



Northern Ireland's students: key findings from the Futuretrack Stage 1 survey

Report prepared for the Department for Employment and Learning (DELNI)

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The Futuretrack longitudinal study of 2006 UK full-time applicants' undergraduate courses, tracking them from application in 2006 until 2011-12 is being undertaken on behalf of the Higher Education Careers Services Unit (HECSU) in conjunction with the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). The analysis for this report was funded by the Department of Learning and Employment (DEL) Northern Ireland



Northern Ireland's students: key findings from the Futuretrack Stage 1 survey

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Abstract

These key findings from the Futuretrack survey of UK 2006 full-time higher education (HE) applicants focuses on NI students, particularly on a comparison of those who had applied to NI institutions (HEIs) and to other UK HEIs. We discuss reasons given for choices of course and HEI, the information that influenced these decisions, perceptions of the relationship between HE and future employment plans and options, and attitudes about various HE-related issues, including funding and debt.

Introduction

The Futuretrack survey is a Higher Education Careers Service Unit (HECSU)-sponsored longitudinal study following 2006 University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) applicants from the time they applied to enter HE until two years after they have completed their courses. Students who only applied for entry to higher education courses outside the UK or who only applied directly to colleges are not included in the study.

The survey examines when, how and why students make decisions about their education and careers.¹ The Stage 1 questionnaire was completed in summer and early autumn 2006, when most had not yet started their courses and some did not know whether they would achieve the course of their choice. It also incorporates subsequent information about their applications and outcomes provided by UCAS in Spring 2007. The findings presented in this summary focus mainly on students who proceeded into HE in 2006. The data have been weighted to take account of response bias².

The first section gives a brief overview of the characteristics of the NI-domiciled applicants. Subsequent sections look at the decision-making processes of applicants as they made their HE choices, their views about issues related to HE, and their aspirations for the future. The final section before the conclusion details the profile of applicants from outside NI who achieved places at NI HEIs.

¹ As well as students who entered HE in 2006, the Futuretrack cohort also includes applicants who took a gap year after applying and those applicants who have not chosen, at this point, to continue into HE.

² Because the main demographic and educational profiles of the 2006 UCAS applicants are known, tests to assess the representativeness of the survey respondents were undertaken. The only significant biases were according to gender and UCAS tariff points, with women and those with high secondary education qualifications more likely to have responded than men and those with lower scores or with non-standard entry qualifications.

Who are the NI-domiciled students in the Futuretrack sample?

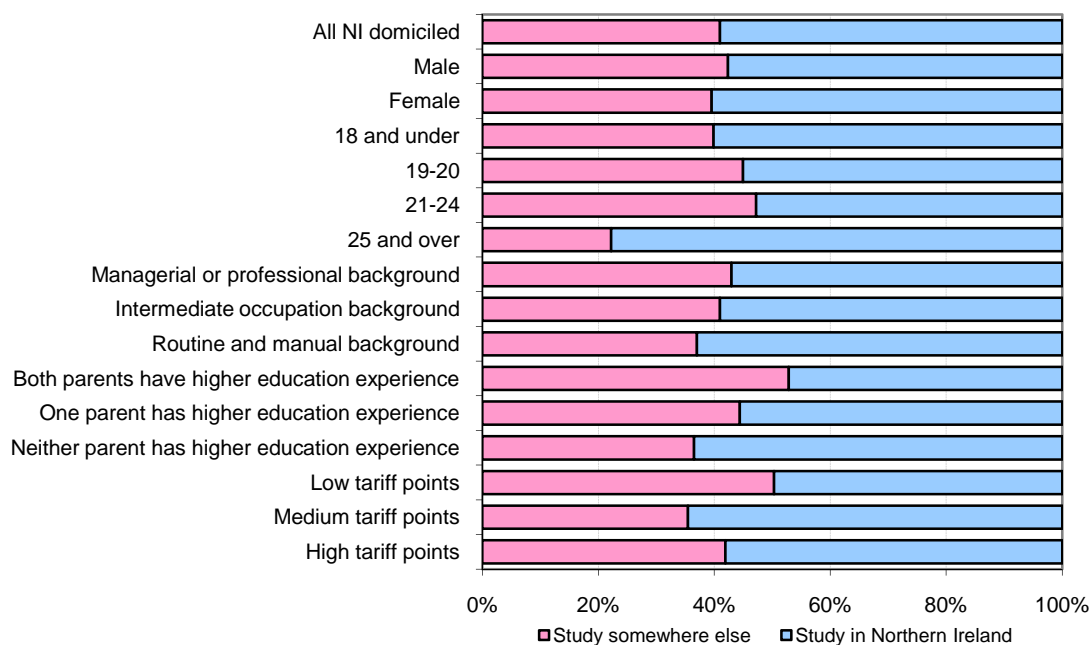
2,983 NI domiciled UCAS applicants participated in the Futuretrack Stage 1 survey. 2,468 gained a place to study at a UK HEI.

Compared to the sample as a whole:

- they were less likely to have entered HE after applying. 17% either did not get a place or chose not to take up a place that they had been offered through UCAS, compared to a UK average of 12%. Some students who did not take up a place through UCAS may have entered HE at an institution outside the UCAS scheme, for example, at an institution in the Republic of Ireland, or through direct application to a particular institution, as in the case of some applicants at St Mary's University College;
- of those who did not accept or were not offered a UK HEI place, 3% had simultaneously applied to Republic of Ireland universities and 22% had applied for non-UCAS UK courses in subjects like nursing or art, mainly in NI;
- they were slightly older than the UK average when they entered HE;
- they were likely to come from less advantaged backgrounds than UK students as a whole; less likely to have parents in the highest Socio-Economic Status (SES) classes and less likely to have parents with experience of HE. 34% of NI applicants came from a professional or managerial background, compared to a UK average of 41%, and 62% of NI applicants said that neither of their parents had completed HE or were currently in it, compared to 56% of UK applicants as a whole;
- they were slightly less likely to be attending a pre-1992 university (44% compared to 47%).

Who remained in NI for higher education, and who left?

Figure 1 Accepted NI applicants studying in NI and elsewhere by selected characteristics



(Source, Futuretrack Stage 1, All accepted NI domiciled respondents, weighted)

Just under 60 per cent of NI domiciled applicants who gained and accepted UK HEI places had places at an HEI in NI. Those who left NI were most likely to have accepted a place to study in Scotland. Merseyside, the North West and North East of England were also significant receiving regions.

Younger students - those aged 18 and under, and older applicants - those aged 25 and over, were most likely to remain in NI.

Applicants from higher socio-economic backgrounds appeared only slightly more likely to leave NI for HE than others, with students from the highest socio-economic groups a little more likely to study in other UK HEIs (43% compared to an average of 41%), but the significance of parental experience of HE was considerably greater (53% compared to 37% of applicants whose parents had no experience of HE went to other UK countries).

According to their entry qualifications, the students studying outside NI were somewhat polarised in their motivations for entering HE and their subject choices, as will be discussed below. Students with low entry tariff points were disproportionately likely to study outside NI; possibly in many cases, as the following quote illustrates, because they could not gain a place to study at an NI institution. Students with high tariff points were also more likely to have accepted a place to study in other parts of the UK.

"I could not get accepted in to a University in NI which was very disappointing. I would have preferred to have studied at home but the criteria here [are] so rigid." [Female, 31 and over, did not enter HE]

81% of accepted students remaining in NI were accepted at their first choice HEI, compared with only 74% of those had accepted a place to study outside NI. The high proportion of students with low tariff points studying outside NI may account for this difference, along with the likelihood that the students with high tariff points were more likely to have applied to study a subject such as medicine and dentistry, for which there is higher competition for places and more opportunities for those prepared to go further afield.

