

UCAS evidence for Lifelong Education Commission – September 2021

UCAS, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, is an independent charity, and the UK's shared admissions service for post-18 education. This service spans undergraduate, postgraduate, technical, and apprenticeship pathways, with the undergraduate service alone supporting over 700,000 students a year from over 200 countries and territories, with more than 400 different verified qualifications, to access UK higher education (HE).

Helping students make the best decision for them is in UCAS' DNA. We therefore welcome the Commission's aim to better understand 'how the individual learner can be better empowered to make decisions and undertake their learning.' We look forward to engaging with the Commission's planned activities throughout 2021 and into 2022.

Our services support young people making post-secondary choices, as well as mature students, by providing information, advice, and guidance to inspire and facilitate educational progression to university, college, or an apprenticeship. All students should have an equal opportunity to access high-quality, personalised, timely support to navigate their journey. That support should cover all options on an equal footing, and not only at the key decision points identified in this report, but right from the start – at primary school and all the way through to graduation. At each stage, students should be aware of the impact of their choices, and how it may influence their future pathway. Given the products, services, information, and advice we offer, we see a key role for us in supporting lifelong learning in the UK, with students returning to UCAS at multiple points throughout their lives to help inform their decisions.

To help inform the Commission's work, we are pleased to provide the following document, which provides an overview of UCAS' insights and activities on matters related to lifelong learning. It also provides a summary of recent UCAS policy outputs. The recommendations provided below, informed by UCAS' recent and ongoing research are aimed at addressing the issues the Commission is examining to improve lifelong learning in the UK.

UCAS is ready to expand on any of the points in this document by participating in the Commission's planned activities throughout 2021 and into 2022, and by meeting with the Commission to provide additional information.

Summary of recommendations

- **Matching the projected growth in 18-year-olds with funding for a greater number of higher education opportunities to support educational progression, particularly for disadvantaged students:** By 2025, more than a million 18-year-olds in the UK are expected to apply to higher education – a 40 per cent increase from 2020. Such growth in demand heightens the need to grow supply of post-secondary education places to support students' career aspirations and, specifically, to ensure that disadvantaged students do not miss out because of increased competition.
- **Stepping up careers information, advice, and guidance (CIAG) in primary schools:** To deliver the ambition set out by the Government in its vision for education, skills, and apprenticeships, we believe that CIAG should be embedded within the curriculum for primary schools and early secondary years.

- **Improving the journey for potential apprentices:** UCAS, working with partners, to support the delivery of the Baker Clause via digital means, providing comprehensive information, advice, and content tools to help students make informed and aspirational choices about the full range of post-secondary opportunities. Information should be clear and comprehensive, to ensure students can make truly comparable decisions between the pathways available to them.
- **Putting personalisation at the heart of the student experience:** Given the variation in student motivation to study, personalisation is critical to informing student choice. As mature demand for post-secondary education soars post-recession, information, and advice (I&A) that meets their specific needs, such as information on support services for those balancing home, work, and life commitments, will be important.
- **Learning from what works internationally regarding lifelong education initiatives to inform thinking in the domestic space:** Embedding multi-channel I&A across initiatives focused on education, skills, and training, will help drive the culture change required to improve lifelong learning.

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How do young people make choices about university or an apprenticeship?

Young people continually make decisions, often earlier than they realise, about their next steps through education, all of which influence and shape the options available to them at every phase of their journey into education and employment. Students can choose from over 50 GCSE and A level subjects in England, Northern Ireland, and Wales, and 70 Higher and Advanced Higher subjects in Scotland – which sit alongside more than 12,000 funded vocational qualifications at 16-19. Thereafter, students can explore over 35,000 undergraduate courses and a growing range of technical education and apprenticeship opportunities, and it is increasingly common for people to change career pathway.

With the recent review of post-16 qualifications at Level 3 in England and the ramping up of the introduction of T Levels, the qualifications landscape will be continuing to evolve in the coming years. This will have an impact on student choice – students will need to be fully aware of the multitude of pathways, where they lead, and how this varies by the qualifications they select.

UCAS recently started a series of reports asking ‘Where Next?’ which provide a detailed examination of how people make decisions about their future, and the influence of these choices on what they do next, ranging from GCSEs through to employment.

The first report [Where Next? What influences the choices school leavers make?](#) (March 2021) highlighted the importance of early engagement and careers advice. The research found:

- **Two in five students** said **more information and advice** would have led to them **making better choices**.
- One in three students considered higher education as an option for them at primary school. However, **more advantaged students were 1.4 times more likely to do so** than their disadvantaged peers.
- Students choose their degree subject before they think about the university or college they want to attend: 83% of students told us they decided on their degree subject before choosing their university or college.
- Almost **one in three** said **they did not receive any information about apprenticeships** from their school, showing more needs to be done to promote parity across these routes.
- When choosing their subject area, **over 50% said that high graduate employment rates had become more important** to them since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The second report [Where Next? Improving the Journey to Becoming an Apprentice](#) (May 2021) focused specifically on apprenticeships, and received widespread press coverage including on the [front page](#) of *The Times*. The research found:

- **Over half of students looking to apply in 2022 told UCAS they are interested in apprenticeships**, but many find it hard to get the information they need about them.
- There is an urgent need to articulate the benefits of apprenticeships as **only 8% of people associated apprenticeships with leading to good job**.
- The word ‘prestigious’ was associated with university degrees (76%) compared to apprenticeships (4%), with 14% rating them equally prestigious.
- Previous research commissioned by UCAS supported this report, finding **89% of students said it would be useful to have a centralised platform that offers a help/advice service when it comes to finding and applying for apprenticeships**.

