

# NATIONAL STUDENT FORUM

ANNUAL REPORT | 2008 |



National  
Student  
Forum



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The National Student Forum was set up by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) in early 2008 to give a greater voice to students on higher education (HE) courses across England and to ensure that policies are the better for being informed by the student voice. The Forum is required to produce an annual report for ministerial review and comment.

The inaugural Forum consisted of an independent Chair appointed by DIUS and sixteen members who reflect the diversity of the undergraduate and postgraduate population. Members participated in four full Forum events and four subgroup meetings to develop recommendations and proposals to improve the student experience. They selected Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) and Student Finance as priorities, and also held discrete discussions around issues relating to disabled, international and postgraduate students. Full Forum recommendations on IAG and Student Finance are outlined below, along with subgroup proposals for future consideration by the Forum, and emerging proposals on Employability – a key recurring theme throughout the year. The Government has committed to respond publicly to the report's recommendations.

## Summary of Recommendations and Proposals

### Recommendations on Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG)

1. Develop a 'first port of call' IAG portal
2. Professionalise and raise the profile of school and college careers advisers
3. Increase the use of student ambassador schemes
4. Define and introduce best practice guidelines for pre-entry information provided by universities and colleges
5. Introduce an entitlement for all Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) students to visit at least two universities or colleges

### Recommendations on Student Finance

#### *Recommendations for Student Loans Company*

6. Monitor progress on the SLC reforms

#### *Recommendations on DIUS policy*

7. Introduce a choice of loan instalment options
8. Increase student loans to reflect increasing cost of living

#### *Recommendations for individual universities and colleges*

9. Employ transparency over tuition fee income and allocations
10. Raise awareness of student financial advisory services
11. Introduce more flexibility in tuition fee payment schedules
12. Provide a guaranteed 'cap' on fee levels for the duration of the course (for international students)

### **Proposals on Employability**

1. Identify approaches to Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) and language teaching that seek to unlock motivation over the long term
2. Consider the introduction of student loans for part-time students
3. Improve the partnership between universities, colleges and employers at a national level
4. Increase the focus on employability at individual university or college level

### **Proposals from the Subgroup on Disabled Students**

1. Explore the feasibility of an Association of Disabled International Students
2. Integrate disability-awareness training for all students into the orientation period
3. Improve disability-awareness training for all Higher Education (HE) staff
4. Develop a bank of student ambassadors for disability
5. Increase the emphasis on disability issues in feedback mechanisms
6. Establish national guidelines to strengthen use of Personal Development Plans (PDPs) for disabled students
7. Investigate the feasibility of a centralised electronic library for disabled students
8. Commission research into comparative progression rates for disabled students

### **Proposals from the Subgroup on International Students**

1. Provide clearer guidance on international equivalence of qualifications
2. Introduce 'cultural transition' workshops for international students as part of a phased orientation programme
3. Implement peer support networks
4. Encourage student unions to be more 'international student-friendly'
5. Identify mechanisms to reassure applicants about course and institution authenticity
6. Allocate a percentage of international student fee income to support individual students in need

### **Proposals from the Subgroup on Postgraduate Students**

1. Evaluate how effectively the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Code of Practice is being implemented for postgraduates
2. Develop a postgraduate student calculator to provide a clearer indication of overall costs
3. Make postgraduate handbooks more relevant and accessible
4. Explore the potential for international postgraduate students to secure Research Council funding
5. Establish a coherent framework for updating and promoting research student databases
6. Implement a bank of postgraduate ambassadors
7. Improve teaching opportunities for postgraduates on research programmes
8. Create an accessible database for alternative sources of funding

# FOREWORD

A photograph of a desk with a yellow sticky note. The sticky note has handwritten text in black ink. To the left of the sticky note is a clear glass. The background is blurred, showing a desk with various items.

MAEVE SHERLOCK  
-NSF's CHAIR-



*"I am currently at Durham University doing research for my doctorate on the subject of the interface between Faith and the State in modern Britain. Until October 2006, I was Chief Executive of the Refugee Council and previous to this, spent three years as a member of the Council of Economic Advisers in the Treasury on issues including child poverty, labour markets and the Third Sector. During the 2007 Spending Review, I chaired an Advisory Panel advising ministers on the future role of the Third Sector in economic and social regeneration. Before moving to the Treasury, I was Chief Executive of the charity One Parent Families, director of UKCOSA (Council of International Education) and President of the National Union of Students."*

**Maeve Sherlock, National Student Forum Chair**

**Welcome to the National Student Forum's first Annual Report, which outlines the work undertaken by the National Student Forum since its launch in early 2008. I hope it will be of interest to ministers and policymakers, universities, colleges and students alike.**

As a student in higher education myself, I was delighted to be appointed as the first Chair of the National Student Forum. I was impressed that the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills had decided to set up a body specifically to solicit the opinion of a range of students on various aspects of higher education policy as they were being developed. The work of the Forum in its first year has been underpinned by a constructive dialogue with DIUS and this has helped to lay some great foundations for the future. The landscape of higher education is very different from the one in which I did my first degree in the 1980s. Higher education today is a costly business and students are understandably more demanding of the universities, colleges and other organisations that shape their educational experience. Students are also a more diverse bunch than ever before, and some aspects of the higher education system are not ready and able to meet the range of needs they now face. The Forum membership reflects this diversity and, by drawing on the experiences of Forum members and those around us, we can advise the Government and the higher education system as to how the student experience can be improved.

Our first year was short, so we chose to focus on a few key issues in depth. We began by selecting issues that we felt could most benefit the majority of students in most universities and colleges, either by challenging the current system to make changes over the longer term, or by identifying practical improvements which could be implemented in the short term. Our recommendations for Information, Advice and Guidance and Student Finance reflect both of these aspirations. Only six months into

the Forum's life, we are very conscious that much of this is necessarily a work in progress. Given the high degree of autonomy of universities and colleges, although some of the recommendations are aimed at the government, others are necessarily aimed at universities, colleges or other HE-related organisations. We have a commitment from the Government to respond to the recommendations that relate to national policy for higher education; I hope that other key stakeholders will play their parts by listening, reflecting and acting upon the recommendations that can help to improve the student experience.

It has been a privilege to work alongside fellow students in their capacity as Forum members over the past few months and I thank them for the time and energy they have contributed freely. As a Forum, we also gratefully acknowledge the input from DIUS and other participating stakeholder organisations over the course of the year.

The Forum has established itself in an intensive but exciting first few months. However, there is much more to do, and we are looking ahead to a second year in which we can develop our thinking more fully, both in new areas and in considering particular aspects of our work to date in more detail. In the meantime, we look forward to the Government's response to our recommendations and to continuing to work together to improve the experience of students in higher education, in all their diversity.

**Maeve Sherlock,**  
Chair, National Student Forum

# INTRODUCTION

• Baroness Delyth Morgan, Minister for Students



## What is the National Student Forum?

The National Student Forum provides students with a direct line to the Government and other national policy makers. It was set up by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) in early 2008 to give a greater voice to students on higher education (HE) courses across England and to ensure that policies are the better for being informed by the student voice. The Forum consists of an independent Chair appointed by DIUS and up to twenty members who reflect the diversity of the undergraduate and postgraduate population.

## Purpose of report

This report:

- provides an overview of how and why the National Student Forum has been established
- articulates the rationale and process for its prioritisation of key issues
- summarises the Forum members' views on the topics selected for detailed consideration
- outlines key recommendations for improvement to be considered by Ministers, national higher education partners and individual higher education institutions as appropriate

## Report outcomes

DIUS Ministers have committed to providing a formal response to the Forum's recommendations. Where the focus of recommendations falls outside the immediate scope of DIUS policy, the Forum requests that the Government consults closely with the relevant organisations, and invites higher education institutions to give careful consideration as to how they might be implemented.

# BACKGROUND

## Student Listening Programme

Listening to the voices of students is an essential component of any programme of improvement in higher education. The government provided a lead in this by implementing a new Student Listening Programme in November 2007.

The Student Listening Programme consists of four key elements:

- **Minister for Students:** DIUS introduced the first ministerial post specifically dedicated to students. Baroness Delyth Morgan now has explicit responsibility for speaking up for students' views and interests in the Government
- **Ministerial Campus Visits:** as part of their regular visits to universities and colleges around the country, DIUS Ministers routinely include time for listening to students' views and taking part in question and answer sessions
- **Student juries:** between November 2007 and January 2008, DIUS commissioned a series of five student juries around the country, giving students an opportunity to hear from sector experts, to speak out about their own experiences of higher education, and to vote on which issues they felt were the top priorities for future consideration
- **National Student Forum (NSF):** the Forum was established in early 2008, in partnership with student representation and advocacy groups, to provide a student perspective on emerging policy areas, to help to evaluate the impact of existing policy on students in different circumstances and to initiate discussion on areas of potential policy development

## Student juries

As a preliminary to the launch of the NSF, DIUS held five student juries to allow the voices of a range of students in higher education to be heard at a national policymaking level – and to inform the discussions of the new National Student Forum. Juries consisted of students from a range of backgrounds, institutions and subject areas, and were held in London, Bristol, Manchester and Sheffield. A jury specifically for international students was held in London in November 2007. An independent company facilitated the jury workshops and prepared reports on all five juries. These reports were circulated to the National Student Forum (NSF) members at their first meeting and were subsequently made publicly available on the DIUS website at: [www.dius.gov.uk/policy/he\\_studentjuries.html](http://www.dius.gov.uk/policy/he_studentjuries.html)

A summary of the major findings of the student juries was used by the Forum to inform its discussions throughout the year, particularly when formulating its agenda for the first year (see Appendix A).

## National Student Forum: remit, membership and ways of working

### Role and remit

A key strand of the Student Listening Programme was the launch of the National Student Forum (NSF) in early 2008, set up to provide students in higher education with a voice in the development of the policies that affect them. The NSF provides the Government and partner organisations with direct access to the views of students from a wide range of backgrounds and study environments.

#### Its remit is to:

- advise the Government on the reasonable expectations and responsibilities of students
- provide a student perspective on emerging policy
- evaluate the impact of existing policies on students in different circumstances
- initiate discussion on areas of potential policy interest
- produce an annual report for Ministers' attention and comment

### Membership

This year the NSF has had sixteen members, initially appointed for a two-year period, plus a Chair. Members are drawn from nominations put forward by the following stakeholder bodies, working together with DIUS to ensure that the Forum is reasonably reflective of the diversity of the higher education student population:

- National Union of Students (NUS)
- National Postgraduate Committee (NPC)
- Mature Students' Union (MSU)
- Open University Students' Association (OUSA)
- Skill: the Bureau for Students with Disabilities (Skill)
- British Council (to nominate international students)



The Forum has an independent Chair, Maeve Sherlock (appointed by DIUS), and a Vice-Chair, Kate Wicklow (elected by NSF members).

Although members may have been nominated by particular organisations, their appointment to the Forum is as individuals. Forum members are encouraged to draw on their own experiences and expertise, as well as to consider the broader needs of other students. Biographies of the members may be found throughout the report.

### Forum ways of working

The Forum meets four times over the course of the academic year. In addition, subgroup meetings are held, where discussion of issues facing particular sections of the student population is needed, or to develop initial recommendations made by the Forum as a whole. During the Forum's first year, four such subgroups were held focusing on: international students, postgraduate students, disabled students, and information, advice and guidance (IAG).

The NSF sets its own agenda. Meetings have been attended by Ministers, policymakers and partner organisations, in accordance with the topic selected by the Forum. In addition, the NSF contributed to the DIUS consultation to develop its High Level Skills Strategy.

## Establishing the priorities

### The process for identifying and prioritising issues

The NSF held its inaugural meeting in February 2008, with a further three meetings in rapid succession over the remainder of the academic year. At its first meeting, the NSF considered the issues identified as priorities by the student juries.

It then shaped the agenda for its first year by:

- mapping these issues against the potential for improvement in the immediate, medium or longer term
- prioritising the issues, taking into account perceived importance and prevalence, and ability to affect the outcome

### The issues

The Forum initially identified the following as areas of particular concern:

- information, advice and guidance (IAG) prior to entering higher education
- IAG during and on preparing to leave higher education
- key aspects of the student finance system (including the student loans system, accessing independent advice and understanding how students' money is being spent by universities and colleges)
- concerns about the current lack of adequate, affordable accommodation
- quality of teaching and arrangements for personal tutors
- issues faced by particular groups of students (e.g. international, disabled, postgraduate, part-time and mature students)

During its first year, it decided to focus on information, advice and guidance prior to entering higher education, and on student finance. It was agreed to defer consideration of IAG during higher education, quality of teaching and accommodation, until its second year.

In addition, the Forum agreed to form subgroups in order to:

- undertake a review of the issues faced by international, postgraduate and disabled students in particular
- ensure that the general discussions on IAG and Student Finance were inclusive of the perspective of these particular student groups

It decided to devote time to considering the particular needs of part-time and mature students in its second year.

## Targets for recommendations

The NSF has developed recommendations for improvement across each of its key topics and indicated which organisations might be involved in their implementation. DIUS Ministers have agreed to respond formally to the issues and recommendations outlined in this report. However, due to the highly autonomous nature of the higher education system, many of the levers for change are in the hands of universities and colleges or other higher education partner organisations. Therefore, in developing its recommendations for improvement, the NSF has targeted them at national policymakers, partner organisations and/or universities and colleges as appropriate.

# INFORMATION, ADVICE AND GUIDANCE

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**“** *Of course students need to take responsibility for making decisions themselves: but they need the tools to enable this process, and a way of making sense of everything that’s out there.* **”**

(NSF member)

## Background and Forum Discussion

We reviewed the findings of the student juries, in which the lack of adequate information, advice and guidance (IAG) before going to university or college was the most prevalent issue, closely followed by IAG whilst studying or preparing to leave. This strongly resonated with our own experiences – whether as a ‘traditional’ 18 year old A-level student, or a mature, postgraduate, international, disabled or part-time student. We therefore felt that it was critical to define a reasonable expectation of IAG from the student perspective, in order to maximise the opportunities for students to flourish on the courses they select, and at the institutions where they choose to study.

### Incoherence and confusion

We find the current system incoherent and difficult to navigate. This view was also expressed during the student juries. It is particularly difficult for those who are not sure exactly what they want to do, or for ‘non-traditional’ applicants such as those looking to study part-time, or from outside the UK, for whom the routes into higher education might be very different to an 18 year old at school or college.

