

Bates, Elizabeth ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8694-8078> and Kaye, Linda K. (2016) The impact of higher fees on psychology students' reasons for attending university. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 41 (3). pp. 379-392.

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## **The impact of higher fees on psychology students' reasons for attending university**

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## **The impact of higher fees on psychology students' reasons for attending university**

The introduction of the new UK tuition fees resulted in concerns about the impact on Higher Education (HE) uptake, and raised questions regarding students' motivations for attending university. The current study explored first year undergraduate psychology students' ( $N = 56$ ) reasons for attending Higher Education through a series of focus groups. These were undertaken both before ( $n = 21$ ) and after ( $n = 35$ ) the fee rise, providing a pre-post comparison of potential changes. Results from the pre-fee rise sample showed general reasons for attending HE reflected wider, contextual factors, drawing on socio-cultural influences. However, the post-fee rise data suggested HE uptake to be largely more motivated by career opportunities associated with degree-level education. Similarly, reasons for choosing Psychology-based courses was related to vocational interest, suggesting strategic decision-making processes of students embarking on HE. The findings present new evidence of the role of financial investments in HE on general and course-specific motivations. Implications of the findings are discussed, with particular reference to the development of relevant employability initiatives within HE curricula.

**Keywords:** Motivations; Higher Education; post-92; Psychology; Employability

### **Introduction**

The changing landscape of Higher Education presents academics, students, parents and policy makers with a range of new challenges, most of which are yet untested. These issues are particularly pertinent in relation to the changes in tuition fees in England<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, initial concern was expressed about the extent to which students would be deterred from attending

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<sup>1</sup>Tuition fees in England were approximately £1000 per year in September 1998. From January 2004 to September 2010, the 'top-up' fees were established at £3000 per year. The most recent and controversial fee rise currently stands at maximum of £9000 per year for some institutions. However, not all institutions and courses have set the maximum £9000 fee.

university, resulting in a substantial drop in university uptake; although these concerns have previously been addressed in countries such as Australia, reports suggested this had little impact on uptake (Foskett, Roberts and Maringe 2006). In the UK, however, the total number of applicants to UK institutions in 2012 declined by 6.6% compared to the previous year (Bolton 2013), highlighting the potential role of financial changes on HE uptake. However, this decrease was not as substantial as had been previously speculated or indeed is solely attributable to increased fees (The Guardian, 2012). A further concern on financial investment in HE, relates to the current impoverished UK labour market, which provides school leavers with limited options for employment. For example, although recent figures reveal unemployment of school leavers (ages 16-24) to have fallen by approximately eight percent from Spring 2011 to Spring 2012, more than one in five young people remain out of employment (Office for National Statistics 2013). Within this, the proportion of young people in full time education has doubled to approximately 40%, as opposed to only 24% in 1992 (Office for National Statistics 2013). These findings may result in these individuals experiencing a conflict of interest, in which their perceived lack of job opportunities, results in them choosing Higher Education to enhance this (Furlong and Cartmel 2007), whereas also experiencing apprehension at the prospect of attending Higher Education, due to the prospect of managing high amounts of debt (Shaw 2014). This represents a dilemma which is likely to be a part of prospective students' consciousness when choosing whether or not to attend Higher Education, and when selecting courses. In this way, wider economic and societal factors play a role in determining the choices students may make in this aspect of their lives. These may include schools, parents, peers and league tables as contributors to HE choices.

Although this is likely to be a key issue for a range of different sub-groups of students, it has been found that such increases in tuition fees are particularly detrimental to those students

from lower socio-economic backgrounds, specifically in creating an additional barrier for Higher Education uptake (Moore, McNeil and Halliday 2011). The wider socio-economic contexts of prospective students therefore is a key influence which may determine the extent to which Higher Education is deemed a viable option, which is likely to become more pertinent with the increased fees.

Additionally, it is yet to be established how the increased tuition fees may impact on students' reasons for selecting particular courses. Understanding these issues presents a timely and pertinent concern for HEIs, particularly given evidence revealing changing attitudes towards the importance of attending university, as a result of the increased fees (Benton 2012; Wilkins, Shams and Huisman, 2013). Examining the main reasons for students attending Higher Education and more important, for specific types of courses, is one useful way of gaining an insight into the decision-making of students, in their considerations of attending university. Indeed, previous evidence highlights the role of financial factors within commitment to HE specifically for Business Studies (Bennett 2003; 2004). However, this does not specifically focus on uptake or commitment to HE to other specific types of courses. To gain insight into these issues, the current research aimed to focus specifically on two post-92 English HEIs, which had similar tuition fee requirements. The two institutions selected were both modern universities, but potentially attract students for different reasons, therefore offering interesting perspectives.

