SUN Research Project Report: Phase 2

Decisions, Decisions, Decisions: An analysis of the external factors affecting Uni Connect students and the impact these can have when making decisions about post-FE education

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Executive Summary

Background

This research was conducted to investigate the decision-making process of Uni Connect learners, in terms of their choices for post-college endeavours. It was conducted to better understand the lived experience of these individuals over the final year of their college course.

Methodology

A series of three semi-structured interviews were conducted using Google Meet. These took place regularly over the three college terms in 2019/2020. Eight participants who were second year students on either a business or sport, vocational level 3 course, took part in the study.

Key Findings

- The key finding was that participants received support in their decision-making from a variety of people in their lives including their friends, parents, but also did their own research.
- A major finding from the current study was that all students had conducted their own independent research regarding university options and didn't purely rely on information from the college careers service.
- Both money implications and the location of a university had a significant impact on the decision-making process.

Key Recommendations

- University websites and social media need to be engaging and effective.
- Universities should engage with college tutors to update them with details of the university itself, the benefits and specific courses.
- Parents also have a significant influence over the decision-making of their children and universities should engage with this group to ensure accurate and current information is available for them to help inform decisions.
- Recruitment teams within universities should gather information regarding a potential applicant's desire to be either close to home, or away from home, to help inform marketing resource allocation.
- Marketing material/ induction support material to include explicit information regarding part-time job opportunities and where to find financial support for students.

Introduction

Background

The past 20 years have seen a global movement towards expanding student choices and the increased impact that external forces, such as parental influence, can have on the decisions of college students (Ho & Lu, 2018). A common misconception is that the increase in tuition fees have had an impact on the number of students progressing to university. Yet, the number of students entering further study is increasing each year, but it is worrying that in 2016, nearly 90,000 students applied to university from "wealthy" areas whilst only 30,000 applied from "poorer" areas (Coughlan, 2017). It can be argued that this is due to parents/family influence and the fact that university has not been an option in the past. However, this is an assumption and one that will be tested in this study.

This study will look at Higher Education as the product/service that it is and seek to understand the demand attributes, i.e. the reasons for purchase, (Kuokkanen and Sun, 2019) that affect any product or service and identify why students make the decision to attend university or not.

The decision-making process itself, and the levels within it, are articulated and explained well in traditional marketing literature (Kotler, 2005; Brassington & Pettitt, 2007; & Baines et al., 2013). A key stage of this process is the evaluation of alternatives (Baines et al., 2013) and, therefore what is equally important, are the external and internal factors that affect students when making this evaluation. These external factors will be affected by the opportunity cost of Higher Education; i.e. the next best alternative forgone (Kotler, 2005), the determinant attributes; i.e. the features of the service and its alternative that are most attractive to the student and, finally, the compensatory decision rule; i.e. the trade-off between alternatives (Brassington & Pettitt, 2007).

The goal of the project is to explore the decision-making process and experience of vocational students from an Uni Connect) background, during their final year at college, in terms of their future post college. Uni Connect individuals, as defined by the Office for Students (OfS), are individuals from areas where engagement with Higher Education is low based on GCSE attainment (https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/uni-connect/how-uni-connect-works/This study seeks to understand, through in-depth discussions with students from business and sport vocational courses, how decisions are made by Uni Connect students about whether or not to apply for higher education. It

seeks to clarify the internal and external factors that affect and influence this decision-making process.

This research is funded by the Southern Universities Network (SUN) as part of the Uni Connect (funded by the Office for Students (OfS)). The research is focused on understanding Uni Connect student decisions when contemplating what to do after college.

Objectives

- Document the decision-making narrative, via 3 semi structured interviews over an academic year, of 8 BTEC students to understand their story when considering HE options
- Identify any factors that influence students when choosing further study or employment choices, and the external influences that affect this motivation
- Recommend interventions for the following year to enable more effective decisions and choices to be made

Methodology

Research Questions

The research questions to be answered by this study are:

1. Who do students talk to?
2. What are the main drivers behind their decisions?
3. What factors contribute to the decision-making process?
4. What could be improved to enhance the decision-making process?

