

Academic Quality Report

Foreword

We are pleased to present the Students' Union's first annual Academic Quality Report, this year focusing on a topic close to the vast majority of students' hearts, the financial costs of study.

We know that more students work to support their studies than ever before, and that our generation of students is spending more on rent, food and transport than those that came before us – particularly when grants and loans do not cover all of our associated costs.

It is in this context that we are really proud to present this piece of work to University Senate and ask the University to carefully consider our findings. We fundamentally believe that students should start University from a position of being fully informed as to the costs they can expect to incur during their studies and we would also like to see the University work to reduce costs for those students most affected by additional costs.

Finally we'd like to thank the members of the 2015/16 sabbatical team who conceived this project, and the Students' Union staff for their help in creating this report.

Yours,

Dan, Gwyneth, Joe and Rebecca

TSDSU Sabbatical Team, 2016/17



Introduction

Outlined in the recommendations of the 2015 QAA Review Action Plan is a commitment from the Students' Union to present an annual statement on the student experience to UWTSD. This piece of work is our first 'Academic Quality Report' and has been developed as a pilot for future research and activity. It is also our first piece of research in some time and has been delivered during a period of changing structures and staff roles. In light of this, the SU Executive decided that our first AQR should focus on a single area of the student experience that is key to as many student groups as possible. This area was broadly identified as the cost of study and honed to focus on the area of "additional course costs". The breadth and diversity of the student body at UWTSD presents unique challenges both to the students themselves and to the University in areas such as supplementary funding, and it was felt that if a picture could be built of this area, it could have benefits for a large number of our students.

For the purposes of this study, 'additional costs' is defined as expenditure on the academic experience which is not covered by the tuition fees payments. This work had four broad aims:

- To investigate levels of expenditure students commit to supporting their academic experience;
- To find out whether students are aware of, and accessing, the financial support available; and
- To understand whether student expectations match their expenditure;
- To investigate whether sufficient pre-course information regarding additional costs is provided to students in advance of their studies.

Methods

This being the first piece of research carried out by the Union for some time, it was felt that simplicity was key, for both participants and researchers. Two short surveys, hosted online, were designed and publicised to the students both online and by TSDSU officers and staff at a number of events during Freshers' Fortnight. Two surveys were designed as it was felt that there were two different perspectives to be gained, especially at the beginning of the year. It should be noted that whilst it is hoped for this to have a real and positive impact on the student experience, it is in some ways a pilot for a more established annual project.

Firstly, a survey was designed and released to students returning to the university after the summer break and was aimed at understanding their experience of the additional costs they have committed during their studies to date (be it printing, specialist equipment, travel, etc), the amount spent, and how the amount they spent compares against the expectations they had before starting their course.

The other survey was designed for students starting University in September 2016, and we sought to gain an understanding of their initial expectations of what costs they might face and how much they expected things to spend.

As well as the surveys, this report has also been informed by reference to other research, notably the NUS UK report on Hidden Costs¹, and by reviewing current promotional material published by the University, including the UWTSD website.

