

Student Academic Experience Survey 2021

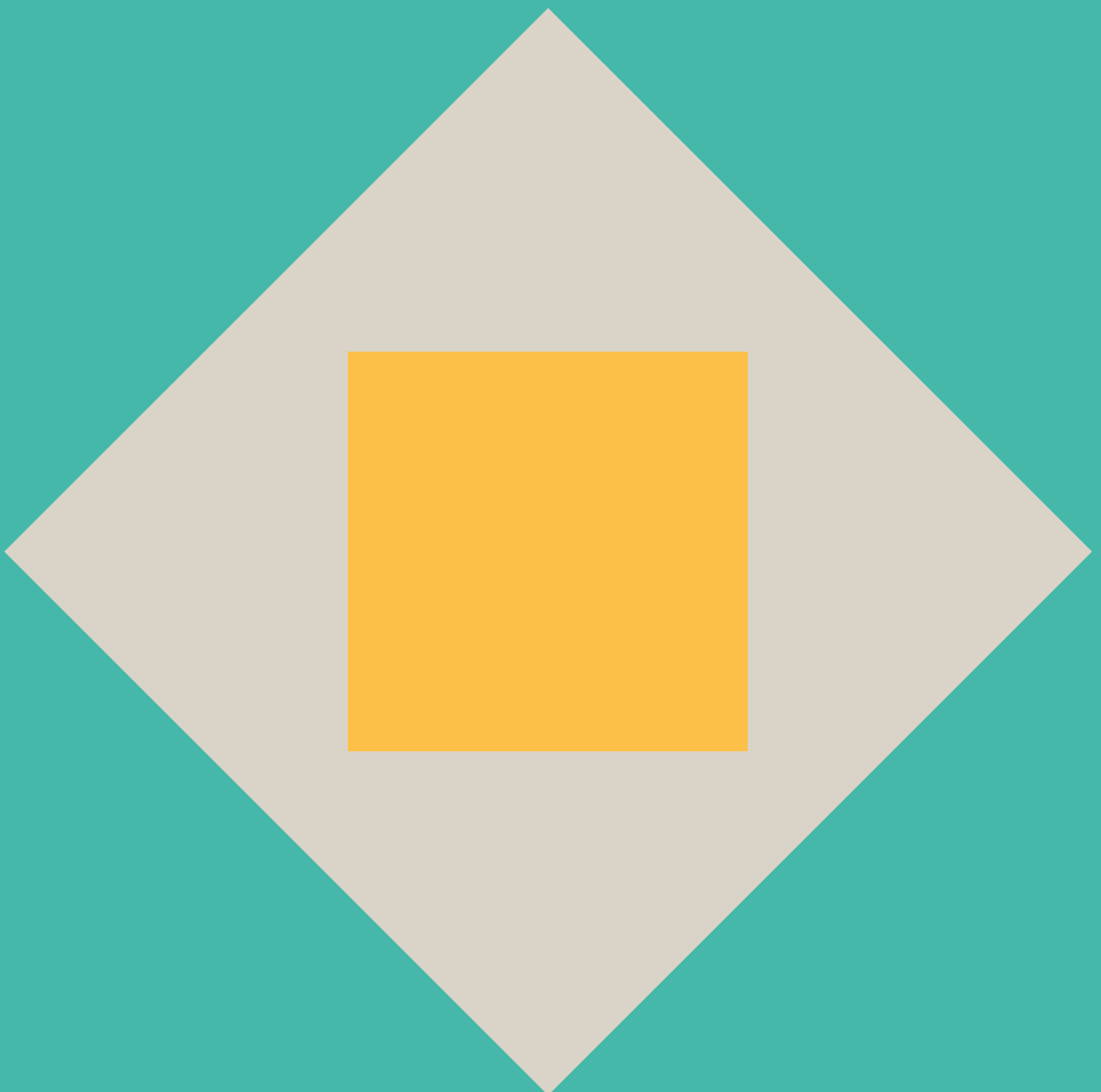
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and Rachel Hewitt (HEPI)

AdvanceHE



Higher Education Policy Institute

STUDENT
ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE
SURVEY



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Foreword by Alison Johns

Many of the headline findings reflected in this year's Student Academic Experience Survey (SAES) 2021 will be disappointing to the sector, though perhaps not entirely unexpected. As a result of the pandemic, a similar pattern is evident in the student experience reported in comparable higher education sectors around the world.

Despite the extraordinary efforts of institutions and staff over the past year in moving to an online offer, and that of students to adapt their learning styles, nobody can seriously entertain the idea that the student experience in 2020–21 was anywhere near what they might have expected at the outset of their studies, or the one institutions intended. This report inevitably reflects the perceptions of a student body who have lived through a year like no other in living memory.

All that said, it would be extremely unwise to dismiss this report as a one-off. On the contrary, it is vital that we remain objective about the findings; that we seek out the lesson learned; that we listen ever more carefully to the students and what they have to tell us. We need to build the post-pandemic recovery and the future shape of the student academic experience together. We need to build it based on evidence.

The sector now has a great opportunity to enhance the academic experience by taking the best of what we've had pre-pandemic with the positives of the very recent past. We are working with many institutions who are looking at how they adapt to a new future – “hybrid higher” as it has been coined. This means looking at organisation and structures, and the leadership at all levels to embrace change to deliver the best possible student experience.

Many institutions will be reassessing strategies and objectives, using an evidence-based approach. If we look at SAES 2021 through this lens, then the report becomes a vital tool in pointing to consistently challenging areas such as assessment, feedback, the sometimes widely different academic experience of ethnic groups, or the deeply worrying and rapidly escalating crisis in student mental health. The report tells us that poor mental health is by far and away the biggest reason students would give up their studies and the life-transforming opportunity that higher education offers.

Though few of these issues are new, perhaps we are at a watershed where we can address them more compellingly and conclusively as we reshape for the future. In re-shaping, we should keep the evidence such as this report close to hand and keep our conversations going with the student body, and every part of it.

Alison Johns

Chief Executive, Advance HE

Foreword by Nick Hillman

The Student Academic Experience Survey began in 2006 so is now 15 years old. We have always known that the longer the Survey goes on, the more useful it becomes, as we are able to build up an ever more detailed picture of what changes and what stays the same in UK higher education. But this year, the Survey has come into its own.

In 2020, although the fieldwork straddled the beginning of the pandemic, there was little evidence that Covid was having a significant impact on students' perceptions of their own experiences. This year, after a lengthy period of serious disruption, the story in the pages that follow is one of profound – though hopefully, in many instances, temporary – change.

Across a range of important measures, such as value-for-money perceptions, experience matching expectations and time taken to return assessments, the picture has become considerably worse.

There is also evidence of resilience, however. Not many more students regret their choice. Disproving the lazy assumption that universities have been 'closed' for much of the year, many students still have positive experiences of their teaching and learning, reflecting the enormous hard work of senior managers, academics and professional services staff.

At the time of writing, we are still waiting for the Government's detailed response to the 2019 Augar report as well as for a much delayed spending review. The results of this Survey suggest that students, staff and institutions have faced bigger challenges than at any point in living memory. Picking up the pieces after the crisis will need proper resourcing, as in schools. So it would be exactly the wrong moment to defund higher education institutions, as some people have recommended.

It has been a great pleasure to work with Advance HE once again on this project. I thank the many thousands of students who took the trouble to respond, allowing our two organisations to continue building an unrivalled evidence base on students' actual lives in the midst of a devastating global pandemic.

Nick Hillman

Director of the Higher Education Policy Institute

Executive Summary

A year ago, in 2020, we saw no material impact from the beginnings of the pandemic and lockdown restrictions on the student academic experience. Unfortunately, this is not the case this year, as a number of key measures have fallen to their lowest levels to date. The proportion of students who feel they have received good or very good value is very low (just over one-in-four), while the proportion whose experience has been worse than expected has more than doubled. Levels of wellbeing among the student population have continued to fall. All these findings are consistent by domicile and across most demographic groups – although some cohorts have had a particularly challenging experience.

Behind this lies a number of key issues. An overall key factor is a reaction against the level of tuition fees being charged in the absence (for many) of in-person teaching. More specific factors include a decline in timetabled contact hours (whether in-person or online), an absence of opportunities to interact with staff and other students, and a perceived lack of detail or timeliness in assessment feedback. Indeed, despite the more widely referenced issues around how students learn and interact with others, the principal issue raised via our new open question around how to improve the experience was around the quality of assessment feedback, which appears to have been impacted as the resources of staff and the administrative systems that support them have been stretched.

We know from sector data that drop-out rates have not increased, and this is backed up by our own question assessing the choice of course and institution. Despite the challenges, many students don't feel they have made the wrong choice, but they would have wished for a different experience over the past year.

One of the more encouraging findings this year is that the majority of students feel that their institution is committed to eliminating racial inequalities, with only 5% disagreeing. However, this view is not as widely held by Black or Chinese students, many of whom feel more could be done.

In what may be perhaps a reaction to the long lockdown and continued disruption, our Survey presents clear evidence that learning online is not the preferred approach for the large majority of students, who state a strong preference for in-person learning. This is not driven by any particular concern around accessibility of technology, but there is a clear feeling that a return to in-person teaching is long overdue, which may potentially impact on any plans to introduce more blended learning options across the sector.

1. Methodology

1.1 Approach

The Survey was designed and developed in partnership between Advance HE and the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), with online panel interviews independently conducted by YouthSight.

YouthSight's Student Panel is made up of over 47,000 undergraduate students in the UK. These students are primarily recruited through a partnership with the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), which invites a large number of new first-year students to join the Panel each year.

Between 2 February 2021 and 22 March 2021, with all four parts of the UK in lockdown, members of the YouthSight panel were invited to take part in the Survey. In total, 10,186 responses were collected, representing a response rate of 21.35%. On average, the Survey took 12 minutes 38 seconds to complete.

Each year, we aim to include a range of questions which provide year-on-year comparison, such as value-for-money, comparing the experience to expectations, and teaching intensity. We also include a series of questions which we change each year, some of which are completely new and are selected based on the prevailing issues impacting the sector. This year, we have included new questions on students' sense of belonging, opinions of institutions' commitment to race equality, representing the student voice, consideration of withdrawing and cost of living. We have also made greater use of open comments than ever before, including for the first time a fully open question on how their experience might be improved – with its own dedicated section in this report.

1.2 Sample size

This year our Survey collected the views of 10,186 full-time undergraduate students studying in the UK. Unless stated otherwise, all figures and tables relate to weighted data from the 2021 Survey.

The total sample size of 10,186, based on a full-time undergraduate population of 1,611,375,¹ provides a margin of error of + / - 0.97%.² This is calculated at the 95% confidence level and based on a result of 50%, where the margin of error is at its maximum. This means that for a result of 50% we can be confident that the true result is between 49.03% and 50.97% in 95 out of 100 cases.³

¹ Source: www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he [Accessed 30 March 2021]

² Please note that in the charts in this report, the total may not add up to 100% due to rounding to whole percentages.

³ Source: www.comresglobal.com/our-work/margin-of-error-calculator [Accessed 30 March 2021]

When comparing between years, the large sample sizes mean that most differences in the Survey between 2020 and 2021 of 2–3% or greater are statistically significant. For smaller sub-samples within the Survey, the margin of error is greater, and hence year-on-year differences of a few percentage points are in some cases not significant.

We have highlighted statistically significant differences between 2020 and 2021 (or between sample groups from 2021 compared against the total sample) in bold text on each chart or table where such differences apply. Where we are comparing two or more sample groups from 2021 against each other we have not highlighted significant differences.

1.3 Weighting

As in previous years the data were weighted by gender, course year, subject area and institution type in accordance with Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) 2019/20 statistics. This year, in order to ensure optimum representation across a full range of factors, supplementary weighting has been conducted on ethnicity, domicile and type of school attended. This has been conducted as part of an overall weighting strategy with an aim to ensure the continued integrity and comparability of the data while maximising representation.

1.4 Base sizes

To streamline the amount of text, we have not included base size descriptions under each chart, save for when we felt particular clarification of unusual base populations or calculation methods would be helpful. As standard, the majority of charts are based on 2021 data comprising the total weighted population of 10,186. Most of the other charts are based either on time-series data or on one of the specific sub-samples identified in the sample profile section overleaf.

1.5 Ethnicity

For ethnicity profiling and analysis, the sample profile and main data in this report (for the ethnicity analysis only) are again based on UK-domiciled students.⁴ This has been done to remove the impact of international students on ethnic groups. The ethnic groups analysed are mutually exclusive, hence the Asian group does not include Chinese students, an approach that we have adopted to provide consistency of analysis with previous years.⁵

1.6 Sexual orientation

Some analysis has been conducted, using the term LGB+, based on students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual or who use a different term, such as pansexual or queer, to describe their sexual orientation. Advance HE and HEPI recognise the limits of this classification.

