

## Gen Alpha Munpacked

Rethinking Higher Education for Tomorrow's Learners



## Contents

## Introduction





At Havas People, we help universities and education brands make meaningful connections with students, not just when they apply, but long before they've even started considering their next steps.

### That's why we're turning our attention to Gen Alpha.

We've been working in higher education for over 35 years, supporting universities with everything from brand strategy to student recruitment. Alongside this, we've built a growing body of insight through our Youth Research series, helping institutions stay ahead of changing audience needs.

In recent years, we've explored the evolving undergraduate mindset through *The Cost of Learning* and *The Focused Generation* (UG editions) and uncovered the motivations and barriers facing postgraduates in *Two Audiences, One Goal* (PG edition). Each has been designed to offer universities practical insight into what young people value, how they make decisions, and where the sector needs to adapt.

Now, we're looking even further upstream.

#### Introduction

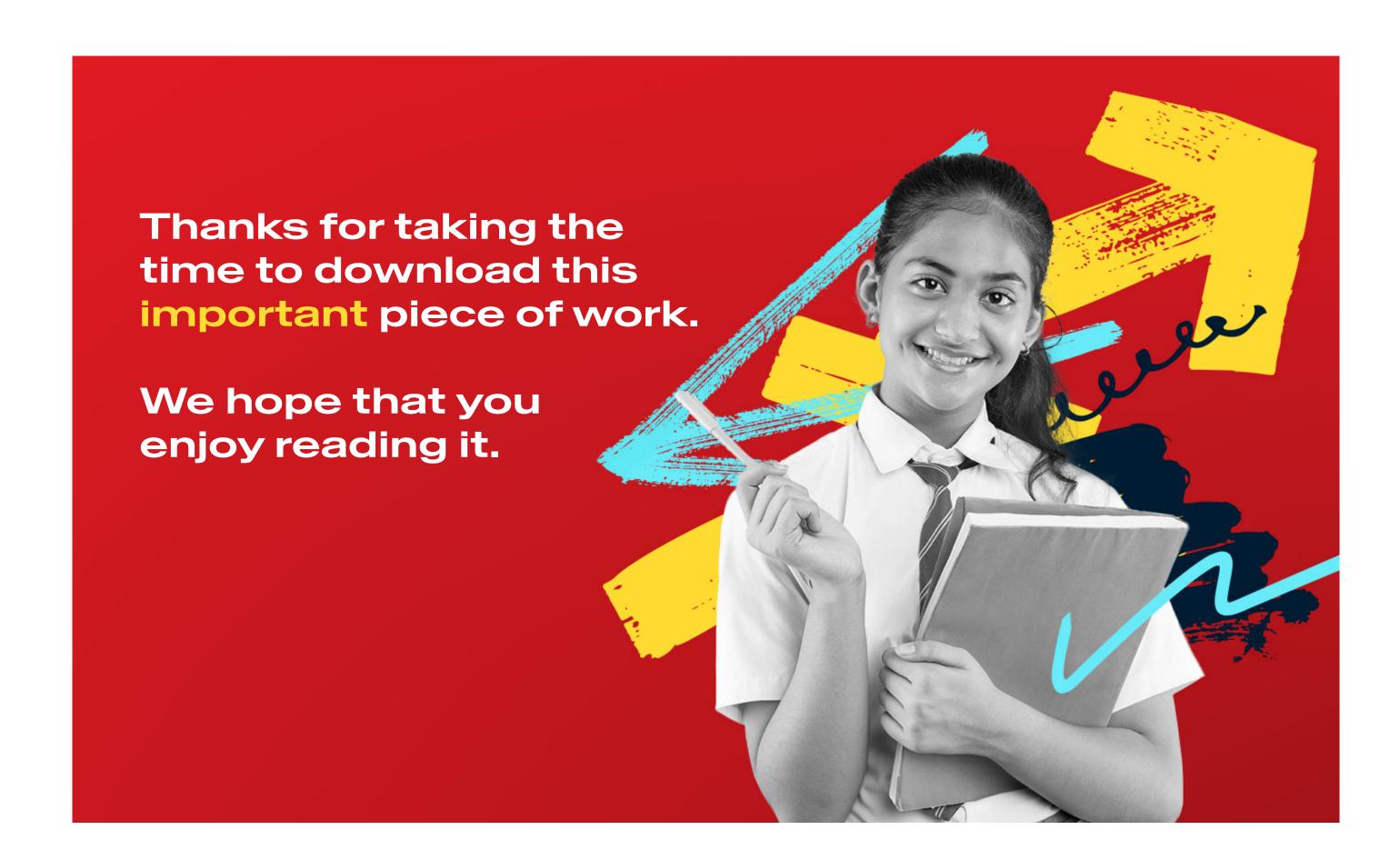
#### Why understanding Gen Alpha needs to start now

Born from 2010 onwards, Gen Alpha is mostly still in secondary school, but make no mistake, they are already shaping the future of higher education. What they value, how they spend their time, where they seek inspiration, all of it points to a student journey that's going to look very different in just a few short years.

This piece of research gives you an early view into the mindset of 12–14-year-olds in the UK. Through in-depth interviews with young people across England, we've explored how they think about the future, where universities fit in (if at all), and what's really shaping their decisions.

