

CSAP Final Report: UK2/C/2010

Employability skills in Social Sciences: Parent and Students expectations

Keywords: Employability; pre-entry students; parent expectations

Summary: This 6 month project evaluated perceptions of the employability value of Social Science courses held by pre-university students and their parents.¹ Through the research findings from three regional schools, parental and pre-entry student's expectations and perceptions were assessed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Findings indicated that there were a number of themes including the availability of university places, financial commitments with clear reflection on the increased fees, and return on investment offered from a course and employability after graduation. Parents were more concerned with long term opportunities offering the students to 'grow as a person'. Pre-entry students highlighted the importance of skills and competences within a degree, the issue of employability and a degree improving their career opportunities, but still were keen to experience 'university life'. Parents, schools and family/friends were important as sources of information and guidance for pre-entry students.

Activities: This research approached the issue of pre-entry students and parents expectations of employability skills within Social Sciences, building upon some of the previous work conducted by the researchers.² There is timeliness to the evaluation of 'employability' at university, and the value of Social Sciences as a discipline, with current issues relating to fees (now costing up to £9,000 per year) and the increased importance attached to employability and calls for university courses to include employability statements. (See Willets 2010).

There is significant literature addressing issues of pre-entry student perceptions, and the value of transferable skills and competencies in the current climate of Higher Education (HE) (see Gedye, et al 2004; Lucas et al 2004; Fitzmaurice, M. 2010; Moreau & Leathwood 2006). Drawing upon the authors experience as academics working at university open days there has been a shift, albeit anecdotally, of parents and pre-entry students 'shopping around' for courses a note previously raised by Tomlinson (2008). Within this context, the perceptions of parents and pre-entry students of the 'return on investment' offered by courses is of significance. Encompassed within this are the expectations of what a course should offer and the best ways to integrate 'soft' or 'transferable' skills and competences into courses. What parents think is clearly important as Ainley (2009: 2) identifies that they often offer support in a number of ways, not just financially, but that 'first generation undergraduates often confirm the influence of parents who wanted them to benefit from opportunities they themselves did not have. Yorke & Knight (2007) discuss how the multi faceted expectations lead to courses, and HE on a wider level, being 'judged', measured and valued on a number of different levels, including league table position, with Jobbins (2002:388) stating that it is 'impossible to contemplate the Higher Education scene of the United Kingdom without league tables' and also being

¹ In this case 'pre-entry' means year 11 and year 12 from secondary schools.

² See previous work from Jameson et al (2009) CSAP Report: UK14/C/09 'Criminology in the professions: Turning Academic Benchmarks into Employability skills'.

effected by the 'employability agenda'. Yorke (2006) (cited Jameson et al 2011) however identifies that the difference between making students more 'employable' and improving graduate 'employment' is not necessarily being recognised politically, which is in itself highly problematic for the university sector.

This research is not trying to establish what employability means, or what makes a graduate more 'employable', although these are imperative debates within HE (See York 2006, Jameson et al 2011). Instead it is attempting to gain some insight into important motivators for pre-entry students in relation to their choice of courses, particularly in respect of employability and transferable skills. This is of particular relevance for academic courses such as those within the Social Sciences, which do not 'train' students for specific work as such, but seek to develop generic skills within a particular knowledge base. The knowledge gained from the research will be used to not only feed back into the development of the curriculum across our own Social Science courses, (Politics, International Relations, Social Policy, Social Science and Criminology), but we would expect the research outcomes to have relevance for many universities offering such courses.

Methods: The research developed a mixed method approach through a two stage process of data collection over 6 months. The first stage of the research focused upon gaining some insights from pre-entry students and parents on the core issues relevant to HE and the place of Social Sciences within this. This involved semi structured questionnaires with pre-entry students from Year 11, Year 12 and their parents in three regional schools. Questionnaires were also collected from pre-entry students and their parents during a university open day. The second stage of data collection involved developing these findings through the use of focus groups with a selection of pre-entry students from two of the schools.

