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RUNNING HEAD: EXPECTATIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

**“I’d be expecting caviar in lectures”: The impact of the new fee regime on undergraduate students’ expectations of Higher Education.**

Elizabeth A Bates <sup>1\*</sup> and Linda K Kaye <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Cumbria, Cumbria, UK; <sup>2</sup> Edge Hill University, Lancashire, UK

\*Corresponding Author at:

Department of Psychology, University of Cumbria, Fusehill Street, Carlisle, Cumbria, CA1

2HH Tel: +44 1228 616358 Email: [Elizabeth.Bates@cumbria.ac.uk](mailto:Elizabeth.Bates@cumbria.ac.uk)

## Abstract

The introduction of the new tuition fee regime in the UK has resulted in growing concerns about the impact on students' expectations of their university experiences (e.g. Jones, 2010). This is coupled with reports from those such as the OIA (Office of the Independent Adjudicator, 2013) which detailed the rise in the number of student complaints year on year. The current study explored undergraduate psychology students' ( $N = 62$ ) expectations and derived experiences of Higher Education through a series of focus groups. In particular, a focus on students' perceptions of level of support, contact time, and resources were explored. These were undertaken both before ( $n = 21$ ) and after ( $n = 41$ ) the introduction of the fee rise, to provide a cross-sectional comparison of the potential changes. Thematic analysis of the narratives indicated minimal support for the idea that increased tuition fees had heightened expectations in Higher Education. Additionally, although there were some discrepancies between students' expectations and experiences, particularly in relation to level of support and contact time, this did not have a detrimental impact on satisfaction of their University experiences. This was related to the fact that these experiences exceeded their original expectations. One noteworthy finding however, suggested that higher tuition fees were related to greater expectations of graduate employability. The implications of this are discussed, as well as the implications of student satisfaction (using models such as the Student Satisfaction Index Model; Zhang, Han & Gao, 2008), for institutional policies of recruitment and retention.

**Keywords:** Expectations; tuition fees, employability, post-92 institutions, Higher Education

## **Introduction**

The recent increase in Higher Education tuition fees in the UK has resulted in growing concerns amongst parents, policy makers and academics, on its potential impact on students' expectations. Tuition fees were first introduced in September 1998 with students contributing up to £1000 a year towards their University education. By January 2004 the cap was lifted further and institutions were able to charge "top up" fees of up to £3000 a year rising to £3290 a year by 2010/11. The publication of the Browne Review (2010) recommended allowing Universities to charge up to £9000 a year which was implemented in England from September 2012<sup>1</sup>. Students in England enrolling at University are entitled to financial support in the form of student loans – this covers both the costs of the fees, plus additional maintenance loan to cover living costs. These student loans are only to be repaid once students have graduated and have reached a particular threshold of income; this is currently £21,000.

With these large financial investments in Higher Education, it has been suggested that students' expectations of their university experiences are likely to increase, resulting in greater dissatisfaction in instances of disparity between such expectations and the realities of their experiences (Jones, 2010). That is, it is noted that a rise in fees may foster the perception of a "consumer culture" (Jones, 2010) in which students may place greater demand on Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to provide them with a service which meets their financial investments. This reflects concerns which arose on the introduction of the "top-up fees" in 2006, (as detailed above) would create a growing complaints culture. These concerns were highlighted in research before the introduction of the top-up fees, in which it was expected

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<sup>1</sup> The cap was lifted and 64 of the Universities in England stated they would charge the maximum £9000 with some opting to charge slightly lower fees. This legislation was not UK wide with Scotland and Wales having different policies on the use of tuition fees.

that these fee increases would heighten students' demands and expectations which may exceed the realistic realms of academic staff (Jones, 2006). For example, Jones (2010) noted the expectation that students may start to insist on greater communication with tutors, and may stipulate an "immediate response...irrespective of the time or day" (p.45). In his original paper, Jones (2006) comments that the relationship between HEIs and students is moving away from the traditional scholarly nature and moving towards a more consumer-based relationship. He believed this would increase the likelihood of students openly criticising the HEI and the likelihood of HEIs treating students more like customers. Jones (2010) states the need for HEIs to demonstrate they are responding to student feedback and endeavouring to meet students' expectations. He believed that lifting the cap on the fees would exacerbate this problem and threaten the "intellectual mission" of Higher Education (p47).

In relation to the expectations of students, Ramsden (n.d.) highlights that most students have a fairly limited view on what Higher Education is really like. He further points out that the greater range and variety of students (due to initiatives such as widening participation with Higher Education becoming more accessible) have increased the range of student expectations. Changes in fees over the last decade has altered the way universities are responding to students, with more focus on the enhancement of the student experience and teaching quality. The introduction of the National Student Survey (NSS) in 2005 meant students were able to feedback honestly about their university experience in their final year. Final year students completing this survey in the academic year 2011-12 were found to rate their satisfaction higher than any other year since the survey began (HEFCE, 2012). This particular survey was completed by 287,000 students at 154 HEIs and 106 Further Education Colleges. This is currently one of the most widely used indicators of student satisfaction in

Higher Education, suggesting the importance in ensuring students' expectations are fulfilled, as one way of enhancing their satisfaction. Additionally, this data feeds into the Key Information Sets (KIS) which allows students to compare HEIs on a number of important aspects increasing the importance of HEIs responding to student feedback. This is supported by reports from the OIA (2013) suggesting complaints by students rise year on year. For the last academic year 2012-13, complaints were up 25% with only 18% being upheld. Ramsden asserts that the value of a degree throughout this period has not necessarily altered, but there are elements of such a statement that should be further explored. Given this, the current study aims to address the expectations of undergraduate students as a means of exploring the expectations and perceptions of Higher Education, and the extent to which these may (or may not) be different as a result of the increased fee structure.

