

Western Power Distribution

Future Bill Payers workshops

Bristol University 15th Feb 2013

Nottingham University 17th Feb 2013

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2. Introduction

The future bill payer's workshop took place on 19th and 21st February 2013 at Bristol University and Nottingham University, respectively.

Every effort was made to reach out to as broad a range of students as possible, although places at both events were limited. In the case of Nottingham University, we used the university's own database of 209 societies (each with a minimum membership of 25 members) and sent an invitation by email. In the case of Bristol University, we placed a number of posters at appropriate locations around the Students' Union building and also emailed 1505 students directly, using a specialist student marketing company.

This report is based on the notes taken by our own scribes at the workshops and we have endeavoured to faithfully record all of the comments made. Where possible, we have used verbatim comments. These are shown in italics.

2.1. Attendees:

31 students attended the 2 workshops. The details of all attendees are shown below:

- Miss Christal Seebran
- Miss Erin Shortall
- Miss Helen Han
- Miss Holly O'Leary
- Miss Julia Walton
- Miss Nicolette
- Miss Samantha Hewitt
- Mr Arran Basra
- Mr David Gradon
- Mr Davis Tan Yong Chuan
- Mr Erik Muursepp
- Mr Geraint Scott
- Mr Gianni Orsi
- Mr Hashem Shibab

- Mr Jean Renaldy
- Mr Kane Blackburn
- Mr Leo Tang
- Mr Li Wong
- Mr Maxwell Ikin
- Mr Mesut Erz
- Mr Nathan Evans
- Mr Richard Nzewi
- Mr Robert Smith
- Mr Ross O'Brien
- Mr Rowan Bailey
- Mr Rupert Cole
- Mr Scott Nugent
- Mr Tom Farmer
- Mr Tom Richardson
- Mr Veeran Chauhan
- Mr Zhi Cheong

Western Power Distribution

- Alex Wilkes - Stakeholder Engagement Regulatory & Government Affairs

Green Issues Communiqué

- James Garland - Director (workshop facilitator, Bristol and Nottingham)
- Emma Webster - Associate Director (workshop facilitator, Nottingham)
- Laura Edwards - Account Executive (scribe, Bristol and Nottingham)
- Alex Coleman - Account Executive (scribe, Nottingham)

3. Executive summary

3.1. Power cuts

- Most students had not had a great deal of experience of power cuts and most believe that the current level of service they receive from their DNO is acceptable
- Most would not know to call their DNO if there was a power cut
- The general feeling was that a power cut of over one hour would be inconvenient and duration was considered more of an issue than frequency

3.2. Communications and social media

- Most of the students we engaged with do not use Twitter. Facebook is far more popular but the general feeling is that it is no appropriate for company's such as WPD to reach out to their customers via this medium
- In times of a power cut, most students would prefer an update via text message and only if they had decided to opt in to such a service
- Students felt that WPD ought to raise its profile. Ideas to do this included the distribution of fridge magnets or stickers which could be affixed to fuse boxes. It was also suggested that reaching out to students at the end of their first years (when they tend to move into their own homes for the first time) would be a good way of building a relationship with future bill payers

3.3. Climate change a severe weather mitigation

- Protecting the network against the effects of severe weather was generally considered to be a high priority issue
- The general view was that WPD should front-load investment in order to mitigate the effects of climate change and severe weather
- Students were of the view that WPD should be more transparent about the need for increasing spending to deal with this issue and that, if they did so, customers would understand

3.4. Smart networks and low carbon technology

- The general consensus was that WPD should adopt a cautious approach with regard to putting in place the infrastructure necessary for electric vehicles
- It was widely felt that this cautious approach also ought to be applied to all initiatives to future proof the network

- Most future bill payers would use a smart meter and felt that it would alter their behaviour, in a positive way