### ***Reasons for attending Higher Education***

The majority of research examining motivations for attending university has identified specific sub-groups; research has studied the motivations of first-generation students (Bui 2002), older adults (Villar, Triadó, Pinazo, Celdrán and Solé 2010), and minority students

(Stewart and Post, 1990). Specifically in first-generation students, evidence suggests that prospects for greater financial support for families comprises a strong motivation for choosing to attend university (Bui, 2002). Other research has highlighted the importance of convenience (e.g., ease of access, transportation) for students when selecting particular HEIs (Pasternak 2005). Similarly, locational proximity has been cited as a key reason for students attending specific institutions (Reay, Crozier and Clayton 2010), particularly for these who represent minority groups (Stewart and Post 1990). These findings are reflective of the issues noted by Utley (1996) who suggests that students are more readily adopting a ‘stay-at-home-culture’ in selecting specific institutions which are close to home. Although this evidence is relatively dated, the issues may remain pertinent in today’s economic climate; with rising cost of tuition fees, students may reduce the costs of living, by selecting universities which allow them to remain living in the parental home. However, more recent evidence has suggested this may not always necessarily be the case (Wakeling and Jefferies 2013). Therefore, the contradictory nature of previous research suggested locational proximity is important to explore as an influential motivation for students in choosing specific HEIs, particularly in light of higher tuition fees.

Alternatively, for older adults the opportunities for personal growth and for remaining mentally active comprise key motivations for attending university (Villar et al. 2010). In contrast, this study revealed little evidence to suggest that employment, work or qualifications were key reasons for choosing to attend university. These results present evidence for a particular demographic group, who largely represent the ‘non-traditional student’ (e.g., mature students). Their motivations are likely to be distinct from those of more ‘traditional’ students, who may have a greater focus on the career alternatives and may be more strategic in selecting specific types of courses which provide them with greater career

options following graduation. This suggests that more vocational-based courses, such as Nursing or Teaching, may be more appealing to students when considering their future job prospects. This is reflected in research evidence showing the importance of career-based motivations in students' reasons for attending Higher Education and for the selection of specific courses (Jian, Sandnes, Huang and Huang 2010; Krutii and Fursov 2007; Loeber and Higson 2009). Similarly, other research has suggested that students have largely vocational orientations towards university (Lehmann 2009), and that usefulness and applicability of course for future career are highly important in motivating choice of course (Jian et al., 2010). This is consistent with findings that job prospects are important to students when choosing to attend Higher Education (Krutii and Fursov 2007; Loeber and Higson 2009), and are perceived to be key expectations of university particularly for students paying higher fees (Bates and Kaye 2014a; 2014b). It seems therefore that students are largely motivated by career-focused factors, particularly when considering vocational courses. The emphasis placed on preparedness for work or careers following university, is particularly noteworthy.

This evidence highlights the possibility that with the rising cost of tuition fees, these career-focused motivations may become even more relevant for students, not only in their general reasons for attending Higher Education, but in their selection of particular types of courses. These issues were considered to be particularly relevant at the proposed fee increase in 2006. That is, a report from the Higher Education Academy suggested that although students were unlikely to primarily focus on fees when deciding whether or not to attend university, they would be more likely to carefully consider the implications of Higher Education in providing a career enhancement strategy, rather than a career-finding strategy (Foskett, Roberts, and Maringe 2006). In this way, it presents a highly unique time-point in which to examine students' motivations for attending Higher Education and an opportunity to draw comparisons of motivations for students both before and after the introduction of the new fee

regime. No research to date has provided such a comparison. Although some research has identified the effects of reductions in financial support on heightening the proportion of students entering Higher Education for career and vocational reasons (Rolfe 2002), no research has provided a cross-sectional comparison of these changes using samples of students, by making use of a naturally occurring event within the introduction of the new fee structure. Given this, the current study aimed to provide a pre versus post-fee rise comparison of motivations for attending university in samples of undergraduate students. For the purpose of the current study, samples of first year undergraduate psychology students were chosen. The rationale behind the selection of this particular sample of students related to the fact that the subject of Psychology represents both an academic discipline of study but also can provide the foundations for professional vocational routes (e.g., Clinical Psychology), and more general career prospect. In this way, when examining specific motivations for types of course, students enrolled on Psychology courses are likely to represent a range of different reasons, it allows for greater insight into these issues. Specifically, the current research proposed a number of research questions:

1. What are students' reasons for attending Higher Education?
2. What are students' reasons for specifically choosing to study Psychology?
3. How has the new fee regime played a role in students' reasons for attending university?

