

University Alliance audience research findings



Who did we speak to?

- General public, including:
 - 3 x focus groups with parents of 14–21-year-olds
 - 2 x focus groups with mature students
 - 2 x focus groups with 14–17-year-olds
 - 40 mobile ethnography journeys with 14–17-year-olds
 - Fieldwork: Jan – Feb 2023 covering England, Wales and Scotland
- Interviews with businesses and parliamentarians, including:
 - Lord Blunkett (Labour)
 - Lord Knight (Labour)
 - Lord Holmes (Conservative)
 - Lord Storey (Lib Dem)
 - Rolls Royce (advance manufacturing)
 - PLANES (small creative/tech)
 - Met police (public sector)
 - Taylor Vinters (Law)

Findings from general public interviews

Spontaneous attitudes towards higher education

All were interested in higher education

- Deliberately selected non-rejectors of higher education
- Desire to attend university higher for those from middle class backgrounds
- Alternatives viewed as gaining an apprenticeship or entering workforce
- Many want to stay relatively close to home

High degree of anxiety around university

- Will I/my child get a job afterwards?
- How do I/my child choose the 'right' university with so many to choose from?
- How supported and safe will I/my child be?
- What is it really like to be at university?
- What if I make the wrong choice?
- I feel pressured by my school to go down a route I am not sure is right for me

Mature students show fewer concerns

- Have clearer parameters in terms of location and subject, so less overwhelmed by choice
- Have often spent a long time thinking about options

Awareness of different types of university is low

- References made to league tables
- References to Russell Group, and assumptions that these are 'best', but unlikely to be able to name member universities
- Awareness for young people largely comes from schools
- Awareness for parents largely comes from where they or people they know have studied
- General belief that all universities are the same, perhaps with some 'better' and some 'worse'

Aspects that were identified as most important factors in decision making re. university

- Real-life industry experience
- Face-to-face hours with teaching staff
- Support available
- Career prospects

Introduction to University Alliance

Overwhelming sense of excitement

- Strengths resonate with what they are looking for, particularly contact with employers
- Young people who believe they respond better to more interactive and hands on teaching were surprised this could be an option
- Many were not aware of or had never considered UA members, but that changed after learning more
- Some concerns around perception of employers of non-elite universities

Key take outs from general public focus groups

What have students and parents told us about choosing a university?

1

There is an enormous amount of **anxiety and pressure** around choosing the 'right' option after school. Careers and employability are everything



In my opinion, I find it quite difficult to make decisions about college/university as it sets you up for life, and I'm scared about making the wrong decision.

What have students and parents told us about choosing a university?

2

There is some **concern** that attending a less selective university may not be as beneficial for a students' career prospects.



I've got a little bit of anxiety about what I'm going to graduate with, and how that's going to look to a potential employer...when I've got somebody else that's applied for the same position who might have come from a more prestigious university...that is something that I do think about.

BUT what employers look for is changing

95% of graduates from an Alliance university were in work or further study just 15 months after graduation and **93%** of those in work (or further study) said their work was meaningful.

These figures are identical to those for the Russell Group.

“20 years ago, where you went to university was really important, now where you've been is less important than how you present yourself.”

Business representative, Public Sector

“I think (where you studied) is less of an issue now. It's more to do with what you've studied and how adaptable that is to workplace learning.”

Business representative, Advanced Technology

What have students and parents told us about choosing a university?

3

Schools were the number one influencers of student and parent perceptions and feelings about higher education.



This information should be available...from schools or colleges when thinking about applying for university.

What have students and parents told us about choosing a university?

4

There is currently very little information available to help students and parents **differentiate** between universities:

There is no information about what a **professional and technical university** is.

The only 'type' of university identified was Russell Group universities.



I took the English Baccalaureate so I could hopefully get into a Russell Group university because I think there's a lot more pathways to go in and obviously, they're meant to be better unis than other unis.

