

Sex and Relationships Among Students: Summary Report

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HEPI Policy Note 30

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Executive Summary

Knowledge and Attitudes

- Undergraduate students enter higher education with a range of prior experiences: 43% 'had never had sex with anyone', one-quarter (25%) had not 'intimately kissed anyone' and 18% were 'in a long-distance relationship'.
- Sex is not a high priority for most new students – 58% say making friends was more important to them than finding sexual partners. Only 16% of students say 'When first going to university, I was excited about having sex'.
- Just one-in-ten students (10%) expected to have sex during their welcome week and a similar proportion (9%) did so.
- Students express confidence in their knowledge about contraception, on reducing the risk of sexually transmitted infections and on 'the facts and choices about pregnancy'.
- Fewer students have confidence in their knowledge on the laws on female genital mutilation, sexual grooming and forced marriage and there is less confidence still on taking action to avoid the spread of HIV.
- Just 6% of respondents 'strongly agree' and a further 21% 'slightly agree' that the education they received before entering higher education prepared them for sex and relationships in higher education and around one-half of students disagree (24% 'slightly disagree' and a further 24% 'strongly disagree').
- One-in-six students (17%) 'strongly agree' and further one-third (32%) 'slightly agree' that the education they received at school provided them with 'a comprehensive understanding of sexual consent', while another third disagree (20% 'slightly disagree' and 12% 'strongly disagree').
- Two-thirds of students want 'opportunities to learn about sex and relationships' across the academic year (26% 'strongly agree' and 41% 'slightly agree').
- A slim overall majority of students think relationships and sex education 'should be made compulsory at my university during the welcome period' and a similar proportion say 'all students should have to pass an assessment to show that they fully understand sexual consent' before entering higher education.
- A majority of students disagree with the statement that 'I learned more about sex and relationships from school than I did searching online', with 34% in strong disagreement and a further 24% 'slightly' disagreeing.

- One-third of students say they have 'learned more about sex from pornography than from formal education', with 11% 'strongly' agreeing and 24% 'slightly' agreeing.

Experiences and Behaviours

- Around one-half of students express positive responses on 'being able to ask for advice and / or help' about sex and relationship issues, where to find that advice and how to access sexual health and contraception services. A big majority of students understand that such services 'are confidential and free'.
- Peer-to-peer support is particularly important to students, with most feeling able to seek support from other students: 32% 'strongly agree' and a further 37% 'slightly agree' that they are 'able to speak to one or more friends at university about sex, sexual health and relationships'.
- Over one-third of students (36%) are 'fairly confident' on 'who and how to contact someone if I am concerned about an aspect of sex including bullying, coercion or regret', and a further 15% say they are 'very confident' on this.
- Two-thirds of students are confident they know what to do if someone they know is in a harmful or abusive relationship. On the other hand, one-in-four (25%) students say they are 'not very confident'.
- Around two-thirds of students express some level of confidence in knowing 'How to challenge inappropriate sexual behaviour' and very few say they are 'not at all confident' (5%), although 26% say they are 'not very confident'.
- There are strongly positive results on the understanding of a range of consent issues, from 'how not to put pressure on others' to knowledge of legislation 'around sex and consent'. Nonetheless, around 10% of students are 'not very confident' and a smaller minority 'not at all confident' on 'how to communicate consent clearly', 'what constitutes sexual assault and violence' and 'what constitutes sexual harassment'.
- A large majority of students know alcohol and drugs can lead to risky sexual behaviour (with 45% 'strongly' agreeing and 42% 'slightly' agreeing). The proportion of students who are 'very confident' about their understanding of sexual consent after the consumption of alcohol is just 30%, which is half the proportion (59%) who otherwise said they were 'very confident' about 'what constitutes sexual consent'.
- Students' experiences confirm they are heterogeneous: for example, 41% say they have had sex during their time as a student, 32% say they are 'currently in a relationship' and 11% say they are 'voluntarily abstaining from sex'.
- Just over half of students (52%) say they have watched pornography, with one-third (31%) saying they currently do so. The proportion who say they currently watch pornography is twice as high for men (43%) as for women (22%).
- Among those students who have had sex during their time in higher education, the majority (52%) have had just one sexual partner and a further one-quarter (26%) have had between two and three.
- A higher proportion of women (47%) than men (34%) say they have had sex during their time as a student. These men are less likely to claim they have only had one sexual partner.

Other Issues

- Two-fifths of female students (40%) report that symptoms of their periods may have stopped them from doing their best effort in academic assignments and over one-third (35%) report missing an academic appointment due to the impact of their period.
- One-in-eight (13%) female students say side effects from contraception have adversely affected their academic work and one-in-nine (11%) say such effects have caused them to miss a class.
- Four-in-ten students (40%) have undertaken sexting. Much of this seems likely to have included sending naked or semi-naked images to another, as 37% of students say they have done this. Smaller proportions have had sex over video software (16%) or the phone (12%).
- When asked whether 'it is easy for me to maintain friendships during lockdown', nearly half of students (48%) express some agreement and around one-in-three (30%) disagree.
- A narrow majority of students say their university has 'maintained good messaging about the importance of wellbeing since the start of lockdown', with 15% in 'strong' agreement and 37% in 'slight' agreement.
- When presented with the positive statement that 'I am happier with my friends now than I was before lockdown', the responses split fairly evenly three ways, with comparable proportions opting for the positive responses, for 'neither agree nor disagree' and for the negative options.
- Although higher education institutions have moved much of their teaching and many of their support services online, only a small proportion of respondents agree their university has told them 'how to have safe intimate and sexual relations online' (9% 'slightly agree' and 5% 'strongly agree') while 45% 'strongly disagree' and a further 17% 'slightly disagree'.

Introduction

Each year, there are lurid headlines about students and their sex lives, particularly on the supposedly high proportion of students who undertake sex work. Recent examples include: 'Number of students turning to sex work doubles in two years, survey indicates'; 'Thousands of hard-up students turning to sex work as loans fail to cover tuition fees and living costs'; and 'More students are turning to sex work during COVID-19 pandemic'.¹

In the stories beneath such headlines, journalists have faithfully reported the data available to them. But the evidence itself is sometimes more salacious than illuminating, much of it is of questionable validity and parts of it may even be dangerous by providing a false impression. Self-selecting internet polls cannot provide an accurate picture on what student life is really like.

So the primary objective of this research is to provide a better evidence base. We do not claim the evidence we have collected is perfect: some people may struggle to answer personal questions accurately, some may provide what they consider socially desirable responses and some may not be willing to answer such personal questions at all. Instead, we make the modest claim that the evidence we have collected, via a representative poll conducted by a reputable youth specialist research consultancy (YouthSight), improves the existing evidence base.

As well as sharpening the fuzzy picture of students' lives, our data should help inform students about how their fellow students behave. This is important, in part, because misunderstandings about other people's sex lives are common and they leave people with an incorrect impression about how their own lives compare to those of others. For example, a recent survey by King's College London found people think women in Great Britain aged 45 to 54 have had an average of 17 sexual partners, yet the true result is eight.² A better understanding of how others really act and what people are confused about should enable more support to be offered when, where and how it can make the most difference and it may make some students less worried about so-called FOMO (the 'Fear Of Missing Out').

HEPI has not published anything on students' personal relationships and sex lives before. To do so now risks being accused of prurience, but this is a risk worth taking to ensure a deeper understanding of today's students' lives and to help those who wish to support students negotiate the challenges and opportunities they face.

Given the evidence about many students' poor mental health and the high incidence of loneliness, it is important to build up a more nuanced and richer conversation about how students really live.

Methodology

The polling was undertaken between 11 August and 19 August 2020 by YouthSight, whose Student Panel comprises over 50,000 undergraduates in the UK, recruited mainly through UCAS.

The sample size of 1,004 undergraduates has a margin of error of +/-3% calculated at a 95% confidence level and based on a result of 50%, where the margin of error is at its maximum. For a result of 50%, the true result is between 47% and 53% in 95 out of 100 cases.

On average, the survey took 17 minutes to complete. Weightings accounting for gender, course year and institution type have been applied to the responses to help ensure the sample is balanced. Students were paid £2 to complete the survey.

At the time of the polling, students were generally on their summer vacation. Where we asked time-specific questions, we used recent time periods (for example 'in the last two months') or other clearly recognisable times. A few questions specifically related to the Covid-19 pandemic.

We sought to ensure the survey was conducted ethically. We regularly reminded respondents that they could leave the survey if they wished and that the results would be anonymous. Issues of particular sensitivity were flagged prior to asking the questions and numbers for sexual health helplines were provided. For every question, there was an option of 'prefer not to say'.

