

With a  
Foreword  
by David  
Palfreyman

# How different is Oxbridge?

Charlotte Freitag and Nick Hillman



Higher Education Policy Institute

**HEPI Report 107**

## **About the Authors**

Charlotte Freitag is a Master's student at the University of Oxford, studying Cognitive and Evolutionary Anthropology. She previously completed a BSc in Psychology at the University of Glasgow.

Nick Hillman has been the Director of HEPI since January 2014. He attended the University of Manchester, the University of Cambridge and Queen Mary and Westfield College, part of the University of London.

Cover photos are of Trinity College, Cambridge, by Nick Hillman and the Blavatnik School of Government, Oxford, by Emma Ma.

# Contents

Foreword	5
Short summary	7
Introduction	9
Key findings	13
Methodology	17
1. Course satisfaction	23
2. Student wellbeing	27
3. Workload	33
4. Class size	37
5. Feedback	39
6. Teaching and learning	43
7. Conclusion	45
Annex 1: The sample	49
Annex 2: Statistical analysis	51



# Foreword

**David Palfreyman, OBE FRSA**

It is an honour to be asked to contribute a Foreword to yet another stimulating publication from HEPI as the foremost think tank in higher education. And it is a pleasure to be able to do so when, for once, there is good and positive news from a third party to be conveyed about Oxford (as one's place of work) and even about ('that other place') Cambridge, in short about 'Oxbridge' (a term coined by Thackeray in 1849 – 'Camford' has never caught on!).

If presented with the exam question 'What is different about Oxbridge?', one could jot down quite a list – *inter alia*, governance still along the lines of a medieval academic guild, the survival of the colleges as independent legal entities, the possession of substantial endowments (fattened by generous alumni-giving), the highly-ranked research output, the strong commitment to the intensive teaching of undergraduates via the Oxford Tutorial or the Cambridge Supervision, the very high entry grades of those undergraduates (not, of course, unrelated to their overwhelmingly coming from the higher socio-economic groups and hence Oxbridge's acute political problem of access and widening participation), the need to cope with diseconomies of scale across the Collegiate University and with a liability of listed buildings while trying to sustain world-class museums as an important wider contribution to culture and civilisation, the hyper-employability of their graduates, Oxford's production line of PMs and Cambridge's output of Nobel Prize winners, the Boat Race and Oxford as the location for an astonishingly high murder rate in endless crime novels

often from the pens of Oxford dons...

This valuable assessment of what is different, however, focuses rightly on the perspective of the students attending Oxford and Cambridge, drawing on HEPI's vast database of survey data and applying its usual statistical sophistication in analysing it.

And, happily, it shows – among a lot of other rather positive things – that the expenditure on that intense and costly teaching methodology pays off in terms of student satisfaction with 'the learning experience' and their sense of 'value for money' – as indeed enhanced by their putting in more hours of work than usual for UK undergraduates so as not to be caught out in that weekly 1:2 Tutorial / Supervision!

Moreover, at a time of seemingly constant depressing news on student mental health issues, Oxbridge students, albeit under that workload pressure, seem not to be any more stressed and to be as happy (or no more unhappy) than their counterparts across the UK universities.

**David Palfreyman is a Fellow of New College, University of Oxford, and a member of the Office for Students' Board. He edited *The Oxford Tutorial* (2008) and is the joint author, with Ted Tapper, of *Oxford, the Collegiate University: Conflict, Consensus, and Continuity* (2011).**

## Short summary

We have conducted a new analysis to compare the student experience at the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge to the student experience at other Russell Group universities and to students at all UK universities. The work is based on data from six waves of the large annual *Student Academic Experience Survey*.

The results show that, compared to other Russell Group students as well as students across all UK universities, Oxbridge students:

- are more satisfied with their courses;
- are less likely to wish they had chosen another course;
- are more likely to say they receive good value for money;
- have higher life satisfaction;
- are more likely to feel their lives are worthwhile;
- are happier;
- have a higher workload (across a range of disciplines);
- spend more hours per week studying outside of class;
- are more likely to have classes with 0 to 5 other students;
- receive more useful feedback;
- receive faster feedback; and
- believe they are learning more.

Oxbridge students are also less likely to have classes of more than 100 students than students at other Russell Group universities. However, they are no more or less likely to have such large class sizes than students as a whole. This suggests other Russell Group universities are outliers in having more large classes.

Furthermore:

- Oxbridge students have similar levels of anxiety to students at other Russell Group universities and UK universities overall;
- Oxbridge students do not have many more scheduled contact hours than students at other Russell Group universities or all UK universities (especially once Oxbridge's shorter term length is accounted for); and
- Oxbridge students and students at other Russell Group universities are less likely to think they are receiving original or creative teaching than students at UK universities overall.

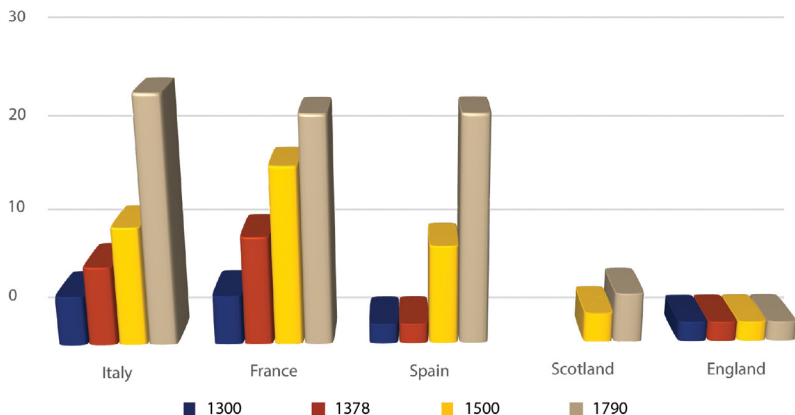


## Introduction

At a HEPI event to mark the launch of *A University Education* by David Willetts, the author began his presentation with a powerful slide.<sup>1</sup> Reproduced below, it shows how the spread of universities from the late medieval period differed in England from other European nations, including Scotland.

For around half a millennium, England had just two universities: Oxford and Cambridge.<sup>2</sup> By the late 18th century, comparable parts of Europe had ten times as many institutions.

### Number of universities in European Countries (1300-1790)



1 David Willetts, *A University Education*, 2017

2 Excepting the short-lived University of Northampton, which lasted from 1261 to 1265. See Nick Hillman, 'Why we must protect university autonomy: speech to the inaugural G20 meeting at the University of Buckingham', 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2017 <http://www.hepi.ac.uk/2017/04/03/4014/>

This long dominance of Oxbridge helped define the shape of the broader university sector that eventually emerged in England during the 19th century and beyond. The redbrick universities, the later civic universities, the plateglass universities, the universities created from the polytechnics in 1992 and those established in the last two decades nearly all owe something to the Oxbridge model.

Some critics argue the dominance of Oxbridge has produced an insufficiently diverse higher education sector.<sup>3</sup> Others claim, in contrast, that it has produced an excessively hierarchical sector, in which every institution knows its place.<sup>4</sup>

Almost a decade ago, HEPI published a paper entitled *Oxford and Cambridge – how different are they?* It considered these two universities against the rest of the modern higher education sector. In particular, the report compared the two Oxbridge institutions to other research-intensive institutions on areas including student recruitment, graduate outcomes and the quality and quantity of research.

