

Contents

Preface	vi
List of Abbreviations	x
1 Behind the Headlines – Debates about Higher Education	1
2 Expectations and Choices	16
3 Leaving Home	25
4 Socialising	41
5 Finance	57
6 Accommodation	79
7 Studying at University	99
8 Health, Safety and Security	118
9 Specific Circumstances	134
10 Students' Experiences	156
11 Checklists	174
Appendix: Useful Websites and Telephone Numbers	181
Notes	188
Index	191

1 Behind the Headlines – Debates about Higher Education

This chapter will look at some of the key issues in higher education and what they mean for you. Specifically it will:

- give an overview of current government thinking and objectives
- comment on student life in the twenty-first century
- assess the benefits of going to university
- provide information on a number of relevant issues such as graduate destinations, graduate salaries and university drop-out rates

► A time of change

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the debates surrounding higher education so that you can come to your own conclusions and take the course of action that is best for you. In recent years, student life has undergone many changes, and more are on the horizon. The maintenance grant system has been phased out and replaced by repayable student loans with financial support for low-income applicants; students now pay tuition fees, and variable top-up fees (an increase in fees up to a maximum of £3000, depending on the course), commence in 2006. In addition, the Government's policy of widening participation has sought to raise the percentage of young people embarking upon higher education courses to 50 per cent.

► Government reforms

This section looks at Government reforms in terms of student finance. It explains the rationale behind the changes and points out what this will mean to you, especially in terms of the costs associated with going to university.

Why the Government introduced changes

Prior to its election in 1997, and against a backdrop of widespread complaints from universities about long-standing underinvestment and funding problems, Labour declared a commitment to reforming student finance and support, and to widening access to higher education. It argued that students should contribute towards higher education costs because later on they would reap the benefits in terms of career opportunities and financial rewards. It pledged to put a loan system in place and offer graduates the opportunity to borrow money to finance their living costs whilst at university and pay the loan back over a long period of time once their earnings had reached a sufficient level. It also planned extra support for low-income students, to enable all candidates reaching the required standard, regardless of class or background, to go on to higher education.

Tuition fees – the Government’s rationale

As a result of the new Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998, students starting higher education degrees were required to contribute to tuition fees of up to £1000 per year, although those qualifying as lower income households had part or all of this sum paid. (This figure then rose with inflation each year.) There then followed a period of debate about whether or not to raise the tuition fee for certain courses, which culminated in the decision to introduce variable top-up fees of up to £3000 a year from 2006. The Government’s argument for the introduction of tuition fees in 1998 and variable top-up fees in 2006 was that the money generated, together with government funding, would counter recent underinvestment and bring UK spending on higher education in line with other countries, whereas previously the UK had lagged behind. This was confirmed in the DfES (Department for Education and Skills) report *Higher Education Funding – International Comparisons*, which noted that in 2000 UK spending per student in tertiary education, at \$9657, was ‘below the OECD¹ mean average and under half of what the US spent (\$20,358)’.² In addition to the extra income generated from top-up fees, the Government pledged to increase spending from £7.5 billion a year to just under £10 billion a year between 2002/3 and 2005/6. Defending his reforms, the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, confirmed that the problems brought on by previous underfunding needed to be redressed, particularly in view of the anticipated expansion in student numbers by 2010:

Why is it necessary to do this? It is necessary because there’s been a 36 per cent fall in funding per student in the 8 years prior to us coming to office. It is necessary because university places are being expanded. We

are now at 43 per cent of under 30's in university, but that is projected to rise. There's a misunderstanding here sometimes. People say we have set some sort of arbitrary target. The reason we have an aim of 50 per cent is that it is actually projected that it will rise to 50 per cent by 2010 in line with both rising school standards and employer demands, and it is necessary to make these changes also because even with this expansion we are still getting far too low participation rates from the poorest families.³

Controversy surrounding tuition fees

However, the reforms were controversial, particularly the issue of variable top-up fees, which has given rise to several concerns. One view is that top-up fees may deter poorer students despite student support packages for those on the lowest incomes.⁴ It is felt that the situation may be particularly difficult for those from low-income households who are nevertheless just above the level required to qualify for extra support. Moreover, not all parents who are considered by the authorities to be capable of helping their children with their university expenses, actually do so. As a result, certain individuals may be burdened with a higher level of debt than those from similar backgrounds whose parents elect to make a financial contribution. Middle-income students who do not receive a grant and yet who are not largely funded by their parents are likely to graduate with a larger student loan debt than those who either receive the grant or who are given money by their parents.

Also, it is argued that students who need to take on paid work throughout their undergraduate years, and who are therefore not able to devote time to voluntary work or other interests that enhance their CVs (curriculum vitae), are then at a disadvantage after they graduate when the time comes to seek a job. Under the present system, the level of debt that an individual has on graduation is partially determined by the financial circumstances of his or her family when the higher education course commenced, and this is seen by some as a serious flaw in the current arrangements. There are also fears that the majority of universities will charge the top rate of £3000 in order to make ends meet, so the fees will not actually be as 'variable' as was anticipated.⁵

What will happen in the future?

