Hello!

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Client Partner.
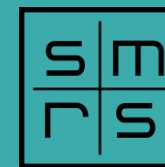
Jo Mclaughlin.

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What we'll cover today.

Setting the scene.

Why did we conduct this research?

Methodology.

The research approach we followed to test our hypothesis and capture insight.

Key findings.

Key themes emerging from our research.

Recommendations.

Our reflections and suggestions for addressing the challenge.
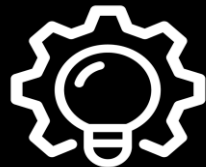
What we want you to think about today.

What's your big picture?

What impact can you have on your overarching goals.

Key Challenges.

Do you have the insight to ensure you activity has impact?

Opportunities.

Explore where your actions can make a difference.

Next Steps.

What actions should you leave today ready to take.

Setting the scene.

- Government narrative
- Volatility across recent cycles
- Expectation gap
- Unplaced numbers high
- Predicted grades v reality
- Published tariff reqts v reality
- Main scheme demand sluggish
- Self release growing at Clearing
- RG or nothing?

Methodology.

Qualitative and quantitative study of teachers and careers advisers with responsibilities for careers guidance within
UK schools/colleges.

Phase 1:

- Online focus groups.

- Analysis of UCAS Application data (2013-2022).

Phase 2:

- Online survey.

Focus Group Methodology.

Online focus groups with careers advisers and teachers.

5 x 1 hour focus groups.

Fieldwork: 19 – 27 Sept 2023.

Attendees contacted via UMF syndicated research participants.

Participants received a £25 Amazon voucher for taking part.

Participants.

18 participants attended.

Regions: Across the UK.

Roles: Teachers with careers service responsibilities and dedicated Careers services leads and advisers.

School type: range of state funded and private schools.

Survey methodology.

Online survey - design informed qualitative findings.

Fieldwork: 13 Nov – 15 Dec 2023.

Respondents contacted via UMF participants and UCAS Teachers and Advisors community.

Incentivised participation

Participants.

293 complete responses.

Regions: Across the UK

Roles: careers adviser (42%) or related roles and heads of sixth forms (24%)

Experience: 63% have 6+ years experience.

Student age range: Most work in schools delivering education for 11-18's (59%) and one third for students aged 16+ (32%).

01

Russell Group universities are appealing.

- 68k more main scheme applicants to RG between 2013 and 2022
- This cycle has seen further increases
- Fewer applicants choose no RG at all
- But exclusively RG applications remain steady
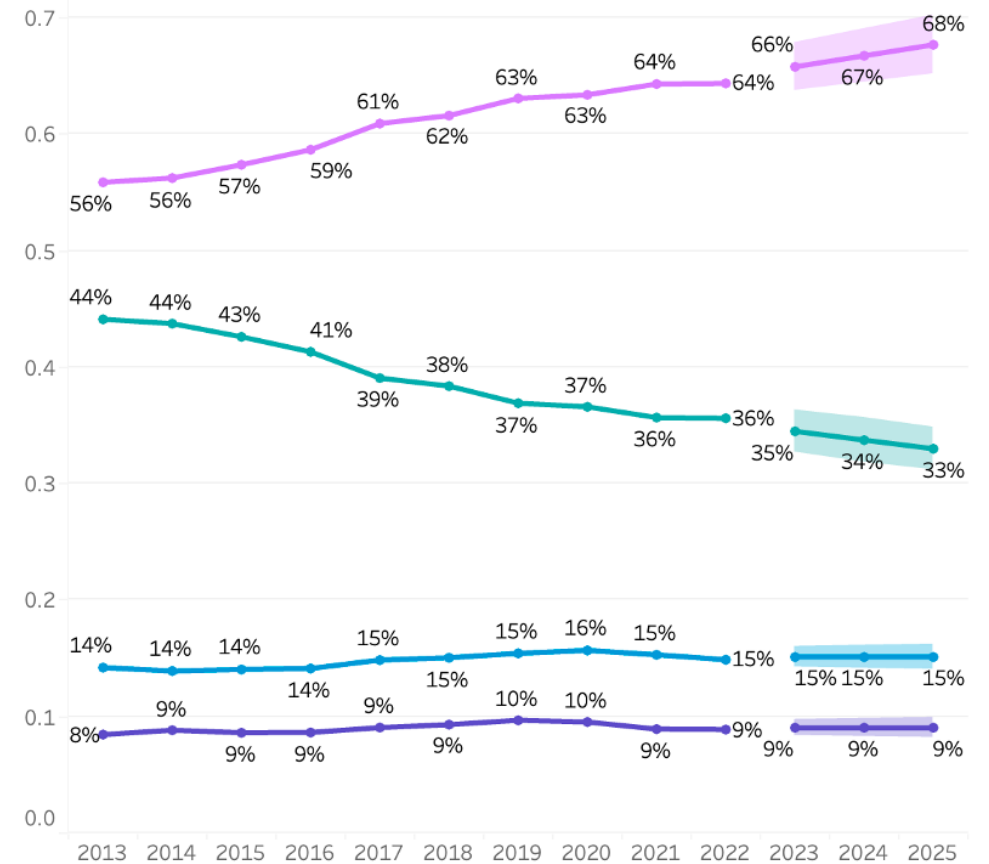
Legend:
- % At least one MS choice to RG
- % No RG
- % All MS choices to higher tariff HEPs
- % All MS choices to RG

Awareness of exclusive RG applications.

More than half have noticed more students filling all five of their choices with RG universities.

We have noticed that more students are filling all five of their university choices with Russell Group universities. Are you aware of this?

