

Pigden & Jegede, 2018

Volume 4 Issue 1, pp.383-404

Date of Publication: 24th March 2018

DOI-<https://dx.doi.org/10.20319/pijss.2018.41.383404>

This paper can be cited as: Pigden, L., & Jegede, F. (2018). *Understanding the Educational Needs Of Joint Honours Degree Students In A Post Brexit United Kingdom Higher Education Sector.*

PEOPLE: International Journal of Social Sciences, 4(1), 383-404.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

UNDERSTANDING THE EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF JOINT HONOURS DEGREE STUDENTS IN A POST BREXIT UNITED KINGDOM HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR

Louise Pigden

University of Derby, Derby, UK

l.pigden@derby.ac.uk

Francis Jegede

University of Derby, Derby, UK

f.j.jegede@derby.ac.uk

Abstract

The motivation for this research was to explore the lived experience of joint honours students, for whom there is little in the literature at present. The objective was to critique primary data collected from the students via a self-administered questionnaire. This phenomenological methodology permitted and unfiltered view of the students' learning experiences to be explored. The research is based on a cross-university student survey, conducted over a period of six months. The online survey, which ran between June 2016 and January 2017, involved self-administered questionnaires designed to collect information on the learning experience of students on joint honours degrees, from four different Universities in England. A key finding of this paper is the need for university administrators to pay particular attention to joint honours degrees in their portfolios in the light of the growing and significant number of students opting to study these degrees and the general tendency amongst universities to focus attention on single honours degrees. Particular areas of concern are highlighted where students on joint honours degrees feel improvements in their educational experience could be made. The future scope of the survey results are discussed in

the context of Britain exiting the European Union and in relation to the growing debate on the intrinsic value of university education and the increasing necessity for university management to recognise the unique nature of joint honours degrees and design policy to meet the needs of students enrolled on joint honours degrees.

Keywords

Joint Honours Degree, Brexit, United Kingdom, Higher Education

1. Introduction

In the wake of the hike in tuition fees that United Kingdom (UK) higher education students have been charged since 2012/13, the economic value of an undergraduate degree that leaves students with an average debt of £44k (The Sutton Trust, 2016) has been the subject of discussion amongst students, educators and administrators of UK Higher Education (HE) institutions (Moretti, 2004; Browne, 2010; Universities UK, 2011; Higher Education Network, 2015).

At the centre of this discussion is what students gain in return for what they consider to be a huge rise in their tuition fees. Most UK undergraduate students partially or fully finance their university education through the government's student loan scheme, but nonetheless many of these students have become savvier about the educational experience they get or expect from universities and other provider of HE education. Related to this debate is the nature of, and degree of variations in the students' learning experiences across different institutions, degrees and subjects on offer in UK universities.

Therefore, a critical study and analysis of students' educational experiences has become an important area of study in education research. One area that has often been overlooked and lacking in literature and critical study is the study of the unique experience of joint honours degree students in UK universities. Joint honours degrees enable students to enrol on two or more subjects, with varying levels of integration of the degrees, which leads to either a BA or BSc honours joint award. Over the last decade, there has been an increase in the popularity and number of joint honours degrees in English and Welsh Universities.

Joint honours degrees represent 10% of all undergraduates – 50,000 out of 500,000 (UCAS, 2015) currently enrolled on all honours degrees. Yet, this cohort of students is often overlooked or subsumed into single honours students' experiences in higher education institutions. This study is a cross-university survey of the learning experience of 886 students on joint honours degrees, drawn from four different institutions in England. The study involves an online questionnaire survey conducted over a period of six months.

The survey, which ran between June 2016 and January 2017, involved self-administered questionnaires sent out to students at four institutions. The survey covered different areas of the students' academic life and extra-curricular activities.

2. The Higher Education sector and post Brexit challenges

A recent study conducted by the market research agency, Red Brick Research (Red Brick Research, 2016), claims that UK universities are considered less desirable since Brexit and as seen in *The World University Rankings, 2017*. According to this study, about 64% of the international students surveyed said that Brexit has made the UK a less desirable place to study. Nearly two-thirds of EU students (62%) said that they would not choose the UK if they had to pay the same tuition fees as non-European Union (EU) students. Almost six in 10 respondents (59%) said they believe that international students are less welcome in the UK following the Brexit vote, while 74% said that graduates from overseas are less welcome to stay in the country. Meanwhile, nearly three-quarters (73%) of participants said they believe that the UK will be a less prosperous place to work and study in when the country leaves the EU in 2019.

In the light of this study and the rather bleak assessment of the higher education sector in post Brexit UK, understanding students' educational needs and working to meet those needs has become ever more urgent. According to Mayhew (2017), it is likely that Brexit in combination with a tougher immigration policy, will lead to a reduction in international students studying in the UK. To that end a comprehensive survey involving degree by degree and subject by subject analysis of students' needs and requirements has become necessary and essential. Such studies should be undertaken by UK universities as a matter of priority in order to offer students a quality service and to provide a *raison d'être* for the increase in fees and a justification for other expenses associated with going to university. In this regard, a group of students that have often been overlooked in most studies of students' educational needs requires special attention. It is to this end that this survey focuses exclusively on joint honours degree students, especially in the context of the new Teaching Excellent Framework (TEF).

2.1. The Teaching Excellent Framework

UK universities have had their teaching quality assessed by the criteria set out in the new Teaching Excellent Framework (TEF), a government initiative designed to give students more information about the standards of education they will experience at different universities. The TEF assessment is largely based on data already in the public domain,

around graduate employment drawn from the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education survey (DLHE), student satisfaction from the National Student Survey (NSS) and degree completion rates from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). It will be 2020 before the next TEF report that covers deep assessment of teaching quality down to discipline level is finally published.

The intention behind TEF is to enable all students to have access to the information they need to make good decisions about what and where to study. However, there is a structural problem for students of joint honours degrees by the very nature of the degree's design. A key issue here is what does 'discipline level' mean in the context of joint honours degrees? The datasets in DLHE and the NSS collect information for the overall degree, History and English for example. So the graduate employability, student satisfaction and degree completion is 'averaged' over the two subjects. This tells the prospective joint honours student nothing about individual subject combinations, nor the quality of the individual subjects that make up the pairing. Therefore, other methodologies and data are required in order to scrutinise the effectiveness of joint honours degrees. Our survey, because it captures primary data at the level of the individual student and includes subjective reflections on their experience, combined with a statistical analysis of their experience, provides additional context to the educational environment that best supports excellent outcomes for this category of student.

