

The heart of
student living



The UNITE Group plc

UNITE Student Experience Report 2012

Introduction



'The Student Experience' has become a catch-all term within Higher Education, used in varying contexts and discussed at length. For those of us working in the sector understanding what a 'high quality experience' means to students is crucially important and therefore it is always high on our agenda. However, with all the recent changes to the Higher Education landscape, we felt that there was a need and opportunity to understand 'the Student Experience' through the eyes of young people about to attend University – **the students of tomorrow**.

For this reason we asked over 1,200 prospective University students, many in the middle of completing their UCAS application, what they wanted from their University experience. They will be the **first students to be affected by higher tuition fees** and we wanted to know if this, combined with the economic downturn of the past few years and tough employment prospects, has affected their University expectations? Would these circumstances cause uncertainty, or even prevent this generation of young people viewing University as a viable and achievable option? Would their expectations be heightened or unrealistic?

Since we conducted our research we have all seen the **7.4% drop in UCAS applications for 2012/13**. 2011/12 was a record year for applications due to the advent of fee increases the following year, and even with the 7.4% drop in applicants demand for places still far outstrips those available, meaning that over **160,000 applicants will be without a place**; University education remains **popular and over-subscribed**.

The results of our survey go some way to explaining the attitudes of prospective students; tuition fees were high on their agenda and did affect their views of 'the student experience'; however on the whole higher fees did not cause them to reconsider attending University. Instead they demonstrated a **'savvy' attitude**, focusing on the value of their University degree; while they expected some aspects of the student experience to improve after the increase in fees, they had realistic attitudes to what the opportunity could offer them. In spite of facing higher levels of debt, University is still viewed as the **best possible route for a secure future in uncertain times**.

At UNITE **accommodation is our area of expertise**. Living arrangements are one of the key components of the student experience for young people; most have never lived away from home before and it is significant that **'independence'** was the dominant phrase used when describing what 'the student experience' meant to them. It is our privilege, along with everyone in the sector, to work with young people during this **important rite of passage**, and we want to make it as positive, rewarding and safe a time as possible.

We have considered responses to our research carefully and are pleased, in this report, to share the insights more widely. These young people will be the next generation of first year students – the importance of getting their experience right while the impact of changes to those of us who work in the sector are still emerging, is essential in order to ensure they get the most out of their time at University. Understanding their expectations might go some way to realising this.

Paul Harris

**Group Director of Strategy and Corporate Relations
UNITE**

Methodology

This report contains the findings of a survey into Student Experience. UNITE commissioned The Student Room, the largest online student forum used by young people from across the world, to conduct the survey and present the results using robust analysis. Unless otherwise stated, any quantitative findings are statistically significant and broadly reflective of UCAS applicant figures for 2011. All quotations in the report are student responses and have been transcribed exactly, with any erroneous spelling and grammar.

Date of survey	11 November – 31 December 2011
Definition of participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ still at school studying A-levels (or other Level 3 qualification)▪ left school or college in 2010 but took a gap year▪ aged 19 or under▪ intent on living away from parental home whilst studying
Total number of respondents	1,236

Enquiries

Any enquiries about the content of this report or for further information or comment please contact:

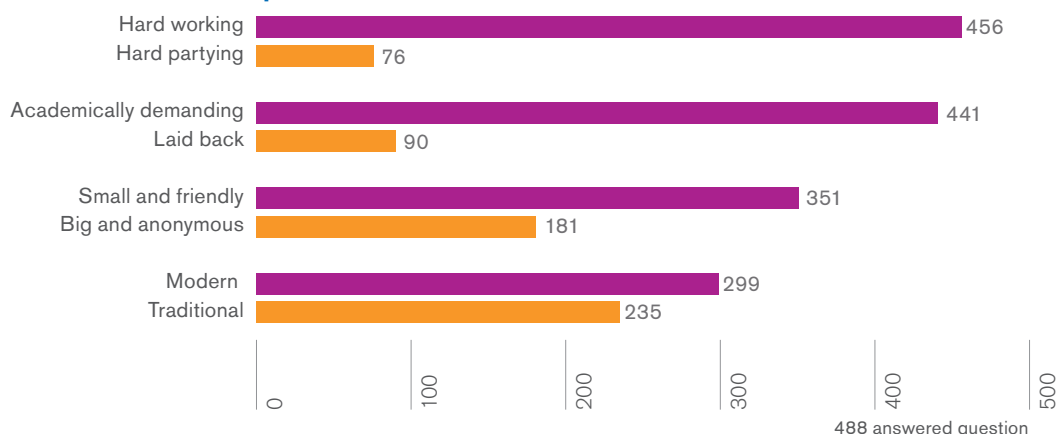
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What does 'the Student Experience' mean to prospective students?

The desired student experience



"I think it's the adventure of living on our own... juggling our studies and taking care of ourselves, as well as the huge amount of freedom to pursue activities we prefer. And the masses of people to meet! Can't wait!"

Given the context of the changing Higher Education landscape we asked the respondents what the Student Experience means to them.

It was clear that they regard it as a broad concept enveloping all aspects of University life: **"student experience encompasses everything about life at uni, from living in halls, to student nightlife, to societies and of course academics."** One respondent felt that the experience started before they even reach University, **"the student experience includes everything from researching courses and the Universities, to actually attending..."**, highlighting the importance of investment in, and consideration of, all stages of the experience.

The dominant term used to describe the desired student experience is 'independence'. This was expressed by prospective students in a variety of ways from moving away from home for the first time – **"The Student Experience is the perfect phrase for summarising the transition from being looked after by a guardian/parent to living on your own"** – to being responsible for running their own life. It was clear that University is still perceived as an important life stage or rite of passage.

Although social aspects of the student experience are given equal importance to the academic experience, the hard-partying student stereotype seems to have diminished. A significant percentage of respondents, while acknowledging that it exists, actively tried to distance themselves from this perception of students: **"Extreme drinking culture... I find it silly to drink away dozens of £'s in a night and live off baked beans..."**

Some admitted that they did not know what to expect; however, throughout the answers the sense of excitement and anticipation was evident: **"For me the student experience hasn't started yet, but I am certainly looking forward to it."** It was also interesting to see individuals taking a sense of ownership for their own experience: **"Having a positive student experience is up to the students really. Nobody is forcing us to go through something we don't want."**

How is 'the Student Experience' perceived to be changing?

The main ways in which the student experience was perceived to be changing was as a result of increased tuition fees. The majority of respondents appear to accept that they will have to incur high levels of student debt but plan to do what they can to ensure they gain as much as possible from the experience: **"University is no longer three years of partying and cruising through for a 2.2 degree. Now it costs so much, you can't afford to waste the experience."** Higher tuition fees mean prospective students are more focused on what they can gain from their University experience and believe this will provide them with best prospects in an uncertain world.

"People are now going to University with the view of the future; the 'student experience' is changing from socialising to setting yourself up for the future."

High academic expectations

"If teaching isn't excellent then the University is pointless."

Prospective students were primarily motivated by academic factors in their choice of institution. They wanted to learn and expected to be supported and challenged in equal measure by excellent academic staff. **"Always having to think hard, being challenged by new ideas every day."**

The qualitative responses suggested that most students were motivated by intellectual curiosity and a passion for their subject. They wanted to explore a subject rather than simply be taught to pass exams, although for some their academic achievement was also an important gateway into a chosen career.

"Courses that challenge you to look beyond face-value and delve into the deeper meaning of what you are studying."