This study does not cover sexual violence in any detail. The limited scope of this project did not allow us to deal with such a critically important issue with the care it deserves. Nevertheless, some of the data we explore are relevant to work on preventing sexual violence.

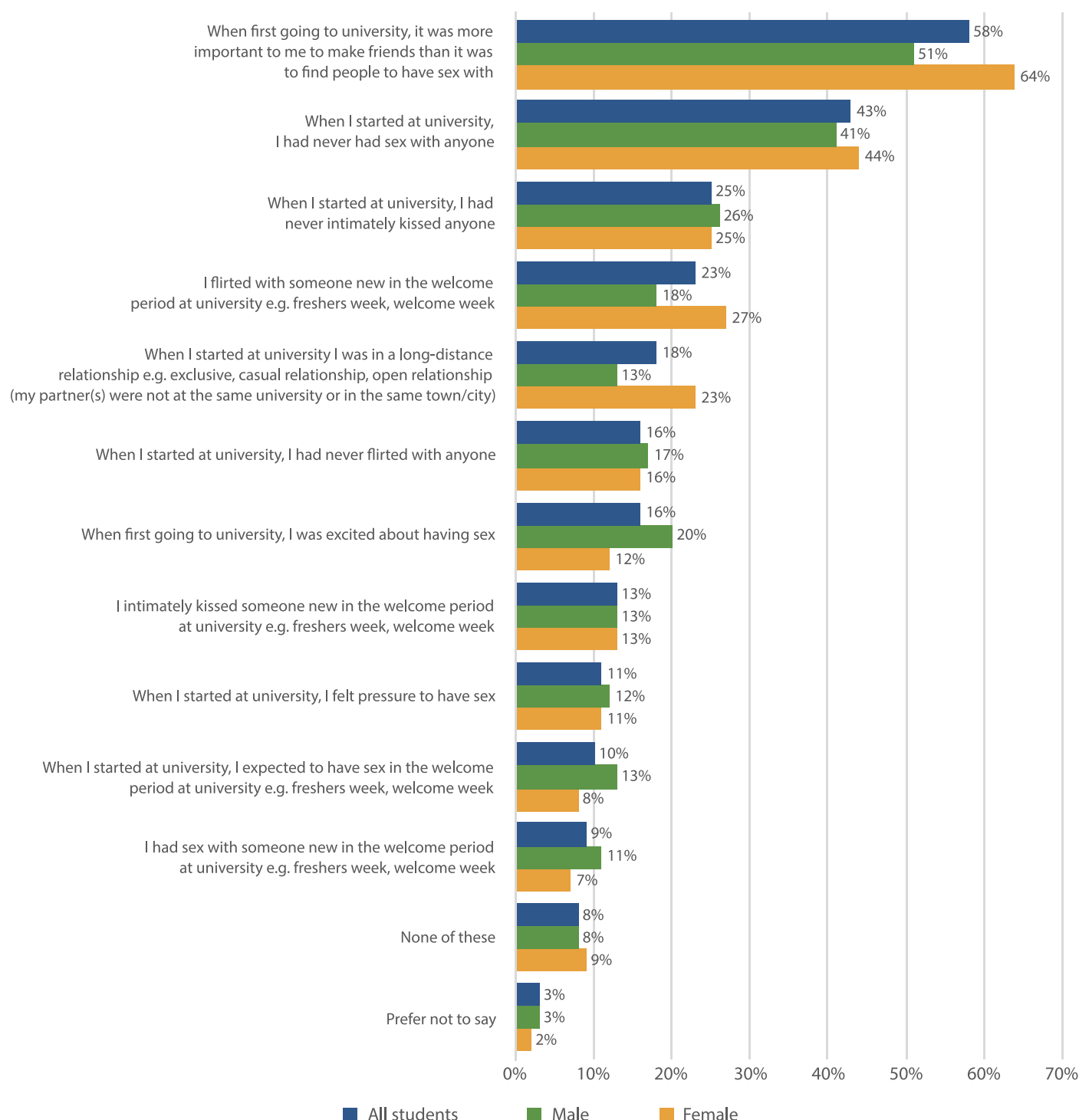
Knowledge and Attitudes

Entering higher education

At the start of the survey, we asked students to respond to a series of statements about their experiences and expectations of relationships and sex before entering higher education, as well as the reality in their early days as a student.

The results suggest students enter higher education with a range of prior experiences: for example, 43% 'had never had sex with anyone', one-quarter (25%) had not 'intimately kissed anyone' and 18% were 'in a long-distance relationship'.

Which of the following apply to your experiences and expectations about sex and relationships when beginning university?



Overall, sex does not appear to be an especially high priority for new students – 58% (51% of men and 64% of women) say making friends was more important than finding sexual partners. Only 16% of students (20% of men and 12% of women) say ‘When first going to university, I was excited about having sex’.

Freshers' week

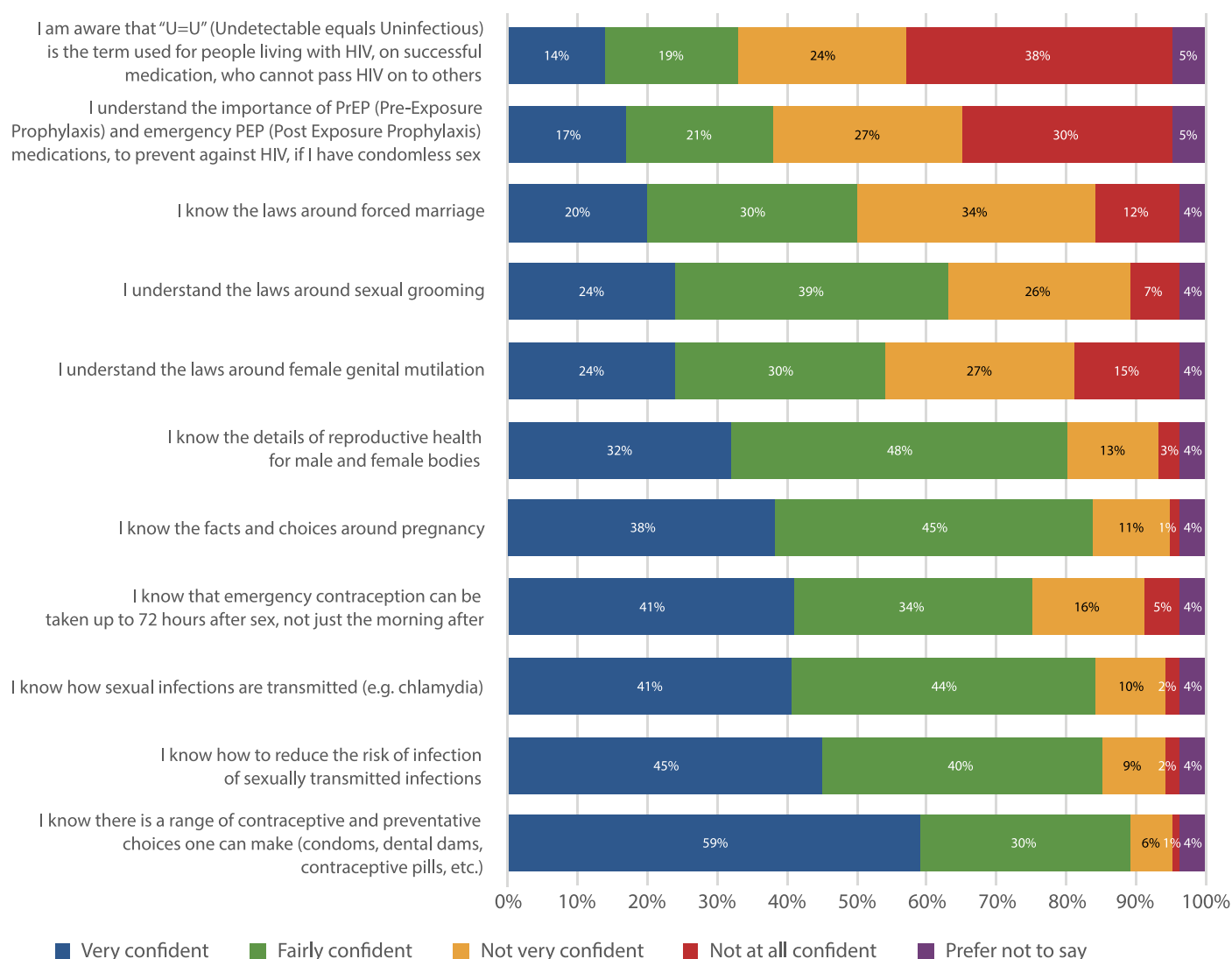
There is a popular trope associating freshers' week with casual sex. As one article with advice for potential international students notes: ‘There is a stereotype that students have a lot of reckless sex during their first week at uni.’³

In reality, just one-in-ten students (10%) expected to have sex during their welcome week and a similar proportion (9%) did so. Other research among higher education applicants by HEPI and Unite Students confirms people have higher expectations of other activities during freshers' week: in a list of nine things that might happen, only smoking cigarettes (6%) had lower expectation levels than our new data suggest apply to having sex – far behind ‘Make new friends’ (79%).⁴

Information

When asked to say how confident they are on aspects of sexual health, the findings were mixed.

