



Higher Education Policy Institute

**YouthSight**

# Students' views on the impact of Coronavirus on their higher education experience in 2020/21

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HEPI Policy Note 27

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## Key findings

- More than half of full-time undergraduate students (59%) say they are very or quite satisfied with the online learning that has replaced face-to-face teaching, up from 42% in June 2020 and 49% in March 2020.
- Half of students (51%) are receiving some face-to-face teaching whereas 49% are receiving none.
- More than half of students (58%) say they consider their mental health to be in a worse state since the beginning of the pandemic, compared to 14% who say their mental health is better. Just over a quarter (28%) say their mental health is the same.
- Only 16% of students are very or quite unsatisfied with the provision of mental health services at their higher education institution. However, less than half (42%) say they are very or quite satisfied with the provision of these services.
- Half (50%) of students are very or quite satisfied with how their higher education institution has provided support services outside of mental health services (e.g. careers support).
- Just under half (44%) of students say they are very or quite satisfied with how their student union or guild are supporting their higher education experience.
- The majority (56%) of students are very or quite satisfied with how their higher education institution has handled any outbreaks of Coronavirus.
- Comparing HEPI / YouthSight's previous polling in June 2020 and this polling, there is a disparity between expectations of how learning would be delivered this academic year and the reality. Around a fifth (21%) of students expected all learning to be online, but 53% currently have all learning online.
- A third of students (33%) say they currently spend all or almost all of their time in their accommodation. A further quarter (28%) say they spend most of their time in their accommodation.
- Most students say their higher education experience feels very or quite safe (79%).
- Just under two thirds (60%) of students say they understand the latest Government guidance about the end of term and Christmas travel.
- Over half of students (54%) are very or quite concerned about the return to university in January 2021.

## Introduction

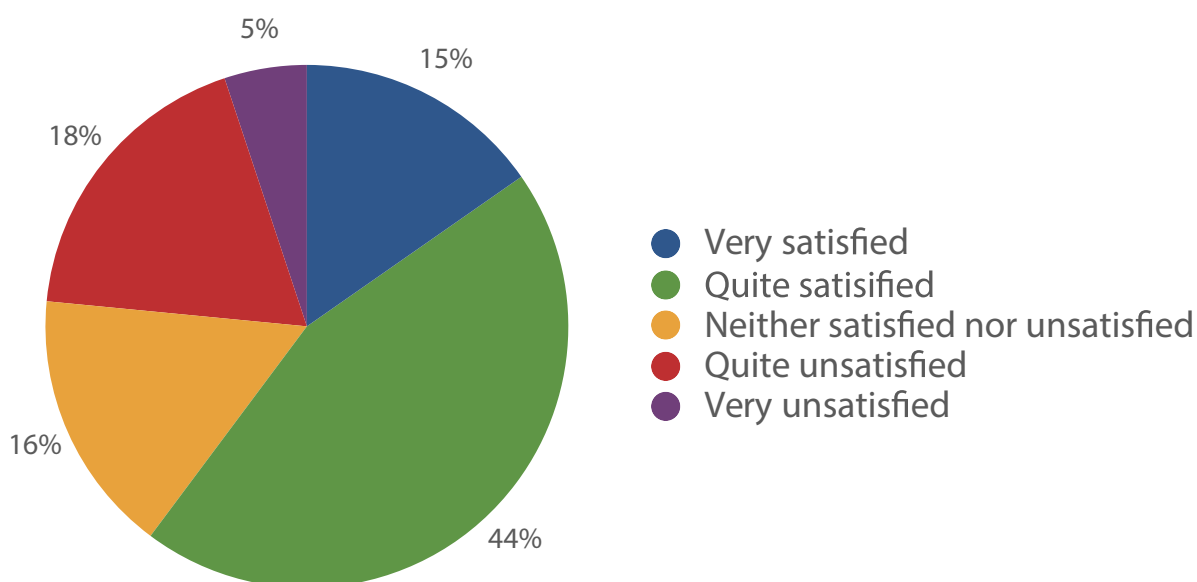
Much more is known about COVID-19 and its impact on the student experience than in the previous rounds of the HEPI / YouthSight Monitor we have conducted. When we first polled students on the impact of the pandemic back in March 2020, it was not clear how long the pandemic or measures to prevent the virus spreading would last.<sup>1</sup> When we conducted our second round of polling in June 2020, there was still much that was unknown about how the 2020/21 academic year would operate.<sup>2</sup> Despite the challenging circumstances 2020 has posed, higher education institutions have remained open and have quickly learnt to operate in an entirely new way. However, much of the coverage about how students are experiencing higher education in 2020 is based on speculation or tends to draw on the worst examples of practice. By surveying students for their views, we hope to add to the evidence base on their experience through the COVID-19 pandemic.

The survey of over 1,000 full-time undergraduate students was undertaken between 20 and 24 November 2020. Weights have been used to ensure the sample is representative by age, gender and university type.

