

The academic experience of students at English universities – 2012 report

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Introduction

1. In 2006, and again 2007, partly funded by the Higher Education Academy, HEPI conducted surveys of various aspects of the academic experience of students. The survey was repeated on a smaller scale in 2009. The present survey, again partly funded by the Higher Education Academy, revisits the questions addressed in the earlier surveys¹.
2. As will be seen from what follows, there is considerable continuity of finding between the previous surveys and the present. In many respects, that is reassuring, and serves to give confidence in the findings. With four surveys of different groups of students at different times, yielding broadly similar results, these findings can be taken to provide a definitive account of those aspects of the students experience that have been surveyed.
3. One of our purposes in conducting the original survey was to create a baseline against which changes in the future could be observed. The original survey was conducted when students were still paying an upfront fee of £1000, and that fee was about to triple, but with a different repayment mechanism. A matter of interest was whether, as they paid more, students would receive more for their money in terms of smaller teaching groups or more contact with or better access to their teachers. The present survey has been carried out in the last year of the £3000 fee regime, prior to a tripling again of fees from September 2012. When in opposition, the Government repeatedly said that it would only countenance an increase in fees if universities could demonstrate what additional benefit students would receive from any increases². The benchmarks that are being created will enable that to be explored.
4. In view of the original purpose of the surveys – to enable changes to be observed over time – the questions posed in earlier sweeps have been repeated, with minimal changes only where these have been unavoidable (e.g. where HESA definitions have changed). The sample sizes of the original two surveys were sufficiently large – 15,000 students each time – to enable detailed findings by institution and by subject. The present survey, because of resource constraints, while still large – over 9,000 students – is not sufficient to allow institution level conclusions safely to be drawn, but it does allow conclusions at a higher level of aggregation –

¹ All four surveys were conducted by YouthSight (formerly OpinionPanel), who provided much valuable additional help and practical advice in the analysis and presentation of the results. We are very grateful to them.

² See for example Times Higher Edition of 1 October 2009 "Man with two brains' vision for life under Cameron."

such as university type and subject differences. In order to enable policy conclusions to be drawn, the survey has been limited to students in the first and second year of study in English universities (students in the third year, often have unusual patterns of study) and is limited to undergraduate students – a survey that confounded postgraduate and undergraduate students would not enable safe conclusions to be drawn.

5. The environment in which the present survey has been carried out is remarkably different from that in which the original two surveys were conducted. Then, while the surveys generated in a high level of interest, that was, perhaps predictably, naïvely focused around the question of contact hours, which forms an important, but only minor, element of the survey. Perhaps because of that, the response of the University establishment was defensive, and betrayed an unwillingness to recognise the importance of the subject of the survey or to engage with the policy issues it raised. Since then, universities on their own account have begun routinely to provide information about what students can expect, including the amount of study they are expected to do and the contact that they can expect with their teachers.

6. The IUSS Select Committee in 2009 produced a report that was highly critical of the unwillingness of universities to engage with the subject that had been raised. Now, some of the matters addressed in the previous reports are to be the subject of the Key Information Sets that the Government requires all universities to provide.

7. This is all to be welcomed, and the new environment is refreshing. However, while providing information to students is excellent and to be encouraged, that is not the same as addressing the policy points that have arisen in previous surveys and have been repeated in this one. Most notably, the previous surveys found that students studying the same subject in different universities might devote very different amounts of effort to their studies – and of course students in different subjects are required to study more or less intensively as well.

8. The policy question that needs to be addressed is what it says about a UK degree, if students can obtain degrees which are held to be comparable³, while devoting very different amounts of effort (including contact time, but also including private study) to their studies. That is a question ultimately about degree standards. It is an uncomfortable question – as was the finding previously that students in English universities by and large devoted far less effort to their studies than

³ For a discussion of comparability of degree standards see HEPI report “Comparability of degree standards?”, June 2010 accessible at <http://www.hepi.ac.uk/466-1838/Comparability-of-degree-standards.html>