Students with places to study outside NI were somewhat more self-confident than those remaining in NI, which probably also reflects likelihood of their relative familiarity with higher education as a result of greater likelihood of family and social network members' experience of it. Leaving familiar surroundings requires a certain level of self-confidence. Exactly half of those with places to study outside NI rated their self-confidence as excellent or very good, compared to 46% of those remaining (an average of 48% for UK students as a whole). Despite this, several students who had accepted a place to study outside NI were both excited and worried by the prospect of leaving NI.

"I am excited about my future in higher education, but nervous and worried about moving to Scotland, although I know it will benefit me greatly in the future." [Female, 18 and under, Business and Administration, UK Pre 92 University]

"The overwhelming independence of moving country to study is certainly a little intimidating but I'm hoping the enjoyment of my time will by far outweigh the burden of having to adapt to a new life. I'm very confident that my university years will be some of the best in my life and can't wait to start." [Male, 18 and under, Mathematics and Computing Science, UK Russell Group University]

What were the reasons behind NI-domiciled students' choices about higher education?

When making choices about HE, NI applicants were slightly more likely than UK students as a whole to be motivated by employment related reasons. In some cases, these reasons were connected to the desire to enter a particular profession, while in others, decision-making was influenced by more general concerns about getting a good job in the future. The likelihood of being able to get a good job was an important concern for NI students, along with whether the cost incurred by HE participation would be recouped in additional earnings after graduation.

NI-domiciled students' reasons for entering HE were similar to those of the UK sample as a whole. The most frequently mentioned reasons were 'I think it will lead to a good job' (82%), 'it is part of my long-term career plans' (77%) and 'I want to study the particular subject or course' (69%).

However NI students were slightly more likely than the UK average to give employment-related reasons for entering HE, and slightly less likely to say they chose to enter HE because they wanted to study a particular subject or course. When asked their main reason for entering HE, the proportion saying that they did so to enable themselves to get a good job was 5 percentage points higher for the accepted NI students than UK students, with 27% giving this as their main reason. However, several NI students expressed concerns about whether HE would turn out to be the route into a good job that they had once imagined.

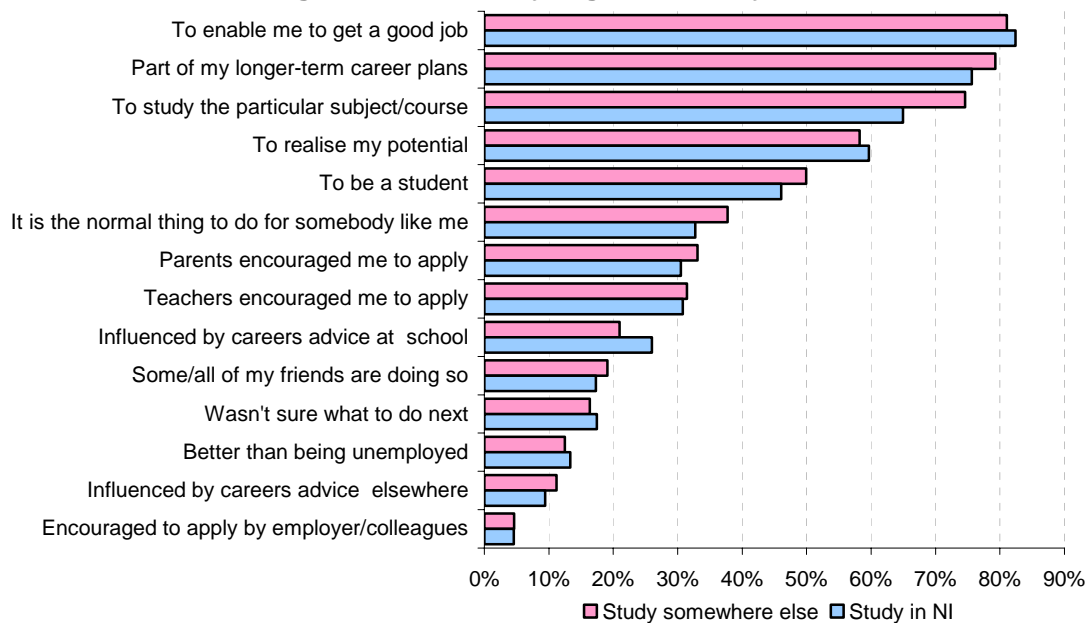
“Higher Education is falsely advertised to be the key to any career future for students. Lecturers and teachers emphasise its importance to students, when it is not essential. Fees are very high for upcoming students and most do not realise what they are left with after the higher education process. With growing monetary inflation and growth in population jobs are NOT as readily available as it is made out and the fees students are left with can be overwhelming. There are too many highly qualified people doing mediocre jobs because they were misinformed.” [Male, 19-20, Mass Communications and Documentation, UK Post 92 University]

“It scares me that nothing is really guaranteed even if you do have impressive qualifications. Whether it is a vocational or non-vocational degree there is still a level of uncertainty that you may not get a job in the end, despite investing so much time and effort into your education. I think in many ways higher education is becoming more and more unattractive. Trades perhaps have a far brighter future” [Female, 19-20, Subjects allied with Medicine, NI University]

NI students were also slightly more likely than UK students as a whole to say one of their motivations for applying to enter HE was the support or information provided by other people, such as teachers and careers advisors.

“We were encouraged to apply for university as it’s ‘the right thing to do’. While I largely agree with this, I believe more time should have been spent by advisers explaining WHY it’s the right thing to do.” [Male, 19-20, Business and Administration, NI University]

Figure 2 All reasons of NI-domiciled accepted applicants for choosing to enter higher education by region of study



(Source, Futuretrack Stage 1, All accepted NI domiciled respondents, weighted)

As **Figure 2** shows, accepted applicants for HEI places elsewhere in the UK were more likely to say they were motivated to enter HE because they wanted to study a particular subject or course. Three quarters of applicants with places to study outside NI chose this as one of their reasons for entering HE, compared to 65% of those who had accepted places to study in NI; 19% of students who had accepted places to study outside NI said that their main reason for entering HE was to study a particular subject, compared to 13% of NI students who had accepted places to study in NI.

Students who had accepted places to study outside NI were also more likely to mention being encouraged to apply by parents or teachers and to say that some or all of their friends were going on to HE and that it was a normal thing for someone like them to do. This is in keeping with the findings outlined above. The students who were leaving NI to study tended to come from backgrounds with a tradition of HE and these students would be more likely to be expected to enter HE by the people around them simply because of this tradition. Students remaining in NI to study were much more likely to say they had been motivated by careers information or advice provided by their school, which highlights the potential importance of this kind of advice for those who come from backgrounds with less tradition of HE participation.

NI students who had accepted a place to study in NI were more likely than those who had accepted a place to study outside NI to say their main reason for entering HE was to get a good job; 29% of NI domiciled applicants with NI HEI places gave this as their main reason, compared to 23% of those who had accepted places to study outside NI. There was a much smaller difference between the two groups when looking at the proportions who selected the other employment-related category, 'it is part of my long-term career plans', although students who had accepted a place to study outside NI appeared marginally more likely to select this option, with 79% giving it as one of their reasons for entering HE and 35% giving it as their main reason, compared to figures of 77% and 33% respectively for students who had accepted places to study in NI. This emphasis on getting an unspecified 'good job', rather than wanting to enter a specific named career may reflect the general anxiety expressed by many NI students about the NI economy and the impact this will have on their employment prospects.

"It's so expensive and there isn't a guarantee of the better job that you thought that you should get after HE" [Female, 21-24, Social Studies, NI University]

NI students' reasons for choosing their course were also mainly focused on related job prospects and enjoyment of the subject. The most commonly given reasons for choosing their course were interest in the content of the course (78%), enjoying studying the subject (70%) and two employment related reasons; thinking the course will lead to good job prospects (58%) and needing to complete the course to enter a particular profession or occupation (49%). Enjoyment of the course (31%) and needing to complete the course to enter a particular occupation or profession (25%) were the most commonly given main reasons for choosing a particular course.

