



# University Applicant Study: NEMCON

Final Report

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## 2. Introduction

The latter part of the twentieth century saw a marked increase in the number of people applying to and attending university; an increasing number of these students are first generation HE participants (e.g. Purcell, Elias, Ellison, Atfield, Adam & Livanos, 2008). Schemes to widen access alongside antidiscrimination legislation and equal opportunity initiatives have helped to facilitate this, however the full range of HE opportunities may still not be fully accessible by all (Purcell et al, 2008). It was hypothesised that the increasing fees charged in England and Wales would potentially impact accessibility further yet there is evidence to show that increased fees have not impacted on application numbers nor does cost seem to be a primary consideration for students (Atherton, Jones & Hall, 2015). If not cost, what are the reasons for not attending HE and for those that do apply what are primary reasons for doing so? A large body of research has examined other possible factors which may influence the decision to attend university and the decision of which institute to attend. A number of socioeconomic, cultural, psychological and rational factors have been identified that influence decision making (e.g. Atherton et al, 2015; Smyth & Banks, 2009; Gorard, Adnett, May, Slack, Smith & Thomas, 2007; Perna & Titus, 2005). Some of the research exploring these have been longitudinal in nature, examining the behaviour of potential applicants over the course of the decision making and application process but this is limited.

The journey from year 12 to enrolment at a course of higher education is a very important one for young people, their parents and their advisers. It represents an important period of decision-making which may have long-lasting implications for future work and career. This research attempts to consider the applicant journey over time, focussing on students in a particular geographical location, with a view to examining potential applicant's awareness of post-18 options, the relative attractiveness of each option, rationales for choosing to apply or not to HE, and the criteria that influence choice of institute. The findings will be used to better understand the decisions young people make, the sources of information they pay attention to and the factors which most strongly influence them in their choices.

### Frameworks and Influencers

There are a number of frameworks for considering the young person's choice of whether to apply; Smyth & Banks (2009) consider the two primary frameworks to be rational choice (an

analysis of the costs and benefits associated with attending university) and social (or socio-cultural) reproduction (where economic, cultural and social capitals differ across different classes which influences intention to attend). They note however that neither of these frameworks explicitly address two other key sets of factors. Firstly, they do not explicitly consider the influence of the school/organisation and the process of application. Secondly, they don't directly consider the structure and agency of the young person's decision making. Reay, David & Ball (2005) suggest that applying behavioural economics and sociology together is a more fruitful way to explain decision making; behavioural economics places emphasis on the agency of the individual decision making whilst sociology considers the structures (e.g. class, gender, race) that form and constrain decision making. Agency and structure have a complex, fluid relationship that may be subject to influence from a number of factors: habitus (individual, familial and institutional - i.e. school), cultural capital, social capital, socioeconomic background/race/class, and key influencers (Diamond et al, 2014; Perna & Titus, 2005).

Habitus refers to a disposition to think, act and behave in a given way but that the individual is not consciously aware of. Habitus is the product of the social context in which the individual lives. There is individual level habitus and class levels habitus; Reay et al. (2005) argue that educational institutes can also demonstrate habitus. Reay (1998) and Diamond et al. (2014) for example present evidence that familial and institutional habitus influence decision making regarding HE; independent schools compared to state schools for example assume an HE progression path for their students.

Cultural capital refers to formal and informal attributes that people may possess directly because of their familial and social background, for example language skills, cultural knowledge, educational qualifications or levels of confidence (Diamond et al. 2014, Perna & Titus, 2005). Two points where cultural capital may be particularly important are at interview and when writing a personal statement. Baars et al (2016) found that white working class boys found this to be a significant barrier during admissions. Related to cultural capital is social capital. This is concerned with social networks and structures and the ways in which these are used. Perna & Titus (2005) found that levels of parental involvement (which they operationalised as a measure of social capital) were related to the likelihood of applying to university. A recent study by Gao and Chi Kit Ng (2017) provides initial evidence that these different forms of capital all have effects and do so in a way that is multiplicative. The authors

demonstrated that social capital moderated the effect of cultural capital on the educational aspirations of students:

*“the building of social capital (e.g. the direct and indirect communication between parents and the student regarding college/university) could positively facilitate the development of cultural capital (e.g. parents’ and students’ predisposition) and ultimately affected the odds of university enrolment” (pp. 16).*

Research suggests that students from lower socio economic backgrounds are not only less likely to feel that HE is ‘for people like them’ (Archer, Hollingworth & Halsall, 2007) but are also less likely to apply to a top university (Harrison & Hatt, 2011). When they do apply it is more likely to be a modern ‘post-1992’ university (Connor et al., 1999). University degrees do not have equal economic value – both the subject studied and the type of university attended effect labour market outcomes and therefore wage benefits (Chevalier and Conlon, 2003; Iftikhar et al., 2008) with modern post 1992 institutes attracting a lower return on investment.

White working class boys are particularly underrepresented in HE. They perform poorly compared to others in compulsory education and this partly explains why they are less likely to attend university (Baars, Mulcahy, & Bernardes, 2016). However, other factors also contribute and this includes financial barriers (Baars et al., 2016); white working class boys have concerns that a university degree is not a worthwhile investment and this is an even stronger influence than the actual initial costs of studying (Baars et al, 2016).

Read et al (2003) examined how maturity, ethnicity and class were related to a sense of belonging in a post 1992 university where the dominance of the ‘normal’ (white, middle class, school leaver) student was giving way to a broader mix of students. Mature students, those from minority ethnic backgrounds and lower social classes gravitated towards post 1992 institutes where it was perceived as easier to belong and they were able to move into a more central position within the academic community there.

Kettley & Whitehead (2011) suggest that working class young people may be less likely to apply to university and a top university not because working class parents are not supportive, but because the parents are unfamiliar with HE (lack cultural capital) and the processes surrounding applications and fees. Baars et al (2016) found that white working class families are less familiar with HE both in terms of what it involves and in the benefits it can bring. They are less likely to consider this as a viable option for their children even if they hold it as an

aspiration for them. Thus white working class boys have real difficulty in accessing information and role models who might convey this.

The introduction of course fees has inevitably led to fees and finance becoming a focus for researchers too (e.g. Atherton, Jones & Hall, 2015; Dunnet, Moorhouse, Walsh & Barry, 2012; Davies, Mangan & Hughes, 2009; Connor, 2001). Connor (2001) found that for those qualified to enter HE, deciding whether to attend or not was a complex process with students being concerned about whether the costs of attending HE would realise sufficient benefits and for those from lower classes whether they would be able to cope with the demand of academic study. Those choosing not to attend HE did so primarily because of a desire to go into employment and earn money more quickly. Dunnet et al. (2012) found that although the introduction of fees had retained its relatively low importance as an influencer, it had led to 'non-traditional' students (those whose parents had not attended university) having a greater loss of utility associated with attending university. Davies, Mangan & Hughes (2009) also report that students who were 'unsure' that they would apply to HE were more pessimistic about a good degree enabling them to get a good job and were also more pessimistic about being able to gain a good degree in the first place. This may actually be a realistic assumption however, CHERI (2003) notes that graduates employment outcomes are influenced by employability development activities undertaken early on in degrees but that working class and mature students were less likely to engage with these activities successfully. Despite causality not being established here, the findings could indicate that these non-traditional HE entrants are less likely to find a good job when they graduate and thus the graduate premium for them is reduced as is the financial incentive.

A common finding is that whilst cost is often not a key consideration, it does impact on some students, particularly non-traditional students, primarily in that their choice of university becomes constrained to those close to home (e.g. Atherton et al. 2015; Dunnet et al. 2012; Davies et al. 2009).

It would seem then that the decision making process of whether to attend university or not has demographic, social, environmental and psychological influences (Dunnett, Moorhouse, Walsh & Barry, 2012). There are also a number of potential key influencers in the decision making process; parents, siblings, extended family and family friends, peers, teachers and career practitioners for example. In part this is because, as Diamond et al. (2014) point out, students struggle to make these complex decisions by themselves and are also reluctant to engage with information sources that are unfamiliar to them in order to help them make their

decisions. Moogan & Baron (2003) report that males and those who decide early to go to university are more influenced by their parents than teachers, and that having siblings who attend HE also increases the likelihood of enrolment (Diamond et al., 2014).

There are some longitudinal studies which have examined decision making and choices across the journey. An early example of a qualitative approach to examining the decision making of students (Brooks, 2003) found that HE was perceived differently within middle class students. With respect to decision making families exerted a strong influence but friends and peers were also strong influencers particularly with respect to which institutes were considered as viable choices.