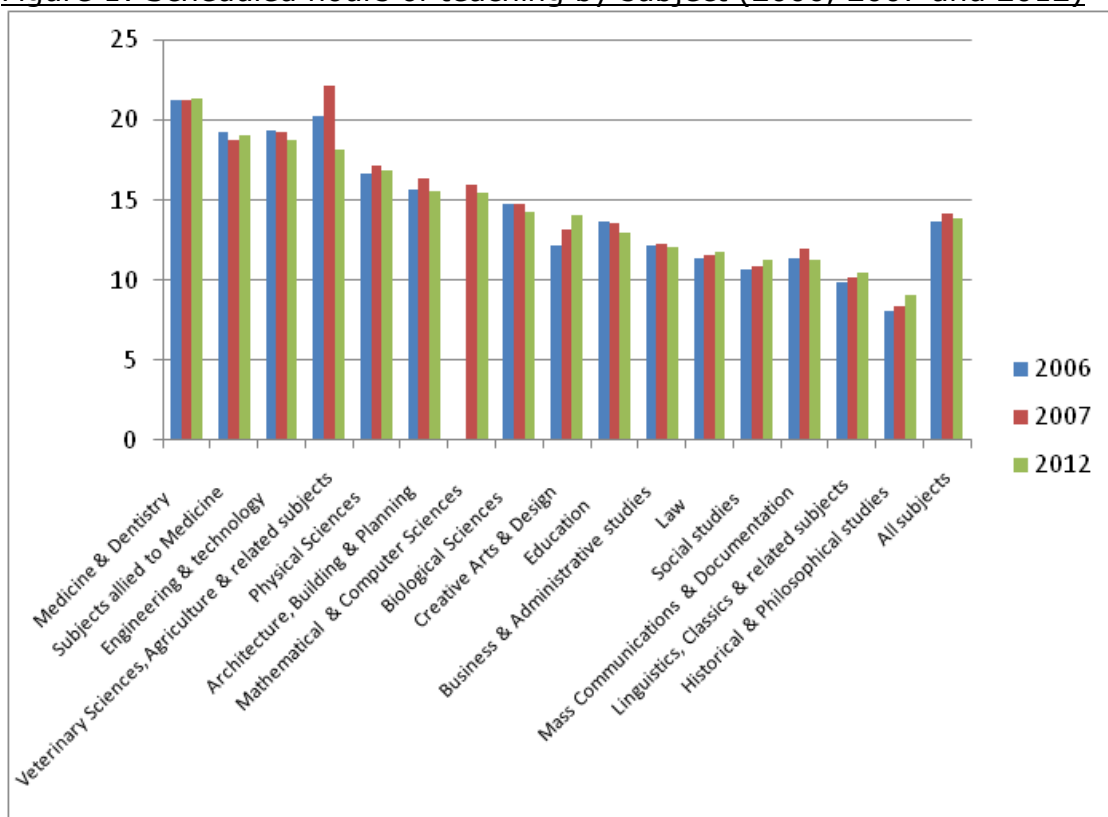
students in most other European countries. But it is a question that once raised will not go away. There is a separate question about contact hours, and it was rightly said in response to the earlier reports that differences in contact hours do not necessarily reflect differences in quality - they may simply reflect different pedagogic approaches. Nevertheless it is good that the question is out in the open and that institutions that offer small amount of contact are obliged to explain how it is that that is acceptable and why students that receive small amount of contact should not be dissatisfied.

9. The main findings of the 2012 survey are summarised below. In addition the detailed 2012 tables are on the HEPI website as is an SPSS file containing the full unweighted data. That will enable universities that wish to do so to benchmark themselves. It will also allow different analyses (for example, combining different groups of universities) by those interested in the subject.

Scheduled teaching (contact hours)

10. In 2012 students reported an average (weighted mean) of 13.9 hours of scheduled teaching per week, compared to 14.2 hours in 2007 and 13.7 in 2006). As Figure 1 shows, subjects where the teaching load was highest reported more than twice as much teaching as the lowest .

