

Young People's Career Ambitions (YPCA) 2025/26

Briefing Paper
Evaluation & Research
Team

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Executive Summary

Background: This briefing paper summarises the **Young People's Career Ambitions (YPCA) 2025/26** research, which forms part of SDS's wider programme of work to understand young people's career aspirations and post-school experiences in Scotland. The research is designed to inform SDS service delivery and partner service delivery across Scotland, and to support Scottish Government policy development, with a focus on equality groups (including deprivation via SIMD, disability, care experience, ethnicity, and sexual orientation).

Research approach: The research gathered responses from **2,859 school leavers (aged 16+)** across all 32 Scottish local authorities, targeting those who left school between September 2023 and September 2024, with fieldwork conducted over five weeks in October/November 2025. Findings are presented across four themes: **Post-school Journeys, Influencers and Support Systems, Skills, Confidence & Barriers**, and **Future Career Aspirations**.

Key findings: The findings highlight that **post-school journeys** are shaped by socioeconomic factors (with more complex pathways among those from the most deprived areas), and that Parent(s)/Carer(s) are the most **influential people** in career decision-making, though young people from more deprived areas report greater influence from careers advisers and youth/community workers. Alongside key people, young people most commonly cite **factors** such as learning new skills or being good at something, doing something they believe in, and interests and hobbies as shaping career decisions, with those in more deprived areas more likely to be influenced by the need to earn money. Overall **satisfaction with current career path** is high (87% satisfied, rising to 92% excluding those unemployed), while common **perceived barriers** to future career progress include lack of opportunities, limited work experience or contacts, and confidence.

Young people's views of the **careers support in school** are generally positive. Most felt supported and encouraged to make their own decisions and agreed that their careers adviser listened and valued their ideas, with those from more deprived areas reporting the most positive experiences. Outwith SDS services, young people most commonly use general internet/online job searches and support from teachers/lecturers/education staff, with few accessing external services such as job centres or recruitment consultants.

Executive Summary...continued

Key findings...continued: Confidence in **Career Management Skills (CMS)** is broadly high (including understanding skills, strengths, and experiences, building relationships, and making informed decisions), while **participation in groups, clubs, and activities** remains uneven between those from the most and least deprived areas.

Looking forward, young people have diverse **industry/job preferences**, commonly including engineering, creative industries, construction, caring, digital/IT, medicine/health, and teaching/education. However, differences in industry/job preferences by sex persist, and patterns differ by SIMD. When asked about their **ideal job**, many named specific roles, although around one in six were unsure. In terms of **earnings**, almost half expect to earn £20k–£50k annually in their ideal job at age 30, with notable differences by sex (males expecting higher pay) and by deprivation (those from the most deprived areas expecting lower pay and being more likely to be unsure). Consistent with previous findings, the most **desirable job factors** cited by young people include good pay, job satisfaction, and work–life balance. The **skills/attributes** young people think they will need for their future career include communication, confidence, and a positive attitude.

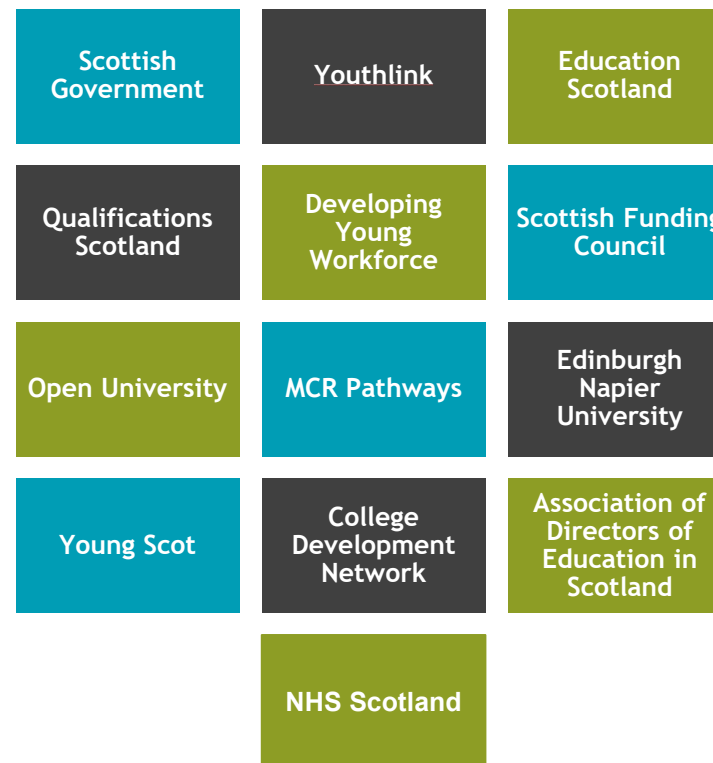
Background

Skills Development Scotland (SDS) is the national skills agency. As the provider of Scotland’s careers services, SDS supports individuals to develop the skills and mindset needed to make decisions about their learning and career paths. SDS’s strategic plan (2022-27) sets out our goal of ensuring that young people are equipped with the skills they need, at every stage of their lives, to have a rewarding career¹.

Through a comprehensive programme of research, led by the SDS Evaluation and Research team in partnership with CIAG² Planning and Performance colleagues and other departments across SDS, we aim to understand and support the career aspirations and development of young people in Scotland. This research aims to inform policy, enhance careers services, and support young people to acquire the skills, guidance, and opportunities needed to achieve their career goals.

SDS works in collaboration with various partners within Scotland’s careers landscape to deliver this programme of research. The list of external partners is shown in **Figure 1**.

Figure 1: External partners collaborating on this research.



¹ SDS (2022) [Skills Development Scotland Strategic Plan 2022-27 – Skills for a Changing World](#)

² [Careers Information, Advice and Guidance](#)

The Young People's Career Ambitions (YPCA) research

The Young People's Career Ambitions (YPCA) research is one of three main projects within SDS's programme of young people research. The YPCA research aims to understand the career aspirations, influences, and challenges faced by young people in Scotland. This research is focussed on recent school leavers and gathers feedback at a crucial phase of a young person's journey when they have transitioned from school into the next phase of their career. The previous iteration of this research (2024/25) captured the views of 2,919 young people (aged 16+ years) who left school in the 2022/2023 academic year³.

The results from the YPCA research are shared with SDS colleagues and with our partners to help shape and improve service delivery. The research is also shared with the Scottish Government to support policy development. Through our work with external partners, YPCA research has become a key source of insight on school leavers' career ambitions and their post-school transitions in Scotland.

An essential element of this research is also to view the findings from an equality perspective, and to capture the views of young people with protected characteristics. Protected characteristics include ethnicity, indicators of deprivation/poverty (SIMD)⁴, disability, care experience, and sexual orientation.

Key areas covered

The YPCA research collects views from school leavers across four key themes:

- **Young People's Post-school Journeys**
- **Influences and Support Systems**
- **Skills, Confidence, and Barriers**
- **Future Career Aspirations**

A broad range of areas are explored within these themes, including young people's transitions into work or education, their satisfaction with their career paths, the influences shaping their decisions, and their perceived career barriers. Young people's confidence in career management skills, the careers support they received in school, their future job expectations, and their use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in career planning are also areas explored in the research.

³ SDS (2024) [Young People's Career Ambitions \(YPCA\) Briefing Paper](#)

⁴ SIMD (The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation) is a tool used to identify areas in Scotland experiencing the highest levels of deprivation. SIMD 1 represents young people

from the 20% most deprived areas in Scotland, and SIMD 5 represents those from the least 20% deprived areas in Scotland (Scottish Government (2020) [Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation](#))).

Research approach

The target cohort for participation in the YPCA research is young people who have left school between September 2023 and September 2024. All school leavers (aged 16+ years) who left school in Scotland within this timeframe, and for whom SDS holds a valid email address or mobile phone number, were invited to take part in the research.

The fieldwork was carried out over a five-week period between October and November 2025. Responses are weighted to ensure the results are representative of the Scottish school leaver population.

The questionnaire was designed by the SDS Evaluation and Research team in collaboration with SDS colleagues working in CIAG and other departments, as well as our key external partners outlined in **Figure 1**.

Respondent profile

In total, **2,859 young people responded** to the research. Responses were received across all 32 local authorities in Scotland. **Table 1** outlines the responses by age, sex, and SIMD. More detailed information on the respondent profile is provided in **Appendix 1**.

Table 1: Respondents by age, sex, and SIMD.

Demographic	Response %
Age	
16	1%
17	33%
18	34%
19	32%
20	<1%
Sex	
Male	45%
Female	53%
Prefer not to say	2%
Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD)	
1 (most deprived 20% areas)	25%
2	21%
3	19%
4	19%
5 (least deprived 20% areas)	16%

About this report

This report summarises the key findings from the YPCA research. The questions young people were asked included a variety of 'select one option only' or 'select multiple option' questions. These are reported as percentages where relevant. Young people were also asked to rate specific statements on a 1-10 scale for some questions. These are presented as mean point (average) scores. The questions young people answered on a Likert scale (i.e. 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree', etc) are presented as the 'top two' box in the results (the proportion of those answering 'agree' or 'strongly agree', etc).

Young people were also asked open-ended questions where they were free to answer in their own words. Comments that young people provided were thematically analysed with the assistance of proprietary artificial intelligence software. The sentiment of each theme (whether the theme was positive, neutral, or negative) is provided where applicable. Missing, non-response, 'don't know', and 'prefer not to say' responses have been excluded from the analysis. Please note that not all respondents answered every question, therefore base counts vary across questions. Base counts are presented as the unweighted counts.

A series of infographics focusing on protected characteristics have also been produced. Additional reports on our research with young people can be found on the SDS website⁵. If you have any queries about this research, please contact SDS's Evaluation and Research team at evaluation&research@sds.co.uk.

If using material from this report, please cite this paper and reference as below:

SDS (2026). Young People's Career Ambitions 2025/26 Briefing Paper. Skills Development Scotland.