What have students and parents told us about choosing a university?

5

The most important factors people wanted to know about when choosing a university:

- Opportunities for real life industry experience
- Face-to-face hours with teaching staff
 - Support available
 - Career prospects



A perfect university in my opinion would be a university that assesses its students based on how well they can apply their knowledge to real life problems/situations.

What have students and parents told us about choosing a university?

6

Students and parents alike were excited when hearing about **professional and technical universities** and want to be told about them when thinking about university options.



“Practical-based learning...I loved the thought of as I find learning through actually trying things much easier.”

“Knowing some of these facts might make a difference to how I think about making a choice about university because these universities prepare you for the workforce and the outside world.”

Key take outs: general public

From our research agency: “we believe it is vital that UA does have more of a well-known position amongst both the general public and schools”, because:

- It can help prospective students differentiate in what can be an overwhelming array of university options.
- It will help move perceptions away from the false and anxiety-inducing impression that students will have failed if they don't end up at one of 24 highly selective Russell Group universities.

Key take outs from employer interviews

Key take outs: employers

- Employers felt, generally, that attitudes towards higher education are changing and that employers are now likely to work with/recruit from a more diverse range of universities than they might have done in the past.

“20 years ago, where you went to university was really important, now where you've been is less important than how you present yourself”

Business representative, Public Sector

Key take outs: employers

- Employers that have worked with UA members felt that UA universities were very good to work with, and saw UA universities as leaders in industry engagement.

“The ones I know are very good at the industry partner ingredient”

Business Representative, Law

Key take outs: employers

- Those who had never heard of UA or engaged with our members and were unaware of professional and technical universities were very excited to hear about our work.

“If there is a focus on the employability and not just the course and you can give easy access to graduates through a collective then that would work for us”

Business representative, Recruitment

Key take outs: employers

- The collaborative way UA members work together is seen as a real strength by employers.

"I like how they work together and promote one another; they are well connected. There's not the infighting, all fighting to move up the rankings. I like the way they move together and are trying to promote each other. Russell Group stand alone, I don't see them collaborating as much as UA."

Business Representative, Engineering

Key take outs: employers

- Employers said they find it difficult to navigate the university landscape, to understand what universities can offer them and how/who to engage.
- Employers suggested UA deliver an employer outreach campaign and provide a gateway to their members for employers across the country.

“We are now doing lots of work with Derby and have been hugely impressed by what they do, but we had to go digging.”

Business Representative, Engineering

“If they could collaborate then this would be really powerful. For example, if there was a centralised pool for patents pipeline/research in a particular area this could be more powerful and build an association that was attractive”

Business Representative, Law

Key take outs from parliamentarian interviews

Key take outs: parliamentarians

- Parliamentarians do feel that generally universities in the UK offer an extremely high standard of education, world class research and other societal benefits

“[HE in the UK is a] Gleaming jewel providing a positive force for good”
- Parliamentarian

Key take outs: parliamentarians

- Parliamentarians felt UA members' industry focus is what really makes us stand out, and where we are leading the way, mentioning skills, innovation and knowledge exchange

"People talk about knowledge transfer and University Alliance and its members seem to be really getting that, they are actually trying to do that"

-Parliamentarian

"My instinct would be that this is the group of universities that are closest to the labour market and employers, helping to develop the skills of the future"

-Parliamentarian

Key take outs: parliamentarians

- Parliamentarians were aware of UA and felt it was well respected in Westminster, but could still be better known
- There is great appetite amongst parliamentarians to know even more about what professional and technical universities do.

“Be crystal clear about the power of tech and professional higher education”

-Parliamentarian

“No-one can do enough communicating and pushing their story”

-Parliamentarian

Key take outs: parliamentarians

- The collaborative way UA members work together is seen as a real strength by parliamentarians, and they encouraged UA to play even more of a convening role.

“Getting people together to learn, to share best practice and share perspective for the future.”

Parliamentarian