



PROJECT NEXT GENERATION

NEEDS & MOTIVATORS REPORT 2023

UCAS

INTRODUCTION

Welcome back to Project Next Generation. This is the first follow up to our Themes Report, but this time we're taking a second look (and a deeper dive) into the specific needs and motivations of young people trying to decide on their next steps.

Understanding what they want, and what's driving their decisions (or lack thereof), will help universities, colleges, and employers to better communicate and connect with tomorrow's students, apprentices, and workforce. They need inspiration, education, upskilling, and better decision making - to help them maximise their outcomes and fulfil their full potential.

Specifically, they need advice and guidance on how to navigate the ever-growing number of higher education and employment options they have. Without the right information to hand, choice paralysis is a real possibility. And when they can't make the right choices at the right times, they're at risk of missing out on opportunities that could make all the difference. With the insight from Project Next Generation, we want to help you, to help them.

The findings of this report – which took place with more than 1,000 participants aged 13 to 17 – will help universities, colleges, and employers to inspire, educate, upskill, and improve the decision-making of young people across the UK.

Jo Richards

Senior Insight Lead UCAS



| IN A NUTSHELL

The analysis in this report paints several new pictures of young people's needs and motivations:

- 1.** Health and happiness are just as important to this age group as planning for the future. There's a pragmatism about life and decision-making, where enjoyment and fulfilment must always play a role. We're not seeing laser-focused pupils making social sacrifices to get their grades – they're finding a balance that works for them.
- 2.** Contradictions and fluctuations are rife, as adolescents navigate towards adulthood. Certainty of career path rises and falls with no clear pattern, and apprenticeships are pursued and avoided for the same reasons. A broad-brush approach won't work in many cases, and marketing must be more nuanced.
- 3.** Experience and exposure are silver bullets to many concerns that young people have. Whether through work placements or conversations with peer mentors, this higher level of direct knowledge breeds confidence, sets expectations, and gives comfort whatever path young people choose. If you can only provide one thing, this is the most universal solution.



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CHAPTER ONE: IMPORTANCE

What really matters to young people – personally and professionally – and why.

**IN THE AGE OF
WELLNESS,
HAPPINESS
MATTERS MOST.**

**YOUNG PEOPLE
WANT TO
HARNESS THE
POWER OF
POSITIVITY.**

If there's one thing we have to remember about teenagers, it's that childhood is very much a recent memory for them. Playfulness, happiness, fun, and pleasure remain important drivers in their adolescent years, even as they begin to navigate crucial life decisions that will influence adulthood.

4 in 5 who we surveyed told us that they felt positive about their lives right now and what the future holds for them. This was true across the board, with the only statistical outlier being that private school pupils are even more optimistic than their state school peers – with 70% feeling extremely or very positive about their future.

But that doesn't mean they're not pragmatic about their priorities. Education is a key focus, with many linking this to opportunities in the future, and both self-improvement and development are important to them too.

But when push comes to shove, and when we asked them to pick what's most important to them right now, it was being happy and being healthy that took the top spots.

In contrast – starting a family, travelling, and being popular are some of the least important things to today's young people.

81% positive

As it is at the moment



82% positive

How you think it will turn out



Overall, how do you feel about your life... BASE: All respondents 1000

“Right now, I am just trying to relax and enjoy my summer after the GCSE period. My focus has also been looking for colleges that I may want to go to in September and different A-level options, as this is an important pathway to what I do later on in life, so I want to make the right decision” (Age 16)

“Some of my priorities are personal such as improving confidence and self-esteem, but I also need to prioritise schoolwork as my GCSEs are this time next year” (Age 15)

Behaving with a wisdom that belies their years, and reflects the fact that young people in 2023 are more aware than ever of their mental health, their list of proactive tasks to pursue wellbeing is inspiring:

- ▶ Spending time with friends and family
- ▶ Playing sports and being active to boost mood and mindset
- ▶ Seeking out support from others
- ▶ Acknowledging that academic and personal happiness go hand-in-hand
- ▶ Recognising that focusing on happiness can create a more positive mindset
- ▶ Believing that all of the above can provide the energy and enthusiasm needed to move forward.

“I believe the key to a good life is to be happy. It’s not about how much money you have, as money is disposable income...but time isn’t” (Age 16)

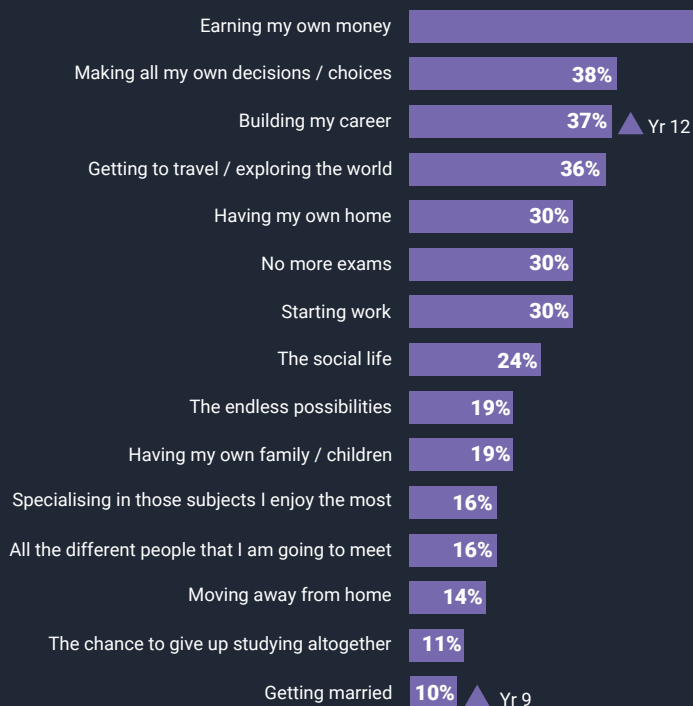
“Mental health means so much to me, I struggle with it, and I have taken steps to being happier. I have received help from doctors and counsellors” (Age 15)

“If I’m not happy then life would lack meaning because no matter your money, success, job etc if I’m not happy then I feel there’s little point. I feel I have already taken steps to be happy such as getting outside, reading, spending time with family and I plan to continue such activities in my future and hopefully find other activities that make me happy” (Age 16)

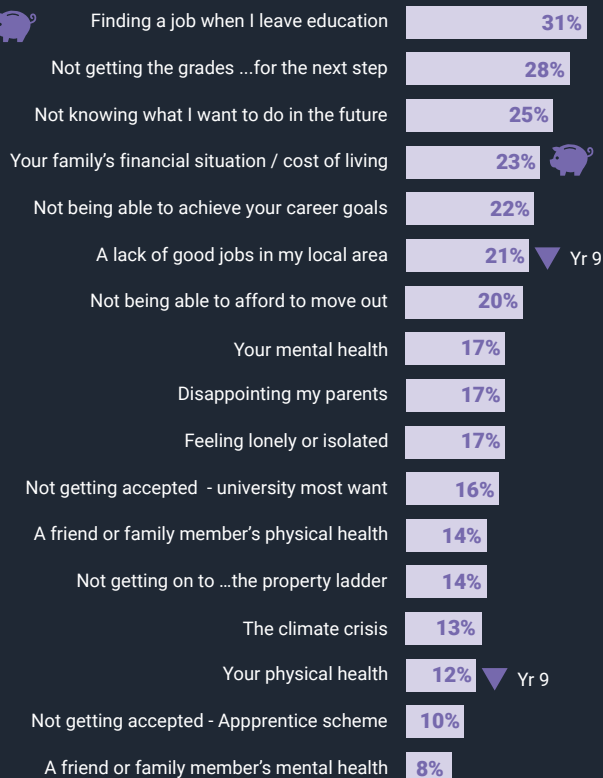


Now, life is far from utopic for young people. They have just as many concerns as they have things to look forward to, but, on balance, they trend more towards the optimistic:

Looking forward to...