Thinking about your understanding of sexual health, how confident would you say you are in each of the following areas?



Students express relatively high levels of confidence in knowledge about contraception, on reducing the risk of sexually transmitted infections and on 'the facts and choices about pregnancy'. They have lower levels of confidence in their knowledge on the laws on issues such as female genital mutilation, sexual grooming and forced marriage, with less confidence still on taking action to avoid the spread of HIV.

A separate set of statements was aimed at eliciting more information about students' perceptions of the information they had received as well as their knowledge about different topics.

Just 6% of respondents 'strongly agree' and a further 21% 'slightly agree' that the education they received before entering higher education prepared them for sex and relationships in higher education. Far more, around one-half of students, disagree with this notion: 24% 'slightly disagree' and a further 24% 'strongly disagree'.

Somewhat more positively, 17% of students 'strongly agree' and a further 32% 'slightly agree' that the education they received at school provided them with 'a comprehensive understanding of sexual consent'. Around one-third of students disagree (20% 'slightly' and 12% 'strongly').

These results are less positive than those published in a 2019 poll by the Sex Education Forum. In their survey of 1,000 16 and 17-year olds, 41% had positive views of their education on relationships and sex and 80% said they had learnt all they needed 'about giving and getting sexual consent'.⁵ It is not clear if the differences in the results stem from experience, age or the lapse of time between attending school and being a student, or from different methodologies.

Two-thirds of students want 'opportunities to learn about sex and relationships' across the academic year (26% 'strongly agree' and 41% 'slightly agree'), while a little over half of students contest the notion that 'university is not the right place to teach young people about sex and relationships' (27% 'strongly disagree' and 28% 'slightly disagree').

Yet under one-in-three students say 'throughout my time at university there have been workshops, talks, assemblies and clinics on sexual health, sex and relationships' (with 23% 'slightly' agreeing and just 7% 'strongly' agreeing).

Compulsion

A slim overall majority of students think relationships and sex education 'should be made compulsory at my university during the welcome period': 20% 'strongly agree' and 31% 'slightly agree' while just 13% 'slightly disagree' and 8% 'strongly disagree'.

There is slightly less support for embedding sex and relationship education into the university curriculum, but doing so is still twice as popular among students as not doing so, with a net positive rating of 46% and a net negative rating of 23%.

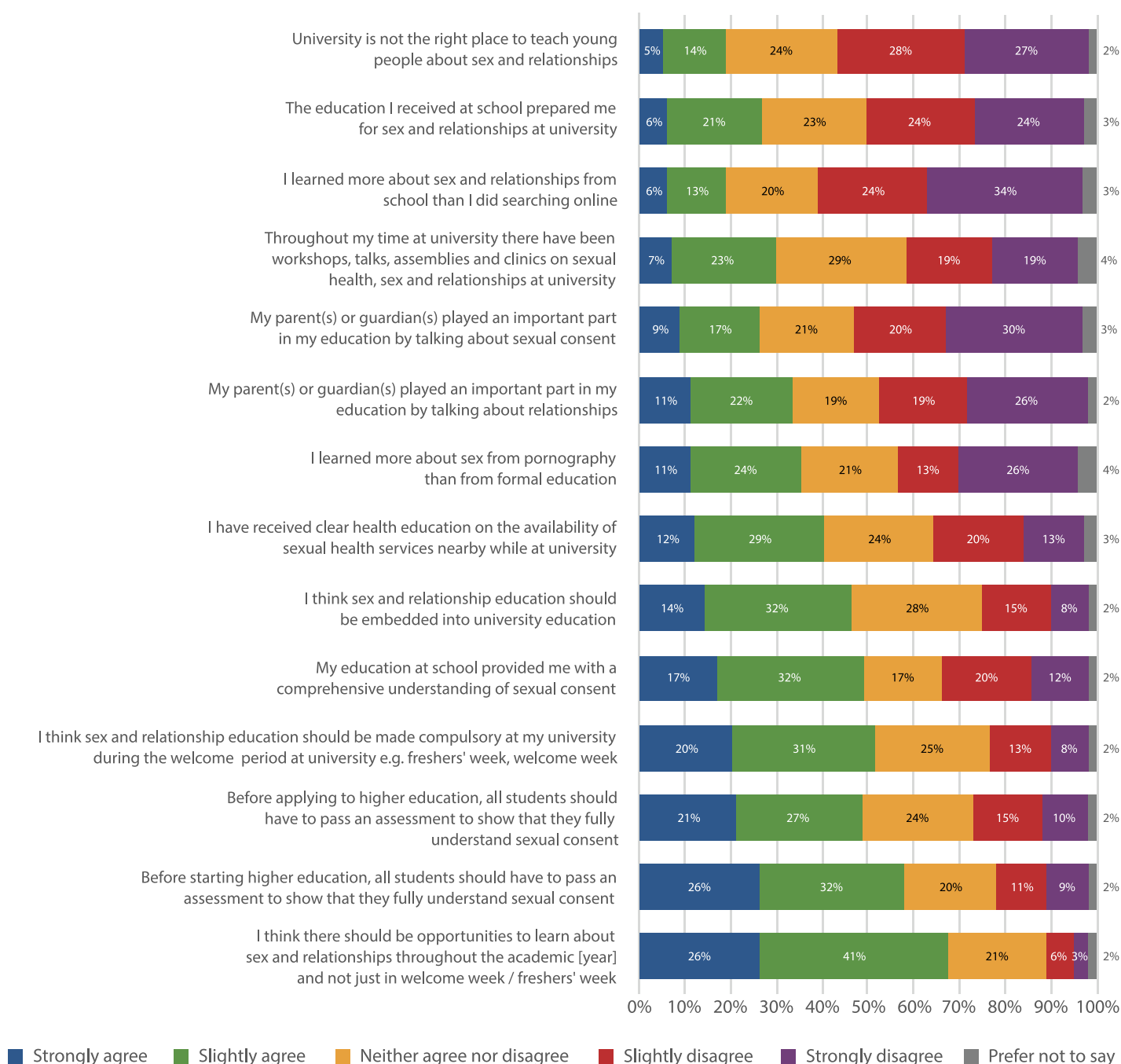
In relation to consent, a majority of students say 'all students should have to pass an assessment to show that they fully understand sexual consent' before entering higher education: 26% of students 'strongly agree' with such compulsion and a further 32% 'slightly agree' while 11% 'slightly disagree' and 9% 'strongly disagree'. Other less robust

evidence confirms young people expect issues of sexual consent to be covered before they arrive at higher education.⁶

There are examples of compulsory consent courses at a number of UK and Australian universities.⁷ The University of Melbourne, for example, requires all students to complete an e-learning course, *Consent Matters*, as part of their enrolment.

However, it is likely that such courses can only ever be a small part of a successful strategy to ensure a deep and broad understanding of sexual consent issues. According to Bianca Fileborn at the University of New South Wales, 'a one-off module is far from sufficient in the absence of widespread and systemic changes within a university.'⁸

Thinking about the ways in which you have learned about sex and relationships, to what extent do you agree with the following statements?



The role of parents

According to the ministerial Foreword to the Department for Education's statutory guidance on relationships and sex education in England: 'We are clear that parents and carers are the prime educators for children on many of these matters.'⁹

One-third of students think their parent(s) / guardian(s) have 'played an important part in their education by talking about relationships', with 11% 'strongly' agreeing and a further 22% 'slightly' agreeing. However, in total, more students disagree than agree, with 19% 'slightly' disagreeing and 26% 'strongly' disagreeing.

Parent(s) / guardian(s) play a lesser role than schools when it comes to thinking through issues of consent: 9% of students 'strongly agree' and 17% 'slightly agree' that their parents 'played an important part in my education by talking about sexual consent', while half disagree (20% 'slightly' and 30% 'strongly').

