University of BRISTOL

The Benefits of Hindsight: Reconsidering higher education choices

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Declarations of interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that influenced or could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper. Nicola Dandridge was chief executive of the Office for Students from 2017 to 2022.

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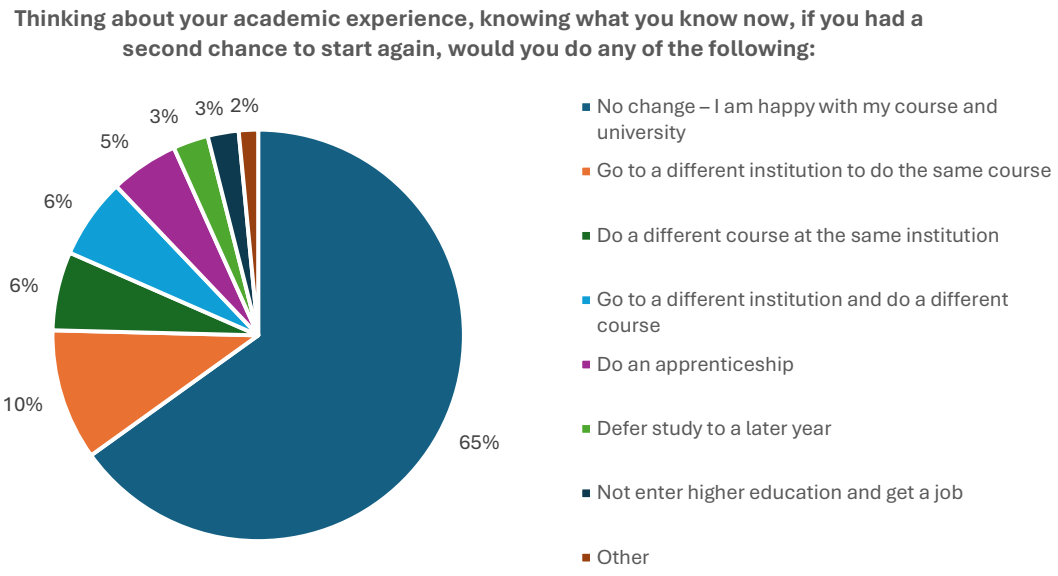
Executive Summary

This report summarises the findings of a research project undertaken in 2024 that explores the views of undergraduates and graduates who consider that with hindsight they would make a different choice about their higher education as to whether, what, and where to study. The research takes as its starting point the question in the annual *Student Academic Experience Survey* (SAES), conducted by the Higher Education Policy Institute and Advance HE, which asks undergraduates in the UK whether they would make the same choices again about what and where to study. The SAES consistently records a sizeable minority of students (40% in 2024) reporting that with hindsight they would make a different decision.

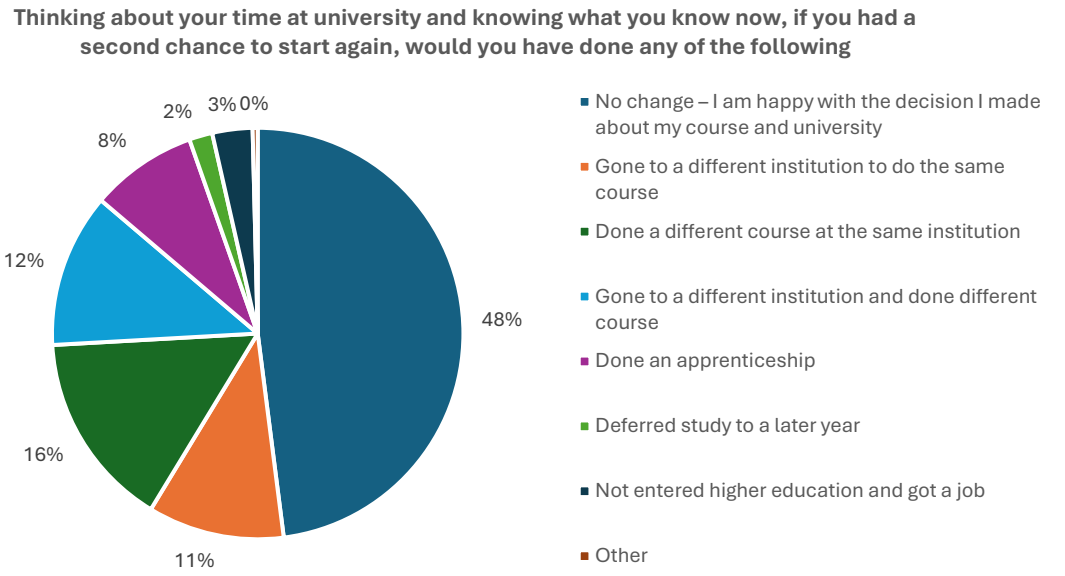
The research involved two new surveys, one of UK undergraduates and the other of UK graduates (aged between 25-30 years old), with just over 2000 respondents for each survey. Focus groups and interviews were also undertaken. Both surveys started with the same SAES question as to whether with hindsight respondents would make the same choice again as to whether, what, and where to study. A subsequent question explored the influences on their decisions. The surveys then split with no further questions being asked of those who reported being happy with their choice (other than in relation to their personal and demographic details). The group that said that they would have made a different decision were then asked what would have helped them make a better decision, and what difference that would have made to them. Respondents were also asked whether they had considered changing course or institution during their studies, and if so what might have assisted them in doing this. These same questions were discussed in the focus groups and interviews.

Research findings

Of the undergraduates surveyed, a substantial majority (65%) said that knowing what they know now they would make the same decision again. This finding confirms that a large majority of students are happy with their choices – in terms of going to higher education, what to study, and where to study. Of the 35% who said they would make a different decision, 10% said that with the benefit of hindsight they would have chosen the same course but at a different institution, 6% a different course at the same institution, 6% both a different course and different institution, 5% an apprenticeship, 3% would have deferred to another year, 3% would not have undertaken higher education and would have got a job, and 2%'*other*'.



The graduate survey results are different. The majority of undergraduates reporting that they were happy with their decision becomes a (substantial) minority of graduates. 48% of the graduates surveyed said that with hindsight they would make the same decision and 52% a different decision, with 16% saying that they would have chosen a different course at the same institution, 12% both a different course and a different institution, 11% the same course at a different institution, 8% an apprenticeship, 3% not gone to higher education and got a job, 2% defer to another year, and 0% '*other*'.



Of the undergraduates and graduates who said that they would have made a different decision, a very large proportion (85% of the undergraduates and 90% of the graduates) said that in their view their decision had made a lot or quite a lot of difference to them.

The most common reason given by the undergraduate respondents for thinking they would have made a different choice was that they would have been happier or fitted in better, followed by the view that their academic studies would have been more interesting/challenging, and that a different choice would have enabled more career options. The most common reason given by the graduate respondents was – by far - that a different choice would have enabled more career options.

These views were reflected in the free text comments in the survey: *'what I regret is the course … I wasted a number of years of my life doing what I didn't want*', or *'I regret the course that I picked … it has limited where I can work'*, or more bluntly *'my degree didn't help me get a job'*. Others emphasised that parts of their course were good but there were elements missing: *'I regret not doing a placement*'.

The survey questions asked respondents what the influences had been on their choices. For the undergraduates, the factor that had the most influence was their own research, as well as school/college results, choice of subjects, information received from the universities or colleges, university league tables, student information websites, and the advice of parents (more frequently referred to than teachers or careers advisers). Graduate responses were similar, except that social media was much more often reported as an influential factor. There was no clear pattern of difference between undergraduate and graduate respondents who were happy with their decisions and those who were not, though the survey did suggest that undergraduates who were happy with their decisions had relied more on their own research, student information websites, and information received from their universities and colleges than those who were not.

In the focus group discussions links were made between students' university choices and what they had enjoyed studying at school, suggesting that students tended (or were encouraged) to look backwards on their experience at school rather than forwards to what might be best for them at university and after graduation. Several people referred to parental advice: *'My parents had an idea of what they wanted me to do, rather than thinking about what I wanted to do.' Others* referred to the pressures of external expectations to go directly to university rather than take a year out to reflect on priorities and alternatives: *'Even though I didn't want to go to university … I remember that situation where you had to because you [didn't want to be] different to everyone else.'*

In response to the question as to what would have assisted them in making different choices, 41% of the undergraduate respondents said that they should have done more research themselves, and 37% said that there was nothing that would have helped them at the time, given their circumstances. In the words of one focus group participant, *'I was just too young, inexperienced,*

didn't really know, and too influenced'. By contrast, 40% of the graduate respondents pointed more clearly to the need for different or better careers' advice.

The option of transferring course or institution was explored in both the surveys and the focus groups. Of those who considered that with hindsight they would have made a different decision, 59% of the undergraduate and 63% of the graduate respondents said that had that option been available they would have wanted to transfer. Not transferring was partly attributed to being unaware that it was an option. However, 49% of undergraduate and 30% of the graduate respondents said that transferring would not have been worth the effort and disruption. A frequent theme in the focus group discussions was that by the time students realised a different decision might have been better for them, or found out about the possibility of transferring, it was too late: at that point they were too embedded in their university lives. The additional cost of repeating a year was also identified as a concern.

The survey results were analysed by reference to respondents' demographic characteristics, including participation measures (POLAR), first in family to go to higher education, equality characteristics, and school type as well as features of their studies such as year of study, discipline, and institutional location. Further detail on how these characteristics were captured and coded is set out in Appendices 1 and 2 of the report.

Analysis of the data by year of study shows the proportions of undergraduates thinking they should have made a different decision increasing through the years of study. This correlates with students in their later years of study identifying career options as being the reason for thinking they would have made a different decision.

The data show some demographic differences: students from lower areas of participation were more likely to report that a different decision would have made a lot of difference to them (47% of POLAR quintile 1 compared to 36% of quintile 5). Students with a disability were also consistently less happy with their decisions than those without disabilities and indicated a greater wish to have transferred. However, the overall picture is quite fragmented: this research data suggests that there is perhaps more that unites the different demographic groups than separates them in terms of their reflections on their decision-making.

There are differences according to the parts of the UK in which the institution is located. 74% of undergraduate respondents studying in Scotland, 73% in Northern Ireland, 67% in Wales, and 64% in England stated that they were happy with their decisions, though country-level variation is less marked for the graduate respondents. Discipline differences suggest undergraduate respondents studying health-related subjects were happier with their decisions (72%), followed by 66% of those studying a humanities discipline, 63% of

science, technology, engineering and medicine (STEM) disciplines, and 62% of social science disciplines.

Conclusions and recommendations

The research focuses on the views of those undergraduates and graduates who considered that with the benefit of hindsight they would have made a different decision. Overwhelmingly the different decision they think they would have made relates to what and where to study rather than not going to university at all. Only 2 - 3% of those surveyed thought that higher education was not the right option for them.

As was acknowledged by participants in the focus groups, it is very easy to have the wisdom of hindsight. There is in any event no such thing as a perfect decision. Being in the right place, doing the right thing, and being surrounded by the right people cannot be easily predicted in advance however good the information, advice and guidance provided. Young people's views are always likely to change, and indeed higher education is designed to prompt exactly that sort of critical reflection that leads to changed views. It should also be acknowledged that some of the expressions of regret in the survey responses might represent speculation about alternatives being better ('the grass is always greener'), prompted by the survey questions.

Nonetheless, the proportions of the survey respondents who considered they would have made a different choice are substantial and are consistent with what other surveys have found. An overwhelmingly large share of both undergraduates and graduates stated that a different decision would have made a lot of difference to them. Further, the views expressed by many of the focus group participants were clear and specific as to what it was that they wished they had done differently: they should have chosen to study economics and finance and not just economics, Spanish plus another language and not just Spanish, or they should have taken a year out to gain labour market experience before applying for a different university. Those students were not expressing fanciful or fleeting aspirations, and to the extent that their views had changed when at university many found that the system was not responsive in accommodating their changed views and priorities.

For both the undergraduate respondents (particularly in their later years of study) and most markedly the graduate respondents, the importance of studying a subject that set them up for getting a job in a highly competitive labour market emerges as a strong theme, and the decision to undertake higher education was frequently rationalised by reference to improved labour market opportunities.

For those respondents who thought they had made the wrong decision, the survey findings point towards an interest in transfer. Although for many transferring course or institution was not a realistic option, for many it might

have been. The discussions in the focus groups did not suggest that the mechanics and options in relation to transferring course or institution were easily available or familiar.

Recommendations

The undergraduate and graduate findings reflect the views of different cohorts which means that a degree of caution should be applied before comparing the findings in relation to the two groups - for instance they would have been differently affected by Covid. The timing of the respondents' experience also needs to be taken into account. When describing the circumstances that led to them making their decisions, some of the graduates refer to events that took place over ten years previously, and advice and guidance to school and college students have developed substantially since then. Nonetheless the results of the survey and focus group findings point to the following recommendations.

Making the right choice first time round about whether, what and where to study

1. School and college students thinking about higher education should be encouraged and supported by teachers and careers advisers to carry out more research themselves into different course and university options, and at an earlier stage, in line with UCAS recommendations and Gatsby Benchmarks. Where appropriate, teachers and careers advisers may think that students should consider deferring their decisions about higher education for a year or more to allow for more mature and informed choices, and exposure to work experience. *[For sixth forms and colleges, and those representing them, supported by bodies such as the Careers Enterprise Company (CEC)]*

2. Schools and colleges should not necessarily see higher education as being a good outcome in itself, without more nuanced consideration of which courses and institutions may be best matches for a particular student. Ofsted assessment of school and college careers' guidance should reflect this. *[For sixth forms and colleges, and those representing them, supported by bodies such as the CEC, and Ofsted]*

3. The perspectives of undergraduates and graduates, and data about their experience, should inform the careers guidance given to young people at school and college. This requires greater coordination between careers advisers in schools and the higher education sector, with good practice being shared between the two. Higher education alumni networks could be usefully leveraged for this purpose. *[For sixth forms and colleges, those representing them, UCAS and the CEC, Ofsted, AGCAS, universities, and the DfE and equivalent UK government departments]*

4. Information provided to prospective students by higher education institutions must be accurate and realistic, and not blur with marketing and promotional material. *[For universities, regulatory/funding bodies, and government departments]*

Correcting course: the possibility of transferring course or institution

5. Work-related learning and the embedding of employability in the curriculum should be scaled up in universities, linked to greater flexibility in module choice. *[For universities and AGCAS]*

6. Universities should make information and guidance available and accessible to students to support transfer arrangements, between or within courses, supported by careers advice. In England, this should align with the OfS's requirements in regulatory condition F2. *[For universities, the OfS and regulatory/funding bodies, and UK government departments]*

7. Consideration should be given to UCAS playing a greater and more visible central coordinating function in supporting students who wish to transfer. *[For UCAS]*

8. The development of policy in England on the Lifelong Learning Entitlement should take into account the substantial number of undergraduate students who may wish to change their course or institution and who might be able to benefit from the proposed accredited end of year qualifications. *[For the DfE]*

Further evidence needed

9. The question in the Graduate Outcomes survey as to whether with hindsight graduates would make a different decision should be made mandatory across the UK, and the results published. *[For HESA/Jisc]*

10. A robust longitudinal cohort study would be of considerable value in enabling better understanding of the mechanisms underlying the issues identified in this report, particularly how students' and graduates' views change over time and with what consequences. A longitudinal study could also usefully capture information on careers guidance received and its impact on students' decisions and outcomes. *[For academic/policy researchers and government]*

1. Introduction

This report summarises the findings of a research project undertaken in 2024 that explores the views of undergraduates and graduates who considered that with hindsight they would have made a different choice as to whether, what, and where to study. Drawing on survey and focus groups findings, the research investigates the reasons for their views, what they wished they had done, what the consequences of their decisions had been for them, and what if anything would have enabled them to make a better decision or ensured a better outcome. The research finds that a substantial proportion of the undergraduates surveyed, and an even greater proportion of the graduates, said that with the benefit of hindsight they would have made different choices.

2. Existing research and analysis

The research took as its starting point the question in the *Student Academic Experience Survey* (SAES), conducted annually by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) and Advance HE, which asks undergraduate students in the UK whether they would make the same choices again about what and where to study: *'Thinking about your academic experience, knowing what you know now, if you had a second chance to start again, would you do any of the following ...'*. The 2024 SAES surveyed 10,319 full-time undergraduate students in the UK, and in response to the question about whether they would make the same choice again, a large majority (60%) reported that they were happy with their course and university. However, a sizable minority reported that with hindsight they would make a different decision. 8% said that they would *'go to a different institution to do the same course'*, 7% *'do a different course at the same institution'*, 7% *'do a degree apprenticeship'*, 6% *'go to a different institution to do a different course'*, 4% *'defer study to a later year'*, 3% *'not enter higher education and get a job'*, 2% *'do something outside HE'*, and 2% *'do an apprenticeship which does not also lead to a degree'*.[1] These proportions are broadly consistent with previous years' SAES surveys.

The SAES findings incorporate disaggregation by equality characteristics, social background, care-experience, subject studied and qualification, year of study, home or international status, accommodation type, provider type, and region. But beyond these broad categories, the survey does not ask open-text questions that might provide a more in-depth, qualitative explanation for the reasons behind the changed views.

In a report published in 2016, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) analysed responses to a question in the Longitudinal DLHE survey which asked graduates, three and a half years after graduation, whether they

[1] SAES 2024. https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/student-academic-experience-survey-2024

regretted their decisions about what and where to study.[2] The report noted that 32% of graduates said that with the benefit of hindsight they would have chosen a different subject and 21% a different institution. Ethnic minority graduates were significantly more likely to wish they had made different choices.[3] HEFCE's analysis is based on the statistical data and does not explore the reasons behind the regret. The DLHE survey was replaced in 2018 by the Graduate Outcomes survey which asks the same question, but the results are not published.

Academic research has looked at student non-continuation[4] and student transfers,[5] demonstrating correlation between drop-out and socio-economic disadvantage. Others have investigated student choice and again found correlation between disadvantage and poor/constrained choices.[6] However, other than the SAES and DLHE survey findings, no publications have been identified by the research team that specifically consider students who regret their higher education choices yet neither drop out nor transfer.

Other countries also conduct regular surveys of students to find out whether they are happy with their decisions, though the questions are differently formulated. For instance, the 2023 Irish National Survey of Student Engagement records 83% of students saying that they would go to the same institution they are now attending, and the Dutch equivalent of the National Student Survey (the Nationale Studenten Enquete) in 2024 found that over 73% of students report being happy with their 'course programme' decision *('based on my experiences so far, I would choose this course programme again'*).

Policy papers have considered issues relating to student transfer, either within the same institution or to another. According to UCAS, 8% of students change the specific subject area of their degree while 5% change the general subject

[2] HEFCE, *Graduate satisfaction with undergraduate choices*, 2016/18, https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED574165.pdf.
[3] According to the HEFCE report, *'the proportion of Black African graduates who say they would be likely to choose a different qualification is 18 percentage points higher, and 11 percentage points higher in the case of choosing something completely different; the proportion of Pakistani and Bangladeshi graduates likely to choose something completely different is 14 percentage points higher; the proportion of Indian graduates likely to choose a different qualification is 10 percentage points higher; the proportion of Chinese graduates likely to choose a different institution is nine percentage points higher.'*
[4] Anna F. Vignoles and Nattavudh Powdthavee, "The Socioeconomic gap in university dropouts", *The B.E. Journal of Economic Analysis & Policy* 9, no. 1 (2009); Yorke Mantz, *Leaving early: undergraduate non-completion in higher education.* Routledge, 1999.
[5] Samuel Dent, Hugh Mather, Jessica Nightingale and Tony Strike, *Should I stay or should I go? Student demand for credit transfer,* University of Sheffield, 2022.
[6] For instance, Stephen J Ball, Jackie Davies, Miriam David and Diane Reay, "'Classification' and 'judgement': social class and the 'cognitive structures' of choice in higher education", *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 23, no. 1 (2002): 51-72.

area.[7] Analysis by the Office for Students (OfS) suggests that less than 3% of students transfer to a different higher education provider one year after entry, with less than half of them transferring with credit.[8] The call for evidence on transfers conducted by the English Department for Education (DfE) in 2016 found that 23% of students who had changed provider found the process difficult or very difficult, and that it was more common for students who do not wish to continue their course to switch to another course with the same provider or simply drop out altogether.[9]

The 2016 White Paper, *Success as a Knowledge Economy,* that led to the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, states that '*we want a higher education system which is flexible enough to cope with change. [Despite funding now following the student] most students remain locked into the institutions they first choose, regardless of changes in circumstances*'.[10] The White Paper points to the need for steps to be taken to support student transfers at the end of the first or second year, with associated credit accumulation arrangements. These policy proposals are reflected in Condition F2 of the OfS's Regulatory Framework which requires registered providers to publish information about transfer arrangements. The role of credit accumulation in enabling more flexible learning and transfer was subsequently emphasised in both the DfE's Post-18 Review of Education and Funding,[11] and their emerging policy proposals for Lifelong Learning Entitlement.[12]

In their report *The Higher Education Market* (2017),[13] the National Audit Office analyses the low rates of transfer between institutions in England, relating these to inherent logistical or emotional barriers as well as academic barriers in connection with academic autonomy and the lack of an effective system of credit transfer. They note that providers in London tend to see more transfers due to the number of other providers nearby. They also describe how other

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[7] 'UCAS, *Where Next? What influences the choices school leavers make*?, 2021. https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-reports#where-next-what-influences-the-choices-school-leavers-make%E2%80%93-april-2021.