Worry you...



Which, if any, of the following do you look forward to when you think of your future? (Please pick up to 5) Which, if any, of the following worry you when you think of your future? (Please pick up to 5). BASE: All respondents 1000

Many of the things they're most excited about can be linked together by the thrill of independence, while many of their chief concerns are around the steps in the process to get there. They can't earn the money (#1 excitement) without finding a job (#1 concern), and they can't make all their own decisions (#2 excitement) without knowing what they want to do in the future (#3 concern).

They're excited about the destination. They're concerned about the journey.

But while this approach might be thrilling to some, for those with additional needs there's a heightened sense of worry. The determination is still there – as is the desire to reach their full potential – but so too is the worry that they will struggle to achieve this. Support is crucial, as is messaging, and most of all – listening to their personal circumstances.

"I'm concerned about the unknown because I don't know what might happen in the future, but this also excites me"
(Age 15)

"I'm worried that I will fail, or my disabilities will give off a bad impression as one bad move is all it takes to never see what your future will turn out to be" (Age 15)

"Worry that my dyslexia will get in the way of my studies or life"
(Age 13)

Overall, confidence and exposure to the working world seem to be the most effective remedies to combat nerves about employment – with those who have work experience and a more concrete idea of their plans being less concerned than those who don't.



32% from the qualitative research were concerned about 'being able to find a job' because...

- ▶ It means stability and having a secure income in the future
- ▶ If they don't earn enough, they fear it will be hard to cope
- ▶ Not having the necessary grades for their chosen career means uncertainty
- ▶ Many associate good grades with improved chances of getting a job
- ▶ There is competition for a job they want
- ▶ Not having the necessary skills or experience will place them at a disadvantage
- ▶ Social anxiety may impede their chances
- ▶ Of general career path uncertainty.

44% from the qualitative research were concerned about 'finding a career they love' because...

- ▶ They want to be fulfilled and happy and career is a significant component
- ▶ They have a drive to find something that motivates them and they can be successful at
- ▶ A large amount of their life will be spent working, and they don't want to compromise on their aims and goals
- ▶ It shouldn't 'just be about money' – personal fulfilment is important too
- ▶ Something you want to do is more important than something you have to do
- ▶ It's disheartening to hear adults talk about how much they dislike work.

ACTION POINTS – CHAPTER ONE

1. **Don't forget the fun.** Playfulness and happiness are important drivers for adolescent audiences, especially those facing big life decisions. Balance your awareness and decision-making campaigns with light-heartedness and levity.
2. **Demystify the process.** This audience's main concerns are all about the journey towards career choice and financial stability. Step-by-step guides and easy-to-follow breakdowns will be welcome, for young people who don't know where to start.
3. **Exposure breeds confidence.** Those with more experience and stronger ideas about what they want to do are the least worried, so make sure you have a strong provision of placements, work experience, mentorship, and expert talks.





CHAPTER TWO: OPEN MINDS

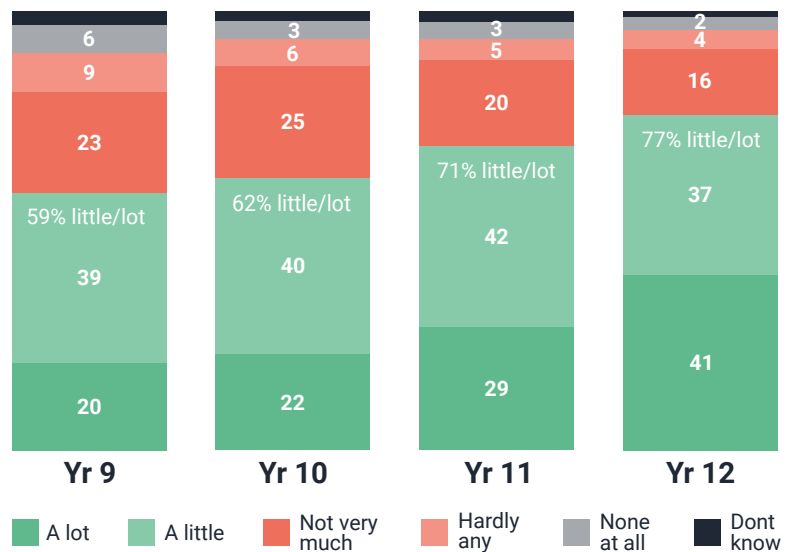
What routes are being considered, and when they narrow down their choices.

**KEEPING YOUR
OPTIONS OPEN
IS ONE THING.**

**INDECISION AND
UNPREPAREDNESS
ARE ANOTHER.**

Young people have more opportunities today than they ever have, which is an undeniably wonderful position to be in. But while the luxury of choice is certainly an advantage, could it also be a challenge?

So far, our mindset research paints a picture of pragmatism and preparation – but when it comes to their post-secondary plans, things start to look a little more uncertain. Relatively few can say they've given it 'a lot' of consideration:



How much thought have you given to what you want to do once you reach 18?
BASE: All respondents 250/ 250/ 251/ 249

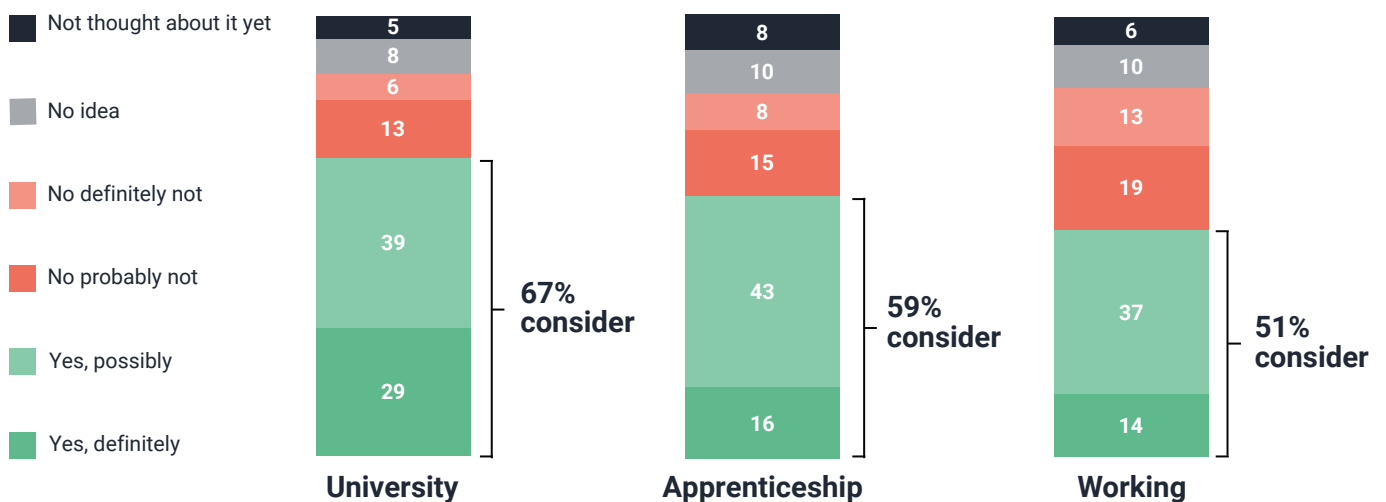
As you might expect, more consideration comes with more experience. **We know that 1 in 3 students starts thinking about higher education as early as primary school**, and the older they are, the more prepared they appear to be. But even in Year 12, less than 2 years away from their post-secondary life, 59% have only given it 'a little' consideration – if that – with 20% giving it 'not very much' or 'hardly any' thought, and 2% 'none at all'.

