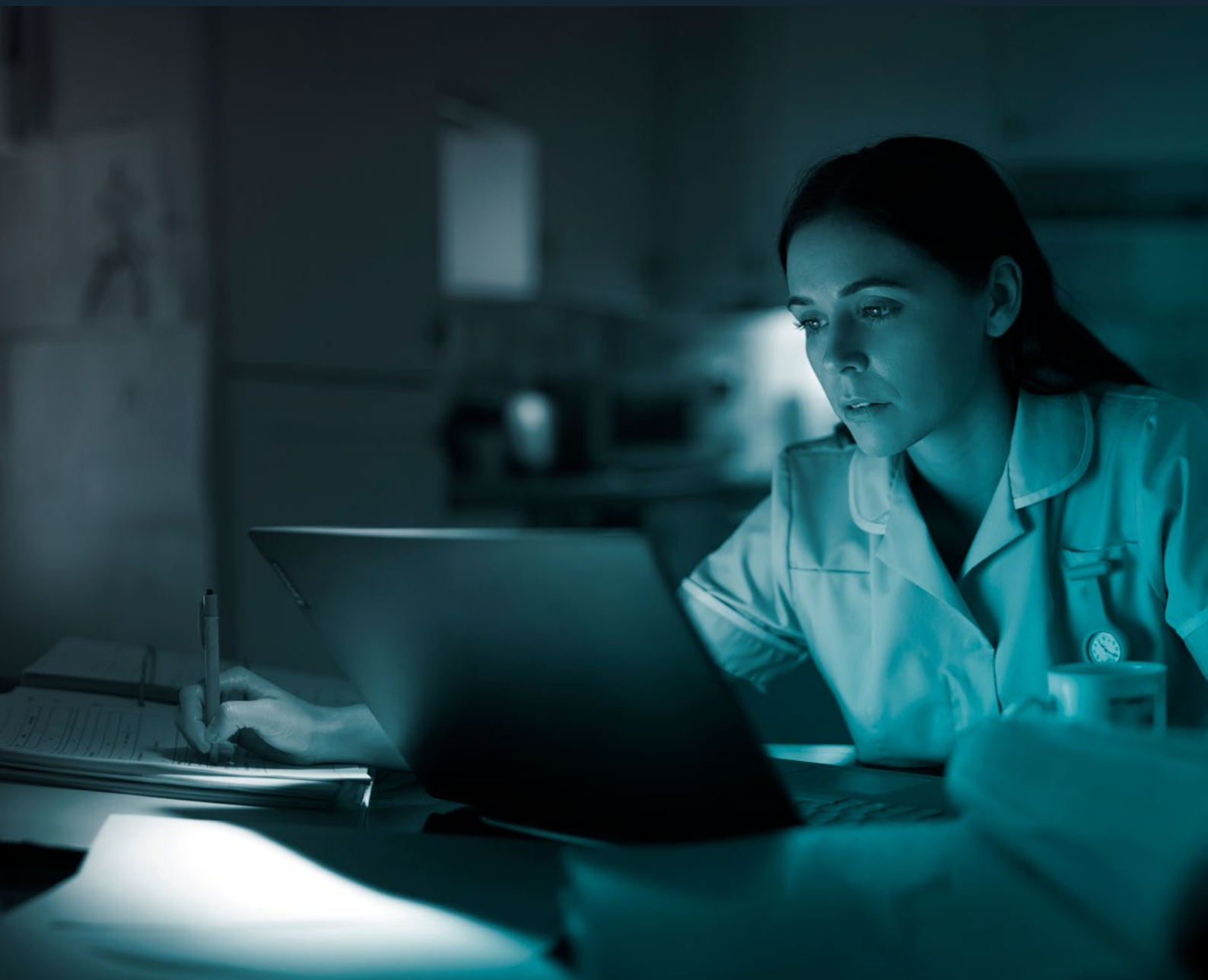


# WHERE NEXT?

WHO APPLIES TO **LEVEL 4 AND 5** QUALIFICATIONS?



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### **Definitions for the purposes of this report**

Across the four nations of the UK, there is a diversity of courses at Level 4 and 5 (in England, Wales and Northern Ireland) and SCQF 7 and 8 (in Scotland). For brevity, this report will refer to them as Level 4 and 5. This includes equivalent levels in Scotland. Where relevant it will use SCQF 7 (not including Advanced Highers) and 8 when appropriate to points made about Scotland only. There will also be points made about Level 4 and Level 5 courses (and their equivalents) separately.

# FOREWORD

## GINNY PAGE, GATSBY CHARITABLE FOUNDATION

Higher education qualifications at Levels 4 and 5 have long been a part of post-18 education in the UK, providing opportunities for adults of all ages to gain higher-level knowledge and skills in further education colleges, universities and some training providers. Historically popular with more mature, part-time learners, and usually with a strong vocational focus, these qualifications have been acknowledged by successive governments as vital to achieving both economic growth and social mobility. Despite this, and in contrast with many other countries, learner numbers have been in general decline. Action to address this decline must centre on good evidence – including a deeper understanding of the interests and motivations of those who choose to study these qualifications. Such action must also take into account a backdrop of financial pressures for both higher education providers and potential HE applicants.

I have been delighted to work with UCAS to explore what their existing data has to say about the preferences and behaviours of their applicants to Level 4 and 5 courses, and to give those young people a voice through a new survey. While this population is only about half of all Level 4 and 5 learners, it represents an important group of young people who are often looking for something different from the traditional bachelor's degree.

At Gatsby Charitable Foundation we have been working to strengthen the place of higher technical education at Levels 4 and 5 in England

since the publication of the Sainsbury Review in 2016. Increasing participation and ensuring good outcomes is a long-term endeavour, one that extends beyond the typical political cycle of governments. The recent introduction of Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs), and the elevation in status of some providers to become Institutes of Technology, have been significant moves in the right direction.

Equally important is the continued implementation and support of the Gatsby Benchmarks for Good Career Guidance in schools and colleges, to help young people understand, and have meaningful encounters with, the full range of higher education providers and the courses they offer.

The information in this report provides invaluable insights into Level 4 and 5 learners, and it is great to see UCAS commit to using these insights to extend and deepen the support they give young people navigating the complex and often-changing world of options beyond 18. I hope that other organisations can make a similar commitment, and collectively recognise Level 4-5 education as a distinctive and crucial part of an inclusive tertiary system in the UK.



**GINNY PAGE**

**Director of Programmes,  
Gatsby Charitable Foundation**

# FOREWORD

DR JO SAXTON CBE, UCAS

UCAS' ambition is that the life-changing opportunities higher education (HE) offers should be open to all, regardless of background.

One of the key components of the UK's world class HE system is its diversity of provision. There is no 'one size fits all' approach, reflecting the range of motivations of students that wish to access and succeed in HE. Level 4 and 5 qualifications are no exception to this and provide an important pathway to and through HE. This report is the first to shine a light on the motivation and experiences of Level 4 and 5 applicants through UCAS. It is published at a key moment, with the formation of Skills England and Medr, and ongoing reform in Scotland, and will provide important insight to aid understanding of the motivations, pathways and barriers to this important provision.

'Where Next? Who applies for Level 4 and 5 qualifications?', unpicks how Level 4 and 5 courses open a door to HE, especially for those who are from underrepresented backgrounds or studying as a mature student (aged 21 and over). Our findings also show that these courses are an important route for those from regions where HE participation is at its lowest – with the highest proportion of those with at least one Level 4 or 5 choice in Wales and the North East and the South West of England.

Level 4 and 5 courses are integral to increasing and widening participation, providing options for those who may have discounted HE as an option.

They should also be seen and celebrated as a means to equip individuals with the skills they need to thrive in life and work. Applicants choose to explore Level 4 and 5 courses for many reasons, including helping them on the career ladder, or a passion for a particular subject. Additionally, Level 4 and 5 courses are increasingly recognised as a key vehicle in closing the skills gap, ensuring HE continues to support economic development.

Providing students with the right information and guidance is key for making informed decisions about their future pathways. Without this, Level 4 and 5 qualifications – including Higher Technical Qualifications, where there is low awareness – will not realise their potential. UCAS recognises its role here. In this report we commit to supporting students, schools, colleges and universities in better understanding and articulating Level 4 and 5 opportunities, including through enhanced information, advice and guidance.

It is my hope that this report and insight will aid the sector in understanding who currently benefits from Level 4 and 5 qualifications, and how we can ensure many more do. I'm grateful to the Gatsby Charitable Foundation for supporting this research.



DR JO SAXTON CBE

**UCAS,  
Chief Executive**

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Higher education offers life-changing opportunities for students from all walks of life, and comes in many forms and durations. Students engage with it for many reasons, ranging from a passion for a particular subject, to needing to upskill or reskill to help them take the next step in their career. A student's motivation will often influence the route they take.

Students have many tertiary education choices today, from the three-year undergraduate degree course to innovations, such as Higher/Graduate Apprenticeships. A recent development has been the advent of Higher Technical Qualifications (in England), as part of a growing recognition of the important role Level 4 and 5 qualifications play in supporting people with the skills they need to support personal and professional development. They can also provide options for those who may have discounted higher education as an option, playing a key role in increasing and widening participation.

**OECD data** shows that the UK is performing well in supporting people to achieve tertiary level education and training. However, the uptake of Level 4 and 5 qualifications in the UK is low in comparison to other nations. Some **estimates** find that 4% of people in England who achieved GCSE qualifications in 2004/5 gained a Level 4 or 5 qualification by age 25. **HESA data** shows that, across the UK, those enrolled in either Foundation Degrees or HNC/HND decreased from 57,230 in 2018/19 to 45,200 in 2022/23.

This relative lack of individuals taking qualifications at Level 4 and 5 is an opportunity to widen higher education, particularly in support of increasing opportunities for people and addressing shortage skills areas.

UCAS, supported by the Gatsby Charitable Foundation, has conducted research<sup>1</sup> to shine a light on the progression of students that are considering and undertaking Level 4 and 5 opportunities and their motivations, while highlighting how the sector can further support people of all ages to discover, explore and apply to courses.

These insights are intended to inform UCAS and the wider sector to support every prospective student to take the right next step for them.

Progression trends include:

- ▶ **The number of applicants placed<sup>2</sup> in Level 4 and 5 courses decreased by 25% between 2019 and 2023**, from 21,670 to 16,195 in 2023. In the 2023 cycle, UCAS saw 34,175 UK applicants apply to study at least one Level 4 or 5 course, representing 5.7% of all applicants. Nearly half of 2023 Level 4 and 5 applicants were placed onto a Level 4 or 5 course by the end of the cycle, and around a third (10,095) were placed for entry into Level 6+, with the remaining not placed in higher education.
- ▶ **The majority (79%) of applicants to Level 4 and 5 courses in 2023 also applied to a Level 6+ course.** A third (33%) picked the Level 4 or 5 course over Level 6+ when given an offer for both.
- ▶ **Proportions of applicants selecting at least one Level 4 or 5 choice in 2023 were highest in Wales (7.9%) and the South West (7.7%) and North East (7.6%) of England.** These places have the lowest entry rates to higher education (HE) so Level 4 and 5 qualifications can be seen as especially important HE pathways in these places.
- ▶ **The most popular choice of Level 4 and 5 subject in 2023 were those allied to medicine,** particularly among mature applicants. There were 5,930 applications in 2023, seeing an increase of 21% since 2019, which is the largest increase of any subject. This presents an important opportunity for the NHS workforce pipeline, including upskilling and reskilling.
- ▶ **Looked at collectively, Level 4 and 5 applicants have distinct characteristics and experiences.** Applicants from the most disadvantaged areas are more likely to choose a Level 4 or 5 choice (7.3%) compared to the least disadvantaged (3.9%). Mature applicants (aged 35+) were twice as likely to include a Level 4 or 5 course in their options than younger (18-35) applicants.

<sup>1</sup> Information gathered from applications has allowed UCAS to uncover key insights from the data collected from the over 34,000 applicants to providers that use UCAS in the 2023 UCAS cycle that had at least one choice to a course at Level 4 or 5. Applicant data dating back to 2019 has been used to identify trends. UCAS also conducted a representative survey of 475 Level 4 and 5 applicants in the 2024 cycle, giving insight into their experiences and motivations. UCAS estimates that it receives around 48% of applicants students to full-time Level 4 and 5 programmes apply via UCAS. Findings are representative of this group only.

<sup>2</sup> A placed applicant is an applicant who, at the end of the cycle, has been placed for entry into higher education.



Relatedly, they were more likely than those placed at Level 6+ courses to stay in their home region. Additionally, applicants with vocational and technical qualifications (notably BTECs and T Levels) were more likely to apply to Level 4 or 5 courses than those who have done A Levels.

▶ **Level 4 and 5 applicants surveyed in the 2024 cycle were more likely than the overall HE population to be considering an apprenticeship.**

Over a third (35%) were actively considering or had considered an apprenticeship, which is higher than among all HE applicants (21%). However, only a minority have had applied to one, with most deciding they prefer the Level 4 or 5 course, but with some facing barriers in finding an apprenticeship opportunity.

▶ **Those applying for Level 4 and 5 courses in 2024 recognised the career benefits,** with around half feeling the greatest advantages of these qualifications would be improved career prospects (51%) and/or that it would help in getting them a job they were interested in (49%). Half (47%) of Level 4 and 5 applicants said they intend to secure a full-time job when after completing their course. Only 20% intend to continue their studies in higher education.

▶ **The most important factors for Level 4 and 5 applicants when deciding which course to apply to were broadly similar to the overall HE population, however there are differences:**

Level 4 and 5 applicants value pre-application support from providers, the on-course student support offer that is available, and the opportunity to gain work experience more than the average HE applicant. They are less concerned about the position of the provider in league tables, entry requirements, and the level of challenge of the course. Respondents said that the most helpful information sources are the UCAS website, teachers, and friends and family, with this varying by age. They would welcome clearer explanations of different types of qualifications, dedicated guidance for working/mature applicants, and more support with navigating student finance.

▶ **Around a quarter (23%) of 2024 Level 4 and 5 applicants had heard of Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs),** with a mixed understanding and awareness of what the term means.

# HOW CAN MORE PEOPLE UNDERSTAND AND ACCESS LEVEL 4 AND 5 OPTIONS?

UCAS believes that individuals from all backgrounds should be able to benefit from higher education. Understanding the range of pathways available is vital to ensuring more people can find the right provision for them and their motivations and aspirations. Level 4 and 5 courses should be a meaningful part of every point in the discovery journey. This breadth of experiences and encounters is a fundamental part of the **Gatsby Benchmarks for Good Career Guidance**.

**To support students, schools, colleges and universities in understanding and articulating Level 4 and 5 opportunities, UCAS will:**

- ▶ **Build on existing content (both digitally and at events) to offer enhanced information, advice and guidance**, informed by insights provided in this report. This would include setting out differences between Level 4 and 5 qualifications (both as standalone qualifications and how they can be used to top-up to a degree) and more information on finance options (including the future Lifelong Loan Entitlement in England), which this report suggests are not fully understood by students.
- ▶ **Support teachers and advisers, charity partners and influencers (e.g. parents/carers), with insights on Level 4 and 5 applicants**, including guides, resources, and training materials as part of our future expansion work with schools and colleges.
- ▶ **Continue to support higher education providers currently using UCAS for admissions, and new providers looking to use UCAS in the future, to reach potential applicants** by supporting them to list courses (including Higher Technical Qualifications in England) on UCAS, enabling applicants to consider a diversity of options side by side.
- ▶ **Share relevant data insights** on Level 4 and 5 in UCAS data releases in the future and explore how insights can be used in **collaborative work with key sectors and employers**.

**To enhance the visibility of Level 4 and 5 courses, universities and colleges could:**

- ▶ **Ensure Level 4 and 5 courses are displayed on [ucas.com](https://ucas.com) in line with good practice**, promoting a broader range of opportunities at this level to be viewed alongside undergraduate and apprenticeship options, making it easier for students to navigate these options.
- ▶ **Include Level 4 and 5 opportunities within marketing, recruitment and outreach strategies.** For example:
  - Forming a key focus on local outreach and civic activity to reflect that applicants are more likely to stay closer to home. Plans should recognise that pre-application communications are particularly important to this cohort.
  - Level 4 and 5 qualifications could form an important part of institutions' widening access and outreach strategies, offering an option to students that may have discounted higher education altogether.
  - When presenting pathways to certain careers, highlight all the varying routes available to students, including Level 4 and 5. Further value could be added by providing this information alongside local and regional labour market information to aid career progression.
- ▶ **Specifically highlight those courses that have been designated as Higher Technical Qualifications (in England)** and articulate what this means across marketing materials.
- ▶ **Set out available student finance, as well as work experience opportunities**, in communications with potential Level 4 and 5 applicants, as they are more likely to say this information is important to them.





