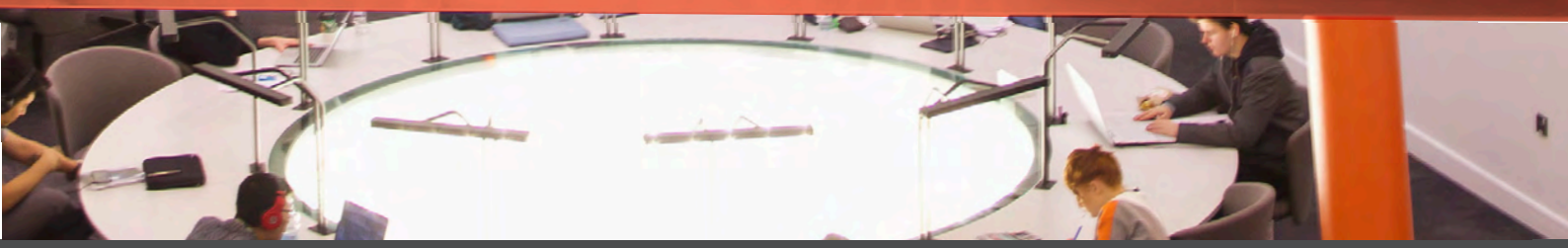
The University Of Sheffield.

Should I stay, or should I go?

Student demand for credit transfer and recommendations for policy and practice



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Introduction

For students, their parents and those who will teach them, choosing where to study for a degree is a momentous decision. Students carefully study university prospectuses, read course materials, attend open days and talk to other students. For most, it is a decision which will determine not only their next step in their education but a place they will make a transition from home to living independently, and to their future.

But what happens if, despite all these efforts, circumstances change. A student realises they may need to change not only a course but an institution. Do universities and teachers help this process? Is there more we could do?

Credit transfer has been a growing area for debate in higher education in the UK for decades, and is already common in other counties like the US. Much effort has been expended looking at the viability and technical processes needed to implement a system of credit transfer which meets the need of those students who find themselves in this situation, without being unduly onerous for universities.

These efforts have been underlined by the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, which gives the Office for Students duties to monitor the availability of such schemes, to monitor the extent to which they are utilised by students and to potentially facilitate, encourage, or promote awareness of the provision of arrangements for student transfers.

What has been missing from much of the policy debate has been the voice of students themselves. My own conversations with students in Sheffield show me that there are many good reasons to help students in need or who now regret their initial decisions, from personal circumstances to poor careers advice to having underestimated their potential.

Limited attention has been paid to the needs of such students for greater mobility. A gap in understanding may have led some to conclude that the amount of movement was small because the demand is latent as students are hindered from moving due to a lack of information or effective transfer systems in higher education providers.

To help understand what a UK system would need to succeed, the following study was conducted collaboratively by a group of partner higher education providers in the North and led by my own University of Sheffield.

We have, together, sought to examine the student perspective on demand for student mobility with credit transfer, naturally talking to lots of students to capture their views.

This does not mean students want dramatic change. The headline findings described here demonstrate the vast majority of students do not normally want or seek to change their location or institution. There is no massive level of hidden latent demand to relocate.

However, while the numbers are small it would be a real mistake to ignore the few but important number of students who find themselves having to move (normally for unexpected personal or social rather than academic reasons).

The students who want to move, or who can conceive circumstances in which they will have to move, fear it will be difficult, will devalue their degree and make them look unreliable. At a stressful time, this can add further stress. Their teachers equally have concerns about the intellectual integrity of a degree 'broken' across locations.

Any switching scheme introduced with a narrative only about student choice would impose a view on the majority of students they do not hold. But the students in this study do think transfer should be possible and frictionless when and if they need it, and at a time when other stresses driving the need to move mean any artificial barriers are likely to be keenly felt.

From the students' perspective, in this regard the Office for Students has been given an important new duty. Higher education providers should better facilitate transfers with credit because it is occasionally in the student interest. Based on these findings the Office for Students should choose to approach the issue of credit transfer using a student-focused perspective.

On top of whatever life change might be happening, students being able to more easily move in times of crisis would be of help to them, rather than see them dropping out from university - adding the loss of future opportunity to whatever the unwelcome stimulus might be to need to have to move. It is a pastoral conclusion, about helping support and retain students in higher education (even if not necessarily in our own institutions).

This report makes practical recommendations about how higher education providers might go about supporting students who need to relocate their place of study and to help them overcome any stigma or disadvantage they perceive might exist when they do. I hope it will stimulate debate and help in the development of policy for all of our students.

Professor Sir Keith Burnett CBE

President and Vice-Chancellor

The University of Sheffield

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Dr Tony Strike

University Secretary

Director of Strategy and Governance

The University of Sheffield

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The opinions presented in this report are those of the authors and are not intended to represent the individual views of our partners in the project.

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Views from Stakeholders

The White Rose University Consortium (a strategic partnership between the Universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York) is delighted to contribute to this significant piece of research on understanding the demand for student mobility and credit transfer, as well as the practical issues involved. The research project outcomes and recommendations are aimed at influencing higher education providers, government, and key sector bodies, in order to support students.

Craig Walker, Director White Rose University Consortium

Yorkshire Universities is pleased to support this important research which highlights a number of areas for the sector to consider when thinking about student mobility. By providing insights into students' perspectives on this issue, the report demonstrates the vital role of higher education providers in ensuring that students are aware of all options available to them in order to complete their studies. This is particularly important for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and those most at risk of leaving higher education.

Roger Lewis, Acting Executive Director Yorkshire Universities

The Open University has for many years, been a leading advocate and practitioner of the Recognition of Prior Learning - ranging from formal certificated learning to non- accredited experiential learning. We believe it to make a significant contribution to widening access in higher education as well as a means of ensuring that students can complete qualifications that they might have had to defer. We welcome this report which highlights the importance of credit transfer in meeting the needs of students who, for whatever reason, find they need, or would prefer, to continue their studies at another institution. This is particularly important for adult learners who may need to relocate for work or family reasons.

Liz Marr, Director of Learning and Teaching, Director, The Open University

The availability and accessibility of credit transfer in support of the higher education student experience sit at the heart of SEEC's mission. As this report highlights, for a variety of reasons some students may have to move institution and we as a sector need to provide them with clearer information about how credit transfer can facilitate this, and be better at supporting them.

Peter Gambles, Chair, SEEC

There are many myths and urban rumours about student mobility and credit transfer but this report gets to the heart of the issues and should aid a proper sector debate. Mobility and credit transfer will never be for the 'majority' of students but it can greatly aid students in specific segments and it is very much in the sector's interest to facilitate this.

Leopold Green, Chair, NUCCAT

This report is a very welcome addition to the debate about student mobility and credit transfer. Providing valuable insights into student perspectives the report identifies seven key recommendations. These are aimed at HE providers, Government, stakeholder groups as well as the Office for Students which has a duty to monitor the provision of arrangements for student transfer. A timely report indeed.

John Storan, Chair, Forum for Access and Continuing Education, & Director, Continuum: Centre for Widening Participation Policy Studies

Opportunities for flexible study are important if universities are to foster lifelong learning. As such UALL warmly welcomes this thorough enquiry into student mobility. The research sheds interesting light on the experience and perceptions of students and makes valuable recommendations for HE providers and policy makers.

Tony Ellis, Honorary Secretary The Universities Alliance for Lifelong Learning (UALL)

Executive Summary

This report presents the findings and recommendations from a research project conducted by a consortium of seven higher education (HE) providers led by and including the University of Sheffield into what students' perceptions about mobility and credit transfer are. The research was undertaken during the 2016/17 academic year into students' demand for greater opportunities for mobility between HE providers during programmes of study, such as through credit transfer schemes. The findings we present here are aimed at informing government, the Office for Students (in particular in light of its duty on student transfers) and HE providers' approaches to these arrangements so they operate in the student interest.

The key findings are:

- Students believe that student mobility can help students remain in higher education (HE) if they face changed personal circumstances. Student mobility can help a student move to a HE provider more suited to their changed needs, rather than 'dropping-out' of HE altogether. Students do not see it as an opportunity to 'trade-up' or to move in HE as a 'market'.
- Students believe that there should be enabling support for student mobility as part of HE providers' student welfare/well-being provision.
- Students believe there is a need for clearer and more transparent processes, information, advice and guidance on student mobility in HE providers, and the sector as a whole. This would help students in need, and tackle any stigma associated with transferring.
- There does not appear to be significant latent demand for student mobility which remains unmet due to current practice in the sector. However, a significant minority of students who expressed a desire to withdraw or transfer may benefit from changes on student mobility which bring it into open practice, rather than its current obscured position in HE.

This report makes seven key recommendations based on the findings.

Higher Education Providers could:

1) In structural terms, beneficially locate the issue of student mobility and credit transfer in student support, welfare, advice and guidance rather than treat it as a student recruitment activity.

2) Ensure that providers of student welfare services, and independent and impartial advice services, consider how to help students identify when transfer to another provider is the right decision for them, and provide support networks, and mentoring to facilitate a smooth transition. For example, ensuring that learning contracts are transferred between HE providers to reduce barriers, and problems which can disrupt student mobility.

3) Make more transparent and clearly available (for example on the institutional website) the opportunity for students to engage in student mobility and credit transfer as a mechanism of providing support for students when they need it, such as in response to mitigating circumstances.

4) Provide clear information in programme specifications, and admissions guidance, about when credit transfer may be suitable, including details of what disciplines/programmes students may be able to transfer to and from to show pre-requisites or prior learning.

5) Provide greater transparency around the criteria of individual programmes and the criteria that module leaders would employ in recognising prior learning in admission. This would enable students to make informed choices about how and when to move, if the need arises, and what the likelihood is that their prior learning will be recognised.

Government, and key sector bodies could:

6) Support HE providers and sector bodies to effect a change nationally to the perception among students, employers and the HE sector, that degrees awarded by credit transfer or accumulation of credits from different HE providers are not of lesser quality or value than a degree awarded by a single HE provider.

7) Encourage providers through Access Agreements to support widening participation students to ensure that they are not priced out of the provision of credit transfer where they meet particular costs and would otherwise fail to continue their studies. In particular, this should not just rely on rectifying financial implications related to fees, but also the more immediate personal costs of relocating in hardship, which require students to have access to finance to meet the costs of an unexpected or unplanned move, which could create barriers to fair participation and access.

Chapter 1
Introduction

Background, context, aims and objectives

Background to the project

This project responds to a discourse in the policy landscape around credit transfer arising from the recent consultation conducted by the Government (BIS, 2016; DfE, 2016). The Government has followed-up on the consultation through the inclusion of a duty on the Office for Students (OfS) "to monitor the provision of arrangements for student transfers" (Higher Education & Research Act 2017 s.38).

Extensive previous work has been undertaken to understand the process and viability of credit transfer summarised in the literature review into credit transfer in higher education commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE, 2017a). Other bodies such as the South East England Consortium for Credit Accumulation & Transfer (SEEC), the Northern Universities Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer (NUCCAT), Universities UK (UUK) and the Higher Education Academy (HEA) have also researched and published reports on credit transfer.

Much of the literature focuses on the technical processes needed to implement a system of credit transfer. Research has been conducted mainly across the 1990s to 2000s and little research has been done in this area since significant changes to higher education have been implemented, including the rise in tuition fees in 2012. Furthermore, little of this existing work considers the extent to which there is demand from students for greater mobility, and can appear predicated on the assumption that student demand is latent, and systemic barriers prevent students from engaging in credit transfer. The new duties for the OfS and its role as a regulator may have interesting implications for student mobility. Subsequent to the project completing, the role the OfS intends to play in terms of student mobility has been set out in the consultation on the regulatory framework for HE (DfE, 2017b). HEFCE has also released a further data report on undergraduate transfers (HEFCE, 2017) (but the work of this project completed before this release).

This report seeks to explore the attitudes of students, and their demand, for greater student mobility, which for the purposes of this research is defined as the ability of students to move HE provider during a programme of study, utilising methods such as credit transfer to continue their course/programme of study without the need to start anew or repeat work already successfully undertaken. This is intended to help inform the approach taken by sector bodies and HE providers toward the issue of student mobility.

Research design

The project's aim and objectives are set out below.

Aim: To conduct research across Northern universities to understand student demand for student mobility, and to use the students' perspective to inform the approach taken by sector bodies and HE providers to student mobility.

Objectives:

1. To understand the student perspective: To collect quantitative and qualitative evidence to provide a rich and representative understanding of the demand for student mobility among students within the North, and the nature of the perceived barriers they may face.
2. To understand the institutional perspective: To gain insight into the practical barriers involved in student transfer between HE providers to understand the initial nature and scope of these barriers and how they can be addressed.
3. To understand the academic perspective: To collect quantitative and qualitative evidence from multi-disciplinary perspectives on the barriers academic staff perceive exist in relation to the pedagogical impact of student mobility, and to seek perspectives on how these barriers can be addressed.
4. To make practical proposals: To make recommendations from the data to improve the experience of student mobility to meet the demand as expressed in 1. above, taking into account institutional and academic insight.

The research design included three core phases of work:

1. Analysis of a matched HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency) dataset into student movement from participant institutions.
2. Analysis of online surveys and focus groups with students at each participant institution.
3. An online survey and series of interviews with a purposeful sample of academic staff with leadership responsibility for learning and teaching.

Over the course of the research project, we collected quantitative and qualitative data from 2,475 students and 81 staff participants across seven participating institutions. The sample is diverse and covers a range of disciplines.

Participant institutions

The participant institutions each responded to an invitation to join the study. Invitations were made within a coherent geographical space with a view to the providers having the potential to have experienced student transfers between themselves or having the possibility of co-operating in a pilot transfer scheme in the future based on the exploratory research described here. The participant institutions were:

Leeds College of Music
University of Leeds
University of Sheffield
York St John University
Sheffield Hallam University
University of Nottingham
University of York

Findings

The key findings from the matched HESA dataset are:

- A very small proportion of students actually leave their HE provider and engage in any form of student mobility and return to higher education.

- Between 0.02-0.6% of students who withdrew from the institutions within the scope of this research project between the 2012/13-2015/16 academic years returned to higher education.
- Most students who do transfer stay within the same broad discipline areas, such as STEM (508 students remained in discipline (71%)) and non-STEM (441 students remained in discipline (65%)).
- Most students (220/94%) from non-Russell Group institutions returned to the same type of institution, while most students from Russell Group universities (729/63%) transferred to institutions which are non-Russell Group.
- Most students who transfer do so into the same year of study (1,090/83%).
- Most students (1,047/75%) transferred to a different region on re-entering higher education.
- A significant proportion of students (540/45%) transfer to their home region on re-entering higher education, after initially studying away.

The key findings from the analysis of the student online survey are:

- The majority of students (1512/61%) were unaware of the possibility of student mobility, and were unclear about where they would seek advice and guidance on this from within their institution.
- A third of students surveyed (1569/33%) were unsure about or disagreed with the principle that improving student mobility would improve the quality and value of their degree.
- However, students also expressed a belief that:
  - a degree awarded by accumulation of credits was of the same quality as one awarded by a single institution (737/32%), although 1,583/68% were either unsure or disagreed with this premise. On perceptions of value, whether such a degree was of the same value, the views were: 903/39% agreed; 1,417/61% were unsure or disagreed.
  - if a student had transferred, the value and quality of their degree may be perceived externally as less valuable and of lower quality by employers or in applications to postgraduate study (value: 907/39% and quality: 978/42%).
- For a large group of students, financial (1099/49%) and social/community (1024/45%) factors were key in making a decision about student transfer in contrast to any academic considerations.
- An estimate of the costs of transferring, informed by factors considered by students, indicates a mid-year transfer could involve costs of approximately £1,745.30 to £6,853.30 (excluding tuition fees). Such costs could have implications for students from low-income backgrounds.
- There was no evidence in the survey that student mobility was favoured more by a particular group of students, and hence would be likely to widen participation.

The key findings from the student focus groups are:

- In the focus group data, demand for greater student mobility was low, but it was felt that universities could do more to support those students who needed to transfer.
- Students were most likely to think student mobility should be used in cases where there had been a change of personal responsibilities (such as caring for family), or to access mental health and wellbeing support, in recognition of variability of provision across the country.

- Students felt that there was a stigma surrounding credit transfer and student mobility, which would discourage engagement. This stemmed from the lack of information, and a belief that engagement in transfer without a valid reason would be seen as showing they were unreliable.
- Students believed that under the current funding system, which relies on fee income, universities may have a vested interest in discouraging greater mobility.
- Some students did express the belief that greater student mobility could support them in 'trading-up', for a better degree or institution (the HESA data showed this was uncommon – see above.) However, few of the students in the focus groups claimed to have paid attention to rankings once they had arrived at university, and most talked about 'better' in cultural terms such as 'Oxbridge' or 'Russell Group'.
- The majority of students in focus groups expressed concerns about the quality of their course and its intellectual coherence if they engaged in processes of mobility. Students in the arts and humanities expressed more frequently the view that greater mobility could enhance their subject area.
- For most students, practical implications such as timing, cost, administration, and the loss of engagement in newly established community and friendship groups were seen as factors deterring them from engaging in student mobility.
- Students suggested improvements in student mobility could be made in three key areas:

  - Communication about student mobility so it was available for those who needed it.

  - Improved processes for student mobility (when needed).

  - Improved information, advice and guidance about student mobility.

The key findings from the staff survey and focus groups are:

- Staff and students express a similar belief that greater student mobility wouldn't improve quality or value.
- Staff are also generally unaware of student mobility taking place or what the regulations and process of mobility would involve unless they have had to deal with a particular case themselves.
- Staff also supported the students' belief that the quality and value of a degree awarded by mobility and the accumulation of credits may be of less value and quality to them when considering an applicant for postgraduate study.
- Staff were clear that the learning and friendship community of the HE provider is significant to students, and that greater mobility would pose negative effects for students in terms of the institution's learning and social community, as well as its curricula.
- Staff were unable to be specific about instances of pedagogical practice which would be affected by student mobility, referring more broadly to the intellectual coherence of the particular degree programme.

