



# PROJECT NEXT GENERATION

SIX THEMES THAT INFLUENCE STUDENT CHOICE

UCAS



## INTRODUCTION

In 2023, we commissioned Project Next Generation – an integrated quantitative and qualitative study to understand what young people are planning for their futures, how they choose their subjects and careers, and how they assess the different pathways to get there.

We wanted to find out what they needed, when, and from who so that we can ensure they are receiving the right information at the right time to make informed choices about their future.

The findings of Project Next Generation have so far inspired four reports, each covering a different angle of the data and support our **extensive library of insight on student choice**.

This report looks closely at how the findings inform the UCAS strategy to support advisers and their students with relevant information and guidance, and how you, as an adviser, can best leverage our tools.

The research, which took place with more than 1,000 participants aged 13 - 17, will help universities, colleges, and advisers to inspire, educate, upskill, and improve the decision making of young people across the UK.

**Jo Richards**  
Senior Insights Lead  
UCAS

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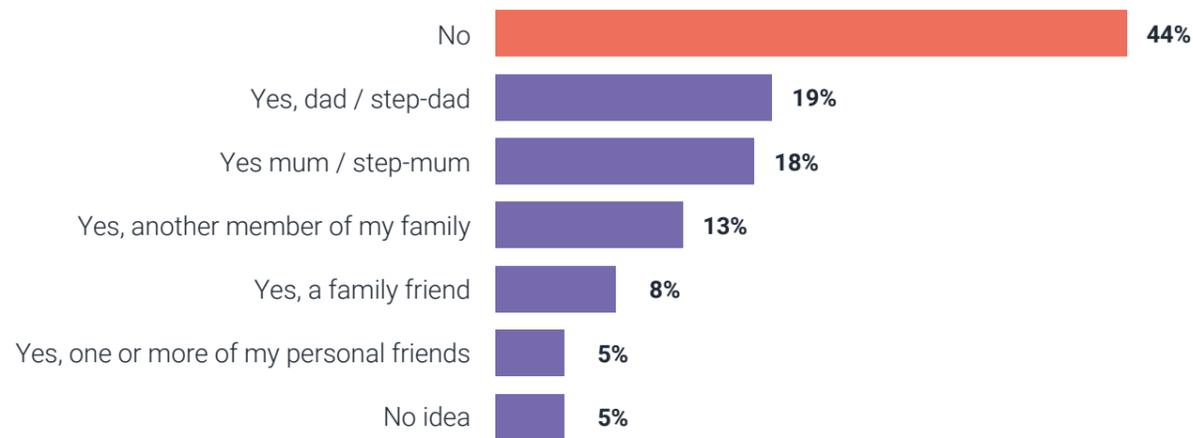
# CHAPTER ONE: INSPIRATION

## WE NEED TO SHOW THEM WHAT'S OUT THERE, SO THEY CAN REALISE THEIR POTENTIAL

Without sound guidance, today's wealth of choice can be overwhelming and intimidating. Presented with the widest spectrum of opportunities than ever before, young people need support if they're going to avoid choice paralysis, make informed decisions, and design a future that works for them.

And with countless subjects, courses, employers, providers, and pathways – discounting each one in turn is too big an ask. Even with technology democratising access and simplifying searches, it's inspiration that plays the biggest role in plotting a route forward. And inspiration starts very close to home:

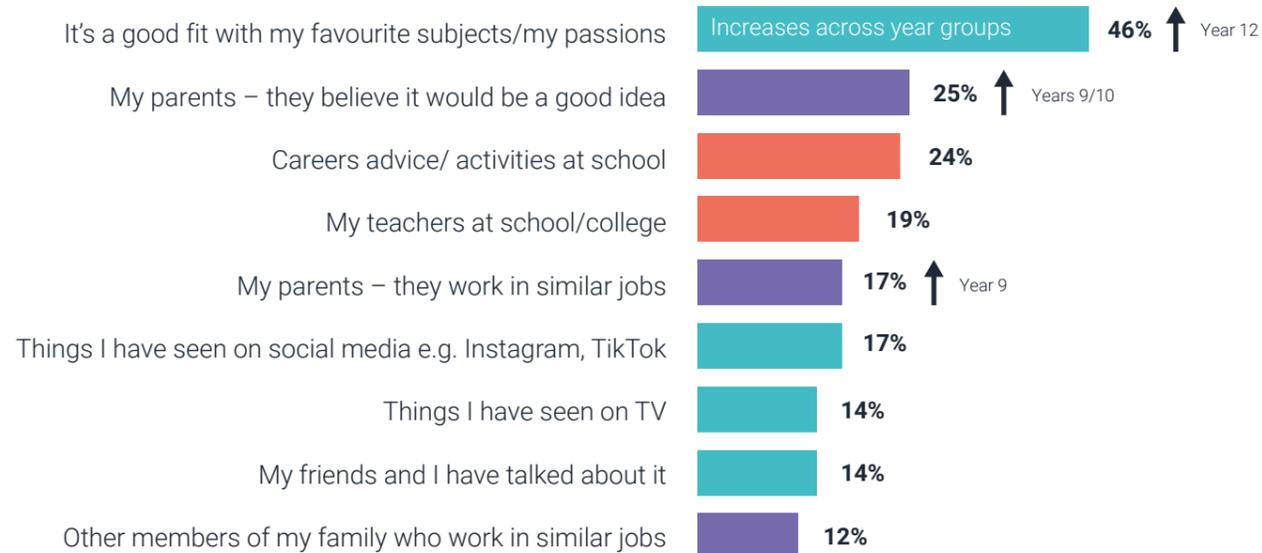
### Do any of your family/friends do something similar for a living?



