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Report

The impact of increased tuition fees in England on the decision to participate in higher education: A study of Year 12 pupils in the Southampton region

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# Executive Summary

## The study’s aims

The study aimed to explore the higher education perceptions, expectations and decision-making processes of young people eligible to enter higher education in the academic year of 2012-13, the first year of raised fees in England. The student perspective was considered from initial information, advice and guidance (IAG) through to the university teaching, curriculum, organisation and student support. As well as potential young students, the study investigated the perceptions and expectations of their parents and college staff, crucial actors in the decision-making of 17-year-olds.

The fieldwork for this study took place at a particular moment in policy time in July 2011. This was after the announcement of the setting of higher education fees at a much higher level for the academic year 2012/13, and after individual universities had decided on the fee levels they would charge, but before details about bursaries and fee waivers were known. It was a time of upheaval in higher education with many details of the changes unclear to all stakeholders.

## Investigative approach

The data were collected from four post-16 colleges in Hampshire. Colleges with different socio-economic profiles of student intake were selected. The level of students claiming Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) was used as a proxy measure for social-economic profile. A mix of further education colleges and sixth form colleges was selected. The data were collected in June and July of 2011 at a point when students were thinking about higher education options, but most had not yet made definite decisions.

Data collected include:

* Questionnaire to students (n= 615)
* Interviews with students (n= 13) with an additional focus group of 5 students
* Interviews with parents (n= 10)
* Interviews with college staff (n= 5)

## Implications of findings

There is plenty of evidence in this report to reassure the University that its strategies and approaches to support undergraduate decision making are respected and are meeting the needs of potential students.

* The increase in fees is not deterring the majority of 17-year-olds, with 80% of our sample still intending to go to university.
* The ‘university experience’ and opportunity to study a subject one enjoys continue to be highly valued.
* University is very much seen as a risk worth taking to improve life-chances and get a more interesting job; the expectation to go to university is proving resilient to change.
* A narrative of a graduate tax rather than perception of debt appeared to reassure those interviewed.
* Universities are highly trusted organisations whose IAG is valued over and above that of any third party.

The study suggests that there are some changes to the landscape of higher education, with students looking much more carefully at the financing of higher education and ‘value for money’.

* Students are anxious and frustrated by the fees increase, but reconciled to the reality. They are not deterred from applying to university but are asking questions about its value. The ‘Southampton entitlement’ is endorsed.
* Students are still choosing a subject that they enjoy and at which they believe they will succeed. That university will provide better job prospects is an expectation, but this is not directly linked to subject choice.
* College staff members detect more interest in vocationally orientated subject and employability. This was not evident from the student participants.
* Students are actively seeking to reduce the cost of higher education in terms of accommodation and travel.
* There is strong evidence that the increase in fees is influencing where people will study. Students are more likely to live at home with their family or attend a university within commuting distance.
* The impact of fees will have profound implications for family life and finance, with more students continuing to live at home and parents providing more financial support. The impact might be more keenly felt by younger siblings.
* Parents believe they have no choice but to support this group of students. They are not always sure university will be the best option for younger offspring.

There a number of issues that universities need to address in response to pressure from students, parents, colleges and even competitors.

* Universities need to preserve their highly trusted status with students. Caution is needed in the adoption of non-traditional marketing techniques.
* University experiences such as Open Days and support in colleges are highly valued; more opportunities to visit campuses would be welcomed.
* Colleges strongly support and advocate closer partnership arrangements with universities.
* These students wanted more information earlier in their A1 year, although January and May were the peak times for seeking IAG.
* In the summer of 2011, EU higher education providers and private training providers were actively recruiting in local colleges and seeking to benefit from the UK increase in tuition fees by offering low-cost alternatives.

The decision to participate in higher education, for this cohort, is resilient to change. Given the time frame of the changes to higher education fees, students, parents and colleges are dealing with major changes but have not had time to explore alternative paths to what had been planned. For this cohort, to some extent the die are already cast; the choice of GCSEs and A-level subjects as well as the lack of current employment opportunities limits them to continuing on their path towards university. In time, alternative pathways into adult employment may develop and parents and children may then consider other options.

## Recommendations

### Trust and IAG

Universities need to take care to preserve their highly trusted status. They will need to be careful not to alienate the students with unsophisticated marketing pitches. University use of social media, for example, is viewed by students with a high degree of scepticism. They commented on the strong marketing messages received from universities, which were not appreciated.

### Sources of IAG

Students like to get IAG direct from the University via printed copies of prospectus from the website and visits. It will be important to maintain and enhance these sources of IAG.

Open Days are a main factor on which the selection of a university is based. It is important for these to be informative about facilities, teaching characteristics, class size, pastoral care, and so on. Anything that makes a bad impression (i.e. not having students present, not knowing about employment rates, accommodation not shown) is remembered by students and parents. Universities need to recruit and engage with local students, as those with direct experience of a university and who have been on its campus are more likely to choose that institution.

### Clear financial information

Clear financial information is helpful for both students and parents. To some extent this already exists through existing channels as described (e.g. the DirectGov website and others, university Open Days and visits of different experts to colleges). Whilst participants recognised that it is hard for universities to provide clear information about bursaries and fee waivers when government policies are liable to change, additional clarity is required.

Our survey indicated clearly that the biggest single improvement universities could make would be to have no hidden extras incorporated in the actual costs of study. This is rated as very important by over half, and as not important by less than 10% (n=503). In the interviews this also comes out as a strong result.

With higher fees, universities will have to specify how the expense is justified and to be informative about all aspects of the education offered in return.

### University initiatives

Freedom to choose modules and more contact with tutors are also seen as important by more than 90% of respondents.

Parents and students want reassurance about safety and security issues related to university study and accommodation.

Teaching sessions taken by academics in colleges are highly valued. These are now being delivered in the Science subjects, but there is a demand for the sessions to be extended across other subjects.

## Conclusions

As this report indicates at the start, this research was carried out at a specific policy moment in a particular context. Students’ decisions to participate in higher education and choice of subjects have proved to be resilient to major changes to the cost to them of higher education. There are strong cultural factors influencing their decision to participate that are reinforced by parents, friends, schools, colleges and growing up within a policy environment of widening participation initiatives such as Aimhigher. A key finding is that these students, despite a deficit of solid financial information, are still intent on going to a local university to study a subject they enjoy.

There are some lead indicators here also that should be monitored. This group of students is actively seeking to reduce costs by living in or near home. Staff members in colleges believe subject choices will change, although we found little evidence from 17-year-olds to support this judgement in 2011. Other providers such as EU universities with lower fees are actively recruiting in the region. Parents are seeking a more active role in the process and require more information. Whilst not directly indicated in the report, researchers found evidence of overseas student numbers increasing in colleges on pre-degree programmes. The landscape of further and higher education is changing in some unexpected ways.

The research reported here surveyed 615 young people aged 17, and 80% of them intend to go to university. As the data clearly demonstrate, these young people are enthusiastic and excited about the prospects of going to university. Their aspirations are resilient to increased fees and they are almost reverential about higher education. They are not making the client demands that one might expect. It will be interesting to see if and how this changes.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background: pivotal changes to policy

In December 2010, following the Browne Review of funding for English higher education (October 2010) and from subsequent adjustments to the Browne proposals, Parliament approved the raising of the fees cap for English universities to a maximum of £9,000 from the academic year 2012-13. Previously, the maximum fees that universities could charge had been £3,375. The increase in fees is intended to ‘broadly’ offset a reduction in the teaching grant to universities (Spending Review October 2010). The teaching grant will be reduced from £4.9 billion in 2010-11 to £4.6 billion in 2011-12, and then £3.8 billion in 2012-13 (DBIS 2010).

These changes indicate a sudden and extensive change in higher education funding policy, with far-reaching consequences for individual graduates, the higher education sector, the schools and colleges sector and the national economy. Within this scenario, the reactions and actions of potential students and their parents is unknown yet critical to the outcomes of the changes in higher education funding.

Although the picture of the repayment burden is complex (Chowdry et al. 2010), as tuition fees go up, many students will incur increasing debt. The burden will vary according to a variety of factors including parental income and graduate earnings. Parental income will affect the level of student eligibility for maintenance grants and loans (Chowdry et al. 2010). The average debt for English students paying an average of £8,630 per year in fees after waivers has been estimated by PUSH, an independent resource for prospective students, to be £59,100 (cited in the BBC http://www.bbc.co.uk/go/em/fr/-/news/education-14488312). While student protests in November and December 2010 indicated one aspect of the response by young people to the policy, the coming impact of this policy on their decision to participate in higher education is less clear.

The fieldwork for this study took place at a very particular moment in policy time in July 2011. This was after the announcement of the setting of higher education fees at a much higher level for the academic year 2012/13, and after individual universities had decided on the fee levels they would charge. It came just as the Access Agreements for each university had been agreed with the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) in July, but before details about bursaries and fee waivers were known. The consultation on the White Paper on Higher Education had commenced following the publication of the Paper at the end of June 2011. It was a time of upheaval in higher education, with many details of the changes unclear at both the macro- and micro-level.

There is great uncertainty in English higher education. The universities are struggling to cope with past and impending funding cuts, as well as a swift-changing landscape of funding, rules for allocating student numbers, and uncertainties about future government policy. It is hard for universities, government bodies, colleges and schools to provide accurate and detailed information for students in this environment. In the meantime, students and parents are caught trying to plan for higher education study in 2012. As the University of Southampton commented in its response to the White Paper:

The White Paper proposals represent a major, untested experiment with higher education in England. We recognise that many details still need to be worked out, and in the meantime the 2012 intake of students are already visiting universities and making choices about their future. We hope the Government listens carefully to this consultation and the more detailed consultations on aspects of the policy, and provides definitive information and advice as soon as possible.

## 1.2 Aims and objectives

The study aimed to explore the higher education perceptions, expectations and decision-making of young people eligible to enter higher education in the academic year of 2012-13, the first year of raised fees in England. The student perspective was considered from initial information, advice and guidance (IAG) through to the university teaching, curriculum, organisation and student support.

As well as potential young students, the study investigated the perceptions and expectations of their parents and college staff, crucial actors in the decision-making of 17-year olds. The research also explored how the sector can best respond and adjust provision to serve the needs of potential students, their parents, and sixth form and further education colleges.

This study focuses on young, traditional age students, but recognises that a large proportion of first degree students are aged 21 or over. For example, 21% of UK domiciled entrants on full-time first degrees in 2009/10 were in this age group, and 92% of part-time students (HESA, 2010).

The investigation involved a questionnaire survey of 615 students at four sixth form and further education colleges near Southampton, together with interviews of students in the first year to be affected by the rise in higher education fees, parents of members of this year group, and college staff.

This study identified:

a) The factors influencing the attitudes and preferences of 17-year-olds and their parents towards higher education

b) The knowledge and understanding of 17-year-olds and their parents of higher education finance

c) The sources of IAG influencing the students’ decisions about participation in higher education. A key issue here was to identify the sources of IAG that are trusted; this included a commentary on the impact of social networking media

d) The perception of student and parental attitudes and preferences held by senior managers, teachers and higher education advisors in colleges

e) Recommendations from the 17-year-olds, their parents and college staff to universities and colleges concerning supporting students’ needs.

## 1.3 The point in the students’ application process

The fieldwork took place at the end of the AS year for students, just as the students were in the middle of thinking about their higher education application, but before concrete decisions had been reached or the full range of support meetings offered by the colleges to students and parents had been experienced. This context is important for understanding the nature of the responses given in the study.

## 1.4 A new financial landscape for higher education

Starting in the academic year 2012/13, the Government will allow universities to charge up to a cap of £9,000 a year. Universities that decide to charge more than £6,000 per year have to take measures such as offering fee waivers and bursaries to encourage students from poorer backgrounds to apply. These measures were contained in Access Agreements agreed with OFFA in July. The National Scholarship Programme helps students with a family income of less than £25,000. The fees do not have to be paid up-front. Instead students, both full-time and part-time, can take out loans for tuition fees. The threshold at which graduates have to start repaying their loans is when they earn £21,000. After that they have to pay 9% of their income in loan repayments, including interest, which will rise as a graduate’s income increases. There will be a complex system of mean-tested loans and maintenance grants to finance living costs for full-time students, adjusted somewhat from the current system. Information about fees, tuition fee loans, maintenance loans, and maintenance grants is available on the DirectGov and UCAS websites, as well as some others.[[1]](#footnote-2)

## 1.5 Structure of the report

This is a time of major change and uncertainty in higher education and the present study captures the views and experiences of a particular moment, suggesting how the fee rises are impacting on student, parent and college perceptions and experiences of decision-making about higher education.

The report first discusses key findings and recommendations, second our investigative approach and finally the research findings. Detailed tables from our questionnaire survey can be found in the appendix.

# 2. Key Findings

The decision to participate in higher education, for this cohort, is resilient to change. Students in our study are frustrated, resentful and angry about the policy change on fees and somewhat anxious, but are broadly reconciled to the reality of the new fees environment and still intend to go to university. The majority of our survey respondents, over 80%, are planning to go to university. The most common reason for not planning to go to university was cost. In the survey data, 30% were in receipt of an Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA). There was no significant difference between students receiving it and those not receiving it in their stated likelihood of going to university.

#### Options and attitudes

Given the time frame of the changes to higher education fees, students, parents and colleges are dealing with major changes but have not had time to explore alternative paths to what had been planned. For this cohort, to some extent the die are already cast; the choice of GCSEs and A-level subjects as well as the lack of current employment opportunities limits them to continuing on their path towards university. In time, alternative pathways into adult employment may develop and parents and children may then consider other options. There was evidence of European universities and private training providers actively recruiting and promoting alternative pathways to public UK university education, but there are also concerns about the cost of living and travel to unknown areas. They are much more likely to attend a local university or one within commuting distance, and a typical acceptable radius is a one to two hour journey from the parental home.

Finance

The increase in fees has not impacted on the participants’ choice of degree subject. In many respects these had been decided by earlier subject choices at GCSE and A-level. Although college staff members detect more interest in vocationally orientated subject and employability, there was no indication by students of this preference. Studying a subject one enjoyed was highly valued by students, parents and college staff members, as was the idea of the university experience. Choice at A2 is based on taking subjects that are ‘enjoyed’ and that will maximise the grade point average for university entrance, based on results received for A/S levels. An important motivation for participation in higher education was a more interesting career, but there was no direct link between subject choice and particular career path for most. Employability was only considered in the most general of ways, in the form of better career prospects.

Levels of knowledge and understanding about finance for higher education were variable among students and parents. They knew that repayments will start when the graduate is earning £21,000 per annum, as distinct from £15,000 under the old system and usually understood that payments will be manageable and progressive, in the sense that they will be controlled by income level. College staff, however, spoke of parents who were far less informed about fees and thought, for example, that they might be liable for their son’s or daughter’s debts. There is a perception of different groups of families/parents/students, likely to respond to contrasting types of information and publicity materials.

A new perception about the fees repayment arrangement is emerging, presenting the increase in fees more as a graduate tax than as a debt repayment scheme. This has meant that the increase in fees is now viewed as manageable by many potential students.

The near-universal settlement on fees of £9,000 per year seems to have levelled the playing field, in that fee level is not a major influence on decision making. For £9,000, students want to attend the best universities they can; it does not make sense for them to pay this amount for a low ranked university.

IAG

Universities command a considerable degree of respect, and IAG sources such as Open Days and college visits are trusted for financial and other information. Open Days are important for students and parents. Parents are positive and enthusiastic about what they see during visits about university life as a whole, and it is something they want their children to experience. University representatives who visit colleges are respected and perceived as making a useful contribution to the financial and other advice offered to students. Hard copies of prospectuses are highly valued, and university websites and prospectuses are generally well-regarded, but students would like more information about what student life is like, rather than mostly the course. Respondents appear to have looked for information increasingly between September 2010 and June 2011, which coincides with the academic year. January and May were peak months, but some started earlier.

Influences

Family members are important sources of advice. Friends’ experience is less highly valued, and social media are not trusted to offer objective and trustworthy information, attracting a high degree of scepticism that does not extend to official websites and university-produced marketing information. League tables, although consulted, are also viewed with some scepticism.

#### Expectations

Although there was some voicing of the view that students would expect more of higher education, owning to the rise in fees, this was not emphasised or elaborated upon much in the student responses. To some extent the university ‘offer’ was taken as a given that students expected to fit into and organise their lives around, rather than actively seek to influence. For parents is it very important that students are safe and there is pastoral care, and students want to feel at home and safe at university.

College views

Staff members highly value the close partnerships with and support from local universities. They hope that this can be continued and further intensified. Colleges strongly support and advocate closer partnership arrangements with universities. Given the propensity for students to stay in the region, universities would be well advised to nurture these local partnerships and provide greater opportunities for activities that provide a ‘university experience’ that might rival ‘work experience’ activities in schools.

# 3. The Study’s Investigative Approach

The study explored the higher education perceptions, expectations and decision-making processes of young people eligible to enter higher education in the academic year of 2012-13, the first year of raised fees in England. The student perspective was considered from initial IAG through to the university teaching, curriculum, organisation and student support. This was all within the framework of the soon-to-be introduced new higher fees regime. The study also investigated the perceptions and expectations of their parents and college staff, crucial actors in the decision-making of 17-year-olds. The research explored how the higher education sector can best respond and adjust provision to serve the needs of potential students, their parents and post-16 colleges.

The investigation involved:

* a questionnaire survey of 615 students in four local post-16 colleges (both sixth form and further education colleges)
* in-depth, semi-structured interviews with
	+ students in the first year to be affected by the rise in higher education fees
	+ parents of members of this year group
	+ college staff.

The data were collected in July and September, 2011, at a point when students were thinking about higher education options but had not yet made definite decisions.

Colleges with different student intake socio-economic profiles were selected. The proportion of students claiming EMA was used as a proxy measure for socio-economic profile. Of those surveyed, 30% (n=156) received the EMA.

## 3.1 Questionnaire survey

The questionnaires explored sources of information used by students, investigated the nature and extent of their knowledge about higher education, specifically finance, and identified the factors affecting attitudes and preferences of 17-year-olds towards higher education. The questions explored their expectations of higher education and probed their recommendations for higher education in terms of provision of IAG, scholarships and organisations of the curriculum.

Following advice from senior staff in local colleges, the questionnaire was administered in hard copy across the colleges in tutorial time and 615 questionnaires were completed. Although this represents a considerable number of responses, it is only a fraction of potential student responses.

## 3.2 Interviews

The interviews were all audio-recorded and eight student interviews were also video-recorded. See Table 1 below for a breakdown of the interviews.

**Table 1**

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| **College** | **Student interviews** | **Parent interviews** | **Staff interviews** |
| College A | 5 | 4 | 2 |
| College B | 4 | 2 | 1 |
| College C | 4 | 4 | 2 |
| College D | 5 (as a group) |  |  |
| **Total** | 13 + 1 focus group  | 10 | 5 |

### 3.2.1 Student interviews

The interviews explored similar issues to those of the questionnaire, but with a focus on the detail of individual cases and an opportunity to explore issues beyond the brief factual statements that a questionnaire offers.

In total, 13 students were interviewed individually in three colleges. In another college, college staff expressed a preference for the researchers to interview five students in a group.

College staff members recruited students willing to be interviewed in each college. Those interviewed tended to be bright, capable and confident students. Some students received the EMA (6), while others did not (6). We do not know which of the students in the group interview received the EMA.

### 3.2.2 Interviews with parents

These interviews explored similar issues to those included in the questionnaire and student interviews. Additionally, the interviews probed for differences between the perspectives of parents and their children.

Each college advised us of the best method to contact parents. We aimed to interview four parents per college, where possible including parents of the students we interviewed. We envisaged this would enable us to build up a picture of perceptions, expectations and decision-making within families, an approach we have found valuable in the past.

In total, ten parents from three colleges were interviewed by telephone or in person. Four of the interviewed parents were related to the students interviewed. In one college it was not possible to interview parents.

### 3.2.3 Interviews with college staff

These interviews explored the perceptions of change in the year’s cohort of 17-year-olds and the impact of increased fees on students’ decision making on higher education.

The college staff members were usually senior, with some responsibility for providing IAG related to higher education. In total, five were interviewed across three colleges.

# 4. Detailed Findings

## 4.1 Attitudes and preferences of 17-year-olds and their parents

To some extent the options are already set for this cohort; their students’ choice of GCSEs and A-level subjects as well as the lack of current employment opportunities has limited their choice to continuing on their path towards university. For this cohort, the decision to participate in higher education is resilient to change.

