

# Through the lens of students: how perceptions of higher education influence applicants' choices

July 2016

UCAS

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## Foreword

This report presents the views of respondents to a survey of all 18-19 year old UK domiciled UCAS Undergraduate applicants in the 2015 admissions cycle. We are very grateful to the 16,600 young people who took the time not just to respond to all the questions in the survey, but to do so in such a thoughtful manner, in many cases providing lengthy answers in free text when given the opportunity. We think the exercise will make a valuable contribution to the evidence base and public debate on what motivates young people to progress to higher education, the barriers that prevent some from doing so, and the kind of support and guidance young people find most useful. We particularly hope it will throw some light on the kind of interventions that might be most effective in widening participation.



In many ways, the answers to the survey were reassuring. There was a clear indication that young people adopt a well thought through and sensible approach to university selection, surprising us sometimes with the maturity with which they make their choices. In general, they are very career-focused and the various aspects of higher education (HE) most likely to secure them the career structure they want are given a high priority in their search. They were articulate in describing the challenges faced in progressing to HE, but determined and enterprising in overcoming them.

But young applicants need more support to understand their options. We detected stark differences in applicants' views of universities and perspectives on HE depending on their social background. 'Fitting in' is more likely to be an anxiety for those from advantaged backgrounds, while for many, the quality of the accommodation was as important as the quality of the course. There were differences too in views about the relative importance to employers of the course studied or the university attended. We need to be mindful of how difficult and expensive it can be to get to open days, which play such an important role in supporting the critical decision about what and where to study.

The cost of going to university is undoubtedly an issue, but potential students are more worried about supporting themselves while they are at university rather than the level of tuition fees. We found that practical information on issues such as cost of living, travel, budgeting, and accommodation are foremost in their minds.

In deciding where to apply, respondents wanted greater transparency in relation to actual admission grades, the extent to which other things like work experience or volunteering are taken into account, and genuine, respectful understanding of disadvantaged circumstances. We must not underestimate the immense challenge the transition to HE is for young people of all backgrounds.

Our survey also suggested two ways in which well-meaning support can be misdirected. First, the generic advice and guidance provided by schools and colleges is often directed most at those who arguably least need it, the high achievers already aspiring to higher tariff universities. Second, the interventions provided by schools themselves or by third sector organisations, tend to be targeted at a narrow group of young people, already close to making the decision to progress to HE. A much larger group has been left behind, disaffected, and disenfranchised.

All the current support mechanisms in place – open days, visits to schools, online communication, school support, third sector interventions – have a role and are much appreciated by young applicants. But equally, they made some inventive and innovative suggestions about how these might be improved and better focused on the desired outcomes.

Much of this advice and support is currently targeted at 16-18 year olds. Crucially, answers to the survey demonstrated that the age at which young people engage with the concept of HE is a key determinant in whether or not they will take that challenging step. The survey responses indicate that having university as a goal from age ten or earlier makes a significant contribution to future success – and those from disadvantaged backgrounds are the most likely to have adopted that goal much later in their education. Advice and guidance post-16, while valuable in itself, is too late for many.

Our recommendations try to address realistic and practical ways in which all those involved in the process – schools, colleges, higher education providers (HEPs), UCAS – can help support young people of all backgrounds to chart a successful and manageable pathway from school, to university, to a career, with a particular focus on those whose family and friends are least able to help and advise.

All young people, in all types of school or college, need good information and advice on all the routes and pathways, at least from the start of secondary school, as well as opportunities to visit or talk to university teachers and students who have successfully accessed HE against the odds.

**Mary Curnock Cook**  
**Chief Executive, UCAS**

## Executive summary

### Why UCAS undertook the work

UCAS' mission is to inspire and facilitate progression in education through information and admissions services. Supporting universities and colleges with their efforts to widen participation and enabling everyone who has the potential to benefit from HE to have the opportunity to do so, is a thread that runs through our strategic priorities.

UCAS supports widening participation in higher education by:

- providing impartial information and advice (I&A) to prospective students, parents, and advisers about the opportunities offered by HE, and more detailed information and support about how to apply to HE
- publishing data and analysis to support effective planning, monitoring, and evaluation of admissions
- supporting contextualised admissions

UCAS is well placed to make a contribution to the evidence base and public debate on widening participation, by exploring the views and opinions of young people who have recently applied to HE.

We surveyed all UK domiciled applicants from the 2015 application cycle who were aged 18 or 19 in the year of application, whether they were ultimately accepted into HE or not. We have explored the factors that motivate young people to apply to HE and what they perceive the barriers to progression to HE to be. We have examined if, and how, the motivations and barriers are different for those applying to higher tariff universities, and how these vary for learners from advantaged and more disadvantaged backgrounds.

More specifically, we have also sought to find out what interventions might motivate non-applicants to apply and learners to consider alternative application choices.

As well as a statistical analysis of the responses, applicants were given the opportunity to provide free text responses to a number of questions, particularly in respect of what motivated them to apply to university, why some of their peers had not done so, and about reasons for choosing or not considering higher tariff universities. These thoughtful answers helped inform a more holistic view of young people's motivations, and some challenged a more traditional perception of what really matters to young people.

The survey was UK-wide and the report therefore reflects the views of applicants from all four nations. While many issues apply to young applicants from all countries of the UK, there were others that were specific to applicants in Northern Ireland, Scotland, or Wales.

We hope the findings will help inform the debate about how universities, colleges, schools, and organisations involved in widening participation can better inform young people about the benefits of HE, and the diversity and choice of study options available, as well as highlighting the need for disadvantaged learners to achieve the qualifications they need to make stretching HE application choices.

## Key findings

### Perceptions of higher education

Applicants have a clear idea about what they think makes a university good:

- Quality of teaching, appropriate delivery, and assessment.
- Academic reputation, and commitment to research.
- A good record for graduate job prospects.
- Facilities – academic, social, and accommodation.

Applicants had firm perceptions about the challenges they were likely to face at university. Some of these perceptions were different between advantaged and disadvantaged learners.

- 64 per cent of applicants think that the right accommodation is as important as the right course, with 70 per cent of disadvantaged applicants agreeing with this statement.
- Advantaged applicants were 18 per cent more likely to say that fitting in at university is an important thing to consider.

Worries about making friends, homesickness, loneliness, taking responsibility for yourself, and coping with being away from home were all mentioned frequently by all groups. However, advantaged applicants tended to focus more on developing networks of friends, while the most disadvantaged groups were more concerned about practicalities like transport and accommodation.

There were some shared views about what employers are looking for from graduates, and notable differences between advantaged and disadvantaged applicants:

- 86 per cent of respondents think that employers are most interested in relevant work experience gained as part of a degree.
- 47 per cent disagreed that employers were most interested in where you studied, not what you studied.
- Advantaged applicants were 48 per cent more likely to say that employers are



- more interested in the university you attended than the subject you studied.
- Disadvantaged applicants were 30 per cent more likely to say that the subject you studied will be more relevant to employers than where you studied.

### **Why some people don't apply to higher education (HE)**

Overall, 43 per cent of respondents said that 'nowadays, almost everyone goes to university', although 49 per cent of advantaged applicants said this compared to 35 per cent of the most disadvantaged group.

82 per cent of respondents said their peers had not applied to university because they wanted to get a job or apprenticeship, and 58 per cent said it was because they were not going to get good enough grades. Among disadvantaged applicants, there were also greater concerns about the affordability of accommodation and living costs, and a desire to not move away from home.

Common themes which emerged from the free text comments included the following:

- Financial concerns and worry about debt.
- Lack of clarity about the real entry requirements for a course.
- Understanding the full range of degree courses available and lack of visibility of employment opportunities as part of the degree.
- Confidence in the graduate job market.
- Variable quality of advice from schools and colleges – in particular, respondents reported a lack of support for those not interested in higher tariff universities.
- Limited access to widening participation programmes.

There is evidence that the earlier young people understand about the opportunities available through HE, the more likely they are to be motivated to apply, and to a higher tariff university. 20 per cent of applicants said they were certain they would apply to HE by the age of ten or younger, with 25 per cent of those in the most advantaged group reporting this, compared to 18 per cent in the most disadvantaged group.

Free text responses also highlighted the need for earlier access to information, including advice on GCSE choices and the importance of GCSE attainment for entry to HE.

### **Why some people don't apply to higher tariff providers**

6,500 respondents to the survey had not applied to a higher tariff university. Their primary reasons were:

- 49 per cent thought the entry requirements were too high
- 41 per cent thought none of these universities offered the courses they were interested in

- 20 per cent thought it would be too expensive to live at these universities

The free text comments highlighted concerns about:

- lack of transparency about entry requirements – more students would have applied if they had known they had a chance of getting in
- the desirability of taking account of contextual factors when considering academic achievements and potential
- lack of understanding of career pathways from academic-sounding degree courses
- lack of relevant outreach and engagement

### **Visits and open days**

Open days and visits constitute one of the most important steps in helping applicants make well-informed choices about what and where to study. 91 per cent of respondents visited at least one university during the application process, and 67 per cent visited between two and five.

Regardless of the number of visits made, almost three quarters of applicants would have found visiting more universities useful. Among those who made at least one visit, lack of time (44 per cent) and expense (43 per cent) were cited as the main reasons for not visiting more open days.

50 per cent of advantaged learners reported lack of time as the main reason for not attending more open days, whereas 49 per cent of disadvantaged learners cited cost as the main reason for not attending more.

In the free text comments, respondents also cited:

- the timing of open days and visits – it is more expensive to travel in the week and at peak times, and parents and carers may be unable to take time off from work
- lack of advice on transport arrangements
- lack of coordinated travel and organised trips

Three quarters of applicants said they would apply to higher tariff universities if they were offered a travel voucher for an open day.



## Recommendations

Our recommendations set out practical steps that schools, universities, and colleges could take to help all young people, whatever their starting point, chart a successful pathway from school or college to HE, in line with their career and employment goals.

Universities and colleges should do more to:

- explain the progression pathways from degree programmes into graduate employment, particularly in relation to degree programmes with more academic titles, where it may be harder for some learners to link these courses to future career opportunities
- explain and promote how employers are involved in shaping their degree programmes, and the opportunities available for students to gain work experience as part of their programme of study
- be clear and transparent about the actual entry requirements for their courses, and any additional evidence they're looking for beyond academic achievement
- raise awareness of the support available to new undergraduates to help them succeed in studying at a higher level, before and after the transition to HE
- provide easily accessible information about the costs of living and studying at their course provider, particularly information about accommodation, transport, and day-to-day living costs, alongside advice on budgeting
- reach out to a wider cohort of prospective students to demonstrate that they are inclusive course providers
- schedule open days, interviews, and any tests at times when it is easiest and cheapest for applicants to attend, and provide more information to make attending as simple as possible, as well as considering alternatives such as virtual tours, regional events, and providing transport solutions
- consider financial incentives to encourage applicants to attend more open days, for example, travel vouchers

Schools and colleges should do more to:

- encourage all learners to start thinking about post-18 choices at a younger age; at least from age 12-13 or even earlier
- provide balanced, learner-centred information, advice, and guidance about the full range of post-16 and post-18 options available
- encourage and support all learners to make aspirational choices and to achieve the highest grades they can

## Report

### Summary of the methodology

In January/February 2016, UCAS carried out an online survey of all UK domiciled applicants from the 2015 application cycle who were aged 18 or 19 in the year of application, whether they were ultimately accepted into HE or not. 18,100 people responded, 16,600 of whom answered all questions, which represents a 4.5 per cent response rate. These responses were weighted to be representative of the characteristics and numbers of the 2015 application cycle UK domiciled June deadline, for the 18-19 year applicant population.

The questionnaire was designed to explore the factors that motivate young people to apply to HE, and what they perceive the barriers are to progression to HE. We have examined if, and how, the motivations and barriers are different for those applying to higher tariff universities, as well as a specific series of questions about open days.

To explore the motivations of those who did not apply to HE, we asked respondents to tell us about why they thought members of their peer group had not applied.

Of the 6,500 respondents who had not applied to a higher tariff university, we asked an additional set of questions to explore why.

As a follow-up activity, we carried out in-depth telephone interviews with nineteen respondents, selected either because they had given responses most consistent with the overall pattern, or because they had raised specific issues that we wanted to explore in greater depth.

The responses therefore reflect the views of young people with very recent experience of applying to HE. 81 per cent (weighted) had been accepted, and 19 per cent (weighted) had not been accepted. Most will have just experienced their first term at university or college, which enhanced their perspectives. A minority were pursuing alternatives to HE, taking a voluntary gap year, or, for a variety of reasons, taking a year out with the intention of reapplying.



This approach enabled us to examine the motivations and options across the whole applicant cohort. By matching the responses back to UCAS' analytical data, we have also been able to examine responses by socio-economic background (POLAR3<sup>1</sup>), sex, and ethnicity, as well as looking at whether respondents applied to a higher tariff university, their country of domicile, age, and whether they applied by the October or January deadline. Where there are significant differences in responses between different groups, these are highlighted in the findings.

The following annexes are included:

- Annex A – Analytical results of the survey
- Annex B – Copy of the questionnaire
- Annex C – Notes on analysis methodology
- Annex D – The survey data tables

## Findings

We present the findings under four main headings:

- Perceptions of higher education
- Why some people don't apply to higher education
- Why some people don't apply to higher tariff providers
- The effectiveness of visits and open days

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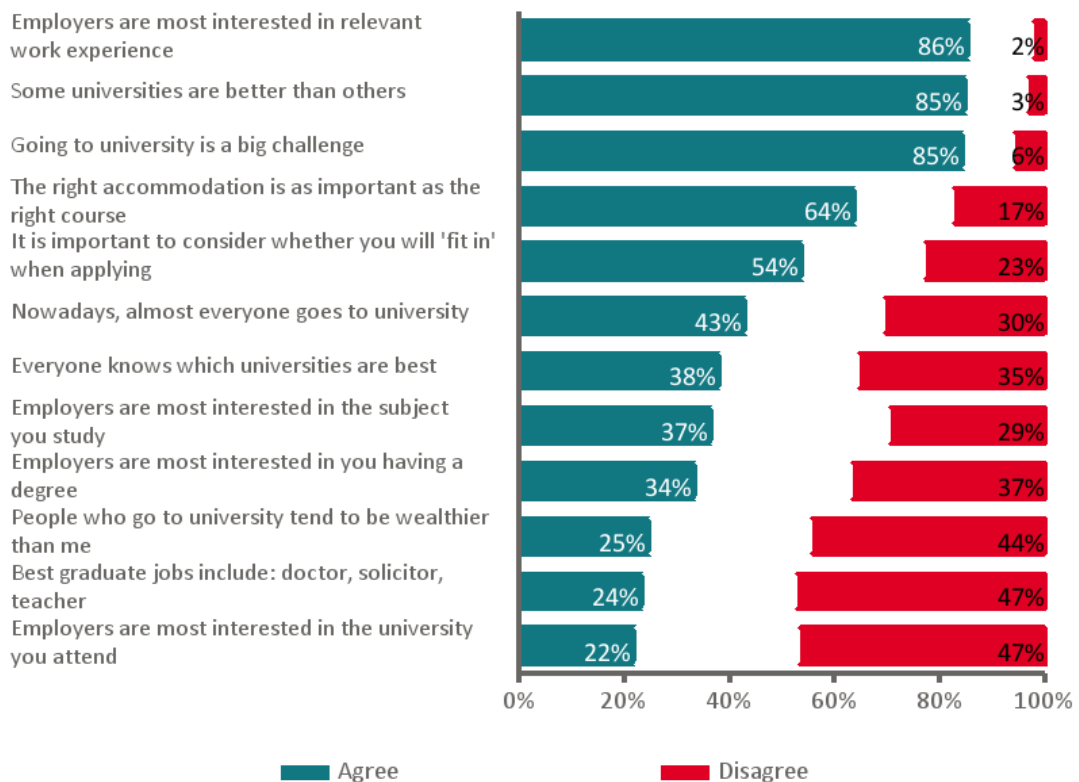
<sup>1</sup> The POLAR3 system has been developed by HEFCE and classifies small areas across the UK into five groups according to their level of young participation in HE. Each of the groups represents around twenty per cent of young people, and they are ranked from quintile 1 (areas with the lowest participation rates, considered as the most disadvantaged) to quintile 5 (highest young participation rates, considered most advantaged).



## 1. Perceptions of higher education

In the survey, applicants were asked if they agreed or disagreed with twelve statements designed to ascertain their perceptions of HE, what they thought employers wanted from graduates, their perceptions of universities, and their own perceived challenges (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Proportion of respondents (weighted) indicating to what extent they agree with each of these statements**



## 1.1 Applicants' perceptions of employers' requirements for graduate recruitment

A very high proportion of respondents (86 per cent) said they thought that employers were more interested in relevant work experience gained as part of a degree, than other factors such as the university someone attended, which only 22 per cent thought was important. This response was evenly balanced between advantaged and disadvantaged groups.

Many applicants had a clear work focus and in our interviews, we found this particularly so among applicants from more disadvantaged groups.



*"I will be the first person in my family to go to university and me having a strong academic background is important to my family. I feel like my future will be more secure with a degree behind me."*

It is therefore not surprising that an opportunity for an internship or work placement as an integral part of their course, was a factor for many in choosing a university. They were impressed by universities where the opportunities for work placements are well-explained, and where the university is actively involved in finding placements.

We were told that some people who opt for employment or apprenticeships do so because they don't know about the work placement opportunities available through university courses. We were also told that such information was not readily available on university websites, and was often found out about from current students.

*"I think universities should advertise their placement courses and sandwich courses more. The majority of people who didn't go to university didn't apply because they were interested in getting a job, but a lot of uni courses offer the opportunity to get a job halfway through your course... I don't think anyone is made aware of this until you're at university and on the course."*

However, while applicants overall were least likely (22 per cent) to agree that employers were most interested in the university you attended, advantaged applicants were 48 per cent more likely to do so. 37 per cent of all applicants thought that employers were most interested in the subject you studied, but disadvantaged applicants were 30 per cent more likely to think this. Advantaged applicants were also 40 per cent more likely to agree that nowadays, almost everybody goes to university.

Only 24 per cent thought that the best graduate jobs included doctor, lawyer, and teacher, though disadvantaged applicants were 11 per cent more likely to say this.

## 1.2 Applicants' perceptions of different universities

85 per cent of respondents said they thought some universities were better than others, but only 38 per cent said everybody knows which universities are best. Advantaged applicants were 32 per cent more likely to agree with the latter statement.

However, free text responses and interviews indicated something of a disconnect between what young applicants thought was a 'good' university, and what they thought was the general perception of what made some universities better than others.

The reasons why applicants thought a university was good displayed a thoughtful and sensible approach to their decision-making. There was an emphasis on the quality of teaching and a good number of contact hours. Academic reputation, position in league tables, and the amount of money put into research were also mentioned. Comments on the quality of the content were balanced, with a desire for appropriate delivery and assessment, e.g. practical experience in medicine. Closely allied to this was that a good university offered the course they wanted. The location, often in relation to their home, also affected their perceptions.

*"One where the course is right for me, has a good number of contact hours with staff that are easy to contact, and where the course itself is taught in a way that is suitable for me."*

The pathway to a successful career was one of the strongest motivations for attending university, so a good record on graduate job prospects also featured highly on the list of what made a good university. Aspirations for a good job, a high salary, an affluent lifestyle, more career options, a satisfying career, a fulfilling life, and doing better than their parents were very evident in the responses.

*"I come from a poor background and I was always convinced that uni is the only way to get out of poverty. It isn't entirely accurate but it's a good way to get out of poverty as it opens so many doors."*



There was also a desire for personal growth. Students expected university to help them achieve independence, maturity, to build character, and act as a safe stepping stone towards adulthood.

*"Somewhere you can develop and take something away from."*

*"Trying to present beauty in knowledge, intelligence, and self-development."*

There was, however, a strong indication that applicants believed there was a hierarchy of universities not necessarily aligned with their perception of what made a university good. This was much more evident in the advantaged group.

In both the free text responses and the interviews, it was clear that applicants had a good understanding of the nature of higher tariff universities, including the Russell Group. They could articulate that they were high ranking, academic universities and that for many careers, particularly in the more competitive professions like law and medicine, it can be important where a degree is from.