**42%** Say that family/friends do a similar job and that has influenced their choice

BASE: all with some idea (710)

### Who/what inspired you to consider that job/career?



**36%** PARENTS    **44%** PARENTS    **37%** SCHOOL / COLLEGE

BASE: all with some idea (710)

42% of young people tell us that somebody close to them has influenced career choice and their passion for that area. Almost half (46%) are considering

careers that fit with their personal interests and subjects they prefer, and this number rises as they age and approach the crunch-time of sixth form.

## YOUNG PEOPLE NEED INSPIRATION EARLY, SO THEY DON'T CLOSE OFF CERTAIN ROUTES

If there's one thing that consistently shows up in UCAS research, it's that earlier equals better. Previous UCAS research has highlighted that 1 in 3 young people think about higher education as early as primary school. This is important just as much for

employers and universities looking to engage with younger applicants, as it is for advisers seeking to ensure that a wealth of choice is fully understood as early as possible – so a young person can dwell, think, consider, and explore.

*My maths teacher is very helpful and supportive with my learning. He's very encouraging and makes me believe in myself that I can do the work. He has built my confidence over the last few years and made me love maths and enjoy the lessons. I will really miss him as he was a great role model. (age 16)*

*My mom and aunts are all my role models. They work hard and support each other and their family and friends. (age 16)*

*My friend always pushes me to be my best. (age 15)*

*Lewis Hamilton being the first black driver as I love watching and following him...it's good to see someone of ethnicity in such a great sport. (age 16)*

Sparking that first, second, third, and even fifteenth interest is something that needs encouragement. Because self-discovery is just as important as guided discovery, especially for more complex pathways or niche careers which may not be as represented in regular channels.

Another crucial factor to note is that young people looking for inspiration are seeking a two-way conversation. Just like the wealth of opportunities, information overload can be another precursor to choice paralysis. Helping them with a human touch, giving them the ability to ask questions, to discover the right path and rule out the wrong ones factors highly. This includes speaking directly to successful peers, graduates, established workers, qualified careers advisers, and those who can show young people the various paths towards their goal, at the start of their discovery journey.

### UCAS TOOLS: **INSPIRATION**

- 1. UCAS Exhibitions** for face-to-face interactions with employers, providers, careers advisers.
- 2. The Hub** for personalised content tailored to what's important to them, offering information, advice and support on decision-making.
- 3. UCAS Discover** for subject tasters, guides, and our What to Study Next tool.
- 4. UCAS YouTube** for easily digestible videos to help them find their way.





**I'm not trying to map out my future – I'm sticking to what I enjoy / what I am good at and the rest will take of itself**



The research shows us that young people think about the future, but through the lens of what they're enjoying now. Because how much long-term thinking really comes naturally to teenagers?

How many have a clearly developed sense of delayed gratification, or the foresight to choose subjects which may not repay them for another decade or more?

And whilst advisers play a key role in guidance, helping them to discover new paths and supporting their analysis and decision-making, ultimately, it's enjoyment that proves the natural starting point:

*47% choose 'enjoying my job' as the number one factor when thinking about what they want to do in the future.*

*And despite thinking that this might become more practical as they get older, it only becomes more solidified – with 42% saying so in Y9 vs 50% in Y12.*

*And when asked about why they're set on choosing university, 52% cite 'following my passions or dreams' – another point for happiness.*

There's much more to this approach than pure instinct or leftover childhood motivations. The positive acknowledgement of enjoyment, passion, and satisfaction (perhaps over the pursuit of money and material possessions) comes from the most mental-health-aware generation in history.

Choosing to stick with what makes them happy isn't a way to avoid decision making, nor does it lack strategy or future planning; it's simply an admirable choice to put their mindsets first. Able to live in the moment and plan for the future, today's young people don't apply as much distinction between the two as previous generations might have done.

# CHAPTER TWO: EMOTIONS

## NURTURE THEIR INSTINCTS AND LET THEM EXPLORE THE POSSIBILITIES

It can be easy for those out of the classroom to forget that, in the face of very grown-up decision making that will shape their futures, young people are new to adolescence and just about graduating from childhood.

At 14 years old, they're only a few summers out of primary school playgrounds. It is so important to remember that teenagers aren't quite children, but they're not quite adults either.

So, when they're making adult decisions, we mustn't forget childhood tendencies – like enjoyment, fun, play, spontaneity, joy, and entertainment.

These motivations, which remain key throughout secondary school, are part of the reason why most young people put so much stock in their instinct. Alongside the inspiration of seeing their loved ones enjoying their careers, young people trust their gut and hold an optimism that – by concentrating on what they're good at right now (or currently enjoying) – good things will come their way.

## Main reasons for being most likely to apply to university:

This is particularly true for university – where passions, dreams, and enjoyment collectively form the largest (89%) motivation.

60% say it's best for their career long-term, and 52% say it's what their parents and/or teachers have advised.



BASE: most likely to apply to university (382)

There exists a fine line then, between an adviser's guidance towards sensible routes that represent positive long-term outcomes and allowing young people to follow their hearts (and their gut).

We therefore need to ensure that young people have a high level of awareness of their options but are also equipped with the realities of those options. Which of their passions align with secure job markets? Which skills learned from their hobbies also apply to potential careers? What do they enjoy now that can be matched to professions in the future?

Because even the most instinctive strategies can benefit from cool-headed experience.

