

# The 2015 Student Academic Experience Survey



Higher Education Policy Institute



Alex Buckley, Ioannis Soilemetzidis and Nick Hillman



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## Foreword by Professor Stephanie Marshall

The *Student Academic Experience Survey* always casts a fascinating light on what students think about their time in higher education (HE). It also helps to illuminate a way forward for all of us in the sector in terms of focus, which is crucial during periods of change.

This year's results again highlight the importance to students of training for those who teach in HE. When asked to rank the importance of three different characteristics of the people they are taught by, students in nearly half of all subjects rate staff having received training in how to teach as the number one priority. When asked last year about priorities for institutional expenditure, a significant number of students chose better training for lecturers.

Students clearly value training and want to see investment from institutions to improve the quality of learning and teaching. As we move forward in an increasingly diversified sector, we must be mindful of maintaining and developing clear standards for teaching, standards that are recognised by students and that support staff as they progress through their careers.

I am also struck by the findings related to independent learning. The high number of students who felt they had not worked hard enough and who do not feel supported in their independent study indicates that providing guidance and structure outside timetabled sessions is key. This is backed up by HEA research which revealed the need to integrate independent learning into academic programmes, and also to ensure its benefits are clearly communicated to students.<sup>1</sup> Helping students to learn independently is critical to their future success, both in terms of employability skills and lifelong learning. Providing opportunities for staff training in relation to independent learning is key too.

Mixed in with the good news, such as the finding that 87% of students are very or fairly satisfied with their course, there is news that continues to concern us. For example, students have lower levels of wellbeing than the general population, a finding first revealed last year. We must continue to work together to address the complex issues at play here.

One thing we can all be sure of on the path ahead is a common goal: working together to improve the experience of students. I hope that you find the insights in this report useful as well as fascinating.

**Professor Stephanie Marshall**  
**Chief Executive, Higher Education Academy**

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas, L., Jones, R. and Ottoway, J. (2015) *Effective Practice in the Design of Directed Independent Learning Opportunities* [Internet]. Available from: <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Effective%20practice%20in%20the%20design%20of%20directed%20independent%20learning%20opportunities.pdf> [Accessed 22 May 2015].

## Foreword by Nick Hillman

The *Student Academic Experience Survey* has been running since 2006. Since then, the balance of responses has been remarkably consistent for some questions and dramatically different for others. This is a reflection of events, as there have been big changes to the higher education landscape but students want the same things they always have, such as a rewarding learning environment.

As in the past, this year's figures show the UK higher education system is in rude health. An overwhelming majority of undergraduates are satisfied with their course. But nothing is perfect and there are clear lessons here for students, institutions and policymakers.

In particular, the positive headline statistics mask some worrying issues. For example, while contact hours are an incomplete measure of teaching and learning, students with fewer scheduled hours:

- are more likely to say they would have chosen another course if they had their time again;
- often think they are receiving poor value for money;
- find their lives less worthwhile.

Each year, some of the survey's questions are modified in the light of events, and new questions are added. An old question about where students' higher education institutions should spend their money has this year been replaced by a related question on where any of the expected cuts could be applied with the least pain. We have also introduced a question on the right balance between funding from government on the one hand and from those who benefit directly from higher education on the other.

For me personally, the most striking finding comes from one of the new questions, which shows a big mismatch between what students want to know about where their fees are going and what institutions are telling them. Informing students about how their money is spent raises concerns about excessive consumerisation and difficult questions about cross-subsidies. It is tricky terrain, but it is nonetheless a challenge worth tackling.

Giving students, not to mention policymakers, more detailed evidence would aid understanding of the financial challenges faced by universities. It would also remind people that higher education delivers all sorts of benefits outside the lecture halls as well as within them.

**Nick Hillman**  
**Director of the Higher Education Policy Institute**



## Executive summary

The Higher Education Policy Institute and Higher Education Academy (HEPI-HEA) *Student Academic Experience Survey* has been running since 2006 and is now a fixture in the policy landscape. Its focus on what students get, how hard they work, and what they think of their experience makes it even more useful at a time of high fees and difficult budget decisions. Even if higher education is not the hot political topic that it was when the fee cap was dramatically raised in 2012, there are still many issues to resolve and decisions to make.

The survey was conducted in February and March 2015 by YouthSight using their 'Student Panel'. With 15,129 responses the survey provides a rich picture of full-time undergraduate education, and – a mark of good research of this kind – raises more questions than it answers.

### Overall academic experience

Most students are satisfied with their course, with 87% saying that they are very or fairly satisfied, and only 12% feeling that their course is worse than they expected. However, for those students who feel that their course is worse than expected, or worse in some ways and better than others, the number one reason is not the number of contact hours, the size of classes or any problems with feedback but the lack of effort they themselves put in. This is an important corrective to any sense that students see themselves as passive consumers; they are aware that the quality of their experience depends on the efforts both of themselves and their institution.

### Information, reflections on course choice and value for money

A substantial minority of students continue to find the information they were given before they started their course vague (21%) or even misleading (10%). One in three (34%) say that, knowing what they now know, they would have chosen a different course. That proportion is higher for students with fewer contact hours, and varies between different subjects.

Overall, 41% of students feel that they have received good or very good value for money. Unsurprisingly, there are differences between students under different fee regimes. Only 6% of students from Scotland studying in Scotland – who pay no tuition fees at all – think they get poor or very poor value for money. The equivalent figure for students from England studying anywhere in the UK – who pay up to £9,000 – is nearly six times higher (34%).

However, while perceptions of value for money have plummeted for those students from England, their other perceptions of their course have barely changed. Those perceptions of value for money do seem to be related both to the amount of independent study they undertake, and – more strongly – the number of contact hours they have.

A new finding from the 2015 survey is that three quarters of students (75%) feel that they have not received enough information from their institution about how their tuition fees have been spent.

### Workload and class size

Overall, students report spending 12 hours per week in taught sessions, 14 hours in independent study and three hours undertaking work for their course outside the institution. Contact time differs widely between subjects, from eight hours in Historical and Philosophical Studies to 19 hours in Medicine and Dentistry. However, students in subjects with fewer contact hours spend a higher proportion of them in smaller teaching groups. Independent study varies less between subjects, from 10 hours in Mass Communications to 18 hours in History and Philosophy.

When they are asked about the educational benefits of classes of different sizes, students in different subjects give remarkably similar answers. Students in Creative Arts spend on average less than half an hour per week

in classes of over 100 other students, compared to three hours per week for students in Subjects Allied to Medicine. Despite this difference, a very similar proportion (just 41% and 46% respectively) feel that they benefit quite a bit, or a lot, from sessions of that size.

### **Quality of teaching and learning**

Students are positive about the proportion of teaching staff who encourage them to take responsibility for their own learning: 77% say that a majority or all staff do so. In contrast, only 33% felt that the same proportion of staff helped them to explore their own areas of interest.

The 2015 survey has revealed wide disparities in the way that different institutions use summative and formative assessment. Within the broad subject group of Humanities and Social Sciences, the ratio ranged from 13 pieces of formative assessment to less than one piece of summative assessment at one institution, to one piece of formative assessment to five pieces of summative assessment at another.

For the first time this year, students were asked to rank in importance three key characteristics of teaching staff: whether they have received training in how to teach; whether they are active researchers; and their industry or professional expertise. The results show that the priority for most students is either training in how to teach or industry/professional expertise. Only 17% feel that staff being active researchers is the most important characteristic. There are wide variations between subjects, but even in non-vocational subjects there is still a priority placed on industry/professional expertise: over one in four students in History and Philosophy feel that is the most important characteristic.

### **Student wellbeing**

Students are less satisfied with life, less happy, and have less of a sense that the things they do are worthwhile than the general population, even compared to the same age group. Female students, and those students reporting lower amounts of time spent on academic work, tend to have a lower sense of wellbeing.

### **Students' views on policy options**

With austerity set to continue, the survey this year asked students to prioritise a range of ways in which institutions could save money. The more favoured options by far are to spend less money on buildings and sports and social facilities. The least favoured options are to cut contact hours, reduce the spending on learning facilities and reduce the support available to academics for improving their teaching skills.

When asked more generally about how the costs of teaching undergraduates should be paid, 83% feel that the government should pay at least half of the costs. There are quite pronounced differences between students from Scotland and students from the rest of the UK: 37% of students from Scotland feel that the government should pay all the costs of tuition, compared to 22% of students from England, 22% of those from Northern Ireland and 18% of those from Wales. However, a majority of students from all parts of the UK, including those from Scotland (55%), feel that students should contribute to the costs of teaching undergraduates.

### **Conclusion**

A number of key messages emerge from the 2015 *Student Academic Experience Survey*. It is clear that students across different subjects are less content with fewer contact hours and feel that larger classes have less educational value. Students also recognise that their own engagement is crucial to their academic success: as last year, the number one reason given by students as to why their experience has not lived up to their expectations is that they have not put in enough effort themselves.

While there are important subject differences, students across higher education value professional and industry expertise among their teaching staff and whether they have received training in how to teach much more than whether the staff are currently active researchers.

Students are keen that any budget cuts made by institutions do not impact on the number of contact hours, and would prefer that spending be reduced on buildings and sport and leisure facilities. They are also overwhelmingly of the view that the government should pay at least half of the costs of teaching undergraduates but that graduates should also make a contribution. However, when interpreting students' perceptions of local and national funding issues, it should be noted that only one in six students (18%) feel that they have been given enough information about how their fees are spent; the first task may be to better inform students about where their fees go.

# I. Introduction

The *Student Academic Experience Survey* was begun in early 2006 as a way to measure changing perceptions before and after the raising of the full-time undergraduate tuition fee cap to £3,000. It was not originally conceived as a permanent feature of the higher education debate, but the environment in which higher education institutions operate has changed so rapidly that it has become an annual initiative that reveals new facts each time.

When the full-time undergraduate fee cap was set at £9,000 for much of the UK in 2012, the survey once more provided the best available data on what happens when fees are sharply increased.<sup>2</sup> This shift in funding means that the majority of teaching costs for many students – particularly students from England – are now covered by student loans rather than government grants. This year's survey is the first one in which the vast majority of respondents from England are on the post-Browne £9,000 fees regime. It therefore offers the most complete picture to date of what has been happening in England and enables comparisons with other parts of the UK.

Regular questions from earlier waves of the survey, on issues such as workload, class size and value for money, are repeated so that year-on-year comparisons can be made, while others have been tweaked in the light of events. Newer additions, like the questions asked for the first time in 2014 on wellbeing, are posed again. In addition, some wholly new questions relating to future funding challenges and policy options have been asked for the first time.

For most of its life, the *Student Academic Experience Survey* has been a joint enterprise between the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) and the Higher Education Academy (HEA), as it is again this year. The fieldwork has always been conducted by YouthSight (formerly known as OpinionPanel), which specialises in market research with young people and builds its panel of respondents through a relationship with UCAS.

We would like to thank John Newton and colleagues at YouthSight for contributing analyses to this report, and for administering the survey on behalf of HEPI and the HEA. We are also indebted to all the students who completed the survey.

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<sup>2</sup> Students from England studying anywhere in the UK pay up to £9,000, as do students from Scotland studying outside Scotland and students from Northern Ireland studying outside Northern Ireland. Students from Wales pay up to £3,810 wherever they study in the UK. Students from Northern Ireland studying in Northern Ireland pay a maximum of £3,805. Students from Scotland studying in Scotland pay no tuition fees.



## 1.1 Methodology

Respondents were drawn from YouthSight's 'Student Panel', which is made up of over 72,000 students in the UK. They are primarily recruited through a partnership with the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), which invites a large number of new first-year students to join the panel each year. About one in twenty current UK undergraduates belongs to the YouthSight Student Panel.

Almost 69,000 members of the panel were invited to complete the survey between 16 February and 24 March 2015. In total, 15,129 responses were collected, giving a response rate of 22%. All respondents who completed the survey received a £1 Amazon gift voucher and, on average, respondents took 13 minutes to complete it. Weighting has been applied to the responses to ensure the sample is balanced and reflective of the full-time student population as a whole.

The survey is not designed or intended to facilitate comparisons or rankings between individual courses, due to the sample size. While 15,129 responses permits a detailed picture of the higher education sector, it is insufficient to make reliable comparisons between institutions at subject level.

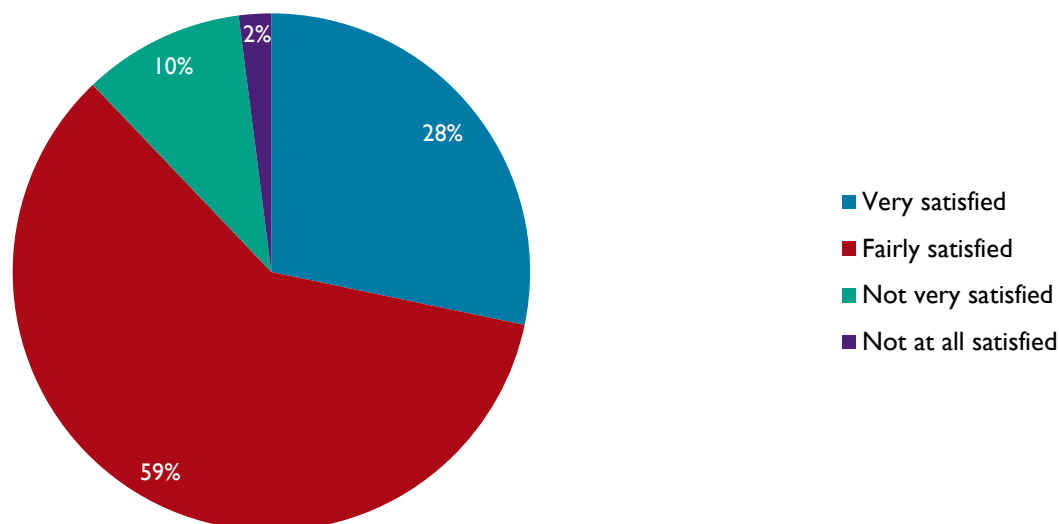
All respondents to the survey were full-time students. Unless stated otherwise, all figures relate to the 2015 survey. The full data are freely available from HEPI and the HEA.

## 2. Overall academic experience

The survey explores students' overall perceptions of their course, including their satisfaction and whether their expectations have been met – and if not, why not.

### 2.1 Satisfaction

**Figure 1: To what extent are you satisfied, or not, with the overall quality of your course?**



Base: All respondents (15,129).

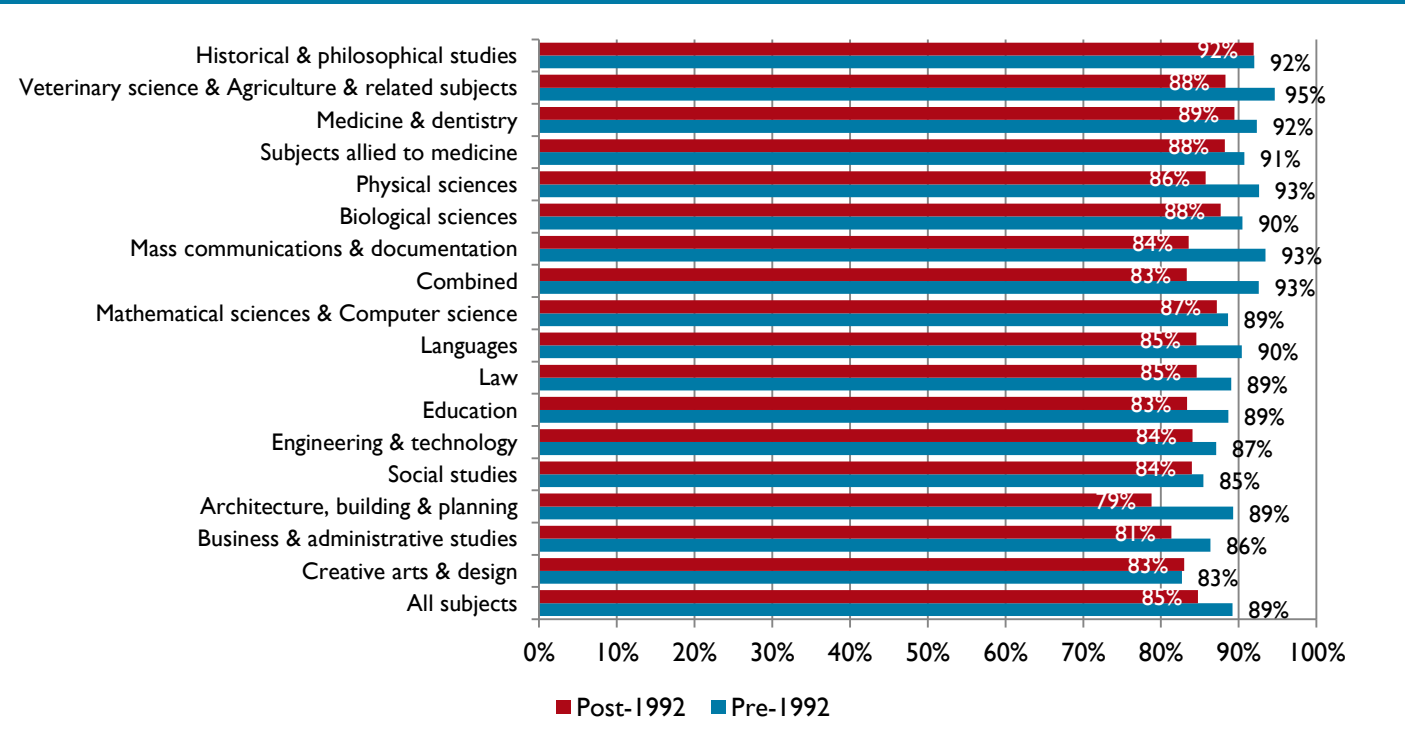
The overwhelming majority of respondents (87%) are “fairly satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the quality of their course. This is consistent with results from previous waves of the survey as well as the *National Student Survey* (NSS) of final-year students.<sup>3</sup>

The headline figures on satisfaction disguise the complexity of students' experiences, however. There are differences in satisfaction according to subject and institution type, as shown in Figure 2. Students in Creative Arts and Design are generally less positive and students in Historical and Philosophical Studies are generally most positive (again, this chimes with results from the NSS).

There are differences between pre-1992 and post-1992 institutions for some subjects, most notably Architecture and Mass Communications. For all subjects except Creative Arts and History and Philosophy, the differences show students at pre-1992 institutions are more satisfied. This could reflect differences in the characteristics of institutions or the characteristics of the students they recruit – or a mix of both.

