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| <b>Activity name</b>   | KS5 UCAS Applications   |
| <b>Date</b>  | Tranche 5 (Sept 2020 - Aug 2021) and Tranche 6 (Sept 2021 - Aug 2022)   |
| <b>Total number of students</b>  | ~799 students   |
| <b>Total number of target students</b>                                       | ~161 students   |
| <b>Institutions involved</b><br><i>* Institutions that completed surveys</i> | Bridgwater & Taunton College*, City College Plymouth, Holyrood Academy*; Notre Dame Plymouth*, Queen Elizabeth's School*, Scott College, Sir John Hunt Community Sports College*, South Devon College, Teign School, Teignmouth Community School, The Cornwall College Group*, The Spires College, Tor Bridge High*, West Somerset College, Yeovil College* |

## Introduction

This evaluation report summarises the survey feedback received for the 'UCAS Applications' workshop offered by Next Steps South West (NSSW) as part of the Office for Students' (OfS) Uni Connect programme. It details the survey results for workshops delivered between September 2020 and August 2022, which corresponds to the NSSW Tranche 5 and Tranche 6 periods. The workshops were delivered to year 12 (Level 3, yr1) and year 13 (Level 3, yr2) students studying at target schools and colleges in Cornwall, Devon and Somerset.

'UCAS Applications' is a one-hour activity designed to inform students about the UCAS online platform and to improve understanding of the application process for UCAS. The session introduces participants to the information available on the UCAS website and its search functions that can help with making choices about courses and universities. It also explains tariff points, how to apply, the offers that can be received from universities, and what happens after results day. The session further provides a brief overview of personal statements and includes tips on key points to include and mistakes to avoid. Students who attend this activity are anticipated to be able to go on to make a successful application for a higher education course. Thus, it reduces the impact that a lack of knowledge of HE has as a barrier to HE progression, as identified in the NSSW Theory of Change model.

UCAS Application workshops were delivered by NSSW staff and student ambassadors as part of the core suite of activities offered to target and non-target students. Most sessions were delivered in-person at target schools and colleges in presentation format. However, due to restrictions to face-to-face delivery during 2020, some students participated live online. In total, 45 workshops were delivered which resulted in 15 institutions engaging and ~799 students taking part.



## Aims

By the end of a session students should understand about applications to HE and the purpose of UCAS and be able to use the UCAS Hub to explore their future options. Having attended a session, participants should be able to navigate the UCAS application system well and plan / make a successful HE application.

As such, the UCAS Applications workshop has two key aims 1) to increase understanding of HE pathways and personally relevant options, and 2) increase understanding of the HE applications process. It addresses the key NSSW barrier of 'Knowledge of HE' and the obstacles that insufficient knowledge and lack of understanding can be for HE progression.

Success of the workshop is measured and evaluated against the target for the expected short-term outcomes as detailed in table 1 below.

**Table 1.** How success of the workshop is measured.

| <b>Barrier to HE</b>   | <b>Short-term outcomes</b>   | <b>Indicators</b>   |
|------------------------|--|---|
| <i>Knowledge of HE</i> | Increased understanding of HE pathways and personally relevant options | Increased understanding of HE application process, including personal statements for <b><u>≥ 80% students</u></b>   |
| <i>Knowledge of HE</i> | Increased understanding of HE application process                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Students can identify different HE routes and relevant options for them</i></li> <li>- <i>Students can outline key steps in HE application process</i></li> </ul> |

## Evaluation Design and Data Collection

The evaluation of the UCAS Applications activity was done via a post-session survey, which was handed out to students to complete either as a paper version or through an online link. Students were asked to anonymously answer five structured qualitative and quantitative questions which related to the anticipated outcomes of '*Increased Awareness of HE Options*' and '*Increased Understanding of How to Access HE Courses*'. The questions included both Likert-scale choices and free-text response options.