## Teaching and learning

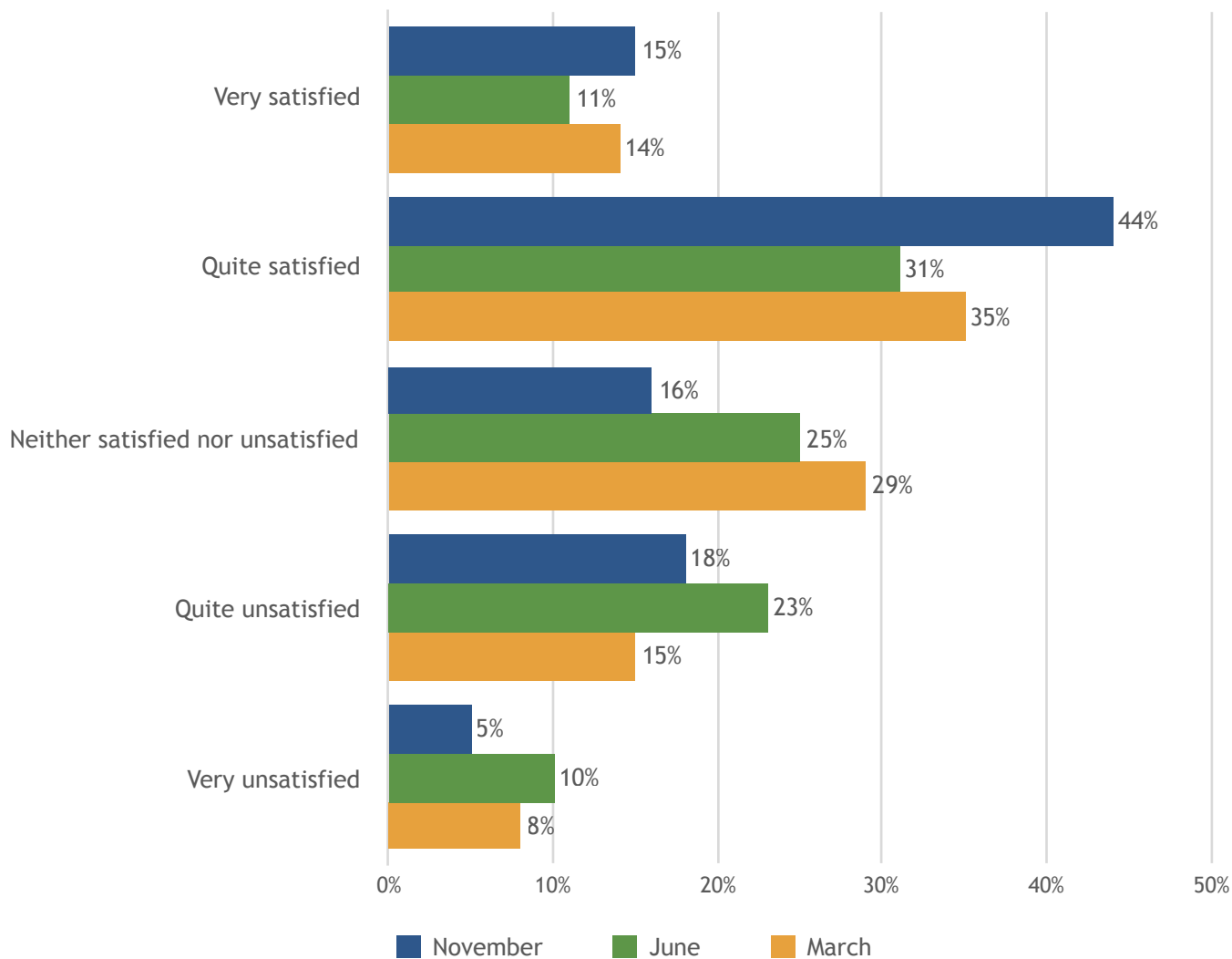
More than half of students (59%) say they are very or quite satisfied with the online learning that has been put in place to replace face-to-face teaching. Less than a quarter (23%) say they are quite or very dissatisfied and 16% say they are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.

*How satisfied are you with the online learning your higher education institution has put in place to replace face-to-face learning?*



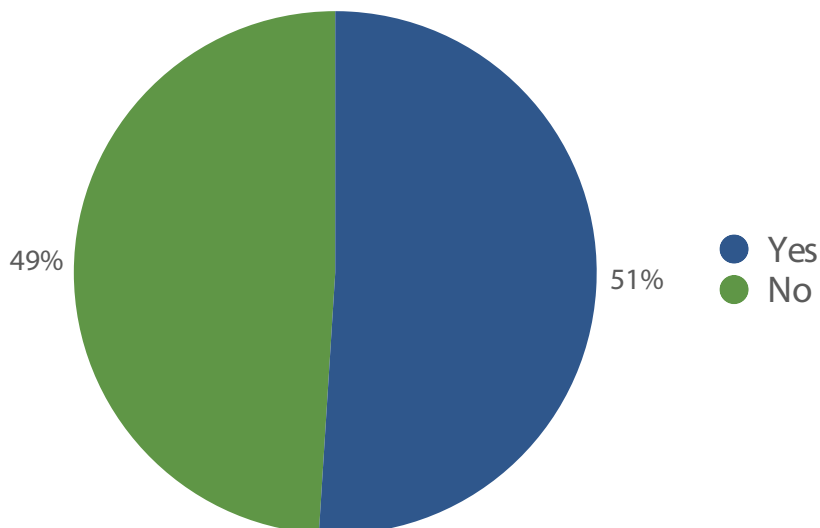
When compared with previous HEPI / YouthSight polling undertaken earlier in the pandemic, it is clear that more students are now saying they are very or quite satisfied with their online learning than they were in March or June. 59% of students surveyed in November say they are quite or very satisfied with their online learning, compared to 42% in June and 49% in March.

*How satisfied are you with the online learning your higher education institution has put in place to replace face-to-face learning?*



Half of students (51%) say they are currently receiving face-to-face teaching compared with 49% who are not. It should be noted that this polling was conducted during the second national 'lockdown', although the regulations did specifically allow for some face-to-face teaching.