1.7 Trans identity/history

For the first time in this report series, distinct analysis has been conducted on the experience of students who identify as being trans or having a trans history.

For specific queries about the base sizes and populations in this report, or for more general information about the contents, please contact surveys@advance-he.ac.uk or admin@hepi.ac.uk.

⁴ For some analyses, groups have been further aggregated into a single Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) group. This definition of BAME is widely recognised and used to identify patterns of marginalisation and segregation caused by attitudes towards an individual's ethnicity. Advance HE and HEPI recognise the limitations of this definition, particularly the assumption that minority ethnic students are a homogenous group.

⁵ In the 2011 census, Chinese students were counted under the Asian ethnic group. However, this Survey has been running since before this date and has historically analysed Asian students separately to highlight areas where the experience is different.

2. Sample profile

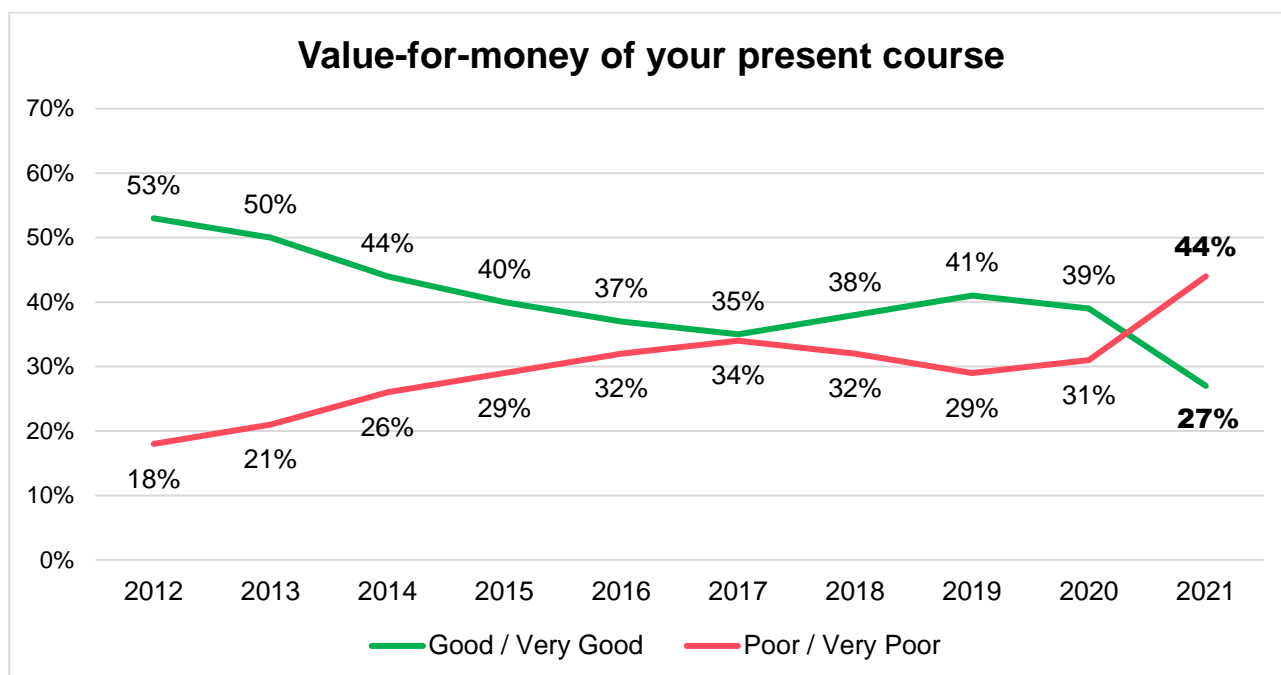
Our sample has been weighted to reflect the undergraduate population and provide consistency with previous waves.

Weighted data					
		2019 (14,046)	2020 (10,227)	2021 (10,186)	2021 Base size
Gender	Female	56%	56%	55%	5,631
	Male	44%	44%	44%	4,432
Domicile	England	78%	76%	74%	7,499
	Northern Ireland	2%	2%	3%	306
	Scotland	6%	6%	8%	815
	Wales	3%	3%	5%	509
	EU	7%	6%	7%	673
	Rest of the World	4%	4%	4%	385
Institutions	Russell Group	28%	28%	28%	2,832
	Pre-92 (excluding Russell Group)	22%	21%	21%	2,183
	Post-92	49%	46%	47%	4,747
	Specialist	1%	4%	4%	393
Ethnicity (UK-domiciled providing an answer)	Asian (excluding Chinese)	13%	12%	13%	1,096
	Chinese	1%	1%	1%	107
	Black	3%	3%	7%	560
	Mixed	4%	4%	4%	338
	Other	1%	1%	1%	93
	White	78%	79%	74%	6,231

3. Value-for-money

3.1 Trends over time

Students' perception of the value they have received throughout their academic experience remains one of the core measures covered by our Survey. After a consistent fall since 2012 following the introduction of £9,000 tuition fees in England, perceptions of receiving good or very good value had recovered somewhat and remained relatively steady despite the onset of the pandemic in 2020. However, there has been a fundamental change this year, with value perceptions falling significantly to the lowest levels we have seen.



Note for all charts and tables: Statistically significant differences (95% level) between 2020 and 2021, or between two sample groups, are highlighted in bold.

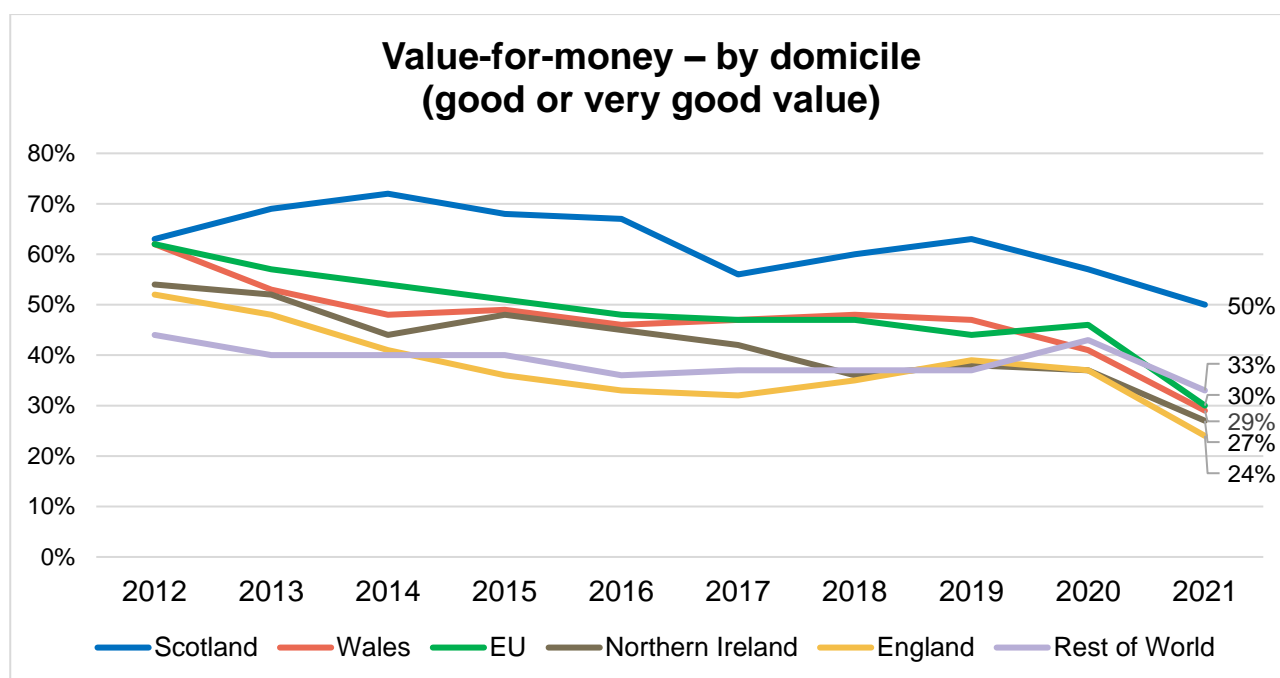
Just over one-in-four students (27%) feel they have received good or very good value (a figure that is close to half of what it was in 2012), against 44% perceiving poor or very poor value. There were a further 29% who felt they had received “neither good nor poor” value. This is the first time that the red line in this chart has overtaken the green one – and it has done so by a significant margin.

In 2020, we remarked that the relatively small fall (from 41% in 2019, to 39%) was somewhat encouraging given the prevailing circumstances, and a reflection of significant efforts made across the sector in order to transition online and offer support during the pandemic. This year, however, it appears that many students, after several long months of upheaval to their learning, have reached a clear conclusion that their experience does not represent good value in their eyes, and as we will see in the following sections, there is a clear desire to return to in-person teaching as soon as possible.

Such a stark fall in perceptions will be seen as disappointing, particularly in the light of the numerous examples of innovation, flexibility and commitment to support that continue to be displayed across the UK higher education sector. However, this is clearly a reflection of the prevailing opinion when considering how this year's experience has reflected value-for-money.

3.2 Value by domicile

Traditionally, value has been one of the measures that has varied widely depending on where a student is from – a likely link to the different funding regimes that prevail. What we have seen this year, by contrast, is that value perceptions are at historically low levels across the board and have fallen significantly. Students from England continue to hold the lowest value perceptions but levels are also very low among students from Northern Ireland, Wales and the EU, all of which have declined.



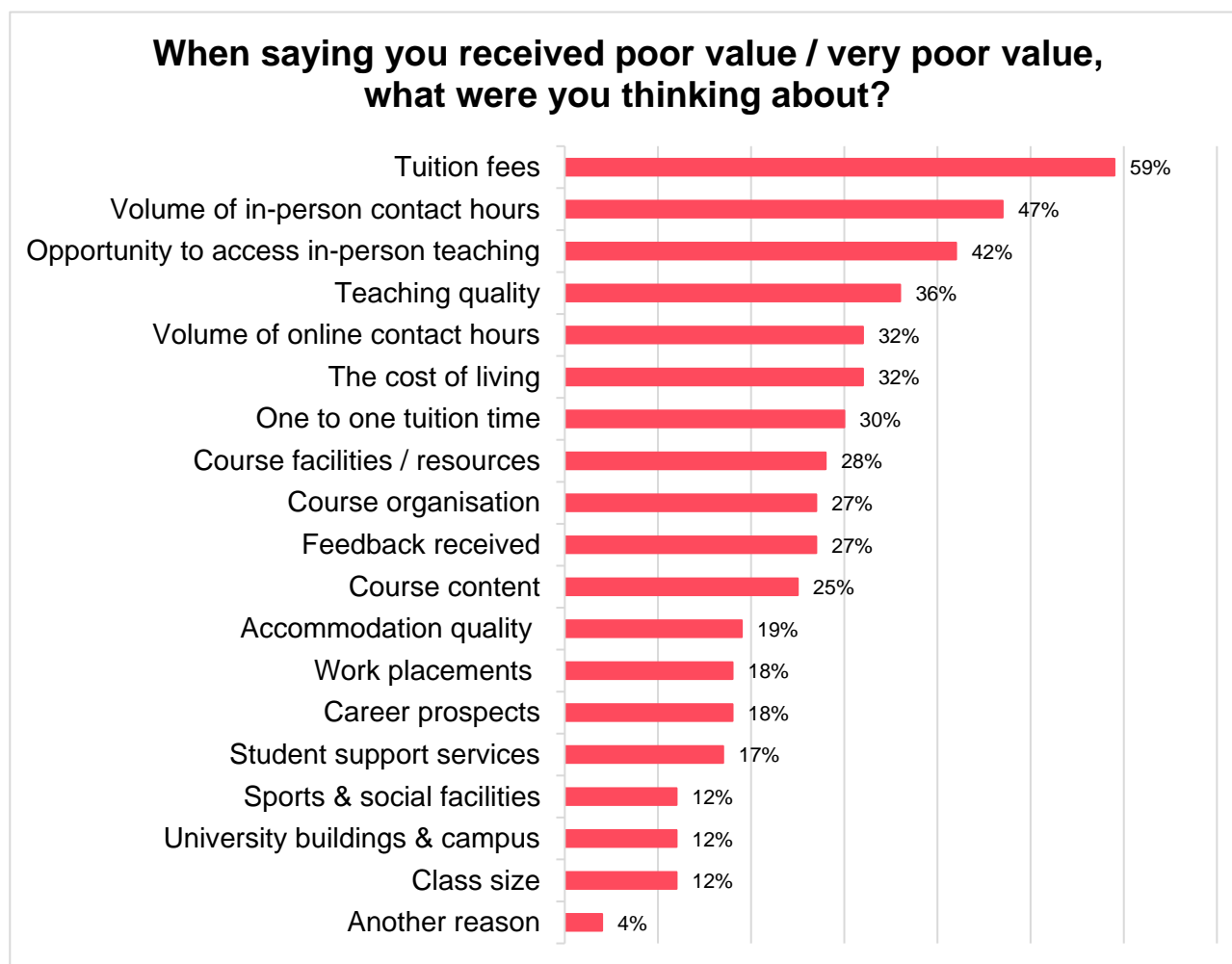
	Scotland	Wales	EU	NI	England	Rest of World
2019	63%	47%	44%	38%	39%	37%
2020	57%	41%	46%	37%	37%	43%
2021	50%	29%	30%	27%	24%	33%

Perceptions in Scotland have declined and are the lowest they have ever been. This suggests that even where students do not pay fees, there has been a fundamental change in the experience, which for many does not equate to their perception of value.