Involvement of Schools: Schools chosen in this self selecting sample were approached following previous involvement with them. Formal letters were sent to the contacts within the schools and meetings arranged to have an introductory session on the aims of the research. These sessions were either individual meetings with the Head teacher, or the Head of 6th form or in the case of two schools a more informal but 'hands on' approach delivered to all of Year 11 and Year 12 in an assembly on the aims of the project. In these incidences a short presentation was given and the research team (including student researchers) were present. These sessions discussed the methodological approaches of the research, and the potential outcomes relevant to their school. Schools were involved in the early stages of the questionnaire development, data collection, sampling considerations and ethical issues. This allowed them to use the methodological discussion as a lesson topic and also to identify how best to engage the pre-entry students with the topic, especially Year 11, who it was argued may have limited knowledge of both the topic of employability and also the terminology within the project.

The ethics of the research are reflecting our position as researchers whose interest is in helping understand pre-entry students motivations and enabling greater understanding of the 'student voice'. In terms of informed consent, an explanation of the research was provided to parents and pre-entry students in years 11 and Year 12. Both parents and pre-entry students were free to participate and to withdraw at any

time. All participants were given an in-depth information sheet and consent form to read and agree before they participated in the research.³

Student researchers: Through the module ‘Criminology in the Professions’, level two students were given the opportunity to be part of the research team. Six criminology undergraduate students volunteered from the cohort, and were involved in the research process. The student researchers visited schools to help with data collection, and discuss some of the aims with smaller groups of pre-entry students. This involvement of students was seen to be developing alongside the ‘student as producer’ initiative (See Neary et al 2009) which has been pioneered at the University of Lincoln within Centre for Educational Research & Development. This initiative aims to re-engineer “...*the relationship between students and academics, giving students more responsibility and a greater involvement with real world situations, they will benefit from a more engaged learning experience, leading to enhanced employability and greater satisfaction with their course*” (University of Lincoln, accessed 2011). The participation of the student researchers was invaluable when working with large numbers of pre-entry students and also served to develop their research skills and competencies that could be applied to enhance their on-going learning at university.

Survey of Year 11 pre-entry students: Both quantitative and qualitative data was collected through the questionnaires to the Year 11 pupils sampled in all three schools. All questionnaires were accompanied by a student information sheet with a contact for the respondents to follow up if required. From the three schools a total of 98 completed questionnaires were collated, 31 from one school, 51 from another and 16 from the final school, there were 54% Males and 46% Females. The questionnaires focused on their perceptions and their aspirations to stay in HE. Pre-entry students were questioned on influencing factors in their choice of courses, and the role of their schools, and their parents, as a source of information. Anecdotally some discussions in a session with Year 11 students indicated that they had a lack of knowledge about employability and transferable skills, especially regarding the familiarity of such terminology.

Survey of Year 12 pre-entry students: Both quantitative and qualitative data was collected by semi structured questionnaires to the Year 12 pupils sampled in all three schools. The sample consisted of 159 completed questionnaires, 10 from one school, 59 from another and 90 from the final school, there were 48% Males and 52% Females. The questionnaires focused upon the student’s perceptions, motivations and future aspirations, while also questioning the place of Social Sciences and ‘employability’ within of Higher Education. Of importance to the project were levels of knowledge, and to what extent they felt prepared to enter into HE. The questionnaire also addressed their reflections on open days at Universities and whether they are influential in both the choice of course and the choice of university. This survey focused more on the employability value of courses and getting the pre-entry students to consider the value of transferable skills.

Survey of parents of Year 11 and Year 12 students: This semi structured questionnaire was approved by the three schools and accompanied with a parent information sheet, a covering letter and an SAE directly addressed to the university

³ Students participating in the focus groups got parental consent through the consent forms.

(to ensure confidentiality and anonymity). Unfortunately the questionnaires had a fairly poor response rate with only 22 completed and returned to the university.⁴ The questionnaire asked parents of their understanding of current issues relevant to HE and their role in the process of informing. The role of open days to them was questioned in some depth, with questions addressing the 'value for money' of degree courses and their views on the value of Social Science courses in comparison to other types of courses. The school parents were predominantly female (77%) but we can't be sure who filled this in as this was a postal questionnaire. 81% of these said their son/daughter wanted to go to university.

