



FOCUS N...

From Selection to Satisfaction: the key factors driving student university experience in the UK

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January 2020



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FOCUS N...

A series of in-depth articles from VitalSource taking a closer look at key issues through research, opinions and analysis



From Selection to Satisfaction: the key factors driving student university experience in the UK

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Executive summary

Choosing a university is a major life decision. Overnight, young people move away from their home, their network of social and financial support, and the structured learning environment that has shaped their understanding of education.

A bad choice can impact on a student's wellbeing and course outcomes, reducing the academic and social value of their time at university. Research suggests that for 65% of students it has been, in some way, worse than they expected. University students are less likely to be happy, and more likely to be anxious than the general population of the same age group.¹

For a university, this can result in worrying drop-out rates and poor student satisfaction. Overall, 6% of students don't complete their qualification and, at 66 UK universities, more than 10% leave in their first year.²

University applicants receive a wealth of information from school and universities to assist with their applications, however research shows that they see existing students as a more accurate resource.³ Forum posts on The Student Room website, such as those entitled 'Stuck in Indecision'⁴ and 'Rank these Universities'⁵, demonstrate an appetite among sixth-formers for insights from current students. They are seeking an insider view of university life, including insights into what they will value.

This report examines how different attributes influence the stages of their journey from sixth-form to graduation. It draws on in-depth interviews with sixth-formers (Group 1) and with current students/recent graduates (Group 2) as well as referencing existing academic and industry research in this area. Finally, it considers actions that universities can take to increase their value to sixth-formers and to current students.

¹Advance/HEPI, 2019 Student Academic Experience Survey, 2019, available at: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Student-Academic-Experience-Survey-2019.pdf> [accessed December 2019]

²HESSA Non-continuation summary: UK Performance Indicators 2017/18, available at: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/07-03-2019/non-continuation-summary> [accessed December 2019]

³The New Realists, The Unite Students Insights Report, 2019, available at <http://www.unite-group.co.uk/sites/default/files/2019-09/new-realists-insight-report-2019.pdf> [accessed December 2019]

⁴The Student Room, 2019, available at <https://www.thestudentroom.co.uk/showthread.php?p=86633660&highlight=how%20do%20i%20choose%20my%20university> [accessed December 2019]

⁵The Student Room, 2019 available at <https://www.thestudentroom.co.uk/showthread.php?p=86631612&highlight=how%20do%20i%20choose%20my%20university> [accessed December 2019]



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Six clusters of attributes emerged from the interviews.

Reputation

Career Advancement

Location

Belonging

Teaching Quality

Student Support

These themes have also been identified in existing academic and industry research.^{6,7,8,9}

During the selection process, interviewees place more value on abstract attributes such as **career advancement** and university **reputation**.

Location was an important factor throughout their journey. However, in some cases current students' viewpoints had changed and they would now make a different decision. In one case, location resulted in a student changing university.

Belonging was also important to all interviewees. Applicants correctly anticipated that it would be important to them, but in some cases overestimated how easy it would be. This had a major impact on their experience of university and the value they took from it.

Once at university, they value **teaching quality** and **student support** - more tangible attributes which impact on their day-to-day lives. These attributes have the potential to impact on student's emotional states and their ability to successfully complete their courses.

During the interview process, current students described positive or negative experiences in detail, suggesting that their understanding of their needs had evolved. Researchers have described students experience of university as a complex process with distinct stages.¹⁰ Between their initial decision to apply to university and their graduation, applicants became better informed about their own needs and more skilled at articulating them. This helps explain why there is a gap between applicants' expectations versus the reality of university life.¹¹

⁶Advance/HEPI, 2019 Student Academic Experience Survey, 2019, available at: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Student-Academic-Experience-Survey-2019.pdf> [accessed December 2019]

⁷Jisc, The Top Five things that Really Matter to Students about their University, 2018, available at <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/news/the-top-five-things-that-really-matter-to-students-about-their-university-07-mar-2018> [accessed December 2019]

⁸Walsh, C. et al, University choice: which attributes matter when you are paying the full price? International Journal of Consumer Studies 39 (2015) 670–681, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12178> [accessed December 2019]

⁹Unite The New Realists, The Unite Students Insights Report, 2019, available at <http://www.unite-group.co.uk/campaign/new-realists-report> [accessed December 2019]

¹⁰Cabrera, A., & La Nasa, S. (2000). Understanding the college-choice process. New Directions for Institutional Research, 107, 5–22. doi:10.1002/ir.10701

¹¹HEPI / Unite Students, Reality Check: A Report on University Applicants' Attitudes and Perceptions, July 2017 available at <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Reality-Check-Report-Online1.pdf> [accessed December 2019]



METHODOLOGY

In addition to secondary research, insights were gathered through 17 individual interviews between September and December 2019. Interviews were carried out face-to-face, or via telephone/virtual meeting. Each lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours.