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

Undergraduate students ( $N = 56$ ) were recruited through opportunity sampling of first year students enrolled on undergraduate psychology degree programmes at two post-92 HEIs (Edge Hill University and the University of Cumbria). Students were recruited through

responding to adverts made available within the psychology departments; no form of incentive was offered for participation. Twenty-one participants comprised the ‘pre-fee rise’ sample, and 35 participants in the post-fee rise sample. Similar numbers of participants were recruited from the two institutions, in both phases of the research (see Table 1 for participant numbers between institutions, genders, and across time-points). In total, approximately two-thirds of the overall sample was female (35 female, 20 male). Participants in the pre-fee rise sample undertook their first year as undergraduate students in the academic year 2011-2012 and those in the post-fee rise, from 2012-2013. Data was collected during the first year of study for both sub-samples. The majority of participants were aged from 18 to 21, with a number of mature students with ages ranging from 22-51 also took part. These were evenly distributed between the institutions and phases of the project suggesting the opinions reported are representative of the varied student body found at both HEIs.

*[Table 1 about here]*

### ***Institutions***

As previously outlined, the two HEIs selected for this research are post-92 UK HEIs with similar tuition fees; Edge Hill University at £9000 and University of Cumbria at £8400 per annum. These institutions are both modern universities, but potentially attract students for different reasons. That is, although both institutions offer a traditional Psychology degree course, Edge Hill University also offers more focused Psychology degree routes (e.g., Educational Psychology). Additionally, although both institutions attract local students, one represents the only HEI in its county, therefore is more likely to attract a higher proportion of local ‘stay-at-home’ students, compared to the other, which is one of many HEIs in the county of Lancashire.

### ***Procedure***

A series of focus groups were conducted; four before the fee rise (conducted between March and May 2012), and seven after the introduction of the new fee structure (between October and November 2012). Each group included four to six participants. Each focus group session lasted approximately one hour, depending on how each group responded to the discussion. The sessions were concluded once the researcher felt that all relevant issues had been covered and when participants indicated that they had nothing further to contribute. The agenda and process of the focus groups followed the equivalent procedure previously outlined in Bates and Kaye (2014a). Specifically in relation to the content of the discussions, a number of issues were selected. These were;

1. Why did you choose to attend Higher Education?
2. Why did you choose to study Psychology?
3. What was important for you in deciding to attend (this) university?

A digital recorder was used for the purposes of ensuring an accurate record of the discussions, to facilitate full transcriptions to be undertaken. Following this, thematic analysis was selected as the chosen analytical strategy. This has been suggested as a useful way of identifying, analysing and reporting themes in qualitative data (Braun and Clarke 2006). Indeed, Braun and Clarke's (2006) procedure was followed to permit a thorough analysis of participants' narratives.

### **Results and Discussion**

The following section discusses the findings highlighting the different reasons psychology students provided when choosing to attend university. This is presented in three main sub-

sections; ‘general reasons for attending Higher Education’, ‘specific reasons for choice of HEI’, and ‘reasons for studying psychology.’ Each main theme will be discussed with reference to its relevance to the two samples.

## **1. General reasons for attending Higher Education**

### **Pre-fee rise**

This section discusses the pre-fee rise participants’ general reasons for attending Higher Education. The analysis revealed a number of main themes, which will be discussed in further detail below.

*Avoiding full-time employment.* Among the narratives, evidence was found to suggest that attending university was an effective way of avoiding full-time work. Extract 1, for example, presents an account of this, particularly since this participant had previously experienced the workplace.

*Extract 1: Focus Group 1, Edge Hill University (Pre-fee rise)*

P5 Well I left school early and then worked full-time, then went back to college for two years and then decided after that time I’d rather go back to university.

R Right, ok. Was there a particular reason why you wanted to go back?

P5 Didn’t like full time work. But I left school early because I didn’t want to be in education either. So then I tried working and that made me decide that I wanted to come back and go to university.

This presents an insight into the wider social factors which influence some students’ decisions to attend Higher Education. For this particular participant, he simply did not enjoy working, and perceived Higher Education as an alternative. In fact, it could be suggested here

that HE was selected through a lack of other more attractive alternatives, particularly given this participant had already “tried out” full-time employment. This may reflect the notion of ‘extended adolescence’ which has been documented to be largely prevalent in today’s society (About Families 2012). That is, by attending Higher Education, this participant has averted the experience of having to make a full transition into adulthood, rather, he is achieving extended adolescence as an alternative through his decisions to attend Higher Education. This seems somewhat reminiscent of the early work on identity development in adolescence in which a typical phase of ‘moratorium’ is established in which individuals undertake roles which they perceive as socially acceptable as a means of postponing specific identity achievement (Marcia 1966). The subsequent theme, from another participant in Focus Group 1 presents a similar notion.

***Cultural norm.*** Choosing Higher Education in some cases was described in terms of the cultural norm. Extract 2 below demonstrates that for this participant, it was apparent that among her cohort, choosing to progress straight through to university from school was largely prevalent, which was the main factor in her deciding to apply for university.

