

About the Social Media Gap



A report by GMP examining how recently enrolled further education students and their parents use social media, providing valuable insights to help colleges develop a strategy for compelling content in engaging formats, deployed through the most effective platforms.



A 3-Part Survey With Focus Groups



Students

A survey of 870 students plus focus groups, to gain insights on who influences their choices, what social media they use, and what content they find engaging.



Parents

A survey of 746 parents to gain insights on what social media platforms they use, what content they engage with, and how they influence their children's choices.

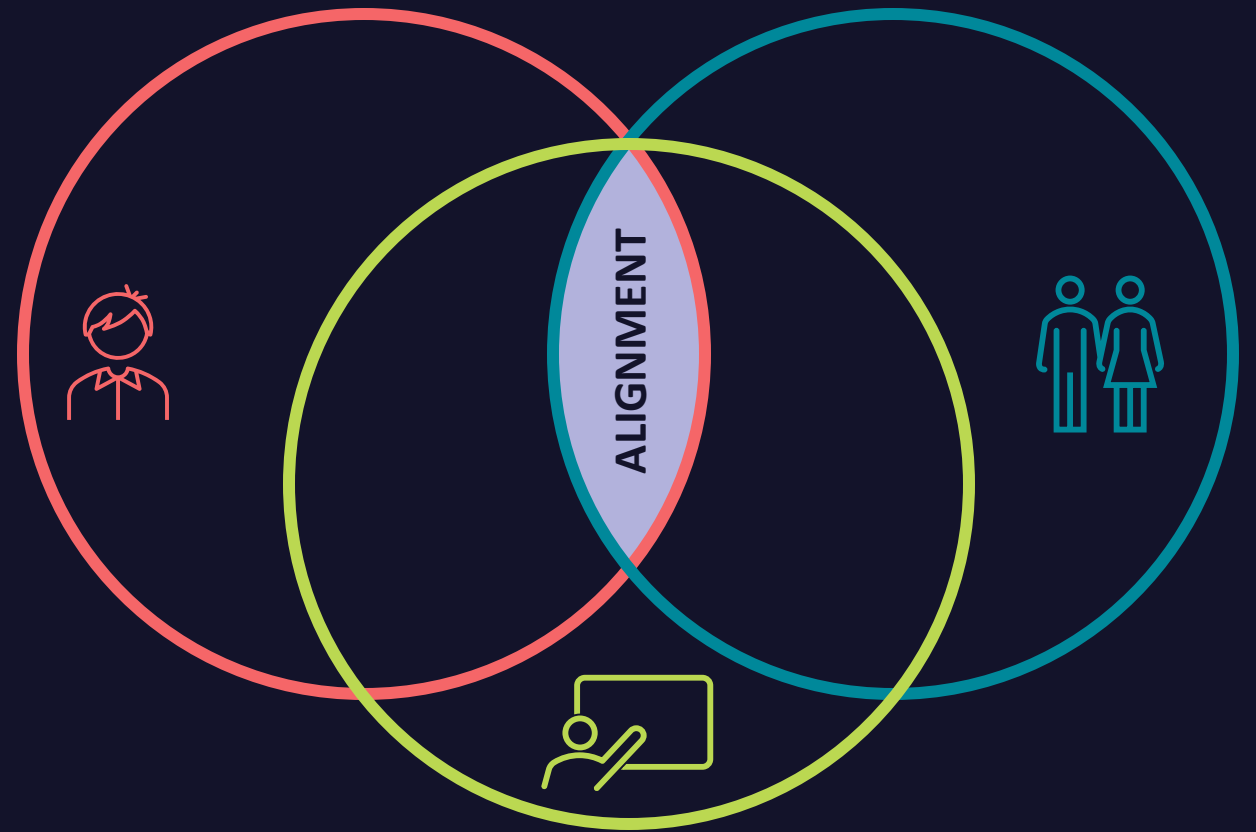


Providers

A survey of 10 FE colleges to gain insights on how they use social media, what constraints they have, and how they'd like to improve their content strategy.

Finding the Sweet Spot

By identifying which social media platforms students and their parents use, and the types of content they find most engaging, providers can tailor their content strategy to hit the sweet spot – giving both students and their parents the content they want to see on the platforms they are most likely to use.



Participating Organisations



Foreword



The findings of this survey resonate with what I have heard anecdotally for years, as a marketing and communications practitioner and strategic leader within the FE and broader skills sector. Social media has become a significant influence in the choices students make in terms of both their preferred programme and the institute where they study.

This research helps providers to better understand student preferences in terms of social media channels and content and in turn it should be an equally significant factor in the marketing and communications strategies of education providers large and small.

Additionally, from NCFE's own insight into successful engagement with learners, we know the importance of enrichment activities for them and their ongoing engagement. The use of social media platforms is ideal to promote an institution's wider offer and range of enrichment programmes on campus, becoming fundamental to an individual's decision.

Students clearly are not the only target audience for social media campaigns, with this research illustrating the continued influence of family advice ("parent power") on the student's choice of qualifications, career pathway and of course, where they study. It is evident from the findings of the survey that including parents and guardians in a college's social media campaigns will inevitably expand their reach and effectiveness.



Kim Taylor
Director of Marketing,
Communications & PR
NCFE





STUDENTS

The aim of the student survey and focus groups was to gather actionable insights into students' social media usage and engagement, which could inform tailored strategies to meet the unique needs of students and parents.

About the Student Survey

870

Total number of respondents.

329

Number of respondents that visited the College social media.

701

Number of respondents Aged 15-18.

50%

Respondents visiting college social media who searched for course options.

85%

Of those with valid Postcode were from: the North-West, Yorkshire or the North-East.

64%

Respondents who classed parents as their biggest or second biggest influence when selecting colleges.

79%

Number of respondents who use TikTok.

77%

Number of respondents who use Instagram.

86%

Of those who use TikTok ranked it in their Top 3 Social Media Platforms.

40%

Respondents who use social media for between 3-6 hours a day.



Key Takeaways

Parents are young people's key influencers

Parents are the biggest influence on student decisions followed by teachers and careers advisors. Colleges therefore need to be able to reach both students and parents/other influential adult figures through their social media platforms and outreach.

Students are not seeking college social media

Most students spend 3-6 hours per day on social media, with TikTok being the top platform and video content most engaging. However, they are typically not looking for college content on social media, instead using it to communicate with friends and for fun.

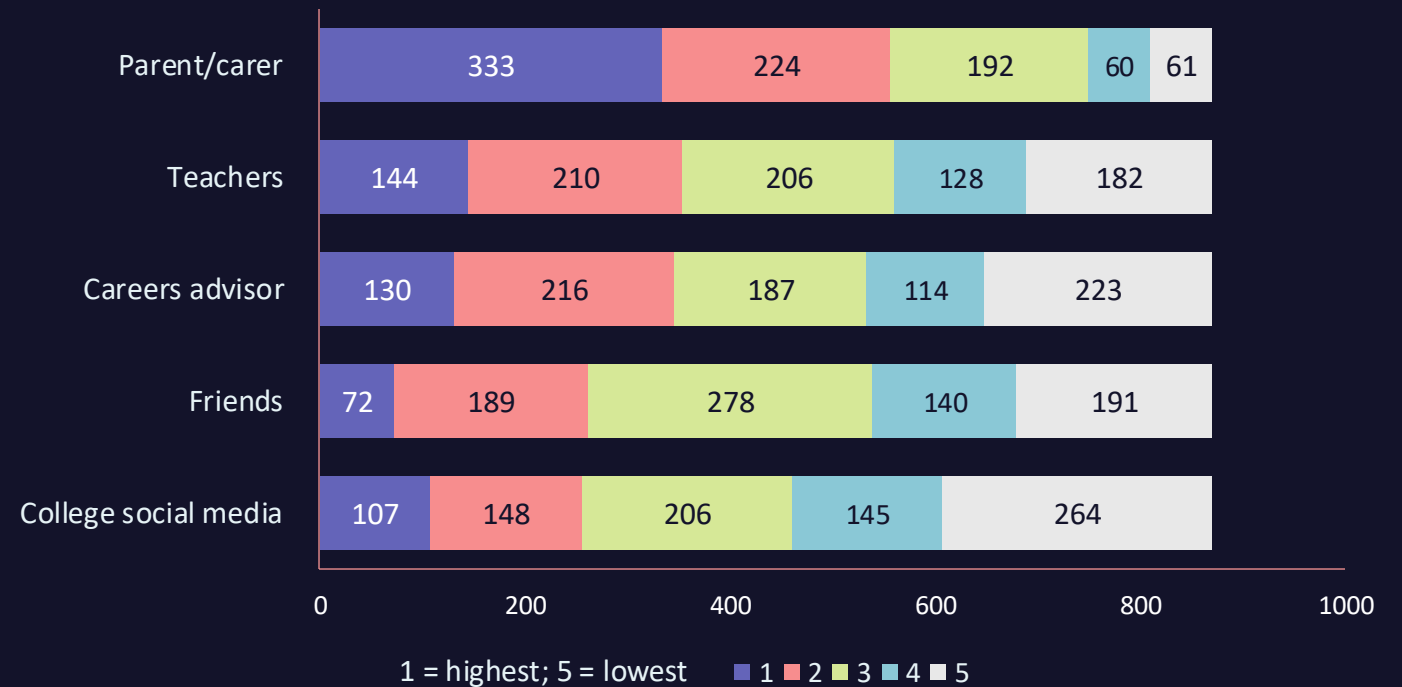
Students want better career insights

Students are increasingly looking for graduate employment rates and job prospects after they finish their course. Showcasing such insights, in addition to classic course options, can be a key differentiator that makes a college stand out and demonstrate its value.

Key Influencers

Parents were overwhelmingly the top influence for students, with 38% of respondents putting them as the highest influence on decision-making. Teachers and Careers Advisors were next ranked. College Social Media had the 4th most responses with 12% ranking them as the number one influence.

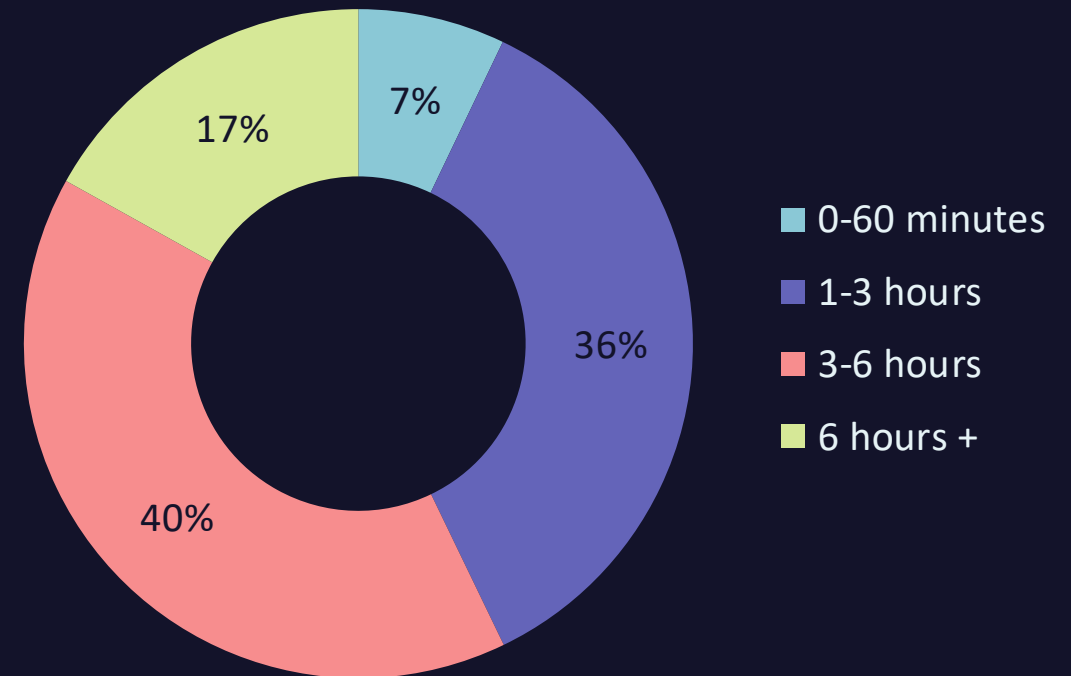
Who or what is your main influence when making decisions about colleges and training providers? Choose a top 5 in order of priority.



Time Spent on Social Media

The majority of respondents (40%) said they spend between 3-6 hours on social media every day, followed by 36% at 1-3 hours. 17% use it for more than 6 hours. Females tend to use it more than males, with 60% saying they used it for 3-6 hours per day, whilst 77% of male respondents said they use for 0-1 hour per day.

