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Acknowledgements are needed for all those who contributed to the information contained in this report. We would like to thank the Aimhigher Kent and Medway Partnership (AHKMP) school and college staff who gave their time and spoke freely about the UCAS application process, and the universities who responded to the online survey and spoke about their experiences of university admissions. Without their contribution, it would not have been possible to have conducted the study. We would also like to thank the young people who gave up their time to be interviewed and who provided such rich, qualitative data on their personal experiences.
An Analysis of Conversion to UCAS ‘Accepted Applicant’ Status of AHKM Partnership School Students

Section One: Executive Summary and Recommendations

In 2002, the UK government set the target of increasing participation in Higher Education (H.E.) to 50 per cent of 18 to 30 year olds by 2010, with a particular focus on young people from under-represented groups. In order to increase this participation, a range of policies and initiatives were introduced in schools and colleges, intended to encourage young people to continue with post-compulsory education, with a specific focus on students from ‘non traditional’ backgrounds. One significant initiative is Aimhigher, which specifically targets lower-socio economic groups and aims to raise attainment, aspirations and improve progression.

This study was conducted by the Research Centre for Children, Families and Communities at Canterbury Christ Church University for Aimhigher Kent and Medway (AHKM) between January and July 2010. The aim of the project was to explore the conversion rates for students in AHKM partnership schools and colleges to UCAS ‘accepted applicant’ status and examine reasons for non-conversion, along with information on support provided to students before, during and after the application in order to make policy and practice recommendations.

The study involved three sets of data offering four complimentary perspectives:

1. An analysis of UCAS school level data to explore the percentage of Aimhiger students applying to HEIs, the percentage being offered a place at an HEI, the percentage accepting and any patterns related to gender, socio-economic group, region and where they applied. These analyses were then compared to similar data from non Aimhigher schools in Kent and Medway to assess whether they were shared by all students in the area.

2. Qualitative interviews with 19 school and college staff, principally heads of sixth form and learning mentors in 14 schools and colleges in Kent and Medway, including one selective school and two FE colleges. In the same schools and colleges paired and focus group interviews were undertaken with 50 year 13 students. Interviews with staff and students explored the kinds of supported offered/received from making choices about going on to HEI or other education and career pathways, the support leading up to the application to UCAS and the support through the application process to taking up a place or considering alternative options; and perceived reasons for non-conversion amongst some students.

3. An online survey of university admissions department staff to explore how applications are processed and what factors maximise the chances of students being offered a place at an HEI.
Key Findings

Involvement from other Agencies

- Most schools and colleges had a special partnership with at least one, usually local, HEI with whom they worked to provide support to their students. These relationships were facilitated by AHKM Learning Mentors and other staff.
- Bespoke support from local HEIs was particularly valued by schools and students particularly Open Days and talks from HE undergraduate ambassadors.

Timing of Applications

- Significant variation in when schools began talking to young people about UCAS between Spring Term Year 12 and at the Start of Year 13.
- All schools began filling out UCAS applications between June and September but ‘deadlines’ varied between the end of November and the January 15th.
- Awareness from schools and students that Grammar Schools and Independent Schools complete applications earlier.
- Places on courses were allocated by HEIs differently. Although there was some evidence to suggest that whilst early applications were important for highly competitive courses, later applications were not considered to be a problem from some universities on some courses.

Support for Writing Personal Statements

- Evidence from HEIs that personal statements constitute a highly significant element of the application.
- However, there were general concerns and confusion from students and staff over the significance of the personal statements.
- Schools were providing very high levels of support to students on personal statements.
- Smaller cohorts tended to provide more personalised support to students, which contributed towards better conversion rates.
- Some schools were more proactive in seeking out resources to inform the advice they give their students.
- Some evidence to suggest university admissions teams need to be convinced that their HEI is not simply another insurance choice before they offer a place.

Academic References

- Confusion amongst school staff as to the relative significance of the reference.
- Concern amongst school staff that the references were often highly varied depending on the person writing the reference.
• Schools expressed concern over the balance between being overly positive about students and ‘truthful’.
• Not all school aware of what universities want to see in an academic reference.

**FE colleges**
• The two FE colleges included in the study varied as much between themselves as they did from schools and sixth forms, in terms of the support available.
• The key difference was in the amount of dedicated support time and staff available to students.
• There was not always a positive correlations between higher levels of support for students and higher conversion rates, this was due to year on year fluctuations, and internal staffing and policy changes,

**Reasons for Conversion/Non-Conversion**
• Some students were over optimistic in their expected grades and did not have an appropriate insurance choice -
• Conversion was higher in schools with selective sixth forms and smaller sixth forms
• Given the tight UCAS application deadlines, some students were encouraged to submit applications before they had conclusively decided what they wanted to study or whether they wanted to go to University. This was sometimes reflected by the content of their applications and often a reason for students to not accept offers.
• Financial restrictions remained an issue, especially if students became accustomed to a full time salary during the summer months.
• Student confidence remained an obstacle to enrolling at university.
• Sense of immediacy with applications as gap years were sometimes seen as counter-productive.
  • There was considerable variation in how soon students were informed about offers from HEIs (from a fortnight to months), this led to some students losing confidence and enthusiasm.
  • Personalised support from sixth form and learning mentor staff with an in-depth knowledge of the student can positively contribute to conversion rates.

**UCAS Data Analysis**
• The 2009 cohort of AHKM students tended to have accepted places at HEIs nearer to home than was usual for non Aimhigher students in Kent and Medway and all applicants in the South East (this trend was also supported during interviews
• The choice of subject areas amongst AHKM partnerships schools were broadly in line with UK patterns and highly similar to that of comparator non-selective schools in Kent and Medway.
• The AHKM partnership schools and the comparator group were broadly similar in their ‘success’ rates for converting applications to acceptances for all subject groups.
• Female AHKM students were significantly less likely to convert than male AHKM students.
• Few schools and only one college in this study had access to the UCAS student data and most said that funding prohibited them from purchasing this service

Recommendations

1. Visits from HEIs and other agencies needs to continue to be encouraged and supported (Students wanted more HEI representatives to come to talk to them, possibly using teleconferencing, a ‘ning’ (networking site) with universities. The value of meeting ex-students, ideally from the same school, who had made the transition to university and to work and could talk to year 13 students was very important to students).

2. Better linking up of support between schools, colleges and universities (It is important that universities and schools liaise to ensure that different types of support occur at an appropriate time. For example, information provided through HEI programmes, such as “Stepping Up” on personal statements was introduced after some students were already on the second or third draft of their statement and some university open days occurred during the period immediately prior to exams).

3. Students could benefit from being introduced to the UCAS application process sooner (Some students wanted more information about HE sooner in year 11 or earlier. University admissions teams want evidence that the student is committed to the course, but some students felt they had rushed their application without devoting sufficient time to the precise details of where to apply or to what specific course).

4. Students applications need to always include an appropriate insurance choice (Schools felt students can be over optimistic in their expected grades and do not all have a safe insurance choice to rely on in case they do not achieve the required points).

5. Schools and colleges need more information regarding the importance of the personal statement (There was some confusion amongst schools and colleges as to the weighting of the personal statement. Although schools devoted a great deal of time to supporting students in writing this, they did not know how significant it was to the application process).

6. Students need to try and convince HEIs in their personal statement that they are thoroughly committed to the course
(Some evidence to suggest university admissions teams need to be convinced that their university is not simply another insurance choice before they offer a place).

7. Schools and colleges need to be more informed regarding the content of the academic reference, including the implications associated with deliberately omitting certain information
(Schools expressed concern over the balance between being overly positive about students and ‘truthful’ where they had poor attendance. Not all school aware of what universities want to see in an academic reference).

8. Reference writing should be included as an area of staff development
(Where staff lack experience in writing reference for UCAs applications it is recommended that this should be considered an important area for staff development and suitable training or support provided)

9. Schools and colleges need to be better informed as to the relative weighting of the academic reference
(Confusion amongst school staff as to the relative significance of the reference)

10. Students need to be given support and guidance for HE interviews
(Where students were applying for courses likely to have an interview as part of the application process it was very important that they were given adequate preparation for this. In one institution of 11 students applying for nursing and other health-related courses only 5 had been offered places after their interviews. Notwithstanding the high demand for places on these courses these students had not been prepared for the interviews. Further support may also be needed to be sure students understand the importance of interviews and have the time and resources to attend them).

