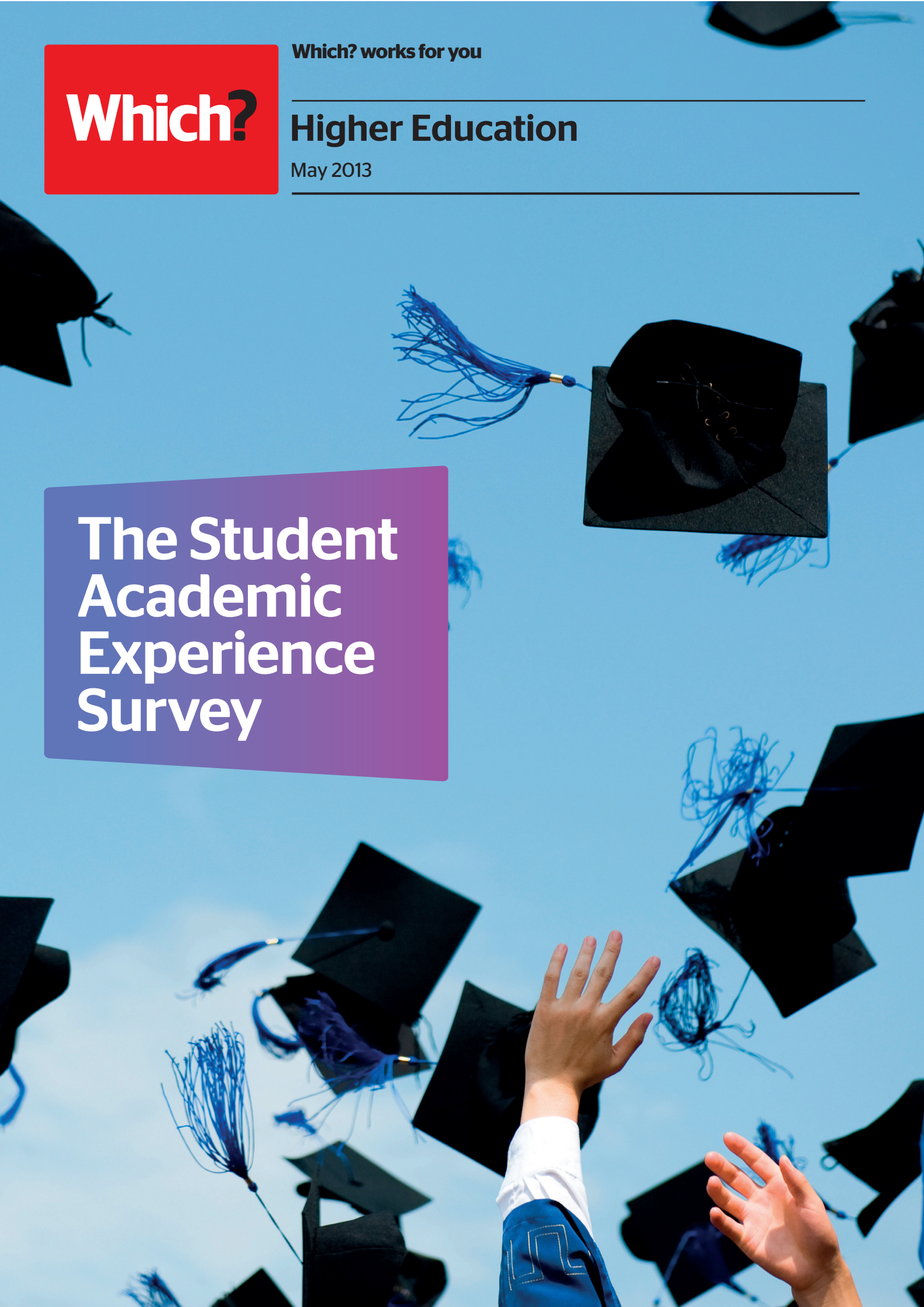
Which? works for you

Higher Education

May 2013



The Student Academic Experience Survey

Executive summary

The landscape in higher education has become increasingly competitive in the last year, raising difficult questions for students and the sector alike. From the student's perspective, with the rise in fees and challenges in the economy, there has never been greater pressure to make the right choice of course and institution and to leave in the best position to enter the graduate employment market. In turn, institutions face the challenge of understanding and meeting the expectations of a more demanding cohort of students without additional funds.

It is in this context that Which? developed its website, Which? University, to help prospective students make the right choice of course and institution for them. The website was launched in September last year and is already proving to be a useful resource for students, parents, teachers and careers advisers. As of April this year it has already achieved more than half a million visits.

In addition to this, we have joined forces with the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) to conduct the most comprehensive research yet into the student academic experience of full-time undergraduates in UK institutions. This is the fifth time the survey has been conducted since 2006 and it is the first time that the experiences of third- and fourth-year students have been included, and of students in institutions outside of England. Combining the results of this year's survey with last year's has given a total sample of around 26,000 students, enabling us to compare the experience of a student studying a subject at one university against another. The analysis is comprehensive but by no means complete; it covers 103 of the total 164 Higher Education Institutions in the UK.

The research reveals some interesting and challenging findings. It highlights the considerable diversity that exists in a student's typical academic experience, both in terms of the amount and the type of contact that they receive. For instance, a student studying Mathematics could expect to receive anywhere between 13 hours of scheduled contact per week at one university compared to 22 hours at another. A Social Studies student with eleven or fewer hours of contact each week, meanwhile, could find that anywhere between a tenth and half of that time is spent in small group teaching.

The need for clear upfront information about what students can expect from their academic experience is stark: **a third of students (32 per cent) said they might have chosen a different course if they had known what they did now**. A fifth of students (21 per cent) thought that information provided by universities was vague and one in 10 (9 per cent) thought it was misleading.

Such variability does not just apply to what students receive from the academic experience but also to what they input themselves. While some students' total workloads (combining the hours students spend in private study and scheduled teaching), were more than 40 hours per week, others were less than 20. The average student workload revealed in our study of 30 hours per week is around **25 per cent less than the amount assumed by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)'s UK Credit Framework[1].**

The Framework, which provides a description of typical practice across the sector, assumes notional learning time of 1,200 hours per year whereas students in our survey were working on average for just 900 hours[2]. This will be in part a result of individual factors; the survey finds that women study for more hours per week than men, for instance, as do mature students. But it also raises important questions about the amount of work demanded by different courses; what this means for sector-wide standards and students' ability to switch between institutions, particularly given that one of the aims of the Framework is to assist mobility. Of the approximately 10,000 students who said that their course had been worse than expected in some way, 14 per cent said that it had not been challenging enough.

Since 2006, when the first HEPI survey

21%
thought that information provided by universities was vague

32%
might have chosen a different course if they had more information

29%
of first year students think their course is poor value for money

was conducted, students at English Institutions have seen a nine-fold increase in tuition fees. However our latest research finds no change in the amount of contact time, small group teaching or proportion of teaching delivered by academic staff and no apparent relationship between the fees students are being charged and what they receive. The average tuition fee for this cohort is around £8,500 per year and yet students are experiencing very different things for this amount. The one fifth of students in our research charged fees of less than £8,000 per year were receiving no less contact time - and in fact were receiving more small-group teaching - than those paying the average fee.

This has implications for perceptions of value for money in higher education: three in ten first year students say that they think their course offers poor value for money. The number of contact hours students receive feeds into this. Thirty per cent of those receiving 0-9 hours of contact a week said that their course didn't offer value for money, compared to 10% for those receiving 15-24 hours contact per week. But it is by no means the only aspect. Fifty-six per cent of students that received 0-9 hours contact per week were satisfied with them. Key factors in determining this included whether or not students thought it was easy to contact staff outside of timetabled sessions, how satisfied they were with the quality of teaching during those sessions and their access to general facilities, such as the library, to support them in their private studies. Institutions need to engage with their students to understand how to improve their academic experiences.

This report contains some of the most important findings from the research and makes recommendations for change. These include:

- **Better information about academic study:** prospective students should be able to compare the amount and type of scheduled contact time they receive, as well as the amount of private study they will be expected to do. We want the Government to ensure that the Key Information Set (KIS) includes this information as soon as possible.
- **Investigation of variability in study time:** the QAA and BIS should investigate differences in the total study time that students are engaging in on different courses, and the implications for the UK Credit Framework.

We believe this research provides a valuable insight into what students are looking for from their academic experience and an opportunity for the sector to take a fresh look at this question from the student's point of view. We are keen that this research is used as widely as possible to inform the debate about how we define and measure the quality of academic experience offered by UK higher education institutions.

We will be making the raw data available on the Which? University website so that institutions can conduct their own analysis.

[1] QAA (2008) 'Higher education credit framework for England: guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England'
[2] Based on the average 30 hours study per week and assuming a 29 week academic year.

Students are working for 25% less than the amount assumed in the QAA Framework

Which?

Methodology

We commissioned independent research agency, Youthsight[3], to conduct a survey of 17,090 full-time undergraduate students in their first, second, third and fourth years at UK institutions. The fieldwork took place between the 26 February and 21 March 2013.

Data analysed at a subject level and above was weighted to ensure the sample was representative by gender, year of study, broad subject area and institution type (Russell Group, Pre-92, Post-92, specialist). Targets for the weights were taken from data supplied by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA).

We adopted the Joint Academic Coding System's (JACS) 19 broad subject area codes for the analysis. In order to ensure accuracy in the results, reporting rules were established. For analysis at institution level, 20 or more responses in a particular subject area within an institution was deemed sufficient for results to be presented, although we advise that findings for sub-groups based on less than 100 interviews are indicative rather than conclusive. In order for a subject to be included in the final analysis, at least five institutions had to have met the above reporting requirements. This meant that four subjects were not included in the institutional level analysis: Combined; Architecture, Building and Planning; Veterinary, Agriculture and related subjects; Mass Communications and Documentation.

To increase coverage and enable institutional level analysis we combined this year's data with last years. This gave a combined sample of 26,000. We limited the institutional analysis to 1st and 2nd years giving a sample of 21,471. This enabled us to achieve coverage of 103 institutions, though we recognise this is by no means comprehensive. For 10 subject areas, the survey covers between a quarter and a third of institutions delivering subjects within those areas, with a further three subject areas covering approximately half or more institutions delivering courses in those areas. In total we obtained 385 cases of different subjects being delivered across those 103 institutions.

However, we can be reassured that the data are reliable enough for inference about the institutions that are covered due to there being considerable consistency with the five waves conducted since 2006, and also that the standard deviations around mean scheduled hours was less than +/- 5 hours for 270 of 385 subjects by institution.

103
institutions

385
subjects across 103 institutions

Combining this year's results with last year's achieved a sample of 26,000

[3] YouthSight is powered by the 115,000 members of the OpinionPanel Community, the UK's largest and best recruited youth, student and young professional panel.

Findings

What do students receive from the academic experience?

