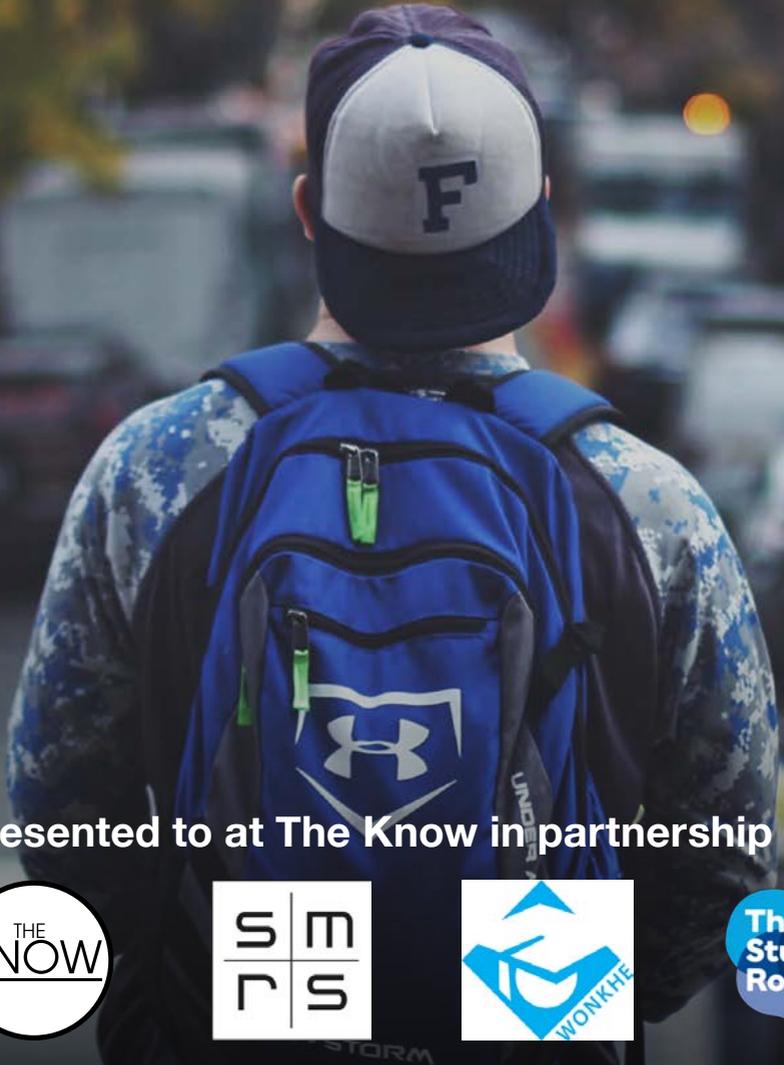


How Widening Participation students think, feel and behave



Presented to at The Know in partnership with:



The Student Room conducted two pieces of research investigating how WP students think, feel and behave when making decisions about higher education. Our substantial annual student pathway report, Options, follows the applicant journey in terms of behaviour and choices. Its significant sample size of 8,751 UK students allows us to make a meaningful quantitative comparison between WP and non-WP students. This substantial primary data is supported by qualitative feedback from a focus group of 21 WP students (identified by income, parent education level and FSM criteria as WP).

This report shares key insights to inform outreach programs and tailored communications to appeal to the aspirational and emotional decisions Widening Participation students make.

Widening Participation applicant journey

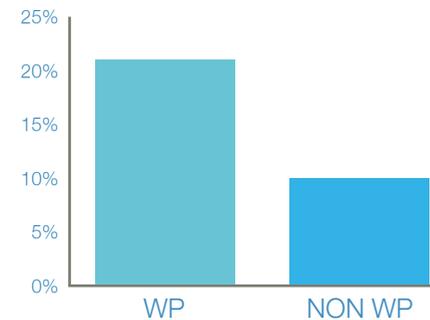
Our research suggests that students from all backgrounds share the same chronological decision making journey, forming key rational decisions at the same time. Our evidence supports the view that attitudes to higher education are shaped early in all groups, with anecdotal evidence demonstrating decision making as early as 11.

The two group's decision making processes differ significantly in one key respect - the use of league tables.