This report doesn't claim to have all the answers. Instead, it offers a clear starting point — rooted in honest conversation and real-life insight. It's about understanding the shape of things to come, so we can start showing up in the right places, with the right messages, at the right time.

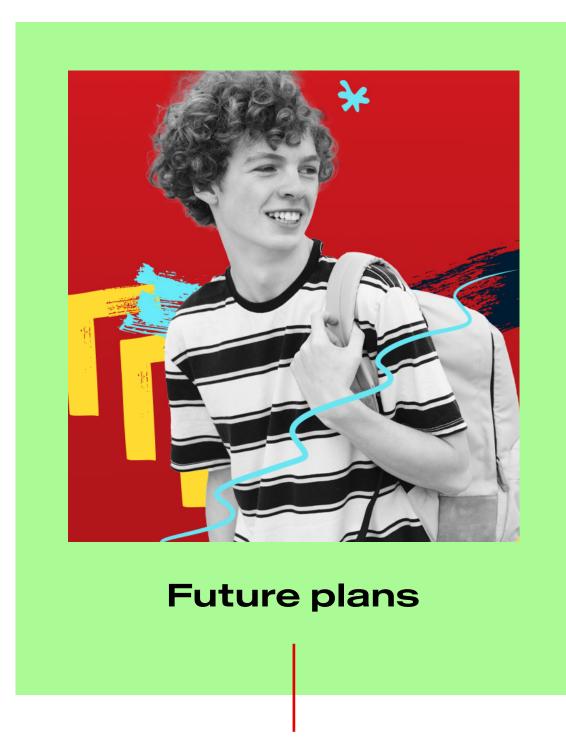
Because if we wait until they reach Year 12, it may already be too late.



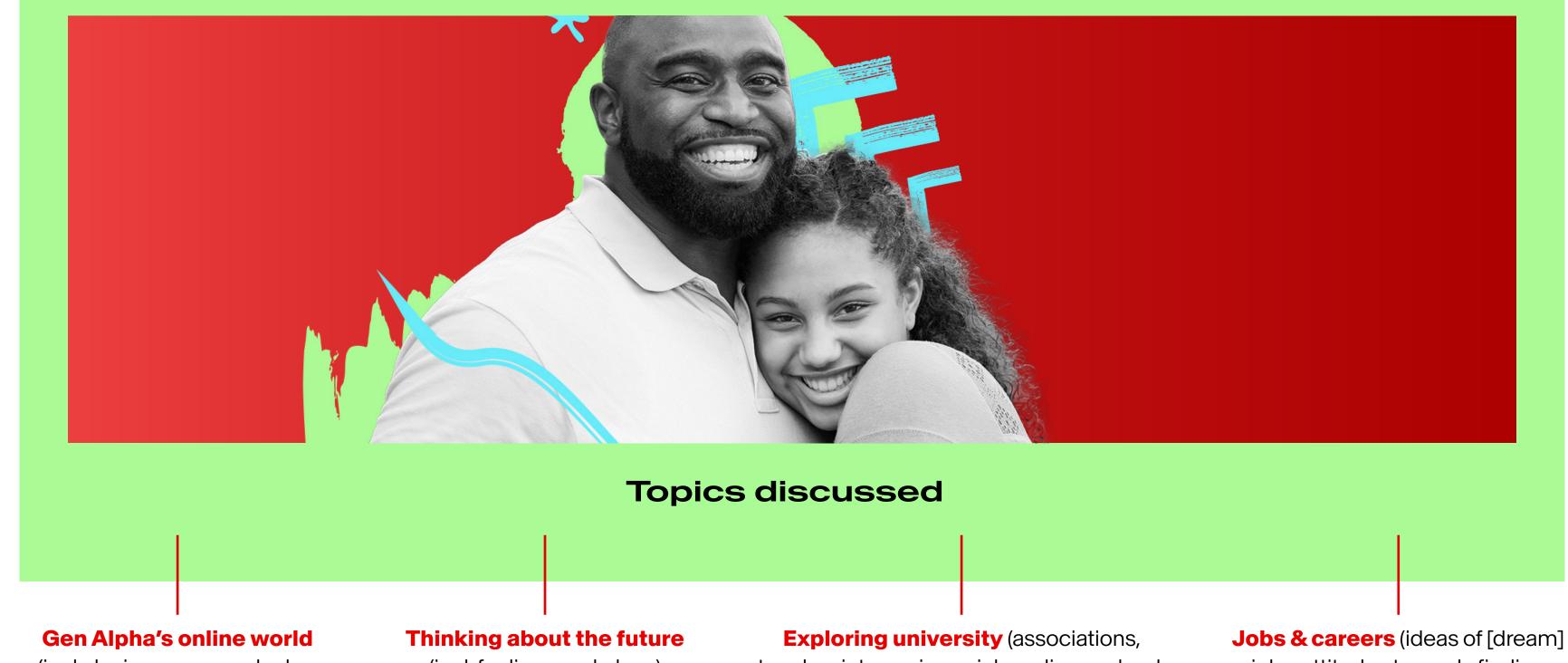


## Our methodology

10 in-depth interviews with 12-14-year-olds from across the UK



Not planning on going to university **n=1** Unsure about going to university **n=4** Currently thinking about going to university **n=5** 



(incl. device usage and rules, brands followed online, perceptions and use of AI, news consumption)

