

Students or data subjects?

**What students think about
university data security**

Rachel Hewitt and Michael Natzler



HEPI Report 122

About the Authors

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Please note: Figures may not sum due to rounding.

Introduction

Higher education institutions collect and hold huge amounts of data on students, whether for regulatory purposes or to gather information about students' experiences. This is only likely to increase with further government focus on measuring universities' performance through metrics and universities increasing their use of data internally for their own analysis and monitoring.

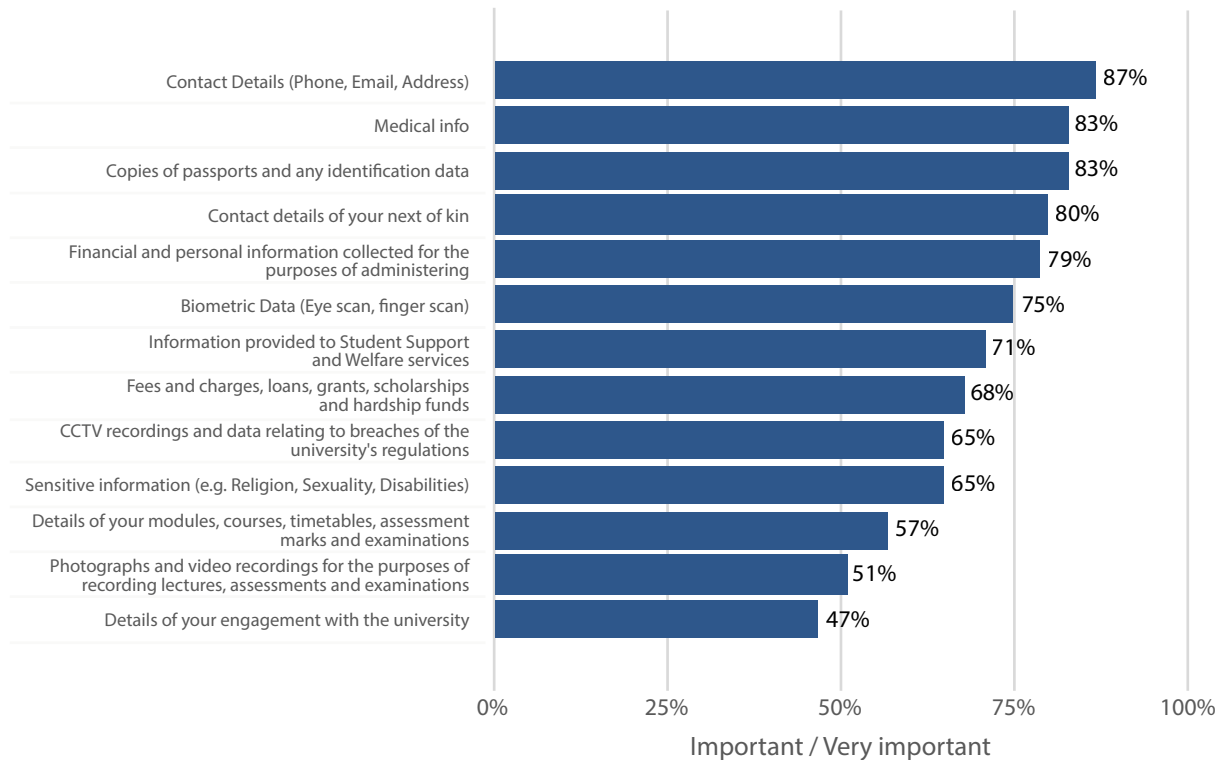
However, young people tend to be more relaxed about providing data to a range of sources than older people. Research by the Open Data Institute shows one in five 18-to-24-year olds feel comfortable sharing their date of birth with an organisation they do not know, compared with only 8% of 45-to-54-year olds.¹ Meanwhile, universities are facing increasing challenges in keeping the data they hold secure, with several universities reporting data breaches.²

How comfortable do students feel about the data that higher education institutions hold on them and the uses that this information is put to? In this report we explore students' views on data security, learning analytics and the information universities hold on students' health and wellbeing.

Students' priorities on data protection

Identification and the most personal data, such as copies of passports (83%) and contact details – both personal (87%) and familial (80%) – and medical information (83%), emerge as the types of information which students consider most important to protect. Of all the areas, data around a student's engagement with their university comes out as the lowest priority, but almost half (47%) of students still believe it is important to protect this information.

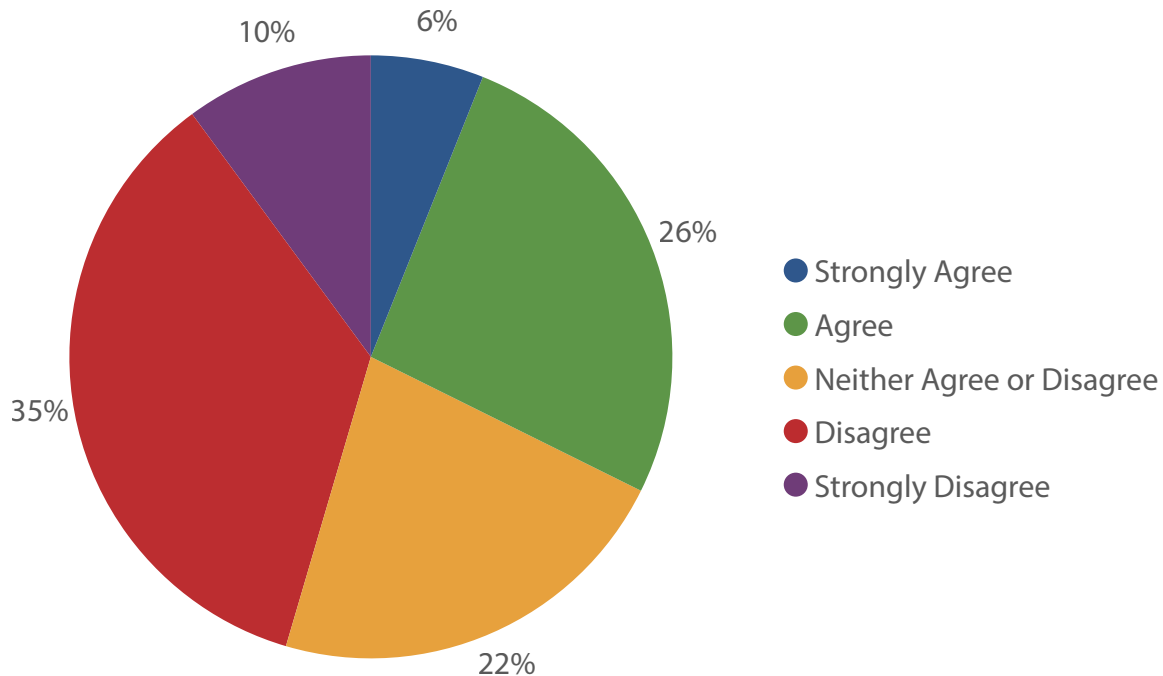
Which of the following personal data stored by your institution do you find the most important for the university to protect?



Student awareness of data security

Students' confidence in their higher education institutions to keep their data safe is likely to be related to how well they understand the uses their data is put to. Only 32% of students surveyed agree they are aware of how their institution handles their personal data, compared to 45% who disagree and 22% who neither agree nor disagree.

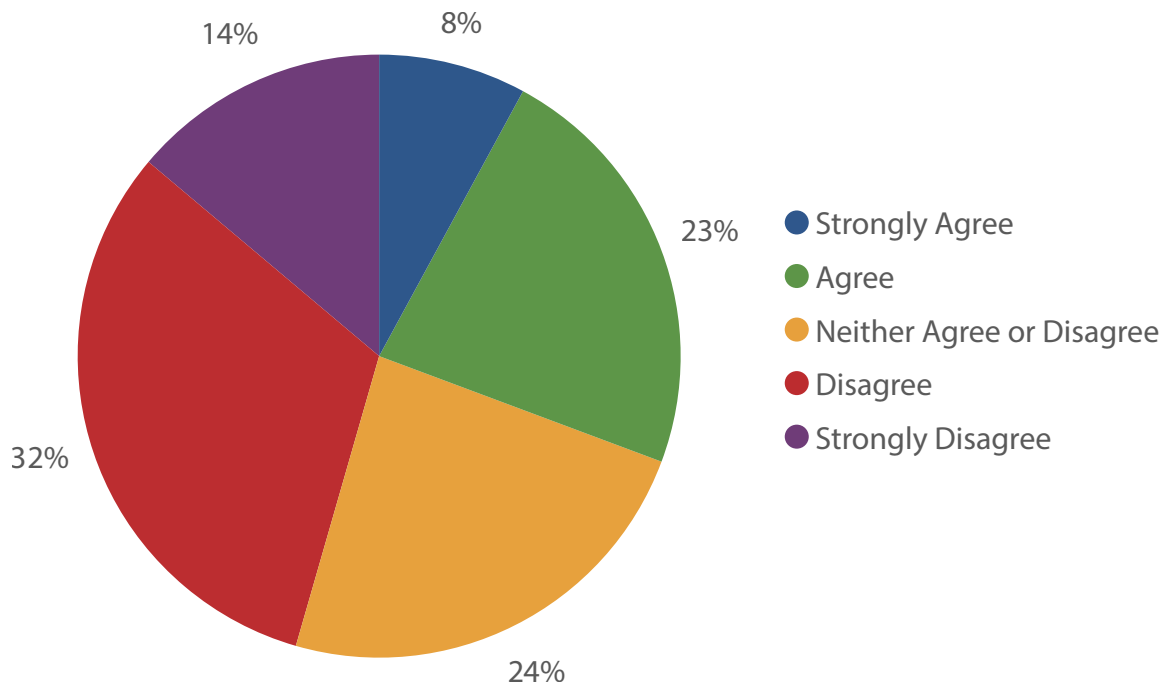
I am aware of how my institution handles my personal data



