

Revisions and Decisions: The Student Journey

An ongoing programme of research that maps the student journey from school through to university or the workplace

INTRODUCTION

SMRS work with a number of university clients and each share a similar challenge: requiring a better understanding of their prospective undergraduate audiences.

The market is full of quantitative data and information about this audience, but the feedback we had was that there was a lack of qualitative insight and understanding of the emotional journey and drivers behind students' choices when considering and applying to university.

We set out to address this with **Revisions and Decisions: The Student Journey**, a research project that is unique in the higher education sector. In 2013 we built our own community of 50 Year-12 students and followed them for two years, all the way from further to higher education or work.

Over the two years, we have engaged with them via discussion groups, quick polls and forums and every week they have provided us with real insight into their decision-making processes through video uploads, blogs, Q&As and surveys, through our dedicated community portal, 'myjourney'.

We made this as inclusive as possible by having a mix of gender, socio-economic groups, locations, course types and target higher education institutions.

This report provides some of the top level findings from across our students' journeys and features insight into awareness, interest, application, messaging, confirmation, clearing, adjustment, the emotional journey and the role of parents. The report also includes our group's views on how the reality of university life has matched their expectations.



BACKGROUND

Dramatic change spanning the political, economic, social and technological spheres is altering the higher education landscape beyond recognition. This change is global in scope and far-reaching in impact. Increased competition from emerging economies, growth in for-profit private providers, new policy restrictions on international students, deregulation of student number controls, changes in funding provision and growth in transnational education are just some of the challenges affecting the higher education landscape.

In order to remain successful in this significantly transformed landscape, universities have had to re-evaluate the way they position themselves. They've had to rethink how they market themselves, create clear institutional identities, re-articulate their values and review what gives them a distinctive edge.

But what is less well understood is the consequences of this revolution for students and prospective students.

- Is it possible that expectations of what universities should deliver have been affected?
- Is it also possible that attitudes towards university marketing have been affected?
- Has the student decision-making process been affected?

Over the last two years, as our student panel reflected on their move towards university, one thing was clear – change has not diminished the appetite to go to university.

AWARENESS

For most students the decision to progress into higher education was made well in advance of sixth form/college. Most of our students had already decided they were going to university as early as years 10 and 11.

A few even knew the subject and the university they planned on applying to as early as then.

I've been thinking about it since January of year 11 and so now I am very certain about what I want to pursue

With their sights set on university, no sooner had they entered year 12 than our students were on the look out for information and guidance to help them solidify their decision. But the information received from their school/college was felt to be inadequate.

Students commented that they could have done with more information on:

- The application process
- University life
- Courses and their associated career paths
- Alternatives to university (although university was most students' preferred option they still liked to read up on the alternatives so they could feel they had made a fully informed decision).

I haven't been told how applying to uni works and what courses we can do but I have been told that we would find out more about our options next year



INTEREST

In summer term of year 12 the decision-making process stepped up a gear, with students drawing up university shortlists, guided in large by **reputation** – that thorny issue. While some students looked at the reputation of the university, others were guided by course reputation. But this begged the question, how exactly did prospective students judge a university's reputation?

We learnt that league table rankings were only one of a number of factors that collectively formed a university's reputation in the eyes of our panel, mirroring other independent research. Entry requirements, the demand for places, the history/back story of the university and course quality all played their part in establishing an institution's reputation.

Where were they getting all this information from to judge a university's reputation?

Answer – a wide range of sources. In the summer term of year 12 our students consulted a variety of university owned, paid and earned media, as well as influencers:

OWNED

- University websites
- Prospectuses
- Other printed material
- Open days

EARNED

- University guides
- Online forums

PAID

- UCAS fairs
- University guides
- Online forums

INFLUENCERS

- Teachers



INTEREST

Students viewed **UCAS fairs** positively although there were a few comments that universities could have done more to stand out. Through providing information on the benefits of university and giving students the chance to talk to university representatives in a well-organised environment, UCAS fairs helped solidify the decision to go to university.

UCAS fairs solidified the decision to go to university but there are opportunities for institutions to make more of an impact and use these events as the start of on going conversations and relationships.