Our results suggest there is scope for parents and guardians to do more to cover consent issues with young people. However, there is a marked difference between our results and those in the Sex Education Forum's 2019 poll, which found 63% of 16 and 17-year olds felt their parents had taught them everything they needed to know about consent.¹⁰

Online material

One popular alternative source of information on relationships and sex is online material, and this is central to the knowledge of many students.

A majority of students disagree with the statement that 'I learned more about sex and relationships from school than I did searching online', with 34% in strong disagreement and a further 24% 'slightly' disagreeing. Only 6% 'strongly agree' and 13% 'slightly agree' with this statement.

Pornography

Students are a little more evenly divided on whether they have 'learned more about sex from pornography than from formal education', with a little over one-third of students expressing some agreement (11% 'strongly agree' and 24% 'slightly agree') and a broadly similar proportion expressing some disagreement (13% 'slightly disagree' and 26% 'strongly disagree').

Over-reliance on pornography as a source of sex education may pose risks. According to a summary of the existing evidence published by the Office of the Children's Commissioner:

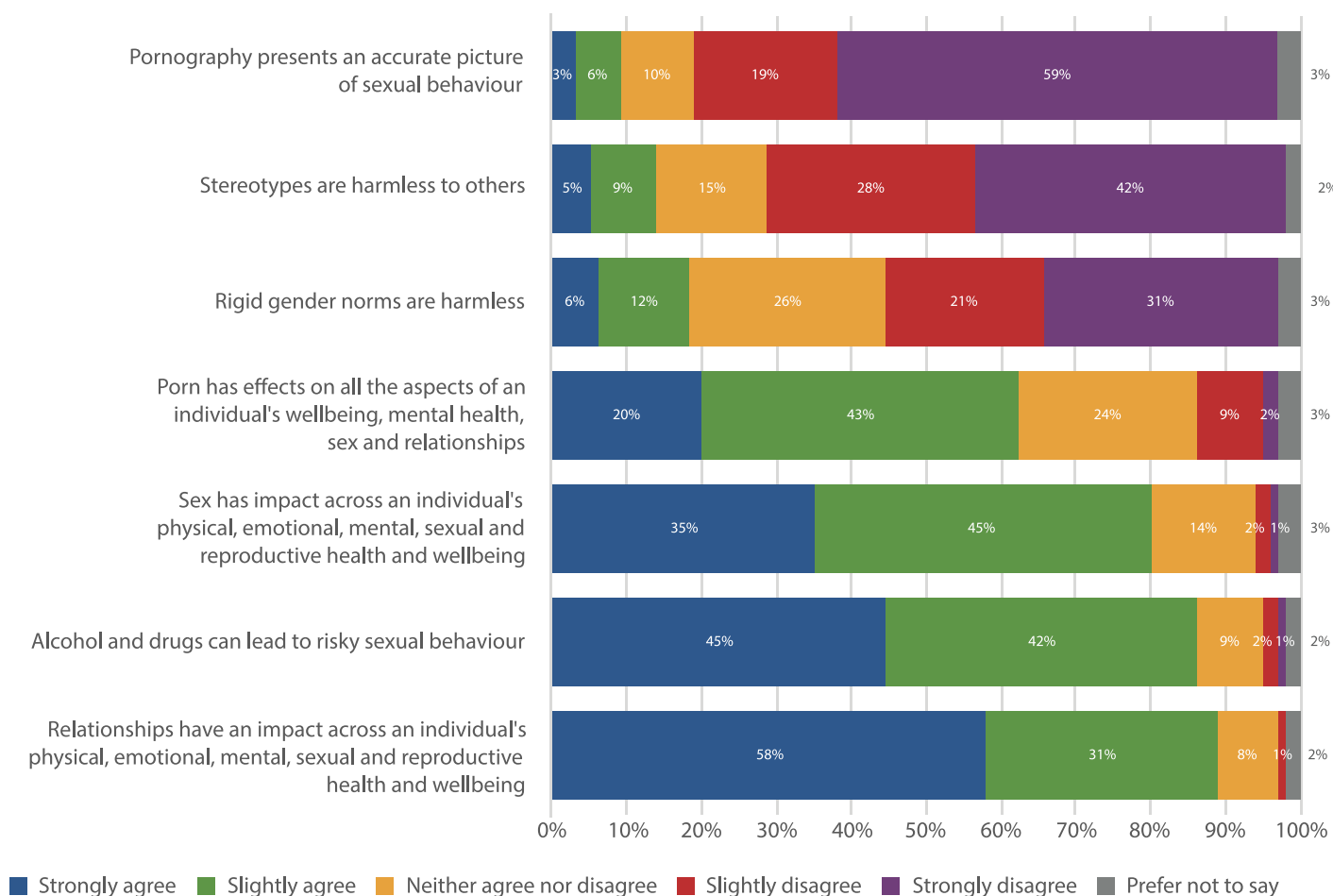
*pornography has been linked to unrealistic attitudes about sex; maladaptive attitudes about relationships; more sexually permissive attitudes; greater acceptance of casual sex; beliefs that women are sex objects; more frequent thoughts about sex; sexual uncertainty (e.g. the extent to which children and young people are unclear about their sexual beliefs and values); and less progressive gender role attitudes (e.g. male dominance and female submission).*¹¹

Only a small minority of students say they think 'Pornography presents an accurate picture of sexual behaviour' while 59% 'strongly disagree' and a further 19% 'slightly disagree'.

A majority of students believe that 'Porn has effects on all aspects of an individual's wellbeing, mental health, sex and relationships'.

In the same section of the survey, a majority of students rejected the notion that 'Rigid gender norms are harmless' and also that 'Stereotypes are harmless to others'.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with each statement?



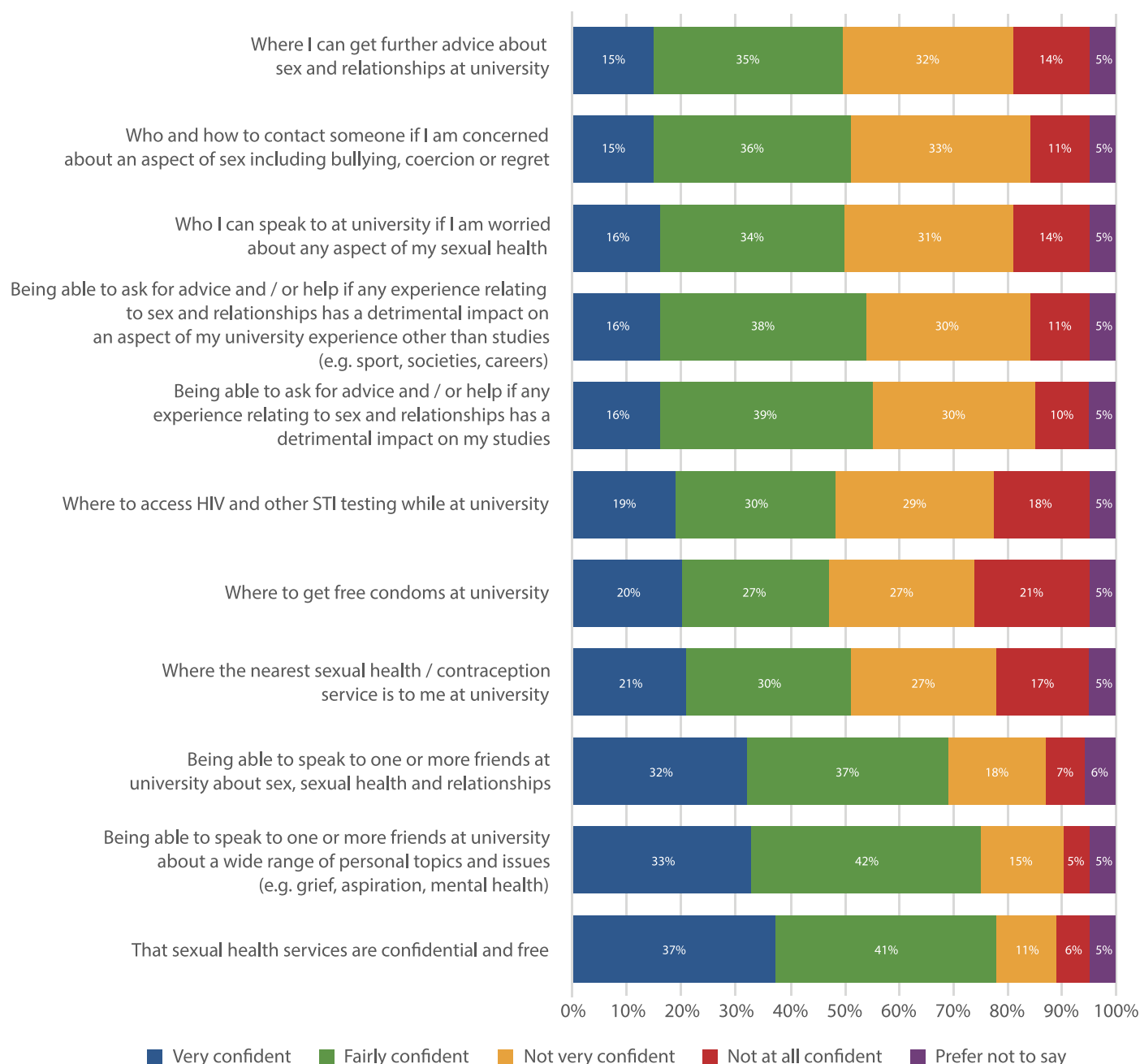
Experiences and Behaviours

Seeking advice

When given a range of statements about seeking advice and help on sex and relationships, around one-half of students expressed positive responses on 'being able to ask for advice and / or help' about sex and relationship issues, where to find that advice and how to access sexual health and contraception services. A big majority of students understand that such services 'are confidential and free'.

