

# Perceptions of 'value for money' (VfM) among final year undergraduate students paying lower and higher tuition fees at universities in England

Steven Jones, University of Manchester

*Understanding Graduate Experiences Of Indebtedness In England And Scotland*

SRHE, 20.06.23

# Research Projects and Publications

The logo for the Society for Research in Higher Education (SRHE), consisting of the letters 'SRHE' in white on a blue square background.

Katy Vigurs, Steven Jones & Diane Harris (2014-18)

## *Greater Expectations of Graduate Futures?*

A Comparative Analysis of the Views of the Last Generation of Lower-Fees Undergraduates and the First Generation of Higher-Fees Undergraduates at Two English Universities

Jones, S., K. Vigurs and D. Harris. 2020. "Discursive framings of market-based education policy and their negotiation by students: the case of 'value for money' in English universities". *Oxford Review of Education*.

Diane H., K. Vigurs and S. Jones. 2020. "Student loans as symbolic violence." *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*.

Vigurs, K., S. Jones, J. Everitt and D. Harris. 2018. "Higher fees, higher debts: Unequal graduate transitions in England?" In *Higher Education Funding and Access in International Perspective* ed. Sheila Riddell, Sarah Minty, Elisabet Wheedon and Susan Whittaker. Emerald Publishing Limited.

Jones, S. 2016. "Expressions of student debt aversion and tolerance among academically able young people in low-participation English schools". *British Educational Research Journal*.

# VfM in policy discourse

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**Education Committee**

**Value for money in higher education inquiry**

Inquiry status: open

Saturday 22 Jul 2017 @ 08:10

## Department for Education

Printable version



Department for Education

## Securing value for money for students and taxpayers

Also published by: Higher Education Funding Council England (HEFCE)

Jo Johnson outlines plans for subject-level Teaching Excellence Framework and a crackdown on vice chancellor pay.

Universities Minister Jo Johnson recently (20 July 2017) set out plans to provide better value for money from the higher education system

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Speech

### Jo Johnson: speech to UUK annual conference

From: Department for Education and Jo Johnson MP  
Published: 7 September 2017  
Delivered on: 7 September 2017 (Transcript of the speech, exactly as it was delivered)

Embracing accountability and promoting value for money in Higher Education



Thank you for inviting me to join you at your annual conference – I am particularly grateful to be here in my brother's wonderful city.

Much has happened in the world of UK higher education since last year's conference.

A General Election, of course, and I note that the number of university seats, now has a rather small

# VfM in media discourse

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Higher education

## Two-thirds of students in England 'feel degree cost is not good value'

Survey finds satisfaction levels have fallen sharply since tuition fees rose to £9,000, with BME students particularly unhappy




## According to All These Students, University Isn't Worth It

By Joel Golby  
Staff Writer

June 9, 2016

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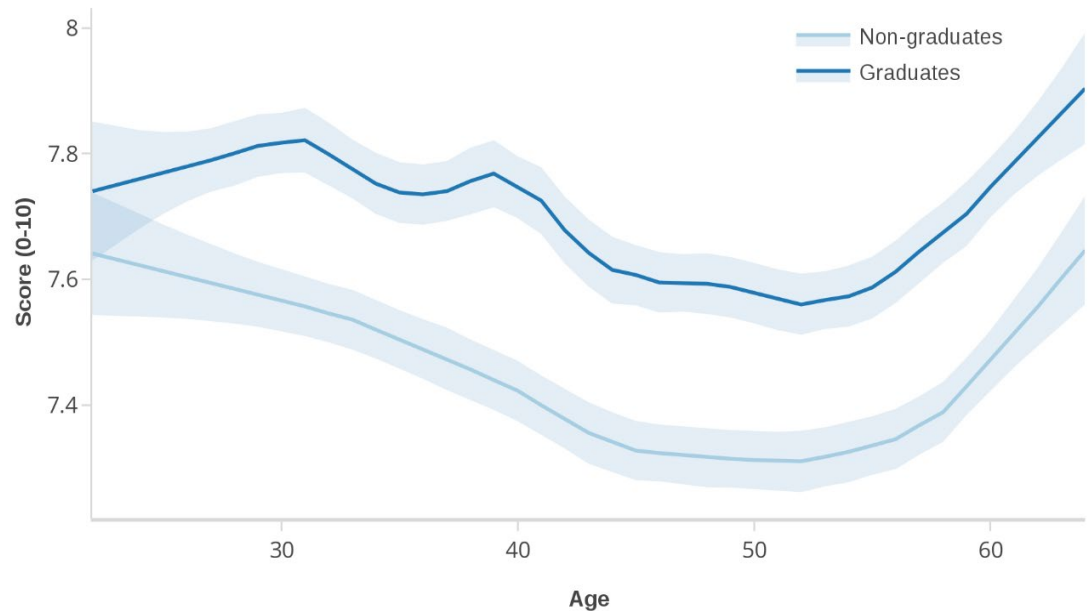


