



British International School Riyadh

Student Loans – debt racks up

Some students, especially in London, are graduating with debts of between £40,000-£60,000. How did they spend it, and was it worth it?

Scott Heath worked throughout his time at Imperial College, from weekends at Argos to outreach work with schoolchildren - but still left with £34,500 in debt. Photograph: Sarah Lee for the Guardian

Scott Heath, Imperial College London. Debt: £34,500

So [students](#) spend their money on booze and don't open the bedroom curtains until midday? Scott Heath's story might convince you otherwise. He worked in the college lab from nine to five almost every day, wrote up research reports in the evening, then spent his weekends behind the counter at Argos.

His "partying" spend was down to just £10 a week last year, yet his debt is now approaching £35,000, compared with the £20,000-£25,000 common among most graduates this year.

It didn't help that his university, Imperial, probably the most highly regarded science and research institution in the country, is slap in the centre of Kensington, the priciest location in Britain's priciest city.

Heath was recently voted in as Imperial's students' union president for 2011-12, and top of his agenda is the battle to keep down accommodation costs. "What we've seen is that Imperial tends to knock down the older-style halls, then replace them with hotel-style accommodation. Some now cost upwards of £220 a week for undergraduates and £260 for postgrads. Rich international students can afford that, but it's very tough on others."

Heath, who studied chemistry and management, is from a relatively low-income single-parent family in Nantwich, Cheshire. He obtained a bursary worth £1,000 a year from Imperial, and got a shared room in his first year for £85 a week, one of the cheapest deals at the university. He was determined not to have to ask his mother for money, so went job-hunting as soon as he arrived in London. Argos paid £13 an hour on Sundays, which he felt was good money, but says working both days on the weekend hit his studies.

"You're expected to write up lab reports at weekends, so it really didn't happen. My life was just too hectic. I stopped working those sort of hours at the end of my first year and would advise other students to work at most one day at the weekends."

He found other work in term time working for the college's alumni telethon, and doing outreach in London schools under the Exscitec mentoring programme. "I was working with students aged 11-18 around schools in London and loved it. And I got paid for it."

Heath says he's one of very few students at Imperial who worked externally throughout term to earn extra cash. "Most just work in the summer months, with some getting very well-paid

Steep rents in London took most of his cash. In his second year, his shared accommodation above a shop in west London cost £520 a month, and over the four years of his course, his total rent bill was more than £17,300.

Travel was his surprise cost. "I didn't really factor it in. I thought I'd cycle everywhere, but it wasn't practical. So I had to pay for a travelcard at around £60 to £70 a month."

But his high debts have not left him in despair, and nor does he feel that students should be put off coming to a place such as Imperial because of the costs. "A lot of my friends in the north would not apply to a university in London because they thought it would be so expensive. But at least at Imperial there are lots of grants and bursaries, and some people will actually be better off under the new system.

"People have to remember that there are no actual upfront costs of going to university. You only pay it off when you are earning. I'm not going to get someone knocking on the door demanding it back tomorrow. If I don't earn enough, then I won't pay. When the NUS says that people can't afford degrees, I find it rather cringeworthy."

It helps, though, that Imperial students are at the front of the queue when it comes to picking up high-paying jobs on graduation. "Students from Imperial are incredibly employable. Even with the recession, most are still getting jobs," says Heath.

Jennifer Isaakson, Goldsmiths, London; then London School of Economics. Debt: £40,000

Searching out free food thrown into skips by the sandwich chains and doing paid medical experiments are just two of the more desperate measures that Jennifer Izaakson has taken to survive as a student.

At times she has stitched together three different low-paid jobs on top of her university studies to help pay her way. Recently she has been working in the student union shop, on the library's IT desk and in the print shop.

Having to work long hours on top of her studying has left her frustrated and angry. "You can end up just doing what's necessary for your course, not the extra studying you'd like to do. At LSE there's quite a few of the international rich who can spend their whole time reading. I know people whose parents are multimillionaires. But I have to work long hours, eat out of skips and do medical experiments, and risk getting lower grades as a result."

Estranged from her parents, Izaakson has no one she can go running to for a top-up. "I managed to get a £5,000 scholarship [to do an MA] and I wouldn't have been able to survive without it at LSE."

One reason her debts are so high is that she abandoned her first course after one year, at Leeds University, because she felt it wasn't up to scratch. "I'm glad I moved, even with the cost," she says. She switched to Goldsmiths in London, where she studied media and communications.

Her rent in Leeds was £250 a month, but in London it has never been less than £450 a month. Yes, paid work is more easily available in London, she says, but the wages don't match the extra cost of living. "You can find a job in London on £7-something an hour compared to, say, £6 an hour in Leeds, but it doesn't make up for what you pay in rent and transport."

When protests against the new fees structure erupted in London last year, Izaakson was among those at the heart of the confrontation in Millbank. She says she wasn't involved in violent action and wasn't "kettled", but the experience has left her nervous about the police. It's one reason why she chose not to be photographed for this article.

But despite the new £9,000 tuition fees, she encourages school students not to be put off going to university. "LSE is clearly a very good place to study. Going to university does mean you have more opportunities. But I don't think going to university should be about getting on to the jobs treadmill but instead about developing yourself as an adult and developing your ideas. Unfortunately a lot of people are now paralysed by the prospect of very high debts."

In the longer term Isaakson wants to become an academic, which means that she'll almost certainly have to do a PhD. "I'd like to do a PhD, but they have cut funding for places. And there are very few jobs going in academia. We seem to be dismantling [higher education](#)."

Angharad Mead, King's College London. Debt: £42,000

After five years at university, Angharad Mead, 23, has £42,000 of debt, the result of going to university in London and changing her degree course after the first year.

