

Preparing for the next steps after higher education



Introduction

Progression is when higher education students move on from university or college into employment, further study or other activities.¹ There is already a body of evidence on outcomes for graduates after higher education and how these can vary between different student groups, on the sorts of jobs graduates enter and on their perceptions of careers services.²

To build on this existing knowledge, we commissioned new research in 2025 to learn more about graduates' perceptions about progression and their experiences in this area. We were particularly interested in how well graduates felt their universities and colleges had prepared them for life after graduation, and the ways students may be supported in their progression. This supports the commitment in our strategy to better understand students' perceptions of the value of their higher education experience, and the support it has given them to advance on to their next steps.

The resulting report, by IFF Research, is intended to help us and universities and colleges to continue to develop policy and practice. It will also complement the quantitative data we already hold on progression after higher education. We use this as part of our student outcomes data, to help us regulate how well universities and colleges comply with one of our conditions of regulation, which all universities and colleges registered with us must comply with. Condition B3 states that a higher education provider 'must deliver positive outcomes for students on its higher education courses.'³

The Office for Students is the independent regulator for higher education in England. We ensure that students from all backgrounds benefit from high quality higher education, delivered by a diverse, sustainable sector that continues to improve.

This student insight report presents what we know, from engagement with recent graduates, about how well they feel their universities and colleges prepared them for life after graduation, and the ways students may be supported in their progression.

This report discusses some of the main findings from the IFF Research report. It offers suggestions from graduates for points universities and colleges should consider when supporting students to prepare for life after graduation. The full research report is available on our website.⁴

We encourage universities and colleges to consider this report's findings in their work to design and deliver their careers services, their curriculum and their support services generally, and in taking wider opportunities to support students to take the next steps after graduation. A list of points to consider is at the end of this report.

Background

Higher education and skills

In its post-16 education and skills white paper, the government set out its intention to align the higher education sector with the needs of the economy.⁵ Priority occupations, as identified by the government, are job roles that are essential for national economic growth, or where high demand for workers can be expected.

Skills England expects employment demand in priority occupations to increase by 15 per cent by 2030. It estimates that around two-thirds of these occupations will require workers with a higher education qualification (at Level 4 or above).⁶

This highlights the continued importance of effective careers support in helping students navigate a changing labour market and make informed choices, while also supporting wider national skills needs.

Progression rates

A **progression rate** shows the proportion of students qualifying at the end of a course who, in the Graduate Outcomes survey taken 15 months later, identified managerial or professional employment, further study, or other positive outcomes among the activities they were undertaking.⁷

Overall, progression rates from higher education are positive. For full-time first degree students graduating in 2022-23 it is 71.2 per cent. Their part-time counterparts have a higher progression rate, of 82.4 per cent. Undergraduate apprentices have a progression rate of 94.5 per cent. Progression rates vary between different student groups: for example, full-time first degree students from the most deprived areas of the UK (quintiles 1 and 2 of the Index of Multiple Deprivation) have a progression rate of 68.5 per cent, whereas their counterparts from less deprived areas (quintiles 3, 4 and 5) have a higher progression rate, of 74.4 per cent.⁸

We recognise that moving on from university or college is a significant life event, and can be challenging both practically and emotionally. The responses from participants in the IFF Research report reflect the uncertainty and insecurity that often accompany this experience. Nevertheless, the data suggests graduates do generally go on to successful careers, and their skills are in high demand.⁹

Research methods

The researchers used mixed methods, combining qualitative and quantitative research techniques. All graduates who participated in the research graduated from their higher education courses between 2023 and 2025.

The researchers held three focus groups in August 2025, involving 18 recent graduates. Based on the findings from these focus groups, they designed a quantitative survey. The researchers then conducted this survey online in September 2025 with 1,671 recent graduates. The survey sampling ensured a spread of responses from the three academic years of graduation, across demographic characteristics, study level and subject, as well as type of university or college.