Education

## Students getting less value for money at university despite rise in fees, figures show



# VfM in sector discourses



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**29 November 2017**

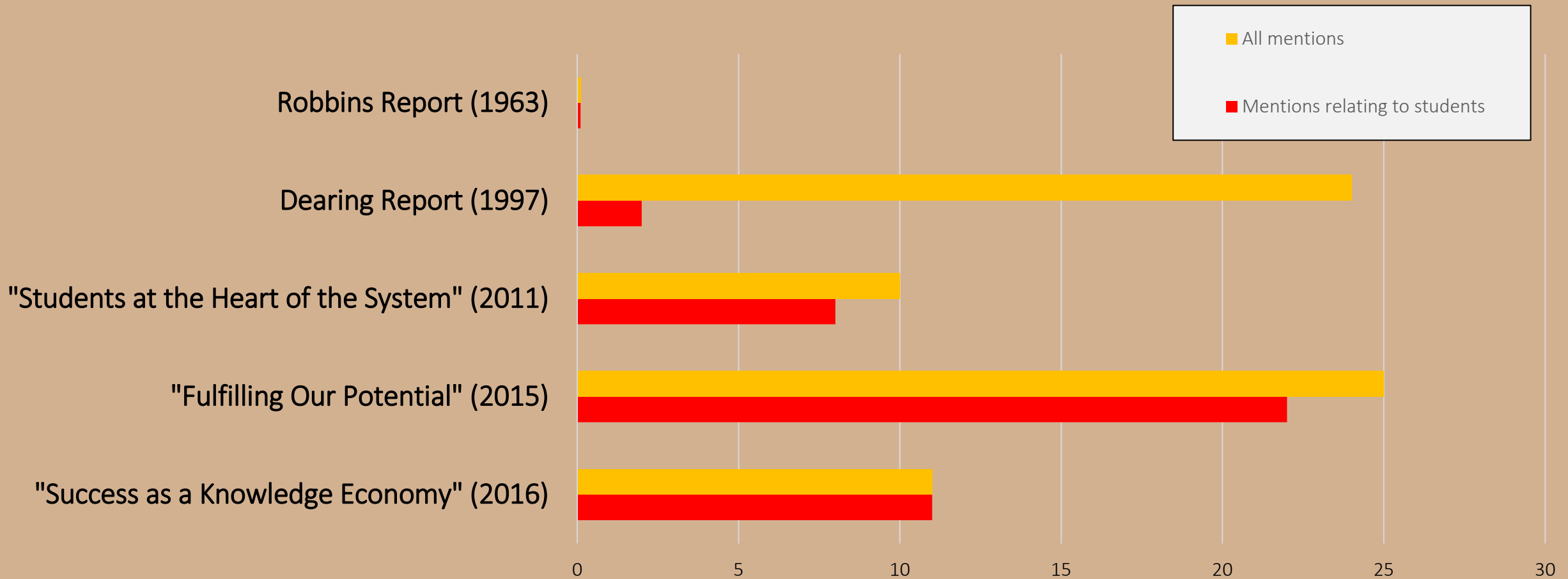
## Wellbeing stronger in higher education graduates

HEFCE has published a report that shows graduates in the UK have a greater sense of personal wellbeing and life satisfaction than those without a higher education qualification.

HEFCE's Chief Executive, Madeleine Atkins, said:

'This new analysis highlights the broad positive effects that higher education has on an individual's life. It shows that the value for money of a higher education qualification extends

# Mentions of 'value for money', from Robbins to the 2016 HE White Paper



# Mentions of ‘value for money’, from Robbins to the 2016 HE White Paper

“We envisage that over time, some substantial part of the funding for tuition ... should transfer to students, in the form of vouchers or proxy fees.