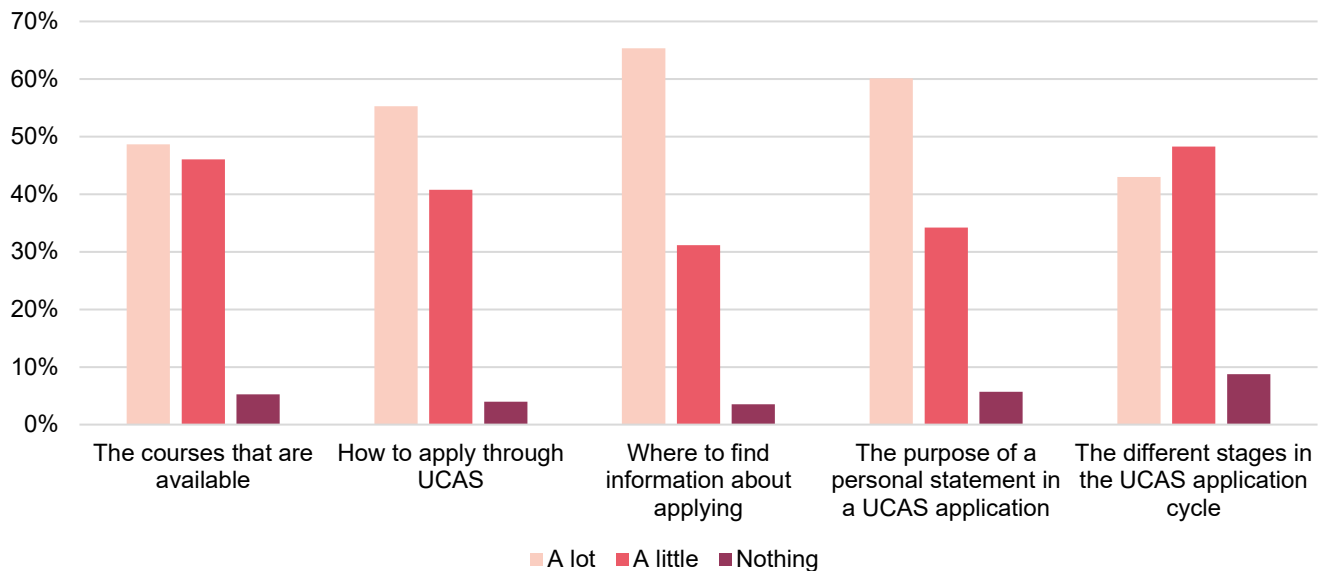
Out of the ~799 students who participated, survey responses were received from 228 participants. The following results section presents the data from the 228 returned surveys.

## Results

Attendees who took part in the UCAS Applications workshop were asked on the post-activity survey to indicate how much they felt they knew about aspects of HE because of their participation in the intervention. Figure 1 shows the success of the workshop in supporting student knowledge across five different areas of higher education. Most



respondents felt they knew 'A lot' or 'A little' about a) the courses that were available; b) how to apply through UCAS; c) where to find out information about applying; d) the purpose of a personal statement and e) the different stages of the UCAS application cycle. Notably, 65.4% felt that they now knew 'A lot' about where to find information and 60.1% felt they knew 'A lot' about UCAS personal statements which are clearly aspects explained well in the sessions.



**Figure 1.** Students' opinions about their knowledge of higher education following a session.

With over 91.2% of all the survey responses showing that participants knew something as a result of their participation, the workshop evidently made a positive impact on improving student awareness and knowledge of HE, specifically concerning UCAS applications. Equally, with less than 8.8% of the responses indicating students knew 'Nothing' about these aspects of HE, this data too shows a positive outcome on the students' overall learning and the barrier of (insufficient) HE knowledge. However, for the last statement, there is a relatively higher proportion of students indicating they knew 'Nothing' (8.8%), and the majority felt they knew 'A little' (48.2%). These figures suggest that whilst students benefited from the session's learning, it could also be enhanced so that students understand more about the different stages of the application cycle.

Qualitative answers provided in the second survey question further illustrate the growth in knowledge that students gained from having taken part in a UCAS Applications workshop. Students were asked to provide two examples of what they had learnt about UCAS and applying to university. Out of the 228 survey responses, 181 participants provided two examples of something learnt and 25 provided one example, with 22 either not providing any answer, or not providing an answer relating to the question. The free text answers received for the second survey question were analysed by coding into thematic groups based on commonalities in topic. Fourteen



categories were determined to best represent the data. The number of responses per category can be seen in table 2 below.

