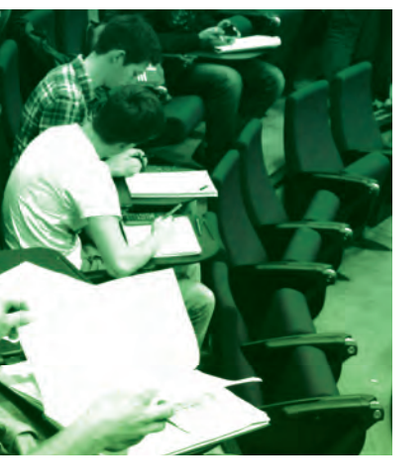
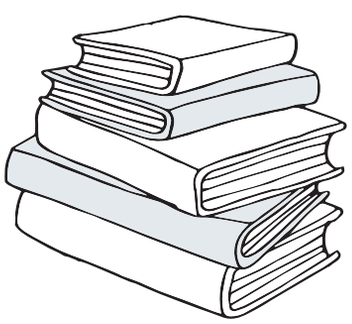
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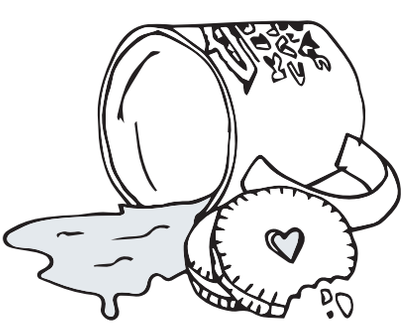












The Student Room

Foreword

Welcome to the fourth annual Options report, the **biggest** report in The Student Room's history. Every year we talk to thousands of UK students to get a unique insight into their decision-making journey. This year we surveyed over **10,000** students aged 16+ on their perceptions of the options available to them after school or college.

This year we added in questions we've never asked before around stress, aspirations and well-being because, as we know, students' lives are getting more complicated. With fees going up, new options becoming available and ever-increasing exam pressure all adding to overall stress levels.

A key theme of 2016 is the growing awareness of university alternatives, such as apprenticeships. Apprenticeships are not the poor relation of a degree and increasingly students are realising that they can study alongside their work and come away with the equivalent of a bachelor's or even a master's degree whilst gaining valuable work skills at the same time. In addition, they avoid the cost of university by following this route.

However, our data showed that 40% of students believe apprenticeships are mainly for men even though the reality is a pretty even split, so there is plenty of work to be done in improving perceptions and increasing awareness of this valuable alternative.

Financial concerns are still on students' minds, with 56% revealing the risk of getting into debt as a key factor for not going to university. Almost three quarters have said earning money is the biggest motivation for getting a job straight away and giving university a miss altogether. It is a situation which is likely to become more acute with the scrapping of the maintenance grant and the possibility of higher tuition fees in the future.

Our well-being data has also revealed differences in confidence levels between male and female students, with females in particular lacking confidence in achieving the career they want. As in previous years, the message is clear: we as the education sector, including schools and colleges, should do more to support our young people and to make sure they get the right advice.



Chris Newson

Chief Executive Officer

The Student Room



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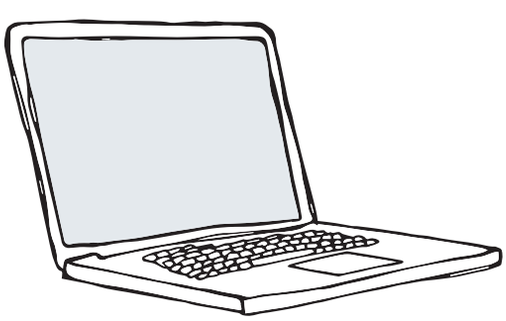
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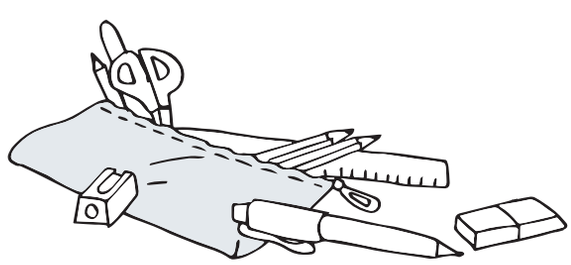
Executive Summary

This report represents insights from a survey of school and college leavers as well as those already at university.

The survey, the largest of its kind ever run by TSR, looked at school and college leavers' motivations, the usefulness of information to support the decision-making journey, the impact of university tuition fees and cost of living, and the perceptions of apprenticeships. It also considered students' well-being, their access to funding options and the possibility of studying abroad.

More than 10,000 students were recruited for the survey and 8,751 gave qualifying responses.[1] Under 16s and non-UK-domiciled students were excluded from the survey, which took place between 1st June and 13th June 2016.

- University remains the top pathway option for the majority of our student participants in Years 11, 12, and 13 with 82% stating they would attend university straight away.
- Those going to university are more confident their chosen pathway will help them secure a job (7.2/10) compared to those going straight into employment (6.3/10).
- BTEC students were twice as likely to opt for an apprenticeship over university as their next pathway option.
- 64% of students at university think it should be easier to switch between university courses compared to 42% of prospective students.
- University open days continue to be the most important decision-making factor, with 76% of Year 13 students saying they found them very useful. Open days were useful both with informing decisions on making the top five university choices (35%) and making firm and insurance decisions (21%).
- Improved long-term prospects remain the key motivation for going to university, with interest in the chosen subject coming second and gaining independence from home third. This follows the same pattern as previous reports.
- Satisfaction at university continues to fall year on year, with overall university satisfaction falling from 7.7/10 in 2014 to 6.9/10 in 2016.
- Student debt remains a worry for pre-university students. 53% cited significant levels of concern and 7% said that it could put them off university.
- Avoiding student debt was the key motivation for not going to university, with 56% of those asked citing it as the main reason not to attend.
- There was a significantly large difference in perception about who studies apprenticeships. The reality is that a roughly equal split of men and women take up apprenticeships. However, our research showed that 40% of students thought that apprenticeships were taken mainly by men compared to just 1% who thought they were taken mainly by women.
- Students were excited about the future and 67% felt being happy was the top motivating factor for them.
- Anxiety about the future was much higher in females than males. Only 14% of female respondents said they were very excited about the future compared to 26% of male respondents.
- Throughout the report reference is made to Year 11-13 academic years. Scottish and Northern Ireland equivalents were included in the original survey questions and where Year 11, 12, 13 is indicated, this would include Northern Ireland Years 12-14 and Scotland S4-S6.
- Due to the sheer scale of this survey we have not been able to include all of the graphs, tables and findings. This report represents the key findings regarding post-school options and we will disseminate further findings from the survey at later dates.



1- A full breakdown of demographic and other attributes of the sample can be found in appendix 1



Findings



Students' Pathway Options

Following completion of school or college, young people are faced with multiple options with regards to their next life decision. With the recent rise in tuition fees and the introduction of degree apprenticeships, The Student Room set out to investigate whether the popularity of each pathway open to young people had changed over time.

This section ranks post-key stage education options by popularity and examines the reasons why these pathways were chosen by school leavers.

University the top student pathway

Going to university and getting a degree is still the most popular option for our student participants. In fact, 82% said they would go straight to university following school, which is more than double the percentage of young people applying for higher education in the UK.

The figure was even higher for students studying the International Baccalaureate, with 90% saying that obtaining a degree was their immediate aim.

At 8%, 'taking a year out' was the next biggest option followed by 'I have not decided yet' (5%) and taking an apprenticeship (3%). While this percentage is small, it has increased each year from 1% in 2014 and 2% in 2015.



However, students taking BTECs, were less likely to opt for university, with 75% revealing that this was their intention. BTEC students were twice as likely to choose an apprenticeship over university (7%).

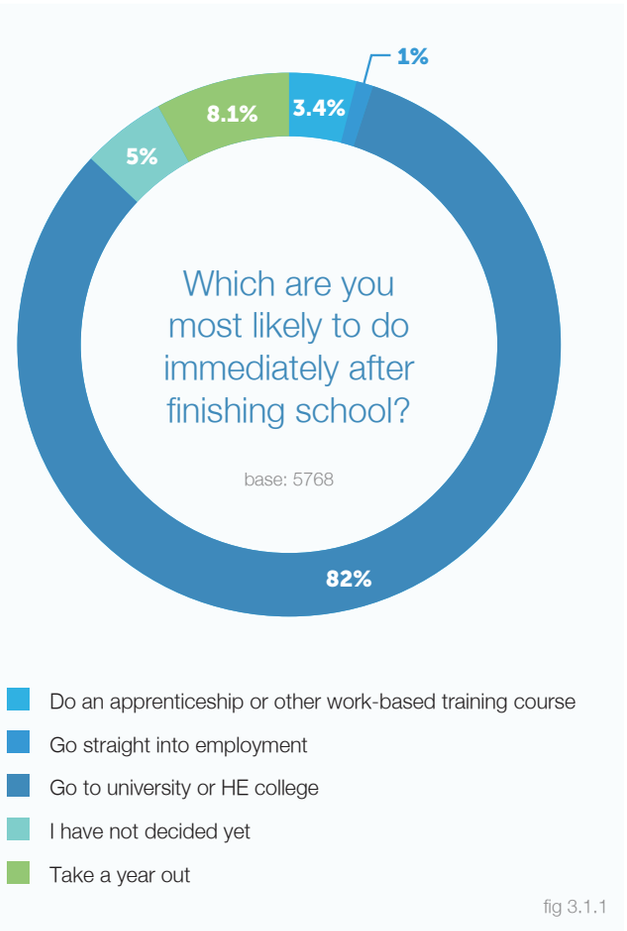


fig 3.1.1

Those decided on university and apprenticeship pathways are most confident in getting a job

School and college leavers heading for university or taking apprenticeships were more confident of getting the job they wanted than those going straight into employment or taking a gap year.

How confident are you that your chosen path will lead to a job?

Rank from 1 to 10 where 1 = No confidence and 10 = Total confidence. Average rank by pathway chosen:

University	Apprenticeship
7.2	7.0
Employment	**Year Out**
6.3	6.7

fig 3.1.2

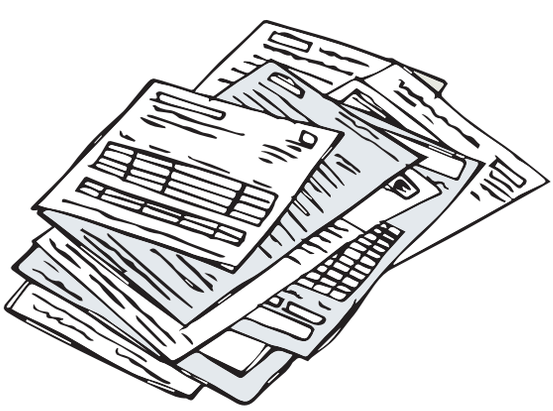
Women are more likely to base their pathway choice on entry requirements than men

More than a quarter of women undecided on their future (26%) said realistic university entry requirements were more likely to dictate their future choices compared to 19% of men. However, for both sexes, 42% said “doing what you enjoy” was the top factor in making their decision. A further 13% made their decision based on the potential it provided in terms of securing a job.

A quarter of students want to take a gap year to travel

Not everyone wanted to head to university straight from school. Of the 8% opting to take a year out, more than a quarter said it was in order to travel (26%). Just over a fifth considered securing work experience as their immediate aim, whilst another 15% wanted more time to decide what to do.

Once the year out finishes, the majority (83%) said they will then go on to a university course. 11% said they don’t know yet what they will do, 2% will go to employment and 2% said they will take an apprenticeship. Females taking a year out were more likely to say they will do a university course afterwards (85%) compared to males (79%). Males were more likely to say that they had not decided what they will do after their year out (13% compared to 9% of females).





Stepping Stones To University

This section explores the journey students take during the period leading up to university. It investigates the initial steps taken, how students research which university to attend and the sources of information used to make decisions.

Deciding what to study is the first major stepping stone

Students in Years 11-13 were asked to rank in chronological order the six major decisions they would make when considering university. Deciding on a course came top, with choosing a career direction typically ranked second or third. Consideration of university affordability was considered much later across all age groups.

University websites and open days rank top information sources

Over half of pre-university students (59%) went to an open day to help with their uni choice; 56% used the TSR website and 60% visited university websites. An overwhelming 83% said the TSR website was either very useful or somewhat useful when researching university options. 94% of Year 13 students felt open days were very (76%) or somewhat (18%) useful in deciding on a university. 35% used open days when deciding on their initial top five, 21% relied on them for their firm/insurance choices and 17% to decide what it is like to live there.

Which information source did you use when choosing your university?

filtered year 11-13, base 5942, multiple choice

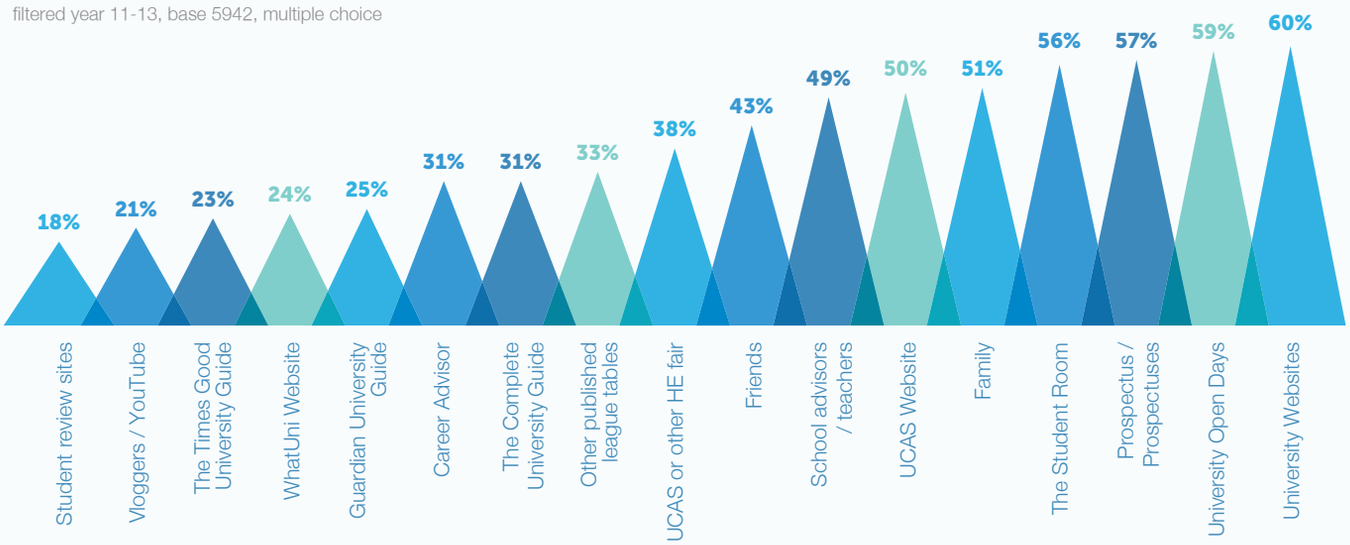


fig 3.2.1

Top Information sources when researching university

Here we focus on the top five information sources for researching university: open days, The Student Room website, university websites, prospectuses and the UCAS website. We have compared preferences between academic years in order to highlight changes in the use of resources from Year 11 to Year 13.