## UCAS TOOLS: EMOTIONS

- 1. Real stories** with people who have followed different paths to success through an apprenticeship.
- 2. The Ultimate Guide** to help them find their true passion and excitement.
- 3. Industry Guides** to excite young people with new possibilities.
- 4. Apprenticeships** information and guidance all in one place.





DIRECT EXPERIENCE	INDIRECT EXPERIENCE	PAST EXPERIENCE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Work experience, placement years, internships</li> <li>▶ Hands on, practical and transferable skills development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Engagement with mentors, employers, or people who have taken a particular pathway</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Experiences of parents / family friends that have influenced their thoughts.</li> <li>▶ Exposure and experience of particular careers or pathways</li> </ul>
<p>This provides confidence and preparedness, confirming interest in certain paths.</p> <p>97% of young people say they need direct experience for university, an apprenticeship, or a job – but only 39% actually have any.</p>	<p>Indirect experience also provides confidence and empowerment but can expose them to more alternatives as it is less time consuming and more logistically convenient.</p>	<p>Natural exposure over the course of their lives, having had conversations or witnessed others' experiences, often influences their opinions and increases their knowledge of other careers and pathways. Indeed 42% of young people say their choices are influenced by their friends or family members, who do a similar job.</p>
<p><i>Hands-on experience is probably best as opposed to just reading or hearing other people's experiences.</i></p>	<p><i>I think it would be helpful if I got advice from people who are going through the process of becoming a nurse as it would help me to understand the best opportunity.</i></p>	<p><i>LinkedIn has been a great help. I have used contacts to reach out to for advice and support.</i></p>

## CHAPTER THREE: EXPERIENCE

### EMPOWERING CHOICES AND FULLY INFORMED DECISION-MAKING

Experience is an important gateway for young people exploring their options:

- ▶ **Confidence**, via developing necessary skills or proving their worth in a given field.
  - ▶ **Experimentation**, via test driving certain sectors or careers before they commit to them.
  - ▶ **Confirmation**, via spending time in the real environment of a career – not just the classroom of a subject.
  - ▶ **Peace of mind**, via gaining knowledge and thus soothing anxieties and uncertainties.
  - ▶ **Empowerment**, via the elimination of what-ifs and the narrowing down of options.
- And getting to these emotions can come via any, or all, of the three distinct types of experience.

Advisers play a key role at this juncture. From supporting different pathways and routes, to understanding the new jobs of the future, advisers are under pressure to be aware of multiple opportunities when supporting students and offering reassurance for parents.

Parents, in particular, will want to ensure that their child has a stable and secure future ahead and may find themselves leaning towards pathways and subjects that they perceive to be more in line with this outcome. And since the data shows that today's generation are far more likely to follow their hearts, we need to be wary of not forcing them to follow their heads.

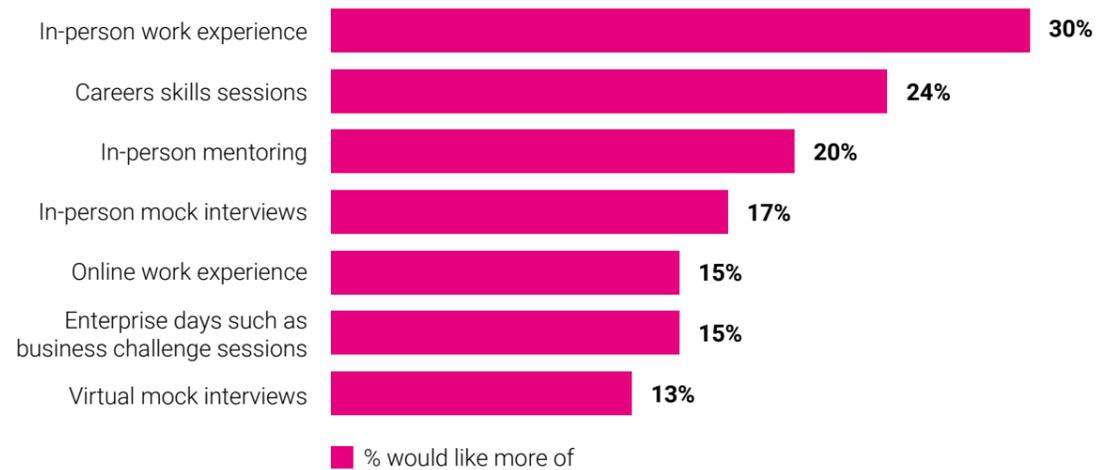
Parents in certain industries or trades may naturally offer more support for entry into that realm – meaning that different young people have different information, but rarely all of it.

Previous UCAS research highlighted a synergy between HE subject choice and parent or carers careers. For example, a third of students who reported having a parent/ carer who is an artist were studying creative arts and design courses. The influence of parents may be greater than young people realise.