There are concerns that the £3000 ceiling will need to be raised still further because, despite top-up fees, there remains a considerable shortfall. A recent report by Oxford University confirms that this sum is not considered adequate:

4 The Student Life Handbook

Recurrent costs exceed revenues because nearly all of the University's core activities lose money. Educating the average undergraduate has been estimated to cost £18,600 per annum as against a total income of £9,500 . . . The introduction of variable fees for home/EU undergraduates will make only a small dent in the loss per student.⁶

Oxford's plans to 'gradually decrease undergraduate numbers over a five-year period'⁷ whilst simultaneously to 'implement a vigorous programme of international recruitment'⁸ have led to vociferous accusations in the press that home students, who pay considerably lower fees than overseas students, will be disadvantaged as universities are forced to seek ways of generating more income. The *Guardian*, for example, reported that Oxford 'proposed slashing the number of places for British undergraduates in favour of those from abroad as part of a package of radical measures to maintain its standing in the international "super league" of universities',⁹ whilst the *Daily Mail* stated that 'the proposals faced growing backlash . . . from academics, politicians and the National Union of Students, who said foreign undergraduates should not simply be regarded as "pound signs"'.¹⁰

The introduction of variable fees has opened up a market in higher education: each institution will need to determine what it is able to charge for individual courses whilst still being able to attract students in sufficient numbers for its courses to be viable. Students, as consumers, are likely to 'shop around' for the best deals and this will affect what is on offer. Universities will have difficult choices to make: some may close or downsize courses, either because student interest is not sufficient, or because they involve equipment and resources that render the course cost inefficient. This explanation accounts for some of the recent closures of science courses, as noted in the press, such as the decision by Exeter not to continue to offer chemistry and the science cuts implemented by Keele and Newcastle.¹¹

Whereas, at present, students who pay all or part of their tuition fees must make an up-front payment, from 2006 students will be able to increase their loan to take tuition fees into account, which means that students who cannot find the capital at the outset will no longer find this an obstacle to pursuing a higher education course. The details of how to apply for a loan, the amount of money that can be borrowed, the student support available, repayment arrangements and so on are covered in detail in Chapter 5.

Student debt

As students are responsible for paying their tuition fees and also for supporting themselves throughout their time at university, usually by taking out a repayable loan, most now graduate with considerable debts. However,

recent research indicates that whilst students are naturally concerned about this, they are not overwhelmed by it. Nicholas Porter, Chief Executive Officer of UNITE, the UK's largest provider of student accommodation services, commenting on a Student Experience Report involving over 1000 students, (commissioned by UNITE and carried out by MORI), states:

This generation of students is perhaps the first to accept and feel at ease with the fact that they will need to borrow to study and possibly work during term time to fund basic essentials. Interestingly, while a significant proportion of students are worried about debt, they are also confident of a graduate earnings premium which will pay off their debts following graduation.¹²

The report established that students anticipate graduating with debts of around £9744. It found that 49 per cent of students are not worried about their debts whilst studying because they are confident that they will pay them off when they start working. Although 31 per cent are 'seriously worried' about their debts, this figure represents a drop of 9 per cent from the number of students expressing this view in a comparable earlier survey, undertaken a year before.

As student loans are a relatively new phenomenon in the UK, the long-term effects are not known. It is not yet possible to identify and estimate the exact nature of any secondary effects of student debt: for example, whether it will influence the average number of years taken for graduates to embark upon home ownership. The potential future problems have not escaped the NUS (National Union of Students), and their president, Kat Fletcher, has criticised the Government for following the line that being in debt is inevitable and acceptable. She observes:

This comes from ministers and politicians who enjoyed full grants and benefits and are reaping the debt-free rewards by owning their own house(s) and providing for their own children and family. Such a life will be out of the question for the next generation of graduates, who will face the burden of years of debt repayments reaching tens of thousands of pounds.¹³

It is also too early to say whether or not there will be a significant increase in the numbers of students who will seek ways of cutting costs or supplementing their income, such as by living at home throughout their undergraduate years or by opting for distance learning or sandwich courses. Certainly, the number of students under the age of 24 enrolling with the Open University

has tripled since 1998 and now represents one in ten undergraduates, which is an indication that some individuals have decided to explore alternatives to 'conventional' university courses. It is likely that changing market conditions will produce new trends, but it will take some time before the nature of these becomes apparent.

