

## Students in the UK: some basic facts

New undergraduate students attending UK universities and colleges of higher education for the first time may, depending on the area, live away from their parental home, often in specially allocated student accommodation.

The majority of new undergraduate students in the UK, unless they are international students, will have experienced the national curriculum - led UK primary/ secondary/ tertiary education system. This system is designed, at least in part, to promote an analytical, reflective approach to learning; which often encourages the use of questions and, depending on the circumstances, class or group discussion of potential outcomes.

Annual tuition fees in UK higher education - which were a flat rate of £1,175 - have, since September 2006, been varied from zero up to a maximum of £3,000. Families earning less than £17,501 a year are eligible for a grant of £2,700 a year. This means that in England and Northern Ireland, many full-time undergraduates are liable to pay tuition fees of up to £3,000 a year.

### What can Higher Education teachers expect from students in the UK ?

International members of staff can confidently expect that the majority of new undergraduate students in the UK will:

- be well motivated to work and study hard and achieve a good outcome from their higher education experience
- respect and acknowledge the academic attributes and capabilities of their tutors and teachers
- attend their lectures, seminars, workshops and tutorials as required by their set timetables

Students will, of course, quite legitimately, have their own sets of expectations. These will be based on what they have read and researched about their particular university or college before applying for admission. Generally, research indicates that students expect:

- lectures, seminars and tutorials to be properly planned, organised and scheduled according to the information they have been given at initial briefing sessions
- high quality learning and teaching resources and facilities to be available for additional preparation and study outside of scheduled 'contact time' with members of staff (libraries; computer rooms, etc.)
- high quality learning support materials to be available (lecture/seminar background notes; research references, etc.)
- clearly defined assessment criteria to be available and, as a related consequence, high quality feedback on their submitted course work
- effective and efficient lines of communication at all levels between university staff and themselves

The good news is that the third annual [National Student Survey](#) (NSS) promoted by the [Higher Education Funding Council for England](#) (HEFCE) shows students in the UK do currently have a high and sustained level of satisfaction with their experience of higher education. Overall, 81 per cent of students were satisfied with their experience at university or college. The table below shows the 2007 survey alongside results from 2006.

	Questions	2006 NSS	2007 NSS
		%average	%agreement
1 - 4	The teaching on my course	81	82
5 - 9	Assessment and feedback	61	62
10 - 12	Academic support	69	71
13 - 15	Organisation and management	69	71
16 - 18	Learning resources	78	80
19 - 21	Personal development	76	77
22	Overall satisfaction	80	81

The figures in this table are for students at universities and colleges in England. The survey also covers higher education students in England, Wales, Northern Ireland, and eight Scottish universities. Responses from some students on initial teacher training courses and NHS funded courses are also available.

The NSS provides clear evidence that, overall, students in the UK are satisfied with their higher education, although it is interesting to note where the most improvement is perceived to be needed.

The HEFCE is working with the [Higher Education Academy](#) (HEA) to support higher education institutions in responding to the findings of the survey, and further improve the learning and teaching experience of their students.

## **How much do students know before they come to Higher Education ?**

### **Subject knowledge**

Ordinary and Advanced (O and A) level examination results provide accessible and verifiable evidence of the background subject knowledge, skills and understanding that individual undergraduates bring to their higher education situation.

Broader student knowledge will naturally vary, depending on the specific pre-university education experienced by individuals. For example, some undergraduates will have attended private schools in the UK and perhaps focussed on a particular sport or discipline. Some may have attended colleges of further education and received extra training. But the overall subject knowledge of the majority of new undergraduates can usually be effectively determined by their A-level results.

### **Student learning styles and 'abilities'**

Many new undergraduates will be initially anxious about their abilities to 'write' 'study' and 'learn' in an appropriate way for higher education. They will therefore need structured support and encouragement in order to come to terms with their HE environment and their understanding of their own personal learning styles.

