

Better support, better decisions, better outcomes

We want every student, whatever their background and circumstances, to get the support they need to make the higher education choice that is right for them. Information alone is not enough to achieve this. It requires a coherent and responsive approach to information, advice and guidance that takes account of individual needs and circumstances. This document is a response to research commissioned by the Office for Students and sets out our work to improve information, advice and guidance for students.

Making the decision to go into higher education is unlike anything else. It's a hugely important and exciting time – but also potentially stressful. The rewards can be vast and enduring, but the stakes are high.

The higher education system is complex, and every prospective student has different needs. Students tell us that they often struggle to get the information, advice and guidance they need to decide whether, what, and where to study. They are unsure which of the many sources of information are relevant or reliable, and information is not always easy to find or to understand.

The Office for Students is committed to empowering all students, regardless of their background, to ask the right questions and get the answers and the support they need. This has to start with understanding how students make decisions, how they use information, and how we can design a system around their information needs. Here we set out what we have found and what needs to change.

Why is this work important?

As the independent regulator of higher education in England, the Office for Students' role is to champion students' interests. As a new organisation, we're still developing our approach, but we have a clear mission: to ensure that every student, whatever their background, has a fulfilling experience of higher education that enriches their lives and careers.

High-quality, impartial information, advice and guidance is critical if students are to find a course that is right for them. Better informed choices have the potential to result in more students completing their studies and achieving positive outcomes. These could be in terms of employment, further study, wellbeing, resilience, or the satisfaction of developing their knowledge, skills and experience. In addition to personal outcomes, we know that there are broader societal benefits from individuals having a successful higher education experience, not least due to the role that this can play in driving social mobility.

What does the evidence tell us?

We know that prospective students struggle to find what they need to make choices. We want to understand why that is and identify how we might improve things. It is essential that we base our approach on sound evidence. This is why we asked CFE Research to review the most up-to-date material on how people make decisions and engage with information¹. We've also been conducting in-depth interviews and large-scale polling research with students of all ages and stages, talking to teachers, advisers, parents and other influencers, and drawing on the expertise and insight of our student panel. The evidence we have gathered gives us some important messages and will help to guide our work in this area.

A big decision

We're hearing from students that they aren't getting the support they need to navigate what is a complex network of information. Often they don't feel well placed to make such a big decision, or feel anxious about making the 'wrong' decision. As the CFE report noted, 'decision making about higher education is challenging because the higher education system is complex and there are lots of alternatives and attributes to consider'. Students need resources they can trust, and help to find their way through the information.

Too much information

There are a huge number of different things that you could consider when thinking about higher education. And as CFE emphasised, 'there are limits to the amount of information processing that people can undertake'. Often when we're faced with more information than we feel we can process, we just switch off because it is overwhelming. The solution is not to throw more and more information out there, but to support and empower people to find the information that is important to them and to make sense of it.

The supporters need support too

The majority of prospective students use internet resources to help them with their decisions. But we know that parents and carers are extremely influential and important in the decision making process. According to a recent Youthsight poll², parents and carers are top of the list as a source of information for applicants about what and where to study. While 60 per cent of prospective students interviewed cited websites as a key source of information, an even higher proportion at 71 per cent said they would consult their parents.