Group 1

Eight sixth-form students

Subject categories*:

Business • English Literature • Environmental Science
Law • Maths and Physical Sciences • Politics • Public Health

**Some students were considering courses from multiple subject categories.*

Group 2

Six current university undergraduates and three recent graduates

Subject categories:**

Construction • English Literature • Business • Geography
Hospitality and Tourism • Languages • Law
Mathematics • Physical Sciences • Public Health

***Some students studied joint degrees.*

Universities attended*:**

Durham University • London Metropolitan University
London School of Tropical Health and Hygiene • London Southbank University
University of Bristol • University of Cambridge • University of Exeter
University of Lincoln • University of Manchester

****Some students had attended multiple universities. Some universities were attended by more than one student.*

A semi-structured interview approach was used. This ensured that there was comparability between the subjects covered but that interviewees could direct the conversation to the issues they considered most important. They were given scope to answer freely before being prompted with specific questions.

All interviewees were asked about their motivations for attending university, their selection process and their priorities.

Group 2 interviewees were asked whether, in hindsight, they thought they had used the right decision-making criteria when selecting a university. They were also questioned about their university experience and, where relevant, about the value it had added to their career.



'A Russell Group university was quite a big deal when I was deciding where to apply – it's meant to be a better university.'

Group 2, English Literature Student, University of Exeter



REPUTATION

Existing Research

A university's reputation is of high value to applicants, particularly for those from higher socioeconomic groups. When making their selection, academic reputation is second only to the suitability of the course.¹²

For current students, it has a modest impact on their perceptions of value for money, but is not associated with an increase in teaching quality.¹³

Interview Insights

Reputation was a highly influential factor in the early stages of the university research process.

For some young people, concerns about a university's reputation reflected high aspirations, either their own, those of their parents or school.

For all interviewees, reputation is closely associated with the main motivations they gave for applying to university:

- i) intrinsic love of learning or of a specific subject
- ii) career advancement

The interviewees felt ill-equipped to judge how well a university might meet their needs in these critically important areas. A good reputation reassures them by acting as a stamp of quality that teaching will be good and that the degree will be welcomed by employers:

'I just wanted reassurance that the quality of teaching would be alright. What I was seeing (in the rankings) implied that there wasn't anything to worry about there.'
Group 2, Public Health Graduate, London School of Tropical Health and Hygiene

'A Russell Group university was quite a big deal when I was deciding where to apply – it's meant to be a better university.'
Group 2, English Literature Student, University of Exeter

Applicants also associated high entry requirements with a good reputation and with a high-quality learning experience:

'I don't think it is snobbery. I've always been high achieving and I wanted to go somewhere where the quality of teaching is good and the quality of students is high. I'd like to be surrounded by like-minded people, more engaged students.'
Group 1, Geography Applicant

¹²Walsh, C. et al, University choice: which attributes matter when you are paying the full price? International Journal of Consumer Studies 39 (2015) 670–681, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12178> [accessed December 2019]

¹³Advance/HEPI, 2019 Student Academic Experience Survey, 2019, available at: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Student-Academic-Experience-Survey-2019.pdf> [accessed December 2019]



'It was confusing. I wasn't really provided with any information of where to start, so I searched the rankings and was presented with a list of 50 universities.'

Group 1, Geography Applicant

REPUTATION (CONTINUED)

Interviewees described using a variety of sources to assess reputation; Russell Group status, Which.co.uk reviews, and various rankings tables. Many interviewees could not remember which rankings tables they had used and acknowledged that they hadn't examined what the rankings purported to measure. Others had engaged at a detailed level:

'I looked at all the listings, The Guardian, student-teacher ratios, number of seminars etc, to find a course that ranked above Oxbridge.'

Group 2, English Literature Student, University of Exeter

There was a low awareness of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) as a ranking tool among all the interviewees. Where it was noticed, students assumed that a bronze TEF was a negative and should be avoided:

'All the unis had their TEF. I remember Southampton had Bronze and I thought that was odd as it is supposed to be a good uni.'

Group 1, English Literature Applicant

Some students were somewhat dismissive of the value of rankings, but even these students used them in their search. Interviewees described using rankings tables, often in combination with entry requirements, to reduce the confusion and scale of the selection task by creating shortlists to investigate further.

'It was confusing. I wasn't really provided with any information of where to start, so I searched the rankings and was presented with a list of 50 universities.'

Group 1, Geography Applicant

Two of the Group 2 interviewees had received unconditional offers. They had been torn between a guaranteed place and a more challenging offer with a higher reputation. The one student who did accept an unconditional offer later changed university.

Once at university, in accordance with previous research, most of the Group 2 interviewees still placed some value on their institution's reputation. Interviewees did not, unprompted, list reputation as a source of value. Instead this emerged when they were directly questioned on the subject.

