

Making the Right Choice

How Students Choose Universities and Colleges

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The expansion of higher education has increased choice and brought new student groups into higher education. At the same time, institutions are operating in a more competitive recruitment market. Universities and colleges now need to be clearer about the students they are trying to reach and how they market themselves, while students need to make well informed decisions if they are to maximise the value of their increasingly expensive higher education.

This report summarises the findings of a major national study into student choice of full-time higher education in the UK, in particular their choice of institution. The research was carried out by the independent Institute for Employment Studies (IES). The findings are based on responses from 20,000 applicants for full-time undergraduate courses in 1998; responses from 1,900 Year 11 (Y11) school students and their Scottish equivalents (S4); interviews with over 200 first year students; and reviews of relevant research literature and statistics.

Decisions are taken early

Many students' career plans, in particular decisions about further study, had been largely formulated by Y11/S4; *ie* long before they have to apply for higher education. The key influences on their plans included: expected attainment levels at GCSE/Scottish Standard grade, earlier school experiences, access to careers advice, and expectations from school and home.

Y11/S4 students expressed broadly positive views about higher education and its value, though there were concerns about the cost. Those most likely to participate in higher education were those with high exam expectations, Scottish students, those from higher social class groups and some ethnic minorities.

Gender was a significant factor: girls were more likely than boys to say they were considering higher education; were more likely to be planning to take vocational qualifications post-16; and were more likely to choose to study business studies or arts subjects in higher education. Differences were also found between white and ethnic minority students, and between Scottish and other UK students.

Both professional careers advisers and parents were influential in giving careers advice. However, those most definite about progressing to higher education were more likely to have been

influenced by school subject teachers, while those who had already decided against or were undecided about higher education were more likely to have been influenced by school careers or guidance teachers and their parents.

The student market is diverse

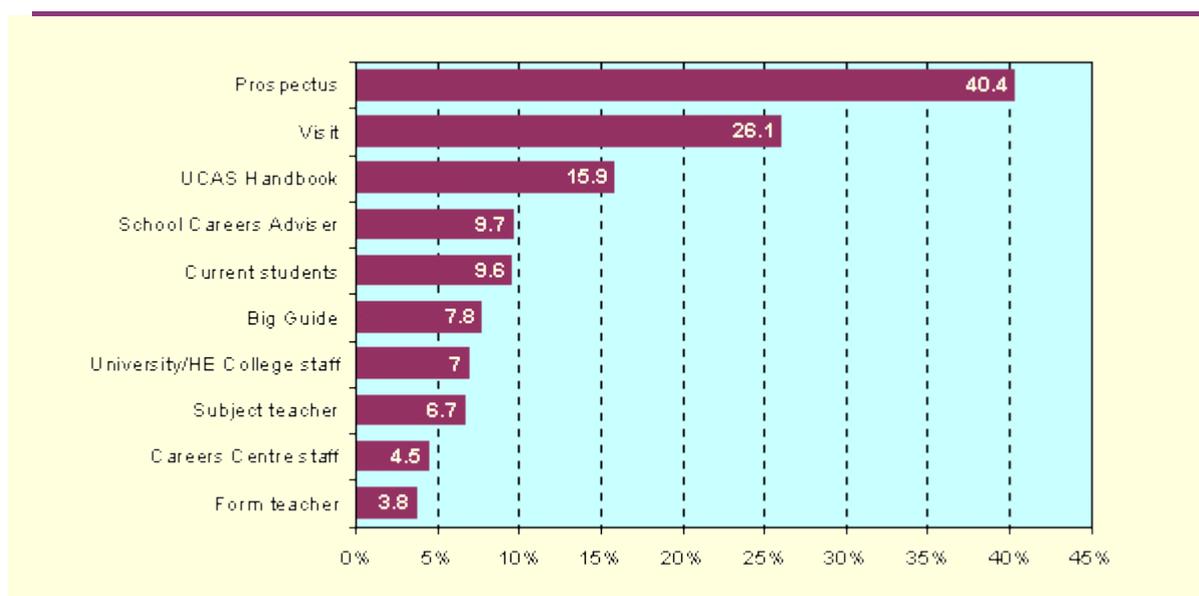
While the overall demand for full-time undergraduate study is still dominated by young people, there has been growing demand from mature students (*ie* those aged over 21), those with vocational or access entry qualifications, those from lower social classes and income groups, and from ethnic minorities. These groups now represent an increasing share of many individual institutions' intakes, and the majority at some.