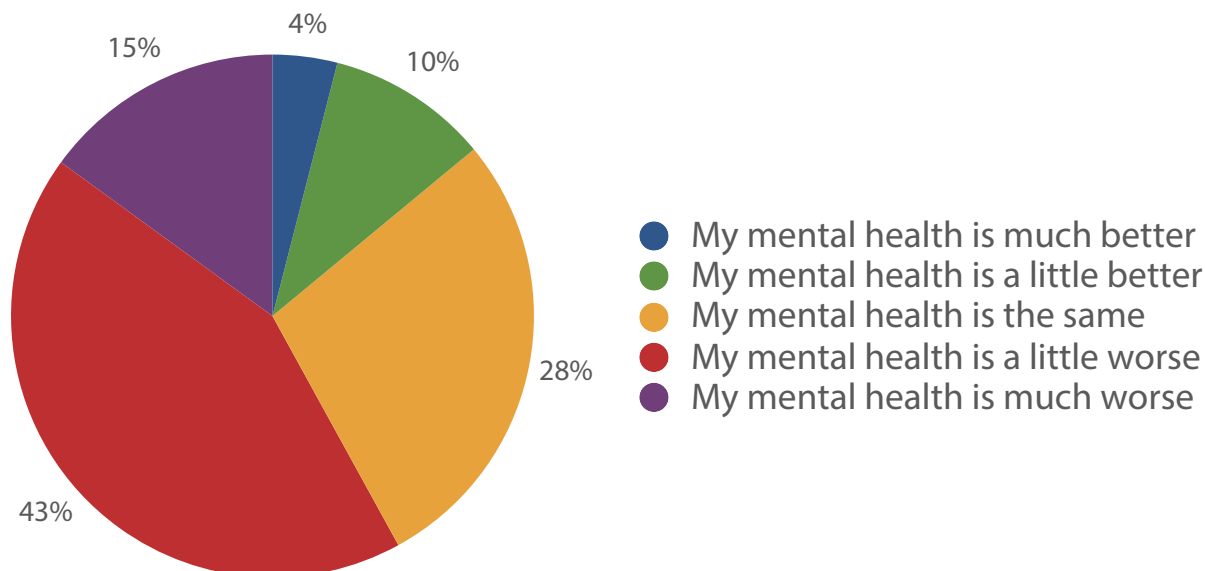
*Are you currently receiving any face-to-face teaching?*



## Mental health, support services and student unions

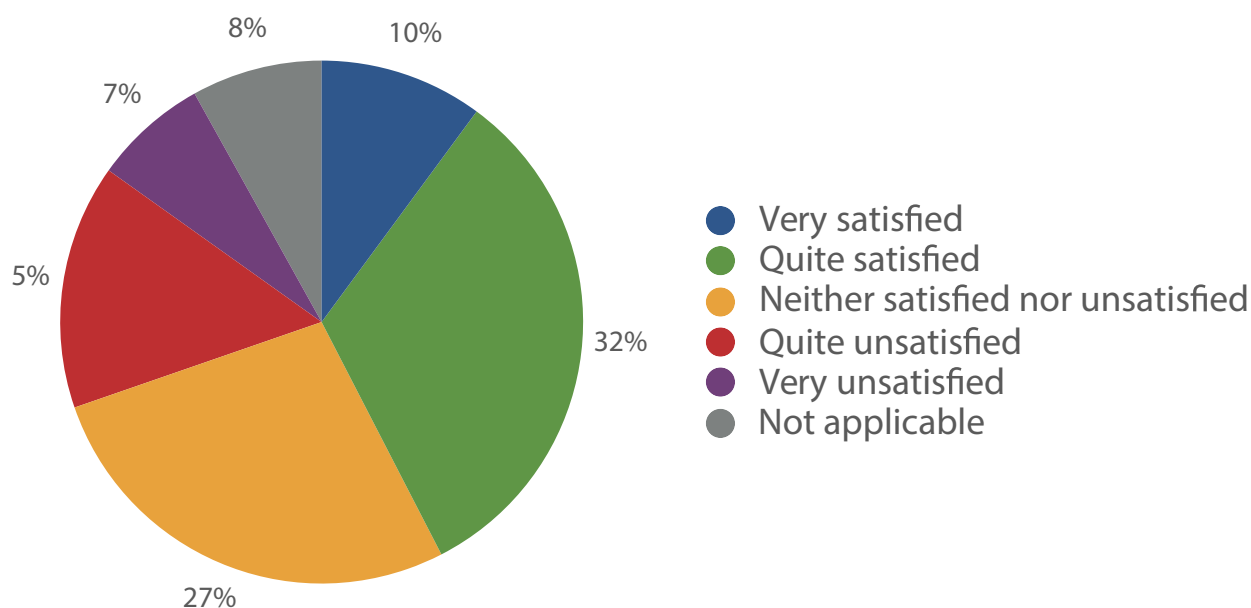
The majority of students say that Coronavirus has had an impact on their mental health. Over half of students (58%) say their mental health is a little or much worse compared to just 14% who say their mental health is a little or much better. Just over a quarter (28%) describe their mental health as the same.

*How has the Coronavirus pandemic impacted your mental health?*



Many student support services have had to be at least partially delivered online through the pandemic. Less than half of students (42%) say they are satisfied with the way their higher education institution is delivering mental health services. However, only 22% say they are quite or very unsatisfied with the provision of these services. Just over a quarter (27%) say they are neither satisfied nor unsatisfied and 8% say the question is not applicable to them.