UCAS Website: Usefulness at a variety of stages

Year 11-13, base: <2,500

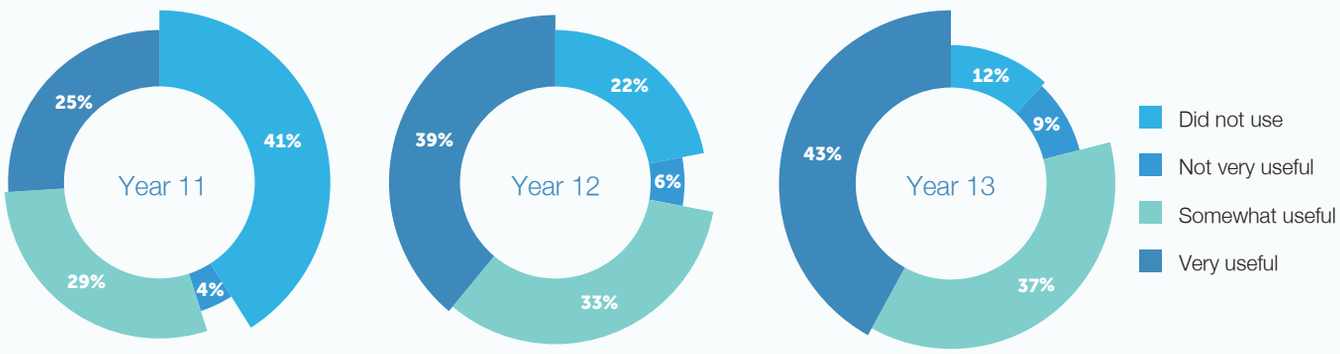


fig 3.2.2

The Student Room: Usefulness at a variety of stages

Year 11-13, base: <2,500

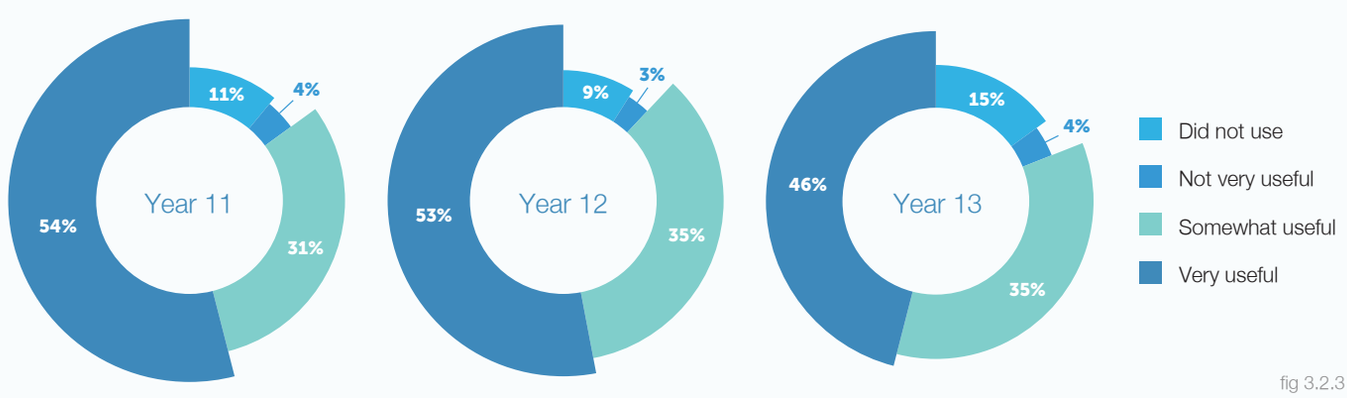


fig 3.2.3

Prospectus / Prospectuses: Usefulness at a variety of stages

Year 11-13, base: <2,500

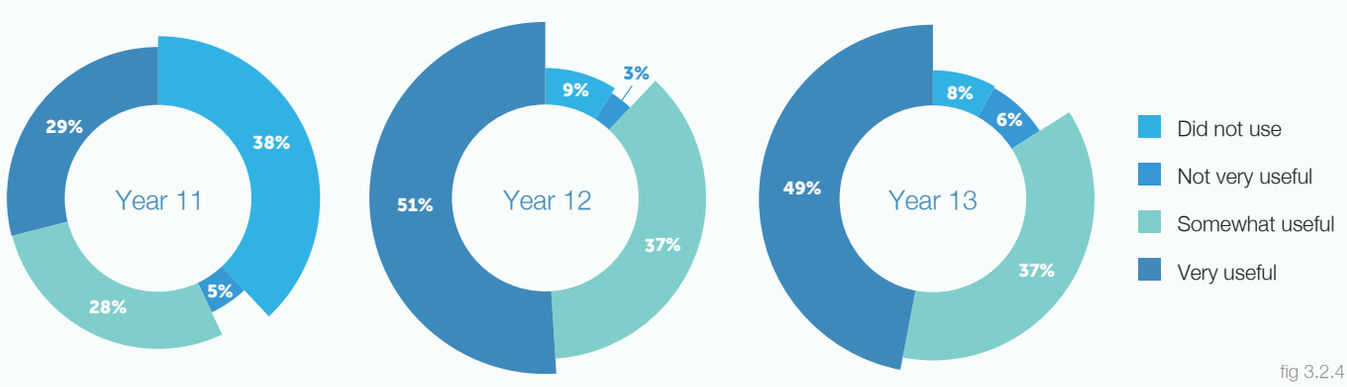


fig 3.2.4

University Open Days: Usefulness at a variety of stages

Year 11-13, base: <2,500

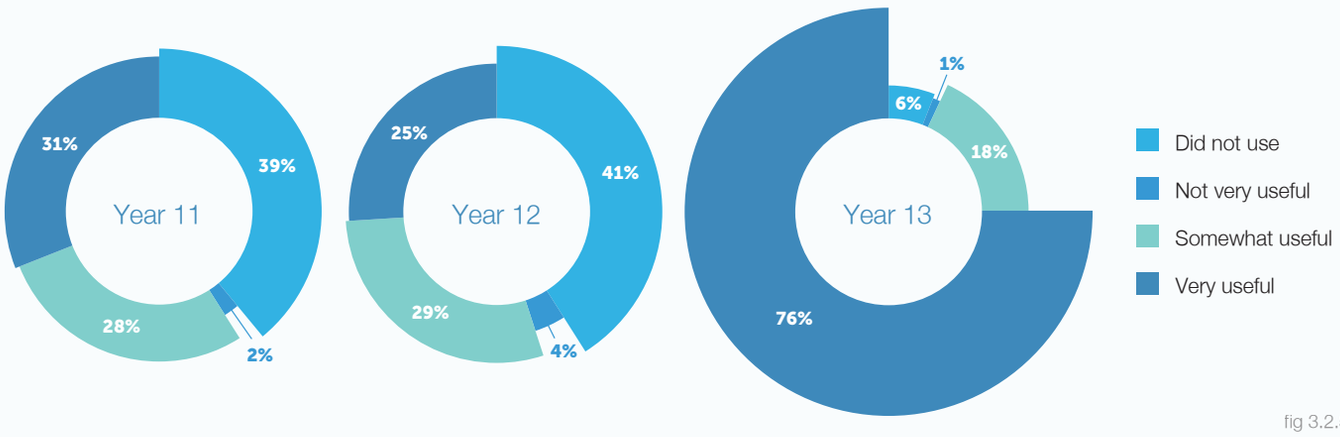


fig 3.2.5

University Websites: Usefulness at a variety of stages

Year 11-13, base: <2,500

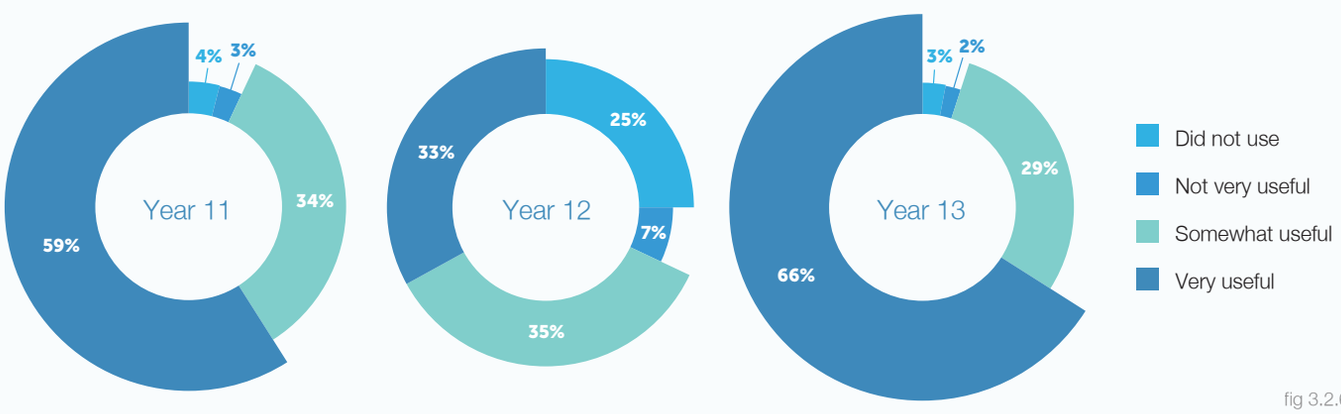


fig 3.2.6

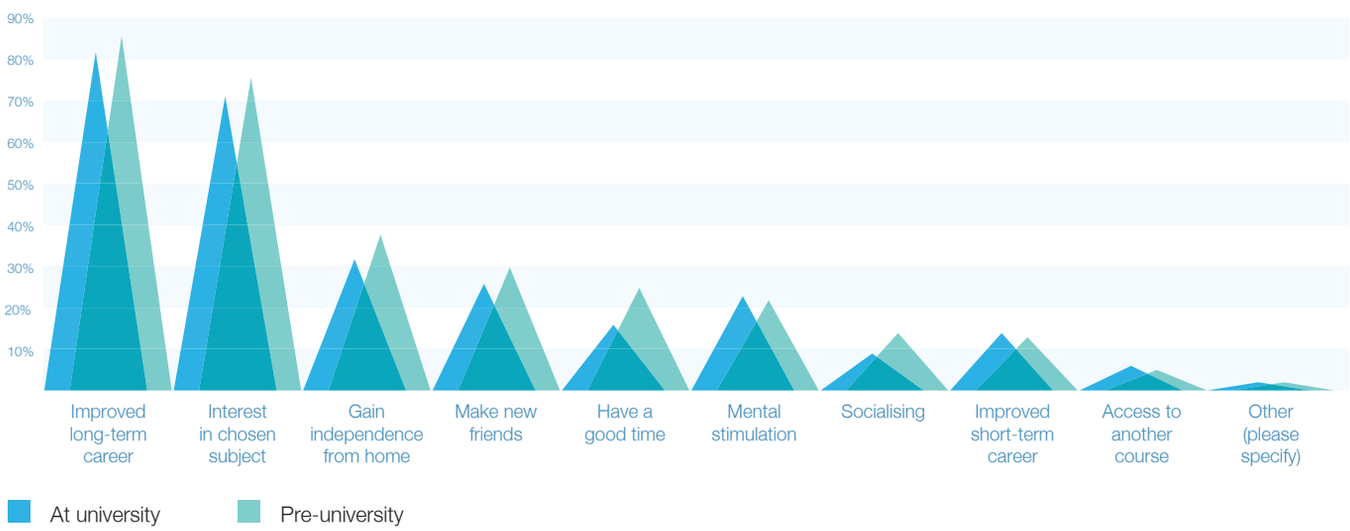


Students feel university will improve long-term career prospects

Both pre-university students and students currently at university state that they decided to go to university because of the perceived long-term career prospects (84% pre-university, 82% at university). Interest in a chosen field is the second most important reason (74% pre-university and 71% at university) with gaining a sense of independence as the third most important reason (38% pre-university and 32% at university).

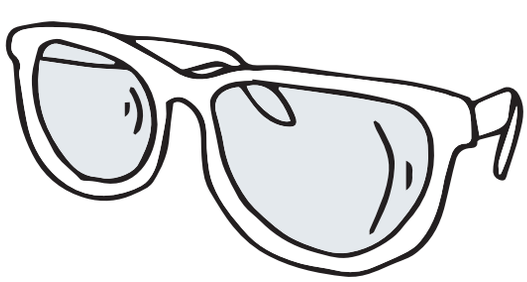
Interestingly, we noted a marked increase between Year 11 and Year 13 students from 60% to 75% of those going to university because they were interested in their chosen subject. This reflects a greater understanding or enjoyment of the subject as they progress through sixth form or college.

Key reasons for going to university - at university/pre-university



Pre uni q.base: 4052, At uni q.base:1097

fig 3.2.7





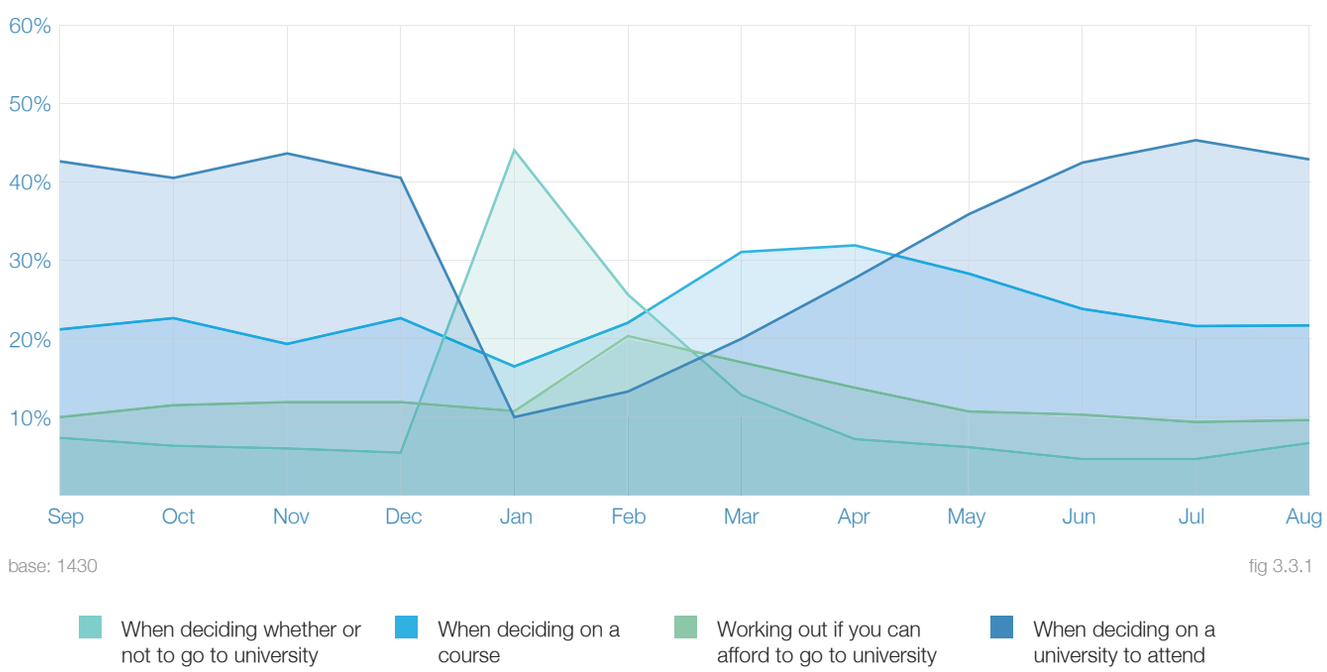
When Do Students Decide To Go To University?

This section presents findings from questions that sought information regarding the optimum months for making university-related decisions. The criteria were: the best time to decide whether to go to university, deciding on a course, choosing which university to attend and whether they could afford to go.

January is the key time when deciding to go to university for Year 12 students

For Year 12 pupils, January is the key time to decide whether or not to go to university, February the month to consider affordability, between March and May is the key period for deciding on a course and June to December is the peak time to use information sources to decide where to attend.

Year 12



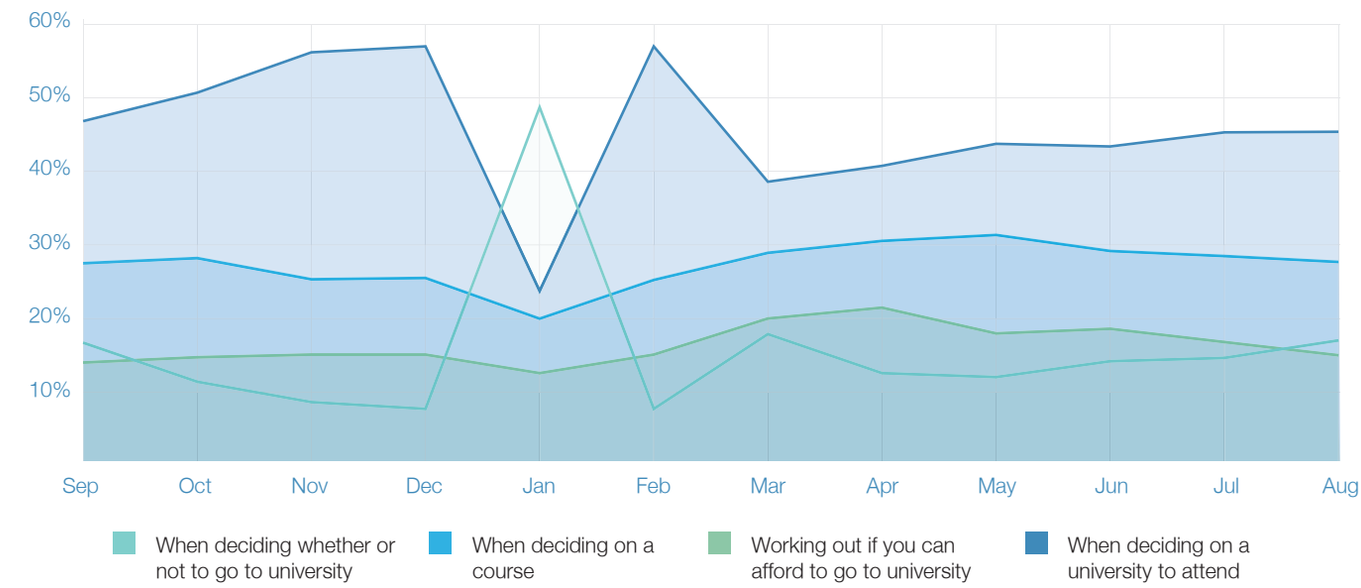
base: 1430

fig 3.3.1

Year 13s decide which university to attend in December & February

Year 13 respondents revealed broadly the same decision-making patterns, with January being the time to decide whether to go to university or not, December and February the peak time for deciding on the university to attend and April for working out the costs involved.

Year 13



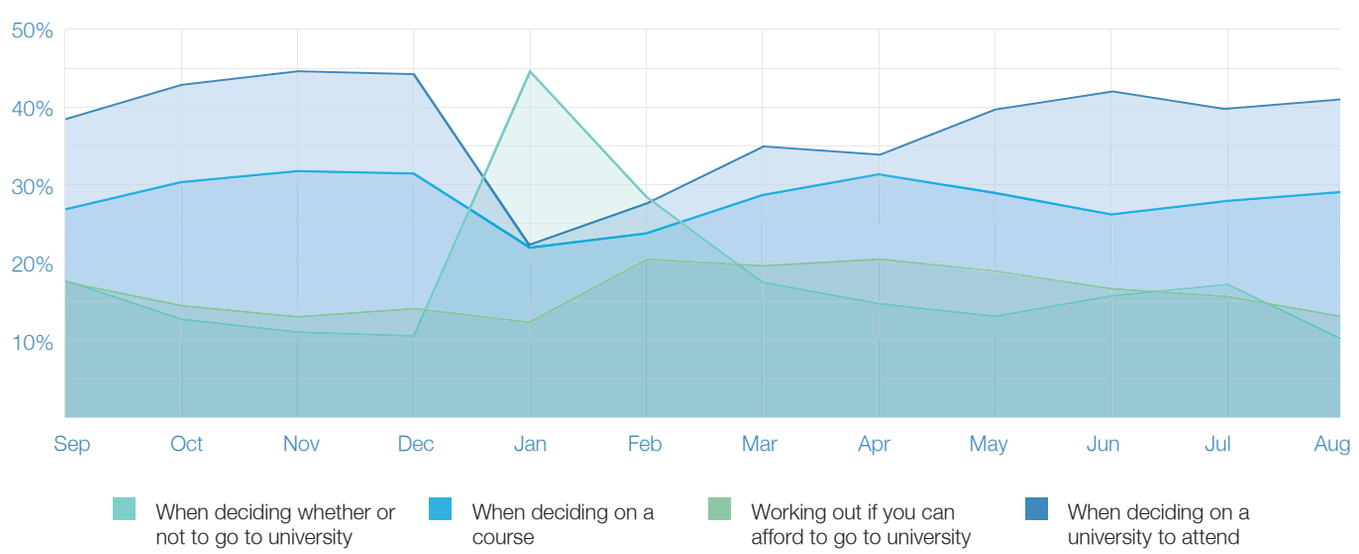
base 1957

fig 3.3.2

Undergraduate students recall January as the key decision period for going to university

45% of undergraduate respondents said that January was the key time for deciding whether to go to university. The number of people making this decision then drops substantially for the remainder of the year. This is likely due to the UCAS application deadline for most courses being the 15th January.