<sup>3</sup> The National Student Survey: <https://www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/lt/publicinfo/nationalstudentsurvey/>

**Figure 2: Total satisfaction (combination of students “very satisfied” or “fairly satisfied”) by institution type, at the level of subject**

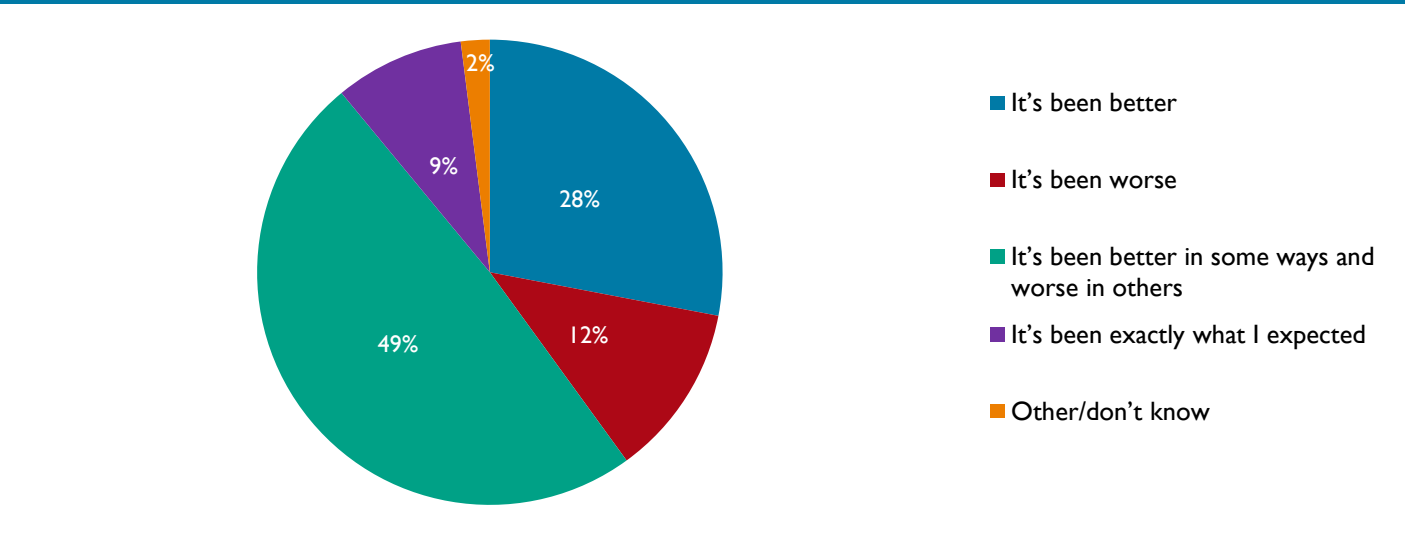


Base: All respondents from the following institution groups; post-1992 (7,333), pre-1992 (7,290).

**2.2 Experience versus expectations**

The survey asked students to think back to when they applied for their current course, and to compare their expectations then with the reality of their academic experience to date. More students (28%) said their expectations had been exceeded than said their experience was worse than expected (12%). But around half of respondents (49%) said their experience was better in some ways and worse in others.

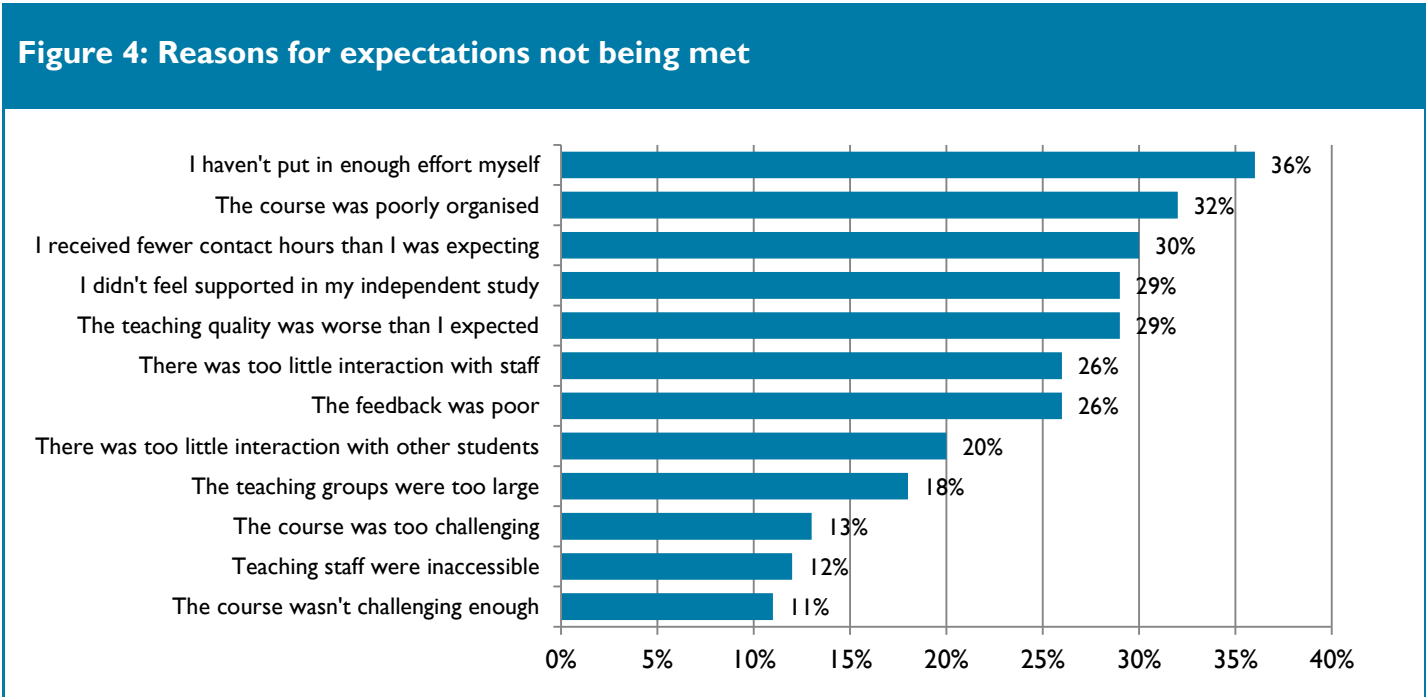
**Figure 3: Thinking back to when you applied to your current university, has the reality of your academic experience matched your expectations?**



Base: All respondents (15,129).

When asked to explain why their experience was worse than expected or better in some ways and worse in others, the top response – chosen by 36% of respondents – was that they had not put in enough effort themselves. Respondents were allowed to opt for multiple responses and other options chosen by more than a quarter of those responding to the question were: “the course was poorly organised” (32%); “I received fewer contact hours than I was expecting” (30%); “I didn’t feel supported in my independent study” (29%); “The teaching quality was worse than I expected” (29%); “There was too little interaction with staff” (26%); and “The feedback was poor” (26%).

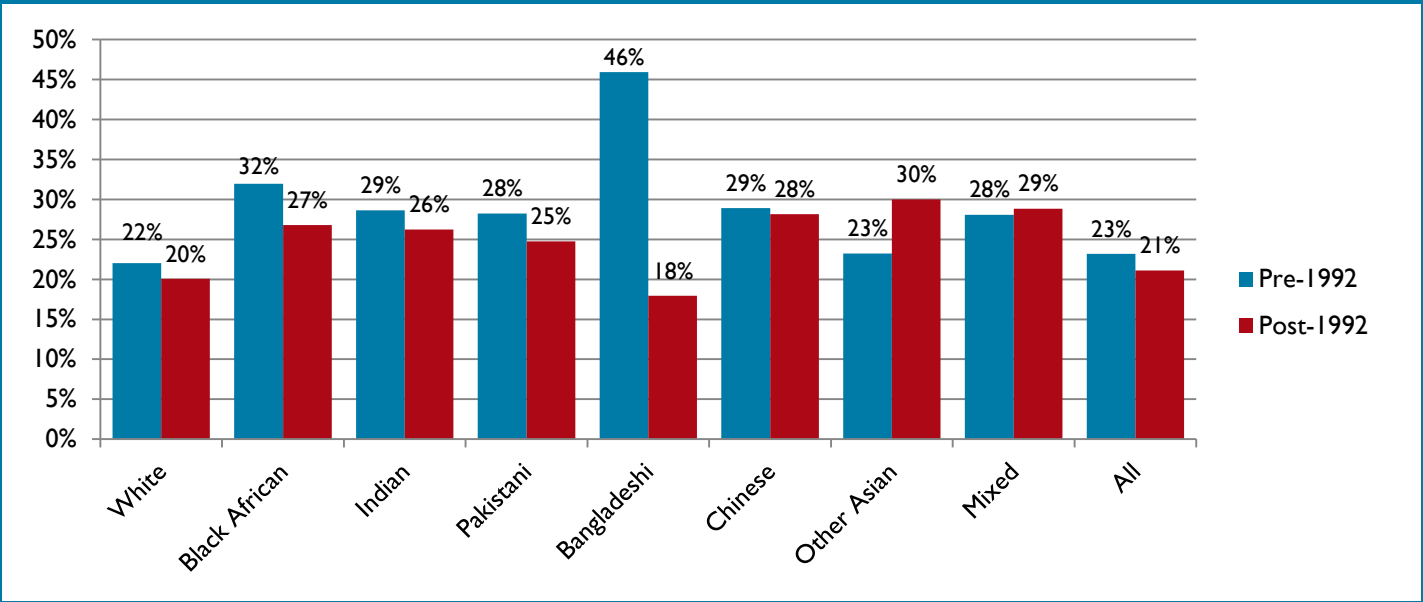
This suggests that, despite the success of UK higher education institutions in the global league tables, there are no grounds for complacency about the teaching and learning environment. The large proportion of students who feel that their own lack of effort has spoiled their experience suggests that encouraging and challenging students to work hard should be a priority for institutions; a far cry from the more crude conceptions of students as passive consumers



Base: All that answered that their experience was worse or worse in some ways compared to their expectations (9,272).

Students at pre-1992 institutions are slightly more likely to feel they have not put enough effort into their studies than those at post-1992 institutions (24% compared to 21%). Some of the difference appears to be explained by differences in opinion within ethnic groups. Figure 5 shows the proportion of students from the UK from each ethnic group who think their experience has not met their expectations at least partly because they have not invested enough effort. Students with Black African and Bangladeshi backgrounds at pre-1992 institutions are notably more likely than their counterparts at post-1992 institutions to feel that they have not invested enough effort.

Figure 5: Proportion of UK students of different ethnic groups selecting “I haven’t put in enough effort myself” for different institution types



Base: All students from the UK from the following institution groups; post-1992 (6,516), pre-1992 (6,125). Groups have been excluded for which there are less than 50 responses.



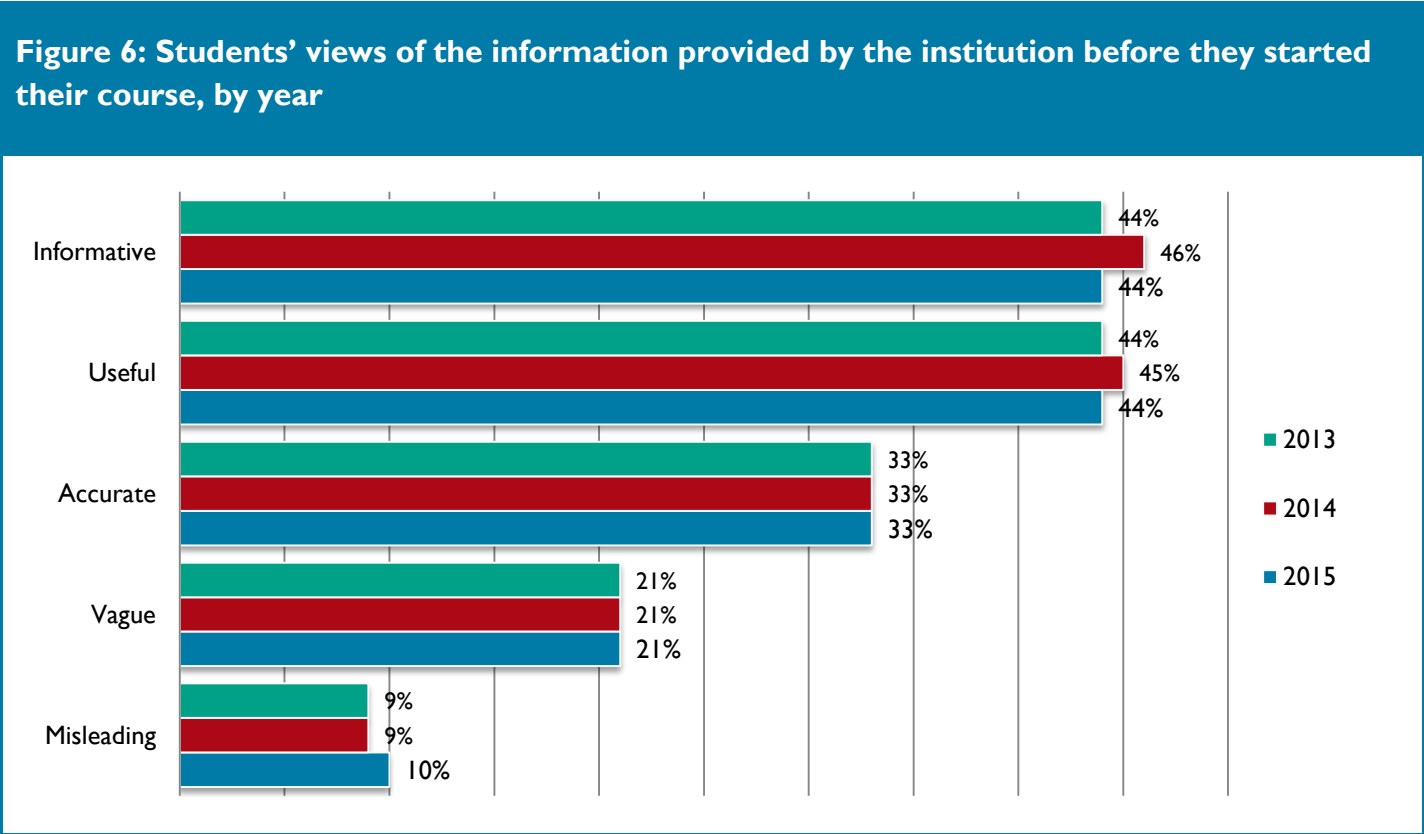
### 3. Information, reflections on course choice and value for money

Providing accurate information to prospective students (along with relevant advice and guidance) is essential in helping students make good decisions about where and what to study. With higher fees and a greater role placed on student choice, it is more important than ever before. This section explores students’ perceptions of the information they were provided with, as well as any regrets they have about the course they chose, and also looks at perceptions of value for money.

#### 3.1 Information provided by higher education institutions

One-third (33%) of students describe the information they received before starting their course as “accurate”, which has been a consistent finding over the last three years. However, one in five (21%) students found the information they received to be “vague” and a further one-in-ten (10%) found it to be “misleading”. There has been very little change in the responses to this question over the years, which indicates that higher education institutions have not made much progress relative to expectations and still have some way to go in improving the quality and accuracy of information for potential students.

The relaxation of student number controls in recent years and the planned complete removal of student number controls at publicly-funded providers for 2015/16 means good quality information will become more important than ever as people will have more choice over where to study. The growing focus in some quarters on the consumer power of students and their growing awareness of the right to take action when commitments are not met should also encourage institutions to address the remaining challenges.

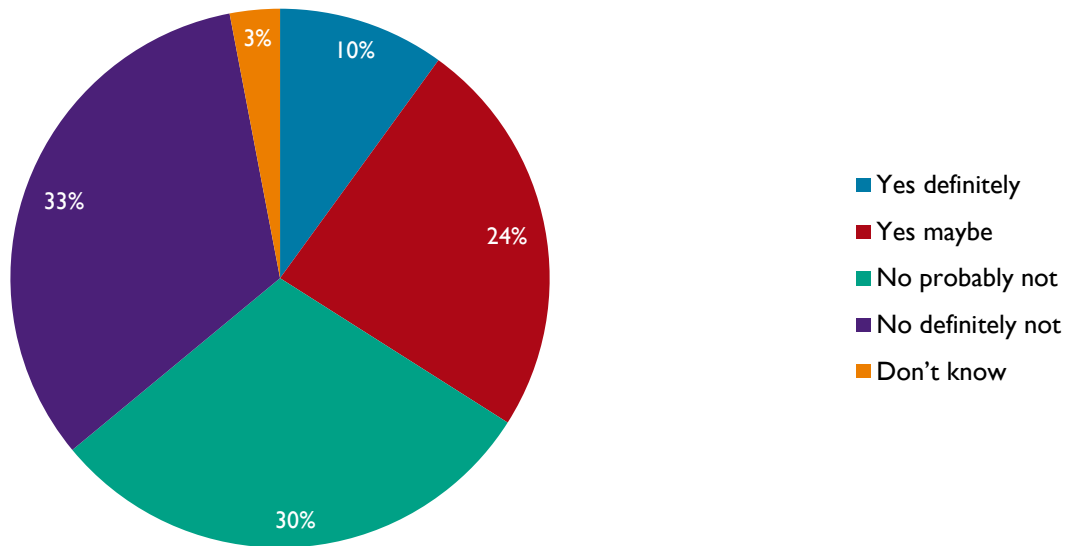


Base: All respondents: 2013 (15,951), 2014 (15,046), 2015 (15,129).

### 3.2 Reflections on course choice

Respondents were asked whether, knowing what they know now, they would have chosen a different course. One in three (34%) would either definitely or maybe have done so. Given that there are 1.4 million full-time undergraduates, this suggests there could be nearly 500,000 full-time students who believe they are on a sub-optimal course.

**Figure 7: Thinking about your academic experience, if you knew what you do now, would you have chosen a different course?**



Base: All respondents (15,129).

As higher education is different to schooling, with many more options, and as young people are typically still changing fast when they enter higher education, it is unreasonable to expect every student to be content with their original choice of course or institution. Nevertheless, institutions need to work harder than ever to ensure the information they provide is accurate and accessible if the proportion of students who change their minds is to be reduced.

These results might be interpreted as showing the need for a more transparent and user-friendly credit transfer system to facilitate movement between courses and higher education institutions.<sup>4</sup> In their 2015 general election manifesto, the Liberal Democrats notably promised to “Work with university ‘mission groups’ to develop a comprehensive credit accumulation and transfer framework to help students transfer between and within institutions”.<sup>5</sup> However, it is unclear whether the Conservative Government will make this a priority.