33%	23%	4%	39%
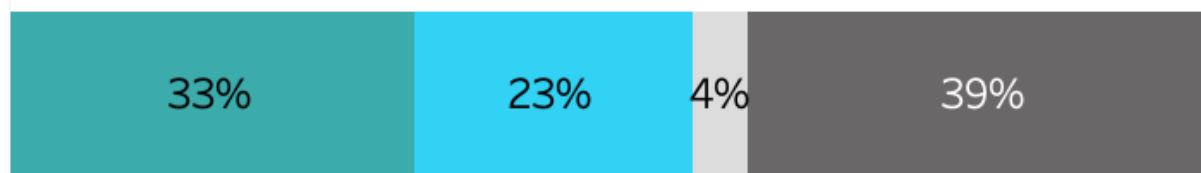
- No, I wasn't aware
- Unsure
- Yes, it's not happening at my school/college
- Yes, it's happening in my school/college

Advisors are split on the impact on students

What kind of impact do you think this increase in exclusive Russell Group applications is having on students? (If aware)

4%	46%	37%	13%

- No impact
- Negative impact
- Positive and negative impact
- Positive impact

02

There's awareness of Oxbridge and the Russell Group but little else.

"[When] I speak to the agnostics my approach is slightly different, it's more geographical. It's like okay, so you want to go to university, you're not sure what you want to study. Do you want to go within a couple of hours so you can get back and do your washing and raid the fridge or do you want to get as far away from your hometown as possible? Then that often gauges their level of bravery and commitment."

"It's all about Russell Group."

"I think there's an awareness of Russell Group and I think certain students will want the prestige that the Russell Group have. But whenever I speak to them I do try and emphasize that they are not necessarily the best."

"I think they're not very aware of, you know, the different sorts of universities, the different learning that you get in different universities, the different style of campuses."

Oxbridge and Russell Group are most familiar and used in conversation.

The Russell Group (88%) and Oxbridge (87%) are often referred to in conversations with students, although some teachers/ advisers deliberately avoid referring to them (10%).
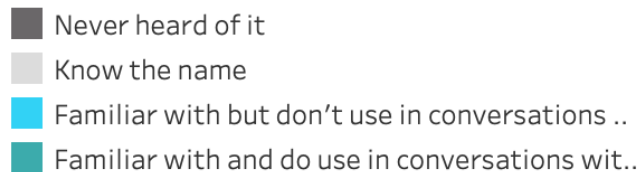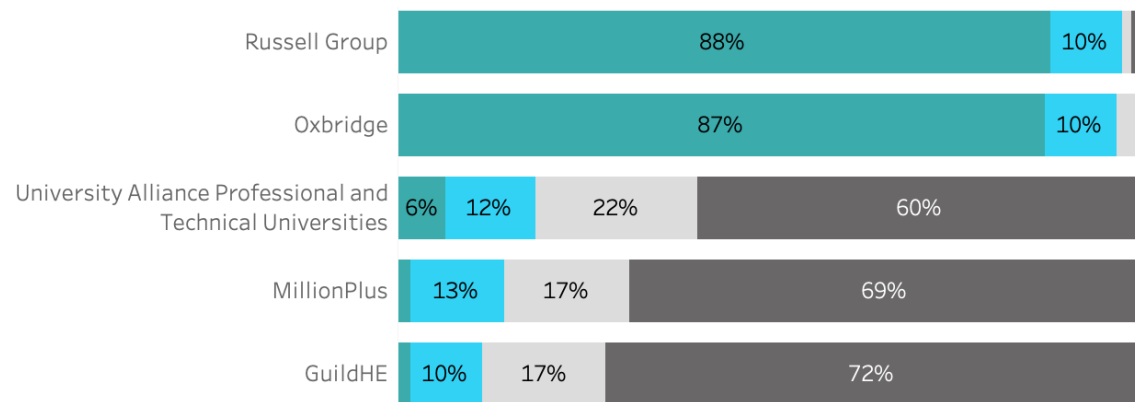
Most are familiar with the term 'Campus' and use it in conversation with students (89%), followed by 'Research intensive' (61%), although students are less likely to understand what this means (55%).

	Familiar with and do use	Familiar with but don't use	Know the name	Never heard of it
Russell Group	88%	10%		
Oxbridge	87%	10%		
University Alliance Professional and Technical Universities	6%	12%	22%	60%
MillionPlus		13%	17%	69%
GuildHE		10%	17%	72%

	Familiar with and do use	Familiar with but don't use	Know the name	Never heard of it
Campus	89%			
Research intensive universities	61%	24%	9%	6%
Traditional	57%	30%	9%	4%
Redbrick	47%	40%	9%	4%
Metropolitan	34%	32%	19%	15%
New	29%	37%	18%	16%
Post-92	12%	36%	14%	37%
Civic	12%	29%	18%	41%

Legend:
- Never heard of it
- Know the name
- Familiar with but don't use in conversations ..
- Familiar with and do use in conversations wit..

What do students understand the Russell Group to be?

> *"They are just bandied about, people don't really know who's in it. They don't know what makes them a Russell Group. They don't know about the alternatives. And that's the challenge that we face and we will always face as long as there's a league table and a group as such."*