A slightly later example of longitudinal research is the Futuretrack study, commissioned by the Higher Education Careers Services Unit (HECSU; see e.g. Purcell et al., 2008) in which the 2006 cohort of applicants to full time courses was tracked for six years from application to higher education (HE) until approximately 2 years following graduation. What the Futuretrack studies provided evidence for is that in 2006 the motivation to study at higher levels was twofold: to improve ultimate job prospects but also to continue to explore a favoured subject discipline. However the study did not attempt to capture particular local contexts - instead institutional data was aggregated by institutional type – for example, Russell Group, Pre and Post 92 institutions, etc. Similarly finely grained data about the pre-HE experiences of particular groups was not the main purpose of the study; although analyses included a range of socio-economic characteristics and tracked outcomes for those from different backgrounds including international students and students with disabilities. For further information, see [http://www.hecsu.ac.uk/current\\_projects\\_futuretrack.htm](http://www.hecsu.ac.uk/current_projects_futuretrack.htm)

## **Information seeking within the decision making process**

There are individual differences in how people search and use information, in preferences for the form in which information is presented and people may use a number of different forms and sources to fulfil their information requirements (Diamond et al., 2014). A recent report from the Careers and Enterprise Company (CEC) (2016) reviewed young people's decision making and information seeking at key moments of choice. It concluded that young people have a high cognitive burden when making key decisions about their future careers; there are many options, many sources of information and often without a simple way to make sense of

the information or compare among them. For some this results in disengagement from the decision making or simplifying the processes by fixing on a single option too early. Young people do not lack for information then, rather their problem is with understanding and using the broad and varied range of information that is available. The CEC's report suggests that young people are used to information they receive about options being personalised to their previous behaviour or preferences (think marketing from Amazon or itunes for example) and this does not happen with career information. Thus career decision making may be facilitated by helping them to produce a more refined set of choices via a number of methods, one of which would be the provision of better, more personalised information.

Evidence suggests that both social and institutional factors influence how people seek information; in particular the socio-economic background, family and school are shown to be important in shaping how people find and use information (Diamond et al., 2014). Diamond et al., (2014) suggest that there are two main types of decision making routes – the first is to assimilate as much information as is available and evaluate it (then decide), the second is to find and use information until the set criteria has been met. These findings suggest that some individuals may be overwhelmed by large amounts of information and HE providers may need to consider ways of reducing this. Individual differences mean there is no ideal format for information and so HE providers may need to ensure that information is available in a variety of formats, although this does not necessarily ensure that people are better informed (Diamond et al., 2014) as too many sources and formats can lead to information overload. One way to overcome this is to make better use of visual displays such as infographics, and technology can certainly facilitate this (Diamond et al., 2014). It has been suggested that providers of information about HE can support decision making by encouraging the potential applicant “to be more reflexive and empowered... by challenging habitual behaviours resulting from cultural norms and any automatic thinking processes...” (Diamond et al., 2014, pp. 7).

Renfrew, Baird, Green, Davies, Hughes, Mangan, & Slack (2010) asked current and prospective students to rate how useful different pieces of information about HE institute elements would be in making decisions. The top most useful sources fell into one of three categories: satisfaction with the institution/course (by existing students); employment rates of graduates; costs (of halls of residence and availability of bursaries). Findings also suggested that participants wanted the information to be at course level rather than at institute level. However, of the students who took part less than half had looked for the majority of the pieces of information which were ranked as most useful – a significant proportion of those who

ranked information as very useful had not even looked for it. However, of those students who had looked for various pieces of information the majority had found it. The most used sources were university prospectuses/websites and UCAS followed by family/friends and teachers.

### **The Unconditional Offer**

A practice increasing in England is that of the unconditional offer to applicants who's predicted A level grades warrant one. Back in 2015 UCAS noted 8% of applicants with A levels and 15% of those with BTEC students received an unconditional offer from one or more of the universities they had applied to (UCAS, 2015) and this number has increased. The unconditional offer may come with no strings attached and that the university can still be put down as a back up option but this is not always the case and this means the student has to commit to the university. For students who perform better than expected the unconditional offer may stop them from looking more widely at higher ranking universities and since the marketplace is now a 'buyer's market' the unconditional offer is not as amazing as it once might have been. The director of student recruitment and admissions at Bath University argued that unconditional offers apply more pressure to students, they undermine the value of the results that students receive and they lack transparency because they are made available "to exceptional students, but that phrase can mean different things at different universities" (Mike Nicholson, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/aug/15/university-a-level-students-unconditional-offer>).

There is also the risk that students will work less hard if they have an unconditional offer - whilst getting lower A level grades won't stop you from attending university, they are one of the first measures that graduate recruiters use to sift out applications. Furthermore, the new A level courses frequently deliver the most difficult material at the end of the course. If the student has an unconditional offer and is not attending or engaging properly, they may fail to learn properly and this can make the first year at university even more challenging. Or, should they discover they don't like the course it might mean that being accepted elsewhere becomes impossible.

However, for other students the reduction in pressure associated with having an unconditional offer may be the factor which helps them perform well beyond their expected grades; the director of recruitment, admissions and international development at Lancaster University argues that students perceive their unconditional offers positively and interpret it

as a vote of confidence in them and their ability to succeed. This takes the pressure of high achieving students at what is a crucial point in their education and career (<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/aug/15/university-a-level-students-unconditional-offer>). At this point the full range of effects and long term consequences are unknown.

## Summary

Increasing numbers of school leavers are opting to attend HE but this option isn't necessarily accessible to all. To understand the factors which influence post 18 option choice and choices of HE institute this study intends to explore decision making and reasoning by year 13 students over the course of the applicant journey, examining the importance of factors, influencers and information sources.

## 3. Aim and objectives

The interest of the North East Midlands Collaborative Outreach Network (NEMCON) is to conduct a longitudinal study focusing on the applicant journey from year 12 to enrolment in HE. To do so would enable NEMCON partners to offer new and fresh insight into such themes as: the advice and guidance provided by schools and colleges prior to application; the effectiveness of communications with prospective students before and following offers; the appropriateness of activities and events aimed to inform prospective students of choices and options – in other words, it would aim to find out how young people choose to study where they study.

The objectives (and attendant research questions) of the longitudinal study would be to gain a better understanding of:

- The awareness of the options available to them post 18 and the importance of each
- The factors which underpin decisions to attend HE or not
- When decision making begins
- The relative importance of key advisors; families, friends, schools/teachers, career practitioners
- The relative importance of messages they pay attention to and the order in which they are consulted

- The effect of institutional branding and reputation on applicant behaviour
- How offers are converted into acceptances

## 4. Methodology

### Design

A longitudinal design was adopted to track decision making over the course of the academic year. Data collection took place at the start of the academic year (data collection point 1 - September/October 2016) when exploration and research into post 18 choices was being undertaken and after applications had been completed and submitted (data collection point 2 - March/April 2017). A final data collection took place post acceptance and enrolment (data collection point 3 - September 2017).

### Participants

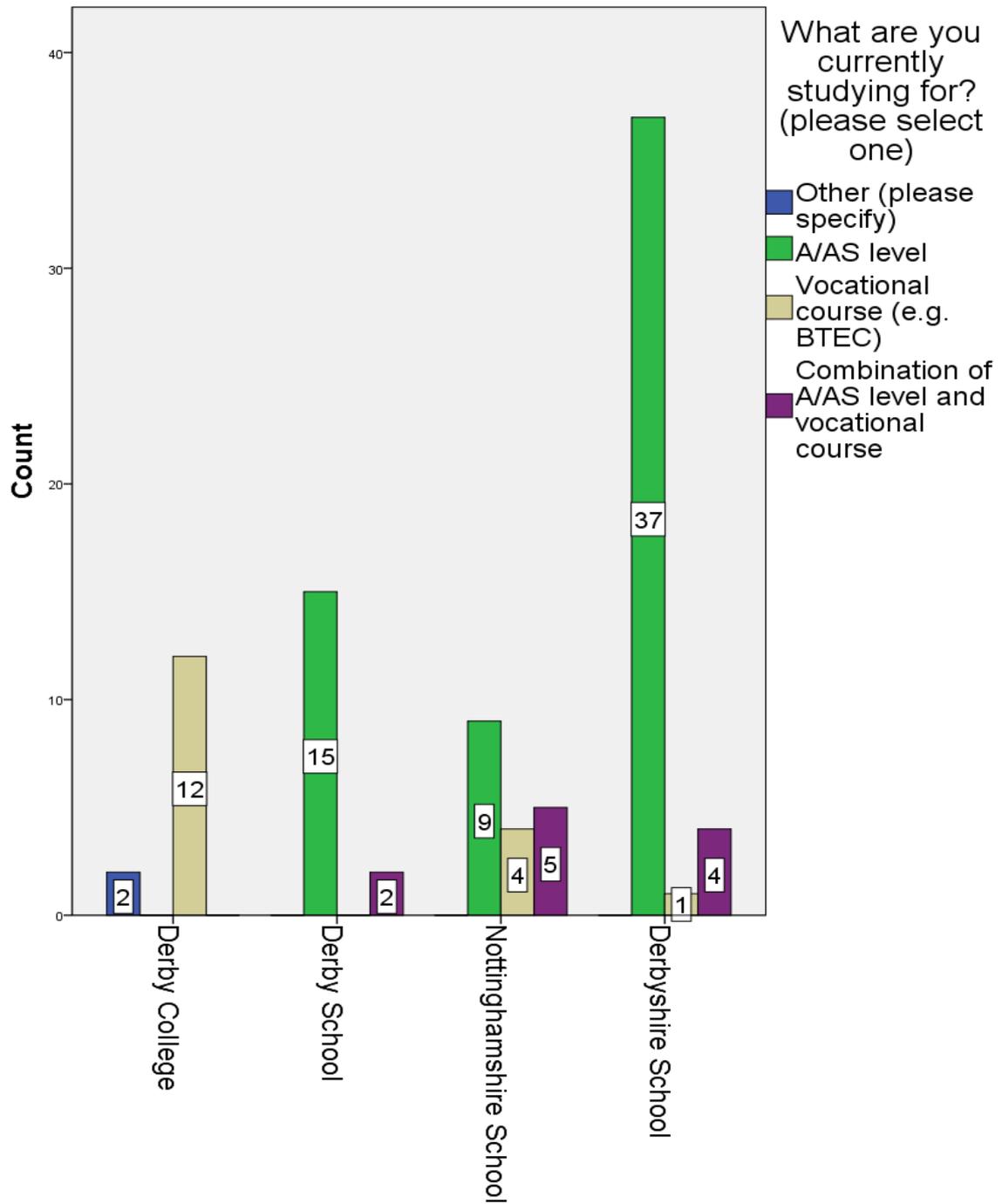
A sample of pre-HE institutions across the Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire regions was selected using opportunity sampling - the sample of schools was selected from those who were available at the time the study was carried out and fitted the necessary criteria. It comprised two good to high achieving 11 - 18 secondary schools, one 11 – 18 secondary school in an area of lower HE participation, and one college of further education. This was done to ensure some institutional diversity to enable inferences to be drawn about the attitudes to university choice from a variety of perspectives. The diversity of pre-HE institution may influence the way messaging is transmitted to prospective students and determine the most effective activities with which to engage them given the different 'cultures' of applicants' pre-HE institutions.