The paper concluded by noting how Oxford and Cambridge had maintained their position at the apex of the UK higher education system:

*The resources that Oxford and Cambridge enjoy are substantially greater than any other institution in the United Kingdom, and without doubt it is this fact above all that has enabled them to stand out as exceptional universities in the*

3 David Goodhart, 'Is university for all working', *Standpoint*, April 2018

4 Tim Blackman, *The Comprehensive University: An Alternative to Social Stratification by Academic Selection*, HEPI Occasional Paper 17, July 2017

*UK and Europe, but also, on most measures, in the world.*<sup>5</sup>

Since then, according to the 2018 World University Rankings from the *Times Higher Education*, the universities have improved further and are now the two best universities in the world.

So this paper revisits the question we last addressed back in 2009. After all the changes in funding and regulation within the UK, as well as all the changes to higher education globally, how different are Oxford and Cambridge to the rest of the higher education system today?

The report looks primarily at how the collegiate environment at the UK's two oldest universities delivers for their undergraduate students. It does not cover these universities' other defining features, such as their strong research performance, their postgraduate education or their international links.<sup>6</sup>

Instead, we use some of the millions of data points collected in the last six waves of our annual *Student Academic Experience Survey* (2012 to 2017), which we have undertaken each year jointly with the Higher Education Academy and YouthSight, a market research company. The survey is relatively large, covering around 15,000 students each year, and ranges across a much wider range of issues than the official National Student Survey.<sup>7</sup>

5 Juliet Chester and Bahram Bekhradnia, *Oxford and Cambridge - How different are they?*, HEPI Paper 44, November 2009 <http://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/44-Oxford-and-Cambridge-full.pdf>

6 Vicky Olive, *How much is too much? Cross-subsidies from teaching to research in British universities*, HEPI Report 100, November 2017

7 Jonathan Neves and Nick Hillman, *HEPI / HEA 2017 Student Academic Experience Survey*, HEPI Paper 96, June 2017

The analysis and commentary that follow focus, above all, on the following features of the student experience:

- contact time;
- workload;
- class size;
- feedback; and
- mental wellbeing.

Our main comparisons are between Oxbridge and other Russell Group institutions, even though some data is provided for the publicly-funded sector as a whole too. This is because:

- our analysis shows Oxford and Cambridge are sufficiently alike to be treated together, validating the portmanteau term 'Oxbridge';
- the two Oxbridge institutions are sufficiently distinctive from others to enable some important contrasts to be drawn; and
- it is more valid to compare Oxbridge to other research-intensive institutions than to the sector as a whole – in this instance, we have used membership of the Russell Group as a rough proxy for high-research intensity.

## Key findings

### *Course satisfaction*

- 59% of Oxbridge undergraduate students are very satisfied with their course compared with only 31% of students at other Russell Group institutions and the same proportion of students at UK universities overall;
- 52% of Oxbridge students compared with 38% of other Russell Group students and 36% of students overall say they would definitely not have chosen a different course if they had their time again; and
- 77% of Oxbridge students but only 46% of other Russell Group students and 45% of all students at UK universities perceive their course to provide either good or very good value for money.

### *Student wellbeing*

- 57% of Oxbridge students but only 47% of students at other Russell Group institutions and 45% of students overall are very satisfied with their lives;
- 57% of Oxbridge students but only 47% of students at other Russell Group institutions and 47% of students overall feel their lives are very worthwhile;
- 45% of Oxbridge students but only 41% of other Russell Group students and 41% of students at all UK universities say they felt very happy yesterday; and

- 14% of students have low anxiety levels, with the result the same whether it is for Oxbridge, other Russell Group universities or the sector as a whole.

### *Workload*

- Oxbridge students work a total of 43 hours per week, 12 hours more than other Russell Group students or all students;
- Oxbridge students spend 13 hours more per week on independent study than students at other Russell Group universities and 14 more than students overall;
- total workload is higher at Oxbridge across a range of disciplines – at Oxbridge, total working hours typically amount to over 40 hours a week, meaning time spent studying more closely resembles full-time work than at other institutions; and
- the differences are not driven primarily by contact hours, as the average number attended each week is broadly similar irrespective of the type of institution (15 hours at Oxbridge, 14 at other Russell Group institutions and 13 overall).

### *Class size*

- 96% of Oxbridge students but only 36% of other Russell Group students and 35% of all students have at least one hour in classes with 0 to 5 other students; and
- 59% of students at other Russell Group institutions have at least one class per week with more than 100 other students, in comparison to just 42% at Oxbridge and overall.

## *Feedback*

- 40% of Oxbridge students but only 14% of other Russell Group students and 16% of all students receive feedback in person;
- a smaller proportion of Oxbridge students (3%) than other Russell Group students (11%) or all UK students (9%) report receiving only a grade as feedback;
- Oxbridge students typically receive more useful feedback, with 75% of Oxbridge students but only 52% of other Russell Group students and 55% of all students reporting that all or the majority of teaching staff provide useful feedback; and
- 82% of Oxbridge students but only 13% of other Russell Group students and 11% of all students receive feedback within one week.

## *Teaching and learning*

- 87% of Oxbridge students compared to 70% of other Russell Group students and 66% of all students report having learnt 'a lot' since starting their course; and
- over half (52%) of all UK students say their teachers use original or creative teaching methods 'a lot' or 'quite a bit', more than at Oxbridge (41%) or other Russell Group students (45%).





## Methodology

### *The sample*

We have looked at data from six waves of the annual *Student Academic Experience Survey* (2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2017) with a total of 60,221 undergraduate full-time students at UK universities.

The responses of 1,625 Oxbridge students were compared with the responses of 18,354 students at other Russell Group universities. The demographics of our respondents are summarised in Table 1, including all UK university students. Overall, Oxbridge and other Russell Group university students are similar in terms of the main demographic measures.

*Table 1: Demographics of participants by university group<sup>8</sup>*

University	Sample size	% Female	Mean age	Nationality: % non-UK
Cambridge	826	60%	19.6	19%
Oxford	799	62%	19.4	16%
Oxbridge	1,625	61%	19.5	18%
Other Russell Group	18,354	66%	20.0	17%
All UK universities	60,221	67%	20.8	14%

Most respondents took part while in their first year at university (see Table 2). If students took part several times, we only used their responses from the first time they took part (which had the effect of excluding 25,387 responses from the original total

<sup>8</sup> Students aged under 16 and over 100 were excluded.

of 85,608). Thus, the results presented in this report will be most reflective of first-year students.

*Table 2: Respondents relative to total sample by year at university*

University	1st year	2nd year	3rd year	4th year or above
Cambridge	60%	23%	9%	7%
Oxford	60%	25%	8%	7%
Oxbridge	60%	24%	9%	7%
Other Russell Group	61%	22%	11%	6%
All UK universities	62%	22%	12%	4%

For further details on the sample, please see Annex 1.

### *Analysis*

Oxbridge students were compared to students at other Russell Group universities in a between-groups design in five domains with a total of 15 aspects of student experience (see Table 3). Comparing the responses of students at Oxford and Cambridge in each of the 15 aspects of student experience confirmed that they could be combined into one group because the responses of the students at each of these two universities closely resemble one another.

*Table 3: Questions analysed in this report*

Domain	Sub-domain	Survey Question
Course satisfaction	Course quality	1) To what extent are you satisfied, or not, with the overall quality of your course?
	Course choice	2) Thinking about your academic experience, if you knew what you do now, would you have chosen a different course?
	Value for money	3) Thinking of all the things you've been asked about in this questionnaire so far, which statement best describes your view of the value for money of your present course?
Student wellbeing	Life satisfaction	4) Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?
	Life worth	5) Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?
	Happiness	6) Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?
	Anxiety	7) Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday?
Course experience	Workload	8) Sum of hours in response to three questions:
		8a) And about how many hours did you attend in the average week?
		8b) In an average week during term-time, roughly how many hours have you spent on independent study (including studying with friends)?
		8c) 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?
	Contact hours	9) How many hours of time-tabled sessions did you have scheduled in an average week during term-time?

