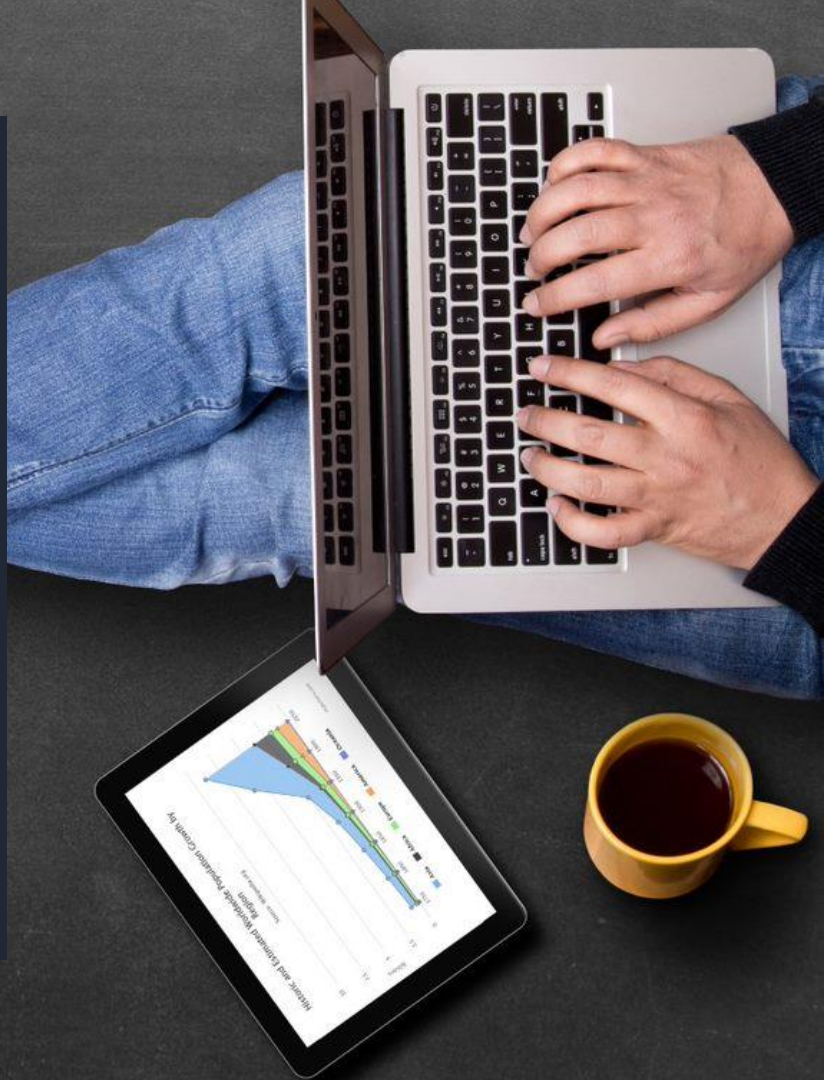
Insight Newsletter

September 2022

UCAS



Welcome to the UCAS Insight Newsletter – September 2022

And welcome to a brand-new cycle too, as term gets up and running and we kick off the 22/23 academic year in style, under new leadership in Parliament and Buckingham Palace!

It's almost time for the **pre-applicants** to climb into the hotseat now, as they reflect on their open days, begin their shortlisting and, after all this time, finally put pen to paper on their applications. **Applicants** are arriving on campus, all nerves and excitement, to try their hand at the infamous Freshers Week – whilst **undergraduates** are, more slowly and less nervously, also making their way back to lecture theatres and the student union.

It's been all systems go at UCAS HQ over the final month of the 21/22 cycle – with the publication of our Student Sentiment report, analysis of Clearing so far, and our support of Pre-Applicants and Registrants as they transition into their next phase for 22/23.

Let's see what's new.

Lessons learned from the final month of 21/22

August is a special sort of month in Higher Education. Part-holiday, part-preparation for a new cycle, it often yields some juicy insight for the final weeks of last-minute campaigns before term starts. This one's no different. Here are the 3 big lessons from August 22.

Clearing is back to pre-pandemic levels and it's crying out for big, bold creative.
With email click rates back to 2.9%, the highest since 2020, now's the time to get that ROI. And the secret sauce for the highest ROI, seems to be the trifecta of: big and bold CTA buttons, plus short and clear CTA text, plus contrasting colours to email headers. This combination repeatedly resulted in the highest performing creative of Clearing – which runs for another 4 weeks before closing on 18 October.

Display adverts blow up, as students engage more online.
Ads on UCAS.com were up 53% in impressions and 41% in clicks, with some areas (like UCAS Search) more than tripling vs last year. Whether students are researching more intensely this year, looking at more options, or scouring our website for inspiration – now is the time to get your message seen, and reap ROI on your ads.

