

THE ROLE OF AI IN STUDENT DECISION MAKING

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UCAS



INTRODUCTION

More than one million students register with UCAS each year to explore their options and take the next step into higher education. With AI tools and services now widely used by young people, it is increasingly important to understand how applicants may be turning to this technology to research and inform their choices.

To date, much of the research into AI has focused on students during university or college and the role it plays in their learning experience. At UCAS, our focus is on supporting students as they research and decide on their options, ensuring that everyone who could benefit from higher education is able to do so. With this in mind, we set out to understand how AI is being used at an earlier stage in the application journey.

This research highlights a shift in how applicants explore their options. Nearly half of those we surveyed revealed they are using AI to explore their higher education options due to its instant answers and the ability to give tailored, personalised advice.

However, while AI is clearly playing a growing role in early-stage research, it is not replacing human input in final decision-making. A consistent theme across the findings is the continued importance of trusted, real-world guidance. Applicants still place significant value on in-person experiences, such as university open days as well as advice from parents and teachers and advisers. In this context, AI is being used primarily as a tool to ask questions, compare and check information, and narrow down options rather than to make final choices. Human guidance is still crucial.

The findings in this report clearly shine a light on an evolving applicant journey, where AI tools and human guidance go hand in hand. It provides valuable insight not only into changing behaviours but also into the expectations applicants now have of the information and services available to them.

This creates a timely opportunity for UCAS and the wider higher education sector. As a charity known for providing impartial, trusted information to those exploring higher education, UCAS recognises that these qualities matter even more as new ways of discovery emerge and audience expectations continue to evolve. In response, UCAS is actively exploring how to adapt to this changing landscape, from piloting new initiatives and investing in tools and platforms to refining our approach to personalisation.

This will help ensure UCAS remains a trusted, accessible and authoritative source of guidance, supporting applicants and the wider sector as the ways people discover information continue to evolve.

Genia Garrity
Director of Information, Advice and Guidance



UCAS AI SURVEY METHODOLOGY

What we did...

- ▶ An online survey with over 4,000 UCAS registered students (pre-applicants, applicants and year 1 undergraduate students) in November 2025
- ▶ Followed by 3 x focus groups in January 2026
- ▶ To understand perceptions, motivations, use of AI tools, trust and ethical considerations among the key student audience age groups that UCAS engages with.

What we asked...

AI AWARENESS
AND USE

SEARCH
PREFERENCES

AI AND
DECISION MAKING

AI USE IN HE RESEARCH
AND DISCOVERY

USEFUL
AI FEATURES

DECISION MAKING
INFLUENCE

TRUST AND
CONCERNS

KEY FINDINGS



HIGH AWARENESS AND USE OF AI TOOLS

From Chat GPT and Google Gemini, to AI summaries and integrated AI recommendation tools- 88% of respondents have used AI tools and services.

Respondents are primarily using AI for practical reasons, e.g. finding information, seeking advice or for schoolwork help.

But for some, AI is more than just a practical tool, with 12% of respondents using AI for emotional support.

YOUNG PEOPLE DO NOT BLINDLY TRUST AI

Respondents were very aware of the limitations of AI, with 73% recognising misinformation. Their next steps are to check against official sources.

There is a need for credible, trusted and expert information sources, alongside AI, like university websites and UCAS.

48% USE AI TO EXPLORE THEIR HIGHER EDUCATION OPTIONS

Respondents are using AI to summarise and compare universities and courses, and appreciate the personalised information and instant response.

They are very comfortable using AI early in the discovery journey, however they are far less comfortable using AI to inform firm and insurance choices.

At this stage, as decisions become more impactful, human connection and experiences become critical. This results in a hybrid approach, consisting of searching, asking, comparing, checking and consulting across a range of on and offline sources.



GENERAL AI USE



AI IS PRIMARILY USED TO FIND INFORMATION OR LEARN ABOUT SOMETHING. THE ABILITY TO ASK A SPECIFIC QUESTION DRIVES THIS, DEMONSTRATED BY THE HIGH USE OF CHATBOTS

THEY USE...

Chatbots (e.g. ChatGPT)

73%

AI powered search results

54%

Recommendation systems

36%

Academic AI tools

29%

AI in games

21%

Q. Which AI services and features do you typically use?
(Please select all that apply) (Base: All AI users 3,838)

Q. What do you mainly use AI for? (Please select all
that apply) (Base: All AI users 3,837)

FOR...