This is problematic because of how the interconnectedness of education and training choices link to career possibilities – particularly for those who may want to pursue specialist pathways. **We know 1 in 5 students inadvertently close a door to a course of choice** they could make later on, because of their qualification or subject selection. If you want to become a doctor, or an engineer, you'll need certain GCSEs, National 5s, Scottish Highers and Advanced Highers, or A Levels to get onto certain degrees, so we'd like to see a much higher level of surety in Year 12 pupils – at the very latest.

Especially as the doors to some pathways start closing at this point.

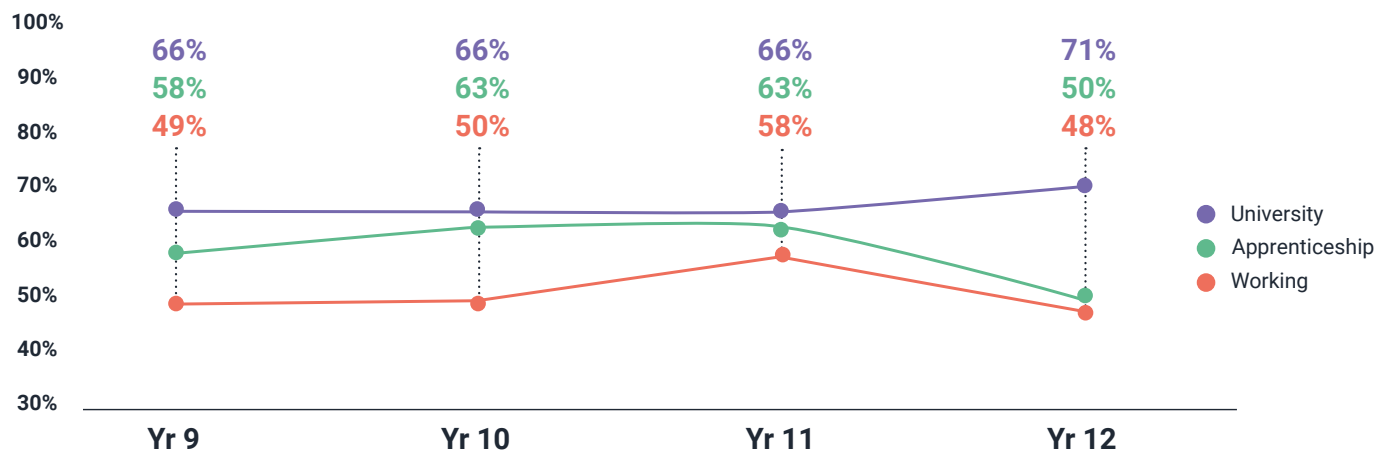
There are some outliers in the subsets though. The university-minded tend to have given it more thought, while the work-minded tend to have given it less. And on either path, it's private school pupils who have given it the most.

When it comes to weighing up the top-line choice – university vs apprenticeship vs work – many young people are considering all three. They need more help weighing things up, so they can make faster decisions, and have more time to hone their strategy to pursue the one they really want.



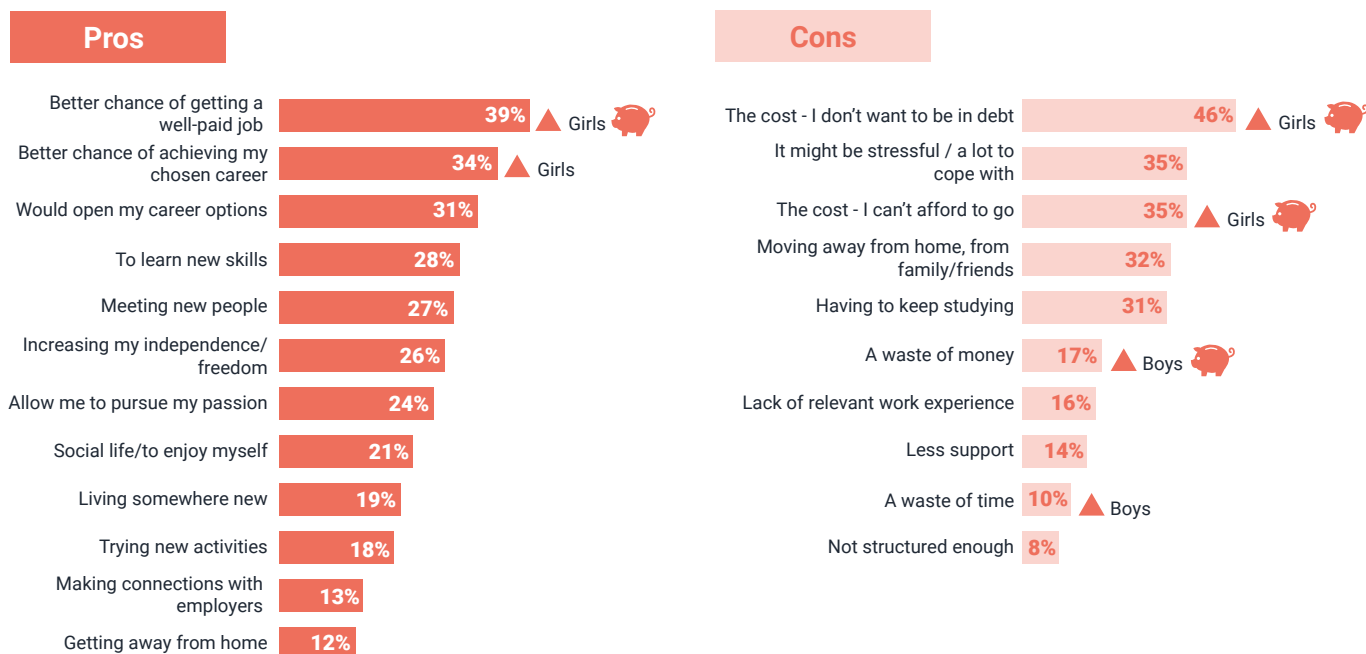
Consideration of the different routes is relatively static, with one exception. As young people move through Year 11 and into Year 12, there's a significant drop in those who are looking to pursue an apprenticeship – falling from almost two-thirds to just half.

% Yes (Definitely + Possibly)



And is... going to university / applying for an apprenticeship / leaving education at 18 and looking for work instead...something that you might consider?
 BASE: All Respondents (250/250/251/249)

As more look to university instead (although this uptick is driven by females) – the perceived list of pros and cons makes for interesting reading, and could certainly be the basis for an effective myth-busting campaign for providers.



In your opinion, what are the MAIN ADVANTAGES/POSITIVES of University (max 5 responses) What are the MAIN DISADVANTAGES/NEGATIVES of University... (max 5 responses). BASE: All respondents 1000

Apprenticeship providers may want to challenge the perceived pros of university – evidencing the earning potential and career options of their route – while universities can provide support for those concerned about debt, cost, and stress.

Overall, university is the most likely route for 38% of young people. Our qualitative research told us why – they:

- ▶ Like what they've heard so far, and what they know already
- ▶ Have learned from the experience of others – particularly their parents, who think it's the path to 'better jobs'
- ▶ Want to gain more knowledge and be better qualified
- ▶ Feel they will get a job more easily and enjoy better job opportunities
- ▶ Want the 'uni experience' – socialising, upskilling, independence, and new experiences.