Align your messaging with student sentiments to fully engage with your audience.
Students are, on the whole, extremely excited – especially when it comes to exploring a new town/city and relishing their newfound independence. They're also looking forward to the social life, albeit making new friends is one of their big concerns – alongside stepping up to uni level work. Make sure that your campaigns, especially those between offering a place and arriving on campus, are built to hype up the best bits and soothe the concerns – so that you can welcome students in the best frame of mind for their new chapter.

What are students doing?

Across ucas.com

WHO'S ENGAGING WITH UCAS?

Top ten searched for subjects on UCAS Search in August 2022

Position for August 2022

Change in position since August 2021	Position for August 2022	Subject
=	1	Medicine
=	2	Law
=	3	Psychology
=	4	Nursing
▲3	5	Computer science
▲4	6	Pharmacy
=	7	Economics
▲1	8	Business
▼3	9	Physiotherapy
▼5	10	Midwifery

Change in position since August 2021

WHO'S ENGAGING WITH UCAS?

ucas.com users: Top ten UK cities in August 2022

POSTCODE DISTRICT MAP

Change in position since August 2021	Position for August 2022	
=	1	London
▲9	2	Sheffield
▲22	3	Wolverhampton
▲32	4	Plymouth
▼3	5	Birmingham
▲26	6	Aberdeen
▲2	7	Newcastle
▲100+	8	Swansea
▼3	9	Leeds
▲2	10	Cardiff

WHO'S ENGAGING WITH UCAS?

Top five undergraduate pages on ucas.com in August 2022

Position for August 2022

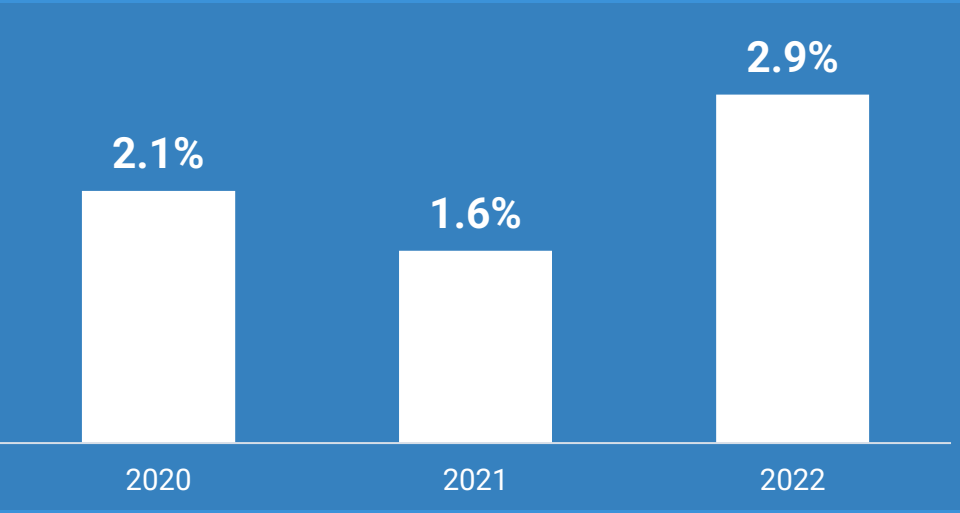
Change in position since August 2021	Position for August 2022	
▲1	1	What is Clearing?
New page	2	Access your application
▼2	3	Tracking your UCAS application
▼1	4	How to write a UCAS Undergraduate personal statement
=	5	Applying to university