⁵ <https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/what-we-do/evaluation-and-research/ciag-research>

Young People's Post-school Journeys

Mapping the post-school transitions of young people

Young people were asked to specify:

- (i) their **preferred destination when they were leaving school**,
- (ii) their **initial destination immediately upon leaving school**, and
- (iii) what they are **currently doing now**.

Figure 2 shows that most young people planned to attend college or university.

University tends to be a linear path – many of those who plan to go to university usually do, and few attend without having planned to.

College, however, involves more varied transitions. While many follow through with plans to attend, others who hadn't planned to go also enter college. College also acts as a gateway to many other destinations.

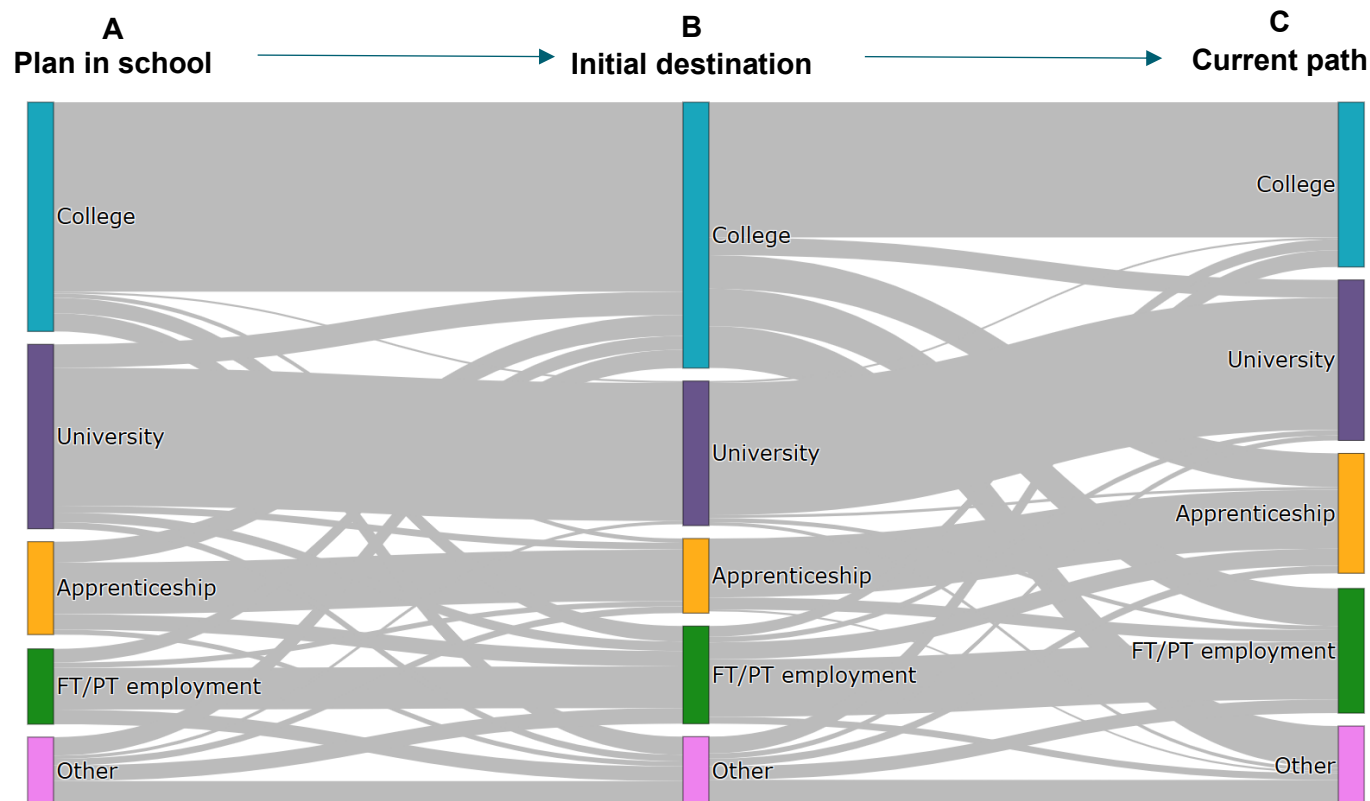


Figure 2: Sankey diagram of the post-school plans and transitions of school leavers (n=2,859). The size (width) of each line presented in the diagram represents the frequency of young people selecting each destination. Connections between destinations that have less than five responses are filtered out.

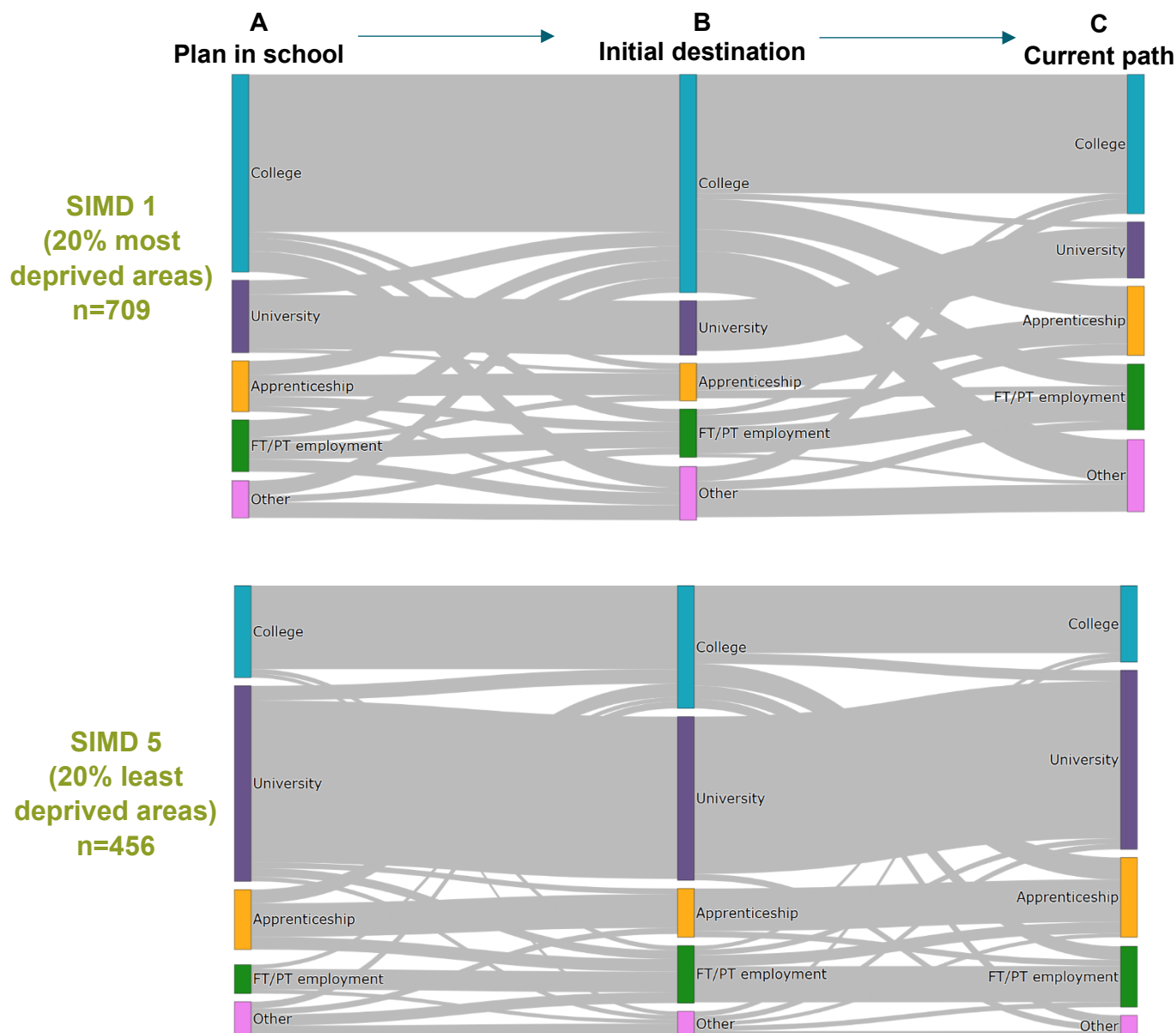
Post-school transitions differ by socioeconomic status (SIMD)

Young people from the most deprived areas (SIMD 1) often have more complex post-school journeys than those from the least deprived areas (SIMD 5).

Those from the most deprived areas (SIMD 1) are more likely to enter college upon leaving school. Often, this is their preferred destination, but for some it is not. There are also some young people in this group who wished to undertake a Modern Apprenticeship, or attend university, who were unsuccessful, at least initially.

In contrast, young people from less deprived areas (SIMD 5) are more likely to see university as their preferred route. Many young people from this group wished to go to university, went there on leaving school, and are still there one year later.

Figure 3: Sankey diagram of the post-school plans and transitions of school leavers by SIMD. Connections between destinations that have less than 5 responses are filtered out.