*“It may not be fair, but it’s how people think.”*

On the other hand, some expressed frustrations about being pressurised to apply to a Russell Group university when they didn’t want to, or when they thought it was not the best thing for them. Others told of teachers giving all their attention to those aspiring to higher tariff universities.

*“They really liked getting students into the Russell Group universities. They published the students’ destinations so it was important to them.”*

In general, there was a plea for schools to adopt a more balanced approach to progression advice, both in respect of universities and colleges, and courses.

*“We need a more inclusive system. My sixth form college focussed very much on high achieving Oxbridge candidates in classes which personally made me feel inadequate, and as if going to any other kind of university would be a waste of time.”*

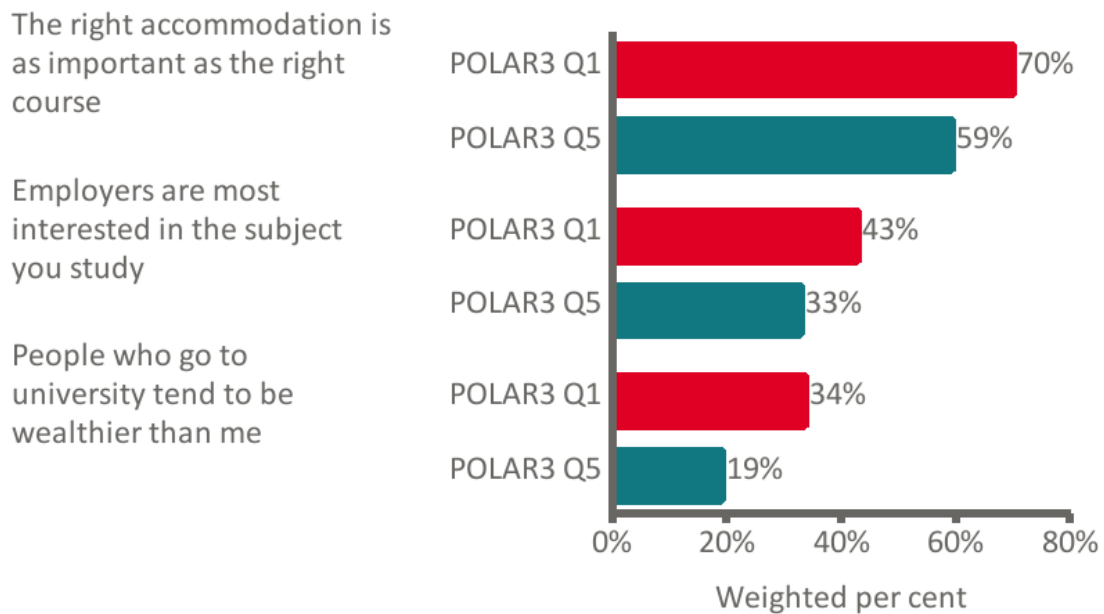
### **1.3 Applicants’ perceptions of the challenges of HE**

85 per cent of all survey respondents admitted that the transition to university was a big challenge. There was less agreement between advantaged and disadvantaged applicants about what the challenges are (Figure 2).

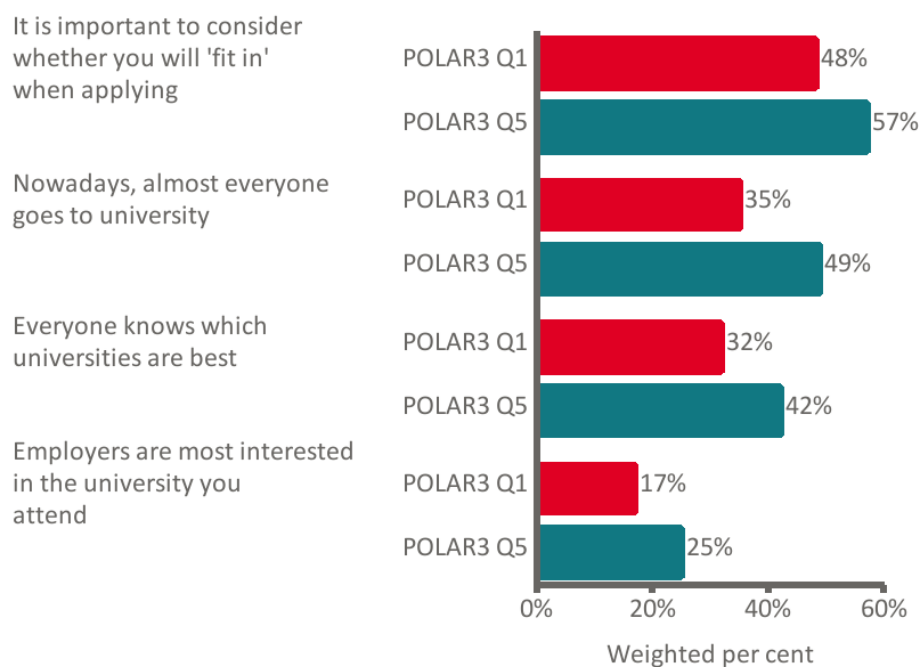


**Figure 2: Proportion of respondents (weighted) indicating to what extent they agree with each of these statements<sup>2</sup>**

**Disadvantaged more likely to agree:**



**Advantaged more likely to agree:**



<sup>2</sup> POLAR3 quintiles: quintile 1 (areas with the lowest young participation rates, considered as the most disadvantaged), and quintile 5 (areas with the highest participation rates, considered the most advantaged).



Disadvantaged applicants were 77 per cent more likely to agree that people at university would be from wealthier backgrounds than them. However, advantaged applicants were 18 per cent more likely to agree that fitting in was an important thing to consider when applying to university. A high proportion (64 per cent) said that the right accommodation is as important as the right course, and this is 18 per cent more important to disadvantaged applicants. Worries about making friends, homesickness, loneliness, taking responsibility for yourself, and coping with being away from home were mentioned frequently by all groups.

However, when describing challenges, the most advantaged group tended to focus on the importance of growing a network – going to university is what everyone does, where they go will make a difference, and they will make acquaintances for life.

The most disadvantaged groups focus more on the actual university experience – the practicalities like transport and accommodation, and the key driver that higher study will lead to a career, with some apprehension about mixing with people more wealthy than them.

Cost, financial worries, debt, and the scrapping of the maintenance grant were mentioned a lot by applicants from right across the spectrum, but were of most concern to those from disadvantaged groups. Finding the right accommodation was also more important to them. This, at least in part, had to do with cost and in some cases, led to a decision to live at home.



*“I come from a lower class family and I could not afford to move to my uni this year because I don’t get any support from my parents. The cost of renting student property is too high. With the deposit, first month’s rent and fees, it’s hard for lower class people to make this move, along with having to find a guarantor which is equally difficult because your parents don’t make enough to fit the criteria. What challenges people most about applying to university is not the university itself, but the cost of moving and living as a student.”*

There was an even balance between concern over the financial or social challenges, and apprehension about coping with academic study. Applicants talked about underestimating the workload, difficulties in dealing with independent study, and adapting to a different style of teaching or different expectations of tutors.

*“It’s a big jump from school to A levels and a bigger jump from A levels to university, but at university you’re on your own.”*

Despite the strong articulation of the challenges, these were not typically seen as barriers, but rather things that had to be overcome in order to achieve goals.

*“A degree opens a door to so many different job opportunities in England and even abroad. I can’t wait to have a degree and potentially do the job I want. I would love to be able to wake up every morning looking forward to work.”*

## Key findings: perceptions of higher education

Applicants have a clear idea about what they think makes a university good:

- Quality of teaching, appropriate delivery, and assessment.
- Academic reputation and commitment to research.
- A good record for graduate job prospects.
- Facilities – academic, social, and accommodation.

Applicants had firm perceptions about the challenges they were likely to face at university. Some of these perceptions were different between advantaged and disadvantaged learners.

- 64 per cent of applicants think that the right accommodation is as important as the right course, with 70 per cent of disadvantaged applicants agreeing with this statement.
- Advantaged applicants were 18 per cent more likely to say that fitting in at university is an important thing to consider.

Worries about making friends, homesickness, loneliness, taking responsibility for yourself, and coping with being away from home were all mentioned frequently by all groups. However, advantaged applicants tended to focus more on developing networks of friends, while the most disadvantaged groups were more concerned about practicalities like transport and accommodation.

There were some shared views about what employers are looking for from graduates, and notable differences between advantaged and disadvantaged applicants:

- 86 per cent of respondents think that employers are most interested in relevant work experience gained as part of a degree.
- 47 per cent disagreed that employers were most interested in where, not what you studied.
- Advantaged applicants were 48 per cent more likely to say that employers are more interested in the university you attended, than the subject you studied.
- Disadvantaged applicants were 30 per cent more likely to say that the subject you studied will be more relevant to employers than where you studied.

## Recommendations: perceptions of higher education

Universities and colleges should do more to:

- explain the progression pathways from degree programmes into graduate employment, particularly in relation to degree programmes with more 'academic' titles, where it may be harder for some learners to link these courses to future career opportunities
- explain and promote how employers are involved in shaping their degree programmes, and the opportunities available for students to gain work experience as part of their programme of study



*“We’re all in competition for jobs in the future and most people have a degree. To be honest, I don’t think anybody really wants to go to university, maybe for the atmosphere, but everyone is pretty fed up of education and if there was another way out, that was still safe to fall back on, most would take it. As young adults, we’re smart, and it’s the sensible decision to go to university.”*

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## 2. Why some people don't apply to HE

The decision to go into higher education is a complex one for everyone. It involves choosing a university or college, a course, and potentially a place to live for three or more years. Finances and logistics have to be sorted out.

However, for some, it is an inevitable step on a progression ladder that they have envisioned since early childhood.

*"I didn't need motivation. University didn't seem like an option or a choice. It was just the next step in life."*

On the other hand, for others it is a huge step forward, possibly in a family where no-one has experience of higher education.



*"The chance to be one of the first in my family to go to university. The opportunity for social mobility. A love of learning from a young age. The support of my parents and siblings. Wondering whether I would get the right grades for the unis I wanted. Where to apply? What to study? How I would cope with the financial side of things? Would I be able to handle the social aspects of university life?"*

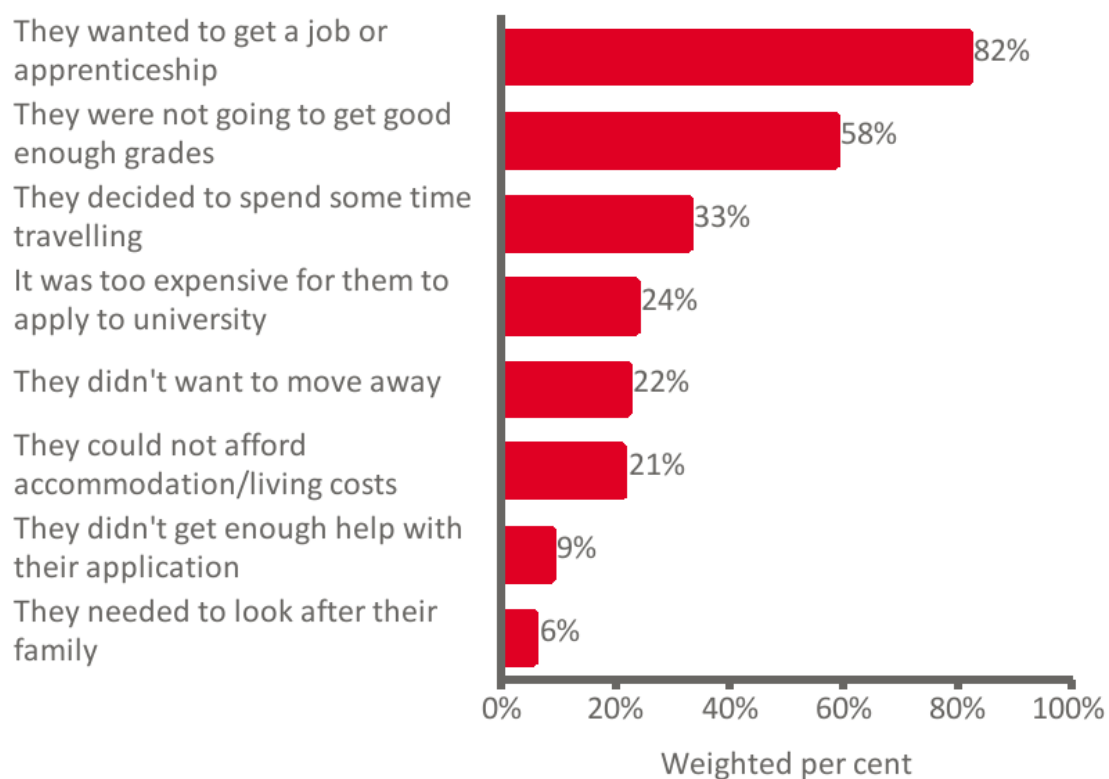
Overall, 43 per cent of survey respondents said that 'nowadays, almost everybody goes to university', however, advantaged applicants were 40 per cent more likely to say so. 64 per cent of all applicants reported that most or almost all of their peers applied, with only 14 per cent reporting that some or very few applied. Only 35 per cent of disadvantaged groups said that almost everybody went to university.

When asked what they believed prevented others their age from applying to university, by far the most popular answer, from 82 per cent of respondents, was that they wanted to get a job or an apprenticeship (Figure 3). What the survey answers were unable to tell us, was the extent to which this was connected to the second most common answer from 58 per cent of respondents, that they were not going to get good enough grades. There was also a perception that some might not have chosen the employment option if they had fully understood the advantages of higher education.



*“More information on the benefits of applying to universities versus going straight to employment. I come from a low income area and for the most part, people want to earn money straight away and ‘start their lives’, rather than spend three years studying BEFORE earning any money.”*

**Figure 3: Proportion of respondents (weighted) reporting why they think those who did not apply to university chose not to apply**



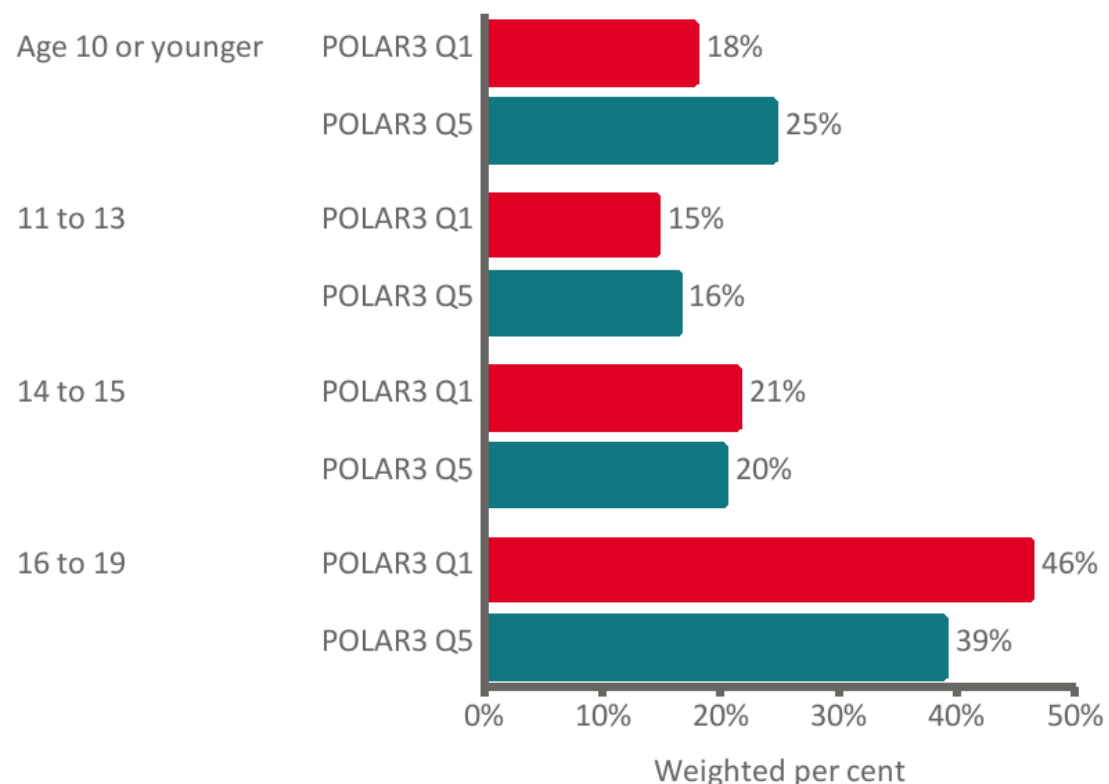
It was clear that financial considerations played a part, with the expense of applying and the cost of living at university being selected by more than a fifth of applicants. Significantly, these options were respectively 24 per cent and 33 per cent more likely

to be selected by disadvantaged applicants. A similar number reported not wanting to move away from home (22 per cent) which is also more common among disadvantaged applicants, with them being 42 per cent more likely to select this option.

There is evidence that the earlier a learner engages, at least with the concept of progression to HE, the more likely they are to go on and apply to HE. When applicants were asked at what age they felt sure they would apply to university, 43 per cent said between the ages of 16 and 19, with disadvantaged applicants 19 per cent more likely to select this option (Figure 4).

20 per cent said they made this decision when they were aged ten or younger. However, this option was 37 per cent more popular with advantaged students. Almost half of the disadvantaged group were aged 16 or older before they felt sure they would apply to university.

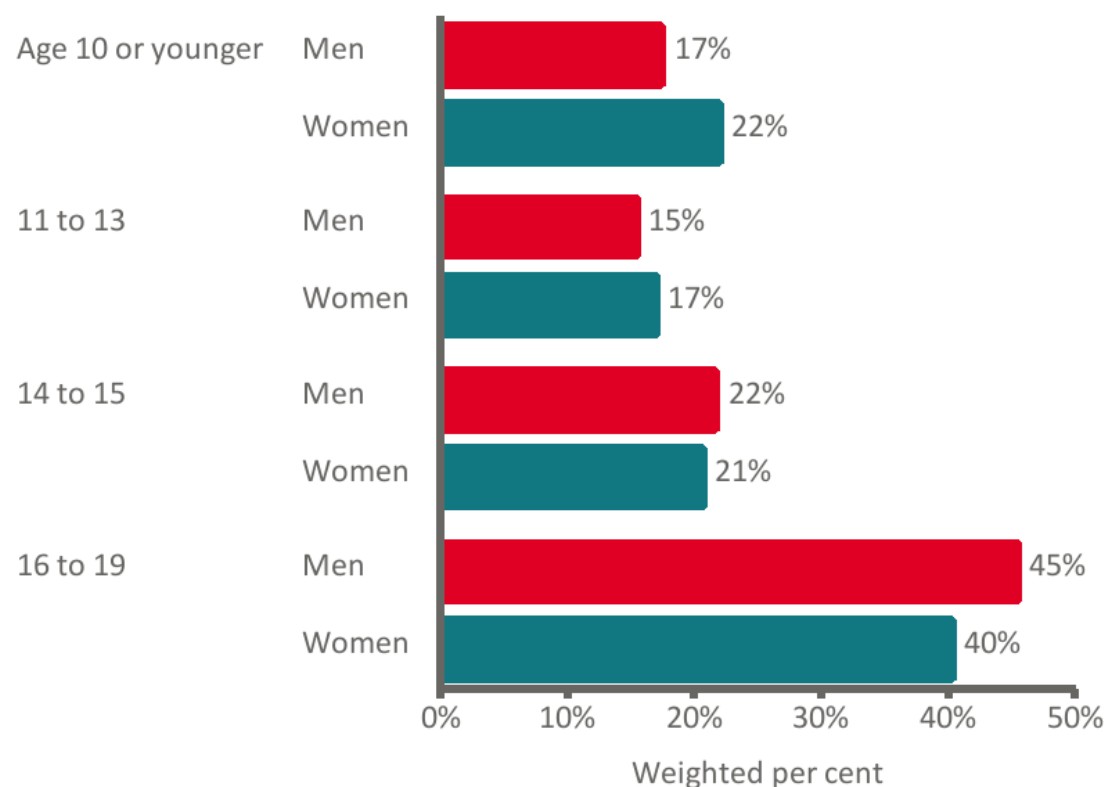
**Figure 4: Proportion of respondents (weighted) indicating the age at which they felt sure they would apply to university**



UCAS data shows that women are now a third more likely to go to university than men and the patterns are visible from a young age. Women were 26 per cent more likely to have known from age ten that they would apply to university. Men were 13 per cent more likely not to have known until age 16 (Figure 5). These findings were

mirrored in a recent report from the Sutton Trust, where research was carried out by academics from Oxford University.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 5: Proportion of respondents (weighted) indicating the age at which they felt sure they would apply to university**



The issue of why some people did not apply to HE was one where free text responses were specifically requested, and which was explored in the interviews. As a result, it has been possible to dig down a little deeper into what the issues actually are that discourage some from thinking higher education is for them.