► **Foundation degrees**

As part of the drive to tailor higher education content to the requirements of the workplace, foundation degrees were introduced in 2001. They focus on work-based learning and are designed in conjunction with employers to ensure that students acquire the skills and experience necessary to contribute immediately within a workplace environment. There are no specified entry requirements as the candidate's employment experience is taken into account. A full-time course takes two years, and a part-time course takes approximately three to four years, after which the individual may go on to take a full honours degree with a further 12 to 15 months' full-time study, or the part-time equivalent. For students who want to acquire practical experience and training that is immediately relevant in the workplace, foundation degrees may be a good choice. (See Conor's experience in Chapter 10).

Widening participation – research and suggestions

The Government has expressed a strong commitment to widening participation in higher education, noting in its White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education*, that disadvantaged groups are under-represented in higher education, and advocating fair access because 'education is the best and most reliable route out of poverty and disadvantage'.¹⁴ With this in mind the Aimhigher initiative was launched to raise aspirations amongst disadvantaged groups and to forge better links between schools, colleges and universities through outreach programmes, including summer schools. The Paper also pledged more support for students from low-income households, more guidance for universities to ensure fair and open admissions policies, better benchmark data for institutions to enable self-monitoring of progress in widening participation initiatives and a reform of the access premium. Data released by HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency) showed that '13.3 per cent of young entrants to full-time degree courses came from low participation neighbourhoods in 2002/03' and '28.4 per cent' in the same year 'came from the lowest four [of seven] socio-economic groups'.¹⁵

Following publication of the White Paper, the Government instigated several specialist reports to analyse the specific problems and make recom-

mendations. These included the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, which remarked that 'access should depend on academic ability', but that 'the priority for widening participation must be action in schools', as 'considerable effort is required to raise the aspiration and achievement of pupils from poorer backgrounds. It is only by doing this that the proportion of those from the lower socio-economic groups entering higher education is likely to increase.'¹⁶

The Government proposals with regards to the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) were detailed in *Widening Participation in Higher Education*.¹⁷ This noted that one in four working-class students with eight good GCSE passes did not undertake higher education, and advocated that universities should do more to encourage applications from sections of the community currently under-represented in higher education. The document outlined what could be done to improve the current situation. Subsequently, a steering group, chaired by Professor Steven Schwartz, was set up to identify good practice in admissions.¹⁸ The final report noted that admissions processes were 'generally fair' but that there was 'room for improvement'. Although the steering group declared that it did 'not want to bias admissions in favour of applicants from certain backgrounds or schools', it urged institutions to think more laterally when assessing candidates for admission:

It is not the task of higher education admissions to compensate for educational or social disadvantage. But identifying latent talent and potential, which may not fully be demonstrated by examination results, is a legitimate aim for universities and colleges to seek to recruit the best possible students regardless of backgrounds.¹⁹

Controversy surrounding widening participation policies

The widening participation initiative has proved controversial and has provoked intense media coverage and debate. On the one hand, it is seen as making higher education more accessible to disadvantaged groups but, on the other hand, it is perceived as social engineering that discriminates against certain candidates, such as those from public schools or selective grammar schools. The rationale behind this latter accusation is based on two main observations. The first is that universities opting to charge £3000 tuition fees must prove to OFFA that they are taking steps to widen access in order to receive the Access Agreement (and related finance) that they require to proceed. However, it should be noted that the requirements relate to encouraging applications rather than directing admissions policy, and that the latter remains a matter for each individual institution.

The second is that some universities have announced that they will not necessarily make offers on the basis of examination grades, and this has been interpreted as discriminating against applicants with good results from independent or grammar schools. There has been abundant press coverage on this: 'Bristol history department has been praised by the higher education minister, Margaret Hodge, for accepting young people with low A-level results whom it considers to have the potential to do well.'²⁰ 'Edinburgh University said academic qualifications were not the only way of judging how students would perform at degree level. . . . Admissions tutors will be expected to look at the "context" in which candidates achieved their A-level and Scottish Highers grades, the university said.'²¹ Along similar lines, some universities have partnership schemes with local schools. Newcastle University has been involved in such a scheme since 2000. Specific students are targeted because of financial or family circumstances and a proportion of them are then offered places at the university despite having lower A-level grades than some other applicants. Newcastle's scheme started with 40 students, rising to 340 students in 2002. Data indicate that 'students accepted with lower A-level offers from local schools are performing as well as their better-qualified peers', with 4.2 per cent failing or resitting their exams at the end of the first year compared to an average of 8.5 per cent for the university as a whole.²² The reasoning behind these and other comparable admissions decisions relates to the findings of a study by the Higher Education Policy Institute, which concluded that:

. . . generally A-levels are a reasonable pointer. But A-levels do not tell the whole story. For example, it is now well established that pupils from independent schools do less well in university than pupils from state schools with similar A-level grades, as is shown [refers to a specific chart in the report]. This is not an attack on A-levels. A-levels remain an extremely effective way of identifying academic potential, and we would be foolish to undermine them in any way. But it is clear too that universities need to use a certain amount of discretion in making their judgements.²³

It is not just the selection criteria that have come under scrutiny, but also the figure of 50 per cent of students going on to higher education which has sparked controversy. Whereas some welcome a larger proportion of students continuing their education after the sixth form or college, others believe that the figure is too high; that universities will lower standards in order to fill places and that the higher education route may not be appropriate for this number of individuals.