This would encourage the student to see him/herself as an investor in receipt of a service, and to seek, as an investor, **value for money** and a good return from the investment.”

The Dearing Report: *Higher Education in the Learning Society* 1997, 22.19



# Mentions of ‘value for money’, from Robbins to the 2016 HE White Paper

“We propose to open up HE to new providers. These proposals offer a thriving future for universities, with extra freedoms and less bureaucracy, and they ensure **value for money** and real choice for learners.”

David Willetts, Minister for Universities and Science, 03/11/2010





# Mentions of ‘value for money’, from Robbins to the 2016 HE White Paper

“We expect new courses to offer increased **value for money**, as they will be delivered by a range of providers with different business models.” (p.7)

“Institutions that can attract students, by showing them that they offer good **value for money**, should grow and prosper, and may well increase their overall income. Institutions that cannot attract students will have to change.” (p. 15)

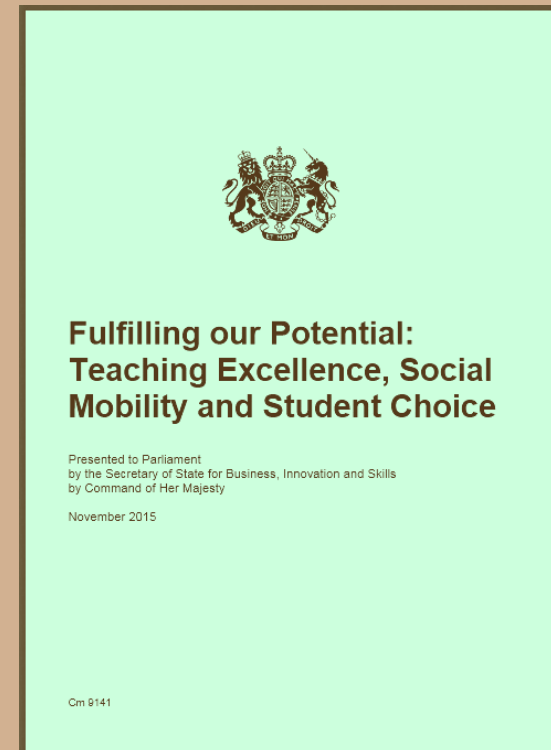
*Students at the Heart of the System, June 2011*



# Mentions of 'value for money', from Robbins to the 2016 HE White Paper

“...the rights of students to hold providers to account and get **value for money** for their investment.”  
(p.62)

“Students are concerned about **value for money**, with one third of undergraduates paying higher fees in England believing their course represents very poor or poor **value for money**.” (p.12)



# Mentions of ‘value for money’, from Robbins to the 2016 HE White Paper

“The consumer organisation *Which?* has found that three in ten students think that the academic experience of higher education is poor **value for money.**” (p.11)

“... more effective policies and deliver better **value for money** in support of social mobility.” (p.57)