Student awareness of how data is used

Universities are required to collect large amounts of information about students upon enrolment, as a statutory requirement by the Office for Students in England, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, the Scottish Funding Council and the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland. In order to comply with the General Data Protection Regulations, higher education institutions must provide students with detailed information on how their data will be used, through a collection notice. However, the students we surveyed do not feel they have been provided with clear information on how their personal data are used. Just 31% feel their institution has clearly explained how their personal data are used and stored, compared to 46% who disagree and 24% who neither agree nor disagree. This could be related to how well students engage with the materials made available to them on data protection or could represent a failing by institutions to provide this information accessibly.

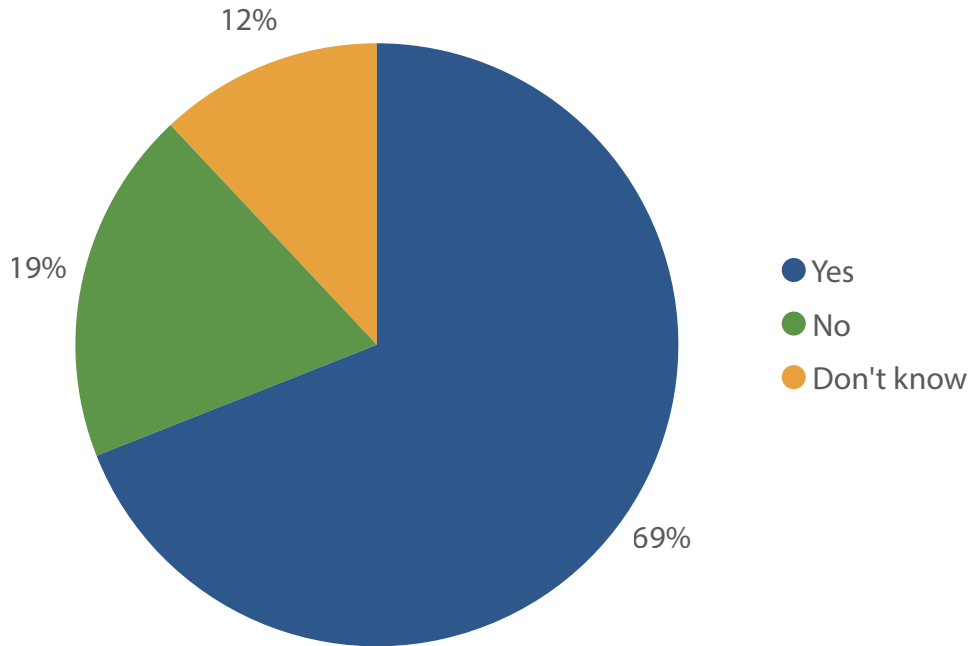
It was clearly explained by the institution how my personal data are stored and used when enrolling



Data security challenges

As data breaches become more frequent, universities face additional challenges in keeping students' data secure. When we asked students whether they are concerned about rumours of universities facing data security issues, 69% of students stated they are concerned. Around one-fifth of students (19%) are unconcerned and 12% are unsure.

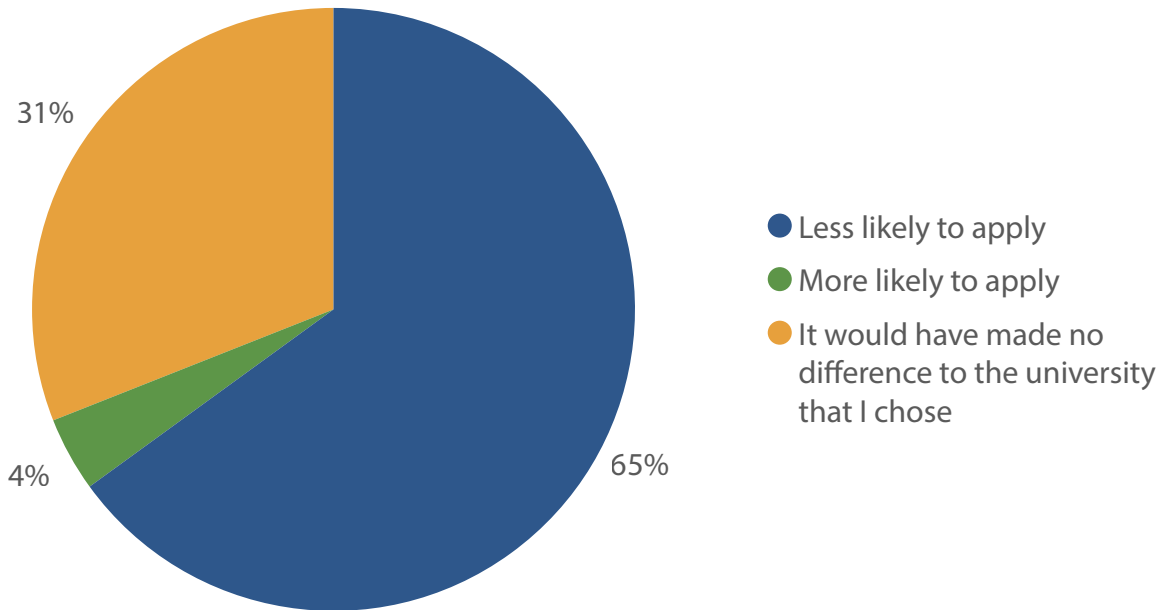
Are you concerned by rumours that some universities are facing data security issues?



Institutional data security reputation

Similarly, when asked if data security concerns would have made them less likely to apply to their university, 65% of students said a poor security reputation would have made them less likely to apply, compared to around a third (31%) who said it would have made no difference and 4% who said it would have made them more likely to apply.

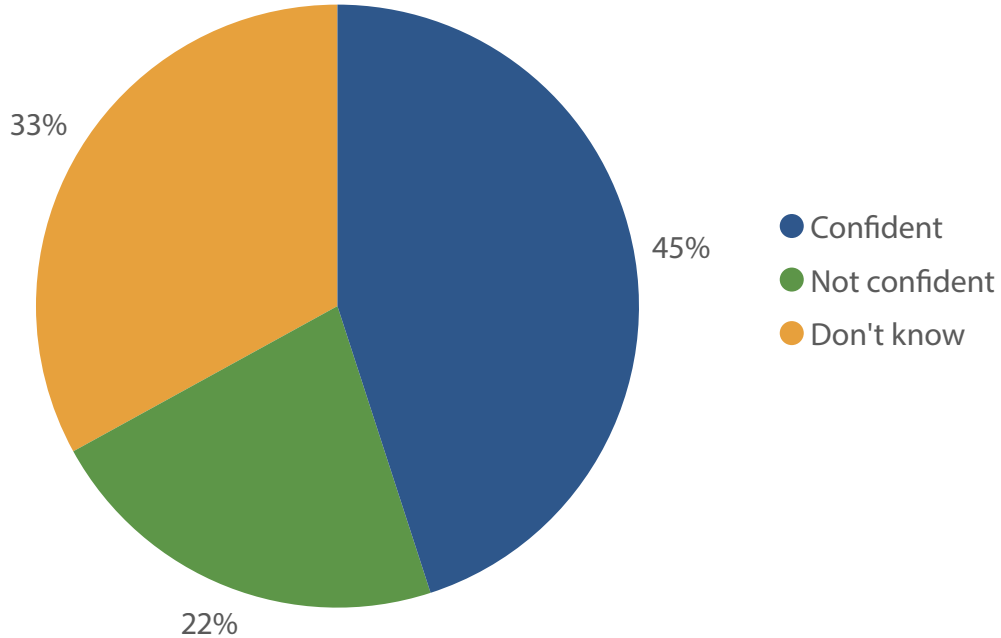
If you were made aware that a university had a poor data security reputation before you applied, would this make you:



Data security confidence

Under half of students feel their university will keep their data safe: only 45% of students feel confident that their institution will keep their personal data secure and private, while 22% are not confident. A third (33%) are unsure.