4. Power Cuts

Bristol University

- The vast majority of attendees stated they had not experienced a power cut for several years
- All acknowledged that there are a low level of power cuts in Bristol
 - 'Vulnerable and disabled customers need round the clock power especially if they are bed-ridden. This is a bigger problem in rural areas rather than a city'
- When asked what length of time is an inconvenience when it come to power cuts it was commented that *'about an hour'* was inconvenient times such as early evening but if a power cut was to occur at night it would not be such a problem. There was general agreement on this point
- Overall, power cuts were not a real concern for students. It was agreed it is acceptable to have a certain number of power cuts, *'within reason'*
- It was agreed that reducing the duration of power cuts is more important than reducing the frequency
- In times of a power cut the first thing most students would do would be to contact their electricity suppliers and they would do this if the power cut had gone on for longer than an hour. Generally, students did not know that they should contact their DNO

Nottingham Table 1

- WPD was not well known and many students were unaware that this type of company existed
- No one had experienced a power cut since living in Nottingham
- In times of a power cut, all students would wait at least an hour before thinking who to call
- Most viewed a power cut of over an hour to be an inconvenience
- As power cuts are not a big priority/problem in the city it was agreed it adding an extra cost to the bill is not justifiable
 - *'Duration rather than frequency is a problem. The time of day in which a power cut occurs is also be a problem. If one occurs between 1800-2100 rather than in the middle of the night it will have more of an impact customer'*
 - *'A 24hr call centre would be good but it would be good to see the power cut dealt with as soon as possible no matter what time it occurs'*

- *'In relation to frequency a power cut lasting 1-3 minutes is not a problem. A power cut lasting 2-3 hours is a massive inconvenience'*
- *'On the subject of compensation, it should depend on circumstances'*
- All agreed compensation should be given if a customer is without power for more than 6 hours. It was commented that the amount of compensation given should depend on the time the customer has been without power. It was suggested that this should be broken down into 3 categories: 6+ hours; 12+ hours and 19+ hours
- The general consensus was WPD needs to its raise profile as suppliers are usually the first port of call when there is a power cut. None of the students present would know to contact WPD

Nottingham Table 2

- One student had experienced a power cut twice in four years, although neither of these were for a *'considerable length of time'*
- No one else in the group had experienced a power cut in recent years
 - *'There are lots of power quality issues out in the sticks'*
 - *'Power cuts appear to be mainly at night, which is probably good as businesses are not open in the evening'*
- The table agreed that hospitals should be given *'special protection'*
 - *'If WPD focus on other areas discussed today such as replacing old technology then power cuts will sort themselves out'*
 - *'It is not realistic to eradicate power cuts'*
 - *'WPD need to ensure they deal with power cuts as efficiently as possible'*
 - *'I would not know if WPD's part of the bill rose or not. We do not see the cost'*
 - *'Because I have not had a power cut, why would I want to pay more for the service I currently receive?'*
 - *'Do WPD get complaints over power cuts and duration? There must be a reason for WPD to want to do this in the first place'*

5. Communications and social media

Bristol

- *'National Rail enquires updates on Twitter are very effective. It is possible to look up to a certain train journey and be constantly kept up to date with times and delays. This scheme has lots of demand and I would like to see WPD develop something similar'*
- *'A key problem with investing in social media is that it is not a long-term solution as things will move on and social media sites that are around today may not be around forever'*
- Most students agree with this point and felt the best way for WPD to communicate with its customers was to have a contact number which customers can text to find out information such as the expected duration of a power cut
 - *'I would like WPD to communicate by sending a text message'*
 - *'An opt-in system for text messages would be the best option and it would also be good for WPD's costs'*
 - *'Alternatively WPD could use Twitter and have an account which only sent out a basic alert. The main benefit would be that WPD would not have to contact everyone individually. All the alert would need to say is where the power cut is and the expected duration'*
- A concern raised about calling WPD was the cost of 0845 numbers as they are very expensive. It was deemed unfair that companies *'make a profit when there is a fault'*
 - *'It would be helpful to have a fridge magnet stating WPD are the company to call in times of a power cut and the number given should a landline'*
- Other ideas included WPD's number being clearly printed on customers' bills or a leaflet enclosed in the bill received from their supplier. Another option could be WPD's number being on their vans, however it was acknowledged not everyone would notice it and it was highly unlikely that people would take the time to note it
 - *'The regulator needs to make energy suppliers such as Eon tell customers to ring WPD in times of a power cut'*
- There was general agreement that WPD needs to raise its profile as customers are not aware of the part they play in dealing with power cuts
- In terms of engaging with future bill payers, it was agreed that a good opportunity to engage with them would when they move out of halls and into a house. At present, universities provide tips for students and the strong consensus was that WPD's contact details should be included in the list of useful numbers to call