Responses

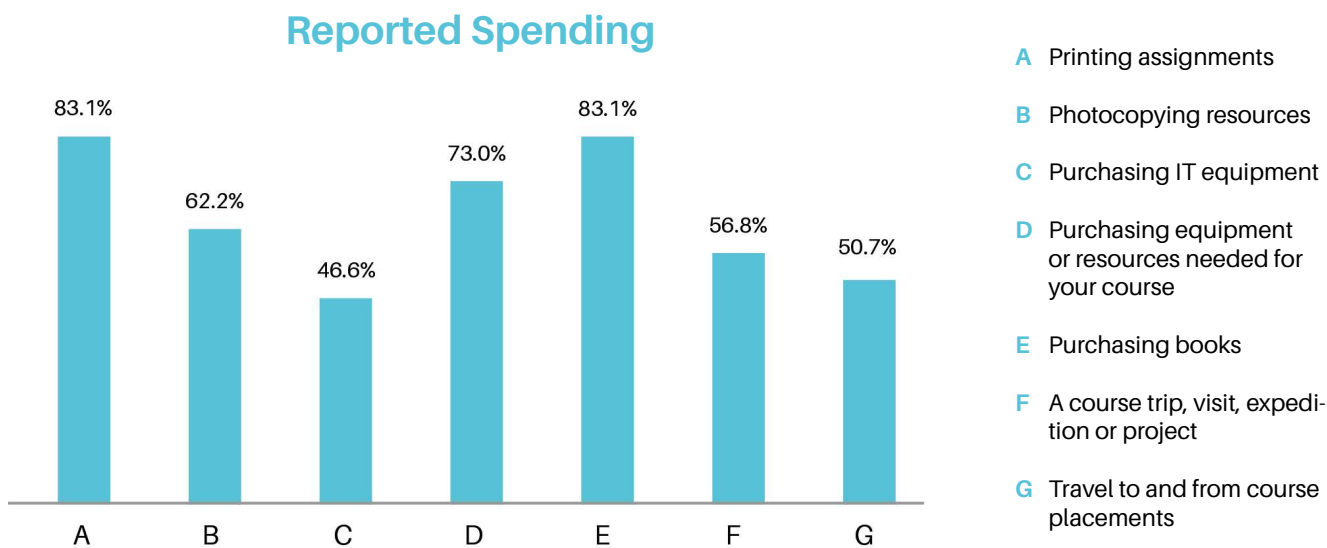
For the survey for current students, completed the survey and the majority of respondents were second year students at 45% and a further 30% were third year students. As well as every undergraduate year group being well represented, we received responses from every Faculty. For the survey of new students, again, all Faculties were represented amongst the respondents.

1. https://www.nus.org.uk/PageFiles/12238/NUS_poundinyourpocketWales_report-English.pdf

Current students survey

Chart 1, below, shows the areas students most commonly spend money on. As we can see, printing and purchasing books are the most common areas of spending, with equipment and resources also reported by nearly 3/4 of respondents. Almost all areas had over 50% of respondents indicating that they had spent money on these areas. Students were also given the chance to add their own comments, and the two most common responses were the cost of travel for the course (especially amongst students on placements) and on further qualifications (for example, coaching qualifications, lifeguard certificates) necessary to support their degree.

Chart 1



Students were also asked how much roughly they spend on each of the above. Responses varied, but for example, the average spend for printing assignments per year was £45, though some students reported over £200 spent. Obviously, different programmes carried different costs. It is notable that Art students reported much higher costs than other students in both printing and equipment.

The cost of purchasing books was also widely dispersed, with some respondents stating they did not purchase books at all, and two respondents stating they spent £1000. There was less of a particular emphasis on individual student groups here, though there were comments regarding the availability of books in the libraries being a motive behind purchases. This was especially true of students on placements who reported finding it difficult to access libraries (because they are off campus when libraries are open).

Regarding students on placements, respondents were asked roughly how much they spend per year on the cost of travel to placements. Again, there was a range of responses, from some spending nothing to again, two students reporting £1000, with an average of £200 per respondent.

Students were also asked whether or not this spending matched their expectations. Regarding the costs of printing assignments, 66% of students stated that it was more than or slightly more than what they expected, with 61% saying the same regarding purchasing books. In terms of the costs of travel for placements, only 12% said it was about what they had expected.

Finally, students were asked whether they had been made aware of bursaries offered by the university. Around 28% of respondents stated that they had not been, and 52% of respondents reported having accessed some form of bursary

whilst studying. Students were generally positive about the bursary scheme, but many indicated that finding out about them wasn't particularly easy, and some mentioned the difficulties of meeting some of the criteria, with a number of students noting that for some courses they fail to cover all of the expected costs.

"If it was not for the bursary scheme I would not have been able to complete my course... The added stress of having to work in order to pay rent put a real strain on my studies. I wish I had known about the bursary scheme prior to my final year"

"As helpful as the bursaries are, if you don't qualify for some then they aren't fantastic"

