

AN INVESTIGATION OF THE EXPERIENCES OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS WHO HAVE CHANGED PROGRAMME DURING THE COURSE OF THEIR STUDIES

1. Purpose

- 1.1 The causes and consequences of student withdrawal have become a significant issue for the sector over the last decade and a great deal of research has been conducted with the aim of identifying the reasons why students might not continue on their initial programme of study. This project aims to collect qualitative and some quantitative data from our students about how they came to want to change course and why they feel that their experience on their new programme of study has been more successful. It is expected that in soliciting the views of students who have continued to study at Manchester we can learn more about their original decisions and the factors that have contributed to a more productive and successful new first year.

It is expected that information from this study will help to inform an understanding of:

- Why students might make an unsuccessful first choice of subject
- What factors influence a student in making a choice to change course
- What transforms an individual into a more successful student
- What other factors are relevant beyond the change of discipline/ subject

2. Methodology

- 2.1 The Student Records Systems Office provided a list of Level 2 undergraduate students who had originally enrolled at the University in September 2007 on a different programme of study. These students had interrupted this period of study at some time during the academic year 07/08, re-enrolled on a new programme in September 2008 and progressed to Level 2 of this new programme in September 2009. The overall number of students who met this criteria was 104.
- 2.2 Students were emailed an electronic questionnaire (see attachment 1) and asked to complete and return this to the Student Experience Office. 33 students (32%) responded and completed the questionnaire. Completed questionnaires were submitted anonymously through 'SurveyMonkey' software.
- 2.3 Students were asked to respond to 32 questions divided into two sections. The first dealt with questions on the subject of their original programme and the second was based on their current studies.

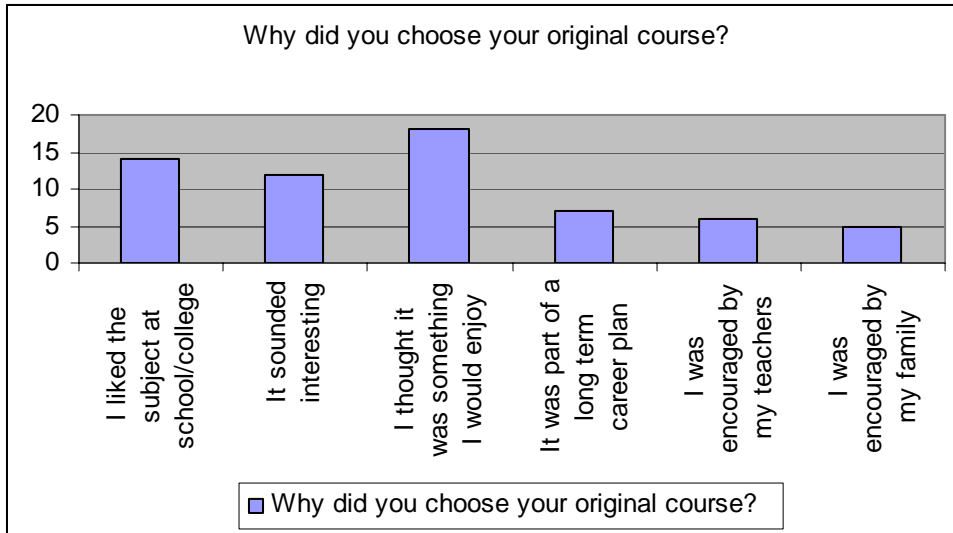
3. Factors affecting original choice and experience of first year

