

The heart of
student living

UNITE

The UNITE Group plc

The Next Generation

2013

A report into applicant and
student expectations

Introducing the next generation



At UNITE we've begun to think about our student experience in terms of a student's journey

For a number of years we produced a Student Experience Report discussing trends within the youth market. Last year we resurrected this but with an important difference: rather than focusing solely on current students, we wanted to look at the expectations of those applying to study at university. In particular we wanted to find out what applicants thought university would be like, and more importantly what they wanted it to be like, before they embarked on their university journey – in other words gaining an understanding of the **next generation of students**.

Our research revealed interesting findings – the main theme being that today's students, in a world of higher tuition fees and a tough graduate employment market, are increasingly savvy; they want value for their increased investment and are not planning to waste the experience.

This year we have also made some improvements to our research including increasing the number of students surveyed and extending the remit to cover students in their first year, enabling us to find out if their expectations changed after experiencing the realities of university life. These current students felt differently about some elements of their experience than applicants and these differences are highlighted within the report. Additionally, there are some differences between the findings from last year's report and those applying for university this year.

At UNITE we've begun to think about our student experience in terms of a student's journey – starting at the moment they begin to consider university as a viable option, right through to after graduation.

Within the research we look at a number of significant areas within the student journey – from teaching, to the support offered, socialising with friends, interaction with the local community – and of course, given our area of expertise, where they live.

We want all our students' experiences to be successful, whether that be through academic achievement, gaining independence and life skills or finding a chosen career. We know that research, insight and understanding of students, partners and the higher education sector are crucial to delivering this successful experience every step of the way.

Richard Smith
Managing Director of Operations

Methodology

UNITE commissioned The Student Room, the largest online student forum used by students across the world, to conduct a survey and present the results. Unless otherwise stated, any quantitative findings are statistically significant. The sample was broadly reflective of UCAS applicants for 2012. All quotations in the report are responses from students or applicants and have been transcribed exactly, with any erroneous spelling and grammar.

Date of survey	The survey was conducted online, from November 2012 to January 2013	
Definition of participants	Applicants	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Those applying for a course beginning in autumn 2013• Intent on living away from parental home while studying
	Current students	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students who began their course in autumn 2012• Living away from their parental home
	Living at the parental home	Students from both groups who identified that they would be living at their parental home during their study were directed to a question that asked them to indicate a reason for deciding to study from home, then were excluded from the rest of the survey
Number of respondents	Applicants	1,065
	Current students	526
	2012 applicants (2012 survey data)	771
	TOTAL	2,326

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Lawson Taylor Research and Consultancy, and The Student Room for conducting our survey, and Sarah Gribbin for carrying out a literature review that helped with the interpretation of some of the findings.

Terminology

Within this report we use three samples, referred to using the following terminology:

- **2012 applicants:** Those who applied to start their study in autumn 2012 (data from 2012 report)
- **Applicants:** Those applying to start their study in autumn 2013
- **Current students:** Those who began their course in autumn 2012

Comparisons will be indicated using the following iconography:



2012 applicants



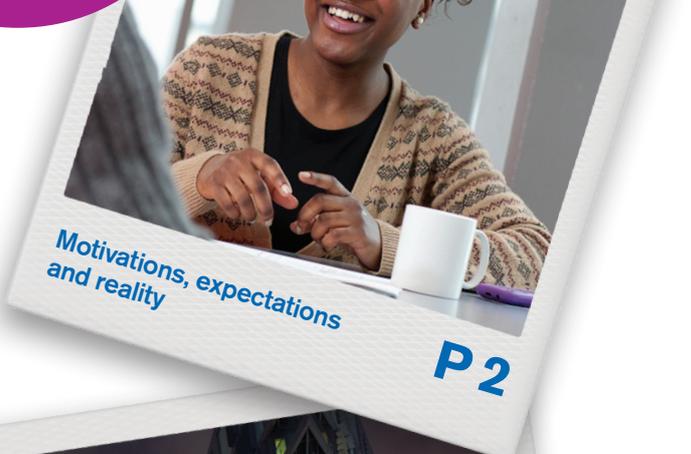
2013 applicants



Current students

84%

study because they are interested in their chosen subject



Motivations, expectations and reality

P 2

53%

of current students feel support is a fundamental part of university life



High academic expectations

P 5



A place to live

P 7

11%

of current students felt that it would be very easy to find a job



Set for the future

P 10

Highlights

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Motivations, expectations and reality

Why university?

