



# Formative Evaluation of the National Scholarship Programme – Year 1

Addendum to May 2012 Report to HEFCE  
by CFE and Edge Hill University

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## 8. Summary of outcomes of evaluation activity undertaken between May and August 2012

**This document is an addendum to the report on the Formative Evaluation of the National Scholarship Programme (the main report) published in May 2012.**

8.1 The addendum has been produced by CFE and Edge Hill University for the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). It summarises the outcomes of the evaluation activity undertaken between May and August 2012. It focuses in particular on findings that are different from or additional to what has already been reported and is intended to be read alongside the May 2012 report. The paragraph numbers in this addendum follow on from the main report to avoid confusion in cross-referencing (with the main report consisting of sections 1 to 7 and this addendum comprising sections 8 to 12). Together the May 2012 report and this addendum form the key outputs from the first year of the formative evaluation of the National Scholarship Programme (NSP) which will conclude in July 2015.

### Evaluation activity since May 2012

#### Survey of potential students

8.2 CFE worked in partnership with YouthSight<sup>1</sup> to conduct a survey of potential students of higher education (HE). The sample was drawn from two panels managed by YouthSight, The Applicant Panel and Youth Panel. The sample population included:

- Residents of England and the European Union who had applied for a place in higher education starting in the 2012/13 academic year and who met the national eligibility criterion for the NSP ('applicants').
- Residents of England and the European Union who had achieved the qualifications necessary to study at the higher education level<sup>2</sup> but had not applied for a place starting in the 2012/13 academic year or had not taken up a place in the past ('non-applicants').

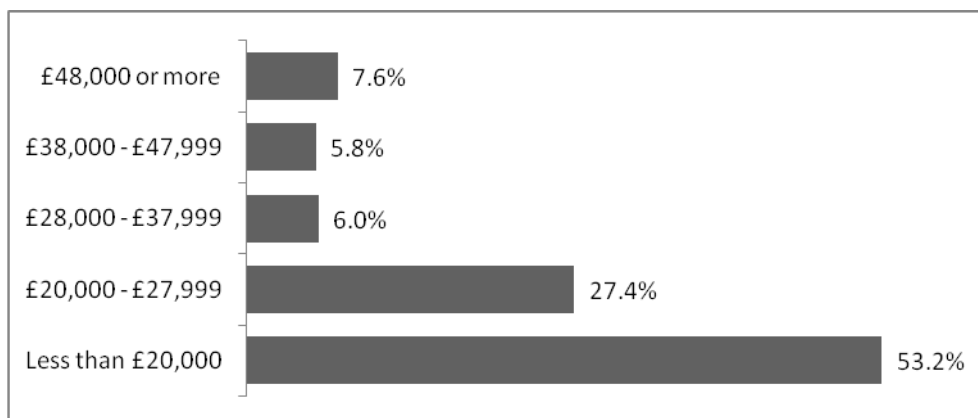
8.3 The sample achieved was 500. As applicants to HE who met the national eligibility criterion for NSP were of primary interest, a target was set to achieve 350 responses from applicants; 315 was achieved, along with 185 non-applicants. The sample was evenly balanced in terms of gender, with a quarter of respondents describing themselves as belonging to a Black or Minority Ethnic group (BME) (n = 123; 24.6 per cent). The majority of respondents were aged 21 or under (n = 436; 87.2 per cent) a further 8.4 per cent (n = 42) were aged 21 to 29, 2.8 per cent (n = 14) were aged 30 to 39 and 1.6 per cent (n = 8) were 40 or over.

8.4 The national guidance on NSP for 2012/13 states that students from households with an income of less than £25,000 will be eligible for an award, although actual entitlement is determined by individual institutions. Capturing accurate information on household income is highly problematic as respondents to surveys of this nature are often not the main wage-earner in the household and are not able to report accurately the total income of their parents/guardians. Respondents were, therefore, asked to provide an approximate figure for their household income for the tax year ending in April 2013 (see Figure 8.1) and all respondents recording an income of up to £27,999 (n = 403; 80.6 per cent) were treated as potentially eligible for NSP for the purposes of the analysis. This allows for a margin of error in respondents' estimates of household income and for the fact that not all income is counted when assessing eligibility for the NSP.

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.youthsight.com](http://www.youthsight.com)

<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of the survey this was defined as a Level 3 qualification such as A Levels, NVQ Level 3, Advanced Apprenticeship, Advanced National Certificate in Education, BTEC National Certificate/Diploma or Access to HE.



**Figure 8.1 Approximate household income for the tax year ending in April 2013 (base = 500)**

## Case study interviews

8.5 In May and June 2012 the research team led by CFE undertook face-to-face in-depth interviews at 24 institutions selected as case studies for the evaluation. The case study institutions were chosen to represent a cross-section of institutional types and the range of implementation models for the NSP. Institutional performance against Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for widening participation (WP) was also taken into account during the sample selection to ensure institutions with limited as well as large cohorts of WP students were included. Within each institution, individual and/or group Interviews were held with the member of staff with lead responsibility for managing the NSP and their colleagues involved in the design and administration of the programme and wider WP strategy. (See Appendix 7 for a full list of case study institutions.)

## Policy update

8.6 Since the May 2012 report was published, many of the recommendations from the White Paper 'Students at the Heart of the System' have been implemented without the need for legislation, and further consultation is being undertaken in the sector on the impacts that any changes will have.

8.7 The first cycle of applications through UCAS under the new funding regime closed in June 2012. Applications from full-time English domiciled students were down by 10 per cent overall<sup>3</sup>, although initial analysis by UCAS suggests that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds have been no more deterred from applying to HE than their counterparts from more affluent households as a result of the reforms.

8.8 In August 2012, the first report from the Independent Commission on Fees, chaired by Will Hutton and supported by The Sutton Trust, concluded that around one in twenty students who would have been expected to apply to HE in 2011 did not do so in 2012<sup>4</sup>. The Hutton commission will continue to monitor trends in applications over the coming years.

8.9 An area of policy that has started to have a profound effect on institutions, and which has a direct relationship with the NSP, is the 'core and margin' policy, which created a 'margin' of up to 20,000 numbers by reducing the 'core' residual student number control population (those remaining after removing AAB+ equivalent students (the 'high grades' policy). The 'margin' was redistributed through a bid process to those institutions charging an average net tuition fee of £7,500 or less and meeting other criteria. The deduction of around 8 per cent of the undergraduate numbers based on previous student number allocations for each institution, coupled with the freedom to recruit unlimited numbers of students achieving AAB+ (unless they are studying medicine or dentistry), has

<sup>3</sup> UCAS 2012 application figures (30 June 2012)  
[http://www.ucas.com/about\\_us/media\\_enquiries/media\\_releases/2012/20120709](http://www.ucas.com/about_us/media_enquiries/media_releases/2012/20120709)

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.independentcommissionfees.org.uk/wordpress/?page\\_id=47](http://www.independentcommissionfees.org.uk/wordpress/?page_id=47)

resulted in more dramatic shifts in student recruitment than many institutions had predicted. Indeed, many institutions have reported that it has been difficult to accurately model both the total numbers of students they were likely to recruit and the profile of these students. In reality, this has meant that some institutions are down by more than 25 per cent on recruitment compared with 2011, which will have significant financial implications for them. In light of these developments, some institutions have asked the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) to revise their commitments in their access agreements which may, in turn, have an impact in relation to the NSP. This is uncharted territory, but it is possible that some institutions will be considering this issue for future applicant cycles and as they prepare future access agreements.

8.10 As was anticipated, to accompany the new finance arrangements for HE, a number of forms of information, advice and guidance have been forthcoming. Most notably, the Key Information Set (KIS) was introduced in September 2012 to support applicant decision-making. A number of other university guides have also been established including the *Which?* University student guide.

## NSP update

8.11 In January 2013, HEFCE published provisional allocations along with the guidance for institutions for the NSP in 2014/15. A number of changes to the NSP are reflected in this guidance which have been made in response to feedback from the sector captured during this evaluation and through individual consultations. The key changes include:

- **A revised allocation model** which will ensure the distribution of Government funding for the NSP is more closely aligned with the numbers of students from low-income backgrounds in individual institutions and corresponding changes in the matched funding requirement for institutions charging more than the fee threshold.
- **Removal of the requirement to provide a 50 per cent matched funding contribution** for institutions that charge less than the minimum fee threshold for all their full-time and part-time courses
- **New menu of options for part-time students** to ensure parity with full-time students.