(incl. feelings and plans)

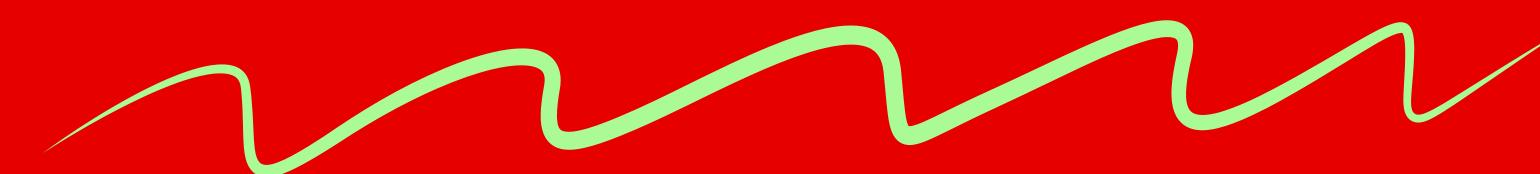
touchpoints e.g. in social media or school, reasons for considering or not considering, importance of university, feelings about costs) jobs, attitudes towards finding jobs in the future, feedback on popular companies/jobs)







## Online exposure instead of active search



Online exposure instead of active search

Born over a decade after Google was first launched, Gen Alpha aren't just digital natives — they've never known life without the internet

But this age group don't just spend time on their phone; they use a variety of devices for different things throughout the day. Although parental controls might keep device and internet usage in check, more than 99% of UK children aged 12-15 go online (Ofcom (2024). "Childrens Media literacy report" *Click here*) and spend on average 4 hours per day accessing the internet (Nominet (2023). "Digital Youth Index" *Click here*) across smartphones, tablets and computers. As a 'chronically online' age group, the time they spend on devices is extremely important to them, and the Gen Alpha teenagers we spoke to were acutely aware that online activity takes up (too) much of their time:



- I'm very online when it comes to, like, Snapchat and TikTok and that. It's probably a big part of my life.
- I probably should spend a little bit less time online, but I do like being online.
- I think I wish I used my time for, like, better things. Instead of just scrolling through social media.
- Scrolling, scrolling, could be doing better things really...
- I wish I could spend less time online due to the pleasant weather and the opportunity to hang out with friends.



Online exposure instead of active search

### Online discovery driven by the algorithm

As a group born and raised completely in the 21st century, it is almost impossible for Gen Alpha to imagine a time spent offline. This age group has grown up with the ability to access constant and instant connectivity through social media.

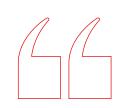
But this space is used not only to connect with friends, but also as a space for discovery of trends, brands, and current events.

Rather than using traditional search engines like Google and exploring websites, apps like TikTok are becoming central hubs for them to consolidate their interests.

In our 2024 report, *The Focused Generation*, we found that social media plays an increasingly central role in how prospective Gen Z students research universities, and we are now seeing a similar pattern emerge with Gen Alpha, but with a greater emphasis on TikTok. Social media is preferred for research as it provides peer shared experiences which feel more trustworthy and up-to-date. Short-form video content is especially appealing due to its visually engaging format and highly personalised algorithm.



I don't really go on any other websites.



On social media, when it comes to anything I want to find out, the likelihood is I'll put it in like the TikTok search bar instead of Google. I just find it easier.



