Perceptions of Fairness Research for the Fair Admissions Review

Universities UK

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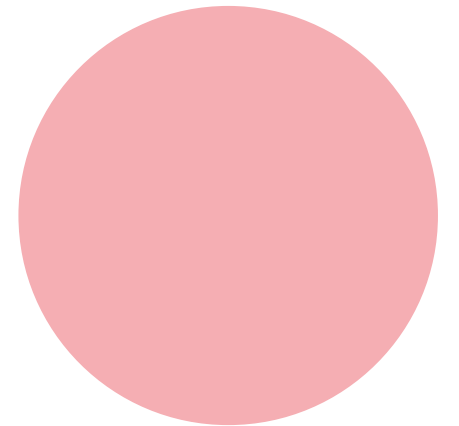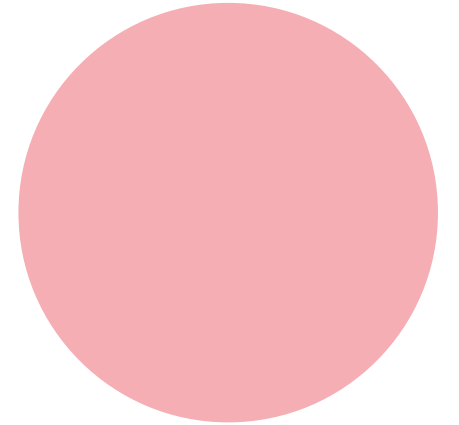
Objectives and methodology

The Fair Admissions Review sought to ensure that the application process is fair to all applicants. To help achieve this goal, this research aims to:

- Gauge perceived level of fairness of the different stages of the process and requirements;

- Explore level of support at each stage;

- Identify specific elements of the process which could be better supported;

- Highlight any barriers to preferred choices.
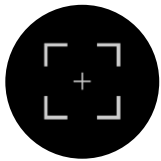
SAMPLE

1,499 adults aged 18+ who have applied to a UK university/college/other HE institution between 2015-2019 and have been UK residents at the time of applying.

METHOD

Online survey
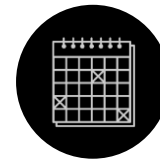
FIELDWORK DATES

8th – 19th November 2019
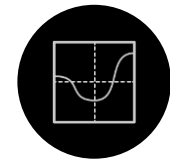
INTERPRETATION

Data were weighted by age, gender and region in order to be representative of all HE applicants between 2015-2019.

Findings marked with asterisk (*) indicate a low base size and should be treated as indicative.

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PERCEPTIONS OF FAIRNESS

Seven in ten applicants consider the application process <u>fair</u> - one in ten say it is unfair and one in five say it is neither fair nor unfair;

Those who consider the application process to be **<u>unfair</u>**, most commonly say this is because:

- **The career advice they were given wasn't very helpful;**

- **The application process was too long**.

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MEETING SUPPORT NEEDS

Four in five of applicants say they felt supported by the universities/colleges they applied to during the application process **-** just one in five say they felt unsupported;

Most commonly used sources of support or guidance include **UCAS**, **parent(s)/guardian(s)**, and **school academic staff.**

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CHALLENGES DURING AND AFTER THE APPLICATION PROCESS

Most common **challenges** of the application process mentioned are:
- **Feeling unsure** about whether university was for them;
- Not having **exam results** before applying;

Applicants who did not accept any offers or did not start their accepted course say this is because they decided the **timing wasn't right** for them**;**

BAME applicants are significantly more likely than White applicants to change courses or to not start their accepted course.

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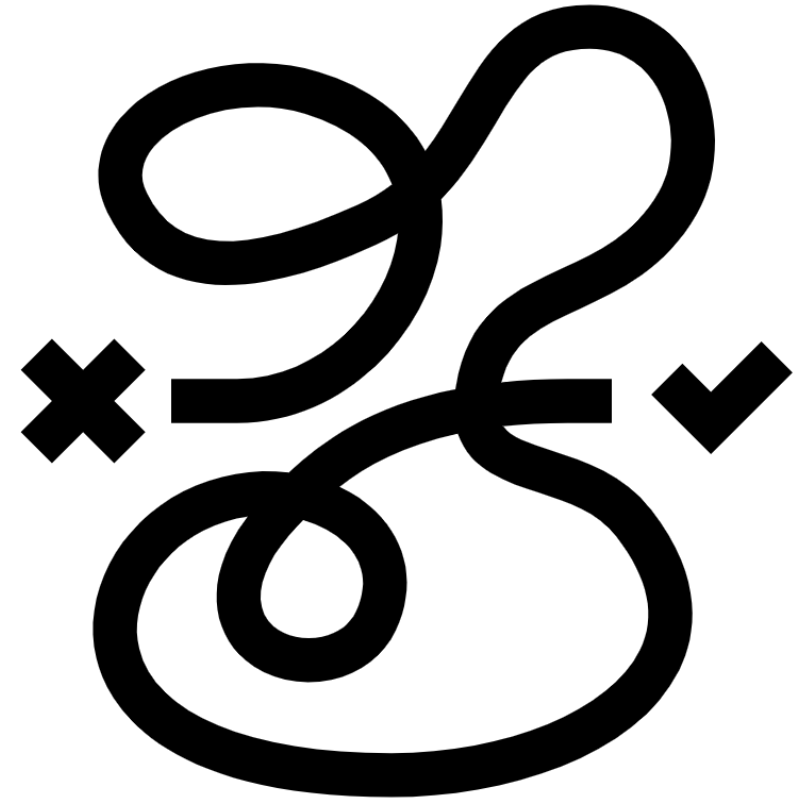
APPLICATION PROCESS

Whether offers drive applicants to perform well academically varies based on the different types offers they received.

Approaching two thirds agree that **the application process works well as it is** or that **it is fine to apply with predicted grades** – almost three in ten disagree with each;

However, over half agree that **universities/colleges should only make offers <u>after</u> people have received their academic results**.

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RESULTS IN FULL

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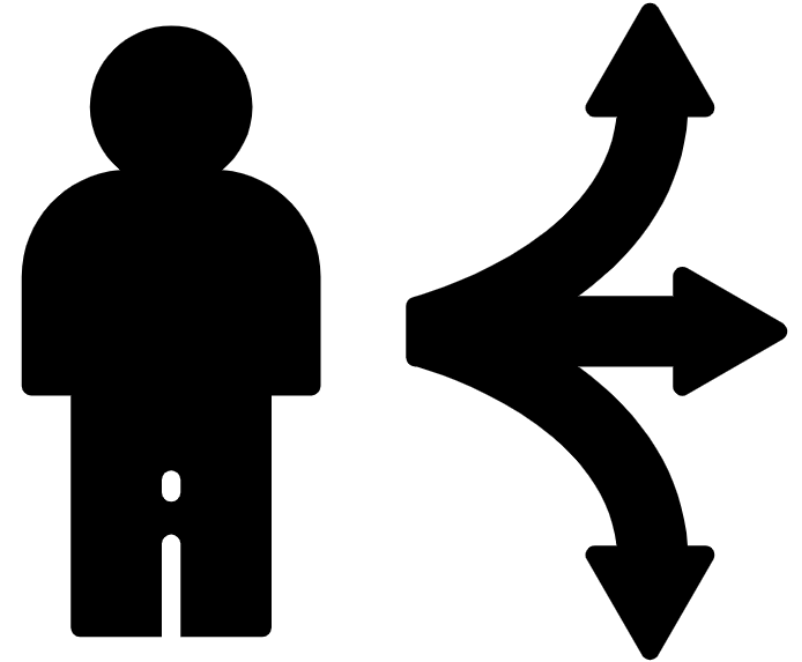
Recent applicants are seven times more likely to rate the application process as fair than unfair