**Table 2.** Students' responses providing two examples of what they learnt about UCAS and applying to university. The three most popular response categories are shaded in light blue.

| <b>Thematic category</b>                   | <b>Number of responses (1<sup>st</sup> example)</b> | <b>Number of responses (2<sup>nd</sup> example)</b> | <b>Feedback examples</b>  |
|--|---|---|---|
| What the UCAS service is                   | 2   | 4   | <i>"UCAS stands for university and college admission system"</i><br><i>"How to use UCAS"</i><br><i>"UCAS sends your applications to the universities so you don't need to send it to them yourself"</i>   |
| The UCAS website and other online services | 11  | 4   | <i>"The website is easy to use"</i><br><i>"UCAS website features"</i><br><i>"How to use the website"</i>  |
| The process of applying through UCAS       | 31  | 35  | <i>"I have also learned how to apply to UCAS and where to find information"</i><br><i>"The process of applying and accepting courses"</i><br><i>"You have the option to put an application for 5 courses"</i>   |
| The costs of applying                      | 13  | 6   | <i>"You have to pay to apply to universities"</i><br><i>"You can apply to 5 uni courses for £26"</i><br><i>"That is costs 22 pounds for 1 application but 26 for 5"</i>   |
| The different types of offers              | 5   | 9   | <i>"Different types of acceptance from universities"</i><br><i>"Conditional and unconditional offers"</i><br><i>"You can't have an insurance choice if you firm an unconditional offer"</i>   |
| Extra, Clearing & Adjustment               | 38  | 31  | <i>"If you achieve better grade than you expected, you can reserve your courses and look to apply for higher courses"</i><br><i>"UCAS Clearing – This is an option if your results don't go to plan. This provides a second chance to apply for courses that still have availability"</i><br><i>"You get extra chances if your 5 applications are rejected"</i> |
| Personal statements and 'selling yourself' | 24  | 22  | <i>"You need to make a personal statement to put on the application"</i><br><i>"They have a personal statement builder"</i><br><i>"Don't write things that will not apply to the course you are applying for"</i>   |
| Tariff points and entry requirements       | 23  | 15  | <i>"You receive UCAS points from your qualifications that will determine what courses you are eligible for"</i><br><i>"The requirements needed for the course"</i><br><i>"Using the UCAS tariff point calculator"</i>   |
| Deadlines and important dates              | 22  | 20  | <i>"When the deadlines are for applications and replies/offers"</i><br><i>"The deadline for Oxbridge and more competitive courses is in October as opposed to January"</i>  |



|                                    |    |    |  |
|------------------------------------|----|----|--|
|                                    |    |    | <i>"That the 15<sup>th</sup> January isn't the last day that you can apply for"</i>  |
| How to find HE courses             | 7  | 9  | <i>"You can find all courses through UCAS"<br/>"Where to find more info about courses"<br/>"I have learnt where to find courses"</i>   |
| Further help, advice, and guidance | 11 | 11 | <i>"That there are so many support websites to help us choose or answer questions"<br/>"Who I can contact if I have any questions in regards to contacting universities"<br/>"Ways to find things best suited"</i> |
| Other                              | 11 | 13 | <i>"You don't always have to apply through UCAS"<br/>"That Conservatoires are for the arts"<br/>"£40 travel card"</i>  |
| Nothing / Unsure                   | 8  | 2  | <i>"I have already been to uni I didn't learn anything new"<br/>"Nothing"<br/>"No clue"</i>  |