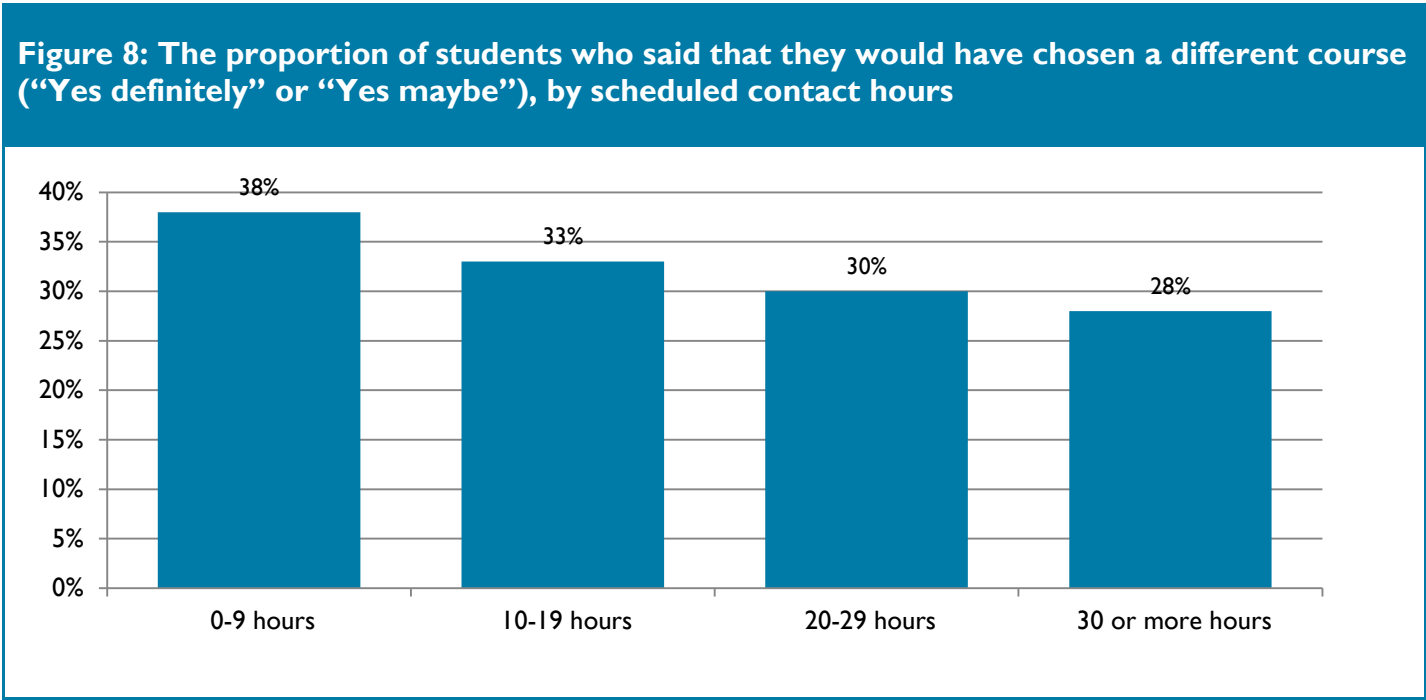
Students with fewer contact hours are more likely to say they would have chosen a different course: 38% of those with nine or fewer scheduled contact hours say they would “definitely” or “maybe” have chosen a different course, compared to 28% of those with 30 or more scheduled hours.<sup>6</sup> Contact hours are not, on

<sup>4</sup> Watson, D. (2014) ‘Only connect’: Is there still a Higher Education Sector? [Internet]. HEPI. Available from: <http://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Only-Connect-WEB-clean.pdf> [Accessed 22 May 2015].

<sup>5</sup> Liberal Democrats (2015) *Manifesto 2015. Stronger Economy. Fairer Society. Opportunity for Everyone* [Internet]. (p.62). Available from: [https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/libdems/pages/8907/attachments/original/1429028133/Liberal\\_Democrat\\_General\\_Election\\_Manifesto\\_2015.pdf?1429028133](https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/libdems/pages/8907/attachments/original/1429028133/Liberal_Democrat_General_Election_Manifesto_2015.pdf?1429028133) [Accessed 22 May 2015].

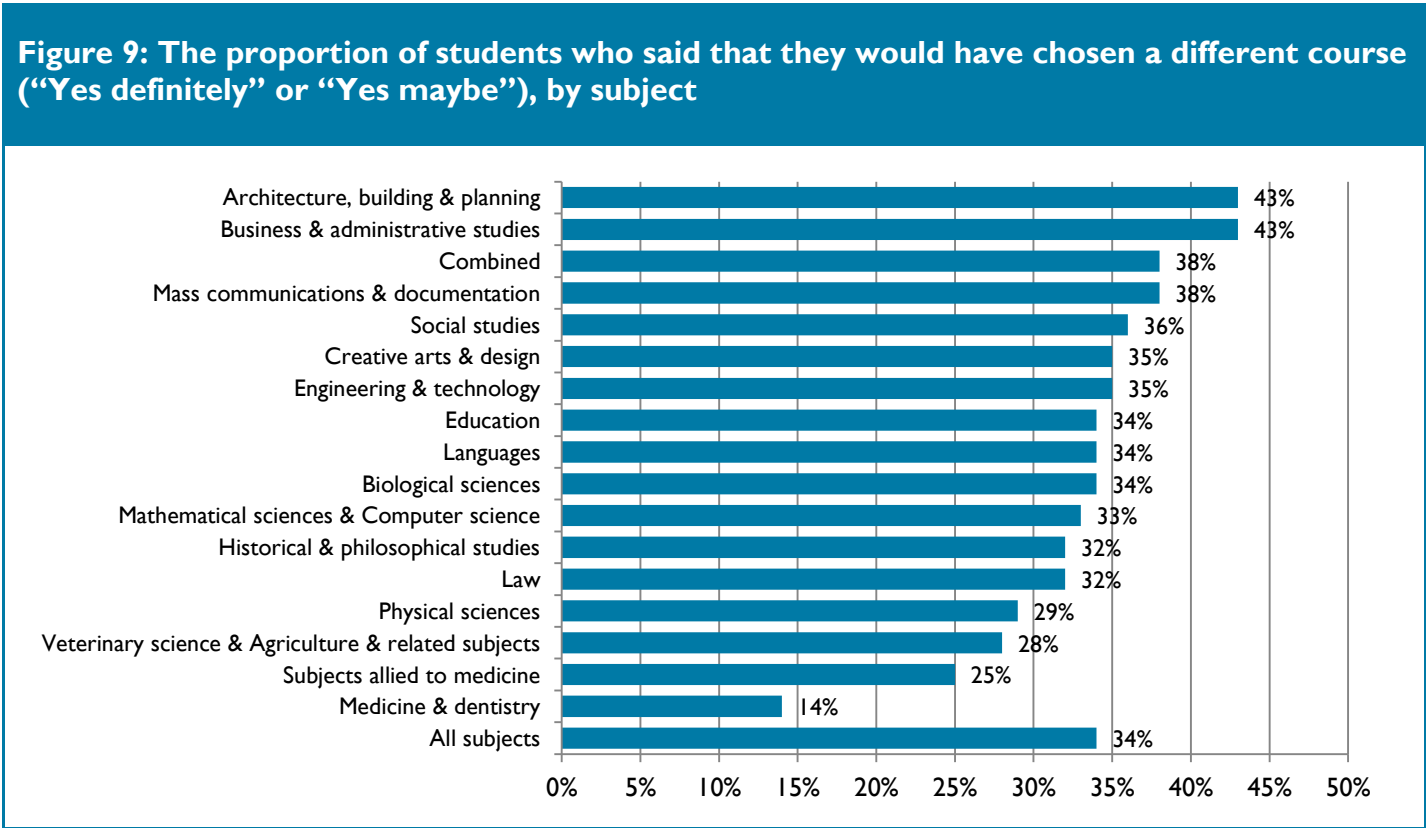
<sup>6</sup> This is to some extent affected by subject (as shown in Figure 10), but the pattern of students who report fewer contact hours having more regrets about their course is seen across most subjects.

their own, a particularly valuable guide to the quality of a course but neither can they be ignored by anyone who cares about what students think.



Base: All respondents (15,129).

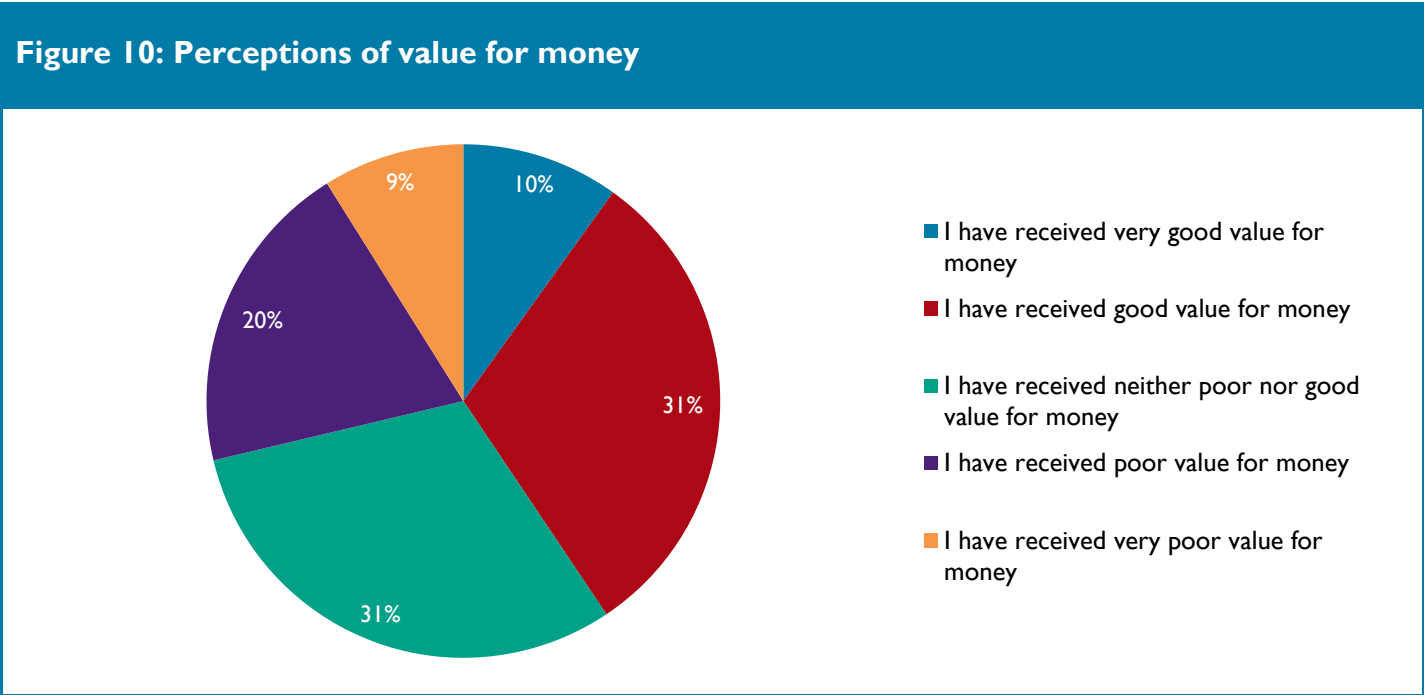
There are some substantial variations by subject. Figure 9 shows that in some subjects a relatively large proportion of students say that they would have taken a different course, including 43% of students on Architecture and Business courses. The figure for Medicine and Dentistry courses, which are notoriously hard to secure a place on and are not directly affected by the planned removal of student number controls, is the lowest at only 14%.



Base: All respondents (15,129).

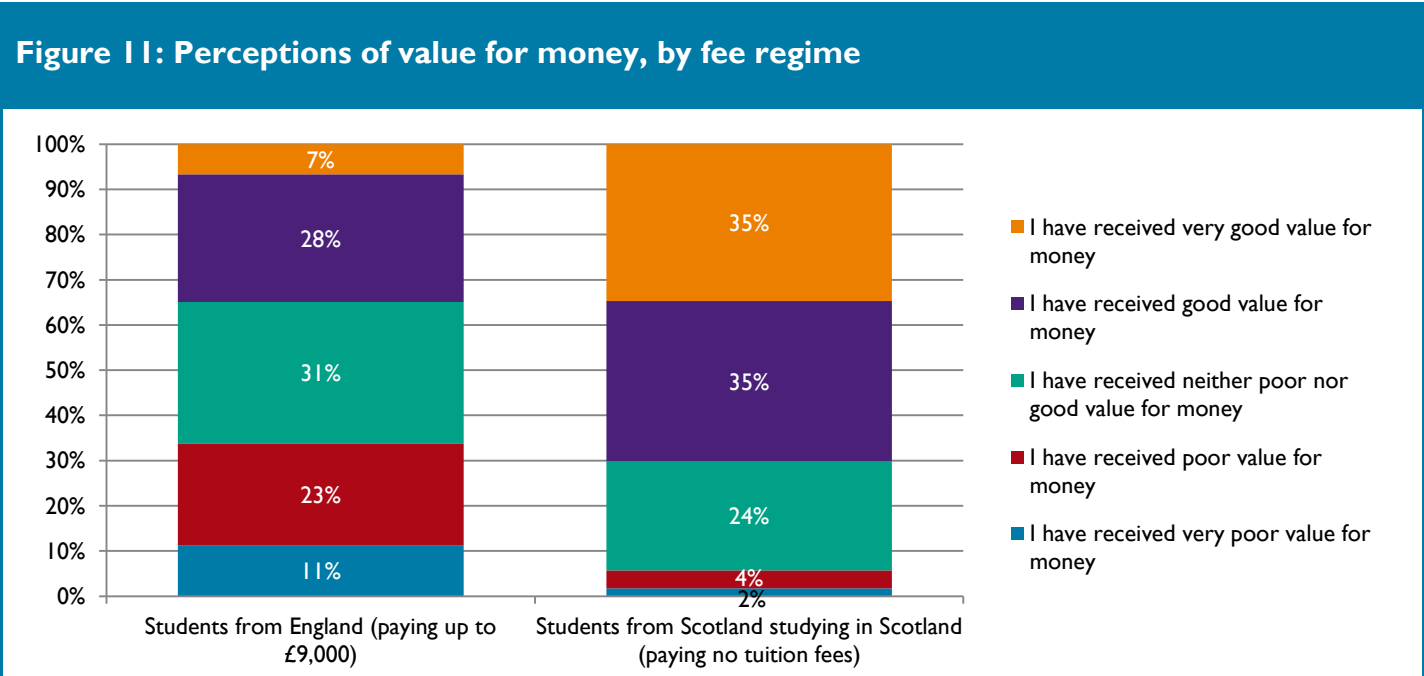
3.3 Value for money

Since the full-time undergraduate fee cap rose to £9,000 in 2012 for students from England (and for students from Scotland and Northern Ireland who travel elsewhere in the UK to study), there has been a new focus on whether universities are offering good value for money.



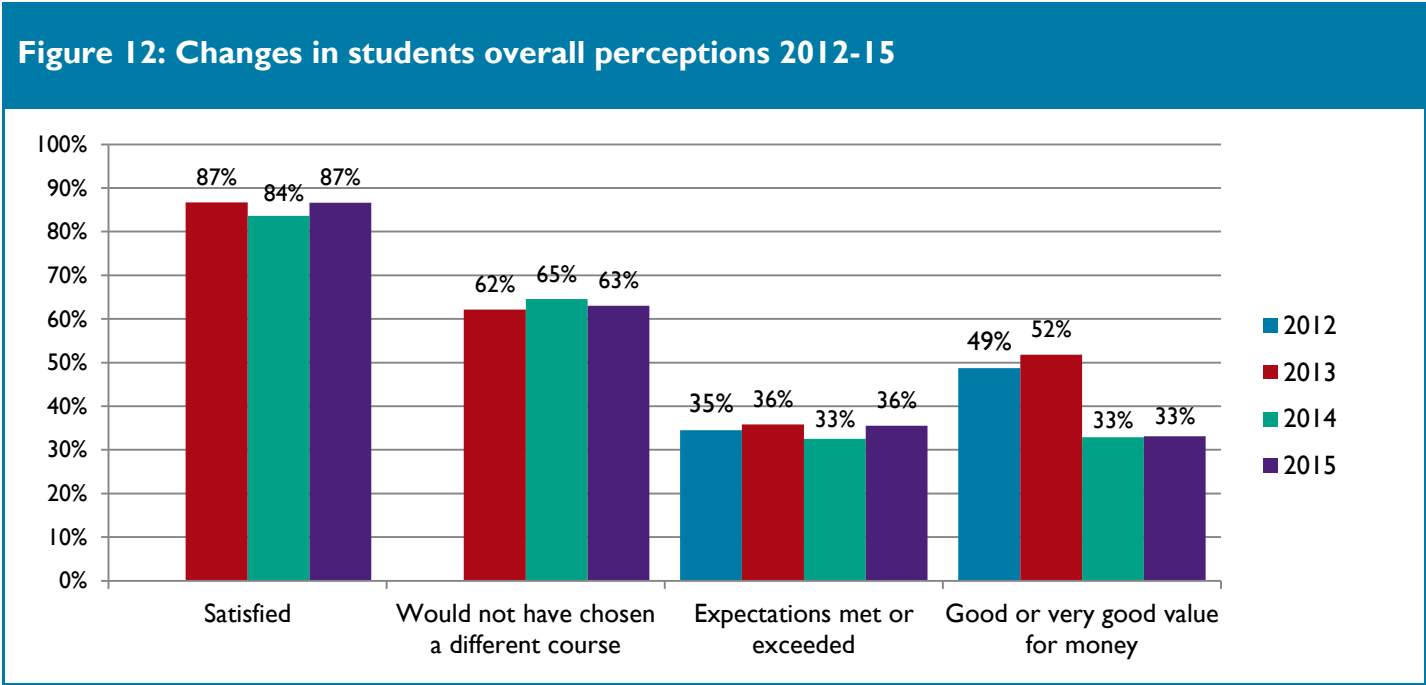
Base: All respondents (15,129).

Overall, 41% of students in the UK think they have received “good” or “very good” value for money, while 29% feel the value for money has been “poor” or “very poor”. Figure 11 compares the perception of value for money among students from England, who pay up to £9,000 wherever in the UK they study, and students from Scotland who are studying in Scotland, who generally pay no tuition fees. The differences are stark. Only 7% of students from England feel they get very good value for money, compared with 35% of students from Scotland studying in Scotland.



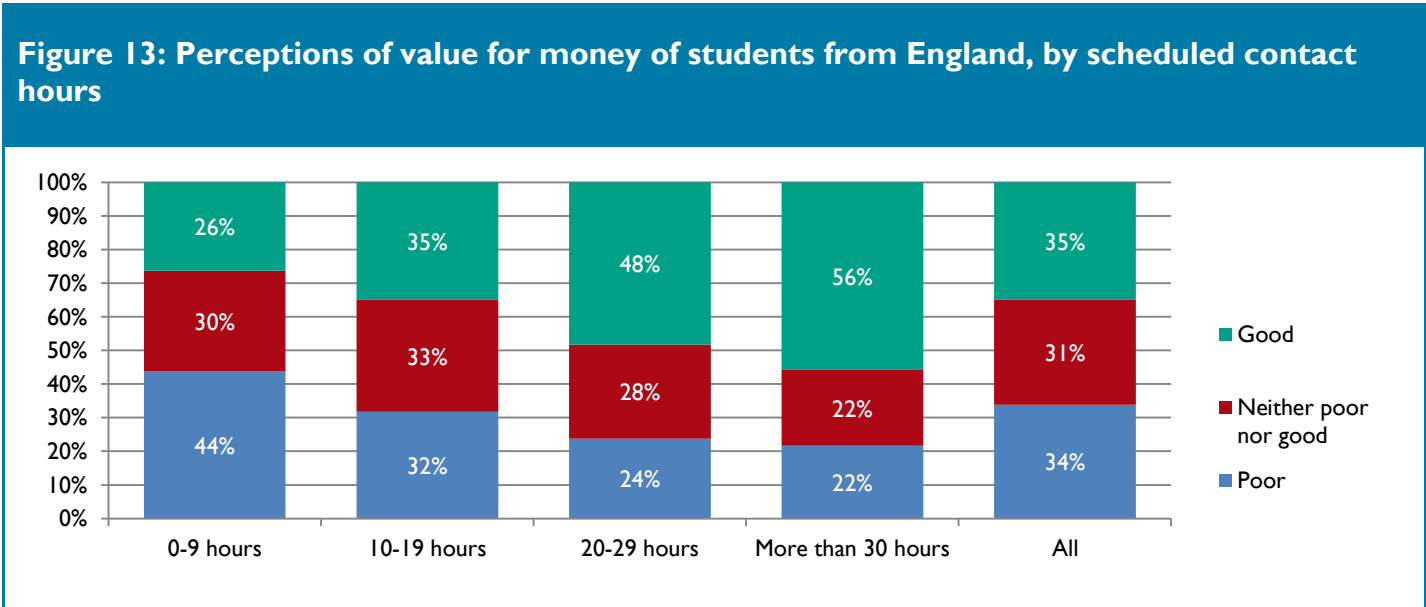
Base: All 1st, 2nd and 3rd year students from England, and from Scotland studying in Scotland; English students (10,865), students from Scotland studying in Scotland (791).