Open days really stood out as a useful source of information for our students. Most found them worthwhile and felt they addressed everything on their and their parents' open day question checklist – what is the location like, what is it like to live at the university, and what kind of modules are available on this course?

Students could only think of a few ways open days could be better – longer tours of the campus, more opportunities to speak to students/staff and better signposting.

Clearly a very important factor in the student decision making process, all institutions have put time and effort into making open days as effective as possible – but there is still some work to be done to meet all of the needs of prospective students who would like as much contact with current students as possible and enough time to look round the campus.

It would have been better if there were slightly more undergraduates just milling around on some open days so that I could just chat to them in a spare moment...



APPLICATION

Going to university remained an exciting prospect for all but a few students as they entered **Year 13**, and open days continued to play a critical and effective role in the decision making process. Getting course information was an increasingly important reason for attending in the students' final year.

Most students already had a clear idea of the kind of employer they would most like to work for – BBC, NHS, Google and John Lewis – and a clear idea of the kind of industry they wanted to work in - retail, technology, media and professional services.

What was not clear was the extent to which students saw university as a path to their chosen career, rather than learning for its own sake.

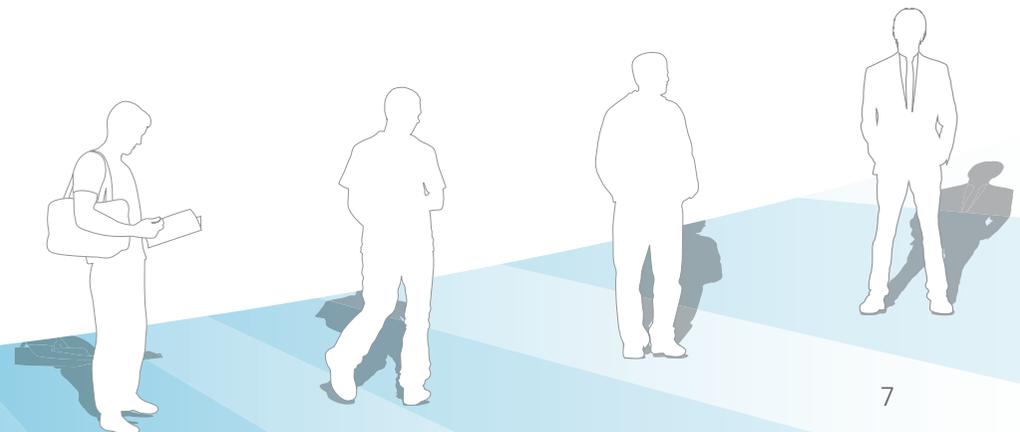
The prestigious and interesting jobs which would come from the graduate programmes at the BBC are what interest me most

There is an opportunity for universities to highlight the path to specific careers rather than rely on broad-based success statistics. Tell stories of alumni in exciting careers with popular organisations.

By November of Year 13 almost everyone that hoped to go to university had submitted their **UCAS application**. Colleges and universities really rose to the occasion. Support and advice received from college and universities during the application process was said to have turned an initially daunting and confusing application process into a straightforward and relatively painless one. Universities were said to have responded promptly to general enquiries and submissions.

Whilst largely happy with this application process, students do feel the process needs explaining clearly to applicants. This would help manage expectations about when they can expect to receive updates and decisions.

Being clear on how long the offer making process takes is important. Even when declining students, providing useful feedback will keep sentiment towards your brand positive, crucial for word-of-mouth influence and potentially re-engaging with these students at a later date, at Clearing or possibly even postgraduate recruitment.



EMOTIONS

The start of year 12, revising and sitting exams were three highly emotional periods for our student panel.

