



Higher Education Policy Institute

YouthSight

# Students' views on the impact of Coronavirus on their higher education experience in 2021

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HEPI Policy Note 29

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## Key findings

- Two-thirds of undergraduate students (66%) say they have not received any financial reimbursement from their university or accommodation provider as a result of the pandemic. Around a fifth (19%) have received reimbursement from their accommodation provider, 13% from their university and 2% from both.
- Two-thirds of students (66%) are living in their usual term-time accommodation, whereas 34% are not.
- Over half of students (56%) are not expecting to receive any more face-to-face teaching this academic year, compared to 44% who are.
- Student satisfaction with online learning is at a similar level to November 2020, but up from the levels in March and June 2020 (54% now, compared to 59% in November, 42% in June and 49% in March 2020).
- Around two-thirds (65%) of students say the messaging from their higher education institution on the impact of the pandemic on this academic year has been clear and around one-fifth (19%) say the messaging has been unclear.
- Almost two-thirds (63%) of students say their mental health is a little or much worse as a result of the pandemic compared to just 14% who say their mental health is a little or much better. Just under a quarter (23%) describe their mental health as the same. One-fifth (21%) describe their mental health as much worse.
- Over a third (38%) of students are satisfied with the delivery of mental health services, whereas 50% of students are satisfied with the delivery of other support services.

## Introduction

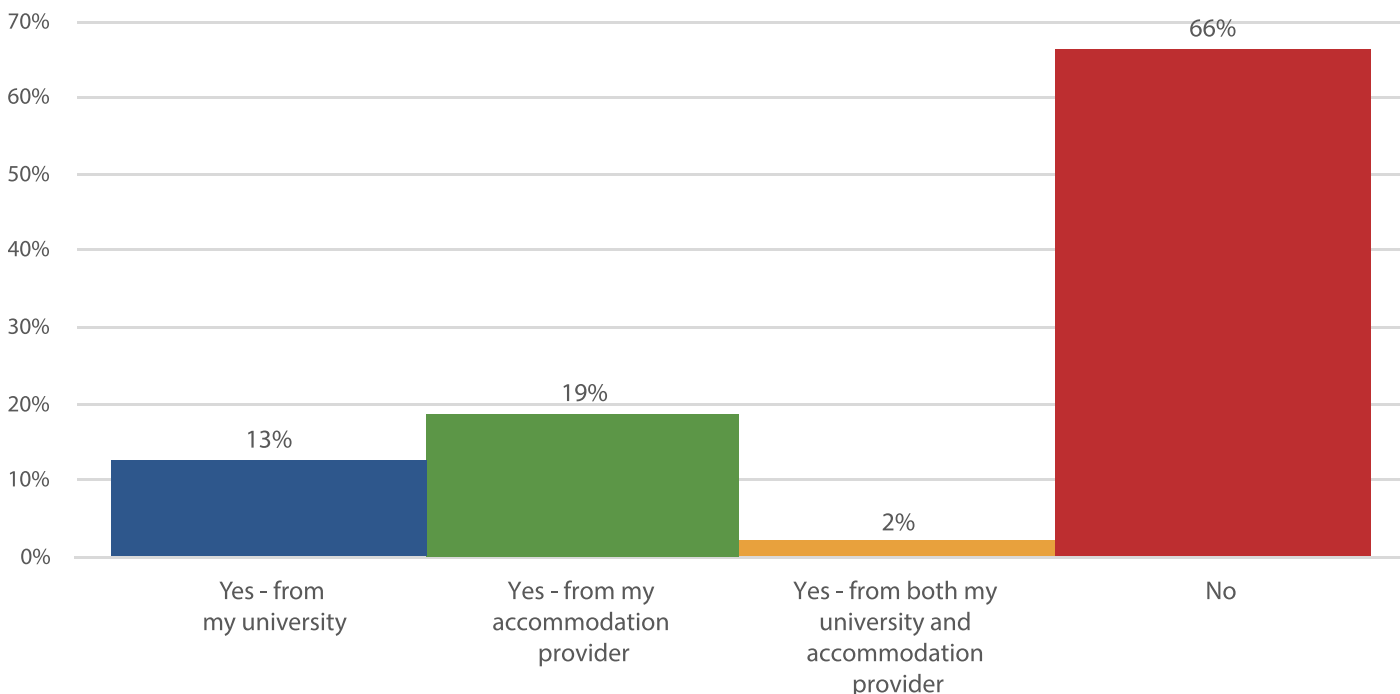
COVID-19 continues to have a significant impact on the student experience as the UK remains under significant restrictions with higher education institutions largely teaching online. Each round of the HEPI / YouthSight Coronavirus polling has taught us more about the student experience during the pandemic, from the first in March 2020, then in June 2020, November 2020 and now in March 2021.<sup>1</sup> This latest polling, conducted as we begin to learn more about the routes out of lockdown across the UK, highlights the issues that are important to students in understanding how the pandemic has impacted their experience, and how perceptions have developed over time.

The survey of over 1,000 full-time undergraduate students was undertaken between 11 and 16 March 2021. Weights have been used to ensure the sample is representative by age, gender and university type.