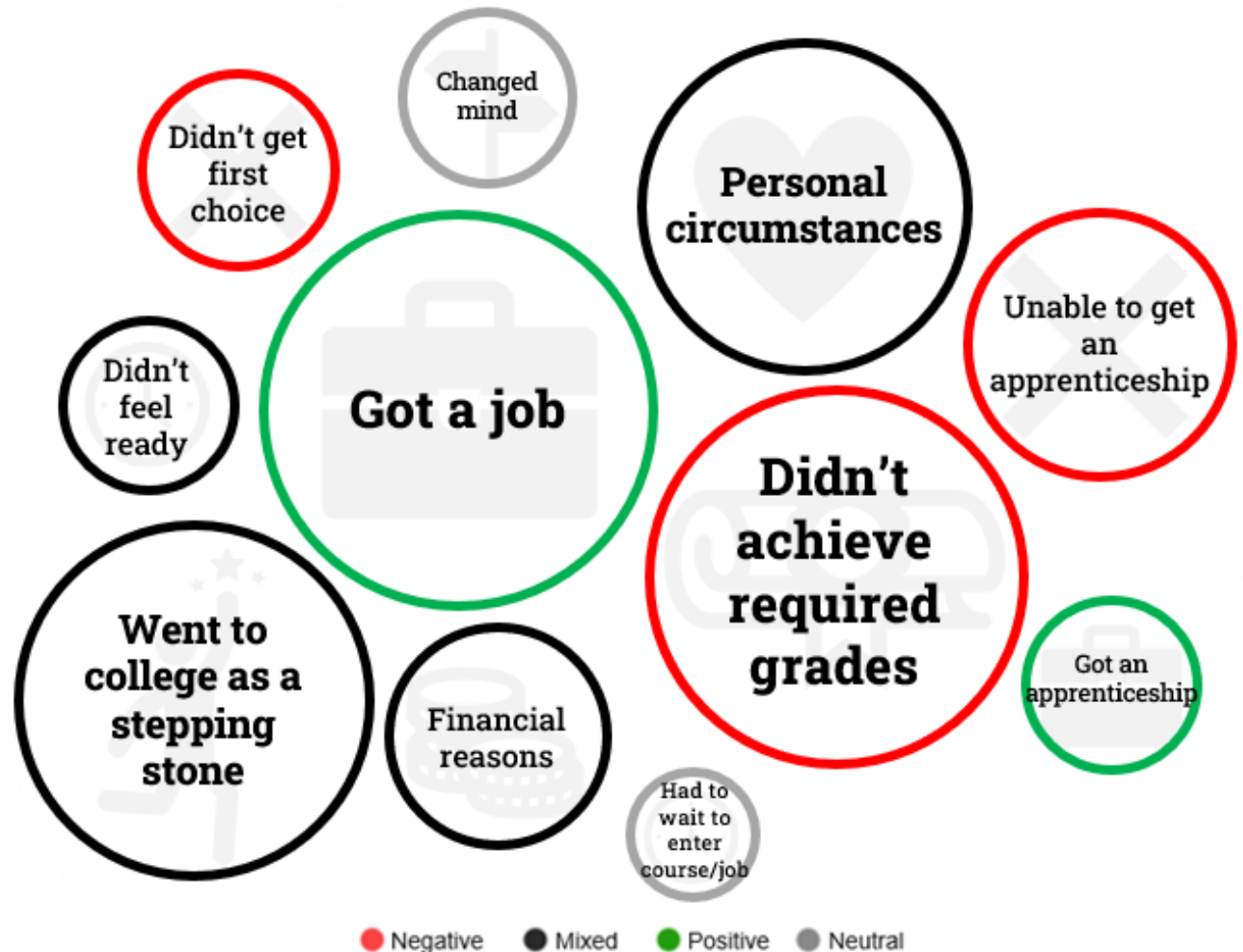
Why was your initial destination different from that planned?

When young people pursued a different path after school than originally planned, they were asked why this was. Responses varied, including both positive reasons and barriers.

A key reason for changing paths was the opportunity to get a job. Others didn't achieve the required grades for their desired next step, and some used college as a stepping stone to their preferred destination. Some young people didn't get their first choice, with a number of young people saying they were unable to get an apprenticeship.

Personal circumstances were also a factor, such as mental health and personal issues. Some young people simply changed their mind on their initial choice, while others did not feel they were ready to take the next step.

Figure 4: Thematic analysis of young people's comments on why their plans changed from school to their initial destination (n=246)*.



*The larger the circle, the more frequent the theme was. The colour around the circle represents the sentiment of the theme (i.e. whether young people's comments were more positive, neutral, or negative).

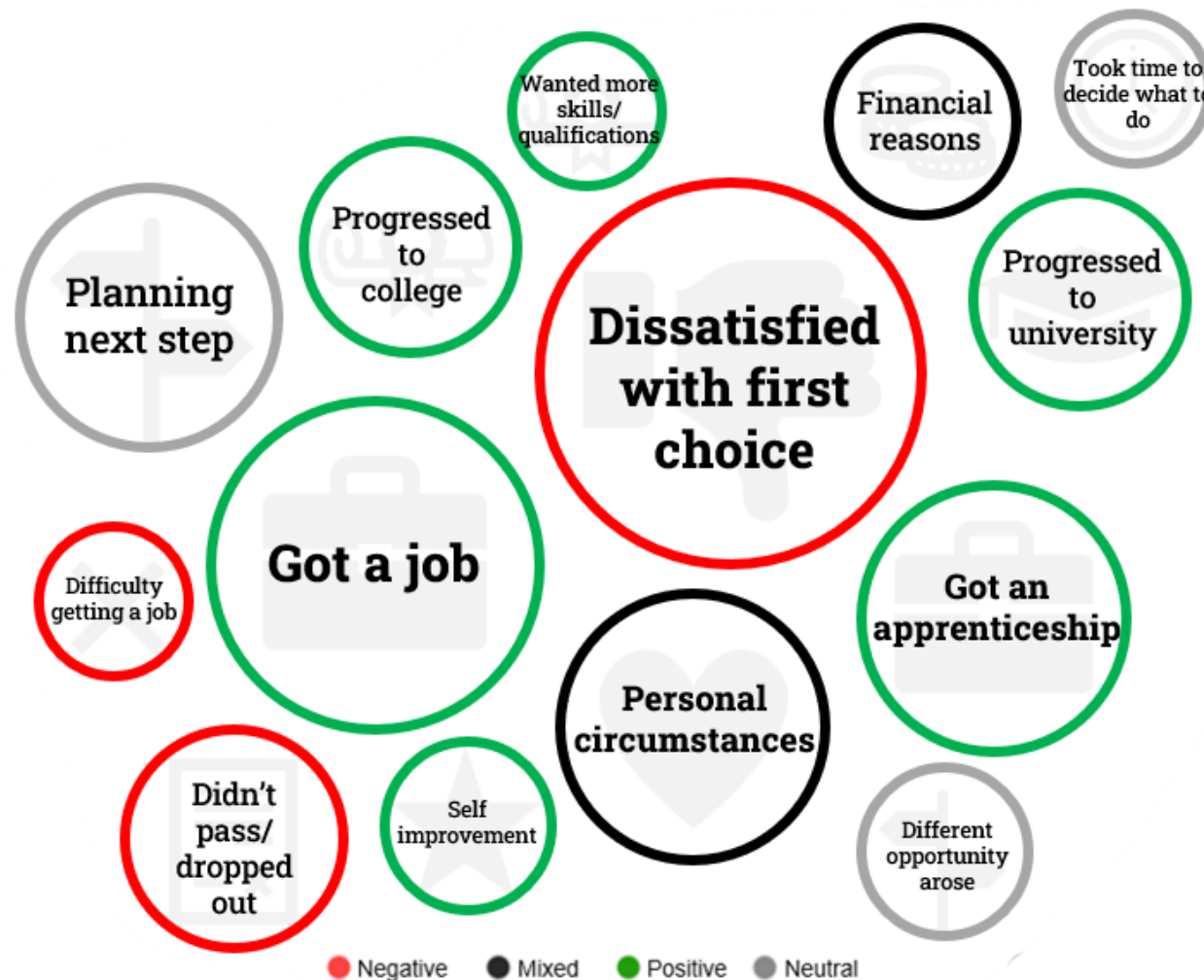
Why did your plans change from your initial destination to your current path?

Young people whose current path is different from their initial post-school destination were asked why this was.

Many cited dissatisfaction with their initial choice. Others viewed their first step as a pathway to their current activity, such as progressing from college to university, or getting a job or an apprenticeship.

Some had difficulty in their chosen pathway, such as being unable to get a job or not passing a course. There were also more neutral reasons for a change, such as taking time to decide what to do and planning their next steps.

Figure 5: Thematic analysis of young people's comments on why their plans changed from their initial destination to their current path (n=285)*.



*The larger the circle, the more frequent the theme was. The colour around the circle represents the sentiment of the theme (i.e. whether young people's comments were more positive, neutral, or negative).

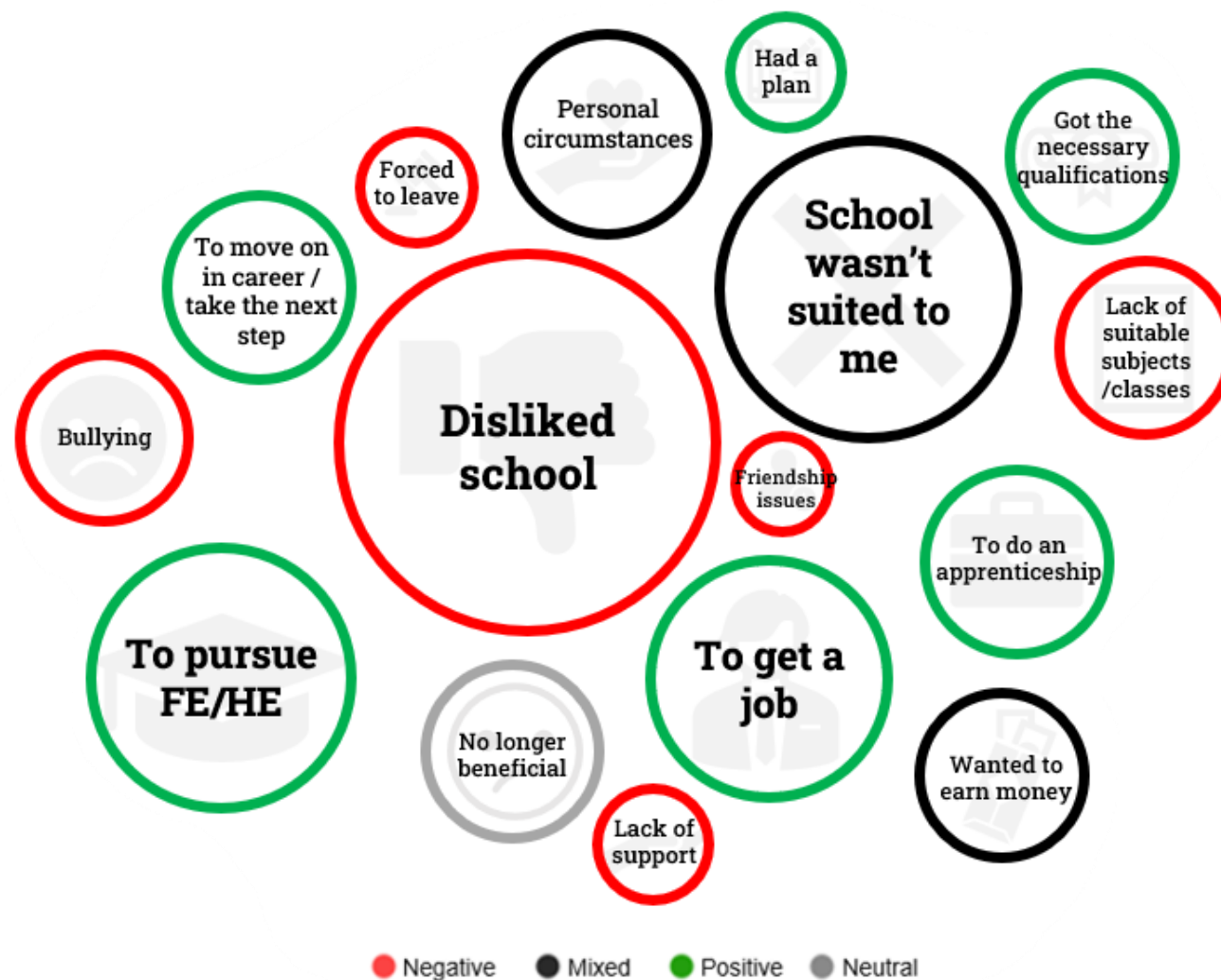
Why did you decide to leave school in S4 or S5?