Research Design

The study used qualitative methods to answer the research questions.

Three interviews were conducted with 8 second year business and sport Uni Connect BTEC students (In October, January and July) from what can be classified as "poorer" areas in Portsmouth and the surrounding area (Coughlan, 2017). A semi-structured interview approach was selected to encourage individuals to share their experiences, insights, attitudes, feelings, and passions. This was done to gain a richer understanding of the decision-making processes of BTEC Level 3 students. Interviewers paid careful attention to the suitable interpersonal skills required before embarking on the interview process as this can have a major impact on the engagement/honesty of the participant (Flick, 2009). The interview process represented a "flowing conversation" (Choak, 2012) where the interviewer probed gently and incisively using tone/body language to maintain the engagement and trust of the participant (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). This was particularly important as the interviews were all conducted digitally due to the Covid situation and facilitated an effective way to complete the study (Lo Iacono, Symonds & Brown, 2016). Individual interviews were also chosen to give participants confidentiality from their peers, with the interviews following a naturalist approach which focused on the personal choices and experiences of those involved (Gubrium, Holstein, Marvasti & McKinney, 2012).

Connelly and Clandinin (1990, p. 8) discuss the functioning of stories and storytelling as 'arguments in which we learn something essentially human by understanding an actual life or community as lived'. They suggest that narrative inquiry can be utilised within educational research to construct and reconstruct personal and social stories, where "stories are the tools with which people build a sense of their experience of the world and the vehicle by which they share that sense with others" (Berry, L. 2016. p. 1). It is also noted by Connelly and Clandinin (1990, p. 2) that one of the most frequent criticisms of this approach is that it can unduly stress the individual over the social context. In addition, they point out the dangers of 'the Hollywood plot', acknowledging how the narrative can seem to make it 'all work out

in the end'. To avoid this 'Narrative Smoothing' (Kim, 2016) it is important to highlight to the reader that there should be an awareness for the stories not told as well as those that are. A clear indication is therefore to be included as to the narrative inquiry selections made, the possible alternative stories and other limitations that directed these decisions.

Sample

The sample was selected from a combination of purposive, convenience and volunteer sampling. That is to say the sample were Uni Connect learners in their second year on a vocational level 3 programme within the subject program areas that the interviewers worked. All level 3 Uni Connect learners within these areas were presented with the opportunity to be involved in the research. A total of 8 participants were recruited for the three semi structured interviews and this sample size was selected based on volunteer sampling.

Data Collection

Data was collected by college staff employed as teaching and learning coaches in the college used in the study. The subject backgrounds of the researchers are within the Sport and Fitness and Business programme areas. Initially due to the restrictions imposed by the coronavirus, the semi structured interviews were conducted and recorded online using Google Meet. Cameras were encouraged to be on for both interviewers and interviewees. Each round of interviews were conducted in the final weeks of each academic term, December, April and July.

Data Analysis

A Grounded Theory approach to the analysis was utilised, with codes developed naturally from the transcripts (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). NVivo 12 Plus software was used to facilitate the coding and analysis of the transcripts. Two researchers coded a set of transcripts independently, but due to time pressures instigated due to Covid, not all transcripts were coded by more than one researcher. The use of a number of coders would have potentially increased the validity and reliability of emergent themes (Ryan, 1999). Following coding seven of the most frequently identified themes were chosen for analysis and discussion.

To ensure a sound level of objectivity in data analysis, all information collected was transcribed, coded and utilised to prevent any bias and misrepresentation of the data (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018). Pseudonyms have been given to each of the participants to

maintain confidentiality and anonymity. The names are gender specific to indicate male and female responses.