### **Student Expectations and Satisfaction**

Given that there is an anticipated relationship between students' expectations and their satisfaction, this requires further exploration. This relationship can be underpinned by previous conceptual models which identify expectations, as well as a number of other factors as predictors of student satisfaction. One such model is the Student Satisfaction Index Model (Zhang, Han & Gao, 2008). This model explains the influence of student expectation, institution reputation, student activity, perception of quality, and value as predictors of student satisfaction. It provides explanatory value to understanding the way in which students' perception of their financial investment in Higher Education might be associated with their perceived value and quality of the "service" they are receiving. In this way, this model can incorporate these types of perceptions students may hold and the way in which they may mediate the relationship between expectations and satisfaction. Therefore, it is

conceivable that when evaluating students paying lower compared to higher tuition fees, perception of value and quality may be somewhat different, which, in turn, operates in distinct ways in contributing to student satisfaction.

This model is supported by the work of Alves and Raposo (2007), who found perceived value, quality, image of institution and expectations as positive contributors to satisfaction in Higher Education. In this way, expectations comprise one key factor in determining level of satisfaction, highlighting the importance in exploring their impact within Higher Education experiences. These expectations may be related to a number of experiences, particularly those such as adjustment and transitions into Higher Education (Jackson, Pancer, Pratt & Hunsberger, 2000). That is, upon entering Higher Education, students have expectations about their university experience as a whole but also relating to specific aspects, such as teaching contact time, the role of the lecturer in their learning experience, and the level of independent work and commitment in the course. These specific experiences will be examined within the following sections.

### ***Tutor support and the role of the lecturer***

There have been several studies examining student expectations at university across a range of different courses, and in various countries (e.g., Crisp et al., 2009; Gedye, Fender & Chalkley, 2004; Longden, 2006; Maclellan, 2001). For example, Marshall and Linder (2005) examined undergraduate students' expectations of teaching in physics and found a number of different expectations including; presenting knowledge, developing understanding and promoting intellectual independence and critical thinking. Their findings indicate a mixed perception among students of their expectations and understandings of the role of the lecturer in supporting their learning experiences. This suggests the importance of addressing any

misconceptions prior to students attending Higher Education, to provide a clear and consistent message to potential students of the independent nature of learning in this setting. The authors highlight the importance of comparing these results to those from studies of lecturers and their perceptions (e.g., Rolfe, 2002) and using this to develop different strategies for motivating and encouraging students to foster their development. This consideration, and further insight into the potential distinctions in perceptions of learning between tutors and students presents a key area of further investigation. Given this, the current study aims to develop the existing literature by exploring students' expectations of university, particularly in relation to tutor support and contact time, as an indication of their perceptions of the role of lecturers in their learning. This will comprise one part of a wider research project, in which tutor expectations and experiences will subsequently be explored to provide a comparative account of these issues following the introduction of the new fee regime.

### ***Resources***

Further to the expectations of learning approaches, a further area of enquiry is students' expectations of the use of resources. For example, Stokes and Martin (2008) compared student and tutor perceptions of course reading lists. Using a mixed methodological approach, they identified distinctions between tutors' and students' perceptions about the purpose of reading lists and course resources. Specifically, tutors perceived the purpose of reading lists to be guidance in students' reading, providing a starting point, in which greater level of autonomy and engagement would be evident across the different levels of study. In contrast, students' expectations surrounded the idea that the resources comprised the "main reading" to fulfil the requirements of the course. This study highlights the importance of structuring students' expectations as a means of aligning them more effectively with those of



tutors, as a way of encouraging and fostering development. This presents another area worthy of consideration, particularly in light of the recent increase in tuition fees. That is, it could be expected that those students who have made large financial investments in Higher Education, may hold higher expectations of quantity and quality of resources, and the extent to which they will provide them with adequate content in helping them meet the requirements of the course. Based on this premise, the current study aimed to explore students' perceptions of the types and amount of resources they expected in Higher Education.

### ***Employability***

A further area of enquiry, particularly in light of the recent tuition fee increases, entails a consideration of the employability expectations of students. Recent evidence suggests that the high cost of tuition fees is associated with enhanced perceptions of prospective employment (Moore, McNeil & Halliday, 2011), suggesting the role of the financial investment in enhancing students' expectations of the extent to which their degree will provide employability opportunities. These issues are reflected in an earlier study by Gedye, Fender and Chalkley (2004) who discussed the pressures of HEIs to prepare graduates for work. Their study examined undergraduate expectations of the value of a geography degree and found that one of the main reasons for choosing to study the subject was as a way of improving job prospects, suggesting these expectations to be evident even before the introduction of the higher tuition fees.

This particular area is important considering changes in the UK economic climate which mean employment is a great concern to all. The fact that students are currently paying a significantly higher fee for attending Higher Education, it could be expected that these employment expectations will be greatly enhanced. Given this, the current study aimed to examine the impact of the increased fee regime on students' employability expectations.

