Outreach and Widening Participation

National Scholarship Programme - Year 1 Report 2013-14

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Contents

Executive Summary ........................................................................................................... 1
1. Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 2
  1.1 What is the NSP? .............................................................................................................. 2
    1.1.1 Overview ................................................................................................................... 2
    1.1.2 The NSP @ UH ......................................................................................................... 2
  1.2 Policy context .................................................................................................................... 4
  1.3 Impact on HEIs, access to HE and student retention .................................................... 4
    1.3.1 Institutions ................................................................................................................ 4
    1.3.2 Access to HE ............................................................................................................. 5
    1.3.3 Student retention ...................................................................................................... 6
2. Methodology .......................................................................................................................... 6
3. Findings & reflections .......................................................................................................... 8
  3.1 Basic information ............................................................................................................ 8
  3.2 NSP options ...................................................................................................................... 8
    3.2.1 Popularity and usefulness ....................................................................................... 8
    3.2.2 Type of impact ........................................................................................................ 9
    3.2.3 Overall impact ........................................................................................................ 10
    3.2.4 Conclusions ............................................................................................................ 10
  3.4 Confidence levels ............................................................................................................ 11
    3.4.1 Managing course requirements ............................................................................. 11
    3.4.2 Managing academic workloads ............................................................................. 12
    3.4.3 Grade prediction .................................................................................................... 13
    3.4.4 Fitting in socially .................................................................................................... 14
  3.5 Mentoring .......................................................................................................................... 15
    3.5.1 Mentoring take-up ................................................................................................. 15
    3.5.2 Mentee expectations and support received ............................................................ 16
    3.5.3 Mentoring’s impact on reaching academic goals .................................................. 17
4. Looking to the future .......................................................................................................... 20
5. Overall conclusions .......................................................................................................... 21
6. References ........................................................................................................................... 23
Executive Summary

The National Scholarship Programme (NSP) aims to improve access to higher education (HE) for students from low-participation backgrounds by providing them with financial support. This report evaluates the NSP’s impact on full-time Year 1 students during the 2013/14 academic year at the University of Hertfordshire (UH). It attempts to uncover the aspects of the NSP that held the greatest value to UH students. It also depicts some of the characteristics UH NSP students hold, from demographic traits to levels of confidence and self-assessments about their performance and how much and what type of support they require. Finally, it draws particular attention to UH’s Mentoring programme, which is a fairly unique component of its NSP programme compared to NSP offerings across the UK, and offers a review of its performance.

This report represents students’ views and draws on several surveys and focus groups administered to students at the start, middle and end of their first year at UH. A literature review also provides further background information on the NSP and some of the current trends and debates on the programme within the UK HE sector.

As the literature suggests, students at UH value accommodation, laptop and book vouchers the most, making it clear they favour incentives that have an immediate impact on the basic necessities of university life—having a stable residency and being able to study effectively. With that in mind, 78% of NSP students at UH felt the NSP helped them to achieve their Year 1 goals. A significant portion, 22%, declared that without NSP support they may not have returned for their second year. These figures substantiate the student data from current sector-wide NSP evaluations. They are also important in the wider context of student retention at UH. 10% of NSP entrants in 2012/13 withdrew from their course, which easily eclipses the 5% drop out rate across the university. 31% of entrants in 2013/14 considered dropping out at some point (it isn’t known yet what percentage withdrew from that cohort). It appears there is an opportunity for the NSP to impact success and retention.

One of the main student characteristics evaluated is how confident they are academically at the start of the year compared with how much support they ended up requiring by the end of the year. NSP students are generally over-confident with how much support they will need. Twice as many students required more support than they initially thought. Furthermore, nearly 30% of students achieved lower grades than they predicted. While the financial incentives have their own positive effect, there is an opportunity to support these students more directly, which is where the Mentoring element plays an important role.

Mentoring offers promising results, 28% say it was crucial to reaching their academic goals, with students living off-campus three times as likely to say so. However, there were some issues in reaching out to students and a significant portion did not want to engage with Mentoring. Further findings suggest students wanted more choice in the kind of support they wanted, while also wanting to be part of specific community of students. With this in mind, UH has re-developed the Mentoring portion of the NSP into a brand-new student experience programme.

Lastly, this report strongly supports the conclusion of the literature that the NSP has more impact on retention and student success than access.
1. Introduction

1.1 What is the NSP?

1.1.1 Overview

The NSP is administered by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) on behalf of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). It provides direct, means-tested financial support to new undergraduate entrants. It began in the 2012-13 academic year and will run through the 2014/15 after which it will only be available to postgraduate students in the 2015/16 year.

The UK government has committed £50m in 2012/13, £100m in 2013/14 and £50m in 2014/15 (and a further £50m for postgraduate study in 2015/16).

Eligible students must be England residents or EU nationals and come from households with less than £25,000 income. Until 2014/15, students received a minimum £3000 bursary. For the 2014/15 year, the minimum amount is reduced to £2000 per student. However, the maximum amount that could be granted as cash is now unlimited, whereas it had previously been capped at £1000 before 2014/15.