Perceived fairness of the university/college application process
(% of all recent applicants who say each of the following)

Legend:
- Very fair (8-10)
- Quite fair (6-7)
- Neither (5)
- Quite unfair (3-4)
- Very unfair (0-2)

Chart (stacked bar, 0%–100%):
- Very fair (8-10): 43%
- Quite fair (6-7): 27%
- Neither (5): 18%
- Quite unfair (3-4): 9%
- Very unfair (0-2): 3%

NET: Fair 70%

NET: Unfair 12%
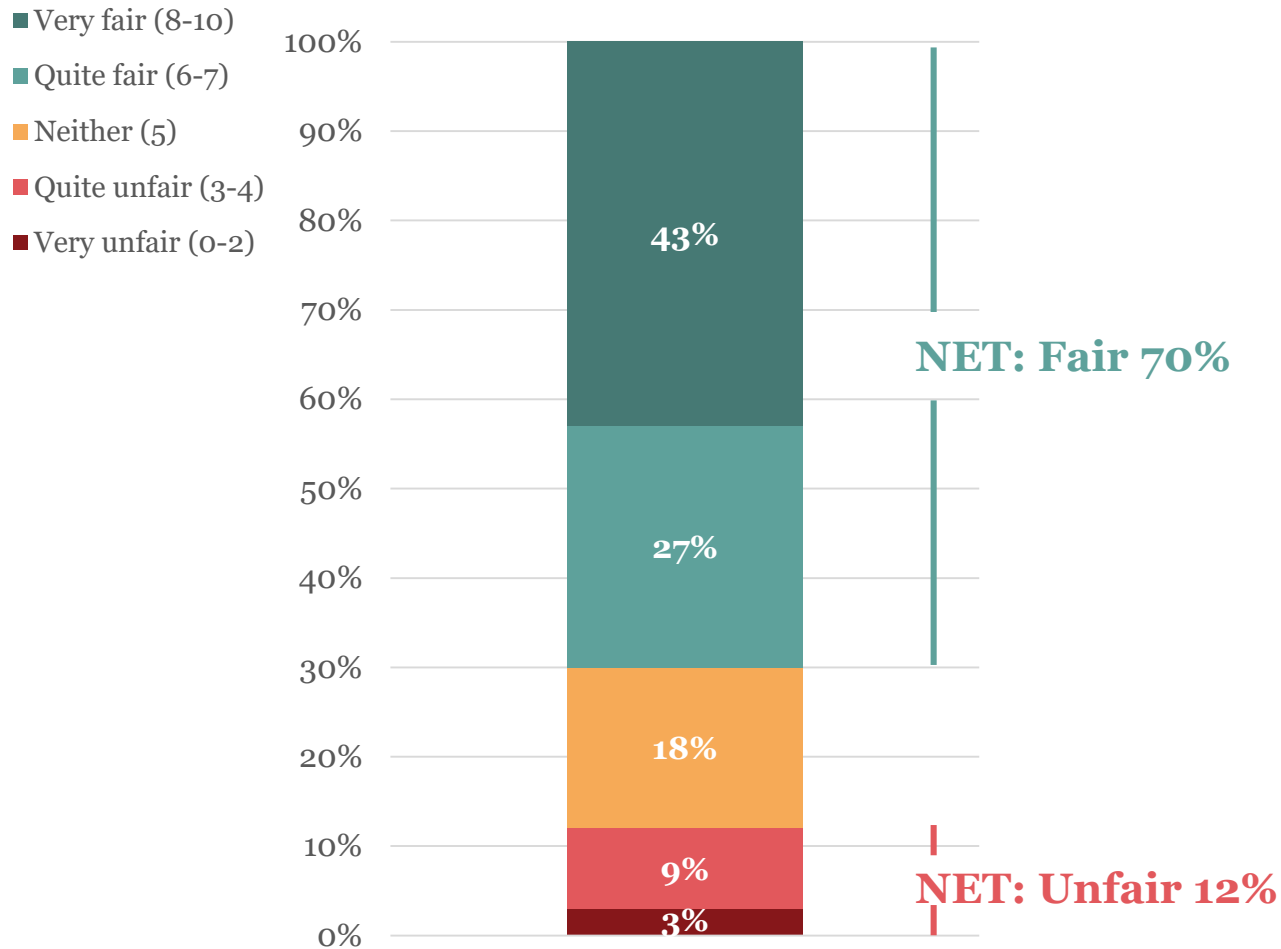
Received an unconditional offer **76%**
vs. 70% conditional offer

West Midlands **75%**

East of England **75%**

Business, Management or Accounting **74%**

White **73%**
vs. 62% BAME

Social Sciences **72%**

Humanities **72%**

Did not receive any offers **24%**

South East **19%**

College applicants **18%**
vs. University applicants 11%

Health Sciences **21%**

Creative Arts **14%**

Q10. Overall, how fair or unfair did you consider the university/college application process to be? Base: All respondents (n=1,499)

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Those who find the application process unfair most commonly say this is because the career advice they were given wasn't very helpful

Reasons for finding the application process generally unfair
(% who consider the application process unfair)

Reason	%
The career advice I was given wasn't very helpful	34%
The application process was too long	29%
I didn't have all the information I needed to make an informed choice about what or where to study	27%
Equal guidance wasn't given to everyone applying at my school/sixth form college	24%
Guidance wasn't available for to the course/career I was interested in	23%
I was pressured into applying to university by my school/sixth form college	22%
I wasn't sure how some of the steps in the process worked	19%
I was pressured in applying to university by family or friends	18%
I was pressured into accepting an offer by my school/sixth from college	17%
I was pressured into accepting an offer by a university/college	13%
I was pressured into accepting an offer by family or friends	12%
Other	11%
None of the above	2%
Don't know	2%

▲ **State-run non-selective school 45%**
vs. state-run selective school 28%

▲ **Creative Arts 44%**

▲ **Social Sciences 58%**

▲ **First in immediate family 40%**
vs. Not first 24%

▲ **Social Sciences 49%**

*"The application process was **biased towards upper and middle class** applicants"*

*"Due to similar exam results and personal statements **offers by universities can be slightly luck based**"*

9

Q11. You mentioned that your university/college application process was generally not fair. Of the following options, which best explains why? Base: All who consider the application process unfair (n=183)

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The majority of applicants say they felt supported by the universities/colleges they applied to during the application process

Perceptions on the level of support received from universities/colleges

(% of all recent applicants who say each of the following)