The effect of the new tuition fee regime on perceptions of value for money is also visible in changes over time. Figure 12 shows a range of overall perceptions of second-year students from England, from 2012 to 2015 (where available). Those students paid less than £3,500, then a maximum of £9,000 in 2014 and 2015. The chart shows a clear drop in the proportion of students who felt they were receiving good or very good value for money, from 52% in 2013, to 33% in 2014 and 2015. It is also striking that the other overall measures – satisfaction, regret at choosing the course, and whether expectations have been met or exceeded – remain largely unchanged, despite the marked drop in positivity about value for money. It seems value for money concerns are masked by other positive findings and possibly by the fact that fees are loan-based rather than needing to be paid upfront.



Base: All 2nd year students from England; 2012 (3,384), 2013 (3,774), 2014 (3,786), 2015 (3,667).

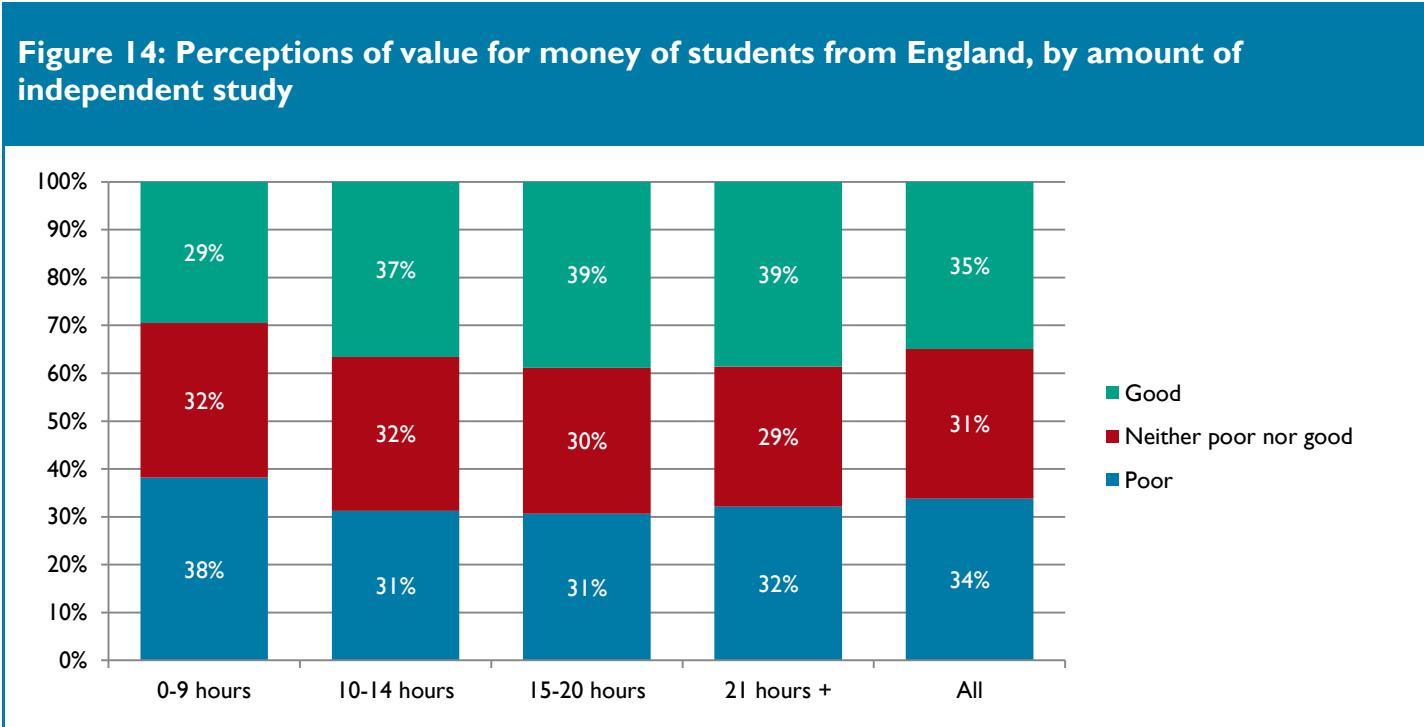
Perceptions of value for money improve somewhat with higher numbers of scheduled contact hours, as shown in Figure 13. The chart is just for students from England on the post-2012 fees regime and paying up to £9,000. The difference is clear: 56% of those with more than 30 contact hours feel they receive good value for money, more than double the figure (26%) for those with fewer than 10 scheduled contact hours.



Base: All English 1st, 2nd and 3rd years; poor (3,674), neither poor nor good (3,397), good (3,794).



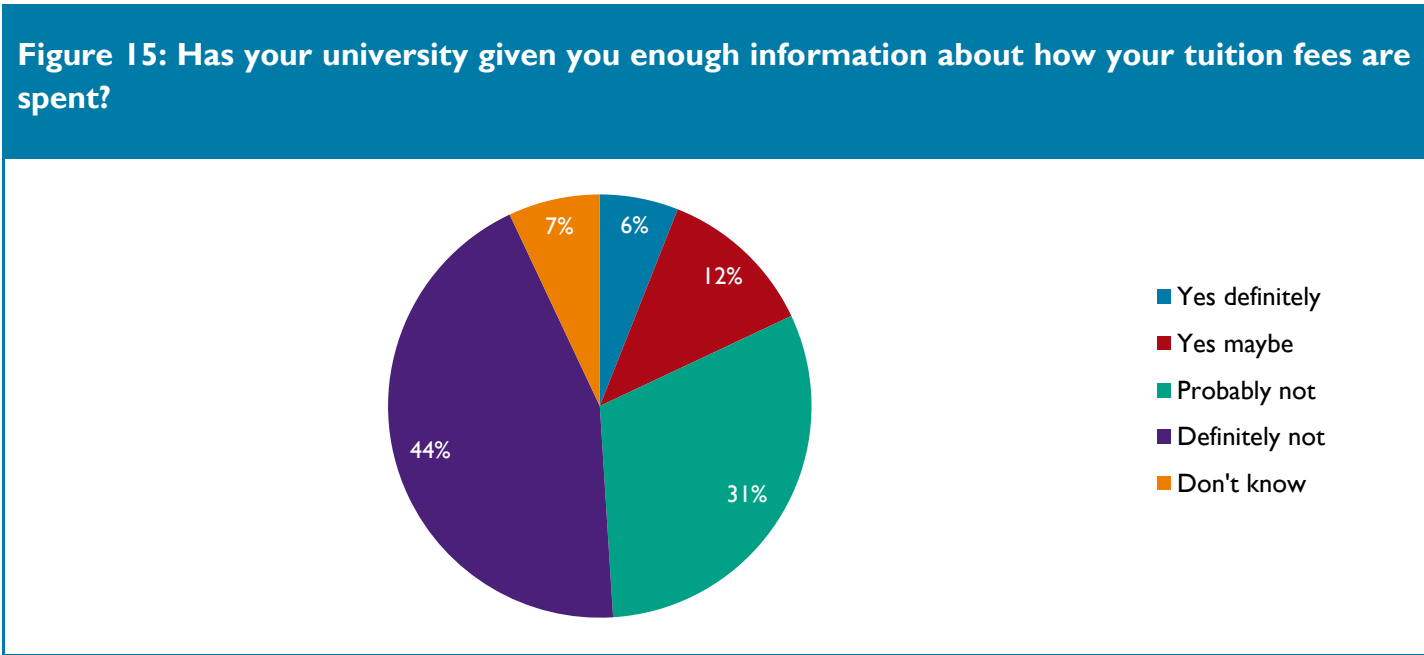
Figure 14 shows that perceptions of value for money also vary to a small degree with amount of independent study. Twenty-nine per cent of those spending under ten hours per week on independent study feel they are getting good value, compared to 37% of those who work independently for more than 20 hours.<sup>7</sup>



Base: All English 1st, 2nd and 3rd years; poor (3,673), neither poor nor good (3,397), good (3,795).

3.4 Information about how fees are spent

For the first time this year’s survey included a question on the information provided by institutions on how tuition fees are spent. Just 18% of respondents feel they have been given sufficient information, while 75% do not.

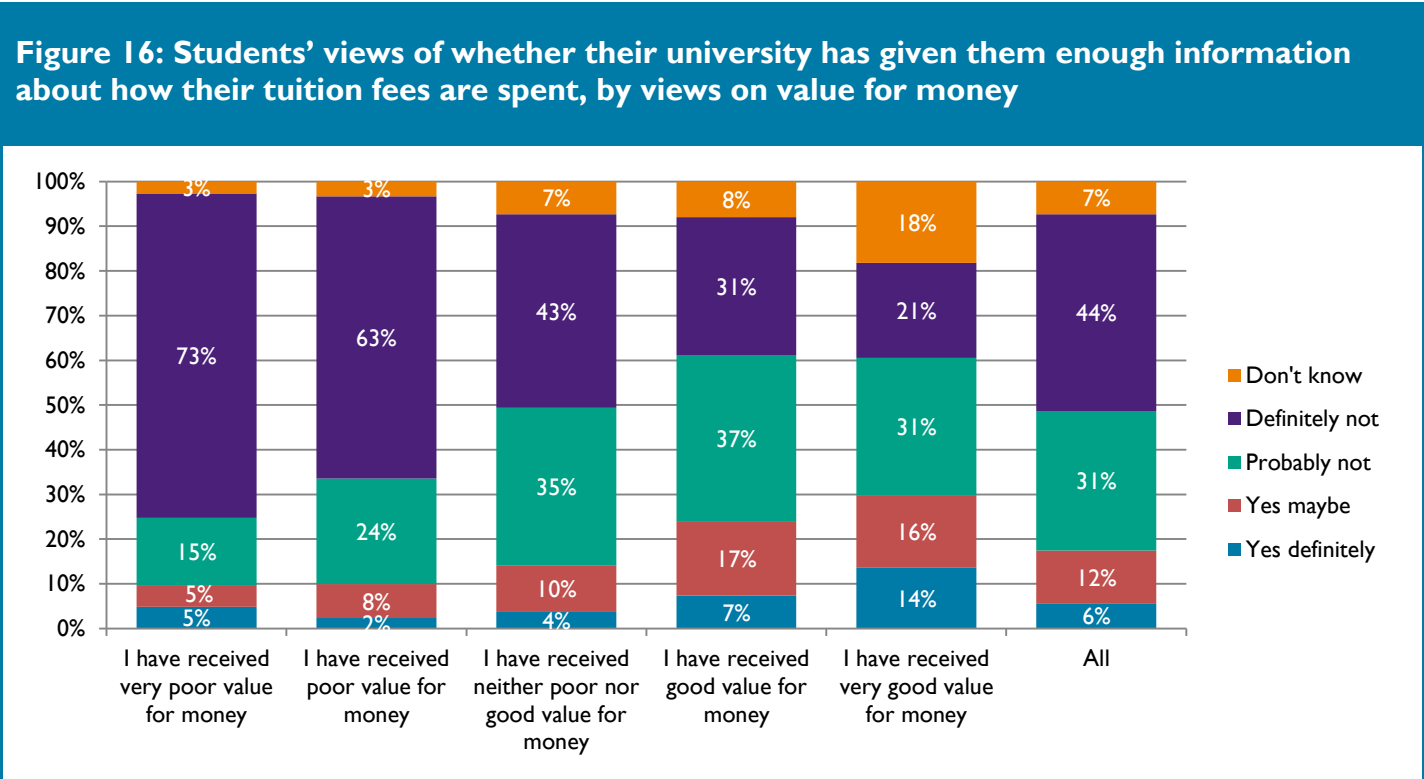


Base: All respondents (15,129).

<sup>7</sup> Both contact hours and hours of independent study are highly dependent on subject, but the pattern of perception of value for money increasing with the number of hours is seen across most subjects.

Providing such information is easier said than done, given the size of most universities and the diversity within the sector. However, institutions stand to benefit if students, policymakers and the general public come to have a better understanding of what they offer.

Figure 16 shows the relationship between students’ views on whether they know enough about how their fees are spent and their views on whether their course offers value for money. Of those who feel they have received very poor value for money, nine out of ten (88%) feel they have “definitely” or “probably” not had enough information about how their fees are spent. The comparable figure for those who feel they have received “very good” value for money is a lower, but still substantial, 52%.



Base: All students; yes definitely (854), yes maybe (1,786), probably not (4,720), definitely not (6,659), don't know (1,110).

It seems clear that institutions could do more to explain the full use to which income from fees is put – and to inform students that “tuition fees” fund more than tuition. Indeed, better information is fast coming to look like an inevitable consequence of a funding model that relies so heavily on student loans, and it may be forced on institutions by policymakers if fairly rapid sector-led progress is not made.

## 4. Workload and class size

A key indicator of the quality of students' experiences is the amount of time they spend on academic work. It is not necessarily the amount of time they spend in lectures and tutorials that is crucial – despite the amount of attention that receives – but the total time they devote to their studies, and the balance between different kinds of studying. This section explores a range of measures of students' reported workload and contact time.

### 4.1 Workload

The table below shows the average number of hours of different kinds of course-related work. On average, students report just under 13 hours of scheduled contact hours and attend for 11.6 hours. Independent study is slightly higher (13.9 hours) indicating the self-directed nature of higher education.

**Table 1: Average figures for reported workload (hours)<sup>8</sup>**

	2015	2014	2013	2012
In an average week during term-time, roughly how many hours have you spent on independent study (including studying with friends)? <sup>9</sup>	13.9	15.3	15.3	13.9
How many hours of time-tabled sessions did you have scheduled in an average week during term-time?	12.8	12.5	12.6	13.4
And about how many hours did you attend in the average week?	11.6	11.4	11.6	12.3
In an average week during term-time, roughly how many hours have you spent working outside the university or college as part of your course?	3.1	3.1	N/A	4.0
Total workload (based on sessions attended) <sup>10</sup>	30.5	31.6	N/A	31.7

Base: All students; 2015 (15,129), 2014 (15,046), 2013 (17,090), 2012 (9,058).

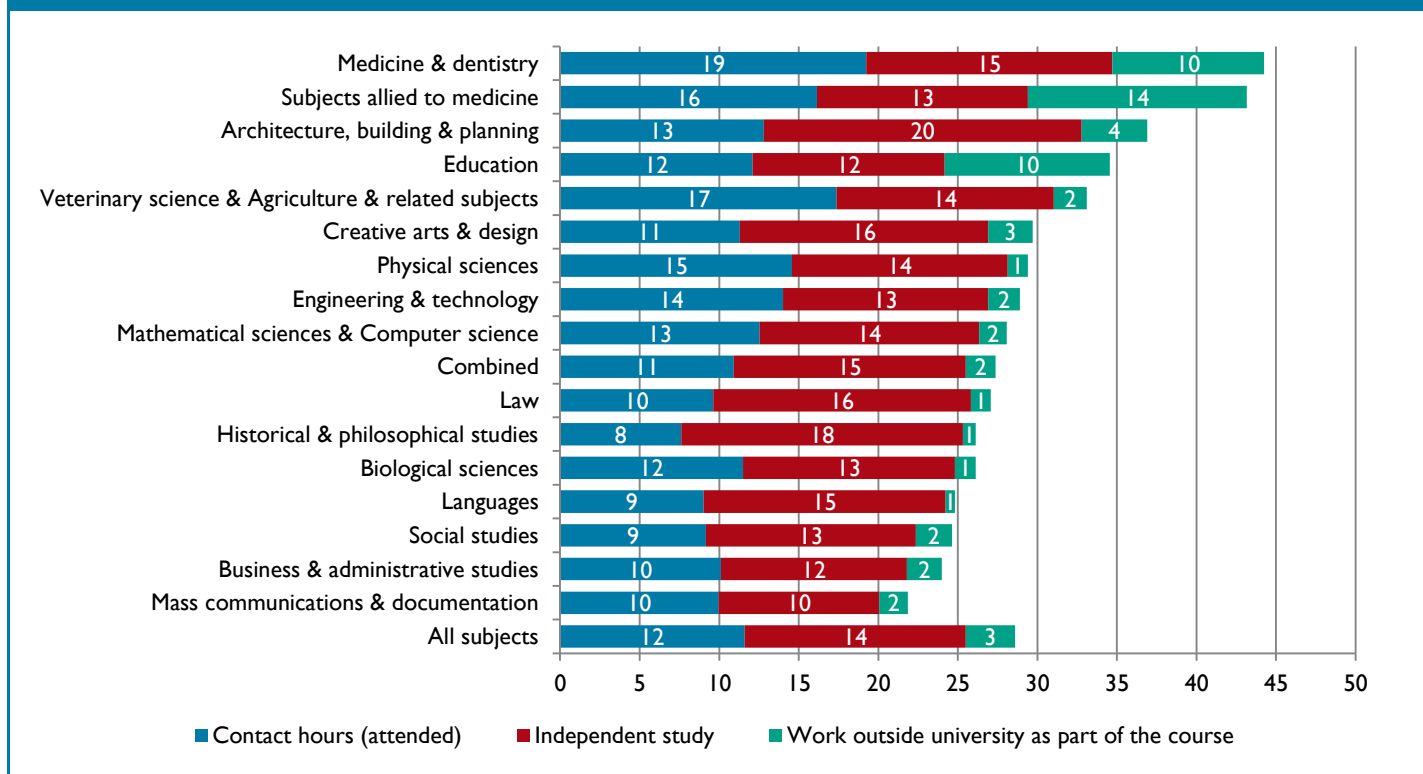
The total workload reported by students varies markedly by subject, from an average of 22 hours in Mass Communications and Documentation to 44 hours in Medicine and Dentistry. Students in all subjects report at least ten hours of independent study, ranging from ten hours in Mass Communications and Documentation to 20 hours in Architecture. Historical and Philosophical Studies show the fewest number of contact hours attended (8) but the second highest number of hours spent in independent study (18). The high workload reported by students in medical disciplines is notable, particularly as even without the high level of academic work they undertake outside their institution (14 hours for Subjects Allied to Medicine) their workload would be higher than those in many other subjects.

<sup>8</sup> 5% trimmed means have been used – discounting the top and bottom 5% to exclude outliers.

<sup>9</sup> For years other than 2015, independent study is calculated from two questions asking about private study, and time spent studying with friends, and comparability may be affected.

<sup>10</sup> This is the average (5% trimmed mean) of each respondent's total workload, so is not intended to equate to the sum of the figures in this chart.