## Structure of the addendum

8.12 This addendum is structured as follows:

- **9: Survey of potential students** presents the key findings from our analysis of the online survey of potential students of HE. Awareness and understanding of the NSP is examined along with the extent to which the possibility of receiving it affects decision-making. The reasons why individuals with suitable qualifications have not progressed into HE are also explored, along with the relative influence of different forms of financial aid over future decisions.
- **10: Implementing the NSP** draws on the 24 case study interviews to supplement the Key Findings section of the main report which summarised the findings from an online survey of 104 HE institutions (HEIs) and Further Education Colleges (FECs). It provides further information on existing WP activities, the management of the NSP by institutions, eligibility criteria, models of delivery, components of the NSP package, and marketing and promotion. There are new sections on the alignment of NSP with existing WP activities, application processes and monitoring the NSP.
- **11: Institutional perceptions of the NSP** provides further detail on the perceptions of those responsible for managing the NSP in case study institutions on different aspects of

the programme. The section includes perceptions of the likely impact of the NSP on potential students, recipients of the NSP and HE providers, as well as suggested areas for improvement.

➤ **12: Interim conclusions and next steps** draws together the key points from the addendum in order to further address the questions set out by HEFCE in the project specification.

## 9. Survey of potential students

### In this section we present the key findings from our analysis of the online survey of potential students of HE.

9.1 Awareness and understanding of the NSP amongst potential students of HE is examined in this section, along with the extent to which the possibility of receiving NSP affects decision-making. The reasons why individuals with suitable qualifications have not progressed into HE are also explored, along with the relative influence of different forms of financial aid over future decisions.

#### Applicants to HE

9.2 Of the 500 respondents to the survey of potential HE students, just over three fifths (n = 315; 63.0 per cent) had applied for a place in HE starting in the 2012/13 academic year. These applicants had applied to study a wide range of higher education courses but almost all intended to study with a university rather than a Further Education College (FEC). Three-quarters of applicants were current students (n = 235; 74.6 per cent); of these, almost half were studying at a school sixth form (n = 108; 46.0 per cent). Of the remainder of applicants, 14.6 per cent (n = 46) were in full- or part-time employment, 6.6 per cent (n = 21) described themselves as unemployed, while a further 4.1 per cent (n = 13) were engaged in voluntary work, work experience or were on a gap year. Most applicants who were current students were in receipt of some form of financial aid, most commonly the Educational Maintenance Allowance/16–19 bursary. The majority of **all** applicants reported that they intended to apply for a loan from the Student Loans Company to cover the cost of their tuition fees and/or living costs (n = 279; 88.6 per cent).

#### Awareness of the NSP

9.3 Based on the information that the applicants provided on their household income, almost all would meet the income threshold that determines eligibility for the NSP at the national level. However, a substantial minority did not think that they were eligible to apply (n = 49; 15.6 per cent) or were unsure whether they were eligible (n = 76; 24.1 per cent)<sup>5</sup>.

9.4 Just under two-fifths of **all** surveyed applicants indicated that they were aware of the NSP (n = 119; 37.8 per cent). There are a number of potential explanations for this figure, including that the programme is in its infancy and also that some institutions have chosen to integrate the NSP into their wider package of financial support and not promote it as a separate 'brand' or initiative. This means that students may have been aware of the financial support packages available from their chosen institution but not aware specifically of the NSP. Those who were aware of the programme were asked how they had heard about it. The most common sources of information were UCAS (n = 44; 37 per cent) and a school or college (n = 40; 33.6 per cent). Approximately three-quarters of all applicants also reported that these were the best ways to promote the NSP to potential students (n = 235; 74.6 per cent and n = 233; 74.0 per cent respectively).

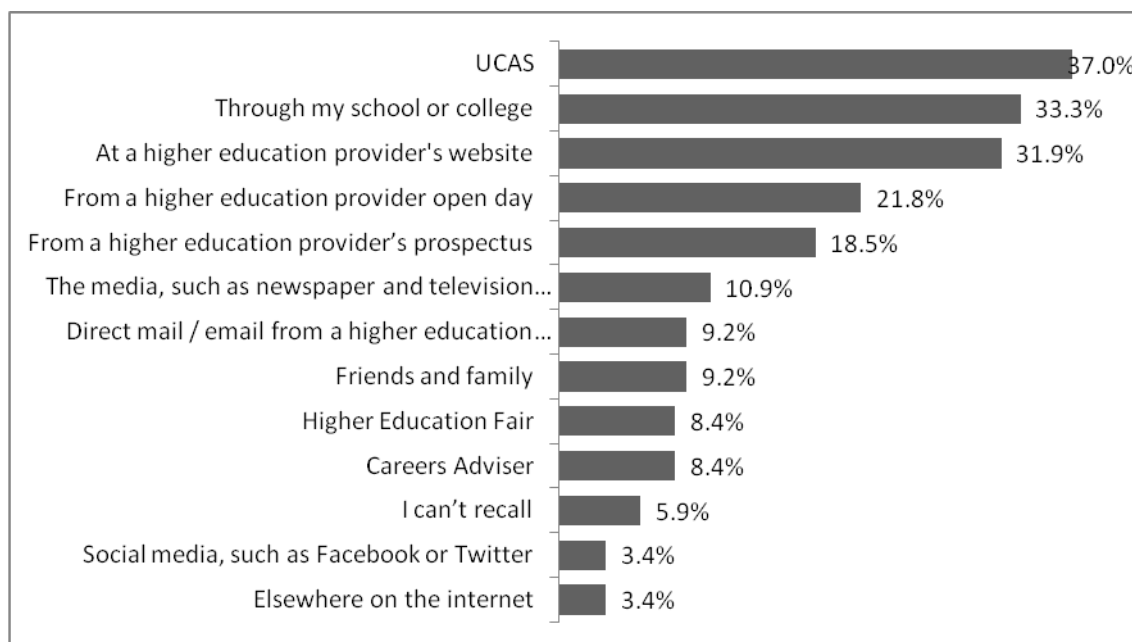
9.5 HEFCE issued guidance outlining the information that should be included on institutional websites about the NSP. The interim report signalled that compliance with this guidance was highly variable (see paragraphs 5.29–5.36 of the main report). However, the survey findings suggest that the information on NSP provided by HEIs themselves is also an important source for potential applicants, as a substantial minority of applicants who were aware of the NSP learned about the programme from an institutional website (n = 38), open day (n = 26) and/or prospectus (n = 22) (see Figure 11.1; numbers expressed as percentages). It is interesting to note that only a minority of all applicants believe that this is the best way to promote the programme; less than one in ten respondents reported that a prospectus, HE Fair, or institutional open day was the best way to promote the NSP, although greater proportions indicated that providers' websites (n = 51; 16.2 per

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<sup>5</sup> 60.3 per cent of applicants (n = 190) thought that they were eligible to apply for the NSP.



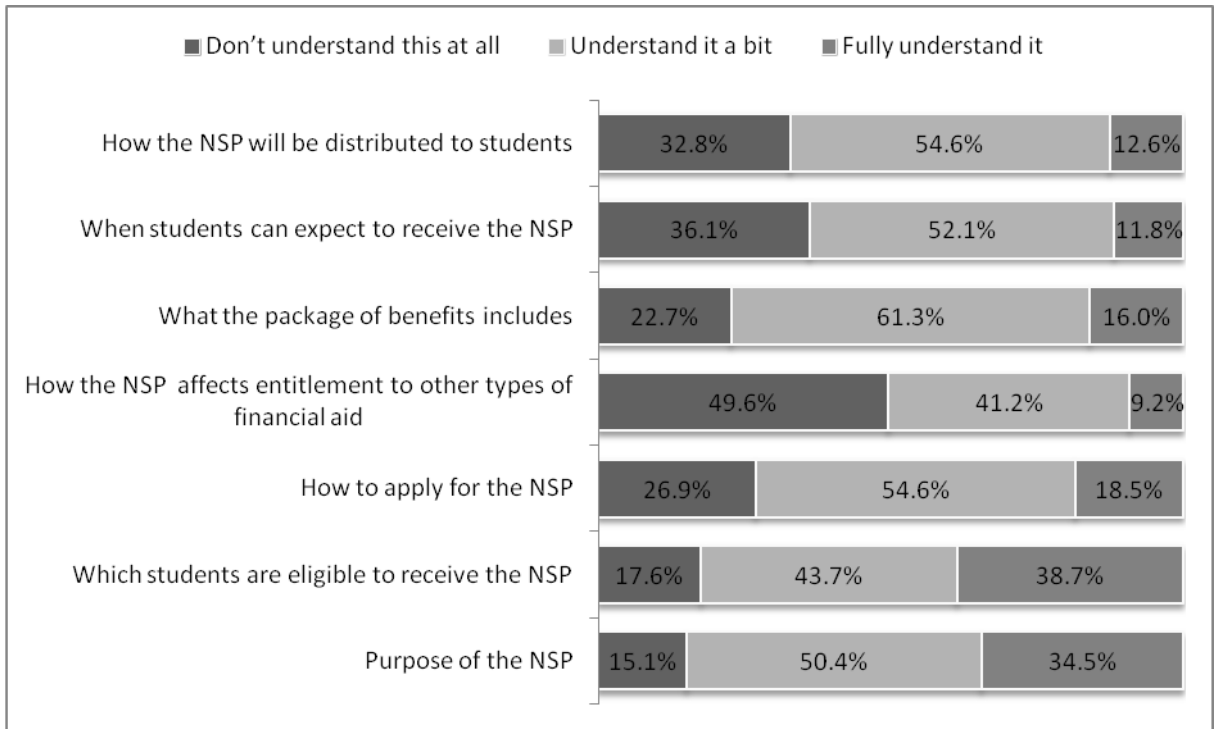
cent) or direct mail/email (n = 115; 36.5 per cent) would be an effective mechanism through which to market it. It is not possible to know from the survey results the degree to which potential students were actively seeking out information on the NSP and how useful they found the information they received. This will be explored in qualitative research with potential students during the subsequent years of the evaluation.



