

Data Digest:

University Preparation Report



Introduction

Helping students get the edge for their future

Decisions surrounding university and higher education can often feel overwhelming for young people, with 52% of high school students reporting that they feel pressure to make decisions about their future too soon (Best Colleges, 2022). Amidst a mental health crisis, and increasing struggles with the cost of living, young people are struggling to navigate difficult decisions about their futures.

But as the number of students attending university continues to rise (HESA, 2023), it's more important than ever that we can support students in making decisions about entering higher education and what to study.

This report shares insights from data on students' preparation for university, gathered from 2273 students in the OxBright University Preparation test. The Uni Prep test is a questionnaire that analyses students' skills, interests, and preferences in relation to their university plans, to generate personalised assessments of strengths and weaknesses, and provide tailored resources.

The aim of this report is to shed light on the prevailing trends among Generation-Z concerning their university plans, and to provide evidence-based advice and practical recommendations. For schools, parents, and students alike, this report is a valuable tool in navigating the complex landscape of university decisions.

Our aim is to empower schools, parents, and students with the knowledge needed to give students the edge for their future. We hope you find this resource valuable!

Best wishes,
The OxBright Team



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"I love the fact that I got such a variety of resources I can use to gain knowledge from, as well as the inspirational messages that I found very motivating! Thank you for this Report!" – Student

Summary of findings

Our report found that:

- 1 Medicine was the most popular subject, making up 27.6% of responses. Within medicine, surgery was the most popular choice.
- 2 The top three universities that respondents selected as their first choice were Oxford, Cambridge, and Harvard. 120 different universities were given as a student's first choice.
- 3 The proportion of students who have done prep in their subject increases steadily with age, then drops between 17 and 18.
- 4 More engineering and law students have little or no prior knowledge of their subject, than students in any other subject.
- 5 Of the students who have applied to university already, those who have been invited to interviews scored significantly higher on every front than those who had not. This was particularly prominent for work experience and external courses.
- 6 The more certain somebody is that they want to study their chosen subject, the more confident they are about their chances of success. This falls marginally for those who have never considered other subjects.
- 7 The average score for preparedness is 1.88 out of 3. As with our Careers Report, students scored lowest for work experience, and highest for reading around their subject.



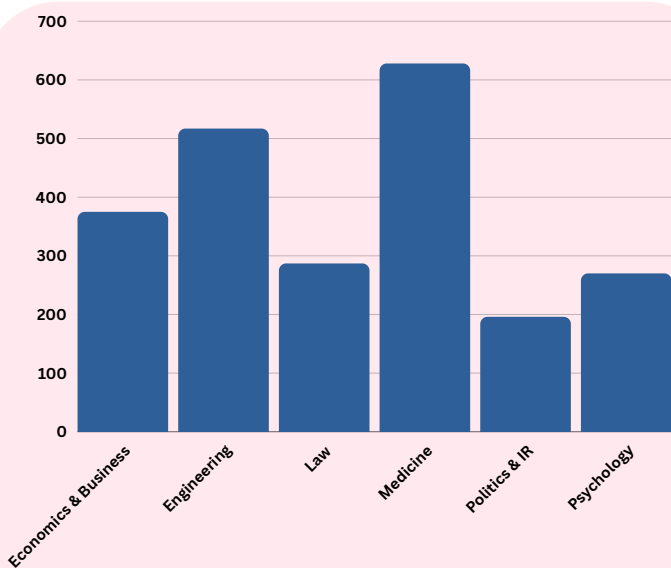
Overview of our Uni Prep Test Data

The data in this report is based on 2273 student responses, from 1000+ schools across the world.

What does our Uni Prep Test measure?

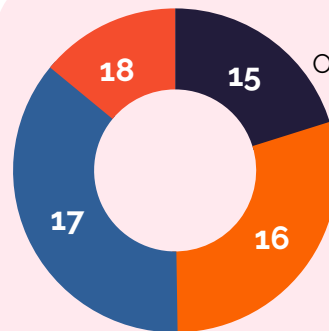
Our Uni Prep Test asks students to score themselves from 1-5 in a series of questions about their skills, interests, and preferences in relation to their university plans. We then collect data on how prepared students are to make competitive university applications, and what skills students are most and least confident with.

Who are our respondents?