Earlier in this chapter I quoted from a Prime Minister's Press Conference in

which Tony Blair spoke of the 50 per cent figure as emerging naturally as a result of 'rising school standards and employer demands'.²⁴ The Government also answers its critics by pointing to international comparisons which indicate that the UK higher education participation rate is below the average of the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries. A DfES document cites the average participation rate as being 47 per cent and the UK rate as being 45 per cent. It notes that several countries have considerably higher participation rates than the UK, such as New Zealand (76 per cent), Finland (72 per cent), Poland (67 per cent) Australia (65 per cent), Iceland (61 per cent), and the Netherlands (54 per cent).²⁵

Drop-out rates

However, opponents of a 50 per cent participation rate cite lowering standards and a rise in university drop-out rates as consequences of encouraging greater numbers to go on to higher education. Sue Fishburn, the Headmistress of Leeds Girls' High School, whilst supportive of a partnership scheme at Leeds University, is quoted in the press as having concerns about the trend: 'The problem the universities have is trying to level the playing field. They shouldn't be doing remedial teaching. This Government is trying to put right failures at secondary school level by putting it in the universities' hands.' (The newspaper notes that Ms Fishburn pointed out that only about half of children were getting the minimum qualifications of five A to C grades at GCSE.) She goes on to comment: 'Where on earth are they coming from saying 50 per cent can get a degree?'²⁶ Along similar lines, Patricia O'Brien, the Head of Business at IT at Edinburgh's Telford College, is quoted as follows: 'Students who would have gone to colleges are increasingly being accepted at new universities but are then dropping out. They are being lured on to courses not appropriate for them.'²⁷ Bahram Bekhradnia, director of the Higher Education Policy Institute, states: 'We have to accept that the government policy on widening access, if it means admitting more students with less traditional qualifications, will inevitably lead to higher drop-out rates.'²⁸

In September 2004, HESA published its performance indicators for 2002/03, which projected a 14.1 per cent drop-out rate for higher education students.²⁹ Some newspapers published 'drop-out league tables' which indicated that certain institutions had non-completion rates in excess of 25 per cent.³⁰ There was additional comment that some universities with poor completion rates were changing their assessment criteria in a bid to reduce drop-out rates:

The University of Middlesex has become the first institution to abolish exams for its first-year students. . . . A *Guardian* table rates Middlesex's

drop-out rate at 25 per cent and this high figure has led to some speculation that the abolishment of exams is a means to reduce it. But this has been vehemently denied by the university, which has stressed that it considers coursework the best way to 'facilitate learning'.³¹

The DfES's response to criticism is to state that the UK has 'one of the lowest university drop-out rates in the OECD so our universities are generally good at finding the right students for the right courses'.³²

Clearly, a decrease in drop-outs would benefit both universities and students, and arguably the way forward is for all potential students to have a clearer idea of what to expect prior to commencing higher education. It is perhaps unsurprising that students who are the first in their family to go to university may be less clear about what to expect and may therefore experience more problems. This situation is being redressed to an extent with the provision of outreach work in sixth forms, summer schools, open days and 'taster' days. Potential university students can help themselves further by exploring the web pages of their chosen institute, meeting current students, and reading books such as this one which outline the key aspects of life as a higher education student and give pointers for further information or specific areas of concern.

► Student life in the twenty-first century

You may find it useful to consider some of the statistics available that give an indication of what life is like for today's students. As I have mentioned previously in this chapter, changes to higher education financing, and most particularly the onus on the student to pay tuition fees and cost-of-living expenses, have meant that living with a growing debt has become the norm for today's undergraduates. Taking on paid employment in parallel with university study is also commonplace, and a recent report on student life estimates that 42 per cent of students are in this position, with the majority of them undertaking catering, retail or bar work. It was found that on average students work 14.5 hours per week and are paid approximately £86, but 14 per cent work over 20 hours per week.³³ The same report notes that 79 per cent are more or less able to keep up with bills and credit commitments. The survey finds that 77 per cent of students in debt owe money as the result of a student loan; 36 per cent have a bank overdraft; 17 per cent owe money to a credit card company and 11 per cent owe money to their parents. Two per cent of students in the survey stated that they had fallen behind with bills and were in a serious financial situation.

In terms of outlook, the UNITE/MORI report finds that 88 per cent of students are happy with their lives. Although about 33 per cent purchase more alcohol than the number of units recommended by the Department of Health, they are generally very health aware, caring about health and fitness (71 per cent), knowledgeable about the dangers of binge drinking (59 per cent) and appreciative of the risks of taking drugs.