"My mum tells me I won't get a good job if I don't go to university, I want to study engineering science and I'm hoping I can get good qualifications and get a good job"
(Age 14)

"I feel it is good to get a degree as it can give you better job opportunities and the experience" (Age 16)

But for those who can reach their goals via an alternative route, and are therefore unlikely to attend university, their perception is markedly different. They believe that university:

- ▶ Comes with too much stress and hard work
- ▶ Takes too long
- ▶ Is for people smarter than them
- ▶ Comes with the worry of debt
- ▶ Comes with concerns about being away from home
- ▶ Isn't accessible for all, e.g. those with financial barriers
- ▶ Is unnecessary – college will provide the education required for their next steps.

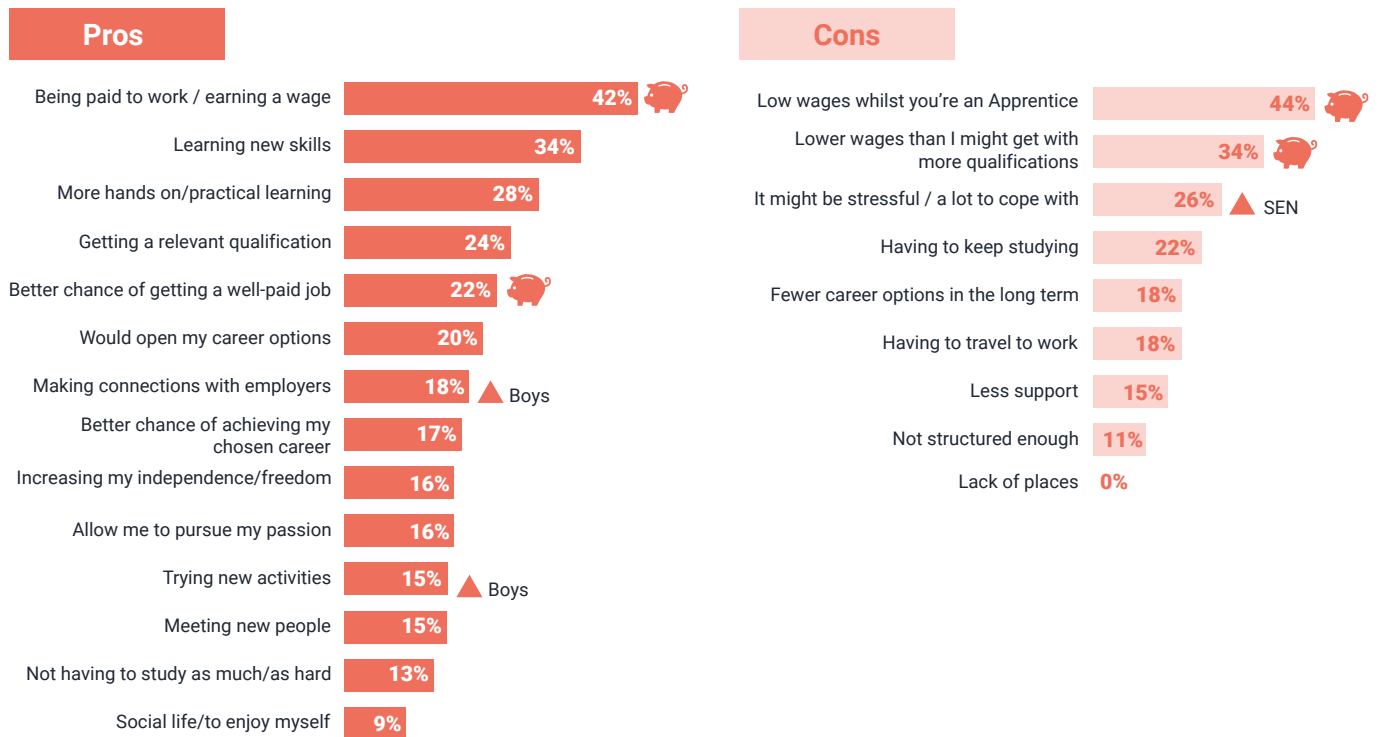


"It's only available to people who can afford it" (Age 15)

"I am not an academic learning person, I am a visual, hands-on skilled type person" (Age 16)

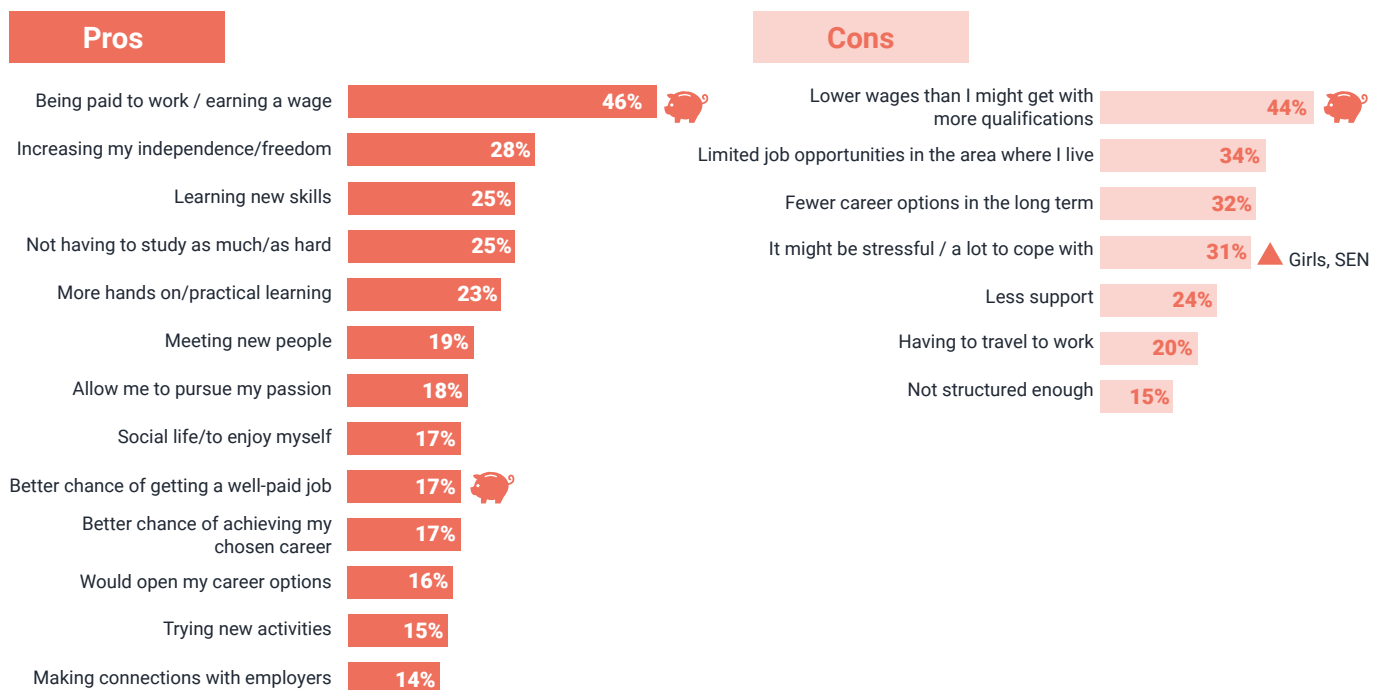
Additionally, we know from our Next Steps reports on the experiences of disabled, LGBTQ+ and/or care experienced students, that their levels of concerns ahead of studying HE vary.