NET: Unsupported

19%

🔺 STEM Subject **23%**

🔺 Health Sciences **23%**

🔺 Did not receive any offers **28%**
vs. 18% received any offers

NET: Supported

79%

🔺 Considers the process to be fair **85%**

🔺 Selective state school **82%**
vs. 77% non-selective state school

🔺 Study in Scotland **89%**

Donut chart values: 26%, 53%, 16%, 3%, 2%

- ■ Very supported
- ■ Fairly supported
- ■ Not very supported
- ■ Not at all supported
- ■ Don't know

Q14. How supported or unsupported did you feel by the universities/college(s) you applied to during the application process? All respondents (n=1499)

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Applicants rely on UCAS, parents/guardians or teachers for support

Ranking most used sources of support during the application process
(Showing NET: Top 3)

Source	%	Fair vs. Unfair
UCAS	38%	*41% **fair** vs. 29% unfair*
Parent(s)/guardian(s)	35%	
School academic staff e.g. teachers	34%	
University/college	27%	*30% **fair** vs. 17% unfair*
Friend(s)	27%	*30% **fair** vs. 18% unfair*
School pastoral staff e.g. form tutors	24%	*25% **fair** vs. 16% unfair*
Online forums e.g. thestudentroom	18%	
Careers advisors	13%	*12% fair vs. **19% unfair***
Sibling(s)	13%	*11% fair vs. **19% unfair***
Employer	10%	
Private tutor	10%	
None of the above	3%	
Don't know	1%	

Q13. Which of the following sources of support or guidance, if any, did you use during your application process? Base: All respondents (n=1499)

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Feeling unsure about whether university was for them or not having exam results before applying are perceived as challenges

Challenges of the application process
(% who say each are challenges)

Challenge	%
Feeling unsure about whether university was for me	31%
Not having exam results before applying	29%
Different parts of the application itself e.g. personal statement	24%
Not knowing where to apply	21%
Not being sure which offer to accept	20%
Finance or funding not being available	18%
Difficulties applying for student finance	18%
Lack of help in choosing a subject	16%
Lack of information about my course	15%
Not understanding the different types of offers	13%
Lack of support from my school, college or employer	11%
Lack of support from universities or institutions	10%
None of the above	9%
Don't know	2%

▲ **Female applicants 34%** vs. 28% Male

▲ **Parents/guardians don't have a degree 35%** vs. 29% parents/guardians have a degree

▲ **Conditional offer 36%** vs. 27% Unconditional

▲ **Conditional unconditional offer 36%**

▲ **Parents/guardians don't have a degree 28%** vs. 22% parents/guardians have a degree

▲ **First in immediate family to apply 16%** vs. 9% not first

▲ **Contextual offer 27%** vs. 12% Conditional and 10% Unconditional

▲ **First in immediate family to apply 12%** vs. 8% not first

Q15. Which of the following, if any, were challenges in your university/college application experience? Base: All respondents (n=1499)

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Nine in ten applicants say they accepted at least one of the offers they received, with seven in ten of those who did so starting the accepted course straight away
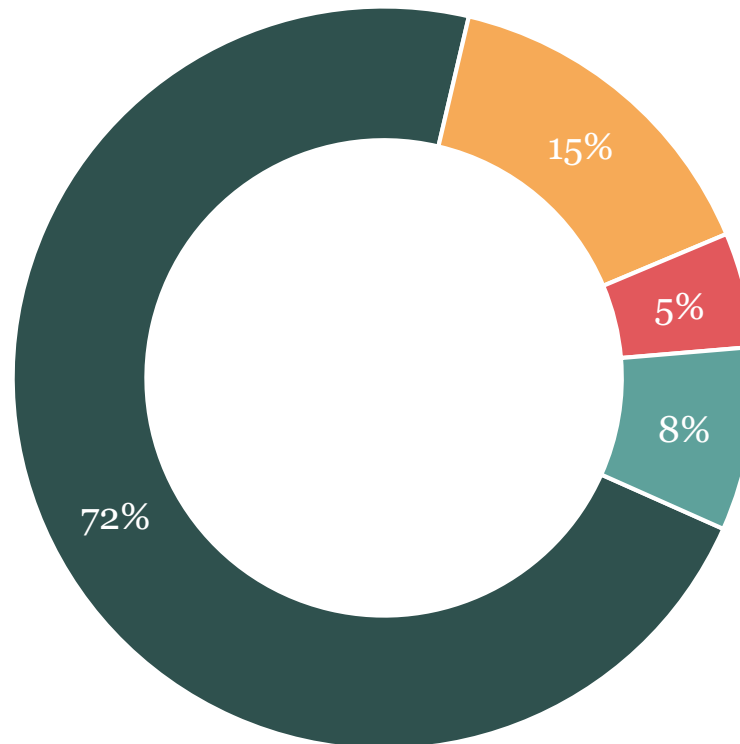
8% say they didn't accept any offers they received

vs.

92% NET: Accepted any offers received

Starting accepted course
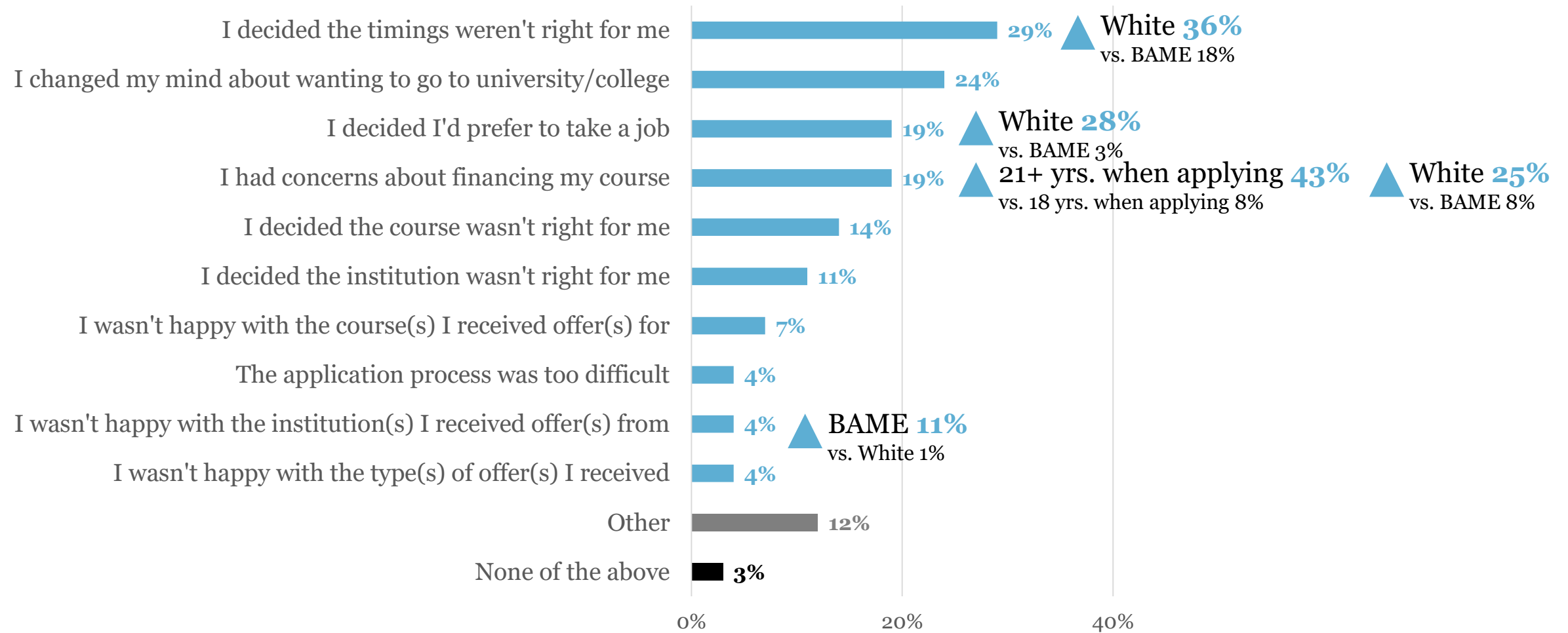*(% who accepted any offer(s))*