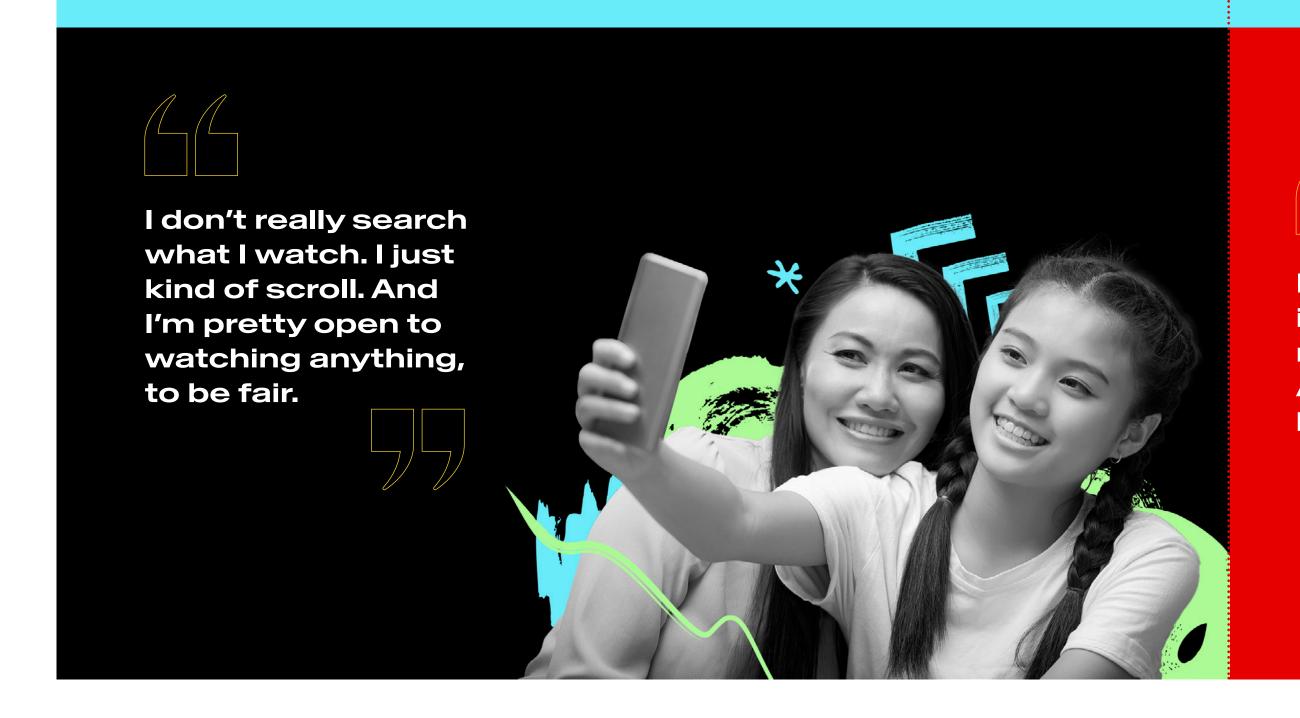




#### Online exposure instead of active search

Yet actively searching for new information seems to be the exception rather than the rule. Of the Gen Alpha students we interviewed, most let the algorithm decide what they see. They scroll through their feeds without really looking for anything specific, and they're content to watch whatever videos appear. There is an expectation to lean back and be informed, rather than proactively seeking out things.

This lack of proactivity might be most obvious when it comes to news. Many said that they don't actively engage with everyday news stories apart from sports, entertainment and celebrity content. Even at times when the news did find its way onto their social feeds, it didn't inspire them to find out more. Some saw news headlines as too mature to interest them properly, but recognised it would be something that would interest them at an older age.





I'm not that interested in the news at my age. Anyway, I might be later on.



I don't follow news, but it does come up a lot when I'm watching, like, TikTok.



It pops up enough that I probably don't need to follow it.









## Finding the human connection

Finding the human connection



Despite growing up with social media as a central force of communication and entertainment, Gen Alpha still place a lot of value on in-person communication and connections. This was especially true when it came to thinking about their future — they said they preferred face-to-face advice and support.



Hearing about people that have like gone on to become successful figures. I feel like that would probably relieve some anxiety.



My school also gets people from the universities to come to our school and do assemblies on it... Before that, I wasn't planning on going to university.





I think it's important to like make friends, because if you make friends then you can learn stuff... that you didn't already know and also have different perspectives.

Gen Alpha Unpacked





I feel like social media has affected people, before COVID no one was really on their phone that much and people were more social, now everyone's on their phone. No one really knows how to have a conversation, like outside of school we speak more on the phone than in real life.



Finding the human connection

When probed on finding out more about university life, they believed that connecting directly with current students would be the most interesting and engaging way to learn more — whether about university in general, if it might be a good option for them, or what university life would be like.



A student who's there at that like time, in the moment, will know the most.





I'd rather talk to an actual person about how it is, like a real person about uni, rather than like a company or a brand or like the uni themselves.





[M]aybe if they had, like, a bunch of students that came down from a uni and, like, gave a talk on their experience, like a day in the life, but in person and at school.





#### Finding the human connection



## The tension between online and offline

The 12-14-year-olds we interviewed were aware of the prevalence of fake news and had a healthy scepticism towards online content.

While they favour apps like TikTok for content, they have an understanding that not all information on social media is reliable, and that sometimes it's better to gain information through **in-person interactions** rather than relying solely on Instagram or TikTok.



I feel like, while the internet is entertaining, it's just it's not always reliable. I see something, and it could be fake news, you just never know. Which is why I feel like, face to face, I know I can see more that it's more genuine.



[In regard to news accounts on TikTok] I just block the account. Because sometimes it can be fake, and then it's just random stuff that I really don't care about.







### Inspiration happens at home

Inspiration happens at home

The Gen Alpha students we spoke to mostly make sense of their future options through what they observe closely around them.



Conversations at home are **powerful in influencing where they form their opinions** about study and career options. Those who already had an idea of what they might like to be when they grow up took a leaf out of their parents' book or were influenced by other adults they know.



My mum, she does real estate. And I've seen that it's quite fun to do.



I did talk to my grandma about the idea of doing something with psychology, because she knows about psychology.





My dad's a carpenter, and he took over my grandad's company. So I think it'd be cool to work as a carpenter as well.





I don't really know where it's come from. I just must have thought that's what I want to do... One of my mum's colleagues, she's a lawyer, and she was saying that she thinks it's best to avoid university, go down another route.