3.1 Significance of the change made

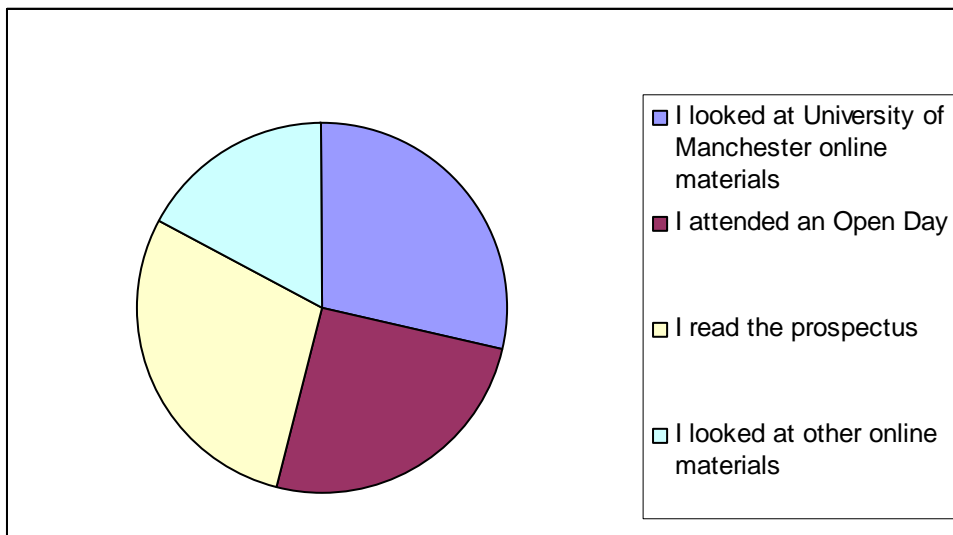
Of the 33 students who responded, a slight majority (17 to 15 with 1 abstention) had changed Faculties in order to pursue their new programme of study indicating a significant change in discipline. Even amongst those who remained in the same Faculty only 5 are studying in the same school as previously.

3.2 Motivations for the original course.

In responding to questions about the motivation they had for their original course, a majority of students indicated that both that the choice had been essentially theirs;



and that a majority of them had done some research into the programme they were applying for;

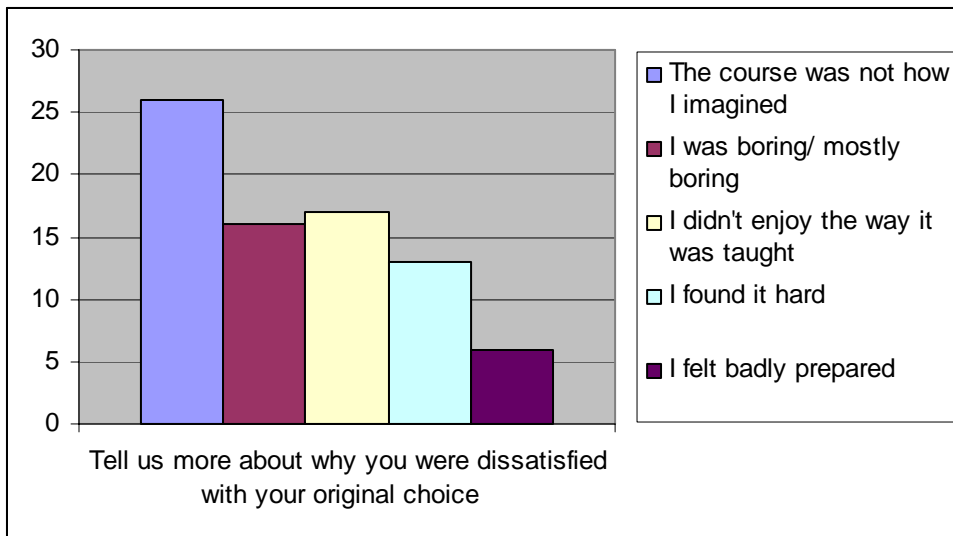


For a significant majority (27 out of 33) not only the programme but also this University were their first choices in terms of study and institution, although just over half (22) said that they had felt under pressure to apply to university.

