



Executive Summary

- Consultation conducted via a range of methods, including direct surveys, face to face interviews and focus groups and road show based activity.
- Students do not believe course based pricing would be desirable as this would create perceptions of value based on cost.
- If fees were increased the provision of resources would need to improve to reflect the increased cost.
- The feedback highlighted disparities in the learning and teaching experience between schools and courses. It was felt that these needed to be addressed to create a consistently good student experience worthy of increased fees.
- The number of contact hours was identified as a key indicator of perceived quality and value of a course.
- Employability on graduating moved from the 5th most important factor for students in choosing to study at Oxford Brookes at circa £3,000 fees, to 2nd at circa £7,500.
- Only 15% of those contacted use their bursary to fund their fees currently, yet 61% of respondents agreed that a fee waiver would be an effective use of the bursary provision. However a larger proportion, 76% of respondents indicated a desire for greater cash bursary provision. Respondents were able to make more than one selection.
- Current students believe that they are “putting up” with a range of less than satisfactory hygiene factors, such as learning resources, provision of amenities including catering, accessibility of ATMs, the Brookes Bus service, and suggest that students paying higher fees would be less willing to do so.

Background

With fees due to increase significantly in 2012 the University agreed to the Students' Union's request for student consultation about the impact that this would have. It was decided that there were three main areas of focus for the consultation; to what extent student expectations are currently being met, and how they might change with such an increase in the cost of their course; how students felt the fees should be structured and how an increase in fees might affect students receiving financial aid. Out of these areas arose the 3 key objectives to the consultation:

Objective 1: To ensure that the University understands to what extent student expectations are currently met and how student expectations are likely to change, in light of increased fees.

Objective 2: To canvass student opinion on the structure of fees, in relation to the costs per course, across the University (should they all be charged the same, or do some courses carry a higher value than others?).

Objective 3: To use information gathered from current bursary students to offer the university a number of suggestions for recruiting, supporting and retaining students from lower socio-economic backgrounds under the new funding regime.

Activity Overview

A combination of different consultation techniques were utilised during this activity. 283 current bursary recipients responded to a direct email correspondence, encouraging them to complete an online survey about financial support from the university. Nearly 300 students engaged with SU staff and officers at road shows at each of the Oxford campuses. 15 students were consulted, through either focus groups, or interviews. The SU also used data from other, recently completed student consultations to feed in to the process, and to support some of the data captured through this latest consultation activity.

Methodology

Objective 1 -

To ensure that the university understands to what extent student expectations are currently met and how student expectations are likely to change, in light of increased fees:

The Students' Union regularly conducts student consultations. The first of the academic year is over the first 2 weeks of the first semester. It takes the form of a survey, aimed at all students, asking what excites them most about the year ahead at Oxford Brookes, what worries them most and, lastly, why Oxford Brookes was their University of choice. This activity helps to form a picture of student expectations at the outset of each year.

A second consultation, called 'All I Want for Christmas', takes place at the end of the first semester and asks students what they have liked about the first half of the year and what they would like to see improved in the second half.

The results of these two consultations help to form a picture of what student expectations are at the outset of the year and to what extent they are being met, at the midpoint of the year. The results of the most recent of these consultations were analysed, to extract key student expectations and issues from the 2010/2011 academic year.

Questions concerning this objective were also included in the focus groups and interviews, where students were asked what their expectations were in coming to Oxford Brookes at £3,000 per year and were asked:

If fees rose considerably, how would your expectations change?

One of the 2 road show questions was dedicated to this objective. Feedback from previous consultations was used to identify key drivers for students in choosing Oxford Brookes as a university. 8 of the most popular drivers were listed and students were asked to stick stickers to identify which was the most key for them, at a cost of £3,500 per year and then at £7,500 per year. The available options were:

1. *Course quality.*
2. *Course/University reputation.*
3. *Level of bursary (financial) support.*
4. *Proximity to home.*
5. *Employability on graduating.*
6. *Location (Oxford).*
7. *Student Support Services*
8. *Availability of part-time work*

Objective 2 -

To canvass student opinion on the structure of fees, in relation to the costs per course, across the University (should they all be charged the same, or are some courses more valuable than others?):

Student opinion around the structure of fees; whether they should be the same across all courses, or different on certain courses, was gathered through the focus groups, where the question was posed as:

Should the cost of courses be the same across the institution or should it vary from course to course?