[8] OfS, *Student Transfers: Latest experimental statistics on students changing course for 2012/13-1018/19*, 2021. https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-transfers.

[9] 'DfE, *Accelerated Courses and Switching University or Degree*, 2016. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a750a18ed915d60d3b90a19/bis-16-263-accelerated-courses-and-switching.pdf.

[10]Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*, Cm 9258, 2016, chapter 2 paragraph 28. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/523396/bis-16-265-success-as-a-knowledge-economy.pdf.

[11]https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5ceeb35740f0b62373577770/Review_of_post_18_education_and_funding.pdf

[12] DfE webpage: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/lifelong-learning-entitlement-lle-overview/lifelong-learning-entitlement-overview.

[13] National Audit Office, The higher Education Market, 2017. https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/the-higher-education-market.

higher education systems overseas have more developed credit transfer mechanisms that facilitate student transfers. For example, some Canadian provinces provide a formal system for universities to recognise each other's credits, making it easier for students to transfer between providers.

3. Research methodology

This research involved two separate surveys: one of undergraduates and one of graduates. The undergraduate survey (sample size 2,195) was carried out in May 2024. The graduate survey (sample size 2,024) was carried out in October 2024. Both surveys were presented to the participants in terms of seeking views about student decision-making and whether with hindsight they would make different decisions and if so why.

The undergraduates were selected using a random sample of current students in the UK across all years of study. The graduates already had a university degree from a UK university and were aged between 25-30. This age group was selected to ensure that those surveyed were sufficiently close to their undergraduate degree to be able to remember the reasons for and circumstances of their choices, but with sufficient distance to enable them to reflect on the implications of their degrees on their current work and personal circumstances. The purpose of interviewing graduates was to understand the extent to which views and perspectives may have changed after graduating. Both surveys were followed up with focus groups and interviews.

The survey questions for both undergraduate and graduate respondents are attached at Appendix 1. The first substantive question in both surveys replicates the wording of the relevant SAES question, including in relation to the options provided ('*Thinking about your academic experience, knowing what you know now, if you had a second chance to start again, would you do any of the following* ...'). A subsequent question explores the influences on their decision. The surveys then split with no further questions being asked of those who reported being happy with their decision (other than in relation to their personal and demographic details). The group who said that they would have made a different decision are then asked what would have helped them make a better decision, what difference their decision made to them, whether they would have wanted to change course or institution during their studies, and if so what would have assisted them in doing this. These same questions were discussed in the focus groups and interviews.

Focus groups and interviews were conducted online between October and December 2024. 30 undergraduate students participated in six undergraduate focus group sessions and four individual interviews, and 31 graduates participated in seven focus groups and three interviews. The interviews were undertaken where individuals had not been able to participate in the focus groups or where it was felt that further discussion emanating from the focus

groups would be of value. The details of the methodology used in the surveys, focus groups, and interviews are set out in Appendix 2.

4. Research Findings

This section summarises the research findings, drawing on the survey data and the focus group and interview evidence. The findings are presented sequentially in relation to each question.

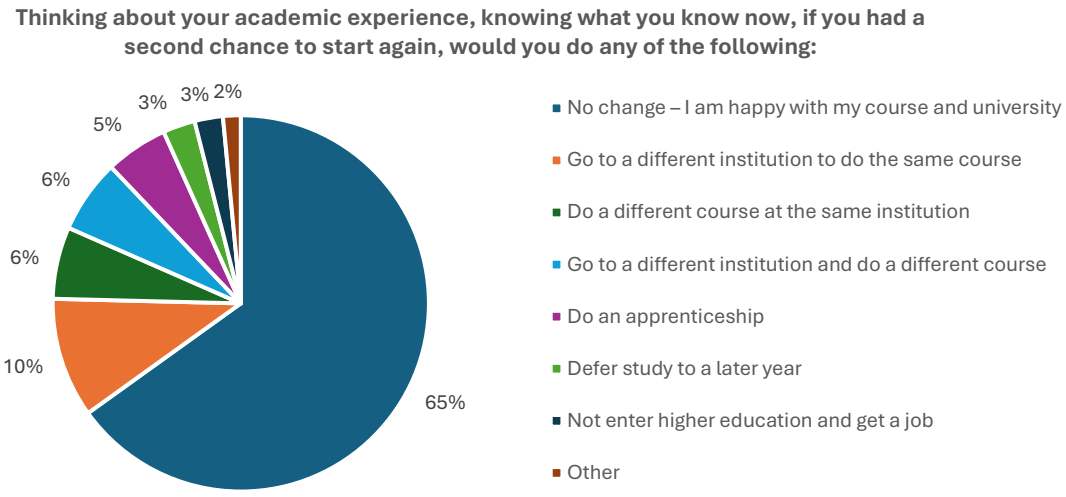
4.1 With hindsight, would undergraduate and graduate respondents make the same decision

Undergraduates

A substantial majority of the undergraduate respondents stated that thinking about their academic experience and knowing what they know now, if they had a second chance to start again, they would make the same choice again and are happy with their decisions (65%). However, a significant minority said that if they had a second chance, they would make a different decision (35%).

Of the reasons given for thinking that they would have made a different choice, 10% said that they would have done the same course at a different institution, 6% a different course at the same institution, 6% would have done both a different course and at a different institution, 5% would have done an apprenticeship, 3% deferred to another year, 3% not gone to higher education and got a job, and 2% *'other'*. These proportions are similar to the 2024 SAES findings.[14]

Figure 1. Proportions of undergraduate respondents happy with their choices/thinking they would have done something different

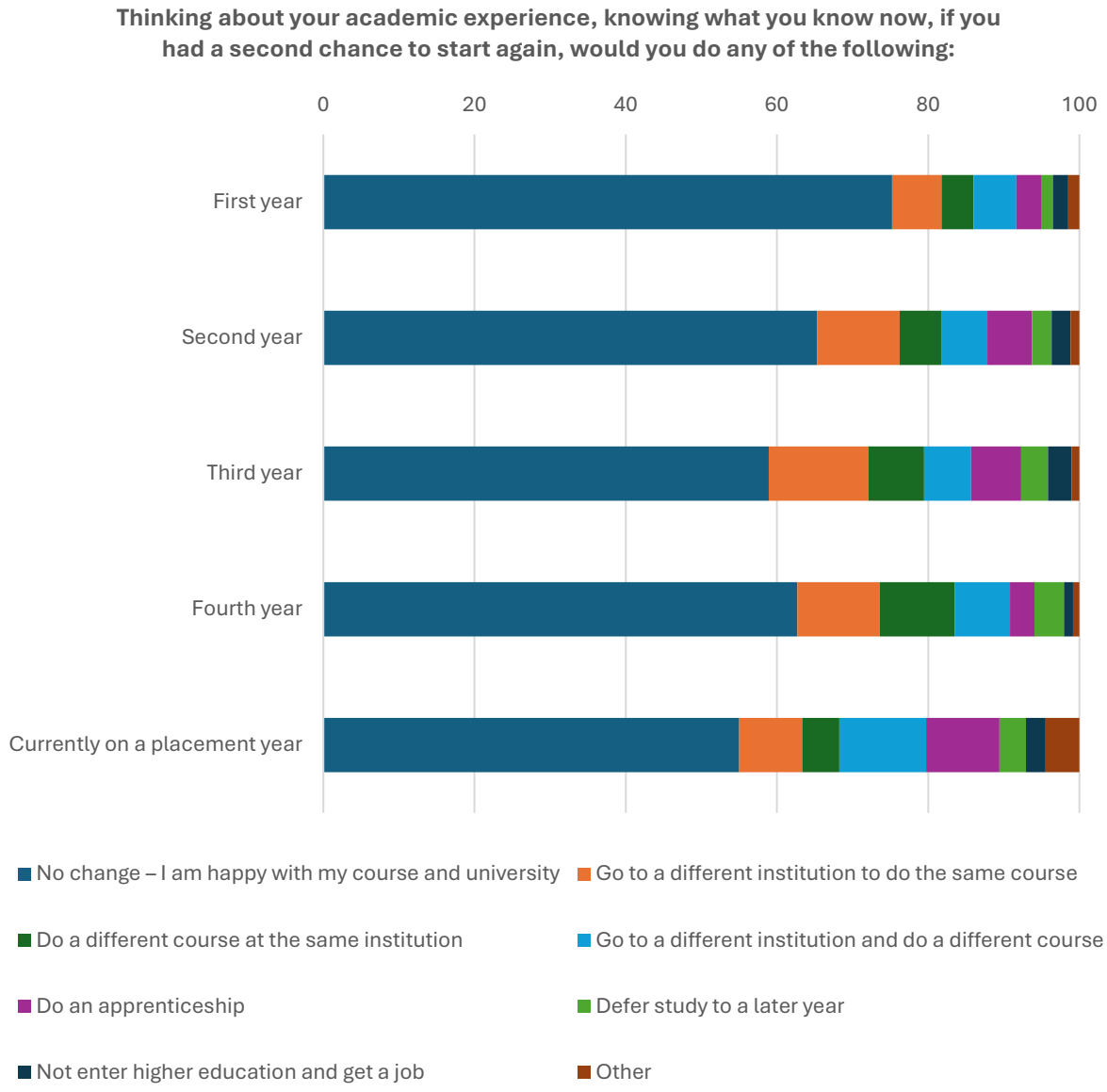


[14] As above at page 10, the SAES 2024 figures are 60% of undergraduate respondents were happy with their decision, 8% would have chosen the same course at a different institution, 7% a different course at the same institution, 7% done a degree apprenticeship, 6% both different course and institution, 4% deferred, 3% got a job, 2% done a non-degree apprenticeship, and 2% done something else outside higher education.

Of the 35% of respondents who reported that they would have made a different decision, a very large proportion (85%) stated that a different choice would have made a lot or quite a lot of difference to them.

Thinking that they would have done something different appears to be more common among undergraduate respondents in later years of their degree, a pattern that appears to be statistically significant. Disaggregating survey responses into years of study, 25% of first-year students reported that they wish they had done something different, increasing to 35% of second-years, 41% of third-years, and 37% of fourth-years.

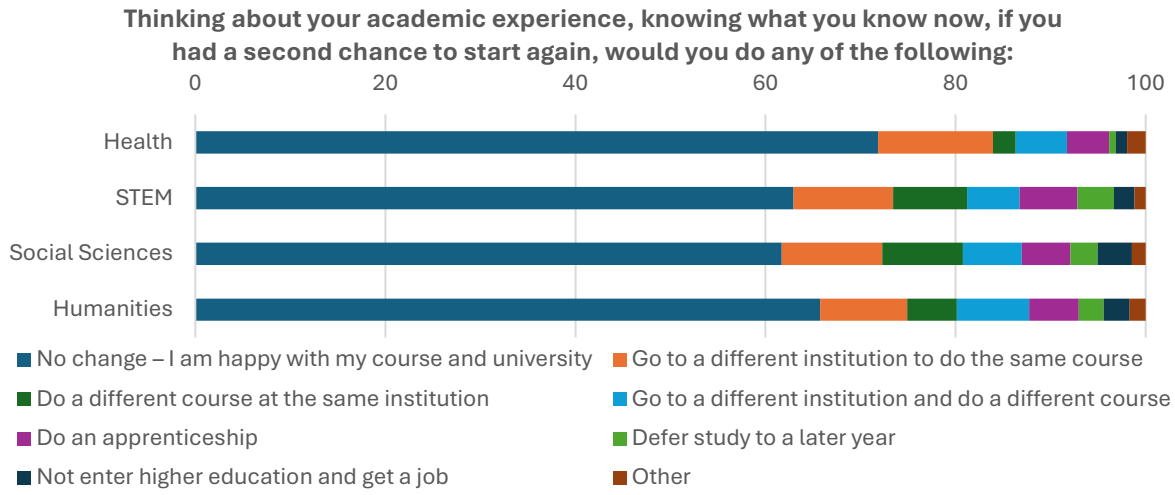
Figure 2. Proportions of undergraduates happy with their choices/thinking they would have done something different, by year of study (%)



The proportions differ according to the parts of the UK in which the higher education provider is located. 74% of undergraduate respondents attending a Scottish institution, 73% attending a Northern Irish institution, 67% of those attending a Welsh institution, and 64% of those attending an English institution reported being happy with their decision, all statistically significant differences.

There are also statistically significant differences by reference to fields of study. 72% of undergraduate respondents studying health-related subjects report being happy with their decision, compared to 66% of those studying humanities disciplines, 63% of those in STEM disciplines, and 62% in social sciences disciplines.

Figure 3. Proportions of undergraduate respondents happy with their choices/thinking they should have done something different, by field of study (%)



Of the 91 EU and 82 international (non-EU) undergraduates surveyed, 62% were happy with their choices. In relation to the 38% who thought they would have made a different decision, of the EU students 15% said that would have gone to a different institution to do the same course, 7% a different course at the same institution, and 5% both a different institution and a different course; of the international (non-EU) students, 14% said they would have gone to a different institution to do the same course, 13% a different institution and a different course, and 5% a different course at the same institution.

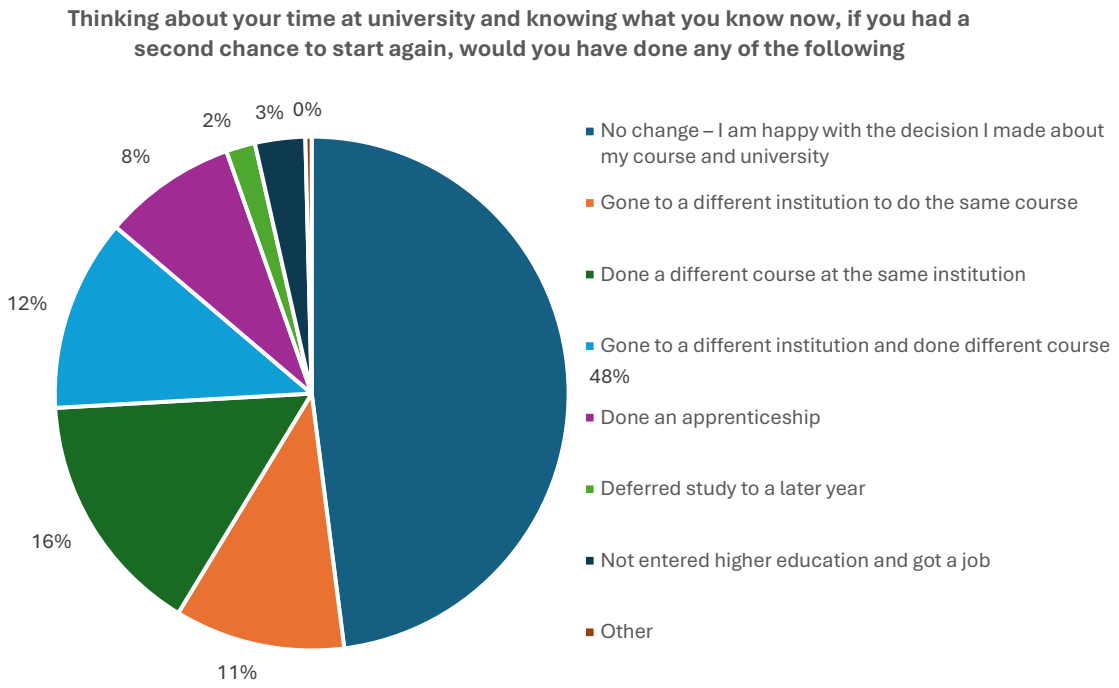
Graduates

The graduate results present a different picture. What was a majority of undergraduate respondents reporting that they were happy with their decision becomes a minority of graduate respondents (48%), with a small majority (52%) reporting that they wished they had made a different choice.

In relation to what they think they would have done differently, 16% said that they would have done a different course at the same institution, 12% both a

different course and at a different institution, 11% gone to a different institution to do the same course, 8% done an apprenticeship, 3% not gone to higher education and got a job, 2% deferred to another year, and 0% *'other'*.

Figure 4. Proportions of graduate respondents happy with their choices/thinking they would have done something different



Of the graduate respondents reporting that they wished they had made a different decision, a very large proportion (91%) said that a different decision would have made a lot or quite a lot of difference to them.

Differences between the parts of the UK in which the graduate respondents studied was smaller in size than with the undergraduates, with the exception of graduates in Wales who were happier with their decisions (54% of graduates in Wales were happy with their decision, compared to 48% in England, and 47% in each of Scotland and Northern Ireland). In terms of reasons given for wishing they had made a different decision, graduate respondents who studied in Wales reported much more frequently that their reasons for wishing they had made a different decision related to career-related options compared to the other countries, with graduate respondents who had studied in Northern Ireland more frequently citing living costs.[15]

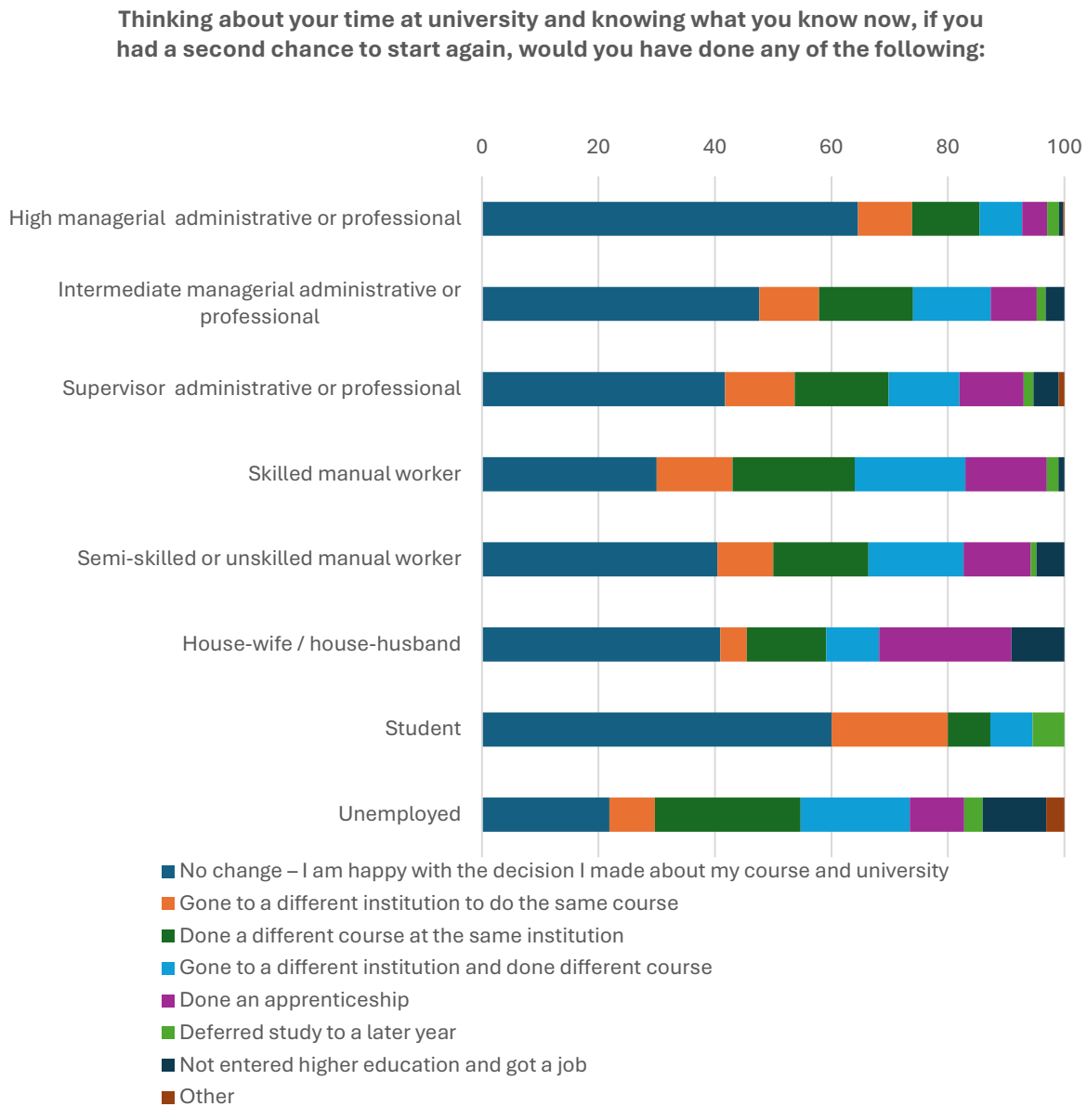
The results in terms of graduate respondents' field of study are broadly similar to the undergraduate results and show statistically significant differences: 56%

[15] These findings align with the findings of the SAES 2024 survey report which (page 22) suggest that students in Northern Ireland are more likely to take on paid employment during their degree, which the SAES suggests may be linked to lower levels of maintenance support in Northern Ireland.

of social sciences and 55% humanities graduates report that they would have made a different choice, compared to 46% of STEM graduates.