Overall 136 students completed at least two of the surveys from data collection points 1, 2 and 3; of this group 82 were female, 50 were male and 4 preferred not to say. Eighty five completed questionnaires from collection points 1 and 2 although these respondents did not necessarily answer every question. Twenty two students completed all three questionnaires. Of the total sample of respondents, twenty attended a college in Derbyshire, thirty five attended a community college school in Derby, twenty six attended a sixth form at a Nottinghamshire school and fifty-five attended a sixth form at a Derbyshire school.

Students were primarily studying for A/AS levels although some were studying for vocational qualifications (primarily those attending the college) or a combination of both as shown below in Figure 1. The GCSE's already obtained by the students are shown in Table 1 alongside the

most frequent grade achieved within the group. The most often obtained GCSE's were English, Maths, Biology, Chemistry and Physics. Table 2 shows the A levels currently being studied for by the group at collection points 1 and 2. The most popular A level, and by a significant margin, was Psychology.

**Figure 1. Qualifications being studied for by institution**



**Table 1. GCSE subjects and Mode grades achieved by students**

	<b>Number of students with GCSE</b>	<b>Mode Grade</b>
Mathematics	84	C
English literature	82	B
English language	82	C
Biology	61	C
Chemistry	59	C
Physics	58	C
Religious Studies	48	C
Geography	38	B
History	37	B
Design and Technology	28	B
French	25	B
Business Studies	24	B
Physical Education	23	C
Computer science	22	C
English language and literature	19	C
Applied Science	16	C
German	16	C
Art and design	15	B
Drama and Theatre	15	B
Science double award	15	C
Music	12	B
Spanish	9	D
Psychology	6	B
Business	3	A
Performance Arts (single award)	2	B
Greek	1	C
Latin	1	B

**Table 2. Number of students taking A Level subjects**

<b>A level</b>	<b>N</b>
Psychology	33
History	13
Biology	12
Sociology	12
Mathematics	11
Applied Science	9
Drama & Theatre	8
Geography	8
Chemistry	6
Computing Science	6
Business Studies	5
English Language & Literature	5
Religious Education	5
Physics	4
Art & Design	3
English Language	3
Dance	3
General Studies	3
Physical Education	3
Design & Technology	2
French	2
Music	2
English Literature	1
Spanish	1

## **Method**

Information from prospective students that participated in study (respondents) was collected primarily through online surveys at three data collection points. All three survey instruments were piloted prior to the main study. Questions were developed from a review of the literature on applicant decision making, information seeking and the relevant weightings of

key influencers and institutional characteristics (see Appendix 1). Likert scales were used wherever relevant with the points on the likert scale typically being:

- strongly disagree (1)
- disagree (2)
- neither agree nor disagree (3)
- agree (4)
- strongly agree (5)

In the analyses this data has been treated as numerical data to provide mean scores for the different items.

Information from staff members was collected using an unstructured interview in which post 18 options, the information provided to students and the support provided to them throughout the application process was briefly discussed.

## **Procedure**

At collection points 1 and 2, the researcher visited each institute and supervised the students accessing and completing the online questionnaire during class time. Students were briefed on ethics and given an opportunity to query any issues arising from the questionnaire process. Informal discussions with staff members took place during the session and the researcher took notes. At collection point 3 previous respondents were emailed a link to the online survey.

## 5. Findings

### Research Question 1: The awareness of the options available to them post 18 and the importance of each

- The option that was most commonly considered was HE
- Very few didn't consider HE at all
- Significant numbers of students also considered higher apprenticeships and apprenticeships

At time 1 students were asked to rate the amount of thought they had given to a range of post 18 options (see Table 3) with the rating scale including:

- Have given this a lot of thought
- Have given this some thought
- Have not given this much thought
- Definitely won't consider it
- Am not sure what I think about it

By far the option which had been considered most was HE with over 70% of students having given this a lot of thought – only 5.1% definitely wouldn't consider it and only 2.2% of people responding to this question were not sure what they thought about HE. Significant proportions of responding students had given some thought to higher apprenticeships (26.5%), apprenticeships (31.6%) and gap years (25%). The greatest frequency of responses to FE college, traineeships, internships, volunteering, employment (full and part time) and travel was 'definitely won't think about it'. This is supported by student's indications as to what was the most attractive option to them at data collection point 1 (September/October 2016) – these responses are shown below in Figure 2. Ninety one students responded to this question; 63 students indicated HE was the most attractive option, followed by apprenticeships (11), higher apprenticeship (10), employment (4), a gap year (2) and FE college (1). This pattern was repeated across all three schools surveyed (see Figure 3), only the college students showed a more even distribution of preferences with 6 preferring HE, and 4 each preferring an apprenticeship and higher apprenticeship.

**Table 3. Percentage of responding students (from all institutes) and the amount of thought they have given to post 18 options**

Post 18 Option	Given a lot of thought to	Given some thought to	Not given thought to	Definitely won't think about it	Not sure what I think about it
University	70.6	14.0	5.9	5.1	2.2
FE College	7.4	4.4	20.6	50.0	10.3
Higher Apprenticeship	14.7	26.5	11.0	11.0	25.0
Apprenticeship	15.4	31.6	8.8	14.7	16.9
Traineeship	4.4	6.6	14.0	36.8	19.1
Internship	1.5	5.1	13.2	36.0	23.5
Volunteering	5.1	16.9	15.4	27.9	14.0
Employment (full time)	11.8	17.6	11.0	25.0	19.9
Employment (part time)	5.1	22.1	16.9	26.5	14.7
Travel	5.9	16.9	11.0	28.7	19.9
Gap year	5.1	25.0	8.1	22.1	16.2

Figure 2. Most attractive post-18 option at Data collection point 1 (N = 91)

