

One for all or all four one?

Does the UK still have a single higher education sector?

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About the author

Nick Hillman is HEPI's Director.

Early scoping for this project was originally undertaken by Wing Chan, who undertook an internship at HEPI in the summer of 2018 while studying Comparative Social Policy as a postgraduate student at the University of Oxford.

The author also thanks Rachel Hewitt for her help with the project at an earlier stage.

Executive summary

Using nearly 60,000 responses to the HEPI / Advance HE *Student Academic Experience Survey* collected between 2015 and 2019, this report considers whether the UK still has a single higher education system from the perspective of students.

Although most UK students move away from home to study, most also remain within the same part of the UK. We compare the experience of locally-domiciled students in each of the four parts of the UK (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) across seven areas:

- i. value;
- ii. finance;
- iii. wellbeing;
- iv. accommodation;
- v. pedagogy;
- vi. workload; and
- vii. regrets.

Some important differences are revealed.

- Students from England studying in England seem to work a little less hard than those elsewhere in the UK. Moreover, a lower proportion of English students in England would make the same choices about higher education if choosing again compared to local students in the other parts of the UK. This contrasts with some of the positive political rhetoric on the funding system in England, which can imply that more student choice and extra resources are available in England and that this should lead to better teaching and learning. However, such differences may reflect, at least in part, a different subject mix among respondents across the different parts of the UK.

- Students from Scotland studying in Scotland have notably different opinions on funding to local students elsewhere in the UK, with a higher proportion (but still under half) thinking higher education should be free and a greater proportion believing they are receiving ‘very good’ value for money. While this reflects the more generous funding regime in place in Scotland, student wellbeing is no better among students in Scotland than elsewhere.
- Welsh students studying in Wales are more positive about the staff who teach them than those elsewhere in the UK. While the differences are modest, the picture is consistently more positive across a range of perceived attributes.
- Students from Northern Ireland studying in Northern Ireland provide more positive responses across the four wellbeing questions than those elsewhere in the UK. This reflects other evidence suggesting more positive wellbeing in Northern Ireland – although as Northern Ireland has just three universities (Queen’s, Ulster and the Open University) and two university colleges, the number of respondents from Northern Ireland is relatively low.

Based on the perceptions of local students studying in the part of the UK where they live, it is fair to conclude that there are some important differences in the academic experience of students across the UK. But given that some of the differences are relatively slim, and they are non-existent on other areas in our polling not covered by this report, it is also fair to conclude that more continues to unite than to divide higher education in the different parts of the UK.

In other words, the concept of a single UK higher education sector has sustained despite increasing devolution and increasingly divergent policies in Westminster, Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast. This is in line with the concept of higher education as an endeavour that crosses political boundaries.

It remains unclear how Brexit will affect UK higher education.¹ Beyond specific decisions affecting institutions across the UK, such as on the UK's participation in Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe, the UK's withdrawal from the EU might conceivably speed up the growth in differences within the UK. Just as conceivably, the changing nature of the UK's relationships with the rest of the world might engender closer working relationships within the UK. Moreover, the long-term effects of the 2020 Covid-19 crisis on higher education remain uncertain.

Methodology

The annual HEPI / Advance HE *Student Academic Experience Survey* is conducted by the polling company YouthSight each spring among full-time undergraduate students in all years of study. For this project, we have used data from each of the last five years, from 2015 to 2019 inclusive. This ensures a sufficient number of students to draw meaningful comparisons for each part of the UK.

Participants studying in their home region, 2015 to 2019

	Total	%
England	52,940	89%
Scotland	4,329	7%
Wales	1,183	2%
Northern Ireland	811	1%

The 'total' number of respondents over the five waves was 72,525 (weighted) but, as we focus primarily only on those students whom we know study in the same part of the UK that they reside in, the number is reduced to 59,263. This is a large number: many opinion polls of students include only around 1,000 respondents. The margin of error is +/- 0.4% at a 95% confidence level overall and for England; +/- 1.5% for Scotland; +/- 2.8% for Wales; and +/- 3.4% for Northern Ireland.

Because the data cover five years, the numbers are averages for the whole period from 2015 to 2019 rather than accurate for any one year. For example, the results for students' value-for-money perceptions fluctuate each year, as explained in the annual *Student Academic Experience* report, whereas the numbers in this report are an average for the whole five-year period.

The purpose of this report is, in part, to show the power of the *Student Academic Experience* dataset in answering questions that have not yet been posed of it. Both HEPI and Advance HE are keen to share the data for others to conduct their own research.

One sector or four?