It is important to note that individual institutions can tailor this provision beyond the above student criteria. Additionally, institutions can provide match-funding for its students and spread this total funding across several years.

1.1.2 The NSP @ UH

Year and monetary breakdown

For the 2013/14 year, in accordance with HEFCE guidelines, UH provided a minimum of £3000 per student, which they match-funded for a total of £6000 across three years. £1000 was available as cash while the rest was split across a number of components. The yearly breakdowns were as follows:

Year 1 - £3000 (including a £1,000 tuition fee waiver and £300 worth of peer-to-peer mentoring)

Students could make up the remaining £1,700 from the following options:

- Accommodation (up to £1,700)
- Laptop package (value £700)
- UH Restaurant Vouchers (up to value £500)
- Uno Bus Pass - Zone 1 (value £300)
- Uno Bus Pass - Zone 2 (value £400)
- Gym Pass (up to value £250)
- Book Allowance (up to value £500)
Year 2 - £1500 (available to those students who were awarded the NSP in Year 1 and progressed to Year 2)

- Up to £500 cash
- Choice of mentoring and other vouchers, as listed above (except accommodation, laptop and tuition fee waiver)

Year 3 - £1500 (available to those students who were awarded the NSP in Year 1 and progressed from Year 2 to 3)

- Up to £500 cash
- Choice of mentoring and other vouchers, as listed above (except accommodation, laptop and tuition fee waiver)

Mentoring

UH packages a unique element to its NSP offering in the form of a peer mentoring programme, which pairs more experienced students with new entrants. The emphasis is on going beyond financial support and supporting NSP students' academically and socially. Relationships are often coordinated on the basis of the pair studying similar courses so that course knowledge can be passed down. Integration support is also a by-product of mentoring with the mentor bestowing their knowledge about UH’s services as well as their experiences of university life. Students are opted-in to the programme, with £300 of their NSP package diverted to mentoring to cover administrative and running costs.

Eligibility criteria

Eligibility at UH for the NSP for 2013/14 was dependent on the following factors:

- Living in an area with a low level of progression to university and coming from a household income of £25,000 or less.
- Or be in receipt of Employment and Support Allowance (formerly Incapacity Benefit)
- Or identified as a 'Looked After Child' (using the statutory definition)

Being enrolled on certain courses prevented eligibility:

- A course that is NHS funded or TDA funded
- A Foundation or Extended Degree
- A postgraduate course
- A part-time course at less than 25 per cent intensity of the full-time equivalent

Finally, various conditions also precluded students from being granted a scholarship:

- Continuing from one UH course to another (i.e. progressing from a Foundation Degree or Extended Degree)
- Transferring to UH from another Higher Education institution
- Receiving sponsorship in the form of fees payment
- Holding an existing degree level qualification

Note: UH contacted and automatically registered all eligible students for the NSP.
1.2 Policy context

Callender and Wilkinson (2013) identify two main drivers of student funding reform that help explain the policy context of the landscape the NSP was born into. First, as public expenditure for HE diminished, the cost of funding the sector shifted onto the student, justifiable by the perceived returns of HE for the individual. Second, the desire to create a quasi-market in HE ramped up competition within the sector and empowered the student, now viewed more as a consumer. These drivers were central to Labour’s 2004 Higher Education Act, which introduced higher fees and subsequent revised access funding (i.e. bursaries).

The current Coalition government powered on in this vein with their 2011 white paper *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System* as they emphasised further budget cuts, even higher tuition fees and the large advantages individuals gained by obtaining a higher degree (Callender and Wilkinson, 2013). The NSP is the latest student funding reform in a history that includes the use of bursaries to safeguard access to HE amongst increasing fees. It forms an important part in this new era of consumer-led HE as higher education institutions (HEIs) jockey with each other to offer potential students enticing variations of the NSP.

1.3 Impact on HEIs, access to HE and student retention

With the NSP now in its third year, research is beginning to uncover its impact on various stages of the student lifecycle as well as the methods institutions use to administer and deliver it.

1.3.1 Institutions

HEIs face various pressures in administering the NSP. Determining student eligibility for the NSP is a significant administrative challenge that has manifested itself through the NSP existence. In their yearly evaluation of the NSP, Bowes et al. (2013a, 2013b and 2014) reiterate the “burdensome” task of identifying eligible students (2014: 6). This due in part to eligible students outstripping the number of NSP awards available, leading HEIs to apply extra local eligibility criteria in order to further identify students (2014).

Callender and Wilkinson, in their review of bursaries and the NSP (2013), also describe this process of identifying eligible NSP students as onerous. The effect of this is twofold: further institutional resources must be devoted to selecting students, while the process itself is lengthened, by several months in some cases, leading to a potential reduction in NSP take-up as selection are delayed.