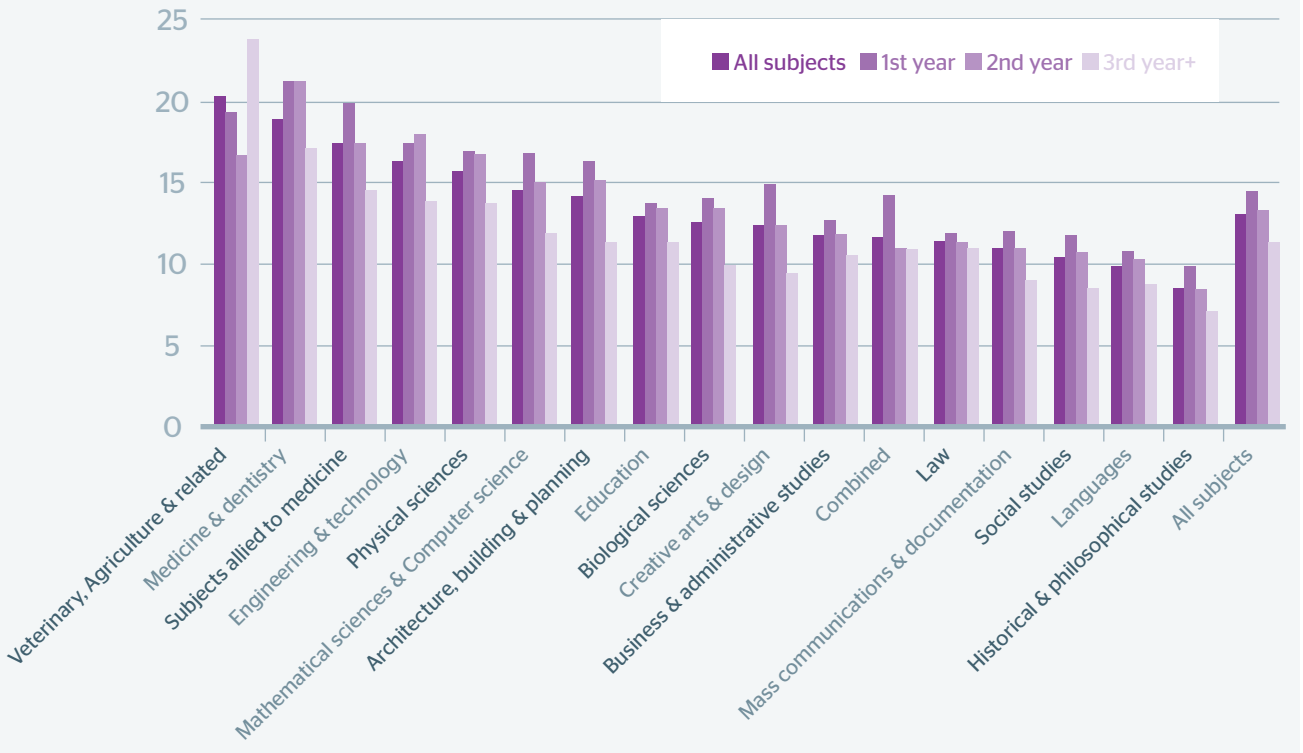
Variation in the amount of contact time

As the chart below shows, the average amount of weekly scheduled contact time across all institutions is 13 hours and 12 minutes. Consistent with previous waves, this year's survey identified quite considerable differences in the amount of academic contact time students receive between subjects and institutions. Medicine and Dentistry students spend most time in scheduled teaching with an average of 19 hours per week, whereas students of Historical and Philosophical Studies spend the least - an average of eight-and-a-half hours per week. Likewise, differences exist depending on the year of study. The average scheduled contact time for first-year students is 14-and-a-half hours per week, falling to 11 hours and 27 minutes in the third and fourth years.

In many ways this is what you would expect. Subjects with a large practical element will understandably have more contact hours than those more theoretical in content and involving greater levels of reading and independent research. Equally, fewer hours of teaching in their final year allows students to engage in more private study while they complete dissertations.

However, differences in the amount of contact time between institutions for the same subject are harder to explain. For most subjects we found instances of some institutions offering double the amount of contact than others. Students studying Physical Sciences can receive anywhere between 11 and 25 hours per week, and Social Studies students anywhere between nine and 16 hours, based on the institution they're enrolled with (table 1).

Chart 1: **Scheduled contact hours per week by subject and year of study (weighted)**



Base: All respondents (17,090); 1st year (6989); 2nd year (5,424); 3rd year+ (4,677)

Table 1 **Institutional ranges of scheduled contact hours per week by subject (unweighted)**

		Lowest institutional mean	Highest institutional mean	Median institutional mean	Number of institutions
1	Medicine and dentistry	14h 42m	26h 24m	20h 48m	17
2	Subjects allied to medicine	13h 18m	25h 06m	19h 54m	34
3	Biological sciences	10h 48m	24h 54m	13h 54m	53
4	Physical sciences	11h 18m	25h 06m	17h 18m	25
5	Mathematical sciences and computer science	13h 36m	20h 36m	16h 30m	26
6	Engineering and technology	13h 18m	29h 36m	19h 18m	22
7	Social studies	8h 42m	16h	11h 18m	46
8	Law	7h 48m	13h 18m	11h 12m	18
9	Business and administrative studies	9h 54m	21h 18m	12h	33
10	Languages	8h 42m	13h 36m	10h 36m	21
11	Historical and philosophical studies	7h 18m	15h	8h 42m	24
12	Creative arts and design	9h 36m	19h 12m	13h 06m	42
13	Education	10h 24m	16h 54m	13h 18m	19
Total		7h 18m	29h 36m	13h 42m	380

Cell sizes range from 20-57

Part of this variation may be explained by the broad subject categories required to carry out the analysis; we cannot be sure that the courses making up Biological Sciences at one institution are exactly the same as those at another. However, analysis at a more granular level (principal subject codes) reveals similar variations. Students studying Mathematics reported receiving anywhere between 13 and 22 hours per week and Nursing students between 15 and 25 hours (table 2). Variation in contact time at subject level may additionally reflect differences within course content, or be explained by different pedagogic practices, with some institutions adopting a more directive teaching approach and others requiring more independent learning. Some of the variation may also level off when you take into account different term lengths and the varying number of academic weeks; our review of 20 institution websites revealed that academic terms can range from 24 to 31 weeks.

Regardless of the reasons for different amounts of contact time, we also found there is very little information about contact hours available on universities' own websites, making it almost impossible for prospective students to know what to expect or to meaningfully compare options. Only two out of the 20 university websites and prospectuses we reviewed provided comprehensive information on the total number of contact hours each week, but even this was not broken down by lectures or tutorials.

Table 2 **Institutional ranges of scheduled contact hours by principal subject (unweighted[4])**

	Lowest Institutional mean	Highest Institutional mean	Number of institutions
Mathematics	13h 24m	21h 36m	10
Nursing	15h 12m	25h 30m	7
Pre-clinical medicine	19h 30m	25h 30m	6
Physics	17h 12m	19h 42m	4
English studies	7h 36m	10h 48m	4
Training teachers	13h 24m	18h 24m	4

Cell sizes range from 22-41

[4] Note in order to be able to show some data at the principle subject level we reduced our reporting requirements in this one instance from five to four institutions.

Variation in the type of contact

In many ways the amount of contact students receive is less important than the nature of that contact. Evidence suggests there are negative educational outcomes associated with large teaching groups[5]. Other influential factors include who is doing the teaching and the amount and type of feedback that students receive.

Small group teaching

The importance of small group teaching was strongly recognised by students. Sixty five per cent felt that they gain 'a lot' educationally from learning in groups of one to five, compared to less than a quarter (23 per cent) in groups of 100 other students.

This is particularly important given the variation in the amount of small group teaching students received. On average students attended four hours per week in teaching groups of 0-15, rising to six hours for students at specialist institutions and falling to around three hours and twenty two minutes for students at other Pre-92 institutions (table 3). Students at specialist institutions

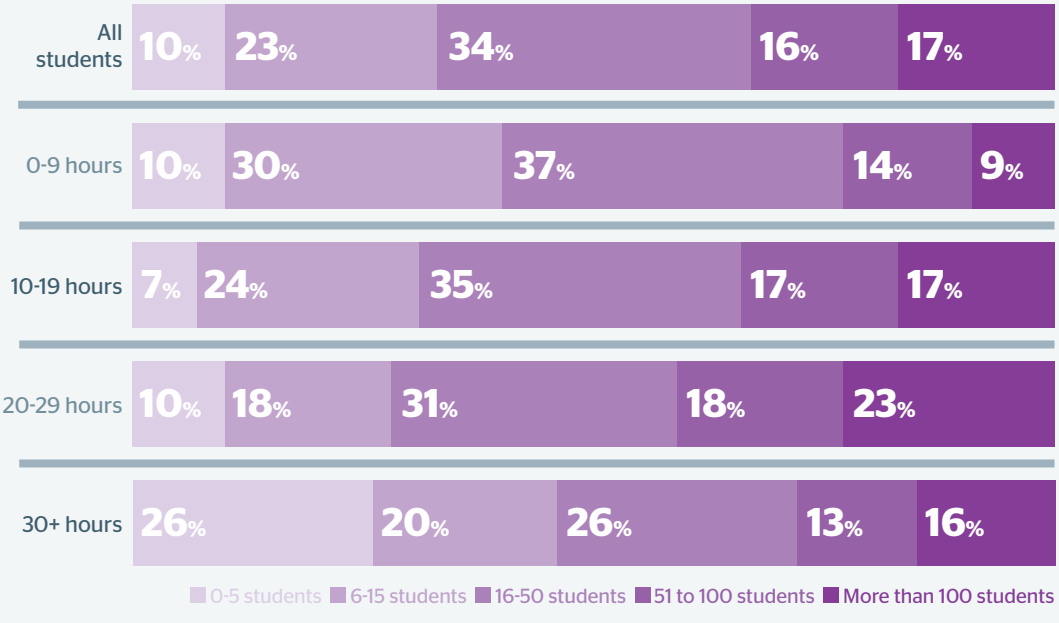
[5]See Gibbs, G (2010) 'Dimensions of quality' and Gibbs, G (2012) 'Implications of dimensions of quality in a market environment'

Table 3: **Size of teaching groups by institutional type (weighted)**

	Hours per week with 0-5 students	Hours per week with 6-15 students	Hours per week with 16-50 students	Hours per week with 51-100 students	Hours per week with more than 100 students	Total hours per week attended
All students	1h 14m	2h 49m	4h 05m	1h 59m	2h 02m	12h 09m
Russell Group	1h 37m	2h 31m	3h 08m	2h 15m	3h 26m	12h 58m
Pre-92	56m	2h 26m	3h 44m	2h 20m	2h 12m	11h 37m
Post-92	59m	3h 07m	4h 39m	1h 43m	1h 16m	11h 45m
Specialist	2h 40m	3h 19m	5h 12m	1h 29m	1h 23m	14h 02m

Base: All respondents (17,090); Russell Group (5,909); Pre 92 (4,356); Post 92 (6,156); Specialist (669)

Chart 2: **Proportion of time in small group teaching by scheduled contact hours (weighted)**



Base: All respondents (17,090); 0-9 hours (4,718), 10-19 hours (9,260), 20-29 hours (2,460), 30+ hours (685)

Table 4: **Proportion of time in small group teaching among Social Studies students receiving less than 11 hours of scheduled contact per week (unweighted)**

	Mean scheduled hours	Mean % 0-5 group	Mean % 6-15 group	Total % in small group	Number of students
Brunel University	10h 12m	2%	9%	11%	25
Hull, The University of	9h 18m	8%	11%	19%	24
East Anglia, The University of (UEA)	10h 24m	4%	29%	32%	27
Sheffield, The University of	9h 18m	3%	30%	33%	30
Royal Holloway, University of London	10h 18m	3%	31%	34%	29
Goldsmiths, University of London	9h	6%	44%	50%	30
Oxford, The University of	8h 42m	39%	13%	52%	41

and Russell Group universities also received considerably more contact in even smaller groups of 0-5 students.