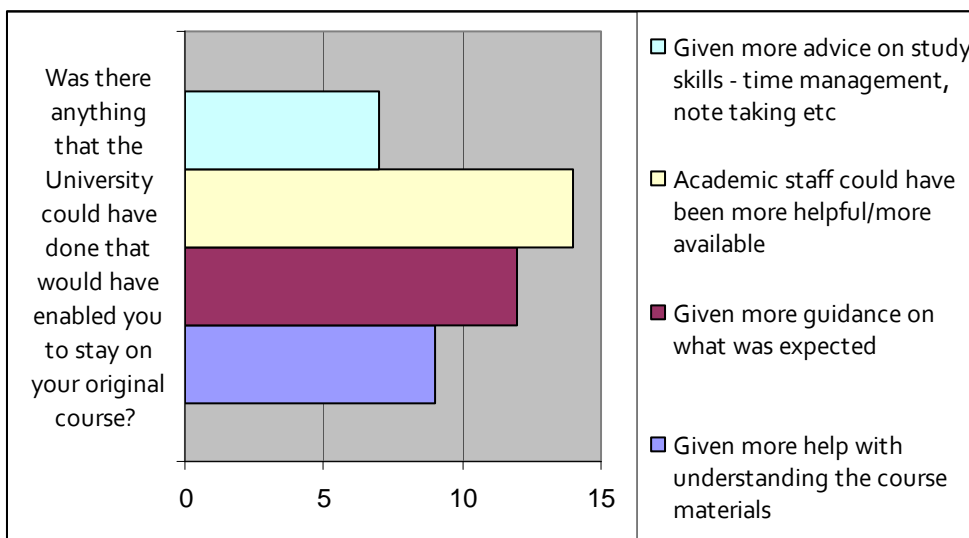
3.3 Expectations and difficulties experienced.

Over half the students (22) described themselves as 'excited' or 'very excited' about coming to University, although only 10 out of the 33 felt themselves to be 'confident' or 'very confident'.

Such misgivings proved to be prescient in that 79% (26) described their original programme as 'not how they'd imagined' and 48% (16) as 'boring/ mostly boring'. 18 students (55%) found it 'hard' and/or 'felt badly prepared'.



When asked specifically whether they felt that they might have been able to continue with the programme if they had been offered additional support or information, there was strong bias expressed towards a greater level of academic support;



Around a third (12) felt that they could have taken some action – principally asked for help and/ or done more work which might have enabled them to stay on the programme.

3.4 Positive experiences of Manchester

3.5.1 Accommodation

73% of students (24) agreed with the statement 'I felt safe and comfortable in my hall' with 55% saying 'I loved where I was living'

3.5.2 Social connections

A majority of students (19 & 18 respectively) stated that they 'had a lot of friends' and 'enjoyed the social life'

3.5.3 Independence

A significant majority of students (20 / 61%) disagreed with the statement that 'missing

family and friends interfered with their enjoyment of the course'. They overwhelmingly enjoyed living independently (85%) and being in Manchester (73%)

3.5.4 Connection to the University.

73% of the students said that, on their original course, they had enjoyed 'being part of the University'

4. Factors affecting second choice and experience of the new first year

4.1 Research

Again a majority of students had looked at online materials when researching their transfer although a larger number had spoken with a member of staff from the new subject area than had when making the first choice (20 as opposed to 12). When they were asked specifically about whether and where they had sought advice, the majority had spoken with family (82%) or friends (73%). A much smaller number had asked the advice of a member of staff from the University – 8 had spoken with their academic adviser and 8 with someone from the Careers Service, 7 had discussed the issue with the Academic Advisory Service.

4.2 Perceived reasons for current success

A majority of students attributed their more successful progress on their current programme to the fact that they were more interested in the subject area (29 out of 33/ 88%) and that the style of teaching suited them better (61%). The same proportion (61%) reported that academic staff were more approachable.

