



Are Higher Fees Behind Career-Focused UK Students?

Description

UK students graduating this year are the most career-focused in 14 years, a new study from [UK-based higher education market research organization High Fliers Research has found](#). Sure, you might say, there is certainly a more vocational atmosphere in higher education, at a time when funding is diverted to subjects with more tangible outcomes, i.e. STEM subjects, while the arts and humanities are seemingly considered “frivolous” by those in the corridors of power – take UK education secretary, Nicky Morgan’s comments in November about students being held back by choosing arts and humanities A-Levels, for example.

The class of 2015 is of particular interest, however, since it is the first batch of students who faced annual tuition fees of £9,000. Have higher fees contributed to this? We also have to factor in that we’ve come through one of the most turbulent times the UK and global economy has known in recent history.

Are subjects seen to be vocational upping their appeal?

In this light, it makes sense that many students will be thinking, “How can I get a job?” and take on what is presumably a different mindset to those who enjoyed the seemingly limitless opportunities afforded to graduates educated in the boom times under the last government. [UCAS data shows that in 2014, the most popular 10 degree subjects were](#): nursing, psychology, law, design studies, pre-clinical medicine, computer science, management, sport and exercise, business and social work – a roundly vocational list which, some might argue, speaks more of a passion for money than Monet.

However, if you raise the price of something, it is natural that consumers – a term at which many of us still balk – will start to wonder what they will get out of it. The value of education, for better or for worse, becomes a question of value for money. When it comes to higher education, you would be hard pressed to quantify a rich interior life or a fuller understanding of the quiddity of the human condition against a price scale. No, the metric on which all our reckonings on this subject have to be based is career outcomes.

Notably, [a study last year from the Higher Education Policy Institute \(HEPI\) and the Higher Education Academy, found that no less than one third of students paying the increased fees](#)

distinctly felt that they were not getting value for money – no doubt feeling somewhat hard done by as those a year above cruised through at a third of the price. Perhaps this even contributes to students taking matters into their own hands and focusing more on how to make things happen for them.

So, how is an increased focus on career outcomes manifesting itself? The High Fliers[®] research (based on a survey of over 18,000 students) shows that half of these students had undertaken some type of work experience while studying, and nearly half had held at least one position of responsibility in an extracurricular context. The number of students in the class of 2015 who had ‘no definite plans’ at the time of this year’s annual survey fell to its lowest level (9%) since 1998, while 64% of final-year students had applied for a job by the end of February – representing a rise of almost 20% since 2005. The average number of jobs to which each student applied stands at an impressive 7.4.

Ambition of today’s UK graduates

They are also an ambitious group, targeting a starting salary of nearly £24,000, rising to over £41,000 after five years with a sixth expecting to hit six figures by the time they’re 30! These targets would certainly be useful in dealing with their student debt, which, it probably goes without saying, has risen and stands presently at £30,000, with £6,900 of this referred to as ‘immediate’ debt.

But, it’s not all about money – they are keen to be challenged, take on genuine responsibility and be given a chance to develop. The most popular career paths were consulting, marketing, the media and charity work.

Notably, only 12% of respondents felt they were certain that they had developed excellent business knowledge and awareness, but a majority of students were pleased with their choice of university and subject.

There’s good news for this year’s graduates, as revealed in a second High Fliers report which shows that [recruiters featuring in the Times Top 100 Graduate Employers, increased hiring by 7.9% over 2014 and plan to have 8.1% more entry-level positions available over 2015](#). This will take recruitment levels beyond the pre-recession peak of 2007. Salary levels at these elite employers (and let’s bear in mind that only so many graduates can work for PwC) have also risen, with the median figure standing at £30,000. Some of the graduates enjoying these salaries will be familiar faces, with 31% of positions expected to be filled by those who have done work with the employer before (a fifth of final year students who had done internships or similar, the graduate survey found, had been offered jobs with someone they’d worked for before, though the experience had put 10% off a particular employer). And it seems that the employers are willing to come to the students, with positions being marketed at an average of 19 universities, and an increased presence at careers fairs.

(As a side note, for an edifying and credible series of analyses of the value for money in terms of career outcomes in a US context, have a look at the sterling work produced by Georgetown University’s [Center on Education and the Workforce](#).)

It looks like a positive outcome on paper, then, with career-focused students being presented with the opportunities to fulfill their ambitions – a state of affairs with which few could find fault. However, the

question of whether we risk reducing education to a zero sum game by focusing on these statistics as the sole outcome of education may well remain troubling to those of us who wonder if, well, perhaps there might be a little more to it?

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