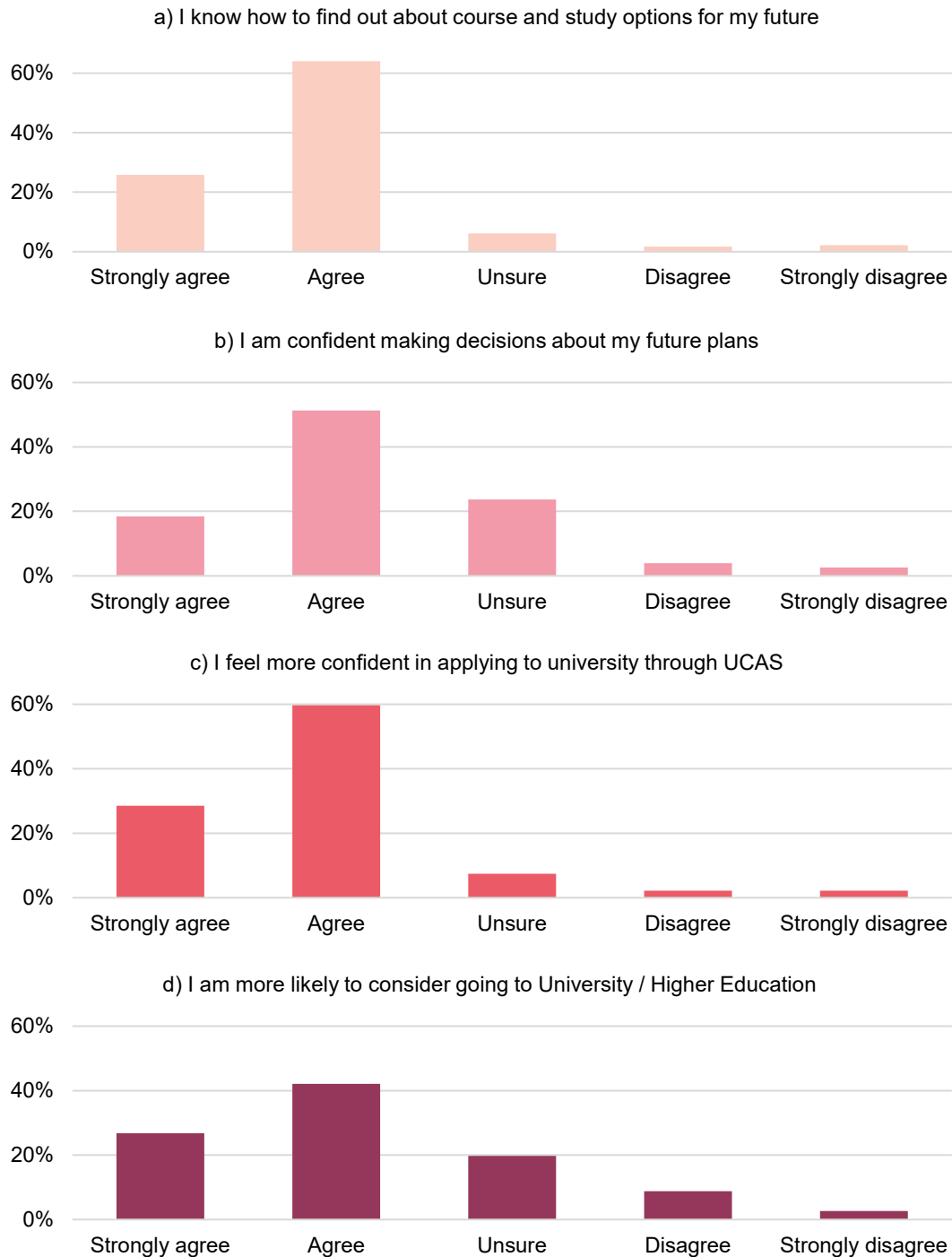
Table 2 highlights that the most common learning related to the actual process of applying, and to the clearing/adjustment and personal statement aspects of the UCAS process. Students could also commonly recall information relating to UCAS tariff points and entry requirements, and to key UCAS application deadlines. Distinctively, some of the responses grouped as 'Other' had a common focus on empowerments about university, such as:

- *"It's never too late to apply"*
- *"It's easy to do"*
- *"I can apply to university"*

The broad range of examples provided on the surveys is testament to the many different facts and tips that students learnt during sessions and indicates that the workshops were successful in informing about HE and HE applications. With statements also relating to the session being useful and learning *"Lots!"*, it can be stated that the workshops were well received.

However, there were some students who did not provide any answer (n=22, 9.6%), or a second answer (n=25, 10.9%), and there were those who specified they did not learn anything new (n= 8, 3.5%). It is possible that the non-mandatory nature of this open question meant that a small number of students did not feel compelled to answer, as opposed to couldn't answer. Of those who specified they learnt nothing about UCAS, some students commented about arriving late to the session and having already studied at HE previously.