The key finding across the data about the nature of demand, suggests that there is some evidence of a latent demand for greater student mobility among students, which takes place in two forms.

The first form, which was most prominent in the data, is student desire for greater provision of mobility in terms of a student support mechanism when students experienced adverse circumstances. Examples of when this would be used by students included change in family circumstances, or responsibilities which would lead to a need to move back home; and secondly for reasons of access to services connected to mental health and wellbeing which can vary across the country. Given the growing crisis in mental health support (Brown, 2016), it is therefore understandable why students may want greater provision of student mobility in this situation, and how it could also be beneficial to institutions in their

support for students. Some students drew the connection in focus groups that by failing to be more open and transparent about the processes of student mobility, institutions may inadvertently create stigma, both about accessing student mobility, and also accessing support more generally for students in certain circumstances.

The second form is the latency of demand among those students who may have considered withdrawal or transfer during their studies (26% of survey respondents). Even with this figure in mind, the data across the study does not clearly indicate students calling for greater mobility, however, this is due to a complex set of interconnected reasons which are presented across the data including: the immediate financial costs of mobility; the social and community aspects of being at a university; the coherence of a single degree programme; the potential impact on the quality and value of a degree both during and after study; and the perception that too much mobility would frame these students as unreliable, or 'flaky'. Very few students in this study suggested that they would engage in mobility as a means of improving or responding to changes in their course or 'trading-up' on their course or institution.

Recommendations

This report makes seven key recommendations based on the findings.

Higher Education Providers could:

1) In structural terms, beneficially locate the issue of student mobility and credit transfer in student support, welfare, advice and guidance rather than treat it as a student recruitment activity.

2) Ensure that providers of student welfare services, and independent and impartial advice services, consider how to help students identify when transfer to another provider is the right decision for them, and provide support networks, and mentoring to facilitate a smooth transition. For example, ensuring that learning contracts are transferred between HE providers to reduce barriers, and problems which can disrupt student mobility.

3) Make more transparent and clearly available (for example on the institutional website) the opportunity for students to engage in student mobility and credit transfer as a mechanism of providing support for students when they need it, such as in response to mitigating circumstances.

4) Provide clear information in programme specifications, and admissions guidance, about when credit transfer may be suitable, including details of what disciplines/ programmes students may be able to transfer to and from to show pre-requisites or prior learning.

5) Provide greater transparency around the criteria of individual programmes and the criteria that module leaders would employ in recognising prior learning in admission. This would enable students to make informed choices about how and when to move, if the need arises, and what the likelihood is that their prior learning will be recognised.

Government and key sector bodies could:

6) Support HE providers and sector bodies to effect a change nationally to the perception among students, employers and the HE sector, that degrees awarded by credit transfer or accumulation of credits from different HE providers are not of lesser quality or value than a degree awarded by a single HE provider.

7) Encourage providers through Access Agreements to support widening participation students to ensure that they are not priced out of the provision of credit transfer where they meet particular costs and would otherwise fail to continue their studies. In particular, this should not just rely on rectifying financial implications related to fees, but also the more immediate personal costs of relocating in hardship, which require students to have access to finance to meet the costs of an unexpected or unplanned move, which could create barriers to fair participation and access.

Chapter 2 Understanding Student Mobility: *A Literature Review*

Supporting HE providers to respond to changes in the policy landscape

This Chapter provides an introduction to the existing literature and research on the topic of student mobility. The policy drivers, which informed the establishment of this project, are reviewed, and the concept of student mobility is defined. A review of the existing research in the area of student mobility, and credit transfer both in the UK and abroad is provided. We have identified a gap in existing research which this report seeks to address. This report is timely given the current significant changes in higher education (HE) with a greater focus on HE as a 'market' and students as 'consumers'.

Understanding the developing policy landscape

Credit transfer has been a topic of policy debate and activity in higher education for decades, with the recent Department for Education (DfE) literature review (DfE, 2017a) charting its modern origins in the 1963 Robbins Report, the establishment of the Open University (OU) in 1969 and subsequent interest and action in the HE sector. We have set out in this Chapter particular points of greater activity and focus on student mobility and credit transfer in the sector; the focus of activity to date highlights gaps which require further research. The issue of whether credit transfer is or could be driven by demand from students is one gap in understanding, although the response from the sector over the years has been to address barriers to mobility in response to a claimed or perceived level of latent demand in the interests of the student.

The DfE literature review (DfE, 2017a) charts credit transfer developments in HE and these can be summarised as follows:

- The development of regional consortia (NUCCAT, and SEEC) and the work of the OU in the early 1990s to facilitate the creation of cross-HE credit frameworks after the abolition of the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) (DfE, 2017a, p.30).
- The Dearing Report in 1997 made several recommendations about the use of greater credit transfer and accumulation (CAT) as a means of supporting lifelong learning, as well as making recommendations for universities to employ greater consistency of student transcripts (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education [NCIHE], 1997).
- The regional consortia worked with counterparts in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, the Quality Assurance Agency and funding councils through a Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) funded project - the Inter-Consortia Credit Agreement (InCCA) (DfE, 2017a, p.30). The results, published in 1998, laid the foundations for an agreed set of guidelines for a national framework of HE credit.
- The 2003 White Paper The Future of Higher Education charged HEFCE to work with the sector to scale-up use of credit. This led to the work of the Burgess Group, chaired by Professor Robert Burgess.
- In 2006 the Burgess Group published Proposals for national arrangements for the use of academic credit in higher education in England (Final report of the Burgess Group), which set out, on the basis of overwhelming support from the sector, recommendations for the development of a 'permissive national credit framework' to be owned by the Quality Assurance Agency. The Framework would be framed in recognition of the autonomy of institutions (UUK, 2006, p.6).
- By 2008 the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) published a series of documents and guidance on the development and implementation of a UK credit framework (QAA, 2008a, 2008b), followed by further updates and publications related to this guidance.

A key pattern emerges from these developments on credit transfer, that policy discussion has been orientated around the technical potential of facilitating movement and the processes of delivering credit transfer schemes, and development of credit frameworks.

It is worth noting that from the period following the Burgess Report in 2006 until the most recent discussion of credit transfer in government policy, little developed work occurred with regard to credit transfer in the national HE policy environment. For instance, credit transfer received little attention in the 2010 Browne Report or subsequent White Paper. During this time, some routes to more flexible study were opened up, such as the provision of Government funded loans for part-time students. The nature of the regulations for part-time students encouraged greater adoption of more structured degree programmes, which do not necessarily support movement across an HE market (SFE, 2017a). Governments have also focused on encouraging two-year degrees as part of supporting greater flexibility in HE provision.

The most recent developments in the area of credit transfer came in the 2016 HE White Paper, Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice (BIS, 2016a), which placed great emphasis on credit transfer, claiming:

The ability of students to accumulate credits which are transferable to other courses and institutions is central to this vision. We want to gather evidence on how credit transfer in particular can help enable flexible and lifetime learning, and drive up quality by giving students more choice. Switching between institutions is possible in theory, but rare in practice: if students are unhappy with the quality of provision, they are unlikely to take their funding to an alternative institution. Some barriers to transfer are easy to fix – universities should, for example, present their policy on credit transfer clearly on their websites – but some will require significant and sustained attention. The evidence of students transferring on the basis of HE credit transfers earned at their previous institution is both limited and anecdotal. We want to better understand the number of students transferring, the reasons why they transfer and the barriers under the current framework that might prevent them from switching. (BIS, 2016a, p53.)

The White Paper also made the commitment to release a call for evidence, which was realised in May 2016, to look at Accelerated courses and switching university or degree (BIS, 2016b). In this call for evidence the nature of the discourse on credit transfer shifted away from the technical administrative discussion (although this was still a factor) and instead sought to bring notions of markets, choice and quality into discussions of credit transfer, as follows:

Students considering higher education face many choices: which subject, which location and which institution is the best fit for them. These choices can fundamentally influence the course of a student's life. (BIS, 2016b, p.4.)

The Government linked this to improving quality, and the value of education through the process of giving all students greater choice over their education (BIS, 2016b, p.40). The discourse has increasingly moved away from widening participation through making lifelong learning a reality as the driver for student mobility in favour of an increased focus on student mobility as a mechanism for enhancing student choice in a market.

A strong theme in the call for evidence was that universities could do more to support mobility of students. Key barriers were set out in the call for evidence, which it sought to explore:

- **Lack of information** – making students unaware of the potential to switch between institutions and programme of study.
- **Inertia** – meaning the belief or perception among students that the institution and programme of study is a singular choice.
- **Credits are not a universal currency** – with differences between institutions in course content, delivery and quality, making switching difficult.
- **Bureaucratic burden** – whereby processes of admission and transfer are long and complicated, to an extent that they dissuade students from applying.
- **Other barriers** – such as student retention measures unintentionally de-incentivising student movement for all institutions. (Summary; BIS, 2016b, p6.)

The call for evidence assumed there was potential demand from students for greater mobility, although there has been limited exploration of the influences of choice, quality, and demand in the policy discourse on credit and student mobility.

The Government published a summary of the findings and conclusions to the call for evidence in December 2016; the Government received responses from 44 providers and 4,500 students (DfE, 2016b, p.1). The extracts below of the summary highlight the barriers which Government may seek to work with higher education to address:

- Student awareness – 19.5% of respondents to the call for evidence were unaware of the option to switch to another provider. 13.3% of respondents were unaware they could switch degree. 60% of respondents (both those who had transferred and those who had not) said more information would help their decision.

- "**Student/provider perceptions** – there is a perception that a degree is a one-off purchase and logistical, financial and social factors contribute to the decision not to switch. 22% of respondents believed it to be too difficult to switch provider. Large numbers of transfers are seen by some to threaten provider prestige and ability to recruit students.
- **Differences between degree courses** – providers noted that courses differ in content between autonomous institutions and modules build on learning from previous levels. Specialist courses have prerequisites and there are differences in assessment methods that can make switching difficult.
- **Administration costs for providers** – providers highlighted the cost to accrediting previous learning and transfers, and the increased difficulty in budgeting and planning resources.
- **Funding rules** – funding is awarded by academic year which makes switching in-year challenging. Higher education institutions also charge different fees." (DfE, 2016, p.2.)

However, the sample of students who responded to the call for evidence included a high proportion of Open University Students (3,000) (DfE, 2016, p.1), so further research is needed to understand the attitudes of students who may have no prior experience of credit transfer, and who have experienced a more traditional form of campus-based HE experience and a degree programme acquired at a single institution.

The question of actual student demand to some extent remained unanswered. While there are potential benefits to utilising credit transfer, there is limited evidence of it taking place on any significant scale.

The focus in the sector so far has been on the technical issues of how credit can be understood, and frameworks developed to operationalise it, instead of adopting a more holistic approach in terms of what the purpose of credit is and how stakeholders including students will perceive and use any process designed for them. This could be explained in part due to the need to react to government policy interventions over the years, as well as responding to a perceived need for greater flexibility.

While some policy reviews may have previously engaged students and stakeholder groups a number of possible observations are worth noting:

- Many of these took place prior to the rise in tuition fees in 2012, a point from which student attitudes may have changed.
- Student stakeholder groups while beneficial, may only be representative of the students who engage with them, rather than the student body as whole.
- It is unclear if students have ever specifically called for greater student mobility, or simply expressed opinions, and participated in consultations when asked by policy makers.
- Reviews have tended to focus on the technical and academic questions in relation to credit transfer, so a greater focus has often been given to expertise in these areas rather than issues of demand per se.
- Student engagement in policy formation has grown significantly since the early developments on credit transfer.

The continued policy focus on credit transfer and student mobility is highlighted through the inclusion of the duty on the Office for Students (OfS) "to monitor the provision of arrangements for student transfers" (Higher Education and Research Act 2017, s.38) which developed from the White Paper (BIS, 2016a). Subsequent to the project completing, the role the OfS intends to play in terms of student mobility has been set out in the consultation on the regulatory framework for HE (DfE, 2017b).

The existing literature on defining student mobility is limited. As part of the development of this project, the authors considered the international lessons which can be learnt from the use of credit transfer in the United States (US) and Europe, where engagement in these processes is said to be more common. There is currently little or no literature which seeks

to make a comparison between the US context and other systems and processes of student mobility. Where US literature does exist its focus is niche, focusing on particular degree programmes, or administrative issues unique to the US education system.

One study by Souto-Otero (2013), funded by the Higher Education Academy (HEA), does seek to make some forms of comparative analysis with Europe, particularly in the context of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). Souto-Otero notes that while the ECTS system gives the appearance of a more coherent framework, many countries subscribed to it follow very different approaches to credit "which makes their meaning vary substantially by country and reduces ECTS's value as a potential instrument to be used in the context of the recognition of professional qualifications" (Souto-Otero, 2013, p.5). The research highlights that in Europe (and the UK) although credit transfer is a common aspect of policy discourse, the operationalisation of these policies is limited.

There are some interesting patterns to note in research which does not directly relate to student mobility in the form defined above, but which could prove insightful.

Finn (2017a, 2017b), has recently made a study of the concept of 'mobility' in relation to students who commute to and from their HE provider. This paper provides insight into the way in which attitudes to mobility are represented. Finn expands on a body of existing work into traditional and non-traditional students, to highlight how this dualism is also mirrored, in the im/mobile student, devaluing mobility and associating it with non-traditional students. Finn calls for "a gradational view of student mobilities" in order to respond to the changing policy landscape of accelerated and flexible degrees (Finn, 2017a, p1). This suggests that the current cultural attitude to mobility in the sector could undermine any widening participation benefits of greater access to student mobility, even before considering more practical barriers for these students.

Research has been conducted by several bodies, including the HEA, Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) (HEPI, 2017), and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (HEFCE, 2016) around 'choice'. A recent survey by the HEPI and HEA highlights that 34% of 14,057 respondents from universities in the UK would choose a different course based on the information they have access to as a student rather than as an applicant (HEPI, 2017). Although related to information shared at admission, this correlates with the concern highlighted above in the call for evidence on credit transfer that there is a lack of information being provided to students about the choices open to them, such as credit transfer (BIS, 2016b, p6).

Research by HEFCE in 2016 into graduate satisfaction and undergraduate choices (HEFCE, 2016) suggests that, a majority of graduates are satisfied with their choices, with the most common response in this research being that students would not be at all likely to make different choices (about two thirds and three quarters of graduates say would not be very or not at all likely to make different choices). However, a large minority of respondents say they would be either be likely or very likely to choose differently. This proportion is greatest for choice of subject (32% of graduates) and smallest for choice of institution (21%) (HEFCE, 2016). This research reported that the levels of satisfaction across ethnic groups varied in large and statistically significant ways, with black and minority ethnic graduates more likely to wish they had made different HE choices (HEFCE, 2016). This creates a mixed message which suggests that while most students may not want to seek mobility between institutions, mobility between institutions could potentially help support some groups, who are the target beneficiaries of widening participation policy to improve on the choices they have made in entering higher education.

Cumulatively, what emerges is a complex impression of student perspectives on greater mobility between institutions, and what consequences, impacts this might have and the potential barriers. It is here that this research project seeks to make an original contribution to knowledge, and to help define more clearly the course of future research and policy in this area.

Conclusions drawn from the literature

The current wider body of literature suggests that there is greater opportunity to provide support for student mobility, including mechanisms which involve credit transfer. Much existing policy work, and literature directly on transfer using credit has focused on the technical and administrative viability of credit transfer, such as in providing frameworks and discussion of systems which recognise prior learning.

Existing literature focusing specifically on credit transfer, has mainly been developed prior to significant reforms to the higher education sector in England, namely the rise in tuition fees introduced in 2012. Literature has also paid limited attention to the demand from students for greater mobility, and provision of credit transfer, assuming that demand is latent as students are hindered from participation due to a lack of information or systems in HE providers.

This absence means HE providers may be asked to respond to requirements to better support greater mobility with only limited understanding of the demand among students and the likely drivers for students as compared to reasons which are imputed to those students in previous and current policy. Considering the value placed on student satisfaction in the sector this exposes institutions to a level of risk in fulfilling prospective policy developments against students' wishes. Therefore, one of the significant drivers for this research, for the seven participating institutions and across the sector, is to build an understanding of the nature of student demand and how to best support students.

Chapter 3
Methodology

A summary of the approach taken to research student demand for student mobility

Having established the aims, objectives, and research questions for this project in Chapter 1, and set out a review of the literature in Chapter 2 this Chapter seeks to explore the methods utilised to achieve and answer the research questions. The project adopted a mixed methods approach, and utilised a number of techniques and approaches to collect and analyse data. This includes analysis of a matched HESA dataset which at the macro level demonstrates the current engagement in processes of mobility and credit transfer. Richer qualitative data was also collected through a series of online surveys of staff and students at each participant institution, and further focus groups and interviews with students and staff respectively. This Chapter concludes by providing further detail of the data analysis and coding which took place, including a period of peer review of results and feedback by project partners, and experts in the field.

Defining & researching student mobility

In this research project, when explaining student mobility to the participants we defined the term to mean:

'The possibility of leaving your institution/course mid-study, but applying to another institution/course and taking with you the grades/marks that you have already gained – in other words you may not have to restart a degree from the start. More technically, this involves receiving a transcript of your current module results, and using this when applying to continue your studies at another institution, so you would carry some or all of your modular marks towards your new degree at your new institution.'

This allowed us to move beyond the confines of understanding how credit could work, and beyond considering mobility as part of a discourse of lifelong learning or widening participation. It created a space within which to ask questions which respond to the consequences for students in terms not just of the practical barriers of credit and transfer, but attitudes toward movement in general, and the views that students have on the impact that increased mobility could have for them in its broadest sense.