Finding general information
or learning about something

65%

To seek advice /
help solve a problem

51%

Schoolwork or
homework help

50%

Creative ideas and help,
e.g. writing, art, images etc

33%

Entertainment,
exploring, fun

25%

Emotional
support

12%

Other

9%

BUT 11% OF RESPONDENTS DO NOT USE AI, PREFERRING TO DO THINGS ON THEIR OWN OR NOT TRUSTING AI. WIDER CONCERNS INCLUDE...

LACK OF REGULATION

“

I wouldn't trust AI to see my personal data.

Male, age 16-17

”

ENVIRONMENTAL/ETHICAL CONCERNS

“

It's killing the environment, critical thinking skills and the creative industries.

Female, age 16-17

”

PRIVACY AND DATA USAGE

“

Biased data and the fact that its being used in place of actual humans.

Respondent, age 16-17

”

MISINFORMATION

“

It will often provide false information. It steals from other people's hard work. I've heard around that it is damaging the environment too. It prevents you from learning other new things about a specific topic and gets straight to the point

Female, age 16

”

STUDENTS ARE RECOGNISING MISINFORMATION AND CHECK VIA RECOGNISED SOURCES

They are seeing through the hallucinations and misinformation

73%

said they had received incorrect information from AI

18% were unsure **7%** said no

Q: Have you ever received incorrect information (or misleading/hallucinated information) from AI? (Base: Respondents using AI 3,840)

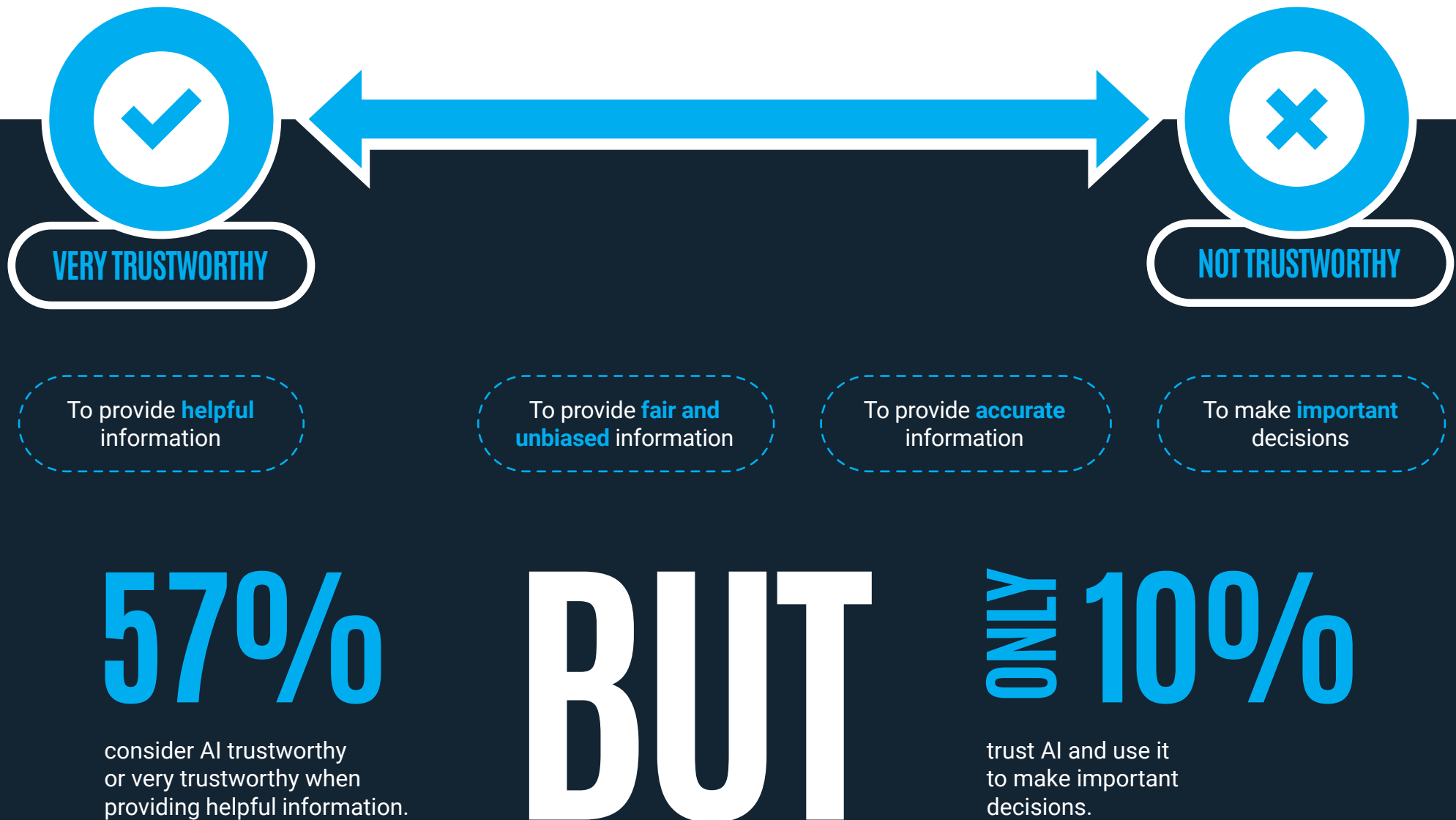
Q: Can you give an example of the incorrect information you received and describe your next steps, e.g. how you went about checking the information? (Base: Respondents using AI 2,300)



