

Upper Sixths and Higher Education 2019 Survey

Introduction and background

The transition from the final year of school to the first year of university is one of life's major turning points. It is not always an easy one and it would be wrong to assume that new undergraduates are fully-fledged adults. A number of factors have made transition more difficult in recent years. The much larger numbers of students at universities can make new undergraduates feel anonymous. Social pressures have increased, mainly due to the fact that technology encourages more solitary pursuits. Finally, a rise in exam-based accountability has led pupils to see learning in terms of 'cracking a code'; they are therefore less prepared for the demands of independent study.

This report was written by Emma Mitchell and Chris Ramsey and published by the Headmasters and Headmistresses' Conference (HMC) and the Girls' Schools Association (GSA). It explores a number of pertinent issues related to school-university transition and makes a number of recommendations. Findings presented in the report are based on data which was gathered through an online survey in 2019. There was a total of 4,796 respondents, representing 10.8 per cent of the 44,560 upper sixth pupils in Independent Schools Council (ISC) schools. Data was weighted to ensure that it was fully representative of the wider ISC school population.

Key findings

Previous research

- Several surveys with the specific aim of exploring school leavers' prior expectations of university have taken place in recent years. The most recent survey was the 2017 *Reality Check* survey conducted by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) and Unite Students which had 2021 respondents from the maintained sector.
- Collectively these projects conclude that course choice and university reputation are significant factors in students' institution choices. Interest in and enjoyment of the subject are the biggest motivators in choice of subject. Indeed, most choose university over other post-18 routes to develop their academic specialism.
- While students are prepared to be more independent in their work, most expect some aspects of school-based pedagogy to continue at university, such as personal verbal feedback, classroom lessons and relationship building with tutors. These expectations may not always be fulfilled. Expectations of one-to-one teaching and structured groupwork are inaccurate for the majority and will not be representative of students' experiences.
- In terms of university readiness and information gathering, visiting the institution has often been reported as the most helpful resource, although peer recommendations can also sway decisions.

Intentions

- Eighty-four per cent of respondents in the sample applied to at least one UK university, with 3.1 per cent making only international applications. The remaining 12.5 per cent had not applied to university; these students may be making alternative applications for apprenticeships, employment or

further education, taking gap years, or intending to apply post-qualifications.

- Almost one in ten (9.2%) intend to select offers from Oxford or Cambridge as a firm choice. Just over 70 per cent have accepted an offer from another Russell Group university.
- The national prevalence of unconditional (or conditional unconditional) university offers is reflected in this survey, with just over 30 per cent holding an unconditional offer. This is lower than the UK average (38%) for the same cycle, perhaps because university choices were more competitive or because pupils at independent schools did not receive contextual offers.
- The most popular locations for firm choice universities are London (14.1%), the South West (15.8%) and the North East (13.2%).
- There is a good spread of intentions across STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), humanities, and arts and languages subjects with similarity to all UCAS places awarded (43% STEM, 39% humanities, and 18% arts and languages).

Expectations and attitudes

- Pupils were asked why they wanted to go to university. The most commonly cited reasons were getting a better job in the future, interest in the chosen subject and gaining a higher level of education. The least common reasons were 'my friends are going' and 'I can't/don't want to get a job yet'.
- In terms of teaching expectations, the pupils in this survey would appear to be more realistic than those in the 2017 *Reality Check* survey. In this dataset, one in three (34%)



expect more one-to-one support (compared to *Reality Check's* 46%) and 28% expect more taught hours (compared to 60%).

