Outreach and Widening Participation

Student Shadowing Report 2013-14

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Executive Summary

Student Shadowing (hereafter Shadowing) at the University of Hertfordshire (UH) is a successful programme offering would-be Year 12 and 13 applicants to higher education the opportunity to sample what a typical day is like for UH students. Shadowing’s goal is to provide participants with information about courses and university life that will impact their decision-making and hopefully move them closer towards being ready to apply to university.

This report attempts to ascertain how useful Shadowing is and its impact on its 112 participants. Two groups emerge: 60% display palpable progress towards determining a course, while for 37% development is much more ambiguous, although not completely discounted.

There are several issues with this smaller group of students. First, their presence on Shadowing is questionable as over half describe themselves as being at the very beginning or end of the decision-making process and are only considering one course. This is a very different demographic to our majority group who are more likely to consider multiple courses and are self-identified as being far enough in the decision-making process to have identified and whittled down the courses they are interested in but not so far that they are ready to apply. Second, this smaller group is highly likely to be unsure both before and after the event about their primary course choice: they do not exhibit the clear growth of the majority group.

The collected data is not rich enough to say in absolute terms if this 37% group is either the wrong demographic for Shadowing or somehow benefiting much less than their peers. There are several nuanced questions that remain challenging: is their persistent doubt healthy or unhealthy? Is the lack of certainty the result of too little knowledge being shared or so much absorbed information that students are still unsure, but, are at least now armed with greater awareness? The same question about usefulness can be applied to those participants who do not waver from their consideration of one course.

Some solace can be found in the overwhelming—albeit very generic—satisfaction attendees have for the help student ambassadors provide and for the event in general (97% and 87% satisfied or very satisfied, respectively).

Introduction

Student Shadowing days offer Year 12 and 13 students from local Hertfordshire secondary schools the opportunity to come on the UH campus and experience life as a typical student. Participants ‘shadow’, i.e. follow, a UH student ambassador for a day. They attend lectures and accompany the ambassador across campus. Several participants are grouped with an ambassador, usually based on participants’ subject interests. Shadowing allows participants to get a taste for the content and style of academic lectures as well as a slice of student life. UH student ambassadors are expected to engage with their attendees and offer information about UH, while answering any questions participants may have.
Across the 2013/14 academic year, the Department hosted 11 Shadowing Days and 125 students. These events are planned and delivered by the Outreach team within the Department of Outreach and Widening Participation at UH and supported by student ambassadors.

Methodology

The initial Shadowing event, consisting of 13 students, was included as part of a pilot evaluation, to test questions and data analysis. This report is founded on the data collected from the ensuing 10 Shadowing Days and 112 students. The data is similar to the pilot data but questions were refined and targeted towards uncovering at what point participants were in their decision-making or application process. Additionally, the updated survey delves deeper into the role Shadowing played in either confirming their intended course choice or introducing them to new options. Participant responses are anonymous.

The questionnaire contains eight questions. It focused on the following themes:

- The main reason for attending the event
- Course choice
  - Before and after self-assessment of students’ levels of course choice certainty
  - Number of courses being considered
- Decision-making process
  - Students’ current point in this process with regards to identifying courses and applying to university
- Satisfaction with student ambassadors
- Overall satisfaction with Shadowing event

The full survey can be found in the Appendix.

The collected data was analysed using SPSS.

Findings and reflections

Gender

Table 1 displays the gender proportion of the 112 participant sample.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Gender proportion for Pathfinder Day participants

This split is more uniform than UH’s overall gender proportions for undergraduate students, which stands at 55% female and 45% male. It is also encouraging in light of the continued decline of male applicant numbers to university. This proportion is more balanced than the Department’s Pathfinder Days, which recorded just 37% male participation.
Motivation

Participants were offered three reasons for attending Shadowing:

- Finding out about student life
- Figuring out my course choice
- Building-up my confidence

Table 2 details the proportion that each reason was selected.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Proportion selected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figuring out my course choice</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding out about student life</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building-up my confidence</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: List of main reasons for attending and percentage selected

Participants clearly see Shadowing as an opportunity to reach a decision on what course to study at university while also using the day to discover what student life is all about. The extremely low proportion of students looking to boost their confidence (just 2%) perhaps reflects the overall self-assurance and commitment of the group to attend university.

The right demographic?

It is important that Shadowing is pitching itself to the right student demographic—primarily those who are seeking more information about courses in order to pinpoint the right degree to apply to. Analysing the number of courses participants are considering and the point at which they are along the decision-making process towards applying to university, should confirm that the ‘right’ students are attending.

