

# Exploring the impact of policy changes on students' attitudes and approaches to learning in higher education



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## I. Acknowledgements

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## 2. Executive summary

### 2.1. Background and aims of research

A significant milestone was reached in UK higher education two years ago when, following the Browne review (2010), English universities were allowed to raise their fee level to up to £9,000 per annum from Autumn 2012. The impacts of this policy on students and their families have been much discussed. There have been concerns that various groups of prospective students will be deterred from entering higher education, or that students will only choose subjects that have purported higher employment return value. Wider concerns have centred on the changing status and value systems of higher education and the move towards a more explicit market-based agenda (Collini 2012). The student perspective on these changes has been largely missing and little is known as to how these changes have filtered through to students' experiences and may be shaping their attitudes and behaviours towards higher education.

These issues are clearly of considerable significance to policymakers, student services, lecturers and course designers: what students want and expect from higher education invariably shapes their approaches and level of engagement. How universities, in turn, respond to these challenges and find ways to meet students' shifting demands raises significant issues about provisions, programme management, and teaching and learning. More widely, these changes map onto students' relationship to institutions at a time when their personal contribution towards their higher education has significantly increased.

This research investigated how the shifting policy landscape, particularly in relation to fee increases, has affected students' approaches to higher education. This was based upon a cross-national and cross-institutional qualitative study, involving interviews and focus groups with 68 undergraduate students across a range of Higher Education Institutions in the UK. The study intended to broaden our understanding of how contemporary students approach higher education, including their attitudes and motivations towards formal learning in higher education and expectations of higher education. In particular, this research aimed to explore the extent to which new market frameworks and students' increased financial contributions may have affected their approaches and attitudes to learning and have potentially redefined how they think of themselves as students; in particular the extent to which they may identify with more consumerist approaches or otherwise.

This study also sought to explore students' views on the potential wider impacts and benefits of learning in higher education and what they valued from participating in higher education. It further explored how they perceived the learning experience and what they perceived to be valuable and positive teaching and learning experiences. This addresses the issue of what students value in formal learning, and how they would like this to be structured and delivered.

At a broader level, the study wanted to make connections to the wider context of policy development; namely, a more openly marketised higher education system that is also attended on a mass scale and operating in much less stable economic contexts. The study endeavoured to examine how the different policy arrangements in different national settings, including those where fee structures are lower than England, might influence students' views. While the study was based on the views of a relatively small sample of students, some clear themes emerged in the interviews and focus groups which formed the core basis for the findings sections in the main report. These are summarised below.

### 2.2. Key findings

- There is still a clear demand for higher education and this demand serves to mitigate inevitable concerns around rising fees, living costs and future debt. The discourse of higher education as an 'investment' and its facilitation of better overall future outcomes and job prospects continue to frame students' rationale for entering higher education. Debt is perceived with some degree of concern, although students are resigned to its reality and take comfort from the income-contingent nature of fee repayment. There was a sense that this 'invisible' debt would not deter current students as long as they could envisage longer-term benefit from participating in higher education.
- Students' choices of both subject of study and institution are based on a range of intuitive, personal and academic reasons and fairly well-developed patterns of interest and identification with the content and pedagogic modes of different subjects. Very few used market information as a firm guide on which to make

their choice of institutions and instead choose on the basis of anticipated academic and cultural fit. While some students may use this to discriminate between a similar range of programmes and institutions, it is not a determining force in student choice. Subject choices are similarly based on perceptions of what will lead to the most beneficial learning.

- The marked increase in fees is affecting students' views of what they expect from higher education. Students expect higher education institutions to be well resourced and more transparent in terms of how fee revenue is being used. While students acknowledge that they are not directly financing HE, they still see a need for tangible improvement in their higher education experiences.
- Higher fees are also shaping attitudes about how to approach higher education. A more proactive and focused approach was evident which students attributed to the increased costs and related pressures of participating in higher education. While students are concerned that institutions should enhance the value of the university experience in accordance with increased fees, they also feel it is up to them to 'get as much out' of the experience as they can and maximise whatever opportunities HEIs provide.
- Students are very conscious of significant pressure points, partly as a consequence of rising costs, but also the dual challenge of a mass HE system operating at a time of labour market uncertainty. The language of 'employability' figures large in students' view of the benefits of higher education and what they need to succeed beyond their formal study. Structured opportunities for enhancing employability are clearly welcomed by some students, including work experience, although students often link their employability to their wider university and life experiences for developing all-important social and personal ('soft') skills.
- There was a mixed level of identification with the notion of the student as 'consumer'. The majority of students spoke of having greater rights and stronger grounds for appraising and questioning the provision they received. However, the notion of actively consuming higher education did not seem to capture the majority of students' approaches. There is clear variability in the types of discourse and frames of reference students employ when referring to student consumption of HE. In between extremes of students adopting a more 'service-user' approach and resisting consumer-focused approach altogether, is a mixed, ambivalent approach that reflects partial identification with an emerging consumer approach.
- University education is perceived by students as a worthwhile and valuable experience and positive regard is given to the opportunities offered through the wider 'university experience' in meeting a range of aspirations and adding value to their overall time during university. Students perceived university as having wider, longer-term benefits and as a vehicle for personal and social change. Considerable value is placed on the social dimensions and outcomes of higher education and in developing more subtle aspects of their personal and social make-up.
- A goal-driven approach was evident among many of the students in terms of wanting to enhance their future outcomes and employability, reinforcing the perceived post-experiential value of their studies. At the same time, there is evidence of intellectual engagement with the subjects and a desire to get something more than 'just a degree'. There are variations in the degree of instrumentality students adopt towards higher education. In between highly 'instrumental' and more 'developmental' approaches, seem to be a mixture of extrinsic, economically-orientated goals and more academic, learner-centred goals, sometimes operating in conjunction. Those adopting the most instrumental approaches are likely to emphasise the 'end product' of their learning and do all they can to fulfil these ends.
- Students continue to value positive teaching and learning in higher education, including knowledgeable and engaging lecturers. The overall accessibility and openness of lecturers is valued, particularly their willingness to personally engage with students and adopt generally more accessible attitudes. Students clearly value more personalised modes of interaction at a time of mass attendance and lower staff-student ratios. Students perceived that the recent fee increase would sharpen expectations of good teaching and make them less tolerant of lower standards.

## 2.3. Recommendations

### **Recommendation 1: Transparency**

The findings suggest the need for greater transparency to students. Universities need to be clear and upfront to students about a) why fees have been raised in the first instance, b) the reason for a specific fee rate an institution charges and c) and how fee revenue is being used to enhance the student experience. Lack of transparency was a source of frustration among students, so the provision of feedback on how money is being spent and resources channelled at both local, course-specific levels and at an institutional-wide level will partly address some students' concerns about 'value for money'. Institutions will at least have to manage resources effectively, particularly in making manifest and more immediate improvements to facilities and programme-level materials.

### **Recommendation 2: Investment and opportunities**

The benefits *and the risks* of participating in higher education need to be presented to students. While nearly all students in this study anticipated future gains and benefits from HE, it is important that all students are made aware of the realities facing graduates in challenging labour market times and the need to make the most of the university experience, including proactive engagement with the informal aspects of university life. However, this needs to be presented positively to students in terms of the many opportunities that HE can offer. Investment discourses used in marketing and promotional literature also need to frame the university experience as an investment in self-development and personal agency as much as in economic returns.

### **Recommendation 3: Employability and the whole student experience**

Given the prevailing concerns over employability and the linkages students make to wider higher education experiences, it is increasingly important to frame the issue in terms of profile building and wider 'experience'. Whilst there is continued discussion about the relative 'economic relevance' of different subjects and potential declining demand for some, more needs to be done to promote the benefits of these in the labour market. Moreover, students need to be in a strong position to develop an employability narrative which can stand them in good stead in applying for future jobs and is built upon wider experiences within higher education. This leads to the next recommendation:

### **Recommendation 4: Structuring extra-curricular activities**

Extra-curricular activities need to be promoted and firmly embedded within institutions and to be a recognised and endorsed aspect of students' profiles. The benefits of extra-curricular activities for raising students' profiles and providing them with invaluable life experience that complements their formal learning needs to be strongly emphasised by student services and student unions so all students are in a position to actively pursue them from the start of their higher education. Students also need to be advised on how to package and present experience gained from these activities so that it can be used to their best advantage in the future.

### **Recommendation 5: Quality of learning agenda**

Quality teaching remains a high priority for students in the current context of raised fees. Professional development programmes need to continue to build on best practice for enhancing HE teachers' capacity to develop practice that best engages students. This will further require effective management of programmes at school-level, including appropriate resourcing of staff best suited to different courses and modules, as well as the use of suitably qualified teachers. Lecturers who are not able to demonstrate the requisite knowledge of a subject area, which may impact on their enthusiasm and engagement, are likely to be appraised negatively by students. Likewise, passive and apathetic teaching practices need to be addressed; particularly those that make students question their attendance.

Students value lecturers' knowledge, research interests and the independent research they undertake as this adds fresh dimensions, so research-led teaching should be promoted actively. At the same time lecturers should be allowed some degree of relative autonomy for 'higher risk' and innovative teaching as it is clear that students wish to be challenged and engaged in the learning process.

### **Recommendation 6: Redefining the role of students**

The role and status of contemporary students need to be discussed more widely and reflected upon at institutional and programme levels. Institutions need to emphasise both the rights *and* responsibilities of students, reinforcing the language of partnerships and engagement. Official institutional documentation that takes the form of learning agreements, learning contracts or educational charters may need to be explicit about institutions' expectations around students' learning. There is a strong case for reframing student learning and experience in terms of a partnership and co-production as these alternative approaches depict more active processes that foreground wider

intrinsic values and benefits of HE and the role of the students as developing a sense of personhood through their time at university. Students may well be very receptive to them if they are more widely propagated. Moreover, the student-consumer approach needs to be discussed more widely in institutions in order to show its impact on students' relationship to university.

**Recommendation 7: Tempering the language of consumption in a market-driven system**

Official documentation at both national and institutional level needs to be reframed as current framing of students' role and rights has tended to valorise the consumer-orientated position of students. Discursive framing can be significant in shaping expectations and institutional relations. At the same time, student feedback forums are needed (e.g. student voice) as they can facilitate ways forward for institutions to make improvements in resourcing and teaching and learning. They are also much valued by students who are involved in them, as they allow a proactive role in decision-making and bring them closer to a professional community. However, the role of students as partners rather than regulators may be better emphasised in such processes.

### 3. Introduction and background

A major policy moment occurred in English higher education in the autumn of 2012 with the increase in tuition fees from £3,375 to a capped £9,000. The system-wide introduction of fees began in 1998 under the Labour government, following the recommendation of the Dearing committee (1997). The original up-front £1,000 per annum fee structure changed to a future income-contingent figure of £3,375 following the 2004 Higher Education Act which had been influenced by the preceding 2003 Higher Education White Paper: The Future of Higher Education. The situation, however, is not uniform across the UK. In Wales and Northern Ireland fee levels are capped at £3,575 for domiciled students, although universities in these countries charge English-domiciled students up to the full £9,000. Scottish universities currently do not charge domiciled students any fees, but like their Welsh and Northern Irish counterparts, also charge up to the maximum for English-domiciled and the majority of international students. Students' contributions to loan-supported fee come on top of income-contingent loans for maintenance since 1990.

The policy framing of fees has traditionally centred on sustaining the HE system in alignment with the new competitive international order of 'world class' universities. It also highlights the on-going fiscal challenges in maintaining a mass system of higher education through full public expenditure. Higher education is seen as a shared investment between state, society and individuals and all stand to benefit, individually and collectively. Further, it is seen that students who graduate from university with a valuable higher-level qualification are the core beneficiaries of higher education so should therefore contribute more in the way of private contributions towards their participation. More recent fee discourses have a decidedly market-driven flavour and hint at more far-reaching endeavours to radically reform the system. The gradual transformation of UK higher education into a market-based mode of delivery and exchange is seen to leverage systematic improvements to the standards and quality of what universities offer. Following the Browne Review (2010) which recommended the raising of fee levels, the Department for Business and Skills made an explicit case for students to base their 'custom' on perceived value for money:

Better informed students will take their custom to the places offering good value for money. In this way, excellent teaching will be placed back at the heart of every student's university experience. (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2011b, paragraph 2.24)

There have been some clear and explicit endeavours among policymakers to recast the contemporary student as a customer, rational chooser and stakeholder. The incorporation of market logics into the higher education sector is seen to benefit all parties, not least the end-user of the service. By introducing the principles of a more competitive market system, power is shifted from provider to the purchaser who ultimately controls service conditions and expectations. Consequently, standards and quality of these services are expected to rise as a result of more sustained efforts among institutions to maximise market share of prospective paying customers. Quality, as such, is often equated with the efficient fulfilment of a client's demand. Clients, in turn, are able to exercise their authority both by making free 'choices' over which service to purchase and by also 'evaluating' these services' capacity to fulfil their needs.

A crucial dimension in the efficient running of higher education systems in a market-driven environment is how they perform relative to rival providers, and how able they are to communicate their better relative performance through persuasive market information. It is now required for all UK HEIs to provide institutional performance data in the form of Key Information Sets (KIS) which contain potentially significant information relating to teaching and quality, student contact times, National Student Survey evaluation scores and employment rates of graduates. Such market information is seen as a significant lever for enhancing HEIs' performance and responsiveness because it enables prospective students to make informed choices about which is the most desirable institution. However, the extent to which these data sets are actively utilised by students in informing their choices is still questioned.

Even more salient are the effects of a more marketised UK higher education, reinforced by students' increased private contributions, on students' attitudes and outlooks towards higher education and how they approach it. This increased contribution has occurred alongside a dominant framing of higher education as a largely private good whose benefits will place individuals in a much stronger economic position. Has students' relationship to university and what they expect from their institutions shifted in light of these changes?

Drawing upon a cross-national and cross-institutional qualitative study that explored the views of 68 undergraduate students across the UK, this study investigated how the shifting policy landscape, particularly in relation to fee

increases, has affected students' approaches to higher education. It is intended to broaden our understanding of how contemporary students approach higher education, including their attitudes and motivations towards formal learning in HE and expectations of higher education. In particular, this research aimed to explore the extent to which new market frameworks and students' increased financial contributions frame their approaches and attitudes to learning and have potentially redefined how they think of themselves as students; in particular the extent to which they identify with more consumerist approaches or otherwise.

This study also sought to explore students' views on the potential wider impacts and benefits from learning in higher education and what they valued from participating in higher education. Furthermore, how they perceived their learning experience and what they perceived to be valuable and positive teaching and learning experiences.

This following section, Section 2, outlines some relevant literature in the area of student experience in higher education in the contemporary context of marketised mass higher education. Notions of student experience have been reformed not only by the diversity of students but also the blurring of HE with other dimensions of students' lives, as well as the fast-changing post-university context they are entering. Section 3 outlines the investigative approach this study adopted and describes the institutions and students who participated in the study. Section 4 opens up the core empirical themes that emerged through the study, based principally around: students' changing relationship with university, including discourses of investment, debt, employability and proactivity; as well as emerging views and self-perceptions of 'consuming' higher education. This section also outlines themes around students' views on the wider benefits of HE and perceptions of teaching and learning in HE. The final section of the report summarises the study's key findings and contains the recommendations from the study.