## Success as a Knowledge Economy:

Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice

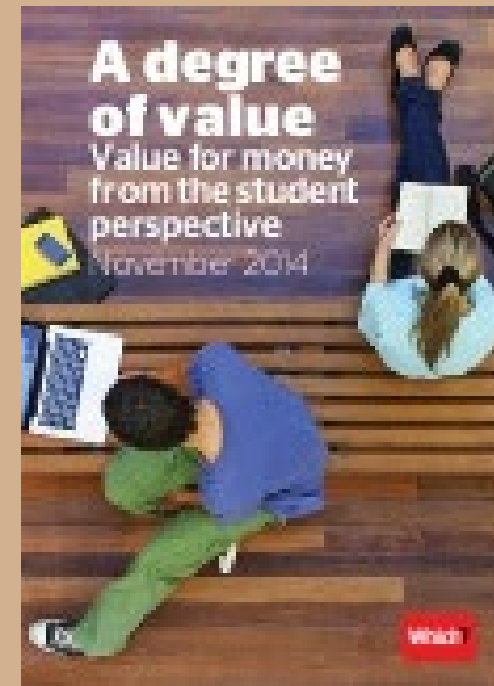
May 2016

Department  
for Business  
Innovation & Skills

*Success as a Knowledge Economy, May 2016*

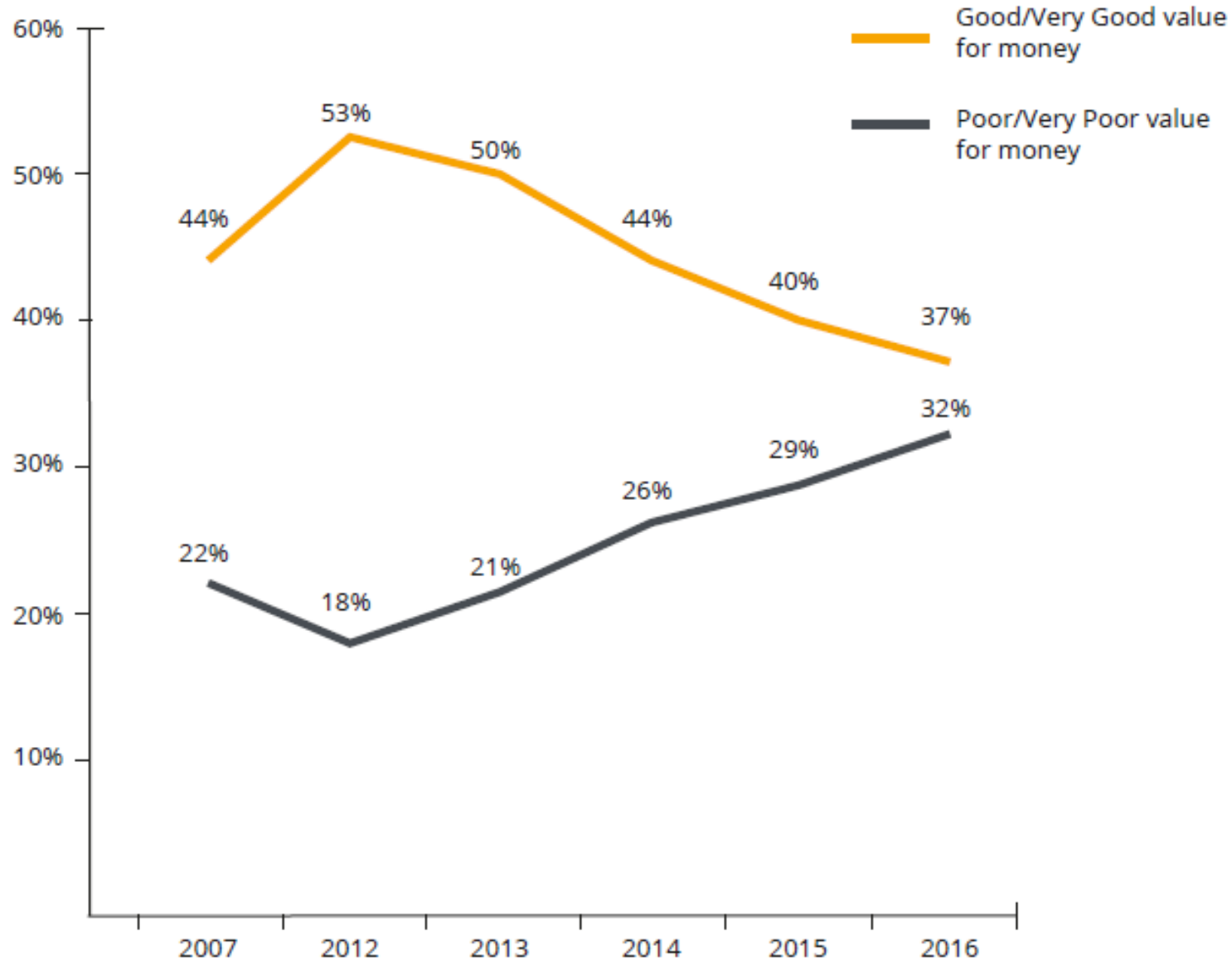
“68% who were paying higher fees, and 81% who paid lower fees thought that their university experience was good value for money.” (p.9)

“A degree of value: Value for money from the student perspective”  
*Which?* November 2014



# The 2016 Student Academic Experience Survey

Jonathan Neves & Nick Hillman



“This decline is likely to be partly explained by the fact that students are incurring much larger debts than in the past even though universities’ teaching income has not increased commensurately.”