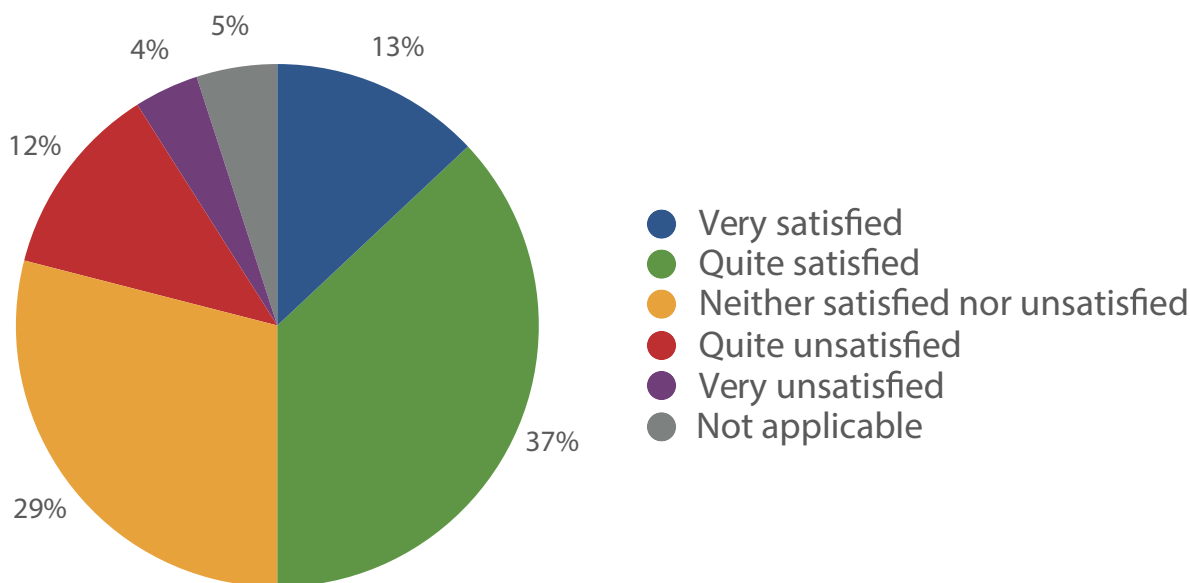
*How satisfied are you with the way your higher education institution is delivering mental health services?*



Half (50%) of students say they are satisfied with the way their higher education institution is currently delivering support services (excluding mental health services). Around a sixth (16%) of students say they are quite or very unsatisfied with the provision of these services.

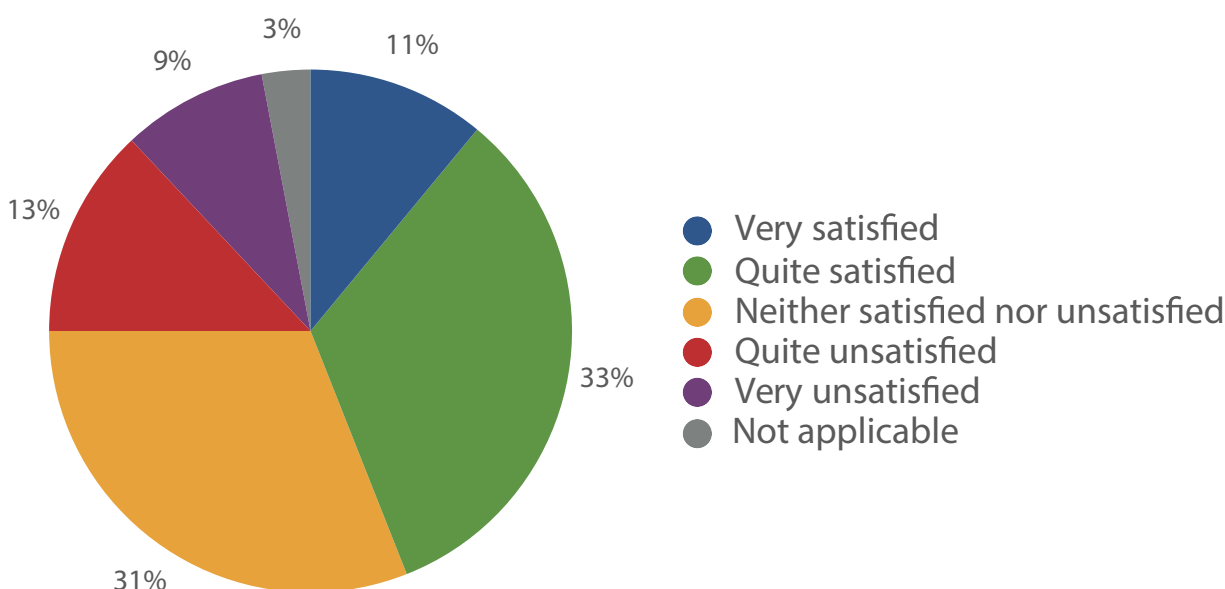
Between a quarter and a third (29%) say they are neither satisfied nor unsatisfied and 5% say the question is not applicable to them.

*How satisfied are you with the way your higher education institution is delivering support services outside of mental health e.g. career support?*



Just under half (44%) of students say they are satisfied with the way their students' union or guild is supporting their experience at university. Just over a fifth (22%) of students say they are quite or very unsatisfied with the support from their students' union or guild. Almost a third (31%) say they are neither satisfied nor unsatisfied and 3% say the question is not applicable to them.