- Pupils were asked to indicate their level of agreement with a number of statements related to expectations using a 5-point scale. Five indicated the strongest agreement. The highest average scores out of 5 were for 'I expect marking and assessment to be fair' (4.53) and 'I expect to be intellectually stimulated' (4.47). There was a fairly high level of expectation (average score 3.74) that they would have to work harder at university than at present.
- Respondents were able to choose up to 3 influences on university choice from a set list. Liking the city or area was the biggest factor, followed by campus facilities and enjoyment of the open day. Affordability or having friends going to the same university was less important.
- Respondents were asked about their readiness for 3 key aspects of transition: accommodation, budgeting/finance and preparing for academic study. Of these, respondents appeared to be most organised in terms of accommodation, with 66 per cent expressing confidence. However, the proportion knowing how to organise budgeting and preparation for academic study was lower, at 55 per cent. These are areas in which schools could do more to support their leavers and in which universities could communicate their expectations more clearly.
- Over 90 per cent of respondents intended to live in university halls for the first year. Five per cent will live in private halls or their family home. These figures differ from the *Reality Check* survey which indicated that the broader spectrum of university applicants is more inclined to live with parents or in private halls.
- Respondents were presented with a list of 10 new experiences which they will have to manage at university. They were asked to state whether they were concerned, a little nervous, quite positive or excited about these. A scale of 1-4 was used, with 4 denoting excitement and 1 denoting concern. The highest scores were for study of the chosen subject (average score 3.44), facilities at university (3.33) and student societies (3.31). The lowest scores were for managing finances (2.58), coping emotionally (2.72) and managing workload (2.73).
- Respondents were asked to indicate how they felt about going to university. Overall, the most popular response was 'excited' (75%). However, the second most popular response was 'anxious' (47%), with some overlap between the two. More respondents feel 'ready', 'supported' and 'well informed' than 'worried', 'impatient' and 'unprepared' but data indicates some unresolved concerns among half of the students surveyed. Males report being less anxious, worried and unprepared than females.

Sources of information

- To facilitate an effective school-university transition, it is important that universities are effective at explaining the changes that students will face. Although students feel they have a good grasp of the course content that they will be studying, they are less sure about the contact hours involved, the process for progression to subsequent years, the academic workload and the support on offer. The least secure area relates to the induction process and how the first few days will work out, a finding repeated from the 2016 HMC/GSA survey.
- The survey was conducted 5 months before respondents would be going to university and it is possible that more information would have been provided in the interim. However, it may be helpful for universities to provide more detailed information before the exam stress engendered by A levels takes over.

- Students' preference (78%) for receiving information is by email. Orientation days would be a good option for a quarter (24%) of respondents but the use of social media and online modules are less popular. None of the options presented was selected by all respondents, indicating that there will be variations in engagement with the process regardless of how induction requirements are communicated.

The higher education curriculum

- Independent schools have a reputation of providing high levels of information and advice to their students about university.
- Respondents were asked to select from a list the interventions and support which they most vividly recalled. The most commonly cited were support with writing the personal statement (85%), lessons about university (77%), for example during form periods and assemblies, and having members of staff to talk to about individual requirements (72%). Fifty-eight per cent of respondents had been informed by academic opportunities, such as trips and talks, or software to support decision-making. Fifty-seven per cent cited careers conventions and 53 per cent recalled alumni or parent visits. Fifty-five per cent recalled meetings with employers making links between higher education and future employment. Fifty-three per cent mentioned that they had been expected to participate in work experience.
- The average number of interventions recalled was 6 out of the possible 10. This may mean that schools are offering some, but not all, of the recommended opportunities. It could also mean that some students do not engage with or recall their school's provision.

Recommendations

- Schools should conduct an audit of their higher education curriculum. Considering the additional needs of vulnerable students, is it appropriately challenging and supportive? If your provision is already thorough, ensure that it is well signposted.
- As parents are an important influence in student choice of university, schools should ensure that there is family engagement when planning support and interventions.
- Schools should consider making provision once students have their offers to help them prepare. A panel of former students could be assembled to discuss what a day in the life of an undergraduate looks like, and to advise on how to prepare for higher academic study and budgeting.
- The open day is perhaps the most important tool in motivating HMC and GSA school leavers to apply for a particular institution, universities should ensure that they present a fair and accurate picture of the undergraduate experience.
- Universities should reach out to local schools to offer talks, workshops and student experience opportunities, even to applicants for other universities.
- Although Easter may be too early to explain the induction process in full, universities should make it clear when details will be provided.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://www.hmc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/HMC-GSA-Survey-2019.pdf>