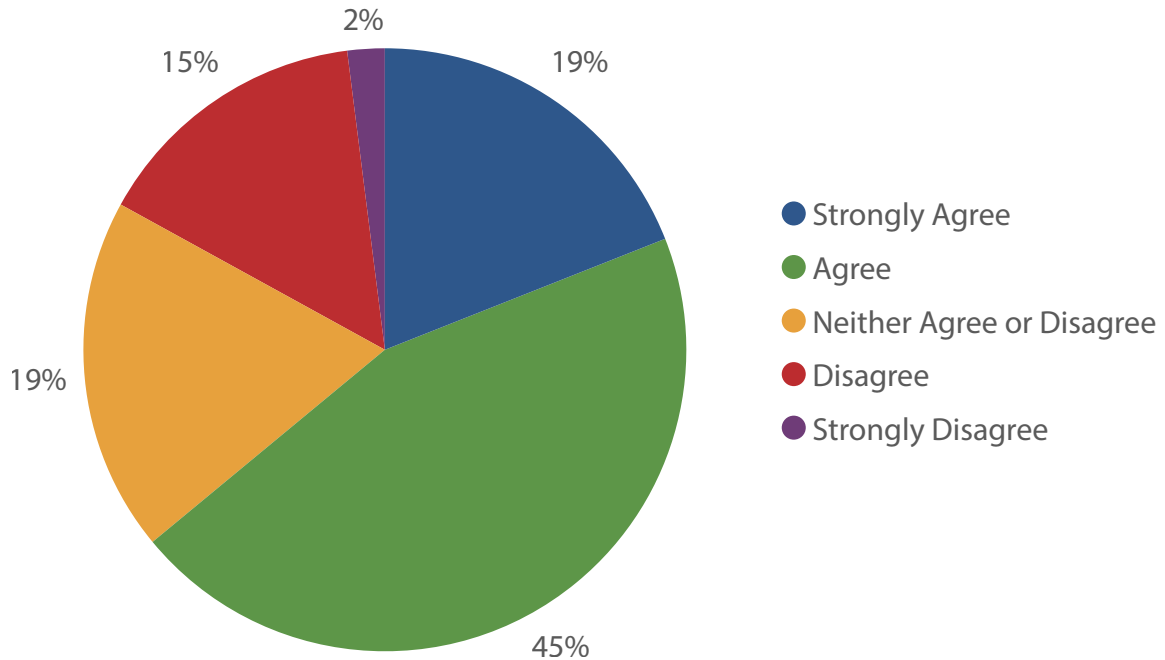
How confident are you that your institution will keep your personal data secure and private?



Personal data security

Students feel confident in how they share their personal information online more generally: 64% of students say that when sharing personal information online, they check to see if the source is trustworthy and secure. Just 17% said they do not do this and 19% said they neither agree nor disagree with the statement offered.

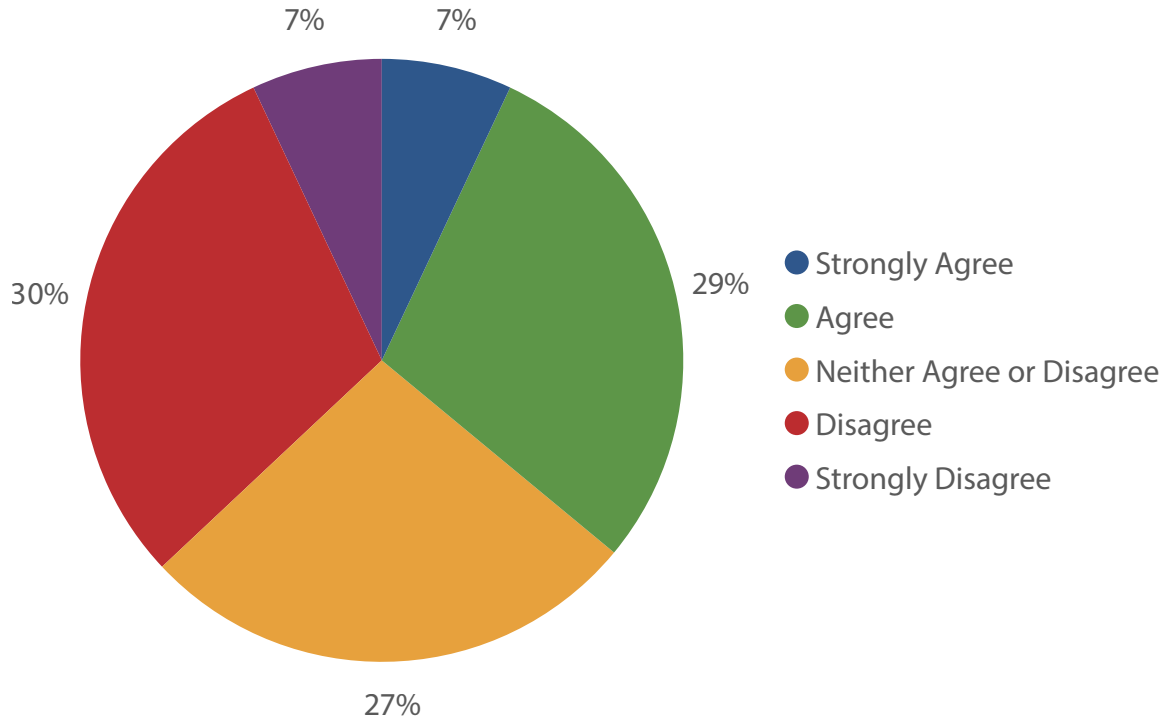
**Whenever I input my personal information anywhere online,
I check to see if it is trustworthy and secure**



Student knowledge of data privacy and ethics

Students were split in their knowledge of data privacy and ethics news, with 36% agreeing that they keep up-to-date with developments in data privacy and ethics, 37% disagreeing and 27% neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

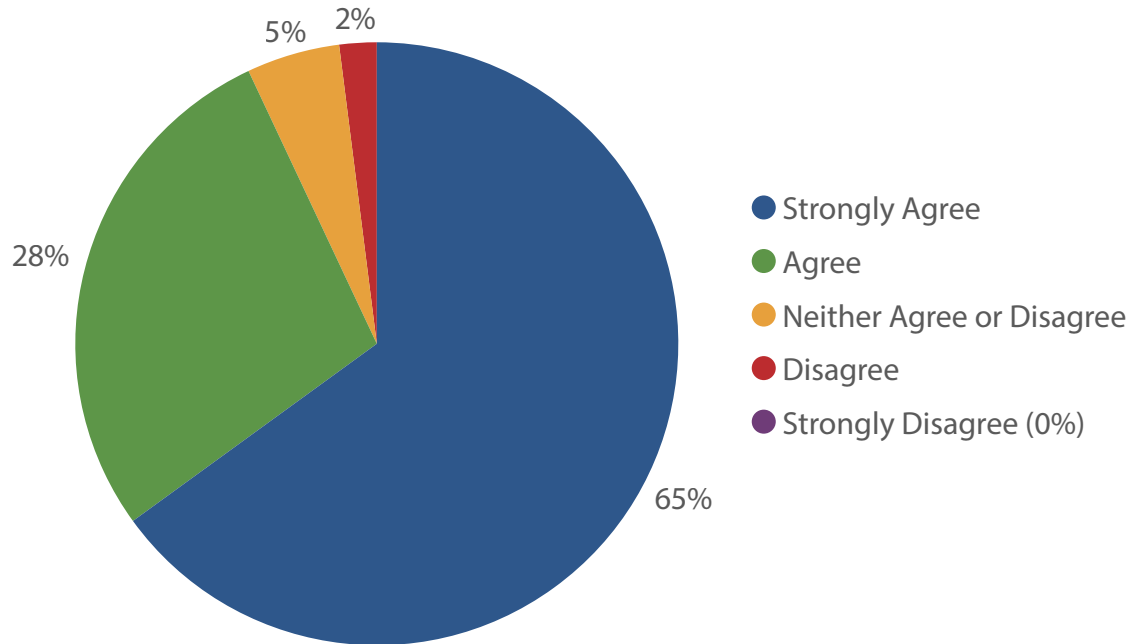
I keep up-to-date with developments in data privacy and ethics



Students' rights to view stored personal data

The new General Data Protection Regulations, which came into place in May 2018, allow individuals to have much greater control about how their data are used, including strengthening their right to see what data are held on them and to request these data are deleted. Students are overwhelmingly supportive of this legal position: 93% agree they should have the right to view any personal information their university stores about them, 5% neither agree nor disagree and only 2% disagree.

