

# The student vote after two Leader Debates

## Research Note - 28<sup>th</sup> April 2010 Opinionpanel Research

New mid-campaign polling by Opinionpanel, the student research specialists, shows that since the start of the general election campaign students have become far more likely to vote and far more likely to vote Liberal Democrat. The televised Leader Debates have made a big impact on driving undecided voters and some Tory and Labour supporters towards the Liberal Democrats.

Opinionpanel's latest polling was conducted on 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> April 2010; after the second Leader Debate. It builds on our long term polling of student voting intentions and party preference: since 2004 we have conducted over fifty waves of fieldwork with students, each with a representative sample of around 1000 full time undergraduates<sup>1</sup>. The results of this polling have been set out in two detailed reports for Opinionpanel by Paul Whiteley, Professor of Government at the University of Essex and co-director of the British Election Study; *The Student Vote 2008* and *The Student Vote 2010*. This latest wave of polling shows the most dramatic changes in student voting intention we have ever measured.

### Party preference

In terms of party choice, students have, for at least six years, been more inclined to vote Liberal Democrat than has the overall population. Prior to the Leader Debates, in the lead-in to this general election campaign, student support for the Liberal Democrats, whilst still lower than for the other two main parties, exceeded 25% (based on all those considering themselves likely to vote<sup>2</sup>). This showed a comparatively high level of support for the Liberal Democrats compared to the general voting population where support for that party was generally between fifteen and twenty percent.

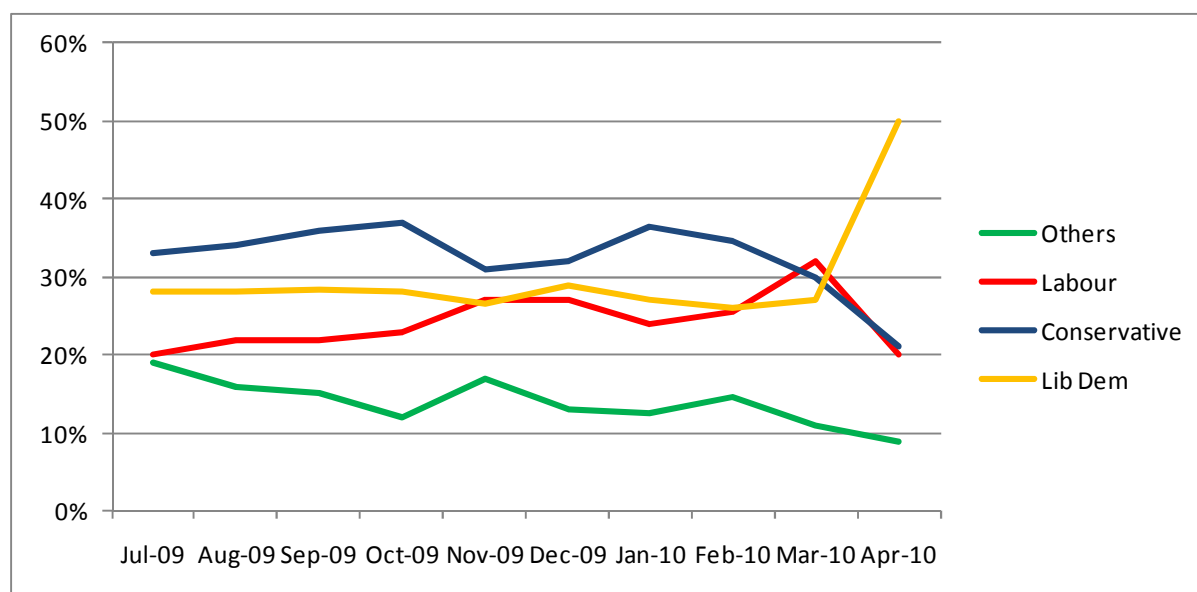
In our latest polling (26<sup>th</sup>/27<sup>th</sup> April 2010), 50% of students who were likely to vote, intended to support the Liberal Democrats. That's an increase of 23 percentage points among students since the start of the election campaign; and significantly higher than typical polls of the national electorate where Liberal Democrat support currently measures around 30%. See Figure 1.

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<sup>1</sup> Quotas are set to make the sample representative by age, gender, course-year and university type. See methodology.