## 4. Recent research on student experience and learning in marketised higher education

There is a strong consensus that contemporary conditions of the UK higher education sector have been significantly transformed through expansion, diversification and the move towards a more market-driven agenda. Students face multiple challenges, including adapting to a new learning environment, choosing appropriate programmes of study, balancing formal learning with other facets of university and trying to enhance their prospects of finding employment post-university. Such challenges are likely to have intensified with the recent increase in fees in all universities: students clearly expect and demand more from their HE experience, particularly in relation to teaching and learning as well as the wider university experience (NUS 2012). Students' concerns regarding their institution's quality, responsiveness and ability to meet a range of short- and long-term goals has no doubt come to the fore more significantly in recent times.

However, quite what the contemporary student experience looks like and what specifically students now want and value from their higher education continues to be debated. There has been an increasing depiction of higher education students as 'consumers', provoking concerns that their higher education experience has become reducible to a commodity purchase or crude market transaction (Williams 2012; Brown and Carasso 2013). This also entails significant resource pressures for HEIs, both in terms of marketing programmes and delivering them in ways that match students' shifting expectations and demands. Brown and Carasso's (2013) extensive analysis outlines a range of consequences in the shift towards a predominately market-driven HE policy framework, including: differential levels of preparation and engagement among students; inter-student competition through grade inflation and outcome pressures; and shifting attitudes and expectations around curricula, course development and vocational relevance.

One of the effects of a market-driven system may be a retooling of students' values and self-identities as learners; all of which may have been intensified by the highly competitive and challenging post-university world they enter immediately after. The dominant framing of higher education as a largely 'private good' through economically-centred discourses of investment and returns on 'human capital' may well shape students' view of themselves as rational agents whose core purpose in higher education is achieving outcomes that will maximise their future earnings.

At another level, there may be further challenges from a market-driven HE system. There have been shown to be some marked disparities in the types of institutions that students both apply to and participate in (SMCCP 2013; Boliver 2013). Evidence overwhelmingly shows the significant likelihood of students from higher socio-economic backgrounds both entering higher education in the first instance and participating in higher tariff and more prestigious universities. However, the evidence also points to continued demand for higher education and existing subject disciplines, despite the major rise in fees, and a slight overall decline in applicants during the year in which it was introduced (HEFCE 2013).

This follows similar patterns to previous years when fees were first introduced in 1998 and then increased in 2006. However, research shows that students' choice of institutions and subjects are not significantly influenced by 'market information' in the ways in which policymakers have aspired (Brown 2007). They are instead largely confined to a range of institutions based on an appropriate match between profile of student and institution, and on existing patterns of attainment and aspiration. Improving equitable access to particular 'types' of HEIs for different groups of students therefore remains a significant issue.

The prevailing critique of the effects of marketisation sees increasing forms of instrumentalism and more stringent stakeholder demand as an inevitable consequence, and to the detriment of HE learning. Williams' (2012) analysis of the rise of a consumer culture in higher education argues that, while there may be some limitations to the 'student-as-consumer' analogy, the introduction of higher fees since 2006 has shifted expectations and attitudes. This may include more questioning among students over the value and quality of their university experiences; furthermore, an increasing culture of litigation, complaint and consumer sovereignty may have begun to emerge in recent years, and is likely to intensify with 2012's fee increase (OIA 2012).

Molesworth et al (2009), drawing on critical humanist approaches, discuss the ways in which consumer-driven learning may unauthenticate or objectify the learning experience, promoting an acquisitive and possessive learning orientation ahead of more developmental, transformative (and longer-term) ones. Consumerist learning bypasses the development of students as human subjects and has an essentially transient quality that places students at

considerable distance from the cognitive material they are offered. Ransome (2011) has discussed how consumer approaches in HE are mirrored in the prevailing institutional audit and performance-output climate that HEIs have embraced, which is crucially linked to the regulation of internal and pan-institutional level data that are fed into market-based information.

The precise positioning of students within current policy discourses, and location of appropriate terms to capture their experiences and identity positions, continues to prove elusive. Matters are further complicated by the broad range of learning profiles within the student population and the potential coexistence of utilitarian values alongside more substantive, learning-centred ones. A growing concern, however, is that popular policy discourses that heavily frame the benefits of higher education in economic terms, either as an investment, consumption or client-provider interaction, may distort the intrinsic value of higher education while also reducing the role and responsibility of learners themselves.

McCulloch (2009) advances a significant argument in exploring alternative conceptions of students' role within, and relationship towards, their higher education experience. He argues that a more productive and mutually-beneficial way forward is to conceive students as 'co-producers' as this implies a more proactive process of engagement and learning, transcending the narrow view of human agency implicit in consumer approaches. Co-production entails students seeing their role more as partners in the learning process and their agency as linked to a role as academic citizens rather than reduced to largely individualised concerns with outcomes and relative 'performance'.

The contemporary student experience has also been shown to be diverse and mediated by institutional context and subject discipline, as well as specific learning cultures and policy agendas of individual HEIs (Brennan et al 2010). Research has also shown the significant socio-economic differences in how students experience HE and the choices they make during and after it, based on pre-existing learner identities and educational biographies (Crozier et al 2008). Moreover, as Brennan and Patel (2008) discuss, mass higher education is characterised by much greater plurality and diversity of student experience, not only in terms of the range of student profiles within a mass higher education system, but also the multiple identities and 'life projects' they embody. Consequently, boundaries between formal study and other aspects of university life are likely to have become significantly blurred as a result of the greater range of activities they are engaged in – for example, extra-curricular pursuits, paid employment, domestic roles outside university, and a whole range of other outside interests.

Some wide-ranging sociological studies on student transition and learning and experience of higher education (for example, Brennan et al 2010; Crozier et al 2008; Reay et al 2010) have highlighted interaction between students' personal agency and the institutional settings in which they find themselves. For some students, this can be a source of empowerment and fulfilment; for others it can cause a sense of consternation, as in the case of students who struggle to adapt to a new context or feel culturally misaligned to the learning environment in which they are situated. Students inevitably import learner dispositions into the university which can then be mediated, rechannelled or disrupted depending on their on-going lived experiences.

Much existing work on student learning has focused on the different ways in which learning may impact on students and the different levels at which students engage with formal learning. The distinction between 'deep' and 'surface' learning has been used to illustrate students' different levels of engagement with the learning process and the effect this might have on subsequent performance (Marton & Booth 1997). The former approach is seen to entail stronger levels of engagement which leads to genuine transformation in understanding and knowledge and better overall academic performance, whereas the latter signals minimal engagement and is focused mainly on extrinsic outcomes. Richardson (2007a) demonstrated that students' approaches can vary across different parts of their programme and depend on levels of interest with different stands of a programme. Ashwin et al's (2014) research has shown the relative levels of engagement students have with specific disciplines and the different ways students attribute their disciplines to changing their perspectives. Their study, drawing upon the students in the discipline of Sociology, illustrated variable levels of engagement, from students' experiencing marked intellectual transformation and identity building, to them being able to locate it more fully in broader different context, to being fairly disengaged and marginalised from their disciplines.

The Brennan et al (2010) research indicated positive views among students around higher education's continued capacity to promote personal development and build students' identities. This indicates that more formally rational and utilitarian values can exist alongside more intrinsic ones: while students may be increasingly preoccupied with the so-called 'end product' of their learning, they also value subtle and less tangible gains associated with higher education learning.

Existing research and analysis in the area of student experience and learning suggests that there is much more to learn about students' approaches, and particularly during a time of significant policy change. The study will allow us to engage more fully with the kinds of issues that have been identified in previous literature and to explore students' relationship to higher education at a time when 'private' costs have become greater. There is also clearly a need to examine the student-consumer ethos and how prevalent it is among contemporary students.

## 5. Investigative approach

### 5.1. Overview of approach

This study adopted a cross-national and cross-institutional approach that employed qualitative interviews with students across seven HEIs across the UK. The rationale was to obtain the perspectives of students from a diverse range of institutional settings, with broad missions and profiles, and encompassing a diverse range of student profiles and subject areas. A further aim was to explore whether the different fee arrangements in different national contexts impacted on students' attitudes and how they approached higher education. A qualitative approach, based on individual interviews and focus groups, was chosen as this research wanted to capture the 'student voice' in the broadest sense of charting students' accounts of wider aspects of their university experience, including their transition into it, experiences during, and perspectives about the future after it. This approach also sought to get beneath the nuances of students' attitudes and the way in which their views further reflected different positions of values and identities.

The choice and range of institutions was intended to generate breadth of coverage and to examine variations in fee arrangement across different national settings. In terms of the choice of English HEIs, four main 'mission types' were included:

- a research-driven 'Russell Group' HEI which had a high-entry tariff and constituted predominately traditional middle-class students as well as a large body of well-qualified international students;
- a 1994 Group HEI which was also research-intensive but had slightly lower-tariff entry requirements although a fairly similar profile of students;
- a post-1992 HEI which, while largely being a teaching-based institution, has an emerging strong research profile and also contained a more mixed profile of students and subject areas;
- a Guild HEI which had low-tariff entry requirements and was committed to widening participation to under-represented groups, including lower socio-economic and black and minority ethnic (BME) students who comprised the majority of the student population.

Given the time and resource constraints, it was not possible to get a similar institutional mix in Wales, Northern Ireland or Scotland. However, it was decided to aim at a range of institutional profiles across each of these countries. This included:

- a Welsh post-1992 HEI which, like the English post-1992 HEI, contained a mixture of students, a combination of academic and vocational disciplines, and a more mixed socio-economic student profile. Just over half the student population at this institution were Welsh-domiciled.
- a Northern Irish non-aligned institution that offered a mixture of vocational and academic programmes, but weighted towards the former.
- a Scottish HEI with a similar profile to the English research-led institution and comprising mainly traditional high-achieving and higher socio-economic group students.

A total of 68 students took part in a combination of individual interviews and focus groups. A breakdown of each institution and the profile of students, including their gender, subject, age and year of study, are provided below. The majority of the sample participated in both the individual interviews and focus groups but not in every case, and the tables below also indicate which students participated in both the individual interview and focus group, or just one or the other. Fifty-nine students participated in individual interviews and 52 participated in focus groups. Interviews and focus groups lasted on average between forty-five minutes and an hour and were recorded and transcribed.

All students who took part have been deliberately anonymised in the findings section. The focus groups were intended to tap into and generate general attitudes on a range of selected themes and to expose the emergent commonalities and differences between students. Given the function of focus groups in gathering general opinions and viewpoints (Barbour 2005), the questions were framed more openly and broadly and predominately in the

second person perspective (i.e. what do you think students value from higher education?). This was helpful in opening up collective attitudes, yet also had limitations as a result of not reining in on students' individual experiences and frames of references. The semi-structured interviews thus complemented the focus group by allowing for some of the generic themes to be more personally reflected on and with much more nuanced references to learners' own profiles, educational biographies and on-going experiences of higher education. The questions used for the semi-structured interviews are included as an appendix to this report.

The project was marketed to prospective students at each of the seven institutions via a range of internal communications, intranet advertisements and staff-student liaison groups. An initial aim was to filter students on the basis of subject discipline to get an even spread of students from different subject areas. However, given the variable response rate to the project invitation (partly attributable to the time in the university calendar), and inevitable challenges of recruiting students as an external researcher, students were recruited on the basis of interest expressed. The project was marketed to both first- and second-year students, ie those who had entered in either 2011 or in 2012 when the fee increase had been introduced for English HEIs. While the study was particularly keen to explore the perspectives of students who had entered HE in 2012, it was also interested to see if there were differences between those who entered earlier, and to obtain the perspectives of students who had been in higher education over a longer period and who would be able to explore some of its impacts.

The majority of the fieldwork was conducted during the end of the Spring semester in May and June 2013, involving a combination of students who were coming to the end of Year 1 and 2 respectively. Data from the remaining institutions, namely the post-1992 English HE and the Northern Irish and Scottish HEIs, were gathered in the autumn semester during October and November 2013. To achieve some consistency with the other institutions, Year 2 and 3 students were invited to participate, ie those who had also entered in either 2011 or 2012.

## 5.2. Profile of HEIs and participants

English Russell Group HEI	
Focus group (participant profile)	Individual interviews (participant profile)
<b>Focus Group 1</b>	*+Female 20, Year 1, Psychology
Male, 43, Year 2, Archaeology	+Female, 40, Year 2, Adult nursing
Female, 20, Year 1, Sociology	+Female, 20, Year 1, Psychology
Female, 18, Year 1, Biology	+Female, 20, Year 2, Psychology
Female, 39, Year 2, IT in Organisations	*+Female, Year 1, Philosophy & Economics
Female, 20, Year 2, Marine Biology	Male, 43, Year 2, Archaeology
Male, 21, Year 2, Politics	Female, 20, Year 1, Sociology
Male, 19, Year 1, Physics	Female, 18, Year 1, Biology
Female, 20, Year 2, Politics	
<b>Focus Group 2</b>	Female, 39, Year 2, IT in Organisations
Female, 20, Year 2, Marine Biology	Female, 20, Year 2, Marine Biology
Male, 19, Year 1, Physics	Male, 21, Year 2, Politics
-Female, 19, Year 1, Audiology	Male, 19, Year 1, Physics
Male, 19, Year 2, Engineering	Male 20, Year 2, Engineering
Female, 39, Year 2, IT in Organisations	Female, 20, Year 2, Politics
<b>Total - 13</b>	<b>Total - 14</b>

**Key:** - Did not take part in individual interview; + Did not take part in focus group; \* International student.

English 1994 Group HEI	
Focus group (participant profile)	Individual interviews (participant profile)
<b>Focus group 1</b>	Male, 23, Year 2, Geography & International Relations
Male, 23, Year 2, Geography & International Relations	*Male, 20, Year 2, Economics
*Male 20, Year 2, Economics	*+Female, 19, Year 2, International Relations and French
	Female, 19, Year 1, English
<b>Focus group 2</b>	Male, 20, Year 1, Physics
Female, 19, Year 1, English	Male, 19, Year 1, Informatics
Female, 22, Year 2, Psychology & Sociology	*Female, 20, Year 2, Art History & English
Male, 20, Year 1, Physics	
Male, 19, Year 1, Informatics	
*Female, 20, Year 2, Art History & English	
<b>Total - 7</b>	<b>Total - 7</b>

English post-1992 HEI	
Focus group (participant profile)	Individual interviews (participant profile)
<b>Focus group 1</b>	Female, 21, Year 3, Politics & International Relations
Female, 21, Year 3, Politics	Female, 20, Year 3, Politics & International Relations
Female, 21, Year 3, International Relations & Politics	Female, 21, Year 2, English & History
Female, 21, Year 2, English & History	+Female, 20, Year 3, Psychology
	+*Male, 21, Year 3, Business Studies
<b>Focus group 2</b>	Female, 21, Year 2, Criminology
Female, 21, Year 2, Criminology	Female, 22, Year 4, Languages & International Relations
Female, 22, Year 4, Languages & International Relations	Female, 20, Year 2, English
Female, 20, Year 2, English	Female, 20, Year 2, Criminology
Female, 20, Year 2, Criminology	Female, 22, Year 2, English
Female, 20, Year 2, English	Female, 20, Year 2, Television & Broadcasting
Female, 20, Year 2, Television & Broadcasting	
<b>Total - 9</b>	<b>Total - 11</b>