3. Survey Methodology

The study, upon which this paper is based, was conducted through a questionnaire distributed online via LimeSurvey, a popular and free, open source, web-based survey tool. There are several advantages inherent in using LimeSurvey as opposed to other methods of survey. First, LimeSurvey data is held securely in UK based servers, and can be exported to Microsoft Word, Microsoft Excel, and SPSS. Second, it is relatively simple to set up and it affords users the ability to create a variety of question types including simple single choice questions, multiple choice, equations and free text. The responses are anonymised by LimeSurvey, giving reassurance to the students participating in the survey of their anonymity. Third, LimeSurvey offers the opportunity to easily share the link to the survey using a short TinyURL, a URL shortening web service.

The survey ran between June 2016 and January 2017 and was sent to students based in four English universities: University of Derby; University of Liverpool; University of Nottingham; Canterbury Christ Church University. These four universities were chosen

primarily because of their willingness to take part in this first phase of the survey. The four universities that consented to take part also reflect the diversity of the entire university sector in the UK in terms of their ranking and student populations.

Participating universities were offered a download of their own students' data, to use as they wished. They were also assured that their students and institutions would be anonymised as the purpose of the research was not to calibrate or measure performance in a competitive market, but instead to seek to understand the general nature and characteristics of students who chose to study joint honours degrees, to examine their lived experiences while studying, and to reflect on their feelings towards their degree and their career prospects post-graduation.

Students who took part in the survey were self-selected as only students able and willing to take part in the study by filling in the questionnaires within the stipulated period were included in this first stage of the survey analysis. The survey comprised forty-eight questions grouped together over seven screens. Recognising that a relatively comprehensive survey was required, since we would have no opportunity to re-contact the participants for further detail, we decided to collect sufficient personal information about participants to create a detailed profile. The first group of questions was simply labelled 'About you', and queried basic information with which a simple profile of the student could be established:

- gender
- age
- ethnicity
- home/EU/international
- type of university accommodation
- commute to university
- registered disabilities
- caring responsibilities
- qualifications on entry
- Term-time paid or unpaid work.

These questions were optional so as not to present a barrier to completing the rest of the survey.

The second group of questions was 'About your university and your degree'. We started by asking the name of the student's university. Although as previously stated there was never any intention to compare individual universities, it was still necessary to

understand the institutional contexts in which respondents answered the survey questions. As the characteristics of different universities, e.g. size, geographical location, scale of joint honours degree provision, may skew responses, it was essential to collect institutional data to be able to refer to this when analysing the survey data.

We went on to collect some basic degree information, to establish the varying characteristics of participation in the degree, and to note the subjects studied. Through this, we are able to draw inferences with later questions around degree satisfaction by:

- mode of study (full-time/part-time, visiting on exchange programme, online/distance learning) (mandatory question)
- year or stage of study
- degree title and main subjects studied

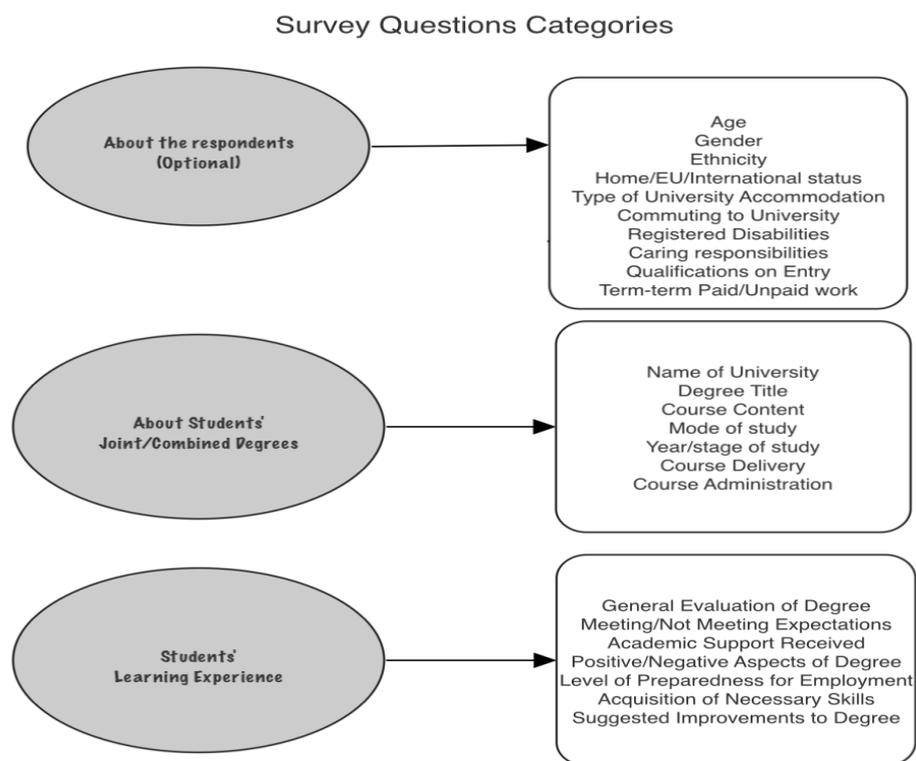
The next question looked at the reasons for selecting a degree, and here the question deviated away from very simple multiple choice or multiple check boxes, and into something rather more rich and detailed. Respondents were asked to choose from a wide range of factors that influenced their choice of degree. This question aimed at assessing how important various factors were in students' decisions to study a particular degree at the university. For example, the degree title, content and design, through to advice available from different sources, through to the university's ranking and location, and the admissions offer made and the availability of bursaries or other incentives. This question group then finished with a simple set of questions around the timetable and engagement with scheduled teaching, and finally some questions about sources of financial support.

The next question group was 'About your learning experience' and here is where we started to personalise the responses and question the students' overall experience. These included their evaluation of the 'best' and 'worst' parts of their degree, whether they had any regrets about their degree and whether they would recommend the degree to a friend. We also asked them what degree classification they hope to achieve and whether they felt prepared for graduate employment. Then to seek to understand this, respondents were asked about the academic support they had received and issues relating to assessment submission and return of feedback. We finished this section by asking the students how their degree could be improved.

We were interested in finding out about the students' perception of their university's learning environment, so the next group of questions asked 'About your university learning environment' and students were asked to rate a wide range of typical university services

including academic and professional advisors, degree leaflets and online information, student wellbeing services, the library, student finance, computing support, administrative support for the degree including enrolment, careers development and, last but not least, catering.

The penultimate group of questions sought to explore a little ‘About your interests outside your studies’, as this would help develop a picture of the holistic and totality of the students’ experiences at university. Respondents were asked what hobbies they enjoyed, whether they were members of any students’ union societies or clubs, and what they liked and disliked about their university communities. The survey questions finished by asking the students ‘What next’ – a free text question asking what the students’ future aspirations were on completion of their degrees. Figure 1 summarises the key questions covered in the survey.



Source: Authors, 2017

Figure 1: A schematic diagram of key questions covered in the survey.