Except where otherwise specified, the findings that follow are taken from the quantitative survey, while the accompanying quotes are taken from the focus groups. For a fuller explanation of the methods, including approaches to sampling and the weighting applied to data, see the accompanying research report.¹⁰

Findings

Key findings

- Although 62 per cent of the graduates surveyed said they felt confident about achieving their goals after graduation, only half said they felt prepared for life after leaving university or college.
- 88 per cent of the survey respondents said that university or college support had helped them prepare for life after graduation. While only a third reported that they had used their institution's career service, many more had used specific elements such as careers fairs (72 per cent) or help with CVs and applications (71 per cent). This may mean that the extent of careers support is not widely understood.
- Perhaps because of this, there was a tendency to prefer informal or ad hoc support from their institution to the formal avenues for support: 58 per cent said informal support had been useful, while only half said this about formal support.¹¹
- 69 per cent said that they had found support from family and friends about next steps after graduation useful. Respondents with a parent who had a higher education qualification were more likely to report having accessed support from family than those who didn't, and more likely to have found it useful.
- Those who had had work placements or other opportunities to develop professional connections felt better prepared than others for life after graduation.

- Another group that felt better prepared was those who had completed their higher education studies at a further education college. This suggests that such colleges are particularly effective in preparing students for the next steps after their studies, which may reflect the vocational nature of study at these colleges, the emphasis they put on employability or next steps, or the strong connections they have with employers in the local community.
- Focus group participants reflected that improving the visibility of careers support at their universities or colleges was important. They also suggested that their institutions should expand integrated work placements, industry guest sessions and alumni mentoring opportunities across all subject areas, and offer careers guidance tailored to the subject and stage of learning.

Preparedness

The survey asked graduates about their goals after finishing their studies. Unsurprisingly, securing employment was the primary goal of most respondents (76 per cent), while 16 per cent aimed for further study. Half (50 per cent) of the graduates surveyed reported feeling prepared, a third (33 per cent) reported feeling unprepared and 16 per cent felt neither prepared nor unprepared.

As with all the questions about students' perceptions, these answers are subjective. Research published by the Graduate Futures Institute (formerly AGCAS) found that confidence is often a barrier to students feeling prepared for their next steps. That research found that students may not be able to recognise or articulate the value of their experiences and the skills they have developed through academic study or other extracurricular experiences (such as part-time work, volunteering or caring responsibilities).¹² Graduate Futures also reports that 45 per cent of its member institutions provide lifetime support for their graduates.¹³ The survey and focus groups conducted by IFF Research cannot tell us whether or not the students' feelings of preparedness are well founded.

Graduates who had completed higher education studies in further education colleges were more likely to feel prepared (69 per cent) than graduates from courses at universities (50 per cent). The subject of study also seemed to be pertinent in how prepared a respondent reported feeling. Graduates who had studied arts and humanities (43 per cent) and social sciences (41 per cent) were more likely to report feeling unprepared than those who studied health and medical sciences (25 per cent), engineering and technology (22 per cent) and education (19 per cent).

This is likely to be because the latter subject areas are more closely linked to a particular profession or field of work. It might also be because studies in these areas have integrated work placements. The recent government white paper on education and skills also emphasises the value in strong links between employers and education.¹⁴

“ You’ve got that clinical practice and then you complete that job and that training course, then you can then go on to other pathways, which is another reason why I wanted to go this route, [it] opened up a few more doors. ”

2022-23 graduate, postgraduate course, health and medical sciences

When asked, 62 per cent of respondents reported feeling confident about achieving their goals after graduation. The highest levels of reported confidence were from respondents who had studied higher education in further education institutions (80 per cent) and those who had completed postgraduate study (70 per cent).

Steps taken

Almost all respondents had taken steps to prepare for life after higher education. 98 per cent of respondents who were interested in securing work and 96 per cent of those interested in further study reported taking steps to prepare for these goals.

The factors respondents reported as useful for such preparation included:

- support from family and friends (69 per cent)
- informal or ad hoc support from their university or college, for example from an individual member of staff (56 per cent)
- formal support from their university or college (50 per cent).

Respondents with a parent who had a higher education qualification were more likely to report having accessed support from family than those who didn’t (24 per cent compared with 19 per cent), and more likely to have found it useful (60 per cent compared with 52 per cent). This highlights the importance of universities and colleges providing support for careers (and other next steps) to students whose families may not be able to. It is also important that this support is visible and accessible to all students, so they know what is on offer and how to access it.