## Accommodation and refunds

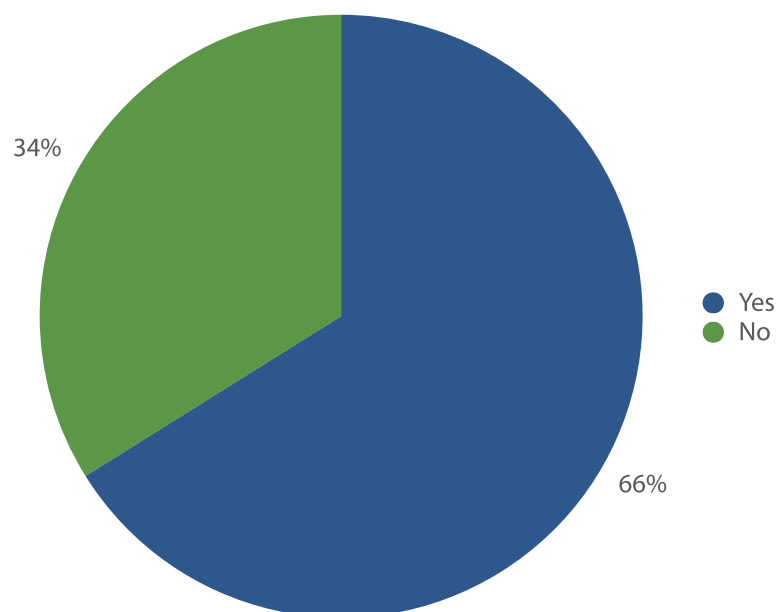
Two thirds of students (66%) say they have not received any financial reimbursement from their university or accommodation provider. Around a fifth (19%) have received reimbursement from their accommodation provider, 13% have received reimbursement from their university and 2% have received reimbursement from both.

*Have you received any financial reimbursements, such as refunds, from your university or accommodation provider?*



The polling was conducted while lockdown restrictions were in place across the UK. Students in England studying practical courses were permitted to return to face-to-face teaching, but all other higher education students in England, Scotland and Wales were continuing to learn online. Nonetheless, two thirds (66%) of students polled said they were currently living in their usual term-time accommodation, compared to 34% who were not. It should be noted that this figure will include students who do not live away from home for study. These results are aligned with findings from the student housing charity Unipol, who found that around 60% of private PBSAs (Purpose Built Student Accommodation) were occupied and around 70% of HMOs (houses in multiple occupation).<sup>2</sup>

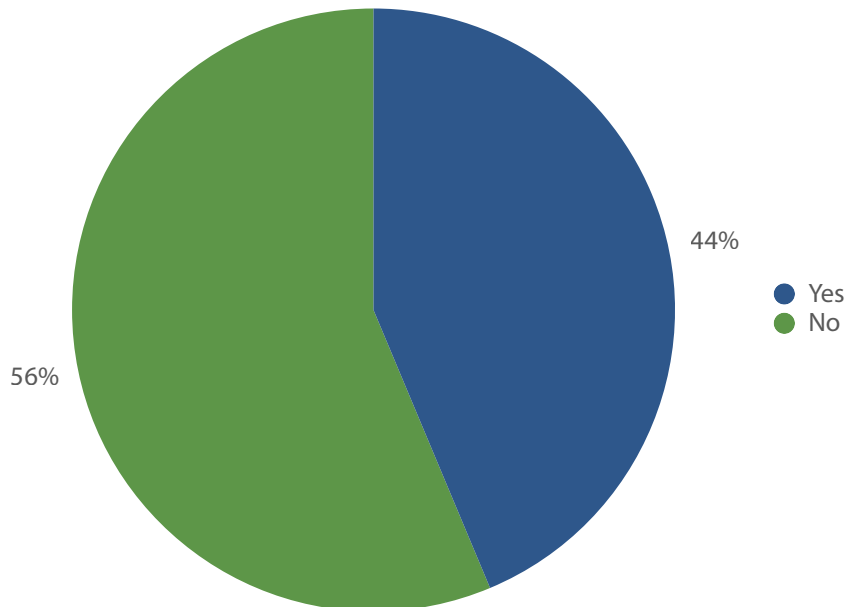
*Are you currently living in your usual term time accommodation?*



## Teaching and learning

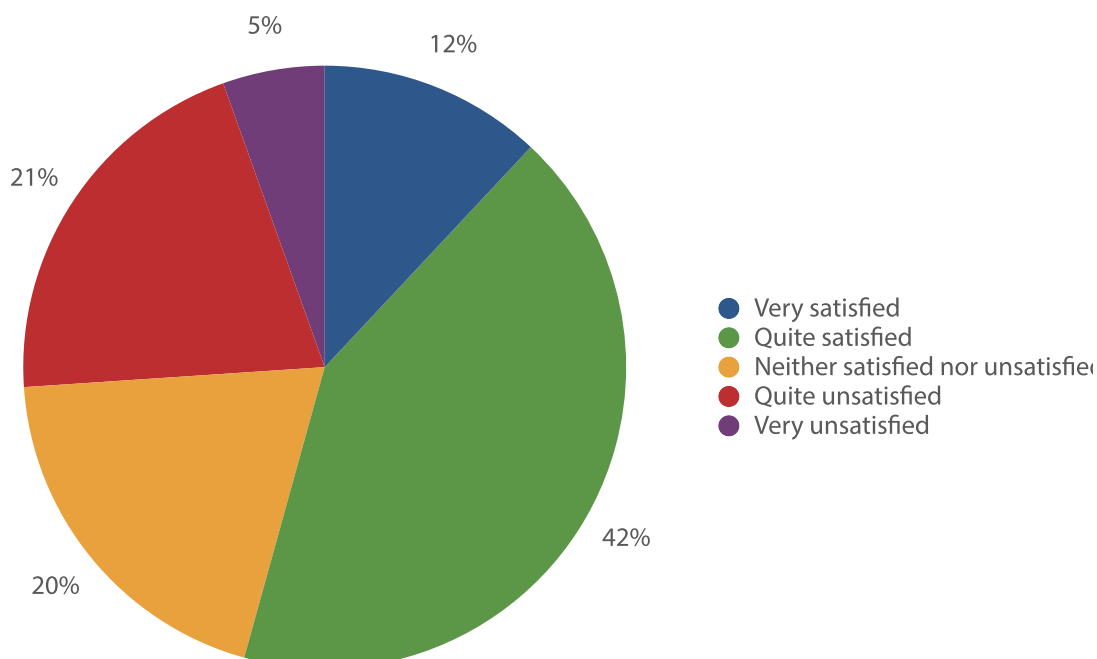
Different universities have set different expectations in terms of face-to-face teaching over the remainder of this academic year. Some, such as the University of Edinburgh, University of St Andrews and the London School of Economics, have confirmed that they do not expect to resume face-to-face teaching this academic year whereas others, such as the University of Sussex, have stated they are aiming to deliver some face-to-face teaching after Easter.<sup>3</sup> Over half of students (56%) do not expect to receive any more face-to-face teaching this academic year, whereas 44% do expect to receive more this academic year.