The graduate results were cross-tabulated against their professions, grouped according to the Office for National Statistics' Standard Occupational Classification categories. This was done to see if there was an association between graduates' professional status and their survey responses. Overall, graduates employed in more highly skilled occupations, and those undertaking further study, were more often happy with their choices, compared to graduates in less skilled occupations or unemployed, though their reasons varied.

Figure 5. Proportions of graduate respondents happy with their choices/thinking they should have done something different, by employment status (%)



Even though higher levels of regret were expressed by semi-skilled, skilled, and unemployed graduate respondents, a greater proportion of graduates employed in higher occupations considered that a different decision would have had a lot of impact on them compared to their counterparts working in lower-skilled occupations.

The graduate survey asked an additional question as to how respondents thought they would have answered the question about whether they were happy with their decision when they were an undergraduate. Of the 2,024 graduate respondents, 38% said that they were happy with their decision both now and when they were an undergraduate. At the other end of the spectrum, 19% said that they wished they had made a different decision at the time and were still of that view now. Somewhat in the middle, 10% of respondents said that in the past they wished they had made a different decision but now did not. Conversely 33% said that they had been happy with their decision when they were undergraduates but were not now.

The question did not investigate the nature of the change of views, though the reasons for changing views were asked in the free text comments. A common explanation as to why views had changed was related to having a more realistic understanding of the job market ('*Knowing what I know now about career paths, I would've chosen a different degree to get better options*'). Another commonly shared reason related to student loans and the costs associated with undergraduate degrees. Some respondents referred to degree apprenticeships as representing a better choice (*'A lot of university courses can be done with apprenticeship. So better to make money than owe money'*). Other reasons mentioned included the impact of Covid, family reasons *('I wanted to stay close to home at the time but now I wished I had branched out*'), and difficulties in transition and adapting to university.

4.2 Reasons for undergraduate and graduate respondents thinking they would have made a different choice

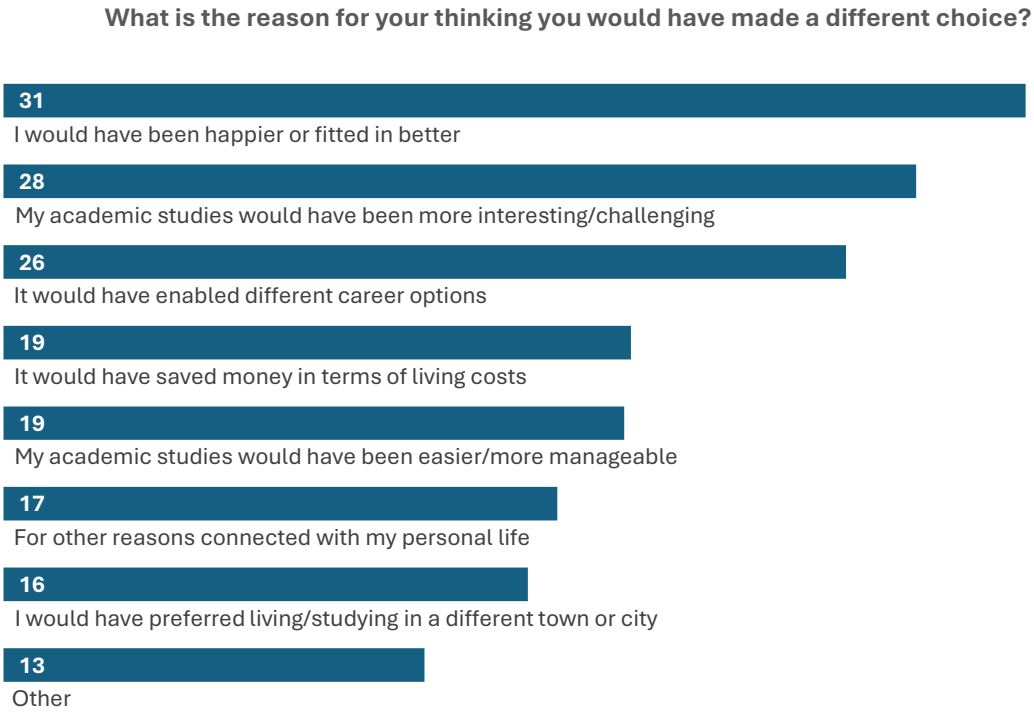
For those survey respondents who stated that with hindsight they would have made a different decision, they were then asked about the reasons for their expression of regret: 'W*hat is the reason for your thinking you would have made a different choice*?' Multiple options were available and respondents could select as many options as they considered appropriate.

Undergraduates

The reasons given by the undergraduate respondents vary substantially. The most common reason was that *'I would have been happier or fitted in better'* (identified by 31% of respondents), followed by '*My academic studies would have been more interesting/challenging*' (28%) and '*It would have enabled different career options*' (26%). 19% referred to living costs as a factor ('*It would have saved money in terms of living costs')* and also 19% for *'My*

academic studies would have been easier/more manageable', suggesting that students regretted a lack of challenge more than too much challenge. 17% referred to other reasons connected to their personal life, 16% *'I would have preferred living/studying in a different town or city'*, and 13% *'other'*.

Figure 6: Undergraduate respondent reasons for thinking they would have made a different choice (%)

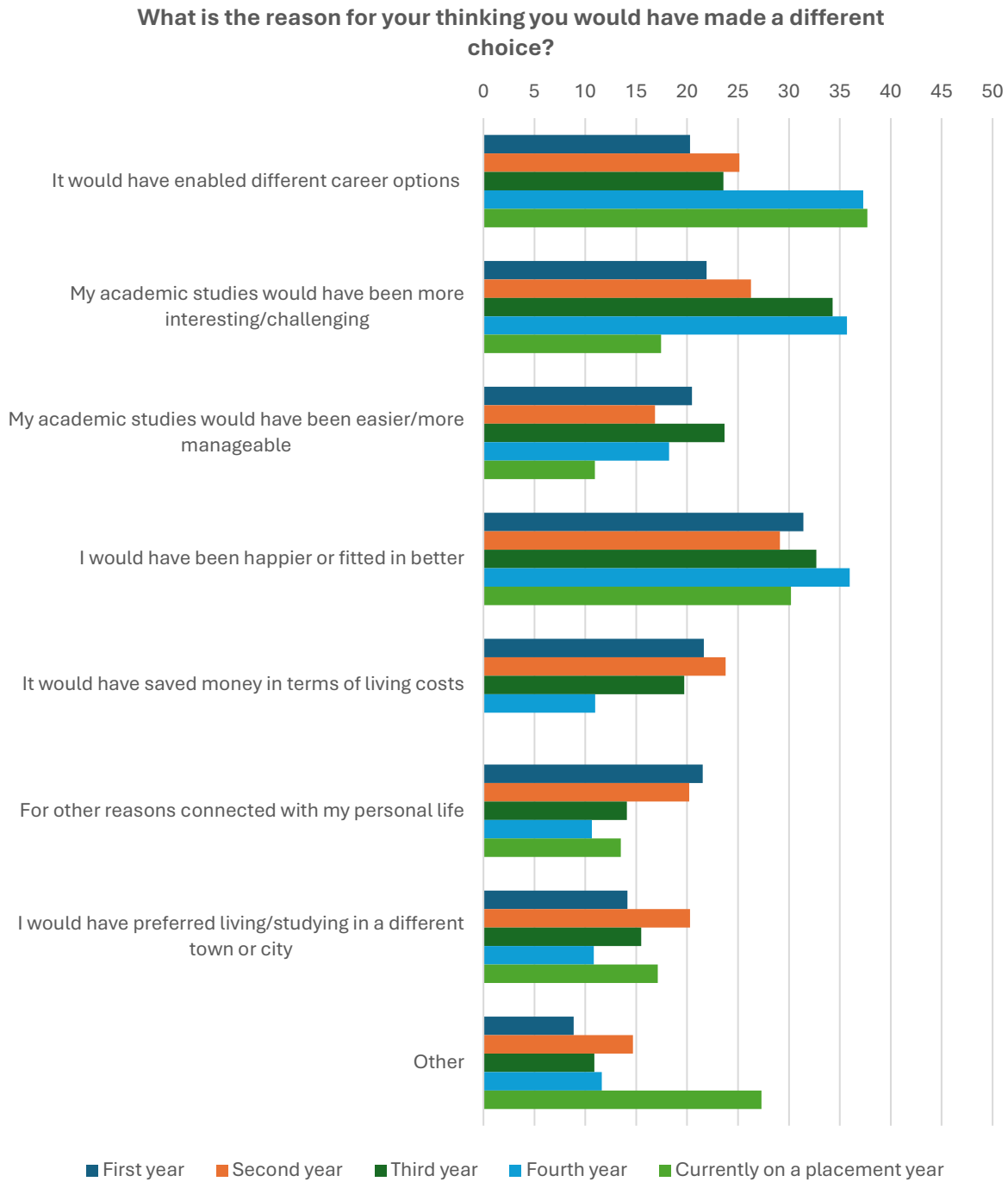


The survey invited free text responses for those who responded *'other'*. Of the undergraduate respondents, 101 chose *'other'* and provided a free text explanation. Reasons given were that a different decision would have avoided the impact of Covid (*'Lockdowns and online study, due to Covid 19, made learning and surviving at university very difficult and upsetting for me'*), that a different choice would have enabled a better quality course or institution (*'Quality of my university and its lecturers could have been better'*), it would have relieved debt and financial burden *('I wouldn't be in so much debt and would be far better prepared for the career I now have'*), and would have had a beneficial impact on career paths (*'Would have prepared me in a field that would have given career growth'*).

The reasons given differ according to the year of study, with the overall patterns being statistically significant. The proportion of undergraduate respondents citing *'My academic studies would have been more interesting/challenging'* increases from 22% in year one, 26% in year two, 34% in year three and 36% in year four. The proportion citing *'It would have enabled different career options'* increases from 20% in year one to 25% in year two,

24% in year three, and 37% in year four. Conversely, the proportion citing '*It would have saved money in terms of living costs*' decreases from 22% for students in year one to 11% in year four. 'For other reasons connected with my personal life' decreases from 22% and 20% in years one and two, to 14% and 11% in years three and four.

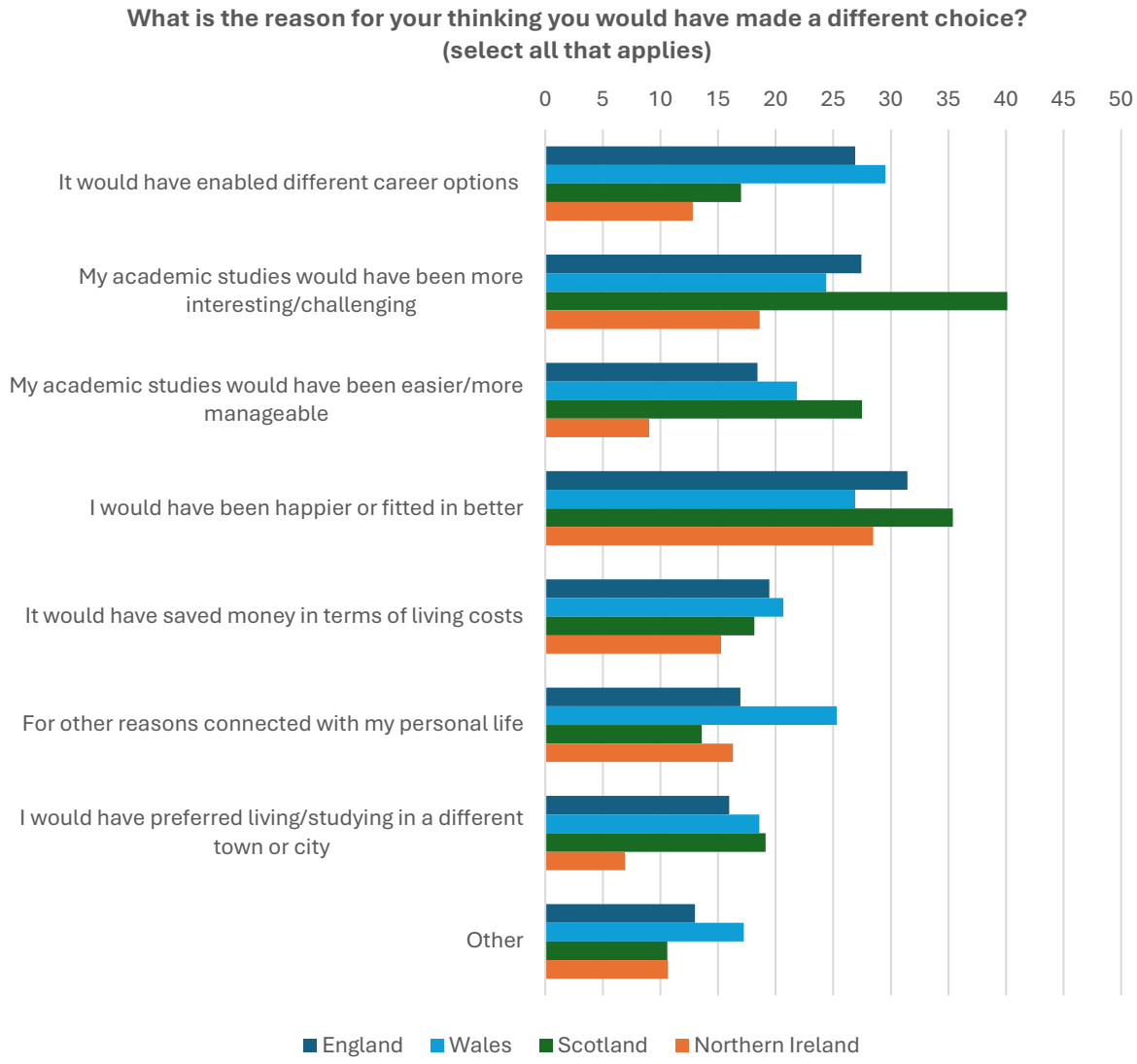
Figure 7: Undergraduate respondent reasons for thinking they would have made a different choice, by year of study (%)



There are also variations in responses according to the parts of the UK in which the provider is located, most of which are statistically significant. 30% of

respondents studying at institutions in Wales, 27% in England, 17% in Scotland and 13% in Northern Ireland said that a different choice would have enabled different career options. 40% of students in Scotland, 27% in England, 24% in Wales and 19% in Northern Ireland said that their academic studies would have been more interesting/challenging.

Figure 8: Undergraduate respondent reasons for thinking they would have made a different choice, by location of study (%)

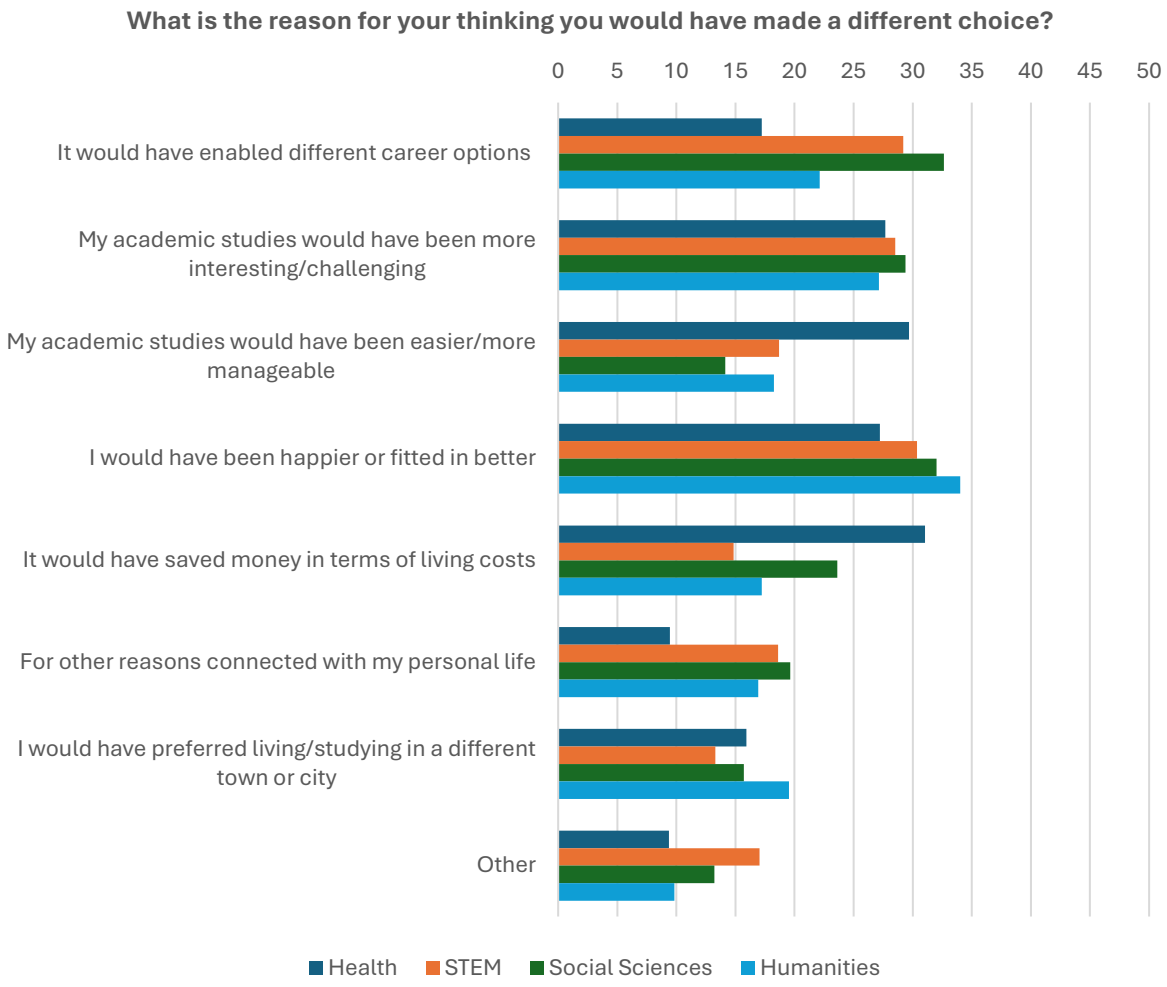


International (non-EU) undergraduate respondents identified career options as the most common reason for wishing they had made a different choice (37%). Compared to their UK-based counterparts, more international undergraduate respondents said that their studies would have been more interesting/ challenging had they made a different decision (34% of international students compared to 26% of domestic students).

There is also statistically significant variation in subject of study: 33% of social science undergraduate respondents stated that a different choice would have

enabled different career options, compared to 29% of STEM respondents, 22% of humanities respondents, and 17% of those studying health-related subjects. A much larger proportion of undergraduates studying health-related subjects (30%) cited '*my academic studies would have been easier/more manageable*' compared to the other three groups.

Figure 9: Undergraduate respondent reasons for thinking they would have made a different choice, by field of study (%)



These issues were explored in the focus group discussions. Participants referred to learning-related reasons for thinking they would have made a different decision, with comments referencing a lack of interest in the course content and that the teaching and facilities would not enhance students' professional knowledge. A humanities student explained:

> *'I found that the knowledge they had to offer, the experiences of the tutors themselves, and the actual equipment and facilities weren't that great. I feel I would have been able to learn a lot more in a better and more professional environment if I had gone to another institution. I felt I*

ended up having to pick up the lack of tutors and do a lot of independent learning.'

