

# The Student Academic Experience Survey 2014: Summary and recommendations

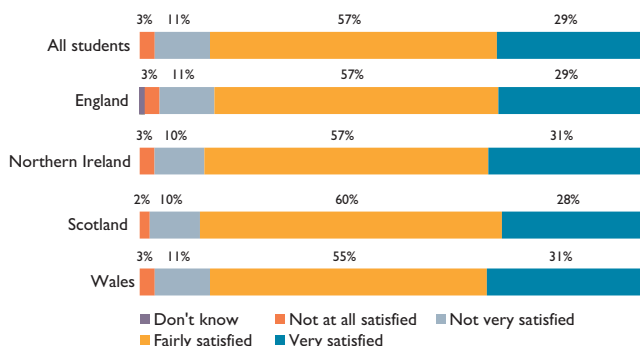


This report summarises the results of the 2014 HEPI-HEA Student Academic Experience Survey and makes some policy recommendations arising from the data.

## 1 Satisfaction

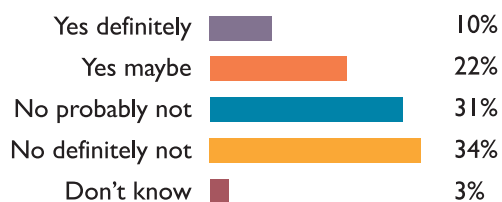
Full-time undergraduate students in UK universities express high levels of satisfaction with their courses: 86% are fairly or very satisfied with their course. There is little variation across the four parts of the UK, despite different student finance regimes.

To what extent are you satisfied, or not, with the overall quality of your course?



However, nearly one-in-three (31%) undergraduates say they would definitely or maybe have chosen another course if they were to have their time again.

Thinking about your academic experience, if you knew what you do now, would you have chosen a different course?



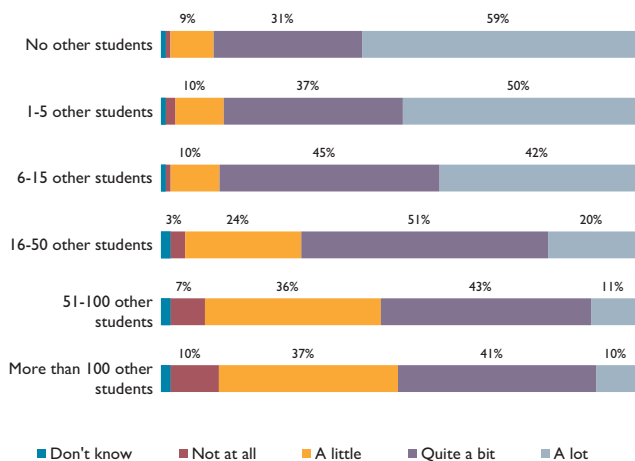
1 Figures may not sum to those shown in the charts due to rounding.

There has been a big increase in the quantity of information for higher education applicants in recent years, but some of the data is of limited value. Recent research suggests information, advice and guidance need to be responsive: 'there is no single solution for the provision of the "right" information, as the outcomes of student choice are inherently personal'.<sup>2</sup>

## 2 Class sizes

There is a close correlation between class size and perceived educational benefits. While 50% of students experiencing classes of between 1 and 5 other students find them 'a lot' beneficial, the figure is only 10% for those with classes of more than 100 students. On average first years have 3.0 of their weekly contact hours in classes of over 100.

To what extent do you feel that you benefit educationally from attending groups with...