When it comes to apprenticeships, the pros and cons list is, perhaps unsurprisingly, more practical. But they also paint a false dichotomy – where wages are the most popular reason to pursue and avoid this route. This echoes previous research, which highlighted earning to learn is a key benefit, but perceived levels of lower pay are a barrier for some (particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds):



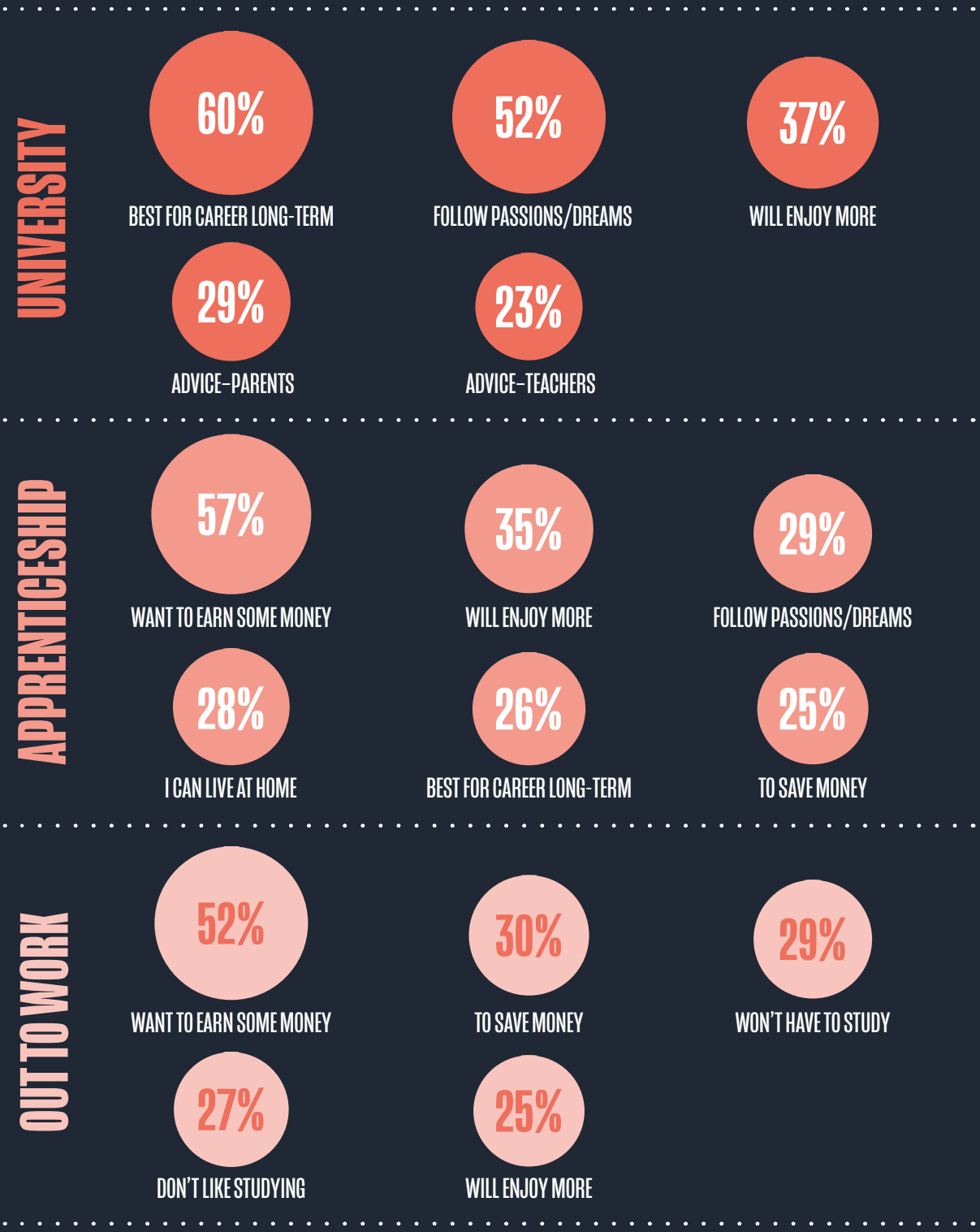
In your opinion, what are the MAIN ADVANTAGES/POSITIVES of getting an apprenticeship (max 5 responses) What are the MAIN DISADVANTAGES/NEGATIVES of getting an apprenticeship (max 5 responses). BASE: All respondents 1000

And the same is true for those considering going straight to work:



In your opinion, what are the MAIN ADVANTAGES/POSITIVES of leaving education and going to work (max 5 responses) What are the MAIN DISADVANTAGES/NEGATIVES of leaving education and going to work(max 5 responses). BASE: All respondents 1000

When you take all three routes and compare the reasons for taking each of them together, there are some divisions of short-term vs long-term thinking. Those hoping to attend university are more focused on the eventual outcomes, although they do expect to enjoy the experience, while those looking towards apprenticeships and employment are tempted by the immediate. There is also a shared mindset of convenience and ease – with young people citing being able to live at home and not having to study any more as chief drivers for the vocational routes:



What are the MAIN reasons that you have decided to apply to University / apply for an Apprenticeship / leave education and look for work at 18? (Max 5)
 Base: University 382 / Apprenticeship 217 / Work 134

ACTION POINTS – CHAPTER TWO

1. **Poke, prod, and prompt.** Few young people are dedicating enough time to thinking about their future, so build this into your curriculum and careers advice provision. Motivate and remind them to think hard, think early, and think often.
2. **Work on the work-minded.** Those headed to university are more forward-thinking, but those with vocational routes in mind tend to be less so. For those looking towards apprenticeships and employment, double down on motivational planning.
3. **Do some apprenticeship mythbusting.** The mindset of a would-be apprentice contains some contradictions – many choose it to earn money immediately, but many are concerned that the wages are low. Give them concrete information, including real earnings and expected timeframes, so they can make decisions with the facts.





CHAPTER THREE: LONG TERM

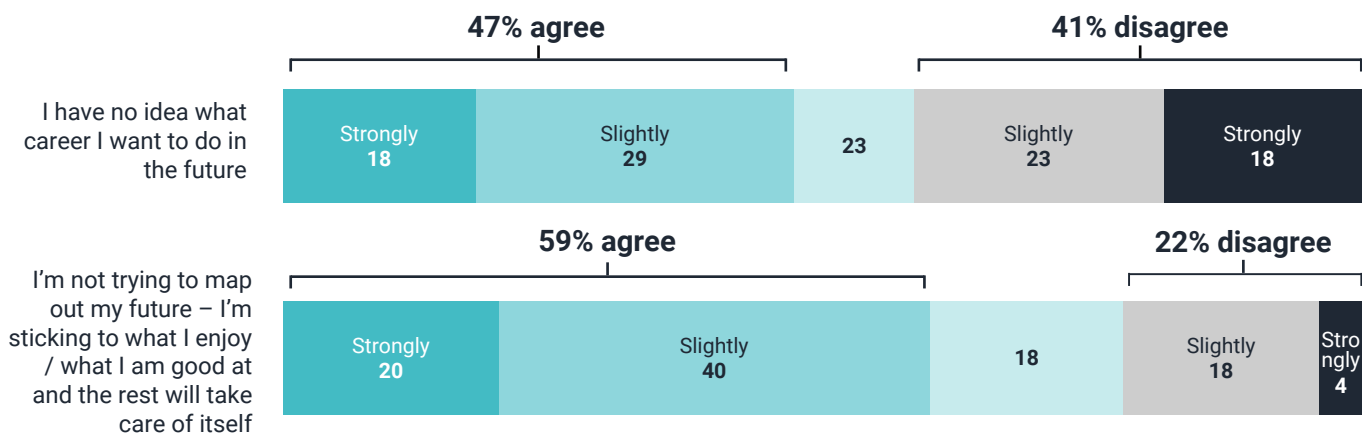
The future needs and motivators coming down the line.