- **High ranking, 'the best', high status**

- **Little depth to understanding**

Category	Percentage
Highly ranked universities	81%
The best universities in the UK	71%
High status brand	63%
Research-intensive	27%
The only type of university worth attending	27%
High quality research output	18%
Research-led teaching	17%
Other (please specify)	5%
Not sure	2%
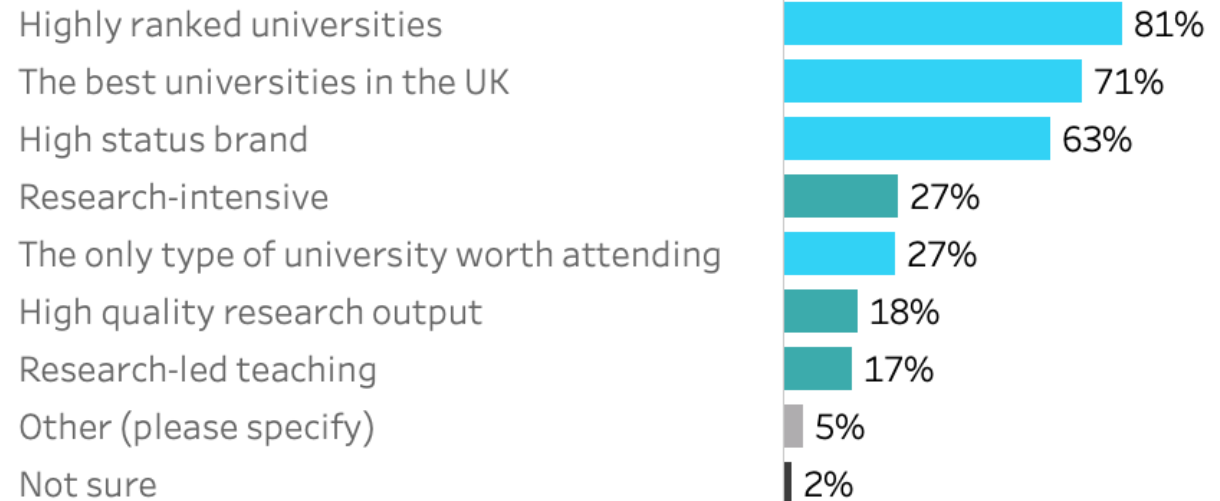
So why are they choosing to apply?

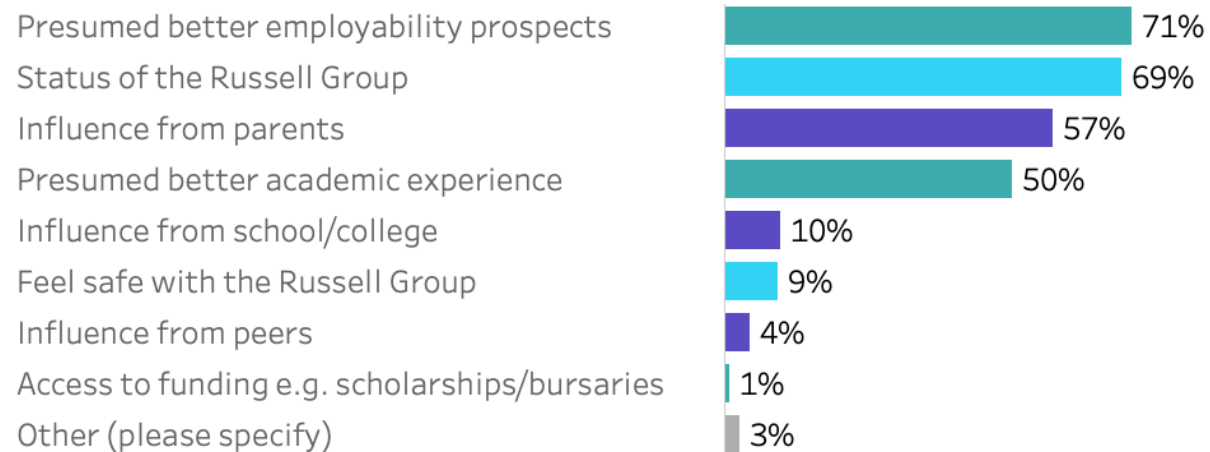*"Brand name and prestige… To them RG just means that it's really good."*

"They know that if you attend a Russell Group, your outcomes are a lot better. And that is sadly a reality, isn't it? If you've gone to a Russell Group uni, people employ us, it's a societal thing.

"I would say all of my cohort is probably obsessed by going to Russell Group universities, you know, even to the point where I had one pair once who said to me well, I'm not sure about Bath, it's not Russell Group and I went, it's a brilliant university!"

Presumed better employability prospects	71%
Status of the Russell Group	69%
Influence from parents	57%
Presumed better academic experience	50%
Influence from school/college	10%
Feel safe with the Russell Group	9%
Influence from peers	4%
Access to funding e.g. scholarships/bursaries	1%
Other (please specify)	3%

03

Employability and finances are seriously impacting students.

"So obviously the government agenda is to try not to get so many people to go to university… but I am definitely changing my guidance to really consider university because of the student finance issue and that has made me very mindful about whether it's the right thing – whether this is this gonna lead to you know a long-term career for you because you're effectively paying this off now till you're 60."

"I think for us a lot of students are interested in apprenticeships because they just don't want to be in debt."

"They're a bit more cautious on some of the creative arts subjects because usually they don't have a a very developed understanding of how the skills learned in those subjects can be applied in different areas."

"It's all about money… halfway through year 12 they started thinking about getting a part time job. Now they're working three or four evenings a week and weekends to help bring money into the household."

"Main interests that I find are in STEM healthcare areas because they see that as that's a guaranteed job."

Changes in student preferences.

Respondents have seen greater interest from students investigating non-university options (80%). More students prefer to remain local (65%), live at home (55%) and have displayed a greater focus on finances due to the cost of living (62%). Considerations around employability (36%) and apprehension in making university choices (33%) have also increased.