The report does show a fall in the time spent campaigning on current issues, such as the environment. Nicholas Porter, Chief Executive officer of UNITE, attributes this to lack of time caused by the necessity to combine paid work with studying. My own research for this book, which involved contact with over 160 students from universities all over the country, concurs with the above findings. Today's students are very busy juggling employment and study commitments. They are well aware of the financial restrictions imposed by their situation and, generally, most are able to navigate their way through it and find solutions, albeit after a shaky start in some cases. However, it is apparent that several students have sought solutions in order to avoid further debt, for example by opting for distance learning, by working in their gap year and consciously saving all their earnings for their university years, or by choosing to live at home whilst studying. It will be interesting to observe if new trends emerge in the aftermath of the 2006 academic year and the proposed changes.

► **Benefits of higher education – finding work and earning more**

In recent years, numbers of applications to university have increased steadily. UCAS data reveal a rise from 339,747 accepted applicants in 2000 to 374,307 in 2003. A recent report notes that 70 per cent of students attend university primarily in order to gain a qualification.³⁴ This is perhaps unsurprising in view of the statistical evidence from a variety of sources that indicates higher education improves both an individual's chance of finding employment and also the likelihood of achieving a higher salary.

Graduate salaries

You will no doubt be pleased to learn that research published in 2004 by the Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR), offered good news for graduates in that it indicated both an increase in the number of graduate vacancies for the first time in four years, and an increase in graduate salaries.³⁵ The report noted that the median starting salaries had reached £21,000, which represented an increase of 3.4 per cent on the previous year; 42 per cent of AGR

members increased their graduate starting salaries by more than 2.5 per cent in 2004; and 39 per cent did not make changes. The highest graduate starting salaries were found in London and the south-east (£25,000 and £21,500 respectively) and the lowest were in Scotland (£18,500) and Northern Ireland (£18,000).³⁶ The highest starting salaries were to be found in the investment banking sector (£35,000), consulting firms (£28,500) and law firms (£28,000).

The research for this report was carried out by High Fliers Research and based on the responses of AGR members. It should be noted that AGR membership tends to include the largest graduate recruiters from both the private and the public sectors and, as such, the salaries quoted are arguably higher than the figures for graduate starting salaries as a whole. Indeed, HESA's report on the destinations of graduate leavers 2002/2003 puts the median salary at £17,000. *Graduate Market Trends*, a quarterly publication produced by Graduate Prospects (the trading subsidiary of the charity HECSU), reveals that predictions for 2005 indicate an average graduate salary of £21,997. The January 2005 report reveals that graduate salaries tend to range from £13,242 to £36,000, but that approximately 25 per cent will start above £25,000 and above.³⁷ These figures are based on vacancies advertised in Prospects Directory, which features larger firms and specific areas of recruitment. As such the salaries offered are likely to be higher than the figures relating to *all* graduates.

The data from Prospects Directory revealed other interesting information, such as the fact that 75.8 per cent of all vacancies did not require a specific subject discipline. This is in keeping with the notion that employers appreciate the value of underlying skills acquired through higher education, such as the ability to organise, communicate and solve problems.

Graduate destinations

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) publishes data on the destinations of leavers from higher education and other related matters on its website www.hesa.ac.uk. The data relating to leavers from 2002/2003 reveals that of the 248,000 individuals who completed the survey, 72.7 per cent had found employment and 6.2 per cent were assumed to be unemployed.³⁸

The same report noted that employment rates varied according to degree subject, with the highest being medicine and dentistry (91.8 per cent), subjects allied to medicine (85.6 per cent) and education (85.1 per cent). The lowest employment rates were for historical and philosophical studies (61.9 per cent), physical sciences (58.9 per cent) and law (49.9 per cent). However, these figures do not tell the whole story because some leavers in some subjects go on to undertake further study before taking up employment. The

highest percentage of leavers assumed to be unemployed were computer science graduates (12.5 per cent) and the least likely to be unemployed were medicine and dentistry leavers (0.2 per cent).

A successful career immediately as undergraduate studies come to an end cannot, however, be guaranteed, and as more graduates enter the employment market, some find themselves in 'non-graduate' types of job. Based on its interpretation of recent HESA data, Matthew Taylor, the *Guardian* education correspondent, states: 'More than a third of students who start work when they finish their degree end up in non-graduate jobs, from stacking shelves to answering phones in call centres.'³⁹ In the same report, James Knight, president of NUS Wales, explains that: 'Many students are so crippled by debt at the end of their course that they are forced to take whatever work they can get to keep their head above water.' Given that most students are motivated to embark upon higher education courses because they believe this will enhance their career prospects, these observations are worrying.