Several students noted that their expectations had led to disappointment and a feeling that their high ranked university was complacent.

'They've got the name behind them. The reputation is already there so they put less focus on appreciating the students.'

Group 2, Geography Student, University of Manchester

CAREER ADVANCEMENT

Existing Research

A number of studies have identified factors relating to career advancement as important considerations for students when they are making their university selection.¹⁴ A successful career is about more than a good salary, students link a successful career to having more choices, to financial stability and quality of life.¹⁵

When asked how their university fees should be spent, current students saw spending funds on careers provision as less valid than teaching, but more important than spending on sports and social facilities.¹⁶

However, universities fall short of students' expectations in terms of career-planning support.¹⁷

Interview Insights

Interviewees associated high ranking universities with better career outcomes, believing that they are preferred by employers and lead to higher salaries.

'It's a career advancer.'
Group 1, English Literature Applicant

This perception may be oversimplified and flawed, but it is pervasive.¹⁸

The problem raised by Group 2 interviewees was not poor provision, but the challenge of having sufficient time and energy to invest in career preparation whilst also managing the pressures of academic study. As a result, students hadn't fully engaged with the career support that was available to them. Students at Russell Groups were more likely to report that workload did not allow time for career planning, which is in line with findings that they are more likely to find their course intense.¹⁷ They were also less likely to have career development interwoven into their regular curriculum as part of their academic course and more likely for it to be an additional extra.

The opportunity for placements and internships appealed when choosing a university, and in some cases, was the deciding factor. Students from a wide range of institutions were participating in these initiatives: including Cambridge University, University of Lincoln and University of Manchester. Students described these as being an incentive to apply to a university, and as the highlight of their study. Recent graduates saw them as instrumental in getting employment. However, they were also challenging to manage, particularly when they took place in vacation periods.

Graduates focused more on the value of having a degree per se than on any specific career services. They felt that the degree had made them more confident in their abilities to perform at work as well as helping them to get interviews.

¹⁴Walsh, C. et al, University choice: which attributes matter when you are paying the full price? International Journal of Consumer Studies 39 (2015) 670–681, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12178> [accessed December 2019]

¹⁵Unite The New Realists, The Unite Students Insights Report, 2019, available at <http://www.unite-group.co.uk/campaign/new-realists-report> [accessed December 2019]

¹⁶Advance/HEPI, 2019 Student Academic Experience Survey, 2019, available at: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Student-Academic-Experience-Survey-2019.pdf> [accessed December 2019]

¹⁷HEPI / Unite Students, Reality Check: A Report on University Applicants' Attitudes and Perceptions, July 2017 available at <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Reality-Check-Report-Online1.pdf> [accessed December 2019]

¹⁸The Telegraph <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education-and-careers/0/what-highest-paying-degrees-uk-top-graduate-salary-britain/>, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/https%3A//www.timeshighereducation.com/student/best-universities/graduate-employability-top-universities-uk-ranked-employers> [accessed December 2019]



'It's a career advancer.'

Group 1, English Literature Applicant





'Location had a lot to do with it – I wanted natural stepping stones, not a jump to a big city.'

Group 2, English Literature Student, University of Exeter

LOCATION AND ACCOMMODATION

Existing Research

A number of studies have identified location factors as important considerations in the university selection process. These include proximity to home and the type of location. Young people who are economically disadvantaged are more likely to select local institutions and to live at home. These 'commuter students', who travel in, on a daily basis, are less likely to feel that they belong, which reduces the non-academic benefits of university.

Accommodation is closely linked to a sense of belonging. Living with other students on campus, or near to university, results in the best experience. Applicants feel that they are as likely to make friends with the people they live with as with those on their course, but living with new people causes anxiety, particularly for disadvantaged students and those who do not define themselves as heterosexual. These groups are also less confident that they will make friends.

Interviewee Insights

When making their selections, location factors were highly relevant to all interviewees, but students had highly personal reasons for their choices.

Some wanted to live a city, with London, Manchester and Edinburgh being perceived as lively locations with lots of opportunities.

'It's really all about location. My brother went to UCL and I just love London and central London. There was no other city in the UK that I was drawn to.'

Group 1, Public Health Applicant

Others specifically did not want a big city:

'Location had a lot to do with it - I wanted natural stepping stones, not a jump to a big city.'

Group 2, English Literature Student, University of Exeter

'I really liked the Falmouth campus – it was rural and seemed very relaxed.'

Group 1, Environmental Science Applicant

They considered how important it was to stay close to their existing networks:

'I've got family nearby – I don't want to be somewhere completely by myself.'