# Student Academic Experience Survey 2023

Jonathan Neves (Advance HE)  
and Rose Stephenson (HEPI)

AdvanceHE  
5 YEARS SUPPORTING THE SECTOR

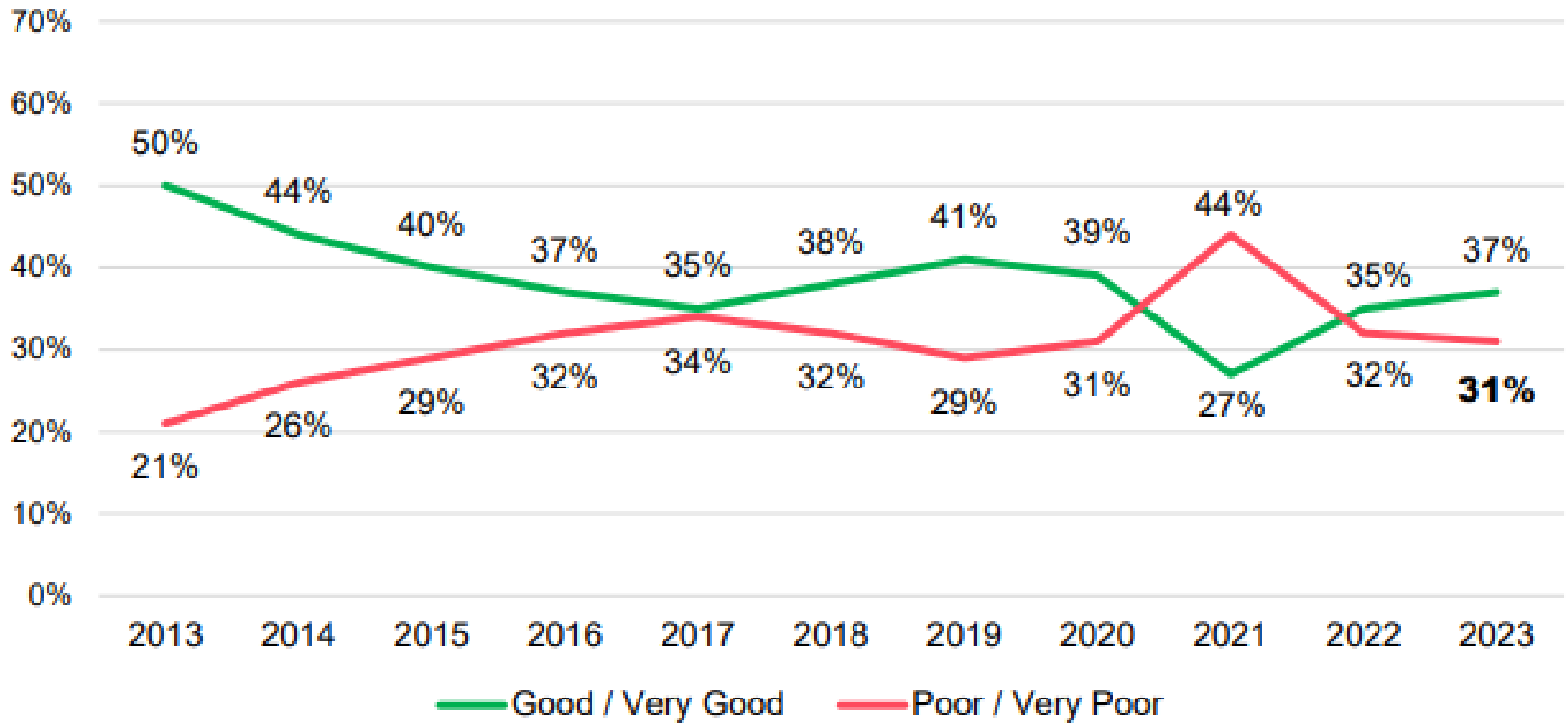
5  
YEAR  
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Higher Education Policy Institute

