

# **The academic experience of students in English universities**

## **2007 report**

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### **Introduction**

1. In March 2006, with a grant generously provided by the Higher Education Academy, the Higher Education Policy Institute commissioned Opinionpanel Research to undertake a survey of first and second year students in English universities retained as panellists in their database. The survey focused on various aspects of the amount of teaching and private study undertaken by students and their levels of satisfaction and other attitudinal questions.
2. In October 2006, the report of the survey was published as *The academic experience of students in English universities*.<sup>1</sup> This is referred to in the text as 'the 2006 report'. References to '2006' should be taken as applying to the 2006 report or the survey on which it is based.
3. The survey was repeated in March 2007 again with the help of generous support from the Higher Education Academy. Thanks are also due to Opinionpanel who again agreed to conduct the survey at a discounted price.
4. The main purpose of repeating the survey was to validate the general account of the English higher education sector provided by its predecessor, and to explore some further aspects not surveyed in 2006. The results here are clear. The very impressive degree of consistency between the 2006 and 2007 surveys enables us to say that the quantitative indicators of learning and teaching provision in English universities at whole system and subject level provide an accurate picture of provision in English universities.
5. This summary report is based on the full report of the survey. In addition, it draws on a commentary on the survey findings, produced by Professor Graham Gibbs, who at the time was Director of the Oxford Learning Institute.<sup>2</sup>

### **Quantity of teaching**

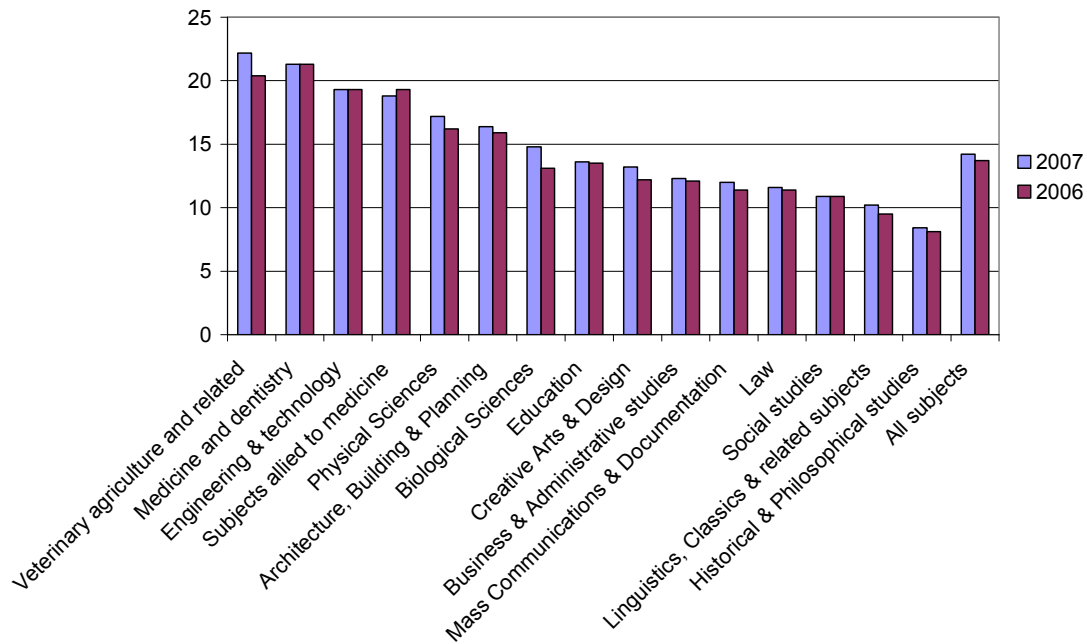
6. Students in English universities typically receive around 14 hours of tuition per week (a weighted average of 14.2 hours in 2007, 13.7 in 2006).
7. Subject variations are both wide and consistent as Figure 1 shows. Students in clinical and veterinary subjects typically receive just over 20 hours teaching per week; at the other extreme, students in historical and philosophical studies typically receive less than 9 hours (8.1 in 2006 and 8.4 in 2007).

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<sup>1</sup> Available at [www.hepi.ac.uk](http://www.hepi.ac.uk)

<sup>2</sup> Both the full report and Professor Gibbs' commentary are available on the HEPI website.