**To articulate Level 4 and 5 opportunities to students, schools and colleges can:**

- ▶ **Explore forthcoming UCAS content and training on Level 4 and 5**, informed by insights provided in this report. This will support schools and colleges in understanding the range of provision available at Level 4 and 5, the range of students that currently follow this pathway, and to advise existing and potential applicants.
- ▶ **Ensure Level 4 and 5 courses (including HTQs in England) are presented alongside undergraduate degrees and apprenticeships** in careers education (both for pupils/students and parents/carers) with early engagement to aid effective decision-making about next steps. This should be provided alongside – and as part of – meeting requirements for Provider Access Legislation.
- ▶ **Make contact with the local Careers Hubs** (in England) to hear about opportunities for those with Level 4 and 5 qualifications directly from regional employers.



# BACKGROUND: ABOUT LEVEL 4 AND 5 QUALIFICATIONS

Level 4 and 5 qualifications in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland include, but are not limited to, Foundation Degrees, Certificates of HE (CertHE), Diploma in HE (DipHE), Higher National Certificates (HNCs), and Higher National Diplomas (HNDs). Some of them are approved in England by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education as Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs). In Scotland at SQCF Level 7 and 8 (equivalent to Level 4 and 5 in other UK nations) qualifications are unique but also called HNCs and HNDs. In national frameworks, these qualifications sit in between A levels, T Levels, BTECs and Scottish Highers and Advanced Highers (at Level 3 or SCQF 6/7), and an undergraduate degree (Level 6 or SCQF 9-10).

While Level 4 and 5 qualifications can be taught in **a range of education providers**, around half in England are taught in further education (FE) colleges, a third in universities, and the rest in other providers. They often provide vocational and technical training, preparing students with the skills and knowledge to succeed in the workplace. Providers may also design them to support progression to academic courses at a higher level, for example, HNCs and HNDs in Scotland are notably often used to support articulation to degree level. Level 4 and 5 qualifications are included in overall higher education figures and thinking in governments about participation.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF LEVEL 4 AND 5 QUALIFICATIONS

Level 4 and 5 qualifications have been **identified** as crucial to plugging skills gaps, empowering people to upskill and reskill in one or two years if taken full-time. However, when compared to three or four year undergraduate degree courses, there is a relative lack of individuals across all ages taking qualifications at Level 4 and 5, which has been dubbed **“the missing middle”**. On one hand, this could be preventing people from accessing better careers and improving their life chances. On the other hand, **employers often find themselves** unable to successfully recruit for positions which would be well suited to those with relevant Level 4 and 5 qualifications.

Though **OECD data** shows that the UK is performing well in supporting people to achieve tertiary level education and training, the uptake of Level 4 and 5 qualifications in the UK is relatively low when compared to other similar nations and historically. Historical comparisons also show low levels, with classroom-based enrolments recognised by **the Office for Students** declining by nearly 40% from 2016/17 to 2020/21. Some **estimates** find that only 4% of people who took their GCSEs in 2004/5 attained a level 4 or 5 qualification by age 25.

Low levels of Level 4 and 5 study comes at a time when **analysis** from the Economy 2030 Inquiry has shown that, given the sectoral and occupational make-up of the UK economy, there should be triple the number of people qualified to this level. The inquiry's final report suggests that this is particularly the case in managerial roles and technical roles within business and finance, ICT, creative and cultural sector, and life sciences. These skills needs represent both a challenge and an opportunity for the higher education sector, and those who influence applicants' decisions about their education and training. **Projections** surrounding the UK's workforce have identified that the demand for skills at this level is to increase, for example with the health workforce vacancies, increasing automation of jobs, and the upskilling and retraining required to deliver a **net zero economy**.

## INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT FOR LEVEL 4 AND 5 QUALIFICATIONS

The uptake of Level 4 and 5 qualifications in the UK is relatively low when compared to other similar nations. Research by the **OECD** from 2014 indicates that just 10% of adults in the UK held a Level 4 and 5 qualification or equivalent as their highest qualification, compared to 20% in Germany, and 34% in Canada. In England, study at Level 4 and 5 in 2018 represented a significantly smaller proportion of highest-level achievement by age 25 than other levels, with 4% in England holding a Level 4 and 5

qualification as their highest qualification, compared to nearly 30% for both Level 3 and Level 6+.

There is some divergence between the nations across the UK. Based on **external data**, in 2014/15, only 4% of all full-time higher education students in England were studying at Level 4 and 5 in comparison to 18% in Scotland and 11% in Northern Ireland.



# METHODOLOGY

The insights in this report have been developed through a new analysis of UCAS admissions data and a bespoke survey, as well as referencing other UCAS surveys. Collectively it seeks to provide a first-of-its-kind understanding of those who apply to Level 4 and 5 courses through UCAS.

- ▶ **Data analysis of 2023 end of cycle data** - This report primarily uses the database of all UK-domiciled applicants who applied in the 2023 application cycle, with comparisons to previous application cycles where appropriate. (See Annex C for more information). Level 4 and 5 applicants are defined as those who have at least one choice of a course at this level. Applicants can choose up to five courses. Where possible, comparisons have been made to those solely applying to Level 6+ courses.
- ▶ **Survey of 2024 applicants** - This report uses data from a new survey of Level 4 and 5 applicants in the 2024 admissions cycle. The main objective of this survey was to understand the perceptions and experiences of those who applied through UCAS. This survey was administered by UCAS between 23rd April 2024 and 14th May 2024. 475 respondents completed the survey. Results are weighted to ensure a representative sample of those who use UCAS to apply to HE. Findings are representative of those who use UCAS to apply to HE. Comparisons are made to other UCAS surveys which survey all HE UCAS applicants to draw indicative conclusions about whether - and how - Level 4 and 5 applicants are distinct. (See Annex D for more information).

## LEVEL 4 AND 5 APPLICATIONS THROUGH UCAS

UCAS supports applicants to full-time higher education, including Level 4 and 5 qualifications. This report looks at data available across all four UK nations for those applying to full-time courses in the UK. Full-time students are **typically** younger than part-time students.

Although this report describes applicants, trends and experiences across the UK, there is more of a focus on England, due to the greater availability of UCAS data for English applicants. UCAS estimates that it receives around 48% of applicants to full-time Level 4 and 5 programmes (SCQF Level 7/8 in Scotland)<sup>3</sup>. Data in Northern Ireland and Scotland represents a smaller proportion of applicants. See Annex A for further information.

<sup>3</sup> An estimate calculated dividing the total acceptances to Foundation Degrees, HNDs and HNCs by the total enrolments to the same courses across England, Wales and Scotland in 2021, using [HESA data](#).





# SECTION 1 - TRENDS IN LEVEL 4 AND 5 UCAS APPLICANTS

## KEY FINDINGS FROM THIS SECTION

34,175 UCAS applicants in the 2023 cycle selected at least one Level 4 and 5 course as part of their application to higher education. This represents 5.7% of all UCAS applicants.

- ▶ The majority (79%) of applicants to Level 4 and 5 courses also applied to a Level 6+ course. A third of these picked the Level 4 or 5 course over Level 6+ when given an offer for both.
- ▶ Nearly half (16,195) of applicants at this level were placed onto a Level 4 or 5 course by the end of the cycle. Around a third (10,095) were placed for entry into Level 6+.
- ▶ The numbers of applicants placed onto Level 4 and 5 courses in the UK decreased by 25% from 2019 to 2023. During the same time there has been a reduction of 12% in the number of applications and around 15% reduction in the number of Level 4 and 5 courses listed on UCAS.
- ▶ The overall decrease in applications is caused by a decrease of in applications to Level 5 courses (down 21% from 37,195 in 2019). Applications to Level 4 courses have increased by 20% (up from 9,530 in 2019).

## DECREASING APPLICATIONS

In 2023, 34,175 UK applicants applied to study at least one Level 4 and 5 course, representing 5.7% of all applicants through UCAS. 16,195 (47%) were then placed for entry into Level 4 and 5 courses, representing 3.4% of all applicants.<sup>4</sup> 10,095 (30%) applicants who included a Level 4 and 5 course in their choices were placed for entry into Level 6+.

Overall, the number of applications to Level 4 and 5 courses (applicants can pick up to 5 choices) has decreased by 12% from 46,725 in 2019 to 40,920 in 2023. The number of applicants then placed for entry into Level 4 and 5 courses has decreased by 25%, from 21,670 to 16,195 students. The decrease of those placed into higher education outstrips the decrease in applications. During this time, the number of courses listed on [ucas.com](https://ucas.com) has decreased by around 15%.

<sup>4</sup> Of these, 6,370 were accepted as records of prior acceptances (RPA)

## OVERALL DECREASE DRIVEN BY LEVEL 5 COURSES DECLINE, BUT LEVEL 4 HAS INCREASED

The majority of Level 4 and 5 applications in 2023 were to Level 5 courses, with 29,520 applications representing 72% of applications at this level. 37% of applications to Level 5 courses resulted in 10,935 placed applicants. There were 11,400 applications to Level 4 courses, with 46% of these applications converting to 5,265 placed applicants.

The overall decrease in applications was caused by a decrease in applications to Level 5 courses (down from 37,195 in 2019). Meanwhile, applications to Level 4 courses increased by 20% (up from 9,530 in 2019).

Qualification	Year				
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Foundation Degree	28,625	26,455	26,165	26,545	23,025
HND	5,565	5,280	4,720	4,595	4,610
CertHE	3,955	4,245	3,765	4,790	5,230
HNC	3,455	3,570	3,890	4,230	3,885
SCQF HNC	2,120	2,310	2,125	2,185	2,245
DipHE	2,195	1,135	1,080	1,040	1,090
SCQF HND	770	805	855	875	800

Table 1: The number of applications to courses with different outcome qualifications



## SHIFTING TRENDS IN QUALIFICATION TYPES

The most popular qualification type in 2023 across Level 4 and 5 applicants was a Foundation Degree, seeing 23,025 applications resulting in 8,220 placed applicants. In England, Northern Ireland and Wales, this is followed by a CertHE with 5,230 applications and 1,730 placed applicants, an HND with 4,610 applications and 2,195 placed applicants, an HNC with 3,885 applications and 2,010 placed applicants and a DipHE with 1,090 applications and 205 placed applicants. In Scotland the SCQF HNC had 2,245 applications with 1,520 placed applicants, and the SCQF HND had 800 applications with 315 placed applicants.

The two qualifications to increase in popularity since 2019 are HNCs (in England, Northern Ireland and Wales) and CertHE with increases in applications of 12% and 32% respectively. Meanwhile the number of applications to Foundation Degrees, HNDs and DipHE decreased by 20%, 17% and 50% respectively. In Scotland, applications through UCAS for HNCs and HNDs increased marginally with increases of 5.9% and 3.9% respectively.

Qualification	Applications	Placed applicants	Proportion of applications which convert to placed applicants
Foundation Degree	23,025	8,220	36%
HND	4,610	2,195	48%
CertHE	5,230	1,730	33%
HNC	3,885	2,010	52%
SCQF HNC	2,245	1,520	68%
DipHE	1,090	205	19%
SCQF HND	800	315	40%

Table 2: The number of applications, placed applicants and the proportion of application which convert to placed applicants by outcome qualifications in 2023





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Faculty of En

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University of  
BRISTOL  
Faculty of Engineering

# SECTION 2 - WHO ARE THE LEVEL 4 AND 5 2023 UCAS APPLICANTS?



**Mature applicants were more likely to apply to a Level 4 or 5 course choice than younger applicants**

- ▶ 4.4% (14,365) of 18 year olds
- ▶ 6.2% (5,630) of 19 year olds
- ▶ 7.1% (2,500) of 20 year olds
- ▶ 6.6% (3,625) of 21-24 year olds
- ▶ 7.6% (2,115) of 25-29 year olds
- ▶ 8.3% (1,655) of 30-34 year olds
- ▶ 8.9% (3,935) of those aged 35+

The number of applicants applying to Level 4 and 5 courses has decreased since 2019 in all age groups except for 18 year olds where it has remained stable, driven by an increasing population for this age group.



**Similar proportions of males and females applied**

- ▶ 5.8% of total female applicants had a Level 4 or 5 choice
- ▶ 5.5% of total male applicants had a Level 4 or 5 choice



**Applicants from disadvantaged areas were more likely to apply to a Level 4 and 5 choice than those from the least disadvantaged areas**

- ▶ 7.3% (9,475) of IMD Q1 (most disadvantaged) applicants applied
- ▶ 3.9% (4,890) of IMD Q5 (least disadvantaged) applicants applied



**Applicants who shared certain disabilities were more likely to apply than those who did not share a disability**

- ▶ 8.5% (780) of applicants with a social, behavioural or communication impairment (e.g. autism)
- ▶ 7.7% (195) of applicants with a visual impairment
- ▶ 5.4% (25,350) of applicants who did not share a disability



**Ethnic group trends are changing, with the White and Black ethnic groups equally likely to apply**

- ▶ 6.1% (3,770) of applicants from the Black ethnic group applied
- ▶ 6.1% (23,205) of applicants from the White ethnic group applied
- ▶ 4.3% (4,005) of applicants from the Asian ethnic group applied

Applicants from the White ethnic group to Level 4 and 5 courses have decreased by 22% since 2019 to 2023, while applicants from Black ethnic group have increased by 21% during the same time period.



**Care-experienced applicants were **more likely** to apply than those without care experience\***

- ▶ **8.2% (730)** of applicants with care experience applied
- ▶ **5.0% (26,590)** of applicants without care experience applied



**Applicants whose parent/guardian did not attend HE were **more likely** to apply than those whose parent/guardian did attend HE\***

- ▶ **5.8% (11,720)** of applicants whose parent/guardian did not attend HE applied
- ▶ **3.9% (10,755)** of applicants whose parent/guardian did attend HE applied



**UCAS Level 4 and 5 applicants **were likely** to be employed part-time or arriving from full-time education (based on survey of 2024 applicants)<sup>5</sup>**

- ▶ **32%** in part-time employment
- ▶ **31%** in full-time education
- ▶ **18%** currently unemployed
- ▶ **15%** employed full-time
- ▶ **1%** retired



**Applicants with vocational and technical qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland were **more likely** to apply to Level 4 and 5 courses than applicants with other qualifications\***

- ▶ **11% (3,465)** of applicants with predicted Level 3 BTECs applied
- ▶ **11% (135)** of applicants with predicted T Levels applied
- ▶ **5.3% (1,395)** of applicants with predicted a mix of A levels and BTECs applied
- ▶ **2.1% (4,620)** of applicants with predicted A levels applied
- ▶ **12% (2,955)** with other<sup>6</sup> qualifications applied
- ▶ **37%** of 18-year-olds who only applied to Level 4 or 5 courses had predicted A levels
- ▶ **74%** of 18-year-olds who only applied to Level 6+ courses had predicted A levels

<sup>5</sup> Q. What is your current employment status?

<sup>6</sup> 'Other qualifications' includes students who have not been predicted a T Level, A level or Level 3 BTEC



### 18-year-olds in FE colleges were most likely to apply to Level 4 and 5 courses when compared to other schools and colleges

- ▶ **10% (3,110)** applicants from an FE college applied
- ▶ **3.9% (2,375)** applicants from a sixth form college applied
- ▶ **3.6% (2,755)** applicants from a state school applied
- ▶ **2.9% (2,830)** applicants from an academy applied
- ▶ **2.3% (285)** applicants from a grammar school applied
- ▶ **1.6% (520)** from an independent school applied



### Applicants of all ages were more likely to apply independently to Level 4 and 5 courses, compared to Level 6+\*

- ▶ **Over a third (9,340)** of applicants with a Level 4 and 5 choice apply independently of a school or college, so do not have the support that teachers and advisers offer.
- ▶ **Around a quarter** of applicants to only Level 6+ apply independently.



### Level 4 and 5 applicants were more likely to stay in the region they live in when they apply than Level 6+ applicants

- ▶ **65% of Level 4 and 5** applicants from England that were placed stayed within their home region
- ▶ **46% of Level 6+** applicants from England that were placed stayed within their home region

\* Excludes Records of Prior Acceptances (RPAs). RPA applicants will have applied directly to the provider and an application is submitted to UCAS via the provider once an unconditional firm has been offered and accepted by the applicant. UCAS has information about the course the applicant has been accepted onto, but limited demographic information about the applicant.