Understanding why young people decide to leave school before they reach S6 is important because these decisions can have lasting effects on education, employment, and long-term outcomes. This insight helps services and policymakers ensure guidance is in place to support positive post-school pathways.

Young people who left school in S4 or S5 were asked why they decided to leave. The main reasons given were that young people simply did not enjoy school, did not like the learning style/learning environment, or they left because they felt school wasn't for them.

Some cited more positive reasons, such as the desire to move into employment, pursue further/higher education, or because they felt they had already achieved the necessary qualifications in school.

Figure 6: Thematic analysis of young people's responses to the question: "Why did you decide to leave school?". Only asked of those who left in S4 or S5 (n=1,148)*.



*The larger the circle, the more frequent the theme was. The colour around the circle represents the sentiment of the theme (i.e. whether young people's comments were more positive, neutral, or negative).

Satisfaction with current path

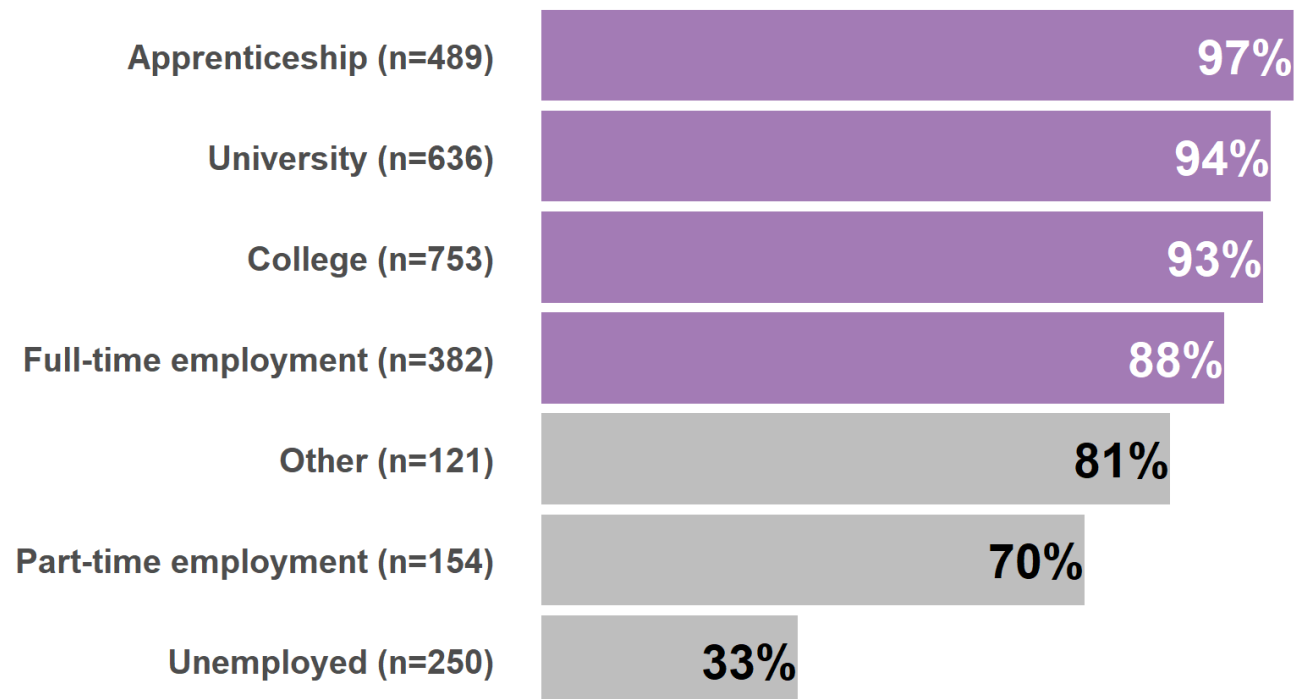
Young people were asked how satisfied they were with their current career path.

Overall, **87% of young people** who had left school in the previous year **were satisfied with what they are doing now**. This increases to 92% when the “unemployed” category is excluded.

When looking at the specific destinations that young people enter, Graduate/Modern Apprenticeships, university, college, and full-time employment had the highest levels of satisfaction (>88%).

Young people were less likely to be satisfied if they were in another destination not listed⁶, in part-time employment, or currently unemployed.

Figure 7: Young people’s responses to the question: “*How satisfied are you with what you are doing now?*” (% ,satisfied/extremely satisfied). Results are broken down by the various destinations that young people are currently in.



⁶ The “Other” category includes self-employed or started own business, volunteering, taking time out or gap year, and other learning such as classes, clubs, or training.

Reasons for dissatisfaction with current path

Young people dissatisfied with their current career path most commonly cited challenges in finding work opportunities. Many also said that their current path is not what they want to do in the longer term.

Young people were also dissatisfied because their current course didn't meet their expectations. Others said they wanted to move into further or higher education or other courses.

Some also expressed feelings of "boredom" and "lack of direction" with their current path, and indicated they would like to be doing something more positive/productive.

Figure 8: Thematic analysis of young people's responses to the question: "Why are you dissatisfied with what you are doing now?" (n=215)*.



*The larger the circle, the more frequent the theme was.

Influencers and Support Systems

Key people that influence career decisions

Young people were asked to rate the level of influence specific people were on their post-school career decisions. Overall, **Parent(s)/Carer(s) were the most influential people** on young people’s career decisions. However, young people from the most deprived areas (SIMD 1) were also likely to be influenced by **careers advisers**.

Other family members, friend(s), teachers, and guidance teachers were also likely to be influential, but to a lesser degree than Parent(s)/Carer(s) overall. Youth workers/community workers were much more likely to influence young people from the most deprived areas in comparison to those from the least deprived areas.

Figure 9: Young people’s responses to the question: “Thinking back to when you first left school, how much influence were the following people on your career decisions?” (% , a fair amount/a great deal). Base counts can be found in Appendix 2.

Key Influencers - People	All %	SIMD 1 %	SIMD 5 %
Parent(s) / Carer(s)	78	76	81
Other family member	53	53	53
Friend(s)	50	51	48
Teacher(s)	50	51	52
Careers adviser	49	59	38
Guidance teacher	43	47	41
A university or college representative coming in to my school to talk about careers	30	35	25
An employer or training provider coming in to my school to talk about careers	29	30	27
Youth worker / community worker	17	22	11

Key factors that influence career decisions

Young people were asked what factors were influential on their career decisions. They cited **learning new skills or being good at something, doing something they believe in, and their interests/hobbies** as being most influential. These were the top influential factors for young people living in the most *and* least deprived areas.

However, differences by socioeconomic status did exist - young people from deprived areas are more influenced by the **need to earn money**, while those from less deprived areas are more likely to be influenced by **school qualifications**.

Of the 37% of young people that cited social media as an influence, TikTok (79%), Instagram (59%), and YouTube (40%) were the most influential, while platforms like Facebook (22%), Snapchat (18%), and X (9%) were less influential.

Figure 10: Young people's responses to the question: "Thinking back to when you first left school, how much influence were the following factors on your career decisions?" (% a fair amount/a great deal). Base counts can be found in Appendix 2.

Key Influencers - Factors	All %	SIMD 1 %	SIMD 5 %
Learning new skills or being good at something	83	86	81
Doing something I believe in	79	81	81
My interests / hobbies	77	75	79
The need to earn money	74	76	69
The qualifications I achieved in school	65	61	74
Education / training opportunities available to me	62	56	67
Job / career opportunities available to me	56	51	57
The subject choice available to me in school	54	53	57
Opportunities available within my local area	40	36	38
Social media (TikTok, Instagram, or similar)	37	40	35
Work experience in school or part-time job	37	36	33
Online careers websites (for example: My World of Work)	28	29	24
My Foundation Apprenticeship experience (if applicable)	25	24	22

Careers support received in school

Young people were asked to rate statements about their views on the careers support received in school. Overall, the scores were generally positive.

Most young people felt supported in making their own decisions and were encouraged to reach their full potential when they were in school. They were likely to agree that their careers adviser listened to them and valued their ideas.

Those from more deprived areas (SIMD 1) were more positive about the careers support they received, reflecting SDS's service provision of targeting those with the greatest need of support.

Approximately two thirds of young people were satisfied with the amount of careers support they received in school, and additional SDS research shows a desire for even more support⁷.

Figure 11: Young people's responses to the question: "How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the careers support you received in school?" (% agree/strongly agree). Base counts can be found in Appendix 2.