- *'An email to students will be much more effective than a leaflet through the door as it would have been validated by the Student Union and students are more likely to take notice'*
- *'By being included in an email to students at the end of their first year, WPD could help to educate students and make them aware of WPD for life'*
- It was stated a lot of students will remain in the WPD area after finishing university
- It was suggested that distributing a sticker to go on fuse boxes would be handy, as would circulating fridge magnets
- *'A customer is more likely to open an envelope to the occupier if it contained a magnet rather than sticker as you'd feel it in the envelope'*
- All agreed adding an extra 5p on a bill to fund these ideas will have a small impact on the customer
- Instead of sending every customer a fridge magnet or sticker, it was suggested WPD aim these ideas at areas that experience a high number of power cuts
- *'WPD should look at the statistics and send information to areas which experience a lot of power cuts but have a low level of phone calls received rather than an area which also suffers from power cuts but has a high volume of phone calls received'*

Nottingham Table 1

- In times of a power cut the general view was that Twitter is not the first port of call for most students. The majority of students do not use Twitter but all on table 1 use Facebook. However, students generally do not use Facebook for reasons that are relevant for WPD
- In relation to Facebook, only after the power has been out for a few hours will a student refer to it and only then if they feel like updating their status
- *'WPD could raise its profile included having the number of the helpline being advertised. This could be done by having a TV advert stating who to phone and why'*
- In terms of having a two way communication with WPD, text message is the favoured option
- Email or *'online chats similar to the O2 web call function'* were also highly favoured
- The phone was regarded as the best method of communication as it is *'reassuring'* and *'website information may not be a reliable source'*
- *The 'cost factor' is a deterrent to making a phone call'*
- *'When there is a power cut the reassurance element is key. All customers need is an update so a text message would be best'*

- *'In relation to communication methods simplicity is good. People have a short attention span and expect instant information'*
- *'WPD's website should give updates showing areas which are experiencing power cuts along with postcodes. All the customer wants to know is the expected duration and a contact number if they need to speak to someone'*
- *'Email is a very popular method of communication. An opt-in option to receive updates via email is reliable as people now send and receive them on their smart phone. It is more of a reliable contact method than texting as customers are more likely to change their phone number than their email address. WPD would have to be careful about SPAM as many customers would unsubscribe'*
- This view was not shared by everyone. Most students said that they would react to a text message on their phone but do not receive check their emails regularly
 - *'Overall there should be to opt-in option for text messages and email. Choice is very important and customers should be able to choose the option that best suits them'*

Nottingham Table 2

- All members of the table were users of social media with the majority claiming to be *'pretty active'*
 - *'I check Twitter twice a week, but Facebook multiple times a day'*
 - *'Facebook is more useful. You can use it as a diary'*
 - *'I would not go on Facebook to find information about Western Power though'*
 - *'You would still have to go looking for the information on Facebook'*
 - *'During the riots, I 'liked' the local Police on Facebook and had their updates on my news page'*
 - *'I do not want companies being too friendly on Facebook. It needs to stay relevant. So no pictures of cute cats'*
 - *'I want to know people are running this stuff and not a power robot'*
 - *'It is a serious matter so I would probably keep posting to a minimum. So you pay attention to the important information'*
 - *'I would hide WPD as soon as they started to clog up my news feed'*
 - *'Keep it to essential important updates. Other information should be available but not in my face'*
 - *'The Met Office a good example for WPD to follow'*
 - *'When I hear something from the Met Office, I know it's quite serious'*