4. Survey Data Analysis and Key Findings

The study showed a national and cross-institutional perspective and experience of 887 joint honours degree students drawn from four UK universities. The universities surveyed varied not only in size in terms of their students’ population but also in the

proportion of their students that were enrolled on joint honours degrees compared to single honours degrees.

4.1 General characteristics of the respondents

We began by reflecting on the general characteristics of our survey respondents. This helped to establish whether there was anything unusual about the students who had elected to study joint honours degrees, or whether they reflected the national characteristics of UK undergraduate students.

About 74% of the respondents were female and the majority, 48.6%, were within the age range of 20 years and below. Figure 2 shows the age categories of the respondents with over 77% falling within the 25 years and below age range. Nationally, females make up 57% of all university enrolments (HESA, 2017) and so our survey was unusually dominated by females. This could be that the traditional subjects studied as joint honours in the UK are those that attract women: humanities, social sciences, business and psychology. Nationally 62% of full-time undergraduates are aged 20 and under (HESA, 2017) so our survey respondents showed an interesting and significant shift towards slightly more mature learners. Certainly studying a joint honours degree in the UK is a minority activity at present, and the students studying in this way are marked out by their passion for studying their chosen two subjects. It is therefore not surprising that the students elect to study this more personalised degree following a few years working and reflecting on what they really want to study at university.

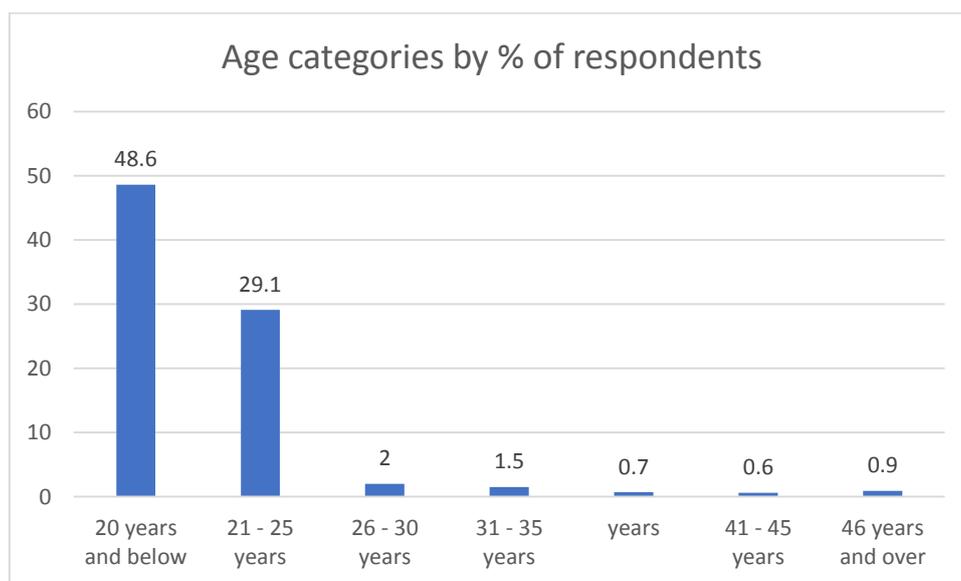


Figure 2: Age range of the respondents

In terms of ethnicity, about 69% of the respondents were white with a relatively small number of respondents from other ethnic groups (see Figure 3). Students from Black African origin were the second largest contributors to the survey with 4.1% and the lowest being from the Pakistani origin. Nationally, of the UK domiciled full-time enrolments with known ethnicity, 24% were BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) (HESA, 2017) so our survey responders were more likely to be BME than the national picture might suggest.

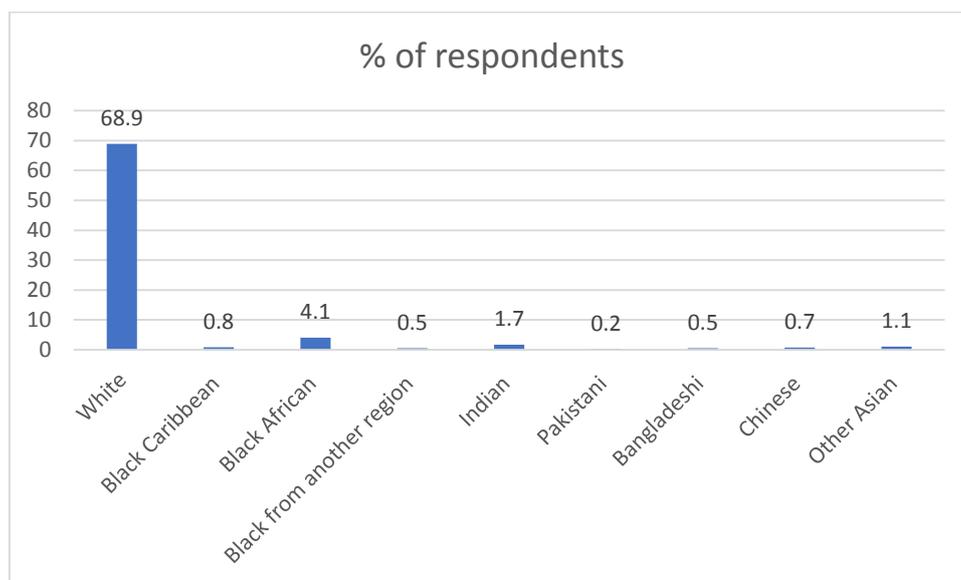


Figure 3: *Ethnic composition of respondents*

In relation to UK residency status, 74.8% of the respondents were home students who were either UK born or UK residents. Only 57 respondents (6.4%) indicated they were international students from the European Union. An even smaller percentage, 1.8% were international students from non-European Union countries (see Figure 4)

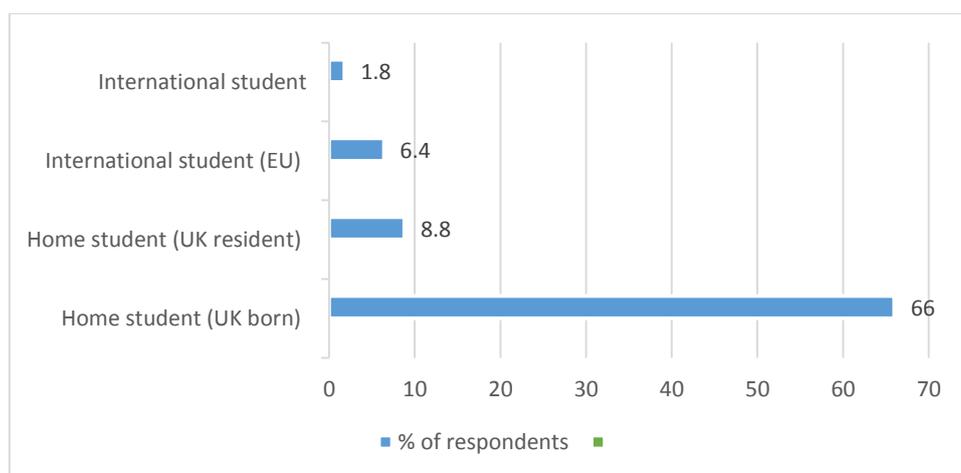


Figure 4 *Students' UK residency status*

However over all UK degrees, in 2015/16, UK domiciled students accounted for 81% of all enrolments at UK HE providers (the same as in 2014/15 and 2013/14), 6% were

other European Union (EU) domiciled (5% in 2014/15) and the remaining 14% came from countries outside the EU (the same as in 2014/15) (HESA, 2017). This shows that in our survey the universities were failing to attract non-EU international students in the same proportion as nationally. This therefore offered a growth opportunity for these types of degrees.