To some extent students who received lower levels of contact time were compensated by receiving a greater proportion of this time in small groups. For example, those receiving 0-9 contact hours per week received 40 per cent of this in groups of 0-15 other students, compared to 28 per cent for students who received between 20-29 hours of contact hours per week (chart 2). However, this trend reverses for the three per cent of students receiving more than 30 scheduled contact hours per week.

These overarching trends mask some considerable variations in practice between different institutions. For instance, Social Studies students receiving less than 11 hours of contact time per week spent anything from 11 to 52 per cent of their time in groups of 0-15 (table 4).

Table 5: **Proportion of teaching in groups of 6-15 led by an academic (unweighted)**

	% with an academic	Number of students
Winchester, The University of	100	37
Middlesex University	100	44
Robert Gorden Unversity, The	100	38
Salford, The University of	100	55
Gloucestershire, University of	100	41
Warwick, The University of	63.4	104
York, The University of	62.9	107
Edinburgh, The University of	61.2	142
Bath, The University of	57.7	60
London School of Economics and Political Science	53.1	26

Amount of teaching from an academic member of staff

While the survey was not able to ascertain whether or not those leading discussions had a teaching qualification, it did ask students whether sessions were mainly led by an academic member of staff or a non-academic member of staff, such as a research assistant or PhD student.

On the whole, students reported that academic members of staff were more likely to lead larger group teaching sessions. Ninety seven per cent of sessions with 51 or more students were led by academic staff, compared to 78 per cent with 0-5 other students. Overall, non-academic members of staff were more commonly used to lead smaller group teaching, although this was more common at some types of universities than others. Use of academic staff to lead smaller group sessions of 6-15 students was more prevalent at newer Post-92 universities (93 per cent), than at older, research-intensive Russell Group institutions (74 per cent).

This pattern was reflected at an institutional level. Table 5 shows the proportion of students who received teaching within groups of 6-15 at a range

of universities. Students at the University of Winchester and Middlesex University received 100 per cent of this time with an academic, whereas those at the University of Bath and the London School of Economics and Political Science received 58 and 53 per cent respectively.

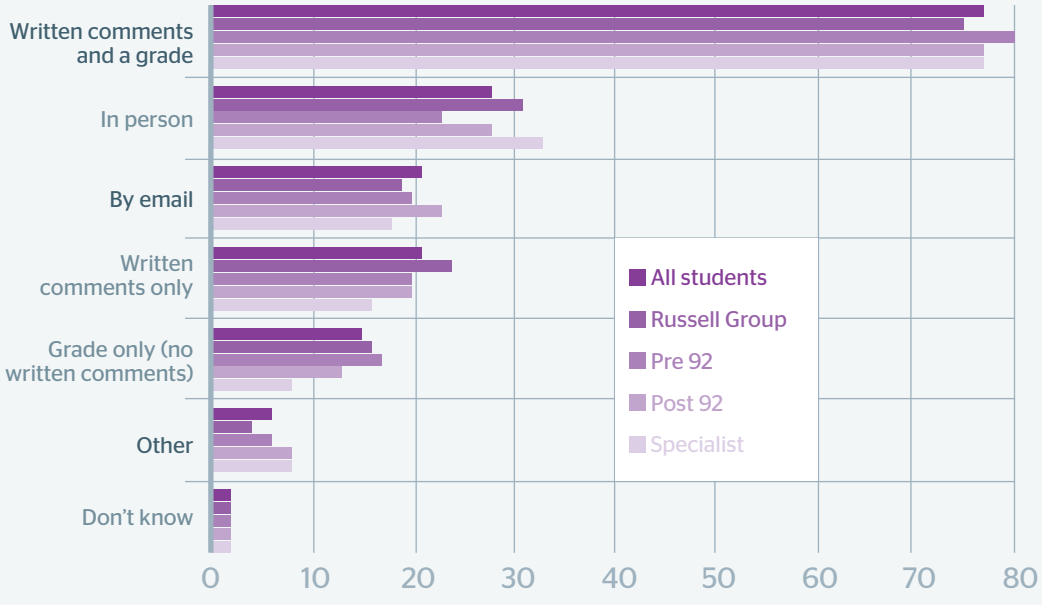
Feedback

Evidence has found that the amount of feedback students receive and the nature of this feedback has a marked effect on student outcomes[6]. This is in part dependent on the amount of work that students are set and hand in to be marked. Students at Russell Group universities handed in an average of seven assignments in the last term compared to five among students of Post-92 institutions and four at specialist universities.

The most common way for students to receive feedback about submitted work was via a combination of written comments and a grade - reported by 77 per cent (chart 3). However, there was some variability within this. Three in ten said that they normally received feedback in person, which was particularly true for students at Russell Group and specialist universities, and a significant minority (15 per cent) said they normally received a grade with no written feedback.

[6]Gibbs, G (2012) 'Implications of dimensions of quality in a market environment'

Chart 3: **Nature of feedback by institutional type (weighted)**



Base: All respondents (17,090); Russell Group (5,909); Pre 92 (4,356); Post 92 (6,156); Specialist (669)

What do students put into their academic experience?

Of course, the teaching students receive is only one part of their academic experience. The amount of effort that they put in independently plays an important role in determining what students get out of the higher education experience. The research also therefore explored students' contributions to their learning in terms of attendance of scheduled teaching and commitment to private study.

Attendance

A third of students reported that they had missed sessions, averaging an hour per week, and bringing the number of attended hours spent in scheduled teaching down to 12 from 13 per week. This differed quite considerably by subject. Students who study courses related to Business & Administrative Studies were most likely to attend fewer timetabled sessions (missing 12 per cent of scheduled timetabled sessions).

When we asked students why they missed sessions it was clear that some of the variation in attendance by subject reflects different course requirements, with a quarter saying that sessions were

optional. However, the most commons reason students gave for not attending sessions related to perceptions of their utility, with 51 per cent saying that they did not find sessions useful and 41 per cent saying they didn't feel they needed to go because the notes were available online (chart 4).

Private study

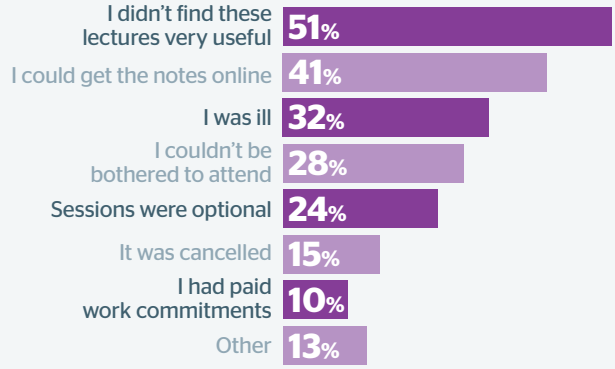
This year the survey found that students spent on average 17 hours per week engaged in private study. The majority of this time was spent studying alone, although students also reported spending around an hour per week studying with friends.

As expected, there is considerable variation in the amount of private study undertaken and some of this will relate to individual factors. For example, the survey found that women spend more time each week studying than men (17-and-a-half compared to around 15-and-a-half hours per week) and students over the age of 21 engage in more private study than younger students (just over 19 hours compared to 14 hours and 42 minutes). Interestingly while employment had a small effect on whether or not students missed scheduled sessions it didn't have any impact on private study, with students in employment studying for just over 16-and-a-half hours per week compared to an average of 16 hours and 43 minutes.

But there also seems to be some institutional and subject effect on private study. Looking at institutional types, the average reported private study duration per week at Russell Group institutions was 18 hours and 18 minutes and 15 hours and 42 minutes at post-92 institutions respectively. As you might expect, students studying subjects with fewer average contact hours reported studying more independently. While the average amount of private study undertaken by students was 16 hours and 40 minutes per week, this rose to 19-and-a-half for Law students and 20-and-a-half for Historical and Philosophical students, who on average received the lowest contact hours of all.

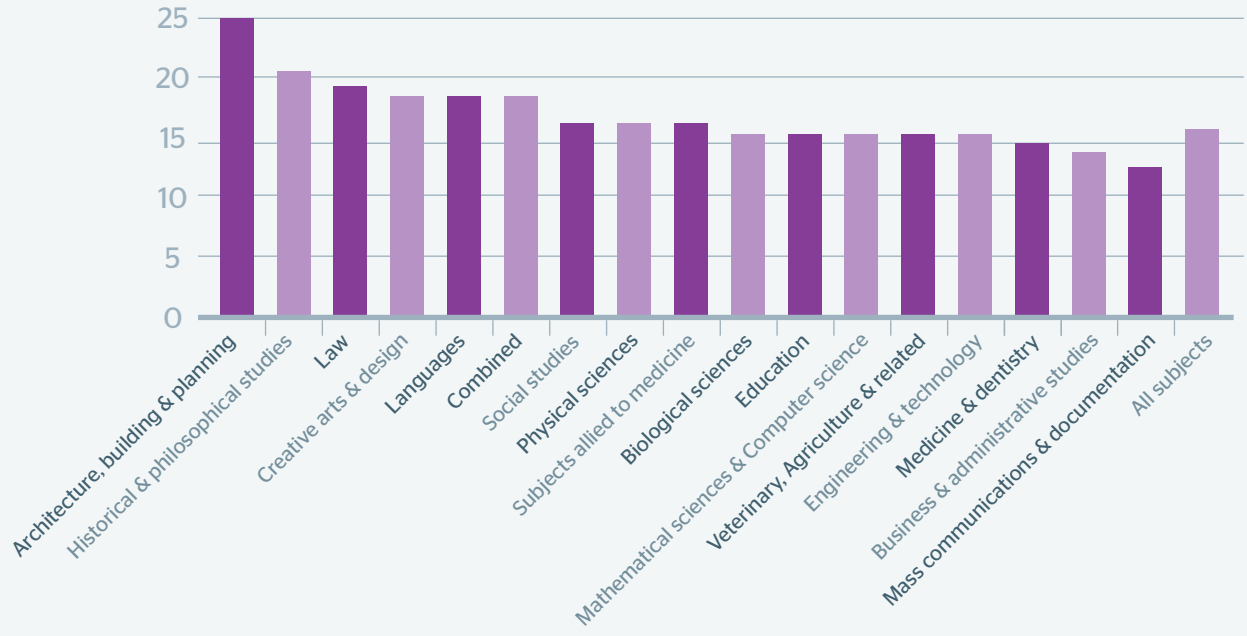
However, this relationship did not hold for all subjects. Mass Communications and Documentation and Business Administration students, who reported receiving some of the lowest hours of scheduled contact time, also reported the lowest amount of private study. Conversely, Architecture, Building and Planning students, who received average hours of scheduled contact, reported the highest amount of private study.