Survey of parents from university open day: From the Applicant open day scheduled at the University on the 12th March 2011 both quantitative and qualitative data was collected from parents/guardians on their perceptions of Higher Education. The research set up a research session with the student researchers for parents. Importantly the opportunity for parents to be involved was not limited to only those whose child was planning to study the Social Sciences but across the university, this was evidently reflected in some of the results and qualitative responses from the surveys. From the session, 30 completed questionnaires were collated and there was also some opportunity for informal discussion sessions with some parents over refreshments. The student researchers were present to liaise with parents during the research session and answer any questions. Open Day parents were predominantly positive for their son/daughter to continue into HE, 86% in comparison to school parents of whom only 55% were positive.

Survey of applicants from University open day: From the Applicant Open day at the University a research session was undertaken with the applicant students. This presented the project and some debate regarding levels of employability and the value of the Social Sciences. A total of 59 completed questionnaires, containing both quantitative and qualitative data, were collected from the pre-entry students, interested in the BA (Hons) Criminology degree at the University of Lincoln. The questionnaire addressed pre-entry student's motivations, expectations and consideration of employability skills within Social Sciences.

Focus groups with Year 11 and 12 students from two schools: As part of the second stage of data collection two schools took part in focus groups. These sessions were held on separate days at the university and in accordance with ethical guidelines, and recommendations from the ethics committee, the students were given consent forms for participation with parental consent.⁵ Both focus groups lasted 90 minutes, with one focus group consisting of ten Year 11 students, all of whom were intending to stay on into the school 6th form. The other had eight Year 12 students, all studying sociology A Level. These focus groups addressed what motivates them in their choice of course, what they expect from university, the importance of 'employability' and skills and the value of Social Sciences.

'Employability Showcase': A one day employability showcase event was organised within the School of Social Sciences in June 2011. The papers presented reflected on student learning and the place of employability and skills within Social Sciences. One

⁴ 500 questionnaires were disseminated through the three schools.

⁵ These focus groups were reliant upon the teachers to 'self select' a sample of willing participants from year 11 and year 12.

of the more reflexive papers was from two students currently involved in a project internally funded under the Fund for Educational development: 'Student as Producer' initiative. The objective of this one day event was to promote some debate with other academics across disciplines, students and also university careers professionals, about the role of 'employability' within both Social Sciences and the university more generally.

Findings:

Findings will be discussed under the four aims of the research:

- 1) Awareness of the place of Social Sciences in HE and pre-entry student plans for future studying.**
- 2) A matching of expectations of HE from parents and pre-entry students.**
- 3) A greater understanding of what motivates pre-entry students to engage with employability, and a harnessing what is considered important within a degree.**
- 4) A greater consideration of whether employability and transferable skills are important measures for universities/degrees choice.**

- 1) Awareness of the place of Social Sciences in HE and pre-entry student plans for plans for future studying:**

Post school plans and motivations:

This section looks at what the pre-entry students wanted to do after 6th form, how their plans were informed and how they perceived 'Social Science' degrees. Findings indicate that the majority of pre-entry students were staying on, 89% of Year 11 were intending to stay on into 6th Form with 54% staying on to allow them to get to university and 14% wanted to stay on because 'they did not know what else to do'. 68% believed that staying on would help them to become more employable. Significantly more girls than boys did not know what they wanted to do ($p=0.009$), and girls reported themselves to be less aware of what the term transferable skills covered ($p=0.048$). They also were more likely to say that staying on would give them more options. More girls than boys wanted more formal talks in 6th form about HE, and more visits from employers and universities.

64% of the Year 12 sample wanted to go to university, 11% wanted to go straight into employment, and 32% were undecided regarding education. The most prevalent influence stated as to whether they would go on to HE was whether they would enjoy the course (84%) and whether they could cope with the financial commitments (76%). There was a significant difference between the numbers of boys going to university in comparison to girls. For Year 12 students, significantly more girls wanted to go to university than boys ($p=0.021$); More boys than girls were motivated to go to university because they did not know what else to do ($p=0.011$), but the overall number was small (26 students out of 159). The ability to be able to play sports and join clubs at university was more important for boys ($p=0.018$); and the ability to meet new friends was more important to girls ($p=0.032$). Girls were also more likely to expect the teaching at university to be similar to teaching at school ($p=0.036$) and

were also more likely to expect voluntary opportunities at university ($p=0.034$). This suggests that pre-entry students have a number of varied reasons as to why they may want to go to university related to both long and short term goals.