In 2014, the late Professor Sir David Watson wrote in a HEPI paper that ‘In lots of ways, nations are no longer good units of analysis for understanding what is really going on in higher education.’²

People often refer to ‘the UK higher education system’ and some rules, such as those on international students coming to the UK, are set centrally for the whole sector.³

Yet there are actually four distinct higher education systems across the UK.

These reflect varying histories, including the devolution settlement in place since the late 1990s and the priorities of different administrations in Westminster, Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast.

In some respects, policy is clearly devolved. For example, the Office for Students is an England-only body. This is despite the fact that it runs initiatives such as the *National Student Survey* for the whole UK.

Elsewhere, higher education institutions are regulated and funded by the Scottish Funding Council, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales and the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland.

Lines of communication are not always as good as they might be and tensions can arise – particularly between bodies in England, which is the largest geographical area with 84% of the UK population and the majority of universities, and those in the other parts of the UK.⁴

Higher education in each part of the UK

England has taken the most market-oriented approach, with a market regulator (the Office for Students), encouragement for new providers, high tuition fees (capped at £9,250 a year for full-time undergraduates) and the replacement of maintenance grants by larger loans.

Scotland charges no fees to first-degree students from Scotland and the EU (except if they are from the rest of the UK) while having a mix of grants and loans for maintenance. In Scotland, students have historically had a strong voice but student places continue to be restricted.⁵

Wales has adopted high fees (capped at £9,000), alongside a generous maintenance system of grants and loans, and has taken a unified approach, such as harmonising funding for students on different modes. Wales is also planning on bringing oversight of all tertiary education together in a new Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER).⁶

Northern Ireland falls somewhere between England / Wales on the one hand and Scotland on the other hand in terms of student fees, which are capped at £4,275 in 2019/20. A shortage of higher education places has traditionally forced many people from Northern Ireland to move elsewhere to study.⁷

Many UK-wide institutions undoubtedly remain important.

- **Sector-wide bodies:** As its name suggests, Universities UK (UUK) represents institutions throughout the UK, UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) ensures the maintenance of a single UK-wide research area and UCAS organises most university admissions for first-degree students all over the UK, while Advance HE also has a UK-wide (and global) remit.
- **Organisations supporting students:** The National Union of Students (NUS) represents students throughout the

UK and the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) supports international students across all four constituent nations.

- **Universities and mission groups:** The Open University can claim to be a truly UK-wide higher education provider and other institutions have a presence in more than one part of the UK too. The Russell Group and other mission groups are not confined to one part of the UK either – nor is HEPI, which is supported financially by institutions in all four parts of the UK.

Even organisations with UK-wide coverage have often come to reflect the growing devolution of power that has occurred in recent decades.

For example:

- Universities UK incorporates the semi-autonomous Universities Scotland and Universities Wales, which have their own offices in Edinburgh and Cardiff;
- UKRI incorporates Research England and important decisions about research funding are taken at a devolved level in the other three parts of the UK;
- UCAS has less complete coverage in Scotland, where around one-third of higher education students attend colleges not in the UCAS system;
- the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) is a UK-wide body but operates differently in different places; and
- the Student Loans Company, which was originally established to pay out maintenance loans across the UK from 1990, now has to oversee four different student funding systems (as well as legacy systems).

The National Union of Students, which is the central hub for all affiliated UK students' unions, reflects the complexity of the current arrangements within the UK. NUS Scotland and

NUS Wales (UCM Cymru) are devolved national sub-bodies as is NUS-USI in Northern Ireland, which is co-administered by the Union of Students in Ireland. There is also an NUS Area for London called NUS London and the whole NUS is a member of the European Students' Union.

The role played by independent providers of higher education reflects a key difference across the UK. One recent study found 813 private providers in the UK, 712 of which were located only in England: 'The vast majority of private providers, 88 per cent, operate exclusively in England.'⁸ This is a consequence of the English policy environment but also shows the different status of London – around half of UK-based independent providers were situated either in London (36.9%) or the rest of the south-east (11.8%).

Another notable difference in higher education across the different parts of the UK is the appeal to international students. Work produced by HEPI, Kaplan International and London Economics on the net financial benefits of international students to the UK found that, relative to their local population size, Scotland accrues benefits that are worth 118% (£365 per head) of the UK average (£310) but also that the benefits in Wales (£287) and Northern Ireland (£92) are worth less than elsewhere.⁹

Lucian J Hudson and Iain Mansfield recently described the swirling and changing state of affairs in higher education policy across the UK accordingly: 'both centripetal and centrifugal forces are increasingly at play (respectively, moving towards and away from a common position).'¹⁰

Student Academic Experience Survey

It is sometimes said that higher education and research benefit when less attention is paid to geographical and political boundaries: the old concept of higher education as a travelling

community of scholars pays limited regard to political boundaries.

