



Higher Education Policy Institute

HEPI Report (61)
The academic experience of students in English universities
2013 report
Bahram Bekhradnia

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Summary

1. This is a report of the fifth iteration of a survey that HEPI has conducted of the academic experience of students at English universities, the first in 2006. This present survey has been carried out jointly with Which?, for whose support we are extremely grateful.
2. The original surveys were carried out in 2006 and 2007, when the new system of higher education funding was introduced – with greatly increased student fees supported by income contingent loans. One of the purposes of the surveys was to establish whether, as students paid more, they would receive a “better” academic experience, in terms of more contact with staff, smaller teaching groups and better facilities. Subsequent surveys have shown that by and large they did not, but previous reports have acknowledged that the issue is not a straightforward one. Although students pay more and might expect to receive more for their money, for the most part universities are no better off, as increased student fees are balanced by reduced government grant. Their ability to make better provision for students has not greatly increased.
3. Fees trebled again in September 2012, and the present survey has been conducted during the first year of the new substantially higher fee regime. Whereas previously the average fee charged was something close to £3000, it is now over £8500. Once again, as will be apparent from what follows, there is no sign that as students pay more they are receiving more for their money, and that is reflected in a sharp increase in the proportion of students who feel that they are not receiving good value for money.
4. In order to ensure continuity, and in order to enable comparisons to be drawn, the methodology adopted for this survey has been the same as in previous surveys. Most of the questions are identical, though one or two have been omitted and a small number of new questions added. Where the methodology has changed we have avoided making

comparisons with previous years. The full report is on our website and the appendices to the report set out the methodology in full¹.

5. The sample size of this survey is larger than that of any of the previous surveys, and when the results of this and last year's survey are combined they provide sufficient responses to enable comparisons to be made between institutions at the subject level – that that is to say they allow the experience of students at one University in, say, physical sciences to be compared with that of students at another university in the physical sciences. Those results are published on the website, though a number of caveats apply to them. In particular, for the results to be statistically valid a minimum number of responses are required, and so there are universities active in a subject the results for which are not shown: the institutional analysis is not a comprehensive one. However, for all the analyses conducted below the institution level sufficient responses have been received to enable comprehensive and statistically robust conclusions to be drawn.

6. When the original survey was published, for understandable reasons, much of the media and public interest concerned the amount of contact hours students received and the differences in contact between subjects and also between institutions in the same subject. That was criticised by others – reasonably – because, as was pointed out, the number of contact hours that are appropriate depend on a great number of different things like the style of teaching, the subject and the precise nature of the courses taught within a programme, and the surveys provided no information about such matters. Moreover, contact hours need to be seen alongside other aspects of the academic experience of students – like the size of the groups in which they are taught and the extent to which teaching is done by non-academics such as research students and assistants.

7. Nevertheless, as was also pointed out at the time, the amount of contact that students have with their teachers is not unimportant – and it is certainly something that matters to students and their parents – and at the very least universities should explain to students why it is that they may be receiving less contact than they might have expected, and they should be transparent more generally about what students can expect. Seven years later it is now far more widely accepted that universities should provide this sort of information; and indeed information about contact hours is one element in the Key Information Sets that universities are required to publish – although the actual information about this that is published is partial and does not give students the full picture. Despite the misgivings of some in the university establishment, the world has moved on, and earlier HEPI surveys must take some credit for this.

¹ This summary does not contain references or footnotes, which are available in the full report.