## 2.1 Financial considerations

Financial issues were a recurrent theme and it was clear that cost and fear of debt are perceived to be deterrents to HE progression. This view comes not just from the most disadvantaged groups, but also from a 'squeezed middle' who do not qualify for any financial aid. Some talked about worrying that their parents would struggle to support them financially, and/or about paying back loans. There was a lot of feedback about debt. If debt was the reality, they questioned if it would be worthwhile. Some admitted that specific universities were ruled out because of cost.

This was particularly true for Scottish (and to a lesser extent, Northern Irish) applicants, who said that they could not afford to leave their home countries. The

<sup>3</sup> Prof. Pam Simmons, Dr. Katalin Toth, Prof. Kathy Silva, *Believing in Better: How Aspirations and Academic Self Concept Shape Young People's Outcomes*: Oxford University/Sutton Trust June 2016.

scrapping of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) for English students was mentioned by a number of respondents.

*“Be real with students applying for university. People are becoming more and more disconnected with the idea that university is a ticket to a better quality of life. People believe that education at this level is merely an introduction to the chains and shackles of debt.”*

There was no doubt that applicants wanted university to be cheaper. They asked for free higher education or at least lower fees. If that couldn't happen, they asked for more financial support in the form of grants and bursaries, and the reinstatement of the EMA in England was given as one of the key actions that would encourage more people to apply. The cost of accommodation was raised frequently and for some universities and cities, was prohibitive. The generic problem was exacerbated by personal circumstances. One example was a person afraid to move away from home because he thought his mother wouldn't be able to afford the rent without his contribution.



*“Accommodation was also a challenge. I believe accommodation can put some students off some universities altogether.”*

Although the argument that university should be made cheaper was strong, it was offset by several factors. Many respondents understood that the financial burden was not as heavy as it first appears. It doesn't have to be paid upfront, or paid back until earnings reach £21,000, and after 30 years, it gets written off.

*“It's the same as paying your phone bill each month. It's not crippling. It's manageable.”*

However, they did not think that everybody felt this way and overall, the perception of financial burden was very evident. People think they're going to be in instant debt and this can be very frightening, particularly for those from less affluent backgrounds.

A number commented that the financial challenges could have been offset with better advice and guidance on budgeting before starting university. There was a strong consensus that prospective applicants needed much more information on the realities of financing HE, for example, talks offered at schools explaining how the student finance system actually works, or information more readily available online. This supports the findings of the recent NEON report 'Does cost matter?', which recommends that government and higher education providers need to do more to





explain student finance options to young people<sup>4</sup>.

*“The fear of student debt was the biggest deterrent for my friends. I myself researched the matter thoroughly and encouraged others to do so. However, the information really needed to come from someone in the know.”*

On the other hand, there was a strong feeling that the financial commitment was worthwhile. There was an expectation that a degree was a sound investment and would generate a bigger income, a better job, more career options, an affluent lifestyle, and a fulfilling life.

*“I was told by many people that I wouldn’t get a decent job without a degree, and it didn’t matter what type of degree, it just had to be a degree, preferably a second or a first.”*

Many quoted this as the prime motivation for progressing to university. Some talked about social mobility and a desire to have a better life than their parents. Others emphasised that a degree was a requirement for the career they wanted.

*“I was working as a cleaner at Virgin Active Gym when I thought if I don’t get my grades, I’m going to be doing this.”*

## **2.2. Entry requirements**

The issue of entry requirements was raised in a variety of ways, and achieving the exam grades or Tariff points required was quoted as one of the biggest challenges in applying to HE and making effective choices. There was evidence that many applicants lacked confidence that they would get the grades required for admission to certain courses and universities. While many suggested lowering entry requirements, they also understood that this was not realistic.



*“Grades were also very intimidating. You don’t feel sure of what grade you’re going to receive and so you don’t know which grades are suitable estimations when applying.”*

*“The biggest challenge in applying was having a realistic idea of the grades you are capable of achieving. Even when teachers think you’re not as capable, you can prove them wrong.”*

The absence of clear and accessible information on grade requirements was raised as an issue. It was suggested that UCAS might consider a tool to filter courses by grade requirements to help applicants find and compare the courses most appropriate for them.

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<sup>4</sup> Does cost matter? Students’ understanding of the HE finance system and how cost affects their decisions’ (2016).

Performing well in interviews and tests was also raised. Applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds expressed concerns about the barriers to accessing the required work experience for courses such as medicine, and the difficulties of having experiences of a high enough calibre for an effective personal statement.

There was some evidence that the issue of entry requirements might hide a more generic nervousness about whether they would be welcome in a university environment.

*“Universities can seem intimidating and they only seem open to a certain calibre of people. Therefore, they should be more approachable in order to make these people feel more comfortable with the idea of entering into such a facility, and feeling there is a chance for them to be welcome in such a community.”*

### **2.3 Understanding of the full range of course choices available**

When asked about their peers who did not apply to university, respondents said more people would apply if there was a better understanding of the rich diversity of courses available. People are discouraged because they aren't aware of the full range of study options, beyond the standard. Schools emphasise the facilitating subjects and particular reference was made to a neglect of creative subjects. Universities could do more to demonstrate the variety of courses on offer.



*“To stress that not all university courses are purely theoretical or academic and that many have a more practical or vocational element. Also to stress the wide availability of courses that are not mainstream and would be more suited to a person's interests.”*

Whether through open days, prospectuses, or websites, applicants felt that there was not enough information about the content and structure of the actual courses.

*“Specific subjects that interested them being showcased more during open days. Some subject talks were hard to find. Also more in-depth overview of subjects on university websites.”*



*“The most important part is detailed descriptions of the courses. I have searched through countless websites including the university website and I never really understood what was going to be taught.”*

There were similar criticisms of advice and guidance from schools and colleges.

*“I mean we just had a day where we basically got prospectuses from different unis.*

*We never had any guidance meetings about what we could potentially do at university since the options are wider than at school or college. A lot of people were confused and disheartened.”*

We were told that universities should advertise their work placements and sandwich courses more. Some said that their peers who went into a job or apprenticeship did so because they thought work experience was more important. They did not understand about the range of work experience that could be acquired through studying for a degree.

It was even suggested that all university courses should offer a year’s internship to give the opportunity to apply and deepen learning, and a chance to see what life will be like after they graduate.

A number of issues were raised about the organisation of work placements. While many universities did this very efficiently with the interests of the students foremost, other examples were given where students had to organise the placement themselves, or where they were assigned to a placement inaccessible without the use of a car, which the student did not have.

## **2.4 Confidence in the graduate job market**

A significant number of respondents talked about wanting the security of a job at the end of their degree. The word ‘guaranteed’ was used a surprising number of times. There was some indication that this might be linked to the growing awareness of apprenticeships, where there can be ‘almost’ such a guarantee.



*“Apprenticeships give qualifications, experience, skills, and pay, whereas university only offers qualifications. University must try to get more similar to apprenticeships in some aspects.”*

Some respondents were even more explicit.

*“An accounting apprenticeship is as good, if not better, than a finance degree from a top university, because you’re almost guaranteed a job at the end.”*

Since a better graduate job market is an incentive to attend university, the consequence is that potential applicants could be put off by a perceived lack of graduate job opportunities, and a fear that too many people going to university would dilute the opportunities. Examples were given of graduates in low-paid retail jobs or unemployed. Some applicants believe that only a degree from a top university in a traditional subject makes you employable.

*“There is little point – aside from a positive social experience and learning to live alone – in doing a degree from another university.”*

## 2.5 Earlier access to information

The discrepancy in the age at which young people aspire to university, with advantaged groups considerably more likely to be confident they will apply before they leave primary school, is a key differentiator, which has two distinct but interrelated aspects.

First, if children are thinking about university by the time they enter secondary school, it has a fundamental effect on their attitudes and motivations. It affects the decisions they make and the way they approach the years of secondary education, both inside and outside school.

However, many respondents talked about being immature at the age of 14 or 15, not knowing what they wanted to do in the future, and not working to their full potential because of this. They also mentioned not finding out what options are available until it was too late. They said that they had never heard of many courses or potential careers at age 14 or 15, and since they had nothing to aim for, did not work hard enough.



*“More information earlier on in school about what the options are. I didn’t find out what I loved until three years after leaving school, and the things I’m doing now I’d never heard of when I was 14 or 15. However, if I had, I’d have loved to have done them then.”*

This is often reflected in both the options young people choose at GCSE, and the quality of GCSE results. Both strongly impact a learner’s chances of studying at university. There was a plea for schools to provide a better academic foundation, particularly advising students on what subjects to take. As they approach university applications, some find themselves without GCSEs in ‘those subjects that universities want’. However, some thought it unfair and also counterproductive to emphasise STEM subjects to the detriment of the arts.

Many young applicants admitted to discovering too late that their GCSE grades were not good enough for the course they wanted to pursue. Medicine was a frequently quoted example. It was also pointed out that this is a particular issue for applicants in families not in a position to support their studies effectively.

*“Out of the eight people I know who grew up in similar situations to me, I am the only one to apply to university. I grew up in council housing up until I was 17, with a single mother... Two of them are the smartest people I know and half the rest are smart enough to get into university... I think these people need a kick in the backside. They need to have a stricter environment when it comes to school as they’re allowed to*



*do nothing during their GCSEs, and no-one says anything and their mothers are under enough stress as it is juggling everything else to help.”*

If most of the information about university is not given until students are in sixth form, many people have already left to pursue other options by then. This is particularly true in schools without a strong tradition of university progression. Some respondents felt that universities and colleges should show greater flexibility on GCSE grades, especially where students ultimately achieve highly at A level.

*“A lesser interest in GCSE grades and an understanding of how much a person can change between GCSE and A level stage. Myself and my friends all received good A level grades. However, GCSE grades and even choices were a big hold back.”*

However, the main thrust was that earlier information, motivation, and encouragement to achieve good GCSEs was the better way forward.

*“Being more prepared at GCSE. Too much pressure at a young age can be very dangerous. However, in my circumstances, GCSE results were very important for the university I wanted to go to most and I was more laid back at that time.”*



## **2.6 Variable advice and support from schools and colleges**

While most applicants were positive about their schools, there was a general impression from the free text comments and interviews that ‘they could do better’ in respect of helping all students make appropriate, and potentially more stretching, progression decisions. A number of common themes are explored below.

There was a plea for teachers to create an environment in which there can be aspiration for all. There were many anecdotes about teachers focusing their efforts on those high achieving students most likely to get into the most prestigious universities, leaving others feeling excluded and not supported in choosing a different type of HE experience.

Respondents felt there could be more encouragement that HE isn’t just for the ‘academically elite’. They pointed out that there is a whole range of degrees that one can do at a large number of universities, and it’s just as important to encourage those who may be worried about their grades or living costs and to encourage them to consider whether university could be right for them.


Those who left school for further education (FE) colleges felt they needed a clearer message that university was an option for them.

*“Some schools make you feel you won’t make it if you don’t go into sixth form.”*

Applicants said they wanted their teachers to take a broader, more inclusive perspective where all students were valued and all universities were given the same respect. A number of examples were given of applicants being sure that a middle or lower tariff university course was right for them, but this choice was not supported by their school. Some thought that schools were more concerned about their performance table position than what was in the interest of the students.

*“If the college had shown more enthusiasm about all types of university, I think more people would have applied.”*

Applicants also thought that teachers could do more to advise students about less traditional university subjects and courses that might be a better fit for their chosen career aspirations, as well as less traditional routes like foundation years or foundation degrees.

 *“What is needed is a change in the social norm of who should and shouldn’t go to university. Most thought they weren’t smart enough and couldn’t afford it, and needed the money a job or apprenticeship would supply.”*

Teachers and advisers were also asked to give more encouragement for students to aim for higher grades – particularly in state schools – and to do more to emphasise the advantages of university.

*“I don’t think that the careers service at school was helpful at all, as it gives you demoralising suggestions and doesn’t allow you to think ambitiously.”*

In respect of the application process itself, respondents were clear that the support, advice, and guidance provided by their school or college had been crucial. It was evident that teachers in general were knowledgeable and encouraging. Most applicants received some help with the UCAS process, particularly the writing of personal statements. It is important not to take for granted that everyone understands how the HE application process works.

*“Many people at our school didn’t know anything about applying to university when we started.”*

However, some said that even where teachers were seen as very helpful and supportive, they had a tendency to make the application process seem ‘insanely difficult’ and gave the impression that being unsuccessful was ‘the end of the world’.




Rather than too little information, many felt that there was an overwhelming amount of information presented to them and a lack of time to make a proper informed decision.

## 2.7 Widening participation programmes

School support in some instances was enhanced by facilitating student participation in outreach or aspiration raising programmes. A small number of applicants in more disadvantaged groups said that they were immensely grateful for the help they had received from such programmes, both those run by individual universities and those run by third party organisations. They talked about being given insight into the advantages of HE and the opportunity to visit course providers they would either not have considered going to, or would not have been able to afford to travel to.

*“I visited the University of Warwick and stayed there as part of a ‘Pathways to Law’ programme and so got a feel for the campus, but had I not been part of the programme, I wouldn’t have been able to afford to go as it is quite far from home.”*

These programmes made applicants feel that the universities cared for them and valued them as people. It also helped them understand that there were other young people in similar circumstances who shared their values and aspirations.

 *“I applied to Cambridge and was one of the only ones in my school to do so. It’s all about perception. I thought everybody would be really stuck up but I got to go on a Sutton Trust summer school and discovered it was actually quite cool.”*

However, there were concerns that there were not enough of these opportunities and that they were not open to enough people. Some were excluded because their backgrounds were deemed not sufficiently disadvantaged. Others were only open to people living in inner cities or close to a major participating university.

## Key findings: why some people don't apply to higher education

Overall, 43 per cent of respondents said that 'nowadays, almost everyone goes to university', although 49 per cent of advantaged applicants said this compared to 35 per cent of the most disadvantaged group.

82 per cent of respondents said their peers had not applied to university because they wanted to get a job or apprenticeship, and 58 per cent said it was because they were not going to get good enough grades. Among disadvantaged applicants, there were also greater concerns about the affordability of accommodation and living costs, and a desire to not move away from home.

Common themes which emerged from the free text comments included:

- financial concerns and worry about debt
- lack of clarity about the real entry requirements for a course
- understanding the full range of degree courses available and lack of visibility of employment opportunities as part of the degree
- confidence in the graduate job market
- variable quality of advice from schools and colleges – in particular, respondents reported a lack of support for those not interested in higher tariff universities
- limited access to widening participation programmes

There is evidence that the earlier young people understand about the opportunities available through HE, the more likely they are to be motivated to apply, and to a higher tariff university. 20 per cent of applicants said that they were certain they would apply to HE by the age of ten or younger, with 25 per cent of those in the most advantaged group reporting this compared to 18 per cent in the most disadvantaged group.

Free text responses also highlighted the need for earlier access to information, including advice on GCSE choices and the importance of GCSE attainment for entry to HE.





## Recommendations: why some people don't apply to higher education

Universities and colleges should do more to:

- be clear and transparent about the actual entry requirements for their courses, and any additional evidence they're looking for beyond academic achievement
- raise awareness of the support available to new undergraduates to help them succeed in studying at a higher level, before and after the transition to HE
- provide easily accessible information about the costs of living and studying at their course provider, particularly information about accommodation, transport, and day-to-day living costs, alongside advice on budgeting

Schools and colleges should do more to:

- encourage all learners to start thinking about post-18 choices at a younger age; at least from age 12-13 or even earlier
- provide balanced, learner-centred information, advice, and guidance about the full range of post-16 and post-18 options available
- encourage and support all learners to make aspirational choices and to achieve the highest grades they can



*“Encouraging students at GCSE to achieve better grades will help them with their A levels and in turn, help them apply to universities. Inspiring students right from the beginning is important because they can't take the next step in their education or career path if they don't make the requirements in the first place. There is a lack of inspiration and encouragement when it comes to secondary school. Not many students are enthusiastic enough about learning and it's only when they grow up they realise they could have done better. Students don't bother applying because they don't think the education system is their friend, and it's a shame because a lot of these students have extremely high potential.”*

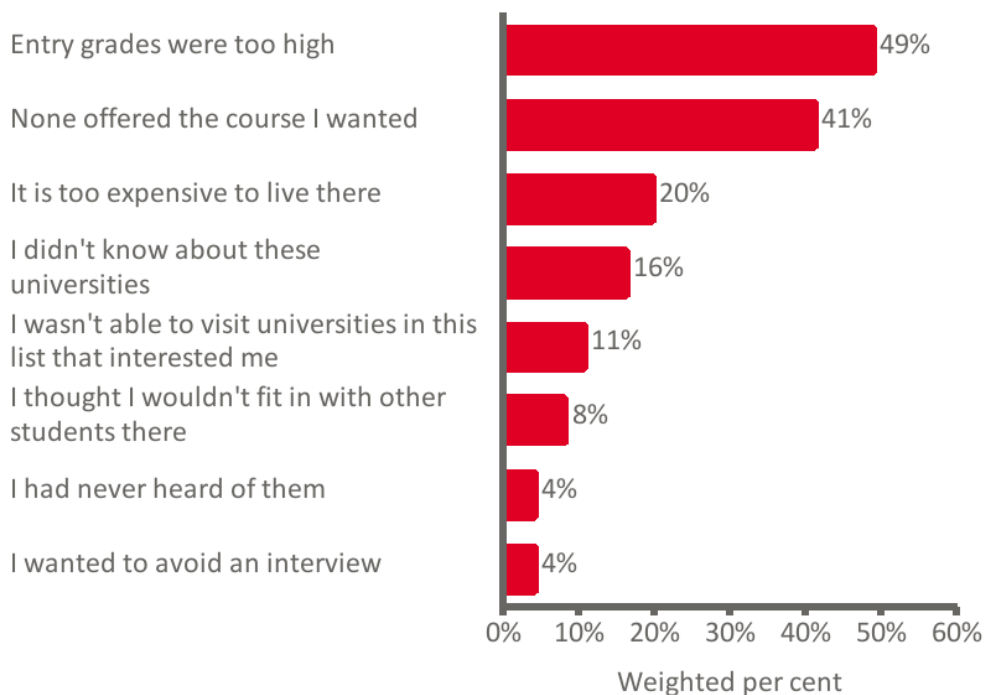
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### 3. Why some people don't apply to higher tariff providers

We asked the 6,500 young applicants who had not made an application to higher tariff universities about their reasons for not doing so and what might have encouraged them. To do this, we listed 13 higher tariff universities by name, located in each region of the UK, without giving any indication why they had been selected (Figure 6).

