

In light of rising tuition fees, is there a difference in the student decision making process for those choosing to study for a degree at a university and those choosing to study for a degree at a further education college? (0276)

Jim Pugh

Staffordshire University, UK

Over 100,000 students are currently studying for their degree within Further Education (FE) colleges. This rise has been a product of changes in Higher Education's (HE) government led recruitment policies, students not wanting to travel distances to study, and the rise in university tuition fees (Garner 2015). Although price increases have occurred within FE colleges for HE study, these have not been pound for pound matching the rise in universities. This provides an opportunity to examine the ways in which the cost of participation influences students' decisions on choosing where to study. The research compares two sets of students across two institutions, showing contrasts between: students subject to higher and lower fees within the university; and students subject to higher and low fees within the college (HE in FE students). Furthermore the discussion covers the motivators behind why these students have decided to enter HE, showing differences between those charged more at both institutions.

#### Method

This study employed survey questionnaires across the two institutions: a new university and a further education college which offers franchised honours degrees from the new university. The survey questioned first and second year undergraduates attending both institutions during the academic year 2012/13. The standard university undergraduate fee for first year undergraduates for the 2012 intake was £7,499, which rose to £8,300 for resource intensive awards and £9,000 for 2 year Fast Track degrees. The standard fee for second year undergraduates was £3,000. Whereas the college was also charging £3,000 for second years, it's year 1 students were only subject to £5,400 – an approximate reduction of £3,000 per year.

Within the university sample of 627 (approximately 6.5% of the full-time on-campus student body), 302 are Year 1, 306 in Year 2 and 19 within third or higher year groups across a range of disciplines. The anomaly of third years in the sample is accounted for retaking students and also those progressing from Foundation Year awards therefore the sample Year 2+ is used in the paper; which captures students who enrolled subject to lower fees. As expected the college sample is considerably smaller. 67 students, all studying degree awards, responded to the survey. This sample is made up of 44 Year 1 and 23 Year 2+ students.

The survey (made of 23 questions for university students and 27 questions for the college students) collects background information including ethnicity; social class; tuition fee level and how it will be paid. The survey includes a series of questions in which students identified factors that influenced their decision to choose their institution as in addition to reasons why to study.

#### Results

Students responded on Likert scale question if they agreed with factors explaining why they have chosen to study higher education. Students in both institutions indicated that they were studying to increase their earning potential. Chi-Square tests were run between year groups at each institution. University students showed statistically significant responses between Year 1 and Year 2+ in categories of studying because 'all my friends went' and because 'costs are going to rise'. Whereas HE in FE students only showed statistical difference for 'increase earning potential'. In each of the questions HE in FE students showed a lower response than the university students cohorts.

Students were also questioned on a range of factors which influenced their decision to choose their institution. A short summary of these are shown below in Table 1.

**Table 1 – Students who indicated the following factors were somewhat important, important or very important in making their decision to choose their university**

	University students			HE in FE students		
	All university students N (% of total)	2012/13 Entry Year 1 N (% of cohort)	2011/12 Entry Year 2 or above N (% of cohort)	All HE in FE students N (% of total)	2012/13 Entry Year 1 N (% of cohort)	2011/12 Entry Year 2 or above N (% of cohort)
TeachingReputation	528 (84.2)	259 (85.8)	269 (83.3)	43 (66.2)	33 (76.7)	10 (45.5)
EmployerLinks	529 (84.4)	267 (89)	262 (81.1)	39 (59.1)	28 (65.1)	11 (47.8)
StudentWebsiteReviews	381 (60.8)	182 (60.3)	199 (61.4)	26 (38.8)	19 (43.2)	7 (30.4)
Parents Liked University	274 (43.7)	138 (46.2)	136 (42.1)	20 (30.3)	15 (34.9)	5 (21.7)
TransportLinks	460 (73.4)	230 (76.2)	230 (71.2)	37 (57.8)	24 (58.5)	13 (56.5)
GeographicLocation	422 (67.3)	196 (65.1)	226 (70)	43 (65.2)	28 (65.1)	15 (65.2)
NightLife	337 (53.7)	165 (55.6)	172 (53.1)	16 (24.6)	8 (19)	8 (34.8)
ApplicationTreated	442 (70.5)	212 (70.4)	230 (71.4)	38 (58.5)	27 (64.3)	11 (47.8)
InstitutionWebsite	428 (68.3)	214 (71.1)	214 (66.5)	30 (46.2)	22 (51.2)	8 (36.4)

Table 1 shows that overall FE students find far majority of factors less important than university students. In each institution first year cohorts indicate that they were influenced by a wider range of factors than Year 2+ students. A range of other factors were covered of both university and HE in FE students, although these aren't as directly comparable as the factors above the trend is similar. For each institution all factors, 25 in total for university students and 24 for HE in FE students, were made subject to principal components analysis (PCA). To provide more suitable results for comparison factors relating to accommodation were removed. University responses revealed the presence of two components, whilst the HE in FE responses showed three components. Price of the award is not present in university components, however does feature within the HE in FE components.

### Discussion and future research

The results indicate two trends; students studying at university indicated that they were influenced by a greater range of factors than those studying at a FE college. Secondly, findings indicate first year students in both the university and college were influenced by a greater range of factors compared to second year students. Although the sample is too small for generalisation, these findings suggest that students subject to higher fees are being influenced by a greater range of factors in their decision making. These results could be interpreted to indicate that as price is raised students are influenced by more factors which they may be using these to compare institutions. As higher education fees could be subject to further rise in both universities and colleges an opportunity for future research is presented.

### References

Garner, R. (2015) Thousands of students shun universities in favour of studying for their degrees at local further education colleges. The Independent, 1<sup>st</sup> February 2015. Available online at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/thousands-of-students-shun-universities-in-favour-of-studying-for-their-degrees-at-local-further-education-colleges-10016084.html> (accessed June 20<sup>th</sup> 2015).