

HMC/GSA Universities Committee

Survey of U6 students

Summer 2016

Report



HMC/GSA Universities Committee

Survey of Upper Sixth Students – 2016

Introduction

In 2011, HMC commissioned the polling organisation *Populus* to research attitudes to university and school amongst undergraduates. The findings have proved of wide interest, and attention has increasingly turned recently in the HE sector and in schools to improving transition, teaching and learning and the whole (undergraduate) student experience. Good preparation for university life is key in this work. The Universities Sub-Committee (USC) therefore decided this year to run a survey of leavers from HMC and GSA schools to try to gain a picture of how well-prepared for university life our students felt. This has been the first study of its kind.

Methodology

We decided that a simple, on-line survey was the easiest and most effective way to start this work: students are used to such surveys, we could hope for quick and simple turnaround of responses and we would at the very least have a 'baseline snapshot' from which to do further work.

It has to be admitted at the outset that our approach is far from perfect in a number of ways:

- The survey was conducted in the summer term, when students were likely to be focussing on exams: next year we will conduct it earlier
- In order to keep the survey simple and quick, some questions open up further room for discussion (what, for example, is the difference between 'well prepared' and 'very well prepared'?)
- There is no comparison group from maintained schools, which had been our original aim: next year we will engage earlier with ASCL to try to ensure this
- Take-up was good under the circumstances (over 2000) but we hope an earlier and better-presented operation next year will at least double that number

All of that said, this presents a very interesting snapshot of the expectations, hopes and fears of over 2000 new undergraduates.

Executive summary

- Overall, these students feel well or very well prepared for university, though a significant minority (one in six) feels unready
- These students are most looking forward to their studies and their course content: facilities are not significantly important to them
- Their main hopes are for independent study, interacting with new people, and a good social life
- But they fear money worries and workload, and a significant minority worry greatly about social life
- They feel well-informed in the main, and find a variety of resources to help them, but the first few days are shrouded in mystery and this may contribute significantly to any feelings of nervousness they experience.

Detailed analysis of responses

School and university type

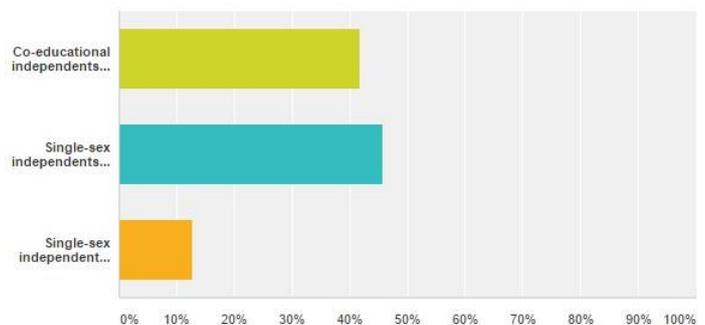
Questions 1 and 2 divided the respondents up by school type and destination.

The 2,132 responses came from a spread of schools which fairly represents the two organisations (GSA and HMC).

Q1

Please indicate what type of school you currently attend:

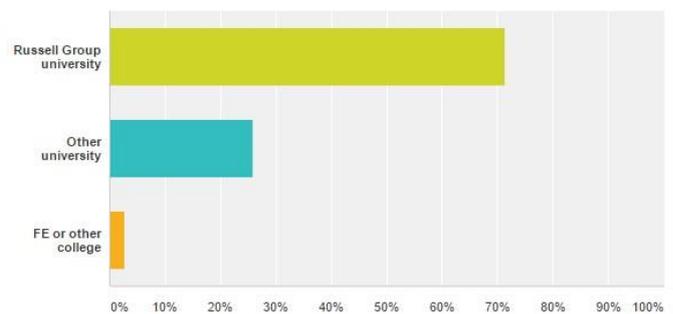
Answered: 2,132 Skipped: 0



Q2

Please indicate what type of university you have chosen as first choice:

Answered: 2,132 Skipped: 0



On university type the answers perhaps unsurprisingly showed a preponderance of Russell Group institutions (71.34%) with very few having chosen FE or other destinations.