■ Yes, and straight away

■ Yes, and deferred until the following year

■ No

■ Not yet

■ Don't know

72%

15%

5%

8%

- **BAME** students are twice as likely as White students to say they have not or not yet started their accepted course (20% vs. 10% respectively.

- Applicants from the **South East** (21%) and the **North West** (18%) are the most likely to say they have not or not yet started their accepted course.

Q4b. And which offer(s), if any, did you accept from this application? Base: All who received any offers (n=1402)
Q5a. And did you start your accepted course? Base: All who accepted the received offer(s) (n=1303)

Those who didn't accept an offer or did not start their course most commonly say this is because the timing wasn't right for them
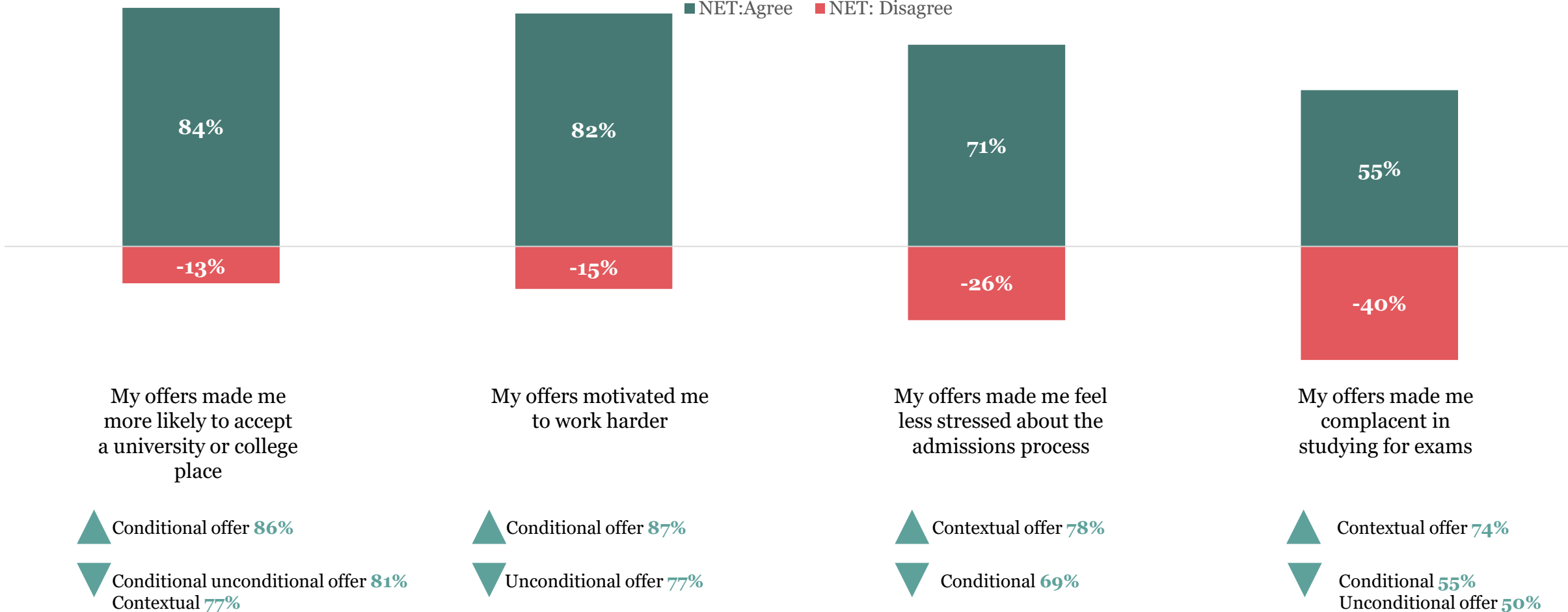
Reasons for not accepting an offer/not starting a course
(% who did not accept an offer or did not start their course)

Reason	%
I decided the timings weren't right for me	29%
I changed my mind about wanting to go to university/college	24%
I decided I'd prefer to take a job	19%
I had concerns about financing my course	19%
I decided the course wasn't right for me	14%
I decided the institution wasn't right for me	11%
I wasn't happy with the course(s) I received offer(s) for	7%
The application process was too difficult	4%
I wasn't happy with the institution(s) I received offer(s) from	4%
I wasn't happy with the type(s) of offer(s) I received	4%
Other	12%
None of the above	3%

▲ White **36%**
vs. BAME 18%

▲ White **28%**
vs. BAME 3%

21+ yrs. when applying 43% ▲ White **25%**
vs. 18 yrs. when applying 8%   vs. BAME 8%

