2017

Student Academic Experience Survey

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Higher Education Academy

hepi
Higher Education Policy Institute

STUDENT
ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE
SURVEY

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2 Foreword by Professor Stephanie Marshall

The Student Academic Experience Survey is extremely well established in the sector's calendar. I am confident you will find that the 2017 Survey, with important new questions this year, provides an even more robust evidence base to inform thinking and potential change, whether at policy, strategic or operational level. The report generated by this Survey tells us in some detail what students – including those in particular cohorts – are thinking. So we should take note and keep striving to improve the student experience, particularly for the minority groups whom this report indicates are less engaged than the 'white majority'.

With our focus at the Higher Education Academy (HEA) exclusively on driving teaching excellence, I am personally very encouraged to see student perceptions in this area improving, right across the spectrum of providers. The results are especially positive for those respondents from alternative providers, who are identified in the Survey for the first time. Complementing student feedback on teaching quality is their response to questions on how much they have learnt – or 'distance travelled'. These questions are new to the Survey this year and show compelling evidence of the value of the higher education experience.

The continuing decline in students' perception of value for money is, of course, a significant cause for concern. As the report notes, value is a 'complex combination' of factors and there is no easy answer. Nevertheless, I would suggest we must work even harder at our conversations with students through deeper engagement and personalisation of approach at every stage if we are to halt and turn this decline, and demonstrate the reality of the huge value and opportunity offered by a UK higher education experience.

I trust this report will provide much food for thought.

Professor Stephanie Marshall

Chief Executive, Higher Education Academy

3 Foreword by Nick Hillman

The UK-wide HEPI / HEA Survey has come a long way since it was first undertaken in 2006. It needed to change because, while it has always been original and useful, it was also one-dimensional. Today, it has a much wider range of questions, covering – for example – the latest policy issues as well as student wellbeing. The analysis of the students' responses has improved too, with the answers to the different questions now being correlated against one another to find links and trends that would have been missed in the past.

Despite the improvements that have been made in the collection and presentation of the data, the results have never been varnished to please higher education institutions. They remain challenging this time around, showing students have falling perceptions of value for money, continue to display relatively low wellbeing compared to the rest of the population and have yet to grow to love England's high-fees model of funding undergraduate education. These are important findings, but they need to be placed in the context of real-term fee cuts in the years since 2012, which have given universities less room for manoeuvre.

There are lots of more positive findings in this year's Survey, too. For example, a new question on learning gain reveals most students believe they are learning 'a lot', and perceptions of teaching quality are rising. The picture is not a standard one identical for all students, however, as it differs notably by subject, ethnicity, financial status, sexual orientation and accommodation type. These findings will no doubt be pored over carefully as institutions work out the best way to respond to the new Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF).

People often question whether we should highlight the weaknesses as well as the strengths of the UK higher education sector in this way. The answer is simple: it would be harder to see the areas where improvements are necessary if we were to shun the opportunity for self-reflection. There is a second reason too in these uncertain times. Policymakers are less likely to meddle in areas that are working well and more likely to address problematic areas if they have a clear and comprehensive understanding of where the UK is performing well and where there is room for improvement. The implementation of the Higher Education and Research Act (in England), the unexpected 2017 general election and the run-up to Brexit will all have profound implications for higher education institutions. So it is critical to understand their needs and those of their students.

Finally, there is one important caveat. Students' perceptions are only one kind of information. Applicants and graduates sometimes have different perceptions and we must also not lose sight of the needs and working conditions of higher education staff. After all, universities are most successful when they enrol a mix of students, focus on excellent teaching and learning and provide a stimulating and rewarding environment for their staff.

Nick Hillman

Director of the Higher Education Policy Institute

4 Executive Summary

Student views on the value they receive remain a concern. The downward trend in perceptions of value has continued into 2017, with ratings among students from Scotland showing the largest decline. This does not signify a decline in quality, as we will see from the results on teaching. However, it does point towards value being linked to a complex combination of factors, not least a gradual change in what students expect from their experience given the level of fees being charged. Overall, the issue of demonstrating value is clearly proving a difficult conundrum for institutions to solve.

Key to the overall experience is meeting student expectations, and this is another core measure that appears to be declining, although only slightly in this case. Expectations are constantly evolving and, although there is evidence of institutions being able to exceed the expectations of first year students, there are certain cohorts of students who experience poorer access to staff and support for their studies than they expected.

In the context of a sector focus on learning gain, we have introduced a question asking students how much they feel they have learnt, with positive results. Students report clear gains, providing a counterpoint to discussions in the UK and beyond which have previously questioned this. That said, there are some clear differences among certain cohorts, with evidence of economic issues impacting negatively on learning.

Another first in 2017 is our inclusion of a small sample of students at alternative providers, which provides a positive story. On all key measures spanning the student experience, ranging from value to teaching quality, students at alternative providers report a strong positive difference compared to the total sample. One exception to this is contact hours, which are lower than average, providing clear evidence for institutions to challenge opinions, traditionally held among students, that high contact hours are necessary in order to demonstrate value.

Although there is still a link between contact hours and value, there is evidence that opinions are evolving, and that students are satisfied with lower contact hours than in the past. The data support the role played by different teaching methods, and how the right combination of teaching methods delivered in the right volumes can impact on learning in a positive way.

Teaching quality is crucial to the overall experience, and appears to be improving, with a clear year-on-year increase in several aspects. This is encouraging and evidence of a renewed focus on teaching, which directly addresses views expressed by students about how much they value staff that are trained in teaching and who demonstrate this in how they carry out their work.

There remains a concerning difference in levels of wellbeing between our student audience and the national population, and results also highlight a significant year-on-year decline. Across the sector, partly as a result of this survey the issue of wellbeing is rightly becoming a more regular focus of attention. The current findings show this needs to continue as students come under more pressure to balance a complex range of challenges around expectations, financial pressures, workload and support in order to achieve what they want from their studies.

Fees continue to be a concern for students and there is no sign of this dissipating. Three-quarters of students feel that Teaching Excellence Framework-linked fee rises should not apply to anyone. Additionally, in a separate question, students remain of the view that the government should contribute the majority, although not necessarily all, of the costs of teaching them.

On several key issues, UK-domiciled students from non-white ethnic backgrounds are more critical of their experience than white students. As well as perceiving lower overall value, non-white students are less positive about the teaching they receive, and accordingly, are less likely to report learning gain. There are also differences among other cohorts, particularly employed students, who report lower levels of learning gain than average, and students who live at home or on their own, who find it more difficult to access staff and general support. This picture is made more complex by the fact that there are significant sub-groups of students who fall into more than one of these cohorts, so unpicking cause and effect between all these factors is a huge challenge.

What is clear, however, is that institutions have a lot to gain by working to develop a greater understanding of how and why ethnicity, financial status and accommodation, among other factors, can impact on the student experience. Doing so will help the sector to reverse declining perceptions of value and continue to focus on improving teaching quality.

5 Introduction

5.1 Methodology

Over the past decade, The Student Academic Experience Survey has become one of the major surveys within the UK higher education landscape, providing insight into how students at UK institutions appraise their time at university to date and influencing policy and debate.

Since 2006 (with the exception of 2013), the Survey has been designed and developed in partnership between the Higher Education Policy Institute and the Higher Education Academy, with online panel interviews independently conducted by YouthSight.

For the 2017 Survey there are a number of questions that enable us to track some of the issues discussed in previous years, such as value for money, wellbeing and teaching quality. Alongside these longer-running questions, we have added new questions addressing some of the key issues in the sector, such as how much students learn, the different ways in which contact hours are delivered, and the extent to which students value learning alongside students from outside the UK.

Responses were sourced from YouthSight's student panel, which is made up of over 80,000 undergraduate 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.

Over 70,000 members of the panel were invited to complete the Survey, between 13 February and 17 March 2017. In total, 14,057 responses were collected, representing a response rate of 20%. All respondents who completed the Survey received a £1 Amazon gift voucher and, on average, the questions took 16 minutes to complete. Weighting has been applied to the responses to ensure the sample is balanced and reflective of the full-time student population as a whole, and to provide consistency in approach with previous years.[1]

One of the key additions to the methodology this year has been the inclusion of a small sample of 66 students from alternative providers (scaled up to 78 in the weighted sample), to reflect how the sector is evolving.

[1] The data are weighted by gender, course year, subject area and institution type. All percentages and base sizes in the report are based on weighted data unless specified otherwise.

5.2 Sample size

All respondents to the Survey are full-time undergraduate students. Unless stated otherwise, all figures and tables relate to the 2017 Survey with a base of 14,057 students. The full data tables are freely available from HEPI and the HEA.

The total sample size of 14,057 provides a margin of error of +/- 0.83%.[2] This is calculated at the 95% confidence level and based on a result of 50%, where the margin of error is at its maximum. This means that for a result of 50% we can be confident that the true result is between 49.17% and 50.83% in 95 out of 100 cases.

In order to facilitate effective analysis on ethnicity, the sample profile and main data in this report (for ethnicity analysis only) are based on UK-domiciled students. This is to remove the impact of international students on ethnic groups, to allow ethnicity and international students to be analysed separately.

5.3 Statistical analysis

To identify the questions in the Survey with the strongest link to value for money and the amount that students learn, Pearson's correlation analysis has been conducted by YouthSight. Pearson's is the most widely used measure of correlation. It measures the strength of the linear relationship between two variables, giving a value between +1 and -1, where +1 is a perfect positive relationship; 0 shows no relationship; and -1 is a perfect negative relationship.

[2] Please note that in the charts in this report, the total may not add up to 100% due to rounding to whole percentages.

5.4 Sample profile

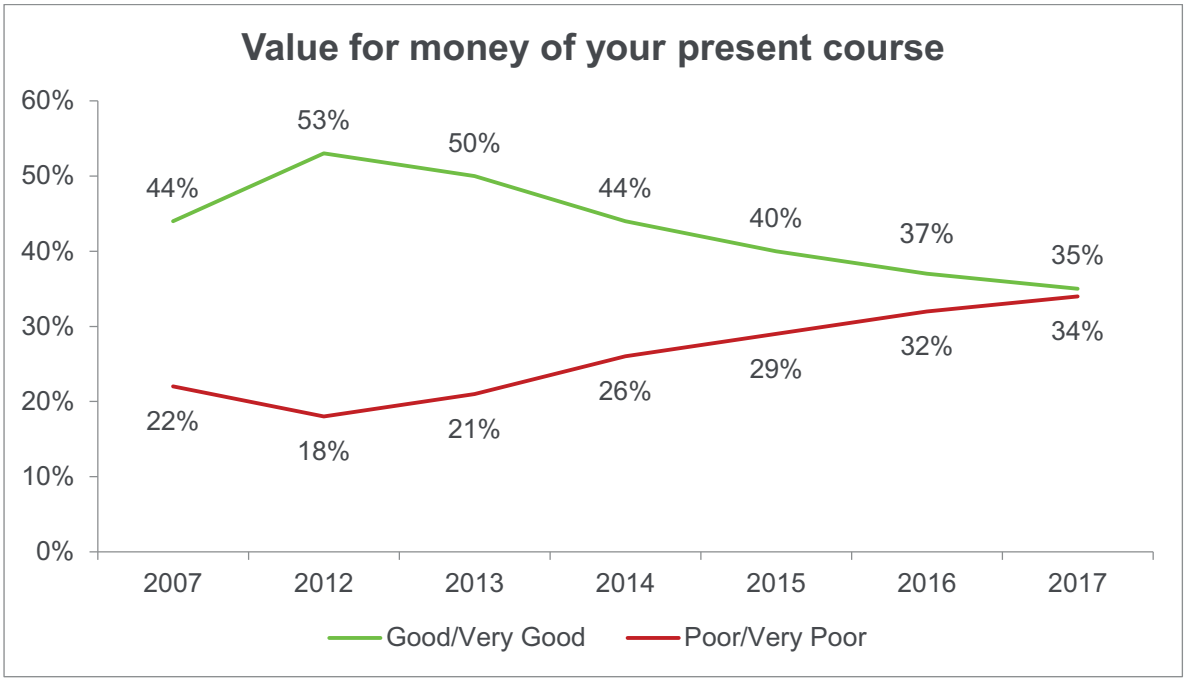
Our sample has been weighted to reflect the evolving undergraduate population.

Weighted sample %				
Year		2015	2016	2017
Base size		(15,129)	(15,221)	(14,057)
Gender	Male	42%	43%	43%
	Female	58%	57%	57%
Country where studying	England	83%	85%	84%
	Scotland	10%	9%	9%
	Wales	5%	5%	5%
	Northern Ireland	1%	1%	1%
Institutions	Russell Group	26%	28%	28%
	Pre-92 (excluding Russell Group)	22%	22%	22%
	Post-92	49%	47%	47%
	Specialist	3%	4%	2%
	Alternative Providers	0%	0%	1%
Ethnicity (UK-domiciled)	White	84%	82%	79%
	Black	3%	3%	3%
	Asian (not including Chinese)	7%	8%	12%
	Chinese	2%	2%	2%
	Mixed	3%	4%	4%

6 Value for money

6.1 Trends over time

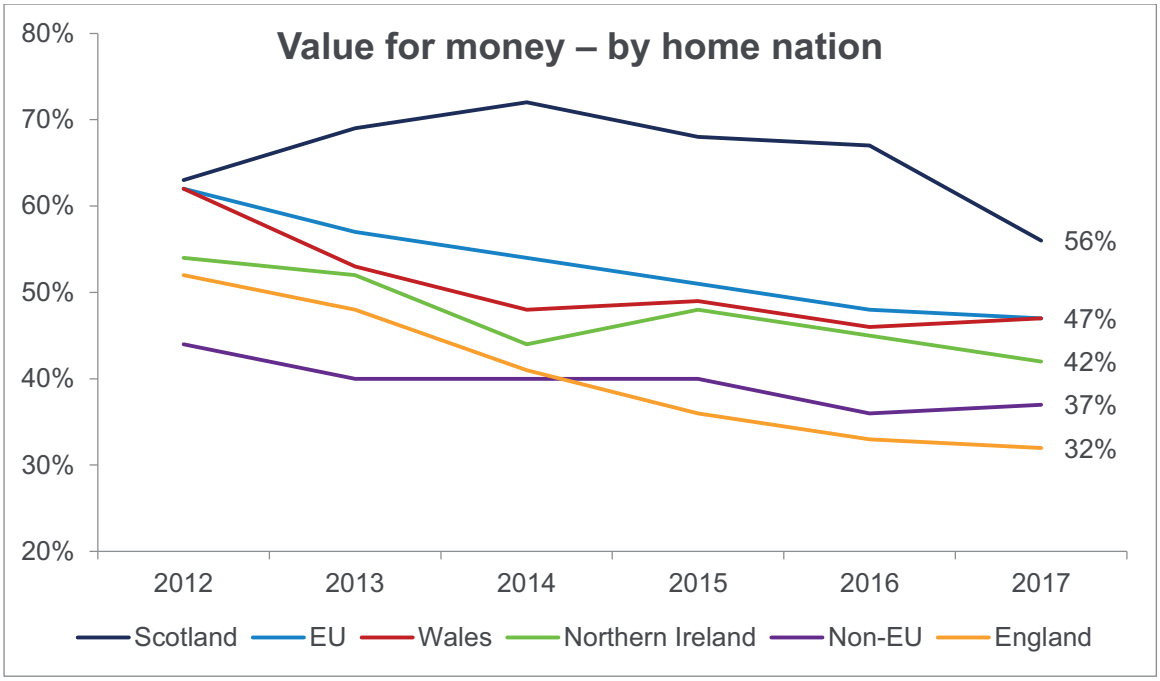
One of the key talking points highlighted by the 2016 Survey was a decline in perceptions of the value for money that undergraduate students feel they receive, and there is evidence of a continued fall in 2017. The 2% decline in value (good or very good) is mirrored by a 2% increase in those who feel they have received poor value, so that there are now almost as many students (34%) who have received poor value as good value (35%). A continuation of this trend into next year would therefore see a net negative view for the first time.



Base: All respondents. 2007 (14,859); 2012 (9,058); 2013 (17,090); 2014 (15,046); 2015 (15,129); 2016 (15,221); 2017 (14,057).