As with student mental health, peer-to-peer support appears to be particularly important, with most students feeling able to seek support from other students: 32% 'strongly agree' and a further 37% 'slightly agree' with 'Being able to speak to one or more friends at university about sex, sexual health and relationships' and even higher proportions feel able to do this 'about a wide range of personal topics and issues'.

Below is a set of statements about experiences of being supported in having a healthy and happy sex life at university. How confident do you feel about each of these areas?

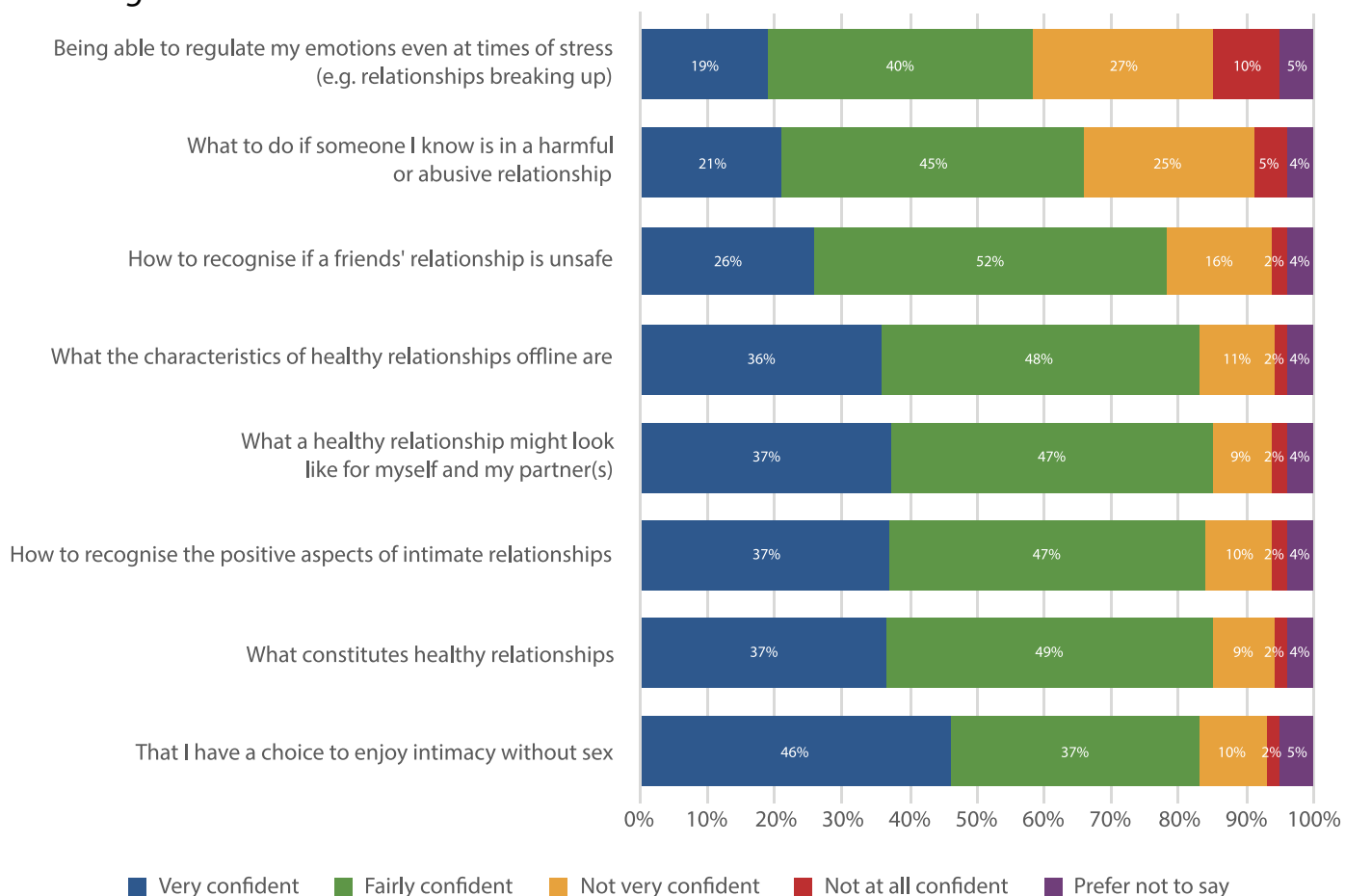


Abusive relationships

Just over one-third of students (36%) are 'fairly confident' on 'who and how to contact someone if I am concerned about an aspect of sex including bullying, coercion or regret' and a further 15% say they are 'very confident' on this. However, many students are not as confident: 33% are 'not very confident' and 11% 'not at all confident'.

We asked students how confident they are about what to do if someone they know is in a harmful or abusive relationship. Two-thirds of students opted for one of the two positive responses (21% are 'very confident' and 45% are 'fairly confident'). Very few said they were 'not at all confident' (5%), which may seem positive. On the other hand, a further one-in-four (25%) students said they are 'not very confident'.

Thinking about your knowledge of relationships, how confident would you say you are in the following areas?



Challenging inappropriate behaviour

There are comparable results in response to a further statement about challenging 'inappropriate sexual behaviour'. While around two-thirds of students express some level of confidence and very few say they are 'not at all confident' (5%), 26% say they are 'not very confident'.

Initiatives designed to support students on sex and relationship issues can usefully incorporate bystander intervention information. According to Public Health England:

We are all bystanders, who witness events unfolding around us. Sometimes we recognise events as being problematic. When this happens, we decide to do or say something and become an active bystander (either in the moment or at a later stage) or to simply let it go and remain a passive bystander. Social norms can be shifted to challenge undesirable behaviour by empowering people to become active rather than passive bystanders.¹²

Consent

Despite the clear demand for more access to relationship and sex education at university, students report high confidence levels on what constitutes sexual consent. There are strongly positive results for a range of consent issues, from 'how not to put pressure on others' to knowledge of legislation 'around sex and consent'. Nonetheless, around 10% of students are 'not very confident' and a smaller minority 'not at all confident' on 'how to communicate consent clearly', 'what constitutes sexual assault and violence' and 'what constitutes sexual harassment'. So there is clear room for improvements.

Self-reported confidence levels do not necessarily provide a complete picture as students may be over-confident about their ability to navigate consent in real-life situations. Moreover, students display less clear notions of consent when alcohol is involved.