▲ BAME **11%**
vs. White 1%

Q7. You mentioned that you did not accept an offer or start a university or college course, which of the following, if any, best explain why? Base: All who did not accept the received offer(s) or did not start their course (n=156)
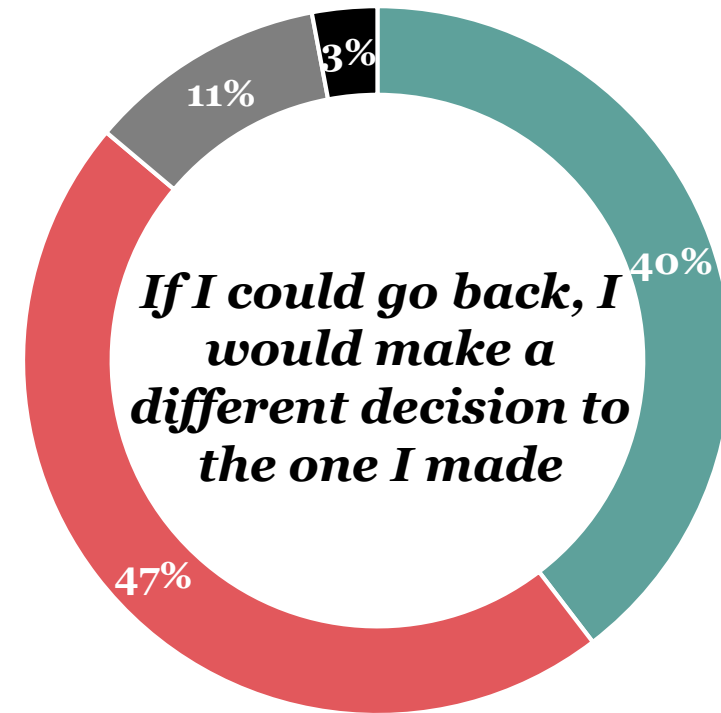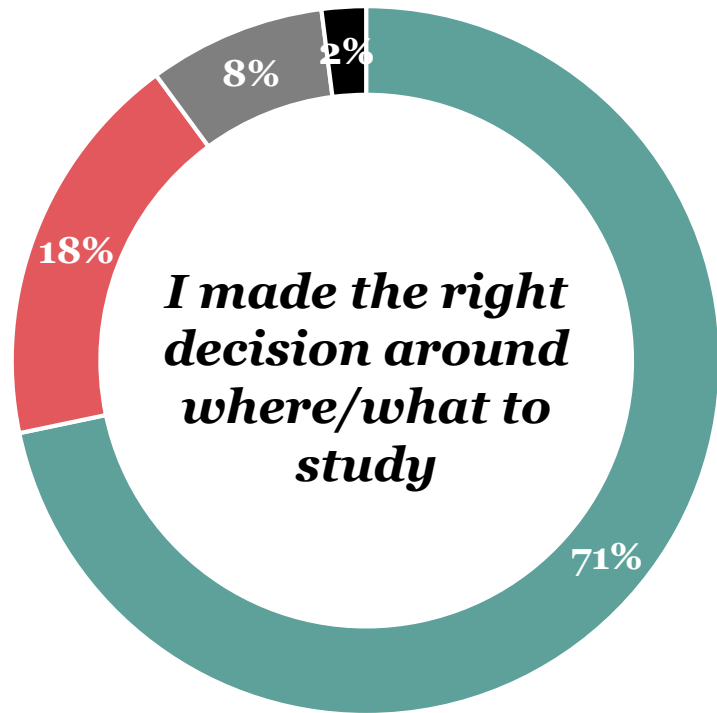
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Whether offers drive applicants to perform well academically is questionable, with four in five saying their offers <u>motivated</u> them to work harder, while half say they made them <u>complacent</u> in studying for exams

Impact of received offers
(% of those who accepted their offer(s))

■ NET:Agree   ■ NET: Disagree

My offers made me more likely to accept a university or college place	My offers motivated me to work harder	My offers made me feel less stressed about the admissions process	My offers made me complacent in studying for exams
84%	82%	71%	55%
-13%	-15%	-26%	-40%

▲ Conditional offer **86%**

▼ Conditional unconditional offer **81%** Contextual **77%**

▲ Conditional offer **87%**

▼ Unconditional offer **77%**

▲ Contextual offer **78%**

▼ Conditional **69%**

▲ Contextual offer **74%**

▼ Conditional **55%** Unconditional offer **50%**

15   Q5b. Based on the offer or offers you accepted, to what extent if at all do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? Base: Those who accepted their offer(s) (n=1303)

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While the majority say they made the right decision, two in five agree that if they could go back they would make a different decision

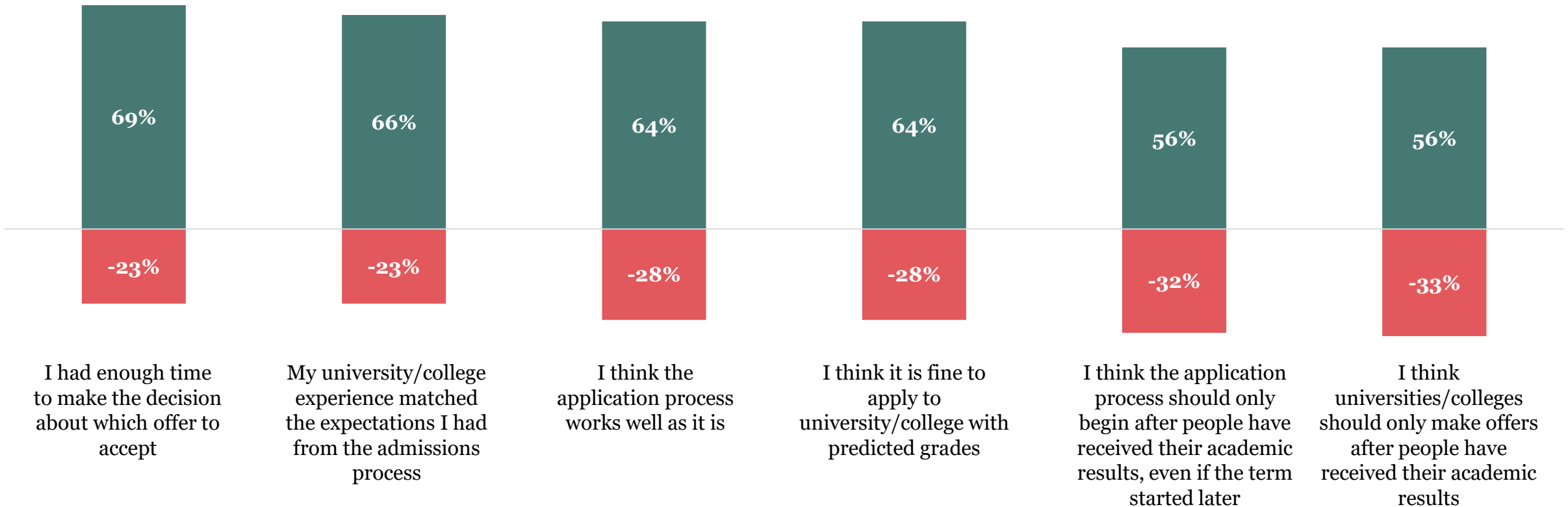**I made the right decision around where/what to study**

- 71%
- 18%
- 8%
- 2%

Legend: ■ NET: Agree ■ NET: Disagree ■ Don't know ■ N/A

If I could go back, I would make a different decision to the one I made

- 40%
- 47%
- 11%
- 3%

Legend: ■ NET: Agree ■ NET: Disagree ■ Don't know ■ N/A

Q18. To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? Base: All applicants (n=1499)

The majority of applicants express satisfaction, although a quarter disagree that the process works well. Half would make a different choice

Perceptions about the application process and outcomes
(% of all recent applicants)

■ NET: Agree ■ NET: Disagree

69%	66%	64%	64%	56%	56%
-23%	-23%	-28%	-28%	-32%	-33%
I had enough time to make the decision about which offer to accept	My university/college experience matched the expectations I had from the admissions process	I think the application process works well as it is	I think it is fine to apply to university/college with predicted grades	I think the application process should only begin after people have received their academic results, even if the term started later	I think universities/colleges should only make offers after people have received their academic results

Q18. To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? Base: All applicants (n=1499)

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Those who haven't received any offers and BAME applicants are less likely to agree that it is fine to apply with predicted grades

"I think it is fine to apply to university/college with predicted grades"
(NET: Agree)