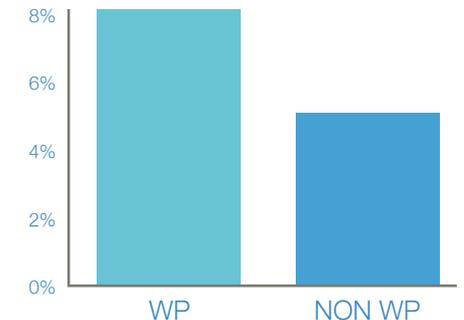
51% of students from disadvantaged backgrounds said that league tables were "useful but not the only tool to help me decided" compared to 64% of more privileged students.



Percentage of students who have never used university league tables



Percentage of students who said university league tables were completely irrelevant



What motivates Widening Participation students?

The love of education and further learning

When polled on their motivations for applying to university, our WP focus group students told us that their love for learning and the passion for doing something they love was the primary reason, second to job prospects.

The WP audience clearly demonstrates anxiety around cost and debt; however both sets of evidence indicate a passion for learning and receptiveness to aspirational and inspirational messaging.

“ I wanted to attend university because **I enjoyed education and learning**. It was logical for me to carry on with further education because I enjoyed it. ”

More opportunities and greater independence

Our WP focus group respondents gave highly orthodox rationale and motivations for attending university. Conventional rationale, like higher graduate earnings, securing a good job, and independence / personal growth featured highly.

The Options report demonstrated similarity in student's motivators for the future. Happiness was the strongest motivator and featured highly for both groups with a score of 67%.

However, WP respondents are significantly more motivated by the opportunity to “help others” (35% of WP respondents describing it as a strong motivation, against 26% of non-WP respondents), supporting the suggestion that the group is highly emotional and aspirational.

“ It will **broaden my career options**, opening more doors / career pathways. It will also **increase my employability and teach me many life skills**. ”

“ **Experience that I will not receive anywhere else**. It will also provide me with an education that my parents and other family members couldn't receive. ”

“ The career I have always dreamed of going into **requires a degree**, and I've always been told from a young age that it is the right option for me and that I would flourish there. As I have gotten older I have found this to be true and believe that it is the **best choice for me**. ”

“ I've always aspired to famous professors, doctors and mathematicians. **I love the idea of university**, going off to study something you love or for some, it's a step they need to take for them to get where they want to in the future. ”

“ Statistics that my school showed me proved that overall those who go to university **earn a higher salary** so I always thought it would secure me a good job. ”

“ It will provide me with **knowledge and skills** of a developed mathematician. I will also be given the **experience of living by myself**, away from home where I can't rely on my parents so much. ”

“ I think a main thing will be the experience of having an **independent student life**. I think in another aspect it will also give you a better opportunity when it comes to **finding your self-determination** and knowing you are able to undergo a lot of hard work, and seeing how far you can push yourself to do so. In the more financial aspect, I think it will also give me **better opportunities for higher paid jobs** for businesses, etc. ”

“ A **high quality education and good career prospects** are the main things, however I also believe it will help me to **develop socially** in terms of becoming more able to befriend people and finding it easier to come out of my shell. As someone who lacks quite a lot of confidence I think this will better me greatly as a person. It'll also provide me with **experience of living in the "real world"**, which I haven't really had to (or had chance to) experience as of yet. ”

How do Widening Participation students feel?

While both groups of students largely share the same motivators and aspirations, WP applicants demonstrate less confidence in getting a job after university and greater general anxiety concerning the future.

Confidence levels:

7.7/10
WP
students

8/10
NON WP
Students

We found that three times the number of WP students were potentially put off by tuition fees than non WP students.

Q: How do you feel about university tuition fees?

A: The cost of tuition fees could put me off going to university.

Anxiety levels:

35% of WP students
were anxious

22% of NON WP students
were anxious

12%
of WP
students

4%
of NON WP
Students





Influencers and supporters

Parents and even grandparents are strong influencers on WP students, as we would expect. They want a better, more affluent future for their children and grandchildren.