3.3 Factors influencing perceptions of poor value

As we noted above, for many observers this year’s results will be seen as disappointing, but how can we interpret what lies behind this?

In order to address this directly, we asked students what they were thinking about when they gave their answer on value, with a number of pre-defined options (adjusted this year to reflect the anticipated impact of the pandemic) as well as an “open” option to cover any other issues not listed.



Respondents were asked to code all that applied.

The cost of studying has always been – understandably – strongly linked to its perceived value. While this is also the case this year, this is underscored by the absence of in-person teaching for many, which is clearly a major issue in itself. Overall teaching intensity, comprised of the number of hours teaching offered and time with staff, also contributes to the overall view on value.

Where students have provided their own comment, this helps to bring these results to life. Although not all students are critical of the quality many feel that, from their point of view, the experience, based primarily around online interactions, does not merit the same level of fees.

One aspect that was not identified explicitly from the pre-coded options in the chart above is how important field trips, placements and practical elements such as lab work are to the quality of learning, with some of the below comments illustrating the extent to which some students feel they have missed out on an essential aspect of their learning experience.

Selected open comments
“Due to Corona, everything seems too high a price for what we are receiving”
“Fees have not changed even considering the changes made with Covid”
“Most courses are around the same price, so quality of teaching is well worth the value, however COVID undermines what we’re paying for because I’m sure in person it would be great, but online isn’t worth £9k+”
“Online learning is extremely different to in person learning. Uni was great up until the pandemic hit, although I do still believe the fees were overpriced regardless”
“The course is great..., but considering its all online, I think £9,250 is too much”
“Fieldwork which was meant to be included in the course but didn’t happen due to coronavirus. The ability to go to a uni with free field-trips was one reason I chose (it)”
“As I am a practical course, although I understand why we cannot meet in person I believe that my quality of education cannot be what I needed. They are trying their best but there are something you can't replace online”
“Working for free as a student nurse while also paying to go to uni, I am essentially paying to work”
“I don't feel like I learnt what I was supposed to learn (lab skills speaking) in my third year to be prepared for graduate level jobs”

Overall the results from this question this year point towards the decrease in value perceptions being driven by the absence of in-person teaching, and associated worries about access to the right kind of resources, experiences and learning support, all underpinned by concerns about the level of tuition fees being charged.

When discussing value, it is common among sector commentators, particularly policymakers, to refer to the value being placed on higher education as being intrinsically linked to student outcomes.⁶ The nature of these outcomes and the relative value that should be placed on them has been the focus of much debate. What the results from this Survey show, however, is another view of value held by students themselves, which is a relationship between how much they are paying and how they are being taught in person –

⁶ Source: luminare.prospects.ac.uk/does-a-university-education-provide-value-for-money [Accessed 22 April 2021]

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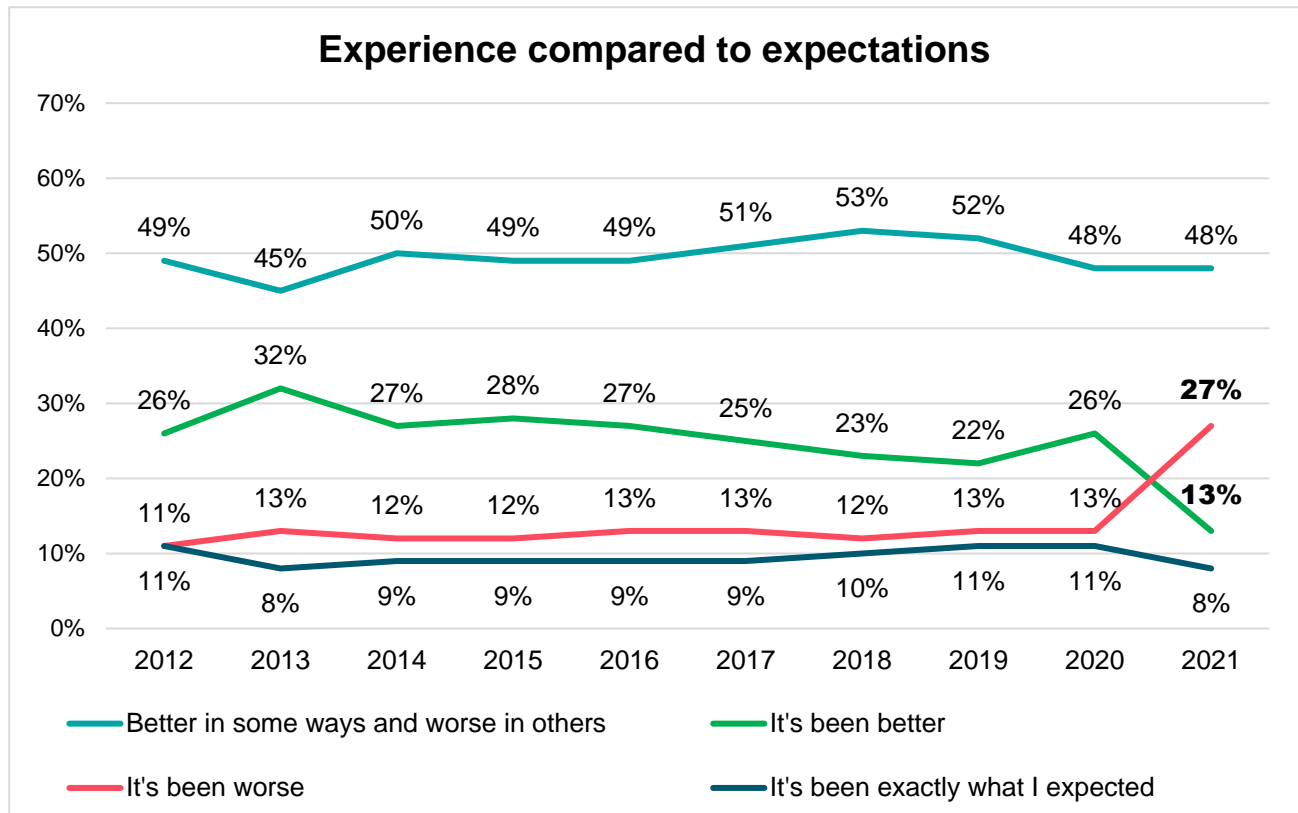
Jonathan Neves and Rachel Hewitt

alongside the opportunities they are given. This year, this is directly related to the move to online learning and what appears to be the widely held view that this does not represent the value they are looking for.

4. Meeting expectations

4.1 Experience versus expectations

At any time, going to university can be both a daunting and exciting experience. Preparing students for this is a difficult and complex challenge, and it may be argued that the experience is always likely to differ from the expectations in some way.



With this in mind, it is perhaps not surprising that for a large proportion of students (48%) the experience has been partly better and partly worse than expected – and that this proportion has remained at a broadly similar level for many years. Where there has been real change this year, in a concerning manner, is in the proportion whose experience has been mainly worse than expected, which has doubled from 13% to 27%. This has been mirrored by a fall in the number of students whose experience has been entirely better than expected (26% to 13%). Such a fundamental change is along similar lines to what we saw for value-for-money, with similarly unprecedented findings this year.

This question is not just about the experience. It is also about the expectations that students held, so the implication here is that, for whatever reason, large numbers of students began the academic year with expectations about their experience that were not met. This could be about expecting more in-person learning which did not happen due to the lockdown restrictions, or expectations of a blended learning model that did not match reality. Although this Survey is about the academic experience, it is also likely that the wider impact of

lockdown on living arrangements and the social aspects of university will have contributed to these findings.

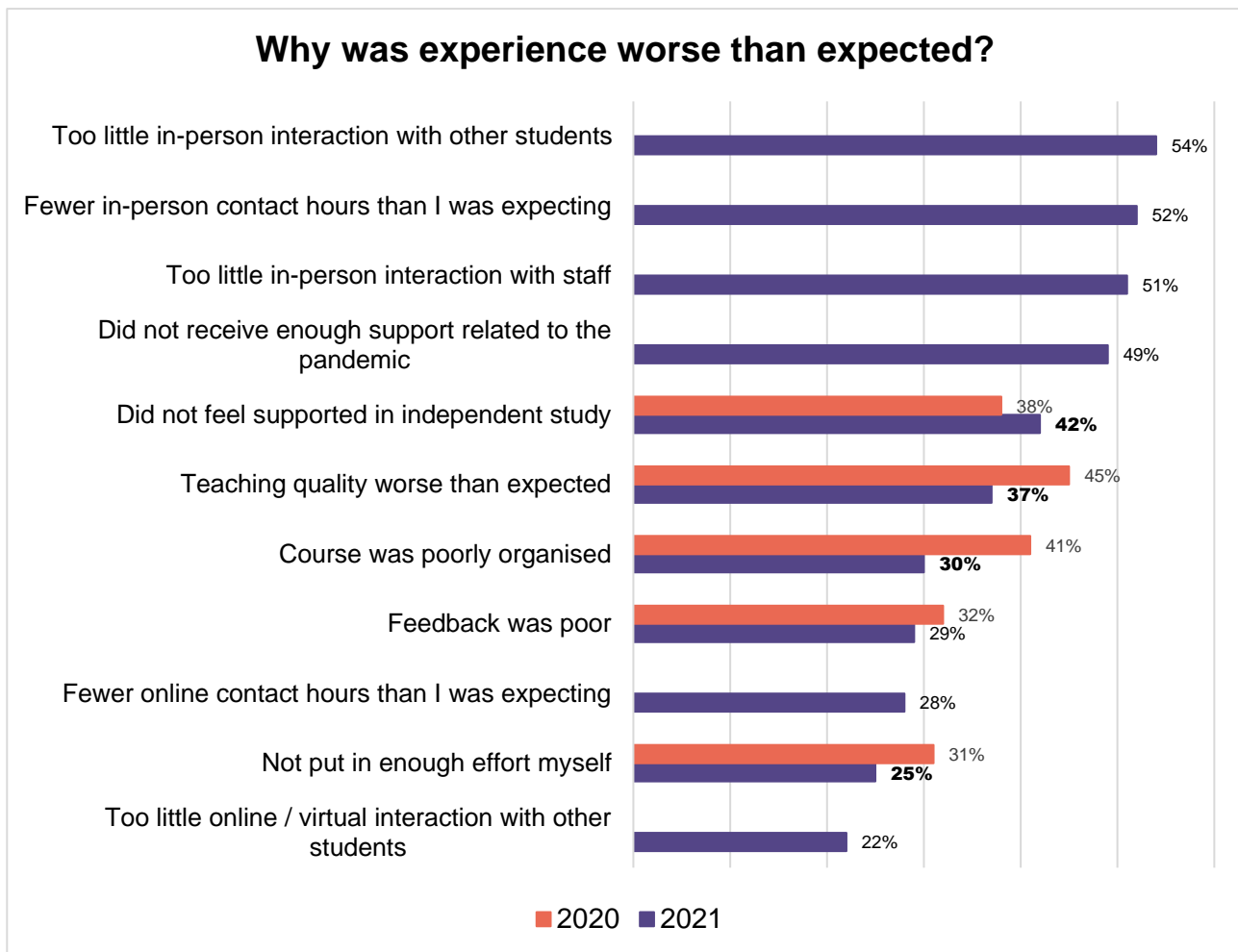
Generally, there is strong consistency across a lot of different groups in the sample. However, there are some differences in particular by year of study. Students in their first or second years are more likely to feel disappointed with their experience compared to what they were expecting. A potential reference point here is the experience of learning during the pandemic. First and second year students will have had the majority of their experience impacted, whereas students in later years will have had more of (or at least some of) their learning as they originally expected, and possibly more time to adjust their expectations.