Despite changes in funding for higher education in England, demand for higher education remains strong. In order to understand what factors affected young people's decision to attend university we asked participants to select their main motivations for going to university.

In line with last year we found that this generation of students is driven by academic motivations. The leading motivator for both applicants and students was interest in their chosen subject. This was felt more strongly by this year's applicants than the previous year, indicating a growing trend in this direction.

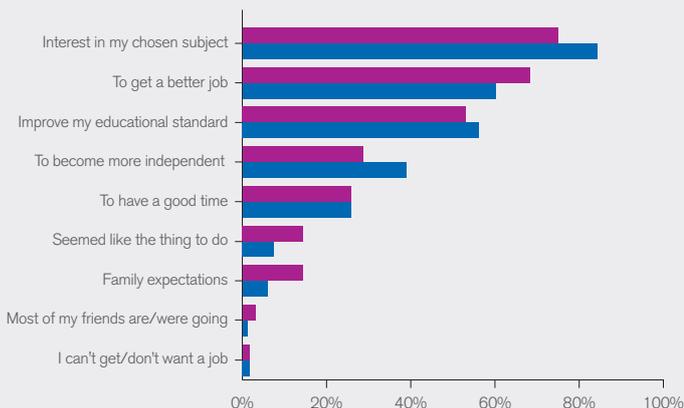


84%

study because they're interested in their chosen subject.

What is your main motivation for going to university?

(Participants were asked to select up to three motivations)



Consistent with last year's findings, the second strongest motivation for all groups was to get a better job. **Current students** show the greatest concern with gaining a better job.

This provides further support for the trend we observed in our 2012 report, suggesting that following increased tuition fees students are more focused and career driven than ever before.

 **Current students**

Number of respondents 464

 **2013 applicants**

Number of respondents 933

Expectations of the student experience

Understanding the expectations of students before they arrive at university is essential in order to meet their needs. We asked respondents what they understood by the term 'student experience' and what they expect from it.

For **applicants**, there is a strong sense that university is an important rite of passage. They expected it to be a place for personal growth, somewhere they could start to find their place in the world.

"A student experience is all about developing yourself as a person, friend, and an academic through interaction with professors and students."

For many, this means taking their first steps as independent adults, and for some this also meant freedom.

Applicants are keen to strike a balance between study and social life, perceiving both as opportunities to learn more about themselves and others. Striking the right balance was occasionally described as a 'struggle', but generally in the positive sense of 'striving'.

Although a few applicants talked about partying and drinking, more of them cited this as a stereotype which they challenged. Many applicants were approaching their time at university in a professional manner and do not want to waste the opportunity it offers.

"The traditional student stereotype of beer swilling, lecture skipping, hovel dwelling layabouts is completely outdated to me and by many."

International applicants, and some from the UK, are looking forward to learning from different cultures and perspectives.

"A student experience is all about developing yourself as a person, friend, and an academic through interaction with professors and students."

Current students were likely to report that their expectations had been met and that they have achieved the level of personal development and independence they were looking for. As might be expected, they tended to be more pragmatic about what they could experience as a student.

"A lot of people believe the student experience is mainly partying. I thought this was the case too, until spending a few months in university in student accommodation. I now think the student experience is learning how to balance that busy social life with an intense education, in turn making undergrads more independent and responsible in their own rights."

Most respondents have found the student experience to be better than they expected and had made a good transition to student life.

"Trying new things has been so much fun and the people I have met have been far more open-minded. I feel very integrated in the university."

For some, the student experience had resulted in opportunities they hadn't previously considered.

"I've tried more new things than I anticipated – I've become really involved in volunteering... I've met people from all over the world too."

However, the most overwhelming positive experience for many is how easy it has been to make friends, contrary to their fears in some cases. The importance and depth of their friendships has taken some by surprise:

"[I] didn't realise how close you would become to your flatmates."