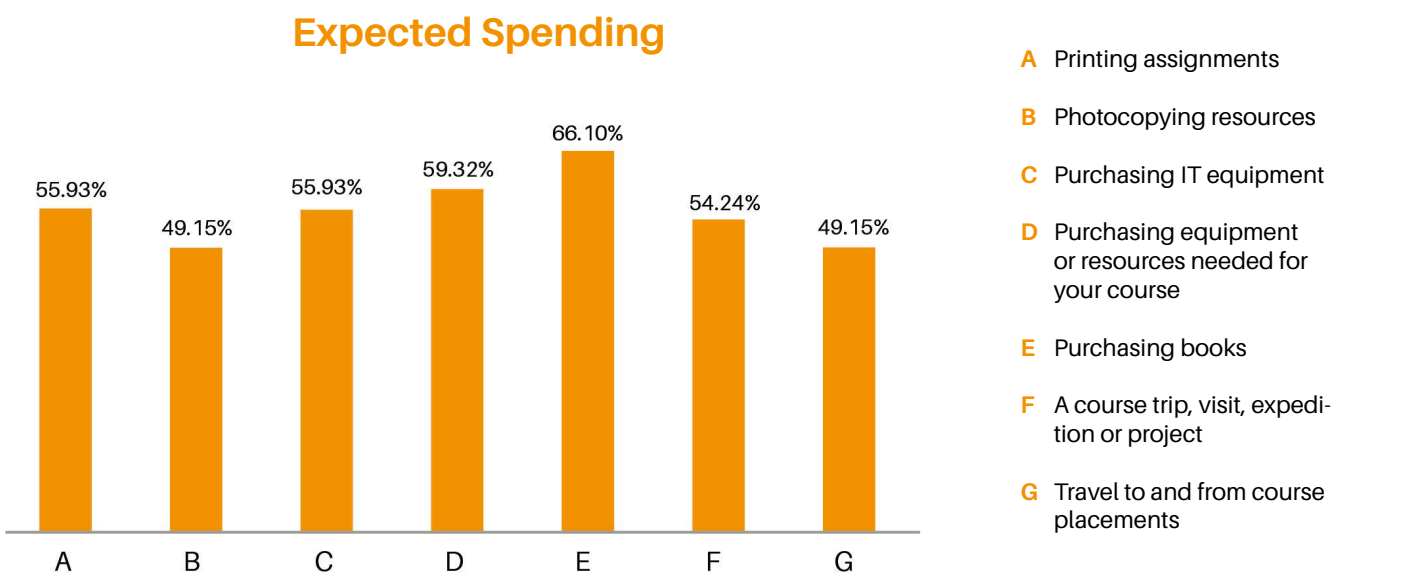
"It's great we can apply for these bursaries but for courses like Outdoor Education it's only a small help to the costs we must pay for equipment"

New Students

This survey focused more on the expectations of students prior to starting their course, and the first three questions examined their knowledge of expected costs prior to actually starting. Over 80% of respondents stated that they had not been made aware of any additional costs they might have to pay, and nearly 95% saw no mention of additional costs in the prospectus.

In terms of students expected spending, almost half of students across all the categories expected to pay at least something on each of the expenditure categories, as we can see in Chart 2.