Group 1, Environmental Science Applicant

¹⁹Walsh, C. et al, University choice: which attributes matter when you are paying the full price? International Journal of Consumer Studies 39 (2015) 670–681, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12178> [accessed December 2019]

²⁰HEPI / Unite Students, Reality Check: A Report on University Applicants' Attitudes and Perceptions, July 2017 available at <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Reality-Check-Report-Online1.pdf> [accessed December 2019]

LOCATION AND ACCOMMODATION (CONTINUED)

Affordability factors influenced some students:

'If I hadn't gone to Cambridge, I think I would have gone to SOAS – then I would have been able to commute which takes expenses off the list.'

Group 2, Japanese Studies Student, Cambridge University.

As found in previous research, students with financial pressures saw living at home as a way to reduce the costs of university.

'I'll live in halls for the first year and then at home. I'll work in my year out and save. And I'll get part time work to help.'

Group 1, Public Health Applicant

Despite the raft of new, luxury student accommodation being built, when the interviewees talked about their needs it was not the newness of the buildings or facilities that concerned them, but social support and physical safety.

'The accommodation put me off. It was really far from university and the roads weren't lit. Safety is quite important to me.'

Group 1, Environmental Science Applicant

Campuses were seen as providing safety, support and an opportunity to connect with other students:

'I liked the idea of more campus based – that it gave a more unified feel and it seemed less of a scary jump – it seemed as though the transition would be easier. We'd be all in one place and everyone together.'

Group 1, Philosophy, Politics and Economics Applicant

'I was looking for a community – a college system.'

Group 2, English Literature Student, University of Exeter

Reflecting on their decisions, Group 2 interviewees had mixed feelings about the locations they had selected. Manchester provided a Maths student with a useful opportunity to escape the stresses of academic life.

Several were less positive. A student at the University of Lincoln changed institution mid-course, moving to London in order to benefit from a more varied social life and increased opportunities for part-time work. Several of those who had actively chosen to move far from home found the high travel costs challenging and missed their family and friends. These regrets stemmed from the students gaining a better understanding of themselves and of what they needed from university life, rather than from any information that would appear in an accommodation brochure.



'I liked the idea of more campus based – that it gave a more unified feel and it seemed less of a scary jump – it seemed as though the transition would be easier. We'd be all in one place and everyone together.'

Group 1, Philosophy, Politics and Economics Applicant

BELONGING AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Existing Research

Rational factors help students build their shortlists and justify their choices, but ultimately, their final selection is driven by emotions rather than logic. In alignment with the FLAG framework, students choose the place that 'Fits Like A Glove'.²² This means selecting the university that feels right to them, where they can see themselves fitting in and anticipating their needs will be met. FLAG factors are particularly important to widening participation students.

Students are increasingly diverse so what 'Fits Like a Glove' for one student may not work for another. 15% of students declare a disability, 24% are BAME, 12% are from low participation areas. Currently these groups report lower levels of satisfaction and perceived value and/or have lower outcomes.^{24 25} This suggests that their needs are not being met.

The majority of students attend an open day, and it is the deciding factor for over a third. Open days allow students to evaluate many aspects of the university environment from the course to the accommodation. It also allows them to consider less tangible aspects such as the culture of the university and whether they will get on with their fellow students.²⁶

Going to university is not simply about education, it is about transitioning to adulthood.²⁷ Leaving their existing social support structures behind is an opportunity to explore their identity, but can also leave them feeling lonely or isolated. Most students feel lonely at least some of the time, but around a quarter often do.²⁶ Loneliness is associated with lower wellbeing and can impact on academic performance.²⁸

Contrary to applicant's expectations, students are less likely to make friends during Fresher's week than they expect. Fresher's week alone is not sufficient to integrate students into university life and for some students, perhaps including the 22% who are teetotal, it is not highly valued.²⁹



'I visited a lot of them. I don't really know what I was looking for... whether I thought I could live there, whether I would get on with people.'

Group 1, Geography Applicant



²² Walsh, C. et al, University choice: which attributes matter when you are paying the full price? International Journal of Consumer Studies 39 (2015) 670–681, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12178> [accessed December 2019]

²³ Unite The New Realists, The Unite Students Insights Report, 2019, available at <http://www.unite-group.co.uk/campaign/new-realists-report> [accessed December 2019]

²⁴ Inside Government, 2019 <https://www.insidegovernment.co.uk/blog/bame-widening-participation/> [accessed December 2019]

²⁵ The Office for Students, 2019. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/beyond-the-bare-minimum-are-universities-and-colleges-doing-enough-for-disabled-students/> [accessed December 2019]

²⁶ HEPI / Unite Students, Reality Check: A Report on University Applicants' Attitudes and Perceptions, July 2017 available at <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Reality-Check-Report-Online1.pdf> [accessed December 2019]

²⁷ Arnett, J. J. (2016) College Students as Emerging Adults: The Developmental Implications of the College Context. Emerging Adulthood. 4 (3), 219-222. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696815587422> [accessed December 2019]

²⁸ Wohn, D. Y. & LaRose, R. (2014) Effects of loneliness and differential usage of Facebook on college adjustment of first-year students. Available from: <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S036013151400075X>. [accessed December 2019]

²⁹ Advance/HEPI, 2019 Student Academic Experience Survey, 2019, available at: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-c> [accessed December 2019]

BELONGING AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS (CONTINUED)

Interview Insights

When asked about their final university selection, most students referred to FLAG factors, ie how they felt, not what they thought.