11. Supporting students through the post- offer ‘wobble’
(Some students may need more support for dealing with both rejections and anxiety about their choice of course or the whole prospect of going to university. Students need to be informed of courses where there are particularly high levels of applications).

12. Schools and colleges should develop their monitoring of successful and non successful applications
(Few schools and colleges had student applicant data. Principally this was because of the cost involved in acquiring this data. It is recommended that schools and colleges budget for the £100 annual fee to acquire this data on a yearly basis or be supported in keeping this information themselves. Included in this data should be staff intelligence on reason for non-conversion so that any emerging patterns that could be addressed by the school can be identified. Personal statements and references could also be retained).
13. Students would benefit from more support on how to spend their gap years constructively

(Some schools and colleges offer their own gap year programmes which help students gain teaching, IT and other experience that can, in some cases, be tailored to areas of individual student interest. A few offer sessions specifically on or including gap years. It is recommended that all school and colleges be encouraged to provided support in this area)

14. More research would be beneficial to understand gender differences in conversion amongst AHKM student

(Further analysis of UCAS or other quantitative data and further qualitative exploration of gender differences in application, attitudes to HE and barriers and facilitators would be helpful to understand the processes at work. It is also recommended that schools and colleges monitor differences in this area more closely by acquiring and retaining applicant status data or keeping other forms of records)
Table 1: Views of students, school staff and admissions staff on key areas of application to HEI

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>School/college staff</th>
<th>Admissions staff</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Support from other agencies</strong></td>
<td>• Highly valued, especially student ambassadors, and ex-students from same school or college</td>
<td>• Most build close relationships with one or two local universities for</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Support from other agencies needs to be timed so it does not conflict with exams and coursework deadlines</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Timing of applications</strong></td>
<td>• Timing varies by school or college and students</td>
<td>• Deadlines vary but most are before Christmas break, some schools proactively encourage early submission</td>
<td>• 5 out of 12 HEIs said that they filled up the course on a first come basis but,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Student belief that earlier applications are more likely to succeed</td>
<td>• Most believe earlier applications beneficial, more likely to succeed and ‘free up’ students to concentrate on study</td>
<td>• Early applications not always required, depending on how competitive the course and/or HEI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal statements</strong></td>
<td>• Happy with support offered, generally find the task of writing the statement very daunting</td>
<td>• Most schools supply some sort of blueprint to help students write their statement</td>
<td>• 10 out of 12 HEIs said that Personal Statements were Very Important or Important</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>• Extensive support given to students but range and nature of support varies, e.g. from proof reading to actual redrafting</td>
<td>• 9 out of 12 HEIs said it was important that these were written tailored to the and in some cases the HEI</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• 9 out of 12 HEIs said they should be written with minimal help from the tutor</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Evidence of extra-curricula activities ‘a good all rounder’</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Want to see commitment and personal qualities relevant to course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>References</strong></td>
<td>• Some uncertain of the importance of references</td>
<td>• Some staff may need extra support for writing</td>
<td>• Reference and personal statement seen as equally important by many</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Some staff may need extra support for writing</td>
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Section Two
Introduction

2.1. Background
In 2002, the UK government set the target of increasing participation in Higher Education (H.E.) to 50 per cent of 18 to 30 year olds by 2010, with a particular focus on young people from under-represented groups. In order to increase this participation, a range of policies and initiatives have since been introduced in schools, intended to encourage young people to continue with post-compulsory education, with a specific focus on students from ‘non traditional’ backgrounds. One significant initiative is Aimhigher, which specifically targets lower-socio economic groups and aims to raise attainment, aspirations and improve progression.

Aimhigher is primarily concerned with encouraging young people to enter post 16 education and ultimately, higher education, with a particular focus on those from disadvantaged socio-economic groups (Aimhigher 2006). Rather than working with the entire school population, Aimhigher often identifies specific ‘Aimhigher target students’. However, the precise definition of an 'Aimhigher student' is problematic, both in terms of the logistics of effective targeting and the potential for negative associations. Even though some schools identify groups of students for intervention, it is recognised that whole schools populations vary in terms of size.

At both the national and local level, although early information is collected on student applications to higher or further education, little is known of how many students are subsequently become accepted applicant and the reasons why.

2.2. Existing Research Evidence
Research by The Sutton Trust has found that although the gap in university participation between social-economic groups narrowed under the Labour Government, it remained highly significant. For example, in 2004 only 10% of people from the poorest fifth of families had been awarded a degree by the age of 23, compared with 44% of those from the wealthiest fifth (Sutton Trust 2008). Significantly, students with A Levels from the lowest percentile in terms of socio-economic group were just as likely to go on to university as their peers (although they are more likely to apply locally and for less competitive courses). Focusing specifically on the more ‘academically demanding’ degree courses, research by the Sutton Trust in 2009 found that students with similar attainment applying to the most academically demanding degree courses were just as likely to be offered a place ‘regardless of the type of school or college they attended’ (Sutton Trust 2009). However, despite this similarity in the offer of places, the research also found that students from independent schools (in the top fifth of schools according to average A level attainment), made an average of twice as many applications to ‘Sutton 13’ universities than their peers from comprehensive schools’ with similar levels of attainment1. Previous research also found that students in FEIs were less likely than schools with comparable A Level results to apply to leading universities (Sutton Trust 2008).

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1 The Sutton 13 universities were defined as: Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Durham, Edinburgh, Imperial College, London School of Economics, Nottingham, Oxford, St. Andrews, University College London, Warwick and York.
2.3. Research Aims
This report outlines the findings from a research project conducted by researchers in the Research Centre for Children, Families and Communities and the Department of Law and Criminal Justice Studies at Canterbury Christ Church University. The project was funded by Aimhigher Kent and Medway and ran between January and July 2010. The project explored the conversion rate for Aimhigher Kent and Medway partner students to UCAS ‘accepted applicant’ status in 2009, together with reasons for the conversion (or non conversion), and levels of support provided to students in schools and colleges during the application process.

Using a combination of quantitative analysis of UCAS data, qualitative interviews and focus groups and questionnaire data this research project investigated the conversion rate for Aimhigher Kent and Medway partner students to UCAS ‘accepted applicant’ status in 2009 (‘Accepted applicant’ refers to students who at the time the data was collected, had met the admissions requirements of a higher education institution (HEI) and was expected to undertake the programme of study).

More specifically, the research explored:

1. Numbers and proportion of school leaver students applying to a HEI;
2. Numbers and proportions of students receiving and not receiving a conditional offer;
3. Numbers and proportion of students not accepting the conditional offer and the reasons why;
4. Emerging trends regarding school type, course type, gender, or ethnicity;
5. Extent of support offered to students from schools in the application process;
6. Student satisfaction with the application process;
7. Communication between HEIs and local feeder institutions.