THEY CHECK INFORMATION USING OFFICIAL SOURCES E.G:

- ▶ Company, brand websites
- ▶ Academic journals
- ▶ UCAS, university websites
- ▶ Textbooks

HELPFUL, BUT NOT DECISIVE - HOW FAR STUDENTS TRUST AI



AI USE AND HIGHER EDUCATION DISCOVERY



HE DISCOVERY...CHATBOTS OR CLICKS?

THEIR 'GO TO' RESOURCES...

43%

University
Website

...SUPPORTED BY AI

48%

used AI to explore
HE opportunities



HYBRID APPROACH



Q: Have you ever used AI (e.g. ChatGPT etc) to explore Higher Education study opportunities, e.g. courses, university life, where to study etc? (Base: All AI users 3,840)

Q: When carrying out your Higher Education research, which of the following is / was your first 'go to' resource? (Single select) (Base: Respondents using AI for HE discovery 1,675)

THE VALUE AND BENEFITS OF USING AI TO NAVIGATE HE DISCOVERY...



INSTANT RESPONSE

at any time to any question



MAKING COMPARISONS



61%

use AI as a comparison tool



PERSONALISED ADVICE

a concise response, avoiding information overload

WHAT DO STUDENTS ASK WHEN EXPLORING HE?

#1 SUBJECT & COURSE INFORMATION

#2 RECOMMENDING UNIVERSITIES & COURSES

#3 ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

#4 CAREERS AND PATHWAYS

#5 PERSONAL STATEMENT PLANNING

Q. What Higher Education topics have you explored using AI ? (Please select all that apply) Base (respondents using AI for HE discovery): 1,674

Q. Thinking about exploring Higher Education opportunities, can you give an example of a typical question you have asked AI? Base (respondents using AI for HE discovery): 1,674

“

Could you give a quick summary of my 5 universities in a table format including distance and if the course is accredited?

Respondent,
age 16-17

”

“

Based on everything you know about me, where should I apply for university?

Female,
age 16-17

”

“

Which universities offer the best engineering programs and what are their rankings?

Male,
age 16-17

”

“

What are the entry requirements for studying law at top UK universities?

Female,
age 16-17

”

BUT AI ALSO OFFERS NEW DISCOVERY OPPORTUNITIES

AS A COMPARISON TOOL:

"It simplified descriptions so I could compare courses quickly."

TO SEEK HIGHLY PERSONALISED SUPPORT:

"It helped me find relevant work experience opportunities to support my UCAS application."

TO BROADEN OPTIONS:

"I asked ChatGPT for marine biology unis because I wanted to be by the coast, and it made a comparison table that showed me options I hadn't considered."

TO INSPIRE:

"I use it for inspiration and checking career pathways."