Chart 4: **Reasons for missed sessions (weighted)**



Base: All who attended fewer hours than timetabled (5,738)

Chart 5: **Private study by subject (weighted)**



Base: All respondents (17,090)

Relationship between scheduled contact hours and private study

Given the variability in the number of scheduled contact hours reported for different institutions delivering the same subjects, a more accurate view of the relationship between scheduled and private teaching can be gained by looking at how this breaks down for different amounts of contact time.

As chart 6 shows, students receiving 0-9 hours of contact per week on average report undertaking roughly the same amount of private study per week as students receiving between 10-29 hours of scheduled contact. When scheduled contact hours exceed 30 per week, students report studying privately considerably more. It is worth noting that this last group of students only makes a small proportion of the total sample - just three per cent - and so this represents the experiences of a minority of the student population.

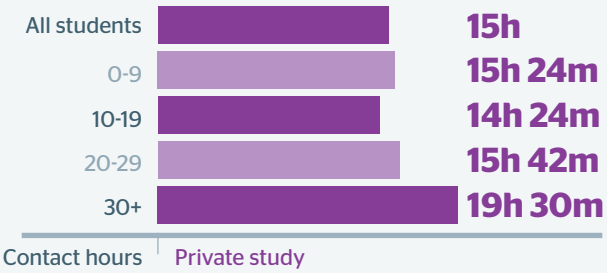
However, yet again, these averages conceal a great deal of variation at the institutional level. Plotting data on scheduled contact hours and private study for each subject at each institution shows that the relationship between contact hours and private study is actually very diverse (chart 7).

There are many cases where students are receiving below average hours of contact but are undertaking very high or very low levels of private study. Equally, there are cases of students engaging in high levels of private study as well as receiving a high number of contact hours. In the figure below, each dot represents a subject at an institution. Whether private or scheduled teaching was high or low was assessed against the average amount of scheduled contact and private study for all students.

Table 6 provides some examples to illustrate the varying combinations of private study and scheduled teaching for different subjects at different institutions.

While Law students at the University of Oxford received just eight hours of contact per week, they undertook almost 40 hours of private study per week compared to 11 hours of private study for students at Leeds Metropolitan University studying Social Studies, who

Chart 6: **Private study by scheduled contact hours per week (weighted)**



Base: First and second year students (11,459)

Chart 7: **Scatter diagram of private study by scheduled contact (unweighted)**

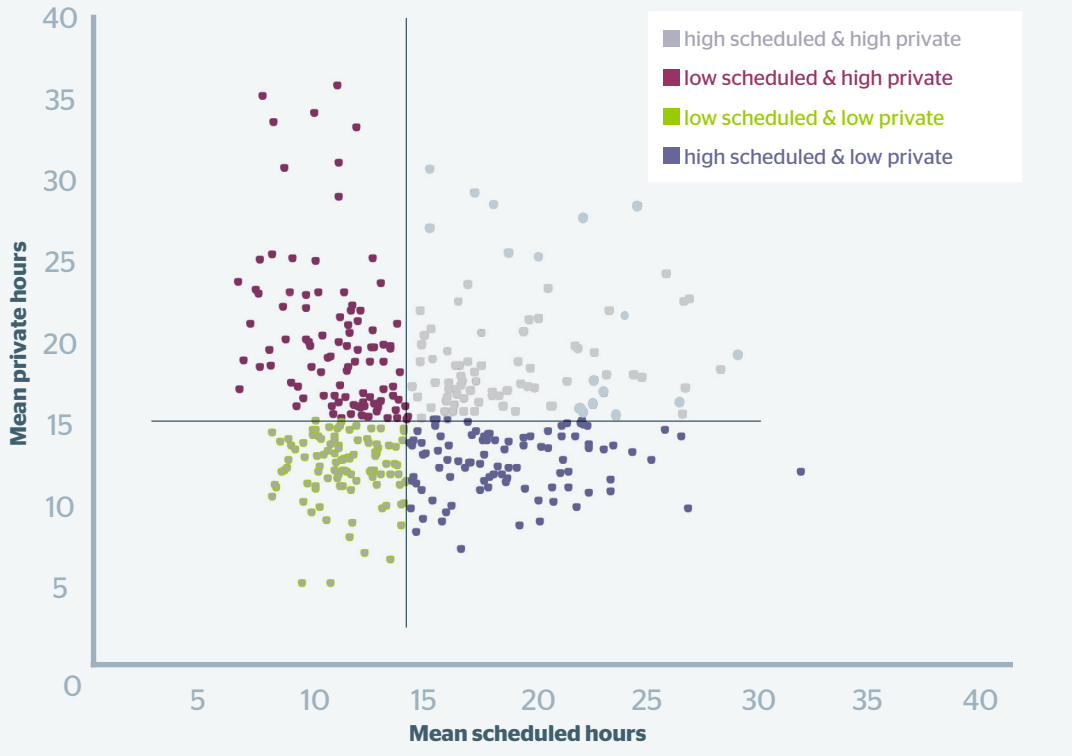


Table 6: **Institutional examples of the mix of scheduled teaching and private study (unweighted)**

Institution	Subject	Mean scheduled	Mean private
Low scheduled, high private			
Oxford, The University of	Law	7h 48m	39h 18m
Cambridge, The University of	Historical and Philosophical studies	11h 12m	33h 18m
Oxford, The University of	Social studies	12h	31h
Cambridge, The University of	Languages	10h 18m	31h 48m
Oxford, The University of	Historical and Philosophical studies	8h 18m	32h 42m
Low scheduled, low private			
Leeds Metropolitan University	Social studies	8h 48m	11h 12m
Manchester Metropolitan University, The	Business and administrative studies	12h 18m	7h 36m
Northumbria University	Historical and Philosophical studies	8h 36m	10h 42m
Middlesex University	Business and administrative studies	11h	6h
Leeds Metropolitan University	Business and administrative studies	9h 54m	6h
High scheduled, high private			
Nottingham, The University of	Veterinary science and Agriculture and related subjects	27h	18h 30m
Dundee, The University of	Medicine and dentistry	26h 24m	17h 42m
Cambridge, The University of	Physical sciences	25h	21h 40m
University College London (UCL)	Medicine and dentistry	25h	16h 42m
Cambridge, The University of	Biological sciences	24h 54m	21h 24m
High scheduled, low private			
Newcastle University	Engineering and technology	29h 36m	12h 6m
Bedfordshire, University of	Subjects allied to medicine	24h 48m	14h
Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine	Medicine and dentistry	23h 12m	14h 24m
St George's, University of London	Subjects allied to medicine	23h 42m	12h 48m
Surrey, The University of	Engineering and technology	22h 54m	13h 12m
Cell sizes range from 20-60			

received a similar number of contact hours. Engineering and Technology students at Newcastle University, who received 29-and-a-half hours of scheduled contact, undertook an average of 12 hours study per week, compared to 18-and-a-half hours per week for students at the University of Nottingham studying Veterinary Science and Agricultural-related subjects, again with a similar number hours of scheduled contact.

It is impossible to discern from this exactly how much private study is a result of institutional factors, such as workload and expectations, and how much relates to the demographic profile of the students that attend these institutions and apply for these subjects. The fact that Russell Group university students are on the whole undertaking more hours of private study per week than non-Russell Group institutions, coupled with the higher number of assignments these students are required to complete, suggests that institutional factors play some role. As we discuss later on in the report, of the approximately 10,000 students who said that their course had been worse in some way than expected, 14 per cent said that it had not been challenging enough.

> *"Disappointed with my course, it's not a challenge and sometimes a complete joke - could be completed in one year, never mind three"*
>
> Second-year student, Business and Administrative Studies

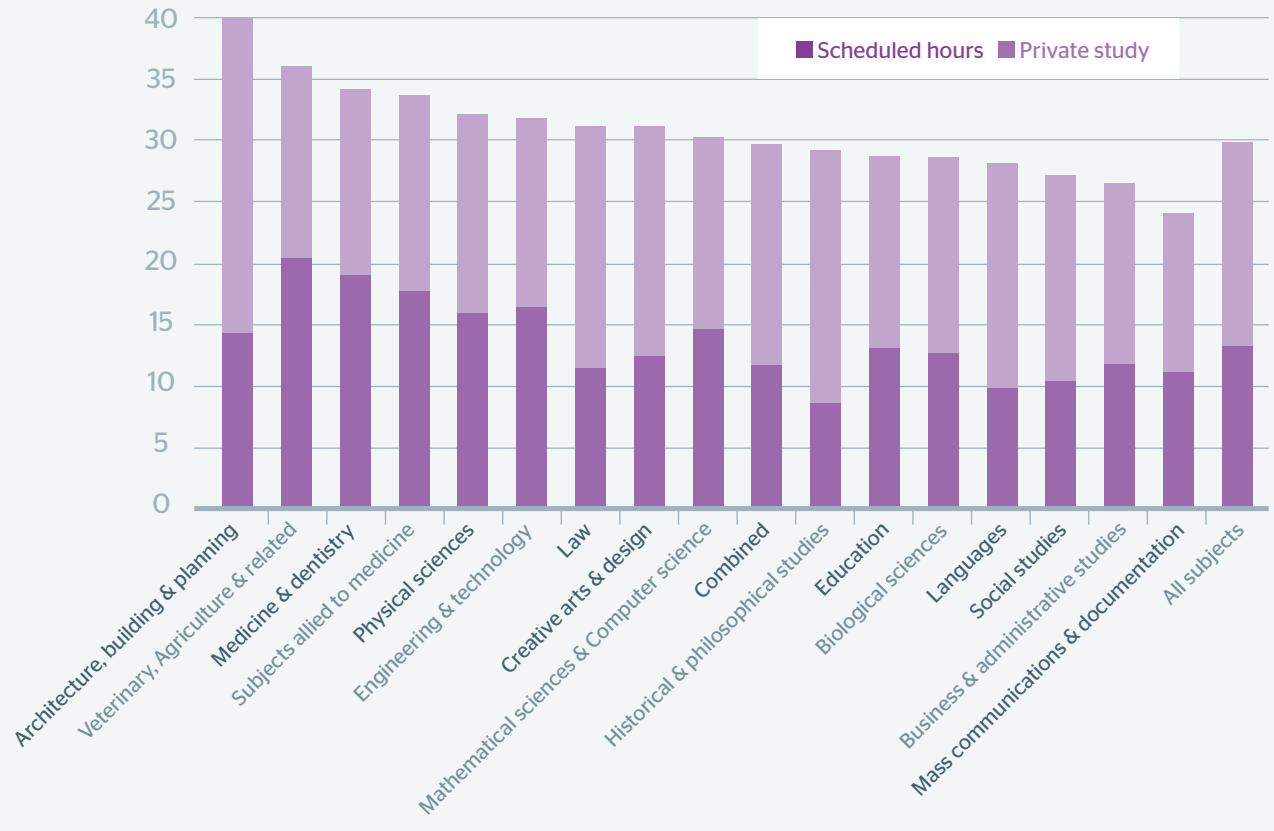
How much are students working in total?