5. Conclusions

5.1 Reasons for and Implications of the first unsuccessful choice

As with many other studies, the primary importance of making a good first choice of discipline is clear. In practice, though, students do not find this an easy process even when they have undertaken a reasonable level of research into the programme and its delivery. One student even noted that despite attending for an interview she had

"(I) Looked at everything (to do with the original choice) with rose tinted specs and got rather single minded";

possibly implying that even where potential difficulties were flagged up to her she ignored any information that didn't match her expectations and preconceptions.

Students clearly also pursued subjects that had interested them at school/ college without perhaps understanding the potentially different focus at HE level

"..... was always my favourite subject at school so I was really surprised to find myself hating it."

"It was really my problem, i was not happy, i rushed into university On top of this, picking engineering was the logical choice but not the right one for me"

In addition, and again perhaps unsurprisingly, students also tended to be influenced by parental expectation;

"18 year olds perspectives are based a lot on what their teachers/parents tell them & I almost needed permission from someone to be able to follow a career that wasn't the most academic/hardest route"

or by an unrealistic expectation of what a new subject would be like;

"I had visions of the course (BSc Zoology) being some sort of mixture of animal wrangling and study of animal trivia. I was wrong. It is a hard, modern, credible, scientific degree"

5.2 The importance of creating connections

One of the key messages from this report would indicate that, even where students are experiencing significant academic difficulties, if they are able to create strong connections socially and/ or to the institution as a whole, it is possible to retain those individuals at the University.

"Few things were to my taste on the (original) course but I loved everything else, that's why I came back."

5.3 Advice Seeking

One aspect of the students' experience which was very marked was their inclination to ask advice of friends and family rather than to look for guidance from University based sources of support. In part this may reflect the fact that a majority of students' parents had attended university (52%); or be linked to levels of maturity and independence in current first year undergraduates.

5.4 Possibility of being successful after transfer

One very positive feature of the report is the significant number of transferred students who have progressed successfully onto their new programme of study. The students themselves who added their own comments about this tended to cite greater levels of maturity as being primarily responsible;

"17/18 years is too young to be deciding on a path for the rest of your life"

"My choice to change courses had very little to do with any way the course was taught, as I feel the Department are very good at what they do. It was more of a personal decision, having felt that the course had become something I was no longer interested in, as well as the desire to return home and join the majority of my friends on a gap year which gave me the opportunity and find my feet a bit more before returning to university."

"(I) Could have approached the (original) course with a more positive attitude"

Especially positive, were the comments in which students acknowledged that the initial experience had in itself been valuable to their overall situation;

"I do not regret my year in Physics, it was a valuable learning experience"

"Simply put, my original course was just not for me. I felt it was a dead end and changing degree was the best decision i ever made - even if it did set me back by a year!"

5.5 Motivations for progression

This study would certainly imply that students are perhaps less strategic and career driven than is sometimes assumed. All those who made an additional comment about why they felt they had been able to persist on the second programme, prioritised the importance of their enjoyment of the subject itself;

"(I) thought it (the original choice) was a good career choice, I was given the impression by my teachers/parents that the subjects I wanted to do were a lot less 'worthy'

"now I see that I don't care about money or status, I just want a career that's 'worth doing' because it helps people"

"I am simply more interested"

6. Bibliography

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Attachment 1

We are conducting an online survey to find out about the experiences of undergraduate students who have changed courses since first enrolling at the University. We want to evaluate your experience of making the decision to change and of carrying out that intention as well as your experience on your new programme of study.

We hope that in gathering and evaluating this information we will be able to guide other students more effectively in the decisions they make and provide more informed advice based on your real life experiences.

We would be very grateful for any help that you are able to give to this process. We appreciate any and all information that you can provide.

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A. Questions about you

1. What course are you currently enrolled on at the University?

What course are you currently enrolled on at the University?

2. What course were you enrolled on when you first came to the University of Manchester?

What course were you enrolled on when you first came to the University of Manchester?

3. How old were you when you first came to the University?

How old were you when you first came to the University?