Informing post school plans:

In terms of whether pre-entry students felt prepared and informed of their options and choices, results indicated that just under half of (48%) of Year 12 claimed they were 'very' or 'fairly well' informed, with 64% of Year 11 claiming they were 'very' or 'fairly well' informed about their future after school. In as much as the overall perception was positive in respect of levels of preparation and being informed, this was not universal with one Year 11 claiming that there was:

“not enough information given”...and that there should be “... more course content maybe student visits” (Year 11)

This qualitative reflection was interesting considering 'schools liaison' with the schools involved in the research. The School of Social Sciences, as part of schools liaison activity, organises a number of school visits and 'taster days' so it was broadly reassuring to note that these are valued as having some impact to levels of knowledge and 'being prepared'.

Both sets of parents predominantly offered help to their children in choosing courses and felt well or fairly well qualified to do so (96% School parents/ 87% Open day parents). But both groups did not feel really knowledgeable about the actual application process, (this we took to mean applying for loans, how places were offered etc). Data indicated that involving their parents was important to Year 11 students for example, with 81% stating they involved their parents in their decisions about HE choices and options.

In terms of where they get their information from, just over half of parents (55%), obtained their knowledge from the school with 95% of Year 11 and 80% of Year 12 students using the school as a source of knowledge and information. Findings showed that the most important sources of information for parents were School, Friends/family, and the 'Internet', but 'the media' more generally was not as important. Teachers were the main source of information in schools, and 79% of open day parents thought that knowledge from teachers was informative. Many parents qualitatively expressed perceptions that the school does well at informing them and their sons and daughters.

“Interviews with heads of year, tutors give information about UCAS forms, references etc during tutor times... talks about financing etc..” (Parent)

Regarding open days, data indicated that 30% of Year 12 students had attended open days, but most of the school parents had not attended an open day. 85% of those students who had attended an open day suggested that these were useful in helping them to make decisions. The students who actually attended the open day rated the 'open day experience' as the most important thing that would influence their choice of course, in comparison to the university location and characteristics about the course such as the nature of the assessment profile, contact hours and the availability of 'work experience'.

Social Sciences – participant perceptions:

Overall therefore, there were a number of important influences on pre-entry students, but information from schools, and teachers seemed to be particularly crucial for both parents and the pre-entry students.

Perceptions from parents, and pre-entry students, on the value of Social Science subjects was measured in a number of ways. On one particular measure, Social Sciences were compared to four other degree subjects⁶ in respect of how useful they will be in the job market, and how they were rated in terms of ‘value for money’.

Whilst the open day students who had a particular interest in the Social Sciences were very positive rating the Social Sciences (78%) second only to medicine at (83%) in terms of its usefulness in the job market, the Year 12 students were much more negative. Here they rated the Social Sciences third (43%), after Medicine (79%) and Engineering (53%), with Media/marketing fourth (39%) and Architecture last (33%).

However, only 22% of the Year 12 students disagreed with the statement that ‘A Social Science degree represents as much value for money as a more traditional science degree’, with 78% either agreeing with this statement or being undecided.

There were generally positive comments from parents about Social Sciences, however one of the comments highlighted some dissonance between a parent and their daughter regarding her choice of course and reasons for wanting to go do university and study the Social Sciences:

“HE is only of value, in terms of time and cost if it is to further a career eg medicine, law, engineering etc. My daughter has no interest in pursuing anything like this and would only go to university to meet people. She would like to work and I have stressed there are other more affordable ways for her to earn a degree at anytime of her life” (Parent).