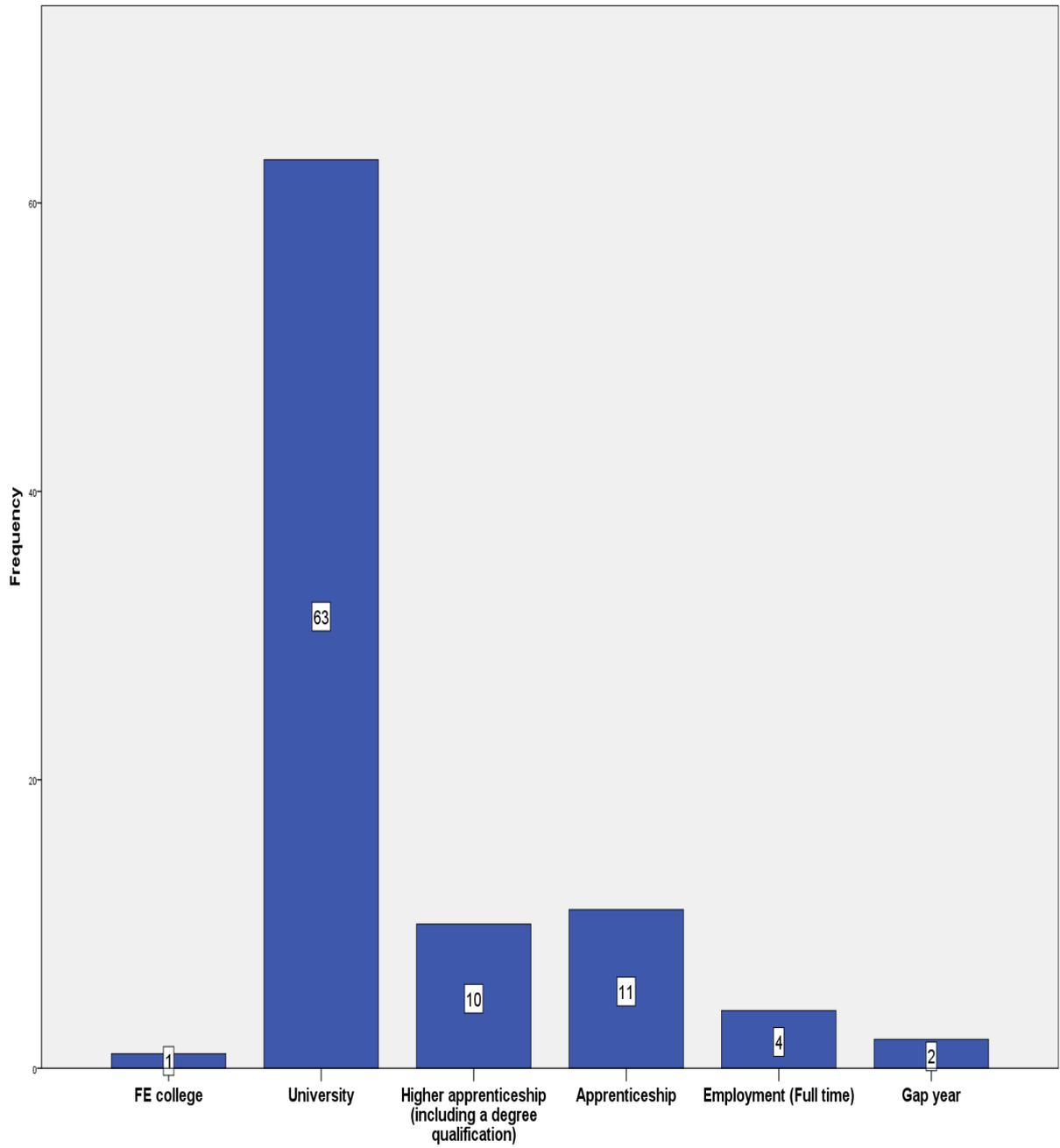
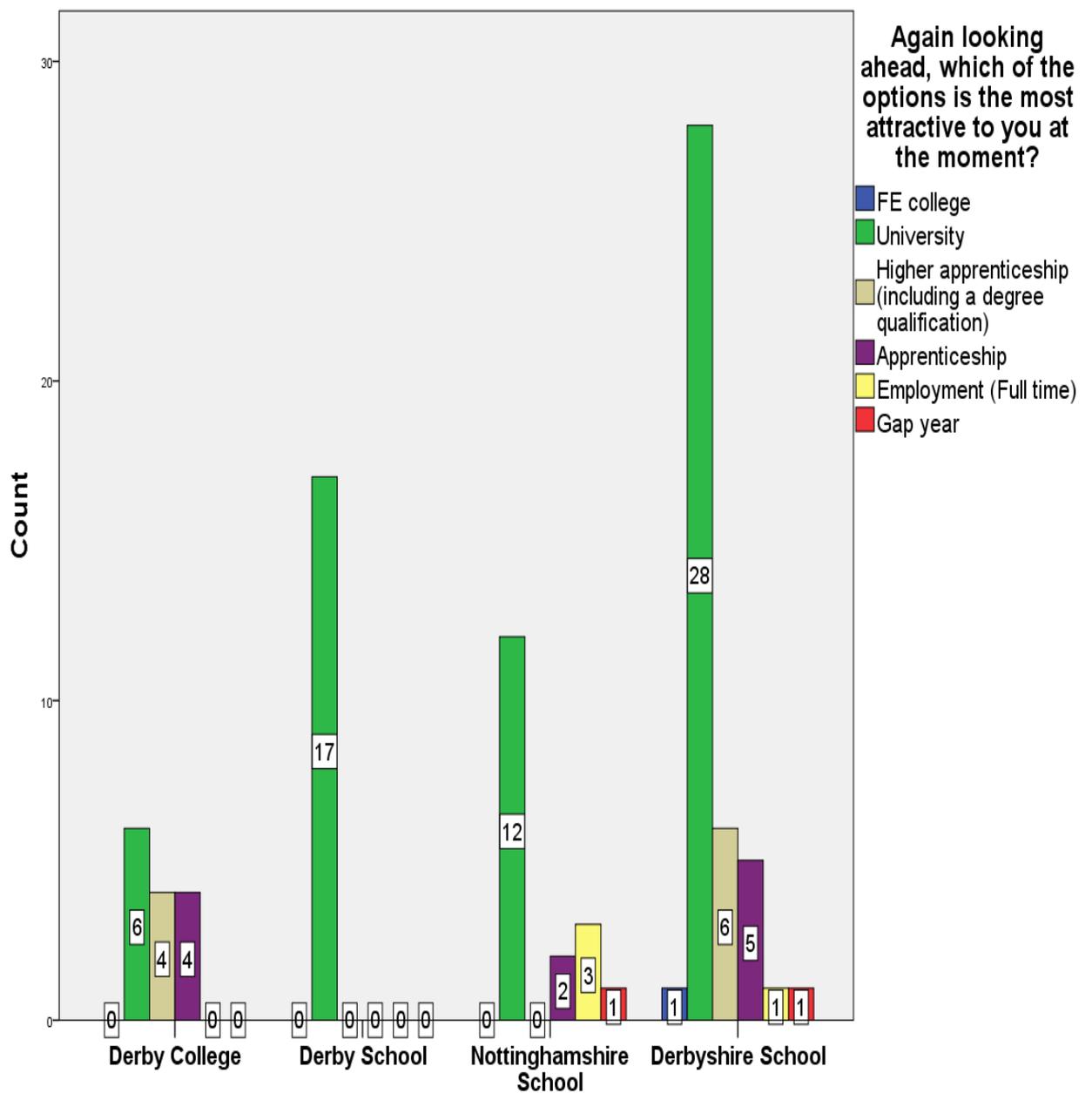


Figure 3. Most attractive option post-18 by college/school



When most attractive options were looked at by gender using cross-tabulations and chi square statistical analysis (this works by comparing actual counts with what you might expect if there were no effects) there were significant differences between males and females in the numbers selecting university and a higher apprenticeship ( $\chi (10) = 26.50, p = .003$ ). More females than should be expected to and fewer males than should be expected to selected university where as the opposite was true for higher apprenticeship (see Table 4).

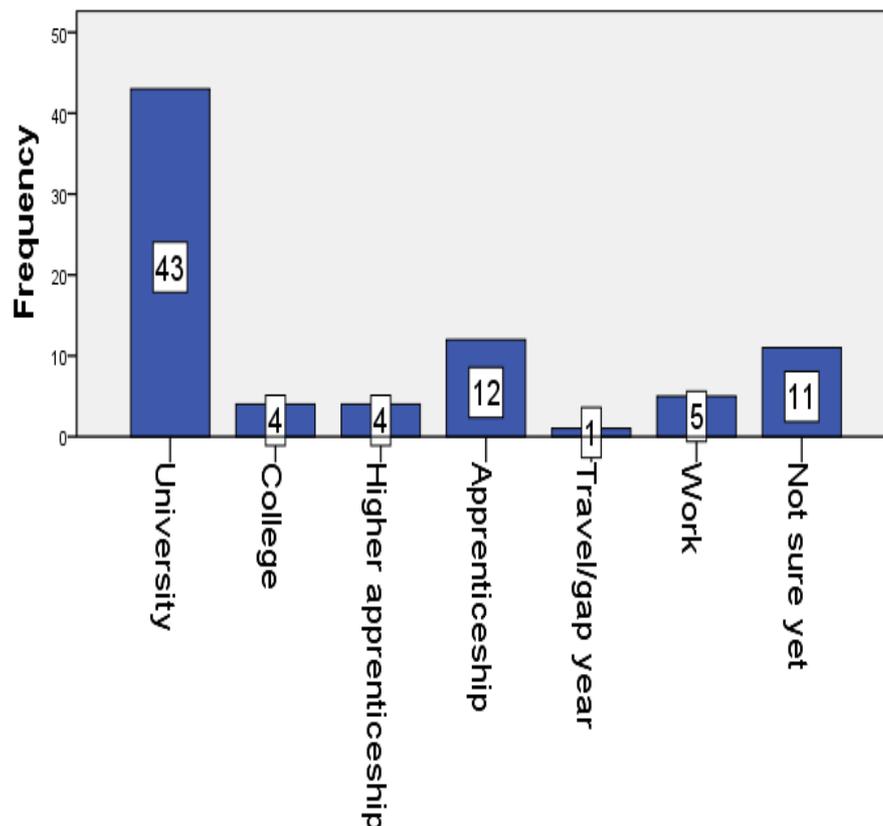
**Table 4. Expected versus actual counts of females and males, university and higher apprenticeship choices**

		University	Higher apprenticeship
<b>Female</b>	Actual count	40	2
	Expected count	33.2	5.3
<b>Male</b>	Actual count	23	5
	Expected count	27	4.3

Similar analyses were run looking at choices by ethnicity and all of the indicators of social economic status (SES; eligibility for free school meals, estimated family income, employment status of parents) and there were no significant effects suggesting that post – 18 choice at data collection point one was related to gender but not to ethnicity or SES.