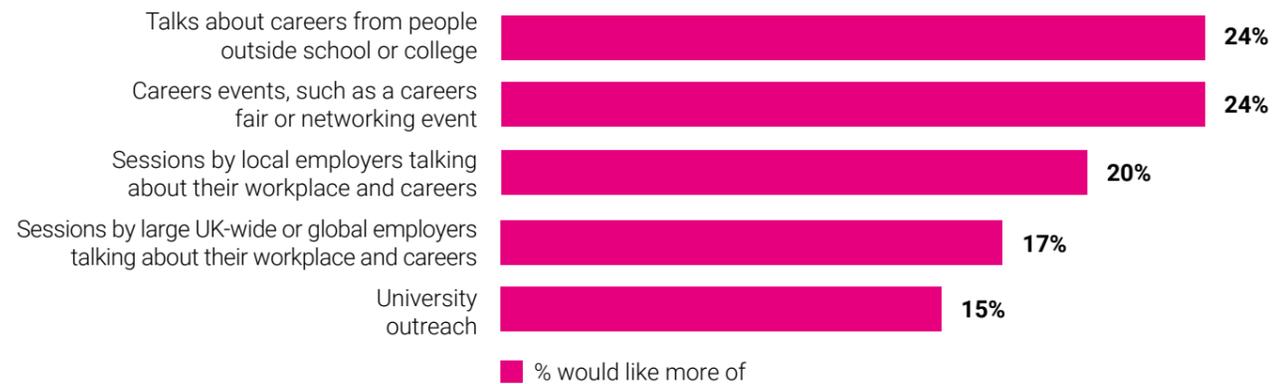
*I helped with work experience on one path so he could try it. He loved it... all the questions he has I have been able to get people from the industry for him to speak to. So, he can hear it from someone who's worked in the industry so it's good, honest truth. – Parent*

**There is a need for experience, whether direct or indirect.** Seeing it with their own eyes, or at least hearing about it from somebody with relevant awareness, is the preferred mode of exposure:

### Direct experience



### Indirect experience



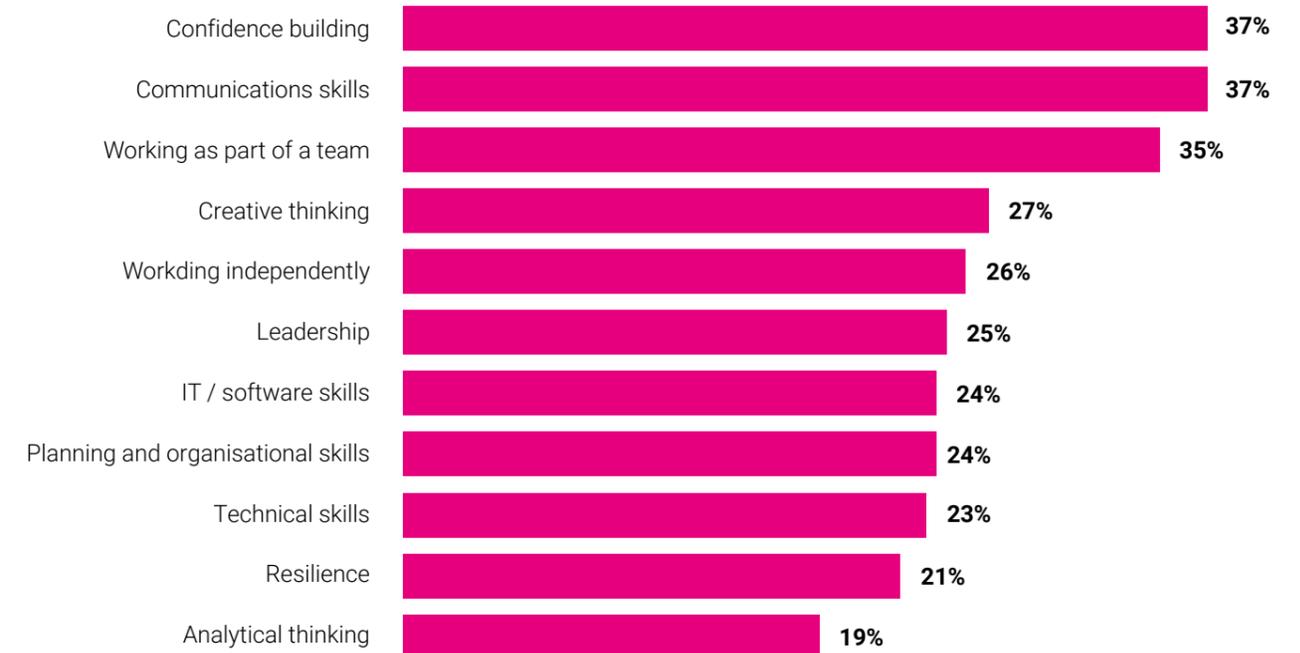
*There are lots of people out there and not many good jobs about, it's harder to find one. Most companies are looking for people with experience or certain qualifications. (age 16)*

*I have been with school to visit colleges which has helped as I now know what to expect after I finish school. (age 15)*

Personal experience, as in developing the skills and knowledge of a certain sector or career, is incredibly important for young people too. As another precursor to confidence, skills work alongside experience to be

one of the great building blocks of empowerment. For job interviews, for degrees and courses, and even for work experience itself – young people tell us that having the skills beforehand is important to them.

**The challenge for advisers is that almost all (91%) would like more skills experience, covering at least one of the below:**



Thinking about the skills that you feel might be important to your future career/ job plans, which if any of the following would you like help in developing? BASE: all respondents (1,000)

## UCAS TOOLS: EXPERIENCE

- Careers quiz** – linking courses to careers.
- Events tool** – open days, online tasters, and virtual tours.
- UCAS Parent Podcasts** - ensuring parents have access to the latest information and guidance to support students.
- Unibuddy chat in the UCAS Hub** – to give prospective students the opportunity to chat with current students on their course.
- Coming soon** – subject taster videos and virtual work experience on the Hub in collaboration with Springpod.



# CHAPTER FOUR: CONFIDENCE

## KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE = CERTAINTY AND EXCITEMENT

When the decision's as big as leaving your hometown for a far-flung university or entering employment to work and study at the same time – you need to feel confident in your choice and in yourself.