Figure 1: Scheduled hours of teaching by subject (2006 and 2007)<sup>3</sup>



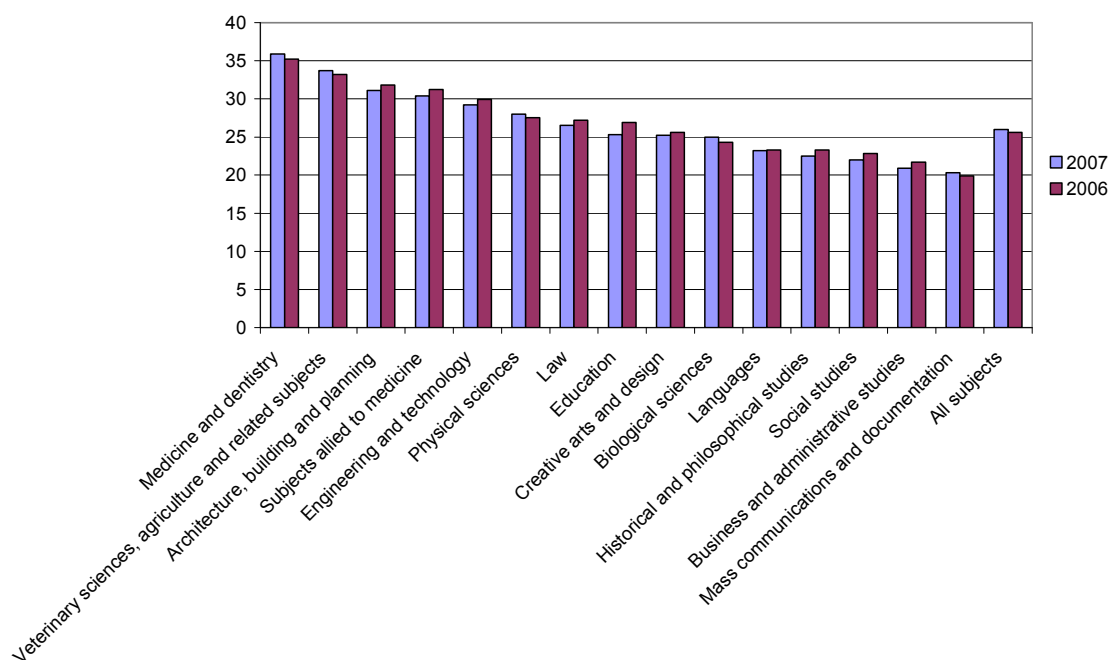
### Total workload

8. The total workload (attended hours of teaching – i.e. allowing for hours not attended - plus private study) of English students averages around 25.5-26 hours (25.5 in 2007; 26 in 2006).

9. Figure 2 shows that for students of medicine and dentistry, study is the equivalent of a full-time job at over 35 hours, but for others it resembles part-time employment. Mass communications and documentation, for example, averaged 19.9 hours in 2006 and 20.3 hours in 2007.

<sup>3</sup> For administrative reasons Mathematics and Computing are excluded from Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 2: Workload by subject (2006 and 2007)



10. The differences in effort required in each subject grouping are substantial, but not unexpected. Moreover, the difference between subjects in formal teaching (a ratio of nearly 1:3 between the lowest and the highest) reduces substantially when total effort is considered (to less than 1:2). What is perhaps unexpected is that within each subject grouping there is large variation in the amount of effort required of students. That is illustrated in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Student workload by subject – highest and lowest institutional mean hours per week (average of 2006 and 2007 results combined)

Subject	Highest institutional mean	Lowest institutional mean	Median
Medicine and dentistry	46.3	26.3	35.5
Subjects allied to medicine	38.3	24.6	31.2
Biological Sciences	39.9	15.0	24.5
Veterinary agriculture and related	41.6	23.5	37.0
Physical Sciences	45.3	19.8	27.6
Mathematical & Computer Sciences	36.4	17.1	26.2
Engineering & technology	41.2	20.8	28.7
Architecture, Building & Planning	41.5	26.3	28.5
Social studies	35.8	14.0	21.6
Law	44.8	18.7	26.2
Business & Administrative studies	28.3	15.5	20.8
Mass Communications & Documentation	26.8	14.7	19.4
Linguistics, Classics & related subjects	39.3	14.8	22.3
Historical & Philosophical studies	39.5	14.0	21.5
Creative Arts & Design	34.5	17.2	25.6
Education	33.7	14.4	25.5

11. The extent of the differences in student workload raises important policy questions. Last year we observed that "it raises questions about what it means