Summary:

This research suggests that there are a variety of views about what is important relating to ideas and motivations for going to university, and that these relate to both long and short term goals. Important influences on pre-entry students are perhaps unsurprisingly parents, family and friends, but teachers and schools play a big role too, which means that it is crucial that they are appropriately informed about courses and universities. Regarding perceptions of these groups about Social Science courses, it appears that views are quite positive about the Social Sciences with only a small minority of individuals suggesting that the natural sciences are more ‘valuable’.

2) A matching of expectations of HE from parents and pre-entry students:

Considering the concerns about HE on a number of levels this research wanted to find out what motivates the pre-entry students to come and study at university, and

⁶ These were Medicine; Architecture; Media/marketing and Engineering.

whether this matched the motivations of parents. There are a number of popular preconceptions as to why students might decide to study a higher degree, including not knowing what else to do or because their friends were going to university. The data from both student groups in this research was merged and showed the following rankings with the percentages representing those who ranked this as important:

1. I want to experience 'university life' (69%)
2. The job I want needs a degree (68%)
3. Graduates earn more money (67%)
4. I enjoy studying (52%)
5. There are no jobs (28%)
6. My friends are all going to university (21%)
7. My family all went to university (19%)
8. I don't know what else to do (18%)

For the open day students we asked what were the most important things that would influence their choice of course, with 92% stating the open day experience; 90% University location; 85% that the assessment suits them; 81% That there are lots of contact hours. Supportive data came from the focus groups in highlighting the key influences and motivating factors. The focus group with Year 12 tended not to be motivated by career opportunities, but it was more focused around interest in the course for example:

“It is important to have a career and that should lead on from what has been studied. You have to be interested to enjoy the job. It is important that you are interested in the subject, and the course studied, and the career should be similar...”(Year 12 focus group comment)

This also was the case in the quantitative data where 'enjoyment of the course' was seen to be the most important motivation in the choice of going on to HE.

The focus group from Year 11 also highlighted the importance of employability and the job prospects in deciding on a university course. When asked 'why they wanted to go to University' the overriding response was to get a 'good' job one that is related to their degree for example:

“ I am hoping 6th form will help provide a good basis in order to go to university and able to get a good job” (Year 11 focus group comment)

For parents relating to their choice of university for both groups, employment after graduation (93% of open day parents and 85% of school parents) and reputation of the university (89% of open day parents and 90% school parents) were the two most important themes. However, whilst employability issues were clearly imperative, of equal or greater importance was that their son or daughter would 'grow as a person'. Although parents were concerned about the current financial situation they were overwhelmingly positive about their son/ daughter staying on in HE. The following comments were typical of parental aspirations as to why they wanted this for their children:

“Because he enjoys learning. University is a great time in ones life and it should give him a wider range of opportunities for employment and fulfilment later”

While another stated that it would enable their child:

“To engage full potential... not an opportunity to be missed.”

Unsurprisingly there were concerns about the financial commitment of university education, from both parent and student groups, although most of the students in the Year 11 focus group were not familiar with the new fee structure and the implications of this for their future study.

Summary:

Both parents and pre-entry students have multi-dimensional views on why university is of value to them or their children, and although concerns were expressed about the costs, this did not seem to stop the participants considering a university education. It appears that for students, motivations are for positive reasons of personal growth, and empowerment, for example that it will help them get the job that they want, or that they want to experience ‘university life’, rather than pessimistic reasons, for instance that there are ‘no jobs’ or that they don’t know what else to do.

3) What motivates pre-entry students to engage with employability, and what is considered important within a degree.

Literature reflects on the challenges universities have had to face regarding expectations, especially graduate employability. This relationship has been discussed by a number of academics (see Knight and Yorke (2003); Lambert et al (2007); Mason et al (2009) and Bridgestock (2009). The role of courses in offering the right amount of skills and competencies is well debated, and one that has noted disagreement in terms of what should be provided (See Gedye, et al (2004); Lucas et al (2004); Fitzmaurice, M. (2010); Moreau & Leathwood (2006); Yorke & Knight (2007). Indeed according to Bennett et al (1999:74) core skills can have several synonyms, including personal, transferable, key, generic, common, and work or employment related skills. In addition to this there is confusion that such skills might mean different things to different groups, such as parents and pre-entry students. The research methodology, which included some discussion sessions with both the pre-entry and school students, helped to address some of these issues. However, although the school parents had the contact details for the researchers and could have contacted them if required, they completed postal questionnaires without prompts which might have had an affect in their interpretation of this terminology.