English Guild HEI	
Focus group (participant profile)	Individual interviews (participant profile)
<b>Focus group</b>	Female, 34, Year 2, Sports and Education
Female, 34, Year 2, Sports and Education	Female, 19, Year 1, English
Female, 19, Year 1, English	Female, 37, Year 2, English & Education
-Female, 50, Year 2, Integrative Counselling	+Female, 19, Year 1, Business Studies & Education
Female, 37, Year 2, English & Education	
-Female, 20, Year 2, Sports Science	
<b>Total – 5</b>	<b>Total - 4</b>

Welsh HEI	
Focus group (participant profile)	Individual interviews (participant profile)
<b>Focus group 1</b>	Male, 20, Year 2, Graphic Communication
Male, 19, Year 2, Sports Science	Male, 20, Year 2, Sports Science
Male, 19, Year 2, Police Science	Male, 19, Year 2, Police Science
Female, 20, Year 2, Psychology	+Male, 20, Year 2, Accountancy
	Male, 19, Year 1, Business Management
<b>Focus group 2</b>	Female, 20, Year 2, Psychology
Male, 20, Year 2, Graphic Communication	Female, 19, Year 1, History
-Male, 20, Year 2, Business Management	+Female, 26, Year 2, Biology
Male, 19, Year 1, Business Management	
Female, 19, Year 1, History	
-Male, 19, Year 1, History	
<b>Total - 8</b>	<b>Total - 8</b>

Northern Irish HEI	
Focus group (participant profile)	Individual interviews (participant profile)
<b>Focus group</b>	Female, 22, Year 3, Graphic Design
-Female, 21, Year 3, Consumer Studies	Male, 21, Year 2, Law
Female, 22 Year 3, Graphic Design	Female, 20, Year 2, Law
Male, 21, Year 2, Law	Female, 20, Year 2, Marketing
Female, 20, Year 2, Law	+Female, 20, Year 3, Biomedical Engineering
Female, 20, Year 2, Marketing	+Female, 21, Year 3, Public Relations
-Female, 25, Year 3, Health Physiology	+Male, 27, Year 3, ICT
<b>Total – 6</b>	<b>Total - 7</b>

Scottish HEI	
Focus group (participant profile)	Individual interviews (participant profile)
<b>Focus group</b>	*+Female, 22, Year 3, Medical Sciences
Female, 21, Year 3, Neuroscience	+Male 21, Year 3, International Relations
Female, 20, Year 3, Chemistry	*Female, 21, Year 3, Genetics
Female, 20, Year 3, Neuroscience	Male, 21, Year 3, Molecular Genetics
Male, 21, Year 3, Biomedical Sciences	+Male, 21, Year 3, Biomedical Sciences
	*Female, 20, Year 3, Chemistry
	*Female, 21, Year 3, Neuroscience
	*Female, 20, Year 3, Neuroscience
<b>Total – 4</b>	<b>Total - 8</b>

### 5.3. Interview focus and data analysis approach

The interview was broken down into several main parts, following a semi-structured format so that key interview themes best aligned to the over-arching aims of the project. The initial part of the interview explored students' realities of being in higher education in the current period and the kinds of challenges they experienced. This also examined students' perceptions around the value of higher education, their views on fees and the recent increase, and the ways in which this was shaping their experiences and attitudes to higher education and their decision to participate. Of particular interest here were broader views on the nature of marketisation and associated discourses around students' rights and regulatory scope. The interview addressed students' views on the recent discursive conceptualisations of contemporary students as 'consumers', whether this was something they identified with and how it might manifest itself in their relations to, and behaviours within, higher education. Throughout this part of the interview themes were invoked around students' journeys into higher education and choices towards institutions and subjects and how these inter-related to the changing policy agenda.

The second main part of the interview engaged more with students' values and goals towards higher education, what they wanted from higher education, and the benefits they perceived from it. This addressed what students valued from participating in higher education and if this shaped their approaches to higher education. It was particularly interested in engaging with students' views on how their higher education had changed them and why,

and their engagement in various aspects of university, including societies and other extra-curricular activities. While focusing on students' engagement with their subject discipline and the values they attached to this, it also sought to explore their views on teaching and learning and what they perceived to constitute positive and high-quality teaching and learning experiences.

A close and in-depth engagement with the interview texts allowed for the extrapolation of significant salient themes. These were unpacked from the raw interview data and broken down into sets of dominant and ancillary themes, which were used to build up the analytical narrative presented in this research. Over 20 core themes emerged from the data, linked in part to the main research aims, which themselves were mapped onto the questions in the interview and focus group schedules. However, the emergent nature of some of the themes were also further captured by extensive textual engagement: for example, while the theme of 'employability' was not an explicit focus of the interviews, the preponderance of the term through many of the interviews, and the links some respondents made to the perceived benefits of HE, led to its inclusion as an analytical theme. Moreover, this analytical approach allowed for the identification of both unified responses that cut across the whole sample, as well as variations and nuances within the sample that helped capture and reflect a variety of perspectives.

## 6. The research findings: the impact on students' attitudes and approaches to higher education

This main section presents the dominant research findings from the student interviews. While this study is based on a relatively small sample of students, some clear themes have emerged across the whole sample which is presented in the following sections. Sections 4.1 to 4.5 open up key findings in relation to student attitudes to higher education and the way in which the shifting policy landscape is shaping this. The core themes examined here are in relation to students' views of higher education as an investment, their perceptions of debt, and the impacts of increased fees on their choices and decisions. These sections also open up data on the ways in which fees had made students think about their approaches and motivations to higher education, the importance attached to employability and the different ways in which they identify with the notion of consuming higher education. Section 4.6 to 4.9 explores students' views on the benefits of higher education, how this related to aspects of their goals and motivations, and also their views of teaching and learning.

### 6.1. Participating in higher education: investment and opportunity (and debt)

The dominant rationale for participating in higher education is the perceived future benefits it provides: all students who were interviewed had developed a strong sense of higher education being an 'investment' towards a better future and improved life chances. Higher education was believed to be both a credible and increasingly accessible route for those who had the potential to participate. Participating in higher education, and achieving a socially-valued and recognised credential, was seen to lead to improved future prospects and help open opportunities that would have been limited without a higher qualification. The perception of higher education as a positional good that facilitates access to desired future opportunities, mainly better jobs and improved future income, dominated students' views on the benefits of participating and served to justify their private expenditure towards it.

For the majority of the sample, participation was seen as part of their on-going learner trajectories and an almost inevitable 'next step' that would help them access the future benefits they aspired to. The fact that many students saw their participation in higher education as forming a strong part of their educational aspirations well before entering it, confirmed this position. For students from higher socio-economic backgrounds whose parents had also participated in HE, there was a certain degree of 'inevitability' that they would enter higher education and it was clear that this had been planned for during the early stages of their educational careers. In the case of the small amount of mature students who, prior to engaging on access programmes, had had significant periods away from formal study, higher education was seen as a clear route to better future prospects. Such students referred to the better pay, promotion opportunities and working conditions they would potentially receive compared with those who had remained in the jobs they had left.

Reference points such as the 'graduate premium' and distinctions between 'graduate' and 'non-graduate' level jobs reinforced the sense that higher education was a justified investment worth the increased private expenditure. The expectations that students carry around higher education is clearly influenced by the wider milieu in how higher education had been presented to them. More widely, public- and institutional-level framing of the benefits of higher education (for example via policy pronouncements, institutional marketing and school- and college-level messages) are influential. More immediate are the messages and influences of significant others such as parents, siblings and peers who not only transmit messages about the benefits of the 'university experience' but also the likely gains it confers through life. The combination of these clearly primes students' expectations regarding what higher education will give them and the benefits they might expect to receive:

More generally I think at the time the idea I had of what sort of job I'd want later, I figured you should have a degree, or at least it's going to help a lot, even if you decide to go into a completely different direction you always have something to fall back on that might make it easier to get a job. So that was a big reason for wanting to go into higher education.

(Female, Year 2, International Relations and French, English I 994 Group HEI)

It's an investment. Definitely. I think you put into it and you use it ... If you think about it on the most basic terms you're giving the money and you're getting a service; but for me it's more of an investment. And I think most people see university as an investment because of where it's going to allow you to be in the future.

(Female, Year 2, English, English post-1992 HEI)

However, students' references to the future and the relationship between their higher education and future outcomes were framed in largely abstract and non-specific ways. Reference was made to general opportunity structures that would be more accessible as a result of possessing higher education qualifications. Even among students who perceived a close link between their formal study and future employment, for example those wished to enter an allied profession or a specialised vocational area, students largely referred to generalised or abstract gains. These derived from a wider sense that the more qualified would be in more advantageous future economic positions.

This generalised social framing of expanded opportunities and enhanced socio-economic outcomes, based on fairly deeply-formed schematic understandings of higher education's wider economic value, strongly influences students' views. This was clearly evident among several students from lower socio-economic backgrounds who perceived higher education to be a route towards better economic outcomes than their parents had experienced. Kulvir, a working class Business Studies & Education student at a Guild HE institution, discussed the potential scope for enhanced social mobility she envisaged higher education providing, which her parents emphasised to her:

I'm happy that I came here and I've put in that investment – £8,400 investing it each year, but I'm hoping to get a lot out of it. Higher education was something I wanted to do for a long time. Like I said, it [fees] feels unfair, but then again I know that I'll get something out of it in return. Because like my dad's a taxi driver and he works from five o'clock in the morning to six o'clock at night, and that's long hours. So I thought like, you know he works such long hours and he doesn't get much money out of it, but if I put hard work into university and get my degree, hopefully I wouldn't need to work as hard as what he works, so like for a teacher, like most teachers and business people, they are on £25,000 or above ... so I thought it's hard work.

(Female, Year I, Business Studies and Education, English Guild HEI)

The discourse of higher education as 'investment' in many ways mitigated the concerns about the future debt that would be incurred through higher fee payments. Debt was clearly a concern among students, reinforced by a general sense of entering more challenging future economic conditions and living costs. A dominant view was that the debt incurred from higher education would not be a core factor in deterring prospective students from applying to higher education, and that other factors relating to students' ability or motivation would be more crucial:

It wasn't really a disincentive, and it didn't put me off. It didn't really figure in reasons why I didn't go initially. It was more that I wanted to do other things and that I hadn't yet decided what I wanted to study, rather than the cost. To be honest cost didn't come into it.

(Male, Year I, Physics, English 1994 Group HEI)

The study found little in the way of resistance towards fees, although some students in lower fee-charging countries felt the three-fold increase might have made them and their peers reconsider their options. However, there was a prevailing sense that this was the case for students who might not have considered other options, or for whom higher education had become the 'default' option. It was therefore imperative that students had some sense of where their higher education would lead them:

I think that (£9k fees) would deter people. I think if Northern Ireland turned to £9k there would be a lot more people turning it down and trying to get jobs based on their A-level ... a lot of people look at it and say I don't want £60k on my head or whatever. I tend to look at it from a more mature point of view as an investment and I supposed you might be paying it back for most of your career but if you're earning that much you don't really see it.

(Male, Year 3, ICT, Northern Ireland HEI)

I just think some students haven't really considered other options, like they feel they have to be there, almost by default. I think higher fees will make this kind of student weigh up their options more and not just go through the motions.

However, very few students from the 2012 cohort at English HEIs felt the increase in fees had made them consider whether to apply to university or not, or that it would act as a significant deterrent for suitably qualified, able and motivated students. The increased costs were believed to have more impact on students who were undecided on whether higher education was the appropriate option or whether they would experience any future benefit. For students in English HEIs, there was a largely resigned attitude towards higher levels of debt resulting from fee increases. The impact was seen to be relatively manageable as a result of the income-contingent nature of fee repayments and the other systems of loans support they received during their time studying. Moreover, the fact that debt was an issue to be negotiated at a future stage meant that it was somehow abstracted from students' immediate realities of university (even as this report will outline, the view that they are making a private contribution does frame their attitudes to HE and their expectations of it).

A common stance towards the challenge of debt was to approach it as a share of future income, almost comparable to a tax or any other future outgoing that they would incur, and that this would have a fairly limited impact on their lives as a whole. Indeed, some of the sample referred to fee-related university debt as 'invisible debt'. This is perhaps a strong metaphor for something that, while students are aware of and accept will have a future impact, does not manifest itself in their immediate realities of HE. The relative benefits of earning beyond a certain threshold and receiving overall greater lifetime earnings clearly buffer anxieties about the long-term repayment of student loans. The fatalistic view of debt which was widespread in this study was predicated on a sense that debt could be rationalised if it was only a relatively small proportion of a better future income, and that HE debt was fairly soft debt compared with personal loans that had more stringent repayment measures:

I think when you sign up for university you accept that you're going to have this debt, but really it doesn't have that much of an impact, you're not going to have bailiffs knocking at your door wanting tuition fees back. And obviously it's good that you only have to pay it back when you receive a certain amount.  
(Female, 22, Modern Languages & International Relations, English post-1992 HEI)

## 6.2. Choices and decisions

In terms of the more specific choices students make of institutions and subjects, the evidence from this study indicates that these do not conform to a highly rational process of picking apart units of marketing information that is presented to them and scrutinising institution's measures on various performance indexes. Students were explicitly asked if they had used the 'market information' presented in the public domain to guide their choices. While students were aware of the significance attached to league tables and the overall ranking of different institutions, choices tended to be clustered around a fairly limited institutional range and based on the perceived alignment of their academic profile and those of their target institutions. Furthermore, when asked whether they had reconsidered the types of institution and subjects they were undertaking as a result of higher debt, very few said it had altered their decision that had already been formed.

Subject and institutional choices are clearly personal and informed by students' wider educational and cultural profiles. The findings of this study confirm this; pointing to a combination of intuitive, pragmatic and subjective factors that shape how students perceive institutions and subject areas, which provide a general sense of what would be an appropriate place to study. These choices are academically and culturally filtered through students' academic profiles and further mediated by a range of other influences derived from parents and peers. Market-based information appears, therefore, to provide a largely secondary lens through which students make decisions about institutions and programmes. In the cases where this information was consulted, it largely confirmed established preferences. Where market information is likely to have some bearing is when students look to differentiate between similar types of institutions within a fairly homogeneous cluster – for instance, those that offered specialist programmes or are linked to an institutional 'type'.

The pragmatic dimension to student choice was manifest in students' choices being guided by which institutions are available and the likely academic fit between their profiles and those of their target institutions. The anticipation of some kind of positive alignment between their own academic profile and the culture of their institution and cultural profile of other students in them informed their decision. High-achieving students with higher grade point averages often emphasised the ranked nature of UK universities and the importance of choosing institutions that had significant prestige value. This was seen as particularly significant in light of the volume of institutions and graduates

leaving mass higher education. Students in so-called 'lower ranked' institutions were prone to emphasise more environmental features of their institutions and the presence of kindred learners who shared similar profiles.

