SCHOOL STUDENTS’ VIEWS ON GOING TO UNIVERSITY:
Low-cost information campaign promotes positive attitudes

A ‘light-touch’ information campaign about the value and affordability of going to university can have a big positive effect on the attitudes of pre-GCSE school students towards staying in education.

That is the central finding of new research by Professor Sandra McNally and colleagues at the Centre for Economic Performance (CEP), which has surveyed more than 12,000 students aged between 14 and 15 in 54 London secondary schools.

The survey reveals substantial gaps in school students’ knowledge of very basic facts about the costs and benefits of staying in education. What’s more, the trebling of university fees announced in late 2010 – and negative media coverage around that time about the potential impact – significantly increased students’ perceptions that going to university is ‘too expensive’.

According to the research, students’ perceptions of the affordability of higher education have widened between different socio-economic groups. For example, the view that going to university is ‘too expensive’ is considerably higher in comprehensive schools and among children eligible for free school meals. Students at independent schools are much less likely to feel financially constrained than students at comprehensive schools.

But the CEP study also finds that misperceptions about the costs and benefits of higher education and the impact of the fee increase can be easily corrected. Students’ attitudes changed considerably in response to the researchers’ information campaign, which gave a more rounded view of the reforms – stressing the availability of grants and how loans can be repaid – rather than a focusing on the fee increase per se.

The information campaign is now freely available online: http://www.whats4.me.uk/

Professor McNally comments:

‘If misperceptions about the value of going to university continue to influence effort at school, they will increase Britain’s already stark educational inequalities.

‘Informing students about the affordability of higher education might be a way of improving GCSE performance.’

The researchers warn that it should not be assumed that information about higher education gets conveyed in the right way – or at all – to students. They call for policy attention to focus on the incentives that schools have to invest time and effort in providing careers information, as well as available resources to ensure that information is conveyed in an appropriate way.


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