When addressing the importance of employability within HE, respondents were asked about their expectations. Both open day and Year 12 students rated employability skills highly (97% and 86% respectively) while also noting that they would expect a degree to ‘improve career opportunities’ (open day 97% and Year 12 87%). Subject understanding came behind the employability choices, as did ‘growing as a person’ and ‘self confidence’, although these were still seen as significantly important to the majority of the pre-entry students. In comparison to the students, parents rated ‘growing as a person’ and ‘self confidence’ more highly than ‘employability skills’

and subject understanding, although these again were significantly important to both parent groups.

Expectations about the curriculum:

Almost all of the parents and pre-entry students thought that some sort of 'employability' teaching should be delivered in the curriculum, although the majority thought that it could also be addressed outside of the taught curriculum. The majority of students also said that they would also value extra opportunities to undertake volunteering and work experience outside of the curriculum. Some of the qualitative comments from applicant students showed that they expected to take part in activities that would benefit employability, such as work experience, practical opportunities relating to the subject and meeting alumni as can be seen in this comment suggesting that they would like:

"The ability to speak to people who are using the skills they have developed in their working life."(Applicant student)

Applicant students were very much aware of the possible employment options or career paths they might be able to follow as can be seen by the following comments about where a degree in the Social Sciences could lead a student:

"Social services/government services prison/ correctional institutions. Anything that involves communicating with individuals on a daily basis." (Applicant student)

Regarding possible work destination, some of the more common responses from parents were the better known occupations/ careers, such as Police, Social work, Prisons, Teaching, Research and Youth work. But there was some evidence of an awareness of the wide range of options available to students following graduation:

"Government, policy thinking, planning.." (open day parent)

Some parents were able to see even more generic routes of employment resulting from Social Sciences:

"Virtually all jobs with the possible exception of specific skill work- medicine/ science"(open day parent)

While responses indicated below show the level of understanding of the value, or role of, Social Sciences with regards to possible employability option. According to one parent graduates could go into:

"Anything they apply themselves to" (open day parent),

and for another graduates would benefit from:

" A wide range of jobs, probably very few jobs are excluded" (open day parent)

Parents also related employment opportunities to qualities that would benefit them in the long term such as quality of life, and the expansion of choices. The following comments are representative of this, thus one parent suggested that that graduates have:

“Fantastic opportunities now available to them, and to embark on a course that hopefully will provide quality of future living and choices”(open day parent).

And another stated that the university experience would give them:

“Better jobs prospects, meeting new people, being away from home and learning to grow up in an adult environment” (open day parent)

There were however some concerns from parents and pre-entry students alike. These were varied with a number of issues such as fees, the availability of courses, ‘return on investment’, ‘value for money’ and employability all highlighted in the responses.

On the issue of fees, courses and competition for courses one parent was very clear in their concerns:

“Although I want my daughter to attend university I am concerned about the huge increase in fees brought about by this Coalition government. In addition, due to tremendous increase in student numbers over recent years I am concerned about her job prospects when she leaves university. I am also concerned about the amount of input and quality of input that she will receive whilst at university”(open day parent)

Whilst another worried about the long term effect of the increase in fees resulting in the:

“...Student loan to be paid back with interest throughout their working lives” (open day parent).

Employability after graduating:

Considering what is seen by both parents and pre-entry students as gaining the ‘appropriate skills’, is problematic. Lucas et al (2004) Moreau and Leathwood (2006) and Gedye et al (2004) identify the shifts occurring have led to generic skills becoming embedded in the HE curricula to improve employability (Robley et al 2005:321). More and more, universities are seen to be responsible for preparing graduates for employment; to equip them with the skills and competencies to enable this however, literature has highlighted the difficulty in defining concisely and comprehensively the term ‘employability’ (Lees 2002 cited Gedye et al 2004: 381)

Given that all courses are measured in league tables by the employability of their students (using the Destination of Leavers in Higher Education survey), it was useful to ascertain what the participants thought about how important they saw employability after university. Results indicated similar findings from both parents and pre-entry students, with the majority seeing employability after graduation as an important issue, with the choice of course as some measure of ‘value for money’ and

university 'reputation'. The focus groups, however indicated the complexity of these issues in relation to their meaning. On asking the Year 11 students how they would find out about these things, the students agreed with a suggestion made by one of the group members:

"I would google a university- ask the best course for what ever courses..."