2.4. Methodology
The research methods were designed to access information at school and pupil level. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were utilised to explore the rate of and the reasons for conversion and non conversion, together with the support and policy of the schools. These methods included:

a. Qualitative Methods
For the qualitative strand of the project interviews with staff involved in supporting HE applications and Year 13 students at 14 schools and colleges (here after referred to as ‘schools’ for simplicity) were undertaken. Included in this group was one selective school and two FE colleges (case studies of 2 FEIs can be found in appendix 1.). Staff principally consisted of Aimhigher Learning Mentors / learning mentors/UCAS support staff (10), and heads of sixth form or equivalents (9). Focus group interviews with (50) students were undertaken. The purpose of the interviews was to explore, from both staff and student perspectives, how students are supported in their progress towards application to HE; how application to UCAS is organised, timed and supported, and personal statements and references are written; what additional support may be required; reasons for on conversion; and how non conversions could be reduced (A full list of the questions is provided in appendix 3).
Most interviews with staff were conducted separately from students but in a small number of cases staff and students were interviewed together at the request of the school concerned. Students were interviewed in pairs or small groups. Interviews for staff and students took around half to three quarters of an hour and were tape recorded.

b. Online Survey of University Admissions
An online survey of university admissions staff was conducted to explore how applications are assessed and places for courses managed, what information is expected in personal statements and the value of these compared to references, the timing of responses to students and what advice could be given to students to maximise their chances of being offered a place. The survey was emailed to the admissions department of all HEIs registered with UCAS. Responses were received from 24 HEIs.

c. Interrogation of UCAS data
- UCAS school level data on where Aimhigher students applied, whether they were offered a place, and whether they accepted
- The same data from a stratified sample of non Aimhigher school students as a control group (for testing against)
- A stratified sample of UCAS data concerning university offers and acceptances by region and socio-economic group
- The same data for Aimhigher partner institutions (universities)
- Aimhigher school level ‘Applicant Status Reports’ from UCAS. This could be followed up by discussions with relevant school staff
Section Three
Contextual Research Findings

3.1. Involvement from other Agencies

**Key points**
- Wide variety of support offered within schools and via the AHKM partnership
- Most schools have a key relationship with one local HEI
- Open days and presentations from ex-students particularly valued by staff and students
- HEI courses such as “Stepping Up” and HE Conventions popular but these need to better timed and students should be prepared before they attend so that they can get the most out of them

Typical forms of support offered to students included the Aimhigher Convention at the University of Kent, university open days, visits from University Ambassadors, and surrounding universities. Comments from school staff and students suggested that university open days were extremely useful. One school that routinely takes all of their Year 12 students to Greenwich University open day explained: “A lot of the young people have the impression that uni is not for them, it’s unattainable, but the open day shows them that the students are actually quite like them and it’s not elitist.”

Four of the schools and colleges sent students to the University of Kent, Canterbury (UKC)’s ‘Stepping Up’ course and for some this was the principal support offered to students contemplating going on to HE. Stepping Up is run by the University of Kent and is open to students from their partnership schools (some of which are AHKM schools). It is an intensive 3 stage course, each stage lasting 10 weeks that explores why students should consider going to university, support and information related to applying to UCAS and in the final part academic (e.g research) and personal (e.g. budgeting) skills needed.

Most schools and colleges had a special partnership with at least one, usually local, HEI with whom they worked to provide support to their students. Bespoke support from local HEIs was particularly valued. The Aimhigher coordinator at Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU) had arranged a bespoke day at CCCU for early years students at school C. This was for first year students thinking about going into teaching via the CACHE diploma. This helped students not only think about the realities of working in early years but also what more they might have to do to get qualified at degree level:

“It was great. It’s allowed them to think about the different activities and how they would have to deliver at primary school...and CACHE diplomas are not readily accepted by many unis so going to that day has motivated them to go for it and try to get merits.”

Attendance at the universities convention was mentioned by six of the schools. This varied in how successful it was from students’ points of view. Some had felt unable to talk to representatives from the HEIs they were interested in and to ask questions because of large crowds and queues to get to the stands.
Both school C and I (see case study) emphasized the need to pre-orientate students in how to get the most from the convention:

“I tell them don’t just wander round getting prospectuses and free pens-go to the speeches, talk to the students…”

The Aimhigher summer schools were mentioned by several schools as being a good introduction to university for their students:

“Everyone who has gone to the summer schools has come back with a wow factor-they’ve really been impressed.”

Two schools felt that Aimhigher students had, in some cases, more support for the process of applying to HE than other students and were at an advantage. For example, the learning mentor at school B felt that because Aimhigher students do the Kent Compact from end of year 12 they are at an advantage in comparison to non Aimhigher students, receiving more information on universities at an earlier stage. Non Aimhigher students only start to get the same level of information after their year 12 exams. The experience at this school had been that Compact students found the UCAS application much easier than other students as they have been thinking about and preparing for it for longer.

3.2. Timing of Applications

Key points
- Variation in when schools introduce students to the application process but half do so between January and March in Year 12
- Most schools encourage students to get application in as early as possible but this is not enforceable and actual timing of applications varies by individual student
- Students and staff believe early applications more likely to be offered a place
- HEIs vary in how quickly they fill course places but early application likely to be important for highly competitive courses

Seven out of the 14 schools began talking to the young people about UCAS applications in the Spring of Year 12 (between January-March), 2 began in the Summer term and 4 at the start of Year 13. However, one school had a far less formalised process and commented that they do not introduce the students to UCAS until: ‘they come to me’. Significantly, whilst this particular school had a very small proportion of students applying to university, it also had a very high conversion rate. This school stood out because of the level of personalised support provided by the learning mentor and her accessibility.

All fourteen schools began filling out UCAS applications between June and September of Year 12/13 but ‘deadlines’ that students were advised to meet for getting their applications in varied between the end of November (1 school), before the Christmas break (11 schools) and by the January 15th UCAS deadline (2 schools). However, though most also said they encouraged students to get applications in ‘as early as
possible’ some were more proactive at making this happen than others; and there was a great deal of variability in when individual students in the same institutions put in their applications, as one learning mentor explained:

“I advise them to do it before the end of October... They all know about the January 15th deadline, and we have a trickle through in November. It’s a case of constantly reminding them ‘these courses are filling up now, you need to apply’. I’d say probably half are done before Christmas and half are done in the 2 week window in early January.”

These timings were also confirmed by interviews with university admissions staff, who commented: “Student forms start coming in Oct/Nov/Dec and then January is a ‘complete avalanche’.”

Although staff expressed some difficulties in getting students to complete applications earlier and students explained competing demands on their time both from coursework and life in general (“It’s difficult to make decisions early on, there’s so much going on- it’s like, you want to party, learn to drive, go to uni!” male student); they also expressed concern that Grammar Schools and Independent Schools would be applying earlier and later applications would be disadvantaged.

Male student: “I had friends who were getting offers when we were still working on our applications. I think it was more Grammar Schools were doing it earlier, so they were getting a better chance.”

Female student: “Yeah, so some unis were offering places to students before they’ve even read or got all the applications in.”

Although at the selective school we interviewed applications went in at similar time to the AH schools, one university admissions staff member had found grammar schools more generally tended to get applications in early:

“Grammar schools generally get the forms back to us in the 3rd week of September. Private schools get their students to fill the forms in in July, so the day the UCAS opens, the form is in.” Although there is significant variation in university recruitment policies (including within as well as between institutions), this university admissions member commented that:

“It is not to the detriment of Aimhigher schools to get the forms in towards the end of the phase”.

Data from the survey of admissions departments indicated that whether later admissions were less likely to receive an offer of a place varied by the competitiveness of the course and individual HEI. Twelve HEIs answered a question on how they managed intake on their more competitive courses to prevent oversubscription. Five said they “Filled the course up as soon as a sufficient number of suitable applications have been received and then closed the course”, 2 said they “held some places in reserve until
after the January deadline,” 2 said they used a grade or tariff system to ensure all applications received before the January 15th deadline were considered fairly, 1 interviewed all candidates in batches and offered places in batches after each set of interviews and 2 said they did not experience oversubscription for the majority of their courses.

Case study school I (conversion rate 70-75% medium): School I’s sixth form common room has an absolute wealth of visible information for students on applying to HE and on careers and student specific reminders about aspects of application. They use a personalised ‘traffic light’ system to highlight which students were applying where and what they needed to do / who they should speak to next.

The school has a strong partnership with the University of Greenwich and London South Bank University, who provide a number of taster days on careers in health and social care, activity days for looked after children and care leavers, and subject specific information days such as days on careers in chemistry. The school has also worked closely with the University of London and took students to taster sessions.

During year 11, the start of year 12 and end of year 12 all students are interviewed and asked if they want to go to university. In year 12 they have a ‘futures’ day in June or July with HEIs coming in to offer taster sessions. Student ambassadors come in and run sessions on personal statements. The Push organisation (www.push.co.uk), which runs a session for students on the school site was especially praised as having highly charismatic and entertaining speakers. Students attend the universities convention at UKC. They are instructed on how to get the most out of this.

Before applications to UCAS, the school run a quiz for students, including how much they know about UCAS and university: how many courses they can apply for, whether they should apply for two different types of course. Lloyds Bank visits the school to talk about student finance and budgeting. A letter is sent home to parents to outline what they have to do to help their children with the finance application, advice on getting the application done early and email contact details for the head of sixth form for support.