Limitations

A potential limitation of the study was the potential for researcher bias. As the researchers carrying out the interviews were members of the research team and linked to the SUN project, there is potential that their perceptions and individual bias could impact the interviews, in terms of questions used and prompts given (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018).

Participation in the study may have been influenced by the power dynamic between the participants and researchers. As the researchers who conducted the interviews work at the college where the participants are students, this may have affected their willingness to participate and potentially the nature of their answers (Teye, 2012).

Results

The key finding was that participants received support in their decision-making from a variety of people in their lives including their friends, parents, but also did their own research. Participants reported talking to each of these groups about different aspects of their decision making. College tutors also seem to play a major role in influencing the student decision-making process. They seem to be a key component in enabling a student to gather information regarding university courses and various institutions.

A major finding from the current study was that all students had conducted their own independent research regarding university options and didn't purely rely on information from the college careers service. However, this independent research was often inspired/ instigated by the events and resources put on by the college regarding going to university.

Both money implications and the location of a university had a significant impact on the decision-making process. With concerns over costs, the potential for part-time work and the perceived freedom that comes with moving a considerable distance from home to study, all impacting the choices made.

Discussion

When HEFCE became the OfS in 2018 and organisations such as the competitive markets authority became prevalent, the concept of education as a product, however distasteful that may seem, was raised even higher. Before this, students were more than able to "Vote with their feet" (Prensky, 2005) however, with more choice and higher costs, the factors affecting demand, choice and customer satisfaction became more impactful.

When looking at the decision-making process of individuals it is common practice in business to look at the proposition acquisition/consumer decision-making process and also the external influences that affect that decision (fig 1). What is interesting, in this case, is how easily it can be applied to the Uni Connect students in this study when making their decisions about post-FE life.

