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How high? 'Reasonable number' would accept fees hike

11 February 2010

By [Rebecca Attwood](#)

Survey responses vary on subject, institution, class, race and gender lines. Rebecca Attwood reports

More than half of students would be willing to pay university fees of £5,000 and one in five would be prepared to go as high as £10,000, a survey of tens of thousands of students suggests.

Opinionpanel Research asked 37,000 university students what price would be so low that it would make them doubt the quality of their courses, and what figure would be so high that they would rule out paying it.

More students were prepared to pay fees of £3,000 - approximately the current level - than any other sum.

But a report on the findings by Anna Vignoles, professor of economics of education at the Institute of Education, says the results also indicate that "a reasonable number" would be willing to pay higher fees, with demand remaining "substantial" even at £7,000.

Unsurprisingly, poorer students would be less willing to pay more.

For example, if fees were £6,000, 44 per cent of students from fee-paying schools say they would not be willing to pay to study the courses they were taking, compared with 54 per cent of students from state schools.

"If fees are raised, it will be important to ensure that poorer students have sufficient financial assistance so as not to deter them from entering higher education, or limiting their choices to the lowest-cost universities," says the study, *How Much More Will Students Pay?*

Social background was less of a factor than other variables examined. The most important driver of how much students were willing to pay for a degree was the subject of study.

If tuition fees were increased to £6,000, about 60 per cent of education students would refuse to pay, compared with less than 40 per cent of medical and dentistry students.

"This suggests that students' expectations of how much their degree will 'add value' to their earning potential has a greater impact on the willingness to pay than does their social background," the report says.

It concludes that "there is a case for the introduction of variable tuition fees within each institution".

There were also significant differences in students' answers by type of university, even when respondents were from the same background or studying the same subject.

For example, Russell Group students who attended fee-paying schools were significantly more willing to pay £4,000 or more than their University Alliance peers.

The study suggests that overall, if tuition fees were increased to £5,000, 65 per cent of students at Russell Group universities would be willing to pay, compared with 60 per cent at 1994 Group institutions and 52 per cent at Alliance universities and the Million+ group of new institutions.

Almost half (47 per cent) of Russell Group students would be prepared to pay £7,000, compared with 38 per cent of Million+ students.

In addition, almost a third (30 per cent) of Russell Group students say they would pay as much as £10,000, as would 27 per cent of those at 1994 Group universities, 24 per cent of Million+ students and 23 per cent of Alliance students.

'Optimal model'

Professor Vignoles said the findings suggested that the optimum model would be for institutions to charge different fees for different subjects, but also for universities to be "mindful of where they position themselves in the market".

Female students were significantly more likely to reject higher tuition fees than male students, while those with lower entry grades were also less prepared to pay more.

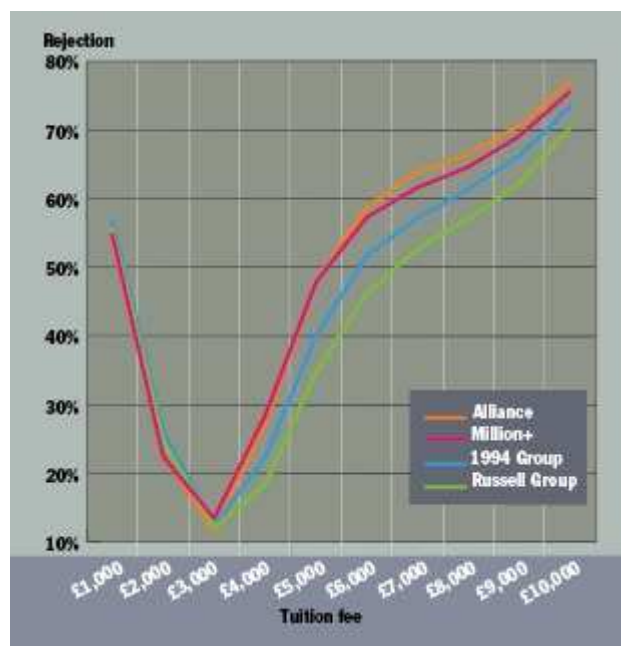
Students from some ethnic groups were less open to the idea of paying more than others, even when they hailed from the same socio-economic background.

Responding to the findings, Wes Streeting, president of the National Union of Students, said: "This report is valuable evidence of how genuinely variable fees would cause serious negative effects.

"It is clear that students from disadvantaged backgrounds, women and those from some ethnic minorities would be priced out of elite universities, pushed away from the subjects they really want to do, or forced to make the calculation that higher education simply isn't for them."

The report is based on data gathered from members of Opinionpanel's student panel who were surveyed during their first term at university between 2006 and 2009.

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Readers' comments

- **Dan** 11 February, 2010

Fantastic - A reversion to Brideshead style elitism!

- **Dr Hectic** 11 February, 2010

When I see the General Public supporting us rather than treating us as lazy parasites then I will develop sympathy for their offspring when it comes to fees.

- **kathz** 11 February, 2010

Why not use an additional graduated tax to take money from those who have already benefited from university education, and done well out of it, instead of pushing the young into debt? In that way, MPs, bankers and others (including lecturers) would

pay for the demonstrable advantage of their free higher education.

It's better than forcing young people into debt. We can't predict which courses will be profitable - and few students had the opportunity to vote for the current government. In a democracy, the older generations should accept responsibility for the crises they created or allowed.

