



This paper is taken from

*Europe's Future: Citizenship in a Changing World
Proceedings of the thirteenth Conference of the
Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe
Academic Network*

London: CiCe 2011

edited by Peter Cunningham and Nathan Fretwell, published in London by CiCe,
ISBN 978-1-907675-02-7

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Atherton, G. & Okonkwo, J. (2011) Understanding the students of tomorrow: How young people think and feel about higher education, in P. Cunningham & N. Fretwell (eds.) Europe's Future: Citizenship in a Changing World. London: CiCe, pp. 304 - 311

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CiCe
Institute for Policy Studies in Education
London Metropolitan University
166 – 220 Holloway Road
London N7 8DB
UK

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Lifelong Learning Programme

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- The CiCe administrative team at London Metropolitan University
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The Lifelong Learning Programme and the personnel of the Education and Culture DG of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

Understanding the students of tomorrow: How young people think and feel about higher education

*Graeme Atherton and Judith Okonkwo
Aimhigher WECAN, University of Westminster (UK)*

Abstract

This paper will explore how young people in England form their views of Higher Education (HE). There is little detailed, previous focus on how the views and attitudes of young people regarding higher education evolve and change over the teenage years. The paper draws on a survey conducted with 1600 young people from years 9 – 13 (13-17 year olds) over May to November 2010. These young people were drawn from schools/colleges in two different areas of England and the survey examines their future occupational & educational preferences. It reflects on their levels of 'aspiration', perceptions of academic subjects, opportunities/constraints, knowledge of HE, attitudes to cost, ideas of 'success' and their views on who/what influences them. The results show the HE 'aspirations' of young people are uniformly high but their knowledge of HE options and the future educational landscape is limited and does not advance greatly over the mid teenage years. As HE is set to become significantly more expensive in England the need for impartial and comprehensive information, advice and guidance for young people is now very pressing.

Introduction

The ideal of social mobility in the United Kingdom is in jeopardy as young people grapple with the complex issues that now surround their future educational choices. Over the past few months, tuition fees have been raised amidst groundbreaking protests, university funding has been slashed, as has funding for a number of widening participation initiatives. In such precarious times, particularly within the context of the UK as a nation that must maintain a skilled workforce to compete effectively in the future (CBI, 2011; Cabinet Office 2010); insights into how young people think and feel about higher education are essential.

This study aims to provide timely information from young people as they navigate the available choices through their school years. By selecting cohorts for participation from years 8 – 13, the findings provide a snapshot of the changes that can occur over time. In particular, attitudes towards finance issues that inform progression to higher education, aspirations, and current knowledge and understanding of higher education options were explored along year group and socio-economic level. This is in contrast to the bulk of previous research which has focused on older students on the verge of HE entry (Bates et al, 2009; Coughlan, 2010).

An outline of the recent changes include – HE tuition fees' increment with a permissible range of £6000 to £9000 per annum for courses with effect from the 2012/13 academic year; the abolition of the education maintenance allowance¹ (EMA), which was considered an effective incentive for young people to remain in post-16 education, and credited with reducing the number of young unskilled people entering the workforce (Maguire and Rennison, 2005); the reduction of funding made available to universities, and the cessation of funding for Aimhigher, the UK's only nationwide scheme dedicated to widening participation (HEFCE, 2004). These changes have occurred against the backdrop of previous progress; made over the last decade; research evaluating the later labour years show that aspirations remained high, including a rise in numbers of those who aspire to go to university across all social groups (Chowdry et al, 2009).

Methodology

This report draws on research with over 1600 young people from 47 schools. It focuses on those who are in year 8-11 and looks at the extent to which their views on future education, employment destinations and the cost of HE change over time. The participants are from schools with differing sets of results and they are drawn from different social groups and across the ability range. They completed a questionnaire in specially organised workshops administered by a team of independent researchers. This study does not reflect the overall distribution of schools in England by faith orientation, pupil gender, 11–16/11-18 etc. Rather the aim was to construct a purposive sample that would include the range of different schools in the maintained, non-selective sector thus allowing young people's views in a diversity of contexts to be explored.

The results were also analysed by Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD). This measure combines a number of indicators, chosen to cover a range of economic, social and housing issues, into a single deprivation score for each small area in England. This allows each area to be ranked relative to one another according to their level of deprivation. The country is divided into 32,482 small areas based on postcodes. These are called Local Super Output Areas (LSOAs) and each one is ranked by its IMD score. The bottom 14,000 LSOA's represent the bottom 40% of areas in terms of deprivation. However as no significant differences were highlighted in the analysis results primarily focus on the general sample and, where differentiation has been observed, on results by year group.