Others described how the course did not match their expectations based on what was shown on university websites and communicated in open days.

> *'I think the way that it was sold is not quite exactly how it is now.' (second-year social sciences student)*

A final-year humanities undergraduate made a similar point in the context of the financial pressures her university was under and the fact that another university might have had better resourced:

> *'My current university has a lot of significant financial issues, and the area I'm studying is the first on the chopping block. My course is being gutted. There are a lot of modules being taken out.'*

Several undergraduates regretted choosing their courses because they limited their career options. A recently graduated STEM student spoke of the challenges she was facing in finding a job:

> *'I felt that the way that the courses were structured was solely for academia. When I realised that I didn't want to go down that path or I didn't feel there were many career opportunities down that line, what could I do with this degree? It didn't really transfer to other subjects or onto other industry-led jobs, which require very specific skills which I didn't have.'*

Reasons relating to cost of living or location were also identified. This was not just a question of having to manage the high cost of living while studying, but also raised the stakes on the significance of their decisions:

> *'I wish I had considered the cost implications and distance because I'm from the north of England and now I live in Bristol. ... Bristol is the second most expensive for rent outside of London. I didn't consider all that, and I wish I had considered [it] more in the application process.'*

> *'The fact that I'm so aware of the cost of it makes me think more critically, because I'm trying to get as much as possible as I can. I know the impact that it's had on both my future finances and also on my parents. I'm aware of how much better I would have wanted it to be for that.'*

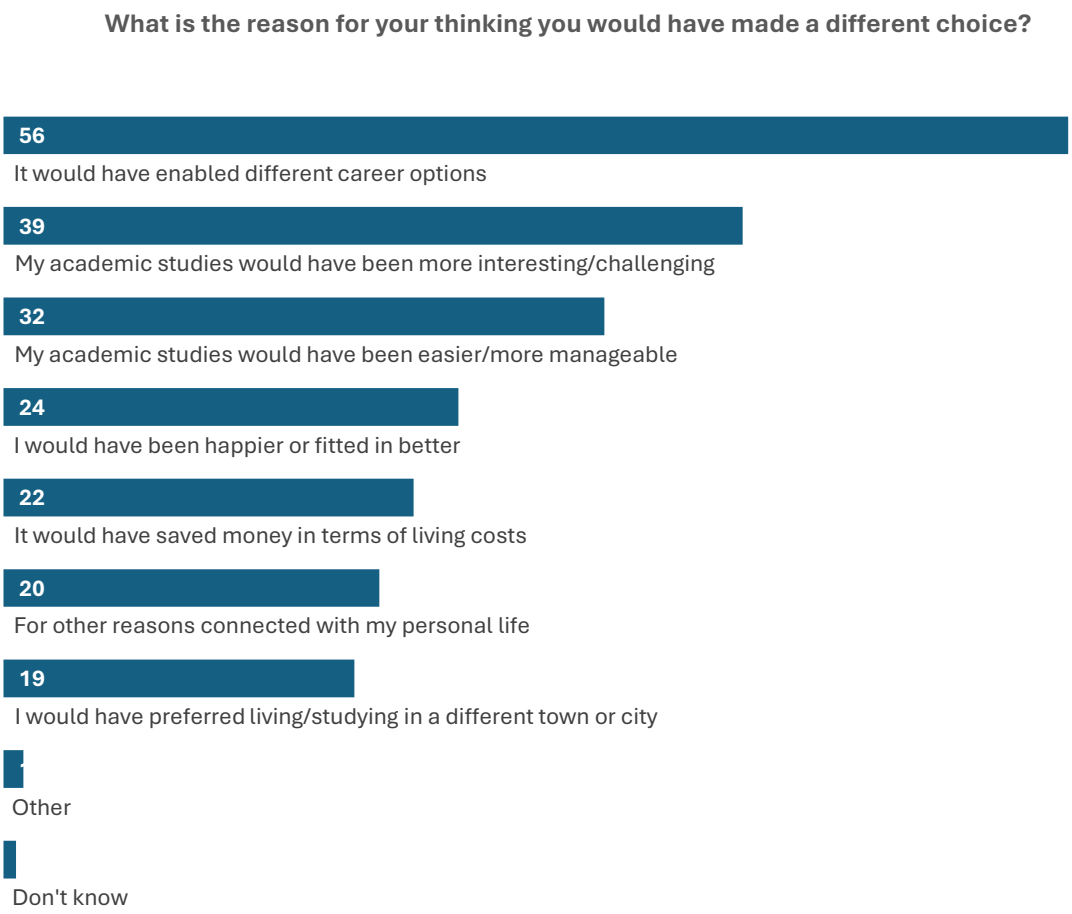
A few participants drew comparisons between the costs of their university courses and alternative options such as degree apprenticeships. Although the survey questions only referred to the option of doing an apprenticeship, several focus group participants specifically identified degree apprenticeships as the option they would have preferred. A recently graduated participant who had studied social sciences said:

'I was thinking I probably would have done a degree apprenticeship if they had been more available when I was going to university, because then I still get a degree but there's not the loan.'

Graduates

The reasons given by graduates were similar, but differently prioritised. For the graduates the most common reason given for their thinking they would have made a different choice was career related: 56% of graduate respondents compared to 26% of undergraduate respondents said that the reason they would have made a different choice was that it would have enabled different career options. Graduates employed in lower-skilled occupations referred to this reason more often than those employed in higher-level occupations. In addition, 39% of the graduate respondents referenced being happier and fitting in better as a reason, and 32% said that their academic studies would have been more interesting/challenging.

Figure 10: Graduate respondent reasons for thinking they would have made a different choice (%)



Ten graduate respondents provided more free text explanations of their identification of the '*other*' category. Their explanations referred to a wish to

have had more hands-on work-related experience (*'My degree didn't help me get a job. I've found experience is more useful than a qualification'*), as well as issues of debt and financial burdens (*'Don't want to be in debt'*).

Career-related reasons for thinking they would have made a different decision also emerged strongly from the graduate focus groups. Several participants reflected that their courses were too specialised and had led to limited career options or bore little relevance to the jobs they had ended up doing.

> *'I regret the course that I picked: it's too specialised. It has limited where I can work - I can work on a children's ward and nothing else'.*

> *'The university I went to was very specific in marketing. So, when I graduated and now, I find it difficult to find jobs because it's very specific.'*

> *'I graduated with a first. I did the best I physically could in this course. I can't have a nicer looking little degree on my resumé and yet nothing comes of it. Nothing comes of it. And there was very little help getting something to come from it.'*

A few graduate participants referred to a lack of practical job-related practice or internship opportunities in their courses, which might have contributed to their difficulties in getting jobs or the time it took them to get a job that they wanted.

> *'I found myself regretting choosing [the university] to do my theatre studies course - not because I didn't enjoy it, but it's very conceptual, there's not a lot of practical stuff involved. ... I just kind of wish that maybe employability was emphasised more because it just made it really hard after graduation.'*

> *'I regret not doing a placement year with it or any kind of placement because ... it's a long time of working in other jobs that were not relevant. Whereas I feel that if I had done some kind of placement I might have got a better head start.'*

By contrast, a few of the focus group graduates said that their views had changed and they now realised that the skills they had learned had proven useful in their careers. For instance, a graduate participant who had dropped out and then started another course explained:

> *'When I started another degree and all my friends were graduating, it was like an all-time high of regret. Like, "Why didn't I choose this before?" When I landed a job, I almost started forgetting about it. But now, when I'm trying to look at different career paths, it's almost as if*

I have made the right choice. So, it definitely does fluctuate I think based on where I am currently.'

Learning-related reasons were also mentioned, though not to the same extent as in the undergraduate focus group discussions.

'What I regret is the course. I didn't really have a passion for it. ... two years into the university I found out that this is not really what I want. ...I wasn't happy about it. It was just like I wasted a number of years of my life doing what I didn't want to.'

Unlike the undergraduate focus groups, the graduates did not particularly identify cost of living as a factor. However, like the undergraduates a few drew comparisons between the costs of their university courses and alternative options such as degree apprenticeships.

'I'm working in a tech company now that hires apprentices and I'm always thinking 'I wish I had done that, done that process, gone through that route - do an apprenticeship that has a degree course while you are working and then progress after that', rather than now having three years at university which I really enjoyed but now sadly having that financial issue in having to repay the money - well repaying mostly the interest and not really the loan.'

4.3 The influences on choices when applying to higher education

All undergraduate and graduate survey respondents, whether happy with their choices or not, were asked about the sources of information or advice that had influenced their decisions. The purpose of asking this question of both groups was to enable comparisons to be drawn between the sources of advice for those who were happy with their choices and those who were not.

Both undergraduate and graduate respondents referenced a variety of sources of information facilitating their decision, with some variation between those who were happy with their choices and those who were not.

Undergraduates

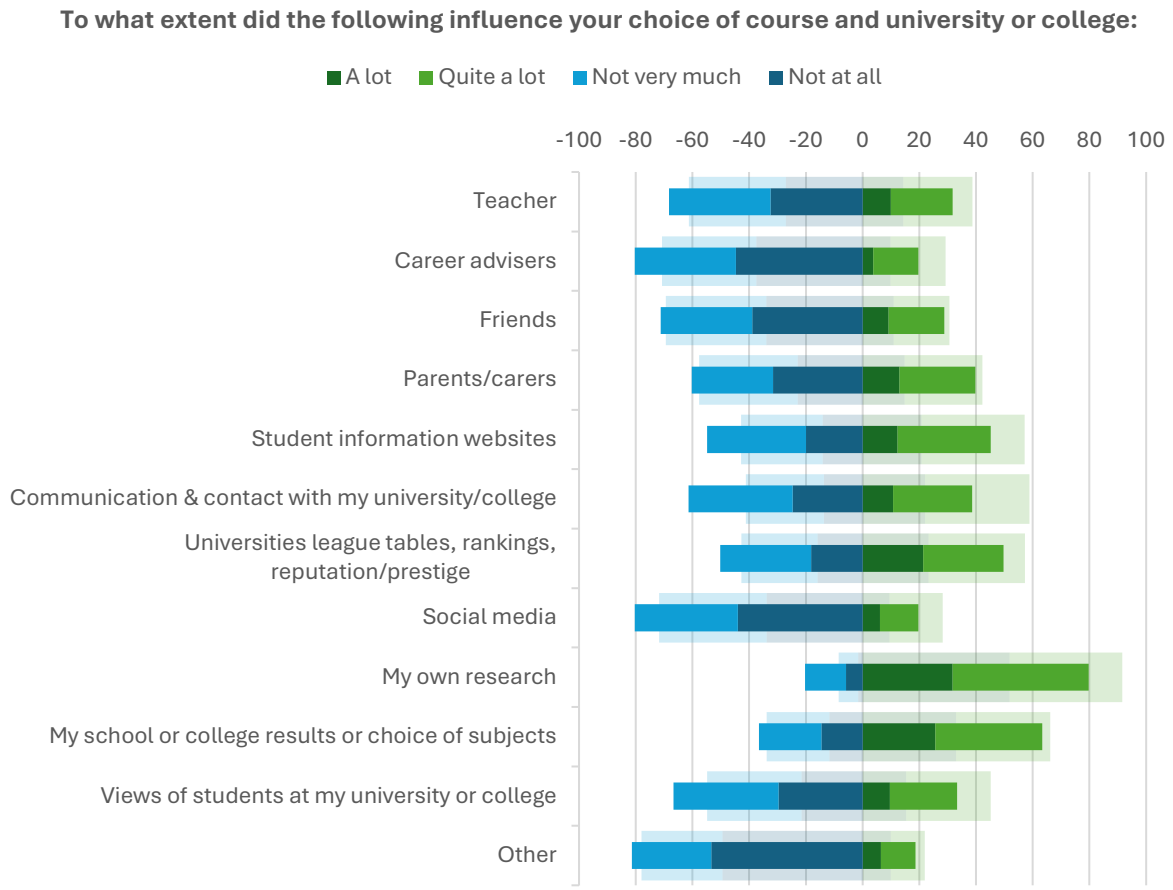
Of the undergraduates who said that they would have made a different decision, the factor that was identified as being most influential was their own research as well as their school or college results or choice of subjects, university league tables and reputation, and student information websites (a higher percentage of respondents reporting these factors as having influenced them 'a lot' or 'quite a lot' compared to other factors). The influence of parents or carers was also identified as being slightly more important than that of their teachers or careers advisers. Very few of the focus group participants referenced careers advisers as a source of influence.

The largest difference between the undergraduate respondents happy with their choices and those who were not relates to the influence of communication and contact with their university. 59% of the students happy with their choice reported '*communication & contact with my university/college*' as having had a strong influence ('a lot' and 'quite a lot') compared to 39% of the students who were not. There were also substantial differences between the two groups in relation to '*student information website*,' '*my own research*,' and '*views of students at my university or college*' with a gap of 12 percentage points between those students happy with their choices and those who were not.

Similar but smaller differences (between 7 and 10 percentage points) can be seen in relation to influence from 'career advisers,' 'social media,' 'universities league tables, rankings, reputation/prestige,' and 'teachers'.

The diverging stacked bar graph in Figure 11 below uses the faded bars to plot the responses of the undergraduates happy with their choices, and the full-coloured bars to plot the responses for those who wished they had made a different decision. The gap visible between the faded bars and the full-coloured bars illustrates the differences between the two groups of undergraduates in reporting the factor as influential.

Figure 11: Influences over undergraduate' choice of course and university/college (%)



In the focus groups, many of the undergraduates referred to their choice of university as having been influenced by the recommendations of their teachers, or that a particular university had been particularly promoted by their schools. Likewise, in terms of subject choice, advice from schools or colleges was identified as having been influential, with several students explaining that the reason they had chosen to study a particular subject at university was because they had studied it and enjoyed it at school. In hindsight they commented that that was not always a good thing in that it looked backwards into their school experience rather than forwards into their future.[16] In the words of a recently graduated international student who studied a STEM subject at university:

> *'It will be good to think a bit more about what I actually want to do post-degree instead of just thinking, oh, I like these subjects and then saying, oh, let me just do these subjects again in university.'*

A second-year social sciences student made a similar point:

> *'My school was very proactive. They helped us quite a lot, but I think the route they were pushing was university. ... Maybe a year out would have helped me make a different decision because I think clarity on my long-term goals was the most important thing to me.'*

Family influence emerged strongly as a factor. Several students explained that they had chosen a subject that met their parents' expectations, with this factor, for some, being linked to their subsequently realising that they should have made a different choice.

> *'My parents had their own notions of what a job should be and what hard work should be. They had their own ideas, and I followed what my father did. I wouldn't say 'force' but he told me that 'this is what you should do', 'that is the best option for you'. Looking back, I wouldn't have taken his advice.' (STEM student)*

> *'My parents had an idea of what they wanted me to do, rather than thinking about what I wanted to do. ... They were talking about the money aspects of things instead of what I would actually enjoy doing.' (humanities student)*

[16] In the polling associated with the DfE's *Curriculum and Assessment Review: interim report*, 2025, 63% of school or college students identify '*what I enjoyed*' as having influenced their choice of post-16 education/training, compared to 54% identifying '*what would be useful for my future life or career aspirations*' https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/curriculum-and-assessment-review-interim-report.

These external influences, from family, peers and schools, were identified as being powerful, and given their circumstances made it almost impossible for some students to have reached a different decision at the time.

> *'I was just too young, inexperienced, didn't really know, and too influenced. I think that was the main reason. I think if all those factors were changed, then I probably would have come out with maybe a better experience after graduation'. (recently graduated STEM student)*

Broader social expectations were also identified by a few undergraduates. These expectations were not related to specific advice from teachers or parents but more to environmental or cultural influences that made students feel a need to pursue a higher education degree. A student who described herself as Asian explained how her cultural background might have affected her decision:

> *'I think it mainly was a cultural kind of thing, as typically in Asian society, they need to succeed in everything education-wise. And I think the main point was to make sure to get to a science subject to do this, to get into a top university.'*

A humanities student also explained that she felt a need to attend higher education due to social expectations.

> *'It was expected for me to go on because I've been very academic my whole life. So, it was expected for me to go straight from college to university, but I definitely think if I took a gap year, it would have been a lot better.'*

One of the themes that emerged particularly from the undergraduate focus group discussions was the challenge for students in having to make these difficult decisions at a time when they were already under pressures from school or college exams. A few participants referred to feeling stressed and pressurised in a way that affected the quality of their decisions. One undergraduate expressed this in the context of having to achieve predicted grades.

> *'For me it was based on the stress of my exams, based on my predicted grades ... so when I was applying for university, I put that anxiety to the forefront and chose what I thought was a more attainable grade. So when I got my A level grades ... by that point I'd already been accepted and so for me that's why I regret. Because I regret the pressure as well as the system of predicted grades. And then once you get your A level results, there's not really much you can do.'*

Several undergraduates said that information from universities, such as open days experiences and available information, was influential. An undergraduate who reported that he later regretted his decision said,

> *'The thing that attracted me the most was actually the open day. I went and visited the university. … On the open day, [they] did one-on-one interviews. They actually directly asked me questions that I thought were engaging and interesting.'*

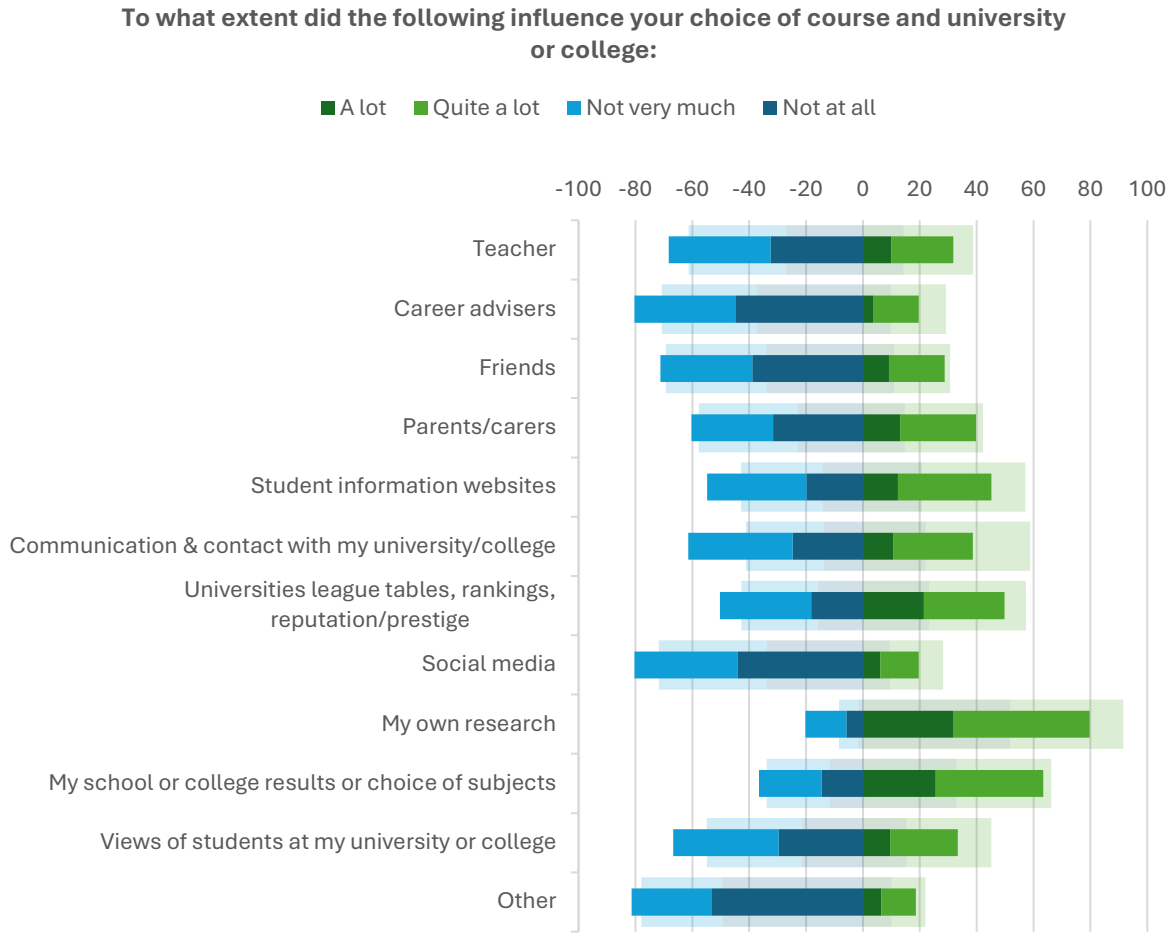
Although undertaking one's own research figured as a prominent factor in the surveys, it was only mentioned by a few focus group participants. One undergraduate student referred to having to do her own research, such as browsing videos or websites about university life, in the context of a lack of advice from her sixth form:

> *'I googled the cities and watched YouTube videos made by other students to get that day in the life, what the campus is like, what there is to do. Honestly, even a checklist would have been helpful - you need to look up the amenities and the location and the nightlife, and where's your nearest supermarket, how far of a walk is the accommodation from the uni. I had to make my own checklist.'*

Graduates

In terms of influence on decisions, the graduate survey results are mostly similar to the undergraduate results, though '*social media*' is identified as an influential factor by more than 85% of graduates (compared to only 25% of undergraduates) while '*school or college results or choice of subjects*' is identified as influential by 39% of graduates (compared to 65% of undergraduates). Differences in the range of 15-25 percentage points also exists for '*career advisers*', '*friends*', '*parents/carers*', and '*teachers'* which are all more often reported as influential by graduates than by undergraduates. Differences in patterns between graduates reporting that they were happy with their choices and those reporting that they were not were overall quite small.