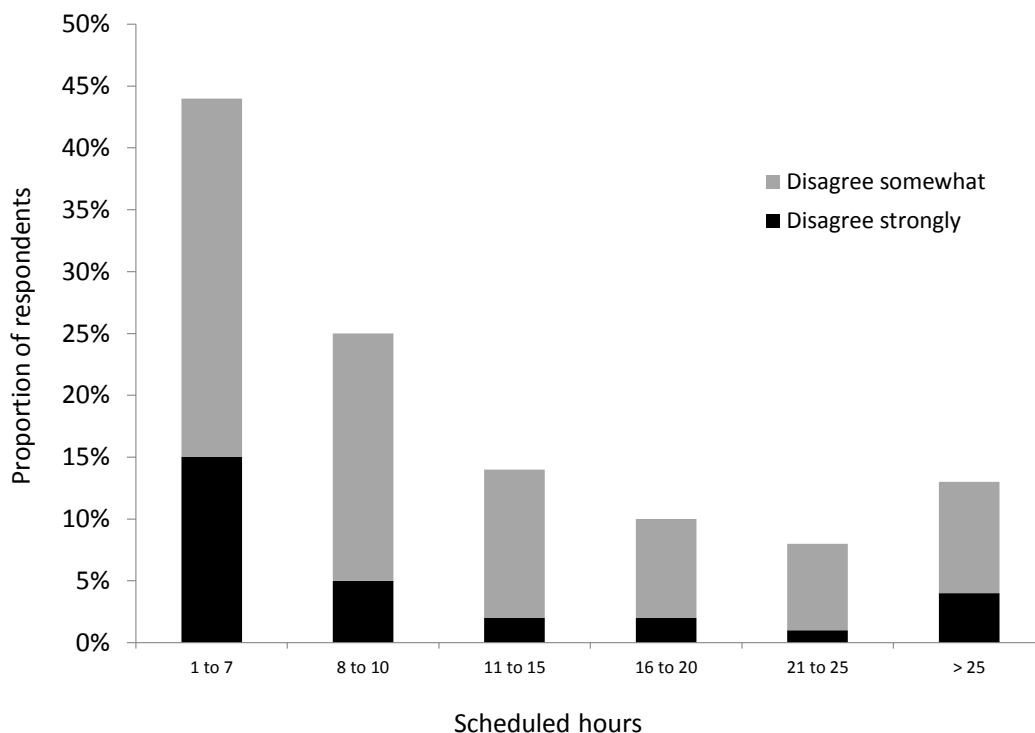
Figure 1: Scheduled hours of teaching by subject (2006, 2007 and 2012)



11. A great deal of comment previously centred around this finding. It is not surprising that some subjects have more contact than others – different subjects lend themselves to different pedagogic approaches and differences in balance between private study and teaching. The same explanation may dispose of concerns about why different universities may offer different amounts of contact – not surveyed this time – but in that case it is incumbent upon the universities concerned to explain the different approaches to students who may otherwise feel short-changed.

12. That universities have not yet convincingly made this case is apparent from responses to the question asking students if they were satisfied with the amount of contact time that they had. As is revealed in Figure 2 below, there is a high level of dissatisfaction (nearly 45 per cent) among those with fewer than eight contact hours per week, and dissatisfaction reduces steadily in line with increasing amounts of contact, though more than 25 hours of contact the week understandably gives rise to increasing dissatisfaction.

Figure 2: Disagreement with proposition: 'I am satisfied with the number of time-tabled classes I have had during this term' by scheduled hours of teaching per week