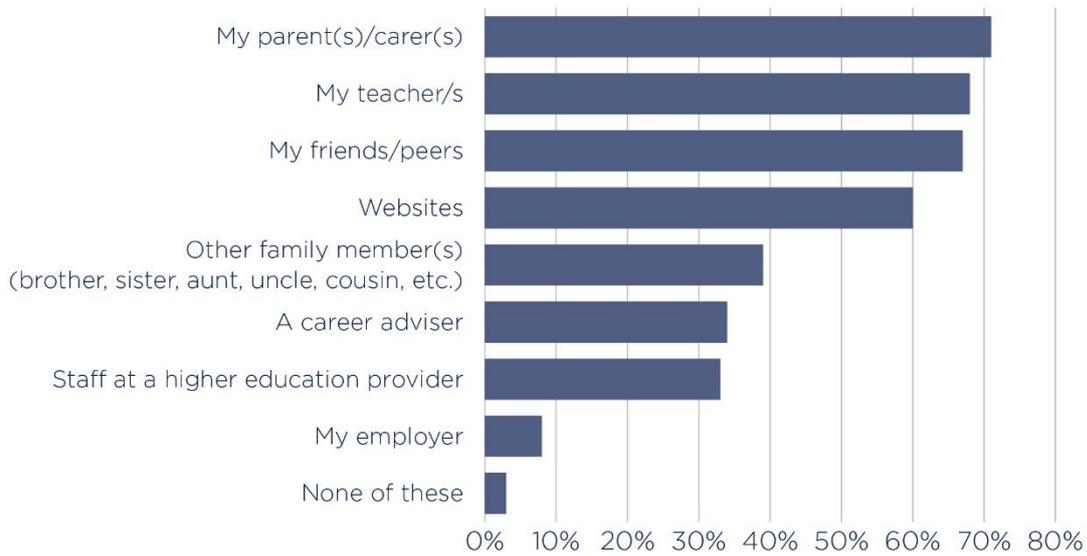
¹ CFE Research 2018 'Student information use and behaviour' <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/next-steps-for-information-advice-and-guidance/>

² These results are based on a survey conducted by YouthSight with 2,119 participants in September 2018. The sample was split between university applicants (529), undergraduate students (531), postgraduate students (529) and graduates (530). In this case applicants refers to prospective applicants as well. All participants were members of The OpinionPanel Community, YouthSight's proprietary research panel, comprised of over 140,000 members aged 16 to 30 including 80,000 students.

Will you consult or have you consulted any of the following to help you make your choice about what, and where, to study?

Applicants are more likely to go to their parents, teacher and peers than websites

Response category



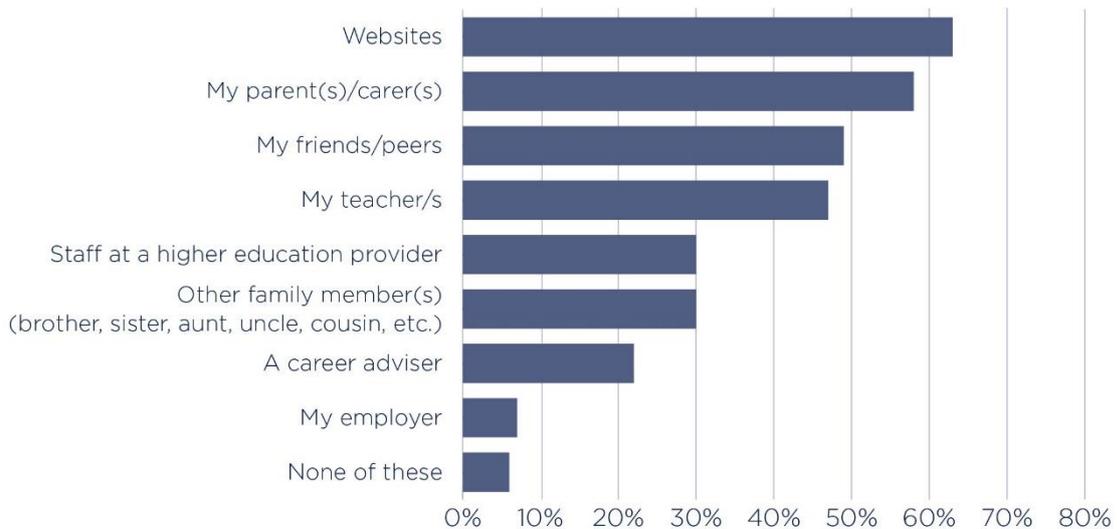
YouthSight interviewed 529 university applicants across the UK between 10 and 17 September 2018

For current students and graduates, websites were the most commonly cited source at 63 per cent but parents/carers were not far behind at 58 per cent.

Did you consult any of the following to help you make your choice about what, and where, to study?

Students and graduates were most likely to have gone to websites, followed by their parents and friends

Response category



YouthSight interviewed 1590 students and graduates across the UK between 10 and 17 September 2018

We know from various pieces of research that prospective students also consult with other family members and friends, and those at school or college seek advice from teachers and, where

available, careers advisers. CFE highlighted 'the need for HE information providers to engage with those who influence the decisions of prospective students'. These important influencers also need support to understand the current higher education system and the options available, particularly in families where there is no experience of higher education.

