

# How will higher tuition from 2012/13 fees re-shape student expectations?

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With the rise in tuition fees, many of us are asking ourselves exactly what young people's expectations are in regard to the student experience are, and whether the UK higher education (UKHE) sector is becoming—for better or for worse—more 'consumerised'. To find the answers, University Partnership Programme (UPP) commissioned a study from youth and UKHE research experts YouthSight. The study involved focus groups and a survey with just over 1,500 young people, equally divided between current university students and applicants due to begin university in the 2012/13 academic year.

The findings indicated that getting a good return on investment is now a key priority for applicants and students, possibly driven by the confluence of higher fees and a pessimistic economic outlook. Expectations and concerns about the non-academic experience cluster around the ability of new starters to make friends and settle in, but also to have an affordable and 'networked' social experience. We believe that students' need for affordability and their desire for social spaces that don't necessitate the making of a purchase may conflict with HE institutions' need to monetise aspects of their facilities. In other words, while there is likely to be an increase in consumerisation in attitudes in terms of return on investment, there is also likely to be a backlash against commercialisation of the campus experience.

In this study, we first asked about why young people want to go to university. By asking what their top five reasons for going were, we in effect had them make trade-offs between all the different factors involved. The idea was to give us an idea of the relative importance of these factors. What emerged was a picture of students becoming increasingly serious about their higher education experience, with the

top reason for going being to improve job prospects—fully 88% chose this as a top five' factor. This suggests that the significant financial investment in tuition fees combined with wider environmental factors, such as high graduate unemployment and a country in a double-dip recession, create even greater pressure to achieve a good degree.

The dialogue young people are now engaging in when discussing their motivations is rather serious, indicating that they are looking for a return on what is a quite significant personal financial investment for them. It is likely that this is partially fuelled by a poor economic situation with high unemployment, particularly amongst young people. This emphasis on a return on investment is confirmed by other YouthSight research. Our large annual survey of new starters at university found that the 2011/12 cohort was significantly more influenced by future employability and earning potential than their peers in the previous four cohorts.

However, when we asked what they most look forward to, young people focus on the challenge of learning about their subject and the desire for a transformative experience that offers independence, new social connections and personal growth.

We asked young people about what constitutes a good non-academic experience, and found that it is all about the people they meet and the experience being affordable. Among young people's top five expectations of the campus experience are meeting people with similar interests and having a great social life. Interestingly, partying/clubbing/drinking are bottom of the list, shattering the clichéd view of students as being primarily interested in partying hard. Could it be that young people are responding to the new higher education landscape by seeking out more substantive experiences? The fact that young people's top non-academic concern is not having enough money seems to support the view that some are spending money on social experiences that do not necessarily involve partying.

Other prominent concerns centre around having difficulty settling in, not being able to make friends and not getting on with their flatmates. Young women were more likely than young men to worry about these things. However, support with non-academic issues comes bottom of the list in terms of importance at 22%. Given the concerns young people express and the pressure they are under to succeed, this support nevertheless needs to be in place. Our focus group work indicates that it is regarded as a "hygiene factor". The support is expected to be there on demand, and it is expected to be personalised.

Campus facilities play a role in the student experience in the sense that they support academic success and the ability to have a great student experience. Facilities are not overtly rated as important so, like student support, they are a hygiene factor. In other words, not investing in facilities is likely to lead to dissatisfaction, but having great facilities will not necessarily increase the proportion saying they are very satisfied.

We asked how important the quality of different kinds of non-academic facilities is to the student lifestyle experience. Quality of the accommodation tops the list, with 54% saying this is very important. This finding chimes with young people placing a good accommodation experience 4th on their list of what defines a good non-academic experience. Other facilities rated as important are the Student union and eating venues, and the quality of the outside spaces is also quite important.

We also asked what the top 5 facility factors for having a great time at university are. Wireless internet access tops the list, with 58% including this in their top five choices. Our focus group discussions suggest that internet access is rapidly becoming seen as a utility like electricity, and that charging for it separately causes resentment. The next most important things for having a great time at university are chill-out areas with no obligation to buy things, followed by campus bars and pubs and the Student Union. The desire for areas to convene with no pressure to spend money could suggest that students are growing weary of being regarded primarily as consumers by their institutions.

We anticipate that the next iteration of UPP's Student Experience Study will confirm our hunch that student expectations are indeed rising. Tensions between institutional needs to monetise shared spaces and students' desire for things like blanket Wi-Fi and non-commercialised chill-out areas will present challenges for institutions as they continue to invest in—and compete with each other over—accommodation and social facilities.

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