**LONG-TERM PLANNING
REQUIRES SHORT-
TERM ACTIONS.**

**BALANCING PLEASURE
AND PREPARATION
IS KEY.**

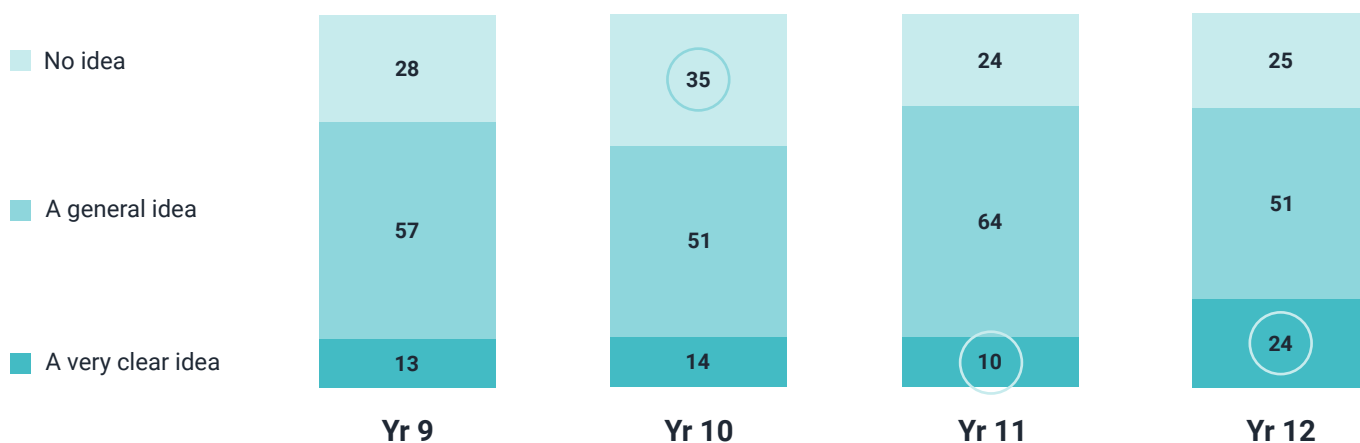
No matter how you arrange the data, one thing is clear: most don't know what career they want.

Regardless of year group, broad intentions, or preparedness – uncertainty reigns. For some, it's a result of a conscious choice to simply pursue their passions and what will be will be. For others, it's not by design – they simply just don't know how to make such a big decision.



How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? BASE: All Respondents 1000

In the final four years of secondary school, certainty rises and falls without following a pattern you might expect to see. For example, more Y12 pupils have a very clear idea than in Y11, but the overall number of those with any idea remains about the same. Yet from Y10 to Y11, the number of pupils with a very clear idea actually reduces, before climbing again in Y12.

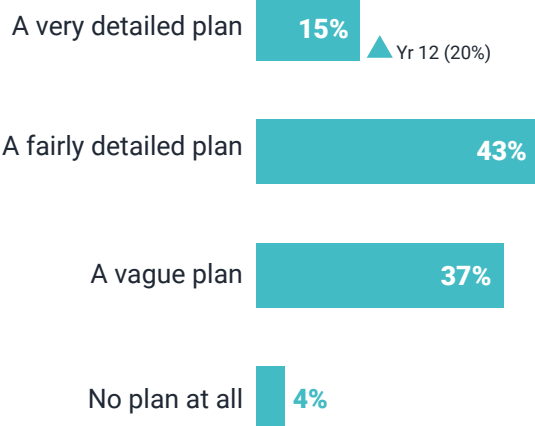


How much of an idea do you have about what you will do for a living / as a career? BASE: All Respondents (250/250/251/249)
Circle indicates a statistically significant different % vs Total

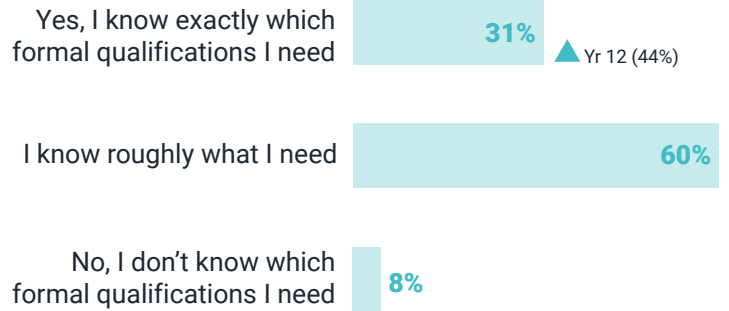
By the time they reach their final year of secondary school, 3 in 4 pupils only have a general idea (or no idea at all) of what they'll go on to do. When sixth-form subjects must be chosen here – which can impact their potential post-secondary routes – there's a clear need for some help distilling their options and making a plan.

From a broader perspective, when we asked those in Y12 who know the industry they'll work in (but not necessarily the job they'll have), the signs of preparedness were much brighter. Two-thirds have a very or fairly detailed plan, and almost all know roughly or exactly the qualifications they need – whatever the industry. And those planning on going to university or an apprenticeship were more likely to have a plan, more so than those likely to leave education and look for work:

How much of a plan do you have?



Do you know which formal qualifications you need?



How much of a plan would you say that you already have for getting there? BASE: All with some idea 710

Given the level of preparedness and surety that comes simply from knowing their desired industry (which can be extremely broad as shown in the list above), this could be the solution to the late-stage indecision we're seeing in Y11 and Y12 pupils. Guiding them towards a generalised destination – e.g. they could pursue healthcare from the perspective of medical, computing, or marketing – could help crystallise their plans and prepare for them.

Generally, young people are looking for financial stability, a job they like, and maintaining connections to family. By using this as a matrix, they can cross many sectors out, and circle a few to make their decision much easier to make, as well their route to preparedness. This is required by some more than others:



Those mostly driven by financial success hope to be able to buy nice things such as cars, a house, or expensive clothes.

These more career-driven young people have a more clearly defined path from studying to employment, with steps in mind like working their way up to the car, the house, potentially a family.

Those who are more interested in a career which involves helping/giving back (e.g. vet, teacher, travelling), hope to have new and exciting experiences.