Tax me - don't sell my students into debt-slavery.

- **Gary** 11 February, 2010

I fail to see the point of asking students what they would pay except in the case of mature students. It might be reasonable to ask parents what they would pay. It might also be relevant to ask students what loan repayments they would bear if the fees were to be funded by loans. Further, if the loans were commercial loans, it might also be appropriate to ask what sum bankers were willing to lend. However, why ask students who will never be writing cheques with their own money?

- **X5** 11 February, 2010

The free education model is only possible if we restrict the number of UK universities to around 30. If we wish to support 150+ universities of variable quality then the students will have to make a contribution to the costs. I would suggest that this contribution will rise steeply over the next ten years and ironically lead to the closure and/or merger of universities in the tail end.

- **Dr Hectic** 11 February, 2010

kathz: It is the parents of current students who are to blame for this situation. You and they will have to be willing to pay more tax for ALL public services. Are you willing to do this?

- **kathz** 11 February, 2010

Dr Hectic: Yes.

- **Confused Inmate** 11 February, 2010

The graduation tax is an idea which could usefully be extended to other areas of public sector activity. I propose a mediation tax for anyone whose earnings have been enhanced by being kept alive by the NHS. A conflagration tax for anyone whose earnings have been enhanced by not being killed in a fire. Probably a lifeboatification tax if your earnings have been enhanced because the coastguard fished you out of the sea. Or we could just have income tax which goes up as you earn more.

- **Dr Hectic** 11 February, 2010

kathz: you would seem to be in a minority then. The main aim of the UK population seems to be to support parties that cut taxes. Or am I mistaken?

- **Martin** 11 February, 2010

Can I just add that I never trust survey results from opinion panel. They assume all who register at their site with a .ac.uk email address are students. Its amazing the surveys that I and other colleagues will complete for a £25 amazon voucher!!

- **Esme** 11 February, 2010

Dr. Hectic/ Kathz;

If I could vote for a party that would increase taxes BUT guarantee that those extra taxes would only be used for health care/education (nursery to HE), then I'd vote for them. If they were to get swallowed up into military / full body scanners at every airport / etc., then infinitely less keen.

- **Cobby Stopford** 11 February, 2010

Dear Esme, that is why you should support local control of health care and education and increasing local tax raising powers through a local income tax set by democratically elected local authorities. Groups of local authorities could then get together and, on behalf of local people, invest in higher education in their region to their hearts content.

- **Andy** 11 February, 2010

Strange, nobody has asked what the students should be getting for their money. Look at this link and read students' comments. This should make us all thoughtful.<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=410328&c=1>

- **The Harsh Truth** 11 February, 2010

"More than half of students would be willing to pay university fees of £5,000" because many 18 years olds are naive and optimistic and believe the propaganda the universities offer. Why would universities be offering courses if employers did not need lots of graduates in these subjects?

When reality sets in and they can't get a job after graduation it is too late and they have £20,000 debts to cope with. Some graduates will do well, but many students will find there are ten times as graduates than openings in fields such as photography, animation, forensic science, etc, etc. Equally graduates with a degree in Public Services may find they get a job similar to the one their parents got twenty years ago - with just a couple of 'O' levels.

- **kathz** 12 February, 2010

Esme: I share your views but didn't want to divert the debate from the important area of student debt. Moreover, as an adult voter I must bear some responsibility for the misdirections of government - I should have done more to campaign with others. Most of the students who are being drawn into debt cannot be held responsible.

If someone must pay, why not me? .. and I don't see why students should be drawn into debt while Tony Blair and Fred the Shred profit enormously from their free university education.

- **Dr Hectic** 12 February, 2010

kathz, the thing is that people like us did not cause this situation. It is not in our genes to destroy the futures of the young for transient gain. Your words regarding "...why not me?" proves this to me. Wearing someone else's hair shirt will do nothing to cure them of their greed or complicity in the greed of others.

- **kathz** 12 February, 2010

Dr Hectic: My parents, who left school in their early teens, paid tax so that I and others could attend university without paying, and with a grant. Why should I not be willing to assist others through the tax system?

I am not an economist but, like anyone with intelligence, could see that the economic system, built on debt and the sale of luxuries, was headed for trouble. It's not a great responsibility, since I'm only one of a very large number of voters, but most students are too young to be blamed for what has happened. Taking money from students to pay bankers' bonuses is wrong.

- **Dr Hectic** 12 February, 2010

kathz: Taking money from anyone to bail out the bankers is wrong. When I see them take responsibility for their actions then I will consider 'belt tightening' for the rest of us. Not before.

- **Russell Smith** 14 February, 2010

Look again at the question asked: 'what price would be so low that it would make students doubt the quality of their courses, and what figure would be so high that they would rule out paying it'. This asserts a link between the fees charged and the quality of the education achieved/received. (Does this mean that, as the vast majority of our politicians received a free higher education, their degrees were worthless?) This survey asserts a leading question designed to ensure that students don't challenge the very idea of PAYING for their education. It's true aim is to provide 'evidence-based' propaganda for the New Consumerist model of higher education.

- **Dr Hectic** 17 February, 2010

Russell, it is a New Consumerist model that has been fed to the kids since birth. They will have a rude awakening when they realise that their futures have been destroyed by the banks and their willingly compliant Boomer forebears.

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