"You build really strong relationships with people you live with and people on your course."



"Student experience means a lot to me. You live work laugh weep eat sleep talk with a variety of different people across the world."

A much smaller number have found their student experience more challenging than expected. For some, this resulted from living with or being around people they have little in common with. This was particularly the case for students who have found they are living with people who are only interested in 'partying'.

Others found the academic side of university life more difficult than expected, and a few are struggling with their finances.

Although as **applicants** many had been looking forward to independence, a few students are finding the reality less fun than they had anticipated.

"Being independent isn't so fun. Cooking/cleaning is quite time consuming and annoying."

Overall, students have found that the immersive student experience is an important and unique opportunity to develop personally, do things they wouldn't otherwise have had the chance to do, and secure their future.

"Student experience means a lot to me. You live work laugh weep eat sleep talk with a variety of different people from across the world."

"For me the Student Experience means transformation through studying and networking. I expect to leave college not only with a degree but as a desired candidate for professional employment.."

What do Mum and Dad think?

This year we also asked respondents what they think their parents expect from their university experience.

On the whole, parents want their children to attend university to further their career prospects. The parents of **current students** ranked achieving a good mark in their degree as equally important. This suggests that despite the difficult graduate recruitment market, university is still viewed as a route to a more certain future.

"My parents believe that university will be my chance to work hard and gain the qualification which will allow me to start the career which I deserve."

Parents also expected their children to gain their independence and crucial life skills while living away from home and studying at university, believing the experience to be central to becoming an adult.

"[My parents want me to] become more independent and more reliable. Mature into a fully-fledged adult. Make good friends for life. Attain a qualification at the end which will help me get a job."

A small number of respondents even said that their parents expected them to find a husband!

High academic expectations



High academic demands

The main requirement from this year's applicants is academic support.

Prospective students assume that academic staff will educate, inform and teach with a clear structure. They expect them to provide academic support, guidance and constructive feedback that will enable the student to mature while developing their skill set and gaining a greater understanding of their chosen subject. In line with last year's findings, **applicants** expect academics to be accessible outside of office hours, and want them to be clear communicators, approachable and willing to help.

"I would like teachers to be supportive and helpful and people that I can turn to and ask for help if needed."

Applicants want reassurance that support is not only readily available but that academics and student services staff will be approachable. Many would like to see a buddy system in place so there is someone they can turn to should they have any issues. Some students are not only looking for one-to-one support but also for staff to be available on the phone or via email.

"An approachable yet non-intrusive system that can be available whenever necessary in a confidential way."

Current students' top priority is outstanding staff and teaching. Students expect to receive value for money; they want to ensure they are getting the most from their degree, especially those in England following the recent increase in tuition fees.

They have high demands and expect to be stimulated by their lectures and tutorials, holding academic staff responsible for their engagement.

"I would like certain lectures to be more engaging and tutorials to facilitate discussions more. While my classes already do that to an extent, there certainly is room for improvement."

Although subtle, the change in requirement from academic support to outstanding teaching may reflect a growing confidence in higher level learners, as the student journey progresses.

Personal support

Again, when respondents were asked what they wanted in terms of personal support it became apparent that this was an important area for applicants. Many are concerned about attending university as they are unsure what to expect. Both applicants and current students identified the need for support in the transition from school or college to university.

Applicants want a confidential support system that is reliable and approachable; they want access to someone understanding who is willing to listen. Furthermore, students expect their personal tutors to provide additional support and to 'keep an eye out', guiding them through university and offering help along the way should they need it.

Applicants recognise that the key areas that they will need support with are: career prospects, academic performance and personal issues. Other areas mentioned were advice on budgeting, settling in, medical issues, accommodation, stress, job opportunities, counselling, emotional challenges, social issues and welfare.

Within the comments it is clear that students with particular needs, those with learning difficulties, mental health issues or those for whom English is not their first language, are worried about the necessary level of support.

"All international students have issues so if and when needed they should help advise on how to handle or what to do."

53% of current students believe that personal support is a fundamental part of university life, confirming the need for non-judgemental support that is accessible, approachable and most importantly confidential.