These figures reflect quite closely what we know about the destinations of GSA/HMC school leavers - in the latest survey of offers conducted for the Universities Committee (Mason, 2016), applications to Russell Group universities represented 68.6% of all applications with an offer rate of 79.3%, both higher than last year. So, the survey is likely to reflect the general pattern of our students.

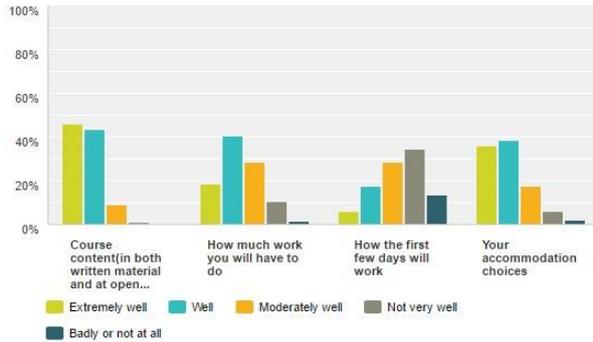
Answer Choices	Responses
Russell Group university	71.34% 1,521
Other university	25.84% 551
FE or other college	2.81% 60
Total	2,132

Quality of information

Question 3 was about information received from the university of the respondents' choice, with strongly positive opinions coming on the quality of explanations on most counts. The weighted averages (where a low score means good explanation) show markedly better results for course content and accommodation than for the more personal aspects such as workload and orientation.

For your first-choice university, please tell us how well the university has explained the following:

Answered: 1,824 Skipped: 308



	Extremely well	Well	Moderately well	Not very well	Badly or not at all	Total	Weighted Average
Course content (in both written material and at open days)	46.15% 840	43.30% 788	9.23% 168	1.10% 20	0.22% 4	1,820	1.66
How much work you will have to do	18.71% 340	40.67% 739	28.73% 522	10.40% 189	1.49% 27	1,817	2.35
How the first few days will work	6.22% 113	17.72% 322	28.29% 514	34.29% 623	13.48% 245	1,817	3.31
Your accommodation choices	36.23% 659	38.32% 697	17.70% 322	5.94% 108	1.81% 33	1,819	1.99

Students are likely to have been reflecting here on information they received during the marketing/admissions time. They are likely to have chosen universities which gave them good information. So, the high scores given for course content (89.45% 'well' or 'extremely well' explained) should be expected. Over half of the students said the work demands were well or extremely well explained, but 10% are negative about this: a small but significant minority who will be entering university unsure of what is expected of them. On how the early days will 'pan out', universities may not be fully understanding new undergraduates' ignorance, since only 6.22% feel well informed, and nearly 48% think the start of the first term has been not very well, or badly explained. It is of course possible that such explanations came after the survey, and following up how students felt later is important. The table below highlights this question:

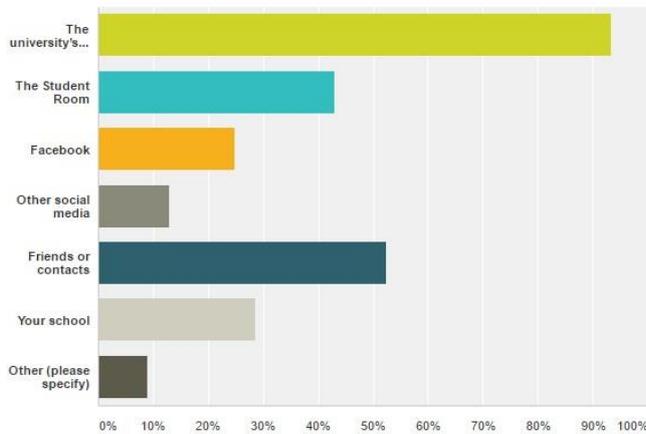
	Extremely well	Well	Moderately well	Not very well	Badly or not at all	Total	Weighted average
How well has the university explained how the first few days will work?	6.22% (113)	17.72% (322)	28.29% (514)	34.29% (623)	13.48% (245)	1,817	3.31

The figure for those who feel that this has been not very well or badly explained is consistently around 47-48% for all school types. In all types of schools the number feeling this has been extremely well explained is significantly lower than for other areas. **Accommodation** information receives a high score overall, with 75% of students feeling it has been well or very well explained.

