

## Independent External Review of the Department for Economy's Careers Service delivery in Northern Ireland - Call for Evidence

### Introduction

UCAS, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, is an independent charity, and the UK's shared admissions service for post-secondary education. This service spans undergraduate, postgraduate, technical, and apprenticeship pathways, with the undergraduate service alone supporting over 700,000 students a year from over 200 countries and territories, with more than 400 different verified qualifications to access UK higher education (HE). In 2021, there were 19,725 applicants for UK HE from Northern Ireland, which resulted in 11,915 acceptances.

With 30 million visits to UCAS.com each year and a network of c.4,000 UCAS teachers and advisers in schools and colleges across the UK, UCAS has significant reach with students and their advisers. As a trusted, independent charity, UCAS provides comprehensive careers information, advice and guidance to students on the full range of post-secondary choices.

UCAS is investing significantly in making sure its services for would-be apprentices are as strong as they are for prospective undergraduates and is already established in the apprenticeships market, which has seen record growth. Our apprenticeship tool – [Career Finder](#) – received a record 2.13 million searches in the last 12 months, up 32% from last year, despite the impact of the pandemic. These searches have resulted in 243,000 applications, an increase from 171,000 last year (+42%).

### Executive summary

It is UCAS' view, and its goal, that everyone should have an equal opportunity to access high-quality, personalised, timely support to navigate their journey through education and training:

- 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.
- This call for evidence aims to inform the approach taken to careers information, advice and guidance within NI schools and the careers service, focusing on how to maximise value for the most disadvantaged individuals.
- This submission will focus on research UCAS has published in 2021 looking at student choice. As part of its [Where next? series](#) UCAS has concentrated on identifying what motivates students across the UK to pick a particular path after school or college.

**With 30 million visits to [ucas.com](https://ucas.com) each year and a network of around 4,000 UCAS advisers in schools and colleges across the country, UCAS' reach is unparalleled:**

- UCAS has a role to play as a digital equaliser, ensuring that if someone looking at university, college, or apprenticeship options on [ucas.com](https://ucas.com), they get balanced and comprehensive information on all their choices.
- UCAS content is a freely available tool for schools and colleges across the country to draw on, to act as a digital equaliser to support those with lower-quality provision and help ensure all students get access to the information they need for each stage of their journey into education or employment.
- The new Careers Quiz tool is one example of innovation in this space through [the UCAS Hub](#) the go-to place for students to explore their options after school or college. It helps students understand what areas of work might interest them and suggests paths to get there. The tool has been used more than 350,000 people since it launched in September 2021.

**Our research highlights the impact of qualification and subject choice at school on students' future pathways, and recommends ways students can be better supported to make fully informed choices at every stage:**

- **Primary school:** Improving access to earlier, broader, and personalised careers information, advice, and guidance about the full range of options available will help tackle inequalities and help young people make more informed choices.
- **Disadvantage gap:** One in three students start considering higher education as an option for them at primary school, with more advantaged students 1.4 times more likely to do so than their disadvantaged peers.
- **Future careers information, advice, and guidance needs:** One in five students report they could not study the course they wanted to at university or college because they did not have the relevant subjects for entry. Two in five students said more information and advice would have led to them making better choices, and almost one in three students reported not receiving any information about apprenticeships from their school.
- **Qualification type and HE entry rate:** There is a distinct link between the type of qualification taken in school and the type of university or college the student attends. The type of post-16 qualification chosen can also impact on HE entry and more students go straight into employment.
- **Other influencing factors:** Curriculum provision, parents, teachers and friends can all impact on what choices students make or those that are available.

### **Primary school**

**There is a need for earlier, broader, and personalised careers information, advice and guidance about the full range of options available as the landscape is set to get more competitive and complicated:**

- Almost one in three students report not receiving any information about apprenticeships from their school.