Some prospective students can find themselves overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information if they have no clear sense of how they might start to prioritise or filter this. For example, UCAS, Connexions, the Student Loans Company, Unistats, Uniaid, Prospects, the British Council, Skill and individual universities and colleges all provide information relating to higher education – much of which overlaps, but none of which is provided by all organisations.

Conversely, other applicants (especially those for whom going to university or college is not the norm for their family or peers) may simply not know how or where to look for the information that is already available – or even have a clear sense of the kind of questions they should be asking – because there is no single ‘first port of call’ to help them navigate their journey through the maze. This applies both to domestic and international students, but is clearly exacerbated for the latter by the lack of a shared cultural frame of reference within which to make comparisons. It is equally applicable to disabled students, who have specific queries relating to accessibility, and financial and learning support.



*“My name is Graham Bates. I’m 21 years old and I’m from Birmingham. I completed my A-Levels in 2005 and had two years out of education working within the customer service sector of local government. I applied for university in 2007, as I felt I would like to go down the career path of being a primary school teacher. I was accepted at Newman University College to study BSc Geography and ICT. I joined the National Student Forum in June 2008. I look forward to discussing interesting issues and meeting new people.”*

**Graham Bates, NSF member**

### **Patchiness of local provision**

We are concerned that the quality of local IAG provision can be very patchy for prospective students still at school or college, and varies enormously from school to school or area to area depending upon the knowledge of individual teachers or Connexions advisors. For instance, many would not be able to provide the targeted IAG required by prospective disabled students. We are aware that the recent shift in accountability for 14–19 IAG provision to local authorities is designed to enable them to be more responsive to local needs, but we are concerned that this further increases the risk of IAG becoming a ‘postcode lottery.’

### **Lack of focus on the long term**

We are concerned that IAG prior to going to university or college does not place enough emphasis on the long term connection to the job market. We feel that students are not encouraged to consider how their choice of subject or institution might affect their future employability as a matter of course. This finding was also borne out by the student juries. This continues once a student is at university or college, where we believe there is often insufficient focus on how to improve employability e.g. identifying and developing transferable skills and gaining relevant work experience.

### **Insufficient information about individual universities and colleges**

We believe that prospective students need to have a reasonable sense of what it will feel like to study subject X at institution Y. At the moment, this does not always happen because universities and colleges do not always provide enough detail about course content, teaching approaches and assessment methods. Disabled students are not always clear about the learning support that they are entitled to receive within the lecture room and need more information about the accessibility of non-academic aspects of the student experience (e.g. bars, sports facilities etc). In addition, not everyone can afford to travel to visit their university or college of choice in advance, to find out more about it first hand at an open day. The practicalities of this can be particularly challenging for some disabled students, and impossible for many international students.

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*“I needed more detail on how I would be taught and the course content. And also the learning support that would be available. What are the expectations around essay-writing, for example? It’s a big cultural shift.”*

**(NSF member)**

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### **Lack of information about additional sources of funding**

In the experience of our Forum members, and that of student jurors, prospective students are not always clear about the additional funding they might be entitled to, in addition to their student loan. For example, international students and disabled students are not routinely informed about bursaries they could apply for. Many students are still not aware of the Access to Learning Fund, or other hardship funds, and of how to go about applying for these.



### Complexities in the visa process

The visa application process for international students is expensive, complex and repetitive. We believe this is likely to be exacerbated by the plans to link visas to specific institutions, making it more difficult for students to change institutions once they have made an initial choice of university or college.

### Lack of preparation for culture shock

We concur with the student jury findings that there is insufficient emphasis on developing skills to support the transition into a more independent lifestyle. Financial management skills, and emotional and social ‘coping’ skills, can be crucial in minimising the drop-out rate, particularly in the first critical weeks and months.

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*“There needs to be more emphasis on the first few weeks. Often, success depends on the ability to build up a social network early in the whole process.”*  
(NSF member)

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This is applicable to domestic and international students, but is obviously intensified for the latter by the culture shock that accompanies living and studying in a foreign country.

### Lack of adequate information when leaving higher education

Some students who are preparing to move on into the world of work, or to continue into further study, are not aware of what is available in terms of careers or further study guidance. They feel a lack of access to independent advice.

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*“It’s difficult to get hold of advice about postgraduate courses which is sufficiently independent – most universities and colleges tend to focus on their own courses. It’s hard to get access to students at other universities and colleges who have first-hand experience of the postgraduate course you’re interested in.”*  
(NSF member)

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Whilst we do not take the view that studying for a degree is solely useful as a route into a career, we nevertheless believe that there is an insufficient focus on future employability. We have found work experience to be of variable quality (both as part of courses and during vacations) and we believe that there are too few optional modules within undergraduate courses to explore related career or future study options. Again, those with specific IAG requirements for entering the world of work, such as international or disabled students, are often poorly served.

## A VISION FOR IAG

We developed the following vision for the ideal information, advice and guidance system.

<b>If the IAG system is working well, how does it feel from a student's perspective?</b>
<i>I feel motivated and empowered to explore the opportunities on offer</i>
<i>I can find out what I need to know</i>
<i>I can understand how the application system works</i>
<i>I am able to make a responsible, considered decision</i>
<b>I feel motivated and empowered to explore the opportunities on offer because:</b>
<i>I am fully aware of the factors that I need to take into consideration</i>
<i>I have access to sufficient information and know how to interpret this</i>
<i>I have the opportunity to 'test drive' at least two universities or colleges through open days or site visits (for prospective undergraduates)</i>
<i>I have spoken with, or listened to, someone who has benefited from his or her experience in higher education</i>
<b>I can find out what I need to know because:</b>
<i>I can access a 'one stop shop' which brings together many disparate sources of information, and offers advice for how to evaluate this</i>
<i>I have a reasonable understanding of which organisation is responsible for what, and where to go to in order to find out about particular issues in more depth</i>
<i>I know that there is always someone who can point me in the right direction and respond to my queries quickly</i>
<b>I can understand how the application system works because:</b>
<i>I understand the process I will need to go through (e.g. various stages of the application process, how to handle visa applications, funding applications)</i>
<i>I understand the entry requirements – and how the qualifications I have relate to them</i>
<i>I am aware of the different funding opportunities that I might be able to access</i>
<i>I know how to complain or lodge my concerns at any point of the higher education application process</i>



#### I am able to make a responsible, considered decision because:

*I have a reasonable understanding of what it might feel like to study subject 'x' at institution 'y'*

*I understand the financial implications that going into higher education has for me*

*I have been encouraged to consider both the academic and non-academic issues that might affect my experience as a prospective student*

*I understand the cultural differences that I might expect to encounter when starting at university or college (both as a domestic student or as an international student) and have the opportunity to develop any necessary skills to cope with this*

*I have been encouraged to consider the long term as much as the short term (e.g. the prospective labour market, and how my decision might affect my place in this after I graduate)*

## Expert Inputs

Through a series of presentations from the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), Connexions, Higher Education Liaison Officers Association (HELOA) and the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS), we established that there is a plethora of information and advice mechanisms already available e.g. UCAS website, Prospects, Connexions, Unistats and publications such as *What do graduates do?* Our discussions also highlighted the recent shift in accountability and funding for Connexions to Local Authorities. This has been carried out in an attempt to ensure greater coherence and enable greater responsiveness to local need.

## NSF approach to development of recommendations

We agreed to focus the recommendations on IAG for our first year on specific groups of prospective students, at a specific point in the higher education journey (i.e. prior to entry). The rationale for this was to make the maximum impact in the Forum's first

year by influencing current government initiatives (i.e. current work on IAG for young people prior to entering higher education) and to make best use of the limited time available by focusing on the development of key recommendations in more detail.

We therefore decided to focus in our first year on IAG issues facing 14–19 year olds, including young people without access to guidance on entry to higher education, and disabled students.

However, we do not wish the Government to lose sight of other groups, such as adults (both within and outside further education), postgraduate, mature and international students. Furthermore, we recognise the need for continuing IAG whilst studying at university or college. We will therefore develop our thinking next year on IAG provision for the groups outlined above, for students already in or preparing to leave higher education, and for students continuing into postgraduate study.

## Conclusions

In discussion with those currently working in the field of IAG, it became apparent that the problem is not so much a lack of information – of which there is clearly an abundance – but rather a lack of a coherent framework which can both promote existing resources and information and help prospective students navigate the journey into higher education. We concluded that an online IAG portal could provide the vital universal ‘first port of call’ that the system is currently lacking. In addition such a portal could provide an effective way of tailoring information to meet the likely needs of particular groups of students (including those with specific IAG needs, such as disabled students, international students, postgraduate students etc).

We considered three potential models for the portal, aware that cost and ownership implications rise and become more complex as the level of service offered increases. The three models are separate but interconnected and could be viewed as short, medium and long term aspirations.

**Model A** (minimum acceptable standard): a simple signposting site that offers an overview of all the existing sources of information available, along with links to other sites, but with little discrete content.

**Model B** (reasonable expectation): a sense-making framework that differentiates and structures information for particular groups of students.

**Model C** (best practice): a sense-making framework that offers bespoke advice and guidance to an individual student.

Appendix B outlines the advantages and disadvantages of each model in more detail. We concluded that **Model B** was our preferred option. It not only provides a coherent framework for all the sources of information available, but also takes a significant step forward from the approach already employed by many existing sites that provide ‘fixed’ content in the form of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs). This is because it would filter information according to particular student groupings. In addition, we feel it could be supplemented in future so as to offer a higher level of specificity and serve a greater diversity of possible audiences (see Recommendation 1 for more detail).

We also believe that access to high quality face-to-face IAG is essential and that a systematic approach to improving the careers guidance available in schools and colleges is therefore essential. We developed a series of recommendations to address this, ranging from improved teacher training (see Recommendation 2) to the wider implementation of student ambassador programmes (see Recommendation 3).



In addition, we concluded that all universities and colleges should provide prospective students with the academic, financial and pastoral or social information they need to make an informed decision about whether an institution is right for them. In order to address the inconsistencies in current provision, best practice guidelines should be introduced to support this (see Recommendation 4).

Finally, we agreed that the ability to experience a prospective institution at first hand is so essential to making an informed decision that it should be accessible to all UK students. We therefore chose to recommend that prospective higher education students who are currently claiming the Education Maintenance Allowance should be entitled to a grant to meet the costs of visiting up to two universities or colleges for open days or interviews (see Recommendation 5).

## Key recommendations for IAG

### Recommendation 1: Develop a ‘first port of call’ IAG portal

The NSF recommends the development of a ‘first port of call’ online portal that would bring together the full range of factors that prospective students need to be aware of in order to make an informed decision about entry to higher education. As an online resource, it would employ the medium that most prospective students now use for research and information-gathering. It would also help to make sense of ‘who is responsible for what’ effectively and impartially.

We note that the IAG recommendations we present would necessitate considerable spending commitments from the Government. We note also that the agency responsible for developing the online portal has yet to be specified.

We recommend the implementation of Model B (see page 16) which provides a sense-making framework to structure the existing information; a means of differentiating this to meet the needs of particular students; and helps them navigate their way through the information-gathering, application and entry process.

**The advantages of this model are:**

- it provides an overview of all the sources of information available and a guide to 'who does what'
- it builds upon the FAQs approach familiar to many young people in terms of providing 'fixed' content
- it differentiates content according to the student group with which an individual most closely identifies him or herself (i.e. 'typical 18 year old', international, mature, or disabled etc).
- it provides a structured framework of questions through which the student then navigates his or her route, encouraging consideration of both academic and non-academic issues, and linking through to other sites at the appropriate stage of the journey (see Appendix C for a suggested list of topics and questions which might inform the structure of the portal)
- it can be adapted to improve accessibility offering for example:
  - links to individual universities and colleges for virtual tours (beneficial to all students, but particularly to disabled or international students)
  - tagged downloadable files/audio files for students with visual impairments or dyslexia
  - information in a variety of languages (for international students, or domestic students for whom English is not their first language)

One disadvantage of this model is that it will be difficult to identify an impartial, independent 'owner'. It is essential that the portal is viewed as authoritative, credible, unbiased and is widely acknowledged as the 'first port of call'. A number of useful websites already exist (including Directgov, UCAS, Connexions, the Student Loans Company and Unistats amongst others). However, we do not believe that any one site is currently viewed as the 'universal gateway' to accessing the higher education system.

**In order to implement this recommendation, the government will need to encourage existing stakeholders (i.e. those already offering online and face-to-face IAG provision) to:**

- employ a more joined up approach to ways of working and thinking
- undertake a joint review of their respective current online provision
- work together to identify who might be best placed to lead on the development of an overarching portal

Compared to the simple signposting site encapsulated by Model A, Model B is more complex and therefore more costly. However, it is significantly more effective at providing IAG. It is also less expensive and more immediately feasible than the ideal 'bespoke' option, Model C, in which content would be personalised for individual students. We therefore recommend the implementation of Model B as an initial pilot, with the option to improve functionality and upgrade to a higher-specification model at a later stage.



*“I have been a student with the Open University since 2002 and I’m working towards a BSc Open Degree, studying a range of courses, predominantly in the Computing and Technology area. I have been involved with the Open University Students Association for most of my OU career, becoming President in June 2007. This is a voluntary role which I manage alongside my employment as a Software Engineer and being a student.”*

**Lisa Carson, NSF member**

### **Recommendation 2: Professionalise and raise the profile of school and college careers advisors**

We recommend a more systematic approach to developing and improving careers guidance by professionalising and raising the profile of careers guidance roles in schools and colleges.

The Forum is aware of the work undertaken by Connexions in this respect, but is concerned that the quality of provision can be patchy, and dependent upon the strengths of individuals. In addition, the remit of Connexions is enormous – providing information on housing, relationships, travel, money, health, careers and learning. It is likely to prove challenging to ensure that one local Connexions office can provide every prospective higher education student in the area with tailored advice and guidance on applying to university or college, or on future careers. The Forum recommends that **all Connexions advisers are trained in accessing higher education as a matter of course.**

The Forum recommends that not only Connexions advisers, but also **those in Careers Guidance roles at schools or colleges undergo specialist training** e.g. by taking the existing Qualification in Careers Guidance – although we are also aware that this qualification itself may well need to be overhauled and improved. There is also an existing NVQ Level 4 in Advice and Guidance. We recommend that careers advisors be encouraged to join professional networks (e.g. the Institute of Careers Guidance) to raise the status of the role, and improve the quality of provision.

**Each school and college should have a fully trained, lead careers adviser:** someone who is trained in careers advice and entry to higher education, not just someone who is ‘the work experience co-ordinator and Connexions contact’ and is therefore called the careers adviser by default. **Disabled students should be able to access IAG from a specially-trained adviser.**

Minimum expectations of teacher-originated careers and higher education advice need clarification. There is also a need to **introduce basic training in subject-related careers advice**, including access to higher education, for secondary school teachers.

