

UCAS

WHERE NEXT?

**WHO DOESN'T PLAN
TO START A FULL-TIME
UNDERGRADUATE
DEGREE IN AUTUMN?**





UCAS, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, is an independent charity, and the UK's shared admissions service for post-secondary education. This service spans undergraduate, postgraduate, technical, and apprenticeship pathways, with the undergraduate service alone supporting over 700,000 students a year from over 200 countries and territories, with more than 400 different verified qualifications to access UK higher education (HE).

On 10 August 2021, hundreds of thousands of UK students will be receiving their Level 3 and SCQF Level 6 and 7 results. For many, this marks the end of their period in secondary education and their first step towards further or higher education and training. UCAS knows that 42% of UK 18 year olds are holding an offer to commence a full-time undergraduate degree in autumn 2021, but what about the experience and aspirations of the other 58% – in particular, those who would like to stay in education or training?

Based on new polling of 'the 58%', this briefing note sets out what we know of their plans, who they are, and how UCAS and the education sector can make sure these young people are completely clear about the options available to them.

EDUCATION AND TRAINING OPTIONS ARE MORE DIVERSE THAN EVER

2020 saw a new record entry rate for UK 18 year olds, with 37% being placed on a full-time undergraduate degree programme. This rises significantly if you include part-time study and mature students, meaning that the latest Department for Education progression data for Level 3 students in England¹ shows:

- ▶ 59% of students were studying for a form of degree (full or part-time);
- ▶ 3% were studying an HE qualification at Level 4 or 5;
- ▶ 1% were participating in an apprenticeship at Level 4 or higher; and
- ▶ The remaining 37% either went into employment, continued to study at Level 3 or below, did not sustain a destination for six consecutive months, or were NEET (not in education, employment, or training).

In addition, recent UCAS analysis shows the rising popularity of HE amongst mature students domiciled in the UK:

- ▶ 79,775 19 year olds, 31,660 20 year olds, and 114,440 students aged 21+ embarked upon a university or college degree in 2020.
- ▶ Similarly, 80,500 19 to 24 year olds and 121,400 people aged 25+ started an apprenticeship in England between August 2020 and April 2021.

In Where Next? Improving the journey to becoming an apprentice in May, UCAS highlighted that more than half of students looking to apply to HE in 2022 said they are also interested in apprenticeships. Nevertheless, as noted in Where Next? What influences the choices school leavers make? one in three students do not receive any information about apprenticeships from their school or college. To better understand these findings, UCAS surveyed over 600 students² expecting to receive their qualification results on 10 August 2021 but who have not accepted an offer to study through UCAS this autumn.

Key findings, which are expanded on throughout the report, include:

- ▶ There is strong demand for apprenticeships from students not going to university or college this autumn, with almost **8 out of 10 (78%) either interested in, or committed to, starting an apprenticeship this year.**
- ▶ The three most popular factors students consider when choosing their future pathway are: **to earn money (50%); to continue learning but in a different way (43%); and to do something new and different (42%).**
- ▶ **Only 11% say they received enough information about their options and did not require any more and 9% state they did not receive any careers information at all.**
- ▶ During the pandemic, students were typically unable to undertake physical visits or attend interviews in person, **but 88% of respondents are 'fairly' or 'very' committed to their choice.**

¹ Progression to higher education or training, Academic Year 2018/19 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK (explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk)

² A total of 630 17 to 19 year olds (216 males, 396 females, 18 other gender) responded to the survey. All participants were sourced via schools and UCAS circulated the survey link. All these students are expecting to receive qualification results on 10 August 2021. None of the sample had accepted an offer via UCAS between 25/06/21 and 14/07/21.



WHO ARE 'THE 58%', AND WHAT OPTIONS ARE THEY CONSIDERING FOR THEIR NEXT STEPS?

Respondents to UCAS' polling fall into two categories: those with a live UCAS application but not holding an accepted offer (38%), and those without a live UCAS application (62%). These groups told us:

- ▶ **Apprenticeships are a popular option for both these groups:** More than three quarters (78%) of 17 to 19 year olds who are getting their results on 10 August but do not have plans to go to university or college this autumn are interested in, or committed to, starting an apprenticeship.
 - More than a fifth (22%) say their **main plan** is an apprenticeship (16% higher or degree level, 6% advanced level) and a further 56% are **considering** an apprenticeship.
 - Of those without a live UCAS application, **25% say their main plan is an apprenticeship** (17% higher or degree level, 8% advanced level).
 - Of those with a live UCAS application but not holding an accepted offer, **17% say their main plan is an apprenticeship** (14% higher or degree level, 3% advanced level).
- ▶ Those who have a live UCAS application but are not holding an accepted offer are **most likely looking to do their degree differently or to start later**. The most popular main plans for this group are: a gap year (27%); part-time undergraduate study (20%); and a higher or degree level apprenticeship (14%).
- ▶ Those without a live UCAS application are largely **not actively seeking undergraduate study**. The most popular main plans for this group are: a gap year (22%); additional Level 3 study (20%); a higher or degree level apprenticeship (17%); and employment (15%).



HOW ARE 'THE 58%' FEELING ABOUT THEIR OPTIONS, AND HOW DOES THIS COMPARE TO THIS AUTUMN'S UNIVERSITY AND COLLEGE ENTRANTS?