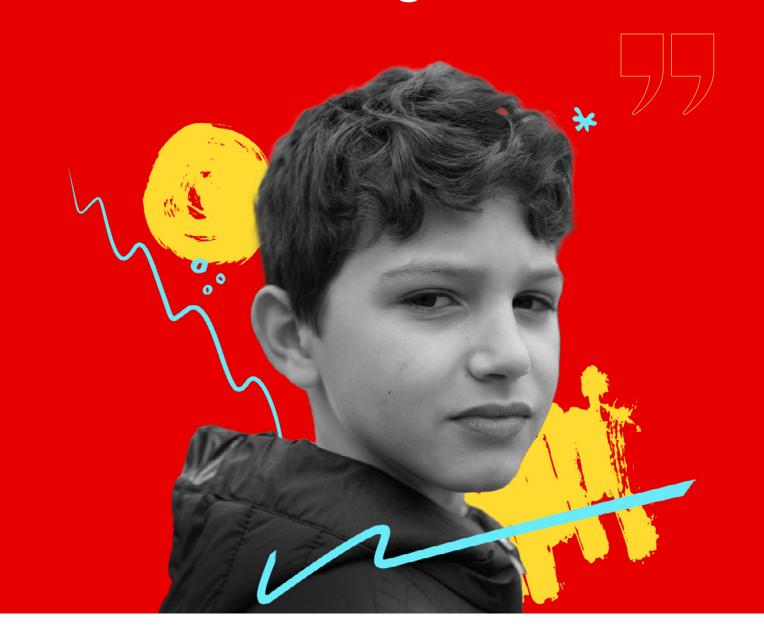
Inspiration happens at home

By contrast, career ideas were rarely inspired from conversations shared with friends or peers. When spending time with friends, the future doesn't seem to rank highly on the list of topics to discuss.





They don't have any idea what they want to do. I feel like there's some just trying to take it day by day, whereas maybe I'm a bit more thought out when it comes to things like this.





Inspiration happens at home

The role of schools





My teachers aren't really talking about university, just about GCSEs at the moment.



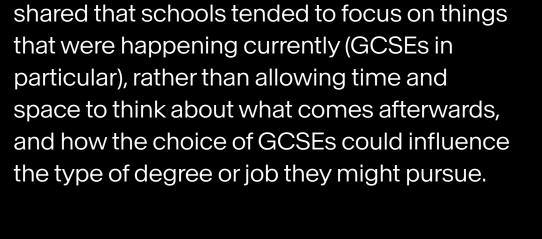


School have never brought up like any ideas for you to follow after, after you leave, not once.





School or teachers...they're not talking to you about the future stuff quite yet.



In several interviews, the young people



All they talk about is how this is what you're going to do as a GCSE. But they don't go into like depth on what it can do for you outside of GCSE.





I don't want them to start talking about it, when it's like, when we're in a later year and there's not much time left to decide what you want to do.





#### Inspiration happens at home

When probed, our Gen Alpha interviewees shared the view that **schools should champion conversations about the future.** Even though most schools only teach up to GCSE level, there's still a strong expectation that they should provide the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in the future. To feel prepared to make decisions about the next steps in their education, they believed the onus was on schools to provide the right information:

I'm not really sure who is in charge when it comes to that, but I reckon there'd be someone [at school] that could give some guidance, or there'd be events that you could partake in that would show you a bit about what there is in store.



[The future]
it's something
I should start
thinking about but
also think school
should tell us
about it as well.



I think the students could do their own research as well, but maybe they, like, are the ones who should listen, and the teachers are the ones who should teach us.



**Why?** Maybe because of the format of school: teachers teach, students sit and learn. Now, social media is mirroring this. The app serves you content — you just have to scroll and consume it.





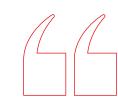
### Section O3 Inspiration happens at home

### Practical issues absorbed by parents

It became clear that parents don't just inspire conversations about the future — they may also be a barrier for young people in thinking through logistical and practical issues for themselves. For example, for those who were planning on going to university, any cost concerns sat primarily with their parents.

The 12–14-year-olds we talked to anticipated that parents would be there to support them, as long as they were following their interests and figuring out what they wanted to do.

In fact, when asked about advice they had received at home, some young people said their parents encouraged them to focus on enjoying learning about their favourite subjects, rather than worrying about questions or concerns along the way.



I don't really look at the cost. I guess it's probably quite expensive.



I thought about it, but not much...
My mum said she's already been thinking about it.



Anything that could happen, she'll help me out with it.





They like, tell me to go, like, live your life and stuff, enjoy it.





Just to enjoy it and learn as much as you can while you're there.







## Future thoughts follow simple logic

Future thoughts follow simple logic

#### Enjoyment as a key driver



In general, our Gen Alpha interviewees seemed to think about the future in terms of what they are enjoying now. Enjoyment was top of the agenda when thinking about their GCSE choices, as well as whether they could see themselves going to university.



[On study]
If you didn't
enjoy it, then you
wouldn't want to
keep doing it.





I picked what I want to do [GCSEs].
Music, Photography (because I won't mind like being a photographer) and, oh yeah, and Business Media, because that sounds very interesting.



Geography and Art.
Mostly because
I really enjoy
them subjects.
But History, I just
wanted to learn
more because it's
really interesting.



While there is a natural connection between enjoying subjects and feeling a desire to pursue them further, this doesn't always translate into a clear plan.



In theory, the young people saw universities as a way to continue studying a favourite subject. In practice, enjoyment alone didn't give them a decided route forward.



I'm at the beginning stage because I'm not very sure what universities involve and what apprenticeships involve. Like, it's quite confusing all of that.



The connection between enjoyable subjects and an enjoyable degree appears to be shallow. The young people might have a good sense of what interests them, but no obvious clarity on how to use that.

Gen Alpha Unpacked

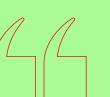
Future thoughts follow simple logic

#### The dream job equation

Just as enjoyment shapes choices for GCSEs, it also is present in discussions about future careers. We noticed a kind of formula in how Gen Alpha arrive at their dream job choices. In many cases, enjoying subject X or Y led to imagining a career doing X and Y professionally.