*Do you expect to receive any more face-to-face teaching this academic year?*



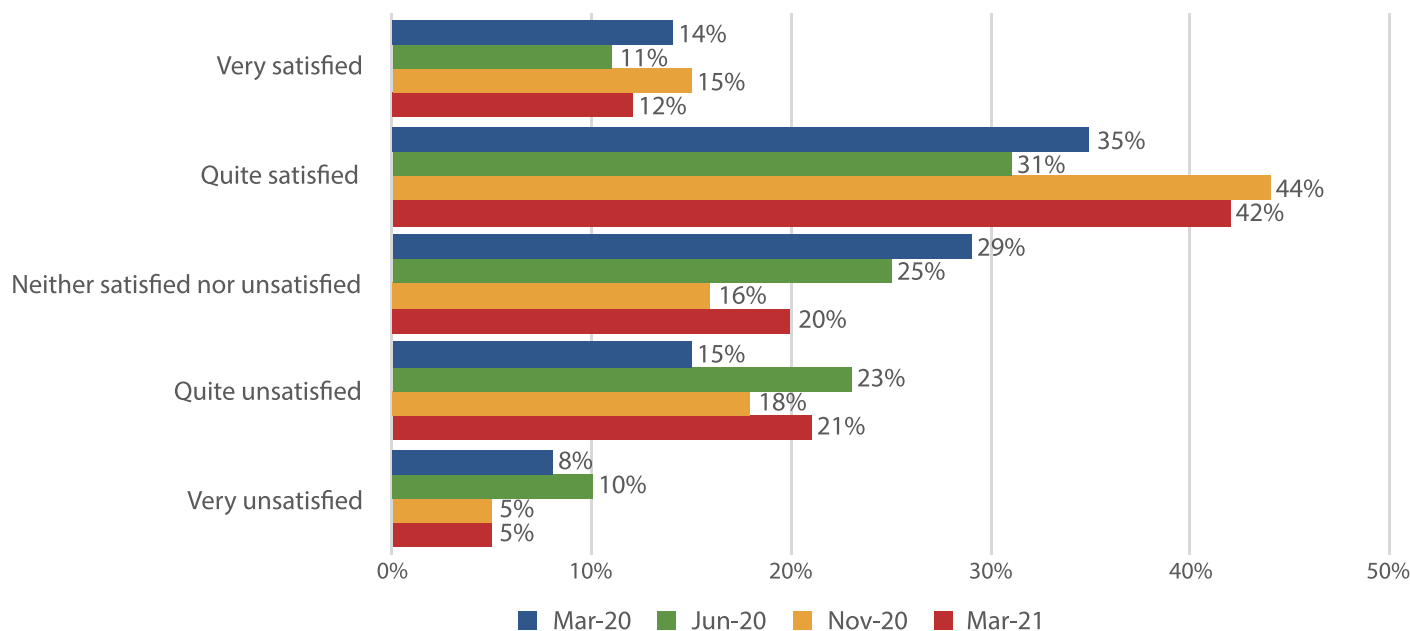
More than half of students (54%) say they are very or quite satisfied with the online learning that has replaced face-to-face teaching, compared with 26% who say they are very or quite unsatisfied. A fifth (20%) say they are neither satisfied nor unsatisfied.

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



Similar numbers of students say they are very or quite satisfied compared to the previous HEPI / Youthsight polling, undertaken in November 2020 (54% now compared to 59% in November). However, satisfaction is higher now than in June (42%) or March 2020 (49%).

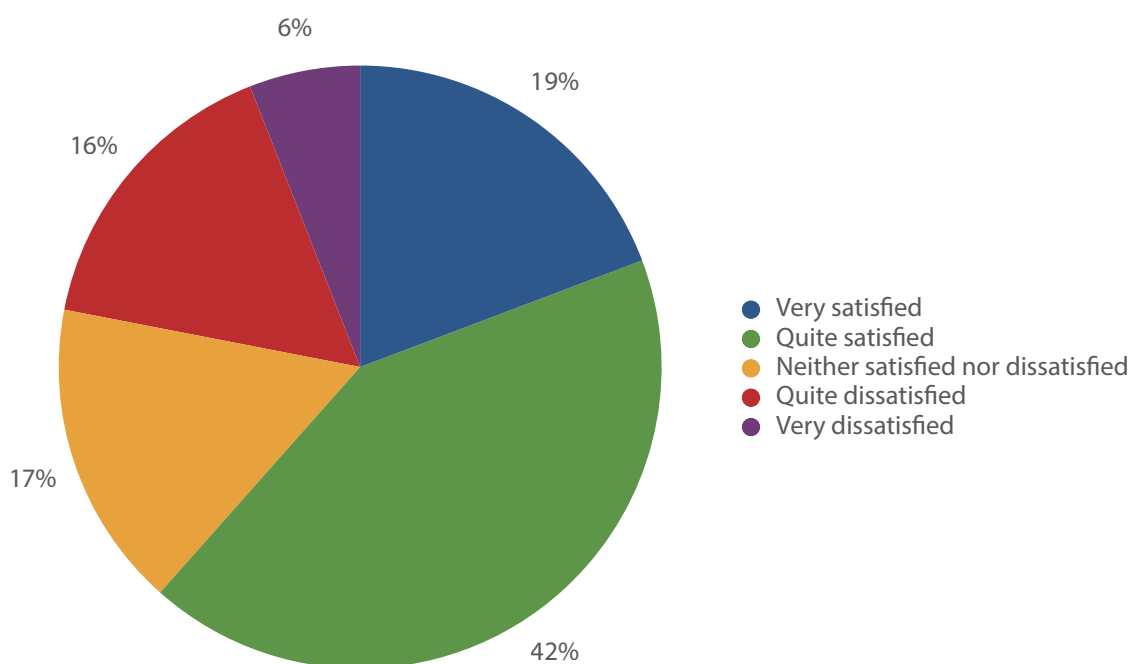
*How satisfied are you with the online learning your higher education institution has put in place to replace face-to-face learning?*