### 4.1.1 Probability of participation or non-participation in higher education

#### We’ve just been like the tester year

The increase in fees has not stopped the majority of our survey respondents planning to go to university. Over 80% of respondents are either ‘very’ or ‘somewhat likely’ to go to university, with over 50% being ‘very likely’ to go to university (see Table 1, Appendix 1). Of those not planning on going to university (n=157), the most common reason given was cost, rated as ‘very’ or ‘somewhat important’ by over 80% of respondents. The only other category, with over 50% rating as ‘somewhat’ or ‘very important’, was better career prospects elsewhere (see Table 3, Appendix 1). Those we interviewed mostly planned to continue to university.

In the survey data, 30% were in receipt of an EMA. There was no significant difference between students receiving it and those not receiving it in their stated likelihood of going to university. This may have been because students receiving the EMA were much more likely to think they are eligible for financial help (Chi Square = 113.26, p<.001). The difference was very strong, with Cramer’s V effect size measure being .49. Of those receiving the EMA (n=153), 51% thought they would be likely to be eligible for financial help, while less than 10% of those not receiving the EMA thought they would be eligible, with many in both groups not knowing (see Table 43, Appendix 1). Those receiving the EMA may have felt more confident than some others that they would be able to meet the costs of higher studies. Our interview data included six out of 18 students in receipt of the EMA. Of the three students who were wavering about participation, two of the three were in receipt of EMA.

These student participants had been working towards higher education over a number of years. There are strong cultural expectations from home, school, college and social networks that reinforce their thinking about higher education. The real changes in the financial conditions of participation in higher education, would appear to have had limited impact on the decision to participate or not participate in higher education. There is evidence that the fees issues had given students pause for thought, some had started to think again about participation. The increase in fees had initially been a disincentive for some who were fearful of the debt they might accrue:

I haven’t started looking at like university stuff until about like two months ago, because I was really like set on like not going, because of like the worries of like the fees and stuff. (Joyce, College C, student)

A perception as ‘graduate tax’ would appear to have superseded that of ‘debt’ and settled some of the initial anxieties about debt for this cohort of students. The students have been reassured that the pay back impact will be minimal and will happen only at a stage in life when they can afford it. The amounts will only increase when income increases and thus will be manageable. If the graduates cannot pay back the full amount borrowed, this will be forgiven after thirty years. To these 17-year-old students, the level of earnings they will need before they start to pay back the fees seems relatively high. They have become quickly resigned to the new realities of higher education finance, although they remain frustrated by the introduction of increased fees and believe it to be unfair, particularly on their particular cohort:

I know, that’s just... we are like the guinea pig year, so many things because um... has been tested on my year group, like we did our SATS a year early and we did our GCSE’s like have Year 10 and half Year 11 at my school and everything like, we’ve just been like the tester year. But um... I obviously, it would have been nice knowing that my debt would have been six grand a year less but at the same time, I just kind of see it as... because it doesn’t affect my credit rating; it doesn’t affect whether I can get a mortgage. So in that sense, it’s kind of just money that is hovering over me, that I have to pay back but I’m not actually that concerned about it because I think I want to go to Uni so I’m going to go to Uni and I’m only going to pay it back if my Uni... like if my degree benefits me; like if I’m earning enough to pay it back, I kind of think if obviously... if I’m not earning enough to pay it back then I don’t have to pay it back and if I am, then I deserve to pay it back because obviously I’m doing really well. (Julie, College C, student)

### 4.1.2 How far to travel and where to live

The increase in fees *is* having an impact on where the students say they will study. They are attempting to control the non-fee element in the cost of higher education by reducing accommodation and travel costs:

And it means with the tuition fees going up, I don’t particularly want to be racking my debt up even more with my moving out.… Because I know that’s going to cost me an extra so much in comparison to whether I am living at home or with family, which will be significantly cheaper, so it won’t put me in so much debt.

Originally I really didn’t want to stay at home, because I wanted the whole independence, and stay at university, but then now I might look closer to home, so that I can live at home, and not have to worry about all that. (Joe, College A, student)

A typical radius for the commute to university would appear to be a one or two hour travel journey. Almost 70% of questionnaire respondents agree that higher fees will make them more likely to study close to home (see Table 8 in Appendix 1). Those that are prepared to travel are seeking a particularly prestigious university or course of study. Propensity to travel is also enhanced where the student has family they can live with near a university town:

Well with the exception of Exeter, they are all within an hour and a half commute. They all have pretty good departments of drama and have quite good reputations. My grandma lives in Exmouth, so I can live with my grandma… I can’t afford to move out. (Joe, College A, student).

What we commonly see is that students kind of set what they perceive to be a route that they could get home fairly easily for the occasional weekend. So it’s not unusual for students to say, ‘I guess I’d like to be within about a two to three hour maximum travel journey’. (…) And obviously some students do apply further afield, and again that would often be the higher achievers, they know they want to study Architecture at Manchester, or you know, we’ve had students go to St Andrews in Edinburgh because nothing else matters other than going to the university they perceive to be the best for their particular subject. And they will sacrifice coming home, because they’re more aspirational, that’s more important to them. (Ann Kingston, College A, college staff)

Students are looking at accommodation costs in different universities. One consequence is that a number of students are now ruling out study in London as too expensive:

I think it limits where I can study, because compared to the actual fees, I’m more worried about accommodation costs and that, so looking at where living costs are going to be the lowest. So, that will balance the fees. Because, I was looking at going to London, but that’s going to… trying to find accommodation is going to be so expensive, and I can’t really afford to be paying that, as well as fees. (Susan, College D, student)

In looking at value for money and marginal costs, there was explicit and positive reference to the Southampton entitlement:

In some cases it is, because I’ve seen some universities include some of the major costs in the fees, like I saw Southampton had the, they included the field trips, which was going to be quite expensive, so I found that quite useful, but the main £9,000 doesn’t seem to be that much, because I know I can pay it back. I know how you pay it back. (Luke, College D, student)

Colleges are witnessing interest by European universities offering cheaper higher education and some companies suggesting alternative training pathways. In the summer of 2011, both were actively recruiting in local colleges and seeking to benefit from the UK increase in tuition fees by offering low-cost alternatives. Other EU universities had visited colleges offering higher education at their universities with degrees taught in English. A senior manager in a college reported at least 12 students seriously interested in higher education study in European countries that did not attract such high fees. It is anticipated that these alternative providers will be more prominent in the future. However, the particular students we spoke to were nervous about overseas study. It does not fit well with their concerns about the cost of living and travel to unknown areas that made them more inclined to stay in their locality.

A staff member at College A contemplated how the increase in fees might encourage students to consider, for example, American universities, as the difference in costs will now be less. At the same time, however, at this college the staff members say that students seem reluctant to go abroad, even if the costs could be far less:

I’ve had three or four talk about the idea of Maastricht, because they’ve got quite a lot of advertising, that they think you know it’s a place, that places like Sweden are completely free, at least at the moment aren’t they. And Stockholm is anyway. A few, but I think culturally again that’s quite a difficult one to sell, and I think, I can’t prove it, but I suspect that would appeal to more middle-class students who are, or they or their parents are more confident.

At College B, the same trend to stay in the south of England is seen, with some people going abroad because of the fees increase in the UK:

And it’s the same with studying abroad. We had a speaker from Maastricht University last week, talking about degrees in English in the Netherlands, which are obviously a lot cheaper. (…) About 12 go I think. But I could see that as something that could develop, I suspect.

### 4.1.3 Choice of A2 subjects

#### But I don’t think there’s a fees element …

For those students with a clear career path, the path strongly influences the choice of subjects at A2. For the majority, however, subject choice is determined by two key factors. The first is the subjects that they enjoy the most, and the second factor is A/S results. Students are actively seeking to maximise their grade point average, which normally means dropping a subject at which they did relatively badly. There was no evidence from the students’ interview data that the impact of increased fees had changed their decision-making about A2 subject choices. However, this cohort had had little time to change direction significantly in terms of educational choices because of the sudden increase in fees, coupled with the long-term nature of subject choices and pathways. Choices at A2 level clearly influence the subject options at degree level.

The majority of survey respondents (63%) state that the tuition fees increase is not making any difference to their A-level choices, while 8% say it is making a big difference (see Table 6, Appendix 1). The survey data correspond with the findings from the interviews with both parents and students.

### 4.1.4 Choice of degree subject and employability

#### It hasn’t changed what I do, but it would change where I do it …

#### …at least I’ve done something that I enjoyed rather than...

#### The interview data do not suggest that students are changing their choice of subjects as a consequence of the increase in fees. The majority of students are selecting subjects that appeal to them. They are subject enthusiasts first, with employment very much a secondary consideration in relation to subject choice. One student articulated this view pithily:

It hasn’t changed what I do, but it would change where I do it. (Luke, College D, student)

Parents we interviewed tended not to express a strong preference for subjects that lead to jobs. They were supportive of their children’s decisions on subject choice and location of study. The ‘well-being’ of their offspring while at university was the primary non-financial concern. A liberal attitude to the benefits of university education in general was strongly identified by parents, college staff and the students themselves. University education was viewed as a rite of passage that was possibly being compromised by fees increases. A detrimental impact of increased fees was perceived as increasing the probability that students’ would continue to live at home rather than move away for university study. However, college staff suggested a broader range of views from parents, including hostility to higher education and fear about the financial consequences and lack of benefit from attending higher education.

There was an expectation amongst educational professionals that increased fees would impact on subject choices. That impact was not apparent in the views of students and parents interviewed, who were primarily motivated by choosing a subject the student would enjoy and do well in. Improved job prospects are an important reason for going to university, but are not having much impact on choice of subjects. It is anticipated the university will improve life chances and secure a ‘more interesting job’, but there is not a direct link between actual subject choice and employment. With the exception of those with specific career plans, such as Medicine, these students are not motivated by seeking a hydraulic link between a particular course and a given career. As one student answered:

I really love Spain; I love Spanish um... I’m not... my concerns are not employability and that sort of thing; I’m not particularly a money motivated person I don’t think... Um... I think the years of not telling myself I’m not going to, I might just end up teaching, not that that’s a bad thing of course! Yeah, so I don’t... I definitely don’t have ideas as to what I want to do as a career… That’s not my motivation for doing a degree; I want to do something I enjoy basically and at the moment, Spanish is the thing I enjoy the most... (Mike, College B, student)

While the interviews suggested that employability concerns had a limited impact on subject choice, in the survey data improved career prospects was the strongest reason for going to university (very important for more than three-quarters of respondents), followed by interest in the subject and experiencing university life (see Table 2, Appendix 1).

Survey respondents were most likely to agree with the statement that higher fees will make them think more about which subjects are likely to get them a good job, with more than 80% agreeing at least somewhat with this statement (see Table 22, Appendix 1). Such views correspond with the perceptions of college staff members (see Table 8, Appendix 1).

Although parents were more inclined to express anxiety about the employment market and job prospects, they generally also endorsed a wider perspective on the benefits of university education:

So I think it’s more important, if you’re going to stay in higher education, to do something that you actually like doing, rather than thinking maybe you’re doing something that you think might get you a better job, or you think might please your family, or you know… (Mrs Harris, Mike’s mother, College B).

Parents do have anxieties about the precariousness of the future job market, but it is not clear that this is communicated to their children.

The relative absence of references to employment by students when discussing the factors that influence their decision-making is interesting. Only 25% of the references coded at constructing employability were from students; the majority were from college staff. Most students did not know what they wanted to do after graduation. Some spoke of general occupational fields and believed in broad terms a degree would improve their job prospects. It was clear that employability was a key motivation for higher education, but primarily in the more general terms of better job opportunities being available after graduation:

Yeah, so I’m going to do something that I enjoy and that I want a job in and then... but if I don’t get the job then I’ve had that chance... at least I’ve done something that I enjoyed rather than... So yeah... (laughter) (Sasha, College C, student)

This perspective was also evident from parents:

She’ll have a more of a chance of getting on in life and getting a better job with the university qualifications she’ll hopefully get at the end of it, you know so it’s just a question of you know after the three years whether she’ll be able to get a job. (Mr Taylor, Chloe’s father, College C)

### 4.1.5 Impact of fee levels

#### No, well it might have if they didn’t all decide for nine grand anyway …

The almost universal adoption of the maximum fee has had the effect of levelling the playing field and making debt appear as a new fact of life for all, as something that has to be endured. These students are aware that differences in fee levels between institutions are relatively marginal. Such differences between universities do not appear to impact directly on student decision making:

They are charging £9,000 a year so, I’m not going to go to one at the bottom... I’m not going to deliberately go to one at the bottom end of the league table and just pay slightly less and only be in forty grand’s worth of debt! That’s just... that’s just pointless to me. (Mike, College B, student)

There was some evidence from the student and parent interviews that universities charging lower fees than £9,000 would be seen as less likely to offer a good quality education:

Universities that lower their prices are going to look like they’re more desperate. (Emily, College D, student)

From the student and parent interviews, there is some sense that the fees increase has resulted in a stronger expectation that university education should offer value for money, and some students showed a more critical attitude in their search for universities regarding what they would be getting for their money, but this finding was not as commonplace as might have been expected.

As reported in Section *4.2.3 Feelings about the changes,* there is evidence from the interviews of anxiety about debt but also a high degree of fatalism, high debt being a new fact of life. There is also evidence from the transcripts of the overwhelming view that a university education is a good thing and something that has to be completed. This cultural perspective on the values of university is strongly reinforced by colleges and obviously universities themselves. It is supported by parents and the positive experience of older friends and relatives currently at university. These cultural influences would appear to outweigh the new material and financial conditions presented by the increase in fees for the cohort in this study.

For these young people university is seen as a risk worth taking. If it translates to higher earnings, there will be a debt to pay back; if it does not, they do not expect pay back the loans. A narrative of graduate tax rather than debt would appear to have reassured these young people about the long-term impact of fees.

### 4.1.6 Motivation to study in higher education

#### Obviously life-wise, it is probably best for me that I do go and get a degree…

The students we interviewed view university as a good in itself. The option of non-participation would not appear to be within the cultural boundaries of possibilities for most, despite a significant increase in the material cost of higher education. These expectations are part of the DNA of colleges and permeate all aspects of the IAG they provide. Part of the *raison d’etre* of colleges is preparation of students for higher education. The success of Aimhigher and other policies aimed at widening participation has created a raft of initiatives that promote higher education. These students are highly motivated towards participation. There is evidence of anxiety about fees and debt, evidence that it has made them think again about going to university. However, these initial doubts have soon realigned towards a strong preference for participation, preferences that are reinforced in conversation with friends, family and college tutors, all of whom who assert the value of university education in itself and promote the study of a subject one enjoys. There is acceptance that, in broad terms, university enhances your life chances.

Students anticipated enjoying university life:

I like the environment, it’s relaxed but everyone works together. And it’s a more adult way of teaching; they talk to you and… I think personally the lessons go quicker and, you know, it will be easier to learn a lot more in that initial time, than if it was more of a class-based, if it were more college or sort of school. And then it’s got a good social life; so the student bodies are a major part of it, so yeah. (Karen,

College B, student)

Just the fact of like having your own place and like not knowing anyone at first, but then you make like goods friends there and it builds your confidence as well, like you know making new friends and stuff. And being in like a city where you don’t know anyone and you’re like totally independent. And yeah, I just think that’ll be like a good experience. (Joyce, College C, student)

### 4.1.7 Full-time or part-time study

According to staff at College A, two-year instead of three-year degrees would be very attractive to many students and their families. Some students are now considering the Open University.

There is an expectation that students will need part-time work in order to support themselves, but no direct evidence of an expectation that universities change or organise their curriculum to facilitate this process. The students we interviewed did not anticipate any change to their university mode of study. A conventional pattern of full-time undergraduate study was anticipated. However, the questionnaire data did suggest an increased interest in part-time higher education. In the survey, just under 60% (n=516) agree at least somewhat that higher fees will make them more likely to study part-time (see Table 8 in Appendix 1). There clearly is a need for universities to find ways to support students’ capacity to learn with a capability to earn. However, when asked about changes universities could make to running their courses, more evening classes and more part-time courses are seen as relatively unimportant, with less than 20% stating that these are very important and over 40% that these are not an important improvement (n=503) (see Table 21 in Appendix 1).

### 4.1.8 Safety and security

There was some evidence among some students and parents to suggest that safety and security while at university was a factor they took into consideration:

Well I think it’s, you know, obviously the course has to be good; the teaching has to be good, and also like the pastoral care of the students as well, because they’re away from home. (Mrs Harris, parent of Mike, College B)

### 4.1.9 Student expectations of university

Overall there were not detailed responses to direct questions in relation to expectations or recommendations universities. The university ‘offer’ was to some extent taken as a given that students expected to fit into and organise their lives around, rather than actively seek to influence.

**4.2 Knowledge and understanding of higher education finance**

### 4.2.1 Introduction

This section will discuss, first, levels of knowledge and understanding among college students, parents and college staff about the financial system for funding students’ higher education, second, their feelings about this funding and related changes; third, the students’ plans for paying for their higher education, and fourth, their sources of financial IAG. Finally, implications of these findings will be discussed.

When reading this section it is important to remember that the fieldwork for this study took place at a very particular moment in policy time in July 2011, after the announcement of the setting of higher education fees at a much higher level for the academic year 2012/13, just as the Access Agreements for each university had been agreed with OFFA in July, and as the consultation about the White Paper for higher education was starting following the publication of the Paper at the end of June 2011. It was a time of upheaval and uncertainty in higher education, with many details of the changes unclear at both the macro- and micro-level. The fieldwork also took place at the end of the AS year for students. This context is important for understanding the nature of the responses given in the study.

### 4.2.2 Levels of knowledge and understanding

#### Fees

Levels of knowledge and understanding about finance for higher education were variable among students and parents. Some knew little more than the headline figure of £9,000 for fees, while others were well-informed about the broader economic and social implications, with many being between these two extremes. Some parents and students had investigated finances thoroughly, either together or separately, and some had elder children or siblings who had previously been through a similar process financing higher education, if with lower fee levels.

At this stage of the application process our survey found that only 27% of students reported that information about financial help would be useful to them. It has a far lower priority than information about career prospects (55.9%), required entry grades (54%), aspects of the course (45.7%) and the quality of teaching (43.7%) (n=511). (See Table 17 in Appendix 1.)

#### Financial assistance

The students and the parents were not at the stage of knowing definitely what help would be available to fund their own study, as they were not yet so far into the application process. However, they often knew in general about loans and grants because of their availability in previous years and because information about fees, tuition fee loans, maintenance loans, maintenance grants was available on the DirectGov and UCAS websites, as well as some others.[[2]](#footnote-3)

In our survey, just under a quarter of respondents (24%) believe they may be eligible for financial help, while just over a quarter (28%) believe they will not. However, almost 50% of respondents do not know whether they are likely to be eligible for financial help, that gives an indication of overall levels of knowledge (n=509). (See Table 10 in Appendix 1.)

It should be remembered that the Browne Report (2010) on higher education finance concluded that that student finance system was complex and confusing (p. 35), so it is unsurprising when students and parents are uncertain of their entitlements, especially given the changes in the system.

### Bursaries and fee waivers

The fieldwork took place before full information about the bursaries, scholarships and fee waivers offered by universities had become available. Universities only had their Access Agreements agreed with the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) in July 2011, just as the interviews were taking place, so information about bursaries and fee waivers had been scanty and provisional.

There was some awareness that bursaries and fee waivers would only help marginally with the cost of higher education. This aligns with the conclusions of the HEPI report that argued that it was surprising that OFFA had pressed so much for financial support such as bursaries in the Access Agreements, given that its own research had concluded that previous bursaries ‘had not influenced disadvantaged young people in their choice of institution’ (Corver 2010) and that, ‘given a decision to spend this money on student support, it would be more efficient, effective and just to channel it through the established system of loans and grants’ (p. 47).

#### Repayment

Students and their parents usually had a basic understanding about repayment conditions. They knew that repayments will start when the graduate is earning £21,000, as distinct from £15,000 under the old system. They usually understood that payments will be manageable and progressive in the sense that they will be controlled by income level. Some parents had an elder child in higher education and so were familiar with the process of acquiring loans and grants.

There was less direct mention about the real rates of interest to be charged under the new fees regime. If a graduate earns below £21,000 per annum, the rate of interest will not be a market rate. If a graduate earns between £21,000 and £41,000 per annum, interest will be charged at a maximum of RPI plus 3%. If a graduate earns more than £41,000 per annum, interest will be charged at the maximum of RPI and 3% (see DirectGov website). In previous years, interest rates varied according to rates charged by High Street banks, but for the year starting 1 September 2011 the rate is 1.5%,[[3]](#footnote-4) below the rate of inflation. This change in interest rate policy is major, affecting the amounts of money to be repaid.