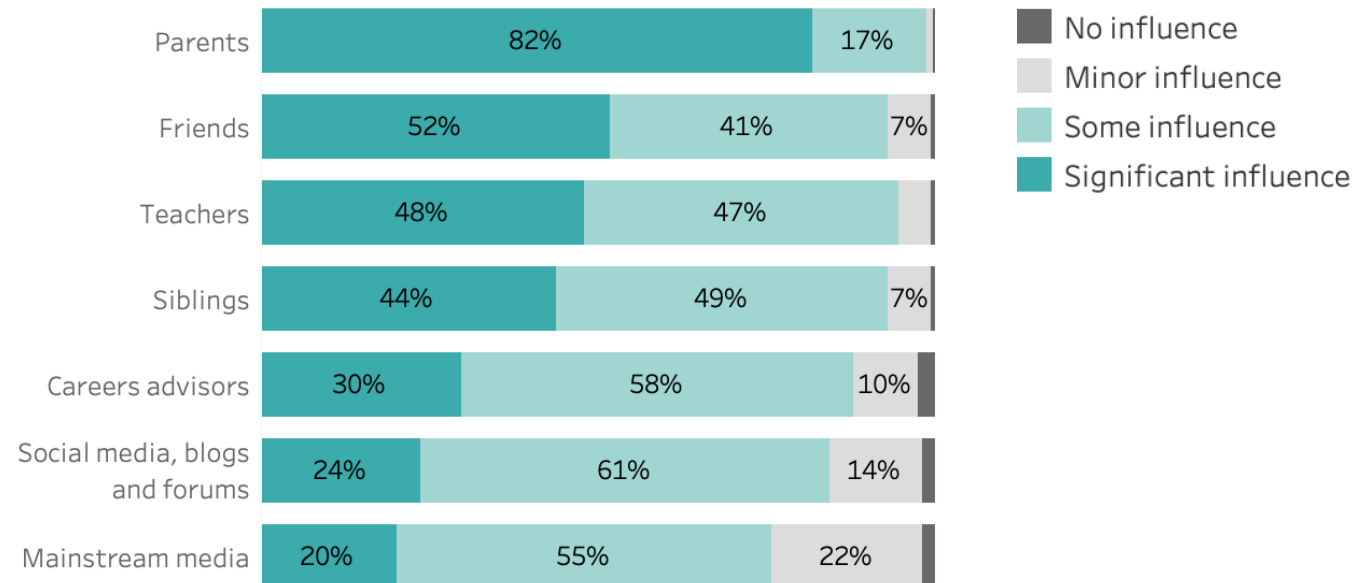|	
More interest in looking at non-university options e.g. apprenticeships	80%
Preference for more local universities	65%
Greater focus on finances due to cost of living	62%
Need/desire to live at home while at university	55%
Greater focus on employability	36%
More apprehension in making university choices	33%
More likely to consider a gap year	31%
Greater emphasis on Russell Group universities	28%
Less likely to consider a gap year	16%
Changes in subject preferences	14%
Less emphasis on Russell Group universities	11%
More confidence in making university choices	9%
Preference to travel further for university	3%
None of the above	2%
Other (please specify)	4%

"I think a lot of them are trying to pick their degrees to try and future proof their careers… where before they might just have gone to do a History degree or something because they love the subject.. for some of them now they are thinking more about, where does that leave me? What does it do?"

04

- Parents are the most significant influence on student decision-making

- Even with parent engagement from schools there is still bias and misinformation

- Negative press about HE can also influence student and parental views on the sector.

Parents are the biggest influencers of student consideration and decision making.

	Significant influence	Some influence	Minor influence	No influence
Parents	82%	17%		
Friends	52%	41%	7%	
Teachers	48%	47%		
Siblings	44%	49%	7%	
Careers advisors	30%	58%	10%	
Social media, blogs and forums	24%	61%	14%	
Mainstream media	20%	55%	22%	

Legend:
- No influence
- Minor influence
- Some influence
- Significant influence

Parental influence.

Parental influences is strong and encompasses unconscious influences.

"Parental engagement is definitely key because often the kids are just in this bubble and won't think to do things for themselves."

"the majority of [parents] seem to have a poor understanding. They don't even really understand A-levels etc. They just know that that's what you need to get to university…there's not really much awareness of the variety of the degrees and higher education institutions or formats that are on offer."

Mainstream media also impacts parent perceptions and influence.

"It doesn't help when the press releases about Mickey Mouse degrees raise their heads again – 'they don't mean anything, they're costing the taxpayer money and are of no benefit to the student'."

"A lot of students get indirect pressure from families because of finance. Those families have been in turn influenced by media, irrespective of their own personal experience of HE."

Parents are not always well informed regardless of their own HE backgrounds.

"Parents just look at League Tables but don't understand how important it is to find the right university for the individual."

"Quite often parents have misunderstood the information about university especially regarding student loans."

"Many of the parents are using the information from back when they made decisions about careers, or the advice that was imparted to them by their own parents."

Parental influence.

Well informed parents receive support from schools/colleges.

"At our college we have a careers newsletter, we run targeted parents events and are also available at parents evenings. They also have access to information via the Parent portal and they can access Unifrog as a parent. This ensures our parents are fully informed."

"Parents receive good advice and guidance from school, but they do not always follow it. They are concerned with academic prestige and rankings - even if we tell them students need to be more open minded"

Less informed and underprepared students are more limited in their thinking.

"Some students think that Russell Group universities are the only ones that they should be applying for when that might not be appropriate for all courses."

"Many students are not educated on where they should be applying to in the first instance prior to having selected their A levels."

"Students are easily influenced by their peers into choosing universities because of their location."

Well provisioned careers services lead to better informed students.

"We start looking at universities lower down the school."

"The College invest in careers supports for talks for all students as well as careers fair, UCAS trips, universities are invited in every week."

"At our school students are better informed than at most schools. We are an academically selective school and take a large number of extra students into Sixth Form. How well informed these external students are varies"

05

Education policy changes have long-reaching impact.

"The alternative routes aren't being promoted, and more importantly, you've got an education system that is focused on attainment and academic attainment and academic progression, not personal development."