Today, it is not always clear what all the growing differences between the separate parts of the UK mean for the quality of the student experience.

External assessments rarely help to clear the fog because supranational bodies, like the OECD and the European University Association, tend to regard the UK as a single unit when comparing different countries' higher education systems.¹¹

This paper uses data from almost 60,000 respondents of the annual HEPI / Advance HE *Student Academic Experience Survey* between 2015 and 2019 to investigate whether the student experience differs significantly across the UK. It makes no claim to be the final word on the issue and is designed, in part, to show the power of the dataset, which we are willing to share with others.

The *Student Academic Experience Survey* has been running since 2006 and covers thousands of full-time undergraduate students each year, the overwhelming majority of whom are young (21 and under). Unlike the official *National Student Survey* of final-year students, the *Student Academic Experience Survey* is answered by undergraduate students in all years of study and, over time, a detailed multi-year comparative dataset has been built up on topical issues – such as students' perceptions of value for money, workload and wellbeing. Each year, the highlights appear in an annual report published jointly by HEPI and Advance HE.¹²

The *Survey* has enabled better answers to important questions. For example, in May 2018, HEPI published a report based on data from multiple annual waves to answer the question *How different is Oxbridge?*¹³ This compared the student experience at Oxford and Cambridge to the experience at other Russell

Group universities as well as to UK higher education institutions overall. The *Survey* has also been used on shorter bespoke reports written by Professor Tim Blackman that seek to answer two questions: *What affects how much students learn?* and *What affects student wellbeing?*¹⁴

Where students go

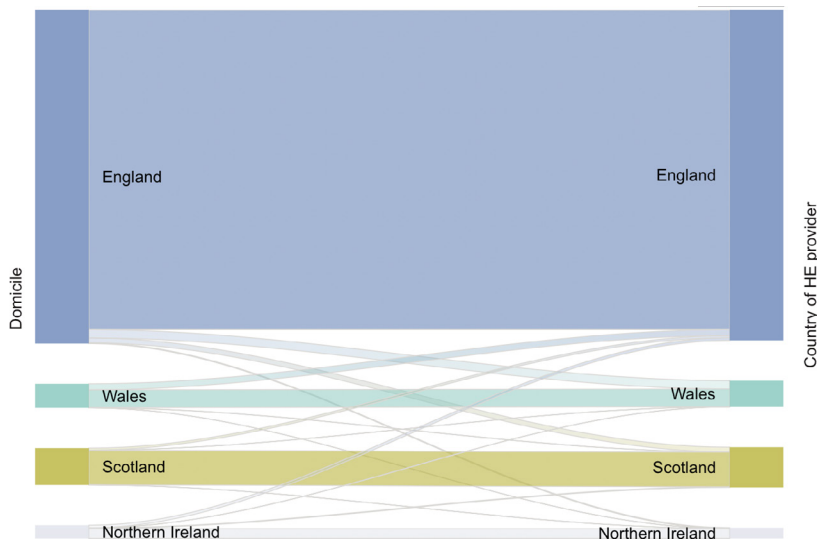
Our comparison is limited to UK students who stay in their home region to study because it would be harder to draw any meaningful conclusions if we were to include students who reside in one part of the UK and study in another.¹⁵ In other words, the focus is on: students residing in England and studying in England; students residing in Scotland and studying in Scotland; students residing in Wales and studying in Wales; and students residing in Northern Ireland and studying in Northern Ireland. Although international students are included in the *Student Academic Experience Survey* each year, they are excluded in the subset of results used for this report.

Despite the greater tendency in the UK compared to many other countries for students to move away from home to study at a higher level, most UK full-time undergraduate students remain in the same part of the UK that they were previously domiciled in. This is even more common in England (96%) and Scotland (94%) than in Wales (74%) and Northern Ireland (74%).¹⁶

According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA):

*the majority of students stay in their home country, although those from Wales and Northern Ireland were more likely to cross borders than those from England and Scotland. The proportion of movements remains roughly the same year on year in general. A higher percentage of students from Wales and Northern Ireland enrolled in English HE providers in 2018/19 compared to 2014/15.*¹⁷

First-year enrolments by domicile and country of provider, 2018/19



Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency, 'Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2018/19 – Where students come from and go to study', 29 January 2020