Most of the respondents, 78.4%, were full-time students with only 5 indicating they were studying part-time. None of the respondents were visiting students on exchange programme or on distance/online degrees. Looking at the picture nationally, in 2011/12, 31% of all degree enrolments were part-time. By 2014/15 this had reduced to 25% of all enrolments, and in 2015/16 part-time enrolments accounted for just 24% of all enrolments (HESA, 2017). Indeed according to the report published by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA, 2017), the number of part-time learners has dropped by 60% since 2006. So our joint honours degree survey responders were mirroring the national trend. The reasons for the year-on-year decline in part-time students are well documented and centre on the changes to tuition fees in 2012 that disproportionately negatively affected the number of mature learners entering higher education, who make up 90% of part-time students (HEFCE, 2017). There is the related impact on diversity amongst the student body, and that is borne out in our survey.

The respondents were almost evenly distributed across the year or stage of study with 24.9%, 26.2% and 26.5% in their first, second and third year of their degree respectively.

Shared student accommodation in the private sector seemed to be the most preferred accommodation for the students surveyed with 40.8% of the students currently in this type of facility. Almost, a quarter of the students were in university halls of residence while 12.2% and 5.3% live in a family home or their own home (see Figure 5).

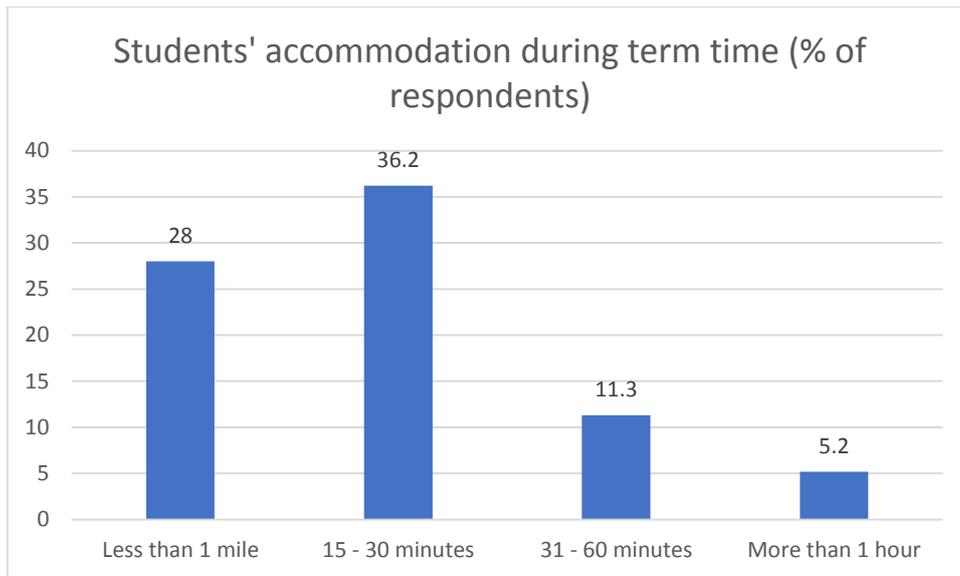


Figure 5: *Students' accommodation during term-time (% of respondents)*

A significant proportion, 14.6%, of the students commuted more than six miles from their residence to their university. Only 33% travelled less than a mile from home to university. While journey time from home to university varied depending on the mode of transport used, most of the students, 75.5%, got to their university within an hour (See Figures 6 and 7). It was worthy to note nonetheless that almost 25% of our survey responders were travelling for over an hour to reach university, which represented a substantial time commitment, probably related to staying at the family home to save on living costs. The potential impact on the students' ability to then participate fully in co and extra-curricular activities was noted.