### **Recommendation 3: Increase the use of student ambassador schemes**

Some universities and colleges employ a bank of student ambassadors to reach out into the community and encourage prospective students (especially those from non-traditional backgrounds) to find out more about higher education. Many schools and colleges also operate an informal system, in which they ask current former students who are now in higher education to come back and share their experiences. The Forum recommends a systematic promotion of the best practice that already exists here to further raise awareness and widen participation. It also recommends targeted use of ambassadors in environments such as careers services and the workplace to reach out to non-traditional prospective students.

• Serena Trowbridge at a Forum meeting



#### **Recommendation 4: Define and introduce best practice guidelines for pre-entry information provided by universities and colleges**

In a highly autonomous system, it is inevitable that some responsibility for the provision of IAG lies with the individual university or college to which the prospective student is considering applying. In the Forum's experience, this can be very variable. Prospective students do not simply require course information, they also require information about the nature and level of social and emotional support that the university or college provides. Going to university or college can be a major culture shock in terms of adjusting to independent living and studying. This is particularly germane to international students, but can be applicable to domestic students. In addition, mature or part-time learners in particular may require information about practical support (e.g. childcare) or help with travel costs.

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*"Prospectuses only have one page on a course description – where can you get more info?"*  
(Student Juror)

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The Forum therefore proposes the following as best practice:

- Academic information:
  - course content and structure
  - teaching and assessment methods
  - nature and shape of contact time
  - definition of 'research-led activity'
  - learning support available for disabled students
- Financial information:
  - additional sources of financial support such as trusts and bursaries (including those for disabled and international students)
  - indication of overall costs (including clarity on course fees, local accommodation rates, any university- or college-specific termly charges etc)
  - additional entitlements (e.g. help with travel costs)
- Pastoral and social information:
  - personal and pastoral support (personal tutors, SU advice centres, counselling service etc)
  - sports/arts/other facilities (including accessibility information for disabled students)
  - formal and informal induction procedures (including specific programmes for international students)
  - accommodation support



*"I am the Education Officer of the University of Nottingham Students' Union and a member of the National Postgraduate Committee executive. Prior to attending the University of Nottingham to study Electronic Engineering and Mathematics, I lived and went to school in Botswana, Jamaica, and finished up in the West Midlands."*

**Matthew Gayle, NSF member**

### **Recommendation 5: Introduce an entitlement for all EMA students to visit at least two universities or colleges**

The Forum believes it is critical that all UK-based prospective students have the opportunity to experience an institution first-hand, regardless of their socio-economic circumstances or the geographical location of the institution. A visit to a university or college incentivises applicants by bringing the institution to life, and enables applicants to make a more informed decision. Wealthier applicants can attend several open days, but the costs of travel and possibly accommodation can be prohibitive for many prospective students. In the interests of genuinely widening participation, the Forum recommends the introduction of an entitlement for all students receiving the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) to receive a grant to cover the costs of visiting at least two universities or colleges when considering applying to higher education.

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*"I didn't have the money to buy train tickets to visit unis too far from my home. I chose [my current institution] because it was close and I could afford to go and view it, as opposed to a few pictures of other unis on their websites."*

**(Student Juror)**

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### **Next steps**

In our second year, the Forum will further develop recommendations for IAG that will focus on improving:

- employability through:
  - range of extra-curricular activities
  - increased emphasis on work experience
  - development of transferable skills
- the international student experience by:
  - increased emphasis on cultural awareness
- the postgraduate experience by:
  - implementing a bank of student ambassadors
- the mature student experience

## SUMMARY OF IAG RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation	Key steps	Target audience	Key Partners
<b>1. Develop a 'first port of call' IAG portal</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• conduct feasibility study into IAG portal</li> <li>• consult with existing web-based IAG providers (UCAS, Directgov, AimHigher, UUK, Connexions, SLC) to ensure joined up approach</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 14–19 year olds (initially)</li> <li>• disabled students</li> <li>• future roll out to other groups (e.g. international, mature, postgraduate)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• multiple potential partners: UCAS, Directgov, AimHigher, UUK, Connexions, SLC <i>(tbc once feasibility study has been conducted)</i></li> </ul>
<b>2. Professionalise and raise the profile of school and college careers advisers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• train all Connexions advisers in accessing higher education</li> <li>• implement compulsory specialist training/ qualifications for school and college careers advisers</li> <li>• ensure every school and college has a qualified lead careers adviser</li> <li>• provide disabled students with access to a specially-trained IAG adviser</li> <li>• clarify minimum expectations for teacher-originated careers advice</li> <li>• introduce basic subject-related careers advice training/higher education training for teachers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 11–19 year olds</li> <li>• disabled students</li> <li>• 11–19 year olds</li> <li>• disabled students</li> <li>• 11–19 year olds</li> <li>• 11–19 year olds</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connexions</li> <li>• DCSF, DIUS</li> <li>• DCSF, DIUS, local authorities</li> <li>• local authorities</li> <li>• DCSF</li> <li>• DCSF/local authorities, TDA</li> </ul>
<b>3. Increase the use of student ambassador schemes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• promote current best practice more widely</li> <li>• introduce schemes into non-traditional environments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 14–19 year olds (including disabled students)</li> <li>• mature, work-based learners</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Universities and colleges; Aim Higher partnerships</li> </ul>

Recommendation	Key steps	Target audience	Key Partners
<p><b>4. Define and introduce best practice guidelines for pre-entry information provided by universities and colleges</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• identify existing best practice and compile guidance handbook for individual universities and colleges</li> <li>• ensure best practice incorporates specific guidelines for specific groups of students (e.g. international, disabled)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• all applicants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• UUK, Guild HE, individual universities and colleges</li> </ul>
<p><b>5. Introduce an entitlement for all EMA students to visit at least two universities or colleges</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• introduce an entitlement for all EMA students to receive a grant to cover costs of two visits to universities or colleges</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 14–19 year olds from less advantaged backgrounds</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• DCSF, DIUS, individual universities and colleges</li> </ul>

# STUDENT FINANCE

02

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**“** For those from less advantaged backgrounds, there’s always a particular anxiety about getting into debt – unless you make it crystal clear to them that going to university or college will be affordable, that there’s a proper plan for paying it all off, they will be put off even applying. **”**

(NSF member)

## Background and Forum Discussion

We noticed that issues surrounding student finance consistently made the top five list of concerns in the student juries. We believe that the introduction of tuition fees, along with increasing expectations of public services generally, has had a significant impact upon student expectations and concerns around financial issues. The topic of student finance encompasses many different strands: from concerns about the student loan system to requests for more support in developing financial management skills. It is clearly critical that students should feel supported and fully informed when undertaking the significant financial commitment that entering higher education now entails.

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*“There isn’t enough flexibility in how I pay my fees – or how I receive my student loan instalments.”*  
(NSF member)

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## Student loans

In our experience, the most prevalent student finance issues relate to student loans: a repetitive and complicated loan application process requiring information that often seems irrelevant from the student perspective; poor levels of awareness of the loan repayment rate; and not enough awareness of entitlement to loans. In addition, we believe that there is not enough flexibility about the loan instalment rate or the loan repayment rate. For example, if someone is paying their rent monthly, it might be far more appropriate to receive their loan in monthly instalments.

Depending on a student’s location, the size of the loan is frequently felt to be insufficient to meet the cost of living, especially during the final year, when the rate is reduced.

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*“People’s loans are exhausted on maintenance costs. Loans don’t cover any more than that.”*  
(NSF member)

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*"I am a final year History of Art undergraduate at the Courtauld Institute of Art, London. I am the Courtauld Students' Union Academic Affairs Officer and begin my MA in the art of Byzantium next year."*

**Jack Hartnell, NSF member**

### **Lack of awareness of sources of financial support and advice**

We strongly believe that too many students are unaware of the additional sources of financial support available (e.g. the Access to Learning Fund, bursaries etc). International students, disabled students or students experiencing financial difficulties are not routinely made aware of alternative sources of support or bursaries to which they may be entitled. Many students have not had the opportunity to develop the necessary financial management skills to manage the transition into being responsible for their own budget effectively. Far too many only consider seeking help once they are already in debt.

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*"There needs to be a more proactive culture about dealing with debt. Lots of students are genuinely terrified of debt and it's a huge emotional burden for them. They are terrified of taking out a loan in the first place, and then when the debts keep mounting, they just pretend it isn't happening and meanwhile the credit cards just keep piling up."*

**(NSF member)**

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### **Lack of transparency about, and flexibility of, tuition fees**

We believe that the current lack of transparency about how tuition fees are spent by universities and colleges can lead to resentment about how much is charged for different courses, especially when there is so much variation in contact time or use of resources.

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*"It feels as if your money just disappears into one big mysterious pot. I've got no idea what happens to it all – and, as a customer, I think I've got a right to know what I'm paying for."*

**(NSF member)**

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Concerns about fees are exacerbated for international students who can sometimes feel that they are paying over the odds compared to domestic students; have more difficulty in accessing hardship funding or learning support; and who can find themselves at the mercy of fluctuating fee as well as currency levels.

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*"I don't think my parents fully understood how much my fees would increase over the duration of my course because the exchange rate has changed so much."*

**(NSF member)**

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We also believe that tuition fee payment schedules are not sufficiently flexible, particularly for the increasing number of part-time students who are likely to be funding their study from monthly or weekly wages.

### **Lack of affordable accommodation and other facilities**

We agree with the juries in finding lack of affordable accommodation to be a major factor impacting on student finance and the student experience more generally. This can be exacerbated for those living on campus.

### **Disabled Students Allowance**

Certain disabled students find the Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) insufficient to cover their impairment-related costs. In addition, the DSA does not meet the needs of some postgraduate or part-time students.

We feel that this needs further investigation.

## VISION FOR STUDENT FINANCE

We developed a vision of reasonable expectations that students might have of their financial experience.

<b>If the Student Finance system is working well, how should it feel from the student perspective?</b>
<i>I am aware of my entitlements and sources of financial support</i>
<i>I am clear on the overall cost</i>
<i>I feel confident that I can survive financially</i>
<i>I feel that the system is fair</i>
<i>I feel that the system is efficient, responsive and flexible</i>
<i>I feel that I am getting value for money</i>
<i>I am confident that my university/college will do everything it can to support me if there is a change in my circumstances</i>
<b>I am aware of my entitlements and sources of financial support because:</b>
<i>I know what financial support I'm entitled to, given my particular circumstances</i>
<i>I know about all of the sources of additional financial support that might be available to me</i>
<i>I have access to at least some financial support if I'm studying part-time</i>
<i>I can access an individual student support package that I could take internationally or use within the UK</i>
<b>I am clear on the overall cost because:</b>
<i>I know how much money I'll need to be able to study and to support myself whilst I am studying</i>
<i>I know that my parents (if they are funding me) understand the financial implications of my course</i>
<i>I can predict the costs of the course for its entire duration</i>
<b>I am confident that I can survive financially because:</b>
<i>I know I can take out a student loan and work part-time</i>
<i>I understand the process for receiving my student loan instalments, and any other financial support to which I may be entitled</i>
<i>I understand the implications for the future of taking out a loan now</i>
<i>I have a dedicated point of contact in the Student Loans Company whom I can access if I have queries at any stage of my application or course</i>
<i>I have the basic financial management skills that I need to manage my money</i>
<i>I know where to go in order to review my current situation or plan for the future</i>

<b>I feel that the system is fair because:</b>
<i>I feel that my funding application has been treated fairly</i>
<i>I can get through the system and get the help I need, even if I face complex personal circumstances, such as being estranged from my parents</i>
<b>I feel that the system is efficient, responsive and flexible because:</b>
<i>I receive what I'm entitled to, when I'm entitled to it</i>
<i>I have a choice over when I receive my student loan instalments</i>
<i>I have greater flexibility in how, and over what period, I pay my tuition fees</i>
<b>I feel that I am getting value for money because:</b>
<i>I know how my university or college is allocating its funding, and why</i>
<i>I understand the percentage of the overall costs of my course that are covered by my tuition fees</i>
<b>I am confident my university or college will do everything it can to support me because:</b>
<i>I know where to go for help if my circumstances change</i>
<i>I can access year-round funding for emergencies easily</i>
<i>If I run into difficulties (e.g. need to change my course) I will not face severe financial implications</i>

## Expert Input

We familiarised ourselves with key aspects of the current Student Finance landscape through discussions with the National Association of Money Advisers (NASMA) and the Student Loans Company (SLC).

The most common issues raised with Student Money Advisors (which partly reflect the shift in the student demographic towards those from non-traditional backgrounds) are:

- debt (increased use of student credit cards, mature students with mortgages)
- eligibility and entitlement (e.g. students uncertain as to whether they are classed as dependent on parents or whether they have independent status; single parent students querying entitlement to welfare benefits; students who have applied for asylum)

NASMA has already identified the need for Student Money Advisors to become more proactive in promoting financial awareness, although we understand it needs to balance this with an increasing focus on debt (with student credit cards, older students with mortgage commitments etc) and already stretched resources.

We welcomed the news that the SLC has taken initial steps to address many of the concerns highlighted by student juries around the student loan application process. The SLC explained its new focus on delivering the best customer experience, and on consulting customers through the Customer First Programme, to deliver the new Student Finance Service. These improvement plans have been developed in response to recent student focus groups as well as the student jury findings.



#### The SLC has committed to:

- Improving information, advice and guidance by:
  - promoting how student finance works
  - providing IAG support pre, post and during the period of a loan
  - implementing 'Customer Channel of Choice' (so students can choose to receive information by web, phone, text, paper)
  - introducing a network of 12 regional advisors
  - providing support to parents and sponsors
- Introducing the 'My Fact Find' service, a personalised quotation and comparator based on university or college and course choice that:
  - includes statutory support and bursary support
  - can select up to 5 courses and compare the finance available
  - can be accessed via the student's preferred channel of communication
- Streamlining the application process by:
  - operating this primarily online
  - ensuring students are directed to student finance application when they make their UCAS application
  - ensuring a seamless application process with details automatically passed from UCAS through into student finance application
  - providing applicants with an instant interim assessment
  - enabling applicants to track progress of their application online and through interactive voice response technology
  - providing a final assessment once the final course choice is made
  - ensuring the re-application process for returning students is simpler
- Improving the payment process by:
  - setting clear payment expectations
  - continuing to ensure that payment is released three working days after confirmation of a student's registration at a university or college
  - notifying the student when they have been paid
  - administering changes quickly
  - enabling students to maintain their own account details online
- Improving the repayment process by:
  - implementing clear communication from an early stage
  - introducing budget, payment and repayment calculators
  - making changes to reduce overpayment
  - giving options to repay outside the tax system
  - providing an online repayments service

## NSF approach to development of recommendations

We grouped the major issues relating to student finance into five main categories, based on our own experience and supported by experiences voiced during the student juries:

- issues relating to the Student Loans Company (SLC)
- challenges arising from inadequate IAG on student finance
- problems arising from Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) policy
- issues which could be resolved by individual universities and colleges
- issues relating specifically to international students

We acknowledge the significant SLC commitments to reform and improvement – but we wish to reserve judgement until the outcomes become apparent. In addition, we were informed about the Financial Service Authority's 'Money Doctor' programme (launched in June 2008) to provide significant IAG support on finance, and welcome its roll out to all universities and colleges.