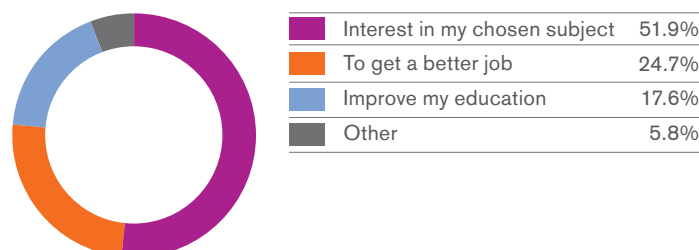
The expectations placed on academic staff were very high. Prospective students want their lecturers to be subject experts, respected authorities at the leading edge of their discipline. More than this, they also expect them to excel as teachers, inspiring their students with their enthusiasm and pacing their teaching to suit the needs of the group.

A significant minority of students also put an emphasis on the interpersonal aspects of the academic-student relationship. They want to be seen as an individual with unique needs and to learn both formally and informally from academic staff. Some expect to have access to staff out of normal hours for academic and non-academic support, and some want to be able to socialise with their lecturers.

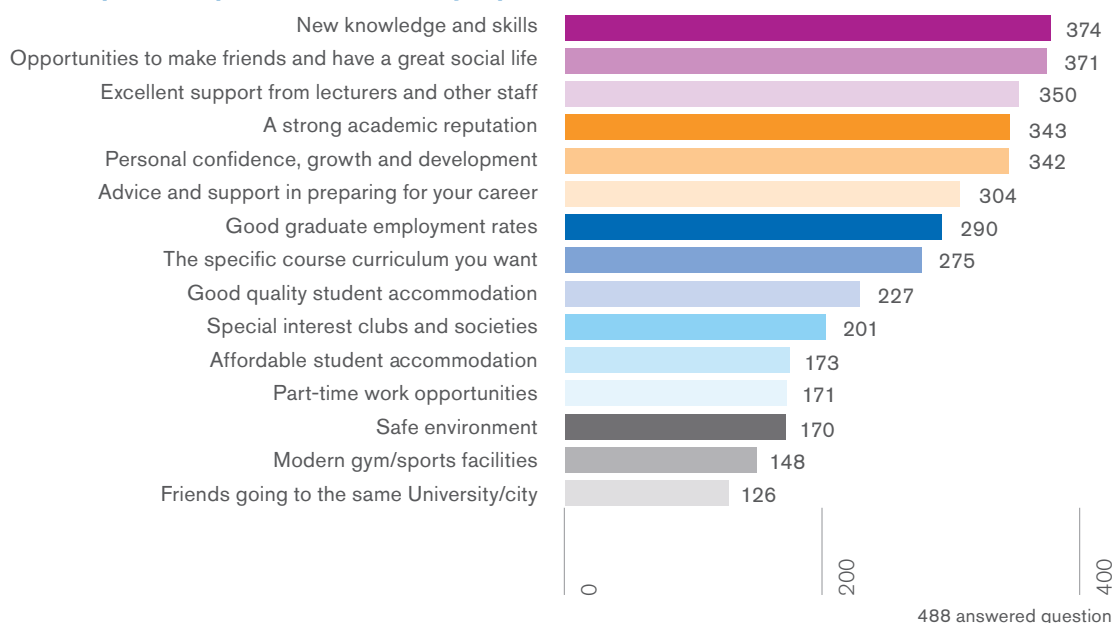
Prospective students wanted to be both challenged and supported, and these were viewed as two sides of the same coin. Many relish the prospect of being among others who are academically-inclined and being intellectually stretched, perhaps for the first time. On the other hand, they **"want to be pushed, but not to breaking point"**. Both academic and non-academic support was expected on an as-required basis, **"as a safety net"**.

"Staff who will get to know me more personally and assign me work which they feel will challenge and work to my strengths as well as improve my weaknesses."