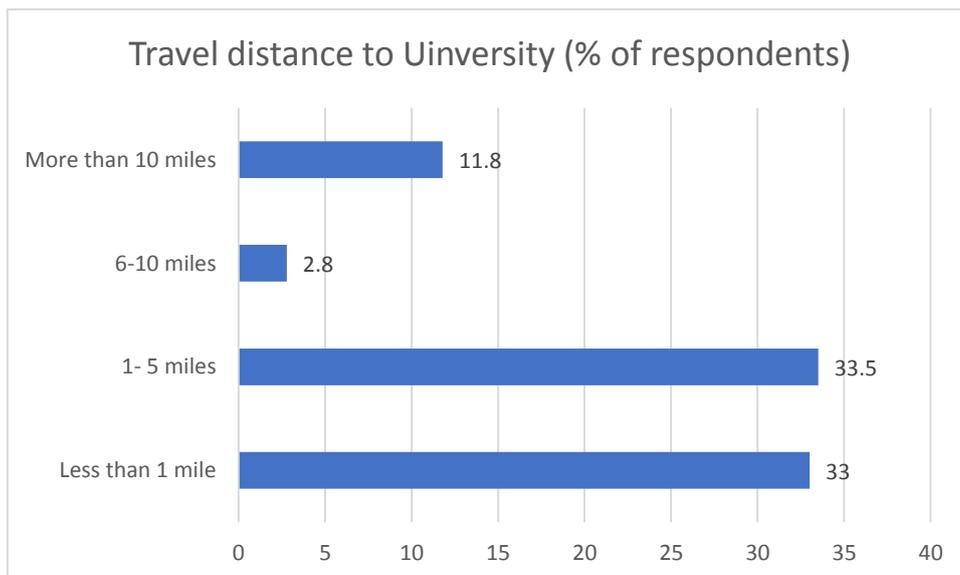


Figure 6: *Students' travel distance to University (% of respondents)*

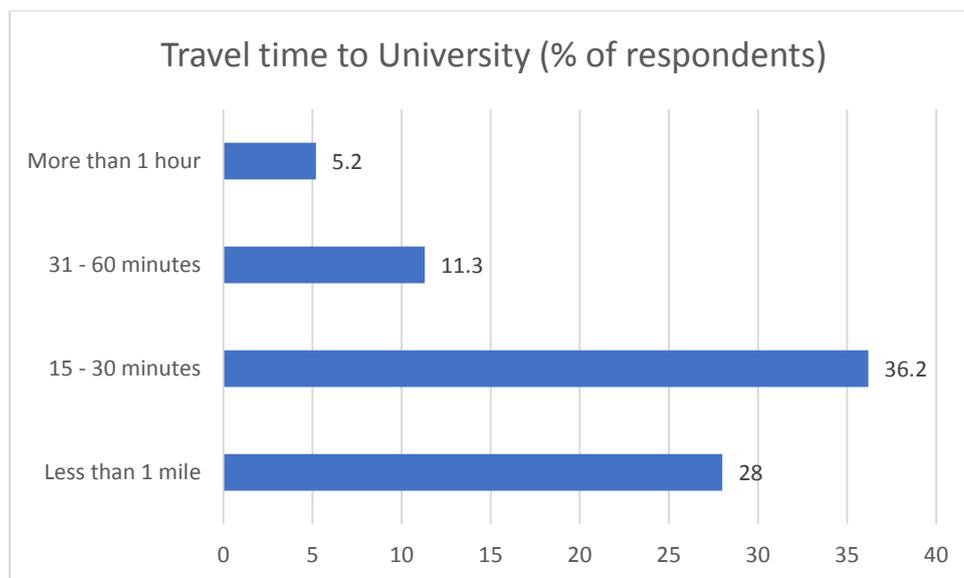


Figure 7: *Students' travel time to University (% of respondents)*

About 19% of the respondents reported having one form of disability or another. Mental health issues and dyslexia, accounted for the highest proportion of disability reported by the respondents with 8.9% and 6.4% respectively (Figure 8). Unseen disability such as diabetes and epilepsy also featured in the survey with about 2% of the students affected. This was a very interesting finding as nationally the percentage known to have a disability was just 11% (HESA, 2017). However our survey asked students to include conditions that might affect their ability to study, e.g. diabetes, and yet these illnesses would not be normally collected by HESA. This broader approach to understanding students' wellbeing would give universities better information on how to adequately support their students. The dominant model at present focusses on learning and physical disabilities over sub-clinical mental health issues and other health challenges that we know are growing to very high proportions. For example it is estimated that the proportion of the UK that were overweight, including obese, increased from 58% to 65% in men and from 49% to 58% in women between 1993 and 2011 (Eastwood, 2013). Since obesity is a major risk factor in the development of Type 2 diabetes, are universities doing enough to support their students in avoiding and managing this illness and the impact it may have on their studies?

Regarding the declining mental health of university students, eight out of ten students (78%) said they experienced mental health issues in the last year (2015), according to a survey by the National Union of Students (NUS, 2015). A third of the respondents (33%) also said they had had suicidal thoughts. The reasons for this have been hypothesised to include pressures due to the increase in tuition fee debt, the competitive nature of the graduate jobs market and the natural stressors of living away from home and the normal

family support networks. Universities must be aware of this and invest in their wellbeing and counselling services so that they can meet the growing demand for support amongst their students.

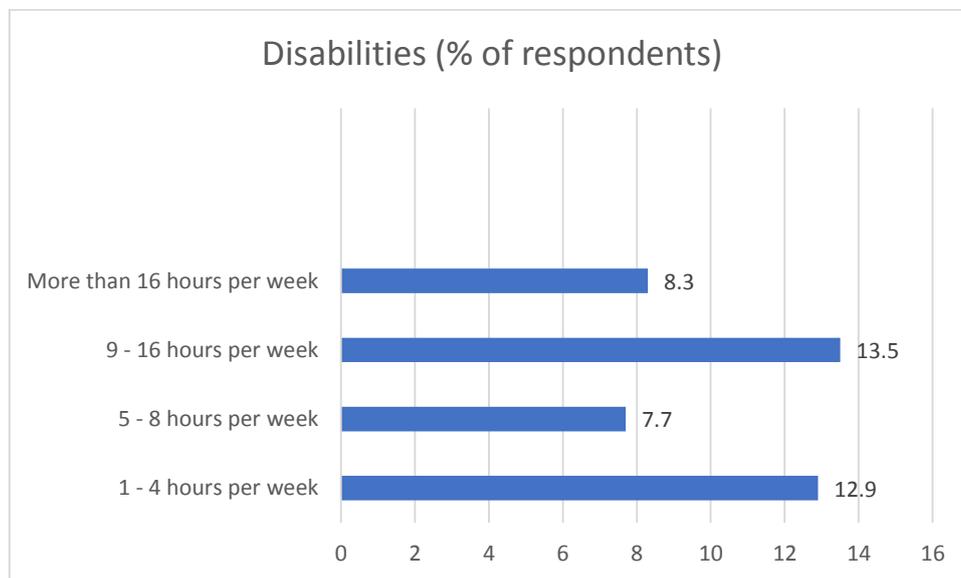


Figure 8: Disability (% of respondents)

Apart from the issue of disability, about 5% of the students surveyed had caring responsibilities for others which could impact on their study at university. More generally there was a limited amount of information available about young adult carers at university, but estimates were that carers made up between 3% and 6% of the student population (Buchanan-Parker, 2013), which mirrored our survey findings. According to the NUS study, 56% of student carers had seriously considered withdrawing from their degree, compared with 39% without caring responsibilities (still a remarkably high figure). Student carers will likely have higher levels of debt, be less likely to integrate socially and take part in the enrichment activities that underpin the personal development that leads to graduate success in the jobs market. Naturally the level of support that universities offer this group will significantly affect their ability to transition and succeed in studying at degree level.

Over six out of every ten students surveyed (62%) indicated that they undertook paid or unpaid work or volunteering activity during term-time in addition to their university studies. According to a survey by Endsleigh (Burr, Wall & Hardie, 2015), a record-breaking 77% of all students were working to help fund their studies, with almost half (40%) of students having a job during term-time, while over three-quarters (78%) having a job during university holidays. In our survey, almost 22% of those who work during term-time spent over nine hours per week on that work (Figure 9). Since students should be studying approximately forty hours a week during term-time, the need to find paid work can only have

a detrimental effect on the students' overall ability to engage with extra and co-curricular activities, in which universities invest so much, in the belief that they enhance the student experience and the likelihood of graduate success. The high percentage of students working while studying may be an indication of the pressure facing students in the UK in financing their studies and covering their living expenses.