Figure 12: Influences over graduate choice of course and university/college (%)



As with the undergraduates, several graduates in the focus groups referred to their choice of university as having been influenced by the recommendations of their teachers. A social sciences graduate explained that he had found suggestions from his state school useful though later had become more concerned about career development:

> *'I had a lot of advice from my teachers ... They were happy with how I was doing with my business studies, so they were just advising me to keep going down that route.'*

Family influence also emerged strongly as a factor, not always helpfully. One of the graduates who had subsequently dropped out of his undergraduate course explained:

> *'Initially, I started doing Computer Science, which was mainly driven by my father who said the future is technology. So, do that.'*

Broader social expectations were also identified. In the words of two social sciences graduates,

> *'Even though I didn't want to go to university - I didn't know how the money worked, how fees worked, and how the courses worked - but I remember that situation where you had to, because you [didn't want to be] different to everyone else.'*

> *'I feel awful saying it, but it was almost like you were looked down upon if you weren't then going to university. It would be every[one] was talking about: 'Where are you going to university?' Like every class and meeting that we had would just be solely focused on university.'*

The pressure of making decisions when working for school exams came up in the graduate focus groups as it had with the undergraduates. A social sciences graduate explained how she felt pressurised due to exams and how that might have affected her decision:

> *'When I look back, it was a bit of a rollercoaster that I couldn't get off of from the age of 13 or 14, as soon as I started secondary school. Especially because we were kind of in a group that was maybe a little bit more pushing the boundaries as to where we were going to apply, and it was more like the top few universities. I didn't know that there was anything else that I could do. I knew that I was good at maths and essays, and economics was just a good balance of those two things.'*

Information from universities was influential, with a few graduates reflecting critically on the information they received from the university:

> *'I relied solely on advice from the university rather than from school or anything. Similarly, I just trusted the prospectus from the website. I maybe failed to realise how all-encompassing everything was [after I got into the course]. It wasn't as niche as I would have liked it to be, and it didn't really give exact details or modules.' (humanities graduate)*

> *'I went to loads of different open days and decided on a course from there. So, the open days were probably the most valuable thing to lead me to which university to go to. But I think they all put on a show for the open day, don't they? So, it's difficult to go just from that.' (social sciences graduate)*

4.4 What would have assisted students make a different decision

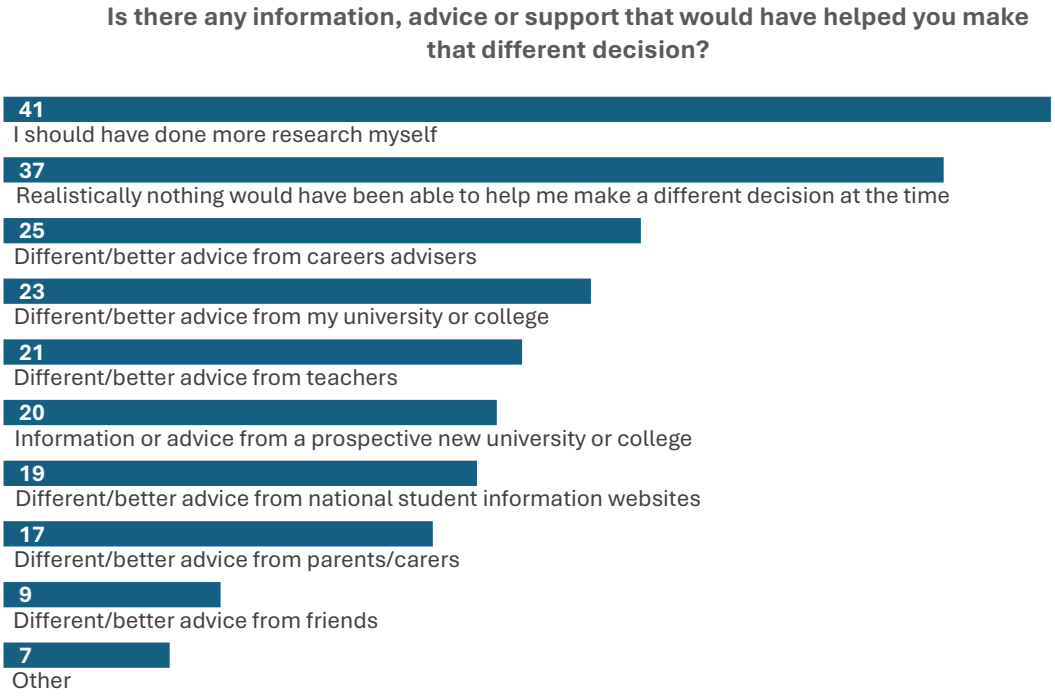
Undergraduates

More than 40% of undergraduate respondents who reported they would have made a different decision said that they should have done more research

themselves. Of the other possible answers to what might have assisted them, different/better advice from career advisers (25%), from their university/college (23%), from teachers (20%), from a prospective new university/college (20%), and from information websites (19%) were all identified.

However, a significant proportion, 37%, said that nothing would have enabled them make a different decision at the time (an issue that was explored further in the focus groups).

Figure 13: What would have helped undergraduates make a different decision (%)



Of the undergraduate respondents who chose '*other*', 50 provided free text comments. The most common reasons given as to what might have helped them make a different decision included more detailed and accurate information from universities *('More in-depth information on what the course actually taught us')* and more confidence *('I should have believed I could get into a better [university]')*. Additionally, a few specifically referenced the impact of Covid *('Having open days - which was cancelled because of COVID - would have allowed me to experience the university before attending')*. In the focus groups, several undergraduates said that they wished they had taken more time to make a more informed decision.

> *'Looking back, I would have definitely taken a year out and decided fully if this is actually worth it. Is there going to be a job at the end of it?'*

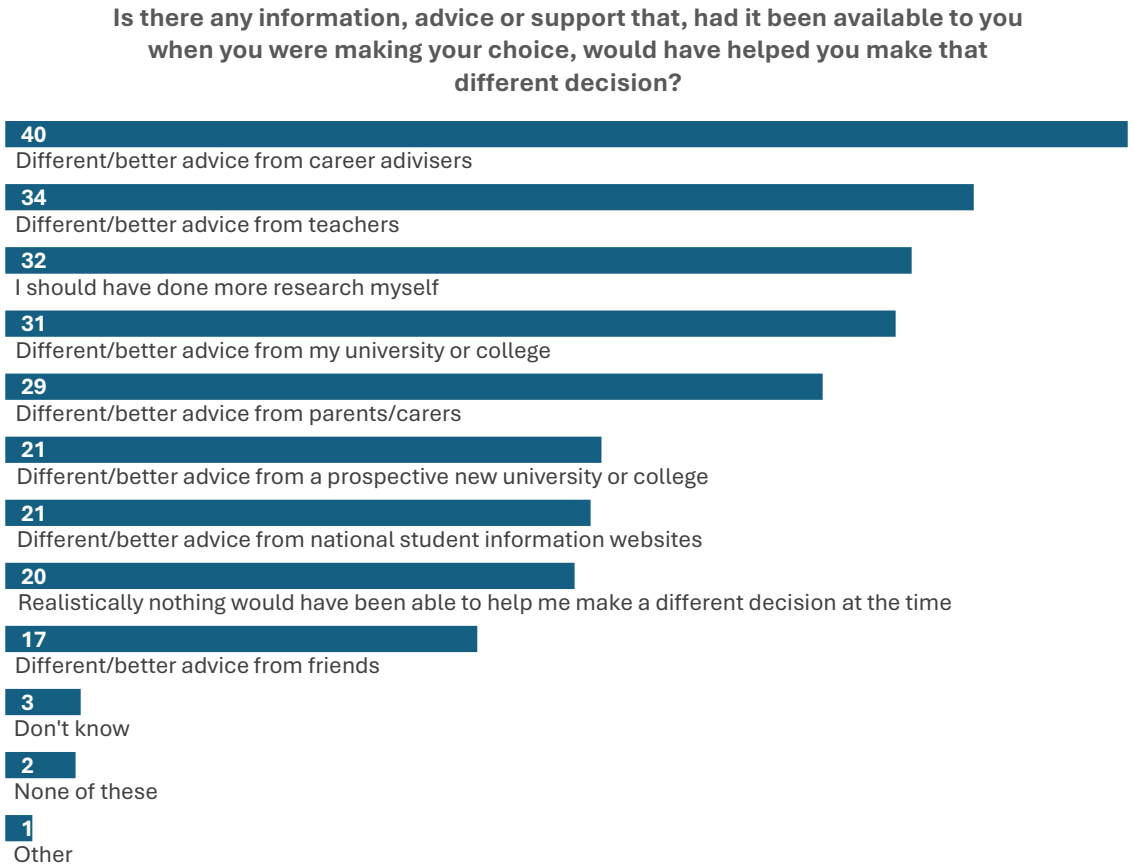
'I definitely think I should have taken a gap year as well to really think about what I actually wanted to do because when I was applying, I didn't really know. What stopped me was the pressure from my teachers and my parents. It was expected for me to go on because I've been very academic my whole life.'

'I kind of just wanted to hurry myself into uni because I didn't want to be in a situation where I felt like I was a bit too old compared to the rest of the students.'

Graduates

For the graduate respondents, the factors which they believe would have made the most difference to them were *'different/better advice from career advisers'* (40%) followed by advice from teachers (34%). 32% said that they should have done more research themselves. These figures are significantly different to the undergraduate results - for undergraduates only 20% identified advice from teachers and 25% careers advisers, and 41% said they should have done more research themselves. Further, only 21% of the graduate cohort stated that nothing would have made a difference, compared to 37% of the undergraduates.

Figure 14: What would have helped graduates make a different decision (%)



Of the graduate respondents who identified '*other*', ten provided free text comments. These included references to better mental health support, more detailed information from universities *('I wasn't given enough information about what the course actually entailed')*, better tools to compare different universities such as university ranking tables, better advice for first-in-family students *('Advice/help from school aimed at people whose families never completed any kind of formal education'),* and more confidence in decision making *('I wish I was strong enough to rebel against my parents to do dentistry')*.

In the graduate focus groups, as with the undergraduates, a lack of useful advice and guidance from schools was identified as having been a problem by several participants.

> *'Our advice was, well, you've taken four subjects for A-level. You just pick one of those that you like the most and go with that.' (humanities graduate)*

As with the undergraduates, several graduate respondents suggested that the reason they wished they had made a different decision was connected to a lack of accurate information from universities. More accurate and transparent information from universities, as well as a wish that they had done more research themselves, emerged as particular themes in the graduate focus groups.

> *'I think the information you get on open days and the information that you get in pamphlets and leaflets and things like that isn't very inclusive of what your experience is actually going to be like.' (humanities graduate)*

Mainly however the graduate focus groups spoke of wishing that with hindsight they had had a better understanding of how challenging the labour market would be.

> *'In retrospect, being in the world of work at the moment, learning about how work experience is important and vital, the main thing that I regret with my course is that I didn't decide to take a year in industry which would have been quite a good way of building up that work experience. Another thing, similar to that, is not having taken advantage of internships either. I know the competition is quite fierce for that, but to try to know what options were available to me and to go for every possible avenue is something that I would do differently if I had the chance.' (humanities graduate)*

Several graduates said that they wished that they had had some support for exploring possible career routes and understanding what skills employers

might value before they were too far advanced in their university courses. In the words of a graduate who changed her mind in the third year of her social sciences programme:

> *'I also wish that the university had built into the curriculum things to help you look for a career post-university, because they didn't really. … I think that would have been really useful because you are bound to change your mind about things from the time you're 17 or 18 to your second or third year of university. So, as much as I do wish the support was there in secondary school, I wish that there was a second level to it a bit later as part of my course.'*

More support in transition from school to university was also identified as something that would have been helpful in the graduate focus group discussions.

> *'If universities can offer some sort of "taster courses", maybe like a seminar or course where students who are not exactly sure where they want to go can have a look at a few modules, get a few courses, maybe during the summertime or just before university and have that sort of experience where they can actually understand what the courses entail.' (social sciences graduate)*

As with the undergraduates, some in the graduate focus groups made the point that it would have been impossible at the time to make a better choice, connected to the constraints of their environment. In the words of a social sciences graduate,

> *'I think it would have been really difficult because there was no support network around me with advice on university and career options. You know that my dad was working in the restaurant for most of his life and only just changed to the fitness industry when I was going into secondary school. So, apart from my sister, there was no one to ask - no aunts, no uncles, nothing. It was almost like, 'Well, we need a degree to advance a bit further', but that was it. There was nothing and no vision.'*

4.5 Transferring course or institution

The question of transferring course or institution once at university was included in both the undergraduate and graduate surveys *('If the option were open to you, would you want to transfer to another course, university or college (or if it is too late now, would you have wanted to)?')* and was also discussed in the focus groups.

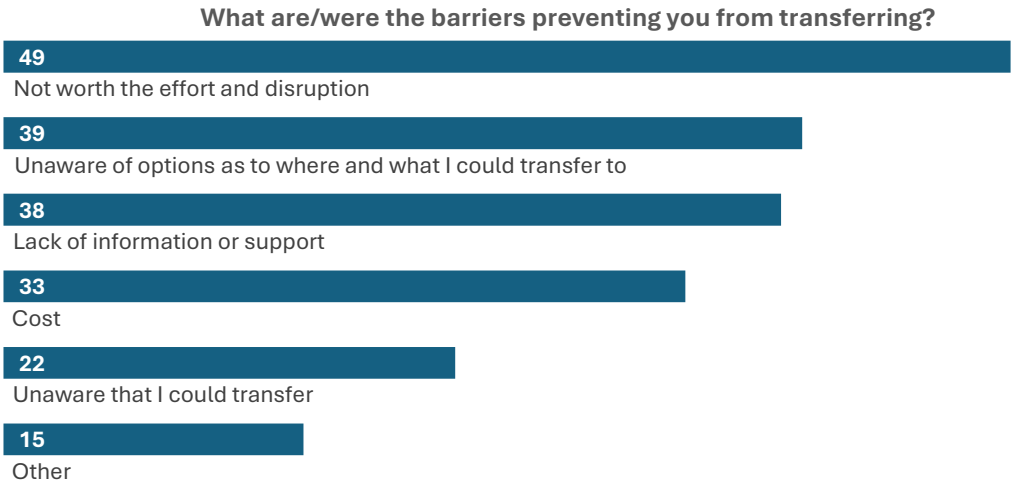
Undergraduates

Of the undergraduate respondents who reported that they wished they had made a different decision, 59% said that had the option been available they would have wanted to transfer to another course or university.

There were different responses (all statistically significant) according to the subject of study. 51% of humanities undergraduates reported that they would have wanted to transfer, compared to 60% of those studying STEM subjects, 65% of those studying social sciences, and 70% of those studying health-related subjects.

In response to the question about the barriers that prevented transfer, a large proportion (49%) said that it would not have been worth the effort and disruption. Others cited lack of awareness about their options (39%). 38% said that there was no information or support available, 33% identified cost as a barrier, and 22% said that they were unaware that they could transfer.

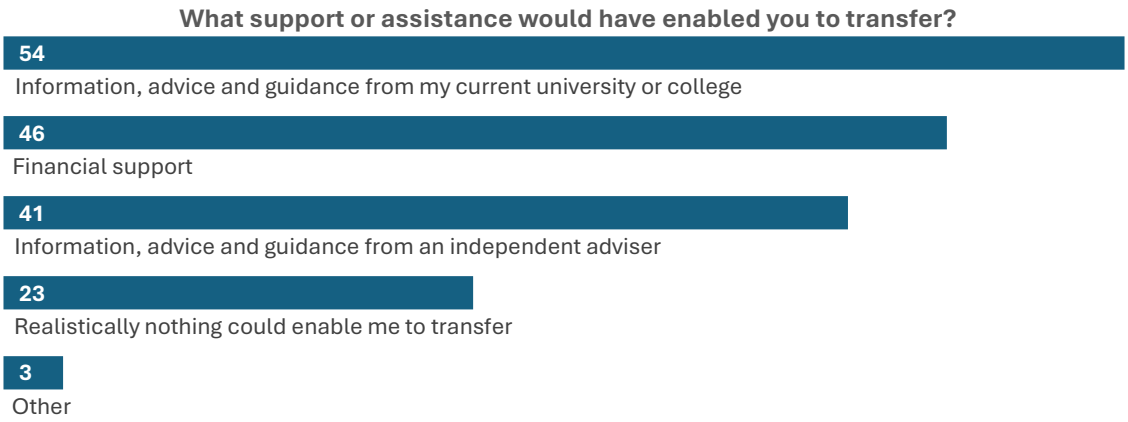
Figure 15: Barriers to transfer for undergraduate respondents (%)



International students showed a greater interest in transferring compared to domestic students: 63% of EU students and 69% of international (non-EU) students said that they would have chosen to transfer course or university had that option been available to them compared to 58% from each of England and Northern Ireland, 56% from Scotland, and 52% from Wales. The international students identified barriers to transfer as primarily relating to financial concerns (58%). 57% of international students thought that transferring was not worth the effort and disruption, compared to 27% of EU students.

A further question asked what support or assistance would have enabled transfer. Here, 54% of undergraduates stated that more information, advice and guidance from their current university or college would have enabled them to transfer, and 46% referred to financial support. 23% said that nothing would have enabled them to transfer, notwithstanding any support or assistance.

Figure 16: Support or assistance that would have enabled transfer for undergraduate respondents (%)



In response to barriers that prevented them from transferring, 50 undergraduates marked '*other*' and provided free text comments. Their explanations included family reasons *('Couldn't as I needed to stay living at home')*, limited grades *('Didn't have good enough grades to go to any other university')*, friendships and social bonds *('Not wanting to leave friends'*), time-related concerns about transferring or restarting a course *('University said it was too late to transfer and that I would have to drop out and restart the year')*, and realising that they might have wanted to transfer at too late a stage.

The same themes emerged in the focus groups. For those undergraduates who had thought about transferring but decided against it, several explained that they enjoyed their studies in their first year, and only regretted their decision at a later stage by which time it was too late to transfer because it would have meant restarting the entire course and being left behind their cohort.

> *'The issues only started to materialise about halfway through the second year, and by that point, I thought that's 50% of the way, I am on track to get a first degree if I carry on, and that was what compelled me to stay. Because … I had the idea of already being behind, I didn't want the past year and a half to be basically nothing.' (final-year STEM undergraduate who wished he had done the same course at a different university)*

> *'I did consider at one point potentially going to a different university, but I think by the time I realised that maybe I probably should consider this, I'd already kind of dug myself in too deep. … It would just literally mean completely de-rooting my life, plucking up, and moving it somewhere else. By that point, it just wasn't really an option for me.'*

Several undergraduates also mentioned the financial implications of incurring additional student debt and additional living costs if transfers involved retaking years of study.

A lack of information about transfer was also identified as a reason by many undergraduate participants.