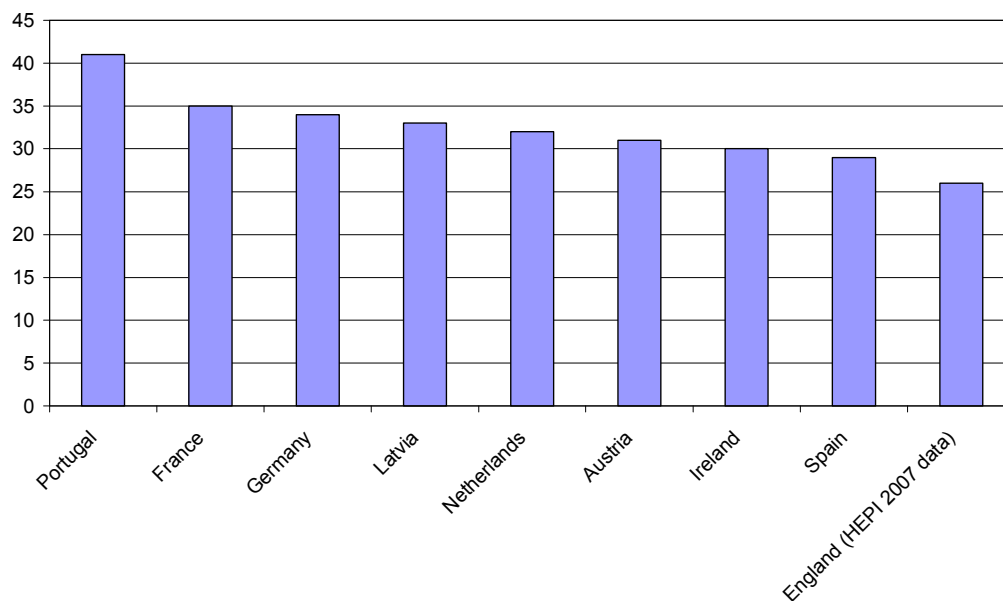
to have a degree from an English university, if a degree can apparently be obtained with such very different levels of effort. Some institutions award many more 2.1 and first-class degrees than others, and there are subject differences too. Explanations for this might be that the students concerned are more able, or else that they work harder. The main report explores these possibilities, and concludes that on the basis of these data, neither of these explanations appears to provide a complete answer”.

12. That observation remains true. Others have pointed out that the degree classification system does not provide a basis for comparing degree standards, and this report adds weight to that conclusion. The Burgess Committee has now completed its work, and is expected also to conclude that the degree classification system requires reform, but that identifying an acceptable alternative is a challenge. These data lend weight to that conclusion and certainly raise questions that need to be addressed<sup>4</sup>.

### International comparisons

13. The total workload figures here are much lower than the study time reported for other countries in the 2005 Eurostudent survey. That and other recent studies provide a solid body of evidence that English students put in significantly fewer hours of study than their European counterparts<sup>5</sup>. Figure 4 below compares the Eurostudent figures with the HEPI result.

Figure 4: Weekly time budget for study (Eurostudent 2005)