The school is trying to introduce students to the idea of HE at an earlier stage than previously and took 60 year 9 and 10 students on a visit to UKC. Students were encouraged to apply early to UCAS (“get in early-like grammar schools do”) -“as long as they know where they are going and they are happy with that choice”. They were expected to come back after the summer holiday into the start of year 13 with some idea of what to write in their personal statements, although the deadline set by the school is by the end of January. Students are asked, where possible, to choose universities that are ‘high’, ‘medium’ and ‘low’ in the grade requirements. Early application is seen as a way of reducing pressure on students and as a motivation to work hard:

“[putting applications in early] takes the pressure off them but it also motivates them because once they’ve got a place we’ve noticed two or three students whose work ethic might not have been that fantastic beforehand but they’ve got their place at uni nice and early and they’ve still got two more whole terms where they’re more motivated.”
Eighty percent of year 13 students had applied to HE in 2010. Of these only 2 had not been offered any place. Both of these students had applied to do nursing. One student had reapplied to study nursing at a more local institution. Three applicants who did not convert in 2009 were discussed. The first (male) had applied to do quantity surveying at Kingston but decided to join the police. The second, (female) ‘a straight A student’, had applied to do creative writing and English and had “offers from everywhere”, went instead to do an apprenticeship in farming. The third had applied to do drama and although they had offers for places at universities, they were not at a drama school so they decided to gain more qualifications at a college and then apply to RADA the following year.

3.3. Support for Writing Personal Statements

**Key Points**
- Evidence that personal statements constitute a highly significant element of the UCAS application
- However, general concerns and confusion from students and staff over the significance of the personal statements
- Schools are providing very high levels of support to students on personal statements
- Some schools are more proactive in seeking out resources to inform the advice they give their students
- Some evidence to suggest university admissions teams need to be convinced that their university is not simply another insurance choice before they offer a place

*a. Significance of Personal Statements*

Many schools spent significant amounts of time working on the personal statement, including providing detailed paragraphs on the school history and context, particularly when the school was in a deprived area as they hoped this would enhance the application. However, they were unsure as to whether this information was taken into consideration within the context of the widening participation agenda.

The students’ personal statements were also heavily processed by staff in most institutions. For example, at school G it took 2-3 weeks to do the whole application, with each student having a one hour one to one session for support on their personal statement and additional support on the application. It was estimated that in this institution, by the end of the application each student had had about 4-5 hours of one to one staff time. In school D it was estimated to have taken 3 weeks between the first and final drafts of the personal statement and in school A it took anything from 3 days for the most able and focused student to several months.

Despite the dedication to the personal statement, school staff and students were often confused as to the significance of the personal statements on the UCAS application forms, and schools explained how they receive very little (if any) feedback on this. In terms of the value of the personal statement, following an interview with a member of staff from admissions at one university, it was clear that in this particular university, the statement was highly significant. They described how at one university, they generally
spend around five minutes on each UCAS application form, with around 3-4 of those minutes being devoted to the personal statement. Responses from the online survey with university admissions confirmed this significance of the personal statement. Ten out of the 12 HEIs who answered the survey question on the importance of a good personal statement said they were either important or very important. Only two out of the 12 HEIs who answered the question felt that the student reference could outweigh and make up for a weak personal statement, whereas six felt references and personal statements were of equal weight and four thought the reference was less important than the personal statement.

However, the staff member at one school we interviewed was more sceptical, suggesting that with the cap on student numbers: “I suspect people reviewing the applications look at the predicted grades first, then they might look at personal statement or reference as an afterthought.” Despite this concern, this particular school continued to devote significant amounts of time to the personal statement. This school (which although had a very high conversion rate, also had a highly selective sixth form) had been extremely proactive in seeking out additional information on this weighting and had attended a number of UCAS conferences and seminars specifically to find out more information regarding the significance of the personal statement.

b. Content of Personal Statements
When asked, students thought that what universities wanted to see in a personal statement included: why they wanted to do course; information that demonstrated their skills, personality and that they were “unique people”; and indications that they will stay the course of study.

However, following an interview with university admissions staff, it was clear that universities also want to see some evidence that the student is serious about coming to their university, and that they are not just an insurance choice. On highly competitive courses, this admissions member explained that they reject some students who “…didn’t have anything like the right grades and were clearly not that interested in coming here. We were going to be insurance for when they didn’t get the grades they needed for their first choice.” Amongst HEIs who answered the online questionnaire, responses to what information they look for in a personal statement included: interest in the programme offered; interest outside the school curriculum; good standard of English; clearly expressed views; some evidence of extra-curricular activities; interest in and knowledge of subject; good ‘all-rounder’; commitment and personal qualities relevant to the course. In addition, 10 out of the 12 HEIs who answered this question said it was important to tailor personal statements to the course applied for, 9 out of 12 thought that it was important that personal statements were written by students with minimal help from tutors and other adults and 3 thought it was important for the student to show that they wanted to come to that institute above others.

c. Resources Drawn from to Inform Personal Statements
Schools all drew on other resources to guide them in the advice they offered students regarding their personal statements. However, the majority relied on the internet as additional sources of information, including exemplars of what makes a good personal statement. A small number of schools arranged for external agencies to come into the school and provide personalised feedback on students’ personal statements. Although very well received by the students and school staff, these did not tend to be in
Schools with particularly high conversion rates. Significantly, some students mentioned that in some cases the point at which personal statements were being discussed in the Stepping Up course came too late as they had already had to complete these in order to get applications in by the deadline set by their school.

Many schools provided students with templates or blueprints for personal statements that broke down the recommended structure and content, whilst others gave them actual examples and some gave both. School E had a template for personal statements which consisted of four paragraphs on what students were currently studying; why they want to go to the university and on to the selected course; what experience they have that would help them undertake the course; and what personal qualities they have that would be of relevance. School H also used a blueprint but deliberately avoided giving written examples as these were felt to be too leading and that it would be better for students to focus on structure. At school A students were given examples and blueprints including examples of personal statements in similar areas to those being applied for. Where schools did not give actual examples, it was often because they did not want to encourage the students to copy them.

**d. Ownership of Personal Statements**

Another key concern over the personal statement was related to the extent to which schools felt they could ‘write them for the student’. One particular school was very open about their ‘hands off policy’ and explained how they only provide one round of feedback to students. This school (school E) highlighted the importance for the personal statement to be, essentially, the students’ own work and that only spelling or grammatical errors would be corrected by staff. The member of staff concerned said they did not want to give a false impression of the student in the application and that UCAS guidance is that only ‘minimal’ advice is given at this point (this school had a conversion rate over 75% in 2008). However, the majority of schools, although not writing the statements for students, did provide large amounts of feedback to students over a protracted period of time and would revisit drafts and redrafts of statements. A small number were more actively involved in correcting not only grammar, but directing the content. A typical comment from a school being:

“We proof read them but we don’t write them. We try to look for have they evidenced skills, and work experience”.

This intensity of staff and student input on personal statements was reflected in student and staff comments in the majority of schools we visited. For most students, staff “make sure we are on the right track”, “going in the right direction” and that personal statements “sound good”. Another student commented: “...it took forever. We had to keep sending drafts to teachers and they commented then we had to write it again...” Female student

In keeping with this view there was evidence to suggest that all schools felt it important for students to retain some sense of ownership in the whole application process:

Female student: “It [the personal statement] went through so many checks”
Male student: “Yeah, but it was up to us as well if you didn’t get it in it was your fault”.

School A

3.4. Academic References

**Key Points**
- Confusion amongst school staff as to the relative significance of the reference
- Concern from school staff that the references were often highly varied according to the person writing the reference
- Schools expressed concern over the balance between being overly positive about students and ‘truthful’
- Not all school aware of what universities want to see in an academic reference

Another area which concerned schools was the content of the student reference. These references tended to be written by curriculum leaders, heads of department, or heads of school, with one person having an overview of all of them before the applications are sent off. Similarly to the personal statement, there was confusion amongst school staff as to the relative significance of the reference. One school commented: “I wonder if in the scheme of things if the reference is actually *that* important, or if the personal statement is more important? I really don’t know.”