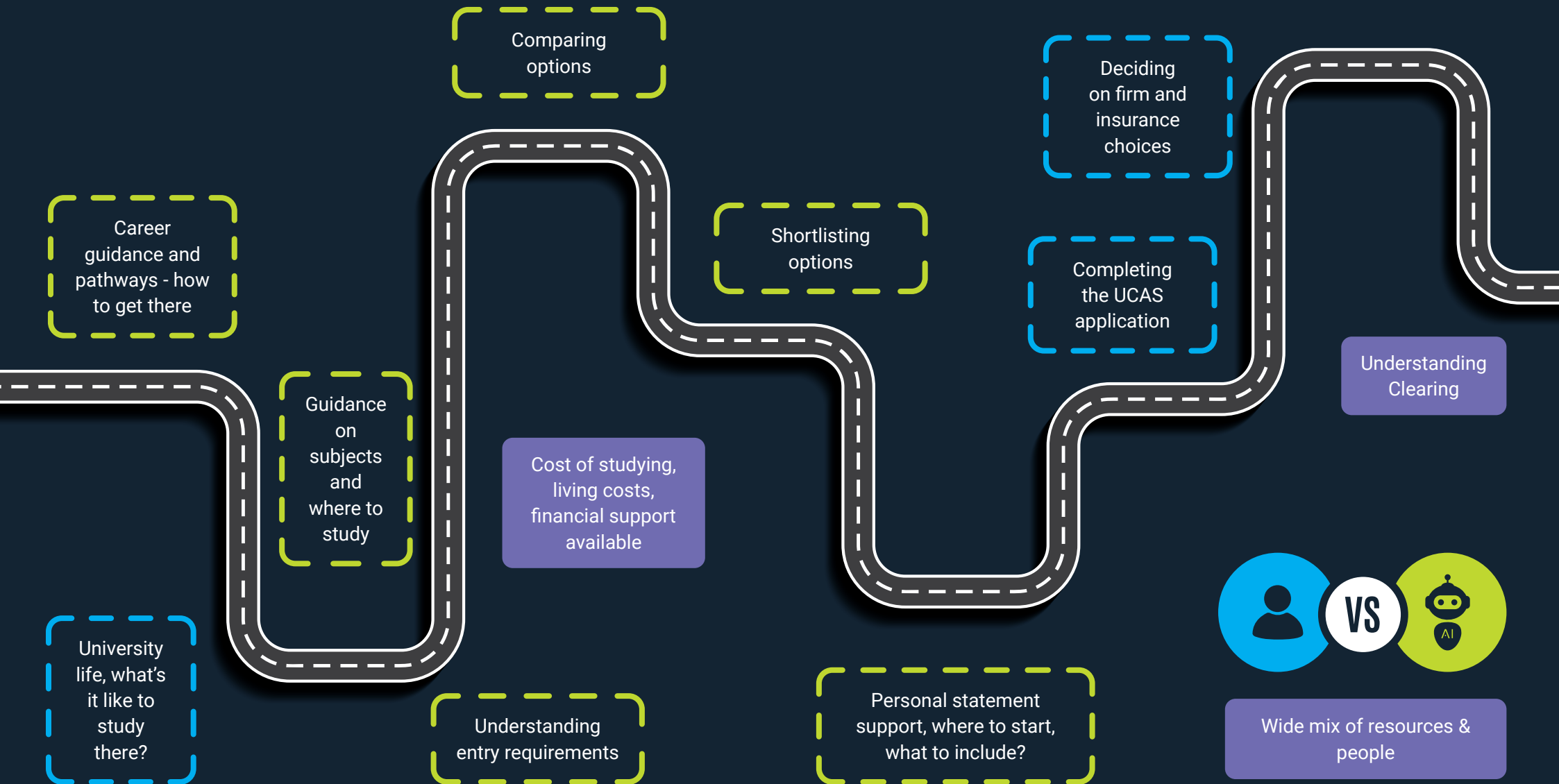
TO HELP ANSWER SPECIFIC QUESTIONS:

"What are the entry requirements for studying law at top UK universities?"

DECISION MAKING



AI IS WIDELY USED ACROSS THE JOURNEY, BUT HUMAN INSIGHT AND REAL-WORLD EXPERIENCE MATTERS MORE AT KEY STAGES



HOW ARE STUDENTS USING AI TO HELP WITH THEIR PERSONAL STATEMENTS?

They **DO** use AI for...



**GRAMMAR AND
STRUCTURE**



**REDUCING
WORD COUNT**



**ORGANISING
NOTES**

"I used Grammarly and AI to check structure, not to write it."

"I used Copilot to reduce the word count."

