

STUDENT MINDSET CONFERENCE

30
APRIL
2026

SPRING EVENT



UCAS₁

COURSE IS KING

How language shapes student choice.



SPEAKERS



> **JO RICHARDS** <
**SENIOR INSIGHT
LEAD
UCAS**



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**CEO & FOUNDER
MARKETING
PARTNERSHIP**

THE SCALE OF CHOICE STUDENTS FACE

Students are navigating an unprecedented volume of choice.



*Available through UCAS Search for 2027 entry as at 29th April





6.7 MILLION

Active annual search tool users

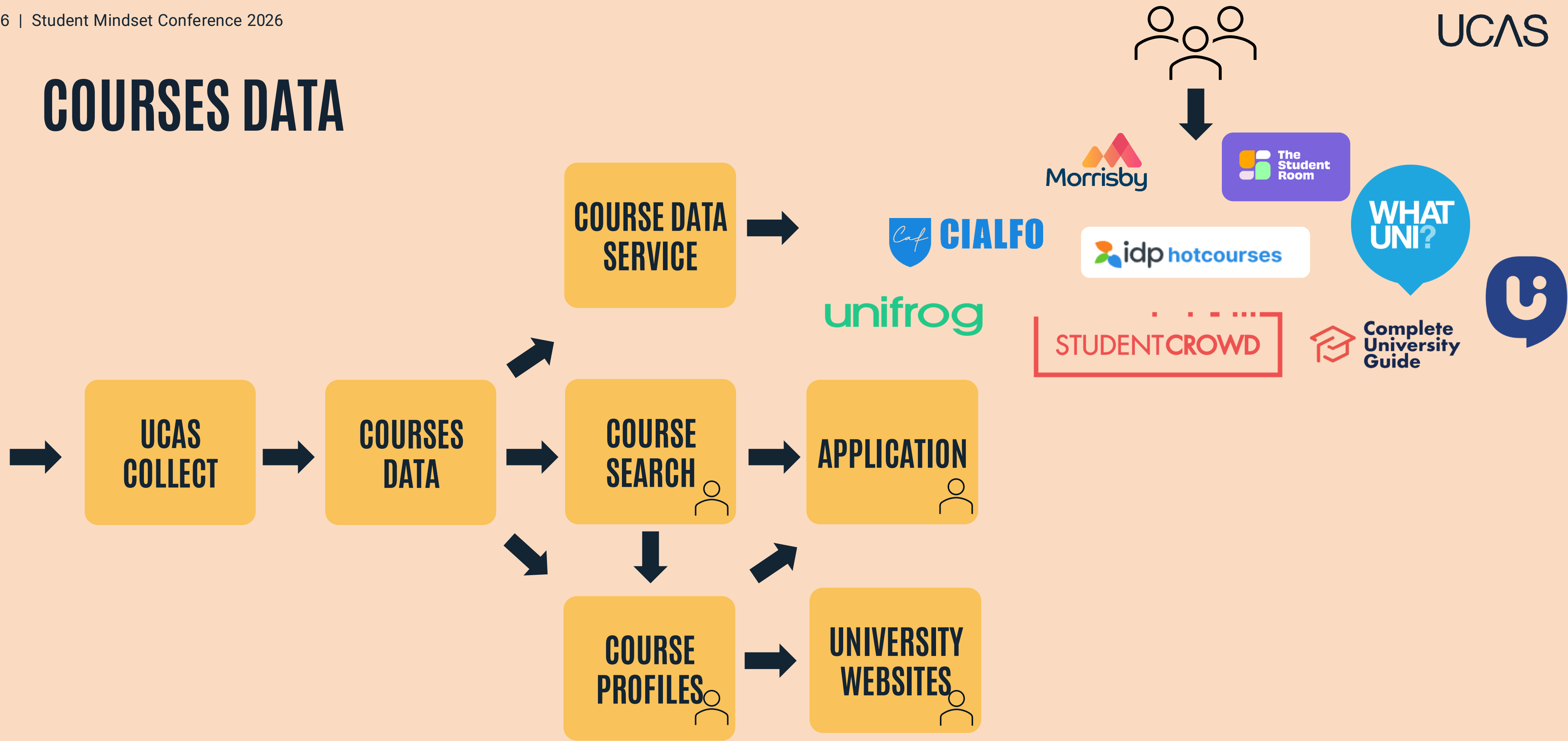
3 MINUTES 22 SECONDS

Average time spent reviewing course descriptions

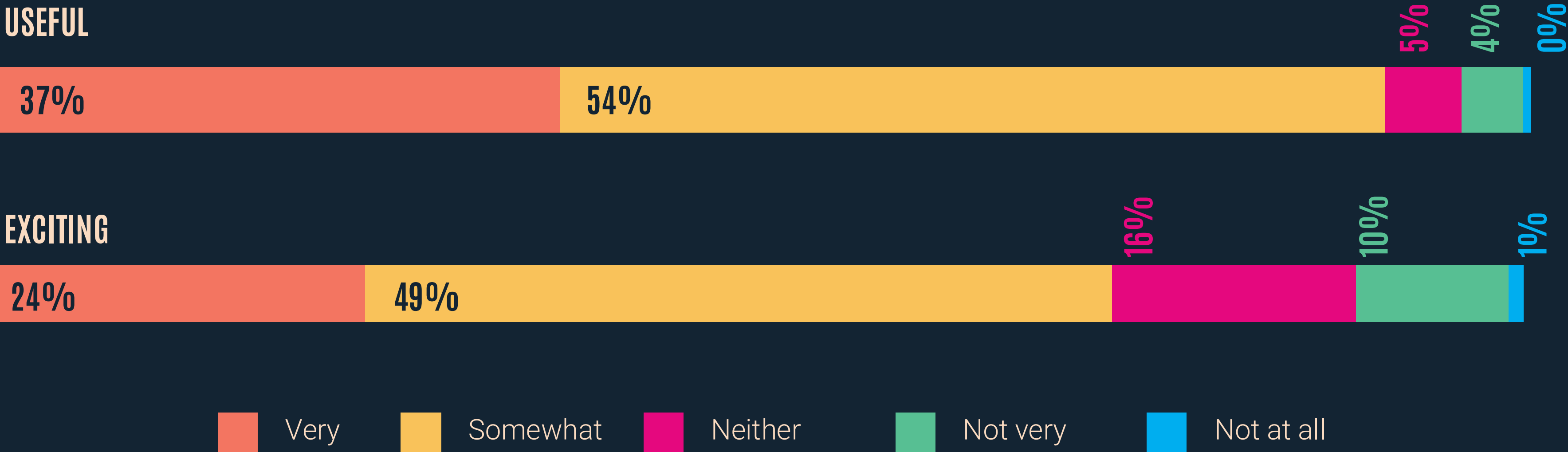
3.1

Average page views per session

COURSES DATA



THE ROLE OF COURSE DESCRIPTIONS

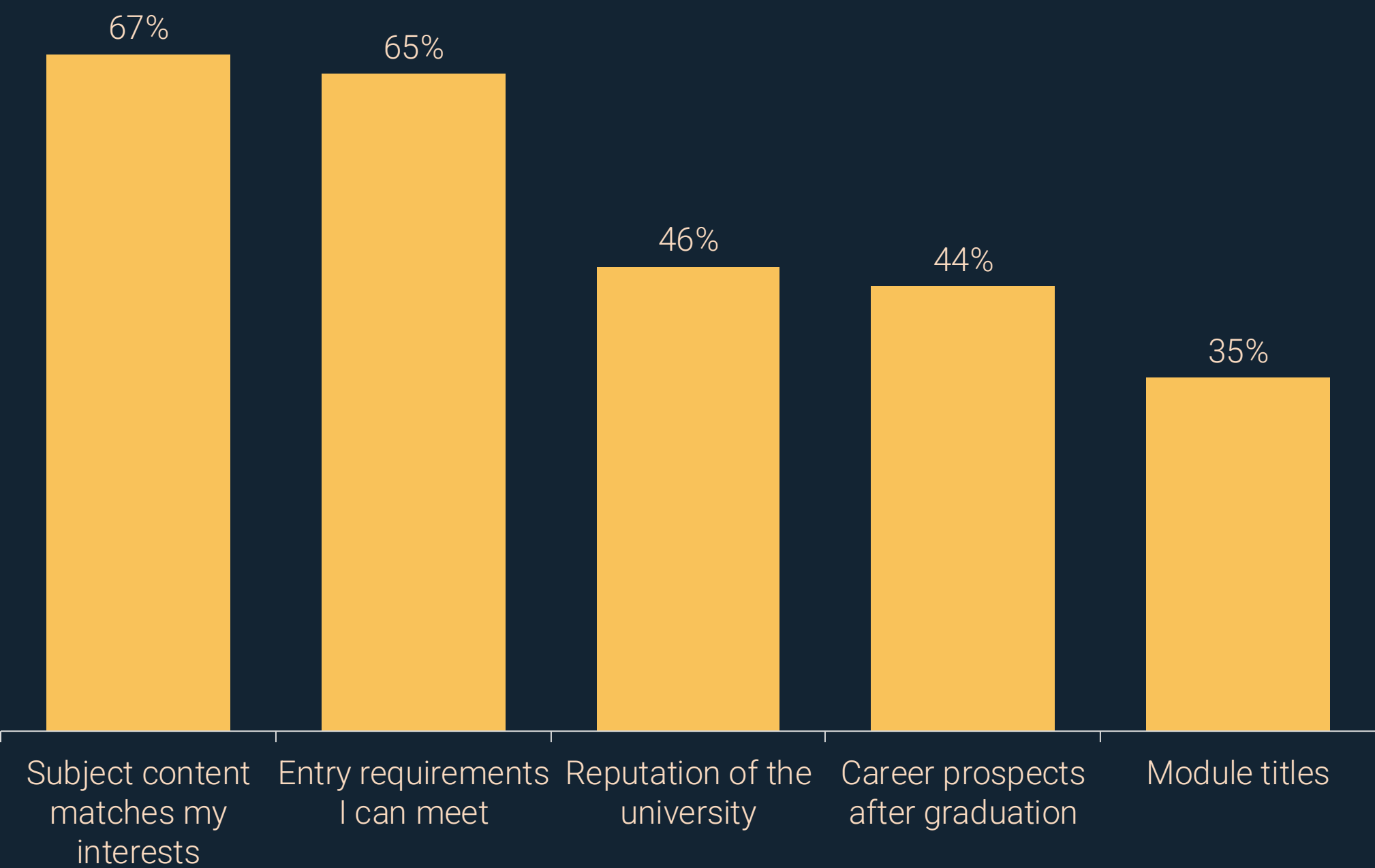


Q. Thinking about undergraduate course descriptions in general, how useful did you, or do you find them when making decisions on where to apply? | Respondent Numbers: 1,129