Some students and parents had more sophisticated understandings of the repayment system, realising that graduates were unlikely ever to pay back the principal borrowed unless they had a well-paid job:

It’s like nine per cent of what you earn over twenty one grand so... I worked out if I earn twenty one grand for the rest of my life I wouldn’t... I’d pay less than three grand over the thirty years that you pay it back over. So it won’t be hardly paying backing back… so in that sense, I’m not really fussed about it! And obviously the more money you earn, the more back but it should be like the more money you earn, the less you’re going to notice the stuff you’re paying back. (Student, College C, Julie)

It’s one of those things where I think the majority of students… who get on a course next year, so again are paying the £9,000 tuition fees and this, that and the other, at the end of the thirty years, I think the majority of students will not have paid all that money back anyway, unless they’re a real highflyer. So it’s just swings and roundabouts in a way, but let’s say it’s probably the students at the moment who are paying £3,000 a year or whatever for tuition fees and compared to those who start next year paying £9,000, it’ll probably even itself out and they’ll probably be paying back the same amount of money anyway. (Mr Taylor, Julie’s father, College C)

Some students and parents were aware of predictions that the Government would only recoup a limited percentage of the money loaned for fees.

The students were 17-years-old when interviewed and most had little understanding of the implications of graduating with a large debt, necessitating repayments over a long period of time. Parents were more aware of the potential difficulties:

[my son is] Not as much [concerned] as I am, because I think when you’re that age I don’t think you realise what an impact it can have on you to be an adult and be in a lot of debt, and still have to live and pay your bills and you know.… I am more concerned than he is. I just feel that it’s unfortunate that he’s going to finish university and instead of thinking, Great! I’ve got a degree, I can go and get a job and start earning money, you’re going to be thinking, Right, great, I’ve got my degree but how am I going to pay all this money back?… I just think it doesn’t give people the best start for a working career, to start off, even before you actually start working, owing a lot of money. (Mrs Harris, Mike’s mother, College B)

### 4.2.3 Feelings about the changes

#### Students

In the interviews, there was much resignation as well as resentment about the rise in fees:

It’s not something you want to deal with, but… it’s kind of forced upon you.… It seems like the Government has just forced all this upon the people who can’t vote them out of government. Get this generation, we’ll make them in debt, they can’t get rid of us. (Luke, College D, student)

I don’t really see any other options, so… The fees, I think they’re too high. I was against it from the beginning.… We have the least say in everything that happens, and I protested and everything, but since the decision has been made, it feels a bit powerless against us. I don’t really know what else to do, but I still want to go to university. I feel angry that I’m paying for something that I really disagree with, but… (Camilla, College D, student)

Students raised quite legitimate and sensible questions about why the rise in fees had to happen so suddenly and be of such magnitude.

As reported in our survey, worries about debts increase with their potential size (see Table 5 in Appendix 1). Once debt goes above £25,000, a steep increase in worry occurs, with over 60% very worried by this level of debt. Notably, 8.3% are very worried and 29.6% somewhat worried by even a debt below £5,000. We did not interview any people operating with this level of anxiety, perhaps an indication that we did not speak to people who were in a highly debt-averse group.

There is some discrepancy between the students’ feelings of resignation about the new high fee levels described below in the interviews and the levels of worry about debts over £25,000 described in the questionnaire data. The majority of graduates will certainly have debts of about £27,000 for fees alone, with maintenance cost debts on top of that for many. Instead of resignation, the majority of students should be expressing considerable degrees of worry. This discrepancy may arise as the bald figures as written in the questionnaire sound frightening, but the students have not actually done the sums about how much they will eventually owe, partly as it is early days in their thinking and partly as they only have vague ideas about maintenance costs at this stage, and so in the interviews they appear calmer. It may also be that it is easier to own up to anxiety in an anonymous questionnaire than in a face-to-face interview. It may also be that those who agreed to be interviewed tend to be the more confident students.

However, there was not an overwhelming sense of rejection of payment of the raised fees. All the students we spoke to were likely to continue on to higher education, despite their resentment about having to pay the fees, although there was talk about others who had given up the idea:

I do know a couple of friends of ours whose children have pulled out of going to university because they can’t afford the fees… which is a shame really.… Yeah, there’s a couple have said that they’re not even… some of them have even pulled out of sixth form college… because there’s no point carrying on, because… they can’t afford to go to university, which is a real shame. (Mrs Cox, College A, parent)

Some students expressed a more critical attitude towards universities and value for money as a result of the fees increase:

If they’re going to be charging more, I want to know what they’re going to be spending it on. And likely hopefully they’ll be like increasing, like improving the courses and like things like that, so I’d really want to, yeah, if I’m going to be like paying nine thousand a year, I really want to know what exactly are they going to be doing with this money. And if they think they deserve it, and whether I should go there or not, because if not, then I’ll look elsewhere... what is this money going to be going on and I mean like they should like maybe re-evaluate courses and like teaching and contact hours. I mean just so like we can get the best that we can for the amount of money that we’re paying. (Paula, College A, student)

#### Parents

Parents were highly varied in their attitudes towards the raised fees. Many were angry, but also resigned, especially given that we were talking usually to parents of bright children who were committed to going on to higher education. Some were very worried about the consequences of the fees increase for their child. Some were worried about the pressures the study would place on family finances now:

Devastated really. I think it’s unfair, because my husband and I, I think, our income jointly is a good income, you know, we’re not poor or anything like that, and to think that when you have such a big income and you’re still struggling to pay for your child to go to university… I think sometimes it’s the middle earners that seem to lose out, because the people who are lower earners will probably get help; the ones above they can afford it; it’s the middle-ground people who take the burden and the brunt of everything. So, yeah, I’m not happy with the fees at all. It’s a huge leap; I think it was £3,000 or something wasn’t it up till now? (Mrs Thomson, Sasha’s mother, College C)

Sasha’s mother pointed out that they were going to struggle to make a major financial contribution, but that they did not want their daughter to have the worry of huge debts:

I mean I think we’re going to struggle, big time, with the money that it is, £9,000 isn’t they’re talking about per year?…. I’d rather we had the worry than her; I don’t want her just to take on, you know, because they can have these debts, these loans and things, can’t they?

Some were relaxed about the nature of long-term debt. Some wished to support their child as much as possible financially, but had been given little warning given the sudden and large rise in fees. Some were questioning how far to support their child’s aspirations to enter higher education. One parent was horrified that universities near the bottom of league tables were charging similar fees to those at the top.

There was some anger with the politicians. One parent commented that he would have hoped that paying taxes since he was 18 would have meant that the state might have made a bigger contribution to higher education when his son needed that money.

Some comments related to the uncertainty of student and parental behaviour in the future. The students and parents we interviewed had had little time to change strategies and expectations, in view of the sudden introduction of higher fees. One parent with two younger children explained how his thinking about supporting his children into higher education might be different as they approached time to leave education:

The speed with which the fees came in did not really give us a long enough time to prepare for them. We have two younger children now – one in Year 9 and one in Year 7 – and as they’re going through we will view their future education in a different way. For our elder two – we may well have thought, in Year 9, that maybe we’d think of their path slightly differently... But… we were well down the road for them going to university… and therefore it was too late really to start thinking about… different… scenarios, comfortably.… We may…, rung up different firms looking at local firms, jobs that they do, careers that they do; seeing if any of the children would have been interested in doing a career without going to university.… Apprenticeships, yes. Well that comes more into the equation, yes.… particularly if they’re not as academically able.… I think there is a question of balance; a university education overall is a better education than not going to university, but that has to then be balanced out with the financial consequences, and if somebody’s not going to get quite as much from the university education… then we’ll not push them to go to university (Mr Phillips, parent, College C)

#### Staff

In general, staff were better informed about the changes to higher education financing for students than parents and with awareness of the wider implications for student futures and for a range of different students. Many were dismayed at the changes from the point of view of equity and for the burden that would be placed on a young group of people.

### 4.2.4 Plans for covering the cost of higher education

#### Variety of means

The students and the parents planned to pay for the higher education of the students through a variety of means. In many cases, plans for coping with paying for higher education were not yet well-developed.

In the survey, over half of respondents intend to obtain a student loan or work part-time to fund university study and living expenses. Just under 30% say their family or parents would pay, just under 25% would try to get a scholarship or bursary. The main ‘other’ option would be to apply for grants from charities, and so on. One respondent intends to win the lottery. (See Table 9 in Appendix 1.)

#### Different family reactions

The changes to the fees system are sudden and dramatic. This will cause greater problems for some groups than for others:

There are students who are you know better off, whose parents have taken some provision, who have been, who have been if you like knocked-back by the fact that the provision they have taken has suddenly tripled. So parents who had, so at one end parents who had saved, suddenly find themselves short on what they thought they were saving for, because it’s changed quite dramatically quickly hasn’t it? You know so it’s a sudden leap. So I think there’s that group of students. And then I think there’s another group of students who would always have borrowed the full amount anyway, who if they go to university will borrow the new full amount anyway. So I don’t think there’s any, I mean I think they were always going to borrow the three thousand, so now they’ll, they’ll, well sorry, three thousand pounds a year or whatever, now they’ll have to borrow nine thousand a year. (Anthony James, College A, staff member)

Some parents were going to struggle to make any contribution to their child’s higher education costs:

We’re not in a financial position to be able to give her you know, much help at all... might be able to send her a loaf of bread now and again! (Mrs Bellstone, Ruth’s mother, College B)

Some parents whose children received the EMA strove to make financial contributions to their children’s higher education costs in whatever form they could. In families, where the plan was for the student to stay at home, this was a way a relatively poor family could make a major contribution towards meeting the upfront costs of higher education. In some cases the money borrowed for fees would be viewed as a family problem and in other cases as a long-term debt for the child. Some parents were able to make a substantial contribution, often with a struggle even in relatively prosperous families.

#### Part-time jobs

Part-time work, both before and during higher education, was another recognised way of helping make ends meet while studying. The students we spoke to were all speaking about traditional part-time jobs, rather than full-time jobs that would enable them to study part-time.

#### Choosing courses because of advantageous funding arrangements

Although not commonly raised as a possibility, two students mentioned choosing courses which were funded or which required less money as a qualification route:

Some [courses] are funded at the moment, by the NHS, things like that. That makes a huge decision as well, because obviously where I do want to do something in the medical field it sort of sways me to which course I go to, if I know that I can get it funded. (Ruth, College B, student)

Options such as degrees sponsored by employers or part-time courses were not mentioned, although these may become more common in the future.

### 4.2.5 Sources of financial IAG

#### Media

Some students and parents mainly had their information from the media. Other parents had heard about the rise in fees from the media, but subsequently knew where to go to find more information.

#### Websites

There was heavy reliance on government, university and UCAS websites for information about finance.

#### College

The colleges gave information about finance to the students. However, this year it was challenging for them to do so, given the huge changes taking place in the financing of higher education. As universities are tending to charge the same fees, this has simplified life for the colleges to some extent.

Some events about finance had already taken place. For example, at one college, there had been one of their major college events, *Progression Day*, just before the student interviews. In other cases, events were planned, for example, information sessions for parents at one college were offered in the second year at college, that is, Spring 2012 for this group.

However, the differences between universities will be hard for the colleges to explain. At College C, there was a range of resources to draw on, in-house appointed experts as well as those who come in from outside to talk about higher education finance. Occasionally, individual teachers might play a part in giving information about finances at university. One college was advising students not just to choose a university as it was charging £1,000 less, but instead to look at the picture holistically. Another college was organising an evening on finance in September 2011. At one college, the Student Union president was keen on bringing people into the college to talk about higher education finance.

#### Universities

University Open Days were a prime source of information about finance for those who had attended. University representatives also came into the colleges to explain finances.

### 4.2.6 Implications of the policy change

#### The magnitude, uncertainty and speed of change

Given the magnitude, uncertainty and speed of the changes, it is difficult for colleges, parents and students (as well as universities) to know how to react. They struggle to understand new rules, comply with them and to address the consequences, both intended and unintended. In many cases, decisions have not yet been made by government (e.g. whether loans can be repaid early at the end of study or whether they have to be paid in arrears), so it is impossible to know to react. The students, their parents and colleges are clearly somewhat confused, shocked and resentful at the changes to fees, with little time to develop considered reactions:

At the moment both with the EMA changes and these fees we’re going into the times when people are making decisions about what their education routes are going to be before the decisions of everyone have been made.... And I that I think is a derogation of duty; not the universities’ part, but on the policy makers’ part. There will be a couple of years that I think we’ll be most, quite disturbed by it, before it settles down. And it’s just a shame there hasn’t been more planning. (Derek Shane, College C, staff member)

In many cases, old coping mechanisms and strategies continue for the time being, but it is unclear what will develop over the longer term. The ways of paying for higher education remain the same, with increased emphasis for some students on the desirability of staying at home or with family members during higher education to keep costs under control. Colleges continue to encourage students towards higher education.

#### Alternative pathways

There are few desirable alternative pathways to higher education at the moment. In time, alternative pathways into adult employment may develop. Parents and children may consider other options apart from higher education. The availability of such options may be affected by the state of economy. It may be that interest in part-time study along with employment may become a more popular option. At the moment, part-time study for first degrees is a far less common option than full-time study. In 2009/10, 48.5% (1,208,625) of all UK higher education students (2,493,420) enrolled in higher education institutions were studying for a first degree full-time or on a sandwich course. Only 8.5% of all UK students, 212,865, were enrolled part-time studying for a first degree (HESA 2011). As the changes stabilise over the coming years, parents, students and college staff will develop more informed understandings of fees, repayment and alternative options to higher education than are possible to have now.

#### Different groups of parents and students

There are suggestions in our data of different groups of families/parents/students: those with wealthy parents who can afford to pay upfront for their children’s higher education; those with relatively prosperous middle group parents who can afford to make a substantial contribution to their children’s higher education, but for whom this may be a considerable financial struggle; those parents who are probably less prosperous, but who are comfortable with high levels of debt for their children which they perceive as repayable within the framework offered by the government; those who are not happy about high levels of debt, but who are willing to tolerate it for bright children; and those whom we did not interview who are poor and debt-averse and not willing to consider putting children through higher education. These groups are likely to respond to different types of information and publicity materials. They will have different types of information requirements and are likely to need different messages. Some groups will be more confident and articulate about asking for information and assistance than others. They will need different types of financial arrangements for those with greater financial needs already in place to some extent with grants, bursaries and scholarships. Responding with clarity of information to these different groups will be especially challenging, given the ever-changing policy scenarios in higher education over the next few years.

#### Family groups

Members of particular families tend to have similar attitudes towards finance. The 17-year-olds are, understandably, strongly influenced by their parents’ views on money. They are affected by what the parents will support or not and their attitudes to and degree of comfort with debt and repayment.

For example, Julie and her father have very similar attitudes to finance. They are relatively relaxed about high levels of debt. Julie’s sister has already entered higher education so they have high levels of knowledge about how the finance system works, how repayments work and what is possible and manageable. Ruth and her mother are much less relaxed about repayment. They focus on the possibility of her finding a course where fees are wholly or partly paid. They know that Ruth’s family will not be able to make major contributions to her higher education costs and focus on the possibility of her staying at home if possible.

Mike and his mother are not very well-informed about higher education finance and this is a single parent family, but they are determined that he will go to university as he is bright, although he will have to borrow heavily. They are also agreed that he will not go to a particular university just because it happens to be marginally cheaper. Mike’s mother is concerned about the amount of debt and also thinks that her son does not realise the full implications of such debt.

Sasha’s family is planning to make as much of a contribution as possible to her higher education, but will struggle to do so. Sasha’s mother is again more worried about loans than her daughter and wants to protect her from those as much as she can. They both realise that it will be a struggle to finance Sasha’s higher education and they are not relaxed about large debts. Protection of children and worry about children’s lack of understanding of the full implications of debt is a strong theme in such families.

There is clearly considerable communication within families about financial issues that might indicate that information to one person in the family will be passed on to others. Alternatively, it might suggest that the family nature of the approach to financial decisions entails information going more or less simultaneously to both parents and students. There are clearly considerable degrees of anxiety among parents which might be alleviated through earlier rather than later information about the manageability of higher education finance.

#### Marketisation of higher education and its implications

The marketisation of higher education will have potentially large implications for social equity unless managed and monitored carefully. If fee differentials increase, it will be important to see that access is maintained through appropriate funding streams for potential students from disadvantaged backgrounds, bearing in mind that these students are those who are most likely to be culturally averse to debt. It is also important to bear in mind the squeezed middle group of parents and students who are not wealthy enough to cope easily with higher fees, but not poor enough to qualify for financial help. It is not impossible to envisage a scenario in which elite institutions are accessed by wealthy family and students from poor families through the financial provision available to them, but not the middle range of families and their children.

As anticipated elsewhere, there will be a tension for universities in the future as student expectations will be heightened because of the increased fees, while the HEFCE teaching grant to universities will have been decreased. There is uncertainty over income from student fees, given the possible dwindling supply of students as they face higher fees and also government control over numbers, as proposed in the White Paper.

#### Presentation of debt

The rise in fees with concomitant loans and large amounts of debt has been presented as such, and is perceived as problematic by several of those we interviewed. However, in fact the repayments function much as a progressive graduate tax might, with repayments starting at £21,000, rising rates of interest payable as the graduate’s salary increases, with the amount eventually repaid not relating directly to the amount owed, and any remaining debt forgiven after 30 years. Presentation of the changes as a graduate tax may be less problematic from the point of view of encouraging poorer students into higher education.

## 4.3 Sources of IAG influencing students’ progression decisions

### 4.3.1 The decision-making process

#### When did you start looking?

From the student questionnaire it appeared that the Year 12 students at the time of the research (now in Year 13) looked at information about universities primarily between September 2010 and June 2011 (apart from December 2010) (see Table 11, Appendix 1). This coincides with the academic year, and January and May were peak months. Some colleges indicated that they encouraged students to start looking for information the moment they came through the door, which seems to correspond to the questionnaire findings.

From the interviews, the same impressions were gained: many students had started looking for information after the start of the academic year (2010-2011). Often, students had wanted to go to university for a long time, or they were academically inclined to the extent that it was clear to their families and to the college staff that they should go to university. Often students had had an interest in particular courses for some time. However, for about half of the 18 interviewed students the active process of applying and registering for Open Days had only started recently and some felt they were lagging behind a little.

#### What made you start looking?

Students often mentioned that they started looking for information on universities after they had been to a University Fair at a local university (Portsmouth Higher Education Fair; many students described taking home bags full of prospectuses and then going through them at home afterwards). Other events mentioned as kicking off the decision-making process about university were the Year 10 work experience placement and university visits at the college, or review meetings with tutors. Many students had held long-term interests in subjects/topics, but had been unsure which course suited these. Registering on the UCAS website and doing the Stamford test also were described as starting the active search process for courses. Visits to Open Days were then scheduled, which helped the course and university selection process along. One parent felt that the encouragement of the college had really started the decision-making process. Sometimes, for parents, high GCSE grades of their son/daughter were the starting point of considering and looking further into university and courses, or alternatives at the same level.

University visits to colleges were mentioned as moving the process along in terms of deciding on a particular course. ‘Gifted and talented’ groups seemed to be guided intensively with applications, especially for Oxbridge, which seemed strongly encouraged, and Medicine courses.

#### Staff descriptions of the decision-making journey and information processes at the college

The tutor system was described by college staff as the central structure in place to start and maintain the decision-making and university application process. Tutor time and individual student-tutor progress review meetings are used for this purpose. Tutors are coached in this process by pastoral leaders and college advisers. ‘Gifted and talented’ groups receive special guidance (for example, Oxbridge visits or with applications for Medicine) and local universities and programmes like Aimhigher help raise students’ awareness. Students were said to start the intensive tutor group programme after the May half-term break in Year 12, calculating their UCAS tariff points then looking at prospectuses and talking with their tutors. Another college indicated that the process sometimes started at a much earlier stage with tutors discussing matters surrounding the process and choices in tutor time from an early stage; but this was said to depend heavily on the tutor. One college said that students started looking for information almost when they first came in through the door.

All colleges interviewed had organised Higher Education Days at the end of students’ Year 12, with a large number of UK universities attending with stands, and specialist sessions organised around writing personal statements, registering with UCAS, planning a gap year, and so on. Local university representatives and Aimhigher held student talks in at least one college, and this college had also invited former students who were now attending universities to address the students during this Higher Education Day.

From September in Year 13, the application and personal statement writing process were said to become intensified and students are encouraged to visit university Open Days. Parent evenings are also organised in June and September to keep parents involved and informed about steps and deadlines in the decision-making and application process.

#### Messages from colleges regarding participation in higher education

One college indicated that it promoted the life-long learning message, whether students go to university or not. Colleges seemed focused on raising aspirations, while encouraging students to be realistic. Promoting social mobility was said to be a strong mission in one of the colleges where, for a high percentage of students, it is not part of their cultural capital to go to university, and going to college is already a big step. In at least one college it was felt that the value of education in its own right was strongly promoted and that employability should not be the main focus in applying for university.