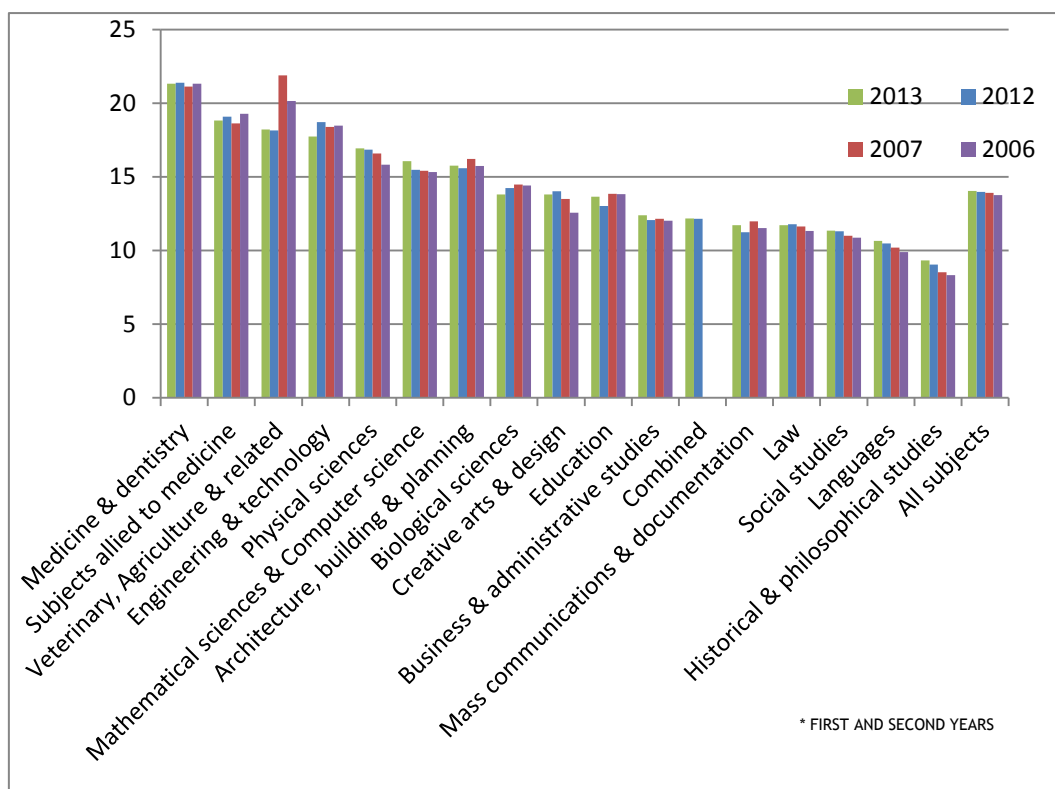
8. More important than contact hours is the total amount of effort that students are required to devote to their studies in order to obtain a qualification. Total study time combines contact hours and private study, and to some extent these are different sides of the same coin – all else being equal, the less contact, the more private study might be expected. One of the disquieting things about previous surveys, and again in this, is the finding that different universities can make very different demands of their students in the same subject. (It is also true that very different amounts of study are required in different subjects across the board – these differences may be explicable, though even here some transparency and explanation is in order.) As was pointed out previously, this raises questions about the comparability of standards in different institutions. This is a difficult question conceptually, but also difficult in terms of its implications – and despite being taken up by the IUSS Select Committee in 2009 and by others (including by the Higher Education Academy that carried out an inconclusive study of the issue) it has never been seriously addressed. It should be. If it becomes known that it is “easier” to obtain a qualification in one university than another, then that will in due course damage the reputation of that university, but it will also have an impact on the reputation of the entire UK higher education system.

9. While some of the most interesting sector level conclusions are described in this summary report, the full report on the HEPI website, together with the appendices that set out all the data and the analyses that have been carried out, provide a far richer and more comprehensive picture. And as in previous years, the full SPSS file containing all the raw data is on the HEPI website. This is available to be accessed by universities that may wish to obtain more detailed information about their results and, where appropriate, compare those with other universities, so enabling benchmarks to be created and comparisons to be made.

Contact with academic staff

10. Figure 1 shows the amount of contact reported with academic staff.

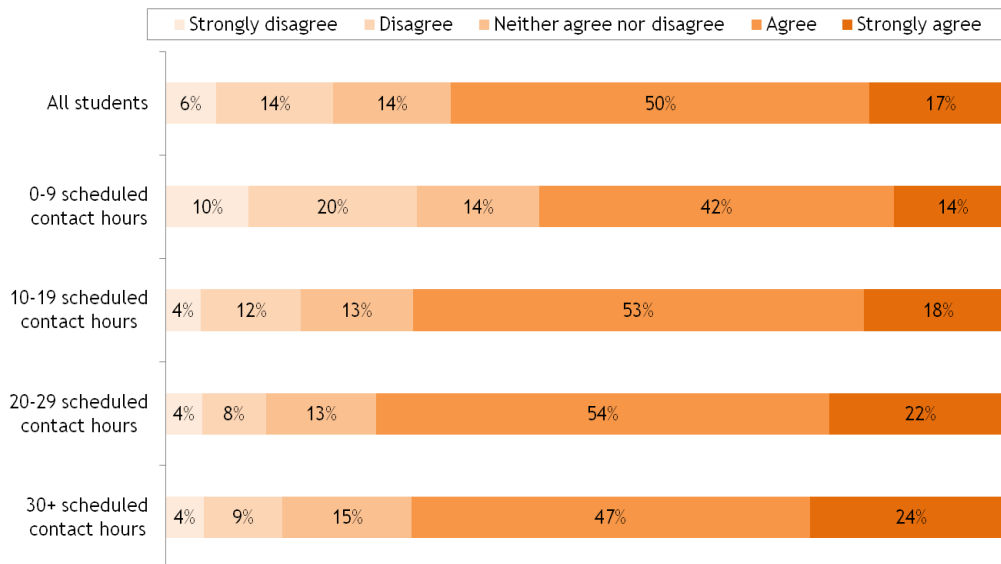
Figure 1: Scheduled hours of teaching per week by subject area



11. It is apparent that the amount of contact has been remarkably stable over the years. While there has been a slight and consistent increase, it is very small indeed. Certainly, there is no sign here that increased student fees have led to an increase in the provision that is made for them. As is by now well understood, different subjects on average provide students with very different levels of contact – for reasons related to the different characteristics of the subjects concerned. That is apparent from Figure 1, where the amount of contact is shown to range from over 20 hours per week in Medicine to less than 10 in Historical and Philosophical Studies².