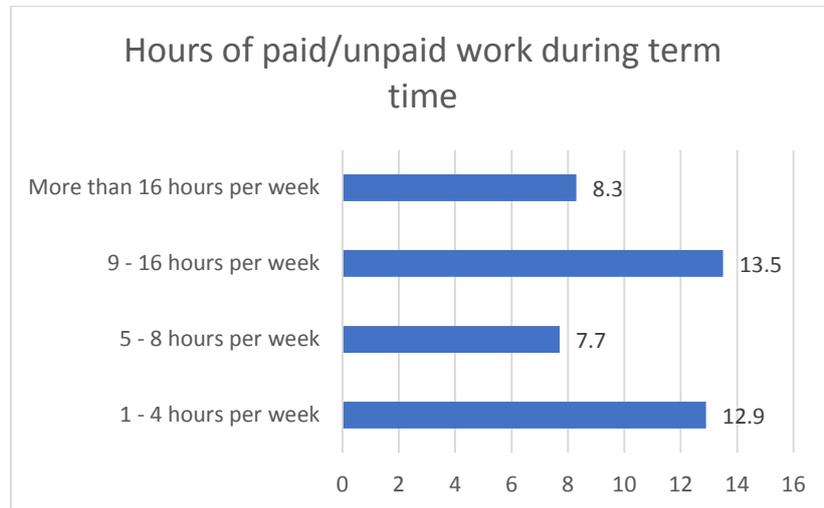


Figure 9: *Hours of paid/unpaid work during term-time (% of respondents)*

According to the survey (Figure 10), personal interest, degree curriculum content and job prospects were the most important factors to students on their choice of joint honours degree. This accords with anecdotal evidence that joint honours degree students have a level of determination to pursue two subjects at degree level, which in the UK is not the dominant model of study. They therefore exhibit higher than average passion for the study of both subjects and the intention to study both at degree level. The students will take two subjects in the belief that it will open doors for them in the graduate jobs market or in further postgraduate study or research.

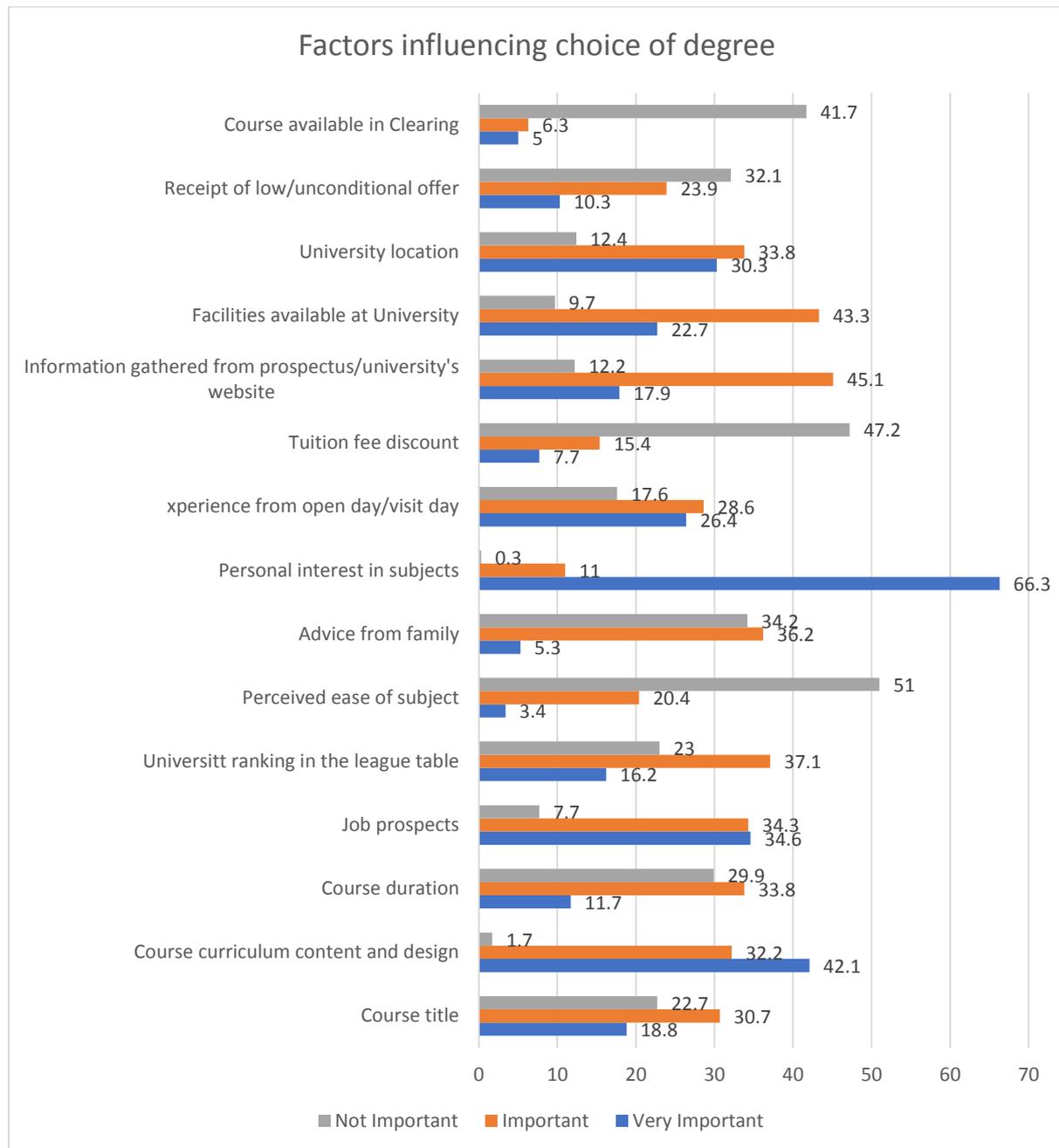


Figure 10: Factors influencing choice of degree (% of respondents)

However attributes pertaining to the institution itself also ranked highly, with over 60% scoring these as being important or very important:

- the university's location (64%)
- facilities available at the university (66%)
- information gathered from the prospectus or website (68%)

This was an interesting finding as from a strategic point of view it lends credibility to universities' considerable investment in their campuses and also underlines the importance of how the university presents itself online and in physical prospectuses.

Almost half of the respondents (49.5%), indicated the degree title as a very important or important factor in their choice of degree. However, 22.7% did not consider title important in their decision to study the subject.

Of low importance in determining the choice of degree was:

- the perceived ease of the subjects (51% said not important)
- degree available in Clearing (42% said not important)
- receipt of low or unconditional offer (32%)

This led us to observe that the students choosing to study two subjects did not do so out of the belief that it would be an easy option, or a means to gain entry to university in a highly competitive process. Instead the students were opting to study in this way for positive and aspirational reasons. This countered an often stated myth that somehow a joint honours degree is a soft alternative, or a fall-back for those that cannot make the grade for a single honours degree. Indeed given the demands of traversing between two academic subjects and the inherent difficulties in timetabling, academic support and time management, clearly studying two subjects should really only appeal to those with sufficient passion for both disciplines to overcome these hurdles. Our survey pointed to the students appreciating this and self-selecting the degree on the basis of their love for both subjects.

