Pathways and progression: a study in student decision-making about a future in HE

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Introduction

This research study, commissioned by Sussex Learning Network and Aimhigher Sussex, has been designed to gain insight into, and understanding of, choices made by Sussex-based students. The students, in Years 12 and 13 and in FE institutions, were surveyed about choices relating to their future: whether to go into HE or straight into employment.

The study provides information for HE providers in Sussex that will inform their future curriculum strategies, give them an understanding of students’ decision-making processes, and reveal key variables involved in students’ education and future employment choices.

Thirteen schools and colleges worked collaboratively to implement a four-page survey; distributing 1700 questionnaires. The University of Brighton received an excellent return of 878 completed questionnaires. Focus groups with 22 participants were implemented in two schools to deepen our understanding of the findings. The full report is available from the SLN website <insert link>.

Aims and objectives

To better understand the key influencing factors affecting the decisions of Sussex-based students in Years 12 and 13 (aged 16–19 years), and also of students following programmes at FE institutions.

The information required from the study was:

- the likely subject areas for study
- the opportunities for new styles of delivery methods
- vocational and academic interests
- profile characteristics of students related to areas of interest
- the criteria for choosing a college or university
- the type of degree ie Foundation or undergraduate
- financial and other potential constraints relating to HE

Key findings

The findings are summarised below but described in Section 8 (pp22-32) of the full report.

Employability

The majority of students who participated in the research were emphatic about their ambition for good employment prospects and improved pay as a result of taking a degree in HE. Employment prospects ranked third in the criteria for choosing an academic institution and, for many students, future earnings and career progression were closely linked to this.
Students voiced concerns about the cost of studying in HE and there was some indication (from the focus on employability and types of courses chosen) that students were looking to make their money back as soon as possible after graduation.

**Progression to HE**

Eighty-eight per cent of the 878 completed questionnaires indicated that students say that they want to continue their education with the majority (42%) wishing to study a full-time three-year BA while a further 17% were interested in either a four-year sandwich BA, an FdA or a part-time BA. However, a significant percentage (24%) said they didn’t know which educational option they were interested in.

Students consider progression to HE to be a high-risk decision, due to the high cost of studying and the potential for long-term negative repercussions if the course turns out to be the wrong one for them, or does not result in immediate employment. There is evidence to suggest that students are seeking a lot of detailed information over an extended period of time before they make their final choices.

**Influences upon the decision-making criteria**

Cost of living, availability of accommodation, and location were the top three criteria when choosing an HE institution. Cost of tuition fees was ranked fourth, suggesting that students are concerned about the financial aspects of progressing to HE.

Internal studies undertaken by the University of Brighton (2006) on undergraduate student profiles support the view that many students are going to institutions closer to home so that they don’t have to pay for accommodation; however proximity to home ranked 14 out 15 in terms of decision-making criteria.

**Academic criteria**

Reputation and quality of teaching ranked high on students’ list of academic criteria, supported by the findings from the focus groups. Signifiers that were captured on flip charts for this were ranking tables, quality of teaching, entry requirements and results. Course availability and good employment prospects were also deemed to be important to the students’ decision-making.

When considering the personal and academic criteria combined, it was found that academic criteria made up five of the top six influences on a student’s decision-making. These influences included quality, reputation, employment prospects and subject area offered. The only personal criterion in the top six combined was cost of living, with accommodation, location and tuition fees being ranked seventh, ninth and tenth respectively.

**Future study prospects**

Students are more likely to continue with their current FE studies into HE than to go into employment. The majority of students who participated in the research were currently studying more traditional academic subjects, including science, maths and English, and most expressed a preference for studying these subjects at university.

Many made reference to HE giving them a ‘deeper level of knowledge’ about specific subject areas and there seemed to be some indication that deeper knowledge was preferable to broader knowledge. This clearly has implications for universities and what they teach on their degree courses.

It was found that many students are likely to have four years’ worth of education in a particular subject before commencing studies in HE (GCSE, ‘A’-Level and BTEC) and that HE institutions need to be wary of repetition if they are to keep students engaged and enrolled.

**Employment prospects**

Whilst employment is seen as a key outcome from gaining higher qualifications, many students didn’t recognise, expect or want industrial engagement while at university. They had a more functional
approach to wanting a higher qualification – in and out in three years. The availability of work placements, industry experience of tutors, guest speakers and field trips all ranked low in terms of decision-making criteria.

Part-time employment prospects were ranked 8th in terms of personal criteria and it was found that 61% of students were already working part-time, with many suggesting that they would continue to work part-time when studying at university (hospitality and retail being the two key industries). When considered along with the results about subject choice and future employment prospects, there seems to be some confusion, as students seem to be missing a link between vocational subjects with good levels of industry engagement and employment.

Some students felt that traditional academic subjects would also stand them in good stead in the employment market, with a few making reference to the reputation of courses at traditional universities being a key to good employment: “if I study English at Cambridge then I will be looked upon favourably by employers”.

Summary

Overall, this research gives HE institutions a number of key points to consider. Whilst the 88% of the students surveyed are likely to progress from further education to higher education, there remain significant concerns about debt and finance. Future employment is a key consideration in their decision-making and certainly they do not want to be carrying high levels of debt into later life. The desire is for employment that will help them repay debts as quickly as possible.

Many students intend to reduce their level of debt by taking on part-time work while they study. With increasing demands being made upon a student’s time, institutions may need to consider how they approach their teaching and learning strategies.

There was no clear-cut desire for distance or online learning, with many students still valuing face-to-face teaching (lectures and workshops), but there was an expectation that institutions would be more flexible in enabling students to work and study at the same time. However, part-time courses were not a favoured option.

Academic criteria including reputation and quality of teaching are significant influences upon a student’s decision-making, and key indicators of quality include good teachers, facilities and interesting courses.

Many students intend to continue studying the same subjects in HE as in FE, and universities should get smarter about how they engage with students who already have several years’ knowledge in the subject area. Consideration needs to be given to whether degree courses are conversion or continuation and how students can be kept engaged with the subject without it becoming repetitive.

It is suggested that HE institutions work closer with FE schools and colleges to gain a better understanding of the pre-HE curriculum. This would ensure that a more worthwhile progression is offered.

The integration of vocational and industrial elements of courses is still up for debate, with many students not being interested in sandwich courses, Foundation degrees and work placements. At a time when HE is being encouraged to become more vocational and employer-friendly, institutions will need to think carefully about how they build this into their programmes of study, and more so about how they promote the benefits to students.

Perhaps the students’ desire for good future employment will become a key part of this approach. Institutions need to think more about the role that part-time work plays in a student’s life and how this can be linked to work-based learning. However, as many students seek part-time work in the hospitality and retail sectors, these may not be appropriate jobs for linking to academic programmes; the scope of the jobs does not give them access to an overview of the business.

Although the decision-making process for students has become more complex and, in many cases, more extended, students still express a high level of desire to progress to HE. They consider more
carefully the pathways open to them with regard to enjoyment of subjects and future employment goals, and institutions need to consider how to promote themselves based on a number of important criteria.

What is key, though, is that students still value the education experience and many are excited by the thought of progressing to university. They see it as a character-building and life-changing experience, and one that undoubtedly will also be a lot of fun.