Careers Support in School	All %	SIMD 1 %	SIMD 5 %
I was supported to make my own decisions and take control of my career path	82	82	82
I was encouraged to be ambitious when thinking about my future career	73	72	70
My careers adviser listened to me and valued my ideas	72	75	65
I was encouraged to explore a wide range of learning and career options	67	71	63
I was directed to other sources of career information (such as industry specific websites, careers events, or similar)	66	69	64
I was satisfied with the amount of careers support I received	63	68	56
My careers adviser helped me to identify my skills, strengths and achievements	63	69	55
My careers adviser understood me and the support I needed	63	69	55

⁷ SDS (2025) *Pupil Voice 2025*

Sources of support with career (outwith SDS careers services)

Young people's use of other sources of careers support outwith SDS careers services was explored.

Young people were most likely to have used general internet/job searches online for support with their career. Many also source careers advice from teachers, lecturers, and guidance counsellors at school or in college/university.

There are some young people that have used college/university websites for advice, or attended in-person careers events/exhibitions.

In contrast, very few young people had used job centres, recruitment consultants, or the Citizens Advice Bureau as a source of support with their career.

Figure 13: Young people's responses to the question: "Have you used any of the following sources for support with your career?" (% 'Yes, I have used').



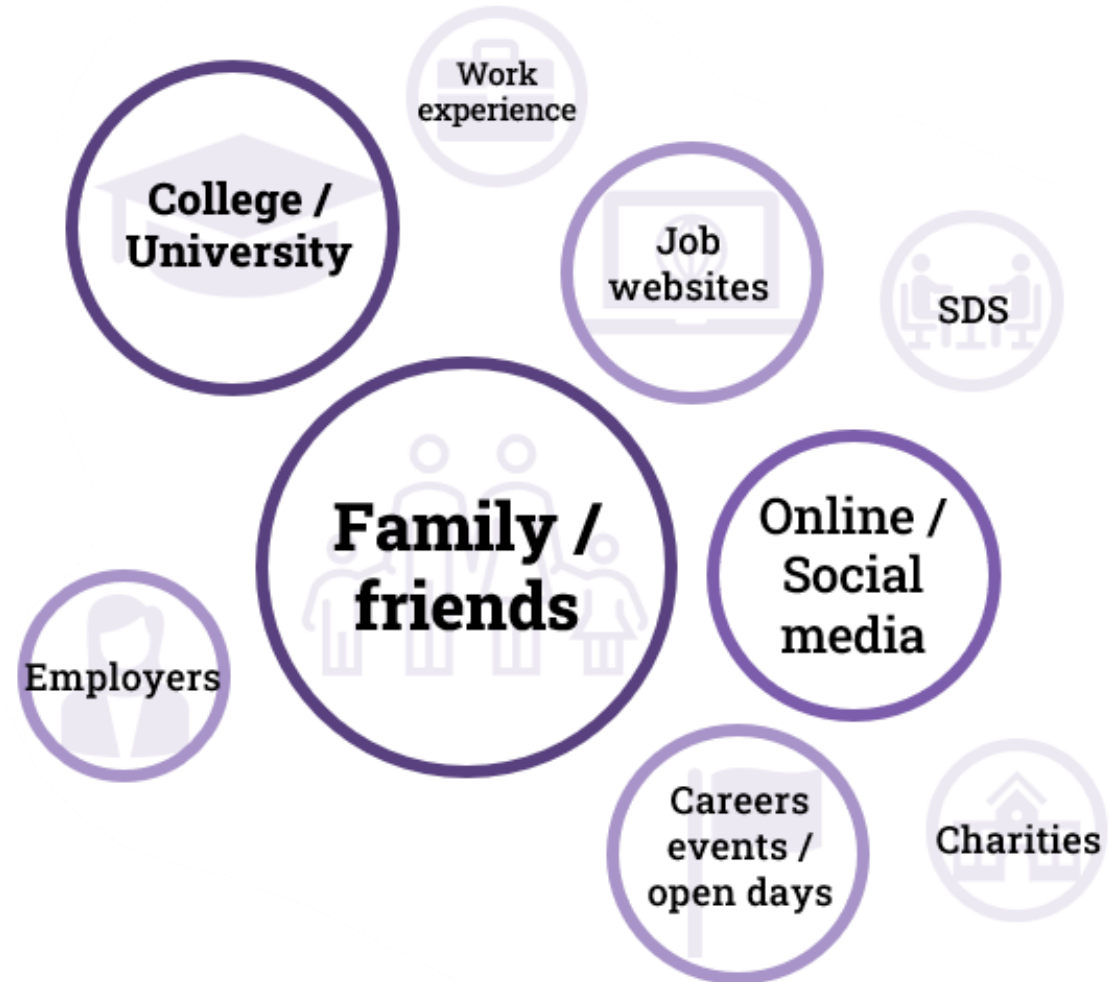
Sources of support with career (outwith SDS careers services)...continued

Young people were also asked to list any other sources of support they had accessed that were not included in the previous question.

Key among these were advice from family or friends, the internet and social media. Young people discussed getting jobs or opportunities through their family and friends, and using job search websites and social media to explore other potential opportunities.

Other sources of support young people mentioned included college and university open days, work experience/volunteering/placement opportunities, receiving information from employers directly, and from attending careers events.

Figure 14: Thematic analysis of young people's responses to the question: "Please detail any other sources that you have used." (n=128)*.



*The larger the circle, the more frequent the theme was.

Skills, Confidence, and Barriers

Confidence in Career Management Skills (CMS)

Career Management Skills (CMS) are a set of competencies that enable young people to understand themselves, their strengths, and how they interact with the world of work⁸.

Young people were generally confident in their Career Management Skills (CMS) as indicated by their ratings across a series of CMS related statements. They felt confident in understanding their skills, strengths, achievements, and how their experiences inform career decisions. They also felt capable of building relationships that could enhance their career, and confident in making informed decisions.

Young people from the most and least deprived areas showed similar levels of confidence across indicators of CMS.

Figure 15: Young people’s responses to the question: “Thinking about your Career Management Skills, on a scale of 1-10, how confident are you that you can do the following...?”. Base counts can be found in Appendix 2.

Career Management Skills	Average score out of 10		
	All	SIMD 1	SIMD 5
Understand and build on my skills, strengths, and achievements	7.5	7.5	7.5
Understand how my experiences and learning can help me make career choices	7.3	7.4	7.4
Identify and build relationships with people who can help me in my career	7.1	7.3	7.2
Make informed career decisions	7.0	7.0	7.1
Consider new things I may not have thought of when it comes to my career journey	6.9	7.0	6.8
Prepare for and manage change in my career	6.8	7.0	6.8
Find and use career information easily	6.7	6.8	6.8

⁸ Skills Development Scotland [Career Management Skills](#)

Perceived skills/attributes required for the future

Young people were asked which skills or attributes they thought were most **required or needed** with regards to their future career.

Communication and confidence were highly prioritised as key attributes they will need in future roles. Having a positive attitude, work ethic, being reliable and adaptable to change were also recognised as important meta-skills that young people rated highly.

Of the skills and attributes that young people selected as ‘needed’ for the future, they were then asked how **confident they were in developing these skills**. While young people generally felt confident that they were developing most of these skills, three had notably lower scores - *gaining work experience, building confidence, and achieving the right qualifications*.

Figure 16: Young people’s responses to the questions: (i) “Which of these skills or attributes do you think you will most need in your future career?” (% , select up to five); (ii) “How confident are you that you are currently developing these skills?” (% , confident/very confident). Base counts can be found in Appendix 2.



Perceived barriers to future career

Young people identified several barriers to making progress in their chosen career. However, the top barrier young people highlighted was **lack of opportunities**.

Young people also identified not enough jobs being available, not having contacts or knowing the right people, not having enough confidence, and not having enough work experience as other potential barriers to their career.

In addition to lack of opportunities being a top barrier, those from most deprived areas (SIMD 1) cited work experience as a major barrier to their future career, while those from less deprived areas (SIMD 5) were more likely to highlight not having the right contacts and there being too much competition as future barriers.

Figure 17: Young people's responses to the question: "Which of the following, if any, could prevent you from making progress in your chosen career?" (% , select up to five).

Perceived barriers	All % (n=1,740)	SIMD 1 % (n=402)	SIMD 5 % (n=291)
Lack of opportunities	42	42	45
Not enough jobs	37	37	39
Not having contacts / knowing the right people	37	33	44
Not having enough confidence in myself	35	34	35
Not enough work experience	34	38	32
Not earning enough money to live on	31	32	30
Too much competition	31	26	36
Not having the right qualifications	28	30	25
My wellbeing	20	19	20
Not having the right skills (for example: communication / numeracy / digital)	17	16	19
Being discriminated against	13	15	12
Nothing, I have no concerns	8	8	9

What would help overcome perceived barriers?

Young people were asked what would help them to overcome any barriers that could prevent them from making progress in their career.

Young people were most likely to say that more job and learning opportunities would help, specifically citing competition for jobs as a major concern.

Some young people mentioned that they had specific barriers that they would like additional support for, such as having a disability and/or a mental health issue.

Improving networks and networking opportunities were also mentioned as areas of support that would be beneficial to young people. They also indicated that improved pay and help with building confidence would be favourable.

Figure 18: Thematic analysis of young people's responses to the question: "What support would be helpful in managing the barriers you have identified?" (n=197)*.



*The larger the circle, the more frequent the theme was.

Participation in groups and activities

Young people were asked if they had taken part in any groups, clubs, organisations, or activities in the last twelve months. Nearly half of young people participated in part-time work, while around a quarter participated in sports or fitness activities. Around one in five hadn't participated in any listed activities in the last year.

Young people from deprived areas (SIMD 1) were much more likely to say they had not participated in any activities in the last year, with 26% reporting no participation, compared to 15% from the least deprived areas (SIMD 5). Those from the least deprived areas were also more likely to take part in a broader range of opportunities, such as part-time work, sports, fitness, and exercise, team sports, and creative arts groups.