**Figure 6: Proportion of respondents (weighted) reporting their reasons for not applying for a course at any of these (higher tariff) universities**

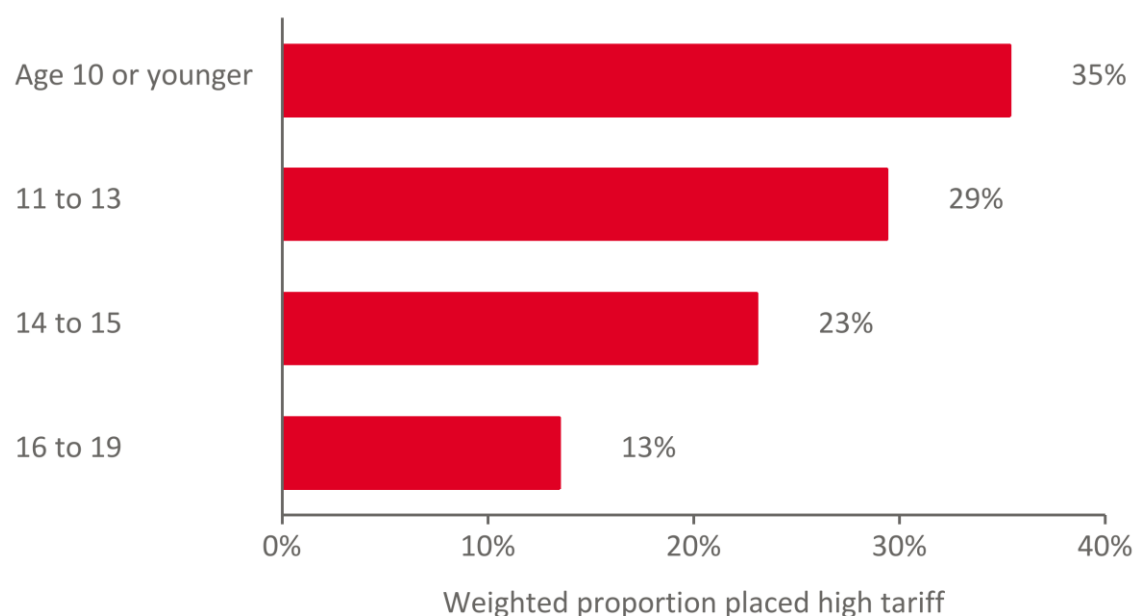


Over half (57 per cent) reported that they did not consider making an application to any of the higher tariff providers listed in the survey. The most popular reason given by 49 per cent of respondents was that they thought that the entry grades were too high. Applicants who attained high grade qualifications were less likely to cite this reason for why they did not apply than those that did not attain higher grades. The next most popular reason, given by 41 per cent, was they thought that none offered the course the applicant wanted.

20 per cent thought it would be too expensive to live where these universities listed were located. However, those in the cohort least likely to apply to university and from the most disadvantaged background were 50 per cent more likely not to have applied to a higher tariff university, because they believed it would be more expensive to live there. Only four per cent reported that they had not heard of these universities, and free text responses indicate that many recognised them as Russell Group or universities perceived as more prestigious.

Significantly, the age at which young people are sure they will apply to university matters in respect of the chance of them ultimately being placed at a higher tariff university. Those who are sure they will apply to university aged ten or younger are 2.6 times more likely to be placed with a higher tariff provider than those who are not sure until they are aged 16 or over (Figure 7).

**Figure 7: Weighted proportion of those respondents who were accepted at higher tariff providers, indicating at which age they felt sure they would apply to university.**



The generic points made in Section 2 of this report about why some people don't apply to university are also pertinent to understanding why some applicants don't apply to higher tariff universities. However, respondents to the survey did believe that these are universities with distinctive characteristics and so some of these factors play themselves out with a different degree of emphasis for these universities. The emphasis is also different between applicants from different backgrounds. These issues are explored below.

### **3.1 Entry requirements**

In free text responses and interviews, some applicants were emphatic in stating that they would not achieve the grades required for entry to higher tariff universities. For others, the issue was more complex and the problem was not so much the level at which the entry requirements were set, as transparency about what grades would actually be accepted.

Applicants said they would appreciate more information about what grades are really needed to get in and the likelihood of getting a place if their grades fall slightly short of their offer. Anecdotal examples were given of students with lower than advertised grades being offered places. One student who was put off applying to a high tariff university because the published offer was AAA was upset when a friend got on to the same course with two grades lower. Several examples were given of universities admitting people with an A for the Extended Project Qualification alongside lower subject grades, but not publicising this. Clarity about whether qualifications like BTECs were accepted was raised a number of times.



*“Knowledge of what grade you ACTUALLY need to get in. Many people got places without getting the grade on their offer. Although I’m pleased they got in, the offers and typical offers should be a closer reflection of what you actually need to get in.”*

Some said they would have appreciated information about the grade requirements for specific courses, alongside those for courses which are similar but require lower grades (e.g. medicine and biomedicine), and also transparency about whether it is possible for students who achieve highly on the course to transfer from one to the other.

Other specific information requested was whether a university interviewed for particular subjects, and a checklist of exactly what they are looking for in respect of things like work experience or volunteering.

There was sometimes confusing information about how many applicants receive offers. An example was given of a higher tariff university that advertised that only ten per cent of applicants got offers in a particular subject. However, this was based on an average across all courses – in one particular course, the offer rate was 75 per cent.

*“I applied to one of these universities. Although I did not have the required grades for the course, I was still offered a place. So from experience, I know students would apply to these universities more if they had the knowledge that, even with grades lower than the requirements, they might still be offered a place.”*

A number of applicants admitted to being risk averse, facing uncertainty whether they would achieve high enough grades, and settling for a university where they felt more confident about getting in.

*“Most of the unis I wanted to apply to wanted really high grades, so for a guaranteed place, I went for the places with more achievable grades.”*

Some played safe because of the difficulties of juggling the firm and insurance choices, and not being able to secure accommodation at the insurance choice. The prestigious reputation of some universities mitigates against applicants having the confidence to take a risk on their offers.



*“More information on the possibility of getting a place if you fall slightly short of the entry requirements. Many people don’t apply to such universities as they carry an air of exclusivity which intimidates people so they don’t apply.”*

Many people talked about the importance of character, not just grades. They wanted universities to take a more holistic view of the application and look at the whole person and their potential.

*“Entry requirements put people off. Making it clearer that admissions staff look at you as a whole person, not just your academic achievements, would encourage more people to apply.”*

They said this is exacerbated when considering applying to the Russell Group because they tend to be big universities and there was a fear that an application would be lost under everyone else’s.



*“Such universities should not only look at an individual’s grades. They should also look at the backgrounds they have come from – as many people do not come from privileged backgrounds but may have achieved a great deal compared to the disadvantages they have overcome.”*

There was evidence that some applicants had a good understanding of contextual data. Many more understood the concept and advocated universities offering places with lower entry requirements to people from low income backgrounds – and to advertise more that this happens so that such people will be encouraged to apply.

*“For universities such as Oxford and Cambridge, allowing students from disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g. those whose parents may have mental disabilities like my father) a lower attainment threshold in the admissions test to gain an interview would be really helpful... I am an individual who went to an extremely poorly performing secondary school. I gained only seven GCSEs and only two at grade A. However, my A level performance was unthinkable in relation to my GCSEs, with four As, three coming from facilitating subjects.”*

*“Due to my grades being affected by mental illness and caring duties, I could have performed better but did not. If these universities could have acknowledged this or provided more information to show how they might acknowledge this, I would have loved to have gone to one of them.”*

In some instances, applicants talked about the importance of being able to talk to current students to get a first-hand and realistic perspective on how concerns can be dealt with. This was particularly true in the case of contextual information. Articles, talks, or visits from current students from less advantaged backgrounds were all suggested to prove what is possible. Interestingly, this again picks up the theme of early information and good GCSE results.

*“I think a great way to increase participation of disadvantaged children would be to get the incredible students from Oxbridge and other similar universities to visit underperforming secondary schools and give them advice on what they need to do from that young age to get into these universities. I think children should be made aware of what sorts of GCSEs typical Oxford and Cambridge students have.”*



### **3.2 Understanding the full range of course choices available**

The second most popular answer, given by 41 per cent of respondents, was that none of the higher tariff universities listed offered the course the applicant wanted. Some commented that they were interested in a niche course and recognised that it was likely to be offered by only a small number of universities.

However, it was generally felt that higher tariff universities did not offer the same diversity of courses as others. The main omissions quoted were courses in the arts.

*“They are easy to apply to but they don’t offer more diverse courses, only the main known subjects like maths/science/English – people interested in the arts industries would not benefit from going to these universities, as different universities are different for different courses.”*

On the other hand, it was evident from the free text comments that some applicants had misunderstood the nature of the courses on offer at higher tariff universities and the career trajectories they could support. For instance, a number of respondents spoke about the desire for a course in forensic science limiting them to a narrow group of universities, without understanding that a degree in chemistry from a higher tariff university might well lead them to the same career.

*“Make the career path when you graduate more obvious. Before attending university, I had no idea you could go into a career in marketing by doing a geography degree.”*

### **3.3 Reaching out to prospective students**

A number of the issues raised by applicants about higher tariff universities in the free text comments and interviews were misconceptions and assumptions. However, there was a view that these universities could do more to reach out to a broader constituency of learners to encourage them to apply, and suggestions were made on possible strategies to bring universities closer to prospective applicants.

*“Action on the course provider’s part to widen their target pool of students. This can include outreach, accessibility on websites, better information on websites, better*

*information given at UCAS exhibitions, and sponsoring schools and colleges from disadvantaged areas to come to their campus.”*

Some expressed disappointment at what was currently happening and it was clear that some young people, in some communities, felt excluded from the process.

*“I attended a college in south east London, which is considered to be one of the worst colleges in the 'least peaceful borough in London'. Not one of these universities was represented at the university Q&A, or the universities fair at this college, nor, from what I heard, any of the surrounding colleges. Maybe try branching out and attempting to reach those from less advantaged areas who have never heard of or been told about them. You may actually be surprised.”*



Students from schools with little or no history of sending students to Oxford or Cambridge felt that the requirements and application process could be better explained to them, and that they should have more access to useful resources. Respondents said that it was “not enough to gather together a lot of kids from a comprehensive and encourage them to apply”. They need detailed advice on how to apply, reading suggestions, and interview practice.

*“Otherwise, it’s just rumour and guesswork while their private school or grammar school counterparts are specially tutored in the process and rehearsed, often having grown up in households full of books with graduate parents.”*

There was a perception among some respondents that higher tariff universities are only for advantaged and affluent people, and that if they want to be more inclusive, they have to work harder at demonstrating they welcome people of all backgrounds and from all types of schools and colleges.

*“They can seem off-putting to people as they have the idea that only ‘posh’, ‘wealthy’, or ‘stuck-up’ people go there. I think if they showed that anyone can go to these universities and that there are options for everyone, people may apply for them more rather than instantly dismissing them.”*

University websites were quoted as a key resource for most applicants and were essential for people who could not visit universities due to financial or time constraints. They play a significant role in helping students decide if they want to apply. However, they did attract a fair amount of criticism. Respondents commented that university websites could be more accessible and helpful.



*“Some were fine but others lacked aesthetic appeal and sufficient information (or the information was there but it was very difficult to find).”*

They asked for websites to be easier to navigate and more comprehensive. Specific suggestions included 3D virtual tours of the whole campus, including all accommodation, and each academic department providing a video of current students with their experiences of the courses and university life.

**Q** *“Cut the babble off your websites. It’s too complicated. Make it simple, fun, and entertaining. Entice students, don’t confuse and scare them.”*

Above all, they wanted them to be open and honest, so that applicants who do visit or even choose the university will not be disappointed because the university doesn’t meet their expectations.

*“Some authenticity, like the university is saying, this is us, this is what we stand for, and this is what you can expect from us.”*

### **3.4 Location**

The geographical locations of the higher tariff universities listed in the survey were found to pose a number of issues for respondents. First, there was a general perception that they were all located in big cities and that it would be expensive to live there.



*“Affordability – even if entry is granted, most of these universities are located in areas often too expensive and likely to put off some students from even applying.”*

Geographical location was also raised. Applicants pointed out that there are a relatively small number of Russell Group universities located across the four countries of the UK, so for many there is not one accessible to where they live or that they can relate to. This is particularly so for those who live in more isolated rural communities, some disadvantaged. Where applicants have to take the cost of living and studying seriously into account, the necessity for long distance travel is a deterrent. For some, that begins with a decision to not even attend an open day.



*“I can’t even afford to go to the open day, so how am I ever going to have a chance if I apply there?”*

Some respondents said that the locations of these universities meant that the applicant could not live at home, a factor for some in disadvantaged groups.

*“Only one of these universities would have enabled me to stay at home while studying. Living at home was a decision I made to save money and reduce the cost of studying. If the overall cost of studying was less, I would have definitely preferred to study elsewhere in the UK.”*

One applicant told how the need to live at home led to her trying to commute daily from the Isle of Wight to a south coast university. However, the pressure became too much and she dropped out before the end of the first term.

In short, where an applicant had to make a conscious decision to save money, the location of the higher tariff universities listed could exclude them from consideration.

*“If they could somehow move the entire building to make it quicker to get to. The University of Hertfordshire is my nearest uni, therefore I applied and now attend.”*

## Key findings: why some people don't apply to higher tariff providers

6,500 respondents to the survey had not applied to a higher tariff university. Their primary reasons were:

- 49 per cent thought the entry requirements were too high
- 41 per cent thought none of these universities offered the courses they were interested in
- 20 per cent thought it would be too expensive to live at these universities

The free text comments highlighted concerns about:

- lack of transparency about entry requirements – more students would have applied if they had known they had a chance of getting in
- the desirability of taking account of contextual factors when considering academic achievements and potential
- lack of understanding of career pathways from academic-sounding degree courses
- lack of relevant outreach and engagement



*“Don't 'big them up' so much. People are scared to apply to them as they are the Russell Group. I've heard many people say things along the lines of 'oh, I wouldn't get in there, it's a Russell', when it's not true.”*

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## Recommendations: why some people don't apply to higher tariff providers

Higher tariff universities could do more to:

- be clear and transparent about the actual entry requirements for their courses, and any additional evidence they're looking for beyond academic achievement
- provide easily accessible information about the costs of living and studying at their course provider, particularly information about accommodation, transport, and day-to-day living costs, alongside advice on budgeting
- reach out to a wider cohort of students to demonstrate they are inclusive course providers

Schools and colleges should do more to:

- encourage all learners to start thinking about post-18 choices at a younger; at least from age 12-13 or even earlier
- provide balanced, learner-centred information, advice, and guidance about the full range of post-16 and post-18 options available
- encourage and support all learners to make aspirational choices and to achieve the highest grades they can



*“More encouragement from teachers. I went to a state sixth form and applied during year 12 to five (higher tariff) universities. I was rejected by four and I didn't feel a connection to the other, so decided to take a gap year because I wanted to be 100% sure of my decision. This application cycle, however, I have the University of Cambridge as my firm, unconditional choice. I genuinely feel if I had been encouraged to attend Oxbridge open days/summer schools before receiving my AS results, the outcome of my first application would have been very different. The difference was the support I received – I managed to get support from a Cambridge PhD student. Although I have no regrets and am very pleased to be in my situation, I would have preferred not to have the many months where I felt a total failure.”*

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## 4. Visits and open days

Open days remain a significant factor in helping prospective applicants find out about universities and colleges and make informed choices. Universities and colleges invest a significant amount of resources in them and applicants place a lot of importance on what they learn from them.

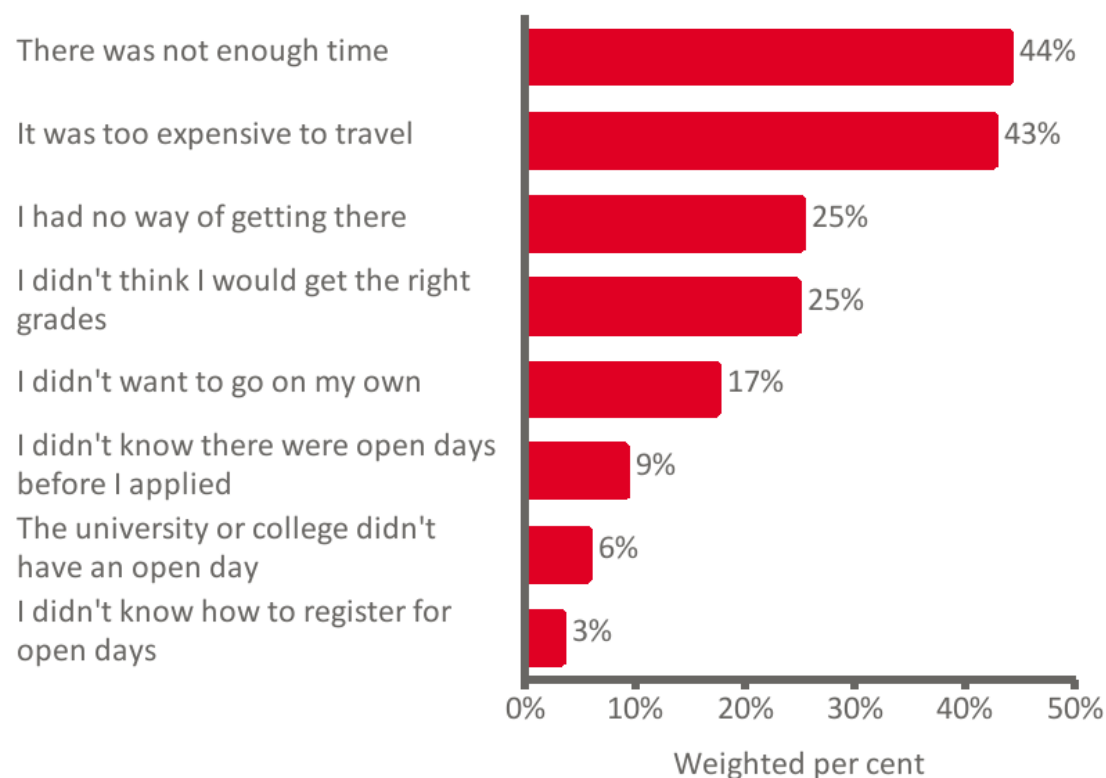
In respect of open days, our survey explored how many applicants had attended, whether they would have liked to have attended more, and what the barriers were to them doing so. In the course of doing this, we were also able to ascertain how useful applicants found open days, the aspects they found most helpful, and how the experience might be improved for them.

Most young applicants (91 per cent) reported they had visited at least one university in the year or two before applying to or starting a course. The majority of applicants (two thirds) made between two and five visits. However, nine per cent attended no open days, and 16 per cent attended only one.

Regardless of the number of visits, the majority of applicants said they would have found more visits useful. 76 per cent of those who did not attend an open day said it would have been useful to have attended some.

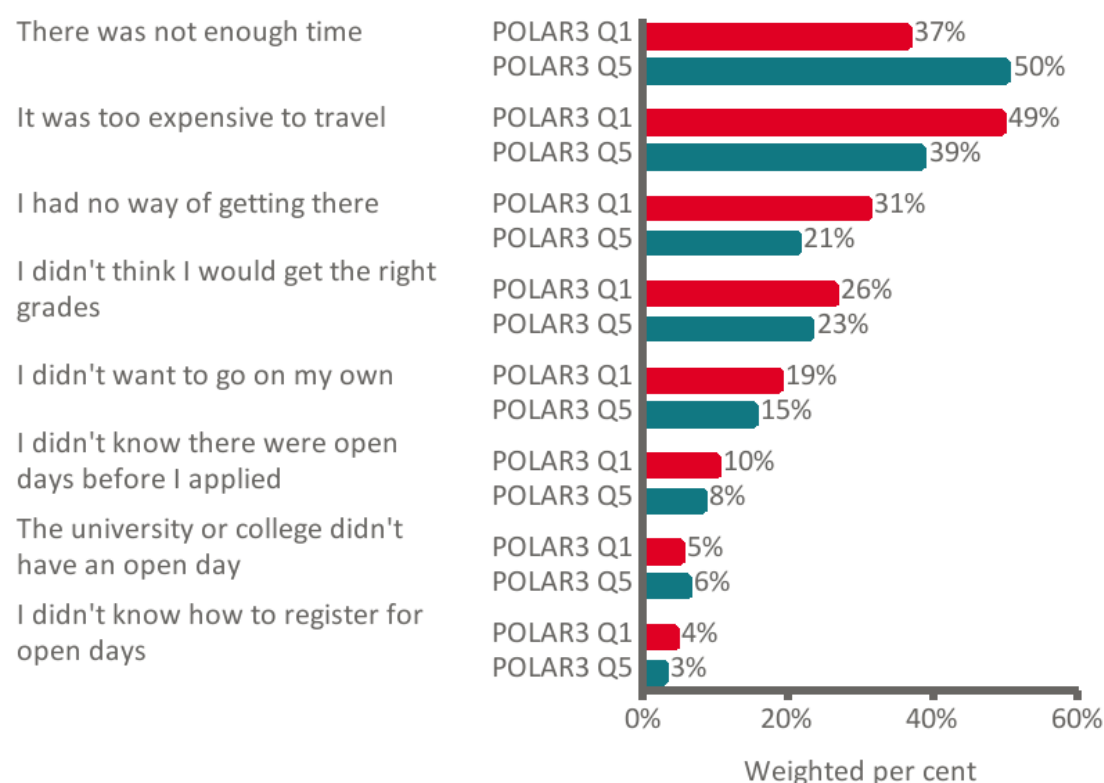
When questioned about why they had not attended more open days, the two most common reasons were that there was not enough time and that it was too expensive to travel (Figure 8).