**Figure 11.1 How applicants heard about the National Scholarship Programme (base = 119)**

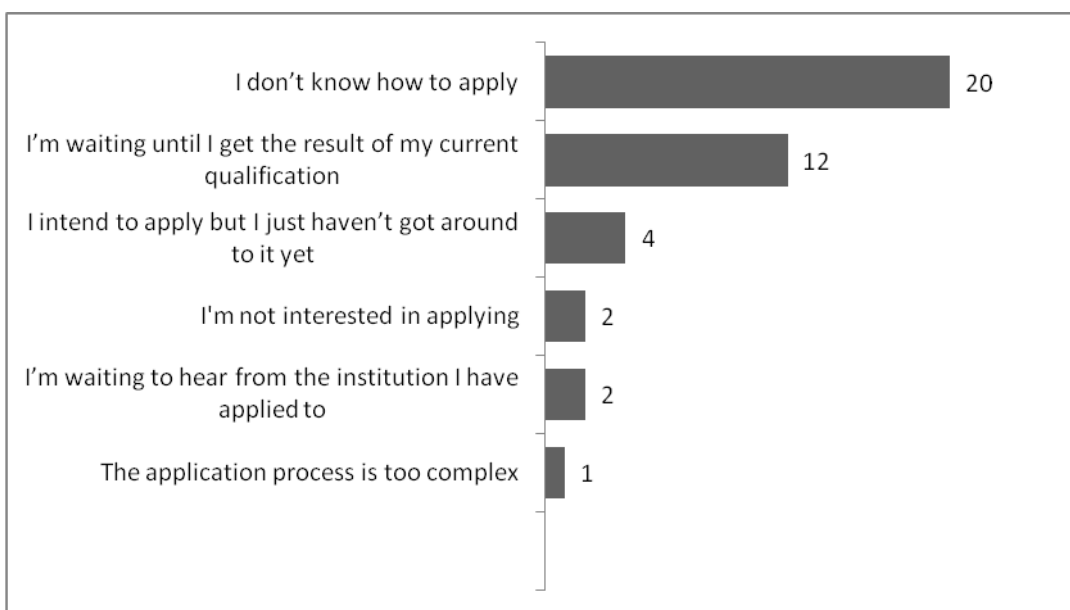
### Understanding of the NSP

9.6 The majority of applicants who reported that they were aware of the NSP reported that they had at least some understanding of key aspects of the programme. They were most likely to fully understand the purpose of the programme (n = 41; 34.5 per cent) and which students would be eligible to receive it (n = 46; 38.7 per cent). However, similar proportions did not understand at all how the NSP would be distributed to recipients (n = 39; 32.8 per cent) and when they could expect to receive it (n = 43; 36.1 per cent). Approximately a quarter of applicants did not know what the package of benefits would include (n = 27; 22.7 per cent) or how to apply for the NSP (n = 32; 26.9 per cent). The latter was the most common reason given for not applying for the NSP by those who thought they were eligible but had not applied (see figure 11.3 below). When asked, applicants who were aware of the NSP were most unclear how the programme might impact on their entitlement to other types of financial support (49.6 per cent) (figure 11.2). The extent to which potential HE students are concerned about the potential impact of the NSP on their entitlement to other forms of financial support, as well as the extent to which this may deter them from applying, will be explored in the qualitative research with potential applicants.



**Figure 11.2 Applicants' understanding of aspects of the NSP (base = 119)**

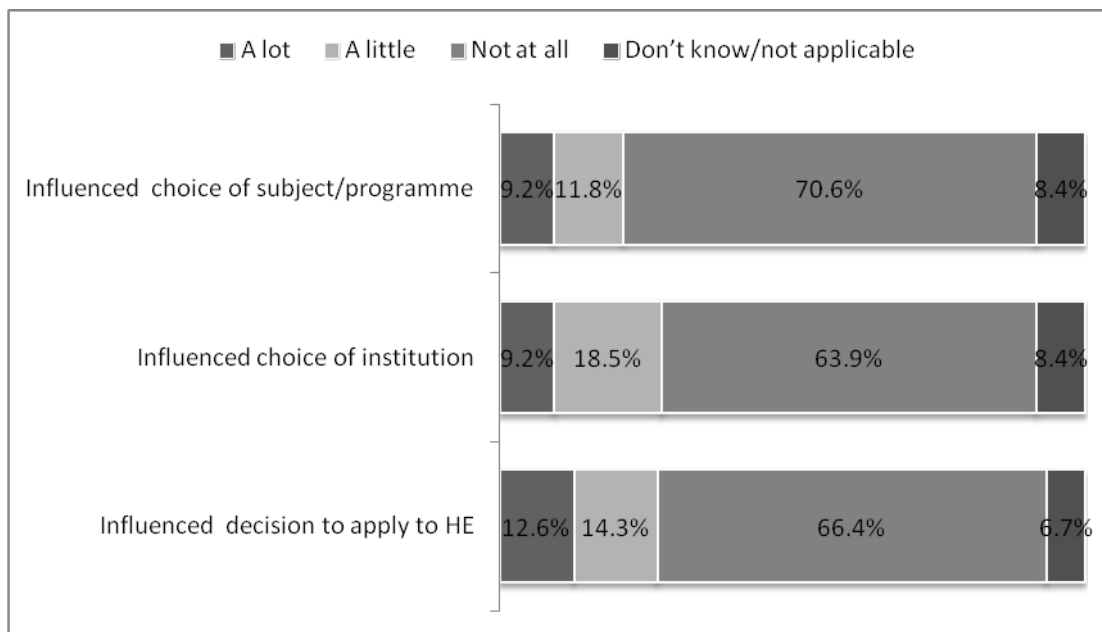
9.7 Just over half of applicants who are aware of the NSP and think they are eligible have actually applied for an award (n = 42; 55.3 per cent). As noted above, the most common reason why applicants to HE have not applied for an NSP is because they do not know how to go about it (n = 20; 47.6 per cent). This is perhaps not surprising given the variety of approaches being adopted by different institutions, ranging from no application process through to a formal application form and accompanying statement (see paragraphs 10.2 and 9.25 below). In contrast, very few applicants to HE have been deterred from applying for the NSP by the complexity of the process (n = 1; 2.4 per cent) or by a lack of interest in the programme (n = 2; 4.8 per cent). Most of the remainder were waiting for their results before applying (n = 12; 28.6 per cent) (see figure 11.3).



**Figure 11.3 Applicants' reasons for not applying for the NSP (base = 42)**

## Influence of the NSP on decision-making

9.8 Applicants who were aware of the NSP were asked to rate the extent to which the possibility of receiving financial aid through the NSP affected their decisions about HE. The majority reported that it had no influence at all over their decision-making. Where it did have an impact, it is most likely to have influenced an applicant's choice of institution and least likely to have influenced choice of subject or programme of study (figure 11.4).



**Figure 11.4** The extent to which the NSP influenced applicants' decisions about HE (base = 119)

## Non-applicants to HE in the 2012/13 academic year

9.9 A total of 185 respondents to the survey of potential HE students reported that they had an appropriate qualification that would enable them to progress into HE but had not taken up a place in the past and/or had not applied to study in HE during the 2012/13 academic year. Over four-fifths of non-applicants were current students (n = 153; 82.7 per cent), most commonly studying at a school sixth form (n=102; 67.1 per cent). Just over one in ten were in employment (n = 21; 11.4 per cent); the remainder were unemployed or engaged in other unwaged activities such as volunteering (n = 11; 5.8 per cent).