> *'We didn't really know that we could transfer. We didn't think it was an option, or it would be expensive or too complicated.' (final year humanities undergraduate)*

> *'I wanted to change university. … But I'd just missed the opportunity … until it was much too late, I didn't receive any information on how to do that.' (second year humanities undergraduate)*

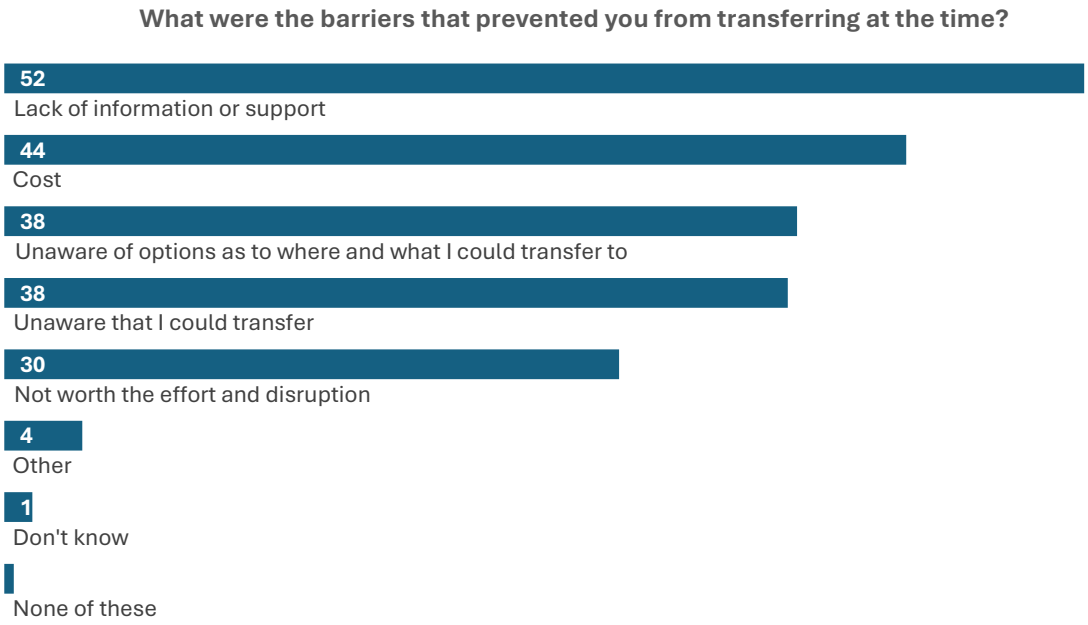
One undergraduate focus group participant who had successfully transferred courses within the same university referred to the support that had been available to her:

> *'I think the university did support me really really well in transferring courses as they explained it so well, and that made it a lot easier for me. So I did think they made the transition quite easy, and I am happy that I've done it.'*

Graduates

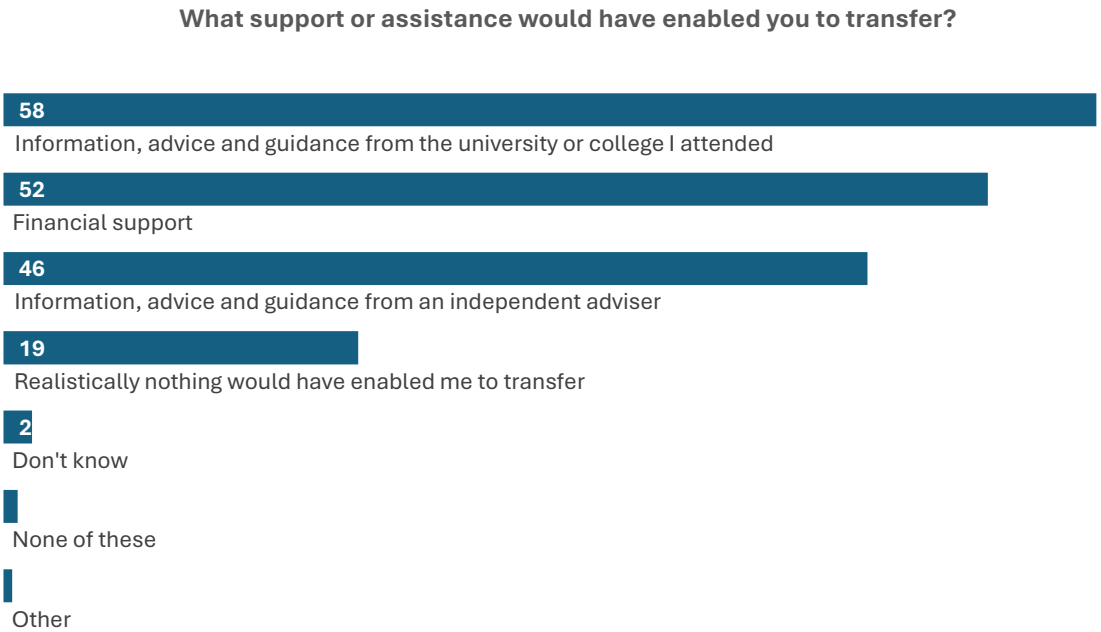
The graduate survey responses present a broadly similar pattern to the undergraduates: 63% reported that they wished they could have transferred. In terms of barriers preventing transfer, 52% mentioned lack of information or support, and 38% stated that they were not aware that they could transfer. However, the proportion of graduates who stated that transferring would not be worth the effort or disruption was 30%, substantially lower that the 49% figure for the undergraduates.

Figure 17: Barriers to transfer for graduate respondents (%)



In terms of what would have assisted them transfer, 58% of graduate respondents who would have wanted to transfer reported that more information or support from the university/college they attended would have assisted them. 19% said that nothing would have enabled them to transfer.

Figure 18: Support or assistance that would have enabled transfer for graduate respondents (%)



Of the 24 graduate respondents who specified '*other*' barriers preventing them from transferring and provided free text comments, the main reasons identified were a lack of flexibility in transferring *('My preferred course does not allow transfers')*, parents' opinions *('My parents would never support the idea')*, financial considerations *('This was not an option for me given the money that I had already spent on university fees')*, limited grades *('Poor A-level grades due to lack of school support with ADHD and ASD')*, and personal reasons, for instance caring duties and visa issues for international students.

In the graduate focus groups, as with the undergraduates, a lack of information was also identified as a reason for not having transferred:

> *'I had no idea [about transferring courses]. It was either like you stick with the university or you just leave it. I didn't realise that was an option at the time.'*

Others said that the regret they felt about their choices was simply not sufficiently significant to justify the disruption of transferring or that they only thought that they should have done something different after entering the job market.

> *'You only find out after you've graduated and you start applying for jobs, and then they're like 'why don't you have any actual experience?' It doesn't matter if you got a good mark in an essay. You don't have that field experience.'*

A few said that they did not consider transferring as they needed family financial support and were potentially afraid of disappointing their families. For instance, a STEM graduate shared his concerns about his family's opinions in relation to transferring:

> *'I didn't think about transferring. Because I spoke to my parents and I spoke to my brother about it, and he was like, OK, if you wanted to study electronics physics, and you are in physics right now, there's no point [to change]. … It was basically my family that was funding the education. So, I just had to take advice from them and go along with it.'*

In terms of what would have assisted them, several referred to better information and support. In the words of a female graduate who did a STEM course (and later dropped out):

> *'I would have benefited from a more independent person to talk to. Because my personal tutor was my course leader, and he's the one who it felt like he was trying to convince us to stay on the course and not transfer within the first six weeks. I know towards the end of my second year, I spoke to him when I was thinking about dropping out,*

and, again, he advised me to just stick with the course. I think that he was biased.'

Others suggested that universities could use different resources, such as lecturers, graduate teachers, seminars, and peer support programmes, to follow up more closely with first-year students to see how they were getting on, checking in with them at an early stage as to whether they had chosen the right course at a point when an early change could more easily be made, if appropriate.

'Every course [could] have like a month grace period. So if you found in that first month you really weren't enjoying it, there'd be no stress on switching because you wouldn't miss out on that much.'

'I think if there's just that continuous checking in with students, just saying that, OK, even if you've started this, it doesn't matter how far gone you think you are, there's still that chance for you to change; and then we would support you throughout that process and continuously check on you once that change has started to happen.'

5. Differences between different groups and demographics

Demographic differences between those reporting that they were happy with their choices and those who were not are in general not that clear cut: in many respects the differences are less marked than the similarities though the descriptive mapping of the survey data does not allow for causal inferences to be drawn. The main points emerging from the surveys are identified below. Demographic differences were not a feature of the focus groups given that the numbers involved were too small.

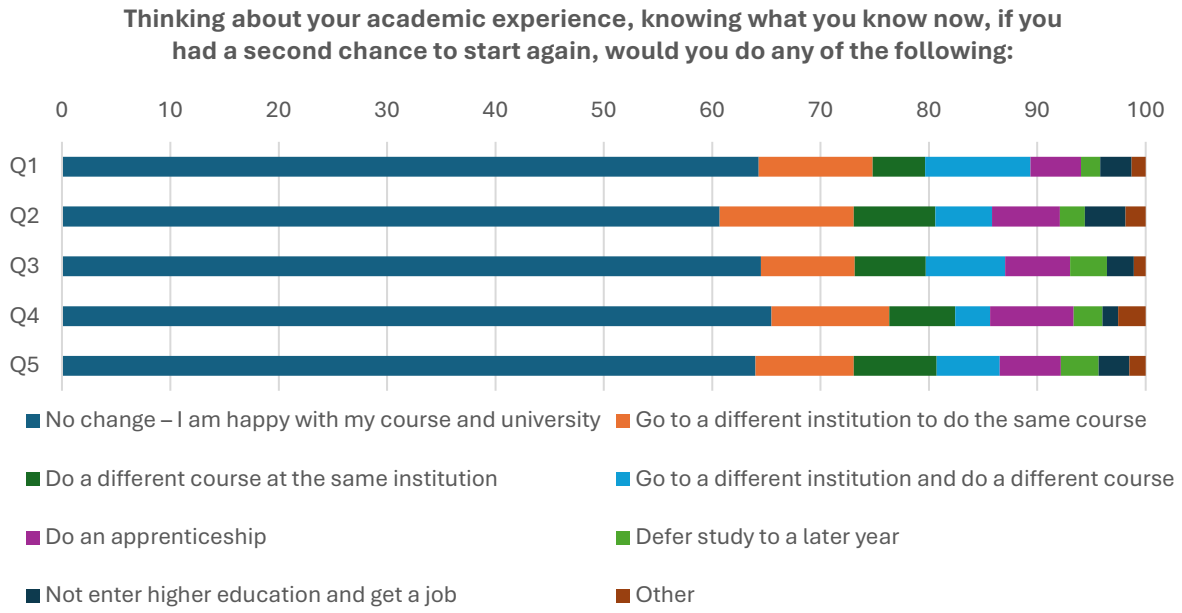
5.1 Socioeconomic status and school type

In the analysis of the survey results, the measures that capture levels of participation in higher education (POLAR quintiles),[17] first in family, and secondary school type, in general appear to point in different directions making it difficult to draw robust conclusions.

The results of undergraduate respondents from different POLAR quintiles are broadly similar in terms of being happy with their decisions or thinking they would have made a different decision.

[17] The participation of local areas (POLAR) classifies local areas into five groups - or quintiles - based on the proportion of young people in each area who enter higher education aged 18 or 19 years old. Quintile one shows the lowest rate of participation. Quintile five shows the highest rate of participation. (see https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/young-participation-by-area/about-polar-and-adult-he/ for an explanation).

Figure 19: Proportions of undergraduate respondents happy with their choices/thinking they should have done something different, by POLAR quintile (%)



However, even though the proportions do not differ markedly, those from lower POLAR areas of participation report the consequences of their choices as having made a greater difference for them than those from higher areas of participation, with these differences being mostly statistically significant. For instance, 47% of undergraduate respondents from quintile 1 reported that the difference made 'a lot' of difference to them, compared to 36% of quintile 5 (and with 91% of quintile 1 reporting 'a lot' or 'quite a lot' compared to 84% of quintile 5).

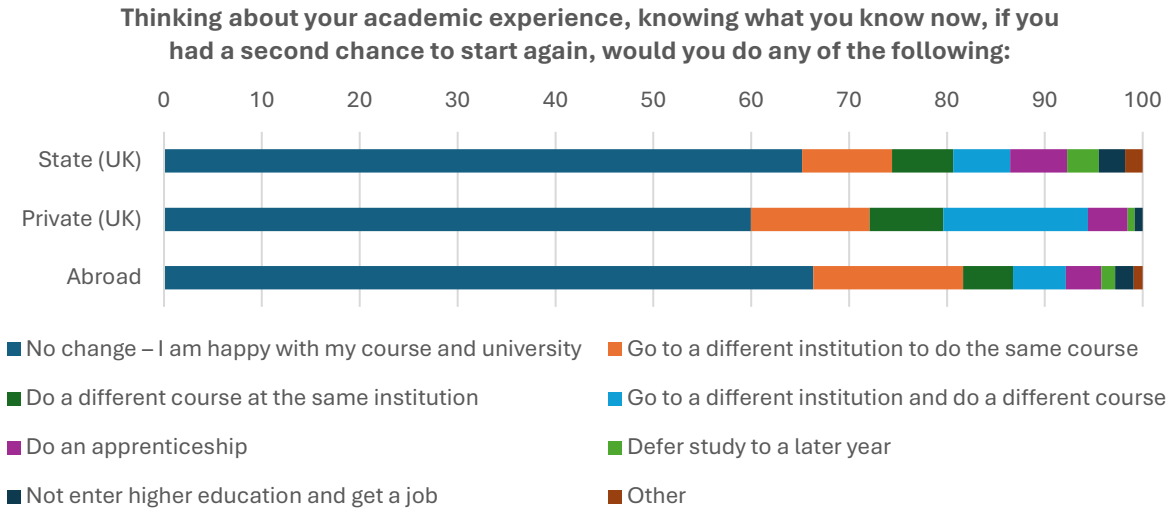
Differences by secondary school type show a similar statistically significant pattern while differences by first-in-the-family status are almost non-existent.

In terms of reasons for thinking they would have made a different decision, there are more identifiable distinctions between those undergraduate respondents who are first in family to enter higher education, and those who are not. Of those who are first in family, 35% stated that they would have been happier/fitted in more easily, compared to 30% of those not first in family, and 24% first in family referred to living costs compared to 17% not first in family (both statistically significant differences). However, in terms of what would have assisted them make a different decision, there is little distinction for those reporting that '*nothing would have made a difference*' (36% first in family and 37% for those not).

Undergraduate respondents' school type also points to differences. Those who attended private schools were less likely to be happy with their decisions than

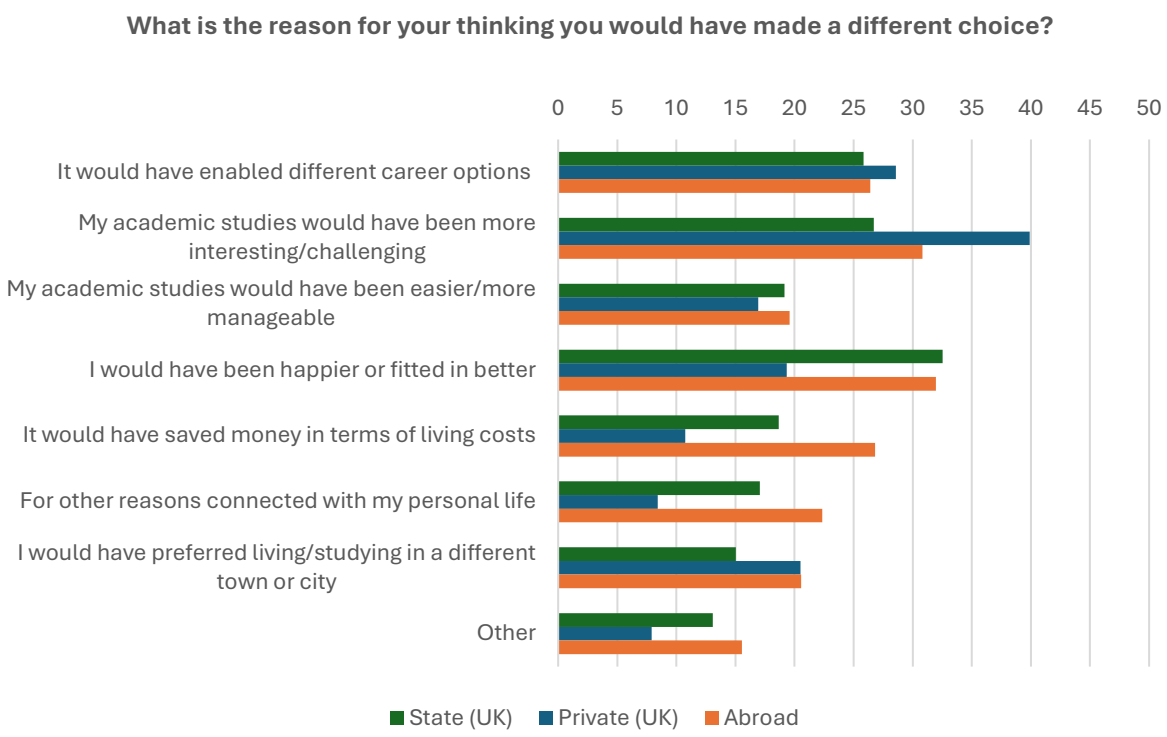
their state school counterparts (60% as opposed to 65%, a statistically significant difference), with marked (and statistically significant) higher proportions of those from private schools saying that they would have wanted to go to a different institution and do a different course (15% compared to 6%).

Figure 20: Proportions of undergraduate respondents happy with their choices/thinking they should have done something different, by school type (%)



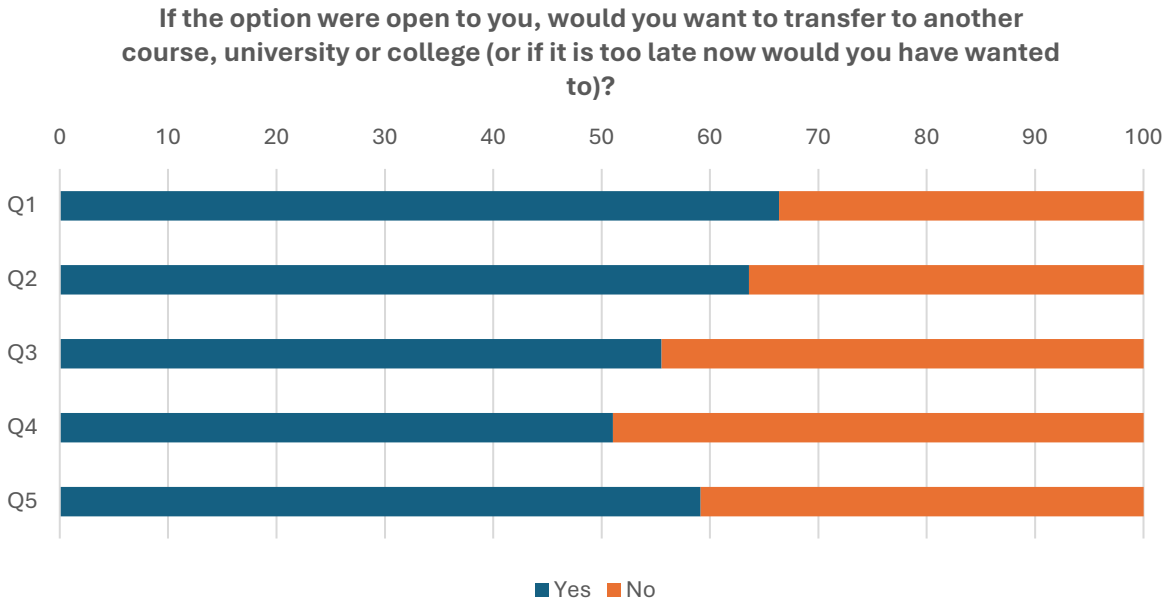
For undergraduate respondents from private schools, the most common reason for thinking they would have made a different decision was *'my academic studies would have been more interesting/challenging'* – 40% as opposed to 27% for their state-educated peers (and 31% for students educated abroad), both statistically significant differences. By contrast, undergraduate respondents who were state educated referred more frequently to *'I would have been happier or fitted in better'* (33% as opposed to 19%) or *'It would have saved money in terms of living costs'* (19% as opposed to 11%), both statistically significant differences. All three groups of undergraduate respondents report in very similar percentages (between 26% and 29%) that a different decision *'would have enabled different career options.'*

Figure 21: Undergraduate respondent reasons for thinking they would have made a different choice, by school type (%)



Undergraduate respondents from lower POLAR quintiles were also more likely to indicate a wish to have transferred (66% of quintile 1 undergraduates and 64% of quintile 2, compared to 59% of quintile 5 and 51% of quintile 4), a pattern that is statistically significant.

Figure 22: Undergraduate respondents wishing they had transferred, by POLAR quintile (%)



The graduate data differ slightly. Graduate respondents who went to private schools are less likely to report that they wished they had made a different decision (45%) compared to graduates educated abroad (48%), and state-educated graduates (54%), this latter a statistically significant difference. However, graduate respondents who went to private schools were more likely to wish they had transferred (80% as opposed to 63% educated abroad and 60% state-educated). Of the reasons provided for thinking they would have made a different decision, state-educated graduate respondents were more likely to identify career-related reasons compared to privately educated graduates (59% as opposed to 40% - a statistically significant difference).