The study supports previous sociologically-informed research on students' choice (Reay et al 2005; Fuller et al 2011) which has shown how students' choices are largely socially-mediated by their immediate cultural milieu. Indeed, the 'cognitive structures of choice' that Ball et al (2002) discuss, captures the parameters through which choices are formed, not only based on available resources and information but also a sense of how an institution's cultural make-up is aligned to their own. The findings from this study also resonate with previous research on student choice, which has used a more behavioural economic perspective to highlight the bounded and contextualised nature of students' rationalities and decision-making around choice of course and university (Diamond et al 2012). Choices are guided largely by a range of intuitive biases and affective judgements that may have little to do with the utility value of their target institutions and programmes.

Institutional choices that were linked to students' perceptions of quality occasionally varied between those based on the internal organisation of provision (including quality of teaching and learning) and those based on external factors relating to an institution's reputation, research profile and public standing. Even though students may be distanced from the formal research activities that academics undertake (unless academics engage them in genuinely 'research-driven' teaching), they still perceive these activities to confer additional value to their institutions. This, in turn, shapes perceptions of relative value; and there is a tendency for some students to conflate quality of established reputation with quality of provision that is more likely to be presented through performance data.

This is clearly the case for students in higher-ranked universities, some of whom had experienced variable teaching quality. A 'good university' is perceived by some students as one that has historical reputation for attracting academically-able learners, being able to trade off its research capacity and having renowned scholars who raise the intellectual profile of the institution. This all served to affirm the externally-perceived status which may be further confirmed by the position of a university in a national league-table. As this German-born international student at a Scottish HEI said about reputation:

I'm not sure if it's really justified because of course I don't have any other experience in other universities. But I guess they base it on the student experience, the educational knowledge that's been taught, the university itself, how it's run, the research, the staff – so I think it's many different aspects that they include in the rankings. So hopefully if it all comes together then that's where the reputation comes from.  
(Female, Year 3, Chemistry, Scottish HEI)

There was little sense among the students in this study that choices of subject discipline were being influenced by fee increases, the purported economic or vocational 'relevance' (or not) of different subjects, or the relative earnings premium attached to them. When reflecting on their chosen subjects, students discussed the natural academic orientation to specific disciplines which had been confirmed during previous education. Having a genuine interest in a subject, which would help them succeed and get the most out of their formal learning, was a clear driver in shaping subject choice. Intrinsic interest in a subject and the sense that it would fulfil their academic and intellectual needs is clearly a strong motivator for choosing it:

I really enjoyed the political aspect in the sense you need to know the theory behind things, and then I really liked the international aspect, and I wanted to look more into it and form my own opinions, because I'd always been influenced by everyone and I thought it was about time that I actually learnt for myself. And then it just fell into place really.  
(Female, Year 3, Politics and International Relations, English post-1992 HEI)

Choosing appropriate subjects which are compatible with a student's intellectual orientations was also seen to potentially minimise the risks of choosing something that would not appeal to students, sometimes forcing them to repeat a year or enduring sustained academic hardship and under-achievement. The main challenge, as many students discussed, was not so much the employment 'relevance' of their subjects, but how they choose to draw upon them:

I think a lot of people do just come here not knowing, or they choose a vague subject, thinking it could open a lot of avenues. But then on the flipside there's other people who completely think right: 'I don't know, like I know that science or something is exactly what they want to do' but then after three years

that's maybe not what they want to do, so they feel like they've not wasted the three years, but it's not really gained any other qualification where they could go into something else.  
(Female, Year 2, Psychology, Welsh HEI)

While some students took a more vocationally-focused approach to subject choice, anticipating organic links between their subject and future employment, the overall perception was that linkages between subject and future employment in the UK were fairly broad and general. Students studying vocational and semi-vocational subjects were optimistic that the more applied and specific features of their programme would equip them well for future employment and that having this kind of focus was important in an uncertain economic context where it was “best to guarantee a specific job”.

At the same time, students in more generalist, ‘non-vocational’ subjects were largely comfortable with the lack of occupational specificity and the more open boundaries between their subjects and future employment which would not ‘pigeon hole’ them but allow them to pursue multiple avenues. Ultimately, while subjects may be partially referenced against future employment opportunities, their potential relative economic value of subject is not the sole factor shaping their choices. It therefore appears unlikely on this evidence that fee increase will fundamentally alter the types of choices students make around their subject of study.

### **6.3. Fees and attitudes towards higher education: getting out what you put in**

The focus groups and interviews explored the extent to which the rise in tuition fees had framed students’ approaches to higher education and what they wanted to get from the experience. This was not only to examine the extent to which students’ conceptions of a valuable and ‘worthwhile’ higher education experience were being framed against their increased personal contribution towards their higher education, but also if it was shaping how they approached it more generally. A dominant view among respondents was that the increasing costs of participating in higher education has made many reflect about what they ‘wanted to get out of’ their experience. It was important to maximise their experience both in order to justify their contribution as well as to ensure maximal value, even though some felt this was not true across the whole student population. The higher personal contribution being made by recent students was clearly reinforcing the sense that students should get ‘more for more’. The relatively transitory nature of the higher education experience and a more challenging future economic climate meant that it had become imperative to achieve well in order to maximise their investment.

While students saw there being a renewed responsibility on universities to do more to enhance the student experience and ensure that students ‘got value for money’, they also saw an onus on individual students to make the most of the experience and get a good overall return on their investment. In terms of students’ views on institutional improvement and responsiveness, much of this was couched in terms of wanting more transparency and experiencing manifest developments in resourcing, facilities and programme-level upgrades. That not all had experienced this, or were able to witness ‘where the money was being spent’ was a source of frustration, leading to questioning the justification for fees:

Obviously it does annoy me a bit that I can't see where the cost of the fees go; obviously I know that the government has subsidised some of the funding for universities, hence the hike in the prices for the students now, but my current year and the years that are now below that are going to be coming into university, are going to be getting the same amount of contact hours as students that paid a third of whatever we end up paying, and that annoys me quite a bit. It doesn't seem as if there is much leeway for additional contact hours.

(Female, Year 3, Politics & International Relations, English post-1992 HEI)

The views of a second-year English domiciled student studying at a Welsh HEI but currently paying a third less than his first-year English counterparts, provides a clear sense of the ways in which the fee increase is framing students’ attitudes towards institutions. Even though this student was accumulating debt and

could in principle demand similar experiences, he sensed that if this had been trebled he would inevitably have to rethink further how he might respond:

If that was the case (I was paying up to £9k) I'd take university very seriously in the terms that I expect my university to give out the resources which they claim they can give out, and should they not be giving that out I could, I'd probably, I don't know, write a letter or something to report that I'm paying these high fees but I'm not receiving the resources that I should be receiving, or the learning structure. So I'd expect them to be able to actually deliver like those kinds of resource in that sense.

(Male, Year 2, Accountancy, Welsh HEI)

At the same time, the fee increase was also forcing students to think about their own responses, as well as their institution, with strong reference to the importance of getting as much from the HE experience as possible. The notion of maximising the value of their experience and approaching higher education in a way that justified their increasing contribution was reflected in references to students being more focused, motivated and proactive in their approach. Respondents talked about the need for greater proactivity and focus and to take their studies more seriously. This was accompanied by an antipathy towards what was perceived to be a more passive and laissez-faire approach among contemporaries who were taking their participation for granted. This was clearly the case for students in English HEIs who had entered in 2012, as well as a sense among earlier entrants that there would likely be an attitude shift among future generations of higher fee-paying students:

Because at the end of the day it's our education, we're the only ones that are going to get anything out of it, and you get out what you've put in. If you're not going to put in the effort then you're not going to get anything out of it. I think so, proactive rather than reactive, you've got to, I mean there's people who don't bother to turn up for lessons.

(Female, Year 2, English & Education Studies, English Guild HEI)

I think also that like missing lectures – a lot of second years I have spoken to, and even third and fourth years, their mind-frame is, Oh you don't need much in first year so you can go out, miss your lectures, don't do it. But then it's stupid; if you go out you're spending that money on top of the money you're spending going out, so I don't think it is worth missing them. And it makes it a lot more realistic, having to go to lectures and having to go to the labs because otherwise you are just throwing away money.

(Female, Year 1, Biology, English Russell Group HEI)

Several international students who were paying a much higher fee tariff than their British counterparts emphasised how fee costs had framed their experience. Kamila, a second-year Neurosciences student at a Scottish HEI, drew comparisons with her situation to the non-fee-paying Scottish domicile students; she believed that while her non-fee-paying counterparts were not necessarily complacent towards HE, they were not experiencing the same levels of pressure to ensure that their contribution added up.

I think from day one, even though as a first year you want to make the most of it; you're paying for it, so you want to make the most of everything you have here, whether it's studies, whether it's the social life, the experience, because you're not only paying for the courses you're paying for the whole experience. So from day one I wanted to make the most of it. It does add a lot of pressure, you're paying so much and you do want to be able to earn that money back and even more.

(Female, Neurosciences, Year 3, Scottish HEI)

The sense of wanting to get more out of the university experience, particularly among high fee-payers also fed into a perception that aspects of students' learning should be more rigorous, including more contact hours, extended learning and a more thorough first-year experience. While students accepted the various transitional hurdles that first-year students had to overcome when embarking on new and sometimes challenging academic terrain, there was also a sense that higher fee-payers should expect the 'first year to count'. A majority of students were of the view that largely formative assessment processes in the first year of study, and the implicit message of 'getting 40%' is enough, promoted casual approaches during a year that constituted a third share of their fees.

There was this general feeling in the department that: oh you're just a first year, you don't need to worry too much. But I want to worry, I want to have good grades, I want to learn now. But it felt as if I was brushed away to the edge.

(Female, Year 2, English and Art History, English 1994 Group HEI)

The language of self-responsibility and individualisation also figures strongly in many of these students' attitudes. As both the costs and risks attached to participating in higher education are rationalised as private ones, there becomes a greater perceived need for individuals to take personal ownership over the process. While it may be more difficult to predict the actual outcome of their higher education investment, it is easier to control the means towards achieving it through greater levels of personal application. This inevitably entails a more proactive attitude and the application of stronger degrees of personal agency to the process.

References to 'other' types of students who were not adopting proactive approaches confirmed the view that such students had not reconciled themselves to the realities and challenges of participating in higher education at a time when private costs were markedly higher. The perception that a body of students 'still expected to walk away with a degree' bemused a large proportion of current respondents, particularly those who entered in 2012. In turn, there was a critical view towards what some students perceived to be a more 'slack' approach which was seen to be more in keeping with previous generations where higher education was considerably cheaper or even totally free:

I think younger kids are just, I don't think they really understand. I mean one girl on the first week here, I sat next to, and I asked her what she was doing and why, and she went: I don't really know, I didn't know what else to do with myself, so I came to uni. You're paying nine thousand pounds a year because you didn't know what else to do!

(Female, Year 2, Sports Science & Education Studies, English Guild HEI)

While in part such approaches were seen to reflect the attitudinal make-up and outlook of other students, they were also attributed to other students' misplaced conception of higher education and what it necessitated in commitment. A good proportion of students questioned some of their peers' motivations and understanding, based on a perception of whether they had made the correct decision to enter. Links were made to the context of mass higher education and the growing numbers of students for whom higher education might not be a genuinely desired option and who had possibly chosen it as a response to limited alternative pathways.

Will, a Sports Science student with strong aspirations to undertake a PhD and then forge a military career alluded to the adverse impact on the quality of the learning environment where lecturers' efforts were spent in negotiating more 'problematic' learners. He expressed frustration that his sense of academic achievement and wanting a challenging learning environment had been undermined by less academic, 'drifter' students who were there for the wrong reasons:

It's a default thing because jobs are so hard to come by people think: oh what can I do for the next three years if I can't get job; I know what I'll do, I'll go to uni. And in that sense it's difficult then, because those people who want to be academics are going to suffer, through no fault of their own, because the lecturers are more concentrated on the idiot sat in the corner, you know online shopping, you know looking for what they're going to wear out on Friday night, instead of just getting like the hardcore theory.

(Male, Year 2, Sports Science, Post-1992 Welsh HEI)

This view was not confined to students in newer HEIs. Students in more highly-ranked institutions also commented on the effects of greater numbers, partly on equity grounds, but also because it had served to undermine the overall value and currency of a degree qualification per se.

Yeah, I think it's difficult, 'cos again I think everyone is expected to go into the same mould; we need to go to uni, and that was so evident in our sixth form, I remember one guy who really didn't want to go, it was like, well you need to go to uni. I think that's quite a pressure, and just something the people maybe aren't always ready for. So I think there should be other routes, and sometimes I wonder if it's a statistical thing

where people are going towards uni and they're, oh we've got so many people in university, but is that the right thing for them? I'm not always 100% sure.

(Male, Year 2, Politics, English Russell Group, HEI)

#### 6.4. Employability: a key pressure point in mass higher education

Students' perception that their post-university experiences were likely to be more challenging and harder to predict related to a future-orientated preoccupation around their ability to find appropriate employment after university; namely their future 'employability'. The recurring perception through the interviews and focus group discussion was of there being a surplus of graduate talent leaving mass higher education. The increasing truism of 'the degree not being enough' had forced students to reflect on how their graduate profiles could be differentiated and what they needed to do to access sought-after employment. The more uncertain futures awaiting graduates was reflected in general references to the number of graduates applying for single jobs and the various 'horror stories' of graduates working in jobs well below their qualification level for significant durations.

I'm really concerned about the future. Because whenever you look in the news you have all these people that are unemployed, that have graduated and they show you the ratio of the job and how many students are competing, and then every year when you come back you have a general lecture and they welcome back, and you have people from our careers section, and they come in and it's really competitive out there; you need to be doing this; you need to be doing that. So yeah, it's a bit of a bleak image.

(Female, Year 3, Politics & International Relations, English post-1992 HEI)

While the idea of being more employable was a desired outcome from higher education and something they strove to maximise, not all students saw this as the core purpose of their studies. However, the prevalence of employability discourses and its relationship to the perceived benefits of HE, and also the reference to the condition of *being employable* rather than simply finding ways of enhancing their future employment, indicates the pressures students now experience in this area. Furthermore, the ways in which the language of employability is articulated by contemporary students conveys something of a paradox in students' views on the relationship between their higher education and future lives. On the one hand higher education is perceived to be a worthwhile investment that will lead to better outcomes; on the other, its currencies are perceived to have a declining, and increasingly contingent, value. This leaves students with an acute sense of having to do more to maximise their post-university chances.

And I'm quite surprised that student engagement is quite low, not that there aren't enough schemes out there trying to raise it, but the fact that even though they have this pressure on them with money that they're going to paying, that's far in the future, so it's not an immediate ... People are concentrating on their social life and just doing well in their studies; but all these other opportunities are right there, they seem to be missing that.