Within all schools, there was a concern that the references were often highly varied according to the person writing the reference. One school commented that some references “...are much better than others.” Whereas: “One staff member has 4 or 5 generic types, which seem to reappear every year, very much following a fairly uninspired formula.” During interviews, it was clear that schools were generally very focused on ensuring the students had a good and fair reference. This responsibility was often a source of concern for them. One particular school talked in detail about the problems they’ve faced in writing the reference:

“I think it depends entirely on the school as to what quality of information the students get and how the references are written. I do references as how I believe how they should be done, so I’ve taken advice... I talk about what I believe is useful to the reader, but there’s been no formal training as to how to write a reference. It seems
that all the courses that are available are in terms of tweaking personal statements. I used to do the references with the previous headteacher so I’m happy with what we do, but someone new coming to this might not know…. It’s a huge responsibility.”

In order to attempt to combat any negative variation in the quality of the reference, in one school the Aimhigher Learning Mentor had compiled a ‘database’ of references given to students who had succeeded in getting places on competitive courses as guidance for less experienced staff.

Another comment raised by schools related to the issue of what information to include, or on occasions, deliberately exclude in an academic reference.

“I don’t want to undersell them, but I don’t want to oversell them either. All schools seem to be different, in some the form tutor writes the reference, but I have no idea in terms of the detail, etc. I mean all of them are generally positive, but I don’t know for example, if I say the student hasn’t got good attendance, do they assume that they don’t?”

This concern over the balance between being overly positive about students and ‘truthful’ was touched on by many schools. Another school explained: If I write, ‘so and so is learning to manage their time and meet deadlines’ what does that look like? So do I write that, or do I not mention deadlines at all? I don’t want to be deceptive in what I’m writing.” Similarly another school (with an average conversion rate) described that their student references are compiled from various comments from a number of teachers. They explained how one of their students who was rejected from her first choice university, had received negative references: “...the references I got from the staff were quite damning actually, you know ‘although quiet in class, has been able to make some contribution when asked direct questions’. In other words, she’ll contribute if she’s forced to. Well, that’s true. I have to take what the staff give me. These paragraphs are edited from what staff send me.”

Generally, the personal reference was felt by the schools to have most significance when it has to fill in gaps in the student’s application. For example, when a student may select a course that does not appear to follow from their A Level subjects: “I might write down that this person has had a change of career plan, but I know they’ve thought it through and I can endorse their decision to have this change of course.” This same school felt that the personal reference often “forms the bigger picture”, in that it enables them to contextualise the student slightly, “A couple of times, I’ve written that English is a second language or they have confidence issues, when their personal statement doesn’t do them justice, so I can compensate for that in the reference really.”
3.4. Overview of Advice from HEIs

**Key points**
- HEIs advise students to make personal statements relevant, complete and specific to the course applied for

As part of the online survey, HEIs were asked what advice they would give to applicants to maximise their chances of being offered a place. The following advice was given: ensure they meet the entry criteria; ensure all relevant information is included in the application (many student omit GCSE and other level 2 qualifications); ensure their personal statement covers all requirements, is easy to read and avoids clichés; ensure personal statement is specific for the course; demonstrate a passion for subject and put all relevant information into personal statement; make sure the subject you apply to (in this case medicine) is one you definitely want to pursue, and do as much voluntary/work experience as possible to show this.

3.6. Payment

**Key points**
- UCAS application payment is not a deterrent to applying

Apart from in exceptional cases, in the institutions visited, all students were expected to pay the UCAS application fee themselves. None of the students we interviewed at focus group level said they had been put off by having to pay £19 to apply to UCAS. None of the staff interviewed had found the payment to be a barrier to their students. However, some practical support for late payment and ‘cash flow’ problems was required in some schools. At school B students payments are made by the school and then paid back at a later date by students, and they explained that they had never experienced any problems with this system. At school E students pay their own UCAS fees but there have been occasions when last minute applications have required staff to pay them on their cards and claim back from students. At school I they can pay themselves or invoice the school.
3.7. Choosing between ‘local’ universities or HEIs further afield

**Key points**
- AHKM students more likely to choose local HEIs (with some variation by school)
- For some students going to university is synonymous with being further away from home but most have a maximum travel time to come homes that influences their choice of HEIs

The quantitative analysis for this project (see below) suggested that AHKM students in 2009 were more likely to choose HEIs closer to their school or college than Kent and Medway students in non-AH schools and colleges. The qualitative part of the study did not set out to compare the choices and views of AH and non-AH students, and nor were the students interviewed a random sample of all AHKM students but the data do support there being a tendency for students to choose local HEIs. More than half the students spoken to had applied to at least one university in Kent and locality of HEIs was mentioned by many when asked the reasons for their choices of HEI:

Male student: “I wanted somewhere local, so I was kinda limited in what courses I could apply for.”

In some cases this related to being able to live at home and reduce costs of studying in some cases it related to having a job locally:

Female student: “I have a job here, so didn’t want to go too far”

However, during interviews and focus groups with the young people, there was evidence to suggest a polarisation between students in terms of the geographical locations they were applying to, with some students only applying very locally, and others only applying very long distances. Notwithstanding this, schools explained how they felt their students were generally more comfortable applying to relatively local institutions. One school described how “For these students, although Greenwich isn’t actually that far away, it is basically London, which is a bit too scary for them” and another explained “Many students don’t want to go beyond Rochester”. For those choosing universities further afield there was still a desire not to be ‘too far’ from home. More than one student had an idea of the maximum travel time from home for their choices of university, for example, those universities within a two hour drive or train journey. In contrast a much smaller number of students actively chose not to apply to ‘local’ universities because they wanted to get away from home as:

Male student: “That’s what university is about.”
Female student “I wanted to get as far away as I could!”

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Key points
- AHKM students more likely to choose local HEIs (with some variation by school)
- For some students going to university is synonymous with being further away from home but most have a maximum travel time to come homes that influences their choice of HEIs
3.8. Waiting for Offers

**Key points**
- Great variation in how soon students hear from HEIs—from a fortnight to months
- Waiting to hear from HEIs is stressful for students and can impact on the course and HEI choices they make and going to university at all

Institutions varied a great deal in how quickly they got back to applicants. Being amongst other students at the same or different schools who had already got offers was disconcerting for those who were still waiting to hear from HEIs:

“If friends have heard back from same uni and they haven’t it makes them worry—you have to explain different courses take different time to get back to students.” Male student, School B

“Say you have got limited choices and you are waiting on a university and you’re not sure if you are going to get an offer back from that so [you] could have used that [taken up another offer] somewhere else in the time you are waiting.” Male student, School I

“For the people who aren’t sure what they want to do if they had got a reply sooner it would have given then that “yeah, I can go to university” whereas a wait makes them feel I might not be going to university so I have to find something else.” Male student, School I

The admissions department survey data also reflected the differences in how quickly students are contacted with offers by HEIs. Respondents were asked how soon they responded to applications after receipt. Four HEIs said that they responded ‘immediately’, two within 2-4 weeks’ after receipt, one began making offers in December, two after the January deadline and one ‘after interview’.
3.9. Reasons for Non-Conversion

Key Points

- In the event of not meeting predicted grades, students need to ensure they have a an alternative HEI option
- Sense of immediacy with applications as gap years sometimes seen as counter-productive, a “now or never” attitude can prevail
- Financial restrictions remain an issue, especially if students become accustomed to a full time salary during the summer months
- Student confidence remains an obstacle to enrolling at university
- A range of personal circumstances can prevent a student from accepting a place but resilience to barriers can be developed with support e.g. mentoring

Amongst schools, the reasons for non conversion ranged from students changing their minds; financial difficulties (including seeking out employment); not achieving their predicted grades or not having a sufficient safety choice.

a. Disparity between Predicted and Required Grades

Many schools felt that students were often too optimistic in their applications in terms of their predicted grades. All students were encouraged to have a sufficient safety choice, but not all students ultimately did this, which was considered to be one reason for non conversion. One school explained:

“In my experience, the only reason students do not tend to convert is because they did not have a safety choice and had too high expectations from their predicted grades. They are encouraged to aspire to whatever is possible, but also to always have a choice as a safety net option.”