Chart 2



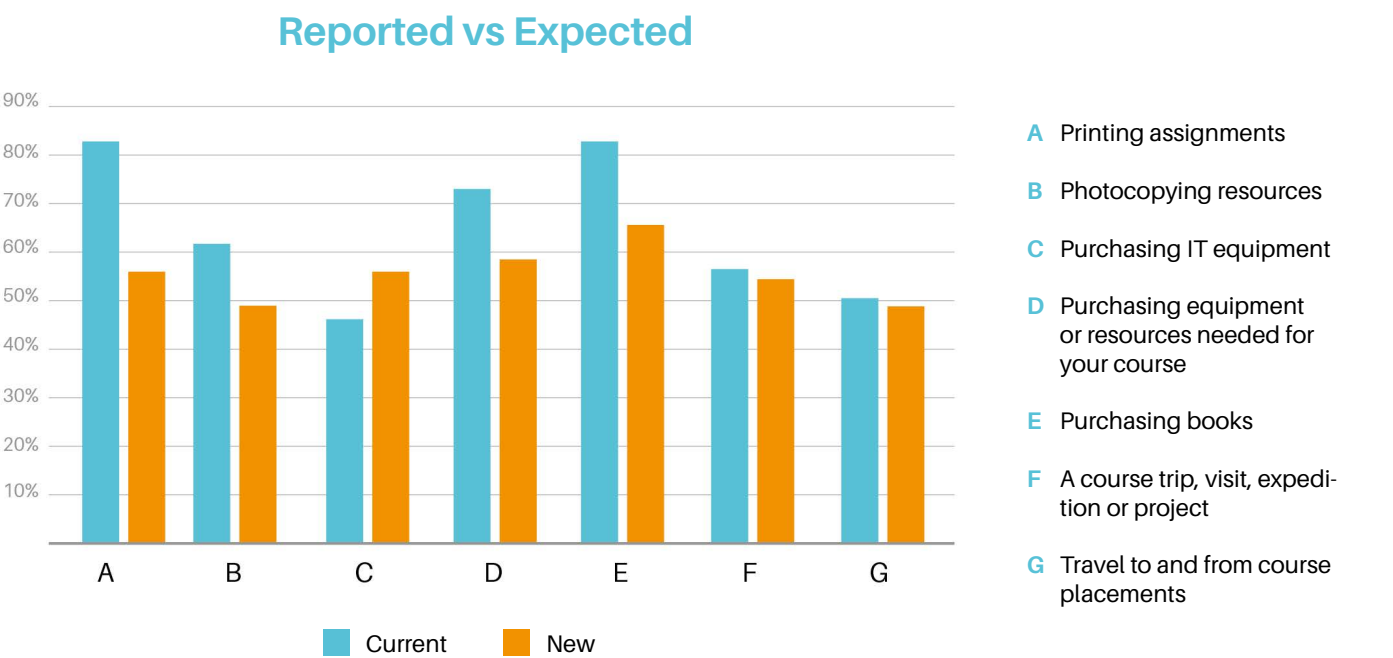
Students were also asked about whether they had been made aware of bursaries. 56% of students reported that they had not been. We are aware that the University does advertise bursaries to students during the induction process, but it seems that this message is not necessarily getting through at present.

Comparison

One of the main purposes of the question for new students regarding expected spending was to compare it against the experiences of current students. In all categories, students are spending more than they expected, except for the purchasing of IT equipment. Reported spending was markedly higher than expected in the following areas:

- Printing Assignments
- Photocopying Resources
- Purchasing Equipment and Resources needed for their course
- Purchasing Books

Chart 3



Prospectus and Other Material

As part of this work, we have also reviewed as much of the promotional material the University publishes, both in terms of the prospectus and the website. We were able to find only a few references to any additional costs involved, and these largely focused on gaining additional qualifications related to some courses in the School of Sport, Health and Outdoor Education.

This is especially concerning regarding the requirement some courses have to purchase equipment as part of some courses (again, especially Outdoor Education courses – one student reported

that they must purchase all their coaching and training clothing, including wetsuits and dry suits) and for students in Art and Design, who have reported having to pay considerable extra costs towards their end of year exhibitions (one student reported his year group having to split a £3,000 bill towards their final year exhibition).

We believe that students have the right to know upfront about additional costs that they may face as part of their studies, and that the promotional material should reflect this.

Outcomes

One of the central issues that we have found is that there is a significant difference between the reality of the costs that students have to commit, and the level of expectations that students hold at the beginning of their studies.

We believe that in accordance with the 2010 Circular from HEFCW to HEIs in Wales regarding the “Provision of information for students on cost of study”², the University has a requirement to make students aware of both mandatory costs (those that “arise from studying core/compulsory modules”) and necessarily incurred costs (“not a direct result of undertaking core modules, may not be experienced by all students, and will vary with students’ circumstances, such as distance travelled to university giving rise to car parking or accommodation costs) by the time they apply to the University.

HEFCW also indicate a clear preference for universities to make students are aware of optional costs before application as well, and many universities around England and Wales do make this clear³ by publishing a statement on additional costs that features on websites and other promotional material. Similarly, the QAA are also clear in Chapter B2 of the Quality Code⁴ that students must be made fully aware of additional costs regarding academic studies.

Recommendation 1

a. The University should make adjustments to its promotional material making clear the general additional costs students will incur as part of their studies.

b. Additionally, the University should ensure that promotional material at the programme level draws students’ attention to any additional costs associated with academic-related activities. This should include mention of the need for specialist equipment, travel costs, or any costs from the general list that are likely to be higher than for the average student.

c. That the University should specify and assess ‘additional course costs’ as part of the module development process, and that this should be included and discussed within the cycle of programme development and review.