STUDENT  
ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE  
SURVEY

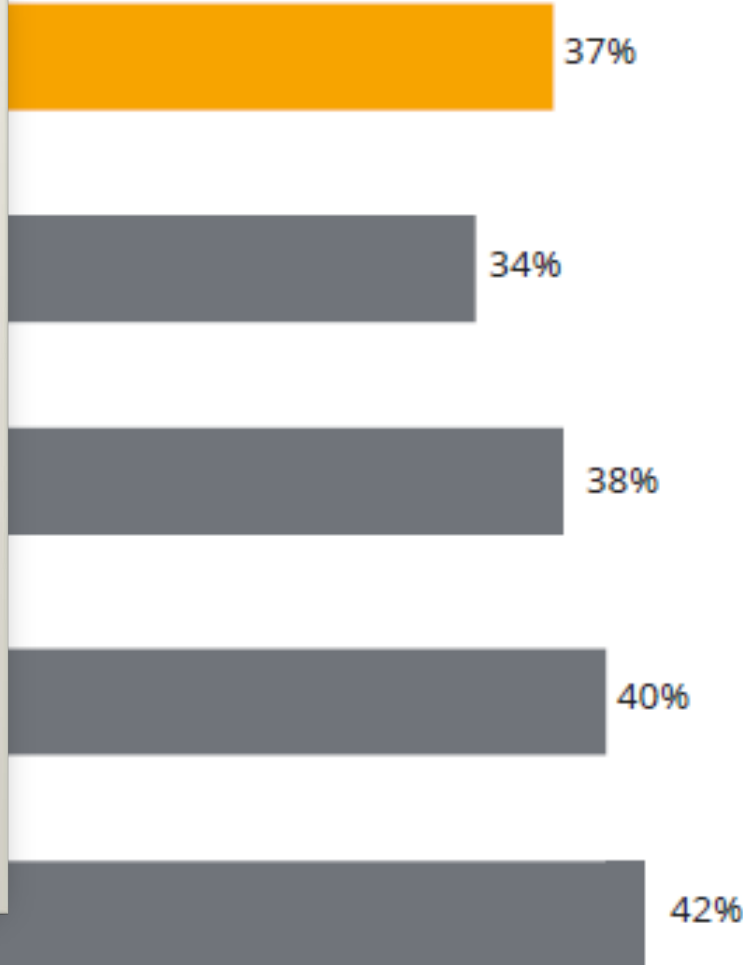
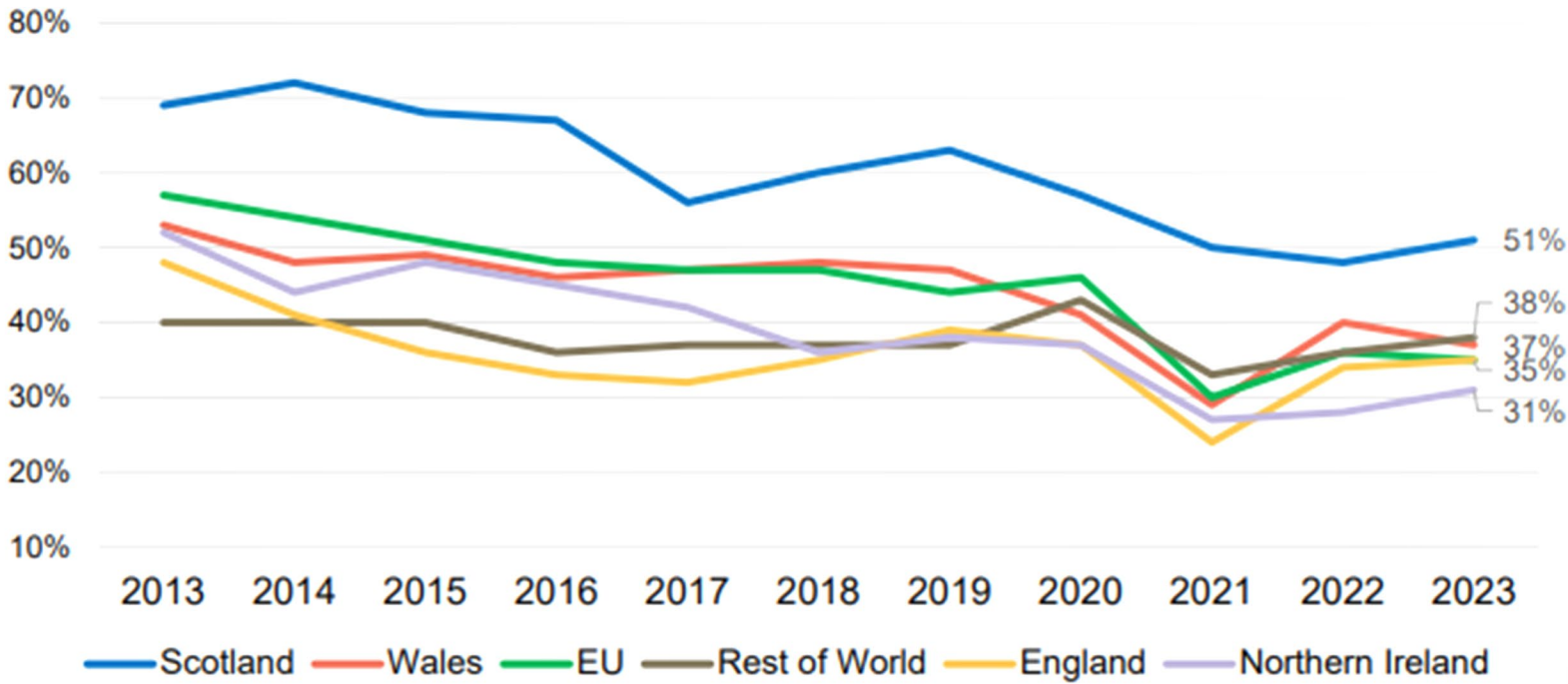
## Value-for-money of your present course