Domain	Sub-domain	Survey Question
Course experience	Class size	10) On average, roughly how many hours per week have you had with 0 to 5 other students? 11) On average, roughly how many hours per week have you had with more than 100 other students?
	Mode of feedback	12) How do you normally receive feedback on assignments?
Feedback	Usefulness of feedback	13) Thinking about all the teaching you have experienced this academic year, what proportion of teaching staff did the following: Gave you useful feedback?
	Speed of feedback	14) What is the average time taken for your assignments to be marked and returned to you after you have handed them in?
	Learning gain	15) Since starting your course, do you feel you have learnt?
Learning	Teaching methods	16) To what extent do you feel your teaching staff currently employ original/creative teaching methods?

### *Statistical analysis*

Single data points that are very different from most of the other data points are outliers. This can be due to respondents making mistakes or not responding truthfully. When scores were a lot lower or higher than most of the data and seemed unrealistic, we excluded them to avoid skewing the data. We did this for all three university groups: Oxbridge students; students at other Russell Group universities; and students at all UK universities.

For workload, we excluded responses under 5 hours or over 100 hours per week as these were considered unrealistic.

Similarly, for contact hours per week, responses under 2 hours or over 50 hours per week were excluded. Data on class size were recorded as hours per week together with 0 to 5, 6 to 15, 16 to 50, 51 to 100 and over 100 students. Respondents with cumulative totals of under 2 and over 50 hours per week across all five class-size categories were excluded because the number seemed unrealistically small or large, respectively. For the remaining respondents, we focused on hours per week with 0 to 5 other students because we expected the biggest differences between university groups to emerge in the number of hours per week in small classes.

Summary statistics from all UK universities are included in the graphs but only data from Oxbridge and other Russell Group universities were included in the statistical analysis. For the statistical analysis, university group (either Oxbridge or other Russell Group universities) was treated as an independent variable. Scores for each of the 15 aspects were compared between the two groups using inferential statistics.

These statistical tests give a measure of whether the difference in scores between two groups is so big that we can be confident that it is not just due to random fluctuations. Differences between groups of which we can confidently say that they are genuine and robust are statistically significant differences. For details on the methods used, refer to Annex 2. The full statistics are reported as endnotes.

Sums may not add up precisely due to rounding.



# 1. Course satisfaction

## *i. Course quality*

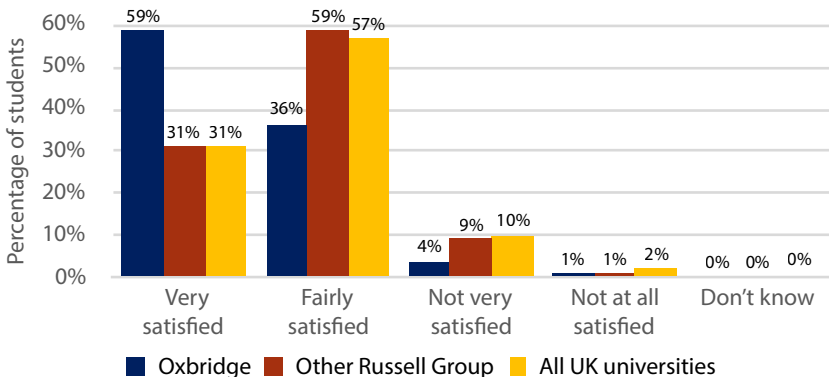
Significantly more Oxbridge students (59%) than students from other Russell Group universities (31%) are very satisfied with their course.

While most students at Oxbridge are very satisfied with their course, most students at other Russell Group universities and all UK universities on average are fairly satisfied with their course.

Overall, 95% and 89% of Oxbridge and other Russell Group students, respectively, are either very satisfied or fairly satisfied with their course.

Although only a small minority are not very satisfied or not at all satisfied, the total for these two groups together is twice (10%) as high for students at other Russell Group universities than it is for Oxbridge (5%).

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



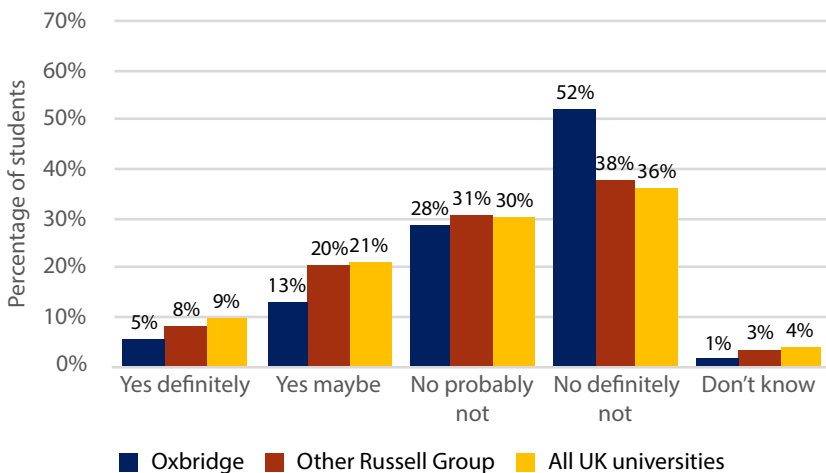
## ii. Course choice

Statistically significantly fewer Oxbridge students (5%) than other Russell Group students (8%) say that they would definitely have chosen a different course if they knew what they do now. A smaller proportion (13% versus 20%) also say they might have chosen a different course.

Conversely, the number of students who say they would definitely not have chosen a different course is much higher among Oxbridge (52%) than among students from other Russell Group universities (38%).

This finding is in line with Oxbridge students' higher satisfaction with their course.

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





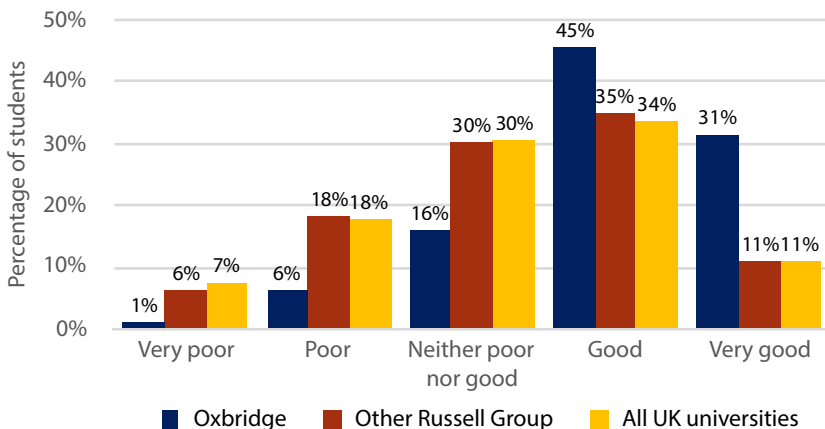
### iii. Value for money

A much higher proportion of Oxbridge students perceive their course as either good or very good value for money (77%) when compared to other Russell Group students (46%).

Overall, 45% of all UK students say their course is good or very good value for money but a quarter (25%) say their course is poor or very poor value for money.<sup>9</sup>

These results are based on a question covering self-perceived value for money during someone's time as a student. To an extent, the results appear to reflect the flow of financial resources: Oxford and Cambridge say they cross-subsidise the cost of teaching their undergraduates from other resources, which is harder for less well-resourced institutions to do.