## **Expectations and experiences**

The literature reviewed above highlights some key distinctions between the expectations of students, with those of tutors. Although there may be means of addressing these distinctions through more effective communication and development of relevant initiatives, a further issue which cannot be as readily addressed is that of the potential disparity between students' own expectations and their actual university experiences. The importance of investigating student expectations in light of the change in fees is highlighted by the research documenting the effect of mismatched expectations and experiences. For example, Longden (2006) examined a UK institutional response to the changing nature of first year students' expectations in response to the widening participation initiative. Her results indicated a number of "problem areas" surrounding retention of students, as a result of disparity in aspects such as; lack of academic preparation. Additionally, Marcus (2008) discussed the issue of students having expectations which were high and unmanageable. He discusses the misleading information students receive including (but not limited to) prospectuses and marketing material. He suggests it is the responsibility of HEIs to ensure a fair reflection of this information and posits those with higher retention may be doing this more effectively. Other studies have examined mismatching of student expectations and experiences using gap analysis (e.g. Awang & Ismail, 2010). For example Yooyen, Pirani and Mujtaba (2011) examined expectations and experiences of both tutors and students in university services. Their initial findings suggest that perceptual gaps influenced evaluation outcomes (i.e. satisfaction or dissatisfaction), based on these findings, the authors conclude that university marketers should move beyond the traditional satisfaction/dissatisfaction paradigm to fully understand mismatching expectations and experiences. Managing students' expectations in relation to their prospective Higher Education experiences is therefore paramount in ensuring that they are fully informed and prepared for the specific experiences

they encounter at university. No research to date, however, has examined the way in which expectations and experiences may be related, particularly with relevance to students' financial investments in Higher Education. That is, since expectations may be enhanced by the increased fees, it may be the case that these are not matched in students' realities of their universities experiences. A comparison of these potential disparities in students both before and after the introduction of the higher fees would therefore be insightful.

Given this, the current study aimed to explore the expectations and experiences of first year undergraduate students. This was undertaken at two time-points, which represented cohorts of students both before (academic year 2011/12) and after the introduction of the new fee regime (academic year 2012/13). This was undertaken to explore the extent to which the enhanced expectations of students could be attributed to the increased fees and whether this would result in greater disparity with students' actual experiences of Higher Education. In particular, based on the previously reviewed literature, the current study specifically aimed to examine students' perceptions of tutor support, contact time, resources and employability. The particular time-point in which this study was conducted presented a unique opportunity in which to examine these issues, given that it permitted the recruitment of first year undergraduates who represented cohorts from both before and after the introduction of the new fee regime. This was achieved through undertaking a series of focus groups with first year undergraduate psychology students. A number of research questions were formulated:

1. What are first year students' expectations of Higher Education before the introduction of the new fee regime?
2. What are first year students' expectations of Higher Education after the introduction of the new fee regime?
3. How has the new fee regime changed students' expectations of Higher Education?

4. To what extent do students' experiences of Higher Education match their expectations?
5. Is there greater disparity between students' expectations and their experiences of Higher Education as a result of the new fee regime?

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

Groups of first year undergraduate students were recruited through opportunity sampling of students enrolled on undergraduate Psychology degree programmes at two UK Higher Education Institutions. The focus groups were advertised around the psychology departments and students volunteered to take part in the study. The overall sample consisted of 56 participants (20 male, 35 female), in which 21 participants comprised the "pre-fee rise" sample (13 female, 8 male), and 35 for the "post-fee rise" sample (23 female, 12 male). All participants were first year undergraduate students who started their degree in either 2011-12 (pre-fee rise) or 2012-13 (post-fee rise). Most of the participants were between 18 and 21 years of age but some focus groups also included mature students, with ages ranging from 22-51. These particular students were relatively 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.

### **Institutions**

The justification for the use of the two institutions relates to the fact that although they are two modern campus-based universities which offer traditional Psychology degree courses.

Both are “post-92” era institutions <sup>2</sup>. Although both institutions attract local students, one of the HEIs is the only one in its county and therefore is more likely to attract a higher proportion of local “stay-at-home” students, with currently 140 students in the Applied Psychology department, typically recruiting between 50 and 75 per year. This is compared to the other HEI, which is one of many HEIs in its county and recruits a total cohort of approximately 150 undergraduate psychology students onto its courses every year.

### *Procedure*

A series of 11 focus groups were conducted, each including four to six participants. This number of participants was chosen since smaller group formats allow each participant to have more time to share their thoughts and allows more in-depth descriptions of the issues (Hughes & Dunmont, 1993). Furthermore, most of the focus groups consisted of established friendship groups which facilitated the discussions. Each focus group session lasted between one hour to one hour and a half, 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.

### *Agenda*

The focus groups sessions commenced with a welcome, including an introduction and overview of the purpose of the research programme. Following this, a review of the session goals was outlined and ground rules were established. Introductions of the focus group session group members were conducted before the main discussions took place. Following the main discussions, participants were encouraged to ask any questions relating to the

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<sup>2</sup> Post-92 era Universities refer to any former poly-technic, central institution or Higher Education college given University status by the UK Government in 1992 through the Further and Higher Education Act (1992). HEIs of this era were chosen as they do not represent the traditional Russell Group (e.g. Oxford University) which generally are leading research Universities and receive more funding through research and scholarly activity.

research. The agenda was developed by identifying a number of issues which have not received substantial empirical attention. Open-ended questions were developed to allow participants to discuss their thoughts and opinions of the issues. Potential probes were noted for instances where more information might be sought. An example of a probe in this case is “does anyone else have any other similar experiences?” In addition, the sessions concluded with the researcher questioning whether focus group members had any further comments to make. This provided an opportunity to let participants make any original contributions on issues they felt were important. A number of issues were initially chosen to be addressed within the discussion sessions. These were as follows:

1. What were your expectations of Higher Education?
2. Have your experiences at university matched your expectations?
3. What have been the best and worst parts of university?