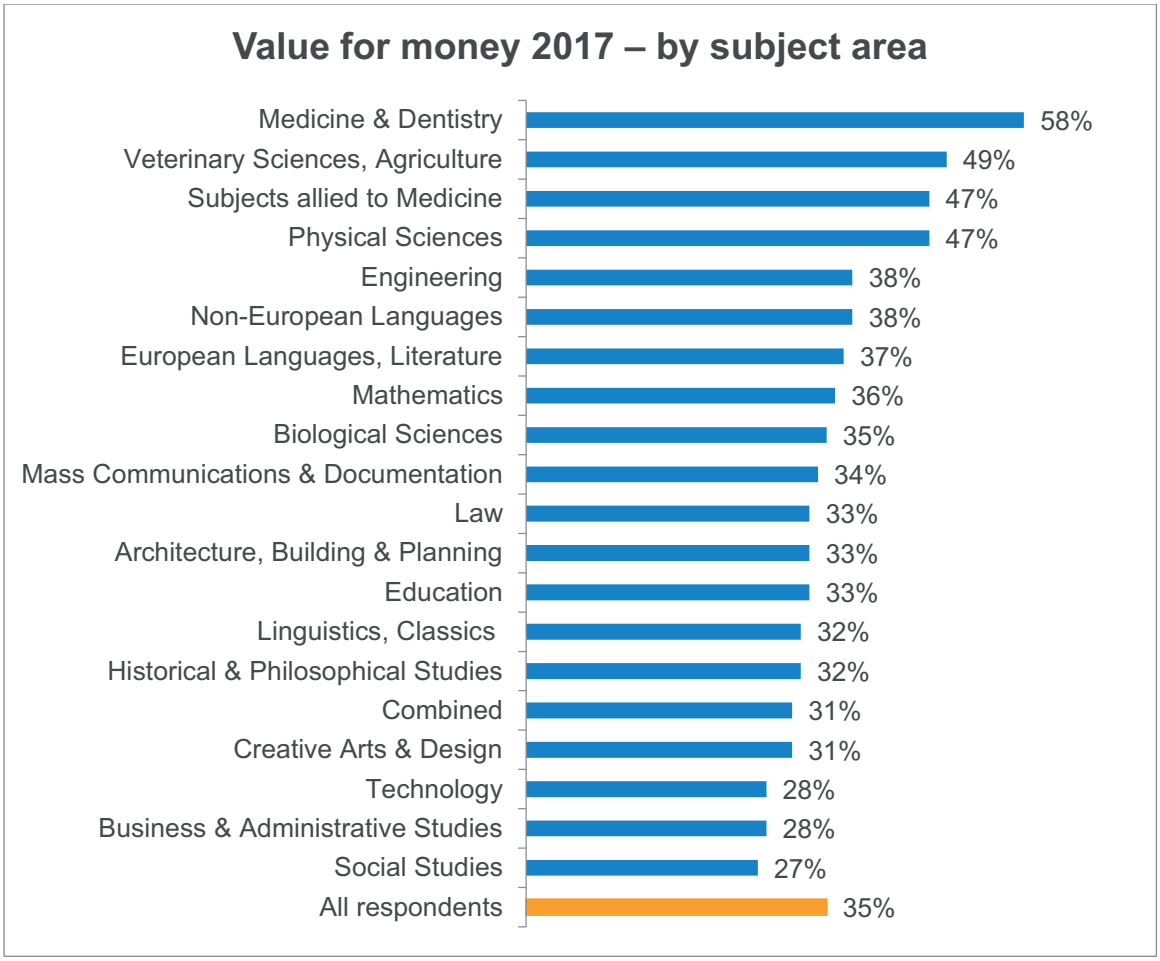
Although there are major differences in opinions between students from the four parts of the UK (based on domicile rather than study location), what is striking is a general downward trend as shown in the chart below. Even Scotland, which was previously a positive outlier, has seen a significant decline – in fact the largest decline, from 67% to 56%. Only students from Wales and outside the EU go against the trend – albeit slightly.

The challenges faced by the sector in demonstrating value for money are exemplified by the results among students from England (which due to its population strongly influences the overall results), where in fact there is a net negative result for the second year running. Just 32% perceive good value compared to 37% who perceive poor value.



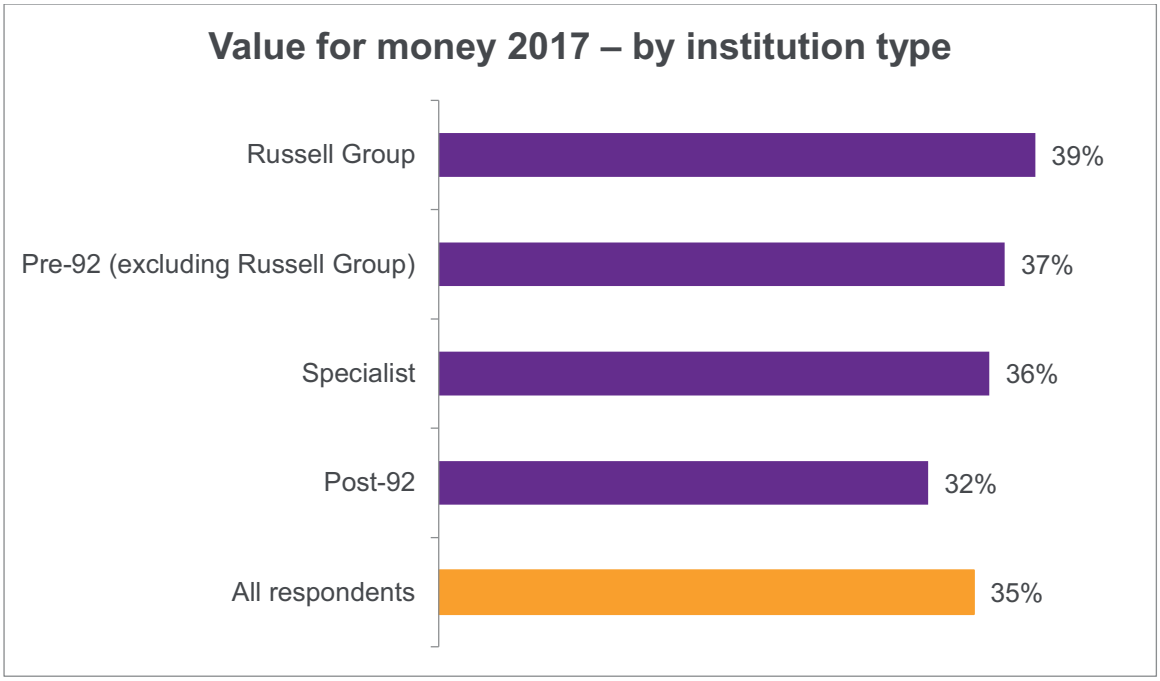
Base: All respondents domiciled in each nation 2017. Scotland (839); EU (1,053); Wales (441); Northern Ireland (264); Non-EU (683); England (10,777). Value for money defined as Good/Very Good combined.

There is also a clear challenge for institutions with regards to students from outside the EU, who pay the highest fees. Within this group, perceptions of value for money are particularly low, at 34%, among the subset of students from East and South East Asia (287 respondents – not shown in the chart above).



Base: All respondents (14,057), by JACS subject areas. Value for money defined as Good/Very Good combined.

Different subject areas involve different combinations of teaching methods, contact hours and overall experiences that can all impact on perceived value for money. Accordingly, there is a wide spectrum of different value perceptions by subject, with a majority of Medicine and Dentistry students perceiving good value, compared to under 30% of students of Social Studies, Business or Technology.



Base: All respondents (14,057); Post-92 (6,730); Specialist (296); Pre–92 (3,054); Russell Group (3,899). Value defined as Good/Very Good.

By type of institution, students from Russell Group institutions are most likely to feel they have received good value, although for all the main institution types, value perceptions are lower than 40%.

6.2 Analysis: What drives value for money perceptions

Pearson correlation calculations were conducted across the questions to assess the greatest drivers of value for money scores.[3]

Measure – Top 10 correlations	Pearson correlation value	Strength of correlation with value for money[4]
Experience has matched expectations	0.36	Moderate
If you knew what you do now, would you have chosen a different course? (negative correlation)	-0.33	Moderate
Teaching staff were helpful and supportive	0.32	Moderate
I am satisfied with the variety of timetabled sessions I have had	0.31	Moderate
Teaching staff were poor at explaining things (negative correlation)	-0.31	Moderate
Teaching staff made their subjects interesting	0.30	Weak
Teaching staff motivated you to do your best work	0.30	Weak
I am satisfied with the amount of timetabled sessions I have had	0.30	Weak
Teaching staff gave you useful feedback	0.30	Weak
Teaching staff maintain and improve their subject knowledge on a regular basis	0.29	Weak

Teaching quality stands out as being a major driver of value, with several of the questions which rate teaching staff being identified as having the strongest relationships with value for money. This consolidates the importance of teaching and provides a consistent view for the sector that a focus on teaching is likely to pay dividends in terms of student views of their experience.

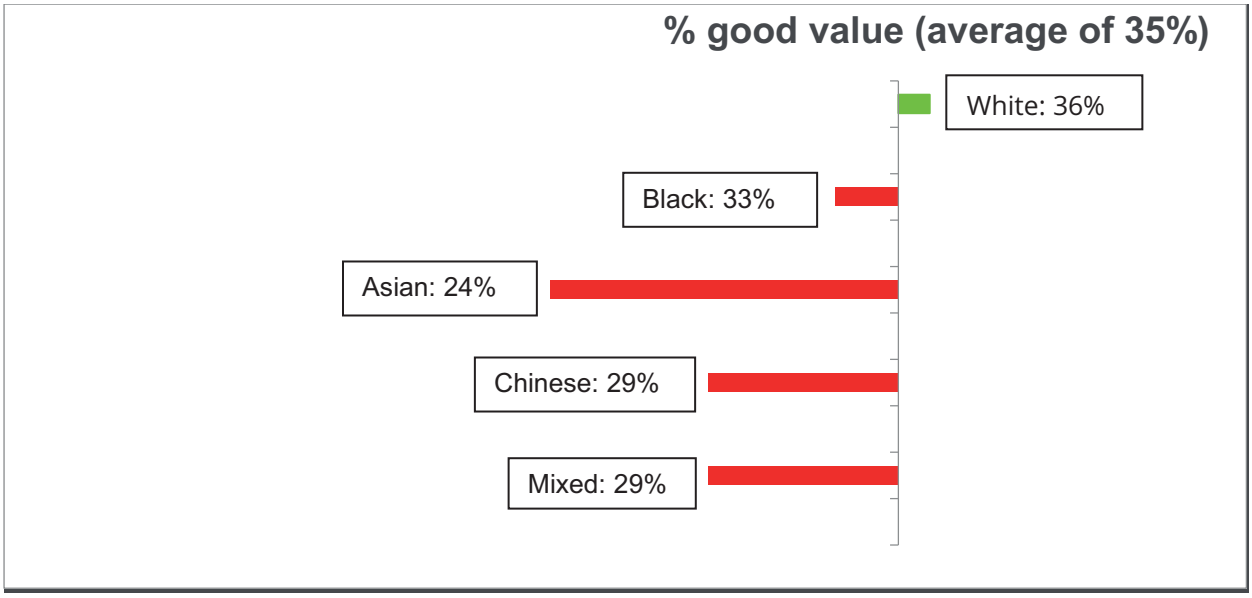
[3] Full methodology and results available on request from www.youthsight.com. All questions measured. Top 10 shown.

[4] Statistical definitions using Pearson's correlation guidelines where 0.51+ is strong, 0.31 to 0.50 is moderate and 0.10 to 0.30 is weak. All correlations are significant at 99%.

One of the new sections this year, which we explore later in the report, is a focus on how contact hours are delivered in different ways. The different methods of learning are proving to be important to students, identified through this analysis as the fourth strongest driver of value for money (a statistically moderate correlation), which provides a counterpoint to the debate around the volume of contact hours. This does not mean that providing variety in itself is always a good thing (indeed, a subject such as Social Studies with a wide variety of methods has a low score on value), but it is important to provide the right combination of methods as appropriate for the subject.

Above teaching quality and methods, the single most important driver of value is the extent to which expectations are met, which underlines the importance of managing and delivering on the wide spectrum of student expectations and providing the right information to match this.

6.3 Profile: Ethnic differences in value



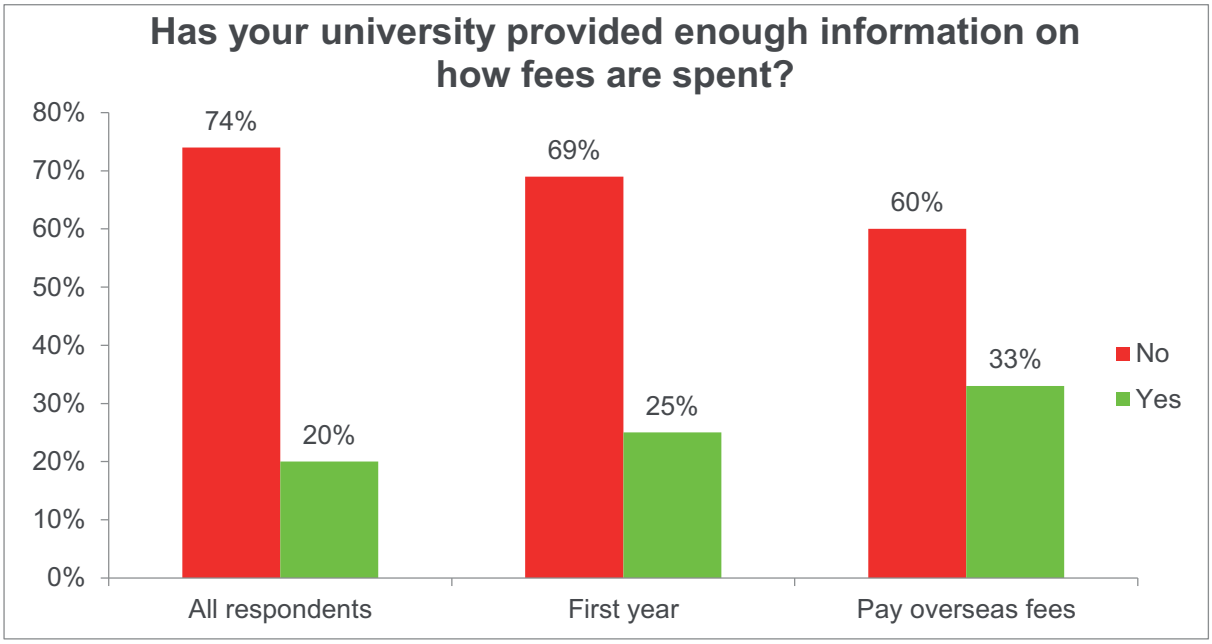
Base: UK-domicile. White (9,577); Black (380); Asian (1,406); Chinese (209); Mixed (564).

Among UK-domiciled students, the differences between white and non-white ethnic groups are significant. In particular, students from Asian (not including Chinese), Chinese and Mixed backgrounds perceive that they have received lower value for money.

At first glance, the reasons behind this are not necessarily apparent, as non-white students are just as likely to have their expectations met (the main overall driver of value). However, upon further analysis, it appears that quality of teaching (also incorporating the support provided and connection with other students), and the amount being learnt are potential issues impacting on value, with students from non-white backgrounds holding a lower opinion on these issues – both of which will be explored in sections to follow.

6.4 Information on how fees are spent

Continuing our focus on the theme of value, the overwhelming majority of students (74%) do not feel they receive enough information on how their fees are spent.



Base: All respondents (14,057); First year (5,125); Overseas (965).

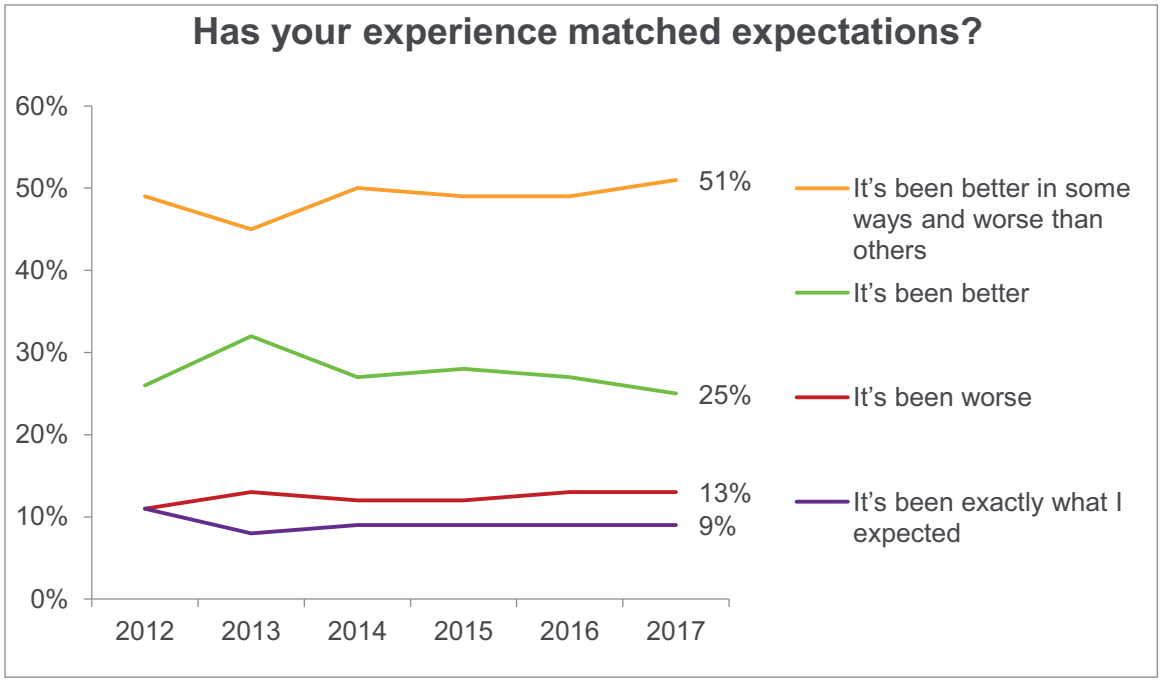
First year students and students who pay overseas fees are more likely than average to feel they have received enough information. It is unclear whether these students have received different information or been the recipient of specific campaigns by their universities to demonstrate value. However, it does show that there is a lot more to do in order to better meet all students' needs for information around spending and value.

7 Meeting expectations

7.1 Experience versus expectations

Meeting expectations is key to helping deliver value. A large proportion of students continue to find some aspects of their experience better than anticipated and some aspects worse (51%), which is logical for such a fundamental change in their lives. Indeed, it could be argued that undergoing a university experience completely in line with expectations may be a slightly disappointing and unnatural outcome. We therefore choose to focus on the extremes: those students whose experience has been clearly better or clearly worse than expected. Results depict a downward trend, albeit less pronounced than with the value for money data. A quarter of students (25%) feel their experience has been better than expected, representing a decline from 27% in 2016. Added to this, 13% think their experience has been worse than expected, which is the same as 2016, but less positive than both 2014 and 2015.