Alcohol

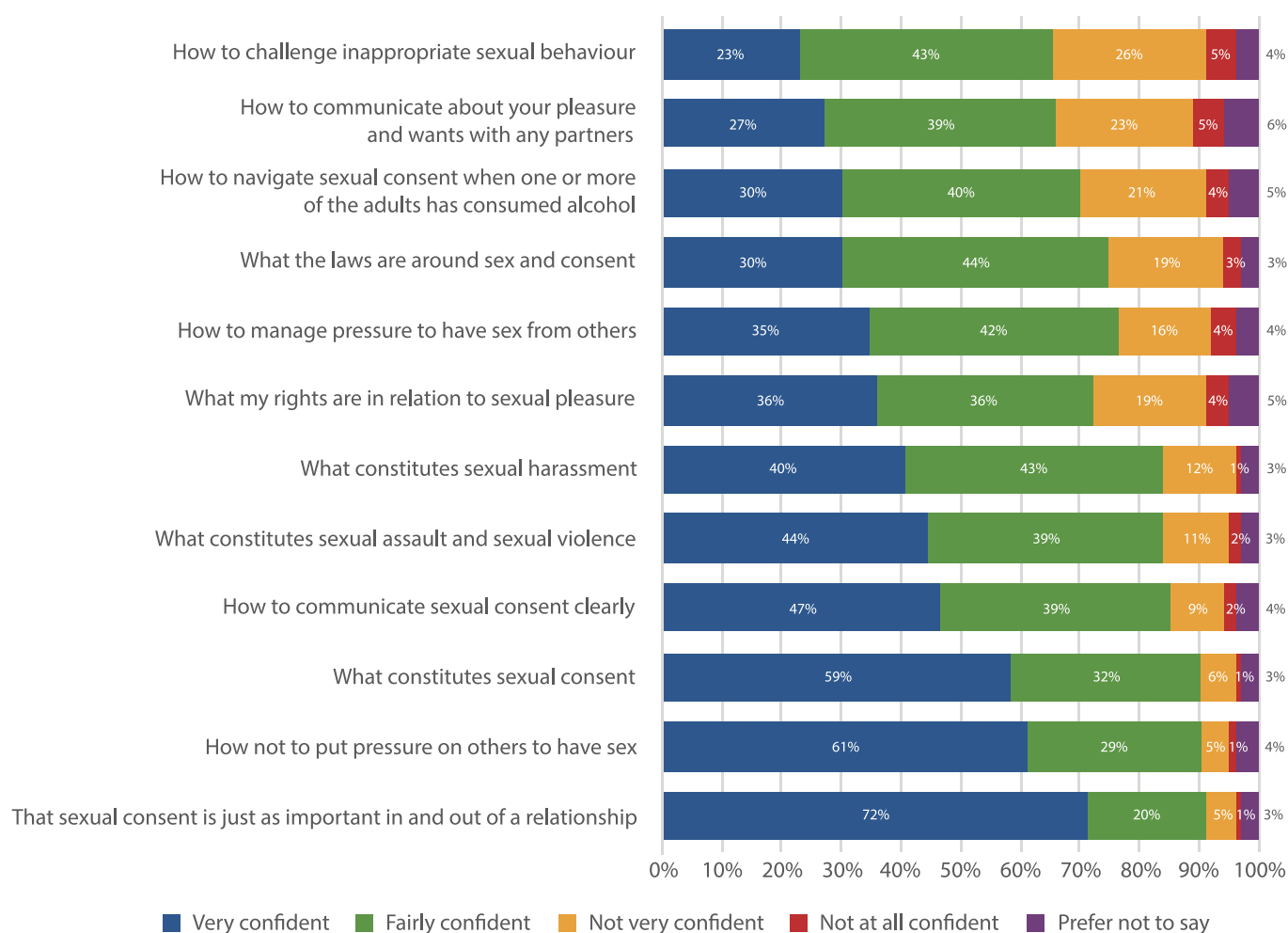
Nearly all students recognise alcohol and drugs can lead to risky sexual behaviour (with 45% 'strongly' agreeing and 42% 'slightly' agreeing) and one-in-four students report a lack of confidence in navigating sexual consent when one or more of the adults has consumed alcohol (21% are 'not very confident' and 4% are 'not at all confident').

The proportion of students who are 'very confident' about sexual consent is just 30% after the consumption of alcohol, which is only half the proportion of students (59%) who told us they are 'very confident' about 'what constitutes sexual consent'.

This gap is concerning in part because half or more incidences of sexual assault among college students in the US have been found to involve alcohol:

Although estimates of the incidence and prevalence vary dramatically because different sources use different definitions and many victims are unwilling to report sexual assaults to the police or other authorities, at least 50 per cent of college student sexual assaults are associated with alcohol use ... Further, when alcohol is involved, acts meeting the legal definition of rape appear more likely to occur.¹³

To what extent would you say you are confident in each of these areas?



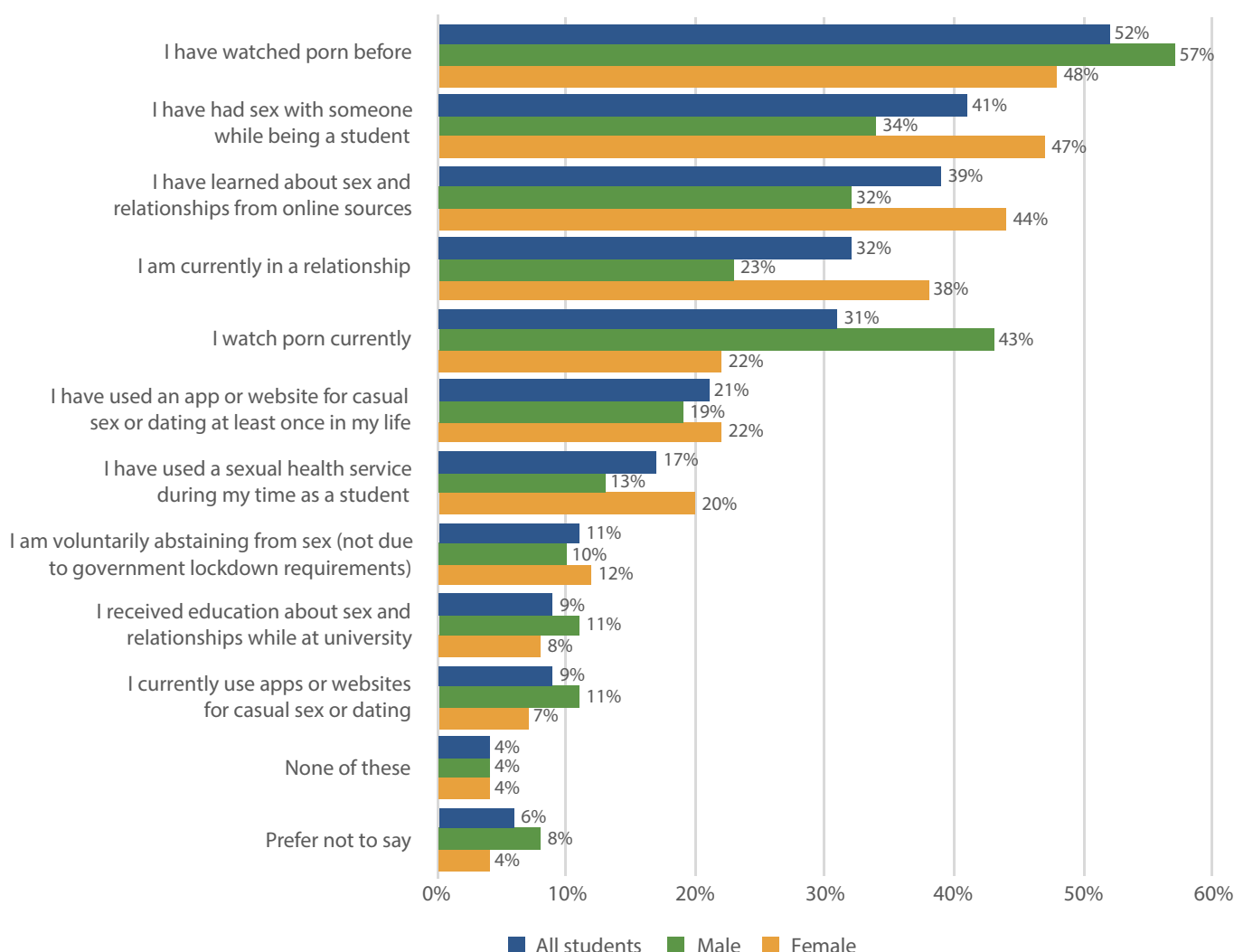
Experiences

We asked students to respond to a series of statements about their current experiences. The results serve as a further reminder that students are heterogenous, with a wide range of different experiences. For example, 41% say they have had sex during their time as a student, 32% say they are 'currently in a relationship' and 11% say they are 'abstaining from sex'.

One-in-five (21%) students 'have used an app or website for casual sex or dating at least once in my life', while one-in-six students (17%) have accessed a sexual health clinic while a student.

Just over half of students (52%) say they have watched pornography, with one-third (31%) saying they currently do so. The proportion who say they currently watch pornography is notably higher for men (43%) than women (22%).