Similarly, another school commented:

“Students who haven’t had offers have generally applied for courses above their predicted grades. Last year, one looked after child left with only one a level and had applied for courses that were very ambitious against our advice”.

Some schools also expressed concern over the higher expectations of universities regarding student exam results. One head of sixth form commented:

“The grades they want are higher than last year and for the first year ever we saw kids not getting in whereas in the past they’d always get something...”

“The only annoying thing universities will do is, we are asked to give the predicted grades and they will offer grades that are three grades higher than their predicted grades... It doesn’t do them [student] any favours...They get all excited and put an
immense amount of pressure on themselves [to get grades needed] but why offer a kid two As and a B when they are going to get Bs, Cs and Ds?”

b. Financial restrictions

Financial restrictions were cited as a major reason for students not ultimately taking up a university place. This included not only the difficulties in funding their university career, but also the concern that when students secure full time paid employment during the summer months, they are often very reluctant to give up this salary in order to enrol at university. One school explained: “I find that once the student starts working, the chances of them going to uni are very, very low.” Talking of the financial restrictions facing their students, this school explained how they had a student who would be very well placed to become a teacher, but “poverty is a big issue” so they have applied to study nursing, because the funding is more favourable.

Although financial restrictions were not a considerable deterrence for all students, for many it was highly significant. One student, who although certain she would be going to university, nevertheless felt that a degree was no longer necessary for getting a good job:

“More and more recently a lot of emphasis has been put on the fact that you don’t need to have a degree to be able get a good job and you’re wasting so much money”.

Another student who had deferred to start a teaching course claimed:

“I don’t think I will [go to university next year]...[after year’s travelling] I’ll come back in England and ... within three months, I’ll be gone again. So I think that it is very unlikely I will go [to university]. Just because, well, I don’t know why I am doing that course yet - that’s why I am taking my year out. So what’s the point of wasting 15,000 pounds on something you don’t even know if you want...”

School G was notable in that while the students there said they were all likely to take up their places, there was evidence to suggest the pull of employment was stronger and more consistently expressed at this school than in others we visited. Students in school G aid they would not take up their university place if they received offers of employment, or if their current part time employment was increased to full time. Despite this view, overall more students recognised that a degree was increasingly becoming a pre-requisite in many areas. For example, three students at school H (all female) said they were 90% likely to go this year. Only an unexpected family event such as illness would prevent them. One explained how she felt employment opportunities increasingly require a degree, and cited the example of a friend who withdrew from a degree in information technology at university in order to take an employment offer, but is now unable to progress without a degree.

c. Deferring Entrance and / or Changing Minds

A small number of students made deferred applications, but school staff and students alike felt that there was an increased chance that students with deferred applications would not enrol at university. Some schools tried to compensate for this, and would only encourage the less confident students to defer, on
the understanding that they were certainly not confident enough to accept a place this year, but may be
the following year. One school (A) offered a Gap Year Programme where students could remain at the
school and gain experience (usually of teaching) to help boost their applications to university the following
year and to give them time to consider their options. However, another school commented on the
problems associated with unstructured gap years, and the likelihood of students going on to university
after taking a gap year:

“Our [students] aren’t very good at planning. They all go gap year, gap year gap, year
but then a gap year is working at Bluewater [shopping centre]. Their gap year isn’t my
idea of a gap year... If they actually used a gap year as I understand it they would end
up going to university.”

Amongst students who were determined to go to university this year, some expressed the idea that the
window of interest, motivation and opportunity would be lost if they did not go immediately:

“I’d like to go to university now. I don’t want a break because I know that I won’t go
back, at all... If I don’t do it now I never will.”

One student felt that she had not researched her course properly before applying and has since changed
her mind:

“I applied for sociology but after thinking about it I wasn’t sure I wanted to do it, I
wasn’t sure where it would take me and then looking at the careers for sociology I
didn’t think I wanted to do them ones. I think it was mainly just me, I don’t think I
looked into it properly enough. I think I did rush into the decision knowing there was
deadlines and there was a certain time the application had to be done by...I did rush it
and I hadn’t thought about it much before.”

However, staff at this school felt that this particular student (quoted above) was having what they referred
to as a ‘wobble’ in that her decision related more to anxiety about going to university at all, rather than
subject choice:

“What we have is... like with X (student who is now not going to take up place) - she
really should be going. She’s having a wobble and I understand that and whether that
wobble is big enough to stop her going I am not sure...and we get quite a lot of kids
doing that and they end up deferring and they end up not going because they get into
work and they like the money but equally I have a lot of kids that will decide not to go
but then contact me a year later, two years later...I probably had 5 this year who left
last or the year before who I did applications for this year.”

Ex-students returning a number of years later wanting support for applications was a common theme
amongst staff interviewed, who were all open to offering this support and made sure students knew this;
although there were limits to this. One member of staff said that a student who had subsequently gone on
to college had returned a number of years later asking for help to apply to university. This was seen, by the school, to be support that should more appropriately be provided to the student by their college at that point. It does, however, illustrate the importance to students of being able to return to a place where they are known individually by staff.

The impact of rejection for some courses had an impact on some students response to remaining offers. One student in school G had applied to 5 social work courses. After the first 3 rejections she had decided “universities don’t want me” and was not going to go to an interview at the fourth one and had rejected the fifth as too far away. She was not aware of the very high numbers of applicants to social work courses reported this year (40% increase) and interpreted the rejections as entirely reflecting the quality of her application and universities as, effectively, a single entity rather than a group of different and unconnected institutions. She had decided to take a year out and try to get some relevant experience.

d. Summer birthdays
Both staff and students were asked if they felt that younger students with summer birthdays were less likely to convert. None felt that chronological age had much to do with conversion and it was more related to individual maturity. For example, when asked if he felt younger than others and less ready for university one student, who was the youngest in his year said: “Well at this school you feel quite mature!”
Key points
- Very few schools have UCAS student applicant data
- Schools stated that funding prohibited them purchasing the data

Very few schools and colleges visited had available student applicant data for 2009. Principally this was because of the cost involved in acquiring this data. School J paid £50 last year to acquire their UCAS data, but claimed they could not afford the £100 required in 2010. It is recommended that schools be supported in funding the acquisition of this data on a yearly basis or encouraged and supported in keeping this information themselves. Given the lack of data, some findings relied on staff memory regarding the conversion of students. School E and was able to tell us about 4 students who did not convert in 2009. Reasons for non conversion included staying to do another course, joining the police and withdrawing due to family illness. Information, from school B, is provided in the case study below.

Case study School B (conversion rate 60-70 % - medium). Support for HE decisions starts during year 13 at school B. All students complete a questionnaire to find out whether they want to go onto HE. The AHKM learning mentor then works with those wanting to apply. The school run groups sessions on choosing the right courses, and workshops in student finance over first few months of year 13. The University of Greenwich also provides student finance sessions and CCCU run a workshop on personal statements with student ambassadors. The school also links with a selective school in the area to provide an information evening for parents. A particularly popular event with students was a special assembly at which a high flying ex-student came back to talk about his experience at university and after. Connexions come into the school three days a week. They go to the classrooms and ask if anyone wants an appointment but the school is planning to be “more proactive”, about this in future and set up appointments for students they think would benefit. The deadline for applications to UCAS is just before Christmas, although in practice a number go in later. Students write their personal statements, which go back and forth between them and the AHKM learning mentor several times. The school pays the UCAS fees for students and they then pay back the school. This was the only school we visited that did this. This year only 1 or 2 student s who had applied to HE had not had any offers, but about a quarter of students who had applied had deferred. Some wanted to save up to be better financial position, some wanted to go travelling and/or have a break from studying for a year. Other reasons for non conversion included: “A lot are not sure what they want to do even at this stage in the year. We say “If you are not sure, apply as you can always withdraw. [One student] is now saying she wants to go into the army. She’s decided actually looking at the grades [she is likely to get] I think I’ll be better off doing something else. And another one is not one hundred per cent she wants to commit three years, so is getting work experience in the field she wants to go into and will decide further on down the line if she wants to go.”
**Key points**

- AHKM students are as likely to apply to HE and be accepted as non Aimhigher students in Kent and Medway.
- AHKM students accept places at HEIs closer to home-more than double the percentage of AHKM students as non AH students accept places at HEIs 0-24 miles from their school or college.
- AHKM students apply to similar course as non AHKM students and with a couple of exceptions have similar success rates in levels of acceptance by subject.
- Female AHKM are less likely to convert than male AHKM students.