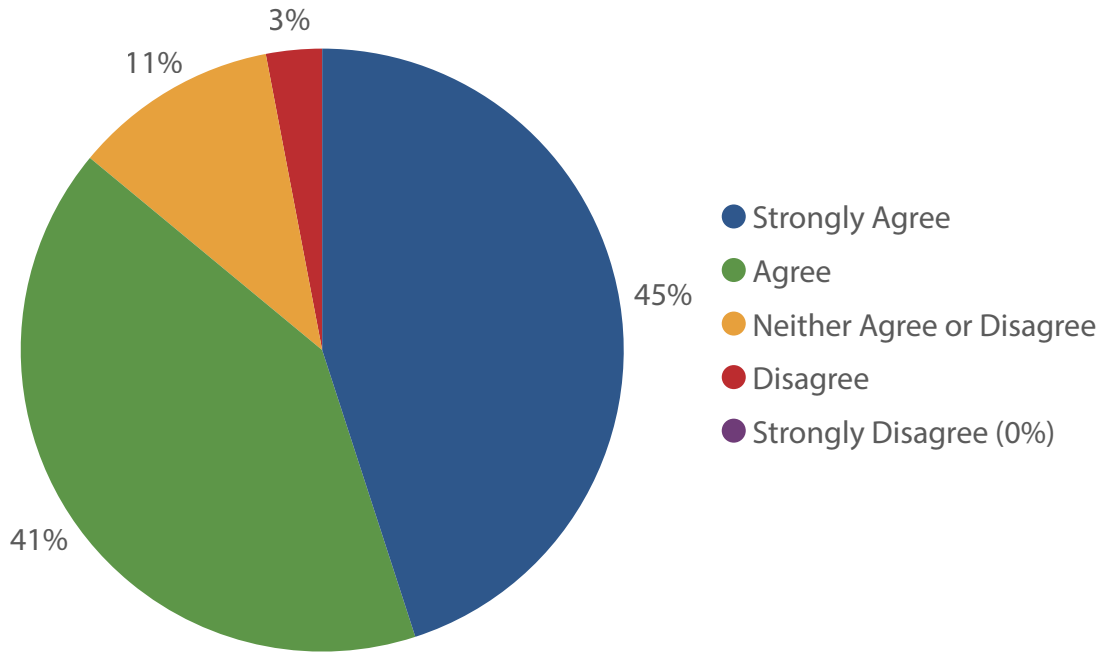
I should have the right to view any personal data that the institution may store about me



Students' rights to delete stored personal data

When asked if they should have the right to delete any personal data the institution holds about them, students feel similarly, with 86% agreeing, 11% neither agreeing nor disagreeing and 3% disagreeing. It is worth noting that this does not tally with what students are able to do. While they are able to request that some of the data universities hold on them is deleted, any that is held for statutory purposes and passed on to the Higher Education Statistics Agency, the Office for Students or the funding agencies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland cannot be deleted.

I should have the right to delete any personal data that the institution may store about me

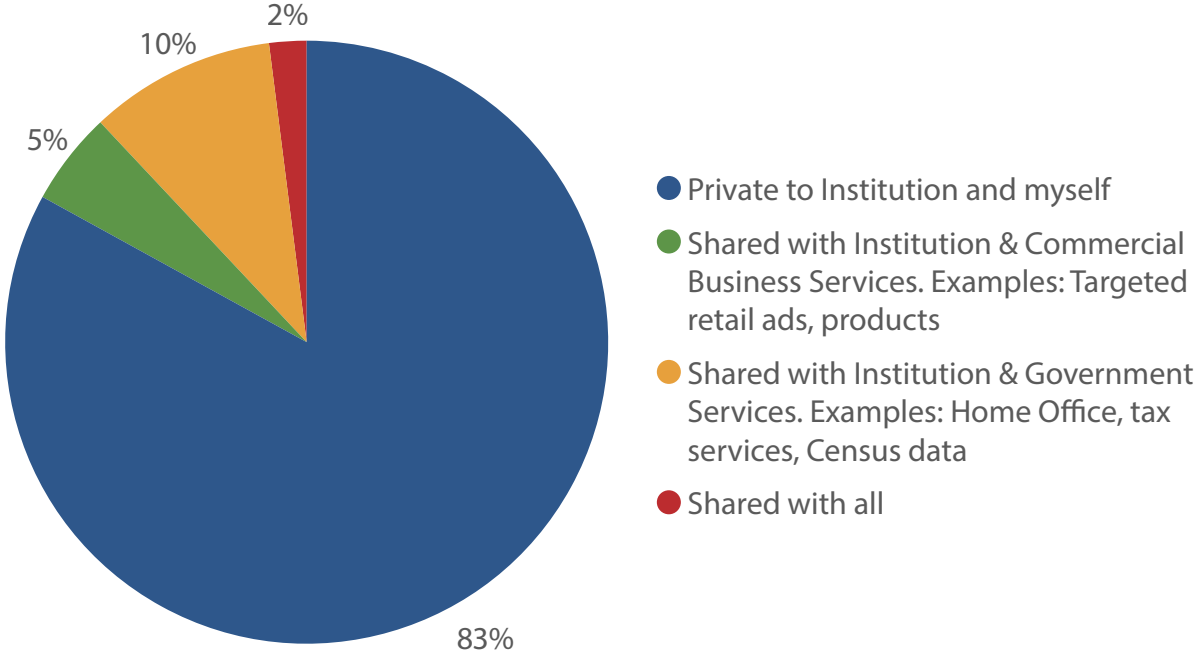


Health, mental health and wellbeing

Some of the most sensitive information higher education institutions hold about students is data on their health, mental health and wellbeing. It is important for universities to gather information on these issues as they grapple with the current crisis in young people's mental health and policymakers expect institutions to help students facing challenges.

Students do not want their health information shared widely. The majority of students (83%) say they expect their medical information to be kept private to their institution and themselves. Just 5% say they would expect for it to be shared with commercial and business services, 10% for it to be shared with government services and 2% for the information to be shared more widely.

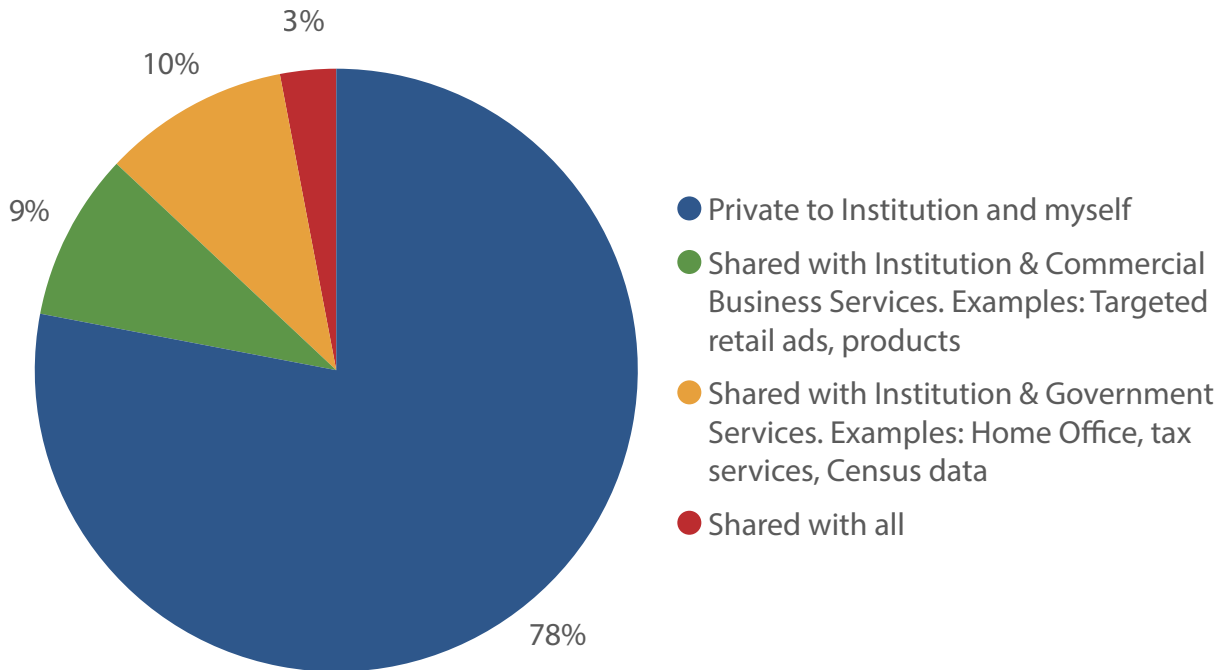
**Which of the following personal data would you expect to be kept private to the institution, and which would you expect to be shared with external organisations?
Medical information**



Expectations on sharing data with student support and welfare services

Similarly, when asked about information provided to student support and welfare services, 78% say they expect the information to be kept private between them and their institution. Only 9% say they expect the information to be shared with commercial services, 10% with government services and 3% with all.