“ My parents and grandparents have always said it would be best for me to go and that they would try to support me getting there, my teachers have said that even though I'm not from the best financial background this **won't hinder my opportunities** in terms of **academic excellence** including university. ”

“ My grandfather, wanted us to do better than he or his children/my parents had done and **do something we actually wanted to do.** ”

“ I think a small part was my family because my parents did not go, and it is just something that's always been looked at in association with a good/higher paid job at the end of it. A bigger part would probably be the careers advisor at the college I went to, as I discussed with him what I could do in terms of the department I wanted to go into, after college, and he **went through possible apprenticeships and then universities and we talked about the differences between them.** ”

Parents behave in the same way as their children

Predictably, when it came to educational and purchasing decisions, parents were identified as strong influencers on all applicants. Interestingly parents appear to go through the same decision making journey as students, balancing cost vs. benefit and experiential factors.

Do your parents think university is valuable to your future?



■ Yes ■ No ■ Don't know

Those who said no said:

“ They got jobs without it. ”

“ Both have succeeded in life without going to university. ”

“ Because they didn't go to uni and they earn more than their friends who did. ”

“ They don't see the long term prospects of a better job, all they see is £40,000 of debt post-graduation. ”



Determination despite detractors

Over a third of our WP focus group (37%) have been told by someone not to go to university. The reasons varied from “not being able to handle the workload”, to worries over the cost of student debt.

Students whose family, peers, teachers or even career advisors told them they shouldn't go, show remarkable levels of determination despite feelings of deflation.

“ My brother told me not to go because he thought that I would just not be able to handle the jump between college and university, and how different they are in the fact that there is a lot more self-study and independence when it comes to university work. It made me feel both deflated that he felt that I couldn't succeed in a way, but also **determined to do great and study hard during my duration at uni** so that I could prove him wrong. ”

“ The Chemistry teacher because **she thought I wouldn't manage it**. It made me feel hurt as all the other teachers believed and still do believe I can yet she is against me and very unsupportive in a subject that I need to get in. ”

“ A careers officer at my school last year told me not to study mathematics at university but rather to do something along the lines of an engineering apprenticeship simply because there **aren't enough women in that industry**. It disappointed me a lot, as it made me feel as though my education didn't mean anything. I felt hurt that I was being pressured into something I have no interest in, just because I'm a girl. ”

“ My mother and brother told me it would be the **biggest waste of money** out due to student debts. Made me feel very conscious but also **determined to be the first in my family to go**. ”



Students understand Widening Participation

When we asked our WP focus group if they considered themselves as meeting the criteria to be considered a WP student, two thirds (63%) stated yes. When we asked them why they think this they articulated a clear understanding of the factors taking into consideration by universities.

“ Lower income, come from rough neighbourhood, **parents did not go to uni.** ”

“ I am the **first generation** of my family to consider higher education, and am **from a low socio-economic group.** ”