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**4.1. Introduction**

UCAS data at an institutional level was interrogated to discover any associations or differences between AHKM partnership schools and comparator non-selective (on the basis of academic attainment) secondary schools in Kent and Medway and, if appropriate, with all schools in South East England. The proportions of pupils making applications through UCAS, the numbers who were then ‘converted’ to accepted applicant status, the proximity of the receiving HEI to the home of the applicant, correlation with the gender of the applicant and applications by subject area were analysed. On collecting the data it was discovered that ethnicity, disability numbers were too small to allow meaningful analysis and hence these have not been included in this report. Unfortunately an insufficient number of AHKM schools were able to provide reliable data on UCAS decision codes (one of the original aims of the research) to enable statistical analysis. However, UCAS-relayed decisions concerning AHKM student applications to HEIs are considered in a more discursive fashion elsewhere in this report.

**4.2. AHKM partnership school UCAS applications and acceptances**

In this section of the report we examine the proportions of AHKM partnership school students making UCAS applications in 2009 and the outcomes of those applications.

*a. Proportions making UCAS applications*

Table 1 shows that there is only a small difference between AHKM and comparator schools in the proportions of pupils who make UCAS applications – in both cases this is approximately 80% to 83% of pupils. Similarly there is only a slight variation in acceptance ratios with comparator group being slightly more likely to convert to accepted applicants than the AHKM partnership group. However, the difference between the two groups is not statistically significant and can be attributed to random variation.
Table 1. Proportions making UCAS applications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No. of students at matriculation² level</th>
<th>No. of UCAS applicants</th>
<th>Applicant ‘Success’ ratio</th>
<th>No. of acceptances</th>
<th>Acceptance ‘success’ rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AHKM Partnership Schools</td>
<td>1339</td>
<td>1105</td>
<td>0.825</td>
<td>790</td>
<td>0.715</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparator Kent &amp; Medway non-selective schools</td>
<td>2117</td>
<td>1703</td>
<td>0.804</td>
<td>1310</td>
<td>0.769</td>
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<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>3456</td>
<td>2718</td>
<td>2100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.3. AHKM partnership school acceptance proximity to receiving HEI
In this section of the report we examine the data that concerns where AHKM partnership students decided to accept places through UCAS. The distances are from the home address of the student to the UCAs coded campus of the HEI or other centre offering higher education (many further education colleges also offer higher education programmes).

a. AHKM partnership school and SE England schools
In Table 2 it can be seen that the 2009 cohort of AHKM students tend to have accepted places at HEIs nearer to home than the comparator group of other Kent and Medway schools and than is usual for all applicants in the South East. In some parts of Kent and Medway the HEIs concerned are members of AHKM (e.g. Canterbury Christ Church University). In parts of north Kent and Medway a number of London HEIs might also be within the 0 to 24 mile range. The chart in Figure 1 also illustrates the difference in location of study patterns of the three groups.

Table 2. Distances to HEIs of AHKM partnership school acceptances compared with SE England

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Distance (miles)</th>
<th>AHKM Partnership Schools</th>
<th>Other Kent &amp; Medway non-selective schools</th>
<th>SE applicants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-24</td>
<td>46.1%</td>
<td>22.1%</td>
<td>25.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 – 49</td>
<td>18.3%</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 -74</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75 -99</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100-124</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>125-149</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>150-174</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>175 +</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

² a QCF level 3 award towards a UCAS-relayed tariff requirement
Figure 1. Graph showing distance to HEI of AHKM partnership school acceptances, comparator school acceptances and SE England acceptances

4.4. Gender and UCAS applications
Table 3 (below) shows the gender balance for UCAS applications in 2009 between AHKM partnership schools and the comparator group of non-selective schools in Kent and Medway. This might be due to a variety of factors (or combination of factors) – for example, the nature of the gender balance of the two groups of schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male Applicants</th>
<th>Female Applicants</th>
<th>Totals</th>
<th>% Male of Total</th>
<th>% Female of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AHKM Partnership Schools</td>
<td>457</td>
<td>648</td>
<td>1105</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparator Kent &amp; Medway non-selective schools</td>
<td>865</td>
<td>838</td>
<td>1703</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTALS</td>
<td>1322</td>
<td>1486</td>
<td>2808</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Given that there is a significant statistical association between gender, UCAS applications and school group a further analysis was conducted to test for association with acceptances. Table 4 illustrates the results. The shortfall is largely in the female rate of conversion amongst the partnership schools. The reasons for this are unknown and require further examination. For example, a ‘lurking’ third variable might be that of subject choice and gender (for example, nursing and education as a choice of subject in higher education).

Table 4. Gender and UCAS acceptances in AHKM partnership schools and comparator group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Applications</th>
<th>Acceptances (% conversion)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AHKM Partnership Schools</td>
<td>457</td>
<td>648</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparator Kent &amp; Medway non-selective schools</td>
<td>865</td>
<td>838</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.5. Applications and acceptances by subject area
The final statistical analysis concerned any association between a student from an AHKM partnership school and choice of subject area for a UCAS application when compared to the rest of the UK applicants and the comparator group.

a. Applications by subject area
The 2009 UCAS data for all schools in the UK, AHKM partnership schools and non-AHKM non-selective schools in Kent and Medway (the comparator group) was analysed in terms of the rank order of ‘popularity’ of subject group in applications. The results are shown in the table in Table 5 below and show that the choice of subject areas amongst AHKM partnerships schools is broadly in line with UK patterns and highly similar to that of comparator non-selective schools in Kent and Medway.

---

3 Note that some data was not provided by UCAS for a number of schools in certain subject areas because of data confidentiality requirements. Note also that the Z subject group category includes combinations of three subjects or other ‘general’ courses.
### Table 5. Proportions and ranks of subject area applications of UK, AHKM partnership school and comparator group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>JACS2 Subject Group</th>
<th>UK proportion</th>
<th>Rank order</th>
<th>AHKM partnership school proportion</th>
<th>Rank order</th>
<th>Comparator group proportion</th>
<th>Rank order</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group N Business &amp; Admin studies</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group W Creative Arts &amp; Design</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group B Subjects allied to Medicine</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group C Biological Sciences</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Z General, other combined &amp; unknown</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group X Education</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group G Mathematical &amp; Comp Science</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group L Social Studies</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group M Law</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y Sciences combined with social sciences or arts</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group P Mass Comms &amp; Documentation</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Q Linguistics, Classics &amp; related</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group H Engineering</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y Combined arts</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group F Physical Sciences</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group K Architecture, Build &amp; Plan</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group V Hist &amp; Philosophical studies</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y Social sciences combined with arts</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y Combined sciences</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group D Vet Sci, Ag &amp; related</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y Combined social sciences</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group T Non-European Langs &amp; related</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group A Medicine &amp; Dentistry</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group J Technologies</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group R European Langs, Lit &amp; related</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
b. Analysis of acceptances by subject area
The data was then analysed in terms of any differences between AHKM and non-AHKM schools in terms of the ‘success’ in gaining acceptances. The outcome is given in Table 6 below where no significant differences were found and the two groups are broadly similar in their conversion rates by subject group.