And with so many precursors to attaining confidence – like knowledge, skills, and experience – it's a journey where an adviser's support can make a transformational difference.

Because with all the usual concerns like managing their finances and missing their families, the last thing young people need to be wondering is whether they've made the right decision (and whether they're up to the task).

The first key tenet of confidence is knowledge, and whilst 59% of young people tell us they have at least a reasonable amount – only 47% of them think it's

enough. This is a universal challenge, not specific to any route, as you can see from the division of pathways below.

### How much do you know about...

Percentage (%)	...continuing your studies	...getting an apprenticeship	...different jobs/careers
A lot	12%	12%	12%
A reasonable amount	30%	26%	29%
A little bit	32%	33%	36%
Very little	18%	21%	17%
Nothing at all	6%	8%	5%
Prefer not to say	2%	1%	1%

How much do you know about...? BASE: All Respondents 1000

### How comfortable are you with that level of knowledge:

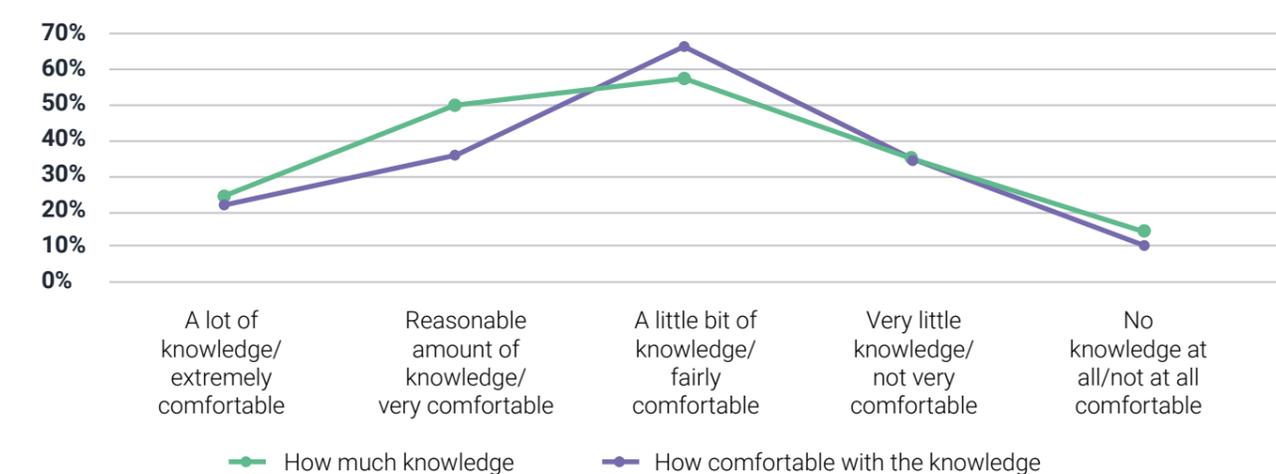
Percentage (%)	...continuing your studies	...getting an apprenticeship	...different jobs/careers
Extremely	11%	11%	11%
Very	20%	19%	19%
Fairly	42%	43%	47%
Not very	21%	19%	17%
Not at all	4%	5%	4%
Prefer not to say	3%	4%	2%

And how comfortable are you with that level of knowledge right now? BASE: All Respondents 1000

The more they know, the better they feel. Equipped with knowledge, they're better able to assess their options and enter into important

decision-making feeling ready and informed. This gap in knowledge is a clear space for advisers to step into.

### Correlation between level of knowledge and comfort with level of knowledge



How much do you know about the various options that you will have at 18, after school/college?, And how comfortable are you with that level of knowledge right now? BASE: All Respondents 1000

Of course, the knowledge that leads to confidence in making the right choice is just one side of the coin. There's also the concept of confidence in the pure

sense – self-belief. And for the optimum outcome, both are prerequisites to decision-making.

1

**Confidence in their ability to do the job or complete the pathway.**  
This directly leads to experience and enjoyment.

2

**Confidence in it being the right decision and it getting them to where they want to be.**  
This directly leads to empowerment and inspiration.



### NEED EXPERIENCE AND KNOWLEDGE OF WHAT THEY'RE GOING INTO

59% feel they have a lot / reasonable knowledge, but only 47% feel comfortable with their level of knowledge



### NEED REASSURANCE THAT THEY'RE NOT EXPECTED TO BE PERFECT

I have a lack in confidence, so I would like help developing my confidence as it would benefit many areas of my life and help with my future career plans (age 16)

This closely connects with the cry for more skills support and experience from Chapter Four, where seeing it for themselves and getting hands-on with

the job leads to a more informed mindset. For advisers, this is a sign to double down on giving young people maximum exposure.

## UCAS TOOLS: CONFIDENCE

- 1. Industry guides** – to explore careers, pathways, and hear from experienced degree apprentices and professionals.
- 2. UCAS Exhibitions** – to meet providers, employers, apprenticeship providers face to face.
- 3. Subject guides** – to discover what it's like to study a subject, how to get into it, and the career opportunities available.
- 4. Personalisation in the Hub** – tailored to give students a personalised, supportive experience.





# CHAPTER FIVE: INDEPENDENCE

## SUPPORT TO STEP CONFIDENTLY INTO THEIR OWN FUTURES

As young people move towards adulthood and their independence grows, this is a great time to encourage them to trust their own decision-making and use the

tools at their disposal - like their Hub dashboard - to take control of their choices.