The third report [Where Next? Who doesn't plan to start a full-time undergraduate degree in autumn](#) (August 2021) focused on the destinations of students who were due to receive grades on results day 2021, but were not intending on starting an undergraduate degree course in the autumn. The research found:

- **56% of 17-19 year olds who were receiving their grades on results day, but not intending to start a traditional degree course in the autumn, had considered an apprenticeship**. A further 22% said their main plan was an apprenticeship (16% higher/degree level, 6% advanced level).
- The main features of apprenticeships are attractive to young people, including **choosing options that ‘earn money’** (50%), to **continue learning but in ‘a different way’** (43%), and to **do something ‘new and different’** (42%).
- 11% say they had received enough careers information, advice, and guidance and did not require any more, while **9% state they did not receive any at all**.
- **Just under a fifth of students (18%) who are not planning to go to university or college this autumn feel they do not have many options for next year**.

What do we know about the journey of mature students into higher education?

Our 2018 [report](#) on admissions patterns for mature applicants, compares the characteristics within groups of mature students aged 21 and over, to those aged 18, applying for full-time undergraduate courses. Key findings include:

- **Living at home** – mature students are more likely to live at home while studying full-time, and this likelihood increases with age. Half of 21- to 25-year-olds live at home while studying, compared to nearly 80% of those aged 30 and over.
- **Vocational subject choices** – mature students are typically drawn to a small range of courses, with subjects allied to medicine (including nursing), education, and social studies the most popular. As more female students typically apply for these courses, this may explain why more than 70% of mature students over the age of 31, accepted to full-time degrees, are female.
- **Entry rates by region** – in 2017, for mature students aged 21 to 50, entry rates to HE by UK country and region are highest in Scotland, followed by London. However, due to differences in age distribution across the regions, entry rates vary by region for different age groups of mature applicants, with London having the highest entry rates for those aged 36 to 50.

Since then, we have reported additional insights into trends associated with mature students. Most notably within our December 2020 [What happened to the COVID cohort?](#) publication. Points of note:

- **Applications are higher when the job market is weaker** – As the economy shifts, older students look to re- and up-skill through HE. 2020 saw significant growth in mature student acceptances, reflecting a demand for up- and re-skilling as the economy entered recession – the work of doctors, medical professionals, and NHS staff inspired applications to health and social care programmes, including nursing. Mature students (aged 21 or over) significantly increased to 114,440, representing the largest single year growth since 2009.
- **Mature student growth is set to continue** – This growth in demand has continued into 2021 with the highest number of mature students applying by the main UCAS June 30 deadline since 2016 (143,360) and UCAS forecasting record numbers of placed mature students by the end of the 2021 cycle.

How do lifelong education opportunities and employability prospects impact the journey of international students studying in the UK?

Based on our surveys of international applicants and students conducted over the past year, we know that students from other countries are particularly interested in obtaining information and support in relation to employment, employability, and career pathways during and after their studies, as they consider their study options in the UK:

- **Postgraduate students** are particularly interested in obtaining greater support in assessing opportunities for work placements and graduate employment prospects.
- Undergraduate applicants surveyed ahead of the upcoming academic year also expressed a desire of wanting to study and work in the UK. **Future employability in the applicant's country of study** (54%) was identified as a more important factor than future employability in the applicant's home country (37%) in making decisions about study destinations.

How can lifelong education initiatives that exist in other countries help inform relevant policy developments and good practice in the UK?

Examining the successes and pitfalls of upskilling, reskilling, and training programmes in other jurisdictions can help inform ways in which students in the UK can be best supported through lifelong learning. Given UCAS' role in supporting the decision-making journeys of students, we are particularly

interested in how personalised I&A is channelled to lifelong students to inform their learning and employment decisions.

- Singapore's [SkillsFuture programme](#) has helped support a culture shift towards lifelong learning by developing initiatives aimed at students at a range of ages and stages. A mix of online tools, workshops and other resources are available for students, employers, and training providers to ensure all who are engaging with the programme are well supported and well connected. The programme is also linked to Singapore's 'Industry Transformation Maps', aimed at supporting sectoral economic growth.
- The introduction of the 'Compte personnel de formation' in France was intended to further support "personal autonomy" in making training choices, all while ensuring students can be well supported by their employers and by relevant support services in improving their skills. [Analysis of the programme](#) has highlighted its benefits, such as the transferability of certifications between employers, as well as challenges students can face in accessing the programme due to lack of employer support, lack of access to support services and the risk of standardisation of training programmes.