This may mean holding career and mentoring sessions at a variety of times, to avoid excluding students who are working part-time or on work placements. In addition, universities and colleges could work with disabled students and student representatives to improve disabled students’ experiences of careers support and ensure it is delivered in accessible and varied formats.¹⁵

Research by the Graduate Futures Institute also found that some student groups face particular challenges in accessing support about their next steps after completing studies. This research highlights that international students, disabled students and some disadvantaged student groups (including those who are care experienced, estranged from their families or have caring responsibilities) could benefit from support tailored to their specific needs.¹⁶

“ There were quite a few weekly classes that you could go to that would cover a different skill every week, but if I [am] on placement I am working shifts that I have no control over – quite often they’re night shifts. ”

2024-25 graduate, undergraduate course, health and medical sciences

“ I’d definitely say family is a big [source of support], like being able to get that support from parents who have been in careers for 30 years is, you know, a lot of knowledge that isn’t as easily accessible [to everyone]. ”

2022-23 graduate, undergraduate course, business and management

The most common barriers respondents reported to preparedness for life after graduating were:

- financial challenges (45 per cent)
- lack of relevant work experience (43 per cent)
- lack of a professional network (40 per cent).

Those who had studied a higher education course in a further education institution were less likely to report the lack of a professional network as a barrier, compared with those graduating from undergraduate or postgraduate university courses (23 per cent compared with 40 per cent). Those who had studied arts and humanities courses (50 per cent) and those who attended high-tariff institutions (46 per cent) were more likely to report this as a barrier (compared with 40 per cent for survey respondents overall).¹⁷

For arts and humanities students, this may reflect the absence of work placements in their courses or fewer links to industry than those established in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subject areas. The reasons for this being reported as a greater barrier for those who attended high-tariff institutions are unclear.

“ I think the internship experience was really beneficial in terms of understanding how the industry works in terms of deadlines and handling multiple projects. ”

2022-23 graduate, postgraduate course, engineering and technology

Support from universities and colleges

Most respondents (88 per cent) reported receiving support from their university or college to help them prepare for their next steps. They most often had such support through contact with academic staff (46 per cent) and course teaching (41 per cent). A third (33 per cent) reported using their university or college’s career

service, and 26 per cent reported accessing other student support services. 24 per cent had participated in work placements as part of their course.

The most common specific types of support respondents reported engaging with (on at least one occasion) were:

- career fairs and networking events (72 per cent)
- support with preparing CVs, applications and for interviews for work or further study (71 per cent)
- wider careers service resources (70 per cent).

Survey respondents were mostly positive about support from their university or college. 59 per cent of those who had engaged with the relevant services were satisfied overall with the support they received, 14 per cent were dissatisfied and 25 per cent felt neutral about it.

Respondents who had completed postgraduate study reported the lowest levels of satisfaction, 54 per cent. Those who had studied at Levels 4 or 5 (for example, for a certificate or diploma of higher education) reported the highest levels of satisfaction with institutional support, at 76 per cent.¹⁸ This is likely to be study at a further education college. As previously noted, this may reflect the vocational nature of study at these colleges and how students value the links colleges have with employers. Universities and colleges could consider building connections with employers, for example through guest speakers or networking opportunities, for courses that are less vocational in nature.

“ My university had [an] alumni mentoring scheme that you could apply to if you fit certain criteria [...] so I was matched with like a qualified solicitor who had previously been [a student at my institution], and it was quite helpful because he [...] talked me through my questions I had on [...] the application process and what kind of activities I should be doing as a student to be able to highlight in my CV. ”

2024-25 graduate, undergraduate course, law and legal studies

Suggestions for improvements from the focus groups

In response to a question on improving the relevant support services at their university or college, graduates in the focus groups made the following suggestions:

- Provide subject-specific and stage-specific career guidance. This should include information about the different pathways into careers and further study, and realistic insights into the job market.
- Improve the visibility of careers support service, and proactively reach out to students explaining the breadth and depth of support available.
- Expand integrated placements, industry guest sessions and alumni mentoring schemes across all disciplines, including non-STEM disciplines. This is especially important for non-vocational courses.

- Provide structured peer-to-peer and alumni forums before and after graduation, to reduce isolation and share practical advice.
- Offer workshops on financial literacy, budgeting, housing and civic responsibilities to support independence after graduation.

This report includes two case studies showing some of the ways in which these and similar suggestions, such as lifelong support for graduates, are already being implemented in some institutions.

Workshops on some of the topics mentioned above, such as financial literacy, may be outside the remit of a university or college. However, institutions could consider signposting to other trusted organisations that offer these types of information or support. As the Graduate Futures Institute research suggests, students' confidence in their own preparedness is essential. They also need the confidence to seek support, and to find out where to access it.