The differential rates of crossing from one part of the UK to another to study are not simply a matter of free choice. For example, Northern Ireland has insufficient places to satisfy local demand.¹⁸

For those students studying in their own region of the UK, we look at seven key areas:

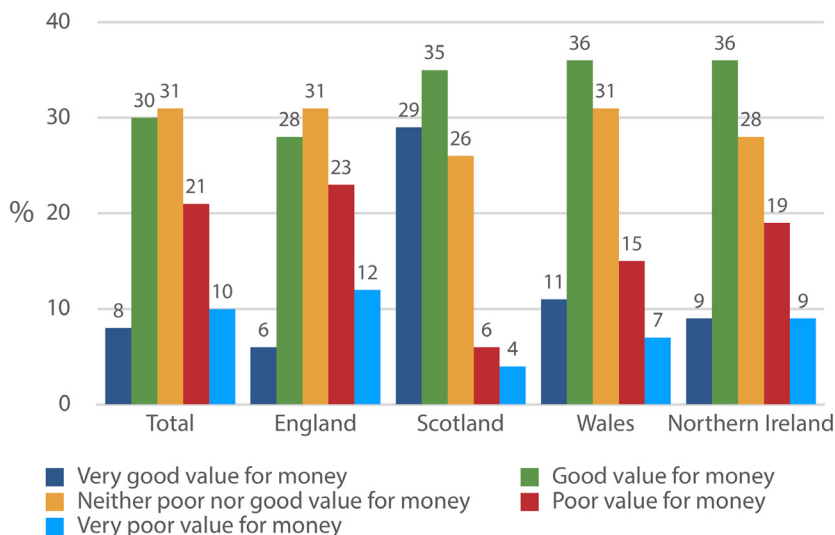
- i. value for money;
- ii. who should pay;
- iii. wellbeing;
- iv. accommodation;
- v. pedagogy;
- vi. workload; and
- vii. regrets.

i. Value for money

Local students studying in Scotland have notably different perceptions of value for money than local students in other parts of the UK. For example, nearly two-thirds of local students in Scotland believe they are getting 'very good' (29%) or 'good' (35%) value for money, compared to only one-third of local students in England (6% 'very good', 28% 'good').

In Wales and Northern Ireland, perceptions lie somewhere between those in England and Scotland: in Wales, nearly half believe they are getting 'very good' (11%) or 'good' (36%) value for money, comparable to the results for Northern Ireland (9% 'very good', 36% 'good').

Q16. 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?



Local students in Scotland are also less likely to say they are getting poor value for money. Only one-in-10 Scottish students at Scottish universities believe they are getting 'poor' (6%) or 'very poor' (4%) value for money, compared to over one-in-three English students at English universities (23% 'poor', 12% 'very poor'). Again, the opinions of students in Wales (15% 'poor', 7% 'very poor') and Northern Ireland (19% 'poor', 9% 'very poor') lie somewhere in between those in Scotland and England.

ii. Finance

There are also notable differences in the results to a question on who should pay for the costs of undergraduate teaching. The idea that 'The government should pay all of the costs and students should pay nothing' is the top answer among students studying in Scotland, with 37% of the total, but it is considerably less popular among local students elsewhere: England, 21%; Wales, 20%; and Northern Ireland, 19%.

Outside Scotland, there is more support for a mixed funding model, with the most popular option in England (42%), Wales (37%) and Northern Ireland (40%) being 'Students and the government should both contribute, but the government should pay more'. In Scotland, this answer came second, with the support of around one-third of respondents (34%).

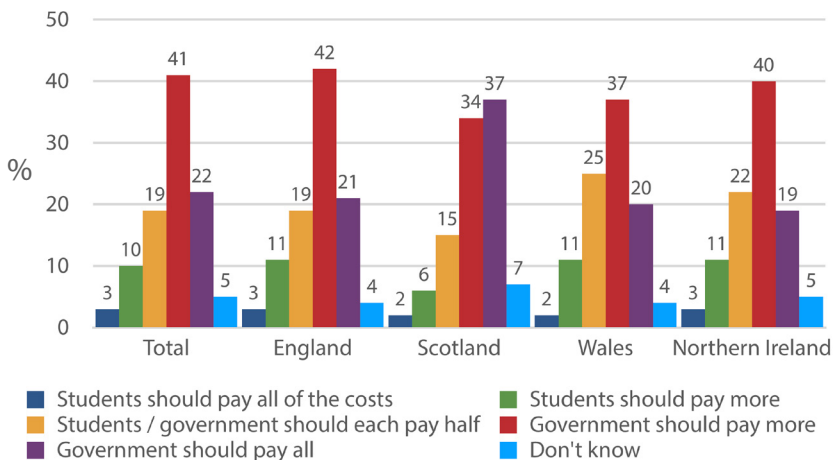
The idea that government and students should split the costs equally is also supported by a higher proportion of local students in England (19%), Wales (25%) and Northern Ireland (22%) than in Scotland (15%).