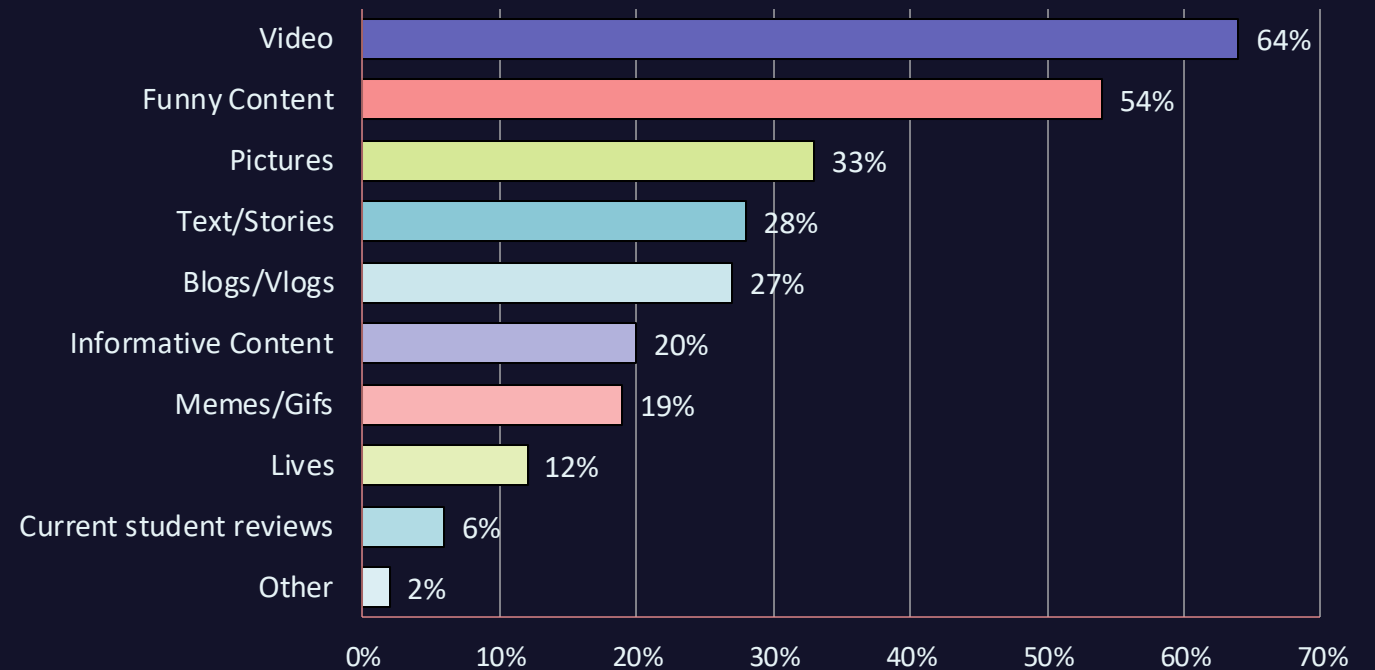
On average, how much time do you spend on social media per day?



Content Preferences

The most popular content is video, with 64% of respondents saying they found them to be the most engaging, followed by funny content (54%). In addition, with the most popular types of social media platforms being TikTok and Instagram, short-form videos are likely to be most engaging.

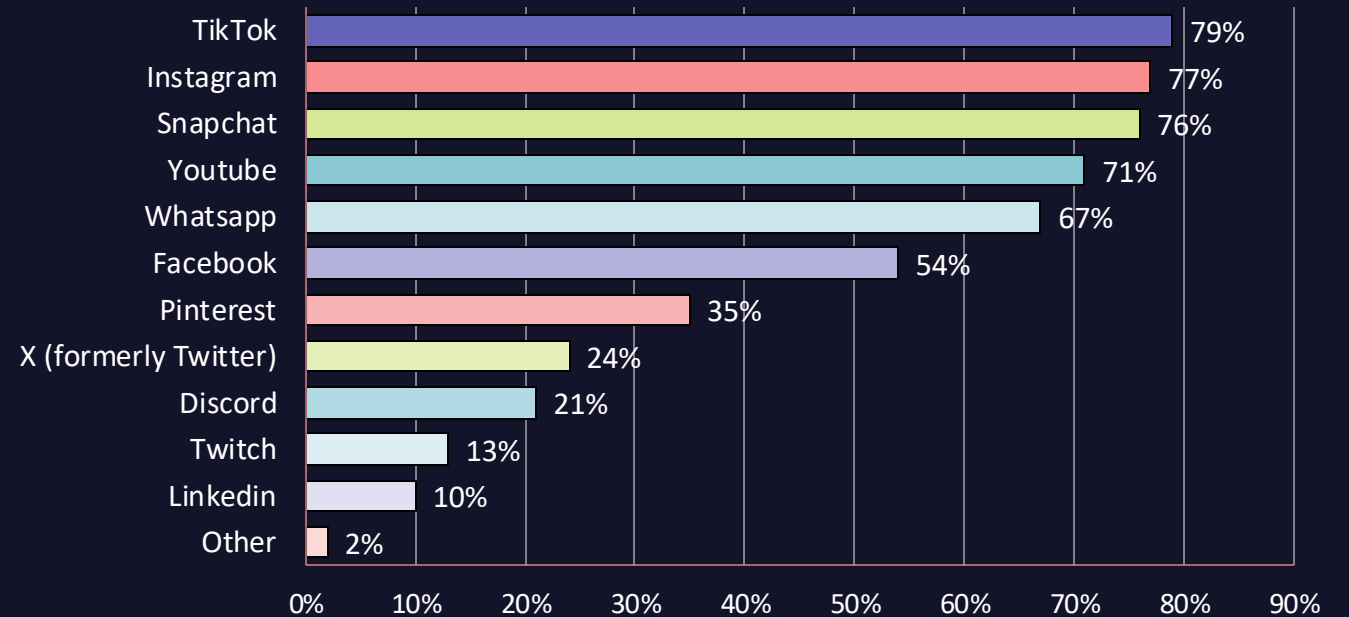
What type of content do you find the most engaging?



Platform Preferences

The most popular social media platforms are TikTok (79%), Instagram (77%) and Snapchat (76%). YouTube and WhatsApp are not far behind, but Facebook is only used by 54%. Social media usage lines up with the type of content people enjoy, for example video content and funny content.

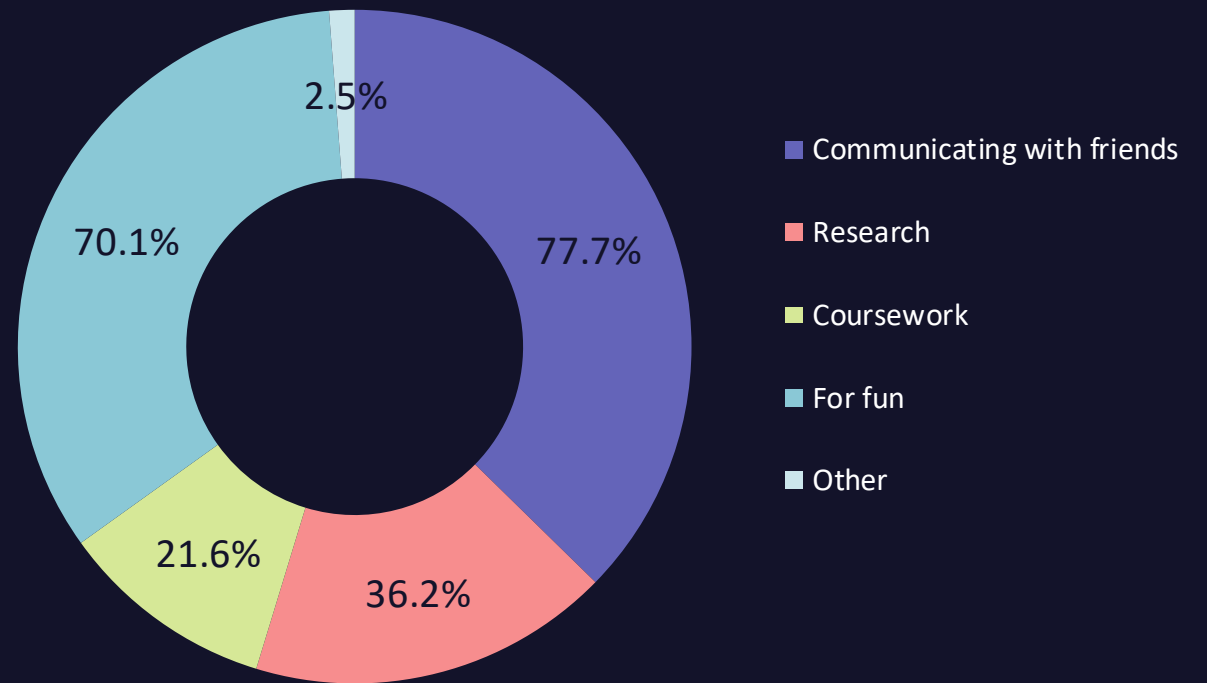
Which social media platforms do you use?
Please select all that apply.



Social Media Usage

Despite respondents' use of TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat, they are using these platforms for things like communicating with friends (77.7%) and for fun (70.1%). They don't really use social media for checking out colleges – which is something providers need to consider when developing their strategy.

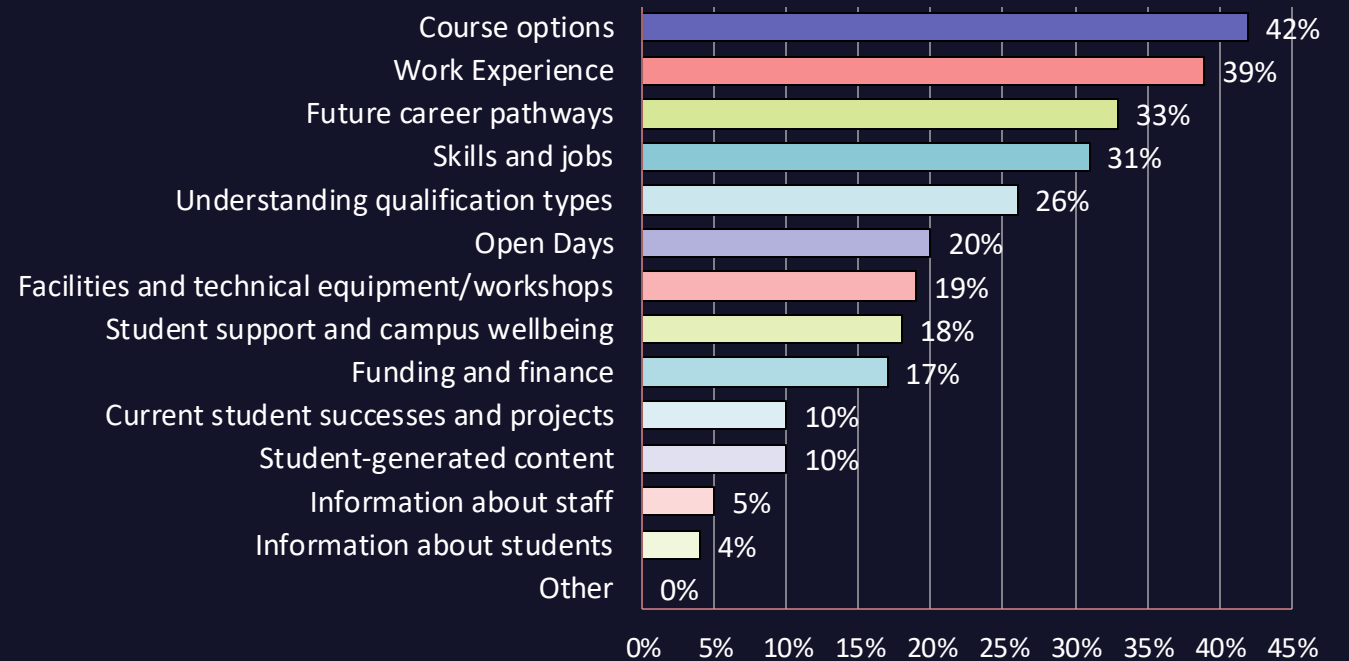
What is the main reason you use social media?
Please select all that apply.



Engaging Students

Only 38% (329) of all respondents said they had visited a college social media account. However, when asked what type of content they would like to see from colleges, the most popular answers were course options (42%), work experience (39%), future career pathways (33%), and jobs and skills (31%).

What type of content would you most like to see from colleges?



Focus Group Insights

Area	Focus
Social Media Usage	Primary usage is on platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest and TikTok, which are used for entertainment and friend connections, with minimal use for college research.
Preferred Channels	Across the focus groups, the preferred channel for college updates is Microsoft Teams, but there are some regional variations with students from Hull preferring emails and texts.
Content Preferences	The top content types were videos, particularly student-led, including behind-the-scenes, relatable and humorous posts.
Engagement Drivers	The key factor that makes for engaging content was said to be authenticity, particularly when it features recommendations and known peers.
Engagement Barriers	The key factor in making content a turn off, is when it is repetitive or contains highly polished, slick promotional content.