At data collection point 2 students were asked to indicate what they had chosen to do after school/college (see Figure 4, N = 80). A number of students were still unsure (11) whilst the majority of students who responded had decided to attend HE (43) followed by apprenticeships (12), work (5), a higher apprenticeship (4), attend FE college (4) and take a gap year/travel (1). This was very similar to student’s indications at data collection point 1.

**Figure 4. Data collection point two post-18 choices (N=40)**



At data collection point 2, choices were again related to gender, chi square statistical test results were significant ( $\chi (12) = 31.09, p = .002$ ). Significantly more females than were expected to, compared to males, had made the choice to attend university, whereas more males than females were opting for higher apprenticeships.

**Table 5. Expected versus actual counts of females and males, university and higher apprenticeship choices at data collection point 2**

		University	Higher apprenticeship
<b>Female</b>	Actual count	34	0
	Expected count	25.3	2.4
<b>Male</b>	Actual count	9	4
	Expected count	17.2	1.6

Again there were no other significant findings so post 18 choice at data collection point time 2 was not related to ethnicity or SES.

At time point 3, the majority of respondents were at university (N=14, 63%) had opted for university, compared to 2 respondents each for college, higher apprenticeship and work and 1 each for an apprenticeship and travel/gap year. There were no statistically significant differences between male and female choices at time point 3 – for either gender the majority of respondents were at university, although it should be noted that the small number of respondents makes statistical analyses unreliable. The small sample size also made comparisons of choices from different schools and ethnicities impossible.

## Research Question 2: What are the factors which underpin decisions to attend HE or not?

- At the start of year 13, student's reasons for applying to HE were primarily that it would enable them to get a good job and they were interested in studying a particular course.
- Later in year 13 the reasons also included HE being part of their longer career plans
- The most common reasons for not applying to HE were wanting to earn money, do an apprenticeship or not enjoying studying.
- The cost of HE was not a key influencing reason

### Reasons for attending HE

Students were asked at data collection point 1 which of a set of reasons had influenced their decision to apply to HE (*It is the normal thing to do for somebody like me; I want to realise my potential; I want to be a student; It is part of my longer-term career plans; to enable me to get a good job; I want to study a particular subject/course; My parents encouraged me to apply; My teachers encouraged me to apply; I was encouraged to apply by my employer/colleagues; I was influenced by careers advice or information provided at my school/college; I was influenced by careers advice or information provided elsewhere; I wasn't sure what to do next and it gives me more options; I thought it would be better than being unemployed*).

The majority of students gave very few if any reasons (only 37 responses across all possible reasons were recorded). However the factor that was selected most often was 'To enable me to get a good job' with 11% of the students indicating this was a reason for them to apply to HE. The next most important factor with 7.4% of students indicating it was important was 'To study a particular course'. The other reasons selected were:

- Careers advice from a professional (2.9%)
- I want to realise my potential (1.5%)
- I wasn't sure what to do next and it gives me more options (1.5%)
- I want to be a student (0.7%)
- It is part of my longer term career plans (0.7%)
- My parents encouraged me to apply (0.7%)

At data collection point 2 they were given a similar set of reasons and asked to rate the extent to which they agreed with each (N = 45; see Table 6 where 1 = strongly disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree and 5 = strongly agree). There was some overlap with data collection point 1 responses; wanting to study a particular subject/course was the statement students most strongly agreed with and university being a route to the job they want was second. However at data collection point 2 there was stronger agreement that attending HE would enable them to get a good career and a good salary and they were starting to demonstrate stronger confidence that they knew the career they wanted. The reasons that were least agreed with were going to university because friends were, or not being sure about what they wanted to do and university giving them more time to think about it.

Reasons did not vary significantly with ethnicity. However, analyses were run to compare males and females mean ratings (independent samples t-tests) and there were significant differences between their ratings on two reasons. Firstly, females disagreed more strongly with the reason 'my friends are going so I thought I would too' than males ( $t(43) = -2.815$ ,  $p = .007$ ). Mean rating for females was 2.23, mean rating for males was 3.09. Secondly, males agreed more strongly than females that going to university would 'give me the opportunity to obtain a variety of different jobs' ( $t(43) = -2.352$ ,  $p = .023$ ) with males rating it at 4.55 and females at 3.85. Further analyses were run to examine whether there were differences in agreement with these items between groups based on ethnicity and SES indicators but there were no significant findings.

The responses from the group as a whole could indicate a move towards HE being seen as a key step in career plans as opposed to something that is simply expected of them, that is to say agency may be a stronger influence than social, familial or cultural background at this later stage of decision making. Alternatively these students may simply be delaying making a decision about their career plans. Small gender differences have been found and may indicate a greater degree of peer influence in males as opposed to females but also a greater degree of agreement in males compared to females that going to university increases the range of job options available.

**Table 6. Data collection point 2 agreement with reasons for attending HE**

	Mean	Std. Deviation
I want to study a particular subject/course	4.42	.65
I want to develop my education	4.42	.62
I want to obtain qualifications to get the job I want	4.41	.66
Going to university is important for developing a career	4.24	.57
It will help me get a job with a good salary	4.22	.59
It gives me the opportunity to obtain a variety of different jobs	4.02	.89
I am confident I will obtain a good degree	3.91	.73
The benefits of having a university degree outweigh the costs	3.82	.98
I thought it would be better than being unemployed	3.82	.93
Living costs at university will be financially challenging	3.77	.85
I have decided what career I would like to have	3.60	1.23
I want the social life	3.45	.95
It is normal for people in my family to go to university	3.02	1.30
I wasn't sure what to do next and thought this would give me time to explore what I want to do	2.73	1.28
My friends are going so I thought I would too	2.44	.94

## Reasons for not attending HE

Those who had chosen not to attend HE (N = 35, as assessed at data collection point 2) were asked to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with a number of possible reasons for not attending HE (frequencies are reported in appendix 1). Strongly agree responses were scored as 5, agree as 4, neither agree nor disagree as 3, disagree as 2 and strongly disagree as 1. The reasons which attracted the most agreement were 'I'd rather go straight into earning money', 'I want to do an apprenticeship' and 'I don't enjoy studying'. The reasons which were most often disagreed with were 'People in my family don't go to university', 'My friends are not going to university', and 'It's not a normal thing for someone like me to do'. Table 7 shows the reasons with mean scores, ranked from most agreed with, to least agreed with. The two most strongly agreed with reasons were wanting to go straight into earning money or wanting to do an apprenticeship. These were followed by not wanting to study and not believing they would get the grades they would need to enter HE. Interestingly, students did not agree that 'HE was too expensive/couldn't afford it' was a reason not to attend.

**Table 7. Mean agreement scores for reasons not to apply to HE.**

Reason	Mean	Std. Deviation
I'd rather go straight into earning money	3.82	1.07
I want to do an apprenticeship	3.68	1.20
I don't enjoy studying	3.20	1.05
I will not get the grades I need to meet the entry requirements	3.14	1.11
I don't need a degree for the job I want to do	3.05	1.15
I want to run my own business	3.00	1.49
I don't know what I want to study	2.85	1.33
It is too expensive/I can't afford it	2.74	1.19
People in my family don't go to university	2.65	1.13
It is not a normal thing for someone like me to do	2.35	1.04
My friends are not going to university	2.31	.96

*Analyses were run to compare ratings between gender, ethnicity and SES indicators but no significant results were found.*

These results suggest then finance is not a general consideration for the majority of respondents and that the key drivers for attending HE involve the continuation of education or obtaining a desirable job or career. Furthermore it appears that decisions to not attend university are not, at least in this sample, driven by ethnicity, gender or SES.