The data on POLAR for the graduate respondents do not enable any firm conclusions to be drawn. Instead, the survey asked graduates whether they had ever received free school meals. 76% of respondents who had been on free school meals reported that they wished they had transferred compared to 56% who were not (a statistically significant difference).

In the focus groups, a few participants referred to their being first in family in the context of explaining they needed more support and guidance from schools and universities because that sort of advice was not available at home:

> *'Maybe the sixth forms or high schools could be more involved in that process, help us research better, and give us tools to help us research. Because for people who are the only ones in their family going to university, it risks them a lot to do that research and figure it out. When you're that young, you can very easily make a very wrong decision'.*

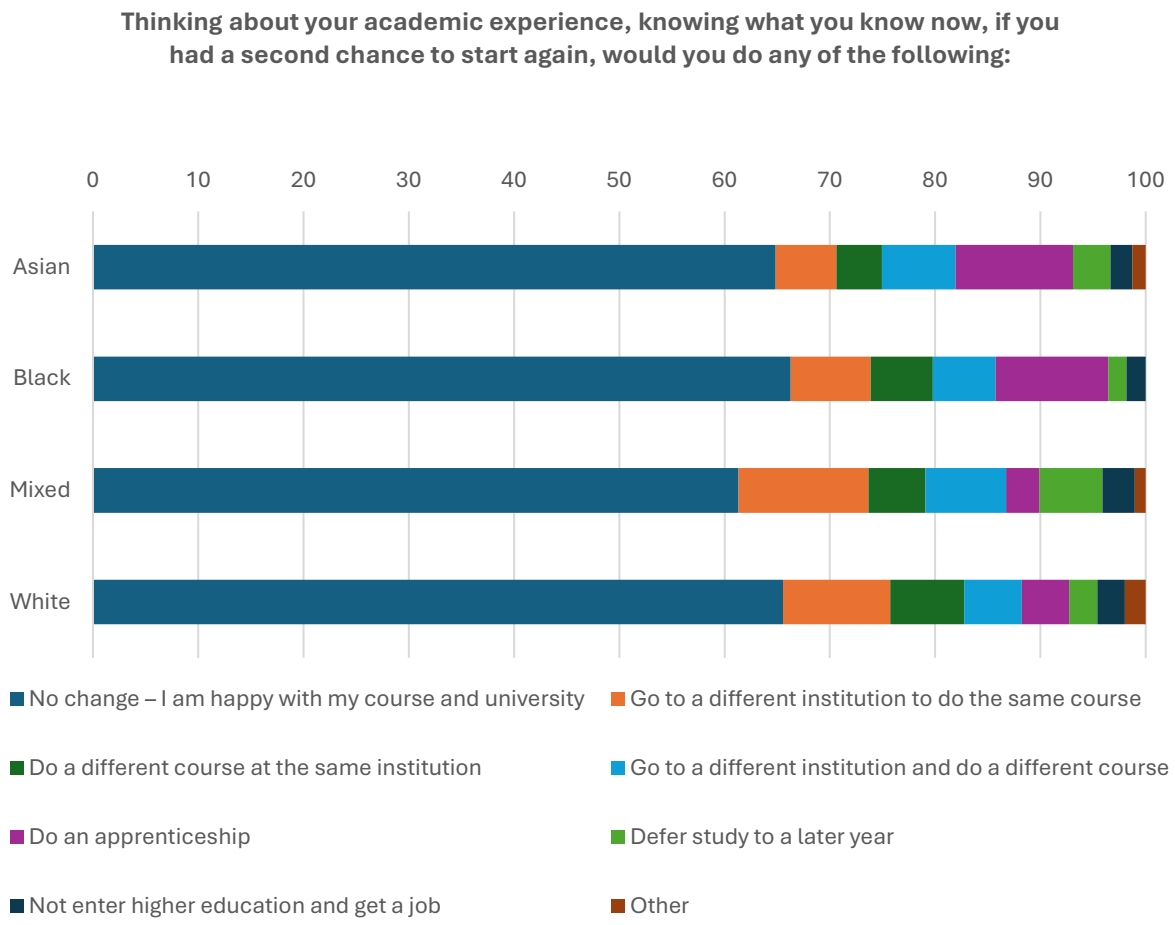
> *'For me, it was a problem of not having the correct guidance. Before going to university, because I come from a low-income family background, no one's ever even finished high school, so I had no idea what I was doing'*.

5.2 Ethnicity

The proportions of undergraduate respondents who were happy with their decisions are broadly similar between the different ethnic groups. 66% of Black undergraduate respondents stated that they were happy with their decisions, 65% of White students, 64% of Asian and 61% of Mixed identity.

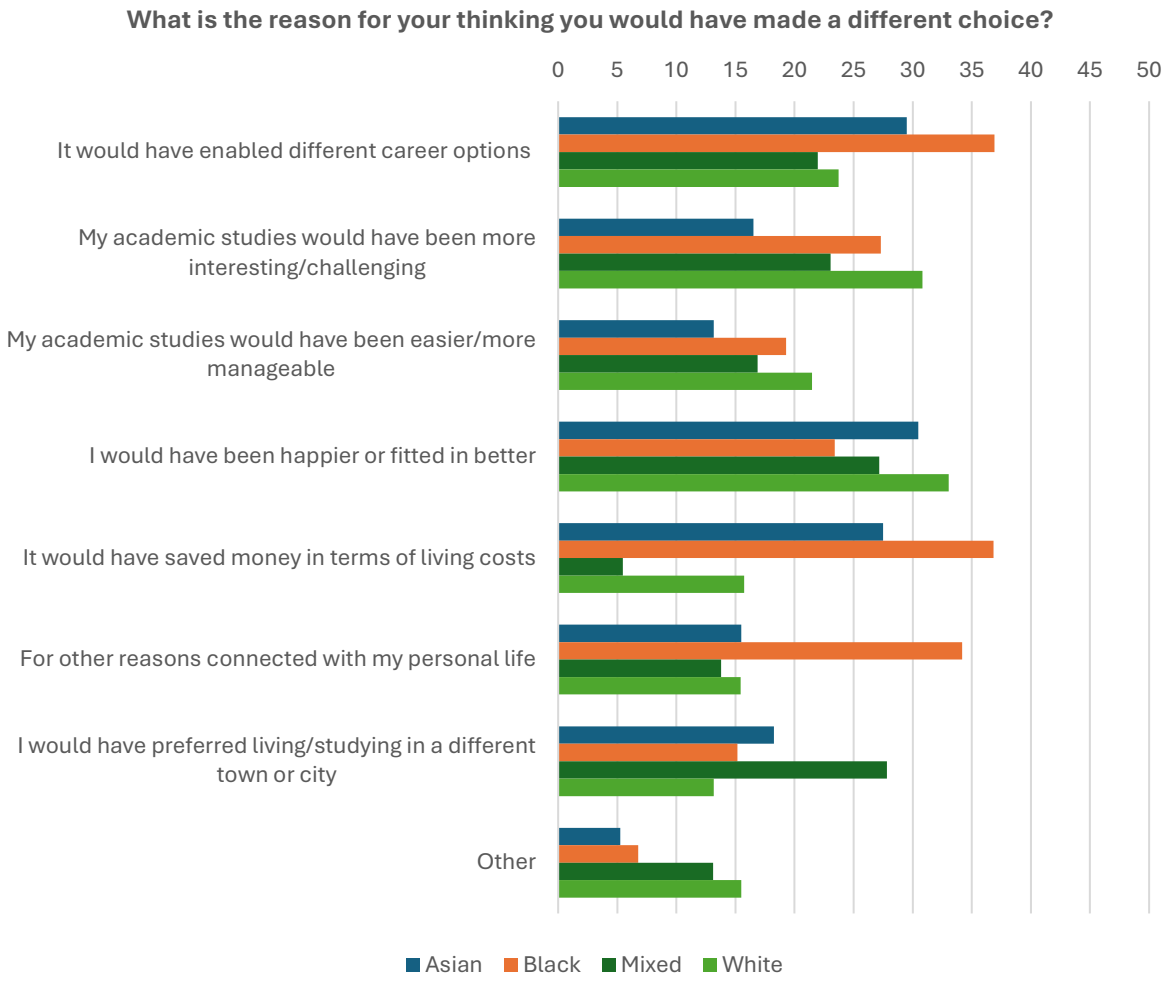
There is slightly more variation in terms of what it is that they would have decided differently. 11% of undergraduate respondents of Asian and Black ethnicity reported that doing an apprenticeship would have been a better choice, compared to 3% of Mixed ethnicity and 4% of White (all statistically significant).

Figure 23. Proportions of undergraduate respondents happy with their choices/thinking they should have done something different, by ethnicity (%)



There are more noticeable and statistically significant differences in terms of the reasons for wishing they had made a different decision. For Black undergraduate respondents who said that they should have made a different decision, 37% said that it would have enabled different career options, compared to 29% of Asian respondents and 24% of White respondents. Reasons relating to living costs were also significantly more often cited by Black undergraduate respondents, as well as reasons connected with personal lives.

Figure 24: Undergraduate respondent reasons for thinking they would have made a different choice, by ethnicity (%)



In terms of influences over decisions made, there are a number of interesting differences, even though ultimately they seem to reflect complex causal patterns beyond the scope of the research. For instance, Black undergraduate respondents who reported not being happy with their decisions were more likely to have been influenced by *'parents/carers'* and *'social media'* than their peers who reported being happy with their choices. Similarly, Asian undergraduate respondents who reported not being happy with their decisions were more likely to have been influenced by *'university league tables, ranking, reputation/prestige'* and less likely to have been influenced by *'social media'* and *'career advisers'* than their peers who reported being happy with their choices. Mixed undergraduate respondents who reported not being happy with their decisions were less likely to have been influenced by *'views of students at my university or college media'* and *'communication & contact with my university/college'* than their peers who reported being happy with their choices. For White undergraduate respondents, differences are overall small other than in relation to *'communication & contact with my university/college'*, *'my own research'*, and *'university league tables, ranking, reputation/prestige'*

for which those happy with their choices reported a strong influence than those not happy.

Figure 25 (part a): Influences over undergraduate choices made, by ethnicity (%)

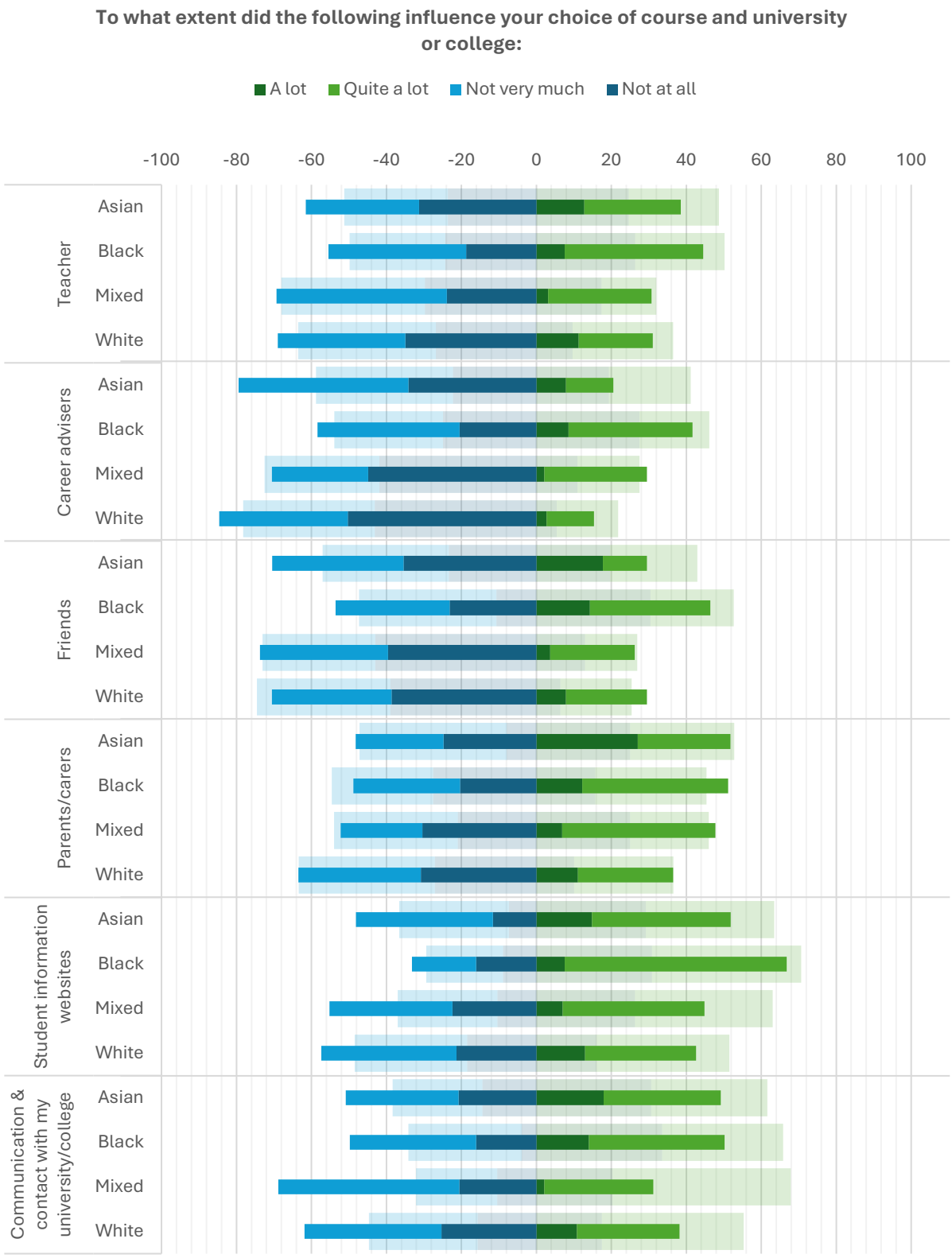
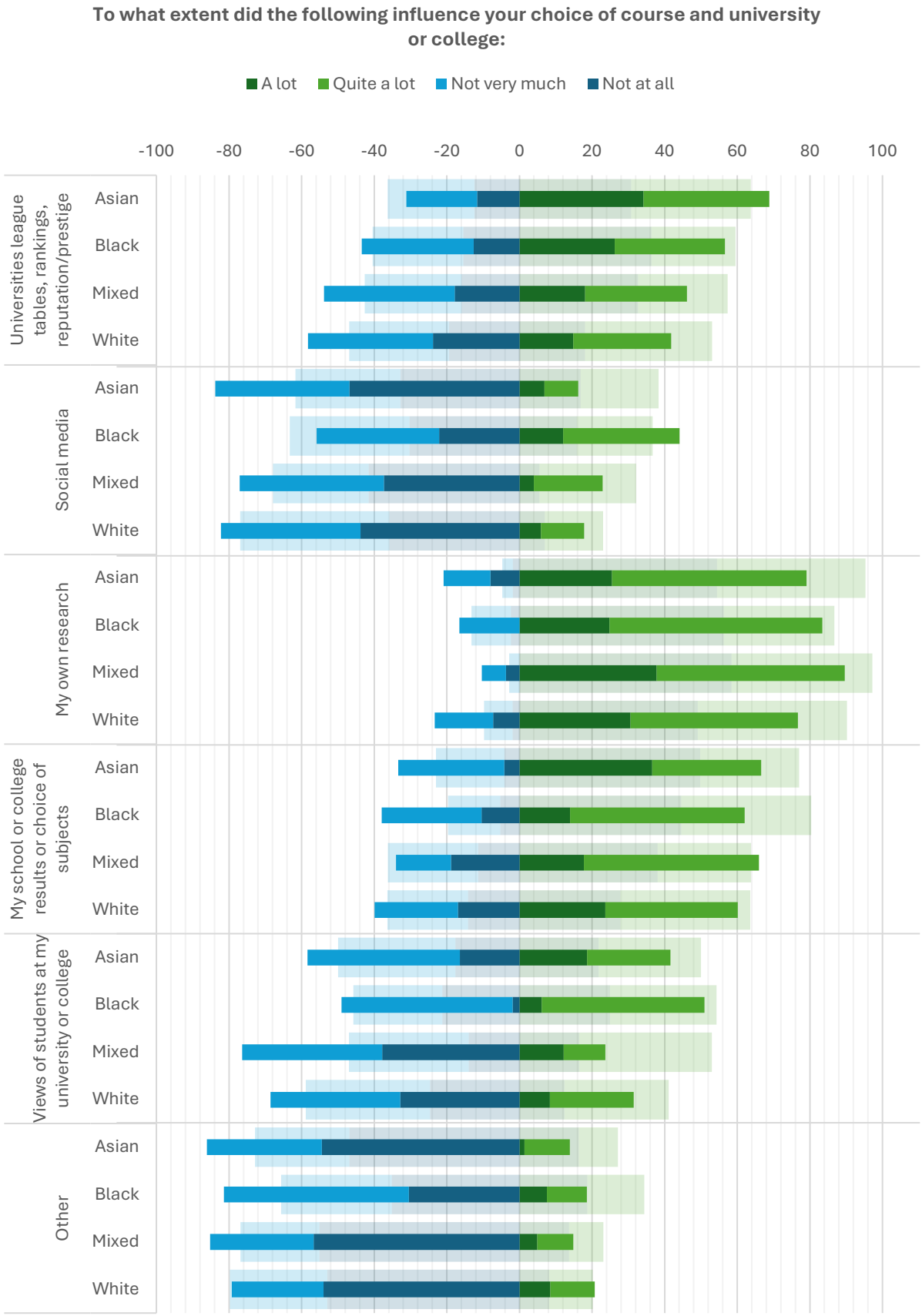


Figure 25 (part b) Influences over undergraduate choices made, by ethnicity (%)



There are variations between different groups in terms of a wish to have transferred and what support or assistance would have made a difference, but the differences do not reveal any clear patterns (other than the higher occurrence of lack of awareness around academic transfer cited by undergraduate respondents of Mixed ethnicity).

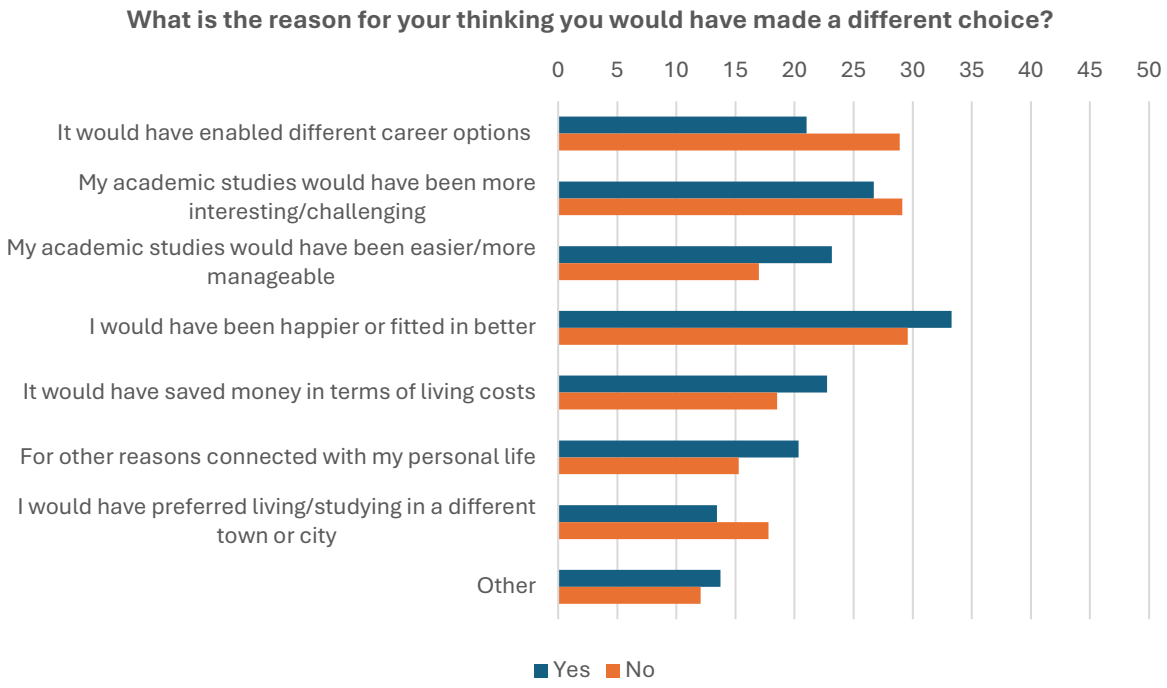
The patterns of responses for the graduate respondents are similar to those for the undergraduates. Black graduate respondents were more likely to report that they were happy with their decisions (62%), compared to 47% of White graduates, 39% graduates of Mixed ethnicity, and 37% Asian graduates (with all three pairwise differences being statistically significant). These differences particularly reflect lower proportions of Black respondents reporting that they wished they had gone to a different institution and done a different course or done an apprenticeship. However, for those who wished they had made a different decision, the consequences point in the other direction: 42% of Black graduate respondents said it would have made a lot of difference, compared to 30% of graduates of Mixed ethnicity, 29% Asian graduates and 29% White (all pairwise differences are statistically significant). Further, a substantially and statistically significantly lower proportion of White graduates (56%) said that they would have wanted to transfer, compared to 76% Black, 73% Asian and 83%% Mixed ethnicity.