*Extract 2: Focus Group 1, Edge Hill University (Pre-fee rise)*

‘It was expected that we all went to university...we weren’t pushed but we had guidance counsellors and stuff so they were always...we had meetings with them...kind of talking to you about what courses you wanted to do. Not everyone did go on to university but only about two people went into work after...everyone else went to university.’

This also suggests the importance of considering wider factors when examining motivations, and highlights the influence of cultural norms and the role of the system in encouraging Higher Education uptake. In this way, the decision-making process in choosing to attend

Higher Education appears to be rather ‘subconscious’ and externally regulated by wider factors. In this way, it is conceivable that prospective students, are influenced by messages portrayed through school or Further Education, in encouraging Higher Education uptake. Through this, the decision to attend university is largely removed from the consciousness and instead, determined by messages presented through wider socio-cultural factors, highlighting Higher Education as the ‘norm’. Within this process, the parental role cannot be overlooked. That is, it is highly conceivable that attending HE, and specific courses and/or institution choices reflect a compromise between a student and their parents’ preference/s.

*Continuity of education.* In a similar way to attending university due to the prevalence norms, Extract 3 presents the idea that some reasons for attending Higher Education were related to the fact that it was ‘familiar’.

*Extract 3: Focus Group 2, Edge Hill University (Pre-fee rise)*

‘ I knew nothing else apart from education, it’s just that it didn’t even cross my mind. It’s just that I’d been in education so long, I didn’t know anything different, I couldn’t go into being a mechanic or something....it’d be the death of me, I didn’t know anything else, so that was my motivation.’

This provides evidence to suggest that the education system can provide a ‘safe’ default option for some students; Higher Education is seen as a mechanism through which students can remain within a familiar setting. This also represents the notion of an automatic, uncalculated decision-making where one could suggest that these types of reasons do not reflect a ‘choice’, rather, a natural transition which requires little conscious judgement or decision.

***Family recognition.*** Another generalised reason for attending Higher Education, discussed by some participants in the pre-fee rise sample, was the idea of university as an indicator of academic success as a means of gaining recognition from family. Focus Group 3, highlighted in Extract 4, included narratives from a two participants in particular, which highlighted these issues, particularly in relation to making parents proud and setting examples to younger siblings.

*Extract 4: Focus Group 3, University of Cumbria (Pre-fee rise)*

P11: ....neither of my older siblings have gone to Uni so I feel like sometimes it rests a little but on me with my parents so I'm also trying to do the best I can for them to be honest with you

P15: Yeah...make my parents proud and because I'm first born I'm trying to set the standard for my little ones kind of thing

The role of such factors in influencing Higher Education uptake reflects a similar notion to those previously discussed. That is, the wider factors of prospective students' lives present key factors in determining the extent to which Higher Education is chosen as a viable option. These present evidence which may reflect a 'rite of passage' which students experience within their transitions through the education system, through which wider factors seem more influential than 'personal choice'. These previously discussed themes were only evident in the pre-fee rise data, suggesting the role of social, cultural and/or economic factors being influential to students' decisions for attending Higher Education. Indeed, it should be acknowledged that choosing to attend university is not simply the students' own decision; parents and others also adopt roles within this process, which should be acknowledged in light of the current findings. The limited evidence of calculated judgement or 'conscious'

decision-making is noteworthy, and may reflect the motivations of students investing an ‘acceptable’ amount of money into their education.

### **Pre and post fee rise**

*Enhanced job prospects.* In contrast to the former more external motivational themes suggesting, the analysis revealed compelling evidence that some participants were motivated to attend Higher Education as a means of enhancing the likelihood of better job prospects. This theme was relevant both in the pre and post fee rise samples, and the extracts below highlight some degree of consensus between the focus group participants:

#### *Extract 5: Focus Group 1, Edge Hill University (Pre-fee rise)*

P2: I went to college when I was the usual age, like 16-18...erm...didn't particularly try or enjoy it, so again went to full-time work. But in the job I was in, I didn't see any prospects to where I could go afterwards....erm....I was looking into other options that I could have done and university was one of them.

P4: Yeah, I went straight from school to college but I did a BTEC<sup>2</sup>, so I'm a Nursery Nurse but I didn't want to do that...forever....'cause there's no...the money isn't very good...it's just like the same thing over and over again. So I've always wanted to come to uni, so I just thought just to come to become a teacher or Educational Psychologist...

In this case, motivation for attending Higher Education appears to be primarily motivated by the perception of minimal prospect for future promotion or development within a particular job. This evidence provides insight into the motivations of a sub-group of students who

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<sup>2</sup> Business and Technology Education Council, work-based qualification

experienced full-time employment in the workplace straight from Further Education<sup>3</sup>. These participants acknowledged the limitations of their jobs in providing adequate future prospects, which motivated them to consider the alternative of furthering themselves academically and professionally by attending Higher Education. This represents a more strategic and calculated decision-making process compared to the former themes and were also reflected in the narratives in the post-fee rise data. Extracts 6 and 7 illustrate this notion very effectively by highlighting the role of university qualifications in promoting better chances of better employment.