To obtain further information on how much the session had impacted on students' knowledge and confidence around HE, the survey required workshop participants to respond to four statements relating to the session. Figure 2 summarises the responses and the usefulness of the session in helping students to access higher education.



**Figure 2.** Students' feelings about whether they agree or disagree to statements relating to the session.

89.9% of survey respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with statement a) that the session had helped them know about course and study options for the future. Likewise, most of the respondents also agreed or strongly agreed to statements b) and c) with the majority of students agreeing that the session had helped them be confident making decisions about their future plans (51.3%) and applying to university through UCAS (59.6%). As a third of the participants (28.5%) indicated that they strongly agreed to statement c) there is reason to suggest the session was particularly

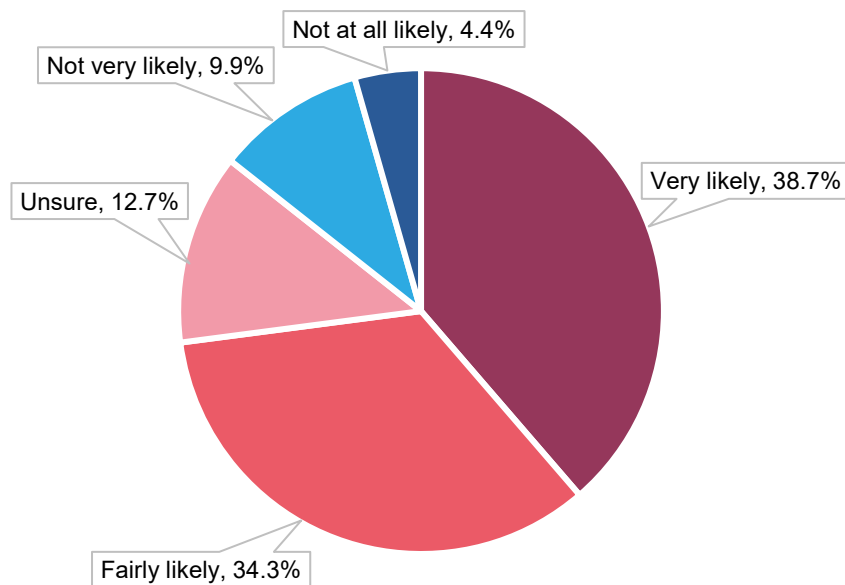


useful in growing students' confidence in this area. The low percentages of those who 'Disagree' (1.8%, 3.9%, 2.2% respectively) and 'Strongly disagree' (2.2%, 2.6%, 2.2% respectively) to the first three statements suggests that overall students felt they gained from having attended the session.

Conversely, for statement b) approximately a quarter of students felt 'Unsure' (23.7%) about their confidence in making decisions about their future plans. It is not possible here to establish the reason for these more uncertain responses, but it is probable that these responses are not all directly linked to the session itself but relate more overarchingly to the students' own feelings about their futures. As such, it is likely they these students will benefit from continual engagement in the NSSW suite of activities.

In terms of their intentions to go into HE as a result of the session, just over two-thirds (68.9%) of respondents stated they 'Strongly agree' and 'Agree' that they are more likely to consider going. Less certain were the 19.7% of students who stated 'Unsure'. Again, this is a difficult question to answer for participants who remain undecided about their futures, and thus this may have resulted in some students feeling 'Unsure'.

To affirm their answers to statement d) and to check whether greater knowledge about applying to HE had had an impact on HE intentions, students were asked to indicate their likelihood of applying to HE. The results are shown in figure 3 below.