All focus group sessions were recorded using a digital recorder for the purpose of full transcription of the discussions. Thematic analysis was used since it is a useful way of identifying, analysing and reporting themes in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It can also provide a rich, detailed account of data, which is not restrained by theory. The analysis process was conducted in line with Braun and Clarke’s (2006) suggested phases for thematic analysis. The transcripts were read through several times to become familiar with the data and to note initial ideas of themes. The data was then coded by identifying relevant parts which corresponded with each code. Codes were then transformed into potential themes by selecting relevant extracts in support. Next, a review of the themes was undertaken, to ensure they related to the data. Finally, extracts were chosen to represent themes to be used in reporting the research.

## Results and Discussion

Analysis of the findings from the participants in the “pre-fee rise” and “post-fee rise” focus groups revealed several themes surrounding their discussions of their expectations and experiences. These were namely: “Contact Time”, “Resources”, “Supportive Experience”, “Employability Expectations” and “Value for Money”. Each theme will now be discussed in turn with respect to both samples.

### 1. Contact time

There was an overwhelming agreement amongst the pre-fee rise group that they expected they would be in university more and have more contact with staff. This was apparent at both HEIs, suggesting it could be a general issue across post-92 type institutions. One participant in particular expressed they did not feel they were in very often:

“...you don’t feel like you’re in uni a lot, and I thought it would be like a lot more than it is...” (P4, Focus Group 1: Educational Psychology student, Edge Hill University, pre fee rise)

This reflects a common misconception that university is a tutor-led, five-day a-week contact time environment, in a similar way to that of secondary education. This conception of greater contact time was further found to be related to a deconstruction of the benefits of being able to successfully complete aspects of independent work.

“I think the ratio between contact time and having time to actually get your own reading and research done kind of works” (P20: Focus Group 4: Applied Psychology student, University of Cumbria, pre fee rise)

Participants seemed to demonstrate an understanding of the time balance between contact and independent time but none had expected it. Interestingly, participants’ narratives surrounding

this theme made reference to the notion of financial investment and its impact on students' experiences of contact time.

“If we was paying, is it nine grand next year, I don't think we'd be very happy with the, like the two days a week and that sort of thing, but for what we're paying now, it's fine but I don't think people paying the full fee next year would be happy....” (P6, *Focus Group 1: Educational Psychology student, Edge Hill University, pre fee rise*)

Interestingly, students in the pre-fee rise samples posited that those students paying higher fees would expect more contact time, and would be dissatisfied with their current provision. In this way, these discussions reflected a prospective expectation of the way the increased fees would be related to students' experiences of having a particular level of contact time. These narratives represent those of the pre-fee rise sample, but no evidence was found to suggest this was actually the case for participants in the post-fee rise sample. This idea represented one of several in which participants demonstrated misconceptions about the way in which the fee structure was related to the finances HEIs actually receive. Additionally, another participant described contact time in relation to “buying” lecturers' expertise:

“Yeah 'cause I mean...well one of the main reasons you come is to learn the expertise of the lecturers, so the more contact time you have with lecturers, the more expertise you have to try and gain from them, 'cause although obviously it's your interpretations as well and developing yourself, you need to have the contact time with the lecturer to learn off them and then sort of, try and make it into your own.” (P2, *Focus Group 1: Educational Psychology student, Edge Hill University, pre fee rise*)

This participant's perceptions of the role of the tutor were largely as a provider of expert knowledge, and that having little contact time would limit the extent to which this could be



accessed. Although this narrative presents evidence which conveys some understanding of the role of the tutor, there appears to be an expectation that less contact time is associated with less learning. In this way, little acknowledgement of the role of independent learning and study within higher education is provided.

Narratives relating to contact time were similar in the group discussions in the post-fee rise sample. Participants expected to have more contact time with staff in relation to lectures and seminars, and less in terms of independent work.

“I expected more like lecture based than independent...” (P43, *Focus Group 9: Applied Psychology student, University of Cumbria, post fee rise*)

But in a similar way, the narratives showed a deconstruction of how this was beneficial for their experiences at university.

“I thought I’d be in like all day like every week day kind of thing but I like I’m happy with the way that it is,” (P46, *Focus Group 9: Applied Psychology student, University of Cumbria, post fee rise*)

“I think I like prefer that it’s on you to have to put the effort in” (P53, *Focus Group 11: Applied Psychology student, University of Cumbria, post fee rise*)

## **Resources**

Participants from both institutions, across the pre and post-fee rise samples were relatively satisfied with the resources available to them with some being surprised by the extent of resources available online in the virtual learning environments (VLEs):

“I didn’t really realise they’d give you so many resources actually” (P20, Focus Group 4: Applied Psychology student, University of Cumbria, pre fee rise)

When examining the post-fee rise narratives regarding resources, the experiences of these participants in both institutions appeared to exceed their expectations about availability of resources.