Clearly, many employers, not just those who require specialist graduate knowledge from job applicants, are drawn towards graduate candidates because of the useful 'soft' skills they tend to possess. Attendance at university generally means that the individual will have acquired self-learning experience, together with time-management, communication and organisational skills. It also implies commitment, ambition and determination, all of which are qualities that are attractive to employers. Individuals should not be deterred from going on to higher education as the likelihood is that if employers wish and are able to find graduates to fill some of the more junior vacancies, young people without higher education experience will find it even more difficult to reach the first rung of the employment ladder. There is also an argument that in the early days of an individual's career, workplace experience is essential in establishing a portfolio of skills that can be used later for career advancement.

Indeed, research has shown that the situation immediately after graduation does not represent the long-term picture. A new report, *Seven Years On: Graduate Careers in a Changing Labour Market*,⁴⁰ which looks at employment issues relating to a group of 4500 students from 38 UK higher education institutions who graduated in 1995, reveals some optimistic findings. Although immediately after graduation 43 per cent were in non-graduate jobs, seven years later 90 per cent were in graduate jobs, with 75 per cent in jobs that related to their long-term career plans. Moreover, the report found that the range of jobs available to today's graduates is wider than in the past, that higher education expansion has not led to fewer opportunities for graduates, and that employers are still prepared to pay more for graduates. Commenting on the findings, the authors note:

14 The Student Life Handbook

The research shows the value of taking a long-term perspective. It is clear that graduate career paths evolve slowly: some graduates take five years or longer to settle into their careers; for some it involves further study, for others the process of assimilation into the labour market involves false starts or a rethink about their early career choices.

This is also borne out by the findings of *What Do Graduates Do? 2005*. This is a report produced by Graduate Prospects, the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS), and UCAS (the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service), based on the HESA First Destination survey. Aiming to analyse the potential outcomes of a range of degree subjects, the 2005 report notes that the appeal of teaching is reflected in the destinations of graduates of several subjects including maths and English. One in six maths graduates went on to teach or to take a postgraduate maths qualification, and one in six English graduates entered teaching. The report also shows that vocational degrees continued to provide a sound basis for future employment, with civil engineering degrees proving particularly successful: 72.3 per cent of civil engineering graduates found employment in the UK or abroad. Although 11.3 per cent of graduates took secretarial or clerical positions, the report also shows that many students (58 per cent) tended not to focus seriously on job hunting until after they graduated, so may not immediately have settled into their chosen career. Mike Hill, chief executive of Graduate Prospects, notes:

... graduates from some degrees take longer than others to decide on their long-term futures, often taking more administrative positions while they consider their options; others use such positions as footholds into companies for which they would like to work. The idea that all graduates should sail from university into high paid graduate jobs within weeks of graduation is a myth and always has been.⁴¹

A higher education qualification does not guarantee employment, but it provides you with knowledge and skills that can then be utilised in the workplace, with the content of some degree subjects having a closer relationship to specific jobs than others. Graduates then need to 'adapt' their skills and experience to meet the needs of the employment market in their chosen field. This is not necessarily automatic, and is likely to involve a further investment of time and effort.

It is important not to lose sight of the fact that there are many other benefits associated with higher education study than simply securing a better job and earnings. These include the valuable experience of mixing with people

from all walks of life. You are likely to encounter people from a wide variety of nationalities and cultural backgrounds, which as well as broadening intellectual horizons can open up new ways of looking at the world and help you to define what you want from your future. University can also lead to travel opportunities, both through formal exchange programmes and also through informal arrangements you may wish to make with your friends for the vacations or after graduation. Your own studying will significantly increase your personal knowledge of an academic subject, but in addition you will also learn about topics outside of your specialisation through interaction with other students. University life offers the opportunity to become involved in a vast range of activities, including political campaigns and voluntary work, at either a local or national level. It also presents the chance to develop current hobbies or discover totally new ones. Student life provides an opportunity to identify how you want to live, to define what is important and to establish goals for the future. It offers an environment in which you can experiment with independent living and work out your views and preferences. The close interaction with others in the same situation usually leads to lifelong friendships and social networks. For most people, having fun and enjoying the undergraduate years are right at the top of the agenda, which is why very many graduates look back on their student years as one of the happiest and most stimulating periods of their life.

► **Summary**

The aim of this chapter was to inform you of the current issues within higher education and their implications, to enable you to identify the course of action that is right for you. It also evaluated the benefits of a university education in terms of long-term employment destinations and salary.