Below is a list of experiences related to sex and relationships. Please indicate which of the following apply to you:

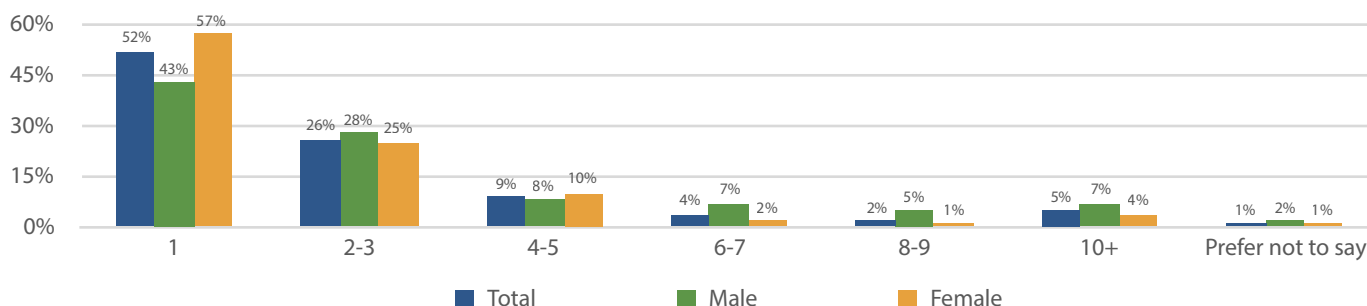


Number of sexual partners

Within these categories, students' experiences also differ. Among students who have had sex while a student, the majority (52%) have had just one sexual partner and a further one-quarter (26%) have had between two and three, with a smaller proportion having had four or more.

As shown in the previous chart, a higher proportion of women (47%) than men (34%) say they have had sex during their time as a student. These men are less likely to claim they have only had one sexual partner.

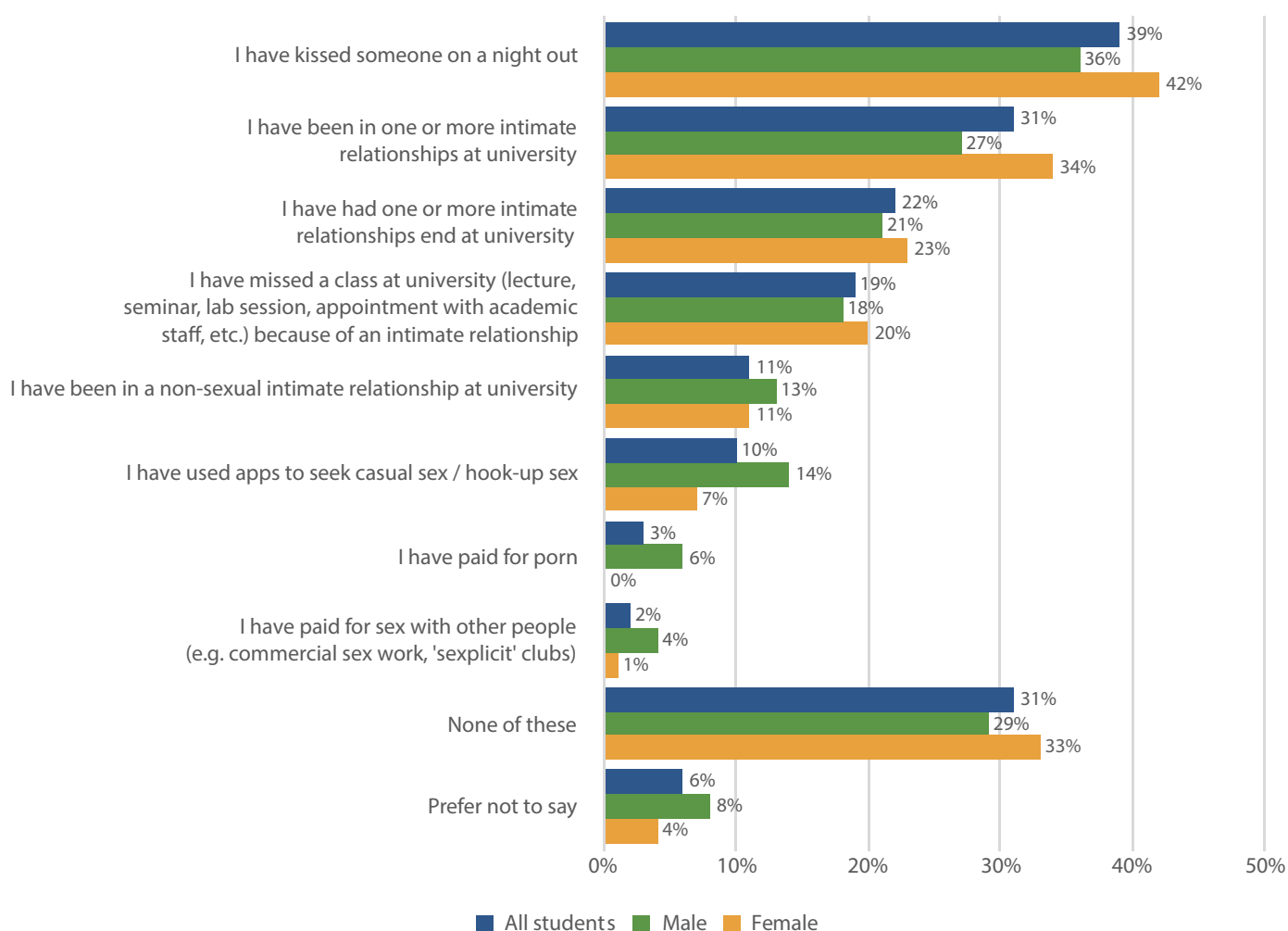
How many different people have you had sex with while you have been a student? (N=413)



Relationships

The heterogeneous nature of modern student life is confirmed by the results to a further question that included a series of statements about relationships. The responses show around one-third of students (31%) have had 'one or more intimate relationships at university', while the same proportion (31%) had not experienced any of the varied options at the time the polling occurred. One-in-five (19%) students have 'missed a class ... because of an intimate relationship'.

Below is a list of experiences relating to your experience of relationships at university. Please select all that apply to you and your experience specifically:



Other Issues

Impact of periods and contraception on female students' academic experiences

There is evidence that considerable numbers of female pupils have missed school because of their periods and it has been claimed this is the most common reason why female pupils miss school.¹⁴ We therefore asked female students about the impact on their higher education.

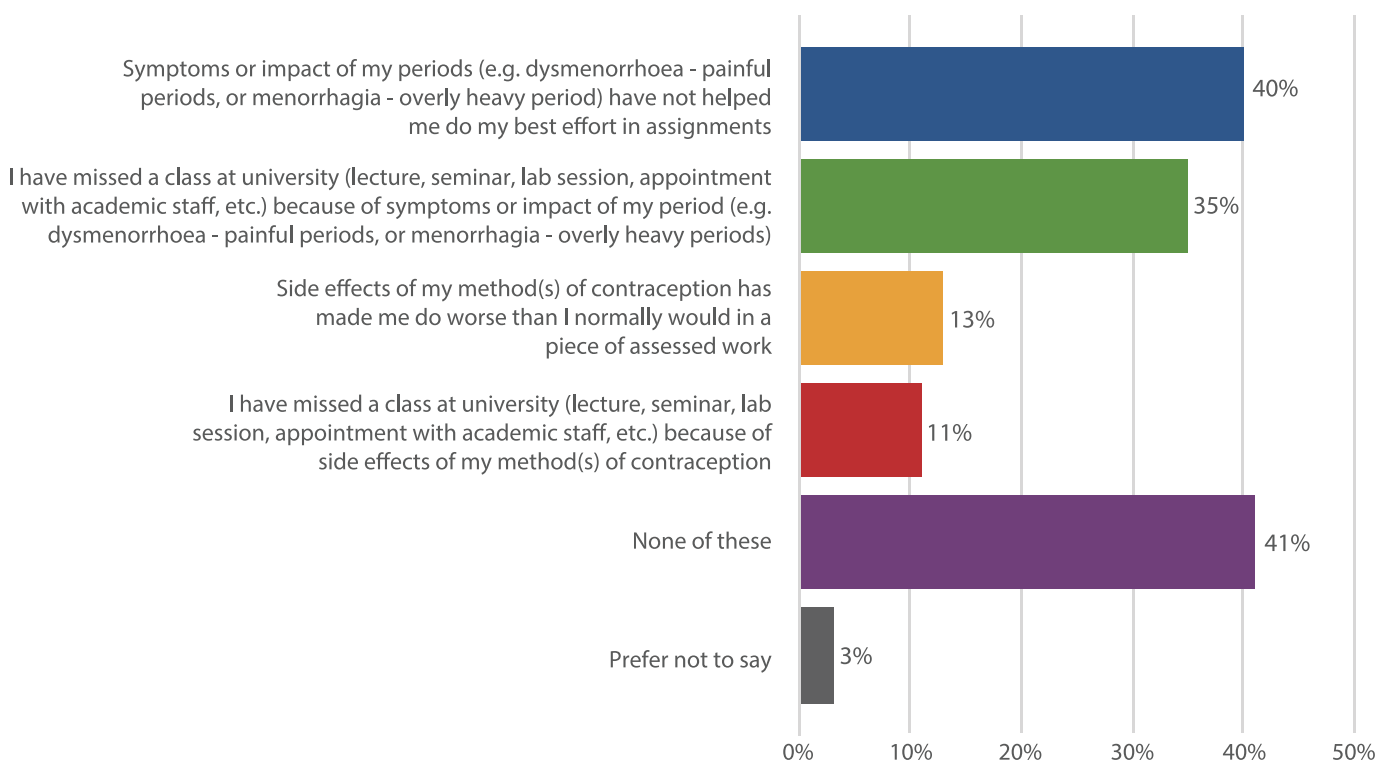
Two-fifths of female students (40%) report that symptoms of their periods may have hampered them in assignments and over one-third (35%) report missing a scheduled academic appointment due to the impact of periods.