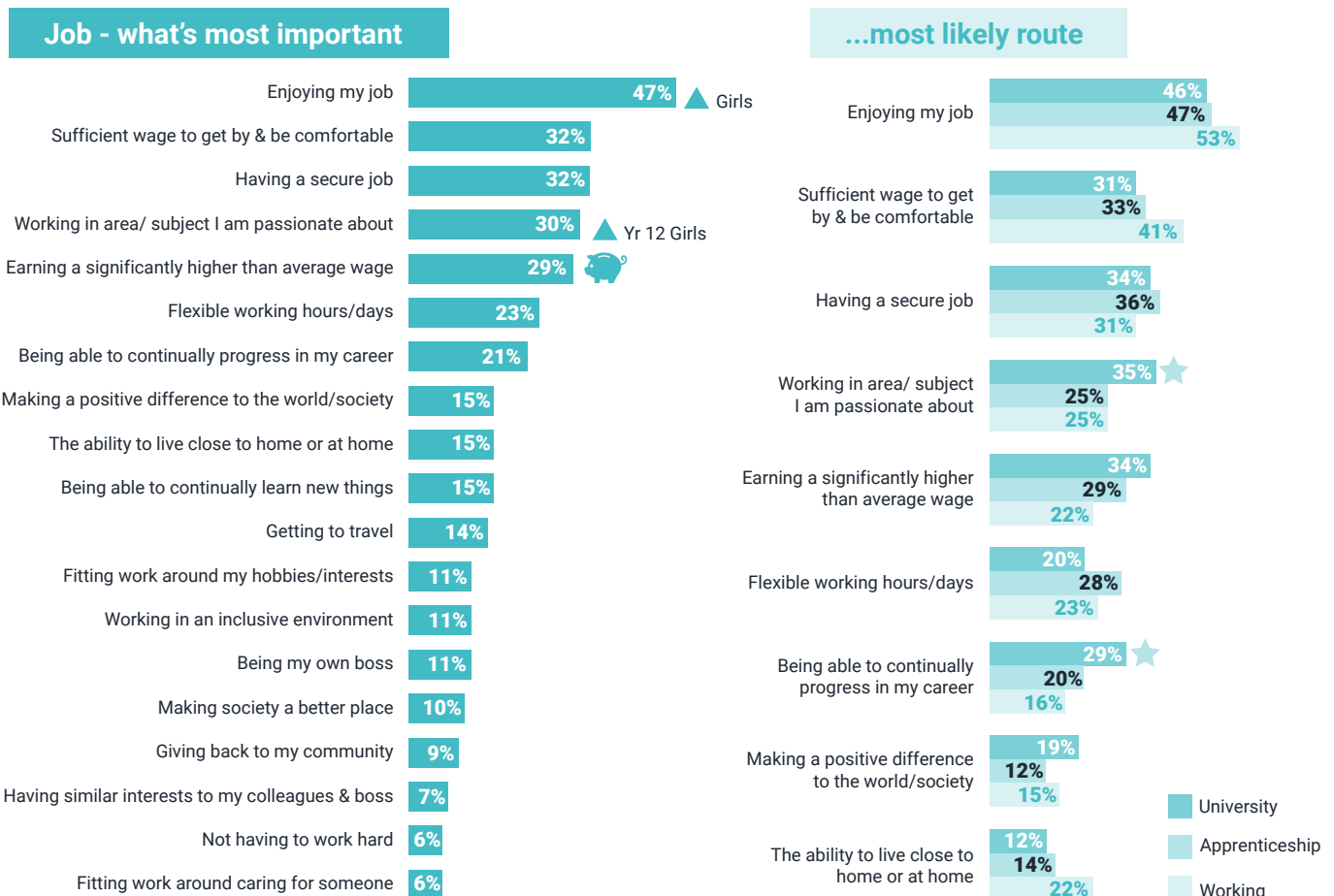
These experience/philanthropic minded young people are more likely to still be exploring their options:

"I'm not sure what I want to do for a job but I like helping younger children. Maybe I might be a teacher" (Age 14)

But this is also a group not afraid to dream big:

"I want to be a basketball player or an engineer. I want to be selected in an NBA Round 1 1st pick by Miami Heat" (Age 13)

Whichever camp they fall into, and whatever their age, the unifying driver for young people is enjoyment. The differences come in their route, not their desires:



ACTION POINTS – CHAPTER THREE

1. **Target Y9 & Y10.** As young people finish secondary school, 75% have at least a general idea of what they want to do, which will determine the subjects they choose at sixth form. If you want to change minds or improve decision-making, Y9 and Y10 are the key battlegrounds. We need to get this right, to prevent the return to uncertainty we're currently seeing in Y12.
2. **Something is (way) better than nothing.** Choosing a sector can be the cure for late-stage indecision. Encourage young people to explore industries, as a broader decision-making tool than specific careers which require earlier choices on subjects. A Y10 focusing on renewables can go into computing, marketing, engineering.





CHAPTER FOUR: NEEDS

What young people need from you, to make their journey easier.

EXPOSURE AND EXPERIENCE ARE ANTIDOTES TO INDECISION.

YOUNG PEOPLE KNOW WHAT THEY NEED, AND THEY'RE ASKING YOU FOR IT.

There are three main things that young people are clear about needing more of.

Firstly, no matter which path they're on or might be considering, they need relevant work experience.

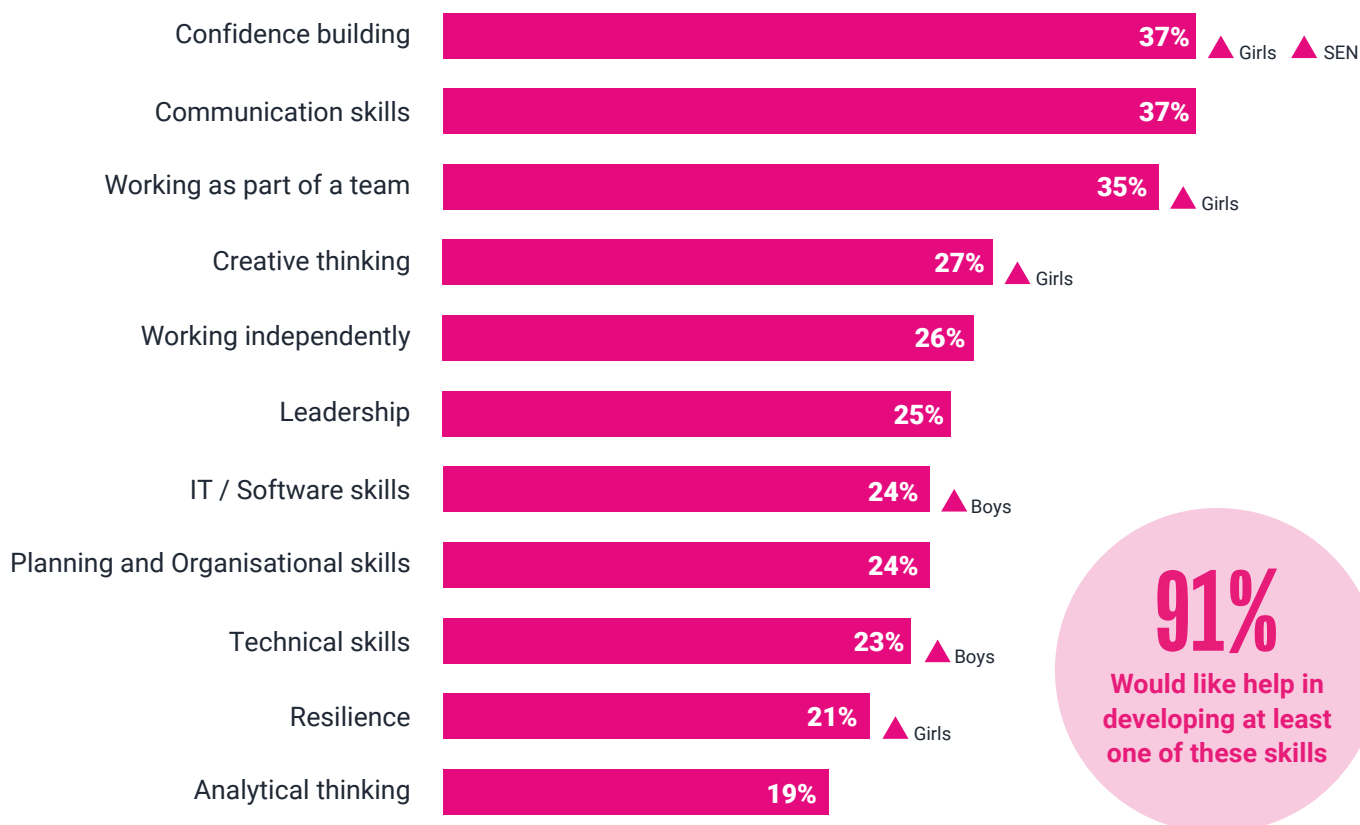
	...continuing your studies	...getting an apprenticeship	...different jobs/careers
Extremely Important	22% ▲ Yr 12	21%	33% ▲ Yr 12
Very Important	32%	33%	37%
Fairly Important	28%	31%	25%
NET: IMPORTANT	81%	85%	95%
NET UNIMPORTANT	16%	13%	5%