- *'Speaking to a real person is quite nice'*
- *'I would not like to pay to be texted. This should be as standard already. I would feel like I was getting a raw deal if I had to pay to receive text updates'*
- *'Real time information in a power cut is pretty essential'*
- *'It is important to have access to information in the winter and in the evenings'*
- *'Dinner time is important too'*
- *'It is important to get through to a real person as soon as possible because recorded messages are quite annoying'*
- *'Why would you be phoning up about a power cut? I can't see how WPD are going to help?'*
- *'Even under extreme weather conditions you should still be able to talk to a real person'*
- *'Extreme weather is WPDs time to shine'*
- *'You would have to employ way too many people for 365 days of the year for these weather events though'*
- *'If I was to call it would be a bit pointless. It's not going to speed up how quickly it would be back on'*
- *'Communication should be as standard'*
- The consensus was that there are other challenges more important than WPD improving its methods of communication

6. Climate change and severe weather mitigation

Bristol

- *'It is best to pay more now to prevent future problems caused by the increase of severe weather'*
- The table was in agreement with this point
 - *'The costs should be spread out so individual customers do not struggle to pay bill'*
 - *'If extra costs need to be paid for, shouldn't those who live on flood plains have an extra charge on their bill? Especially if they live there out of choice. Why should everyone have to contribute towards the extra cost?'*
 - *'However if customers who live in a flood plain have an extra cost on their bill is it fair if another area floods where customers have not paid an additional charge receive the money? Is that fair?'*
 - *'An additional cost of 45p to a bill is not a lot but if other gas and electric companies also raise bills it will become too much. Legislation is needed to ensure not all bills are raised'*
- The group agreed 10% up on inflation is a reasonable rise
 - *'WPD could push harder on matters such as climate change if they had a unique campaign. WPD needs a good campaign stating statistics and detailing the benefits an extra charge on the bill will bring. This is a PR issue'*
 - *'Any PR is costing the customer money and they don't have a choice as to whether or not they are tied in'*
- All students agreed they would be happy to pay more so that places such as Gloucester which has been affected by severe flooding are better protected. It was pointed out and accepted the *'not in my back yard approach may occur'*
- It was also felt that customers should be made aware how much they need to pay now and how much less it will cost in the future
 - *'Front loading costs is the way forward'*

Nottingham Table 1

- Tree trimming was not considered to be a necessity or a large priority. Instead WPD was viewed as having an over the top reaction and was wasting money by checking all trees

- *'By the time all trees have been checked WPD will then have to restart the cycle'*
- A power cut caused by a tree falling was held to be acceptable and there would be *'no pointing the finger of blame'*
 - *'WPD should invest to put substations on stilts as flooding will get worse'*
- The general consensus was that an extra charge on customers' bills to protect the network from severe weather was acceptable. All agreed that front loading costs would pay dividends over the medium to long-term
 - *'In terms of who pays the extra cost everyone should pay. Although it is expected for more power cuts to happen in a rural rather than in urban areas, not everyone can chose where they live'*

Nottingham Table 2

- *'WPD should be investing in severe weather mitigation. If someone's house is flooding, it's a big enough stress without a power outage'*
- *'The amount WPD spends depends on how effective the steps are'*
- *'Is the cutting trees a sustainable option? Is there a replanting programme?'*
- *'As energy needs go up we need to consider more undergrounding of lines, rather than cutting down trees'*
- *'Putting the whole network underground is going to be a big task though'*
- *'I realise that it's not going to happen in two years, but it should be built in to new technologies'*
- *'I am not sure about charging those in urban areas for the cost of improving rural area provision'*
- *'This seems a worthier cause for paying more money than getting texts'*
- *'How much of a problem is flooded substations? Difficult to make a decision with the information available to us here today'*
- *'Those most at risk should be addressed first'*