In studies of the reliability of the Learning Styles Questionnaire Angus Duff (2006) reinforces the point that individual student approaches to learning may vary quite considerably. He reminds us that student learners sometimes see themselves as falling into different categories and he provides some interesting examples of their comments.

- "On balance I talk more than I can listen" - Activists can be thought of as open-minded and enthusiastic about anything new; they tend to act first and consider consequences later.
- "I tend to discuss specific things with people rather than engaging in social discussion" - Reflectors prefer to ponder on experiences and observe them from a number of different perspectives. They thoroughly collect and analyse data about experiences and events, to postpone reaching a conclusion for as long as possible.
- "I am keen on exploring the basic assumptions, principles and theories underpinning things and events"- Theorists try to adapt and integrate experiences and observations into logical, complex theories. They tend to be detached and analytical and are uncomfortable with anything subjective or ambiguous.
- "I can often see better, more practical ways to get things done"- Pragmatists are said to enjoy trying out new ideas, theories, and techniques to see if they work in practice. They are practical, down-to-earth individuals who like making practical decisions and solving problems.

Student learning styles and abilities will, of course, vary and change as undergraduates progress through their university or college course, For the member of international staff who wishes to continue to fully develop his or her professional role, the important issues in regard to the UK student learning experience are briefly summarised below.

### **What are the important issues in regard to the student learning experience in UK higher education ?**

#### **Teaching**

- Effective teaching leads to successful learning and:
  - is well-prepared, purposeful and informed by up-to-date scholarship
  - is systematic, relevant and stimulating
  - has clear goals
  - has an appropriate workload
  - has appropriate assessment
  - encourages learner independence

Successful learning implies changes in student knowledge, skills, understanding and attitudes brought about by experience and reflection. Successful learning occurs when:

- objectives and learning outcomes are clear to students
- learning tasks relate to earlier learning and existing knowledge
- students are exposed to a variety of learning modes - ranging from direct teaching through participative work to autonomous learning
- learning tasks are appropriate to the level of the students, and are perceived to be relevant to their development
- assessment methods are clear and appropriately varied , and students perceive that their efforts lead to progress in their learning and to success
- workloads are consistent across the curriculum and are not excessive

#### **Motivation**

Students in the UK are motivated by a sense of achievement and evidence of success. If they perceive that members of university or college staff are supportive and encouraging in their professional roles as teachers, tutors and supervisors then students will usually respond accordingly - and work hard.

#### **Communication**

Cultural differences may, on occasions, make good, clear communication between international staff and students significant and occasionally challenging. Students in the UK assume - because of their primary/secondary/tertiary education - that it is appropriate to ask questions, to analyse and discuss responses, as part of their higher education process.

As part of the preparation and organisation of teaching and learning it may therefore be professionally important to establish at the beginning the ground rules for running a particular session - whether it is a lecture, seminar workshop or studio session. Ground rules might include such simple, basic statements as:

- all questions will be taken at the end of the lecture or
- please raise your hand if you wish to ask a question during the lecture
- please raise your hand if you wish to seek clarification about an issue
- please do not interrupt another participant during seminar discussion

It is a well recognised and acknowledged point that basic, down-to-earth good communication promotes good teaching and motivated learning.

#### **Further information**

[www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/nss](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/nss)

Duff, A. 1996 Learning Styles of UK Higher Education Students: Four studies of the reliability and replicability of the Learning Styles Questionnaire (LSQ) Working Paper 93. University of Paisley.

The LSQ is designed to assess the relative strengths of four different learning styles: Activist, Reflector, Theorist, and Pragmatist. These four styles correspond approximately to those suggested by Kolb (1976).

The LSQ is a self-administered inventory consisting of 80 items, with which respondents are asked to agree or disagree. The vast majority of these items are behavioural. That is, they describe an action that someone might or might not take. Occasionally, an item probes a preference or belief rather than a manifest behaviour.

KOLB, D.A. (1976) Learning style inventory: Technical manual. (Boston, MA: McBer and Company).