Our respondents are aiming to study a range of subjects at university. The most popular sectors were:

- **Medicine** (628)
- **Engineering** (517)
- **Economics and Business** (375)



Our respondents are aged 15-18.

- 20.2% were age 15.
- 29.6% were age 16.
- 36.2% were age 17.
- 14.0% were age 18.



Our respondents come from **1000+ schools** globally. From Accra to Boston, to Jakarta, to London, our report digests insights from students across the world.



92% of respondents had not yet applied to university.
8% had already applied to university.



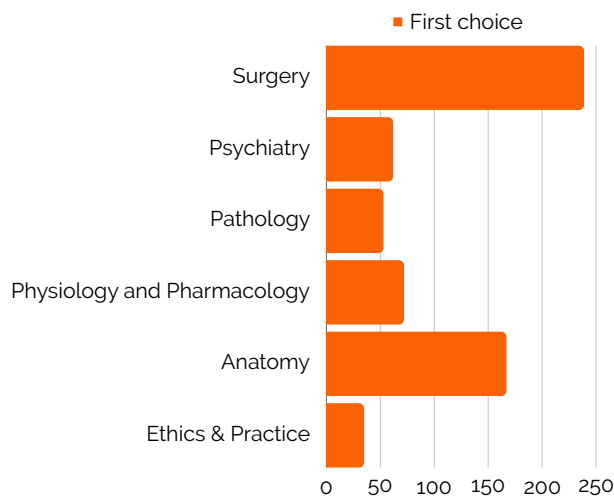
1 **Medicine was the most popular subject, making up 27.6% of responses. Within medicine, surgery was the most popular choice.**

D A T A 1

628 of our 2273 respondents want to study medicine at university, making it the most popular subject choice among the students we surveyed.

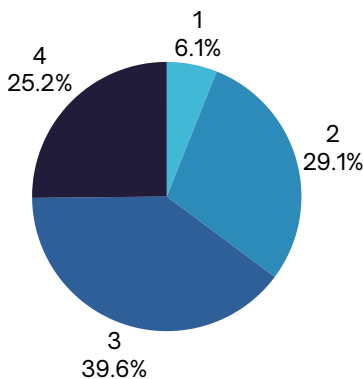
Within medicine, **surgery was the most popular area of interest**, with 239 students (38% of aspiring medics) ranking it as their top choice, and a further 16.6% ranking it second.

Anatomy was also popular, with **62.4%** of aspiring medical students ranking it as their first or second choice.



Key

- 1** - Medicine is just one of a number of courses I'm considering
- 2** - I'm interested in Medicine and think it's probably the one for me, but I'm still exploring my options
- 3** - I'm sure I want to study Medicine, having explored other subjects too
- 4** - I've always wanted to study Medicine and I'd never study anything else



D A T A 2

Most students were **fairly sure that they wanted to study medicine**, with **25.5%** saying "I've always wanted to study Medicine and I'd never study anything else".

Only **6.1%** said it was just one of a number of courses that they were considering.

A N A L Y S I S A N D R E C O M M E N D A T I O N S

Of 2273 students who completed the OxBright University Preparation Test, 628 (**27.6%**) **wanted to study medicine**, or a medical-related course, at university. Within medicine, students had a range of interests, though surgery and anatomy were particularly popular. But why is medicine such a popular course? Medical degrees have an impressively high employment rate, with **98.7% of graduates in employment or further study** (Prospects, 2022), and a median salary of £35k (HESA, 2021). It also offers socially meaningful and impactful work, which is an important factor for many of Gen-Z (OxBright, 2023).

Our data also found that most students were fairly sure that they wanted to study medicine, with only 6.1% viewing it as one of many options they are currently considering. Perhaps this is because young people have a fairly strong idea of what a medical degree entails. Alternatively, it may be because they perceive a clear career path; if an individual knows that they want to be a doctor, then they know that they must study medicine. Few other careers offer this clear a path.

