting the tone right



Hannah Morrish, education community manager at The Student Room, is talking to our community day-in day-out (even on Saturdays!) and really understands how students today form opinions on what good communication looks like.

Here she shares her expert advice on the best ways of communicating with applicants through the conversion period.

Becoming less corporate and more conversational

“Online communication can be tricky for universities because you have to strike a balance between the formal on-brand voice of the university and, without wanting to sound crass, being down with the kids.

“Rapport is the key element of persuasion – it is the art of getting another person on your side. If someone likes you, or feels they are like you, they will unconsciously try to agree with you.

“So if you want to build real rapport online with prospective applicants it’s time to become a chameleon, cleverly adapting your tone of voice and the vocabulary and even mirroring the same use of emojis to ensure you keep the student’s interest.

“Ideally, you’ll also want a question to become a conversation, because this will make you memorable. Connect with them by asking them open questions about what they’d like from their university experience and subtly weave in your own experiences of applying to uni.

“Sharing your own personal experience and vulnerabilities from that time resonates with the applicant and helps them to feel understood and assured which is vital for rapport building.”

Using your current student ambassadors

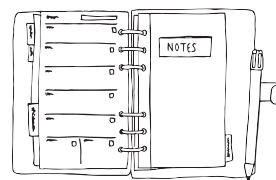
“It’s in our human nature to want to find people who are like us. Students who meet other like-minded current students on an open day are far more likely to feel more at home on campus. On a subconscious level, they’ve met their new tribe. The more content and happy they feel, the more likely they are to apply and accept your offer.

“The same goes for online. With your current students sharing their experiences of their



course and university lifestyle, this provides applicants with information and authentic content.

“Although students will nearly always refer to league tables and other formal documentation, we know that knowledge gathering from their peers is a vital prerequisite to them making a decision.



“Asking your student ambassadors to share genuine, truthful experiences is one way to fulfil this need, and conversation is also key.

“Don’t get your students to link off to their uni blogs and shut down the conversation, make sure they keep it flowing, the more personal the connection the more likely the applicant will think favourably of your university.”

Getting the tone right

“When having a conversation in person, it’s easy to build rapport by mirroring tone of voice, the pace of the conversation and body language.

“When online, the words you use in your responses can suggest that you understand them. Make sure you pay attention to the words and phrases they use and consider how you can you integrate the same words in to your response.

“Notice whether they have they inserted smiley icons or emojis at their end of their sentences to accentuate their message. Review how they have used punctuation in their communication and consider what this may tell you about how they are feeling as they have written this.



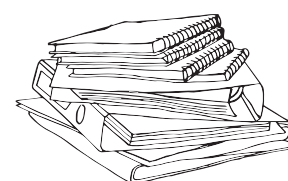
“Does the use of an exclamation mark suggest to you that they are excited or maybe frantic? If it’s excitement because they’ve just received an offer, share their excitement and congratulate them, progressing the conversation by asking them if they need any help or asking if they have visited the campus. If they have, what did they love most about it? If you detect they’re frantic, perhaps everyone else has received an offer and they haven’t heard a thing. Try to calm them by suggesting why this is and offer to take the conversation offline if you think that might help soothe the situation.”

Timing is key

“Fast response times are vital for two reasons. Firstly, this generation have grown up with real-time reactions to their social media posts. Secondly, if you don’t reply quickly, it’s likely one of your competitors will.

“Monitoring your social media out of hours is becoming an essential. Students don’t work within the timeframe of 9-5, especially when they’re trying to balance their studies with their application.

“Make sure there is cover across the evenings and weekends, especially during core times of the cycle to respond to any questions from applicants.”