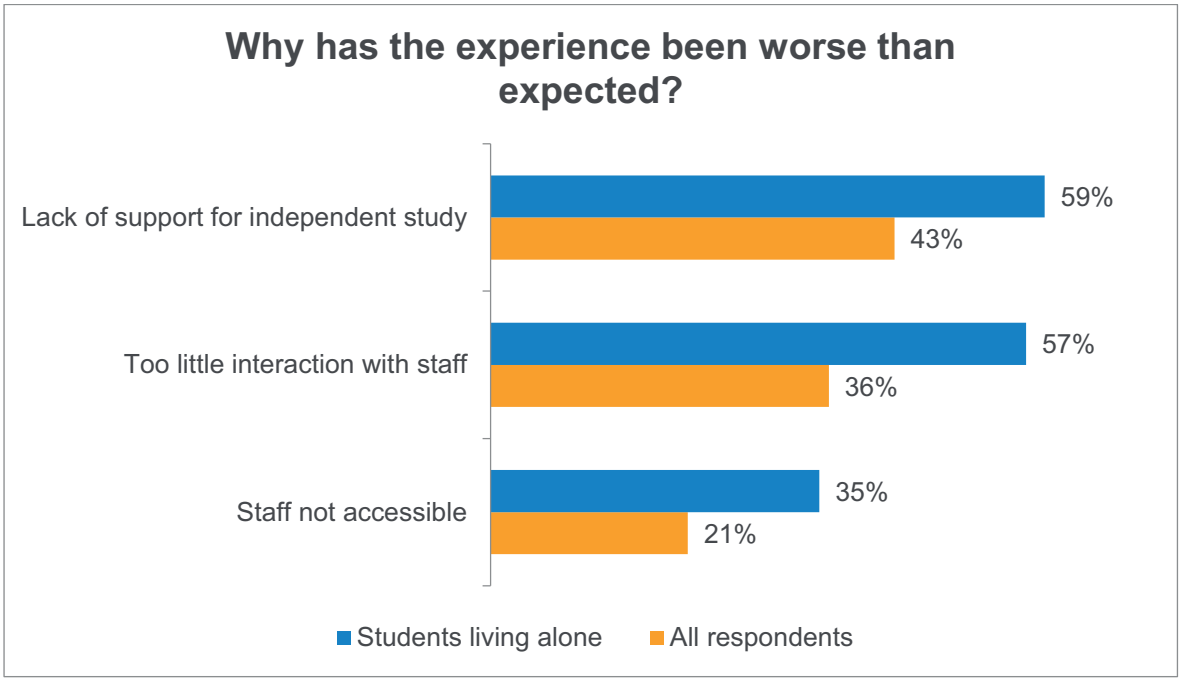
More encouragingly, first year students (29%) are significantly more likely than average to find their experience better than expected. If this continues as they progress through university, then overall scores on this measure should change for the better, although this is not guaranteed as students may become more critical as they gain more experience of study.



Base: All respondents. 2012 (9,058); 2013 (17,090); 2014 (15,046); 2015 (15,129); 2016 (15,221); 2017 (14,057).

There are a range of reasons why expectations are not met, with students often critical of the effort they put in themselves. Students of black ethnicity are more likely to be self-critical in this way, although as a group they are just as likely to feel their expectations are being met.

Students living on their own are much more likely than average to say their experience has been worse than they expected (18% compared to 13%).



Base: All respondents whose experience has been worse than expected (1,769); Students living alone whose experience has been worse than expected (72). Chart displays the items that show the greatest difference between all students and students living alone.

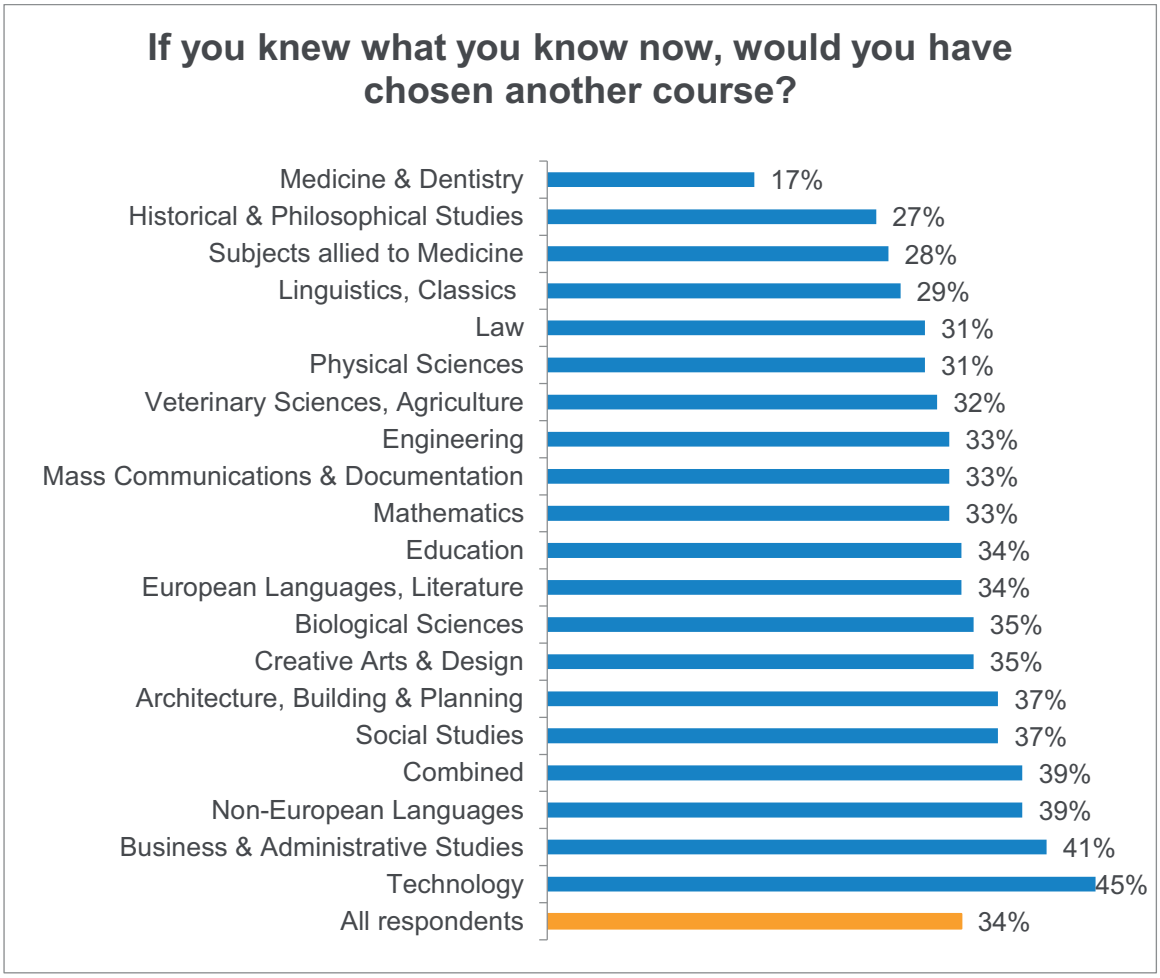
Some of the reasons given for this, shown in the chart above, reflect a sense of isolation and disconnection, particularly in terms of access to university staff. Students living on their own are not so concerned about interaction with other students, but they clearly value connections with staff. Although these students represent a small cohort, there is evidence here that institutions can help improve their experience by creating staff–student networks and working to ensure students living on their own have sufficient access to these.

A lack of support and connection is also particularly likely to be cited by students of non-white ethnicity as reasons for their expectations not being met. Many Chinese students are concerned about a lack of support for independent study, many Asian students (not including Chinese) feel lecturers are inaccessible, while across all non-white categories there is an issue with a lack of contact with other students. As we will see in detail later on, teaching-quality ratings are lower across the board among non-white students, and these findings tell us that there may be a wider issue at play in terms of a lack of connection between staff and students, which could be impacting on ratings of teaching itself.

7.2 Retention

Overall, one in three students say that they would have chosen another course if they could choose again (11% definitely/22% maybe), a number that has remained remarkably steady over time. Clearly, a very high proportion wishing they had made another choice would be seen as a concern, but it could also be argued that evolving preferences are a natural experience and that we would always expect to see a proportion of students who would change their preferences if they had their time again.

What is perhaps more illuminating than the absolute figures is how this differs by course, with the table below pinpointing some major differences.



Base: All respondents (14,057), by JACS subject areas. Chart displays % saying they definitely or maybe would have chosen another course.

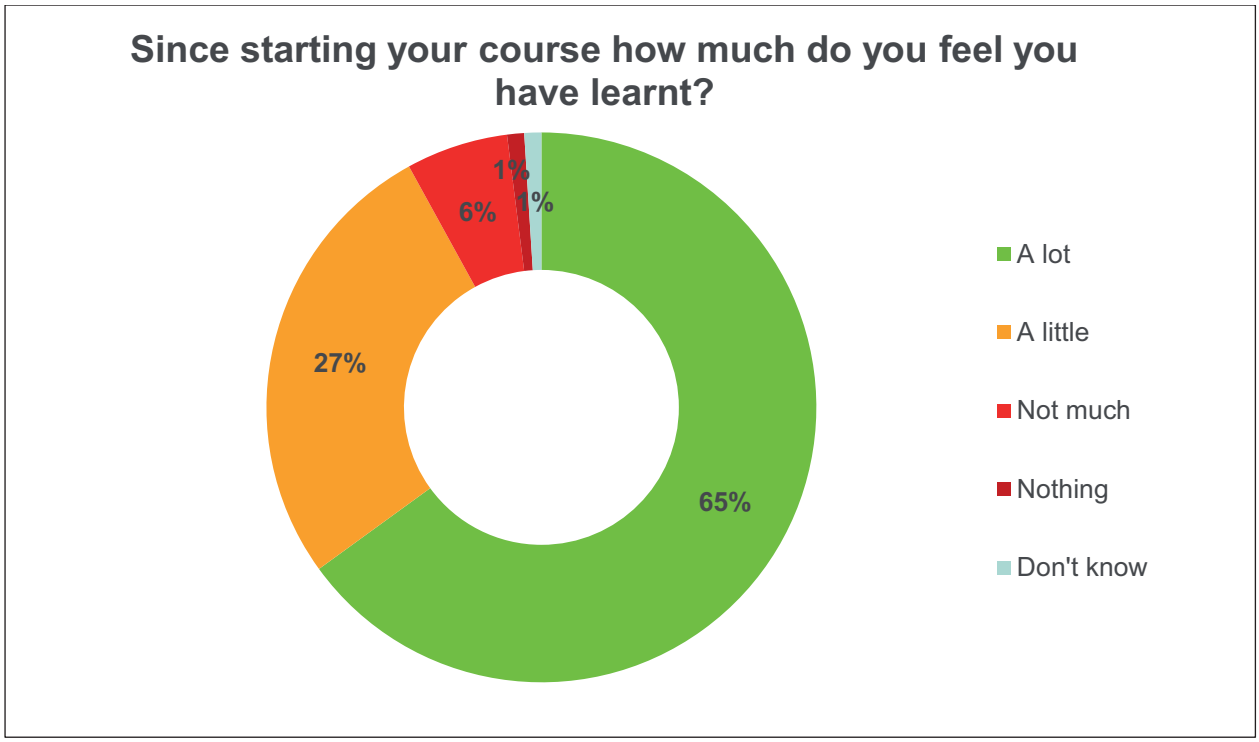
As might be expected from the correlation analysis which identified a strong link between value and retention, the ranking of subjects in terms of retention broadly matches the ranking of subjects on value (see previous section). Medicine and Dentistry students demonstrate the best value perceptions and the lowest propensity to choose another course. At the other end of the scale, a higher proportion of students in Technology, Business Studies and Social Studies question their choice, and value received.

In addition to differences by course, there is also a difference by type of accommodation, with 15% of students who live in the family home saying they definitely would have chosen another course, compared to 11% overall. This consolidates findings from the 2016 report, which identified how students living at home may not be benefitting fully from their student experience, an aspect explored further in the next section of this report.

8 How much do students learn?

8.1 Students' own assessment of how much they learn

In a new question for 2017, and in the context of the current focus on measuring learning gain, we asked students to assess how much they feel they have learnt during their course. As shown in the chart below, the results are positive.



Base: All respondents (14,057).

Two-thirds of students feel that they have learnt a lot, with just 7% feeling they had learnt not much, or nothing. On the face of it, this may appear an obvious or expected finding, but in the context of debates on learning gain, it provides real evidence of the value of the university experience. In an influential US study on learning gain, Arum and Roksa found 45% of undergraduate students showed no measurable improvement in selected skills during their first two years of college.[5] Although based on students' own assessments rather than demonstrated gains, the results here portray a more encouraging picture.

[5] Akram, R. and Roksa, J. (2011) *Academically Adrift. Limited Learning on College Campuses.* Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

8.2 Analysis: What contributes to learning the most?

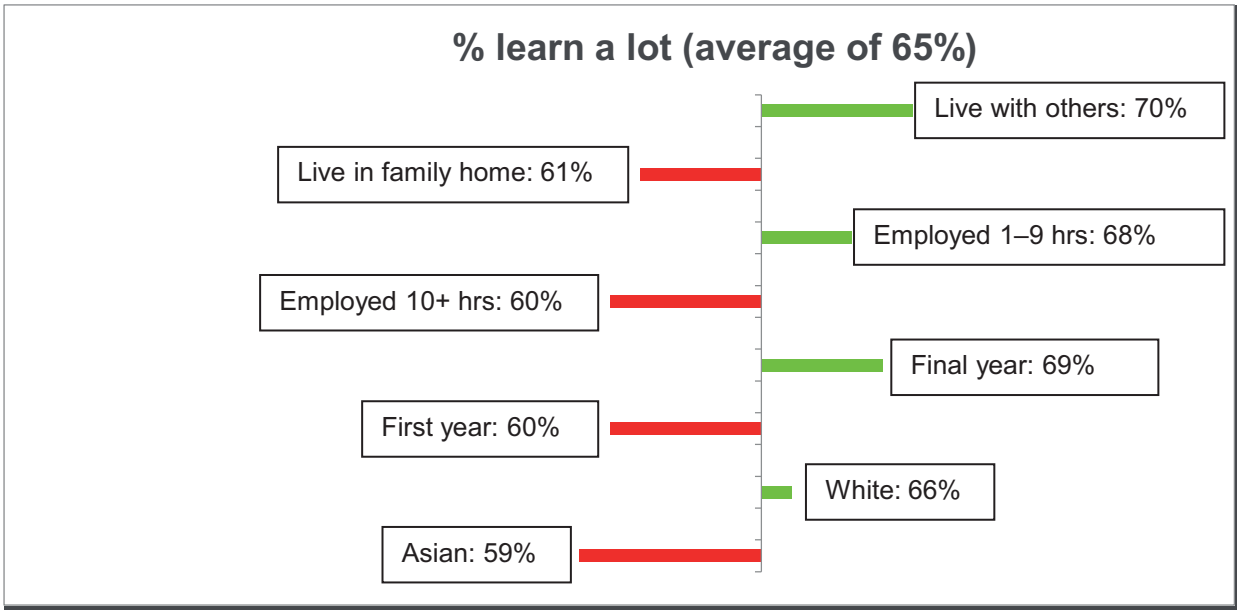
As with value for money, correlation analysis has been conducted to identify the elements of the experience that link most closely to learning. Although the strength of the correlations is not especially high, given that all questions in the Survey have been measured, the relative ranking and identification of the top 10 is still revealing.

Measure	Pearson correlation value	Strength of correlation with learning[6]
Experience has matched expectations	0.36	Moderate
If you knew what you do now, would you have chosen a different course? (negative correlation)	-0.35	Moderate
Teaching staff were helpful and supportive	0.33	Moderate
Teaching staff maintain and improve their subject knowledge on a regular basis	0.33	Moderate
Teaching staff motivated you to do your best work	0.31	Moderate
Teaching staff made their subjects interesting	0.31	Moderate
I have benefitted from independent study	0.31	Moderate
Staff were poor at explaining things (negative correlation)	-0.30	Weak
Satisfied with the variety of timetabled sessions	0.30	Weak
Staff gave you useful feedback	0.28	Weak

The ranking of main items is very similar to the ranking for value for money, featuring several teaching measures, hence implying a clear link between learning a lot, perceived value of the experience, and teaching quality.

[6] Statistical definitions using Pearson's correlation guidelines where 0.51+ is strong, 0.31 to 0.50 is moderate and 0.10 to 0.30 is weak. All correlations are significant at 99%.

8.3 Who learns the most/least?



Analysis of the type of students who report learning the most reveals some potentially significant contrasts, by type of accommodation, year of learning, employment status and ethnicity.

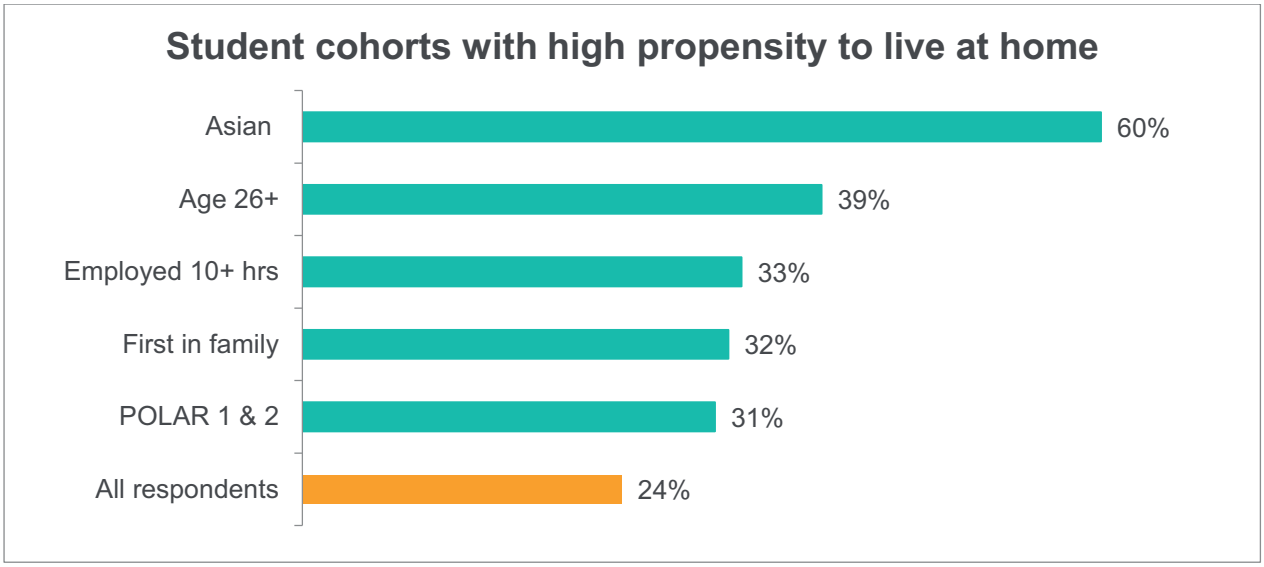
In 2016, we found that students who live in the family home potentially experience some disadvantages in terms of isolation, and this analysis suggests that this could be following through into learning outcomes. Employment status is also a key differentiator, with students who spend a lot of their time in paid employment less likely to report a gain in their learning outcomes, compared to those who have fewer employment commitments. This finding is logical in that large amounts of time spent in employment may put pressure on time available for learning or, crucially, other extra-curricular activities. This matches analysis conducted in the HEA's 2016 UK Engagement Survey (UKES), which highlighted how paid employment does not link as strongly to skills gain as other non-learning activities such as volunteering or caring.[7] The difference between first and final years is also encouraging, in that students appear to be learning more as they progress through their course.