Table 3 indicates the percentage of students considering one, two or three or more courses (post event).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of courses</th>
<th>Proportion selected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 or more</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Proportion of students considering different amounts of courses

About two-thirds of participants are considering multiple courses, which is a fairly healthy indicator. Shadowing should have an impact of these students. The fact that 32% of attendees are considering just one course requires a more nuanced explanation. It may be that these students are seeking confirmation that this course is right for them and that without the opportunity to come along they would remain unsure. Or, it may be that these students are ‘deadweight’, that they would apply to that particular course anyway and that Shadowing will have little impact on their decision.
Decision-making

Table 4 reveals where students place themselves along the decision-making process from just starting to thinking about applying to being ready to submit an application.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decision-making point</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Just started</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identified courses</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrowed it down</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ready to apply</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Percentage of participants at different points in the journey to applying to university

Similar to the data in table 3, the results from table 4 suggest most attendees will benefit from Shadowing. 79% have either identified courses or narrowed down their selection. Either way, these students appear ideal candidates to attend Shadowing.

However, almost 1 in 5 students may find the day overwhelming or of little use: 18% have either just started thinking about applying to university or are ready to apply.

Those who are just starting may need a broader introduction to university and the courses that best suit them, rather than being plunged into lectures they may not enjoy. Conversely, those declaring themselves ready to apply will likely already be committed to applying to a particular course and will have a good idea of what it offers. For these participants, taster lectures and conversations with ambassadors may reinforce their position to a certain extent—but their place on Shadowing might be better served going to students who still unsure.

Cross-analysing this data with the number of courses students are considering sheds more light on the matter:

- 100% of the ‘ready to apply’ students are considering just 1 course
- 43% of the ‘just started’ students are considering just 1 course
- 22% of the ‘identified courses’ and ‘narrowed it down’ student are considering just 1 course

This data reinforces the position that attendees on either end of the decision-making spectrum may find Shadowing of little practical use, especially for those already committed to one course.

Shadowing’s impact on course choice

Before and after
Shadowing purposes to help participants get a clearer sense of the course they should apply to. This report has so far endorsed the view that most attendees are in a position to reap the benefits of being exposed to academic environments. Looking more closely now at participant outcomes should further clarify Shadowing’s impact on attendees’ decisions.
Event participants were asked to reflect back to before the day started on whether they either knew which course they wanted to apply to or whether they were deliberating between several courses. That was followed by a similar question asking if Shadowing had either confirmed their initial course choice or if they were now (or still) considering several options. Table 5 details these before and after proportions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BEFORE</th>
<th>AFTER</th>
<th>Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I know exactly what course I’ll apply to”</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I narrowed my choice down but am not 100% sure”</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I am hesitating between several courses”</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I know exactly what course I’ll apply to”</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>+82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I’m not sure about my original choice”</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>-53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I’m still unsure”</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>+2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Participants’ certainty levels for course selection, before and after Shadowing

The ‘before’ proportions in table 5 confirm that most students who come to the event are indeed seeking information about courses that can help them reach a decision about what to apply to: almost 80% have narrowed their choice down but are still unsure or are hesitating between several courses. However, much like table 4 highlighted, around 1 in 5 students may find the benefits of Shadowing limited since they are already secure in their course decision (in table 4, 18% of attendees were at either end of the decision-making spectrum).

At first glance, the ‘after’ percentages seem to offer a mixed view. On a positive note, there is an 83% increase in participants indicating they now know exactly which course to apply for. However, 43% of students leave the event still unsure about what courses to apply to. Tracking the before and after changes of individual students allows some clear trends to emerge:

- Of those who stated BEFORE the event that they knew exactly which course to apply to, 88% still held the same view afterwards
- Of those who stated BEFORE the event that they had already narrowed their choice down but were still not sure, 40% now know exactly what course to apply to, while 42.5% were now even more unsure about their choices
- Of those who stated BEFORE the event that they were hesitating between several courses, 64% were just as unsure afterwards, while just 15% know what course they wanted to apply to

That initial 88% represents 20% of the overall sample population, so once more we are seeing a clear segment of around 1 in 5 students who are not necessarily benefiting from Shadowing (note previously we saw that 18% are either just starting or finishing their decision-making journey AND 22% are considering just 1 course).
What remains unclear about this segment of students is whether Shadowing is reinforcing course choice for students who come to the event with a clear idea of their intended course, or, if these students would have persisted with this decision without Shadowing.

The other two bullet points above indicate there are still significant numbers of students leaving Shadowing with a degree of doubt about what courses they will apply to. This doubt may be ‘healthy’, in that Shadowing has perhaps provided new information for students to digest. Or, it may be ‘unhealthy’ if students are either confused or their event has somehow not offered them enough information to make informed decisions. Just how many of the 64%—who represent 42% of the overall population—who were unsure to start the day and are still unsure after it is a worrying unknown.