12. Students were also asked if they were satisfied with the amount of contact. The responses are shown in Figure 2.

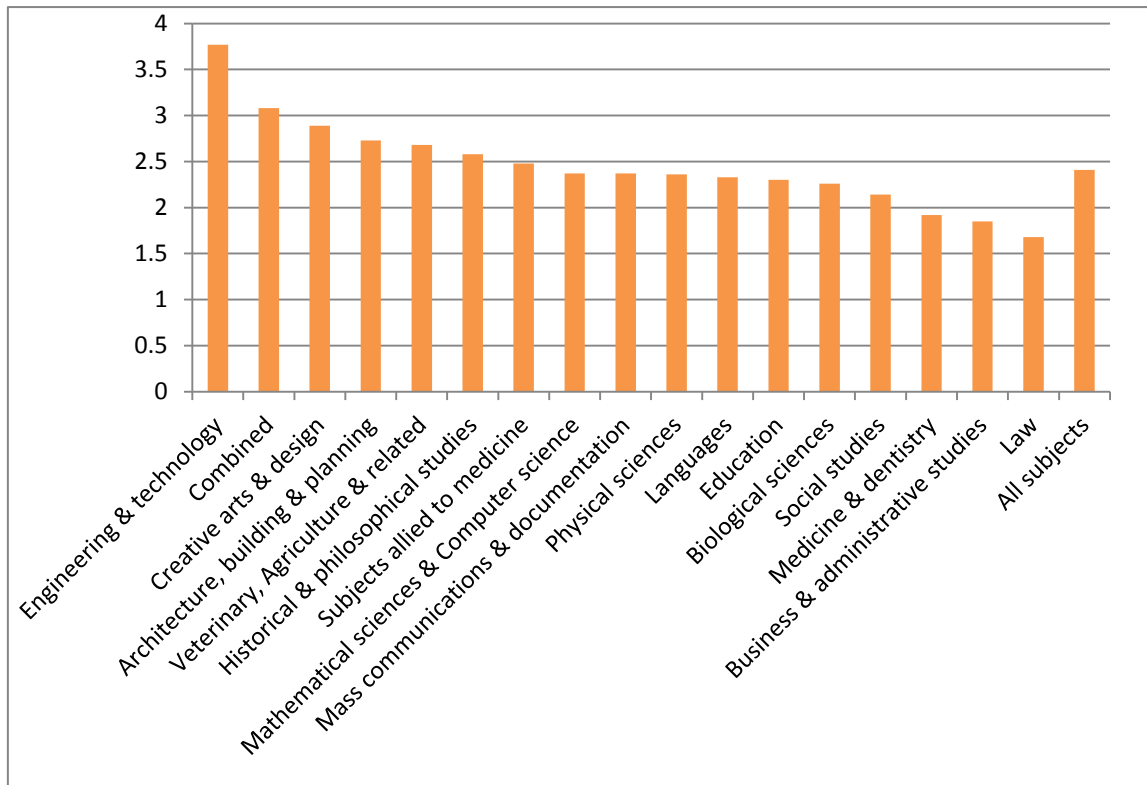
² This shows results for 1st and 2nd year students only. When 3rd and 4th year students are added the results change very slightly.



13. The great majority were satisfied, regardless of how much contact they received, but within this overall general satisfaction it is noticeable that those with least contact were least satisfied, and also that satisfaction appeared to diminish beyond a certain intensity. In a separate question students were asked for priorities for the use of the additional fees that they now pay. Increasing contact with staff, together with reducing the size of teaching groups were the two options whose mention had increased over the years by far more than any others. Contact hours are important to students and universities that do not satisfy students about the amount of contact that they provide will have more dissatisfied students.

14. In reply to a question about the availability of staff for informal contact outside scheduled teaching hours, as is shown in Figure 3, students reported that they had on average had contact with staff in this way nearly 2.5 times during the current term. Although a little over a quarter were dissatisfied, more than two thirds were satisfied with the amount of informal contact.

Figure 3: Number of meetings with teaching staff (outside teaching time)