**Figure 8: Proportion of respondents (weighted) who made at least one visit and would have found more visits useful, reporting reasons for not visiting more universities before applying**



However, the issues were different for advantaged and disadvantaged groups (Figure 9). 43 per cent of respondents quoted cost as a deterrent, but were 26 per cent more likely to do so in disadvantaged groups, who were also 48 per cent more likely to answer that they had no way of getting there. While overall, the most popular reason given for not attending was lack of time, this was 35 per cent more likely in advantaged groups.

**Figure 9: Proportion of respondents (weighted) reporting reasons for not visiting more universities before applying**



The majority of young applicants reported that their parents (64 per cent) or friends (seven per cent) had taken them to an open day, with 48 per cent responding that it had not cost them very much, as their family or friends had paid for it. However, 50 per cent of applicants also said that they had arranged at least one visit themselves and gone on their own, travelling by train (36 per cent), or bus or coach (14 per cent). 46 per cent paid for visits using their own money, with half of these spending under £50.

15 per cent went on a visit arranged by their school or college, and five per cent reported that their school or college had paid for a visit.

Over 75 per cent of respondents reported that they would have applied to a higher tariff university if they were offered a travel voucher incentive for an open day visit. 39 per cent reported that they would have applied with just the incentive of a £5 travel voucher. Those from disadvantaged backgrounds were 13 per cent more likely to respond positively to the £5 voucher, and 17 per cent more likely to do so to a £50 voucher. While we accept that the structuring of the questions may have encouraged these responses to an extent, the proportions are significant.

In free text responses, applicants from disadvantaged groups talked of the difficulties of making their own way to open days, and of the expense of having to use public transport. Several first generation applicants spoke about the mutual

desire for a parent to accompany them, but the prohibitive cost of an additional train fare.

*“We were in debt just visiting unis.”*

For those travelling independently, the complexity of travel arrangements was covered at some length in the free text comments. Respondents suggested that universities and colleges could do more to announce open days at the earliest possible opportunity, so that it’s possible to buy cheaper train tickets, and also to give clear information about routes and parking instructions.

They said that sometimes the most expensive and complicated part was the journey from the station to the campus, so group transport from stations would be much appreciated.

Respondents also highlighted the additional cost of having to pay for overnight accommodation for visits and open days. It was felt that universities could also be more considerate and, for instance, not plan entry tests or interviews first thing in the morning.

*“This (higher tariff) university had their application day with a maths test early in the morning. This was an issue as I couldn’t get a train to take me there in time and I would have had to go the day before and stay in a hotel, which would be expensive including travel and hotel costs, so this stopped me going.”*

The issue of there not being enough time to visit more universities appeared to be connected to both schools’ and students’ reluctance to be out of school too much. It was also noted that weekday travel was often more expensive and could be difficult if it meant parents – and sometimes applicants – having to take a day off work. The latter issue was most evident in the more disadvantaged groups. Many respondents suggested more open days at weekends or during school holidays.

*“It’s stressful finding time to do college work while applying for uni and working a job to save money for uni, without finding time to travel to open days, which makes the process of finding a uni more difficult.”*

There are also geographical issues. It was evident from free text responses that not everyone can afford to attend open days outside their region, so even those who attend five may do within a fairly small geographical area. This issue was particularly evident in the answers from applicants about why they had chosen not to visit the higher tariff universities listed in the survey.



There were a number of suggestions about how these issues might be addressed. Many respondents talked about how much better it



would be to go on a trip organised by their school or college. Some reported that their schools had organised this for students on a gifted and talented programme, or for students aspiring to apply to Oxford or Cambridge or other selective universities. However, they could see the irony that this support was not offered to those who might need it more because of their circumstances.

The advantages of trips run by schools were well articulated. Applicants reported that school visits take people to cities that might otherwise be inaccessible to them, and the trips are cheaper for the individual student, even if a fare is charged. Students also have the support and advice of both their peers and teachers on these trips.

*“Simultaneously, this would lessen the stress on parents and guardians who have to pay money and often book days off work in order to take their child to various open days, while not being fully aware of the subject matter.”*

Respondents did appreciate that such an approach might not be cost effective, where only a few students from a school were interested in a particular university. However, they felt that if trips were organised by groups of schools or colleges from a particular area, or if groups of universities were able to organise regional transport, this could enable more applicants to visit.

In both instances it was suggested that there should be centrally funded financial incentives for doing this, and even a proposed name, ‘Coach to campus’. However, it was not clear where the funding for this would come from.

Some respondents felt that if travel grants to attend open days were to be offered, they should be according to need or distance, and not just for a select group of universities.

While applicants were generally very happy to visit universities, they were even happier when universities came to them. In both free text responses and in interviews, there was strong feeling that university visits to schools and colleges were a welcome and effective alternative to open days. Good examples were given of all types of university doing this. This approach eliminates the two main difficulties associated with open days – cost and time. The prospective applicants are secure and comfortable in their own environment, and there is a better opportunity

to ask specific questions. Such visits were felt to be most effective where university staff were accompanied by current students, and where the information was specific and relevant.



*“More visits from universities to schools with relevant information on courses and university life, not just ‘we*

*look like Hogwarts and have loads of societies and grade requirements’, but maybe an honest, engaging talk, possibly in small groups, about university study and life and really try to help students understand whether going to university is a choice for them at all.”*

Some recognised that such visits are resource intensive for universities. Some respondents felt that more efficient alternatives to open days are regional university fairs or exhibitions, which have the added advantage of providing the opportunity to compare course providers.

*“It was a great way of immediately comparing each university with the others and it also gave the chance for one-to-one conversations with the right people.”*

Open days and associated activities have a very important role to play in the admissions process for higher education, and most applicants would have found it beneficial to have attended more. There are many ways in which they can be made more accessible and informative. However, their benefit is largely for those who have already made a decision at least to consider university. In their current form, they play a small part in attracting those who do not think higher education is for them.

*“I think they are useful in deciding what university to go to, rather than deciding whether or not to go to university.”*



## Key findings: open days

Open days and visits are one of the most important steps in helping students make well-informed choices about what and where to study. 91 per cent of respondents visited at least one university during the application process, and 67 per cent visited between two and five.

Regardless of the number of visits made, almost three quarters of applicants would have found visiting more universities useful. Among those who made at least one visit, lack of time (44 per cent) and expense (43 per cent) were cited as the main reasons for not visiting more open days.

50 per cent of advantaged applicants reported lack of time as the main reason for not attending more open days, whereas 49 per cent of disadvantaged applicants cited cost as the main reason for not attending more.

In the free text comments, respondents also cited:

- the timing of open days and visits – it is more expensive to travel in the week and at peak times, and parents and carers may be unable to take time off from work
- lack of advice on transport arrangements
- lack of coordinated travel and organised trips

Three quarters of applicants said they would apply to higher tariff universities if they were offered a travel voucher for an open day.

## Recommendations: open days

- Schedule open days, interviews, and any tests at times when it is easiest and cheapest for applicants to attend, and provide more information to make attending as simple as possible, as well as considering alternatives such as virtual tours, regional events, and providing transport solutions.
- Consider financial incentives to encourage applicants to attend more open days, for example, a travel voucher.



*“Pupil premium students, or those who are not of a comfortably affluent background, could be offered trips to universities, be it on an open day or not. Sometimes it will be near impossible to visit the one, let alone five universities they will be applying to, and they will have to make a choice based on league table rankings or hearsay. As such, they miss out on an idea of the social life at the university, the surrounding town(s), and the accommodation it has to offer – all of which are important. When applying to more prestigious universities, it would help if the universities themselves had outreach programmes that spanned the local authorities. There can be misconceptions about such places and ultimately prospective students should be able to visit these places to see whether they would fit in or enjoy a particular course.”*

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## **Annex A: Analytical results of survey**

UK domiciled UCAS Undergraduate applicants who were aged 18 or 19 years in the year that they applied, were invited, by email, to participate in an online survey between 25 January and 5 February 2016. There were 18,100 respondents (a response rate of 4.9 per cent) and 16,600 of those answered all questions (equating to a response rate of 4.5 per cent).

The 16,600 respondents who answered all questions were weighted, using a response model, to be representative of the characteristics and numbers of the 2015 application cycle UK domiciled June deadline applicant population, aged 18 or 19 years (see Annex C for details). These weighted responses from those who answered every question are used as the base for this analysis (referred to in these results, for simplicity, as 'applicants'). The pattern of results reported is similar to those calculated from the responses before weighting. Data for every question, with both the weighted and unweighted values, is provided in the data tables (see Annex D for details).

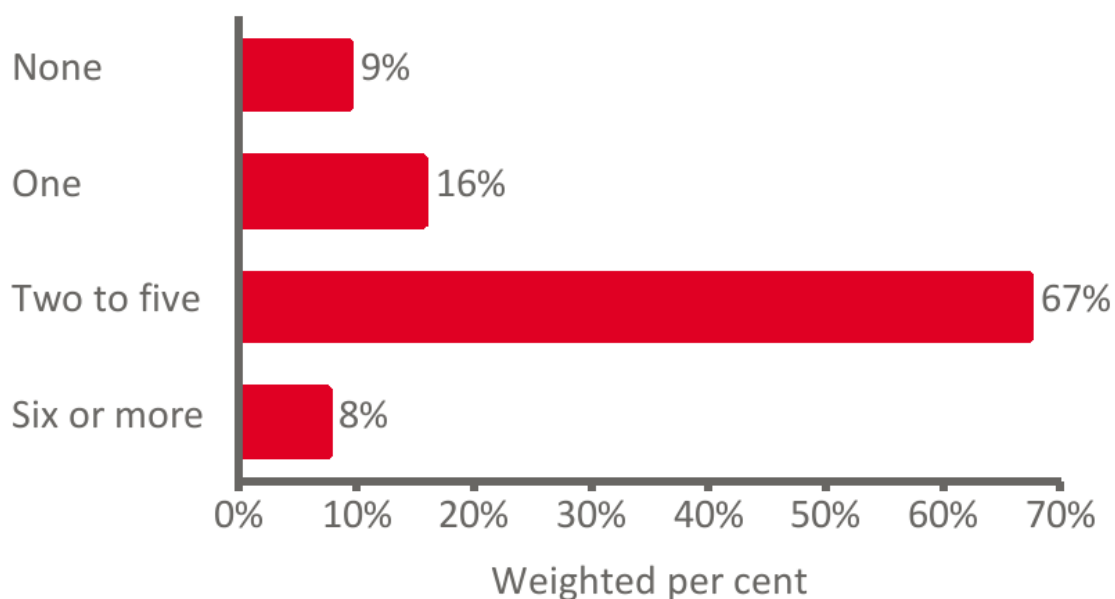
## Visits and open days

### 91 per cent of applicants visited at least one university

Most young applicants (91 per cent) reported that they visited at least one university or college in the year or two before applying to, or starting, a course. The majority of applicants (two thirds) made between two and five visits.

A quarter of respondents to the survey made at most one visit. Just under ten per cent reported they did not visit any universities before applying or starting, and a further 16 per cent visited only one.

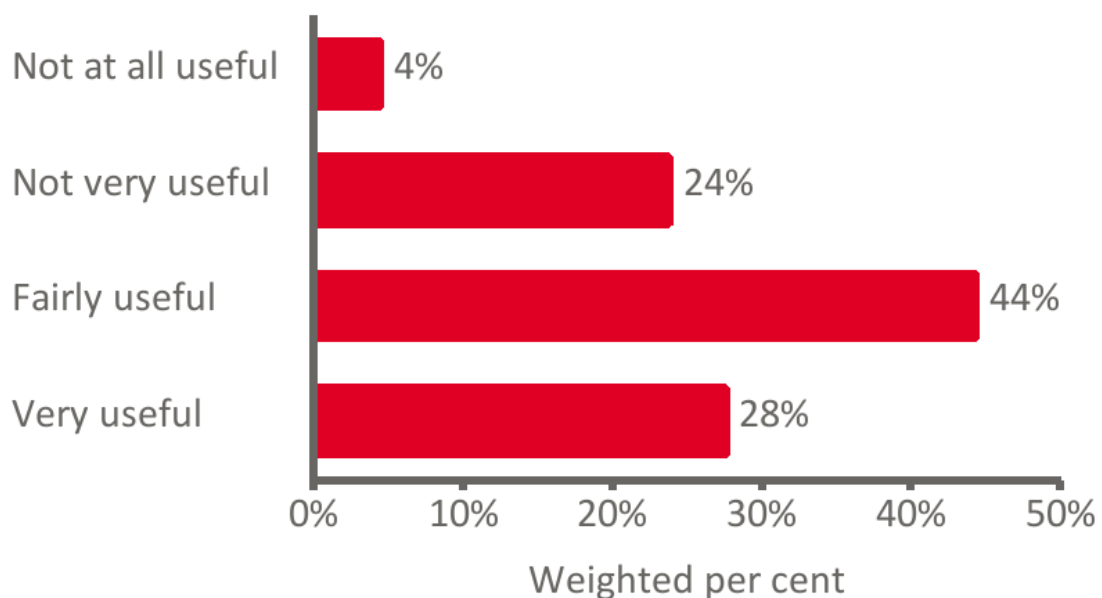
**Figure 1: Proportion of respondents (weighted) indicating how many universities or colleges they visited in the year or two before applying to, or starting, a course**



### Nearly three quarters would have found visiting more universities useful

When asked about how useful they would have found visiting some universities (for the nine per cent who visited none), or more (if they had visited at least one), most thought that visiting more universities would have been useful. This includes over a quarter (28 per cent) who thought it would have been very useful. Just four per cent thought extra visits would not have been at all useful.

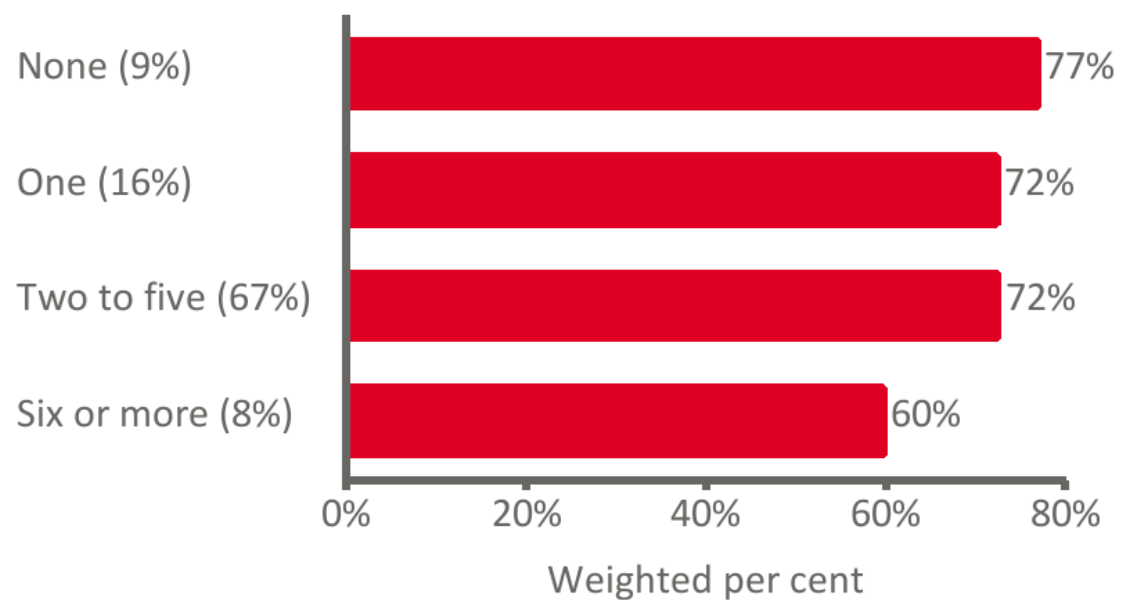
**Figure 2: Proportion of respondents (weighted) indicating how useful it would have been to have visited some or more universities or colleges before applying**



Regardless of number of visits, most applicants would have found more visits useful

Applicants who made no visits were most likely to have thought it would have been useful to have visited more. Over three quarters of this group (77 per cent) reported that with hindsight, they would have found visiting universities or colleges before applying useful. For those who made six or more visits, 60 per cent would have found more visits useful, indicating how valuable applicants find the visits.

**Figure 3: Proportion of respondents (weighted) who would have found more visits useful, by the number of visits they made**



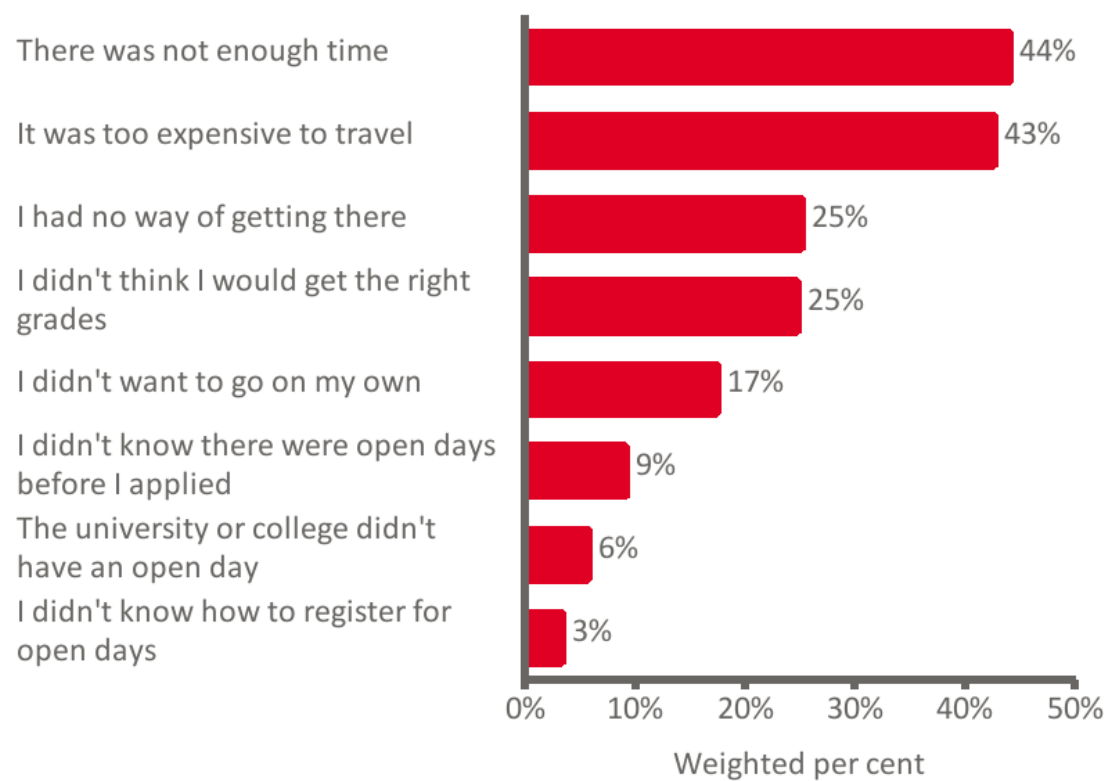


### Lack of time and cost of travel prevented applicants from visiting more universities

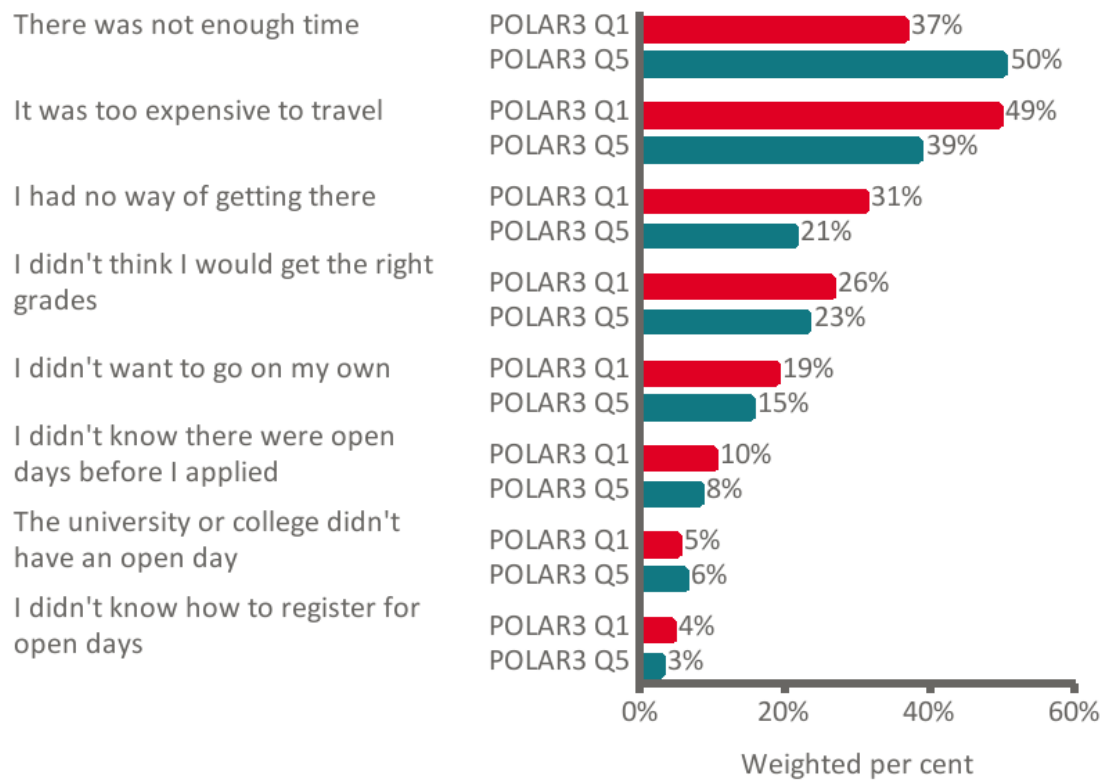
Among those who visited at least one university, just under half (44 per cent) said the expense of travelling stopped them visiting more, and a quarter (25 per cent) said they had no way of getting there. These responses were more likely to be selected by applicants from more disadvantaged areas.