#### Which statement best describes your view of the value for money of your present course?



<sup>9</sup> These figures are higher than those reported in our recent annual *Student Academic Experience Survey* publications. This is because this study uses six different waves of the survey (every year from 2012 to 2017) and value for money perceptions have declined during this six-year period.



## 2. Student wellbeing

### *i. Life satisfaction*

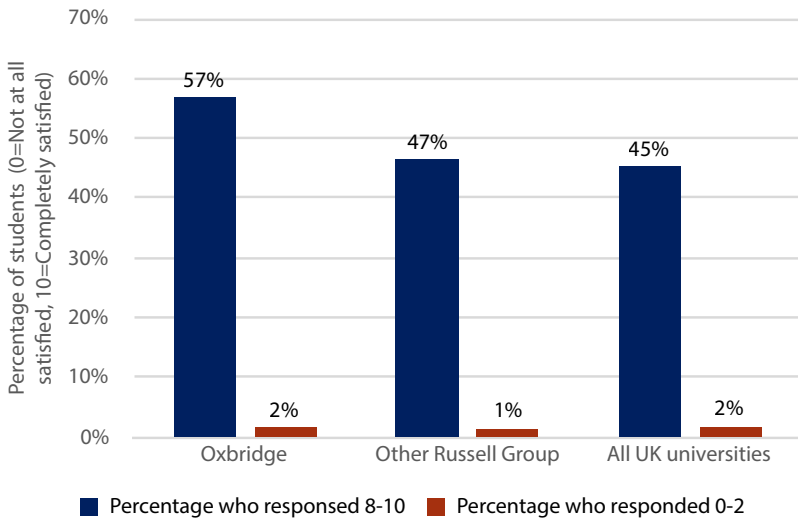
The *Student Academic Experience Survey* as a whole has consistently shown full-time students have lower wellbeing than the population as a whole, including other young people.<sup>10</sup>

But significantly more Oxbridge students (57%) than other Russell Group students (47%) respond with 8 to 10 on a scale from 0 (not at all satisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied). The results suggest Oxbridge students are more satisfied with their lives than other students from Russell Group universities and students from all UK universities on average.

Overall, almost half of UK university students have high life satisfaction (45% responded with 8, 9 or 10). Few students have low life satisfaction: 2% of Oxbridge students, 1% of other Russell Group students and 2% of all UK students responded with 0, 1 or 2.

10 This issue has been addressed in two full-length HEPI publications: Poppy Brown, *The invisible problem? Improving students' mental health*, HEPI Paper 88, September 2016; Anthony Seldon and Alan Martin, *The Positive and Mindful University*, HEPI Occasional Paper 18, September 2017.

## Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?



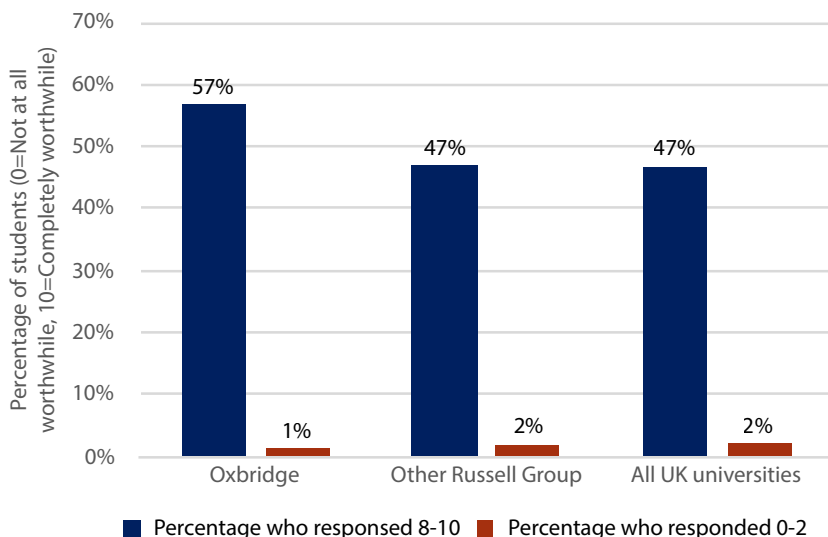
### ii. Life worth

More Oxbridge students (57%) than other Russell Group students (47%) respond with 8, 9 or 10 to the question on life worth (where 0 is 'not at all worthwhile' and 10 is 'completely worthwhile').

This suggests Oxbridge students see their lives as more worthwhile, on average, than other students. The percentages for Oxbridge and other Russell Group students are the same as the ones found for the life satisfaction questions. For all UK students, 47% rated their life satisfaction with 8 to 10 out of 10, which is very close to the rating for life satisfaction at non-Oxbridge Russell Group institutions.

As with life satisfaction, only a very small proportion of students perceive their life as not being worthwhile at all – just 1% at Oxbridge and 2% for other Russell Group and all UK universities.

### **Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?**



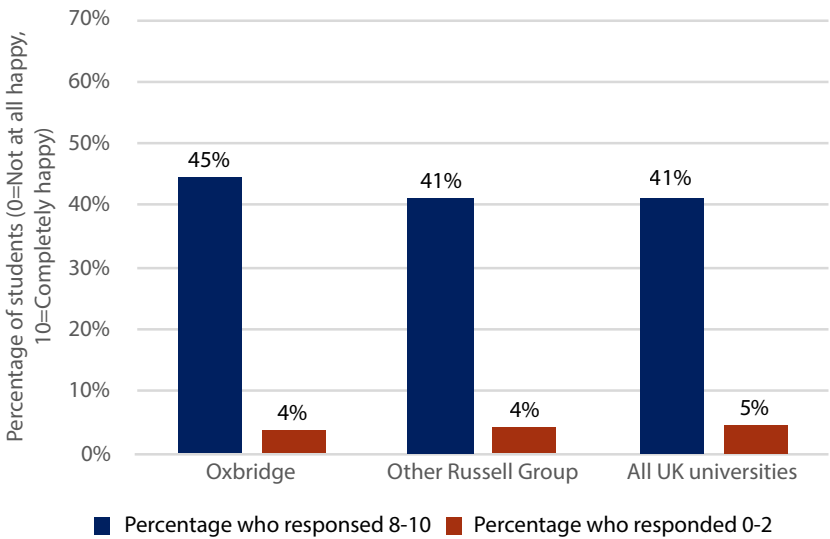
### *iii. Happiness*

There is a small but statistically significant difference in happiness between university groups.

A slightly higher proportion of Oxbridge students (45%) than other Russell Group students (41%) responded with 8, 9 or 10 on the 10-point scale. Just 4% picked 0, 1 or 2 among both Oxbridge and other Russell Group institutions.

Across all UK universities, 41% responded with 8 to 10 while only 5% responded with 0 to 2, indicating that they were very unhappy yesterday.

Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?

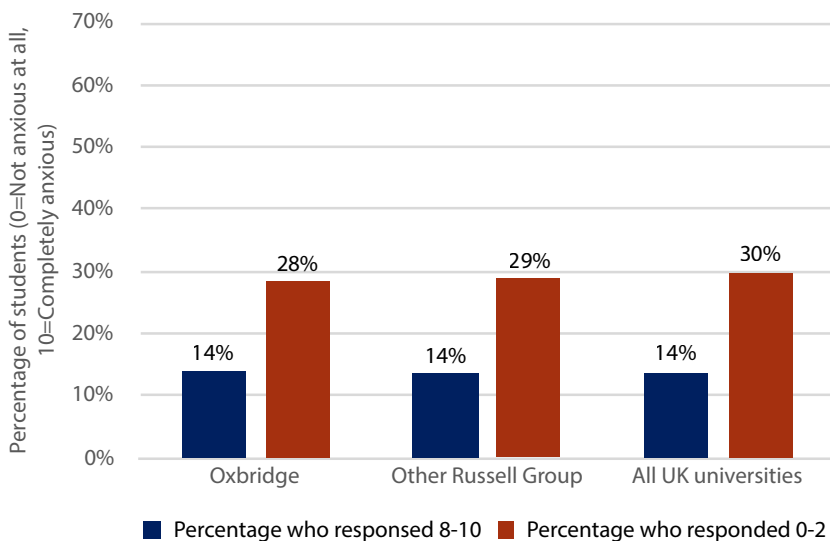


#### *iv. Anxiety*

Anxiety does not differ in a statistically significant way between groups either.