<sup>2</sup> On a one to ten scale where a score of 0 means 'absolutely certain not to vote' and a score of 10 means 'absolutely certain to vote', we consider all those scoring themselves between 8 and 10 (inclusive) as being likely to vote.

**Figure 1 - Trends in student party choice July 2009 to April 26th/27th 2010**

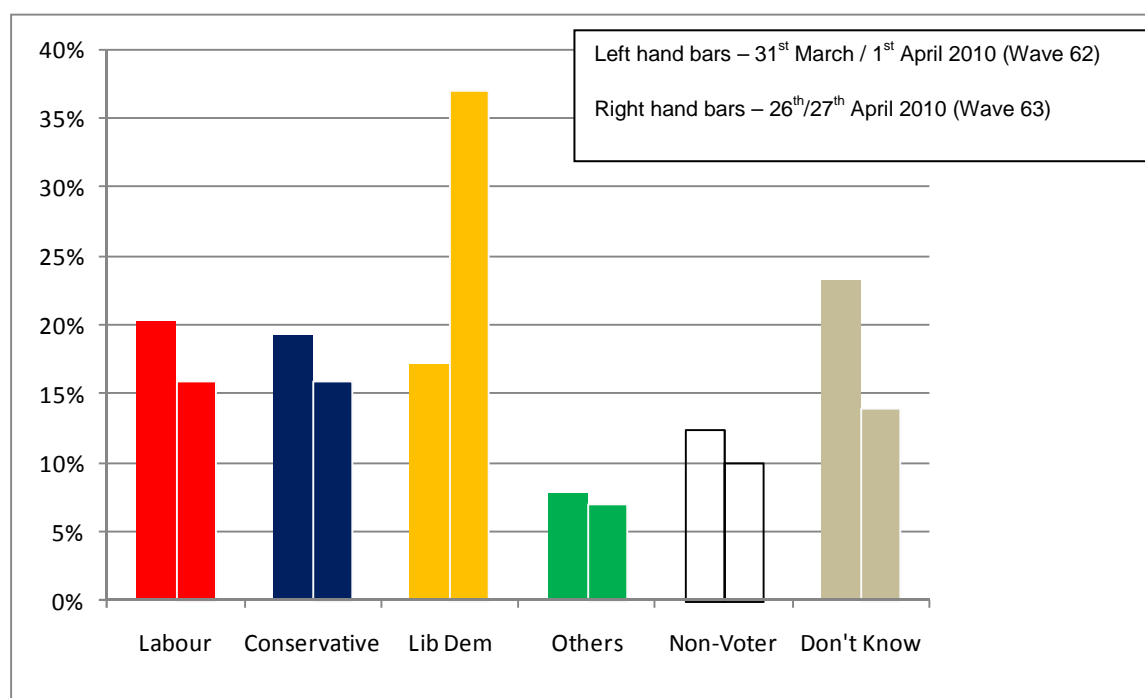


**Q2V How would you vote if there were a General Election tomorrow?**

**Base (1,003): All likely to vote (answering 8-10 at Q1V) excluding those who would not vote and don't know**

Professor Whiteley's report, *The Student Vote 2010*, looked at the proportion of students who claimed they didn't know who they intended to vote for. He found this to be substantially higher among students than for the overall electorate (at 23% versus 11% among the general electorate). In the last few weeks, the proportion of 'Don't knows' among students has dropped from 23% to 14%. Students seem to be making up their minds and, in large part, selecting to vote for the Liberal Democrats. There is also a fairly high level of defection from the Conservatives and from Labour. See Figure 2.

**Figure 2 - Party choices of students at the start of the election campaign versus party choice after two Leadership Debates**