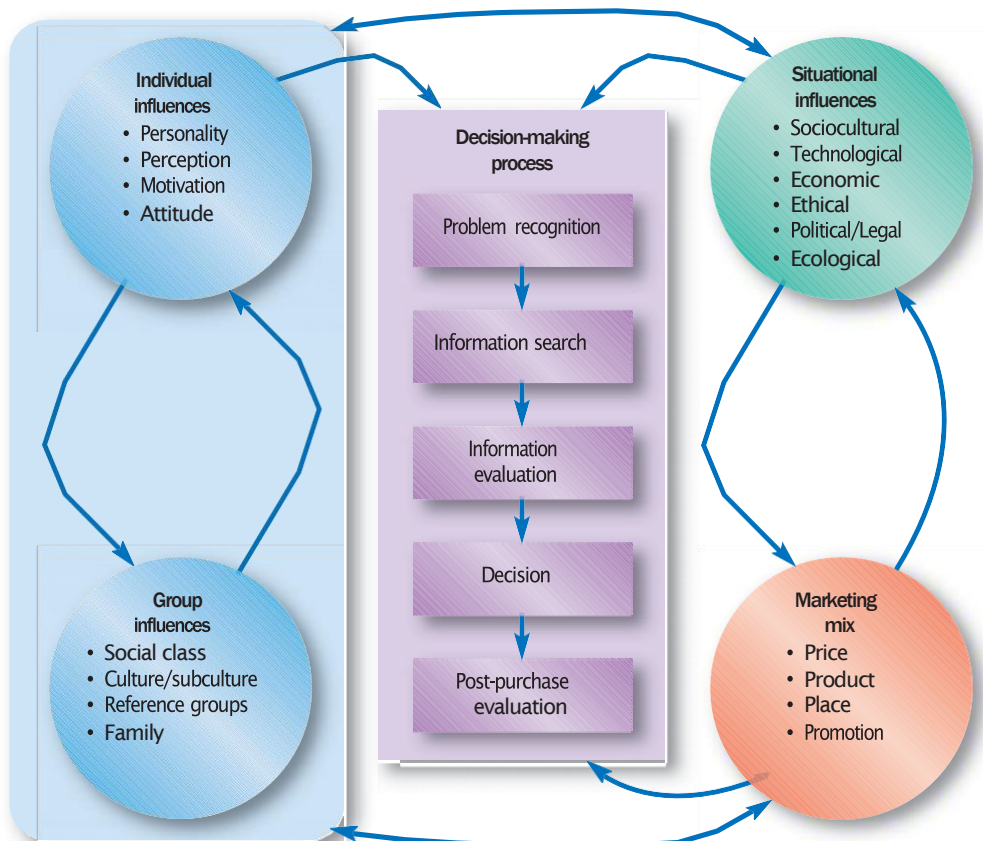The Consumer Decision Making Process

Fig 1 (Brassington and Pettit, 2013)

The first stage, problem recognition, occurs when the student realises that they need to do something after college. Whether that be university, work, an apprenticeship or, in fact,

nothing - they still need to deal with that scenario. Very early on in this problem recognition stage, students move on to information search where, more often than not, they look to peers in the first instance as part of their group influencers. For example, Hannah told us,

> As much as, like, in college I can speak to people on my course, quite a lot of them, I feel like they'd want me to do what they're doing sort of thing. Like, quite a few of them have been I'm not going to uni, like, you can go into a full-time job. And then it'll put in my head, oh, maybe I should go into a full-time job or sort of like following. And I just don't need…shouldn't do that.

The study found that students like Hannah were not overtly influenced by their peers and, according to the interviews, made rational choices based on their own evaluation of information and alternatives. This is somewhat contrary to the experiences/observations of some of the researchers where, as the year progresses, more students seem to choose university as an option. These "late majority or laggards" (Rogers, 2003) are influenced by the idea itself, how the idea is communicated, time and also the social system in which they operate. This social system, the visible progress and elation other students demonstrate based on offers, talking about halls and nightlife, combined with time passing, may have an impact on students who have not made a decision. However, one must remain cautious that Universities do not 'hard sell' a course as it could be the wrong option for the individual. In marketing terms, the acronym AIDA (Aware, Inform, Desire, Action) is often used when designing a communication/advertising strategy (Brassington and Pettit, 2018). Therefore, making students aware that a course exists, giving specific information that is relevant to the student at that point in time, is essential. It is possible that the messaging that Universities use over time could reflect this change in rationale, or problem recognition, to better reflect the changing demand attributes of the students over time.

For the participants, the information search itself took many forms; searching the internet, internal recollections, parental discussions, university visits and speaking to staff. From the results it is clear that one size does not fit all and students source their information, evaluate it and make a decision based on many factors and sources. The challenge is not just the opportunity cost, the cost of the next best alternative forgone, it is the very nature of education and it being a service rather than a good. Services are intangible, perishable, variable and inseparable (Palmer, 2013) which means that every student will get a different experience based on individual circumstances and perspective. Therefore, evaluating information and making a decision becomes extremely difficult and those sources of information must be carefully considered. When looking at any service, such as education, the traditional 4p's (Price, Product, Place and Promotion) (McCarthy, 1960, cited in Baines *et al*, 2008) must be extended to the 7P's to include Process, People and Physical Evidence (Palmer, 2013). Process being how students apply to the university and the ease (or lack of)

that has. The People would encompass all individuals involved from careers, tutors, tour guides to guest lecturers. The Physical Evidence is not only the buildings, halls and lecture theatres but the intangible physical of the website itself. Arguably, it seems the results from this study suggests that People have more of an influence on decision making. Fiona said,

> *...the college has been sending people on trips to different unis so that people can get an experience of what it would really be like. And the people that were giving us the tour and stuff, they did help me understand more about what kind of things I should be expecting if I do decide to go to uni, things like that.*

Here the importance of the People is made clear. If the individual is not engaging, approachable and knowledgeable then this could have a big impact on the decision-making process of the individual. From the interviews conducted, it also became clear that the role of the tutor, in college, is extremely important in supporting this decision-making process.