A breakdown of the sample revealed that 49% were female, 25.5% on free school meals (FSM), 27.9% receiving educational maintenance allowance (EMA), 33.7% have at least one parent with HE experience, and the majority of respondents (31%) were Year 10 students, followed by Year 9 (25.5%).

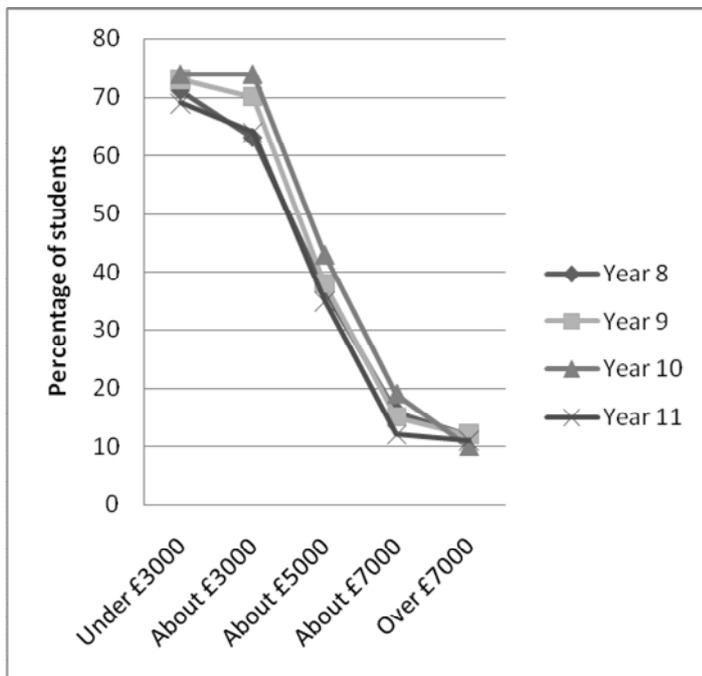
Results

¹ The Education Maintenance Allowance is an income dependant allowance up to a maximum of £30 per week, paid to young people who opted to remain in education after school leaving age.

Finance

The questionnaire explored knowledge levels about the current cost of university, as well as how much young people would be willing to pay for higher education. As figure 1 below shows, the amount students are willing to pay was uniform across the year groups, with the majority of students opting to only pay £3000 or less a year for higher education. A small minority <20% indicated a willingness to pay £7000 or more, but as other research has shown (Atherton et al, 2010), this is only for courses they consider 'premium' such as Law at Cambridge or Medicine at Oxford.

Figure 1: How much students are willing to pay for HE in percentages



When asked if it was fair that students have to pay to go to university, responses spanned a five point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree, with the majority opting to neither agree nor disagree. Additional financial support for students from low income backgrounds was a less contentious issue, with the majority of respondents (72%) agreeing. For students who were opting to go to university, a majority felt that they may decide to go to university where the opportunities for part time work are higher and choose a university on the basis of what financial support they offer. The general consensus was that 'you should have a clear idea of how much university is going to cost and how you will manage financially before you apply'.

Grants, Loans and other Support

Although the students had some understanding of what grants and loans were, only 22% of respondents felt confident in their knowledge of the financial support available to them for higher education. The students also expressed uncertainty about how to apply to university, and where to get the most useful sources of information about different universities and courses. When asked to assess which support activities they found the most useful, respondents selected university visits during which they had the opportunity to look round the campus and meet students. These responses are supported by previous research (HEFCE, 2010) that lists information from current students regarding their satisfaction with teaching and chosen course as the information that prospective students would find most useful in making decisions. At the opposite end of the scale, both residential and non-residential summer schools left participants lukewarm, as did having their parents attend a session about going to university. The results from this section did not exhibit any significant differences between the year groups.

Influence

Participants were asked to rank a number of factors in order of how much they influence their thoughts about the future. Rankings were from 1 (least influential) to 10 (most influential), with the phrase 'the encouragement I get from my parents/carers in my school work' receiving the highest average ranking (7.4). The lowest indicated influence was 'what my friends think of school and how they behave in class' with an average ranking of 4.2. Parents/carers support is a widely acknowledged influence for young people (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003); when asked if they 'want to go to university because it will make their parent/carer happy' the majority of young people responded in the affirmative. Irwin (2009) explores class differences as defined by parental experience of higher education, finding that in the group of those with parents who neither provide support nor have HE experience a majority opt to pursue jobs that do not require HE. Despite this, Irwin was able to detect an anomaly, a group with high aspirations that include HE and well paying professional careers despite this lack of parental support. The impact of parental HE experience, particularly maternal education, should not be discounted with recent research (Strand, 2010; Ross, 2009) indicating this variable has a strong significant relationship to attainment and engagement. This is further magnified when coupled with social class as determined by parental career e.g. higher managerial, long-term unemployed etc.