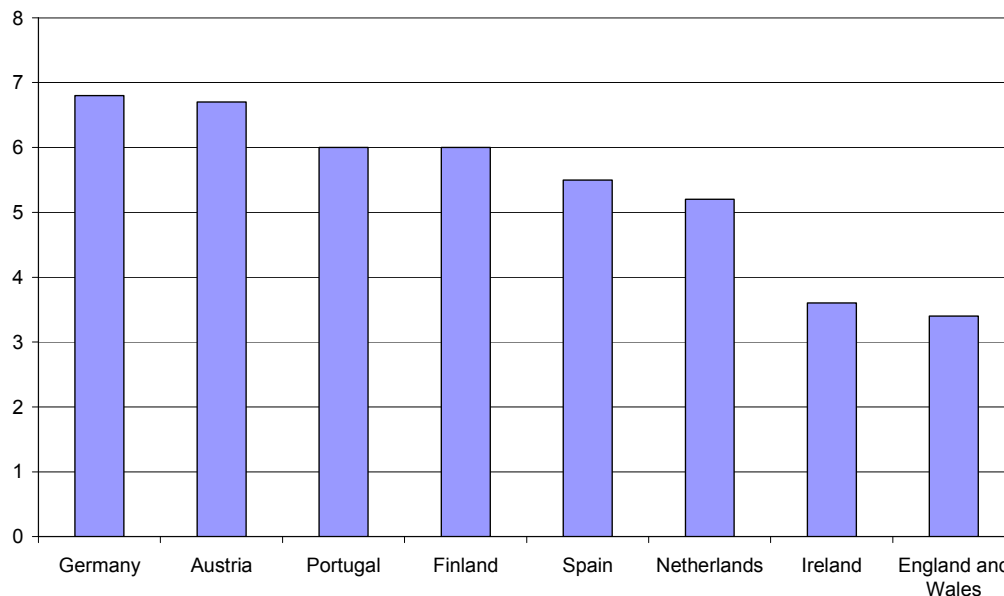


<sup>4</sup> However a model developed by HEFCE indicates that degree classes in different institutions are more or less what would be expected taking into account gender, entry qualifications and disciplines. See HEFCE 2003/32 *Schooling effects on higher education achievement* and HEFCE 2005/09 *Schooling effects on higher education achievement: further analysis - entry at 19*.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., a study by CHERI and other European institutions, reported by Maastricht University in Allen, J., Coenen, J., Kaiser, F. & Weert, E. de, *WO-Monitor 2004 en 2005: VSNU-kengetallen, Analyse en Interpretatie* (The Hague: VSNU, 2007) which found that students in other European countries undertook on average 15 per cent more study each week than English students.

14. English degrees are also shorter. Figure 5 below needs to be approached with a little caution because, whilst first degrees in England are usually at Bachelors level, in other countries the initial enrolment is commonly for a higher qualification which requires a longer period of study. These figures do not take account either of possible differences in term and semester lengths (which is also true of the of English university comparisons in the HEPI survey). And it is commonly held that students entering university with A levels have a deeper level of knowledge in their chosen subjects than their counterparts in other European universities. Nevertheless, it is undeniably the case that courses in England are shorter than equivalent qualifications in most other European countries.

Figure 5: Years of study for first degree (Eurostudent 2005)



15. The short length of degree (which the Bologna process is anyway eroding) and the lower intensity of study in English universities do not in themselves tell us anything about the quality of our degrees. For example, the number of hours of study reported here is a measure of all study – it does not tell us whether the discrepancy is in taught hours or private study. Nor does it tell us anything about the quality and nature of teaching – it is reasonable, for example, to suppose that an hour spent in a small seminar group enables more learning than an hour in a lecture with 300 others.

16. These subtleties notwithstanding, there is real reason to doubt whether English degrees will be *perceived* as being of equivalent value to degrees from countries where the requirements on students are more onerous. It will be particularly difficult to maintain our argument that our relatively short degrees are comparable to those of other European countries, which is what we have argued in the context of the Bologna process.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the availability of data on the intensity of study is improving year by year which is likely to make these comparisons an increasingly pressing issue for those charged with marketing

<sup>6</sup> The Bologna Process seeks to achieve a measure of degree harmonisation across Europe.

English HE overseas. It will be hard to counter the likely response of a student or his or her advisers to the kind of information presented in this section that English universities require less of their students than universities elsewhere in Europe.

17. These are potentially very serious findings. Although there is no suggestion here that the length of study equates to quality of learning, as these comparisons become better known there is bound to be increasing pressure on English universities to explain how their shorter, less intensive, courses match those elsewhere in Europe. These findings, together with the finding reported later in this report that a worrying proportion of international students believe they receive poor value for money, and the fact that fees in this country are so much higher than in most other countries, make our international student market vulnerable. A decline in that market could seriously impact the finances of a great many universities.

### **Assessment and feedback**

18. It is noticeable that neither the 2006 nor the 2007 survey has found a straightforward relationship between the volume of teaching and the hours of private study invested by students. In his commentary on this report, Professor Graham Gibbs observes that the main determinant of student effort may be the attention paid by universities to assessment rather than the hours of teaching. It is reasonable to suppose that both the quantity of assessments and the quality of feedback are important. It is notable that assessment and feedback is the category which respondents to the National Student Survey rate as weakest in almost every university and college. It may be that English universities eager to acquire a reputation for rigour in undergraduate provision would be better advised to work on assessment and feedback as a means of increasing private study, than to provide additional teaching hours.

19. There are two dimensions to the question of assessment and feedback. The first relates to the volume of assessment or, more precisely, to the amount of work students need to submit in order to achieve a given assessment outcome. In 2007 HEPI asked students how many assignments they had submitted in the previous term. The results are shown in Table 6 below.

Table 6: Assignments submitted in previous term (England, HEPI 2007)

All	6.4
Russell Group	8.0
Pre 92	6.1
Post 92	5.3
Other	n/a

20. This is a reversal of the pattern observable in the application of high-value teaching inputs (small group teaching and teaching by full academic members of staff) where new universities show higher scores. A possible explanation is that the ability of old universities to recruit students with higher entry qualifications enables them to employ a model based around lower than average teaching inputs and higher than average demands upon students. This model is almost certainly cheaper but possibly more effective for such students than the high teaching input lower demand model which institutions with lower entry

requirements are forced to adopt.