High academic expectations continued



53%

of current students feel support is a fundamental part of university life.

"I would like personal support to be not stigmatized, so students can seek help without feeling ashamed about it. While the university tries to encourage that, it is difficult as it is a social issue."

On the whole **current students** tend to be happy with the support services offered by their universities. Many commented on the role of the personal tutor and what this should encompass.

"Every student has a personal advisor and one or several student mentors which is great!"

"The personal support system is first class, exactly how I expected it to be."

Work versus play

Applicants are seeking a balance between academic work, socialising and having fun. They want to meet new people and for there to be a variety of affordable activities provided by the student union including clubs, societies and sports.

Many are worried about their flatmates and hope they will be well matched. They also look forward to their accommodation having dedicated social areas such as a bar and/or games area.

"I am supported by my personal tutors, lecturers, assistant teachers, department employees and last but not least, my friends."

Applicants want to meet like-minded people in a relaxed and safe environment. They are looking for easily accessible yet constructive activities, for example volunteering in the local community.

Current students also expect their university and student union to provide a variety of activities, but more importantly they should be affordable and regular.

Again, a recurring theme was that students were looking for alternative activities to drinking alcohol. Many found that existing socialising opportunities focus on this type of culture.

"A wide variety of activities for all people. This is only well met if you're a sport student or you want to drink yourself to death."

On the whole, however, students tended to be happy with the provision of activities, clubs, societies and sports that their university offers.

"There is a strong social atmosphere at the university, as I desired and can opt in and out of as other responsibilities arise."



A place to live

Preferred accommodation type

The appeal of university halls of residence is strong and the vast majority of **applicants** indicated that halls are their first choice. As few universities can house this proportion of students within their own estate, this category will also include independently managed halls under nominations agreements to universities. Most of the **current students** surveyed managed to secure a place in halls.

Accommodation expectations

The **applicants** who responded to the survey were asked to imagine what their student accommodation would be like.

Comments about cleanliness are the most prevalent. Aside from this, there are some clear differences in focus. Some applicants have strong preferences for the way a room looks and how 'homely' it feels. Others focused on interpersonal aspects and commented on the number of students they wanted to live with.

Another distinct group has minimal requirements; for them accommodation is simply a place to sleep as other aspects of the student experience are much more important. This may represent a number of distinct student segments with regards to accommodation preferences, which could have implications for accommodation policy. These findings accord with a large-scale segmentation study of students in the UK undertaken by UNITE, which will be shared with partners later this year.

Required features

All respondents were asked about the features that are important to them in their student accommodation and were invited to select three from a pre-defined list. The results are shown in the graph to the right, and include those from the 2012 UNITE Student Experience Report for comparison.

The **2012 applicants** from last year's report were more likely to use all three of their votes and therefore showed a more marked set of preferences. This may be attributed to the fact that those applying to English universities were the first cohort paying higher tuition fees.

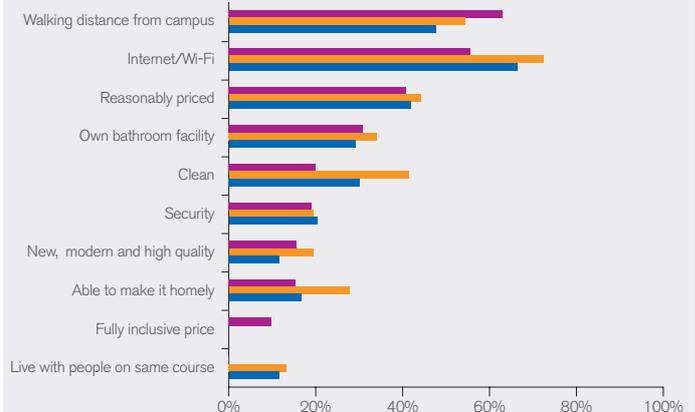
The requirement for accommodation to be within walking distance of campus increased between application and joining university. As noted in the next section, respondents linked the proximity of their accommodation to university to their ability to be successful as a student, to make the best of the academic facilities and not to waste time or money. The requirement for internet/Wi-Fi in their accommodation is less of an issue for current students than for applicants, though these two preferences clearly dominate across all three groups surveyed.