We're all different

People have different needs, priorities and goals, and their information needs are correspondingly diverse. What is critical for one person might be irrelevant for someone else. And, as the CFE report noted, 'what might be considered a "best" outcome for one person may be not be optimal for another'. People also have different preferences for how much information they want and how they want to access it.

Some students need more help

It's harder for some groups of prospective students to access and use information about higher education. Disadvantaged students often lack the information, advice and guidance they need, or don't know what questions to ask; they are 'more likely to have greater needs for support with using information', the CFE work confirmed. Careers advice in schools and elsewhere is patchy – and sometimes non-existent. Mature students can be even worse off. It's often the case that those students who would benefit most from good information are the ones least well placed to access and understand it.

Keep it simple

Because information on higher education is complex, people use mental shortcuts to make it easier, but this doesn't always help. For example, someone might disregard some information because it conflicts with the impression they had previously. As well as this, information is often simplified to make it easier to digest, but this can mean it no longer gives the full picture. There needs to be a balance between presenting data in a way that is engaging – we know good data visualisation on web resources is extremely important – and ensuring it remains accurate and meaningful. As CFE notes, 'it is a fine line to balance to ensure information is presented responsibly as well as accessibly'. Students also need more support to understand what the data can tell them.

Myths and misperceptions

Our research has shown that there are some unhelpful myths about higher education that can affect whether or not people consider it as an option, and what they think it will be like. Some are about the financial support available to students, which is obviously a critical element of the decision making process. These myths are affecting the advice parents and carers are giving to their children as well as limiting students' own aspirations. As observed in the CFE report, 'for students from lower socioeconomic groups, elite universities are seen to be "not for people like us"'. For the most part these misunderstandings have been created by what people see or read in the media, and there is a need to ensure clear and accessible information is made available in prominent ways to counter widespread myths.

Key messages

1. **It's not just about what information is available.** There is a lot of information out there, but students' needs are not being met because they are struggling to make sense of it. They need help to find their way through the information and support to understand it in order for it to be meaningful. This means that a fundamentally different approach to student information is needed.
2. **It's all about personalisation.** Everyone arrives at their decision about higher education from a different starting point, with different motivations, criteria and preferences, and different sources of support. A little information can be too much and a lot of information can be not enough. Any solution has to be personalised to the individual's circumstances and information needs if it is to be helpful.

How can the OfS help?

The Office for Students has a duty to ensure that everyone is supported to make the right choices for them about higher education. Informed choice underpins the regulatory framework in which we operate. It is embedded in our role to support informed choice for all students, at all levels, directly from school and later in life. This not only has the potential to help us meet our aims around improving access to higher education, but is also critical in ensuring positive outcomes for all.

The CFE report states that 'schools and higher education information providers do have a responsibility to support prospective students to make more informed decisions and choices that satisfy their own needs'. We've started work shaping and defining what our approach to improving information, advice and guidance will look like. It is vital that our approach in this area draws on the best and most reliable evidence. Most importantly, this will mean adopting an approach informed by an understanding of how people make decisions in the real world, supported by the latest thinking and technology. It will be rooted in behavioural psychology approaches, and driven by research and collaboration directly with students and those who advise them.

What will we do next?

We are having conversations with a wide range of people – students, parents, careers advisers, policy makers, higher education providers and others – to help us decide what we can do to support students better. We'll be continuing these conversations over the next few months and seeking views in early 2019 on the approach that we develop as a result.

We're also exploring opportunities for working in partnership with other organisations operating in this area. Our view is that the more that we can do to integrate and link provision, the better the experience of prospective students will be.

We are taking the first steps in developing a new resource to better support decision making about higher education. This new resource would help students navigate and understand available information and data, and would be integrated with other key sources of information. It would use personalisation to ensure that students can quickly identify and find the information that is most important for them. This would be combined with carefully designed data visualisations that would make engagement with key datasets easier.

Our aim is to create a resource that can support a seamless journey through available information and which responds to individual needs. This is an ambitious project, but our research shows that it is needed. The next steps will be to build on the research we have already carried out with prospective students, parents and teachers, and develop prototypes to test with them. If the outcomes of this testing give us a clear way forward, we will begin building the new resource in the spring.

Any questions?

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