"I literally had that conversation with someone this week going you might be rejected from all five of these History choices because they are Oxford, St. Andrews, Durham etc.… I was like there is no backup here."
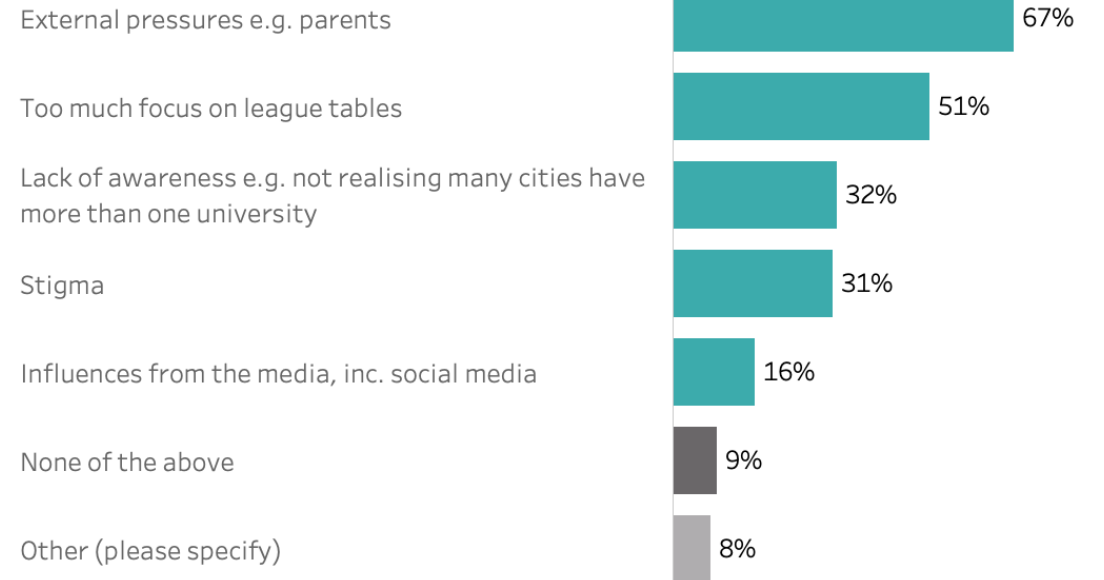
"In FE Colleges, few schools have really broached the subject before they leave in year 11, so it's up to us in FE to give them everything they need... however, it's also our duty to ensure they cover safeguarding, British values, Prevent, and 101 other things related to study skills, work experience, the importance of healthy relationships and not stabbing each other, before we are allowed anywhere near them to talk about making sensible choices about careers, apprenticeships and university. Not to mention that we have a team of 8 delivering 5 days per week of careers adviser cover (only 3 of which are trained at level 6/7 currently), to cover 6,000 students over 3 campuses.... So that's why students are not well informed about their HE choices. We do our best."

Contributing to barriers to considering non RG universities.

"Damaging Government comments about degrees, subjects and institutions which are usually highly prejudiced and ill-informed."

"Schools are also under pressure and measured by how many students go to a Russell Group university. That is the case whether people like myself agree with it or not. I always give students the full picture and explain that there are many excellent 'non-RG universities'."

"Pressures from the Academy chain who want to know Russell Group numbers."

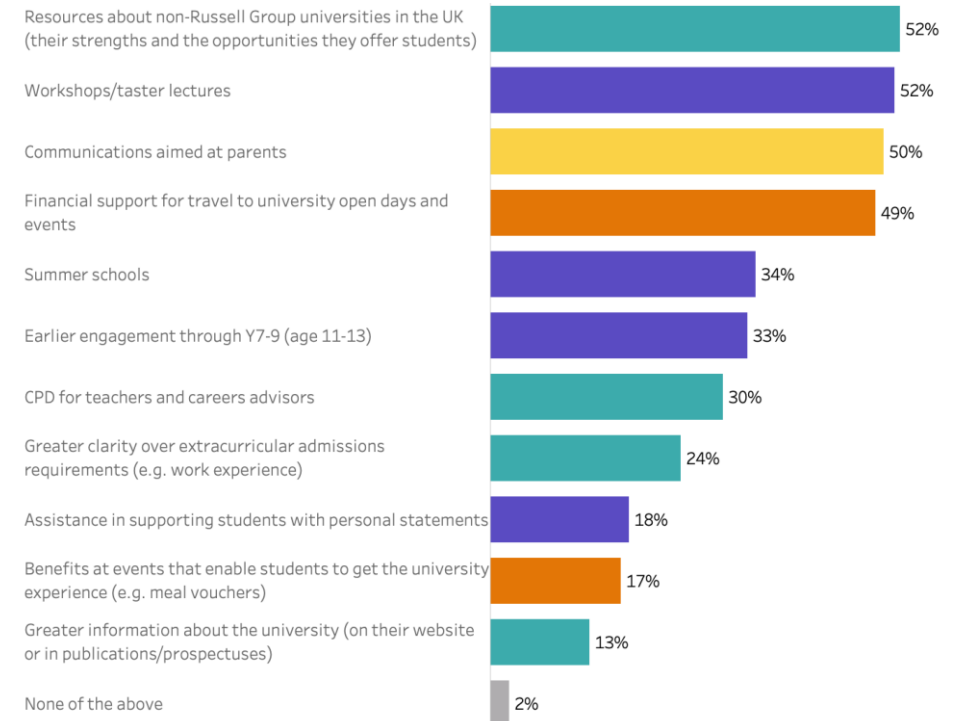| Category	Percentage
External pressures e.g. parents	67%
Too much focus on league tables	51%
Lack of awareness e.g. not realising many cities have more than one university	32%
Stigma	31%
Influences from the media, inc. social media	16%
None of the above	9%
Other (please specify)	8%

06

More resources, comms and activities are needed.

How can universities help?