Focus Group Quotes

Area	Quote
Social Media Usage	<i>"TikTok is fun, but I wouldn't trust it for anything important about college."</i>
Preferred Channels	<i>"Don't want to hear from college via WhatsApp – Teams is better."</i>
Content Preferences	<i>"Student takeover would be great. Adult-led can be a bit boring."</i>
Engagement Drivers	<i>"Real people/students is what students want to see."</i>
Engagement Barriers	<i>"It feels fake when it's too promotional. Show us the real side of college."</i>

GMP Insights



Students say they want “authentic content”, particularly that featuring fellow students. Creating this kind of content is key to engaging them.



Their preferred content type is video and funny content. Content creation should be focused on short, entertaining videos that are highly shareable.



The content students want from colleges is course content. The use of careers Insights in “authentic” videos is therefore likely to be highly engaging.





PARENTS

The aim of this survey was to gather actionable insights on parents' use of social media, how this is similar or different to students, to help colleges identify the most effective platforms and content to engage them with.

About the Survey

746

Total number of respondents.

703

Number of respondents that visited the College social media.

54%

Of respondents ranked blogs/vlogs or video as their content preference type.

45%

Of respondents ranked Course Options as content they most want to see.

67%

Of respondents ranked email as their number 1 communication preference.

77%

Of respondents completed some form of Higher Education.

60%

Of respondents who use Facebook.

49%

Of respondents use TikTok.

95%

Of those who use Facebook ranked it in their top 3 social media platforms.

85%

Of those who use TikTok ranked it in their top 3 social media platforms.



Key Takeaways

Parental content priorities align with students

The top priority for parents for the type of content they would like to see on the college's social media is course options. This is the same as the top content preference indicated by students, which may give opportunities to target both with similar content.

Social media is used to search for colleges

Parents' use of social media to search for a college for their children is very high. Their use of social media in this way suggests potential opportunities for investing in paid content on their preferred platforms, one of which – perhaps surprisingly – is TikTok.

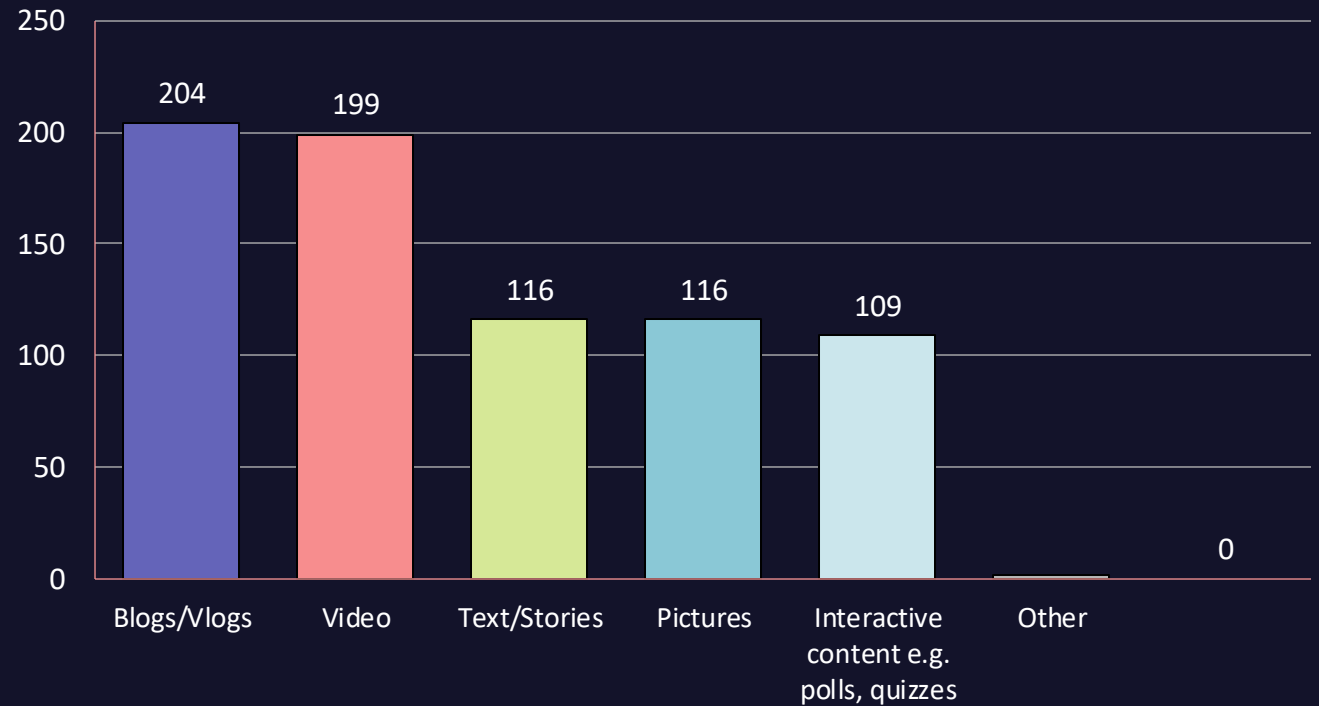
The college website is the top resource

When researching information on a college, the top resource parents recommend to their children is the college website. This shows the importance of ensuring the website is engaging and relevant, but also how vital it is for colleges to invest in managing their online reputation.

Content Preferences

The majority of parents said their preference for engaging content is Blogs/Vlogs (27.3%) followed by Video (26.7%). Video content is therefore popular amongst both students and parents, including shorter form content seen, particularly on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram.

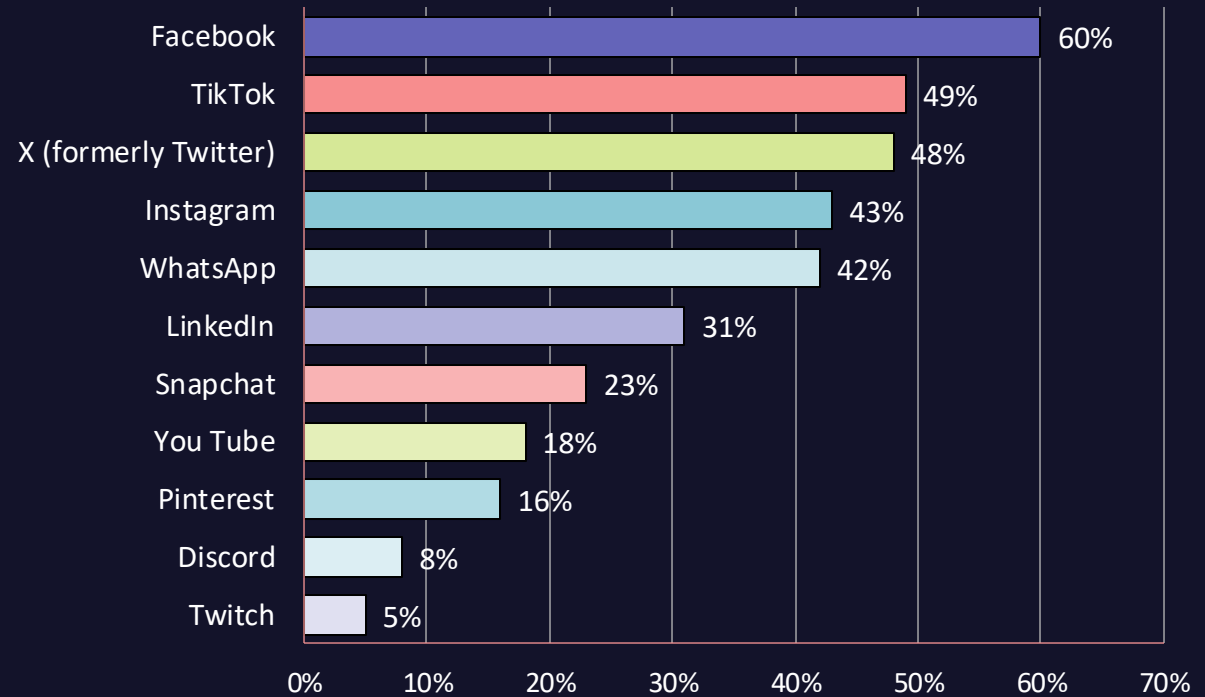
What types of content do you find the most engaging?



Platform Preferences

The most popular social media platforms amongst parents are Facebook (60%), TikTok (49%), and X (48%). In terms of finding synergies between what parents and their children use, the finding that TikTok is ranked second is very interesting, as this was the highest ranked social media platform for students.

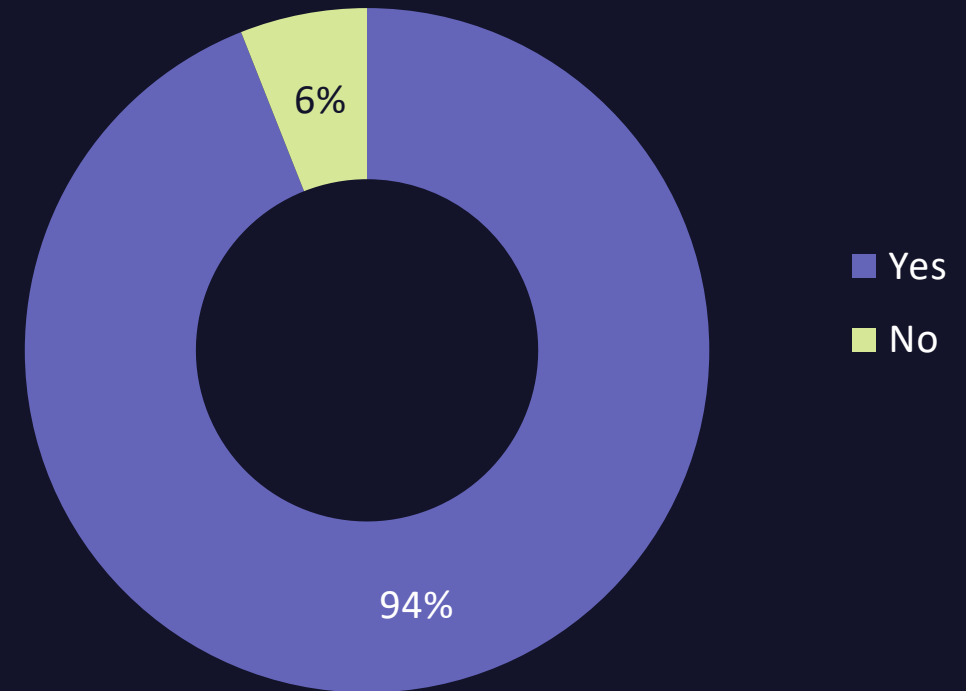
Which Social Media platforms do you use?
Please select all that apply



Social Media Usage

The answer to this question produced one of the clearest insights of the survey, with 94% of respondents answering yes. This really highlights the importance of providers focusing on the content they serve up to parents, who are the biggest influencers of young people's college choices.

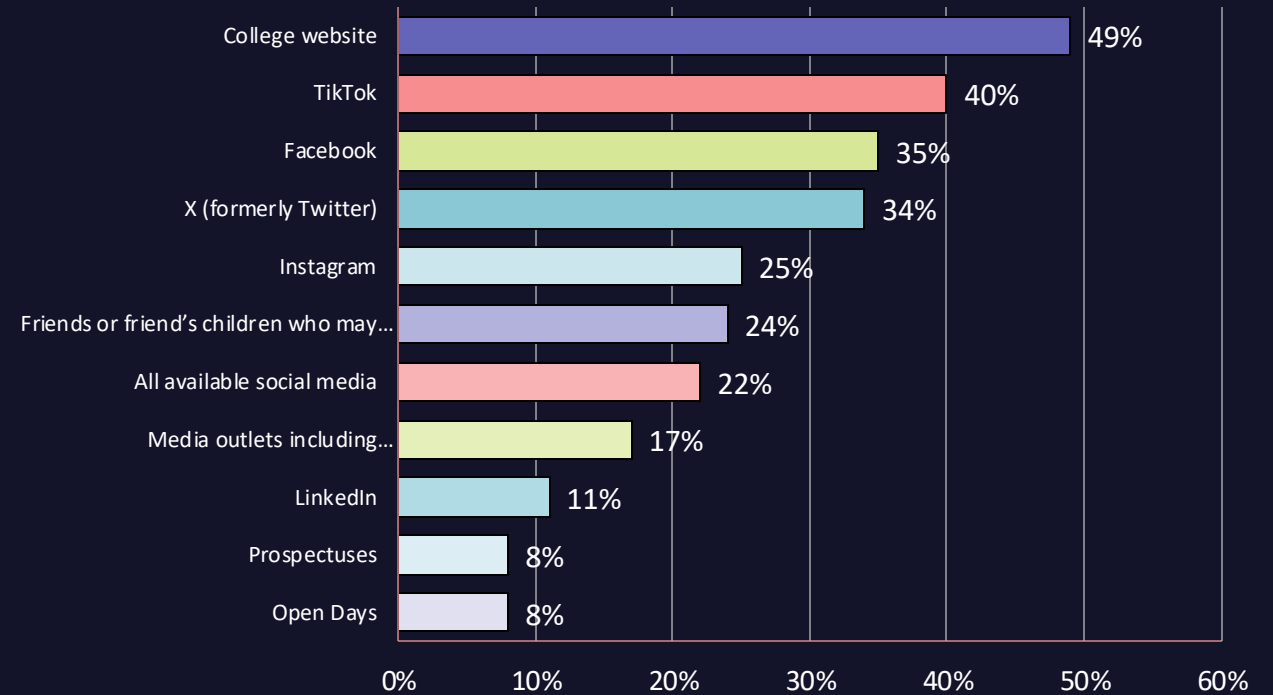
Have you used social media to research colleges or other providers?