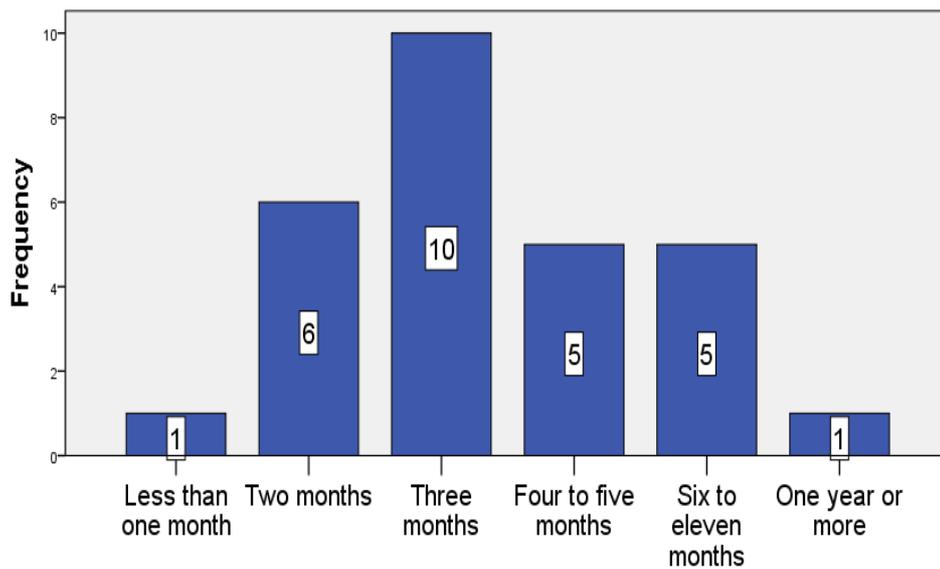
- The vast majority of students had spent at least two months researching post-18 options
- More than half had spent at least three months researching post-18 options

### **Research Question 3: When does decision making begin?**

At data collection point 2 (March/April 2017 – Spring term of Year 13) students were asked to indicate how long they had spent doing research before making decisions regarding what to do post-18 (See figure 5). The majority of students had begun researching options early in the first term of year 13 and had spent 3-5 months doing so. This is in line with sixth form classes and tutors providing time and support for students to research options and make applications. Five students had begun researching options before starting year 13 and one had spent more than a year researching options. Thus the majority of students who responded to this question had invested a considerable amount of time in exploring their options.

*There were no differences in time spent researching by gender, ethnicity or SES indicators.*

**Figure 5. Number of months spent conducting research into post-18 options**



**Research Question 4: What is the relative importance of key advisors; families, friends, schools/teachers, career practitioners?**

- Mothers were reported as being the most important advisors followed by fathers.
- Teachers were also considered to be important advisors
- Career guidance professionals were not rated as being important

Respondents were provided with a list of possible influencers (at data collection point 2) and asked to rate each on a scale how important they had been in helping them make their choices:

- Very important
- Somewhat important
- Neutral
- Not very important
- Not at all important

Mothers were the influencer most commonly rated as very important (N=34) followed by fathers (N= 25) (frequency of responses to each influencer can be seen in appendix 3). The

response categories were transformed into numeric scores such that very important was equated with 5, somewhat important with 4, neutral with 3, not very important with 2 and not at all important with 1 (see Table 8) - thus influencers who were rated as being more important recorded higher mean scores. The influencers rated as most important were mother (mean = 4.45), father (mean = 3.95) and teachers (3.41) followed by friends (3.19), siblings (3.18) and representatives from universities (3.16).

*There were no differences in ratings by gender, ethnicity or any SES indicator.*

These findings broadly replicate those of previous studies with parental influence being a key driver. Neither career guidance professionals or employers were considered to be particularly important advisors which is interesting given the recent evidence which has argued that the more encounters an individual has with an employer between the ages of 14 and 19, the less likely they are to become NEET (Mann, 2015).

**Table 8. Mean rating scores for each influencer**

Influencer	Mean	Std. Deviation
Mother	4.45	1.71
Father	3.95	1.85
Teachers	3.41	1.68
Friends	3.19	1.56
Brothers/sisters	3.18	1.71
Representatives from universities	3.16	1.58
Employers	2.95	1.76
Other family members or family friends	2.95	1.58
Career guidance professionals	2.62	1.45
The media (newspapers, television, radio, social media)	2.40	1.49

## Research Question 5: What are the kinds of messages applicants pay attention to, their relative importance and the order in which they are consulted?

- University open days were the most important source of information
- University websites and UCAS were also very important
- HE fairs and independent guides and websites were rated as least important sources of information
- UCAS was the typically the first source of information
- This was followed up with university prospectuses, websites and open days

Respondents were asked at data collection point 2 to rate a range of sources of information in relation to their importance:

- Very important (5)
- Somewhat important (4)
- Neutral (3)
- Not very important (2)
- Not at all important (1)

Mean scores were calculated for each source and are presented in Table 9.

Most important sources of information were university open days (mean = 4.25), followed by university websites (4.02), UCAS (3.93), family (3.78), teachers/school (3.78) and the university prospectus (3.72). HE fairs on average are viewed as least important (2.38) with independent guides and websites also perceived as not very important.

*There were no differences between genders, ethnic groups or across different SES indicators.*

**Table 9. Mean ratings for importance of information sources (N=47)**

Information Source	Mean	Std. Deviation
University open days	4.25	.94
University website	4.02	1.03
UCAS	3.93	1.00
Family	3.78	1.04
Teachers/school	3.78	.95
University prospectus	3.72	.97
Presentations or conversations with current students	3.54	1.02
League tables and the National Student Survey	3.52	1.06
University run workshops, activities or experience days	3.44	1.07
University advertising	3.23	.82
Friends	3.12	1.17
Faculty/school leaflets	3.02	.84
Faculty/school websites	3.00	.69
Independent guides	2.54	.86
Independent websites	2.53	.83
HE fairs	2.38	.96

Respondents were asked to rank the information sources according to the order in which they were consulted (see Table 10). The sources which were most frequently consulted **first** were UCAS and the university prospectus followed by university open days, the university website, league tables/NSS, teachers/school, university run workshops/activities and university advertising. The sources most frequently cited as being consulted **second** were the university website followed by university open days, UCAS, league tables/NSS, teachers/schools, the university prospectus, faculty websites and leaflets and then university run workshops/activities. The third source to be consulted was most often the university prospectus followed by UCAS, the university website, league tables/NSS then family, independent websites, and faculty websites and leaflets.

**Table 10. Number of people consulting information sources 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>**

Information Source	1 <sup>st</sup> source	2 <sup>nd</sup> source	3 <sup>rd</sup> source	4 <sup>th</sup> source	5 <sup>th</sup> source
UCAS	7	3	4	3	2
University prospectus	7	2	5	2	0
University open days	5	4	1	4	2
University website	3	8	3	5	2
League tables/NSS	2	3	3	0	3
Teachers/school	2	3	1	5	3
University run workshops etc	1	1	0	1	3
University advertising	1	0	0	1	0
Faculty websites	0	1	1	0	2
Faculty leaflets	0	1	1	2	1
Family	0	0	2	2	4
Independent guides	0	0	0	0	0
Friends	0	0	0	0	1
Independent websites	0	0	2	0	0
Presentations/conversations with current students	0	0	1	0	1

The median order of consultation was calculated for the information sources using SPSS (the median is an appropriate measure of dispersion when dealing with ranked data) and is displayed in Table 11. This supports the previous analysis – the sources consulted initially are UCAS, faculty level information from the university, the university prospectus and website and university open days. Teachers/school, league tables/NSS, university run activities, family and friends are consulted typically at a later stage, with independent guides and websites, presentations/conversations with current students and advertising being the last sources to be used. However, although there were broad similarities between males and females, there were some interesting differences (see Table 11). Whilst faculty level information and UCAS continued to be initial ports of call for females, males tended to university level information (prospectus, website and particularly open days) first. For males, NSS scores and league table position appeared to be considered at a later date than for females. The sample size however was too small to test for statistical significance.

**Table 11. Order of consultation for information sources.**

Information Sources	Order of consultation (whole sample)	Order of consultation (males)	Order of consultation (females)
UCAS	2 <sup>nd</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>
Faculty/school leaflets	2 <sup>nd</sup>	N/A	2 <sup>nd</sup>
Faculty/school websites	2 <sup>nd</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>
University prospectus	3 <sup>rd</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>
University website	3 <sup>rd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>
University open days	3 <sup>rd</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>
HE fairs	3 <sup>rd</sup>	12 <sup>th</sup>	N/A
Teachers/school	4 <sup>th</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>
League tables and the National Student Survey	4 <sup>th</sup>	7 <sup>th</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>
University run workshops, activities or experience days	5 <sup>th</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>
Family	5 <sup>th</sup>	6 <sup>th</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>
Friends	6 <sup>th</sup>	6 <sup>th</sup>	7 <sup>th</sup>
Independent guides	8 <sup>th</sup>	8 <sup>th</sup>	8 <sup>th</sup>
Independent websites	9 <sup>th</sup>	9 <sup>th</sup>	6 <sup>th</sup>
Presentations or conversations with current students	9 <sup>th</sup>	12 <sup>th</sup>	9 <sup>th</sup>
University advertising	11 <sup>th</sup>	12 <sup>th</sup>	10 <sup>th</sup>

## Research Question 6: What is the effect of institutional branding and reputation on applicant behaviour?

- Students agreed that a universities reputation was important
- A universities brand was less likely to be seen as important

Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with statements regarding their views on university reputation and university branding: “A universities reputation is important to me” and “A universities brand is important to me”. Figures 6 and 7 show responses to these items. For the former item the majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that a universities reputation was important to them. Respondents were less likely to agree that a universities brand was important however.