In the light of these developments, we therefore chose to focus our recommendations on issues relating to the latter three categories: DIUS policy, individual university or college practice, and international students.

## Conclusions

We welcome the SLC's commitment to improving the student loan application process and the surrounding support for this. However, in order to achieve this, we expect the following to take place during each of the key phases of implementation:

### Phase 1: September 2008

- centralise service for new customers
- set up central Processing Unit at Darlington
- set up Contact Centre with advanced technologies (NB. these are still in preparation)
- align application cycle with UCAS timeline
- provide enhanced ready reckoner and improved online application process
- collate static information from universities and colleges for bursaries, scholarships and fees rates, and signpost university or college websites from SLC site

### Phase 2: September 2009

- launch full 'My Fact Find' service (April 2009)
- streamline paper and online application process
- implement 'Customer Channel of Choice'
- introduce budget, payment and repayment calculators
- integrate with Identity and Passport Service (IPS) to validate identity



*"I am an undergraduate student at Durham University, pursuing Law. I was born in Hong Kong and I am an international student here in the UK. It will be my third year studying abroad and I continue to enjoy my time here. When I first came over, I experienced a bit of a cultural shock but have now successfully gotten over it. For this reason, I would like to represent other international students and be able to voice their thoughts and needs through the platform that this forum offers. I am also now the President of the Durham University Hong Kong Society, which aims to promote the Chinese and Hong Kong culture to the university and aid the new students from Hong Kong in making as smooth a transition as possible. I am looking forward to the progress of the Forum this year and hope that I can contribute in any way possible"*

**Phoebe Hoi Ki Lau, NSF member**

We are broadly satisfied that the appropriate accountability and review mechanisms are in place and therefore concluded that no further recommendations relating to the student loans application process were necessary at this stage. However, we made a formal request to be updated on progress for Phase 1 in March 2009, and for Phase 2 in March 2010.

We feel that the introduction of tuition fees has undoubtedly shifted students' perceptions of their rights and needs as paying customers. The need for flexibility, whether in terms of loan instalments, loan repayments and payments of tuition costs, was a recurring theme throughout our discussions. Several of our recommendations therefore focus on employing a flexible rather than a 'one size fits all' approach to student finance.

We believe that many domestic students are not aware that their tuition costs are actually subsidised, whilst international students sometimes feel that they are paying more for their courses by comparison. We therefore believe that universities and colleges should employ greater transparency about all their income strands (and a high level indication of how these are being allocated), so that students feel more empowered and better informed. They would also have a more accurate perception of the wider context within which they make their contributions. More generally, we believe that individual universities and colleges have a key role to play in encouraging a culture in which students manage their money, rather than just manage their debt.

## Recommendations for Student Finance

### **Recommendation 6: Monitor progress on the SLC reforms**

We support the improvement plans outlined by the SLC above. We recommend that DIUS and the SLC should provide the Forum with a formal update on progress for phase 1 on the SLC reform programme in March 2009 and for phase 2 in March 2010.

### **Recommendation 7: Introduce a choice of loan instalment options**

We feel there is a need for more flexibility in loan instalment arrangements. Some students are content with current termly arrangements, whilst others would prefer a monthly instalment that better suits their outgoings. With increasing numbers of universities and colleges moving towards semester systems, the Forum recommends that DIUS introduce a choice of loan instalment options: monthly, termly, or each semester.



### **Recommendation 8: Increase student loans to reflect increasing cost of living**

The total amount of borrowing by students on university or college courses has increased dramatically, according to the media and to anecdotal evidence. Our discussions with NASMA indicated that much of this is in the form of commercial debt, through credit cards and bank overdrafts. Although escalating costs of living partially account for this rise, it seems that many students feel that they are borrowing specifically to cover the cost of tuition fees. This is despite the SLC principle that student loans are directly linked to tuition fees, which should mean that domestic and EU students do not need to take out extra loans against fees.

We hope that the government takes into account the results of the 2007/08 Student Income and Expenditure Survey (SIES) when it is published. Subject to its findings supporting the situation outlined above, **we hope that the Government recommends an increase in the size of student loans**, to ensure that they accurately reflect increased costs of living as well as any rises in tuition fees – and consequently reduce the amount of commercial debt students need to take out.

We draw particular attention to the fact that loan payments for final year students are lower than those for first or second year undergraduates, because their need for support is deemed to end with the last day of their courses. However many students use their loan to pay for accommodation. As tenancy agreements often run on through the summer months after the end of university and college courses, students may then find themselves forced to stay in the town or city in which they have studied for longer than desired. Many find it hard to obtain temporary work for this short period, and are simultaneously under pressure to win longer-term employment. In addition, figures from the Student Income and Expenditure Survey for 2004-5 (the most recently available) clearly indicate that the overall expenditure for students during their final year is higher than during earlier years<sup>1</sup>. Were loan payments to final year students to be increased, however, there is a risk that this would prevent them from applying for other benefits at the end of their courses. We would like to see this aspect of student loans debated and clarified further.

<sup>1</sup> Mean and median for final year students are £10,424 and £8,926 respectively, compared to £10,178 and £8,823 respectively for Year 1 and £10,066 and £8,879 respectively for Year 2. Source: DIUS Student Income and Expenditure Survey, 2004-05



*"I was brought up in a remote part of Nepal where there are no services such as electricity and health care. I became involved in the health sector at the age of 13 as a volunteer health worker. I graduated from Northumbria University in BSc Health Development Studies and with Master of Public Health. Since I arrived in the UK, I've been volunteering with my university and with local communities in Newcastle. I've been awarded with the first ever Lord Glenamara International Scholarship in recognition of my efforts in improving public health and the environment, and been named the North East's International Student of the Year 2006. I was further honoured by my university establishing 20 scholarships for Nepalese students under my name, Tshering Lama Northumbria University Scholarships. Currently I am a PhD Research student and looking at the possibilities of applying telemedicine (telehealth) in rural Nepal."*

**Tshering Lama, NSF members**

### **Recommendation 9: Employ transparency over tuition fee income and allocations**

There is an appetite amongst students for a greater degree of transparency about how the institution they are helping to fund is financed – and the contribution they make to this. We recommend that universities and colleges should commit to providing all students with a simple breakdown (in a pie chart or other similarly accessible format) of how domestic and international student fees relate to the overall income, and how these fees are allocated across different faculties and facilities.

**A basic minimum level of information should include:**

- a breakdown of income sources e.g.
  - tuition fees from domestic students
  - tuition fees from international students
  - HEFCE and Research Councils funding
  - alumni etc
- a breakdown of expenditure e.g.
  - teaching
  - research
  - facilities etc

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*"There's a level of honesty needed about where tuition fees go, especially if, like me, you only have a few hours of lectures each week."*

**(Student Juror)**

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### **Recommendation 10: Raise awareness of student financial advisory services**

We recommend that universities and colleges should work in partnership with Student Unions to encourage pro-activity in dealing with student finance issues and systematically raise awareness of the financial support available (e.g. bursaries, access to learning fund, trusts).

**Activity might include:**

- setting up finance stands in Freshers' Fairs
- actively promoting student advisory services during registration, and online
- advertising bursaries on intranets
- working with advice/counselling services (e.g. nightlines) to ensure they can provide clear signposting for financially-related issues
- promoting financial 'health checks' that encourage students to check up on their financial situation with their banks before it becomes critical
- including key finance dates in SU-produced diaries or wallplanners (e.g. loan application dates)



**Recommendation 11: Introduce more flexibility in tuition fee payment schedules**

Both domestic and international students in the Forum requested more flexibility in tuition fee payments. For example, some students would prefer to pay monthly rather than termly. We recommend that universities and colleges consider introducing more flexible payment schedules for tuition fees. Whilst we acknowledge that this would require an initial review of a university's income flow, we believe this approach would give universities and colleges who offer such flexibility a competitive edge and a reputation for innovation and student responsiveness.

**Recommendation 12: Provide a guaranteed 'cap' on fee levels for the duration of the course**

We recognise that HEIs are currently not allowed to increase tuition fees for domestic or EU students by more than inflation (RPI). However there is no such limit in place for international students. We recommend that universities and colleges guarantee that fees will rise by no more than a certain percentage during the course for all students. We believe that this could be a decisive factor in influencing student choices about which university or college to study at – particularly for international students, whose fees are subject to a secondary uncertainty because of fluctuations in exchange rates. We recommend that, as minimum standard practice, all international students and their parents (if responsible for their fees) are explicitly warned about the potential impact of currency fluctuation on their fees.

**Next steps**

Next year, we will review access to student loans for part-time students and postgraduate students, as we believe increased support for these groups is essential.

## SUMMARY OF STUDENT FINANCE RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation	Target audience	Key Partners
<b>Student Loans Company</b>		
6. Monitor progress on the SLC reforms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>all currently eligible applicants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>SLC/DIUS</li> </ul>
<b>DIUS policy</b>		
7. Introduce a choice of loan instalment options	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>all currently eligible applicants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>DIUS working with SLC</li> </ul>
8. Increase student loans to reflect increasing cost of living	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>all currently eligible applicants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>DIUS</li> </ul>
<b>Individual universities and colleges</b>		
9. Employ transparency over tuition fee income and allocations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>all students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>UUK, Guild HE with individual universities and colleges</li> </ul>
10. Raise awareness of student financial advisory services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>all students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>UUK, Guild HE with individual universities and colleges</li> </ul>
11. Introduce more flexibility in tuition fee payment schedules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>all students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>UUK, Guild HE with individual universities and colleges</li> </ul>
12. Provide a guaranteed 'cap' on fee levels for the duration of the course	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>international students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>UUK, Guild HE with individual universities and colleges</li> </ul>

# EMPLOYABILITY



03

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“Universities really need to understand that their own marketability increases when they offer better access to the workplace, and emphasise the transferability of your skills.”

(NSF member)

## Background and Forum Discussion

We found that employability emerged as a recurring, cross-cutting theme for the Forum over the course of the year, as it did during the student juries. Although we fully endorse the view that the rigorous study of a discipline is an end in itself, it is nonetheless clear that the link between higher education and better job prospects is high on the agenda for many students.

We did not select employability as a specific priority for the first year. However we accepted an invitation to participate in a DIUS consultation on its High Level Skills Strategy: *Higher Education at Work: High Skills, High Value*. The aim of this consultation was to advise the government on how better to equip the workforce with the skills required for an innovative and competitive economy.

A digest of our views on employability, drawn from both the consultation and broader discussions, is outlined below. We have also put forward proposals for improvement. We plan to return to this topic during the Forum’s second year.

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*“I pay £13k in fees, but if it won’t lead to a job for me, what’s the point?”*  
(International Student Juror)

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*“I have been involved in higher education since the early 1990s, studied distance, on campus, undergraduate and graduate courses. I have also been active in the student movement, as Union President of two different Institutions, UK Ambassador for SOCRATES, National Postgraduate Forum, University of London Union Exec, NUS, Council for International Students London Co-ordinator, Student with Disabilities Officer, Mature Students Union. My passion is cricket, which I actively lobby to be an Olympic Sport. I believe in a more open courseware-led higher education system with great flexibility in examinations alongside more emphasis on public lectures and learning. Current research proposal: ‘Widening participation through a multi-modal open courseware and public lectures’, University of London.”*

**Ismail Malik, NSF member**

## Issues relating to employability prior to entering higher education

### Insufficient focus on employability during pre-entry IAG

We highlighted that one of the weaknesses of current IAG provision can be an insufficient focus on employability, and the impact that choice of subject, or place of study, might have upon a student’s prospects in the labour market after graduating. There is a need for more easily accessible information about courses and subsequent employment paths at the point of application to a university or college.

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*“When you’re thinking about going away from home for the first time, you don’t always pay enough attention to what your choice of course is going to mean for your chances of getting a job afterwards.”*  
(NSF member)

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### Financial barriers for part-time students, or those who want to re-skill

More part-time students are attending university or college than ever before – and many of these are already in the workplace and looking to upgrade their skills. In an ideal world, the employer will make a contribution towards the cost, but in reality we feel this situation is still a long way off. Student loans are not automatically available to support part-time students, despite the fact that employees may need to reduce their hours (and therefore income) in order to be able to study part-time in the first place.

Furthermore, we are aware that the withdrawal of government funding for the fees for some second degrees (Equivalent and Lower Level Qualifications, ELQs) is a hot political issue. We understand that the rationale for this policy is to redistribute funds to help widen participation from those who have no experience of higher education. Nevertheless, we wish to record our strong view that this position seems fundamentally to contradict the principle of encouraging lifelong learning. In particular, we are concerned that this withdrawal of funding may disproportionately affect women returning to work after having children, and older people who find that their original qualifications and skills do not have the necessary currency in today’s labour market. In our view, many students taking ELQs are doing so to improve their skills and become more employable, and are therefore directly helping to meet the skills needs of the economy, outlined in the Leitch targets for 2020.

### Failure to engage students in strategically important subjects

We are aware that certain subjects are considered to be strategically important (science, technology, engineering and mathematics, collectively referred to as STEM), but that they frequently struggle to engage sufficient numbers of students to meet the future needs of the UK economy. Whilst it is tempting to offer ‘quick fix’ financial incentives to encourage participation, we are concerned that this will only mask rather than resolve the core issue. We believe that it is more important to focus on engaging and motivating students from a much younger age to pursue these subjects.

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*“You should place the emphasis on future career and earning prospects, rather than on immediate financial incentives for prospective STEM students.”*  
(NSF member)

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There is a similar issue with lack of take up of modern foreign languages. We welcome the recent initiatives at primary school level to introduce language teaching, in the hope that this will motivate young people to take language learning to higher levels. We believe that learning a language should be compulsory in schools – but it is critical that the languages on offer should be perceived by young people to be relevant to the global market (e.g. Mandarin, Russian, French, Spanish) and that they have a clear sense of the potential employment opportunities that might open up to them as a result.