While other students commented on what 'reputation' means, and the importance of it, which for them related specifically to the teaching that they would experience:

"The good points , good teachers, that they teach well, if they do not they may not care, its important..."

Although the students agreed that reputation was important they were also quite critical of a simplistic conception of 'reputation', as can be seen by this comment which suggests that individual experience of a university might be better than the 'reputation' suggests:

"It is important if the university has got a better reputation than not. Once you get there you might find the university itself is better..."

Summary:

Pre-entry students were perhaps a little more instrumental about the value of employability in their degree, in comparison to more abstract ideas such as 'growing as a person', which were more valued by the parents. However these issues were important for both students and parents. Student comments in the focus groups showed a particular definition of a universities 'reputation', predominantly seeing this in relation to the teaching and experiences they would undergo, rather than relating this to other issues such as 'research excellence'.

4) Are employability and transferable skills are important measures for universities/degrees choice?

Employability and transferable skills:

Literature has reflected on the various skills offered on courses (see Lucas et al 2004). As we have seen, both the student participants and parents identified that employability is an important consideration in their choice of course. It was therefore useful to find out how they perceived the Social Sciences, in comparison to other degree areas, in terms of providing specific transferable skills. In comparing the transferable skills of Social Sciences, with Science and Business, open day parents rated Social Science very highly placing it top in group work; evaluative skills; critical thinking; oral and written communication skills; ability to use evidence; and useable employability skills. Science failed to come top any of the categories with business coming top in customer awareness only, with Social Science second. School parents however were much less positive about Social Sciences, which came top in none, although they were second in all but useable employability skills and critical thinking where the discipline was placed last. This group put business top in group

work; customer awareness; oral and written communication skills; useable employability skills and science top in evaluative skills; critical thinking; ability to use evidence.

For students (Year 12), Social Sciences were rated top in evaluative skills, and last in critical thinking and usable employability skills. Sciences were rated top in critical thinking and using evidence. Business was rated top in group work; customer awareness; oral and written communication skills; useable employability skills.

The main trend here is that the open day parents, who had a specific interest in the Social Sciences, were significantly more positive about the types of transferable skills their son or daughter would gain from such a degree, although we were unable to ascertain what had informed this view. An average of all of the skills categories showed that the open day parents rated the Social Sciences with an average of 80% compared with Business at 57% and Science at 46%. This compared with the School parents who rated Business at 76%, Social Science at 62% and Science at 59%, and the Year 12 students who rated Business at 62%, Social Sciences at 48% and Science at 46%.

What is important about university?

There is arguably significant value in understanding the expectations from pre-entry students and parents. Such expectations might influence their choice of course, how they view subjects, and also the considerations of value for money and implications rising from the new fee structure. The expectations of students are important, however when questioned on the current issues with HE the subject of 'return on investment' was not seen to be very important for parents or Year 11 pre-entry students with only 33% of parents and 9% of Year 11 arguing it is one of their current concerns. This is in contrast to Year 12 students with 70% stating 'return on investment' was important to them. The focus group data produced some interesting reflections on the issue of cost of courses and the legitimacy of this. When questioned on whether all courses should be the same price, the Year 12 focus groups indicated some interesting points on the 'value for money' concept. Some felt that a course should give something back to society, and if it does then it should be free as can be seen by this comment:

About value for money... if the subject helps the community it should be paid for by the government, such as Law or Politics. With Medicine you are helping other people...this should be related to the costs.