4. Did your parents/guardians go to University?

Yes No I prefer not to answer

5. Are you the oldest child?

Yes No I prefer not to answer

6. If you are not the oldest child, do you have older siblings who went to University?

Yes No

If you are not the oldest child, do you have older siblings who went to University? I am the oldest child

B. Questions about your decision to enrol on your original course

7. Why did you choose your original course?

Click on all that apply

- | | | |
|---|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Why did you choose your original course? Click on all that apply I liked the subject at school/college | <input type="checkbox"/> I was encouraged by my teachers | <input type="checkbox"/> It sounded interesting |
| <input type="checkbox"/> It was part of a long term | <input type="checkbox"/> I was encouraged by my parents | <input type="checkbox"/> I thought it was something I would enjoy |

career plan

Other (please specify)

8. How much research did you do about your original course?

Click on all that apply

- How much research did you do about your original course? Click on all that apply
- I read the prospectus
- I looked at University of Manchester online materials
- I looked at other online materials
- I attended an Open Day

Other (please specify)

9. Did you ask anyone's advice about your original choice?

Click on all that apply

- Did you ask anyone's advice about your original choice? Click on all that apply
- I spoke to friends
- I spoke to someone/people in my family
- I spoke to a careers adviser
- I spoke to a teacher

Other (please specify)

10. Did you speak to a member of staff or a student from the University?

- Did you speak to a member of staff or a student from the University? Yes
- No

11. If yes, click on all that apply

- If yes, click on all that apply
- At an Open Day
- Online (Facebook or similar)
- At an interview
- I already had friends at Manchester

Other (please specify)

12. Did you feel under pressure to apply to University?

- Did you feel under pressure to apply to University? Yes
- No

13. Did you feel under pressure to apply to THIS university?

- Did you feel under pressure to apply to THIS university? Yes
- No

14. Did you/Do you have friends who applied to this University?

- Did you/Do you have friends who applied to this University? Yes
- No

15. Was this course your first choice of degree?

- Was this course your first choice of degree? Yes
- No
- Prefer not to answer

16. Was this University your first choice of Institution?

- Was this University your first choice of Institution? Yes
- No
- Prefer not to answer

17. Did you come to the University through clearing?

- Did you come to the University through clearing? Yes
- No
- Prefer not to answer

through clearing? Yes

18. Did you have a gap year?

- Did you have a gap year? Yes No Prefer not to answer

19. How did you feel about coming to University?

Click on all that apply

- How did you feel about coming to University? Click on all that apply (Very) excited Indifferent I avoided thinking about it Worried (Very) confident

Other (please specify)

20. Did you continue to live at home whilst at University?

- Did you continue to live at home whilst at University? Yes No Prefer not to answer

C. Questions about your experience of your original course

21. Tell us more about why you were dissatisfied with your original choice

Click on all that apply

- Tell us more about why you were dissatisfied with your original choice Click on all that apply The course was not how I imagined I felt badly prepared I wanted more choices about what I studied I was boring/ mostly boring I didn't enjoy the way it was taught I found it hard

Other (please specify)

22. Was there anything that the University could have done that would have enabled you to stay on your original course?

Click on all that apply

- Was there anything that the University could have done that would have enabled you to stay on your original course? Click on all that apply Given more help with understanding the course materials Administrative staff could have been more helpful/more available Given more guidance on what was expected More opportunities could have been created for me to talk to other students on the course Academic staff could have been more helpful/more available Given more advice on study skills - time management, note taking etc

Other (please specify)

23. With hindsight, was there anything that you could have done that would have enabled you to stay on your original course?