Content Recommendations

The college website is the number one resource most parents recommend their children use for researching information about colleges (49%), followed by TikTok (40%). This shows the importance of maintaining good, fresh content on the website, and promoting it through the likes of TikTok.

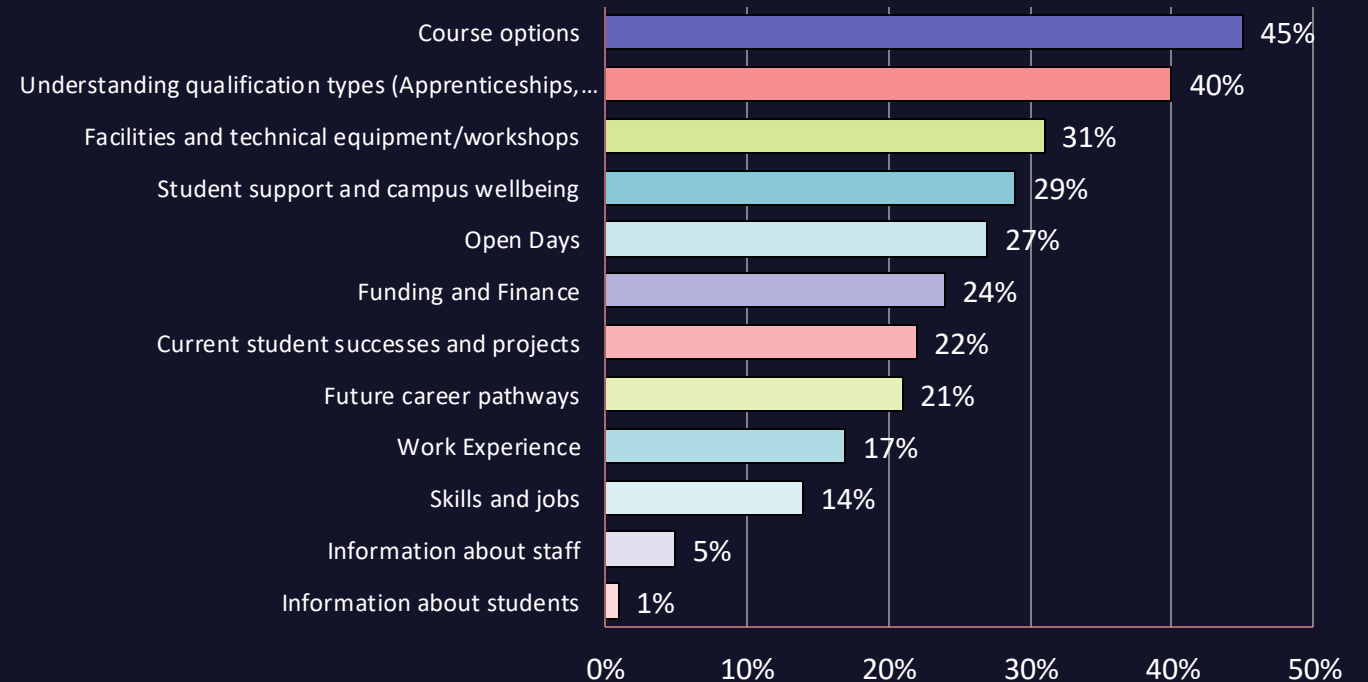
Choose the top 3 resources you would use, or encourage a young person to use, to research their preferred college.



Engaging Parents

There are many differences in the type of social media content parents and students want to see from colleges, the number one for both is course options (45% for parents and 42% for students). Prioritising content highlighting course options may well be a compelling way of targeting both parents and students.

What type of content would you most like to see from colleges? Please select all that apply.



GMP Insights



When parents want information on a college, they go to the website. Ensuring your website is compelling and up-to-date is therefore vital to engaging them.



With 94% of parents using social media to research colleges, it is vital that providers invest resources in managing their reputation on these platforms.



Parents use TikTok far more than most of us might have suspected. Using this platform, particularly with paid ads, could well be a sensible approach.





PROVIDERS

The aim of this survey was to gather actionable insights on how FE providers use social media, how this fits with what students and parents want, so providing a basis for a social media strategy that maximises opportunities.

About the Survey

10

Total number of providers.

£3.7k

Average year-on-year increase in marketing spend.

80%

Say they are unable to track conversion rates on clicks to applications.

70%

Use Instagram as their primary social media platform for 16-18-year-olds.

50%

Rated content strategy as the top social media challenge.

100%

Use Facebook as their primary social media platform for parents.

60%

Use an outside agency or contractor to support their social media.

50%

Have a specialist social media resource, but 90% have a specialist digital marketing role.

50%

Would increase staff resources if they were given more budget.

60%

Said time was one of biggest challenges in producing social media content.

Key Takeaways

Increased support is the key to success

Marketing teams want to create quality content yet find themselves under-resourced. Investment into specialist resources is key, as this can enable the creation of quality, engaging video content, as well as helping to grow on platforms like TikTok.

TikTok could be used for paid social

Students say they don't want to see college content on platforms such as TikTok, as they use this for fun, not research. However, the fact that parents use it suggests that it could be something providers should consider using for paid advertising.

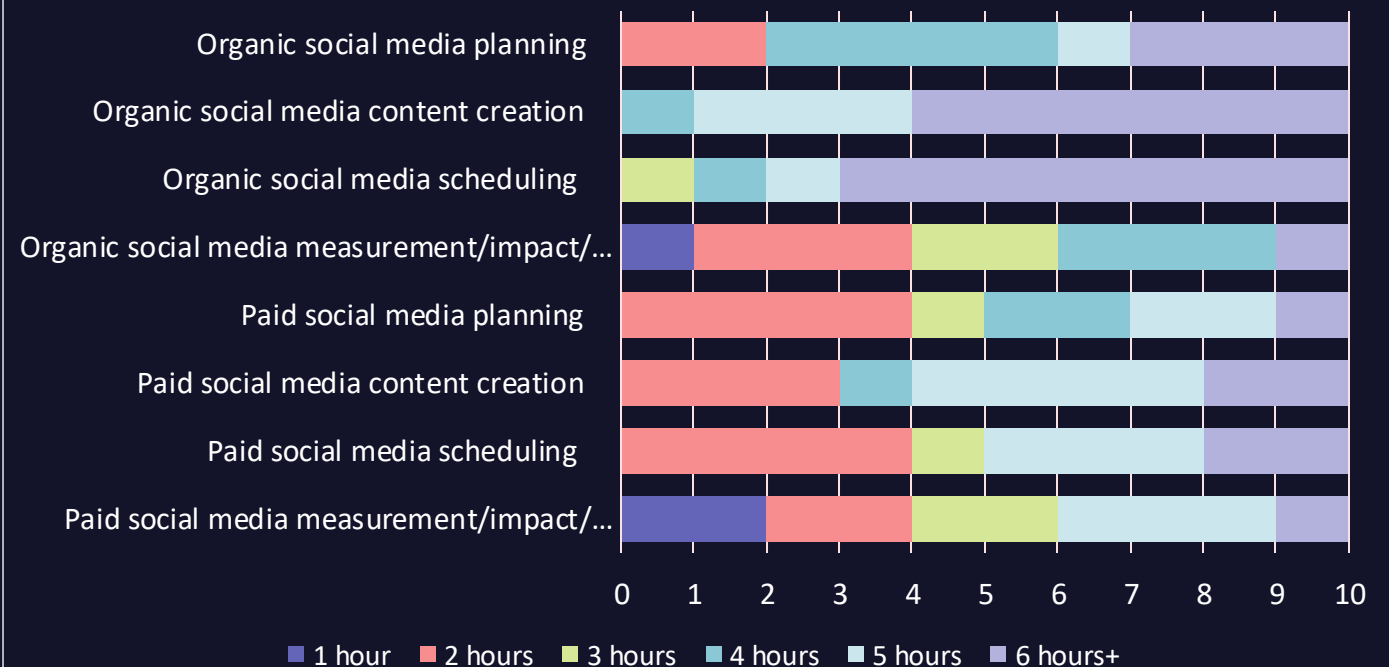
Insights are vital for a successful strategy

There is generally not enough time spent on measuring the impact of social media engagement when compared with other activities. A dedicated focus on these sorts of data and insights is a vital part of developing a robust, successful social media strategy.

Time Spent on Social Media

Providers spend more time on organic than on paid social media activities, with 80% saying they spend four or more hours per month just on organic social media planning. However, the reason for this could well be that most colleges tend to outsource their paid social media planning and content.

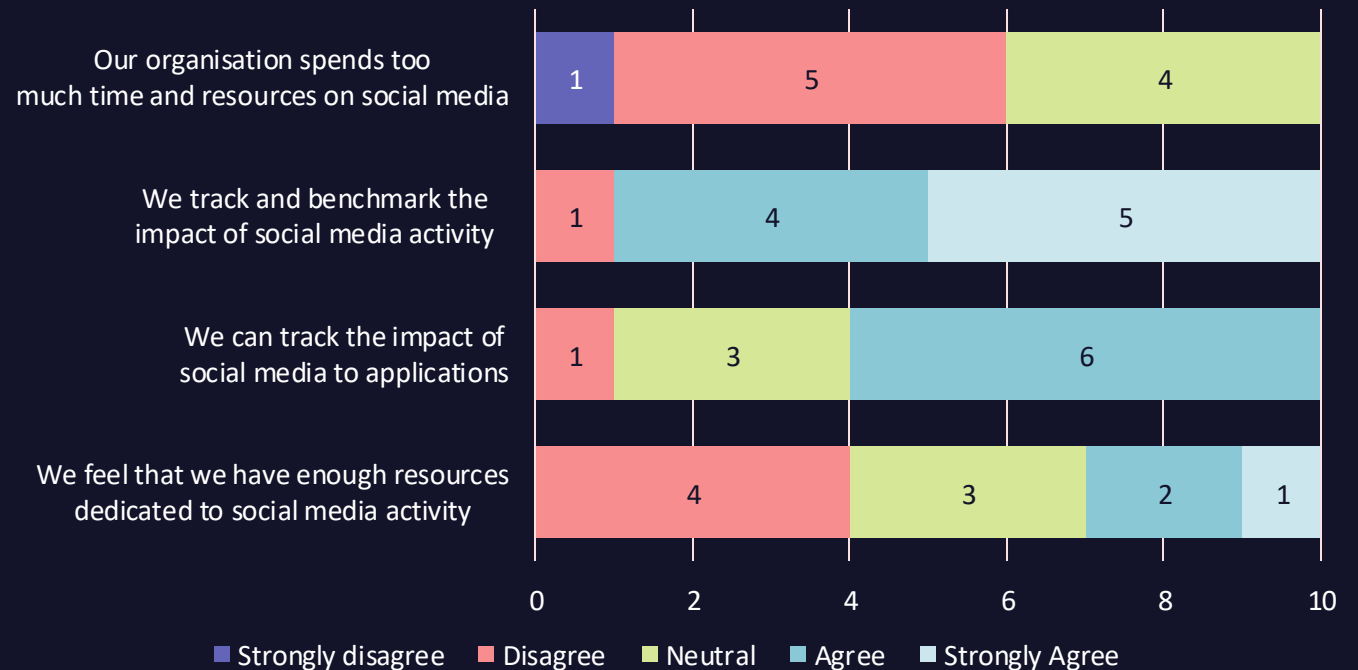
How much time does the college typically spend (in hours) on the following each month?



Attitudes to Social Media Activity

60% of providers disagreed with the statement that they spend too much time and resources on social media, with 40% expressing neutrality. 60% also said they are able to track the impact of social media to applications, yet only 30% said they felt they have enough resources dedicated to social media activity.