NI applicants were again more likely than the UK applicants as a whole to mention employment prospects as the main reason for choosing their course. UK students were more likely than NI students to give enjoyment of the subject as one of their reasons for choosing their course, with 78% doing so compared to 71% of NI students giving this as one of their reasons for choosing their course, and 39% giving it as their main reason, compared to 33% of NI students. The two employment-related categories accounted for 37% of NI students' main reasons for choosing a course, compared to 33% of all UK students.

"I wanted to choose a course which would result in a job directly related to the course i.e. accounting degree [to] become an accountant: there is no thought or choice involved. It is considered to result in good, well-paying employment - I really didn't know what I wanted to do so I decided to go for a career that would easily pay off student loans etc."
[Female, 18 and under, Business and Administration, NI University]

However, some respondents were critical of this emphasis on job prospects when choosing courses.

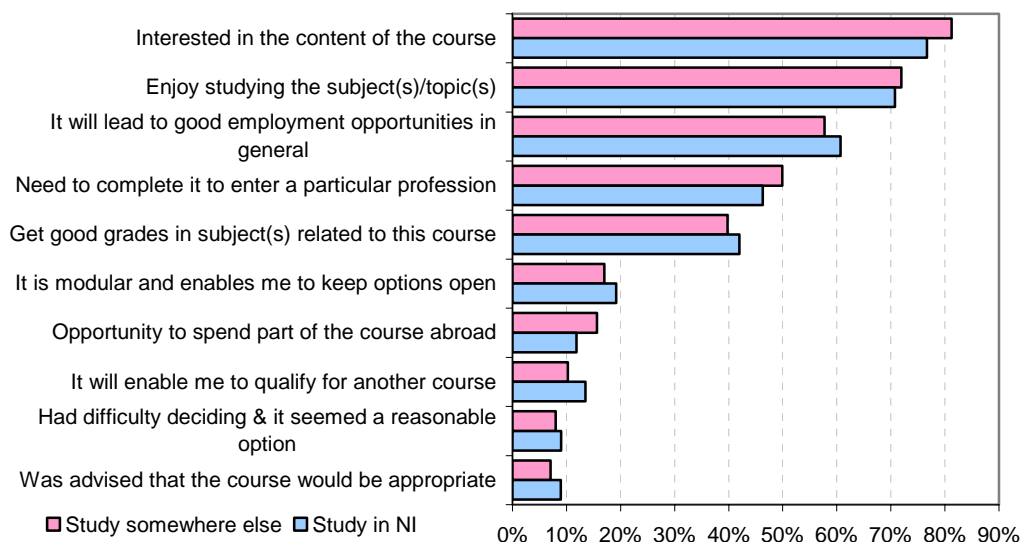
“The pressure of university fees on students affects their choices on subjects to those that will assure them a good career on graduating. This has a great affect on the types and backgrounds of students studying certain arts subjects and shall have a profound affect on our cultural wealth!” [Female, 25 and over, did not enter HE]

As **Figure 3** shows, NI applicants who had accepted places to study outside NI were again more likely to mention their need to complete the course they had chosen as part of their long-term career plans. The proportion saying that they had chosen a particular course because they needed it to enter a particular profession was 4 percentage points higher for applicants who had accepted places to study outside NI (50% compared to 46%), and 3 percentage points more applicants who had accepted places to study outside NI said this was their main reason for choosing their course (25% compared to 22%). As will be seen later, students who were leaving NI were slightly more likely to be studying subjects like medicine, dentistry and veterinary science which are necessary for entry into specific professions. These subjects are not taught at all HEIs and there is greater demand for them than places available. It is possible that applicants are going to other UK locations due to a lack of supply of these courses in NI, particularly in the case of veterinary science which is not available in NI.

“I feel that I will almost certainly get a job once I have completed the course in Civil Engineering. Other University subjects (e.g. Psychology, History) do not offer almost guaranteed employment in any profession; I feel that Civil Engineering does.” [Male, 21-24, Engineering and Technologies, UK Russell Group University]

Students who had accepted places to study outside NI were also more likely to say that they had chosen the course because they were interested in its content. Applicants who had accepted places to study in NI were more likely to select reasons that had a broader scope. They were more likely to say they chose their course because it would lead to good employment prospects in general, rather than those related to a specific career; and to have chosen their course because they enjoyed the subject, rather than because of the specific content of the course.

Figure 3 All reasons of NI-domiciled accepted applicants for choosing course

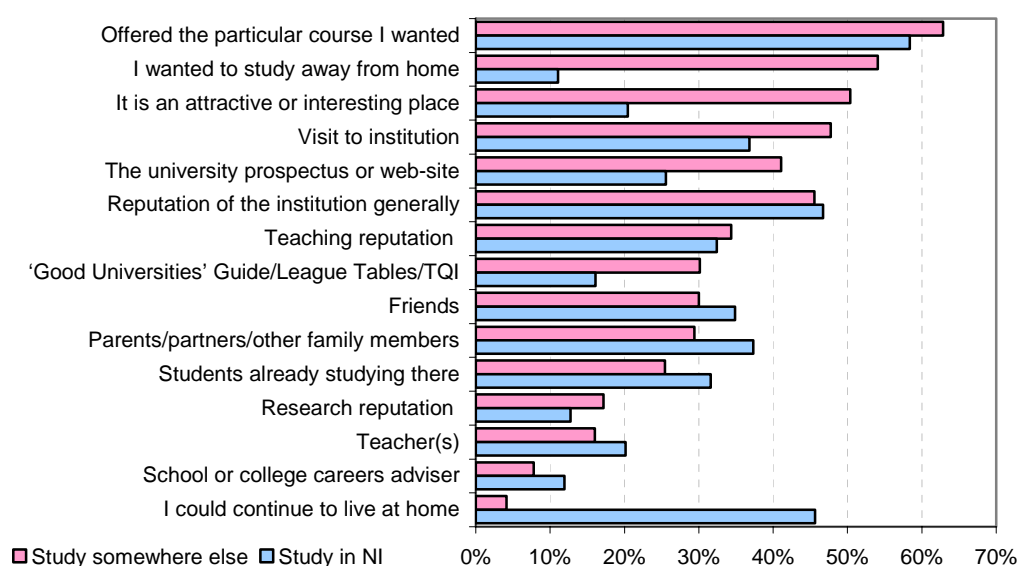


(Source, Futuretrack Stage 1, All accepted NI domiciled respondents, weighted)

When choosing their HEI, NI applicants were more likely than UK applicants as a whole to be motivated by the opinion of other people that they knew and less likely to be motivated by academic reputation and league tables. The proportion of NI students who said they were influenced by their friends in choosing their HEI was 8% higher than for other UK students, 6% more said they were influenced by applicants already at the institution, 3% more were influenced by their school or college careers advisor, and 8% more said they had personal reasons for choosing their HEI. NI students were also 8% less likely to say they were motivated by league tables like the Good Universities Guide, 7% less likely to have been influenced by the teaching reputation and 7% less likely to have been influenced by the research reputation of the HEI. They also appear somewhat likely to have been influenced by the institution's prospectus, visits to the institution and whether the location of the institution was attractive.

Students who were leaving NI gave reasons for choosing their HEI that were more similar to the UK respondents as a whole. They were 14% more likely to say that they were influenced by league tables and 4% more likely to have been influenced by the research reputation of the HEI. Students who had accepted places to study outside NI were also 16% more likely to have been influenced by the HEI's prospectus and 11 % more likely to have been influenced by visits to the institution. This may simply reflect the larger number and variety of institutions from which they were choosing, compared to students who wanted to remain in NI.