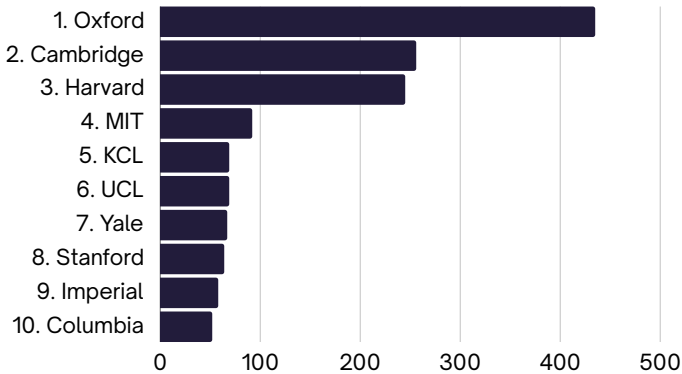
Give your students the edge by:

Sharing OxBright's Ultimate Guide to Studying Medicine. Penned by medical students and doctors, it's jam-packed full of all the advice your students will need to get into medical school. You can find the Ultimate Guide here:

<https://www.oxbright.org/resources/the-ultimate-guide-to-studying-medicine/>

2 The top three universities that respondents selected as their first choice were Oxford, Cambridge, and Harvard. 120 different universities were given as a student's first choice.

DATA 3



When asked to give their first choice university, **Oxford** (435), **Cambridge** (256), and **Harvard** (245) were the most popular responses. They received over 2.5x more responses than the next popular choice, (MIT, 92).

This suggests that many of our respondents are interested in applying to competitive universities..

120 different universities were given as a student's first choice, showing that students are interested in a broad range of universities and locations.

This suggests that it's not just league tables that matter - there's clearly other factors going into university choices.

DATA 4



ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our data shows that many students are interested in applying to competitive universities, with **41.2% of respondents selecting Oxford, Cambridge or Harvard** as their first choice. Whilst these universities consistently rank in the top 5 globally, it's clear that rankings are not the only factor that matters to young people. Rather, a study found that league tables were most important to high-ability candidates, perhaps due to their wider choice set, (Economics of Education Review, 2015).

120 different institutions were given as students' first choice, demonstrating that **students are interested in a broad range of universities and locations**. The factors that influence their choice of university may still be academic, such as entry requirements or course structure. However, **students may also consider social or welfare-related factors**, including location, pastoral support, facilities, or reputation, (Education Sciences, 2022).

Give your students the edge by:

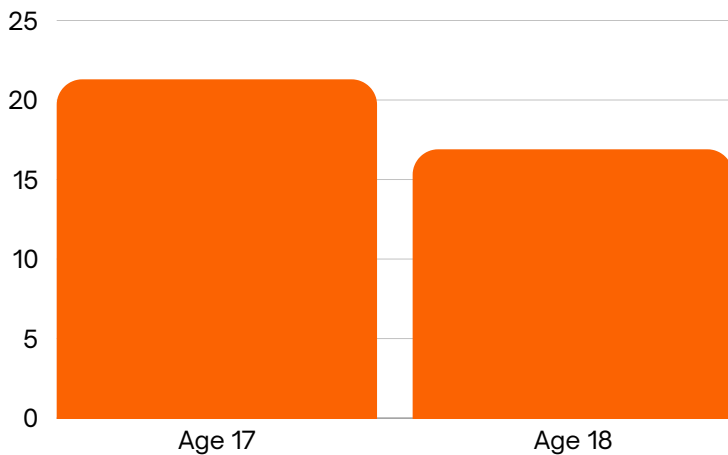
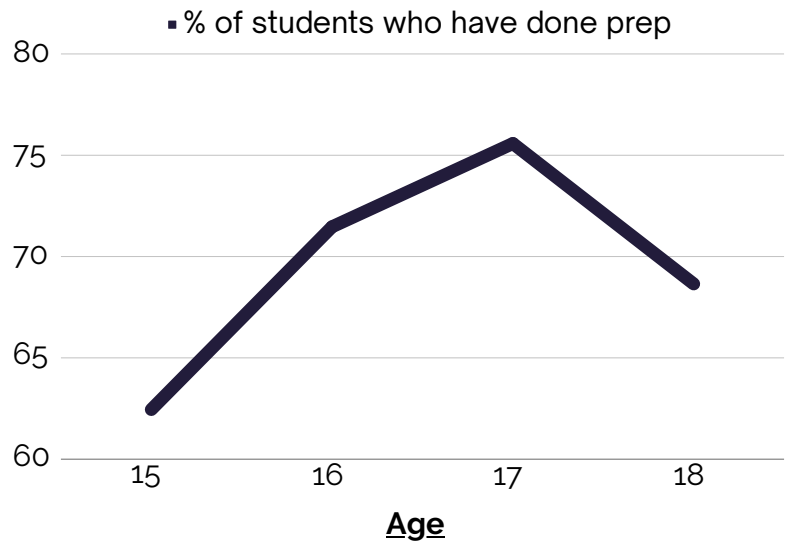
Sharing our top tips on navigating the difficult process of choosing a university:
<https://www.oxbright.org/blog/university-preparation/choosing-your-dream-university-essential-tips-for-high-school-students/>. Our blog covers all the essentials that students should consider when making their university choices!