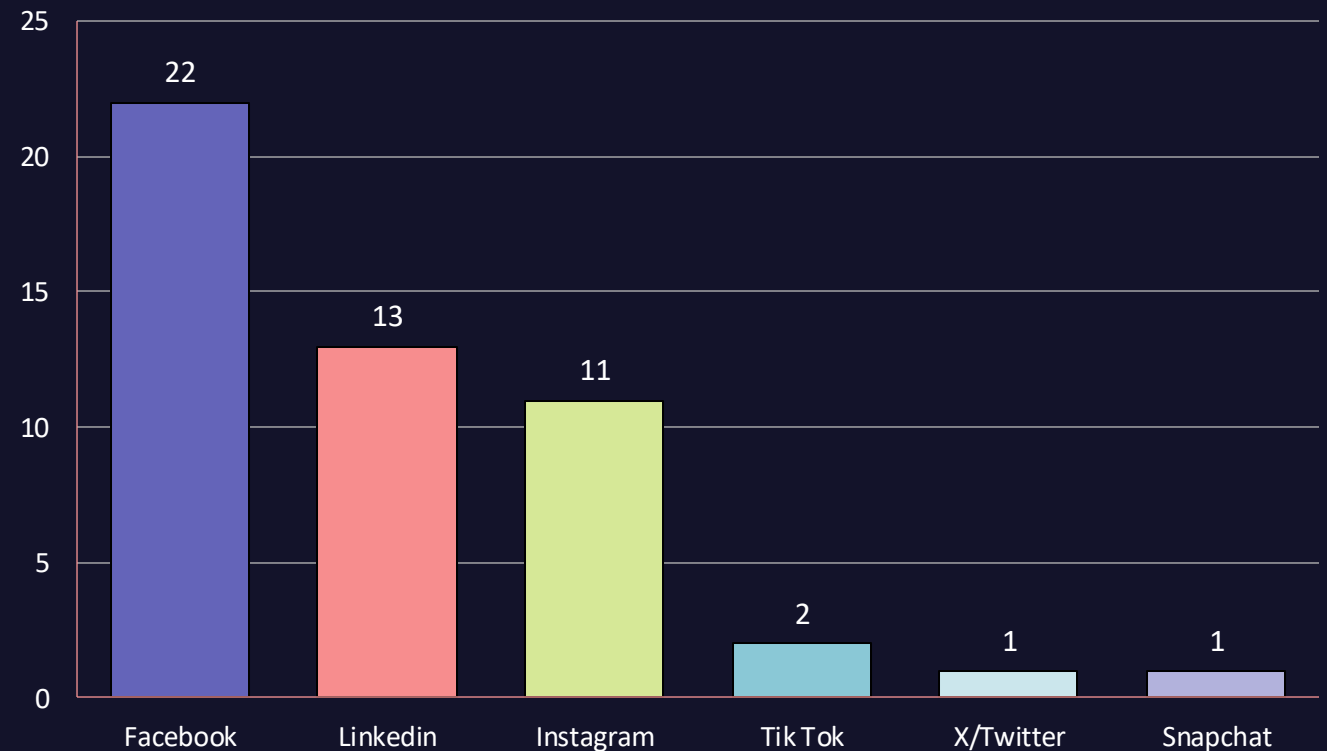
Attitudes to Social Media Activity



Platform Preferences

The most commonly used platform among the providers is Facebook, followed by LinkedIn and then Instagram. Interestingly, TikTok only came in fourth. Given that TikTok was ranked first for students and second for parents, this is something that providers may well want to review and adjust accordingly.

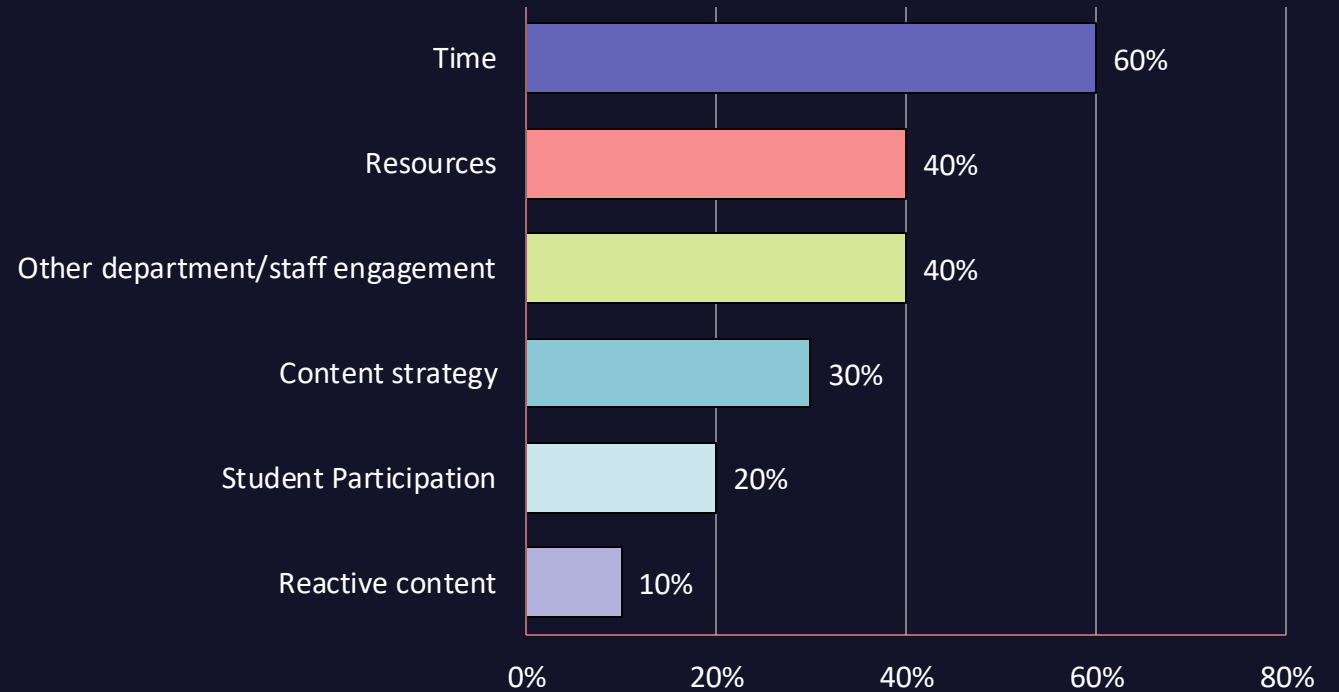
What is your most common primary social media platform?



Biggest Challenges

The biggest challenge facing teams producing social media content is time (60%), followed by resources (40%) and other departments/staff engagement (40%). Time constraints in particular, tend to mean there is a lack of creative strategy and content, resulting in much of what goes out being reactive, rather than planned.

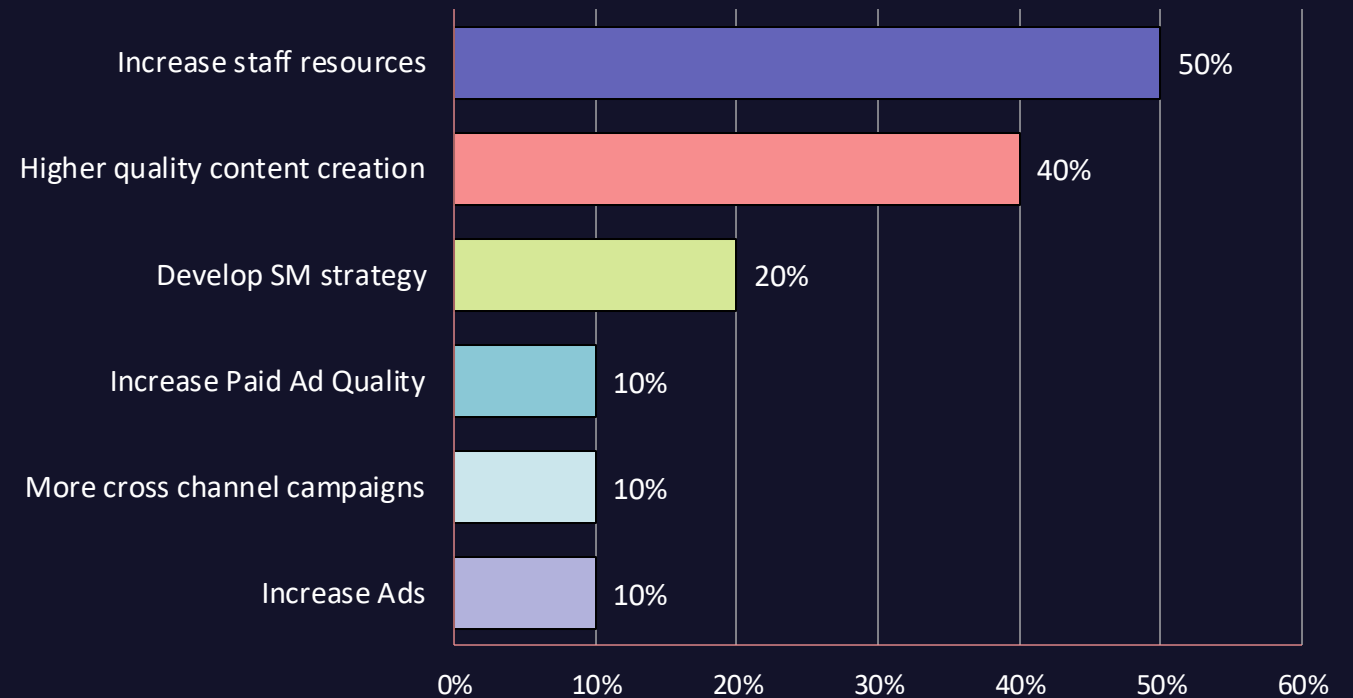
What do you think is the biggest challenge you face in producing social media content?



Improving Social Media Strategy

Asked how they would improve their social media strategy, providers overwhelmingly identified two things: an increase in staff resources (50%), particularly in terms of social media specialists who can implement a strategy and provide content; and more investment in high quality content creation (40%).

If you had the budget, how would you look to improve your social media strategy?



GMP Insights



With time and resource constraints being cited as big challenges for providers in their social media output, outsourcing should be considered as an alternative.



The creation and implementation of social media campaigns should also include a strategy for tracking insights from them, for use in refining future campaigns.



Social media strategies should be based on solid evidence. Providers should conduct market research to shape that strategy and subsequent campaigns.





Summary



Key Recommendations

Area	Recommendation
Authentic Content	The key to engaging young people on social media is to make your content authentic. Consider encouraging students to post content on the college's behalf, which taps into their desire to see more "real people" in college content.
Shareable Videos	Both parents and students say their preference is the video content. Focus on producing a smaller amount of shareable, light-hearted, entertaining, and relatable material, ultimately pointing to course content.
Appropriate Platforms	Platform delivery should be tailored to those used by students and parents. This includes TikTok, and shouldn't discount YouTube. Maintaining your website is also crucial, as most parents use it to research colleges and recommend their children do so too.
Early Engagement	Opportunities should be taken to engage parents early on. This could include collecting contact details at open evenings and then delivering email streams, which is the preferred method of communication from colleges for most parents.
Market Insights	More time should be spent on evidencing the impact of your social media. Consider using market research to test content, learn about what works and what doesn't, in order to help you understand which content is most engaging.



The Social Media Sweet Spot



About GMP

The Social Media Gap was conceived, developed, and delivered by our team of marketing experts at GMP – John Gray, Jim Manning, and Sally Steadman.

Contributing authors include Andrew Cox, Rachel Mather, Ben Owen, Geraint Reeves, and Rob Slane.



John Gray

John is a Chartered Marketer with over 25 years' marketing experience in both B2B and B2C at international, national and regional levels, including 18 years at executive team level. His expertise includes business development; corporate strategy; customer success; and marketing & brand strategy.



Jim Manning

Jim has more than 15 years' experience working in both management consulting and in marketing. An MBA graduate, Jim's areas of expertise includes advertising planning; corporate strategy; customer experience; digital marketing; marketing strategy; social media strategy and delivery.



Sally Steadman

Sally is a Chartered Marketer and CIM Fellow with more than 20 years' experience in marketing, including over 10 years at senior leadership and board level. Her specialist areas of expertise includes business development; corporate strategy; marketing; and partnership development.



Next Research Topic

What does good content look like?

A survey that looks to test different types of content with the target audience.

or

A Focus on adult learners.

The same format as this survey but taking a deep dive on adult learners.