**Q2V How would you vote if there were a General Election tomorrow?**

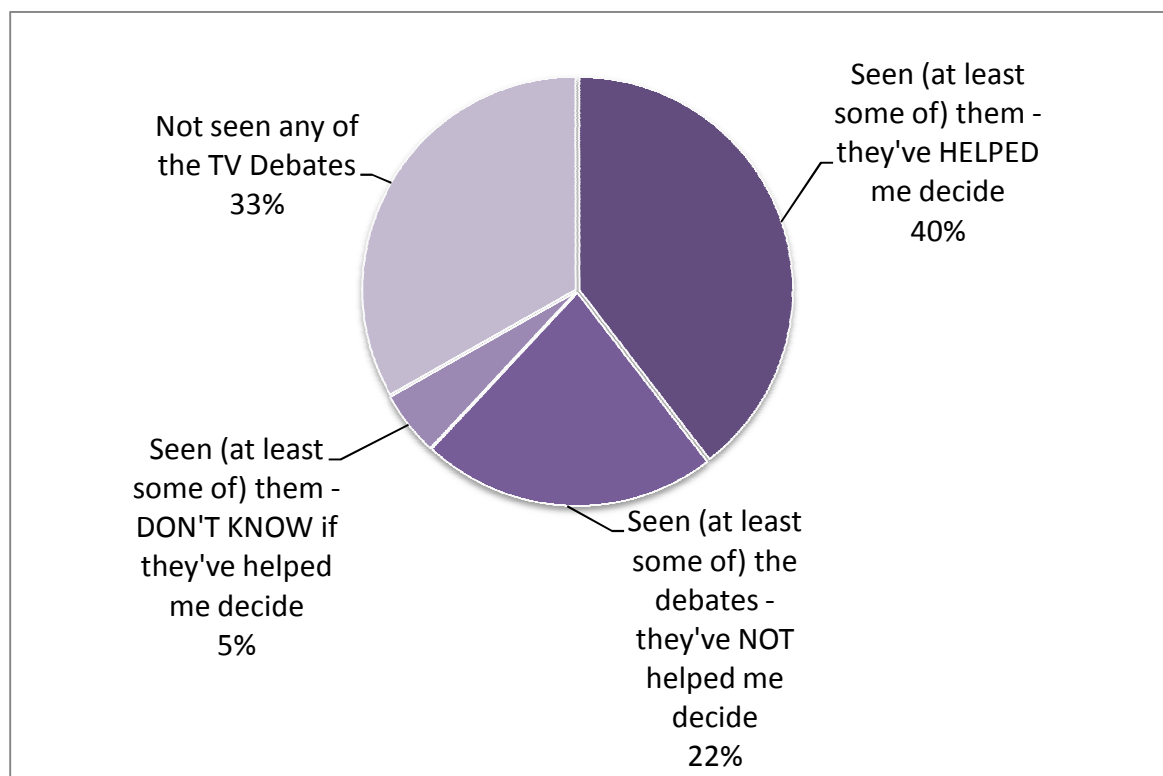
**Base (1,006, 1,003): All respondents, Wave 62 (31<sup>st</sup> March/1<sup>st</sup> April 2010) and Wave 63 (26<sup>th</sup>/27<sup>th</sup> April 2010)**

Over the past three weeks, one of the key changes to the student vote has been in terms of perceptions of Nick Clegg. At the very start of the campaign, 7% of students rated Nick Clegg highly on a scale of one to ten (i.e. giving him a score of eight to ten, with zero meaning ‘strongly dislike’ and ten meaning ‘strongly like’). 29% of students felt unable to rate him at all (responded ‘Don’t know’). By 26<sup>th</sup> / 27<sup>th</sup> April 24% of students rated Nick Clegg highly while his ‘Don’t know’ rating had fallen to 11%. The change for Gordon Brown were less stark, with the proportion rating him highly moving from 8% at the start of the campaign to 10% by 26<sup>th</sup>/27<sup>th</sup> April. David Cameron’s ratings remained static at 7%. The likely student vote for Nick Clegg and the Liberal Democrats has clearly grown significantly. Has this been due to the impact of the Leader Debates?

**The impact of the Leader Debates**

Our most recent wave of polling found that two thirds of students (67%) had seen at least some of the recent televised Leader Debates. And two fifths of all students (40%) found that the Debates had helped them decide who they would be voting for. See Figure 3.