### **Increasing numbers of students risk undervaluing undergraduate qualifications**

We are aware that some students continue into postgraduate study primarily because they feel that a degree in itself is no longer enough to single them out from the crowd with employers, because of the ever-increasing number of students going to university or college. The implications of this need to be thought through.

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*“So many people have degrees now that many students do postgraduate study primarily to improve their employability.”*

**(NSF member)**

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### **Issues relating to employability whilst at university or college**

We value work placements highly for those on both vocational and non-vocational courses. In our view, universities and colleges sometimes struggle to find a sufficient number of suitable placements for students, which can lead to a mismatch between student interests and what the university or college is able to offer. We believe that a more flexible approach in which students also have the option to identify and secure their own placements would be beneficial. Students then have a stronger motivation to find a placement that suits their particular needs. We also think that it is crucial to ensure that employers provide relevant and well-structured work placements, and that they recognise the long term value of this in increasing the employability of students.

Personal Development Plans (PDPs) provide an excellent opportunity for students to think constructively about the full range of skills they are acquiring whilst studying at university or college. However, there are currently no standard or compulsory guidelines for PDPs: each university or college approaches them as it wishes.



*“Currently completing a doctoral degree (PhD) in Environmental Science in Lancaster University (2008), I am the Co-Founder and Chair of Xn Foundation, and Conference Chair of the First & Second International Conference of Nigerian Students (ICONS 2007 & 2008). I am currently the Chair of the Nigerian International Students Agenda (NISA) and the Creator of the Scribes’ Prize. I am a published poet and novelist and a multi-award winner, with awards including the British Council International Student Award for the North West of England and for the whole of the UK in 2006, Editors Choice Award for 2005 from the International Library of Poetry, and Roundtable for Entrepreneurship Education Fellowship Award from Stanford University, USA. I have been an ambassador for Lancaster University for the past two years and have worked as a consultant for British Council, Nigeria.”*

**Akanimo Odon, NSF member**

• Kate Wicklow at a Forum meeting



## Employability issues for disabled students

In our experience, PDPs can be of particular benefit to disabled students, by providing a framework through which to consider the future transferability of skills. We welcome this shift towards pro-activity in skills development. However, the NSF subgroup for disabled students suggested that employability can sometimes be hampered by having to disclose disability, due to stigma and employer ignorance. The subgroup highlighted the additional challenges that disabled students face in securing work placements and engaging in field work.

## Employability issues for international students

From the perspective of full fee-paying international students, a higher education course is only seen as offering true value for money if it brings with it a reasonable guarantee of employability and employment within the UK (if desired), or elsewhere.

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*“It’s only worth the fees if you end up with a guarantee of employment. I pay over £12K and I’ve been told I won’t find a job in London.”*  
(Student Juror)

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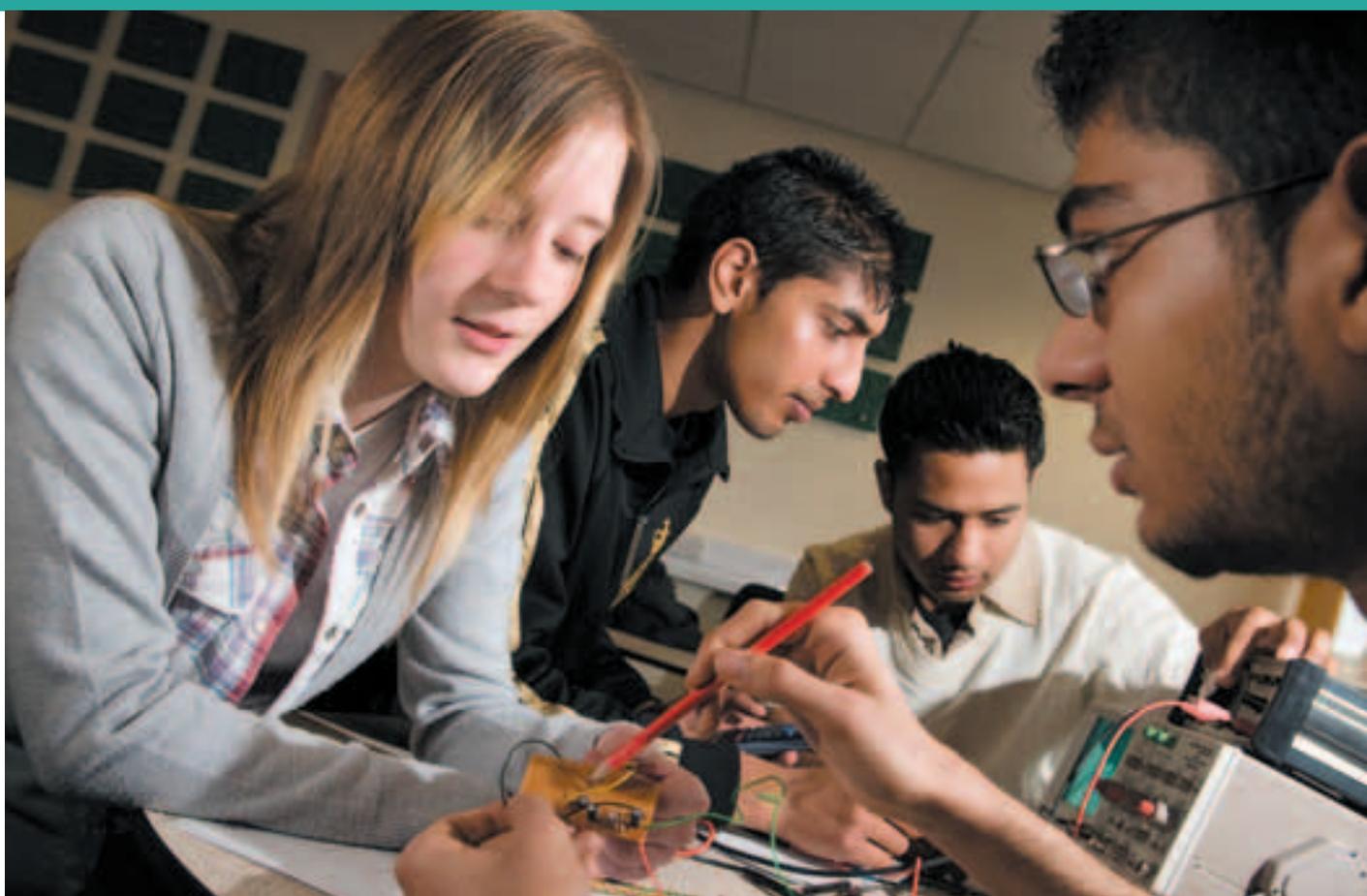
We welcome the recent extension of the **International Graduate Scheme** that will allow international students to live and work in the UK for up to two years after graduation, and believe this will have a very positive impact. However, international students still face equivalence difficulties when they try to translate their qualifications between different educational systems, either when returning to their country of origin or applying for work in the UK.

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*“It took me a long time to find out how courses here translate into the credits I need to take home.”*  
(NSF member)

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In addition, one of the most common ways in which domestic students gain valuable work experience and improve their employability is through **part-time work**. International students can currently undertake a maximum of 20 hours paid work a week. Many international students mistakenly assume they will find work easily in the UK to support the cost of their studies and need better information about the real situation: the work they find may well not link to their studies, particularly whilst still at university or college.



### Employability issues for postgraduate students

Due to the increasing numbers of students taking part in higher education, some students choose to continue with postgraduate education in an effort to distinguish themselves from those with bachelor level qualifications. We have found that the full picture of employer demand for postgraduate qualifications can be skewed by the fact that small and medium employers are not in a position to make demands of universities and colleges for the skills they really need. These demands tend to come from large employers. We believe there is a need for further research on postgraduate destinations.

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*“Is it better to move into the job market straight away, or should I apply for another degree? Why are these questions not addressed by Careers Services?”*  
(NSF member)

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We also feel that there is a need for an increased emphasis on the skills that are developed whilst studying for a PhD: problem-solving, self-motivation, comprehension and articulation of complex issues. These are all valuable skills in the workplace, but some employers (or even students) might struggle to see the connection immediately. We therefore feel that Personal Development Plans (PDPs) are as relevant to postgraduates as they are to undergraduates.

• Ismail Malik at a Forum meeting



## Proposals

We did not develop full recommendations on employability during our first year, but here put forward proposals for improvement.

### **Proposal 1: Identify approaches to STEM and language teaching that seek to unlock motivation over the long term**

- direct funding into supporting exchange trips at school level
- encourage more schools to pursue special status in modern languages and to run language clubs
- promote positive role models for children and young people

### **Proposal 2: Consider the introduction of student loans for part-time students**

- student loans for part-time students could encourage participation from non-traditional groups, and support individuals who are already in the workplace but need to study to upgrade their skills

### **Proposal 3: Improve the partnership between universities, colleges and employers at a national level**

- employers should be encouraged to supply information which will help inform subject selection, so that prospective students get an overview of the long term prospects when considering courses
- employers should provide universities and colleges with a 'wishlist' of broad-based skills so universities and colleges can develop courses which integrate and deliver on these
- universities and colleges should work with employers to shape meaningful work placements that will develop the skills that employers need in the long term
- universities, colleges and employers should work together to set up funding for business secondments for university or college staff

### **Proposal 4: Increase the focus on employability at individual university or college level**

- set up a database detailing content and skills base of various work placements previously undertaken (plus contextual detail, such as accessibility for disabled students etc)
- introduce modules with a specific focus on prospective careers and transferability of skills to all courses
- provide more information about how to affiliate with professional societies
- implement high profile inter- and intra-university or college competitions that require students to collaborate with others to develop team-working (particularly for those students in predominantly solitary subjects e.g. science, maths)
- work collaboratively with other universities and colleges to set clearer guidelines for Personal Development Plans to improve consistency across the system

# SUBGROUP DISCUSSIONS

From the outset, we agreed that all discussions should be inclusive of a range of student perspectives and that topics selected for detailed discussion (Information, Advice and Guidance and Student Finance) should take account of the diversity of the student population in the development of recommendations.

We also decided to create dedicated subgroups that would allow us to consider the issues faced by particular groups of students in more detail, the better to inform the main discussions, and to surface discrete issues.

We focused on the needs of **three particular student groups** during our first year: disabled, postgraduate and international students. We will look to consider the specific needs of part-time and mature students in our second year.

**The subgroups had two distinct but complementary objectives:**

- to consider issues that are specific to the particular student group
- to complement issues under discussion in full Forum meetings

Consisting of around three to four members, each subgroup met once in the course of the first year. As a result of their discussions, **each subgroup developed draft proposals**. These are not final recommendations, but the starting point for further discussion and consideration by the full Forum in its second year.

# IMPROVING THE EXPERIENCE OF DISABLED STUDENTS

04

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**“** *My uni is on a hill – difficult if you’re a wheelchair user! I don’t think I’d have applied here if I’d realised that at the time...you need to consider all the aspects of being a disabled student, not just the learning support that’s there in the lecture room.* **”**

(Student Juror)

### Background to subgroup discussion

A subgroup of the Forum met to explore the challenges faced by disabled students entering and studying in higher education, and was joined by the Disability Officer in the Learning Support Service for Queen Mary, University of London. In addition to developing our perspective on the Forum’s priorities for this year (Information, Advice and Guidance and Student Finance), we highlighted a range of other challenges for disabled students that fall into three broad categories:

- perception and stigma
- curricular issues
- social/extra-curricular issues

### IAG issues for disabled students

The Forum’s review of Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) is outlined in Chapter 1. In addition to the general questions and concerns that all students have on applying to university or college, disabled students require additional information and guidance such as:

- what learning support will be available given my particular disability, both inside and beyond the lecture-room?
- how accessible are all the different aspects of university life?
  - the lecture room?
  - the social and sports facilities?
  - the accommodation?
  - the campus or town generally?
- what basic funding am I entitled to as a disabled student? What other sources of financial support might be available?



*"I am a poet, parent, artist, Quaker, traveller and enquirer. I think promoting human happiness and human rights are crucial duties for all of us, which we secure by looking out for each other's best happiness. I have always worked for charities and causes which support human rights. I think we often don't know our own strengths until we meet challenges and difficulties that make us grow to meet them, yet often we don't find those opportunities that could best use and develop our full potential. That is why I am a perpetual student, in every way that I live, looking to learn from what life offers... I have survived being attacked by macaque monkeys 100 feet up a tower in the rain forest, Hurricane Katrina, and being captain of a University Challenge team...AND social work training!"*

**Rosemary Rimmer-Clay, NSF member**

## Student Finance issues for disabled students

The Forum's review of Student Finance is outlined fully in Chapter 2. The overall vision for Student Finance and the recommendations are equally applicable to disabled and non-disabled students alike. However we feel that improving awareness of the relevant bursaries (both before applying to and whilst studying at university or college), together with routine signposting to additional sources of support from university or college financial advice services, is particularly important for disabled students.

In our experience, disabled students are not always aware of the financial support that is available from the disability services of Universities themselves and/or from national funding programmes<sup>2</sup>. This might help finance their learning, care or transport needs, or help with the provision of practical resources such as laptops.

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*"I didn't know about it at first. Now I get 12 hours support. University and national funding pay for it."*  
**(NSF member)**

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However, it should be noted that this funding is not currently available to international disabled students.

## Other key issues for disabled students

### Perception and stigma

We believe that the perception of disability is an umbrella challenge which informs many of the issues faced by disabled students – sometimes unwittingly perpetuating discrimination. For example:

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*"Staff, they think immediately that disabled students would take more time."*  
**(Disability Officer)**

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Time management can (but does not always) cause problems for students with disabilities. In fact, the expectation or perception that disabled students will automatically have issues with time management is an example of the unintended, but nonetheless real, discrimination that can occur.

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*"There is a lot of ignorance – it's more about ignorance than disrespect or intended discrimination."*  
**(NSF member)**

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In our experience, different countries can have different perceptions of the same disability. For example, dyslexia is not recognised in some countries, whilst in others mental health problems are taboo. As a result, the perception of disability in the UK could either be liberating or constraining for international disabled students compared with their home country, depending upon the impairment.

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<sup>2</sup> Compare the online service Funderfinder [www.funderfinder.org.uk](http://www.funderfinder.org.uk).