Universities have taken a mixed approach to the handling of assessments in the 2020/21 academic year, with some higher education institutions putting in place a ‘no-detriment policy’ where measures, such as students not receiving lower grades than previously achieved, are used to ensure students’ academic attainment is not negatively affected as a result of the pandemic. However, not all have taken this approach, including Russell Group institutions who have stated they will not be using no-detriment policies this year.<sup>4</sup>

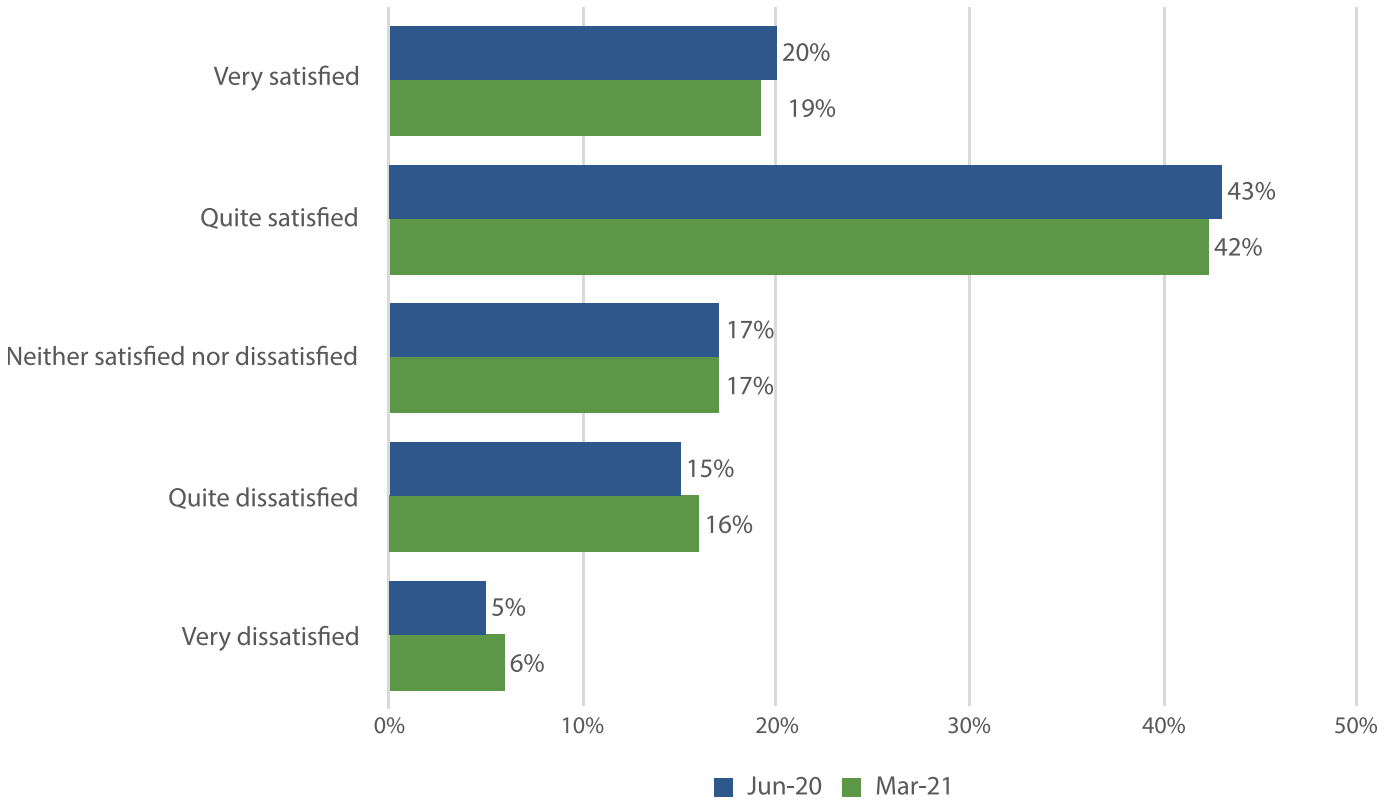
Most students (61%) say they are very or quite satisfied with how their higher education institution has handled their remaining assessments for this academic year. Just over a fifth (22%) say they are very or quite dissatisfied and 17% say they are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. Students from pre-1992 and specialist institutions are more likely to be satisfied (68%) than students from post-1992 institutions (60%) or Russell Group institutions (58%).

*How satisfied are you with the way your higher education institution has handled your remaining assessments for this academic year?*



Students' levels of satisfaction with the handling of assessments is very similar to the HEPI / YouthSight polling conducted at the end of the 2019/20 academic year in June 2020, where 63% of students reported being very or quite satisfied.