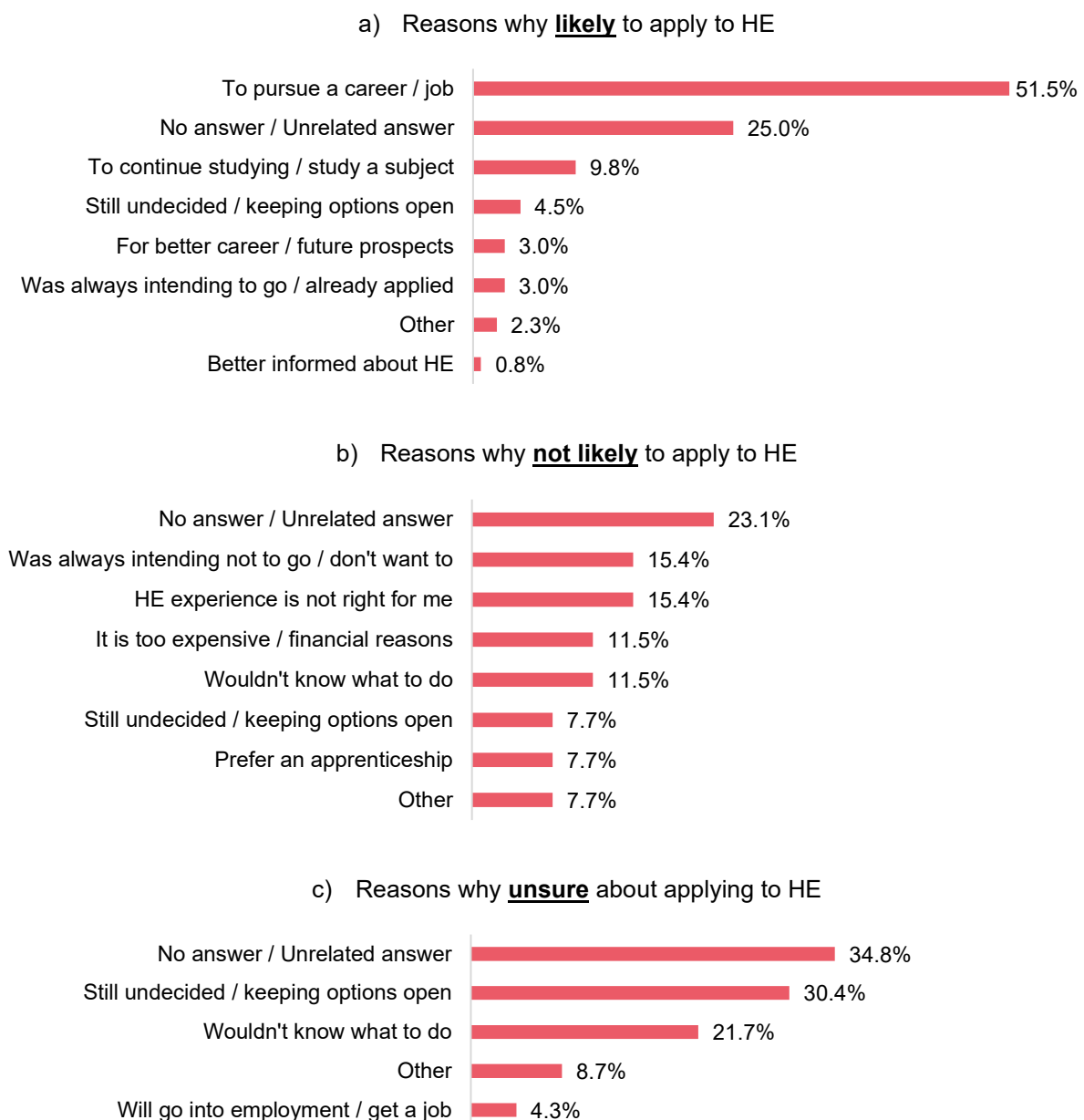
**Figure 3.** Likelihood of an HE application.

The survey results show that session participants were 'Very likely' (n=70, 38.7%) and 'Fairly likely' (n=62, 34.3%) to apply for higher education study. Less than a tenth of the responses indicated that applying to HE was 'Not very likely' (n=18, 9.9%) and 'Not at all likely' (n=8, 4.4%). This implies that most students are preparing to go on to HE. These figures do not include the 47 (20.6%) students who did not answer this question and are therefore percentages of the 181 participants who did provide an answer.



There are missing answers because this question was not present on the earliest versions of the evaluation survey in tranche 5.