**Course choice vs student life**

A deeper analysis of individual students’ before and after certainty levels combined with their reason for attending Shadowing, still presents a mixed outlook:

- Of the students who knew exactly what course they wanted to apply to BEFORE and AFTER the day:
  - 52% wanted to primarily find out about student life, while 43% wanted to figure out their course choice

- Of the students who were hesitating in some form BEFORE and AFTER the day:
  - 50% wanted to primarily find out about student life, while 50% wanted to figure out their course choice

These data points help take the sting out of some of the earlier results suggesting some students are going home without key information pertaining to their course choice. In fact, around 50% of such students are more focused on finding out about student life. This amounts to 36% of the total sample population.

Thinking more generally, we can propose that many participants who are sure about their course choice both before and after the day have gotten something positive out of Shadowing: it either confirmed that choice (‘actively’ by offering alternatives or ‘passively’ by not doing enough to challenge assumptions) or the student was primarily seeking information about student life, which we know over half of them in this situation do, based on the above statistics.

The waters are muddied when it comes to those leaving Shadowing still unsure about course choices. 50% of these students—amounting to 27% of the total population—came with the intention of solving this issue and yet leave without having done so. Unfortunately, this report cannot confirm if this indecision is ‘positive’ (i.e. the student has been challenged and needs time to make a decision) or ‘negative’ (i.e. the result of a lack of information received on the day).
Ready to apply?
The final analysis for this section examines students’ before and after statements about finding courses and where they are in their decision-making journey towards applying to university.

- 43% of attendees who were sure about course choice before AND after are now ready to apply (8% of total population)
- 13% of participants who were unsure in some fashion before AND after are now ready to apply (3% of total population)

We know that the overall low level of ‘ready to apply’ students (11%, see table 4) indicates the vast majority of participants still have steps to take before they feel prepared to apply to university.

This renders qualifying Shadowing as a successful event somewhat difficult and, naturally, depends on how ‘success’ is qualified. If it is based on getting students to the verge of applying, then that 11% exposes some shortcomings. However, being ‘ready to apply’ is not necessarily the key outcome for Shadowing. Progress of some description towards that final outcome is a much more desirable goal. With that in mind:

- 56% of participants who were sure about course choice before BUT have now either confirmed their course choice OR are no longer sure about their original top selection have either ‘identified courses’ or ‘narrowed it [courses] down’ (11% of total population)
- 83% of attendees who were unsure in some fashion before the event BUT have now either confirmed their course choice OR are no longer sure about their original top selection have either ‘identified courses’ or ‘narrowed it [courses] down’ (30% of total population)

Both these statistics reveal a measure of progress for students still considering what course to pursue. 11% of all participants came into the event seemingly sure of themselves and departed either still sure or no longer convinced by their top choice. 30% of all attendees who came to the event unsure in some way have now either confirmed a top choice or reneged on their initial favourite selection.

So, a combined 41% of participants, who are in key phases of their decision-making, have seen demonstrable change in their behaviour regarding course choice. If this appears underwhelming, consider that it is sensible to define exactly how many students were in a realistic position to be positively influenced by Shadowing.

We know 18% of all attendees are either ‘just starting’ or ‘ready to apply’ in terms of decision-making, so almost all of these can be removed, bar the 3% noted above who were unsure in some fashion before Shadowing but are now ready to apply, thus clearly displaying positive change. We can also remove the 8% who were sure about course choice before and after and who are ‘ready to apply’ (as we have seen these students may have never been in a position to be affected by Shadowing).
With these changes in place, the aforementioned ‘41% group’ jumps to 59% of the newly-reduced total population. Consequently, more than one in two students undergoes positive change that can be directly linked to Shadowing. The following quotes from students help bring this group to life:

I was able to see first-hand what studying engineering is like.

It [Shadowing] showed me what the course entailed, what I should expect and how I should work towards it.

Found the lessons really useful and interesting.

I got a good taster about what the course would be like.

**Ambassador satisfaction**

Participants’ satisfaction with the ambassadors they were paired with was very high. Specifically students were asked how satisfied they were with the course information provided by ambassadors:

- 3% are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with amount of course information received from their student ambassador
- 37% are satisfied
- 60% are very satisfied

Such results are another sign of how valuable UH’s student ambassadors are to the Department’s outputs, as the following quotes reinforce:

[the student ambassador] was very helpful and gave us a lot of information about the courses and university life.

[the ambassador] provided all the information I needed to know about the course and gave me more insight into student life.

**Overall Satisfaction**

Much like the Department’s other programmes (see Pathfinder Day report, specifically), overall satisfaction with Shadowing is extremely high:

- 1% not satisfied
- 1% neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- 87% satisfied or very satisfied

While it is pleasing to see such positive statistics, it should be reminded that overall satisfaction is not a direct correlation for the amount of new knowledge learned or the overall usefulness of an event. However, the following quotes help breathe some life into these statistics:

I got a real insight into university courses and what is likely to be the lifestyle as well. I feel I am going to be more confident when going to uni.
I’ve enjoyed the day; the lectures and going about a ‘normal’ student day. I’ve found it very helpful and useful being able to ask questions as and when about uni and to have them answered by someone who is currently experiencing it.