Q. How exciting did you, or do you find course descriptions when making decisions on where to apply? Respondent Numbers: 1,124.

HOW STUDENTS DECIDE WHICH COURSES ARE RIGHT FOR THEM

WHAT RESPONDENTS PRIORITISED IN DECISION-MAKING



WHAT RESPONDENTS FELT COULD HAVE BEEN MORE CLEAR

- Modules
- Teaching Delivery
- Assessment type
- What makes this course different

Q1. How did, or do you usually decide which courses are right for you? | Respondent Numbers: 1129.

Q2. Are there any big gaps in the information you usually find in course descriptions when applying to undergraduate courses? Respondent Numbers: 1129

THE UNRESOLVED QUESTION

What actually resonates with students –
and what doesn't?



WE ASKED THE SECTOR

Before testing with students, we asked HE marketers what they wanted answers on.

industry-standard-facilities

WHAT WE SET OUT TO TEST

We wanted to test real course language, not theory.

- Real course descriptions in Business Management
- 1,129 student respondents
- Students reviewed 5 descriptions from the UCAS website
- Measured: understanding, appeal, quality, intent

WHAT COURSE PAGES MOSTLY CONTAIN

2.5k+ undergraduate Business Management courses (2026 entry).



Real-world experience



Industry links



Placements



Work experience



Accreditations



Digital/Analytics



Sustainability

HOW WE TESTED COURSE LANGUAGE

We grouped real descriptions into five common approaches.

- ▶ **DIRECT LANGUAGE & ETHICAL ANGLE**
- ▶ **EMPLOYABILITY FOCUS**
- ▶ **CONTEMPORARY ISSUES**
- ▶ **SKILLS BASED**
- ▶ **NAMED EMPLOYERS & METRICS**

DO STUDENTS UNDERSTAND THESE TERMS?

| Understanding isn't a given.