On the reputation of universities focus group data indicated an awareness of a number of issues including university reputation, the difficulties for the less well off and the problems of devaluing a course both through reputation and fee level:

It is expensive and this is something to think about but I still want to go. It is a problem for poorer people... I would do anything to do it because it is expensive to go and get a degree, but worth the payment. It should all be the same price it might devalue some courses if they are cheaper.

Students were clearly aware of the issues of image, and indeed the perceived quality of teaching offered at a university. One reflected:

Cheaper courses might be seen as not as good, again this goes back to reputation. I will be going to university... even with the fees going up; hopefully it will work itself out.

This concept of reputation and quality was also seen as important to the parents in the questionnaires. Data showed that 90% of parents in saw reputation as an important issue to the choice of course.

Summary: Employability and transferable skills are clearly seen as important by the participants, although as we have seen in the other sections of this report, employability is just one of a number of issues important to pre-entry students and parents. In comparison to Science and Business, the Social Sciences come out relatively positively in respect of the perceptions of the transferable skills participants thought they would offer. In terms of ‘value for money’ and fees it is interesting to note that although the general views of the focus groups were that all courses should cost the same, there was some feeling that courses that had a function for ‘social good’ should be free.

Conclusions

Employability is clearly an important issue for both parents and pre-entry students, but it is only one of a number of pertinent concerns which included the need to enjoy the course, meet new friends, and generally experience university life with all the opportunities that this brings with it. Both students and parents had concerns about the financial commitment, but students were still determined to go to university because of the benefits in terms of earnings and career choice generally. Parents were also particularly keen for their son or daughter to ‘experience university life’ because they thought that this would allow them to ‘grow as a person’ and increase their self confidence.

Both parents and pre-entry students gained much of their information about university courses from their schools, and specifically their teachers. This suggests that for universities, school liaison is very important for recruitment because teachers are seen to be a trusted source of information. For those who had attended an open day at a university, their experience of this was also seen as important in their choice of university.

In terms of providing ‘value for money’, ‘employability’ and transferable skills, Social Science courses came out relatively well in comparison to a number of other subject areas. Whilst the ‘reputation’ of the university or course was seen to be important for all of the participants, the focus groups suggested that students had a critical understanding of the concept of ‘reputation’. When questioned in detail about this issue, students suggested that the ‘public reputation’ of a university may not actually represent the student experience of the teaching quality, which for students was a crucial issue.

Although it has to be said that our sample does not necessarily represent the views of the general population in these issues, there are a number of useful themes that may have some impact on institutional practice.

Outcomes and impact:

Research Poster Presentation: The findings of this research, alongside others from the School of Social Sciences at Lincoln were presented at a 'Research in the Social Sciences' poster presentation day held in June 2011, which was attended by staff from other disciplines in the university. A poster was presented which showed key findings and is now on display in the school.

Employability Showcase: The objective of this 'showcase' held in June 2011 was to present findings from this project and some of the other research conducted on employability and student expectations; a project looking at 'the student as producer' (see Neary 2009 et al); and some preliminary findings from a long term project about student experience of university courses. Delegates included, university careers professionals, third year students, academic and executive staff from the university of Lincoln and a speaker from another university.

Subject talks at Open Days: The findings of this research are to be included as part of the subject talks for Criminology given at Open Days. The poster produced as part of this research, and others relating to employability, will further displayed at the stand at the Open days for public viewing.

Website links: Links to the main findings will be placed on the websites at the University of Lincoln, which are publically available.

Resource Development:

Employability web page to be developed for the School of Social Science at the University. These pages will report on the findings from this study but also on other research that has been completed within the School (See Jameson 2009). Having this focus would enable us to update with podcasts from current undergraduates on their perceptions about the place of employability, but also show pictures and Mahara sites for both internal and external viewing.

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Contact Details: Katie Strudwick Senior Lecturer in Criminology, kstrudwick@lincoln.ac.uk University of Lincoln, School of Social Sciences, Brayford Pool, Lincoln, LN6 7TS 01522 886285

Jill Jameson Senior Lecturer in Criminology, jjameson@lincoln.ac.uk University of Lincoln, School of Social Sciences, Brayford Pool, Lincoln, LN6 7TS 01522 886230

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