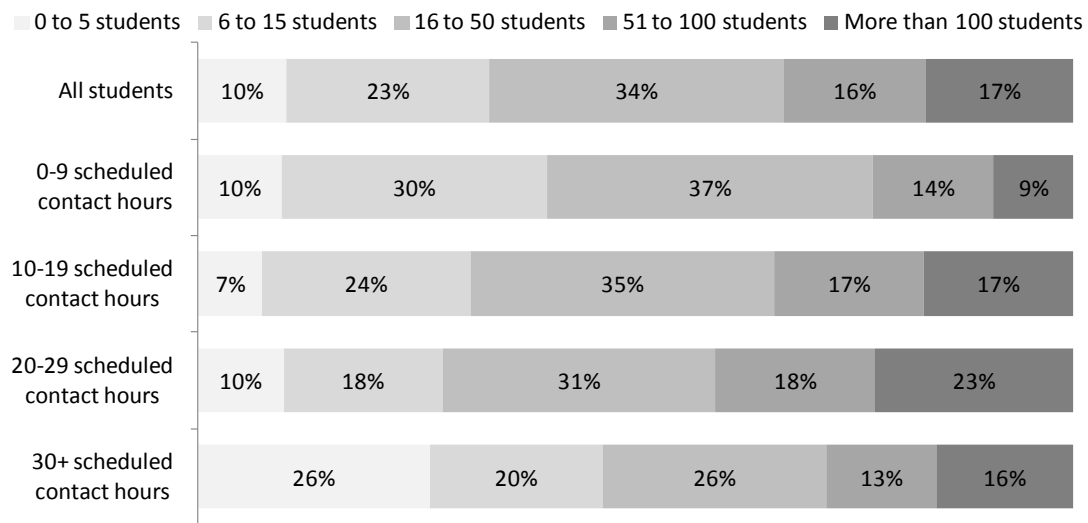


15. As in previous years, rather than ask about the number of tutorials, seminars or lectures that they attended, whose definitions are not standard, students were asked about the number of other students in the sessions that they attended, and who led these (whether academics or non-academics). Unsurprisingly, those who receive more hours of teaching in total have some of these extra hours in small groups and so have more small group teaching than those with fewer hours overall as well as more teaching in larger groups.

16. However, Figure 4 shows that a greater proportion of the hours that they did receive was in smaller groups, though the absolute number of hours they received was smaller than those with larger number of contact hours overall³.

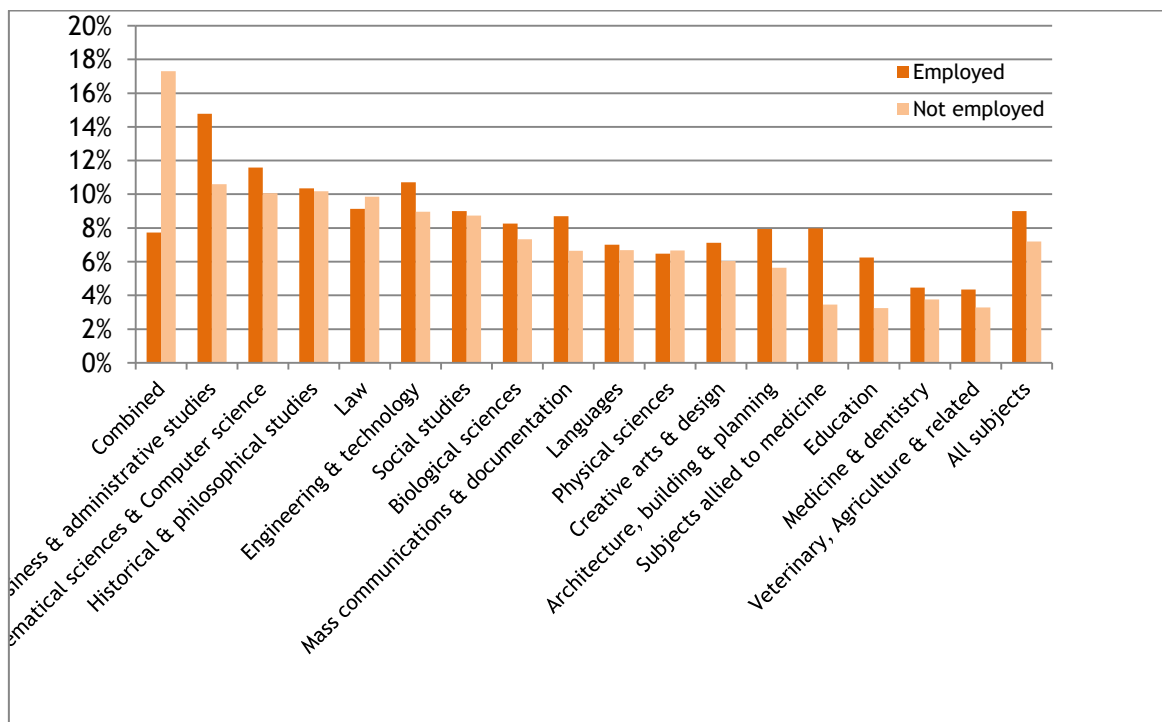
³ The results for those with 30+ contact hours (of whom there were only a small number) seems to be an aberration.