Everyone was pleasant and helpful – really see what student life is like every day and had a great experience in lectures seeing the levels of participation and note-taking. Very relaxed and well-planned day – shown me lots of aspects of this university!

**Conclusion**

Shadowing at UH aims to inform secondary students with information about courses and student life, so it is not surprising there is a fairly even split amongst attendees’ main motivation for the participating (52% leaning towards courses and 46% towards student life).

This report tries to capture where students are in their decision-making process towards applying to university, in an effort to determine if Shadowing is attracting students who will benefit the most from it. The results are a fairly homogenous group who have thought enough about courses to have identified and possibly narrowed down their options to a select few: two-thirds are considering two or more courses, while 78% have identified or narrowed down their options.

However, there are a few caveats to this circumstance. Almost 1 in 5 attendees is at the opposite ends of the decision-making spectrum, either just beginning to think about their opportunities in higher education or ready to apply. It has to be considered how useful Shadowing is for these students. Will it help them confirm their decision and give them food for thought? Or would they apply to their preferred course regardless of Shadowing? Should they engage more with higher education before attending Shadowing? The subtlety of these questions is beyond the scope of this report but should be considered for the 2014/15 academic year. We should still consider that:

- 100% of ‘ready to apply’ students consider just 1 course
- 43% of ‘just started’ students consider just 1 course (11% higher than overall rate)

Determining the usefulness of Shadowing presents us with two segments of students: a majority group who benefit and display demonstrable progress in their thinking about university and the courses they want to apply for; a smaller group, for whom it is more difficult to discern Shadowing’s impact.

What is clear is that 41% of participants, who are in key phases of their decision-making, have seen perceptible change in their behaviour regarding course choice. This figure increases to 59% when some of the smaller groups defined earlier are removed to create a more Shadowing-friendly population.

However, 27% arrive at Shadowing with the intention of figuring out their favoured course choice, yet depart unsure. 10% knew exactly what course they wanted to apply to before
the event, yet prioritised figuring out their top course choice and still felt their position remained unchanged afterwards. Combing these two groups for those who are primarily interested in determining their course choice equates to 37% of the overall population.

What is undeterminable is how healthy these students’ doubt or absolute certainty is. For those seemingly certain of their top choice, did Shadowing do enough to challenge them? For those unsure throughout the process, is their lack of conviction a sign that Shadowing has provided them with new knowledge to ruminate on? Or has it failed to offer them with enough information? Should these students have participated given the precise nature of Shadowing essentially only allowing one course to be fully explored? Might they have benefited from insights into multiple courses?

The data collected cannot be mined for such nuances. Free text comments record mainly effusive—but general—praise for Shadowing. While they provide some confidence that the event is impacting many students, they cannot be solely relied upon to answer those questions. Department staff should review the selection criteria in an effort to pinpoint with greater accuracy those students who will benefit the most. Perhaps, pre-selection surveys (designed by the Department) should be administered to schools in an effort filter out students who might not benefit as much as others.

The content of the event could be reviewed in order to better engage with the 37% of attendees who do not display obvious headway in their decision-making. Further iterations of evaluations should also attempt a greater level of depth into students’ expectations and development throughout the event.
Appendix – full survey

Student Shadowing Event

We’d really appreciate your honest thoughts on today’s shadowing. Thank you!

1. What is your gender?
☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Prefer not to say

2. What is your main reason for attending the student shadowing event? Tick one.
☐ Finding out about student life
☐ Figuring out my course choice
☐ Building-up my confidence

3. Which statement best described you BEFORE today? Tick one.
☐ I knew exactly which course I wanted to apply to
☐ I narrowed my choice down to one course but was not 100% sure
☐ I was hesitating between several courses

☐ Today confirmed my course choice
☐ I’m not sure any more about my first choice course
☐ I’m still unsure which course to apply to

5. How many courses are you considering? Circle one.
One ☐ Two ☐ Three or more ☐

6. At which point in your decision-making process are you? Circle one.
Just started ☐ Identified courses ☐ Narrowed it down ☐ Ready to apply
7. How satisfied are you with the amount of course information you received from your student ambassador? Circle one.

1 Not satisfied at all  
2 Not that satisfied  
3 Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied  
4 Satisfied  
5 Very satisfied

8. Overall, how satisfied are you with today’s event? Circle one.

1 Not satisfied at all  
2 Not that satisfied  
3 Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied  
4 Satisfied  
5 Very satisfied

9. Please explain why.


10. Would you liked to have done, seen or talked about anything else today?