21. The second issue related to assessment and feedback concerns the quality of feedback, something that is not addressed in this survey. As Gibbs notes, the extent of feedback and the extent to which it is tailored to help the student to improve rather than just to provide a view on his or her performance are critical:

“while the relationship between the volume of teaching and the volume of student effort is not straightforward, the relationship between the volume and type of assessment and the volume of student effort is comparatively clear. Students work hardest when there is a high volume of formative-only assessment and feedback, and oral feedback, less when there is a high volume of summative assessment but little formative-only assessment, and least when there is relatively little assessment of either kind.”

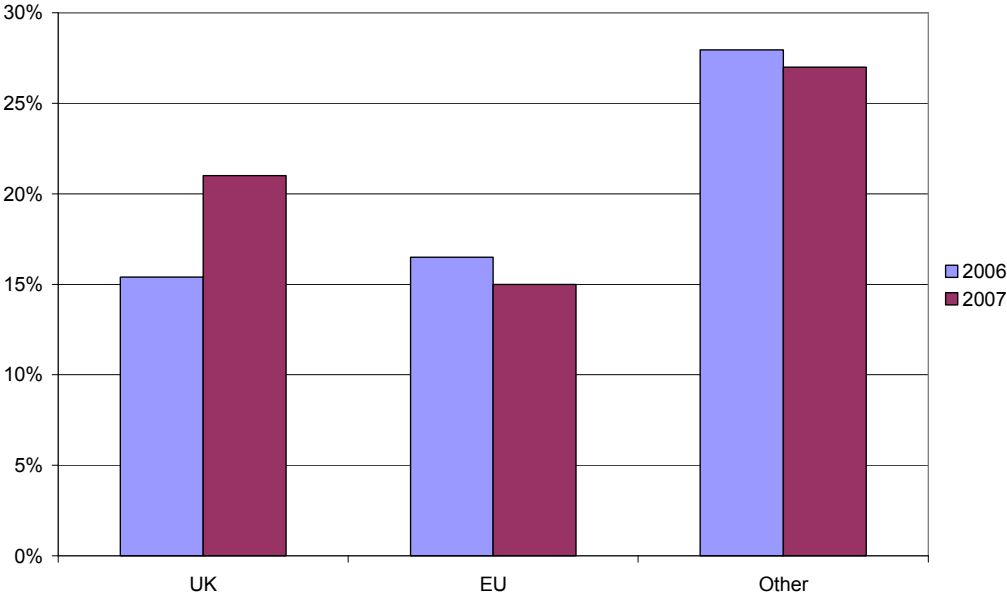
### **Fees and student attitudes**

22. The survey also offers an opportunity to investigate the impact of the new ‘variable’ fee regime. First year home and EU students in 2007 are liable to pay fees of up to £3000 per year but are allowed to defer payment until they are earning whilst also being eligible for more generous support for maintenance. Second year students are subject to upfront fees of £1250 per year.

23. Curiously, value perception appears to have improved slightly amongst students from other EU countries (who are subject to the same changes in the fee regime as UK students) whilst worsening significantly amongst home students as Figure 7 shows. This may be because the publicity given to the fees issue in the UK is more of a factor in students’ value perceptions than the actual experience of the new regime. It could on the other hand be because EU students are now eligible for loans to pay their fees – loans that some of them may never pay back.

24. Once again, a worryingly high proportion of international (non-EU) students report poor or very poor value for money, with 27 per cent reporting this (compared to 28 per cent in 2006). This may in part be related to the low level of teaching provision made in some subjects, and suggests that our international student market may be disturbingly vulnerable.

Figure 7: Percentage of students reporting very poor or poor value for money by nationality (2006 and 2007)



25. It is notable that, as Table 8 shows, 19 per cent of second year students perceive their courses to be poor or very poor value for money despite the fact that these students are the last to enjoy what is generally portrayed as a more favourable deal than those coming after them. It may be that the sentiments of these students are also affected by the publicity surrounding the new fee arrangements although they are not themselves directly affected.

Table 8: The effect of higher fees on value perception: value for money as rated by first and second year students

	Percentage	
	1st year	2nd year
I have received very good value for money	8	10
I have received good value for money	34	40
I have received neither poor nor good value for money	34	31
I have received poor value for money	19	15
I have received very poor value for money	4	4

26. Reanalysing the HEPI data, Professor Gibbs has found that “students experience their courses as better value for money when they have more teaching”. This is unsurprising - high contact hours are a very visible sign of the university’s investment in the student’s learning experience. Views about value for money are quite distinct from satisfaction. The National Student Survey, which measures student satisfaction with various aspects of their academic experience, reports a high level of satisfaction all round, and no attempt has been made to correlate the findings of this report with those findings. However, it would be quite plausible if what one might term ‘lower intensity courses’ give rise to higher levels of satisfaction, notwithstanding any negative views about value for money. It may be that reported satisfaction levels reflect a ready acceptance of what Gibbs calls “an education which makes comparatively low demands on them”.