Colleges seemed to be united in wanting to keep encouraging students to go to university, and they promoted the message that the tuition fees are to be regarded as a tax, that the repayments would be affordable and that, in the long run, going to university is still the most attractive option in terms of career prospects, life satisfaction and income. Some college advisers interviewed were daunted by the prospect they described of a difficult two years ahead trying to encourage students to go to university. Parents who were hesitant about their child’s taking out a student loan were reported to be tried to be reassured at one college that the loans would not be in their names, but in those of their son/daughter. Talks with parents tend to often be about why students should consider going to university.

In at least one another college, students were told not to ‘sell themselves short’ by applying to universities with lower fees, as the difference was not felt to be sufficiently substantial to preclude applying to the highest university possible with their predicted grades.

### 4.3.2 Sharing the decision: family and friends

Decision-making was mostly reported to be largely shared between parents and their sons/daughters in the interviews, although many parents let their child take the lead and followed their interest. Many parents indicated they felt it was important to leave the decision to their son/daughter and that these would or should now be more independent, considering their age. However, parents would intervene if they felt bad decisions were being made or their child would ‘fall by the wayside’. Parents often accompanied students to university Open Day visits, however; one student described how she was happy to have her mother present when visiting open days at universities, as she would ask the more critical questions this student would not have considered. Another student said her father helped her a great deal in being realistic about her future.

No clear distinctions between the sources of information used by parents and their sons/daughter were mentioned. Social media were hardly used at all by parents to look up information about universities and, even though this source of information was more used by students, it was not trusted.

From the interviews with students and parents, parents and family seemed much more important in terms of information and support to students than peers. Sometimes the wider family network was used to find out information about and recommendations towards universities. Parents often indicated that they supported their son/daughter in whatever they wanted to do and, if their child was academically inclined, this was supported regardless of the cost. The decision-making process was often shared between parents and their children although, as described earlier, parents would often let their child take the lead and leave them somewhat independent in the process:

Oh yeah I mean so obviously we have our daughter’s interest you know at heart type of thing and whatever she wants to do we’ll back her up you know. Obviously if we see things that we don’t think she’d doing quite right, we’d advise her you know, but at the end of the day it’s her, it’s her education, it’s her life you know. And you know it’s, if she falls down by the wayside you know she could just say well, I’m, that I am mainly responsible for my actions so to speak so, but we try, we try to guide her as much as we can, the best kind of career pathway to go type of thing. But and generally it’s worked in the past, so you we just see how, we just back her up you know a hundred per cent, as long as it goes, so as long as we feel that it’s the right pathway for her to take. (Mr Taylor, Julie’s father, College C)

No I’m not... you know, very supportive but not ‘pushy’! Um... because, especially with her, it just doesn’t work; you’re almost better to kind of ‘plant the seeds’, walk away and then she’ll come back and say ‘oh...’ you know and then it’s basically what you’ve told her! You’ve got to leave it... you know, use a bit of psychology. (Mrs Bellstone, Ruth’s mother, College B)

Students in their turn often mentioned the support they felt from their parents, although some said their parents left it completely up to them. Parents are also seen as important in deciding what is financially feasible, for example in terms of the travel distance from home to university, or whether the student could move to a hall of residence rather than stay at home:

And have your parents helped you with anything apart from... like knowing how the finance works and...

My dad... like he likes sitting on his laptop and just like researching anything and so, he was really good; like when I wanted to Psychology and Criminology he was literally, I swear, he was looking every night just at Uni’s that did; all over the country and saying ‘well, there’s one up here’ and I was like ‘I don’t want to go up there dad!’ You know... he likes researching and he’s quite organised and stuff like that so he has been looking at other Uni’s and saying like... Because I didn’t really consider Plymouth and then he looked this and he said ‘this is... you know, you should look at their website’ and I checked out their website and ‘well actually, you know, Plymouth looks quite nice!’ So and stuff like that, he’s quite... been quite helpful. [My dad drives] So my dad’s like taken me to Exeter’s Open Day, um... he might take me to Bristol’s if he can. (Julie, student, College A)

College staff members felt parents varied in their level of involvement with their children’s decision-making process:

Well I think it, I think it depends, it depends on the individual. I mean some students on the UCAS application will make their parents, give their parents nominated access, so their parents can actually look at the form; I think probably the majority don’t, and treat it as they are in control of the form. But I mean I think parents have differing degrees of input into, some parents will take their, their children to you know countless open days, and others, well it’s not fair to say they’re not interested, and don’t take them to open days and don’t get involved. (Anthony James, College, A staff)

Whether or not the parents had been to university themselves was said by staff to be an important factor in the decision-making process of the students, more important than the college or friends.

Some students had been informed by older siblings and their friends and had been visiting universities to visit their siblings, which had already given them an impression of university life and about which they were enthusiastic. These siblings also served as important sources of information, both for parents and students. Older siblings’ decisions had sometimes had a major impact when they regretted not having gone to university. The students took this into account in their own decision making.

Some college staff felt that peers were quite important in the decision-making process and in terms of worry about fees; however, other college staff did not feel peers were deeply important and also it was not what students themselves indicated during the interviews. Decisions about university and course were seen to be very individual; students felt that they decided on their own future and that people in their peer group would go their own ways. However, friends were seen as a source of support in terms of going through the same decision-making process, and sometimes friends could help in getting organised in terms of booking Open Days, for example. Mention was made in one instance of friends deciding not to go to university but, as the student interviewed was set on going, this did not affect him. However, one staff member felt that with the fees rise, peers are now going to be less effective in convincing the students who are thinking of not going:

I think a couple of years ago the ditherers… would have been persuaded by the peer group pressure to actually apply and go onto university… a couple of years ago. (Stuart McEnroe, College C, staff)

One student described how she was almost put off university because of her friends considering not going as a result of the fees rise:

INT So even though your friends and people in your class were negative, you did not, you were not influenced by that, or maybe initially?

Joyce At first, when the fees did go up. I was kind of influenced, but it was mainly like my own like feelings towards going. But like with my brother going to university and him having like such a good experience and like my, like my aunties, my uncles, and my mum, my dad, they’ve all said like oh it’s so good, you have to go, you’re going to be like missing out if you don’t. And also my sister, she’s always wanted to go to university, even with the fees. (Joyce, College C, student)

### 4.3.3 Most-used sources of information

The most frequently used sources of information are university websites, prospectuses, UCAS and teachers, all consulted by over 50% of questionnaire respondents. Least often consulted are Unistats and social media sites, used by less than 10% of respondents (see Table 13, Appendix 1).

University sources dominate respondents’ choices of top three sources of information when researching universities, with university prospectuses the first choice for over a third of respondents, followed by Open Days and university websites, which are first choice for just under 20% each. These three categories are also the most common second choice, and in the top four of most common third choices (behind UCAS). UCAS is the next most common source chosen, with no the other category registering strongly.

At this stage (end of A1, start of A2), respondents feel that the most important information for them relates to career prospects (55.9%), required entry grades (54%), aspects of the course (45.7%) and the quality of teaching (43.7%). Information they would find least useful relates to the inclusive feel of the university (3.1%), recommendation by friend/family/teacher (5.9%), clarity of the admissions process (8.8%) and sports facilities (9.1%) (see Table 14, Appendix 1).

Females were more likely to use university prospectuses (Chi square = 23.82, p<.001, Cramer’s V=.20), university websites (Chi square = 20.22, p<.001, Cramer’s V=.19), university individuals coming to school (Chi square = 5.61, p<.05, Cramer’s V=.10), and UCAS (Chi square = 17.89, p<.001, Cramer’s V=.18). Males were significantly more likely to completely trust family (Chi square = 7.10, p<.01, Cramer’s V=.11). There were no significant differences for, careers advisors, teachers, parents, friends, information from university Open Days, university guides, Unistats or social media sites (see Table 31, Appendix 1).

Some weak to modest gender differences emerged on what information students felt was important to them at this stage. Females were more likely to feel that information about campus (Chi Square =7.40, p<.01, Cramer’s V=.11), aspects of the course (Chi Square =6.09, p<.05, Cramer’s V=.10), entry grades (Chi Square =8.94, p<.01, Cramer’s V=.12), and financial help (Chi Square =6.06, p<.05, Cramer’s V=.10) were important. Males that information about sports facilities (Chi Square =14.71, p<.001, Cramer’s V=.16) was important. No other significant differences were found. See Table 35, Appendix 1.

Students receiving EMA were less likely to use their parents as sources of information (Chi square = 8.75, p<.01, Cramer’s V=.12) (see Table 45, Appendix 1). We will see later on that they also trust their parents less as sources of information than students who do not receive the EMA.

No significant EMA differences were found in use of social media, or on any of the statements about social media.

#### Prospectuses

In the interviews, as in the questionnaire results, prospectuses stood out as one of the most important information sources for students and parents. One of the first stages of the decision-making process would be collecting or ordering many different prospectuses (at a fair, from the careers library, or ordering them from universities) and then going through these in detail.

Prospectuses are read by both students and parents, often in a joint search for the best options. One parent expressed concern about how his daughter was using the information in prospectuses, as she focused very much on course requirements. Another parent was concerned about ‘personalised’ prospectuses as it worried him that his daughter would no longer consider other options outside her narrowed-down personalised prospectus that had been tailored to the course(s) she was interested in.

Course information and entry requirements, as well as accommodation, were most looked for in prospectuses. One student had hoped to find reasons to choose particular universities described more in the prospectuses.

From this research, prospectuses also stood out as the *most trusted* source of information. Students often regarded prospectus information as objective and factual, because it is printed material and therefore, in their opinion, had to be correct. Parents also often indicated that they felt the prospectuses would be the most reliable source of information, even though they were more aware that they were marketing material.

#### UCAS

Together with prospectuses, UCAS was an important first port of call for students finding out which universities they could consider with the grades they were predicted to achieve. At colleges, one of the first steps in the decision-making and application process is registering on the UCAS website, calculating tariff points based on predicted grades, and taking the Stamford test. As with prospectuses, UCAS was considered highly trustworthy and objective.

#### University websites

The questionnaires showed that university websites are also one of the top three information sources used by the students. In the interviews they were also mentioned by students and parents as one of the first ports of call, together with prospectuses, the UCAS website, and league tables.

Information searched for on these university websites involved course options; the course curriculum; topics and modules; accommodation; entry grades; employability; but some students also indicated they used the websites (and prospectuses) to find out what the university and course would offer them for their money. Students also said they looked for information about student life and the town on websites, but that this was not generally available.

A few students mentioned that they found it very difficult to discriminate between universities on the basis of their websites as they figured the universities would represent themselves and their courses well; one of them said all universities should have a ‘Why choose us?’ section. Not all students interviewed, however, seemed alert to the fact that university websites are a marketing tool.

Some students preferred websites and others prospectuses – no clear pattern was discernable. Websites were considered more accurate by some, as they felt information can be easily updated when it changes and therefore will be more current. Also, it was sometimes felt that websites contained more information. Equally, however, some students felt the prospectuses offered more information. Some felt the prospectuses would contain more accurate information since they are printed material and hence the ‘set in stone’ information was probably more reliable. Unsurprisingly, there was variation in how well the different university websites were received in terms of ease of navigation, finding of information, attractiveness, and so on.

#### League tables

League tables were another important source for both students and parents in terms of framing the types of universities they should be aspiring to attend. Although the league tables were used, it was interesting to see that it was the Guardian league table that was mentioned by name as being particularly reputable.

Both students and parents were savvy enough to limit the influence of league tables; many took them with a pinch of salt, as they realised league table rankings can vary greatly between providers and across years. In most interviews students conceded that the tables were a useful tool to act as a broad guide as to which universities (not) to include in their selection.

#### Social media

The main social media sites used by questionnaire respondents were Facebook and YouTube, used by over three quarters and over 60% respectively. A smaller proportion used Twitter (15%). Tumblr was frequently mentioned among the ‘other’ options (see Table 18, Appendix 1).

Respondents mostly indicated that they used social media at least somewhat to see what their friends are doing, but were less inclined to use or trust social media when it came to information about universities. Less than 40% agreed that they get truthful opinions on what universities are like from social media, and less than 30% agreed that they looked at social media sites to get real opinions about universities, or that they trusted the information they got from social media sites. The majority of respondents, however, agreed at least somewhat that universities should have an information page on social media sites (see Table 19, Appendix 1).

From the interviews a similar answer pattern emerged. Although most students used social media (which their parents did not), it was generally felt their purpose was purpose said they would not use them to obtain academic information; therefore social media are not the place for universities to inform potential students about their institutions and courses. A few, however, indicated that universities should become involved more with providing information via social media. Some students used social media to find out opinions from current students at the universities they were interested in, mostly about student life, nightlife, and so on, but at the same time they realised that this is precisely what they are: subjective personal opinions. In short, students often do not trust social media for the purposes of gaining objective and factual information. One student, however, describes using student forums:

And I have been on a couple of student forums to see what they say about the subject or what they say about the Uni. It’s very good to get the students view, because they’re the ones studying there, so. [The university students on these forums] are generally quite pro whatever uni they’re at. They’re never like oh it sucks, or whatever, because I’d imagine if they didn’t enjoy it, a lot of the people that wouldn’t enjoy it would drop out. (Germaine, College A, student)

The same student, although she indicated that she felt individuals put ‘stupid things’ on Facebook, felt that if universities had a group on Facebook, supposedly functioning like a student forum, she would look at this:

But if, I suppose if the university had like a group on Facebook, I would have a look at that, because you would possibly get like the students, well a student union group on Facebook now.

Another student suggested how Twitter could be used:

I think they should. I mean with, not Facebook, but with Twitter I know that you can get like pages of like that like they tweet, so they give you messages about like, I don’t know, so I’m guessing they do do that for university. And if you do like, like mention them in like a tweet, then they can reply and then give you like direct information about it, but I haven’t, I’m not too sure if they do that for universities, but I’m guessing that they would, and then in that sense it would be useful for people. (Joyce, College C, student)

YouTube was sometimes valued for clips of accommodation, for example, although students realised they would only get snapshots in this way. One student felt that if universities are on social media sites, they make a more social impression. She felt this was a positive thing.

Parents usually did not use social media at all, except one who felt that every piece of information helped:

INT Do you use social media at all, things like Facebook and …

Mrs H Yeah, yeah.

INT Do you? And would you value information about universities from those websites? The social media?

Mrs H Not necessarily, but I’d take them into consideration, definitely.

INT OK. And what type of information would you look for on those sites?

Mrs H Oh, I don’t know, I expect other people’s experiences and recommendations.

INT Yeah. More personal experiences?

Mrs H Yeah.

(Mrs Harris, parent of Mike, College B)

#### University Open Day visits

Slightly under half of questionnaire respondents had visited a university campus. When they had done so, this tended to make them more likely to want to go to university (see Table 20, Appendix 1).

The usefulness of university visits was reported as ‘getting a flavour’, a sense of the atmosphere; the size of the town, the university, and of the course occupancy; what students and staff were like and to ask them specific questions; student life; accommodation. Open Days sometimes seemed to function as the ‘making or breaking’ of the student’s interest in going there – one student called the visit an ‘eye opener’. If impressions were positive, students would shortlist them but if, for example, the accommodation did not seem to suit them (even if brand new) or staff were unable to answer particular questions about employability, the university in question would be struck off the list.

One college self-funded or used the help of the Sutton Trust to fund costly university Higher Education Fair and Open Day visits as part of the ‘drip-feeding’ process to encourage students to consider going to university, as this was often not part of their cultural capital. They also said they went on many Aimhigher visits during the year. Colleges generally encourage students to visit Open Days individually as well, although there are restrictions to the number of days they can take off from school in order to do this.

Some students received very specific financial information on Open Days, for example about fee waivers that they had not seen anywhere else and that had a very encouraging effect on going to the university in question. Also, more specific information about entry criteria that applied to their situation was obtained on Open Days.

Parents who attended Open Days sounded very positive about their impressions. Sometimes it made them realise the atmosphere of a particular university did not suit their son or daughter.

Some students had been to summer schools, in Southampton and other cities, and reported back very enthusiastically. One student spoke of how she was put at ease about the academic climate that beforehand had made her feel quite intimidated (although she was in the ‘gifted and talented’ group).

Other students had visited their siblings already at university and this had made them enthusiastic about becoming university student themselves.

Non-EMA students are slightly more likely to have visited a university campus (Chi Square = 3.92, p<.05, Cramer’s V=.09), but the difference is small. There is no significant difference in the extent to which visits have changed their views on university (see Table 47, Appendix 1).

#### Information used by college advisers

College advisers rely heavily on the local universities for their information (by liaising and visiting, but also by the university contacts visiting them), as well as the news, the internet, UCAS, league tables, and the Connexions service. Brain Heap’s books were mentioned as a primary resource on degree course offers, and the big newspaper guides as well. The experience in the field built up over many years of in the field by college advisers was also seen as a very important source of information: knowing the universities and being able to inform students of the atmosphere of particular universities, and that individual departments can be very different from the university as a whole in terms of flavour; and also where three Bs means three Bs and where it means BCC will also be accepted. Sometimes YouTube or TV show clips were said to be used with students to inform them about aspects of the application or decision-making process.

#### Trust in sources of information

From the questionnaire, the most trusted sources of information on university study appeared to be UCAS and university sources, followed by school/college sources and external sources, such as family, university guides and Unistats. Least trusted were social media (see Table 12, Appendix 1).

Information sources fall into three main categories according to the data. Most trusted are UCAS and university sources (websites, prospectuses, Open Days), which over 50% of respondents fully trust and 1% or less do not trust. School/college sources (teachers, careers advisors) are fully trusted by over 35%, and not trusted by less than 5%. Interestingly, university individuals coming to college appear to be grouped alongside other college rather than university sources in terms of trustworthiness. The third category is made up of a range of external sources, such as family, university guides and Unistats. These tend to be fully trusted by around a quarter of respondents, and not trusted by up to 12.5%. Friends fall somewhat below this group, being fully trusted by 14%. At the bottom of the trustworthiness scale we find social media, fully trusted by less than 5%, and not trusted by 60% of respondents.

Cell counts were too small to do meaningful analyses of gender for when students started looking at information regarding universities.

Some differences emerged that related to trust in different information sources. Females were more likely to completely trust university prospectuses (Chi square = 11.16, p<.01, Cramer’s V=.15); university websites (Chi square = 6.92, p<.05, Cramer’s V=.12); information from university Open Days (Chi square = 19.19, p<.001, Cramer’s V=.20); and UCAS (Chi square = 10.53, p<.01, Cramer’s V=.15). Males were significantly more likely to completely trust family (Chi square = 9.74, p<.01, Cramer’s V=.14). There were no significant differences for university individuals coming to students’ school/college, careers advisors, teachers, parents, friends, university guides, Unistats or social media sites (see Table 30, Appendix 1). These differences are largely related to actual sources used; see Section 5.3.3.

Very few differences emerged related to trust in different information sources. Students receiving EMA were less likely to trust parents (Chi square = 7.07, p<.05, Cramer’s V=.12), but no other differences were found (see Table 44, Appendix 1).

From the interviews with students and parents, a very similar response pattern emerged. Most trusted sources of information were university prospectuses, UCAS and university websites, also word of mouth from family and friends by parents. League tables were generally not relied upon heavily but used as a broad indicator of the quality of the university, and used as a tool to help select universities. Social media were distrusted but still used by (mainly) students to obtain current students’ opinions about their university. There was some evidence that student forums are held higher in esteem than sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

Talking about Facebook, another student commented that they were taught not to trust social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook:

No, no, I wouldn’t. I don’t know... unless I was using it as a medium for contacting someone who was at said university; no I wouldn’t because obviously then it would... GCSE IT taught me that they’re not trustworthy sites! (student)

### 4.3.4 College support

The support from the college appeared to be pivotal in the students and their parents’ decision-making and application process with regard to higher education.

Tutors and individual subject teachers were often spoken of highly in terms of the role they had played so far in the process, whether instilling confidence in a student to enrol for a particular course, inspiring a student to a particular course choice, helping with the decision on whether to continue with a particular subject, or writing a personal statement, to name a few examples. In one college, the careers adviser was spoken of extremely highly by all interviewed as going out of her way (and out of school hours) to support and inform students about options, Open Days, and so on.

The Higher Education Days at the colleges were received very positively by the students in terms of the information provided and stimulating the students to start with the application process.

There were some suggestions from students and parents to the individual colleges involved in this research which are listed in separate reports to the colleges.

## 4.4 College staff perceptions of student and parent attitudes and preferences

This section reports on college staff views, valuable because they offer an overview of the scene in colleges and may indicate more finely-grained understandings than are offered by macro-level discussions. It should, however, be remembered that they are in many cases impressionistic interpretations.