(Female, Year 1, Biology, English Russell Group HEI)

The prevalence of the term 'employability' may reflect how the employability discourse has travelled and embedded itself in institutional cultures and goals, as well as increased institutional efforts to align their students to employer demands. The widespread use of the term, and related discourse such as 'graduate attributes' and 'transferable skills', together with the sense that both individual students and their institutions should do more to enhance employability, was far more evident in the current study than in a study exploring students' attitudes to the labour market in the previous decade (Tomlinson 2007).

Two dominant sub-themes underpinned the majority of students' perceptions of having to be more employable: their relative performance compared with other similarly qualified graduates and their ability to 'signal' the 'right message' in terms of distinctiveness (and attractiveness) to employers. The challenge of adding value to their formal higher education experience resonated strongly with all respondents of the study, a view which was derived from concerns about greater inter-graduate competition in mass higher education. These widespread concerns resonate with recent large-scale survey-based research that has charted recent graduates' outcomes and experience in the year following graduation (Future Track 2012). The Future Track survey has shown how distinctions between 'graduate' and 'non-graduate' jobs has blurred; jobs that have traditionally been undertaken by school and tertiary-level leavers are increasingly being occupied by university graduates. It has also shown the increasing income dispersion between recent graduates and the challenges this presents for achieving equitable returns on a university 'investment'.

The issue of how students performed relative to others was linked to a preoccupation with grade outcomes, what might be referred to as the 'cult of the grade'. The concern with reaching a certain grade threshold, most commonly in the UK the upper second class degree (2.1) loomed large. Students were concerned the first challenge was in possessing the right kind of credentials that employers would view favourably; and in some cases this spilled over into quite stringent forms of instrumentality towards achieving this. The overriding concern around grades in some cases appeared to distort the overall value students ascribed to their degrees. While some students discussed the longer-term benefits of participating in higher education, they also alluded to this being greatly devalued if they did not achieve a desired grade.

I don't want to just pass a degree, I want to get a good grade, because I want to do the best. So in the first year when actually grades don't technically count, when it's just a pass or fail, I've heard some quite interesting comments: It doesn't matter as long as you pass. Whereas for me it does matter, it's very different. There's quite a difference between me and the youngsters then.

(Female, Year 2, Information Technology in Organizations, English Russell Group HEI)

There was also a clear sense that 'good grades' alone were insufficient markers of a future graduate's employability. More had to be done to develop the wider dimension of their profile, encompassing experiences and achievements outside of formal study. The types of discourses students used around their future employability ranged from being in a position to actively 'sell themselves' to employers to acquiring the sorts of skills and experiences that would be valued by employers. All students in the study were concerned with adding value to their formal academic achievements, exploiting wider activities and experiences that would signal various 'soft' skills and personal dispositions that would give them an advantage over other graduates. It was seen as increasingly important to be able to develop and present a self-styled personal narrative that was distinctive from fairly homogenised or identikit mass educational profiles. The ability to signal personal attributes developed during extra-curricular activities and other outside experiences was perceived to be very significant in enabling an individual to stand apart from other students with similar formal academic qualifications.

The importance students attach to building profiles and adding value to their emerging CVs was borne of a widespread perception that through mass higher education employers had surplus talent to choose from and would only select those who could demonstrate both academic and social dimensions. Therefore, engagement in activities that developed and then conveyed wider skill-sets, such as student voice, volunteering and Student Union roles, were seen as a valuable means of signalling interpersonal and social skills that complemented formal study.

## 6.5. Students as 'consumers'?

A significant focus to this study was around students' perceptions of themselves as 'consumers', and the extent to which this was informing their own self-perceptions as learners. How did they perceive the 'student as consumer' condition and to what extent did it inform their approach to higher education? What did students perceive themselves to be consuming exactly, and how might this affect their attitudes and behaviours and their relationship to their institutions? Given the extensive commentary written about the student as consumer and in the context of more explicitly market-based discourses and institutional language that places students 'at the heart of the system', we might expect this to feed through into students' view of themselves as learners. In terms of institutional languages that reflect this, perhaps the most striking example of this is the 'you said, we did' framework of student feedback. This has been construed as an adoption of language from the hospitality or service sectors, encouraging HEIs to develop a reactive position rather than formulating longer-term strategies to best meet a variety of student needs.

The data indicated variable levels of identification with the notion of 'consuming' higher education, both in relation to students' identities as learners and in their relationship to their institutions more generally. Overall, it was clear that recent increases in fees have given students a heightened sense of expectation that their institution's quality should be commensurate with what they are financially contributing. There was also a feeling among respondents that they had more potential to exercise greater authority over matters relating to their programme and wider university experience. However, this did not necessarily translate in a widespread attitude of 'entitlement' or that their role as students had been minimised, including the levels of engagement that learning in higher education might necessitate.

The ambivalence towards the consumer approach appeared to stem from a number of views on the applications of a consumer approach in higher education. Firstly, higher education was still viewed to be incomparable with other products and services given the fundamentally different nature of education to the products in open markets and the ways in which they were experienced. Likewise, students were aware they were still working within structures set by their institutions and had to meet expected requirements that were specified within by their institutions and specific programmes.

At the same time, personal financial contribution had brought into question the value of their experiences, the ways in which they were being delivered and whether these experiences were commensurate with the private nature of their investment. Even though most students were aware that the analogies with other forms of consumption, including 'haircuts', 'crisps' and 'shows' did not properly capture the higher education experience, the very invocation of them implies that students have begun to think differently about higher education:

Like I think it works out 60 pound an hour and sometimes you do come out of a lecture and think 'well that wasn't very good' and like if you went to see a show, you'd be asking for your money back, and so the idea of whether it's worth it does come into it.

(Male, Year 2, Law, Northern Irish HEI)

Broadly, three types of position were identified in the study. The first, the *active service user* approach, constituting roughly just under a quarter of the sample showed the strongest identification with the consumer ethos. This was characterised by a strong sense that increased costs needed to be matched by highly transparent and effective modes of delivery by providers who were 'receiving' the costs students were incurring. These students typically referred to themselves as 'users of a service' or 'paying customers' and perceived the consumer position to be legitimate and something contemporary learners should embrace.

The second group of students, constituting just under half the sample were what could be termed *positioned consumers*, in the sense they had come to see themselves as consumers as a consequence of participating at a time when costs were substantially higher. While identifying in part with consumer discourses and believing that this had increasingly become part of their expectation of higher education, they did not see themselves as actively consuming higher education per se. These students tended to show a mixed and ambivalent attitude towards the consumer ethos: while there was some degree of identification with being a consumer and a sense of being able to exercise greater entitlement as students, this didn't generally influence their behaviours. However, their views indicate a partial identification with the consumer approach in the sense that they perceived themselves to have increasing stakeholder and bargaining power in how their higher education was arranged and delivered.

The final group, *resistors*, constituting roughly over a quarter of the sample, perceived the notion of consuming higher education to be both educationally problematic and something that potentially undermined their role as learners. The views of these students indicate the existence of values that emphasised the less tangible process of student engagement, the responsibility of student and their more active engagement in the process. In all cases, awareness of student consumer discourses and how students had become increasingly depicted as such was prevalent. The extent to which students identify or distance themselves with these discourses not only reflects wider sets of values and dispositions towards higher education, but also the extent to which they perceive consumerism to capture the realities of higher education.

#### **6.5.1. Active service-user approach – 'we're paying for it'**

The active service-user approach revealed a number of themes in students' attitudes and expectations of higher education, which appeared to be framed strongly by fee increases. The first was a clear sense that HEIs needed to be responsive to students' shifting demands, together with an antipathy towards practices that were not in line with these. Secondly, and related to the above, was a perception of what universities were now seen to represent - that is, as service providers whose value could be equated with how well they conformed to the effective delivery of a service that promised to offer a positive experience and facilitate positive future outcomes. In the absence of what some of these students viewed as clear and robust channels of accountability, it was only right that contemporary students should demand effective service. Thirdly, these students saw themselves and other students as having a more substantial role of ensuring greater overall accountability and of playing a more regulatory role in mitigating against so-called 'faulty provision'. This group of students were comfortable with the consumer analogy while also being receptive to the ways in which universities had marketed themselves and what services they had promised. Thus, prevailing policy-driven and institutional discourses around consumerism were more likely to be actively internalised and accepted.

Two of the students in this group were mature students. One of these, Kevin, had extensive experience of industry but had wanted a change of direction studying an arts programme. Throughout, Kevin spoke of being naturally curious about higher education having left formal education at an early point and witnessed peers go through the process. It was also evident that he had genuine enthusiasm for his subject, partly the reason for choosing this over more 'vocational' subjects. If he was going to pay for university education, it had to be in an area he enjoyed. At the same time, he expressed clear antipathy to the ways in which higher education was organised, ranging from the level of contact hours, the quality of standards and aspects of his programme delivery. A student with considerable industry experience, he compared universities unfavourably with what he perceived as the more responsive and effectively deliverable models in other industry sectors. He also made reference to what paying customers could expect in other services; namely greater transparency and 'value for money'.

There's no command structure which is what I'm used to. Someone is responsible for the whole thing: this is your job, you're to deliver that module and this is how you're going to do it; this is your job and you're going to do it ... And if that goes horribly wrong I've got a bloke ready to stand in, if you get sick or your child gets sick and you can't deliver this. But here there's no overall control; the individual modules people do their best with, but the overall structure of the whole place, no one is balancing up all the different bits and making sure everything comes together.

The analogy with 'industry' and the fact that HEIs were somehow seen as separate institutions outside the 'real' corporate world, or at least the private sector, reinforced his sense that universities continued to operate within a 'Golden Age' collegial structure with minimal responsiveness to a changing environment. The fact that he was financially contributing to a service in which he was not actually 'seeing any major improvement' made him question the efficiency of the service. Kevin discussed his appreciation of some of his lecturers' efforts and expertise, but he also emphasised a rebalance in power towards purchasers in a system that needed to be responsive to students' changing demands.

In many ways, the shifting power dynamic from the provider to the paying service user has given rise to a sense of justification towards wanting a more client-centred relationship between learner and higher education professional. The role of university teachers is not only as an effective provider, but also as accountable 'employee'. Judgement of lecturers' effectiveness is mainly criterion-referenced against performance in meeting learners' expectations. Not to see it in this way is to tolerate ill-practice and allow unquestioned, yet questionable, professional practice to run its course, particularly as lecturers' roles have become reducible to 'employees'.

I look at every lecturer who teaches me as an employee of mine. I think, I'm paying you and you'd better be good enough. And if they're not ... [laughs]. I think everyone should get what they pay for. The kids, through no fault of their own they've just come straight from A-levels, they just don't understand the value of money in many ways, and they haven't had to work for it, so they don't understand what it's worth to them.

In several instances, the desire for efficient servicing of student demands stemmed from a clear instrumentality towards higher education. The formal rationality of higher education being a vehicle towards better economic returns and employment prospects explicitly frames these students' attitudes. While instrumental and utilitarian dispositions towards higher education do not necessarily equate with a consumerist approach, they can certainly spill over into more client-centric understandings of the relationship between learner and teacher. The explicit desire to get a much sought-after positional good, a competition-enhancing and valued degree credential, may result in minimal tolerance to practices that impede this.

This attitude resonated with Matilda, a second-year politics student at the same institution, whose primary goal was the 'best possible grades'. Her self-identification as someone 'paying for a service' was allied with wanting this to lead to something tangible; both on-going service quality and subsequently on graduating. Again, analogies with other services are prevalent:

I do think that I'm paying for a service and I expect something out of it. And also I think I would definitely think that more so if I was paying the higher fee. So if you can't get through to your lecturers, or if they're not replying I do think that's rude because at the end of the day you're paying for service. You wouldn't go to a supermarket and just pay for half a sandwich – do you know what I mean?  
(Female, Year 2, Politics, English Russell Group HEI)

In the cases of students who largely valued the service that they received from their lecturers, there was still an evident paradox: at one level appreciating the expertise and enthusiasm of some of their lecturers, while at another level viewing them as individuals whose very position was contingent on students entering in the first instance. The idea of students 'paying lecturers' wages' introduces a direct transactional dynamic to the pedagogical relationship. While such students may seem themselves to be in receipt of lecturers' intellectual authority, they also view themselves to have substantial regulatory muscle.

You want to interact with the staff, because we are technically paying their wages, so I want to get lots out of them, because on my course they are so passionate about their subject and their field, and I just want to get that out of them, and expand my own knowledge.

(Female, Year 2, English, English post-1992 HEI)

The notion of what a student 'gets out' of their formal educational experiences had clearly led some students to associate, or at least conflate, value with a lecturer's perceived capacity to meet changing expectations. Value is not only associated with a cost return, but also with time, service quality and levels of expenditure involved – and in increasingly specific terms. The highly rational time-quality-cost model of evaluating overall value against estimated levels of potential economic expenditure led to some students making calculations about what each session was 'costing' them. While in some instances, the volume and quantity of teaching that students received was the key area of complaint, costs were also measured against perceived quality and whether this was commensurate with increased expenditure. Even though some of these views carried genuine judgements and concerns about the quality of the learning experience and a desire for a positive educational experience, the very linkage of a concrete learning experience with a price indicates a more stringent assessment of what students were being offered:

It is sort of a business, 'cos that's why they've upped the prices, because once there's competition there's a load of people going to university, and they might want less people going; and then they want the competition between the universities. So I can see where it could be seen as a consumer, but the idea of we want something out of it, so we don't want to just buy the packet of crisps; we want the packet of crisps and then we want to have satisfaction from what we're buying.

(Female, Year 2, Television and Broadcasting, English post-1992 HEI)

It's just when you pay for it, if you do call it a service, if you're paying for a service you're going to use it. If you had a gym membership you're going to use it as much as you can to get your money's worth. And this is one thing about this university, they always offer all these extra little bits and pieces that are amazing, like student ambassador, and careers, but you have to go out of your way to get them, and I like that because I think if people aren't going to bother that's their problem. If I want to bother and I want to make the most of my degree I'll be the one to go and do that. It's just how my mind-set is.

(Female, Year 2, English post-1992 HEI)

### **6.5.2. Positioned consumers – 'in some ways we are'**

A larger group of students expressed views that were somewhat less brazen in language and less critical of HE. For these students the increase in fees and related institutional discourses around a higher education 'market' had made them think more about whether they were 'getting value for money' and if higher education was meeting their requirements. At one level, their increased private expenditure had made them question the value of service, quality and delivery of their provision. However, while these students had internalised aspects of this consumer discourse and used it to inform views about what they could expect, they didn't perceive their role and status to be consumers as such. These students also emphasised both the rights and responsibilities of students in what some referred to as a 'two-way process' of engagement: fee-paying students could now expect and demand more from their institutions, but they also had to put in requisite effort.

Students in this position believed that consumerist approaches were now more prevalent in HE and that higher costs had reinforced this. It was further affirmed by the ways in which students had become positioned as such within official public and institutional discourses. Students identified in part with the consumer condition, but this was taken to be a by-product of the shifting environment they now operated in, including the ways in which universities had been presented to them:

I'm not really sure. I'm quite on the fence. There were some people there who were like, I'm paying for this I should get something out of it. I don't know because I think you should also be here because you

enjoy it, so therefore – it's really difficult, it is a balance; you need to put into it as well; you're going to make your worth out of it if you put into it, like 100%.