For young people, independence isn't all about flying the nest and leaving old lives behind:

### Making/trusting their own decisions and choices

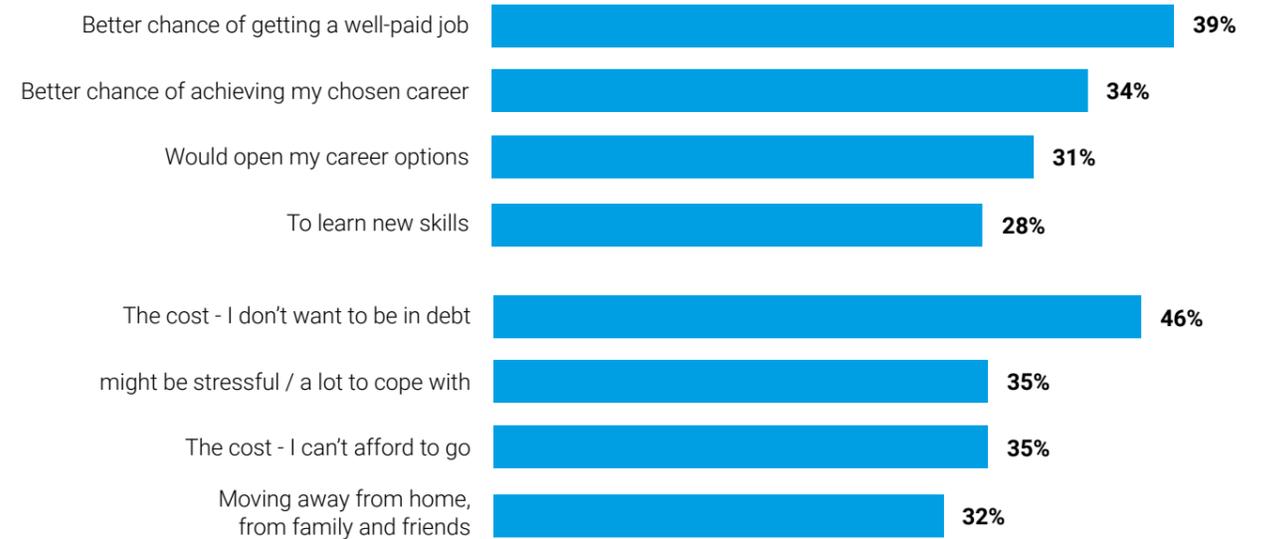
- ▶ This branch of independence is impacted by confidence, experience, and pressure from parents.

### Feeling ready and able to manage their own lives

- ▶ This branch of independence is impacted by strained finances, lack of experience, living away from home, and confidence.

And whilst these two types of independence have some key differences, they converge at one of adulthood's chief challenges: money.

This is especially important for those going to university, because one of the main draws is building towards a stable financial future, whilst the debt and living costs are simultaneously one of the main concerns:



And it's also natural that advisers and parents, who live in the same world with the same money worries, are inclined to guide young people toward pathways which will see them safe and stable financially.

It's a drive that comes from an inarguably positive place, but here comes a moment where independence can be contentious, because however well-intentioned the guidance might be, young people are feeling the pressure:

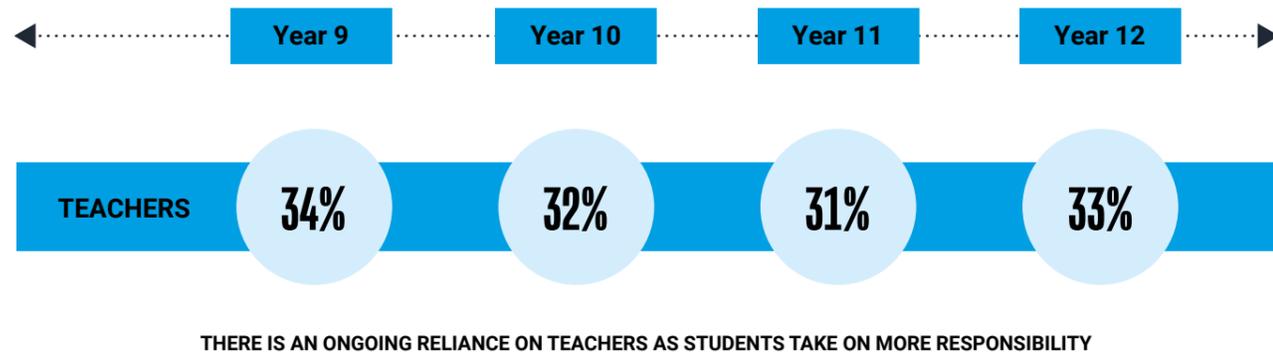
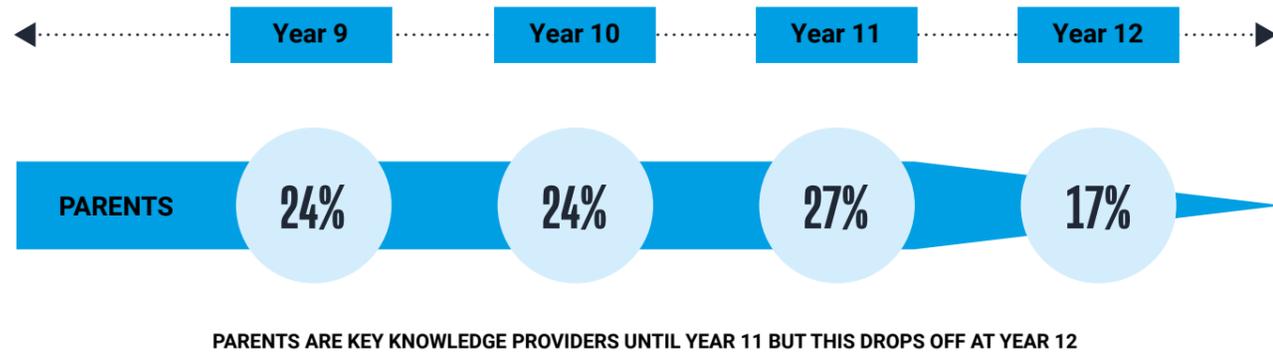
*My mum tells me I won't get a good job if I don't go to university, I want to study engineering science and I'm hoping I can get good qualifications and get a good job. (age 14)*