TERM	I KNOW WHAT THIS MEANS	I DON'T KNOW WHAT THIS MEANS
Work experience opportunities	97%	2%
Curriculum	96%	2%
Real-world experience	95%	2%
Employability skills	95%	2%
Placement year	95%	2%
Real-world skills	95%	3%
Critical thinking	93%	3%
Modules	93%	4%
Full-time hours	89%	5%
Practice-based learning	85%	9%
State-of-the-art facilities	84%	9%
Problem-based learning	83%	9%
Portfolio	81%	9%
Research-led teaching	80%	10%
Applied learning	76%	13%
Industry-standard facilities	76%	14%
Professionally accredited	74%	15%
Industry-trusted tools	68%	17%
Cohort	66%	21%
Credits	62%	20%
Multi-disciplinary	55%	31%
Competency-based	46%	35%
Interdisciplinary	41%	41%
Thorough grounding	28%	53%

Q. Below are words and phrases that describe how courses and degrees are structured. Thinking about these phrases, please tell us how well you understand each one. | Respondent Numbers: 1,129

LANGUAGE THAT LANDED

Across all descriptions. The same types of words rose to the top.

- Opportunities
- Skills
- Equipped
- Real world
- Professional
- Global
- Future
- Experiences.

1. EXPERIENCE & ACTION PHRASES

- Engage in live **project work**
- **A paid work placement**
- Optional **placement year**
- Meet with **business practitioners**
- ...can be applied to **real-world** situations

LANGUAGE THAT LANDED

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- Real world
- Professional
- Global
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2. OPPORTUNITIES & SKILLS

- The business world is constantly evolving and full of opportunities
- Opportunity to specialise in areas that interest you
- You will learn how to spot opportunities
- You'll be equipped with the skills they need
- Confident

LANGUAGE THAT LANDED

Across all descriptions. The same types of words rose to the top.

- Opportunities
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- Professional
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3. FUTURE-FACING OR CONTEXTUAL TERMS

- A global mind set
- Within a global context
- Ethical leadership
- Aware of key sustainability challenges

LANGUAGE THAT LANDED

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4. AUTHENTIC NARRATIVE

- You won't just study theory
- With our collaborative approach
- We want you to aim high
- By the time you leave you'll feel inspired

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Across all descriptions. The same types of words rose to the top.

- Opportunities
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5. EMPLOYMENT-ORIENTED

- A placement year significantly improves your employability on graduation
- Boost your CV
- #1 most targeted university by top graduate employers
- Gain eligibility for Affiliate member status of the Chartered Management Institute

LANGUAGE THAT DIDN'T

Certain language consistently pushed students away.

1. BUZZWORDS & HYPE ADJECTIVES

- Discover the tools to thrive in today's **dynamic** business world
- Blend **cutting-edge** academic theory with....
- ...and other **special** events
- With our **prestigious** business degrees

LANGUAGE THAT DIDN'T

Certain language consistently pushed students away.

2. VAGUE QUALIFIERS & UNKNOWN LANGUAGE

- You'll gain a **broad** understanding of the business world
- **Later**, you'll have the opportunity to specialise
- This course is designed for students wishing to **embark** on a professional career...
- Triple crown accredited
- **13th** out of UK institutions

LANGUAGE THAT DIDN'T

Certain language consistently pushed students away.

| 3. MOTIVATIONAL SLOGAN LANGUAGE

- Unlock your potential
- The future of work
- Why do some businesses thrive where others fail?

WHAT EMPLOYABILITY SIGNALS TO STUDENTS

Students associate employability with the likelihood of getting a job.

EMPLOYABILITY IS MOST COMMONLY UNDERSTOOD AS:



Getting a job

Likelihood of securing work after the course.



Being attractive to employers

Standing out as a desirable candidate.



Having the right skills

Generic “skills employers want”, often without specifics.