'What was most important? How it felt when I went there on the open day.'

Group 1, Mathematics Applicant

'I visited a lot of them. I don't really know what I was looking for...whether I thought I could live there, whether I would get on with people.'

Group 1, Geography Applicant

Both groups of interviewees suggested universities may not be doing a sufficiently good job with regards to supporting diversity and reassuring students that they understand their needs. One Group 2 interviewee explained that he had chosen Manchester University because 'other universities felt too white' for him to feel he fitted in. A Group 1 interviewee was put off an academically excellent university by their poor dyslexia support:

'There should be a competent SEN department that seem to know what they are doing and want to help - even if you don't actually need help at the time.'

Group 1, Physics Applicant

Group 1 interviewees anticipated universities providing value by supporting them in transitioning to adulthood; becoming independent and building their social circle:

'I want to go for the experience – to make more friends.'

Group 1, Geography Applicant

'It's about experiencing being independent, but more it's safer than just going off by myself.'

Group 1, Environmental Science Applicant

However, this support did not materialise. Group 2 interviewees were disappointed by the lack of opportunities for building new networks.

One interviewee commented that universities depend too heavily on societies to provide social interaction. These were viewed as expensive and students were put off by unpleasant initiation ceremonies:

'Initiation ceremonies are so bad especially in the major sports. I wouldn't fit in socially. You spill your drink and you have to buy another and down it. Drinking is a big thing...if someone didn't drink, I wonder how they would find settling in.'

Group 2, English Literature Student, University of Exeter

Social activities are being driven by a drinking culture. This excludes students who do not drink and can be prohibitively expensive.

'I didn't just want to be living the university life. I'm not the kind of person who wants to go out drinking. I can't afford it.'

Group 2, Tourism Management Student, University of Lincoln

Given the importance of social capital in course completion and life opportunities, there is clearly a space for universities to do more to help students connect with one another. This would have particular value for students with additional challenges, for example those who are economically disadvantaged.



'It's about experiencing being independent, but more its safer than just going off by myself.'

Group 1,
Environmental Science
Applicant

TEACHING AND ACADEMIC CONTENT

Existing Research

Most students go to university because they love their subject and have an intrinsic desire to continue their education.³⁰ Unsurprisingly then, the course itself influences their choice of university.³¹ Both the course and the quality of teaching have a high impact on student's perceptions of the university's value.³²

More widely, teaching and learning is an area where there is a high disconnect between applicant expectations and actual experience. Students identified teaching quality, poor course organisation and lack of support in independent study as the top areas in which their experience was worse than they expected. Overall, they expect more group work, more contact hours and more one-to-one support than they receive.³³

Surprisingly, research does not always identify quality of teaching as an important consideration for students when they make their selection³¹. This may be because students wrap this into other categories such as the course or the academic reputation. However, TEF Gold and Russell Group universities do not perform consistently better in perceptions of teaching quality.³⁴

This dissatisfaction may stem from the change in learning style experienced when students go to university. Student expectations have been shaped by their school environment. They lack the experience necessary to know what they should expect from university teaching, and do not understand the terminology used to describe it. For example, the term "independent study" causes particular problems, as their experience at school leads students to expect more supervision and guidance than university provides.³⁵

Assessments, feedback and guidance are also an area where students feel let down. Fewer than 60% receive feedback in time to inform their next assignment, and those that did reported receiving insufficient detail.³²

Face to face contact has high perceived value, but the Unite Students Insights Report, 2019 states that students also expect 'a strong digital option, though they expect it to be well designed and intuitive and they may become frustrated if that's not the case.' Students rate those universities with good digital provision more highly in NSS surveys and around 70% say that they enjoyed learning and understood more when digital was used.³⁶

³⁰The New Realists, The Unite Students Insights Report, 2019, available at <http://www.unite-group.co.uk/sites/default/files/2019-09/new-realists-insight-report-2019.pdf> [accessed December 2019]

³¹Walsh, C. et al, University choice: which attributes matter when you are paying the full price? International Journal of Consumer Studies 39 (2015) 670–681, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12178> [accessed December 2019]

³²Advance/HEPI, 2019 Student Academic Experience Survey, 2019, available at: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Student-Academic-Experience-Survey-2019.pdf> [accessed December 2019]