Total:
64% NET: Agree
28% NET: Disagree

Offer received – any/none

41%
Received no offers

65%
Received any offers

Ethnicity

67%
White

55%
BAME

Q18. To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? Base: All applicants (n=1499)

Savanta:
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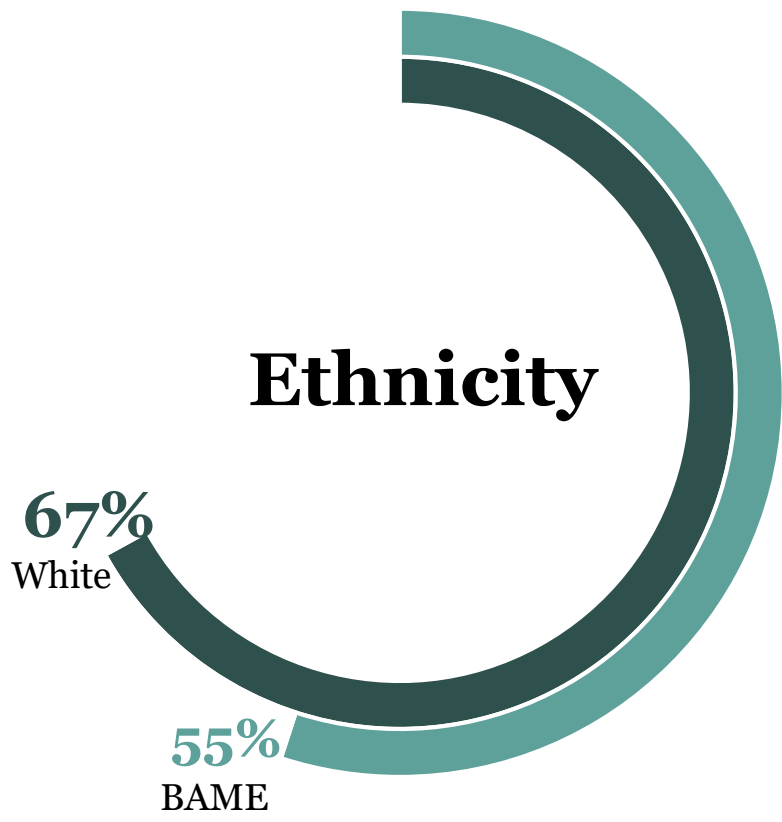
Those who were 18+ when applying, those who received a contextual offer, BAME applicants and those who were first in their families to apply are the most likely to agree that offers should be made <u>after</u> people have received their academic results

"I think universities/colleges should only make offers after people have received their academic results"
(NET: Agree)

Total:
56% NET: Agree
33% NET: Disagree

Age when applying
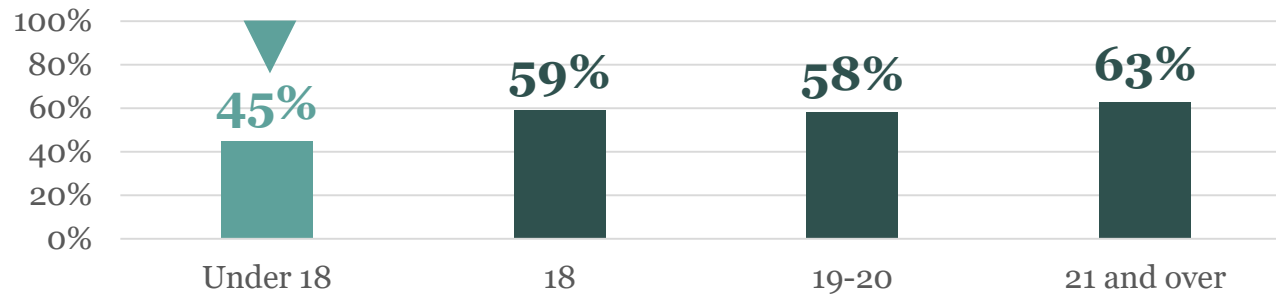
- Under 18: 45%
- 18: 59%
- 19-20: 58%
- 21 and over: 63%

Type of offer received

- Conditional offer: 56%
- Unconditional offer: 54%
- Conditional unconditional offer: 56%
- Contextual offer: 71%
- No offer: 57%