*How satisfied are you with the way your students' union or guild is supporting your experience at university?*

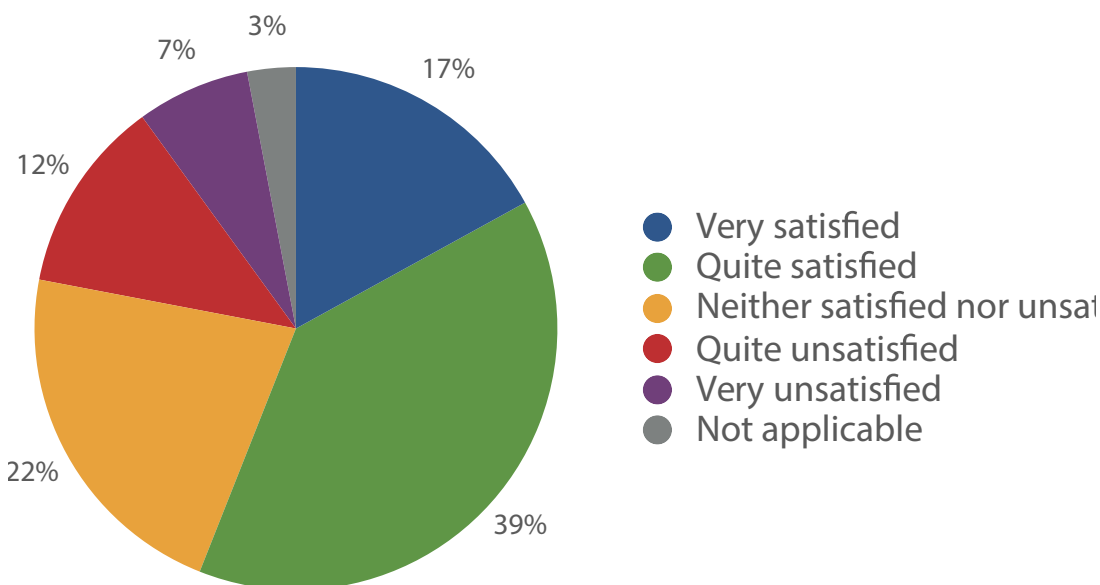


### **Coronavirus and safety measures**

Just over half (56%) of students say they are very or quite satisfied with how their higher education institution has handled any outbreaks of Coronavirus. Less than a fifth (19%) say they are very or quite dissatisfied with how their institution has handled any outbreaks

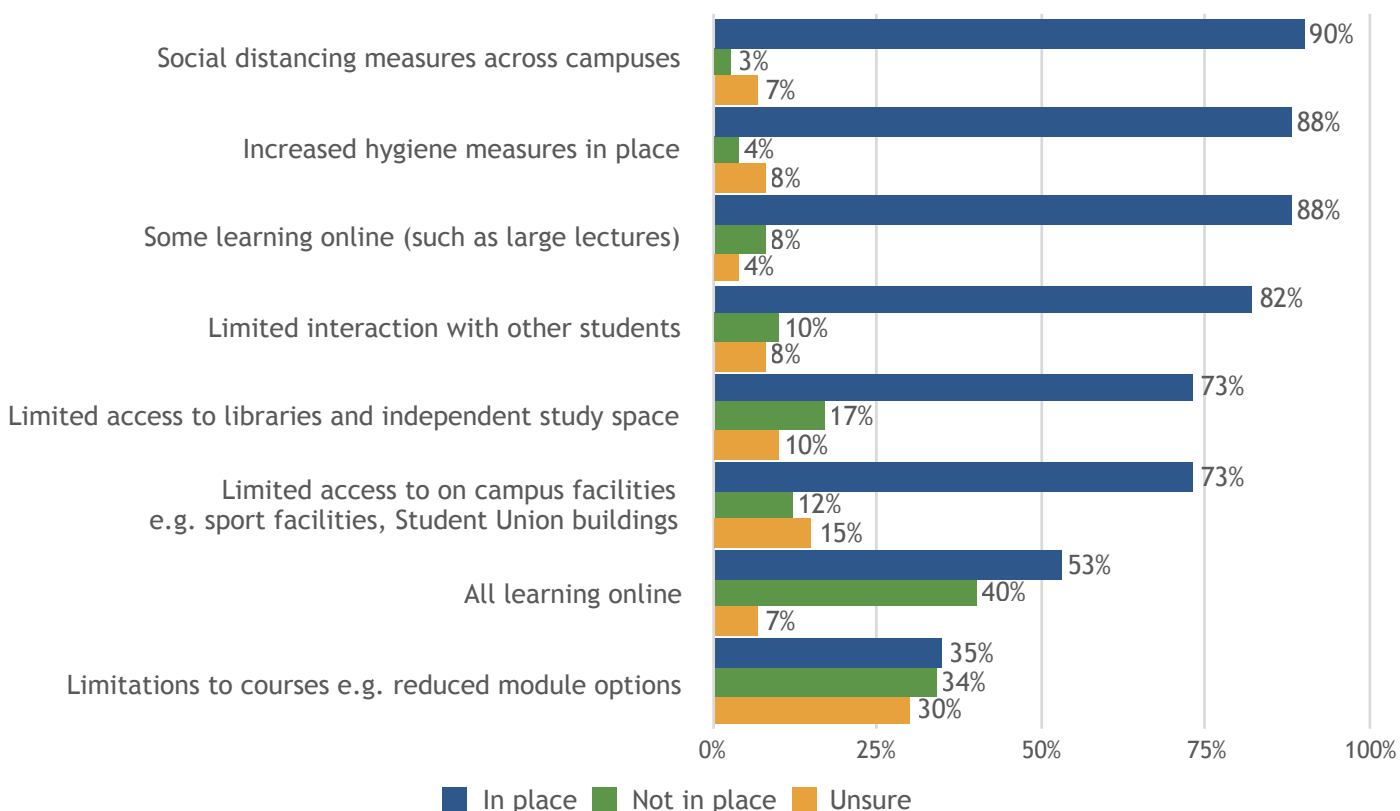
and 22% say they are neither satisfied nor unsatisfied. Only 3% say this question is not applicable to them.