### I feel quite a bit of pressure from my parents to make good decisions about my future education/careers



It's support and reassurance, not pressure, that they need from key influencers in their life. Whilst the concern comes from a good place, any advice given must also come from knowledge – otherwise it can feel like control.

This pressure may go some way to explaining why parental influence drops significantly as young people approach those big post-18 decisions:



Who would you say has done most of the work to improve your knowledge around your options at 18? BASE: All Respondents 1000

And of course, at some point, young people will shed their teachers too. All roads lead to independence,

the key is in knowing which advisers play which role at which time.

## UCAS TOOLS: INDEPENDENCE

- The Ultimate Guide** on apprenticeships will help students research all the pathways available to them to work out if a traditional degree or a degree apprenticeship would suit them better.
- Subject Guides** – with one click, they can see breakdowns of subject areas and the pathways and career options available.
- Budget tools** – support and guidance to help make money matters less stressful.





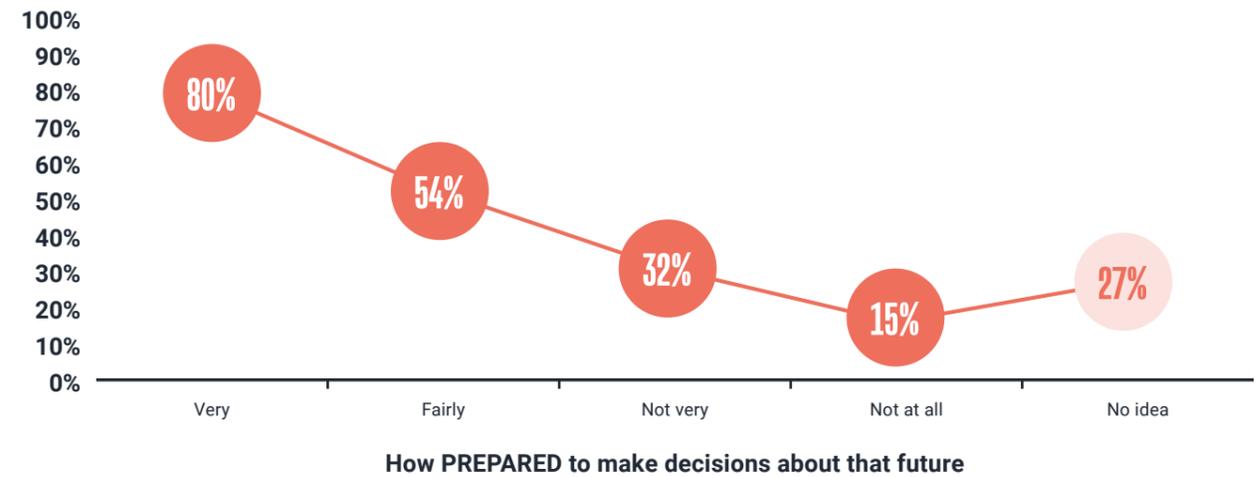
## CHAPTER SIX: CONTROL

### TAKING OWNERSHIP OF THEIR OWN CHOICES AND LIVES

With the freedom to be independent and the confidence of knowledge comes a sense of control, which for many young people will be the pinnacle of their journey so far. It represents their first steps into genuine ownership of their choices, and the beginning of adulthood.

And just as we saw in Chapter Four, that knowledge results in confidence, here we see that preparedness creates positivity.