The most frequently selected response was that there was not enough time, and this was more likely to be selected by applicants from more advantaged areas.

**Figure 4: Proportion of respondents (weighted) who made at least one visit reporting reasons for not visiting more universities before applying**



**Figure 5: Proportion of respondents (weighted) who made at least one visit reporting reasons for not visiting more universities before applying, by POLAR3 Q1 and POLAR3 Q5**



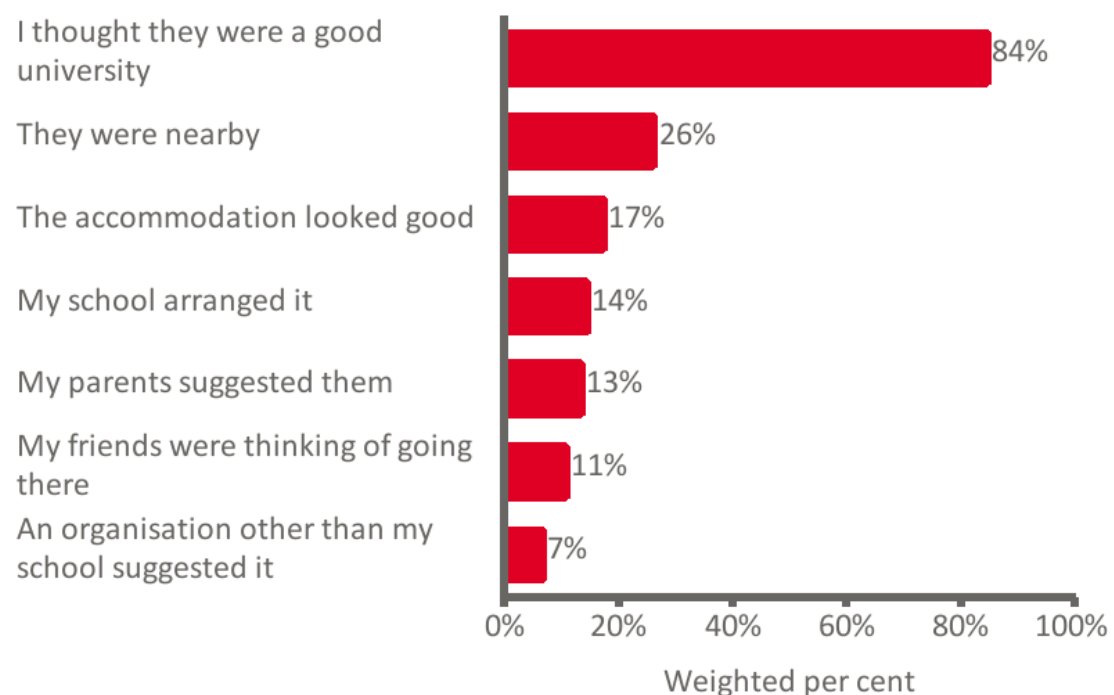
### Most chose to visit universities they thought were good

Over 90 per cent of applicants made at least one visit to universities or colleges and of those, the most popular reason for choosing a university to visit was that they thought it was a good university (84 per cent of those who made a visit).

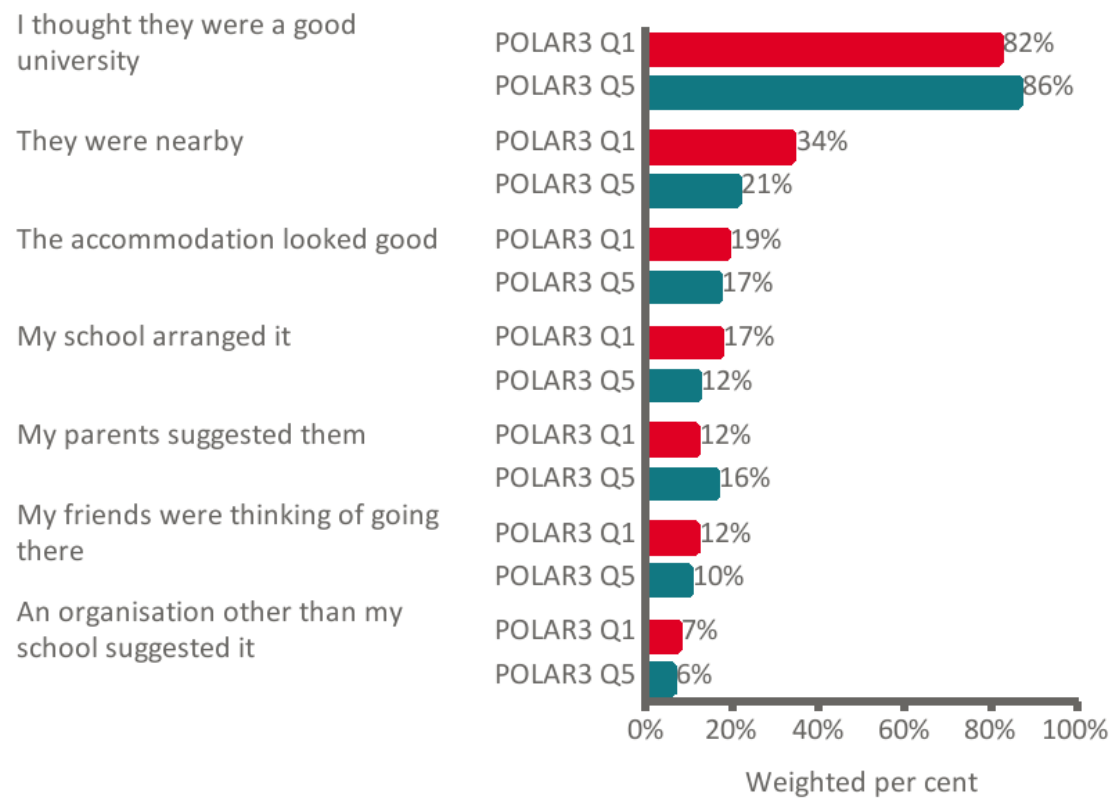
More than a quarter (26 per cent) visited a university because they were nearby. For those from the most disadvantaged areas (POLAR3 Q1), over a third selected this option (34 per cent), compared with only 21 per cent of those from the most advantaged areas.

Those young applicants from disadvantaged areas were more likely to report that their school arranged the visit, and this drives the selection of university to visit. Conversely, applicants from the same areas were less likely to say that their parents suggested the universities to visit.

**Figure 6: Proportion of respondents (weighted) who made at least one visit reporting reasons for choosing universities to visit**



**Figure 7: Proportion of respondents (weighted) who made at least one visit reporting reasons for choosing universities to visit, by POLAR3 Q1 and POLAR3 Q5**



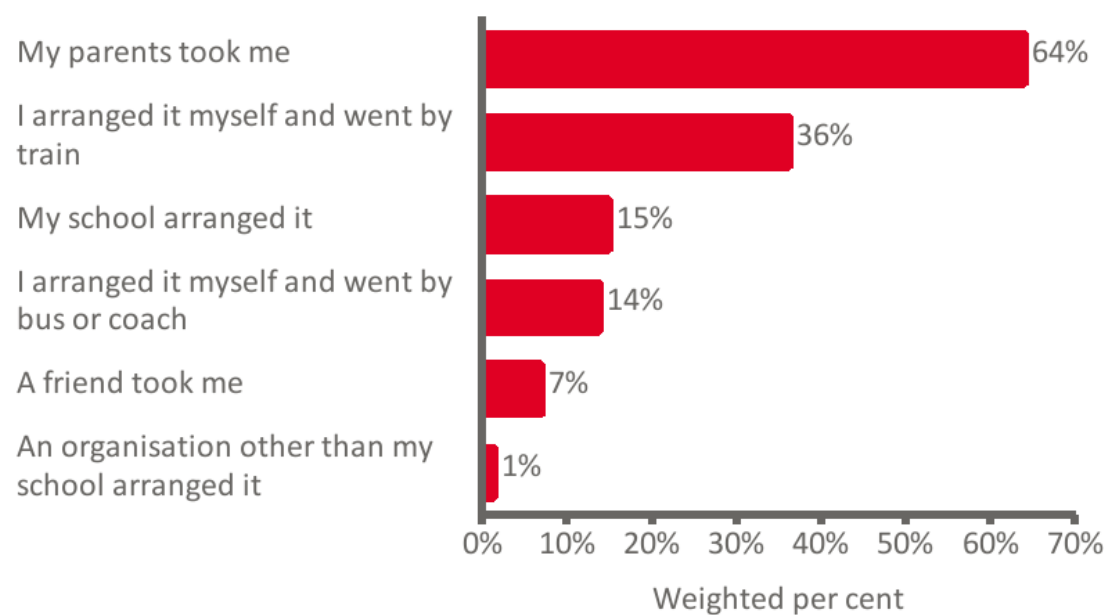
### The majority of applicants organised their own travel to universities

When asked how they travelled to universities and colleges, nearly two thirds reported that their parents took them to at least one visit. 36 per cent reported arranging the visit themselves and travelling by train, and 14 per cent went by bus or coach.

Only 15 per cent reported that their school arranged a visit, and very few (one per cent) reported that another organisation arranged it.

This suggests that most young applicants arrange visits themselves, or rely on support from friends or family to visit universities, ahead of applying to or entering higher education.

**Figure 8: Proportion of respondents (weighted) who made at least one visit reporting how they got there**

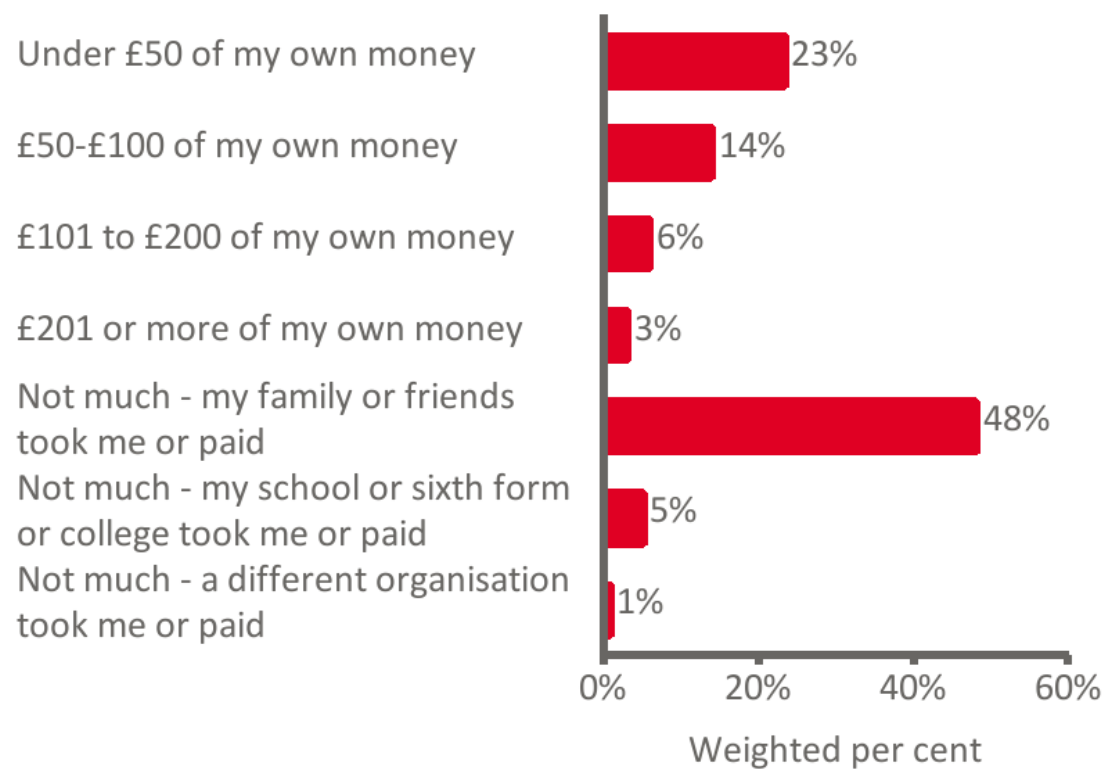


### Over half of applicants did not pay personally for visits to universities

We asked about how much the applicant personally spent on making visits to universities and colleges. Just over half (54 per cent) reported that it didn't cost them much, with most of those (48 per cent of all) reporting that family or friends took them or paid. Only six per cent reported that school or another organisation took them or paid.

Just under half (46 per cent) paid for visits using their own money, with half of these spending under £50.

**Figure 9: Proportion of respondents (weighted) indicating how much they spent visiting universities and colleges**

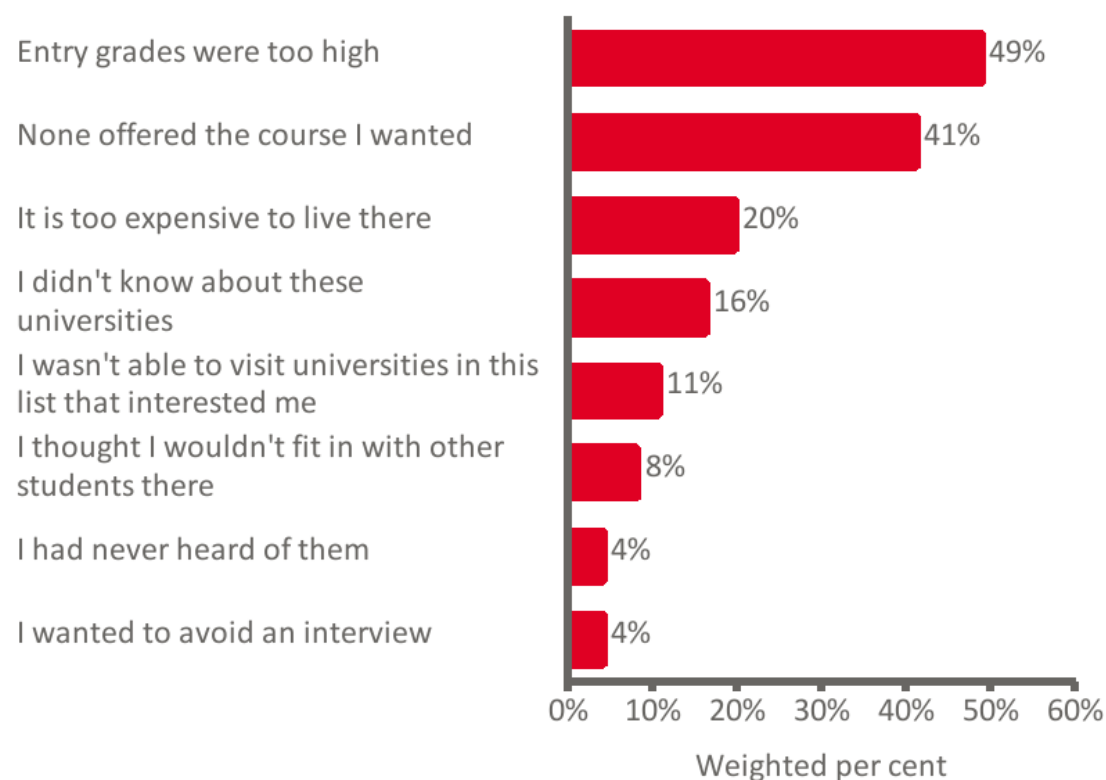


## Applying to higher tariff providers

### Reasons for not applying to higher tariff universities vary by background

6,500 respondents to the survey did not make an application to a higher tariff provider in the UCAS scheme. We asked those who had not made an application in the main scheme to a higher tariff provider whether they had considered applying to any in a list of providers (one higher tariff provider from each region of the UK). Over half (57 per cent) reported that they did not consider making an application to any in the list.

**Figure 10: Proportion of respondents (weighted) reporting their reasons for not applying for a course at any of these (higher tariff) universities**



Nearly half (49 per cent) believed that the entry grades were too high. Those from the most advantaged areas (POLAR3 Q5) were more likely to report this as a reason (52 per cent) compared with those from the most disadvantaged areas (44 per cent).

Table 1 shows how this relates to the attainment of the applicants who replied to the survey. Over 85 per cent of those who held A level qualifications, Scottish Highers or Advanced Highers in the ABB+ category made at least one choice to a higher tariff provider. Of those with the very highest A level grades of AAA and above, 96 per cent applied to higher tariff providers. Nearly half of the applicants who did not hold a qualification in the ABB+ category made an application to a higher tariff provider.

Amongst applicants that did not apply to a higher tariff provider those that also did not hold a qualification in the ABB+ category were much more likely to cite entry grades as the reason they did not apply (55 per cent) than those that held ABB+ qualifications (between 13 per cent and 31 per cent depending on type of qualification).

Only one per cent of those that attained AAA or above at A level did not apply to higher tariff providers and stated that entry grades were the reason for not doing so. This is higher for those holding ABB+ BTEC qualifications, where 15 per cent did not apply and reported entry grades as the reason.