Which months of the year are the most important for each of the activities identified in the previous question?



filtered to those at uni, base: 835

fig 3.3.3

Are students satisfied with university?

We asked students to indicate their levels of satisfaction with their current course and university. The findings suggest that overall satisfaction has decreased over the last three years. Course satisfaction has fallen from 7.7/10 to 7.0/10 since 2014, with overall university satisfaction falling from 7.7/10 in 2014 to 6.9/10 in 2016.

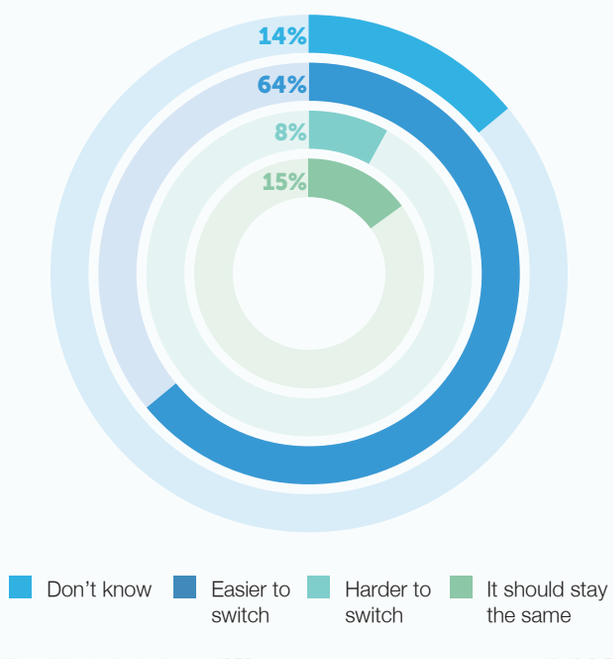
Almost half of students (47%) were very satisfied – rating their course between 8 and 10/10. However, overall the rate of satisfaction has fallen from 2014 to 2016. Those in the first year of study at university were likely to rank satisfaction as higher (7.1) compared to those in their final year (6.7).

How has your university experience met your expectations?

Satisfaction with your course:		Satisfaction with your university as a whole:	
2014	7.7/10 base: 725	2014	7.7/10 base: 725
2015	7.4/10 base: 906	2015	7.6/10 base: 908
2016	7.0/10 base: 1,344	2016	6.9/10 base: 1,351

fig 3.3.4

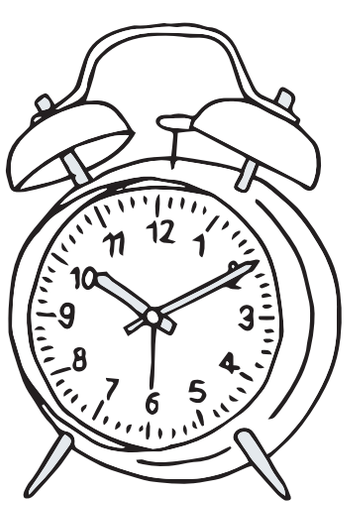
Should it be easier to switch between universities?

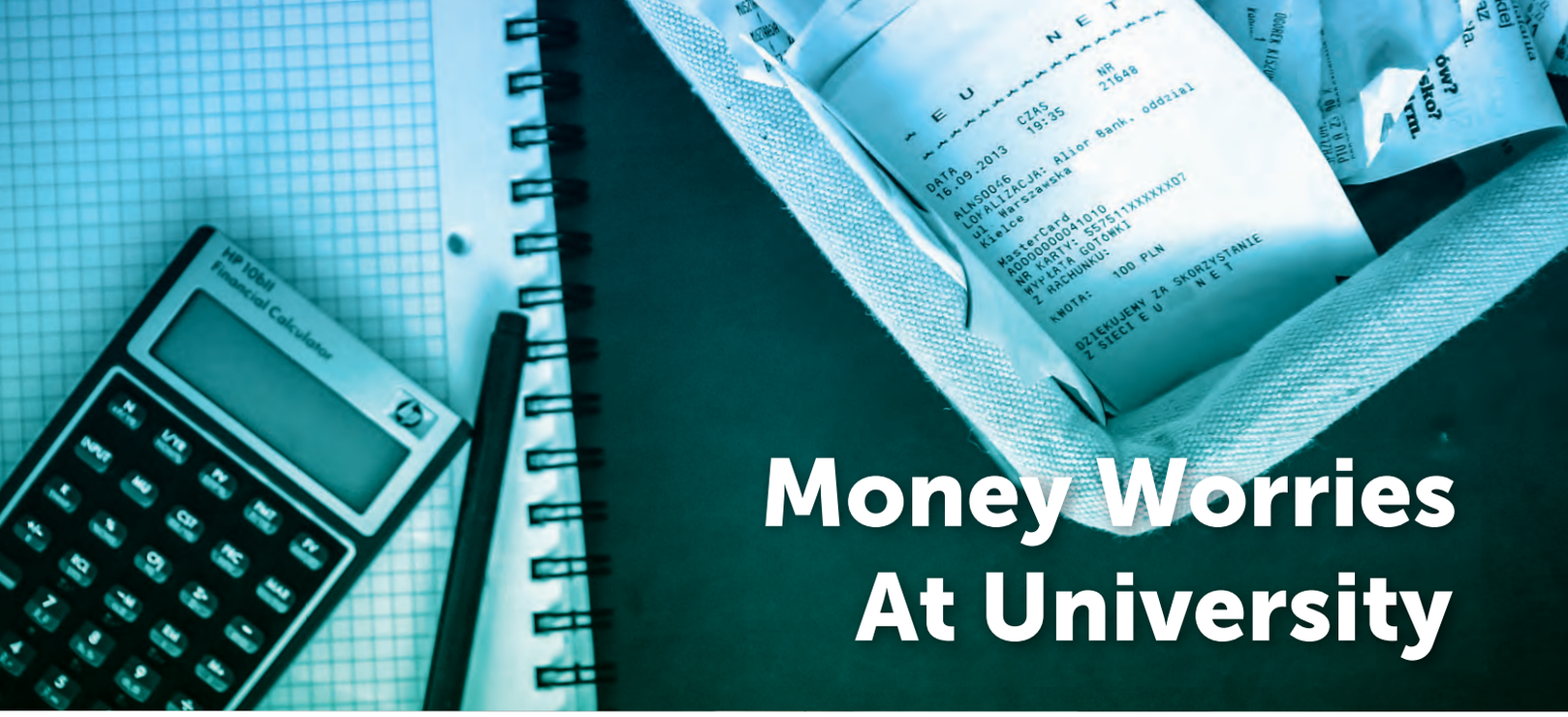


filtered to students, base: 1352

fig 3.3.5

64% of students surveyed felt that switching university should be made easier, should they be dissatisfied with their initial decision.





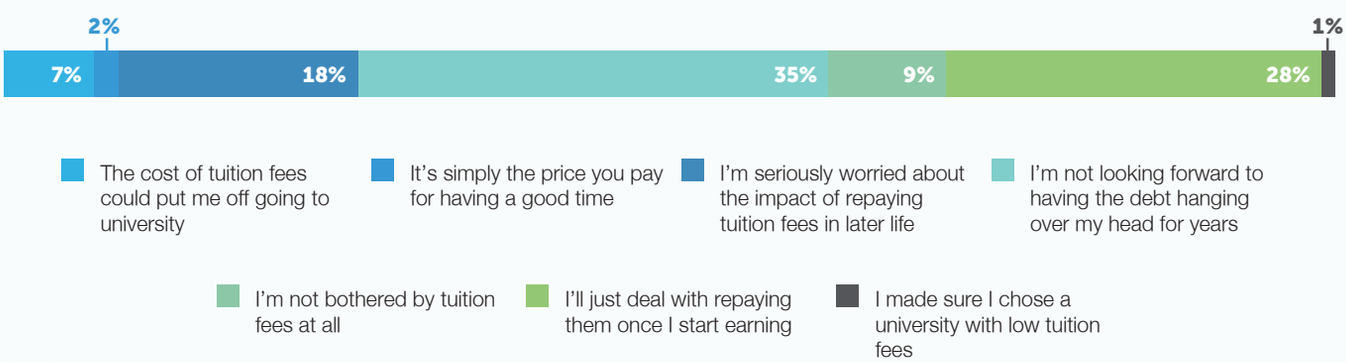
Money Worries At University

With tuition fees now averaging £9,000 a year, coupled with living expenses on top, it's not surprising that student debt has become a hot topic. Yet, whilst 53% were worried about levels of student debt, 28% said they would only worry about it once they had started working. Nevertheless, concerns over student debt have increased year on year, up from 30% in 2015. The percentage of current students saying they will deal with debt once in work has dropped from 36% in 2014 to 28% in 2016, perhaps indicating growing concern before they embark on a degree.

Student debt seems to be an increasing concern for pre-university students, with fears surrounding debt increasing from 34% in Year 11 to 36% by Year 13 to 37% for students already at university. 27% of university students said they would worry about paying back their debts when the time came and 23% said they were seriously worried about the impact of student debts in later life, up from 19% in 2015.

More than a third of university students (37%) said finding a part-time job was essential to funding their studies. 36% admitted that the cost of living at university would have a serious impact on their social life and one in five had decided to live at home and commute to manage costs.

How do you feel about university tuition fees?



filtered year 11-13, base: 4875

fig 3.4.1

For students planning to go to university the figures are similar. 46% felt they would need to get a part-time job and there was an increase from Year 11 to Year 13 in those believing lack of money would hamper their social life whilst at university.



fig 3.4.2

Students would pay more for guaranteed graduate earnings

Both prospective and current university students agreed they would be willing to pay higher tuition fees if it meant a guaranteed higher salary afterwards (50% pre-university, 42% at university) and some might pay more to study at a university higher in the league tables (27% pre-university, 28% at university).

However, they differed in their outlook on other options, with 55% of pre-university students saying they would pay more for extra support and tutorial time compared to just 37% of students at university. 46% of pre-university students said they might consider paying more for a university with a higher satisfaction rating

compared to 33% for university students. 36% of pre-university students said they might pay more for smaller class sizes compared to 22% at university.

On average, current undergraduates were almost twice as likely to say they would never choose to pay for increased tuition fees compared to just 18% of pre-university respondents.

Looking at it the other way around, university students would consider paying less for large class sizes (36%), less attractive campuses (35%) and greater distances from halls or campus (26%). This mirrors closely the pre-university view where on average across Years 11 to 13, respondents were willing to pay less for large class sizes (28%), greater travel distances from campus (28%) and a less attractive campus (28%).

Which of these would have persuaded you / would persuade you to pay a higher tuition fee?



fig 3.4.3

Where would you be / have been prepared to compromise in order to pay a lower tuition fee?

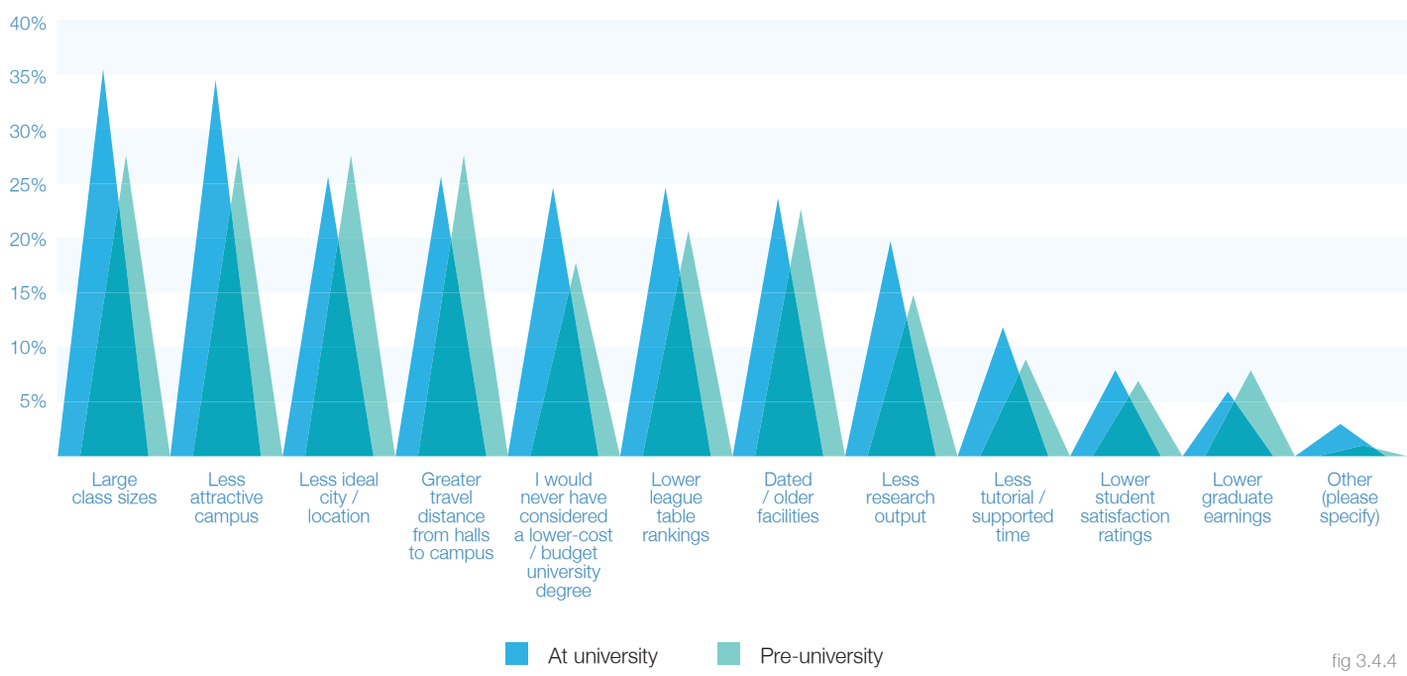


fig 3.4.4



Plans After University

Perceptions of the possibilities open to students following graduation appear to change throughout the university experience. The following results are from students who are currently in higher education.

Current undergraduates want to further their education

Taking a postgraduate course was the most popular next step following completion of undergraduate studies, showing that our student participants are very engaged with continuing education. 40% of students said they would pick a postgraduate course after finishing their undergraduate course, compared to 33% who intended to get a job. Interest in taking a postgraduate course rose steadily from 39% in Year 1 to 43% for those in their final year.

We asked respondents how interested they were in taking a variety of options after university:

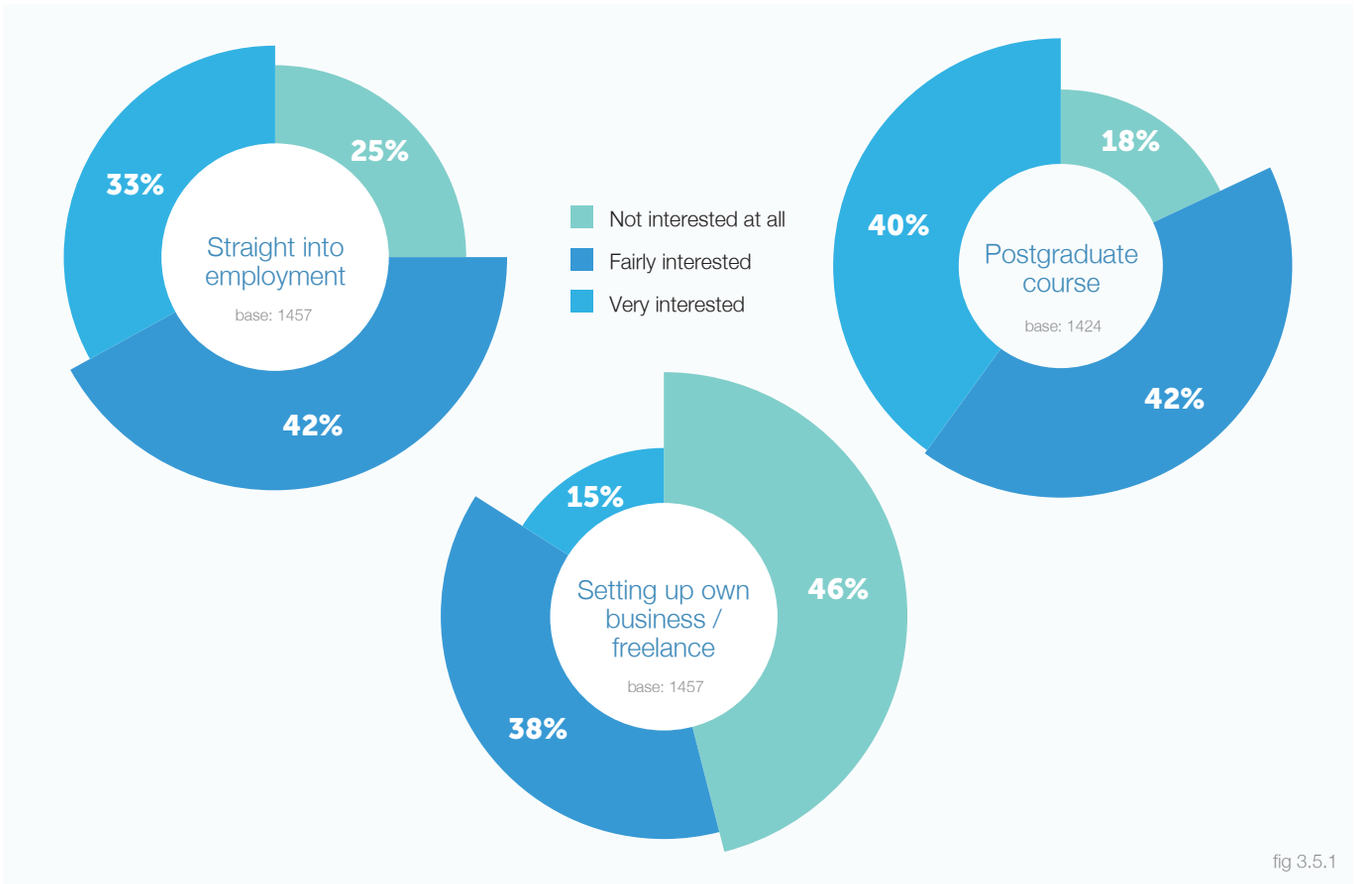
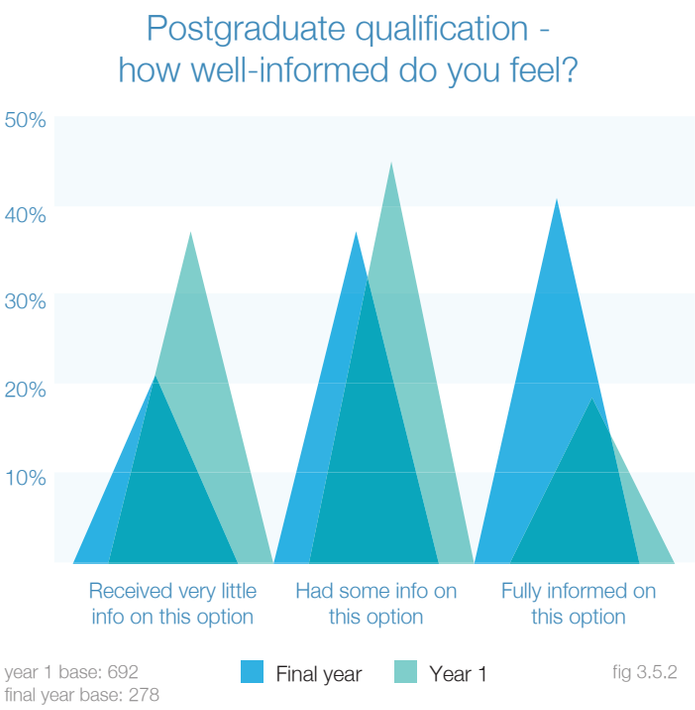


fig 3.5.1

First year students want more information about postgraduate opportunities

There was a sharp increase in how well informed students felt in terms of postgraduate study between the first and final year, with only 18% feeling fully informed on further study in Year 1, jumping to 41% for those in their final year. However, one in five final year student respondents did indicate that they had received little information on further study during their time as undergraduates.