We additionally asked whether contraception was affecting academic work and 13% of female students reported that side effects from contraception have caused them to do worse in a piece of assessed work (13%) or to miss a class (11%).

A minority of female students (41%) said neither their periods nor any contraception had hindered their studies.

The results show female health matters need further consideration across all aspects of policies for working, teaching, learning and assessment.

Which of the following apply to you? (Female students only N=557)

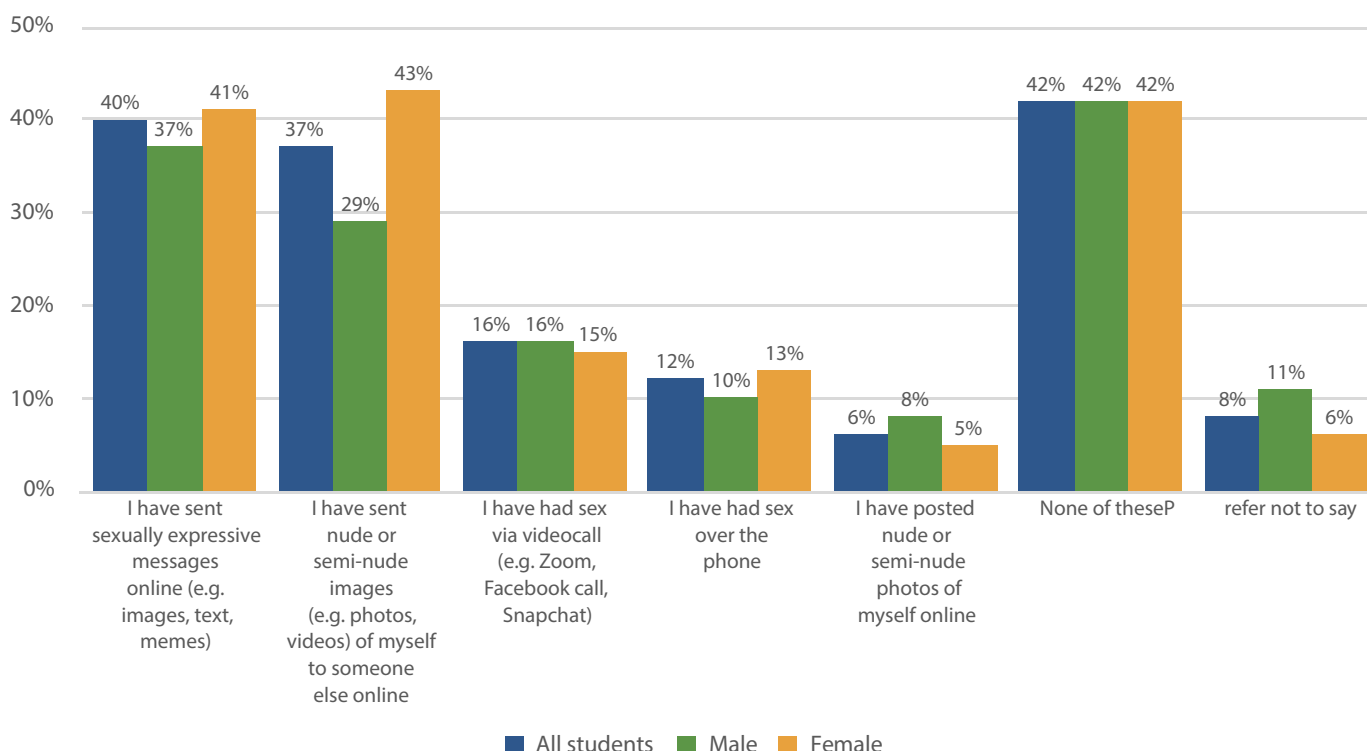


Technology

The results to a question on technology suggest it has affected students' relationships and sex lives in recent years. Although four-in-ten students (42%) say they have not undertaken any of the activities in a list provided, a similar proportion (40%) say they have undertaken sexting. Much of this is likely to have included sending naked or semi-naked images to

another, as 37% of students say they have done this, while smaller proportions have had sex over video conferencing software (16%) or the phone (12%).

Below is a set of statements that relate to your experience of online sex and relationships. Please select all that apply to you:



Covid-19

As the polling was undertaken during the Covid-19 pandemic, we asked students about how this had affected their relationships and their sex lives.

The results are mixed. In some respects, they may appear less negative than expected but they nonetheless still serve as a salutary reminder of the additional obstacles faced by many learners during the crisis.

- When asked whether 'it is easy for me to maintain friendships during lockdown', nearly half of students (48%) express some agreement and one-sixth (18%) are neutral while around one-in-three (30%) disagree.
- A narrow majority of students say their university has 'maintained good messaging about the importance of wellbeing since the start of lockdown', with 15% in 'strong' agreement and 37% in 'slight' agreement, while a lower proportion disagree (13% 'slightly disagree' and 9% 'strongly disagree').
- When presented with the positive statement that 'I am happier with my friends now than I was before lockdown', the responses split fairly evenly three ways, with broadly comparable proportions opting for the two positive responses (31% either 'strongly' or 'slightly' agree), a neutral option (35% 'neither agree nor disagree') and the two negative options (29% 'slightly' or 'strongly' disagree).

Higher education institutions have moved much of their teaching and many of their support services online but only a small proportion of respondents agree their university

has told them about 'how to have safe intimate and sexual relations online': 9% 'slightly agree' and 5% 'strongly agree', while 45% 'strongly disagree' and a further 17% 'slightly disagree'.

To what extent do you agree with the following questions?



Conclusion

In some respects, our survey replicates other findings on different topics in that it suggests students are less hedonistic than is sometimes supposed. For example, when we polled students about illegal drug use in 2018, we found this was considerably less common than self-selecting internet polls had previously suggested.¹⁵ The caricature of full-time undergraduates as lacking responsibility has been somewhat redrawn in recent years – the *Financial Times* even ran a piece which described students as the 'New Young Puritans'.¹⁶ In some ways, therefore, it may not be surprising that a poll about students' relationships and sex lives confirms many students are living more regular lives than is sometimes perceived.

This is important to understand not least because one of the key insights of behavioural science is that people often change their own behaviour when they have access to a more accurate picture of the behaviour of others. Students are adults and free to choose how

to live their own lives (which is sometimes forgotten when demands are made of higher education institutions to intrude on students' personal lives) but, as with other adults, better information can help them make those decisions.

In other respects, our survey replicates the sort of findings we revealed when we polled students on free speech issues.¹⁷ There, we found considerable confusion among students, but also the potential for institutions to work with their students to explore some of the inherent challenges and to help them understand the complexities. Students are not 'snowflakes' but, like everyone else, they do benefit when the appropriate support is provided at the right time.

These new results on relationships and sex suggest there is considerable scope for additional support on perhaps the most personal and important issue of all: the quality of our relationships with other human beings.

As the UK model of student life is typically a residential one, at least for young full-time school leavers, people tend to leave their homes and communities behind, and it is therefore particularly important to ensure strong relationships can be fostered when they arrive at their place of study.

There is no quick and easy fix for providing students with more support on sex and relationship issues. There is scope for schools and colleges, parents and guardians and higher education institutions, as well as policymakers and media outlets, all to do more to support their students on the issues outlined in this Policy Note. Success calls for considerable resources, but the end result should be safer, happier students with stronger relationships and more confidence in dealing with them.

That is a prize worth seeking in part because of the clear evidence on the deteriorating levels of wellbeing among students even before the additional pressures of Covid-19.¹⁸

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