7. Smart networks and low carbon technology

Bristol

- *'Electric cars cannot only happen in the WPD area and therefore the scheme must be rolled out on a national level'*
- *'One issue that needs to be addressed is that technology needs to be dramatically improved as currently it is not possible to make long journeys and quick charge car battery'*
- Although most students agree with this point, the general consensus was that there should be no investment in electric car charging points if there is no certainty they will be used
 - *'WPD need to find a balance between possible future plans and what is definitely going to happen. This is a good plan as it is unknown whether electric vehicles will take off'*
- None of the students at the workshop had a smart meter but all agreed it would be a great asset
- The group said they would keep a close eye on a smart meter and that it would inform their behaviour
- It was felt that comfort often takes precedence, especially when money is not an issue
 - *'It would be good if the smart meter displays to the customer traffic light colours, if always red it would encourage people to change'*
- The group was very interested in investment in low carbon technology and connecting renewable sources of generation. However, the general feeling was that WPD should not spend customers' money updating the network beyond what they deemed to be necessary
 - *'WPD needs to be cautious as these are big chunks of money we are talking about'*
 - *'They need to future proof the network but only do it for things we know are going to happen'*

Nottingham Table 1

- *'Electric cars are outdated technology. Hydrogen cars are the future'*
- *'In today's economic climate, electric cars are not cheap and are therefore only the super-rich can afford them'*

- *'The question is: is new technology affordable and sustainable?'*
- *'Solar panels are a lifelong investment and are therefore more appealing than electric cars which are constantly changing as technology is always moving forward'*
- *'More plugs for electric cars may energise market'*
- *'Introduce new things step by step and offer incentives like the solar panel scheme which offered returns for money invested'*
- *'I have a smart meter at home and it had a positive effect by giving me a feel of how much power is being used. This has led to a changes in my behaviour'*
- All students agreed they would like a smart meter if they were free
 - *'Saving Money is more of an incentive than saving power for the greater good and a person's financial circumstances are key to how they behave'*
 - *'Prices of power at different times would be annoying. Ignorance is bliss when it comes to peak and off peak times'*
 - *'In regards to recycling people just do it as it's a lifestyle habit and when it comes to bills we are always money conscious. The Government should start to encourage and help us change our habits'*
- Overall it was agreed that a cautious approach should be adopted with regard to 'future proofing' the electricity network.
 - *'There should a mix between preparing for future possibilities and waiting to see what will happen'*
 - *'WPD need to future proof in a sensible and smart way. Don't put all your eggs in one basket'*
 - *'In terms of the extra cost to the bill it was agreed it must be proportionate to the total cost of the bill. '10% is too much 5-7% acceptable'*
 - *'Future directions should be spear- headed by the Government'*
- *'A clear direction is needed first from the Government before WPD can invest in future plans'*

Nottingham Table 2

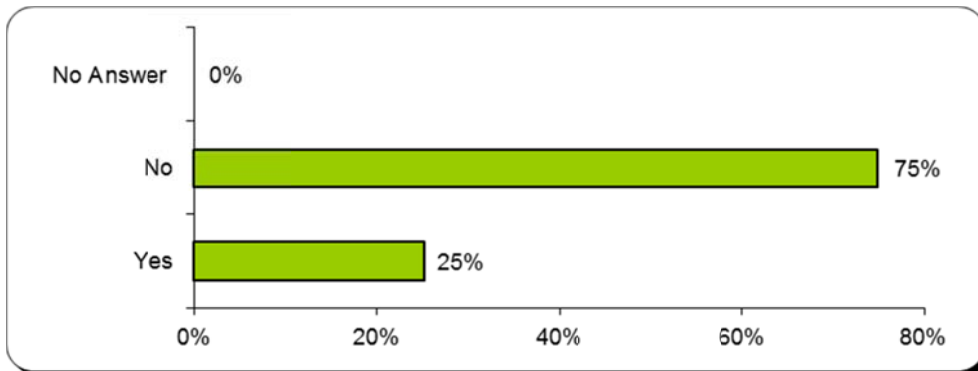
- *'No one on the table drives an electric vehicle or would be prepared to drive one currently'*
- *'Possibly the fact that there are no charging points is holding back car manufacturers from pushing electric cars'*
- *'Diesels are more efficient than electric ones currently'*