# SECTION 3 - HOW ARE LEVEL 4 AND 5 SUBJECT CHOICE AND PROVIDER TYPE CHANGING?

## KEY FINDINGS FOR THIS SECTION

- ▶ The most popular choice of Level 4 and 5 subjects was those allied to medicine, particularly among mature applicants. There were 5,930 applications in 2023, increasing by 21% since 2019, the largest increase of any subject. This presents an important opportunity for the NHS workforce pipeline, including upskilling and reskilling.
- ▶ While numbers are lower, agriculture, food and related studies received the highest proportion of all applications, with over one in five applications to Level 4 and 5 courses.

## SUBJECT CHOICES ARE CHANGING

In 2023, the most common choice at Level 4 and 5 was subjects allied to medicine (including nursing) with 5,930 applications, increasing by 21% since 2019, the largest increase of any subject. There was a significant increase between 2019 and 2021, which has since stabilised. This is notable in the context of UCAS trends in the overall HE population in that time period: subjects allied to medicine saw a significant increase as a result of the coronavirus pandemic - from 337,690 applications in 2019 to 439,170 in 2022, and then declined in 2023 to 400,145. Level 4 and 5 courses are therefore bucking the HE trend in subjects allied to medicine. This shows a promising avenue for exploring how Level 4 and 5 study can support the pipeline for health and care professionals.

Meanwhile, applications for education and teaching have decreased by 31% (to 1,615) and for social sciences by 34% (to 5,400).

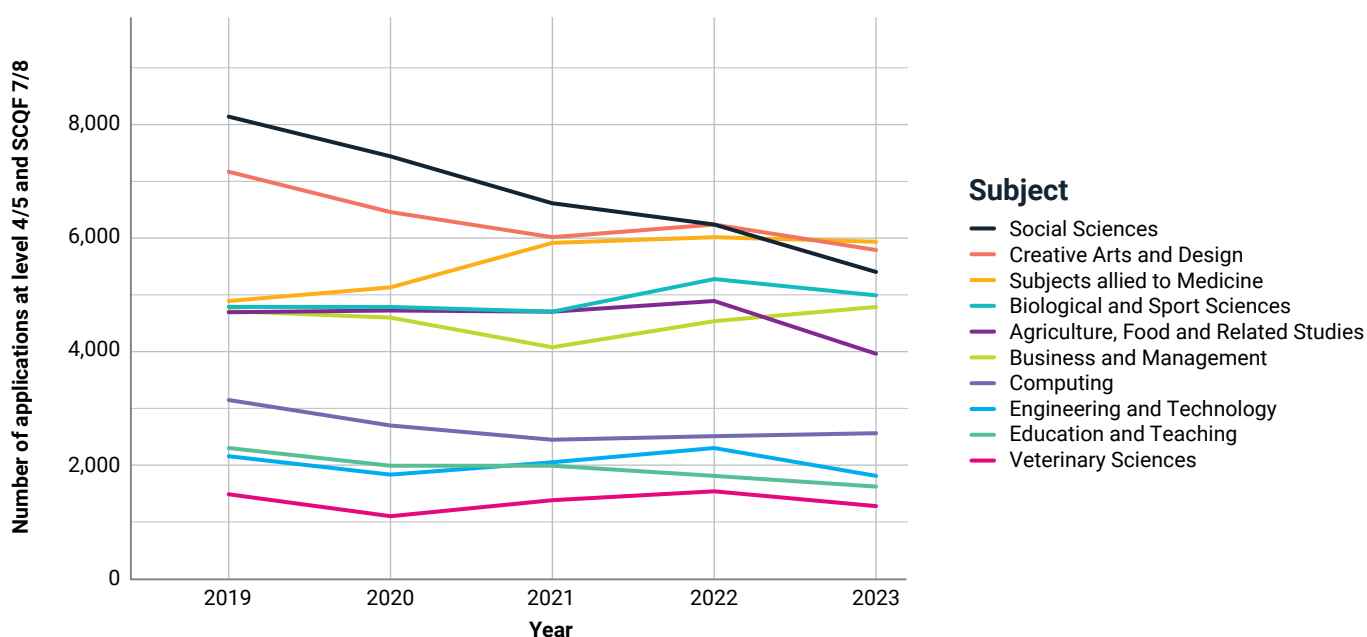


Figure 1: The number of applications to each subject group at Level 4 and 5 and SCQF Level 7/8 by year for subjects with more than 1,000 applications in 2023

The proportion of applications to courses at all levels varies by subject. The subject group with the highest proportion of Level 4 and/or 5 applications is agriculture, food and related studies, where 22% of applications were to Level 4 and 5 (3,940 applications), followed by veterinary studies with 9.7% (1,290).

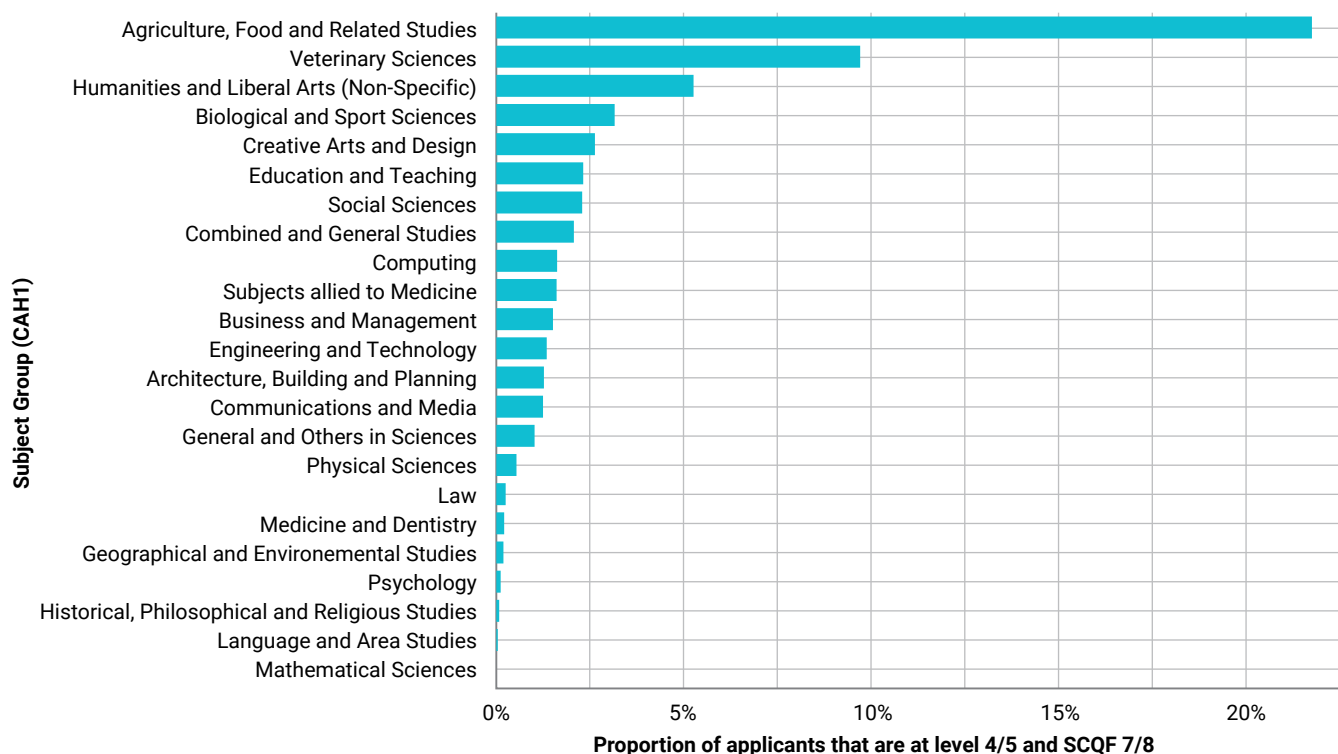


Figure 2: The proportion of applications that are at level 4/5 and SCQF level 7/8

## SUBJECT CHOICES VARY BY AGE

Those over 35 years old were more likely to apply for subjects allied to medicine (32% of Level 4 and 5 applications from this age group were for this subject, compared to 8.3% for 18 year olds), while younger applicants were more likely to apply for creative arts and design (17% of 18 year olds, vs. 6.3% of 35+) or biological and sports science (18% of 18 year olds vs. 2.3% of 35+).

## CHOICES DO NOT APPEAR TO BE DRIVEN BY COURSE AVAILABILITY

While course availability does not equate to available places, exploring applicant trends alongside course availability is important. Applications to biological and sports science courses have increased by 4.1% since 2019, but the number of available courses has decreased by 16% (343 to 289). Meanwhile, the subject to experience the biggest total increase in course availability is computing, increasing by 4.8% (332 to 348) since 2019. However, applications to computing courses have decreased by 19% (3,140 to 2,545) during the same time period. This does not reflect the wider trend of UK applications across all levels to computing courses which have increased by 33% since 2019.

The biggest decrease in courses available is for creative arts and design courses which have decreased by 24% (769 to 585), which aligns with a decrease of 19% in applications (from 7,155 to 5,785)

## THE MAJORITY OF APPLICATIONS ARE TO LOWER TARIFF PROVIDERS, REFLECTING WHERE MOST COURSES ARE AVAILABLE

Most (89%) Level 4 and 5 courses in 2023 were offered at lower tariff providers, with 11% at medium tariff providers and only 0.4% at higher tariff providers. It is not surprising, then, that lower tariff providers saw the greatest proportion and numbers of applications for Level 4 and 5 courses, with 72% of applications.

3.5% (29,520) of applications to lower tariff providers were for Level 4 or 5 courses, converting to 6.3% (12,420) of all applicants placed in these providers. The numbers were much lower for medium and higher tariff providers. 1.3% (9,775) of applications in medium tariff providers were to Level 4 and 5 courses, converting to 2.2% (3,550) of all those placed. 0.2% (1,630) of applications in higher tariff providers were to Level 4 and 5 courses, converting to 0.2% (225) of all those placed.

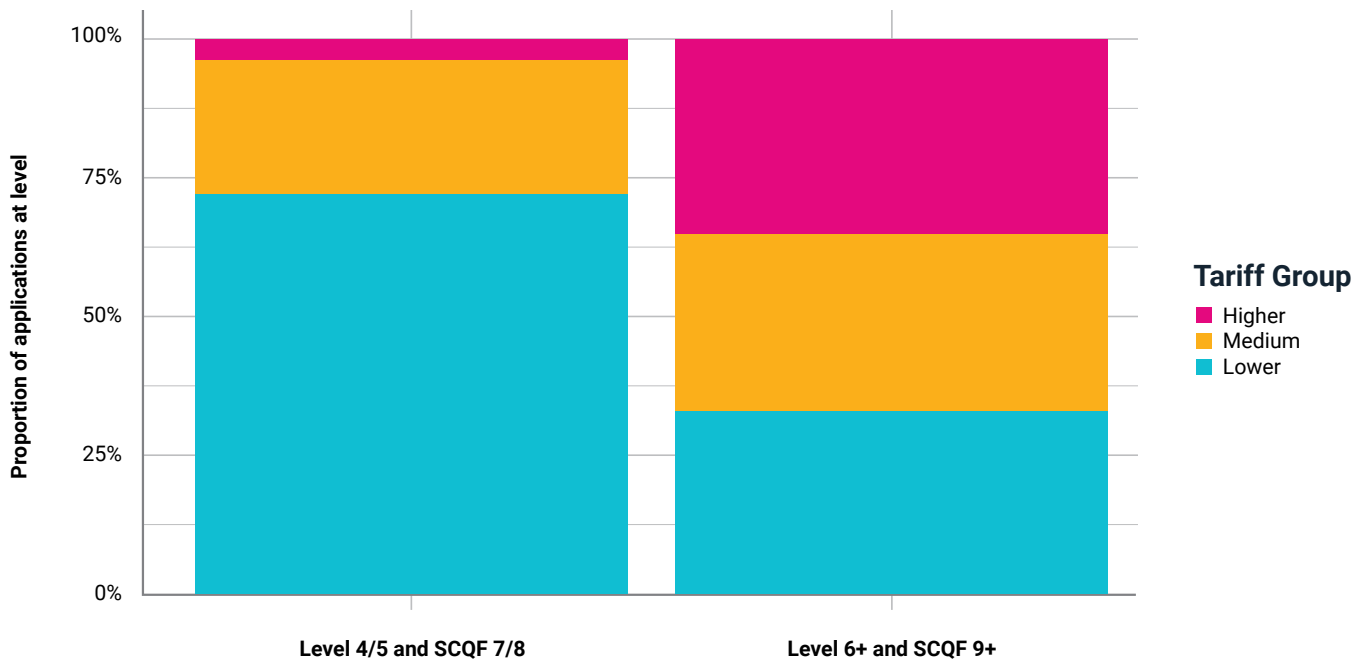


Figure 3: The proportion of applications to each tariff group by level in 2023.

The number of Level 4 and 5 applications to medium and higher tariff providers has increased from 2019 (2.7% and 59% respectively, though starting from low levels), while the number of Level 4 and 5 applications to lower tariff providers has decreased (-18%).

Higher tariff providers were relatively more popular with younger applicants in 2023 with 4.8% of applications to a Level 4 and 5 course from 18 year old applicants being to a higher tariff provider, compared to only 1.3% for those aged 35+.

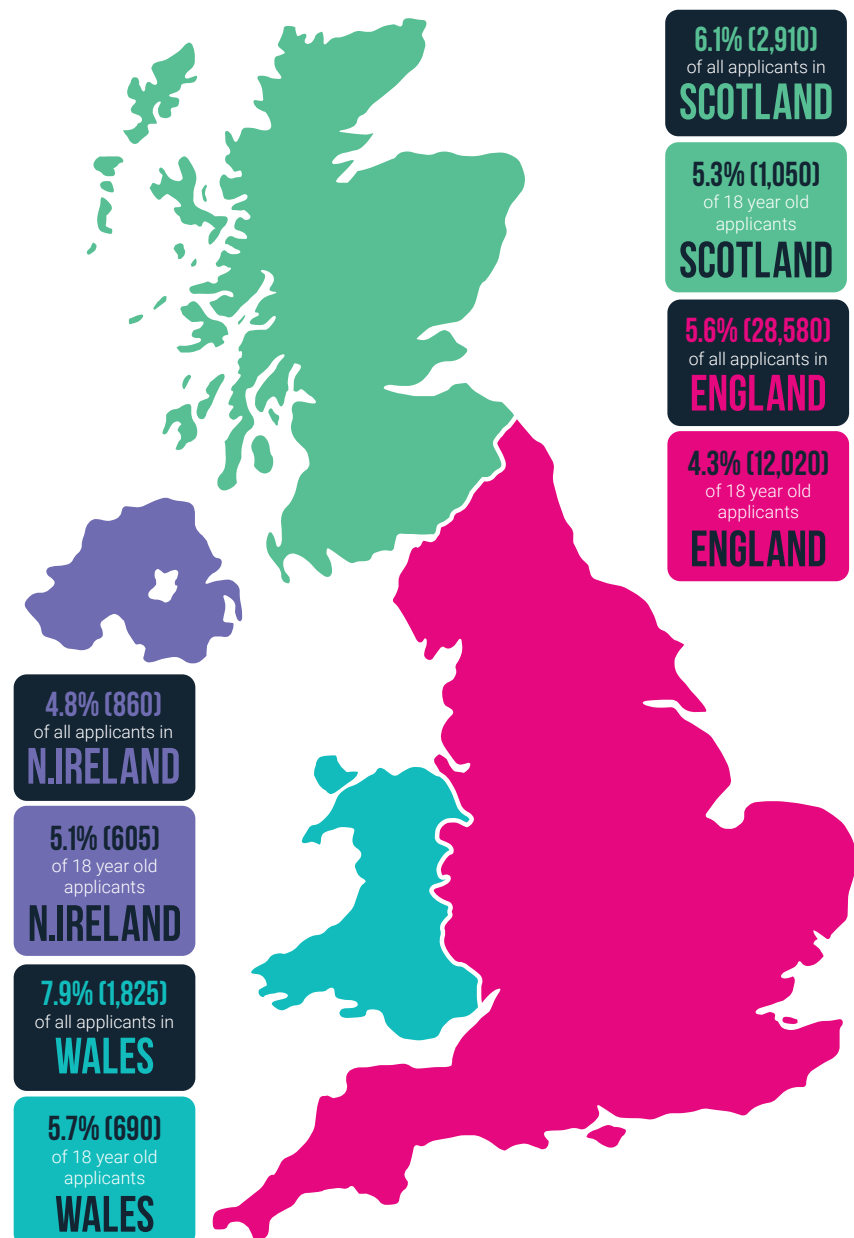


# SECTION 4 - LEVEL 4 AND 5 APPLICANTS ACROSS NATIONS AND REGIONS IN 2023

## KEY FINDINGS FROM THIS SECTION

- ▶ Applicants living in Wales were the most likely from all UK nations to apply for a Level 4 and 5 course through UCAS providers, with 7.9% doing so.
- ▶ Applicants in the South West (7.7%) and North East (7.6%) were the most likely to apply to a Level 4 and 5 choice out of all regions in England. These are regions that have the lowest entry rate for HE overall, so this can be seen as an especially important HE pathway. London (4.3%) and the South East (4.1%) had the lowest proportions.
- ▶ The North West (87%) and North East (87%) had the highest proportions of Level 4 and 5 applicants staying in the same region, with East of England (46%) and London (52%), having the lowest proportions.