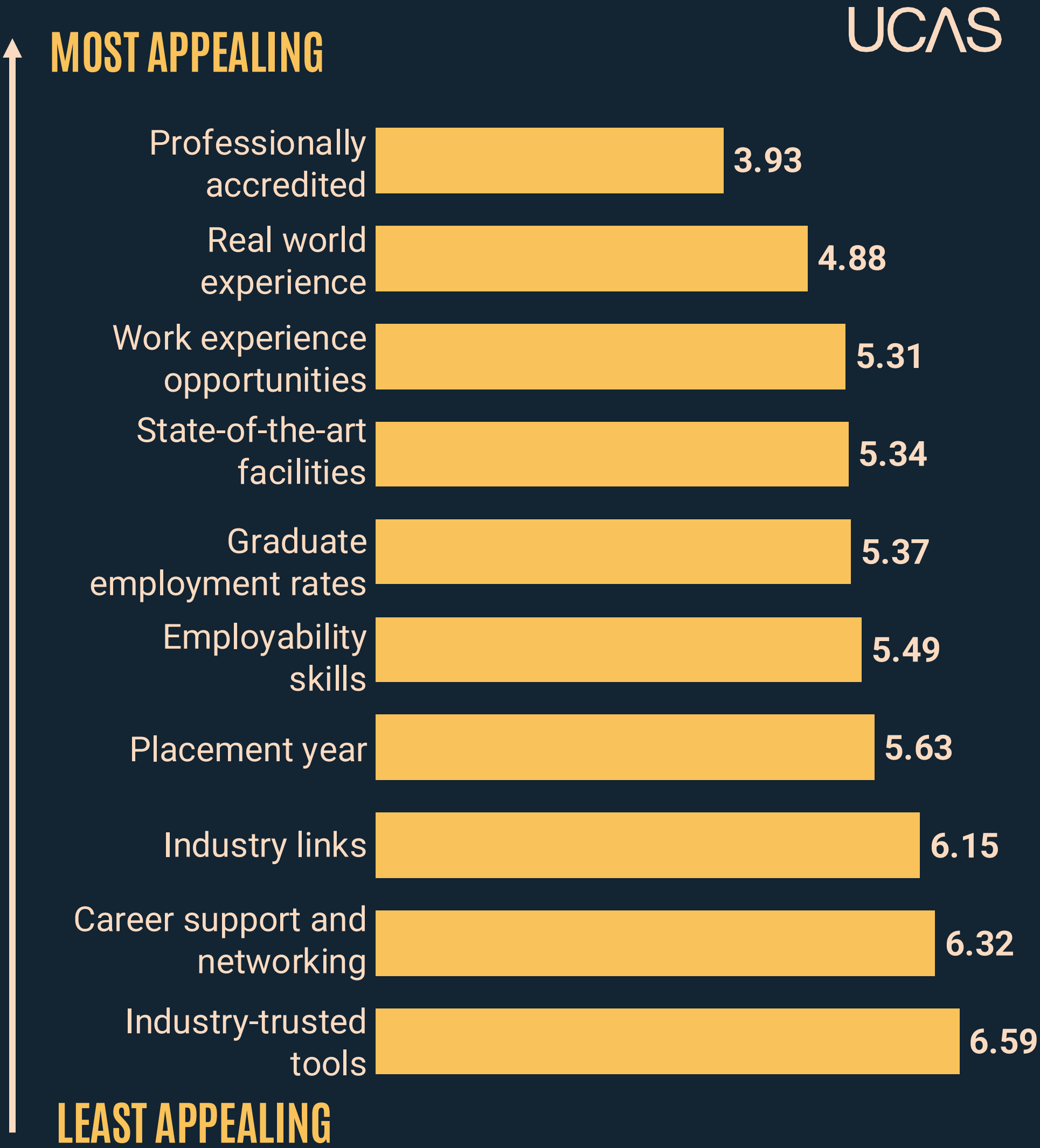
How the course prepares you

Experience, readiness for work, employer recognition.

HOW APPEALING DO STUDENTS FIND COMMON COURSE TERMS?

Students were asked to rank 10 common course description terms based on appeal.

Q. Please read through the following terms that you may see in a course description and rank them based on how appealing you find them. | Respondent Numbers: 1,129 (mean rank score)



WHAT THE RESEARCH TELLS US OVERALL

Students respond to clarity, specificity and proof.