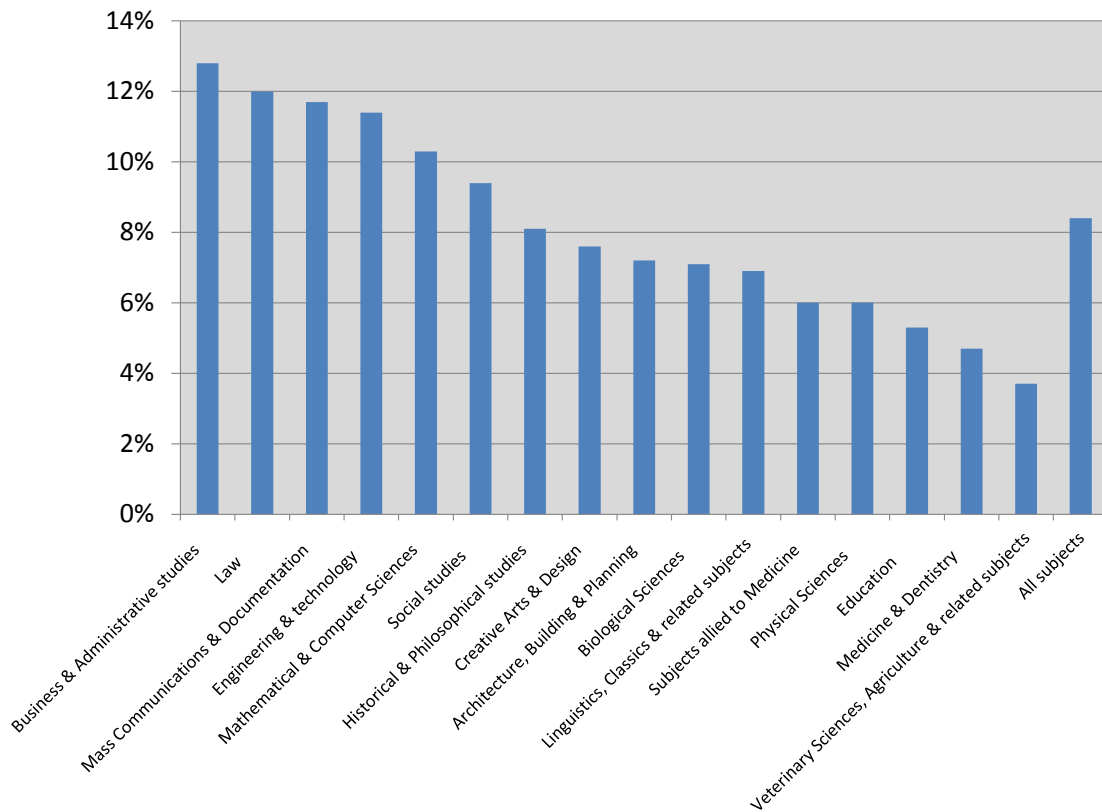


Hours of teaching missed

13. The survey asked students how many hours of timetabled teaching they missed. As Figure 3 shows students claimed on average to attend 92

percent of timetable sessions in 2012, almost exactly the same as in the earlier years. As before, there are substantial subject differences.

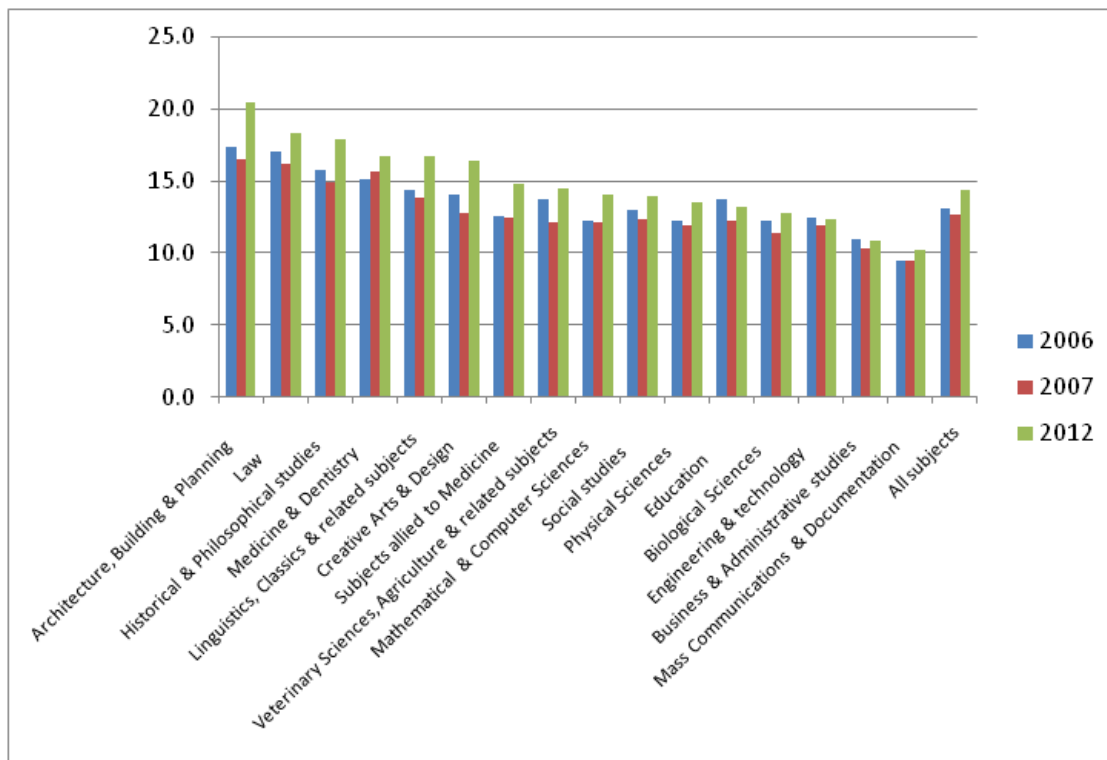
Figure 3: Percentage of scheduled hours of teaching not attended - by subject area



Private study.

14. It might be expected that those subjects with the least contact might require the most private study, and indeed to some extent this appears to be so (see figure 3). However, there are some subjects – notably mass communications and business studies – that are among the lowest in terms of contact hours, but also score lowest in terms of private study. On average, as Figure 4 shows, in 2012 students reported 14.4 hours of private study per week – a significant increase over the 13.1 hours in 2006 and 12.7 in 2007.