College tutors seem to play a significant role in exposing students to the potential of university as an option post college. It can be inferred that they are a key conduit in terms of signposting options to students and relaying information. Fiona said,

> *... my law teacher has told me about law taster days, stuff like that, like, quite specified. But then my tutor and...they email us quite a lot about just anything general to do with uni, and we get that fed through us quite a bit, which is quite useful.*

Here, it can be seen that the support, and knowledge about the subject/choices on offer, is very valuable with useful tips and suggestions being made to the student. Whether this is the case across the board is unclear and further work needs to be completed looking at tutor knowledge of Universities and courses. Whilst the careers service is an essential part of the college, students are actually less likely to engage with it. In addition, this study seems to show that students spend longer with, and value, the views of their tutors more so than the careers professionals they speak to. It is evident that students value their opinions and use these perspectives as a driver in their decision-making process. An example of this was shared by Kevin,

> *...especially, my tutor, he's been very good" ... "he gives you information and then he explains positives and negatives for me and then you can work out yourself if it's good. Like, he makes you do what's always best for you I think is good.*

Students seem to be swayed by the tutor's personal views and experiences. They trust their judgement and value their perspectives due to the relationship that they have with them (Giles, 2011) and this can be a powerful cursor to a decision particularly if they have a positive perception of that member of staff (Karpouza & Emvalotis, 2019). From a marketing perspective, this suggests that if universities invest time in educating college tutors in terms of their institution's offer, activities and experience for students, that may result in more positive exposure for their establishment.

If the tutor's views are out-dated, biased or they do not have a full picture of the options available, then students may make decisions without all the correct information. Therefore, it can be recommended that universities look to provide updates, and specific training or experiences for college staff (both teaching and careers based) so that they can impart a current and valid narrative, from potential universities that their students may be considering.

Whether it is before speaking with tutors, or after, the university website is normally the first way that students interact directly with an education provider. Having a website that not only attracts new students but services the needs of current students, staff and other stakeholders is seen as essential in Higher Education where usability is considered the key credential of effective higher education website design (Iqbal, 2012). Adam gives examples of his experience,

> *I went to the X webinar for strength and conditioning, and it was a pretty good course, and I was actually really wanting to do that."…"It was very informative. It gave all the info I actually wanted. It gave me a bit of like…a view of the timetable and see how the courses [inaudible], the different semesters and I actually kind of…it was maybe more what actually goes on at X.*

The importance of an easily navigable website cannot be understated and can be the difference in a potential applicant choosing an establishment and not. Lisa's said,

> *Then their website had like the course finder which I found really easy to use. Whereas I went onto X's website and I just kept getting lost in the website and I couldn't find any courses and that, so I just applied for four courses at Y.*

The detail within specific course webpages also has a bearing on an applicants' decision whether to apply or not. For example, Kevin, in his third interview told us,

> *I looked at all the – what were they called, the modules online and they did cover a wide variety of things as well which was something that attracted me to the course as well.*

Therefore, it can be suggested that easy to navigate and use digital services, are an influential factor in the decision-making process of college students, as this will enable them to receive and absorb relevant information from which to choose an institution, or not. Limited information and/ or difficult to use digital platforms may lead to an applicant refraining from choosing that institution. This concurs with much research regarding the usability of websites as a marketing tool or consumer transactional site for users from all backgrounds (Schmutz et al, 2018; Ageeva, et al, 2019: & Fatima et al, 2020) all of which suggests that consumers will be deterred from engaging with an organisation if the information they require isn't accessible and in a timely manner.