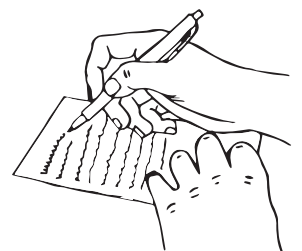
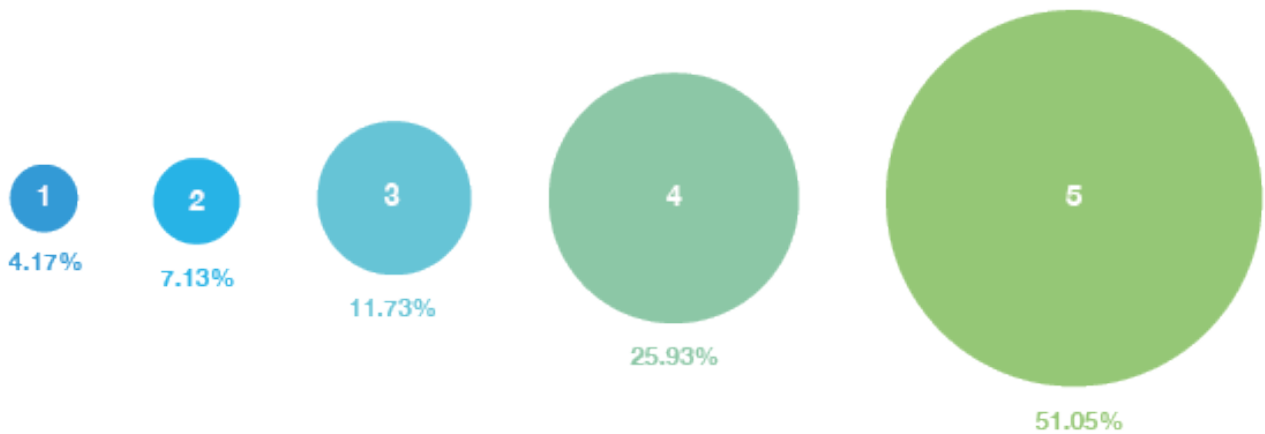


How do students feel about offers?

The vast majority (80%) of students are applying to at least five universities. In fact, less than 5% of students applied to fewer than three institutions.

In terms of offers received, more than half (51%) had received offers from five or more universities (as at 4th April 2016).

How many offers have you had?



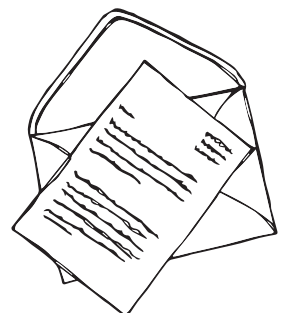


How do students feel about unconditional offers?

How do students feel about receiving an unconditional offer and will it sway them in deciding on their firm or insurance choices? We took a closer look at how unconditional offers may, or may not, influence students' decisions.

Nearly a third (30%) of students had received at least one unconditional offer.

Did you receive any unconditional offers?



Unconditional offers – perceptions

We found that the majority of those who had received an unconditional offer felt that this was due to strong predicted grades.

Unconditional offers can trigger a warm glow and positive response from students. They are seen as an endorsement of their abilities as can be seen from the following reasons students gave for receiving an unconditional offer from universities:

“I have a broad set of skills that covers academic and creative fields. I have taken part in many different youth programs while growing up and always look for new opportunities which I emphasised in my personal statement”

“My predicted grades combined with my references”

“High academic performance”

“Personal statement and enthusiasm”

“I interview well. And my personal statement was original”

We did find a small minority of students who viewed unconditional offers negatively and saw them as reflecting poorly on the university itself rather than positively on themselves.

Here are some representative comments from these students:

“Everyone received one from that uni”

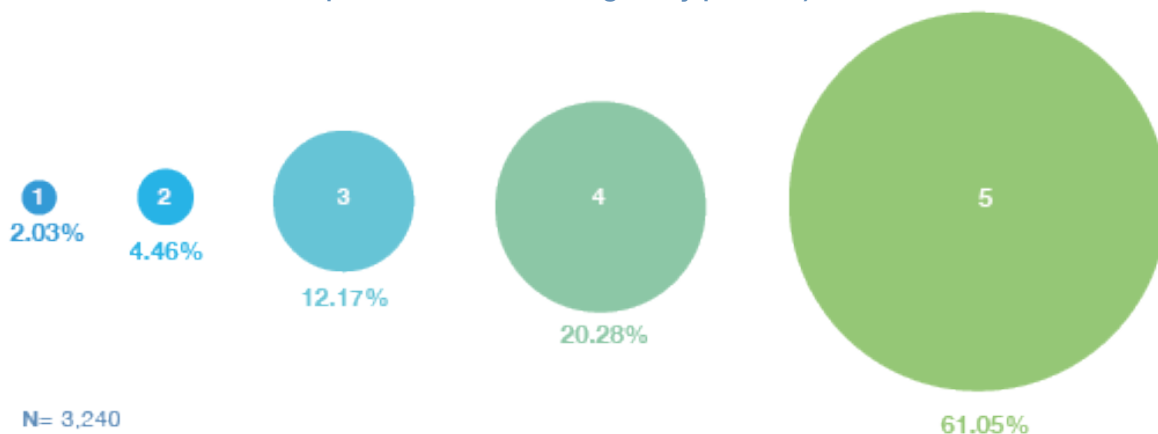
“Course isn’t well attended”

“Scottish universities are easy to get in to”

“Because I am one out of a few applying to that course”

“Not a reputable Uni”