[7] Neves, J (2016). Student engagement and skills development. York: Higher Education Academy.

Another key difference is by ethnicity. Asian students (not including Chinese) are highlighted here in the chart, but Chinese students (60%) also report lower levels of learning. As will be shown later in the report, a potential reason for this is related to lower perceptions of teaching quality, which highlights the need for further investigation as to how teaching may be perceived differently among students of different ethnic backgrounds.

8.4 Profile: Students who live at home

As identified above, students who live at home are a lot less likely than average to report strong gains in learning, which is concerning. These students are also more likely to wish they had chosen another course (and/or institution). These findings consolidate issues highlighted by previous editions of this Survey around isolation and access to learning support. With this in mind, we have highlighted some more information about the profile of this cohort.



Base: All respondents (14,057). Chart displays % of each cohort who live at home.[8]

The results highlight both economic and cultural factors at play in a student's decision to live at home. Students from less affluent backgrounds (POLAR – participation of local areas – 1 and 2), as well as those from the Asian community, have a high propensity to be living in the family home.[9]

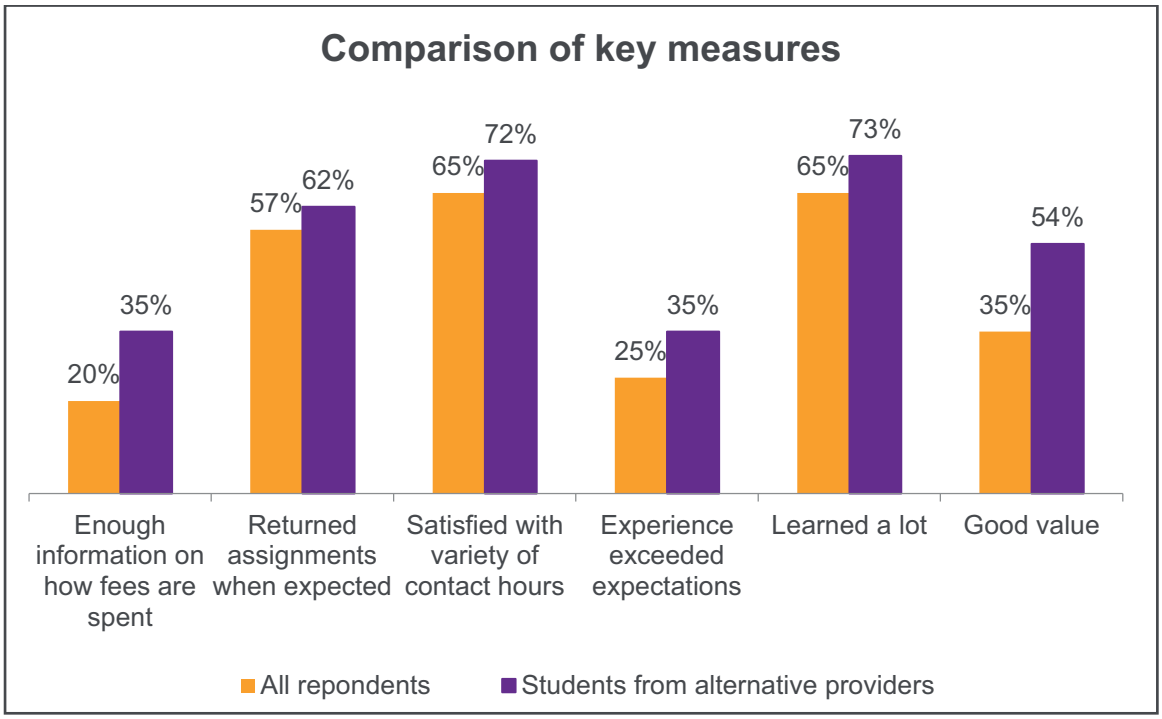
[8] 'First in family' defined as students who classify themselves as the first person in their immediate family to attend university.

[9] Participation of local areas classification groups. Codes 1 and 2 are the areas with lowest participation in Higher Education www.hefce.ac.uk/analysis/yp/POLAR.

These findings therefore suggest a clear overlap between some of the groups who report lower levels of learning gain (see the previous section) and those who live at home, namely Asian students and employed students. Exactly how and why living at home may be connected to lower levels of learning is an issue that warrants further investigation. However, if universities wish to address the issue of learning gain and improve the overall experience, they need to take into account a complex and potentially interconnected range of cultural and economic issues.

9 Focus on alternative providers

Analysis across the key measures of the Survey reveals that there is a positive story to be found among students at alternative providers. While it should be noted that our sample size of 66 responses, scaled up to 78 in the weighted data, is not intended to be a full representation of such a heterogeneous range of providers, it does provide us with the opportunity to draw attention to this part of the sector and to make some tentative comparisons with the sector overall.



Base: All respondents (14,057); alternative providers (78).[10]

As the chart above highlights, there is consistently strong performance across the board, with evidence of a positive student experience in terms of value, learning gain, variety and information.

This is complemented by strong scores on several aspects of teaching quality, as shown in the chart below, even though workload and contact hours are lower than average, providing a clear example of how institutions can deliver value in different ways beyond a focus on the number of taught hours.

[10] A list of alternative providers in the Survey is available on request.

Teaching quality and workload		
Sample	All respondents	Students at alternative providers
Base size (all respondents excluding N/A)	(14,057)	(78)
All teaching staff encouraged you to take responsibility for your own learning	34%	43%
All teaching staff clearly explained course goals and requirements	21%	26%
All teaching staff motivated you to do your best work	15%	26%
All teaching staff helped you to explore your own areas of interest	10%	12%
Total contact hours attended	12.14 hours	11.92 hours
Total workload	30.42 hours	28.35 hours

As the market evolves, we will endeavour to ensure that alternative providers continue to be represented fully in our Survey, and believe that these results can help prompt further investigation as to how and why the experience at these providers may be seen as more positive.

10 Workload and class size

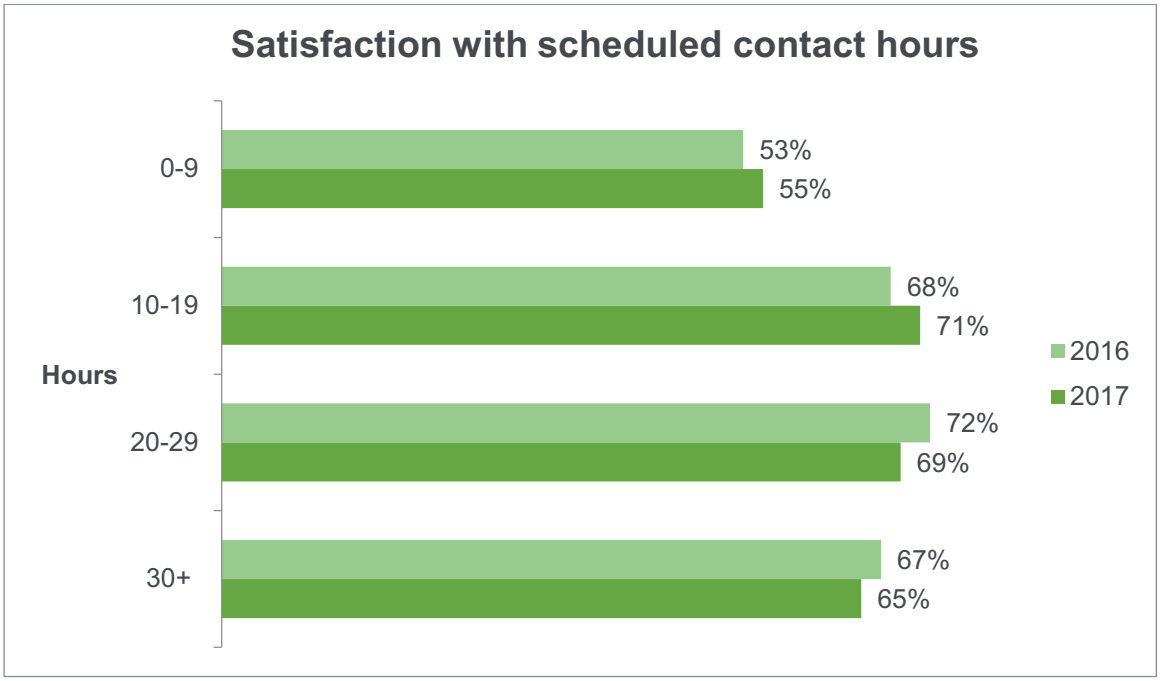
10.1 Workload

Total workload hours in an average week[11]					
Year	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Base size	(17,090)	(15,046)	(15,129)	(15,221)	(14,057)
Timetabled (contact) hours	13.19	13.12	13.41	13.6	13.73
Timetabled (contact) hours attended	12.15	11.89	12.15	12.12	12.14
Independent study hours	-	-	15.20	14.75	13.71
Hours working outside the university	-	5.40	5.21	5.54	4.56
Total workload	-	-	32.55	32.41	30.42

Total workload appears to be declining over time. This is not due to timetabled contact hours being reduced (although the proportion attended continues to fall slightly), but is instead related to independent study, which is reducing quite markedly, and external study, which has clearly fallen this time around.

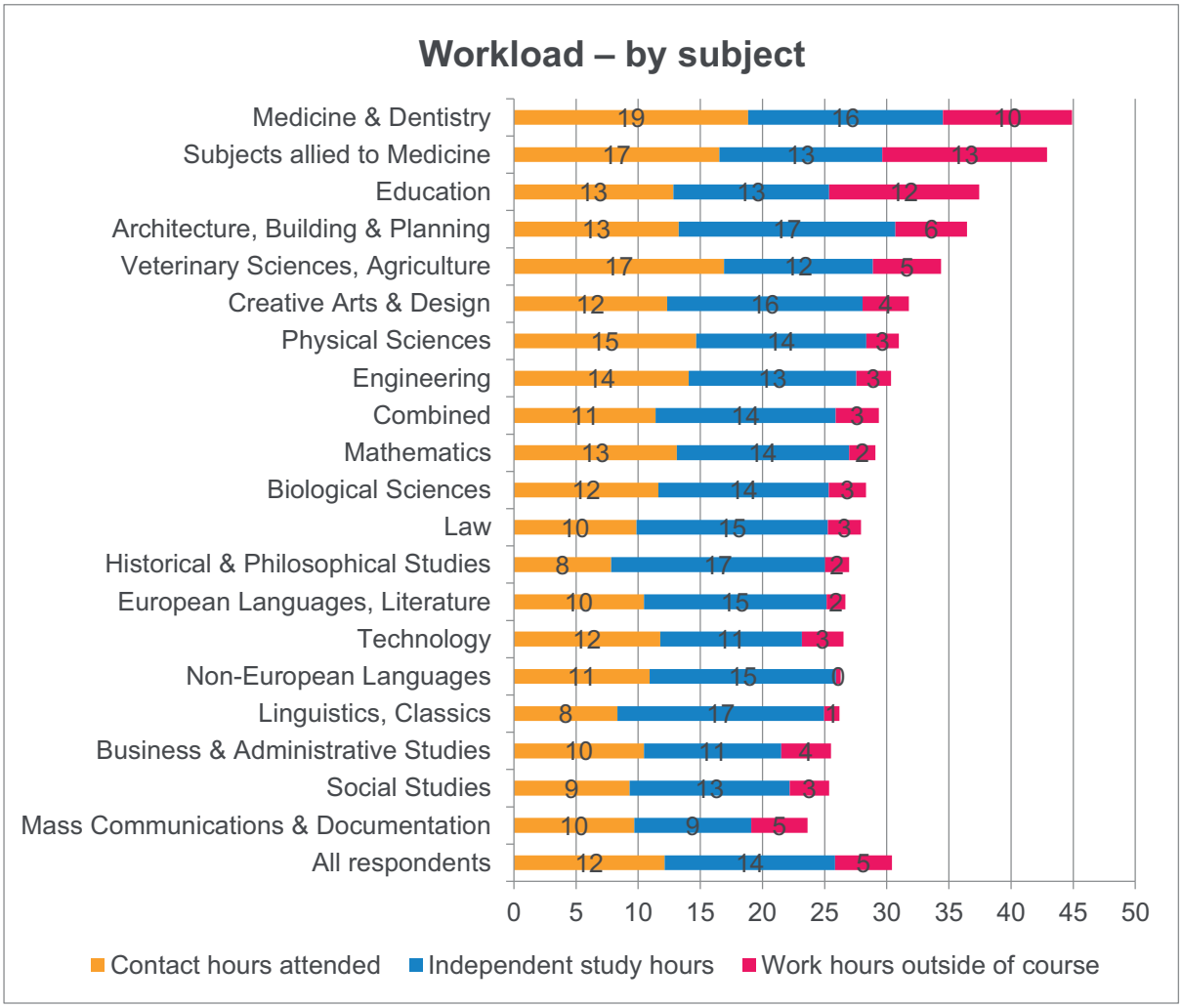
[11] Mean including 0 used (ie no exclusions).

Although students clearly value contact hours, there is evidence that expectations might be beginning to evolve. The chart below shows the percentage of students with different levels of contact hours who are satisfied with the hours they have. What is significant is that this appears to peak at a (broad) level between 10 and 19 hours, whereas in 2016 the peak level of satisfaction was between 20 and 29 hours. Combined with the continued, slight decline in the proportion of hours attended, this implies that students may be thinking about the relative importance of workload and contact hours in a different way.



Base: 0–9 hours (4,395 in 2016/4,054 in 2017); 10–19 hours (8,006/7,380); 20–29 hours (2,097/1,939); 30+ hours (723/685).

Workload and contact hours vary significantly by subject area. Overall workload is again highest in Medicine and lowest in Communications, while Veterinary Sciences have a high number of contact hours, and Historical and Philosophical Studies the lowest.



Base: All respondents (14,057), by JACS subject areas.

The ranking here shows a similar pattern to the ranking on value for money, with Health subjects having the highest contact hours, and workload, as well as the highest perception of value for money, contrasting with Languages, Social Studies, and Business and Administrative Studies towards the opposite end of the scale. An exception to this is Mass Communications, which has the lowest overall reported workload, but achieves average value for money, suggesting that for this particular subject workload levels are not a key factor when assessing overall value.

Hours in an average week[12] – Institution type				
Mission Group	Russell Group	Pre-92 excluding Russell Group	Post-92	Specialist
Base size	(4,219)	(3,327)	(7,094)	(581)
Timetabled (contact) hours attended	12.93	11.69	11.83	13.5
Independent study hours	16.06	13.55	12.36	15.57
Hours working outside the university	3.28	3.51	5.77	5.03
Total workload	32.26	28.75	29.97	34.1

As well as subject differences, there are also some institutional differences, with evidence of higher workload hours at specialist and Russell Group institutions, particularly in terms of independent study.