Stigma around disability still features both within, and when moving on from, the university or college experience. For example, while studying, field work and work placements are difficult to obtain for disabled students. It seems that disclosure of a disability can sometimes lead to problems in obtaining employment, even if the student has achieved the correct qualifications. Yet disclosure of disability is imperative for certain kinds of employee, such as teachers or doctors.

## Curricular issues for disabled students

### Access to electronic textbooks

We surfaced a real difficulty for blind and print-disabled students in accessing electronic copies of textbooks. There is a delay between paper publication and electronic circulation, costs are high and disability support services do not have sufficient leverage with publishers.

It can also be difficult for learning support services to access reading lists and source textbooks for students if lecturers do not prepare the lists early enough, or if students do not select their course options early enough. Often, resource centres and libraries do not let disabled students have access to resources for long enough.

### Transcription and interpretation services

Our experience indicates that these services can be very patchy, yet they have a major impact on learning and assessment.



### Insufficient training and awareness for teaching staff

There is no compulsory training for higher education teaching staff in how to deal with disability, yet lecturers may be faced with meeting highly individualised needs in their students. Conversely, we feel that it is important for lecturers to remember that not every disabled student requires a differentiated approach (which can draw unnecessary attention to the disability). Some techniques which support the teaching of disabled students can simply be integrated into a whole class approach, so that all students benefit from best practice teaching.

• Rosemary Rimmer-Clay at a Forum meeting



### Skills Development

We are pleased that support in universities and colleges is beginning to move from reactive to proactive with respect to skills development. The Personal Development Plan (PDP) is an example of this. It works to draw out skills over and above academic achievement. In our view, the PDP can be a particularly effective tool in enabling disabled students to think constructively about the full range of skills they are acquiring while studying, and how these might translate into the world of work afterwards. However, there are no standard or compulsory guidelines for PDPs: each university or college currently approaches them as it wishes.

### Disclosure: the impact on assessment

We are concerned that the very act of disclosing a disability can sometimes inadvertently create stigma during assessment processes. For example, we believe that flagging up a disability through a stickering system on examination papers could potentially lead to lowered grades, because the marker may be unconsciously prejudiced against the content of the papers by the presence of an indicator of disability.

### Extra-curricular support needs for disabled students

#### Orientation and awareness of disability

Emotional and practical orientation support is important for all students in the first few weeks of higher education courses, but a structured approach can be particularly important for disabled students to ensure that all aspects (the academic, extra-curricular and financial) are covered. Some students may start university or college unaware that they even have a learning difficulty or disability – for example, dyslexia or dyspraxia may have remained undiagnosed until this point. There is a need to promote more awareness about disability amongst the wider student population during these first few critical weeks to encourage self-diagnosis, where necessary, and to improve general levels of understanding.



*“I am 20 years of age, currently taking Education and Early Childhood Studies at Roehampton University. I am very active within the university, as I work for the student union as Welfare Officer and a teacher of R.O.A.Ds whereby I teach key skills to other students; I was trained by NUS to do this. I am also a student representative for Early Childhood Studies and most recently became a Sport and Wellbeing Ambassador. From these opportunities I have learnt many new things and gained valuable experiences.”*

**Samina Sabir, NSF member**

### Accommodation

Accommodation is a major challenge for many students, and has been highlighted as a long term issue for the Forum to consider in its second year. However, it provides particular challenges for disabled students because of the following:

- too few adapted rooms: the percentage of adapted rooms in university or college accommodation is very low
- insufficient family-size accommodation: availability is patchy for disabled students coming with family and/or carers
- insufficient acknowledgement of, and provision for, students’ particular needs e.g. students with mental health difficulties, who might require stable accommodation on campus for the duration of study
- inflated campus costs: it can be cheaper to live in private accommodation than in some campus accommodation (this is most frequently seen in those universities and colleges in which there is a strong pressure for students to live on-site)
- compulsory summer vacation clearance of accommodation: this can pose a particular problem to disabled students
- culture of one-year tenancy agreements: the annual relocation that this entails for many students poses greater difficulties to disabled students

### Social life

In our experience, many academic areas are now increasingly accessible, but the social facilities can lack far behind. Socialising can pose particular challenges for disabled students, and even greater challenges for disabled international students.

### Subgroup approach to developing proposals

In order to improve the experience of disabled students, we developed a series of recommendations and suggestions to address some of the concerns outlined above.

We integrated our concerns relating to information, advice and guidance and student finance into the full Forum discussions, and these have been addressed by the main recommendations for these topics (see Chapters 1 and 2 respectively). We believe that the Forum’s recommended IAG portal model would allow prospective disabled students to pre-filter information to ensure that the content was relevant. It would prompt students with learning difficulties and disabilities to consider all aspects of the higher education experience (e.g. academic, social, accommodation, financial) and raise awareness of potential funding sources or entitlements to learning support.

We therefore developed a series of discrete proposals relating to other issues for disabled students, for review by the full Forum in its second year.

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*“The lecture room itself was fine – but I couldn’t get into the bar easily.”*  
(Student juror)

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*"I am a first year student at Birmingham City University studying Visual Communications with the Birmingham Institute of Art and Design. I am especially interested in design and photography. My interests and hobbies include a range of outdoor activities including walking, kayaking and climbing. I am also an active member of the scouting movement."*

**Christopher Sadler, NSF member**

### **Initial outline proposals for discussion and consideration by the full Forum**

#### **Proposal 1: Explore the feasibility of an Association of Disabled International Students**

We propose that the feasibility of an Association of Disabled International Students be considered, to combat the isolation that can be felt by these students – and to provide peer support about any potential sources of funding and broader advice.

#### **Proposal 2: Integrate disability-awareness training for all students into the orientation period**

We propose a more systematic approach to raising awareness of disability amongst the general student population, especially during the orientation period e.g. offering workshops on disability, self-diagnosis posters and leaflets.

#### **Proposal 3: Improve disability-awareness training for all higher education staff**

We would like to see the introduction of compulsory disability-awareness training for academic staff, and the improvement of disability-awareness training for all other higher education staff, to address issues surrounding perception and stigma, and to provide practical strategies for improving practice both within and beyond the lecture room.

#### **Proposal 4: Develop a bank of student ambassadors for disability**

We are interested in exploring the potential of a bank of student ambassadors for disability to raise awareness of disability issues, support their peers and encourage applications from prospective disabled students. We feel that this would complement the Forum's recommendation to develop the use of student ambassadors further, to encourage applications from a wider range of students (see IAG Recommendation 3).

#### **Proposal 5: Increase the emphasis on disability issues in feedback mechanisms**

We propose that national and local feedback mechanisms, such as the National Student Survey and individual university or college surveys, should place a much stronger emphasis on disability issues and provision. The National Student Survey could then offer pre-entry comparative information for prospective disabled students to access.

#### **Proposal 6: Establish national guidelines to strengthen the use of Personal Development Plans (PDPs) for disabled students**

We would like to see the establishment of national guidelines to strengthen the use of PDPs, for the benefit of all students. However, we suggest that the guidelines should make specific reference to the potential for PDPs to focus on the development of transferable skills and support goal-setting for disabled students.



**Proposal 7: Investigate the feasibility of a centralised electronic library for disabled students**

We propose a centralised system enforcing a copyright requirement to produce an electronic copy of every book published. Our understanding is that current copyright law enshrines the right for visually-impaired people to request an electronic copy of a publication, but that this right does not extend to people with dyslexia. Only universities and colleges are currently able to approach publishers to ask for electronic copies, rather than individual students. We would like to see a centralised library to which all disabled students have access. We believe that universities and colleges should extend their loan periods for disabled students as a matter of course.

**Proposal 8: Commission research into comparative progression rates for disabled students**

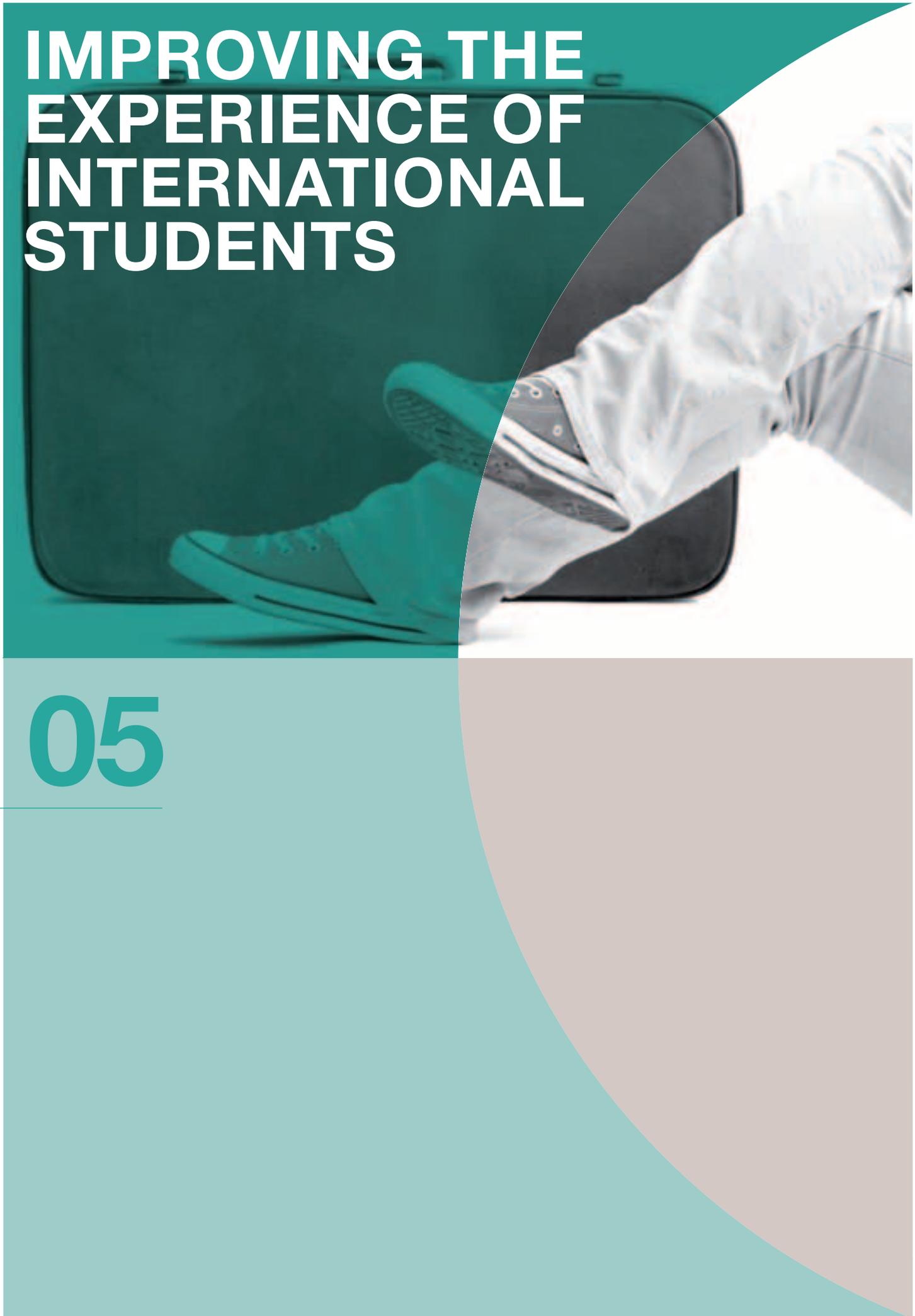
We suggest commissioning research into identifying the comparative progression rates for disabled and non-disabled students for:

- achievement and take up of places
- progression and attainment (including non-completion of courses)

# IMPROVING THE EXPERIENCE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

05

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**“** *We don't have the same cultural understanding as a student from the UK about what's a good uni and what's a bad one, what's expected in terms of essay-writing or studying skills, what's expected in social situations and so on.* **”**

(NSF member)

### Background to subgroup discussion

A subgroup of the Forum met to explore the challenges faced by international students applying to and studying at university or college in the UK. We invited representatives from the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) and DIUS to participate in our discussions and undertook a review of the key findings of the student juries relating to international students to orientate our initial discussions.

The subgroup reported that international students are, by and large, satisfied with their experience in the UK. Many international students continue to believe that the UK education system is the best in the world – and most students do not think that they have been misled in this respect.

However, we believe there is a risk that high costs and insufficient responsiveness to the specific needs of international students could potentially undermine prospective international students' perceptions of the excellence of the UK education system over the longer term.

In addition to reviewing information, advice and guidance and student finance issues from the perspective of international students, we highlighted a range of other challenges that fall into three broad categories:

- pre-entry difficulties
- curricular issues
- extra-curricular issues



*“I am a disabled, postgraduate, mature international student, and have been in UK higher education for the last eight years. In this period, I have been interested in and campaigned for various issues relating to disabled, postgraduate and international students. My involvement in organisations such as the National Postgraduate Committee and the British Council has strengthened these efforts. The PhD research that I am conducting at present, investigates disabled international students’ experiences. Through this research, I hope to identify barriers faced by disabled international students, and recommend ways to address these difficulties, in order to strive towards an inclusive higher education system for ‘all’. By participating in the National Student Forum, I endeavour to contribute towards and promote this inclusive educational structure further.”*

**Armineh Soorenian, NSF member**

## IAG issues for international students

The Forum’s review of information, advice and guidance (IAG) is outlined in Chapter 1. International students have many of the same pre-entry questions as domestic students, but applying to study in the UK also poses some specific additional challenges for international students. We do not have the same cultural frame of reference as most domestic students, and therefore our IAG requirements tend to focus on developing a better understanding of how the ‘system’ works in the UK, compared to that in our own country.

The following are some of the typical areas in which we need IAG:

- how do I judge which universities and colleges might be best for me?
- how do I find out which courses are available where (especially if I don’t understand the UK’s Joint Academic Coding System used by UCAS)?
- how does the application process work for international students? Which organisations can help me with different aspects of the process?
- how do my current qualifications ‘translate’ across to the UK system?
- what kind of study skills will I need, and how do they differ from those in my home country?
- how much is it all going to cost me (including all my living costs) and is there any additional funding available to help me?
- am I responsible for finding my own accommodation? If not, will I be integrated with UK students, or find myself living with other international students?
- what support is available with the visa application process?
- how do I set up a UK bank account?
- what are the customs and social norms in the UK that I might want to be aware of?
- what opportunities will there be for me to socialise with other students?
- what are my chances of getting a job in the UK afterwards?

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*“I didn’t know which uni to apply to, as in India we are hardly aware of which uni will be best for each subject. I chose my university for marketing – and am regretting it, because only now do I know it’s not particularly respected in this field.”*

**(Student Juror)**

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We concur with the findings of the full Forum about the lack of coherence in the system – and this is further exacerbated by our lack of familiarity with the UK education system in general.