Q4

For your first-choice university, please tell us which of the following ways of finding out about work and life you have used. (Check all that apply)

Answered: 1,818 Skipped: 314

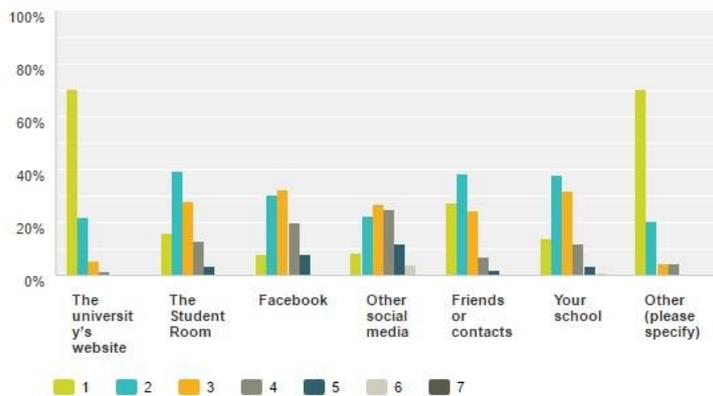


Question 4 asked how students had got their information. Universities score highly here, and schools relatively weakly. There were 1400 mentions of social media, with nearly half gathering information from the Student Room. Over half speak directly to friends and family. The importance of the university website is clear, with the consequent vital need for students to understand the various student areas/VLEs etc in operation.

Q5

Please put these resources, which you used to find out about work and life at your first-choice university, in order of helpfulness (where 1 was the most helpful and 6 was the least helpful).

Answered: 1,703 Skipped: 429



However, when we analyse in more detail how helpful students found the sources of information they had used (Question 5), social media gains a slightly more moderate score, the Student Room rated in fourth place, with the university website and 'other'* rated top.

This is positive news for university websites, since it appears they are able to answer the questions which are most concerning students.

Clearly, too (and unsurprisingly), students are using a wide variety of sources of information, and making nuanced critical judgments about them.

Following up how useful they think these sources were in retrospect will be of interest.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Total	Score
The university's website	70.74% 1,071	22.13% 335	5.48% 83	1.32% 20	0.26% 4	0.07% 1	0.00% 0	1,514	6.62
The Student Room	15.86% 112	39.66% 280	27.76% 196	13.17% 93	3.40% 24	0.14% 1	0.00% 0	706	5.51
Facebook	7.97% 33	30.68% 127	32.37% 134	20.05% 83	8.21% 34	0.72% 3	0.00% 0	414	5.08
Other social media	8.41% 18	22.43% 48	27.10% 58	25.23% 54	12.15% 26	4.21% 9	0.47% 1	214	4.75
Friends or contacts	27.70% 246	38.74% 344	24.44% 217	7.09% 63	1.80% 16	0.23% 2	0.00% 0	888	5.83
Your school	13.93% 67	37.84% 182	32.02% 154	11.85% 57	3.53% 17	0.83% 4	0.00% 0	481	5.44
Other (please specify)	70.70% 111	20.38% 32	4.46% 7	4.46% 7	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	157	6.57

The questions on sources of information seem to reveal a good range of sources used, lots of reliance on the university's websites (which however receive high approval ratings) and much use of social media. With significant development of various student advice apps and websites, it will be important for advisors and current students to review these critically and be able to direct students to where the most helpful advice is to be found.

Later in the questionnaire we ask more generally about preparation.