“I didn’t expect so much for it to all be on Blackboard but I’m quite happy it is now” (P43, Focus Group 9: Applied Psychology student, University of Cumbria, post fee rise)

“I like that things are a lot more accessible than I was expecting” (P42, Focus Group 9: Applied Psychology student, University of Cumbria, post fee rise)

This demonstrates one aspect of the higher education experience in which participants’ expectations are largely out-weighted by their derived experiences, presenting interesting evidence to suggest that resources are perceived in generally positive terms. Interestingly, in a similar way to the discussions about contact time, some participants in the pre-fee rise sample described scenarios in which higher financial investment might be related to higher expectations in relation to resources.

“I think for what we’ve had it’s been fine and it’s all worked really well but it might be different if you were sort of tripling those fees and thinking of doing it next year” (P18, Focus Group 4: Applied Psychology student, University of Cumbria, pre fee rise)

In relation to the availability of resources and level of contact time, the current findings revealed that both the pre and post-fee rise samples were largely satisfied, with little evidence of any increase in such expectations as a result of increased fees. There appeared to

be minimal distinctions between the expectations of the pre and post-fee rise samples, with the exception of the pre-fee rise participants in their prospective expectations of the impact of the increased fees on this issue. These anticipations, however, were not evident in the narratives of the post-fee rise participants. This may reflect a more general aspect of these participants' motivations and learning approach, and their conceptions of the differences between Higher Education and previous educational contexts.

The "prospective student expectations" discussions amongst the pre-fee rise sample did not translate in the narratives of the post-fee rise participants. These findings generally reflect misconceptions of the role of tutors and contact time in the Higher Education experience. Little acknowledgement appears to be made to the fact that a substantial part of university education surrounds independent work, rather than direct contact time and tutor input. Such misconceptions are therefore translated into these students' expectations of the level of contact time. These findings partially support those of previous studies demonstrating similar findings of misconceptions of the role of lecturers in Higher Education (Marshall & Linder , 2005), and challenge the assumption that all students entering Higher Education are fully prepared for the autonomy and independence required.

Additionally, an examination of the relationship between students' expectations and experiences revealed that these were largely distinct. That is, it was revealed that in both the pre and post-fee rise groups, there was an expectation for greater contact time than was actually provided, but this was not experienced in a negative way. In fact, there was a general sense of contentment through the structure and contact time of the courses for both institutions. This provides another example to refute the idea that mismatched expectations and experiences always result in dissatisfaction. In contrast, it provides some evidence for the way in which misguided expectations can promote largely positive, enhanced experiences of Higher Education.

Although previous research has examined differences in students' expectations and experiences (e.g., Awang & Ismail, 2010; Yooyen et al., 2011), and compared distinctions between tutor and students' expectations (e.g., Maclellan, 2011; Martin, 2008), no research to date has identified the specific aspects of Higher Education experiences, and the way in which they challenge students' expectations. In this way, the current study presents new evidence for the notion that a mismatch in expectations and experiences is not necessarily a detriment to student satisfaction. However, these findings suggest that student experiences must exceed such expectations in order for this to be the case.

## **2. Supportive Experience**

A theme which emerged from the pre-fee rise narratives suggested that participants generally were satisfied with the level of support in their Higher Education experiences. Although they were satisfied, it appeared that their experiences did not entirely match their original expectations of this.

*Extract 1: Focus Group 3: six Applied psychology students, University of Cumbria, pre fee rise*

P15: Staff are a bit friendlier than I expected

R: You were expecting Professors with long beards?

P15: Yes

P12: That's what I was expecting

Similarly the post-fee rise participants further suggested they were satisfied with level of support was apparent, and that expectations and experiences were distinct.

“I think there is a lot more staff support and that here than I was expecting” (P42, *Focus Group 9: Applied Psychology student, University of Cumbria , post fee rise*)

“...you’re so readily available then there’s like extra support, I was expecting it to be harder to get in touch” (P51, *Focus Group 10: Applied Psychology student, University of Cumbria, post fee rise* )

Previous perceptions and expectations had let these participants to believe that whilst they would see staff frequently in terms of contact time that there was little outside of that for additional pastoral support.

The results suggest that both in the pre and post-fee rise samples students derived largely positive and supportive experiences in Higher Education, and that their original expectations of tutors were superseded by the high level of support and approachability of the academic tutors at both institutions. This illustrates one example of mismatched expectations and experiences in which positive perceptions are promoted, in contrast to the originally proposed notion that such disparity might result in negative perceptions of Higher Education experiences and dissatisfaction (Jones, 2010). In this way, both institutions are exceeding students’ expectations through promoting friendly and supportive learning environments, which students perceive in a largely positive way. This may represent a particular feature of post-92 institutions which may be more challenging for larger, more traditional Russell Group institutions to achieve. The implications of these findings relate to previously proposed ideas (e.g., Byrne & Flood, 2005; Crisp et al., 2009), in suggesting the role of academic tutors in adopting an awareness and understanding of students’ motivations and expectations. In this way, this can promote sensitivity in responding to potential student anxiety, and foster better communication between tutors and students, to balance perceptions with reality. Similarly, other researchers have suggested the use of student contracts as a

means of managing and structuring students' expectations (Jones, 2006). That is, these may be designed as a way of pre-empting complaints which may arise through dissatisfaction in instances where expectations are unfulfilled. This represents one potential practical solution to structuring students' expectations accordingly, as means of minimising the likelihood of dissatisfaction through derived Higher Education experiences.