## Student Finance issues for international students

As full fee-paying customers, we are particularly keen to understand how our money is spent by universities and colleges, and to get a clearer sense of the contribution we are making to their overall income. We need more guidance on the additional funding that we could apply for and are keenly aware of the lack of funding available to support disabled international students, or international students whose circumstances change.

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*“There should be better guidance on currency fluctuation and inflation and the impact it might have on fees for international students.”*

**(NSF member)**

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In particular, we highlighted difficulties in getting a clear picture of how much it is going to cost to study in the UK as an international student. At the moment, there are no guarantees that tuition fees will remain at a certain level for the duration of the course, and there is little guidance to help budget for hidden costs (e.g. books, TV licences, travel etc).

## Other key issues for international students

### Pre-entry difficulties

#### *The complexity of the visa system*

We drew attention to the bureaucracy, complexity and expense of the visa application process:

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*“It’s complicated – and you end up having to pay twice! Couldn’t something be done to simplify the process?”*

(Student Juror)

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We are aware that, as from 2009, there are plans to link visas to institutions. This has implications which we do not feel have been thought through. For example, a doctoral student will face visa issues if he or she has to change institution to follow a supervisor. It also means that if students change their mind about applying to a particular institution they will need to change their visas. We are concerned about the impact that this will have upon our freedom of choice, particularly as full fee-paying customers.

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*“Having your university or college stated in your visa is going to be restricting if you need to change course. Why shouldn’t we have the same choice in changing institutions as EU students?”*

(NSF member)

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### Insufficient accreditation

We are concerned about the current lack of a course or institution accreditation body that can authenticate courses, and offer international students security for their investment<sup>3</sup>. Fraudulent higher education offers are a current risk in the system as a result. We believe that this could seriously undermine the credibility of the UK system internationally if it is not addressed.

### Curricular issues for international students

#### *Lack of familiarity with UK study skills*

Many international students come to the UK to take one-year courses. In our experience, it can be difficult to adapt quickly to UK assessment and study practices, such as analytical essay-writing (rather than rote learning), and expectations around self-study.

### Extra-curricular issues for international students

#### *Lack of orientation support*

We have found the quality of induction programmes run by universities and colleges to be very variable, and many fail to acknowledge the depth of culture shock that international students experience.

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*“Every time you consult someone for info they say ‘Oh, it’s in the handbook’. That’s simply not good enough for an international student in a totally new system.”*

(Student Juror)

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<sup>3</sup> But see [www.dcsf.gov.uk/recognisedukdegrees](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/recognisedukdegrees), which offers lists of accredited institutions.

We highlighted that induction processes need to take account of the whole experience for international students.

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*“You don’t know the basics – like how to register for health care, how to set up a bank account or how to get an NI number so you can work part-time.”*  
(NSF member)

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#### *Difficulty in obtaining employment*

Whilst studying, international students can only take up to 20 hours paid work per week during term time – unlike domestic students, who are not restricted in any way. Many international students assume it will be easy to work in the UK to support the cost of studying, but we need better information about the reality of the situation: that the work we find may well not link to our studies.

We welcome the Government’s recent changes to allow international students to live and work in the UK for two years after the end of their studies – but we need specific careers guidance to enable us fully to take advantage of this opportunity.

#### **Sense of isolation**

Prior to arrival, many international students believe that studying at a UK university or college will afford the opportunity to integrate with domestic students and play a full and active part in student life. However, university or college accommodation policies do not always actively promote integration and this can exacerbate the sense of isolation that international students feel.

International students can sometimes feel culturally and socially isolated and do not always identify with UK student bodies such as the local university or college Student Union or national student bodies such as the NUS.

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*“Not having a sense of ‘belonging’ is a big issue – do we have the same rights as UK students?”*  
(NSF member)

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## **Subgroup approach to developing proposals**

In order to improve the experience of international students, we developed a series of proposals to address some of the concerns outlined above.

We integrated our concerns relating to student finance into the full Forum discussions, and these have been addressed by the main recommendations for this topic (see Chapter 2).

**In particular, we believe that the following full Forum recommendations will be of benefit to international students:**

- to employ transparency about fee income and allocation
- to raise awareness of student finance advisory services
- to introduce more flexibility in the tuition fees payment schedule
- to provide indicative fee levels for duration of course

In its first year, the Forum chose to focus its work on IAG on 14-19 year olds and disabled students. However, it will further develop this strand of work in its second year to incorporate international, postgraduate, part-time and mature students. It is also likely that the Forum will consider accommodation issues next year.

We therefore developed a series of discrete proposals relating to other issues for international students for review by the full Forum in its second year.



*“As former NUS Vice-President 07/08 (currently President 08/09), I am responsible for representing the needs and interests of more than five million students across the UK. Before taking up the Vice-President position in July 2006, I was a member of the NUS National Executive Committee, with specific responsibility for liaising with the National Union of Teachers. I served as President of Cambridge University Students’ Union from 2004-5, after graduating with a BA in History from Selwyn College in 2004. I was a member of the Burgess Steering Group on Measuring and Recording Student Achievement and I am a member of the Delivery Partnership Steering Group on admissions. I am also a Director of the Higher Education Academy and the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education and a board member of the European Students’ Union (ESU).”*

**Wes Streeting**

## Initial outline proposals for discussion and consideration by the full Forum

### **Proposal 1: Provide clearer guidance on international equivalence of qualifications**

Despite the work already undertaken by UK NARIC (the organisation responsible for providing advice on international qualifications equivalence) and UCAS in this area, we believe there is still a need for further awareness-raising.

### **Proposal 2: Introduce ‘cultural transition’ workshops for international students as part of a phased orientation programme**

Student orientation sessions are essential for international students and we believe that all universities and colleges should offer these. However, there can be information overload. We therefore propose a phased process as best practice, in which international students undertake an orientation programme consisting of a ‘cultural transition’ workshop, followed by a more general induction course about study skills, financial IAG, use of resource centres etc.

Topics to support cultural transition might include:

- support offered by the International Student Advisor
- cultural awareness training (e.g. behaviour in pubs, queuing etc, that can make a big difference to a sense of integration and adaptation)
- registering with, and entitlements through, the NHS
- how to gain part-time work
- identifying opportunities to socialise with domestic students

### **Proposal 3: Implement peer support networks**

We suggest the introduction of peer support networks. Ongoing emotional support from peers is invaluable, and we would like to see a buddying/mentoring system run by international students for international students.

### **Proposal 4: Encourage student unions to be more ‘international student-friendly’**

Local and national student unions and student bodies can be a great source of support for all students, yet many international students can feel disenfranchised from these. We suggest that the NUS take steps to encourage student unions to make a more explicit effort to be ‘international student-friendly’, in order to promote a sense of belonging and integration.

### **Proposal 5: Identify mechanisms to reassure applicants about course and institution authenticity**

We propose the introduction of a mechanism – e.g. a licensing system – that can authenticate courses and offer international students security when they are applying to study in the UK. We will develop our thoughts on this proposal in our second year.

### **Proposal 6: Allocate a percentage of international student fee income to support individual students in need**

We believe that the allocation of a percentage of international student fee income specifically to support international students in need is best practice for universities and colleges and would like to see this being implemented more widely.

# IMPROVING THE EXPERIENCE OF POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

06

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**“** *If the nation wants more highly skilled postgrads coming out of unis, they need to do more to support and finance that.* **”**

(NSF member)

### Background to subgroup discussion

A subgroup of the Forum met to explore the challenges faced by postgraduate students applying to and studying at university or college in England. We invited the Research Careers and Diversity Unit to join us to offer advice on current policy and practice around postgraduate study.

Having completed an undergraduate degree, an increasing number of students are going on to postgraduate study. Many choose to work, and then return to full or part-time postgraduate study. In our experience, students choose to undertake postgraduate work (whether at masters or doctoral level) for many different reasons, but two predominate: to embark on an academic career in teaching, research and university or college administration or, increasingly, the desire to improve employment opportunities and progress in another chosen career.

### Vision for postgraduate study

The group developed a vision of a reasonable postgraduate experience:

- I received appropriate Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) prior to embarking on postgraduate study, in which I was encouraged to consider subsequent career opportunities in both academic and non-academic contexts
- I benefited from a structured and relevant induction process and I am consequently clear on the levels of support my department will provide me with
- I have reasonable levels of contact with supervisors
- I have access to adequate research facilities
- I have access to teaching opportunities, together with training and ongoing support for this
- I feel my institution supports me by providing networking opportunities for social and research purposes
- I feel supported in addressing the cultural challenges that I face as an international postgraduate student
- I am clear about the levels and types of funding available to me
- I can access effective, ongoing guidance on subsequent career development



*"I am a PhD student at Birmingham City University, having obtained a Masters from the University of Birmingham and a BA (Hons) in English Literature and Language from King's College London. My thesis is entitled 'Christina Rossetti and the influence of Gothic' and considers the effect on the work of Rossetti on Gothic literature. I am also the editor of the Review of the Pre-Raphaelite Society, and I am currently undertaking some teaching at Birmingham City University."*

**Serena Trowbridge, NSF member**

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*"I started a PhD thinking that I wanted to go into academia. I was not told that this environment was that competitive. They took my money and didn't do anything for me."*

**(NSF member)**

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We recognise that many of our expectations around postgraduate study are already enshrined in the *QAA Code of Practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*. However, our experience (reinforced by findings of the HE Academy's survey on the postgraduate research experience) shows that there is a gap between the QAA instrument and the lived reality of postgraduates. In particular, we identified the following key aspects of the postgraduate experience in which the reality can fail to meet expectations.

### **IAG issues for postgraduate students**

We are aware that 70% of postdoctoral researchers who hold grants and undertake research projects begin by wanting an academic career, but that this proportion declines over time, once such researchers understand more about other career options, and know more about academic careers. Access to impartial, informed IAG is clearly critical in supporting prospective postgraduates in making the right decisions about the next step. For example, we should be encouraged to consider the impact that subject area can have on potential salaries after postgraduate study – with salaries often being higher for STEM than for arts and humanities postgraduates – and to consider the long term career prospects both within and beyond academia.

### **Difficulty in accessing independent advice about postgraduate courses**

When considering further study, some of us have struggled to find impartial advice, as the careers services attached to particular universities and colleges seem to focus on promoting their own postgraduate courses. There are similar problems in accessing independent information, advice and guidance for research degrees.

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*"Unis are adept at getting undergrads to do their postgrad study at the same institution. In terms of outlining future academic options, something other than a uni selling its own goods would be helpful."*

**(Student Juror)**

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### **Insufficient focus on long term career prospects**

When considering prospective postgraduate courses, we have found an insufficient focus on the long term career implications, whether within or outside academia. In our experience, there is a widespread but false assumption across universities and colleges that people who undertake research know what their next steps will be. This is not always the case.

### **Difficulty in determining an accurate picture of employer demand**

The full picture of employer demand for postgraduate qualifications can be skewed by the fact that small and medium employers are not in a position to make demands of universities and colleges for the skills they need. These demands tend to come from large employers. Although the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) has produced longitudinal studies to show what students are doing 3.5 years on from graduation, in our experience information on postgraduate destinations is generally very poor. We support any further research to identify this.

## Student finance issues for postgraduate students

### Lack of postgraduate access to student loans

We drew attention to the current lack of access to student loans for postgraduates, and will give this further consideration in our second year.

### Insufficient awareness of full costs of postgraduate study

We highlighted the challenge for postgraduates in gaining an understanding of the full financial implications of continuing their studies. We are aware that the Student Loan Company will be developing its 'My Fact Find' database (where a student enters a course and personal details and the site generates the fees due), and we propose the implementation of a similar initiative for postgraduates.

### Insufficient awareness of other potential sources of funding

We also feel it would be useful to have an easily accessible database of alternative sources of funding (e.g. small charities etc).

### International postgraduate student funding

There are issues in securing funding for international postgraduate students, because the Research Councils only fund UK applicants. We propose that the Government investigate whether access to Research Council funding could be opened up to international postgraduate students who have undertaken all of their undergraduate study in the UK.

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*"When you study abroad, there are a lot of hidden costs."*

(NSF member)

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## Other key issues for postgraduate students

### Academic issues

#### *Lack of clear definition of the postgraduate experience*

The subgroup feels that individual universities and colleges should provide a clearer definition of the postgraduate experience – and provide a better means of articulating it than the lengthy handbooks that are currently issued. The Code of Practice issued by the QAA sets out that students should be aware of what they can reasonably expect from universities and colleges – but this is not always the case in reality.

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*"The Postgraduate handbook is so thick! I wish there was a more user-friendly type of information that would have told simply told me "these are the things you need to look at.""*

(NSF member)

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Postgraduate handbooks tend to focus on taught courses (whereas doctoral work is highly varied and it is therefore difficult to standardise information).

### *Patchy supervisor support for postgraduate students*

If properly supported, a student's interest in a subject taken to masters level can increase over the course of study, and lead to further research work at doctoral level. However, students can also become demotivated by the challenges both of research work and lack of ancillary support. We believe that the ongoing emotional and practical support provided through contact time with a supervisor is crucial to preserving morale – particularly for those in arts and humanities research. However, it can be difficult to secure sufficient contact time with supervisors, even though guidelines on appropriate contact time are set out in the QAA Code of Practice, and it is critical that, in turn, supervisors receive adequate support and training.



### *Insufficient departmental support with teaching experience*

The QAA Code of Practice makes clear that universities and colleges need to offer postgraduate students on research programmes opportunities to teach, as well as the appropriate training and support.