**Figure 3 - TV Leader Debates - student audience and impact**



**QV14 Have you watched the recent General Election Leadership Debates; QV15 Have the debates helped you decide who you'll be voting for?**

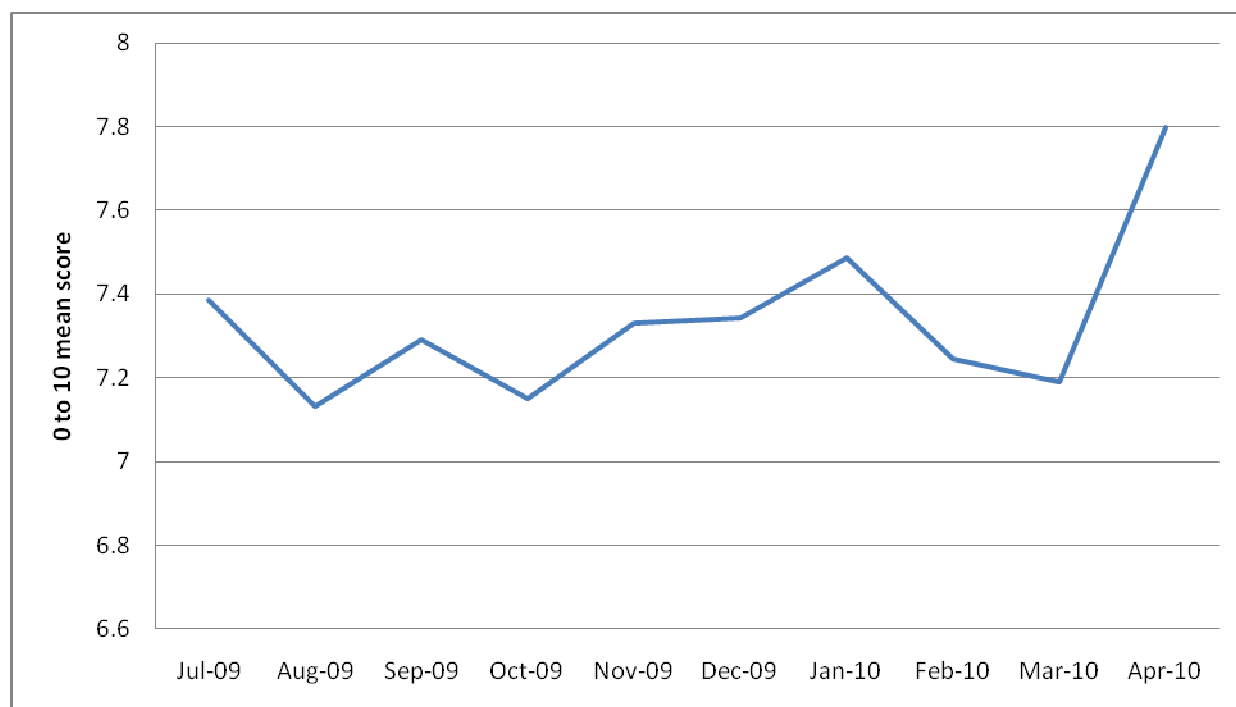
**Base (1,003): All respondents, Wave 63 (26th-27th April 2010)**

Of the people who found the debates helped them decide who to vote for, just over a third (37%) actually switched votes. This equates to 14% of all students, overall. And nearly all the switching traffic was in the direction of Nick Clegg. Amongst the switchers, 35% moved from David Cameron to Nick Clegg, 25% switched from Gordon Brown to Nick Clegg, and 18% switched from 'Don't Know' to Nick Clegg. There has been a small group of 4% moving from 'Other' to Nick Clegg. In other words, 82% of all switching traffic went in the direction of Nick Clegg. Gordon Brown picked up 7% of switching traffic while David Cameron picked up 6% of student switchers who watched the TV Leader Debates. Professor Whiteley commented, "The Nick Clegg "bounce" has affected the whole electorate since voting intentions for the Liberal Democrats increased rapidly after the first TV debate putting the party in second place in most opinion polls with support of around 30 per cent. It appears to have affected students even more, however, with voting intentions for the Liberal Democrats increasing from just over 15 per cent to just above 35 per cent in Figure 2. This is one of the most remarkable shifts in support for a political party in the post-war history of election campaigns".