³³HEPI / Unite Students, Reality Check: A Report on University Applicants' Attitudes and Perceptions, July 2017

³⁴Advance/HEPI, 2019 Student Academic Experience Survey, 2019, available at: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Student-Academic-Experience-Survey-2019.pdf> [accessed December 2019]

³⁵Students Julie Money, Sarah Nixon and Linda Graham, 'Do Educational Experiences in School Prepare Students for University? A Teachers' Perspective', Journal of Further and Higher Education, 2019

³⁶Jisc, Digital experience insights survey 2019: findings from students in UK further and higher education, available at <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/reports/digital-experience-insights-survey-2019-students-uk> [accessed December 2019]

Assessments, feedback and guidance are also an area where students feel let down. Fewer than 60% receive feedback in time to inform their next assignment, and those that did reported receiving insufficient detail.³²





'It was a lot harder than I expected. In terms of the intensity and compared to friends studying similar courses at other universities.'

Group 2, Maths and Spanish Student, University of Manchester

TEACHING AND ACADEMIC CONTENT (CONTINUED)

Interview Insights

Most Group 1 interviewees did not mention teaching quality as a distinct selection-criteria until prompted.

When asked directly, there was a high level of uncertainty around what the university teaching and learning experience would entail. They were able to refer to lectures, independent study and in some cases tutorials, but they found it difficult to imagine what it would be like to learn this way. However, smaller class groups and higher access to teaching staff were associated with high rankings/reputations and with a better learning experience.

The words support and guidance were frequently used, reflecting their experiences at school.

'Intimate teaching sessions with guidance.'
Group 1, English Literature Applicant

'Guidance on what tools to use and what to study and what we need to know... Assistance if we are studying.'
Group 1, Environmental Science Applicant

'I don't mind the number of hours, its more about the support that is in place, how accessible the faculty members seem. The ability to have small tutorials.'
Group 1, Geography Applicant

'Support if you need it. A collaborative approach with discussions, instead of a teacher just talking at you.'
Group 1, Public Health Applicant

Some had attended taster days and had found it inspiring to receiving lectures from experts. Experiencing high quality university teaching and engaging with enthusiastic academics made these students feel emotionally connected to the institution.

'I could really see the enthusiasm; how good they were at talking to people and to ask questions.'
Group 1, Geography Applicant

A positive experience at a taster day had a stronger influence on application decisions than rankings. However, one applicant found the experience of sitting in huge lecture halls 'daunting'. Another commented that that taster lectures were probably better than the regular teaching that they would receive as their purpose was to show off the best that a university had. Substandard lectures at open days and taster days were sufficient to remove a university from a shortlist.

Group 2 interviewees considered teaching as central to their satisfaction and gave detailed examples of their experiences.

TEACHING AND ACADEMIC CONTENT (CONTINUED)

Although they were expecting hard work, those at Russell Group universities were surprised by the extent of the pressure.

'It was a lot harder than I expected. In terms of the intensity and compared to friends studying similar courses at other universities.'

Group 2, Maths and Spanish Student, University of Manchester

They also found that the advantages of access to exciting new research were sometimes outweighed by academics who were only teaching because they had to.

'A lot of the lecturers at uni didn't like teaching. They absolutely hated it. If someone who is teaching you doesn't like teaching, it impacts your experience.'

Group 2, English Literature Student, University of Exeter

Feedback was a problem area. Most students received very little, even on assessed work. It is common for students to receive a single line of feedback. In contrast, only one student spoke enthusiastically about this area:

'Some of the feedback on our assessments was lovely, especially some that I had really struggled with. A couple of paragraphs and a whole table with a marking scheme and a comment in each bit. It was impressive.'

Group 2, Health Graduate, London School of Tropical Health and Hygiene

However, even this student commented that feedback earlier in the course would have been helpful and would have reduced anxiety levels among the students.

Digital support was also mentioned, both as a positive and a negative. Online learning resources such as lecture capture were taken for granted. However, some halls of residence still do not have any wifi provision. This hampers learning, but also impacts on student's attitude to their university.

'It's not 2013. There should be wifi in all accommodation.'

Group 2, Maths and Spanish Student, University of Manchester

That same student commented on the extensive resources provided by the university library, both in print and digitally, saying that this thoroughly supported his learning. The importance of the library and online resources was echoed by other students:

'You have access to any library within the college – a lot are open 24 hours a day. A huge database of e-resources. I haven't encountered a situation where I have needed something and it wasn't available.'

Group 2, Japanese Studies Student, Cambridge University

Group 1 interviewees were already thinking about resources when attending open days:

'I looked at library spaces – Royal Holloway had an amazing library. And it had access to the internet – online research, e-books and JSTOR.'

Group 1, Public Health Applicant



'You have access to any library within the college – a lot are open 24 hours a day. A huge database of e-resources.'