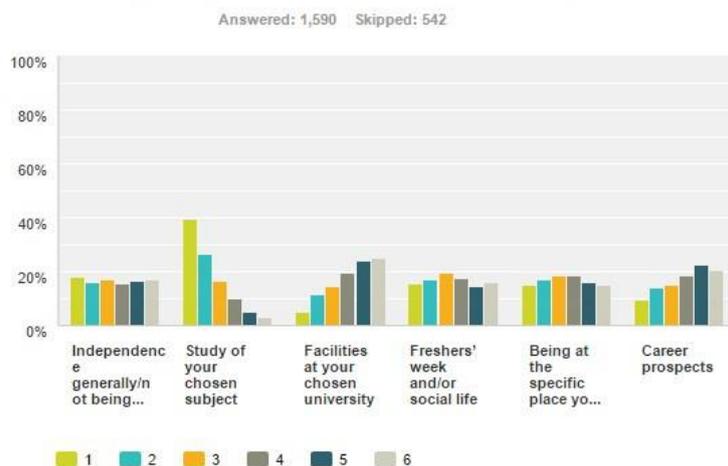
Hopes and Fears

Questions 6-9 aim to get under the skin of what most excites and most worries future undergraduate students. Inevitably these are subjective comments, but they paint a picture of a generally optimistic and positive cohort

(as we might expect) with some significant areas of concern.

Q6

Generally, which aspects of university life are you most looking forward to? Place the following in order, where 1 is the aspect you are most looking forward to and 6 is the aspect you are least looking forward to.



Question 6 asked about areas students are positive about. Their studies head the list, with the highest proportion of top scores and the highest weighted score.

Independence and social life both scored highly, but both also divided opinion: more respondents put Freshers' Week/social life last than first, most putting it somewhere in the middle of their list.

Career prospects scored secondlowest: are students as focussed on life after university as we assume?

	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total	Score
Independence generally/not being micro-managed	18.10% 276	16.07% 245	17.11% 261	15.34% 234	16.39% 250	16.98% 259	1,525	3.53
Study of your chosen subject	39.36% 603	26.50% 406	16.45% 252	9.86% 151	5.03% 77	2.81% 43	1,532	4.77
Facilities at your chosen university	5.23% 80	11.37% 174	14.64% 224	19.61% 300	24.18% 370	24.97% 382	1,530	2.79
Freshers' week and/or social life	15.66% 241	16.89% 260	19.49% 300	17.48% 269	14.42% 222	16.05% 247	1,539	3.54
Being at the specific place you have chosen	14.97% 227	16.95% 257	18.47% 280	18.47% 280	15.96% 242	15.17% 230	1,516	3.51
Career prospects	9.61% 146	14.21% 216	15.00% 228	18.29% 278	22.30% 339	20.59% 313	1,520	3.09

Interestingly, facilities scored lowest of all overall, with nearly a quarter of respondents putting them in last place, and only 5% putting facilities first. Given the expenditure on facilities in top universities, it might be of interest that they are so low on the priority list for new students, who perhaps do not view them as of immediate benefit.

Question 7 asked respondents if there were other aspects they were particularly looking forward to. There were 262 responses (just over 10%), with sport, extra-curricular activities, meeting new people and studying abroad most often mentioned. Societies and clubs were mentioned by 122 respondents, meeting new people by 34, and a further dozen elaborated by citing ‘a sense of community and purpose’, and in several cases a ‘more diverse’ group of friends. One respondent mentioned ‘not having to jump through the hoop of the examination system’.