The findings highlight the average total workload (the amount of private study and scheduled teaching combined) for students was just under 30 hours per week - or 29 hours, when factoring in the hour of scheduled learning missed by student each week on average. This figure rises to almost 40 hours for those studying Architecture, Building and Planning subjects and falls to 24 hours for students studying Mass Communications and Documentation (chart 8).

As previously mentioned, the chart below shows that to some extent lower contact hours are made up for by private study, but this does not hold for all subjects. Students studying a Social Studies, Business and Administrative Studies or Mass Communications and Documentation subject all report receiving low scheduled hours of contact and undertaking the least private study.

However, when we look at institution-level data it reveals a far more varied picture. Most strikingly it shows that in all bar four subjects there were cases of institutions whose student workloads were under 25 hours per week (table 7). These were not isolated incidences. More than a quarter of the total 386

Chart 8: **Total workload by subject (weighted)**



Base: All respondents (17,090)

Table 7: **Institutional ranges of total workload (unweighted)**

		Lowest Institutional Mean	Highest Institutional Mean	Median Institutional mean value	Number of institutions
1	Medicine and dentistry	32h 42m	49h 48m	36h 18m	17
2	Subjects allied to medicine	28h 36m	44h 12m	34h	34
3	Biological sciences	20h 12m	40h 18m	28h 12m	53
4	Physical sciences	32h 06m	47h	31h	25
5	Mathematical sciences and computer science	23h 06m	43h 30m	30h 32m	26
6	Engineering and technology	20h 36m	42h 06m	34h 30m	22
7	Social studies	22h 54m	40h	25h 18m	46
8	Law	21h 42m	47h 12m	29h 30m	18
9	Business and administrative studies	16h 54m	39h 12m	24h 48m	33
10	Languages	23h 48m	42h 06m	28h 06m	21
11	Historical and philosophical studies	19h 18m	44h 36m	27h 06m	24
12	Creative arts and design	23h 24m	43h	31h 12m	42
13	Education	21h 06m	36h 36m	26h 48m	19
Total		**15h 54m**	**49h 48m**	**29h 36m**	380

Cell sizes range from 20-63

cases (102 out of 386) in the sample had total workloads of less than 26 hours per week.

Among institutions delivering the same subjects we can also see that total workloads vary considerably. The table below shows examples of total workloads for students studying Historical and Philosophical Studies. Whereas students at Northumbria University engage in 19 hours of learning in total per week, students at the University of Cambridge engage in nearly 45 hours.

The majority of students reporting total workloads of less than 25 hours per week also reported below average contact hours, on average 11 hours per week. Somewhat surprisingly, this also included students of some subjects more typically associated with higher hours generally, such as Biological Sciences and Mathematical Science and Computer Science.

Table 8: **Range of total workloads for Historical and Philosophical Studies students**

	Mean scheduled hours	Mean private hours	Scheduled & private hours mean	Number of students
Northumbria University	8h 36m	10h 42m	19h 18m	21
Essex, The University of	8h 48m	11h 24m	20h 12m	20
University College London (UCL)	10h 42m	11h 12m	26h 54m	21
Sheffield, The University of	8h 30m	18h 48m	27h 18m	22
Oxford, The University of	8h 18m	32h 42m	41h	49
Cambridge, The University of	11h 12m	33h 18m	44h 36m	46

How has this changed over time?

The table below looks at some of the core metrics measured as part of the Academic Experience survey to see how they have changed over time, both in terms of what students put in but also what they get out.

It shows that there has been very little change since the survey started in 2006. Average reported contact hours have risen by around 20 minutes per week, small group teaching by 12 minutes per week and the amount of time with an academic has not seen any change. There has been a greater increase in the amount of effort students believe they put into their studies: a rise from 12 hours and 48 minutes per week to 14 hours and eight minutes between 2006 and 2013. Over this time students at English institutions have seen a nine-fold increase in fees, from £1,000 to £9,000 per annum.

To some extent it is not surprising that there is no correlation between these measures of the academic experience and the rise in tuition fees, as fees have replaced government grant funding income rather than providing additional funding. And while there has been an increase in teaching funding per full-time entrant since 2006, in many cases this has been matched by additional cost pressures. However, the findings do show that, as a whole, the sector has not found ways of cost effectively delivering more to students over this period.

Table 9: **Changes to student academic experience since 2006**

	2006	2007	2012	2012
Scheduled contact hours	13h 45m	13h 55m	13h 59m	14h 3m
Private study hours	12h 48m	12h 27m	14h 22m	14h 8m
Total workload hours	26h 30m	26h 22m	28h 21m	28h 10m
Time spent in small teaching groups (0-15)	3h 38m	3h 51m	3h 30m	3h 51m
Proportion of time in small groups with academic member of staff	N/A	83%	82%	N/A

Base: first and second year students only; 2013 (12,413); 2012 (9,058); 2007 (14,819); 2006 (14,616)

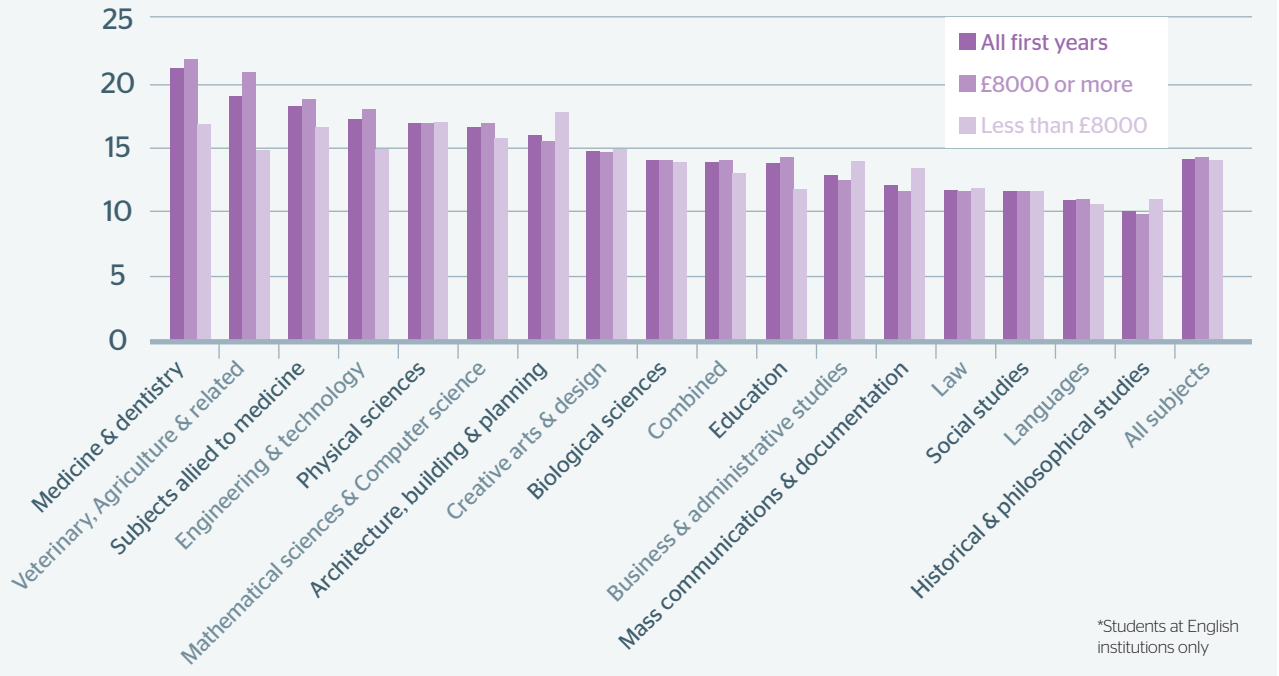
Contact hours have risen by just 20 minutes per week since 2006

Do students who pay more get more?

Looking at first-year students studying at English institutions in isolation, the survey also found no obvious relationship between tuition fees and the academic experience students say they have. Fees are clustered around the £9,000 mark (£8,500 per year on average overall), yet in return it appears there are vast differences in students' academic experiences.

Looking at the minority of first year students at English institutions who paid under £8,000 in fees (20 per cent of the sample) it is also interesting to note that they didn't receive fewer contact hours on average than students paying higher fees - and in fact received more small group teaching. Students paying more than £8,000 received 3.54 hours per week in groups of 0-15 compared to 5 hours for students paying less than £8,000.

Chart 9 **Scheduled contact hours by tuition fees paid**



*Students at English institutions only

Base: All first years* (5,231); First years who pay £8,000 or more (4,358); First years who pay less than £8,000 (873)

What do students think?

Quality of the course

In addition to looking at what students say they contribute and receive, the research also considered what students think about their academic experience.

Here we see that, very much in line with the National Student Survey (NSS), students are positive; 87 per cent agreed that the quality of their course overall was good. Students at older universities were more likely to agree with this – 91 per cent at Russell Group institutions versus 84 per cent at Post-92 institutions.

However, within this overall positive picture a significant minority were dissatisfied with their academic experience and more broadly there were areas of discontent even amongst the satisfied. When we asked students how far their academic experience at university had met their expectations, a third said it had exceeded them (32 per cent), while one in 10 said it was worse than expected. Overall, more than half of the sample agreed it had either been worse (13 per cent) or better in some ways and worse in others (45 per cent). A third (32 per cent) said that they definitely or might have changed their course or university if they had known what they did now about their academic experience. Students from Post-92 universities were more likely to say this (35 per cent versus 28 per cent at Russell Group institutions).