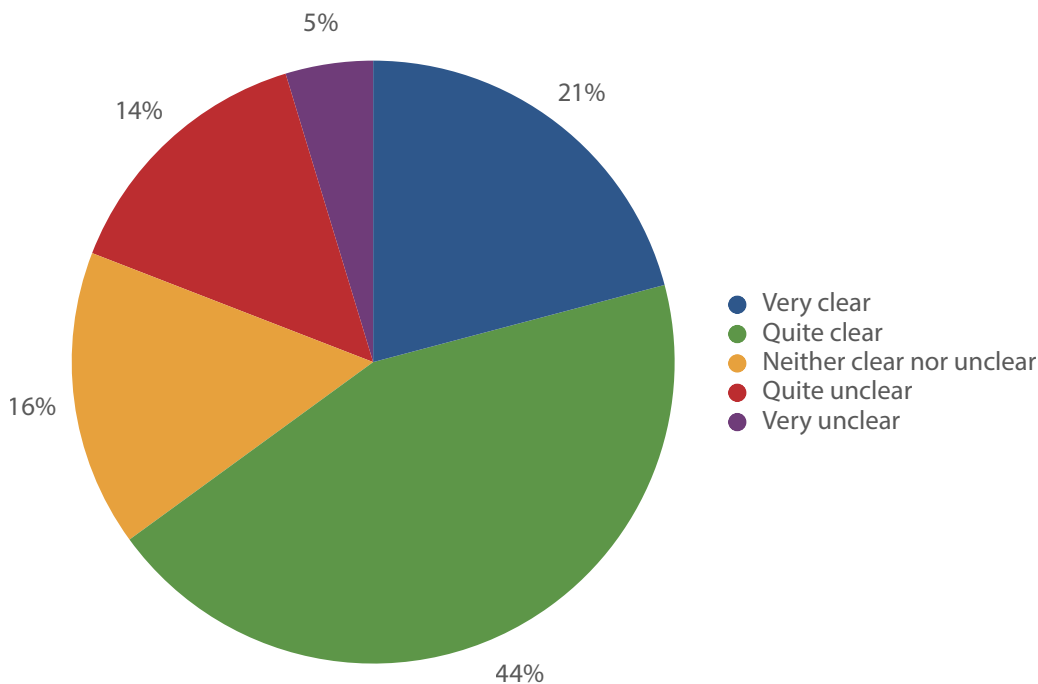
*How satisfied are you with the way your higher education institution has handled your remaining assessments for this academic year?*



### Communication

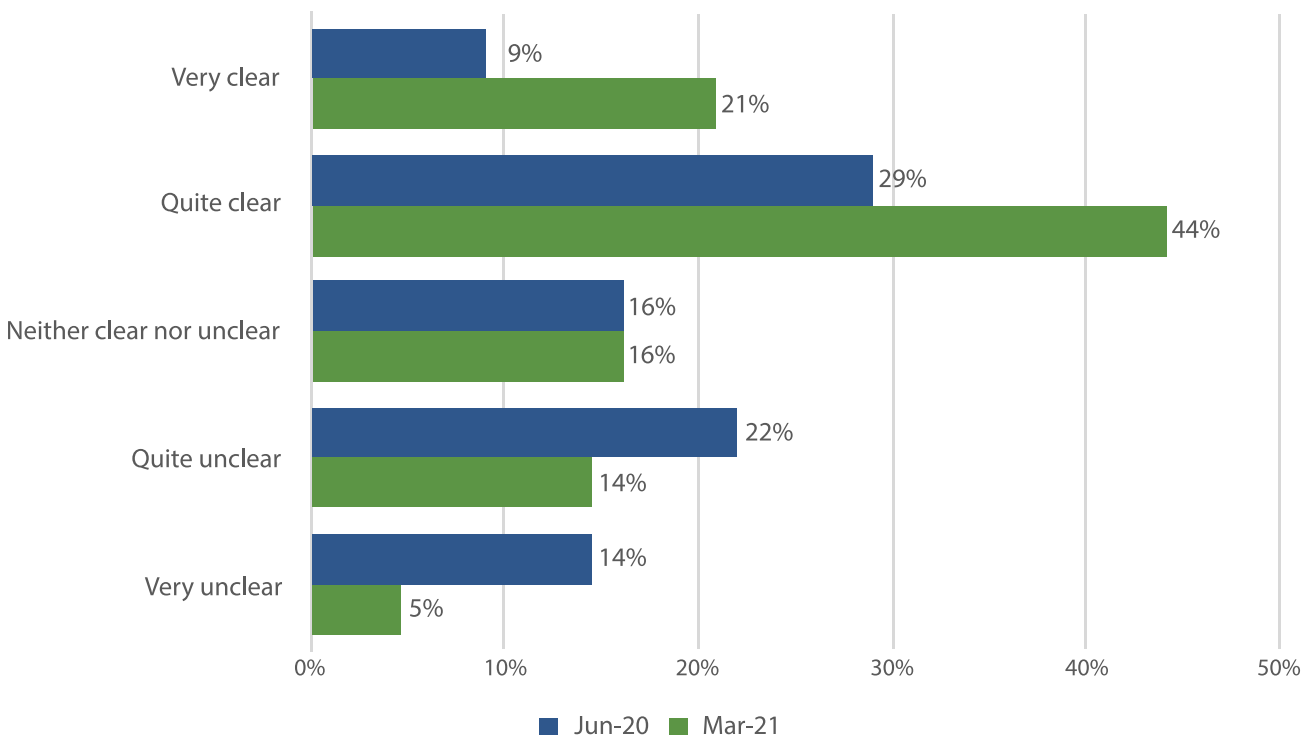
Almost two-thirds of students (65%) say the messaging from their higher education institution about the impact of Coronavirus on this academic year has been very or quite clear. Less than a fifth (19%) say it has been very or quite unclear and 16% say it has been neither clear nor unclear.