A similar question was included in the road shows, where students were encouraged to stick a sticker in a box, indicating their preferred fee structure, from the following options:

1. *All courses charged the same*
2. *Price reflects quality of teaching (number of contact hours, academic staff expertise, level of resources required/available, etc.)*
3. *Price reflects course reputation (position in league tables, industry reputations, etc.)*
4. *Price reflects employability on graduating (work placements, networking opportunities, soft skills training, etc.)*

Objective 3 -

To use information gathered from current bursary students to offer to the university a number of suggestions for recruiting, supporting and retaining students from lower economic backgrounds under the new funding regime:

The university agreed to send out an email on behalf of the SU to all current bursary recipients. This direct communication was vital in both reaching the target audience and maximising responses to the online survey. The full list of questions asked, and available responses, is available below (fig.1.).

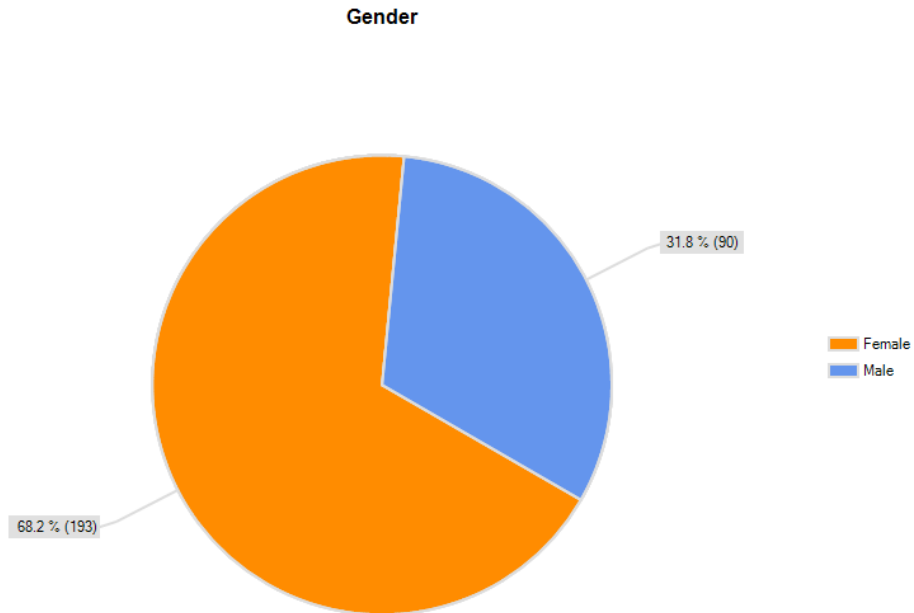
Fig.1. Bursary Survey Questions

Question	Available Options
<p>Gender <i>Radio buttons, single answer</i></p>	<p><i>Male / Female</i></p>
<p>School <i>Drop-down box, multiple answers</i></p>	<p><i>Health & Social Care / Life Sciences / Technology / Business/Arts & Humanities / Social Sciences & Law / Westminster Institute of Education</i></p>
<p>Student Profile <i>Radio buttons, multiple answer</i></p>	<p><i>Ethnic Minority / Part-time / Mature / Disabled / International</i></p>
<p>Bursary Amount (bracket) <i>Drop-down box, single answer</i></p>	<p><i>£1 - £499 / £500 - £999 / £1,000 - £1,499 / £1,500 - £2000</i></p>
<p>What do you use your bursary for? <i>Radio buttons, multiple answer</i></p>	<p><i>Course fees / Other course expenses / Rent / Other living costs / Travel / Social activities / Childcare / Other (please specify)</i></p>
<p>Were any of the following important factors in your choosing to come to Oxford Brookes? <i>Radio buttons, multiple answer</i></p>	<p><i>Bursary level / Cost of living / Proximity to home / Level of student support / Availability of part-time employment / Other (please specify)</i></p>
<p>If Oxford Brookes chooses to raise course fees above £6,000, additional support will be needed for students who currently receive bursaries. How do you feel this would best be delivered? <i>Radio buttons, multiple answer</i></p>	<p><i>Subsidised fees / Subsidised accommodation / Subsidised catering on campus / Subsidised travel / Subsidised child care / Help with finding part-time employment / Other (please specify)</i></p>
<p>How strongly do you agree with this statement? 'If I didn't receive financial support from the university, it would be impossible for me to attend Oxford Brookes.' <i>Drop-down box, single answer</i></p>	<p><i>Strongly agree / Agree / Neither agree nor disagree / Disagree / Strongly disagree</i></p>