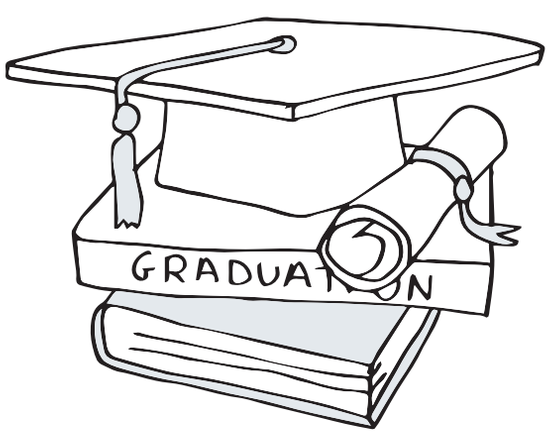
year 1 base: 692
final year base: 278

fig 3.5.2

Students are more likely to switch university to study a postgraduate course

Of those students considering postgraduate studies, 61% would opt to take a master's programme, 14% a research doctorate, 9% a second degree and 8% would take a PGCE.

Just over a third (38%) had not decided where they wanted to study a postgraduate course, 34% would like to study at a different university and 28% at the same institution.



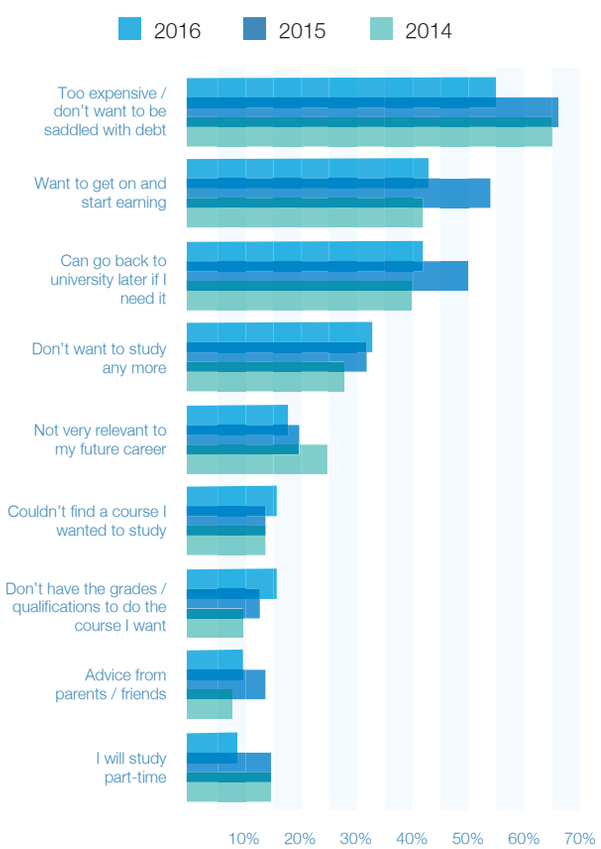


Motivations For Not Going To University

Avoiding student debt is the key reason for not going to university

According to the survey results, the main reasons young people are put off going to university are the high cost of tuition fees and living expenses. The desire to avoid debt was cited by 56% of those asked, whilst another 43% decided against university because they wanted to start earning money. However, an increasing number of students chose to avoid further education simply because they had had enough of studying, up 5% from 2014. Those who cited achieving the wrong grades as the reason for not going to university increased by 6%.

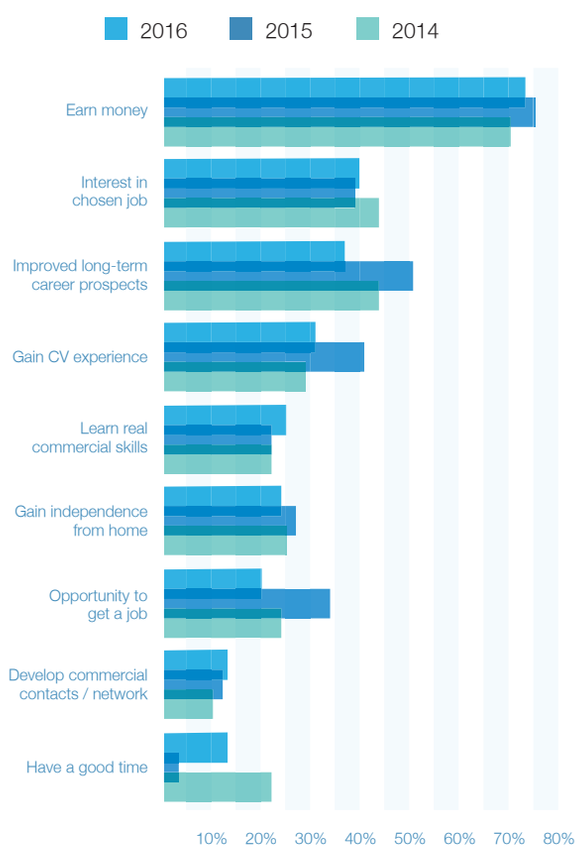
What would you say are the key reasons you decided not to go to university?



2014 base: 96, 2015 base: 146, 2016 base: 447

fig 3.6.1

What are your reasons for going into employment or freelancing?



2014 base: 68, 2015 base: 60, 2016 base: 255

fig 3.6.2

Earning money is the driving force behind going straight into employment after school

Almost three quarters of those asked cited earning money as the main reason for getting a job after school or college. Another 40% said it would be because they were interested in a particular job and 37% would take this option because they thought it would help their long-term career prospects. These have remained the top choices for the last three years, though there was a small increase in students who said they would get a job to increase commercial skills or develop a commercial network.

Students going straight into employment are unsure whether they would return to education

Almost a third of students going straight into employment were undecided as to whether they would return to their studies in the future. Of those who would, 12% said that taking a part-time or evening course would be a more popular option for them than an online course (6%).

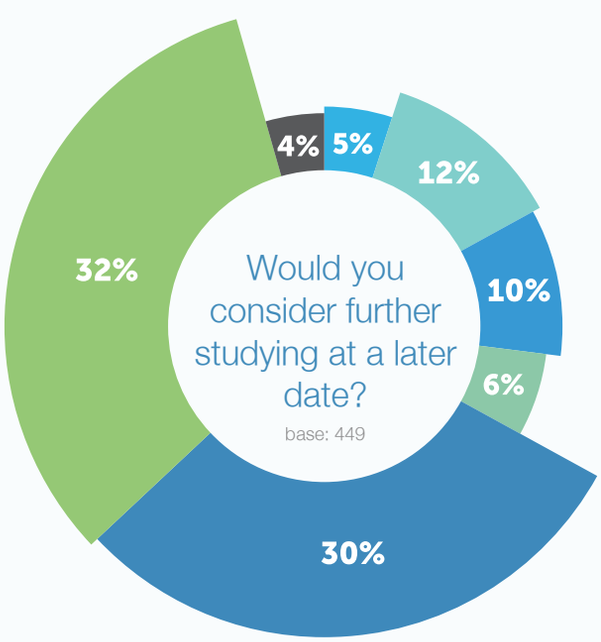


fig 3.6.4

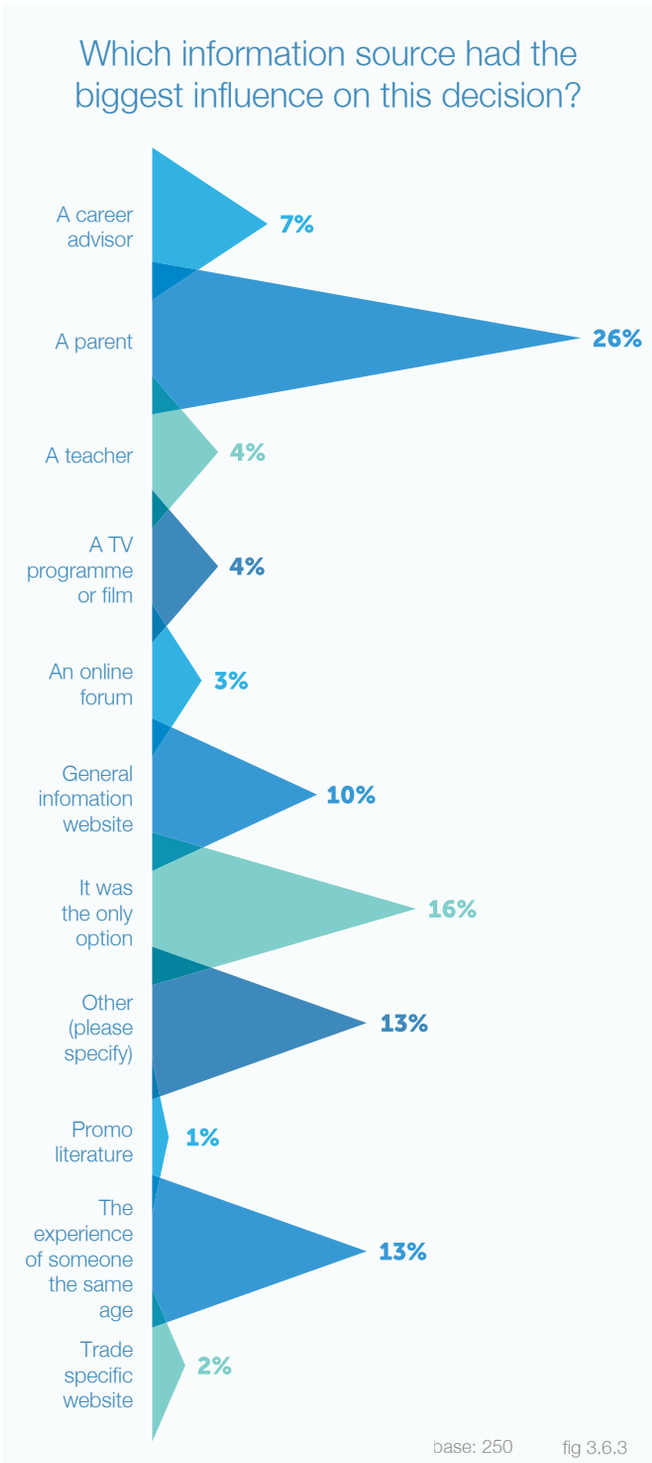


fig 3.6.3

Parents are the key influencers

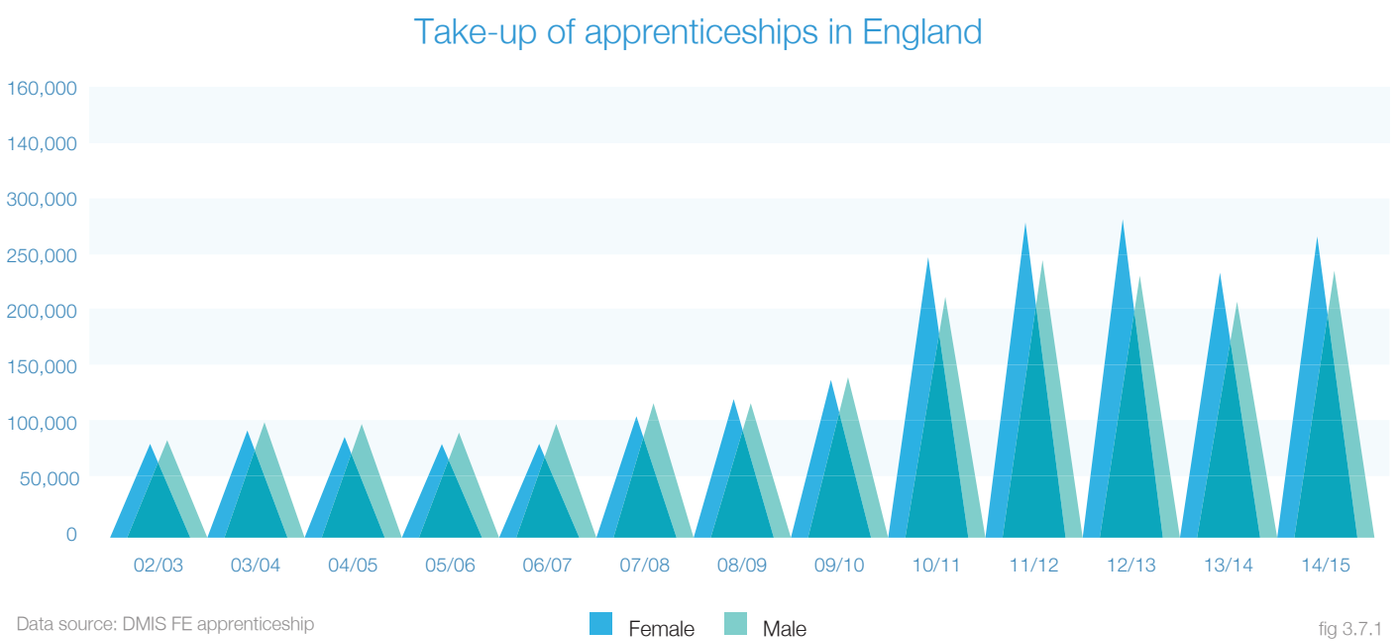
Those going straight into employment were most likely to be influenced by a parent (26%). Females were slightly more likely to be influenced by parental guidance (27% compared to 25% of males). There was a significant difference between those influenced by a TV programme or film with 1% of females saying they had been influenced in this way compared to 9% of males. It also appears that males are influenced more by aspirational goals whereas females tend to stick with a rational goal.



Appetite For Apprenticeships & Vocational Training

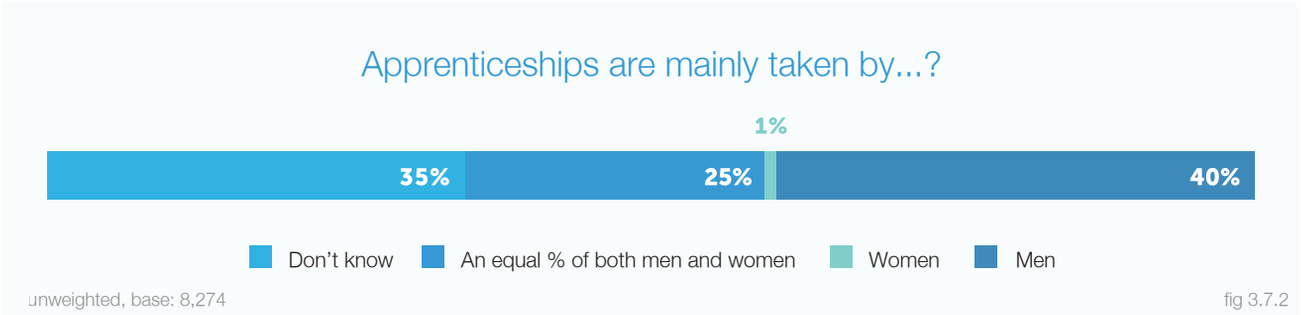
Students think apprenticeships are mainly taken by men

According to government statistics there is an almost even split between men and women taking up apprenticeships (52% female, 48% male).[2] The number of people taking up apprenticeships has grown year on year since 2002 from 20,000 to almost 140,000 but the gender split has remained largely equal. However, the survey showed just 25% of students believe apprenticeship take-up is equal whilst 40% believe it is mainly men who opt for them. Just 1% believed it was women who mainly took up apprenticeships and another 35% weren't sure.