Difficulties can also occur in the interpretation of the support the NSP should deliver. In an early review of the NSP, Bowes et al. (2013a) cite several case study interviews in which HEIs report a tension between marketing fee waivers as a sensible option and reinforcing the notion that higher tuition fees should not be viewed as a barrier to HE. Nonetheless, most HEIs include fee waivers as part of their NSP offering.
1.3.2 Access to HE

Student awareness

Clearly, the NSP is a tool meant to preserve access to HE by reducing financial barriers as tuition fees have significantly increased (Bowes et al., 2014). However, the reality across the sector presents a view with limited success with regards to impact on HEI destination.

The yearly reviews by Bowes et al. consistently point to a lack of awareness of the NSP among potential HE entrants (2013a, 2013b and 2014). This is coupled with the inability of most HEIs to guarantee prospective students an award, which greatly reduces the NSP’s impact on potential entrants’ decision-making (2014). In fact, of the institutions sampled by Bowes et al. (2014) more of them disagreed than agreed with the following statements:

- the NSP encouraged students who would not have otherwise applied to study in HE
- the NSP helps to improve participation rates among students from disadvantaged backgrounds

This view is similar among applicants to HE: 58% report that the possibility of collecting an NSP award had no impact on their decision to apply to university (Bowes at al., 2014). The same authors note in their latest yearly report that this figure rises to 69% for students already enrolled at an HEI. However, they temper this welcome increase by acknowledging that students may be retrospectively adding importance to any financial assistance they received.

This landscape becomes even murkier when we consider that it is not uncommon for students to be identified and notified of their eligibility three or four months into their first year (a situation familiar to UH). The effect of this was predicted by Callender and Wilkinson (2013) as ‘deadweight loss’, meaning that those students who end up being allocated NSP awards would have attended that HEI anyway.

All of these factors do little to clarify the NSP’s impact on access to HE as they highlight the challenges HEIs face in disseminating information about the NSP and the issues students face in decision-making.

Further analysis of the NSP’s impact on access reveals deeper sector trends.

Pre and Post 1992 institutional trends

There are significant trends in levels of support between pre and post-92 HEIs. Post-92 HEIs reported supporting fewer students from their traditional intake with the NSP than they had done previously (McCaig, 2014). Furthermore, both McCaig (2014) and Callender and Wilkinson (2013) noticed the concentration of support funding within the NSP elicited a general shift within post-92 HEIs away from supporting as many students from disadvantaged backgrounds as possible, to a strategy either focusing on the ‘best and brightest’ candidates, specific cohorts or incentivising application to particular programmes of study.

Large, post-92 HEIs were particularly vulnerable to a drop in overall support due to the NSP’s requirement that awards are match-funded by the institution. For these institutions,
and especially those with a high proportion of disadvantaged new entrants, there are fewer awards to go around (Callender and Wilkinson, 2013). Meanwhile, the relaxing of student numbers for AAB entrants has reinforced the ‘best and brightest’ approach that pre-92 HEIs can favour (McCaig, 2014). The overall result is fewer students being supported more generously, which McCaig (2014) confirms: 10,600 students received awards in 2012/13 versus the 100,000 who collected OFFA bursaries previously.

1.3.3 Student retention

The NSP’s potential as a tool for improving student retention is more widely accepted than its influence on access. In their latest report, Bowes et al. (2014) confirm that HEIs support this narrative, especially when the NSP delivers cash support and access to services. Financial rewards are particularly helpful in driving student engagement, and possibly academic performance, by facilitating access to basic university resources (e.g. accommodation, educational materials, and electronic equipment). The popularity of cash and financial among students is well-known, and was highlighted in Bowes et al.’s first report on the NSP (2013). Its continued popularity, as reported in their latest report (2014), promotes just how crucial this form of support is for students. For instance, of those students sampled:

- 79% state that financial aid helped them purchase resources that they would not have otherwise been able to afford
- 78% state that as a result of receiving financial support they are able to participate university life
- 54% state that they are able to live away from home as a result of financial aid

The following data from the same Bowes et al. report further underscores the NSP’s role in student retention:

- 79% state they are more likely to persist and complete their studies because of received financial support
- 66.5% state that without financial aid they would have found persisting with their studies challenging

It is important to note that there is a plethora of research, including Bowes et al. (2014), suggesting that financial difficulties are not necessarily the primary cause for students’ withdrawal (Yorke, 2004, Thomas, 2002, Roberts, 2011 and Wray et al., 2013) and that non-continuation is a multi-faceted issue, including personal issues and challenges with academic performance (Yorke and Longden, 2004).

With that in mind, it is perhaps not surprising that Bowes et al. (2014) note that most institutions sampled are reviewing their NSP schemes to potentially tackle more than just financial relief (although this is also partly due to changes in NSP guidelines that take effect in 2014/15).