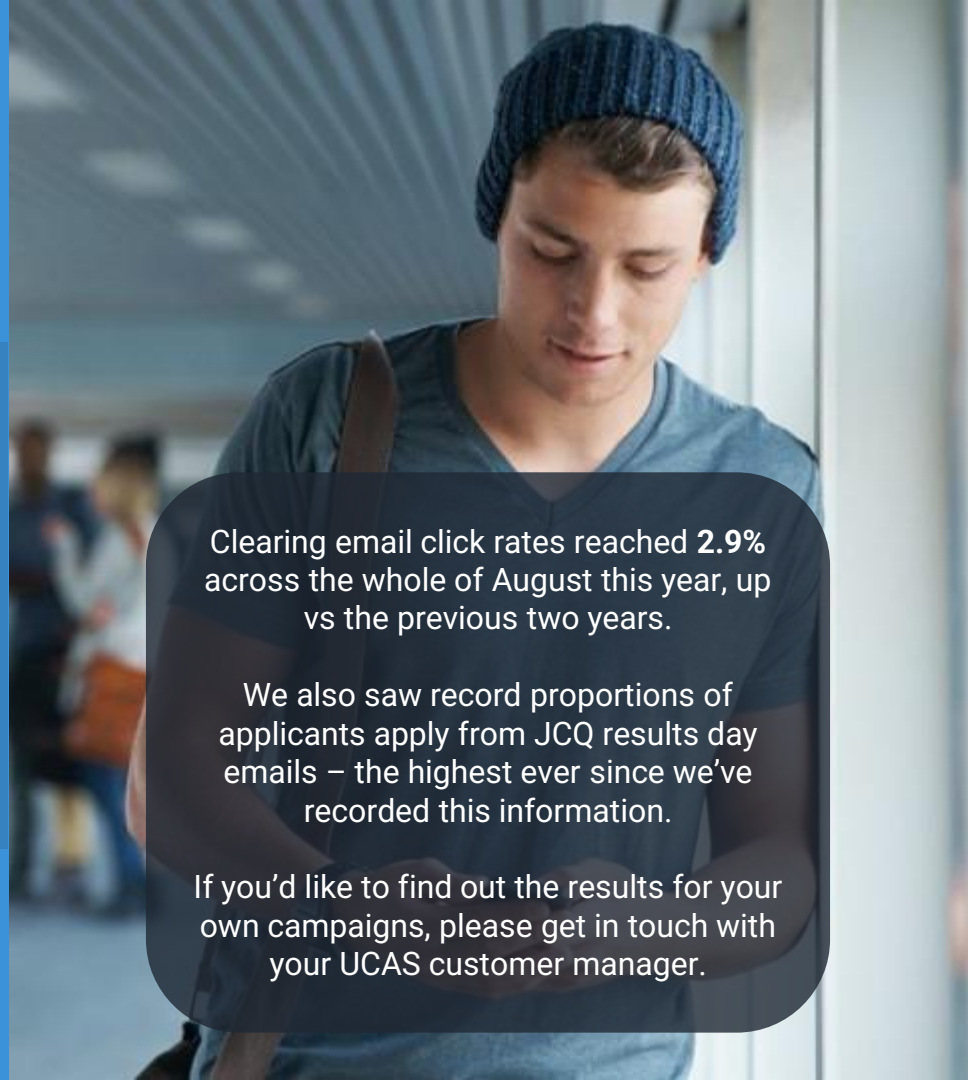
Change in position since August 2021

Clearing 2022 ad performance

Education Clearing ad performance across emails and display ads on ucas.com

Unique click rates August 2020-2022





Clearing email click rates reached **2.9%** across the whole of August this year, up vs the previous two years.

We also saw record proportions of applicants apply from JCQ results day emails – the highest ever since we've recorded this information.

If you'd like to find out the results for your own campaigns, please get in touch with your UCAS customer manager.

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High performing email creative attributes

Prominent call to action buttons were used with a clear, and direct action e.g.

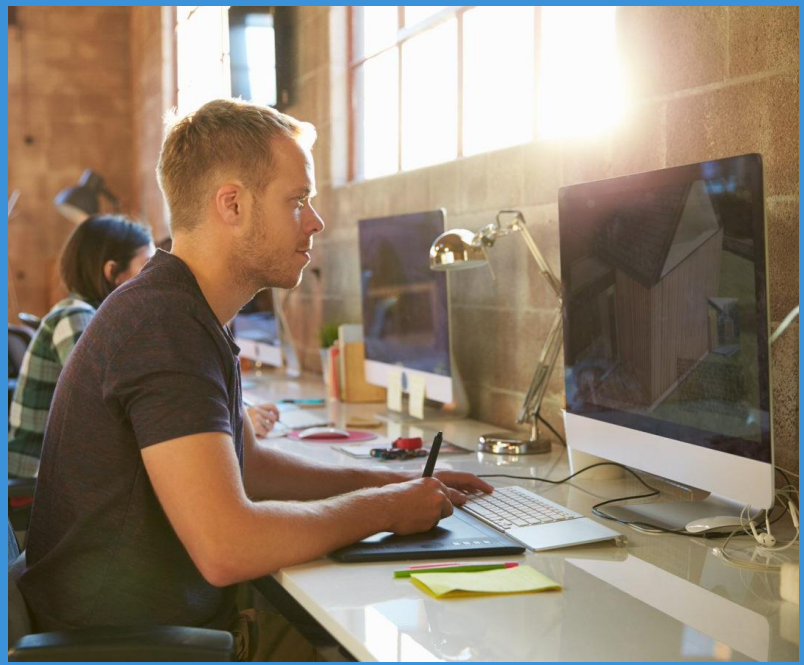
Find your course

View course vacancies

Apply now >

FIND YOUR COURSE >

Even where creatives included lots of text and information later on, the call to action buttons particularly stood out due to their size and bold colours. They were also a different colour to the header image to help them stand out further.