Motivations towards higher education, and the different types of institutions and courses, varied between young and mature applicants, ethnic groups, the qualifications held, routes into higher education, social class, family income and family experience of higher education. Gender was most likely to affect subject choice.

Not all applicants use the same information

The most used, and the most useful, information sources were the UCAS Handbook, prospectuses and visits/open days at universities and colleges. IT-based media, *eg* the internet and CD Roms, were used the least. 'Advisers', ranging from family and friends through to professional careers advisers, played an influential role in the choice process for many. By far the most helpful overall source of information (people or documents) was the university/college prospectus.

**Fig. 1: Finding out about universities:
most helpful source of information or advice (per cent cases)**



Note: only those sources mentioned by three per cent or more respondents are shown

Source: IES Survey, 1998/1999

Mature applicants used a narrower range of sources and 'advisers' than younger ones (under 21 years); and they were much less likely to use guides or career fairs, but equally likely to have used the internet/websites. Young applicants were more likely to be influenced in their choices by informal advisers, such as family and friends, but mature applicants were more likely to have experienced visits from university representatives (*eg* to their colleges) and found them more useful than younger applicants.

The research and teaching quality assessment ratings and league tables were not widely used, but more so by higher ability and higher social class applicants. Prospectuses, while found to be very helpful, were often seen as promotional documents and many lacked the detail on courses to meet applicants' needs. Experiences of visits to institutions varied considerably, not all were positive.

While they were not confused or overloaded by the large and growing volume of information available, many students found the choice process complex and difficult. They did not want more general information from institutions, rather better information that was more focused, and less one-sided, about specific courses, institutions and aspects of student life.

What do applicants want?

The priority was for the right subject of study. Quality, particularly in terms of teaching, and academic support and facilities, overall image and employment prospects for graduates were also important. Non-traditional applicants, particularly mature applicants and ethnic minorities, gave more emphasis to reputation and quality, location and nearness to 'home'. By contrast, the more traditional applicants (*ie* the young, academically qualified) were more likely to seek a balance between academic quality and social life. Good employment prospects were important for most applicants, but especially for women, black and Asian applicants, Scottish applicants and those under 25. Figure 2 gives some examples to show how priorities differ between groups of applicants.

Fig. 2: Factors of importance for deciding where to apply

Student group	Cluster of most important factors (in descending order)
Young (under 21 years)	Offered the right subject, overall image, social life, teaching reputation, employment prospects, entry qualifications
Older mature (25 yrs+)	Offered the right subject, attitude to mature students, teaching reputation, academic support facilities, distance from home

Vocationally qualified/access	Offered the right subject, teaching reputation, academic support facilities, employment prospects
Black	Offered the right subject, teaching reputation, academic support facilities, employment prospects, overall image, attitude to ethnic minorities, location, entry qualifications
Asian	Offered the right subject, employment prospects, teaching reputation, entry requirements, academic support facilities, distance from home
Scottish domiciled	Offered the right subject, employment prospects, teaching reputation, image, entry requirements, academic support facilities, location