Data source: DMIS FE apprenticeship

fig 3.7.1



unweighted, base: 8,274

fig 3.7.2

2- Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/fe-data-library-apprenticeships

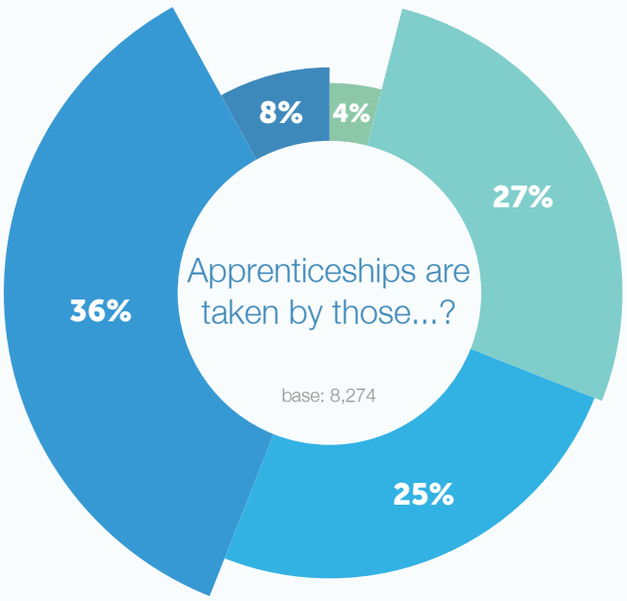
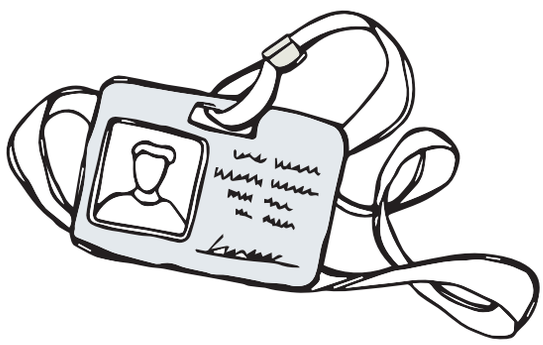


fig 3.7.3

Students believe those taking apprenticeships want to combine practical experience and work

In general, young people have a very positive outlook on apprenticeships, with 36% believing they were taken up because people wanted to combine study with practical work experience. Just 12% believed apprenticeships were mainly taken by those from non-traditional backgrounds or who did not make the grades for university.



Students disagree with the statement that apprenticeships "might lead to lower-income employment" but lack of awareness persists

63% of students disagreed with the statement "apprenticeships lead to low-income employment", indicating that students are aware of the benefits of apprenticeships in broad terms. However, despite a general awareness of apprenticeships, many did not understand how they worked, the funding options available or their earning potential.

A Boston Consulting Group research project commissioned by the Sutton Trust and published in October 2015 suggested that those achieving the best apprenticeships (Level 5 qualifications) could earn on average £50,000 more across their lifetime than someone taking a degree.[3]

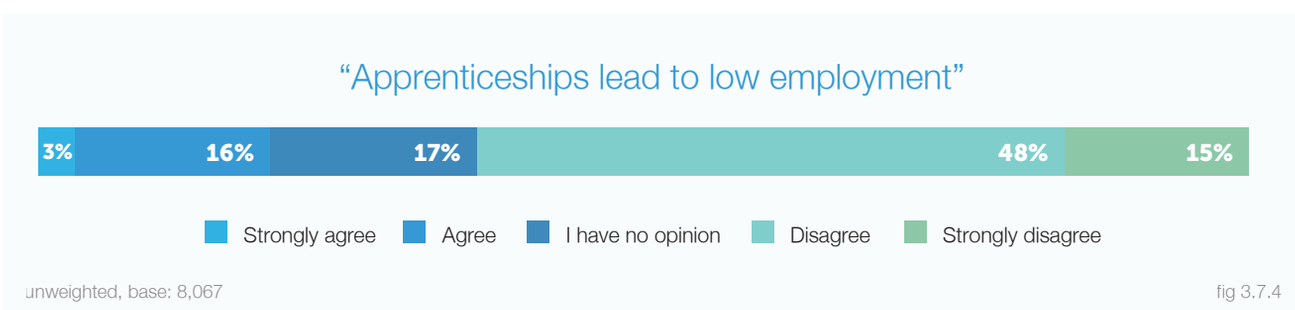


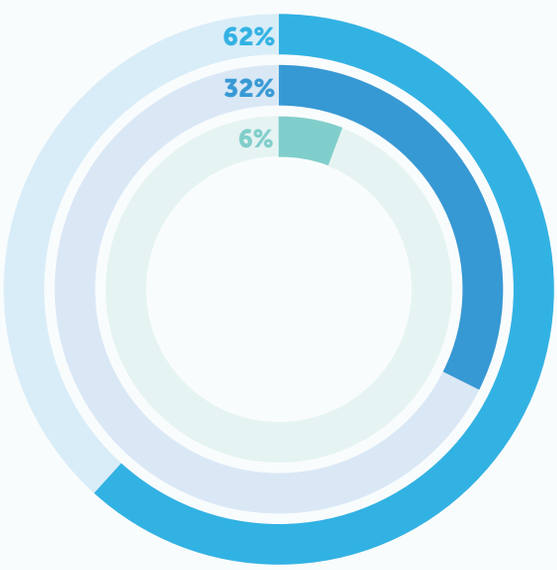
fig 3.7.4

3- Source: http://www.suttontrust.com/newsarchive/best-apprentices-earn-50000-more-than-many-graduates/

Students do not feel fully informed on the apprenticeship option

Just 6% of respondents who were still in school or college were very interested in taking an apprenticeship, compared to 62% who said they weren't interested at all. This may indicate a lack of awareness of the apprenticeship option which could be attributed to the fact that 40% felt they were given very little information about apprenticeships. Only 11% felt they were "fully informed".

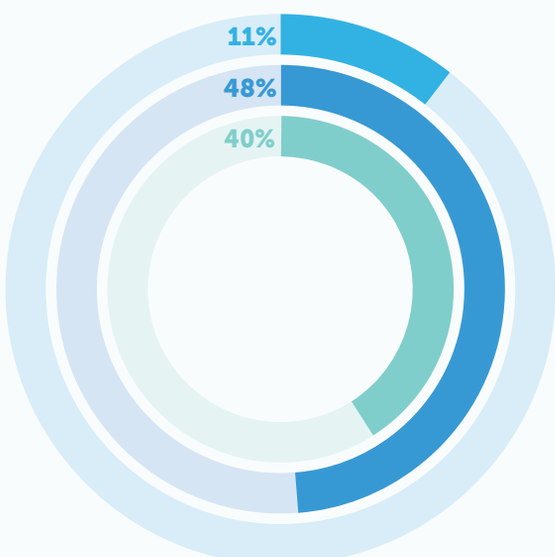
The top three reasons for taking an apprenticeship were to improve long-term career prospects (65%), earn money (48%) or because of an interest in their chosen job (47%). Interestingly, despite the assumption that most apprenticeships are taken by men, the rate of interest in them varied little between the sexes.



How interested are you in doing an apprenticeship?

- Not interested at all
- Fairly interested
- Very interested

base: 6,688 fig 3.7.5



How informed do you feel about taking an apprenticeship?

- Fully informed on this option
- Had some info on this option
- Received very little info on this option

base: 3,954 fig 3.7.6

How interested are you in taking an apprenticeship?

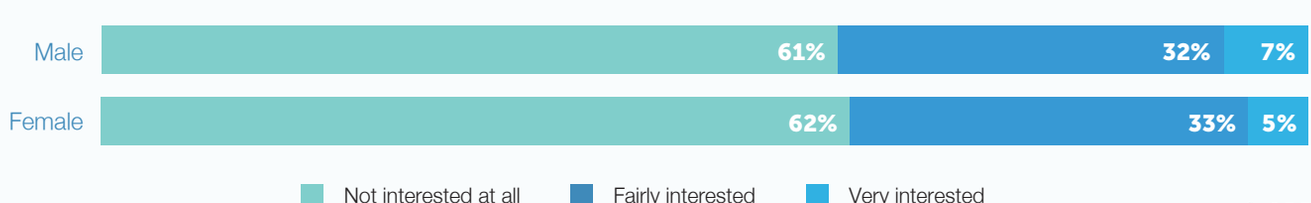


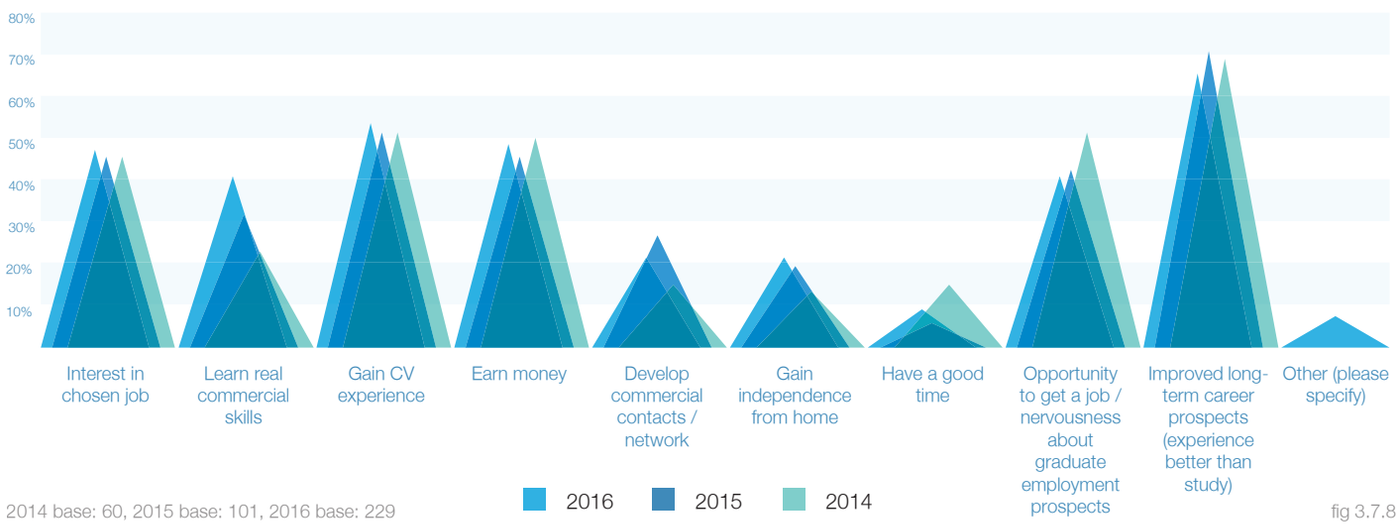
fig 3.7.7

Reasons for choosing to do an apprenticeship remain the same

The top three factors for choosing an apprenticeship have remained the same over the last three years. Long-term career prospects (65%, 71% in 2015), interest in chosen job (47%, 45% in 2015) and earning money (48%, 45% in 2015) are all important motivations year to year. Learning commercial skills has increased by 10% across the years since the survey began, perhaps indicating a growing awareness of the need for academic skills to be balanced with skills that will prove attractive to employers. Gaining independence from home as a reason has also increased year on year, as students realise apprenticeships will allow them to learn as they earn.

Of those wanting to take an apprenticeship, 27% were interested in the higher level, 26% in advanced level, 22% in a degree apprenticeship and 14% in an intermediate level.

Top three reasons for choosing to do an apprenticeship or vocational training



2014 base: 60, 2015 base: 101, 2016 base: 229

fig 3.7.8





Studying Abroad Factors

Interest in studying abroad remains high

All respondents were given the same questions around studying abroad, giving a strong base number. Of those who answered, 67% of respondents have considered or would consider studying abroad, 21% definitely would not consider it and 11% were unsure.

Ultimately, there has been little change in the figures over the past four years concerning interest in studying abroad, with the majority of respondents having considered this option. Nevertheless, this study was carried out prior to the Brexit vote and it remains to be seen what impact this will have on students travelling abroad for study. The mean average across the four years for saying "Yes" to studying abroad was 64%, the median average being 66%.

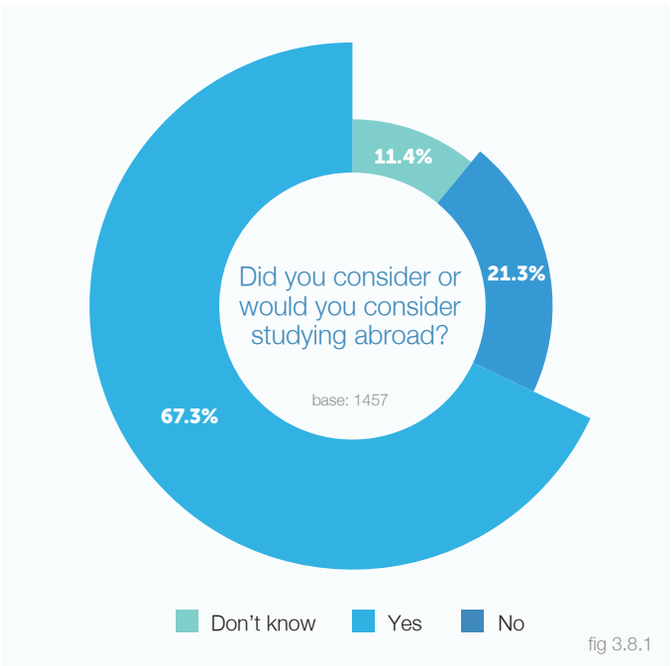
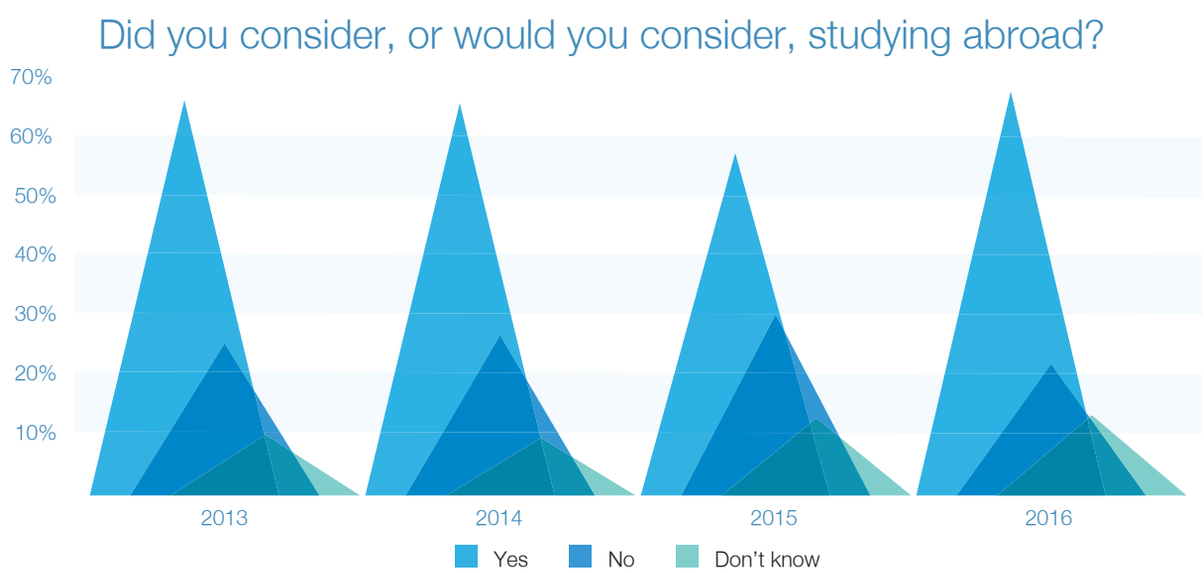


fig 3.8.1

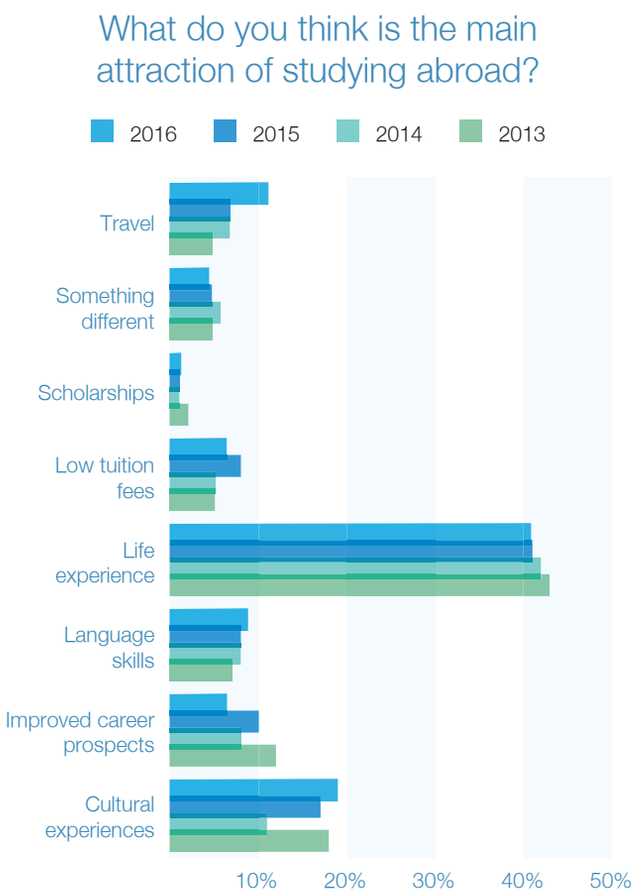


2013 base: 3744, 2014 base: 5918, 2015 base: 4704, 2016 base: 6001

fig 3.8.2

Life experience is the top reason for studying abroad

41% of students said the top reason for studying abroad was gaining life experience, a further 19% said it was for cultural reasons and 11% simply wanted to travel.



2013 base: 2841, 2014 base: 4460, 2015 base: 3223, 2016 base: 4055

fig 3.8.3

The majority of students interested in studying abroad researched a specific country to study in. However, less than one in five ordered or read a specific prospectus

Two thirds of students (67%) had seriously considered studying in a specific country, but very few had actually done major research into it. Just over a third (37%) had checked out the funding situation, but only 18% had ordered a prospectus. Just 15% actually took steps to apply for an overseas course, indicating that whilst travel and studying abroad is a desire for many, it only becomes a reality for a small proportion.