Figure 4: Proportion of hours of teaching by group sizes and number of contact hours



17. Students do not attend all their classes as Figure 5 shows

Figure 5: Average hours missed by subject and whether in employment



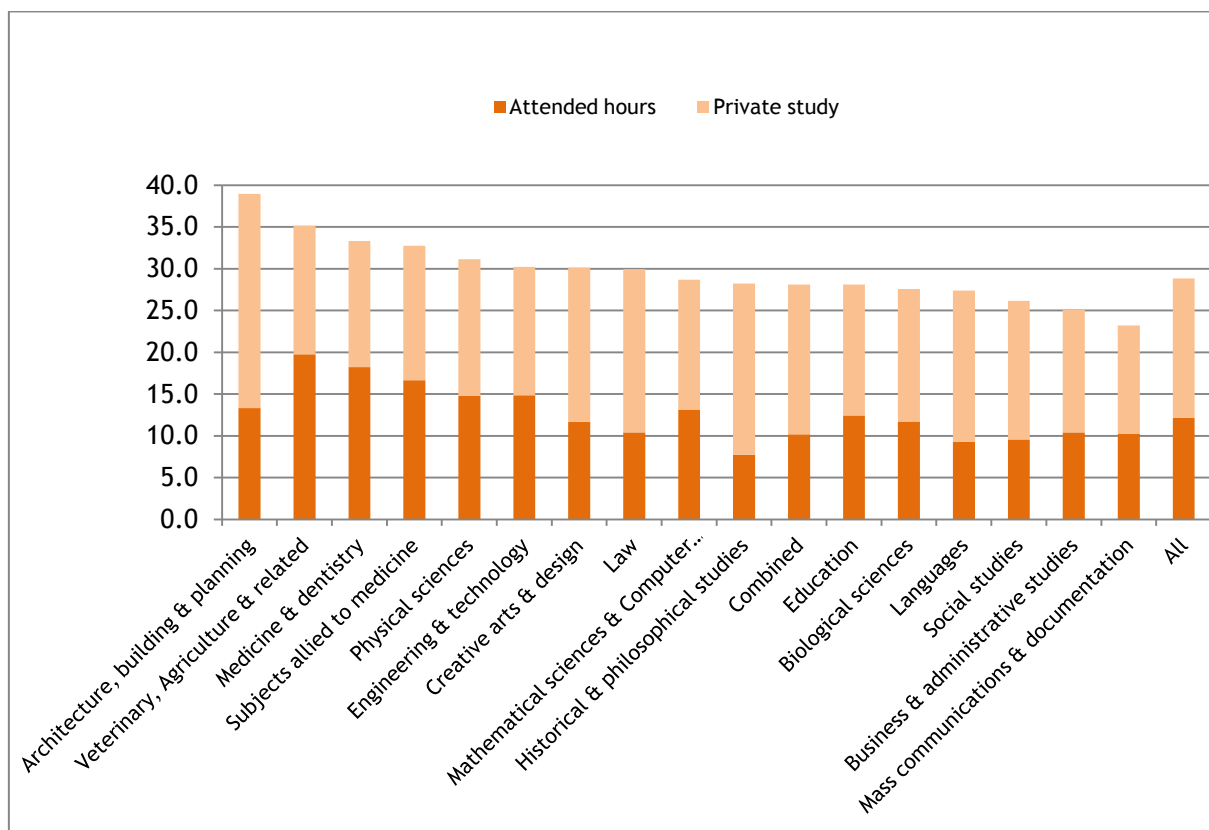
18. Students who had term-time employment were more likely on average to miss timetabled lessons (such students missed 9 per cent of lessons compared to 7.2 per cent among those who did not have employment). Considering the evidence that students with term time employment tend to do less well in their studies than others, this will be of concern if the new funding arrangements lead to more students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds taking such employment. There

has been progress recently in widening participation, and increasing numbers of disadvantaged students are attending university. And there is evidence also that the new fee regime has not deterred economically disadvantaged young people from attending university. It is important to ensure that, once there, students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds do not fail because of financial considerations.

Total Study Time

19. Among the most interesting findings from previous surveys, and again as shown in Figure 6 in this survey, are those that relate to the total effort that students are required to devote to their studies – whether private study or scheduled contact.

Figure 6: Total study by subject (private study + attended hours)



20. As might be expected, in general those subjects with the smallest amount of contact tended to require more private study, and so the differences in the amount of total workload between subjects were considerably less than the differences in the amount of contact. Whereas the number of contact hours varied between subjects by a factor of nearly 2.5 between those that provided the least contact on average and those that provided the most, total workload varied by a factor of a little over 1.5 between the most demanding and the least.

21. The Quality Assurance Agency guidelines assume that a full-time student at a UK university studies (all forms of study, direct contact and

private) for 1200 hours per year. The implication of the findings of this survey – which is consistent with earlier surveys, and so is unlikely to be an understatement – is that on average students at English universities study for no more than 900 hours per year. That is to say that students study for less than three quarters of the time that is expected for a degree programme. In our previous report we commented that study at an English university was more like a part-time than a full-time job, and so it has proved again.

22. This suggests that on average the standards of degrees are not as has been assumed. At least it suggests that the calibration of a credit against 10 hours of study needs to be reconsidered (because a three-year honours degree requires 120 credits per year for 3 years). It needs to be borne in mind that it is the Quality Assurance Agency itself that has judged that 10 hours of study are required to obtain one credit, and therefore that 1200 hours per year are required for a three-year degree programme.