2. Methodology

The NSP at UH was evaluated throughout the academic year using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods.
A profile form was completed by 546 Year 1 students in October 2013, almost the entire NSP cohort. This was followed up by a mid-year questionnaire in March 2014, aimed at discovering how much impact the different aspects of the NSP had on students’ academic performance and social integration, as well as the most and least useful options. 236 Year 1 students completed the survey, representing a total response rate of 43%, which signifies a large increase on the previous year’s attempt to engage NSP recipients.

Focus groups were also run as part of this mid-year research in order to get more of an in-depth view into students’ perceptions of the NSP. In all 22 Year 1 students attended.

Finally, an end-of-year survey was administered in May 2014. Although the academic year was not quite finished yet, it was deemed the most appropriate time to contact students before the majority had taken their exams. The perception from the mid-year focus groups was that students would be harder to access once they had taken their exams.

164 Year 1 students completed this survey, representing a response rate of 30%. This lower rate is likely indicative of impending exam pressures, as well as students having already left UH for the summer (the focus groups also revealed that students who did not have exams were already preparing to head home). Where this report presents individual tracked data, these figures represent the 164 student sample that answered all three surveys.

The end-of-year survey asked questions that complimented some of the profile form students completed at the beginning of the year. It also asked students to self-assess their academic performance and social integration from the past year and to identify the level of impact the NSP had on them.

All surveys, focus groups included, had a specific Mentoring element that probed students to think about their experience with the Mentoring programme to date. Their engagement levels were captured and attempts were made to highlight what kind of impact Mentoring had on their academic performance and social integration and how valuable they felt it was.
3. Findings & reflections

3.1 Basic information

Below are several tables detailing out demographic data for Year 1 NSP students at UH.

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

Table 1: Gender splits for NSP students at UH

The gender split across UH undergraduates for 2012/13 was 55% female and 45% so the NSP figures represent an important difference (UH, 2014).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Residency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Halls</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanent home address</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private rented accommodation</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Place of residency for NSP students at UH

3.2 NSP options

3.2.1 Popularity and usefulness

Part of the mid-year NSP survey’s goal was to reveal the most and least useful options (table 3 and 4).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NSP element</th>
<th>Most useful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book voucher</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laptop voucher</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restaurant voucher</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bus pass</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuition fee waiver</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gym membership</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentoring</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fresher’s pass</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parking permit</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childcare</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Percentage that students selected each NSP element as being the most useful option

Consistent with the literature review, immediate financial rewards, as opposed to fee waivers, were savoured by NSP students:

My NSP package was extremely helpful financially. I saved so much money thanks to both the UNO bus pass and the restaurant vouchers. Both of these options in my opinion were the most rewarding as it really took the pressure off financially. *Male NSP recipient*
The least useful options:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NSP element</th>
<th>Least useful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fresher’s pass</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentoring</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childcare</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gym membership</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bus pass</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book voucher</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restaurant voucher</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parking permit</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laptop voucher</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuition fee waiver</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Percentage that students selected each NSP element as being the least useful option

Mentoring, which we will focus on later in the report, divided opinion and a popular sentiment was that it should not have been compulsory:

Mentoring should have been an option [not compulsory] I personally thought the money could have been used towards other aspects of the programme. Female NSP recipient

3.2.2 Type of impact

The end-of-year survey addresses and categorises the type of primary impact each NSP element had. There are four categories respondents could choose from: academic, financial, social or ‘no impact’. Table 5 highlights the types of impact for some of the NSP elements and their proportions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NSP element</th>
<th>Percentage chosen and type of impact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation voucher</td>
<td>85% = financial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book voucher</td>
<td>49% = financial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>46% = academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gym membership</td>
<td>33% = financial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>33% = social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>27% = no impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laptop voucher</td>
<td>75% = academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17% = financial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentoring</td>
<td>49% = academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>45% = no impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restaurant voucher</td>
<td>86% = financial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bus pass</td>
<td>66% = financial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20% = no impact</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Types of impact and their proportions for NSP elements (highest levels of impact for category are in bold)
Once again, there is little surprise as to how students view the impact of the NSP elements: they are mainly financial.

Looking at some of the most useful options and their impact highlights the popularity and impact some of the larger financial options (accommodation, laptop and book vouchers) have. Much as Bowes at al. (2014) found, these options allow students to access resources they might not otherwise be able to afford (e.g. laptop) and live away from home, providing them with new experiences.

Table 5 also starts to uncover the academic impact financial aid can have, which is not always apparent in previous research. Almost 1 in 2 respondents who engaged with Mentoring favoured its academic impact. This helps support the notion that academic support is much needed if delivered in a more direct way, than say providing a laptop, which is more of an academic tool than a type of support.