**Figure 17: Average contact hours attended, independent study, and work outside institution as part of the course, by subject**

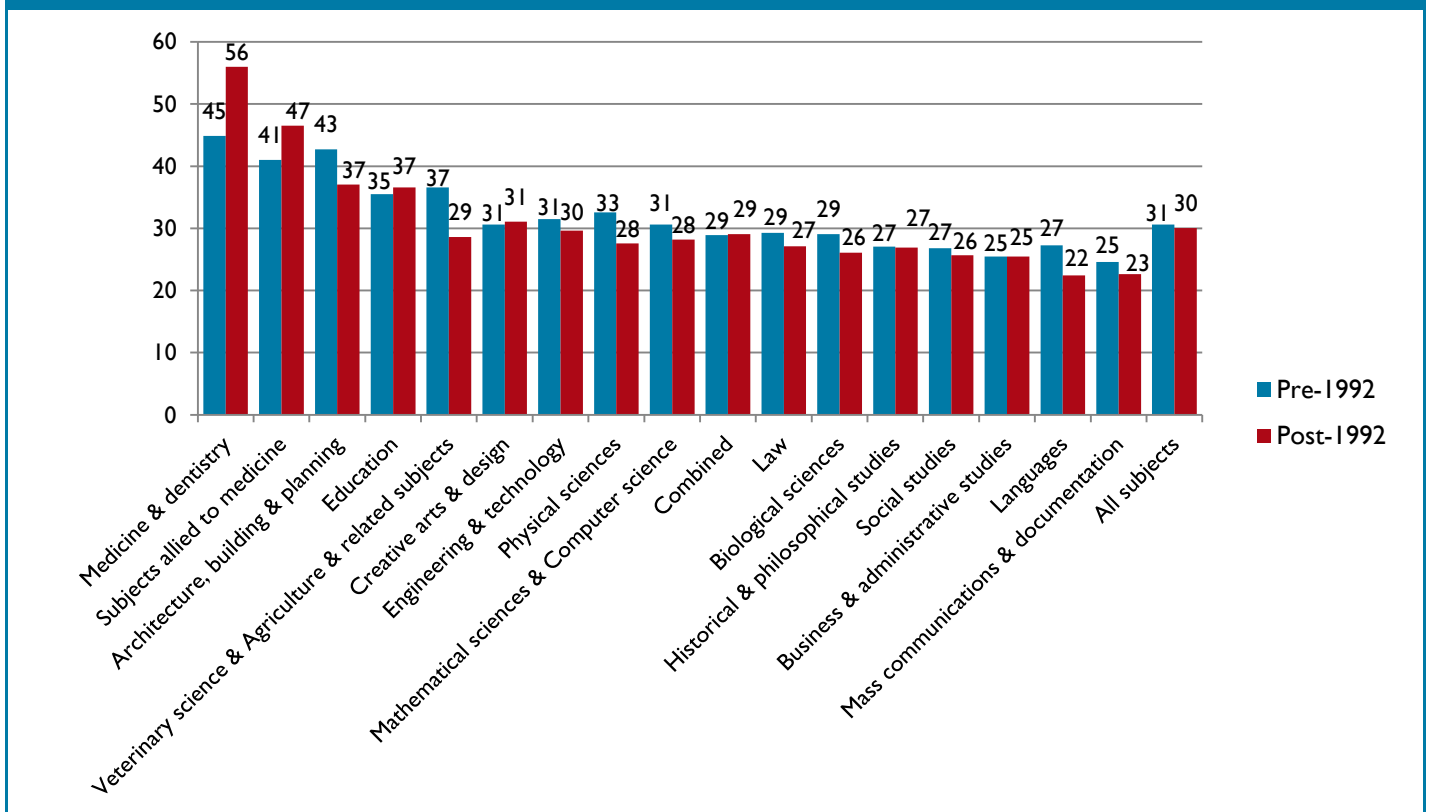


5% trimmed means.

Base: All respondents (15,129).

There is no clear pattern across subjects in how workloads differ between newer and older universities. Students at post-1992 institutions report a markedly higher total workload for Medicine and Dentistry and allied subjects. Those at pre-1992 institutions report a substantially higher total workload for Veterinary Science, Architecture, Languages and Physics.

**Figure 18: Total workload hours by subject and institution type**

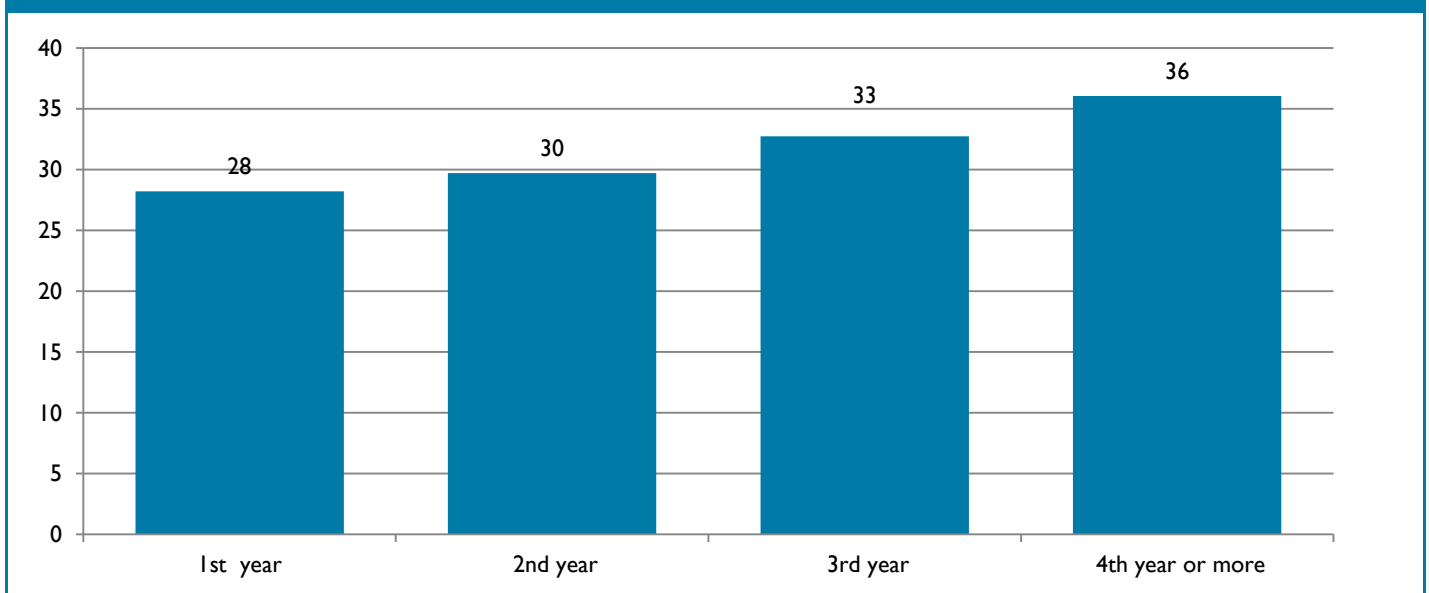


5% trimmed means.

Base: All respondents from the following institution groups; post-1992 (7,333), pre-1992 (7,290).

Workload increases as students progress, with third and fourth-year students reporting the most demanding workload – a total of 33 and 36 hours respectively. However, for many full-time students, the total number of weekly hours they report spending on academic work does not equate to the standard definition of a full-time job nor the guidelines of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), which assume a workload of around 40 hours a week during term-time.

**Figure 19: Total workload hours by year of study**



5% trimmed means.

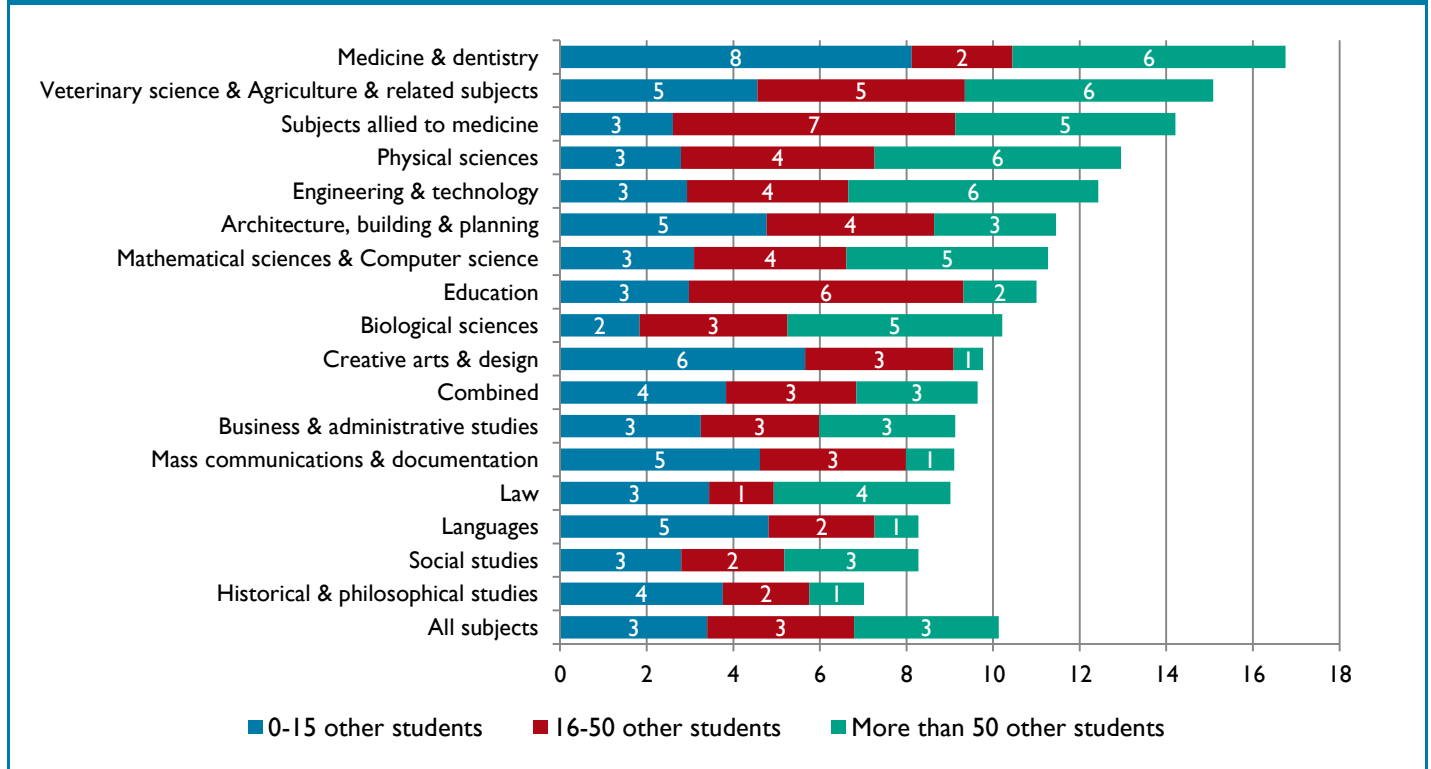
Base: All respondents; 1st year students (5,246), 2nd year students (4,764), 3rd year students (3,835), 4th year + students (1,283).



## 4.2 Class size

Figure 20 below shows the average number of hours that students in different subjects spend in small, medium and large classes.

**Figure 20: Hours spent in different class sizes, by subject**



5% Trimmed means<sup>11</sup>.

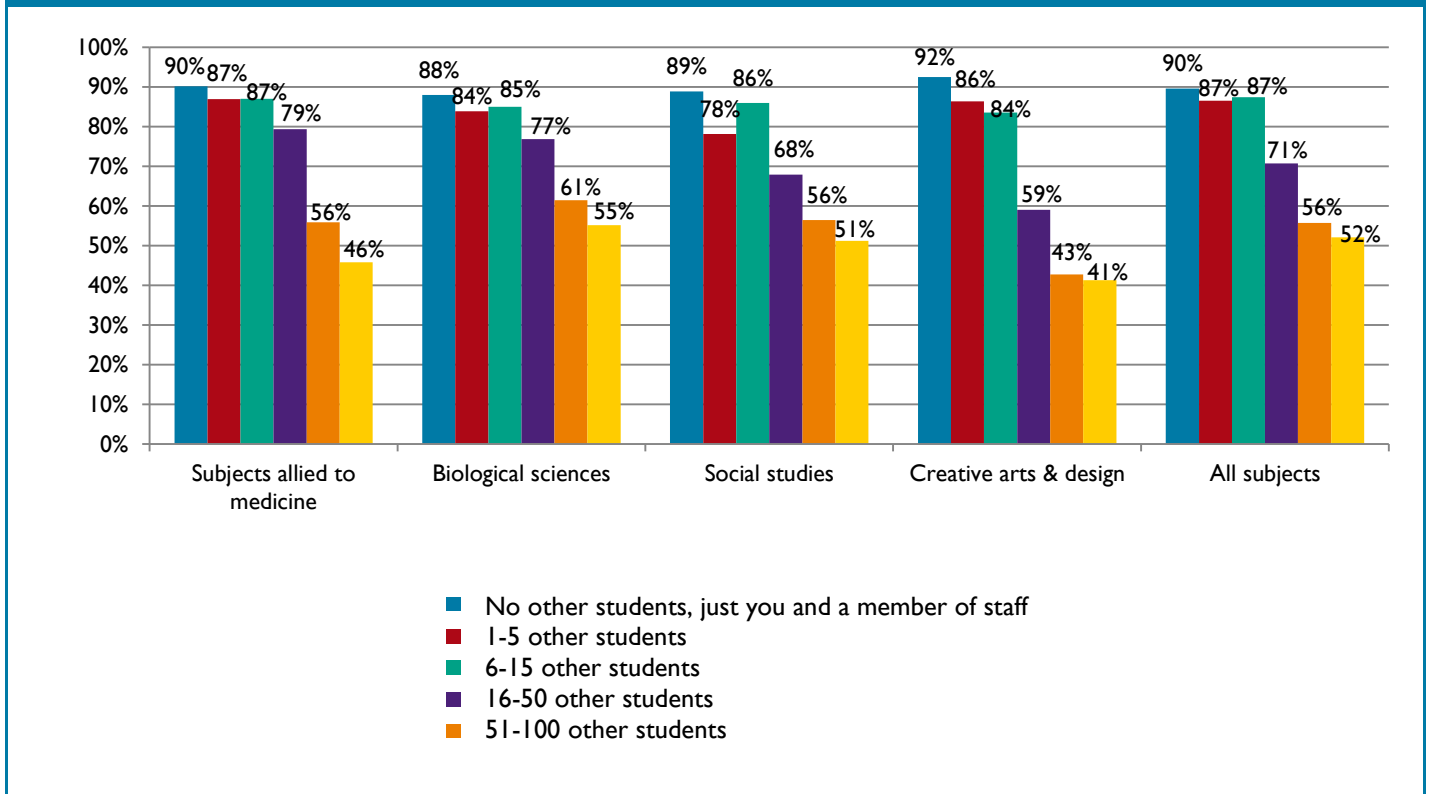
Base: All respondents (15,129).

Students on courses with a high number of contact hours report that a higher proportion of their classes are large, and subjects with fewer contact hours typically have smaller classes. For example, students in Historical and Philosophical Studies spend around half of their contact hours in classes of 15 people or fewer, whereas the figure for those in Subjects Allied to Medicine is only 20%.

Figure 21 shows that regardless of the relative proportion of small, medium and large classes, the general pattern across very different kinds of subjects is for students to place less value on large classes. In particular, classes of more than 50 people are perceived to be less educationally valuable.

<sup>11</sup> The difference between the combined total contact hours for all subjects in Figure 20 and in both Figure 17 and Table 1 is due to the use of trimmed means.

**Figure 21: Proportion of students who feel that they benefit educationally “a lot” or “quite a bit” from classes of different sizes, for a representative range of subjects**



Base: All respondents; no other students (2,363), 1-5 other students (4,365), 6-15 other students (9,427), 16-50 other students (9,888), 51-100 other students (5,703), over 100 other students (4,911).

The balance between smaller and larger classes varies according to the practices of different discipline and institutional cultures, as well as available funding, but perceptions of the value of differently-sized teaching groups is relatively consistent. It is clear that students think that class size makes a difference to how well they learn.

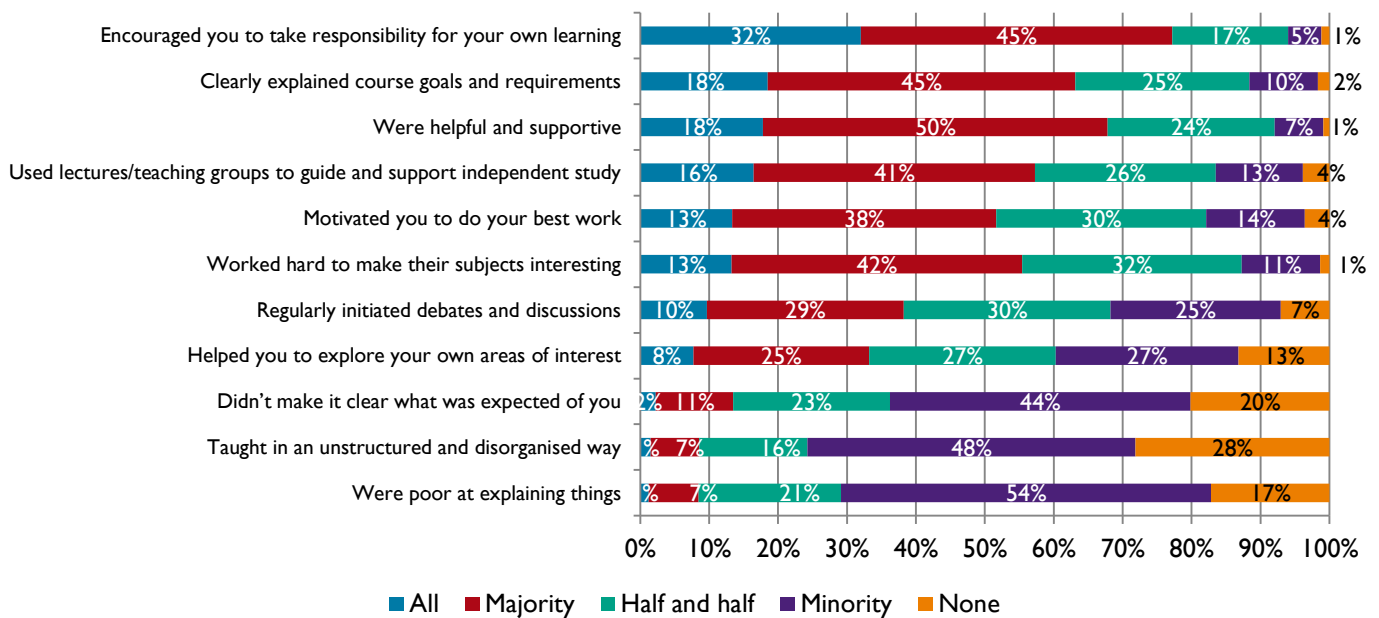
## 5. Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching that students experience is of renewed interest. The survey collects students' views about the quality of the teaching staff and the quality of the feedback received, as well as other important aspects of their academic experience.

### 5.1 Perceptions of the quality of teaching staff

Students were particularly positive about staff encouraging them to take responsibility for their own learning, with 32% saying that all staff do that and a further 45% saying a majority do so. In contrast only 33% feel that all or a majority of staff help them to explore their own areas of interest.