Figure 4 All reasons of NI-domiciled accepted applicants for choosing higher education institution



(Source, Futuretrack Stage 1, All accepted NI domiciled respondents, weighted)

As **Figure 4** shows, students who were remaining in NI were more likely than those leaving to mention that their choice of HEI was influenced by people that they knew. They were 8% more likely to have been influenced by their parents, 7% more likely to have been influenced by students already studying at the institution, 5% more likely to have been influenced by friends and 4% more likely to have been influenced by teachers and school or college careers advisors. One possible reason for this is that people in NI are likely to have more knowledge of NI HEIs and consequently be able

to give advice about them that influences potential applicants in a way they may not be able to about HEIs outside NI. As would be expected, students planning to leave were much more likely to say they chose their HEI so they could live away from home, and students who were staying in NI were much more likely to say they chose their HEI so they could live at home or near to home.

“As the university was still situated in NI, it gave me the opportunity to study away from home and gain some independence, but not too far away as I can still travel home at weekends.” [Female, 18 and under, Subjects allied with Medicine, NI University]

The desire to remain near to home limited certain applicants’ choices, for some, as in the case of the following respondent, to the extent that they were ultimately not able to enter HE.

“It is the only place in Belfast that offers the course I want to do and I do not want to go any further from home than Belfast.” [Female, 18 and under, did not enter HE]

Students leaving NI were also much more likely to say that they chose their HEI because it was located in an attractive or interesting place, which again is likely to be related to the relative proportions of students who were moving away from the area where they were living when they applied. They were therefore likely to have been more discriminating consumers of HE than those who preferred to remain, and have considered a wider range of options..

What were NI students planning to study?

The profile of NI domiciled students in terms of the type of course they were planning to study for is similar to the profile of the UK as a whole, with the majority planning to study for a degree-level course. They were less likely than the UK average to be planning to study for a three year degree (46% compared to 55%) but more likely than the UK average to be planning to study for a 4 year degree (30% compared to 22%) or a degree lasting for more than 4 years (8% compared to 5%). Students studying outside NI were more likely than those remaining to be planning to study for a degree lasting more than 4 years, and less likely to be planning to study for a degree lasting 3 years. This can be attributed to two things, firstly, the high proportion of NI students studying in Scotland where 4 year degrees are the norm, and the subjects that those who were leaving NI were planning to study.

As **Table 1** shows, there were some subjects that NI students were more likely to be planning to study outside NI. These subjects tend to be those that are not available at all institutions, where entry is competitive, and which are more vocational. For example, while a higher proportion of NI students planned to study medicine and dentistry, more than half had accepted a place to study it at an HEI outside NI.

NI students were slightly more likely than UK students to be planning to study subjects that were vocational and/or scientific. Subjects which a higher proportion of NI students than the UK average were planning to study include: Architecture, Building and Planning; Medicine and Dentistry; Subjects Allied to Medicine; Mathematical and Computer Science; and Engineering and Technologies.

Table 1 Subjects studied by NI and all UK accepted applicants, and the proportion of NI accepted applicants studying outside NI

	% of NI students	% of all UK students	% NI studying outside NI
Education	2.2	3.9	74.0
Interdisciplinary, other combined subjects	1.8	2.3	56.4
Medicine & Dentistry	5.0	2.9	55.3
Subjects allied to Medicine	9.1	8.0	52.5
Creative Arts & Design	6.6	11.1	49.2
Biology, Vet Sci, Agriculture & related	9.4	10.7	48.8
Social Science combined with arts	2.1	2.6	47.2
Science combined with social science	4.4	4.5	46.4
Languages	2.7	4.1	45.4
Law	4.8	4.3	42.5
Architecture, Building & Planning	4.8	1.9	39.0
Engineering, Technologies	6.5	5.6	38.6
Physical Sciences	4.7	4.8	36.3
Business & Admin studies	9.9	9.4	33.5
Mass communication & Documentation	2.3	2.4	32.9
Social Studies	8.9	8.2	29.8
Historical & Philosophical studies	3.5	3.6	26.6
Mathematical & Comp Science	9.0	6.4	25.1
Linguistics and Classics	2.1	3.1	20.5

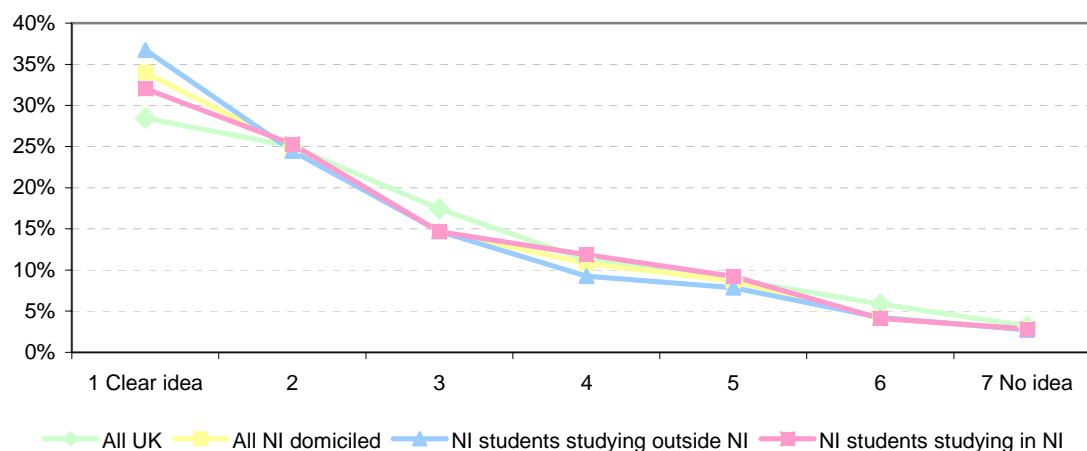
(Source, Futuretrack Stage 1, All accepted UK domiciled respondents, weighted)

NI students' career plans and access to information and guidance

As **Figure 5** shows, compared to the UK as a whole, NI students had a clearer idea of the type of occupation they want to go into when they graduate and the qualifications they require to do so. This is consistent with the data on subjects NI students were planning to study, which is outlined above. NI has a larger than average proportion of students planning to study for degrees in subjects with a vocational focus, and NI students placed a slightly greater emphasis on future employment as a criterion for making decisions about their courses and HEIs.

Findings from the Futuretrack survey have shown that many of the characteristics that were more common in the cohort of students who had accepted places to study outside NI correlate with ideas about career planning. For example, younger students and those whose parents had experience of HE tended to have less clear ideas about the occupation they eventually want to enter. However, students studying outside NI were more likely to be planning to study subjects with a clear vocational focus, such as medicine, which results in them being the group most likely to say that they have a clear idea about the occupation they wish to enter.

Figure 5 Clarity of NI-domiciled and all UK-domiciled accepted applicants' ideas about the occupation they eventually want to enter and the qualifications needed to do so



(Source, Futuretrack Stage 1, All accepted UK domiciled respondents, weighted)