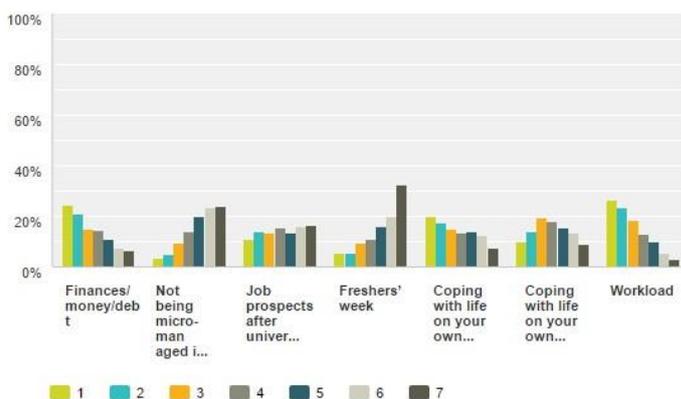
In general, then, the picture seems to be of a focussed group, keen to start exploring their chosen subject(s) and looking forward to the obvious opportunities on offer to meet new people and try new things. They are less excited about facilities, and not even particularly focussed on the specific place they have chosen, and they are relatively ambivalent about specific undergraduate social life, though the general social experience of HE is clearly a big attraction.

They appear focussed on the three years to come (as it will be for most), more than on what will follow afterwards, and they relish the potential independence.

Q8

Generally, which aspects of university life are you most worried about? Place the following in order, where 1 is the aspect you are most worried about and 7 is the aspect you are least worried about.

Answered: 1,572 Skipped: 560



Question 8 focussed on their concerns.

Freshers' Week/social life was put in the list again almost as a 'control': would it gain the same scores when put negatively? In fact, respondents were more positive here: it seems that although this area is not a major excitement, it is not a major cause of anxiety either. However, over 10% - a significant minority – so still name this area as a worry (top or second 'fear').

Money is a major concern, 25% putting this top, and is slightly behind workload, which gains the highest weighted score.

Given the only moderate scores given for how well universities explain workload, there is clearly an information gap which could be filled here: if they knew more about what is expected, these students might worry less.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Total	Score
Finances/money/debt	24.56% 376	20.77% 318	14.96% 229	14.50% 222	10.91% 167	7.58% 116	6.73% 103	1,531	4.84
Not being micro-managed in your work by school/parents	3.29% 50	5.20% 79	9.48% 144	14.09% 214	20.21% 307	23.50% 357	24.23% 368	1,519	2.90
Job prospects after university	10.97% 167	13.99% 213	13.72% 209	15.43% 235	13.46% 205	16.15% 246	16.28% 248	1,523	3.80
Freshers' week	5.26% 80	5.58% 85	9.53% 145	11.24% 171	15.83% 241	20.24% 308	32.33% 492	1,522	2.83
Coping with life on your own emotionally/not making friends	19.78% 301	17.35% 264	15.11% 230	13.60% 207	13.99% 213	12.55% 191	7.62% 116	1,522	4.47
Coping with life on your own practically (cooking, washing, paying bills)	9.97% 151	14.06% 213	19.47% 295	18.22% 276	15.45% 234	13.73% 208	9.11% 138	1,515	4.07
Workload	26.55% 406	23.61% 361	18.51% 283	12.88% 197	10.14% 155	5.49% 84	2.81% 43	1,529	5.16

‘Not being micro-managed’ is, perhaps gratifyingly, not seen as a significant concern (just over 3% placing this first overall). Job prospects, although only 10% of respondents’ top fear, has a spread of responses, appearing in most respondents’ higher scores.

Question 9 asked for any other significant concerns. There were 110 responses (only 5% of the total).

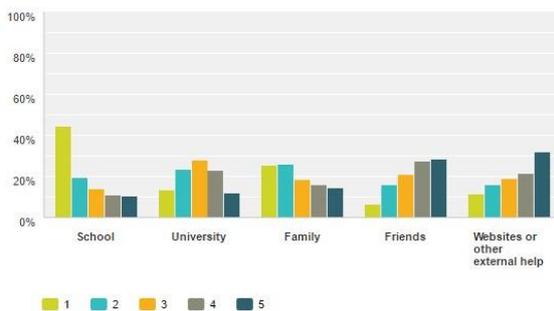
These responses did however home in on some significant areas: not having support when in difficulties, or not knowing where to find it were mentioned several times, health and especially mental health were repeated themes, and racism was also mentioned a number of times. University bureaucracy (slow processing of requests and rumours of lack of support) and ‘not ending up enjoying my subject’ also featured.