*Extract 6: Focus Group 6, Edge Hill University (Post-fee rise)*

‘I was also just looking at other jobs and stuff. In fact I was on the Job Centre website and I was looking at all the jobs and all the interesting ones wanted a degree.’

*Extract 7: Focus Group 7, Edge Hill University (Post-fee rise)*

‘Just, everyone talks about it, like it’s really hard to get a job, so more qualification will put you at the top of the pile.’

These extracts present current thinking as a result of the current economic and employment climate, in which gaining employment is becoming increasingly competitive and demanding. The perception that a university qualification can enhance future job prospects therefore is noteworthy. This appears to suggest these participants hold an expectation that a degree will provide better opportunities in gaining employment following graduation. These findings largely reflect highlighting perceived lack of available jobs in enhancing the attraction towards educational options (Furlong and Cartmel 2007), and provide evidence for the notion of higher education attendance as being motivated by the prospect of enhancing career or

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<sup>3</sup> The UK equivalent to Post-Compulsory Secondary Education, or Senior High, offered to students from 16 years old

employment opportunities. This somewhat reflects previous work which indicates the role of outcome expectancies as key factors associated with career intentions (Chuang and Dellmann-Jenkins 2010). This notion was particularly noteworthy in Focus Group 3, highlighted in Extract 8, in discussions about considering employment in the context of the current labour market.

*Extract 8: Focus Group 3, University of Cumbria (Pre-fee rise)*

‘...the society keeps changing and the rules keep changing and like you’re going to need degrees like in the future for a job, you just don’t know like stuff like just keeps changing and because employability levels have gone high you just want every chance to make you ahead of others kind of things.’

This narrative presents evidence highlighting the impact of the wider economic factors, and the way in which these function in the decision-making of prospect students. These factors appear to be largely enhanced following the introduction of the higher fees, given that students’ are more likely to be caught in a conflict of interest whereby Higher Education may provide greater opportunities for enhancing future career prospects (Arnett 2004) yet presents a costly endeavour which may be related to future financial issues.

### **Post-fee rise**

*Safe option.* In addition to the notion of ‘enhanced job prospects’ participants in the post-fee rise sample also suggested Higher Education as a ‘safe option,’. Extract 9 illustrates narratives from a number of participants in Focus Group 6 surrounding this issue.

*Extract 9: Focus Group 6, Edge Hill University (Post-fee rise)*

P30: It seemed like the thing to do. It seemed safe...like...so further on in life, if ever ..if you went straight into a job from sixth form, if ever that went wrong, you'd have like a degree, as like a back up.

P27: Yeah, as long as you've got a degree, you've always got something you can fall back on if you did...just go straight into a job, and it's interesting as well, it's always different so...it's not like being stuck in a rut...it's just different , so in my mind, it's better.

These findings generally seem to illustrate a shift between the pre and post fee rise samples in their reasons for attending Higher Education. That is, although the pre-fee rise data showed evidence of reasons which seemed to primarily represent extrinsic/externally-regulated motivations, determined by a range of wider influences, such as social and cultural norms, these appeared to be less relevant in the post-fee rise data. Specifically the post-fee rise narratives suggested a stronger focus on the enhancement of job prospects and graduate opportunities as key motivations, in contrast to the pre-fee rise sample which represented greater diversity of reasons. Although evidence for career-related motivations was apparent in the pre-fee rise data, it comprised a lesser focus compared to post fee rise data. This reflects a more strategic decision-making, than those of the pre-fee rise narratives who largely described more general, less calculated processes. This presents interesting evidence which may suggest the role of the increased fee structure in largely determining more career-related motivations and choices in Higher Education uptake. Table 2 below presents a summary of the general motivational themes for attending Higher Education, as well as the specific reasons for specific HEIs and the reasons for studying Psychology, which will be discussed in the following section.

*[Table 2 about here]*

These findings therefore reveal new evidence in understanding the influence of financial investment in Higher Education, on the decision-making of first year students in their general reasons for choosing whether or not to attend university. This suggests that the perceptions of financial investments play a role in shifting the focus towards ‘weighing-up’ the benefits of attending Higher Education in enhancing graduate level employment. Given this, it could be expected that greater financial investment could also result in students holding higher expectations of their prospective employment opportunities, than those paying lower fees. Given this, a focus on enhancing the employability provisions of undergraduate students represents a key initiative in addressing these potential issues, to provide students with greater prospects of gaining such employment following graduation. The practical implications of this are further considered in the Conclusion section of this paper.