“ It was kind of a steep learning curve to realise that the support services were there, but if you wanted to access them, you had to [...] ask. No one was really going to check in on you, which was like different [...] from being at school. ”

2023-24 graduate, undergraduate course, law and legal studies

Case Study: City St George's, University of London

City St George's Careers Registration programme begins at enrolment, so response rates are consistently high. Students' emerging interests, levels of confidence and developmental needs are tracked to analyse and respond to their needs from the moment they join. This helps the university to understand them as individuals with diverse backgrounds, aspirations, and confidence levels, and to design interventions that are responsive, inclusive and grounded in evidence.

The question set incorporates the latest research on students' career decision-making. It focuses on:

- **What students want help** with this year, mapped to six categories ('understand', 'explore and identify', 'explore and prioritise', 'plan', 'apply', and 'prepare').
- **How prepared** they feel (from 'not at all prepared' to 'fully prepared').
- Their top three **sectors of interest**, which are also analysed at cohort level.

The data powers Career Map, a personalised employability dashboard that provides intuitive guidance and a clear pathway, and encourages proactive engagement, by highlighting recommended actions, upcoming events and curated resources. The university uses the data to identify industry interests, informing the choice of visiting speakers, placements etc.; to

target communications according to students' interests; to deepen the understanding of personal tutors; and to design school-level interventions to address specific needs.

City St George's has also increased the duration of its careers support from three years following graduation to lifelong support.

Case Study: UWE Bristol

UWE Bristol offers a range of tailored programmes to help students feel confident and supported in the move from school or college, as well as building employability into courses from day one.

The UWE Cares programme, for carers, care leavers, estranged students and refugees, provides bursaries, tailored communications, accommodation support and a designated point of contact from application to graduation.

Contextual offer holders and neurodiverse students are invited to join the Access to UWE Bristol support programme, designed to boost confidence during the transition to university life through:

- 'Prepare for higher education' talks.
- Webinars about university life with current students and alumni.
- An email series with tips, reminders, and resources.
- Opportunities to apply for scholarships and funding.
- A three-day summer school giving a taste of student life.

The university's accounting and finance programmes include a year-long professional development module integrating careers education, practical activities and work-based learning, as well as 'ask the expert' events building students' confidence and resilience through connections with employers and alumni. Meanwhile, arts and creative students have a professional practice week, which offers various opportunities to explore creative career pathways, attend workshops, and network with industry professionals. Students can also undertake paid work with external partners and charities through the university's own creative agency, New Wave.

Conclusion

We are publishing this research at a time of national discussions on education and skills, the value of the graduate premium, the impact of artificial intelligence, and the role of higher education in addressing skills shortages and meeting employer demand. Our findings show the importance of university or college support in guiding students' their next steps in the unfamiliar and challenging landscape that follows higher education, and in so doing help meet national policy goals.

The research suggests that most graduates feel their university or college support has helped them prepare for life after graduation. As well as the broad support of a careers service, the findings suggest that students would benefit from strengthening of institutions' current links with employers and industry professionals, including through work placements, mentoring and speaker visits. Other helpful factors like a knowledgeable and supportive family are beyond institutional control, but universities and colleges can help to compensate when these are absent by enhancing their support for students who are less advantaged in this area.

As the progression rates and the case studies in this report show, many universities and colleges are doing impressive work in supporting their students and graduates in their careers, adopting practices such as holistic tracking, tailored support for vulnerable groups and lifelong careers support for graduates. However, it is clear from the research that graduates recommend more support to raise students' confidence and their awareness of what careers services and other careers support institutions have to offer.

We hope that the reflections in this student insight report, together with the detailed findings in the IFF Research report, will be useful in helping institutions to support students. We encourage all those working in, or making decisions about, careers and related services at universities and colleges, to read them, and in particular to consider the following points for improvement suggested by graduates.