*How satisfied are you with the way your higher education institution has handled any Coronavirus outbreaks?*



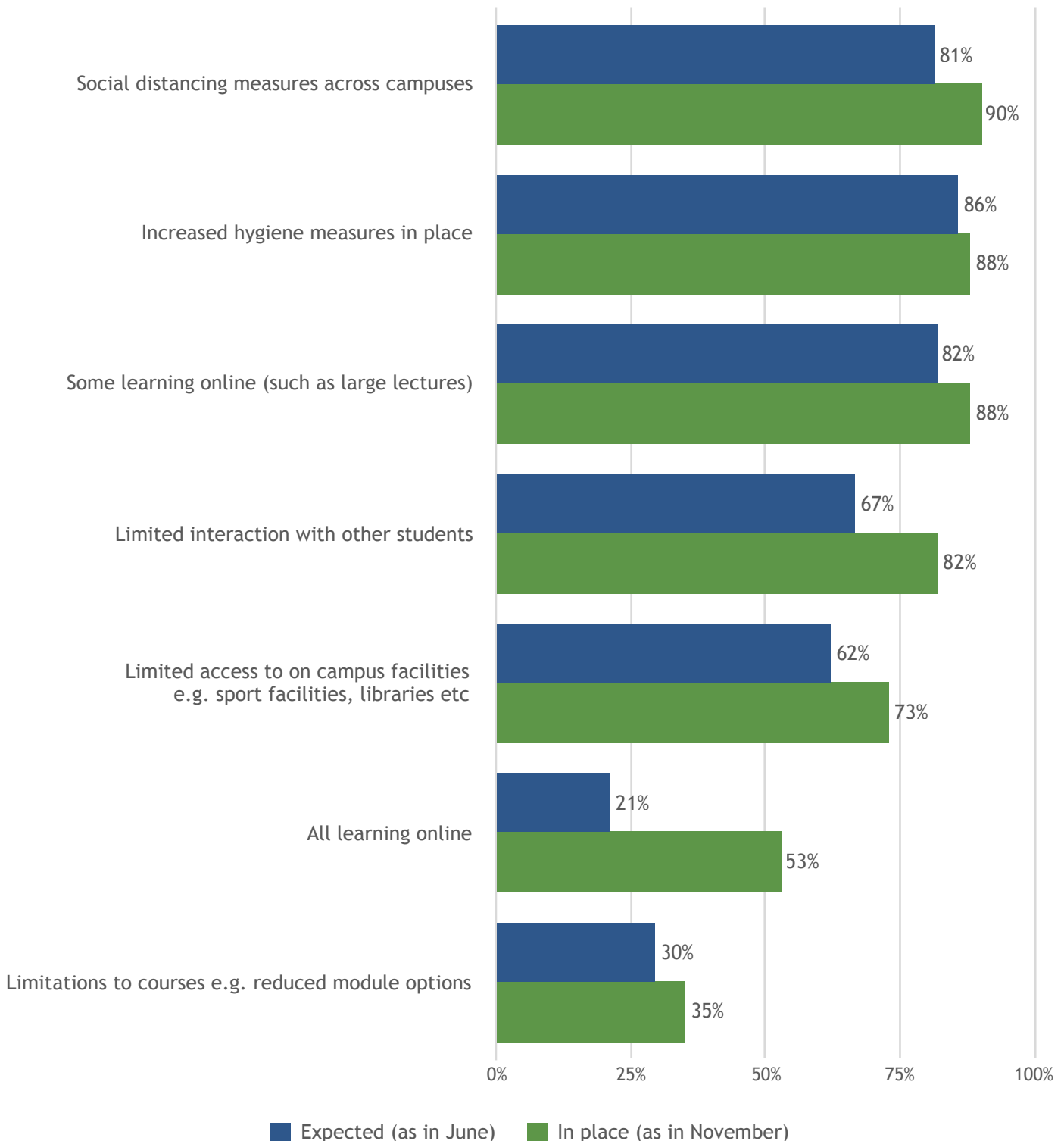
When asked about what measures are in place at their higher education institution, most students report social distancing measures across campuses (90%), increased hygiene measures (88%), some learning online (88%) and limited interaction with other students (82%). Around three-quarters say they have limited access to libraries and independent study space (73%) and campus facilities such as sports facilities and Student Union buildings (73%). Just over half of students say all learning is online (53%) and just over a third (35%) say there are limitations to courses, such as reduced module options.

*Which of the following measures are in place at your higher education institution?*



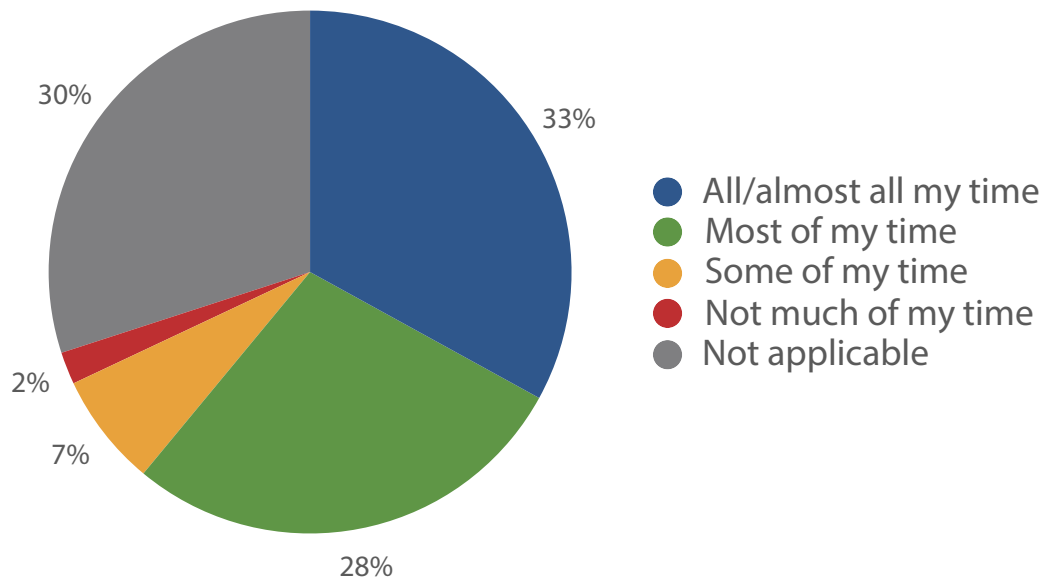
These measures can be compared to students' expectations before the 2020/21 academic year, in June 2020. The biggest gap between expectations and the reality is with regards to online learning: only 21% expected all learning to be online, whereas 53% of students are receiving all their learning online. Other disparities between expectation and reality include limited interaction with other students, which 67% of students expected but 82% are finding is occurring and limited access to campus facilities, which 62% expected but 73% are finding is the reality. Again, it should be noted that our latest polling was conducted during the November national lockdown and therefore does not necessarily represent the measures in place throughout the academic year.