### **3. Employability Enhancement**

The pre-fee rise sample appeared to hold expectations that having a degree would present them with greater employment prospects.

“Well I want to go into the police force so I'm hoping that the degree will help me get into that...the police force a lot easier, you know? Be a credential that I have that sort of helps them pick me.” (*P15, Focus Group 3: Applied Psychology student, University of Cumbria, pre fee rise*)

This participant demonstrates a perception that doing a degree will help them enter an organisation more easily than not having one. Many of the narratives presented evidence that there was a general focus on participants' intentions of entering a career in psychology, although others were less decided on their career aspirations.

Interestingly, Focus Group 1 presented strong views that the increased fees would result in students having greater expectations of gaining a job at the end of their degrees.

“Well, the course is three years, so if you're paying £9000, that's, let's round it up to £30,000, that's an unreal amount of money...I'd want to jump straight into work, and try and get that paid off...I do kinda expect to get a good profession to try and pay

back to money.” (P3, Focus Group 1: Psychology student, Edge Hill University, pre fee rise)

Other narratives revealed evidence that the expectation of employment was related to the choice of subject to be studied in higher education.

“I’d have picked a different course I think...something that erm would have guaranteed me a return...I’d be doing a degree in something that I can make quite a lot of money in and I think that’s the problem with erm the new fees because it kind of makes it less viable to do more academic courses” (P16, Focus Group 3: Applied Psychology student, University of Cumbria, pre fee rise)

In this way, as well as the prospective expectation that higher fees would result in students being more selective in their choices of subject, this narrative suggests that a focus on higher paid jobs would be a primary concern for those paying higher fees.

Despite the concerns outlined by the pre-fee rise sample, many the narratives of the post-fee rise sample indicated that a common motivation for choosing the subject of psychology was not necessarily as a means of obtaining a better job, but purely for the interest in the subject itself.

*Extract 2: Focus Group 10: five Applied psychology students, University of Cumbria, post fee rise*

R: And why did you pick to do psychology?

P48: Because it’s interesting like I like it

P49: ... I just did it for A-Level and I really enjoyed it...

Similarly, another participant indicated that motivation for an enjoyable and intrinsically rewarding degree should be more important than the financial concerns.

“I hope people would choose something they were interested in rather than going with thinking of it like it’s going to cost me this much to do this, like you should be going after a career than you actually want to do rather than like feeling like you should get your money back...” (P47, *Focus Group 10: Applied Psychology student, University of Cumbria, post fee rise*)

These extracts indicate that these participants were generally not motivated by the prospect of employment, suggesting employability expectations to be relatively irrelevant which provides a strong contrast to the prospective expectations of their pre-fee rise counterparts.

This theme surrounded the notion that higher financial investment in Higher Education was related to enhanced expectations of graduate employment. Interestingly, this was more evident in the narratives of the pre-fee rise sample, in their prospective expectations for those students attending university after the introduction of the higher fee structure. Although some evidence of this was found in the post-fee rise sample, it was not as discernible as was originally predicted. However, the fact that this was apparent, suggests the importance of addressing issues relating to employability within the Higher Education experience. That is, this implies the development of a provision in which Higher Education can better prepare graduates for the workplace (e.g. Gedye et al., 2004). Furthermore the introduction of the Key Information Sets (KIS), detailing the destinations of leavers in terms of employment and salary data suggests the importance of enhancing these provisions, both as a means of boosting universities’ graduate employment statistics, as well as better preparing students. Ways of addressing this may include a greater focus on embedding employability within curricula, to achieve a more integrated provision, which may be



perceived as more favourable, and being more relevant for students, than “add-on” provisions. These notions have been addressed within the UK Psychology Discipline, through the introduction of the “Psychology Student Employability Guide” (Lantz, 2011), which may be used as a resource in line with existing Psychology curricula. An examination of the effectiveness of such a resource within an embedded curriculum represents the subsequent phase of the current research agenda, in which an evaluation of this resource and its integration with an existing first year Essential Skills module will be undertaken. This will be achieved through examining the role of these provisions on changes to students’ awareness and attitudes towards personal development planning, and the extent to which they recognise its impact on employability. This is intended to present a justification for enhancing such employability provisions, as a means of addressing students’ expectations of enhanced employment, in a competitive and ever-changing Higher Education context.

#### **4. Value for Money**

A key theme which emerged through the analysis was the notion of “value for money”, in which participants’ narratives indicated that higher fees would require a greater value for money. Specifically in the pre-fee rise group discussions, these participants’ narratives indicated that their experiences were generally consistent with the financial investment in their studies.

“I think it’s dead on what we’re paying at the minute, I think it’s perfect for the amount of contact time we get, the amount of resources and everything” (*P21, Focus Group 4: Applied Psychology student, University of Cumbria, pre fee rise*)

However, the awareness of the rise in fees meant that it was impossible to untangle their thoughts about their own position with their comparisons between their position and that of the prospective students:

“I think for what we’ve had it’s been fine and it’s all worked really well but it might be different if you were sort of tripling those fees and thinking of doing it next year”

*(P18, Focus Group 4: Applied Psychology student, University of Cumbria )*

This quote highlights that their own feelings about value for money in terms of their financial investment takes a frame of reference in the changes that they themselves have avoided being part of. This comparison allowed some students to reflect on whether it would have affected their choice should they have been applying for a 2012 start.