### 3.2.3 Overall impact

The mid-year survey asked participants to reflect on the overall impact the NSP had on their year, their successes and retention:

- **77% disagree or disagree strongly** with the statement “I would have been fine without it”
- **78% agree or strongly agree** with the statement “It has helped me achieve my goals”
- **22% agree or strongly agree** (and 18% are undecided) with the statement “I might have dropped out or would be considering not returning next year without it”

A number of quotes reflect this data:

> I found myself getting quite stressed and depressed quite a lot throughout the year however, the facilities provided through the NSP helped me a great deal in getting through most of my work load. *Female NSP recipient*

> It has definitely helped [...] without it I would leave university. *Male, Pharmacy*

> Although I would not have dropped out without it next year, it has helped thoroughly and I do believe it would have been a large struggle to continue without it in terms of expenses. *Female NSP recipient*

> It absolutely did help. I didn’t have much money to begin with when I spent every last penny I’d earned over the summer on university essentials to bring here with me. *Female NSP recipient*

### 3.2.4 Conclusions

As the literature review predicted, students gravitate towards financial rewards: the most sought after elements of the NSP were all vouchers. They also value financial support more than academic or social support—but not in the form of tuition fee waivers. This is due to the immediacy the financial vouchers provide, often fulfilling a basic need (e.g. a place to live, a laptop to work on, and vouchers to redeem for meals). This may be why students feel so strongly about the overall impact the NSP has on their year, with large swathes believing
it helped achieve their goal and even more than a fifth indicating it positively impacted their decision to continue into Year 2.

Indeed, although students were not as unequivocal as in Bowes et al. (2014) when asked directly about the impact the NSP had on their retention (22% in this report vs 66.5% in Bowes et al.), they were emphatic in stating its impact on their academic goals. This is crucial when we consider the 10% withdrawal rate of Year 1 NSP students in 2012/13. Additionally, 31% of the 2013/14 NSP cohort considered withdrawing at some point. The impact the NSP at UH has on retention is a success and validates Bowes et al.’s assertion (2014) that the NSP plays a prominent role in retention than in improving access.

By teasing out whether elements of the NSP had any direct academic impact, a picture is beginning to emerge of students needing more than just financial aid. The high academic value placed on Mentoring suggests the NSP can play in role in going beyond providing financial relief, with academic support coming as a by-product (as in the laptop example).

Having unpacked the various options available to students and their impact, we will now shift towards investigating the confidence levels of NSP students and their self-assessments of how they performed at UH and adapted to their new surroundings.

### 3.4 Confidence levels

NSP students were asked four different questions about their academic and social confidence heading into their first year:

1. How do you feel about managing your academic workload?
2. How confident are you that you will manage your course requirements (e.g. submitting course work on time, doing weekly coursework, attending classes)?
3. What grade do you think you will get at the end of your first year?
4. How confident are you that you will fit in at UH?

Corresponding questions were asked at the end of their first year in order to determine trends.

#### 3.4.1 Managing course requirements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not confident/not well at all</th>
<th>Not that confident/not that well</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Confident/quite well</th>
<th>Very confident/very well</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRE</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POST</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: Pre/post Year 1 confidence levels in managing course requirements

**Overall**

Course requirements are the ins-and-outs of being on a course, the practical tasks students must take part in. Generally, NSP students are confident, with 70% either confident or very
confident heading into Year 1, which increases to 76% as students self-assess how well they managed course requirements throughout their year (table 6).

**Tracking students individually reveals 23% had a drop in confidence from start to finish, compared to 33% who had an increase.**

**Residency trends**
Students living in private rented accommodation are less confident about managing course requirements than their peers living in Halls or in their family homes (table 9).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Private accomm.</th>
<th>Halls</th>
<th>Family home</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PRE</strong></td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>POST</strong></td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7: Percentage of confident and very confident students about managing their course requirements, at the start and end of their first year, according to residency criteria

**Conclusions**
Students can generally accurately predict how much support they will require when it comes to managing course requirements. This may be due to the nature of course requirements: most of the tasks involved will seem familiar to them, such as needing to attend classes and handing in assignments on time.

Nevertheless, almost a quarter of students had a drop in confidence, which raises the question of further support being required being the NSP’s mainly financial aid. It is particularly interesting to see that those living in private accommodation—not including family homes—are more susceptible to lower levels of confidence. Would this group of students have benefitted from targeted support?

**3.4.2 Managing academic workloads**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Concerned/didn’t manage well at all</th>
<th>Nervous/needed lot of assistance</th>
<th>OK/small amount of help</th>
<th>Good to go/no help needed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PRE</strong></td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>POST</strong></td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8: Pre and post Year 1 confidence levels in managing academic workload

**Overall**
Contrary to managing course requirements, there is significant over-confidence when it comes to predicting how well students will manage their own workloads, mainly with those feeling they will be **OK with a small amount of help**, which has a drop of 25% (from 67% pre-Year 1 to 50% post-Year 1).

At first glance, this change seems to be explained by the bright streak of students who in fact needed little to no support: a 170% increase in students who identified themselves as needing zero support.
However, looking at individual students reveals that just 18% required less support than originally thought. In fact, twice as many students (32%) needed more support than first predicted.