SUBSTANCE OVER SLOGANS

- Show something real
- Be different
- Back claims with evidence

EXPERIENCE-LED, OUTCOME-FOCUSED LANGUAGE WAS MOST POWERFUL

- Practical examples resonate
- Clear future pathways matter

BUZZWORDS BREAK TRUST, CLARITY BUILDS IT

- Vague or inflated phrasing reduced appeal
- Technical terms need explanation

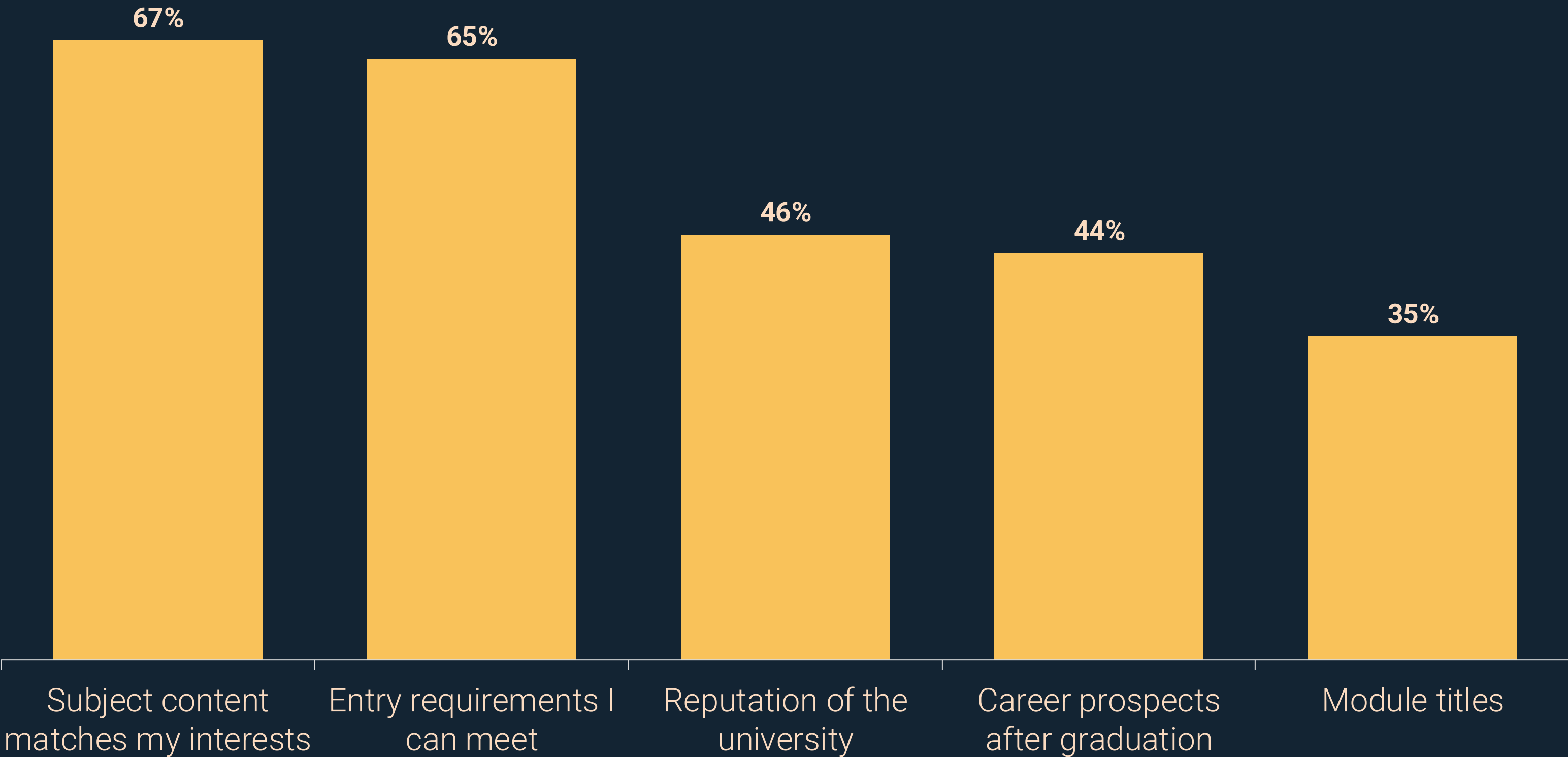
FINALLY!

**WE WERE
RIGHT**

WHAT CAN WE LEARN?

- ▶ **VAGUE**
- ▶ **BORING**
- ▶ **EXCLUDE**
- ▶ **AMBIGUOUS**
- ▶ **ENTRY REQUIREMENTS MATTER MORE THAN WE THINK**

WHAT RESPONDENTS PRIORITISED IN DECISION-MAKING



Q1. How did, or do you usually decide which courses are right for you? | Respondent Numbers: 1129.

Q2. Are there any big gaps in the information you usually find in course descriptions when applying to undergraduate courses? Respondent Numbers: 1129

WHAT CHANGES SHOULD I MAKE?

STEP 1:

BE SPECIFIC, BE TANGIBLE

STEP 2:

BE EXCITING!

STEP 3:

STRIP OUT JARGON - OR AT LEAST EXPLAIN IT CLEARLY

STEP 4:

ANSWER THE 'SO WHAT?'



“It’s Legit”

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STEP 4:

ANSWER THE 'SO WHAT?'

STEP 5:

BE STRATEGIC ABOUT ENTRY REQUIREMENTS



FINAL THOUGHT

“But Penny, I could have crafted the entire lyric sheet to the next ‘Imagine’ on my web page but what’s the point if nobody actually looks at it?

It’s all the fault of our marketing team and their inability to drive traffic, it’s not about what we put on our course descriptions”