## Small group tuition

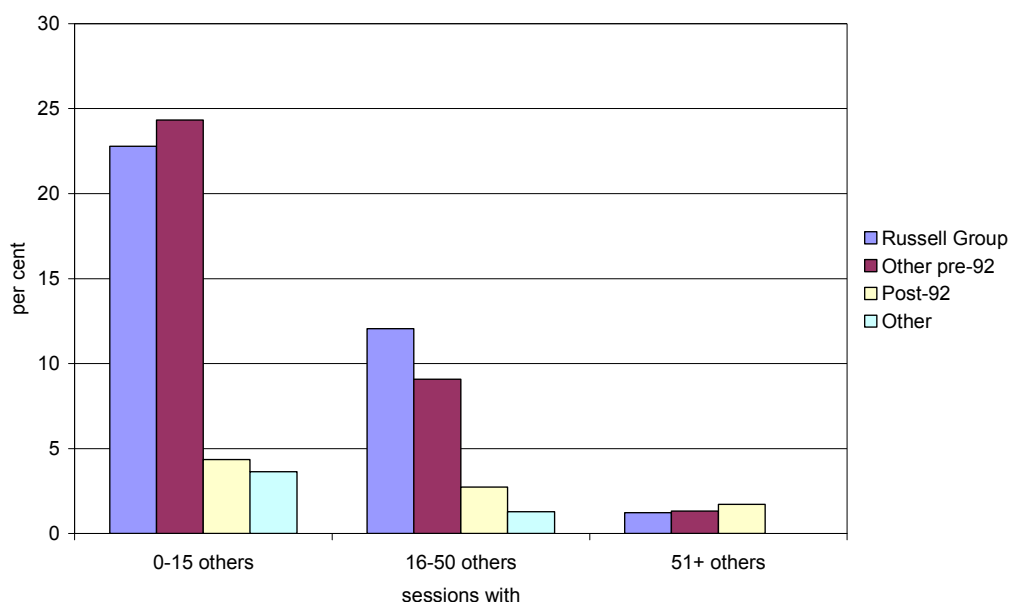
27. Students at old universities (Russell Group and pre-92 institutions) receive, on average, less small group tuition (with 0-15 other students) than their counterparts at post-92 universities as Table 9 shows.

Table 9: Mean number of hours in small group sessions – old and new universities (2007)

	0-5 others	6-15 others	0-15 others
All institutions <sup>7</sup>	0.8	2.8	3.6
Russell Group	1.0	2.3	3.4
Other pre 92	0.5	2.5	3.0
Post 92	0.8	3.4	4.2
Other	0.6	3.1	3.7

28. In addition to receiving less small group tuition, students in old universities are much more likely to receive most of their small group tuition from non-academics<sup>8</sup>, as Figure 10 shows.

Figure 10: Percentage of respondents reporting their teaching led mainly by non-academics (2007)<sup>9</sup>



29. Professor Gibbs notes that the use of both casualised lecturers ('adjunct faculty') and graduate teaching assistants is commonplace in the US: market pressure has not obliged US institutions charging very high and steeply growing fees to increase the engagement of full faculty members with undergraduate teaching. This indicates either that the use of academic staff – rather than

<sup>7</sup> Data for all institutions weighted. Other data unweighted.

<sup>8</sup> Or in some cases from 'pre-academics' – post-doctoral students beginning an academic career.

<sup>9</sup> Unweighted data. There is a risk that these results may be influenced by differences between the subject profile of the achieved sample and the overall HESA population. However, the 2006 results, which were weighted, show that 30 per cent of old university students reported that most seminars were taught by non-academics (7 per cent in new universities). The figure for tutorials was also 30 per cent (8 per cent in new universities). These findings tend to confirm that result.

graduate and teaching assistants – adds little to the learning experience or that students are not equipped to identify their own interest in being taught by academic staff. Other possible explanations are that despite understanding the value of teaching by academics, students remain disempowered even when their financial contributions are very substantial; or else that many in prestigious institutions are willing to accept weaker teaching as the price to pay for the enhanced status that accrues from their attendance. None of these explanations is comforting.