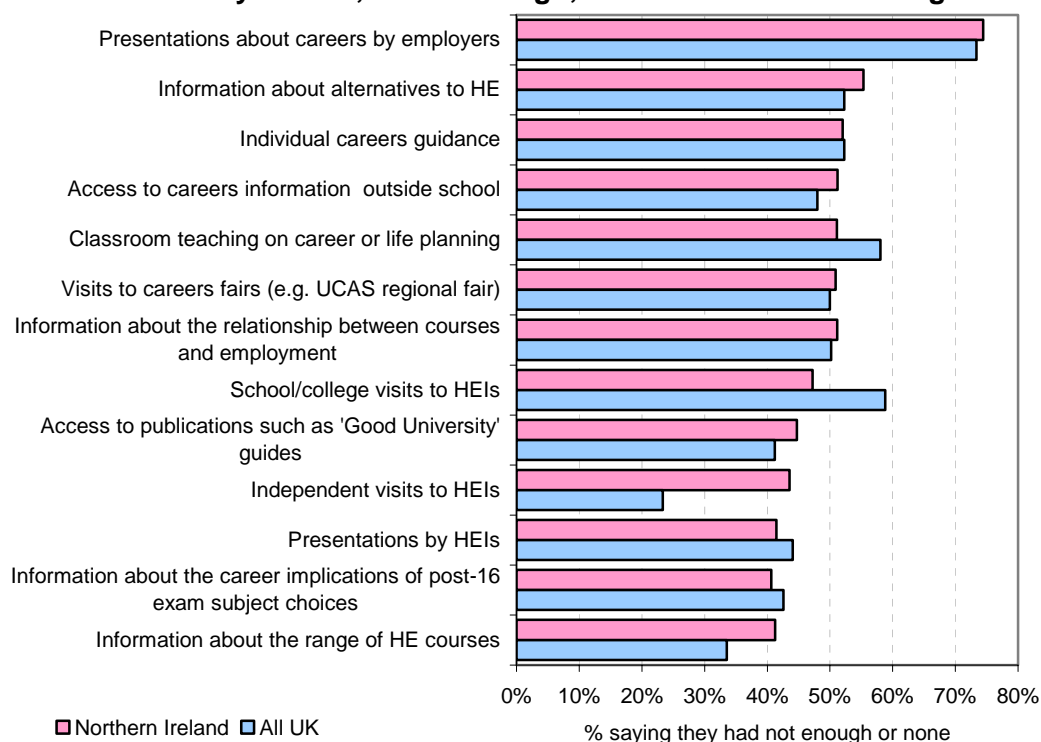
Despite this clarity about their future occupation, NI students were more likely to indicate that they lacked information about HE and careers than UK students as a whole. 70% of NI students said they agreed or strongly agreed that they had all the information they required about HE courses, compared to 75% of UK students as a whole.

More than half of the NI students indicated that they had not enough or no information about: presentations about careers opportunities by employers (74%); alternatives to going on to HE (55%); individual careers guidance (52%); the relationship between courses and employment (51%); classroom-based teaching on career or life planning (51%); visits to careers fairs (51%); and access to careers information or guidance outside school (51%).

“I think higher education can be very valuable in terms of gaining life experience, independence and a degree that can open career opportunities that would otherwise be denied you. Having said that, higher education is not the best option for all school leavers and I think that too little information is provided on the alternatives -- specifically vocational courses and apprenticeships and full time employment. There are far too many graduates currently under-employed (especially in Northern Ireland), filling roles they could have secured without a degree. At the same time we have a shortage of nurses, care workers, plumbers, electricians, bricklayers to name but a few.” [Male, 25 and over, Biology, Veterinary Science, Agriculture and Related, NI University]

“Not everyone should be pressured into higher education, which is something I think is happening a lot more at the moment. Plenty of good careers can be obtained through other means.” [Male, 18 and under, Law, NI University]

Figure 6 NI-domiciled and all UK-domiciled accepted applicants saying they had no, or not enough, careers information and guidance



(Source, Futuretrack Stage 1, All accepted UK domiciled respondents, weighted)

As **Figure 6** shows, NI students were significantly more likely than UK students as a whole to indicate that they had received ‘not enough’ or no information at all about the range of courses available and were more likely to say that they had not made enough independent visits to universities or colleges. NI students were also significantly more likely than members of the UK sample as a whole to say they received enough or too much classroom-based teaching on career or life planning and had made enough school or college visits to HEIs. Generally, NI students were more positive than UK students as a whole about the careers information and guidance they had received, with significantly higher proportions agreeing or strongly agreeing that they had excellent careers guidance and that careers guidance provided at their school or college was helpful to them. Despite this, NI students were more likely to agree or strongly agree that they needed more help and advice in choosing their course and that they found it difficult to choose their course.

“I and my fellow school pupils were given an extremely poor and at times non-existent careers guidance. I have therefore chosen a course which I am unsure will lead me anywhere. This must be addressed!” [Female, 18 and under, did not enter HE]

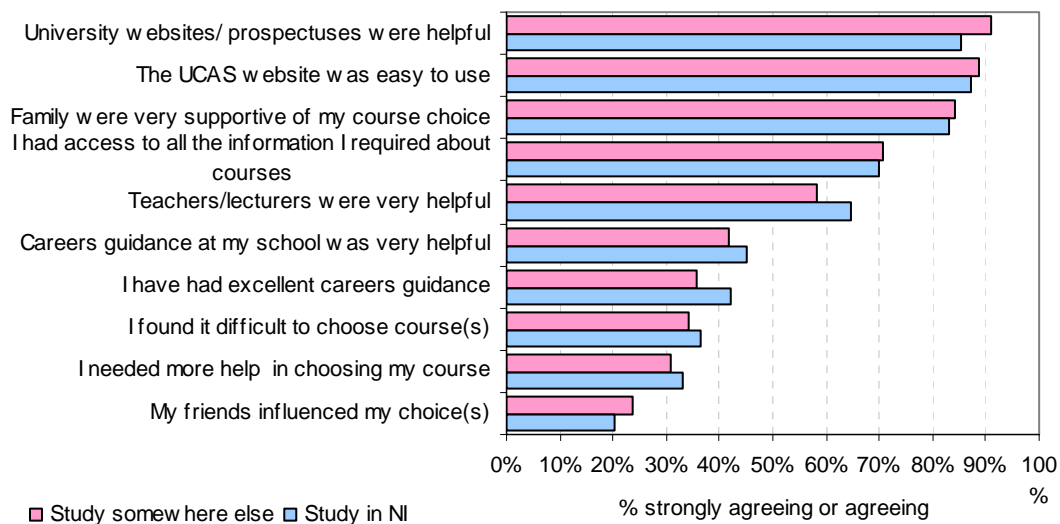
There was little difference in the perceptions of the amount of information received by students leaving NI and those staying, except in the area of visits to universities or colleges, which can largely be attributed to location, since students choosing to leave NI were more likely to think they had not made enough school or college visits to HEIs, but were less likely to say that had not made enough independent visits.

Students remaining in NI to study were more likely to feel that their teachers and careers guidance in schools had been helpful to them, which may reflect a greater knowledge of NI institutions than those in the rest of the UK. Perhaps as a

consequence, 6% more of the students remaining in NI to study agreed or strongly agreed that they had received excellent careers guidance, compared to those who had opted to migrate to other parts of the UK. However, as **Figure 7** shows, they were also more likely to say agree or strongly agree that they found it difficult to choose courses and that they needed more help in choosing their course.

“My school was not at all helpful in helping to find a course that I wanted to do - unless I would have wanted to do medicine or law.” [Female, 18 and under, Biology, Veterinary Sciences, Agriculture and Related, UK Post 92 University]

Figure 7 Percentage of NI domiciled accepted applicants strongly agreeing or agreeing with statements about careers information and advice