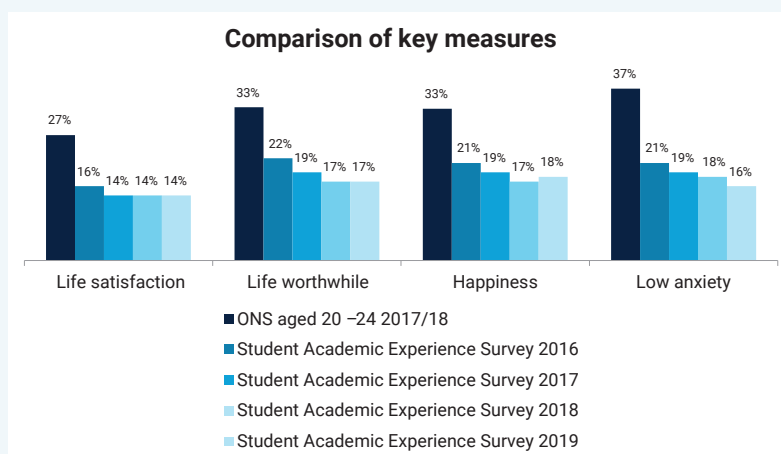
'I haven't encountered a situation where I have needed something and it wasn't available.'

- Group 2, Japanese Studies Student, Cambridge University

STUDENT SUPPORT

Existing Research

Wellbeing measures for students are significantly lower than for the general population of the same age: happiness (18% versus 33%), low anxiety (16% versus 37%).³⁷



Around 23% of students have used a university wellbeing, support or mental health service but 26% did not feel they could reach out to their university support team³⁸. Those who do use the services are generally positive about the experience, but there are limitations and barriers, such as a cap on sessions or long waiting times.³⁹ Only just over half, 52%, report being able to access health and wellbeing services online.⁴⁰

Rising dropout rates since 2015 have been attributed to high fees and lack of support.⁴¹ Fees certainly add to the pressure and students are struggling financially. Rent, groceries and bills make up almost 70% of their spend.⁴² Applicants are not financially prepared – for example, they are not aware that rent will be their biggest cost.⁴³

Academic pressures appear to be rising with an increase in assessment. There is a statistically significant relationship between anxiety and students finding a course too challenging, with some students blaming themselves for not meeting their own expectations.³⁷

³⁷HEPI/Advance Student Experience Survey 2019 (p47), available at: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Student-Academic-Experience-Survey-2019.pdf> [accessed December 2019]

³⁸The New Realists, The Unite Students Insights Report, 2019, available at <http://www.unite-group.co.uk/sites/default/files/2019-09/new-realists-insight-report-2019.pdf> [accessed December 2019]

³⁹Office for Students, Mental health: Are all students being properly supported? Available at <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/b3e6669e-5337-4caa-9553-049b3e8e7803/insight-brief-mental-health-are-all-students-being-properly-supported.pdf> [accessed December 2019]

⁴⁰Jisc, Digital experience insights survey 2019: findings from students in UK further and higher education, available at <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/reports/digital-experience-insights-survey-2019-students-uk> [accessed December 2019]

⁴¹The Guardian, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/sep/27/anxiety-mental-breakdowns-depression-uk-students> [accessed December 2019]

⁴²Save the Student, 2019, <https://www.savethestudent.org/money/student-money-survey-2019.html> [accessed December 2019]

⁴³HEPI / Unite Students, Reality Check: A Report on University Applicants' Attitudes and Perceptions, July 2017 available at <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Reality-Check-Report-Online1.pdf> [accessed December 2019]

Rising dropout rates since 2015 have been attributed to high fees and lack of support.⁴⁰





'My worst worry would be not understanding and having anyone to help.'

Group 1, English Literature Applicant

STUDENT SUPPORT (CONTINUED)

Interview Insights

More than half of the current students and recent graduates interviewed had suffered some kind of crisis during their time at university and had not felt well supported by their university. Seeking help, they experienced impersonal, automated application processes and long waiting times for counselling and other services.

They value the ability to access online resources that enable them to study even when they don't feel emotionally able to come to campus.

'I ended up having a thing about the library. I found it quite hard to study. It was so silent and so tense. What I found really useful was the online library – that was really useful for last minute panics and needing resources.'

Group 2, English Literature Student, University of Exeter

The narrative around university application is largely positive, focusing on choice, aspiration and improved career outcomes, and understandably, no one wants to draw attention to what can go wrong. However, for Group 1 students there is already an underlying anxiety, about lack of support.

'My worst worry would be not understanding and having anyone to help.'