Results

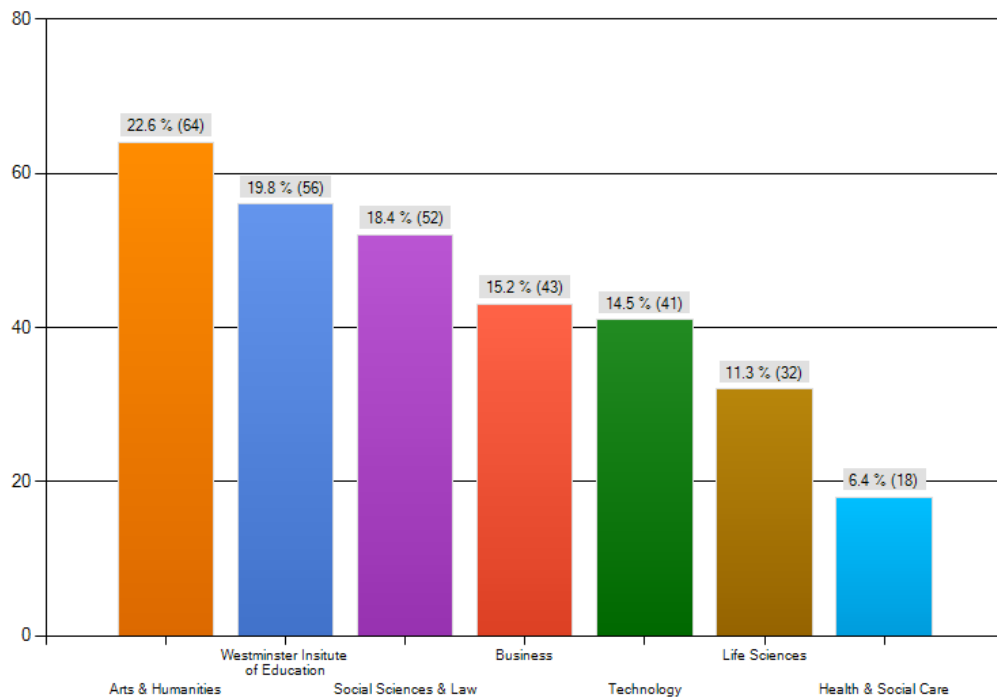
Bursary Survey

Student Profile #1 – Gender

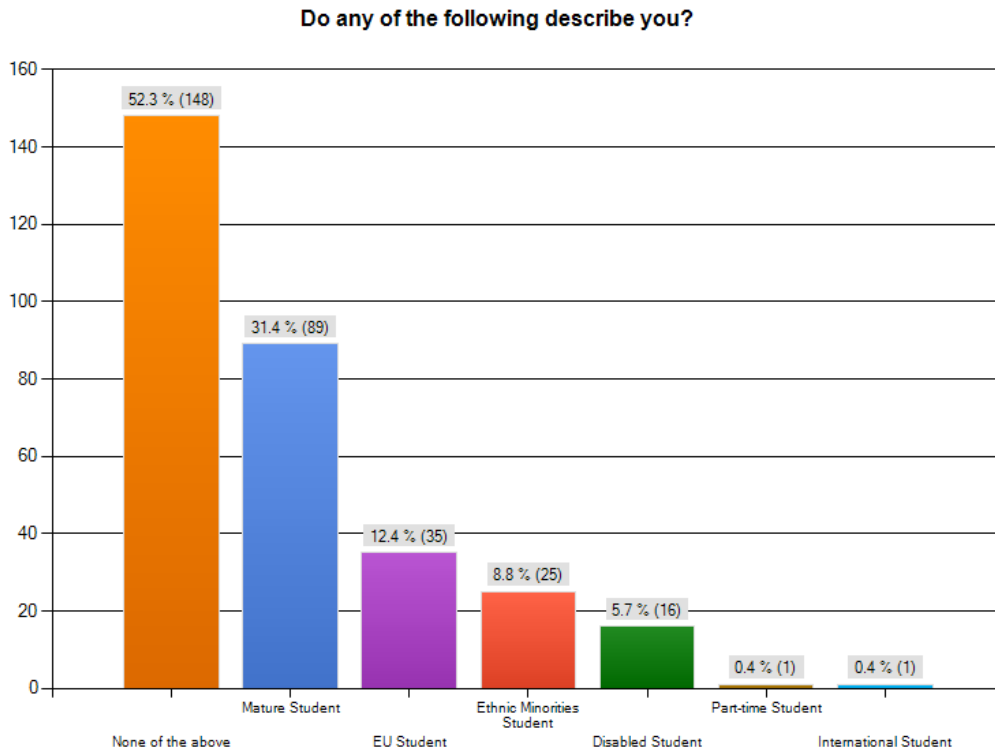