2 HEFCE, UK Review of the provision of information about higher education, April 2014, p.5.

This finding about the classroom environment confirms the research of Professor Graham Gibbs: 'The number of class contact hours has very little to do with educational quality, independently of what happens in those hours.'<sup>3</sup> Dr Eric Mazur of Harvard University has even suggested brain activity in traditional lectures can be lower than when asleep.<sup>4</sup>

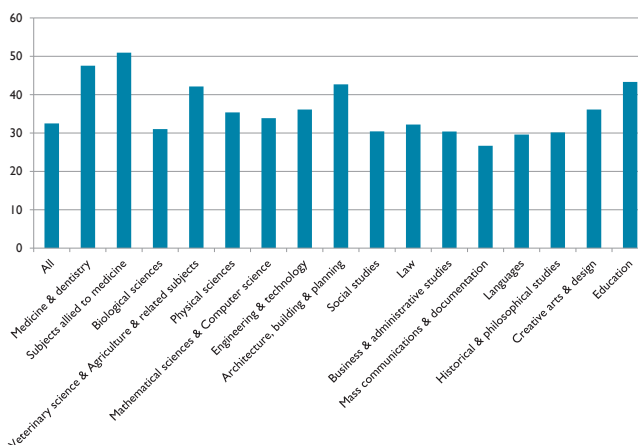
It is sometimes argued that innovations, including massive open online courses (known as MOOCs), can enable the benefits of small group teaching to be delivered on a mass scale. However, a recent review of one particular online course found 'Professional learners tend to conform to passive behaviours in a highly structured MOOC design.'<sup>5</sup>

### 3 Study hours

Undergraduate students in their first and second years have an average of 14.2 contact hours per week during term time and complete another 14.3 hours of private study on top.

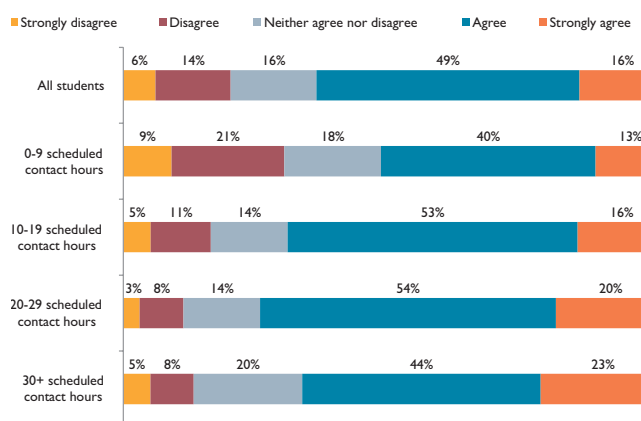
Taken together, this is less than three-quarters of the 40 hours a week assumed in the Quality Assurance Agency guidelines. However, other study hours, including time spent on placement, increases the total for all full-time undergraduates to 33.9 hours. Moreover, one-half (51%) of undergraduates in all years are expected to complete some academic work during vacations. On the other hand, students do not attend around 9% of timetabled sessions.

#### Total workload hours by discipline



Two-thirds of undergraduate students (64%) are satisfied with their contact hours.

#### I am satisfied with the amount of time-tabled sessions this year



However, those with between 0 and 9 contact hours are notably less satisfied than those with between 20 and 29 contact hours. Levels of satisfaction decrease above this level, perhaps because other activities can become squeezed.

#### Institutional ranges of total workload (unweighted)

Subject area	Lowest institution mean	Median	Highest institution mean	Number of institutions
Medicine & dentistry	36.38	46.96	51.23	11
Subjects allied to medicine	32.75	45.96	64.42	23
Biological sciences	21.70	30.14	47.83	40
Physical sciences	29.79	35.07	45.60	21
Mathematical sciences & Computer science	30.36	33.26	45.74	9
Engineering & technology	30.71	36.25	46.12	12
Social studies	24.42	29.52	43.39	16
Business & administrative studies	23.59	26.76	33.58	8
Languages	23.23	29.36	43.45	17
Historical & philosophical studies	26.91	34.96	40.48	8
Creative arts & design	27.88	33.64	44.72	11

The balance of total workload (contact hours plus independent study) varies:

- **by discipline** – students in disciplines allied to medicine study for 50.9 hours a week on average, while students on courses in mass communications and documentation study for an average of 26.7 hours a week;
- **by institution** – for instance, students at Russell Group universities generally have a slightly higher number of timetabled sessions, although the position is reversed in creative arts and design; and
- **by year of study** – first-year undergraduates have 14.5 timetabled hours and undertake 32.7 hours of total study on average, while third years have fewer timetabled hours (11.1) but undertake more hours of total study (37.2).