Appendix

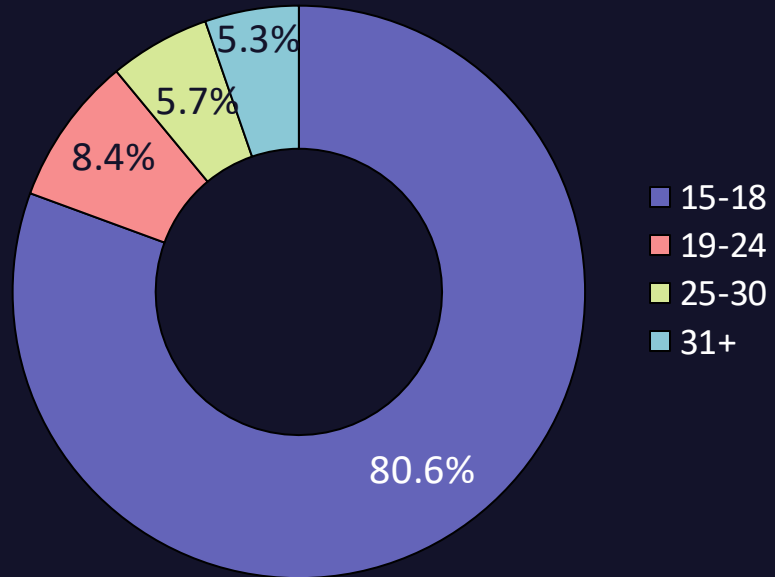




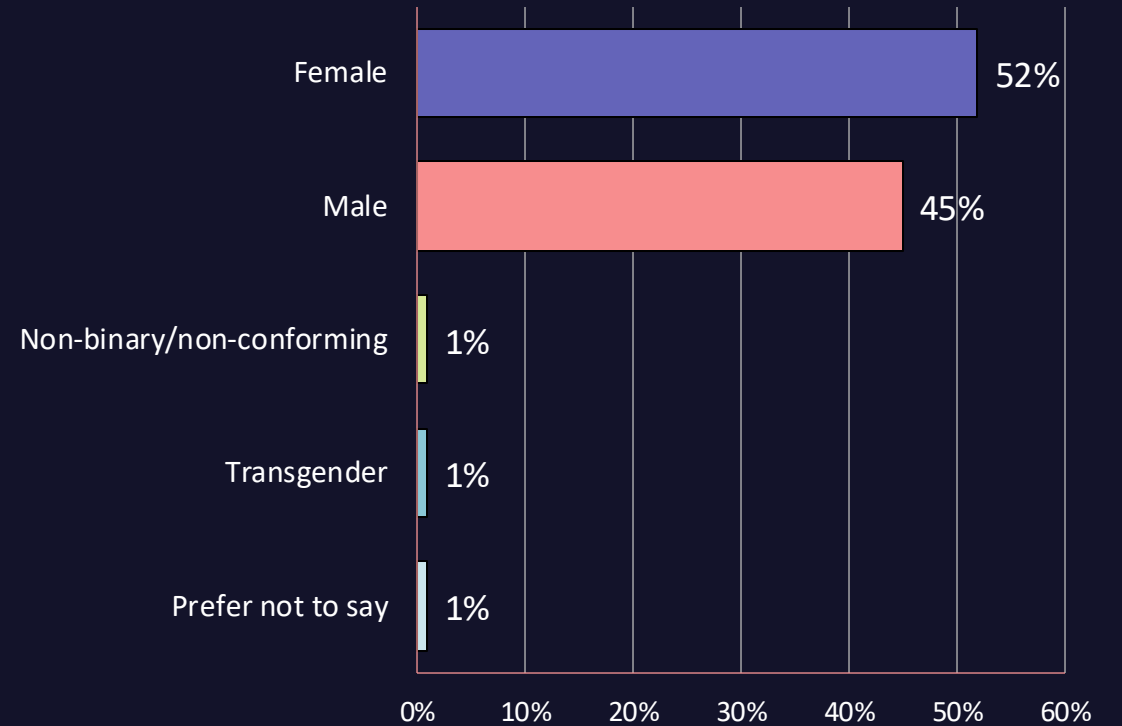
MORE STUDENT INSIGHTS

Demographics

How old are you?

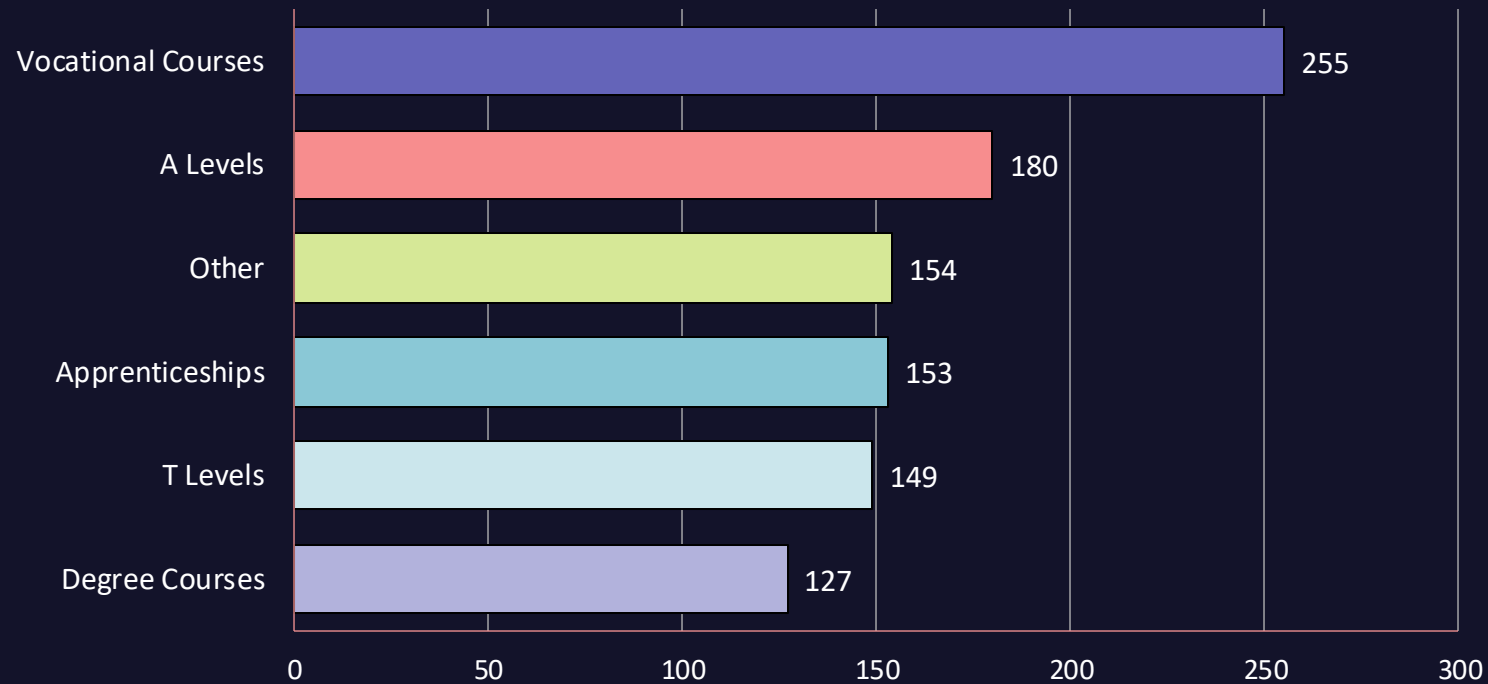


Which gender identity do you most identify as?



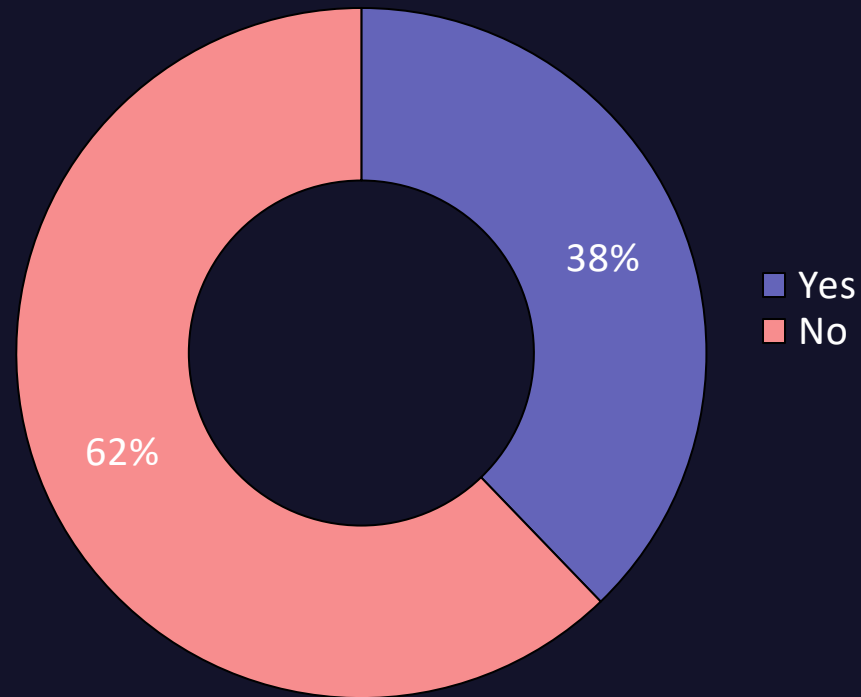
Area of Study

Please select the type of course(s) that you are considering studying at college. Select all that apply.



Viewing College Social Media

Have you ever looked at college social media accounts to find out information to influence your choice of college/course?