Figure 4: Hours of Private Study by subject

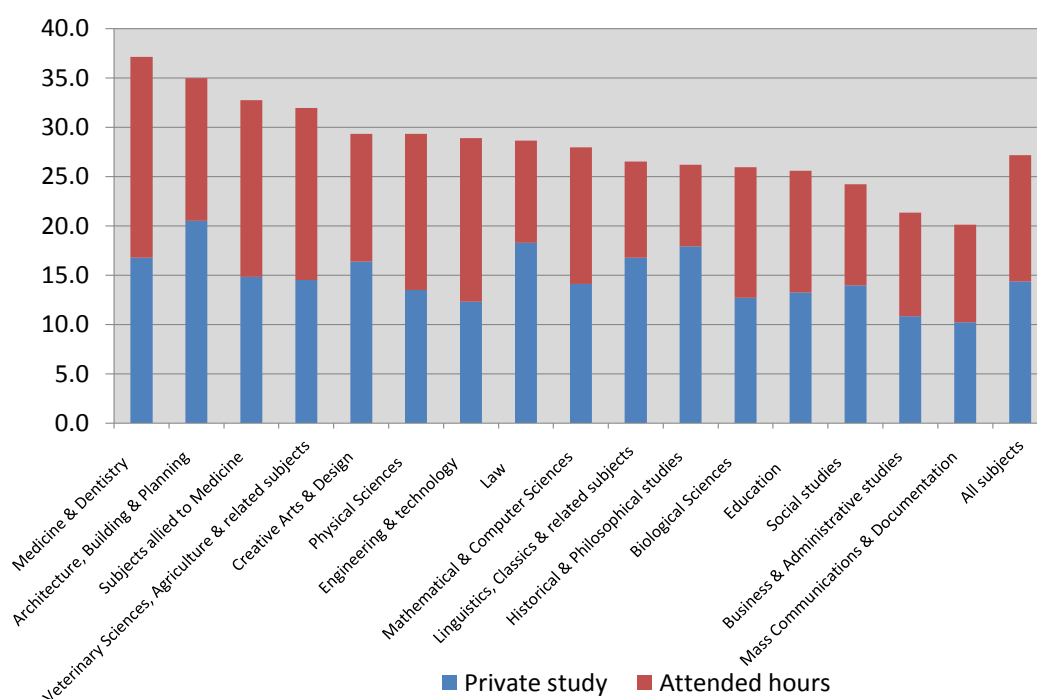


Total workload.

15. In 2012 students reported an average weighted total workload of 27.2 hours per week (attended hours of teaching – i.e. allowing for hours not attended - plus private study). In 2007 the figure was 25.5 hours and 26 in 2006). This suggests that students have been working steadily harder, particularly in some subjects – for example medicine and dentistry, where the average of over 35 hours of study per week study is the equivalent of a full-time job - but for others it resembles part-time employment. Mass communications and documentation, for example, averaged 20.1 hours in 2012, 19.9 hours in 2006 and 20.3 hours in 2007.

16. Figure 5 shows the different effort required in different subjects. While the different balance between teaching and private study in different subjects (see above) is not surprising, what is more surprising is that different subjects should require such different amounts of total effort. What it has not been possible to survey this year, but which was revealed in the previous studies, is the very different amounts of effort required in different universities in the same subject. However, given that the findings in 2012 overall are not so very different from those of previous surveys, it can be assumed that these differences remain. So the same policy questions arise as previously . How is it possible in one University to obtain a degree in a particular subject with so much less effort than is required in another University? And what does it say about what it means to possess an English degree if this is so?.

Figure 5: Workload by subject (2012)



17. Previous reports referenced other research that showed how the amount of effort devoted to their studies by students in English universities compared with those in other countries. The conclusions of the HEPI reports in this respect were endorsed by research published by HEFCE and carried out by the Centre for Higher Education, Research and Information in 2009⁴. Our degrees are already shorter than those elsewhere. It appears also that less effort is required by our students during each week of study. This raises potentially awkward questions, and indeed these are being posed by our European partners and those who sponsor students from overseas. On the other hand it appears that students in the USA and Canada may spend even less time each week studying. Research based on analyses of the National Survey of Student Engagement⁵ reveals that on average in 2003 the average weighted study time of students participating in that survey was 23.7 hours per week (12.1 hours private study and 11.6 hours class time).