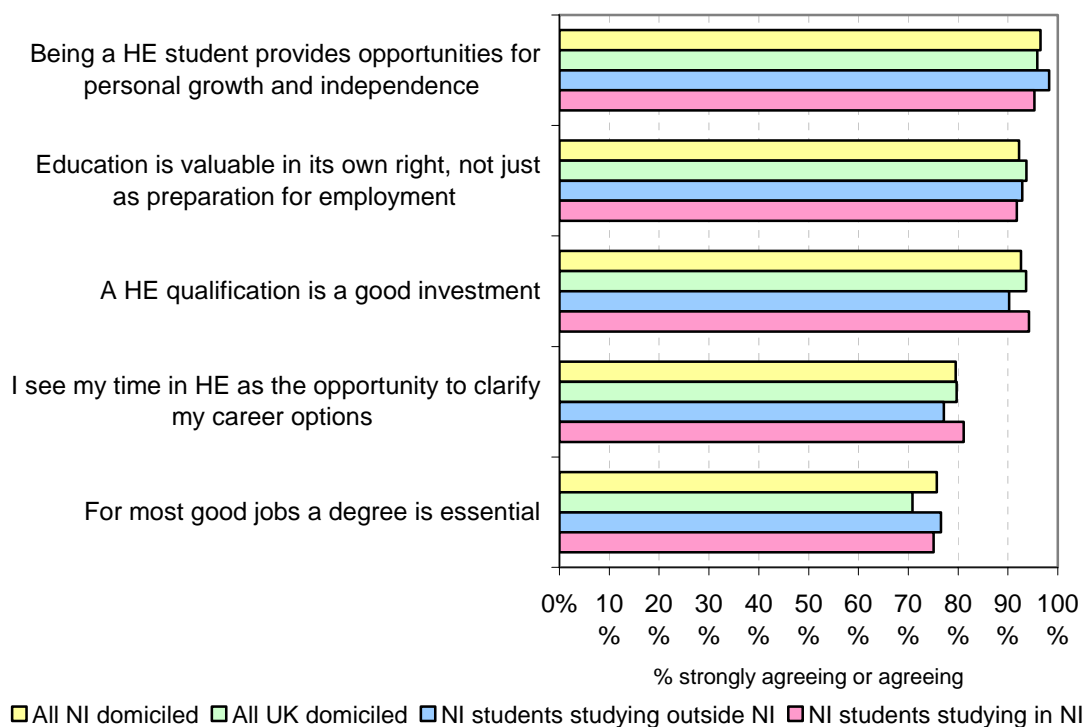
(Source, Futuretrack Stage 1, All accepted NI domiciled respondents, weighted)

Attitudes towards higher education

As **Figure 8** shows, the attitudes of NI students towards HE were not significantly different to the attitudes of the UK students as a whole. The most noticeable difference was in the proportions agreeing or strongly agreeing that for most good jobs, a degree is essential. 76% of NI students agreed or strongly agreed that this was the case, compared to only 71% of the UK respondents as a whole.

Students who were studying outside NI were more concerned with the non-academic aspects of being a student. 70% of NI students studying at HEIs outside NI agreed or strongly agreed that ‘one of the main benefits of HE is the opportunity for extracurricular activities’, compared to only 62% of NI students studying at NI institutions. They were also more likely to agree or strongly agree that ‘being a HE student provides opportunities for personal growth and independence’. Subsequent Futuretrack surveys have shown that NI students were more likely than average to be living at home with their parents or other family members while in HE, which may explain this difference. Students remaining in NI were more likely to see HE as an opportunity to clarify their career options.

Figure 8 NI-domiciled and all UK-domiciled accepted applicants' attitudes toward higher education



(Source, Futuretrack Stage 1, All accepted UK domiciled respondents, weighted)

"I expect to work hard to the best of my ability to gain the qualification necessary to change my future path in life. I expect University to be difficult but I will do what is necessary to succeed. I expect to meet new people, learn new things and I intend to enjoy the good and the bad and the ugly bits of University whatever they may be - it will be an experience" [Female, 25 and over, Biology, Veterinary Science, Agriculture and Related, NI University]

Debt and Student Finance

Students from NI were the most likely amongst the UK countries to think that they will have significant debt when they have completed their course. 67% of NI domiciled students expect significant debt, compared to an average of 64%. 72% of students who had accepted a place to study outside NI expected to have significant debts, compared to 64% of those who had accepted a place at an HEI in NI. In each case, almost a quarter said that they did not know whether or not they would have significant debts upon completing their course.

"Unfortunately at this time I have not really thought about how I am going to pay for my University studies." [Male, 18 and under, Historical and Philosophical Studies, UK Pre 92 University]

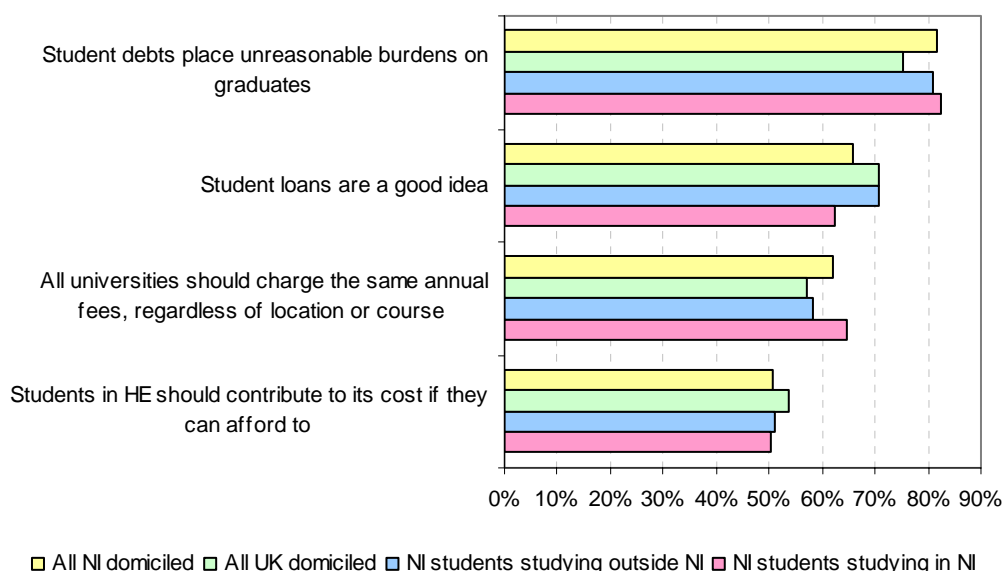
Consequently, NI students were more concerned than UK students as a whole with debt. The increase in tuition fees in 2006 was mentioned by many respondents as being unfair and making them reconsider whether entering HE was the correct route for them.

"I am really just worried about being able to afford to live on my own for 3/4 years while having to go to university, being able to pay for food/clothes/rent/etc." [Male, 19-20, Mathematics and Computer Science, UK Post 92 University]

"I am worried that even if I do get a good job as a result of the higher education I have received I will not be able to afford the loan repayments I will be required to pay and even if I can they will leave me in debt for many years to come." [Female, 18 and under, Business and Administration, NI University]

As **Figure 9** shows, NI students were more likely to agree or strongly agree that universities should charge the same fees regardless of location or course, and that student debts place an unreasonable burden on graduates. They were less likely to agree or strongly agree that student loans are a good idea.

Figure 9 NI-domiciled and all UK-domiciled accepted applicants' attitudes toward debt



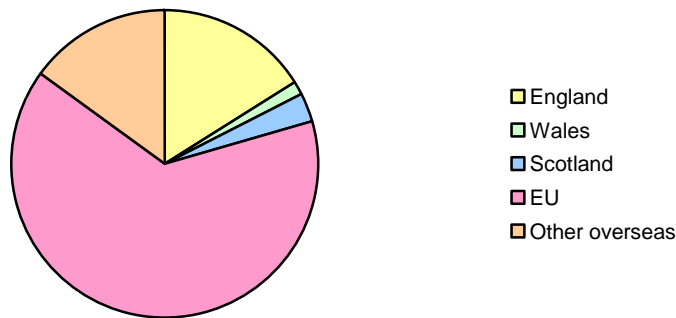
(Source, Futuretrack Stage 1, All accepted UK domiciled respondents, All accepted NI domiciled respondents; All accepted NI-domiciled respondents studying outside NI; All accepted NI domiciled respondents studying in NI. Weighted)

As would be expected, students staying in NI to study, who tended to come from less advantaged backgrounds, were less likely than those leaving to be expecting to pay for their HE through personal savings or inheritance or non-repayable contributions from their family.

Students from outside NI studying at NI HEIs

- 134 respondents in the Futuretrack survey had applied for and been offered places at an HEI in NI.
- 47% were male and 53% female.
- They are a relatively young cohort, with 40% being aged 18 and under at the time they applied to enter HE, and a further 30% being aged 19 or 20.
- As **Figure 10** shows, the majority (65%) were normally domiciled in the EU excluding the UK.