To further explore students' HE intentions, and how the session may have impacted on decisions to apply or not, the final survey question asked participants to explain the reasoning behind their response. Due to the open nature of this survey question the responses were wide ranging. To order the data, the responses were categorised into common themes which best represented the variation in the data. Eight explanation categories were identified for the 'Very likely' and 'Fairly likely' responses; eight categories were identified for the 'Very unlikely' and 'Fairly unlikely' responses; and five categories were identified for the 'Unsure' responses. The reasons why students were likely or not likely to apply to HE can be seen in Figure 4 below.



**Figure 4.** Reasons why.





There are 47 surveys which could not be included in the analysis of this question because they were missing responses about the likelihood of an HE application. Therefore, the percentages for the reasons why are calculated from the 181 responses collected for the preceding question.

Categorising the data shows that most of the students (n=68, 51.5%) would likely be applying to HE because they had a set career goal or job in mind which required a higher education qualification e.g., a career in Law. Being able to continue studying a subject or continue learning (n=13, 9.8%) were also significant factors for those likely to apply. It was also positive to see feedback about applying due to being better informed about HE, albeit only one response.

- *“Now I know there is a wider range of courses.”*

However, there may be an overall response focus on careers and jobs because the survey question provides an example answer of *‘fairly likely to apply because I want to pursue a career in...’*. It seems probable that some participants have used the example to formulate their response. Whilst the prompt was added to the Tranche 5 and Tranche 6 versions of the survey to encourage a greater number of students to answer, the higher number of responses which include this phrase suggests that some inadvertent bias has been introduced to the survey results. Considering this, it would be beneficial for this question to be reviewed again, to ensure an adequate prompt if required, but one that does not influence the feedback.

For students who stated that they did not intend to apply to HE, the majority simply did not want to attend (n=4, 15.4%) or considered that the higher education route was not right for them personally (n=4, 15.4%) with reasons including not being able to get enjoyment from the HE-experience.

A very small number of students also highlighted the costs of higher education (n=3, 11.5%) and not knowing what to do (n=3, 11.5%) as reasons for not applying.

For the students who were ‘Unsure’ about their intentions to apply to HE or not, it appears that most were unsure because decisions were still yet to be made or they were keeping their options open (n=7, 30.4%). Other students commented on not knowing what to do (n=5, 21.7%).

Whilst most survey participants provided feedback about their reasons why, there was also a number (n=47, 26.0%) who left no response or answered with a comment unrelated to the survey question. It is also important to recognise that this may have been a difficult question to answer, and some respondents may not have felt comfortable providing an answer so directly about themselves. But attention should be paid to the higher number of non-responses here and this data should be considered when reviewing future versions of the survey.



## Conclusion

In summary, the survey data presented and analysed in this report demonstrates that the UCAS Applications workshop has had a positive overall impact on those who took part in a session. From a knowledge of HE perspective, the workshop was successful in building student awareness of the different aspects of HE and of the UCAS process, especially concerning where to find information on applying and the purpose of a personal statement (see figure 1). In the students' responses about what they had learnt (see table 2), there is evidence to show that students gained a lot of varied knowledge and that they could correctly recall key facts and information of use to them. The majority of session participants felt they agreed that they knew more about their future options and felt confident making decisions about the future, including applying to university through UCAS (see figure 2). Survey data also revealed positivity towards considering HE (see figure 2) and the likelihood of making an HE application (see figure 3), because of attending this workshop. The success of the workshop in meeting its short-term outcomes and target is summarised in table 3 below.