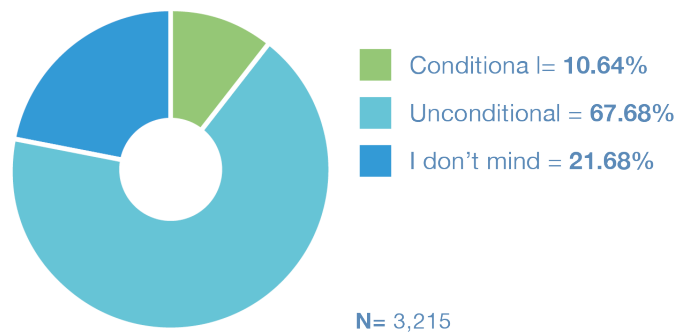
On a scale of 1-5 how positive did you feel about getting an unconditional offer? (1 being not positive at all - 5 being really positive)



Overall student sentiment regarding unconditional offers

The vast majority of students (68%) would prefer to receive an unconditional offer to study at a university. As shown above, there is a great deal of positive sentiment surrounding them.

Would you prefer to get conditional or unconditional offers?

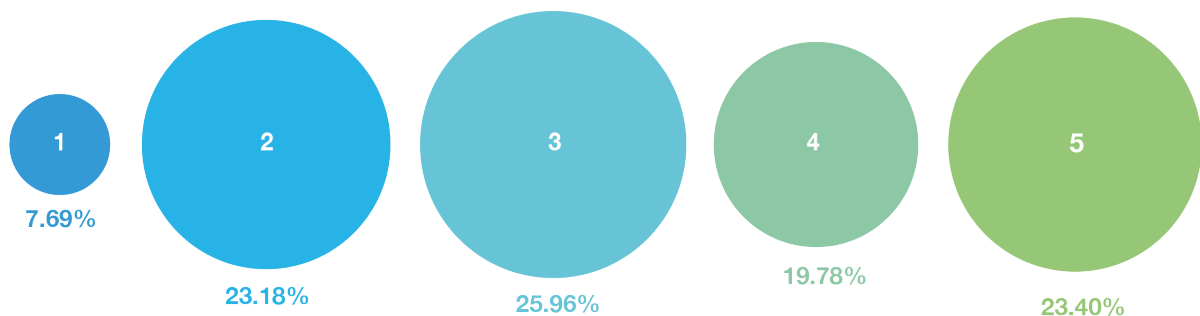


Unconditional offers – pressures

Some students felt pressure to accept unconditional offers that were not from their first choice. A number of students (31%) told us they felt pressure to accept the offer as those who stated they felt no or little pressure at all (43%). Whether this pressure is felt negatively or as a positive deciding factor can be determined by looking at student sentiment towards unconditional offers.

So where does this pressure come from? By looking at discussions posted on The Student Room forums we can see that some students suffer a crisis of confidence in the run-up to exams, especially if they're struggling with revision. They can feel that an unconditional offer may be the safer option with the uncertainty of exams looming.

How much pressure do you feel to accept an unconditional offer if it's not from your first choice? (1 being a lot of pressure - 5 being no pressure at all)



Hannah Morrish, education community manager at The Student Room, says

“Students want to feel more valued by universities. Unconditional offers are one way to achieve this but we have seen a minority of students still hold some negative sentiment surrounding these. This can be overcome by creating more personalised communications stating why you have offered them an unconditional. By mentioning their excellent personal statement, interview performance or predicted grades you can ensure you gain an overall acceptance advantage and keep your brand perception positive.”

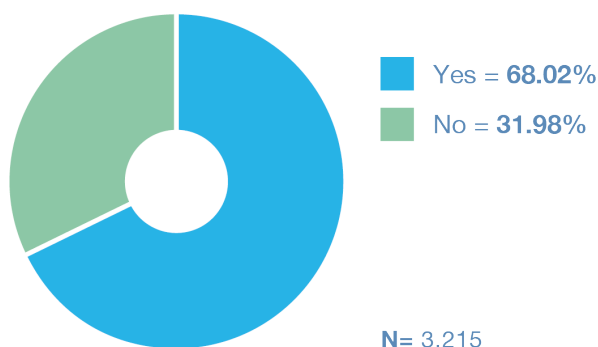
“Universities may want to consider emphasising the importance of still achieving predicted grades in exams to unconditional offers holders. They can do this by explaining how it will benefit them in the future in terms of employability. From the universities’ point of view they will not want to see acceptance levels dropping as a result of making unconditional offers as this could be detrimental to their reputation.”



How students decide on their firm and insurance choices

As of 4th April 2016 most students (68%) have made a decision on their firm and insurance choices based on offers already received.