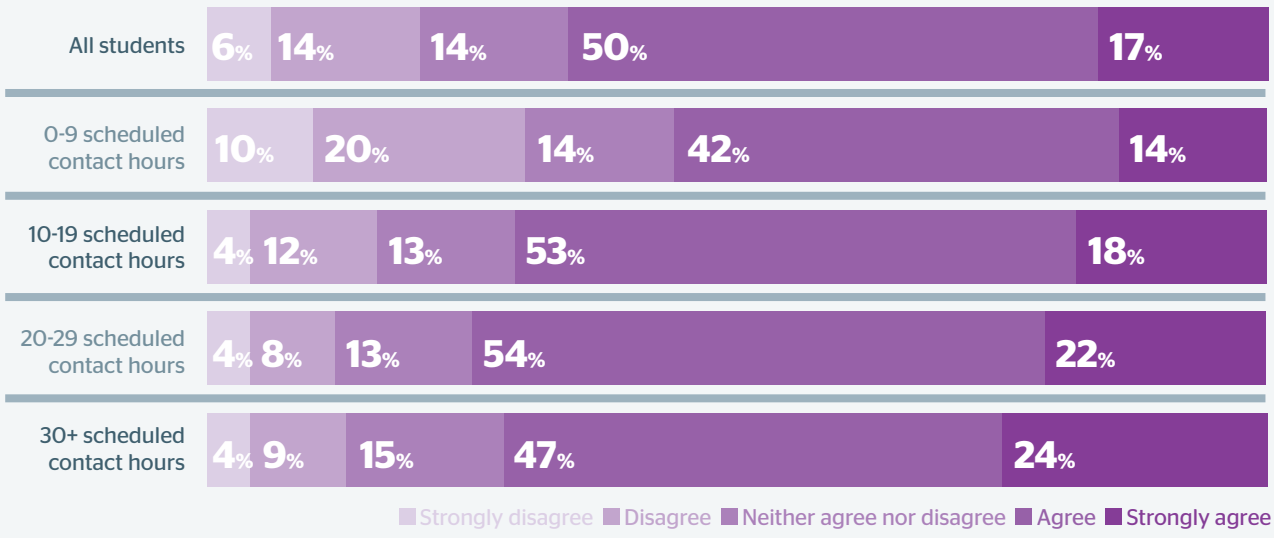
Looking at the reasons students gave for their course being worse than expected (chart 10), roughly a third of students (34 per cent) said that this was because the course was poorly organised or that they received fewer contact hours than expected (32 per cent) and three in ten that teaching quality or feedback was poor (30 per cent) or that they didn't feel supported in their private study (30 per cent). A fifth (20 per cent) said that the teaching groups were too large.

Chart 10: **Reasons for course being worse than expected**

Base: All who thought their academic experience was worse in some ways (9,871)

87% agreed that the quality of their course was good

Chart 11: **Proportion that agree they are satisfied with the amount of timetabled sessions they receive by scheduled teaching hours**



Base: All respondents (17,090); 0-9 hours (4,718), 10-19 hours (9,260), 20-29 hours (2,460), 30+ hours (685)

Contact hours

One of the most common reasons students gave for the course being worse than expected related to receiving fewer contact hours than they had anticipated. While two thirds of students were satisfied with their contact hours overall (67 per cent), this fell to just over half (56 per cent) among students who reported receiving 0-9 contact hours per week (chart 11). Three in ten students were dissatisfied with the hours they received compared to 12 per cent of students with 20-29 hours of contact.

The research also indicates that students' perception of value for money is associated with contact hours: 30 per cent of students receiving 0-9 hours of contact per week disagreed that their course offered value for money, compared to 10 per cent for those with 15-24 hours contact per week.

However, it is worth reflecting on what makes the 56 per cent of students that are receiving 0-9 contact hours satisfied. When we conducted a logistic regression to measure the independent association of factors with the likelihood of being satisfied with scheduled hours of 0-9 per week, the model explained a fair amount of the variation in the data (between 21 per cent and 28 per cent). It found the following factors had the most significant relationship with satisfaction with amount of timetabled sessions received:

- whether students agree that it is easy to schedule time with staff outside teaching sessions;
- whether students agree they have sufficient access to academic staff;
- whether students think that the teaching quality is good;
- whether students have a clear understanding of course goals; and
- whether students are satisfied with access to general facilities.

This is also reflected in the comments received from students.

> *"It's down to value for money. I'm a third year history student and only get three hours a week contact time. And yet I pay the same price as someone who has 12 hours a week."*
>
> Third year, Historical and Philosophical Studies (History by Topic)

> *"The lack of contact hours for English is pretty disappointing. It's a bit of a running joke that there are hundreds of English students, but you never see one another because you only have six hours of class a week. The rest of the time is spent in independent study - valuable, yes, but perhaps not good enough, especially considering the hike in tuition fees."*
>
> Third year, Classics and related subjects (English)

> *"The course doesn't have as much small group or seminar work as I could wish for.. As the lecturers are researchers you often have to wait a week or two to get an appointment if you cannot make their office hour."*
>
> First year, Biological Sciences (Psychology)

Teaching quality

On the whole students were positive about the quality of the teaching they received. As chart 12 shows the majority of students said that all or the majority of their teaching staff were helpful and supportive (70 per cent), clearly explained course goals and requirements (65 per cent) and worked hard to make their subjects interesting (59 per cent). But this still leaves a considerable proportion of students who thought that half or fewer of their teachers met these indicators.

Other aspects of teaching were reported to be more variable, with 48 per cent of students saying that half or fewer of their teaching staff motivated them to do their best and 45 per cent said the same proportion used lectures and teaching groups to guide independent study.

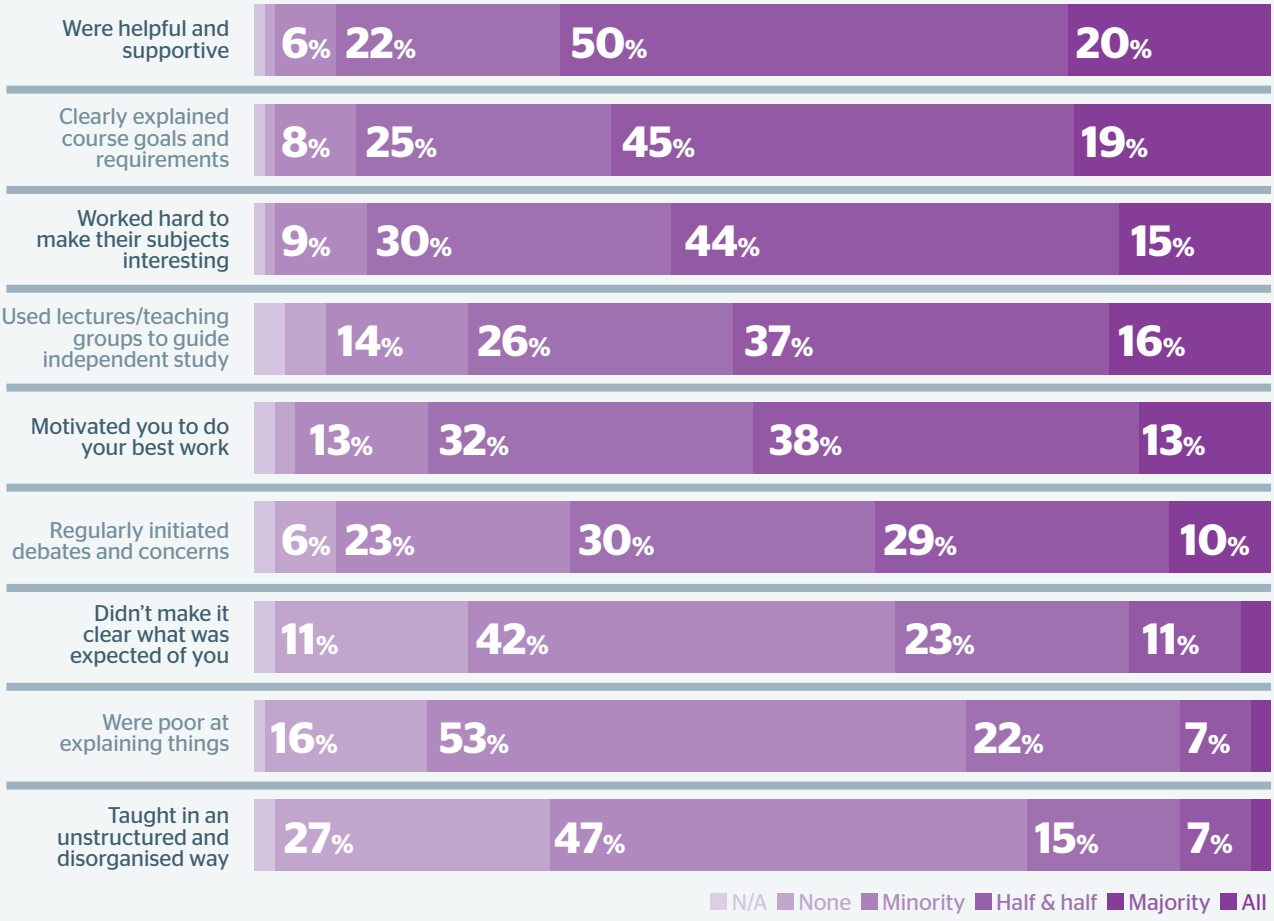
This variability in quality of teaching is borne out by comments made by students. The over-use of Microsoft PowerPoint is a particularly strong theme.

Variable teaching quality clearly has knock-on effects for student engagement. As we noted earlier, of the students that missed lectures the most common reasons related to issues with the quality of teaching.

> *"At the moment each lecturer simply gives out the PowerPoint slides of their lecture which can be absolutely meaningless and impossible to discern anything useful from. The lectures consist mostly of death-by-PowerPoint."*
>
> First year student, Medicine and Dentistry (Pre-clinical medicine)

> *"The lecturers in my opinion spent 98 per cent of the lecture just essentially reading out the slides - which are put up online anyway - and what is not on there is just simple examples or jokes etc. Meaning [it] almost feels like there's no point in going to a lot of lectures."*
>
> First year student, Biological Sciences (Psychology)

Chart 12: **Proportion of teaching staff who...**



Base: All respondents (17,090)

Feedback

Dissatisfaction with feedback has been a long-standing issue in the sector. Even in 2008, when the average overall student satisfaction in England was 82 per cent according to NSS figures, only 56 per cent of respondents reported that feedback had been prompt.

This research indicates that feedback remains an issue for some students, with around a fifth of students disagreeing that teaching staff gave prompt feedback (22 per cent) or that staff put a lot of effort into commenting on their work (23 per cent). Roughly half of students thought that the majority of staff provided good feedback with the remainder saying that half or fewer did so. Fifty-one per cent of students thought that half or fewer teaching staff were prompt in giving feedback and four in 10 (43 per cent) thought the same proportion gave useful feedback (43 per cent) or were open to having further discussions about their work (40 per cent).

"Feedback is atrocious. In a few cases it has only been a bit late but I have had almost none on time, in fact we are lucky if a coursework handed in in late October is given back before the January exams. The average is several months despite the Uni policy promising a three week turnaround. Also, when we do get feedback, it is almost always useless, in some cases just a single line and an arbitrary mark with no indication of reasoning or areas for improvement."

Third year, Computer Sciences (Software engineering)

"Feedback on first- and second-year Law coursework, both formative and summative, is very limited and often consists purely of a grade, with little or no advice on areas for improvement or even material that should have been included to provide a fuller answer."