*COVID-19 measures in place*



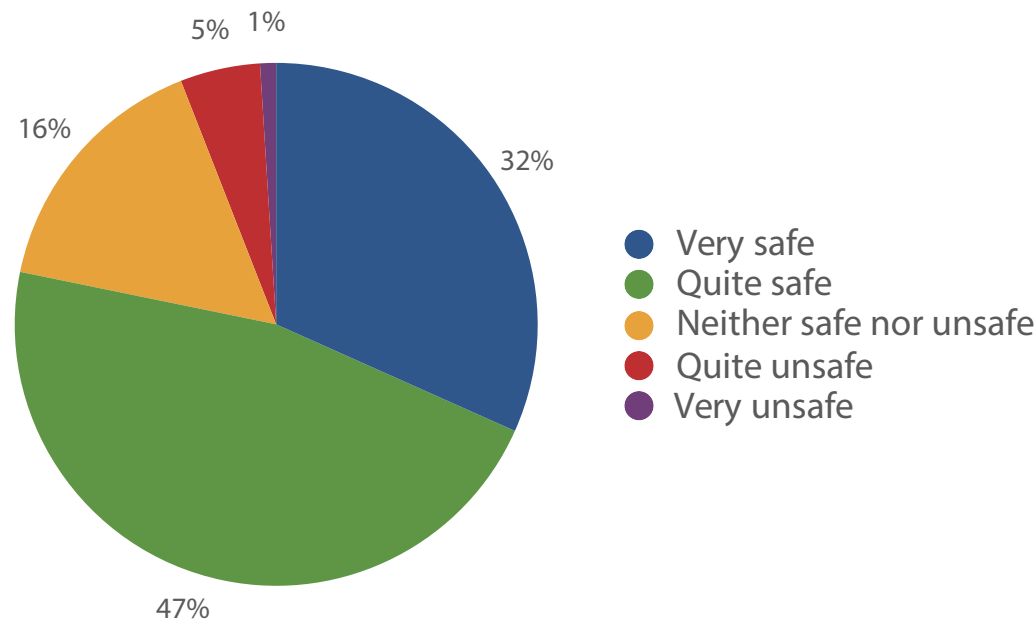
A third of students (33%) say they currently spend all or almost all of their time in their accommodation and more than a quarter more (28%) say they spend most of their time in their accommodation. Only 7% say they spend just some of their time in their accommodation and 2% say they do not spend much of their time there. For just under a third (30%) of students, this question was not applicable.

*If you live away from home to study, what proportion of your time do you currently spend in your accommodation?*



Most students say their higher education experience feels very or quite safe (79%). Only 6% say their experience feels quite or very unsafe and 16% say it feels neither safe nor unsafe.

*How safe does your higher education experience feel?*

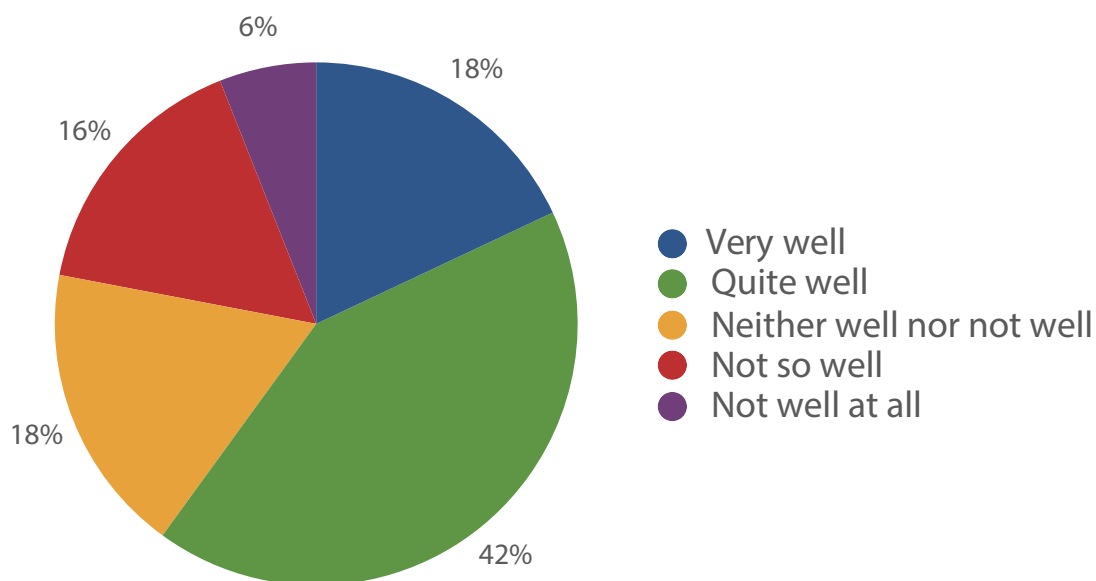


### Christmas and New Year

When asked how well they understand the latest Government guidance about the end of term and Christmas travel, just under two thirds (60%) of students report understanding very or quite well. Less than a quarter (22%) say they do not understand it so well or not well at all and 18% say they neither understand it well nor not well.