	First year	Second year	Third year	Fourth year and above
Better than expected	10%	12%	16%	18%
Worse than expected	29%	29%	25%	19%

4.2 Why expectations are not met

Focusing specifically on students whose experience has been worse than expected, it is clear that the main academic drivers of this are related to the absence of in-person teaching and interaction with staff and other students. To reflect the pandemic, we introduced a number of new options to this question this year, but comparison with previous years is still useful in that we can see the extent to which the new options dominate ahead of more traditional concerns such as teaching quality, feedback or not putting in enough effort themselves.

It is clear from this question that interaction with other students is a crucial part of the experience, and the absence of in-person opportunities to do this was identified as the single academic factor that most impacted on their views.



Where there is no data for 2020 this denotes a new option introduced for 2021.

Analysis of the “other” comments (representing 8% of mentions) behind this question sheds more light on issues related directly to the pandemic, as well as related issues such as mental health concerns and student support.

Expectations not met - Selected open comments
“Because of Covid I haven't met any of my classmates or tutor”
“Covid affected a lot of aspects. Mental Health too”
“Purely because of the restrictions of the pandemic, almost all in person interactions were far less satisfying or varied than normal, the scope for activities was small and it was much harder to create productive relationships with fellow students”
“Covid-19 had halted clinical teaching and that's the area I learn and develop best so I feel that I'm not progressing as quickly as I could have”
“I'm not too fond of the online learning. And wasn't expecting this pandemic”
“Being on the front line in the NHS during Covid with minimal support from uni”
“I did not expect to work full-time to afford necessities, which has also affected my academic progress”

4.3 Why expectations are exceeded

As we saw earlier, the proportion of students whose experience was better than their expectations has halved this year, but this still represents a large number of students in terms of volume across the sector.

So in light of the challenges this year, which factors have helped exceed expectations?



Where there is no data for 2020 this denotes a new option introduced for 2021.

These findings underline that there have still been large numbers of positive experiences this year, driven by factors including high levels of organisation, challenging content, and interaction with teaching staff.

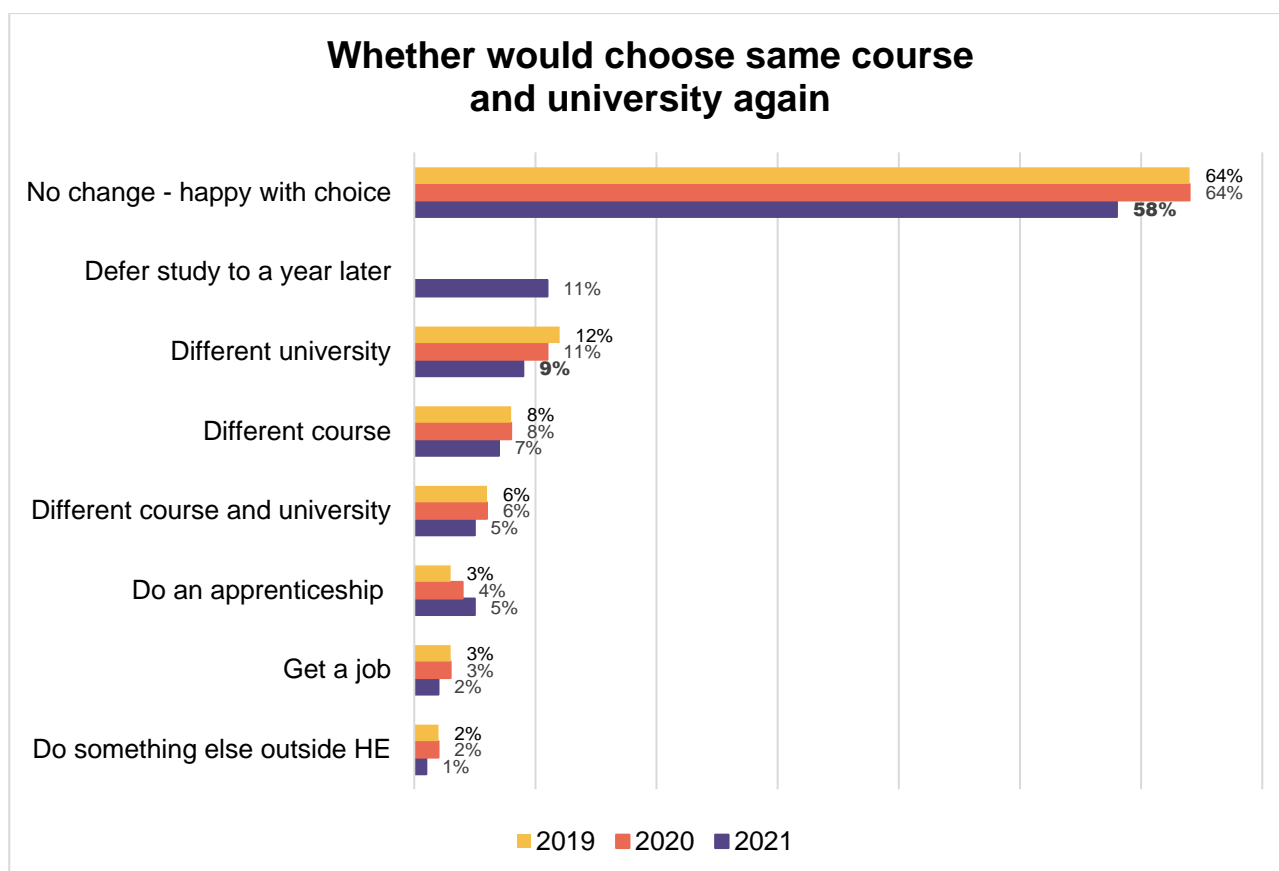
Expectations exceeded - Selected open comments
“Teaching staff were even better at making the topics clear than expected”
“I didn't expect the teaching staff to be helpful, there is always someone who can support you in whichever way you require support”
“In comparison to other courses, there was a greater effort to get f2f interactions”
“It was nice to have the flexibility of watching recorded lectures in my own time, and to attend seminars from the comfort of my flat”
“The teaching staff organised the online work and placement at a short notice and extremely well”
“The course content is very interesting and intellectually fulfilling”
“There was an extra French oral class for those who didn't go there on their year abroad to try and bring them up to standard”

Due to the overarching situation this year much of the attention may focus analysis on where students felt they did not get what they expected, or what they felt their fees paid for, so it is important to highlight some of these factors, as well as the comments above which bring life to further positive experiences and showcase some of the exceptional efforts made by staff.

5. The choice to go to university

5.1 Whether would make same choice again

A question introduced a few years ago asks students whether, knowing what they now know, they would make the same choice of university and course again. This has become one of the key measures in the Survey, as it assesses the extent to which aspects of their experience, good or bad, would have led to an alternative choice – as well as the extent to which realistic alternative choices are available.

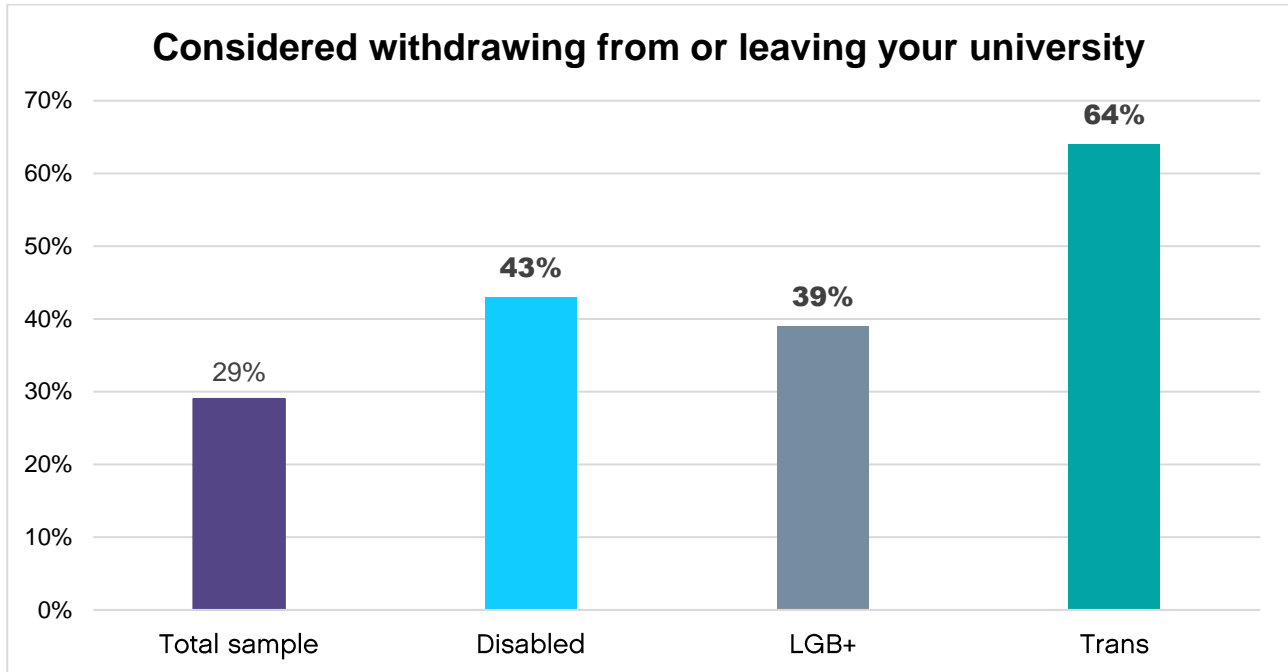


Where there is no data for 2019 or 2020 this denotes a new option introduced for 2021.

Despite the concerns about value and the lack of in-person interaction, the majority of students – 58% – would still have chosen the same course and institution. This is a decline from previous years, but this is not completely comparable as we introduced a new option this year to cover those wishing to defer their study to a later year. One-in-eleven students selected this, which is not especially high, although it does perhaps underline that with pressure on the job market and no realistic options to travel abroad, there are few real alternative choices. In general, this result suggests that the pandemic has not materially impacted upon students feeling they made the wrong choice, just that they would have liked a different experience.

5.2 Whether considered leaving

To complement the above question assessing the choice to go to university, we included a new question this year which asked students whether they had considered leaving their course, with a follow-up as to the reasons behind this.



Significant differences compared to the total sample are in bold.

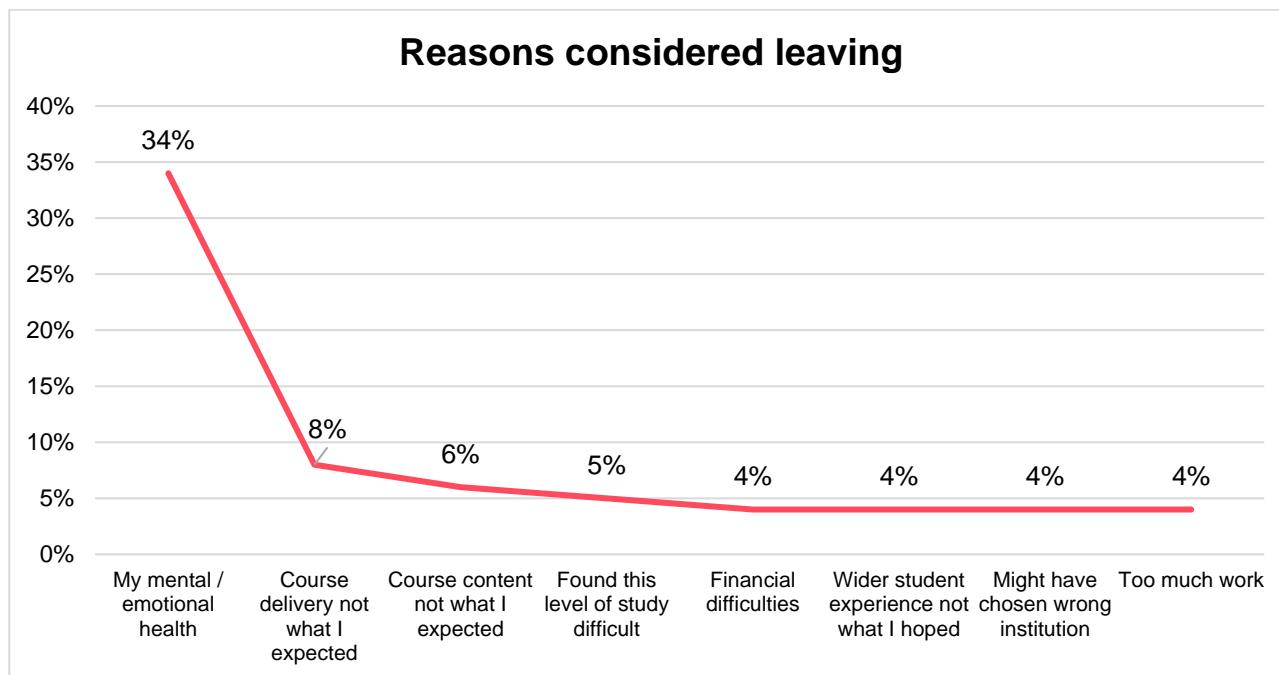
Overall, despite the challenges faced, just under one-in-three had considered leaving their course, which is perhaps more positive than might have been expected. We do not have a direct comparison for this question from a previous wave of this Survey, but we can compare to the UK Engagement Survey (UKES) which used the same question among undergraduate students in pre-pandemic times (2019).⁷ The proportion from UKES who had considered leaving at the time was 27%, which is only 2% lower than the percentage recorded here.