“Historically, this measure has set a high bar for the sector to deliver, with a relatively low number of students – typically between 35% and 40% – feeling able to say their experience represented “good” or “very good” value.”

# Value for money 2016 by institution type

## Value-for-money – by domicile (good or very good value)



2016 Student Academic Experience Survey  
(Higher Education Policy Institute and the Higher Education Academy)

Base: all institutions (15,221), Post-92 (7,094), Pre-92 (3,327), Russell Group (4,219), Specialist (581). Good/Very Good value for money

# 'Graduate Futures' project: headline findings on VfM

- Fall in the proportion of VfM-positive students (**71%** in 2014 to **50%** in 2015);
- Fall sharpest among state-educated students who did not qualify for bursaries (**72%** to **40%**);
- Fall lesser for state-educated students who did qualify for bursaries (**60%** to **56%**);
- Greater change among students at M+ uni (**69%** to **26%**) than those at RG uni (**73%** to **76%**).



# VfM positive students: state school background

**RG 2015, state non-WP:** “career-wise it’s probably the investment you need to make”

**M+ 2015, state non-WP:** “it put me off being in that much debt but then I realized that without an undergraduate degree you’re not really going to get anywhere in life”

**RG 2014, state WP:** “I’m not particularly from an affluent background / one of the main reasons why I’m going into the career I am / even though I’m not particularly romanticised by accounting / it is because there are good economic prospects”

# VfM positive students: independent school background

**RG 2015, ind non-WP:** “I’m lucky enough that my parents are paying the fees for me / I went to a boarding school and that cost £30K a year so £9K a year doesn’t seem very much”

**M+ 2015, ind non-WP:** “My university right now is being funded by my parents so I’m not taking out a loan or anything so it’s not affecting me or them much / I am concerned about my future and finding a job and being paid what I deserve”

**RG 2014, ind non-WP:** (*Have you been doing part-time jobs?*) “I haven’t / no / my parents are very good in that they felt that uni should just be for uni / I’ve been able to do plays and choirs all that kind of thing which I just wouldn’t have been able to do if I’d had to have a job / I wouldn’t mind paying whatever the fee if I could have that experience / I’ve got some contacts now and I feel I’m ready to take the next step and I’d far rather be in this position with a lot of debt than done another route and not be as socially confident”

# VfM negative students: (1) anxiety about volume of debt

RG 2015, state non-WP: “there’s a lot to pay back / it is a lot of money”

M+ 2015, state WP: “I’m in the deepest pit imaginable”

RG 2015, state non-WP: “I wasn’t expecting to have to [move back to my parents’ home] / I thought that when you got a degree you then instantly moved out / I didn’t realize that I’d have to go back”