High performing email creative attributes

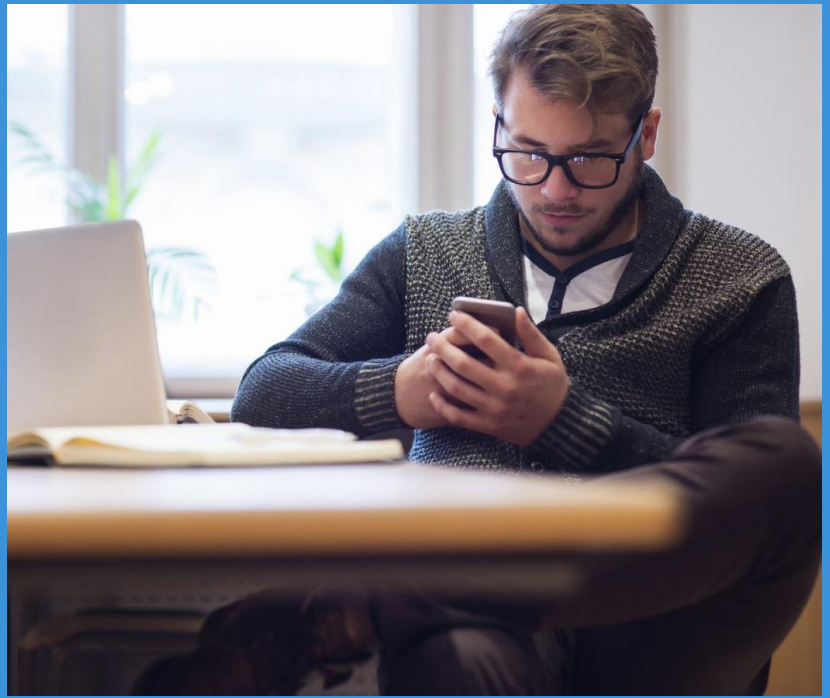
High performing creatives also included a short introductory message (most in capital letters) in the header image to accompany the call to action e.g.

COURSES IN CLEARING AT **[UNIVERSITY/COLLEGE]**

Call to action: Find your course

CLEARING: NOW OPEN

Call to action: View course vacancies

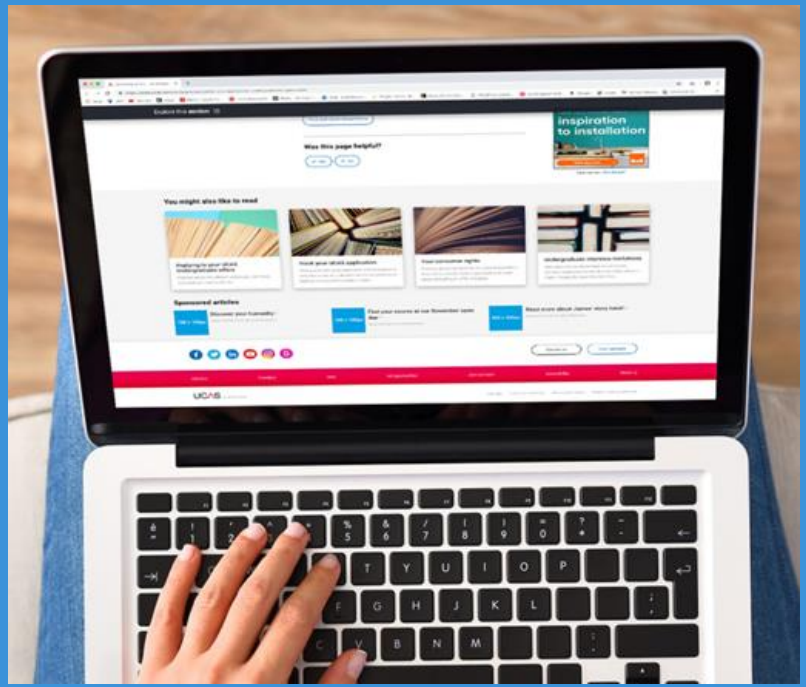


Display ads across ucas.com

- The ads reached just under **40m impressions**, and over **104k clicks,** meaning that impressions were up by **53%**, and clicks were up by **41%.**
- The largest increase in impressions came from our keyword ads on the UCAS Search Tool, where impressions were more than triple vs last year overall.
- CTRs for almost all ads were up vs last year, with the **Clearing homepage** ads achieving the highest CTR overall, at **0.64%** vs 0.46% in 2021.