“I think I’ve got a much better deal than those who will come later next year and I’d have to seriously consider whether I could justify coming next year...one of the reasons I didn’t take a gap year this year was because I was just like I really want to but I can’t justify it financially” *(P14, Focus Group 3: Applied Psychology student,*

*University of Cumbria, pre fee rise)*

The narratives of the pre-fee rise sample also made reference to the notion that those students paying higher fees might expect more opportunities for wider employability activities, provided by the HEI rather than independently sought out.

“...erm you know like we’re doing volunteering and stuff like that erm maybe if we had maybe had more information and stuff like that and maybe made it more mandatory, is that the word?” *(P12, Focus Group 3: Applied Psychology student,*

*University of Cumbria, pre fee rise)*

This represents a shift in thinking towards the notion that higher fees are related to greater provisions by the HEI. These narratives reflect those of the theme of increased contact time which was expected as a result of the fee increases. Similarly, some of the narratives reflected misconceptions about the new finance structure, in relation to the idea of getting value for money. Influence of the media seemed to have led these participants to believe that HEIs would be in receipt of greater finance due to the prospective students increasing their contributions. One quote in particular effectively highlights this.

“I’d be expecting caviar in lectures and stuff like that” (*P14, Focus Group 3: Applied Psychology student, University of Cumbria, pre fee rise*)

The sub theme that emerged with the post-fee rise students surrounds the effect of the media and their influence. The authors accept that this area of the research is quite obviously biased, we are asking students who have already made their decision to accept the higher fee structure, if it affected their decision to come to University, however their insight still lends itself to illustrate part of this complex debate.

“Erm yeah I think it’s worth the fees because it’s like essential to get the degree you need” (*P44, Focus Group 9: Applied Psychology student, University of Cumbria, post fee rise*)

For some of them, this acceptance seemed to be related to an understanding of how the debt impacts upon them:

“I’m really enjoying it and I think I do think it’s worth it...especially when you don’t have to pay it off all in one go anyways it’s like a percentage of your wage afterwards it’s more like a graduate tax than like repaying a loan...” (*P56, Focus Group 11: Applied Psychology student, University of Cumbria, post fee rise*)

These students did not seem to have higher expectations for the investment they were putting in, however it did seem to affect their own personal motivation whilst at University:

“Because you’re paying so much, you feel you need to attend the lectures, you need to try your best” (P27, *Focus Group 6: Psychology student, Edge Hill University, post fee rise*)

“I think it like pushes me to like kind of make sure that I get a really decent grade at the end of it because I don’t want to have spent and pay back 24 grand for me to have like a 3<sup>rd</sup> or something” (P53, *Focus Group 11: Applied Psychology student, University of Cumbria, post fee rise*)

Rather than placing the emphasis on the HEI to make a return on their investment they felt more strongly that their investment motivated them to make the most of their experience and to leave university with a good degree. This notion was not evident within the pre-fee rise data, suggesting the role of higher financial investment in providing a key motivation for dedication and interest in “making the most” of the university experience.

This theme involved students considering the extent to which their university experiences provided them with an appropriate level of support to justify the financial investment. The finding that there was little distinction between the pre and post-fee rise groups in this theme, suggests that those students paying higher fees were not necessarily expecting more from their HEI as a result of greater personal financial investment. Interestingly, the pre-fee rise sample posited prospective expectations that those students who were paying higher fees would, in fact, hold higher expectations, but little evidence for this was found in the post-fee rise data. One noteworthy idea which was presented in the post-fee rise data was that personal financial investment was related to a sense of determination in “making the most” out of the Higher Education experience. That is, investing more effort and

motivation into gaining a good Higher Education qualification, as a means of gaining value for money. This presents evidence which refutes the idea that the current intake of students are expecting more from their institutions, but instead, are expecting more of themselves from paying higher fees. This presents new evidence to the existing literature, which implies the role of the higher tuition fees in fostering a more motivated type of student, who invests more both financially, as well as personally in their Higher Education experiences. These ideas, however present a potential conflict when considering the fact that these increased fees may present increased financial burden and hinder students from completing their degree. These findings show increased determination for gaining a good degree, and evidence of enhanced employment expectations, but this may not necessarily be translated in all cases, given the increased likelihood of students encountering financial issues. This issue highlights the potential conflicts which may underpin contemporary Higher Education experiences, highlighting the importance of examining these issues within the current educational and economic context.

### **Conclusion**

The current study aimed to explore the possibility of students' expectations changing as a function of the new fee regime introduced in September 2012. This was undertaken as a way of addressing current concerns about the role of the changing nature of Higher Education and the threat of Higher Education becoming more consumer-focused (Jones, 2010). This was examined by conducting focus groups with first year psychology students, taken from cohorts both before and after the introduction of the new fee regime. These samples were recruited from two post-92 institutions, which represented some similarities in relation to the fact that they both attract local students and comprise small, self-contained campuses, but differences with regards to one being the only HEI in its county while the other being one of many in its region. This approach was utilised as a way of gaining a more general insight into the

expectations and experiences of psychology students at post-92 institutions, so as not to limit the scope to one particular HEI. Through analysing these focus group discussions, several themes emerged which were evident at both time points. Furthermore, students in the pre-fee rise sample led discussions on their perceptions of prospective students' expectations of Higher Education as a result of paying higher fees. The impact for HEIs and future directions will now be discussed.