Student Profile #2 – School of Study

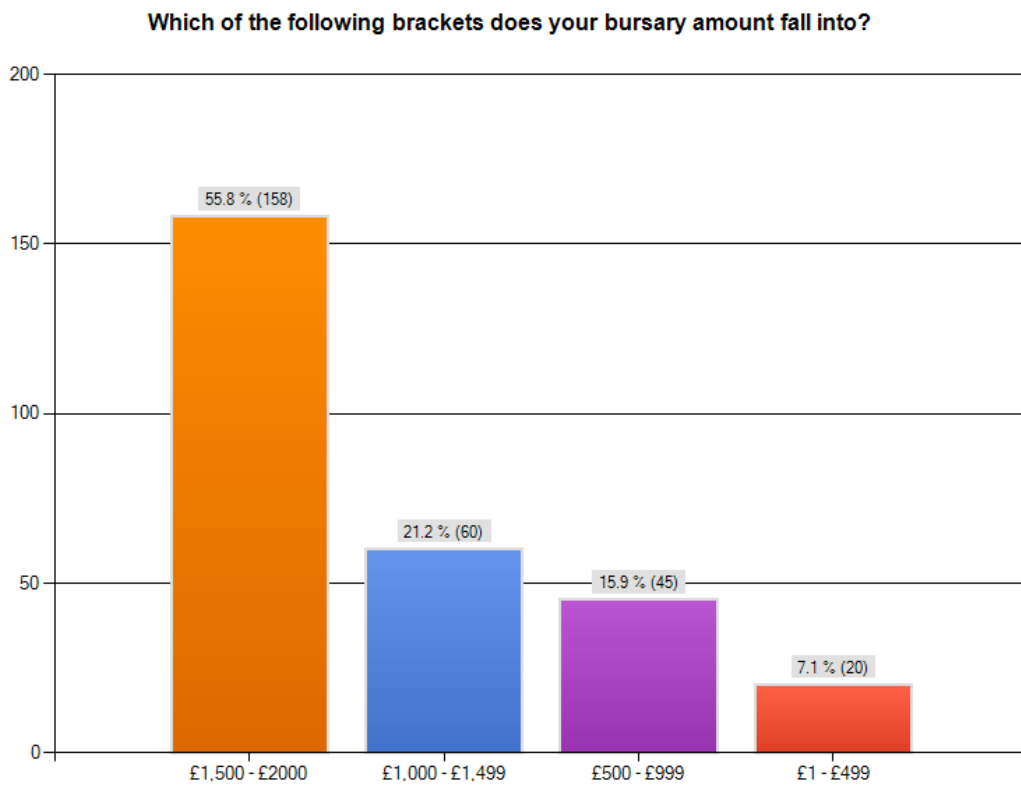
Which school(s) does your course belong to?