Research design and delivery

In seeking to address the aims and objectives, research was undertaken in the following stages:

1) A data request and analysis of a matched HESA dataset to understand if students currently engage in student mobility in ways which are not automatically clear at present.
2) A series of online surveys at each participant institution to understand the nature of current student demand.
3) A series of follow-up focus groups at each participant institution, to gain richer qualitative data, to further understand the patterns presented in online survey data.
4) A purposive online survey of leaders of learning and teaching at each participant institution to understand current perspectives of staff on student demand for greater mobility.
5) A series of follow-up interviews with a sample of staff who participated in the survey to gain richer qualitative data and to further understand the patterns presented in online survey data.

Analysis of existing HESA data

A data request was submitted to HESA. This data request sought to understand the extent to which mobility and some form of credit transfer was already taking place within higher education.

We requested data on students who had withdrawn from the participant institutions in the last three academic years, since the increase of tuition fees: 2012/13, 2013/14, and 2014/15. From this data on student withdrawals we asked HESA to provide data fields which would cover the following factors for each student:

- Indication of transferred or withdrawn status in HESA data.
- The type of qualification students left.
- The discipline or subject these students left.
- The year of study that they were in when they left.
- The geographical location (such as city or region).

We asked HESA to conduct a matching exercise between this dataset of withdrawn or transferred students from the project's participant institutions, with the national HESA data to see if these students reappeared subsequently as participating in higher education. From these matched students, we requested fields which would show:

- The institution type these students move to.
- The qualification type they have entered.
- The discipline or subject they have entered.
- The programme level/year of entry students re-entered higher education.
- The geographical location they now study in (such as city or region).

Taking these datasets together we analysed the data to seek answers to the following questions:

1. How many students from the participant institutions have formally transferred to another HE provider since the academic year 2012/13 until the date of the current dataset (2015/16)?
2. How many students have withdrawn from one of the participant institutions, and subsequently re-entered higher education at a different HEI since 2012/13?
3. What are the disciplinary breakdowns of students who have completed either of the above processes?
4. What are the types of HE provider these students have moved/transferred to?
5. What year of entry have the departing students come from, and entered into with their new provider?
6. How many students geographically moved when moving HE provider?

The answers to these questions are not linked to the participant data collected in the separate surveys and focus groups, and thus to an extent the conclusions drawn from each strand of work should be treated separately. This form of analysis helps to build understanding, through multiple methods, the extent to which students are currently engaged in some form of mobility. By analysing if students stay within disciplines, or degree programmes, it is also possible to gain some insight into the extent to which students engage in a form of student mobility which might be supported by the developments in policy.

This data alone does not provide an understanding of the extent to which there is demand from students for the provision of mobility, as the behaviour of previous cohorts of students does not necessarily represent future demand. Furthermore, this data provides no indication of attitude or opinion towards the nature of or reason for this movement. This is where attitudinal data for students currently studying in higher education captured in the surveys and focus groups has additional value.

Online surveys of students & follow-up focus groups

Online surveys for students were run at each of the seven participant institutions between the beginning of November 2016 and the end of January 2017. The survey was conducted by the University of Sheffield, the questionnaire was circulated and promoted through existing communication channels at each participant institution, such as all-student mailing lists, social media and promotion by local Students' Union Officers in each participant institution.

The questions were structured into a series of themes following the capture of informed consent, and demographic background information.

The first set of questions sought to establish an understanding of the decisions students had made in choosing their institution. The purpose of this was to understand what shaped students' decisions to choose their course and HE provider. This provides contextual data to understand the ways in which participants view higher education and make decisions when choosing between providers, which may shape the way they approach mobility.

The second set of questions sought to understand students pre-existing knowledge of the provision and availability of credit transfer. These questions sought to understand prior knowledge, comprehension of the process, and if students knew how they might seek information or advice to engage in the process.

The third set of questions dealt specifically with participants' attitudes towards and likely demand for student mobility and credit transfer. Participants were asked if this was a service they had used or could see themselves using, and under what circumstances. Participants were asked their opinion on the impact that student mobility may have on the quality and value of their degree, according to their definitions of these terms, both during study and after graduation.

The fourth set of questions sought to understand the nature of the barriers to student mobility. This involved considering the impact mobility might have on the social and community aspects of university life, as well as the costs which participants believed they might experience if they engaged in mobility, and the consequences these factors might have on their decisions to move between providers.

Finally, participants were offered the opportunity to provide comments in a free text box to cover any information or views they felt they had not been given the opportunity to provide. Students were also offered the opportunity to claim a £2.00 printer credit incentive for their participation, and volunteer to participate in further follow-up research.

Following the closure of these surveys, focus groups were held between January 2017-March 2017. Sampling for the focus groups was conducted via a self-selecting convenience sample. This followed the principle of one focus group per participant institution for every increment of 500 students surveyed, and each focus group would comprise a maximum of 10 participants. Focus group venues were then arranged with the involvement of participant institutions and students were asked to sign-up to these on a first-come first-served basis. There was also a requirement that focus groups include no fewer than 5 participants.

The focus groups lasted for approximately one hour each and were conducted using an informal semi-structured approach where participants were encouraged to discuss the topic both with the facilitator and among themselves using prompts orientated around the five sets of questions described above. Participants were given £15 in gift vouchers each as recognition for their time. The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, by a third-party transcription provider, and coded.

Online surveys of staff & follow-up interviews

Online surveys for staff were run at each of the seven participant institutions between the beginning of February 2017 and March 2017. The survey was a purposeful sample of leaders for learning and teaching at each participant institution. The survey was conducted by the University of Sheffield, but was circulated and promoted through existing communication channels at each participant institution such as mailing lists for leaders in learning and teaching, or programme and module leaders.

As the focus of this research is on understanding student demand, staff data was collected to understand points of connect and disconnect with the student perspective among the leadership of learning and teaching.

This survey followed the same five thematic question sets detailed above in the student online survey; however, these were reframed to enable staff to share their perspectives on their experience of students using student mobility or the nature of student demand. The significant departures from the themes of the question sets that students engaged with are listed below:

- Replacing questions orientated around choosing an institution with questions for staff intended to understand how staff would approach making decisions about applications for credit transfer, or considering applications for future study from applicants.

- Reframing questions about seeking advice with questions about approaches to giving advice to students who may want to consider student mobility.
- The addition of questions which sought perspectives from staff on specific consequences for pedagogical practice and programme or module delivery if more students were to engage in credit transfer.

Staff were given the opportunity to volunteer to participate in follow-up research in the form of a semi-structured interview around the themes and topics discussed in the survey. Interviews rather than focus groups were selected as these were easier to schedule, to take place via Skype or using the telephone for convenience. The aim was to seek a 5% sample of the 57 staff respondents to the survey in these follow-up interviews, however, only 3 staff participants engaged representing 3.7% of the total participants sampled. The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, by a third party transcription provider, and coded using the data analysis approach detailed in each of the following chapters.

Ethical considerations

This project was subject to formal ethical approval by the University of Sheffield, and the ethical approval documentation was shared with each participant institution.

The primary ethical considerations in this research, and how they were controlled, included:

- **Informed consent and the right to withdraw.** At the start of each survey and focus group an information sheet, and informed consent sheet was shared with each participant, this asked students to consent to participation in the research and acknowledge that they understood and consented to how the data they provided would be utilised. The information provided also stated that participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time prior to April 2017, and this was reiterated at the start of each focus group and interview. Following the closure of the online surveys, the data collected was cleaned, this cleaning activity was conducted prior to sharing with the wider research team, and included the isolation and destruction of any data which had been provided where participants answered 'no' to any questions posed in the opening informed consent questions, which resulted in the removal of 963 responses overall. No participants chose to withdraw from the interview and focus group parts of the study.
- **Anonymity.** This included ensuring that focus group transcripts were redacted or specific identifiable details removed or summarised in quotation in a way which makes them useful in analysis but not attributable. Data about participants who had elected to receive their printer credit incentives did need to be shared with institutions. However, not all participants chose to receive this incentive, as such this data was isolated from student responses, with strict procedures governing the use and destruction of this data to prevent the identification of participants.
- **Confidentiality.** As this research engaged with potentially sensitive issues, such as the personal circumstances which may motivate a student to leave their provider, there was the potential that confidentiality may have needed to be broken in the event that participants declared a risk of harm to themselves or others. This was highlighted in the introduction to focus groups by the facilitator, and in collecting informed consent. However, no such disclosures were made during this study.
- **Coercion and participant expectations.** In engaging in research about a sector, and as a member of that sector, there is the potential for two ethical challenges, first the impression of coercion of participants to engage, and the management of expectations that research findings could have an immediate impact on the lives of participants. In controlling for these concerns, we were clear in the informed consent that this research project was voluntary and disconnected from any forms of academic assessment (for students), or career progression (for staff). We were also clear that the research

was undertaken in an exploratory capacity and that the immediate benefits of this project and its recommendations may not be felt for some time. This provided a way of managing the expectations of staff participants. For students, we recognised that many may have left the sector or graduated prior to any of the recommendations being implemented and the project provided incentives to acknowledge the value of their participation.

Participants

Appendix 1 provides an analysis of the demographic characteristics captured in the student survey by age, gender, ethnicity, disability, and sexual orientation. From this data, we can conclude that as a microcosm of the national student population, the sample is relatively representative, particularly in terms of age and gender characteristics.

Chapter 4
Macro Picture

Understanding student mobility using HESA data

This Chapter presents an analysis of data provided by HESA to understand what activity students have currently been engaged in which could be understood as a form of student mobility, using the definition given in Chapter 1 of this report. As approaches in the sector to credit transfer are currently limited and inconsistent it is difficult to make any useful analysis of data specifically categorised as 'credit transfer'. We sought to look at the data patterns in the behaviour of students who withdraw from university. We present here the findings of a HESA data matching exercise of student withdrawals from participant institutions during the 2012/13, 2013/14, and 2014/15 academic years, and their reappearance in HESA data following withdrawal. This gave us a dataset which helped develop an understanding of how many students currently 'move' as opposed to simply 'withdraw', and if this provides an example of the patterns of student demand demonstrated in the preceding chapters.

Understanding the HESA Data

All data for this analysis was provided by HESA in response to a data specification designed to answer the questions in Chapter 3. This analysis focused on students transferring out of the following six participant institutions in the project in academic years 2012/13-2015/16; Sheffield Hallam University, University of Leeds, University of Nottingham, University of Sheffield, University of York and York St John University.

Data was restricted to include UK domiciled, full-time undergraduates only. A special marker was created to indicate if a withdrawing student had transferred to a different HE provider, either within their year of withdrawal, or in the following year. Withdrawing students were identified by using a special Higher Education Special (HES) variable, this involved scanning the full period 2012/13-2015/16, for the appearance of a student's unique HESA identifier (known as a HUSID), and cross referencing it with its re-appearance, or absence in subsequent years. HESA then used the following definitions stemming from this variable to understand students as 'withdrawn' or 'transferred':

> An individual is defined as having transferred if they have moved to a different HE provider in either the same or following academic year after starting at a particular HE provider. For those who have transferred multiple times in the period being considered, we provide information relating to their first transfer. A student is recorded as having withdrawn if they have not qualified and are not still continuing with their studies in 2015/16. The withdrawal information is provided from their final year on a full-time, part-time, writing-up or a sabbatical (excluding dormant) undergraduate or postgraduate course at the same HE provider as they entered.

This form of data definition avoided the potential errors which could arise from the subjective and potentially inconsistent use of fields such as the reason for withdrawal value in HESA data (known as either CSTAT or WITHDRAWNREASON), and the coding values within them between HE providers.

The analysis used a range of descriptive statistics and graphical visualisations. To understand the extent of student transfer the transferring population in the HESA data request was compared to the overall student population (approximately 344,798 students across the period 2012/13-2014/15).

To understand the mix of disciplines for transferring students, the average Full Person Equivalent (FPE) of students in each subject area was taken across 3 years 2012/13-2014/15. For all other analyses the FPE of transfers in each category was taken for the 4 years covered by the study (2012/13-2015/16). To identify students who changed discipline, region or institution type, variables were compared before and after transfer.

Findings

The matched data from the HESA request returned 5,968 student withdrawals out of the six participant institutions in academic years 2012/13-2015/16. Of these 5,968 students who withdrew in the period, 1,595 were cases of student transfers from the six participant institutions to a different institution with an FPE of 1,390. This be the baseline used in the analysis throughout this Chapter with the exceptions of Fig 4.6, where the Open University is excluded, and Fig 4.8, where students studying in their home region before transfer and who do not change region are excluded. The remaining cases were student withdrawals from participant institutions who did not appear again in a different institution. This section will address in turn the research questions posed for the HESA data return to provide a macro-level picture of existing student mobility.

How many students have formally transferred since the 2012/13 academic year?

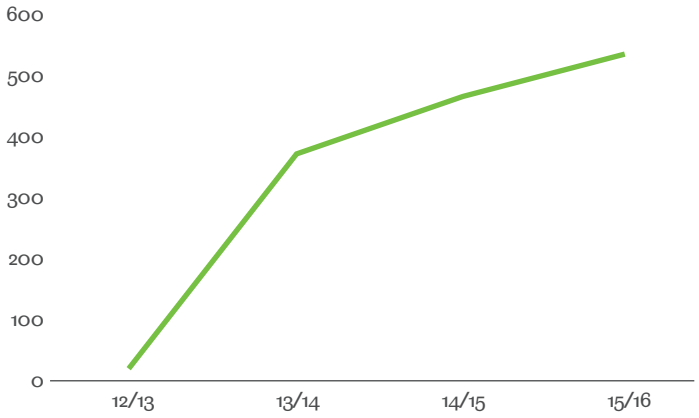


Fig 4.1 Student withdrawals and re-entry into higher education at a different institution

The total number of students who withdrew and then reappeared having transferred is not evenly distributed through the period. The number of withdrawals and re-entry into higher education at a different institution has increased in the last three academic years from less than 0.02% of the student population of participant institutions in 2012/13 to 0.6% of the student population in 2015/16.

Table 4.1 Percentage of student transfers

	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
% Transfer	0.02%	0.4%	0.6%	0.6%
Total Student Pop	86012	85767	85354	87665

Notably, the slight increase in the number of transfers, from 0.02% to 0.4%, occurred after wider changes within the sector including the rise in tuition fees. Further research would be needed to explore this potential link of rising fees and increasing mobility. However, the uptake is still very low in proportion to the student population in participant institutions. The low uptake of student mobility could also be linked to a lack of systematic awareness of student mobility demonstrated in the survey and focus group data and negative student attitudes to mobility other than for personal extenuating reasons.

Programme of study and student mobility

The second question addressed was the type of programme studied, to see if there was any link between the programme studied and the potential likelihood to transfer. We were also interested in learning which subjects students transferred into to see if there was a pattern in transfers. For this analysis, and as a result of the relatively small sample, we considered mobility between STEM and non-STEM subjects. Fig 4.2 and 4.3 present averages of the figures across three academic years.

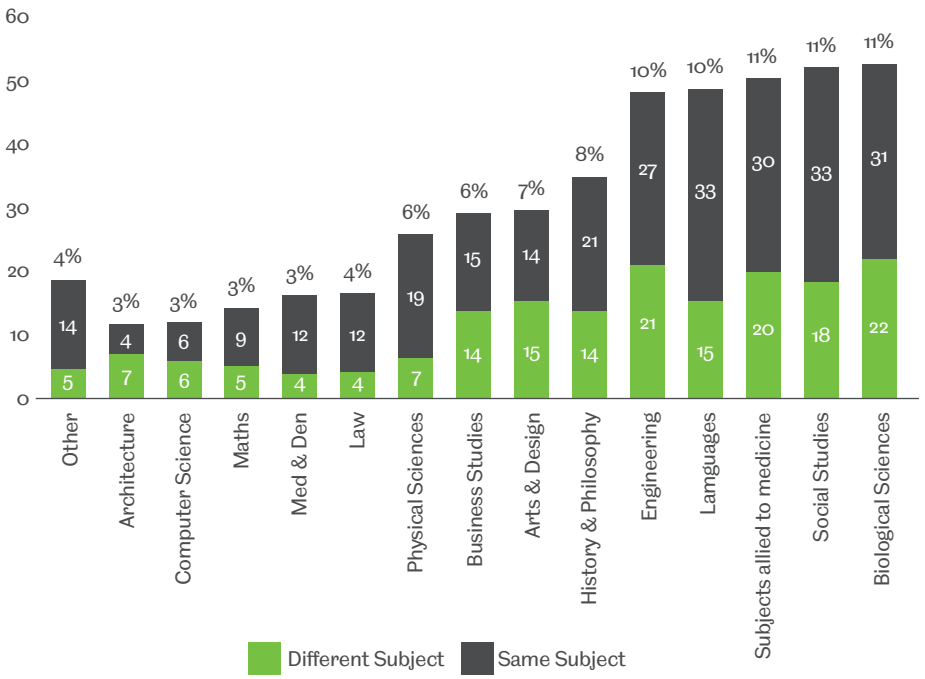


Fig 4.2 Discipline breakdown of student mobility

Biological Sciences has the highest number of student transfers, representing 11% of the total sample of the 1,390 FPE compared to 3% of FPE in the sample from Computer Science. The data shows that students tend to transfer within discipline. This provides the insight that students may change and rethink which institution they chose compared to the subject area they applied for. We investigated further to understand whether there was a pattern of students transferring to STEM subjects. The distinction between STEM and non-Stem subjects was used due to the complex breadth and depth of subjects students moved from and to.