## Reasons for not entering higher education

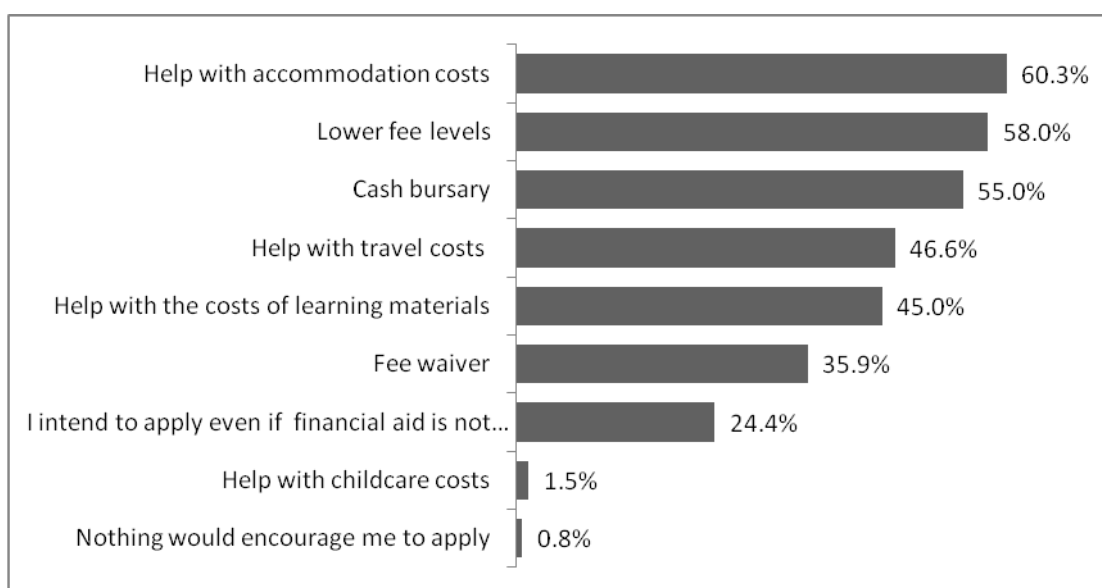
9.10 A small proportion of respondents who had not applied for a place in HE in 2012/13 reported that they had applied for HE in the past (14.1 per cent, n=26). Only five out of the 26 who had previously applied were not offered a place. The remainder gave a variety of reasons for not progressing, but the most common reason was that they realised the course was not for them (n=6). Although only two respondents indicated that the main reason they had not taken up a place was a lack of financial support with tuition fees, and only one reported that a lack of financial support with living costs had deterred them, this does not necessarily mean that a lack of financial aid is not a deterrent for some groups or does not discourage some of those with the potential to progress into HE from considering it and/or applying. These findings are based on very small numbers and should be treated with caution. In addition, there is a plethora of research to demonstrate that the cost of HE, and fear of debt in particular, can act as a barrier and constrain choice, especially when other aspects of an individual's character and personal circumstances are taken into account.<sup>6</sup> The

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Pennell, H. and West, A. (2005). 'The Impact of Increased Fees on Participation in Higher Education in England', *Higher Education Quarterly*, 59 (2) pp. 127–137; Gorard, S., Smith, E., Thomas, L., Adnett, N. and Slack, K. (2006). *Review of Widening Participation Research: addressing the barriers to participation in Higher*

evidence to date presents a mixed picture about the actual impact increased fees will have on participation. There is, however, broad agreement that financial concerns will impact most on students from lower socio-economic groups.<sup>7</sup>

### Factors that would encourage non-applicants to apply in the future

9.11 Virtually all of the non-applicants to HE in 2012/13 reported that they would either consider applying to study in HE in the future (n = 126; 68.1 per cent) or that they had already applied for a place in 2013/14 (n = 54; 29.2 per cent). Respondents who had not applied to study in HE in 2012/13 or 2013/14 (n = 131) were asked to indicate which types of financial aid would encourage them to apply in the future. The results illustrated in Figure 11.5 suggest that some form of financial incentive would encourage the vast majority of non-applicants to apply but that help with accommodation costs would be most likely to influence their decision (n = 79). Over half would also be influenced by a cash bursary (n = 72). It is interesting to note that a much larger proportion of non-applicants would be positively influenced by lower fee levels (n = 76) than a contribution towards their fees in the form of a fee waiver (n = 47).



**Figure 11.5 Factors that would encourage non-applicants to enter HE in the future (base = 131)**

9.12 The composition of the package awarded through the NSP is largely decided at institutional level, within certain restrictions (e.g., institutions are prohibited from offering cash bursaries of more than £1,000). While some have opted to provide the total benefit in the form of a fee waiver, others are offering a package of support which includes one or more of the types of financial assistance included in Figure 11.5 above (see also paragraph 5.20 of the main report). As noted in paragraph 10.23 below, the composition of the package on offer is influenced by a range of factors, including the fact that fee waivers are amongst the simplest to administer. However, there is also a widespread concern that fee waivers have less of an impact on widening access for disadvantaged students, and do very little to support retention and achievement, because the fee represents a deferred cost which may never be repaid. There is a perception that potential students are more concerned about, and therefore influenced by, immediate direct costs such as accommodation and

*Education*, Bristol: HEFCE; Fuller, A. and Paton, K. (2007). *Barriers to Participation in Higher Education? Depends who you ask and how*. Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, Institute of Education, University of London, 5–8 September 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Callender, C. and Jackson, J. (2005) Does the fear of debt deter students from higher education? *Journal of Social Policy*. 34 (4), 509-540. Lawton, J. and Moore, J. (2011) *University Choices of Year 12 Learners*. Aimhigher Greater Manchester. Percy, P. and Hudson, T. (2007) *Moving On: the Creative Way*. University of East London.

travel. The survey findings appear to support this perception. The factors that influence decision-making and the reasons why they have an impact will be explored in subsequent surveys and interviews undertaken as part of the on-going evaluation of the NSP.

### **Awareness and understanding of the NSP**

9.13 Non-applicants to HE in 2012/13 were asked whether they had heard of the NSP; just over a third reported that they had (n = 63; 34.1 per cent). Like the applicants, they were most likely to have heard about the programme through their school or college (n = 32; 50.8 per cent) or UCAS (n = 27; 42.9 per cent) and felt that these would be the best mechanisms for promoting it. However, non-applicants were more likely than applicants to suggest that the best mechanism to promote the NSP would be the media (30.8 per cent (n = 57) compared with 19.4 per cent (n = 61) of applicants). Although the majority of non-applicants in the sample were students, this may reflect the need for those who are not in education but who may be considering HE in the future to have access to the relevant information to inform their decision. Only a small proportion of respondents overall had heard about the NSP through social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter (n = 6; 3.3 per cent). However, substantial minorities of applicants (n = 64; 20.3 per cent) and non-applicants (n = 47; 25.4 per cent) reported that this would be the best way to promote it in the future.

9.14 Non-applicants report very similar levels of understanding of the different aspects of the NSP as applicants. This is perhaps not surprising given the high proportion of non-applicants who are students and who reported hearing about the NSP through their school or college.

### **Influence of the NSP on decision-making**

9.15 Just under half of non-applicants to HE in 2012/13 reported that they lived in a household with an income of less than £28,000 (n = 88; 47.6 per cent) and were, therefore, potentially eligible for the NSP in the event that they decided to apply to HE in the future. Only those who had applied to study in HE in 2013/14 (n = 54) were asked whether they thought they were eligible to apply for the NSP. Of these, 28 (51.9 per cent) reported an income of less than £28,000 but only 20 thought that they were eligible (37.0 per cent).

9.16 A total of 21 non-applicants had applied to study in HE in 2013/14 and had heard of the NSP. Of these, 12 (57.1 per cent) reported that the possibility of receiving financial aid through the NSP had no influence at all over their decision, compared with just three (14.3 per cent) who indicated that it influenced it a lot. This, along with their perceptions of the extent to which the NSP influences choice of institution and subject, reflects the findings for applicants in 2012/13.

### **Mature entrants to HE**

9.17 Part-time and mature entrants to HE who meet the specified national and institutional eligibility criteria will also be entitled to the NSP, although it should be noted that part-time recipients are only entitled to benefits in the form of a pro-rata fee waiver<sup>8</sup>. Although current data on part-time students' perceptions of the NSP is limited, the survey of potential students offers some insights into the awareness and understanding of mature entrants.

9.18 A total of 64 respondents were aged 21 or over at the time the survey was conducted in July 2012. Of these, 15 reported that they were aware of the NSP (23.4 per cent, compared with 38.3 per cent (n = 167) of respondents aged 20 and under), all of whom had applied for a place in HE in either 2012/13 or 2013/14. Unsurprisingly, those aged 21 and over were less likely to have heard about the NSP through a school or college than those who were under 20, with UCAS and the institutions themselves being the most common sources of information for potential students of all ages.

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<sup>8</sup> However part-time students will be able have access to the full range of the NSP menu in 2014-15.

9.19 Although the findings are based on small numbers and should, therefore, be treated with caution, the evidence suggests that younger potential students may be more likely to fully understand the purpose of the NSP, and which students are eligible, than those aged 21 or over. Potential entrants of all ages are unclear about the application process. However, none of the respondents aged 21 and over reported that they fully understood how the NSP might affect their entitlement to other types of financial aid and what the package of NSP benefits includes, compared with small proportions of younger students (8.4 per cent; n = 14 and 18 per cent; n = 30 respectively).