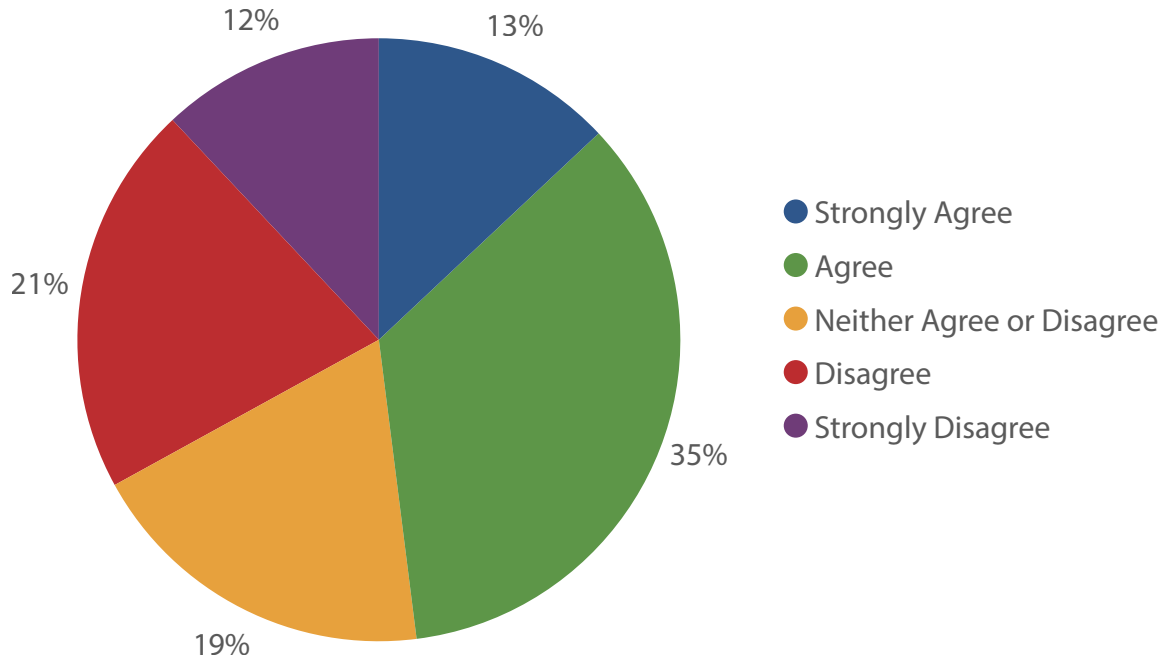
**Which of the following personal data would you expect to be kept private to the institution, and which would you expect to be shared with external organisations?
Information provided to student support and welfare services**



Mental health disclosure

When it comes to sharing health or wellbeing information with a student's parents or guardians, almost half (48%) of respondents say it would be fine for institutions to do so. A further 19% said they neither agree nor disagree and a third (33%) disagree. This tallies with findings from the 2019 HEPI / Advance HE *Student Academic Experience Survey*, which, when asking about extreme circumstances, found two-thirds (66%) of students were happy for universities to contact their parents or guardians if they were worried about a student's mental health.³

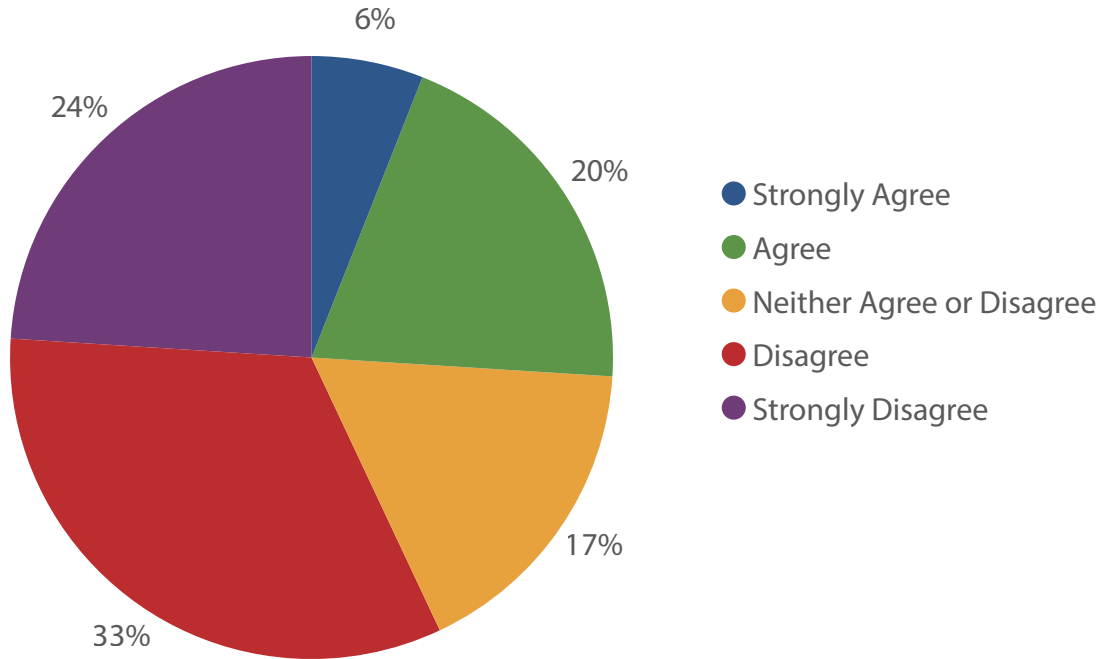
I would be fine with institutions informing my parent / guardian of health / wellbeing issues I am having at my institution



Social media

A quarter of students (26%) say they are comfortable with their higher education institution reviewing their social media posts, if it allows them to better identify and target struggling students with wellbeing support services. The majority of students (57%) do not feel comfortable with this and 17% neither agree nor disagree.

I would be fine with institutions reviewing my social media posts if it meant improving wellbeing support services catered to me and others, e.g. identifying traits of succeeding or struggling students

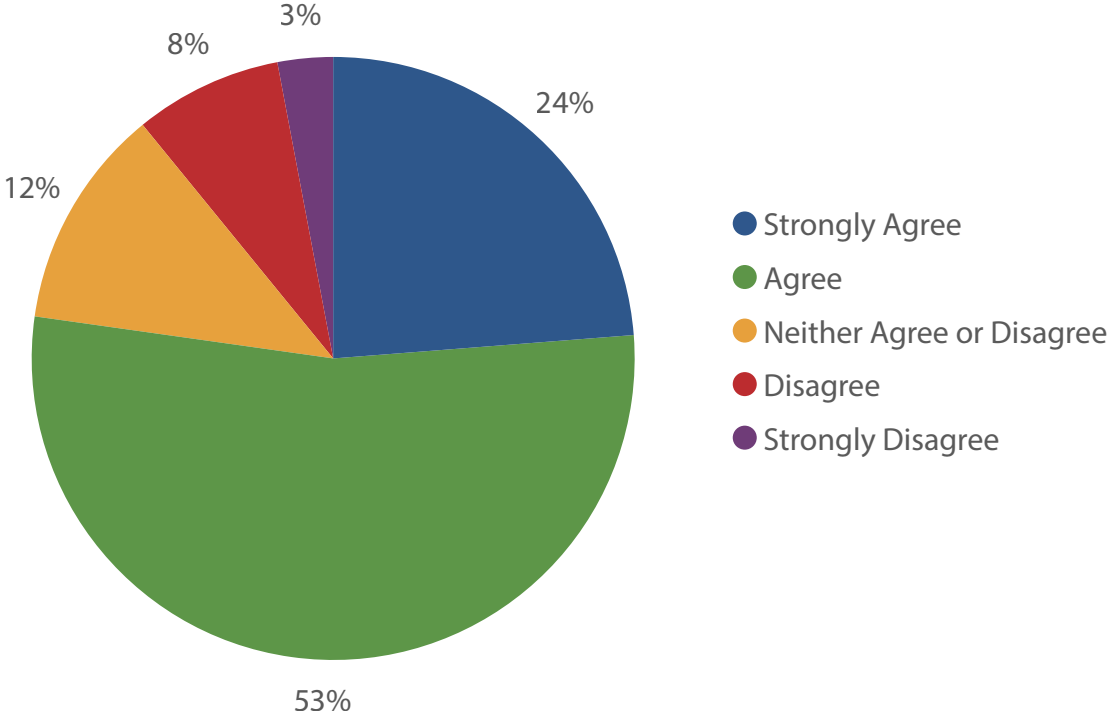


Learning analytics

Learning analytics use data about students and their activities to help institutions understand and improve learning and teaching. Students generate vast amounts of data which includes accessing university buildings, logging into online learning platforms and checking books out from libraries. The key idea driving learning analytics is that through aggregating and reading this data, systems can draw out patterns and correlations that can provide insight for learners and instructors. These insights can be acted upon in the form of feedback, recommendations and interventions and enable educators to move closer towards a more customised learning experience.