The students who do not plan to go to university or college this autumn say they have a wide range of options available to them:

- ▶ **73% feel they have 'some' (40%) or 'lots' (33%) of options for next year.**
- ▶ 88% feel they are 'fairly' or 'very' committed to their plans for the next year. The **most commitment is expressed towards higher or degree level apprenticeships** (92% compared to 88% average commitment).
- ▶ **Of those who feel they had 'not many' options (18%), the most popular main plans are: a gap year (31%); employment (18%); and an advanced Level 3 apprenticeship (8%).**

Alongside this new polling, UCAS conducts regular sentiment tracking of undergraduate applicants, the latest of which surveyed this autumn's university and college entrants. This shows:

- ▶ The level of commitment expressed by the '58%' is similar to the levels of commitment expressed by this autumn's university or college entrants – more than three quarters (76%) of offer holders are committed to their firm choice and not exploring other options.
- ▶ The **high level of commitment expressed by school and college leavers in both surveys indicates that 'digital decisions' appear to be largely robust**, despite students having been typically unable to undertake physical visits or attend interviews in person.

Therefore, the importance of high-quality digital careers information and advice delivered by UCAS and partners is clear; this content is freely available and acts as a comprehensive tool for students at schools and colleges across the country to draw on. It acts as a digital equaliser to ensure all students can access the information they need at each stage of their journey into education, training, or employment.

WHY HAVE THEY CHOSEN THEIR NEXT STEP?

The reasons behind students' decision making are encouraging for the apprenticeships brand as the main features of apprenticeships provision resonate and are popular. As previously noted, the three most popular factors students consider when choosing their future pathway are: **to earn money (50%); to continue learning but in a different way (43%); and to do something new and different (42%)**.

Digging into these motivations more deeply finds:

- ▶ For those whose most important motivation is to earn money, 24% say their main plan is to take a gap year, 19% to go into employment, 16% to take a higher or degree level apprenticeship, and 7% to take an advanced Level 3 apprenticeship.
- ▶ For people looking to learn in a different way, 22% say their main plan is a higher or degree level apprenticeship, 17% to undertake part-time undergraduate study, and 16% to take a gap year.
- ▶ Of those who want to avoid debt, 26% say their main plan is to start a higher or degree level apprenticeship, 18% to take a gap year, 17% to go into employment, and 7% to start an advanced Level 3 apprenticeship.

WHAT INFORMATION AND ADVICE DID THE '58%' RECEIVE?

As referenced above, a minority of students feel they received their full careers information and advice entitlement. 9% state they did not receive any careers information, while only 11% say they received enough information and did not require any more.

This cohort say they were more likely to have received information about a full-time undergraduate degree than about higher or degree level apprenticeships: nearly three quarters (74%) received information about full-time undergraduate study, while just over half (53%) received information about higher or degree level apprenticeships. Most wanted additional information about gap years (37%) and employment (35%).

Disparities were found in the equality of careers information and advice provision, with 58% of white respondents having received information about apprenticeships, compared to only 45% of those from an ethnic minority group. This reflects analysis by the **Social Mobility Commission** in June 2020, which showed fewer apprenticeship opportunities are going to the most disadvantaged young people, who disproportionately belong to ethnic minority communities.



NEXT STEPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- ▶ **The Skills and Post-16 Education Bill should recognise the role UCAS plays as a trusted and independent source of information.** UCAS should be included alongside the National Careers Service as a pillar of the government's ambition for skills and careers advice in England. UCAS will continue to work with the devolved governments to help inform their careers strategies.
- ▶ **Earlier careers advice must be improved, including at primary school.** As highlighted in our *Where Next? What influences the choices school leavers make?* report, access to high quality information, advice and guidance about all options helps young people to make better choices. It is crucial that all students can access this from an earlier age, recognising the importance this plays in raising aspirations.
- ▶ **UCAS to act as a 'digital Baker Clause', providing careers information and advice for the full range of choices.** To achieve this would require an expansion of the comprehensive information, advice, and content tools already available through UCAS to help students make informed and aspirational choices about the full range of post-secondary options in a single location.

These recommendations are made in the context of the findings from the UCAS Where Next? series of reports.

Published in March 2021, the report *Where Next? What influences the choices school leavers make?* recommends the **stepping-up of careers information and advice in primary and early secondary education.**

- ▶ One in three students considered HE as an option at primary school. However, advantaged students were 1.4 times more likely to do so than their disadvantaged peers. This can limit their later choices, especially for more selective subjects and higher tariff providers.
- ▶ 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. This indicates that more needs to be done to promote parity across all routes.
- ▶ Students who think about their degree subject early tend to feel more prepared once they start studying. 65% of those who considered the HE subject they might want to study before choosing their GCSE/National 5 options felt 'extremely' or 'mostly' prepared, compared to 56% of those who only considered this after entering post-16 education.
- ▶ Advantaged students are also more likely to feel 'extremely' or 'mostly' prepared, with 64% of students from more advantaged areas reporting this to be the case, compared to 58% of those from less advantaged areas.

In May 2021, UCAS' follow-up report, *Where Next? Improving the journey to becoming an apprentice*, highlighted the importance of helping students make **informed and aspirational decisions about the full range of opportunities including apprenticeships.**

- ▶ Over half of students looking to apply in 2022 told UCAS they are interested in apprenticeships, but many find it hard to get the information they need about them.
- ▶ Only 8% of survey respondents associated apprenticeships with leading to a good job.

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