Table 6. AHKM acceptance ratios compared with comparator group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>JACS2 Subject Group⁴</th>
<th>AHKM acceptance ‘success’ ratio</th>
<th>Comparator group acceptance ‘success’ ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group B Subjects allied to Medicine</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group C Biological Sciences</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group G Mathematical &amp; Comp Sci</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group L Social Studies</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group M Law</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group N Business &amp; Admin studies</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>0.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group P Mass Comms and Documentation</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Q Linguistics, Classics &amp; related</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group W Creative Arts &amp; Design</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group X Education</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y Combined arts</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y Sciences combined with social sciences or arts</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>0.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Z General, other combined &amp; unknown</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.6. AHKM partnership schools and subject group acceptances
The data was then analysed to examine any differences in ‘difficulty’ of gaining an acceptance to study a particular subject group when AHKM partnership acceptances are compared with the UK norm. Hence both AHKM data and UK data was ranked in terms of ‘difficulty’ in being accepted (measured by the ratio of applicants to number of acceptances for each subject group) and then compared. An examination of the ranks in Table 7 below suggests that AHKM partnership school students find it ‘easier’ than average (when compared with all applicants in the UK) to gain UCAS acceptances to the following subject areas:

- Biological Sciences
- Linguistics, Classics & related
- Combined arts

⁴ Note that some subject groups have been omitted (such as Medicine and Dentistry) as the frequencies concerned were too small to be analysed.
Likewise they find it more ‘difficult’ to gain access to the following:

- Creative Arts and Design
- Education

**Table 7. UK and AHKM partnership school applications to acceptances ratios**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>JACS2 Subject Group</th>
<th>UK applications to acceptances ratio (rank)</th>
<th>AHKM partnership school applications to acceptances ratio (rank)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group B Subjects allied to Medicine</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Z General, other combined &amp; unknown</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group W Creative Arts &amp; Design</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group X Education</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group L Social Studies</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group N Business &amp; Admin studies</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group M Law</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group G Mathematical &amp; Comp Sci</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group P Mass Comms and Documentation</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y Sciences combined with social sciences or arts</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y Combined arts</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group C Biological Sciences</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Q Linguistics, Classics &amp; related</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The explanation is perhaps to be found locally available options in these subject areas — as we saw earlier AHKM students tend to study more locally and hence are perhaps more subject to the tariff requirements of local HEIs. However, this requires further investigation.

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Note that some subject groups have been omitted (such as Medicine and Dentistry) as the frequencies concerned were too small to be analysed.
Appendices

Appendix 1.
Case Study: FE Colleges
We visited two FE colleges to gain insights into ways in which student applications are supported in these contexts. However, there was as much variation in support for UCAS applications between the two colleges visited as between these and the schools in the study.

Both colleges had large and diverse student populations but students interviewed in college one appeared to have had access to much less support and resources than in college two where there was a large dedicated IAG department. College two had strong links with local universities and had worked with them to provide bespoke taster days for students on some courses but had also taken students on open days further afield and students course choices seemed more geographically dispersed than those of students in college one, who were mainly applying to universities in Kent and South London.

Early and extensive exposure to online resources and information regarding university and the application process was key to the approach of college two. This was seen by the learning mentor to help smooth the process of course choice and application:

“After the summer break they are already familiar with UCAs so it’s not daunting, it’s not a new thing.”

However, the study of the two FE colleges presents an interesting case of conversion rate data lagging behind changes being made at grass roots level. Data from 2008 on conversion rates demonstrated that college one had a higher conversion rate (over 80 %) compared with college two (over 70 %) whose extensive support work had been mostly put in place in the previous two years.

The greater support and time current students had to explore the course choices open to them at college two, compared to college one, is illustrated by the following student who was asked how she had chosen which courses and universities to apply to, in this case for Occupational Therapy:

“I looked at what grades they needed, and a little bit about the course and (laughs) this sounds kind of geeky I looked on Google maps at like the area and that kind of thing as well and I went on several open days.”

In contrast a student from college one said some of their year group had only got their UCAS logins two weeks before the January 15 deadline. She was applying for nursing courses:

“We had to rush-everyone was stressing out about their personal statements because we had to get them done so quick.”
Other problems in college one were reported. One student did not have a home computer, so could not get her application completed online at home. It was not possible for her to complete it at college because her father needed to be there to fill out the forms. Although she had requested support from the college, they had been unable to provide it. Ultimately, she applied on a paper copy of the form which contained limited supporting guidance. Another student applied to only one HEI, but was subsequently rejected.

There was evidence to suggest that support for students in college one was student-led, in that the students would approach the learning mentor for help as and when they required it. Students commented that the learning mentor was very helpful and had an open door policy but in reality constraints on her time meant: “you had to catch her when she had five minutes” and the amount of help received seemed to be dependent on her availability. Speaking of the need to ask for assistance with the personal statement, one student commented: “It just depends if you ask for that help, because I did and I got half an hour off them.”

In contrast, at college two, student personal statements from the students interviewed were crafted over a much longer period, involving detailed drafting and redrafting: “They went back and forth until we [students and tutors] were happy with them.”

The two FE colleges illustrated the importance of adequate support in the area of interviews. Amongst the students interviewed at college one there was a number who had failed to get onto courses at the interview stage, mostly for nursing and midwifery courses, which they attributed to lack of support and preparation in this area. Their lecturer had “given some hints” on what sort of questions they might get at interview but they had had no actual interview practice:

“You don’t have many interviews at college, like you could have set up interviews so you are experienced in it because some people the nerves get the better of them and then when they are in the interview they don’t come off as good as they could be and then they may not get the place because of nerves.”

Students who failed at interviews said they would like feedback on why they were not successful because this affected the likelihood of them reapplying in the future.

“I really want to do it [go to university], I still want to do it but I just don’t feel confident I will get in.”

At college two students had been given interview practice in the form of ‘mock interviews’ and a class about interviews. This support was valued highly and one student who had been offered a place on a course following their interview commented:
“Yeah, that [mock interviews] was really good, apart from I messed mine up! But I think I was OK on the day [of the real interview], well obviously I was OK at my interviews because I got offers.”
Appendix 2.

References


Appendix 3.

Interview questions for staff and students

1. Questions for School and FEI staff:
   - What information do you give to your students about the UCAs application?
   - What kind of support do you give to students to make their applications?
   - Can you talk me through when and how this happens? Which members of staff are involved in this?
   - Do you encourage all students to apply to UCAS?
   - Does everyone get the same support and information or is some of it tailored to individual students needs?
   - Who generally pays for the UCAS applications-the school? Students? Would the school [ay if they thought it was a barrier to a student applying?
   - Is any information provided to parents about the UCAS application process? Does the school involve in the application process in other ways?
   - Have you identified any training needs with local feeder institutions e.g. refs and personal statements
   - What kinds of things do you advise students to put in their personal statements?
   - How do you decide which students to encourage to apply to college and which to university?
   - What do you think are the main reasons for students not taking up places?
   - Are younger students (Summer birthdays) less likely to take up places in your experience?
   - Has the cap in university numbers had an effect on the number of students applying to UCAS?
   - What do you personally think of the UCAS application process and forms? Are there any changes you would like to see made to this to make it easier or fairer for students?

2. Questions relating to the previous years’ student applicant data:
   - X out x students took up places last year-is there anything special we should note about this in relation to your school? That is, how well does this data reflect the true uptake of university and college places of students from this school, is it misleading in any way?
   - What do you take column A to mean-‘students at end of A/AS and equivalent exam’? Is there anything particular we should note about how this figure is arrived at in relation to your school?
   - Do you know which students didn’t take up a place last year?
   - Can you talk me through the individual cases where this happened (using sheet)
   - What were the reasons those students didn’t take up their places, do you think?
   - Do you have any thoughts more generally on why students from this school might not take up places?
   - And why students in general might not take up places?
   - Do UCAS or individual institutions ever send you any additional info on applications that would help understand the application data-e.g. letters relating to high levels of applications in a particular year?
3. Questions for Year 13 Students:
   - What courses did you apply for?
   - Where have you applied?
   - What made you choose that course?
   - What made you choose that university?
   - When did your tutors first talk to you about applying to UCAS?
   - What support and information did you get for making your application to UCAS?
   - Were there any parts of filling out the application form that you found difficult?
   - What were the hardest bits to fill out—personal statement? Refs?
   - How long did it take you to fill it out?
   - How satisfied were you with the final application?
   - What do you think UCAS are looking for in students’ applications?
   - How satisfied were you with the support you got from the school in doing your application?
   - Was there any support or information you didn’t get but would have liked to have had?
   - Who was most helpful in giving you support? Why?
   - What support and information do you think would help students in the year behind you?
   - How likely are you to take up a university place if you are offered one?
   - What would stop you taking up a place?
   - Why do you think some students don’t take up offers of a place?
   - How happy are you now with your choice of courses?
   - How happy are you with where you have applied (location of university/college where applied)?