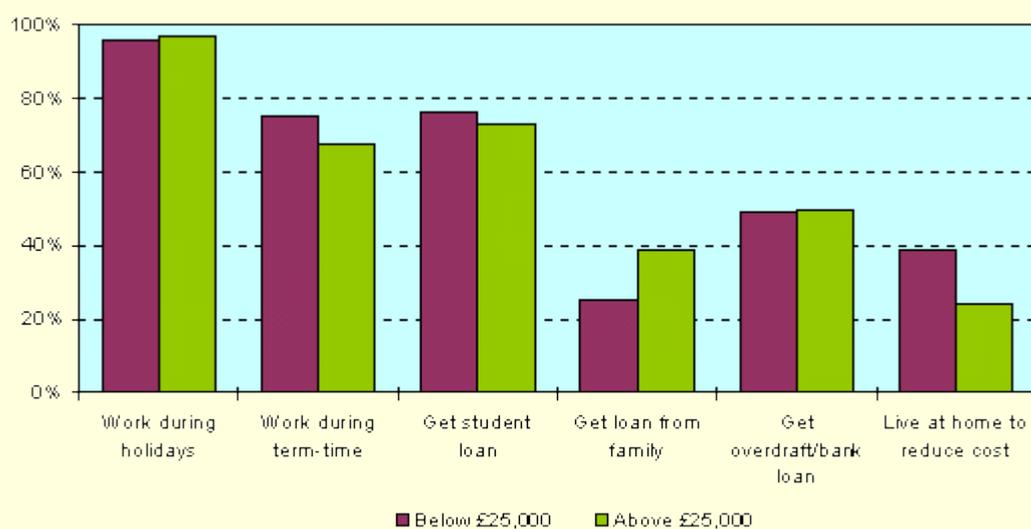
Source: IES Survey, 1998/1999

The perceived costs of studying

Cost is a significant factor in the choice process, particularly for non-traditional student groups, encouraging many to study close to home and/or on a course where there are good employment prospects.

Most expected to have to work while they were students; their preference was to work during the vacation rather than in term time. Living at home was the least preferred option to meet the costs, especially among younger applicants. Lower income groups and older applicants were more likely to expect to work during term time. The majority would be considering taking a student loan.

Fig. 3: Options considered by applicants to help with their finances



Source: IES Survey, 1998/1999

The majority estimated the costs of study to be in the range £2,000 to 5,000 (excluding fees). The upper end of this range is closest to informed estimates of the annual costs. Mature applicants estimated costs to be higher on average. Most were aware of the cost of fees but there was some evidence of confusion about the level of family income at which they had to be paid.

Improving student choice

The choice process seemed to have been taken seriously by applicants, most having appeared to have made their choices in a sensible and logical way. There were few major areas of concern although there were criticisms about the quality and accuracy of information provided by some institutions and the lack of clarity on costs and financial arrangements. It was too early to assess what proportion may have had made 'right' or 'wrong' choices.

If potential students are to become 'informed consumers' and make the 'best' decisions for them, then a number of developments are needed, as shown below. Improvements, however, need to be shaped to recognise the diverse needs and circumstances of different groups of potential students and their advisers.

- Improving decision making tools, through for example developing a 'checklist' to help students think through the relative importance to their circumstances of a range of topics such as: choice of subject (*eg* entry requirements, relevance to life after graduation); course structure (*eg* balance between structured tuition, self study, work experience *etc.*); type of university/college and its environment; sources of income (including loans, parental contributions, the availability of student employment, and help with budgeting); subsequent career aspirations and expectations.
- Improving the core information on the above factors, especially in respect of regular, independently validated, information about courses and institutions so as to discourage reliance on less reliable and anecdotal sources.
- Improving guidance on finance, including potential contribution to fees, living costs, and sources of income.
- Improving the quality of information on the longer-term experiences of those graduating from different types of courses, along with an assessment of longer-term trends affecting employment opportunities for different types of graduates.
- Providing a comprehensive guide to sources which highlights their relevance to people at different stages and the different aspects of choice, coverage, reliability *etc.*
- Improving careers advice in the early years of secondary education, and for those from less traditional backgrounds, including better support available from careers advisers, and providing help to parents/family members who increasingly act as 'advisers' and funders of students.

- Improving information provided by institutions through better market intelligence about their market segment. Also providing single points of contact, 'one stop shops', where potential students can find out about, and discuss issues such as courses, fees, additional costs, support, accommodation, etc.
- Maximising the use of the new technologies, especially providing better interactive information and decision making tools to help focus and personalise information, and bridge the divide between information users and providers.

The study

The *Making the Right Choice* study was undertaken by the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) and sponsored by the CVCP (now Universities UK), the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) and 15 universities and colleges. The study was also supported by a range of other bodies including the Committee of Scottish Higher Education Principals (COSHEP), the Standing Conference of Principals (SCOP) and the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC).