



NUS/HSBC Student Experience Report: School Leavers



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NUS/ HSBC School Leavers Research – Motivations & Expectations

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1 Introduction & Methodology

This report discusses findings from the Motivations & Expectations module of research amongst a nationally representative sample of school leavers who had been offered a place at university. As such this is the second wave of research carried out by GfK Financial on behalf of HSBC and the NUS following on from the one conducted in 2008. The research looked at a variety of areas, including motivations for attending university, reasons for university and subject choices and expectations of workload, the findings of which will be presented in the main Student Experience report due to be delivered in November 2010.

The research programme was a mix of quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative phase consisted of an online survey, which ran between 3rd and the 12th of August 2010. The follow-up qualitative stage consisted of an online bulletin board as a discussion group which ran for three days between the 8th and 10th of September. A total of 300 students took part in the quantitative online survey, and a further 24 took part in the qualitative bulletin board discussion group.

2 Executive Summary

- Overall, school leavers mainly choose to go to university 'to gain qualifications' (71%), but also 'to improve chances of getting a job' (42%) and 'to improve my earning potential (39%)'. It seems that for many, university is seen as a means to improving future prospects rather than a specific aim in itself.
- Those in social class D/E are more motivated by improving their earning potential than any other social class (50% v 39% average). If the graduate job market continues to be challenging, this could potentially discourage this group from going to university, if they begin to feel that their chance of increasing their prospects through university is low.
- While school leavers primarily choose a course that 'match their interests' (92%), they are, as mentioned previously, clearly also motivated by a course that will provide them future prospects that is 'a requirement for my career' (68%) or that is 'respected by potential employers' (38%).
- School leavers are likely to choose their university based on the 'academic reputation of the university' (61%) and whether it 'has the subject/ course I want' (61%).
- School leavers in lower social group D/E are more likely to choose a university close to home, which is probably because school leavers in grade D/E are the most likely to consider living at home whilst studying. It seems therefore that many school leavers in lower social grades feel that their choice of university is restricted to those within a close distance.
- Approximately half (46%) said they received all the information they needed from universities to make their choice, however many would have liked further information in relation to undertaking their actual course.
- School leavers in social grade D/E are much more likely to say they would have liked information on accommodation costs and sources of financial support. This suggests perhaps that they are

more likely than other social-economic groups to take finances into account when making their university choice.

- A small majority (55%) of school leavers expect to spend more hours learning at university than at school or college, while one quarter (25%) expects the time spent to be about the same. On average, school leavers expect to spend 31 hours learning at university per week, which is more than current students actually do, but less than they believe they are required to do.
- School leavers are likely to expect life at university to be different from school, with high percentages agreeing with 'I will have a whole new lifestyle at university' (82%) and 'doing well at university will require learning to think differently' (79%).
- The majority of school leavers (57%) agree that 'at the end of the day, it will be true that the university is there to serve students like me'. However, males and those in social grade A are more likely to think this than females and those in lower social grades.
- Student loans are expected to be the most used source of funding at university. However school leavers are significantly more likely than existing students to use existing savings or paid income from employment.
- Despite school leavers being more likely to use income from paid employment as a source of funding, their perceived dependence on this to help with living costs is significantly less than that indicated by existing students who took part in a separate study and answered the same question. Further insight from the qualitative discussion group reveals that school leavers intend to use income from paid employment to stave off debt rather than using it for day-to-day expenses.
- Over a third of school leavers (36%) appear worried about their financial situation at university. With most respondents in the qualitative work mentioning 'finances' or 'managing a budget' as their key issues of concern.
- School leavers estimated that it should take just over 10 years to pay back all debt they had accumulated during university.



- Approaching three quarters (70%) of schools leavers said they were confident that they would get a job within a year of completing university; of the remainder (30%) not confident, a majority (80%) said they would simply continue to look for a job in their field of interest. Whilst nearly half (47%) said they would consider staying in education.

3 Survey findings: Motivations & Expectations

3.1 Choosing course and university

When school leavers were asked their main reasons for wanting to go to university, the most popular response by some margin was 'to gain qualifications', with nearly three quarters (71%) saying this. Around two fifths said 'to improve my chances of getting a job' (42%) and 'to improve my earning potential' (39%). It seems therefore that, by many, university is seen as a means to improving their future prospects rather than a specific aim in itself.

However for some school leavers, the university experience itself does contribute to their desire to attend. One third (34%) say they want to go 'for the experience', while 28% want to go 'to learn more about interesting subjects'.

These motivations are similar to what we have seen for current students, where gaining qualifications was also the top motivation and improving job prospects was of more importance than the university experience itself.

Chart 1: Gaining qualifications is school leavers' main motivation for attending university

Q1. What are your main reasons for wanting to go to university? Please indicate your top three reasons.



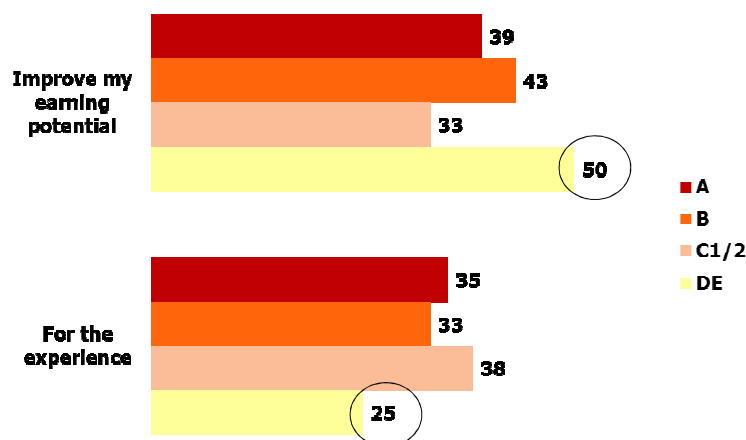
Base: All school leavers (300)

There are some slight differences in motivations for attending university by gender: female school leavers are slightly more likely to say they want to gain qualifications (74% v 67%), whereas males are more likely to want to improve their earning potential (45% v 35%). Females are also significantly more likely to say they have 'always wanted to go' (19% v 10%), while males are significantly more likely to be motivated by having a good social life (10% v 4%).

Reasons also vary by social class; school leavers in the lowest social class (D/E) are more likely to be motivated by improving their earning potential (50% v 39% average), and least likely to be motivated by the university experience (25% v 34% average). This indicates that these school leavers are more likely to think of university as a means to an end rather than a worthwhile experience in itself. Increases in tuition fees and competitive graduate job markets could potentially therefore discourage them from going to university, if they begin to feel that their chance of increasing their prospects does not justify the increased cost.

Chart 2: School leavers in social grade DE are the most likely to be motivated by improving their earning potential, and the least likely to cite the university experience

Q1. What are your main reasons for wanting to go to university? Please indicate your top three reasons.

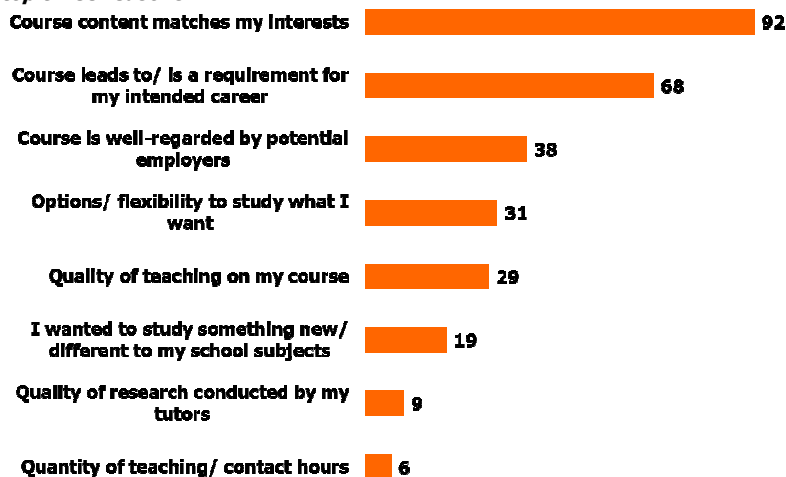


Base: A (51*); B (79*); C1/C2 (126); DE (44*)

When asked about their main reasons for choosing their course, the most popular reason was 'course content matches my interests', which was in the top three for most of the school leavers (92%) taking part in the survey. The 'course is a requirement for my intended career', was the second most important reason (68%).

Chart 3: The vast majority of school leavers choose courses that match their interests; while two thirds choose subjects that are required for their intended career

Q2. What were the main reasons for choosing your first choice course? Please indicate your top three reasons.



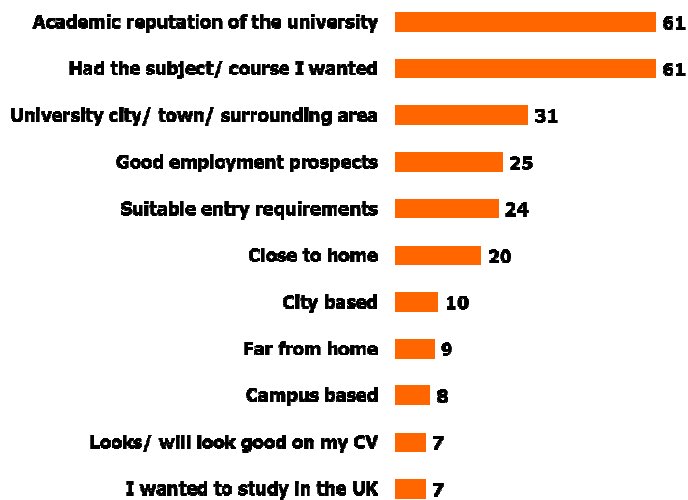
Base: All school leavers (300)

This suggests that although school leavers' main reasons for attending university are to gain qualifications and improve their job prospects, they also choose a course they believe they will enjoy. These findings are in line with that of current students.

As the majority of school leavers choose to go to university to gain qualifications and choose their course based on their interests, it would be expected that they would choose universities based on these criteria, and this does appear to be the case. When asked the main reasons for choosing their first choice university, the most popular responses overall were 'academic reputation of the university' (61%) and 'had the subject/ course I wanted' (61%).

Chart 4: School leavers mainly choose universities that will give them the best qualifications in the subject of their choice

Q3. What were the main reasons for choosing your first choice university? Please indicate your top three reasons.



Base: All school leavers (300)

These findings differ slightly from what were found for current students, where the 'subject/course they wanted' was of most importance followed by 'the city/ surrounding areas'. 'The academic reputation' was only the third most important reason.

Given the increasingly competitive graduate job markets, it may be that school leavers are increasingly choosing universities with good reputations, which they may consider to be more likely to help them gain employment after graduation. However, we cannot rule out the possibility that the disparity could be due to students completing the survey one year or more after making their decisions, and therefore their memories of what motivated them could have become modified over time.

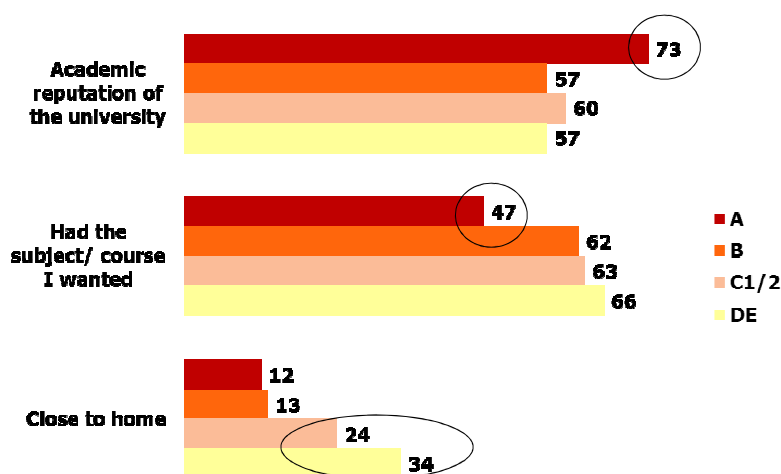
School leavers' choices of university seem to be influenced by their social group. Those in the highest socio-economic group (A) are much more likely to be influenced by the academic reputation of the university (73% v 61% average). This could potentially be due to those in this socio-economic group

having a greater likelihood of attending an independent school, where students are more likely to be encouraged to apply to prestigious universities. In contrast, students in this group are less likely to choose their university due to it having the subject/course they wanted (47% v 61% average). This suggests that many students in the highest socio-economic group feel that their choice of university is more important than the specific course they undertake.

The results also suggest that the lower a school leaver's social grade, the more likely they are to choose a university because it is close to home – one third (34%) of school leavers in the socio-economic group D/E said this, compared to only 12% of group A. This is likely to be because school leavers in grade D/E are the most likely to be considering living at home whilst studying – as seen in the Finance & Debt report, 39% of grade DE said they are considering this, compared to 16% of school leavers in group AB. It seems therefore that many school leavers in lower social grades feel that their choice of university is restricted to those within a close distance, which could potentially limit their opportunity to choose the universities that are best for maximising their career prospects.

Chart 5: School leavers in social grade A are more influenced by a university's reputation than the courses it offers, while those in grade DE are likely to choose a university close to home

Q3. What were the main reasons for choosing your first choice university? Please indicate your top three reasons.



Base: A (51*); B (79*); C1/C2 (126); DE (44*)

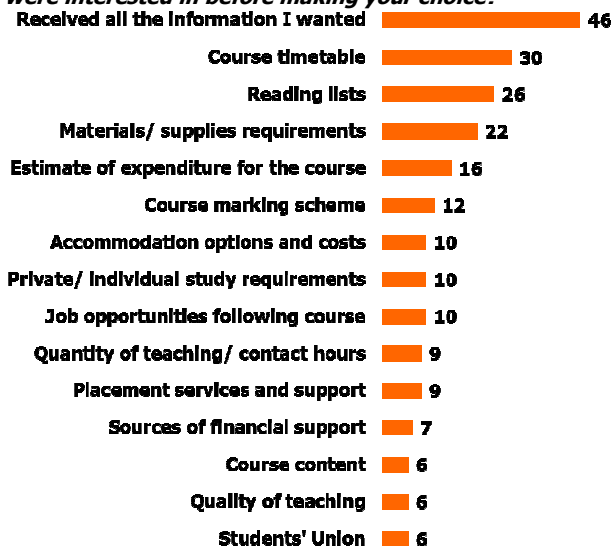
School leavers were also asked what additional information they would have liked to have received from universities before making their choice and approximately half (46%) said they received all the information they wanted.

Those who did not receive all the information they wanted mainly wanted information relating to undertaking the actual course, such as 'course timetable' (30%), 'reading lists' (26%) and 'materials/supplies requirements' (22%).

School leavers are less concerned about receiving financial information, such as 'an estimate of expenditure for the course' (16%), 'accommodation options and costs' (10%) and 'sources of financial support and associated application procedures' (7%).

Chart 6: While half of the school leavers received all the information they wanted when making their choice, many would have liked more information on their course

Q7. What additional information would you have liked to have received from universities you were interested in before making your choice?



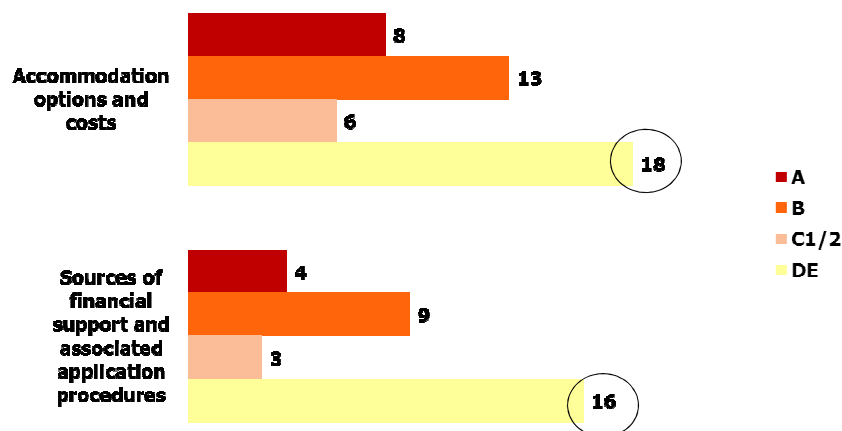
Base: All school leavers (300)

However, school leavers in social group D/E are much more likely to say they would have liked information on 'accommodation options and costs' (18% v 10% average) and 'sources of financial support and

associated application procedures' (16% v 7% average). This suggests that school leavers in social group D/E are more likely to take finances into account when choosing their university, and therefore require information on this in order to make their decision. As this social group seems to pay more consideration to finances than the other social groups, it could be that they are discouraged from applying to more prestigious universities when these universities are allowed to charge larger fees than their rivals.

Chart 7: School leavers in social grade DE are much more likely to say they would have liked more information on costs and financial support

Q7. What additional information would you have liked to have received from universities you were interested in before making your choice?



Base: A (51*); B (79*); C1/C2 (126); DE (44*)

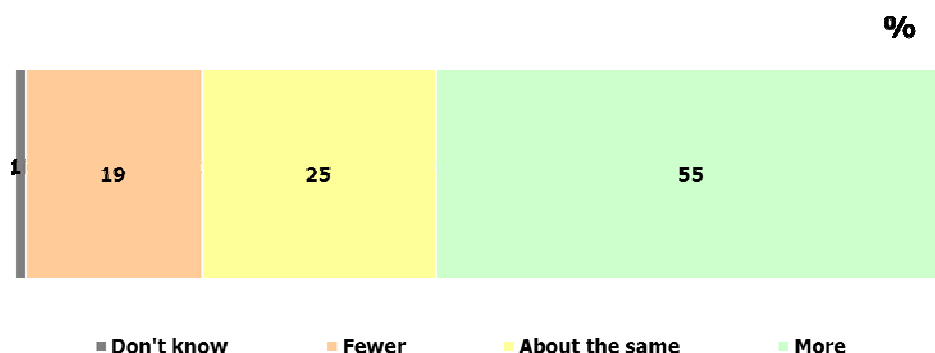
Females are less likely to say they received all the information they needed than males (41% v 51%). They are more likely to say they would have liked information on their course content, such as course timetable (37% v 22%), reading lists (30% v 21%) and the quantity of teaching/ contact hours (13% v 5%).

3.2 Expectations and perceptions of university

When school leavers were asked whether they expect to spend more or fewer hours learning at university than at school or college, a small majority (55%) said they expect to spend more time learning at university, while one quarter (25%) said they expect the time spent to be about the same. Perhaps surprisingly, one fifth (19%) said they expect to spend fewer hours learning at university than at school/college.

Chart 8: The majority of school leavers expect to spend more hours learning at university than at school/college

Q8. Overall, do you expect to spend more or fewer hours learning at university than you did when you were at school or college? By learning we mean attending classes, tutorials, lectures, practicals etc., preparation for these sessions, and private study



Base: All school leavers (300)

When this is looked at by gender, it seems that males are slightly more likely to expect to spend more time learning at university compared to females (60% v 50%). School leavers in social groups A and DE are also a little more likely to expect to spend more time learning (61% and 59%) than those in group B (51%) and C1/2 (53%).

On average, school leavers expect to spend 31 hours learning at university per week. This expectation seems to be realistic, as current students report having 13.4 hours of contact time and spending 15.0 hours on private study – 28.4 hours in total. Current school leavers therefore anticipate spending slightly more time learning than students say they do at the moment.

However, when current students were asked how many hours they are required to spend on private study, on average they said 27.1 hours, meaning that students are actually required to spend 40.5 hours learning per week. School leavers' expectations of learning time therefore sit between what students are expected to do and what they actually do. This suggests that school leavers are likely to complete less private study than they see as being required when they become students, as is the case with current students.

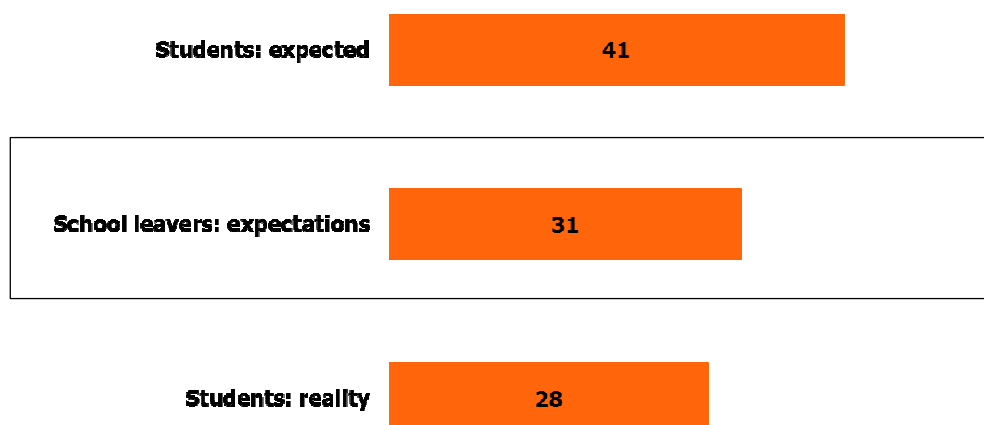
Chart 9: School leavers' expectations of the time spent learning at university is much in line with how much time students currently undertake

Q9: How many hours per week do you expect to spend learning at university? Again, by learning we mean attending classes, tutorials, lectures, practicals etc., preparation for these sessions, and private study

Q15: On average, how many contact hours a week do you have at this stage of your course?

Q18: In addition to contact hours, how many hours a week do you spend on private study?

Q19: How many hours of private study does your course require?



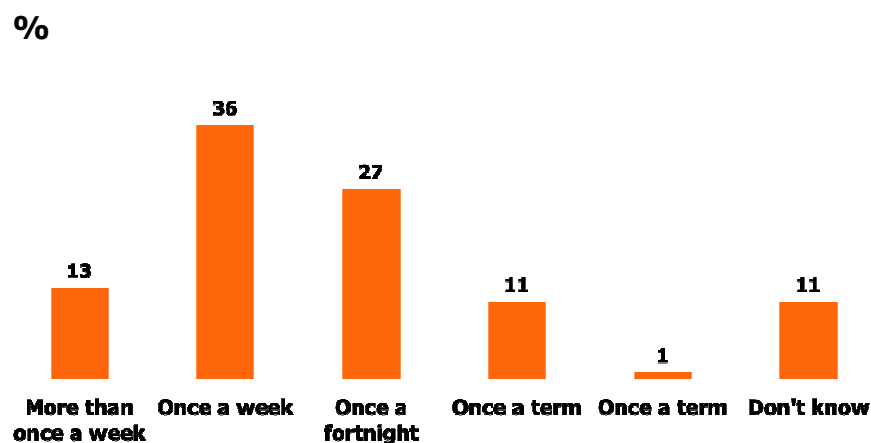
Base: All school leavers (300); All students receiving teaching (3179)

Expectations do not appear to vary greatly by gender or social grade though it does seem, again, that those in grades A and DE expect to spend more time learning when at university: those in social group A and DE expect to spend an average of 33.0 and 32.1 hours learning, compared to 30.3 and 31.2 hours for group B and C1/C2. However, this difference is not significant.

School leavers were also asked how often they expect to produce written work that will be marked by an academic member of staff, and approximately one half (49%) said once a week or more often. One quarter (27%) expect to produce work once a fortnight, while 12% said less frequently than this. One tenth said they do not know.

Chart 10: Half of school leavers expect to produce written work at least once a week

Q10. How often at university do you expect to produce written work that will be marked by an academic member of staff, that is a tutor, lecturer, professor or similar?



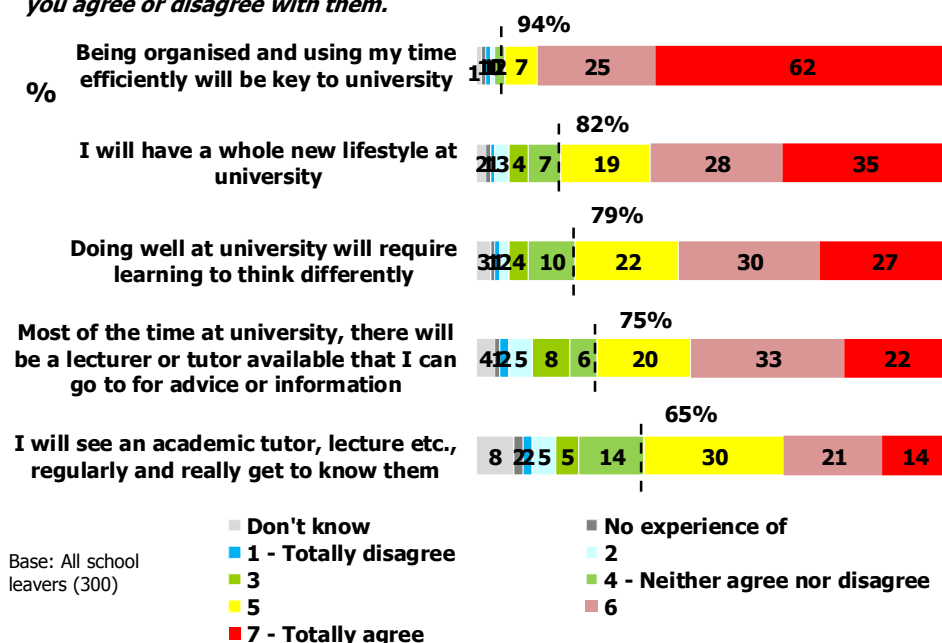
Base: All school leavers (300)

School leavers were also asked a range of attitudinal questions about their expectations of university.

The key statement that the vast majority agree on is that 'being organised and using my time efficiently will be key to university': 94% agree with this statement, with 62% totally agreeing.

Chart 11: Students are likely to think university will be very different from school

Q10a. Read the following statements by other school leavers your age and say how far you agree or disagree with them.



The results indicate that school leavers are very likely to expect life at university to be different from school, with high percentages agreeing with 'I will have a whole new lifestyle at university' (82%) and 'doing well at university will require learning to think differently' (79%). Likewise, not many agree that 'university will be like school, only harder' (34% agree) or 'I will be told exactly what to do and when I need to do it' (17% agree).

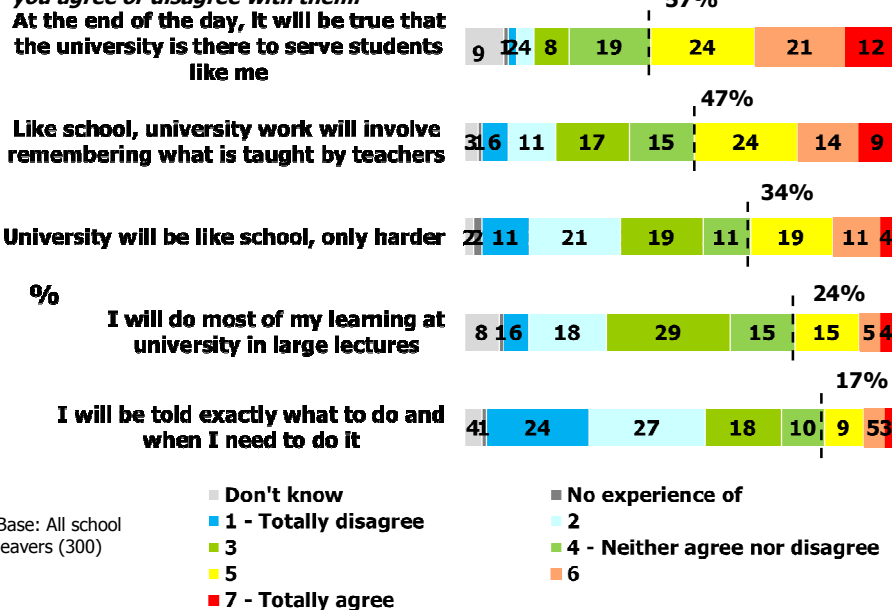
Males are less likely to appreciate that university is likely to require more independent working; compared to females, they are more likely to agree that 'I will be told exactly what I need to do and when I need to do it' (24% v 10%). However, they are less likely to agree that 'University will be like school, only harder' (30% v 38%).

School leavers appear to have high expectations of university academic staff: three quarters (75%) agree that 'most of the time at university, there will be a lecturer or tutor available that I can go to for advice or

information' and just under two thirds (65%) agree that 'I will see an academic tutor, lecturer etc. regularly and really get to know them'.

Chart 12: Students are unlikely to think they will be instructed on what to do and when to do it

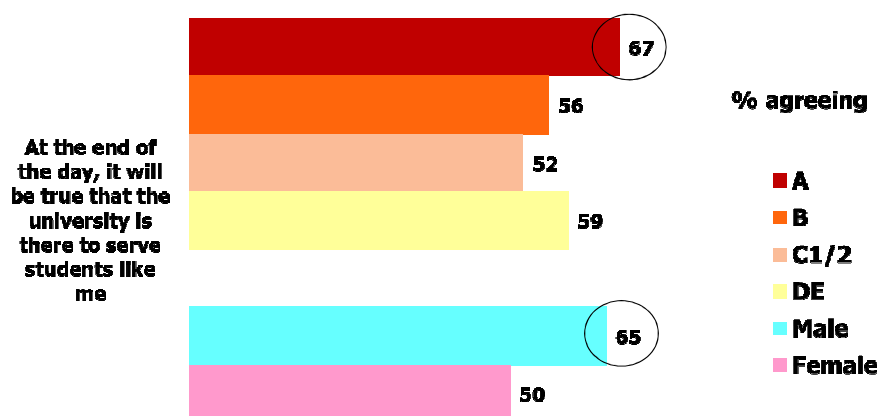
Q10a. Read the following statements by other school leavers your age and say how far you agree or disagree with them.



The majority of school leavers (57%) also agree that 'at the end of the day, it will be true that the university is there to serve students like me'. However, certain demographics are more likely to think this than others: males are significantly more likely to agree with this than females (65% v 50%). School leavers in social class A are also slightly more likely to agree with this statement than average (67% v 57% average).

Chart 13: Males and those in social grade A are more likely to agree that university is there to serve students like them

Q10a_9. Read the following statements by other school leavers of your age and say how far you agree or disagree with them: "At the end of the day it will be true that the university is there to serve students like me"



Base: A (51*); B (79*); C1/C2 (126); DE (44*); Male (136); Female (164)

4 Survey findings: Finance & Debt

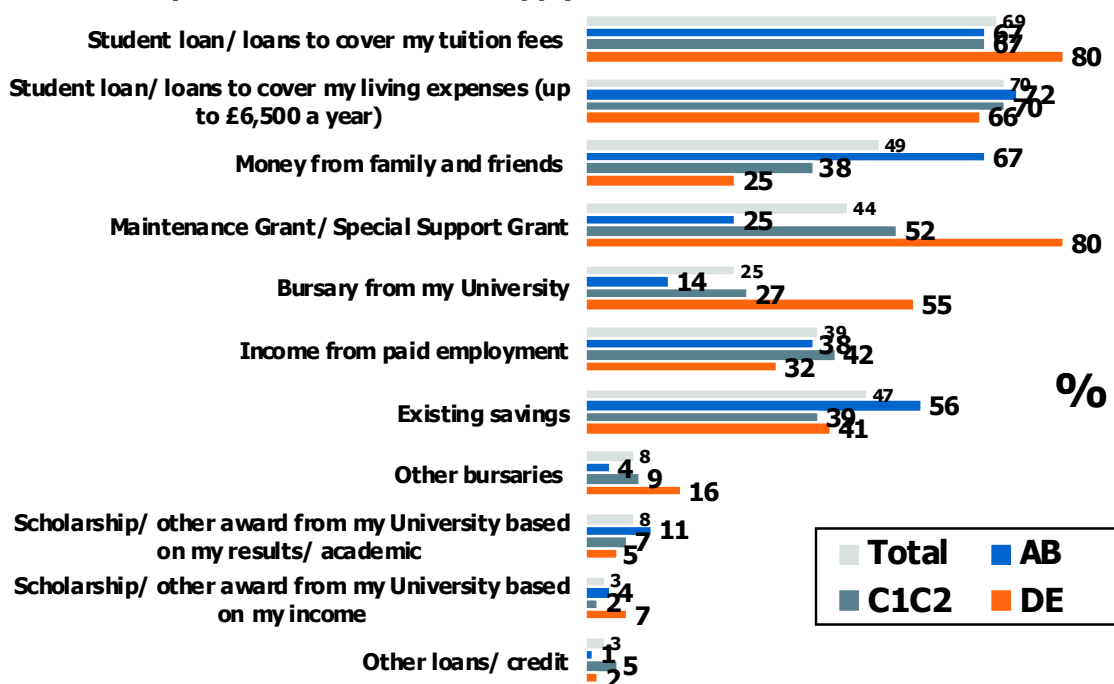
4.1 Sources of funding

The most common source of funding that school leavers plan to receive is a student loan, either to cover tuition fees or living expenses such as accommodation, course costs, food and other expenses – see chart 1 – this is similar to the findings from the existing student's survey which we reported previously. However, there are some significant differences in the expected sources of funding; School leavers appear significantly less likely to use a student loan to cover tuition fees, this may be because they are currently unaware of the possibility of this and so emphasising the need for better financial information. They are though, significantly more likely to expect to use income from paid employment and existing savings. It

looks that perceived usage of existing savings is perhaps a result of the recession and it's aftermath with there being a greater awareness of financial responsibility.

Chart 14: Sources of funding is affected by socio-economic group.

Q73/11. Which of the following sources of funding do you plan to use/ receive at university? Please select all that apply



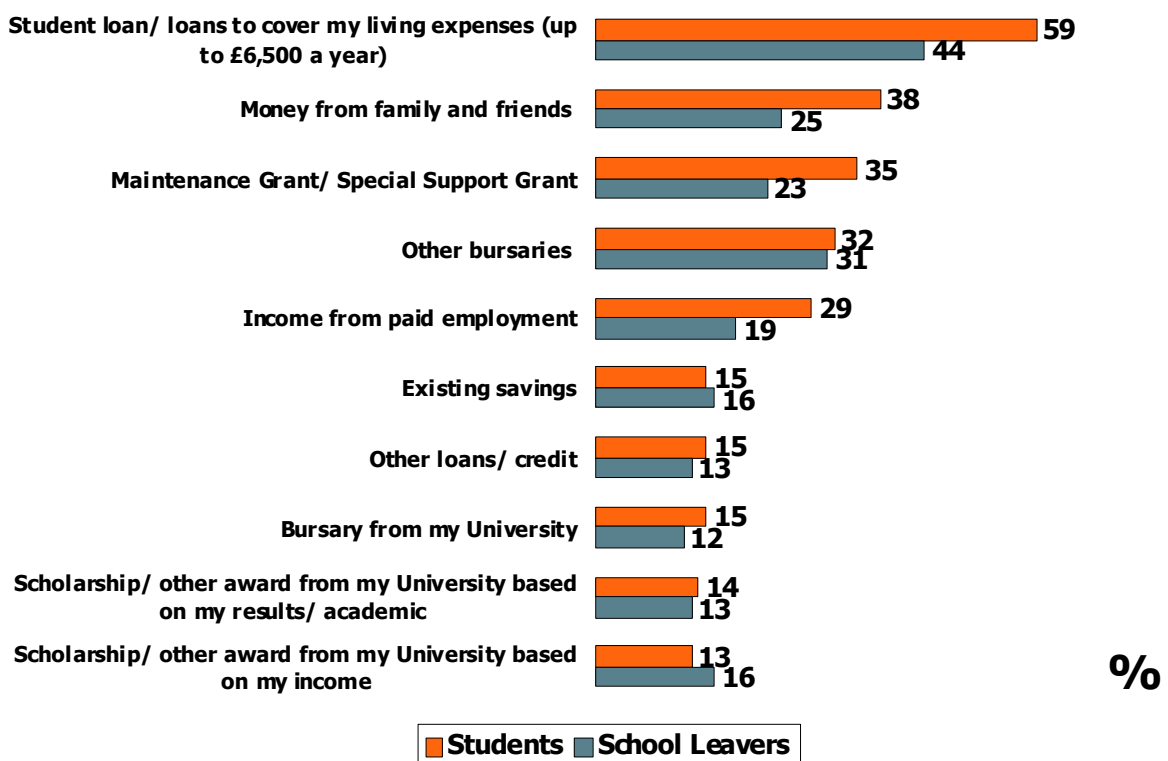
Base: AB school leavers (130); C1C2 school leavers (126); DE (44)* small base size

We also see significant differences of sources of funding by socio-economic group. In particular, significantly more school leavers from DE families are looking to use maintenance grants or bursaries from their university as sources of funding, whilst those in AB are significantly more likely to use money from family and friends.

When looking at the proportion of living costs met by various sources of funding, views of school leavers are seen to be broadly similar to students, with student loan meeting the biggest proportion of their total living costs – see chart 2. However we do see some significant differences, in particular the less dependence on the student loan, money from family and friends and grants to meet their living costs – however, as with sources of funding expecting to be used, it may be a disparity between what they plan to do and what is actually done.

Chart 15: Sources of funding as a proportion of total living costs

Q74/12. What % (approximately) of your total cost of living (do you expect to) come from your ...



Base: Student loan/ loans to cover my living expenses: students (1977) school leavers (210); Money from family and friends: students (1362) school leavers (146); Maintenance Grant/ Special Support Grant: students (1198) school leavers (133); Other bursaries: students (168) school leavers (23); Income from paid employment: students (878) school leavers (116); Other loans/ credit: students (114) school leavers (8); Existing savings: students (779) school leavers (140); Bursary from my University: students (898) school leavers (76); Scholarship/ other award from my University based on my income: students (127) school leavers (10); Scholarship/ other award from my University based on my results/ academic: students (173) school leavers (25)

4.2 Financial Situation at University

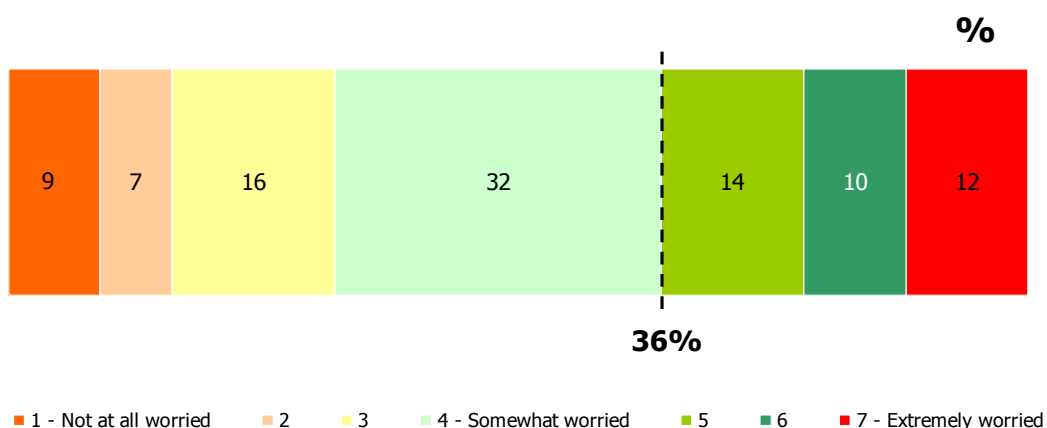
When school leavers were asked how worried they were about what financial situation at university, over a third (36%) said they were worried; a further 32% said 'somewhat worried' and with the

"Having to sustain myself on two part-time jobs means even less time for the fun things."

remainder (32%) saying they were not worried. The follow-up qualitative discussion group identified 'finances' or 'managing to budget' as the number 1 worry for most, with the rest placing it in their top 3 concerns – similarly when asked what the pro's and con's were for going to university, some of the top 'con's' were 'no money' and 'debts'. Unsurprisingly, this is interlinked with school leavers' families' socio-economic situation, with those in social grade D or E significantly more likely to be worried about their financial situation at university than those in higher grades – see chart 3.

Chart 16: School leavers are worried about what their financial situation at university will be.

Q15. How worried are you about what your financial situation at university will be?



Base: All school leavers (300)

"Summer work, savings and budgeting."

ut the lifestyle changes they were considering in order to make the best use of their money – see chart 4, 'living on a fixed budget each week' was most commonly mentioned by almost three quarters (70%). The qualitative work supported this finding, when asked about their 'coping' strategies for their finances many said 'drawing up a budget' was one.