## Nations



## England regions

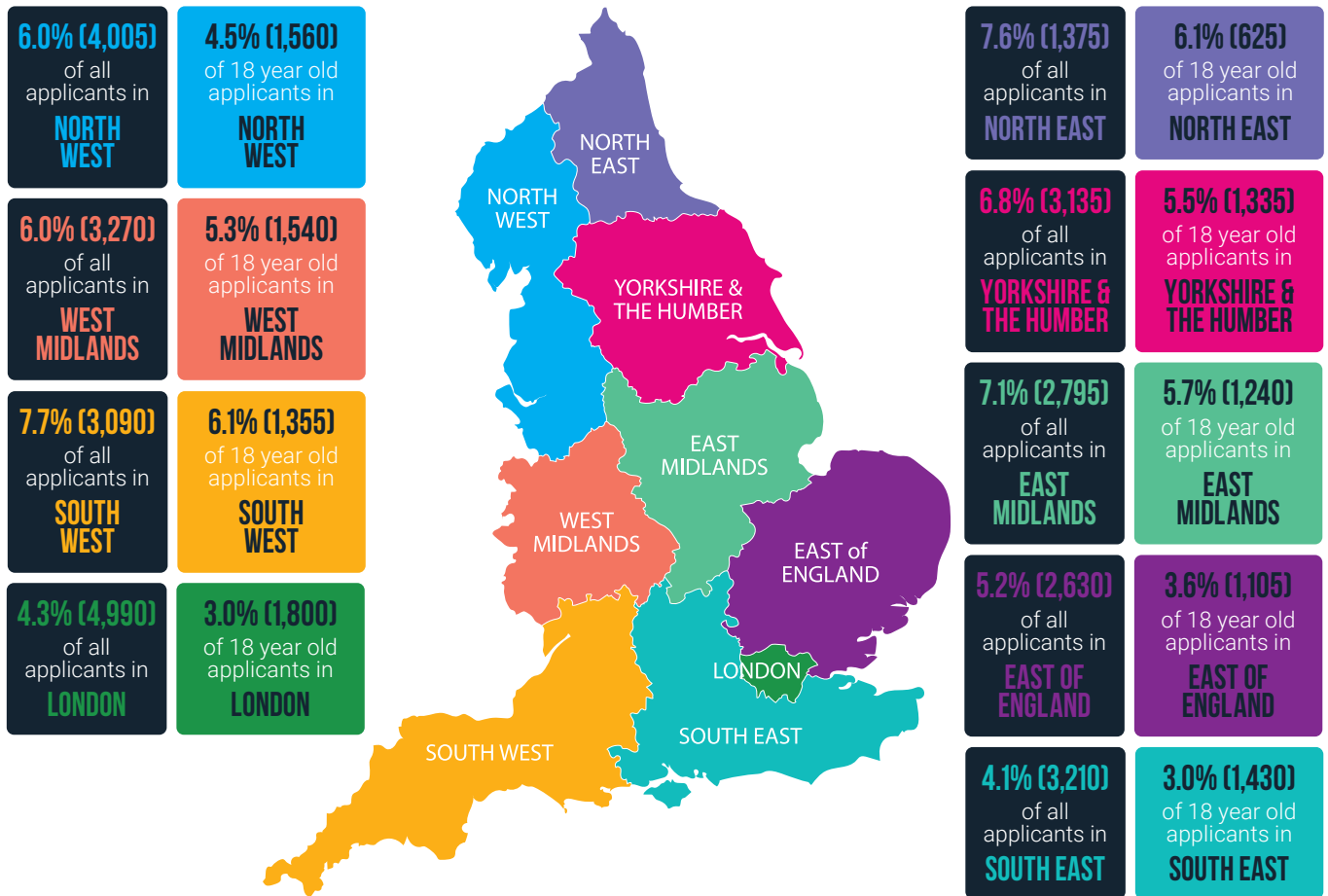
In England, applicants in the South West and North East are the most likely to apply to a Level 4 or 5 choice, with applicants in South East or London the least likely to do so.

- ▶ **7.7% (3,090)** of applicants in the South West
- ▶ **7.6% (1,375)** of applicants in the North East
- ▶ **4.3% (4,990)** of applicants in London
- ▶ **4.1% (3,210)** of applicants in South East

This is consistent when restricted to young applicants as well. Amongst 18 year olds:

- ▶ **6.1% (1,355)** of applicants in the South West
- ▶ **6.1% (625)** of applicants in the North East
- ▶ **3.0% (1,800)** of applicants in London
- ▶ **3.0% (1,430)** of applicants in the South East





## LEVEL 4 AND 5 APPLICANTS ARE MORE LIKELY TO STAY WITHIN THEIR OWN REGION, NOTABLY IN THE NORTH

As set out in section 2, UCAS' 2023 end of cycle data shows that that Level 4 and 5 applicants were more likely than Level 6+ applicants to accept a place at a provider in the region they already reside in. This varies by nation and English region.

Applicants were highly likely to stay in their own nation when placed in Level 4 and 5 courses, with 98% in England, 98% in Scotland, 89% in NI, and 87% in Wales doing so in 2023. Figure 4 shows that, when compared to Level 6+, the most notable differences are in Northern Ireland and Wales.

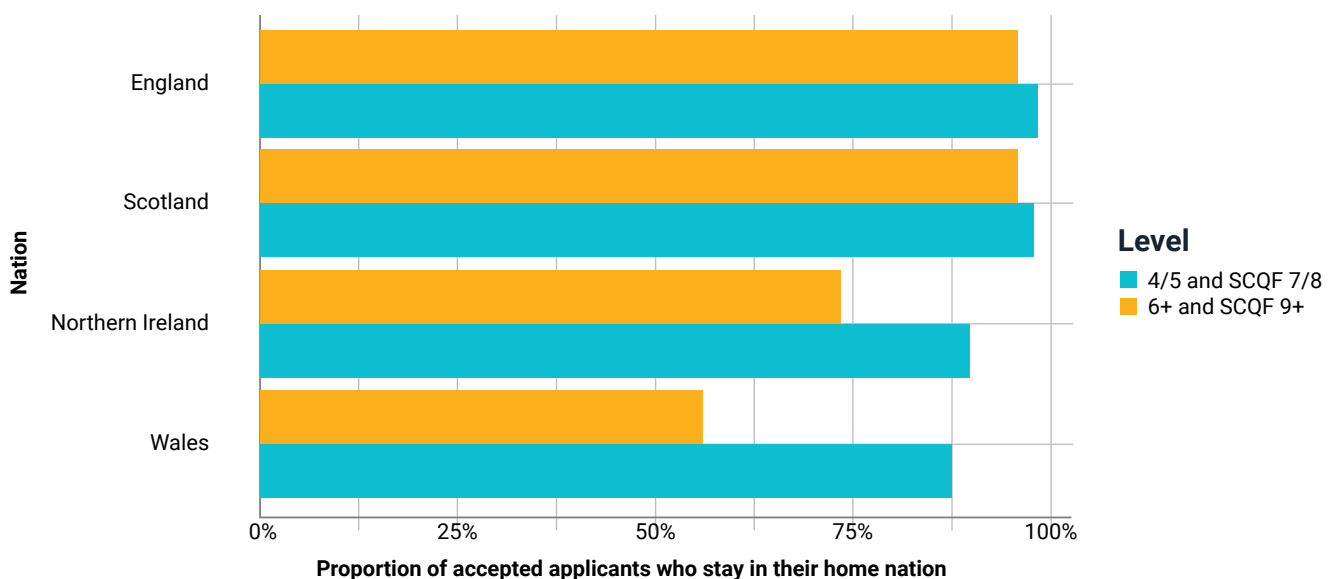


Figure 4: The proportion of accepted applicants to different level courses who stay in their home nation

Looking at regions within England, the North West and North East had the highest proportions of Level 4 and 5 applicants staying in the same region (both 87%). The East of England and London had the lowest proportions of applicants staying in the same region, with only 46% and 52% of applicants respectively.

The story in London is unique. London is the region where the proportion of applicants staying in the region for Level 4 and 5 and Level 6+ is most similar, with only 52% staying in the region for Level 6+ courses. Moreover, the most notable cross-region flows were to and from London. 23% of applicants from the East Midlands were placed in courses in London, and 17% of applicants in London were placed in courses in the South East.

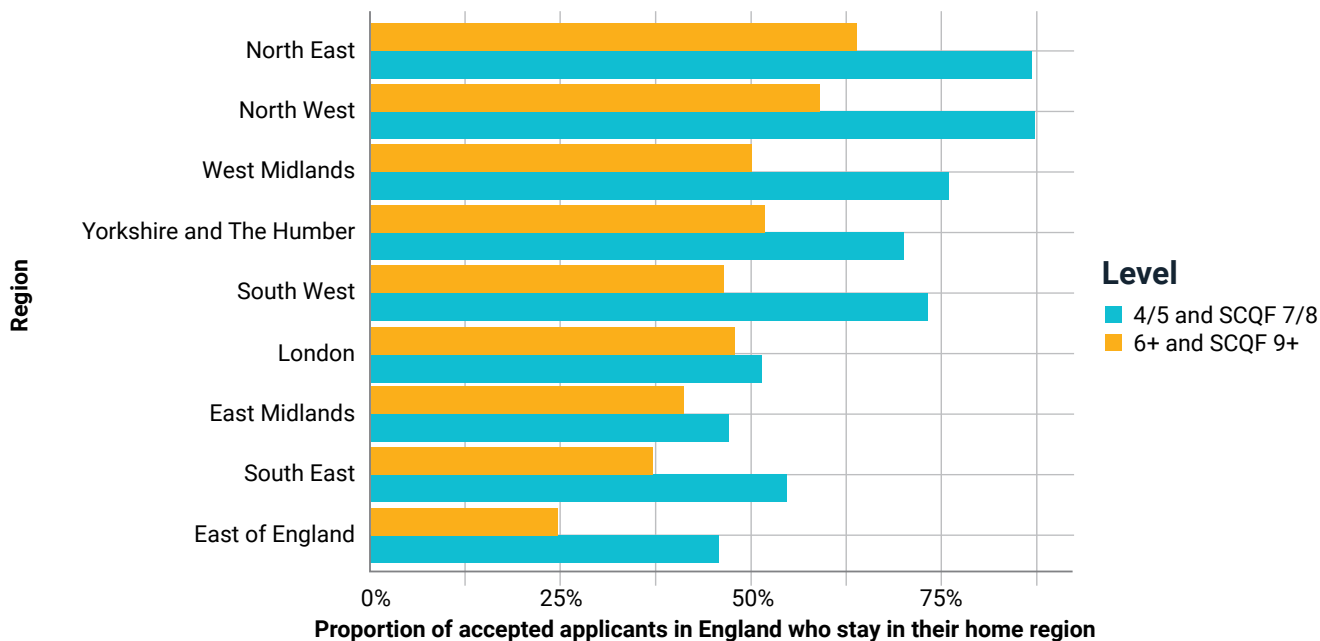


Figure 5: The proportion of accepted applicants to different level courses who stay in their home region



## APPLICANTS IN WALES WERE MORE LIKELY TO APPLY THAN THOSE FROM OTHER NATIONS

Across the nations, applicants in Wales were the most likely to apply for a Level 4 and 5 course through UCAS providers, with 7.9% (1,825) of applicants in Wales selecting a Level 4 or 5 choice. Applicants in Northern Ireland were the least likely, with 4.8% (860) of applicants.<sup>7</sup>

Scotland is the only nation where the number of applicants to Level 4 and 5 courses through UCAS providers has increased since 2019, when there were 2,705 applicants. This also corresponds to an increase in the proportion of Scottish applicants applying for Level 4 and 5 courses from 5.5% in 2019.<sup>8</sup>

These findings should be understood in the context of varying levels of availability of Level 4 and 5 courses (rounded to the nearest 10) in the 2023 cycle.

- ▶ 320 Level 4 and 5 courses were available in Wales (11.8% of all courses in Wales)
- ▶ 120 Level 4 and 5 courses were available in Scotland (2.8% of all courses in Scotland)
- ▶ 2,980 Level 4 and 5 courses were available in England (9.3% of all courses in England)
- ▶ 10 Level 4 and 5 courses were available in Northern Ireland (2.3% of all courses in Northern Ireland)

## IN ENGLAND, APPLICANTS LIVING IN THE SOUTH WEST AND NORTH EAST WERE THE MOST LIKELY TO APPLY

The regional picture of Level 4 and 5 applicants necessitates an in-depth exploration of the trends and contexts. In England, applicants in the South West (7.7% of all applicants, representing 3,090) and North East (7.6% of all applicants, representing 1,375) are the most likely to apply to a Level 4 and 5 choice, with applicants in South East (4.1% of all applicants, representing 3,210) or London (4.3% of all applicants, representing 4,990) the least likely to do so. While London had the highest number of Level 4 and 5 applicants, relative to the number of Level 6+ applicants it has, the proportion applying to Level 4 and 5 was low. In fact, 18 year olds in the North East were twice as likely to make a Level 4 and 5 choice than 18 year olds in London (6.1% vs. 3.0%).

It is important to set this against a backdrop of the entire HE applicant population. In 2023, London had the highest application rate for 18 year olds (59% in January 2024) and the North East has the lowest (33%). However, when restricted to Level 4 and 5 choices, young people in the North East were more likely to apply than in London – with 2.2% of young people in the North East applying to Level 4 and 5 courses in 2023 compared to 1.8% in London.

Taken together, this suggests that, for regions where HE participation is lower, Level 4 and 5 qualifications can be seen as especially important HE pathways.

## THE NUMBER OF LEVEL 4 AND 5 COURSES ARE GROWING IN THE NORTH EAST AND DECLINING IN LONDON

While the English region with the lowest number (rounded to the nearest 10) of Level 4 and 5 courses from providers that used UCAS in 2023 is the North East with 190, this is an increase from the 160 available in the same region in 2019. The South East has the second lowest number of courses available with only 230 courses - a significant decrease from the 370 available in 2019. The North West has the most courses available with 520, which is also down from 540 in 2019. In London, where we see the highest number of applications, the number of courses has decreased significantly since 2019, from 420 to 310.

<sup>7</sup> The coverage of UCAS providers in Northern Ireland is small, notably in colleges.

<sup>8</sup> UCAS supports only two-thirds of providers in Scotland. See Annex C for further details.

# SECTION 5 - WHAT IS THE EXPERIENCE OF 2024 LEVEL 4 AND 5 APPLICANTS?

The experiences and perceptions of applicants to Level 4 and 5 programmes is an underdeveloped area of research. This section covers a new survey of UCAS applicants that investigates the following:

- ▶ **Discovery:** the 'light bulb' moments, influences and influencers that lead to applications.
- ▶ **Exploration:** how applicants explore different options side by side (including degrees and apprenticeships) and why they ultimately chose Level 4 and 5 courses.
- ▶ **Application:** how applicants make decisions about which courses and providers to apply to and what could have helped them in their application journey.
- ▶ **Future:** applicants' plans and career aspirations.

## KEY FINDINGS FROM THIS SECTION

### Discovery

- ▶ More than half of respondents (62%) became aware of the course(s) that they had applied to within the last 12 months.

### Exploration

- ▶ Level 4 and 5 applicants were more likely than the overall HE population to be actively considering other options. Half were considering full or part-time employment (49%), closely followed by studying an undergraduate degree (46%) as other options.
- ▶ Of survey respondents who applied to both Level 4 or 5 and Level 6+ courses, 52% indicated that they would choose a Level 4 or 5 course if they received offers from all their choices.
- ▶ Over a third (35%) were also actively considering or had considered an apprenticeship, which is higher than among all HE applicants (21%). However, a minority had already applied, with most deciding they preferred the Level 4 and 5 course. Some faced barriers in finding and apprenticeship opportunity.

Those applying for Level 4 and 5 courses felt the greatest advantages of these qualifications would be: improved career prospects (51%); help getting a job they were interested in (49%); and allowing them to study a subject they really enjoyed (43%).