#### % Extremely/very positive about the future

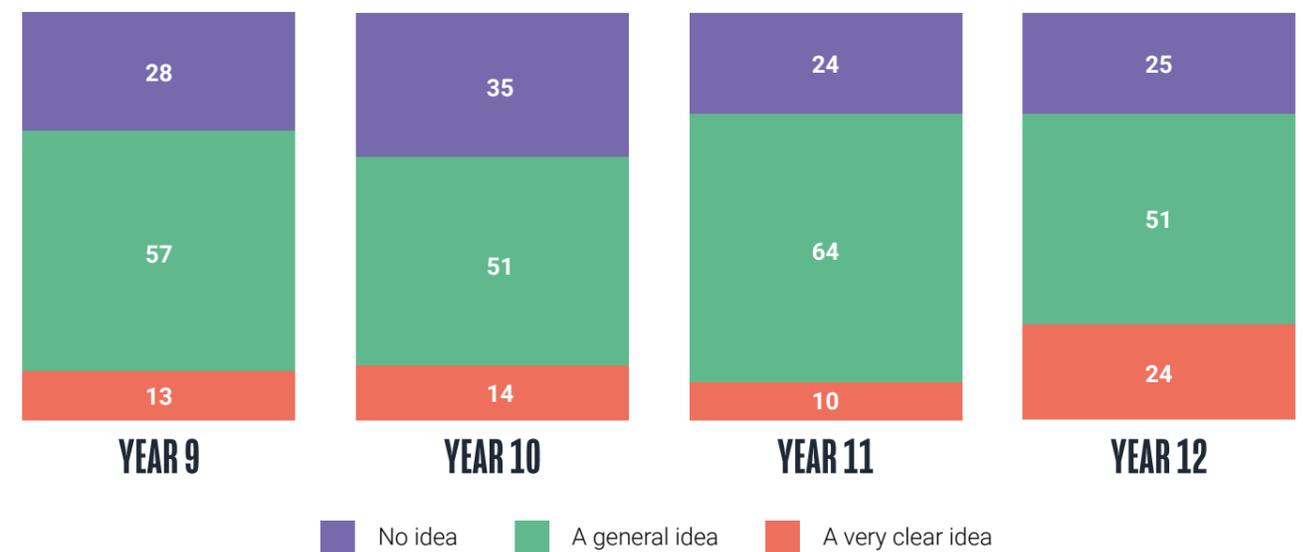


Overall, how do you feel about your life... how it will turn out in the future? BASE: All Respondents 1000

This really is the ultimate goal. Not only does ensuring the preparedness of young people make better decisions more likely, but it also makes better mindsets as they leave the orbit of home and school.

But there is work to do on this front. From Year 9 to Year 12, the proportion of young people who have a

clear idea of their direction rises and falls. Year 10 seems to be an episode of doubt and Year 12 is a crucial moment where 76% only have a general idea (or no idea at all) what they'll do post-18. There is a crystallisation job for advisers here, helping young people to distil their knowledge and experience into a plan.



"How much of an idea do you have about what you will do for a living/ as a career?" BASE: all respondents (250/250/251/249)

*I'm concerned about the unknown because I don't know what might happen in the future, but this also excites me. (age 15)*

Many of the main causes of concern behind these uncertainties sit within a young person's control:

- ▶ 31% are concerned about finding a job
- ▶ 28% are concerned about not getting the grades they need
- ▶ 25% are concerned about not knowing what they want to do

*This worries me as it can determine my future and how easy it will be to find a job and what kind of money I can earn. (age 16)*

When the obtaining of a job is so linked in a young person's mind to getting good grades and finding the right path, these are three worries that can be soothed – if not solved – by advisers.

As we explored in Chapter Two, many young people are remarkably comfortable with trusting their instinct, sticking with their passion, and trusting the process.

Here, as we approach crunch time, advisers could remind them of this and reinforce that it's okay not to know exactly where they're going.

We also need to provide them with resources which can help them tap into the reality of life on each given pathway. Self-visualisation and access to role models can help to untangle their worries and show them a way forward that isn't so scary after all.



## UCAS TOOLS: CONTROL

1. Use **The Hub** to research, favourite, and explore – and then combine all that work to bring an application to life on the same platform.
2. Use the course recommendations based on content they have 'favourited' in The Hub – which puts them in control of what's shown to them.
3. Access the **latest podcasts, videos** and **Hub lives** so students can hear directly from their role models and peers.
4. Hosting the **UCAS Widget** on your school or college website enables students and their parents to link directly to key pages **on [ucas.com](https://ucas.com)**.

## WHAT NEXT?

### THE HUB IS AT THE HEART OF SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE TO MAKE SENSIBLE DECISIONS

Designed to satisfy their digital preferences, whilst remaining simple and intuitive for both student and adviser use, it's where every student journey of discovery begins. **Visit our Hub Guide** on [ucas.com/hub-adviser](https://ucas.com/hub-adviser), where teachers can find lesson

plans and classroom posters, and read top tips on finding the most suitable features to suit your needs. Alongside The Hub, familiarise yourself with the 12 key tools from this report so that you have the right answers when a young person comes to you for advice:

<p><b>UCAS Discover</b> Subject tasters, guides, and our what-to-study-next tool.</p>	<p><b>UCAS YouTube</b> Simple, digestible videos to help young people find their way on their own time.</p>	<p><b>Real stories</b> With people who have followed different paths to success.</p>	<p><b>The Ultimate Guide</b> Answers to the big questions and solutions for the heart and the head.</p>
<p><b>Careers quiz</b> Linking personalities to courses and courses to careers.</p>	<p><b>Events tool</b> Find open days, online tasters, and virtual tours.</p>	<p><b>Industry guides</b> Explore subjects, locations, universities, and colleges.</p>	<p><b>UCAS Exhibitions</b> Meet providers, employers, apprenticeship providers face to face.</p>
<p><b>Parent Podcasts</b> Ensuring parents have access to the latest information and guidance to support students.</p>	<p><b>Apprenticeships</b> Explore everything there is to know about an apprenticeship pathway.</p>	<p><b>Unibuddy chat</b> Give prospective students the opportunity to chat with current students on their course.</p>	<p><b>Budget tools</b> Support and guidance to help make money matters less stressful.</p>

# COMING SOON...

Our **Outreach Connection Service** is launching in 2024, as a directory for advisers to see what support is available in the relevant area.

It has been developed for UK teachers and advisers offering an efficient and timesaving online tool for you to support disadvantaged and underrepresented students to higher education. The service allows trusted providers to showcase their outreach opportunities, so teachers and advisers can connect students to suitable opportunities throughout their discovery journey.

**Adviser Portal Integration with the UCAS Hub** is constantly developing and soon it will let you see and understand how your students are using The Hub for their discovery journey. By following their patterns of behaviour you'll have even better insight and be able to offer the right support at the right times.

With new research already taking place, and new tools in development, make sure you're signed up to our newsletter so that you don't miss out on the latest news at [www.ucas.com/adviser-updates](http://www.ucas.com/adviser-updates).

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