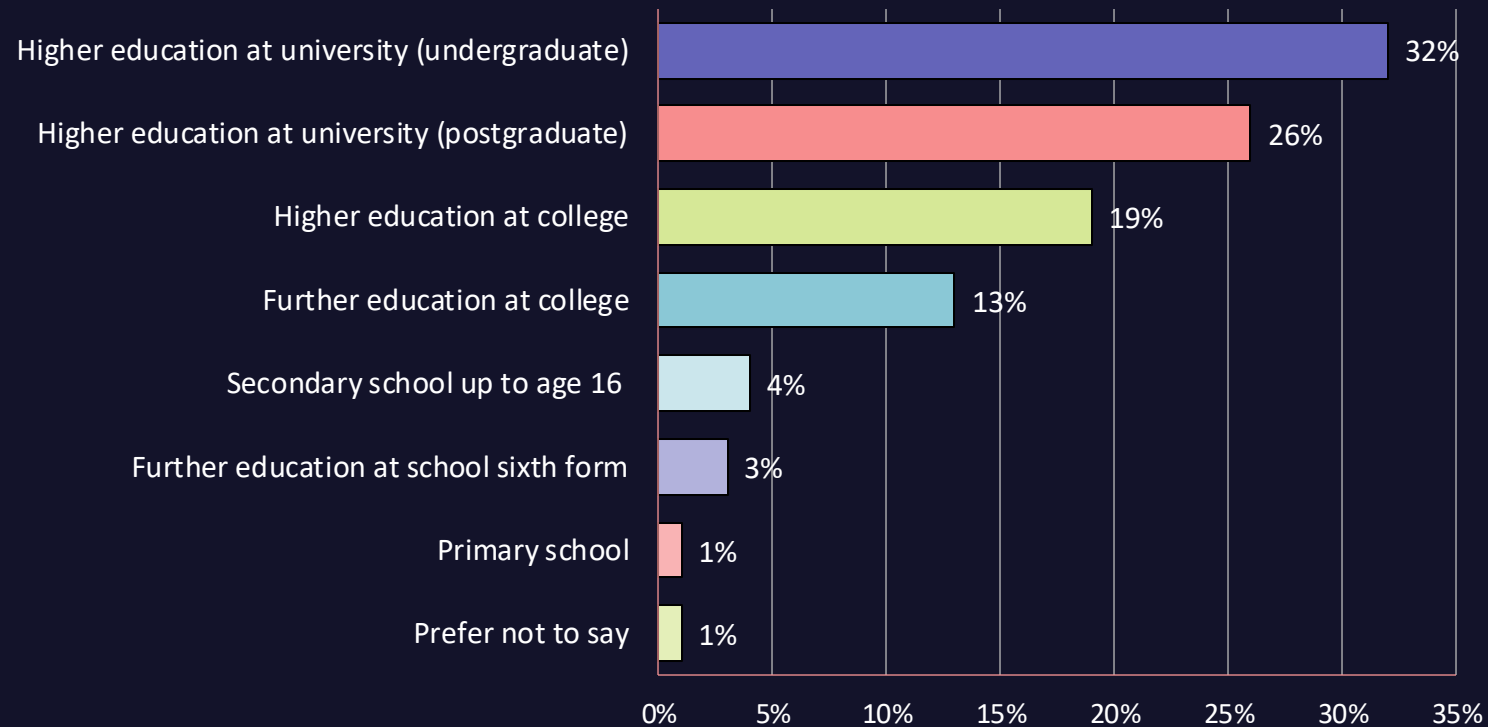


MORE PARENT INSIGHTS



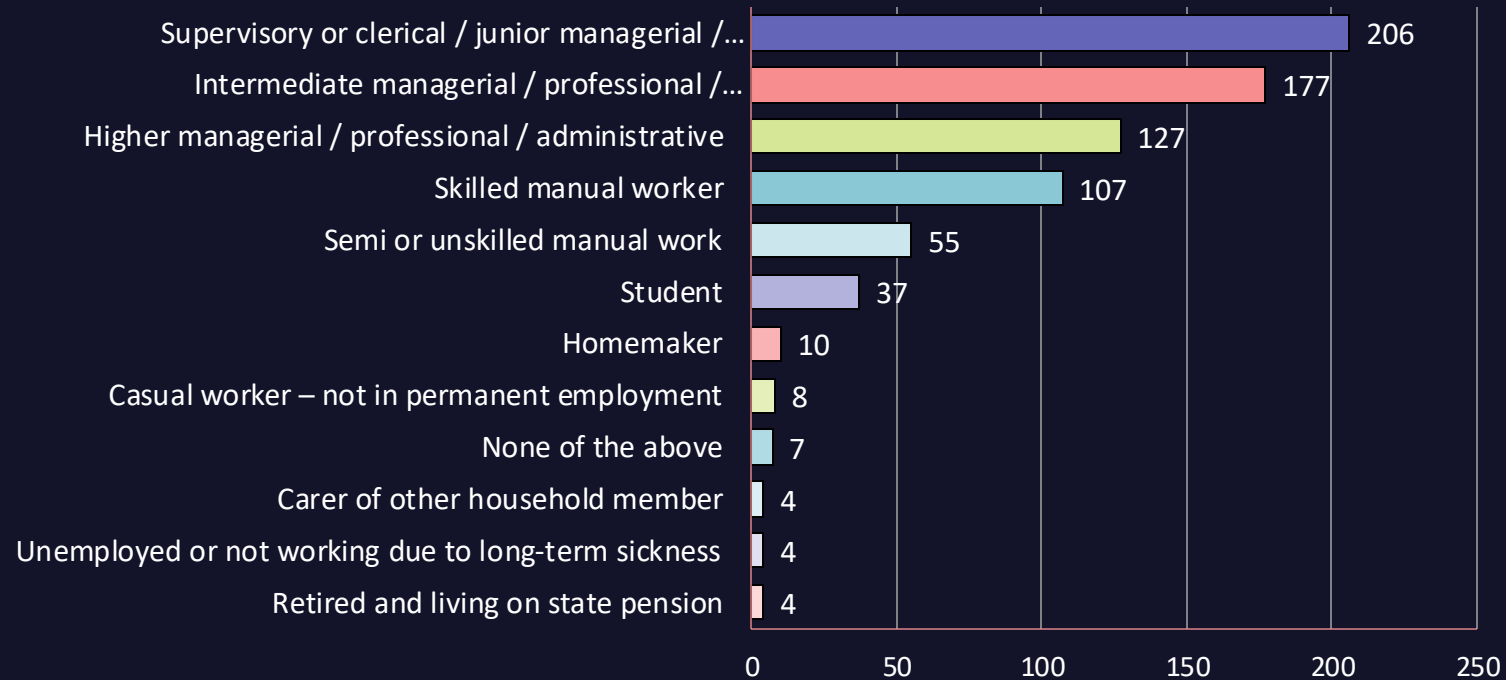
Education Level

What is the highest level of education you have completed?



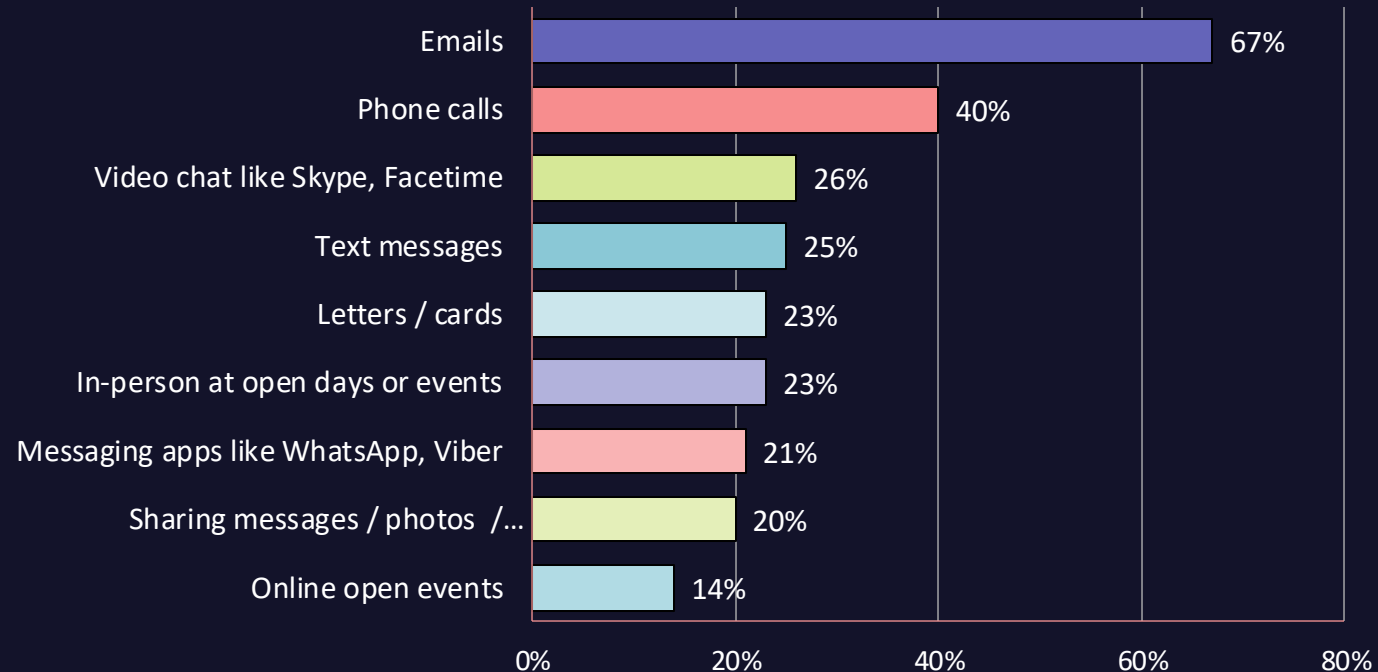
Occupation Level

Which occupational group does the chief income earner in your household belong?



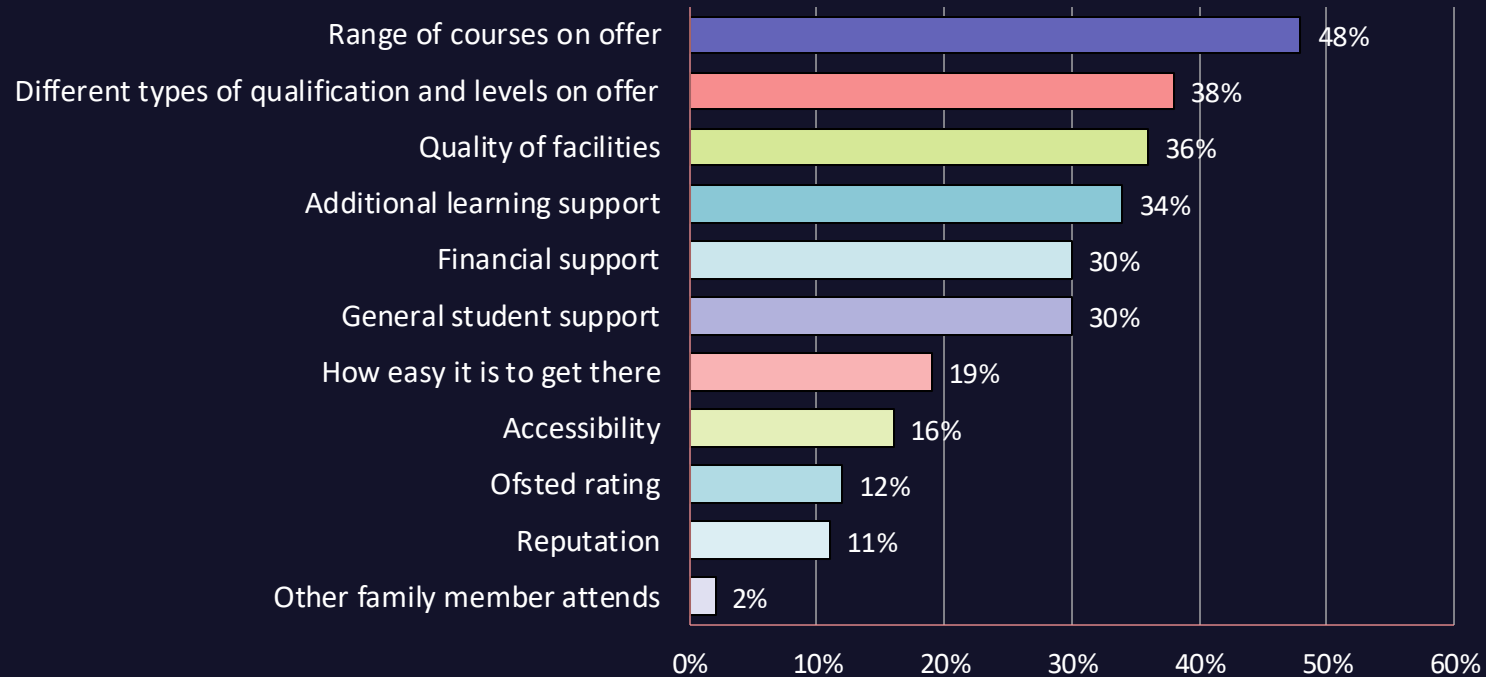
Preferred Method of Communication

How would you like colleges to communicate with you?
Select all that apply.



Preferred Content Type

What type of content would you most like to see from colleges? Please select all that apply.

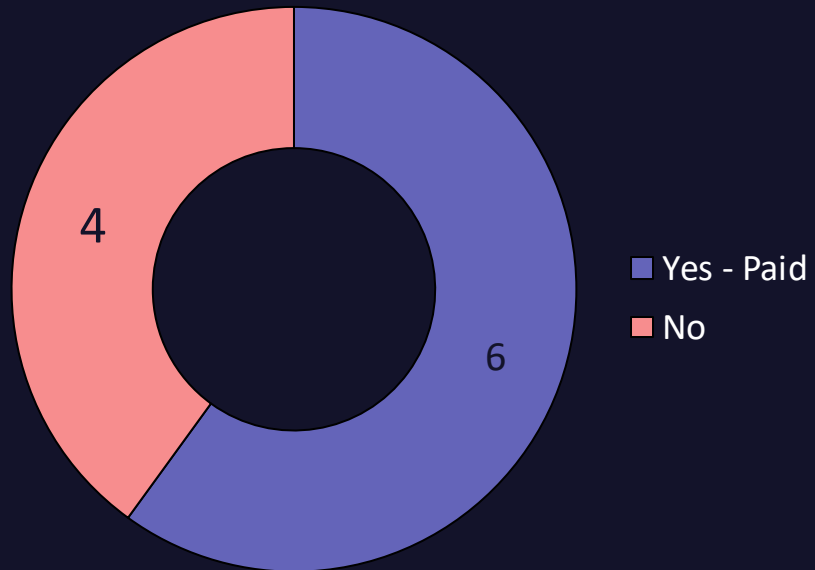




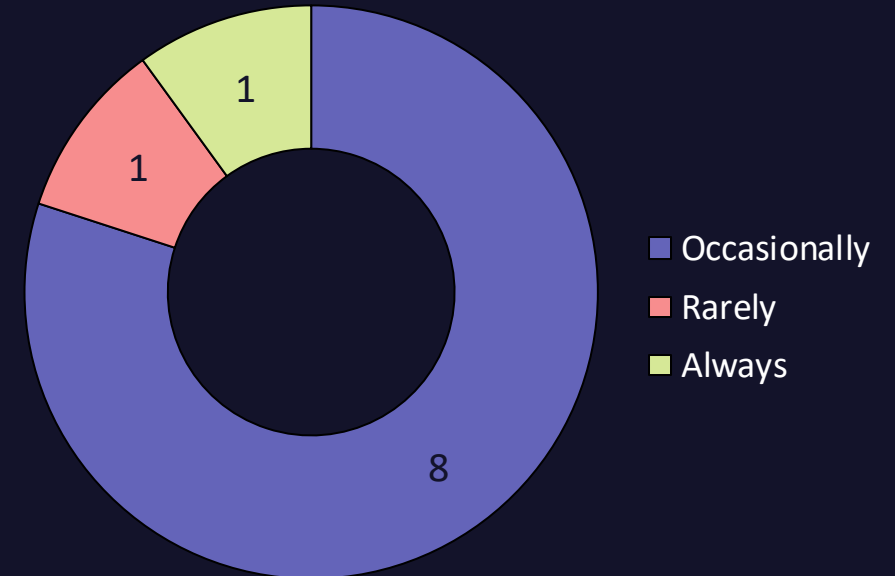
MORE PROVIDER INSIGHTS

Social Media Approach

Do you use an outside agency or subcontractor to support social media activities?

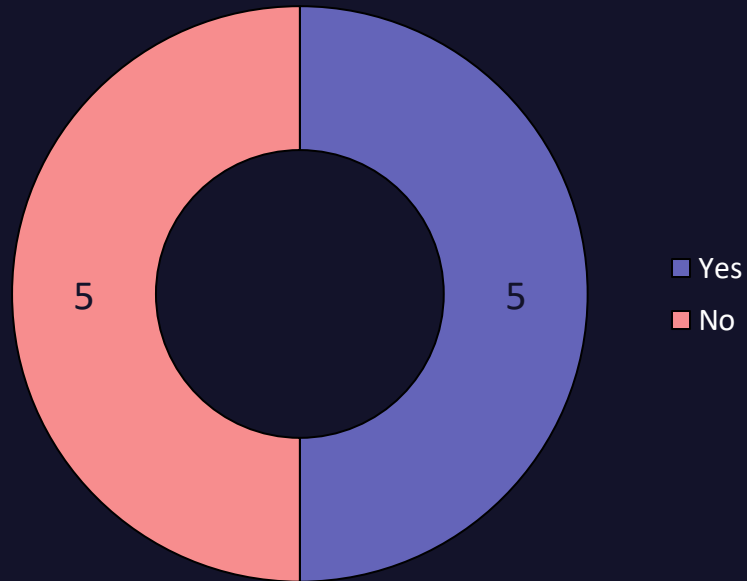


Do you undertake market research with your target audience to inform social media strategy?