For example, only 14% of students across Oxford and Cambridge, other Russell Group universities and all UK universities responded with 8, 9 or 10, meaning that they felt very anxious 'yesterday'.

#### **Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday?**







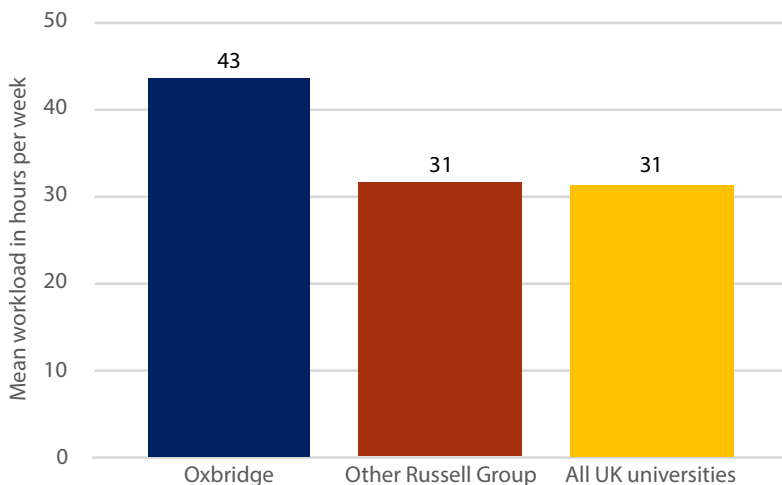
### 3. Workload

#### *i. Total workload*

When workload is calculated as the sum of weekly hours spent attending classes, doing independent study and undertaking course-related work outside of their university, Oxbridge students work 12 more hours per week (mean of 43 hours per week) than other Russell Group students (mean of 31 hours per week) or students overall (mean of 31 hours).

Overall, this suggests that Oxbridge students work harder than the 40 'notional learning hours' per week that is expected of full-time students. Students at other Russell Group universities and the average UK student are 12 hours or 30% below the recommended 40 hours per week.

#### **Workload per week (sum of attended classes, independent study and course-related work)**



### *ii. Time spent on different tasks*

Oxbridge students spend on average 13 more hours per week studying outside of class than other Russell Group students and 14 more hours per week than UK students on average.

This difference in independent study is the main driver of the higher workload among Oxbridge students.

*Table 4: Mean workload in hours per week*

	<b>Attending classes</b>	<b>Independent study</b>	<b>Course-related work</b>	<b>Total Workload</b>
Oxbridge	15	28	1	43
Other Russell Group	14	15	3	31
All UK universities	13	14	4	31

### *iii. Workload by discipline*

Looking at three examples of workload by subjects, it is clear that Oxbridge students spend substantially more hours per week on independent study, compared to other Russell Group and all UK university students, across a range of disciplines.

*Table 5: Workload hours per week: Physics*

	<b>Attending classes</b>	<b>Independent study</b>	<b>Course-related work</b>	<b>Total Workload</b>
Oxbridge	18	27	0	45
Other Russell Group	17	14	1	32
All UK universities	16	14	2	32

*Table 6: Workload hours per week: History*

	<b>Attending classes</b>	<b>Independent study</b>	<b>Course-related work</b>	<b>Total Workload</b>
Oxbridge	6	36	2	44
Other Russell Group	8	18	1	27
All UK universities	8	17	2	27

*Table 7: Workload hours per week: Economics*

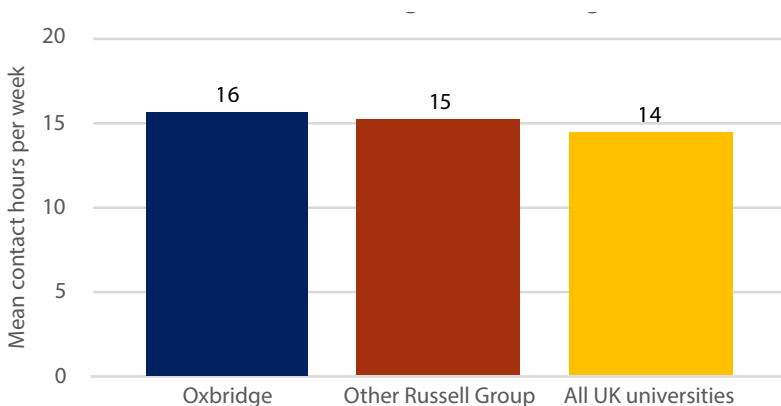
	<b>Attending classes</b>	<b>Independent study</b>	<b>Course-related work</b>	<b>Total Workload</b>
Oxbridge	14	28	0	42
Other Russell Group	11	14	2	27
All UK universities	11	13	2	26

#### *iv. Contact hours*

In terms of contact hours, differences between Oxbridge students (mean of 16 hours per week) and other Russell Group students (mean of 15 hours per week) are relatively slight – and statistically insignificant.

There is a one-hour difference in contact hours between Russell Group universities (including Oxbridge) and all UK universities where students report a mean of 14 hours of time-tabled sessions per week. This difference in contact hours is probably not due to Russell Group universities offering courses such as Medicine that usually have a lot of contact hours more often than other UK universities.<sup>11</sup>

**How many hours of time-tabled sessions did you have scheduled in an average week during term-time?**



<sup>11</sup> At Russell Group universities, 0.34% of all respondents report studying Medicine and having more than 30 contact hours per week, roughly twice the proportion of all UK university students studying Medicine and having more than 30 contact hours per week (0.15%). But this a very small group and the same is true for other more intensive courses, like Nursing and Dentistry.

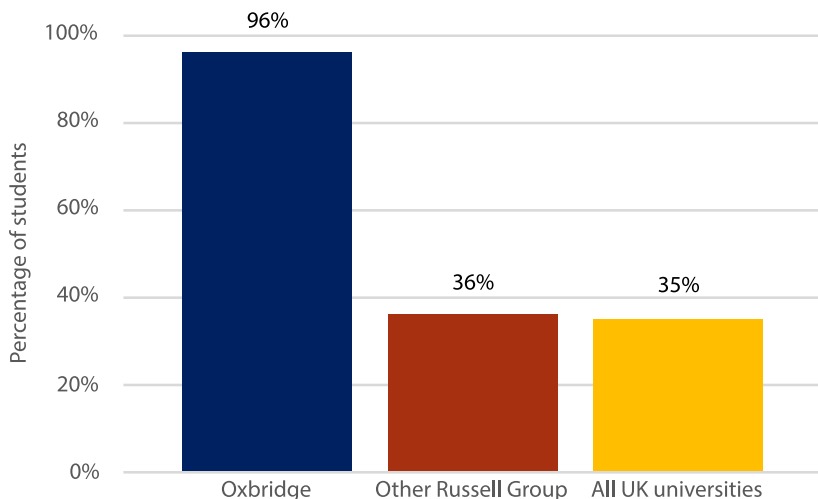
## 4. Class size

### *i. Small class size*

Oxbridge students (96%) are much more likely to have at least one hour in classes with 0 to 5 other students than other Russell Group students (36%) or students at all UK universities (35%).