(Female, Year 1, Biology, English Russell Group HEI)

I don't know. I don't really, I understand that we're consumers of the university in a sense we're consuming, I don't know, like products or a classification or whatever, but I don't see students as consumers. I see us as individuals within, but then I suppose society views us as a different, and a consumer, but I don't know, I don't think I do.

(Female, Year 2, Biology, Welsh HEI)

This tension was encapsulated by Caitlin, a student at an English post-1992 institution. Her views indicate clear ambivalence towards the 'consumer' label, but also convey students' sensitivity to discourses that endorse the 'payment' element and the association with education as a 'service'. If the delivery of her degree qualification, the so-called 'product' is achieved through the efficient arrangement of service provision, then students are naturally entitled to question this. However, Caitlin largely disassociated her degree from being a 'product', as both the processes involved and the effect of attaining a degree and consuming more general market products was perceived as too dissimilar:

Yeah, it's strange because I would never think of it like that, but I suppose in reality we are really consumers because it is a service that we're paying for. But then again you could argue that whatever you pay taxes for that's a service that you pay for – you're a consumer of that. But I think it's different because it doesn't feel like a product. When you use the term 'consumer' you're thinking of a product, whereas I'd never think of my degree as something I can put a price on.

(Female, Year 3, Languages and International Relations, English post-1992 HEI)

In a similar way, Syrah reflected on how the cash nexus between students and their institutions was generating expectations of 'service standards' and delivery. Like other students in this group, she viewed this as conferring students with greater authority even if it did not take the form of consumer-driven relationship:

As soon as you start paying for a service, it then becomes a service, and I do notice, I personally do see it, and even though I don't call myself a consumer, I am a consumer then. But how I see it is I'm paying for this now, so I want a certain standard, a certain quality you know in the delivery of the curriculum and, because well I can make comparisons can't I then, because if I'm paying the same fee here that I could pay somewhere else, and I'm getting better value.

(Female, Year 2, Education Studies & Sociology, English Guild HEI)

Lara, a second-year mature Biology student at a Welsh HEI, discussed how the student-consumer agenda had been conferred on current students, making direct reference to both institutional marketing and wider discursive framing. She felt this was particularly the case when students were choosing universities and universities attempt to differentiate themselves and 'sell the product' of their unique experience, even if it didn't quite correspond with the actual experience of being a student:

I would generally say it's mostly media. As soon as you've got your a-level results and you've chosen, you know the universities you would like to go to, that's all media based and it's all, you know you're paying this amount of money, you should go to the best, you know the best university you can for the A-level grades that you've got. So it's the advertising and the selling of the better universities in comparison with the lower-graded ones. But as soon as you're there, it doesn't.

(Female, Year 2, Biology, Welsh HEI)

Like the service-users, these students were aware of the rationalistic cost-time-quality dynamic (working out how much each session cost) suggesting this has penetrated through to many students' judgement of the value of their experience and how they might equate cost to quality. However, compared with the service-user approach, where more explicit judgements were made, this group were more likely to distance themselves from this stance and emphasise students' input into the formal learning experience. Educational value was not always equated with a specific cost calculation, and it was still up to students to make the most from their learning. These students acknowledged there were numerous instances where expectations had been set for students, including engagement with wider reading and taking up the challenges that some of their lecturers had set them. So even though they might be 'paying for a service' there still needed to be some personal input from the student. The views of Liam, a second-year Law student, who was very much driven by future careers, captures this approach:

Like you're paying for a service, but it's a two-way street. You're not in secondary school and there a certain responsibility for you to ... like if you haven't done any work for a seminar you can't engage, and you're sitting there blankly and you know you're just there to be signed in so you don't get an email from someone ... But you're getting no value out of it for the specific reason that you haven't upheld your part of the agreement, like they've provided the hour of teaching and if you haven't done any work it's your fault that you have got anything out of it. Like there's rights and responsibilities on both parts.  
(Male, Year 2, Law, Northern Irish HEI)

### 6.5.3. Resistors – 'it's not what higher education is about'

The third position, that of actively resisting the consumerist approach, constituted roughly a quarter of the sample. It was characterised by a more active distancing from the consumerist approach, and a sense that this was fundamentally discrepant with the underlying goals of higher education. A number of key features framed these students' attitudes. The first was an underlying view that higher education was not there to be consumed, and that the positioning of current students as consumers not only diminished their role and status as learners, but also the process of attaining a degree. Related to this was a concern about the educational values consumerism engendered and the marked differences between universities and other commercial services. While these students saw themselves as being at university to get 'a good degree', they were also there 'to learn' and become 'better individuals'.

As such, these students sought to distance themselves from other students whose approaches they perceived to be highly instrumental and having a strongly consumerist ethos. These students also tended to engage critically with the consumerist discourse, sometimes drawing upon political views and disciplinary influences. Like service-users, they harboured expectations of standards in higher education and were not adverse to criticise poor practice. However, these were premised more on educational grounds than on exercising their rights as potential paying customers. Like some of the students in the second category, they acknowledged the responsibilities of students themselves and the importance of being more proactively engaged in the process.

In a number of instances, antipathy towards consumer approaches reflected what these students saw as the devaluing of their status as students and a signal of the declining intellectual effort and merit required to attain a degree. For these students, a consumerist approach to higher education was a passive one, denoting that students had merely 'purchased their degree' rather than expending due cognitive effort and commitment. This was also seen to signal a lower intellectual effort in achieving the degree, which could further potentially diminish its social and economic value. Reducing the degree to a passive purchase and an outcome that was detached from a learner's own efforts was at odds with these students' self-perceptions of being more proactive learners. Higher education learning was seen to entail some degree of agency and active engagement in the process that did not sit with a student-consumer approach:

Consuming to me is passive. I'm not just sitting there in lectures with my eyes propped open watching; I'm listening and I'm thinking about it, and I don't just think about these things during lectures, I do outside reading, and I really do consider these points that come up in lectures deeply; I'm deeply interested. I mean if I really had to create a label, even the label I'd create would be open-ended, but it would be something like a person who is working towards a degree. It just states it is with that active component with no other assumptions, it's just very plain.

(Female, Year 1, English Literature, English 1994 Group HEI)

Such attitudes were shared by Hayley, a second-year Psychology student at a Welsh HEI, who expressed concerns about the anti-educational vein in the consumer ethic. She replaced the term consumerism with 'life experience' to sum up her stance on higher education, indicating that HE engendered more intangible personal gains than those implied in transactional (and short-termist) approaches to higher education:

You think that the university experience is richer than perhaps just turning up, paying for a service, going to lectures, getting particular value and that sort of thing. It's just a life experience I suppose.

(Female, Year 2, Psychology, Welsh HEI)

The notion of working towards a degree and engaging in some level of intellectual effort was seen to be in strong contrast to the more passive approach of consumer-driven learning. The distancing from passivity and the implicit

sense that consumer-orientated students were physically attending sessions if not actively engaging (there in body, if not spirit) was a recurring theme among this group of students.

This view was highlighted by Sandra who made reference to the shifting cultures of mass higher education and the declining intellectual effort of some students who were participating by default and who felt it was 'their right' to obtain a degree. This also connected to prevailing concerns she held about the declining currencies of a degree credential, a view shared by all students in the study, as earlier discussed. To her, a more consumer-oriented approach denoted diminishing efforts in achieving a credential, serving to further lower its value:

There are things that upset me about the people who are here who don't bother; can't be bothered to do the work and still get the good grades. And it's like the masses getting into university, and I have this thing about before it used to be the elite would go to university, and I have this conflict in my mind whether that should be open to everyone.

(Female, Year 3, Politics & International Relations, English post-1992 HEI)

Students who challenged consumer approaches were more prone to highlight the incomparability of higher education with other services, as related to both the nature of higher education's activities and what they saw as a higher intrinsic value to higher education. Duncan, a Genetics student in the research-driven Scottish university made reference to the fairly high-standing profile of his institution and the competitive, higher tariff entry requirements which had reaffirmed his sense of intellectual merit and achievement. He saw there being a responsibility on him to prove his worth and intellectual value as a student, which was reinforced by what he perceived to be a challenging intellectual environment. He contrasted his antipathy towards what he perceived to be a growing short-term consumer-orientated approach with his own sense of engaging in intensive activity over a four-year period. For Duncan, more short-termist, transactional approaches undercut the wider educational values he felt underpinned his programme, which were based on rigorous academic learning:

Even though it has changed a lot you almost don't feel like you can exercise your way to your degree, I don't see it as a service. So unlike if you were getting a haircut or something, you can't go: 'oh no I don't like this, think again, or something'. You feel like you're privileged to be there, and you've earned that opportunity to be there, so you should work hard. It's almost like you're working for the university rather than the university is working for you, in some ways.

(Male, Year 3, Genetics, Scottish HEI)

Related to this sentiment was a more politically-orientated resistance to what these students perceived to be the detrimental consequences of more market-driven higher education. This was certainly the case among students in the lower fee paying UK nations with a concern that fee increases could potentially escalate.

I think the commodification of education is disastrous, and I'm really grateful that all the universities pretty much seem to have united – consciously or not – to say we're going to all put £9,000 as the fee. I think fees are wrong, education should be a right, but it's far better that's it's all accessible so it's an equal basis, because some degrees are more expensive than others but they're all of equal merit to society; so a physicist or a historian have very different skills and they will benefit each other in differing ways. You don't know how exactly necessarily to the exact amount, so they should be subsidising each other because they have a net benefit to society, together, and you don't want to end up with a situation like the US and Canada as well where it's very expensive for certain degrees, and you can say, our school is the best and we're going to charge you a lot more; that basically means that the richest can get an education, and that's very bad for society, self-mobility and all the rest of it.

(Male, Year 3, Genetics, Scottish HEI)

Similar views were evident among other students at Duncan's institution, which was also located in a country which had not introduced tuition fees. A related concern was the perceived colonisation of market values in public institutions such as education and health. Steve, a second-year Politics and International Relations student drew analogies with other public services and the incorporation of what he saw to be market agendas in services that were originally conceived for the public good. Higher education, like the NHS, in Steve's views needed to be immune from 'market forces' which he saw as distorting the nature of these services. Transforming both health and higher education into a market commodity was wrong in his view and undermined its core values:

I definitely don't like the term (consumer) because – not just education but also with health and with a lot of social factors and anything that's not actually material, then I just don't like the idea that everything in life

can be attributed to consumption, and can be analysed in the economical terms, and that you would look at ideas like knowledge, or like happiness, or like physical or emotional health as being sellable. And so, for the same reason, then I oppose privatisation of the NHS and anything similar. I just don't really like what I see as an economic encroachment on the human sphere, which I don't think should be down to mathematical imperatives. I think there's some sanctity to certain things, I guess, which is an idea which runs counter to consumerism.

(Male, Year 2, Politics and International Relations, Scottish HEI)

## 6.6. Students' values, motivations and perceptions of the gains from higher education

This report has illustrated the increasingly utilitarian language used by contemporary students, based on economically-centred discourses of investment, employability and outcomes. This appears to be a consequence of the shifting higher education and economic landscape that students find themselves in and the raised stakes for securing advantageous outcomes post-university. It is also clear from previous illustrations that the rising costs are reinforcing these perspectives, reflected in the sense that universities need to do more to meet their needs and best facilitate outcomes in a future context where risks have become higher. There is also clear variability in the degree of instrumentality that students employed which is likely to inform their approach and attitude towards learning and their relationship to their institutions.

However, amidst prevailing economically-driven discourses, the 'university experience' continues to be valued by the majority of students as evident in their accounts of the 'social' and 'personal' gains derived from participating in HE. Alongside the values students ascribe to being more 'employable' and better prepared for the labour market, are other values around academic achievement, intellectual development and greater social confidence. While there was some degree of variance in the priorities students gave to 'academic' and 'social' dimensions of higher education, students acknowledged the importance of combining both areas. Across the sample, there was a view that formal academic learning constituted just one dimension of the university experience. Economic, academic and personal benefits are all valued and in many ways students see these as being conjoined. For instance, students' perceptions of possessing greater academic knowledge and having stronger social skills can feed into their sense of being in a more advantageous position for finding future employment. Certainly, the challenge of having to develop a profile for their post-university lives that encompasses these different aspects of development was prominent in most students' minds.

In many ways, the separation of the different dimensions of higher education, including formal study, social and extra-curricular engagement, peer interactions and paid employment gave students the sense that they had to 'balance' different aspects of the university experience. This was clearly the case for students who were both keen to get the most out of their higher education and conscious of building up their profiles. Given the importance attached to social skills, including 'learning how to get on with people' and the development of social confidence, many students felt they had to utilise wider aspects of university life. Engagement in various Student Union activities and other more informal channels were seen to add significant value to their student profile and experience. However, this does not come without challenges as pointed out by Jenna, a student who attached significance to engaging in broad aspects of university life:

It is hard, like on top of my busy academic workload, like I'm a course rep, president of the law society, involved in student voice, and then on top of that I'm involved in various student clubs that I have to fit in.

Oh, and I try to see my boyfriend at least once a week.

(Female, Year 2, Law, Northern Irish HEI)

Gavin, a first-year Physics student at an English Russell Group university described similar challenges in striking a balance around student lifestyle, extra-curricular activities that he was committed to and which enriched his profile, and mastering a challenging new subject area:

It's difficult to balance actually. Where I work in Outreach I feel like I'm letting people down if I can't do it. So I've ended up missing a few lectures actually to work. So it's quite difficult to balance. But I think in my case it's fairly atypical, 'cos it's a big commitment to have a part-time job alongside doing a degree, and when it's just sports or extra-curricular activities you've got the Wednesday afternoon for that.

(Male, Year 1, Physics, English Russell Group HEI)

## 6.7. Developmental gains and higher education

Across the sample, students ascribed value to their participation and considered it had some positive bearing on their future lives and had equipped them well overall, if not directly 'preparing them' for specific jobs. While there is much concern about getting an equitable return and positioning the degree towards future employment, the majority of students in this study also discussed the personal and social benefits from being in university. Higher education was seen to provide them with employment-related assets and skills, as well as developing them as individuals. There was a widespread perception that the benefits of higher education were derived from both the formal academic context and the enrichment of subject-related knowledge and skills, as well as the more informal contexts of wider social interactions with others.

The data indicated students' sense of there being a cognitive and cultural added-value associated with participating in higher education through the overall enrichment of personal dispositions and the development of their own agency. The majority of students made implicit references to a notion of *graduateness* in terms of more distinctive dispositions that graduates were likely to have acquired through higher education. This related to a view that there were discernible differences between graduates and non-graduates, the latter were seen to be missing out on the development of graduate-specific dispositions and skills. Students' perception that their university experiences had somehow 'changed them' as individuals was attributed to both informal contexts of the wider university experience, as well as more formal academically-specific contexts. In terms of the former, particular value was placed on living independently, extending social ties, negotiating other people and interacting with diverse groups of individuals.