Figure 10 Normal country of domicile of accepted applicants from outside NI studying at NI HEIs



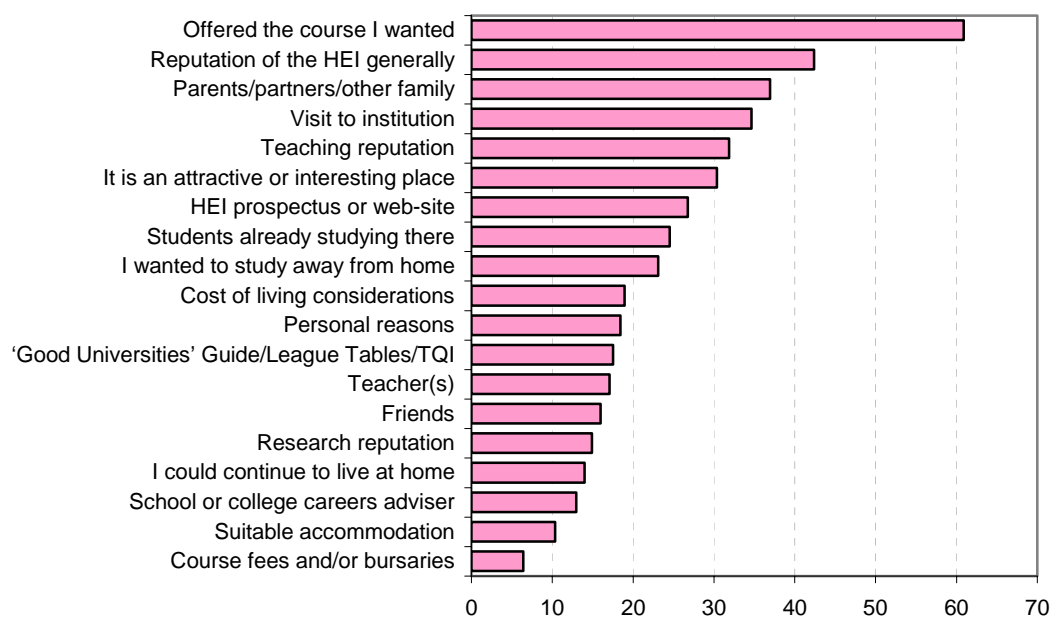
(Source: Futuretrack Stage 1. All accepted non-NI domiciled respondents at NI HEIs, weighted)

- 44% had accepted a place at a Russell Group university, 53% a post-92 university, and 2.7% another type of HEI.
- For 81% of respondents, the HEI was their first choice when they applied.
- As would be expected from students coming from outside the UK, 57% held non-standard qualifications on entry. 22% had a high level of qualifications based on UCAS tariff points, 17% medium and just 5% had low qualifications.
- 93% of students coming from outside NI were planning to study for a degree-level course. 59% were planning to study for a degree lasting three years, 19% for a degree lasting four years and 15% for a degree lasting more than four years. 4% were planning to study for a Foundation degree and 1% for an HND.
- For the majority of respondents, because they come from outside the UK, data on their socio-economic background is not known. The UK students accepting places to come to NI come from the highest SES groups, with 70% coming from a professional or managerial background.

Reasons for choosing to study at an HEI in NI

As **Figure 11** shows, the most common reason given by students from outside NI for wanting to study at an NI HEI was that it offered the particular course that they were interested in. Wanting to live away from home was surprisingly infrequently mentioned as a reason for their choice.

Figure 11 All reasons of accepted applicants coming from outside NI for choosing their HEI



(Source: Futuretrack Stage 1. All accepted non-NI domiciled respondents at NI HEIs, weighted)

Students coming from outside NI were less likely than UK students as a whole and NI students to say that they had all the information about HE courses that they needed. Only 65% agreed or strongly agreed that they had enough information, compared to 69% of NI students and 74% of UK students. They were also less likely to say that they had found university prospectuses helpful, with only 79% agreeing or strongly agreeing that they were, compared to 88% and 85% of NI students and all UK students respectively. As only a relatively low proportion said that they had chosen their HEI as a result of visiting the institution, it may be the case that these students generally lacked information about what the institution they were planning to study at was like.

"It's all very organised but I need to go over to Ireland at some point and see the Uni that I have confirmed as my Final choice... Hmmm, perhaps not the best idea" [Male, 18 and under, from North West England, taking a gap year before studying Engineering at an NI University]

Overall, students accepting places at NI HEIs from outside NI felt that they had received less advice and guidance than NI students or all UK students. Areas where these students were particularly more likely to say that they had not received enough or any advice included information about the career implications of post-16 subject choices, where they were 10% more said they did not have enough information, and

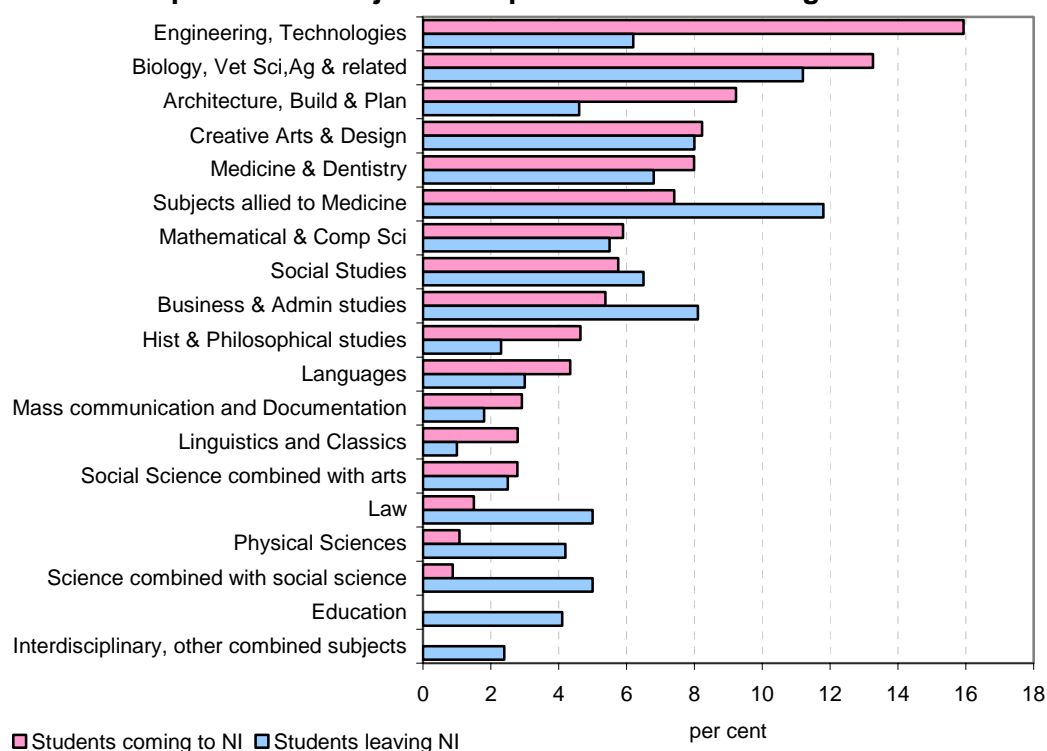
presentations by employers (12% more). Students accepting places to come to NI from outside NI were less likely than all UK students and all NI students to say that they had not received enough information about the alternatives to going on to HE, and that they had not had enough careers guidance, although the differences in these two areas was relatively small compared to the bigger differences in other areas.

Despite this lack of information, students accepting places to come to NI were more likely than UK students as a whole or NI students to say that they had a clear idea about the kind of occupation they would eventually like to have and the qualification they needed to do so. When respondents were asked to rate themselves on a scale of 1-7 where 1 meant that they had a clear idea and 7 meant that they had no idea what they would do after they had completed their course, 37% rated themselves as 1, compared to 30% of UK students and 35% of NI students. They were slightly less likely to see their time in HE as an opportunity to clarify their career options, and more likely to agree that a degree was necessary for getting most good jobs (81% compared to 75% of NI students and 70% of all UK students) and that a HE qualification is a good investment (97% compared to 92% of NI students and 93% of all UK students).

