

What students want to know about HE: 'hot', 'warm' and 'cold' information (0174)

Mangan Jean¹, Kim Slack¹, Amanda Hughes¹, Peter Davies², ¹*Staffordshire University, Stoke-on-Trent, United Kingdom*, ²*University of Birmingham, Birmingham, United Kingdom*

This paper draws on a recent research study which investigated the public information needs of potential users of Higher Education in England. It is set against a background in the UK of an emphasis on prospective students having access to good quality information, advice and guidance in recent high profile reports from various bodies. For instance, the previous government's blueprint for higher education, *Higher Ambitions*, states that "well-informed student choice will be the most powerful force for change over the next decade" and *The National Student Forum* regarded the lack of adequate information, advice and guidance available for prospective students before going on to HE as a prevalent issue.

The study adopted a mixed method approach which included a series of focus groups and survey questionnaire with potential and current students. A total of sixty-six students took part in the focus groups. The total final sample of students who completed the questionnaires was 1926. All participants were drawn from a range of institutions which included those located in state and independents 11-18 schools, Sixth Form and Further Education Colleges, and universities. Initially, this data was analysed thematically, focusing on determining which points of information participants regard as most important and why. Attention was also paid to students' information-seeking processes in relation to their own HE decision-making. The data was then analysed in terms of participants' background and educational pathway in order to determine differences between groups (including first generation students, family income, state or independent school and ethnicity).

This mixed method approach made visible the issue of different interpretations of the same item of information amongst different groups of participants. The survey results indicated that certain items of information which were valued highly by participants, including data that appeared to be obtainable from the student satisfaction survey, but that some groups were more likely to access information than others. Analysis of the focus group data indicated that the rationale behind the valuation of the items differed between student groups. There was also a preference for 'hot' knowledge compared to 'cold' knowledge by all types of prospective students. These terms are used by Ball & Vincent (1998) in relation to parental choice of secondary school. Hot knowledge refers to that acquired through the 'grapevine' (in this case from family, friends, existing students known to them and school-based networks) whereas cold knowledge is that acquired from official sources or formal knowledge (in this case from sources such as prospectus and comparison websites). Information from existing students was emphasised by participants as being particularly valuable and perceived as more honest and trustworthy. Students are using their friends and open days as a way of accessing student opinion and assessing the general atmosphere of the university. They value students' views because they think they are more honest – and there is preference for using friends because of this.

Ball & Vincent argue that this sort of knowledge is 'is unevenly distributed across and used differently by social class groups' in relation to school choice (Ball & Vincent 1998:377) and we contend that this also applies in the case of potential users of HE. Working class students are more likely to have a smaller network of persons who have experience higher education.

In the study, while the participants at both a state school (urban 11-18) and an independent school said they used friends as a source of information, the latter appeared to use the school based networks more. This in effect created a pool of information they could access which also appeared from the study to provide information on different types of institutions. Rather than 'hot' knowledge, working class students are more likely to make use of information from students in general (either in the form of quotes in a prospectus, or verbally from students on open day) which may be seen as 'warm' knowledge, in that it is perceived as more honest and trustworthy than that from a more formal source, but are not from a network the prospective students are personally part of. Students seen as more like themselves because they will be students in a few months – similar, but in reality there is no knowledge of what that student is like and whether they are really like them. This may become problematic when such sources are used by the institution to promote the university or course. Participants expressed some awareness that university websites may be projecting a limited view; however, this was not always consistent throughout their narrative.

In exploring the implications of the different access to information by different groups and the reduced recourse of working class students to 'hot' knowledge and the substitution of 'warm' knowledge, the paper gives rise to various questions of importance such as: what is the appropriate data and how do we get students to access this; which is the appropriate interpretation and what should we be giving them?; how does this link to social mobility and fair access in the light of the recent report from OFFA (2010)? The analysis suggests that changes in policy on the provision of information needs to take account of the risks of increasing gaps between students; providing more information is not sufficient.

References

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