### Application

- ▶ Half of Level 4 and 5 applicants felt the course and location of provider are of equal priority when making their choice, but the younger the applicant the more likely they will prioritise the course over the location, reflecting trends to live at home by age.

Level 4 and 5 applicants said the most important factors when deciding which course to apply to are the match of the course to their desired job, the quality of staff/teaching, and teaching facilities. While this may be similar to overall HE applicants, there are differences: Level 4 and 5 applicants value pre-application support from the provider, on-course student support offer, and the opportunity to gain work experience more than the average HE applicant. They are less concerned about the university's/college's position in league tables, entry requirements, or the level of challenge of the course.

The most helpful information sources for both courses and providers identified by respondents were the UCAS website and teachers, as well as friends and family.

Survey respondents said that they would welcome clearer explanations of different types of qualifications, dedicated guidance for working/mature applicants, and more support with navigating student finance.

Nearly half of Level 4 and 5 applicants surveyed were not aware that they could apply for a tuition fee loan (45%) and maintenance loan (46%) to support them during Level 4 and 5 studies.

## Future

Nearly half (47%) of Level 4 and 5 applicants intended to secure a full-time job after completing their course. Only 20% intended to continue their studies in higher education.

475 respondents completed an online survey, administered by UCAS between 23rd April 2024 and 14th May 2024. The respondents were diverse in terms of gender, age, nation, ethnicity and POLAR4 quintiles. Results are weighted to ensure a fair representation of each target group. Comparisons are made to other UCAS surveys, notably the 2024 New Applicant Survey, that explore all HE UCAS applicants to draw indicative conclusions about whether - and how - Level 4 and 5 applicants differ. This is set out in the footnotes. (See Annex D for more information).

## DISCOVERY

### Over half discovered the course(s) they are applying to in the year leading up to application

More than half of respondents (62%) had become aware of the course(s) that they had applied to within the last 12 months. This could be interpreted in a number of ways. It could suggest that Level 4 and 5 applicants act quickly and proactively upon discovering these courses, or that Level 4 and 5 courses are not well known to earlier age groups. Less than a fifth (15%) became aware of these types of courses over three years ago.

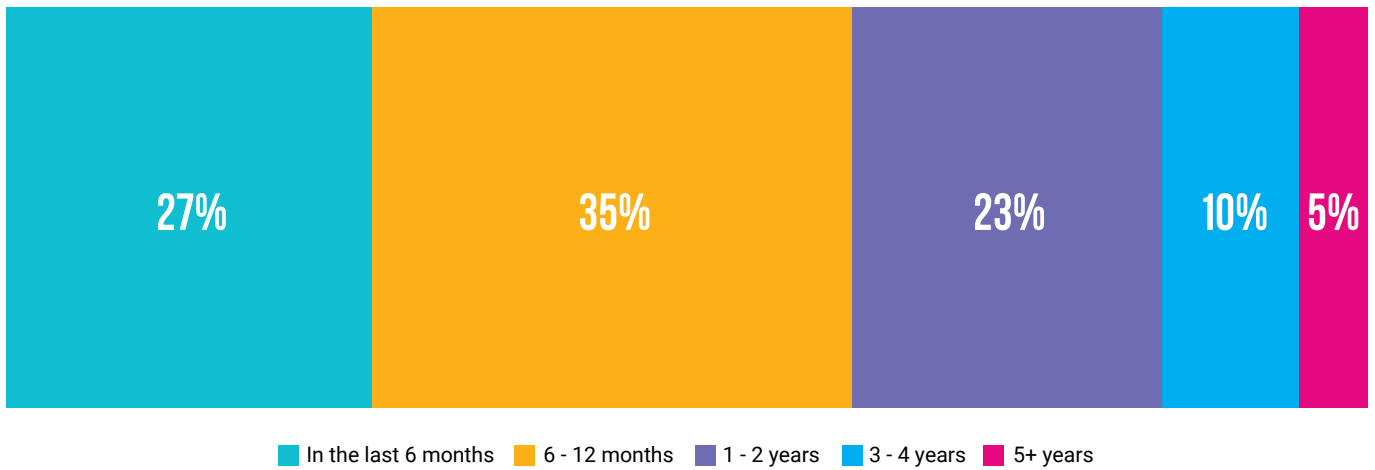


Figure 6: Q: As far as you can remember, roughly how long ago did you first become aware of the Level 4 and 5 course(s) and/or SCQF Level 7-8 course(s) you applied to?



A greater proportion of respondents aged 18 years became aware in the last 12 months when compared to other age groups.

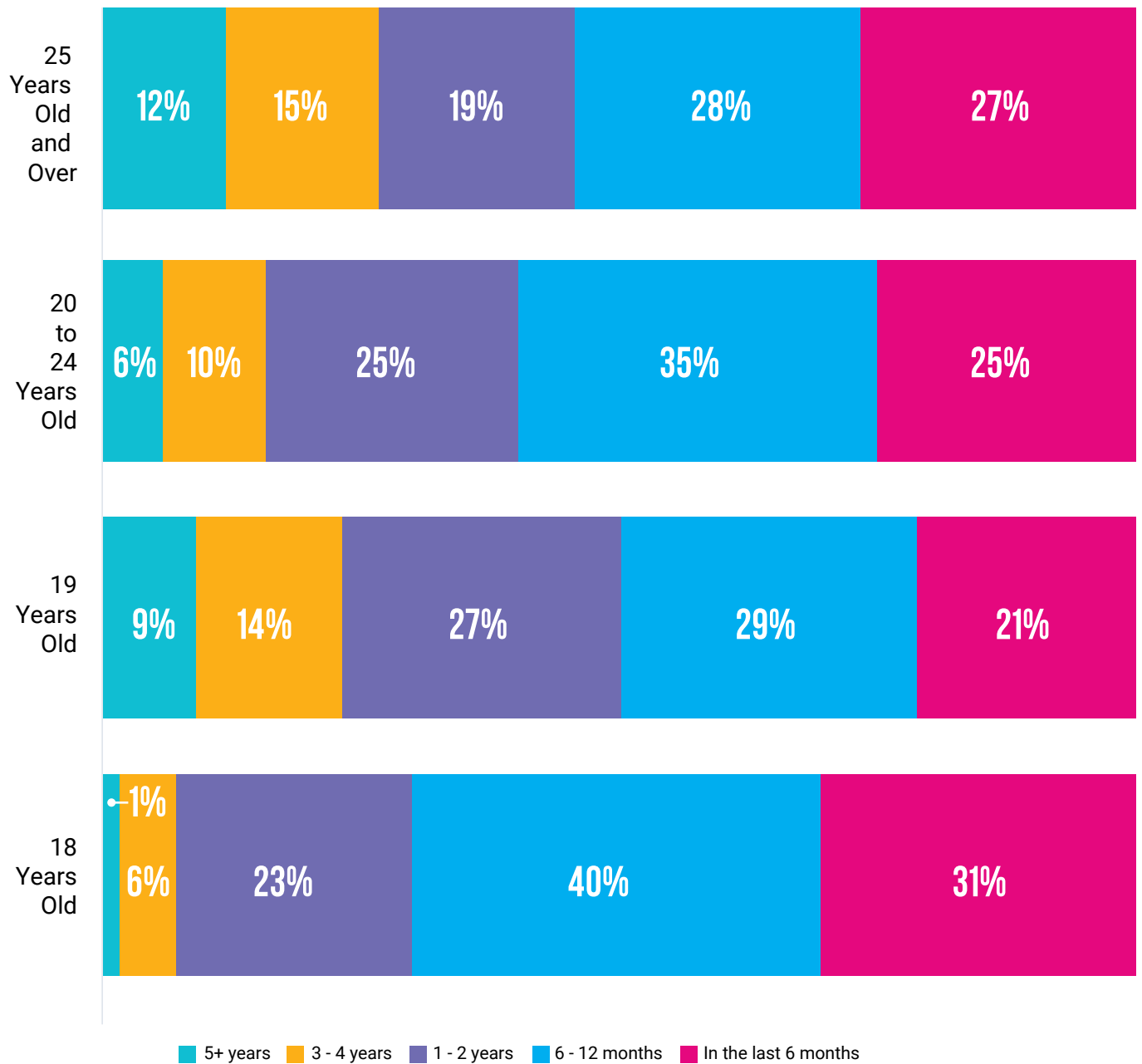


Figure 7: Q: As far as you can remember, roughly how long ago did you first become aware of the Level 4 and 5 course(s) and/or SCQF Level 7-8 course(s) you applied to?

## EXPLORATION

### Students applying for Level 4 and 5 courses are most motivated by the advantages they offer their career prospects and the enjoyment of a subject

The top three advantages of studying a Level 4 and 5 course that respondents identified were:

- ▶ Improved career prospects (51%);
- ▶ Would help to get a job they were interested in (49%);
- ▶ Would allow them to study a subject they really enjoyed (43%).

Fewer respondents thought that an advantage of studying a Level 4 and 5 course was:

- ▶ Give you more contact with employers (19%);
- ▶ Lower entry requirements than a degree (13%);
- ▶ Lower fees than a degree (8%).

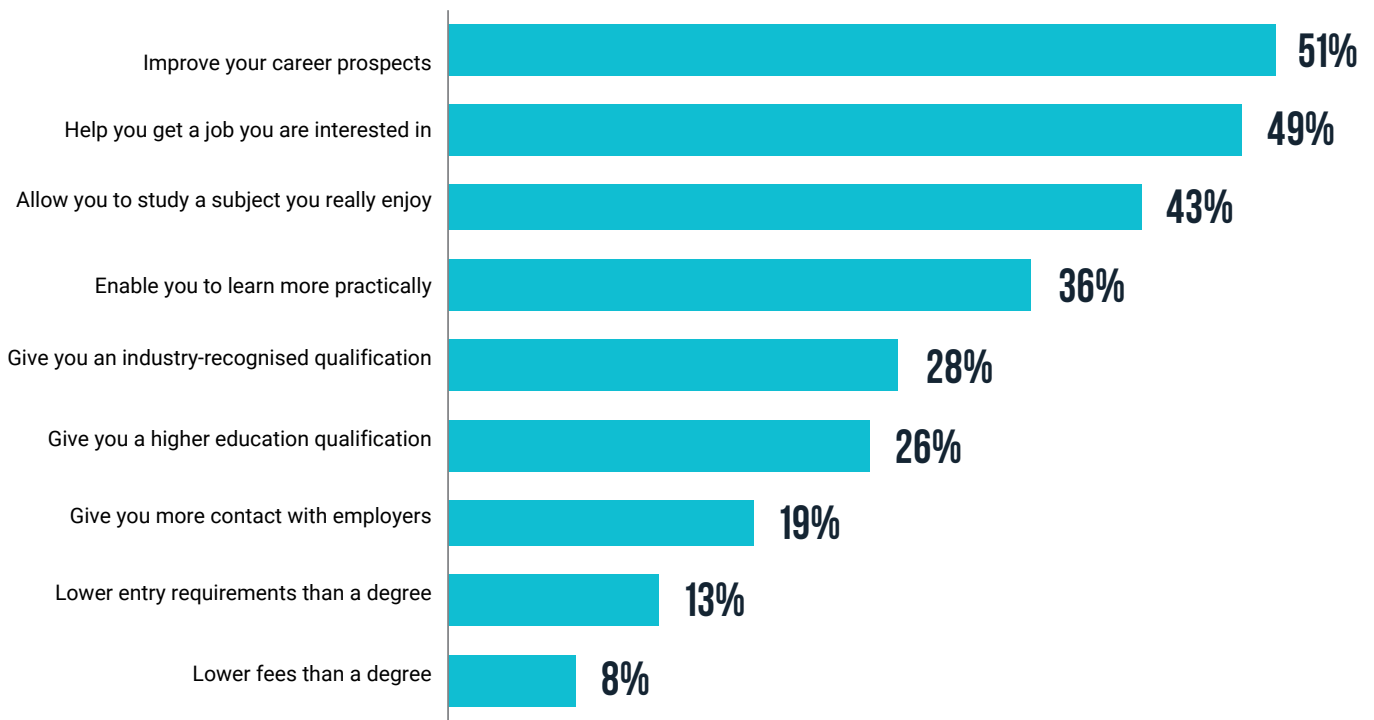


Figure 8: Q. What do you think are the advantages of Level 4-5 course(s) and/or SCQF Level 7-8 course(s)?

Applicants in this survey indicated that they wanted to apply for a Level 4 and/or 5 course to advance their careers, progress to higher study or gain practical skills. The top words used by respondents were career, education, knowledge, future and job.

"I am currently doing a level 3 course in the same place that I would do this Level 4 and 5 course, and the quality of teaching is great."

"Change of life direction and return to study."

"I wasn't ready to go to uni yet and I can do it at college."

"Because I'm already working the industry that I'm going to study, I want to expand my knowledge and better my skills."

"To gain a degree post completion."

"It allowed me to stay closer to home and was in the subject I wanted."

Q. Why did you apply to this/these Level 4-5 course(s) and/or SCQF Level 7-8 course(s) in particular? And what was the most important reason why?

## Employment or undergraduate degrees are also considered alongside Level 4 and 5 qualifications

Almost half of applicants to Level 4 and 5 courses in 2024 were also considering full or part-time employment (49%) closely followed by studying an undergraduate degree (46%). Over a third (35%) were also considering an apprenticeship. However, age is a factor, with respondents aged 25 years old and over less likely to consider an undergraduate degree, an apprenticeship, or take a gap year than the other age groups.

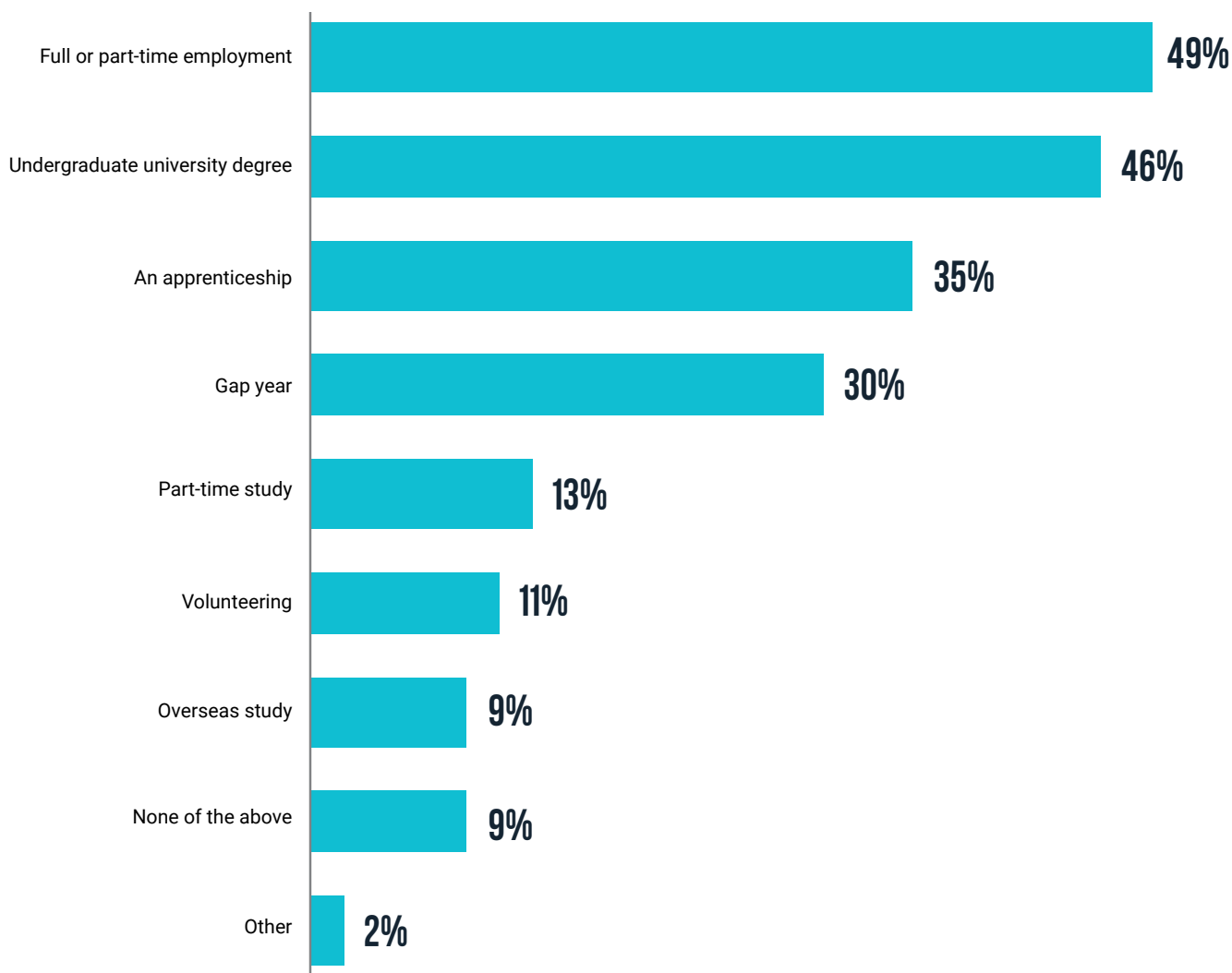


Figure 9: Q. What other options are you considering or have considered as an alternative to the Level 4-5 course(s) and/or SCQF Level 7-8 course(s) you applied to?