### **Non-academic activities**

30. Table 11 below shows the percentage of respondents reporting that participation in non-academic activities has helped them 'a lot' in developing various skills. The percentages relate to the total response, not merely to those who participate, meaning that those activities with lower levels of participation tend to have lower scores even if participants rate them very positively. It is striking that 32 per cent of the student body report that clubs and societies have helped them 'a lot' in developing confidence and communication skills, suggesting that universities' investment in student societies is a very effective means of contributing to the development of their students. Other activities, particularly volunteering and music & drama – whilst valuable to those who choose to participate – have a much less dramatic impact owing to much lower levels of participation. These findings are in line with previous literature on the subject<sup>10</sup>.

Table 11: Percentage of all respondents reporting that they have been helped 'a lot' to develop skills by various non-academic activities

	Problem-solving	Team-working	Communication	Organisational	Confidence
Clubs & societies	10	28	32	20	32
Music & drama	1	2	2	1	2
Paid outside work <sup>11</sup>	6	9	11	8	9
Volunteering	1	2	2	1	2

31. On the basis of these figures, a case could be made for the diversion of resources currently invested in promoting volunteering into clubs and societies.

### Paid work

32. The positive side of students undertaking paid work – apart from the obvious economic considerations – is that it enables them to acquire skills, although the above findings about the value of non-academic activities puts this into perspective somewhat. The negative side is that paid work has the potential to divert students from academic work and thereby to affect learning outcomes. That does not have to be the case. As Gibbs notes, students in other European

<sup>10</sup> For example Pascarella & Terenzini, *How College Affects Students: Findings and Insights from Twenty Years of Research*" (Jossey Bass, 1991)

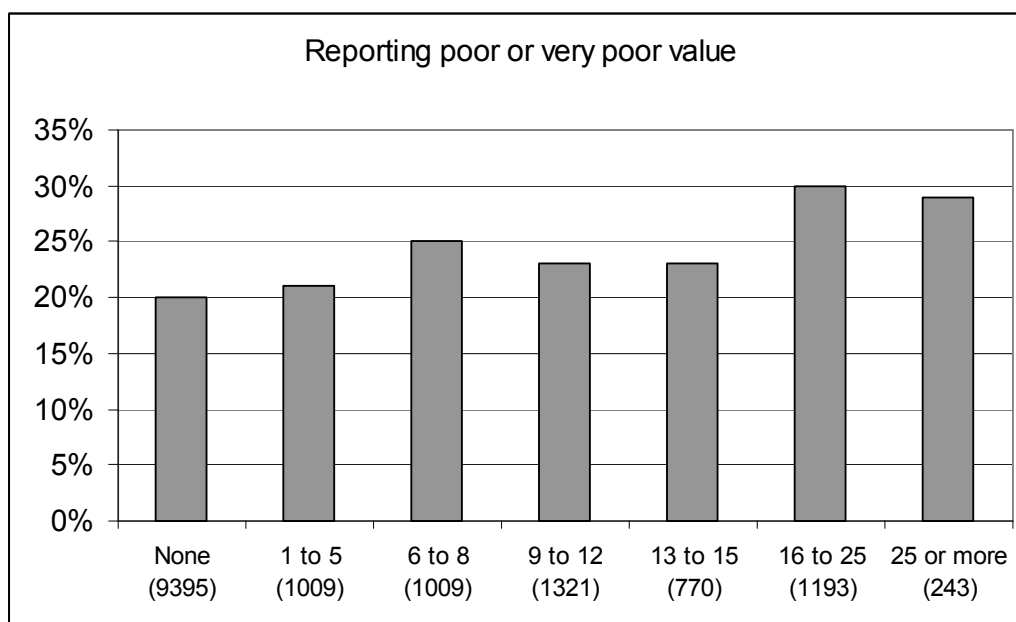
<sup>11</sup> Respondents were given the option to skip questions relating to each activity if they had not participated in that activity. The low figures for paid work reflect the very low numbers (14 per cent) electing to do this. Given that 37 per cent reported some hours of paid employment, this suggests that more than half of those with experience of paid employment elected not to answer this question. This rate of abstention is far higher than for any other question.

countries who undertake paid employment appear to put in more hours of study than their UK counterparts:

“In mainland Europe students on average undertake between 8-15 hours a week of paid work, whilst studying full time (compared with 33 per cent of UK students undertaking more than 6 hours of paid work a week) and still, on average, put in more study hours than in the UK. In Latvia students work for 31 hours per week to supplement their income and still study for 33 hours per week, eight hours per week more than the average in the UK. UK students appear to study less hard even when parallel paid work is taken into account.”

33. Perhaps it is not surprising that the survey found that students who do more hours of paid work not connected with their courses tend to perceive poorer value for money than those who do less. That is illustrated in Figure 12 below. This finding was also noted in 2006. In neither year, though, was the effect a particularly strong one, which itself is a slightly surprising finding<sup>12</sup>.