Click on all that apply

- With hindsight, was there anything that you could have done that would have enabled you to stay on your original course? Click on all that apply No I could have done more work I could have socialised more

I could have asked for more help

Other (please specify)

24. If you were living away from home, how did you feel about your accommodation?

Click on all that apply

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> If you were living away from home, how did you feel about your accommodation? Click on all that apply I loved where I was living | <input type="checkbox"/> I felt safe and comfortable in my hall |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I had a lot of friends | <input type="checkbox"/> I liked the food |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I thought the standard of accommodation was poor | <input type="checkbox"/> I felt very isolated |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I enjoyed the social life | <input type="checkbox"/> I didn't enjoy living in halls |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I liked the area my hall was in | <input type="checkbox"/> I thought the facilities were good |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I enjoyed cooking for myself | <input type="checkbox"/> People behaved antisocially |

Other (please specify)

25. How did you feel about your studies?

Click on all that apply

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> How did you feel about your studies? Click on all that apply I was very interested in the course materials | <input type="checkbox"/> If I had a question, I felt I could approach someone in the school office |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I was bored a lot of the time | <input type="checkbox"/> I made friends on my course |
| <input type="checkbox"/> If I had a question, I felt I could speak to the lecturer about it | <input type="checkbox"/> I enjoyed doing the work |
| <input type="checkbox"/> There was a lot I didn't understand | <input type="checkbox"/> I couldn't see what I would do afterwards |
| <input type="checkbox"/> The course was what I expected | <input type="checkbox"/> I had a good relationship with my academic adviser |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I missed a lot of classes | <input type="checkbox"/> I felt confident about being successful |

Other (please specify)

26. When you were first enrolled, did you feel that missing family and friends interfered with your enjoyment of the course?

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input checked="" type="radio"/> When you were first enrolled, did you feel that missing family and friends interfered with your enjoyment of the course? Not at all | <input checked="" type="radio"/> Quite a lot |
| <input checked="" type="radio"/> A little | <input checked="" type="radio"/> Very much so |

27. Please ignore this question. The design is incorrectly formatted.

	Agree strongly	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
On my original course, I often felt	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Please ignore this question. The	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Agree	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Disagree	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Strongly disagree

	Agree strongly	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
lonely	design is incorrectly formatted. On my original course, I often felt lonely Agree strongly			
On my original course, I often felt 'I don't belong here'	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> On my original course, I often felt 'I don't belong here' Agree strongly	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree	<input type="checkbox"/> Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly disagree
On my original course, I often felt stressed and anxious	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> On my original course, I often felt stressed and anxious Agree strongly	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree	<input type="checkbox"/> Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly disagree
On my original course, I often felt I didn't understand the course materials	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> On my original course, I often felt I didn't understand the course materials Agree strongly	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree	<input type="checkbox"/> Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly disagree
On my original course, I often felt that people were very different from those at home	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> On my original course, I often felt that people were very different from those at home Agree strongly	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree	<input type="checkbox"/> Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly disagree
On my original course, I often thought about leaving	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> On my original course, I often thought about leaving Agree strongly	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree	<input type="checkbox"/> Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly disagree
On my original course, I often thought about changing to a different programme	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> On my original course, I often thought about changing to a different programme Agree strongly	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree	<input type="checkbox"/> Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly disagree

28. Tell us what, if anything, you enjoyed about your original course

Click on all that apply

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tell us what, if anything, you enjoyed about your original course | <input type="checkbox"/> Learning more about my subject area |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Being in Manchester | <input type="checkbox"/> Being challenged by the course |
| <input type="checkbox"/> My social life | <input type="checkbox"/> Making new friends |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Living independently | <input type="checkbox"/> Being part of the University |
| <input type="checkbox"/> The societies and activities I was involved in | |

Other (please specify)

D. Questions about your decision to enrol on your current course

29. Tell us more about why you wanted to change to your current course

Click on all that apply

- Tell us more about why you wanted to change to your current course Click on all that apply I expected to enjoy the subject (much) more
- I knew people on the course
- I thought I was more likely to be successful
- I thought that I would enjoy the way it was taught

Other (please specify)