More academic-specific gains were attributed to overall intellectual maturation, improved disciplinary knowledge, handling more abstract material and having to work independently in a more challenging learning environment where they were supported less directly by teachers. There was inevitable variance in the level of academic engagement and subject discipline affiliation, yet the overwhelming view was that they were in receipt of more advanced knowledge that had broadened their cognitive profiles.

In the case of some students, intellectual, social and behavioural changes were seen as a direct result of participating in higher education with marked changes from before they had entered. The students interviewed in this study conveyed a sense that higher education had provided them with a better overall platform from which to operate in the future and negotiate future challenges:

I think the independence of working on your own work and living by yourself and socialising, coming to university and making new friends – that's the best skill ever, because when you get into a new job you're going to have to get along with people because we're all social primates; you have to be able to get on with people. So, diving in at the deep end, learning how to live by yourself straight away, having to deal with a lot of work straight away - it's a baptism of fire that sets you up well because you can deal with it in a new situation, and by the fourth year you're ready; you're ready to go to the big, wide world, and experience it, because you're going to be by yourself again.

(Female, Year 2, Marine Biology, English Russell Group HEI)

Learning to live independently – you're obviously getting the degree and you hope that's going to lead to having a better job. It's not always the case; I know a few people that just went straight from school to work and did really well, and it's frustrating but you have to go fair play to them, they seem to have got it all right. But it's all these little things.

(Female, Year 2, English, English post-1992 HEI)

The personal and social benefits were perceived to be fairly considerable, although it was seen as important that students exploited social opportunities in order to achieve a more holistic experience that encompassed both the social and academic side. This was seen to be of immediate and longer-term advantage. Even among students who placed greater value on their academic development, there was a sense that the benefits of higher education would be constrained by excessive focus on purely academic aspects and by students 'just spending their time in the library, with their head stuck in books'. The 'university experience' was one which not just encompassed academic engagement, but wider aspects. It was also through these broader contexts that students were able to develop as people by providing them with a platform for self-expression. Much reference was made to ways in which higher education had made students more self-confident, more socially-rounded, and equipped with a range of 'softer' interpersonal and social skills that had been lacking previously.

The genuine developmental gains that students attribute to the university experience were evident in the views of Judy, a mature student from a large working class family in the West Midlands, who attributed a marked intellectual and cultural shift to her two years at university. When probed further on what she felt had occurred, she referred to both the formal and informal learning environment of higher education. At one level, her academic engagement with course materials in social science disciplines had opened up intellectual and discursive spaces that had not been entered into before and had provided a more sophisticated platform for understanding human relations. At another level, the more informal context of university, including being in the presence of students from ethnically diverse backgrounds and being in a position to interact more closely with them through her course, had broken down prejudices. She clearly felt more empowered and liberated through this type of acculturation which had generally enriched her social interaction with others. This was also mediated in part by the institution the student attended, as in the case of the above student who attended a relatively small widening participation Guild HEI. This student's classes would have been relatively small and contained students from mixed ethnic background and ages and offered a broader opportunity to engage others' perspectives.

I've always been ... I suppose racist is the wrong word ..., but I suppose in some respects my views were a little bit maybe that way. Tolerant, yeah more, not just tolerant though, because tolerant means you kind of put up with it ... more accepting, understanding. I think it's both (the intellectual environment and social contact). It's the fact that you are meeting a lot of different people from different backgrounds, cultures, religions, and people at this age, when you get older are more willing to share their views with you, whereas when you're younger, it's like yeah, this is my religion and that's it.  
(Female, Year 2, Sports Sciences & Education, English Guild HEI)

The fact that formal academic discourses facilitate a broader cognitive framework and a set of core discipline-related skills (which in the case of social sciences may actively engage in critical race approaches) can clearly work in enhancing or shifting students' existing intellectual and cultural dispositions. Other students noted both the subtle and tangible cognitive gain through participating in higher education, particularly in knowledge and understanding. Clearly subject-specific skills across different disciplinary domains can enrich students' intellectual frameworks in discernible ways and filter through to their view of the world. Levels of engagement with subject areas inevitably varied, but the scope that subject-related learning and the cognitive activities it entails is well recognised by students. In some cases, this can very much shape students' future orientations, particularly in the case of students who strongly affiliate with their subject disciplines and wanted to study further or pursue employment in a closely allied area. In many instances, students referred to the ways in which studying in a specific subject had greatly broadened their understanding of the world and their ability to apply this to aspects of their thinking around everyday situations, as in the case of this politics and international relations student:

There are a lot of skills my course in particular gives you to do with research and just finding things out; they don't teach you specifically, but you do it through the process of looking at different arguments and strengths and different arguments, looking at different points of view, different takes from different situations. Just the general education, the learning about different aspects of politics, and how to go about finding out about them as well as thinking about them.  
(Male, Year 2, Politics, English Russell Group HEI)

## 6.8. Values and motivations

Quite broadly, this research found a range of values that ranged from the highly utilitarian and instrumental on one extreme, towards ones that emphasised the developmental and intrinsic value of formal learning and its capacity to develop and enhance their agency. There were quite a lot of overlaps in between. For instance, students' engagement and commitment towards their programme often co-existed with future concerns with achieving a desirable qualification that would serve them well for the job market. A future-orientated and pragmatic perspective was seen to reflect the rising stakes and risks for contemporary students and graduates, even among students with intrinsic values and motivations.

The tensions between getting the most out of the higher education experience, achieving well academically and enhancing future job prospects was captured by Rory, a proactive and involved student who was engaged in wider aspects of university life as a student ambassador. He was also aware that his numerous extra-curricular commitments had to be matched by achieving well on his degree programme, Engineering. His choice of programme had been driven by future career goals and earlier academic interests and he was now looking forward to entering the job market. The instrumentality towards doing what he could to achieve highly on his programme

and give himself a future advantage, as well as sense of achievement, worked in parallel with more development aspects of the university experience. The emphasis on getting a 'good degree' predominated much of his views on the core aims of university even though he acknowledged having got much from the more informal contexts of HE and outside extra-curricular interests:

Getting a good degree definitely is a key. Yeah, that is it. But also it's nice to socialise, but at the end of the day I am coming to university to learn and as much as I want to do the extra-curricular stuff, it still comes back to the point that I am here to learn and that's what I'm supposed to be doing.  
(Male, Year 2, Engineering, English Russell Group HEI)

Sometimes, dual and competing goals and values co-exist. For instance, Vanessa, a Year 2 English student, discussed how her university experience had crucially developed her as a person; if she was to look back on it she would not change many aspects of it. Later in the interview, this view was off-set somewhat by a preoccupation with her grade outcomes and an emphasis on the absolute imperative that she attained the 'all-important 2.1'. When asked whether she would still value the experience, knowledge acquired and its personal development-building scope if she did not reach this outcome, a somewhat different reaction was caused:

Mmm, like as I mentioned I love my subject but I'd be disappointed if I didn't get the grade I wished for (2.1). That'd change my perspective quite a bit.  
(Female, Year 2, English, English Post 1992 HEI)

Concerns with degree qualification outcomes and what students need to do to achieve this are clearly salient, and linked to prevailing concerns about future employability. These can override what are genuine values around academic learning and its role in self-development. If the 'post-experience good' of a sound return in future employment is not met, circumvented by not attaining a desirable credential, these more subtle gains can easily diminish. Intrinsic and largely intangible benefits related to the enrichment of self-identity and personal agency are not necessarily measurable or returnable. They can, in turn, be easily devalued.

Students who had developed more stringently instrumental attitudes towards learning were concerned almost exclusively with the degree outcome and attaining a desirable grade. Their values centred on 'being more employable' and being in a more favourable position to get a 'decent job' after they graduated. Less tangible outcomes relating to processes such as acquired knowledge and academic citizenship were given less value. Accordingly, such students placed stronger emphasis on the role of higher education in equipping them well for future employment. They were also more prone to adopt economically-driven discourses around investment and ensuring that they gained a return in the future.

The linkages between values and motivations are clear here: values based on the formal rationality of economic betterment tend to manifest in a set of extrinsic goals and behaviours that concern the fulfilment of these values. Some students were fairly explicit in describing their core motivations as 'getting the best possible degree' that they could. This tended to be norm-referenced against other students' achievements, suggesting this had less the intrinsic value of 'proving to oneself' than the extrinsic value of 'succeeding over others'. Furthermore, such students' conceptualisation and approaches to learning are likely to be more outcome-driven and concerned with the employment-enhancing potential of their formal study; and mainly in terms of the acquisition of relevant credentials rather than an in-depth inquisition of new knowledge. The notion of higher education credentials as positional goods very much underpins such perspectives.

At one level, instrumentality among students reflects a concern with credentials and how best to attain them and then add value to them. Among students who had adopted a more instrumental credentialist approach, significant value was placed on the 'end result' of their learning; finding the most efficient ways of achieving this often framed their motivations. A certain degree of apathy and indifference was evident here, particularly among some students moving towards the end of their studies, almost as if an end-game point had been reached and they were now thinking about their lives post-graduation. Learning therefore takes on a more acquisitive value and is based on engaging with material that would best help them reach the end goal of a desirable grade. In turn, a more surface-type approach becomes more prominent based on engaging with material that will most enhance their degree outcomes. There are clearly relationships between these approaches and students' wider perception of higher education, how it should be organised and best fulfil their expectations. Students with a more explicitly instrumental orientation are more likely to convey a stronger identification with consumer attitudes and emphasise the market good value of higher education and their role in contributing towards the attainment of this through higher fees.

More instrumental approaches to higher education can easily spill over into wider attitudes of the value of higher education and perception of what higher education will provide. Other aspects of higher education are likely to take precedence such as involvement in extra-curricular activities and doing all they can to enhance their profile, and in some cases similar levels of instrumentality were evident as expressed in 'putting on their CV'. While such students are aware of the positional value of their degree credential they were also aware that it needed to be enriched as a result of greater competition. For those who are now more motivated by future employment and do not necessarily perceive a strong affinity to their subject area, the task was to work best with existing curricula and modules to ensure the best possible outcome.

Other students' instrumentality was more directly orientated towards future employment. Students with a more instrumentally vocational orientation placed emphasis on acquiring salient job-related skills and knowledge that would potentially assist them in the labour market. This was clearly the case for some students who had chosen vocational subjects due to their anticipated relevance and saw their learning in terms of best facilitating access to, if not directly preparing for and socialising them towards, their target employment. As with students who had adopted an instrumental credentialist attitude they also wanted to acquire the most desirable credentials, although their approach showed engagement with their subject areas and the learning process. Given these students' goals were very closely aligned to future employment, they were more likely to focus on tangible, concrete aspects of their programmes and to downplay the more reflective aspects, or at least those which appeared tangential to their primary goals. Vocationally-driven learners also tended to value teaching and teachers who were more at the industry interface and could offer practical guidance on aspects of their programme and its applied relevance.

Other students conveyed values that were less instrumental overall and had a more developmental and academically-orientated focus. Their discussion of the benefits of being in higher education and its salient impacts tended to be foregrounded by reference to the more intrinsic and developmental benefits from their learning and wider experiences of higher education. However, these students were not motivated purely by a 'learning for learning's sake' approach. Like most other students in the study, they used discourses of economic investment and also emphasised the employment-enhancing benefits of their degree. However, this group made strong overall links to their academic learning and their own personal development and not just more exclusive reference to more transient values of acquiring credentials. Thus, while these students harboured a range of extrinsic goals such as achieving 'good grades', they emphasised the means of achieving these and wanting to intellectually engage in course material.

## **6.9. Expectations of Teaching and learning**

In terms of teaching and learning experiences, some clear themes emerged in terms of what students expect, and are categorised in the following areas.

### **6.9.1. Knowledgeable, enthusiastic and engaging lecturers**

Students clearly valued knowledgeable and engaging lecturers, particularly those who could bring the 'subject to life' and make strong linkages between more abstract academic material and real-world contexts. Students particularly valued tutors and lecturers who knew their subject well and were able to present it in an interesting and clear way, and stimulate them into reading further on a subject. There was a strong sense of students wanting lecturers who were able to project authority in their discipline and, where appropriate, illuminate this with the kinds of research they and colleagues were engaged in. Students discussed how the best teaching experiences were when lecturers 'were passionate' and that this was fairly easy to pick up. There was a strong sense among the respondents that the raising of tuition fees would shift expectations about their formal teaching and learning experiences with students demanding more high quality teaching.

By extension, there was criticism of less innovative and didactic approaches among some lecturers who opted for more passive forms of pedagogic engagement ("just reading off notes"). At the same time as lecturers' ability to impart knowledge in meaningful ways was valued by students, so was their ability to de-centre from advanced specialist knowledge. A lecturer's knowledge was valued, but so was the way they engaged students and translated their knowledge. This was particularly important in larger classes which provided less room for interaction and more personal forms of engagement. The views of these two students from a 1994 HEI, studying very different subject areas, reinforces the value students ascribe to lecturers' enthusiasm:

What I really want from teaching at university is passionate tutors who enjoy teaching, because I see in some lecturers that they just can't be bothered with teaching, all they want to do is their research, which I understand that that's more interesting for them, it's personal preference. But I feel like sometimes they forget that after all they're also teachers. I guess that's one of my disappointments.  
(Female, Year 2, Art History and English, English 1994 Group HEI)

Well I do agree that having a lecturer that does actually engage you and is actually passionate about it does make quite a bit of difference actually. I think also for your own personal learning. But I personally think that workshops are better than that.  
(Male, Year 1, Physics, English 1994 Group HEI)

Students viewed effective teaching as both aiding their learning, but also as provoking further interest in their subjects and encouraging them to engage in independent learning activities. Students discussed how positive teaching generated further interest, for example wanting to pursue a subject matter further. While students' interest and level of engagement in lecturer's own research varied, as well as the extent to which they valued the transference of up-to-date research, students perceived that lecturers' enthusiasm for subject areas which they were at the forefront of would engage students. The development of independent ways of behaving and learning was perceived by a significant number of respondents to be one of the main outcomes of effective teaching and learning in higher education:

I think the lecturers they're really inspired with what they are doing and they really enjoy it, and it kind of shows, and when they're teaching it, it's not like they are reading from a textbook, and they're teaching it and it seems like they're really enjoying it and it kind of makes you enjoy it and you love it and you want to be as knowledgeable as they are. So they're kind of like inspiring. Especially because some research it, some of my lecturers have done a lot of research, and we just kind of look up to them and you would just want to be like them.  
(Female, Year 1, English, English Guild HEI)

A number of students drew upon what they perceived to be innovative teaching that had made a meaningful impact on their engagement with a subject area and capacity to learn new material. Underpinning such views was the belief that a lecturer had made a genuine impact on their learning, sometimes through a novel or lateral approach to the subject, or by providing a firm context to the subject. This was particularly the case for denser material that students might find less accessible and needed a firmer contextualisation and illustration. Students discussed the importance they attached to theoretical and applied interlinks in their subject area and the capacity for good lecturers to bring dense subject area more to life:

Because it's biology there is a lot of theory behind it, and obviously there's a lot of ethics as well, so there's a lot of stuff you need to be told and take because you can't experiment on it, but I think it just needs to be brought to life a bit, and it depends on the lecturer and it depends who is giving you all this information.  
(Female, Biology, Year 1, English Group English HEI)

Just brings it to life. I wouldn't like the thought of somebody teaching me something they've just read out of books, so they've learnt it themselves and so it's from book to them to me. I don't agree with that. I think it should come from actual experience, and that is what really brings it to life for me, and what really makes it interesting, because you can actually see how it is and not how it's written in a book, or on the Internet.  
(Female, Criminology, Year 2, English post-1992 HEI)

### **6.9.2. Greater levels of interaction and personal contact**

A further area of teaching and learning which students valued, but felt was not manifest enough currently, was more extensive and better quality interaction between students and lecturers, mainly in the form of contact hours. Greater levels of interaction were perceived to help personalise aspects of learning in what could sometimes feel like fairly anonymous learning environments of larger group teaching, such as the 200+ lectures. Students often pointed towards a preference for more 1:1 opportunities where they could get more informed guidance tailored towards individual students' need. This is a growing expectation among new students who were paying more for their higher education and could expect less mass-scale forms of learning. The experience of engaging at a more personal level was something that would not only improve the learning experience, but give them a greater sense

of belonging. In a number of instances, students contrasted the learning context in higher education to earlier education in which they felt more valued as learners.