- *'The main issue is the problem with charging points and mileage'*
- *'It should be policy for new builds to have technology such as solar panels'*
- *'If the technology is there, it should be used'*
- *'The start-up cost is still quite expensive and this is what is holding these technologies back'*
- *'Solar thermals are quite good for heating water, but electricity production is not efficient'*
- *'Offshore wind is good for this country. The money required to spend on this is a lot though'*
- *'Research has shown that when people see how much energy you use you use less'*
- *'The benefits are often too far in the future for people to decide if it's really benefiting someone'*
- *'If given the choice of charging his car for 30p now or 7p overnight it will make a difference'*
- *'Smart meters would definitely help change a person's behaviour'*
- *'I would use a smart meter. You can see it as a game'*
- *'The more wealthy have the better chance to become more energy self-sufficient'*
- *'There is a generational gap. I am forever going around turning things off after my parents'*

8. Feedback

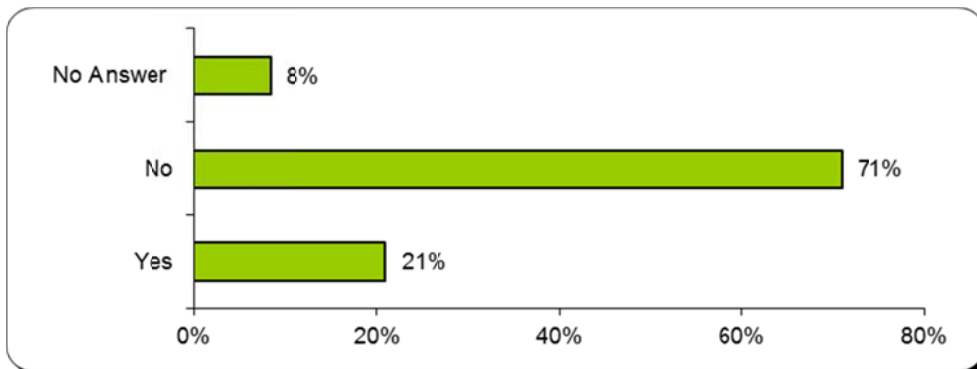
Q1. Had you heard of Western Power Distribution before the workshop?

75% of students had not heard of Western Power Distribution before the workshop



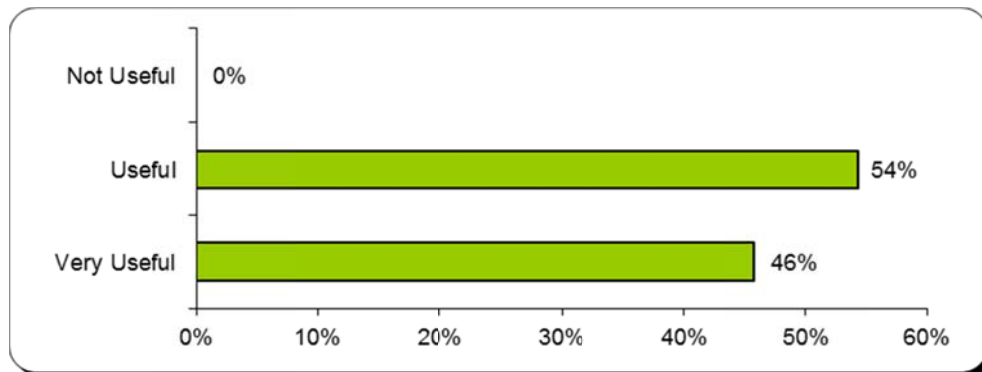
Q2. Did you know what a DNO did before the workshop?