One-in-six (18%) of Oxbridge students say they have five or more hours per week in these small classes while only 6% of other Russell Group students and of all UK students do.

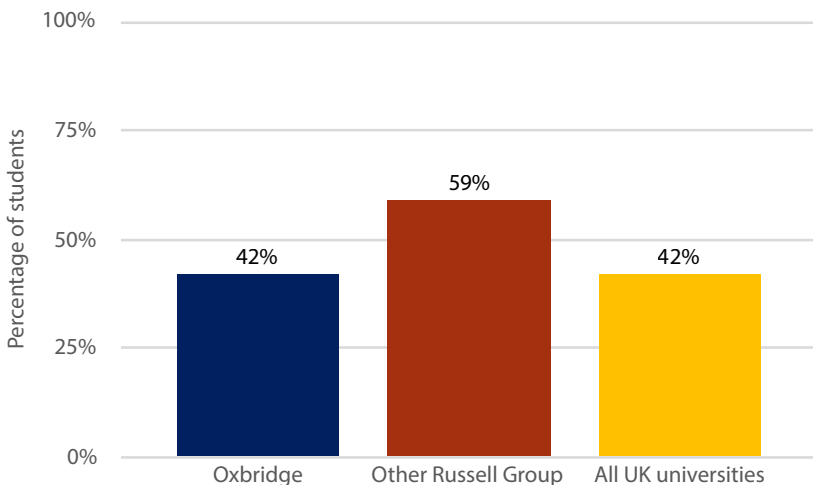
### **Percentage of students who had at least one hour per week with 0 to 5 other students**



## *ii. Large class size*

In terms of larger classes, 59% of other Russell Group students have at least one class per week with more than 100 other students in comparison to 42% of Oxbridge students, a statistically significant difference. On this question, the average UK student more closely resembles Oxbridge students than students at other Russell Group universities.

### **Percentage of students who had at least one hour per week with more than 100 students**



## 5. Feedback

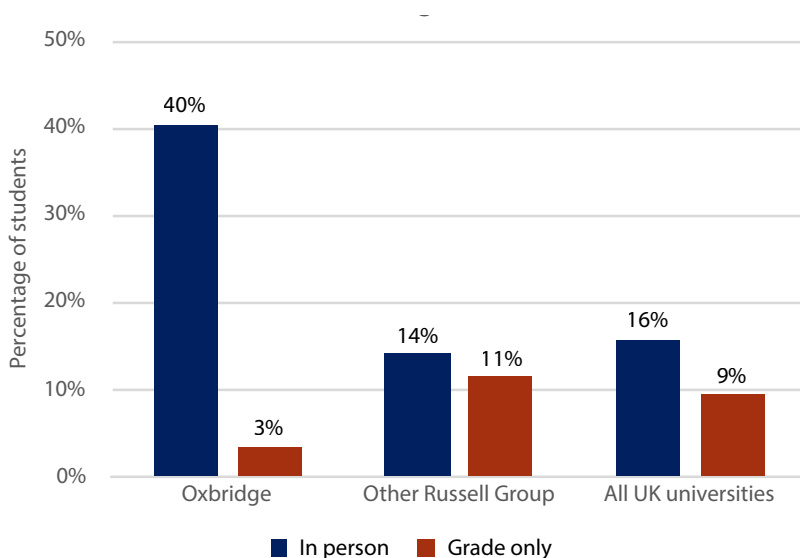
### *i. Type of feedback*

Oxbridge and other Russell Group universities differ in how they normally provide feedback on assignments.

Far more Oxbridge students (40%) than other Russell Group students (14%) or students overall (16%) report receiving feedback in person.

A smaller proportion of Oxbridge students (3%) than other Russell Group students (11%) or all UK students (9%) report receiving only a grade as feedback.

### **How do you normally receive feedback on assignments?**

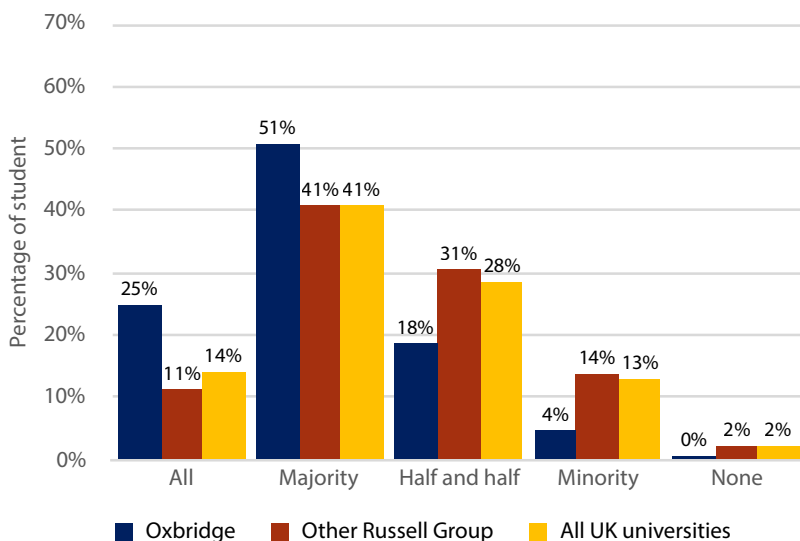


## *ii. Usefulness of feedback*

Oxbridge students differ from other Russell Group students in how useful they perceive feedback on their assignments to be.

Far more Oxbridge students (75%) than other Russell group students (52%) report that all or the majority of teaching staff provide useful feedback. Overall, 55% of students at all UK universities say that all or the majority of teaching staff provide useful feedback.

### **What proportion of teaching staff gave you useful feedback?**



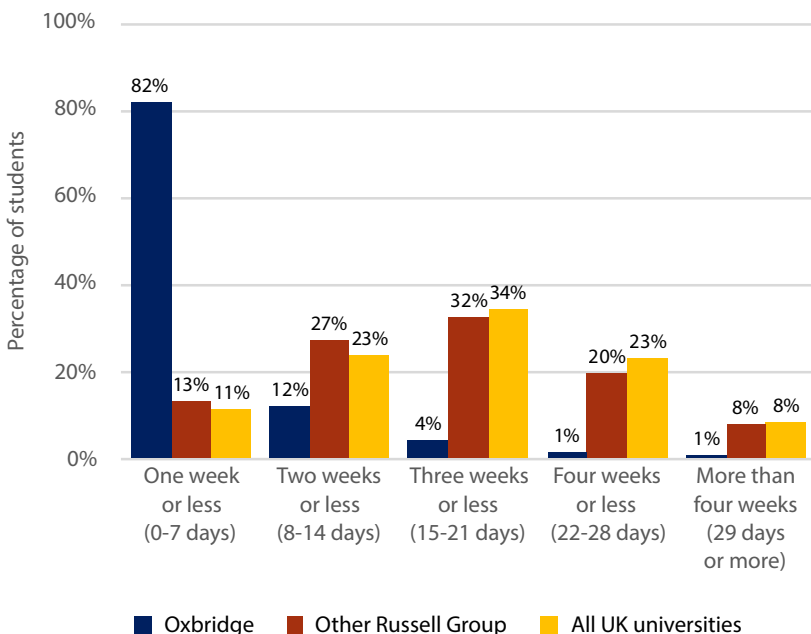


### *iii. Speed of feedback*

In terms of speed of feedback, the vast majority of Oxbridge students (82%) reported that they received feedback within one week – far more than other Russell group students (13%).