## **2. Specific reasons for attending these HEIs**

The previous extracts have considered students’ general motivations for choosing to attend Higher Education. The following two themes use extracts to illustrate some of more specific reasons for choosing to attend the target HEIs. These predominantly relate to environmental or contextual factors, such as location and setting. These themes were relevant in both the pre and post-fee rise samples, suggesting little change in the extent to which these were related to increased tuition fees. Therefore the pre and post-fee rise narratives are considered together for the purposes of analysis and discussion.

**Locality.** Narratives taken from both institutions showed evidence that locality of the respective institution was a key reason for students choosing to attend. This related to the idea that the institutions were close enough to home, but yet far enough away to provide a sense of moving away from home. This is illustrated in Extracts 10 and 11 which represent narratives from both institutions.

*Extract 10: Focus Group 1, Edge Hill University (Pre-fee rise)*

‘It’s close to home, but like still far enough away...but I’ve just always wanted to come here....’

*Extract 11: Focus Group 4, University of Cumbria (Pre-fee rise)*

‘I specifically came here because I needed to be somewhere where I could travel, I’ve got a family at home, so it had to be somewhere where I could still have a base at home but do something for me for a change.’

These students therefore represent those of traditional students who are attracted to the respective institutions based on location and convenience to their parents’ home, but who have a sense that it is far enough away to gain a sense of independence and autonomy. The notion of location was also discussed as being important for participants in the post-fee rise sample. This was discussed in a largely equivalent way to the pre-fee rise discussions.

*Extract 12: Focus Group 9, University of Cumbria (Post-fee rise)*

‘Why did I choose the university? Because it was close enough to home that I could go home whenever I wanted but far enough away so that I moved away and erm I liked living here and I’ve got family close to here so I could go to them if I ever need anything’

Extract 12 illustrates a narrative which reflects similar ideas to those presented in the pre-fee rise data; the location of the HEI is not too far away from home, yet far enough to for her to experience a sense of independence from home. This contradicts the expectation that higher fees would motivate students to ‘stay at home’ as previous research has found (Utley 1996). The fact that this was found to be relevant in both the pre and post-fee rise data suggests the increased fees as having little influence on changes in students’ reasons for choosing specific HEIs. This issue requires further empirical attention, particular in reference to those students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, since previous evidence suggests this as a key factor in determining transitions to adulthood (About Families 2012), and the likelihood of them choosing a local HEI in which they can remain within the parental home (De Marco and Cosner Berzin 2008; Wister, Mitchell and Ge 1997).

*Safe setting.* Another theme which emerged was the fact both institutions were that perceived as being ‘safe’ settings.

*Extract 13: Focus Group 4, University of Cumbria (Pre-fee rise)*

‘When I came here for the open day, it does it just seemed kind of it seemed more welcoming and more homely and stuff so, erm like it would probably be advantageous to my work’

Additionally, the fact that each of these institutions are situated as one contained campus, rather than being spread out over a larger area, in a similar way to city-based universities, was also suggested to be important in motivating attendance to specific types of universities. Universities which provide a self-contained campus, which promote a sense of community therefore, appeared to be important.

*Extract 14: Focus Group 2, Edge Hill University (Pre-fee rise)*

*'This uni, I loved because it's like a little community, not dotted everywhere.....the fact I felt safe here, especially how I feel with my anxiety and stuff, because I feel safe here and I couldn't see myself anywhere else.'*

Similarly to the pre-fee rise discussions, the notion of the specific institutions providing a sense of safety was discussed in reference to the setting of the campuses. Extract 15 illustrates this, with particular attention paid to the idea of the importance of a smaller institution and greater familiarity with the staff.

*Extract 15: Focus Group 5, Edge Hill University (Post-fee rise)*

*'...it's a really nice campus as well. It's all campus-based rather than in a city, where there's buildings everywhere! It seems to be a lot more friendlier as well, you know, with it being all on campus, whereas if you were at a city-based uni you wouldn't really know half the lecturers...'*

This provides evidence which highlights the attraction of more campus-based universities which may be better suited to providing this type of context for students. These accounts provide some indication of the importance of the atmosphere and setting of these institutions in promoting a sense of safety and security for some students. Taken together, these themes suggest the way in which environmental dimensions of institutions comprise key criteria for some students in their choices for attending specific types of HEIs. For both these institutions, these participants had strong attitudes towards the way in which the structure and setting of the institution were key factors in their institutional decision-making. This notion of "safety" appears to mirror the previously discussed issues relating to the more general reasons for HE uptake, on it being deemed a "safe option" in contrast to other alternatives. Here, these findings share a common underpinning which is perhaps reflective of an underlying "anxiety" in transition to HE. This perhaps underpins these students' decisions,

both generally in deciding whether to actually attend HE or not, and further to this, the type of institution which presents a more settling atmosphere for these new HE experiences.