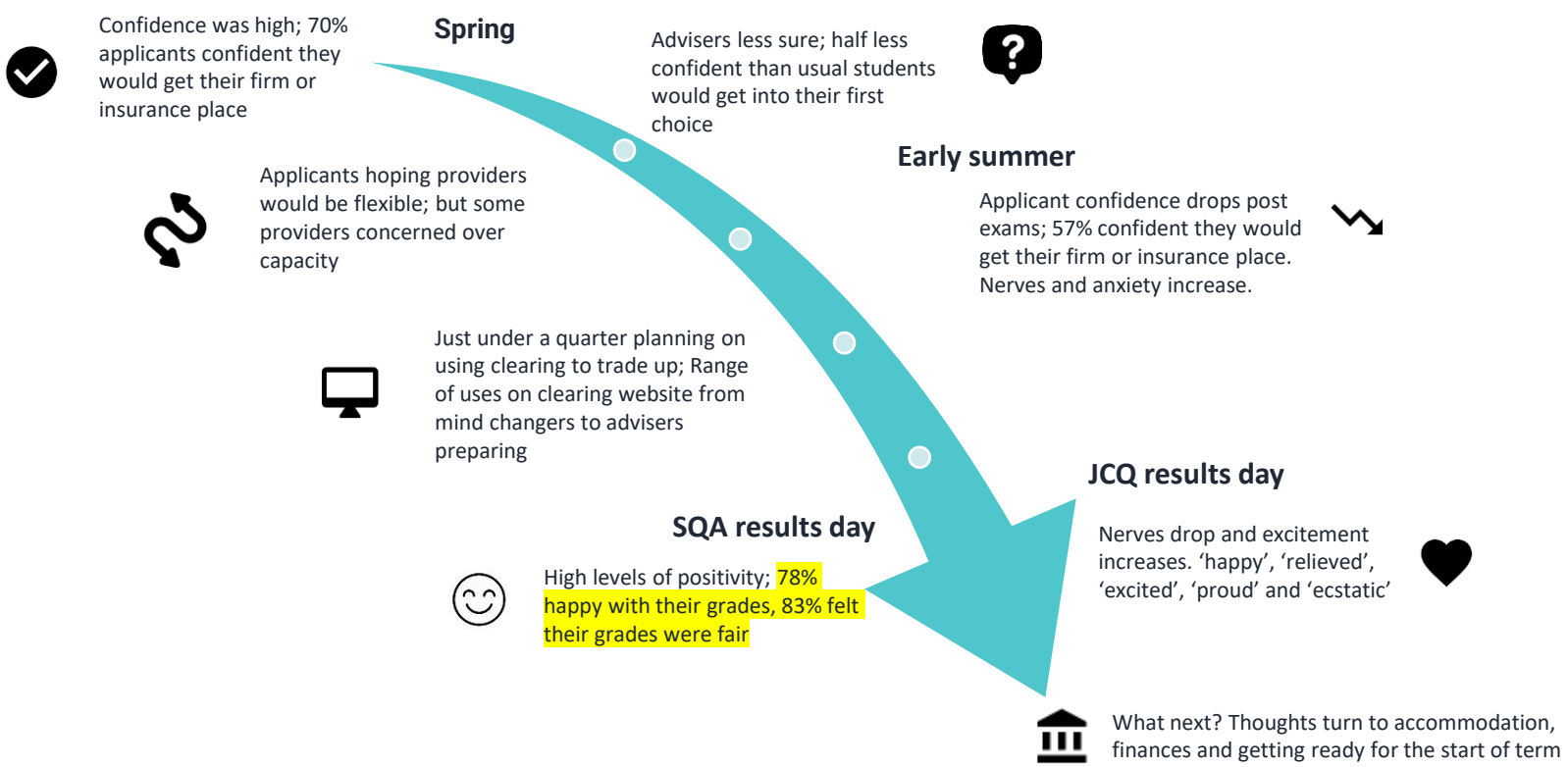
High performing display creative attributes

- In the run up to results days, the highest performing creatives used emotive/supportive language which resonated well with users, using phrases such as ‘we’re here to help’ and showed interest in how applicants were feeling.
- Text was concise with one short message per frame, meaning that there’s more room to increase your font size and increase visibility of your message whilst it’s displayed alongside other information on the web page.
- Some of the highest performing mobile creatives had just one frame, allowing more time to view the message.



Student sentiment

In the run-up to Clearing & on Results Days



Surveys with over 1,000 applicants for 2022 entry, 600 teachers and advisers

SQA results day key findings

- 76% of Scottish applicants who'd received their results reported that they were happy with their results.
- When asked how they were feeling about going to uni or college, the most common answers were excited (77%), nervous (63%) and happy (44%).
- Applicants were most excited about exploring a new town or city, and being more independent.
- Applicants felt most worried about stepping up to uni level study and making new friends.

Survey sent to a sample of Scottish applicants aged 17 or 18 on 10th August 2022. 760 responses received. Results have been weighted to be representative of the population.