Index

- Access Agreement, 7
Access to Learning Funds, 66
accommodation
 concerns about an
 accommodation contract, 87
 different types of accommodation,
 82–92
 finding suitable accommodation,
 79–82
 finding suitable flatmates, 94–7
 miscellaneous responsibilities,
 93–4
 website and other resources,
 87–9, 182
admissions, 3–4, 6–9
Adult Dependents' Grant, 66
alcohol, 11, 121–2, 129
applications, number of, 11
arriving at university, 41–3
Association of Graduate Careers
 Advisory Services (AGCAS), 14
Association of Graduate Recruiters,
 (AGR), 11–12

benefits (of higher education study),
 11–15
Blair, Tony, 2–3, 9
borrowing money, 69–71
Bristol University, 8
British Council, 144–6
British Nutrition Foundation (BNF),
 126

budgeting, 57–9, 74–7

Child Tax Credit, 65
childcare grant, 65–6
choosing a university, 16–24
 how to start, 17–19, 174
 key reasons for choice, 17, 18–21,
 24
 lifestyle choices, 20–2, 175
cleaning, 29
clubs and societies, 47–8
Cochrane, A., 136
concerns
 about an accommodation
 contract, 87
 about debt, 70–1
 about feeling anxious, lonely or
 negative, 50–6
 about independent living, 22
 about personal and emotional
 issues, 125
 about studying, 115–17
 about writing an essay, 113
 parental concerns, 35–6, 38
 students living at home, 52
Consumer Credit Counselling
 Service (CCCS), 70
cooking, 29–30, 126–7
costs *see also* finance; loans; tuition
 fees
 for international students, 145
 of educating undergraduates, 4

- costs – *continued*
of student living, 59, 69
Council Tax, 94
courses, closure of, 4
credit cards, 70
curriculum vitae (CV), 3
- date rape, 129
- debt
advice on debt, 70–1
criticism of debt, 5
research on student attitudes to
debt, 5
- Department for Employment and
Learning (Northern Ireland)
(DELNI), 60, 62, 69, 139, 151
- Department for Education and Skills
(DfES), 2, 6–7, 9–10, 60, 62,
64–6, 135, 139, 151
- Department of Health (DH), 11, 50,
66, 121–3, 126
- Disability Rights Commission (DRC),
92, 139
- disability, website resources, 183
- disabled students, 139–44, 162–3
- Disabled Students' Allowance
(DSA), 139–40
- distance learning, 134–8, 162–3,
172–3
- doctor, registering with, 119
- drop-out rates, 9–10
- drugs, 11, 123
- E111 form, 49–50
- Edinburgh University, 8
- emotional support, sources of, 125
- employment *see* graduate
destinations and working while
studying
- European Economic Area (EEA), 49,
144
- examinations, 114–15
- Exeter University, 4
- fieldwork, 105–6
- finance *see also* costs; financial
support; loans; tuition fees
borrowing money, 69–71
budgeting, 57–9; 74–7
financial preparation before going
to university, 28
sponsorships and scholarships, 71
statistics on income from paid
employment whilst studying,
10
website resources, 183–4
working whilst studying, 72–4,
77–8
- financial support for students *see*
also Northern Ireland, Scotland
and Wales if appropriate
Access to Learning Funds, 66
Adult Dependents' Grant, 66
Child Tax Credit, 65
Childcare Grant, 65–6
Disabled Students Allowances,
139–140
Higher Education Grant, 65
Parents' Learning Allowance, 65
Part-time students, 135
National Health Bursaries, 66
- first days at university, 41–3, 53,
178
- Fishburn, S., 9
- flats/houses (private sector) *see*
private sector rental
- flats/houses (university owned),
84–5
- Fletcher, K., 5
- foundation degrees, 6, 168–9
- Freshers' ball, 44
- Freshers' fair, 44–5

- gas, 130
- General Social Care Council, 66
- government
 - rationale for reforms, 2–4
 - reforms, 1–2
 - spending, 2
 - websites, 181
- graduate destinations, 12–15, 18
- Graduate Prospects 12, 14
- graduate salaries, 11–12

- halls of residence (private sector), 85
- halls of residence (university owned), 82–4
- health, 11, 118–27; *see also* alcohol; drugs; emotional support; sexual health; smoking
 - basic advice, 119–21
 - healthy eating, 126–7
 - website resources, 184–6
- Higher Education Careers Services Unit (HECSU), 12
- Higher Education Policy Unit (HEPI), 8
- Higher Education Grant, 65
- Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), 6, 8–9, 12, 14, 18
- Hill, M., 14
- Hodge, Margaret, 8
- homesickness, 50–2
- hostels, 85

- independent living, getting prepared, 27–30
- information, 181–7; *see also* individual categories plus useful websites
- insurance, 93, 130
- International Student Identity Card (ISIC), 49

- international students, 4, 144–50, 159–60, 186
- Internet use for study, 109

- Keele University, 4
- Knight, J., 13

- landlords, advice on dealing with, 86–91
- laundry, 29
- leaving home, 25–40
 - cleaning, 29
 - cooking 29–30
 - financial matters, 28
 - general maintenance 30
 - laundry, 29
 - packing for university, 30–40, 177–8
 - preparing for independent living, 27–30, 176
- lectures, 101–2
- library, 107–9
- living at home, 52, 91–2, 164–5
- lodgings, 91
- loneliness *see* concerns
- Leeds University, 9
- loans 1, 4, 5
 - arranging a loan, 62–3
 - repaying a loan, 64