The greater support for so-called 'free' higher education among Scottish-domiciled students studying in Scotland might seem unexpected, given that Scotland abolished fees many years

ago and has since resisted the shift to high fees that has taken place in England, Wales and, to a lesser extent, Northern Ireland. However, the *British Social Attitudes Survey* has repeatedly found that attitudes among the wider population in Scotland are not so different to views in England:

In 2013, only around a quarter of people in Scotland (26%) actually backed the Scottish Government's policy of free tuition for all Scottish students studying in Scotland. So in this instance, policy differences between England and Scotland appear more a reflection of differences in elite political ideology than of fundamental differences in the direction of public opinion.¹⁹

Q18a. The costs of teaching undergraduates are partly paid for by students themselves (through fees and loans) and partly by the government (which funds universities and pays the loans of those who can't repay). What do you think the balance should be?



Moreover, even among students, the differences across the UK are easily exaggerated. According to the *Student Academic*

Experience Survey results, only a minority of students studying in each home region think students should pay most or all of the costs. On the other hand, over half of students in every part of the country, including Scotland, believe students should pay something towards the costs of teaching.

iii. Wellbeing

Unlike many physical health conditions, many mental health conditions are first experienced by younger people, particularly between the ages of 16 and 24.²⁰ Not only do new undergraduate students typically come within this age bracket, but there is also good evidence of a higher incidence of mental health challenges than in the past.

Various causes of this rise have been pinpointed – for example, the prevalence of social media. It is also sometimes argued that the expectation that students should take on large debts in order to obtain their higher education adversely affects their wellbeing.

The *Student Academic Experience Survey* includes the Office for National Statistics's questions on wellbeing. The data show that young students have lower wellbeing than the population as a whole or young people in general – although it is also important to note other research shows that, after graduation, former students may have better mental health on average than non-graduates, with less risk of depression and a better ability to cope with distress, even after controlling for factors such as social background.²¹

The table below shows the proportion of local students in each part of the UK who choose especially high and especially low scores on the four wellbeing questions covering: life satisfaction; how worthwhile life feels; happiness; and anxiety.

Respondents were asked to score each question on a scale of 0 to 10, with the highest number representing the most positive answer – except for the anxiety question, where high scores are negative and low scores positive.

Wellbeing results (%)

	Total	England	Scotland	Wales	NI
Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays? (9-10)	15	14	15	14	19
Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays? (0-4)	9	9	8	7	7
Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile? (9-10)	20	19	20	19	26
Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile? (0-4)	10	10	10	10	8
Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday? (9-10)	19	19	19	18	23
Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday? (0-4)	16	16	15	16	13
Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday? (6-10)	34	34	34	34	32
Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday? (0-1)	17	17	17	17	18

The results show only very slight differences between England, Scotland and Wales, but the picture is consistently more positive for Northern Ireland than elsewhere.

Although the number of respondents from Northern Ireland is relatively small, the more positive findings reflect other evidence for the overall population in Northern Ireland. The Office for National Statistics reported in autumn 2019:

As has been the case in previous years, people in Northern Ireland gave better average ratings for life satisfaction, feelings that things done in life are worthwhile and happiness than people in England, Scotland or Wales.²²

As outlined earlier, there are different funding regimes in place across the UK as well as differences of opinion on student funding. So the lack of any marked difference in the wellbeing data for students in each part of the UK, and the notable similarities in the results for England and Scotland, may suggest wellbeing is not significantly affected by funding or attitudes towards funding.