55%

of applicants find Wi-Fi access important in student accommodation.



What factors are important to you in student accommodation?



Current students

Number of respondents
296



2013 applicants

Number of respondents
668



2012 applicants

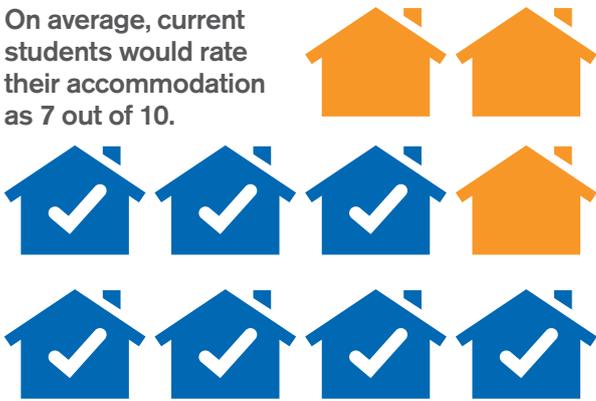
Number of respondents
424

Satisfaction with accommodation

Among **current students**, satisfaction levels with their accommodation are generally high with a mean rating of 7 out of 10. However there is a small but significant minority who rated their satisfaction as four or lower.

7 out of 10

On average, current students would rate their accommodation as 7 out of 10.



Only a small proportion of respondents left comments stating a dissatisfaction with accommodation and these indicated a mismatch between expectations and reality. There is an almost equal split between issues relating to the accommodation itself (cleanliness, maintenance) and other students (incompatibility, noise). A few students were also dissatisfied with the cost of their accommodation; this was not only in terms of the price but also value for money.



Accommodation and success

Current students and applicants were both asked: Does student accommodation affect your success at university? The majority of both groups thought that it did, with 57% of applicants and 72% of current students in agreement.

Most applicants take it for granted that their basic needs will be met through their accommodation, whereas for some current students this had not been the case, which consequently had an impact on their studies. Both applicants and current students talked about a 'good living environment' which facilitates study and feels safe. Conversely, they stated 'a bad living environment' is distracting and may contain real or perceived threats to personal safety.

While material factors such as room size, heat, light, cleanliness and location are all mentioned, factors linked to living with other students were most prevalent in the responses of both applicants and students.

Proximity to campus is desirable, with both applicants and current students believing this would make a difference to their ability to attend lectures and seminars and to make best use of library facilities. They felt that a long commute to campus could also be expensive and tiring.

A few current students have experienced difficulties with sleeping and studying due to noise at night. This is a nuisance but could be tolerated or negotiated. Others stated it could lead to serious problems, even mental health issues that might significantly disrupt studies.

Feeling safe extended beyond physical safety for some respondents, encompassing the need to feel safe in the company of other people. The responses to this question suggest that who students live with may be as important as where you live, if you are to do their best academically:

"I was living in a flat with four other girls and was severely bullied. They stopped me from going to sleep at night if they were still awake so of course this was affecting me on my course."

However it was also apparent that students experienced such situations in different ways, with personal factors such as resilience and social confidence playing a strong role.

There are two sides of the coin with regard to living in a student community depending on whether other students became a support network or a source of conflict and stress. For **applicants**, this could be an area of apprehension:

"If... the students you live with are too noisy for you and you don't get along, then you will feel stressed... and you might struggle to study and relax, this might reflect on grades/ attendance."

Living with people from different backgrounds can bring this into sharp relief. On the one hand it offers an opportunity for personal growth and learning, but on the other there is the need to feel comfortable and not isolated.

On the positive side, halls of residence provide an opportunity to build friendship networks that would make students feel safe, help them with their studies and provide personal support:

"You can study together, consult one another when need be, hold discussions and motivate each other."



An interesting finding, particularly in light of the recent NUS and Unipol Accommodation Costs Survey 2012/13¹ and the NUS Pound in your Pocket² research, was the virtual absence of any mention of finance in both the applicant and the student responses. We had expected **current students**, especially, to cite the cost of accommodation as having an impact on their happiness and success but it was only mentioned by one applicant and one student.