I'd like to have a job with sports, because that's what I enjoy doing. But I also study German, so I could maybe even bring that skill abroad and work abroad doing something there.





I want to be a lawyer. Next thing after that's probably a pianist, because I do like playing on piano and stuff.

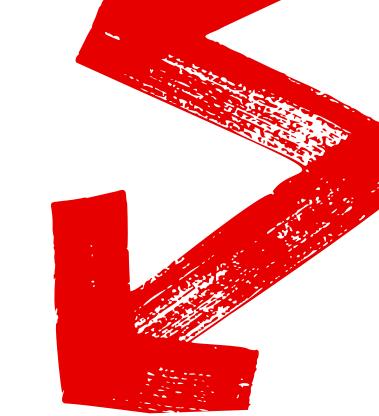


While this is a simplistic way for them to conceptualise their future careers, it suggests a sense of possibility and imagination. At 12–14-years-old, they are not yet thinking about the path to their dream jobs as being obscured by practical realities — they are still in the wonderful position where everything feels within reach.





Future thoughts follow simple logic



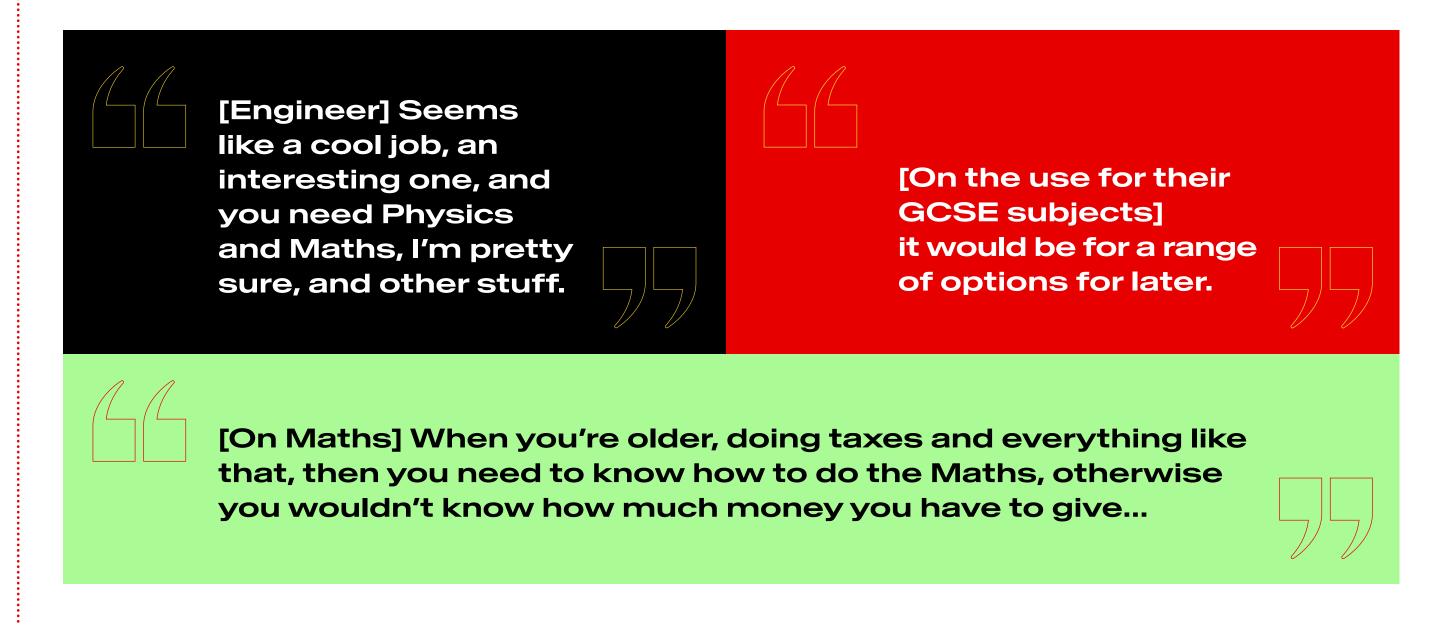
### Useful and non-useful subjects

While fun is the main factor in deciding what they want to study, some Gen Alpha students we spoke to recognised that 'useful' subjects could **open doors for them in the future**.

Maths is more useful than, like, History, in my opinion, because Maths is used every single day. History, I think, is just kind of facts and knowledge about the past.

[On history]
Well, it's not really useful in the future, but is just educational. You get to learn stuff.

They generally understood the value of sticking with a subject if they found it fun or interesting, but that didn't always mean they saw all enjoyable subjects as equally useful. Some subjects were identified as being more **practical**, which got them thinking about how they could be used in the real world — for example, a knowledge of Maths supporting filing taxes.



But the thinking process for determining which subjects were 'useful' was often lacking in nuance. For example, History was seen as less practical than Maths, based on the idea that numbers are visible everywhere you go. Subject decisions tended to be biased towards what was clear and evident, without requiring much further thought.

Gen Alpha Unpacked



## Positivity and flexibility outweigh anxieties



Positivity and flexibility outweigh anxieties

#### A sense of hope

Through our research, we set out to explore our Gen Alpha interviewees' thoughts on the future as a concept, and any fears or worries they might have about it. Surprisingly, we found that most of them thought about the future in a positive light — full of **potential and possibilities**.