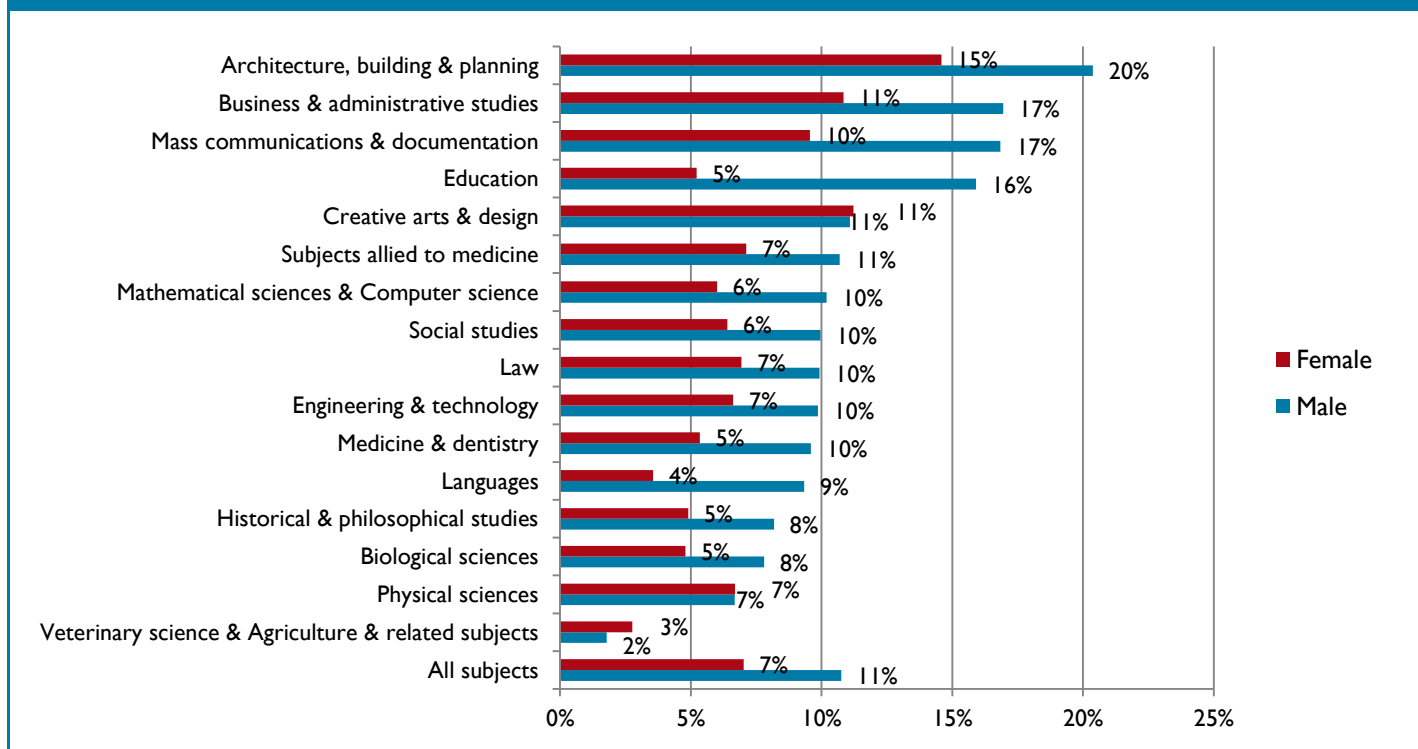
**Figure 22: What proportion of staff did the following?**



Base: All respondents (15,129).

There are notable differences in perceptions between genders, with female students generally more positive than male students about teaching quality. Figure 26 shows the proportion of male and female students in different disciplines who feel that more than half of the teaching staff teach in an unstructured or disorganised way. In some disciplines (such as Education) male students were three times as likely as female students to feel teaching was disorganised and unstructured (16% versus 5%). This is a significant finding if the gender balance on Education courses is thought to be of concern.

**Figure 23: Proportion of students reporting that more than half of teaching staff taught in an unstructured and disorganised way, by subject**



Base: All respondents; female (10,228), male (4,908).

## 5.2 Perceptions of feedback

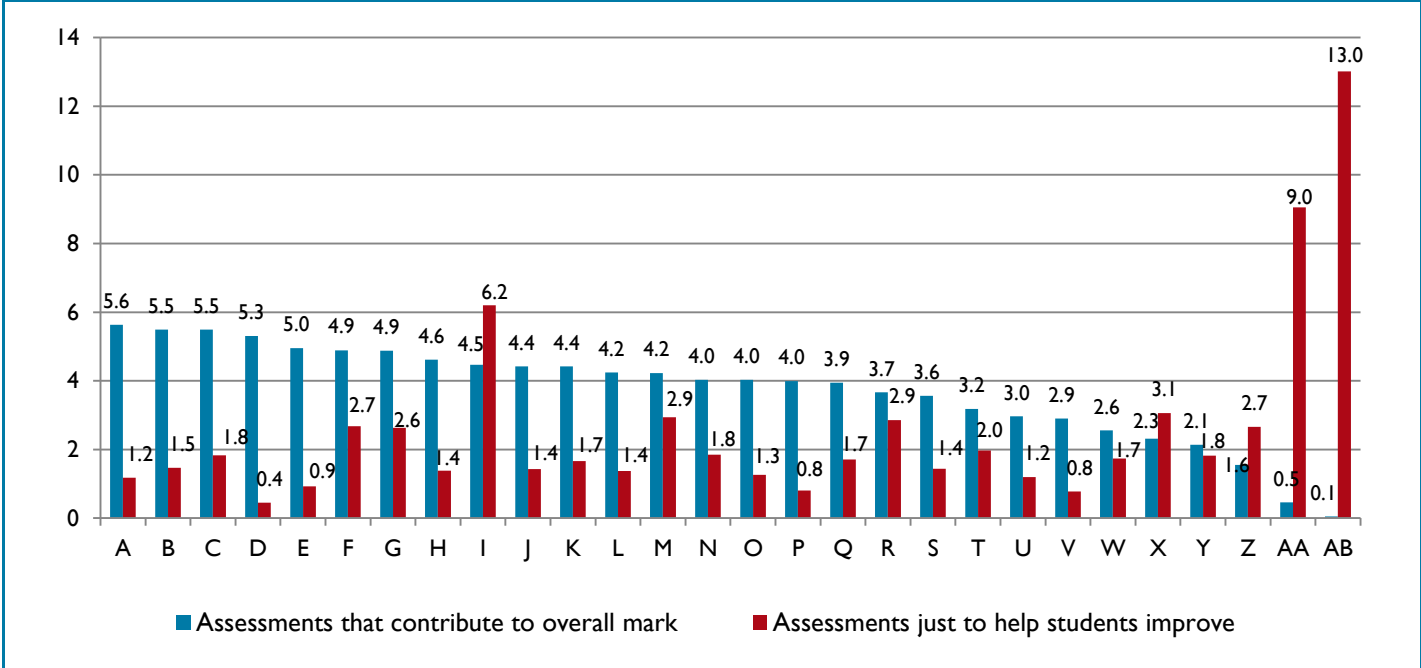
For the first time, the 2015 survey asks students about the number of assignments they complete that contribute to their grade or degree class – known as “summative assessment” – and the number of assignments they complete that are designed to help them improve – known as “formative assessment”. The balance between assessment aimed at evaluating students, and assessment aimed at helping them improve is important; the amount of formative assessment is regarded by some as a key measure of the quality of a course.<sup>12</sup>

Previous research for the HEA indicates that the balance of summative to formative assessment varies widely between courses.<sup>13</sup> The 2015 HEPI-HEA survey confirms this. On average, students report completing 4.1 summative assessments per term/semester, compared to 1.6 formative assessments in the same time period. Figure 24 shows the average amounts of formative and summative assessment at a range of anonymised institutions, within the broad subject of Humanities and Social Sciences. It is clear that at the majority of institutions, the number of summative assessments vastly outweighs the number of formative assessments (sometimes by a factor of 5). However, there are a small number of institutions where the reverse is the case.

<sup>12</sup> Gibbs, G. (2012) *Implications of ‘Dimensions of Quality’ in a Market Environment* [Internet]. York: Higher Education Academy. Available from: [https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/HEA\\_Dimensions\\_of\\_Quality\\_2.pdf](https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/HEA_Dimensions_of_Quality_2.pdf) [Accessed 22 May 2015].

<sup>13</sup> Gibbs, G. and Dunbar-Goddet, H. (2007) *The Effects of Programme Assessment Environments on Student Learning*. York: Higher Education Academy. Available from: [https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/gibbs\\_0506.pdf](https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/gibbs_0506.pdf) [Accessed 22 May 2015].

**Figure 24: Average assessments per term/semester reported by humanities and social sciences students, at institution level**



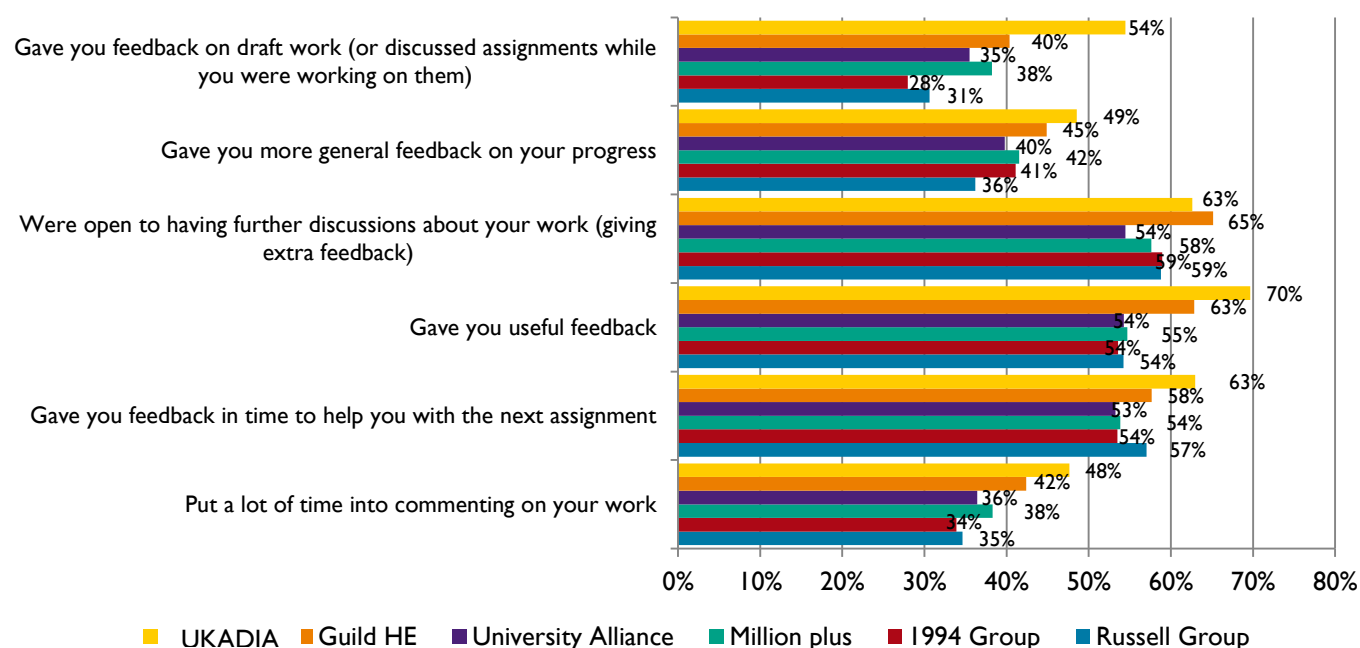
5% trimmed means.  
 Institutions are presented anonymously. Only institutions with at least 50 responses are included.  
 Base: Humanities and social sciences students at selected institutions (1,835).

Students’ perceptions of the quality of the feedback they receive differ by type of institution. Figure 25 shows that students at UKADIA institutions (a small mission group focused on the Creative Arts) are most positive about virtually all aspects of feedback. Of the other university groupings, for most areas Guild HE sees the most positivity, while those institutions previously in the 1994 Group and Russell Group see the least.<sup>14</sup> The biggest variations between groups in students’ views are for getting feedback on draft work, and staff putting a lot of time into commenting on work.

<sup>14</sup> The 1994 Group formally disbanded in 2013. Those institutions that subsequently joined the Russell Group have been included in the Russell Group.



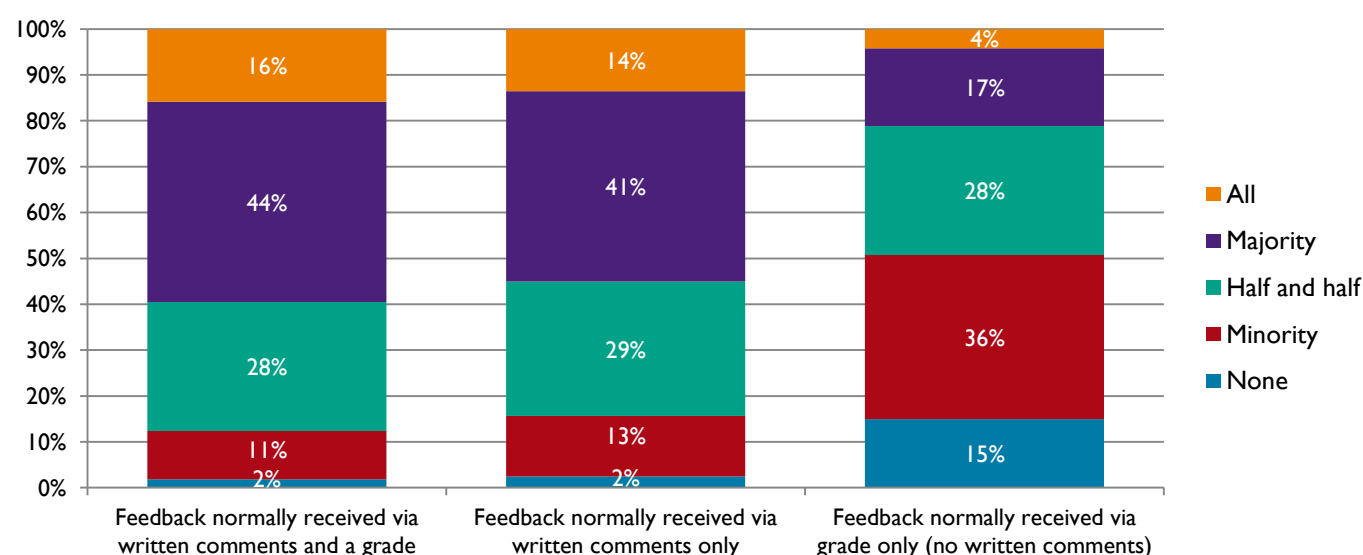
**Figure 25: Proportion of students reporting that more than half of teaching staff did the following, by institution group**



Base: All respondents from the following institution groups: UKADIA (277), Guild HE (596), University Alliance (3,521), Million Plus (1,444), 1994 Group (1,045), Russell Group (3,992).

Figure 26 explores the relationship between the delivery mechanism for feedback on work and its perceived usefulness; for each method of receiving feedback (written comments, written comments and a grade, or grade only) it shows students' views of the usefulness of that feedback. Students who usually receive only grades are much less likely to feel that staff provide useful feedback. There is very little difference in the perception of the usefulness of feedback between students who typically only receive written comments and those who also receive grades, suggesting that students do not see grades as particularly useful elements of feedback on their work.

**Figure 26: What proportion of teaching staff gave you helpful feedback on how you were doing? By normal method of feedback**



Base: All respondents who selected one (and only one) of these mechanisms of receiving feedback (11,138).

5.3 The importance of different characteristics of teaching staff

For the first time in 2015, the questionnaire asked students to rank the importance of three different characteristics of the people they are taught by:

- whether they have received training in how to teach;
- whether they are currently active researchers;
- expertise in their professional or industrial field.

All three of these characteristics are key parts of the academic identity, but for the first time we can explore students’ perceptions of their relative importance.

Overall, the priorities for students are that staff have received training in how to teach and possess professional/industry expertise, with around 40% of students placing each of those as being of primary importance. Being an active researcher is a lower priority, with over half (54%) of students ranking it third in importance.

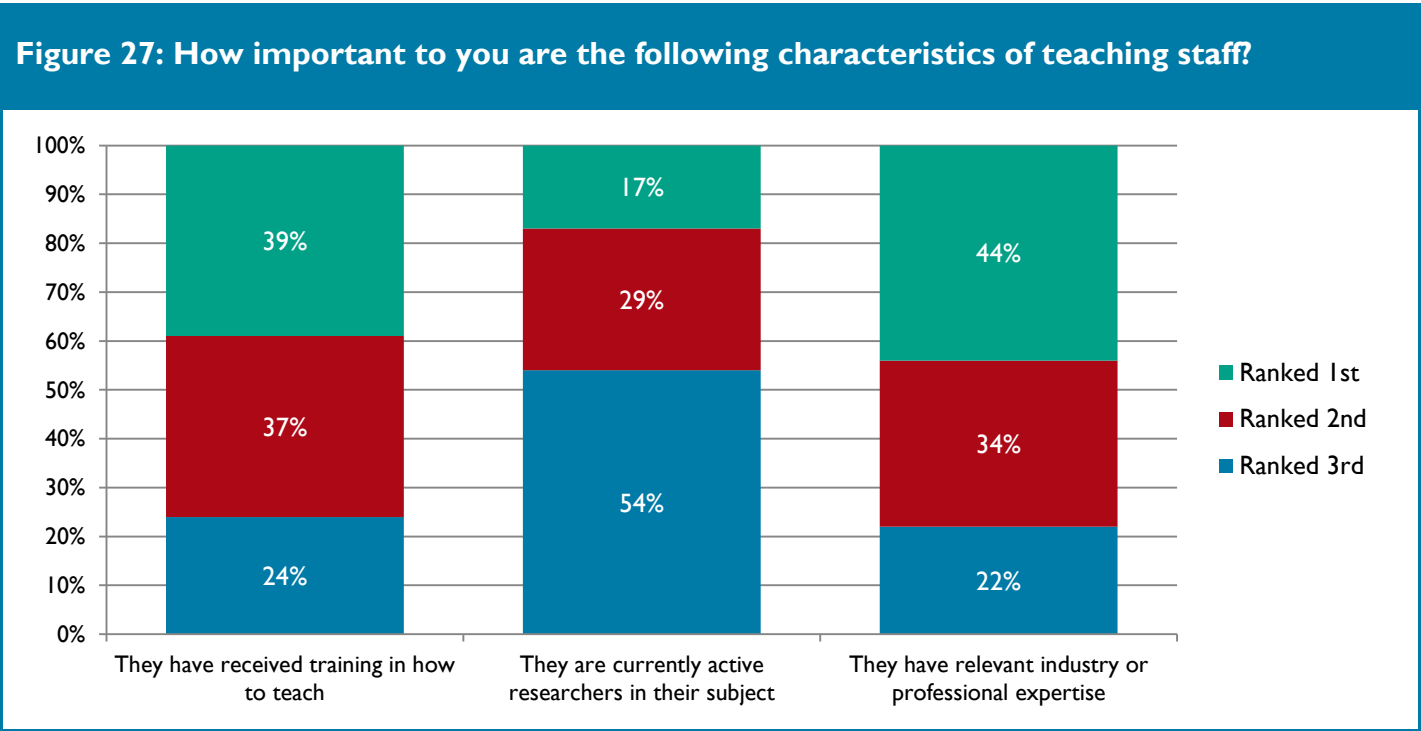
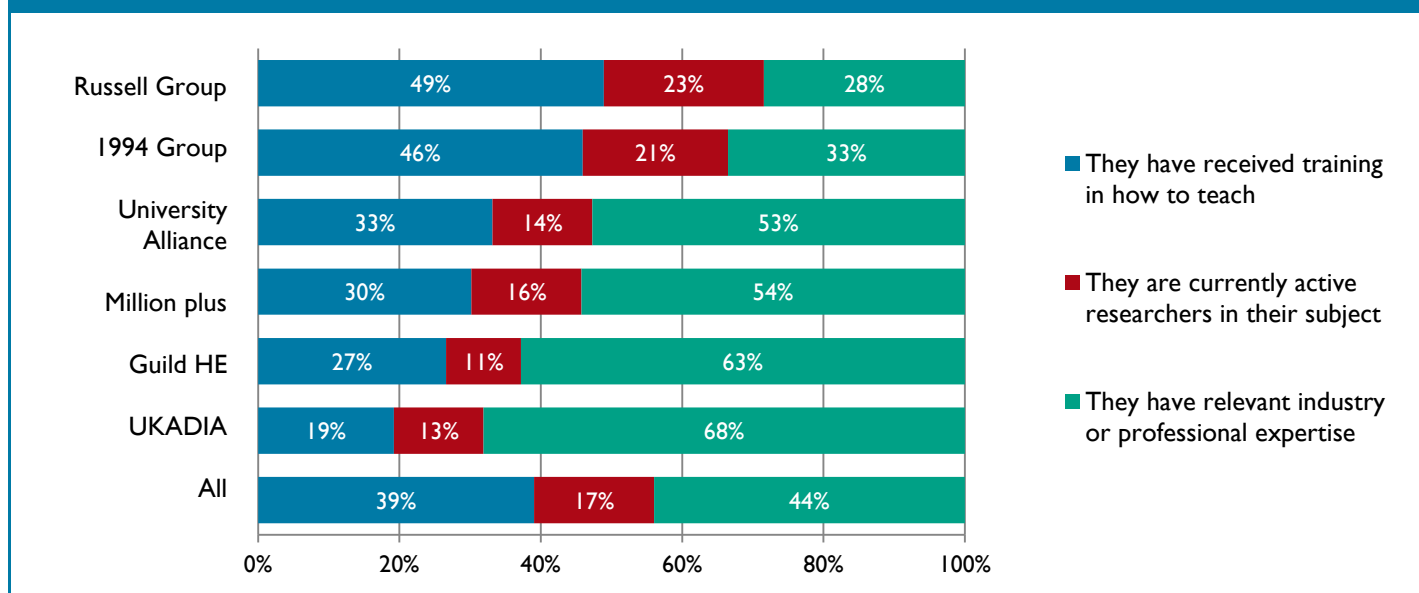