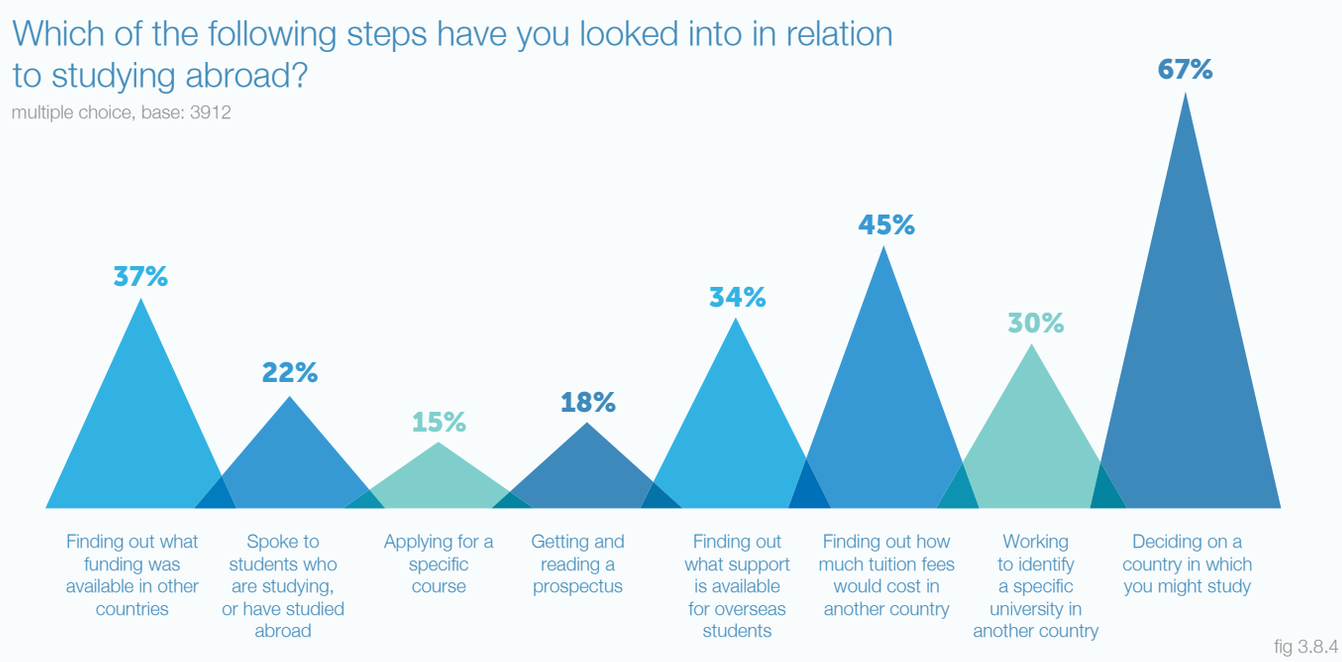


fig 3.8.4



Widening Access & Participation

The continuing controversy surrounding university tuition fees and the possibility of further hikes in the future, coupled with the removal of maintenance grants in 2016, has made affordability of university education a sensitive topic. It is particularly important that individuals from less financially secure backgrounds are not disadvantaged in their university journey. As a result, there are ongoing discussions around access to university for talented students from all walks of life.

Over a third of students from university-educated parentage said going to university was an “exciting step in life”, whilst those whose parents did not go to university saw it more as an opportunity (32%).

When it came to the use of league tables, 64% of respondents whose parents had been to university “thought they were useful but not the only tool” compared to 55% of those whose parents had not been to university.

Three in four students from low-income households were offered some type of access support

49% of those with university-educated parents reported being offered no support compared to 36% of those whose parents had not been university educated. School type attended also affected these results, with only 36% of those at an academy or comprehensive school reporting that they had not been offered any access support compared to 52% of respondents at independent schools. The difference was even greater by household income with only 26% of students from the lowest income families receiving no access support compared to 55% of those from the highest household income.

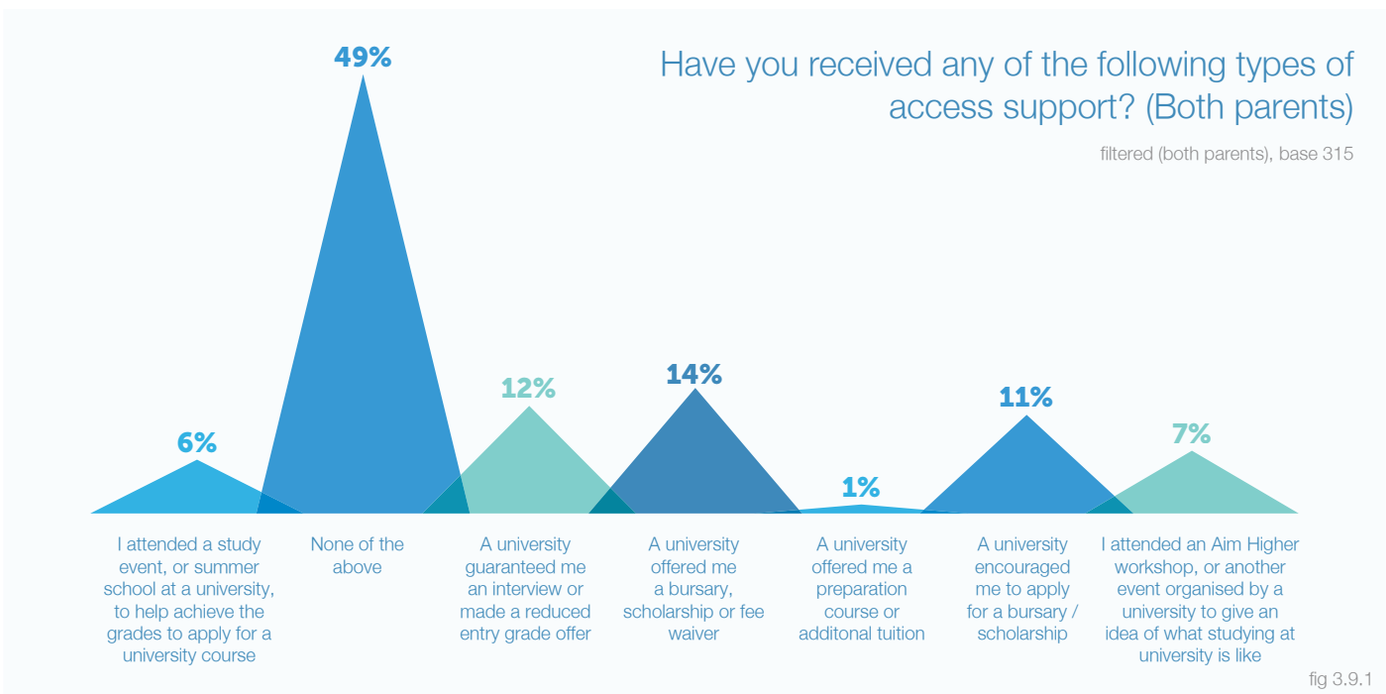


fig 3.9.1

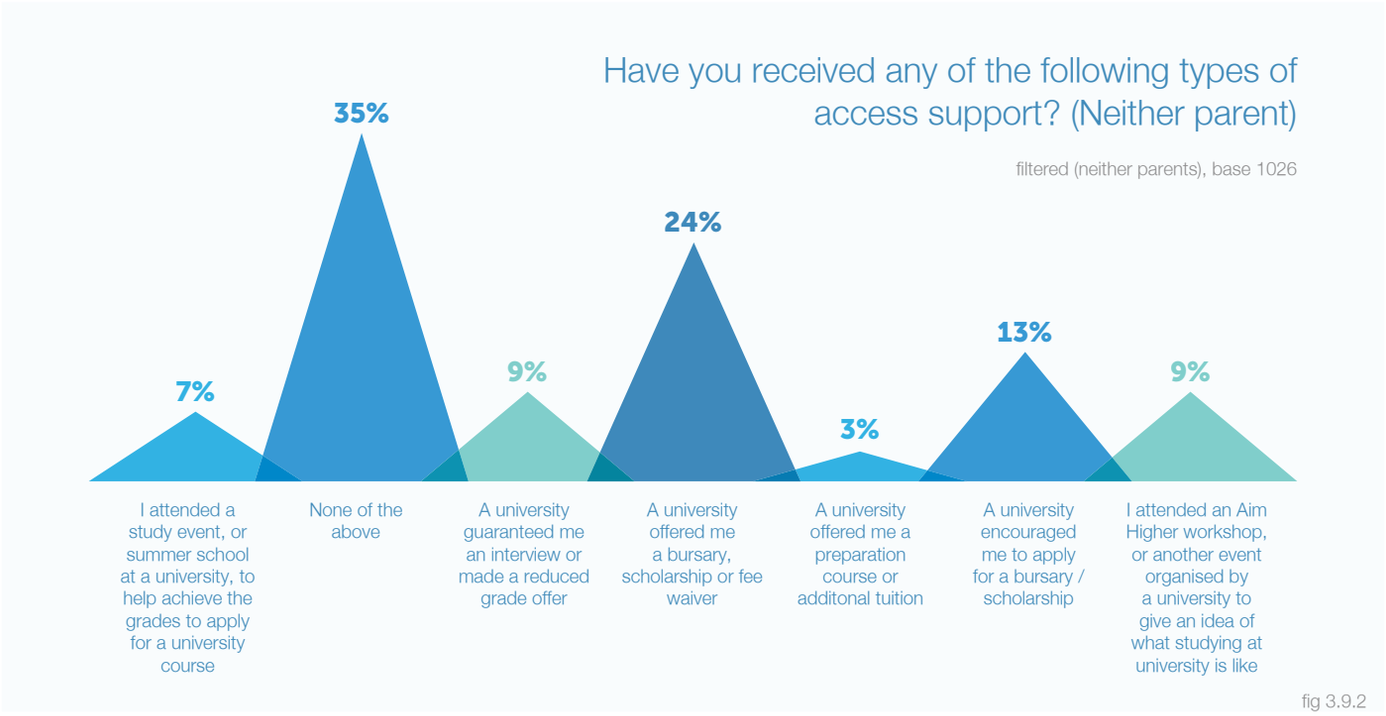
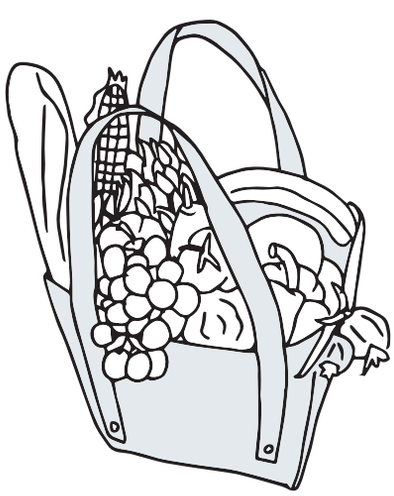


fig 3.9.2

Half of students from low-income households would consider attending university based on the types of access support on offer. Interview and tuition support was generally preferred to bursary support

For those offered access support, the most common response was “a university offered me a bursary, scholarship or fee waiver” with 30% of those on the lowest incomes reporting this type of assistance.

21% of those from the lowest income bracket suggested that the availability of a “fee waiver” influenced their decision to go to university. Half of those from a low-income background indicated that their decision to go to university would not be influenced by any of the access support offers mentioned (50%). Of course, this means that half of respondents would make their decision on whether or not to go to university based on the support they could access.



For students from high-income backgrounds, who attended an independent school and whose parents went to university, 88% said that none of the access support mentioned would influence their decision whether to go to university.

When asked whether any of the access support available might influence their decision to go to a specific university, 72% of all respondents said none of the options would have an impact. This dropped to 53% for those where neither parent had been to university, had attended an academy school and were from a low-income background. The access support options they felt might really help them decide on a specific university were: guaranteed interview (12%) and extra tuition/ preparation (12%), which both ranked higher than the availability of a bursary (8%).

For those whose parents went to university, studied at an independent school and indicated a high-income background, 81% recorded that none of the above access support options would influence their decision to attend a specific university. This is a slight drop from the decision to go to university, suggesting that different access support offers from different universities might influence their decision on a specific university or course but only for a small number.

Overall, income rather than other background factors had the most impact on interest in access support offers.



Careers & Aspirations



fig 3.10.1

Choosing and working towards a career is a huge challenge faced by young people as they transition into the adult world. In this section we look at their long-term motivations and career aspirations.

Being happy is the biggest motivating factor for young people

According to the survey the top three motivations included: being happy (67%), having a family (38%) and travelling the world (37%). Working toward a dream job was popular at 36% but not the ultimate aspiration across the board. It is evident that some look for a specific career whereas others desire a well-paid job they enjoy in order to fund aspirations outside of working hours.





Stress & Satisfaction With Life Attributes

Revision, exams, choosing a career, moving away from home and living independently are all issues that young people have to consider, often within a short space of time. Naturally, negative effects are common when dealing with new responsibilities, so the survey also focused on stress levels and support available during this period.

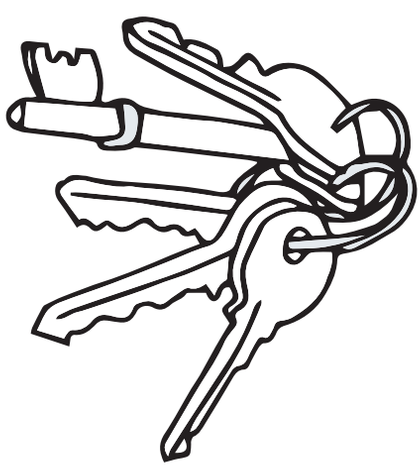
Students feel mostly excited about the future with some anxiety



unweighted base: 8742

fig 3.11.1

More than half of students (55%) are “Mostly excited about the future with some anxiety”. 73% were “Excited” or “Mostly excited” compared to 27% of those who were “Mostly anxious” or “Very anxious”. There was a big difference by school type with those at independent schools being more likely to indicate they were “Very excited” (21%) and far less likely to say they were “Very anxious” (4%) compared to those at other schools.



We asked respondents to indicate how satisfied they were with several aspects of their lives and to rate how important they felt these features were to others. These have been listed in the table below (fig 3.11.2) with “Very satisfied” and “Somewhat satisfied” grouped together and “Very important” and “Somewhat important” included in the same data field. The data is split between male and female respondents.

How satisfied are you with the following features in your life and how important do you think they are to others?

	% Satisfied with myself / own performance Female	% Satisfied with myself / own performance Male	How important it is to others Female	How important it is to others Male
Academic Achievement	74%	81%	84%	78%
Personal Appearance	40%	53%	80%	75%
Relationship Status	44%	37%	46%	48%
Friendships	72%	74%	79%	81%
Income / Job Status	31%	30%	67%	62%
Social Life	55%	58%	78%	79%
Social Profile & Reputation	52%	56%	71%	69%

base: 8676

fig 3.11.2

Females far more likely to mark themselves down on life attributes and believe these attributes are more important to others

There is a noticeable trend which sees females rating themselves or their own performance at a much lower score than the score they give to the importance to others. For males, the distance between how they rate themselves and how important they think others rate the attribute is much smaller.

The only attribute which conflicts this trend is ‘relationship status’, with females being more satisfied than males and also believing that being in a relationship is less important to others.

Attitudes to personal appearance tended to reveal the largest disparity in opinion. Only 40% of females said they were “very satisfied” or “somewhat satisfied” in their appearance; however, they rated the importance of personal appearance as “very high” at 80%.

Males and females were similarly satisfied with their friendships and job status.

Conclusions

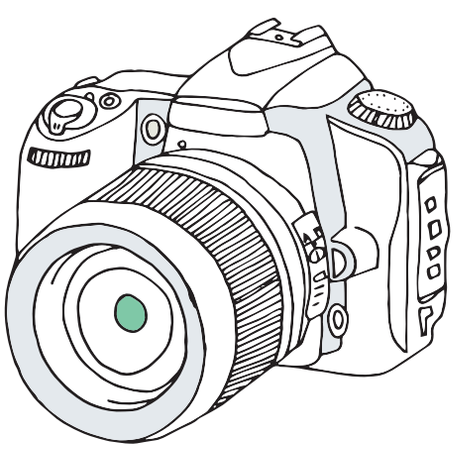


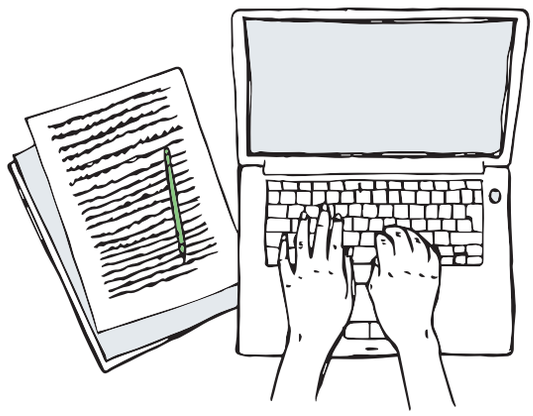
Survey respondents are very interested in going to university with 82% saying they will take this option - nearly double the national participation rate. Pre-university age groups were most responsive to the survey, with 74% of respondents being between Year 11-13 at school compared to 20% at university. Those at university have a higher interest in doing a postgraduate course.

Although official statistics reveal the uptake of apprenticeships is pretty evenly split between men and women, the perception is different according to the survey with 40% of respondents believing apprenticeships are taken mainly by men and only 1% thinking apprenticeships are taken mainly by women. Those studying BTECs were more likely to indicate "an equal percentage of men and women" (35%) compared to those taking other qualifications (where the mean average was 25%).

What could cause this altered perception? It is interesting to note that one in five of those taking an apprenticeship said parents were the biggest influence source (20%). The 2013 AAT survey[5] in collaboration with Netmums showed that 48% of parents felt apprenticeships were mainly for men and 32% felt they were only for the "less academically gifted". If parents are key influencers it is important they have access to the latest information.

There was a big difference in confidence between those attending independent schools and those attending academies or comprehensive schools. As well as feeling more excited about the future (21%), less stressed (69%) and more confident in getting a job (7.4/10), respondents from independent schools were also likely to say they felt completely supported by their school/teachers (41%) and mostly supported by their classmates (52%). Is there a connection? A large study in 2012 conducted by The Sutton Trust and UCAS[6] looked at confidence levels in applicants from different backgrounds and identified that applicants from independent schools were much more likely to apply to the most selective universities, compared to applicants from state schools, regardless of academic achievement.





Continuing on the confidence theme, males were much more confident than females, more confident that their course is related to their career (67% prior to university and 65% while at university) and more confident they will get a job (7.3/10). They were more excited about the future (26%) than females (14%) and reported less daily stress. Crucially, they rated their own satisfaction with various life attributes higher than females and rated the same life attributes as less important to others than females (see page 47). The one difference is that males indicated they received much less support from their friendship circles regarding their future compared to females.

Females were more anxious about the future and one interesting difference was regarding realistic entry requirements. Females who were undecided what to do after school would be much more influenced by realistic entry requirements than males. Although only a 7% margin, does it shine a light on the propensity for risk-taking behaviour? Do female applicants choose universities and courses that they know they will get into and therefore, have a higher propensity to play it safe? Are males more likely to try for universities and courses that are perhaps a stretch in grades, on the basis that they might make it? Or is this simply the difference between confidence and anxiety? This was a really interesting facet to the survey and one which requires further study.