Fig 4.3 Transfers between STEM and Non-STEM subjects

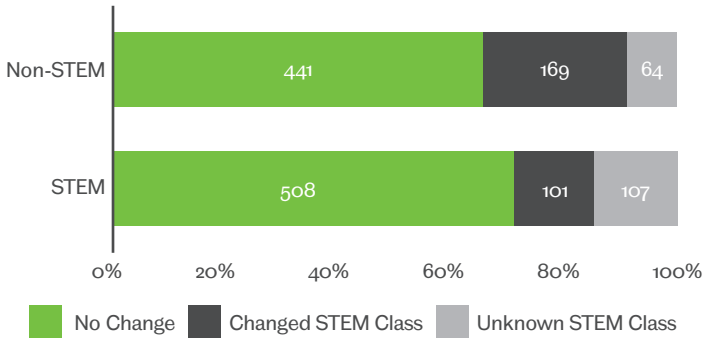
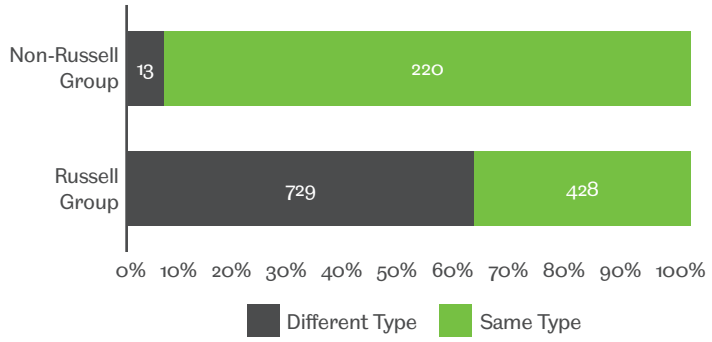


Fig 4.3 demonstrates that students on non-STEM programmes are slightly more likely to transfer than students taking STEM subjects. They are also less likely to stay within their broad subject grouping. STEM students were less likely to transfer on the whole. However, the overall proportion of transfers remains low with relatively few students (22% of the 1390) changing both course and institution. This has implications for student mobility as the HESA data seems to indicate that transfer may be used to correct a decision about location rather than programme. Further research could be undertaken to understand internal programme-based student mobility within the same institution

Type of university and student mobility

Fig 4.4 Movement between Russell Group and non-Russell Group insitutions by transfering students



The HESA data request included a field to understand the type of institution a student initially attended and the type of institution they transferred to. The above graph demonstrates that a student who transfers is much more likely to move to a non-Russell Group institution, regardless of the type of institution they are transferring from. There is little or no evidence of a significant movement of students from a non-Russell Group institution to a Russell Group. This is echoed in the focus group data as participants were less confident that 'trading up' was a valid reason for transfer compared with more personal emotive issues as the potential reasons for transferring.

Year of entry and student mobility

Fig 4.5 Year of transferred for students

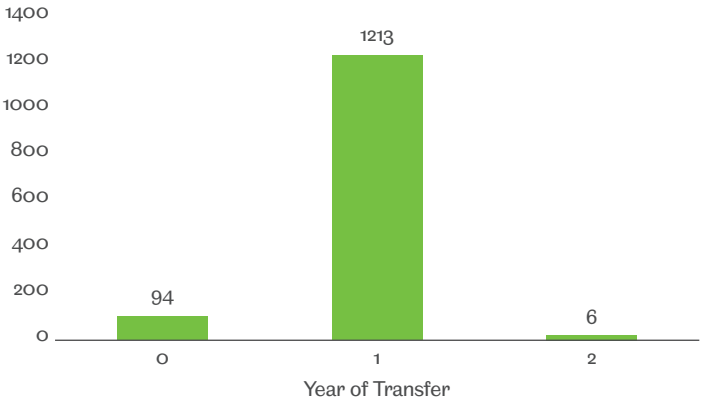
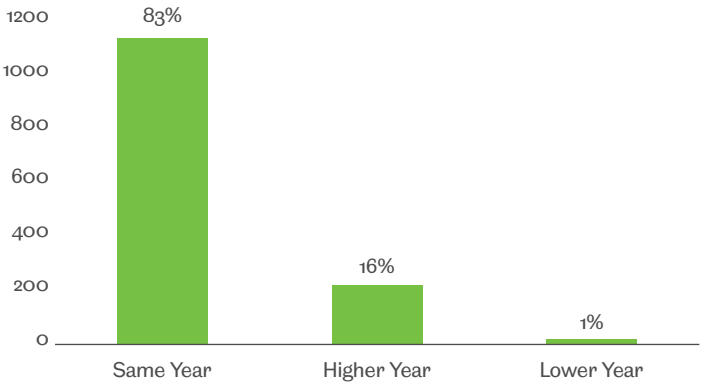


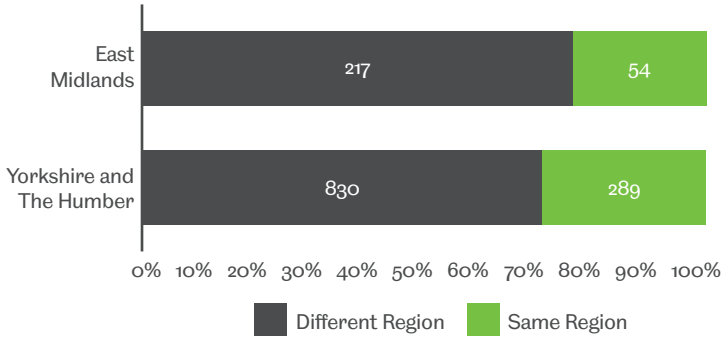
Fig 4.6 Year of entry for student transfers excluding student transfers to the Open University as the year of programme was not coded comparably with other institutions



With the exception of students who transfer to the Open University, the majority of students (83%) who continue their studies at their new institution start in the same year they left. The majority of students (1,213 students (87%)) who transfer do so in their first year. Together this could be taken to indicate that despite the majority of students staying with the same programme (Fig. 4.2 and 4.3), credits are not transferred when they join a new institution. Students transferring to the Open University may have a different experience because of the flexibility and distance-learning nature of their programmes.

Geographical student mobility

Fig 4.7 Regional movement of students who transfer



The majority of students (cumulatively 1,047 students (75%)) across all years at the six participant institutions based in the North of England moved to a different region of the UK to continue their studies. This could suggest that students don't change programmes because of their programme of study or because of institutional fit but because location is more the issue driving where they choose to move to.

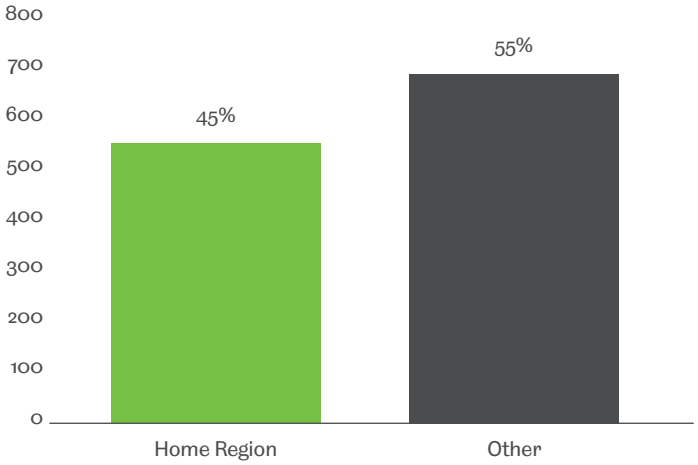


Fig 4.8

Students who transfer to home region, students already studying in their home region and who remained in region were excluded from this analysis. Due to the flexibility of their courses OU students were classed as transferring to their home region (5% of Total)

As Fig 4.8 indicates, a majority (55%) of students do not move to a university close to their home address. This suggests a different pattern of behaviour than assumed by the students in the focus groups. The focus groups saw advantage in students using mobility to move closer to home in cases of changing caring responsibilities or homesickness. Although a significant proportion do move to their home region.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the following key findings can be seen in the data which tell us more about mobility at the six participant institutions:

- A very small proportion of students actually leave their HE provider and engage in any form of student mobility and return to higher education.
- Between 0.02-0.6% of students who withdrew from the institutions within the scope of this research project between the 2012/13-2015/16 academic years returned to higher education.
- Most students who do transfer stay within the same broad discipline areas, such as STEM (508 students remained in discipline (71%)) and non-STEM (441 students remained in discipline (65%)).
- Most students (220/94%) from non-Russell Group institutions returned to the same type of institution, while most students from Russell Group universities (729/63%) transferred to institutions which are non-Russell Group.
- Most students who transfer do so into the same year of study (1,090/83%).
- Most students (1,047/75%) transferred to a different region on re-entering higher education.
- A significant proportion of students (540/45%) transfer to their home region on re-entering higher education, after initially studying away.

Chapter 5
The Student Perspective: *Results From The On-line Survey*

Understanding current student demand and attitudes towards student mobility

This Chapter presents an analysis of the data collected from students from each of the seven participant institutions in this project. Over 3,000 respondents from across all participant institutions engaged in the survey, leading to 2,475 responses once the data had been cleaned. From this, nine one-hour focus groups took place across five of the participant institutions, with 71 student participants; student attrition following the survey accounted for the two institutions which did not hold a focus group.

Participants were not forced to answer any of the questions throughout the survey, therefore in the following analysis figures may not total to the overall respondent population of 2,475.

Surveying student attitudes to mobility

Here we present findings from the online survey data collected from students, and provide analysis, before expanding in richer detail on these findings utilising data in the next section from the student focus groups.

Evidence of awareness and existing support

In the first part of the survey we sought to develop an understanding of what the students who engaged in our research currently knew about student mobility. We provided a definition to the participant students (given in Chapter 3: Methodology, p.25).

We sought to understand the extent to which current students were aware of their ability to transfer, whether the information was accessible to them and who they might consider talking to about this issue if they decided to pursue the option. Fig 5.1 shows the results from these three questions in the survey.

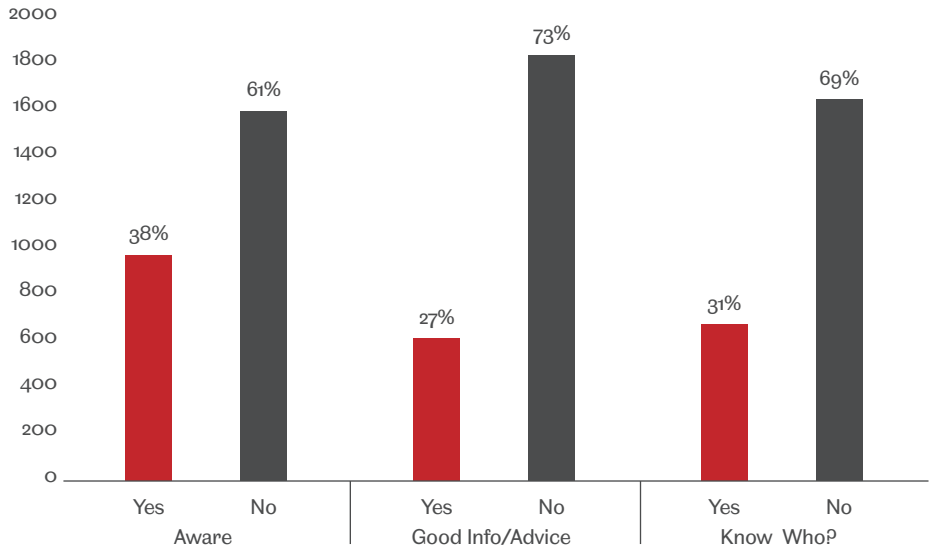


Fig 5.1

Awareness of student mobility, location of information and advice, and who to seek support from

A consistent pattern emerges from these answers: the majority of students (61%) had not been previously aware of student mobility, and did not currently know where to find information and advice (73%), or who they would speak to it about it (69%) if this were something they decided to pursue.

Table 5.1 Distribution of awareness of student mobility with provision of support to 0 decimal point

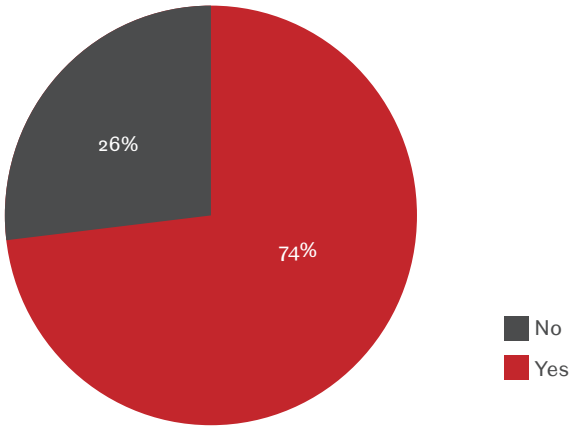
		Quality of Information	
		Yes	No
Awareness	Yes	13%	26%
	No	14%	47%

		Know Who to Talk To	
		Yes	No
Awareness	Yes	14%	25%
	No	16%	45%

In cross-referencing these results, the distribution of responses between awareness of student mobility, and believing that information is accessible and students knowing who to talk to, further suggests that the provision of information could be improved. As the Tables in 5.1 show those students who were aware of student mobility did not believe that quality information was accessible, or that they would know who to talk to if this was something they wanted to pursue. These findings were echoed in the distribution of students who were previously unaware of student mobility, where students felt that they would not know who to talk to.

We also asked students to reflect upon their current experience at university, and if they had at any point felt inclined to leave or move university during their course of study. We asked the students if they had ever experienced a desire to withdraw or transfer HE provider, which provided us with a baseline measure of student attitudes towards withdrawal from study.

Fig 5.2 Proportion of students who had expressed a desire to withdraw or transfer from university



When asking students if they had ever considered withdrawing or transferring from university during their studies, 26% of respondents said they had. This data should be seen in the context of HESA data which shows that on average 0.6% of withdrawing students actually transfer. Yet these two findings combined do suggest that, while this may be small, a form of latent demand may exist, which this research will seek to probe further across the data collected.

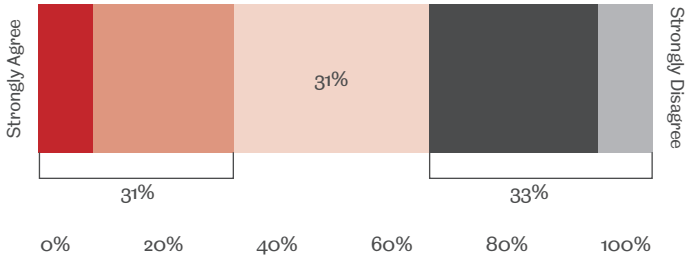
Establishing opinion on student mobility

Following on from this analysis of awareness we sought to establish a baseline opinion from our sample towards increased access to student mobility. Initially, we asked participants to what extent they agreed with the following statement:

Some argue that making it easier to move universities would improve quality, and value, by giving students more choice and flexibility over their programme of study.

The answers to this are presented in the chart in Fig 5.3. Responses demonstrate that a slight majority of students, in terms of the different proportions, disagree (33%) with the principle that student mobility would improve the student experience in terms of quality, and value but the responses are evenly spread.

Fig 5.3 Agreement with statement on increasing value and quality by moving universities



Following on from this we asked students a series of questions around their perspective on what engaging in student mobility (in terms of transferring degree) might mean for them in terms of impacting the quality and value of their degrees both during and after study. We asked students to define what these terms mean for them first in free text boxes, a word cloud definition from these answers is provided in the images below:

Image 5.1 A representation of Value

Image 5.2 A representation of Quality

We then asked, using student understanding of the terms 'quality' and 'value', what they think mobility would mean:

During Study:

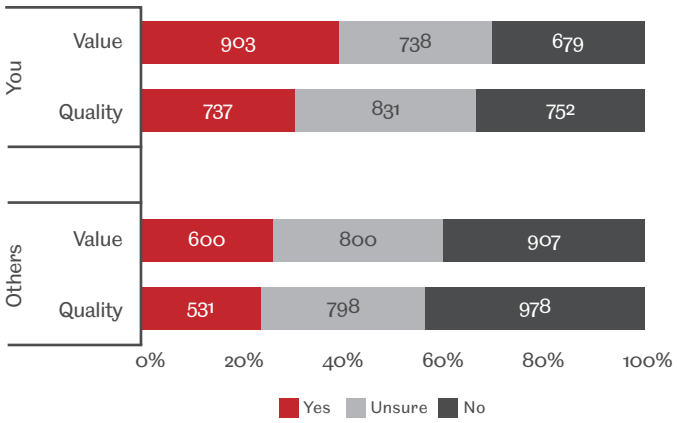
- Do you believe that a degree awarded by the accumulation of credits (essentially grades) from different institutions is of the same quality to you as one awarded by one institution for a single programme of study?
- Do you believe that a degree awarded by the accumulation of credits from different institutions is of the same value to you as one awarded by one institution for a single programme of study?

After graduation:

- Do you believe that a degree awarded by the accumulation of credits from different institutions is of the same quality to you as one awarded by one institution for a single programme of study?
- Do you believe that a degree awarded by the accumulation of credits from different institutions is of the same value to you as one awarded by one institution for a single programme of study?

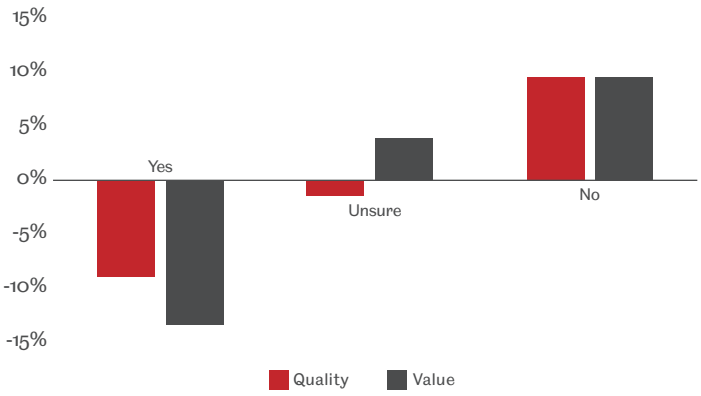
The results of these questions are shown below in Fig 5.4 and demonstrate a pattern where students remain concerned about the potential negative impact on the quality of their degree through increased access to or use of student mobility. A majority of students are unsure or don't agree the value (1,707/74%) and quality (1,776/77%) of their degree would be recognised externally (such as by employers) after graduation.