5.3 Disability

Of the undergraduate respondents reporting a disability, 40% reported that they would have made a different decision compared to 33% of undergraduates with no disability (a statistically significant difference). Although the numbers in the focus groups were too small to enable any robust conclusions to be drawn, issues of mental health and autism were identified by several participants.

The reasons for undergraduate survey respondents reporting a disability saying that they wished they had made a different choice are not clear cut, though they point slightly more towards being happier/fitting in better (33% with a disability, compared to 30% with no disability), saving money for living costs (23% as opposed to 18%), and for reasons connected to personal lives (20% as opposed to 15%), all statistically significant.

Figure 26 Undergraduate respondent reasons for wanting to have made a different choice, by disability (%)



The option of transferring was identified in statistically significantly higher numbers by undergraduate respondents reporting a disability. 65% of those reporting a disability said that they would have wanted to transfer, compared to 57% of those not reporting disability. In terms of barriers to transfer, 44% of those with a disability said that they were unaware of the options for transfer, compared to 35% of those without a disability, while 44% of disabled respondents referred to cost being a reason preventing them from transferring, compared to 28% of those without a disability, both statistically significant differences.

The proportion of graduate respondents with a disability who stated that they would have made a different decision is statistically significantly higher than graduates without a disability (62% as opposed to 50%). The difference between the two groups of graduates seems to be mostly due to the fact that graduates with a disability more often said they would have gone to a different institution (either to do the same course or to a different course). In terms of reasons, graduates with a disability were less likely than their peers to say '*It would have enabled different career options*' but more likely to cite reasons relating to the academic studies (both '*would have been more interesting/challenging*' and '*would have been easier/more manageable*'), reasons relating to living costs, reasons relating to their personal life, and '*I would have been happier or fitted better*'. Graduates reporting a disability expressed a markedly and statistically significantly higher desire to have transferred (82%) as opposed to 58% without a disability.

In both the undergraduate and graduate focus groups, several participants reflected on how their neurodivergent or disabled status might have contributed to their thinking they would have made a different decision. For instance, a student mentioned that his late diagnosis of neurodiversity might have resulted in a lack of proper support and understanding during his placements, and another said that an earlier diagnosis of his special needs and clearer information about available mental health support would have significantly improved his university experience. The implication of these comments was that they may have received better support elsewhere.

5.4 Sex, gender, and age

The impact of sex and gender were also examined. Although there were differences in terms of the responses, there were no particularly substantial or consistent differences or patterns. Likewise in terms of age, the older the student the more the expressions of regret increased, but beyond that trend there were no other substantial patterns in terms of age.

6. Conclusions

This research report focuses on the views of undergraduates and graduates who said in their survey responses that knowing what they know now, if they had the chance to start in higher education again, they would make a different decision. Only a very small proportion (2-3%) said that they would not want to go to higher education at all. It was far more a question of thinking that they would have made a different decision as to what, when, and where to study. Many of them said that a different decision would have made a lot of difference to them.

As was acknowledged by participants in the focus groups, it is very easy to have the wisdom of hindsight. There is in any event there is no such thing as a perfect decision. Being in the right place, doing the right thing, and being surrounded by the right people cannot be easily predicted in advance however good the information, advice and guidance provided. Young people's views are always likely to change, and indeed higher education is designed to prompt exactly that sort of critical reflection that leads to changed views. It should also be acknowledged that some of the expressions of regret in the survey responses might represent speculation about alternatives being better ('the grass is always greener'), prompted by the survey questions.

Nonetheless, the proportions of the survey respondents who considered they would have made a different choice are substantial and are consistent with what other surveys have found. An overwhelmingly large proportion stated that a different decision would have made a lot of difference to them. Further, the views expressed by the focus group participants were clear and specific as to what it was that they wished they had done differently: they should have chosen to study economics and finance and not just economics, Spanish plus

another language and not just Spanish, or they should have taken a year out to gain labour market experience before applying for a different university. Those students were not expressing fanciful or fleeting aspirations, and to the extent that their views had changed when at university many found that the system was not responsive in accommodating changed views and priorities.

Reflecting the structure of the surveys, the conclusions fall into three categories: first, what if anything can be done to support better decision-making in the first place; second, what can be done when at university if a student considers that they may have made the wrong decision; and third, some reflections on the evidence.

6.1 Making the right choice first time round about whether, what and where to study

Overall, in terms of the factors that influenced students' decisions about what and where to study, the survey results point to students who are happy with their decisions being more likely to identify the full range of factors as being influential in their decisions, compared to students who felt they had made the wrong decision. This suggests that students who take into account a variety of sources of information are more likely to make a durable decision.

In both the surveys and the focus groups, both undergraduates and graduates said that with hindsight they should have carried out more research themselves. This was particularly the case for the undergraduates (the graduates pointed more to better careers' advice). Figures 11 and 12 (page 28, 32) suggest that larger numbers of undergraduates and graduates who reported being happy with their decision relied more on their own research than those who were not happy with their decision.

The constraints on carrying out more research were for some focus group participants linked to not knowing where to find relevant information, as well as the pressures that some of them were under when they were making their decisions – either pressures of time from their school or college exams, or pressures in their choices from their family and peers. Focus group comments about the influence of their families reflect UCAS findings about the impact of family influence on student decision-making.[18] A frequent theme from focus group participants was that they wished they had taken time out after finishing school of college to gain experience and confidence, enabling them to reflect on what the right option was for them.

The need for students to spend more time reflecting, investigating and considering their options aligns with UCAS research which emphasises the importance of starting research into university options at an earlier stage (including at primary school), with late decisions made during Clearing being

[18] UCAS, 2021 (ibid)

associated with higher proportions of students' dropping out.[19] UCAS particularly identify the importance for early research for students with disabilities to allow the time for understanding the support that is likely to be made available to them from different higher education institutions.[20]

Information and communications from higher education institutions were also identified as important in both the surveys and focus groups. Several students in the focus groups spoke of how important university open days were. Figure 11 on page 28 suggests that more students who reported being happy with their decisions said that they were more strongly influenced by communications from their university or college compared to those who were unhappy. However, in the free text answers and focus groups some who regretted their decision asked questions about the accuracy of the picture of university life presented to them. This aligns with concerns previously expressed by the Advertising Standards Agency that university marketing material was not always capable of being objectively justified.[21] It is essential that the information provided by higher education institutions is accurate and realistic and does not blur the provision of accurate information with marketing and promotional material.

Advice from schools and colleges was also relied on in making decisions, though of less importance than other factors. Some focus group participants (who were unhappy with their choices) described the advice they received as being cursory and generic. For them, the advice seemed to be more about getting into (any) university rather than choosing the right university or course. Perhaps understandably, the advice received when they were at school or college was seen as having a retrospective focus reflecting the subject they had enjoyed most at school being projected onto their university choices, rather than anticipating what their future careers and priorities might be.[22]

UCAS have undertaken extensive work to ensure personalised support to students wishing to apply for higher education, for instance the development of their Student Hub in 2019, and have emphasised the need for support to span the primary, secondary, and post-secondary education sectors to ensure robust and consistent advice and guidance.[23] The findings of this research also

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[19] UCAS, *Reimagining UK Admissions*, 2021. https://www.ucas.com/files/reimagining-uk-admissions.
[20] UCAS webpages, *Disabled students: researching your choices.* https://www.ucas.com/applying/applying-university/students-individual-needs/disabled-students-researching-your-choices.
[21] Advertising Standards Agency webpages, https://www.asa.org.uk/advice-online/universities-comparative-claims.html.
[22] Consistent with the findings in UCAS' *Where Next? What influences the choices school leavers make?*, 2021, (ibid) which references DfE research in 2017 which found that '*personal enjoyment of or interest in a specific subject was the principal motivating factor behind choice of subject*'.
[23] UCAS, *Where Next? What influences the choices school leavers make?,* 2021 (ibid).

point towards the need for better integrated coordination between the different sources of information, advice and guidance for students in schools, colleges and in higher education, involving for instance the CEC, UCAS, and AGCAS, as well as the various information tools coordinated by the OfS such as DiscoverUni, the National Student Survey, and the Teaching Excellence Framework.

A consistent theme for the undergraduate respondents, particularly in years three and four of their studies, and most markedly for the graduate respondents, is the link between thinking they should have made a different decision, and the challenges of finding a job. With hindsight, both undergraduates and graduates said they should have thought more about what course would best enable them to find a good job and career when they graduated. This was the primary reason for graduate respondents thinking they would have made a different decision (56%). The equivalent figure for the undergraduates was 26%.

For both undergraduate and graduate respondents, it is noticeable how relatively little reliance seems to be placed on careers guidance for both those happy with their choice and those not, even though the reasons for wishing they had made a different decision are frequently linked to careers options. This is most marked for the undergraduates, among whom less than a third said that career advisers played a lot or quite a lot of influence in their choice, but it holds also for the graduates, among whom roughly half report career advisers as having played a lot or quite a lot of influence in their choice. Moreover, in both groups of respondents, there are – at most – small to moderate differences in the influence of career advisers by those happy with their choices and those that are not. Aligned with this finding, it is perhaps significant that in response to what information, advice or support would have made a difference to them, 39% of the graduates referenced better advice from career advisers – the factor most commonly identified of all the options.

The importance of careers guidance for young people is well-rehearsed and is a consistent theme in many policy and government documents, such as '*The Implementation of the Careers and World of Work Framework (CWoW) in Secondary Schools'* published in Wales in 2017, the '*The Curriculum for Excellence for ages 3-18*' and the '*Youth Guarantee - No-one Left Behind'* strategy in Scotland, '*Preparing for Success: A Guide to Developing Effective Career Decision Makers'* in Northern Ireland, and in a number of CEC research reports.[24] In England, all state-funded mainstream schools are required to use the eight Gatsby Benchmarks as the framework for their careers' provision. Benchmark 7 states that '*by the age of 16, every student should have had a meaningful encounter with providers of the full range of educational opportunities, including sixth forms, colleges, universities and apprenticeship*

[24] https://www.careersandenterprise.co.uk.

providers. This should include the opportunity to meet both staff and students; [and] by the age of 18, all students who are considering applying for university should have had at least two visits to universities to meet staff and students…'

In England, the DfE's destination measures are used to provide information on school's success in helping students continue in education, training or employment. One of the measures relates to progression to higher education and includes a more detailed assessment of the number of school pupils who progress to a 'top-third' higher education institution, defined by reference to the average UCAS tariff points for students at the institution. Schools or colleges that have more students going on to higher education institutions, and 'top' institutions in particular, will receive a positive progression score. It could be argued that these measures incentivise students with the aptitude and inclination to go to any university to study anything, rather than focusing on which university and which course might best suit the individual student. Although this is sensible in many respects – the benefits of going to university in general are compelling and well-documented[25] – it may not support a more personalised approach that considers which higher education option is best for the particular student and which course will support them into the future, in line with the Gatsby Benchmarks.

Overall, the findings from this research study suggest that there is a compelling case for factoring in the views of undergraduates and graduates based on their post-graduation experience into school and college advice and guidance in a more granular and systematic way.

6.2 Correcting course: the possibility of transferring course or university

For many of the students and graduates, whether due to their age, their environment or their circumstances, a different decision would simply not have been possible. They only realised that they may not have made the right decision when they were at university or after graduating. For others, circumstances may have changed in a way that could not have been anticipated when the original decision to apply to higher education was being made.

For these students, it is less a question of working out what could have been done to support their original decision, and more what options are available to them when at university to support a change of views or circumstances. For this reason, questions about transferring course or institution were asked in both the surveys and the focus groups. Of those survey respondents who reported being unhappy with their decision, 59% of the undergraduates said

[25] For instance, Resolution Foundation, *Are Universities Worth it? A review of the evidence and policy options*, 2025. https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/are-universities-worth-it/; or Universities UK, *The value of going to university*, 2024. https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/publications/value-going-university.

that had the option been available they would have wanted to transfer, and 63% of the graduates.

The focus group discussions did not suggest that the mechanics and options in relation to transferring course or institution were commonly discussed or were familiar to them. Some connected the fact that they had not transferred to not knowing how to, and not even being aware of the possibility of transfer. Where students had transferred, the sense was that it was chance that they had had a tutor or lecturer who had alerted them to the options and assisted them. There was little awareness of UCAS' facilities to enable transfers between years one and two. Others pointed to the fact that by the time they realised that they had made the wrong decision, they felt it was too late for them to consider transferring or it would not have been worth the effort, disruption and cost.

Clearly, transferring course or university cannot address all the many and complex factors that lead to a student feeling that they may have made the wrong decision, and for many students, personal and family reasons may make moving to a different geographical location impossible. Further, degree courses may be too distinct and specific to allow for a transfer to another course, with credit. Transferring course and institution may also seem an attractive way out at one point in a university course, but students may change their mind later (a point made by the graduate focus group participant at page 26 above). Nonetheless, there seems to be an inherent rigidity in much provision that assumes that students make a single choice at the beginning of their studies and that they should stick with it throughout, reinforced by the potential financial consequences of transferring. This rigidity does not reflect the way in which young people's views change and evolve, as the evidence in this research demonstrates, and suggests a lack of flexibility that does not fit with the contemporary pressures of a fast evolving and challenging job market that students face when they graduate. It also does not fit with the aspirations of the 2016 White Paper (page 12) which sought to facilitate student transfers.

There are exceptions to this approach, with some higher education courses explicitly enabling a wider range of options in year one followed by greater specialisation in later years. This is more common with four-year courses and is a particular feature of Scottish higher education. Of the undergraduates at Scottish institutions who took part in the survey, 40% were in their fourth year, compared to 15% at Welsh, 11% at Northern Irish, and 10% at English institutions (consistent with Scottish institutions more frequently offering four-year courses). Although this issue was not explored in the research, it is interesting that the proportion of students enrolled in Scottish institutions reporting that they were happy with their decision is significantly higher than that in England.

Providing information and advice about transferring would enable students to make a more informed decision as to whether to transfer or not. For those for

whom transferring is the right thing to do, better and clearer transfer arrangements would ease an intrinsically difficult decision and could support better outcomes for them. Even if transferring proved ultimately not to be the right decision, if students were able to talk about the options available to them this might provide reassurance to those with misgivings about their original decision that it was overall the best in the circumstances.

Emerging DfE policy in relation to lifelong learning[26] could prove of substantial benefit to students who consider that they may have made the wrong decision. The greater normalisation of modular provision might enable undergraduates to gain a qualification for each year of study with an accredited stopping-off point at the end of the year to allow for time out, or reassessment of their choices and career options. This might have been of considerable benefit to some of the students and graduates interviewed for this research had the option been more available. Greater flexibility would also support the employability agenda: many of the students and graduates involved in this research considered that their original choice of higher education course or qualification had not adequately equipped them for the job market. The lifelong learning proposals offering a fourth year of loan-funded study might be relevant to graduates in these circumstances.

6.3 The evidence base

This report presents a snapshot based on the views of just over two thousand undergraduates and two thousand graduates, with the 61 focus group participants being in large part self-selecting. The circumstances of the undergraduates and graduates (for instance their experience of Covid) would have affected them differently. Given the consistently large numbers of students and graduates who report regretting their decision – in this and previous surveys - and the substantial financial and personal consequences of these decisions, there is a compelling case for exploring these issues in more detail by way of a longitudinal cohort study.

There is also a strong case for making the question in the Graduate Outcomes survey about whether graduates would make a different decision with the benefit of hindsight mandatory across the UK, and publishing the results.

Further work could be usefully undertaken exploring issues not covered in this research, such as the impact of the different educational systems in the UK and the contribution played by later specialisation to student outcomes, and, related to this, the consequences of the high degree of subject specialisation that is inherent in large parts of our school system. The potential role of AI in supporting effective higher education choices would also be valuable, as would exploration of the correlation between undergraduate and graduate regret and

[26] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/lifelong-learning-entitlement-lle-overview/lifelong-learning-entitlement-overview.

prior school/college attainment, institutional identity and performance in, for instance, the Teaching Excellence Framework.

This research was deliberately framed to provide a comprehensive but descriptive mapping, so has not investigated or explained in any depth the different experiences based on socioeconomic status, ethnicity and other equality characteristics, nor the intersection between and combination of different demographic, socioeconomic and institutional characteristics. These areas would benefit from further investigation to try and understand the mechanisms underpinning these patterns, as well as the large and statistically significant disparities in respect of disabled students.

7. Recommendations

The findings from this research study point towards further action that can and should be taken to improve the position for students and graduates. These recommendations do however need to be seen in context, not least that the majority of undergraduates in the survey felt that they had made the right decision as to what and where to study, a proportion consistent with other studies over a number of years. Further, when discussing the circumstances that led to them making their decisions, some of the graduates were referring to events that took place over ten years previously when advice and guidance provided to school and college students were less developed than they are now. The UK's undergraduate admissions system and careers advice arrangements are strategic, proactive, and widely admired, and organisations such as UCAS and the CEC are already addressing some of the issues identified in this report. Nonetheless, as all parties acknowledge, there is more that needs to be done, particularly given how high the stakes are for students and graduates in terms of the time, cost and consequences of their decisions as to what and where to study.

Making the right choice first time round about whether, what and where to study

1. School and college students thinking about higher education should be encouraged and supported by teachers and careers advisers to carry out more research themselves into different course and university options, and at an earlier stage, in line with UCAS recommendations and Gatsby Benchmarks. Where appropriate, teachers and careers advisers should advise students to consider deferring their decisions about higher education for a year or more to allow for more mature and informed choices, and more exposure to the world of work *[For sixth forms and colleges, and those representing them, supported by bodies such as the CEC]*

2. Schools and colleges should not see higher education as being a good outcome in itself, without more nuanced consideration of which courses and institutions may be best matches for a particular student. Ofsted assessment of school and college careers' guidance should reflect this. *[For sixth forms and colleges, and those representing them, supported by bodies such as the CEC, and Ofsted]*

3. The perspectives of undergraduates and graduates, and data about their experience, should inform the careers guidance given to young people at school and college. This requires greater coordination between careers advisers in schools and the higher education sector with good practice being better shared between the two. Higher education alumni networks could be usefully leveraged for this purpose. *[For sixth forms and colleges, those representing them, UCAS and the CEC, Ofsted, AGCAS, universities, and the DfE and equivalent UK government departments]*

4. Information to and communication with prospective students from higher education institutions must be accurate and realistic, and not blur with marketing and promotional material *[For universities, regulatory/funding bodies, and government departments]*

Correcting course: the possibility of transferring course or institution

5. Work-related learning and the embedding of employability in the curriculum should be scaled up in universities. *[For universities and AGCAS]*

6. Universities should make information and guidance available and accessible to students to support transfer arrangements, between or within courses, supported by careers advice. In England, this should align with the OfS's requirements in regulatory condition F2. *[For universities, the OfS and regulatory/funding bodies, and UK government departments]*

7. Consideration should be given to UCAS playing a greater and more visible central coordinating function in supporting students who wish to transfer. *[For UCAS]*

8. The development of policy in England on the Lifelong Learning Entitlement should take into account the substantial number of undergraduate students who may wish to change their course or institution and who might be able to benefit from the proposed accredited end of year qualifications. *[For the DfE]*

Further evidence needed

9. The question in the Graduate Outcomes survey as to whether with hindsight graduates would make a different decision should be made mandatory across the UK, and the results published. *[*For HESA/Jisc*]*

10. A robust longitudinal cohort study would be of considerable value in enabling better understanding of the mechanisms underlying the issues identified in this report, particularly how students' and graduates' views change over time and with what consequences. A longitudinal study could also usefully capture information on careers guidance received and its impact on students' decisions and outcomes. *[For academic/policy researchers and government]*