Profile of subjects to be studied by students from outside NI accepting places to study at NI HEIs

Figure 12 shows the percentage of each cohort opting for particular subjects. Students accepting places to come to NI were most likely to be planning to study engineering and related technologies. This is consistent with the picture for the UK as a whole when looking at students who were coming to study from overseas. In addition to engineering, Architecture, Building and Planning subjects were noticeably more commonly applied for by students coming to NI than those leaving, although the different sizes of the cohorts mean that more students in all subjects were leaving NI in absolute terms. Subjects allied to Medicine, Business and Administration Studies, Law, Physical Sciences and Education were all more likely to be applied for by students leaving NI than those coming to NI.

Figure 12 Proportion of accepted applicants coming to NI to studying particular subjects compared to those leaving NI

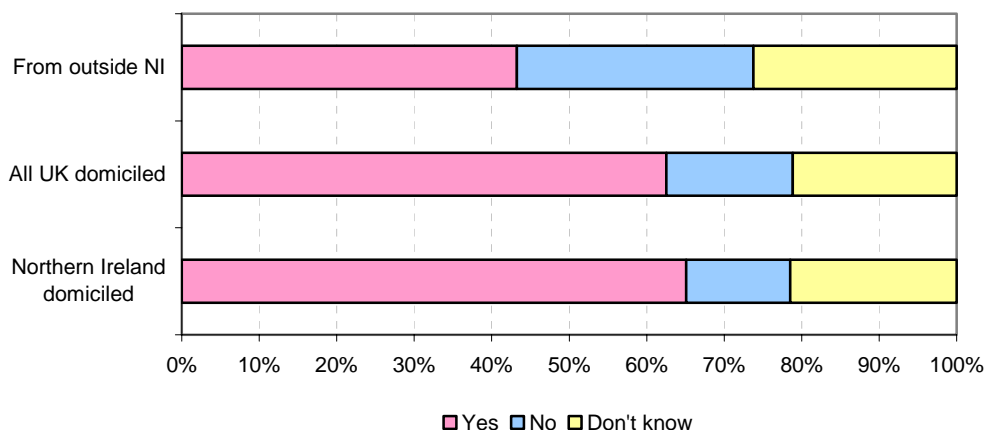


(Source: Futuretrack Stage 1. All accepted non-NI domiciled respondents at NI HEIs and All accepted NI-domiciled respondents studying outside NI, weighted)

Expected debt and attitudes towards debt of non-NI students studying in NI

As **Figure 13** shows, students from outside NI accepting places to study at NI HEIs were less likely than students from NI or all UK students to expect to have significant debt when they finished their courses, as was the case for overseas students studying in UK HEIs as a whole. Only 43% said that they did expect to have significant debts, compared to 65% of NI students and 63% of UK students. 31% said that they did not expect to have significant debts, compared to only 13% of NI students and 16% of UK students as a whole. This reflects both the socio-economic background of the students coming from outside NI and different HE funding regimes in different countries.

Figure 13 Accepted applicants' expectation of significant debts on completion of course



(Source: Futuretrack Stage 1. All accepted Non-NI domiciled respondents at NI HEIs; All accepted UK domiciled respondents; All accepted NI-domiciled respondents. Weighted)

These students were more likely than NI students or UK students to strongly agree or agree that students in HE should contribute to its costs if they can afford to do so (60% compared to 51% of NI students and 54% of all UK students). They were also less likely to think that all universities should charge the same annual fees regardless of location or course (54% compared to 62% and 57% of NI and all UK students respectively). Despite these views, they were more likely than UK students as a whole to agree or strongly agree that student debts place an unreasonable burden on graduates (78% compared to 75%), although the figure is higher again for NI students (82%).

Conclusions

The overall picture of NI domiciled students is one of a cohort that was more likely than average to be influenced by employment-related issues in the choices they made about higher education. This is reflected in the subjects they were accepted to study, where they were going to study them and their views about higher education in general.

Well over half NI students had selected an HEI in NI as their first choice. NI students tend to come from less advantaged backgrounds than UK students as a whole, and while SES group appeared to have some impact on whether an applicant was going to study outside NI, whether or not parents' had experience of HEI was a clearer predictor of HEI and study location choices than socio-economic background in itself.

The students poised to study outside NI were a polarised group in terms of qualifications. Students with high tariff points were more likely than average to be migrating to another part of the UK, but students with low tariff points were the group most likely to be studying outside NI. This polarisation is likely to be accounted for by the differences in acceptance rates at first choice HEIs between those choosing to study in NI and those choosing to study elsewhere in the UK. Students with higher tariff points were more likely to have applied to competitive courses, and students with low tariff points were less likely to be accepted in general. A lower proportion of those with places to study away from NI were destined for their preferred course.

NI students were somewhat more likely than UK students as a whole to have been motivated by concerns about future employment when making decisions about their higher education. They were more likely than the UK average to have a clear idea about the occupation they wanted to enter in the future and the qualifications they needed to enter it. The likelihood of getting a good job was particularly influential in the decision-making of students choosing to remain in NI, although they also appeared to have a more general view of their future employment, being more likely to give reasons related to getting some kind of 'good job', rather than reasons related to entering a specific career, and this is reflected in their slightly lower propensity to say that they had a clear idea about the occupation they wanted to enter when they graduated. They were also slightly more likely than the UK cohort as a whole to be influenced by the opinions of people they knew, including family members, friends, teachers and careers advisors, although some students were concerned that they, and other applicants, were being advised to enter higher education when this was not necessarily the best option or necessarily a route into a good job.

NI students were slightly more likely than UK students as a whole to be planning to study vocational subjects such as Medicine and Dentistry and Architecture, Building and Planning. They were also more likely to be planning to study subjects such as Mathematics, Computer Science and Engineering, which are also generally regarded as being difficult subjects with good job prospects. Amongst these subjects, a relatively high proportion of NI-domiciled students were planning to study Medicine and Dentistry outside NI, but this was not the case for the other subjects.

NI-domiciled students' attitudes towards higher education, particularly the attitudes of students accepting places to study at NI HEIs, also reflect the increased importance of future employment to them. NI students were more likely than the UK average to agree or strongly agree that a degree was essential for most good jobs, and they were less likely to see extracurricular activities as one of the main benefits of higher education. Despite this, they were no less likely to agree or strongly agree that higher education is valuable in its own right, not just as preparation for employment.

Despite the clarity of their career ideas, NI domiciled students were slightly more likely than the UK average to feel they lacked information about higher education and careers.

Debt was an important concern for HE students domiciled in NI. Students accepting places to study outside NI in particular were much more likely to expect to have significant debts when they graduated. NI domiciled students were more likely than the UK students as a whole to feel that debt placed an unreasonable burden on graduates, and many respondents expressed concerns about whether there would be enough 'good jobs' for graduates to make the debt they expected to incur worthwhile.

The final section of the summary looked at reasons why students from outside NI chose to attend NI HEIs. This was a relatively small group of applicants, who predominantly came from EU countries. Although the information was known for only a small number of these at Stage 1, early analyses of the Stage 2 responses reinforce the finding that they appear to be a highly qualified group with parents employed in professional and managerial occupations. They were most likely to be planning to study Engineering and Technologies, which is in keeping with trends observed in the rest of the UK.

The lack of information reported by applicants from outside NI may be a concern. These students tended to have a clear idea about their future occupations, but to feel they did not have enough information about their subject choices and some mentioned they had little information about the HEI they were planning to attend.

Gaby Atfield is a Research Associate and Kate Purcell a Professor at the Institute for Employment research at the University of Warwick: see <http://www.warwick.ac.uk/ier> for contact details and more information about the Futuretrack survey, which Professor Purcell directs on behalf of the Higher Education Careers Services Unit (HECSU): <http://www.hecsu.ac.uk>