63%

of current students live within walking distance of their campus.

Adding value to their communities

In contrast to the perception that students are a nuisance to local residents, our respondents identified a number of activities that have a positive impact on the wider community.

The overwhelming majority of applicants (81%) and over 50% of current students are looking for part-time work opportunities, demonstrating one way in which students bring economic benefits to communities. Both applicants and current students would also like to take part in an internship at a local business.

There was also a strong desire for volunteering opportunities, with 63% of applicants and 45% of current students stating that they would be interested in volunteering at university, recognising this as being a great way to meet people, make friends, enhance their CV and become integrated in their new community.

Attending community events was of greater interest to prospective students (44%) than current students (22%).

¹ NUS and Unipol (2012) Accommodation Costs Survey 2012/13 <http://www.unipol.org.uk/Media/PDF/Accommodation%20Costs%20Survey%20V6%20WEB.pdf>
² <http://www.poundingyourpocket.org.uk/>

Set for the future

A helping hand

We asked **applicants** what they wanted their university to provide that would support them to secure graduate employment, and asked **current students** to indicate which of the options is provided by their university.

For both groups of applicants, work placements are most in demand; over 89% of this year's applicants highlight these opportunities as a key need and encouragingly 71% of current students said this is being provided.

90%

of students said they wanted their university to provide work placement opportunities.



Career

Is there anything specific you want your university to provide that will help you achieve your dream job after you graduate? Please select as many responses as apply.

Number of respondents
410

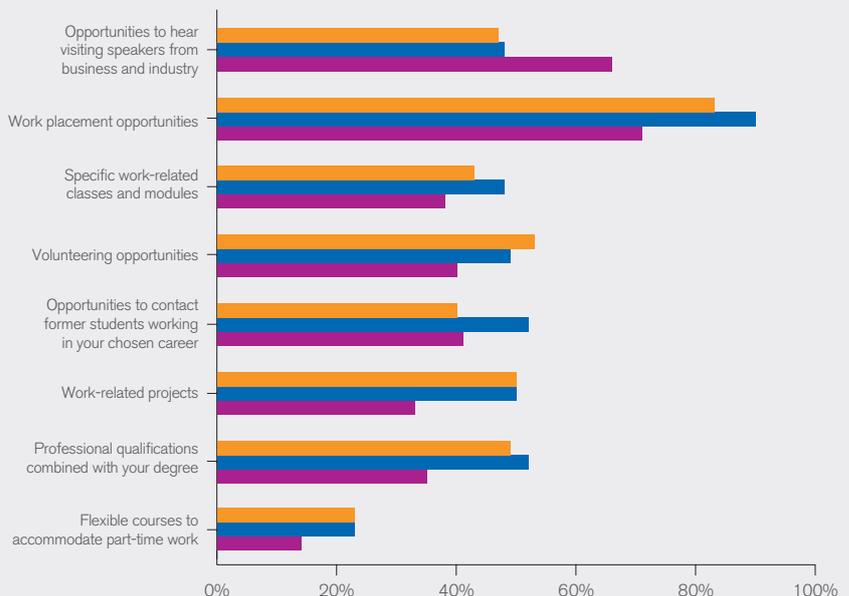

2012 applicants

Number of respondents
656


2013 applicants

Number of respondents
273


Current students



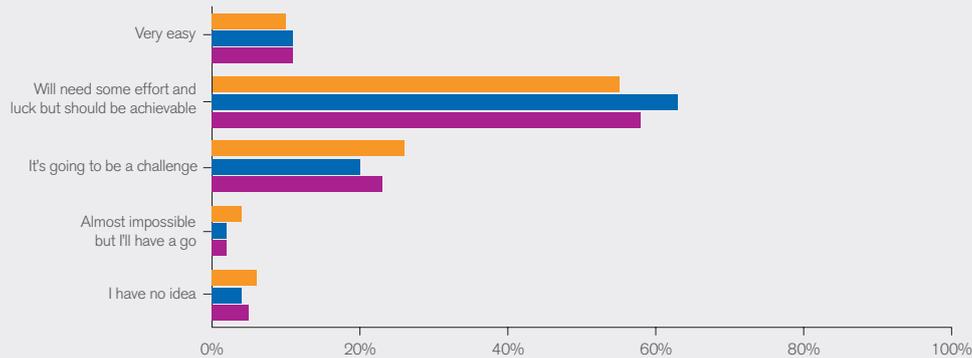
Positive outlook

63%

of 2013 applicants believe that with some effort and luck they will be able to find a job when they graduate.