Tania, a first-year Psychology student at an English Russell Group discussed her desire for more face-to-face contact which she viewed to be more effective than traditional lecture programmes, which for her promoted passive engagement. She felt that more individually-centred learning which involved smaller groups also promoted better interaction and more social learning:

Yeah, I think more contact rather than lectures. We do have a lot of content so more structured sessions. We had tutor sessions at the beginning of this year, but we've only had one of those since we came back after January. That's been cut down quite a lot, but it's nice because you met the same people and got to discuss things and do things as a group, so it made you feel part of the university, because you got to make friends.

(Female, Year 1, Psychology, English Russell Group HEI)

Her views were shared by many other students who expressed a preference for smaller, more interactive forms of learning that would help personalise the experience. This was often linked to the theme of students' added financial contribution and the sense that less personalised teaching was not commensurate to the personal costs involved in higher education:

I think more small-scale things then you really feel like time has been given to you and that's what you're paying for, rather than 200 in a lecture session.

(Female, Year 1, Psychology, Russell Group English HEI)

### **6.9.3. Accessibility and approachability of lecturers**

Value was also ascribed to other 'softer' pedagogic practices, including lecturers' approachability, responsiveness to concerns and the adoption of more 'open door' and invitational approach. Students' conceptions of quality in teaching and learning were very much linked to these areas, although lecturers' responsiveness was also linked to extensive and prompt feedback. The overall perception among respondents was that increased costs of HE would provoke more responsiveness among lecturers and that there would be more pressures on teaching staff to ameliorate less effective practices. Respondents perceived that new cohorts of HE students would be more inclined to question practice and demand changes due to higher expectations; quite a few discussed the importance of engaging in dialogue with course tutors, beyond the submission of course evaluations. For some students, the issue of lecturers' availability signalled not just responsiveness but also a more personally engaging approach:

A good enthusiastic approach, preferably approachability ... having open drop-in sessions that sort of thing, and continually saying "Feel free to email me, for me to post messages." One of my lecturers who is probably the most accessible person that I know, the most successful lecturer, he's got on a blackboard some sort of forum thing, I think most lecturers can set them up, and you can post anonymously, so if you don't want to email him even though your email address hasn't got a name in it, it's actually like he might be able to find out, so for people that are concerned about that it's quite useful, you can post anonymously. So accessibility, yes.

(Male, Year 1, Physics, Russell Group English HEI)

You expect that you can go and talk to your lecturer; you can send them an email, arrange a meeting, talk to them and discuss your problems, and have a one-to-one session, and have the resources available to you, whether that's the library, software which you get through the university to do your degree, or just talking to your lecturer. I suppose it's just the support that you get from university as well as the lectures.

(Female, Year 3, Chemistry, Scottish HEI)

In most cases, students felt that there would be more questioning of the value of lecturers' practices and whether their formal learning experiences were 'worthwhile' – a theme which resonates with the earlier discussion on students making calculations over quality and price. There was a very strong sense that future students would expect more from their formal learning experiences and that higher fee-paying students would be more challenging of practices that were not matched to their expectations as fee payers.

## 7. Conclusions and recommendations

Higher education in the second decade of the twenty-first century is clearly undergoing rapid change and there is a need for continued debate over its purpose, modes of delivery and how it responds to the changing challenges felt by students and their families. This study has shown that demand for higher education is still strong among a core group of learners: those who are able to benefit from higher education are likely to continue to participate. The route through to higher education is still fairly robust for many students, augmented by positive earlier educational achievements and experiences. Increased fees do not appear to be a major deterrent in applying for higher education among students for whom higher education is part of their educational trajectory. The anticipated longer-term financial and personal gains from higher education dampen the concerns about accumulated debt. The UK higher education system is still attributed value, and this is clearly so among international students, who generally pay higher fees than their British counterparts. There also remain significant cultural factors that shape students' choices around institutions and subjects which are very much filtered through students' academic and cultural profiles.

However, this study has demonstrated that recent policy changes relating to fees are having a genuine impact on students and how they are thinking about their higher education, the value of their higher education and how higher education can facilitate their development. Contemporary students want and expect more from higher education, and they are reflecting on both their own institution's responsiveness, as well as their (and others') approaches and levels of engagement.

The study challenges a number of assumptions about the ways in which students approach higher education, not least the idea that students perceive themselves as 'customers', and that they may be reducing their higher education to a service transaction and their degrees to commodities. This may be reassuring for practitioners who have been concerned that a rampant consumer-driven ethos has penetrated deep into HE culture and pedagogy, significantly damaging teacher-student dynamics. Wanting value for money and to experience a service that is commensurate to the private contributions students make towards higher education is an inevitable by-product of a market-driven system that actively positions students as paying customers. However, it does not necessarily always translate into students' actual behaviours and relationships with their institutions. Some students have co-opted themselves into the condition of being active service users, others see consumerism as a form of social positioning which they may partially adhere to, while others critically detach themselves from this altogether.

The contemporary student experience is marked by a number of core challenges which frame students' attitudes, as this study illustrates. At the heart of this is the fact that while higher education is still valued for conferring longer-term benefits and being a positional good, this value has become increasingly contingent and harder to exchange. The linkage between this wider framing of higher education and students' approaches is clear. The language of proactivity and self-responsibility, of investment and personal debt is a highly individualised discourse. The risk of not getting a job after graduating, or of not being in a position to repay debt, or to realise the potential that has been developed through higher education, is of much concern. Contemporary students are very conscious of the pressure points and challenges facing students and graduates in a mass HE system at a time of economic challenge.

Instrumentality based on the formal rationality of enhanced economic returns appears to be more characteristic of students' experiences. These values often coexist alongside, and can also override, 'softer' substantive values around self-development which are still ascribed importance. This might explain why students in the current study were more comfortable with 'investment' metaphors than consumer ones, the latter denoting a more active and involved process. At the same time, the university is still perceived by students to provide broader benefits and gains and much value is attached to social development and opportunities as well as having a broader set of intellectual tools to work from. Students still value good quality teaching and look to lecturers to engage, motivate and facilitate positive learning experiences.

This study has shown that the fee increases are having an important impact on students' approaches to higher education. This is clearly apparent among the higher fee payers in English HEIs and who are expecting more from their higher education experiences, and certainly want more value across their higher education; including a meaningful first year experience that counts towards the rest of their degree. While only a minority saw themselves as active 'consumers' of a service, there is general concern to obtain value for money and greater transparency. Moreover, there remains a strong appreciation of the wider benefits of higher education and for which students remain willing to pay.

## Recommendations

Some powerful, albeit hitherto largely under-explored, messages have emerged from a relatively small sample of current higher education students and the study's core findings lead to the following recommendations.

### **Recommendation 1: Transparency**

HEIs need to maintain an open and transparent relationship with their students, in terms of presenting accurate information around what institutions and programmes offer so that they are aligned to students' expectations. There are clearly risks if students choose inappropriately given the costs of repeating a year or enduring prolonged periods of academic difficulty. By extension, universities need to be clear and upfront to students about a) why fees have been raised in the first instance, b) the reason for a specific fee rate an institution has charged and c) and how fee revenue is being used to enhance the student experience. Lack of transparency was a source of frustration among students, so the provision of feedback on how money is being spent and resources channelled at both local, course-specific levels and at an institutional-wide level are essential to address some students' concerns about 'value for money'. Institutions will at least have to manage resources effectively, particularly in making manifest and more immediate improvements to facilities and programme-level materials.

### **Recommendation 2: Investment and opportunities**

The benefits *and the risks* of participating in higher education need to be presented to students. While nearly all students in this study anticipated future gains and benefits from HE, they were also aware that substantial future challenges awaited them. It is important that all students are made aware of the realities facing graduates in challenging labour market times, and the need to make the most of the university experience, including proactive engagement with the informal aspects of university life. This needs to take the form of positive messages about the multiple opportunities and benefits from higher education that can advantage and empower students both economically and personally. Investment discourses used in marketing and promotional literature also need to frame the university experience as an investment in self-development and personal agency as much as in economic returns.

### **Recommendation 3: Employability and the whole student experience**

Given the prevailing concerns over employability and the linkages students make to wider higher education experiences, it is increasingly important to frame the issue in terms of profile building and 'experience'. Whilst there is continued discussion about the relative 'economic relevance' of different subjects and potential declining demand for some, more needs to be done to promote the benefits of these in the labour market. Moreover, students need to be in a strong position to develop an employability narrative which can stand them in good stead in applying for future jobs and is built upon wider experiences within higher education. The role of higher education institutions in this regard should be clear: they are there to facilitate students' post-university outcomes, but *not make them employable* per se. This leads to the next recommendation

### **Recommendation 4: Structuring extra-curricular activities**

Extra-curricular activities need to be firmly promoted and embedded within institutions and to be a recognised and endorsed aspect of students' profiles. The benefits of extra-curricular activities for raising students' profiles and providing them with invaluable life experience that complement their formal learning needs to be strongly emphasised by student services and student unions. Students should be placed in a strong position to actively pursue them from the start of their higher education. Students also need to be advised on how to package and present these so that they can be used to their best advantage in the future.

### **Recommendation 5: Quality of learning agenda**

Quality teaching remains a high priority in the current context. Professional development programmes need to continue to promote best practice in enhancing lecturers' capacity for developing ways of best engaging students. But this also requires effective management of programmes at school-level, including appropriate resourcing of staff best suited to different courses and modules, as well as the use of suitably qualified teachers. Lecturers who are not able to demonstrate the requisite knowledge for a subject area, and which may impact on their enthusiasm and engagement, are likely to be appraised negatively by students. Likewise, more passive teaching practices need to be addressed; particularly those that make students question their attendance.

The fact that some academics' professional identities are more orientated towards research presents challenges, although the integration of research and teaching in the form of 'research-led teaching' may provide a key solution here given that students value lecturers' fresh expertise. It is important that lecturers are allowed relative

autonomy to innovate, to engage in forms of teaching that challenge students, and to base these on the educational values they have developed over time, even if these do not meet short-term goals such as passing assessment criteria.

### **Recommendation 6: Redefining the role of students**

The role and status of contemporary students needs to be discussed more widely and reflected upon at institutional and programme levels. Institutions need to emphasise both the rights *and* responsibilities of students, reinforcing the language of partnerships and students' engagement in the process. Official institutional documentation that takes the form of learning agreements, learning contracts or educational charters may need to be explicit about institutions' expectations around students' learning. There is a strong case for reframing student learning in terms of a partnership and co-production as these alternative approaches depict more active processes that foreground wider intrinsic values and benefits of HE and the role of the students as developing agents in the university. Students may well be very receptive to them if they are more widely propagated, so finding appropriate institutional channels which can facilitate partnership approaches is important. Moreover, the student-consumer approach needs to be more openly discussed more widely by institutions so that its limitations and strengths become clear.

### **Recommendation 7: Tempering the language of consumption in a market-driven system**

Official discourses that valorise students' rights, while also downplaying their responsibilities, risk turning responsiveness and responsibility into a one-way process. Accommodating students' expectations and demands are clearly legitimate goals in the first instance, and robust mechanisms for ensuring student feedback continue to be needed for ensuring that learning needs are met and feedback channels maintained. The participants in the study who had been involved in initiatives such as 'student voice' and staff-student liaisons valued this involvement for allowing a valued role in decision-making and bring them closer to a professional community.

Official documentation at both national and institutional levels needs to be reframed as current framing of students' role and rights have tended to valorise the consumer-orientated position of students. Discursive framing can be significant in shaping expectations and institutional relations. At the same time, student feedback forums are needed (eg student voice) as they can facilitate ways for institutions to make improvements in resourcing and teaching and learning. They are also much valued by students who are involved in them, as they allow a proactive role in decision-making and bring them closer to a professional community. However, the role of students as partners rather than regulators may be better emphasised in such processes.

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# Appendix - Interview Schedule

## Part 1

What key challenges do you personally experience in higher education?

Has the increase in fees made you think about what you want from higher education?

- *Has it shaped in any way your expectations around higher education?*
- *Did it have any bearing on your decision to enter higher education?*

Do you think students get value for what they financially contribute towards higher education?

What do you personally think about the notion of 'student as consumer'?

- *Do you see yourself as consuming a higher education?*

When choosing a university, what factors influenced your choice?

- *Did the kinds of information provided for each institution (e.g. NSS, teaching contact, employment returns) have any bearing on your decisions*

Did the university's reputation have any influence?

Do you personally feel prepared for the challenges of study in higher education?

Do you feel you have to balance academic aspects of university with other aspects of being in university?

- *Paid employment?*
- *Extra-curricula activities?*

## Part 2

What do you most value from being in higher education?

- *For example, are the social aspects of being in university just as important as the academic?*

What kinds of benefits and outcomes would you like to receive from their time at university?

- *Personal development?*
- *Professional development/future careers?*
- *Social outcomes and benefits?*

What might you get from higher education study that you might not have if you went straight into employment?

What do you expect from your teaching at higher education?

What kinds of things do you particularly value in teaching in higher education?

- *Access to lectures?*
- *Smaller groups?*
- *Responsive/engaging teachers?*

What do you think makes a positive learning experience in higher education?

- *What do you think counts as a 'quality' learning experience*

What could be done to best engage students in their learning?

### Part 3

At what stage did you start thinking of applying to higher education?

Did your parents (and siblings) attend university?

What do you think are your key goals and motivations around learning in higher education?

Do you have a particular way of approaching your studies?

- *E.g. go into as much depth as possible, do all you need to pass?*

Do you identify strongly with being an (subject discipline) student?

- *Does this in any way influencing how you see the value and purpose of higher education?*

Do you think being a student at (type of HEI) has a bearing on your university experiences and how you see yourself as a student?

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