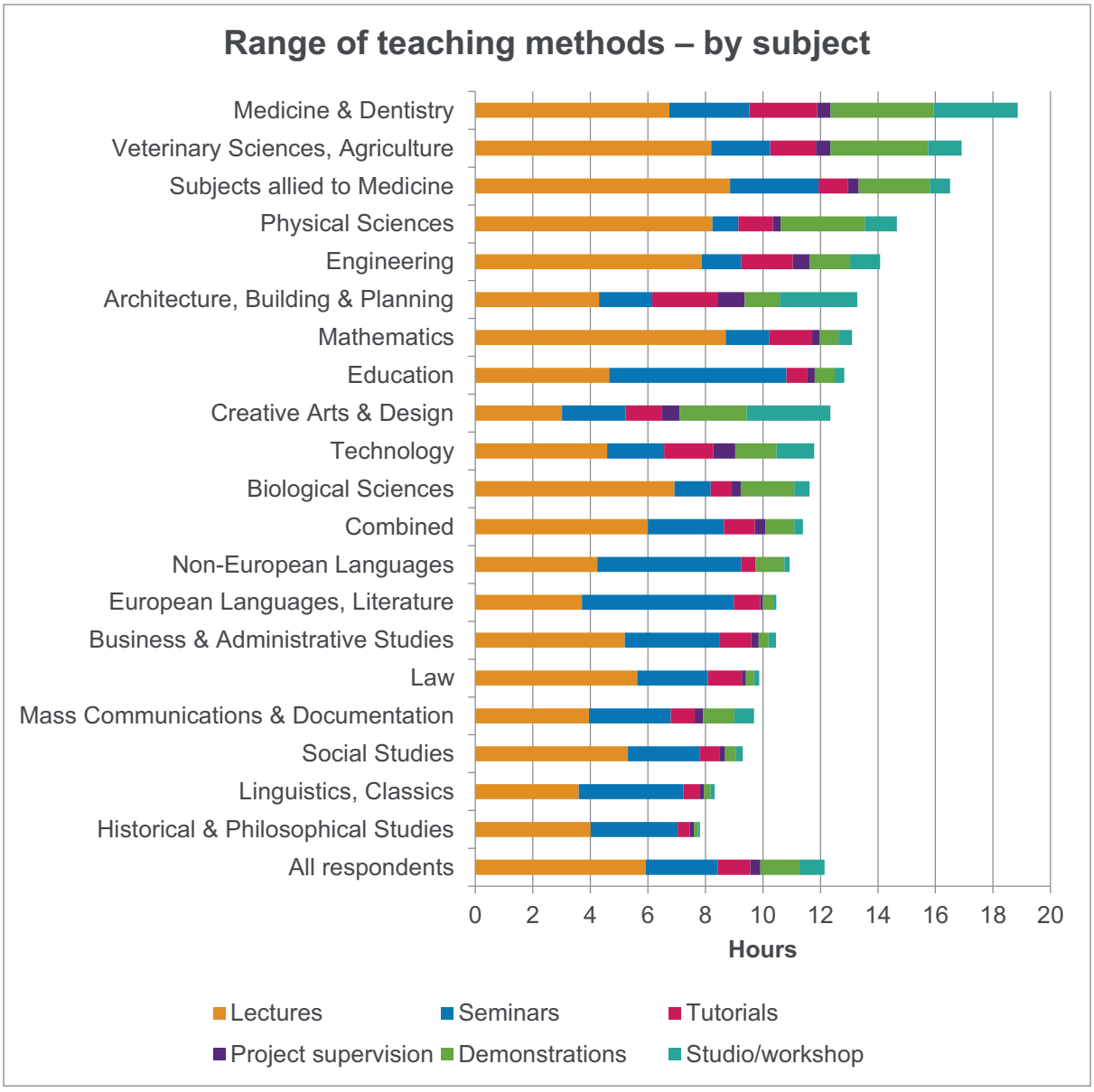
10.2 Different contact methods

This year the Survey looks in greater detail at how contact hours (attended) are spent. Specifically, students are asked to break down their total hours by six main categories – lectures, seminars, tutorials, project supervision, demonstrations and supervised lab/workshop time.[13]

[12] Mean including 0 used (ie no exclusions).

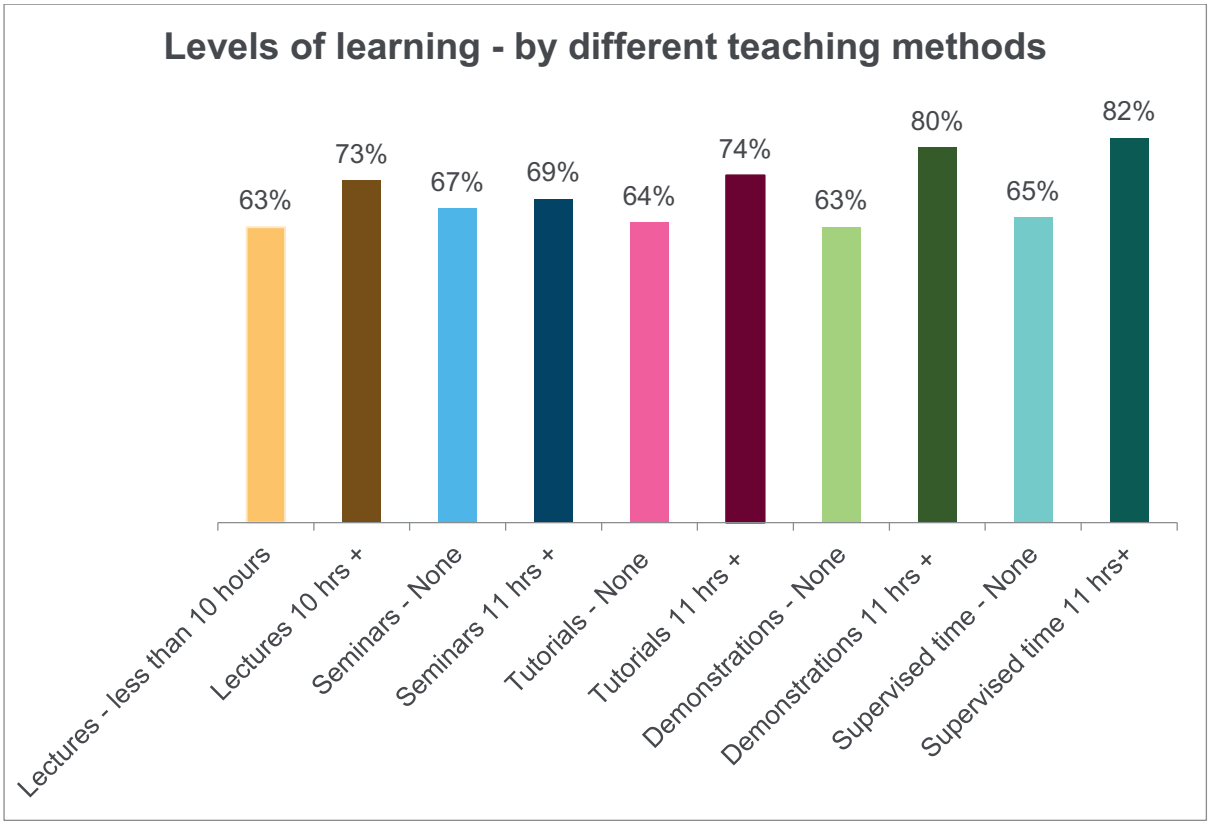
[13] Categories based on those used in the Key Information Set (KIS). www.hesa.ac.uk/collection/c16061/calculations_methods - assessment

As the chart below demonstrates, lectures and seminars represent the main activity but there is significant variation by subject. Demonstrations and supervised labs/workshops are frequent in Medicine and Technology, seminars are common in Language courses and lectures predominate for Mathematics. Creative Arts & Design stands out as having a wide range of different methods used.



Base: All respondents (14,057), by JACS subject areas.

Different methods of contact hours could be expected to impact differently on students, but ideally we would hope to see evidence of benefit across all methods of delivery. One of the key ways of evidencing benefit is the amount that students learn. The chart below illustrates clearly, for each method of delivery, how students who were exposed in high volumes of hours, reported higher levels of learning compared to those students who were not exposed at all – an encouraging finding.

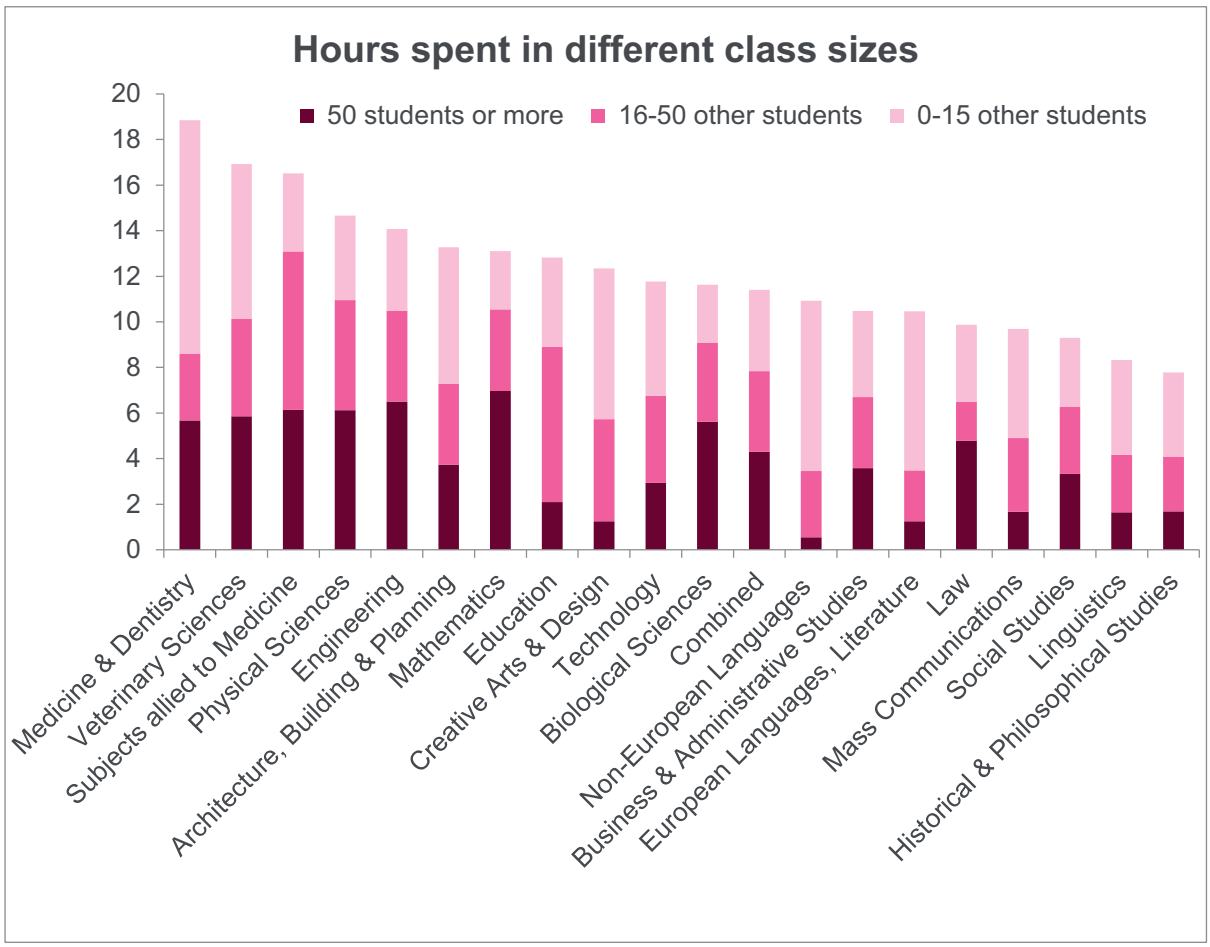


Base: All respondents in each category. Chart displays % who say they learnt a lot.

By identifying clear gains across a range of different delivery methods, the results suggest that beyond an absolute measure of contact hours, using the right teaching methods, in the right volume, is critical to ensuring students get the most out of their experience.

10.3 Class size

The data below imply a trade-off between high volumes of contact hours and small class sizes, with subjects typically being delivered through one or the other, and rarely both. Arts and Languages students tend to experience smaller classes, but fewer timetabled hours overall, while the reverse is true for many Science subjects.



Base: All respondents (14,057), by JACS subject areas. Chart displays number of hours spent.

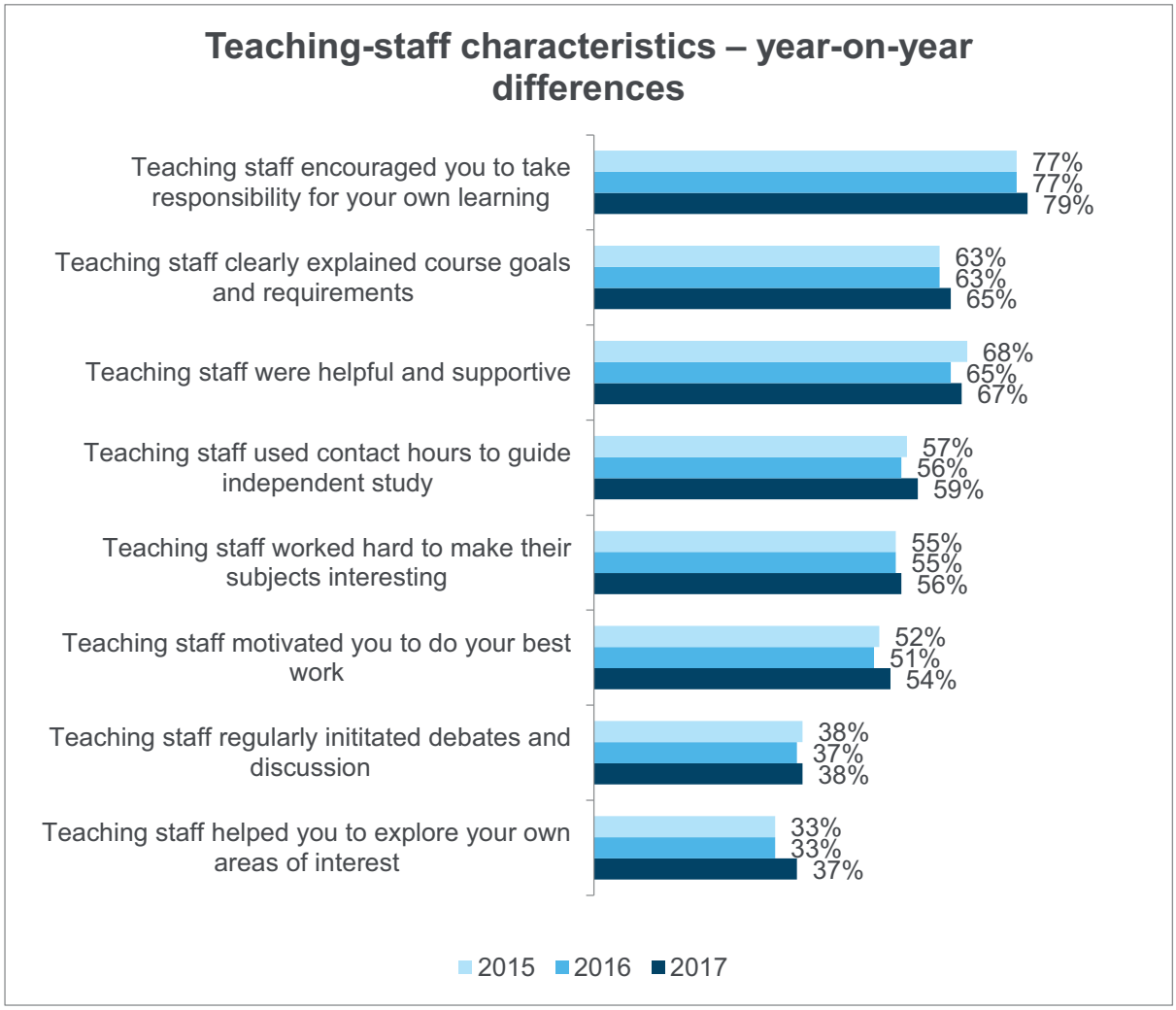
One exception to this is Medicine & Dentistry, which benefits from the highest average volume of contact hours, and also the highest volume (rather than percentage) of hours spent in small classes, which is likely to contribute to the strong value for money perceptions among its students.

At the other end of the scale, Social Studies is notable for a relatively low volume of timetabled hours, combined with fairly large class sizes. Perhaps unsurprisingly, value for money scores among Social Studies students are the lowest overall.

11 Quality of teaching and learning

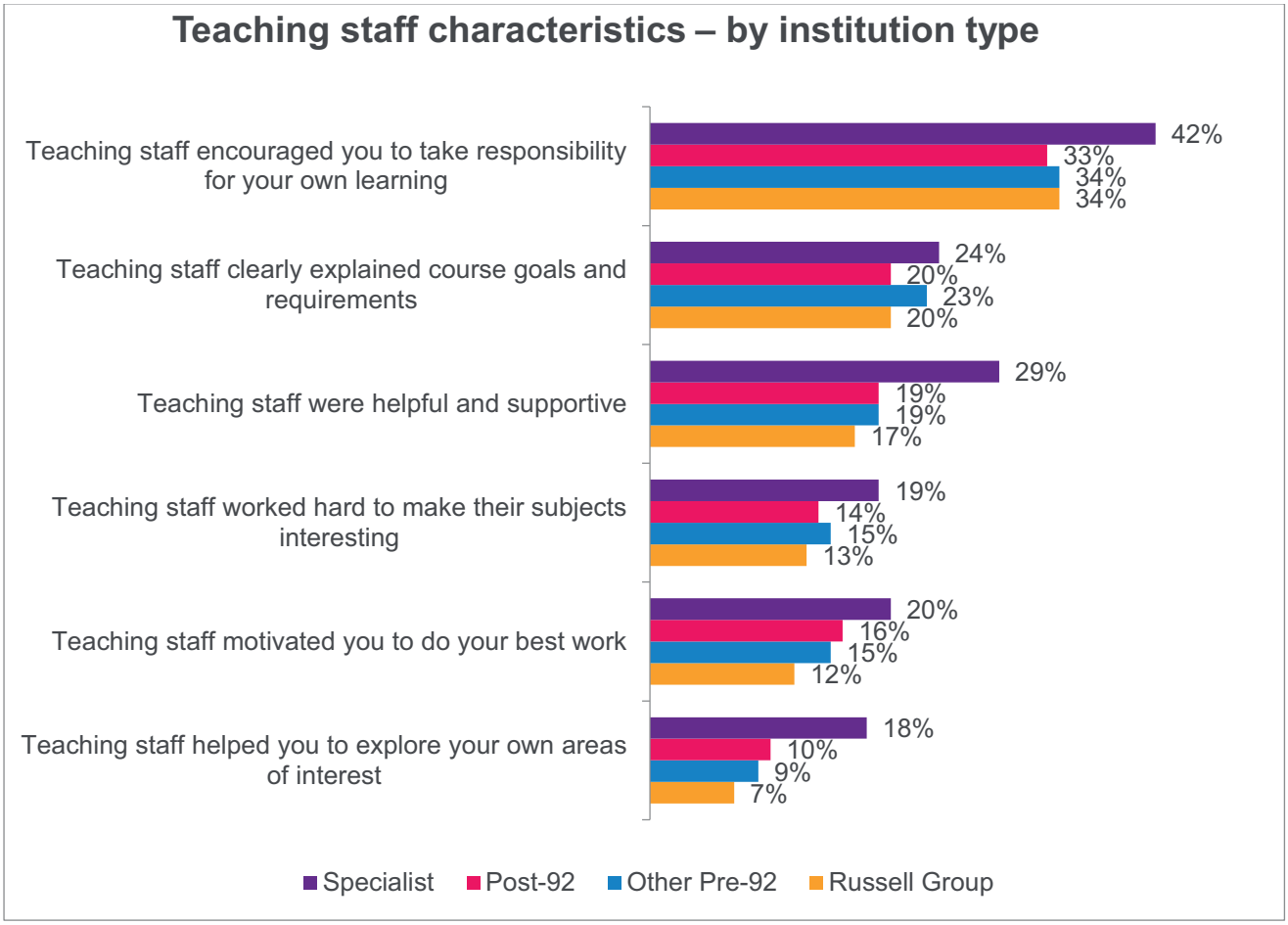
11.1 Perceptions of the quality of teaching staff

As identified earlier through the correlation analysis, teaching quality is central to the student experience. Although some of the other key measures in our Survey such as value and exceeding expectations have declined, it is encouraging that perceptions of teaching quality are improving. Although these differences are relatively small in percentage terms, all the 2017 results represent a statistically significant increase from 2016, and in most cases are also higher than 2015, representing evidence of a greater focus on teaching across the sector. This does not yet represent a trend, as scores in 2016 were often lower than in 2015, but the general improvement in 2017 could hold the key to addressing the declining opinions of value.