Open days remain a hugely influential and valued activity to help Year 13 students make their mind up (76%). They were important when deciding which five universities to apply to (35%) and also for deciding who to make firm and insurance offers to (21%).

Interestingly, prospectuses were still cited as an important source for information (57%) for finding out about course content. While digital sources like a university website rated slightly above printed prospectuses, they still feature strongly in a student's decision-making process. As more universities and colleges move to digital and print runs of prospectuses decrease, it will be interesting to see whether the new range of e-prospectuses hold the same importance as the printed kind.

5 - https://www.aat.org.uk/news/article/parents-and-apprenticeships

6 - http://www.suttontrust.com/newsarchive/university-course-course-content-important-student-decision-making/

The Student Room university discussion threads were hugely important to students with 81% saying they had found it very useful or useful to ask questions, connect with others and get a feel for university life. It was most frequently used to get a feel for university life (30%).

While social media did play a part in the decision-making process, university-specific social media were used less frequently than predicted. Popular university social media channels included a university Facebook page (45%), university YouTube channel (37%), university Twitter feed (28%) and university Instagram feed (25%). These were mostly used for connecting with other students and getting a feel for the place.

The key reason given for not going to university was "Too expensive / Don't want to be saddled with debt" (56%, 66% in 2015) and "Earn money" was ranked second (45%, 54% in 2015). Both factors have decreased significantly from previous years.

Concern with student debt "hanging over their heads for years to come" has increased steadily over the years for pre-university students from 30% in 2014, 34% in 2015 to 35% in 2016.

Undergraduate students were much more likely to think it should be easier to switch between universities (64%) than pre-university students (42%). 17% of respondents at university said they had thought about changing university frequently or very frequently.

Satisfaction at university has declined from previous years (7.6 in 2015 to 6.9 in 2016). The increasing focus on student satisfaction together with increased fees could be factors in driving current satisfaction down.

50% of respondents from low-income backgrounds would be influenced on whether to go to university or not by the availability of access support. Guaranteed interviews (12%) and help with university preparation/ tuition (12%) were the most popular access support factors to help decide on a specific university.

The key motivation for those going straight into employment was to earn money (74%, 76% in 2015). Improved long-term career prospects was also a key decision factor (37%, 51% in 2015).

The number of students indicating they will go into vocational training or an apprenticeship has increased steadily each year from 1% in 2014, to 2% in 2015 and 3% in 2016. Improved long-term career prospects was the most important motivation (65%, 71% in 2015).

The majority of respondents (67%) had considered studying abroad. Females (69%) were slightly more likely than males (64%) to have considered it. Life experience (41%, 41% in 2015) was the main benefit with cultural experiences (19%, 17% in 2015) a distant second.

The USA was the most popular potential study destination (32%, 36% in 2015). The main reasons for deciding against studying abroad were the expense and anxiety about moving so far away.



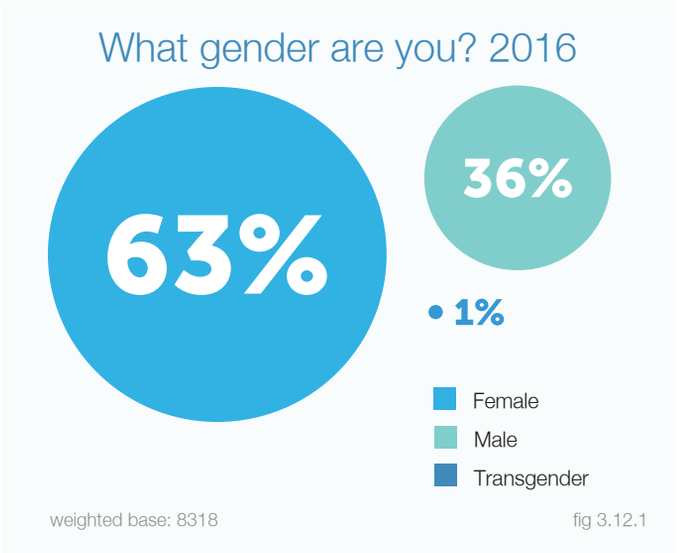
Demographic Profile

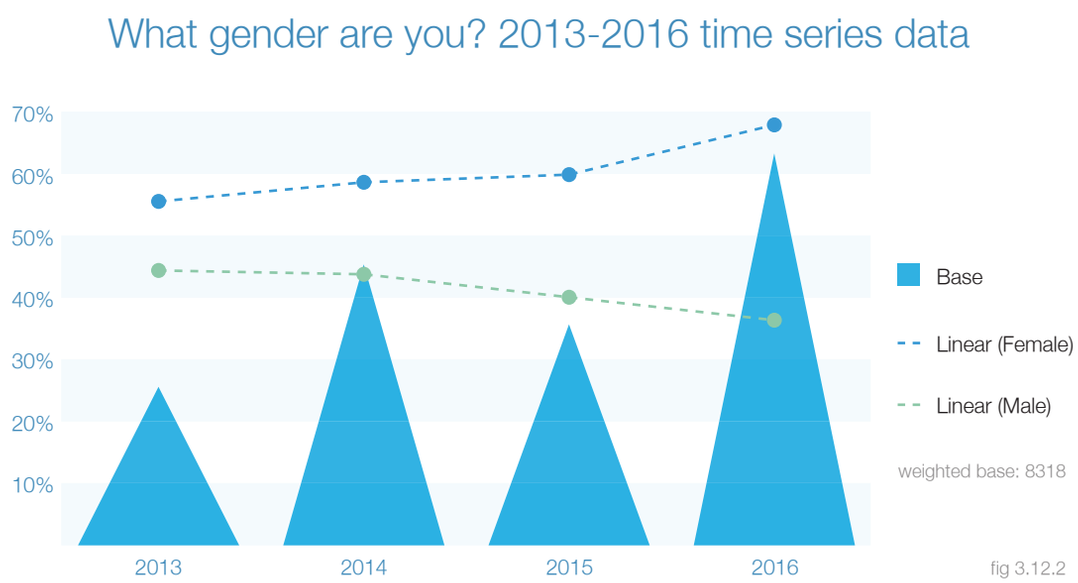


The demographic profiles of respondents are detailed below. The results have been weighted against The Student Room online community population to be more representative, in most cases this has reduced the raw question base.

Gender

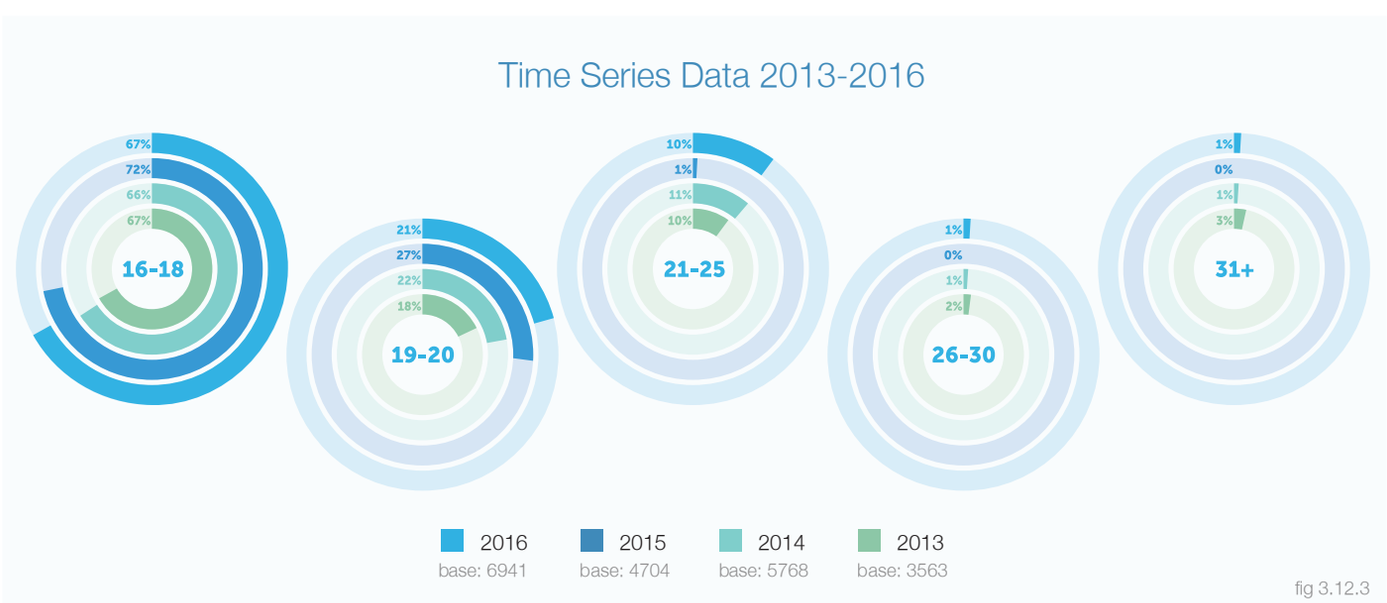
There has been a widening split between the percentage of male and female respondents over the years for the TSR Options survey.





Age

As the Options 2016 survey was mainly aimed at students aged 16+, the distribution of all respondents was heavily skewed towards those aged 16-18.



Location

The representation of UK countries almost exactly mirrored the TSR population and weighting had little effect on the question base. There is a change in the methodology for 2016 which had an impact on time series data.

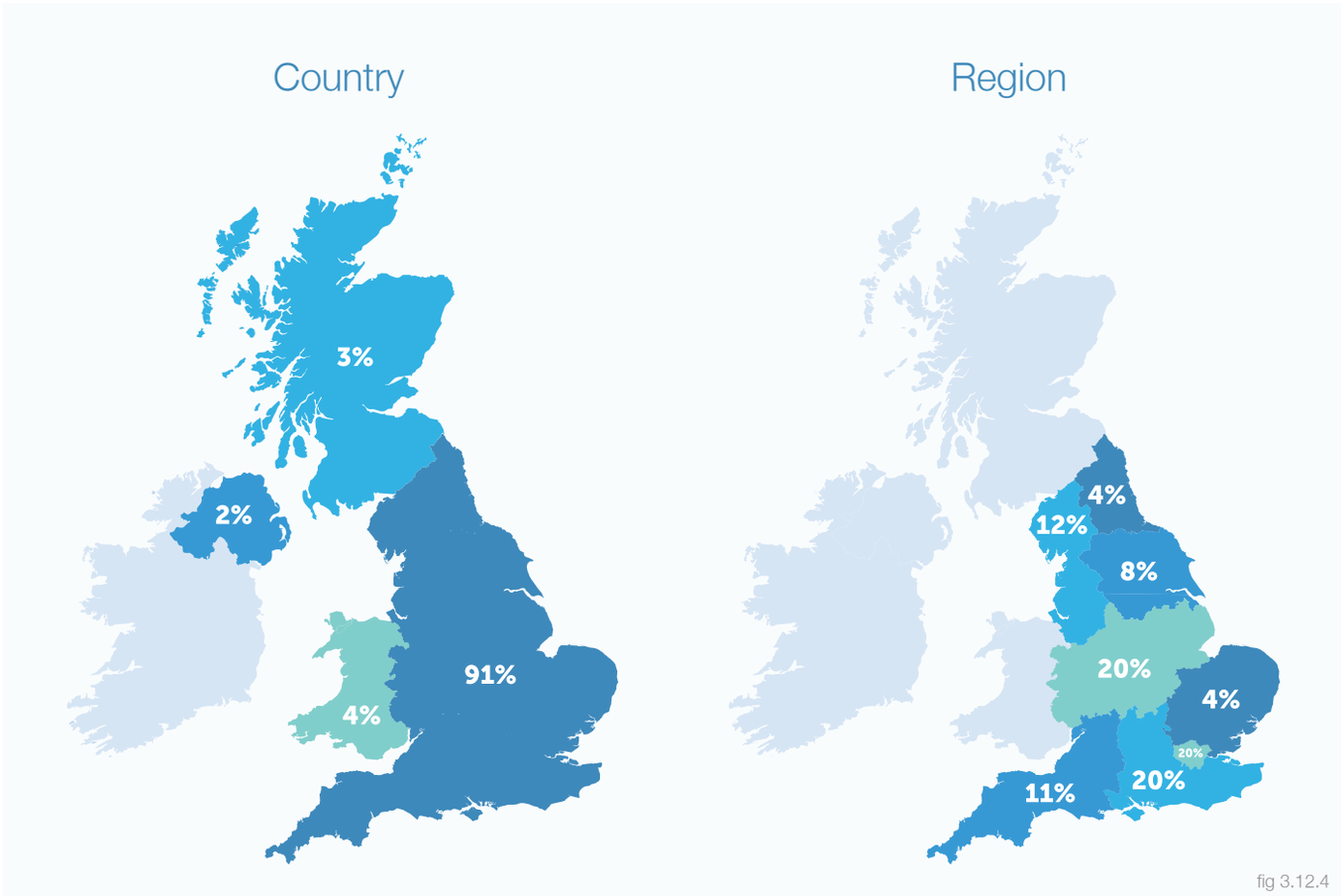


fig 3.12.4

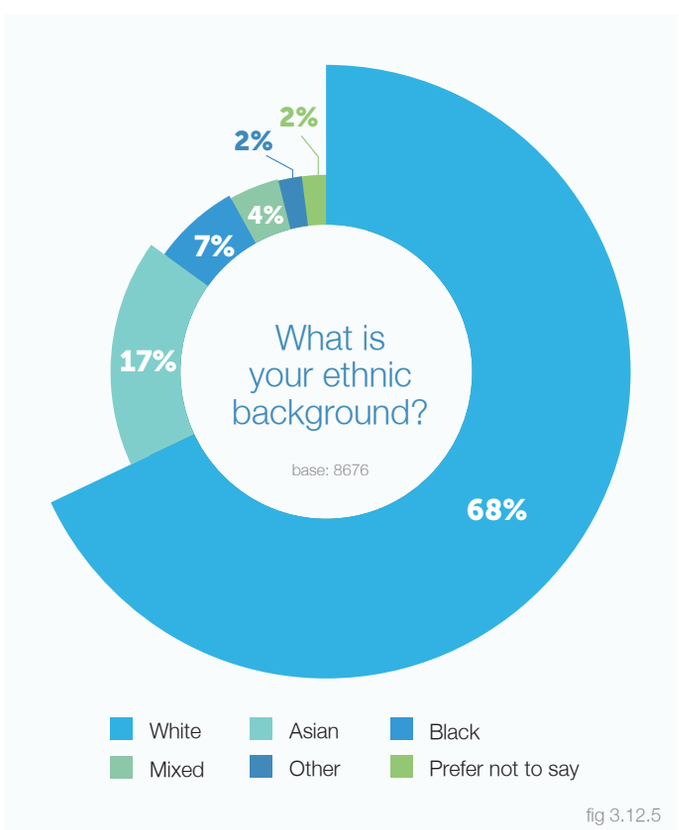


fig 3.12.5

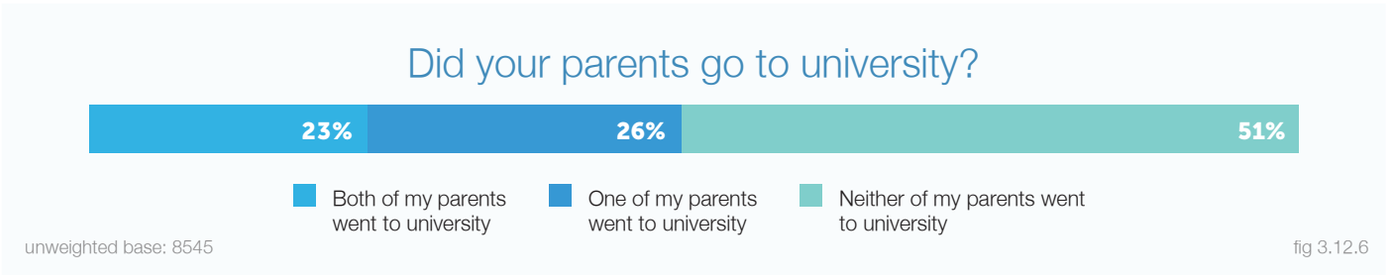
Ethnic Background

This year was the first time we asked respondents to indicate their ethnic background. The choices were very specific such as Asian – Chinese, Asian – Indian, White – Traveller. However they are grouped by main category in the graph to the left (fig 3.12.5). The overwhelming majority are from White backgrounds (68%), Asian (17%) and Black (7%).