"It helped me organise everything I wanted to include."

They **DO NOT** use AI for...



**WRITING THE
STATEMENT**



**ANYTHING
PLAGIARISM-RELATED**



**REPLACING TEACHER
FEEDBACK**

"It removes the personal side, it sounds generic."

"I was afraid in case of plagiarism checks."

"Teachers give more constructive and critical feedback; AI just wants to please."

WHERE DO STUDENTS DRAW THE LINE?

STUDENTS DO NOT TRUST AI FOR:

**PERSONAL
DECISIONS**

“

I wouldn't trust AI to give me advice on my personal life.

”

**UNDERSTANDING
CAMPUS EXPERIENCE**

“

I wouldn't trust it to tell me what student life is like.

”

**HIGHER EDUCATION
DECISION MAKING**

“

I wouldn't trust it to finalise my choices, just to give insight.

”

EXPERIENCES ARE STILL IMPORTANT AND NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES CAN SHAPE DECISIONS

Their own experiences or the experiences of others are important when making decisions. AI has much less influence.

OPEN DAY EXPERIENCE

48%

said they would be likely to remove a university from their shortlist following a **negative open day** experience.

STUDENT REVIEWS

34%

said they would be likely to remove a university from their shortlist after reading **negative student reviews**.

LEAGUE TABLES

25%

of students said they would be likely to remove a university from their shortlist if it **fell 10 places in the latest league table**.

AI HAS MUCH LESS INFLUENCE:

8%

said they would be likely to remove a university from their shortlist if AI gave it a negative response.

AT PRESENT, AI IS EMPOWERING CHOICES AND SHAPING DECISION MAKING TO A POINT, BUT YOUNG PEOPLE RECOGNISE THE IMPORTANCE OF HUMAN JUDGEMENT AND SUPPORT, PARTICULARLY FROM TEACHERS, PARENTS AND STUDENT AMBASSADORS



PEOPLE REMAIN THE MOST TRUSTED SOURCE



STUDENTS PARTICULARLY WANT PEOPLE INVOLVED IN FINAL DECISIONS

"If I do use AI, I will always use university websites or talk to teachers/career advisers to double-check what I've been told."

"The advice of any human is more valuable to me, especially regarding education because the teachers giving that advice will have lived through higher education themselves."



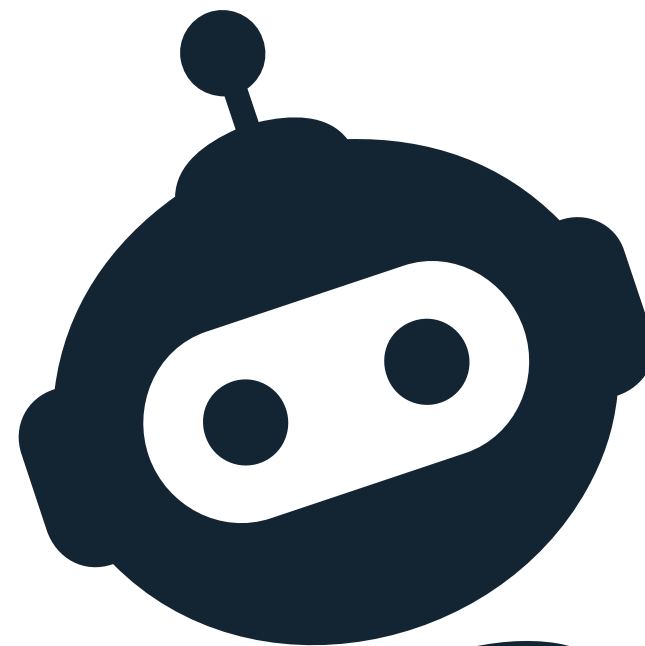
AI ACTS AS A HELPER FOR FILTERING, COMPARING, AND EXPLORING



IT IS NOT A REPLACEMENT FOR HUMAN JUDGEMENT OR OFFICIAL SOURCES

"I would not trust AI to understand the emotional side of making a decision to study at a specific university."

"I would not trust it to detail what student life is like on a particular campus. I also wouldn't trust it to shortlist my university choices, just give me more insight."



AI

“

I believe a university website provides clear information and is more reliable than using AI resources. However, if these websites are complicated to follow or do not directly provide the information I am looking for, it is often AI tools that I reach for.

Female, age 19

”





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