Over three-quarters of students (78%) feel comfortable with their grade data and course interaction being used to predict performance of future students. More students are undecided (12%) than opposed to this idea (11%).

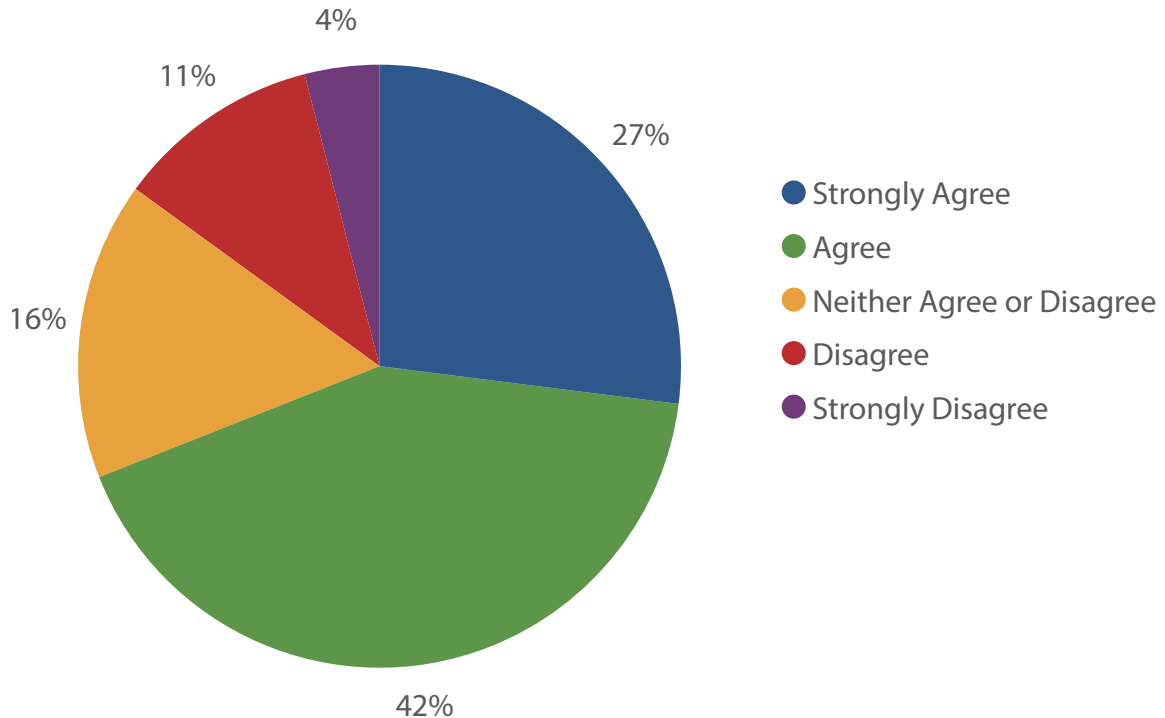
I would be fine with my grade data and course interaction being anonymously used to predict students' performance in future, e.g. if they succeed or drop out



Accessing past students' grades

Over two-thirds of students (69%) support access to anonymised past students' grades to measure their own progress. Only 14% of students are opposed to this idea, with 16% undecided on their position.

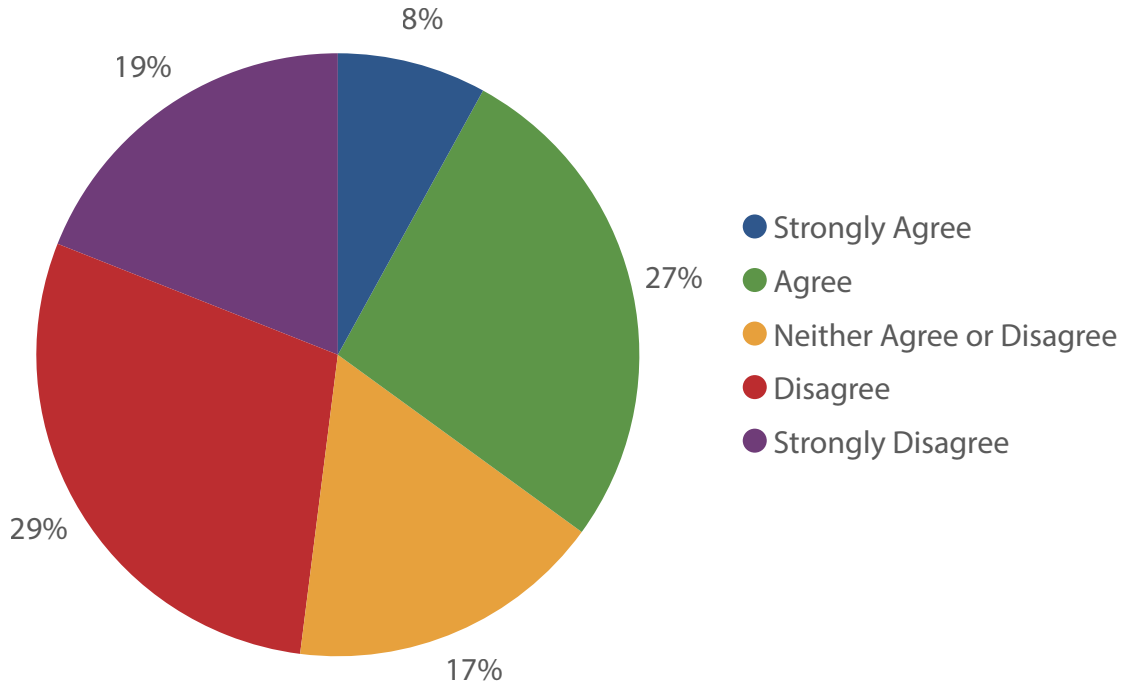
I would want to be able to view other past anonymous students' grades and course progress to compare against mine, e.g. 'Other students in the past have got a 2:2 with your results'



Academic disclosure

Significantly fewer students are comfortable with their parents or guardians being contacted about academic performance compared to mental health issues. Almost half of students (48%) are opposed to the idea that parents or guardians might know about academic performance issues at university, compared to only a third (33%) of students who are uncomfortable with their parents being contacted about mental health issues. The data show that 35% were supportive of parents or guardians being contacted about academic performance and 17% do not take a stance on this issue.

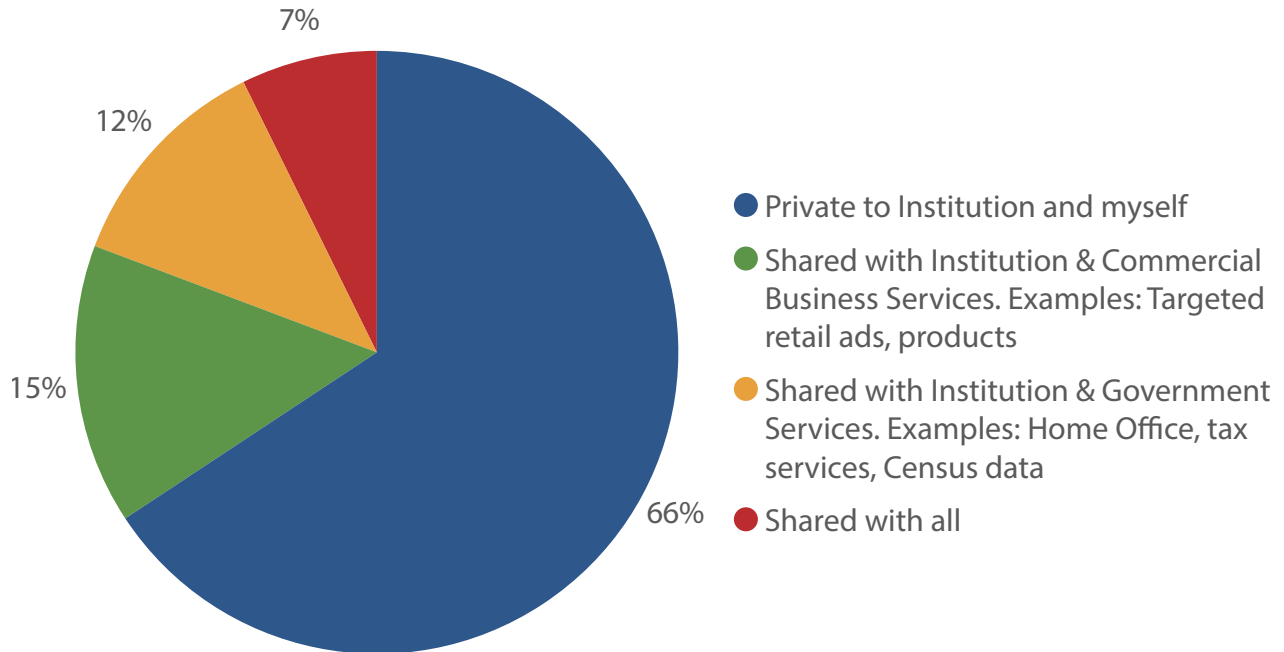
I would be fine with institutions informing my parent / guardian of academic performance issues I am having at my institution