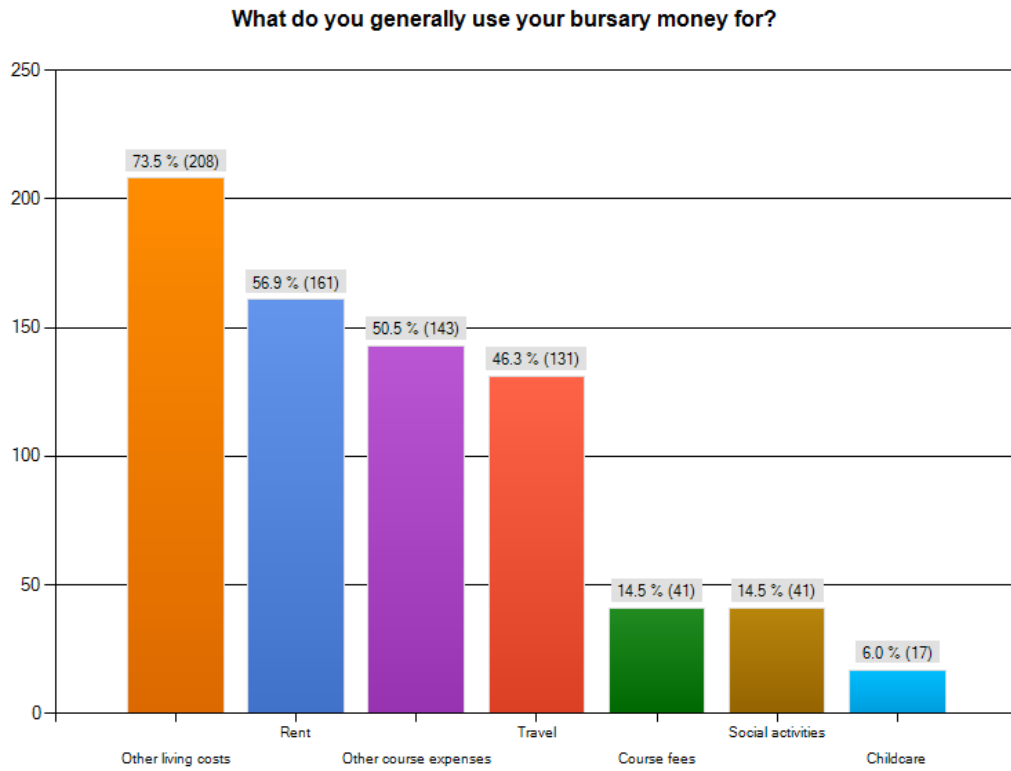
Student Profile #3 – Minority Groups



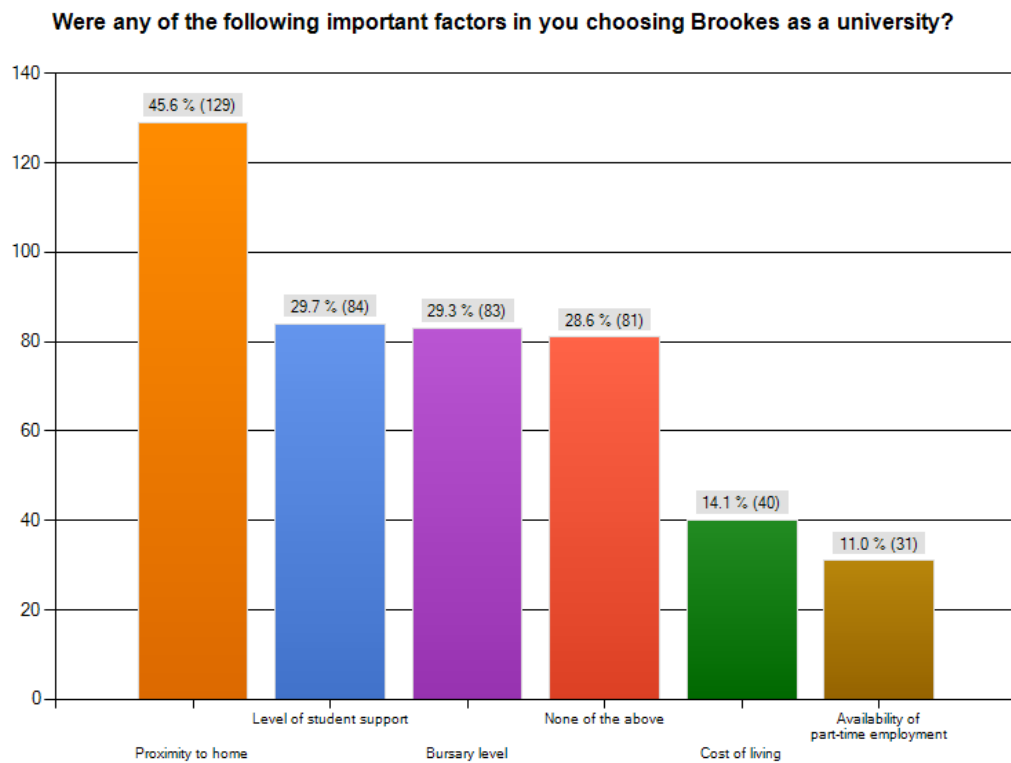
Student Profile #4 – Bursary Amount



Student Profile #5 – Bursary Spend

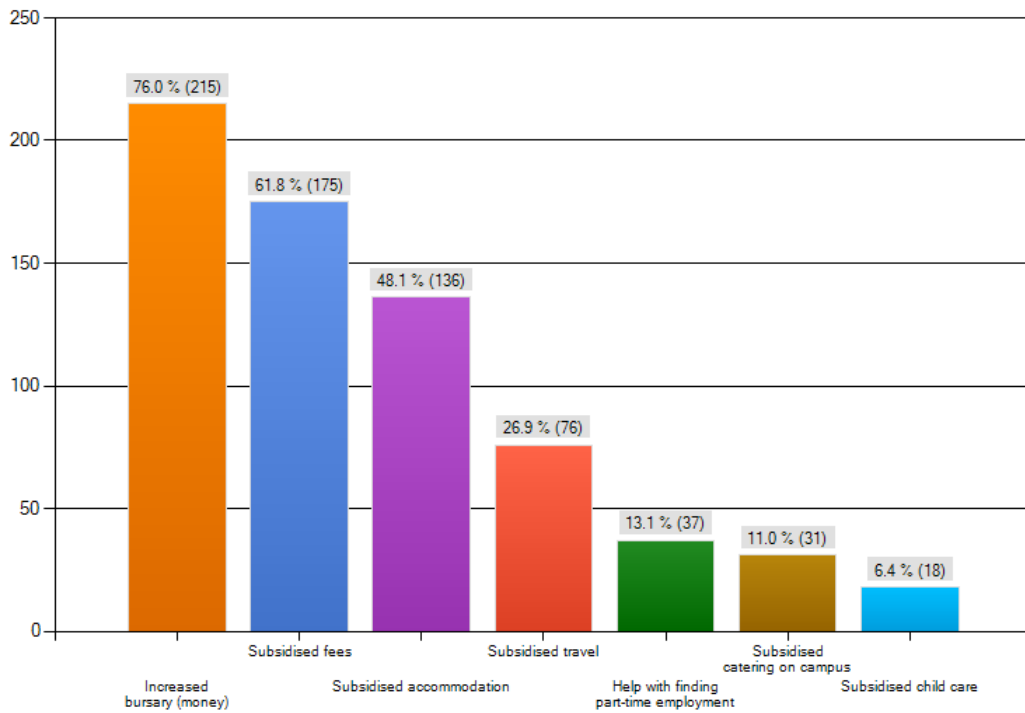


Student Profile #6 – Reasons for Choosing Oxford Brookes



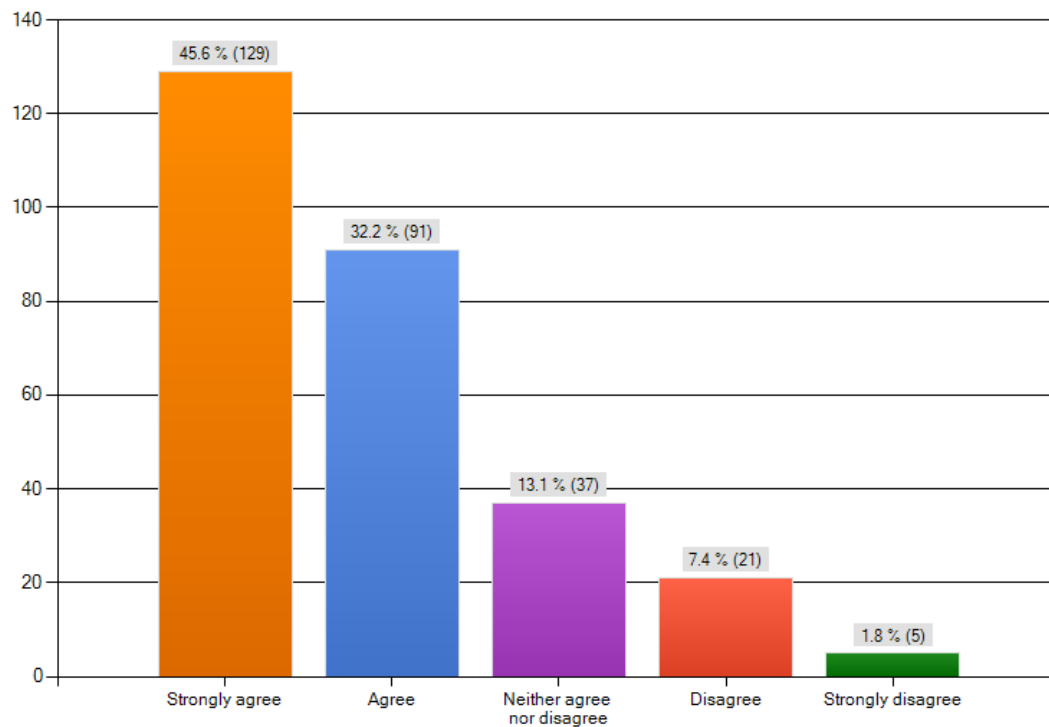
Student Profile #7 – Future Bursary Delivery

If Brookes chooses to raise course fees above £6,000, additional support will be needed for students who currently receive bursaries. How do you feel this would best be delivered?



Student Profile #8 – Feasibility Statement

How strongly do you agree with the following statement? If I didn't receive financial support from the university, it would be impossible for me to attend Oxford Brookes.



Road shows

Question 1

How should the University structure its course fees, when they rise in 2012?	Marston Rd	Wheatley	GLC	Harcourt	TOTAL
Price reflects the quality of teaching	20	31	34	32	117
All Courses charged the same	23	27	28	27	105
Price reflects employability on graduating	11	14	7	3	35
Price reflects course reputation	1	2	3	2	8

Question 2.a.