3 The proportion of students who have done prep in their subject increases steadily with age, then drops between 17 and 18.

DATA 5

The proportion of students who have done some or lots of preparation in their subject increases steadily with age, from **62.4%** at age 15, to **75.6%** at age 17.

This then **drops sharply to 68.7%** at age 18.



DATA 6

Only **16.9% of 18 year olds had done lots of preparation in their subject**, compared to 21.3% of 17 year olds.

ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As students progress through school, the proportion who have done preparation in their subject increases. The reasoning might seem clear: students have increased exposure to their subjects and are beginning to streamline their subject choices, they are prompted more heavily to engage in supra-curricular reading, and many may have begun to think about pursuing a specific subject at university.

What's surprising is the **drop that we see in preparation between the ages of 17 and 18**. Why might fewer 18 year olds have done preparation in their subject than 17 year olds? In our Careers Data Digest (OxBright, 2023), we found that clarity about future career paths fell between the ages of 17 and 18. Perhaps this data demonstrates a similar trend: that between the ages of 17 and 18, students explore a wider range of options and **discover a new subject that they knew nothing about**, thus feeling less prepared. Perhaps some of our 18 year old respondents are gap-year students, who are unclear about the subject they wish to pursue. Indeed, a 2021 UCAS survey found that **more than a third of students would have made different post-16 choices had they properly understood what their degree involved**, (UCAS, 2021). So, it seems that 18 year olds may be better positioned to understand the full requirements of their subject, and thus feel less prepared.

Give your students the edge by:

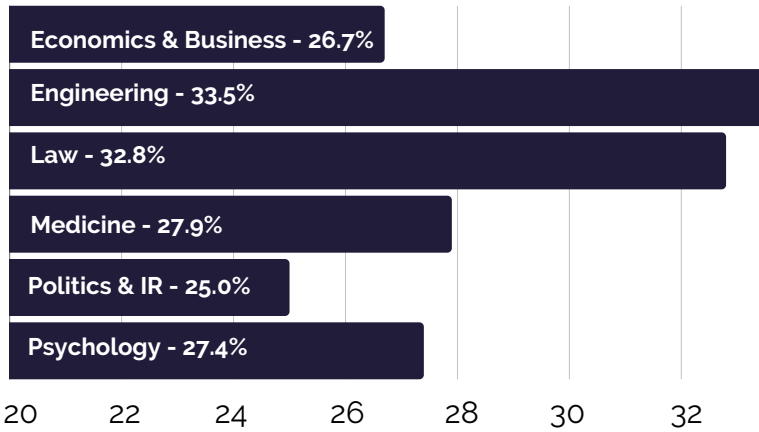
Educating students on the advantages and disadvantages of taking a gap year, and how they can use this year to prepare for their future: <https://www.oxbright.org/blog/university-preparation/should-i-take-a-gap-year-if-im-not-sure-what-to-study-at-university/>.

4

More engineering and law students have little or no prior knowledge of their subject, than students in any other subject.

DATA 7

■ % new to the subject



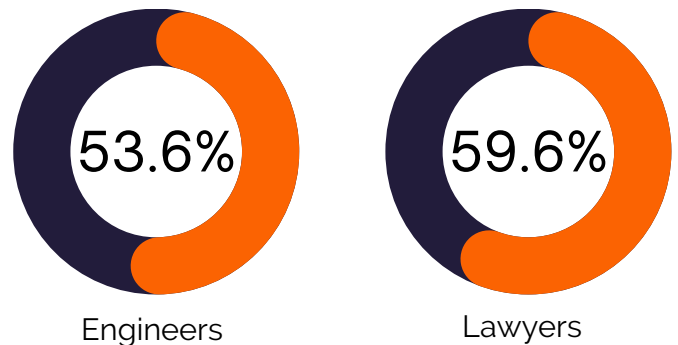
More engineering and law students were new to their subject, (**33.5% and 32.8% respectively**), than any other subject.