Reason for University study



Most important aspects of the University experience

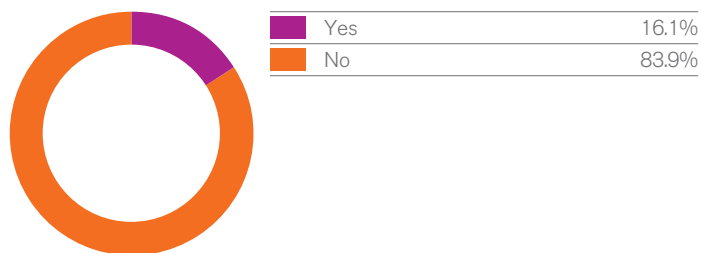


Reasonable accommodation expectations

"Great accommodation = a great working environment = great work."

Given that independence and moving away from home were highlighted as the two most important elements of the student experience, student accommodation is clearly pivotal to students' time at University.

Number expecting to live at family home



16% of respondents expect to live at their parent or guardian's home when they go to University; this is slightly less than the 20.3% of students (Source: HESA 2010/11) who currently live at home and suggests that there will not be a significant change in the number of students who will choose to study closer to home in 2012/13 because of tuition fees. (These respondents were subsequently filtered out of the rest of the survey.)

We asked students what they expected from student accommodation. The most popular answers were:

- central location
- reasonably priced
- internet provision
- clean
- own bathroom facility
- the ability to make the space their own
- on-site security
- modern and high quality
- to live with a mix of nationalities

Descriptions of where students imagined they would live clearly showed that they do not expect student accommodation that is luxurious, but they do want modern, clean, affordable rooms that provide the basics.

"I don't expect a 5-star hotel; a cosy convenient place is alright for me."

Prospective students want the balance of a private space within a social environment: **"You can go to your room where it is quiet and peaceful for studying, or you can go out of your room to see your other flatmates... if they are out or busy, you can go see other people on other floors."** It is clear that they feel getting this balance right at the outset is of huge importance to their overall enjoyment of their student experience: **"[It is] very important that all first years are integrated. Accommodation has a great deal to do with this. Many of my friends have left uni because they feel alienated by the difficulty of integrating."**

The demand for en suite facilities is identifiable in the comments. A proportion specifically state that they are happy to share facilities, but there is the implication that they should be up to a good basic standard.

Overall the respondents' expectations for accommodation were reasonable. A clear hope is that it will be somewhere they can personalise and make to feel like home: **"I see myself in a small space filled up with my own favourite items: the rose patterned blanket I sleep with every night, my tree-shaped candle stand, photographs from my own art portfolio, an interpretive drawing of Emperor Qin Huangdi, my favourite perfumes and lotions, every Dorothy Parker book ever published..."**

"The area will be busy, vibrant and a safe place to live. The accommodation itself will be clean, light and airy and have good facilities."

Social space:

Meeting lots of new people and making friends is an important part of the student experience. With the possibility of a reduced budget for 'going out' students are looking to Universities and accommodation to provide them with social spaces to meet with friends and engage.

Campus facilities:

"Any resources that are required by students for their course should be available on site."

Responses showed that facilities to support the academic experience, such as libraries, are fundamental, but that other more social facilities also make a significant difference to the overall Student Experience, depending on an individual's interests. Sports facilities are critical for some, whilst domestic and social facilities are important for others. The key features of all these facilities is that prospective students want them to be accessible, either on campus or close enough to walk, and modern. **"Needs high quality and modern sports and gym facilities, as well as up to date lecture halls."**

These facilities also provide an extended place to meet and socialise, further extending the Student Experience... **"sport facilities and student union where students from different departments come together to make new friends and get to know each other."**

Other important aspects of 'the Student Experience'

Graduate opportunities:

One way these students identified that they will be looking for added value is through graduate employment opportunities:

"Competition when it comes to employability is at an all-time high. Simply having a degree now will not suffice, and the quality of the degree is more important."

Students are concerned that, in general, a University degree has become more commonplace and are keen for opportunities that will help them stand out from the crowd.