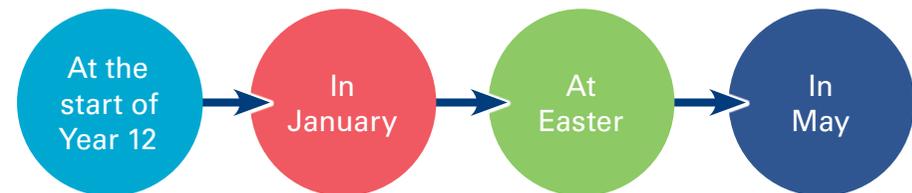
The beginning of college evoked a mix of emotions. Students felt nervous and excited. Some were nervous about the massive jump from GCSE to A Level, others excited to be starting afresh. For some, the initial experience of year 12 was a shock to the system because of the greater workload and changes in friendship groups.

Exams also evoked a mix of emotions – stress, panic, anxiety, disappointment and relief. Exams and exam results took up a good proportion of students' conversations and worries and concerns. Comments about stress often related to exams, finding the right balance of revision, and exam results.

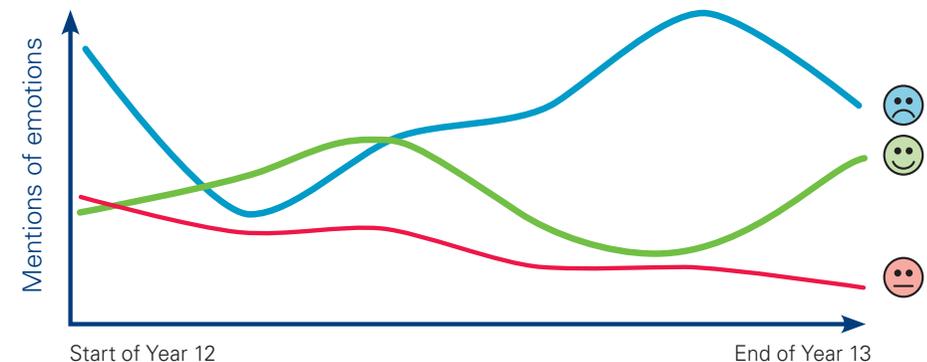
One student summed up the last two years **as a rollercoaster ride**...

I guess it has been a rollercoaster ride. I'm studying topics that I enjoy and I am finally being treated like an adult. However, I have recently had some slip ups regarding my work and have had a phone call home because of underachievement...

Four key periods of stress in Year 12



Mentions of emotions



Students' emotional state is far from static and changes over the course of the education cycle. The types of messages that resonate will be different depending on how they feel. It's important that students' emotional state is taken into account when communicating with them.