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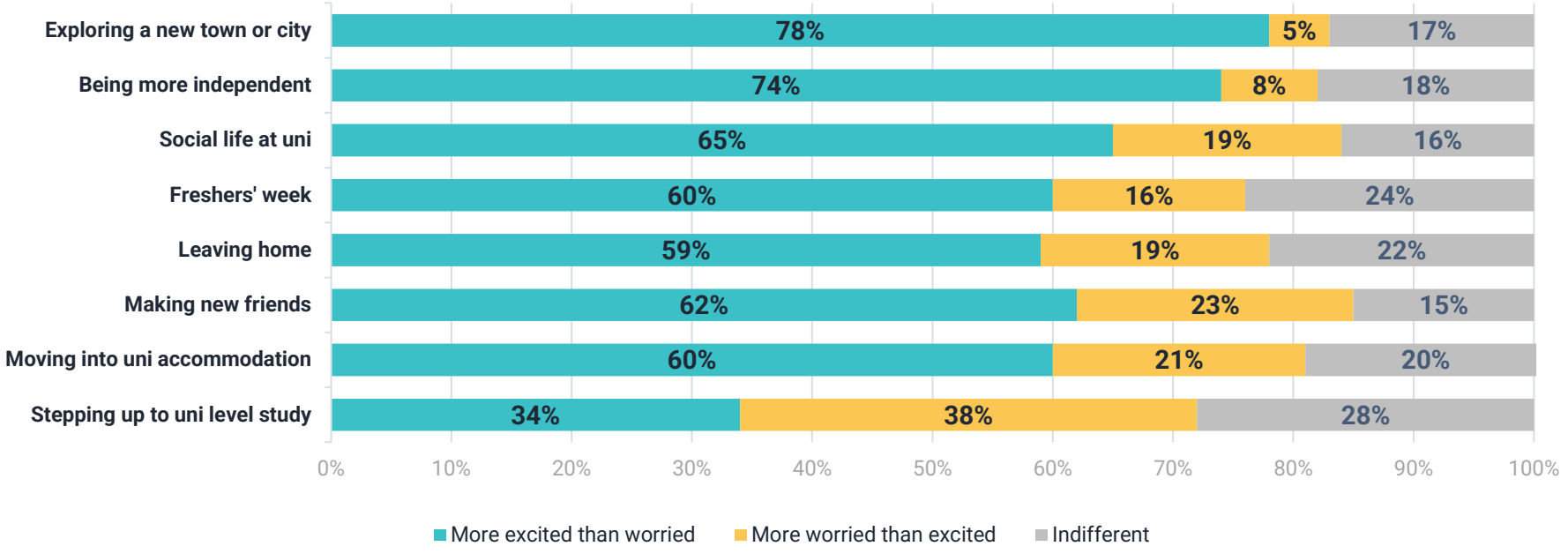
How did placed applicants feel about specific aspects of going to uni?



Q: How do you feel about the following specific aspects of going to uni? For each factor, please tell us if you're feeling more worried or more excited.