For university senior managers the fact that in our survey 47% said that tuition fee discount was not an important factor in their choice of degree may affect strategic positioning around bursaries, scholarships and other fee discount schemes. While for some students clearly these incentives were important, for nearly half our respondents the degree content and career prospects vastly outweighed the prospect of a fee reduction and this should be noted by universities in terms of where to invest in order to attract students.

Interestingly 34% of our survey respondents felt that advice from family was not important in terms of their degree choice. This is a surprisingly high proportion given the emphasis universities now place on welcoming the wider family at open days and speaking directly to parents in much of the marketing literature. University leaders should note that over a third of their students were very much minded to make their own decisions, and this must be acknowledged or else run the risk of patronising these independently minded applicants.

5. Research Outcomes and Policy Implications

Despite the market research agency analysis (Red Brick Research, 2016), the post-Brexit UK universities will continue to appeal to international students as the reputation of the British university education is strong and long-standing. Currently, international students contribute £7.3 billion of the HE sector's £10.7 billion export earnings, according to Universities UK (Universities UK, 2015). In a recent survey, nearly 80% of former international students plan to develop professional links with the UK (Universities UK, 2017). Even after the UK voted to exit the EU, 81% of the British public agreed that international students have a positive impact on local economies.

Therefore, joint honours degrees will continue to be an important part in the undergraduate degree portfolio in UK universities. However, universities will face stiff competition both within and outside the UK. Universities in countries such as Canada, India and Scandinavia will continue to promote themselves as alternative destinations for an excellent university education. Hence, university administrators and strategists would do well to pay attention to the needs of their students if they are to remain economically viable and indeed flourish.

Post Brexit, UK universities would benefit from marketing themselves to students in the USA, Canada, South Africa and Australia. The reputation of the UK university system is strong in these regions, and they have followed a similar trajectory to the UK in increasing the proportion of young people entering higher education:

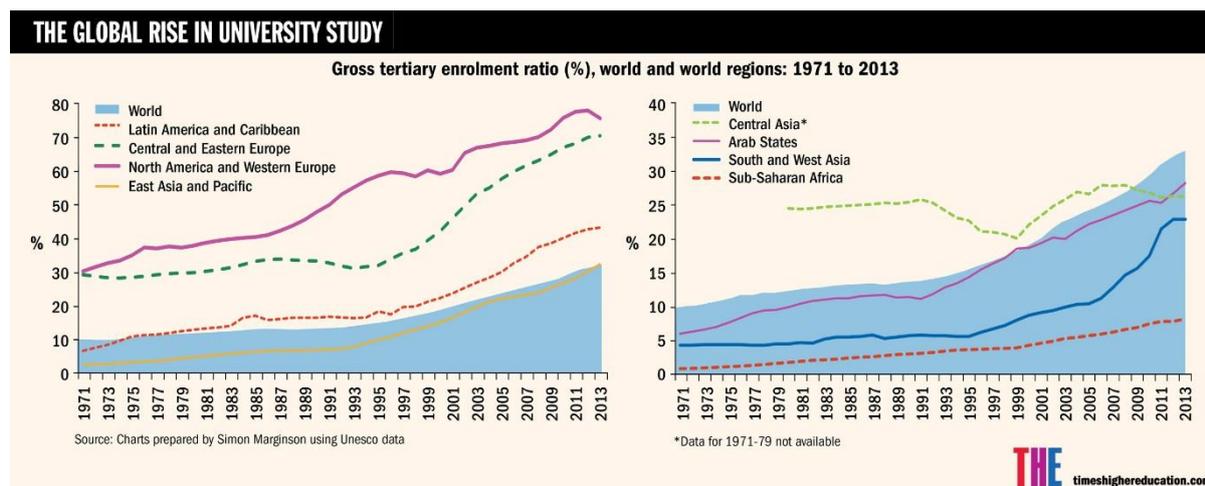


Figure 11: The Global Rise in University Study

Source: charts prepared by Simon Marginson using Unesco data; * data for 1971-9 not available.

However in these regions, the major/minor or double major mode of degree study dominates over the single honours model that features so strongly in the UK. Therefore UK universities wishing to appeal to the North American market, say, must emphasise the availability and quality of their joint honours degree provision.

Given the national and global contexts in which UK universities operate, and the concerns over a hard Brexit (Fowler & Menon, 2016), this study has five main policy implications. First, although the study shows that 8.2% of the students surveyed are international students from EU and non-EU countries, the future of many UK institutions depend to a large degree on the extent to which they are able to recruit and retain international students after Brexit. The significant income generated by UK universities from the recruitment of international students and the effect Brexit may have on this income stream, and to which the institutions have become accustomed, will remain an issue of discussion for many years to come.

Second, given the relatively high percentage of students who reported mental health issues and other unseen disabilities or illnesses affecting their study, UK university administrators and strategists need to pay particular attention to the type and level of wellbeing support available to students in these main areas. Further research needs to be conducted to uncover reasons why mental and physical health issues and learning conditions such as dyslexia have become such a major area of concern to students in the HE sector.

Third, the growing pressure on students to undertake paid work during term-time is apparent in this survey. One policy implication of this is whether universities should consider a much more flexible teaching and learning approach that enables students to juggle study with work life. Making teaching and learning resources available online would benefit students in accessing materials off-site and therefore studying more efficiently. Yet there appears to be a huge institutional variation in the degree to which students can remotely access their study materials.

Fourth, given that the international target markets are often most familiar with a major/minor or double major mode of study, UK universities must market their joint honours degrees in order to attract these students. Therefore it is vital that the needs of these students are understood and that they are provided with an exceptional learning experience.

Lastly, given the sector-wide decline in part-time, mature students, and combined with the dominance of young, white females on joint honours degrees, it is incumbent on universities to reach out to segments of the market that will increase the level of diversity in our undergraduate degree population. By targeting the EU and broader international market,

there is the opportunity to inject a global awareness into university students that will position them strongly when it comes to entering the graduate jobs market. An understanding of globalisation, world issues and cultural differences are all pivotal to success in an increasingly mobile labour force.

6. Conclusion and Research Limitations

Our findings shed some light on this important but often over-looked mode of study: the joint honours degree. Because this model dominates in significant global regions including the USA, Canada, Australia and South Africa, and these are target markets for UK HE recruiters, it is important to ensure that these students are well-catered for in British universities, and their needs and expectations are well understood and provided for. This is particularly acute given the impending Brexit and the impact this will have on EU student recruitment into the UK.