### 4.4.1 Motivation to study in higher education

Staff members expect that some trends will be reinforced by the new tuition fees scheme. One trend, partly attributable to the recession and partly to increasing higher education tuition fees, is that fewer students have been applying to university. Another trend is a dichotomy between students with high grades, who tend to be from academic families in which it is expected that everyone goes to university and in where there are no great worries about finding a job after graduation; and students capable of going to university but from families where people do not usually go to university and who therefore not necessarily think it is for them, lack the confidence, or do not see the value of it. This latter group is also described as having a background where, culturally, it is not common to incur debt as an investment into something, whether education or otherwise. With this second group, the process of encouraging these students instilling confidence in their ability to go to university is described as very delicate (‘drip-feeding’, as one staff member describes it). With the increase in fees, which does not seem to have altered the college’s message to students and parents about the value of higher education, college staff anticipate a difficult two years ahead in which it is going to be even harder to encourage this second group of students to consider going to university. Staff are concerned about the impact on widening participation in higher education.

There are contradictory messages from the colleges about alternatives to university. One college staff member describes how the company schemes for students with A-levels have been abolished due to the economic crisis, whereas another college staff member describes how a large amount of company mail is being received at the college to recruit A-level students for jobs, now that the higher education tuition fees have increased to £8,000–£9,000. Lastly, a trend is described of students who are still considering university, but are now looking more at the vocational routes within higher education to increase job prospects (i.e. nursing or healthcare professions).

### 4.4.2 Changes in A-level subject choice

Staff at the three colleges expressed different views about possible changes in A-level subject choices as a result of the rise in higher education tuition fees. They mentioned some trends that started as a result of the economic crisis rather than directly from the fees increase.

At College A, an increase in the pursuit of vocational A-levels has been seen, following on from a wider offer of vocational subjects at GCSE. These vocational routes are said to suit the students at this college better, as they are not very confident in their capabilities, tend to be more afraid of failure at exams and because their coming to college is a big step in itself. Much nurturing then goes into encouraging them to consider higher education. These are trends which have been happening over a longer period.

At College B, slight declines in Creative Arts and similar subjects have been seen with a growth in mathematics and science, ascribed to a wish to study subjects that will be useful for gaining employment that has to do with the state of the economy over the last couple of years, but also with rise in fees for higher education. Additionally, with the current changes, it is felt that students will see themselves as purchasing something, and this trend is therefore expected to accelerate. Students will want to have a sense that what they are purchasing is going to be worth it, and this may affect their A-level choices. Students are expected to choose paths which do not follow their natural ability, but are more likely to lead them to be employed.

At College C, no differences have been seen in choice of subjects, and this is not really expected as it is felt that students know by 18 whether they are Science or Humanities students and they need a strong science and mathematics background to cope with A-levels and higher education studies in these areas. It is therefore not a change that is easily made. It is not felt that an element of ‘if I’m going to pay for it, it must do something that will give me a job’ is currently present, but part of the reasons given for this is that students do not seem to understand the implications of degrees on employment; and parents often have misunderstandings about options available with science subjects, because of which they do not realise the breadth of options available.

### 4.4.3 Changes in type of degree and construction of employability

At College A, it is expected that the students who know there will not necessarily be a job at the end of the degree of their choice, will be less keen to come to terms with the £9,000 per year. Students who are determined to go into a profession that they cannot get into without the degree are expected to remain very focused, whatever the cost, and staff interviewed indicated that these tend to be the careers where the earning potential will be there for them when they finish, such as Medicine and Law.

At College C, the view of education as simply equipping someone to be a member of the workforce in the future was seen as an impoverished view of education by one staff member we interviewed, but he indicated that students buy much more into this view than people think. However, especially for the brighter students, it was felt that this should not be seen as the only way, and these students are usually confident that they will get a job, as members of their family have also always had jobs. For students from more deprived backgrounds, there will be less confidence and different views:

The other staff member interviewed at College C saw a pattern over the last couple of years that he expected to strengthen further with the fees increase, where both students and their parents have become much more utilitarian about their degree courses.

### 4.4.4 The relationship between cultural capital, social mobility and higher education decision-making

The themes of the cultural capital of the students and social mobility came up in several interviews and have therefore been brought into this analysis.

At College A, it was felt that encouraging students to go into higher education is a difficult process generally, because in this college particularly they are often the first generation in their family to go - their parents do not encourage them, and the students do not think it is for them. Encouraging these students at school is done in a ‘process of drip-feeding’ in order to not scare them off and to instil gently the confidence that it is an option to consider. As a result of the increase in tuition fees from 2012 there is a worry about the impact on widening participation to higher education, as the fear of debt amongst parents and students will add to this existing hesitation to go into higher education. Another sociocultural issue indicated here is that the parents of these students typically do not have a mortgage and do not have any credit, so fees of both £3,000 and £9,000 frighten them. Also, culturally many of these students do not want to move out of the area. If their parents have not been to university, this provides no further encouragement.

Additionally, some tutors feel that if the students do not take the initiative to find out about university, then they do not deserve to go, whereas these are the students that need more help as they do not have the cultural capital to assist with their search.

At College C, the fear is expressed that the gap between families where it is assumed all will go to university, and those for which the step to higher education is a big one, is going to be widened by the increased fees.

### 4.4.5 Responses to the increase in fee levels

At College A, staff express a fear for a potentially challenging couple of years in encouraging students to go to university. It is expected that the negative accounts of the media around tuition fees could well affect the numbers applying, but once £9,000 fees have become the norm and the media interest subsides, numbers might increase again:

We think with the implications of 2012, we’re bracing ourselves – if that’s the right term – for potentially a challenging year, possibly two years, because I think when it first comes into play, with the media - very negative media that we’ve had in the build-up to this since the publication of the Browne Report really – that parents particularly actually only tend to hear the negative press, and once it goes out of the media limelight, when it becomes, shall we say ‘the norm’ to pay those fees, the media will be less interested in it really. So then we think, when it’s the norm, then we could actually see an increase, you know, within one year, but possibly not for two. We think whilst it attracts such poor media it could well affect the numbers going, and certainly that has been the suggestion from some students and parents already.

The factor of unemployment and redundancies is also expected to have an impact, as in cases when both parents lose their jobs, for example, and students detect the atmosphere at home and will not want to add to their parents’ financial worries by borrowing large sums of money.

However, the staff member interviewed indicated that, in her experience with the 2006 rise to £3,000 tuition fees and the introduction of the tuition loan system, when the parents and the student realised that the debt was going to be the student’s responsibility, the parents did not object and the students were willing to take this on. The number of students applying actually increased at this college as a result of this change. However, the amounts borrowed at that time were much smaller than they will be in the future.

The new fees are seen as a frightening prospect by parents, according to staff at this college, and it will be a matter of coming to terms with the idea that university education is very expensive.

At College B, it is felt that only in January will the impact of the fees be known, when the actual numbers of university applicants becomes clear, although more students seem to be looking at alternatives to higher education, but this is seen as a result of more alternatives being presented to them.

However, it is expected that the fees will have an off-putting effect, and paradoxically for the students who will be most supported under the new fees structure:

I mean I don’t think there’s any way of getting round it. I think that it will have an off-putting effect from more than [inaudible] the students I suspect. I mean paradoxically, I think the hard message to get across is the fact that those are the students who paradoxically are actually going to be supported most, and who probably are going to have less of a problem. But they also, they tend to be culturally, the students who most dislike the idea of being in debt.

This member of staff also indicates that he feels that the presentation of the new fees as a loan is the single most off-putting factor. He added that the unfairness of the contrast between this cohort and their predecessors is going to be hard to stomach for students and parents.

It is felt that in the past tuition levels have sometimes only been significant in making a decision about whether to go or not, and that there are not going to be many students who do not apply because they think they cannot afford it. Staff indicated they have no sense so far of panic or of large numbers of students indicating they will now not go to university. One potential reason given for this is that at the moment people do not have clear choices if they do not go to university, but it is felt that alternatives might develop in the longer term, and more rapidly than they would have done otherwise.

Contrary to the earlier statement of a staff member at one of the other colleges, one staff member at College C indicated that he felt the new tuition fees would not make a difference for middle class families, but that it will for students of less well-supported families in which there is no culture of going to university:

My honest feeling is that it will make a change. It will make a change, that it will make changes for different groups of learners. And I wouldn’t have any evidence for this particularly, but I have to say I think from out reasonably well supported aspirational families, middle-class families, I don’t think it will make a blind bit of difference. And I can also say that as a parent of a child in Year 12 now, who is in exactly the same age group. As the first people to, to get these fees. And we talk about it, but it’s never, it’s certainly not in a way that it would influence the decision that he will make about going to university or not. So it’s just not an issue. You deal with it. And I think that will be the majority of that sector of society’s view. What we also come across though of course, are students of less well supported families, where they may be not having a, an experience of their brothers or their parents going to university, who are very quick, very quick I think to dismiss the idea of university anyway, and this factor has just made it easier for that to happen.

As this group of students typically needs much nurturing and encouragement to go into university, which the college begins early, it is felt that:

…of course the fees just muddy the water entirely don’t they, in that discussion!

At the same time, it is felt that the main impact is more than it should be, because of the lack of clarity about what it really means. College staff themselves pointed out that it was hard to keep pace with the changes in higher education finances:

I have son who’s going to get hit by these things, and I don’t know, and I’m left thinking, as a parent now, I probably would have the means to pay that £9,000 fee, or is it better that he has the loan and pays it back later. So I don’t even know financially what the best way of doing it is.

…Of whether he can pay it back over time. I know very little about it.

…And I’m thinking if I know very little, and I’ve had every opportunity to hear and learn and be deeply involved, I suspect the level of understanding of fees in the community generally is really, really poor. All you hear is, it’s £9,000 and almost every university is going to charge it. Those two messages have come across really clearly. (Derek Shane, College C, staff member)

The removal of the EMA is also seen as a factor with a significant impact on the number of students applying to university, as it will affect the number of students going into further education. This makes it hard to predict what will happen and raises the issue of social mobility:

We don’t know what the impact of the reduction in EMA will have as well, and I think that will be quite significant. It’s overlooked in this issue about HE participation, because if you don’t get the people through FE they won’t go on to HE. (Derek Shane, College A, staff member)

Another staff member interviewed at this college reports that more students will be less confident about going to university, and that the feeling of uncertainty about going to university amongst peers will affect individual students.

### 4.4.6 Parents’ and students’ worry about incurring debts

Worry about debt was a recurrent theme that was also linked to social background by some of the staff interviewed. At College A it was felt that the way parents perceive the fees, as a debt or an investment, is going to make a big difference, as it is felt that many parents are frightened of the word ‘repayment’:

We can’t always be in the mind-set of the attitude of the family when they definitely regard it as debt rather than investment – that’s our hurdle. (…) Trying to focus on the investment is hard for the students and parents of first generation because they, the media aren’t very friendly with that focus.

They’re frightened of the word ‘repayment’, so along with the negativity of the press, we do need to highlight to them how affordable the repayments would be when they graduate. And keep re-enforcing the message, no fees up-front; got to be in a job earning a minimum of £21,000 before you start making any repayment; if you’re not in work at any time the payments are frozen, and the contributions due monthly are affordable against an income.

Informing parents that the loan will not be in their names, but in that of their son’s or daughter’s name, is often said to make a major difference to parents.

The other staff member interviewed at this college indicated that looking in detail at the amounts to pay back at different salary levels after graduation might be ‘the only way of selling HE’.

This staff member indicated impacts will affect families in three different ways, depending on social class:

So parents who had, so at one end parents who had saved, suddenly find themselves short on what they thought they were saving for, because it’s changed quite dramatically quickly hasn’t it? You know so it’s a sudden leap. So I think there’s that group of students. And then I think there’s another group of students who would always have borrowed the full amount anyway, who if they go to university will borrow the new full amount anyway. So I don’t think there’s any, I mean I think they were always going to borrow the £3,000 a year, so now… they’ll have to borrow £9,000 a year. So I don’t think, which of course then just has the fear of well can I pay that back. (…) the only people I’ve heard, and that’s not at this college, who’ve said what’s all the fuss about, are people who send their kids to private school. (…) So it hits all social classes, but it, I’m sure it must be more worrying if you’ve never had a loan or if you’ve got a very low income, and wouldn’t even dream of borrowing a thousand pounds let alone.

College C also mentions different attitudes to debt according to social background, and worry about debt:

Well, [they worry about] debt more than anything else. Not surprisingly. And that has always been a worry. But a few years ago, I would say even up to two years ago, students were not really put off by the thoughts of having some debt at the end of it, and they all seemed to be talking about applying for university whilst they were here, and then having a gap year – a gap year was the norm, and I think had been since about the late 90s, right through to, as I said, a couple of years ago students were talking about the gap years all the time, in fact if the student said that they were going to go straight into university, in the October, having done their A-levels, that was quite unusual, yeah? The norm was I’m going off on a gap year and I’m working for half of it and travelling, you know. That’s not the case now.

### 4.4.7 Changes to where to study and where to live

The location of study is often seen as more important than the university itself, according to one staff member at College A:

And when they’re making their choices, they are more interested, they are often, well not always, often more interested in where they’re going, rather than the university. So you know Brighton’s an attractive city, and then great it’s got universities too, so that’s, that’s, that’s part of, that’s part of the attraction.…

I think if students can, if you can go local and save money, they’ll go local and save money. But I think it will be a matter of the proportion of, the proportion of what they save will become less, because the fees are so expensive, so that’s one issue.

At College C, a tendency to stay closer to home has been observed over the last number of years:

Well over the, over the recent years and certainly over the last five or six years there has been a much clearer tendency to stay closer to home. And I think that’s been a significant shift in patterns. (…) fewer are making those sorts of applications that certainly I would have done in my day, which was sort of Newcastle (…), because part of the university experience was leaving home, and that’s less of an issue, because it’s hard to leave home when you’ve got no money.

Another staff member at college C sees students from more affluent families still looking further afield, but a general trend that students want to stay very local.

## 4.5 Participants’ suggestions to universities and colleges to support students’ needs

### Towards the end of the interviews and questionnaires, our questions included an opportunity for participants to make specific recommendations to their college and to universities regarding help with the decision-making process. It is these answers that are reported in this section.

### 4.5.1 Suggestions to universities

#### From students

##### Websites and prospectuses

Feedback that was given on the information that universities provide in their prospectuses and on their websites indicated that students were generally quite positive about this:

No, I don’t think [there is anything the universities could improve in their information about finance, subjects, etc. Everything is clear. (Joe, College A, student)

Students found the websites and prospectuses clear and informative, although some students expressed difficulty navigating some websites and one student felt it was difficult to find specific contact information:

But the websites, some of them could definitely be clearer some of them are a bit confusing. And the contact information should be easily displayed as well, because they don’t mention at the start of the website, or anywhere on the website, that there’s a different phone number for each department, so then you call one, and then they’ll direct you to completely somewhere else and it’s really confusing. (…) I mean different universities do different things. Some are brilliant, and some are just a bit basic. (Nicola, College B, student)

Many students would like prospectuses and websites to provide a better sense of what the city, the university, accommodation, and student life are like, rather than mostly giving course information. Some students had very clear marketing advice to the universities:

I think the information that I’ve got from like, like the leaflets and stuff that I got, and the web stuff, I think it was good. (…) Maybe just like a bit more about like the, like the like city centre itself, like obviously if you’re going to like live there for like three years, you don’t want to just see like the university campus, you want to see what the city is like as a whole. So I think maybe they should like include like, like I don’t know, pictures or like things to do and stuff. And, because like obviously like they may make the university look really nice and then the rest of the city isn’t like as nice as you thought. And you might get there and think oh, is this where I’m going to be living for the next three years. (Joyce, College C, student)

More detailed figures on employability are felt to be important, especially more information on the places where students find jobs, not merely whether they have found one.

##### Costs

The survey data suggested that the single greatest improvement universities could make to how they run their courses would be to have no hidden extras. This also came out quite strongly in the interviews:

I think it would be to include things with the fees. I’ve seen two include quite a few foreign trips. Because I remember Southampton said that within the first two years, there are compulsory trips and they pay for those, so that sounds really helpful. Because, they’re not optional and they’re not extra cost, it’s just included. Everyone goes on them then. You’re not left behind. (Luke, College D, student)

##### Recommendations about financial information in prospectuses and on websites

Many students felt the need for more financial information, on how to pay accommodation and how to minimise their costs in terms of living. Openness, availability of and easy access to financial information were frequently mentioned.

More financial support is requested by one student; and another indicated that students need more financial information about available support in order not to be discouraged from going to university:

I think it would be good advice to not just solely focus on funding, but everyone knows the fees are nine grand, but less people know that it’s not as bad as it seems. So I think that they do need to advertise maybe that more, because I think that’s why a lot of students are being discouraged from coming to university. I suppose they wouldn’t really want to advertise their grants, because that’s like money given away, but the student loans, I think they do need to do it maybe a little bit more on funding, because obviously that’s a big thing right now. (Germaine, College A, student)

However, in evaluating these recommendations, it is important to remember that the fieldwork took place at a time before students had had full briefings from their colleges, and just as information about bursaries and grants from universities had been agreed with OFFA and when the students were only part-way through their decision-making processes.

##### Open days and higher education fairs

Students commented positively on the information they received from universities when these came to their own college, and on visits to Open Days. However, difficulties with scheduling visits were reported; Saturdays are often difficult for students due to weekend jobs, and week-days are difficult because it is not always easy to get time off school. Holidays were suggested as a good time for Open Days:

The one thing I’ve noticed is, nearly all their Open Days are on Saturday; … and because I work on Saturdays and a lot of people have part-time jobs on Saturdays, it is hard to go to all the Open Days that you want to because you can’t just book off like every Saturday for a month because it’s a different one each Saturday. So I’ve had to kind of look at the alternative one which is usually… a week day which obviously means I have to miss a day of college to go to it.… one of my parents] has to take a day off.

I know it’s not ideal but having Open Days in the summer holidays or the Easter holidays or during half-term and stuff so that we don’t have to miss like lessons to go then, we can still go kind of thing. (Julie, College C, student)

##### While at university

Freedom to choose modules and more contact with tutors are also seen as important by more than 90% of respondents (see Table 21 in Appendix 1).

##### Part-time job finding agency

Given the importance of part-time jobs for students while at university, one student suggested that universities could provide a job-finding service:

I’ll be definitely like job-hunting as well as studying so like I don’t know, maybe if universities like have a service maybe, I think some of them do, but I mean.… Yeah, things like that; that would be like really helpful. (Paula, College A, student)

#### From parents

Parents’ recommendations were varied, many relating to issues over which universities have little control. One parent indicated that current parental income should be more important than parents’ income of two years ago when assessing loans as, especially with the current climate on the job market, parental income can fluctuate considerably. Another parent thinks university education should be made more affordable to the average family. One parent felt quite strongly about the fact that the universities were quick to put up the fees, but there was a lack of financial information surrounding it; she felt this should have been part of the package immediately and that it had been far too difficult to obtain financial information. She also suggested that universities put a detailed financial calculator on their websites to inform students properly.

#### From staff

##### Information about employability

There is a need for more specific information about employability, in terms of where graduates actually found work rather than overall employment percentages:

I think – and I think we are seeing it with some university websites – we definitely need more about the employability, the emphasis on that, so that we see more about your alumni. Ourselves and students don’t really want to read fairly bland statements like: ‘70% of our graduates go into employment within six months’. We actually want to know how many go into graduate employment within six, twelve, eighteen, twenty-four months. You know, we’re not saying they’ve got to come straight out of Uni and land a fantastic graduate-level job; but we do want to know in a relatively short time following graduation, what percentages go into degree-related or graduate level positions. And I think that there does need to be more accountability in that area, by higher education institutions, as part of offering reassurance that £9,000 a year is good value for money. We don’t think that’s an unreasonable request. (Ann Kingston, College A, staff member)

##### Partnerships between universities and local colleges

There was a concern about the demise of Aimhigher and the hope that universities have now embedded the strategies involved in this. College staff strongly recommended that universities keep working in close partnerships with schools and colleges. These relationships were highly valued:

Continue working closely with us in the FE sector, because I think – and our secondary schools – you know, just as we work with secondary schools and we’re aware that obviously universities work with secondary schools as well, what we’d like to see really is the model where the university goes into a secondary school, probably with their ambassadors and comes to the College saying, Can we work in partnership on this, just as we have done historically with Aimhigher, and so OK, we’re Southampton Uni here for the day, guys, and here’s some people studying on a degree, and actually before you get to us you need to go to sixth form college and hear some representative from sixth form, to tell you about their progression plans., and of course they were in your shoes in Year 10, not so very long ago. So that those school pupils really do see that whole progression in one session; it’s about joined-up partnership working that Aimhigher encouraged that we’d like to continue. (Ann Kingston, College A, staff member)

One staff member expressed strong appreciation for the effort the local universities put into guiding the colleges and their students:

I think, I think higher education and locally [Solent and Southampton] we’re grateful for the help they already give. I think there’s quite a lot of effort going into this and I think it’s genuine effort. (Derek Shane, College C, staff member)

##### Warnings against intensive marketing

Staff commented on how honest they felt the information universities provide was, and warned against intensifying the marketing in their student recruitment strategies. Some suggested universities should emphasise the overall personal and academic value of a university education:

I think students don’t find it helpful when a university comes in to give us sort of supposedly a general talk on something and then it does become a marketing exercise. I don’t think that’s very helpful. I think the students are more sophisticated than that. I mean they, they can see if you know University X are just saying well come to us. I think they accept that the university is bound to talk about themselves. Because that’s the example they’re going to use, and. But I think if they sell too much I don’t think it’s very effective.