UCAS, working with partners, is learning from examples such as these in shaping its future approach to I&A in support of students embarking on modular or credit-based study. For example, our [content](#) to support transfer students provides information on relevant considerations related to course changes, such as credit transfer.

What other policy insights will UCAS be publishing whilst the Commission is active?

Further reports over the next six months will cover the experience of international students, LGBT+ students and nursing students in applying to HE. Of notable interest to the Commission's work will be our planned outputs linked to supporting specific disadvantaged cohorts of students. We are also exploring potential research into student familiarity with and perceptions of modular study.

More information

We regularly update our [consultations page](#) on [ucas.com](#) to reflect our recent work in informing policy makers and other stakeholders' activities. Recent publications of interest to the Commission relate to Higher Technical Qualifications and flexi-apprenticeships.

A summary of our recent policy outputs is provided at the annex of this document.

Annex – Recent UCAS policy outputs

Over the past 12 months UCAS has released the following high-impact outputs that shone a light on significant issues in education and skills:

[What happened to the COVID cohort? Lessons for levelling up in 2021 and beyond](#)

Providing unparalleled insight into the trends and behaviours of students progressing to higher education during the pandemic, and challenges faced in levelling up participation. Key findings included:

- Record proportions of UK 18-year-olds applied (41.5%) and were accepted (37%) into university or college, despite widespread concern that demand for higher education would fall due to the pandemic.
- Based on the current trajectory, it will take 332 years to close the equality gap in participation between the most and least advantaged. The annual admission of 70 more of the most disadvantaged English 18-year-old pupils to each higher tariff provider could all but eliminate the equality gap highlighted through UCAS' multiple equality measure (MEM) in just a decade.
- The UK's 18-year-old population is set to rise; UCAS projects there will be an additional 90,000 applicants by 2025 and potentially increased competition for the most selective courses. Without intervention, there is potential for widening access and participation progress for traditional three-year, full time undergraduate programmes to stall, and possibly reverse.

[Where next? What influences the choices school leavers make?](#)

A ground-breaking report, based on a survey of 27,000 students, mapping how students make their choices throughout education, and the consequences of these choices. Key findings include:

- One in five students could not study a degree subject that interested them because they didn't have the right subjects to progress. This is most apparent for some degree courses, such as medicine and dentistry, maths, economics or languages.
- One in three students consider that higher education is an option for them at primary school. However, advantaged students are 1.4 times more likely to think about higher education in primary school than their disadvantaged peers.
- One in three students do not receive information about apprenticeships, despite the Baker Clause in England.

[Where next?
Improving the journey to
becoming an apprentice](#)

Our second report in the ‘Where next?’ series focused on the experience of students exploring apprenticeship opportunities. Key findings include:

- Over half of students looking to apply to higher education in 2022 are interested in apprenticeships but find it difficult to access the relevant information that they need about them.
- More needs to be done to highlight the benefits of apprenticeships – only 8% of students surveyed associated apprenticeships with leading to a good job.
- Only 4% of students associate the word ‘prestigious’ with apprenticeships compared with 76% for a traditional university degree.

This report attracted widespread media attention, including [a front page feature in The Times](#). Our report signals UCAS’ commitment to being a central source for information about all post-secondary opportunities, allow students to explore all of their choices in a comparable manner.

[Starting the
conversation?
UCAS report on student
mental health](#)

This deep dive into student mental health, one of the most pertinent issues impacting education and training today, identified an over 450% increase in the disclosure of mental health conditions over the last decade. In addition, the report found:

- 3.7% of all UK applicants declared a mental health condition in their application to study in 2020 – up from 0.7% in 2011.
- Women are 2.2 times more likely to declare a mental health condition than men.
- Alongside engineering, medicine and dentistry courses have the lowest declaration rates with only 1.4% of accepted applicants sharing an existing mental health condition.
- Some LGBT+ students are around six times more likely to share a mental health condition, and care experienced students are almost three times as likely – underlining the value of recognising how mental health intersects with other characteristics and support needs.
- One in five students research support specifically for an existing mental health condition before they apply, and more than one in four look at the provision of general mental health and wellbeing service.

This report marks the first in a series of deep dives into students with particular characteristics, as part of our commitment to supporting the broader levelling up agenda. In addition to widespread media coverage, the report has been cited by UUK, OfS and the All-Party Parliamentary University Group.

[Where next?](#)
[Who doesn't plan to start a full-time undergraduate degree in autumn?](#)

Our latest research found that 56% of 17-19 year olds who are receiving their grades on results day, but not intending to start a traditional degree course in the autumn, have considered an apprenticeship. A further 22% said their main plan is an apprenticeship (16% higher/degree level, 6% advanced level). It also found:

- The main features of apprenticeships are attractive to young people, including choosing options that 'earn money' (50%), to continue learning but in 'a different way' (43%), and to do something 'new and different' (42%).
- 11% say they had received enough careers information, advice, and guidance and did not require any more, while 9% state they did not receive any at all.
- Just under a fifth of students (18%) who are not planning to go to university or college in autumn feel they do not have many options for next year.

The report was covered in the sector press (TES, FE News) and trade publication, Research Professional. Apprenticeships minister, Gillian Keegan, also welcomed the findings on Twitter.