3 Graham Gibbs, Dimensions of Quality, p.21.

4 <http://newsletter.alt.ac.uk/2012/11/alt-c-2012-a-confrontation-with-reality/>

5 <http://www.gcu.ac.uk/academy/pl-mooc/findings/>

Such big differences could be more systematically recognised by graduate recruiters. The Government's Independent Reviewer on Social Mobility and Child Poverty, Alan Milburn, has complained 'too many employers continue to recruit from too narrow a range of universities'.<sup>6</sup>

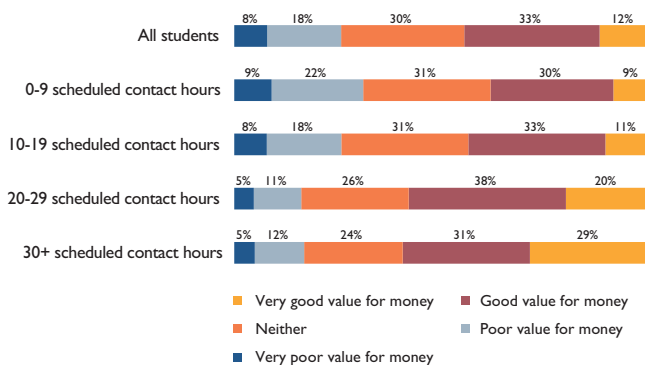
#### 4 Value for money

More than four out of ten full-time undergraduate students (44%) think they are receiving very good or good value for money, compared with one-quarter (25%) who consider they are receiving very poor or poor value for money.

International students, who typically pay more, perceive their course to be somewhat less good value for money than others: 38% rate their course as very good or good value for money, while 27% rate it as very poor or poor.

First and second-year students with one to five scheduled teaching hours were only half as likely to say their course was good value for money as those with 25 to 29 scheduled hours (32% versus 65%).

#### Perceived value for money by contact time



These results mask variations across the UK and across different entry years:

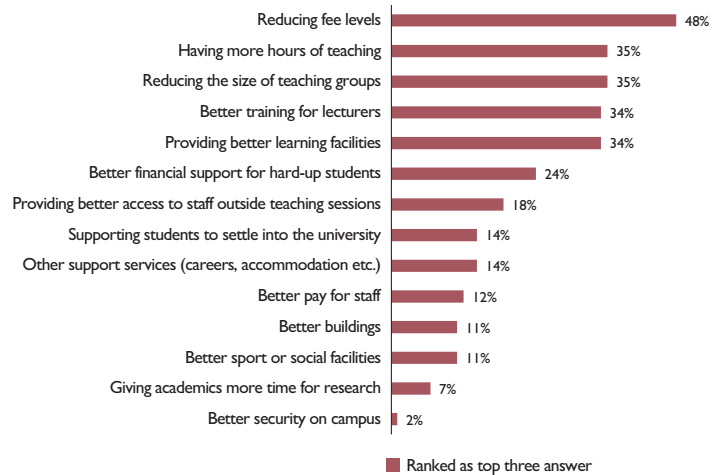
- 70% of undergraduates at Scottish institutions, who typically pay no fees, believe they are receiving good or very good value for money, compared with only 41% in England, where fees are typically £9,000;
- fee levels in Northern Ireland are around 40% of those in England for the majority of students in their first and second year, but the perceived 'value for money' profile is closer to the one in England than Scotland; and
- one-sixth (18.3%) of first and second year students from the UK studying at institutions in England believed their course represented very poor or poor value for money in 2012, but the figure has now risen to one-third (33.1%).