I don’t think the PowerPoint training conference type approach is necessarily very exciting for students. I think students don’t get the idea that university is quite challenging and exciting. I think it has got to be an engaging speaker.

I think universities have dropped into, or at least marketing type departments or bits of universities have dropped into the paradigm that university is just about getting a good job. Now I know that’s difficult not sell that message when somebody’s going to pay fifty thousand quid for it or whatever. But the idea that university is just about getting a job. I mean I think we’ve all dropped into this, and I do that too because you’re trying to sell this thing. Where, instead of saying well no actually, this is going to challenge you and change you and so I think much more practical things would be good about what university is like. I suppose when they go to a summer school type thing it’s much better. I think those, students who’ve been on summer schools and day schools and things are usually really positive about university and want to go and you know and so. (Anthony James, College A, staff member)

##### Differences between universities

Several staff members had specific points/requests about the information the universities provide to the colleges. One staff member indicated that students need to be aware how different the universities are and even how different departments within a university can be, but found this is difficult to communicate to students:

I think, on the whole, university [prospectus and website] information is quite good really. Tend to be a little bit ahead of us [in college] anyway. I think what is hard for the students to imagine is what the life of university is actually like. And I think it’s quite hard for them to get their head round the structure and the fact that universities are so departmental. Because they don’t have that kind of experience, so they tend to assume that you know, they’re looking at Leicester University that they’re looking at one thing. Whereas my experience would be that the difference between the student experience in different departments can be actually enormous in terms of staff contact and all that kind of thing. So I think those sorts of information you know, is quite hard to get across to students, quite how diverse those institutions actually are. Where we did tell them; I’m not sure we really succeed. Which is why Open Days is a good idea ’cos they can go and they can see just the scale of the whole thing. (Anthony James, College A, staff member)

##### A named contact person

A named contact person for specific difficult queries from parents (e.g. about students with disabilities) was suggested by one college staff member.

### 5.5.2 Participants’ suggestions to their college

The timing, extent and focus of IAG about higher education are clearly knotty issues for colleges.

#### College A

##### Students

At College A, students were very positive about the support received and the knowledge the staff possess about universities and university applications.

##### Staff

The two college staff interviewed at College A expressed different views on the quality of the guidance and support with university applications: one staff member felt that the college is doing really well; the other felt that there is an inconsistent level of support given by tutors for various reasons, including the specific background and motivation of individual tutors as well as the spread of the subjects students in the tutor group are taking.

#### College B

##### Students

One student felt that it was very much down to the initiative of the student to get the information they needed:

I feel it gives like a broad idea, but I wouldn’t say it gave that much knowledge to students about where they can go to find advice. Like I wouldn’t know about the lady in Student Services, but if I didn’t go to my tutor myself and say ‘Look I need to speak to someone’, I wouldn’t know about that, and it is left up to how independent I feel. And so if you’re not a motivated person the likelihood is you won’t know anything. think that’s what, you know, could be improved. But other than that, yeah, no, the information is there, which depends on what sort of person you are. (Ruth, College B, student)

Other students said the college did very well at providing guidance.

[The college] does pretty much everything well. (Karen, College B, student)

They’re really good. They organised those people to come in, and they give you links and websites, and what you want to do if you don’t want to go to university. Just everything really; they give us loads. (Nicola, College B, student)

Another student, who is applying to study Medicine, felt she was given every help she needed to get on to this highly competitive course:

The College is actually quite useful, they do give, because I’m applying to Medicine they do give me any extra help I need because it’s such a competitive field. And everything really – they’re prepared to help, and I can always look on the website so it’s OK. (Karen, College B, student)

Another student, who is in the ‘gifted and talented’ tutor group, felt that a lot of emphasis was being put on Medicine within this tutor group, something that she was not applying for:

Also they’ve got... I don’t know if it’s just ’cos I’m in a ‘gifted and talented’ tutor group, and they emphasise a lot on Medicine. They give them a load of extra information for that. I don’t really know about other tutor groups. (…) Normally just your personal tutor finds stuff, and if they don’t then they’ll contact their tutor manager and just there’s loads of people over there. (Nicola, College B, student)

Having all the information about open days together in one place and starting earlier with the application process were recommendations given by another student.

##### Parents

One parent requested that parents receive more direct information about university applications, rather than that it going via their sons/daughters, as this is not always a reliable way for it to get to them. However, another parent indicated that she felt that her daughter was now at an age where she should be left more independent and therefore she did not get too involved herself.

#### College C

##### Students

One student would have liked more individual guidance and support:

I think they could like give out like prospectus, like to students and stuff and I don’t know, they do give us a lot of help for university, but they haven’t like put it to us like individually like what university you want to go to and stuff, so I think they could give us like more help and like maybe give us like the websites and stuff we can look at, and yeah I think yeah that’s pretty much it. (…) Like they could tell us like what dates, like the opening dates are and stuff, and at the moment I’ve had to like look for myself, because I thought they would tell us like, like for instance in secondary school, they’d give us like the dates for like college Open Days in Southampton. So I thought maybe they should like give us like a list of the Open Days for universities. That’s the only thing I reckon. Yeah, because now you have to find out these things by yourself and I’ve missed some already, because I didn’t know. (…) So at the moment I, I could with like as I said like a little bit more guidance at college, but I think what they’re doing at the moment is good and like that’s it. (Joyce, College C, student)

Another student, who is in the ‘gifted and talented’ group, felt that there should be less emphasis on Oxbridge applications and other prestigious universities and also that the college be more realistic about students chances of actually getting into Oxbridge.

Help with organising Open Days visits was also requested:

I think it would be quite useful if the teachers could give you like... like a list of Open Days as well because it’s kind of quite difficult to look through all the universities and when they’re... because if you go on all the individual ones and if feels like there’s not really a... I can’t find a place where they’re like all in one place; so it would be quite easy to somewhere like where the Open Days were all in one place so that you can kind of organise it better in your head. (Sasha, College C, student)

The same student indicated she was feeling a bit lost about where to start looking and what to look for, but at the same time she felt the college had been very helpful with giving information about higher education, although the process had only just started. Another student commented very positively on the support of the staff and about the necessity for such support at college:

I think the teachers are really supportive and if you like have any questions or enquiries and they’re always there, you know take out time to listen to your questions and stuff so they give you quite a lot of support when you’re looking so that’s definitely good. (…) when you’re at school it doesn’t seem like such a bigger choice because when you go... you’re kind of choosing four subjects, you’ve still got quite a variety of things you can do, whereas when you go to university, it’s... you’re literally choosing you know, your future, so like... It’s quite daunting so I think you do need extra support at college. And at school they kind of, you have your careers meeting and then you have... but you, when you’re at school you don’t feel that you need that extra support so...but when you get to college I think you do feel that you want your teachers to be there if you need them or... So stuff like that I’d say that, that... at school you don’t get as much support because that’s because you don't really need as much support from your teachers but... (Sasha, College C, student)

##### Parents

Parents were generally very positive about college support with higher education applications:

I think they’re doing all right as they are at the moment actually. So they seem to have a strong ethos about pushing the students to go to university, and whether it be, whether it be Cambridge or Oxford, or the other universities. You know they, they seem to have a good policy and the procedures of, yeah and they do try at the actual college themselves to encourage the students to push themselves as far as they can and to apply the, well go to colleges like, universities like Oxford or Cambridge, but obviously other universities as well. But they seem to have a good grounding, the actual college themselves, you know I can’t fault them in that way you know, so they seem to know what they’re talking about. (…) we’re especially happy with the college at the moment, yeah. (Mr Taylor, parent of Julie, College C)

One parent felt that students should be allowed more time off for Open Days:

I think that would be the only thing, but actually for the Sixth Form College to allow the time [to allow them time off to go to Open Day], willingly; not negatively. (…) we’ve been quite happy about [the information the college provides]. The only slight thing was the caution they showed about allowing students to go to as many open days as they’d like to… I can understand some students would abuse that, so that wouldn’t apply to my son, but I can understand what their side is as well. (Mr Phillips, College A, parent)

The strong ethos of the college to ‘push’ students to go to university is commented on by one parent.

##### Staff

College C was seen by one staff member to be very committed to the intrinsic value of education and learning and that this message and the support levels that accompany it seem to be reflected in the high participation rates. The other staff member interviewed felt that the college keeps improving itself as regards equipping students to apply for higher education.

#### College D

At this college, students would have preferred to have started receiving information at an earlier stage so that they could have start thinking about higher education earlier as well, and in order not to miss university Open Days:

I think they should have started providing it earlier, because by the time they said, you need to start doing UCAS and deciding your courses, most Open Days had been and gone, and it’s too late. I know, they said to me two days ago, you should have started your personal statement by now, but it’s a bit late to say, you should have…. When you haven’t been told, you should have started it before, it’s a bit nerve racking to hear. We don’t know what to include and things like that, and so I just think they should generally make an earlier start with advice and everything like that. I think they should have done it between the January and mid-year exams, because then you’ve got a gap where you actually have time to think about that stuff. They only started talking about it in the middle of exams, and I was under pressure to look at my course. I wanted to revise. After exams, it’s too late because you’ve missed Open Days, so yes. I think there should be more advice about getting to Open Days sooner, because I missed a lot. A lot of them are oversubscribed, so I didn’t get into them. (Susan, College D, student)

More personal and more subject specific guidance with personal statements was another request. Students were very positive about the College’s higher education fairs and days.

# 5. Recommendations

## 5.1 Credible IAG

Universities need to take care to preserve their highly trusted status. It will be important and challenging in the light of the increased marketisation of higher education and fast-changing policies in higher education to maintaining trust in and respect for universities at local colleges. Universities will have to be careful to avoid alienating students with unsophisticated marketing pitches. Use of social media, for example, might be viewed by students with a high degree of scepticism. On the other hand, this is a fast-developing area and in future may become more respected as a source of reliable information.

## 5.2 Optimal sources of IAG

Students like to obtain IAG direct from universities by means of printed copies of the prospectus, the website and visits to universities. It will be important to maintain and enhance these sources of IAG.

Open Days are a main factor on which selection of universities is based. It is important for these to be informative about facilities, teaching characteristics, class size, pastoral care, and so on. Anything that makes a bad impression (i.e. not having students present, not knowing about employment rates, accommodation not shown) lingers in the minds of students and parents.

As students find it difficult to schedule Open Day visits on weekdays and Saturdays, holidays might be something to look into for the universities.

## 5.3 Clarity in financial information

Clear financial information is helpful for the students and parents. To some extent this already exists through existing channels (e.g. the DirectGov website and others, university Open Days and visits of different experts to colleges), but additional clarity would be welcomed, recognising that it is hard for universities to provide clear information about bursaries and fee waivers when government policies are liable to change.

The different family groups will have different information requirements and are likely to need different messages. Some groups will be more confident and articulate about asking for information and assistance than others. They will need different types of financial arrangements; for those with greater financial needs, these are already in place to some extent with grants, bursaries and scholarships. Responding with clarity of information to these different groups will be especially challenging over the next few years, given the ever-changing policy scenarios.

The close communication within families about financial information might indicate that information to one person in the family will be passed on to others. Alternatively, it might suggest that the family nature of the approach to financial decisions entails information going more or less simultaneously to both parents and students. Young college students, whose understanding of adult finance is as yet undeveloped, may find it hard to pass on accurate messages about finance to their parents. This would suggest that early and comprehensive information for parents may be helpful.

One parent suggested that universities could have a calculating application on their website to enable potential students to input information about their financial circumstances and work out how much financial assistance they would expect from each university. A staff member suggested that clear presentations showing students how much they could expect to be paying back when they were earning certain amounts of money would also be helpful.

As much clarity as possible about costs while at university (e.g. of accommodation and living expenses) would be welcomed.

Our survey indicated clearly that the biggest single greatest improvement universities could make would be to have no hidden extras incorporated in the actual cost of study. This is rated as very important by over half, and as not important by less than 10% (n=503). In the interviews this also comes out as quite a strong result.

## 5.4 Justification of higher education expense

With higher fees, universities will need to justify the cost to students and to be informative about all aspects of the education on offer. This is especially the case since parents and students do not understand how all universities can charge similar fees when they are positioned differently on the league tables.

More detailed figures on employability are felt to be important, especially on where students find their jobs, not merely that they have found employment.

Freedom to choose modules and more contact with tutors are also seen as important by more than 90% of respondents.

Reassurance about security issues is likely to be useful.

## 5.5 Regional engagement

Universities need to recruit and engage with local students. When students have direct experience of a university and have been on its campus, they are more likely to choose that institution.

# 6. Direction for Future Research

As this report indicated at the start, the research was carried out at a specific policy moment. These students were faced with higher education decision making at a time of rapid change within a new and still emerging landscape of higher education finance. Their decision to participate in higher education and choice of subjects has proved to be resilient to major changes in the cost of higher education.

There are strong cultural factors influencing the decision to participate that are reinforced by parents, friends, schools, colleges and growing up within a policy environment of widening participation initiatives such as Aimhigher. That these students, with a deficit of solid financial information, are still intent on going to university and studying a subject they enjoy is a key finding. A key question is whether the trend will remain the same in future years or whether a changed pattern of decision-making will develop.

There are some lead indicators here that should be monitored. This group of students is actively seeking to reduce costs by living within their home region. Staff members in colleges believe the subject choices will change, although we found little evidence from 17-year-olds to support this judgement in 2011. Other providers such as EU universities with lower fees are actively recruiting in the region. Parents are seeking a more active role in the process and require more information. Whilst not directly evidenced in the report, researchers found evidence of substantial increases in overseas student numbers in colleges on pre-degree programmes. The landscape of further and higher education is changing in some unexpected ways.

That the growth of overseas student numbers is in mainstream further education is an interesting phenomenon, and one that is relatively under-researched. It could provide an interesting comparative element and opportunities to extend the internationalisation of higher education from within a UK context. The issue of local partnerships between higher and further education could provide synergies for both undergraduate and overseas student education.

The research reported here surveyed 615 young people aged 17, 80% cent of who intend to go to university. At 17 they are almost reverential about higher education and are not making the client demands that one might expect; it will be interesting to see if and how this changes. It is possible for the research team to conduct a longitudinal study of this cohort as they navigate their way through higher education and see how their experiences, perceptions and demands on the system change. We have successful instruments to survey young people at a similar stage of their decision making in future years. This would enable the team to monitor whether these lead indicators are significant and trace the long-term trends flowing from the increase in UK tuition fees.

As the data clearly demonstrate, at present this cohort’s aspirations are resilient to fee increases. It is vital that we serve the individuals well and monitor their progress over the coming years to verify whether their ‘teen spirit’ endures.

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# Appendix 1 Questionnaire data analysis

## 1.1 Frequencies

**SECTION A: HIGHER EDUCATION CHOICES**

**Summary**

Most respondents are very or somewhat likely to go on to university following college. The main reasons for this are better career prospects, followed by interest in the subject and experiencing university. Those not likely to go on to university cite cost as the main reason.

**Table 1: How likely is it that you will go to university once you leave college? (N=615)**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| very likely | 54.9 |
| somewhat likely | 28.3 |
| somewhat unlikely | 10.0 |
| very unlikely | 6.8 |

Over 80% of respondents are either very or somewhat likely to go to university, with over 50% being very likely to go to university.

**Table 2: If you *are* intending to go on to university, what are your main reasons for considering university? (N=529)**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | ***Very important*** | ***Somewhat important*** | ***Not very important*** | ***Not important at all*** |
| Interest in continuing a subject that you enjoy | 58.0 | 37.0 | 4.4 | 0.6 |
| Better career prospects | 77.7 | 21.2 | 0.9 | 0.2 |
| Recommendation from friends/family | 8.4 | 44.9 | 37.7 | 9.0 |
| Next logical step | 28.0 | 54.5 | 16.1 | 1.4 |
| Social life | 19.8 | 55.5 | 20.6 | 4.1 |
| Experience  | 48.1 | 44.2 | 7.1 | 0.6 |

The strongest reason for going to university are better career prospects (very important for more than three quarter of respondents), followed by interest in the subject and experiencing university life. Recommendation from friends/family is the lowest rated reason, with just over half rating this as very or somewhat important.

**Table 3:** **If you are not intending to go on to university, what are the main reasons you don’t intend to do so? (N=157)**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | ***Very important*** | ***Somewhat important*** | ***Not very important*** | ***Not important at all*** |
| Not interested in university subjects | 7.7 | 37.4 | 34.3 | 20.6 |
| Better career prospects elsewhere | 17.8 | 45.9 | 26.8 | 9.6 |
| Recommendation from friends/family | 3.4 | 29.5 | 38.9 | 28.2 |
| Too expensive | 55.0 | 27.2 | 9.5 | 8.3 |
| Need to move from home | 7.2 | 30.9 | 34.9 | 27.0 |

By far the most common reason given for not going to university was cost, rated as very or somewhat important by over 80% of respondents. The only other category with over 50% rating it as somewhat or very important was better career prospects elsewhere.

**SECTION B: TUITION FEES**

**Summary**

Over 60% report that the increase in tuition fees has made them at least a bit less likely to consider going to university, and debt starts to make a majority of respondents very worried once it goes over 25,000.

The increase in tuition fees is not having a great impact on A-level choices. There is a greater impact on choice of university, with over half stating that the rise in tuition fees is making at least some difference to their choice of university. Higher fees will make them think more about which subjects are likely to get them a good job, will make them more likely to study close to home, and will make them more likely to study part time.

**Table 4: Has the planned increase in tuition fees made you less likely to consider going to university? (N=606)**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| A lot less likely | 21.5 |
| A bit less likely | 42.8 |
| Hasn't made any difference | 35.7 |

Over 60% report that the increase in tuition fees has made them at least a bit less likely to consider going to university.

**Table 5: How worried would you be about incurring the following levels of debt at the end of your university studies?**  (N=575)

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | ***Very worried*** | ***Somewhat worried*** | ***Not worried*** |
| Up to £5,000 | 8.3 | 29.6 | 62.1 |
| £5,001 - £15,000 | 17.0 | 44.8 | 38.2 |
| £15,001 - £25,000 | 37.4 | 46.2 | 16.3 |
| £25,001 - £35,000 | 61.9 | 30.7 | 7.4 |
| £35,001 - £45,000 | 79.6 | 14.9 | 5.5 |
| More than £45,000 | 87.0 | 8.7 | 4.3 |

While unsurprisingly worries about debt increase with the potential size thereof, it is once debt goes beyond 25,000 that a steep increase in worry occurs, with over 60% very worried by this level of debt. Notably, 8.3% are very worried and 29.6% somewhat worried by even a debt below 5,000.

**Table 6: Is having to pay higher university tuition fees making a difference to your *choice of subjects at A level?***  (N=434)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| A big difference | 8.1 |
| Some difference | 19.6 |
| No difference | 63.1 |
| Too early to say | 9.2 |

The majority of respondents (63%) state that the tuition fees increase is not making any difference to their A-level choices. 8.1% say it is making a big difference.

**Table 7: Is having to pay higher university tuition fees making a difference to your *choice of university?***  (N=506)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| A big difference | 14.4 |
| Some difference | 41.9 |
| No difference | 35.2 |
| Too early to say | 8.5 |

There is a greater impact on choice of university, with over half stating that the rise in tuition fees is making at least some difference to their choice of university, with 35% stating that it is making no difference.