The role of the parent appears to be dependent on the participants' relationship with their parents and the way that advice was perceived to be intended. Parents who acted as influencers, listeners, and coaches more strongly influenced their children's decisions than parents who were more demanding with certainty in their ideas for their children's futures. For example, Kevin told us this about his mum's advice,

> *But I think the biggest conversations I've probably had with my mum. She wants me to go to uni, she thinks it'll be like the best thing I've done. But she's also quite a big person to, like, push me on not to do physio, go onto other courses. So I get my back up quite a bit with some conversations we've had.*

The participants also valued their parents' own experiences, which were often a strong reason for parents to suggest certain paths for their children. For some parents' they wanted their children to take a path they did not take, while others encouraged them to follow in their footsteps. Lisa told us about her mum's support in her going to university, even though she had not gone. Lisa said,

> *I live with my mum, my mum's very open and she will talk to me about it, but she didn't go to uni, like, none of my family, apart from my sister, she was the first person to go to uni. So I feel like it would be quite hard for them to connect to someone once they've already lived that part of them and it wasn't an option for them, like, she hasn't really researched anything to do with it.*

When the parent gives direct advice rather than 'coaching/ listening' there appears to be resistance and internal challenge. For example, Kevin said,

But I think the biggest conversations I've probably had with my mum. She wants me to go to uni, she thinks it'll be like the best thing I've done. But she's also quite a big person to, like, push me on not to do physio, go onto other courses. So I get my back up quite a bit with some conversations we've had.

Another student, Brian's parents wanted him to travel abroad to work which he found difficult. He explained,

I would say they're more pushy. I'm the one that's a bit more worried about it and they're like, you've got to do it while you're young.

These findings suggest that the participants responded more favourably to parental advice when it was an open discussion rather than more directive.

In addition to parents, discussions surrounding the role that friendship groups played in the decision-making process focused on more of a sounding board than an influential contributor. The majority of reference was made to friends within their class, however some reference was made to friends at work, friends from sports teams and family friends. The friendship groups external to college focused on discussion regarding university experience as these groups had individuals within them that were currently at university. Kevin said,

I have mates who are at uni now and mates who are going to uni, not in this college, and they've all gone to different unis, like Bournemouth and Nottingham and stuff. So it wasn't really based on where they've gone and what they want to do, it's just something which I thought would be good and the best for me.

The friendship groups within college focused on regular discussions regarding what each other were doing or had done in preparation. There was consistent reference to the decision-making being one that was individual and not necessarily influenced by peers. For example, Hannah discussed how she felt friends were pressuring her to make the same decisions as they had. She said,

As much as, like, in college I can speak to people on my course, quite a lot of them, I feel like they'd want me to do what they're doing sort of thing. Like, quite a few of them have been I'm not going to uni, like, you can go into a full-time job. And then it'll

put in my head, oh, maybe I should go into a full-time job or sort of like following. And I just don't need…shouldn't do that.

Adam also discussed considering pursuing the same path as his friends, but ultimately decided to prioritise his studies. He said,

So I have in mind to go to Chichester because…the main reason, I know it's maybe not a good idea, but a few of my mates from my course and college right now are going there and I didn't want to be alone. But then again, I chose Winchester out of the fact that I need to do what's best for myself. But I know the courses my friends are attending in Chichester, they're not attending the same course. They're attending sports therapy, not strength and conditioning, which is kind of a separate area to me.

While the participants expressed the importance of friends discuss their futures with, ultimately, the decision about their next steps was not one that was ultimately strongly influenced by their friends.

Aside from people and interaction with the university, the location of the university itself plays a major role in the decision-making process. When discussing university options and decision making, the location of the university was often raised in relation to being close to home, friends and family or being away for the experience and independence. Those students that selected universities closer to home had mentioned feelings of 'not being ready' (academically or for independent living) or concerned in case of Covid and they needed to return home. Some had also wanted to stay close to friends and family. Hannah explained her reasons for wanting to stay at home. She said,

... I feel like it's a bit out of my comfort zone. I still share a room now, I've never, like, had my own room. So the thought of being in, like, even just a shared house with new people or even having my own little dorm or whatever the situation would be, and not just coming back home every night, it just wouldn't…I don't know, it wouldn't sit right.