How easy do you think it will be to find a job that you want after graduating?



2012 applicants

Number of respondents
415



2013 applicants

Number of respondents
667



Current students

Number of respondents
299

On the whole both applicants and current students are positive about the outlook for the future. Most believing that with some effort and luck they will be able to find a job when they graduate, and 12% of current students even stating that it will be easy.

23% of current students believe that it will be a challenge to find a job compared with 20% of applicants and only 2% of both groups think it will be almost impossible. These figures are in-line with our 2012 findings.



11%

of current students felt that it would be very easy to find a job.

International students

Given the importance placed on international students, we analysed results to understand if there are any significant variations between UK, European Union (EU) and international students in their responses to the survey.

EU and international applicants (66%) tend to be more motivated when it comes to improving their education in comparison to UK applicants (54%). Similarly, current overseas students are more motivated than current UK students. This may be linked to the higher level of financial investment they have made in their education compared to UK students, despite the tuition fee raise.

When discussing accommodation, fewer EU (79% compared to 90% of UK applicants and international applicants) planned to live in university accommodation, they preferred to rent privately. Current international students were less concerned about making friends in shared accommodation than UK students.

Current international students believe the main advantages of living in student accommodation are improving life experience (70%) followed by learning from others (69%).

International students (47%) tend to be less motivated than UK students (63%) by the need to get a better job. However, they valued internships (69%) more than their UK peers (41%). In addition, EU and international students were slightly more optimistic than UK students about finding employment after graduation.

Conclusions

Expectations are high across all aspects of the student experience. Interest in their chosen subject remains the most significant motivator for studying at university, but employability is a strong motivator too.

Students appear to be becoming more serious and professional about their studies. They are looking to develop as future employees and citizens and as such are keen on constructive uses of their time both in and out of the classroom.

And yet today's students still maintain a real optimism about the job market with a high level of confidence about future employment.

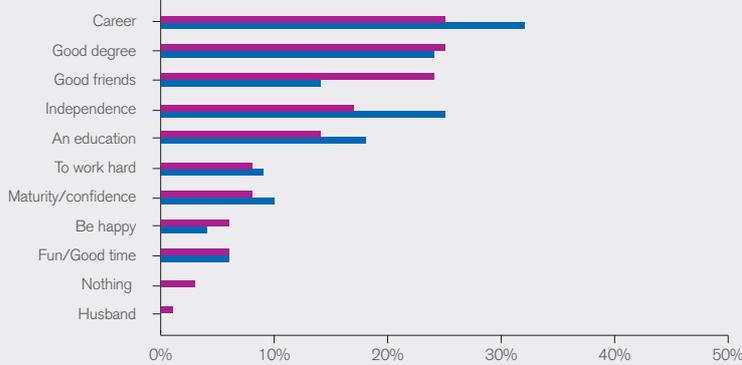
Both **applicants** and **current students** have a tendency to view their student experience as a seamless whole, encompassing all elements, whether that is academic, social or relating to their living requirements. While most current students are happy with their accommodation and their university offering, applicants are increasingly looking for areas of distinctiveness that make a university stand out from the rest.

For both universities and accommodation providers, this account of the student experience can be challenging, but it raises many opportunities too – those that can show that they understand the needs and expectations of this next generation should be able to deliver success, both for themselves and their students.