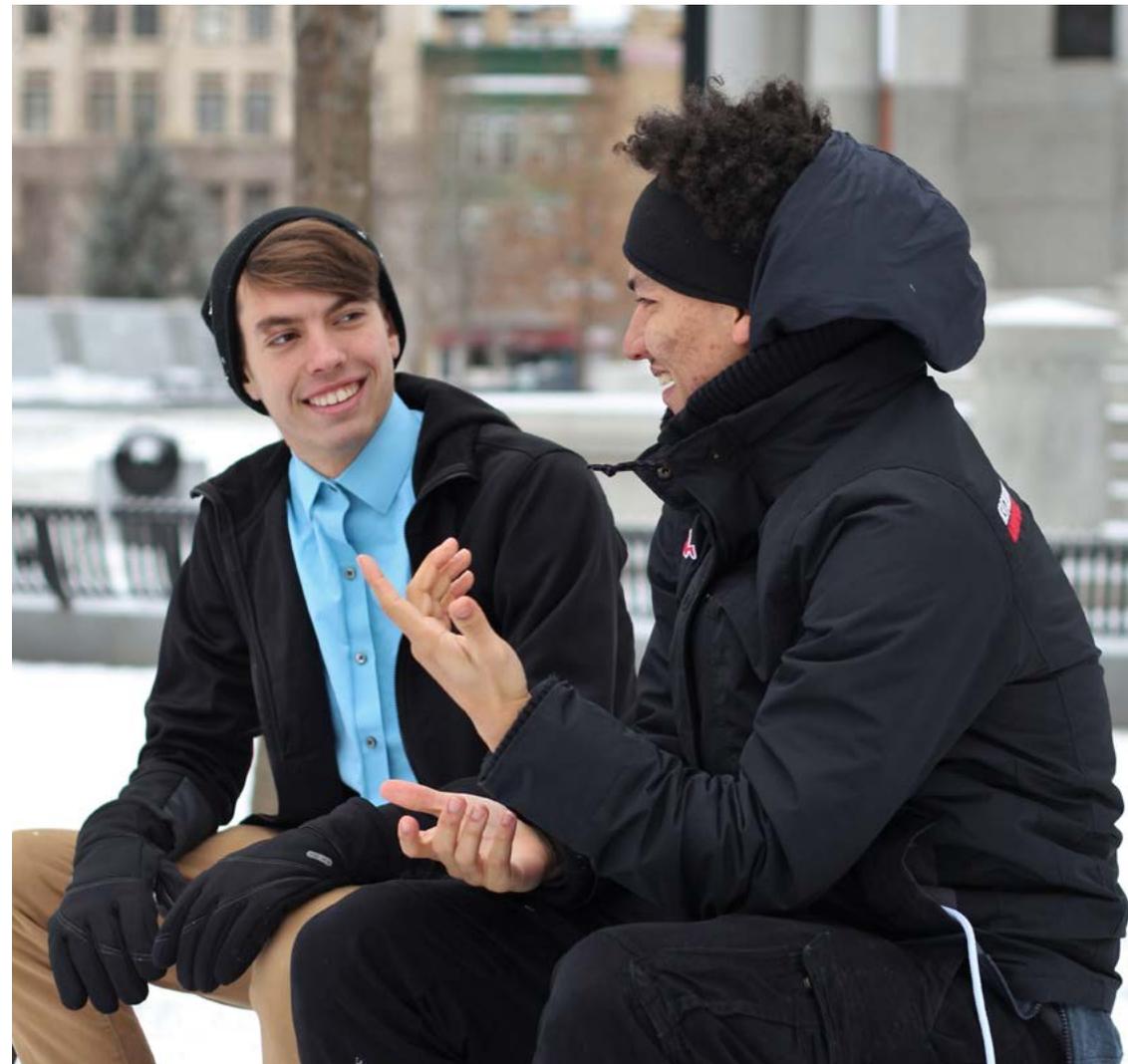
“ A majority of my family did not go to university nor did my parents. One of parents don't work and the other has a low salary job. They are also from a different country, and so perhaps **haven't had as many opportunities** due to this. ”

“ I've been introduced to a small variety of Widening Participation schemes (such as **Realising Opportunities, Durham's Supported Progression** and **WAMS** to name a few) and have looked at the eligibility criteria for these. I happened to find out that I meet the majority of the criteria for each scheme already. My sixth form is very dedicated to making sure **every student gets to flourish** in whichever way is best for them post-18, which is why i have been introduced to these schemes quite early on and have a good knowledge of them. ”

“ My mother is single, 4 children, although she has a part time job she does rely on benefits and a trust fund also, as she has an **annual income below £16,000 for a household of 5 adults.** ”

“ I'm from a **farming background** and none of my family or very few have gone to university. I'm one of few Scottish students from my area **wanting or willing to study outside of Scotland to achieve greater things.** ”

Having demonstrated that WP students have specific motivations and concerns, it is now evident that they self-identify as WP. This suggests that there may be merit in an explicit appeal to their specific needs, offering tailored support and incentives.



In conclusion – TSR Opinion

To the marketing and recruitment community the Widening Participation audience is an interesting proposition.

Behaving in a similar way to the mainstream audience, and with largely similar motivations, tailoring communications and outreach to this community is a balancing act. The challenge lies in amplifying messages around specific WP wants and needs, while maintaining the elements that resonate with all audiences.

In practical terms the theme of reassurance comes out of the research around anxiety. This reassurance is equally valuable to influencers as to applicants, and can help to allay key concerns around affordability and debt.

However the WP audience can't be characterised as timid or nervous as a whole. Their social and educational aspiration is greater than their non-WP counterparts and they demonstrate an admirable robustness and determination.

This combination of determination and self-identifying as WP suggests the sector could, arguably, be more overt in our appeals to this market.

About The Student Room

The Student Room is the largest, most useful and best-loved online student community there is. Millions of students turn to us first for advice, info and support on work, learning and life's ups and downs. And that means we're uniquely privileged to connect educators, employers and consumer brands to switched-on young people actively seeking out answers and meaningful connections.

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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