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Hidden Drivers of Choice

Project Overview

A national study with leading UK universities | 2026

UNIVERSITY OF WOLVERHAMPTON

UNIVERSITY of HULL

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE NEW UNIVERSITY
EST 1891

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cosmosltd.uk | hello@cosmosltd.uk | 0113 887 0191

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Background & Context

Higher education is navigating a period of real change.

The students arriving at the doors of our universities are more diverse, more varied in their routes, and arguably more complex in their experiences than at any point before. Yet the assumptions that shape how higher education communicates with, and supports prospective students, have not always kept pace with that reality.

For many young people, the decision about whether to pursue higher education is shaped by experiences that go far beyond grades and geography. Financial pressure, caring responsibilities, confidence, prior educational experience, and varying levels of adversity and trauma all play a role.

These are the hidden drivers. The factors that sit at the heart of how many students navigate one of the biggest decisions of their lives, but that rarely surface in traditional research conversations.

> Widening participation has been a sustained priority for the sector for many years, and real progress has been made. However, understanding that ambition needs to be matched by understanding. The insight that institutions and policymakers rely on to support underrepresented students often reflects what students say they care about, rather than the deeper motivations that actually drive their decisions.

Hidden Drivers of Choice sets out to close that gap.

02 About the Study

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Hidden Drivers of Choice is a national research study exploring what underrepresented students really value when making decisions about higher education. Not what is assumed they value but what students themselves, through their own lived experiences, actually weigh up when deciding whether higher education is for them, and where they might go.

Student-grounded

Built on the actual experiences and voices of underrepresented learners, not assumptions about what they need.

Statistically robust

Combining qualitative depth with large-scale quantitative analysis, producing findings that are rigorous, reliable and nationally benchmarked.

Trauma-informed

Designed with specialist oversight to ensure every element of the research is ethical, sensitive, and safe for every participant.

This study is about understanding underrepresented students more deeply, so that higher education can respond more meaningfully to their actual experiences and needs.

03 What the Research is Exploring

The study goes beyond surface-level data to explore the experiences that genuinely shape how underrepresented students think about, and decide on, higher education.

- What underrepresented students truly value when considering whether and where to study
- How experiences of adversity, trauma, or uncertainty influence confidence, aspiration, and decision-making towards higher education
- Which factors most strongly predict whether a student intends to apply or accept a place in higher education
- How decision-making differs across different groups of underrepresented learners
- What students feel institutions understand about them, and where they feel misunderstood

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Research with purpose

This study is about understanding underrepresented students more deeply, so that higher education can respond more meaningfully to their actual experiences and needs.

When institutions genuinely understand the students they serve, they are better placed to respond to their actual needs.

That is good for students and that is good for higher education.

04 How the Research Works

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Phase 1

Qualitative Research

Discussion groups bring together underrepresented students to explore their experiences in depth. Open and student-led, these conversations ensure the language and priorities that matter to students shape the research, rather than imposing the frame.

Quantitative Research

Large-scale research captures three layers of insight: what students say they prioritise, which factors statistically predict their likelihood of applying to/ accept a place in higher education, and how their responses compare to a national benchmark. Accessible, sensitive, respectful of participants' time and experiences.

Analysis

Insight and Findings

Advanced statistical techniques identify the factors that most strongly shape decision-making. This produces insight that is not just descriptive but genuinely informed about the drivers that matter most — enabling the sector to respond with greater precision and care.

Trauma-informed throughout: Miranda Arieh, specialist trauma consultant, oversees the design and delivery of every stage, ensuring the process is ethical, safe, and respectful of all participants.

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The Research Consortium

Led by Cosmos, specialists in educational research with two decades of experience in widening participation, advanced statistical analysis, and trauma-informed practice.

Partner Universities

Three leading UK universities each bringing deep expertise in supporting underrepresented learners.

University of Wolverhampton

'The study offers a valuable opportunity to explore how trauma - particularly trauma linked to poverty and instability - may influence how underrepresented students make decisions about entering higher education.'

UNIVERSITY OF WOLVERHAMPTON

Partner institution

University of Hull

'Hull has a deep commitment to widening participation, and this study offers a rare chance to uncover what truly matters in students' hearts and lives, not just their applications.'

UNIVERSITY of HULL

Partner institution

Buckinghamshire New University

'This sector-leading research which will provide critically important intelligence about the hidden drivers and barriers for underrepresented students.'

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE NEW UNIVERSITY
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Partner institution

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What Will Be Shared

The research is designed to benefit the wider education community, not just the institutions directly involved.

Public Executive Summary

A summary of findings made publicly available on completion of the study, accessible to the wider sector.

Sector Publications and Conference Presentations

Findings presented at leading sector conferences, with partner institutions invited to co-present. Findings will also shared through various sector media.

Real student voices. Real student experiences.
Real insight into the realities young people face today.

Find Out More

If you would like to know more about the Hidden Drivers of Choice study, or to discuss how the findings might be relevant to your institution or organisation, please get in touch.

Website	www.cosmosltd.uk
Email	hello@cosmosltd.uk
Telephone	0113 887 0191
Address	Nexus, University of Leeds, Discovery Way, Leeds LS2 3AA