Perceptions of Success

When asked to rate 10 pictures representing young people in various stages of training or education, such as Trainee Sports Coach, Politics Student at Manchester Metropolitan University etc, the students ranked the highest (maximum 10) and the lowest (minimum 1) scoring as shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Young People's Perceptions of Success

High		Low	
<i>Course</i>	<i>Average Score</i>	<i>Course</i>	<i>Average Score</i>
Law	7.9	Trainee Hairdresser	3.9
Medicine	7.7	Trainee Plumber	4.5

There are clear indications that the students' perceptions of success are linked to their aspirations. As shown in Table 1, Law was the highest ranked profession, followed closely by Medicine. This is reflected in their aspirations with 48% of respondents indicating Law or Medicine/Doctor when asked what career they intended to pursue. There were marked differences in perceptions of success when comparisons were carried among the year groups, with Law retaining a top two spot for Years 8 to 10 but dropping to six for Year 11s. The choice of teaching as a career was the top choice for young people in Year 11.

A breakdown of future career aspirations by year group is shown in Table 2 below, describing the 69% of respondents who indicated a future profession.

Table 2: 'Career I would like to pursue when I leave education' by year group

Rank	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10	Year 11
1	Doctor	Doctor	Doctor	Teacher
2	Lawyer	Lawyer	Lawyer	Doctor
3	Teacher	Sports Related	Sports Related	Musician
4	Vet Surgeon	IT & Gaming	IT & Gaming	Engineer
5	Actor	Teacher	Teaching	Businessman
6	Engineer	Footballer	Graphic Design	Lawyer
7	Policeman	Musician	Architect	Social Worker
8	Footballer	Nursing	Armed Forces	Accountant
9	Hairdresser	Accountant	Actor	IT & Gaming
10	Nurse	Businessman	Engineering	Armed Forces

Income, Desired level of qualification and job satisfaction

As has been observed when considering previous variables, there was no differentiation in responses between the different year groups. Aspirations were remarkably high across the sample with the majority exhibiting educational, career and salary ambitions (see Table 3 below). Over 80% of young people would like to get a job that eventually pays over £50,000 a year. A majority also indicated a preference for achieving higher qualifications than their parents; however participants felt the most strongly about getting a job that would meet their personal interests.

The focus on personal interests and future job satisfaction was echoed in the drivers identified for pursuing higher education; with 82% agreeing (over 50% strongly agreed) that university was very important for the achievement of their life goals.

Table 3: Young People's Aspirations

I want to.....	Strongly agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Get a job that eventually pays over £50,000 per year	48%	35%	16%	1%	0%
Achieve a higher qualification than my parents	37%	35%	23%	3%	1%
Get a job that I really want to do and meets my personal interests	63%	27%	9%	1%	0%

Discussion

This study highlights a number of issues that are pertinent for widening participation in HE. Utilising a cross-sectional approach, it attempts to track the changes in perception of young people towards higher education over 5 school years.

Limited changes between school year groups have been observed on a number of factors ranging from perceptions of success, to the amount young people would be willing to pay for higher education. In addition there were few observed differences based on socio-economic status, and where these were found, the results were not significant. The changing attitudes highlight focal points for intervention, providing clues to future needs, supporting previous research highlights key points between 11 and 16 when aspirations can be influenced (Sutton, 2008; Atherton et al, 2009; Goodman and Greg, 2009).

Along with identifying the need for interventions to articulate aspirations and encourage achievement with young people at much earlier stages, particularly as the research highlights fairly high aspirations across board, this study indicates an urgent need for IAG services to be deployed across the nation in light of the recent changes. It is

essential to keep young people informed of the impact these changes can have on their choices and aspirations. Further, it is recommended that in future such drastic policy changes are preceded by adequate preparation – particularly the provision of information - to forestall confusion and panic.

There is considerable scope for further study on this issue; in particular, the authors would be keen to see a longitudinal, as opposed to cross-sectional, tracking of young people's perceptions of HE across a demographic that is representative of the general population. Such a study would provide clarifying data regarding what changes in perceptions, preferences and attitudes actually occur. A number of variables tested showed no differentiation between the year groups, this might well be challenged in a longitudinal study.

A final thought that reverberates through the work we have done, and has similarly been found in other research (e.g. Finlay et al, 2009; Willets 2009) - quite often, and contrary to some views (Bonnett & Reid, 2010) there is no lack of aspirations among young people; rather it is a lack of expectation, apathy brought on by the circumstances in which they find themselves.

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