For most other Russell Group students, it takes two weeks (27%) or three weeks (32%). More than a quarter (27%) of other Russell Group students and a third (31%) of all UK students have to wait four weeks or more for feedback after handing in their work.

**What is the average time taken for your assignments to be marked and returned to you after you have handed them in?**





## 6. Teaching and learning

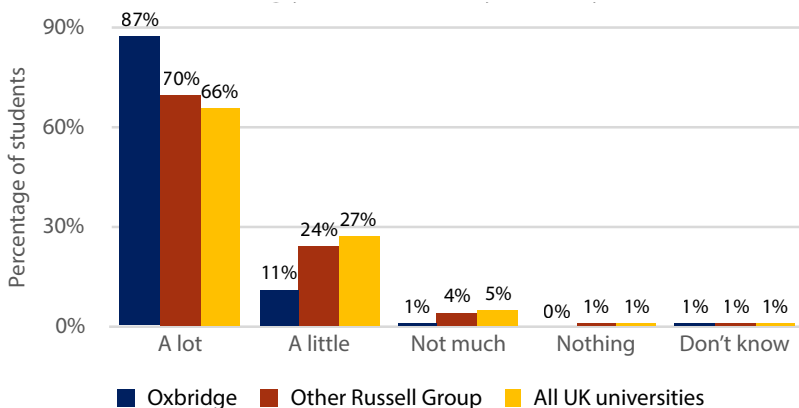
### i. Learning gain

In 2017, the *Student Academic Experience Survey* included a new question on self-perceived learning gain for the first time.<sup>12</sup> As this question has only been asked once to date, there are fewer respondents included than for other sections of this report.

Overall, the majority of all UK students (66%) report having learnt 'a lot' since starting their course, but the proportion of Oxbridge students (87%) who feel they have learnt 'a lot' is considerably higher than for other Russell group students (70%) and for students as a whole (66%).

As a result, the proportion of Oxbridge students who say they have only learnt 'a little' (11%) or 'not much' (1%) is lower than for students at other Russell Group universities (24% and 4%, respectively) or universities overall (27% and 5%, respectively).

### Since starting your course, do you feel you have learnt?



12 Tim Blackman, *What affects how much students learn?*, HEPI Policy Note 5, January 2018

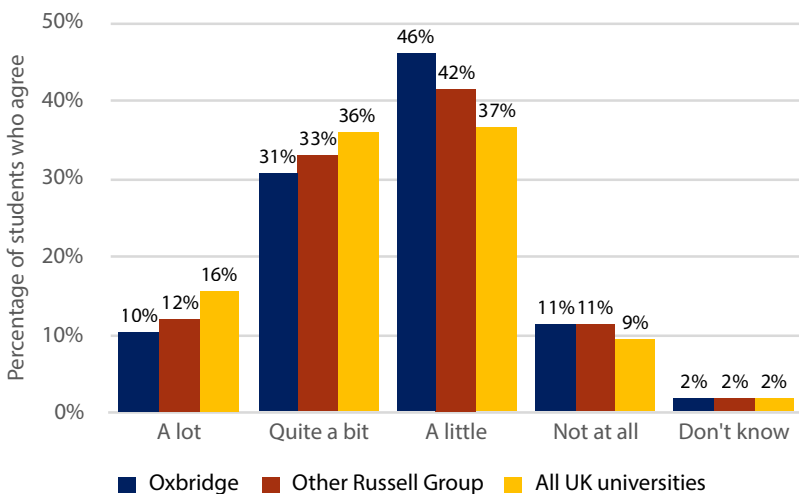
## ii. Teaching methods

There is no statistically significant difference between Oxbridge (10%) and other Russell Group students (12%) in the proportion of students who responded 'a lot' to our question on creative teaching methods.

Oxbridge and other teaching staff at other Russell Group institutions seem to use innovative and creative teaching methods to a similar extent.

The UK average (16%) for this is higher than for Russell Group universities or Oxbridge. Overall, half (52%) of all UK students say their teachers use original or creative teaching methods 'a lot' or 'quite a bit', rather more than at Oxbridge (41%) or other Russell Group students (45%).

**To what extent do you feel your teaching staff currently employ original/creative teaching methods?**



## 7. Conclusion

Oxbridge performs very strongly in the data used for this analysis. It is not possible to say precisely which defining characteristics, beyond Oxbridge's additional financial resources, are most responsible for this. But they are likely to include:

- the preparedness of Oxbridge entrants, who are drawn from better-off sections of the population in much larger numbers than from parts of society;<sup>13</sup>
- the collegiate environment, which offers possibilities for better student welfare, peer-to-peer support and secure and subsidised accommodation;
- the quality of the facilities, including excellent libraries, welfare support services and careers advice;
- a higher level of teaching intensity, with more small classes, and a strong personal tutoring system;
- diverse student and staff communities that have arrived in Oxford or Cambridge from around the world and;
- being situated in relatively prosperous and safe cities open to many international influences.

The results revealed by this new analysis are valuable in their own right but they also hold some profound lessons for policymakers. Some are specific. For example, the level of resources matters in providing a high-quality student

<sup>13</sup> Iain Martin, *Benchmarking widening participation: how should we measure and report progress?*, HEPI Policy Note 6, April 2018

experience, a collegiate environment has the potential to offer extra benefits and the total workload of some students outside Oxbridge seems to remain too low.

But illustrating the differences between Oxbridge and other UK higher education institutions also reveals a more general lesson on how higher education policy is made. It shows, above all, why we should never assume that Oxbridge is typical of our higher education system.

The personal higher education experience of our leading politicians, civil servants and commentators is notoriously limited. For example, 10 of the 14 post-war Prime Ministers studied at Oxford. One Oxford degree, PPE (Politics, Philosophy and Economics), has been particularly dominant. According to the *Guardian*:

*Monday, 13 April 2015 was a typical day in modern British politics. An Oxford University graduate in philosophy, politics and economics (PPE), Ed Miliband, launched the Labour party's general election manifesto. It was examined by the BBC's political editor, Oxford PPE graduate Nick Robinson, by the BBC's economics editor, Oxford PPE graduate Robert Peston, and by the director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, Oxford PPE graduate Paul Johnson. It was criticised by the prime minister, Oxford PPE graduate David Cameron. It was defended by the Labour shadow chancellor, Oxford PPE graduate Ed Balls.<sup>14</sup>*

This uniformity has sometimes meant parts of Westminster, Whitehall and the national media have underestimated the

14 Andy Beckett. 'PPE: the Oxford degree that runs Britain', *Guardian*, 23 February 2017  
<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/feb/23/ppe-oxford-university-degree-that-rules-britain>

extent to which Oxbridge is exceptional rather than typical of the higher education sector as a whole. While Oxbridge continues to be atypical, policies that work for these two institutions may not work so well for the higher education system as a whole – and *vice versa*.

As a country we are fortunate to have two such undeniably excellent institutions as Oxford and Cambridge, which always perform well in the main international comparisons. Other countries look at them jealously. But Oxbridge is so distinctive that policy debates which assume the same policy interventions will work across the board are likely to be suboptimal.

The fieldwork on which this report is based is the large annual student survey undertaken by HEPI and the Higher Education Academy via YouthSight. Separate YouthSight research, undertaken as part of their *Higher Expectations* work on applicants' decisions, helps to explain why students choose one university over others. Two comments collected as part of that exercise neatly capture the differences between Oxbridge and other institutions that are outlined in this report.