Figure 19: Young people's responses to the question: "In the last 12 months, have you actively taken part in any of these types of groups, clubs, organisations or activities (including evening classes)?" (% , select all that apply).

Activities	All % (n=1,642)	SIMD 1 % (n=375)	SIMD 5 % (n=280)
Part-time work	46	41	54
Sports, fitness or exercise groups (Such as dance, swimming, athletics, martial arts, or similar)	25	22	26
Team sports (Such as football, rugby, hockey, basketball, or similar)	24	21	29
I have not taken part in any of these activities	21	26	15
Volunteering and fundraising groups	20	21	21
Creative arts groups (Such as drama, art, music, photography, or similar)	11	9	14
One-to-one mentoring	5	5	4
Uniformed youth groups (Such as scouts, girl guides, army cadets, or similar)	5	3	6
Youth clubs	5	5	4
Youth award schemes (Such as duke of edinburgh or similar)	4	3	5
Science and technology (Such as coding club, science club, or similar)	3	1	3
Political and democracy groups (Such as scottish youth parliament, political parties, representative on boards/youth panels, or similar)	1	1	2

Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in career planning

Young people's use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) for career planning and decision-making was explored.

Only 14% of young people said they had used AI in career planning or decision making about their future career, with the majority (86%) indicating they had not used AI for this purpose.

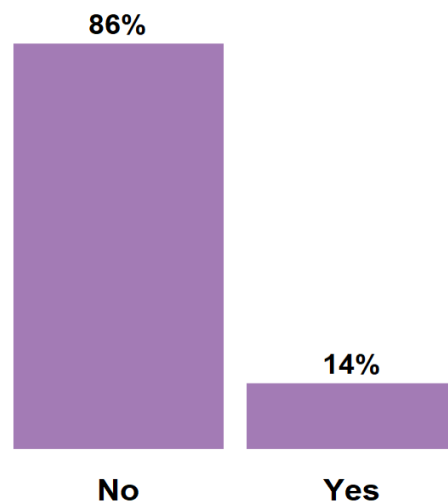
If young people said they had used AI to support their career planning, they were also asked how they used AI in this way.

The main use was to explore career and learning options generally. Many also said they used AI to seek advice about their career decisions and planning.

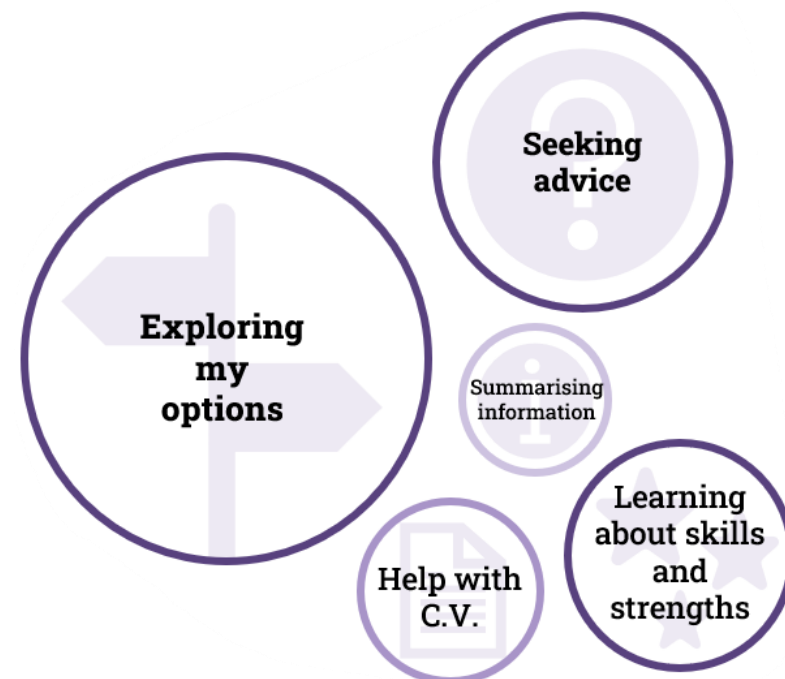
Young people also mentioned using AI to explore their skills and strengths, and to find out what skills and strengths are required for certain careers. Some used AI to help with drafting CVs and cover letters, and with general summarising of information.

Figure 20: Understanding young people's use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in their career planning or decision making about their future job/career.

"Have you ever used AI to help with your career planning or making decisions about your future job/career?" (n= 1,771)



*"If yes, how did you use AI to support your career planning or decision making?" (n=167)**



*The larger the circle, the more frequent the theme was.

Future Career Aspirations

Preferred Industries

Young people were asked what industry they want to work in in their future career.

Young people expressed interest in various industries, with popular choices being engineering, creative industries, construction, caring, digital and IT, medicine/health and teaching/education.

Choice of industries varied considerably by sex: Males preferred engineering, construction, and digital and IT industries, while females were more interested in medicine/health, caring, creative industries, and teaching/education.

Figure 21: Young people’s responses to the question: “What industries do you want to work in in your future career?” (% , select all that apply). Results are broken down by sex.

Industry	All % (n=1,764)	Female % (n=930)	Male % (n=786)
Engineering	16	5	26
Creative industries (for example: Art & Design, Music, Acting)	15	17	12
Construction	12	3	22
Caring (for example: Childcare, Social Care)	11	18	3
Digital, Computing, and IT	11	6	15
Medicine and Health	10	16	3
Teaching / Education	10	15	6
Armed Forces, Policing or Security	9	7	11
Sport	8	5	12
Banking and Finance	7	6	7
Hospitality, Food and Drink (for example: Working in hotels, bars, restaurants)	7	7	7
Media	7	6	7
Agriculture, Forestry, and Fishing	6	4	8
Government and Public Administration	5	5	5
Law	5	6	4
Retail	5	5	5
Science (for example: Pharmaceuticals, Life Sciences, Biotechnology)	5	6	5
Tourism	5	7	3
Transport and Logistics	5	2	7
Energy	4	2	7
Environmental Science and Conservation	4	4	3
Personal Care (for example: Beauty, Haircare, Wellness)	4	8	0
Housing / Property	3	2	4

Preferred Industries...continued

There were also some differences by socioeconomic status in young people's choice(s) of preferred industries.

Young people from the most deprived areas (SIMD 1) were more likely than those in the least deprived areas (SIMD 5) to want to work in the caring industry, while those from the least deprived areas (SIMD 5) expressed greater interest in engineering, teaching/education, medicine/health, and in the media.

Figure 22: Young people's responses to the question: "What industries do you want to work in in your future career?" (% , select all that apply). Results are broken down by SIMD.

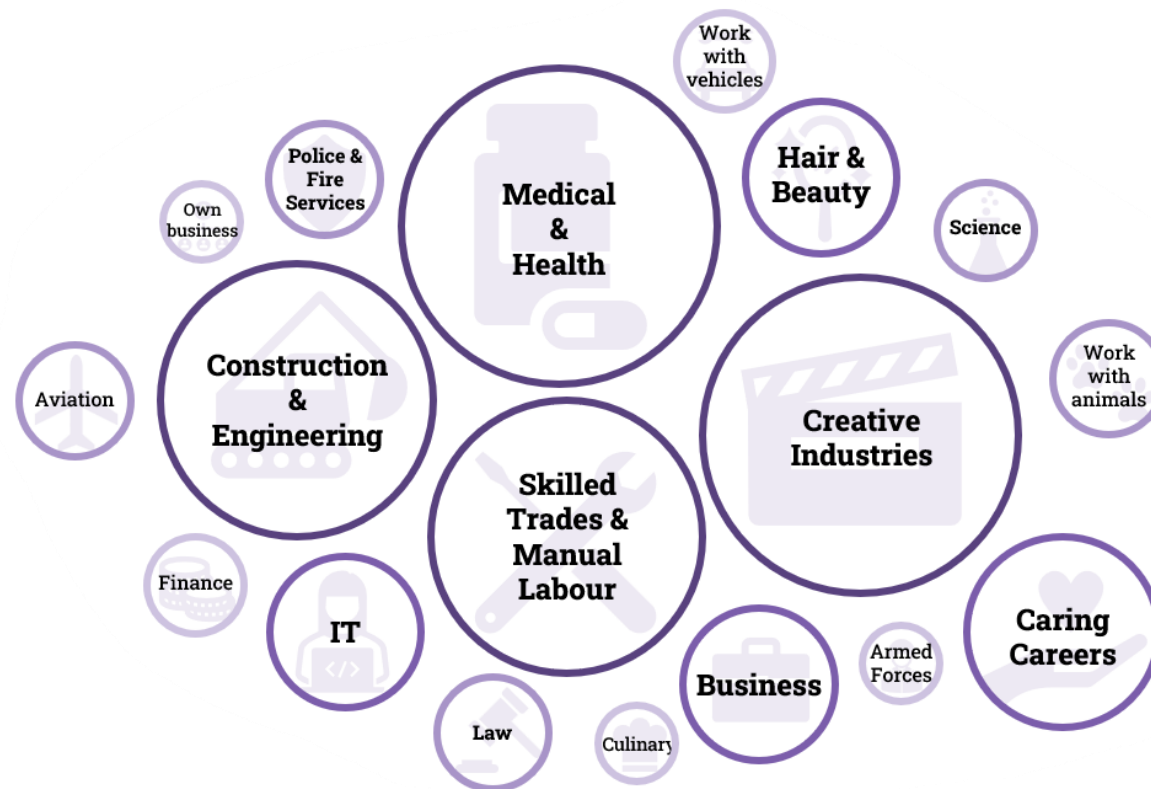
Industry	All % (n=1,764)	SIMD 1 % (n=410)	SIMD 5 % (n=292)
Engineering	16	11	19
Creative industries (for example: Art & Design, Music, Acting)	15	14	14
Construction	12	13	14
Caring (for example: Childcare, Social Care)	11	14	8
Digital, Computing, and IT	11	12	11
Medicine and Health	10	10	12
Teaching / Education	10	10	13
Armed Forces, Policing or Security	9	9	10
Sport	8	9	8
Banking and Finance	7	8	7
Hospitality, Food and Drink (for example: Working in hotels, bars, restaurants)	7	7	6
Media	7	5	10
Agriculture, Forestry, and Fishing	6	5	5
Government and Public Administration	5	3	6
Law	5	4	7
Retail	5	5	6
Science (for example: Pharmaceuticals, Life Sciences, Biotechnology)	5	7	6
Tourism	5	5	5
Transport and Logistics	5	3	4
Energy	4	2	7
Environmental Science and Conservation	4	3	4
Personal Care (for example: Beauty, Haircare, Wellness)	4	6	3
Housing / Property	3	3	3

Ideal Job/Career

As well as preferred industry, young people were asked to identify (if they could) what specific job they want to do in their future career. Many young people mentioned more than one job role, sometimes in different areas. The job roles were categorised into broader industries.