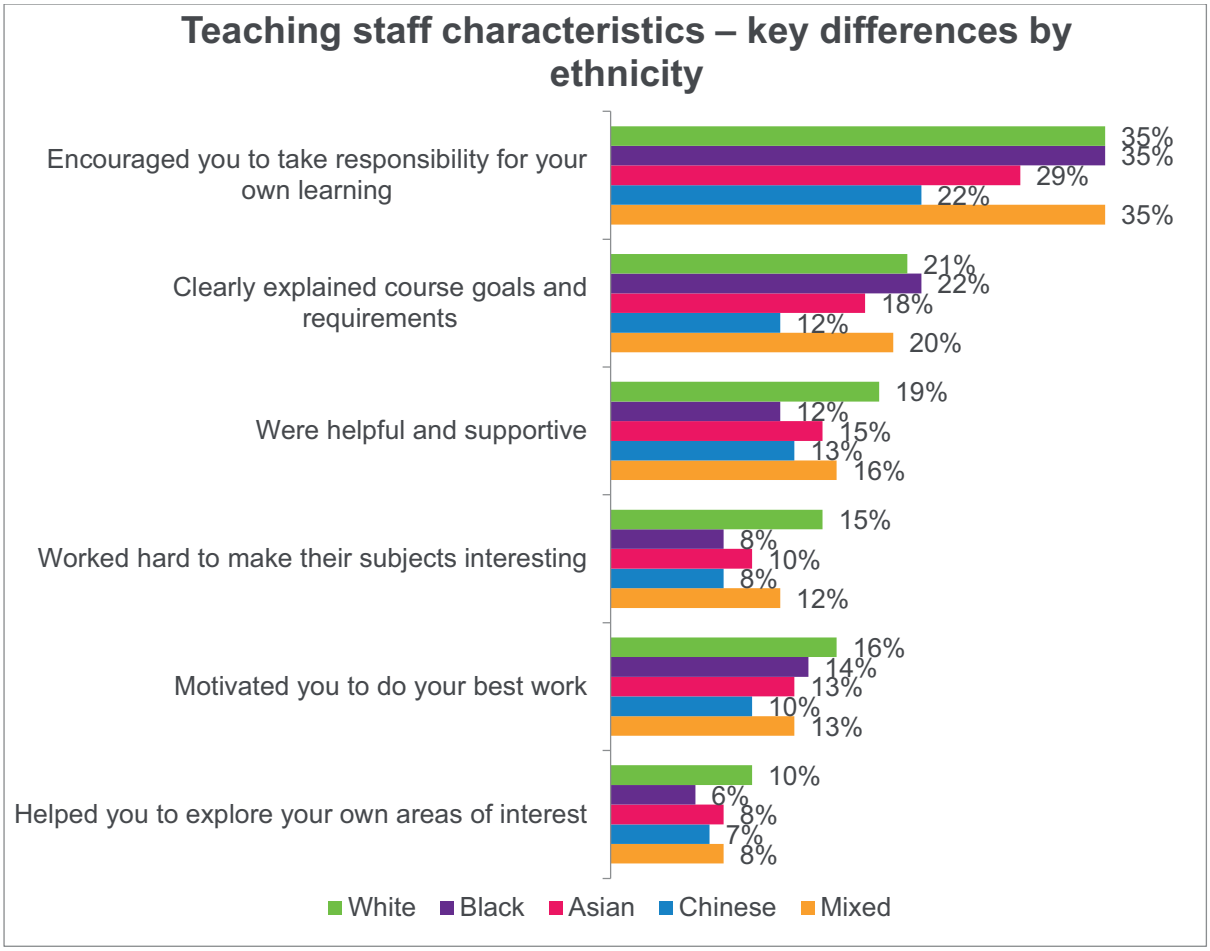
Base: All respondents excluding N/A. 2017 (13,854); 2016 (14,989); 2015 (14,947). Chart displays % who say all or most of their teaching staff demonstrate the above characteristics.

Comparing institutions on aspects of teaching quality highlights a number of key differences. Specialist institutions perform relatively well, particularly in terms of help and support, whereas Russell Group institutions tend not to score as well, despite strong scores on overall value for money.



Base: All respondents excluding N/A. Specialist (289); Post-92 (6,630); Pre-92 (3,006); Russell Group (3,851). Chart displays % who say all their teaching staff demonstrate the above characteristics.

Another key area where perceptions of teaching quality differ is in terms of ethnicity. As highlighted below, aspects of staff and teaching are rated consistently lower among UK-domiciled students of Asian (not including Chinese) and Chinese ethnicity, who are also the cohorts with the lowest scores for learning gain and value for money.



Base: All respondents excluding N/A. White (9,443); Black (374); Asian (1,379); Chinese (209); Mixed (554). Chart displays % who say all their teaching staff demonstrate the above characteristics.

Given that the different ethnic groups are each distributed across a broad range of different types of institutions and course, there is little immediate explanation for these differences in perceptions of teaching, hence there is a need for deeper investigation as to what might lie behind this.

The issue of access to staff may potentially be impacting on overall perceptions of quality. As shown below, non-white students are much less likely to feel they have sufficient access to academic staff, an issue which we saw earlier can impact on expectations not being met.

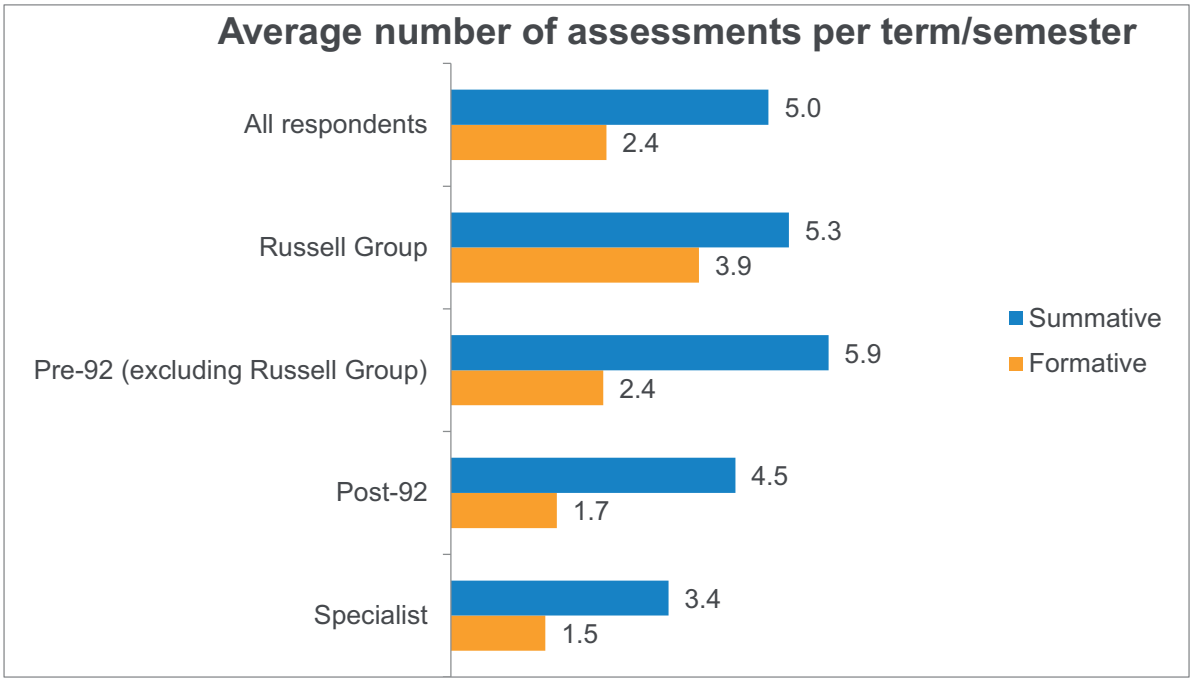
I have sufficient access to academic staff outside class					
Ethnic group	White	Black	Asian	Chinese	Mixed
Base size	(9,577)	(380)	(1,406)	(209)	(564)
% agree strongly	21%	18%	14%	11%	17%

Base: All who gave an answer excluding N/A.

These different perceptions of teaching quality and access among particular ethnic groups should therefore be a key priority for further investigation across the sector, to pinpoint whether this is related to expectations, or if actual experiences are in some cases different, and what might be contributing to this. Either way, improving perceptions around teaching quality is likely to follow through into an improved and more consistent overall experience across different groups of students.

11.2 Volume of assignments

In last year's report, we highlighted the importance of achieving a good balance of formative assignments which are designed to aid improvement, and summative assignments, which contribute to grades. Russell Group institutions again succeed in delivering a good balance between types of assignment, whereas Post-92 institutions in particular tend to focus on more summative tasks.



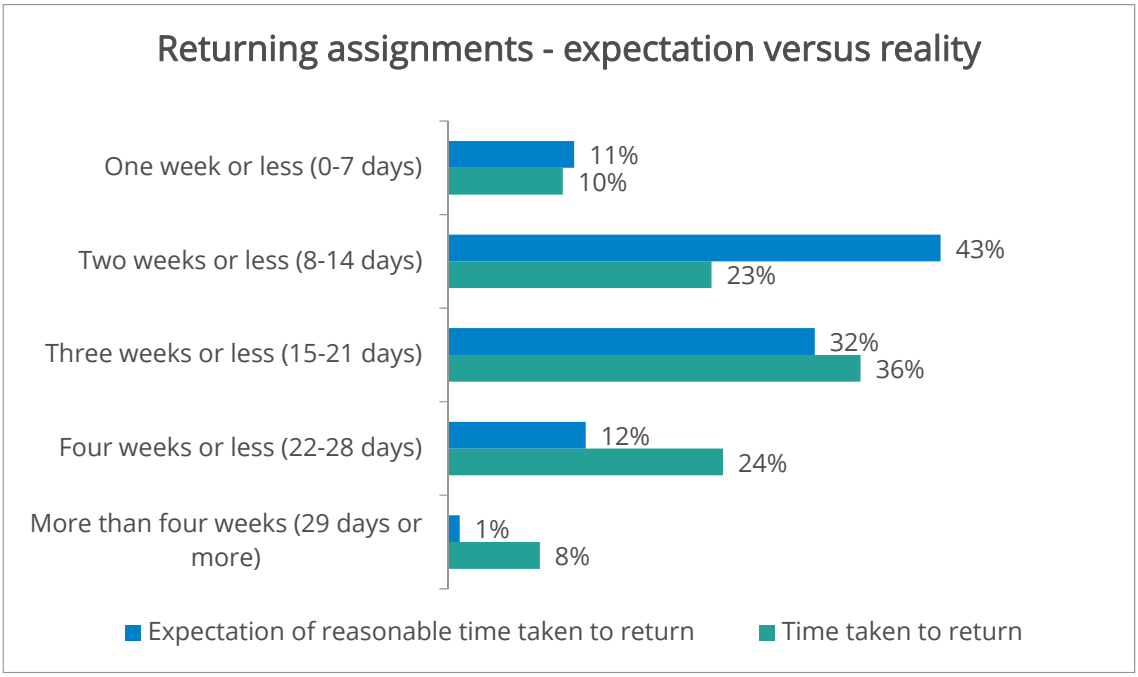
Base: All respondents (14,057); Russell Group (3,899); Pre-92 (3,054); Post-92 (6,730); Specialist (296). Mean average calculated from all responses including respondents citing zero assignments.

At an overall level, the number of assignments has not changed, with an average of 5.0 summative and 2.4 formative assignments in 2017, compared to 5.0 and 2.5 in 2016.

11.3 Timeliness of feedback

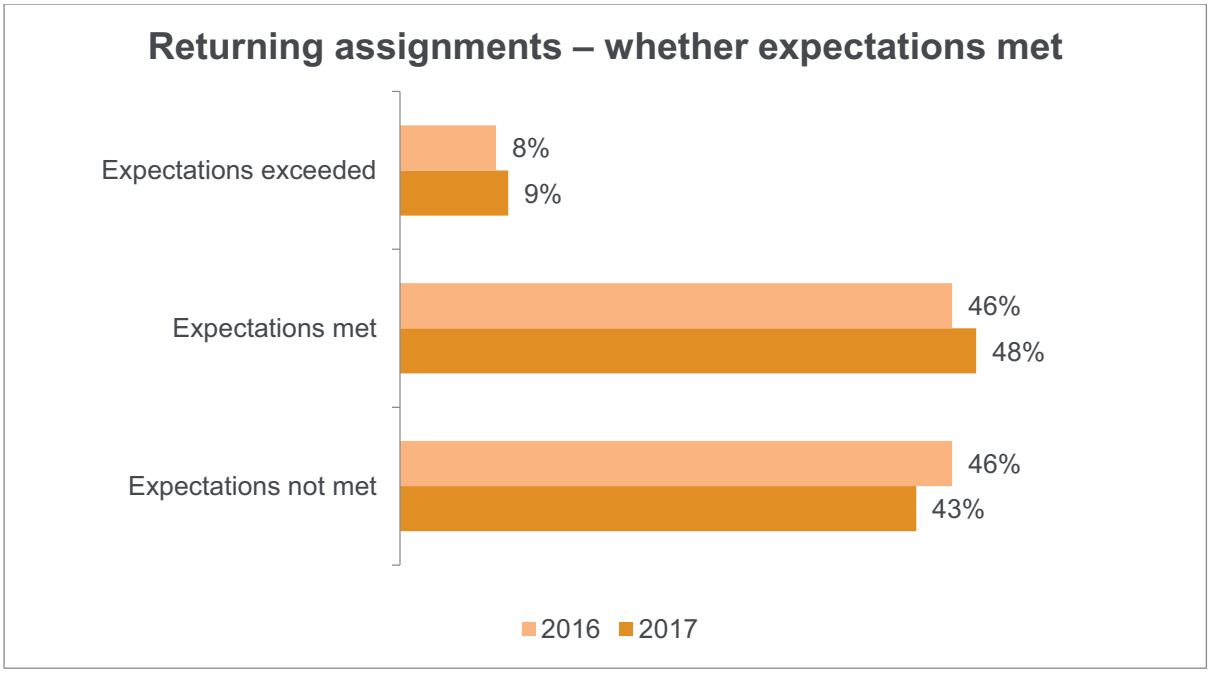
Students are asked in the Survey about the time it took for their assignments to be marked and handed back and, crucially, how long they feel would be reasonable – to facilitate analysis of whether expectations are being met.

On average, assignments are returned within three weeks, while around two weeks would often be seen as reasonable, highlighting a gap in perceptions.



Base: All respondents (14,057).

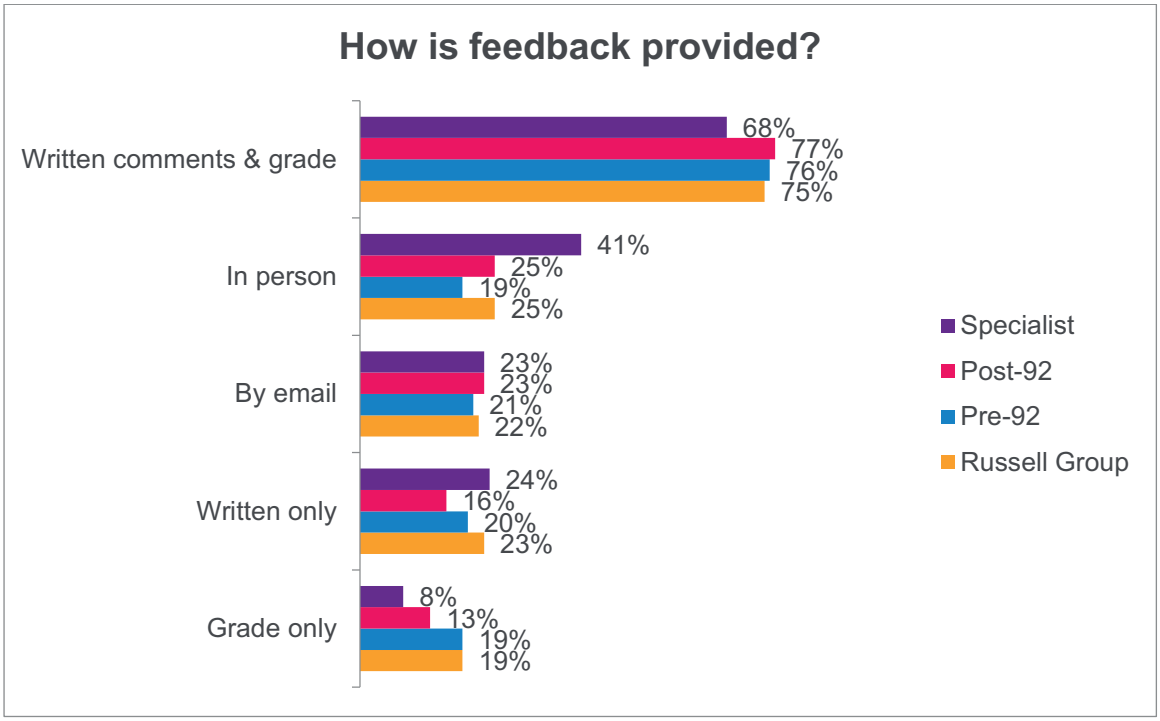
However, when we compare expectations on an individual basis against the reality experienced (aggregated across the total sample), we see that expectations are met or exceeded more often than not, and in fact this has moved in a positive direction compared to last year, with 57% meeting or exceeding expectations compared to 54% in 2016.



