

1 in 5 students unintentionally block themselves from degree choices

Strictly embargoed until 00:01 Thursday 25 March 2021

Two in five students at university say they would have made better choices had they had better access to higher quality information and advice in school. As a result, one in five students couldn't study a degree subject that interested them because they didn't have the right subjects to progress. This is most apparent for some degree courses, such as medicine and dentistry, maths, economics or languages, which require applicants to have taken a specific set of 'fixed' pre-requisite qualifications.

UCAS has today released its latest report 'Where next?', which highlights the impact of qualification and subject choice at school on students' future pathways, and recommends ways students can be better supported to make fully informed choices at every stage.

The report also highlights the importance of early engagement in careers information, advice and guidance, with one in three students understanding that higher education was an option for them at primary school. However, advantaged students are 1.4 times more likely to think about higher education in primary school than their disadvantaged peers. These students are also less likely to see a door closed to them through their choice of subjects.

Other key findings of today's report are:

- 83% of students choose their degree subject before they choose their preferred university or college, highlighting the importance of subject-focused outreach.
- Almost all (99%) said their choices at school were influenced by how much they enjoyed the subject - also the primary driver of degree choice.
- When choosing their degree subject, over 50% said that high graduate employment rates had become more important to them since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- 49% of English 18 year olds with post-16 vocational qualifications, such as BTECs and OCR Cambridge Technicals, enter higher education, but these students are significantly less likely to attend higher tariff providers than those with general qualifications (entry rate of 3% vs. 27%).

- As well as two in five saying more information and advice would have led to them making better choices, almost one in three say they did not receive any information about apprenticeships from their school, showing that more needs to be done to promote parity across these routes.
- More than a quarter of students we surveyed would make different GCSE/National 5 choices now they know what their degree course involves – and around a third would choose a different post-16 options.
- One in four students say their parents or carers were their biggest help in determining their choice of degree course, and many follow similar pathways, eg:
 - students with a parent or carer in farming are nearly 20 times more likely to study veterinary science, agriculture or related subjects;
 - students with a parent or carer who is a medical practitioner are eight times more likely to study medicine or dentistry;
 - students with a parent or carer who is an artist are over three times more likely to study arts and design courses.

Clare Marchant, Chief Executive at UCAS, said: “Students today face more options than ever before. Whilst choice is a core part of the UK higher education system, it is essential that students know how to navigate this. No student should unknowingly close the door to their career aspirations.

“We know that early engagement raises aspiration. The data showing that disadvantaged students tend to consider the prospect of higher education later than their more advantaged peers clearly demonstrates the need to embed careers information, advice and guidance within primary schools and early secondary years to raise aspirations from an early age.

“UCAS data shows that just under half of registered applicants would like more information about apprenticeship opportunities. Despite this, nearly one in three students have told us that they did not receive any information and advice about apprenticeships from their school. The sector has long talked about the need for a single destination for students to explore all of their options, and it is our ambition to be the destination for all post-secondary education; apprenticeships are not just an add on, they are fundamental to the delivery of that goal.

“Importantly, today’s report does not say students have made the wrong choice – it remains, above all, a highly individual and nuanced decision. Instead, it says that students should know the consequence of each and every choice they make along their journey. From the analysis, we see that some students would have made different decisions had they had better careers information, advice and guidance. We have recommended a series of ways for this to be achieved, including providing

digital access to the full range of post-secondary opportunities through the UCAS Hub.”

Jonathan Atkinson, UK Chair of HELOA, said: “HELOA members work collaboratively to enhance our knowledge, our best practice sharing enables us to focus on the individual needs of students helping them to make an informed decision about their future options. We look forward to supporting the ongoing work of our partners in enhancing student choice.”

Ends

UCAS Press Office

01242 545 469

communications@ucas.ac.uk

[@ucas_corporate](#)

Notes for editors:

A pdf copy of the report is available on request

The report covers UK 18 and 19 year old applicants with data from the 2019, 2020 and 2021 cycles where appropriate. It uses data from a survey of over 27,000 first and second year students at UK universities and colleges, looking at the choices they made at school and into higher education. Any statements are therefore only relevant for the subset of UK 18 and 19 year olds who apply to Higher Education and/or are accepted.

The subject groupings used here are using the JACS method of classifying academic subjects and modules (www.hesa.ac.uk/support/documentation/jacs) and unless otherwise specified, they refer to the JACS 3.0 specification.

UCAS, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, is an independent charity, and the UK's shared admissions service for higher education. We manage almost three million applications, from around 700,000 people each year, for full-time undergraduate courses at over 380 universities and colleges across the UK.