**Residency trends**
Students in private rented accommodation again had lower confidence coming into university and also felt they struggled more as they looked back on their year (table 9).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Private accomm.</th>
<th>Halls</th>
<th>Family home</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRE</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POST</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9: Percentage of students, at the start and end of their first year, requiring a lot of support managing their academic workload, according to residency criteria

**Conclusions**
There is a significant group that required further academic support, as almost a quarter struggled in some way. The off-campus subgroups continue to display worrying signs of needing extra focused support for their needs.

**3.4.3 Grade prediction**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prefer not to say</th>
<th>Fail</th>
<th>3rd</th>
<th>2:2</th>
<th>2:1</th>
<th>1st</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRE</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POST</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 10: Grade predictions at the start of the year and actual grade received

**Overall**
The over-confident streak is even more prevalent with grade predictions, as the number of 2:1s and 1sts dropped from what was predicted (by 9% and 42%, respectively). The amount of 3rds also increased.

These differences are more striking when individuals are tracked. 29% achieved a lower grade than they had predicted, while just 15% achieved higher marks. Additionally, 7% preferred not to reveal their actual marks, after having offered a prediction at the beginning of the year.

Of those students with a drop between achieved and predicted grade, 56% were unhappy with their final marks.

**Residency trends**
Taking residency into account, predictions at the start of the year were very even, but, by the end of the year students in Halls had outperformed their peers and achieved proportionally more 1sts and 2:1s (table 12).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1st</th>
<th>2:1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Halls</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private rented accomm.</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Home</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 12: Proportion of students having achieved a 1st or 2:1, according to residency

**Conclusions**

Academic over-confidence appears endemic as performance is explored, as almost 30% achieve lower grades than they predicted. With 56% of that particular group being unhappy with their final grade, there is considerable work at hand to support these students reach their goals. Being provided a laptop or having accommodation paid for is not enough to help deliver strong academic performances—or even satisfactory grades as far as the student is concerned. It may alleviate basic concerns about attending university and increase wellbeing (Bowes et al., 2014) but it does not address more fundamental issues regarding transitioning into HE, particularly for those in non-university accommodation.

With the NSP being such a main form of support, could it also include more direct academic offerings? UH’s Mentoring element aims to do that and will be evaluated later in this report.

### 3.4.4 Fitting in socially

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Struggle to fit in and make friends</th>
<th>Hard at first but eventually OK</th>
<th>Gen made friends quickly</th>
<th>Fit in fast</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PRE</strong></td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>POST</strong></td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 12: Percentage of students who predicted their level of social integration at the start of the year versus their self-assessed level at the end of the year

**Overall**

Almost half (49%) said they generally made friends quickly and wouldn’t find fitting in difficult, whereas in reality, 39% reported found this to be the case. However, by the end a quarter of students claimed to have fit in very quickly, whereas only 15% had predicted this would be the case.

Tracking students individually reveals students tend to be accurate in their predictions regarding social integration and where they are not, they overestimate the difficulty more often than not:

- 54% fit in at their predicted expectation
- 27% found it easier to fit in than predicted
- 16% found it harder to fit in than predicted

Additionally, 70% are happy with their level of social integration. 62% of students who found it hard at first but eventually made friends were happy with level of integration by the
end of the year. However, those who struggled more were much less content with their integration (17%).

**Residency trends**
More students in private accommodation predicted it would be either be hard at first or a longer struggle to fit in than those in Halls or living with their families (table 13).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Private accomm.</th>
<th>Halls</th>
<th>Family home</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRE</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POST</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 13: Percentage of students who predicted it would be hard at first or a long struggle to fit in socially at the start of the year versus their self-assessed level at the end of the year

**Conclusions**
Fitting in socially presents less of a dilemma than the academic obstacles so far witnessed, as just 16% found it harder to fit in than predicted.

Perhaps predictably, private renters found it harder to fit in than students in Halls or living in family homes. The immediate network students in Halls gain and the friendly confines and support of home life likely explain these differences. Still, more than 1 in 10 students found it harder to integrate socially than they thought and 30% are either neutral or unhappy about their level of integration, suggesting there is scope for social support. There are elements of the NSP where social integration is a possible by-product (e.g. gym membership), but these findings are revealing that there is a need for more direct social support, albeit less than academic support.

### 3.5 Mentoring

Mentoring as part of UH’s NSP provision is, as far as we know, unique across the HE sector. It strives to offer student personal support that goes beyond financial incentives mainly based on vouchers, which is replicated across many HEIs. The support is based on a relationship between the new student (the mentee) and an experienced student mentor, who is often further along in the same degree. As incoming UH students are identified as NSP recipients, a dedicated Mentoring team evaluates the needs of each new mentee and matches them with a trained mentor. Pairs then coordinate their relationship via an online mentoring system and communicate or meet up as and when support is needed.