Ethnicity

- BAME: 60%
- White: 54%

First to apply / not first to apply in family

- First: 63%
- Not first: 49%

Q18. To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? Base: All applicants (n=1499)
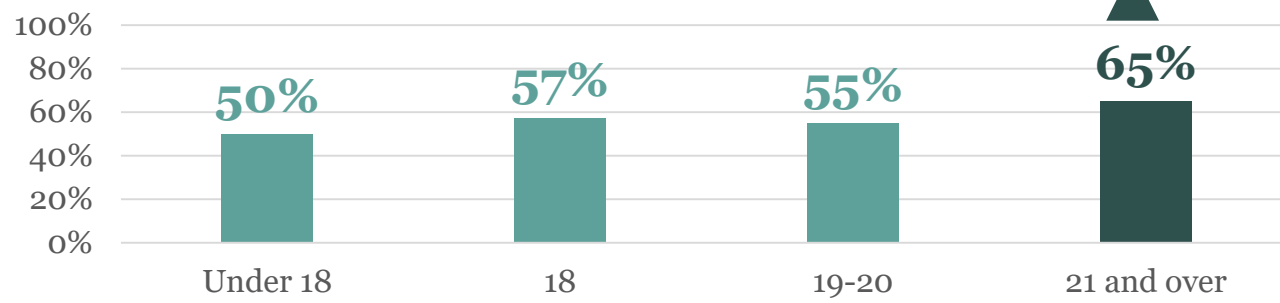
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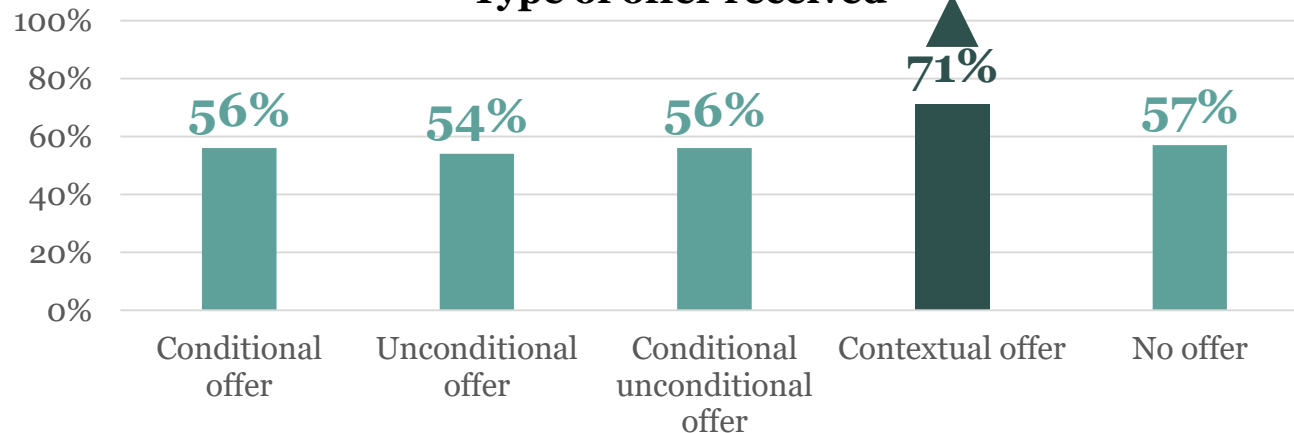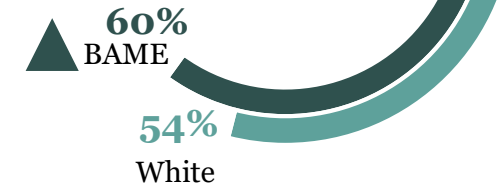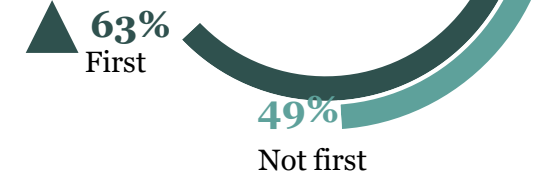
Applicants are most likely to be split on whether the process should begin before or after people have received their academic results
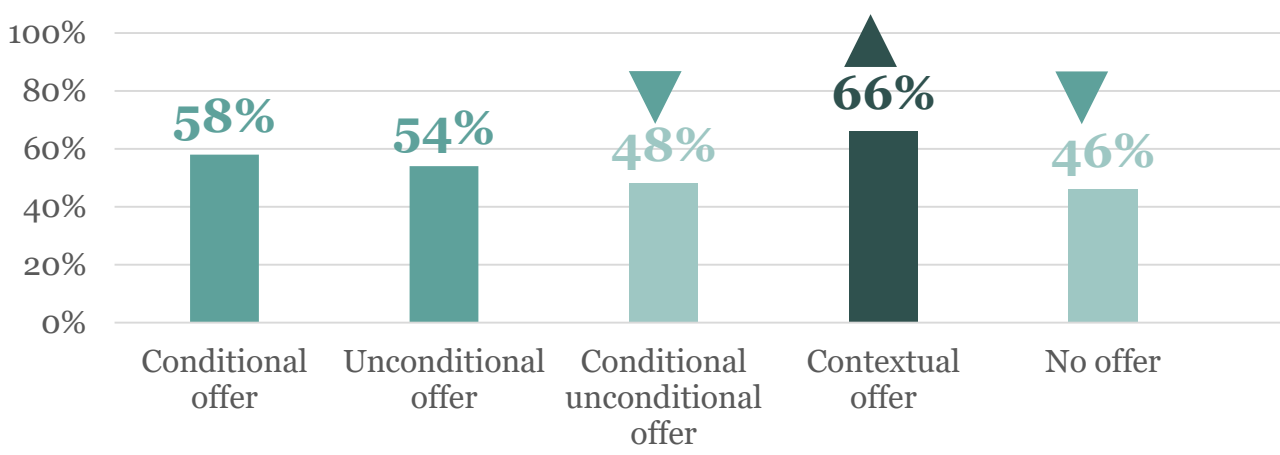
"I think the application process should only begin after people have received their academic results, even if the term started later"
(NET: Agree)

Age when applying

- Under 18: **50%**
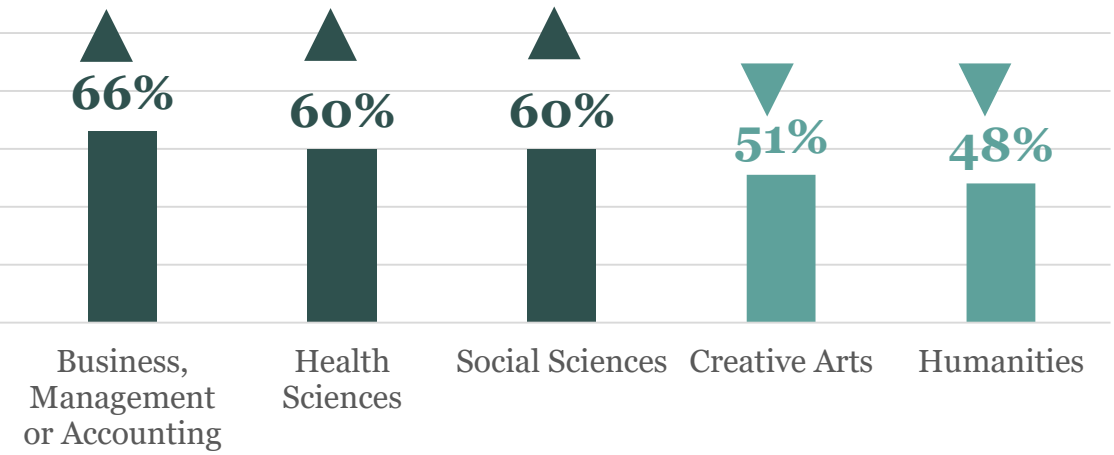- 18: **57%**
- 19-20: **55%**
- 21 and over: **65%**

Ethnicity

- BAME: **63%**
- White: **54%**

First to apply / not first to apply in family

- First: **59%**
- Not first: **53%**

Type of offer received

- Conditional offer: **58%**
- Unconditional offer: **54%**
- Conditional unconditional offer: **48%**
- Contextual offer: **66%**
- No offer: **46%**

Degree type

- Business, Management or Accounting: **66%**
- Health Sciences: **60%**
- Social Sciences: **60%**
- Creative Arts: **51%**
- Humanities: **48%**

Q18. To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? Base: All applicants (n=1499)