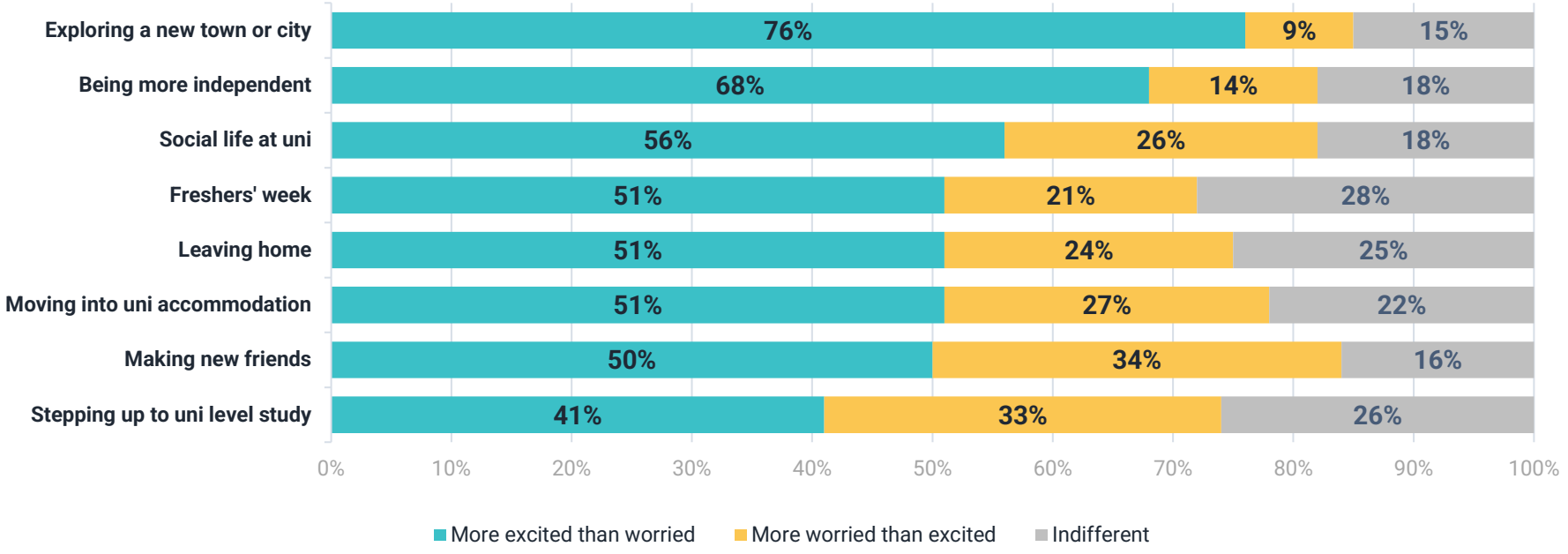
JCQ results day key findings

- 78% of applicants who'd received their results reported that they were happy with their results.
- 93% of applicants were happy with their confirmed place at university or college.
- When asked how they were feeling about going to uni or college, the most common answers were excited (71%), nervous (69%) and happy (50%).
- Applicants were most excited about exploring a new town or city, and being more independent.
- Applicants felt most worried about stepping up to uni level study and making new friends.
- For those without a place, the most common plans were to try to find a place through Clearing, and to reapply to uni next year *(low base size n= 110).*

Survey sent to a sample of English, Northern Irish and Welsh applicants aged 18 on 19th August 2022.
1,858 responses received. Results have been weighted to be representative of the population of 18 year old applicants from the three nations.

UCAS

How did placed applicants feel about specific aspects of going to uni?



Q: How do you feel about the following specific aspects of going to uni? For each factor, please tell us if you're feeling more worried or more excited.

Pre-applicants and UG Registrants

Pre-applicants and UG registrants opted into emails for 2023 entry study are available to contact now, and our opt-ins are higher than ever.

Pre-applicants 2023 entry (PAD23)

There are currently **440k** learners opted in for emails, looking to study in 2023.

Top preferred subjects include:

Business studies
Medicine
Law by Area
Psychology
Computer Science

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High performing PAD subject lines from Sep-Oct last year

- Register for Virtual Open Day at the [University/College]
- %%FIRSTNAME%%, you're invited!
- Hi %%Firstname%%, your best begins with the [University/College]
- Book your place %%FIRSTNAME%%!
- Join [University/College] Virtual Open Day on 9 and 10 September
- Explore Our Zoology and Animal Science Courses
- Book a Campus Visit this month to discover the [University/College] experience

UG registrants 2023 entry

There are currently **317k** learners opted in for emails, looking to study in 2023.

Top preferred subjects include:

Medicine
Law
Psychology
Computer Science
Economics

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High performing UG registrant subject lines from Sep-Oct last year

- %%firstname%%, Apply now to study Sport
- %%firstname%%, get to know [University/College] at our next Open Day
- %%Firstname%%, your best begins with the [University/College]
- %%firstname%%, want to be immersed in Law? Study at [University/College]
- Study [course name] at [University/College]
- %%firstname%%, take your next step at [University/College]
- Are you driven by curiosity? Discover a course you'll love

UCAS Policy Unit

Ten key highlights from our policy reports

The policy unit at UCAS combines our **expertise** with our extensive **data science** capabilities to tell the complete story of progression to higher education and training in the UK.

The policy team uses UCAS' position as the **central point** for both domestic and international students to release **unparalleled insights and reports**. We bring forward **evidence** on student behaviour across different groups and how they navigate their choices.

In the past year, UCAS has released a range of **high impact reports** with topics from experiences of disabled students to LGBT+ students, and future nurses. The **key highlights** from these reports have been shared on the next two pages.

UCAS

10 Highlights of UCAS Policy Reports and Insights

1. **One in three** UK school pupils report first thinking about higher education at **primary school**. **Disadvantaged** students are more likely to **consider** higher education **later**, which can **limit their choices**.
2. Students **choose their degree subject before** they think about where they want to attend.
3. More than **1 in 10 international students** are considering higher education abroad **before their eleventh birthday**. Around **half** of them say that parents /guardians or close **members of their family** have previously **studied abroad**.
4. Top factors **motivating international students** to study in the UK include **the prestige of UK universities (47%),** the desire to **live in the UK (45%),** and **teaching quality (43% overall).**
5. While there has been a **450% increase in the number of students sharing a mental health condition** in the UCAS application, approximately **half (49%) do not share** an existing mental health condition, primarily due to **misconceptions** about how this information is used. Alongside **engineering, medicine and dentistry** courses have the lowest declaration rates, with **only 1.4%** of accepted applicants sharing an existing mental health condition.

6. Students are increasingly interested in **apprenticeships**, but find it hard to get information about them. One in three UK school pupils **do not receive any information** about apprenticeships from their school or college. This compares to **three-quarters of students reporting it being easy to find information about higher education.**

7. **Disabled applicants are more likely to defer** entry to higher education: before the pandemic, disabled students were 23% more likely to defer entry than non-disabled students, rising to 28% in 2021 – this disparity varies by impairment type.