It is a matter of luck that at the time of writing this report, an interim report was released by researchers at the Institute of Education demonstrating the likelihood of a causal link between bursaries and academic attainment⁵. The report, based only on initial findings it should be noted, suggests that a £1000 bursary can improve the chances of a student getting a good degree by 3.7%. It also seems to overturn the 2014 study by OFFA that suggested that bursaries do little to support students from lower income backgrounds, and instead, indicates that students in the lower half of the income ranges benefited from the impact of the bursary up to 6 times more than overall.

Furthermore, research from Southampton University and the Solent NHS Trust⁶ demonstrated a link between financial worries in students and greater risk of depression, anxiety and alcohol abuse. This also obviously impacted academic attainment levels and retention rates.

Whilst the University provision of bursaries stands up in comparison to other universities, we believe that this could be further improved upon. One of the central issues that we found was that whilst there was a broad range of bursaries available, the qualifying criteria for many were often more limiting than those on offer elsewhere. The UWTSD bursary, for example, is means tested at a household income of below £18,000. By comparison, Bath Spa and UWE Bristol means test at £25,000 and Bangor at £40,000. It is also recommended that the University attempts to promote the bursaries available to students more widely, especially those with closing dates prior to the start of term.

There are also issues regarding the amount of money available through some of the bursaries, especially the Educational Bursary. Capped at £100, this would not cover the amount of money that certain student groups need to meet the requirements of their course, especially but not limited to, students from on Art programmes or on Outdoor Education courses. We would welcome more targeted funding for students in these groups especially. A final group we wish to highlight is postgraduate students. Whilst the provision to undergraduates is generally strong, the provision for postgraduates by comparison is quite low.

We also wish to make clear that we are aware of, and welcome, the continued increase in annual bursary funding available and are very pleased that the disbursement of the available funds is nearly at 100%. However, the research shows that more work needs to be done in making students aware of the support available.

2. <http://www.cardiffmet.ac.uk/study/finance/Pages/Additional-Costs.aspx>, http://www.hefcw.ac.uk/documents/publications/circulars/circulars_2010/W10%2007HE%20Provision%20of%20information%20for%20students%20on%20costs%20of%20study.pdf
3. <http://www.cardiffmet.ac.uk/study/finance/Pages/Additional-Costs.aspx>, <http://www.glos.ac.uk/life/finance/costs/pages/fees-and-additional-costs.aspx>, <http://www.ncl.ac.uk/undergraduate/finance/tuition-fees/additional-costs/>, <http://www.swansea.ac.uk/undergraduate/fees-and-funding/tuition-fees/additionalcosts/>
4. <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/uk-quality-code-for-higher-education-chapter-b2-recruitment-selection-and-admission-to-higher-education/#.WBnuzdKLSUK>
5. <http://repec.ioe.ac.uk/REPEc/pdf/qsswp1510.pdf>
6. <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs10597-016-0052-0>

Recommendation 2

a. That the University investigates its current offering of bursaries and looks to increase and widen current offerings, especially by targeting students studying courses which carry particularly high associated costs.

b. At this point, we would like to see the development of means tested bursaries designed specifically to support:

- Students studying Art programmes
- Students studying Outdoor Education
- Placement Students

With the publication of the Diamond Review recently, there are likely to be significant changes in terms of the support students can access centrally. We broadly welcome this, as the recent changes to HE funding and support have shifted a lot of the burden of costs onto both students and institutions. Anything that relieves pressure from both groups will be a positive.

However, we strongly feel that any changes in student support from government should not lead to a decrease in student support from universities. In addition to this principle, one of the main issues that has been raised by our surveys is that there is currently a lack of clarity surrounding the costs students currently face as part of their studies.

We therefore suggest the University utilises the time between now and the possible implementation of the Diamond recommendations to make a thorough review of all additional costs faced by students, categorised in the manner HEFCW do (mandatory, necessarily incurred and optional) so that all stakeholders can have a better understanding of where best the University can target further support to best effect.

Recommendation 3

a. Fully review the current associated costs of study faced by students, using the HEFCW categorisation.

b. Develop an action plan in concert with the Students' Union on how best to ensure the burden of these costs is most equitably shared.