University engagement

Two-thirds (66%) of students expect details of their engagement with the university not to be shared outside of the student-university relationship and 27% expect it to be shared more widely with government and commercial business services. Just 7% expect it to be shared more widely.

Expectation of who can see details of your engagement with the university

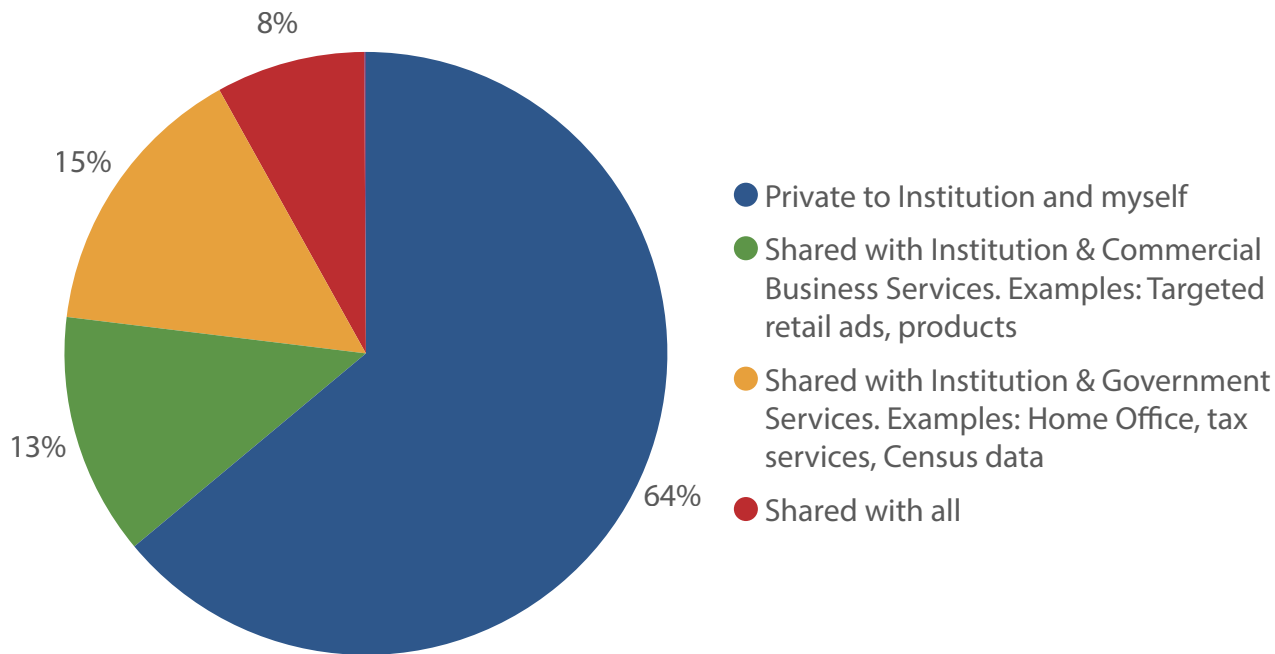


Course information

Almost two-thirds of students (64%) expect details of modules, assessment marks and examinations to be limited to the student-university relationship, 13% expect it to be shared with businesses and 15% with government services. Just 8% expected it to be shared more widely.

These responses show that students are generally willing for their data to be used to help themselves and other students, but are hesitant about parties outside of that environment being able to access and use their data.

Privacy expectations: Details of your modules, courses, timetables, assessment marks and examinations



Limitations of learning analytics

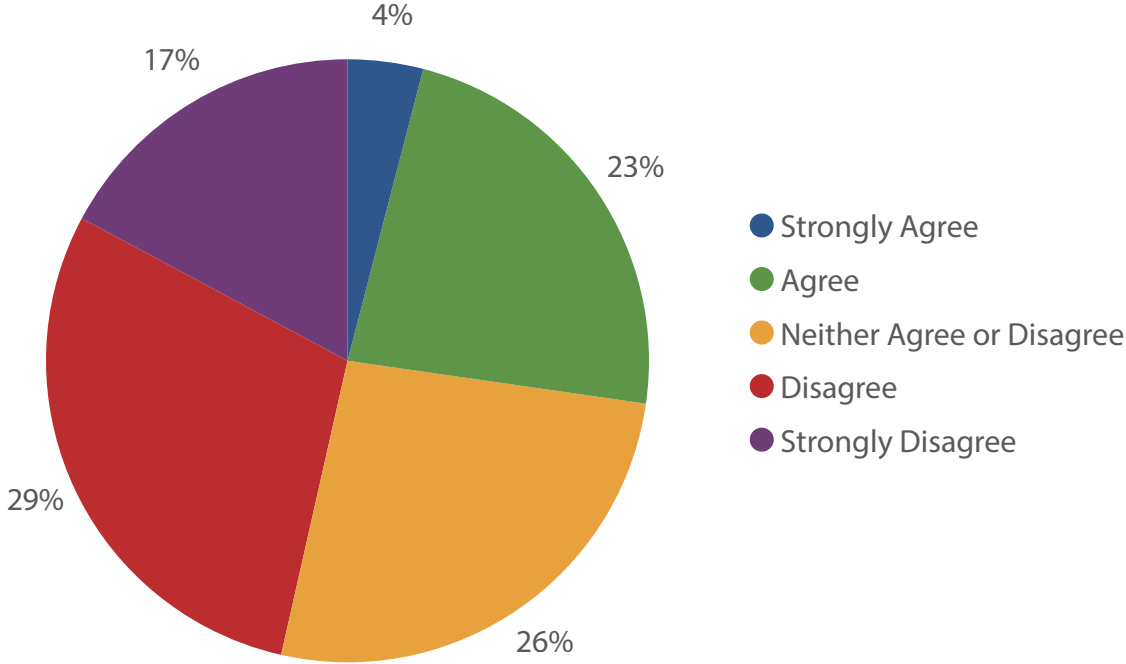
Learning analytics, like those used to track and enhance mental wellbeing support, undoubtedly have potential. However, they also face significant limitations and are highly complex. At the most fundamental level, the data points can be misleading: six hours between checking in and out of the library could be a serious session of work or six hours talking to friends. Similarly, library books taken out might not be opened and some subjects demand time spent offline where digital footprints are not left behind, for example reading literature for English or completing an Engineering worksheet. In addition, there is a high initial cost of introducing learning analytics. It is necessary to find data analysts with a knowledge of pedagogy, and a high level of digital literacy is required from both staff and students.

The Society for Learning Analytics Research (SoLAR) ran a session where professionals shared their experiences of the challenges and issues faced when introducing learning analytics. One issue which stands out is the necessity for IT and learning and teaching departments to work together closely. There are also concerns that tracking a student's academic trajectory against that of other students may have a detrimental effect on student wellbeing.⁴ Educause highlight the concern that learning analytics may drive students to pursue credentials over their passions.⁵ On top of these issues, a 2018 paper which analysed over 250 papers on learning analytics in higher education found that not only is there little evidence to show that learning analytics have driven improvements in student learning outcomes, support and teaching, but also that they are rarely deployed ethically.⁶

External organisations

Nearly half of students (46%) are opposed to their data being used by external companies for the sake of improving advertising and product placement, while similar proportions were unsure (26%) and open to the idea (27%).