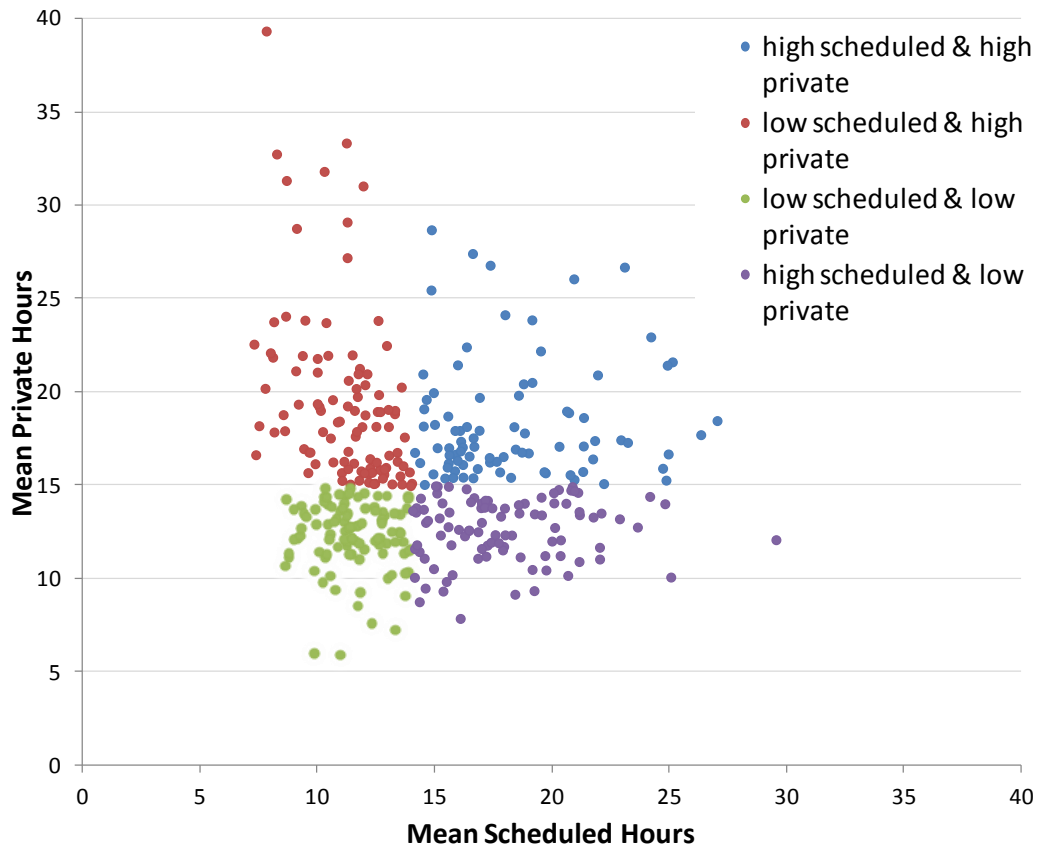
23. Table 1 below shows that there was very large variation between those universities that required the most and those that required the least amount of effort in any one subject.

Table 1: Range of institutional total study hours across each subject

	Lowest institutional mean	Highest institutional mean	Median institutional mean value
Medicine and dentistry	32.7	49.8	36.3
Subjects allied to medicine	25.3	44.2	34.0
Biological sciences	20.2	46.3	28.2
Veterinary sciences, agriculture & related subjects	34.7	45.5	39.2
Physical sciences	22.8	47.0	31.0
Mathematical & Computer Sciences	23.1	44.0	30.7
Engineering and technology	20.6	47.2	34.5
Social studies	20.0	43.0	25.3
Law	21.5	47.2	29.5
Business and administrative studies	15.9	39.2	24.8
Languages	22.9	42.1	28.1
Historical and philosophical studies	19.3	44.6	27.1
Creative arts and design	22.9	43.0	31.2
Education	21.1	36.6	26.8
All subjects	15.9	49.8	29.6

24. In engineering, for example, the range was from 20.6 hours per week to 47.2, with a median number of study hours of 34.5, and there are similar variations in other subjects. This variation is clearly apparent when the details are examined.

Figure 7: Mean scheduled hours by mean private hours for subject areas within institutions