Further, this is because students studying these subjects are younger. Engineering had an average age of 16.5, and law had an average age of 16.4. The highest was politics at 16.6, and the lowest was medicine at 16.3. **Average age was fairly consistent across subjects.**

Only 9.9% of engineers and 3.8% of lawyers see their subject as only one option that they are considering.

53.6% of engineers, and 59.6% of lawyers are sure that they want to study the subject.

DATA 8



ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The proportion of students who were new to their subject was higher for engineering and law than other subjects, at 33.4% and 32.8% respectively, despite having a similar average age to other subjects. Additionally, more than half the students in each subject were sure that they wanted to study it, leaving no obvious reason why law and engineering students should be less prepared than others.

Perhaps this is because engineering and law are **not directly taught in the school curriculum**, (and not as easily related to common subjects, in the way that medical students may perceive biology to be). Therefore, it's likely that engineering and law students **lack direct exposure to their subject**. One way to address this is to highlight the **transferable skills** from other subjects, and highlight the overlaps. We can also focus on broad teaching themes and approaches to learning, such as problem-solving and creativity (Royal Academy of Engineering, 2014). Alternatively, we can direct students to introductory level courses and resources for engineering and law, that will help prepare them.

Give your students the edge by:

Share our Ultimate Guide to Studying Law: <https://www.oxbright.org/resources/the-ultimate-guide-to-studying-law/>.

Those interested in Engineering can check out our Engineering Hub:

<https://www.oxbright.org/blog/category/engineering/> (with an Ultimate Guide to Studying Engineering coming soon!)

DATA DIGEST: OXBRIGHT UNI PREP TEST

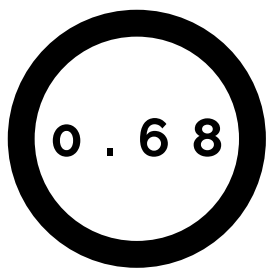
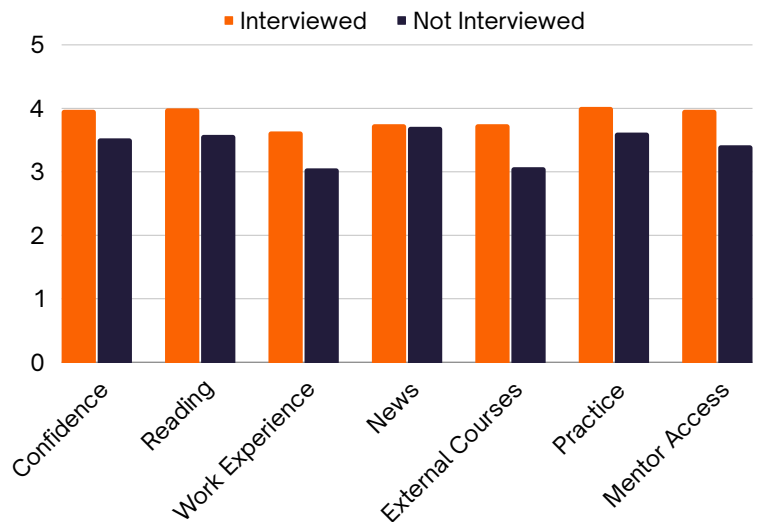
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Of the students who have applied to university already, those who have been invited to interviews scored significantly higher on every front than those who had not. This was particularly prominent for work experience and external courses.

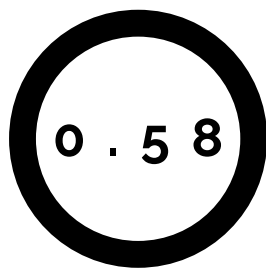
DATA 9

7.8% (178) of our respondents had applied to university. Of those students, **73.6% had been invited to interviews**, or expect to be invited to interviews, whilst 26.4% hadn't.

Students who had been invited to interviews **scored higher on every single metric** than students who hadn't.



External Courses



Work Experience

DATA 10

The most significant areas of difference were work experience and external courses.

Students who were invited to interview scored **0.68 higher for external courses**, and **0.58 higher for work experience** (out of the possible max of 5) than those not invited to interview.

ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It makes sense that those students who score higher, and are better prepared for their applications, would be more likely to receive an invitation to interview. But where were the biggest differences, and how can other students learn from this? The biggest differences were seen in **work experience and external courses**. As UCAS highlights, work experience looks great on a student's university application (UCAS, 2015), and is even essential for some courses. This doesn't have to be a prestige internship, but can also take the form of a part-time job that demonstrates strong time-keeping skills and responsibility. What's crucial is that students are able to demonstrate the **skills that they have learnt from their experience of the workplace**, and how this would benefit them at university.

In addition, universities are looking for students to show them their "passion, knowledge and skills by **demonstrating [their] engagement with the subject**" (Durham University), and external courses are an excellent way to do this. Hence, we can see why students who score higher in these fields are likely to offer more competitive university applications.

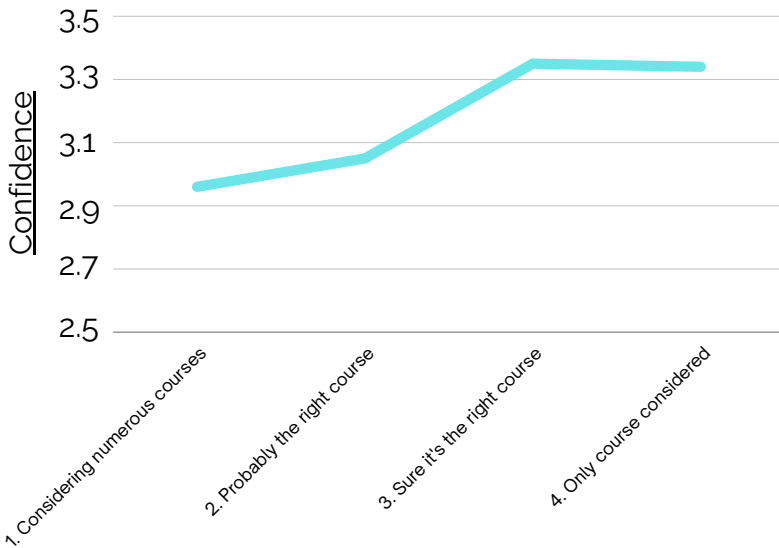
Give your students the edge by:

Helping students to think creatively about work experience! Our blog provides great tips for finding and securing work experience opportunities: <https://www.oxbright.org/blog/university-preparation/unlocking-your-first-work-experience-a-step-by-step-guide-for-high-schoolers/>

6

The more certain somebody is that they want to study their chosen subject, the more confident they are about their chances of success. This falls marginally for those who have never considered other subjects.

DATA 11



However, confidence was marginally lower where a student was sure they wanted to study the subject, but had **never considered any other options**.

Of these students, **37.3% gave a confidence score of 1 or 2**, compared to only **19.1%** in category 3, (those who have explored a range of courses but decided on the right one for them).

Where a specific subject was just one of many choices a student was considering, their confidence score was **2.96** out of 5.

The more sure a student was that they wanted to study the subject, the higher their confidence score. This **peaked where students had explored a range of courses**, but had decided on the one that was right for them, at **3.35**.

DATA 12



ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A 2019 survey found that 57% of students turn to their academic advisors first when they have questions about university applications (Ellucian, 2019). With the same survey finding that **nearly two thirds of students feel overwhelmed by the process of selecting a degree course**, it's clear that teachers can be highly influential in determining the certainty that students feel about studying a subject at degree level, and can help to boost their confidence.

But **when a student has only ever considered one degree course, their confidence of success tends to be lower** than that of students who had considered multiple courses before making a decision. This might suggest that there is **value to be derived from students exploring all available options**, to ensure that they have the best possible understanding of which course is right for them. With university student drop out rates increasing (SLC, 2023), it's crucial that students are confident in their choice of course.

Give your students the edge by:

Sharing our blog on how to choose the right degree course for you: <https://www.oxbright.org/blog/university-preparation/navigating-your-future-how-to-choose-the-best-degree-course/>. Our blog covers everything that your students need to know when deciding between different university courses.

7 The average score for preparedness is **1.88** out of **3**. As with our Careers Report, students scored lowest for work experience, and highest for reading around their subject.