Themes	Summary and considerations
Students are becoming more academically focused and career driven	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Universities need to demonstrate value for money in terms of tuition and support University remains an important 'rite of passage' and route to a successful career
Parents' expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents' expectations are about the long term They are concerned with their children's future after university, and how the experience will set them up for this
Academic expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Applicants have high expectations of their academic experience Students expect a high level of engagement from academic staff
Student services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support, when needed, has become an expected aspect of the university experience Responses indicated increasing anxiety amongst applicants Need for proactive and confidential, non-stigmatised services
Accommodation features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wi-Fi was the top priority for applicants in their accommodation, whereas the requirement for accommodation to be within walking distance of campus increased between application and being a student Suggests that Wi-Fi is now a hygiene factor for accommodation providers
Accommodation satisfaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students are satisfied with their accommodation overall Top factors causing dissatisfaction are poor condition, cost and inconsiderate flatmates Who you live with may be as important as where you live, in terms of getting the most out of your university experience
Home for success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Respondents believed that accommodation can affect your success at university
Communal living	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Making friends and socialising are the key benefits of living in a community Some respondents believed that a halls of residence environment is an important factor in their ability to develop their networks
Community involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students can have a positive impact on local communities, through both economic and social contribution Students would like opportunities to integrate with communities, give back to society and enhance their CV through volunteering
Graduate employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students were fairly upbeat about their employment prospects Work placements and other employability activities were in high demand

What do your parents/guardians expect you to achieve from your student experience academically and/or socially?

Answer options



Current students

Number of respondents
323



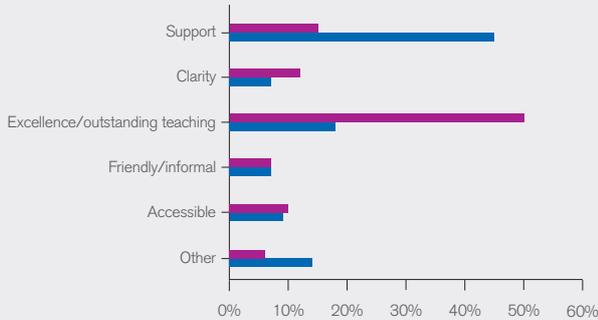
2013 applicants

Number of respondents
712

A content analysis was made of verbatim comments and the leading classifications are shown above. Due to the variation that is possible in interpretation the figures should be regarded as being approximate.

Describe what you want your university to deliver in relation to teaching?

Answer options



Current students

Number of respondents
254

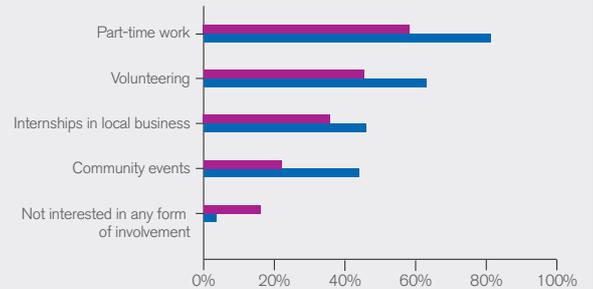


2013 applicants

Number of respondents
551

What is your interest in local community involvement?

Answer options



Current students

Number of respondents
292

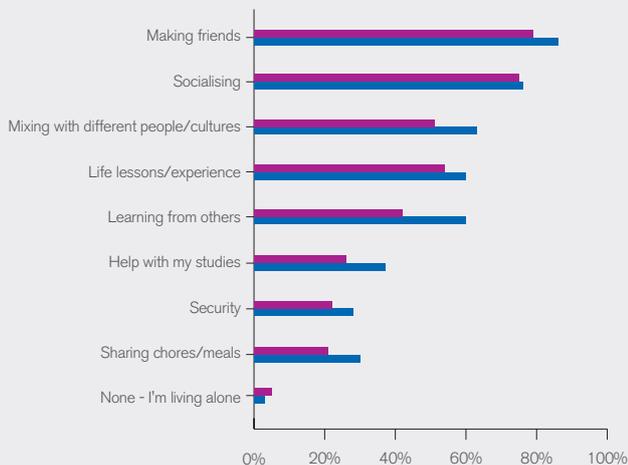


2013 applicants

Number of respondents
661

What do you think are the main benefits of living with other students? Please select all that apply.

Answer options



Current students

Number of respondents
292



2013 applicants

Number of respondents
666

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The heart of
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