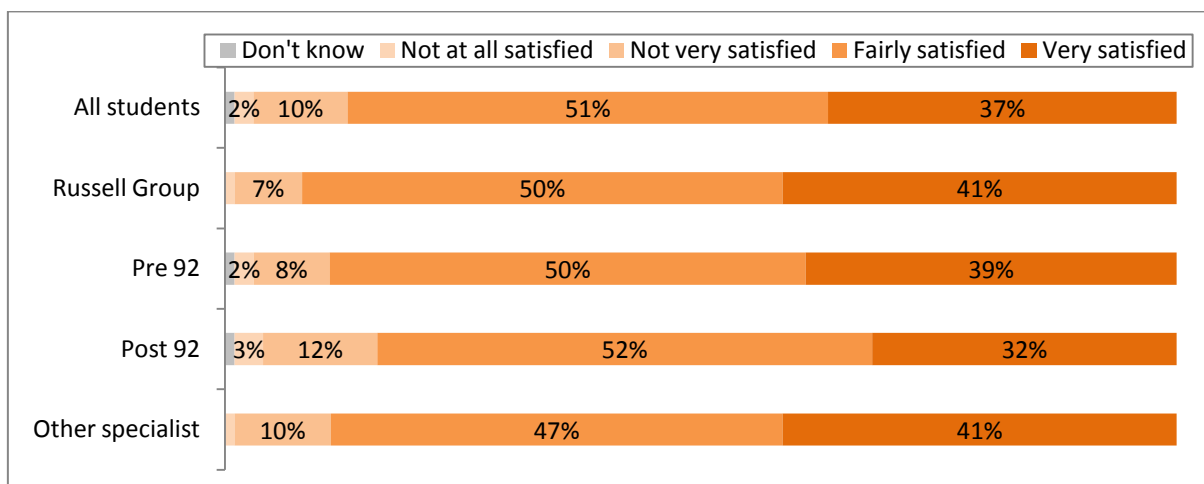


25. Figure 7 above maps for each subject in each university the amount of formal teaching that students had against the amount of private study. It shows that whereas in many subjects/institutions the pattern was as expected, with those providing least contact requiring more private study, there were many also (those identified as "low scheduled/low private – in green) where formal lessons were relatively few and that was not compensated by the amount of private study required. This raises questions about the comparability of standards between these institutions. It is unlikely that on average students studying for less than half the time studied by other students in the same subject will achieve the same outcomes. And yet almost all obtain degrees, no matter the differences in the amount of studying they have done.

Satisfaction

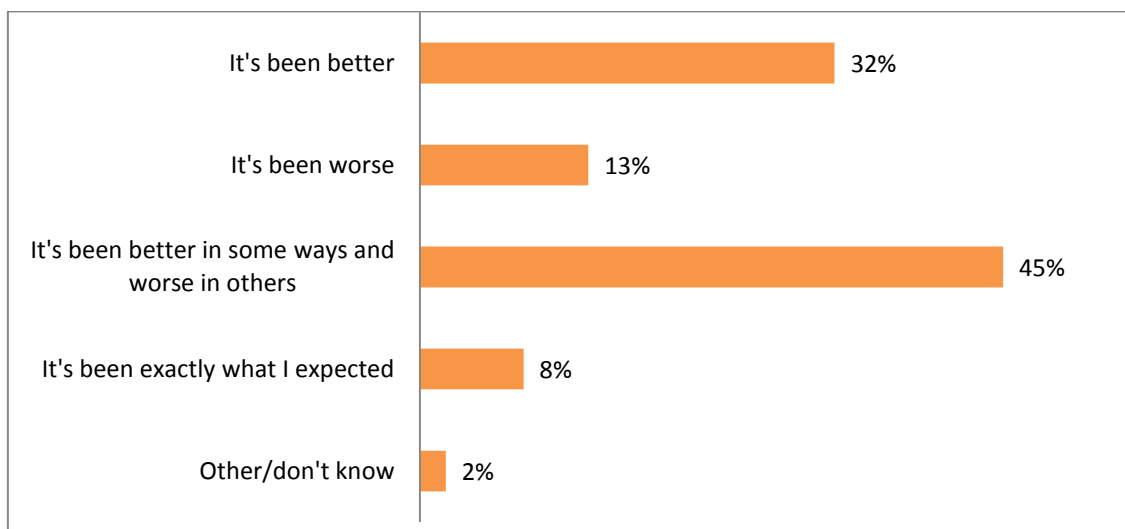
26. In response to questions about overall satisfaction Figure 8 shows that, as with the National Student Satisfaction Survey, students expressed themselves overwhelmingly satisfied – 87 per cent on average were satisfied, though there was some variation between post-92 universities where 84 per cent on average were satisfied and others where the satisfaction level was rather higher.

Figure 8: Satisfaction with overall quality of course by uni type



27. However, in response to the question whether their academic experience had matched their expectations, Figure 9 shows that 58 per cent said that it had failed to do so in some ways, and in answer to another question nearly one third of those said that contact hours were fewer than they had expected – only surpassed as a reason by the answer “course was poorly organised”.