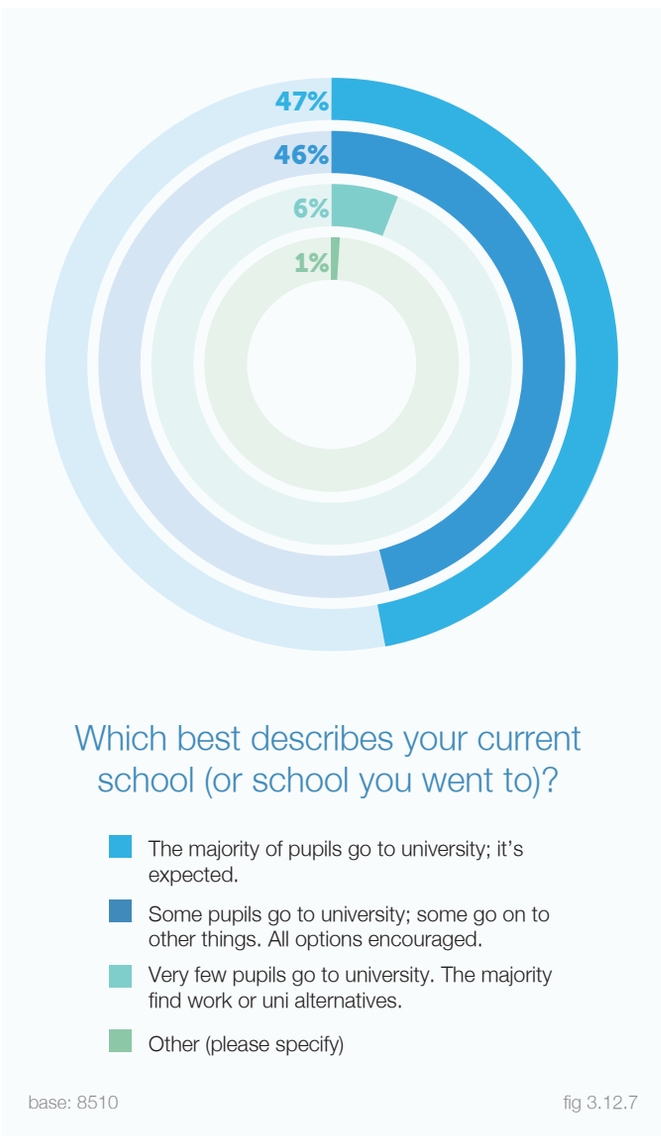
Widening Participation

This year we changed the widening participation question by separating it into four questions, this gave us more flexibility when looking at different variables. For the majority of our 2016 respondents, they were the first to go to university in their family with 51% indicating that neither parent (guardian or carer) had been to university before. This is a decline from 2015 (57%) and increase from 2014 (49%).



unweighted base: 8545 fig 3.12.6

Only a small number of participants felt they attended a school where very few pupils went to university - just 6% felt this was the case. There was an equal rating for attending schools where going to university was expected (47%) and all options were encouraged (46%).



base: 8510 fig 3.12.7

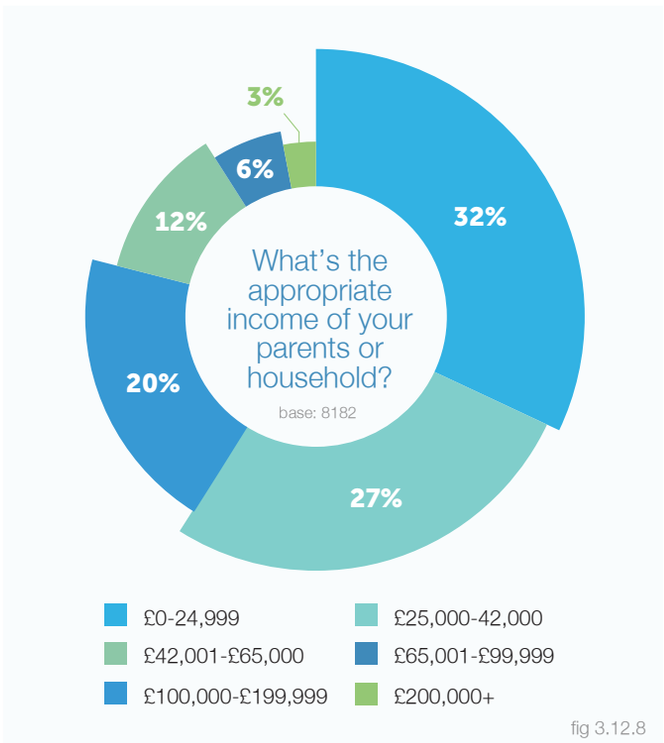
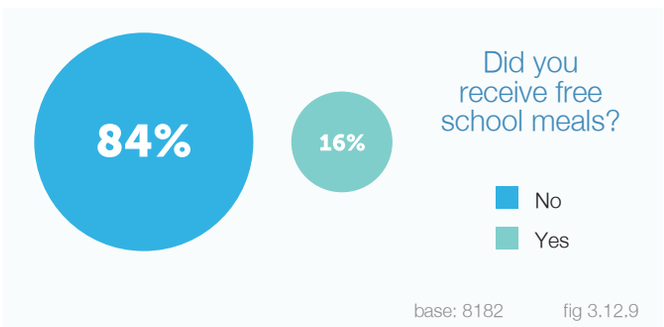


fig 3.12.8



base: 8182 fig 3.12.9

Two new questions for this year regarded parental and/or household income and access to free school meals. 16% of respondents indicated they had access to free school meals. With regards to parental or household income, 32% suggested their household income was in between £0-24,999. This decreased to 29% when looking at just 16-18 year olds.

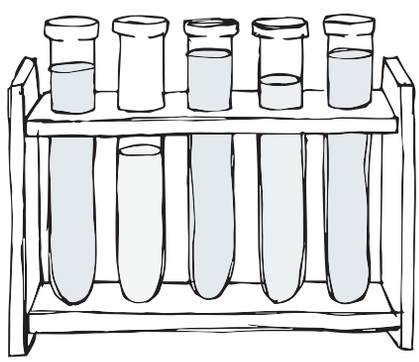
Academic Profile

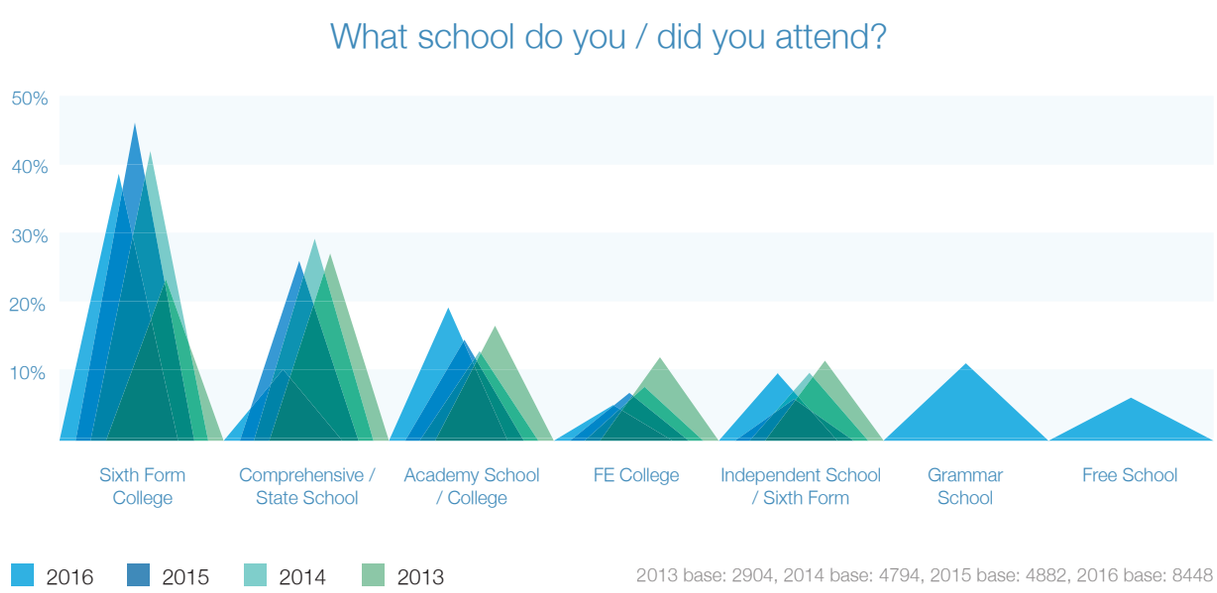
As well as asking for school type, this year we included a question on academic achievement and school qualification. School type has been a perennial question from the first Options Survey in 2013.

The types of schools and colleges attended by respondents are shown in the graph below (fig 3.12.10). 39% of respondents indicate they have attended or currently attend a sixth form college.

There are a number of changes in school type over the years. However, this is more likely to be reflective of changes to the survey than physical school type. This year, we enabled students to choose two extra choices of “Free School” and “Grammar School” which were not options in previous surveys. The addition of “Grammar School” has had a big impact with 11% choosing this option and this is likely to be partly responsible for the 16% drop in choosing “Comprehensive / State school”.

Respondents could indicate “other school type” and looking at open comments shows that at least <0.5% were home schooled and a further <0.5% attended faith schools. The rest were a mix of international, European schools, independent public schools and those who have attended more than one school or college.

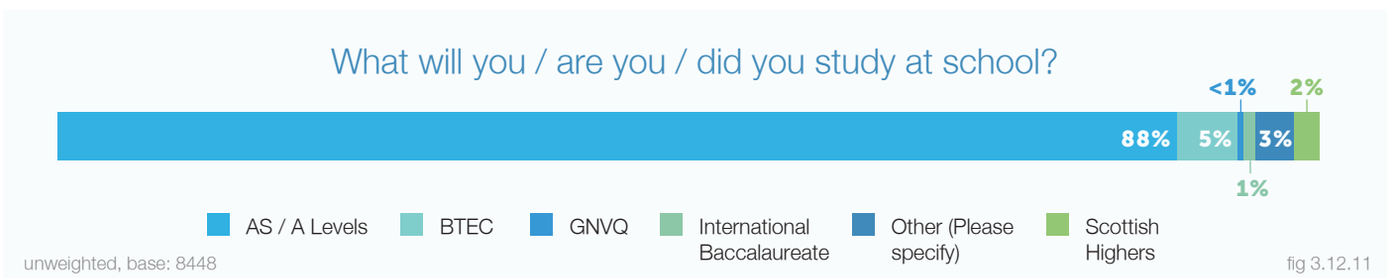




2013 base: 2904, 2014 base: 4794, 2015 base: 4882, 2016 base: 8448

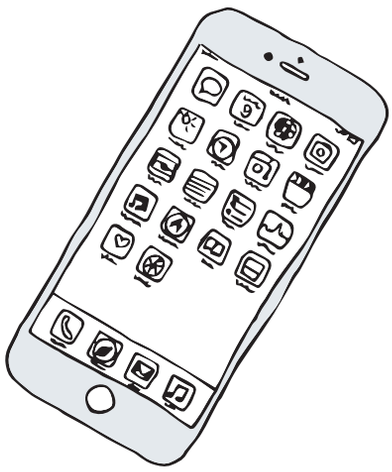
fig 3.12.10

We asked respondents to indicate their school level qualifications. Overwhelmingly, respondents were taking or will take A-levels (88%) compared to all other qualifications. All other options provided such as BTEC, Scottish Highers, GNVQ and IB were below 10%. Respondents could indicate “Other” and these included Access, Irish Leaving Certificates, Pre-U, Cache and City & Guilds, indicating a wide range of qualifications being taken by the respondents.



unweighted, base: 8448

fig 3.12.11



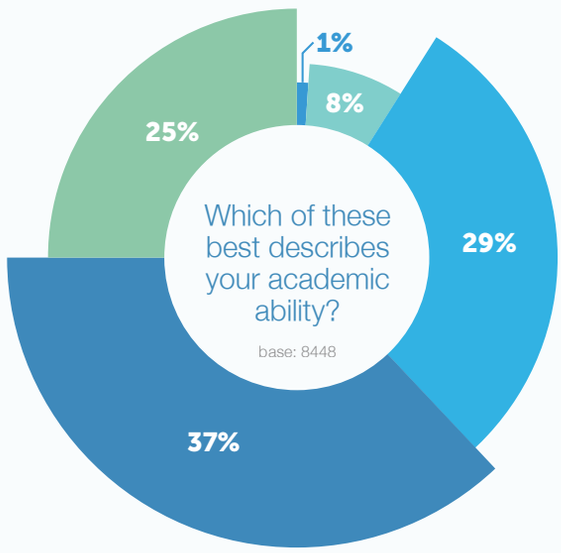


fig 3.12.12

Respondents were asked to rate their own academic ability by stating what category their grades best fitted from “Mostly A* or A” to “Mostly Ds or below”. Clearly this is reliant on honest self-selection together with the fact the categories may not be suitable for each respondent. Nevertheless, it created an interesting variable to compare with other factors. The majority of respondents rated themselves as “Mostly As, some Bs” (37%), followed by “Mostly Bs, some Cs” (29%) and “Mostly A* or A” (25%).

There was a large skew above the mean average (14%) from the group indicating both parents went to university, that their academic ability was “Mostly A*or A”. This group was on the mean average mark for “Mostly As, some Bs” and scored significantly below average for “Mostly Bs, some Cs” and “Mostly Cs, some Ds”. In fact, when the raw data was analysed, the results showed a significant correlation. Students who achieve higher grades are much more likely to have had both parents attend university.

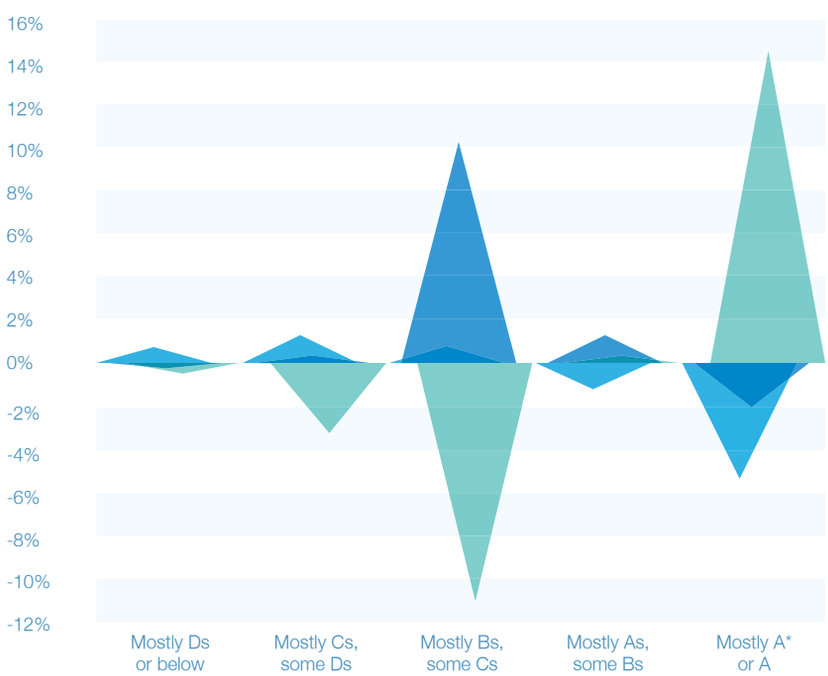


fig 3.12.13

Academic ability compared with whether both parents went to university

2014 base: 60, 2015 base: 101, 2016 base: 229

Neither of my parents went to university

One of my parents went to university

Both of my parents went to university



Methodology



The Student Room commissioned a fourth annual survey to explore school and college leavers' perceptions of the options open to them and the influences that affect the decisions they make.

The sample used for the online survey was derived from The Student Room online community and other social media sources. The population of interest was The Student Room community members aged 16 years and older and those who live in the UK.

The survey was open from 1st to 13th June 2016 and attracted a total of 10,406 responses. There was an initial screening question to disqualify those aged under 16 years or who reside outside the UK. The final usable sample was 8,751. The survey was long and in-depth, 67% of respondents completed the survey to the end which was considered a good result.

There were a number of research objectives to explore:

- Motivations for choosing the three main post-level 3 options.
- The availability and value of information to support decision-making.
- The impact of university tuition fees and cost of living on decision-making.
- The sentiment and feeling towards apprenticeships.
- The pathways into various study options.

The methodology was an online survey in keeping with the previous years. Respondents were directed to the survey from links featured on The Student Room website and from direct emails. Responses were incentivised by a free draw with prizes that included a chance to win a GoPro Hero4 Silver, iPad Mini 4 (16GB), a PlayStation 4, five £10 Amazon vouchers or donations to charity. 93% chose to enter the prize draw, 6.5% chose a donation and 0.5% chose not to enter.

The questions in the survey were a mixture of repeated questions from previous years with additional questions sourced from collaborators. There were a number of changes in the methodology in 2016 Options compared to previous years, these include:

- Sending the survey earlier in the year (previous surveys where sent in July).
- Changes to the incentives offered.
- Changes to the structure of the survey with additional questions, moving demographic questions to the beginning of the survey, adding a screening question which disqualified non-UK respondents and minor changes to the logic.

It has been made clear throughout the report where a change in methodology may have impacted results when making comparisons to previous years. These changes were made in response to feedback and to capture more insight for the 2016 research objectives.

At the close of the survey, the data was exported into Excel for analysis. Pivot tables were used to cross tab various results. Confidence norms and margin of error were calculated using standard deviation, alpha and sample size since the sample population was known. A confidence level of 95% (alpha 0.05) was used.

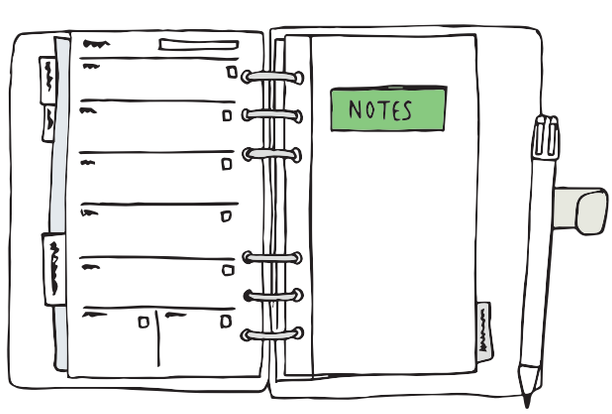


In the majority of the report, the sample population (n) is compared to the population of interest (N) which is The Student Room community unless otherwise stated. Results are labelled whether they have been weighted or not.

The anonymity of respondents has been treated with great importance. The response rate was very high, meaning there were was little risk of disclosure through manipulating data. However, a number of measures were put in place just in case. Data has been grouped or aggregated to avoid disclosure. Values less than 5 or 0.5% are reported as <5 or <0.5%.

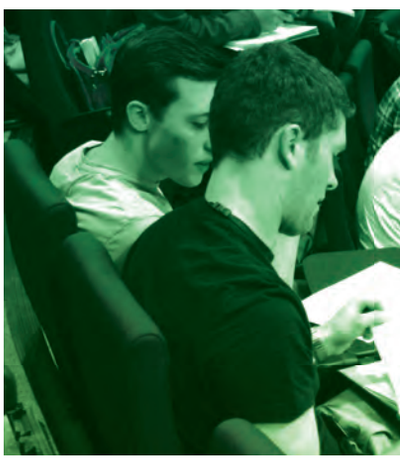
Data labels are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Notes


NOTES

With thanks to **Debbie Scott**, Managing Director and Founder of Spark & Bangle, who produced the research on behalf of The Student Room Group

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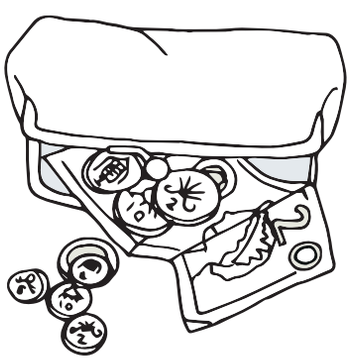














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