## Turnout

In the lead-in to the election there was no evidence that student intentions to vote had increased from their 'normal' levels. In the last three weeks, however, intentions have risen from a mean likelihood score of 7.2 to 7.8<sup>3</sup>. See Figure 4. The proportion rating their likelihood of voting at between 8 and 10 has grown from 61% in late March 2010 to 72% just three weeks later. Based on the full time undergraduate population of 1.27m students in higher education, this represents an increase of around 120,000 student voters since the start of the election campaign. Professor Whiteley commented, "Students have been mobilised to vote by the election campaign in a similar way to rest of the population. This pattern recurs in general election campaigns, but it may well be more important this time because the campaign has been so surprising in terms of the changing fortunes of the three major parties, and because of the closeness of the contest"

**Figure 4 - Turnout among students - July 2009 to April 26th/27th 2010**



**Q1V. How likely would you be to vote in an immediate General Election?**  
**Base (1,003): All respondents, Waves 47-63**

## Conclusion

Recent announcements from the Electoral Commission point to an increase in voter registration, particularly among young people. Anecdotal evidence has recently implied that young people have been fired up by the Liberal Democrats and Nick Clegg's performance in

<sup>3</sup> Mean score is based on a one to ten scale where a score of 0 means 'absolutely certain not to vote' and a score of 10 means 'absolutely certain to vote'.

the Leader Debates. Opinionpanel's latest polling only confirms and reinforces this picture, so far as the undergraduate student vote is concerned. The extent of the change is particularly important given the size of the undergraduate population (1.27m), and the fact that today's students will be tomorrow's leaders and opinion formers.

## Methodology

### Study design

Fieldwork was conducted via Opinionpanel's Student Omnibus Survey. The sample size was 1,003 respondents. Students from 129 higher education institutions took part. The highest number of respondents from any one university being 25 and the mean average 8 respondents per university. Timing of the Student Omnibus for the latest wave of research was 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> April 2010.

### Sample

The respondents questioned in the fieldwork for this report were members of The Student Panel. Nearly all had been recruited to the panel via invitations from UCAS. All respondents had their academic email address (ending 'ac.uk') verified by Opinionpanel. All respondents were credited with £1 in Amazon Gift Certificates for completing the questionnaire. After completing a Student Omnibus Survey, respondents are excluded from at least the next 3 omnibus studies.

### Quotas and weights

In each Omnibus, quotas are used to make the sample representative of the national student population in terms of gender, course year (1, 2 and 3+) and university type (with aggregations made for Russell Group universities, other Old universities, New (post 1992) institutions and small and specialist institutions). Quotas and weights were set based on population returns supplied by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). The quotas per 1000 responses can be found in the tables to accompany this research note, "Tables - The Student Vote – April 26<sup>th</sup>-27<sup>th</sup> 2010"

### Questionnaire

In every wave of Opinionpanel's student polling since 2004 we have asked three common questions relating to likelihood to vote, voting preference and which party respondents thought was most likely to win the election. Our two most recent waves of research asked a number of extra questions to gain a more detailed picture of student voting. In the April 26<sup>th</sup>/27<sup>th</sup> wave three new questions were added concerning the Leader Debates. See questionnaire, below.

### Analysis

Data tables were produced in-house by Opinionpanel. See the Opinionpanel website under 'Research', "Tables - The Student Vote – April 26<sup>th</sup>-27<sup>th</sup> 2010"

## **Questionnaire**

### **Q1V How likely would you be to vote in an immediate General Election?**

Absolutely certain NOT to vote – 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 - Absolutely certain to vote

### **Q2V How would you vote if there were a General Election tomorrow?**

Liberal Democrat

Conservative

Labour

Some other party

Scottish National Party / Plaid Cymru

Would not vote

Don't know

Base: All who are likely to vote, this is defined as scoring 8 to 10 (absolutely certain to vote)

### **Q3V Regardless of which party you happen to support, who do you think will win the next UK General Election?**

Labour

Conservative

Liberal Democrat

Some other party

Scottish National Party / Plaid Cymru

Would not vote

Don't know

### **QV2. As far as you're concerned, what is the single most important issue facing the country at the present time?**

Open response

### **QV3. Which party is best able to handle this issue?**

There are no important problems

None - No Party

Labour

Conservatives

Liberal Democrats

Scottish National Party (SNP)

Plaid Cymru

Green Party

United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP)

British National Party (BNP)

Other

Don't know

### **QV4. Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat or what?**

Labour

Conservative

Liberal Democrat

Scottish National Party (SNP)

Plaid Cymru  
Green Party  
United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP)  
British National Party (BNP)  
Other  
No – None  
Don't know