Fig 5.4
Opinions on value and quality of degrees awarded by the accumulation of credits during study (for students), and after graduation (to others)



In Fig 5.5 we linked the answers about quality and value during study, and value and quality after study. This demonstrates the percentage change in opinion (y-axis) compared to opinion on student mobility (x-axis), which shows a significant change in opinion among those who feel that greater student mobility may be positive. This shows that they are most likely to hold the view that a degree awarded following student mobility would be seen to be of lesser value and lesser quality after graduation, than a single degree programme awarded after staying at one institution.

Fig 5.5
Variance between opinion of quality and value while studying, compared to the value and quality of their degree to others after studying



To begin to unpick respondents' attitudes to student mobility expressed in Fig 5.3 we compared these responses to whether respondents had expressed a wish to leave university in Fig 5.2. and the results of this are set out in Fig 5.6 below with bars comprising portions of the responses in Fig 5.6 (Yes-26%, No-74%).

Fig 5.6 Relationship between attitudes towards student mobility (from Fig 5.3) and if students had expressed an inclination to withdraw from university

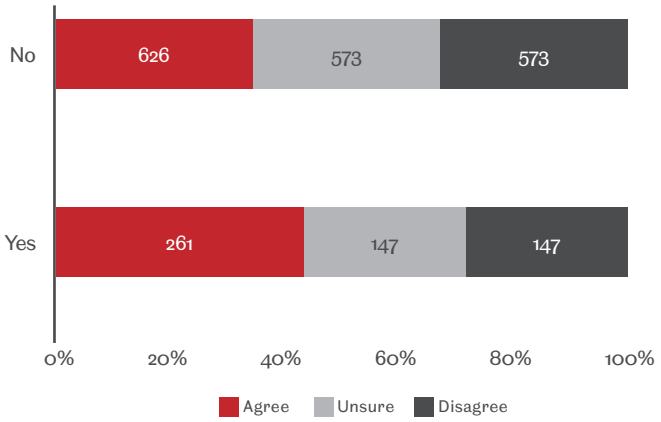


Fig 5.6 shows that from our respondents, if students have previously considered leaving university they are significantly more likely to be in favour of credit transfer. This suggests that there may be group of students who would be retained in higher education if access to credit transfer were improved, demonstrating a potential form of latent demand. However, it is worth noting that this group (261 respondents) make up 10.5% of the total survey respondents, while this may be small it is also not an insignificant percentage.

In further exploring the nature of demand, and the factors which may affect it, we sought to understand the significance two specific factors would have on a student's decision to move university:

- The social and community life of being at university.
- The immediate day to day costs of studying (not including fees).

As shown in Fig 5.7 these factors held great significance for the majority of students, with 49% citing financial factors would inform their decision to move, and 45% agreed that the university community and social life would have a significant impact on their decisions to engage or not in student mobility.

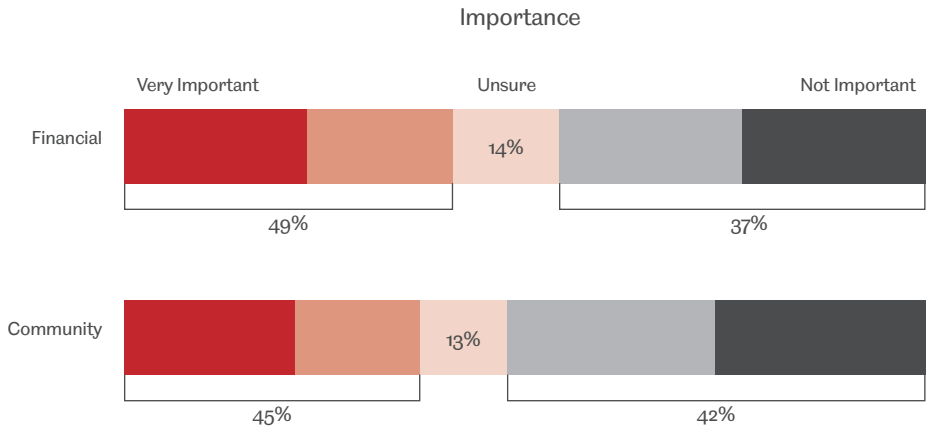
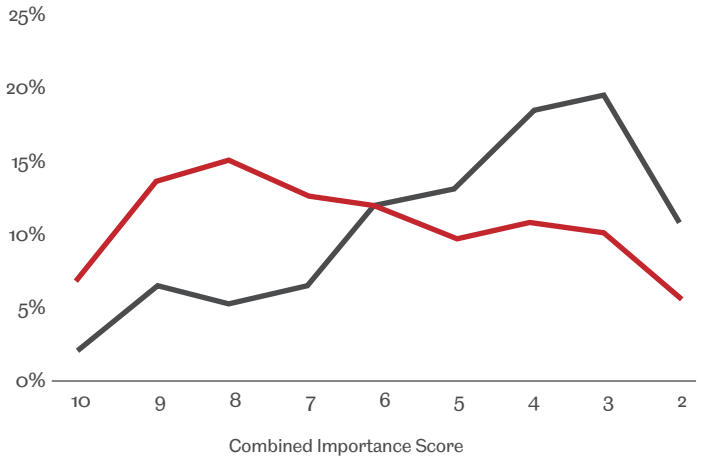


Fig 5.7 Importance of financial and community factors to students in deciding to move university if they engage in student mobility

When cross referencing the level of importance students give financial and community factors (from Fig 5.7), with their opinion of student mobility (shown in Fig 5.3), a pattern starts to emerge which suggests a complex set of reasons as to why any latent demand is not currently engaged with. In Fig 5.8 for instance a relationship is shown with those respondents who view student mobility positively agreeing with the statement below, and also placing the greatest importance on the value of community and financial factors in making a decision about student mobility:

Some argue that making it easier to move universities would improve quality, and value, by giving students more choice and flexibility over their programme of study.

Fig 5.8 Relationship between views on student mobility (from Fig 5.3) and the combined importance of financial and social factors (from Fig 5.7)



This would start to suggest then that any latent demand that does exist may be inhibited by these factors, and that those students who agree with student mobility may not attempt it because of factors like the cost of movement (explored later in this Chapter), and being uprooted from a university community, and friendship groups. Factors which may influence decisions about mobility are further explored in the focus group data to get a better understanding about the nature of these factors and if any further factors would shape or influence the uptake of student mobility and credit transfer.

Finally, in collecting this survey data we conducted further analysis to see if students from particular demographics or disciplines valued or viewed mobility differently. However, no significant patterns or relationships emerged between disciplines or demographics and opinion on student mobility. As show in Fig 5.9 and Fig 5.10 below.

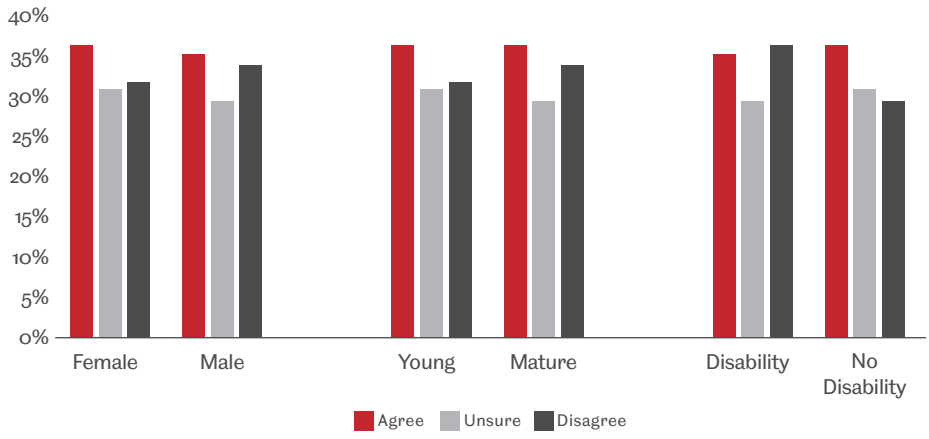


Fig 5.9 Relationship between views on student mobility (from Fig 5.3) along demographic lines: gender, age, and disability

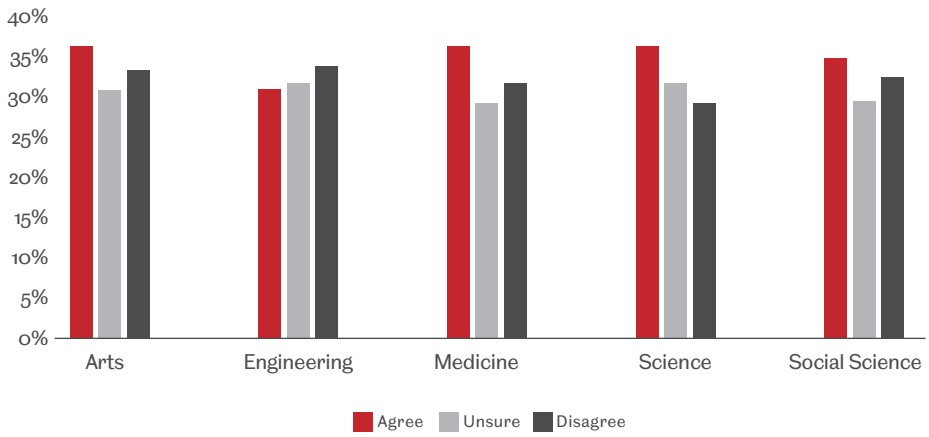


Fig 5.10 Relationship between views on student mobility (from Fig 5.3) along disciplinary lines

Projected cost implications of transferring between universities

This study sought to understand the practical barriers, including financial, faced by students who are interested in transferring institution. Finances in terms of the transfer of loans for maintenance and tuition fees are known to be a potential issue due to the current regulations which can mean that unless a student presents mitigating circumstances additional funding may not be available in full for their second course (SFE 2017b), which potentially limits mobility. However, what has not been explored in any detail is the extent to which the actual liquid capital costs of mobility may inhibit student mobility.

In the student survey we asked students to profile the costs they felt they might incur should they engage in a transfer. Focus group data demonstrated that students understood mobility as being theoretically possible mid-way through the academic year, as well as at the end of each academic year. Therefore, in Table 5.2, we have taken the costs students detailed in the survey, and sought to provide a rudimentary estimate of the expenditure students may incur if they move HE provider, either mid-year, or towards the end of the academic year.

This costing is not presented as an exhaustive analysis; however, it represents a student-informed costing, which provides specific figures to demonstrate the immediate financial implications of transferring institution.

	Costs incurred within 2 months of moving from the University of Sheffield to a university in South West England	
Incurred Cost	Moving on 1st February	Moving on 1st June
Previous Tenancy Costs§	£2,320	£464
New Tenancy Costs • Deposit§ • Fees§ • Rent until 1st July§	 £200 £99 £3,360	 £200 £99 £168
Utility Bill Charges • Gas (British Gas*) • Electric (British Gas*) • Broadband/landline (BT*) • Water	£30 (early exit fee + bill)	£0 + 1 month's bill £0 + 1 month's bill
• Water	£30 (early exit fee +bill) £50 transfer fee/ final bill	£50 (early exit fee +bill)
Cost of moving • Van rental (Hertz*) • Packing material (Argos*)	 £140.83 £31.99	 £140.83 £31.99
Gym Membership (Ending) Pure Gym*	£14.99	£14.99
Gym Membership (Joining) Pure Gym*	£29.99	£29.99
Sports Club/Society membership and Kit#	£125	£125
Travel costs between locations (assumed 3 trips minimum) • Travel (Train – off peak return*) • Accommodation (Travelodge*)	 £286.50 £135	 £286.50 £135
Totals	£6,853.30	£1,745.30

§ Figures sourced from Unite Student accommodation website – note independent private accommodation may cost more and Unite provides all-inclusive billing

* Figures sourced June 2017 from service providers' websites – where specific figures could not be gauged average advertised rates were used

Costs taken from University of Sheffield rates and assumed similar

Table 5.2 Cost estimates associated with student transfer

To create this costing, we have made the following assumptions:

- That a student move is relatively seamless due to credit transfer (i.e. leaving at the end of semester one exam period to join semester two, or leaving at the end of an academic year, to join the following one).
- A student may move a significant geographic distance – in this case we have assumed from Yorkshire (i.e. University of Sheffield) to the South West of England (i.e. University of Bristol). However, it is notable that many students in the focus groups cited London institutions as possible candidates they might move to, which would dramatically increase costs.
- That a student would not be able to fill a room in student housing following their departure, and that they would be liable for a housing contract for a full academic year. This is informed by the knowledge that student housing is not necessarily in short supply. Many student residential companies, such as Unite, currently

have spaces available during the academic year in all major cities according to their website (Unite, 2017). Similarly, a student housing charity in Leeds, Unipol, estimated that there are significantly more bed spaces than students in the city (Unipol, 2017, p.6).

- That, in order to move HE provider, a student would need to make a minimum of three trips to their new city or HE provider, which might involve overnight accommodation, before moving. These trips might include: a visit to a prospective HE provider; an interview at that prospective provider; a visit to view accommodation and sign-up for new housing.
- Some costings might be variable, but these variations would not fundamentally reduce the overall cost of mobility to an extent that a student may be more likely to engage in mobility. For instance, society memberships may be cheaper, fewer trips to institutions might be taken, and not all utilities may be incurred as some students leave all-inclusive accommodation.
- That students will utilise budget or low-cost options for travel, accommodation or gym membership wherever possible e.g. off-peak train tickets, budget gyms and hotels.

While this is not a deeply systematic review, what is provided here is a figure, guided by students' perceptions, which presents the potential real-time costs incurred in employing greater student mobility. In discussing the results of the focus groups below, we go into further detail about students' views on the financial implications of greater student mobility.

However, one conclusion which can be drawn from this data so far is the potential for groups of students from widening participation backgrounds to be disadvantaged by moves to increase student mobility. For instance, it is unlikely that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds would be able to easily and quickly access approximately, at best £1,745.30, or worst £6,853.30, of liquid capital.

Studies have also shown that cultural differences in attitudes to debt suggest that some demographic groups, based on ethnicity or religion, have become disenfranchised from higher education (Callender & Jackson, 2005; UUK, 2003). If any further systematic implementation of mobility relied on students accumulating further debt it could dissuade these groups from engaging in greater mobility.

Any systematic embedding of support for student mobility would need to have an equality impact assessment (as required already under the Equality Act 2010 in terms of policy development) and ensure that suitable controls and support were in place to avoid students from certain backgrounds being 'priced-out' of engaging in student mobility. Without this, the work and effort which universities already put into tackling social inequalities through widening participation could be undermined.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the following key findings can be seen in the data which tell us more about The following conclusions can be drawn from the student survey data:

- The majority of students (1512 / 61%) were unaware of the possibility of student mobility, and were unclear about where they would seek advice and guidance on this from within their institution.
- Almost two thirds of students surveyed (1569/64%) were unsure about or disagreed with the principle that improving student mobility would improve the quality and value of their degree.
- However, students also expressed a belief that:
    - a degree awarded by accumulation of credits was of the same quality as one awarded by a single institution (737/32%), although 1,583/68% were either unsure or disagreed with this premise. On perceptions of value, whether such a degree was of the same value, the views were: 903/39% agreed; 1,417/61% were unsure or disagreed.
    - if a student had transferred, the value and quality of their degree may be perceived externally as less valuable and of lower quality by employers or in applications to postgraduate study (value: 907/39% and quality: 978/42%).
- For a large group of students, financial (1099/49%) and social/community (1024/45%) factors were key in making a decision about student transfer in contrast to any academic considerations.
- An estimate of the costs of transferring, informed by factors considered by students, indicates a mid-year transfer could involve costs of approximately £1,745.30 to £6,853.30 (excluding tuition fees). Such costs could have implications for students from low-income backgrounds.
- There was no evidence in the survey that student mobility was favoured more by a particular group of students, and hence would be likely to widen participation.

Chapter 6
The Student Perspective: *Results From The Focus Groups*

Understanding current student demand and attitudes towards student mobility

Deepening our understanding using focus groups

Following analysis of the survey data discussed above, the use of focus groups allowed us to examine the data further and gain a richer understanding by discussing the preliminary findings with groups of respondent students at the five participant institutions:

- Sheffield Hallam University
- University of Leeds
- University of Nottingham
- University of Sheffield
- University of York

The focus groups involved 71 students. They were all students at one of the five HE providers and had already responded to the survey questionnaire. The focus groups were semi-structured, recorded and transcribed verbatim. After reading the transcripts an initial set of categories emerged for coding and this was used to set-up a coding structure for the transcripts.

In coding the data, the researchers sought to be led by the data to create the structure for the subsequent report below, here three core themes are presented based on our interpretation of the data:

- Opinions on demand.
- Concerns about, and barriers to, mobility.
- Areas for improvement.

Each of these three themes is explored in turn in this Chapter, and the key patterns from each of these student-data informed themes discussed.

Opinions on demand

Within the data which demonstrated student opinions on demand, several key patterns were identified, including:

- Awareness of student mobility.
- Reasons for mobility.
- Employability factors.

This section will now explore each of these within the focus group data in turn, and elaborate on students' perspectives in these areas.

1. Awareness of student mobility

Overall in the focus group data, students demonstrated a low level of demand and interest in increased access to student mobility. However, students felt that in support contexts, student mobility might be appropriate, and that more could be done by institutions to support students who choose to transfer.

Students who participated in the focus groups were either made aware of student mobility through this research or through anecdotal evidence, for example, from friends or flatmates who considered transfer or new members of their programme joining in the second year. There was no evidence of a more systematic awareness of student mobility through university communications or advice provided by student support services, as demonstrated in the three quotes below which were typical of this view:

"I realised, where my friend was doing English and Psychology at London and she moved to do it at [a Northern University] for her second year, I hadn't really thought about it and then I realised afterwards, I was like 'oh, right, did you use your credits?' and she was 'yes, it was really hard though'."

"I'll be honest, I didn't know that you could change universities in the middle of your degree, I knew that, say you were half-way through your first year you could drop out temporarily, as it were, and then restart the year either at the university that you are currently at or go to another one in the new year."

"I tired to move in the first year, back home, and there was nothing online, although I looked on the university website and it did speak about, there's a possibility but it was always, just, very short, non-specific sentences about being able to transfer university."