The end-of-year survey explored several aspects of the Mentoring programme, including mentee expectations of the service they received, the frequency of contact between mentees and mentors and Mentoring’s impact on mentees reaching their academic goals.

#### 3.5.1 Mentoring take-up

Here are some figures regarding students’ engagement with Mentoring:

- 72% had some form of contact with their mentor
- 16% consciously did not engage
This figure rises to 24% when some students who initially had a mentor decided they no longer needed one

- 11% wanted a mentor but could not access one due to administrative issues within the delivery of Mentoring

The high levels of contact between mentees and mentors underpin the need many students have for more direct academic support.

### 3.5.2 Mentee expectations and support received

Respondents were asked to select from a list all the expectations they had regarding how mentors might support them. Table 14 showcases how often each expectation was selected.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expectation</th>
<th>Percentage chosen</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listen to academic concerns</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Answer questions about course/modules</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share academic experiences</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support with specific tasks (e.g. referencing)</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help understand assignments</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide feedback on work</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review work before submission</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 14: Mentee expectations of mentoring relationship

The emphasis is very much on mentees using mentors as a sounding board for worries and concerns. Essentially, they want to be guided through the academic process by the more experienced mentor, as this quote demonstrates:

> I needed guidance to help me in the right direction and to clarify my thoughts and ideas.  
*Female NSP recipient*

> It's always good to have someone who's been through it before to guide you.  
*Female NSP recipient*

Surprisingly, there is less of a demand for support with actual academic work, perhaps explained by the high levels of confidence upon arriving at university that was outlined earlier in the report.

Incoming NSP students were also separately evaluated at the beginning and end of their year as to what specific academic tasks they were seeking help with and which tasks they actually requested support for (table 15).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Expected help</th>
<th>Requested help</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time management</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structuring assignments</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing research</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing essays</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group work</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referencing</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentations</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revision</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exam preparation</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentor didn’t help</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 15: Tasks mentees expected to get help with versus tasks they received support for

The most popular tasks mentees indicated they wanted help with were more technical in nature: structuring assignments, writing essays and referencing:

The first session we had helped me a great deal in terms of structuring an assignment I had at the time. She also helped me a great deal in exploring other points of view in my essay, which was greatly appreciated. *Female NSP recipient*

I found it difficult to start my coursework however my mentor helped my significantly with how to start and structure my coursework, which increased my confidence and broaden my knowledge. *Female NSP recipient*

Mentors also supported mentees with less technical tasks, such as time management, revision and exam preparation. Actual support sometimes included a blend of general support with periods of more technical assistance, as the following quote emphasises:

*My mentor has been extremely supportive and has helped me find the best ways to get my essays done. Female NSP recipient*

It is also possible students received assistance for technical tasks within their courses and therefore used their mentors for other purposes.

**Conclusions**

This report has so far suggested the need for more direct academic support. The findings regarding Mentoring substantiate this, with students keen on mentors sharing their course experiences, assisting with general academic support (e.g. time management) and especially with more technical tasks.

The lower individual percentages for requested tasks might be explained either by mentees utilising their mentor for one particular task (e.g. referencing) or the result of mentees using this relationship for other purposes, such as employability.

**3.5.3 Mentoring’s impact on reaching academic goals**

Broadly speaking, students were asked how big a role Mentoring had played in achieving their academic goals:
• 28% felt Mentoring is *quite important or very important* in helping reach goals
• 31% are neutral about it all
• 34% indicate Mentoring is *not that important or not important at all*

The frequency of a student’s contact with their mentor might affect how much impact it had on their academics. Table 16 addresses this.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-existent</td>
<td>Infrequent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not important at all</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not that important</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite important</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very important</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 16: Frequency versus the importance of Mentoring in reaching students' academic goals

Generally, the more students communicate with their mentors, the more Mentoring helps them in reaching their academic goals.

Students’ residency also provides interesting cross-sections:

• 21% of students in Halls felt Mentoring is *quite important or very important* in helping reach goals, versus
• 67% for students in private rented accommodation and
• 62% for students living in family homes

This suggests those in Halls are leaning on greater peer networks, which more isolated students might not have as much access to. The higher levels of successful support for students living off-campus further cements the importance of providing academic support to this group, which we highlighted earlier.

Uncovering any links between grade satisfaction and both contact frequency and the importance of Mentoring in achieving goals could also help determine the programme’s usefulness.

• 50% of those who were satisfied with their grade had *periodic or frequent* contact
• 35% of those who were satisfied with their grade felt Mentoring was *quite important or very important* to reaching academic goals, versus,
Conclusions
Mentoring is proving to be a capable form of academic support for many students, who in engaging with this element are corroborating the need for provision that goes beyond financial relief. Clearly, there is a core group of students who are benefitting greatly from the service and it is helping them reach their goals and achieve the grades they want:

- 28% of NSP students say Mentoring was crucial to reaching their goals
- 32% of NSP students who are satisfied with their grades engaged significantly with Mentoring
- Students living off-campus are three times as likely to praise Mentoring for helping them reach their goals

Broadly speaking, a third of all students are having positive experiences with Mentoring. Off-campus students represent a significant group who we are now seeing should be targeted for more kinds of support.