**Table 8: Views on tuition fees (N=516)**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | ***Agree strongly*** | ***Agree somewhat*** | ***Disagree somewhat*** | ***Disagree strongly*** |
| Higher fees will make me more likely to study close to home | 30.2 | 39.4 | 22.3 | 8.1 |
| Higher fees will make me think more about which subjects are most likely to get me a good job | 39.5 | 44.7 | 11.6 | 4.2 |
| Higher fees will make me more likely to study part time so I can work as well | 23.0 | 36.5 | 30.1 | 10.4 |
| Higher fees will make me more likely not to go to university at all | 12.6 | 28.0 | 30.4 | 29.0 |

Respondents are most likely to agree with the statement that higher fees will make them think more about which subjects are likely to get them a good job, with more than 80% agreeing at least somewhat with this statement. Almost 70% agree at least somewhat that higher fees will make them more likely to study close to home, and just under 60% agree at least somewhat that higher fees will make them more likely to study part time. Just over 40% agree that higher fees will make them more likely not to go to university.

**Table 9: If you went to university, how would you pay your fees and living expenses? (N=615)**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| I would work part-time | 56.1 |
| My family or parents would pay | 28.8 |
| I would get a student loan | 64.4 |
| I would try to get a scholarship or bursary | 23.7 |
| Other | 2.1 |

Over half of respondents intend to obtain a student loan or work part time to fund university study and living expenses. Just under 30% say their family or parents would pay, just under 25% would try to get a scholarship or bursary. The main ‘other’ option would be to apply for grants from charities etc. One respondent intends to win the lottery.

**Table 10: Are you likely to be eligible for financial help? (N=509)**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Yes | 23.8 |
| No | 27.7 |
| Don’t know | 48.5 |

Just under a quarter of respondents believe they may be eligible for financial help, while just over a quarter believe they will not be. Almost 50% of respondents don’t know whether they are likely to be eligible for financial help, however.

**SECTION C: INFORMATION ABOUT UNIVERSITY**

**Summary**

Most trusted are sources of information on university study are UCAS and university sources, followed by school/college sources and external sources, such as family, university guides and Unistats. Least trusted are social media. The most frequently used sources of information are university websites, university prospectuses, UCAS and teachers. At this stage (end of A1, start of A2) respondents feel that the most important information for them relates to career prospects, required entry grades, aspects of the course, and the quality of teaching

When asked to rate reasons for considering going to university, respondents most strongly agree with interest in the subject and getting a more interesting career (two thirds agreeing strongly), followed by better earning potential. Enjoyment of studying the subject has the strongest impact on subject choices, followed by career prospects, entry grades required and the ability to get good grades.

**Table 11: When did you start looking at information regarding universities?**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | ***2009*** | ***2010*** | ***2011*** |
| January | 1.1 | 3.4 | 11.9 |
| February | 0.3 | 0.8 | 7.2 |
| March | 0.7 | 1.6 | 7.8 |
| April | 0.5 | 1.8 | 9.3 |
| May | 0.7 | 3.3 | 10.6 |
| June | 0.7 | 4.6 | 9.3 |
| July | 1.6 | 3.7 | 4.4 |
| August | 1.3 | 4.6 | 2.3 |
| September | 1.6 | 9.9 | 3.1 |
| October | 1.0 | 7.5 | 1.1 |
| November | 1.3 | 6.5 | 0.5 |
| December | 1.3 | 3.1 | 0.5 |
| I haven't started looking |   |   | 3.9 |

Respondents appear to have looked at information about universities primarily between September 2010 and June 2011 (with an exception for December 2010). This coincides with the academic year. January and May were peak months. It is important to note that as questionnaires were administered in June, July and September the data for the months following this is not reliable.

**Table 12: To what extent do you trust the information provided by the following sources? (N=503)**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | ***Completely trust*** | ***Trust to some extent*** | ***Don’t trust*** |
| University prospectuses | 55.0 | 44.6 | 0.4 |
| University websites | 52.9 | 46.9 | 0.2 |
| University individuals coming to my school/college | 35.0 | 61.5 | 3.5 |
| Career advisors | 36.2 | 59.0 | 4.8 |
| Teachers | 35.2 | 62.2 | 2.8 |
| Parents | 24.5 | 63.4 | 12.1 |
| Friends | 14.8 | 72.7 | 12.6 |
| Family | 24.2 | 66..4 | 9.4 |
| University open days | 57.3 | 40.7 | 2.0 |
| University guides (Times, Guardian, etc) | 27.9 | 63.1 | 9.0 |
| Unistats | 25.8 | 66.7 | 7.5 |
| UCAS | 57.3 | 41.6 | 1.2 |
| Social media sites (Facebook, Twitter, etc) | 4.4 | 35.6 | 60.0 |

Information sources fall into three main categories, according to the data. Most trusted are UCAS and university sources (websites, prospectuses, Open Days), which over 50% of respondents fully trust and 1% or less do not trust. School/college sources (teachers, careers advisors) are fully trusted by over 35%, and not trusted by less than 5%. Interestingly, university individuals coming to college appear to be grouped alongside other college rather than university sources in terms of trustworthiness. The third category is made up of a range of external sources, such as family, university guides and Unistats. These tend to be fully trusted by around a quarter of respondents, and not trusted by up to 12.5%. Friends fall somewhat below, being fully trusted by 14%. At the bottom of the trustworthiness scale we find social media, fully trusted by less than 5%, and not trusted by 60% of respondents.

**Table 13: Which sources of information have you used so far when researching universities?**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| University prospectuses | 66.7 |
| University websites | 73.8 |
| University individuals coming to my school/college | 37.2 |
| Career advisors | 24.2 |
| Teachers | 51.2 |
| Parents | 35.8 |
| Friends | 34.1 |
| Family | 27.8 |
| University open days  | 34.6 |
| University guides (Times, Guardian, etc) | 24.4 |
| Unistats | 9.1 |
| UCAS | 53.3 |
| Social media sites (Facebook, Twitter, etc) | 7.8 |

The most frequently used sources of information are university websites, university prospectuses, UCAS and teachers, all consulted by over 50% of respondents. Least often consulted are Unistats and social media sites, used by less than 10% of respondents.

**Table 14:** **Which do you think will be your *top three* sources of information when researching universities?**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | ***1st*** | ***2nd*** | ***3rd*** |
| University prospectuses | 34.3 | 18.5 | 8.0 |
| University websites | 19.5 | 23.7 | 11.9 |
| University individuals coming to my school/college | 2.3 | 5.2 | 9.8 |
| Career advisors | 2.1 | 3.7 | 5.0 |
| Teachers | 2.1 | 5.0 | 7.2 |
| Parents | 1.3 | 2.8 | 3.9 |
| Friends | 1.0 | 0.7 | 1.6 |
| Family | 0.7 | 1.5 | 2.4 |
| University Open Days | 19.7 | 12.4 | 13.5 |
| University guides (Times, Guardian, etc) | 2.4 | 3.4 | 3.9 |
| Unistats | 0.8 | 1.3 | 1.6 |
| UCAS | 6.5 | 8.5 | 14.5 |
| Social media sites (Facebook, Twitter, etc) | 0.2 | 0.5 | 1.5 |

University sources dominate respondents’ choices of top three sources of information when researching universities, with university prospectuses the first choice for over a third of respondents, followed by open days and university websites, which are first choice for just under 20% each. These three categories are also the most common second choice, and in the top four of most common third choices (behind UCAS). UCAS is the next most common source chosen, with none of the other categories registering strongly.

**Table 15: Reasons for going to university (N=509)**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | ***Completely agree*** | ***Agree to some extent*** | ***Disagree to some extent*** | ***Completely disagree*** |
| I’m really interested in studying the subject | 68.6 | 28.7 | 2.6 | 0.2 |
| I think it will get me a more interesting career afterwards | 65.6 | 31.9 | 2.4 | 0.2 |
| I think I’ll be able to earn more afterwards | 57.4 | 38.6 | 4.0 | 0.0 |
| I want to experience university life | 48.4 | 42.0 | 8.4 | 1.2 |
| I really like learning new things | 40.7 | 52.4 | 6.3 | 0.6 |
| My family expect me to go to university | 15.8 | 35.2 | 28.9 | 20.0 |
| My teachers expect me to go to university | 10.8 | 40.5 | 31.3 | 17.4 |
| My friends are going to university | 9.8 | 38.0 | 31.6 | 20.6 |
| It seems the next logical step | 30.5 | 51.5 | 14.9 | 3.2 |

When asked to rate reasons for considering going to university, respondents most strongly agree with interest in the subject and getting a more interesting career (two thirds agreeing strongly), followed by better earning potential (57% agree strongly). Respondents are least likely to agree that they are going to university due to expectations or actions of others (less than 16% strong agreement with family, teachers expect me to go to university, and less than 10% agree strongly with because friends are going).

**Table 16: When you are deciding which subject(s) to study in your degree, how important are the following to you? (N=513)**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | ***Very important*** | ***Fairly important*** | ***Not very important*** | ***Not importantat all*** |
| The amount you would enjoy studying the subject | 79.3 | 19.4 | 1.2 | 0.2 |
| The career prospects | 67.2 | 30.0 | 1.8 | 0.0 |
| The entry grades | 51.2 | 44.8 | 3.4 | 0.6 |
| The way your choice would be viewed by friends and family | 11.0 | 29.9 | 38.3 | 20.8 |
| The way your choice would be viewed by future employers | 40.4 | 50.8 | 5.8 | 3.0 |
| Your ability to achieve good grades | 56.5 | 38.4 | 3.9 | 1.2 |

Enjoyment of studying the subject has the strongest impact on subject choices, and is seen as very important by almost 80% of respondents. Career prospects are seen as very important by over two thirds, and as not very important by less than 2%. Ability to get good grades and entry grades required are very important for more than 50%, and unimportant too few. The way choices would be viewed by future employers is very important for over 40% and at least somewhat important for another 51% of respondents. The way respondent’s choice would be viewed by friends and family is not seen as that important, with over half stating that this is either not very important or not important at all.

**Table 17: Which information is important to you at this stage?**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| The accommodation | 30.1 |
| The campus | 28.0 |
| The career prospects | 55.9 |
| The city the university is based in | 28.6 |
| The clarity of the admissions process and criteria used to distinguish between applicants | 8.8 |
| Aspects of the course | 45.7 |
| The department and its staff | 15.6 |
| The departmental facilities | 20.8 |
| The distance from home | 21.8 |
| The entry grades | 54.0 |
|  Financial help | 27.2 |
| The friendly atmosphere | 20.2 |
| The inclusive feel of the University for students from different backgrounds | 3.1 |
| The quality of teaching | 43.7 |
| Recommendation by friend / family / teacher | 5.9 |
| The social facilities | 12.4 |
| The sports facilities | 9.1 |
| University's league table ranking | 13.8 |
| University's reputation | 31.0 |

At this stage (end of A1, start of A2) respondents feel that the most important information for them relates to career prospects (55.9%), required entry grades (54%), aspects of the course (45.7%) and the quality of teaching (43.7%). Information they would find least useful relates to the inclusive feel of the university (3.1%), recommendation by friend/family/teacher (5.9%), clarity of the admissions process (8.8%) and sports facilities (9.1%).

**SECTION D: INFORMATION SOURCES**

**Summary**

The main social media sites used by respondents are Facebook and Youtube. A smaller proportion use Twitter. Respondents use social media to see what their friends are doing, but are less inclined to use or trust social media when it comes to information about universities. Slightly under half of respondents have visited a university campus. Where they have done so, this has tended to make them more likely to want to go to university.

**Table 18: Which social media sites do you use regularly (more than once a week)?**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Facebook | 78.4 |
| You Tube | 61.6 |
| Linked In | 0.3 |
| Bebo | 0.8 |
| My Space | 1.3 |
| Twitter | 15.0 |
| Other | 6.7 |

The main social media sites used by respondents are Facebook and YouTube, used by over three quarters and over 60% respectively. A smaller proportion use Twitter (15%). Tumblr was frequently mentioned among the ‘other’ options.

**Table 19: To what extent do you agree with the following statements about social media? (N=509)**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | ***Completely agree*** | ***Agree to some extent*** | ***Disagree to some extent*** | ***Completely disagree*** |
| I look at social media sites to get the real opinions about universities | 5.1 | 24.4 | 37.1 | 33.4 |
| I look at social media sites to see what my friends are doing | 38.7 | 48.1 | 8.6 | 4.7 |
| I trust the information I get from social media sites | 2.6 | 21.0 | 53.4 | 23.0 |
| Universities should have an information page on social media sites | 17.1 | 54.5 | 21.2 | 7.2 |
| I get truthful opinions on what universities are really like from individuals on social media sites | 6.9 | 33.2 | 39.5 | 20.4 |

Respondents overwhelmingly agree at least somewhat that they use social media to see what their friends are doing, but are less inclined to use or trust social media when it comes to information about universities. Less than 40% agree that they get truthful opinions on what universities are like from social media, and less than 30% agree that they look at social media sites to get real opinions about universities, or that they trust the information they get from social media sites. The majority of respondents agree at least somewhat that universities should have an information page on social media sites, however.

**Table 20: Visits to university campus**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Have visited a university campus | 46.0% |
| This visit has made them more likely to want to study at university | 68.7% |

Slightly under half of respondents have visited a university campus. Where they have done so, this has tended to make them more likely to want to go to university.

**SECTION E: WHAT UNIVERSITIES COULD DO**

**Summary**

The single greatest improvement universities could make would be to have no hidden extras. Freedom to choose modules and more contact with tutors are also seen as important by more than 90% of respondents.

**Table 21: Here are some changes universities could make to the way they run their courses. Which of these would be important to you in choosing which university to go to? (N=503)**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | ***Very Important*** | ***Somewhat important*** | ***Not important*** |
| A lot of freedom to choose modules | 48.7 | 48.9 | 2.4 |
| Using technology for teaching | 31.9 | 58.3 | 9.8 |
| Grouping teaching into three days a week | 26.7 | 54.2 | 19.1 |
| More evening classes | 11.5 | 46.4 | 42.1 |
| More part-time courses | 17.6 | 42.4 | 40.0 |
| More contact with tutors | 47.5 | 46.3 | 6.2 |
| No hidden extras (e.g. paying extra for field trips, equipment, etc) | 56.1 | 36.5 | 7.4 |

The single greatest improvement universities could make would be to have no hidden extras. This is rated as very important by over half, and as not important by less than 10%. Freedom to choose modules and more contact with tutors are also seen as at least somewhat important by more than 90% of respondents, and as very important by almost half. Over 90% also agree at least somewhat that universities should use technology for teaching. More evening classes and more part time courses are seen as less important, with less than 20% stating that these are very important, and over 40% that these are not important improvement.

**SECTION F: DEMOGRAPHICS**

A total of 615 respondents completed the questionnaire. Of these, 46.4% were male and 53.4% female. 30.4% receive an Education Maintenance Allowance. 5.7% have a known disability.

**Table 22: Age of respondents**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| <16 | 0.5 |
| 16-17 | 76.4 |
| 18-19 | 21.6 |
| 20-24 | 1.4 |

Most respondents were between 16 and 17-years old.

**Table 23: Ethnic origin of respondents**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| White | 81.8 |
| Asian | 13.9 |
| Black | 1.3 |
| Mixed race | 2.5 |
| Other | 0.5 |

## 1.2 Cross-tabs by gender

**SECTION A: HIGHER EDUCATION CHOICES**

Most respondents are very or somewhat likely to go on to university following college. The main reasons for this are better career prospects, followed by interest in the subject and experiencing university. Those not likely to go on to university cite cost as the main reason.

Females are more likely than males to say they are very likely to go on to university (Chi Square = 20.46, p<.001). Table 1 shows the expected values (‘expected count’) if there was no difference between males and females, and the actual values (‘count’) in the sample. The Cramer’s V measure of association was .19, showing a modest difference.

| **Table 24: How likely is it that you will go to University once you leave college? \* gender cross-tabulation** |
| --- |
|  | ***gender*** | ***Total*** |
| ***male*** | ***female*** |
| How likely is it that you will go to University once you leave College?  | very likely | Count | 119 | 190 | 309 |
| Expected count | 142.6 | 166.4 | 309.0 |
| somewhat likely | Count | 83 | 74 | 157 |
| Expected count | 72.5 | 84.5 | 157.0 |
| somewhat unlikely | Count | 36 | 17 | 53 |
| Expected count | 24.5 | 28.5 | 53.0 |
| very unlikely | Count | 20 | 20 | 40 |
| Expected count | 18.5 | 21.5 | 40.0 |
| Total | Count | 258 | 301 | 559 |
| Expected count | 258.0 | 301.0 | 559.0 |

The reasons students want to attend university don’t generally differ strongly between males and females. No significant differences were found for ‘better career prospects’, ‘recommendation from friends or family’, ‘next logical step’, ‘social life’ or ‘experiencing university life’. There was a difference for ‘interest in continuing a subject’ (Chi Square = 10.23, p<.05), with females more likely to rate this as very important (see Table 25). The Cramer’s V measure of association was .14.

| **Table 25: Interest in continuing a subject that you enjoy \* gender cross-tabulation** |
| --- |
|  | ***gender*** | ***Total*** |
| ***male*** | ***female*** |
| Interest in continuing a subject that you enjoy | very important | Count | 120 | 170 | 290 |
| Expected count | 129.3 | 160.7 | 290.0 |
| somewhat important | Count | 82 | 96 | 178 |
| Expected count | 79.4 | 98.6 | 178.0 |
| not very important | Count | 14 | 6 | 20 |
| Expected count | 8.9 | 11.1 | 20.0 |
| not important at all | Count | 3 | 0 | 3 |
| Expected count | 1.3 | 1.7 | 3.0 |
| Total | Count | 219 | 272 | 491 |
| Expected count | 219.0 | 272.0 | 491.0 |

The same is true for reasons not to go to university. These do not differ significantly by gender for any of the variables studied.

**SECTION B: TUITION FEES**

There is no significant gender difference in the extent to which the fees rise is making them less likely to go to university. However, females are more likely to be very worried by debt, this at all hypothesised debt levels (see Table 26).

**Table 26: Debt worries \* gender cross-tabulation**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | ***Very worried*** | ***Somewhat worried*** | ***Not worried*** | ***Chi Square (sig)*** | ***Cramer’s V*** |
| ***Female*** | ***Male*** | ***Female*** | ***Male*** | ***Female*** | ***Male*** |  |  |
| Up to £5,000 | Count | 29 | 17 | 93 | 66 | 164 | 170 |  |  |
|  | Expected count | 24.4 | 21.6 | 84.4 | 74.6 | 177.2 | 156.8 | 2.82 (0.54) | .10 |
| 5,001–£15,000 | Count | 58 | 32 | 138 | 104 | 90 | 113 |  |  |
|  | Expected count | 48.1 | 41.9 | 129.4 | 112.6 | 108.5 | 94.5 | 12.39 (.002) | .15 |
| £15,001–£25,000 | Count | 124 | 70 | 122 | 126 | 39 | 51 |  |  |
|  | Expected count | 103.9 | 90.1 | 132.9 | 115.1 | 48.2 | 41.8 | 14.05 (.001) | .16 |
| £25,001–£35,000 | Count | 188 | 139 | 79 | 88 | 15 | 26 |  |  |
|  | Expected count | 172.4 | 154.6 | 88 | 79 | 21.6 | 19.4 | 9.23 (0.10) | .13 |
| £35,001–£45,000 | Count | 234 | 194 | 46 | 38 | 8 | 22 |  |  |
|  | Expected count | 227.4 | 200.6 | 44.6 | 39.4 | 15.9 | 14.1 | 9.94 (0.11) | .13 |
| Over£45,000 | Count | 255 | 215 | 27 | 22 | 6 | 18 |  |  |
|  | Expected count | 249.3 | 220.7 | 26 | 23 | 12.7 | 11.3 | 7.94 (0.19) | .12 |

The increase in tuition fees is not having a great impact on A-level choices. There is a greater impact on choice of university, with over half stating that the rise in tuition fees is making at least some difference to their choice of university. Higher fees will make them think more about which subjects are likely to get them a good job, will make them more likely to study close to home, and will make them more likely to study part time.

No gender differences were found in regards to whether the tuition fees increase was making a difference to choice of A-level subjects or university, or to views on tuition fees.