Figure 28 shows the proportion of students at institutions in different groups who rank each of the characteristics as the number one priority. In institutions that focus more on research, students value research somewhat more highly but students in Russell Group institutions and institutions formerly in the 1994 Group also care most about whether their lecturers have been trained in how to teach. Those in UKADIA, Guild HE, Million Plus and University Alliance institutions care most about whether they have professional expertise.

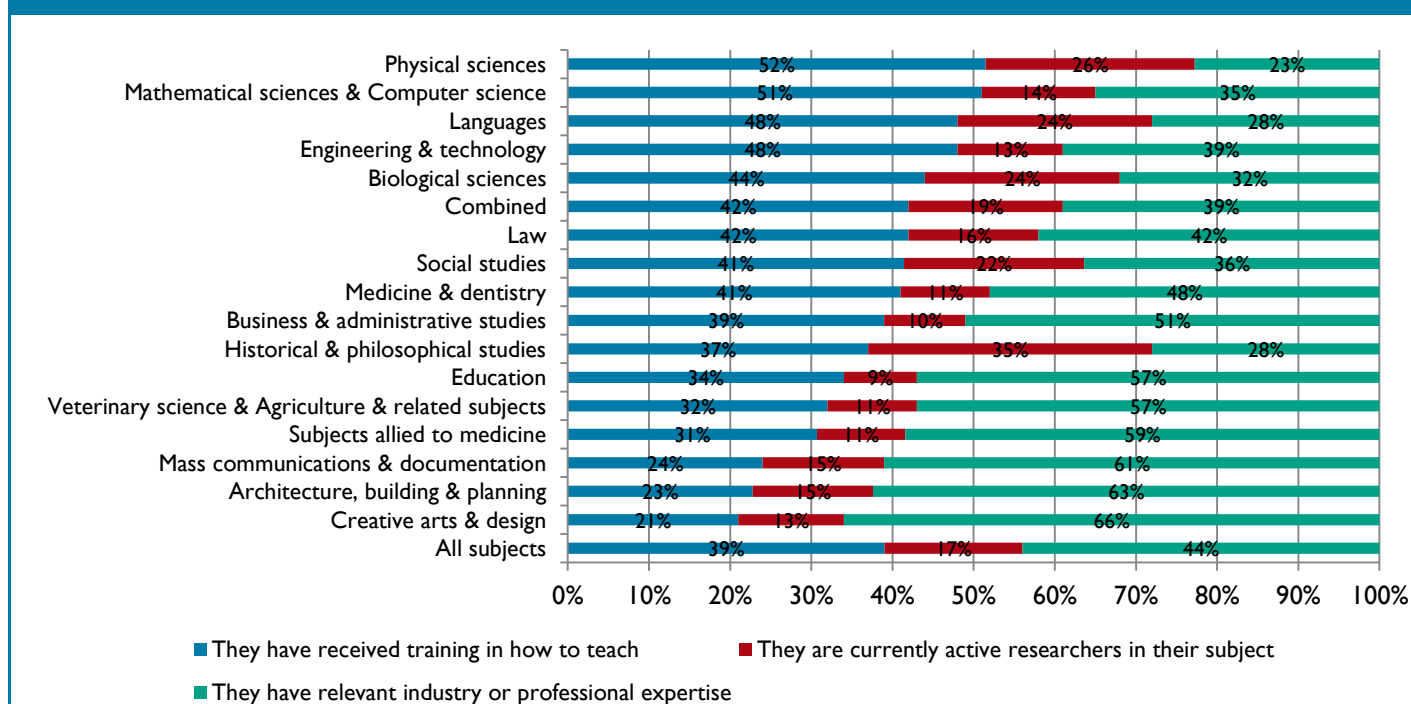
**Figure 28: Characteristics ranked as the top priority by students at different institution groups**



Base: All respondents from the following institution groups; UKADIA (277), Guild HE (596), University Alliance (3,521), Million Plus (1,444), 1994 Group (1,045), Russell Group (3,992).

Figure 29 shows the proportion of students ranking each of the characteristics as the top priority, by subject. Students in some subjects, such as Creative Arts, Architecture and Subjects Allied to Medicine, place a clear priority on expertise from a relevant profession or industry. However, even in a relatively non-vocational field such as Historical and Philosophical Studies over one in four students (28%) selected professional or industry expertise as the top priority. Physical Sciences is the only disciplinary area in which fewer than one in four students feel that relevant “real-world” experience is the most important.

**Figure 29: Characteristics of staff ranked as the top priority by students in different subjects**



Base: All respondents (15,129).

Students in all subjects clearly value training to support academics in their teaching. This was a particular priority for students in Physical Sciences (52%), Maths and Computer Science (51%), Languages (48%) and Engineering and Technology (48%). The subjects where less priority was placed on the training of teachers were those where one would expect a particular emphasis on professional expertise such as Creative Arts and Architecture.

While Labour and the Liberal Democrats committed to making teaching qualifications compulsory in state-funded schools at the recent general election, no political party committed to making a teaching qualification compulsory for higher education. The Conservative Party's manifesto, however, promised the introduction of a new "framework to recognise universities offering the highest teaching quality."<sup>15</sup> What this might mean in practice remains unclear.

It is notable that staff being active researchers was ranked highly by such a small proportion of students. It was the lowest priority for students in all subjects except Physical Sciences and Historical and Philosophical Studies, where in both cases it was higher than professional expertise. In a number of vocational subjects (such as Education, Business and Medicine), only around one in ten students feel that it is the most important characteristic of the staff that teach them. This could partially reflect a concern that fees cross-subsidise research, and suggests more could be done to explain and show to students the benefits of research-informed and research-led teaching.

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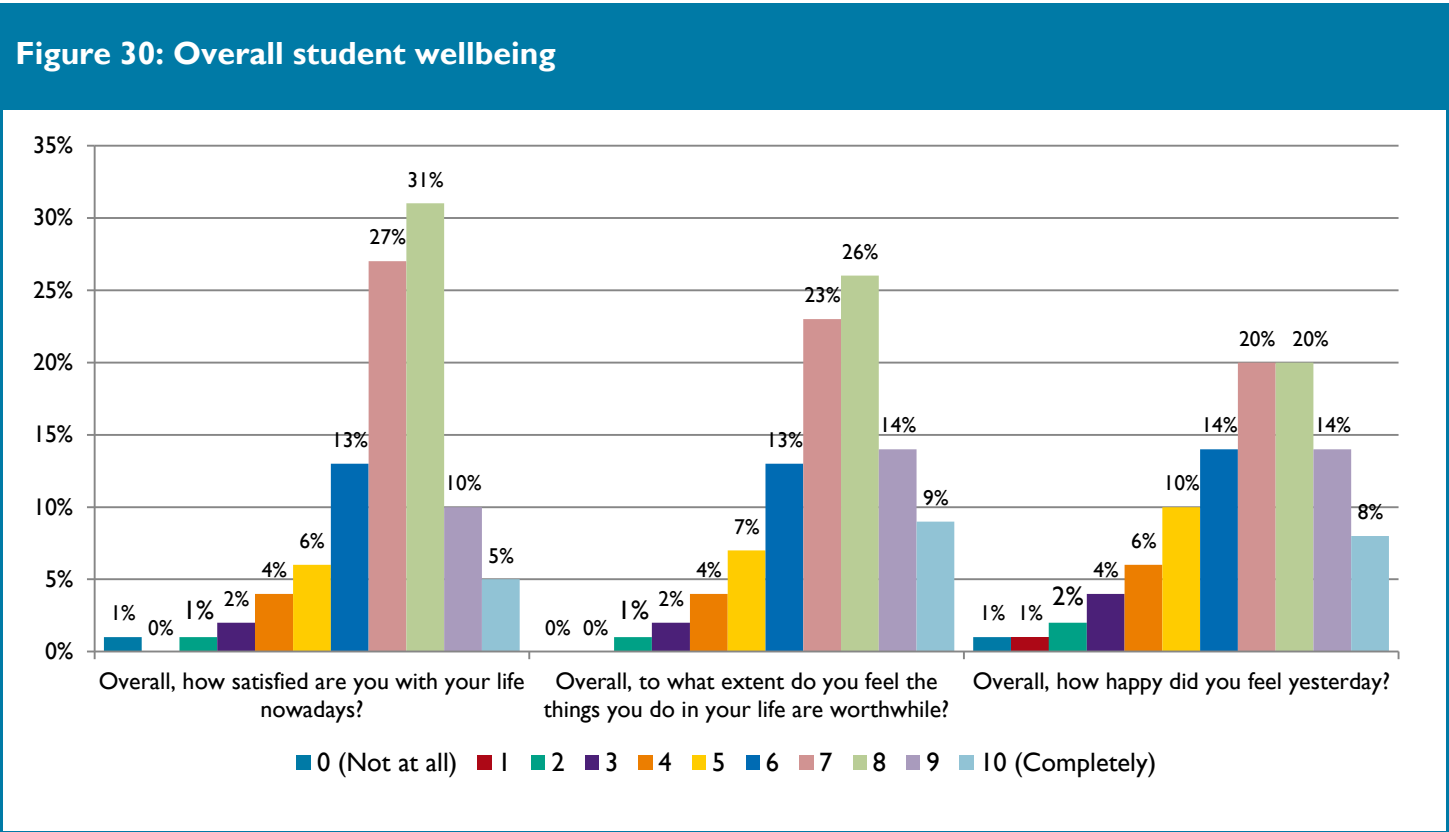
<sup>15</sup> Conservative Party (2015) *Strong Leadership A Clear Economic Plan A Brighter More Secure Future* (p. 35) [Internet]. Available from: <https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/manifesto2015/ConservativeManifesto2015.pdf> [Accessed 22 May 2015].

# 6. Student wellbeing

The survey includes four questions on wellbeing that the Office for National Statistics (ONS) poses to the general public. This allows us to explore students' satisfaction with life, their happiness and their sense that what they do is worthwhile, and to make comparisons with the rest of the population.

## 6.1 Overall wellbeing

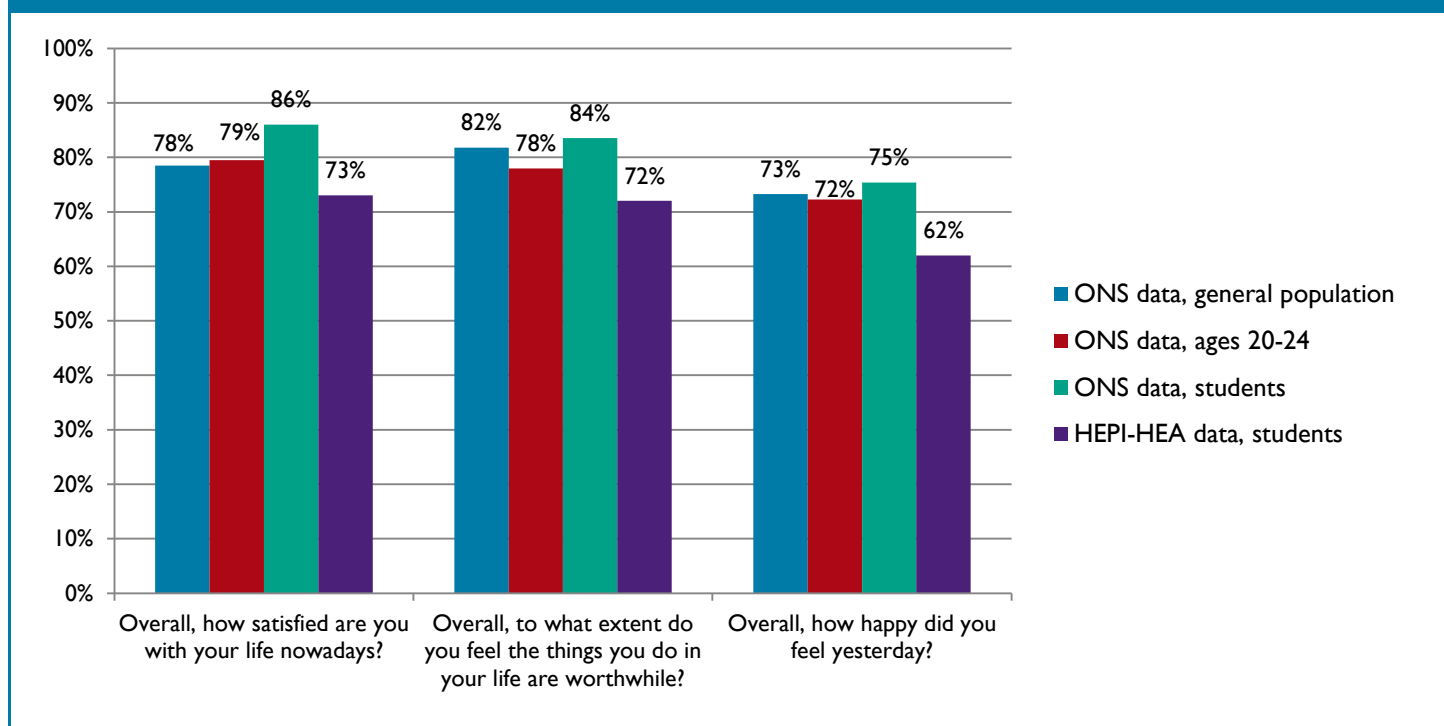
Figure 30 shows the responses of students on three of the questions on a scale from zero to ten, where ten equals completely satisfied (for example). It shows that a majority of students are generally satisfied and happy with their lives, and consider the things they do to be worthwhile.



Base: All respondents (15,129).

The results last year showed that students were less positive about their lives than the general population, when compared with data from the Office of National Statistics. That is true even when the comparison is with a similar age group. That finding is repeated this year across the board, as shown in Figure 31.

**Figure 31: Personal wellbeing of students compared with ONS data (those selecting 7-10, where 10 is “completely”)<sup>16</sup>**



Base: HEPI-HEA data (15,129), ONS data, general population (approximately 165,000), ONS data, ages 20-24 (approximately 7,000), ONS data, students (approximately 2,640)<sup>17</sup>.

The chart confirms that students are less satisfied, less happy, and have less of a sense that what they are doing is worthwhile than the general population, including those of a similar age group. The possible removal of student number controls could mean more students with atypical backgrounds entering higher education, making support services for vulnerable students even more important.

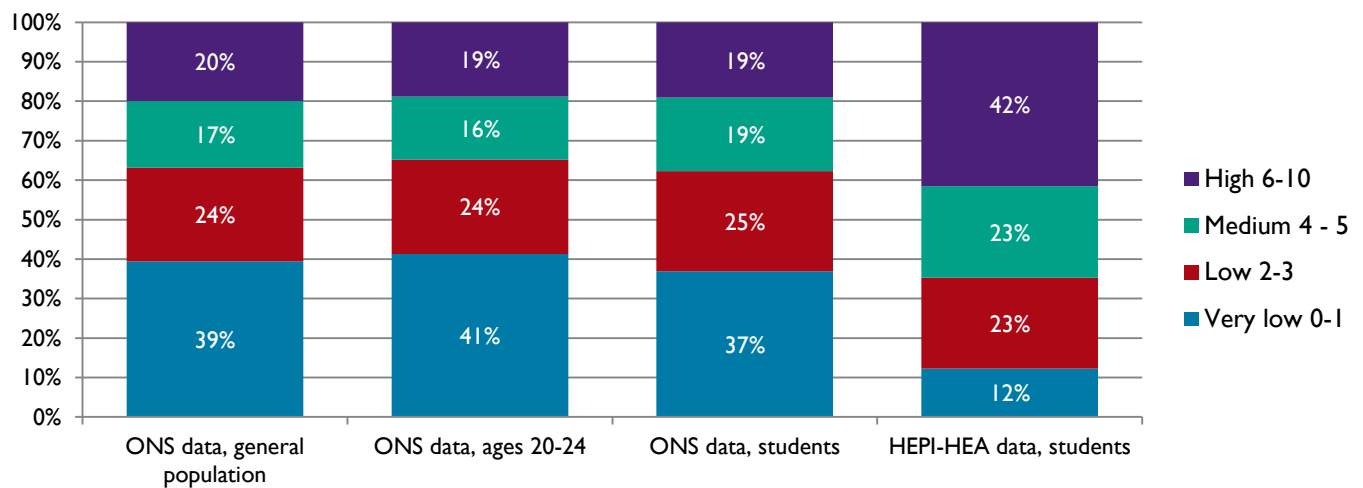
The survey also asked students about their sense of anxiety. The results are shown separately in Figure 32 because the results from the HEPI-HEA survey are markedly higher than those from the ONS and this is likely to be due to the different methodology. ONS research shows that respondents have a tendency to reverse the scale for this question, even when asked over the phone or face-to-face and an online survey may be less appropriate for this question.<sup>18</sup> Further investigation of anxiety levels among students could be of value.