This is not to downplay the challenges faced by students but, potentially due to an absence of alternative options during the pandemic, it implies that retention levels may not be significantly impacted at a total sample level. This implication is backed up by data from the Student Loans Company, which highlights that, in the period from 1 August to 21 February 2021, there had been no increase in student withdrawal notifications compared to the

⁷ Jonathan Neves (2019), *UK Engagement Survey*, p.28. Advance HE

previous year. Clearly, a range of factors related to the pandemic have caused frustration for students, but at an overall level, this has not impacted on continuation rates.^{8,9}

However, retention is clearly more of a concern among a number of specific cohorts, in particular disabled students, LGB+ students and trans students, which implies that their time at university has thrown up particular challenges which have led some of these students to consider their future.



In terms of specific reasons for considering leaving, the one key issue that stands out is mental health. There has been widespread coverage around the impact of the pandemic on mental wellbeing, particularly among younger people, and hence the dominance of this factor here is perhaps not surprising.¹⁰ It could also be argued, however, that many of the other factors listed, such as the impact on course delivery, financial concerns and restrictions on the wider student experience are inherently linked and are contributors to the challenges with mental health.

Only 5% of those who had considered leaving were prompted by finding the course too difficult. Last summer, one of the predicted consequences of the increase in A level grades awarded for the 2020 cohort was that it could lead to students being ill-equipped for the level

⁸ Source: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/early-in-year-student-withdrawal-notifications-academic-year-201819-to-202021-up-to-21022021 [Accessed 4 May 2021]

⁹ The 2021 HEPI publication *A short guide to non-continuation in UK universities* provides further discussion on student drop-out and how it might be addressed. www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/A-short-guide-to-non-continuation-in-UK-universities.pdf

¹⁰ Source: inews.co.uk/news/health/young-adults-suffering-financial-and-mental-wellbeing-covid-pandemic-982314-982314 [Accessed 4 May 2021]

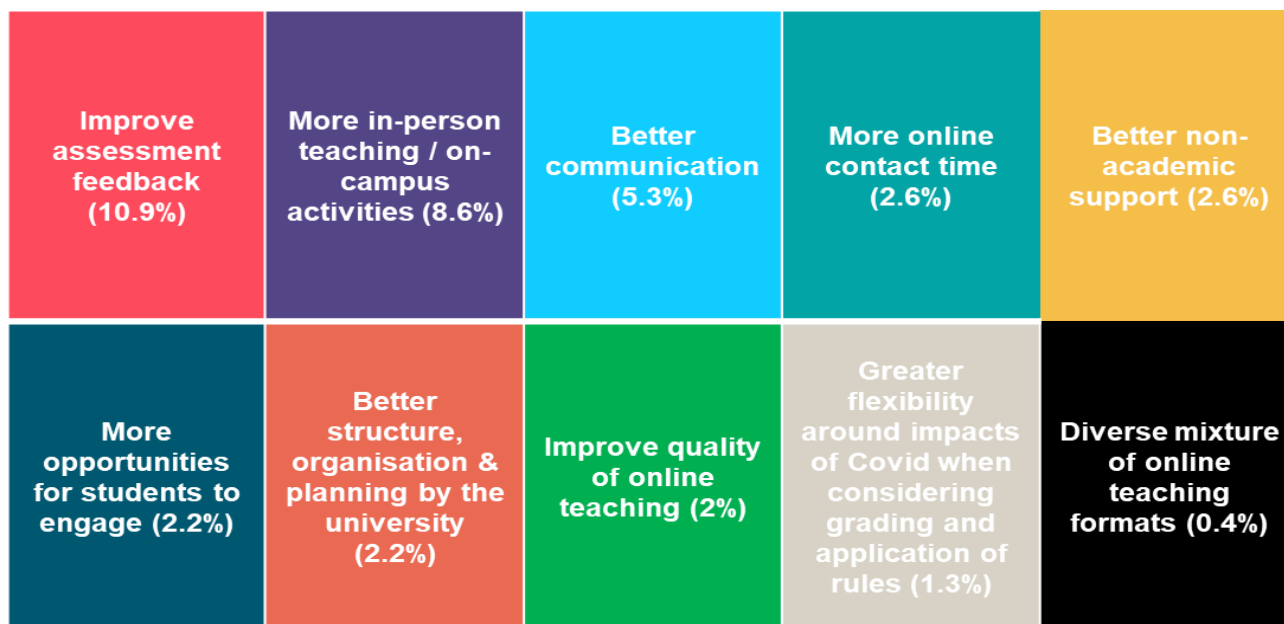
of study at university that their grades had enabled them to access.¹¹ These findings do not appear to support this.

¹¹ Source: [inews.co.uk/news/education/gcse-results-2020-grades-inflation-7-above-grading-system-583624](https://www.inews.co.uk/news/education/gcse-results-2020-grades-inflation-7-above-grading-system-583624) [Accessed 7 May 2021]

6. How to improve the academic experience

This year, for the first time, we included in the Survey a completely open question. We asked students to tell us, using free text, the one thing their institution could do to improve the quality of the academic experience for students. In the light of the significant declines in how students have rated their experience this year, the following analysis is particularly pertinent to understanding what lies behind the major changes we have seen this year and how they might be reversed. Researcher Kevin Guyan, from the Advance HE Research Team, conducted the analysis and authored this section.

The qualitative analysis was conducted using Atlas.ti software, to identify and rank the most common themes cited from the circa 5,000 respondents who provided a comment, in order of frequency.¹² Although not intended to be a strictly quantitative “ranking”, this does enable us to identify the factors of most importance to students which, if addressed, would have the most impact on the quality of their experience.



Percentages are based on the the proportion of respondents mentioning each theme, among those who gave a comment.

We now go on to look at each theme in turn and the type of comment that lies behind it.

¹² atlasti.com

The Survey received open text responses from 4,579 students. To analyse responses, a sample was first derived based on 5% of all responses received. The sample was manually reviewed using Atlas.ti, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software. This software made it possible to identify recurring themes and mark these themes with a ‘code’. To code the remaining 95% of responses, Advance HE used Atlas.ti’s auto-coding function. Due to the use of automated coding, the results are best understood as an illustration of key themes rather than a definitive account of code frequencies.

1. Improve feedback provided to students

The quality of feedback is key for students, particularly in these times where in-person interaction has not often been possible. Respondents highlighted the need for feedback that was detailed and timely (given before the next assignment is due). They expressed an awareness of the benefits of peer feedback and the utility of feedback seminars / sessions. They also acknowledged that improved feedback may require institutions to employ more staff.

Example comments

“Better feedback on assignments; ie more feedback to be given (maybe even consider a voice recording) and give the feedback a lot sooner for next assignments”

“Ensure feedback is to a good standard; some feedback can just be one word comments which aren’t helpful or even just question marks”

“Improve the way they give feedback so it is easier to understand and constructive for future assignments”

Ratings of feedback are covered in more detail in chapter 10 of this report.

2. Provide more in-person teaching/on-campus activities

Many students felt the quality of online delivery did not match in-person delivery. While mindful of the limitations brought about by the pandemic, many expressed their desire for more on-campus activities in small groups. This was particularly the case among respondents engaged in a subject that required lab access or particular tools or spaces (such as Art students). Respondents described their university experience in language that suggested a purchase of a service and what they had received did not meet their expectations – which fits directly with the fall in value-for money perceptions that we saw in chapter 2.

Example comments

“Be honest about the reality of the learning environments. We were promised blended learning but I've only had 2 in person classes across 2 semesters”

“Don’t make students self-study that much. More on-campus classes would be nice (when it is possible of course)”

“The main thing for my course would have been labs. I also think in-person tutorials could have been possible, but weren’t allowed. This would have built up a much better relationship with the tutorial group tutor”

3. Improve communication with students

A large number of students commented on their frustration about the delay or lack of response to their emails sent to lecturers or tutors. Respondents also highlighted the importance of receiving clear information in a timely manner. Some also noted that they would have appreciated personal check-ins during the pandemic.

Example comments

“Make professors reply to emails, they often ignore emails and this is really frustrating considering the amount of money we’re paying for a service”

“Make welfare checks with all students. I know many people who have suffered mental health problems and therefore fallen behind in their work but the lecturers and pastoral staff would never know because they don’t check in with students individually. I would just appreciate a phone call once a semester to check that I’m okay”

“When tutors are checking up on students, make sure they actually make you feel like you can talk to them instead of just making us feel like sending us an email to check we’re getting on okay is just something they want to tick on their to-do list”

4. Provide more online contact time/teaching (eg live lectures)

Respondents shared their wish for more online contact time, including lectures and seminars. Some respondents specifically requested the provision of more live lectures (though others noted the benefits of asynchronous content – eg material that can be accessed when required, so that they can work around employment or caring responsibilities).

Example comments

“Provide more online lectures than pre-recorded You Tube videos and powerpoints”

“More online contact hours, as most of mine are self-guided and it makes a lot more difficult, especially given it’s our first year”

“There is barely any in-person – I think there could be more. Live lectures instead of pre-recorded, even if online”

5. Improve the provision of non-academic support (eg mental health)

Many highlighted the need to improve the provision of mental health support. A large number of respondents detailed their struggles with wellbeing and isolation throughout the pandemic, noting that their university could be doing more to help.

Example comments

“I think that the institution could support students’ wellbeing / mental health better. I have been stuck in halls and no form of earning money and there is no way for me to apply for funds. I think there should be more support. This would help my academic experience as I wouldn’t be worrying all the time about whether or not I can afford food the next week”

“I think many of the disadvantages and challenges I have faced have been due to the Covid-19 pandemic, therefore it is largely out of the university’s control. However, I would say that it would be helpful if the university provided more support for mental health, especially within the context of the current situation”

6. More opportunities for students to engage with each other (eg peer learning, sense of community)

Many respondents shared moving descriptions of their struggles during the pandemic to engage socially with others on their degree or at their university. The lack of in-person teaching made it harder for some to participate meaningfully in online seminars or feel as if they know their fellow students. As a partial solution, some respondents expressed the need for more opportunities for students to engage online outside of lectures or seminars.

Example comments

“Allow for online social sessions, and relocate university society groups and clubs online to socialise with more people. The lack of social interaction negatively affects my learning, as I need a good balance between that and work, or my motivation drops from a lack of contact with people”

“Despite the current pandemic, realise we are only human. Very little ability to meet coursemates or study together due to rules. Being in residences having only online lessons was like living in a prison... one costing £14k a year with residence and tuition fees”

“I have one professor that gets students to engage really well, she uses a website that means people could collaborate without speaking which was often the case in seminars. It helped produce some good thoughts, and brought everyone into the learning whereas in other seminar groups it’s either silent or you have two people who are confident to speak”

7. Need for more structure, better organisation and planning by the university (eg timetabling, online portals, scheduling of exams, assignments set by lecturers)

Comments cited issues such as short notice announcement of timetables or assignments, or clashing of due dates (very busy periods followed by very quiet periods).

Example comments
“Give us information earlier on, eg exam timetables, how things will work during the pandemic, when they plan to open up face to face teaching, what they hope to happen next year”
“Better organised timetables and faster notification of deadlines and scheduled classes”
“Lecturers speaking to each other to timetable assignments better so it isn’t one after the other. More time is spent working on one assignment than what we are learning other lectures”

8. Improve the quality of online teaching (eg ensure it is up-to-date)

Respondents described the varied quality of online teaching. Although some lecturers and tutors excelled, most comments on this theme related to the poor quality of online content. This included the design of content that was too dense, too lengthy, not engaging and / or not up-to-date. In some instances, comments referred to the use of substandard devices such as microphones or poor internet connections.