- Show advantages of all types of institution
- Help with student engagement
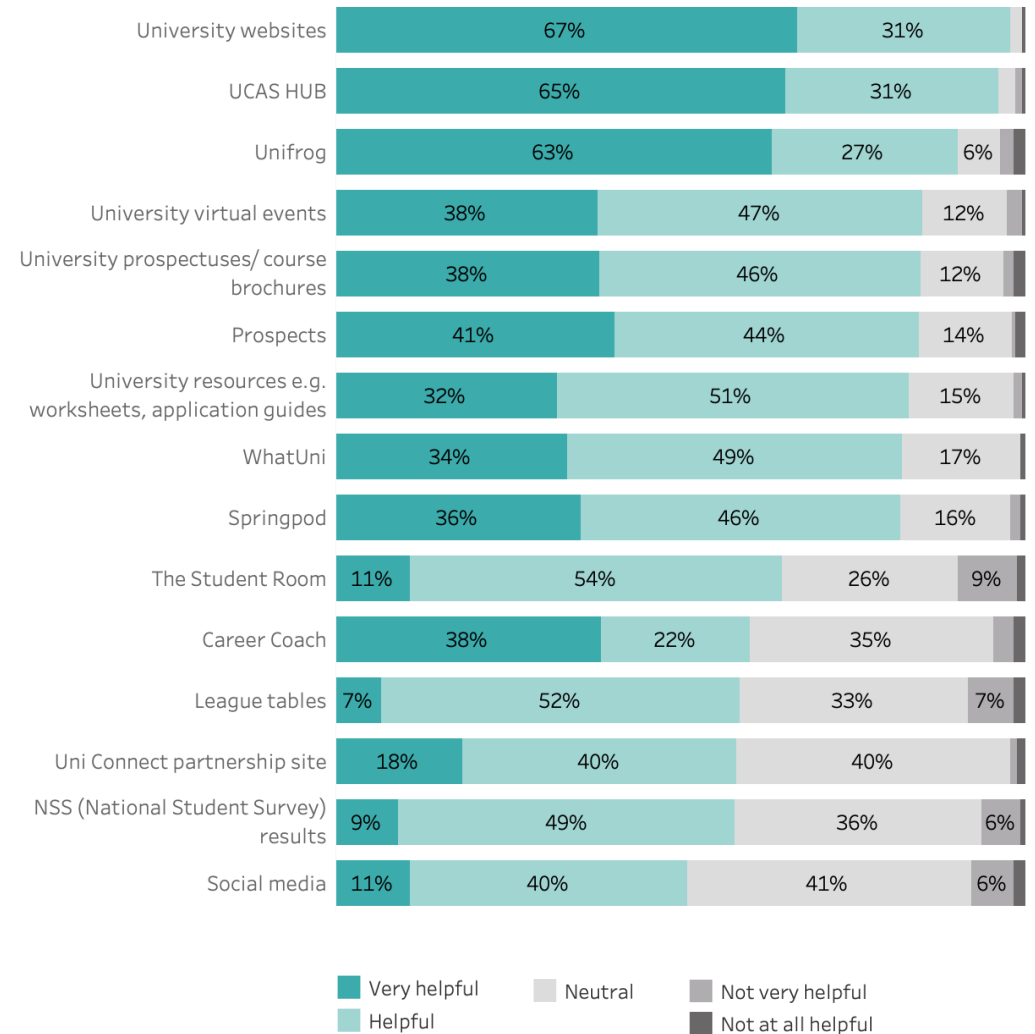- Comms for parents
- Funding transport to events

"You might be able to do something about parental awareness and how much parents influence children... because we often find that our students are almost too scared to tell their parents that they're not going to apply for these subjects/universities."

Category	%
Resources about non-Russell Group universities in the UK (their strengths and the opportunities they offer students)	52%
Workshops/taster lectures	52%
Communications aimed at parents	50%
Financial support for travel to university open days and events	49%
Summer schools	34%
Earlier engagement through Y7-9 (age 11-13)	33%
CPD for teachers and careers advisors	30%
Greater clarity over extracurricular admissions requirements (e.g. work experience)	24%
Assistance in supporting students with personal statements	18%
Benefits at events that enable students to get the university experience (e.g. meal vouchers)	17%
Greater information about the university (on their website or in publications/prospectuses)	13%
None of the above	2%

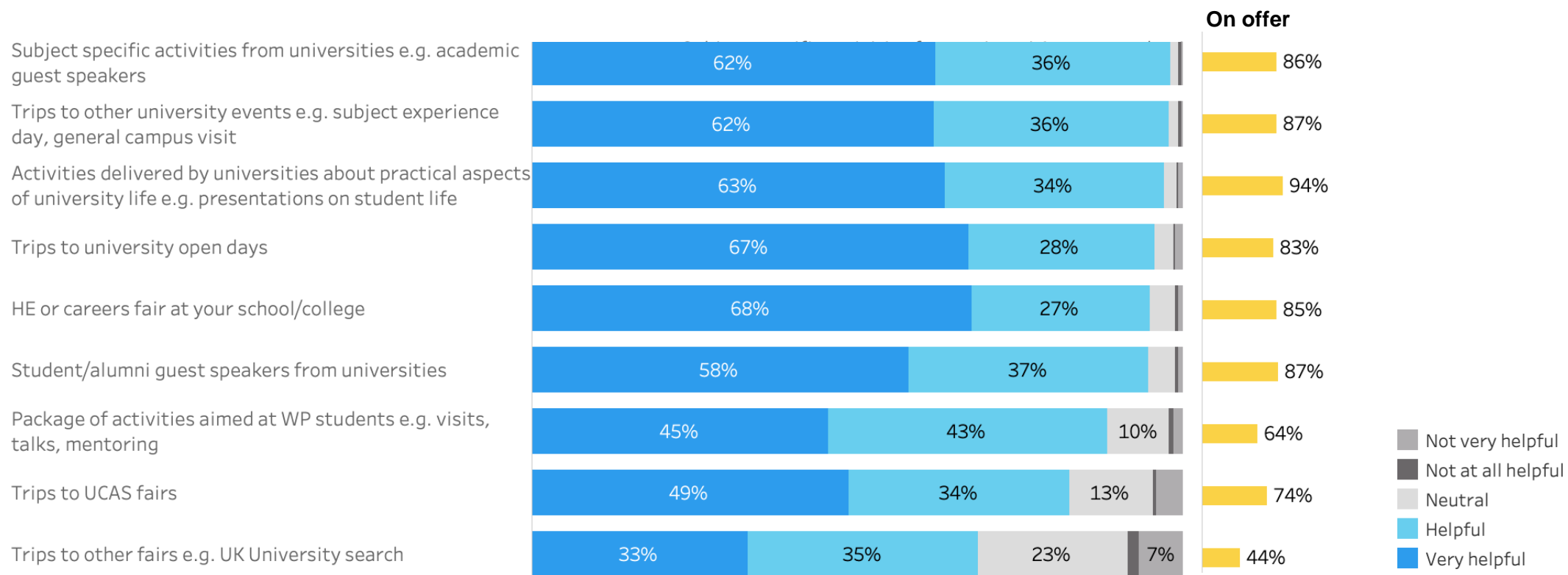# Conversations start early and rely heavily on resources from universities.