9.20 Just under half (n = 25; 47.2 per cent) of mature respondents who had applied for a place in HE in either 2012/13 or 2013/14 reported that they thought they would be eligible for the NSP. However, the possibility of receiving the NSP had little impact on the decisions made by students of all ages about whether to apply to study in HE, and the choices of institution and programme of study.

## Summary

9.21 A wide range of factors can deter potential students from applying to and/or taking up a place in HE. Although, according to our survey, respondents' lack of financial support may not be the main deterrent for the majority of those potential students who actually apply for a place, existing research suggests that the cost of HE and the fear of debt does act as a deterrent for some groups which could be alleviated, at least in part, by financial aid such as the NSP. Furthermore, the survey findings suggest that most potential applicants would be encouraged to apply to HE if financial support with aspects of their living expenses in particular was available. Although fee waivers do appeal to a substantial minority of potential students, the findings also suggest that lower initial fees would have more impact on progression into HE. The relative importance that potential students attach to different types of financial aid, along with the relative influence they have on decision-making at key stages in the process, warrants further investigation and will, therefore, be explored in subsequent stages of the evaluation of the NSP, including the qualitative research with potential students and NSP recipients.

9.22 The NSP is in its first year of operation so it is perhaps not surprising that the majority of potential students are unaware of it and that those who are aware do not fully understand key aspects of it. Along with UCAS, schools and colleges are the key sources of information about the NSP at present in addition to the institutions themselves. However, those with the potential to enter HE but who are not currently in education may find it difficult to access information in this way. If the NSP is to be used to encourage applications from individuals in groups that are traditionally under-represented in HE, other mechanisms, such as advertising in the media and/or using social networking sites, should be considered. However, it is recognised that promoting the NSP at this level presents a number of challenges and is highly problematic because of the lack of a national 'brand' with a common application process, entitlement and package of benefits (see paragraphs 10.28, 10.29 and 11.13 below).

9.23 The institutional survey conducted in December 2011 revealed that the majority of respondents perceived that the NSP would have limited impact on student decision-making. The survey of potential students affirms this view by demonstrating that the possibility of receiving the NSP is currently having a very limited impact on applicants' choice of institution and programme of study in particular. The factors that are likely to be limiting the impact that the NSP can have on the decision-making process include: the lack of a national brand and clear, consistent information about the NSP; the diversity in eligibility criteria; the stage in the application process when recipients are notified about their eligibility and entitlement; and the lack of a consistent offer (e.g. the variation in level and package of benefits). A key question for policy-makers as the NSP evolves is whether it is in fact desirable for the NSP to impact on and influence students' choice of institution and programme of study. If it is, then these issues will need to be addressed in order for this aim to be realised.

## 10. Implementing the NSP

**This section draws on interviews with representatives of the 24 case study institutions. It supplements the Key Findings chapter of the main report which explored findings from the online survey of 104 institutions. The findings relate to the planned implementation of the NSP for academic year 2012/13.**

### Existing widening participation activities

10.1 Widening participation (WP) is an important strategic priority in the majority of institutions. All the case study institutions are engaged in some form of activity designed to raise aspirations and/or overcome barriers for specific target groups who are under-represented in HE (see paragraphs 5.4, 5.6, 5.8 and 5.9 in the main report).

10.2 However, the challenges WP presents and the extent, nature and focus of current strategies and activities vary according to the type of institution. For some, WP is fundamental to their identity and is embedded in what they deliver, often as a result of the location of the institution, the profile of the population from which the majority of their students are drawn, and/or the nature of the courses offered.

*...we'd describe it as being embedded in our DNA. We are a widening participation institution. Everything that we do is targeted at widening participation and underrepresented student groups.... we don't have currently a room, an office, a group of people that we could say, 'They are the Widening Participation Team'. We don't have that because everybody is in the Widening Participation Team.*

10.3 As a result, increasing access to HE was less of a priority for some of the institutions who attracted a high proportion of WP students. According to interviewees from these institutions, their WP efforts generally were being re-focused on supporting students during their studies to ensure they were retained, progressed well and achieved a good outcome.

10.4 For other institutions, including those with high entry requirements and/or a specialist offer that traditionally attracts students from particular socio-economic groups, widening participation, and access in particular is more challenging for them to achieve.

*I think one of the challenges is that we recruit at the very, very top of the achievement range. So you have to be doing well in school, so it's the groups that don't do well in school that we then find hard to take in, because there is no point in taking in someone who's then not going to cope. That won't do anybody any good.*

### Alignment of the NSP with existing WP strategies

10.5 The survey of institutions conducted in December 2011 revealed that approaches to the NSP were informed by existing institutional strategies for WP in over two fifths of cases (see paragraph 5.23 in the main report). Most institutions interviewed confirmed that they are seeking to align the NSP with their WP strategies, although some felt this had been more successful than others. Interviewees generally interpreted 'alignment' to mean being able to target NSP at their priority groups for WP. However some interviewees commented that the NSP complemented other provision by providing additional support (e.g., a fee waiver to go with their own in-house bursary) or because other funds were used to support different groups of students (for example, those with

modest household incomes over £25,000). Some institutions that were planning to make changes to their NSP scheme in the future (see paragraph 10.32 below) were doing so to bring it more in line with their WP strategy, for example, by making awards to summer school attendees. In institutions where a greater emphasis was being placed on retention and achievement rather than access, interviewees reported that there was a tension between their institutional objectives and the objectives of the NSP. Two interviewees in particular reported that the NSP was separate from rather than aligned to their wider WP strategy because of a perception that its capacity to help improve grades or support retention is limited. If the NSP is at odds with institutions' WP objectives and ambitions this may be problematic and could lead to the NSP being perceived as a burden and a distraction. Increasing institutional discretion over the design and delivery of the NSP would help to facilitate greater alignment with wider institutional strategies for WP by enabling institutions to tailor their offer to the specific needs of their students as well as their institutional priorities. However, it is also likely to generate further complexities in relation to targeting and allocating awards and is at odds with calls from some parts of the sector for a more standardised national scheme which provides a consistent offer for disadvantaged students wherever they choose to study.

## **Alignment between the NSP and the new 16–19 bursary scheme**

10.6 A key research question for the evaluation is 'What opportunities might exist for alignment between the NSP and the 16–19 bursary scheme?' (see paragraphs 7.23 to 7.27 of the main report). Previously, the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) provided financial support to young people from low-income households to enable them to stay in education after 16. Bonus payments were also made to reward good attendance. The EMA was replaced in September 2012 by the 16–19 bursary scheme, designed to support the most vulnerable young people in education in this age group. However the total fund available is much smaller than for the predecessor initiative and individual schools and colleges have greater autonomy over its implementation.

10.7 Interviewees were asked for their views on the desirability and feasibility of greater alignment between the 16–19 bursary and the NSP. Most interviewees who discussed this issue were generally positive about greater alignment, seeing it as useful, particularly in giving students a clear understanding and expectation of what they would be entitled to if they went on to HE. Those who were more negative highlighted practical problems with greater alignment; in particular the fact that because the 16–19 award is discretionary and differs between FECs, administering an aligned scheme would be extremely complicated. Two interviewees argued that such an aligned scheme would need to be administered nationally rather than locally through HEIs. Two other institutions suggested that alignment between EMA and NSP would be easier, and one had indeed previously administered bursaries on this basis.

## **Management of the NSP by institutions**

10.8 Several of the case study institutions interviewed expected there to be no or only minor challenges involved in setting up and managing the NSP from an administrative point of view. For some this was because staff and systems were already in place to administer existing financial support schemes.

10.9 Where concerns were raised these frequently related to the selection of recipients to ensure that their NSP allocation was neither over- nor under-spent. The two main challenges identified by interviewees are inter-related: managing eligibility and demand, and communicating the scheme effectively. For some institutions the most difficult and resource-intensive part of administering the scheme appears to be working out the eligibility criteria to fit with their allocation.

10.10 Compounded by recent policies such as 'core and margin' and AAB+ admissions, some institutions raised concerns that their student profile may differ from predictions and, as a result, that their carefully-constructed criteria would no longer be adequate.



*...because we've had to almost patch together a number of criteria to find 166 [eligible students], we think this makes 166, if we then find that we've only offered 120 in November then we're going to be finding 46 students and identifying them.*

10.11 Ambiguity surrounding student eligibility for the NSP is perceived to be impacting on the ways in which the NSP is communicated to students and parents and the extent to which it can influence student choice (see paragraphs 10.29 and 11.4 below). As stated in the main report (paragraph 6.47), many institutions who responded to the online survey (n =22; 24.2 per cent) feel that the scheme needs to be simplified and standardised to ensure that everyone in the same circumstances receives the funding regardless of which institution they attend.