71% of students did not know what a DNO did before the workshop



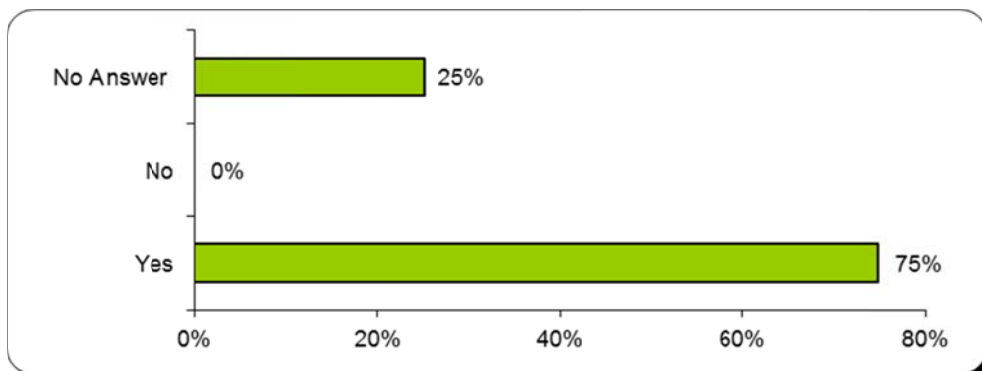
Q3. Did you find the workshop to be useful:

54% of attendees found the workshop to be 'useful' and 46% found it 'very useful'. No one found it to be not useful



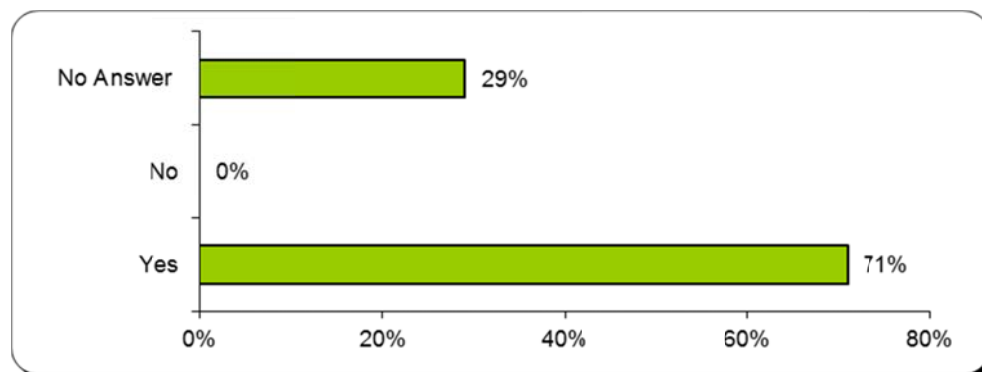
Q4. Did you feel you had enough opportunity to discuss your views today?

All students who answered felt they had the opportunity to discuss their views



Q.5 Does the rising cost of energy concern you?

71% of the students are concerned about the rising cost energy. 29% did not answer the question



8.1. Written feedback

A number of stakeholders left written comments on their feedback forms. A selection of these comments is shown below:

- *'Fantastic and very insightful'*
- *'Unexpected price hikes are a very big nuisance'*
- *'Very good to talk with others outside an engineering background'*
- *'Informative, good slides and discussion'*
- *'I am very keen to see the majority of future investments going into research, then WPD can make informed decisions on what/where to upgrade etc'*
- *'Well done for thinking about future bill payers'*
- *'Very imaginative, good to give my views and hear about the future of electricity distribution'*
- *'Good direction, good time frame'*
- *'As a student, bills are a definite concern as we are not earning an income'*
- *'Very educational and beneficial for attendees for understanding future concerns'*
- *'Excellent facilitation'*
- *'Always good to understand future concerns early'*
- *'It is really good in increasing our awareness on energy distribution and problems related to it'*
- *'It's been a very interesting and useful discussion with regard to increase of awareness in energy distribution etc'*
- *'Good information and discussion, seemed to be discussing some issues that would require consultation with other organisations (power, new tech etc.)'*
- *'Very informative, engaging and thought provoking'*
- *'Very interactive session learning about WPD and their aims for the future'*
- *'I found it interesting to find out where WPD is spending money and what it is considering to invest in'*
- *'Plenty of opportunities to raise opinions were given'*
- *'I now know much more about the whole system, how the business works and future issues'*
- *'Very well executed event'*