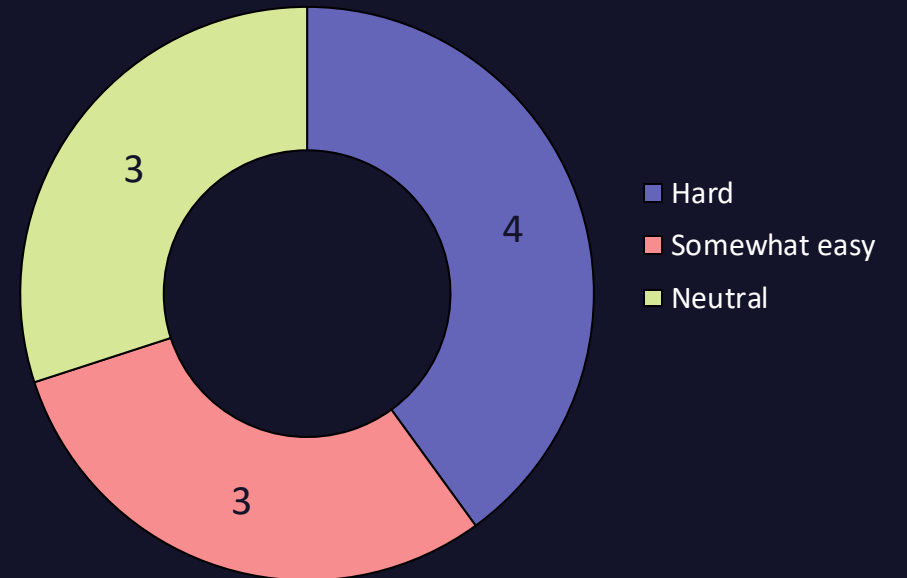


Social Media Roles

Does your organisation have specialist social media roles?

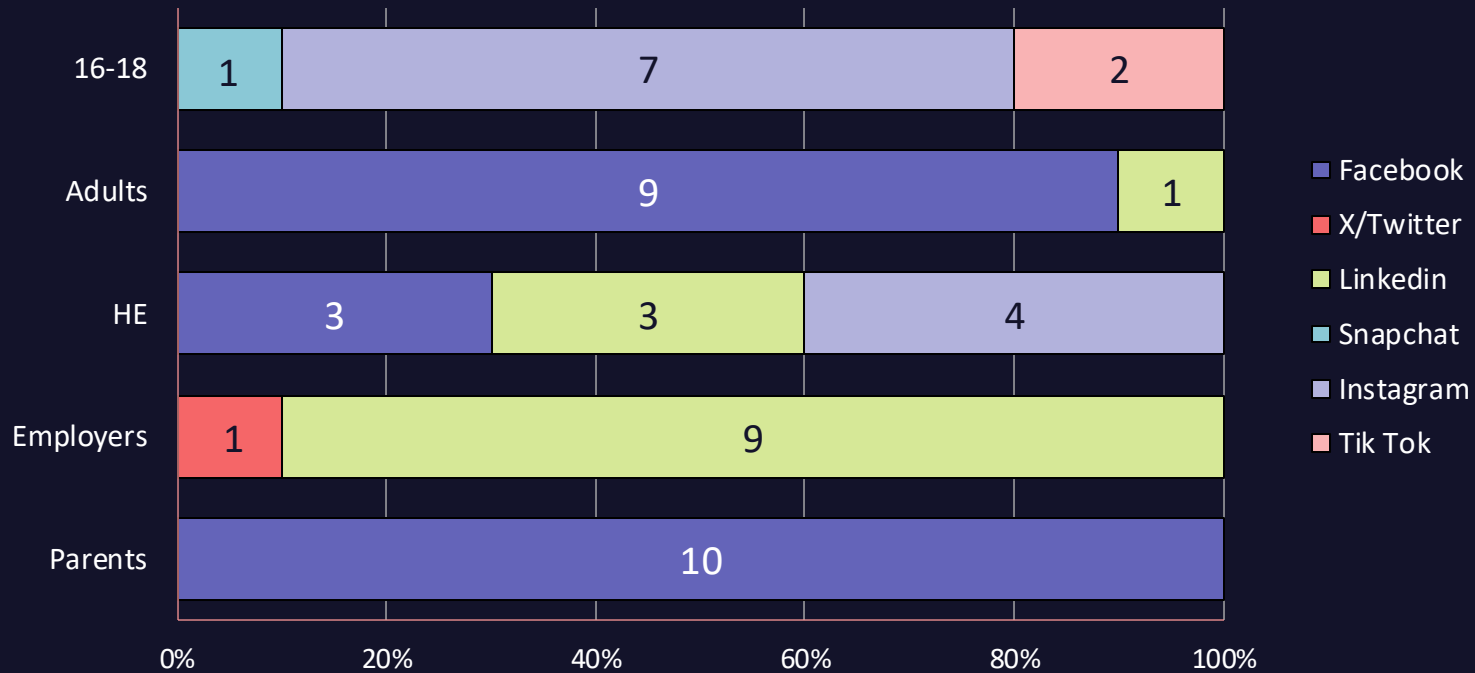


How easy do you find it to hire and retain social media specialist staff?



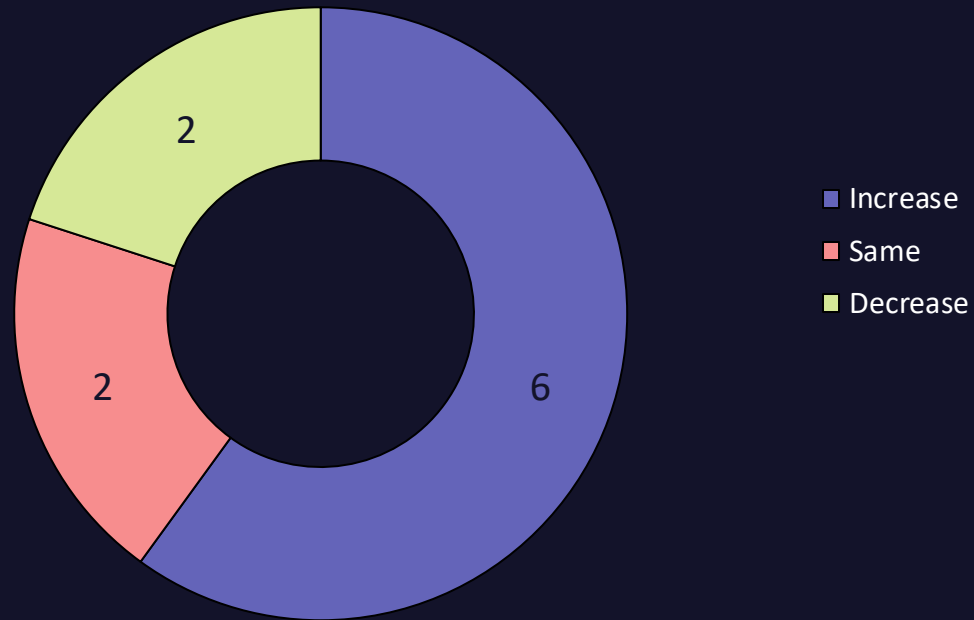
Social Media Channels

What are the primary channels you use for each audience?



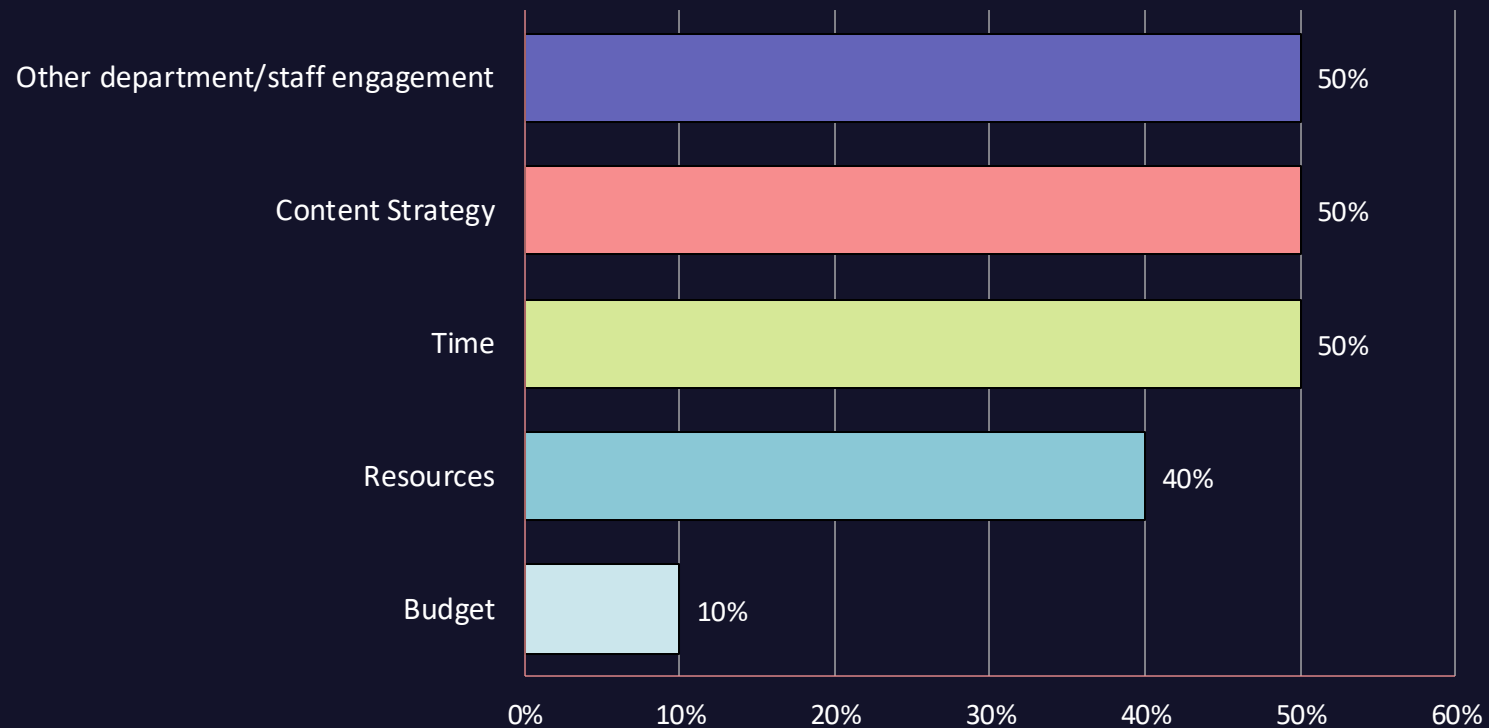
Social Media Spend

What was your social media advertising spend in 2024 vs 2023



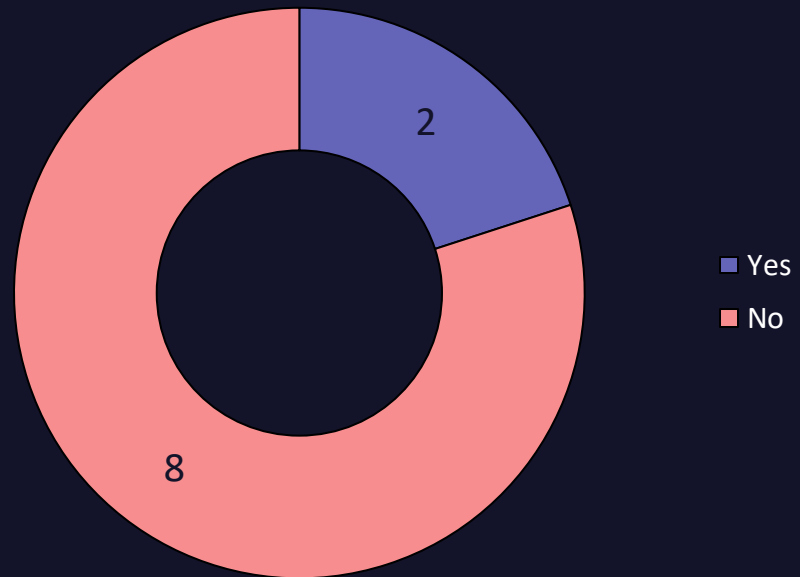
Social Media Challenges

What is your organisation's biggest challenge relating to social media?



Social Media Insights

Are you able to track clicks to applications through digital channels, and detail conversion rates: Organic/Paid



thanks

Get in touch to find out how we can help
you create a social media strategy and
content to engage your audience.

john@gmpartners.co.uk