#### **The opportunity to teach has benefits for several different audiences:**

- good for personal career progression if postgraduate students wish to pursue a career in academia
- cross-fertilises both research and teaching, and helps to create a stimulating learning environment for lecturers, researchers and students
- supports the widening participation agenda at a national level

However, our experience suggests that this requirement is not always being properly implemented in practice. There is a need for:

- improved support and training for postgraduates who undertake teaching
- improved training for science teaching (as it is often carried out through demonstration)
- support and training to deal with pastoral matters
- training on diversity issues
- teaching assistant (TA) frameworks for disabled students, with a regulated pay rate
- optional TA frameworks for those students undertaking overseas fieldwork, and/or heavy research workloads (since they are unable to carry out teaching duties if they are abroad during term time)

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*“If we are going to have more and more people going to university or college, we need more and more people to teach them.”*

**(NSF member)**

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*“I was President of the National Union of Students (2007–08). While working towards my psychology degree at Liverpool John Moores University, I became involved in my students’ union. For the last two years of my degree, I was elected as a part-time NUS National Executive Committee member, leading on student housing and volunteering projects. While studying for my finals, I was elected as NUS National Secretary. I was elected NUS President in 2006 and re-elected in 2007. I am the first NUS President from a post-1992 university to be elected and the seventh woman to be elected in the NUS’s 85-year history.”*

**Gemma Tumelty, NSF member**

### Extra-curricular issues for postgraduate students

#### *Lack of appropriate accommodation*

Accommodation is a challenge for all students whether undergraduate or postgraduate, and can be particularly difficult for postgraduate students, especially if they require family accommodation. University-based family accommodation for postgraduates should offer:

- affordability
- good facilities for children and carers
- family-friendly community
- separation from undergraduate accommodation

#### *Isolation*

Research work is often isolating, especially in arts and humanities research (although this is less true for scientific research, which is much more team-based):

- interdisciplinary events or away-days can help postgraduates both work and socialise
- databases of research students should be more accurate and more widely available, to enable networking

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*“All the postgrads went to the Lake District for two days and shared their experience. I think the university or college funded this trip. People get to know each other and network this way.”*

**(NSF member)**

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#### *International Postgraduate Students*

International postgraduate students are highly motivated to study in the UK, but can encounter similar problems to international undergraduate students (see Chapter 5) in terms of integration and lack of familiarity with the system. There is greater pressure on international students to stay on track with research courses, because of the high costs involved – and they also face parity issues in terms of clarity about equivalence of qualifications.

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*“An international student might be very highly motivated to come to the UK to study but quite ignorant of how it works. There is a lack of detailed information about transitions between Masters and PhDs and a lack of cultural information.”*

**(NSF member)**

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We highlighted a need for increased funding and scholarship opportunities for international students, particularly those who have completed undergraduate studies in the UK prior to application for postgraduate courses.



*"I am the current sabbatical officer at Anglia Ruskin Students' Union with the portfolio of Academic Affairs. While a student at Anglia Ruskin I studied drama with music on the Cambridge campus and was the president of the Anglia Theatre Society (ATS) in 2005-06. My love of theatre and music has meant that I have worked with lots of local theatre groups both in Cambridgeshire and in my home town of Luton and have performed at the Queen Elizabeth Hall and the Royal Albert Hall. As well as the day-to-day issues I face in my union, I am also heavily involved in NUS campaigns and helping to strengthen student representation at other unions. I always get stuck in to every project I undertake."*

**Kate Wicklow, Vice-Chair**

### Subgroup approach to developing proposals

We agreed to further develop our IAG recommendations by providing a more focused emphasis on IAG for postgraduate students (along with international and mature students) next year. We will explore whether the principle behind the 'first port of call' IAG portal recommended in Chapter 1 could be applied to postgraduates, which would help with:

- simplifying and articulating the application process
- decision-making and transitions
- access to Research Council funding information

It is likely that recommendations to address accommodation issues will be developed as part of the proposed full Forum discussions on this topic in Year 2.

We therefore developed the following series of discrete proposals relating to postgraduate study for further discussion by the full Forum.

### Initial outline proposals for discussion and consideration by the full Forum

#### **Proposal 1: Evaluate how effectively the QAA Code of Practice is being implemented**

We recommend an evaluation of how effectively the QAA Code of Practice is being implemented. There needs to be a review of the degree to which its recommendations do – or don't – translate into the reality of the daily postgraduate experience. This especially relates to levels of supervisor contact time and opportunities for teaching (and support for this).

#### **Proposal 2: Develop a postgraduate student calculator to provide a clearer indication of overall costs**

We suggest that the SLC explores whether its proposed 'My Fact Find' service could be adapted to incorporate postgraduate fees and other related costs, so that students have a clearer picture of the overall costs of undertaking postgraduate study.

#### **Proposal 3: Make postgraduate handbooks more relevant and accessible**

We feel that universities and colleges need to review the handbooks that are currently provided for postgraduates, as they are often too dense and have insufficient focus on what matters from a student perspective. On commencing postgraduate study, a short, accessible 'survivors guide' that outlines the key defining points of the postgraduate experience is much more helpful in orientating yourself than a technical, lengthy tome. We suggest that universities and colleges liaise with existing postgraduates to establish what they wish they had known when they first started, and rework their handbooks from this perspective.

A survivor's guide might cover the following:

- what provision will be made for proper induction at different points in the academic year?
- what can I reasonably expect of my supervisor?
- what pastoral and academic support, advice and training can I reasonably expect from my department?
- what is expected of me in terms of study and output?
- what are the costs of study likely to be (both compulsory and optional, e.g. conference attendance)?
- what provision will be made for careers advice and guidance?
- what should I do if something goes wrong?
- what training and support is available to supervisors?
- what networking opportunities are available to me?

**Proposal 4: Explore the potential for international postgraduate students to secure Research Council funding**

We suggest that the Research Council reviews its position on funding International Students, so that those who have previously undertaken all of their undergraduate study in the UK could secure Research Council funding if they wish to continue their study here.

**Proposal 5: Establish a coherent framework for updating and promoting research student databases**

Current research student databases are frequently out of date or hold patchy information. In addition, we believe that more could be done to leverage their potential to provide networking opportunities and combat potential isolation.

**Proposal 6: Implement a bank of postgraduate ambassadors**

We propose the creation of a bank of postgraduate ambassadors, who can provide advice for prospective students on the topics and universities and colleges they are considering. We will further develop our thinking on the practicalities of this in our work on IAG for postgraduates next year.

**Proposal 7: Improve teaching opportunities for postgraduates on research programmes**

We feel that more can be done to improve the postgraduate experience of teaching, through better teacher training, and support while teaching. While we appreciate that it is difficult to tailor teaching opportunities to every individual researcher, in every discipline, we believe that universities and colleges could do more to offer doctoral students teaching opportunities in a systematic, accredited, and well-regulated way.

**Proposal 8: Create an accessible database for alternative sources of funding**

We propose the creation of an easily accessible database of charities or bursaries which provide funding in specific circumstances.

# APPENDIX A

## STUDENT JURY FINDINGS – EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Background

DIUS launched a **Student Listening Programme**, to amplify the student voice in government. One of the strands of this programme was a series of five student juries to capture the views of HE students and feed them into the policymaking process. The juries took place between November 2007 and January 2008. This appendix provides a synthesis of the conclusions reached by the student juries, which comprised a diverse cross-section of students studying in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in England.

### Overview

The juries highlighted that the evolving perception of students as ‘customers’ has an impact upon student expectations: they require transparency about what they are paying for and how this money is being allocated. They expect this to offer value for money. Students articulated a clear expectation regarding the quality of teaching provision, resources and IAG to which they felt entitled. They also expressed the view that this IAG should extend to supporting students in addressing increased financial responsibilities.

Jurors were concerned that, if the number of students participating in higher education continues to increase, having a degree may not actually increase your **employability** in future and that students would feel compelled to undertake (at more expense) postgraduate study to maintain a competitive edge with potential employers.

As full fee-paying customers, **international student** jurors had particularly high expectations not only of their courses and ancillary services, but of subsequent employability. Employability is a key determinant of international student satisfaction, whether in the UK or in the country of origin.

Disabled student jurors felt that HEIs should employ a more holistic approach when trying to improve their provision for disabled students, by considering issues well beyond the lecture room.

## General Findings

- An improved impartial, 'one stop shop' system for IAG during the transition between FE and HE, including:
  - collated information on rankings/ratings systems
  - vocational alternatives to academic study
  - more explicit consideration of longer term aims when entering higher education
- A rationalised, simplified approach to the student loan application process
- A requirement for HEIs to improve access to accommodation in terms of quantity, quality and affordability
- More information about finances, including how to:
  - access different sources of funding
  - manage a budget
  - feel clear about a plan for repayment
- Study resource centres that are more flexible, more accessible and better equipped
- Greater transparency about the feedback process from students to HEIs so that students are aware of its impact and HEIs are more accountable
- Improvement in the quality of teaching
- A mechanism to ensure parity of services across all HEIs (e.g. a nationally recognized service level agreement)
- More transparency about the allocation of funding and tuition fees within institutions
- An improved personal tutor system
- A greater emphasis on careers and postgraduate opportunities, including a more systematic approach to supporting work placements and career-related seminars, and access to an independent graduate careers service

## Findings specific to disabled students

A holistic approach to improving the student experience, including:

- advice on the physical accessibility of individual HEIs
- efficient and appropriate learning support mechanisms
- awareness-raising training for higher education careers services
- improved accessibility to non-academic and extra-curricular facilities
- streamlined funding application process

## Findings specific to international students

- A simplified visa application process
- More respectful and empathetic lecturer attitudes
- An improved, systematically-embedded path into immediate postgraduate career opportunities for international graduates

# APPENDIX B

## POTENTIAL MODELS FOR IAG PORTAL

	Advantages	Disadvantages
<b>Model A: a signposting site</b> 'minimum acceptable standard'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• cost effective</li> <li>• easy to build</li> <li>• extendable</li> <li>• could be either formal or informal in style</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• lack of distinct identity would make it difficult to promote as a first port of call</li> <li>• offers no significant help in structuring and filtering the different sources of information</li> </ul>
<b>Model B: a sense-making framework, with targeted material for particular groups of students</b> 'reasonable expectation'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• specific, discrete identity</li> <li>• relatively cost effective</li> <li>• extendable to all groups of prospective students</li> <li>• supplements and aggregates existing IAG sites by 'structuring' the IAG available</li> <li>• acts as training tool to enable students to navigate through HE application process</li> <li>• could offer virtual online tours of campuses, virtual open days, sample lectures etc</li> <li>• could be multi-lingual</li> <li>• could be fully accessible for disabled students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• existing 'competing' sites may still make it challenging to ensure it was a first port of a call</li> <li>• complexity of ownership/ sponsorship</li> <li>• higher maintenance costs</li> <li>• no bespoke, fully personalised guidance</li> </ul>
<b>Model C: a fully personalisable IAG mechanism</b> 'best practice'	All of above, plus: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• comprehensive, bespoke advice and guidance for individuals</li> <li>• multi-platform: could be linked with a telephone, podcast, email or face to face IAG support services</li> <li>• enables prospective students to construct individualised pathways</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• high cost</li> <li>• complexity of potential ownership/ sponsorship (e.g. UCAS, Connexions, SLC)</li> <li>• difficulty of establishing an identity separate from existing UCAS site</li> </ul>

# APPENDIX C

## SAMPLE QUESTIONS TO INFORM STRUCTURE OF IAG PORTAL

This appendix illustrates the kinds of IAG issues that have arisen for Forum members, in their own experience of applying to enter higher education. It demonstrates in rough form the idea of pathways towards application, through sets of questions which might be found on an IAG portal. Prospective students can use this to orient themselves and then successfully locate information, filtering out what is redundant by learning to ask the right questions for their needs.

### Content Filter

This would provide a drop-down menu that filters from the outset, enabling prospective students to identify quickly which category applies to their situation before they research further, e.g.

I am ... 18–21  22–25  mature   
international  postgraduate

I have a learning difficulty or disability

I would like to study full-time  part-time   
don't know yet

### Step 1: Getting your bearings

[NB: all the content below would be filtered according to the student group the individual had most readily identified with previously]

- Nobody in my family has ever gone to university or college. Where do I start?
- What is higher education? E.g.
  - what's the difference between further education and higher education?
  - why go to university or college?
  - how does the education and higher education system work in the UK? (for international students)?
- Am I eligible to go to university or college?
- What are the main things I need to consider when thinking about going to university or college?
  - as a 'typical' 18 year old
  - as a disabled student
  - as an international student
  - as a postgraduate student
  - as a mature student
- What can I study – and what are the factors I need to consider when choosing a course? E.g.
  - am I eligible? How do my qualifications 'translate'?
  - how will my choice of course affect my employability?
  - I am disabled, what are the specific issues I need to consider?
- Where can I study – and what are the factors I need to consider when choosing a university or college? E.g.
  - campus or non-campus
  - urban or rural
  - levels of accessibility for disabled students

- How can I study – and what are the factors I need to consider when making a choice? E.g.
  - flexible
  - part-time
  - distance
  - deferral
- How much will it all cost – and how will I pay for it? E.g.
  - how much are the fees?
  - what are the overall costs of studying (including accommodation, books etc)? How much should I budget for?
  - how does the student loan system work?
  - what additional financial support is available to me...
    - as a matter of course (e.g. trusts, bursaries for international/ disabled/mature/postgraduate or disadvantaged students)?
    - in a crisis (e.g. access to learning funds)?
- What kind of pastoral support can I expect? E.g.
  - what specific support can I expect as a disabled/ international/mature/postgraduate student?
- What kind of help can I expect with careers guidance?
  - before I go?
  - when I get there?
  - coming up to leaving?
  - is there any specialist advice for international/ disabled/mature/postgraduate students?
- Is there a downloadable 'Survivors Guide to University' available?

## Step 2: Signposting

- I know what course I want to study. What's the next step?
- I know where I want to study. What's the next step?
- I might be interested in going to university or college, but I don't know what to study or where! Who can I talk to now to help me take the next step?

### Step 3: Making decisions

- I know which course I'd like to do, so:
  - how can I compare the quality of this course offered by different universities and colleges?
  - what do students say about the course I want to do?
  - what kind of jobs might this course lead to – and what are the employment rates?
- I know which university or college I'd like to go to, so:
  - what courses do they offer? And how do they work? E.g.
    - course content, contact hours, assessment methods etc
  - what do students say about the university or college I'd like to go to?
  - will I have a personal tutor?
  - what kind of pastoral support is there?
  - what kind of learning support is there for my academic studies, as a disabled student?
  - what additional financial support is available for me? E.g.
    - bursaries, trusts, financial advice for disadvantaged/disabled/international/mature/postgraduate students
  - how much will it cost me to study and live here? (including fees, accommodation, books, etc)
  - what kind of help can I expect with careers guidance and improving my employability? E.g.
    - is there any tailored advice for disabled/international/mature/postgraduate students?
  - what accommodation is available? What help is there to find somewhere to live? E.g.
    - is there any specially adapted accommodation for disabled students?
  - what kind of help with childcare is available?
  - what are the sports/arts/other facilities like? E.g.
    - are they accessible for disabled students?
  - what kind of induction process is there to help me settle in? E.g.
    - is there a dedicated programme for international/disabled/postgraduate/mature students?
  - how can I find out more about this university or college? E.g.
    - virtual tours, open days







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