Mead started her studies in French at King's in 2006, but after a year and a term she realised that it wasn't the subject for her. "I think 18 is a bit young to decide what course you want to do in some cases. There wasn't a lot of advice, I thought you could only study one of your A-level subjects at university." She does believe that the change in degree was worth it "as I did something which was a lot more relevant to what I wanted to do" and advises students who don't like their degree to change it, despite the debt.

After taking a temping job for eight months, she started a new degree at King's, this time in English language and communications. "I didn't do English language for A-level – it was only through looking at the prospectus that I realised this may be a course I'd be interested in."

She funded her degree through a combination of £6,000 per year in loans, as well as large overdrafts from the bank and a bit of help from her parents. She however is aware that the next generation to begin university won't be so lucky.

"My brother is 15 so will be starting under the new fees system. I don't know if my parents are going to be able to support him like they supported me as it's just going to cost so much more. I also have a friend who dropped out and is now faced with starting under the 2012 system – I can't imagine what that will be like."

Studying in London was not cheap, with Mead spending on average £500 per month on rent and £86.40 on a zone 1-3 travelcard.

In her first year, she was placed in the Stamford Street apartments in Waterloo, one of the more desirable halls that KCL has to offer, at a cost of nearly £4,000 per year.

When asked about how her debt makes her feel, Mead admits: "It does hit you when you first start out. I'm interning at the moment and don't know when I'll start earning over £15,000, but I know that the chunk of loan I'll have to pay per month will feel larger on a smaller salary."

Her fiancé had £20,000 worth of debt in comparison. "I don't regret going to university – I think it's what you make of it, really," says Mead. "I started my blog, Edible Glitter ([edible-glitter.com](#)), and improved my communication skills which will help me in the future."

Mead is now hoping to build a career in digital media and online journalism.

She does have an idea for how courses could be made cheaper. "Maybe you could squash some courses down to one or two years to alleviate debt. In my first year I had eight hours a week of lectures and didn't use the time wisely. Maybe loans could be given out for students to do internships and learn skills you wouldn't get from the classroom."

Rupert Gove, King's College London. Debt: £35,000

Even though he worked part-time throughout his studies, Rupert Gove, a 21-year-old who has recently graduated in history from King's College London, estimates that he has debts amounting to £35,000. But he counts himself among the lucky ones.

"It could be worse – if I was starting university in 2012 I would be staring at a debt of £60,000 upwards."

He believes Nick Clegg's U-turn on fees to be a "betrayal of trust by what was touted as the new wave of politics". Yet, ironically, he couldn't attend the student marches as he was busy working at his reception job at King's students' union. "I did support my friends who demonstrated peacefully, though. I think the situation showed complete hypocrisy by the government, who didn't pay for their education and received grants."

As a student in London, Gove found that the bulk of his finances went on transport and accommodation costs. A zone one and two travelcard in the capital, even for students, is £74.20 a month, and despite being placed in the cheapest halls of residence at KCL, he paid £4,400 for his first year accommodation, leaving just £100 of his student loan.

He also found that, despite having a £3,000 maximum overdraft for three years, he still struggled. "Without parental help it's impossible to live in London without taking on a part-time job. The ratio of student loan to basic living costs is insanely small. Working at the SU was stable money and a sociable job, but at one point I was doing another job in a shop as well – I wanted to do my second dissertation on the Wall Street crash but needed to go to New York to get primary sources and it was costly. It was a balancing act." Even though on the whole he was prudent with his finances, he sometimes found that he struggled. "There were times when I had to walk for two hours to get to university because it wasn't quite payday yet and I'd spent too much money a couple of weeks before."

When asked if he regrets going to university, Gove remains upbeat. "The thing is, university is so valuable, it's clichéd to say it but it is a currency for employment. It's hard for my generation because there is increased competition and with inflation a salary now is worse in real terms than three years ago. But I don't think people should be put off, it's about so much more than the degree – finding your feet in a new city and being able to have new opportunities like playing on sports teams or writing for the student paper.

"And it definitely taught me the value of money."

Jenny Challenor, Wolverhampton. Debt: zero

After three years studying at the University of Wolverhampton, Jenny Challenor has left with zero debt. But she was not like other undergraduates – she's a mature student who had already worked for 15 years, and was a single mum with two young girls.

"Did it nearly kill me? Yes. Was it worth it? Completely. I got a first and am now looking at skipping my masters and studying for a PhD part-time. It has the potential to completely

change my life which is what education is supposed to do. It shows it can be done without getting into stupid amounts of debt."

Challenor somehow managed to juggle a full-time degree while doing a full-time job – and looking after the children. "I couldn't stop working as I have a mortgage to pay," she says.

She didn't get a grant, and didn't have any savings to tide her over, either. "My biggest problem was being time-poor. Working and studying gives you the advantage of not having money worries but you have to be 100% committed. It's three years of working in the day and studying late at night, not everyone could or would want to do it.

"I was lucky that having worked in my field of study [public relations] for a number of years I was able to apply what I was taught to practise. It's not a route everyone could take but I was used to working under pressure and to deadlines. I also had the support of a great team of lecturers at Wolverhampton Uni. Like anything, it is possible to juggle if you want it badly enough but probably an easier option for a mature student rather than an 18-year-old.

"I would literally walk out of the office for a lecture and then make up the hours that day working through lunch and after work. It helped that my boss allowed flexible working and my lecturers would talk to me by email rather than meetings. I am quite driven, so when the children went to bed I would pick up the books. My mum continued to study as an adult so I went in believing it was completely manageable."

Always in the back of her mind was making sure that she would be employable and able to keep looking after her children. "As a mature student and a mum I had completely different priorities to other students. I wasn't interested in socialising – I was there to develop my career."