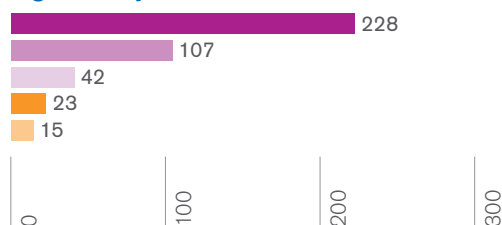
"Whereas in the past it was a big thing to go to uni, nowadays it's the norm so students must work much harder to separate themselves from the pack."

How can Universities help students achieve their dream graduate job?

Opportunities to hear visiting speakers from business and industry	194
Work placement opportunities	341
Specific work-related classes and modules	178
Volunteering opportunities	219
Opportunities to contact former students working in your chosen career	162
Work-related projects	206
Professional qualifications combined with your degree	199
Flexible courses to accommodate part-time work	95
Other	5

410 answered question

How difficult do students think it will be to get a graduate job?



- Achievable with effort and luck
- It's going to be a challenge
- Very easy
- I have no idea
- Almost impossible but I'll have a go

415 answered question

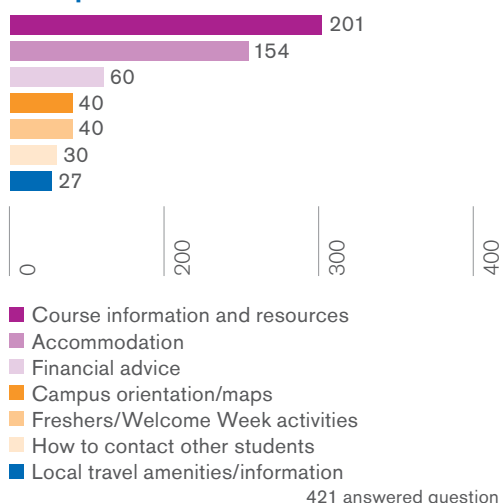
Pre-arrival University communications:

Course information and student accommodation are at the forefront of students' concerns before arriving at University.

Respondents preferred for their institutions to communicate with them via email, followed by post, however dedicated web portals are becoming a more common means of engaging and this appears to be reflected with this method of communication the third favourite.

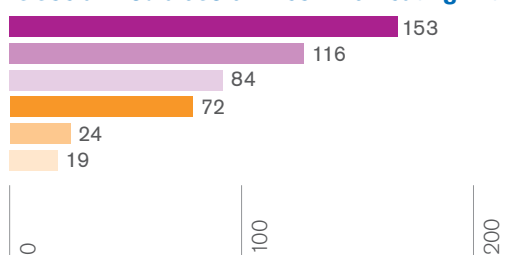
Interestingly the potential for social networking sites to be used as a method of enhancing University-applicant communications seems yet to be realised, with the majority of students suggesting communication through these sites does not add a significant benefit over other more traditional routes, and surprisingly 18.8% claimed never to look at them.

What pre-arrival information do students want?



421 answered question

Is social media useful in communicating with students?



- Can be useful but don't add anything significant
- Give a better sense of what a University is really like
- I've never looked at them
- Universities shouldn't try to use social networking
- Other
- Don't know

444 answered question

What effect have increased tuition fees had on student expectations?

When asked for the reason they had chosen, or felt able, to go to University given the fee increases, the top answer was that 'whatever debt they ended up with the qualification they will gain and their life as a student would be worth it'. The next most popular outcome is that they are not worried about the amount they will have to pay back. Responses to this question and comments in the other sections demonstrate that a University education is still felt to be worthwhile and that, combined with a practical attitude to repayment, meant they did not reconsider applying.

There was an overwhelming view that students are willing to pay higher tuition fees in exchange for a high quality University experience; 80% are still prepared to pay more for a University with a strong academic reputation. This suggests that University brand will be a more important factor than price in choosing where to study.

There was a sense that the greatest impact the increased fees has had was on the students' focus on a sense of value and that students have greater expectations that institutions will deliver what is promised. Half of respondents expect academic facilities to improve with higher tuition fees, while nearly 40% expect teaching staff to become more accessible and 42% expect that accommodation will improve.