Our primary data analysis is important since it side-steps the weaknesses inherent in other published data sources, namely DLHE, NSS and HESA, in that it can report directly on joint honours degrees. Furthermore, we can reflect both subjective and analytic inferences that will assist university administrations in determining their strategic investment intentions.

However the research had some limitations that constrained the breadth and depth of the data analysis, and therefore limited the conclusions that were drawn. In particular only four universities participated in the study, and yet we know that joint honours degrees are studied at every university in the UK, but in slightly different formats depending on the institution (UCAS, 2015).

Furthermore, although 887 students participated in the survey, this is out of a possible 50,000 students studying for a joint honours degree at any one time (UCAS, 2015). This means the quality of the conclusions could be enhanced by administering the survey in a greater range of universities, and in so doing collect a much larger sample to analyse.

7. Scope of Future Research

In future work we will report on our survey questions relating to the students' perception of the aspects of university organisation and management that impact on their studies. For example, timetable arrangements and the students' engagement with scheduled teaching, will establish whether this is an area of concern for joint honours degree students. We also reflect on the students' sources of financial support to triangulate with the national picture.

We will look at the students' overall learning experience and this will include their subjective evaluation of the 'best' and 'worst' parts of their degree, whether they have any regrets about their choice of degree and whether they would recommend the degree to a friend. We also reflect on what degree classification the students hope to achieve and whether they feel prepared for graduate employment. Then to seek to understand this, we will analyse the academic support the students have received and any issues relating to assessment submission and the return of assessment feedback. We will consider how the students feel their degree could be improved.

In terms of the students' perception of their university's learning environment, we will look at a wide range of typical university services including academic and professional advisors, degree leaflets and online information, student wellbeing services, the library, student finance, computing support, administrative support for the degree including enrolment, careers development and, last but not least, catering.

Lastly, in order to develop a picture of the holistic and totality of the students' experiences at university we will report on what hobbies students enjoy, whether they are members of any students' union societies or clubs, and what they like and dislike about their university communities. Finally we will publish the students' future aspirations on completion of their degrees. The analysis will point university strategists in the right direction to invest correctly to achieve excellence in teaching and learning outcomes and the broader university experience.

References

- Browne, J. (2010). Securing a sustainable future for higher education: An independent review of higher education funding and student finance. Retrieved from <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+hereview.independent.gov.uk/hereview/report/> [Accessed 4 January 2018].
- Buchanan-Parker, L. (2013). Learning with care – experiences of student carers in the UK. Retrieved from <https://www.nus.org.uk/global/campaigns/learning%20with%20care%20-%20nus%20research%20report.pdf> [Accessed on 5 January 2018]
- Burr, A., Wall, M. & Hardie, H. (2015). 77% of students now work to fund studies. Retrieved from <https://www.endsleigh.co.uk/press-releases/10-august-2015/> [Accessed on 5 January 2018]
- Eastwood, P. (2013). Statistics on Obesity, Physical Activity and Diet: England 2013. NHS: The Information Centre for health and social care. Retrieved from <https://digital.nhs.uk/catalogue/PUB10364> [Accessed on 5 January 2018]

- Fowler, B & Menon, A. (2016). Hard or Soft? The Politics of Brexit. National Institute Economic Review. Vol 238, Issue 1, pp. R4 - R12. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1177/002795011623800110> [Accessed on 24 February 2018]
- HESA. (2017). Higher education student enrolments and qualifications obtained at higher education providers in the United Kingdom 2015/16. Retrieved from <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/12-01-2017/sfr242-student-enrolments-and-qualifications> [Accessed on 4 January 2018]
- HEFCE. (2017). Undergraduate education – part-time. Retrieved from <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/analysis/HEinEngland/undergraduate/parttime/> [Accessed on 4 January 2018]
- Higher Education Network. (2015). Six ways higher education benefit the UK economy. The Guardian, Thursday 9th July 2015. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2015/jul/09/six-ways-higher-education-benefits-the-uk-economy> [Accessed 4 January 2018].
- Mayhew, K. (2017) UK higher education and Brexit, Oxford Review of Economic Policy, Volume 33, Issue suppl_1, 1 March 2017, Pages S155–S161, Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxrep/grx012> [Accessed 24 February 2018]
- Moretti, E. (2004). Estimating the Social Return to Higher Education: Evidence from Longitudinal and Repeated Cross-Sectional Data. Journal of Econometrics, July/August, 175-212. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeconom.2003.10.015>
- NUS. (2015). Mental health poll, November 2015. Retrieved from <https://www.openaccessgovernment.org/nus-survey-finds-students-experience-mental-health-issues/23255/> [Accessed 5 January 2018]
- OECD. (2007). Understanding the social outcomes of learning. Paris: OECD.
- OFFA. (2017). Outcomes of access agreement monitoring for 2014-15. Retrieved from <https://www.offa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/2016.04-Outcomes-of-access-agreements-monitoring-1.pdf> [Accessed 5 January 2018].
- RedBrick Research. (2016). The Brexit Effect. Retrieved from <https://www.redbrickresearch.com/the-brexit-effect-polling/> [Accessed 4 January 2018]
- Pigden, L. & Jegede, F. (2016): Combined Degrees & Employability: A Comparative Analysis of Single and Joint Honours Graduates of UK Universities. West East Journal of Social Sciences. Vol5, No2 (August 2016).
- The Sutton Trust. (2016). Degrees of Debt. Retrieved from <http://www.suttontrust.com/researcharchive/degrees-of-debt/> [Accessed 4 January 2018]
- The World University Rankings. (2017). Canada overtakes UK as ‘most desirable’ country for EU students. Retrieved from <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/canada-overtakes-uk-most-desirable-country-eu-students>. [Accessed 4 January 2018].
- UCAS. (2015). Applicants and Acceptances by Groups of Students. Retrieved from <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/data-and-analysis/ucas-undergraduate-releases/ucas-undergraduate-end-cycle-data-resource-4> [Accessed 3 February 2016].
- Universities UK. (2011). Degrees of value. How universities benefit society. Universities UK. Report by the new economics foundation, commissioned by Universities UK.

University Partnerships Programme. Retrieved from
<http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Pages/degrees-of-value.aspx>. [Accessed 4 January 2018].

Universities UK. (2015) Universities attract talent from across the globe. Retrieved from
http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/facts-and-stats/impact-higher-education/Pages/universities-attract-talent-from-across-the-globe.aspx?utm_content=buffer3041f&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=UUK [Accessed 5 January 2018]

Universities UK. (2017). The economic impact of international students. Retrieved from
<http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2017/briefing-economic-impact-international-students.pdf>. [Accessed 5 January 2018]