Level 4 and 5 applicants seem to be more certain about their options. 9% of Level 4 and 5 applicants UCAS surveyed said they weren't considering other options. Looking at all HE applicants through the 2024 New Applicant Survey (when asked a similar question<sup>9</sup>), 35% of applicants reported that they weren't considering any other options. Applicants to Level 4 and 5 were also more likely to be considering employment, with nearly half (49%) selecting this as an option. This is significantly more than the overall HE population, with the 2024 New Applicant Survey finding that a third (34%) considered this as an option.

## The majority apply for both Level 4 and 5 and Level 6+ courses

Applicants often apply to Level 4 and/or 5 courses alongside Level 6+. Based on the 2023 end of cycle data, 79% (21,850) of applicants (excluding RPAs) applied to a mixture of choices at various levels. 1,270 of applied only to Level 6+ choices in the main scheme but later added a Level 4 or 5 course in Extra or clearing. Of the applicants who applied to Level 4 and 5 and Level 6+ choices in the main scheme, applicants on average applied to more Level 6+ courses than Level 4 or 5: an average of 3.4 choices vs. 1.2 choices.

9 New Applicant Survey: Q. In addition to your application for higher education, are you seriously considering any of the following?



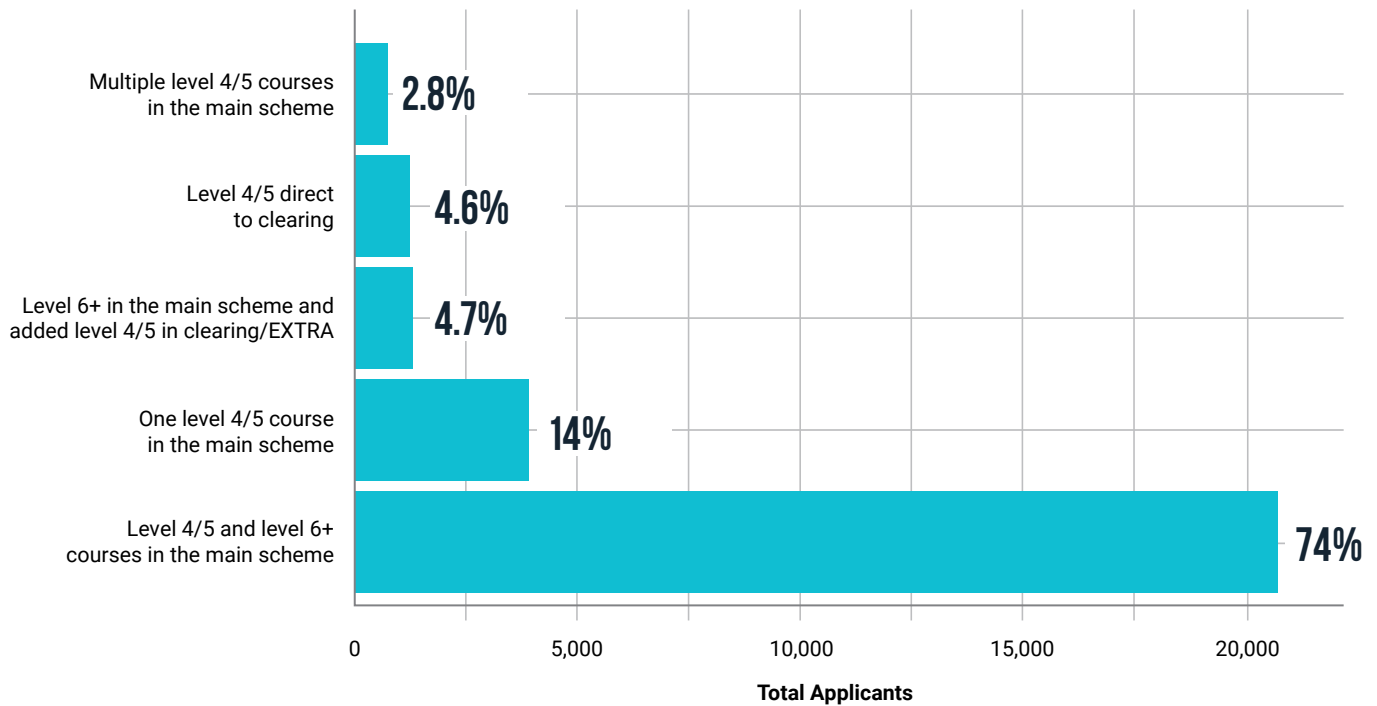


Figure 10: Number of applicants to Level 4 and 5 courses who had different combination of choice types.

### A third of applicants pick Level 4 or 5 courses over Level 6+ when given an offer for both

65% (13,340) of those who applied to both Level 4 or 5 courses and Level 6+ courses received offers across both. To assess decision making, the level of courses that applicants pick as their 'firm' choice (confirming their intention to take the place) and insurance choice has been analysed.

- ▶ 11,330 replied firm to at least one of their offers.
  - 33% of these replied firm to a Level 4 or 5 course
  - 67% to a Level 6+ course
- ▶ 88% with a Level 4 or 5 firm choice had an insurance choice at Level 6+
- ▶ 50% with a firm choice at Level 6+ had an insurance choice at Level 4 or 5

Taken together this suggests Level 4 and 5 courses are not universally being used as a 'back up' to Level 6+ courses

Of the survey respondents who applied to both Level 4 or 5 and Level 6+ courses, 51% indicated that they would choose a Level 4 or 5 if they received offers from all their choices. 14% said they would not choose the Level 4 or 5 course and 35% said that they didn't know what they would pick.

### Some Level 4 and 5 applicants also apply to apprenticeships

UCAS data shows that around 40% of applicants across all levels are interested in apprenticeships. When looking at how interest converts into active consideration, 35% of Level 4 and 5 respondents said they were considering an apprenticeship. This is higher than the overall HE population – in the 2024 New Applicant Survey, 21% said they were considering at least one form of apprenticeship.<sup>10</sup> For Level 4 and 5 applicants, the level that they are interested in doing an apprenticeship in is relatively evenly split across all levels.<sup>11</sup> For HE applicants across all levels, degree apprenticeships come out on top.<sup>12</sup>

10 Q. What other options are you considering or have considered as an alternative to the Level 4 and 5 course(s) and/or SCQF Level 7-8 course(s) you applied to?

11 Filtered from other considerations: Asked those who selected 'An apprenticeship'. Q. You mentioned you are considering an apprenticeship, which type of apprenticeship(s) are you considering?

12 2024 New Applicant Survey: Q. In addition to your application for higher education, are you seriously considering any of the following?

Of those who had considered applying for an apprenticeship, 12% had already applied alongside their HE application, and just under a third were planning to apply (31%). More than half of the respondents had decided not to apply for an apprenticeship (57%).

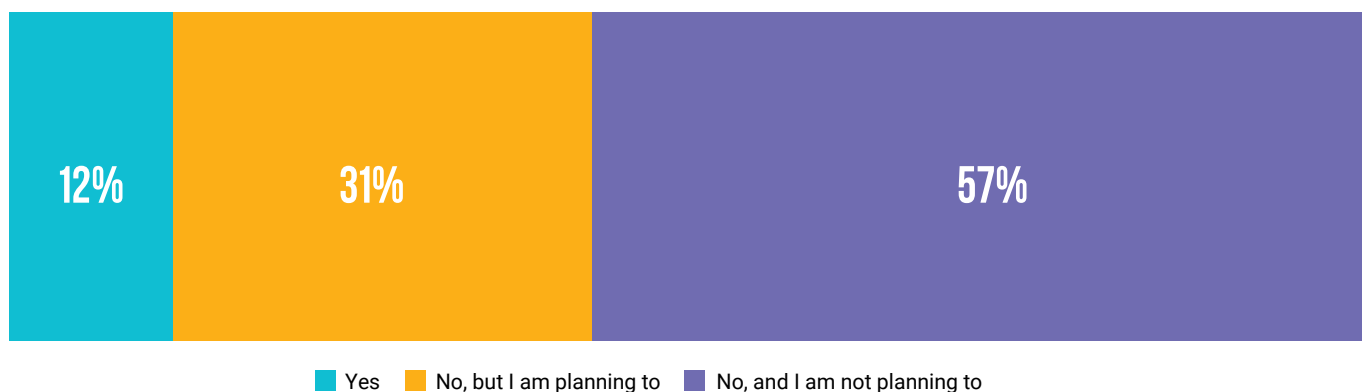


Figure 11: Filtered from other considerations: Asked those who selected 'An apprenticeship'. Q. You mentioned you are considering an apprenticeship. Have you applied? (Respondent Numbers: 160)

For those not planning to apply to an apprenticeship, preferring the subject choice at university or college was the main reason why (69%). Other reasons included the perception that career prospects would be better if they went to university or college (33%) and a lack of apprenticeships relating to their chosen career path (23%). Other considerations included: affordability (8%), opportunities to complete apprenticeships with desired employers (6%), and a negative perception of apprenticeships (3%) - but these were least likely to be reported as an influence on their decision-making.<sup>13</sup>

13 Filtered from applying for an apprenticeship: Asked those who selected 'No, and I am not planning to'. Q. Why not? (Note: This question has a low base rate.)



# APPLICATIONS

## Location is important when deciding where to apply

For half of respondents, the Level 4 or 5 course itself and the location of the university/college were equally important, but for just over a third of respondents, the course was a priority over the location of the university/college (36%), with 8% saying the location of the provider was the most important.

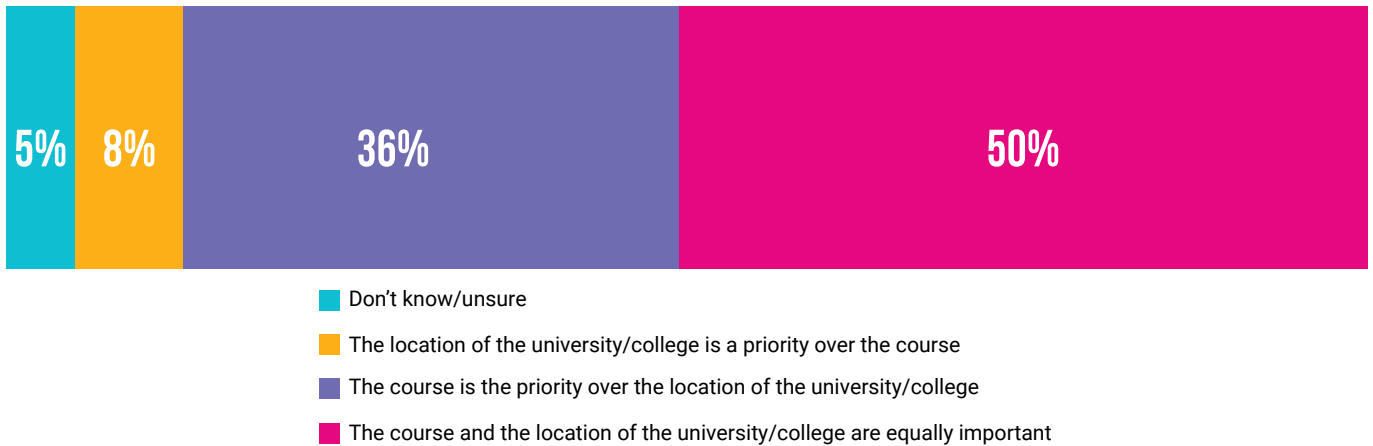


Figure 12: Q. When choosing a course at a university/college and deciding where to study, which of the following statements best describes your priorities?

It is unsurprising that mature students were more likely to say that location is a priority, with 70% of those aged 25 and over saying that it was either equal or more important than the course, compared to 56% of 18 year olds. This reflects what we see in the 2023 application data, with 72.3% of applications from those aged 25+ to Level 4 and 5 courses intending to live at home while studying, compared to 43.9% of those aged 18 years.

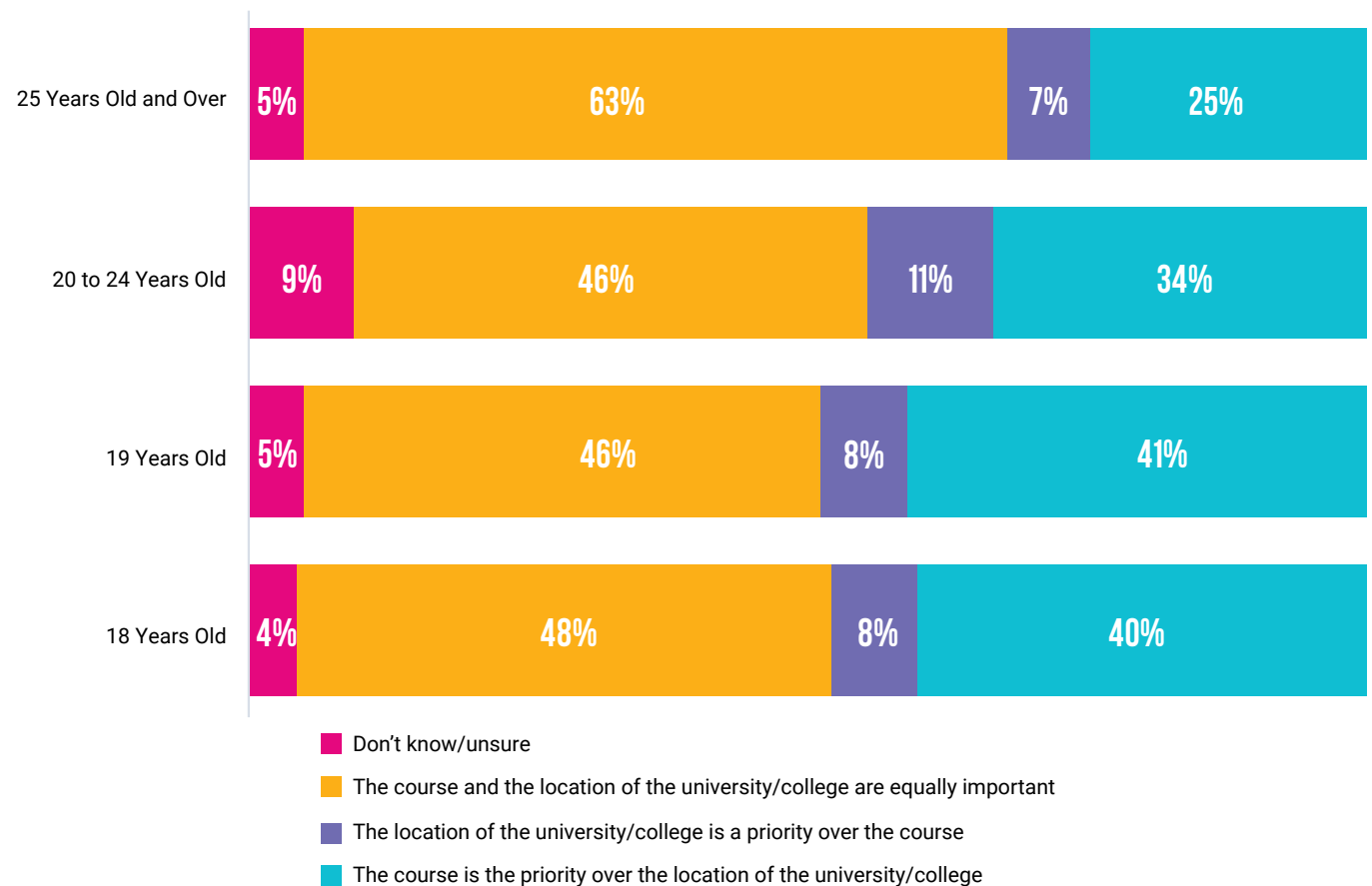


Figure 13: Q. When choosing a course at a university/college and deciding where to study, which of the following statements best describes your priorities?

## The majority of applicants find it easy to find courses

59% of respondents found it easy or very easy to find Level 4 and 5 course(s) and/or SCQF Level 7-8 course(s) in the location where they planned to study. 11% found it difficult or very difficult.