*There were no differences between genders, ethnic groups or SES groups.*

Interestingly students showed a slight tendency to believe that the kind of university they attended was important for their career (see Figure 8) yet the majority of students were not applying to Oxbridge or Russell Group universities (N = 21). Rather the majority were applying to pre- and post- 1992 institutes (N = 37; see Figure 9). There are a number of possible explanations; these pre and post 1992 institutes may be perceived to support career development through offering specific courses, placements or employability development opportunities or alternatively these choices may reflect levels of confidence, aspiration and ‘fit’.

Figure 6. Responses to item “A universities reputation is important to me”

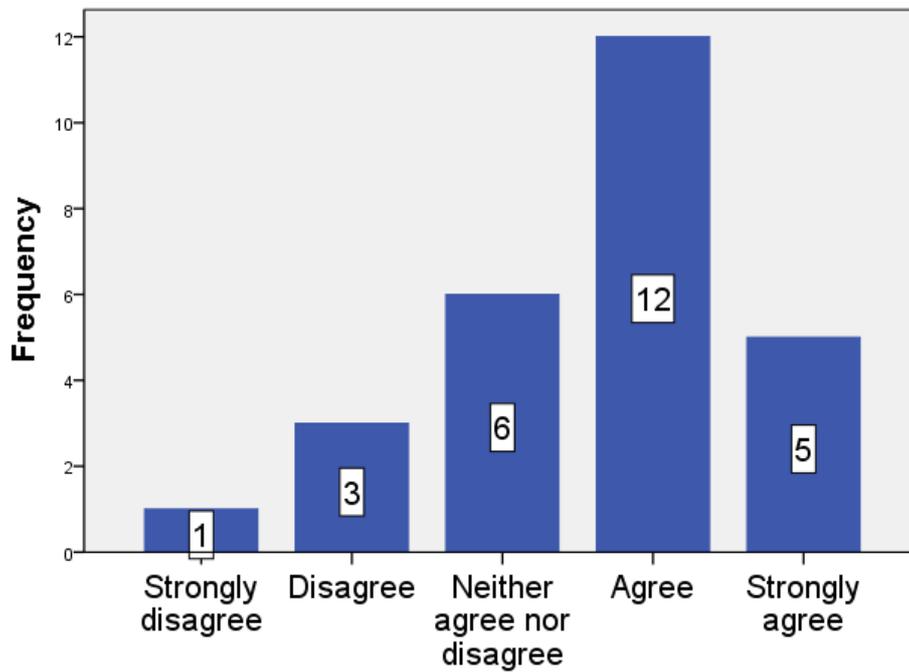


Figure 7. Responses to item “A universities branding is important to me”

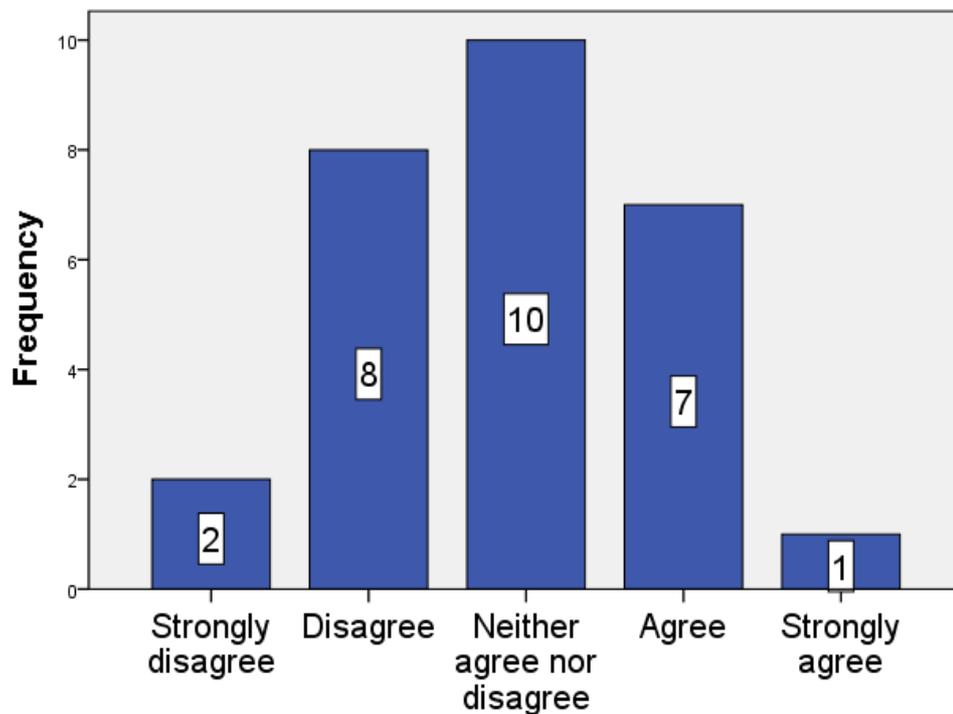


Figure 8. Responses to item “The kind of university I go to is not important for my career prospects”

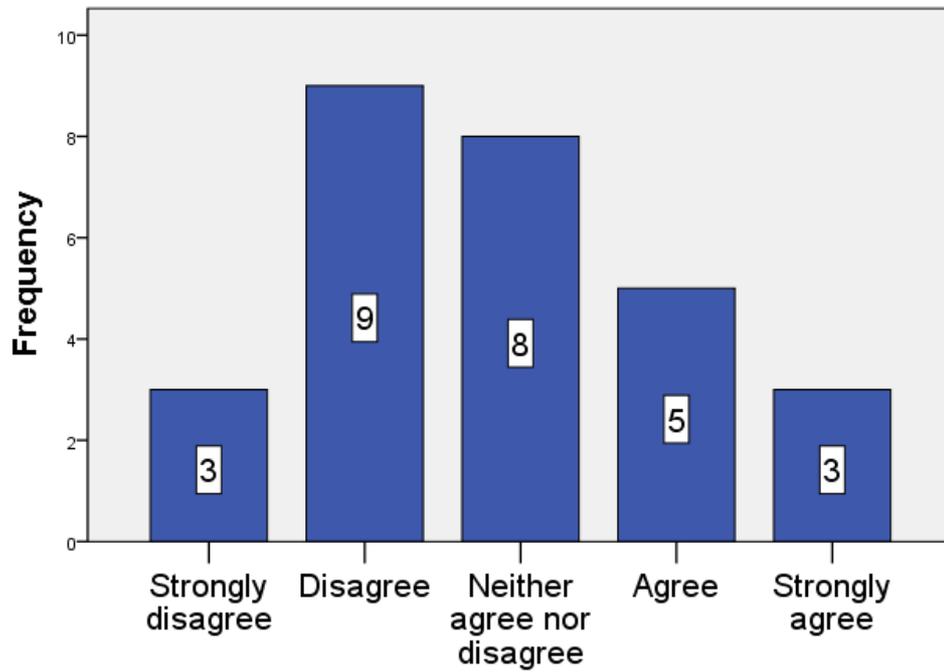
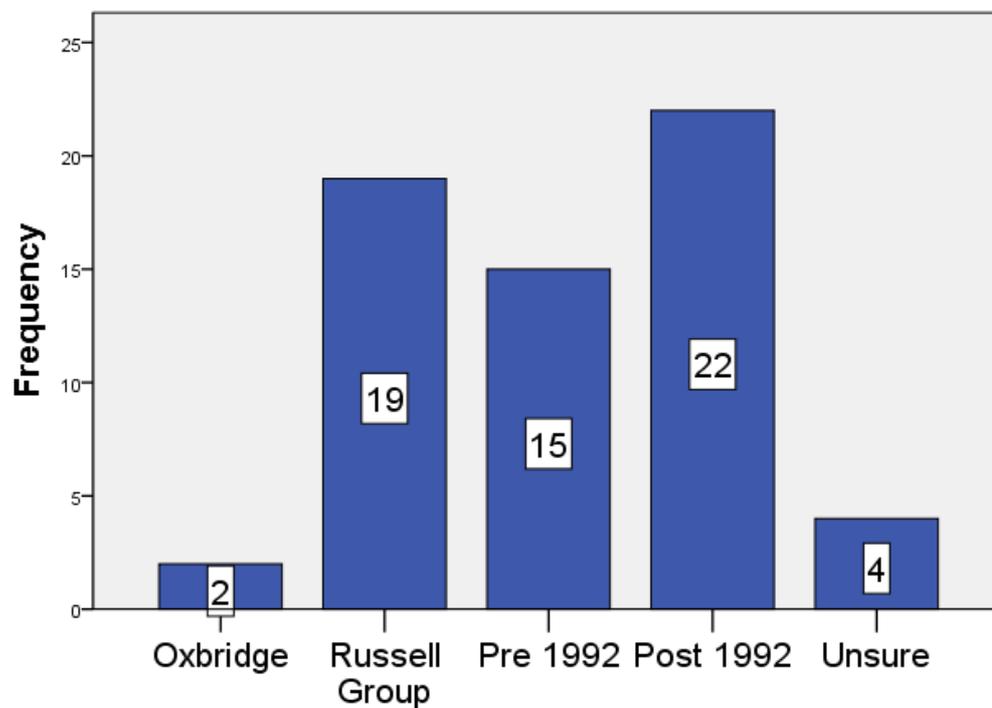