10.12 The Student Loans Company (SLC) verifies household incomes for means-tested student finance. Institutions can access this information by subscribing to the Higher Education Bursary and Scholarship Scheme (HEBSS) and use it to identify those full-time students who qualify for the NSP. Timely information on eligible students is essential for institutions administering the NSP as well as for recipients. Many institutions expressed concern about the impact that possible delays could have on the speed with which the NSP could be awarded to students in need of financial assistance at the start of their studies, and there appears to be a lack of confidence in SLC in this regard. Frustration was also expressed about the change in the guidance with regard to the interest incurred on fee loans. It is possible that recipients of the NSP in the form of a fee waiver will incur interest on a portion of their fees which is subsequently waived if the decision to award the NSP is delayed for any reason, including while their circumstances are verified by the SLC. Although loan payments are deferred, clearly any interest charged will offset some of the benefit gained as a result of being awarded the NSP.

10.13 Part-time students are not currently entitled to state maintenance support and so their household income is not assessed by SLC. As a result, institutions will have had to have set up their own systems for verifying the household income of part-time students and confirm their eligibility and entitlement to the NSP. Many of the case study institutions have very few or no part-time students and did not raise this as a concern. Interviewees from four institutions highlighted this as a possible challenge. Some have introduced or are considering introducing application forms for these students as the only way of collecting the necessary information. One institution has decided to award NSP to part-time students that are in receipt of means-tested benefits in order to avoid assessing their income in more detail. This could mean that a part-time student with household income less than £25,000 but who is not in receipt of benefits will not qualify for the award when a full-time student at the same institution with the same household income would.

10.14 Other challenges include: assessing incomes for EU students; resourcing the set-up and ongoing management of the NSP; a lack of timely or sufficiently detailed guidance on administering the programme; administering diverse packages of support with multiple elements (for example, in some cases students will be able to select from a menu of options the composition of their NSP package); and setting up or adjusting IT and other necessary systems. For some institutions, the scheme is perceived to increase the administrative burden (see also paragraph 6.15 in the main report). A few related this to the difficulty of administering complex schemes or different schemes concurrently for different student cohorts (for example, in instances where the institution plans to change the scheme for the following year).

## **Financial aid for students from lower income families**

10.15 Financial aid is one of a suite of measures that can widen participation by helping to ensure that potential students are not deterred from applying to and succeeding in HE because of monetary concerns. All but one of the case study institutions reported that they already offered some kind of financial support to students (one was introducing a bursary this year in addition to NSP). Existing support comes in the form of bursaries, fee waivers, accommodation waivers, book-shop credits, hardship funds and help with overseas travel. Support is directed using achievement criteria such as academic or sporting excellence, and/or is targeted at specific groups of students such as

disabled students, care leavers, and international students. As well as financial aid for students from low-income households, some institutions also offer financial support for students from better-off families that still have relatively modest incomes, typically of less than £42,000, described by one interviewee as the 'squeezed middle'.<sup>9</sup>

10.16 The evaluation to date has revealed a great diversity in the WP initiatives in place. The amount of NSP that institutions are awarded is linked to total student numbers and does not take into account the proportion of students they bring in from non-traditional and low-income backgrounds. Institutions with a large proportion of WP students are unlikely to receive sufficient allocation to award the NSP to all their students who meet the national eligibility criterion. Each NSP award cannot be less than £3,000; this means institutions are also unable to make more but smaller awards in order to make their allocations stretch further. This creates a number of challenges both in terms of managing student expectations and determining which groups of students are prioritised for an award. This has important implications for both the administration of NSP, and the ongoing evaluation of the programme, including any assessment of its impact on WP, as it is difficult to draw direct comparisons between different schemes.

## Eligibility criteria<sup>10</sup>

10.17 As stated in the main report, the survey of institutions found that a minority have taken the strategic decision to make an award to all students who meet the national household income eligibility threshold (see paragraphs 5.21 and 5.24 in the main report). Particularly for small, specialist institutions with a limited number of eligible students, the NSP allocation may be sufficient to achieve this; where it is not, these institutions will match-fund the government allocation by more than 100 per cent in order to ensure all eligible students receive an award. We will continue to monitor how this works in practice and evaluate the long-term sustainability of this approach.

*We didn't want students to have to apply, so there won't be any student that's under 25,000 that won't get a fee waiver. So everybody, whether, you know, how far the NSP stretches or doesn't stretch, everybody with that household income will get £3,000 waiver.*

10.18 In the majority of institutions where the NSP allocation will not be sufficient to make an award to all those who meet the national eligibility criteria, additional local eligibility criteria will be employed. These include academic achievement, postcode, attendance at a partner school or college, receipt of free school meals and/or whether the student belongs to a specific target group, such as care leavers, first generation entrants or students with a disability, health condition or learning difficulty (see paragraphs 5.22 and 5.23 in the main report). The interviews revealed that a small number of case study institutions have set up panels to make the selection decisions.

10.19 Some of the case study institutions are planning to use household income as the only criterion but are either setting a lower threshold (for example, a household income of up to £20k) or simply allocating the award through a process of rank-ordering students by household income from the lowest to the highest and working their way up until all the allocations are made.

10.20 The application of differential eligibility criteria has a number of implications for recipients as well as for institutions seeking to promote the programme while managing student expectations. Students with a certain household income may receive the NSP if they study with one institution but not with another, and there may be year-on-year disparities within the same institution as overall levels of household income fluctuate. In addition, in institutions where more than one factor is taken into account, not all students with the same household income studying at the same institution will be guaranteed an award. Because of the disparities in these systems, some institutions have been

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<sup>9</sup>It is important to note in the context of this report that students with a household income of more than £25 000 would not be eligible for the NSP element of the package.

<sup>10</sup> The findings reported here and in the main report relate to the local eligibility criteria for academic year 2012/13. Institutions have now submitted plans for 2013/14 and some have changed their approach to eligibility.

reluctant to give a high profile to the programme on their website and in their literature on financial aid (see paragraph 10.29 below).

## Models of delivery

10.21 Paragraphs 5.13 to 5.17 of the main report set out the different models of delivery adopted by institutions for the 2012/13 academic year. There remains considerable diversity in the approaches being adopted, including the way in which the institutional match funding is being used. At this stage it is not possible to identify a dominant model or approach, although over half of the institutions surveyed are adopting a model whereby their match funding will be used to award additional scholarships rather than to increase the amount awarded to individual students (more awards, not bigger awards). The strengths and limitations of the different approaches will continue to be monitored during the evaluation and in light of experience so that effective practice in the administration of the award can be identified. However, it is important to recognise that the effectiveness of different models and the relative impacts they have on recipients will be much harder to determine because the effect of the NSP cannot be disaggregated from other factors that may contribute to a recipient's success or otherwise in HE and beyond.

## Timing

10.22 Paragraph 5.18 of the main report indicated that just over half of institutions plan to award their full NSP in the first year of study. It was not clear at that stage whether those institutions providing support over more than one year would make future payments contingent on additional criteria. The interviews have revealed that at least one institution is making continued receipt of financial support dependent upon achieving an academic average of at least 60 per cent. Another is spreading cash bursary payments over the three terms of the first year and payment is dependent on attendance and achievement.

## Components of the NSP package

10.23 Details of the components of NSP packages are summarised in paragraph 5.20 of the main report. The interviews shed light on the rationale behind the package designs. Many institutions reported that they had consulted on the NSP package with their Students' Union (who were generally said to strongly favour cash bursaries over fee waivers). A few had carried out other student consultation activities such as focus groups to inform the package design. What is perceived to be attractive and helpful to students appears to be a key consideration for institutions when putting together packages. Many of those institutions whose package includes a cash bursary said they wanted to include it because they felt it was popular with students, would be most beneficial to students or would help with retention. Interviewees from several institutions indicated that they felt obliged to adopt a fee waiver as part of their NSP package for various reasons, for example, to reduce their average fee or because of the cap on cash bursaries and the perceived limitations of other options such as accommodation discounts. Just two interviewees said they felt that fee waivers would be more attractive to students on low incomes. Other considerations when developing their packages were that they should be straightforward to administer and simple and easy to understand for students.

*...there's a real, kind of, balance between offering the students as much flexibility as you can, so that they can choose what suits them best, and being able to administer it from behind the scenes. Because the more flexibility you give them and the more different values of bursaries that this student might have, or that student might have or that fee waiver, or whatever. The more complicated it's going to be for us to administer.*

## Application processes

10.24 Over half (16 institutions) of the case study institutions interviewed do not require students to complete an application for the NSP. Instead, eligibility is assessed using data from university and student loan applications. Those who expressed a view felt that an additional NSP application form was burdensome, unnecessary and might put off the kinds of students that the programme is aiming to attract and support.