Points for universities and colleges to consider

- How **visible and accessible** is your careers or employability support? Do students know where they should go for support, including where support forms part of their studies?
- Are you **reaching out to groups of students** who may not be aware of the breadth and depth of support available, or who may particularly need support? Examples might include students who do not have family support, or who do not have access to work placements or professional networks.
- Are you **working with disabled students** and student representatives to ensure that your careers support is accessible for disabled students?
- Is there a clear and comprehensive **approach to coordination** between the employability work done by academic departments, careers teams and co-curricular services?
- How can you **improve students' confidence** in recognising and articulating their skills? This includes the skills they have developed through studies and extracurricular activities.
- What opportunities are there to **tailor support** to specific student needs? Examples might include course-specific or subject-specific support.

- Do you offer opportunities for students to **network with industry professionals** or **access mentoring**? This could be particularly important for students studying on arts, humanities and social science courses, who are less likely to have work placements or links to employers as part of their courses.
- How can you **embed employability support** and information about steps to further study in course delivery?
- Do you offer careers support **after graduation**, and how long does this continue? Does it include lifetime support?



Notes

- 1 In this report, for the sake of readability, we have used ‘universities and colleges’ (or sometimes simply ‘institutions’) to refer to what our regulatory framework and other more formal documents call ‘higher education providers’ or ‘providers’.
- 2 For example, see Higher Education Statistics Agency, [‘HE Graduate Outcomes Data’](#); P Bolton and J Lewis, House of Commons Library, [‘Equality of access and outcomes in higher education in England’](#), December 2025; Universities UK, [‘Graduate outcomes: What the latest data reveals about employment, pay and job quality’](#), October 2025; J Freeman and N Hillman, Higher Education Policy Institute, [‘How can you help me?: Students’ perspectives on careers services and employment’](#), December 2022; R Hewitt, Higher Education Policy Institute, [‘Getting on: graduate employment and its influence on UK higher education’](#), March 2020; the research available at Graduate Futures Institute, [‘Research & Insights’](#) (members only access); the research available at Advance HE, [‘Student access, retention, attainment and progression in higher education’](#) (some resources are for members only).
- 3 See Condition B3: Student outcomes in OfS, [‘Securing student success: Regulatory framework for higher education in England’](#), last updated November 2022.
- 4 See OfS, [‘Preparing for the next steps after higher education Student insight report’](#).
- 5 Department for Education, Department for Work and Pensions and Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, [‘Post-16 education and skills white paper’](#), October 2025. A white paper is a policy document that sets out the government’s proposals for future legislation. See UK Parliament, White Papers.
- 6 Skills England, [‘Assessment of priority skills to 2030’](#), November 2025. See also Skills England, [‘Skills England: Skills for growth and opportunity’](#), July 2025.
- 7 See [Graduate Outcomes survey](#).
- 8 See OfS, [‘Student outcomes: Data dashboard’](#).
- 9 See for instance Centre for Global Higher Education, [‘Understanding graduate skills demand in Britain through the work people do: New evidence and policy implications’](#), May 2024; Universities UK, [‘Graduate outcomes: What the latest data reveals about employment, pay and job quality’](#), October 2025.
- 10 See OfS, [‘Preparing for the next steps after higher education Student insight report’](#).
- 11 The poll distinguished between ‘Formal support and guidance I received from my institution’ and ‘Informal or ad hoc support and guidance I received from my institution, e.g. from an individual member of staff’. The interpretation of this distinction was left to the respondent, but the former may well include such support as careers services, careers fairs, industry placements etc.
- 12 See Graduate Futures Institute (formerly AGCAS), ‘Uncovering Skills’, 2025, available for members only at [Graduate Futures Institute](#); C Toogood, [‘Skills and employability: Embedding to uncovering’](#), Higher Education Policy Institute blog post, October 2025.
- 13 Graduate Futures Institute, [‘Quarterly data barometer Q1 24/25’](#).
- 14 Department for Education, Department for Work and Pensions and Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, [‘Post-16 education and skills white paper’](#), October 2025
- 15 For more information about the experiences of disabled students, see OfS, Insight brief #25 [‘One size doesn’t fit all: Equality of opportunity for disabled students’](#), October 2025.
- 16 See Graduate Futures Institute, ‘Uncovering Skills’, 2025, available for members only at [Graduate Futures Institute](#); C Toogood, [‘Skills and employability: Embedding to uncovering’](#), Higher Education Policy Institute blog post, October 2025.
- 17 High-tariff institutions are those that require the most UCAS points (the points allocated to qualifications and grades) for entry.
- 18 For more information on different levels of study, see Gov.UK, [‘What qualification levels mean: England, Wales and Northern Ireland’](#).