However, Mentoring is not without its pitfalls, as there are segments of students who either do not feel they need Mentoring or could not access it for some reason:

- 33% don’t feel it impacted their academic goals
- 35% either did not want a mentor or could not access one

These figures suggest that while Mentoring has its positives, it is not a form of support that reaches all students. Its modest success suggests that other forms of academic support could be beneficial and that offering students a suite of provision could allow them to select what is most appropriate for them.

This suggestion is further supported when we consider that 45% of all students sought out other forms of academic support. This proportion actually increases to 54% for students who engage with Mentoring, suggesting that a) some students are simply more likely to engage with academic support and b) Mentoring fills a finite amount of student needs—indeed we noted earlier that students tended to focus on using Mentoring for support with one or a few specific tasks.
4. Looking to the future

Focus groups were held towards the end of the 2013/14 year to help determine how UH could further support students via the NSP. While students praised the financial support received, and appreciated the Mentoring that was available to them, they bemoaned the lack of choice the latter of offered. If a mentor was not required, that portion of NSP funding was deemed lost (even though it could be re-attributed to other elements) and an opportunity missed.

Specifically, students requested:

- more types of ad-hoc academic support (e.g. workshops)
- the chance to be a part of an NSP community
- the opportunity to meet other NSP students via:
  - social trips to high profile sites (e.g. tours in London, amusement parks) that they would not otherwise be able to afford
- employability support (especially for students in Years 2 and 3)

The desire to be part of community was especially strong and highlights the struggle some students in identifying with different student groups across the university.

This feedback, along with the data presented in this report, has led to a complete redefinition of NSP support at UH for the 2014/15. The funding that went towards Mentoring now supports Herts Success, a brand-new student experience element of the UH’s NSP. Herts Success offers students choice in what type of support they want to access: academic, social and employability. Mentoring still exists but is scaled back to support a core group (roughly that third of students who benefitted from it in 2013/14). It also forms part of a wider academic offering, which hosts a suite of workshops aimed at boosting students’ technical skills (e.g. writing, referencing, and cognitive abilities). Social trips and activities are offered in order to bring students together, increase integration and build a community of NSP students. This is seen as crucial for engaging those living off-campus. Employability sessions help students plan their careers and while bursaries for non-paid placements help students concentrate on gaining experience rather than worrying about financial implications.
5. Overall conclusions

There are many headlines to take away from UH’s NSP offering, which has provided insights into how students value the programme, students’ key characteristics and a specific evaluation of the unique Mentoring component of UH’s offering.

Concerning the individual NSP elements, immediate financial benefits (e.g. accommodation vouchers) are valued the most and students view the NSP as a mainly financial support tool.

However, it has some distinct academic outcomes:

- 78% agree or strongly agree with the statement “It has helped me achieve my goals”
- 22% agree or strongly agree with the statement “I might have dropped out or would be considering not returning next year without it”

There is a strong over-confident streak amongst NSP students. In terms of managing academic workloads, twice as many students (32% overall) needed more support than first predicted.

Similarly, there are differences in grades predicted and achieved:

- The proportion of 2:1s and 1sts dropped from what was predicted by 9% and 42%, respectively
- 29% achieved a lower grade than they had predicted, while just 15% achieved higher marks

Crucial gaps appear when considering residency. Students in Halls outperform their off-campus peers.

In terms of social integration, 81% of students either fit in at their predicted level or found it easier to socialise. 70% were content with their level of social integration.

Mentoring is used by mentees for support mainly with specific tasks or general guidance. Additionally:

- 28% of NSP students say Mentoring was crucial to reaching their goals
- 32% of NSP students who are satisfied with their grades engaged significantly with Mentoring
- Students living off-campus are three times as likely to praise Mentoring for helping them reach their goals

However:

- 33% don’t feel it impacted their academic goals
- 35% either did not want a mentor or could not access one

The main narrative throughout this report is that while financial aid is clearly appreciated by students, they are requesting further forms of support, especially academic help. The data presented throughout corroborates this and is particularly pertinent in the context of
student retention at UH. The NSP is an ideal vehicle to deliver this extra support and UH has attempted to do so with its Mentoring element. The interest in Mentoring helps support this assertion.

Further developing the NSP will continue to boost the impact it can have on retention and student success, which is evident from this report and from the literature.

UH’s unique approach in delivering the NSP is a step forward in improving student success. Students have responded to the choice of accessing more direct support by largely taking up Mentoring, which an important segment benefited from. The fact that Mentoring struggled to be a more widespread success, evidenced by the almost 50% seeking academic support elsewhere, suggests the need for further differentiated support.

UH has responded to this need by reshaping its non-financial element of the NSP ahead of 2014/15 and launching Herts Success.
6. References