Figure 12: The impact of paid work on value perception: percentage reporting poor value for money by hours of paid employment



### **Priorities for further investment**

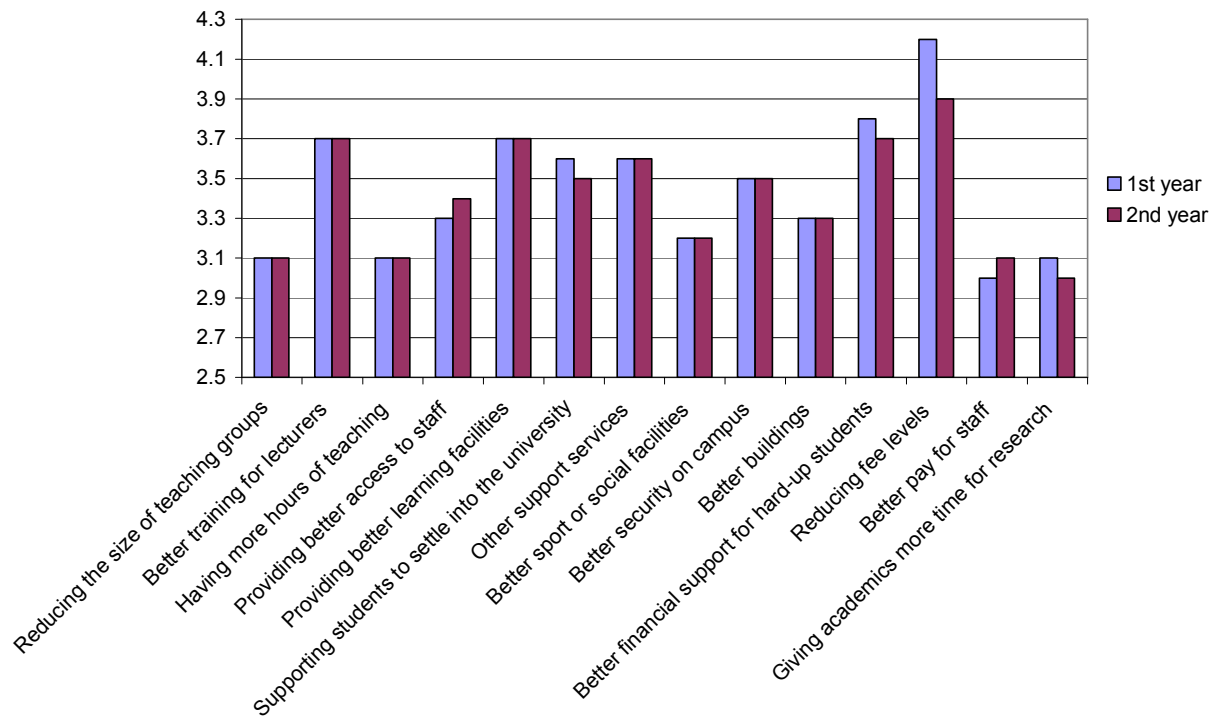
34. The 2006 survey revealed a strong prioritisation of qualitative improvements in teaching (smaller teaching groups) over quantitative ones (more contact hours). In 2007 refinements in the questionnaire enable us to unpack this preference further. Students rated training for lecturers (which was not included in the 2006 options) much higher than smaller teaching groups, suggesting that it is the quality of the teacher which concerns students more than the character

<sup>12</sup> For a comprehensive account of the effects of term-time working and the attitudes of students to this, see the report for HEFCE by the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information *Survey of higher education students' attitudes to debt and term-time working and their impact on attainment* ([http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/2005/rd15\\_05/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/2005/rd15_05/)).

of the teaching occasion, and may reflect not only the level of preparedness of academic staff to undertake teaching, but also the extent of the teaching they receive from non-academics. In the light of the findings summarised above and the relative weaknesses in assessment and feedback revealed by the NSS it may well be that future surveys of this type should offer students the opportunity to rate the importance of investment in additional feedback on academic work.

35. Unsurprisingly, students' overall top priority is to reduce fee levels and this is also the category where there is the greatest difference between first year students (who are subject to the new fee regime) and second year students (who are not) as Figure 13 shows.

Figure 13: The effect of higher fees on priorities: preferences by year of study<sup>13</sup>



<sup>13</sup> Mean levels of importance based upon a hypothetical scale of 1 to 5 where 5 = Extremely important, 4 = Very important, 3 = Quite important, 2 = Not very important, and 1 = Not at all important. Respondents were not presented with these numeric values.