**Table 1: Applications to higher tariff providers by qualification level**

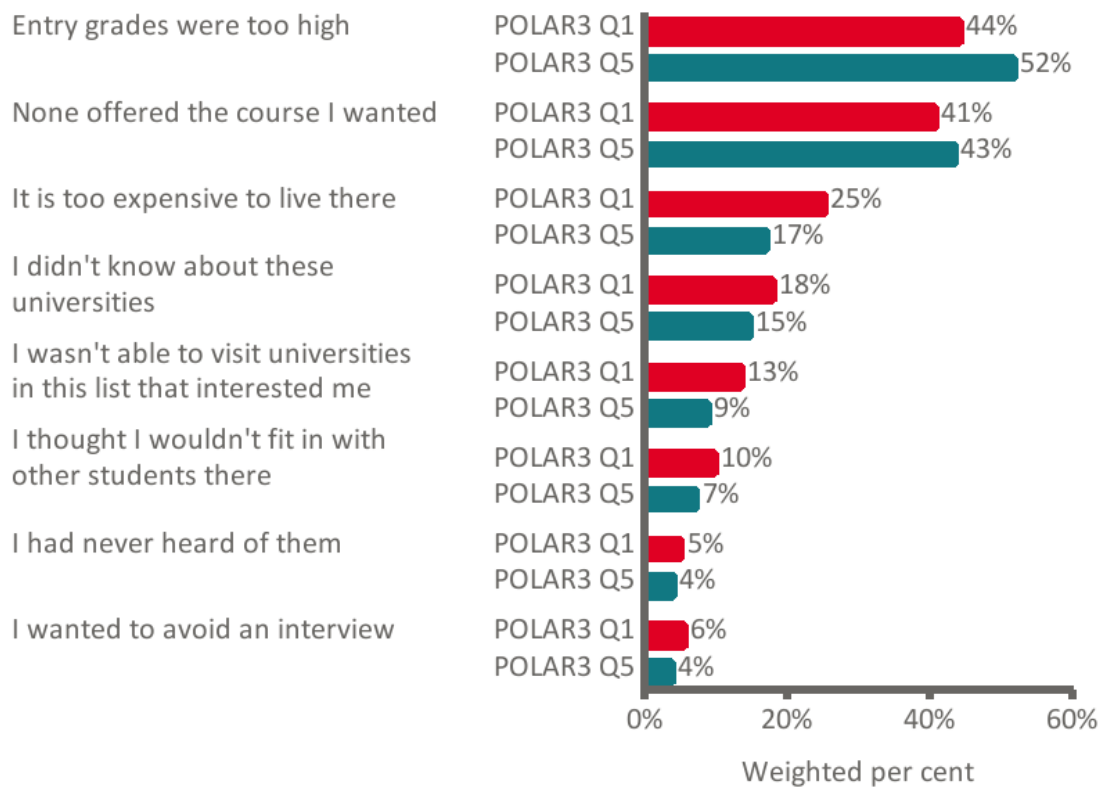
Achieved grades	Number of respondents who applied to higher tariff	Proportion of respondents who applied to higher tariff	Number of respondents who did not apply to higher tariff	Proportion who reported reason as entry grades being too high	Proportion of group who did not apply to higher tariff and stated entry grades too high
AAA+ A level	2,010	96%	80	28%	1%
ABB/AAB A level	1,970	86%	320	31%	4%
ABB+ BTEC	540	34%	1,035	22%	15%
ABB+ Scottish Highers or Advanced Highers	720	92%	65	17%	1%
Other ABB+	90	65%	45	13%	4%
Not ABB+	4,765	49%	4,995	55%	28%
All	10,090	61%	6,540	48%	19%

Two-fifths (41 per cent) of those that didn't apply to higher tariff providers reported that they did not offer the course that they wanted.

A fifth (20 per cent) reported that they perceived that it was too expensive to live there. This reason was more likely to be selected by those from the most disadvantaged areas (POLAR3 Q1), 25 per cent compared with 17 per cent from the most advantaged areas.



**Figure 11: Proportion of respondents (weighted) reporting their reasons for not applying for a course at any of these (higher tariff) universities, by POLAR3 Q1 and POLAR3 Q5**



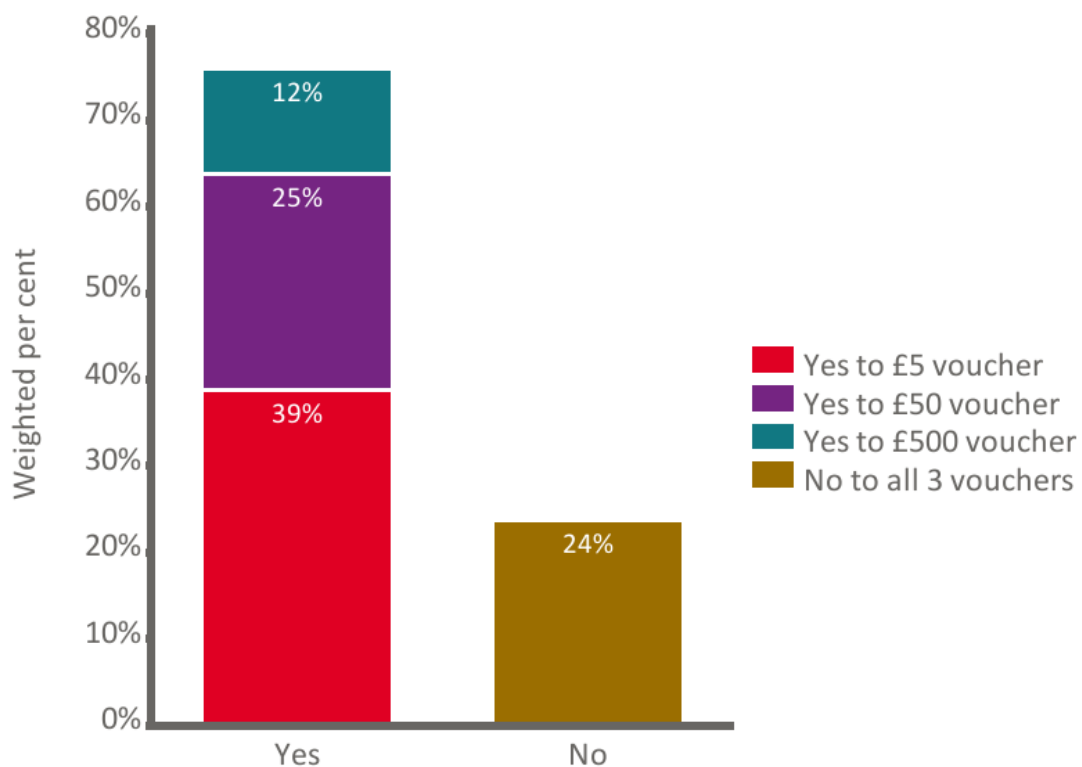
### Three quarters of applicants would apply if offered a travel voucher

We asked the respondents who did not make an application to a higher tariff provider whether they would have applied to the universities listed if a £5 travel voucher had been offered. If they answered 'No', they were then asked whether they would have applied if a £50 travel voucher was offered. If they answered 'No' again, they were asked whether they would have applied if a £500 travel voucher was offered.

Over three quarters (76 per cent) reported that they would have applied to one of the universities listed if they were offered a travel voucher incentive for an open day.

Nearly two fifths (39 per cent) reported that they would have applied with the offer of a £5 travel voucher.

**Figure 12: Proportion of respondents (weighted) indicating if they would have applied to one of the universities listed (higher tariff) if they had been offered a travel voucher**



## Perceptions of higher education

Respondents to the survey were asked to assess how strongly they agreed with a set of twelve statements connected to the value of higher education, the experience of going to university, and the range of higher education available. Over 85 per cent of applicants agreed that employers are most interested in relevant experience, some universities are better than others, and going to university being a big challenge.

**Figure 13: Proportion of respondents (weighted) indicating to what extent they agree or disagree with each of these statements**

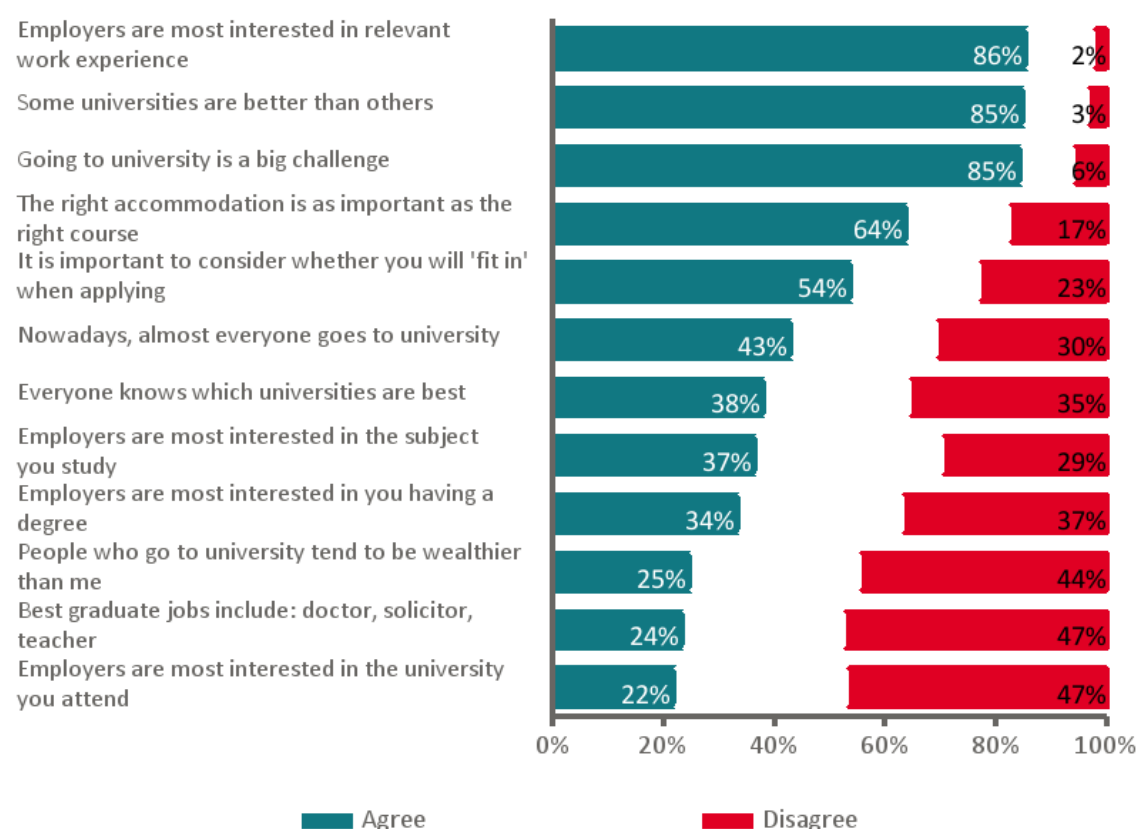


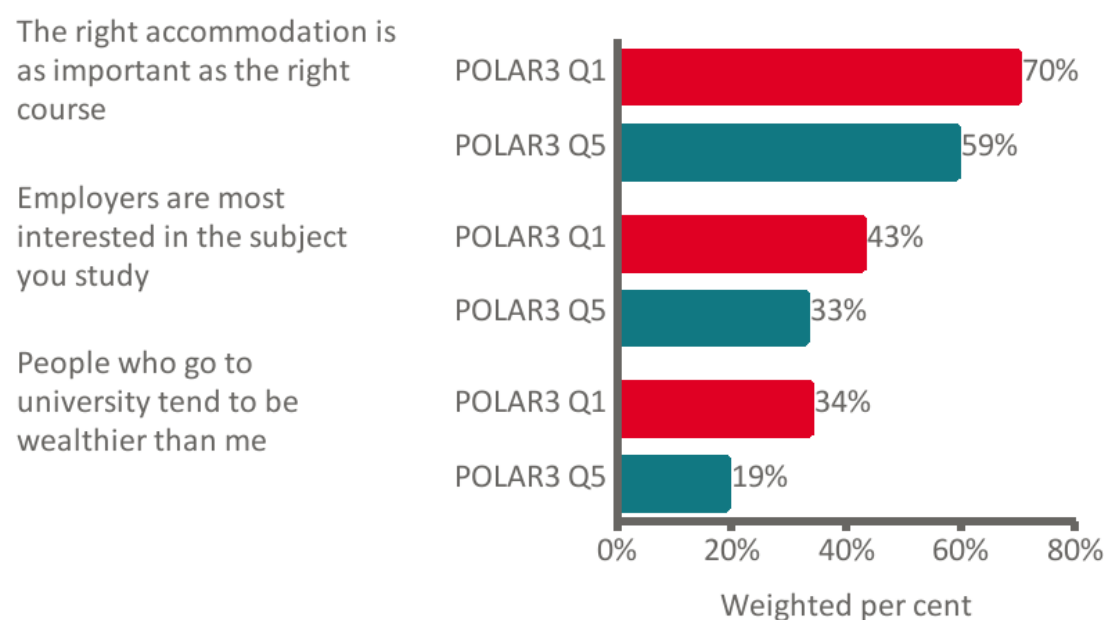
Figure 14 and Figure 15 show the proportion from the most disadvantaged areas who agree (POLAR3 Q1) and from the most advantaged areas (POLAR3 Q5). Figure 14 show statements where those from the most disadvantaged areas are more likely to agree, and Figure 15 shows the statements where those from the most advantaged areas are likely to agree.

Over half of respondents agreed that the right accommodation is as important as the right course (64 per cent), and it is important to consider whether you will 'fit in' when applying (54 per cent). However, those from the most disadvantaged areas are more likely to agree that accommodation is important (70 per cent) than those from the most advantaged areas (59 per cent). Similarly, 'fitting in' is more likely to be a concern for those from the most advantaged areas (57 per cent) than those from the most disadvantaged areas (48 per cent).

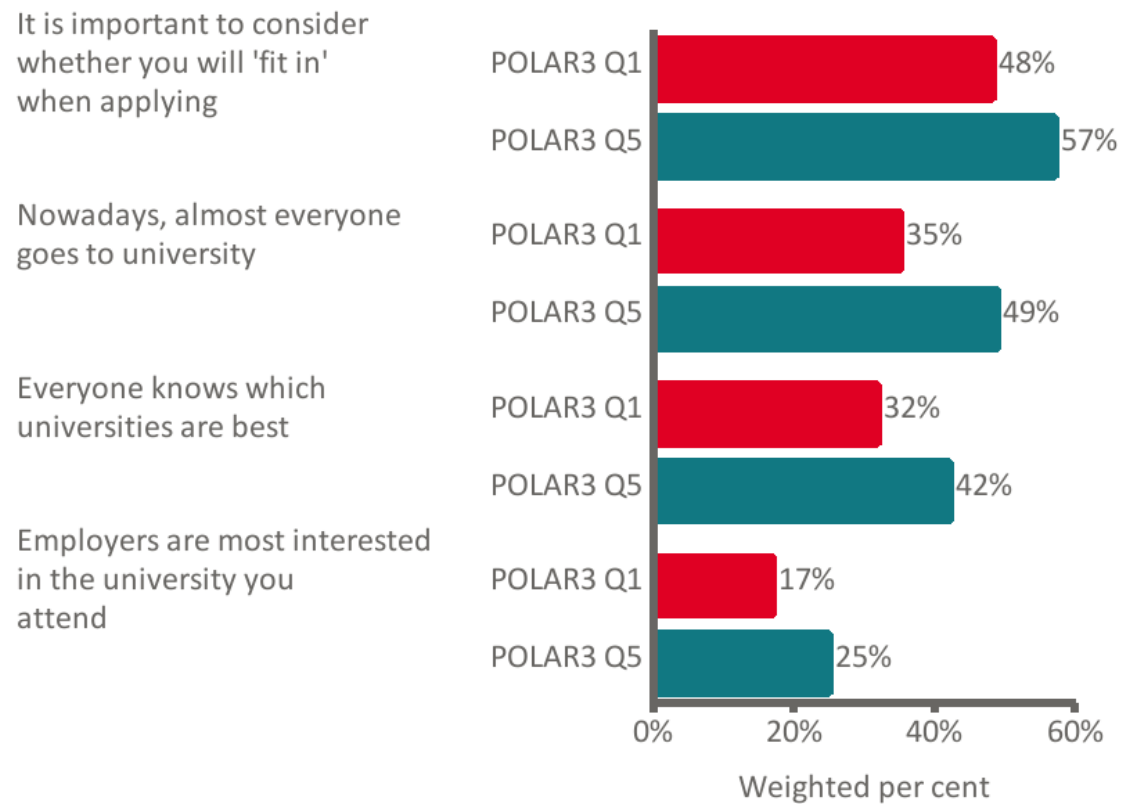
Applicants from POLAR3 Q1 areas are more likely to agree that employers are most interested in subject of study (43 per cent vs 33 per cent in POLAR3 Q5) and 'people who go to university tend to be wealthier than me' (34 per cent vs 19 per cent).

Applicants from POLAR3 Q5 areas are more likely to agree that 'nowadays, everyone goes to university' (49 per cent vs 35 per cent in POLAR3 Q1), 'everyone knows which universities are best' (42 per cent vs 32 per cent), and 'employers are most interested in the university you go to' (25 per cent vs 17 per cent).

**Figure 14: Proportion of respondents (weighted) indicating to what extent they agree or disagree with each of these statements, by POLAR3 Q1 and POLAR3 Q5 (POLAR3 Q1 more likely to agree)**



**Figure 15: Proportion of respondents (weighted) indicating to what extent they agree or disagree with each of these statements, by POLAR3 Q1 and POLAR3 Q5 (POLAR3 Q5 more likely to agree)**



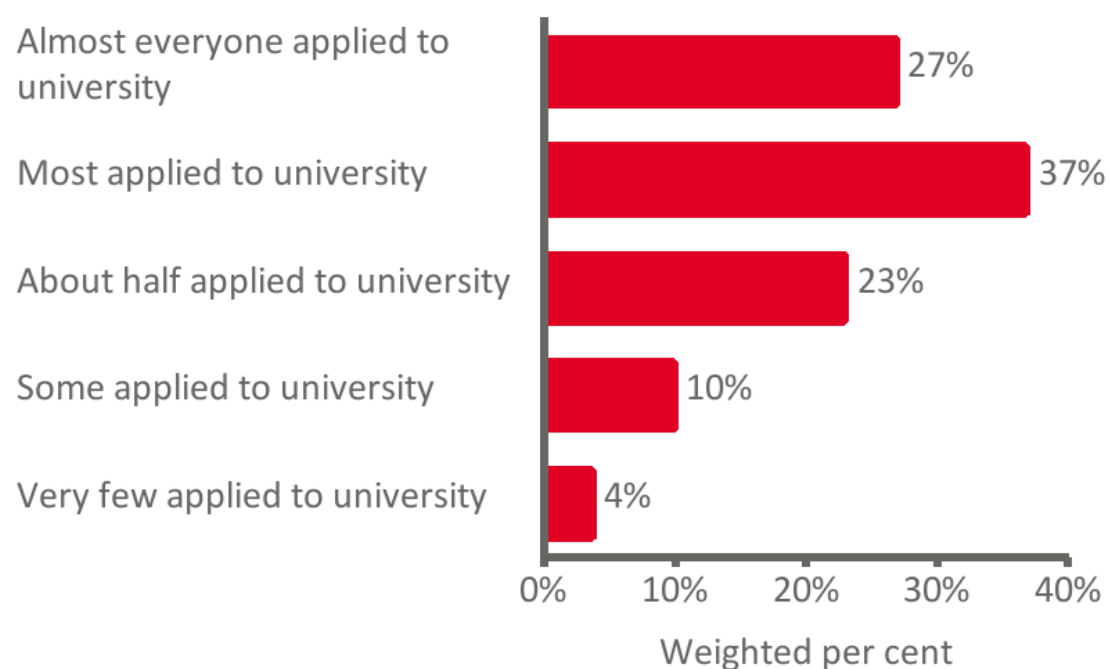
## Views about their GCSE year peers

64 per cent of applicants report that most of/almost all of their peers applied

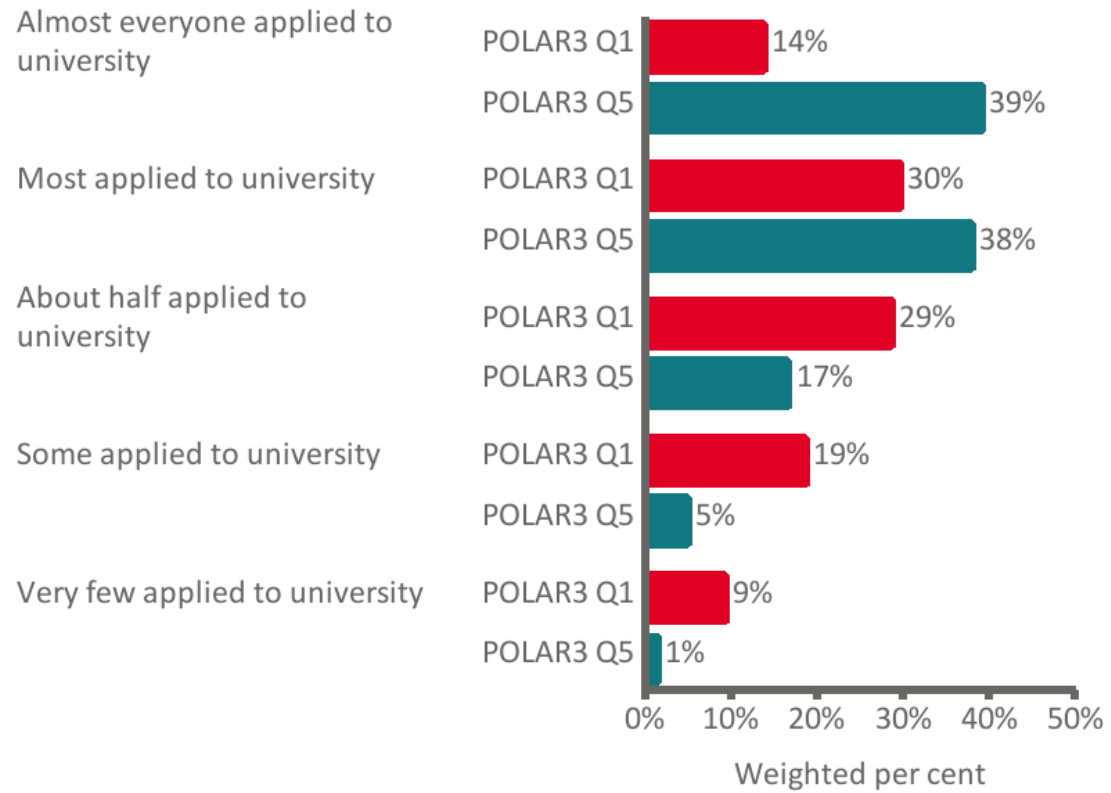
When asked about those who they attended school with when aged 15 or 16, 64 per cent of applicants said that most or almost everyone applied to university, with only 14 per cent reporting that very few/some of their peers applied.