### **Impact for HEIs**

The importance of the current research surrounds its potential impact on a number of key Higher Education issues. Understanding what students expect from the HEI can present useful evidence for informing institutional policies and procedures, particularly within the pre-application stages and induction processes. That is, investing time and resources into structuring students' expectations within these earlier stages of Higher Education presents a key recommendation for institutional policy. Each HEI has a responsibility to ensure its prospective students are well informed of what their student experience will entail and the realistic prospective employment that will ensue. Within this, consideration of the role of the tutor and level of contact time, and the way in which these are related to the development of autonomous and independent learning experiences presents a pertinent issue. Although these types of expectations were mismatched with students' derived experiences, this did not appear to be detrimental to their satisfaction. However, understanding the issues which are related to student satisfaction are of utmost importance, particularly in relation to the Key Information Sets (KIS) and the National Student Survey (NSS). These indicators of satisfaction are key resources for prospective students when selecting their institutions, and can therefore be instrumental in student recruitment and intake. Indeed, the two institutions of

the current research both have established outreach programmes with schools and other educational institutions which provide useful opportunities for prospective students to develop their understandings of the expectations associated with Higher Education. These include Summer Schools, Residentials, Taster sessions and School Visit days, all of which include opportunities for students to engage in relevant activities and talk with Higher Education staff and students on their experiences. Furthermore, one HEI has a strong goal of widening participation and making education accessible to all. This is reflected in the way outreach programmes are managed and advertised. These programmes are aimed at advertising the accessibility of HE and also ensuring the transition to HE is a smooth one (e.g. summer schools and taster days).

A further important aspect to be highlighted by these findings is the importance of applicants receiving all information about the financial position of University. There are still misconceptions about the fee structure and the use of student loans. This may be an issue deterring potential applicants and more knowledge and discussion about this pre-application by the individual HEIs in their outreach work could encourage more to apply. As well as recruitment, student satisfaction can be related to retention of current students. Effective management of students' expectations can potentially result in lower attrition rates, particularly in the first year of university. Longden (2006) questions the role of HEIs in implementing strategies to improve student retention. Attrition remains a key concern for most HEIs, due to its influence on University league tables. Therefore, lowering the risk of attrition is at the forefront of most HEIs' agendas. Ensuring that students' experiences are largely positive, and are not unfulfilling of their expectations therefore is a key consideration. Furthermore, in the pre-application stages if potential students are given accurate and plentiful information by individual HEIs about the financial aspect of attending University (including financial support available in addition to the standard maintenance loan for some

students) they would be able to make better and more informed choices about their HE. This in turn would be reflected in their expectations, experiences and then likely retention.

The current findings also hold some utility in supporting established indicators of satisfaction, such as the NSS or staff-student committee outcomes. That is, these qualitative indicators gained from the current investigation provide support for the quantitative-based measures currently used within the Higher Education sector to establish levels of student satisfaction. These student accounts can add weight to the two institutions' most recent NSS scores within the subject of Psychology, in relation to Student Satisfaction for teaching, learning and support. This suggests the importance of using alternative indicators of student satisfaction which move beyond the traditional quantitative-based approach, in helping to explore the "student voice" to a greater extent.

### **Future Directions**

Although the current study has presented insight into the changing (or otherwise) expectations of students, the forthcoming phases of the current research programme include an exploration of academic tutors' experiences of Higher Education, as a result of the increased fees. This comprises an examination of the potential increased pressures which may present themselves, as a result of higher students' expectations, particularly in relation to employability, as has been found in the current findings. It has been suggested that there are growing pressures on tutors to balance increasing workloads and respond to students' demands. As Houston, Meyer and Paewai (2006) highlight, the HEIs of today are "complex organizations" (p. 27) in which staff are trying to balance their workloads whilst respecting the academic culture. Although some research has found that financial investments increase students' demands for tutor contact time (Rolfe, 2002), an examination of these factors in the



current Higher Education context would extend this existing evidence-base. Furthermore, the current authors also wish to explore involves exploring the employability experiences of the alumni of both HEIs to examine the relationship between expectations and experiences.

Finally, an issue that has not generated as much discussion as anticipated is that of feedback. The 'assessment and feedback' question on the National Student Survey (NSS, 2012) still reports the lowest satisfaction levels by students compared to the other satisfaction categories (excluding data regarding Student Unions). Currently there is little agreement in the literature for the most successful way of delivering student feedback (Wakefield, Adie, Pitt & Owens, 2013) and this is something that could be explored further in the context of the current study.

### **Final Thoughts**

This study represents new evidence within a unique time frame. By sampling students both before and after the rise in tuition fees, it has been possible to systematically compare their perceptions, expectations and experiences of Higher Education, at a point when higher fees are a current and timely issue for these students. The implications of the findings suggest that the fee rise has not increased students' expectations (particularly in relation to contact time, resources and support) as greatly as was originally anticipated. Additionally, there appears to be little compelling evidence to suggest any impact on student satisfaction as a result of increased tuition fees. One particularly noteworthy finding, however, surrounds the fact that students are placing greater emphasis on graduate employment, and hold greater expectations of better job prospects as a result of investing more in Higher Education. This presents a strong justification for HEIs to critically consider the extent to which they are

preparing their students for employment following graduation, and to enhance the way in which employability is integrated as a core component of Higher Education curricula.

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