HIDDEN DRIVERS OF CHOICE

Understanding the Hidden Drivers of Student Choice

Early findings from a national collaborative study

University of Wolverhampton | University of Hull | Buckinghamshire New University | Cosmos

Overview and key objectives

Cosmos is undertaking a national study on student choice in partnership with the University of Hull, Buckinghamshire New University and the University of Wolverhampton. The decision to study at university is rarely a rational one, and the sector is contending with shifting demographics, a growing proportion of widening participation students and a lack of robust, statistically viable data on what actually drives students' decisions.

The study set out to **identify the key factors at critical decision points, and to identify how much weight each factor carries in the decision to apply, for widening participation students and their peers alike,** so that institutions can see where the two groups differ and where they do not. The study will also examines whether and how trauma shapes higher education decision-making.

Part 1: The headline

Across both age groups and all three institutions, a concurrent theme of anxiety, identity and belonging emerged. A current of worry about coping, leaving home and 'getting it wrong' appears to sit beneath the decision. Proximity to home, family and support acts as an anchor, keeping the familiar within reach. Trusted voices within close networks and the wider community hold strong sway over the choice, and for younger students social media plays its part too.

Part 2: Younger students, 16 to 18

For many younger students, **university feels daunting before it feels exciting, and the decision is wrapped up in anxiety about coping,** getting it wrong and stepping into the unknown. Proximity to home and family acts as an emotional anchor, a way of managing the leap into independence before they feel ready for it. Commuting was frequently discussed in this light. Whilst cost is a factor, for many it is as much about safety, stability and easing into the transition, while keeping the comfort zone close.

These students hold a long list of expectations of the institution and its academic staff. **They want somewhere that is both pastoral and academically strong,** that protects their wellbeing whilst still building their independence. Networks shape confidence: those with family or friends who have been to university feel reassured, whilst those without can talk themselves out of applying altogether.

Part 3: Mature students, 21 and over

The **decision for mature students is highly career-focused and deeply practical.** With jobs, homes and children to consider, the question is less 'where would I love to go?' and more 'what can I make work?'. Location comes first. Commuting is not generally a matter of preference but practically the only option, and a local course that fits around life is the first filter applied, before anything else is considered.

Community and representation can decide it. Trusted voices, and seeing people like themselves on campus (particularly for ethnic heritage students), can carry more weight than rankings or course content. Often a single 'human' moment, a nurse, a colleague, or caring for a parent, is the catalyst that tips them into applying. Notably, the support these students value most is discovered after they arrive. It rarely shapes the choice, because it is not visible at the point of decision, and this represents a clear opportunity gap for institutions.

Part 4: The common thread

Across age, background and institution, underrepresented students lean heavily on trusted, personal and community voices, often over and above formal information sources. **Decisions are made through people.** There is a noticeable gap between where institutions typically focus their effort and what students report as having influenced them.

Where institutions often focus

- Open days and campus tours
- Prospectuses and league tables
- Official channels and 'the website'

What often influences students

- Family and friends who have been to university
- Community figures and role models
- Visible representation on campus
- A gut feeling that 'I could belong here'

Part 5: Opportunities and ways forward

These findings raise a number of questions for practice. For outreach, how do we reach students through the people they already trust, such as peers, alumni and community voices? For transition, how early should support start, how do we reach commuters, and what is the right balance between support and building independence? For recruitment and marketing, how do we make belonging, representation and support visible whilst students are still deciding?

As outreach, recruitment and marketing functions continue to converge in the sector, research of this kind helps institutions understand students' communication preferences, what they value, and how well that matches the university's proposition.

What comes next

The qualitative findings describe what students say drives their decision. The quantitative analysis identifies which of those factors actually influence the choice, and how much weight each one carries, validating this picture at scale. Widening participation students and their peers have been modelled separately, so that any differences between the two groups are visible. These results will form **The Student Decision Index**, which will be published for the first time on **13 October at our national conference**. A practical quality framework for trauma-informed recruitment and transition, for partners and the wider sector to use, will follow.

HIDDEN DRIVERS

A National Research Conference on Student Choice

Tuesday 13 October 2026 · 09.45 to 15.30 · Nexus, University of Leeds

Keynote Professor Antony Moss, London South Bank University

Expert panel Chaired by Dr Hannah Merry, with Jon Datta of the Sutton Trust

The day brings together senior colleagues from widening participation, recruitment and marketing, alongside the three partner universities. Lunch and refreshments are included, and there will be a drinks reception afterwards for those able to stay on.

Book your place cosmosltd.uk/hidden-drivers

Research background

The study combines two phases. The qualitative phase consisted of discussion groups across all three partner institutions with prospective students aged 16 to 18 and with mature students (21 and over) in their first or foundation year. The quantitative phase is a 15-minute driver survey capturing stated priorities, derived importance and likelihood to apply, with around 800 responses now analysed. A trauma-informed frame runs throughout, built on the established 'small t / large T' distinction, a validated anxiety measure (CORE) and Adverse Childhood Experiences.

The qualitative findings summarised here were first shared at the NEON Summer Symposium in June 2026. The quantitative results will be published for the first time on 13 October.

If you would like more information about the study, or would like to talk about what the findings might mean for your own institution, we would love to hear from you.

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