

Downturn causes students unease over degree choice

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Sinking fast: according to one marine biologist, looming recession might cut research funding.

Photograph: Corbis

One in 12 final-year university students regrets their degree choice now that recession looks likely, a poll has revealed.

And almost half believe the downturn will jeopardise their career prospects.

Market research firm Opinionpanel Research quizzed 1,041 undergraduates last week, from freshers to final-year students, on whether they thought they would suffer in the economic slowdown.

Some 8% of the 357 final-year students polled wished they had chosen a different degree given the current climate. The figure was 4% for students across all years.

When final-year students were asked whether a recession would harm their careers, 46% replied that it would "a bit" and 9% thought it would "a lot". One in 10 was unsure.

Some 42% of students in all years believed a recession would harm their job prospects "a bit", 8% thought it would "a lot" and 14% were unsure.

Women were slightly more pessimistic than men: 9% of the female students worried a downturn would endanger their careers "a lot", compared with 7% of male students.

The pollsters quizzed students at 133 UK universities and specialist higher education institutes.

They found those at post-1992 universities such as the University of the West of England and University of Middlesex were more worried about recession than the rest.

Some 12% of these students feared a downturn would harm their job prospects "a lot", compared with 8% of students at Oxford, Cambridge and redbrick universities such as Bristol and Leeds.

Students at the newest universities, such as the University of Winchester, and the specialist institutes were the least worried - 7% and 6% thought their prospects would be jeopardised "a lot".

One student who took part said: "It's going to change everything. I was planning on taking my time to get a job but my savings won't go as far now and I'll have to take whatever job is available, even if it's something like waitressing."

Another said: "Maybe a module I didn't perform particularly well in could become an issue when it really shouldn't be. Employers will be more ruthless when looking for new employees."

Fears about the downturn are not confined to students studying finance. One physiotherapy student said: "People with injuries will decide to not pay to see a physiotherapist and just ignore the injury due to saving money therefore slowing down business."

A marine biology student said: "As a marine biologist, it is possible that current research may be considered less important and therefore not costworthy, unless it is related to climate change which is a 'hot' topic. Current research is incredibly expensive and organisations which previously may have been able to afford to have the research carried out, may no longer have the necessary funds."

But Femi Bola, associate director of student services and head of employability at the University of East London, said it was important for graduates to think positively.

"By the end of their degrees, students will have developed transferable skills for the workplace," she said. "It shouldn't be forgotten that graduates are the cheaper end of the employment chain. Their jobs may not be the ones that will be cut. Work still exists, it just may be in a different sector to the one that graduates anticipated."