What would most important consideration be for you in choosing Oxford Brookes at £3,000 pa	Marston Rd	Wheatley	GLC	Harcourt	TOTAL
Course quality	20	34	35	27	116
Course/University reputation	13	16	21	7	57
Proximity to home	7	6	3	24	40
Location (Oxford)	12	7	7	6	32
Employability on graduating	3	14	4	4	25
Level of bursary (financial) support	3	0	0	1	4
Student support services	1	0	0	0	1
Availability of part time work	1	0	0	0	1

Question 2.b.

What would the most important consideration be for you in choosing Oxford Brookes at £7,500 pa	Marston Rd	Wheatley	GLC	Harcourt	TOTAL
Course quality	30	34	22	13	99
Employability on graduating	5	16	20	2	43
Course/University reputation	9	6	12	10	37
Level of bursary (financial) support	10	4	6	11	31
Proximity to home	1	2	7	14	24
Location (Oxford)	4	1	1	3	9
Availability of part time work	0	4	0	0	4
Student support services	0	1	0	0	1

Focus Groups

As the feedback from focus groups was so diverse and anecdotal, it will not be listed here but will be duly noted, where referenced in the conclusions to this report.

Conclusions

Objective 1 -

To ensure that the university understands to what extent student expectations are currently met and how student expectations are likely to change, in light of increased fees:

Our previous student consultations highlighted areas where student expectations weren't being met. Some of these issues were endemic to certain campuses and others were experienced throughout the university.

A major area of feedback was around course quality, with issues ranging from a perceived lack of support and guidance around exams, to a lack of contact time with academic staff. Many of the comments received at the most recent focus groups supported these concerns. One issue identified during conversations at focus groups was a lack of consistency between courses in terms of the quality of teaching. In one focus group, a student had experienced 'a balanced workload, good resources, quality teaching and course structure', which sharply contrasted with the student in the next seat, who's experience was of 'a lack of support, no individual feedback and no prompts about deadlines'. One of these students was studying at the School of Technology and the other at the Business School. It is possible that if these two courses were to be priced equally, the discrepancies between the quality of teaching would be flagged up more readily by students. Rather than charge differently for these courses, however, the suggestion from the focus group attendees was that the quality of the teaching should be addressed and made consistent. This was linked to a concern that making courses cheaper than others might portray a lower quality course, which could affect the course's reputation, league table position, etc.

Construction work received a lot of feedback during our Christmas consultation at the Gypsy Lane Site (GLS), with students reporting that they struggle to concentrate, or to hear clearly over the noise when in lectures. Students also said that they had experienced last minute room changes, which was thought to be due to construction work. This was supported by feedback received through the most recent focus groups, where students suggested that lots of students 'put up with the level of disruption caused by the construction work at the moment but wouldn't at £7,500 [per year]'. Construction work accounted for nearly 8% of all negative feedback from GLS.

Another area of issue arising across the university was resources. Pooled computers received negative feedback consistently at GLS during previous consultations. Students felt that they were often found to be out of action, either due to malfunction, or whole PC rooms used for lectures of a few students. Other resources that were mentioned as being insufficient or problematic by students at the recent focus groups included PiP, VLE, shared social space and study spaces. There was a suggestion that if students were paying significantly more for their course, they would expect the available resources to reflect this.

Amenities proved a contentious issue on all sites. At GLS, students wanted to have access to sustenance and a space to consume it, while studying at weekends and evenings. Students at Marston Road and Wheatley reported a need for more social space. A lack of a cash machine was highlighted as an issue at Harcourt and Wheatley. Students studying at Harcourt and Marston Road expressed a need to have a small shop on campus.

Issues with the Oxford Brookes Bus Service frequently arise during student consultations and although considerable improvements have been made to the U1 service and students are very happy with the introduction of the U5X service, students report that there are still issues with the evening bus service from Wheatley and the reliability of the U5X.

Objective 2 -

To canvass student opinion on the structure of fees, in relation to the costs per course, across the University (should they all be charged the same, or are some courses more valuable than others?):

117 students (44%) indicated through the road show activity that their preferred option in terms of the structure of fees was that the price should reflect the quality of the course. The suggested indicators of this quality included the number of contact hours, the level of academic staff expertise and the number of resources required and available to students studying the course. The most consistent feedback from focus groups was that you should 'pay for what you get'. However, participants suggested that if the variance in the quality of a course could be improved, it should be and then the charges should be kept consistent. This could be possible where a perceived lack of quality is attributed to a lack of staff availability, a lack of support, or a lack of resources which should be available to students (e.g. set texts in the library), etc.

In some cases, however, there was an understandable variation in the number of contact hours, such can be the case between, for example, an Arts & Humanities based course and a Science based course. In these cases, there was a strong suggestion from focus group participants that it would be unfair to charge the same price for courses with much less contact time. This was also supported strongly in the feedback from the road shows, where the most popular option for the structure of fees was that they were staggered, according to teaching quality, one of the suggested indicators of which was number of contact hours.