Example comments
“Invest in training lecturers in online teaching and invest in high quality video cameras and microphones”
“Get lecturers who make the content interesting and explain the content in an easy to learn way, I’ve had lecturers who are both good at teaching and bad at teaching and it is so clear in how much I remember the content of the lectures which lecturer was good and which was bad”
“Listen to students when we say that the money we pay for tuition does not reflect what we receive. Be honest about whether it was/is safe or right for students to move around the country for university, and not just for profit reasons. Have an open dialogue about online learning, recognise that it is not the same quality as in-person learning”

9. Offer greater flexibility and consideration of the multiple impacts of Covid-19 on grading and application of rules (eg no-detriment policy)

Many respondents described the need for their university to demonstrate a greater sense of care and compassion, with a willingness to bend the rules in light of the Covid-19 pandemic. This might include flexibility of deadline submission dates or leniency about meeting specific requirements. In particular, many respondents described the desire for a 'no-detriment' policy in regard to grading and assessment.

Example comments

"Think about student mental health. Yes, there are counselling services in place, however with the impact of COVID I have seen a massive decline in my mental health and the mental health of everyone around me. The staff are still expecting students to get work completed on time and to a high standard and very few are taking into consideration external factors that could impact student life"

"More leniency on assignments using IT as everyone's hardware is different"

"The response to the pandemic in terms of a 'no detriment policy' has been poor this year. They should have been more timely with a response. Whilst I have the opportunity to apply for an extension to my assignment, I will not receive a response to my application for over 3 months until the end of the academic year"

10. Use a diverse mixture of online teaching formats

Respondents described the need for more variety in online delivery formats, including quizzes and interactive activities. In many cases, the transfer of in-person content to online delivery was not ideal, with the most effective learning involving short and frequent information.

Example comments

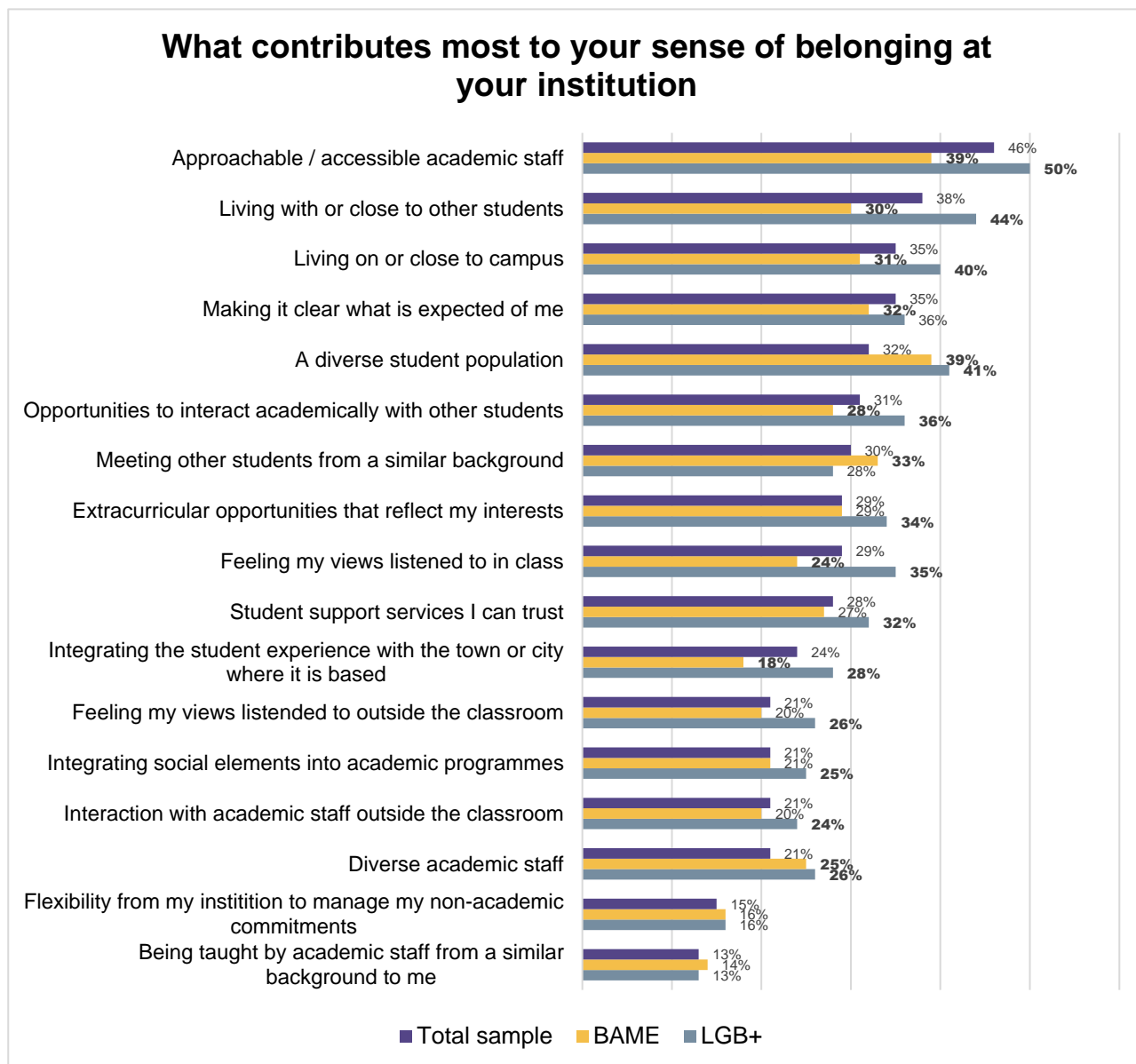
"Look into more varied formats of teaching – not all years and classes work well with the same sort of online scheduling. Especially in the earlier university years, allowing small groups to work together in break out rooms allows for social bonding. In the later years, having some of the classes taught in much smaller groups was really good, so more of that would be great"

"Encourage more discussions with students in engaging ways, such as Kahoot or well explained topics"

7. Student priorities

7.1 Sense of belonging

As a new area of focus this year, we asked a question around which factors most contribute to students' sense of belonging at their institution. As well as focusing on the overall findings, this question provides a dedicated opportunity to identify the extent to which this may vary by protected characteristics such as ethnicity and sexual orientation.



Significant differences compared to the total sample are in bold.

Across all students, being able to connect and interact with academic staff is key, as is proximity to other students, as well as proximity to campus.

Another important aspect is that institutions should make sure they communicate what is expected of students – which is logical, as arrival at university (physically or virtually) can be a daunting experience and hence provision of a set of guidelines for how to approach university and perhaps how to get the most from it would be welcomed. Late spring 2021 has seen a much-delayed return to campus for most students, and analysis of the main factors mentioned here help highlight why this is so important for many.¹³

To an extent, there are different priorities by background. For BAME students, diversity is key. Having a diverse range of students, and staff, helps foster a sense of belonging.

For students describing themselves as LGB+, diversity is also important, but there are also other high priorities. Being connected to other students, living nearby and interacting academically are major factors, while there is a particular priority to feel represented – to feel their views are listened to.

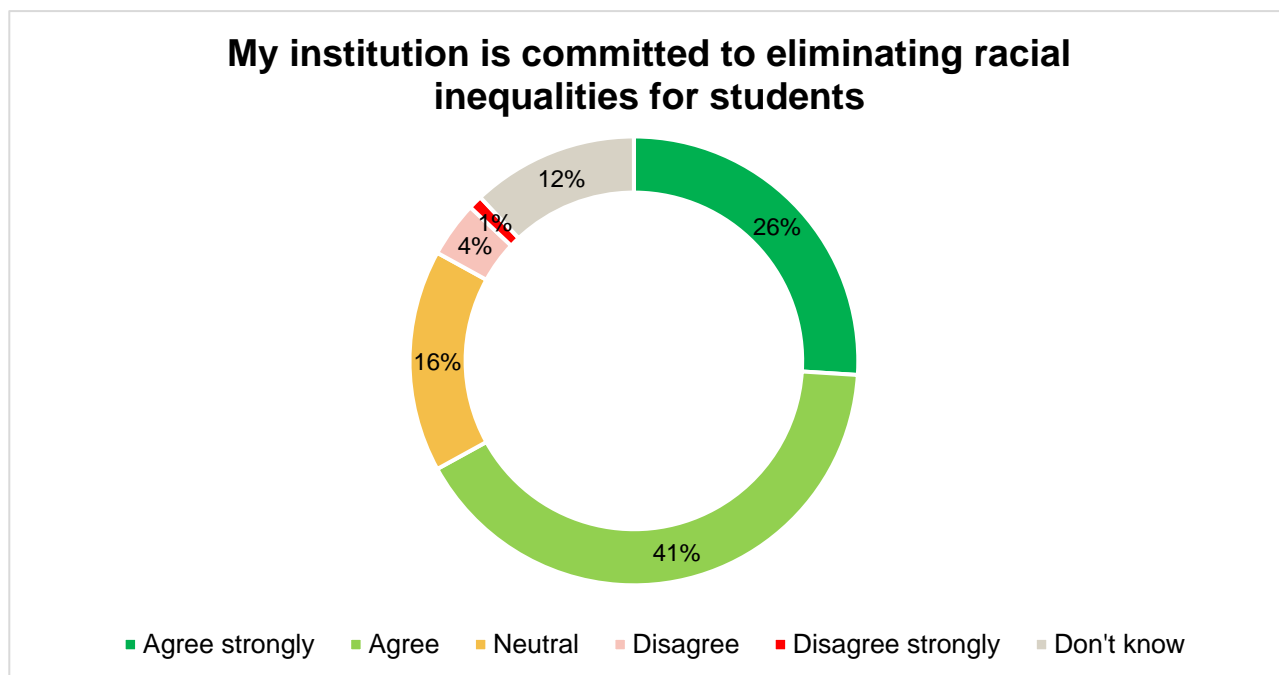
7.2 Commitment to race equality

The murder of George Floyd in the US in May 2020 and the momentum it gave to the Black Lives Matter movement placed a fresh spotlight on race equality across the globe. As part of the scrutiny around this, different sectors, including the UK higher education sector, have been challenged by their own stakeholders to demonstrate their commitment to eradicating institutional racism and engagement with the concept of anti-racism.¹⁴

In the light of this increased scrutiny, we included a question this year asking the extent to which students felt their institution demonstrated a commitment to eliminating racial inequalities for its students.

¹³ Source: www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-56731330 [accessed 21 April 2021]

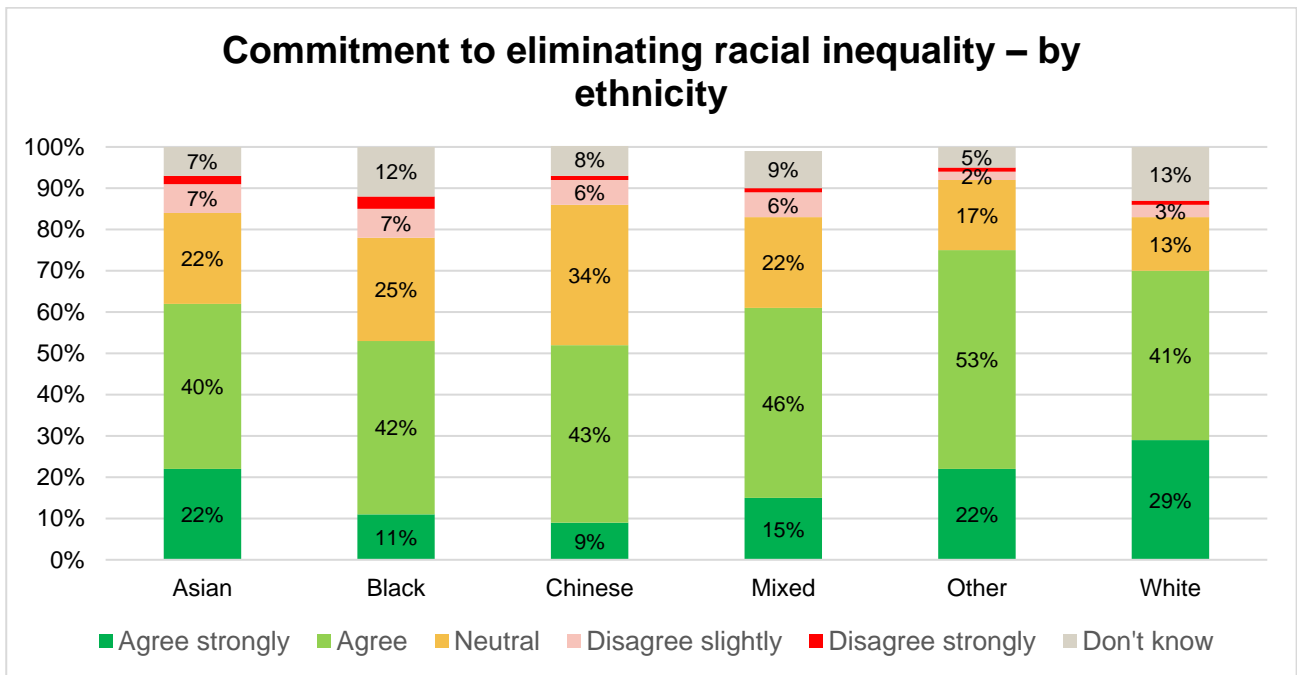
¹⁴ Source: [UK universities perpetuate institutional racism, report says | Higher education | The Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/may/10/uk-universities-perpetuate-institutional-racism-report-says) [accessed 10 May 2021]



At a total level, these results may be seen as relatively positive. Two out of three students feel their institution is committed to eliminating inequalities, including 26% who agree strongly. By contrast, just 5% disagree, although there is a sizeable proportion – 12% – who are unable to give a view.