Question 10 returns to the theme of preparing for HE, this time asking in general who helps most.

Q10

Who has given you most help in preparing for university? Please place the following in order where 1 has provided the most help and 5 has provided the least help.

Answered: 1,550 Skipped: 582



Preparation: who helps most?

As we might expect, since these students are still at school, school tops the list with the highest weighted score and 44% of ‘1’s. Interestingly, though these students found university websites good for information, they do not feel they emotionally prepare them: this comes more from individual contact.

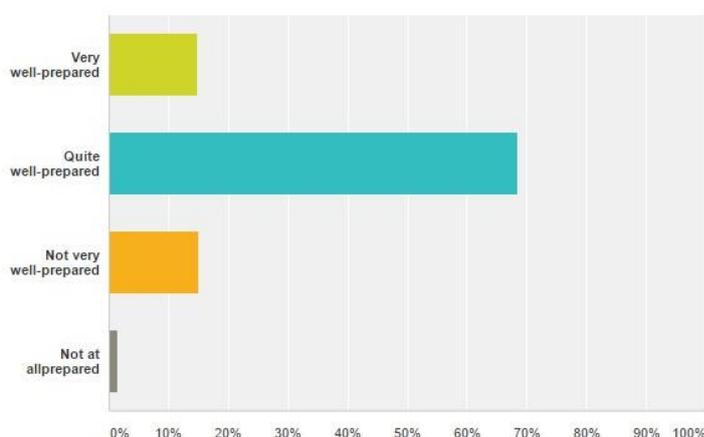
Question 11 asked if any other significant sources of help and advice had been found. Some very positive remarks were made about specific advisors or ‘start-up’ courses (Medilink, HeadStart) were mentioned; there were no mentions of Open Days.

Overall feeling of readiness

Q12

Generally, how well-prepared do you feel for life at university?

Answered: 1,564 Skipped: 568



Question 12 asked the overall question about preparedness. Given all the positive feelings of excitement, we would expect positive scores here, and the overall picture is indeed positive: 83% feel well or very well-prepared.

However, the vast majority of these only feel ‘quite’ well prepared: only one in ten is very well-prepared, and slightly more than that (16.56%, or more than one in six) feel not very well prepared or not at all prepared.

This may simply reflect the magnitude of this step, and it may well be that many students who do not feel prepared in reality

are; it may also be that they do not have the bravado to claim to be 'on top of it' (though the confidence expressed in their hopes and excitements suggest they are ready for the challenge).

Answer Choices	Responses	
Very well-prepared	14.90%	233
Quite well-prepared	68.54%	1,072
Not very well-prepared	15.03%	235
Not at all prepared	1.53%	24
Total		1,564

Conclusions

This is clearly a serious group of students, who have aimed high and feel generally ready for the next stage of their education. They feel that universities have informed them well about course content and accommodation, but less well about the mechanics of the early days of their university experience. They feel that their schools have done good job, but rely equally on peers and social media. They relish the thought of independence, are concerned about finance more than about employment, and are as concerned about social life as they are excited by it. Coping, in all its aspects – work, practicalities, emotional stability – is a background fear on some level for almost all.

Recommendations

Given the relatively small sample size and general nature of the questions, we would not expect to be able to make very specific recommendations, but we do highlight the following points for further consideration:

1. There is clearly still work to be done in clarifying workload at some universities: information on websites appears strong overall, but weakest in this area.
2. Students need to understand better how the mechanics of the early days will work: it is surely possible that university authorities are leaving the 'settling in' time to Student Unions, Freshers' weeks and student mentors, when what students want is for the university itself to put some structure in place
3. Schools can do more work in harnessing advice from former students: these young people clearly appreciate advice most from people

Acknowledgements and notes

The survey was conducted in June-July 2016. Thanks are due to GSA for administering the survey, and especially to the Digital Manager, Imogen Vanderpump, for all of her help.

Thanks are also due to the students who completed the survey, especially to those who have agreed to be surveyed again in the course of their studies.

Chris Ramsey, September 2016