Although the primary focus of the current study was on exploring the general motivations for students attending Higher Education, these findings suggested that particular features of HEIs were important in students' decisions to attend. In particular, the fact that setting and location were largely influential to students, across both the pre and post-fee rise samples, indicates little effect of increased tuition fees on decisions to attend specific HEIs. Although it could be highlighted that these motivations may have limited relevance to other institutions, the extent to which the target institutions represent other campus-based HEIs is noteworthy. Many campus-based institutions provide largely equivalent experiences for students in relation to providing self-contained campuses in contrast to the more city-based institutions which are often more widely distributed. Given this, the implications of the current findings suggest the importance of considering the setting of HEIs and the way in which smaller, more self-contained settings promote a greater sense of community and friendly atmosphere, which is likely to motivate students to attend specific types of HEIs.

### **3. Reasons for choosing Psychology**

Comparisons of the reasons for choosing to study Psychology were largely equivalent between the pre and post-fee rise samples. These themes related to Psychology as being an interesting subject, versatile, and providing a vocational requirement for particular professional routes. The narratives from both the pre and post-fee rise sample are considered together within this analysis and discussion.

***Interesting subject.*** A substantial proportion of participants' narratives revealed strong evidence to suggest that the interest in the subject of Psychology itself was a primary motivator for choosing to study it at university. This motivation appeared to be relatively enduring across both the pre and post fee rise data suggesting the increased fees to have little influence on students' selection of this particular course.

*Extract 16: Focus Group 1, Edge Hill University (Pre fee rise)*

'Whilst I was at college I did Psychology as one of my subjects I enjoyed it then, so I went and did an access course which included Psychology.'

*Extract 17: Focus Group 9, University of Cumbria (Post fee rise)*

'I've always been interested in psychology since before I started doing it at A-Level and erm I've always been like really paranoid about what people think erm and I wanna know how what makes them act and think the way they do so I can like change it to suit me and erm but in a good way and erm...just yeah, that's it.'

In this way, the intrinsic interest in the subject itself appears to be a strong motivator for these participants in choosing to study it at university. This represents a solely intrinsic motivation, suggesting that regardless of the financial investments in Higher Education, this comprises a key reason for choosing to attend university. The implication of this finding is key, and should offer reassurance to universities which offer Psychology, or related disciplines (e.g., Educational Psychology) since students appear motivated purely by the interest in the subject. In this way, the subject of Psychology has general intrinsic interest for students, suggesting the importance of it being offered as an option for students at HEIs, to reduce the impact of low uptake.

*Versatile subject.* Further from the theme that the interesting nature of subject motivated attendance at university, participant narratives suggested that psychology was chosen due to its versatility and adaptability for a range of different types of careers. Extract 18 illustrates one narrative which describes an uncertainty in a degree which could lend itself to her chosen career.

*Extract 18: Focus Group 4, University of Cumbria (Pre fee rise)*

‘I want to be a marriage counsellor and I wasn’t entirely sure where to begin but applied psychology, counselling psychology specifically sounded like a good place to start.’

In a slightly distinct way, Extract 19 illustrates an example of the perception of the subject of Psychology in offering a range of alternatives for career paths, highlighting the versatility of the subject in providing a range of opportunities.

*Extract 19: Focus Group 6, Edge Hill University (Post fee rise)*

‘I haven’t decided what I want to do at the end of my degree but there’s just so many things you can do, and not just Psychology.’

Interestingly, these extracts effectively emphasis the way in which career-related motivations may be related to the choice of subject at university.; in this case, Psychology appears to be favoured due to its utility in providing not only specified professional psychology career routes, but also more general ‘people-based’ vocations. Psychology is therefore an attractive subject, which may be a strong justification for students being motivated to select it as their chosen degree course. These themes contrast some of the former themes for the general motivations for attending Higher Education, which revealed the influence of wider factors playing a role in the decisions of prospective students. Rather, the themes relating to subject

choice, through the intrinsic value presents a more personally determined choice, representing little influence of wider socio-cultural factors in motivating Higher Education choices. Whereas these previous themes considered the interest and versatility of the subject of Psychology, the subsequent theme of ‘vocational requirement’ suggests the role of the degree subject as a core requirement of a chosen career path. The former themes represent a more general interest in the area as a useful starting point for career prospects.

***Vocational requirement.*** The final theme which was apparent in both the pre and post fee rise data, surrounded the idea that a degree in Psychology was a requirement of specific professional psychology routes. For example, in the pre-fee rise sample, Extract 20 illustrates a narrative from a student who chose the subject of Educational Psychology purely based on the fact that it was a core component of her aspiration to study to become an Educational Psychologist.