Roles in medicine/health, the creative industries, construction/engineering, and skilled trades were popular among young people, with a variety of job roles mentioned within each of these industries (see Figure 24). However, although young people are considering a varied range of career options, around one in six young people said they didn't know what job they wanted to do in their future career.

Figure 23: Thematic analysis of young people's responses to the question: "Thinking about the future, what is your ideal job/career?" (n=1,467). The larger the circle, the more the job/career area was mentioned.

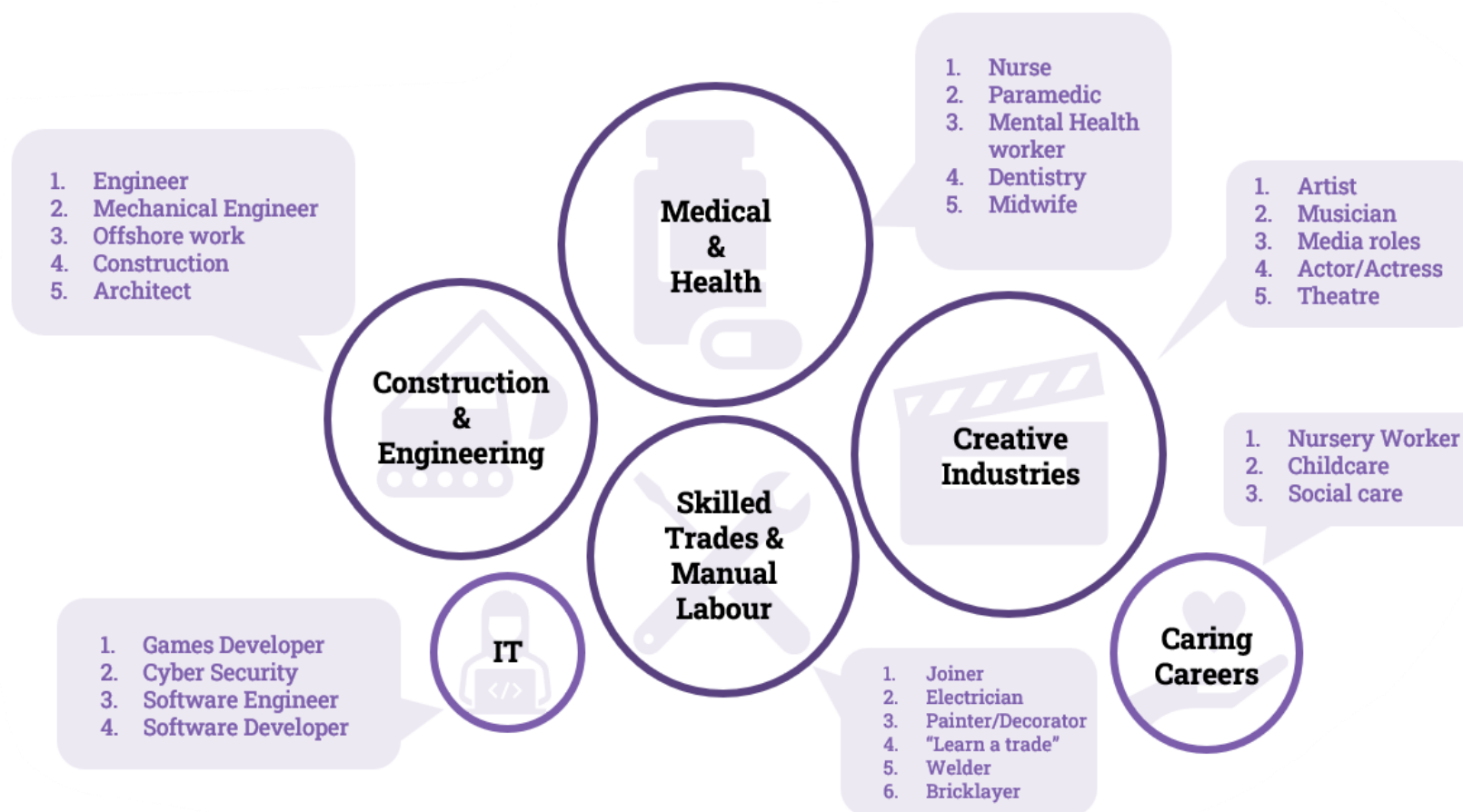


*The larger the circle, the more frequent the theme was.

Ideal Job/Career...continued

The specific jobs that young people mentioned varied considerably. Listed in the visual are the most popular roles (or phrases) mentioned by young people within each broader industry.

Figure 24: The most popular job roles/phrases mentioned by young people in response to the question “Thinking about the future, what is your ideal job/career?” (n=1,467).



Yearly earnings in ideal job/career at age 30

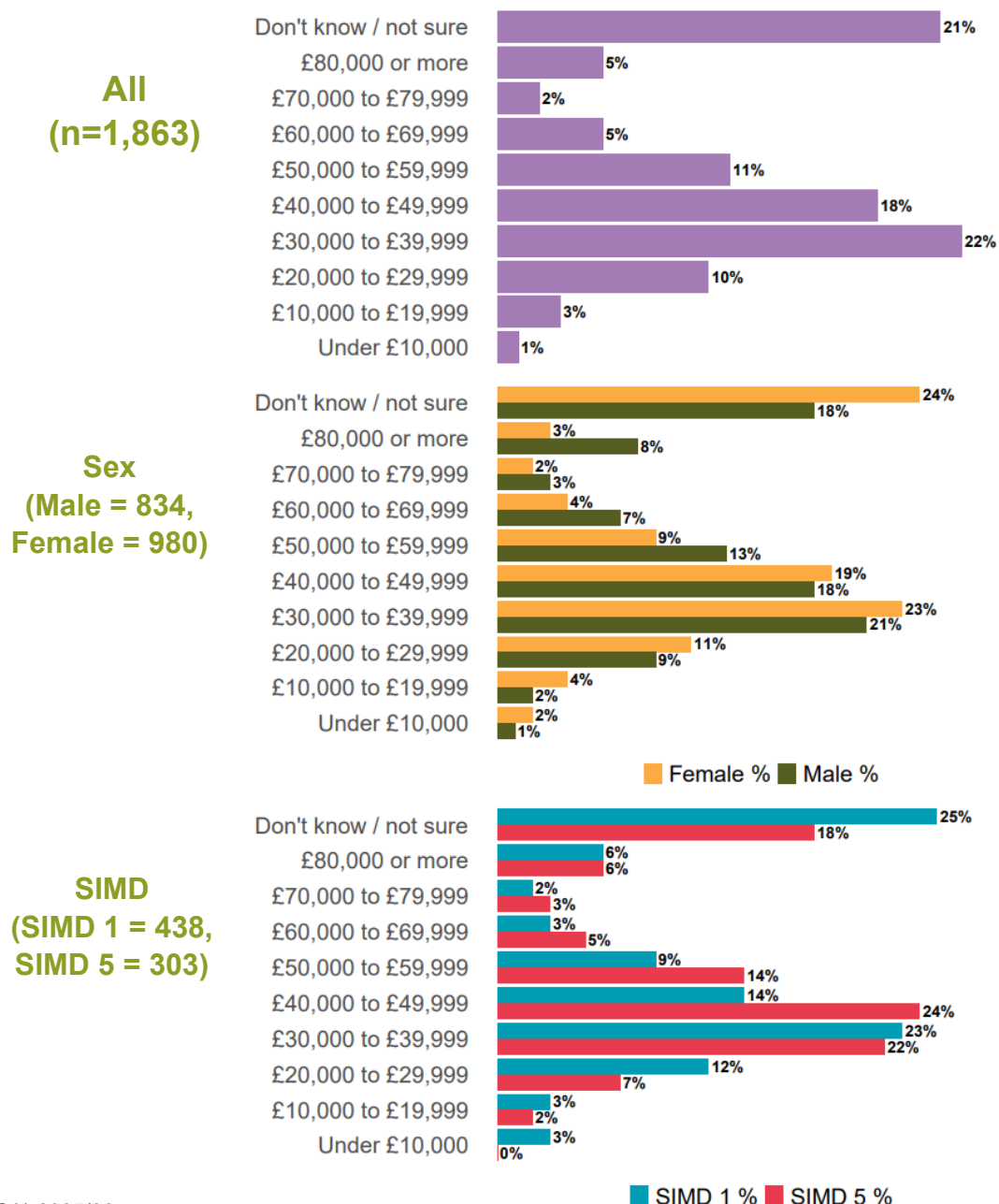
Young people were asked what salary they might expect to earn in their ideal job/career at age 30.

Almost half of all young people expect a salary between £20,000-£50,000 in their ideal job at age 30, while nearly one in five are unsure.

There are differences by sex - males expect to earn higher salaries than females, whereas females were more likely than males to be unsure of their yearly salary at age 30.

Those from the most deprived areas (SIMD 1) expect to earn less at age 30 compared to those from the least deprived areas (SIMD 5). Greater proportions of young people from the most deprived areas are also unsure about what salary they might earn at age 30.

Figure 25: Young people's response to the question: "Which of these [salary bands] might fairly represent your yearly earnings at age 30 in your ideal job/career?"



Important job factors

The factors that are important to young people in their future job/career was explored.