<sup>6</sup> Alan Milburn, *University Challenge: How Higher Education Can Advance Social Mobility*, October 2012, p.70.

#### 5 Spending priorities

When asked about their top three priorities for institutional expenditure, 48% of undergraduates chose 'reducing fee levels' (55% for first and second years in England), even though demand for full-time courses has changed less than many people expected as a result of higher fees and loans.

Below is a list of things which a university might choose to spend money on. Please rank your top three priorities in order of importance...'



However, four further clear priorities emerge, each chosen by over one-third of students:

- more teaching hours (35%);
- smaller class sizes (35%);
- better training for lecturers (34%); and
- better learning facilities (34%).

Far smaller proportions backed other options, such as 'better pay for staff' (12%), 'better buildings' (11%) and 'giving academics more time for research' (7%).

Given the likelihood of continuing austerity measures, the renewed push for university efficiencies and the promised removal of student number controls, funding per student could be squeezed in future years.<sup>7</sup> So it might be useful to start asking students where any reductions in spending should fall.

#### 6 The wellbeing of students

This year's survey uses the Office for National Statistics's questions on national wellbeing to assess how content students are.

In contrast to the happy-go-lucky caricatures of students, the data suggest they are somewhat less content than young people in general as well as the population as a whole.

<sup>7</sup> Institute of Fiscal Studies, *Green Budget 2014*, February 2014.

For example, when asked to plot 'how happy did you feel yesterday' on a scale between 0 (not at all) and 10 (completely), 72% of the general population chose between 7 and 10 compared with only 62% of full-time students.

### Policy conclusions

In some areas, the Student Academic Experience Survey has shown only modest changes since it began in 2006, but students in England are paying much more for their education and this is having an impact on their perceptions. They are paying a lot more, receiving a little more and increasing their expectations in terms of value for money. The survey has also shown persistent issues across the UK on contact hours and class sizes, as well as the comparability of degrees.

### Policy recommendations

- The range of information, advice and guidance on offer to people considering higher education should be improved further, particularly as higher education institutions are freed to expand from 2015/16.
- Given the proportion of students who would now consider applying for a different course, it should be easier for people to transfer their place, as the Office of Fair Trading suggested.<sup>8</sup>
- People considering higher education need the Key Information Set to be supplemented by comprehensive information on what happens during contact hours.
- The higher education sector needs to explain more clearly why degrees that are widely regarded as comparable make such different expectations of their students.
- Graduate employers should be helped to understand the differences between courses and encouraged to accredit those courses they value the most.

- Students could demand more transparency from their institutions in explaining how their fees are currently spent.
- The current focus on teaching and learning needs to be augmented with a new focus on students' overall quality of life, and the structures in place to support them.

The removal of student number controls from 2015/16 could potentially have an impact on issues like class size, retention rates and the use of facilities. So it is important that these issues continue to be monitored.

#### About the Student Academic Experience Survey:

Since its introduction by HEPI in 2006, the survey has come to encompass a broader range of students and a wider range of topics. In contrast to the official National Student Survey, it includes first and second-year students. The results do not cover part-time students nor those studying at alternative providers.

#### About the 2014 survey:

The survey is produced in partnership by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), which aims to shape the higher education debate with evidence, and the Higher Education Academy (HEA), which promotes high quality learning and teaching across the UK and internationally. Many of the questions are repeated from earlier years to enable comparisons over time. We have also added questions to enable a broader picture of students' quality of life.

*Fieldwork was undertaken by Youthsight between 24 February and 26 March and the sample consisted of 15,046 full-time undergraduates. The results have been weighted to ensure they are representative. A more detailed assessment is available from HEPI or the HEA and the full data are freely available for anyone to use on the HEPI website.*

8 Office of Fair Trading, *Higher Education in England*, March 2014.

## Contact us

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