- mature students, 150–5, 162–3, 169–70
- Middlesex University, 9–10
- maintenance skills, 30
- Market and Opinion Research International (MORI), 5, 11

- National Health Bursaries
 - England, 66
 - Northern Ireland, 69
 - Scotland, 68–9

- National Health Bursaries – *continued*
 Wales, 67
- National Health Service Direct (NHS Direct), 119, 123
- Newcastle University, 4, 8
- Nightline, 54
- Northern Ireland, students in, 69, 121, 124, 139, 151
- NUS
 assessment of student costs, 69
 card, 46
 criticism of student debt, 5, 13
 Union, 45–8, 75
 website resources, 45
- O’Brian, P., 9
- open days, 19
- Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2, 9–10
- Office for Fair Access (OFFA), 7, 61
- Open University, 5–6, 134–8
- overdrafts, 70
- Oxford University, 3–4
- packing for university, 30–40, 177–8
- parental concerns, 35–6, 38
- Parents’ Learning Allowance, 65
- photocopying, 109
- plagiarism, 112
- Porter, Nicholas, 5, 11
- pregnancy, 124
- presentations, advice on, 114
- private sector rental
 considerations, 86
 understanding the contract, 87–8
 visiting potential properties, 86–7
- problems *see* concerns
- Prospects Directory, 12
- Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), 18, 144
- R85 form, 59
- rag week, 47–8
- rape, 124–5
- reports *see also* statistics
Fair Admissions to Higher Education: Recommendations for Good Practice, 7
First Destination Survey (HESA), 14
The Future of Higher Education (DfES), 7
Higher Education Funding – International Comparisons (DfES), 2, 9
Seven Years On: Graduate Careers in a Changing Labour Market, 13–14
Unite Student Experience Report, 5, 10–11
What Do Graduates Do?, 14
Widening Participation and Fair Access (HEPI), 8–9
Widening Participation in Higher Education (DfES), 7
- safety
 personal safety, 128–30
 safeguarding possessions, 130–2
- Samaritans, 54
- scholarships, 71
- Schwarz, Professor Steven, 7
- Scotland, students in, 67–9, 119, 121, 124, 139, 151
- seminars, 103–4
- sexual health and sexuality, 123–5
- skill, 140
- smoking, 122–3

- socialising, 43–9
- sponsorships, 71
- staff, 106–7
- Stamford Test, 17
- statistics *see also* reports
 - on applications to university, 11
 - on attitudes to debt, 5
 - on cost of educating
 - undergraduates, 4
 - on drop-out rates, 9
 - on graduate destinations, 12–14
 - on graduate salaries, 11–12
 - on health, 11
 - on international comparisons of
 - higher education funding, 2, 9
 - on Newcastle University's
 - participation scheme, 8
 - on student finance, 10
 - on widening participation, 6–7
 - on working while studying, 10
- Student Awards Agency for
 - Scotland (SAAS), 60, 62, 67–9, 139, 151
- student debt *see* debt
- Student Experience Report, 5, 10–1
- student loans *see* loans
- Student Loans Company (SLC),
 - 62–3, 69
- student websites, general, 181
- Students' Union, 45–6
- studying
 - concerns about studying, 115–17
 - differences between university
 - and sixth-form study, 99–101
 - effective studying, 109–11
 - fieldwork, 105–6
 - lectures, 101–2
 - seminars, 103–4
 - tutorials, 104–5
 - what to bring from home, 31–2
 - writing, 112–14
- Taylor, M., 13
- Teaching and Higher Education Act
 - (1998), 2
- television licence, 93
- Telford College, Edinburgh, 9
- tenancy *see* accommodation
- top-up fees, *see* tuition fees
- travel, 48–50
 - E111 form, 49–50
 - International Student Identity
 - Card, 49
 - NX2 card, 48
 - Railcard, 48
 - STA Travel, 49
 - website resources, 186–7
- tuition fees, 1–4, 7, 60
 - controversy over tuition fees, 3–4
 - England, 61
 - Northern Ireland, 69
 - Scotland, 67
 - variable tuition fees, 1–4, 61
 - Wales, 66–7
- tutorials, 104–5
- United Kingdom Council for
 - Overseas Student Affairs
 - (UKCOSA), now known as the
 - council for International
 - Education, 74, 144–6
- Universities and Colleges
 - Admissions Service (UCAS), 11, 14, 17
- UNITE, 5, 10–11
- university admissions *see*
 - admissions
- utility companies, 93–4
- variable tuition fees *see* tuition fees
- Wales, students in, 66–7, 121, 124, 139

- Welsh Assembly Government, 60, 67
- White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education*, 6
- widening participation, 1–3, 6–9
 - controversy over, 7–9
 - initiatives, 6
- working while studying, 10, 32, 72–4, 77–8
- worries *see* concerns
- writing an essay, 112–13
- writing up fieldwork/lab notes, 114