*How clear has the messaging around the impact of Coronavirus on this academic year been from your higher education institution?*



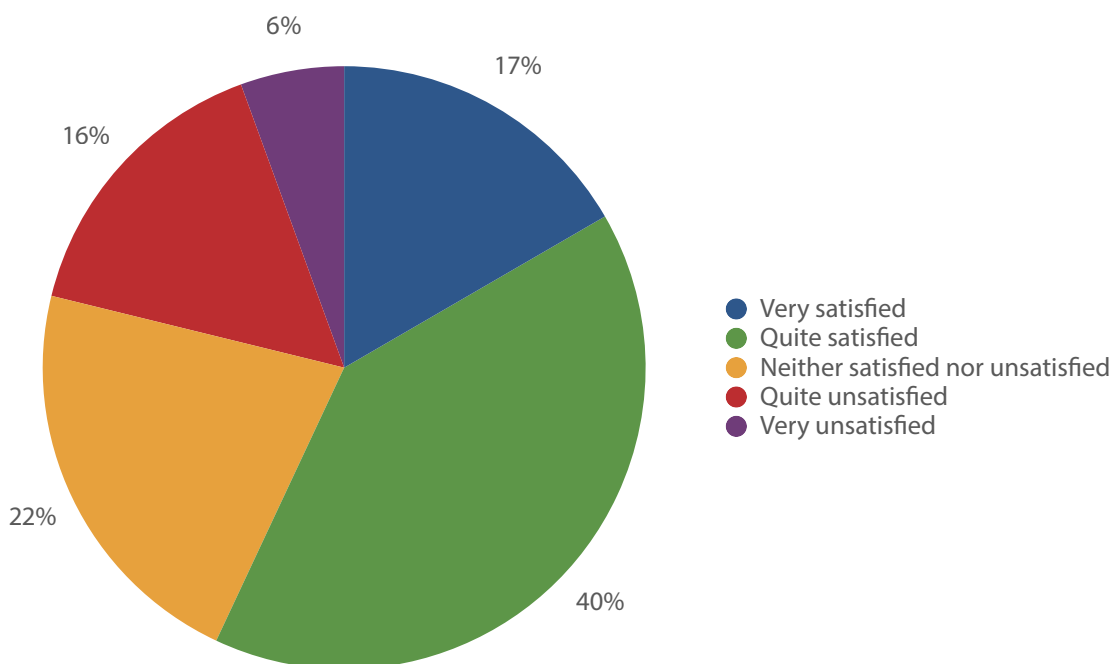
When we asked students in June 2020 how clear the messaging had been about the upcoming 2020/21 academic year, far fewer students were satisfied: only 38% reported the messaging about the upcoming year being very or quite clear, compared to 65% now. This may be partially explained by the clearer position we are now in in terms of the development of the pandemic, the route out of lockdown and how institutions respond to it.

*How clear has the messaging around the impact of Coronavirus on the 2020/21 academic year been from your higher education institution?*



More than half of students (57%) say they are very or quite satisfied with the overall approach taken by their higher education institution to the pandemic, compared to 22% who are very or quite unsatisfied and 22% who are neither satisfied nor unsatisfied.

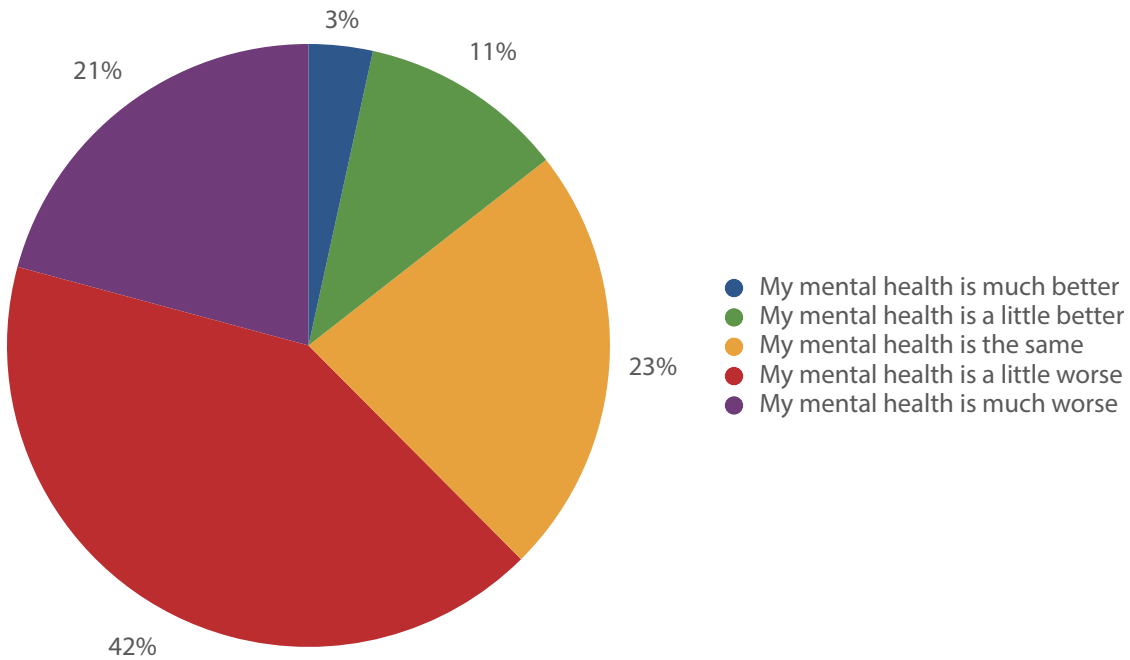
*How satisfied are you with the overall approach your university has taken to responding to the Coronavirus pandemic?*