⁴ “Diversity in the student learning experience and time devoted to study: a comparative analysis of the UK and European evidence” available at <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2009/diversityinthestudentlearningexperience/name,64092,en.html>

⁵ By Professor Jim Cote of Western University, Canada, author of “Lowering Higher Education: The rise of corporatized universities and the fall of liberal education”.

18. This general overall picture appears to apply to universities of all types (although the previous surveys did show substantial variations between individual universities). However, there are differences between university types in aggregate, and the material published on the HEPI website provides the detailed data which can be aggregated into different groupings. One of these is repeated in Table 1 below. This reveals that in almost all subjects students in old universities devote more time to their studies than students in new universities and specialist colleges.

Table 1: Total workload by subject and type of institution⁶

	Pre-92	Post-92	Other⁷	All
Medicine and dentistry	37.3	34.5	36.5	37.2
Subjects allied to medicine	32.4	33.0	31.7	32.8
Biological sciences	27.9	24.2	23.2	26.0
Veterinary sciences, agriculture & related subjects	37.9	27.0	34.9	32.0
Physical sciences	31.4	25.7	25.9	29.3
Mathematical & Computer Sciences	29.4	26.6	31.0	28.0
Engineering and technology	31	26.7	24.7	28.9
Architecture, building and planning	38.8	34.3	27.7	35.0
Social studies	24.7	23.6	25.6	24.2
Law	31	26.5	37.0	28.6
Business and administrative studies	23.3	20.5	21.6	21.3
Mass communications and documentation	18.1	20.4	23.0	20.1
Languages	27.4	24.6	20.4	26.5
Historical and philosophical studies	28	23.9	20.5	26.2
Creative arts and design	28.1	28.6	34.3	29.3
Education	26.9	25.9	23.3	25.6
All subjects	28.6	25.9	29.3	27.2

19. Moreover, as is revealed in Table 2 below, this difference applies to contact time as well as to private study, confounding the widespread perception that – because they tend to have weaker academic backgrounds – students at post-92 universities receive more intensive teaching and a different balance between taught time and private study than those in old universities.

⁶ The old university/new University/other disaggregation is necessarily crude – the old universities include some with many of the characteristics of new universities and vice versa – and finer grained analyses can be done. Nevertheless, this high-level disaggregation allows some interesting conclusions.

⁷ Largely specialist institutions

Table 2: Attended (contact) hours

-	Pre-92	Post-92	Other	All
Medicine and dentistry	20.6	15.4	21.8	20.4
Subjects allied to medicine	18.4	17.7	18.6	17.9
Biological sciences	14.1	12.5	12.4	13.2
Veterinary sciences, agriculture & related subjects	23.2	13.1	19.9	17.5
Physical sciences	17.3	13.1	15.2	15.8
Mathematical & Computer Sciences	14.8	13.0	11.0	13.9
Engineering and technology	18.2	14.9	15.0	16.6
Architecture, building and planning	16.2	13.8	14.6	14.5
Social studies	9.8	10.8	9.4	10.2
Law	10.2	10.5	12.0	10.4
Business and administrative studies	11.0	10.3	11.5	10.5
Mass communications and documentation	9.0	10.0	11.8	9.9
Languages	9.9	9.6	9.1	9.8
Historical and philosophical studies	8.0	8.8	8.1	8.3
Creative arts and design	11.6	12.5	16.7	13.0
Education	9.4	12.6	11.8	12.3
All subjects	13.1	12.4	15.1	12.8

Size of teaching groups

20. Students were also asked about the size of the groups in which they were taught, and who taught them. Here too, as Table 3 shows, there are marked differences between the institutional groupings, with students in new universities and specialist colleges tending to be taught in smaller groups and more likely to be taught by academic staff, compared to students in the old universities who were more likely to be taught by graduate students.

Table 3: Hours in small group sessions – old and new universities

	0-5 others	6-15 others	0-15 others
All institutions	0.8	2.7	3.5
Pre 92	0.8	2.4	3.2
Post 92	0.8	2.9	3.7
Other	1.1	3.7	4.8

21. The previous surveys also found that 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-academics⁸, as Table 4 shows.

⁸ Or in some cases from 'pre-academics' – post-doctoral students beginning their career.