There are various factors that young people highlighted as important, but top among these was **good pay**, followed by **job satisfaction**, and **work-life balance**.

Learning new skills and helping others are also factors that young people feel are important in their career. This is particularly true for young people from the most deprived areas (SIMD 1) compared to those from the least deprived areas (SIMD 5), and potentially reflects the types of jobs/careers these young people aspire to work in.

Figure 26: Young people's responses to the question: "Please select the factors that are most important to you in your future job/career from the list below." (% , select up to five).

Important job/career factors	All % (n=1,828)	SIMD 1 % (n=423)	SIMD 5 % (n=300)
Good pay	56	51	53
Job satisfaction	41	40	42
Work-life balance	39	36	39
Learning new skills	34	38	30
Helping others	33	38	32
Working with people I like	32	31	31
The variety and interest in the job	29	24	30
Doing valuable work	27	29	29
Job security	25	22	30
Being challenged in the work you do	23	19	23
Opportunity to earn while you learn	23	25	24
Flexible working options (for example: working from home / flexible hours)	17	15	18
Having a voice / being listened to in the workplace	17	19	18
Chances for promotion	16	12	17
A job / career within my local area	13	15	10
Opportunity to be entrepreneurial (be your own boss)	10	9	10
Autonomy / independence	7	6	7
Supporting the climate emergency	4	3	7

Appendix 1: Profile of respondents

Demographic*	n	%
Age (n=2,859)		
16	21	1%
17	936	33%
18	968	34%
19	920	32%
20	14	<1%
Sex (n=2,810)		
Male	1,298	46%
Female	1,512	54%
<i>Prefer not to say</i>	49	
Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) (n=2,854)		
1 (most deprived 20% areas)	709	25%
2	607	21%
3	531	19%
4	551	19%
5 (least deprived 20% areas)	456	16%
<i>SIMD not known</i>	5	
Sexual Orientation (n=1,621)		
Heterosexual/straight	1,286	79%
Bisexual	200	12%
Gay/lesbian	101	6%
Other sexual orientation	34	2%
<i>Missing/Prefer not to say</i>	1,238	
Do you consider yourself to be trans or have a trans history (n=1,581)		
Yes	75	5%
No	1,506	95%
<i>Missing/Prefer not to say</i>	1,278	
Ethnicity (n=2,816)		
African/African Scottish/African British/African Other	54	2%
Asian/Asian Scottish/Asian British/Asian Other	114	4%
Black/Black Scottish/Black British	12	<1%
Caribbean/Caribbean Scottish/Caribbean British/Caribbean Other	5	<1%
Gypsy/Traveller/Roma	3	<1%
Mixed or multiple ethnic group	54	2%
Other ethnic group	35	1%
White/White Scottish/White Irish/White Other British	2,404	85%
White Other	135	5%
<i>Missing/Prefer not to say</i>	43	

*Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding. Missing/prefer not to say/non-response cases have been excluded from totals.

Demographic*	n	%
Disability (physical or mental health condition/illness lasting/expected to last 12 months or more) (n=1,723)		
Disabled	436	25%
Non-disabled	1,287	75%
<i>Missing/Prefer not to say</i>	1,136	
Impairment, health condition, learning difficulty (select all that apply) (n=365)**		
Autism spectrum condition	139	38%
Blind or have a visual impairment uncorrected by glasses	9	2%
Deaf or have a hearing impairment	7	2%
Learning difficulty such as dyslexia, dyspraxia or ADHD	131	36%
Learning disability, such as Down's syndrome	2	1%
Long standing illness or health condition such as cancer, HIV, diabetes, chronic heart disease or epilepsy	32	9%
Mental health difficulty, such as depression, schizophrenia or anxiety disorder	191	52%
Physical impairment or mobility issues, such as difficulty using your arms or using a wheelchair or crutches	18	5%
Speech or language impairment	6	2%
A disability, impairment or medical condition that is not listed above	69	19%
<i>Missing/Prefer not to say</i>	2,480	
Care Experience (n=1,787)		
Care experienced	150	5%
Not care experienced	2,686	95%
Prefer not to say	23	

*Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding. Missing/prefer not to say/non-response cases have been excluded from totals.

**Please note that individuals could select more than one type of impairment/health condition/learning difficulty options. Counts/percentages are based on the number of selections ("ticks") of each option rather than the count of individuals answering the question.

Appendix 2: Base counts (unweighted)

Statement	All (n)	SIMD 1 (n)	SIMD 5 (n)
Post-school transitions			
Sankey diagram of the post-school plans and transitions of school leavers	2,859	709	456
Thematic analysis of young people's comments on why their plans changed from school to their initial destination	246	NA	NA
Thematic analysis of young people's comments on why their plans changed from their initial destination to their current path	285	NA	NA
Thematic analysis of young people's responses to the question: "Why did you decide to leave school?"	1,148	NA	NA
How satisfied are you with what you are doing now?	2,786	NA	NA
Thematic analysis of young people's responses to the question: "Why are you dissatisfied with what you are doing now?"	215	NA	NA
Thematic analysis of young people's responses to the question: "Why did you decide to leave school?"	1,148	NA	NA
Influencers - key people			
Parent(s)/Carer(s)	2,574	608	423
Careers adviser	2,570	607	420
Other family member	2,564	607	419
Friend(s)	2,576	607	421
Teacher(s)	2,563	606	423
Guidance teacher	2,572	608	424
An employer or training provider coming in to my school to talk about careers	2,577	608	418
A university or college representative coming in to my school to talk about careers	2,607	623	424
Youth worker / community worker	2,556	600	419
Influencers - key factors			
The need to earn money	2,356	558	385
My interests/hobbies	2,347	555	382
The qualifications I achieved in school	2,353	556	385
Education/training opportunities available to me	2,376	556	386
Job/career opportunities available to me	2,367	562	385
The subject choice available to me in school	2,341	554	381
Opportunities available within my local area	2,363	561	385
Work experience in school or part-time job	2,358	557	383
Social media (TikTok, Instagram, or similar)	2,335	551	380
My Foundation Apprenticeship experience (if not applicable, leave blank)	1,449	345	247
Online careers websites (for example: My World of Work)	2,334	552	378
Doing something I believe in	2,341	555	381
Learning new skills or being good at something	2,329	553	379
Careers support received in school			
I was supported to make my own decisions and take control of my career path	2,154	507	359
I was encouraged to be ambitious when thinking about my future career	2,160	509	360
My careers adviser listened to me and valued my ideas	2,153	508	359
I was encouraged to explore a wide range of learning and career options	2,162	510	361
I was directed to other sources of career information (such as industry specific websites, careers events, or similar)	2,144	504	357
I was satisfied with the amount of careers support I received	2,145	505	354
My careers adviser helped me to identify my skills, strengths and achievements	2,149	507	356
My careers adviser understood me and the support I needed	2,163	511	361
Thematic analysis of responses to the question "How could the careers support you received in school be improved?"	545	NA	NA

Statement	All (n)	SIMD 1 (n)	SIMD 5 (n)
Sources of support with career (outwith SDS careers services)			
General internet/job search online	2,040	NA	NA
Teachers, lecturers and guidance counsellors at school/ college/university	2,044	NA	NA
College, university, and/or education websites (such as Student Support Scotland, or similar)	2,035	NA	NA
In-person careers events/fairs/exhibitions	2,040	NA	NA
Company or sector/industry websites	2,035	NA	NA
Community-based/voluntary sector organisations (such as local employability providers, or similar)	2,025	NA	NA
Job Centre	2,036	NA	NA
Recruitment consultants	2,034	NA	NA
Citizens Advice Bureau	2,032	NA	NA
Thematic analysis of young people's responses to the question: "Please detail any other sources that you have used if not included in the list above."	128	NA	NA
Career Management Skills (CMS)			
Understand and build on my skills, strengths, and achievements	1,919	450	312
Understand how my experiences and learning can help me make career choices	1,920	450	312
Identify and build relationships with people who can help me in my career	1,918	449	311
Make informed career decisions	1,928	454	313
Consider new things I may not have thought of when it comes to my career journey	1,920	450	312
Prepare for and manage change in my career	1,911	446	308
Find and use career information easily	1,922	452	312
Perceived skills/attributes for the future			
Which of these skills or attributes do you think you will most need in your future career?	1,813	NA	NA
Confidence in developing skills/attributes			
Communication skills	1,075	NA	NA
Confidence	966	NA	NA
A positive attitude	838	NA	NA
Being reliable	685	NA	NA
Work ethic	716	NA	NA
Being a team player	589	NA	NA
Work experience	523	NA	NA
Being able to work independently	494	NA	NA
Creativity	497	NA	NA
The right qualifications	436	NA	NA
Digital skills	270	NA	NA
Literacy skills (reading and writing)	223	NA	NA
Numeracy skills (working with numbers)	249	NA	NA
Being adaptable/able to manage change successfully	637	NA	NA
Perceived barriers			
Which of the following, if any, could prevent you from making progress in your chosen career?	1,740	402	291
Thematic analysis of young people's responses to the question: What support would be helpful in managing the barriers you have identified?	197	NA	NA

Statement	All (n)	SIMD 1 (n)	SIMD 5 (n)	Females (n)	Males (n)
Participation in groups and activities					
In the last 12 months, have you actively taken part in any of these types of groups, clubs, organisations or activities (including evening classes)?	1,642	375	280	NA	NA
Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in career planning					
Have you ever used AI to help with your career planning or making decisions about your future job/career?	1,771	NA	NA	NA	NA
If yes, how did you use AI to support your career planning or decision making?	167	NA	NA	NA	NA
Preferred Industries					
What industries do you want to work in in your future career?	1,764	410	292	930	786
Ideal job/career					
Thematic analysis of young people's responses to the question: Thinking about the future, what is your ideal job/career?	1,467	NA	NA	NA	NA
Yearly earnings in ideal job/carer at age 30					
Which of these [salary bands] might fairly represent your yearly earnings at age 30 in your ideal job/career?	1,863	438	303	980	834
Important job factors					
Please select the factors that are most important to you in your future job/career	1,828	423	300	NA	NA

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