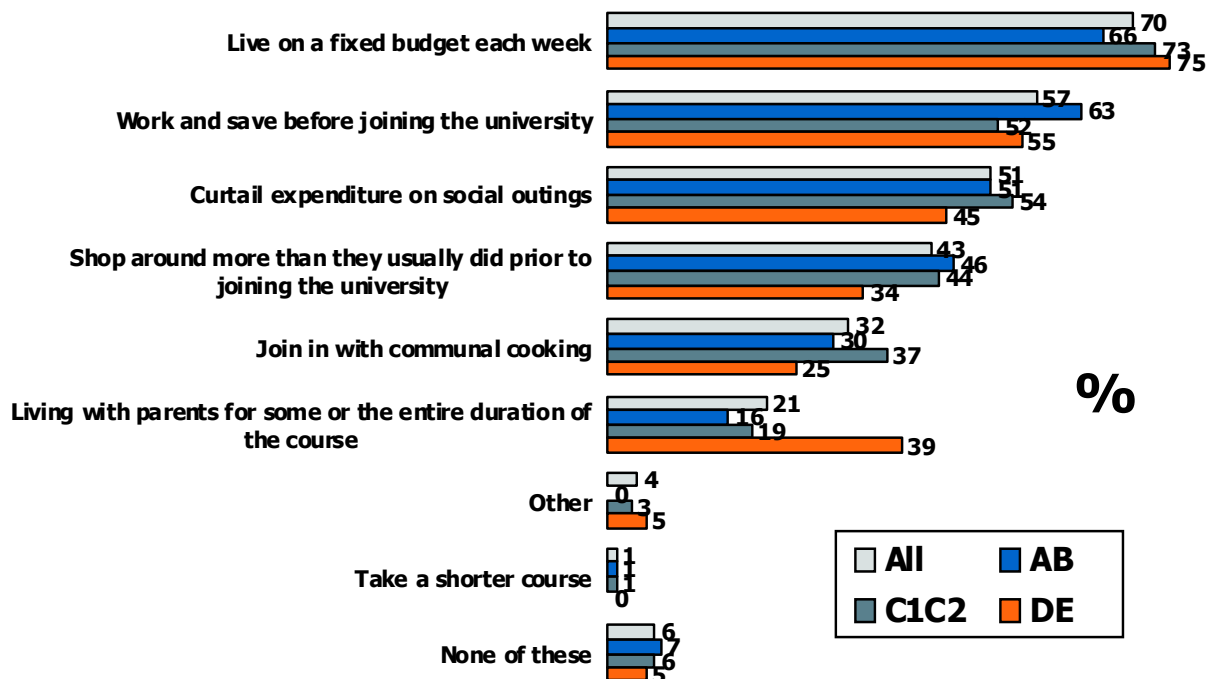
Interestingly we see a fifth (21%) of school leavers considering living with parents for some or the entire duration of their course in an effort to save money. Once again we see a significantly higher proportion of school leavers in lower income families (D or E social class) mentioned this (39%).

"To get through med school without having to sell a kidney."

When asked whether the school leavers intended to work when they go to

Chart 17: Living on a fixed budget is what most school leavers plan to do to help make best use of money at university.

Q15a. Please indicate if you are considering or have already done some of these or anything else in this aspect?



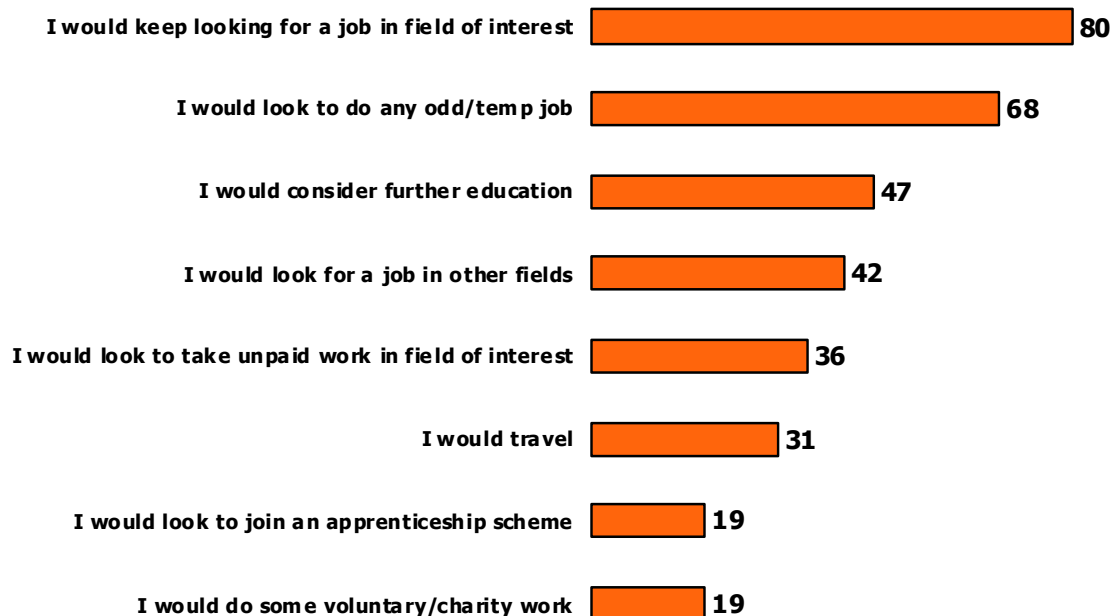
Base: All school leavers (300); AB (130); C1C2 (126); DE (44*) * small base size

university, almost half (49%) said that it was their intention to work during term times and holidays or both. Certainly from the qualitative work, we find that one of the ultimate goals for school leavers is to finish university with as little debt as possible.

Of these school leavers who were not confident of getting a job within a year after completing their course – see chart 5 – a majority (80%) said they would continue to look for a job in their field of interest, although nearly half, 47

Chart 18: School leavers would persevere looking for a job in their field of interest.

Q19d. If you didn't get a job within the first year of leaving the university, which of these are likely to do?



Base: All who are not confident of getting a job within the first year of leaving university (91)



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