105 students (40%) preferred the option of all courses being charged at the same rate. Again, however, anecdotal feedback from both focus groups and road shows, suggested that there were discrepancies in the quality of teaching that would need to be addressed if this approach was implemented.

35 students (13%) felt that course cost should be reflective of employability on graduating. Students felt that they would need to be safe in the knowledge that they could find a job with sufficient salary to start paying off their debts, as soon as they graduate. Although 13% is a comparatively low percentage when compared to the two options above, employability was a key issue raised at focus groups also. Students suggested that employability was about the quality of the course and its reputation but also about the opportunity to have a work placement included in their course, so they could get experience in their chosen field and make industry contacts. The results from

road shows also supported a shift in student focus towards employability as fees increase. Employability on graduating moved from the 5th most important factor for students in coming to Oxford Brookes at £3,000 fees, to 2nd at £7,500.

Only eight students (3%) felt that course reputation was the most important factor when deciding the structure of fees. The general feel from focus groups was that issues with quality and reputation should be addressed and rectified rather than the price of a course being reduced accordingly.

Objective 3 -

To use information gathered from current bursary students to offer to the university a number of suggestions for recruiting, supporting and retaining students from lower economic backgrounds under the new funding regime:

The responses to the survey sent to bursary recipients demonstrated a good representation from the different schools and different student profiles. The results can therefore be interrogated in various different ways, and filtered by different minority groups, schools of study, etc. Responses filtered by these demographics can be provided on request; however, for the purposes of this initial report, only over-arching observations will be made.

One important observation is that a relatively low number of students (41, or 15%) currently use their bursary to help to pay for their fees. Far greater numbers used it to fund their rent (161, or 57%), other living costs (208, or 74%), course costs other than fees (143, or 51%), and travel costs (131, or 46.3%). However, when asked how they thought financial support should be delivered once fees rise, a high number (175, or 62%) chose subsidised fees. Although this seems like a contradiction, it could be that students would rather that their hand was forced in this matter, so that they could avoid spending their bursary on other things, or so the benefit is delivered to them more directly. 41 students (15%) admitted to spending some of their bursary on social activities and forcing students into receiving financial support in a particular area would ensure that this didn't happen moving forward.

Other popular options for the delivery of financial aid were increased bursary (129 students, or 76%), subsidised accommodation (136, or 48%) and subsidised travel (76, or 27%). All of these relate closely to the results from the question around what students currently spend their bursary on.

All of the possible delivery mechanisms for financial support received some interest from students and additional suggestions were given in the 'other, please specify' option, including:

- Shorter/more flexible accommodation contracts focused on student needs.
- Funding arrangements with employers who will pay for study e.g. KPMG.
- Use bursary funds to provide students with core texts.

This demonstrates that students have different needs and would suggest that a single solution for the delivery of financial aid is unlikely to cater for every student.

The assessment of the reasons that bursary recipients chose to study at Oxford Brookes, the most popular response by some margin was proximity to home (129, or 46% of students). This would suggest that subsidised accommodation might not be helpful to

this demographic. Another popular response was the level of bursary on offer (83, or 29%). This would suggest that many of the students receiving bursaries could already only attend a university close to their home and with financial support. This conclusion is supported by the results of the question asking bursary recipients how strongly they agreed with the statement:

If I didn't receive financial support from the university, it would be impossible for me to attend Oxford Brookes.

220 or 78% of students either agreed or strongly agreed.

The question asked at road shows around important factors for students in choosing Oxford Brookes as a university suggested that at the higher fee rate, the availability of a bursary becomes more important to students, with the number of students choosing this option increasing from 4 (1%) to 31 (11%). A further 15 students declined to answer the question at the higher fee rate, as they felt it would be impossible for them to attend university if the fees were as high as £7,500 per year. Although these fees are not paid by students at the point of delivery, it would appear that the prospect of paying back such a significantly increased debt upon leaving University will be enough to deter some students.

As in all other areas of the consultation, bursary recipients mentioned a need for a greater focus on employability. One student suggested that an investing in developing relationships with relevant industries, to increase the availability and accessibility of internships. Another student suggested that rather than giving students money, or subsidies, 'the emphasis should be on future employment to re-pay the loan'.

This activity has served to demonstrate that significant concern exists within the current student body about the potential impact of an increased fees structure. It can be concluded that whilst an increase in the fees payable by students is inevitable there will be much emphasis placed on the perceived value and quality of the student experience.