Base: All respondents. 2016 (15,221); 2017 (14,057).

In particular, in line with their performance across other aspects of the Survey, specialist institutions (67% met/exceeded) perform well on this measure, as does Mathematics as a subject (78% met/exceeded).

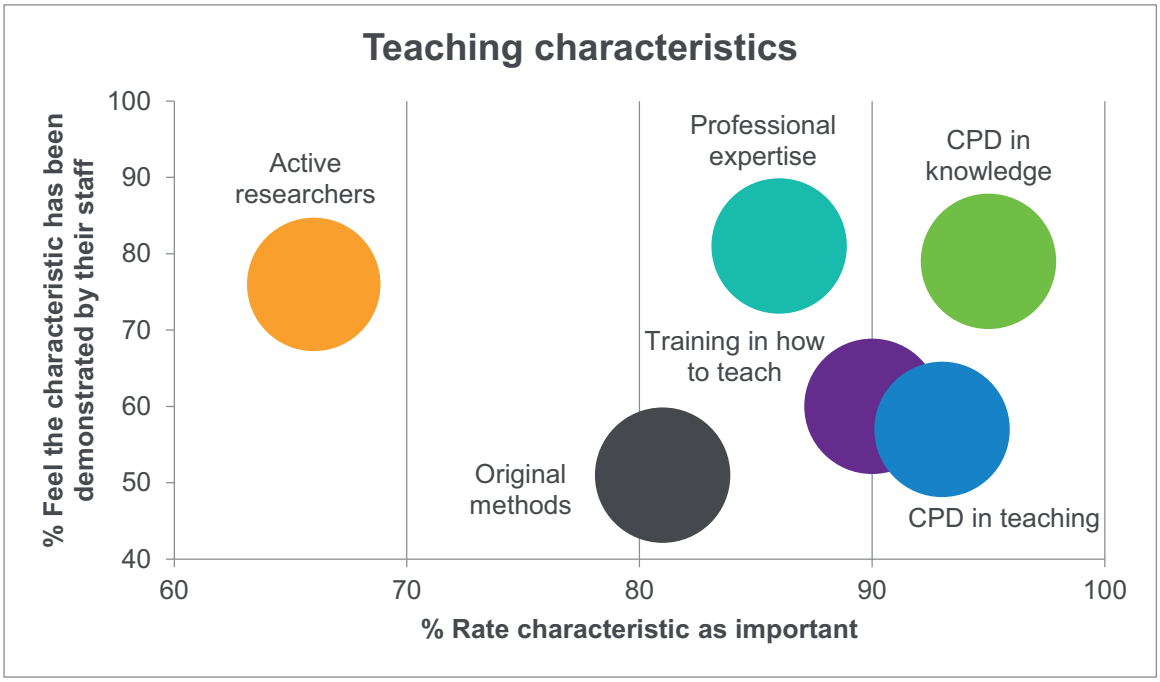
11.4 Type of feedback



Base: Specialist (296); Post-92 (6,730); Pre-92 (3,054); Russell Group (3,899).

In keeping with the results so far, there are differences by institution in how feedback is provided. The most common type of feedback is written, accompanied by a grade, although email is also used across the board. Direct feedback in person is the second most common type of feedback. Specialist providers are a lot more likely to use this method, and these institutions achieve strong perceptions of teaching quality.

11.5 Teaching staff characteristics



Base: All respondents (14,057).

Students were asked to rank the importance of different characteristics of teaching staff, and compare this to whether they feel that staff had demonstrated these qualities.

Characteristics in the bottom right-hand quadrant of the above chart are of particular significance in that they are seen as being important but are not always displayed. This is particularly the case for training in teaching, and continuous development of teaching expertise, which students cite as being particularly important, but are not consistently demonstrated.

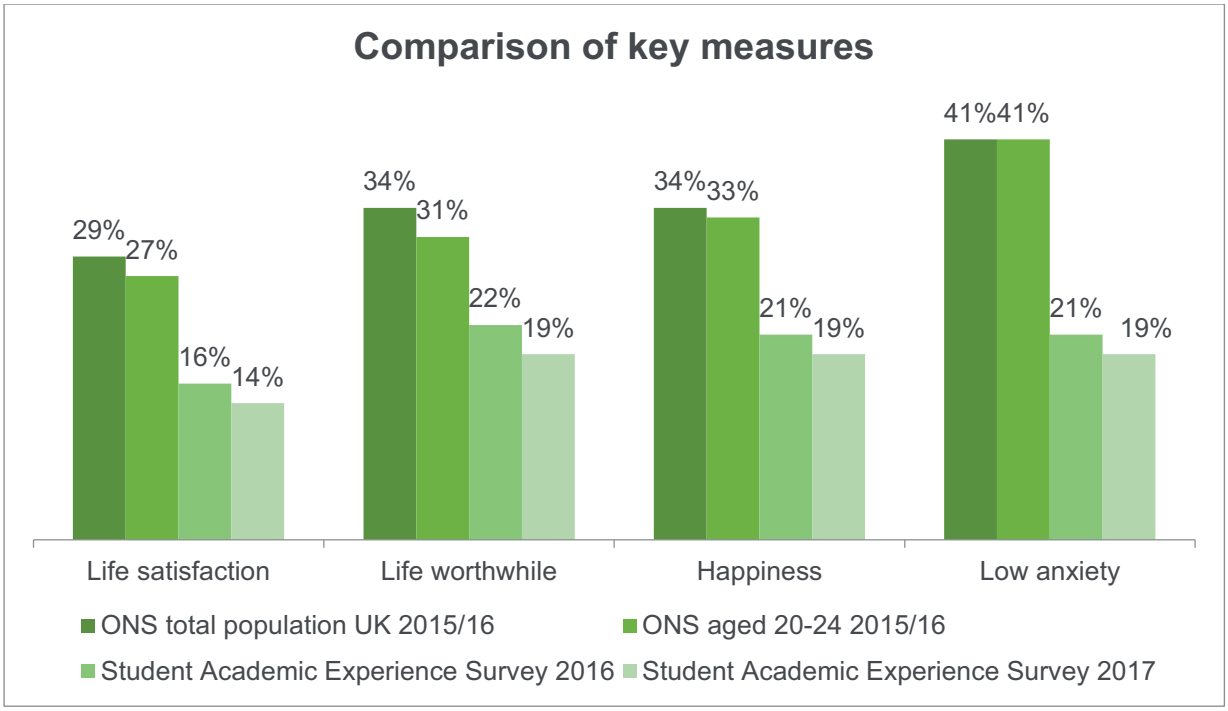
At the other end of the scale, being a leading, active researcher is less critical to the student, despite this often being amply demonstrated by their teaching staff.

This further underlines the importance of teaching within the overall experience, and how students value the way they are taught, placing a premium on staff whose training and continuous professional development is focused on this.

12 Student wellbeing

12.1 Wellbeing measures

As well as identifying lower levels of wellbeing among our student respondents compared to the national population, the results also highlight a clear decline year-on-year, with all four measures decreasing among our population by between 2% and 3%.

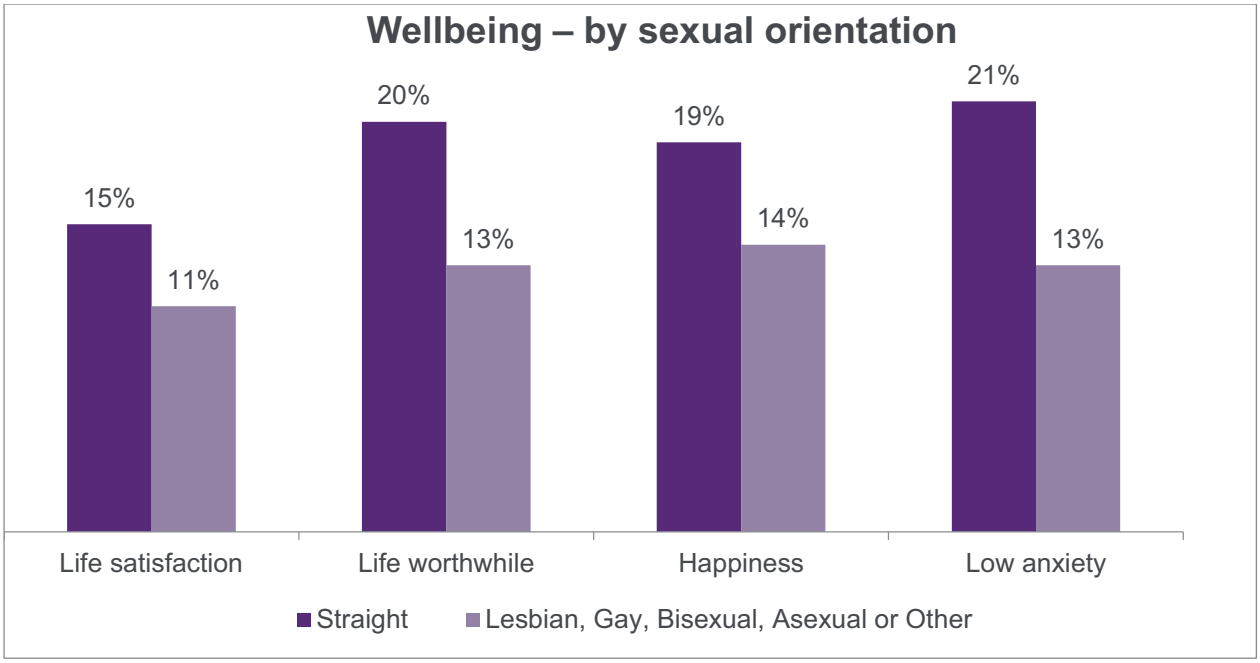


Base: ONS (Office for National Statistics) total UK (circa 157,000); ONS aged 20–24 UK (circa 6,000); Student Academic Experience Survey (2016 15,221/ 2017 14,057).[14]

Percentages calculated from all students scoring 9–10 out of 10 for life satisfaction, life worthwhile, happiness/0–1 out of 10 for anxiety.

This is an area of concern, although there is evidence that the issue of both undergraduate and postgraduate wellbeing is becoming a more regular part of discussions and debate in and around the sector, partly as a result of this survey, which will hopefully prompt greater understanding and action.

[14] ONS. (2017). *Measuring National Well-being: Personal Well-being in the UK, Oct 2015 to Sept 2016* [Internet]. Available from: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/measuringnationalwellbeing/oct2015tosept2016 [Accessed 29 March 2017].



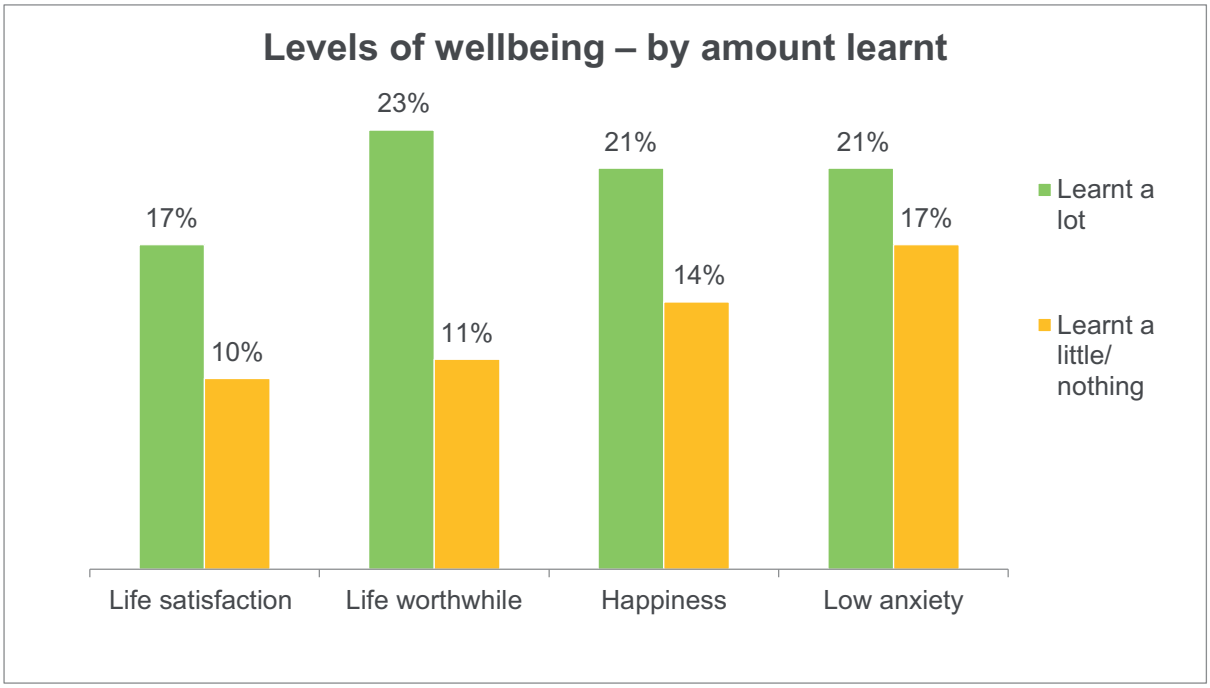
Base: Straight (11,480); Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Asexual or Other (2,118).

Percentages calculated from all students scoring 9–10 out of 10 for life satisfaction, life worthwhile, happiness/0–1 out of 10 for anxiety.

There are differences in wellbeing levels by gender (not charted here), with males a lot more positive than females. However, for the first time we are now able to conduct wellbeing analysis by sexual orientation, by virtue of asking a direct question in the Survey. The results show a striking difference in wellbeing levels between students who classify themselves as straight, compared to those who classify themselves as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Asexual or Other.

At present, similar data is not currently available at national level in order to compare this result, but alongside the low overall levels of wellbeing among students as a whole, these differences by sexual orientation are important for institutions to understand in order to put appropriate initiatives in place to address them.

12.2 Wellbeing and learning gain



Base: Learnt a lot (9,106); Learnt a little/nothing (4,830).

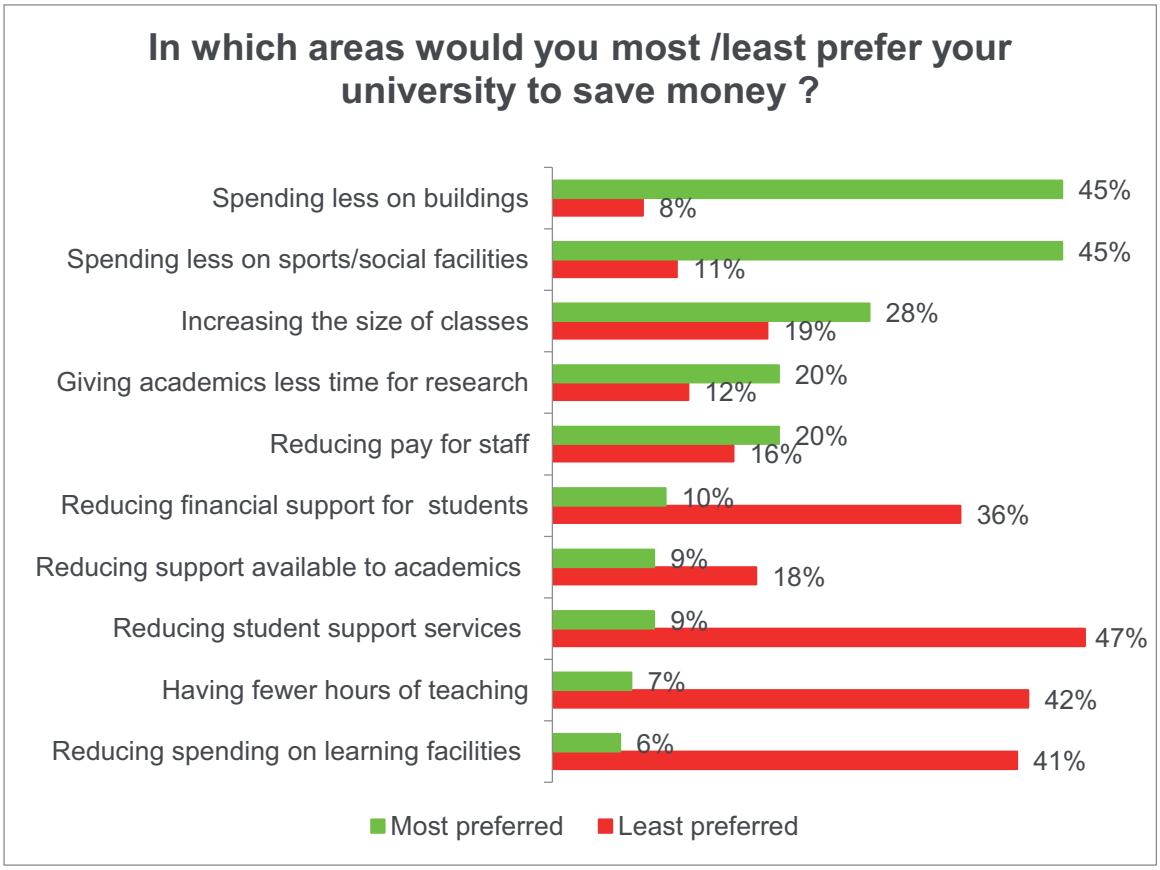
Percentages calculated from all students scoring 9–10 out of 10 for life satisfaction, life worthwhile, happiness/0–1 out of 10 for anxiety.