8. Around **1/3rd of LGBT+ students researched specific LGBT+ services** when applying for university of college, with half of them also researching mental health support services available.

9. COVID inspires the next generation of nurses: The **pandemic inspired more than two-thirds (69%)** of 2021 **nursing applicants** to apply, with around one in ten stating it was the most important factor.

10. UCAS projects the **2026 cycle will have one million applicants** to the UK higher education. About 40% of this increase will be attributable to a **growth in demand from UK 18- year-olds** (driven by both an increase in application rates and an increase in the population), with the remaining **60% driven by continued growth in mature and international demand.**

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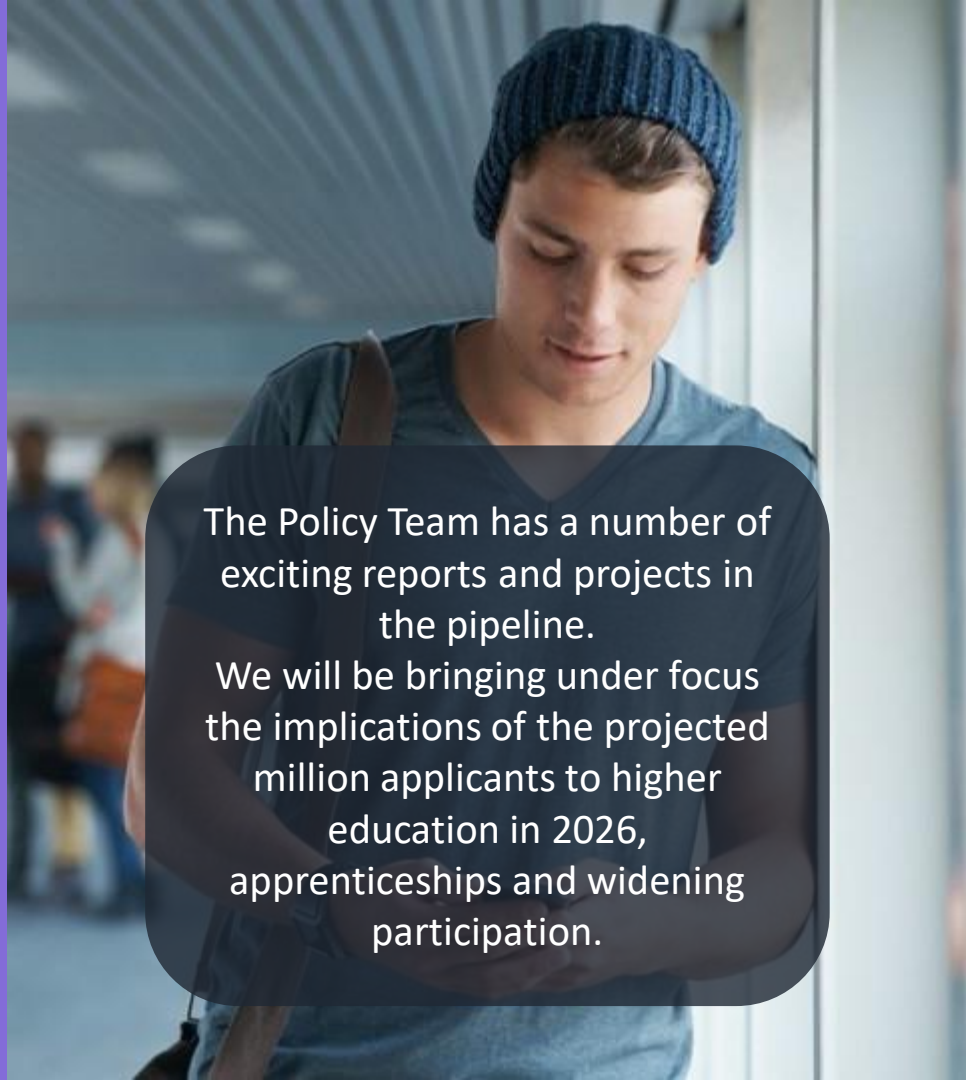

The Policy Team has a number of exciting reports and projects in the pipeline.
We will be bringing under focus the implications of the projected million applicants to higher education in 2026, apprenticeships and widening participation.

Be brief, be bright, be gone!

That’s the message we’re getting from our analysis of this cycle’s creative campaigns. It’s crunch time now for the would-be and will-be students, each with their own decisions that leave no time for deciphering long emails or figuring out where to click. Keep it short, clear, and to the point.

But don’t forget to show that you care, too. Students have always been nervous about making new friends and adjusting to a bigger academic challenge, but this year those doubts are alongside post-COVID blues and the cost-of-living situation. Be patient, listen to your audience, and respond in kindness.

We’ll see you again in October.

Get in touch

For further information and insights contact your UCAS customer manager or email us at educationservices@ucas.ac.uk.