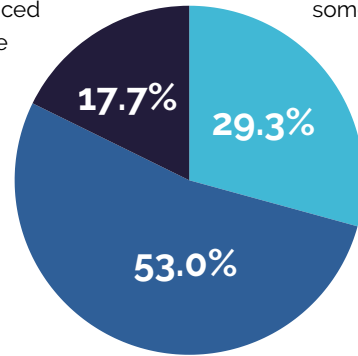
DATA 13

The average score for preparedness was **1.88 out of 3**, where 1 means a student is completely new to their subject, and 3 means the student has already done lots of preparation.

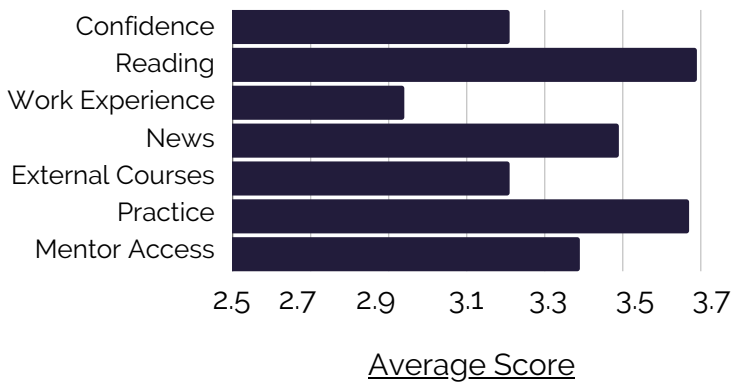
53.0% of students scored a 2, meaning they have done some preparation but would like to develop this further.

I've already done lots of prep and I'm looking for an advanced challenge

I'm really new to my subject so I'd like some introductory guidance



I've already done some reading around my subject and would like to develop this further



DATA 14

Students scored highest for reading around their subject, with an average score of **3.69**.

They scored lowest for having participated in work experience, with an average of **2.94**.

ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Very few students (17.7%) had done lots of preparation in their subject. Whilst the age range of 15-18 makes it inevitable that some students will still be exploring a range of different options, it seems that **students are generally underprepared**, with 29.3% being completely new to their subject, and having done no prior reading.

Reading around the subject is essential for students to develop analysis skills and basic knowledge, (CUP Brighter Thinking, 2020). Indeed, this is where students score highest, suggesting it is **one of the first ways that they engage with their subject beyond the curriculum**. But if many students have still done no preparation, they may not be engaging in this supra-curricular reading, and thus might need additional support in finding resources.

As in our Career Data Digest (OxBright, 2023), work experience presents itself as students' biggest weakness. Since work experience is **valuable to develop soft skills, and to gain greater clarity about careers** and the workplace, it should be a greater area of focus for educators.

Give your students the edge by:

Sharing the link to our subject specific newsletters: <https://www.oxbright.org/about-us/brochure/>. Your students can sign up to receive exciting resources, reading recommendations, and opportunities in the subject of their choice.

Conclusion

Our key recommendations:

- 1 Students care about more than just league tables. Empower students to make informed decisions about their choice of institution by guiding them through a personalised approach. Encourage them to consider a diverse set of factors that truly matter to them, going beyond traditional league tables.
- 2 It's important for students to consider a wide range of subject options before selecting what's right for them. Foster early exploration of different options, ensuring students gain a comprehensive understanding of the requirements for each subject. This proactive approach will support students in making well-informed and confident choices.
- 3 Work experience is an excellent way to demonstrate soft skills such as timekeeping and reliability, and where relevant can demonstrate further commitment to a subject. Support your students in thinking creatively about work experience, and emphasise the value of soft skills. Encourage them to explore opportunities that align with their interests and further demonstrate commitment to their chosen field.

Join our Heads of Futures Network

For access to our full range of free careers resources – plus the latest insights from the field, and the chance to network with like-minded educators from around the world – become a member of our Heads of Futures LinkedIn network (<https://www.linkedin.com/groups/12883444/>). We'd love to see you there!

Final comments

Our data has shown that most students have some idea of what they want to study in the future, and a goal of where they want to study it. Students are interested in a wide range of disciplines and institutions, and many aspire to attend competitive universities.

However, some students are still not adequately prepared to apply to university, with engineering and law students in particular lacking exposure to their subject. Exploring their options in more detail will allow young people to make informed decisions, and have greater confidence that they are pursuing the right path. Fostering a culture of exploration, and paying attention to individual students' needs and preferences, will be essential in ensuring that students are supported in making decisions about university.

References

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