# VFM negative students: (2) degree choice anxiety

**M+, 2014, state non-WP:** “yeah I think it was three and a half [for me] and then the next year it went up / I don't think I'd have done my course / I don't think I'd have done photography / no way”

**RG, 2014, state WP:** “I'd only come to university now if it was a degree that would pay me quite a bit of money”

**RG, 2014, state WP:** “I don't think I would've come to university with the nine grand and if I would have it would have been something vocational I think”

# VFM negative students: (3) family comparisons

**RG, 2015, state non-WP:** “I’ve got an older brother who got an entire degree for the price of one of my years”

**M+, 2015, state non-WP:** “My sister went to uni ten years ago as well so she paid like the £3K and I can’t see that anything has substantially changed from how her course was and how my course is now / so I don’t think it was worth the money”

**RG, 2014, state WP:** “I mean my [younger] brother’s in university and he’s paying nine grand a year and he’s like “why?””

# VFM negative students: (4) insufficient short-term funding

**RG, 2015, state non-WP:** “when I came to university, I was expecting that the loan that you were given was enough, but it really isn’t / like all I get is the maintenance loan and I’ve had to ask my parents for money”

**M+, 2015, state non-WP:** “If you get the minimum amount it doesn’t even cover your rent / I mean it’s very cheap where we live at the moment and my loan does cover that but I have to get the food from somewhere / where are you going to get that money from?”

# Student loans as symbolic violence

Diane Harris  , Katy Vigurs  & Steven Jones 

**SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE** describes how people play a role in reproducing their own subordination by internalising the ideas and structures that subordinate them (Connolly and Healy, 2004 p.15).

“Power which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force.”

(Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, 4)

**SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE...**

- (a) is encoded in public discourses of student borrowing;
- (b) becomes more prominent as systems move towards higher fees;
- (c) is experienced differently by different types of students.

# Debt aversion project headline findings



- Literal approach to VfM:

“I don’t get why it’s gone up so much / what are you getting now that you didn’t used to be getting?”

- Job market realism:

“it’s okay if you’re a lawyer or an accountant or whatever but how many of us lot ever get up there?”

- Dismissal of concessions:

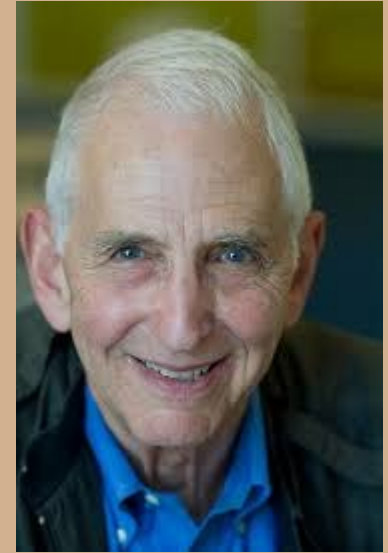
“what’s the point of going if you don’t end up getting paid loads?”



# Ellsberg Paradox?

“People are more likely to choose gambles that involve known probabilities even where there is no reason to assume that the odds of a less certain alternative bet are inferior”

(Daniel Ellsberg 1961)



“it’s too risky / there’s other things I can do without having to get a degree / that way I don’t have to worry about being thrown out or not liking it”

“it’s too much unless you know you’re going to love it / my sister’s mate doesn’t love it / she’s home every weekend”

“all that money then what? / no job / nothing / my step-dad gets a thousand pound a week and he never went”

## VfM policy level discourse assumptions...

Young people make participation decisions based on rational cost-benefit analyses of long-term loan repayments against deferred graduate premium.

Perceptions of VfM are determined by the quality of a degree.

Students are a homogenous grouping.

Bursaries don't affect VfM.

VfM is the lens through which young people see university.

## VfM ground level student experiences...

Short-term financial security matters disproportionately;  
Perceptions of VfM are trumped by a degree's perceived necessity in labour market.

Perceptions of VfM are determined by the cost of a degree.

Perceptions of VfM are predicted by socio-economic background, school type, cultural/social capital, etc.

Bursaries are important signifiers of state and institutional 'backing' for state WP students.

VfM discourses are dominant because there's an absence of counter-narratives.

sj@manchester.ac.uk

@SteveJones\_MCR