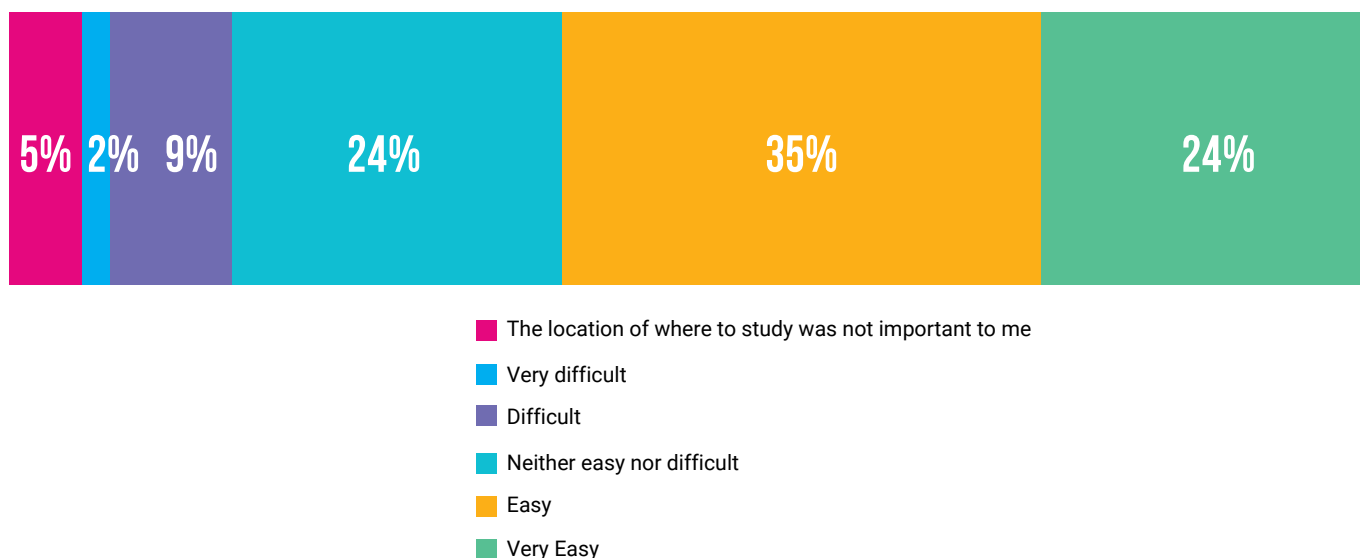


Figure 14: Q. How easy was it to find the Level 4 and 5 course(s) and/or SCQF Level 7-8 course(s) you applied to in the location you plan to study?

## Important factors when considering which courses to apply to focus on career prospects and teaching

When deciding to apply to a Level 4 and 5 course there were a number of factors that were important to applicants.<sup>14</sup>

Most important factors include:

- ▶ Studying the right course and subject to enable respondents to get their desired job (95%)
- ▶ The quality of staff/teaching (93%)
- ▶ The quality of the teaching facilities (92%)

Overall, what Level 4 and 5 applicants say matters to them is broadly similar to overall HE applicants, but there are some exceptions.<sup>15</sup>

Less important to Level 4 and 5 applicants

- ▶ The university/college's position in the league tables (39% for Level 4 and 5 vs. 67% for all)
- ▶ Entry requirements (72% for Level 4 and 5 vs. 83% for all)
- ▶ The course being challenging (56% for Level 4 and 5 vs. 64% for all)
- ▶ Good student reviews (79% for Level 4 and 5 vs. 86% for all)

More important to Level 4 and 5 applicants

- ▶ The provider's communication before applying (79% for Level 4 and 5 vs. 66% for all)
- ▶ Support for students with individual needs (70% for Level 4 and 5 vs. 63% for all)
- ▶ The opportunity to gain work experience (76% for Level 4 and 5 vs. 69% for all)

<sup>14</sup> Q. When deciding to apply for your Level 4 and 5 course(s) and/or SCQF Level 7-8 course(s), how important were the following factors?

<sup>15</sup> 2024 New Applicant Survey: Q. When deciding which universities and colleges to apply to, how important were the following factors?



### Key information sources when selecting both courses and providers

When asked about what the most helpful resource was in selecting potential courses, the UCAS website (28%), followed by teachers (18%) were identified. Others included contact with a higher education provider (13% combined of either a talk or an email), and family and friends (13% combined).

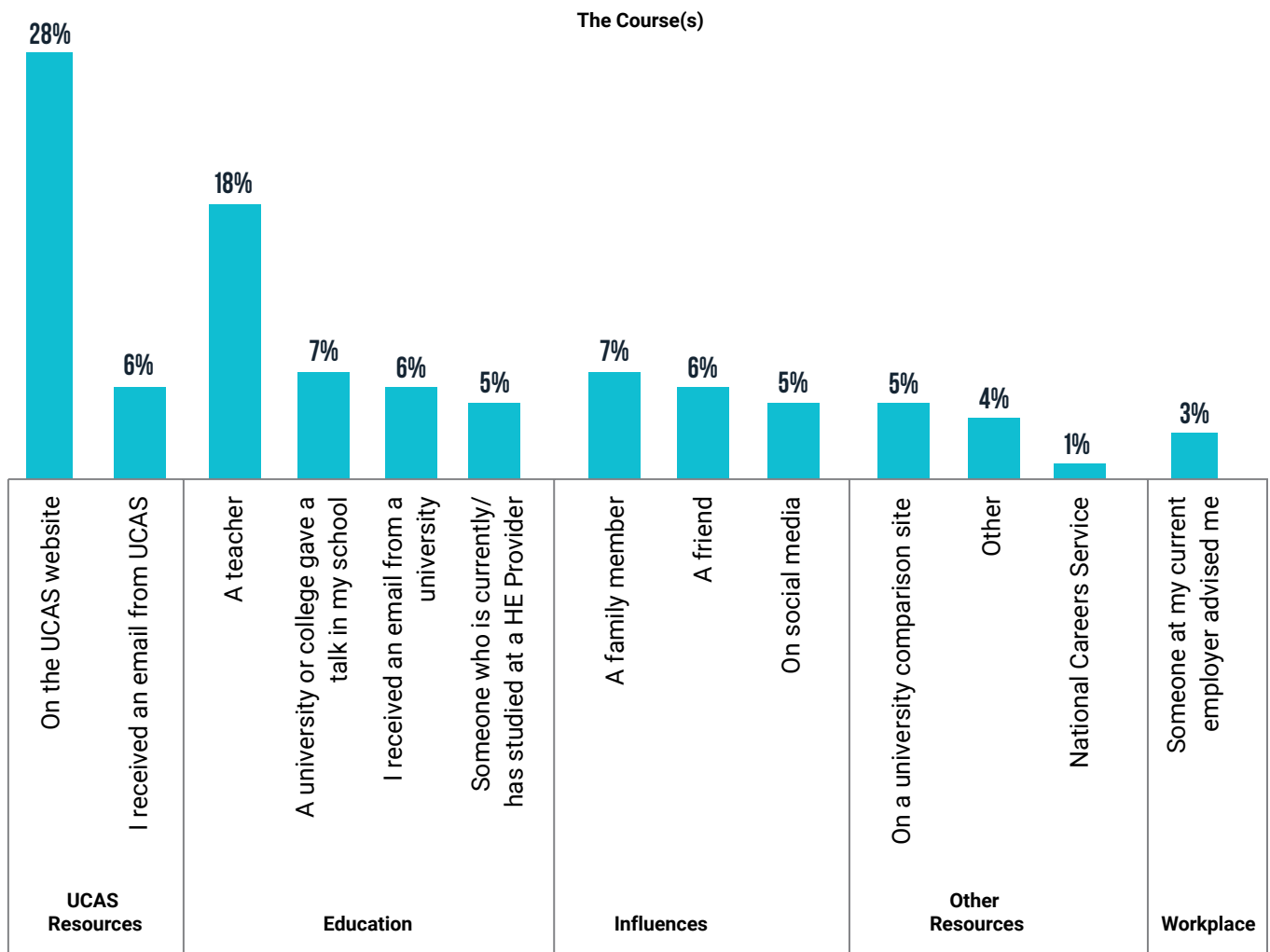


Figure 15 Q. And which one of these sources was the most helpful when selecting your Level 4-5 course(s) and/or SCQF Level 7-8 course(s)?

When Level 4 and 5 applicants were asked about who offered the most helpful resource about potential providers, similar trends are seen.

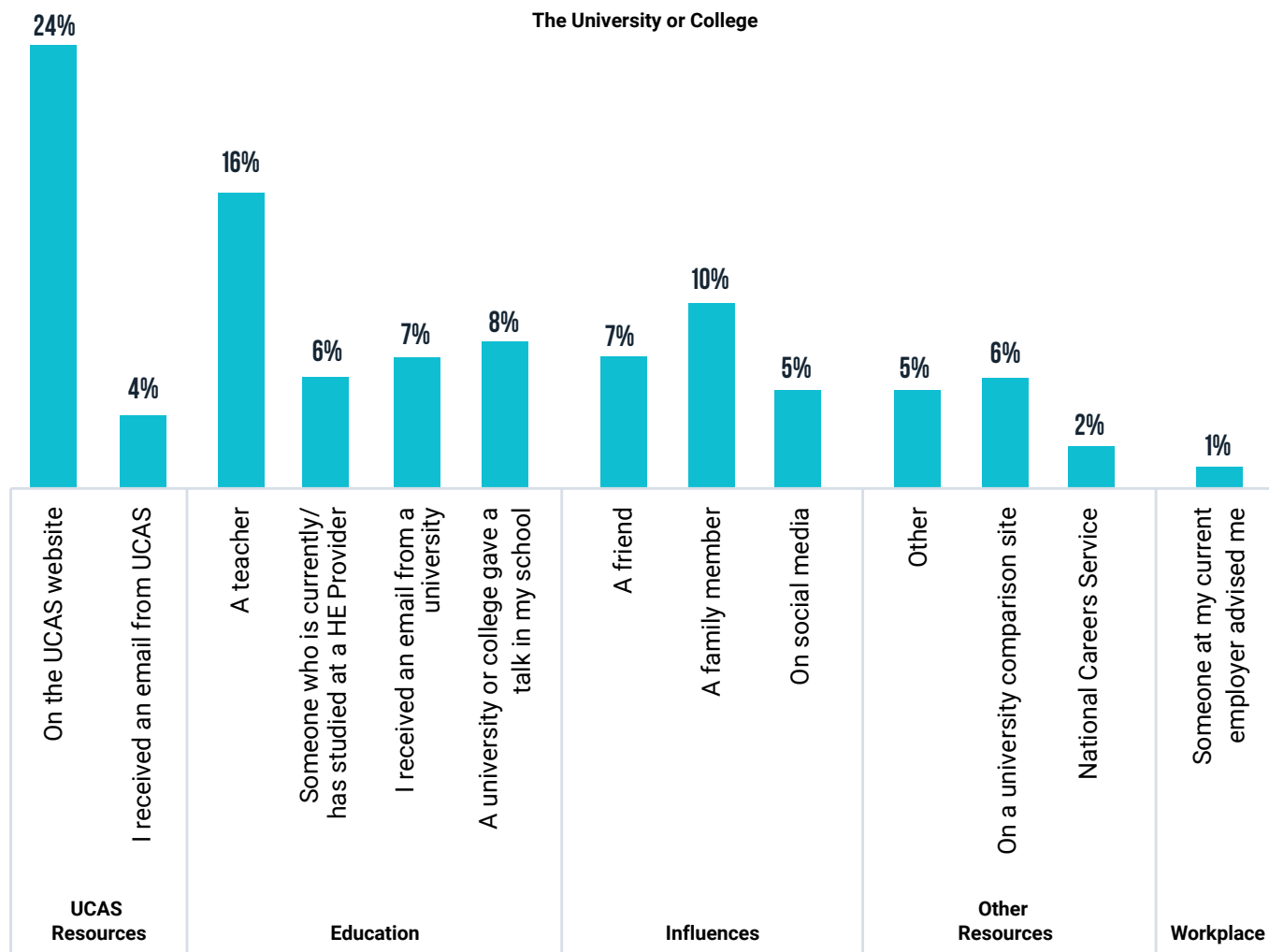


Figure 16: Q. And which one of these sources was the most helpful when selecting your university/college?

When breaking this down by age, respondents aged 20 years and over were more likely to be advised about selecting Level 4 or 5 courses by someone at their current employer, while those aged 19 years or younger were likely to receive information via a talk from a university or college at their school.





## Applicants request more information on qualification types and finance options

Some respondents shared ideas on improvements. Key themes included clearer explanations of different types of qualifications, dedicated guidance for working/mature applicants, and more support with navigating student finance.

“I would have liked more advice on deadlines to apply and student finance.”

“A bit more specific on how to find HNC as can be hard to find.”

“A list of different Qualification types and prospects.”

“Dedicated guidance for working professionals, highlighting relevant information and resources.”

“Funding if you have financial commitments like a mortgage.”

“Clearer information on employer sponsorship and support options.”

## Mixed awareness of financial support

Nearly half of respondents were not aware that they could apply for a tuition fee loan (45%) and maintenance loan (46%) to support them during Level 4 and 5 studies. 42% believed that they could apply for bursary and 27% thought that grants were available. However, 17% of respondents were unsure whether these funding mechanisms were available to support them.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Q. Which financial support are you aware of that would support you during the Level 4 and 5 course(s) and/or SCQF Level 7-8 course(s) you applied to?

## FUTURE

### Almost half of respondents plan on entering a full-time job after completing their Level 4 or 5 course

Of those who answered the survey almost half (47%) were working either part-time (32%) or full-time (15%). Just under a third (31%) were in full-time education when applying. Looking to the future, nearly half of the respondents (47%) to this survey were planning to secure a full-time paid job upon completing their studies, while one in five (20%) intended to continue their higher education.

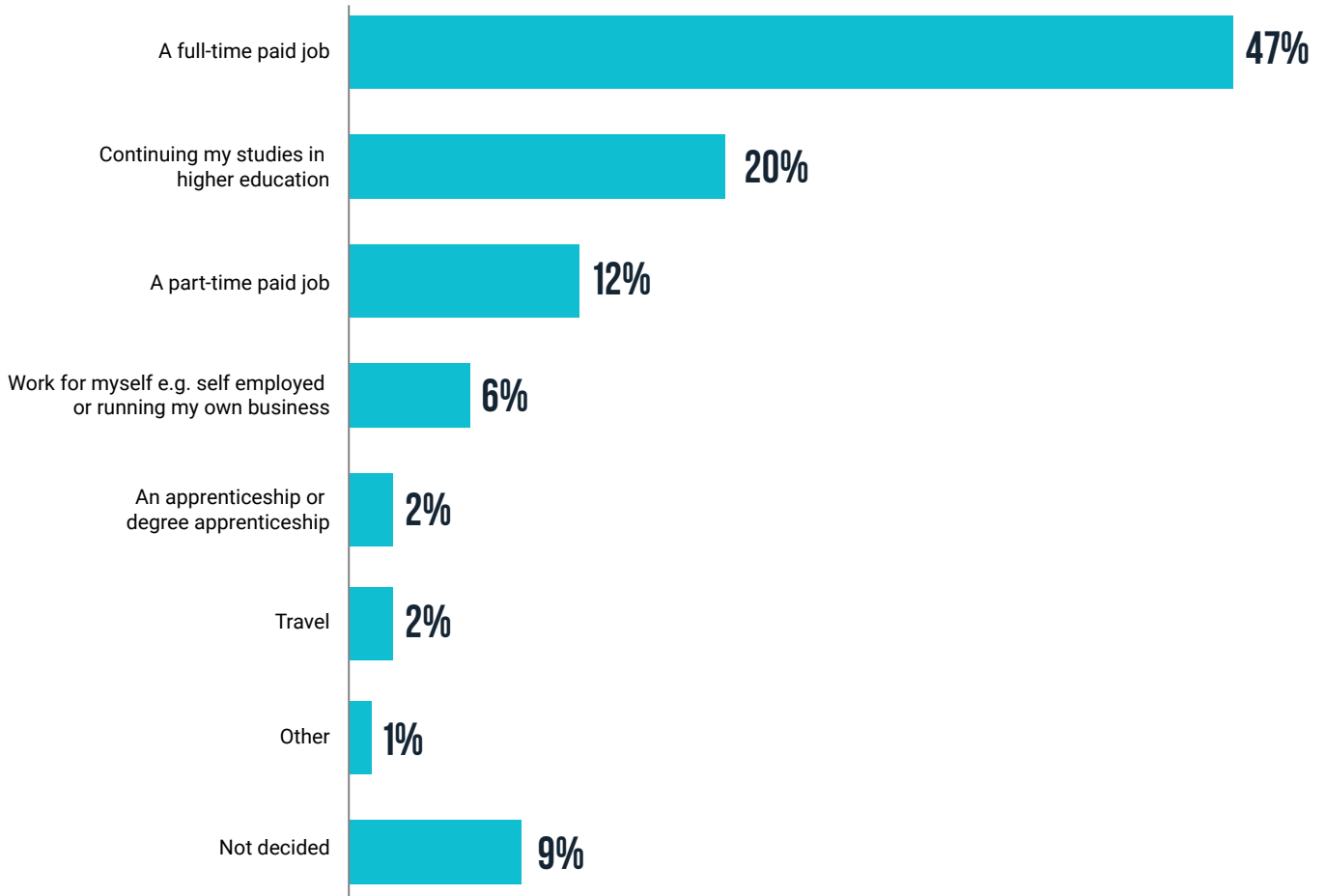


Figure 17: Q. What are your plans after you have completed your course?