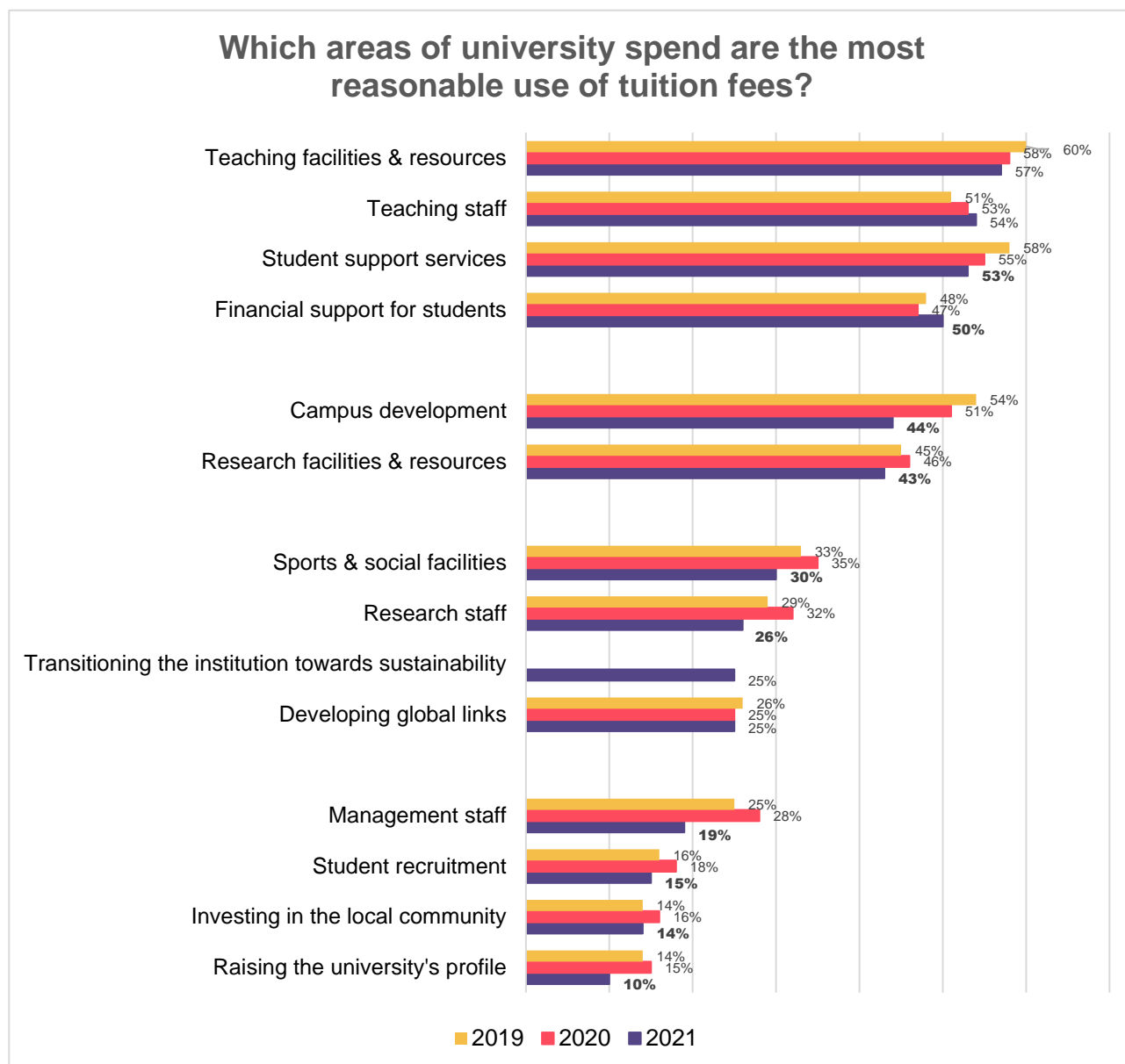
However, there is a fundamental difference in attitude when we drill down to individual ethnicities, with white students holding a more positive view, and Black students in particular being more critical.

It is important to point out that there are very low levels of disagreement with this statement among all groups, which is encouraging, but agreement or strong agreement is markedly lower among Black and Chinese students in particular, many of whom feel there is more to be done to demonstrate fully their institution's commitment.



7.3 Most appropriate use of tuition fees

Providing enough information on where fees go has been a long-standing challenge facing institutions, but by understanding where students feel spending is most appropriate, we can help identify how value concerns might be addressed.



For ease of reading, the above chart is divided into four categories – those areas with very high support, generally high support, more modest support and low support.

The most important aspects are teaching and student support, with financial support increasing in significance this year into the group of factors with the highest level of support.

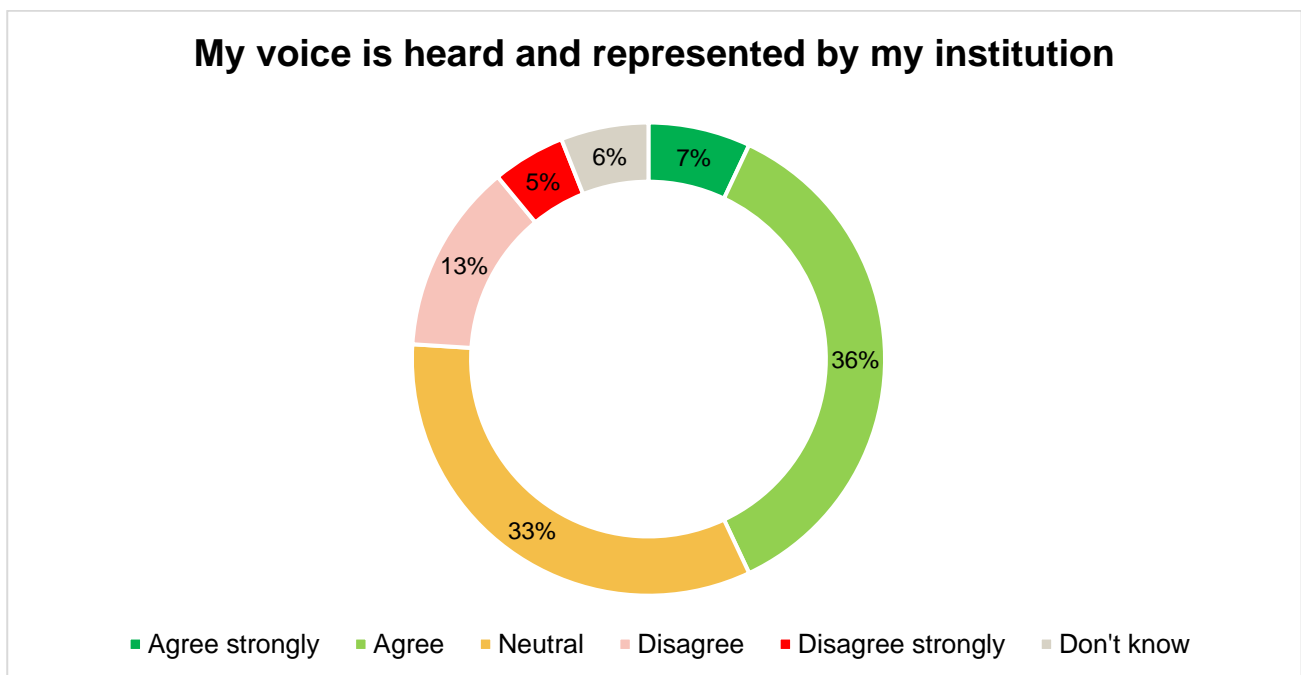
At the lower end of the scale, investment in the community or in raising profile are seen as less crucial. These aspects had shown a small increase in 2020 but this year, potentially due to the impact of the pandemic on relative priorities, they have fallen back again. A new category introduced this year – spend on institutional sustainability – received a moderate amount of support (25%).

7.4 Representing the student voice

Capturing the student voice is critical for institutions to keep enhancing their provision and to ensure students feel they have a say. This has never been more critical than over the past year as the sector has worked to come together to innovate in the face of challenges.

Given this backdrop, it came as a surprise to many across the sector that one of the major survey-based methods of gathering the student voice – the National Student Survey (NSS) – was recently subjected to a Government-initiated review, in the light of questions around the alleged level of burden placed on the sector and the extent to which the NSS may be contributing to a ‘reduction in quality and standards’.¹⁵ In response to this, phase one of the review found no evidence to support any link to the lowering of standards.¹⁶

In a new question this year, we asked students whether they felt their voice was represented by their institution.



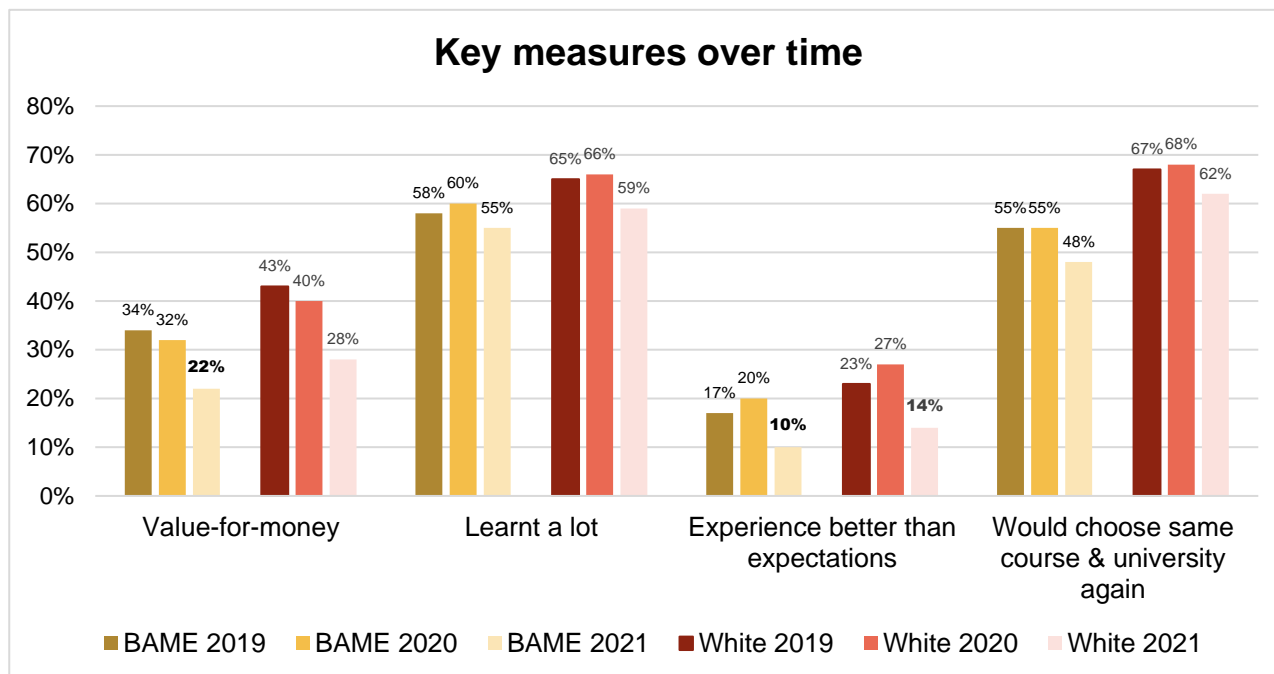
The results imply that there is room for improvement, with 43% agreeing, a further 33% who are neutral, and 18% disagreeing. There are multiple ways of capturing the student voice – going far beyond surveys such as this one and the NSS – but the data implies that there needs to be greater focus on this across the sector rather than a reduction.