Group 1, English Literature Applicant

With student suicides becoming headline news, universities are having to engage with that anxiety very publicly. They may discover that exceeding student expectations in terms of wellbeing and support will not only boost student satisfaction, but also have a positive influence on students as they make their university selection:

'I went to the applicant day...this girl talked about how the support Lancaster had given her had helped her to flourish. I related to how nervous she felt before coming to uni, so when she was talking about her journey at uni I felt better about going there.'

Group 2, Politics Student, Durham University



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Insights were drawn from a relatively small sample group, but there was a high level of overlap with existing research, and considerable agreement regarding the key issues. There is a gap between student's selection criteria and the factors that matter to them once they are at university.

Applicants are overwhelmed by the choices they face. They rely on reputations and rankings to create manageable shortlists. These become a catch all, a 'trusted trader' stamp for employability, teaching, and wellbeing. But students' wants and needs are diverse. Given the sophisticated AI solutions for everything from health care to booking a holiday, reputations and rankings tables seem blunt tools for such complex, high-value, decision making. TEF meanwhile, fails to contribute to their understanding. It is poorly communicated and opaque to them.

Even when students carry out more detailed research to make the final selections, there are significant barriers to meaningful evaluation. Open days presented a carefully curated view, visits are short and students and parents lack the expertise to compare teaching quality across institutions. Instead they make their choices based on how the university feels to them.

In contrast current students care about quality of teaching and feedback, social connections, and support for when things go wrong for them. Applicants overestimate the support they will receive in all of these areas. This leaves them unprepared for the realities of university life and reduces their ability to make the right decision, contributing to their unhappiness and anxiety, and to university drop-out rates.

How should universities respond to this gap?

Students need more support in understanding what university life will be like:

1. Bridge the communications gap

Understand how sixth-formers view teaching and learning, and you will be better placed to explain how university teaching is different, and to help them develop the skills and strategies they need. Independent learning is one key problem area. Reach out to local schools and engage with your own students as they transition, in order to identify others.

2. Experiential learning

Allow sixth-formers to experience your university for themselves rather than relying on rankings. Residential programmes are a form of experiential learning. They showcase your university, but also help sixth-formers imagine university life and thereby, identify potential problems, anticipate their own needs and ask the right questions. Programmes of this kind already exist and generally sell out. Many are targeted at economically disadvantaged students, or those less likely to attend university. They are expensive to run but, managed well, these opportunities can build a long-lasting emotional bond.

3. Use technology

Residential events are difficult to scale, but technology allows you more frequent and personalised engagement with students. Many universities are embracing social media tools and using co-creation with current students to change the tone of their communications. For example, Royal Holloway University posted its student-life playlist on YouTube and the University of Bath ran webchats and a student Instagram takeover.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS (CONTINUED)

4. Be transparent

Electronic word of mouth (eWom) sites such as The Student Room are another way in which technology is helping students prepare. Students ask and answer questions or post week-by-week blogs detailing their experience. Multiple students contribute, so users see the opinions as verified, the site it is unmonitored by the university and comments are in writing so is seen as trustworthy.⁴³ However, while applicants value transparency, from a university perspective it is impossible to manage. If your current students are not happy, that is the message that applicants will receive.

Therefore, in addition to preparing applicants better there is also a need to continue to improve the experience of current students.

5. Provide stabilisers

Applicants conflate a good academic record with good teaching, but current students do not. They are painfully aware of the appeal of research over teaching for many of their lecturers. This is particularly challenging for first year students as they transition to university. They are used to smaller classes and high levels of support. Lectures can be daunting and lack of feedback feeds their insecurities. Provide additional scaffolding during the transition period. Consider group learning, peer support, and online learning materials such as textbooks or courseware, which support independent learning.

6. Build strong networks

Strong peer groups provide academic support, emotional support and in the long term, have the potential to provide career opportunities. Social aspects motivate students to go to university, support new students through the transition period and add value for current students. Despite this, many students are lonely and don't feel they belong, particularly minority groups and commuter students. Society events and Fresher's Week are not sufficient for the increasing diverse student population. Consider how to integrate these groups, perhaps through structured networking events, volunteering opportunities or a sticky campus. This is a digitally-enabled space, with seating and screens to encourage collaborative study, even when students have lectures.

However social support does not replace formal support services. These need to be accessible and suitably flexible to manage urgent needs. A two-week waiting list renders support useless if your exam is tomorrow.

The transition from school to university is challenging. It can have an ongoing, negative impact on student experience, from wellbeing to academic outcomes. By understanding your current and future students, universities can make that transition easier, and add value to the university experience.

⁴⁴Yang, H.-P. (Sophie) and Mutum, D. S. (2015) 'Electronic Word-of-Mouth for University Selection: Implications for academic leaders and recruitment managers', *Journal of General Management*, 40(4), pp. 23–44. doi: [10.1177/030630701504000403](https://doi.org/10.1177/030630701504000403). [accessed December 2019]