PARENTS

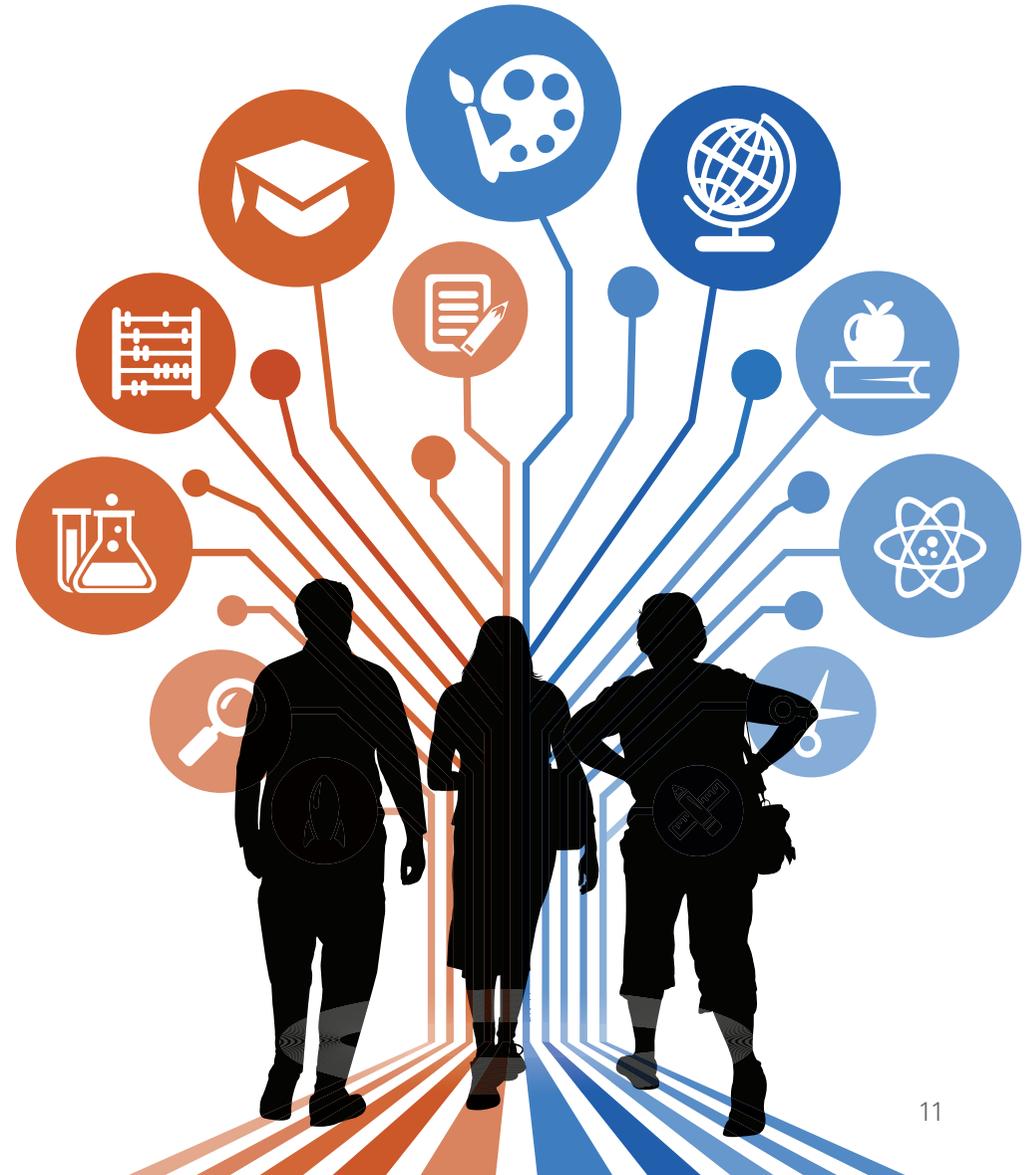
Of course colleges and universities haven't been the only ones to help our students on their move towards university – their **parents** have played a key role too. All but one of thirteen parents we spoke to expected their child to go to university and many started discussing it with their child in years 10 and 11. For all, conversations became more serious in year 12.

For the parents of our student panel, university is a chance for their child to gain valuable life and social skills, achieve their chosen career path, increase their options later in life and increase their job prospects. For universities, making sure parents can see the potential to deliver on these fronts is important.

As with students, parents looked at **reputation** to help them draw up a shortlist of universities, as well as league table rankings, facilities, social life and location. Most had seen a number of university prospectuses and half had referred to a league table guide and various university websites. They were generally happy with the content of the prospectuses but thought the websites had the edge, being more accessible and more comprehensive.

Quite a number of parents attended an open day with their child, armed with a clear list of objectives. Encouragingly, all found open days worthwhile. Their main drivers for attending were to:

- Get a feel for the town or campus
- Obtain further course information
- See the accommodation