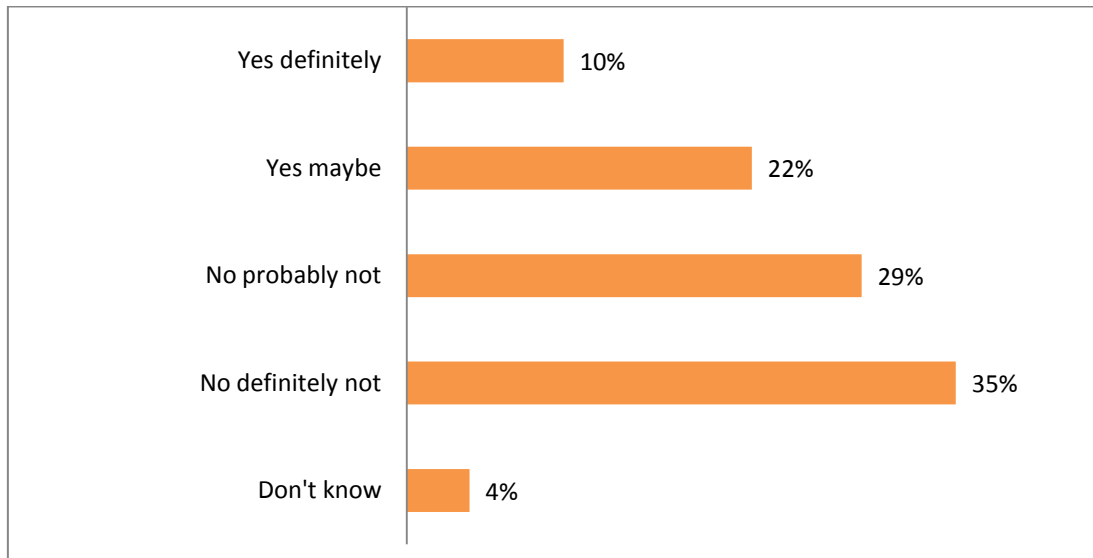
Figure 9: How academic experience has compared to expectations



28. And when asked whether given the chance they would have chosen a different course, Figure 10 shows that nearly one third said that they would definitely or possibly have done so, with a significantly larger proportion of students from new universities saying so than old. That is hardly surprising, given that so many more students enter new universities through clearing than others, and by definition such students are not entering courses that they have chosen to enter. It would be interesting to know if there is a higher level of dropout or other manifestations of a less satisfactory experience among students who enter through clearing. It seems plausible that there might be, and this points to the importance

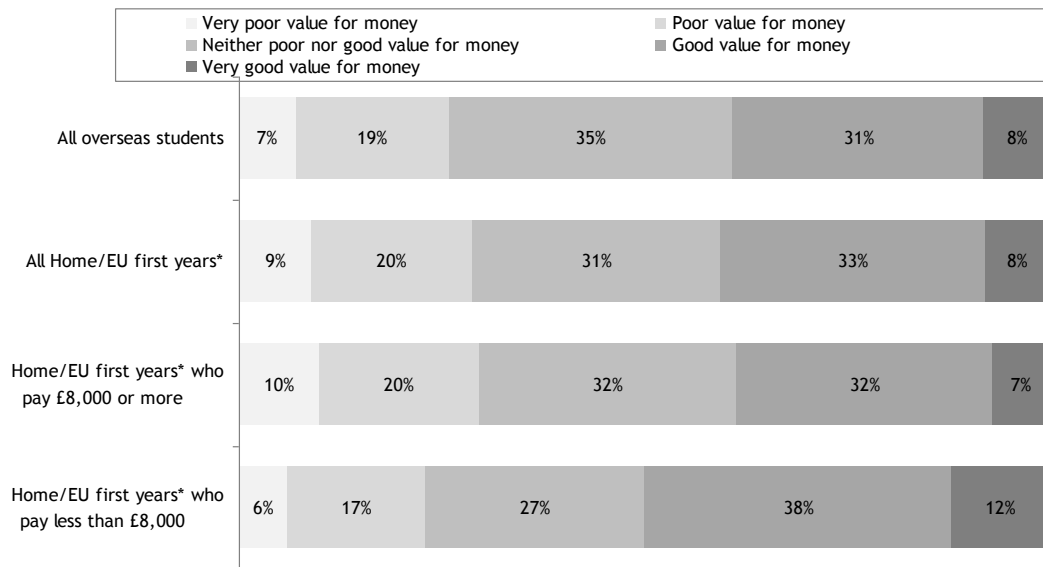
of reforming the admissions process to create a better match between student aptitude and course selection.

Figure 10: Whether would have chosen a different course



29. In response to questions about the value for money of their programmes, Figure 11 shows that there is a clear relationship between the amount paid and satisfaction – hardly surprising given that value for money is an economic consideration and the more that is paid the higher the threshold for satisfaction. Nevertheless, there is a very large difference - of nearly one third - between those first-year students paying less than £8000 who thought their course represented poor value and those paying more than £8000. And the 29 per cent of all first-year students who thought that their courses represented poor value for money compares with about 16 per cent who thought so in 2006, when the fee was just £1000 – 81 per cent more

Figure 11: Views on value for money of course by fee levels (home & EU students only)



30. The responses of first year students were similar to those of overseas students, who were in fact marginally less dissatisfied with the value for money of their course (26 per cent against 29 per cent).

31. Despite the 26 per cent dissatisfied with value for money (a feeling that while understandable is also unsurprising given the economic nature of the question), overseas students were altogether as satisfied with the quality of their programmes as home students, as shown in Figure 12 below, with 87 per cent of both home and overseas students expressing satisfaction with the quality of their courses.

Figure 12: Satisfaction with overall quality of course by home/overseas