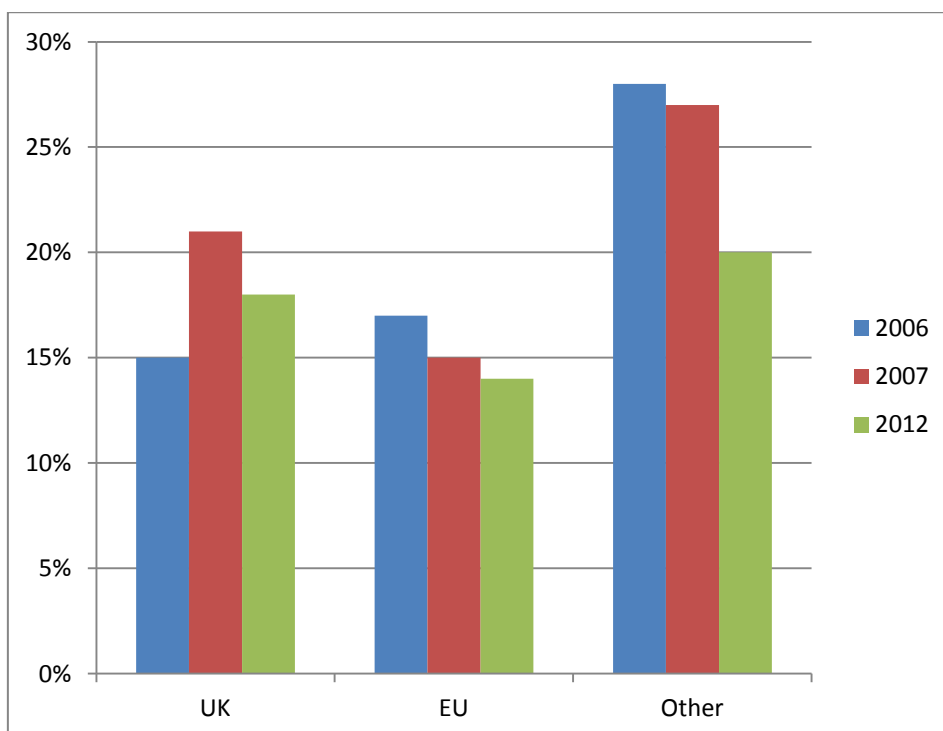
Table 4 Summary table - teaching led by academics by type of teaching (per cent) (2007 data)

	Pre-92 universities	Post-92 universities & others
Lectures	98	99
Seminars	70	92
Tutorials	70	93
Practicals	64	83
Fieldwork	74	85

22. Students were asked their opinions about the value for money of what they received. The results are shown in Figure 6 below. They indicate an encouraging improvement in the opinions of EU and international students. The increase in dissatisfaction with value for money on the part of home students in 2007 coincided with the first year of the introduction of the £3000 tuition fee, and appears to have moderated somewhat, though, is still above the 2006 level. That is not entirely surprising, since value for money is in part an economic judgement, and as the price increases so the threshold for satisfaction is likely to increase as well.

Perceptions of value for money

Figure 6: Percentage of students reporting very poor or poor value for money by nationality (2006, 2007 and 2009)



23. The relationship between levels of satisfaction expressed in the National Student Survey and the findings of this survey is worth investigating more deeply than has been possible in this study. What is

shown in Table 5 below, however, is a brief analysis of the relationship between the level of satisfaction on average shown by students in different subjects in the National Student Survey and both the relative amount of effort required of students and the amount of contact they have with their teachers. No obvious correlations are apparent between satisfaction overall and either of these two measures. Indeed, the subject with least contact (History) shows the greatest satisfaction. On the other hand Mass Communications, which demands least effort also has among the least satisfied students

Table 5: Relationship between satisfaction as revealed in the National Student Survey⁹ and contact time and total study time

Global score for full-time core population	Total % satisfied (from NSS)	Percentage points above or below average (81%) (from NSS)	contact hours (from this survey)	Total study effort (from this survey)
Creative arts and design	72	-9	12.95	29.34
Mass communications and documentation	74	-7	9.91	20.12
Computer science	77	-4	¹⁰	
Architecture, building and planning	77	-4	14.47	34.97
Engineering and technology	80	-1	16.58	28.89
Education	81	0	12.33	25.58
Social studies	81	0	10.23	24.21
Medicine and dentistry	83	2	20.38	37.15
Veterinary sciences	87	5	17.47	31.96
Subjects allied to medicine	85	3	17.93	32.76
Biological sciences	85	4	13.23	25.95
Mathematical sciences	87	6	13.88	27.98
Languages	87	6	9.76	26.52
Physical sciences	88	7	15.82	29.33
Historical and philosophical studies	89	7	8.3	26.21