How important do you think getting relevant work experience will be when it comes to...?
 BASE: 534 / 408 / 1000. Circle indicates significant difference from both of the other groups

This is going to look different for each and every pupil, so it's all about having those conversations and facilitating the opportunities. For some, placements and summer jobs will be possible – giving them maximum exposure to the real working world they're going to find themselves in. For others, it could be part-time work. For some, the best they can do might be to engage with those who are working in the areas they're interested in. Whichever it is, the more they know, the more prepared they'll be when they reach it themselves.

Work experience is slightly more important to those thinking about the apprenticeship route than university, but they're both unified by acknowledging the importance of work experience for their eventual destination – their future jobs and careers. 95% believe that relevant work experience is important, but only 39% have had it.

Secondly, soft skills are hugely important to young minds.

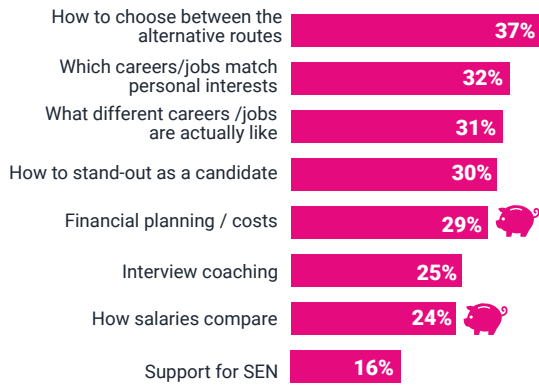


Thinking about the skills that you feel might be important to your future career/job plans, which if any of the following would you like help in developing?
Base: All Respondents 1000

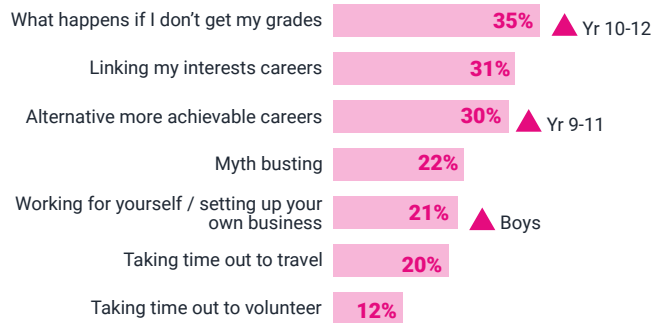
The vast majority of young people are looking for help in developing their personal abilities – most of which are sector, route, and career-agnostic. Workshops, talks, and practical ways to boost their soft skills are going to prove popular on a macro level – and help to make them feel more prepared for what's to come.

And thirdly, young people are well aware that knowledge is power. They are research-minded and independent – they know exactly where the gaps in their information are, and what knowledge will help them move forward:

Routes

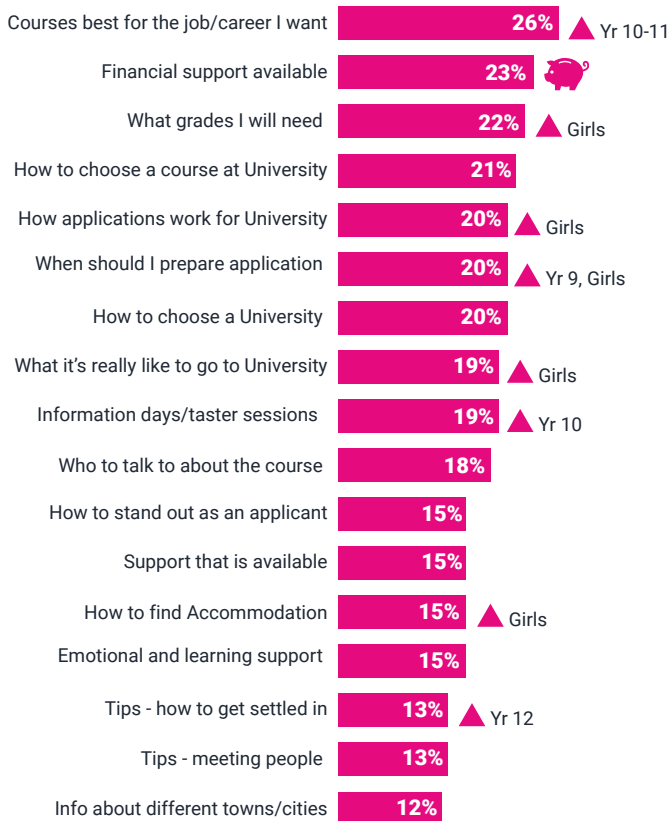


General

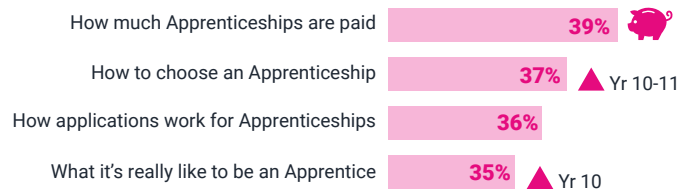


Which of these, if any, would you like MORE INFORMATION about, when it comes to your choices at 18 when you leave school/college? Finally, which of these, if any, would you like more information about? BASE: All Respondents 1000

University



Apprenticeships



At this point in time, which of these, if any, would you like more information about, when it comes to going to university/ apprenticeships? Base: All Respondents 1000

There are very few differences by year group or gender, as most of these information requests are easily and directly linked to generalised uncertainties – like choosing between routes, the outcomes of not achieving tariffs, and what money is available to help them pursue their chosen path.

These four lists are essentially blueprints for your content marketing strategy, around which you can build a bank of resources to directly tackle the most important gaps in your target market's knowledge.

ACTION POINTS – CHAPTER FOUR

1. **Work experience improves decision-making.** 95% of young people perceive it as important, no matter the path they're on – university, apprenticeship, or work. Build it into the foundations of your provision.
2. **Soft skills improve confidence.** 91% of young people want help improving their generic skills and abilities, so in your interactions be aware that they may feel lacking, and in your provision include an easy way for them to upskill.
3. **Knowledge improves forward momentum.** Whatever the age or gender, young people are research-minded and they know what they're looking for. Provide the information they need, in easily digestible formats, in easy-to-find places.





WHAT NEXT?

So far from Project Next Generation, we've published the Themes Report and the Needs & Motivators Report – giving you a glimpse into the way that young people's minds work and what you can do to influence and inspire their decisions. There's plenty more to come, including our Building Connections Report in early 2024, which will show you how to develop brand loyalty and relationships, earlier, easier, and better.

To read our previous reports, or to be the first to hear when the next ones are published, take a look at ucas.com/project-next-generation.

Or if you'd like to talk to us about the insights within this report, and find out how we can help you turn them into direct actions for your marketing or recruitment, get in touch:

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