This varies considerably depending on area based background (POLAR3). For those from the most disadvantaged areas, only 44 per cent said that most or almost everyone applied, and 28 per cent reported that very few or some applied. For young applicants from the most advantaged areas, 77 per cent reported that most or almost everyone applied, and only six per cent reported that very few or some applied to university.

**Figure 16: Proportion of respondents (weighted) reporting how many of their peers from the school they attended when they were 15 or 16 years old, went on to apply to university at age 17 to 19**



**Figure 17: Proportion of respondents (weighted) reporting how many of their peers from the school they attended when they were 15 or 16 years old, went on to apply to university at age 17 to 19, by POLAR3 Q1 and POLAR3 Q5**

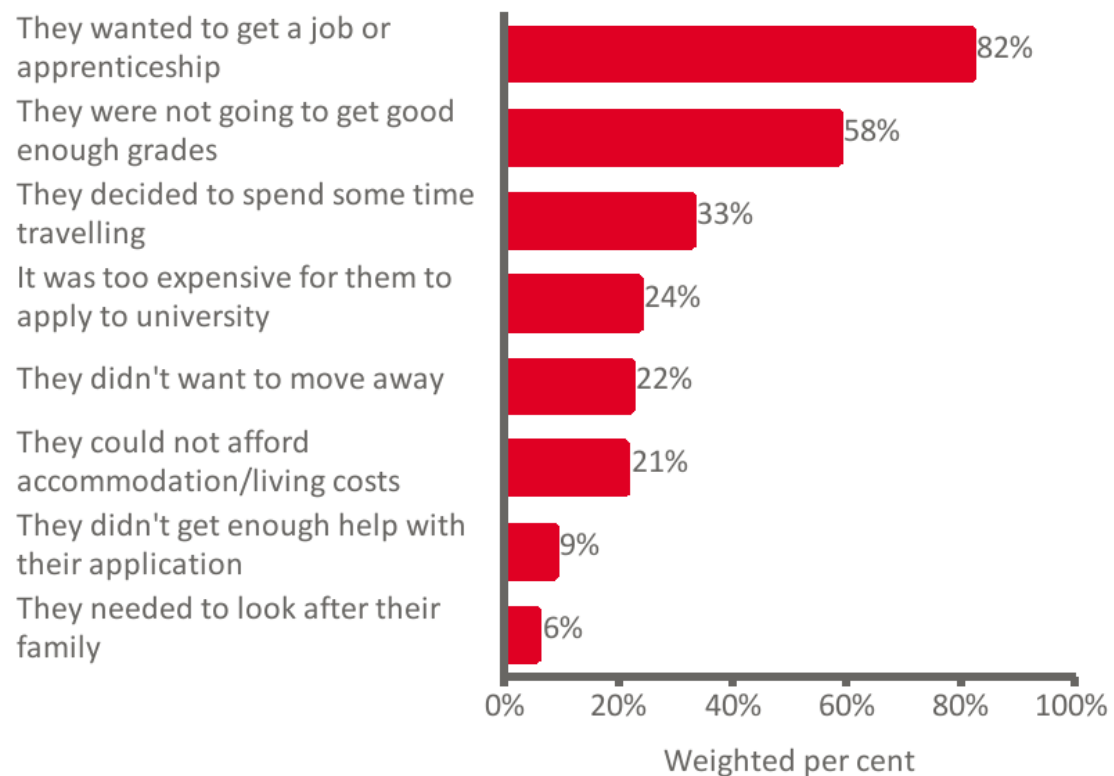


### The most frequently selected reasons for their peers not applying to university

When asked why their school peers had not applied, 82 per cent said that they wanted to get a job or apprenticeship. The second most frequently selected reason was that they were not expected to get good enough grades (58 per cent). Spending time travelling was reported by a third of respondents, but this was nearly twice as likely to be selected by those from the most advantaged areas (42 per cent) compared to those from the most disadvantaged areas (24 per cent).

The cost of applying to university or living at university was selected by more than a fifth of applicants, and both of these were more likely to be selected by those from the more disadvantaged areas (see Annex D Q16). A similar proportion reported that their peers who did not apply to university had not wanted to move away from home (22 per cent). This was also more likely to be reported by those from the most disadvantaged areas.

**Figure 18: Proportion of respondents (weighted) reporting why they think those who did not apply to university, chose not to apply**



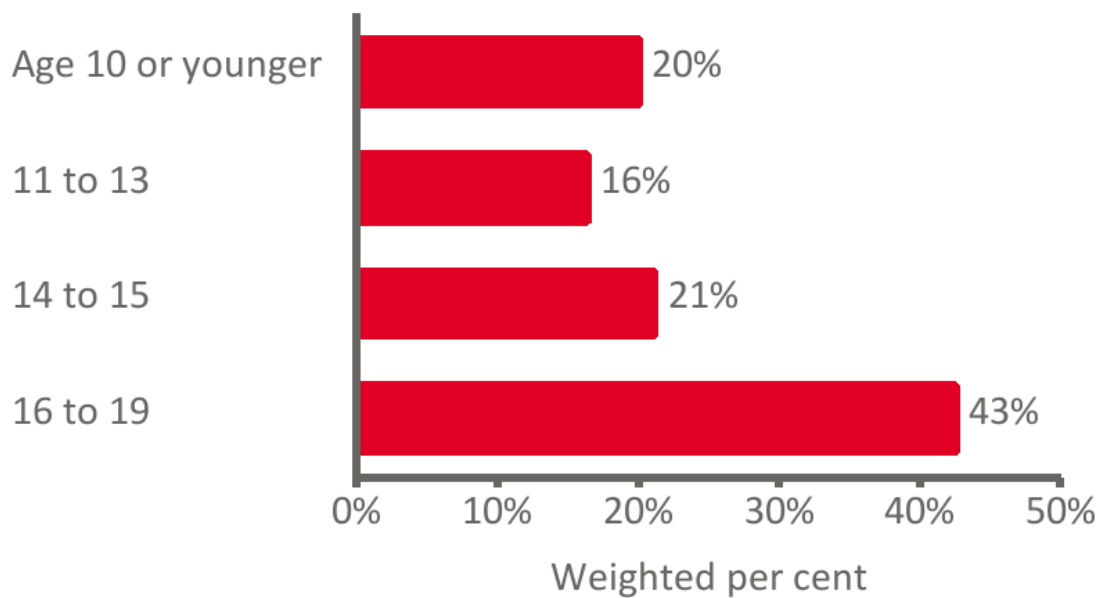


### A fifth of applicants knew they would apply to university by age ten

When applicants were asked at what age they felt sure they would apply to university, 43 per cent said not until the ages of 16 to 19 – 46 per cent of those from the most disadvantaged areas, compared to 39 per cent of those from the most advantaged areas (see Annex D Q18).

A fifth (20 per cent) said they made this decision when they were aged ten or younger. This varies by background such that a quarter (25 per cent) of those in the most advantaged areas reported feeling sure they would apply to university aged ten or younger, compared with 18 per cent of those in the most disadvantaged areas.

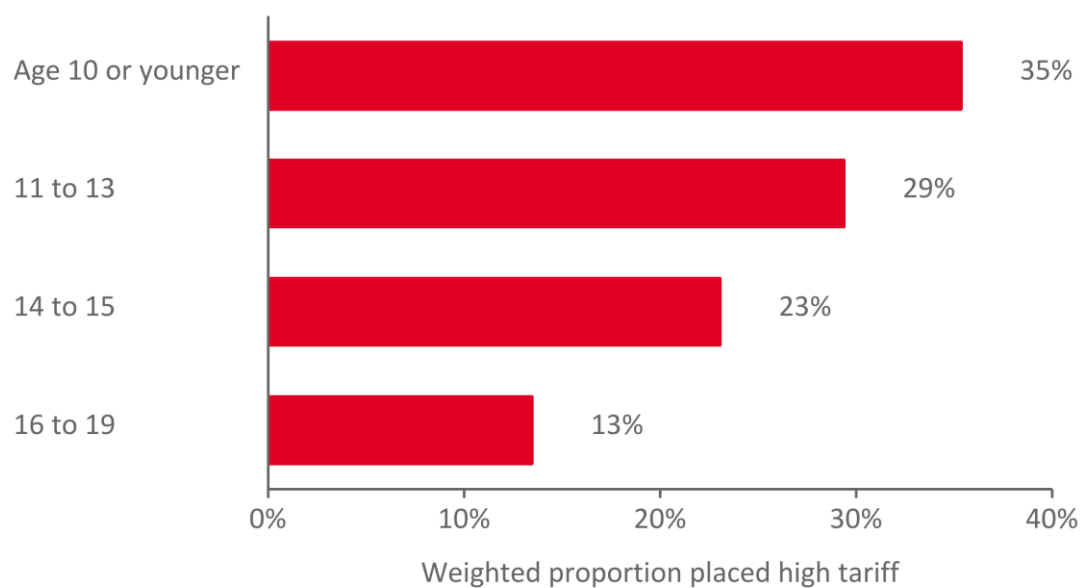
**Figure 19: Proportion of respondents (weighted) indicating the age at which they felt sure they would apply to university**



Age when applicants were sure they would apply to university is related to being placed at higher tariff universities

Those who were sure they would apply to university aged ten or younger are 2.6 times as likely to be placed at higher tariff providers as those who were not sure until they were aged 16 to 19 years. Over a third of applicants (35 per cent) who were ten or younger when they felt sure about applying were placed at higher tariff providers, compared with just 13 per cent of those who were not sure until they were aged 16 to 19 years.

**Figure 20: Proportion of respondents placed at higher tariff providers by the age they felt sure they would apply to university**



## Annex B: Questions used in the survey

### Q1:

Many people visit universities or colleges in the year or two before applying to or starting a course. Roughly how many universities or colleges did you visit?

- None
- One
- Two to five
- Six or more

### Q2 (asked to those who answered 'None' to Q1):

With hindsight, how useful would it have been to have visited some universities before you applied?

- Very useful
- Fairly useful
- Not very useful
- Not at all useful

### Q3 (asked to those who answered 'None' to Q1):

Was there anything that stopped you visiting universities before you applied? Please tick all that apply.

- There was not enough time
- I had no way of getting there
- It was too expensive to travel
- The university or course didn't have an open day
- I didn't think I would get the right grades
- I didn't know there were open days before I applied
- I didn't know how to register for open days
- I didn't want to go on my own
- Other (please specify)

**Q4** (asked to those who did not answer 'None' to Q1):

Did you generally visit them before or after you applied?

- Mostly before applying
- Mostly after applying
- Equal number of visits before and after applying

**Q5** (asked to those who did not answer 'None' to Q1):

Thinking about those universities and colleges you visited BEFORE you applied, generally, how did you choose which ones to visit? Please tick all that apply.

- My school arranged it
- My parents suggested them
- I thought they were a good university
- They were nearby
- My friends were thinking of going there
- The accommodation looked good
- An organisation other than my school suggested it to me
- Other (please specify)

**Q6** (asked to those who did not answer 'None' to Q1):

And generally, how did you get there? Please tick all that apply.

- A friend took me
- An organisation other than my school arranged it
- I arranged it myself and went by bus or coach
- I arranged it myself and went by train
- My parents took me
- My school arranged it
- Other (please specify)

**Q7** (asked to those who did not answer 'None' to Q1):

Think about the total cost of your visits to universities and colleges. How much did you spend on visiting universities?

- Not much – my school, sixth form, or college took me or paid
- Not much – an organisation other than my school, sixth form, or college took me or paid
- Not much – family or friends took me or paid
- Under £50 of my own money
- £50 – £100 of my own money
- £101 – £200 of my own money
- £201 or more of my own money

**Q8** (asked to those who did not answer 'None' to Q1):

With hindsight, how useful would it have been to have visited more universities before you applied?

- Very useful
- Fairly useful
- Not very useful
- Not at all useful

**Q9** (asked to those who did not answer 'None' to Q1):

Was there anything that stopped you visiting more universities before you applied? Please tick all that apply.

- There was not enough time
- I had no way of getting there
- It was too expensive to travel
- The university or course didn't have an open day
- I didn't think I would get the right grades
- I didn't know there were open days before I applied
- I didn't know how to register for open days
- I didn't want to go on my own
- Other (please specify)

**Q10:**

To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of these statements?

**Columns:**

- Strongly agree
- Agree

- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

**Rows:**

- Employers of graduates are most interested in the subject you study – the university isn't as important
- Employers of graduates are most interested in the university you go to – the subject isn't as important
- Employers of graduates are most interested in whether you have a degree or not – where you studied or what you studied isn't as important
- Employers of graduates are particularly interested in relevant work experience as part of your degree
- The best graduate jobs include being a doctor, teacher, or solicitor
- Having the right accommodation at university is just as important as the quality of the course
- Going to university for the first time is a big challenge
- Nowadays, almost everyone goes to university
- Some universities are much better than others
- Everyone knows which universities are best
- Whether you 'fit in' with other students is an important part of choosing a university
- People who go to university tend to be from wealthier backgrounds than me

**Q11** (asked to those who did not apply to higher tariff providers):

When thinking about which universities and colleges to apply to, did you consider any of these?

Cardiff University	UCL (University College London)
Newcastle University	University of Cambridge
Queen's University Belfast	University of Exeter
The University of Birmingham	University of Leeds
The University of Edinburgh	University of Oxford
The University of Manchester	University of Southampton
The University of Nottingham	

- Yes
- No

**Q12** (asked to those who did not apply to higher tariff providers):

What were your reasons for not applying for a course at any of these universities?  
Please tick all that apply.

- Entry grades were too high
- I didn't know enough about these universities
- I had never heard of them
- I thought I wouldn't fit in with other students there
- I wanted to avoid an interview
- I wasn't able to visit universities in this list that interested me
- It is too expensive to live there
- None offered the course I wanted
- Other (please specify)

**Q13.1** (asked to those who did not apply to higher tariff providers):

It can sometimes be costly to visit universities.

If you had been offered a £5 travel voucher if you applied to one of those universities listed, would you have made an application?

- Yes, definitely
- Yes, probably
- No, probably not
- No, definitely not

**Q13.2** (asked to those who did not apply to higher tariff providers and answered 'No, probably not' or 'No, definitely not' to Q13.1):

If you had been offered a £50 travel voucher if you applied to one of those universities listed, would you have made an application?

- Yes, definitely
- Yes, probably
- No, probably not
- No, definitely not

**Q13.3** (asked to those who did not apply to higher tariff providers and answered 'No, probably not' or 'No, definitely not' to Q13.1 and Q13.2):

If you had been offered a £500 travel voucher if you applied to one of those universities listed, would you have made an application?

- Yes, definitely
- Yes, probably
- No, probably not
- No, definitely not



**Q14:**

What, if anything, do you think might make it easier to apply to these universities?

Cardiff University	UCL (University College London)
Newcastle University	University of Cambridge
Queen's University Belfast	University of Exeter
The University of Birmingham	University of Leeds
The University of Edinburgh	University of Oxford
The University of Manchester	University of Southampton
The University of Nottingham	

(Free text response)

**Q15:**

Thinking back to the school that you attended when you were 15 or 16 years old, how many students went on to apply to university at age 17 to 19?

- Almost everyone applied to university
- Most applied to university
- About half applied to university
- Some applied to university
- Very few applied to university

**Q16:**

Thinking about those who didn't apply to university, why do you think that was? Please tick all that apply.

- They were not going to get good enough grades
- They wanted to get a job or apprenticeship instead
- They didn't want to move away from home
- They didn't get enough help with their application
- It was too expensive for them to apply to university
- They decided to spend some time travelling
- They could not afford to pay for accommodation and other living costs
- They needed to look after their family
- Other (please specify)

**Q17:**

What, if anything, would you say would have made the most difference to encourage those people to apply to university?

(Free text response)

**Q18:**

At what age were you when you felt sure that you would apply to university?

- Age ten or younger
- 11 to 13
- 14 to 15
- 16 to 19

**Q19:**

We're interested in what motivates people to apply to university. Please add anything about what motivated you to apply and what challenges you dealt with when thinking about applying.

(Free text response)

## Annex C: Notes on analysis methodology

All UK domiciled UCAS Undergraduate applicants at the 30 June deadline, aged 18 or 19, were considered in the scope of the survey (378,000). Once contact preferences were taken into account, a total of 372,000 invitations to complete the survey were sent by email on 25 January 2016. The survey remained open until 5 February 2016, and a total of 18,100 responses were received in that 12 day period (4.9 per cent of all invited). Over 90 per cent of those who responded (16,600) answered all questions they were asked (4.5 per cent of all invited). It is this base of applicants who answered every question that is used in the analysis reported here, and in the data tables and comments files.

The data has been weighted by sex, age, background (POLAR3), country of domicile, ethnic group, acceptance route, and whether the applicant applied by the October or January deadline, to be representative of the complete UK 18 and 19 year old June deadline population by those dimensions. In each of the tables and charts, we show the weighted responses for this base of 372,000 applicants. The weighted totals can be taken as an estimate of how many applicants hold a particular view, if those who did not respond to the survey had the same views, within each of the weighting categories, as those who did respond.

## Annex D: The survey data tables

A [full set of data tables](#) is provided for each question in the survey.

The survey results are presented both as the number of responses in each category (from the 16,100 respondents who answered all questions) and as the weighted totals (by the methodology described in Annex C).

As well as the overall results, data (responses and weighted totals) is also provided for different types of applicant. Results are reported by whether the applicant applied to higher tariff providers, their sex, background (POLAR3), the provider tariff group the applicant was placed at, declared ethnic group, country of domicile, age, and whether the applicant applied by the October or January deadline.

For each question, the unweighted results are given first, then weighted results in the same format. The top left hand box of each table states whether weighted or unweighted results are being reported.