It is interesting that 17% claimed that the main reason they felt able to go to University was that they will be eligible for a bursary or other financial support. This suggests that bursary schemes and support with upfront costs are a significant enabling factor for many young people following the fee increase.

These findings demonstrate that the majority of students still see a well-rounded University education as the key to better future prospects. However, they will prioritise academic experiences over social activities in the future and, understandably, demand more value from institutions and other elements of University life in return for their investment. The implications for how all of us working in the sector promote the experience they offer is clear.

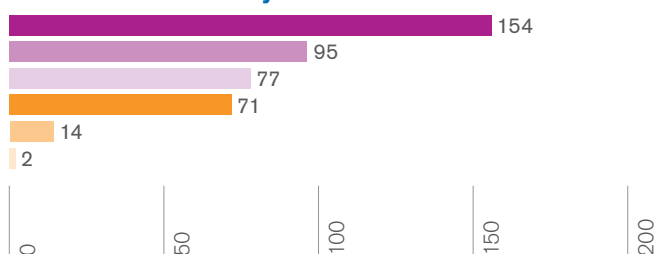
"The student experience means being able to go out and learn about the things you love, but also about yourself and how to get on in the world. I want to be able to go to University and get a degree so I can go on and make the rest of my life better."

Has the fee increase changed expectations?

	Agree	Disagree	Don't Know
Academic facilities will improve	206	129	76
Teaching staff will be more accessible	158	151	99
Social facilities will improve	129	172	106
Student accommodation will improve	169	152	82
Sports facilities will improve	128	165	112
University catering will be cheaper	85	209	113

406 answered question

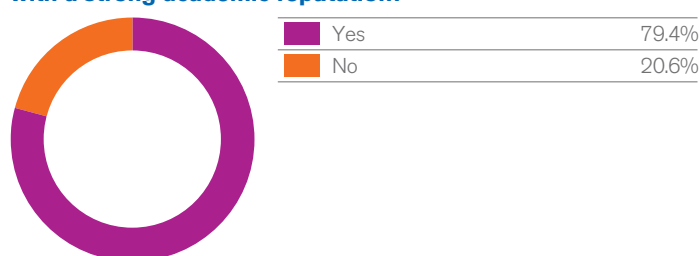
Given the rise in tuition fees, why have students not reconsidered University?



- The qualification and my life as a student will be worth it
- I'm not worried about what I will have to pay back
- My parents will help cover the costs
- I will be eligible for a bursary or other financial support
- I deliberately chose a university with lower fees
- Going to live at home

413 answered question

Are you prepared to pay higher fees for a course/University with a strong academic reputation?



Highlight findings and implications

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Respondents are focused on the value for money they will derive from their University education, both in terms of the academic and social experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Challenge in how Higher Education institutions demonstrate the value of their student experience offering ▪ Students are looking for added value opportunities – what extra can I get out of my experience for the future?
Respondents will pay more for a good University reputation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Students will pay more for a good University reputation – suggesting a brand market over a price market in which the distinctiveness of the student experience will be important
Academic facilities and student accommodation are expected to improve with tuition fee increases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Students are expecting some aspects of the student experience to improve with increased tuition fees – challenge in managing these expectations so they are realistic
Social facilities are a must for engaging with peers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ With increased tuition fees and the prospect of debt students want to be provided with socialising spaces and opportunities to facilitate meeting friends without having to spend too much on 'going out'
Want a balance between academic challenge and support, and an individualised approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How do academic staff and student services meet student expectations of an intellectually stimulating but supportive environment in which all students can achieve their potential?
Want opportunities, such as work placements, to develop themselves and stand out from the crowd when entering the graduate employment market	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ In a difficult economic climate how do we best support students in ensuring their experience gives them opportunities that enhance their chances post University?