Fig 6.1 Example quotes related to awareness of student mobility

When students were aware of credit transfer, it was usually through the experience of their peers who presented accounts of student mobility and transfer as a negative, difficult and complicated administrative process. Furthermore, discussions in this area made frequent reference to providers which students thought had more awareness of student mobility, such as the Open University:

"My best mate's currently trying to transfer. She did a first year and a half at The Open University and is now trying to transfer to, I think, somewhere in London and, like, I think the process was a lot simpler than she thought because she assumed that it being The Open University she wouldn't be able to, like, it wouldn't have the same...."

This supports the general pattern seen in the survey data that the majority of students in this study are unaware of student mobility except through peer student stories about their experiences, which tend to be negative. This speaks to an emerging theme in the data, about the lack of guidance, advice and communication about student mobility.

2. Reasons for mobility

The majority of students in the focus groups felt that mobility and transfer were not advantageous as it could lead to a fragmented experience of higher education. Students offered support for student mobility in a framework of student support. In particular, students emphasised a change in family circumstances or mental health issues as potential reasons to improve access to student mobility. In this context, students felt that the ability to transfer institutions to a HE provider closer to home, would be preferable compared to dropping out of university or taking an extended leave of absence:

"I think family is a big thing. Again, like, I wouldn't consider moving until Cambridge or Oxford called but if for example my mum passed then I would go straight back home because I've got family to think about, but that's a very extreme situation. I think student mobility when things like death and severe illness occur I think universities need to be very flexible about it."

"I think maybe family situations as well, people's parents/grandparents get ill and it's a case of maybe... like, I guess, moving to [a Northern University], if I wanted to carry on doing the same course, [a Northern University]'s nearer home. So I guess I could still care for them, you could be a carer for your family and still be maintaining your degree."

Fig 6.2 Example quotes related to changes in family circumstances

"I think people change aswell because of mental health reasons, because one of my friends, he actually dropped out of [a Northern University] because he got diagnosed with depression and he's, like, taking a year off but I don't know if that's, kind of, a case where you would use student mobility or you would actually have a leave of absence."

"Yes one of my friends is very ill and, when she was trying to decide what university she wanted to go to, she wanted to find out what support would be available to her, but quite a lot of the universities would say 'oh, we'll sort it when you are here, when you've decided upon ours' so I think, for that, that would be a really good reason to swap because, quite a lot of universities are reluctant to say anything until you have confirmed them."

Fig 6.3 Example quotes related to supporting mental health and wellbeing

In highlighting this issue, there was greater consensus among the student participants that mental health and wellbeing support were valid reasons to transfer HE provider. There was recognition of different health services provided across the country and it was highlighted that greater ability to transfer institutions could be a method for students to access the most appropriate support.

Students in the focus groups were concerned that a lack of information provided about accessing student mobility could stigmatise accessing this form of support when it is needed:

"I think by saying, 'We shouldn't advertise,' it adds to the stigma of it, like, there's something wrong with it and if it wasn't advertised I'm not sure how you would know about going to look for it on a website anyway."

Despite the willingness to transfer in times of family crisis, students did have concerns about the type of institution they would transfer to. Here, student mobility was seen as a 'last resort' and students would prefer to transfer to a similar institution, for example, trying to transfer from one research intensive institution to another which was more conveniently located:

"Especially if you go home but the university back home is a slightly lower-ranked uni, it will make you seem like you just weren't cut out for a Russell Group."

Furthermore, correlating with the stigma which can exist around mental health and wellbeing (Brown, 2016), students felt transferring institution as a result of a family crisis was less problematic. Here, it was felt that it could be explained and justified to a future employer as adapting to a difficult situation and needing to be closer to home. As reflected in Fig. 6.4 below, students felt that leaving otherwise may be perceived as being an indication that they are in deficit. Generally, students felt that moving institutions could be seen as 'failure' and if student mobility was more widely communicated, to an extent, this stigma would be removed which would in turn enhance the student experience:

"Having the right reason to change is really important because the question is definitely going to pop up as to why you didn't complete your degree in the first place when you have an interview with an employer, and just having the right reason I think would be important, or something that you really believe in and you don't regret that choice. I think that would be important."

"Yes, but I don't think you would just change university if you couldn't hack it, I think you'd jut drop out."

"I think it also makes you look a bit flaky as well if you've changed university, like, if you're going into Law, for example, they want you to be headstrong but then if you're also changing university and changing course and changing this then they're going to think that you're going to be a bit dodgy."

Fig 6.4 Example quotes related to justifying mobility, and potential deficit discourses surrounding mobility

While some students did express a belief that student mobility would give them an opportunity to 'trade up', these students appeared in the minority. Expressing opinions such as:

"Yes, it's like, if it was from a non-Russell Group to a Russell Group or somewhere like, not a Russell Group but if it was like a university which wasn't particularly good in that area, trying to transfer to a university which was better in that area would be, yes, go with that but, if they were going down, unless there were extenuating circumstances, I would be, 'no, just carry on through it'."

All students broadly expressed opinions that the way in which they understood 'better' universities where culturally enshrined, such as 'Russell Group', 'Oxbridge', or not. Most students paid little attention to rankings and didn't value the specific granular detail of where an institution currently sat within a ranking system:

"I really don't pay attention to rankings at all anymore just because so much of them are based off of student's satisfaction where they'll get, like, a bad grade so mark less. I just don't pay attention to rankings whatsoever."

"Rankings wouldn't really matter to me but what would matter to me is the uni's, sort of, perceived prestige so to speak and its perceived status."

Fig 6.5 Example quotes related to student attention to rankings

Further to this, most students did not see 'trading-up' as a valid reason to transfer between institutions. Some students raised concerns about the reliability of information and about future employability:

"It's a bit of a strange answer to give, like, 'Oh, well, I wanted to go to somewhere that's higher up'. Just…Yeah I think seem like an odd reason or maybe that you'd made up that reason that it's actually for other reasons."

From those students who supported the notion of 'trading-up', most indicated that the extent to which it would improve their graduate trajectory would rely heavily on the extent to which they could 'spin' the move as advantageous for the employer, as shown in Fig 6.6. This echoes the concern mentioned above in relation to student support that students felt they needed a 'valid' or justifiable reason to move, such as some form of mitigating circumstances:

"I think it's what you make it, you say 'I've had to adapt to a completely different situation' and, therefore could make you even more employable."

"I think you can always spin something to seem positive even if it's not, so you can always... it will look good because you've been able to... I mean, not... they don't necessarily know whether you moved because you hated your life or whatever at uni. But you can spin it as 'I did a whole year, made a whole year's worth of friends and lived independently for a year and then did the same all over again. So I can repeatedly come into new situations and thrive and whatever' you can always spin it."

Fig 6.6 Example quotes related to 'spinning' student mobility post-graduation

3. Employability factors

Students indicated that they would be unlikely to tell their employer if they had transferred and only include the institution they graduated from on their CV, as shown in Fig 6.7 below. Students explained that they would only seek to explain their move to their employer if asked to provide a transcript. This can be seen as an indication of the wider stigma that students felt was attached to student mobility. This finding is supported by patterns in the quantitative data shown in Fig 5.4:

"I honestly just think, if it's a risk, that employers might say something, that's your risk to take, it's not for the institution to decide, it's your decision whether you want to, potentially, impair what employers think about you but, I don't think it should be up to them to decide whether you do it."

"It's something I would probably discuss at the interview stage but I'd probably put the university that I graduated from, because I wouldn't know how to articulate why I moved on a CV. I don't know where you would even put that, so I'd probably just leave it as where I graduated and then try as best as I could to explain."

Fig 6.7 Example quotes related to informing employers about use of student mobility

Many students felt that universities had a vital role in tackling the stigma attached to student mobility. Students felt that universities could be more open and provide greater information about student mobility. Students were aware that the current funding system, which relies on fee income, could mean that universities may have a vested interest in discouraging greater mobility, as seen below:

"I think the uni is never going to shout about it, you can leave us, because, at the end of the day, they wouldn't want that, they want you to stay because they want your money."

"Yes, which is not, like, in the interests of, like I said, the institution. We are consumers but then that note they are losing a £9,000 a year consumer and the university's not going to advertise that."

Fig 6.8 Example quotes related to student perceptions of institutional bias

Cumulatively, an overarching impression is created in understanding student demand, which does not suggest that demand is latent, and that there is a population of students who feel prevented from being able to move. Students feel that universities could do more to be transparent and open about the process of mobility, to help reduce stigma about the process, and ensure that support and provision is there for students when circumstances suggest it is the most appropriate action. As one student reflects:

"I think it should be more transparent and open, because if you want to weigh up your possibilities it should be available information, I don't think it should be just once you're within the uni and I think it's a positive to change universities. At the end of the day, university is supposed to be, like, a really good part of your life so you should be able to do what you want and make what you want of it, and I don't think the university should hinder you from making such a choice."

Concerns and barriers

Focus groups with students were an opportunity to learn and understand the concerns and barriers that students might face. From this, several patterns and themes emerged from the data, which this Chapter will now consider in turn. These included:

- Concerns about the quality and value of the degree.
- Time-related implications.
- Employability concerns.
- Cost implications.
- Social implications.

1. Concerns about the quality and value of the degree

Many students in focus groups expressed concerns about the quality of their course and its coherence if they engaged in processes of mobility, as expressed in the quotes seen in Fig 6.9. This would seem counter to the impression given in the student survey which suggested that in terms of quality and value during study, student mobility might have a positive impact seen in Fig 5.4.

While it may be that the focus group featured some form of bias towards those with a negative view, this suggests its more likely that those who expressed 'not sure' as an opinion in Fig 5.4 are more likely to swing to a negative view if exploring the topic in more detail:

"Is that the curricula are so different across the different universities that it's not really... and we don't have credits in the same way that other courses do, so it's not really possible to take what you have already got to another location, necessarily, because the structure of the courses so different that it's not really the same with another place, so what you've got is to necessarily transferrable and, although passing Year One here lets me into Year Two here, it wouldn't necessarily let me into Year Two anywhere else."

"I think there's a coherence within the course, So, there will be, like, foe example, as some of you might have done, you know, module so and so last year, well you can't really do that if you, kind of, switch courses. Like, it kind of breaks the coherence basically. So, lecturers know each other and so they'd know what ground you covered in your first year because they know the lecturers that did the modules in the first year."

"I think that whole building upon things really important because if you've done something in your first year that, sort of, like, in-depth knowledge can come in later but if you're starting again then you're going to have to start everybody off on a child's level and then have to build them up straight away. Whereas, if you restarted you can start at a higher level, then go higher."

Fig 6.9 Example quotes related to quality concerns of engaging in student mobility

There was some limited evidence in the focus groups to suggest that students on humanities programmes were content with more flexibility compared to students on science or engineering based programmes. As seen in the quote below:

"So, with PPE you've got basically, Philosophy's very short-term things where each term-to-term you're doing different modules which is completely different stuff, different lectures altogether. Politics, you've got a few self-contained modules but you've got a few long-term ones as well which will span the entire year or sometimes even multiple years, and Economics it really does feed in year-to-year. So, I think it might be a Humanities, non-Humanities distinction but I think for Humanities it'd be a lot more flexible with less, you know, continuation between the modules but for sciences and stuff, unless it's structured like in Physics...I think it's all about whether or not it's self-contained."

For most students, however, there was a consistent acknowledgement that what credits meant between institutions varied considerably and therefore it would mean that they would be likely to struggle if they moved between universities. As shown in the quotes in Fig 6.10, these indicate views that changes would involve differences in: module delivery, perceived quality, and teaching style, subject content and administration.

"Changing university to go to a different university I'd probably not. The academic level would be so different and the knowledge would be so different. Like, it's basic at the beginning but that's where the quality comes from, like I said before, from [a Northern University] stretch you so much in the Chemistry and that's why it's so well-regarded therefore less hard and I don't think you can standardise something like that. I couldn't go up against Oxford, but then Oxford and [a different Northern University] it wouldn't work."

"My friend does Genetics at [a Southern university] and she wanted to stay at home, so she could just commute, and it was 12/15 places below us so, like I said, there's not very many course, it was out of the top 10 and we are doing the exact same course and she has already way less workload than me, the teaching style is completely different, we don't really do the same content, there is a massive jump between hours, she's looked at some of the papers I've written and they are like 'oh no, we haven't ever done anything like that'."

"I think it's like you said, to do with the quality of teaching. Just because I've done second year modules here doesn't mean that they'll have the same value as second year modules in [a Northern University]."

Fig 6.10 Example quotes related to in-course changes related to engaging in student mobility

2. Time-related implications

Time was also seen as a significant factor for students, and was prioritised in the focus groups against some of the other barriers to student mobility. In the time sensitive environment of higher education, mobility for many students would add time consuming labour in addition to study. For instance, as shown in Fig 6.11 students highlighted how they would have to research new potential institutions, make arrangements at their current institution, start the process of transferring (including recognition of credits) followed by practical considerations such as finding new student accommodation and getting to know a new HE provider and location:

"I did consider moving to another university for this year because I thought, it's a good opportunity to experience a different city and to make new friends somewhere else but, in the end, the logistics of doing it, I decided I didn't;t really want to leave what I already had here, because I thought that I'd end up, perhaps, having to live in halls again and, as a Fourth Year, I absolutely didn't want to be moving back in with 18 year olds again, having already done that part of my life."

"It would take up a lot of time moving. This sounds really silly, but, like, if you're having academic problems then perhaps throwing a load more academic problems in won't, sort of, make anything better."

"I feel personally that wouldn't make sense in terms of logistics, I think that would be an incentive to stay at the institution you are currently at because, if you like the city and you've got somewhere to live, but me, personally, I'd probably look at is there another course that I could do at the same university rather than picking up my whole life and moving it across the country somewhere."

Fig 6.11 Example quotes related to the time-implications of student mobility

A small proportion of students who participated in the focus groups who were undertaking a 1 year postgraduate taught programme (2 participants) perceived even less value in student mobility, due to time constraints:

"For me it's just one year, it only takes one year for a Masters degree, so it's just very, I don't know, not comfortable to move when it's just one year's study. Yes, not comfortable. It's just short enough. So I have to survive that's why."

While we recognise that our sample of postgraduate students is small, and not necessarily the focus of the policy landscape discussed in Chapter 1 around student mobility, postgraduate student communities could benefit from further research, if greater mobility were provided in the sector as their needs may be distinctive.

Time was also a factor for students in terms of considering the consequences of 'when' to move institution. For instance the ability to start mid-year or during a semester was perceived negatively by students in the focus groups as they felt it would be disruptive to students on the programme, they would need extra support from academic staff and expressed concerns that students starting in January, for example, would struggle settling in to a new HE provider, a new programme and different processes. This was expressed in terms of the impact this would have being on a programme which allowed mobility:

"It's a bad thing as well because obviously if we will have people moving from term-to-term, like we have something that goes on for two terms, someone would drop into a seminar and they would have no idea what you've talked about. They would, kind of, drag down the whole seminar."

As well as considering the difficulty of being a student engaged in the act of moving university:

"I think as well it's, like, it's getting used to the marking style of the academics and that's part of university is learning how to write, but that's going to vary a lot across universities. So if you're moving multiple times your grades might fluctuate so much and not just because the course is different, but just the marking, things like that."

Furthermore, in line with the pattern identified above, where students felt there should be a 'valid' or 'justifiable reason for mobility, students across the focus groups reported the belief that mobility should generally not be engaged in more than once in a degree programme. As highlighted in the quotes in Fig 6.12:

> *"I think, maybe, it might depend on the number of changes but I think if you change once, that's easy to explain, you can say, because employers they enjoy that you can balance it, you know yourself and they won't view you so, maybe, one change would be alright and maybe benefit you but, if you change more than once then I would be just 'why can't you…'."*
>
> *'It might be like if you are changing universities often, how long are you going to actually stay with us for the job."*
>
> *"I think it would be a difficult thing to do because when you go to a job, they would ask about the reasons why you have changed so many universities. So, that's basically a good reason why you don't want to change three times."*

Fig 6.12 Example quotes related to students' belief that movement should only happen once in a degree programme

3. Employability concerns

The theory that a move should not take place more than once was guided by a number of factors. Returning to employability, students felt that more than one move would jeopardise their future career, presenting them as unable to settle or as unreliable. As highlighted by some of the quotes in Fig 6.13:

> *"I don't know, I think it's hard to envisage, but I think it might look weirder on you CV if you were applying for jobs and they're 'Oh, we see that you moved universities in your very last year'."*
>
> *"I think that could look quite bad on a job application because, like 'Oh, you weren't handling this better university and then you had to go to a lower university' and then, sort of, the connotation's there that you can't handle something."*

Fig 6.13 Example quotes related to the employability impacts of student mobility occurring multiple times

4. Cost implications

Finance was presented as one of the most significant factors negatively influencing engagement in student mobility. Here the argument presented through the real-time cost estimates incurred in student mobility is strengthened as students highlight the significance of cost in terms of quality of life, and in liquid capital terms, rather than with reference to fees, and student loans although these remain a factor. As seen in Fig. 6.14 below key issues cited by the students include: rent, inflexible housing contracts, gym membership, society fees, utility bills, travel, access to bursaries and relocation costs:

"I think that staying at the institution that you are currently at are things like the cost of rent, or default to your contract, that's a legally binding document and you can't change that, so if you were to go to another city half way through the year, for me personally that would be impossible because if you are tied into one contract you couldn't… I, personally, couldn't afford to pay that and then afford to pay rent in a new city."

"It depends where you go to, generally [a Northern University] is a cheaper city to live in than London, it's a fact, so if you want to move to London, it's going to cost a lot more than what it does currently, purely because rent is higher, food's higher, transport's higher, so it depends on where you move as well."

"And I guess there's also, like, the financial aspect you take into consideration because I'd need to be really unhappy with mu course to change it. Because I know that change to another city, another university would mean spending a lot more money on new flat and so on."

"I think you would have to buy everything all over again, supply, everything. Some universities, you might have, like, a scholarship at your first university which you lose at the second one."