Ask: ALL THOSE WHO ANSWERED OTHER AT QV4

**QV5. You said you generally think of yourself as an 'other' party. Please say here what this is:**

Open response

Ask: ALL THOSE WHO FAILED TO NAME A PARTY (SELECTING NO-NONE OR DON'T KNOW AT V4)

**QV6. Do you generally think of yourself as a little closer to one of the parties than the others? If yes, please tell me which party?**

Labour  
Conservative  
Liberal Democrat  
Scottish National Party (SNP)  
Plaid Cymru  
Green Party  
United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP)  
British National Party (BNP)  
Other  
No – None  
Don't know

Ask: ALL THOSE WHO ANSWERED OTHER AT V6

**QV7. You said you generally think of yourself as a little closer to an 'other' party. Please say here which party this is.**

Open response

**QV11. Using a scale that runs from 0 to 10, where 0 means strongly dislike and 10 means strongly like, how do you feel about Gordon Brown?**

Strongly dislike – 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 – Strongly like, Don't know

**QV12. Using a scale that runs from 0 to 10, where 0 means strongly dislike and 10 means strongly like, how do you feel about David Cameron?**

Strongly dislike – 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 – Strongly like, Don't know

**QV13. Using a scale that runs from 0 to 10, where 0 means strongly dislike and 10 means strongly like, how do you feel about Nick Clegg?**

Single response

Strongly dislike – 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 – Strongly like, Don't know

**QV14 Have you watched the recent General Election Leadership Debates on TV?**

Yes, I've watched all of them

Yes, I've watched some of them  
No, I've not watched any of them  
Don't know

**QV15 Have the debates helped you to decide who you'll be voting for?**

Yes  
No  
Don't know

**QV16 Have you changed your voting intention since watching the debates?**

Yes  
No  
Don't know

**QV17 Those who claimed to have changed their voting intentions since watching the debates then completed a grid showing how their vote had switched from and to. The following choices were offered for 'from' and 'to'.**

Cameron  
Clegg  
Brown  
Other  
Don't know

## **About Paul Whiteley**

Paul Whiteley is Professor of Government at the University of Essex and co-director of the British Election Study. He is the author or co-author of some fifteen books and more than 50 academic articles on electoral behaviour, public opinion, political parties, political methodology and political economy. These include Labour's Grassroots: the Politics of Party Membership (OUP, 1992), True Blues: The Politics of Conservative Party Membership (OUP, 1994), Political Choice in Britain (OUP, 2004), Citizenship in Britain, Values, Participation and Democracy (CUP, 2004), Third Force Politics: Liberal Democrats at the Grassroots (OUP, 2006), and Performance Politics and the British Voter (CUP, 2009). He has held appointments at the Universities of Bristol, Sheffield, Arizona, and the College of William and Mary in Virginia. He is married with three children and lives in Suffolk.

## **About Opinionpanel Research**

Opinionpanel is the independent research business set up to represent the views of students and young people to social and market researchers, policy makers and recruiters. Founded in 2004, we own and manage the UK's largest specialist panel of students before, during and after their time at university: The Future Panel, The Student Panel, The Graduate Panel and, privately The Learner Panel for the Young Person's Learning Agency (YPLA).

Our services run from basic sample provision to detailed full-service projects incorporating qualitative and quantitative methods. By blending our knowledge of students, higher education and commercial marketing with access to our market-leading panels and sector knowledge, we bring a fresh and insightful approach to all the clients we serve.

With over 100,000 members Opinionpanel covers those critical, transformative years before, during and after life as a student. Opinionpanel provides clients with genuinely valid and representative samples. For the last three years panellists have been recruited by email invitation sent by UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service). UCAS is the UK's central body for handling undergraduate applications and is therefore able to invite almost the whole of each starting cohort. This means there is very little systematic bias in the panel. All respondents have verified *ac.uk* academic email addresses which means only bona fide students take part, almost eliminating the problem of participants with multiple identities. Student and Graduate panellists get a minimum of £1 credit in Amazon Gift Certificates for completing each questionnaire.

Over the past few years Opinionpanel has worked with many of the leading brands and agencies involved in student market plus much of the UK's Higher Education establishment including 60 UK universities. Other clients include brands such as NatWest and Red Bull; market research agencies such as TNS, ICM and Ipsos MORI and Higher Education organizations such as the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), the Student Loans

Company and the National Audit Office. We are on the Central Office for Information's (COI) research framework.