I'm excited for it. I love, like, the future and stuff, so I want to know what happens. And I already have an idea of where I want to go.



I'm happy thinking about the future, because I'm excited to meet new people and learn new things and experience new things.



It makes me excited because obviously when I go to university, I'm going to meet new people.



**Gen Alpha aren't weighed down by practical details yet**. When they think about what's to come, their first
response isn't to calculate the obstacles or difficulties that
might be experienced along the way. Similar to the simplicity
of dream jobs (I like X, so a job doing X would be fun),
they see the future as a whole as not overly complicated.

It's also fair to say that some of the appeal lies in the fact that **the future feels like a big unknown** to this age group. The 12-to-14-year-olds we spoke to seemed to appreciate that there's a lot more to explore beyond the classroom and the current focus on GCSEs they experience at school. The newness of the future, whether that means new people, new things to learn, and new experiences to try, is a major attraction that fills them with excitement.



Positivity and flexibility outweigh anxieties

We did encounter some small anxieties over the future after probing.

[On worries]
Just like moving away
from home to go to uni.



It's essentially another type of school, isn't it, but you can end up with huge debts from it.





I've also seen or heard how much debt everyone gets into by going to university, right?



It probably will worry me a bit because obviously when you sleep in there, you won't, really have anyone. I'm guessing there will be a lot more work since you sleep there too.



But this soon gave way to more relaxed attitudes. Overall, for the individuals that we spoke to, brushing aside any worries to focus on the bigger picture didn't seem to be too difficult a task. For the majority, there was a sense that you'd cross that bridge when you come to it.



Positivity and flexibility outweigh anxieties

#### Time on their side



Another aspect of the future gave our interviewees cause for hope. They might feel excited to find out what it has in store, but it's also far enough away not to cause them much stress. When we asked about the need to prepare in advance for university or career plans, it wasn't that they didn't see the value in preparation — they just preferred a **flexible approach** that didn't involve too much work ahead of time.



You shouldn't really invest too much earlier on. You should just wait and see what happens.







Well, I'll obviously prefer to know how I'm gonna plan, step by step, but I think as time goes on, I'm gonna get more of an idea.



The young people saw events in the near future as something to focus their energy on, rather than making long-term decisions that might change anyway.



Schooling may have something to do with this, given the emphasis placed on GCSEs rather than preparation for life beyond them. It could be that young people are less inclined to take this upon themselves to figure this out, instead relying on teachers to set an example.

When asked whether they had received much advice about the future, their responses tended to focus on how far away the future feels.



I don't really get advice about university. Think it's too far away.





It just feels like quite a long way off. Yeah, I think I'll probably start worrying about it in year 10.





#### Positivity and flexibility outweigh anxieties



If the future is exciting because it remains unknown, this age group is largely content to keep it that way. **Curiosity has its limits.** They're not prepared to invest time in research and preparation for something that feels too far removed from their everyday lives.

There were a few instances that showed the need to **prepare in advance**. But those who had done a lot of thinking about big topics seemed to recognise that this was rare for someone their age.



[About others' thoughts on life beyond school] Maybe they're just not thinking quite as hard about it... I just think it would be better for me to start planning now than be procrastinating later.





I feel like my friends probably aren't as bothered but I like having the idea of a kind of safety.







Positivity and flexibility outweigh anxieties

Preparation to work out ambitions for the future isn't seen as worthless — that's something all interviewees agreed on. It's just not something that's expected.

While the future did seem generally abstract and quite far away, it was interesting to note how young people's opinions changed over a seemingly short amount of time. One interviewee, reflecting on ideas they had in the past for potential jobs, said they had outgrown thoughts about the future that they had held only a year or two earlier.



[On wanting to become a police officer] 'When I was younger, you didn't really know what stress was or anything. You didn't really think about the future as much. I'd just say what I'd want to be. You wouldn't really know the risks.





Even if young people recognise that they're still too young to make fully informed decisions and plans for later life, they are aware when they've had to reassess hopes and expectations they held previously.

They might feel too young to plan properly, but they still recognise that they would make better judgments now than their past selves.







## University as a mysterious gateway

University as a mysterious gateway

## A lack of knowledge on university

The future appears as a big unknown to these young people, and life at university is no exception. While some found the prospect exciting, many felt unsure about key aspects of the experience and the day-to-day practicalities of university life.



Nobody really like talks about it, so I don't really know what universities there are.





I don't think you sleep in universities here. Or is that college?





University as a mysterious gateway





As schools hadn't filled the gaps in their knowledge about university, the information they had was shaped by external sources. When considering what day-to-day university life might be like, several had mixed ideas influenced by content they had consumed.



I wish I knew
more about, like,
the sort of stuff
we'd be doing,
because I don't
know anything
much about it...
I only know stuff
from movies. And
obviously, movies
don't really tell
the truth most
of the time.





While some may have had conversations at home about the prospect of university and its importance, some of the answers we received showed a clear lack of conviction when estimating what life there would look like.

While a few had made up their minds that they were set on pursuing a university degree, it was rare for them to have chosen a specific place in which to do it.



I don't know about certain uni, but I know I want to study.