## Mental health and support services

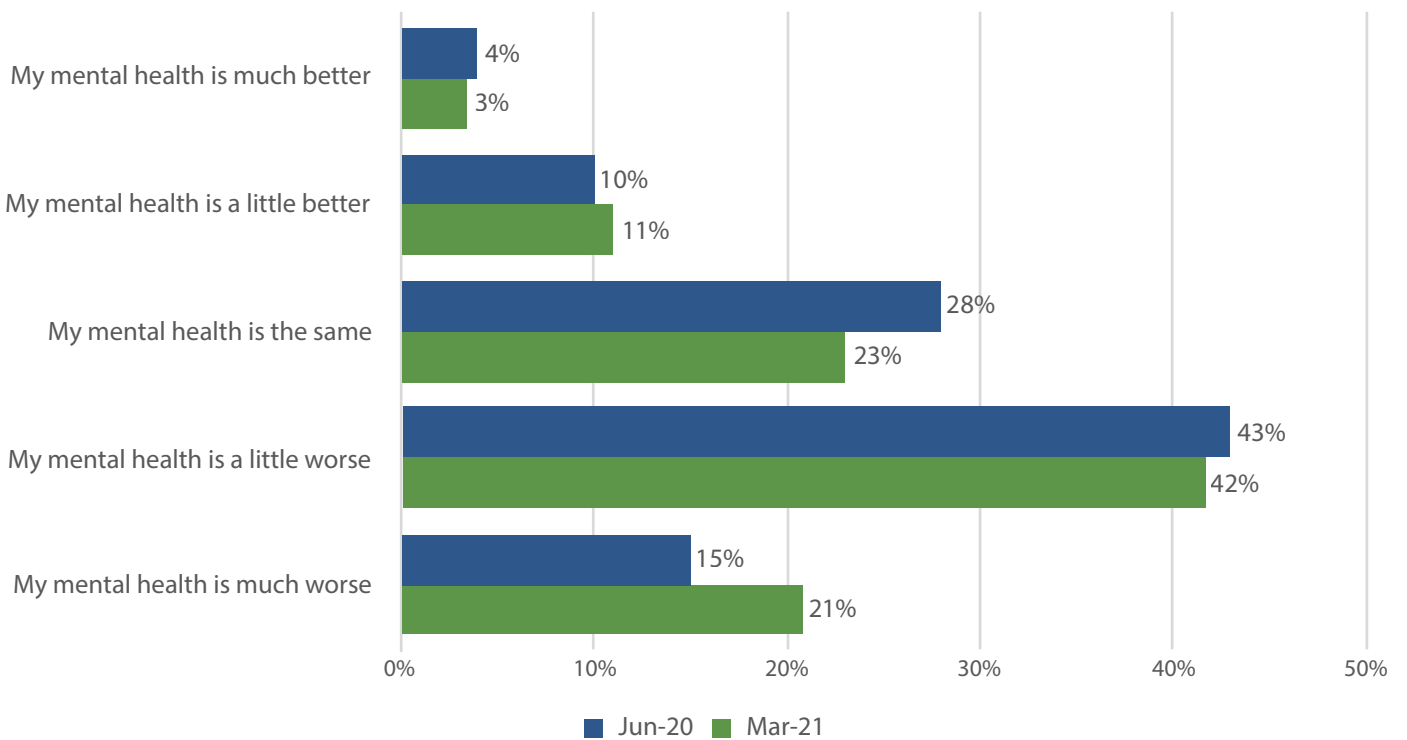
The majority of students say that Coronavirus has had an impact on their mental health. Almost two-thirds (63%) say their mental health is a little or much worse compared to just 14% who say their mental health is a little or much better. Just under a quarter (23%) describe their mental health as the same.

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



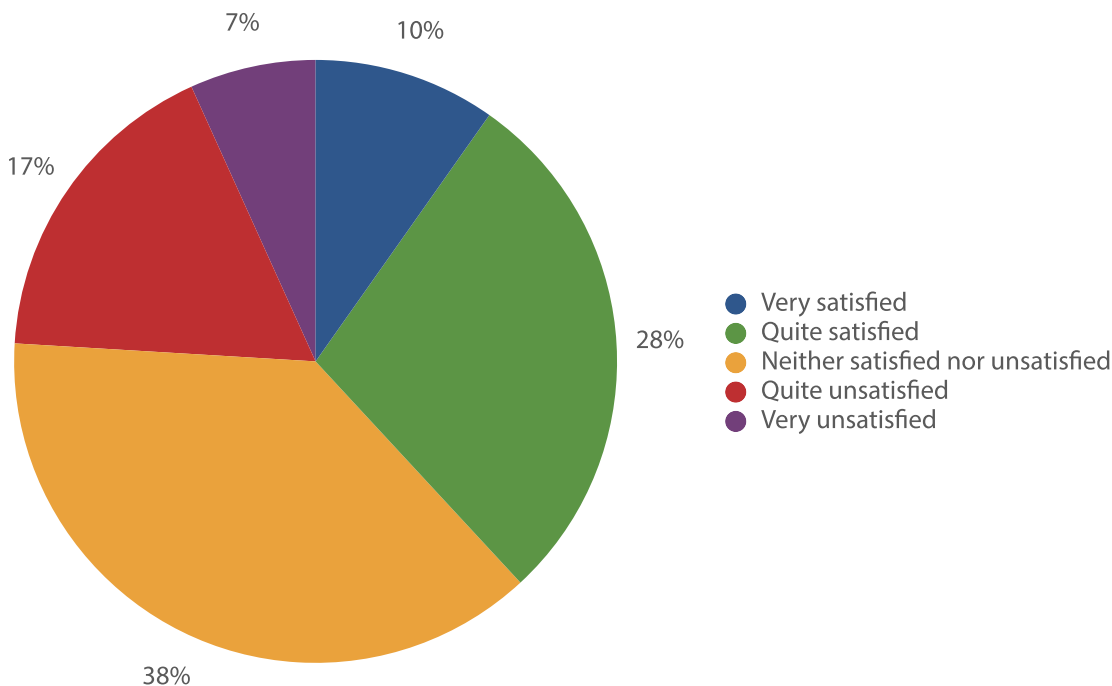
When compared to the HEPI / YouthSight polling conducted in June 2020, similar numbers of students now report that their mental health is much or a little worse (63% now compared to 58% in June).