*One of our concerns was that the students who most need the bursaries are possibly the ones who have the least support in terms of the filling in application forms, are likely to be possibly a bit less organised, certainly from our experience of other financial systems.*

10.25 However, other institutions do require students to apply for the award. This may be due to the nature of the eligibility criteria selected and the need to collect additional information not otherwise available from SLC or the UCAS application. Some application forms are tied to other existing bursary schemes and others are separate. One institution has combined the application with its enrolment form so there is no additional paperwork. Another institution is asking for a written statement from applicants. As the evaluation progresses, it will be useful to explore the degree to which an application form is a barrier to accessing financial support.

10.26 A potential benefit of having an application form and a deadline is that awards can be confirmed earlier. There is much variety in when institutions expect to notify students; at least one had already done this at the time of the interview (May–June 2012), some expected to do this during the summer months, while others expect to be making awards well into the academic year. Although several institutions spoke of wanting to make an early start on allocating awards, as noted above, reliance on data from the Student Loans Company restricts their ability to do this and is recognised as a potential source of delay. This, and the fact that some institutions' eligibility thresholds are moveable due to a fixed numbers of awards, means that institutions may not be able to confirm who will get NSP until after students have taken up places.

*So we've got to wait until fairly late in the process to have all the data, because what we don't want to do is say to someone, 'You're going to get it,' and have another 50 people come through that bump them back above that threshold.*

10.27 The ability of institutions to be clear about eligibility and the timing of award confirmation are likely to affect the degree to which the programme can have an impact on students' choice of institution.

## Marketing and promotion of the NSP

10.28 The uncertainty around who might qualify for an award was highlighted as a particular challenge at some institutions when communicating the scheme to students, parents and other stakeholders. So too was the fact that NSP awards and eligibility differ from institution to institution. Trying to make sense of the different schemes and compare them was seen as potential source of confusion for students.

*It's the applicants and the parents that I feel for, because there's so much confusion out there for them. You know, how do you know what's a good deal?*

10.29 A few institutions reported that they were taking deliberately cautious, low-key or vague approaches to marketing and promoting the NSP because of uncertainty about who would receive the award and/or the small number of awards available, with the intention of minimising disappointment. Several interviewees commented on the perceived tension between marketing fee waivers as an attractive option while re-assuring students that tuition fees should not be a barrier to

participation because they are only be repayable on graduation if they get a sufficiently well paid job. They felt this made marketing the fee waiver element of the NSP more difficult.

10.30 Queries about NSP are being directed mainly to Admissions, Student Support or Finance departments. One institution has produced a briefing paper on NSP and circulated this across the organisation to ensure 'no wrong door' for student queries and information requests. Many institutions commented that they had received very few, if any, queries specifically relating to NSP. Three institutions interviewed said that they were not using the NSP label; instead the package has been given a local name, such as the 'University of X Bursary'.

## **Monitoring take-up and impact**

10.31 HEFCE requires institutions to flag recipients of the NSP in their returns to the Higher Education Statistics Agency and to provide an end of year report to HEFCE and OFFA as part of reporting against Widening Participation Strategic Assessments (WPSA) and access agreements. In addition to the required monitoring and reporting, over half of the case study institutions indicated that they planned, or had the capability, to track recipients of NSP through their monitoring systems, examining issues such as progress and retention. Two further institutions are hoping to track NSP students in the future but the systems are not yet in place. Other institutions reported that they track WP students or bursary recipients generally but it wasn't always clear whether they were able to look at NSP recipients as a specific group. Some institutions appeared to have little interest in monitoring the impact of NSP; others were more enthusiastic, with a few planning activities such as focus groups and surveys to evaluate the impact of NSP. There are opportunities here for the formative evaluation team to link-up with institutions in order to avoid duplication and make best use of resources.

## **Plans for the future**

10.32 A handful of interviewees indicated that their NSP scheme would be different for academic year 2013/14 or that they expected to make changes in the future. Planned changes include different packages (with a greater proportion of cash), different eligibility criteria (e.g., more targeted) and greater alignment with the institutional WP strategy. Some indicated that the increased allocation of awards next year will mean revisiting this year's plan and will add to the complexity of schemes. One institution indicated they were making additional match funds available this year so that the same eligibility criteria could be used in future years; another has adjusted this year's scheme to bring it in line with that planned for 2013/14 to avoid students in different years being subject to different schemes. However, two interviewees commented that it was difficult to develop an access agreement and NSP scheme for next year without the benefit of learning from the current year.

## 11. Institutional perceptions of the NSP

**This section provides further detail on institutions' perceptions of various aspects of the NSP, as gathered from the case study interviews.**

11.1 It is too early in the evaluation to assess the impact of the programme. We will be able to begin to assess this once the first cohort of recipients have received their award and begun their studies. However, the interviews with case study institutions enable us to explore in more detail perceptions of how the NSP may or may not have an impact. Perceptions of the NSP generally were more negative than positive. While recognising the benefit to individual students who receive the NSP, most of the interviewees were at best a little sceptical about the likely impact on students and potential students and the overall value of the programme.

### Impact on WP

11.2 Many interviewees agreed that the NSP was beneficial for students and that it would be 'nice' for those who received it, but they were more equivocal about the degree to which the NSP would have an impact on student choices and behaviour. This reflects the views of the NSP Steering Group members (see paragraphs 6.18 and 6.21 of the main report). Respondents to the survey of institutions described in the main report also generally disagreed that the NSP will encourage students to consider HE who would not have otherwise applied (see paragraph 6.17) and that it will encourage students to apply to a particular institution (see paragraph 6.21). The case study interviews provide some detail on the reasons behind these views.

11.3 Most interviewees who expressed a view were sceptical that the NSP would impact on potential students' decision to go on to HE, especially for this year's cohort who would have most likely already made the decision by the time information on NSP was made available. One interviewee made the point that finance is only one of many barriers to be overcome in WP. A small number of interviewees were more optimistic that the NSP could encourage more young people into HE who might previously have been deterred because of the cost. Those with a more positive view were all offering NSP in the form of a combination or choice of fee waivers and other benefits, but otherwise had different delivery models.

11.4 Similarly, most interviewees felt that NSP was unlikely to influence students' choice of institution or course, largely because other factors were seen as more important to students, such as course quality, institutional reputation and the experience offered. A few suggested that NSP and other financial incentives could even be a distraction from what are the most important considerations or that some students might be put off an institution if they perceive that it has to "buy" students. The difficulty in comparing institutions' differing offers and in some cases the limited likelihood of getting the award were also given as reasons why the NSP is unlikely to impact on choice of institution. Just three interviewees felt NSP might have an impact on students' choice of institution. These were from different institutions to those that felt NSP might have an impact on students' accessing HE and there were no obvious common factors that might explain their views.

11.5 In terms of the potential for the NSP to affect retention and performance, views were more mixed. Several interviewees argued that a fee waiver would not have any impact, while a cash bursary might. Four interviewees could see clear links between the award and retention and performance; these were all from institutions that were either linking the award to progress and/or were offering a cash bursary over all years of study. One of the interviewees outlined how they carefully time payment of bursaries; as a result they felt that this meant that students did not need to work so many hours in part-time jobs during periods of revision and final assessment. Another said that their research indicated that bursaries helped retention; they suggested this was because the

cash enabled students to take part in activities and therefore feel more involved in the student community.

11.6 Concerns were also expressed about the fact that many schemes will only provide support to students in the first year of their studies. Some institutions have addressed this by providing additional funding so students receive support throughout their course:

*...one of the things about the NSP which is slightly bizarre is... it's only for a year. In your first year you get the support, then you get zero after that, so from our point of view, if there's a need throughout your studies, and so the programme extends for the full three years on the same basis.... That would seem to us a very important component, in that this idea that people would be given something for a year and then, sort of, cast adrift just seemed to us the wrong approach.*

11.7 As noted previously, most interviewees who commented were highly sceptical about the value of fee waivers, and perceived that cash bursaries were preferred by students. They based these claims either on experience, the results of consultation with the Students' Union or on other research or consultation with students. Interviewees from only two institutions felt that there were some benefits to having a fee waiver. (See paragraph 10.23 above for more detail on attitudes to fee waivers.)

## **Impact on HEIs and their WP strategies**

11.8 In the main report (see paragraph 6.14) we stated that more than a third of institutions responding to the online survey agreed that the NSP will impact on the resources available for WP in their institutions, although the findings did not clarify whether this was a positive or negative impact. Two institutions consulted commented that the NSP is affecting other bursaries; one is reducing their existing bursary to bring it into line with NSP (they could not afford to increase the NSP awards to the same level); another reported they might have given more generous cash bursaries if it were not for the need to match fund NSP. A further three institutions explicitly stated that the match funding necessary for NSP will be taken from other WP activity.