iv. Accommodation

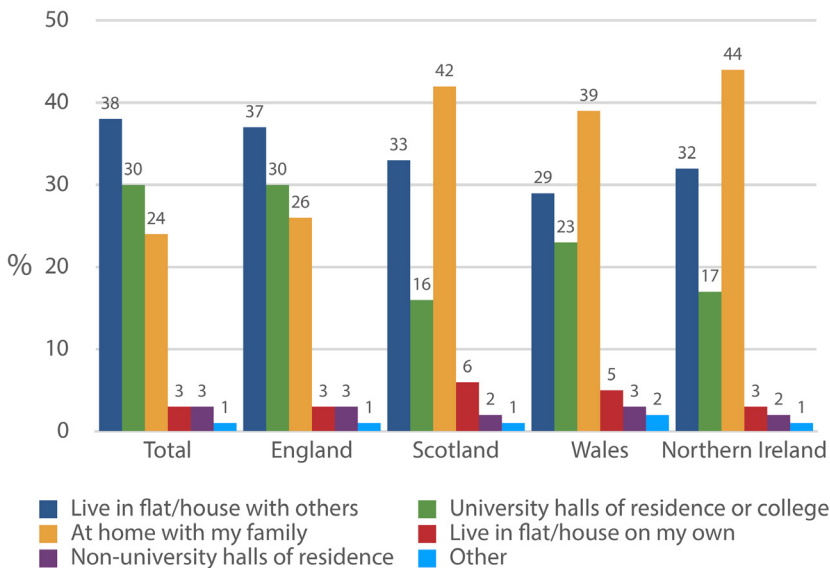
The results appear to confirm the tradition of moving away from the family home while undertaking higher education is particularly common among students from England.

For students from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland studying in their own local parts of the UK, living at home is the most popular option (42%, 39% and 44% respectively). In England, in contrast, flat / house shares (37%) and university halls of residence (30%) are both more popular than living at home (26%).

However, these results need careful handling: given the relative size of England and the larger number of higher education institutions, an English student has more options for staying in England than, say, a Scottish student studying in Scotland.

As mentioned at the start, a higher proportion of students from Wales and Northern Ireland move away from their home part of the UK to study. Not every discipline has been available in every part of the UK: for example, despite the importance of agriculture to the Welsh economy, Wales' first School of Veterinary Science opened at Aberystwyth University only in 2020.

Q0e. Where do you live during term-time?



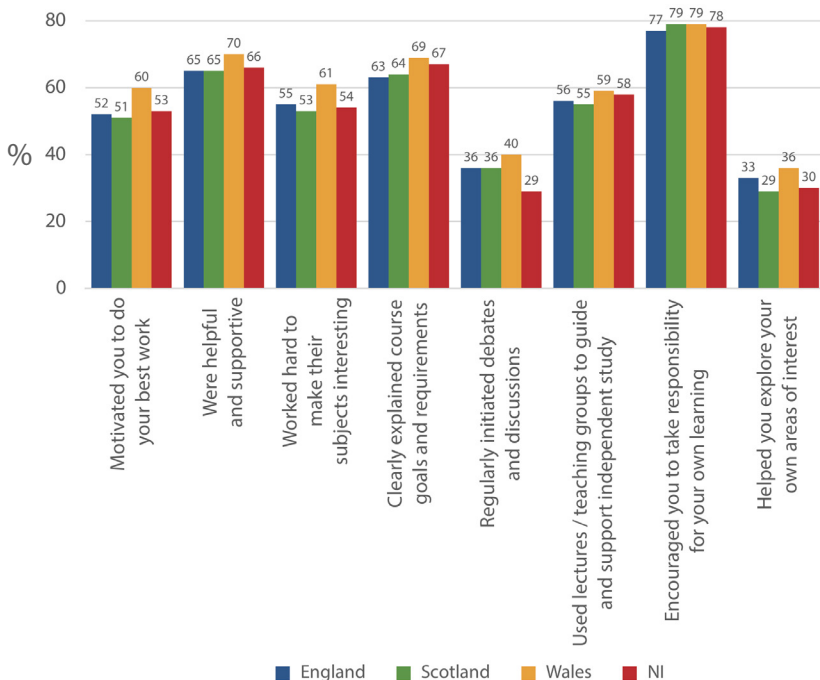
v. Pedagogy

Compared with its earliest years, over time the *Student Academic Experience Survey* has come to include more questions on students' perceptions of those who teach them.

The differences in perceptions among students across the UK are fairly slight, but Welsh students studying in Wales are nonetheless notably more positive about their teaching staff than local students in all other parts of the UK.

The *Survey* asks respondents about the proportion of teaching staff who display certain attributes. On seven of the eight positive attributes covered by the questions, Welsh students studying in Wales provide more positive responses than local students in each other part of the UK (and on the other one, local students in Wales are equally positive as local students in Scotland and slightly more positive than those in England or Northern Ireland).

Q4D. Thinking about all the teaching you have experienced this year, what proportion of teaching staff did the following: ALL / MAJORITY



So, for example:

- 60% of local students in Wales say all or a majority of their teaching staff motivate them to do their best work, higher than in England (52%), Scotland (51%) and Northern Ireland (53%); and
- 61% of local students in Wales say all or a majority of their teaching staff work hard to make their subjects interesting, ahead of local students in England (55%), Scotland (53%) and Northern Ireland (54%).