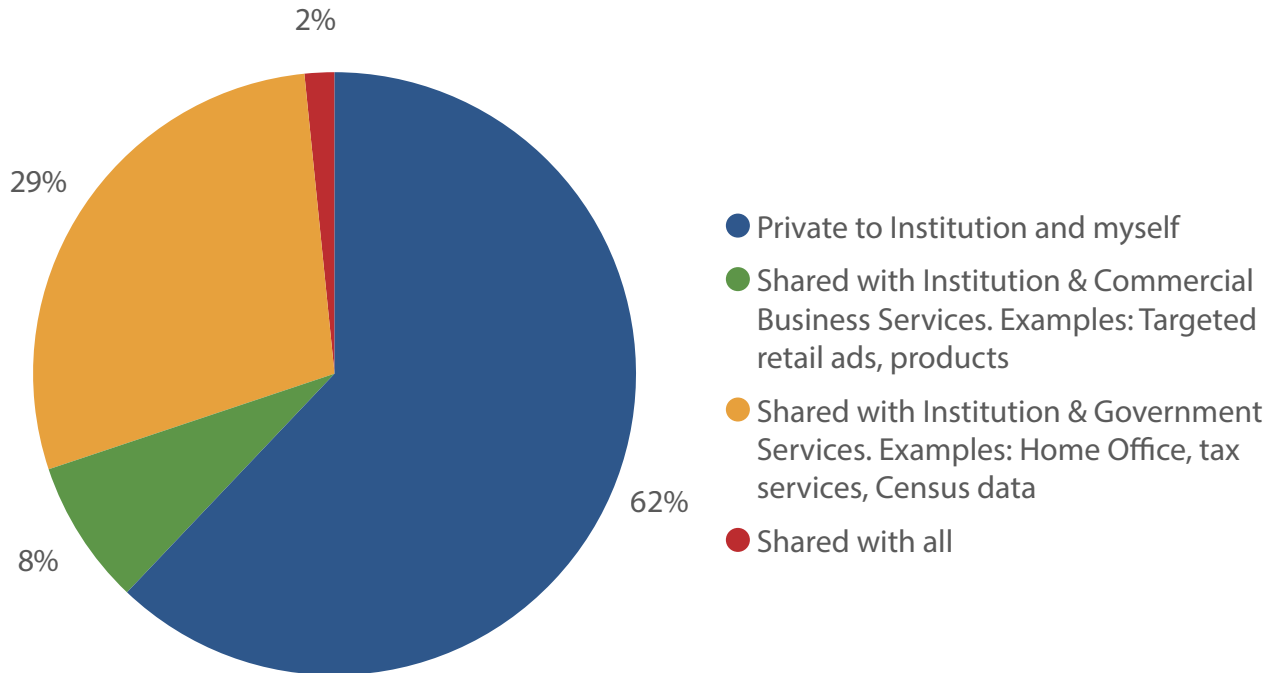
I am comfortable with business corporations using my personal data to better cater business products to myself, e.g. shopping recommendations, targeted advertising



Administrative financial information

The majority (62%) of students expect their financial and personal information to be kept private between themselves and their institutions. Less than a third (28%) expected Government services would have access, 8% expected it to be shared with the commercial sector and just 2% expected that it would be shared further.

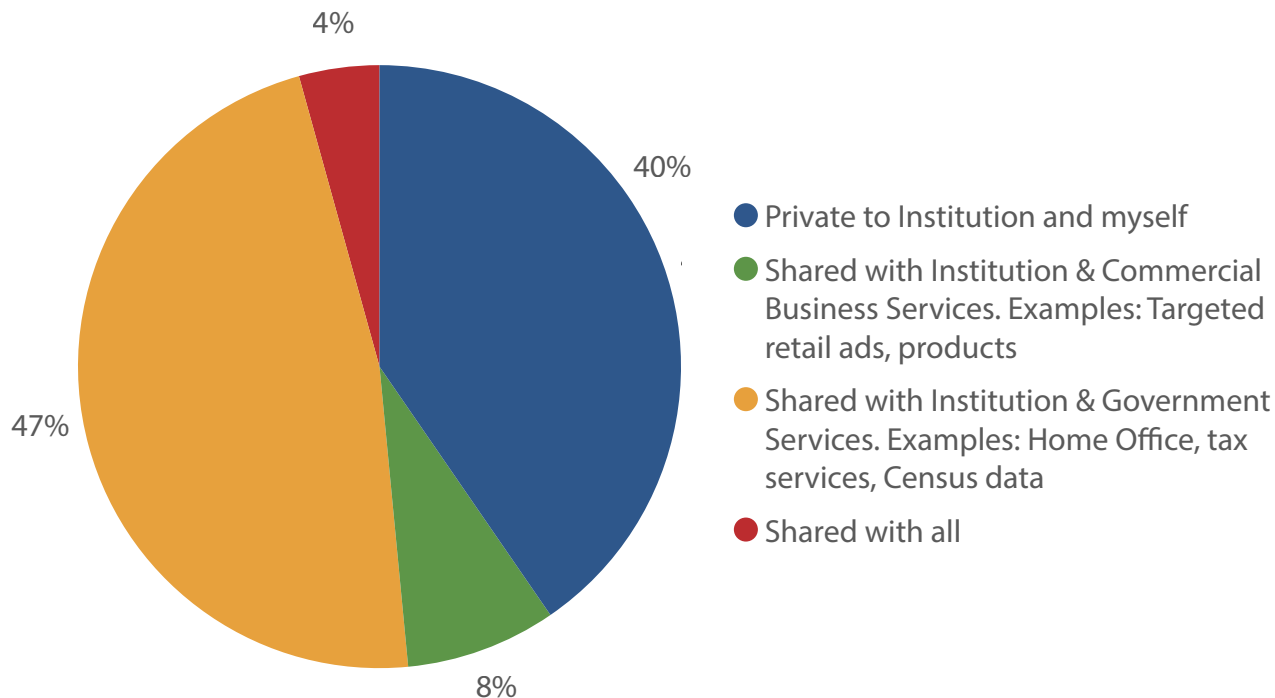
Financial and personal information collected for the purposes of administration



Fees and funding

Student opinion was split between the belief that monetary issues should be private to the institution (41%) and shared with government services (47%). Only small proportions thought this information would be public knowledge (4%) or shared with the commercial sector (8%).

Fees and charges, loans, grants, scholarships and hardship funds



Who do universities share information with and why?

Universities share data with a range of groups, from the Student Loans Company, GP practices, potential employers and Electoral Registration Officers, if the student has approved the sharing of this data. However, HMRC and local government tax departments all receive relevant data without needing the student to approve it. The Home Office request data from universities on students from overseas. Higher education institutions also often share data with third parties who assist them with ICT infrastructure or timetable provision.⁷

Conclusion

Students express a high degree of consensus around the use of their data by higher education institutions, even if their understanding of how the university uses their data is somewhat muddled. A clear majority of students are happy for the university to use their own and other students' data to enhance the learning and mental wellbeing of students at university.

However, students do not want personal data and data related to learning to be shared outside the student-university relationship. More than half the students surveyed want categories of data marked as 'important' or 'very important' to be protected.

The findings of this report bring up an interesting point about how students see the role (or

involvement) of parents at university: they are willing for parents to be called in to support in the event of a health crisis, but less willing if the student is struggling academically.

Students expect and demand privacy around their data, while being aware of the positive outcomes responsible usage can bring. Understanding of how student data are used is lower than it ought to be, which universities should work to address, but the message about how students want their data used is clear and must be listened to.

Methodology

Wave 7 of the HEPI / YouthSight Monitor was answered by 1,078 full-time undergraduate students and undertaken between the 16th August 2019 and the 20th August 2019. Weights have been used to ensure the sample is representative by age, gender and university type. The margin of error is +/- 3.09%, based on a 95% confidence level.

Respondents received a £1 Bonus Bond gift voucher for answering these questions and others on a different topic.

Quotas were set to reflect the UK student population in terms of age, gender and university type. Targets for the quotas were acquired using data supplied by UCAS.

Endnotes

- 1 <https://theodi.org/article/odi-survey-reveals-british-consumer-attitudes-to-sharing-personal-data/>
- 2 <https://www.openaccessgovernment.org/safeguarding-students-personal-information/76626/>
- 3 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2019/06/13/student-academic-experience-survey-2019/>
- 4 <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2017/7/learning-analytics-avoiding-failure>
- 5 <https://library.educause.edu/-/media/files/library/2017/7/eli7146.pdf>
- 6 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0747563218303492>
- 7 <http://www.rpc.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Data-sharing-table-v1.pdf>

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In this report we explore students views on data security, learning analytics and the information universities hold and share on students' health and wellbeing.

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