Nobody really, like, talks about it. So, I don't really know what universities there are.



This may be part and parcel of the laid-back approach to the future we've already explored. A vague idea of university might feel adequate simply because there's still plenty of time to bear it in mind. However, there also seemed to be some confusion about the core differences between university options and alternative pathways.



[After confirming they want to attend university] I think I would start doing apprenticeships... I don't know. I think it's a good option to do.





University as a mysterious gateway

## The link between university and a good career

Even if the details struck young people as a mystery, there was a widespread belief that going to university would equip you with what's needed to land a good career. Without much examination or reflection, university generally seemed to be the place you'd go if you wanted to find a better, more **secure** job.

It's clear that the idea of a good career after university was gained from those with authority, parents and teachers, despite young people's ignorance of the ins and outs of university life.



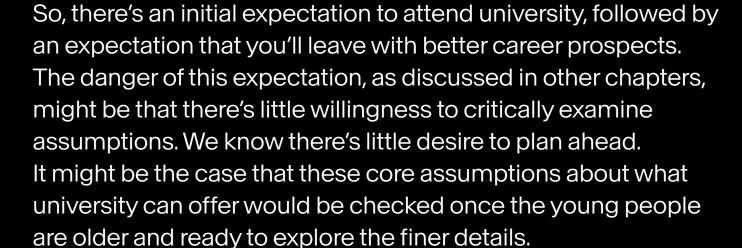
- You can tell that obviously they went far in life because they went to university. You kind of see that as like an obvious stepping stone for kind of being successful in life.
- I'd say it's going to get me further in life. If I go to university, it's going to set me on kind of a good life.
- If two people are going to sign up for a job, they're probably going to pick the person who's been to university, rather than the person who's not been to university.



Those who weren't so sure about going to university spoke to a sense of **societal expectation** that universities now represent. You leave school, then you go to uni. For them attending university felt like a socially expected stepping stone rather than something that would necessarily better their opportunities in the long run.



Getting actual experience can help more than just being cooped in a classroom, but I feel like it's just a social norm.





University as a mysterious gateway

### What young people wanted to see from universities

The lack of clarity surrounding the fundamental aspects of university life was highlighted during an exercise we conducted towards the end of the interviews.

We asked the young people to imagine that a university was planning to make a TikTok-style video to encourage people to find out more about them.

The answers we received reflected the need to gain basic information about what happens behind university doors and what the overall experience has to offer.



Maybe some photos of like students and stuff, and then maybe what subjects they do, and maybe like people in a classroom and like the teacher just showing the work and seeing it.





It would describe if the teachers are nice there, if the education is actually good there, what the school itself is like, is it hard?



Just how they are living through it... and what their experience has been.



Most of the time, the young people didn't focus on the style or format of the video. It was more important for them to populate their ideal university videos with lots of content covering the many sides of the experience. We gained the sense that if these videos were made to young people's preferences, they'd feel more like guided insights into the university rather than an advert or social post.

University as a mysterious gateway

Many preferred a video format which is the kind of content young people are already very used to seeing on the home pages of their social media apps.



Some people don't want to spend 10 minutes watching a tour of the school. Some people just want to watch something like a trending dance or something. You can earn more followers and likes that way.

If universities were to tap into trends rather than focusing directly on everyday lived experiences, there is a possibility that young people would stop and pay more attention.

Finding **relatable** entry points into their lives could be key. However, this approach is still likely to leave gaps in understanding — there remains a significant amount that is unknown about university life.







#### To sum up

Gen Alpha is growing up in a world where discovery is driven by the scroll and not the search. This is a curious generation, but they are reluctant to always flex the muscle of curiosity. They are open-minded, but not always well-informed. And while university might be on the cards for many, it's still a blurry concept — undefined and largely unexplained.

While much of their thinking remains in flux, they've made a few things very clear: **they value enjoyment, authenticity, and simplicity.** This generation doesn't want pressure — they want possibilities. They don't need polish — they need people they can relate to. They want a better sense of what's out there, and guidance on how to make sense of it.

So, what they'll need tomorrow is guidance, clarity and real-world relevance.

For Higher Education providers, this shouldn't be a call to panic, but a call to prepare. There is a real opportunity for universities to show up early, speak the language of Gen Alpha and to earn their trust.

There is real value in getting ahead of the game by rethinking how you show up, what you say, and when you start the conversation. This may involve working more closely with parents and teachers. It may mean empowering university students to act as the influencers they already are. And it certainly means being present where Gen Alpha are — online, offline, and at home.

If you'd like to discuss how our team can help you act on any of the findings and recommendations in this report, please contact:

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# Understanding Tomorrow's Students, Today

We're Havas People. And we believe in starting early. Not just because the journey to university begins long before UCAS. But because younger audiences are already forming opinions — about the world, their future, and what's possible.

That's why we help universities build meaningful connections sooner. Connections rooted in insight. Shaped by strategy. And brought to life through bold creative that speaks their language.

With decades of experience in education marketing, we know what it takes to engage future students in ways that stick. Whether that's defining your brand, reaching new audiences, or crafting campaigns that cut through the noise — this is where we thrive.

You've seen what makes 12–14-year-olds tick. Now let's use it to get ahead of the curve. And start building preference, trust, and ambition — together.

If you'd like to discuss any of our findings, or chat about how our team can support you, please contact:

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