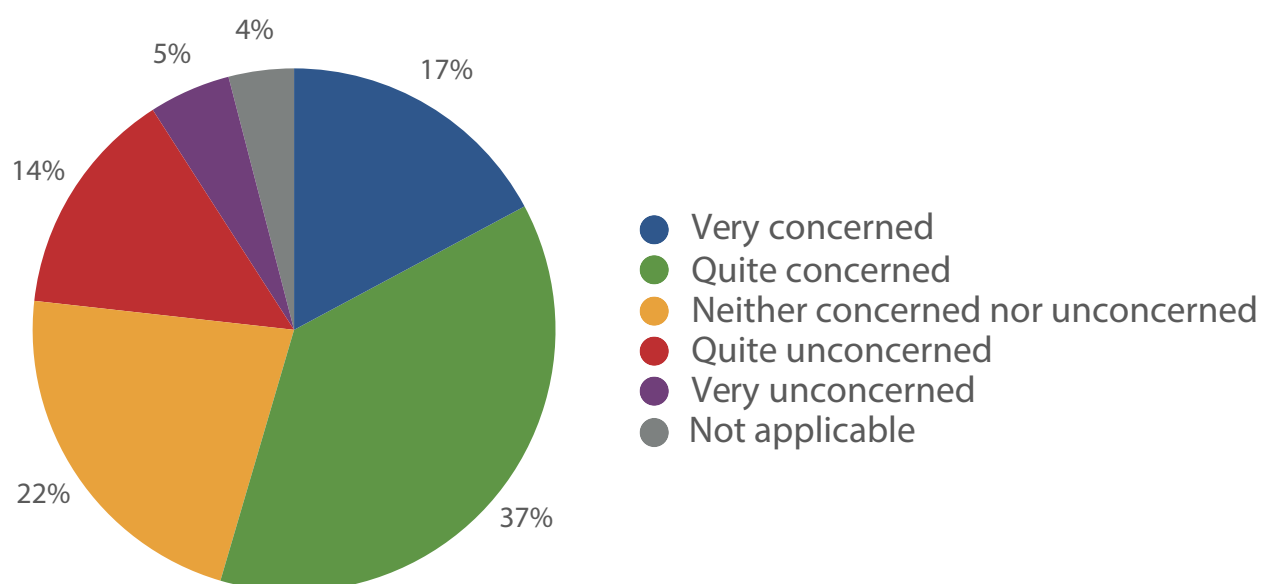


*How well do you understand the new Government guidance about the end of term/travelling home for Christmas?*



Over half of students (54%) are very or quite concerned about how the return to university in January 2021 will operate. Less than a fifth (19%) of students are very or quite unconcerned. Just over a fifth (22%) are neither concerned nor unconcerned and for 4% the question is not applicable.

*How concerned are you about how the return to university in January for the start of your next term will work?*



**Conclusion**

There are clearly some positive takeaways from this polling of students' experience through the COVID-19 pandemic. More students than in either of HEPI / YouthSight's previous polls feel satisfied with the online learning that has replaced face-to-face teaching, suggesting universities are strengthening their online delivery. This could also suggest students are becoming more familiar with online delivery. Where cases of Coronavirus have arisen, most students say they are satisfied with how these have been handled by their higher education institution and most students also say their higher education experience feels safe.

However, there are still plenty of challenges for universities. Student mental health, which the HEPI / Advance HE *Student Academic Experience Survey* has shown to be poor for a number of years prior to COVID-19, has been worsened through the pandemic and universities will need to continue to prioritise supporting students through this challenging period.<sup>3</sup> There is a disparity between the expectations reported by students in the previous polling in June 2020 and their current experience. Far more students are finding they are receiving no face-to-face learning when they were expecting to. This is not necessarily problematic, as alongside this their satisfaction with online learning has increased. It could be that students see more online delivery as necessary, given the increase in the spread of the virus since the last polling was undertaken. It does, however, also show a disparity between the experience of students and the expectations of Government. Since the start of the 2020/21 academic year, the Government have been clear they expect face-to-face teaching to continue, including through the most recent national lockdown.<sup>4</sup>

There are also clearly challenges to be faced ahead. While most students feel they understand the guidance for travelling at the end of term, more than half of students are concerned about the start of the next academic term. It is clear that, to address these concerns, the Government should work to publish guidance about the return to university in the New Year as soon as possible.

## Methodology

1. Wave 10 of the HEPI / YouthSight Monitor was answered by 1,075 full-time undergraduate students and undertaken between the 20 and 24 November. Weights have been used to ensure the sample is representative by age, gender and university type.
2. The margin of error is + / - 2% for students. This is calculated at a 95% confidence level.
3. Respondents received a £1.50 Bonus Bond gift voucher for answering these questions and others on a different topic.
4. Results may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

## Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/04/07/new-poll-finds-almost-one-third-of-applicants-feel-less-confident-they-will-get-into-their-chosen-university-since-the-coronavirus-pandemic/>
- 2 [https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/HEPI-Policy-Note-24\\_Coronavirus\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/HEPI-Policy-Note-24_Coronavirus_FINAL.pdf)
- 3 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/06/11/the-student-academic-experience-survey-2020/>
- 4 <https://twitter.com/michelledonelan/status/1323389860011532290>



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