"We start in year 10 and at that point it's really about encouraging them to think about university as an option."

"There are two extremes. They either want to go to Russell Group universities, or they want to stay local. So they tend to have an idea already about where they want to go... often it's just a case of checking their predicted grades against the entry requirements and making sure that they've got some aspirational, mid-level and backup choices."

Resource	Very helpful	Helpful	Neutral	Not very helpful	Not at all helpful
University websites	67%	31%			
UCAS HUB	65%	31%			
Unifrog	63%	27%	6%		
University virtual events	38%	47%	12%		
University prospectuses/ course brochures	38%	46%	12%		
Prospects	41%	44%	14%		
University resources e.g. worksheets, application guides	32%	51%	15%		
WhatUni	34%	49%	17%		
Springpod	36%	46%	16%		
The Student Room	11%	54%	26%	9%	
Career Coach	38%	22%	35%		
League tables	7%	52%	33%	7%	
Uni Connect partnership site	18%	40%	40%		
NSS (National Student Survey) results	9%	49%	36%	6%	
Social media	11%	40%	41%	6%	

Legend:
- Very helpful
- Helpful
- Neutral
- Not very helpful
- Not at all helpful

Activities.

Schools and Colleges really value engagement with universities and access these opportunities when they can. At least 83% offer activities delivered by universities, including subject specific activities, trips to university events/open days, events about university life and alumni/guest speakers. At least 95% report that these activities are helpful, including more than half that said they were very helpful.

On offer

Activity	Very helpful	Helpful	Neutral	Not at all helpful	On offer
Subject specific activities from universities e.g. academic guest speakers	62%	36%			86%
Trips to other university events e.g. subject experience day, general campus visit	62%	36%			87%
Activities delivered by universities about practical aspects of university life e.g. presentations on student life	63%	34%			94%
Trips to university open days	67%	28%			83%
HE or careers fair at your school/college	68%	27%			85%
Student/alumni guest speakers from universities	58%	37%			87%
Package of activities aimed at WP students e.g. visits, talks, mentoring	45%	43%	10%		64%
Trips to UCAS fairs	49%	34%	13%		74%
Trips to other fairs e.g. UK University search	33%	35%	23%	7%	44%

Legend:
- Not very helpful
- Not at all helpful
- Neutral
- Helpful
- Very helpful

But it's trips to visit universities that are most valuable.

"It is startling how little our young people have travelled, even just 20 miles up the road to Bristol. The majority of our students at one of our schools will never have been to anything other than the large supermarket or the shopping centre. So to shop around universities is a stretch e.g. when they haven't been to Cardiff, Exeter, Plymouth."

"The biggest barrier for any school I would say is costs for transport. A lot of [universities] will put on these fantastic offers and they'll send out brochures for their school outreach programme and with free workshops and stuff. But it costs £500 for a coach to get up to there and schools just haven't got the budget."

"The one thing I need and that would really help is funding buses... my department can have a couple of 100 students in it - I'm not taking a minibus, I'm taking two coach loads and I still probably haven't got them all on and bus quotes are currently running about £780 - our departments just don't have those kind of budgets."

How does your activity stack up?

Time to reflect and share best practice.

- What's your development story?
- Engaging with parents.
- Communicating affordability.
- Brand and offer alignment.
- Your offer to Schools and Colleges.

What could you do?

Helping Advisers

- Possible IAG toolkit.

- What's your honest story to this audience?

- Outreach can always be improved – what does your audience need from you?

- Honest advice on UCAS predicted grades/references – avoid "arms race" positive and realistic choices.

Helping each other

- Quality exists across all UK HE – share that story

- Highly selective unis face challenges too – capacity, expectations, volume, NSS

- Not sustainable for the sector – no-one wins.

Helping students and their Parents and carers

- Understanding how you can personalise the journey to support applicants.

- Allow students to opportunity to share their real views of how their feel about your institution.

- Develop a real understanding of sentiment across the journey.

- What level of investment do you need to pitch in providing the right level of support for parents/carers?

Impact Story with Swansea University

Embarking on a Journey to Truly Understand the Enquirer & Applicant Experience and Behaviour

A student's experience.