*...inevitably there are diverted resources that we would have used for other things, and certainly as we've looked at the 2013/14 scheme we've had to, just in terms of affordability, reduce what we may have spent on outreach and retention.*

11.9 The Government's contribution to the NSP is set to increase over the next two years leading to an increase in the matched-funding requirements for institutions. The effect of these increases on institutions and their wider WP activities will continue to be monitored in subsequent years of the evaluation.

11.10 However, more interviewees perceived that the NSP would have a positive impact on resources for WP, providing additional funding to help augment their WP offer and support disadvantaged students. Interviewees from three institutions felt their NSP offer might enhance their institutional reputation or make courses more attractive when compared with their competitors.

11.11 Some argued that the likely impact on their institution was negligible because they were already providing similar types and levels of support. One institution reported that they are replacing their existing bursary with NSP and so perceived no net impact, negative or positive.

## Areas for improvement

11.12 Interviewees highlighted a number of areas where they felt the programme might be improved or where they had concerns.

11.13 As set out above (see paragraph 10.11), several interviewees argued for a more national, standardised offer. These suggestions generally related to the eligibility criteria. One interviewee suggested the funding should follow the student, not the institution, encouraging aspiration to HE generally, but allowing students to focus on selecting an institution with the right academic offer for them. This point is also made in paragraph 6.46 of the main report.

11.14 Again, as highlighted in the main report (paragraph 6.47) the NSP is not perceived as 'national'. A number of interviewees commented on the lack of publicity and identity of the scheme at a national level; several felt this could be improved to raise awareness of the scheme. However it might be argued that the diversity of institutional offers and local eligibility criteria, as well as the use of local names, could make a national NSP 'brand' a potential source of further confusion.

11.15 In contrast, several interviewees said they valued the ability to tailor the scheme to local circumstances and many wanted to see a greater degree in flexibility in how allocations were paid to students. This generally related to the timing of awards (being able to provide support throughout a student's time at university) and how each allocation could be spent (more cash, fewer in-kind benefits). Interviewees at two institutions said they felt if restrictions were lifted they could come up with far more creative ways to use the funding to the greater benefit of students. A few felt the funds would be better simply put towards WP activity more generally rather than scholarships.

11.16 Some interviewees argued that the allocation of awards should take into account the proportion of WP students attending an institution, so that those with greater numbers were better able to support them (see also paragraph 6.47 in the main report). But at least one interviewee argued the opposite; as an institution with good levels of WP and existing generous financial support, they thought it might be more of an incentive for those institutions with traditionally lower numbers of WP students.

*...so you give more bursary and you give more NSP places to those institutions that routinely fail to recruit them. So stop worrying about people like us and [other institutions], and actually deal with... and say, 'Right, you have a target of 200, Cambridge, there you go.'*

11.17 The latest NSP guidance issued in January 2013 indicates that the allocation model for 2014/15 will change to ensure that the distribution of the funding is more closely aligned with the number of students from low-income backgrounds. Corresponding changes to the match-funding requirements will also be introduced to ensure institutions with a high proportion of eligible students are not penalised.

11.18 Several interviewees expressed concern about the 'cliff edge' effect of the £25,000 household income threshold, where students from households with incomes only marginally over this would get no support.

11.19 One institution with a high number of part-time students highlighted the perceived inequity of awarding a pro-rata fee waiver in the first year of study only. This means that a part-time student may receive less benefit as a proportion of their fees over the course of their studies than a full-time student. Changes to the benefits for part-time students will come into effect in 2014/15 and will ensure that part-time students have access to the same menu of options as full-time students. However, there are currently no plans to change the amount or timing of the award for part-time students.



## **12. Interim conclusions and next steps**

### **Progress against national aims and objectives for the programme**

12.1 In the main report (see paragraph 7.4) we reported a consensus that the primary aim of the programme is to provide financial benefit to individual students from disadvantaged backgrounds as they enter HE. Interviewees from case study institutions were in agreement and positive on this point, which is encouraging. However they were more equivocal about the likely wider impact of the programme on student choice and behaviour.

### **Progress against institution-level aims and objectives for the programme**

12.2 A key aim of institutions is to ensure the programme is aligned to and complements existing strategies for access and WP. In the main report (see paragraph 7.9) we highlight the challenges of aligning NSP with WP when the NSP cohort is much smaller than the wider WP cohort in most institutions. However most case study institutions confirmed there were seeking to align the NSP with their WP strategies, with varying degrees of success. There may be a particular tension for those institutions who are seeking to prioritise retention and progress rather than access for their WP students.

12.3 While most case study institutions perceive NSP as an additional resource that can enhance their WP offer, there are a few examples of existing WP activities being replaced, reduced or diverted by NSP. As the evaluation progresses this is an issue we will seek to monitor closely.

### **Potential for the NSP to add value to or enhance institutional strategies for social mobility, access and WP**

12.4 As shown in the main report (see paragraph 7.13) finance is just one of a number of barriers to accessing HE. The survey of potential students indicates that few applicants to HE are deterred from applying solely on the basis of cost. Interviewees at case study institutions were sceptical about the likely impact of NSP on encouraging students to access HE and this was also confirmed by the findings from the survey of potential HE students.

However, we demonstrated in the main report that financial aid can have a positive impact on retention and achievement once students are in HE. Despite this, over half of institutions will allocate their full match-funding contribution in the first year of study and it appears that just two case study institutions are linking payment of NSP to continued achievement and attendance.

### **Potential impact of the NSP – influencing student choice**

12.5 The stakeholder interviews and institutional survey (see paragraph 7.16 in the main report) revealed that those involved in the sector were divided on the likelihood that the NSP will impact on choice of institution and/or subject. The survey of potential HE students provides further evidence to suggest that it will have little if any impact in this regard.

12.6 Interviews with case study institutions illustrate why this might be so. Some students will not know until they arrive and enrol at their chosen institution whether they will receive a scholarship. The variety of local eligibility criteria, limited availability and minimal promotion of the NSP at some institutions also mean making comparisons across institutions is difficult. These are all aspects of the NSP design that it may be worth focusing on in order to increase impact in regard to student choice. Furthermore other factors, such as course, institutional reputation and student experience may be more important considerations, and it could be argued that this is as it should be.

## **Models of delivery and effectiveness in implementing NSP**

12.7 We highlight in the main report (see paragraph 7.20) the need to investigate the perceived and actual impact of those schemes where greater emphasis is placed on fee waivers, as these were perceived by the Steering Group to be less likely to be effective. This view is reflected by many of the case study institutions who reported that a cash bursary was more useful and attractive to students, particularly with regard to supporting retention. The survey of potential applicants also backs this up, as most would be encouraged to apply if financial support for living expenses such as travel or accommodation was available. However, the design and restrictions of the programme, coupled with wider policy such as the need to reduce average fee levels, means that many institutions felt compelled to include fee waivers as a key part of their NSP package.

12.8 The case study interviews have also revealed that some institutions are requiring students to complete an application form in order to access the NSP; in other institutions this will not be necessary. There are benefits and disadvantages to both these approaches and as the evaluation progresses we will monitor this and assess whether application forms act as a barrier to students accessing the funds.

## **Approaches to eligibility and shortfall**

12.9 Interviews with case study institutions reveal further detail on how they are addressing shortfalls in their NSP allocation in comparison to their WP cohort, including the development of local eligibility criteria. We highlight in the main report (see paragraph 7.22) the need to further explore the impact of the shortfall of NSP allocations in relation to the wider WP cohort. As a result of the different approaches to managing the shortfall, there will be disparities across and within institutions for students with the same household income. The case study interviews show that addressing shortfalls has already added to the administrative burden of the programme and affected approaches to marketing and promotion. We will continue to monitor the effects of decisions on local eligibility as the evaluation progresses.

## Appendix 7 **List of case study institutions**

The following institutions were selected as case studies for this evaluation.

Arts University Bournemouth  
Birkbeck, University of London  
Cleveland College of Art & Design  
De Montfort University  
Harper Adams University  
Keele University  
Lancaster University  
Leeds City College  
Leeds College of Art  
Leeds Metropolitan University  
Royal Agricultural College  
St Georges, University of London  
South Nottingham College  
University of Cambridge  
University of Chester  
University of Chichester  
University of East London  
University of Hull  
University of Sheffield  
University of Southampton  
University of Warwick  
University of Westminster  
University of Wolverhampton  
York St John University

## Appendix 8      **Explanation of abbreviations**

<b>Abbreviations</b>	<b>Aligned Definitions</b>
BME	Black or Minority Ethnic
EMA	Education Maintenance Award
FE	Further Education
FEC	Further Education College
HE	Higher Education
HEBSS	Higher Education Bursary and Scholarship Scheme
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI	Higher Education Institution
KIS	Key Information Set
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
NSP	National Scholarship Programme
OFFA	Office For Fair Access
SLC	Student Loans Company
WP	Widening Participation
WPSA	Widening Participation Strategic Assessment