When compared to the whole HE applicant population, Level 4 and 5 applicants were less likely to report that they hadn't decided what they wanted to do after their course. 19% didn't know what they wanted to do or were undecided when asked a similar question in the 2024 New Applicant Survey, as opposed to 9% of those in the bespoke survey for Level 4 and 5.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> 2024 New Applicant Survey: Q. We're interested in finding out more about your future plans, in particular what you plan to do after you complete university or college. Which of the following best describes how you feel about what you will do after finishing university or college?





# SECTION 6 - WHAT DO ENGLISH APPLICANTS KNOW ABOUT HTQS?

## KEY FINDINGS FROM THIS SECTION

23% of 2024 applicants had heard of Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs), though it is likely that many of the courses they were looking at had not been approved as HTQs at the time of applying.

50% of Level 4 and 5 applicants who may have heard of HTQs correctly identified that they had been approved by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE), only 27% understood that they had been developed in conjunction with employers, and nearly a third didn't know which types of courses could be approved as HTQs.

## ABOUT HTQS

The term HTQ describes a “**new or existing Level 4 and 5 qualification**” that has a quality mark recognising that it has been “developed by awarding bodies in collaboration with employers” and approved by IfATE as “meeting the knowledge and skills needed by the sector” through alignment to occupational standards. Such courses should show the HTQ quality mark logo when being advertised to potential students. UCAS’ course search function has a filter for HTQs.

First teaching of approved HTQs began in 2022. **A DfE survey** found that for years 11-13 in 2022, a third (35%) said they had heard of “Higher Technical Qualifications”, while around one in ten (11%) said they had heard of “HTQs”. UCAS wanted to gauge levels of understanding about HTQ from those already applying to Level 4 and 5 courses.

## THERE IS A MIXED LEVEL OF AWARENESS AND UNDERSTANDING ABOUT HIGHER TECHNICAL QUALIFICATIONS

Awareness of Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs) was low among 2024 UCAS applicant respondents, with nearly two-thirds being unfamiliar with the term. Given the gradual nature of HTQ approval, only a proportion of the courses being considered by applicants surveyed would have already been approved.

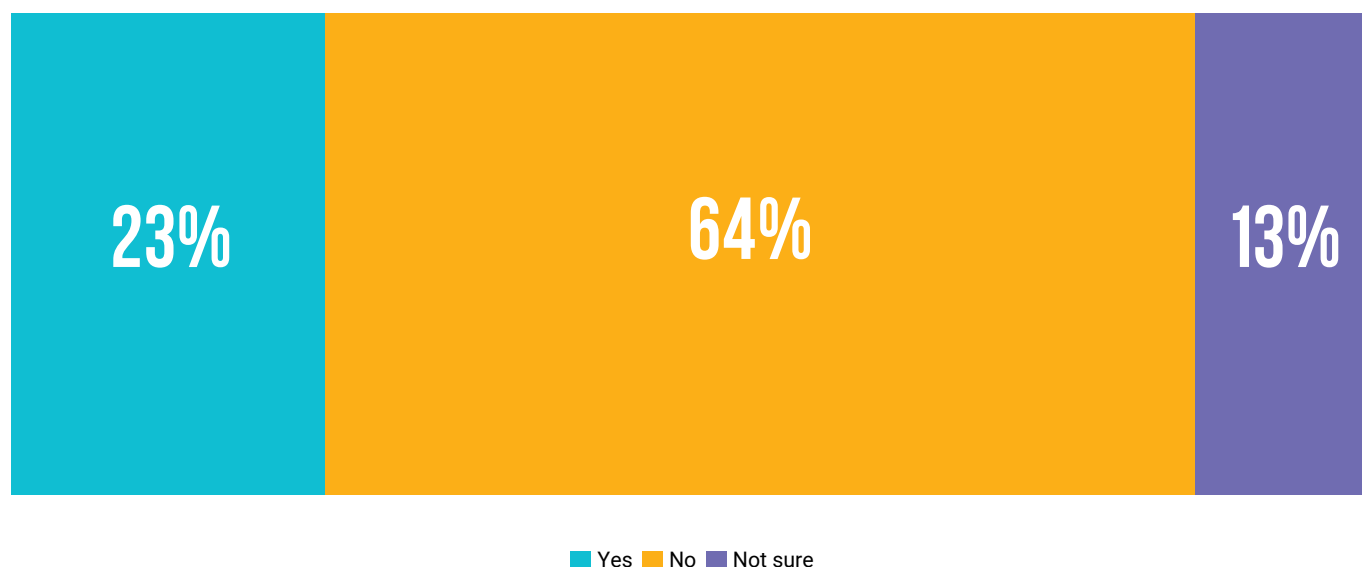


Figure 18: Q. Have you heard of Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs)? (935 respondents, weighted)

When asked about a range of possible features of HTQs, only 27% of Level 4 and 5 applicants who had (or may have) heard of them understood that they had been developed in conjunction with employers, with 50% correctly identifying that they had been approved by IfATE and 25% correctly saying they thought HTQs were currently only available in a limited number of subjects. 25% of this group didn't know any features of an HTQ.

Respondents were most likely to think that HTQs could be HNDs (43%), HNCs (39%) or foundation degrees (36%). Almost a third of respondents were unsure which types of courses could be approved as HTQs.

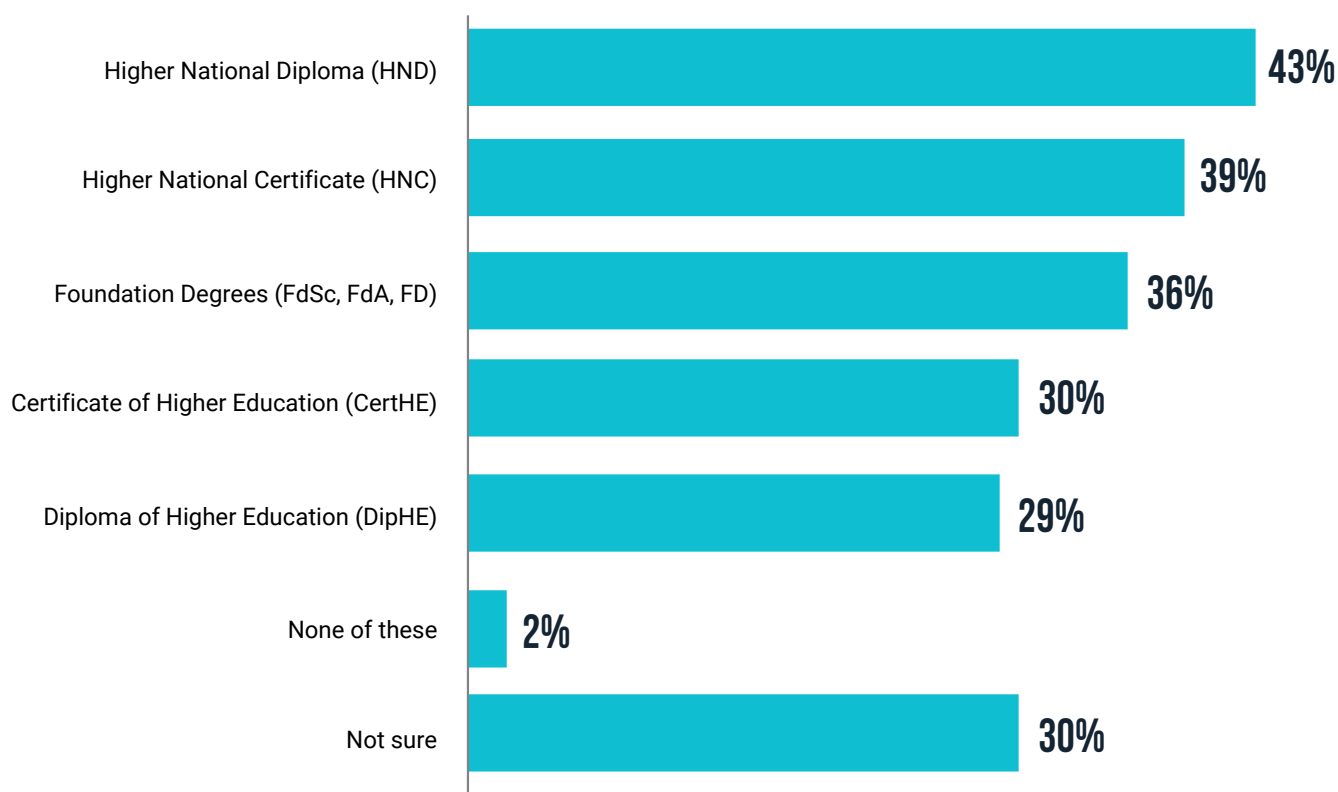


Figure 19: Filtered from awareness of HTQ question: Asked of those who selected 'Yes' or 'Not sure'. Q. Here is a list of course types. Which of these did you know could be an approved Higher Technical Qualification (HTQ)?



# ANNEX

## A) UCAS DATA ACROSS THE UK AND PROVIDERS

UCAS data describes those who apply to providers who are customers of UCAS for full-time higher education. UCAS estimates that it receives around 48% of applicants to full-time Level 4 and 5 programmes (SCQF Level 7/8 in Scotland)<sup>18</sup>. There is also a significant amount of part-time provision at Level 4 and 5. HESA data shows that 25% of Level 4 and 5 enrolments are part time, which UCAS data does not include. Part-time students are **more likely** to be mature.

Additionally, not all HE providers use UCAS for applications, with FE colleges and independent providers less likely to do so. This varies by nation. In Northern Ireland and Scotland, there is a substantial section of higher education that is not included in UCAS' figures. In Northern Ireland, UCAS did not list courses delivered through FE colleges in 2023-2024. In Scotland, there is a substantial section of provision that is not included in UCAS' figures. This is mostly full-time higher education provided in further education colleges, which represents around one-third of young full-time undergraduate study in Scotland. This proportion varies by geography and background within Scotland.

## B) GLOSSARY

### Placed applicant

An applicant who, at the end of the cycle, has been placed for entry into higher education.

### Clearing

**Clearing** is another service for applicants to find and apply for courses. It is used if they didn't secure or accept a place on a course, for example, didn't receive offers, declined their offers, or didn't get the required grades, or applied after 30 June. Clearing allows learners to apply for courses that still have vacancies.

### EXTRA

An acceptance route is where applicants holding no offers after using all five main scheme choices can make additional choices. They have the opportunity of making further applications(s) (one at a time) and receiving an offer. Extra opens in February of each year.

### Records of Prior Acceptances (RPA)

Where possible, the data used includes Records of Prior Acceptances (RPAs). RPA applicants will have applied directly to the provider and an application is submitted to UCAS via the provider once an unconditional firm has been offered and accepted by the applicant. UCAS has information about the course the applicant has been accepted onto, but limited demographic information about the applicant. Consequently, there are some instances where these applicants have been excluded from the analysis. This is indicated throughout.

### Main scheme

A main scheme choice is one made through the main UCAS Undergraduate application scheme through which up to five choices can be made.

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<sup>18</sup> An estimate calculated dividing the total placed applicants to Foundation Degrees, HNDs and HNCs by the total enrolments to the same courses across England, Wales and Scotland in 2021. <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he#numbers>

## C) TECHNICAL NOTE ON UCAS' DATA ANALYSIS

### UCAS End of Cycle Data

This report primarily uses the database of all UK domiciled applicants who applied in the 2023 application cycle, with comparisons to previous application cycles (2019-2022) where appropriate.

A Level 4 or 5 application is any application to a course with an outcome qualification at level 4 or 5. This includes Higher National Certificate (HNC), Higher National Diploma (HND), Certificate of HE (CertHE), Professional Diploma, Diploma of HE, Foundation Degree and Foundation Diploma. For a small number of courses (fewer than 150 in 2023), a course has a range of outcome qualifications at different levels. It is not possible to identify the level or outcome qualification of an application to these courses. In this instance we prioritise the outcome qualification of the lowest level, and assume the application has that outcome qualification and level. For example, if a course could have an outcome qualification of HNC or HND, the application is assumed to be the HNC at Level 4. This does not have a large impact on the number of applications to Level 4 or 5 courses or on the number of applications to each individual outcome qualification type.

### HESA data comparison

Overall, across England, Wales and Scotland, UCAS sees the application data for 48% of all placed applicants to Foundation degrees and HNDs/HNCs at providers covered by HESA.

Country of provider	Course type	Number in HESA (21/22)	Number in UCAS (2021)	Proportion
England	Foundation degree	19,265	10,210	53%
England	HND/HNC	10,255	4,430	43%
Wales	Foundation degree	1,840	330	18%
Wales	HND/HNC	510	190	37%
Scotland	HND/HNC	2,700	1,680	62%

### Rounding

Total applications, acceptances or applicants have been rounded to the nearest five. Total courses are unrounded unless specified. Percentages have been rounded to the nearest one decimal place if under 10 and to the nearest whole percentage if over 10.

## D) TECHNICAL NOTE ON SURVEY

This report uses data from a new survey of Level 4 and 5 applicants in the 2024 admissions cycle. Comparisons are made to other UCAS surveys of all HE applicants through UCAS in order to draw conclusions about how Level 4 and 5 applicants differ or how they are unique. The main objective of this survey was to understand the perceptions of those who have applied through UCAS. This survey was administered by UCAS in partnership with the Gatsby Foundation between 23rd April 2024 and 14th May 2024.

In total, 1,220 prospective undergraduate respondents completed the survey, but 475 of these respondents completed the survey after completing the qualifying criteria.

The respondents involved in the survey were:

- ▶ Applicants to the 2024 cycle.
- ▶ Applicants applied to at least one Level 4 or 5 programmes (SCQF Level 7/8 in Scotland) inclusive of, but not limited to, CertHEs, DIPHEs, HNCs, HNDs and foundation degrees (including those which are HTQs).
- ▶ Diverse in terms of gender, age, country, and ethnicity.
- ▶ Diverse across the POLAR4 quintiles.

While the findings have been analysed at an overall level, the domicile of the sample was as follows:

	English Applicants	Scottish Applicants	Welsh Applicants	Northern Irish Applicants
No. respondents:	385	50	25	15

Age: 42% 18 years old, 16% 19 years old, 19% 20-24 years old, 22% 25 years+

Gender: 29% males, 68% females, 1% prefer not to say, 1% use another term

The top three subject areas that respondents applied to were: subjects allied to medicine, biological and sports science, and creative arts and design.

Additional survey data from the 2024 UCAS New Applicant Survey and 2024 UCAS New Applicant Decisions Survey has been used for comparing Level 4 and 5 applicants to the overall population of university and college applicants in 2024. These surveys ran between 10 September 2023 to 30 June 2024 and were both sent to separate samples of 2024 cycle applicants after they had submitted their UCAS application. The objective of the two new applicant surveys is to understand what is important to applicants when deciding which universities and colleges to apply to, and what other options (such as employment, apprenticeships, overseas study, etc) they are considering alongside their application to UK HE. The New Applicant Survey received a total of 19,605 responses and the New Applicant Decisions Survey received 11,850 responses from applicants.

All survey data referenced in this report data has been analysed and presented using weighted data. Results are weighted to ensure a fair representation of each target group. Unweighted base sizes have been rounded to the nearest 5. The survey responses are weighted up to be representative of the population of students who are eligible to receive the survey. The weighting process uses a logistic regression model to assign each respondent a weight, considering differences in response rates observed in different characteristic groups, including: gender, age, ethnic group, POLAR4 quintile, country, the type of school a student attended, and (for students from the UK) the region where the students are originally from.





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