It's very personal. It may include ups and downs, which must be measured to be understood.
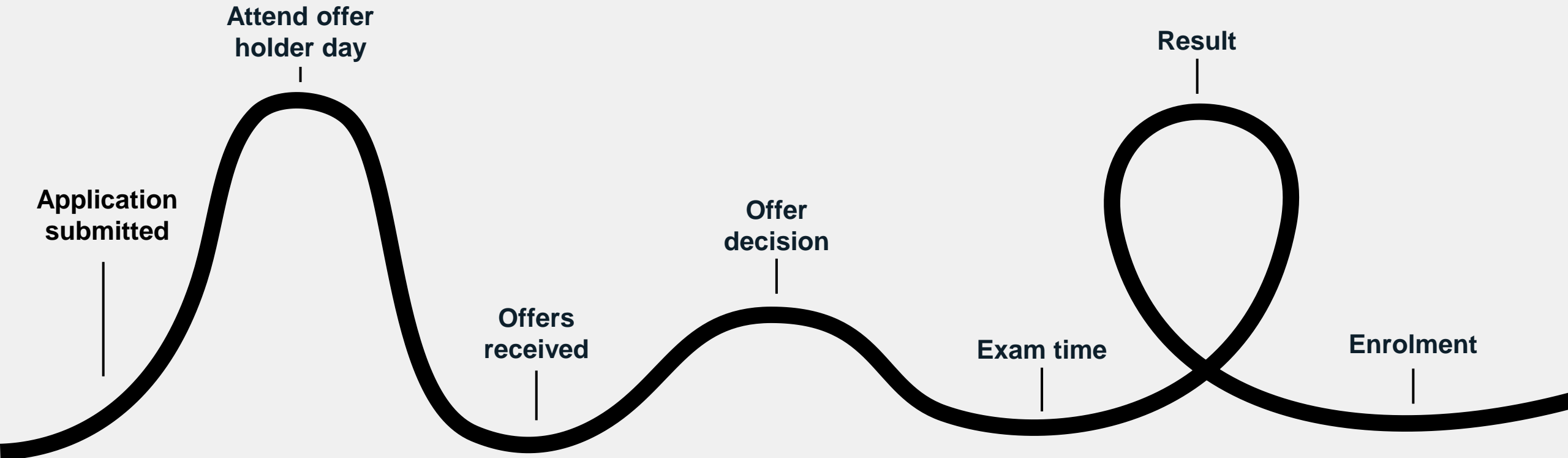
What is **StudentPulse**?

A platform that uses pulse surveys to understand student experiences and enable real-time interventions.

- **Experience tracking** - StudentPulse helps track and improve student experience through actionable data and providing detailed insights.

- **Real-time analysis** - Dashboards allow for quick, real-time analysis of student experience.

- **AI-Powered insights** - Utilises AI to uncover the root causes of student experience issues.

- **Comprehensive question framework –** Using a thorough set of questions developed to cover all aspects of student/applicant experience.

- **Immediate support** - The platform provides immediate support actions for respondents.

Give it a go!

Campaign impact for Swansea University:

- Proactive Recruitment Support: Generated **over 7,100 interactions**, related to recruitment interventions, effectively supporting conversion efforts.
- High Engagement Level: Achieved an average survey **completion rate of 83%,** indicating strong participant engagement and reliability of the data collected.
- Valuable Feedback: Collected **1,740 comments**, categorised into key themes, offering the university actionable insights to enhance the student experience
- Comprehensive Data Collection: **5,600 completed surveys** from offer holders throughout the decision-making cycle, providing critical insights into their sentiment towards the university.
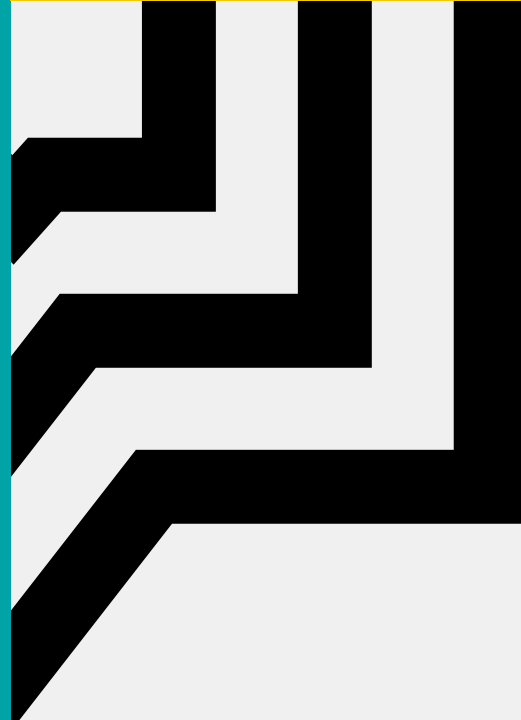
We want you to ask you some questions…

Time to reflect and share best practice.

- **What is one question you want answered about your enquirers/applicants?**

- **What is one change you could make to improve their experience?**

Conclusions and recommendations.

Inform advisors.

Careers advisers and teachers want information about the benefits of attending universities that are not in the Russell Group so they can inform themselves and others. Ensuring this is clearly on websites and through direct comms will improve visibility.

Educate parents.

Parents present the biggest opportunity to influence appropriate decision making but can also present the biggest barrier. They may base decisions on their own cultural influences, university experiences, or negative stories in the media. Comms to dispel misconceptions and illustrate ROI could be helpful.

Hero your graduate outcomes.

Employability has always been a key driver behind university decision making and has become increasingly prevalent. Many advisers, teachers, parents and students think that employers favour Russell Group graduates. What can the sector do to address this?

Address systematic bias.

How can the sector collectively address systematic bias from influential sources such as national government, school governing boards and academy trusts? The presence of misinformation and stigmatisation of non-RG universities exists and has influence on decision making.
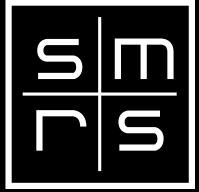
Be mindful of recent changes.

The cost of living crisis and long-term impact of covid on education has impacted university decision making, whether that's driven by financial or wellbeing concerns, or both. Students are more anxious and looking for support and advice.

Fund transport and engage early.

Attending university events can be a real game-changer for student decision making but not all schools and colleges can afford the transport costs. Can universities help with funding transport for? Also consider providing opportunities for younger students.

Thank you.