- The point at which young people start to consider HE also varies widely between individuals. Our survey analysis found that more than three in four students first realised HE was an option for them before they started post-16 education, and one in three first realised this when they were still at primary school.
- Disadvantaged students tend to consider the prospect of HE later than their more advantaged peers, with 27% from POLAR4 Q1 (the most disadvantaged group) realising this in primary school, compared to 39% of those from Q5 (the most advantaged group).
- This reaffirms the findings of [UCAS' 2016 Student Lens report](#) and the [2019 Founders4Schools report](#), which emphasises the role of primary schools in shaping and broadening aspirations.
- This demonstrates the need to embed careers information, advice and guidance within primary schools and early secondary years to support the wider levelling-up agenda, and raise aspirations from an early age

**As recommended in our *Where next? reports*, careers information, advice and guidance should be embedded within the curriculum in primary schools and early secondary years:**

- To include statutory requirements for careers information, advice and guidance within primary education to include the full range of pathways and careers.
- Age-appropriate Gatsby Benchmarks to be rolled out across the UK to raise aspirations from an early age.
- Universities and colleges, working with UCAS and partners, to undertake more targeted outreach work within primary schools and early secondary years with a focus on 'fixed' yet lesser-known subject areas.

**Disadvantage gap**

**The point at which young people start to consider HE varies widely between individuals, and our research shows socioeconomic background can play a role:**

- One in three students started considering higher education as an option for them at primary school, with more advantaged students were 1.4 times more likely to do so than their disadvantaged peers.
- Disadvantaged students tend to consider the prospect of HE later than their more advantaged peers, with 27% from POLAR4 Q1 (the most disadvantaged group) realising this in primary school, compared to 39% of those from Q5 (the most advantaged group).
- The number of 18-year-olds in set to increase each year for the rest of the decade, with the largest increases up to 2025. UCAS forecasts that by 2025 there could be one million applications to UK HE. More students mean increased competition and therefore the decision-making process is even more critical.
- The percentage increase in the 18-year-old population in Northern Ireland between 2020 and 2025 is +13%.

### **Future careers information, advice and guidance needs**

**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:**

- Decisions taken about GCSE subjects at 13 or 14 years old can have a major impact when it comes to post-18 options.
- There are over 50 GCSE and A level subjects available, and 12,000 funded vocational qualifications at 16-19, not to mention the thousands of undergraduate higher education courses, technical and apprenticeship routes into employment.
- Students may be inadvertently shutting doors on their future options through this early decision-making around subject choice and qualification type if they are not fully aware of the options available and where they may lead.

**Our landmark report [Where next? What influences the choices school leavers make?](#) highlighted:**

- One in five students report they could not study an HE subject that interested them because they did not have the relevant subjects for entry – with medicine the most cited example.
- Two in five students believe more information and advice would have led to them making better choices.

**Many students were already mindful of these factors when they made their GCSE choices:**

- 80% report choosing some or all their subjects with their post-16 choices in mind.
- 78% were considering future HE entry more generally.
- 64% were thinking of a specific degree subject area.

### **Other influencing factors**

**As well as being an important factor in degree subject choice, future employment prospects are also at the forefront of students' minds when they make their post-16 decisions:**

- Almost all (94%) cite this as a key motivation.
- 84% chose their subjects based on what they wanted to study at university or college.
- 93% report their choices were made to keep their employment and/or future study options open.

**UCAS research found that 16% of students were unable to study all the post-16 options they wanted:**

- Of these, 49% said their school or college did not offer that qualification or subject, and 21% were constrained by timetabling.
- In fact, restricted choice leads to more than 10% of students moving school specifically to study their chosen post-16 qualifications.

**Parents and carers play an important part in influencing their child's subject choice at school:**

- One in two students report having chosen a subject at either GCSE (49%) or post-16 (50%) because their parents or carers had wanted them to. But, as seen above, by the time students are ready to make their degree choice, their influence has diminished.
- A parent's own experience has some influence on the desired pathway they seek for their children. Our [polling of parents](#) shows those who had taken an apprenticeship themselves are twice as likely to encourage their son or daughter to follow in their footsteps rather than choose a traditional undergraduate degree. Of the parents who had been to university, 12% would advocate a university degree exclusively over considering an apprenticeship – this falls to 5% when parents had not been to university.

**Teachers are a critical source of support when pupils make their school subject and qualification choices:**

- 99% report being influenced by enjoyment or interest in making both their GCSE and post-16 choices.
- 88% of students report choosing a subject at GCSE because their teachers told them they would be good at it.
- 79% cite the same reason for making their post-16 choices – slightly more (81%) chose a post-16 subject because they would have good teachers.

**The role of friends is another significant factor:**

- 44% of students say their friends' post-16 choices had affected their own, rising to 53% for their GCSE subjects, which suggests younger pupils are slightly more swayed by their friends' choices than their parents' advice.
- The role of peers means that early and sustained careers information, advice and guidance is needed to help dispel myths.