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



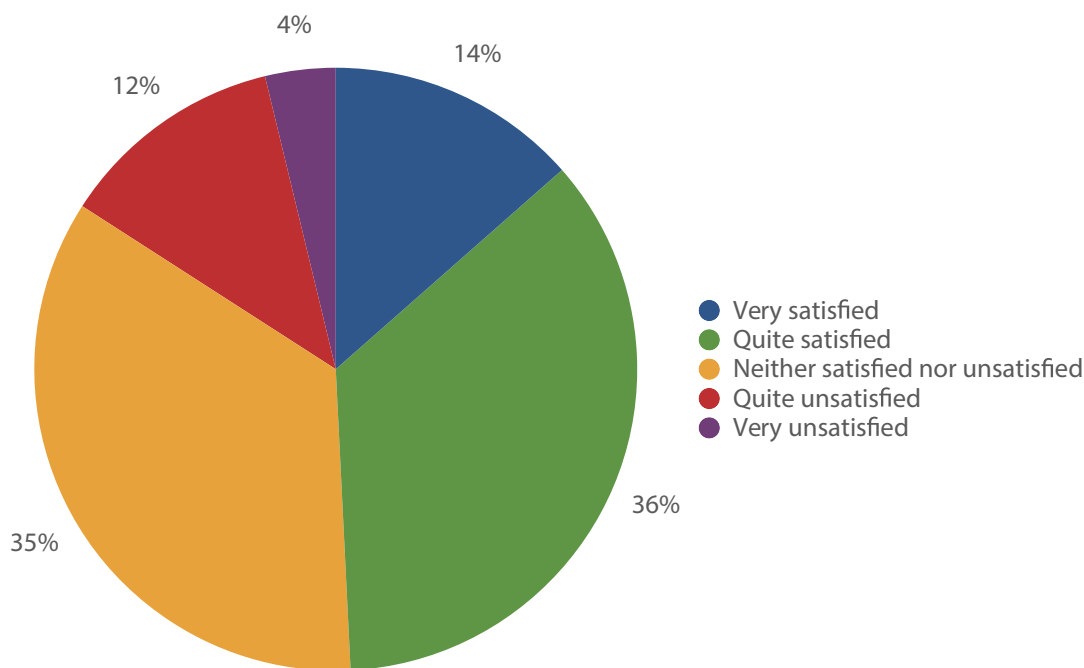
Just under a quarter (24%) report being very or quite dissatisfied with how their higher education institution is delivering mental health services, compared to 38% who are very or quite satisfied and 38% who are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.

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



More students are satisfied with the delivery of support services outside of mental health: 50% report being very or quite satisfied, compared to 16% who are very or quite dissatisfied and 35% who are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.

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





## Conclusion

As with previous HEPI / YouthSight pollings on Coronavirus, there are some positive takeaways in the approach that has been taken by higher education institutions. Most students are satisfied overall with the way their higher education institution has responded to the pandemic, the level of clarity in the messaging and the approach to assessments. This is credit to the work done by university staff in delivering higher education in extremely challenging circumstances. While the majority of students remain satisfied with their online learning, there is still a significant minority of students who are dissatisfied with what they are receiving. However if, as expected, most students do not receive any further face-to-face teaching this academic year, universities will need to continue to consider how they can improve online delivery for all students.

Despite students largely being encouraged to stay away from university campuses, the majority of students are currently residing in their term-time accommodation. Two-thirds have not received refunds, although the low level of accommodation refunds could be partially explained by the numbers of students in term-time accommodation.

It is concerning, but not surprising, that students report worsening mental health as a result of the pandemic. In considering this it should be acknowledged that student wellbeing prior to the pandemic was already at a low level, as reported in the HEPI / Advance HE 2020 Student Academic Experience Survey.<sup>5</sup> While universities cannot be solely responsible for the mental health of their students and must be supported by NHS services, higher education institutions should note the lower levels of satisfaction found here for the future delivery of mental health services compared with other university support services.

## Methodology

1. Wave 11 of the HEPI / YouthSight Monitor was answered by 1,044 full-time undergraduate students and undertaken between the 11 and 16 March. Weights have been used to ensure the sample is representative by age, gender and university type.
2. The margin of error is + / – 3% 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/>  
[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)  
<https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/HEPI-Policy-Note-27-Students-views-on-the-impact-of-Coronavirus-on-their-higher-education-experience-in-2020-21-FINAL.pdf>
- 2 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2021/03/19/myth-debunking-a-post-easter-mass-return-to-halls-and-rented-houses/>
- 3 <https://theboar.org/2021/02/online-teaching-remain-until-autumn/>  
<https://inews.co.uk/news/education/universities-return-all-students-after-easter-summer-graduation-ceremonies-884744>
- 4 <https://www.russellgroup.ac.uk/news/russell-group-statement-on-ensuring-fair-assessment-and-protecting-the-integrity-of-degrees/>
- 5 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/The-Student-Academic-Experience-Survey-2020.pdf>



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