While some of the differences between local students in Wales and elsewhere are modest, it is nonetheless clear that Welsh students studying in Wales have more positive perceptions of the quality of their teaching and learning than local students in every other part of the UK.

vi. Workload

The *Student Academic Experience Survey* includes the most detailed data that is available on the working patterns of students across the UK. We measure scheduled classes as well as classes attended, independent study hours and course-related employment among other things. Summing categories can provide a figure for total workload.

It was our original expectation that students in England would be likely to work at least as hard, if not a little harder, than students in other parts of the UK, as England was the only part of the UK to have high tuition fees for the whole period covered by the data and high fees are sometimes thought to mean better funded institutions and more demanding students.

	Weekly scheduled hours	Weekly attended hours	Independent study hours	Weekly hours worked outside uni / college as part of course	Satisfied with timetabled hours (net agree %)	Summative assignments per term	Formative assignments per term
England	13.4	12.0	14.0	5.3	64	4.8	2.4
Scotland	14.0	12.6	13.9	5.3	68	5.5	3.0
Wales	14.3	12.9	12.9	6.6	67	5.3	1.8
NI	14.6	13.4	12.2	6.5	71	6.1	2.6

However, if anything, the opposite seems to be true. Students from England studying in England:

- have fewer scheduled hours and attend for less time;
- are least likely to say they are satisfied with the number of timetabled hours; and
- do fewer written assignments that contribute to their final marks (known as summative assessments).

English students in England do more independent study than others but this is not enough to make up the entire shortfall in other working hours once work related to their course is included.

The lower contact time among English students in England is not explained by these students undertaking more paid employment unrelated to their course (which is not shown in the chart). They do less paid employment of this type than their counterparts in every other part of the UK, at 10.8 hours per week on average compared to 12.9 hours, 12.6 hours and 11.6

hours by their counterparts in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland respectively.

Percentage of home students studying each subject area (%)

Subject area	Total	England	Scotland	Wales	NI
Medicine & Dentistry	3	3	4	4	5
Subjects Allied to Medicine	8	9	11	9	13
Biological Sciences	12	13	10	13	7
Vet Sciences, Agriculture etc	2	2	2	1	*
Physical Sciences	5	5	7	6	4
Mathematics	3	3	2	2	3
Engineering	9	8	14	8	15
Technologies	1	1	1	1	2
Architecture, Building, Planning	2	1	2	1	4
Social Studies	10	10	8	8	6
Law	4	4	4	5	3
Business & Administration	13	12	14	9	11
Mass Comms & Documentation	2	2	1	1	3
Linguistics, Classics etc	4	4	3	5	3
European Languages, Literature	2	2	2	1	4
Other Languages	*	*	*	1	0
Historical & Philosophical Studies	5	5	3	4	3
Creative Arts & Design	10	10	8	10	10
Education	4	4	3	8	4
Combined / General	1	1	*	1	*

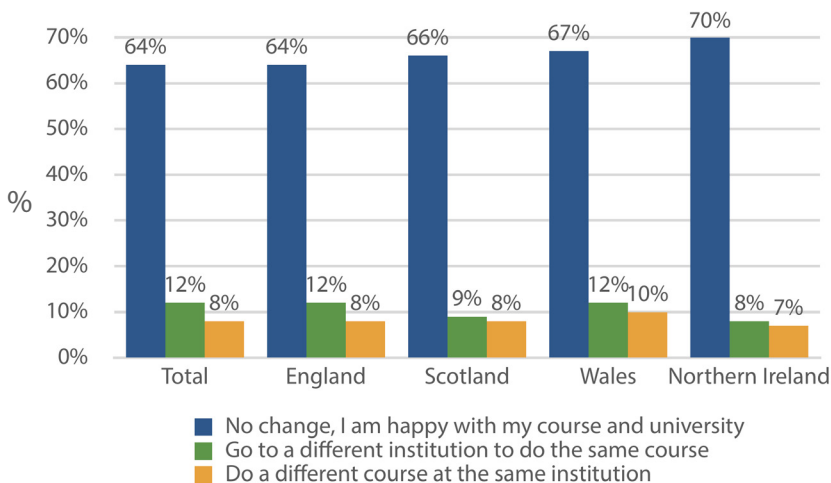
Further exploration may provide an explanation for some of the differences. For example, a different mix of courses will