Conclusion

24. So, returning to the question originally posed, is there any evidence that the trebling of fees in 2006 led to any changes in the provision that was made for students? On the basis of the evidence provided by these surveys, the answer has to be that it has not. There appears to be some

⁹ See "National Student Survey – Findings and Trends" available at <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2011/201111/>

¹⁰ Combined with mathematics

evidence that students are working a little harder – in their own time - but in terms of the amount of teaching contact that they have (Figure 1, repeated in Figure 7 below), and the size of the groups in which they are taught (Table 6 below) – the increase in fees has led to no change. These findings need to be seen in the context of the replies of students to a different question about how they thought their increased fees should be used. Both in 2006 and 2007 they said that their top priority for the use of increased fees should be in improving staffing ratios; and when in opposition the Government insisted that it would only countenance increased fees if students were able to see a commensurate improvement in the provision that was made for them (see footnote 2 above).

Figure 7: Scheduled hours of teaching by subject (2006, 2007 and 2012)

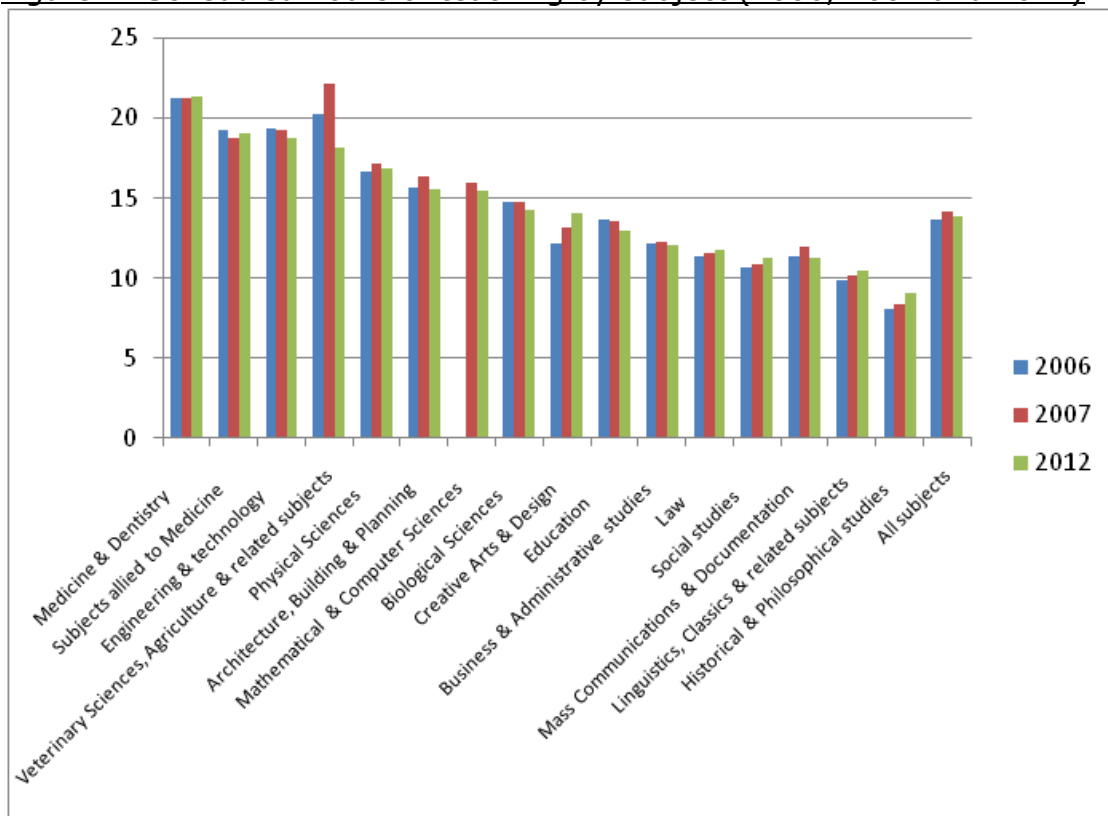


Table 6: Hours in small group sessions – 2012 compared to 2006 and 2007

	0-5 others			6-15 others			0-15 others		
	2006	2007	2012	2006	2007	2012	2006	2007	2012
All institutions	0.7	0.8	0.8	2.8	2.8	2.7	3.5	3.6	3.5

25. This and the earlier reports raise questions, many of which are unanswered – generally concerning the intensity and extent of what is offered to and demanded of students, and ultimately the standards of provision and how these compare with those obtaining elsewhere and previously. It is in the sector's interest that these questions should now be addressed properly.