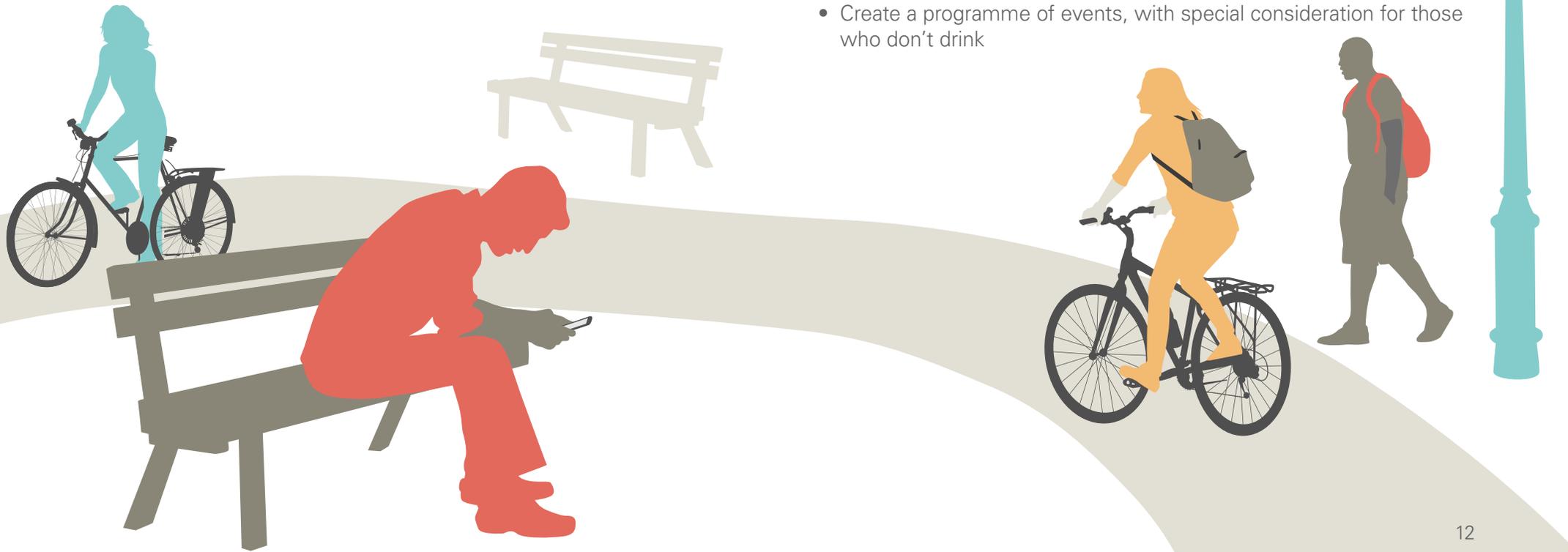
EXPECTATIONS VERSUS REALITY

After six months of university life the majority of our panel were enjoying their university experience and, for the most part, expectations had been met. Where this was not the case, the focus was primarily around contact hours not being what was expected.

Prior to university, our panel received little information from peers or teachers about the variety of the student experience, with advice focussing mainly on the academic. However, most had enjoyed their time so far, and received a wealth of support academically, socially, and practically, through hands-on support and detailed information.

Many of the panel suggested that settling in well was down to the friendship groups they had formed. Whilst this is outside of university control, there are factors that have aided these friendship groups, which a university can affect:

- Allow students to state lifestyle preferences for accommodation
- Arrange opportunities to meet peers prior to moving in
- Offer support to those who are homesick, through, for example, a buddy system or 'college families'.
- Create a programme of events, with special consideration for those who don't drink



EXPECTATIONS VERSUS REALITY

The reality of the academic experience has varied in comparison to expectations with some finding the courses harder, and some finding them easier. Despite this, there is a general appreciation for studying a subject that they are passionate about.

It is harder, because you have to be more responsible for yourself. Already, I have seen people thrown off the course for not 'being serious or focused' enough. It's more intense than A-levels.

Most of the students felt that university marketing had accurately portrayed their institution.

Credit to the University for painting a true and accurate picture, without over glamourising university life.

Almost all of the student panel would recommend their university to others citing the course, the location, resources and social life as reasons to do so.

I would definitely recommend my university. It's a great institution, with great resources, courses and lecturers. There are so many societies, opportunities and events which everyone is welcome to join.

During the first few terms of their university course our panel were focussing on the task at hand rather than their careers. However, a quarter of the students had already begun to consider postgraduate study.



SUMMARY

Over the last two years we have listened to our students talk about wanting to go to university since as early as year 10. Clearly nothing, not the rise in tuition fees or the cut in maintenance grants is going to stop them.

We look forward to following them throughout their undergraduate degree and seeing if their time at university lives up to all the things they have come to expect.

For more information

If you would like to discuss the Student Journey project and outcomes, please contact Dan Beynon, Head of Education.

e. dan.beynon@smrs.co.uk
t. 0207 421 3350
m. 07710 378421