Those that selected universities that were further away from home were driven by independent living and 'life experience'. However there also was an element of caution as one of the selected options was local. Finn explained,

"[I want to study further away] To experience something new, like I don't want to stay at home the rest of my life obviously, go far and experience life and being my own independent person isn't it...Southampton, I mean that is my last choice, it's quite close.

Southampton is just like Portsmouth I guess, like obviously it's got more stuff in it, it's got a shopping mall and that, but it's basically just another city, Portsmouth is close, that's why the last choice, just to make my mum happy isn't it.

This suggests that recruitment teams within universities should initially establish how much importance an individual places on either wanting the security of staying local and being close to home support, or looking for freedom and 'adventure'; and then their distance from the university to decide whether to target specific resources towards them or not.

In addition to the location of a university, financial implications had a significant impact on the decision-making process of those students interviewed. Students talked to all sources of support about the financial impact of going to university, these included, parents, friends, careers teams and tutors. The conversations focused on establishing 'would it be worth it' rather than establishing the actual costs, how to apply and the time scale and salary scale for contribution for repayment. Brian summarised his experience of these conversations,

Well, I feel like everyone says it's a lot of money but it should, in theory, end up being worthwhile, that's generally the message I hear from that which, yeah, would match with what's been said at home.

In his first interview Adam spoke of the shared concerns he and his peers had regarding the student loan and its repayment.

So, the main thing that we're all concerned about, our whole group was concerned about was the student loan and how…well you might be in debt for the next ten years if you don't pay back your student loan. So, that's something I would be kind of worried of, but I know in the end I can probably do it if I actually start finding a part-time job and actually start paying it off with that. So, right now that's just what the meeting has been speaking about.

With financial considerations being a key focus in the decision-making process, students may require additional time and resources to help support them. Hannah highlights her confusion and misunderstanding when looking at financing university,

Having to work everything out financially and trying to get some support with that. Because obviously, when you start looking into UCAS and you get people going through it with you, you don't realise how much it is like financially, how much you have to pay

for, what you have to pay for, that sort of thing. You don't…I didn't realise how much was sort of behind it and it's not just you join a course and you go, it's a lot.

In addition to the longer-term financial implications, students were also concerned about the fiscal challenges of managing their money whilst at university. For some this was a significant concern and more of a worry than the studying itself. As Calum explains,

I mean I ain't worried about the work because I always get that done, like that don't worry me. The only thing that does worry me is like the money, I know I'm going to spend a lot of that and quickly, so.

For other students like Lisa, that financial concern meant that she needed to start saving to be able to afford university life. Lisa told us in her final interview,

But at the moment, I am actually working two jobs, so I've taken on another job, so I'm working full-time, and then I've got another part-time job at the moment, just so I can have enough money saved up so that when I do move up there, I can go a couple of months while I'm looking for a job, if it comes to it.

This suggests that the financial implications of going to university, both in the short-term whilst studying, and in the long-term with regards to paying back any student loans, are key considerations for Uni Connect students. Although the results of this study suggest that students aren't deterred from university by the cost implications, any support the university can offer in terms of students finding jobs, but also to reassure them that their longer-term financial position will be enhanced by going to university, would be beneficial, particularly if students could have this information during their decision-making phases.

In conclusion, the implications of the decision-making process for these students demonstrate the importance of universities, tutors and others to help students ultimately make their own decisions about what their next year will entail; This support should recognise the complexities of students' decision-making as multifaceted and generally not contributed to one factor alone.

Recommendations

- University websites and social media need to be engaging and effective.
- Universities should engage with college tutors to update them with details of the university itself, the benefits and specific courses.
- Parents also have a significant influence over the decision-making of their children and universities should engage with this group to ensure accurate and current information is available for them to help inform decisions.
- Recruitment teams within universities should gather information regarding a potential applicant's desire to be either close to home, or away from home, to help inform marketing resource allocation.
- Marketing material/ induction support material to include explicit information regarding part-time job opportunities and where to find financial support for students. Probably most beneficial at an early stage as possible.

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