30. How much research did you do about your current course?

Click on all that apply

- How much research did you do about your current course? Click on all that apply I looked at online materials
- I spoke to a member of staff in my current school
- I spoke to a member of staff in the original school
- I read the prospectus

Other (please specify)

31. Did you ask anyone's advice about your current choice?

Click on all that apply

- Did you ask anyone's advice about your current choice? Click on all that apply I spoke to an administrator in this school
- I spoke to my family
- I spoke to friends
- I spoke to a student support officer
- I spoke to my academic adviser
- I spoke to someone from the central support services
- I spoke to someone from the Careers Service
- I spoke to someone from the Academic Advisory Service

Other (please specify)

32. Please ignore this question. The design is incorrectly formatted.

	Agree strongly	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I found out much more about the course content	<input type="radio"/> Please ignore this question. The design is incorrectly formatted. I found out much more about the course content Agree strongly	<input type="radio"/> Agree	<input type="radio"/> Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Strongly disagree
I found out much more about the method of teaching	<input type="radio"/> I found out much more about the method of teaching Agree strongly	<input type="radio"/> Agree	<input type="radio"/> Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Strongly disagree
I feel that this is much more MY choice	<input type="radio"/> I feel that this is much more MY choice Agree strongly	<input type="radio"/> Agree	<input type="radio"/> Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Strongly disagree

	Agree strongly	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I feel that this is what I should have done from the start	<input checked="" type="radio"/> I feel that this is what I should have done from the start Agree strongly	<input type="radio"/> Agree	<input type="radio"/> Disagree	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Strongly disagree

E. Questions about your experience of your current course

33. Tell us what is most different about your academic experience of your current course, compared to your original course

Click on all that apply

- Tell us what is most different about your academic experience of your current course, compared to your original course Click on all that apply People seem more approachable
- I like the style of teaching
- I find it more interesting
- I think I know what is expected of me

Other (please specify)

34. Tell us what is most different about the social experience of your current course, compared to your original course

Click on all that apply

- Tell us what is most different about the social experience of your current course, compared to your original course Click on all that apply People seem more approachable
- I feel more comfortable
- I have a better work/ life balance
- I feel that this is 'more me'

Other (please specify)

35. Please indicate whether you agree with any of these statements.

This time I feel that I have a better relationship with;

- Please indicate whether you agree with any of these statements. This time I feel that I have a better relationship with; My academic adviser
- People in my halls
- Staff in my school office
- Academic staff
- Students on my course
- The University

36. Please ignore this question. The design is incorrectly formatted.

	Agree strongly	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
This time I feel better prepared	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Please ignore this question. The design is incorrectly formatted. This time I feel better prepared Agree strongly	<input type="radio"/> Agree	<input type="radio"/> Disagree	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Strongly disagree
This time I have been able to make more/better friends on my course	<input checked="" type="radio"/> This time I have been able to make more/better friends on my course Agree	<input type="radio"/> Agree	<input type="radio"/> Disagree	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Strongly disagree

	Agree strongly strongly	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
This time I get on better with my flatmates	<input checked="" type="radio"/> This time I get on better with my flatmates Agree strongly	<input type="radio"/> Agree	<input type="radio"/> Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Strongly disagree
This time I feel that I am coping better academically	<input checked="" type="radio"/> This time I feel that I am coping better academically Agree strongly	<input type="radio"/> Agree	<input type="radio"/> Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Strongly disagree
This time I feel that I am better able to balance living independently with study	<input checked="" type="radio"/> This time I feel that I am better able to balance living independently with study Agree strongly	<input type="radio"/> Agree	<input type="radio"/> Disagree	<input type="radio"/> Strongly disagree

F. Conclusions

37. Is there anything else that you would like to tell us about this issue?

Is there anything else that you would like to tell us about this issue?

Thank you very much for having taken the time to participate in this project.

We wish you every success in your current programme of study

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Done