"Bursaries from different uni 'cause different uni offer different amounts of financial support and say you move… [a Norther University] is very generous. Say, you move to somewhere… [a different Northern University] is not very generous. Your amount of money that you're used to being able to spend throughout the year could go up, but also could go down and could go down by, like, £2,000, which is a big deal."

Fig 6.14 Example quotes related to the financial impacts of student mobility

5. Social implications

Students also felt that their social life and existing friendship groups and networks would inhibit their ability to move, as seen in Fig 6.15. For some students, it was the main reason why they wouldn't consider moving despite issues they may have with the value and quality of their programme. Students indicated that they didn't feel comfortable attempting to establish a new network in their second or third year. There was an emphasis on society memberships as students would lose their leadership role within a society if they were to transfer institutions. Students also felt that universities could do more to support transferred students to integrate within the university community:

"Going straight into second year everybody already had their groups. So you're the one that's sat by yourself in lectures and seminars, you don't want to say anything because everybody else is already in their group discussion discussing."

"I feel like most of my course I was scared of, like, moving to different universities because I'd lose those friendships and especially, like, you can see it with our Year in Industry and there are only three people trying to do it because everyone else is scared of losing those fends because if they go away, when they come back everyone will be gone and then they'd have to make new friendships and stuff."

"Yes, like I am part of one of the student newspapers and I have a position on the team, and I think that's quite a good society to be part of and it's, kind of, getting to see people. So, if I left I'd, kind of, have to rebuild that experience somewhere else."

Fig 6.15 Example quotes related to the social impacts of student mobility

Areas for improvement

Across this study as students engaged with the topic under discussion, ideas for improvement were discussed explicitly. The ideas for improvement have inspired and contributed to the recommendations which are presented in Chapter 8. Key observations are made by students below in relation to three specific areas of development that the students felt institutions could engage with.

1. Communicating student mobility

Awareness of student mobility among students in the survey and focus groups was low and was based on anecdotal evidence rather than direct communication from the HE provider, Students' Unions or other support services. This lack of information has direct consequences as most students were not aware of the process and this has allowed misinformation about student mobility and its potential implications to prosper. Students felt that the lack of communication contributed to the stigma attached to student mobility.

Students called on universities to raise awareness of the possibility of student mobility to varying degrees with some students advocating the development of an independent advisory service for transferring, a peer network, a website/poster campaign or ensuring that student mobility is an option discussed in a student support framework. This is demonstrated in the quotes below in Fig 6.16:

"It should be on the university's website, quite easy to find, but it's not. You have to... Like, even Admissions should be able to tell you about it, it shouldn't be that you email Admissions asking and they do 'no'."

"Well, it should be the university that you're transferring to. If all universities that were involved in transfer had a page at their website saying 'Are you interested in transferring here?' then that way you're not advertising you can leave our university."

'So, like, if you're taking about the website I think the entire process should be laid out on there. So, like 'Okay, if you do decide to take this through this is what would happen, this is who you need to speak to next'."

"University websites do have information about transfers, so id you are transferring you will go to the website of the university you want to transfer to and for finding out which universities you want to transfer to, I think talking to someone who is actually studying in the same programme that you want to transfer to, in that university might be helpful."

"Yes, I think it's important it's a blog though and not just like a video on the X website, because I watch all of them and I know that it's going to be really positive, and so that's not really the truth. Like, I mean it is in some cases but you don't necessarily feel like that that's the total truth, whereas you want someone to be like 'Look, this was hard, this was hard but this is how we resolved it and actually I'm glad I did it'."

Fig 6.16 Example quotes related to students' views on improving communication about student mobility

2. Process of student mobility

Students felt that the process of changing institution during a degree, including the transfer of credits, should be simplified and more clearly communicated. There was consensus that the process should be mapped out for students and there should be a named contact at each institution to support students through the process and potentially act as an advocate. These proposals were linked to participants' view that student mobility should be viewed through the lens of student support.

"I think it's quite common, it's just that they don't care that much so, you just drop out or start agains somewhere else, I don't think they really care enough to be, like to accept that you can transfer."

"it's hard finding out that you can do it because they didn't advertise it anywhere. And the first people in Admissions that I emailed said 'No, you can't do it, full stop' and then like [a Northern University] had a contact here so I emailed then and they were, like 'Yeah, that's fine. I'll put you in contact with the head of that course and you should be fine doing that'."

"I just think I just don't know how the process would work at all and I think there's a lot of, like, lack of information out there and how hard it is, and when you can do it and stuff and, like, can you actually transfer credits at all? I guess it's specific for each person in some ways but, like, it would be good to have some general information to help with that, and I think, yes, that's what's needed basically."

Fig 6.17 Example quotes related to students' views on improving processes of student mobility

3. Information, advice and guidance (IAG)

Students felt that information about student mobility could be discussed in a student support setting. Staff in student support roles or personal tutors had a key role to play as they were often thought to be the first point of contact if a student was considering leaving university for reasons of mental health and wellbeing. Student participants in the focus group emphasised the need for staff across the university to be aware, understand the process and be able to communicate it to students. This would ensure that the advice provided to students was transparent, unbiased and of sufficient quality so they could take informed decisions about their future. This is illustrated in the quotes in Fig 6.18:

"Yeah it's difficult, it's definitely a lot harder than, sort of, applying in the first place 'cause I wouldn't have any idea who to go and talk to or who to even email to find out who to talk to about it."

"Yes or all members of staff should at least just know who to forward it onto yeah, so that whoever you decide you're going to go and ask, they will, like... to pass it to. I have no idea where I would go to get the information about changing."

"I would hope they give more open opinions or advertise more to students, because sometimes students they go to advice centres or support and there are so many procedures. It's, like, really stressful and you want to look for some help but then they just give you so much reading, then make the process even harder and then make you feel they don't really want to deal with you or try to educate you even though you are already in this situation."

"What I'm saying is, if you had someone who was maybe hired by the UK higher institutes who you could just go to, so say if you had any concerns and they would be trained to know if it was just first term nerves and they could maybe talk you through your options. So, even if you didn't;t have any university in mind but you knew that you were unhappy they would, sort of, be there to guide you to, sort of like, help you figure out what your options could be."

Fig 6.18 Example quotes related to students' views on IAG relating to processes of student mobility

Conclusions

In conclusion, the following key findings can be seen in the data which tell us more about student demand for greater mobility, who these students are, and the drivers and motivations for demand. These findings are summarised below:

- In the focus group data, demand for greater student mobility was low, but it was felt that universities could do more to support those students who needed to transfer.
- Students were most likely to think student mobility should be used in cases where there had been a change of personal responsibilities (such as caring for family), or a need to access mental health and wellbeing support, in recognition of variability of provision across the country.
- Students felt that there was a stigma surrounding credit transfer and student mobility, which would discourage engagement. This stemmed from the lack of information, and a belief that engagement in transfer without a valid reason would be seen as showing they were unreliable.
- Students believed that under the current funding system, which relies on fee income, universities may have a vested interest in discouraging greater mobility.
- Some students did express the belief that greater student mobility could support them in 'trading-up', for a better degree or institution. However, few of these students paid attention to rankings once they had arrived at university, and most talked about 'better' in cultural terms such as 'Oxbridge' or 'Russell Group'.
- The majority of students in focus groups expressed concerns about the quality of their course and its intellectual coherence if they engaged in processes of mobility. Students in the arts and humanities expressed more frequently the view that greater mobility could enhance their subject area.
- For most students, practical implications such as timing, cost, administration, and the loss of engagement in newly established community and friendship groups and so on were seen as factors deterring them from engaging in student mobility.
- Students suggested improvements in student mobility could be made in three key areas:
    - Communication about student mobility so it was available for those who needed it.
    - Improved processes for student mobility (when needed).
    - Improved information, advice and guidance about student mobility.

However, in order to develop these findings and recommendations further it is important to consider how these currently connect, and disconnect with the perspectives of academic staff who provide leadership for learning and teaching in the participant institutions. This will provide insight into the complexity of delivering on these recommendations, and the further barriers which might emerge in responding to changes in the policy landscape.

Chapter 7
The Views Of Academic Staff On Supporting Student Mobility

Reflections on staff perspectives, and providing information, advice and guidance

This Chapter presents an analysis of the perspective of academic staff on the issues of student mobility, and the demand students have for this. The Chapter presents data from a purposeful survey of staff in leadership roles for learning and teaching at participant institutions, from senior leadership (i.e. pro-vice chancellor/faculty dean level), to programme and module leadership. There were 57 members of staff who responded to the survey. Again participants were not required to answer all questions so totals in the following analysis may not sum to 57. Staff were offered the opportunity to participate in follow-up research, from this 16 staff volunteered, however, attrition led to 3 half-hour interviews being conducted. The purpose of collecting data from staff was to provide an analysis of the points of connection and disconnection between student demand, which is the focus of this research, and staff. Accordingly, the data analysed in this Chapter has been coded in reference to the patterns seen in data analysed in Chapters 3 and 4. The focus group data is discussed in parallel with the survey data and not analysed separately as in Chapter 3 to ensure the small numbers taking part in the interviews are not over-represented.

Understanding staff perspectives on student mobility, and student demand

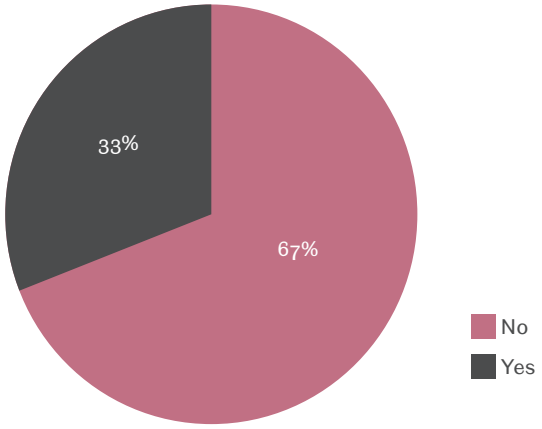
In analysing the staff data in the student mobility project, the core objective was to understand the extent to which staff who worked in leading and delivering learning and teaching and specifically with students, had some understanding of student demand for mobility. In addition, to also ascertain what staff interpret as the barriers to student mobility.

In the first instance, we asked staff if they did or did not agree with the following statement, which had also been included in the student survey:

Some argue that making it easier to move universities would improve quality, and value, by giving students more choice and flexibility over their programme of study.

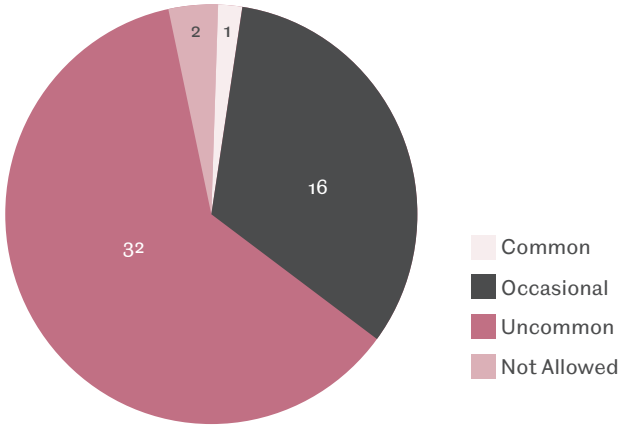
In asking this question of staff it was rephrased slightly compared to when presented to students, to require a yes or no answer. The answers are presented in Fig 7.1, contrasting with the answers students gave in Fig 5.3 and subsequent analysis, which suggests that staff do view mobility similarly to students.

Fig 7.1
Extent to which staff believe that student mobility will improve value and quality



We also asked staff about their experience, or awareness of cases of student mobility in their institution prior to this survey, similar to the questions to students about their prior experience. The results presented in Fig 7.2 represent a similar picture to those presented by students in Fig 5.1 suggesting that the experience of both students and staff of student mobility is uncommon, but also that both are unaware of where to find information, an assumption based on the proportion that suggest it may not be allowed.

Fig 7.2
Awareness and prior experience staff in this survey had of student mobility



Staff were also asked to expand briefly on their answers in a free text box. Those who did provided some statements that demonstrated a wide and diverse number of suggestions about who would be responsible for student mobility processes if they had to engage with them. Staff referred to a wide range of departments and resource from those concerned with quality assurance, to student support offices, and admissions.

Following up on the question asked to generate Fig 7.2, we asked staff for their experience of the possible drivers for students to move. Here, almost overwhelmingly, these answers referred to a change in personal circumstances, or mitigating reasons, with a very small number of staff suggested mobility may help a student who is struggling with their course through a move to an institution or course which would better match their skill sets and academic ability.

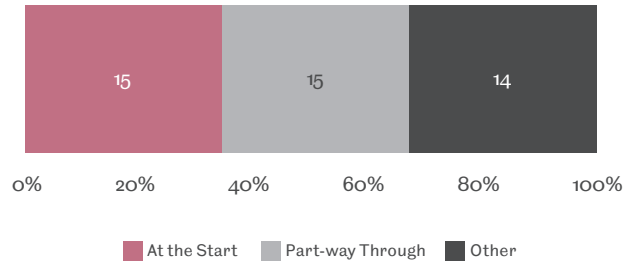
The survey data suggests that staff and students have an understanding of student mobility which appears similar. Their understanding of when mobility would be utilised i.e. in the case of mitigating circumstances is also similar. However, the mutual lack of information and experience in this area, as well as a belief by staff seen in Fig 7.2 that mobility is simply not allowed at their institution, suggests greater communication is needed on this area within institutions. This was also suggested by students at the end of Chapter 6.

For those staff who did have experience of student mobility we asked if this involved students entering:

- At the start of a degree programme.
- Part-way through a degree programme (i.e. 2nd year or mid-year).
- Or another route.

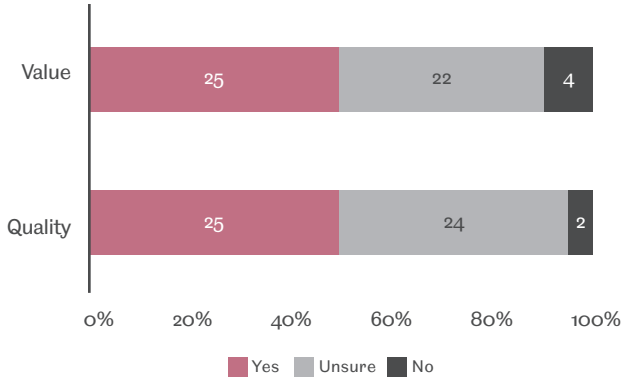
As seen in Fig 7.3, the answers appear evenly spread, however, from the expanded comments those who suggest 'another route' usually refer to judging this on a case-by-case basis.

Fig 7.3 The entrance points for students who transferred into a programme of study, based on staff experience



We asked all staff to consider the question of admissions in terms of if they were considering a postgraduate application from someone whose degree was awarded through credit accumulation and student mobility. From this we wanted to establish if staff believed such a degree would be considered to be of the same quality, and value as one awarded by one institution for a single programme of study. In effect, this gave us perspective on the student expectation that their degree would be seen as of 'lesser' value and quality was realistic. While the results in Fig 7.4 suggest that staff were evenly split in relation to this question, a slight majority were either unsure or did not think such a degree would be of the same value or quality.

Fig 7.4
Opinion of staff on the perceived value and quality, when considering an application for study, of a degree awarded by credit transfer compared to a single institution degree

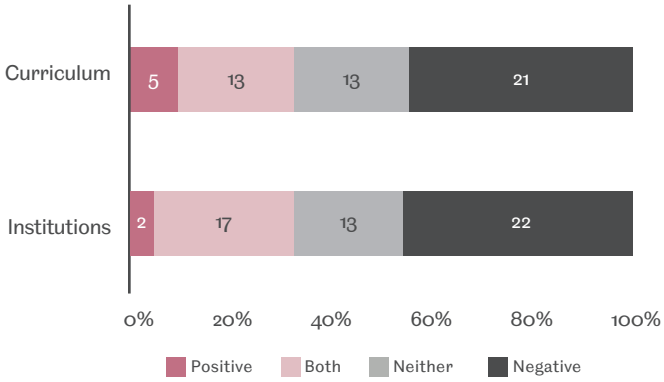


This therefore echoes the position of students, and suggests there is uncertainty among staff about the quality and value of awarding degrees through a process of credit accumulation.

However, uncertainty and a lack of clarity became an overarching pattern in the responses of staff when unpicking the potential for student mobility. This provides support for the call by students and the Government for greater information, clarity and transparency, about processes of credit transfer and accumulation.

For instance, asking staff what the potential impact would be for their curriculum and institution if greater credit transfer were introduced, a clear majority were either uncertain, or held a negative view, as shown below in Fig 7.5. Correlating with the views both staff and students appear to hold on the process in Fig 7.1 and Fig 5.3.

Fig 7.5
Perceived impact on the curriculum and community of the university if greater student mobility occurred



However, when pressed for more specific examples and details for the negative opinions there was a lack of clarity about where and why these opinions were formed.

For example, staff were asked for specific examples of why students may face pedagogical and academic difficulties if they were to transfer to another institution or programme. Only one member of staff specifically articulated an example, which related to a possible loss of professional body accreditation for the student between institutions. This was also picked up in the interviews:

"I think that just multiplies the disruption and it makes it much more difficult to get a whole programme that fits together. In engineering it's quite difficult because we need to show that students have covered certain learning outcomes for accreditation. And so if a student wants to transfer we would have to go through a process of checking their background and that they've done the requisite type of modules, covered the requisite content learning outcomes that have been covered by students on our programme wherever they've come from. So there would need to be, that would be an additional process that would have to be done at the admissions stage, it's not impossible but it just makes the whole thing even more difficult to cope with I think."

However, in the main, staff could not be specific when citing a lack of coherence to the degree programme, and did not specify any specific skills or pre-requisites which would determine if they would or could not admit a student via credit transfer.