We can now explore the impact of learning on wellbeing through the new question on learning gain. With the exception of anxiety, which does not display a major difference, there are sizeable variances in wellbeing related to the amount the students feel they are learning, with students who learn a lot reporting much more positive levels of wellbeing, indicating the importance of a fulfilling and productive learning experience.

13 Students' views on policy options

13.1 Budget priorities

The chart below reveals the preferred and least preferred ways to save money and by asking both questions in this way, a clear ranking emerges.



Base: All respondents (14,057).

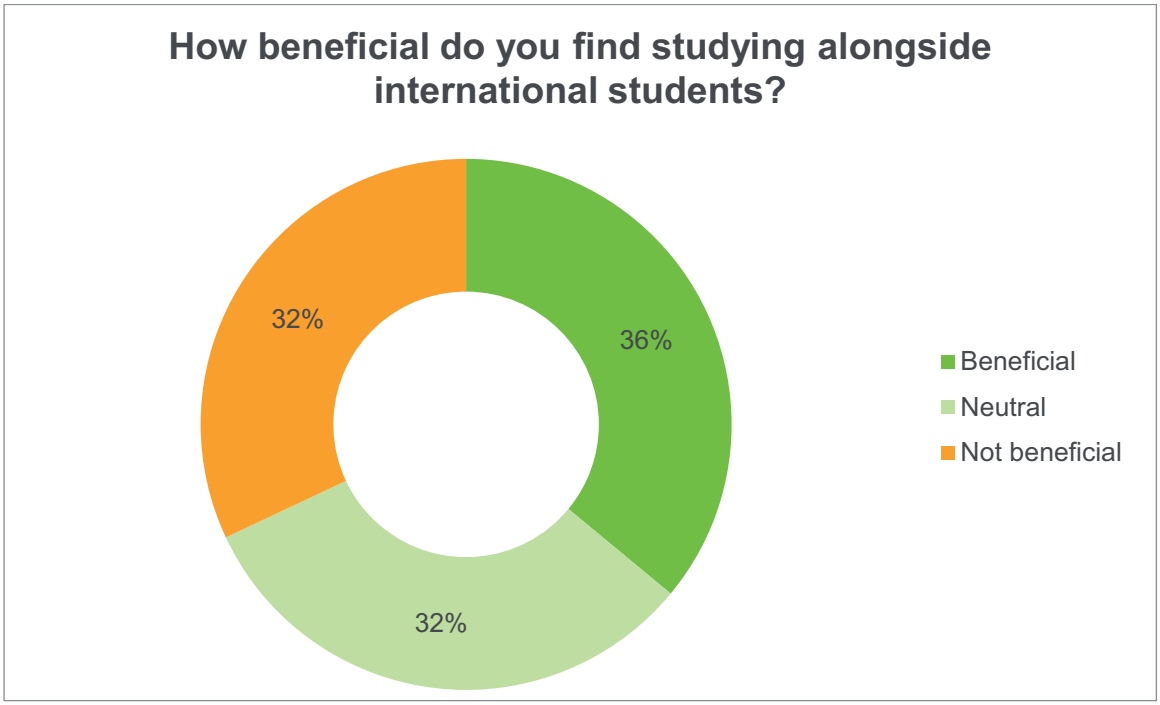
Sports facilities and buildings are, on the face of it, seen as lower priorities among current students, compared to teaching hours and learning facilities. Support services are also crucial, which is particularly pertinent given the concerning wellbeing statistics.

One potential contradiction thrown up by these results is that in order to improve on learning facilities (top priority), a university might reasonably wish to build a new building (lowest priority). This conundrum could be explained by students not wanting to live and study on a building site, although there is clearly a contribution that completed new buildings can make to improving the environment and image of the university and its community, as well as improving learning facilities housed within them.

13.2 Internationalisation

In light of the current political climate, 2017 saw the introduction of a new question asking UK-domiciled students how much they feel they benefit from studying alongside students from outside the UK.

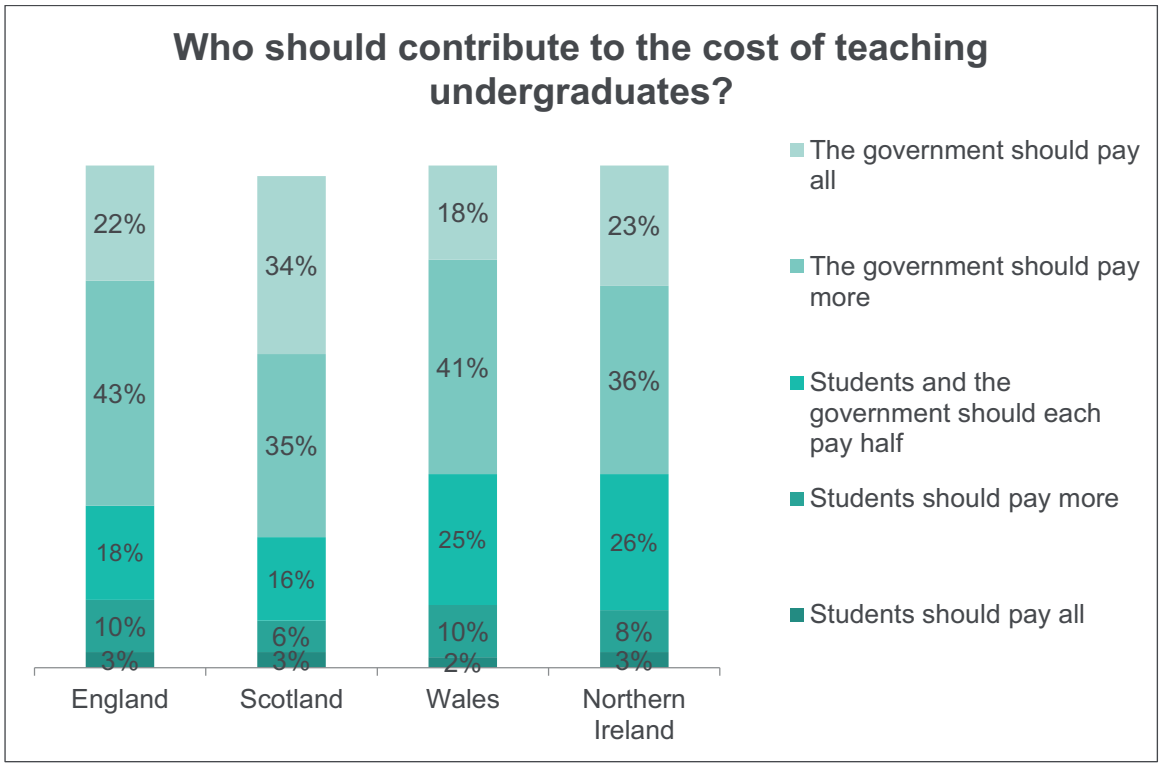
Clear benefits of interaction with international students are recognised by only a minority, with just over one-third of students (36%) seeing clear advantages. A third are neutral and the rest do not see benefits, although not seeing benefits is not necessarily the same as seeing actual disadvantages.



Base: All respondents (14,057).

13.3 Funding

The Survey asks about whether the costs of teaching undergraduate students should be funded by students, the government, or a mixture of the two.

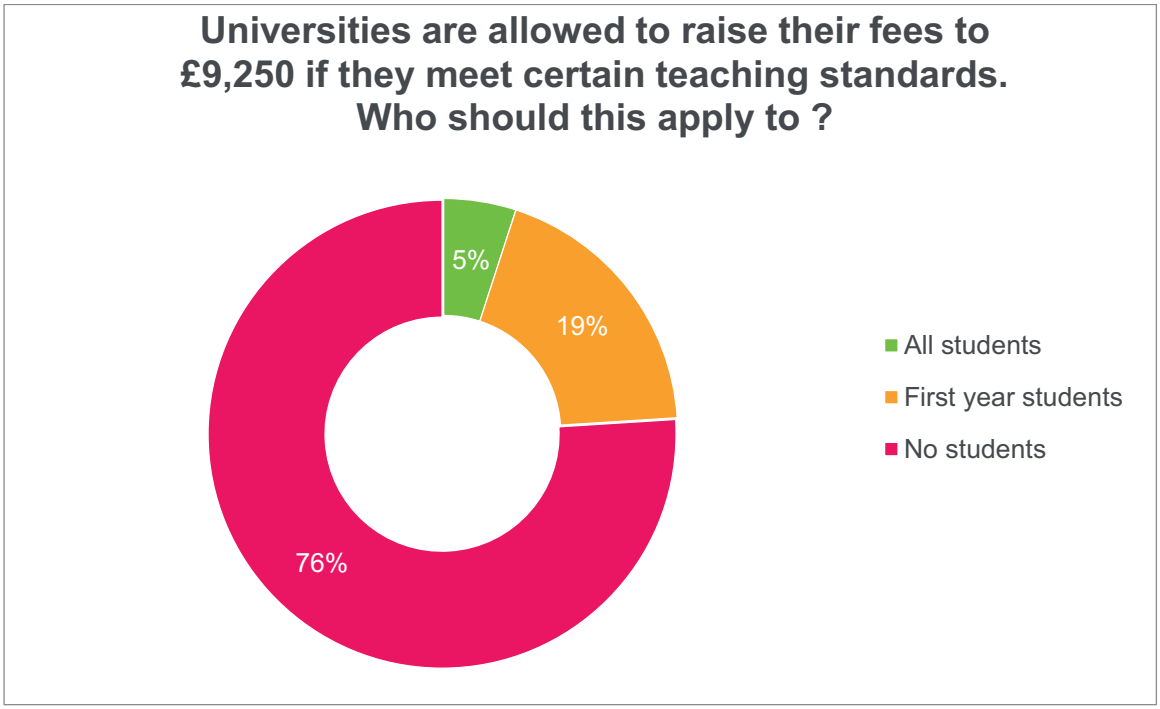


Base: England domicile (10,553); Scotland (835); Wales (440); Northern Ireland (224).

Few respondents feel students should pay the full, or even most of the cost, and only a small proportion think the costs should be shared. Views are strongly in favour of the government (ie taxpayers) contributing the bulk of the cost, with students making a smaller contribution. Although views among students domiciled in Scotland are still weighted towards greater government contributions, the differences are slightly less pronounced than last year (34% in 2017 saying the government should pay all, compared to 38% in 2016). Alongside the falling perception of value for money, there is evidence that the views of students domiciled in Scotland on issues like fees, policy and value may be beginning to come closer into line with the rest of the UK.

13.4 Fee rises

A new question for 2017 asks about prospective fee rises to £9,250 linked to the TEF awards, and who, if anyone, the fee rises should apply to.



Base: All respondents (14,057).

Three out of four students (76%) are clearly against the idea of TEF-linked inflationary fee rises for anyone. A further 19% think the fee rises should apply to incoming first years from next year, and 5% feel that the fee rises should apply across the board.

Who should fee rises for excellent teaching apply to?						
Domicile	England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland	EU	Outside EU
Base size	(10,553)	(835)	(440)	(224)	(891)	(150)
First year students	19%	17%	21%	17%	27%	22%
All students	4%	8%	8%	4%	6%	8%
No students	77%	76%	71%	79%	67%	70%

Although still firmly against the idea, students from Scotland, Wales and outside the EU are slightly more likely to think the fee rise should be applicable to all students, while EU students are most likely to be in favour of the fee rise for incoming first years.

There is no difference in response by year of study, so there is no evidence of student perceptions evolving in response to policy change. Clearly the issue of fees and fee rises continues to be problematic for UK-domiciled students in particular.

14 Conclusion and policy recommendations

When it began over a decade ago, the Student Academic Experience Survey was originally envisaged as a temporary way of assessing how students live and how they respond to policy changes, such as fee increases. It was not expected to become a firm feature of the higher education policy landscape. But it has become so – for example, featuring regularly in ministerial speeches – because it reaches into places other surveys do not go, and because the number of major changes to higher education have made the Survey a particularly useful barometer. Many of the questions stay the same from year to year while others change in the light of events. So the Survey offers a time series, while also covering the main higher education policies that emerge each year.

The volume and pace of change has never been greater than now. The first major piece of higher education legislation for over a decade finally passed in spring 2017, sandwiched between the Brexit referendum of June 2016 and the unexpected general election of June 2017. Over the next couple of years, we will come to understand how the new Office for Students will regulate the sector, what the new UK Research and Innovation unit means for the country's research base and what leaving the EU will really mean for UK higher education institutions. In the meantime, institutions will have to grapple with continuing uncertainty over funding, unpalatable but ever-changing rules governing international students and turmoil caused by changeovers in the arm's-length bodies.

So it has never been as important as it is now for us to discern policy lessons from our own Survey data – and, indeed, for others to do so too. We make our full results freely available to policymakers, higher education institutions and the media, in fact anyone who wants them, to use as they see fit.

This year, there are 10 clear areas where the Survey can usefully guide policy.

1. For the third year running, three-quarters of students have said they do not have enough information on how their fees are spent. University finances are complex, so it is difficult to provide income and expenditure at the level of each individual student. Nonetheless, it would be better for higher education institutions to respond to this negative finding than wait for government to intervene by imposing their own solution. Now is a good moment to act, given the way in which the pressure on universities to use their fee income to sponsor schools has generated so much discussion on the flow of financial resources in and out of universities.

2. This year, we have built up a better picture of how students from black and minority ethnic backgrounds are falling behind relative to white students, thanks to more sophisticated interrogation of the data. Accusations that curricula, teaching and learning practices and assessment methods unintentionally favour white students have proved controversial. Yet the Survey confirms that all these areas, and more, must be considered if we are to understand fully the different performance of students with different ethnic backgrounds.

3. Above all, students attend university to learn and, across the world, there is increasing interest in measuring how students are progressing. A new question in the Survey this year shows two-thirds of students think their learning is progressing 'a lot' while most of the rest feel it is progressing 'a little'. Although this question is based on self-perception rather than objective assessment, it is more positive than the doomsayers allow. Nonetheless, there are some notable differences between students. For example, those who live with others are more likely to say they are learning 'a lot', which highlights how living arrangements affect learning. On average, students who live at home perceive themselves to be learning less, perhaps showing they are not as well integrated as others. Some institutions are now usefully exploring the concept of the 'sticky campus' to ensure all students have access to the non-academic aspects of student life.

4. The same new Survey question shows that students who undertake employment for ten or more hours a week are less likely to feel they are learning 'a lot'. This confirms that undertaking paid employment for more than a few hours a week can be detrimental to academic work, including – potentially – the class of degree obtained. However, universities can potentially make life easier for students in need of extra income by providing on-campus jobs, acting as caring employers and providing managers who understand the rhythms of student life.

5. The relatively few students at alternative providers captured by the Survey are generally having a positive experience. However, given the nature of the Survey, they are unlikely to be fully representative of students at all alternative providers and it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions about alternative provision, which is anyway markedly heterogeneous. But the Survey's results provide a timely reminder that non-traditional higher education providers can offer high-quality provision that is appealing to students. While the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 clarifies the route for new providers, it will nonetheless remain important to ensure that new entrants provide a good student experience, as well as for the various regulatory bodies – old and new – to act vigilantly when things go awry in either the traditional or alternative parts of the sector.

6. The Survey confirms there is a partial trade-off between contact hours and class sizes. In particular and with some exceptions, university courses with larger classes tend to have more contact time. While neither contact hours nor class sizes are very useful indicators of quality on their own, there is currently interest in 'teaching intensity', which combines different metrics as a measure of the academic experience. Such teaching intensity measures also do not reveal a full picture – revealing little, for example, on levels of student engagement or even teaching quality – but they could provide useful supplementary information on how students spend their time.

7. As in last year's Survey, students remain unconvinced that it is important for the academics that teach them to be active researchers. This could be read as confirmation of a lack of evidence to prove the benefits from research-informed teaching. Yet, overall, the Survey provides a more nuanced picture. For example, while the research-informed institutions in the Russell Group perform relatively poorly when students are asked about the characteristics of their academic staff, the same institutions score relatively highly on value for money.

8. Universities are often regarded as places where people can be themselves, for example offering a relatively benign environment for people of different sexual orientations. For the first time ever, we have filtered our Survey's results according to the sexual orientations of the respondents and the findings are salutary. On all our main wellbeing measures, straight students provide more positive results overall than those who classify themselves in other ways. So, despite the positive and welcoming environment that many staff and students strive to provide, it seems there is a need for additional support for students in minority groups – as well as room for further research on how different groups of students fare.

9. Another new question added to the Survey for 2017 shows that roughly one-third of students believe it is beneficial to study alongside international students, roughly one-third disagree and roughly one-third are neutral. Given the clear benefits that international students deliver to universities, such as improving the learning experience by bringing people from different backgrounds together, enabling courses to be viable and delivering financial sustainability, this result may appear a little surprising. It is possible that higher education institutions need to redouble their efforts to convey the benefits for teaching and research of having diverse student communities.

10. The Survey shows once more that an overwhelming majority of students dislike the idea of tuition fee rises being linked to their institution's performance in the Teaching Excellence Framework. Opposition to this link has been evident not only in recent parliamentary debates but also in a partial boycott of the National Student Survey. However, the government's last-minute concessions on the Higher Education and Research Bill, which included a further year's delay to the fee link as well as a statutory review of the Teaching Excellence Framework, removed some of the sting while almost certainly not amounting to a permanent U-turn.

This is a rich agenda of topics for the sector to grapple with during 2017/18. We plan to look again at the student experience in another round of the Survey next summer, when we should also know more about big outstanding issues, like the impact of Brexit on the UK's autonomous, world-class and incredibly successful higher education sector.

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