<sup>16</sup> The Office of National Statistics (ONS) data is from 2013/14. The data are available from: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/re-reference-tables.html?edition=tcn%3A77-355552>

<sup>17</sup> The ONS “student” category refers specifically to those students who are economically inactive, and is therefore only a partial picture of student wellbeing.

<sup>18</sup> “The scale was a particular problem at this question because a group of respondents reversed it when answering. This was because in the previous questions, scores close to 10 reflected a positive state but at this question, scores close to zero represented a positive state.” Ralph, K., Palmer, K. and Olney, J. (2011) *Subjective well-being: A qualitative investigation of subjective well-being questions*. Office of National Statistics, p.6. Available from: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/user-guidance/well-being/about-the-programme/advisory-groups/well-being-technical-advisory-group/working-paper---subjective-well-being--a-qualitative-investigation-of-subjective-well-being-questions.pdf> [Accessed 22 May 2015].

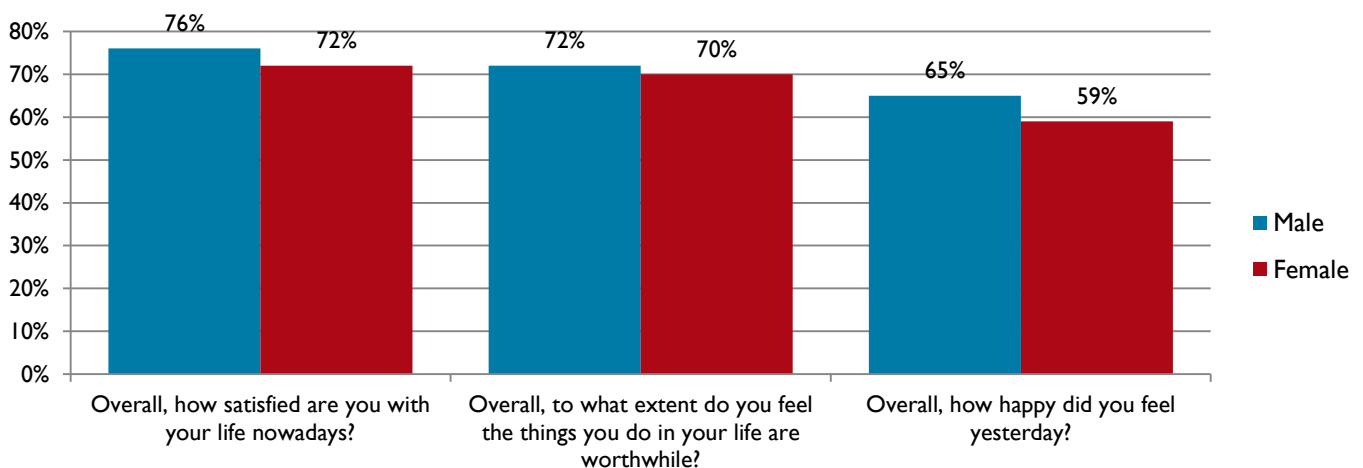
**Figure 32: Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday?**



## 6.2 Wellbeing and gender

Figure 33 shows female students tend to report lower levels of wellbeing than males. However, this should not be read as implying male students face less trauma. The number of male students that commit suicide is thought to be more than double the number of female students.<sup>19</sup> There is considerable evidence showing that men are less likely to seek mental health help than women.<sup>20</sup> So it is vitally important that higher education institutions ensure their counselling services are regarded as accessible by all students, male as well as female.

**Figure 33: Student wellbeing by gender (students selecting 7-10)**



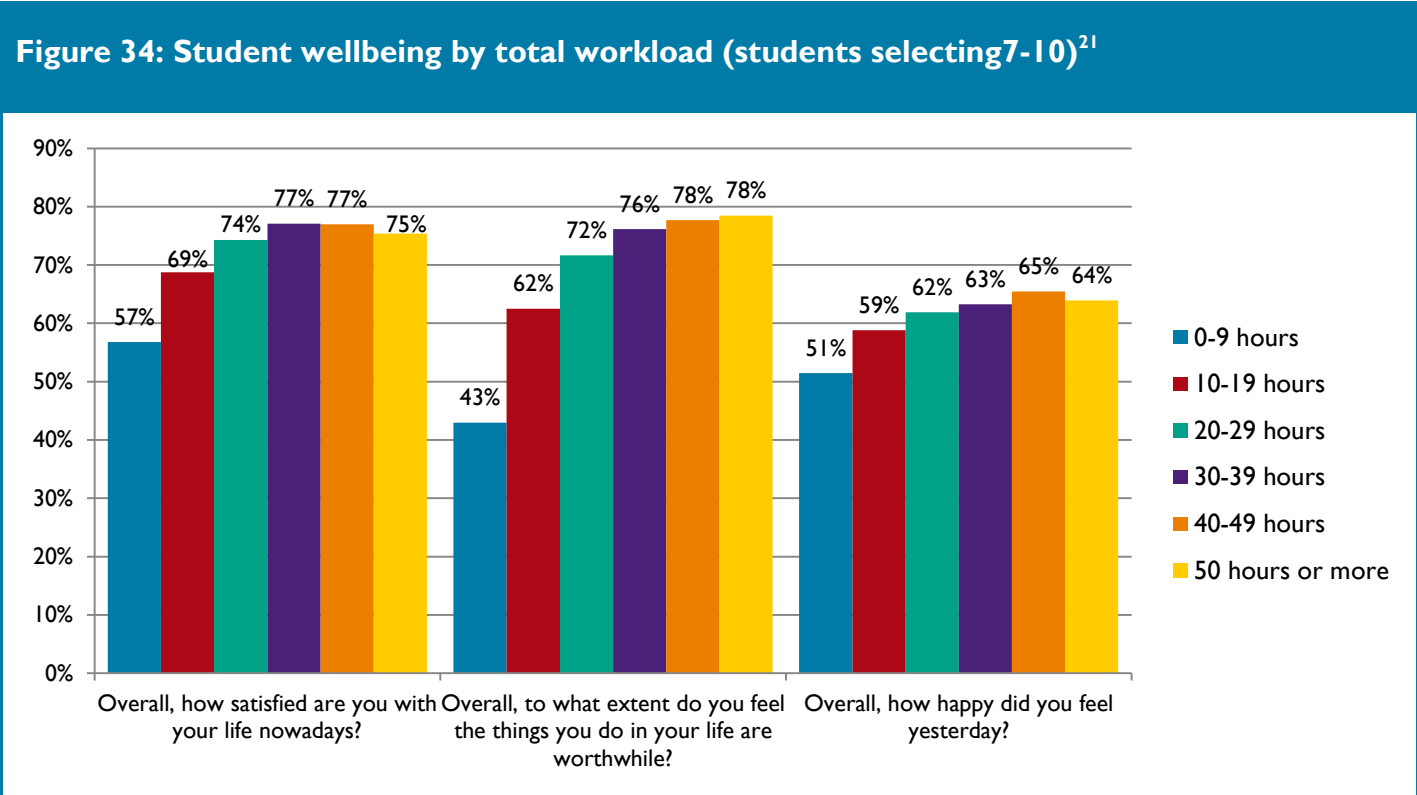
Base: All respondents; male (6,342), female (8,787).

<sup>19</sup> Universities UK (2015) *Student Mental Wellbeing in Higher Education: Good Practice Guide* [Internet]. UUK. Available from: <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/highereducation/Documents/2015/StudentMentalWellbeingInHE.pdf> [Accessed 22 May 2015].

<sup>20</sup> See for example Maria Oliver, Nicky Pearson, Nicola Coe and David Gunnell (2005) Help-seeking Behavior in Men and Women with Common Mental Health Problems: Cross-sectional Study [Internet]. *British Journal of Psychiatry* 186 (4). Available from: <http://bjp.rcpsych.org/content/186/4/297> [Accessed 22 May 2015].

6.3 Wellbeing and workload

Figure 34 shows a strong positive relationship between wellbeing and total academic workload (though this trend does not fully hold where workload exceeds 50 hours a week). Only 57% of students who spend fewer than ten hours a week on their studies feel a sense of satisfaction with their lives, compared with 77% of those who undertake academic work for between 30 and 39 hours a week. The relationship is even stronger for students' sense of whether the things they do are worthwhile.



Base: All respondents; with workload 0-9h (442), 10-19h (3,393), 20-29h (4,259), 30-39h (3,067), 40-49h (1,787), 50h+ (2,180).

<sup>21</sup> Total workload is made up of contact hours attended, independent study and time spent working outside the institution as part of the course.



## 7. Students' views on policy options

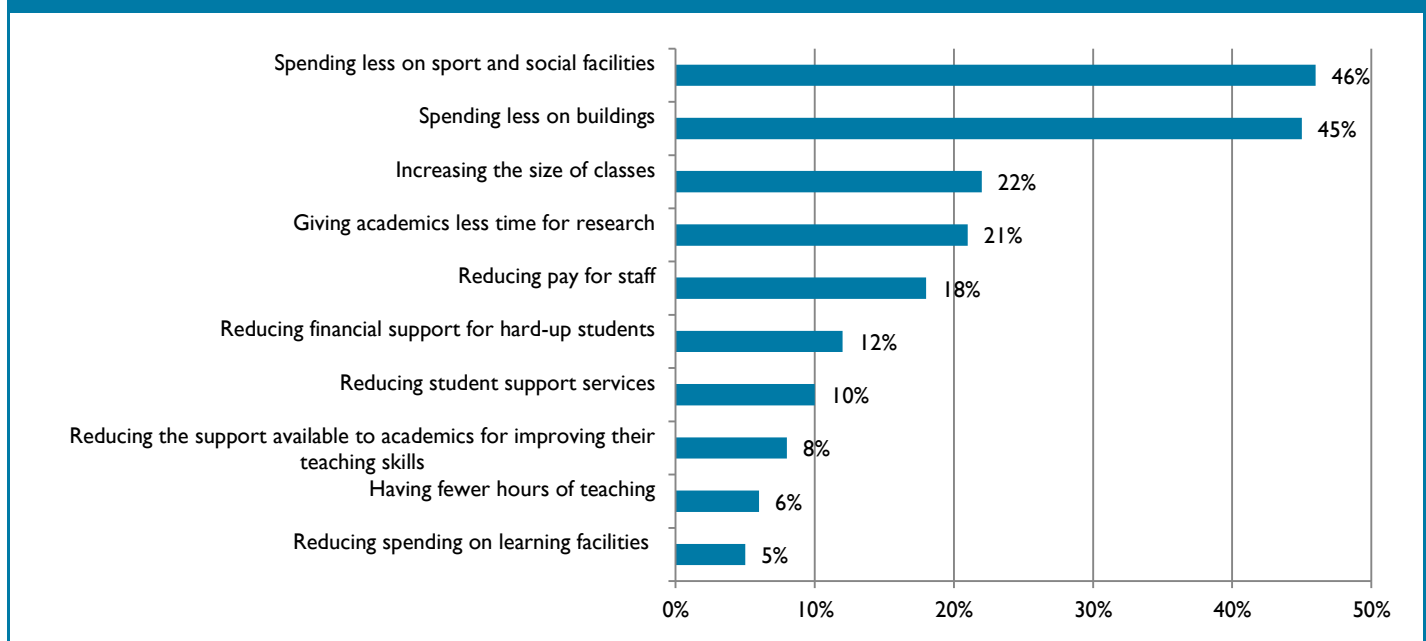
The 2015 survey asked students about what institutions' budget priorities should be, and about how higher education should be funded more generally.

### 7.1 Budget priorities

In earlier years, the *Student Academic Experience Survey* included a question on how institutions can best spend their resources. Given the expectation of continuing austerity, this year the question was reversed to ask undergraduates their preference on where institutions might save money. They were presented with a list of ways in which institutions could reduce spending, and asked to select the three they would prefer to happen (Figure 35).

Some critics of the new higher fees introduced in England in 2012 argue that it has led to an arms race in which institutions seek to outdo one another in terms of new buildings that look good in prospectuses and on open days but might not reflect the learning priorities of students. There is some support for this view in the results. The most preferred option for saving money, chosen by 46% of respondents, is to reduce spending on sports and social facilities and the second most preferred option, chosen by 45%, is spending less on buildings. These two answers are more than twice as popular as the next areas of potential saving, which are "Increasing the size of classes" (22%) and "Giving academics less time for research" (21%).

**Figure 35: In which areas would you most prefer your university to save money?**



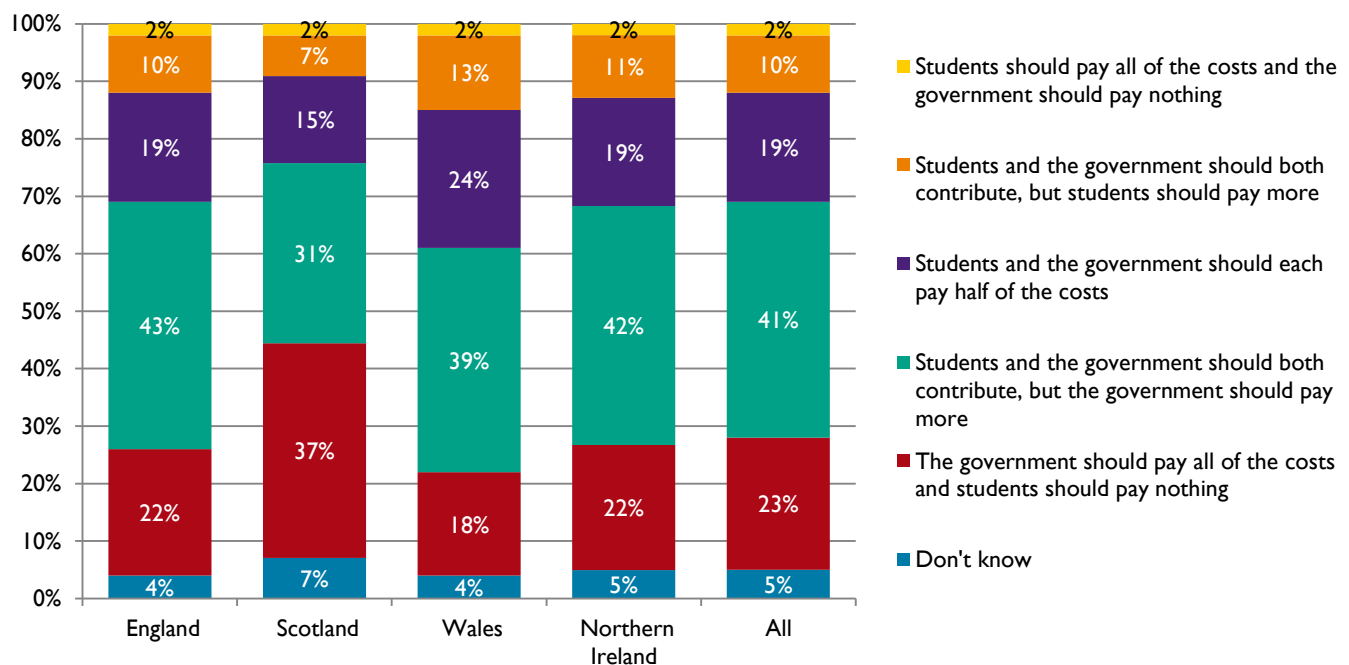
Base: All respondents (15,129).

These findings confirm those elsewhere in the survey that contact hours are among the things that matter most to students. They also suggest students have a sophisticated understanding that buildings and other physical facilities are not always a good indicator of the quality of the learning environment, which also depends on factors such as the professional development of staff. It may also reflect a fear that money spent today on buildings will only improve the university estate after they have left. Perhaps surprisingly given other results from the survey, increasing class sizes is the third most popular option for saving money.

## 7.2 Funding

For the first time, the survey asked about how the costs of teaching undergraduate students should be funded. Very few students from all four parts of the UK (2%) feel students should pay the full cost but an overwhelming majority (70%) think they should contribute along with government. The proportion that think that the costs should be shared equally between students and government (which is broadly the balance currently in existence in England) is one-quarter (24%) in Wales and lower in Northern Ireland (19%), England (19%), and Scotland (15%).

**Figure 36: The costs of teaching undergraduates are partly paid for by students themselves and partly by the government. What do you think the balance should be? By students' home nation**



Base: All respondents (15,129).

On other options, students from Scotland differ markedly from those of the rest of the UK. For example, 37% of students from Scotland think the government should pay all the costs, around twice as many as those in England (22%), Wales (18%) and Northern Ireland (22%). However, there is still a majority (55%) of students from Scotland who believe that they should contribute to the costs of teaching. Thirty-nine per cent of Welsh students think that students should pay at least half of the costs, compared with only 24% of Scottish students. English students are broadly midway between on 31%.

## Conclusion

The survey confirms that students are in general content with their courses, even if those paying higher fees have growing concerns about value for money.

There is clear evidence here that students are, on average, less content when having fewer contact hours and believe the largest classes are of less value than smaller ones. Students also recognise that their own engagement is crucial to their academic success. As last year, the number one reason given by students as to why their experience has not lived up to their expectations is that they have not put in enough effort themselves. The amount of independent study that students engage in also affects their sense of whether their course is good value for money. When, on average, students are spending more of their time studying independently than they are in the classroom, more attention needs to be paid to how students can best be supported in the self-directed work that higher education requires.<sup>22</sup>

Another important finding this year relates to the importance that students place on their teachers being trained to teach. In many subjects, that is more important to students than their lecturers' research activities or their professional expertise. It is possible that this will result in some contestable funding to promote better teaching or other efforts to reward the provision of training for teachers. However, unless and until the league tables incorporate more weighty measures for good teaching quality, the incentives to raise teaching standards may remain limited.

On funding, students display a sophisticated understanding that money spent on new buildings is not always the most effective way to raise standards. They are clear that any cuts should protect frontline teaching provision.

Higher education is about much more than money, but it is nonetheless hard to deliver without sufficient resources. Currently, some students in the UK face among the highest fees in the world, albeit with a relatively progressive student loan system underlying them. Those fees are often buying them a world-class education at a world-class university in a world-class system. But, whether or not that is so, the students feel they have been given little intelligible information on where their fees are going. Fixing that would be a fitting response to the views revealed by this survey and would enable institutions to tell a positive story about the diverse range of experiences they offer while simultaneously facilitating more evidence-based policymaking.

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<sup>22</sup> The HEA and the QAA have begun this process, with the publication of *Effective Practice in the Design of Directed Independent Learning Opportunities*, by Liz Thomas, Robert Jones and James Ottoway, 2015. Available from: <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Effective%20practice%20in%20the%20design%20of%20directed%20independent%20learning%20opportunities.pdf> [Accessed 22 May 2015].

## Contact us

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**The Higher Education Academy**  
**Innovation Way**  
**York Science Park**  
**Heslington**  
**York**  
**YO10 5BR**

**+44 (0)1904 717500**  
**[enquiries@heacademy.ac.uk](mailto:enquiries@heacademy.ac.uk)**  
[www.heacademy.ac.uk](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk)  
[www.twitter.com/heacademy](https://www.twitter.com/heacademy)

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**The Higher Education Policy Institute**  
**99 Banbury Road**  
**Oxford OX2 6JX**

**+44 (0) 1865 284450**  
**[admin@hepi.ac.uk](mailto:admin@hepi.ac.uk)**  
[www.hepi.ac.uk](http://www.hepi.ac.uk)  
[@Hepi\\_News](https://twitter.com/Hepi_News)

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