Third year student, Law

Access to facilities

The facilities students have access to also have a considerable impact on the extent to which they benefit from the academic experience. Overall there was high satisfaction with access to facilities, with just one in 10 (11 per cent) dissatisfied with general facilities and 14 per cent dissatisfied with specialist facilities. Access to general facilities is particularly important where students are required to engage in a lot of private study. This came through as one of the key factors determining whether students with 0-9 hours of scheduled contact were satisfied with them.

Course organisation

The course being poorly organised was the top reasons given by students (34 per cent) for their experience being worse than expected in some way. While the survey did not ask about course organisation specifically, we found that 15 per cent of students who missed timetabled sessions attributed it to them being cancelled.

"I understand that during certain times of the year areas will be busy but the issue has become worse since I've been here. People have to work during the night in order to get a computer /desk, with some even bringing sleeping bags so they could stay by their computer!"

Second year student, Physical Sciences (Environmental Sciences)

"My course only contains four modules per semester so I was only there for four half-days a week. However, lectures and/or seminars could be cancelled by the lecturers when they had other commitments such as meetings to attend. Although we were always informed at least a week in advance, it was still disappointing because I felt that the students on my course were treated as though they were not important."

Third year student, Education (Academic studies in Education)

Policy implications

While there is a lot to celebrate in the report, it also raises a number of challenges for Government and the sector. It highlights the diversity in what students receive from the academic experience, as well as what they contribute, and the implications that this can have for satisfaction and perceptions of value for money. It also highlights a number of cases where students are working for relatively few hours in total, raising questions about academic standards and the importance of information about scheduled contact and private study prior to application. And while there has been an increase in the total amount of study students engage in since the first survey in 2006, there has been no increase overall in what students receive, despite an increase in fees. In this section we outline our recommendations based on these key findings.

Better information provision

The research identified considerable variability in academic experience across UK higher education institutions, both in terms of what students put in and the amount and type of teaching they received. Even when students were studying a similar course, the number of scheduled teaching hours varied widely. Students studying Mathematics, for instance, can expect to receive anywhere between 13 and 22 hours of teaching per week. This variation also applies to the type of contact, including the amount of small group teaching and whether or not it is led by an academic or non-academic member of staff. A student studying Social Studies with 11 hours or fewer of scheduled contact per week could find themselves spending anywhere between a tenth and half of that time in small group teaching.

This has an impact on student satisfaction. Of the two thirds of students who said that their academic experience was worse than expected (13 per cent), or worse in some ways and better in others (45 per cent), the most common reasons for discontent included the course being poorly organised (34 per cent), teaching quality (30 per cent), dissatisfaction with feedback (27 per cent), contact hours (32 per cent) and class size (20 per cent). **A third of students (32 per cent) said that they may have made a different choice if they had known what they did now about their academic experience.**

The launch of the Key Information Set (KIS) in 2012 was intended to make it easier for students to compare courses based on key pieces of information. The objective is to support students to make informed choices and as a result to raise standards in the sector.

However, the information within the KIS about the student academic experience, and in particular on what students will receive from it, is limited. Students are presented with student satisfaction scores from the National Student Survey (NSS) but, while these reflect students' perceptions, they don't

necessarily reveal the differences in academic experience that exist in reality.

The only objective measure in the KIS that relates to the academic experience is the proportion of time students spend in private study, scheduled teaching and placements. But this is of limited utility because it doesn't include information on total workloads, which our research found varied widely.

A student who is told that they can expect to spend 46 per cent of their time in scheduled teaching would need to ask themselves, '46 per cent of what?'. Applying the highest proportion of contact in the KIS to the highest and lowest reported total workload from our survey, a Business Studies student could, for instance, expect to receive anywhere between eight and 18 hours of scheduled contact per week.

Table 10: **Variations in contact hours according to different workloads**

Subject	Highest proportion of contact hours in the KIS	Potential range based on total workloads for that subject from the survey
Business Studies	46%	8-18
Medicine	85%	28-42
English	44%	10-19
Politics	39%	9-16

Students stated that they wanted information on the number of contact hours of a particular course at the time that the KIS was being developed; it was the 10th most popular piece of information from the list of things students said they would find 'very useful'.[7] However, it didn't make it into the KIS following concerns from the sector that students would overly focus on the amount over the quality of contact.

To some extent this point is valid. Information on contact hours alone says nothing about the quality of that contact. As the research shows, while three in ten students (30 per cent) were dissatisfied with contact hours of 0-9 per week, six in ten were satisfied (57 per cent). The regression analysis suggests that the quality of teaching and accessibility of staff outside of this contact time are key contributing factors to satisfaction with low scheduled contact time.

But it is also not the case, contrary to the widespread assumption, that low contact hours are always made up for by private study. This makes it all the more important that students can access information both on scheduled contact hours and expected private study time. This will help ensure that students know what is expected of them, and will also enable them to consider whether or not they can reasonably combine studying with working part-time, for instance.

In fact, students are more sophisticated in their understanding of the value of contact hours than they are given credit for, as research by the NUS for QAA has found.[8] While the vast majority of students (84 per cent) agreed that contact hours delivered direct improvements to the learning experience, they were clear that the type of contact was a key factor in this. Information about the amount and type of contact needs to be viewed in the round, so that students can make an accurate assessment of what they will receive. And while information on contact hours may not be a valid quality indicator in isolation, it does allow prospective students to consider what would best match their preferred style of learning.

Institutions aren't currently providing comprehensive information about scheduled contact time themselves. The review we conducted of 20 institution websites and prospectuses, looking in particular at information provided about English courses, found that:

- only two provided comprehensive information on the total number of contact hours per week, but even then this was not broken down by lectures or tutorials;
- only two of the 20 gave an indication of the amount of private study that was required; and
- six out of 20 gave an idea of the size of the seminar / tutorial class.

No institution provided information on all of these aspects. This echoes the findings in the research – a fifth of students (21 per cent) thought that information provided by universities was vague and one in 10 (9 per cent) thought it was misleading.

Prospective students should be able to compare the amount and type of scheduled contact time they receive, as well as the amount of private study they will be expected to do. We want the Government to ensure that the Key Information Set (KIS) includes this information as soon as possible.

30%
were dissatisfied with contact hours of 0-9 per week

21%
thought information provided by universities was vague

[7] Oakleigh Consulting and Staffordshire University, (2010), 'Understanding the information needs of users of public information about Higher Eduation'.
[8] NUS/ QAA (2012) Student experience research 2012, Independent learning and contact hours.

Investigation of variability in study time

One of the most striking findings in the research is the low total workloads (private study plus scheduled contact time) some students are engaging in. The survey found that the average total workload was around 30 hours per week, or 29 hours per week once missed timetabled sessions were taken into account. Over a quarter of the sample had total workloads of less than 26 hours per week. As HEPI has noted in the past, study of between 20-25 hours per week is more akin to part-time rather than full-time study.

While individual factors will play a part in explaining such low workloads - for example the propensity for women and mature students to spend more time than men in private study - it also raises questions about whether students are being pushed hard enough by institutions, particularly when considering that the average student workload is about a quarter short of the amount of study assumed by the QAA's Credit Framework.

The Credit Framework assumes that students engage in a notional 10 hours of learning for every one credit. For the standard 120 credit course this equates to 1,200 hours learning annually, but on average students in our survey appear to be working for no more than 900 hours per year.[9]

The Credit Framework is not a statutory requirement on the sector, and only provides an approximation of the number of study hours a student might engage in. There is no equivalent to the National Curriculum in higher education, and universities have the autonomy to design their own courses and choose what learning outcomes students need to demonstrate in order to pass. However, if one of the aims of the Credit Framework is to support mobility by giving institutions confidence that a certain level of learning has been demonstrated, it does raise questions about how this can be achieved if such varying levels of input are required. The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System assumes even more hours of notional learning - between 1,500 and 1,800 per year.

These findings also have a bearing on confidence in the standards of some UK higher education institutions as well as students' ability to switch – one of the key benefits of a market in higher education. Research we conducted with first-year students found that a fifth had considered switching (19 per cent) or had switched (two per cent) courses.[10]

The QAA and BIS should investigate differences in the total study time that students are engaging in on different courses, and the implications for the UK Credit Framework.

[9]Based on average workload of 30 hours per week and assuming a 29 week academic year.
[10]Online survey of 1200 students, who have just completed their first semester of University, between 11 Dec and 19 Dec 2012.

There needs to be greater transparency over expenditure levels

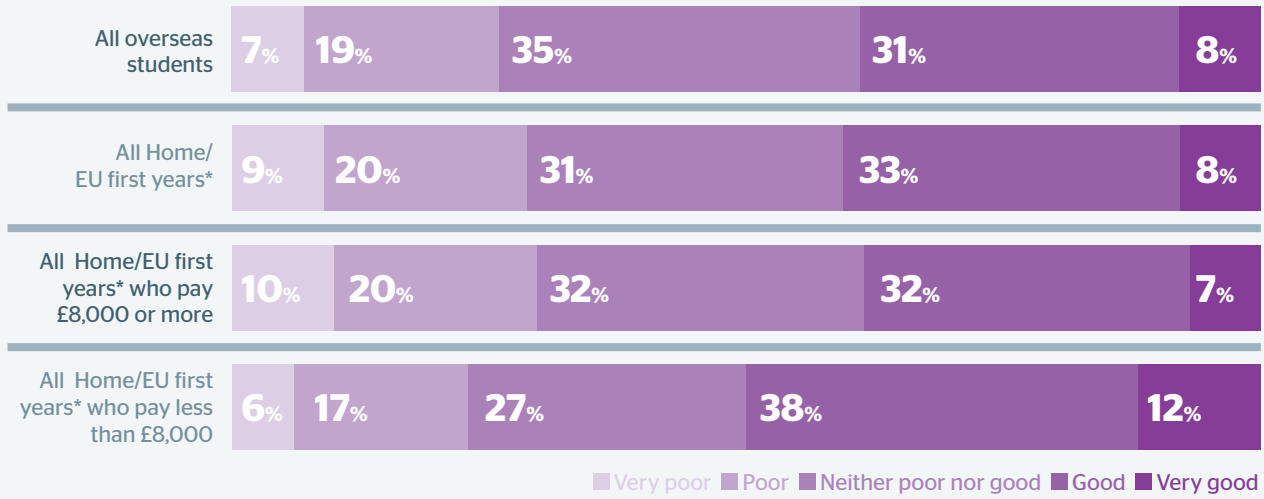
This year, consistent with previous years, we find that there has been no apparent change in what students receive, despite a ninefold increase in fees since the survey first began in 2006. The single measure that has changed is the amount of effort that students put in, with private study increasing on average from 12 hours 49 minutes to 14 hours and eight minutes per week between 2006 and 2013.

Course fees also appear to bear little relationship to what students receive in scheduled contact time. Student fees have clustered around the £9,000 mark, on average £8,500 per annum, and yet as the research has revealed students can receive very different things for this amount. The minority of first year students at English Institutions who were paying less than £8,000 (20 per cent) received no less contact time on average, and in fact received slightly more small group teaching.