**Table 3.** UCAS Applications outcomes achieved in T5 and T6.

| Barrier to HE   | Short-term outcomes  | Indicators  | Evidence   | Outcome achieved        |
|-----------------|--|---|--|-------------------------|
| Knowledge of HE | Increased understanding of HE pathways and personally relevant options | <p>Increased understanding of HE application process, including personal statements for <b>≥ 80% students</b></p> <p><i>Students can identify different HE routes and relevant options for them</i></p> | <p>94.7% knew about the courses that are available</p> <p><b>Target 80%: Result 94.7%</b></p>  | <b>Nearly achieved</b>  |
|                 |  |   | <p>89.9% agreed they knew how to find out about course and study options for the future</p> <p>69.7% agreed they were confident making decisions about their future</p> <p>68.9% agreed they were more likely to consider applying to HE</p> <p><b>Target 80%: Result 68.9%+</b></p> <p>72.9% (without missing data) were likely to apply to HE</p> <p><b>Target 80%: Result 72.9%</b></p> |                         |
| Knowledge of HE | Increased understanding of HE application process                      | <p>Increased understanding of HE application process, including personal statements for <b>≥ 80% students</b></p> <p><i>Students can outline key steps in HE application process</i></p>                | <p>96.1% knew how to apply through UCAS</p> <p>96.5% knew where to find information about applying</p> <p>94.3% knew the purpose of a personal statement</p> <p>91.2% knew about the different stages of the application process</p> <p><b>Target 80%: Result 91.2%+</b></p>   | <b>Achieved overall</b> |
|                 |  |   | <p>79.4% could give two pieces of information learnt about UCAS and applying to university</p>   |                         |



|  |  |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|--|--|
|  |  |  | Target 80%: Result 79.4%   |  |
|  |  |  | 88.2% agreed they were more confident in applying to university through UCAS |  |
|  |  |  | Target 80%: Result 88.2%   |  |

Table 3 illustrates that the expected outcomes have largely been achieved, with the session making significant impacts on students’ understanding of UCAS and of the HE courses available, and in their confidence in applying to university through UCAS. Thus, students are now able to outline key aspects of UCAS applications and personally relevant options as intended. The expected outcome of being able to increase understanding of HE pathways and personally relevant options for 80% of participants however was only partly met as the data did not reflect this level of increase in all areas. The results fell only marginally short of the desired 80% target and highlight a significant influence of the session on reducing the barrier of ‘Knowledge of HE’.

**Recommendations**

The survey results show an all-round success of the workshop, but there is scope for some improvement to be made to the follow areas:

- Data in figure 1 indicates that most of the students felt they knew ‘A little’ about *‘the different stages of the UCAS application cycle’*, but slightly less students felt they knew ‘A lot’ compared to other workshop aspects. It would be preferable to increase the number of students stating ‘A lot’ to this statement. A review of the session is suggested to make sure that learners are best supported in their knowledge of HE for all aspects of UCAS. NSSW should further ensure that additional or supplementary sources continue to be signposted to as follow-up for students to be able to further their knowledge and understanding.
- The use of a three-point scale in figure 1 of ‘Nothing’, ‘A little’ and ‘A lot’ seems disproportionately weighted towards the more negative end of the scale as the phrase ‘A little’ does not appear to measure well a mid-range attitude. It is suggested that the series of statements respondents can choose from should be more balanced. Using a Likert-type scale that has four ordered response categories is suggested as an alternative substitute: for example, ‘Nothing’, ‘A little’, ‘Some’, ‘A lot’.
- Some students also felt less certain about their confidence in making decisions about their future as highlighted in figure 2. This apparent hesitancy might be alleviated too from extra emphasis on signposting to further research, contacts, and material. Students would moreover benefit from attending additional NSSW workshops, for instance to increase the number of those feeling more confident about their future choices. It is suggested that schools and colleges continue to be encouraged to book other complementary workshops to further develop students’ awareness and knowledge of HE, and the support available to them regarding



future-decision making. Workshops such as Choosing an HE Course, Higher and Degree Apprenticeships, and Student Finance & Budgeting would dovetail well with the UCAS Applications session.

- There were several surveys which had a least one non-response; item non-responses likely resulted from an unwillingness to respond or inability to respond appropriately, as well as avoidance of non-mandatory questions. There are also instances where a question has been added to a later version of the survey, which accounts for missing information from previous versions. Whilst it is not possible to eliminate non-responses completely it is recommended that survey content and continuity be reviewed to assist with higher completion rates next time. Expectations, distribution methods, and timings can also be reiterated at training sessions.
- Finally, the last survey question would benefit from a re-phrase or re-format to ensure that it does not skew students towards responding with a set answer. As currently the example prompt unintentionally creates bias within the data. Given that this question received fewer responses without a prompt, a suitable replacement will require careful review.

These recommendations should support workshop evaluation into Tranche 7 and beyond.