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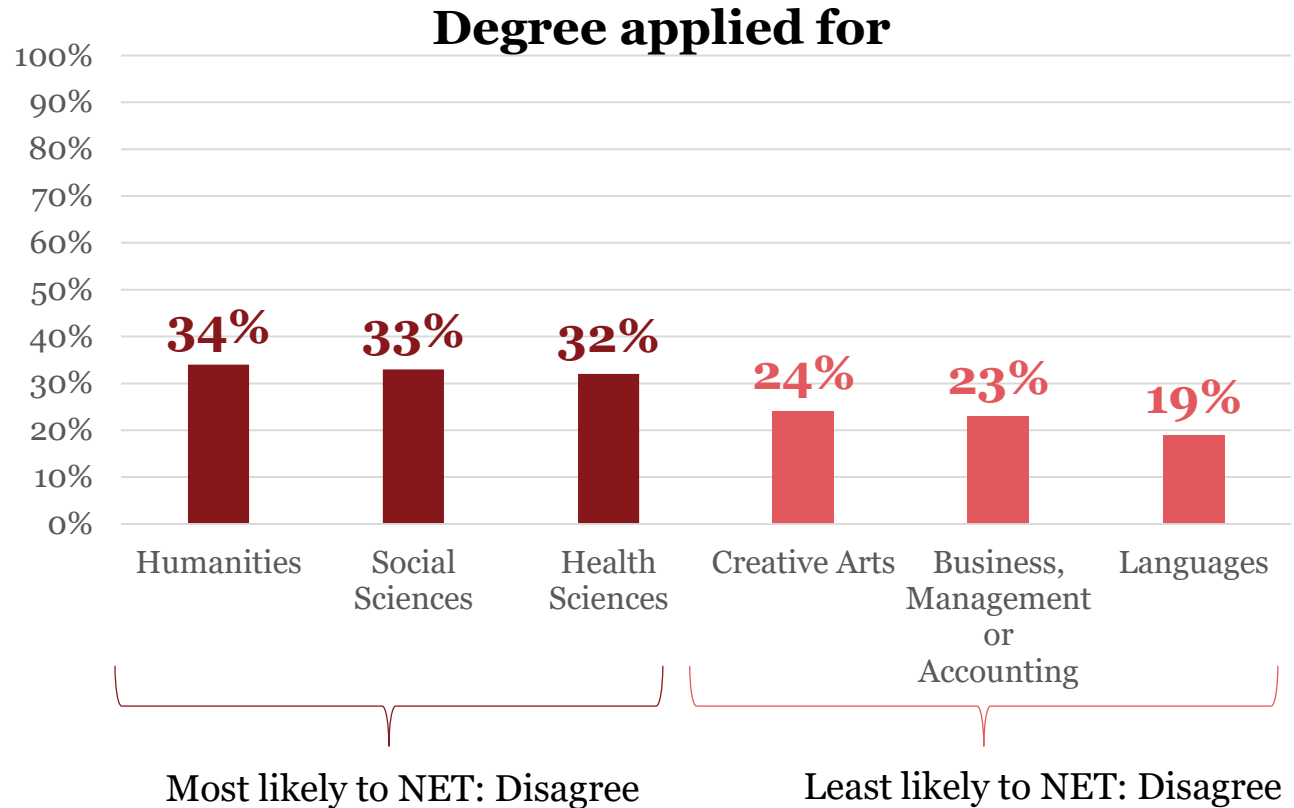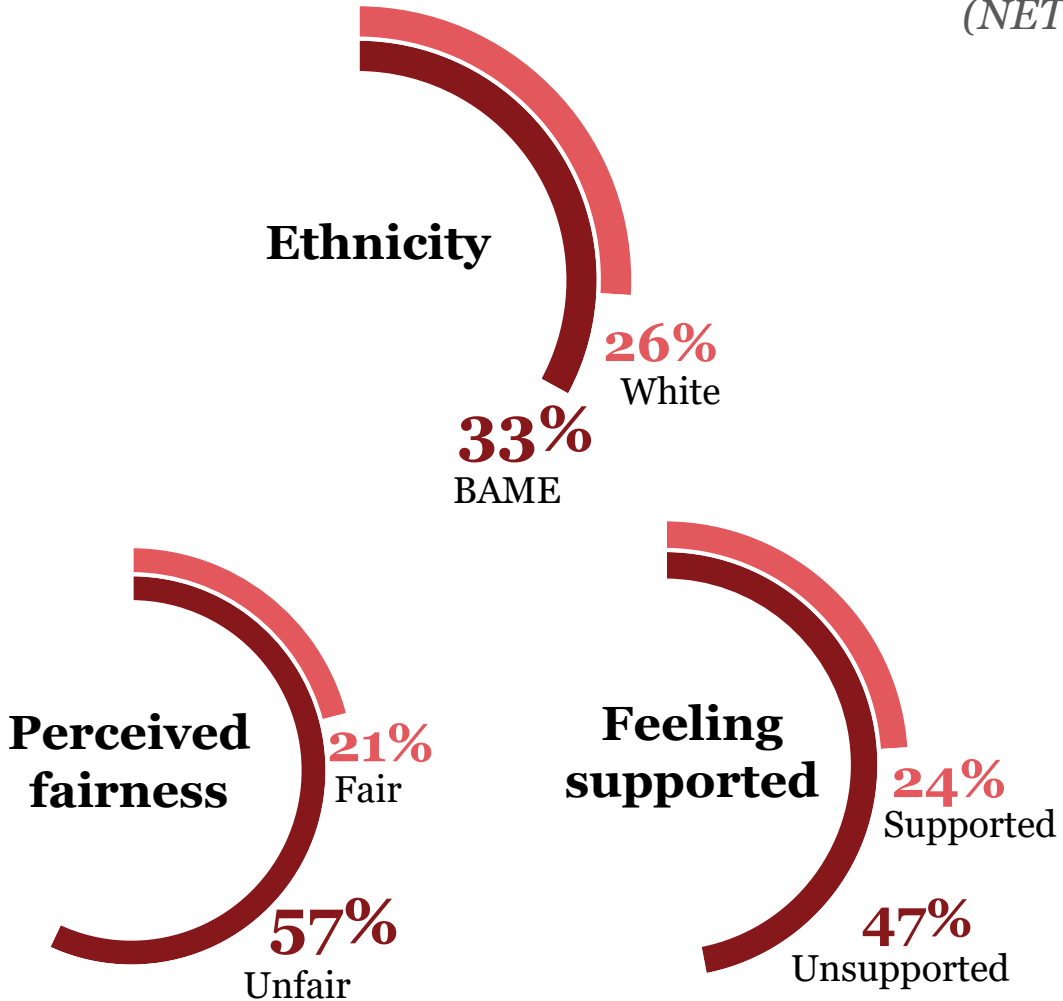
BAME, Humanities, Social Sciences or Health Sciences applicants are the most likely to disagree that the application process works well as it is

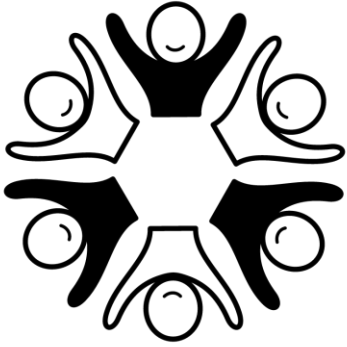*"The application works well as it is"* - **significant differences**
(NET: Disagree)

Total:
64% NET: Agree
28% NET: Disagree

Ethnicity

26% White

33% BAME

Perceived fairness

21% Fair

57% Unfair

Feeling supported

24% Supported

47% Unsupported

Degree applied for

Humanities	Social Sciences	Health Sciences	Creative Arts	Business, Management or Accounting	Languages
34%	33%	32%	24%	23%	19%

Most likely to NET: Disagree — Least likely to NET: Disagree

Q18. To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? Base: All applicants (n=1499)

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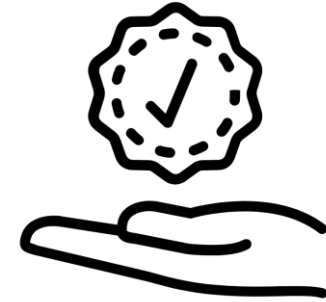ComRes

RECOMMENDED AREAS OF FOCUS

Savanta:

Fairness review and recommended areas of focus

BAME applicants

Those who are first in their immediate families to apply / whose parents don't have a degree

Explaining the meaning and implications of different offers

Careers advice – particularly in non-selective state schools and for more subjective courses

Help determining whether university is the right choice

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