The first is from a student who opted not to accept an offer from Cambridge:

*I didn't feel like I could fit in well, I thought I would struggle too much.*

The second is from one who enrolled at Oxford.

*Oxford is not a place for everybody. It's very difficult to get into and requires a certain type of person to work well with the tutorial system ... I love this place with all my heart and for me*

*I couldn't see myself being anywhere else. For me this is the best university.*

These voices are a useful reminder that there is no objective hierarchy of institutions appropriate for all individuals. Rather, different institutions offer a different sort of student experience. No one type of experience is best for the rich variety of students that modern mass higher education systems seek to serve. And that is why we must protect against Oxbridge exceptionalism driving policy in suboptimal ways.



## Annex 1: The sample

Sample sizes vary with questions because not every question was asked every year. The lowest sample size was 280 for Oxbridge and 4,384 for other Russell Group students on the learning gain question, which was new in 2017. The highest was 2,583 for Oxbridge and 27,109 for other Russell Group students on the mode of feedback question. For an overview of sample sizes by Russell Group university, see Table 8.

*Table 8: Sample size per Russell Group university excluding Oxbridge*

University	Count	Percentage of all Russell Group	University	Count	Percentage of all Russell Group
Nottingham; The University of	1334	7%	York; The University of	832	5%
Manchester; University of	1237	7%	Durham University	830	5%
Birmingham; The University of	1040	6%	Bristol; The University of	826	5%
Leeds; The University of	1038	6%	Warwick; The University of	808	4%
Sheffield; The University of	1035	6%	Newcastle University	743	4%
Cardiff University	927	5%	Liverpool; The University of	739	4%
Southampton; The University of	914	5%	University College London (UCL)	726	4%
Edinburgh; The University of	896	5%	King's College London	677	4%

University	Count	Percentage of all Russell Group	University	Count	Percentage of all Russell Group
Queen Mary; University of London	863	5%	Imperial College of Science; Technology & Medicine	504	3%
Exeter; The University of	853	5%	Queen's University Belfast	501	3%
Glasgow; The University of	850	5%	London School of Economics and Political Science	181	1%

## **Annex 2: Statistical analysis**

The data points for the numerical dependent variables (workload and contact hour) are not normally distributed, since some students report very high or very low scores. Therefore, two independent two-group Mann-Whitney U Tests were conducted to compare the responses of students at Oxbridge and other Russell Group universities. This test compares the median of Oxbridge and other Russell Group universities, rather than the mean, since the mean is more easily influenced by extreme scores. The Mann-Whitney U Test gives a measure of whether the difference in scores between two groups is so big that we can be confident that it is not just due to random fluctuations.

The categorical dependent variables were analysed with both a Chi square test of independence and a two-sample z-test for proportions. The Chi-square test indicates whether the variable of interest (e.g. course satisfaction) and university group are statistically significantly dependent. The z-test provides a measure of how different the proportion of Oxbridge and other Russell Group students are. For life worth and learning gain, the assumptions for Chi square was not fulfilled, and for mode of feedback and class size, we were specifically interested in certain answer categories. In these cases, we conducted a two-sample z-test for proportions only.

All the analysis was conducted in the statistical software R. For a copy of the R script, please contact the authors. For a summary of the results of the inferential statistical tests please see Table 9.

*Table 9: Summary of descriptive and inferential statistics*

Sub-domain	Oxbridge	Other Russell Group	Inferential test	Test statistic	Significant at alpha-level 0.05
Course quality	59%	31%	Chi-square, z-test	$\chi^2 = 408.97$ , $df = 3$ , $p < .01$ ; $z = 20.14$ , $p < .01$	Yes
Right course choice	5%	8%	Chi-square, z-test	$\chi^2 = 106.01$ , $df = 3$ , $p < .01$ ; $z = -3.76$ , $p < .01$	Yes
Perceived value for money	77%	46%	Chi-square, z-test	$\chi^2 = 839.85$ , $df = 4$ , $p < .01$ ; $z = 24.13$ , $p < .01$	Yes
Life satisfaction	57%	47%	z-test	$z = 5.86$ , $p < .01$	Yes
Life worth	57%	47%	z-test	$z = 5.70$ , $p < .01$	Yes
Happiness	45%	41%	Chi-square, z-test	$\chi^2 = 9.58$ , $df = 10$ , $p = 0.48$ ; $z = 2.04$ , $p = 0.02$	Yes
Anxiety	14%	14%	Chi-square, z-test	$\chi^2 = 16.78$ , $df = 10$ , $p = 0.08$ ; $z = 0.52$ , $p = 0.3$	No
Workload	median = 43 hours	median = 29 hours	Mann-Whitney U test	$W = 4,447,300$ ; $p < .01$	Yes
Contact hours	median = 14 hours	median = 14 hours	Mann-Whitney U test	$W = 14,791,000$ ; $p = 0.78$	No
Class size: 0-5 students	96%	36%	z-test	$z = 31.28$ , $p < .01$	Yes

Sub-domain	Oxbridge	Other Russell Group	Inferential test	Test statistic	Significant at alpha-level 0.05
Class size: >100 students	36%	59%	z-test	$z = -7.62, p < .01$	Yes
Mode of feedback: in person	40%	14%	z-test	$z = 33.89, p < .01$	Yes
Mode of feedback: grade only	3%	11%	z-test	$z = -12.81, p < .01$	Yes
Usefulness of feedback	75%	52%	Chi-square, z-test	$X^2 = 349.82, df = 4, p < .01; z = 15.90, p < .01$	Yes
Speed of feedback: one week	82%	13%	Chi-square, z-test	$X^2 = 2590.1, df = 4, p < .01; z = 50.69, p < .01$	Yes
Learning gain	87%	70%	z-test	$z = 6.30, p < .01$	Yes
Teaching methods	10%	12%	Chi-square, z-test	$X^2 = 2590.1, df = 4, p < .01; z = -1.15, p = 0.12$	No



## **Trustees**

Professor Sir Ivor Crewe (Chair)

Sir David Bell

Dame Sandra Burslem

Professor Sir Peter Scott

Professor Dame Helen Wallace

## **Advisory Board**

Mary Curnock Cook

Professor Dame Julia Goodfellow

Professor Carl Lygo

Professor David Maguire

Professor Sally Mapstone

## **Partners**

Advance HE

BPP University

Ellucian

Elsevier

Jisc

Kaplan

Mills & Reeve LLP

Oracle

Pearson

PwC

Times Higher Education

Unite Students

UPP Group Limited

## **President**

Bahram Bekhradnia

We have conducted a new analysis to compare the student experience at the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge to the student experience at other Russell Group universities and to students at all UK universities.

The results show that, compared to other Russell Group students as well as students across all UK universities, Oxbridge students:

- are more satisfied with their courses;
- are less likely to wish they had chosen another course;
- are more likely to say they receive good value for money;
  - have higher life satisfaction;
- are more likely to feel their lives are worthwhile;
  - are happier;
- have a higher workload (across a range of disciplines);
- spend more hours per week studying outside of class;
- are more likely to have classes with 0 to 5 other students;
  - receive more useful feedback;
  - receive faster feedback; and
  - believe they are learning more.

HEPI was established in 2002 to influence the higher education debate with evidence.

We are UK-wide, independent and non-partisan.

May 2018 ISBN 978-1-908240-39-2

Higher Education Policy Institute

99 Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 6JX

Tel: 01865 284450 [www.hepi.ac.uk](http://www.hepi.ac.uk)

Printed in the UK by Oxuniprint, Oxford

Typesetting: Steve Billington, [www.jarmanassociates.co.uk](http://www.jarmanassociates.co.uk)