UK students pursuing physics degrees minimally deterred by increasing fees, report reveals

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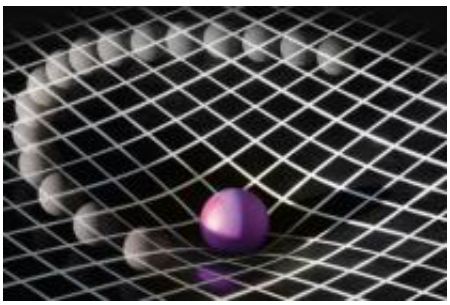

Research assessing the impact of £9,000 per year tuition fees on future university physics students has found them largely undeterred by fear of debt and determined to pursue a subject they love.

A new report, "Gravitating towards physics: How will higher fees affect the choices of prospective physics students?", uses secondary data, focus groups and a survey, involving more than 500 applicants, to understand better the potential implications of the new funding model.

Professor Paul Hardaker, Chief Executive at the Institute of Physics, said, "It was crucial to undertake this research because it is of national strategic importance that universities are able to continue producing a steady stream of physics graduates.

"While the report does throw up some concerns – particularly in relation to diversity – we're delighted to find physics in rude health."

The report, produced by YouthSight, states that physics "attracts passionate, curious and intelligent young people from an early age, and enjoys a very positive reputation. These young people perceive the subject to be prestigious, important and fundamental, and studying it is viewed as a mark of intelligence."

The report finds that physics students are significantly more likely than the average student to say that cost will not have any effect on their decision about whether to go to university; 39% of the physics sample in contrast to 29% of the UK average for all subjects.

Looking at students' perception of the subject, the report concludes that those who choose to apply for a physics course believe they will be positively received by future employers as a physics degree proves their level of intelligence, numeracy and ability to work in a team.

Professor Peter Main, director of education and science at IOP, said, "Higher fees and a very challenging job market are leaving school students with very tough decisions about which courses to apply to at university.

"Students are recognising, however, that employers regard physics graduates positively and, partly because of this, we are seeing physics enjoy somewhat of a renaissance in universities."

The report does raise concern about levels of diversity among students taking the subject and suggests that higher tuition fees might work to compound an already difficult issue.

Raising the issue of levels of participation in the subject by women,

ethnic minorities and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, the research does find that many of these non-traditional groups say that they are more worried about new fee levels and incurring debt.

Mia Lorenz, Associate Director at YouthSight, said, "This study corroborates other research we've conducted at YouthSight recently showing that higher tuition fees are likely to have a disproportionately negative impact on diversity in higher education."

Professor Peter Main, director of education and science at IOP, said, "The challenge is demonstrating to pre-A level school students, of both genders and from as wide a range of backgrounds as possible, that physics 'is for them'.

"Among these groups, we need to see a greater number of them choosing to take A-level physics because, if they can see the benefits of a strong background in physics, then we're sure this enthusiasm will stay with them all the way to university."

Read the full report – "Gravitating towards physics: How will higher fees affect the choices of prospective physics students?"

Provided by Institute of Physics