– all other things being equal – produce different working patterns among students. As the table shows, a slightly lower proportion of English-domiciled respondents studying in England were taking Medicine and Dentistry (3%) or Subjects Allied to Medicine (9%), which tend to have higher workloads, than local students in each other part of the UK. Meanwhile, a higher proportion of English-domiciled respondents studying in England (10%) were taking Social Studies, which tends to have lower workloads, than local students in the other parts of the UK.

vii. Regrets

A lower proportion of local students in England (64%) say they would make the same choice about their higher education if choosing again, compared to 66% in Scotland, 67% in Wales and 70% in Northern Ireland.²³

Q12b.i. Thinking about your academic experience, knowing what you know now, if you had a second chance to start again, would you do any of the following? (Top three answers only)



On the face of it, this might seem counterintuitive. The removal of student number controls in England, plus the greater resources available as a result of England having the highest fees anywhere in the UK, might be expected to produce more satisfied students.

However, our results are partially corroborated by the most recent *National Student Survey* results, which show marginally lower satisfaction with the quality of courses among final year students in England and Scotland (both on 83%) than in Wales (85%) and Northern Ireland (84%).²⁴ England also has a higher non-continuation rate among first-year students than other parts of the UK: in England in 2017/18, 6.9% of home full-time entrants did not continue after their first year, compared to 6.1% in both Scotland and Wales and 6.3% in Northern Ireland.²⁵

Conclusion

Recent political developments, most notably debates about Brexit, have put a new focus on unity and disunity across the UK. As higher education tends to downplay the importance of borders, this has proven a challenge to the UK's higher education institutions.

Questions about the UK's place in the world and the long-term sustainability of the UK itself have been subject to fierce debate. Internal and external changes have directly affected higher education. For example, a generation ago, there was a single tuition fee system for the whole UK and the UK was at the heart of the EU's research and student mobility programmes. Today, neither of these things is true.

This high-level study of the nature of the student experience across the UK has thrown up a number of issues that need further investigation. In the areas where there might be expected to be differences among students in the four parts of the UK, the story revealed by the data is sometimes intuitive,

as with Scottish students' greater dislike of tuition fees, and sometimes counter-intuitive – for example, the idea that significantly larger student debts damage student wellbeing is not supported.

Where there are differences, these may also be a little counterintuitive. Contrary to the official claims when the marketised high-fee regime was introduced, English students in England seem to work less hard than their counterparts elsewhere. In other words, English students in England may be paying more for less – or, given the different subject mix, more for the same.

Local students in Wales are notably happier with their teaching staff than students elsewhere in the UK, which is a finding worthy of greater exploration. Meanwhile, students in Northern Ireland are more content with their lives, echoing other findings about wellbeing in this part of the UK.

Nonetheless, many of the differences – including on topics not presented here – are slight and there is insufficient evidence, at least so far, to suggest that the concept of a single UK higher education system has outlived its usefulness as a conceptual device or a marketing tool when showing what universities in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have to offer.

Our results suggest there is still a single UK higher education system, at least in terms of the student experience. In other words, UK-domiciled students who move to another part of the UK to study are likely to have a comparable experience to the one they could have had if they had stayed in their own home region. Even on issues like student workload, student wellbeing and attitudes towards teaching, there is more that unites the different parts than divides them.

At another level, however, the four parts of the UK continue to diverge on higher education. Funding, regulation and quality assessment already differ and there are few grounds

for believing that we are on the brink of greater cohesion, although shocks such as Brexit and the Covid-19 crisis may yet have unpredicted effects.

One outstanding question remains: as devolution continues to encourage greater divergence, will this – in time – come to have a greater impact on the student experience than it has had to date? For example, if local political decision-making means higher education systems in one part of the UK receive significantly less (or more) income to educate each student than higher education institutions in other parts, this is likely to have a growing impact on the quality of the facilities and may affect the reputation of individual universities.

Endnotes

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- 28 One for all or all four one? Does the UK still have a single higher education sector?

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Using almost 60,000 responses to the HEPI / Advance HE *Student Academic Experience Survey* collected between 2015 and 2019, this report considers if the UK still has a single higher education sector – from the perspective of students.

Some important differences are revealed among locally-domiciled students studying in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In particular, the findings suggest students in England work a little less hard, students in Scotland have different attitudes towards funding, students in Wales rate those teaching them more positively and students in Northern Ireland have higher wellbeing.

However, given that many of the differences are relatively slim, the paper concludes that more continues to unite than to divide higher education across the four parts of the UK, despite the increase in devolution and increasingly divergent policies.

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

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