Female respondents were more likely than male respondents to state that they would work part time to fund university (Chi Square = 10.25, p<.001, Cramer’s V = .13) (see Table 27, or that they would get a student loan (Chi square = 8.07, p<01, Cramer’s V = .12) (see Table 28) or a bursary/scholarship (Chi square = 7.11, p<.01, Cramer’s V=.11). There was no difference in likelihood of getting family to pay.

| **Table 27: I would work part-time \* gender cross-tabulation** |
| --- |
|  | ***gender*** | ***Total*** |
| ***male*** | ***female*** |
| I would work part-time | False | Count | 133 | 113 | 246 |
| Expected count | 114.1 | 131.9 | 246.0 |
| True | Count | 131 | 192 | 323 |
| Expected count | 149.9 | 173.1 | 323.0 |
| Total | Count | 264 | 305 | 569 |
| Expected count | 264.0 | 305.0 | 569.0 |

| **Table 28: I would get a student loan \* gender cross-tabulation** |
| --- |
|  | ***gender*** | ***Total*** |
| ***male*** | ***female*** |
| I would get a student loan | False | Count | 107 | 89 | 196 |
| Expected count | 90.9 | 105.1 | 196.0 |
| True | Count | 157 | 216 | 373 |
| Expected count | 173.1 | 199.9 | 373.0 |
| Total | Count | 264 | 305 | 569 |
| Expected count | 264.0 | 305.0 | 569.0 |

| **Table 29: I would get a bursary or scholarship \* gender cross-tabulation** |
| --- |
|  | **gender** | ***Total*** |
| **male** | **female** |
| I would try to get a scholarship or bursary | False | Count | 214 | 218 | 432 |
| Expected count | 200.4 | 231.6 | 432.0 |
| True | Count | 50 | 87 | 137 |
| Expected count | 63.6 | 73.4 | 137.0 |
| Total | Count | 264 | 305 | 569 |
| Expected count | 264.0 | 305.0 | 569.0 |

There were no gender differences in reported likelihood of being eligible for financial help.

**SECTION C: INFORMATION ABOUT UNIVERSITY**

Cell counts were too small to do meaningful analyses of gender for when students started looking at information regarding universities.

Some differences emerged related to trust in different information sources. Females were more likely to completely trust university prospectuses (Chi square = 11.16, p<.01, Cramer’s V=.15), university websites (Chi square = 6.92, p<.05, Cramer’s V=.12), information from university open days (Chi square = 19.19, p<.001, Cramer’s V=.20) and UCAS (Chi square = 10.53, p<.01, Cramer’s V=.15). Males were significantly more likely to completely trust family (Chi square = 9.74, p<.01, Cramer’s V=.14). There were no significant differences for university individuals coming to my school/college, careers advisors, teachers, parents, friends, university guides, Unistats or social media sites (see Table 30).

**Table 30: To what extent do you trust the information provided by the following sources? \* gender cross-tabs (significant relationships only)**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | ***Completely trust*** | ***Trust to some extent*** | ***Don’t trust*** |
|  |  | ***Female*** | ***Male*** | ***Female*** | ***Male*** | ***Female*** | ***Male*** |
| University prospectuses | Count | 163 | 98 | 106 | 110 | 0 | 2 |
|  | Expected count | 146.6 | 114.4 | 121.3 | 94.7 | 1.1 | 0.9 |
| University websites | Count | 156 | 98 | 115 | 112 | 1 | 0 |
|  | Expected count | 142.8 | 111.2 | 127.6 | 99.4 | 0.4 | 0.6 |
| Family | Count | 48 | 64 | 186 | 127 | 28 | 18 |
|  | Expected count | 62.3 | 49.6 | 174.1 | 138.9 | 25.6 | 20.4 |
| University Open Days | Count | 173 | 99 | 92 | 101 | 1 | 8 |
|  | Expected count | 152.6 | 119.4 | 108.3 | 84.7 | 5.1 | 3.9i |
| UCAS | Count | 172 | 104 | 96 | 105 | 2 | 3 |
|  | Expected count | 154.6 | 121.4 | 112.6 | 88.4 | 2.8 | 2.2 |

These differences are largely related to actual sources used. Females were more likely to use university prospectuses (Chi square = 23.82, p<.001, Cramer’s V=.20), university websites (Chi square = 20.22, p<.001, Cramer’s V=.19), university individuals coming to school (Chi square = 5.61, p<.05, Cramer’s V=.10), and UCAS (Chi square = 17.89, p<.001, Cramer’s V=.18). Males were significantly more likely to completely trust family (Chi square = 7.10, p<.01, Cramer’s V=.11). There were no significant differences for, careers advisors, teachers, parents, friends, information from university open days, university guides, Unistats or social media sites (see Table 31).

**Table 31: Which sources of information have you used so far when researching universities? \* gender cross-tabs**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | ***Female*** | ***Male*** |
| University prospectuses | Count | 237 | 155 |
|  | Expected count | 210.1 | 181.9 |
| University websites | Count | 253 | 176 |
|  | Expected count | 230 | 199 |
| University individuals coming to my school/college | Count | 130 | 87 |
|  | Expected count | 116.3 | 100.7 |
| Family | Count | 71 | 88 |
|  | Expected count | 85.2 | 73.8 |
| UCAS | Count | 190 | 118 |
|  | Expected count | 165.1 | 142.9 |

No gender differences were found for the top three sources, however.

With regards to reasons for going to university, females were more likely than males to completely agree with the statements ‘I think it will get me a more interesting career afterwards’ (Chi square = 7.85, p<.05, Cramer’s V=.13) (See Table 32) and ‘I really like learning new things’(Chi square = 9.40, p<.05, Cramer’s V=.14) (See Table 33). Males were more likely to agree with the statement ‘My friends are going to university’ (Chi square = 10.34, p<.05, Cramer’s V=.15) (See Table 34). No differences were found for the other items.

| **Table 32: Better career prospects \* gender cross-tab** |
| --- |
|  | ***gender*** | ***Total*** |
| ***male*** | ***female*** |
| Why consider uni - better career prospects | completely agree | Count | 127 | 195 | 322 |
| Expected count | 139.6 | 182.4 | 322.0 |
| agree to some extent | Count | 75 | 73 | 148 |
| Expected count | 64.2 | 83.8 | 148.0 |
| disagree to some extent | Count | 7 | 4 | 11 |
| Expected count | 4.8 | 6.2 | 11.0 |
| completely disagree | Count | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Expected count | .4 | .6 | 1.0 |
| Total | Count | 209 | 273 | 482 |
| Expected count | 209.0 | 273.0 | 482.0 |

| **Table 33: Learning new things \* gender cross-tab** |
| --- |
|  | ***gender*** | ***Total*** |
| ***male*** | ***female*** |
| Why consider uni - like learning new things | completely agree | Count | 71 | 124 | 195 |
| Expected count | 86.3 | 108.7 | 195.0 |
| agree to some extent | Count | 120 | 126 | 246 |
| Expected count | 108.9 | 137.1 | 246.0 |
| disagree to some extent | Count | 16 | 12 | 28 |
| Expected count | 12.4 | 15.6 | 28.0 |
| completely disagree | Count | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| Expected count | 1.3 | 1.7 | 3.0 |
| Total | Count | 209 | 263 | 472 |
| Expected count | 209.0 | 263.0 | 472.0 |

| **Table 34: Friends going \* gender cross-tab** |
| --- |
|  | ***gender*** | ***Total*** |
| ***male*** | ***female*** |
| Why consider uni - friends going | completely agree | Count | 25 | 22 | 47 |
| Expected count | 20.6 | 26.4 | 47.0 |
| agree to some extent | Count | 89 | 89 | 178 |
| Expected count | 77.9 | 100.1 | 178.0 |
| disagree to some extent | Count | 51 | 99 | 150 |
| Expected count | 65.7 | 84.3 | 150.0 |
| completely disagree | Count | 43 | 57 | 100 |
| Expected count | 43.8 | 56.2 | 100.0 |
| Total | Count | 208 | 267 | 475 |
| Expected count | 208.0 | 267.0 | 475.0 |

Some weak to modest gender differences emerged on what information students felt was important to them at this stage. Females were more likely to feel that information about campus (Chi Square =7.40, p<.01, Cramer’s V=.11), aspects of the course (Chi Square =6.09, p<.05, Cramer’s V=.10), entry grades (Chi Square =8.94, p<.01, Cramer’s V=.12), and financial help (Chi Square =6.06, p<.05, Cramer’s V=.10) were important. Males that information about sports facilities (Chi Square =14.71, p<.001, Cramer’s V=.16) was important. No other significant differences were found.

**Table 35: Which information is important to you at this stage? \* gender cross-tabs**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | ***Female*** | ***Male*** |
| The campus | Count | 102 | 61 |
|  | Expected count | 87.4 | 75.6 |
| Aspects of the course | Count | 161 | 112 |
|  | Expected count | 146.3 | 126.7 |
| The entry grades | Count | 186 | 128 |
|  | Expected count | 168.3 | 145.7 |
|  Financial help | Count | 95 | 58 |
|  | Expected count | 82 | 71 |
| The sports facilities | Count | 16 | 39 |
|  | Expected count | 29.5 | 25.5 |

**SECTION D: INFORMATION SOURCES**

No significant gender differences were found in use of social media, though males were more likely to agree that the information they received from social media sites was trustworthy (Chi Square =9.27, p<.05, Cramer’s V=.14) (see Table 36), and that they get truthful opinions on what universities are really like from individuals on social media sites (Chi Square =18.10, p<.001, Cramer’s V=.19) (see Table 37).

| **Table 36: I trust the information I get from social media sites \* gender cross-tab** |
| --- |
|  | ***gender*** | ***Total*** |
| ***male*** | ***female*** |
| I trust the information I get from social media sites | completely agree | Count | 5 | 8 | 13 |
| Expected count | 5.7 | 7.3 | 13.0 |
| agree to some extent | Count | 53 | 46 | 99 |
| Expected count | 43.6 | 55.4 | 99.0 |
| disagree to some extent | Count | 117 | 141 | 258 |
| Expected count | 113.5 | 144.5 | 258.0 |
| completely disagree | Count | 38 | 76 | 114 |
| Expected count | 50.2 | 63.8 | 114.0 |
| Total | Count | 213 | 271 | 484 |
| Expected count | 213.0 | 271.0 | 484.0 |

| **Table 37: I get truthful opinions on what universities are really like from individuals on social media sites I get truthful opinions on what universities are really like from individuals on social media sites \* gender cross-tab**  |
| --- |
|  | ***gender*** | ***Total*** |
| ***male*** | ***female*** |
| I get truthful opinions on what universities are really like from individuals on social media sites | completely agree | Count | 15 | 17 | 32 |
| Expected count | 14.0 | 18.0 | 32.0 |
| agree to some extent | Count | 86 | 71 | 157 |
| Expected count | 68.7 | 88.3 | 157.0 |
| disagree to some extent | Count | 81 | 110 | 191 |
| Expected count | 83.6 | 107.4 | 191.0 |
| completely disagree | Count | 28 | 72 | 100 |
| Expected count | 43.8 | 56.3 | 100.0 |
| Total | Count | 210 | 270 | 480 |
| Expected count | 210.0 | 270.0 | 480.0 |

Females and males are equally likely to say they have visited a university campus.

**SECTION E: WHAT UNIVERSITIES COULD DO**

Few gender differences were found on views of what universities could do to improve the way they run their courses. Females were more likely to agree that more contact with tutors is very important (chi Square = 7.35, p<.05, Cramer’s V=.12) (see Table 38).

| **Table 38: More contact with tutors \* gender cross-tab** |
| --- |
|  | ***gender*** | ***Total*** |
| ***male*** | ***female*** |
| Uni changes to courses - more contact w tutors | very important | Count | 87 | 139 | 226 |
| Expected count | 97.5 | 128.5 | 226.0 |
| somewhat important | Count | 99 | 120 | 219 |
| Expected count | 94.5 | 124.5 | 219.0 |
| not important | Count | 19 | 11 | 30 |
| Expected count | 12.9 | 17.1 | 30.0 |
| Total | Count | 205 | 270 | 475 |
| Expected count | 205.0 | 270.0 | 475.0 |

## 1.3 Crosstabs by EMA

**SECTION A: HIGHER EDUCATION CHOICES**

There were no significant differences between students receiving an EMA and those not receiving an EMA in stated likelihood to go on to university.

The reasons students want to attend university don’t generally differ strongly between EMA and non-EMA students. No significant differences were found for ‘interest in continuing a subject you enjoy’, ‘better career prospects’, ‘recommendation from friends or family’, ‘next logical step’, ‘social life’ or ‘experiencing university life’. There was a difference for ‘recommendation from friends or family’ (Chi Square = 13.37, p<.01), with females more likely to rate this as very important (see Table 39). The Cramer’s V measure of association was .17.

| **Table 39: Recommendation from friends or family \* EMA cross-tabulation** |
| --- |
|  | ***Do you receive an Education Maintenance Allowance?*** | ***Total*** |
| ***yes*** | ***no*** |
| Recommendation from friends or family | very important | Count | 5 | 34 | 39 |
| Expected count | 12.8 | 26.2 | 39.0 |
| somewhat important | Count | 62 | 150 | 212 |
| Expected count | 69.8 | 142.2 | 212.0 |
| not very important | Count | 72 | 108 | 180 |
| Expected count | 59.2 | 120.8 | 180.0 |
| not important at all | Count | 17 | 26 | 43 |
| Expected count | 14.2 | 28.8 | 43.0 |
| Total | Count | 156 | 318 | 474 |
| Expected count | 156.0 | 318.0 | 474.0 |

The same is true for reasons not to go to university. These do not differ significantly by EMA for any of the variables studied.

**SECTION B: TUITION FEES**

There is no significant difference between EMA and non-EMA students in the extent to which the fees rise is making them less likely to go to university. There is, however, a tendency for EMA recipients to be more worried about debts between 15,001- 25,000 and 25,001 and 35,000 (see Table 40). No differences were found at higher or lower levels of debt.

**Table 40: Debt worries \* EMA Cross-tabulation**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | ***Very worried*** | ***Somewhat worried*** | ***Not worried*** | ***Chi Square (sig)*** | ***Cramer’s V*** |
|  |  | ***EMA*** | ***No EMA*** | ***EMA*** | ***No EMA*** | ***EMA*** | ***No EMA*** |  |  |
| £15,001 - £25,000 | Count | 80 | 119 | 77 | 167 | 20 | 67 |  |  |
|  | Expected count | 66.5 | 132.5 | 81.5 | 162.5 | 29.1 | 57.9 | 8.75 (.013) | .13 |
| £25,001 - £35,000 | Count | 125 | 204 | 45 | 117 | 10 | 30 |  |  |
|  | Expected count | 111.5 | 217.5 | 54.9 | 107.1 | 13.6 | 26.4 | 6.58 (0.37) | .11 |

No EMA differences were found in regards to whether the tuition fees increase was making a difference to choice of A-level subjects or university, or to views on tuition fees.

Respondents receiving EMA were less likely to say their family parents would pay their costs (Chi Square = 16.61, p<.001, Cramer’s V = .17) (see Table 41) and more likely to say they would try to get a bursary or scholarship (Chi Square = 5.01, p<.05, Cramer’s V = .09) (see Table 42). There were no differences on the other variables such as working part time.

| **Table 41: My family or parents would pay \* EMA cross-tabulation**  |
| --- |
|  | ***Do you receive an Education Maintenance Allowance?*** | ***Total*** |
| ***yes*** | ***no*** |
| My family or parents would pay | False | Count | 154 | 249 | 403 |
| Expected count | 133.4 | 269.6 | 403.0 |
| True | Count | 33 | 129 | 162 |
| Expected count | 53.6 | 108.4 | 162.0 |
| Total | Count | 187 | 378 | 565 |
| Expected count | 187.0 | 378.0 | 565.0 |

| **Table 42 I would get a bursary or scholarship \* EMA Cross-tabulation** |
| --- |
|  | ***Do you receive an Education Maintenance Allowance?*** | ***Total*** |
| ***yes*** | ***no*** |
| I would try to get a scholarship or bursary | False | Count | 132 | 299 | 431 |
| Expected count | 142.6 | 288.4 | 431.0 |
| True | Count | 55 | 79 | 134 |
| Expected count | 44.4 | 89.6 | 134.0 |
| Total | Count | 187 | 378 | 565 |
| Expected count | 187.0 | 378.0 | 565.0 |

Students receiving EMA were much more likely to think they are eligible for financial help (Chi Square = 113.26, p<.001). The difference was very strong, with Cramer’s V effect size measure being .49.

| **Table 43: Are you likely to be eligible for financial help? \* do you receive an Education Maintenance Allowance? Cross-tabulation** |
| --- |
|  | ***Do you receive an Education Maintenance Allowance?*** | ***Total*** |
| ***yes*** | ***no*** |
| Are you likely to be eligible for financial help? | yes | Count | 78 | 31 | 109 |
| Expected count | 35.4 | 73.6 | 109.0 |
| no | Count | 11 | 121 | 132 |
| Expected count | 42.9 | 89.1 | 132.0 |
| don't know | Count | 64 | 166 | 230 |
| Expected count | 74.7 | 155.3 | 230.0 |
| Total | Count | 153 | 318 | 471 |
| Expected count | 153.0 | 318.0 | 471.0 |

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**SECTION C: INFORMATION ABOUT UNIVERSITY**

Cell counts were too small to do meaningful analyses of EMA for when students started looking at information regarding universities.

Very few differences emerged related to trust in different information sources. Students receiving EMA were less likely to trust parents (Chi square = 7.07, p<.05, Cramer’s V=.12) but no other differences were found (see Table 44).

**Table 44: To what extent do you trust the information provided by the following sources? \* Gender cross-tabs (significant relationships only)**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | ***Completely trust*** | ***Trust to some extent*** | ***Don’t trust*** |
| ***EMA*** | ***Non-EMA*** | ***EMA*** | ***Non-EMA*** | ***EMA*** | ***Non-EMA*** |
| **Parents** | Count | 32 | 80 | 94 | 202 | 27 | 29 |
|  | Expected count | 36.9 | 75.1 | 97.6 | 198.4 | 18.5 | 37.5 |

The same was true of information sources used, where again the only difference was in use of parents (Chi square = 8.75, p<.01, Cramer’s V=.12).

| **Table 45: Sources used – parents \* EMA cross-tab** |
| --- |
|  | ***Do you receive an Education Maintenance Allowance?*** | ***Total*** |
| ***yes*** | ***no*** |
| Which sources used - parents | False | Count | 136 | 227 | 363 |
| Expected count | 120.1 | 242.9 | 363.0 |
| True | Count | 51 | 151 | 202 |
| Expected count | 66.9 | 135.1 | 202.0 |
| Total | Count | 187 | 378 | 565 |
| Expected count | 187.0 | 378.0 | 565.0 |

No differences were found for reasons to go to university.

Some weak to modest differences emerged on what information students felt was important to them at this stage. Non-EMA students were more likely to feel that information about campus (Chi Square =5.92, p<.01, Cramer’s V=.10), and inclusiveness (Chi Square =6.88, p<.01, Cramer’s V=.11. Absolute numbers are small here, however, as very few students overall rated this as important) were important. EMA students were more likely to feel that information about financial help was important (Chi Square =27.16, p<.001, Cramer’s V=.22) was important. No other significant differences were found.

**Table 46: Which information is important to you at this stage? \* EMA cross-tabs**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | ***EMA*** | ***Non-EMA*** |
| The campus | Count | 41 | 120 |
|  | Expected count | 53.3 | 107.7 |
| Financial help | Count | 75 | 74 |
|  | Expected count | 49.3 | 99.7 |
| Inclusiveness | Count | 1 | 18 |
|  | Expected count | 6.3 | 12.7 |

**SECTION D: INFORMATION SOURCES**

No significant EMA differences were found in use of social media, or on any of the statements about social media.

Non-EMA students are slightly more likely to have visited a university campus (Chi Square = 3.92, p<.05, Cramer’s V=.09) (see Table 47), but the difference is small. There is no significant difference in the extent to which visits have changed their views on university.

| **Table 47: Have you ever been to a university campus \* Do you receive an Education Maintenance Allowance? Cross-tabulation** |
| --- |
|  | ***Do you receive an Education Maintenance Allowance?*** | ***Total*** |
| ***yes*** | ***no*** |
| Have you ever been to a university campus  | yes | Count | 76 | 191 | 267 |
| Expected count | 86.0 | 181.0 | 267.0 |
| no | Count | 77 | 131 | 208 |
| Expected count | 67.0 | 141.0 | 208.0 |
| Total | Count | 153 | 322 | 475 |
| Expected count | 153.0 | 322.0 | 475.0 |

**SECTION E: WHAT UNIVERSITIES COULD DO**

No EMA differences were found on views of what universities could do to improve the way they run their courses.

There are no demographic differences between EMA and non-EMA students.

1. See [http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/EducationAndLearning/UniversityAndHigherEducation/ StudentFinance/Typesoffinance/DG\_194804](http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/EducationAndLearning/UniversityAndHigherEducation/%20StudentFinance/Typesoffinance/DG_194804) and <http://www.ucas.com/students/studentfinance/> for information about student finance for higher education. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. See <http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/EducationAndLearning/UniversityAndHigherEducation/> StudentFinance/ Typesoffinance/DG\_194804 and <http://www.ucas.com/students/studentfinance/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. See http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/EducationAndLearning/UniversityAndHigherEducation/ StudentFinance/Gettingstarted/DG\_199403 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)