Have you confirmed your firm and insurance choices yet?



We explored the factors influencing students' decisions when making their firm and insurance choices.

The overall ratings received placed the following factors as critical in affecting the choices that students make:

- Experience on the open day
- The university's reputation/image
- University rankings
- University lifestyle

Influence rating	Factor	Weighted average
1st	Experience at an open day	3.21
2nd	The university's reputation/image	4.57
3rd	University rankings	4.70
4th	University lifestyle	5.52
5th	Advice from current students	6.08
6th	Location (eg. how far from your family home)	3.11
7th	Information found online	6.46
9th	Unconditional offers	6.92
9th	Experience when communicating with the uni (customer service)	7.32
10th	Communication you had from the uni	7.45
11th	How the experience of applying to uni made you feel	7.66

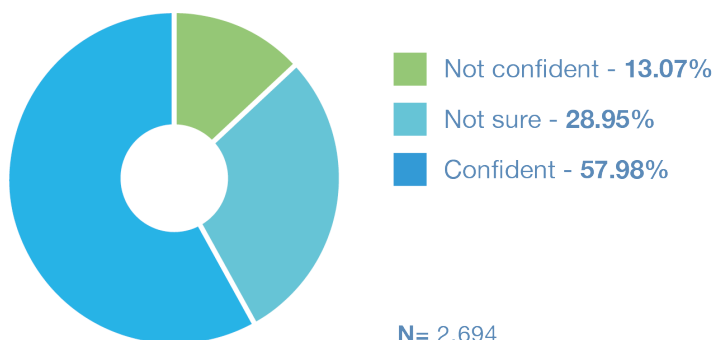
*1 was ranked most important, 11 was ranked least important

A student's experience at the open day is far more influential than any other factor. This is rated as being 54% more influential than an unconditional offer, 50% more influential than information found online and 32% more important than the university's official rankings and unofficial reputation.

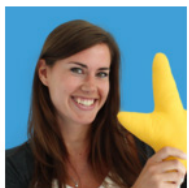
Student confidence in their choices

Having chosen their universities, most students (58%) feel confident that they will get a place at their preferred university. Just over one in ten (13%) do not feel confident at all in their chances of getting the place they have opted for.

How confident are you about getting into your chosen university?



Be personable, be visible, achieve campaign success.



Emily Gardener, our top senior account manager, has worked at The Student Room for more than three years. She works closely with a huge range of different universities in the UK, helping them develop strategic, successful and engaging student recruitment campaigns on The Student Room. Here she offers her advice on what makes a winning campaign when converting students.

“At this time of year, there is a great opportunity to connect with your offer holders online, positioning your university as welcoming and supportive, and re-affirming your brand. Students flock to our university forums to gain advice and reassurance on their decision, and meet other people going to the universities they have shortlisted.

“Be visible. There is enormous potential to engage using your official rep, and also to reinforce your brand by owning your forum. 30% of students are yet to make their firm choice; there is still time to influence those wavering. If you are the one university they applied to with a strong branding presence, or who takes the time to communicate directly in their channels (such as on TSR or Get Revising, where between April and June we see more than 6 million page views from students cramming for exams) you will stand out from the crowd.

“Students are increasingly savvy; by this stage they’ve done their research, they know all the stats. The best way to appeal is to think holistically – help students imagine themselves at your university, show them what else they will get from choosing to study with you. What is unique about your area? Is the location vibrant? What clubs and sporting activities do you offer? Are there any quirky local traditions? With all the pressures of imminent exams, it is important to display the non-academic side and emphasise the fun things about university.

“Be personable, it is natural for students to have doubts at this time of year; in fact, recent research we conducted showed that 30.33%* of students are not sure on their university choices. Many students worry whether they are ready to leave home and step up into university life, it can be daunting and some advertising can exacerbate these concerns. Positioning your university as welcoming and supportive to make students feel comfortable and reassured can go a long way.

“Finally, choose your language carefully. Research we have conducted shows that inclusive language such as ‘us’ and ‘we’ resonates best with students. It makes them already feel part of your university community.”



* TSR Poll of 1,431 students



About The Student Room

The Student Room is the place students connect for advice and information on education, career and lifestyle choices. And the place for universities to connect, engage and convert students.

75% of UK students aged 14-24 visited The Student Room and we're home to more than 1.8 million members, making TSR the largest student community in the world.

The Student Room provides a powerful range of services allowing education providers to engage this market effectively – targeting the right audience in unique ways at exactly the right point in the decision making process.

Want to tell others?

If you'd like a member of The Student Room or SMRS to come and present this report to others in your institution, please get in touch;



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