In some ways this is not surprising. As a Veblen or 'snob' good, it is in providers' interests to charge higher fees. And because students largely only experience higher education once, and do not currently have access to useful comparative information about academic quality, they have no way of knowing what different institutions are offering. In this respect, the high levels of discontent with value for money may in fact be an underestimate. As chart 13 highlights, 29 per cent of first year students think that their course offers poor value for money.

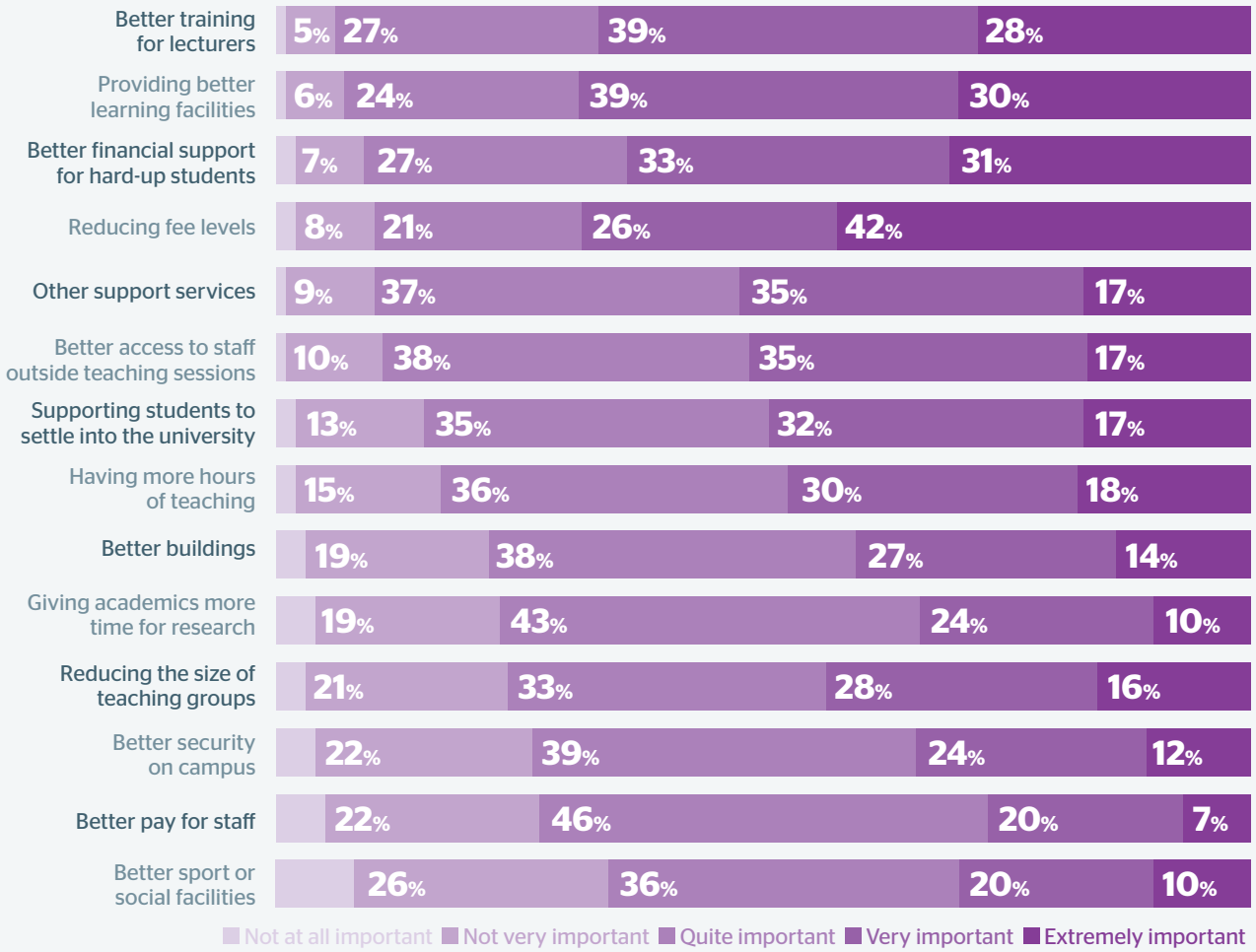
While it is true that the sector as a whole is faced with financial constraints, the increase in fees understandably means students expect and want more for their money. The challenge for the sector is to understand what students want and demonstrate how they are meeting this. The survey found that, looking at overall net importance, more training for staff was the number one thing students thought universities should be spending more money on (chart 14). And interestingly there has been a considerable increase in the

Chart 13: **Views on value for money by course fees**



Base: All first years at English institutions (5,231); First years who pay £8,000 or more (4,358); First years who pay less

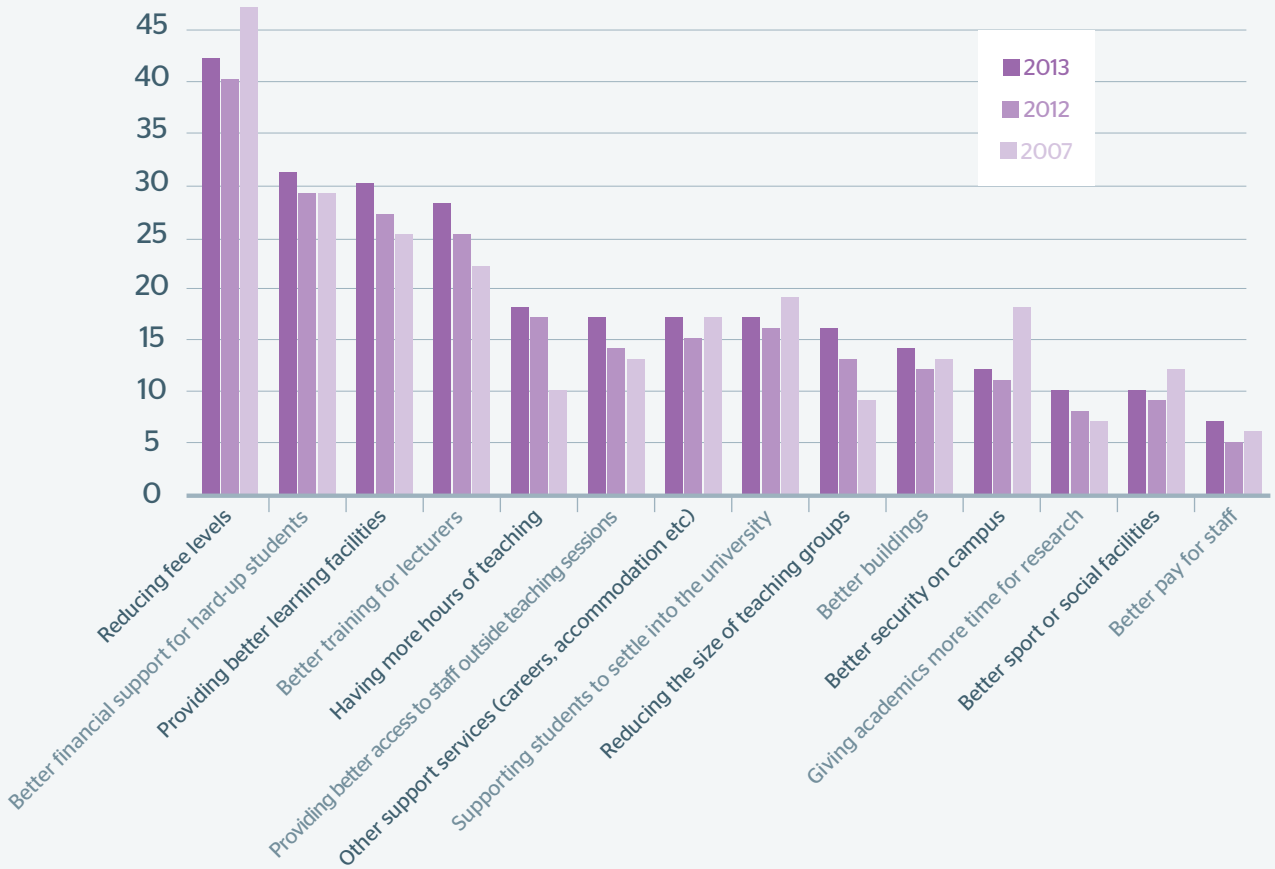
Chart 14: **Importance of things universities should spend money on**



Base: All respondents: (17,090)

Policy implications

Chart 15: **Importance of things universities should spend money on over time**



Base: All respondents: 2013 (17,090); 2012 (9,058); 2007 (14,819)

number of students placing importance on institutions spending money on more hours of teaching, as well as and reducing the size of groups since 2007 (from 10 to 18 per cent and nine to 16 per cent, respectively, chart 15).

We think it is important that information on institutional expenditure is transparent, particularly around the amount being spent on the academic experience. While this is admittedly only one element of the wider university experience, it is arguably the biggest single determinant of student success.

This question has recently been considered by the Transparent Approach To Costing (TRAC) Review Group. The proposal to make TRAC data available at an institutional level was rejected by the sector on the basis that this information is too commercially sensitive. The Review Group has recommended that HEFCE and the sector find other ways to make existing data more accessible. In doing so it will be particularly important to ensure that it is possible to distinguish how much money institutions are spending on teaching versus other activities.

HEFCE / BIS should make sure there is transparent information available on higher education expenditure and in particular that this includes a breakdown of the amount of money going towards teaching.

Since 2007 there has been a large increase in students who think money should be spent on more contact hours and smaller teaching groups

Students need better access to advice and guidance

While the provision of information will certainly go some way to helping support choice it should not be assumed that, in isolation of advice and guidance, it will result in students making better decisions.

It is too soon to know how successful the KIS has been so far, but research we carried out with last year's prospective students highlighted the challenges facing its successful implementation. Despite employment prospects being the main reason that applicants were applying to university, less than half had researched employment outcomes of particular institutions at the point of making their choice (chart 16). Just a third had considered the learning and assessment style and four in 10 had not attended an open day. At the same time 95 per cent were confident about having made the right choice, suggesting that this confidence is at least in part misplaced.

This highlights the need for access to advice and guidance so that students know how and why to use information. Our research found that students are not accessing such advice: 39 per cent had not received any one-to-one advice at the time of making their choice of institution.

We are very concerned that at a time when fees have increased, students are making choices in an environment where there is less rather than more career advice available.

The closure of Connexions has resulted in the creation of a £200m funding gap, which is unlikely to be filled. It is too soon to know how schools and colleges have responded to the new duty on them to deliver careers advice. However, we are concerned that, if schools do no not offer face-to-face advice and those under 19 are not able to access this from the National Careers Service, they will in fact be worse off.

The Government must not view its student information policy in isolation from policies on advice and guidance. We await the Ofsted report this summer on how schools and colleges are responding to the new duty on them to provide advice. In the interim students under the age of 19 should be able to access face-to-face advice from the National Careers Service if they feel they need it.

Chart 16: **Factors prospective students considered at the time of making their university choice**

Base: 1010, Prospective Student Survey, August 2012

Key contacts
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