We asked if there was any particular example of learning and teaching or pedagogy which a student who had transferred would be unable to complete having entered mid-programme. Here staff talked about the general disconnection and coherence of the degree programme, and about practical barriers such as a change of personal tutor, and the potential that the transferred student may struggle in group work. However, there was little specific expansion on this. This could be a limitation of survey data, but it raises a question about how specific staff could be if faced with a student enquiry regarding mobility. Hence, echoing the recommendations of students, space and thought should be given by universities to consider the way in which greater transparency could be achieved. This could include providing information about how decisions would be made, and the criteria used at a degree programme level. Primarily so that students can make informed choices easily, especially when experiencing adverse personal circumstances, but also to manage and minimise institutional risk. This is an area where specific reflection is given in Chapter 8.

Conclusions

The following key findings can be seen in the data which tell us more about the staff perspective on student mobility and how these correlate with student perspectives. These findings are summarised below:

- Staff and students express similar beliefs that greater student mobility wouldn't improve quality or value.
- Yet staff are also generally unaware of student mobility taking place or what the regulations and process of mobility would involve.
- When mobility does happen, staff were broadly evenly split between three possible answers suggesting that mobility could happen mid-year, or at the beginning of the year, with 'another route' suggesting it could be judged on a case-by-case basis.
- Staff also provided evidence supporting the students' belief that the quality and value of a degree awarded by mobility and the accumulation of credits may be of lower value and quality to them when considering an applicant for postgraduate study.
- Staff were very clear that the community of the university is significant to students, and that greater mobility would pose negative effects in the main for students in terms of the institution's community, as well as its curricula.
- However, in the main, when asked staff were unable to be specific about instances of pedagogical practice which would be affected by student mobility, referring more broadly to the coherence of the degree programme.

Holistically, across the three datasets some interesting findings and patterns start to develop. Having outlined and highlighted some of these developing patterns across Chapters, 4, 5, 6 and 7, Chapter 8 will bring these findings together, discussing them within the context of each research question, and defining the project's overall recommendations.

Chapter 8
Conclusions & Recommendations

A Summary of findings and suggestions for future action in the sector

Summative conclusions

In this Chapter we summarise how the findings relate to the project's research questions (RQ). Based on the answers we make a series of recommendations for both HE providers and policy makers about ways to approach student demand, and changes that could be made in the policy landscape to promote greater student mobility.

RQ 1: To what extent is there student demand for greater student mobility, and what is the nature of this demand (i.e. latent, or not)?

Overall, the project has demonstrated little evidence that students want a systemic approach to the provision of credit transfer, as part of the standard operation of higher education. There is some evidence of a latent demand for greater student mobility among students, which takes place in two forms.

The first form, which was most prominent in the data, is student desire for greater provision of mobility in terms of a student support mechanism when students experience adverse circumstances. Examples of when this would be used by students included, change in family circumstances, or responsibilities, which would lead to a need to move back home; and secondly for reasons of access to services connected to mental health and wellbeing which can vary across the country. Given the growing crisis in mental health support (Brown, 2016), it is therefore understandable why students may want greater provision of student mobility in this situation, and how it could also be beneficial to HE providers in their support for students. Some students drew the connection in focus groups that by failing to be more open and transparent about the processes of student mobility, HE providers may inadvertently create stigma, both about accessing student mobility, and also accessing support more generally for students in certain circumstances.

The second form is the latency of demand among those students who may have considered withdrawal or transfer during their studies (26% of survey respondents). Even with this figure in mind, the data across the study does not clearly indicate students calling for greater mobility, however, this is due to a complex set of interconnected reasons including; the immediate financial costs of mobility; the social and community aspects of being at a university; the coherence of a single degree programme; the potential impact on the quality and value of a degree both during and after study; and the perception that too much mobility would frame these students as unreliable, or 'flaky'. Very few students in this study suggested that they would engage in mobility as a means of improving or responding to changes in their course or 'trading-up' on their course or HE provider.

Ultimately, this report has shown that students do want the opportunity for student mobility or credit transfer to take place in extremis, when required, and that the processes to enable such transfer could be better enabled with more transparent information, guidance and support.

RQ 2: What are the current barriers to, and drivers for, students engaging in mobility and credit transfer, and how could these be addressed to meet potential demand or respond to policy change?

The barriers to student mobility are multiple, one of the most significant being the culture and attitude around mobility.

For instance, as well as the stigma around accessing support in the form of mobility, students expressed the view that there is further stigma where without a 'valid' reason for moving students will be seen by employers and universities as 'unreliable'. Some evidence of this was also provided when considering staff attitudes towards receiving an application from a student for postgraduate study whose first degree had been awarded through student mobility and credit accumulation.

Students who had considered withdrawing from university, also expressed positive views of student mobility. This tells us that while mobility may not dissuade a student from leaving HE completely if they fundamentally do not enjoy the experience, students who have considered withdrawing, may be more likely to be retained within HE if greater support for student mobility were in place.

Resources were a significant barrier to engaging in mobility particularly in terms of time and finance. Students were not sure that the time commitment involved in planning and implementing a transfer was worthwhile. While the costs of movement alone have the potential to reach nearly £7,000, and appear to be a significant disincentive. These estimated costs may also inhibit any potential driver for greater mobility supporting widening participation.

Students also expressed a concern about the coherence of their degree programme, as a result of engaging in a transfer, and a lack of clear information for students to make informed decisions could further this concern. Students' concerns were related to how modules would build on their knowledge and carry them forward. If due to mitigating circumstances a student did seek to transfer between HE providers it is unclear from current information how easy or difficult it may be for them to continue their course where they left it at their previous HE provider (assuming a similar course).

RQ 3: What are the points of connection and disconnection between student demand for greater mobility and staff perspectives on student mobility and its pedagogical implications?

Generally, staff and students held similar views about student mobility, and believed that greater mobility would not improve the quality and value of degrees, instead mobility was beneficial in the context of supporting a student with mitigating circumstances.

However, there was a lack of clarity about what the potential impacts on pedagogy might be if students engaged in processes of mobility, while specific examples could be given such as in relation to professional body accreditation, these were not necessarily presented as unresolvable.

While many staff cited a broad concern about the incoherence of a degree programme built by the accumulation of credits, few could cite specific examples of what this would look like, and why this might be the case. While this may be a limitation of survey data, considering the purposeful sampling of staff who lead on learning and teaching, and it can be assumed curriculum design, it is possible to see how students could be led to believe that barriers which cannot be clearly articulated may lack substance. This may also be perceived as indicative of a bias to dissuade students from engaging in mobility.

The coherence of a degree is clearly important to both staff and students. However, a lack of information makes it difficult for a student experiencing personal circumstances which required them to move university to make an informed choice about this, and understand the impact for them.

It is absolutely necessary that academic judgement must be exercised in relation to student transfers. The broader need for better information, advice and guidance is important within the context of HE providers' responsibilities to students ranging from competition and markets requirements to the Equality Act 2010.

Universities may wish to consider how they balance and present information on credit transfer, in a way that allows for academic judgement, and also meets the demands of students, other bodies, and legislation to demonstrate transparency. This is a significant factor considered in the recommendations this report makes below.

RQ 4: In what ways could transparent information advice and guidance be provided to reconcile student demand, developing policy requirements, and other stakeholder needs?

In summation, when reflecting on the findings and answers to the research questions discussed above, this report makes the following recommendations, which could improve institutional support for student mobility.

This report makes seven key recommendations based on the findings.

Higher Education Providers could:

1) In structural terms, beneficially locate the issue of student mobility and credit transfer in student support, welfare, advice and guidance rather than treat it as a student recruitment activity.

2) Ensure that providers of student welfare services, and independent and impartial advice services, consider how to help students identify when transfer to another provider is the right decision for them, and provide support networks, and mentoring to facilitate a smooth transition. For example, ensuring that learning contracts are transferred between HE providers to reduce barriers, and problems which can disrupt student mobility.

3) Make more transparent and clearly available (for example on the institutional website) the opportunity for students to engage in student mobility and credit transfer as a mechanism of providing support for students when they need it, such as in response to mitigating circumstances.

4) Provide clear information in programme specifications, and admissions guidance, about when credit transfer may be suitable, including details of what disciplines/ programmes students may be able to transfer to and from to show pre-requisites of prior learning.

5) Provide greater transparency around the criteria of individual programmes and the criteria that module leaders would employ in recognising prior learning in admission. This would enable students to make informed choices about how and when to move, if the need arises, and what the likelihood is that their prior learning will be recognised.

Government, and key sector bodies could:

6) Support HE providers and sector bodies to effect a change nationally to the perception among students, employers and the HE sector, that degrees awarded by credit transfer or accumulation of credits from different HE providers are not of lesser quality or value than a degree awarded by a single HE provider.

7) Encourage providers through Access Agreements to support widening participation students to ensure that they are not priced out of the provision of credit transfer where they meet particular costs and would otherwise fail to continue their studies. In particular, this should not just rely on rectifying financial implications related to fees, but also the more immediate personal costs of relocating. This requires students to have access to finance to meet the costs of an unexpected or unplanned move and could create barriers to fair participation and access.

List Of Abbreviations

BIS – Department for Business, Innovation and Skills

BSA – British Sociological Association

DfE – Department for Education

LCM – Leeds College of Music

GSR – Government Social Research (Social Science in Government)

HEA – Higher Education Academy

HEFCE – Higher Education Funding Council for England

HEPI – Higher Education Policy Institute

HESA – Higher Education Statistics Agency

InCCA – Inter-Consortia Credit Agreement

NUCCAT – Northern Universities Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer

SEEC – South East England Consortium for Credit Accumulation & Transfer

SHU – Sheffield Hallam University

SRHE – Society for Research in Higher Education

TUoS. – The University of Sheffield

UCAS – Universities and Colleges Admissions Service

UoL – University of Leeds

UoN – University of Nottingham

UoY – University of York

YSJ – York St John University

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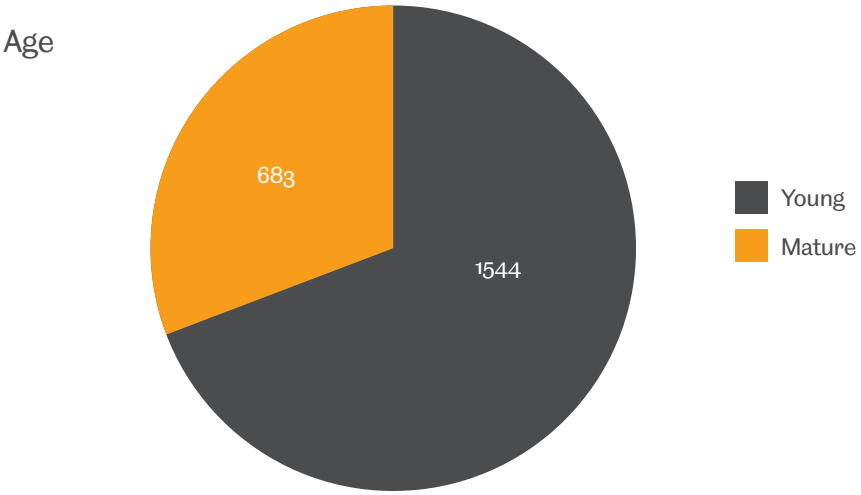
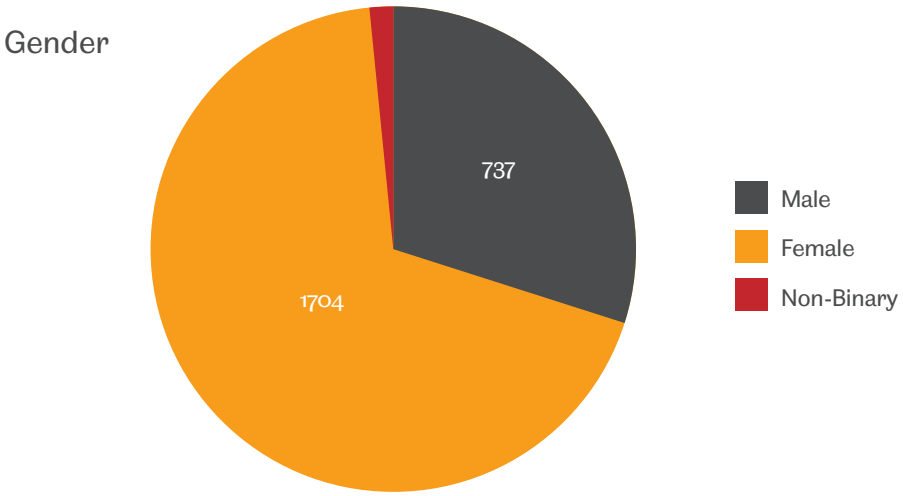
Appendix 1 – Demographic Breakdowns – Student Participants

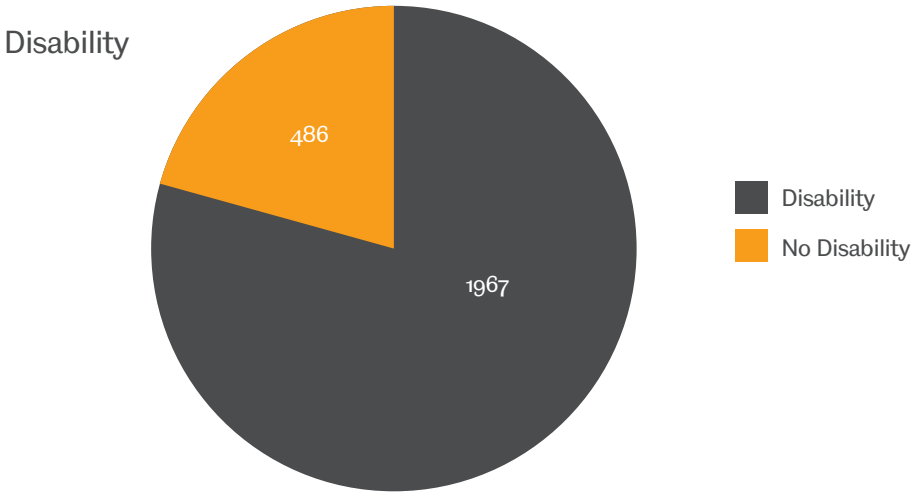
Graph to show the proportion of Young (21 and below), and Mature Students (21 and above)



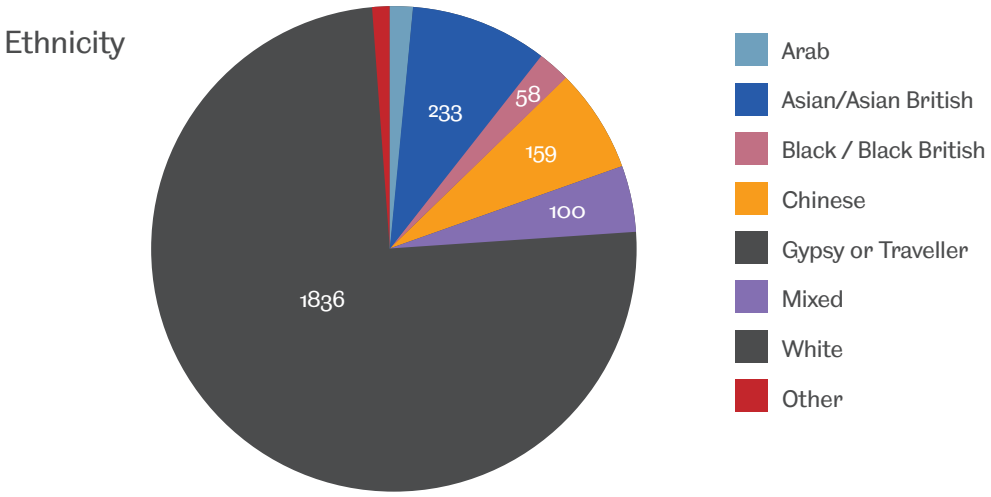
Graph to show the gender breakdown of student participants



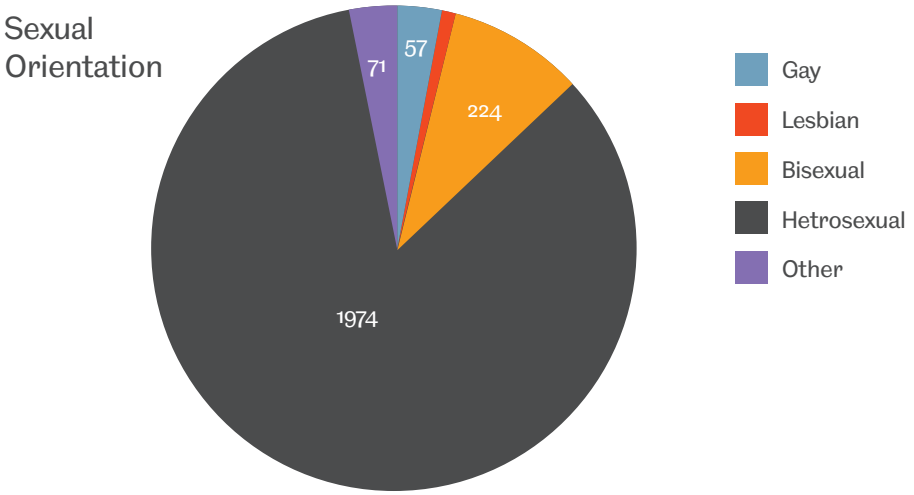
Graph to show the declared disability status of student participants



Graph to show the ethnic make-up of student participants



Graph to show the sexual orientation of participants



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Samuel is a Project Manager in the University Secretary's Office at the University of Sheffield. He leads on a number of HEFCE funded strategic projects and partnerships. Samuel is due to submit his PhD on Higher Education in early 2018, which focuses on the recognition of underrepresented groups in HE, such as students who care for children while studying. Samuel's work has focused on issues of equity and diversity in Higher Education, and in 2016 he was named the Forum on Access and Continuing Educations (FACE) Emerging Researcher. He is one of the Newer Researcher advocates for the Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE). Samuel also holds a BA(Hons) in Politics, and a Masters of Arts Research (MAR) in Governance and Politics, both from the University of Leeds.

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