Figure 9. Type of universities as first choice in application

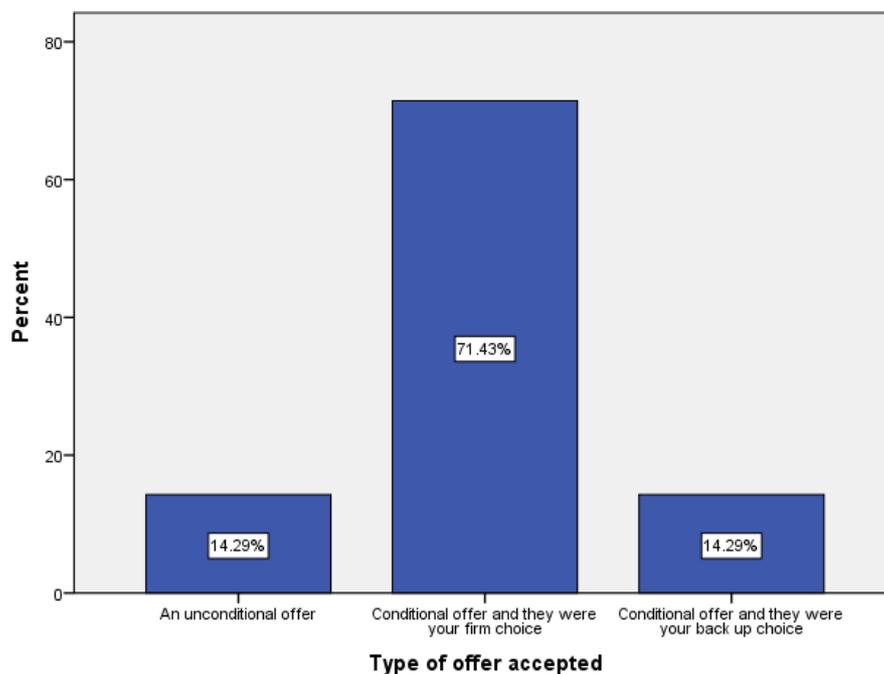


At time point 3, the primary decision maker for which university to attend was the course itself (one third of respondents stated this). For each of the other reasons given (it was local, the campus, position in the league table) there were only one or two respondents.

## Research Question 7: How are offers converted into acceptances?

At collection point 3 respondents were asked about what kind of offer they had accepted for the university they were now attending. The majority of respondents had accepted an offer from the university which was their firm choice (see Figure 10) although a small percentage had accepted an unconditional offer or a conditional offer from a university which was their back up choice.

**Figure 10. Type of offer accepted**



Further analysis of the effects of being given an unconditional offer on A level performance are impossible since only two respondents were given one but anecdotally it seems that one felt the offer had no effect on their attendance, engagement or performance and one felt it had encouraged them to attend, engage and they had performed better than expected.

Respondents noted a range of activities that universities had undertaken to convert offers into firm acceptances (see Table 12). The three most frequently encountered were emails/letters with generic information about the course, information from the faculty about the course /relevant events and personal contact from the course tutor (each being encountered five

times). Only one individual stated that the university had done nothing (that they were aware of).

**Table 12. Frequency of conversion activities encountered**

Conversion activities by the university	Frequency
Not applicable	0
Nothing that I am aware of	1
Emails/letters with generic information	5
'Goodies'	3
Faculty information about the course/events	5
Personal contact from the course tutor	5
Invitations to participate in activities, events and further open days/tours	2
Phone calls	2
Social media engagement	3
Other	2

Of these the activity which respondents stated was most influential on their decision making was contact from the faculty regarding the course and relevant events (N=7, 58%), followed by phone calls (N=2, 15%), the opportunity to engage with activities in the university (N=2, 15%) and 'other' (N=2, 15%). Sample size was too small to investigate differences between genders, ethnicity or SES.

## 6. Conclusions

### Discussion

The most common post-18 choice was university, except for those students studying for vocational qualifications at college, and only 2% of respondents weren't sure what they thought about this as an option. A significant proportion of respondents weren't sure what they thought about the other options including apprenticeships and higher apprenticeships. Qualitative data from discussions with tutors and students suggest that schools favour university as a destination and that other options are less well understood. By spring 2017 students were well into the application process for whatever they had chosen to move on to and the overwhelming choice was university. The trend for applications to university to be favoured by schools and students remains clear.

Reasons for applying to university approximated those found by the Futuretrack team with the most commonly selected reasons being 'getting a good job' and to 'study a particular course'. Later in the decision making process reasons also included references to career and salary prospects. For those who had chosen not to apply to university, their primary motivations for not doing so were that they did not enjoy studying, they'd rather go straight into earning money or they wanted to do an apprenticeship. These findings imply that familial and organisational habitus may be key influencers in decision making but that individual agency is also important.

The decision making process for the vast majority of students began in year 13 with research into courses and universities lasting on average 2-5 months. In all the schools who took part, dedicated time was given to students to research universities and courses and prepare applications. The people who they deemed most important for advising them were mothers, fathers and teachers (in that order). They rated university open days, university web sites, UCAS, teachers/school and university prospectuses as the most important information sources. Interestingly independent guides and websites were rated as relatively unimportant. Diamond et al., 2014 point out this may be because students defer to sources that are more familiar to them. Information seeking typically began with UCAS and faculty level information before considering university level information through websites and open days. Information sources that permitted independent assessment of the university/course quality were consulted at a later date; the NSS and league tables appear most typically as a fourth source and independent websites/guides even later (8<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup>) if at all. These findings are partially in line with those of Renfrew et al., (2010); again students make more use of information at course level but are less concerned with existing students satisfaction with courses or employment rates (accessible through the NSS, league tables and independent guides/websites).

Students reported that the reputation of the university was important to them and there was a tendency for them to believe that the type of university they went to would be important for their career prospects but after enrolment, the main reason respondents were where they were was the course itself and fewer students had applied to Oxbridge and Russell group universities than did to pre and post 1992 universities. This is particularly interesting and warrants further investigation. It may reflect a feeling that they would not 'fit' in such institutes and felt more comfortable in pre or post 1992 institutes. Since many applicants ended up in a university because of the course itself, these institutes appear to be offering

courses with greater appeal. This might be for a range of reasons including teaching style, placement opportunity, focus on employability and nature of classes and assessment.

The majority of respondents at collection point 3 were at the university they had chosen as their firm choice although two had received unconditional offers. The effect of receiving an unconditional on student's attendance, engagement and attainment remains unclear as the sample size was too small to draw any kind of conclusions. To convert offers to firm acceptances universities engaged in a range of activities that most frequently centred around the course itself with the contact coming from the course tutor, the faculty or the university generally. From the student's perspective, the activity most frequently rated as being most helpful was information from the faculty regarding the course.

There were some initial differences in post 18 choices and the importance of various criteria in making decisions regarding university between genders but not in other aspects of decision making. Likewise ethnicity and SES did not appear to be related to the factors investigated. This is likely due to the nature and size of the sample which was small and not comprised from large numbers of lower SES individuals as may be the case in other studies.

## **What they might mean for practice**

The school and the family of applicants are key influencers on whether university is seen as the next step so widening participation activities need to target school habitus and familial habitus as well as the students themselves. Students tend to want to go to university to study a particular course and to enhance their job, salary and career prospects. Activities then might consider examining particular courses and linking them to career pathways and salary differences.

Course level information and university open days are two information sources that are seen as highly important by students and appear to be amongst the first to be consulted (after UCAS). Universities may need to focus on providing course level information that includes career pathway options.

The effect of unconditional offers on student choices, behavior and performance remains unclear although the unconditional offer does not appear to be a practice on the wane. There are potential negative consequences for the careers of individuals who allow the offer of an

unconditional offer to impact negatively on attendance, engagement and attainment so schools, careers advisors and other relevant parties need to make these clear to applicants and encourage them to work to achieve as good a set of grades as possible.

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