*Extract 20: Focus Group 2, Edge Hill University (Pre fee rise)*

‘I just knew my long term goal was you had to come to uni to get your degree, in order to go onto your doctorate, to be an Educational Psychologist.....I just knew that in order to get to become an Educational Psychologist, I had to come to uni’

In a similar way, a narrative from the post-fee rise data shows the relevance of choosing Psychology as a degree as a means of pursuing a career in other areas of professional psychology, such as Clinical Psychology.

*Extract 21: Focus Group 9, University of Cumbria (Post fee rise)*

‘ I wanna do clinical psychology, that’s what I was thinking about doing because I’ve been told that I help people quite a lot so I just want to carry that on which was why I was looking at that.’

It appears therefore that as well as career-related reasons were related to students' reasons for choosing to study Psychology. That is, the fact that Psychology represents a particularly versatile degree, which provides students with a wide range of options following their degree, both in pursuing professional psychology routes, as well as more general careers, suggests this makes the subject largely appealing. This was found to be relevant both in the pre and post fee rise data, suggesting it to be a relevant issue in a changing educational climate. These findings reflect those of previous studies identifying the role of career-related motivations for specific degree courses (Jian et al. 2010; Krutii and Fursov 2007; Loeber and Higson 2009), and extends them by providing an insight into these mechanisms within the subject of Psychology, which has not previously received empirical attention. Additionally, the current study examined these motivations within two different educational contexts, both before and after the introduction of the increased fees. In this way, the current study provides new insight into the way in which motivations for specific degree courses change (or not, in this case), as a result of the wider educational and economic climate.

Although this provides new evidence for students' motivations for choosing a specific type of course, which has not received substantial empirical attention, this may present a limitation of the current study. That is, the findings cannot necessarily be extended beyond the scope of the subject of psychology. Further research is therefore warranted on examining the impact of the increased fees on students' reasons for selecting other types of degree courses, as a means of gaining a greater insight into the way in which financial investment in Higher Education affects course choice. A comparison of these issues across a range of different types of courses presents one area of future enquiry. For example, a focus on more non-vocational-based subjects, which are less likely to be perceived as providing graduate employment prospects, are a particular area of empirical concern. Understanding students' motivations for these types of courses is therefore useful as a means of anticipating and potentially preventing

the likelihood of reduce uptake from prospective students. The pertinence of these issues therefore warrants further empirical consideration.

## **Conclusion**

This study aimed to explore students' reasons for attending Higher Education, and more specifically, the reasons choosing the subject of Psychology. These issues were explored specifically in relation to the introduction of the new fee regime, to examine the extent to which this could potentially account for any changes. This was achieved by conducting focus groups with groups of first year psychology students, taken from cohorts both before and after the introduction of the new fee regime. The current study therefore presents evidence of both a timely and salient nature, in a vastly changing educational and economic climate.

The current findings suggest the role of increased tuition fees on students' reasons for attending Higher Education, particularly in focusing prospective students on graduate career options. The importance of the current research surrounds its potential impact on a number of key Higher Education issues. Firstly, understanding the factors which initiate university uptake at specific types HEIs is relevant in informing marketing strategies for these particular institutions. For example, HEIs which encompass smaller, friendlier settings may consider promoting this as a strength of their institution, given that this was found to promote a positive atmosphere in attracting potential students. Secondly, the apparent shift in students' perceptions of the importance of undertaking a degree as a means of securing employment, or providing better career opportunities justifies the development of better employability provisions in Higher Education. Whilst the concept of 'employability' is hotly debated within academic communities, the importance of enhancing students' transferable and life skills has a solid consensus (see Knight and Yorke 2003). Additionally, the role of HEIs in enhancing

employability of students and is underpinned by the objectives of Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in monitoring graduate employment six months following graduation. Therefore, HEIs have a key contribution in providing specific curriculum-based initiatives which have a direct impact on developing personal and professional development, as well as employability more generally. Subjects such as Psychology are well suited to providing such an intervention based on the fact the nature of the discipline provides a wide range of key transferable skills, which are largely relevant in most workplace contexts. For other subjects which are less vocational by nature, a suggestion towards developing the range of vocational or explicit employability opportunities may present a means of integrating employability provisions into undergraduate curricula, to provide students with an incentive to study these subjects, with the intention of gaining employment following graduation.

Taken together, the current findings provide an initial insight into undergraduate psychology students' perceptions of their Higher Education motivations, and the extent to which their financial investments may be related to a shift in these decisions between two distinct samples. This study provides an original evidence for these issues, particularly for campus-based HEIs, and the extent to which increases in tuition fees function in students' decision-making for Higher Education uptake. One particularly noteworthy notion which emerged through the findings was the role of wider economic factors as determinants, particularly for prospective students in their general reasons for choosing whether or not to attend Higher Education. Given this, the current study highlights the importance of considering these issues with acknowledgement of the wider influences within students' lives, and the extent to which these function in the transitions through the education system.

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