¹⁵ Source: www.gov.uk/government/publications/reducing-bureaucratic-burdens-higher-education/reducing-bureaucratic-burdens-on-research-innovation-and-higher-education [Accessed 20 April 2021]

¹⁶ Source: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/nss-review-phase-one-report/ [Accessed 30 April 2021]

8. Spotlight on specific student groups

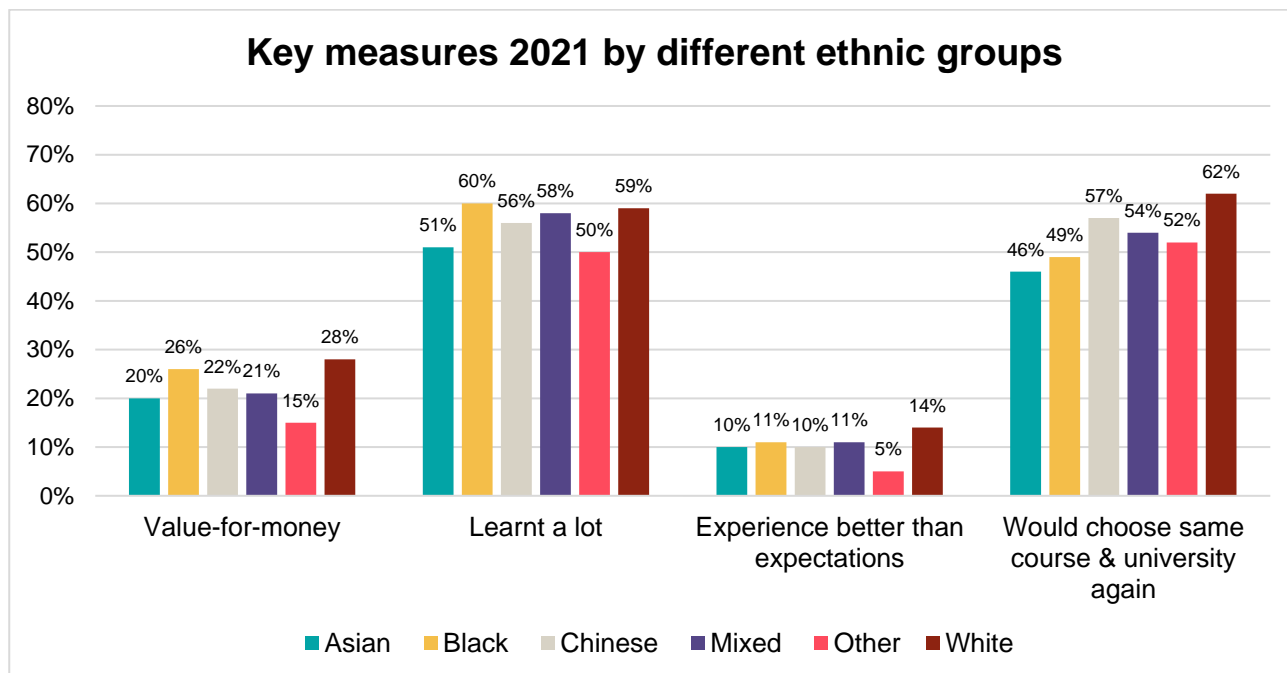
8.1 Ethnicity (UK domicile)



A consistently worrying finding in our Survey over time has been the less positive experience enjoyed by students from BAME backgrounds. Whereas some of the key measures increased in some years and decreased in others, among most cohorts, a consistent negative gap has remained between results among BAME compared to white students.

In 2021 we unfortunately see a similar picture. Results among both cohorts have fallen significantly – for reasons described in the previous chapters – but there remains a significant gap in the experience, with BAME students still much less likely to feel they have learnt a lot, received good value, or that the experience exceeded their expectations.

In terms of value-for-money, the relative gap between BAME and white students has fallen slightly from 8% to 6%, but this is in the context of less than one-in-four BAME students perceiving they have received good value. For some of the other measures, the gap remains very high, in particular for the proportion who would choose the same course and university again, which now sees a negative difference of 14%.



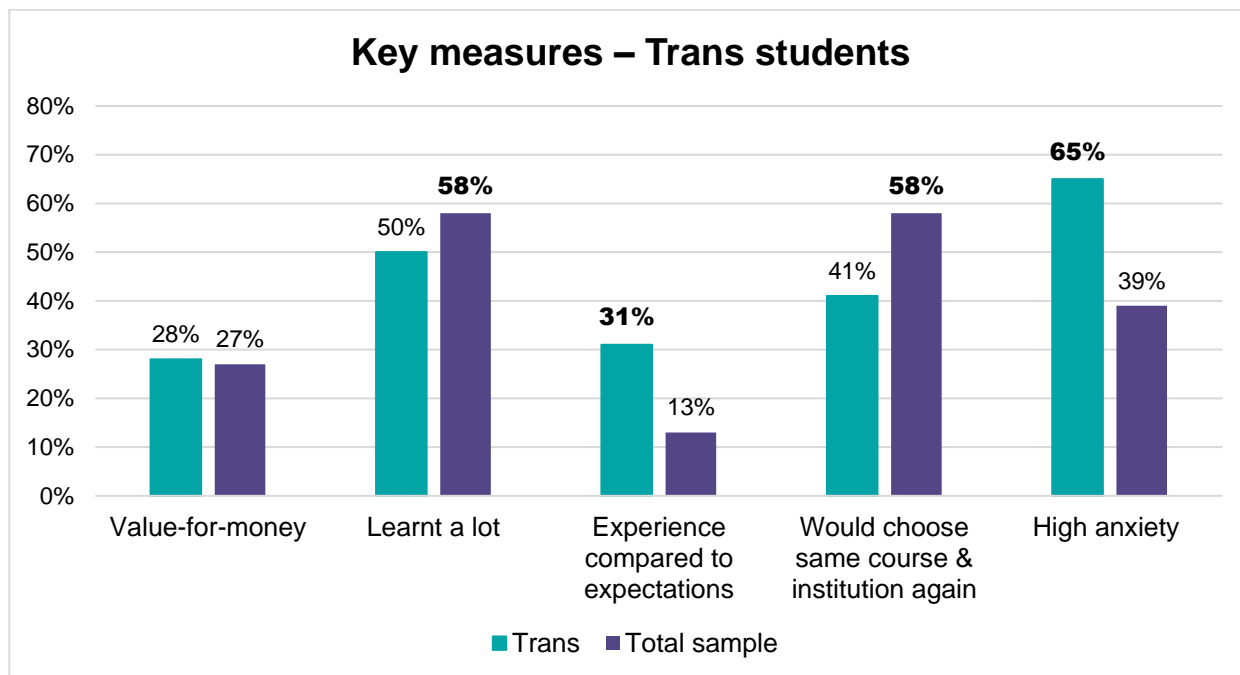
When we analyse the different ethnicities in detail, we see a mixed picture, although in almost all cases, white students report the most positive findings. The small number of students who identify their ethnicity in the “Other” category¹⁷ are the most concerned about their experience, while Asian and Black students are least likely to say they would choose the same course and university again. More encouragingly, Black students are the most likely among all groups to feel they have learnt a lot.

8.2 Trans students

Just over 2% (234) of the sample identified as being Trans or having a Trans history. As the chart below shows, there is mixed evidence as to the quality of their experience, with a number of statistically significant differences compared to the total sample despite the small sample size and hence the larger differences required to be significant.

Trans students are generally disappointed about the value they have received, but at similar levels to all students. More concerningly, Trans students are less likely to feel they have learnt a lot, and only one-in-four would make the same choice again. The low score for those who would make the same choice again fits with what we saw in chapter 5, where a very large proportion of Trans students – 64% – had considered leaving their course.

¹⁷ Ethnicity data is taken from the YouthSight panel which uses the following categories: White, Black Caribbean, Black African, Black Other, Indian, Pakistani, Chinese Other Asian, Mixed, Other. The Other category may potentially include Arab or any other Ethnic category.



Significant differences compared to the total sample are in bold.

By contrast, Trans students are significantly more likely (than the total sample) to feel their experience was better than their expectations. In fact, unlike the total sample, there were more Trans students (31%) who felt the experience exceeded expectations compared to those who felt it was worse (25%), which implies that some of the concerns and apprehensions before university may have been allayed during their experience. Trans students were also more likely than the total sample to feel their voice was heard and represented by their institution (not charted here).

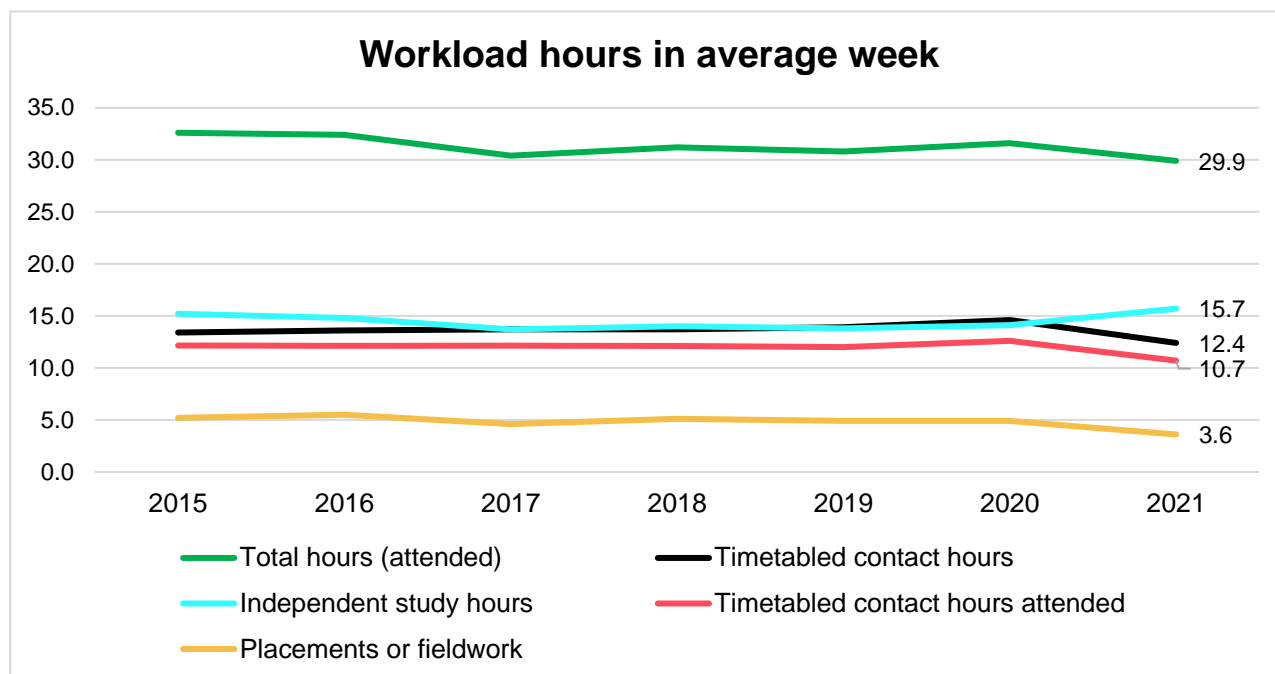
One other area of the Survey where the views of Trans students differ markedly from the total sample is in terms of future plans (main results in section 12). Whereas 49% of the total sample expected to go into graduate employment, this was the case for just 20% of Trans students, who were significantly more likely to consider alternative options such as further study, developing a creative portfolio or voluntary work, while a higher proportion (12%) were unsure as to their next step.

There are clearly some complex factors at play in contributing to these findings. In some aspects, Trans students are positive, with evidence of feeling listened to, but in others there are major concerns which feed through into particularly high levels of anxiety.¹⁸

¹⁸ High anxiety measured based on those answering 6–10 out of 10 for the question “How anxious did you feel yesterday?” See chapter 11 for further discussion of anxiety alongside other wellbeing measures.

9. Teaching intensity

9.1 Workload trends



	Total hours (attended)	Timetabled contact hours	Independent study hours*	Contact hours attended*	Placements or fieldwork*
2019	30.8	13.9	13.8	12.0	4.9
2020	31.6	14.6	14.1	12.6	4.9
2021	29.9	12.4	15.7	10.7	3.6

* These measures contribute to the total figures

This year, perhaps unsurprisingly, we have seen some key changes in workload and teaching intensity – in measures that had previously remained relatively consistent.

The number of hours in placements or fieldwork has fallen significantly, and against this there has been a marked rise in independent study. This is logical as we know from some of the comments highlighted earlier that placements and fieldwork have been impacted significantly by the pandemic, and hence there has often been no choice but to find replacement ways to obtain the same learning, often via independent study.

There has also been a notable decline in scheduled contact hours, which have fallen by 15% in the past year. Many students have found it helpful to watch lectures in their own time – something which this year has counted as independent study in these figures – and may have prompted the increase in this year’s figure. This is likely to have impacted upon the

volume of contact hours attended but not necessarily on the volume of contact hours scheduled – both of which have declined.

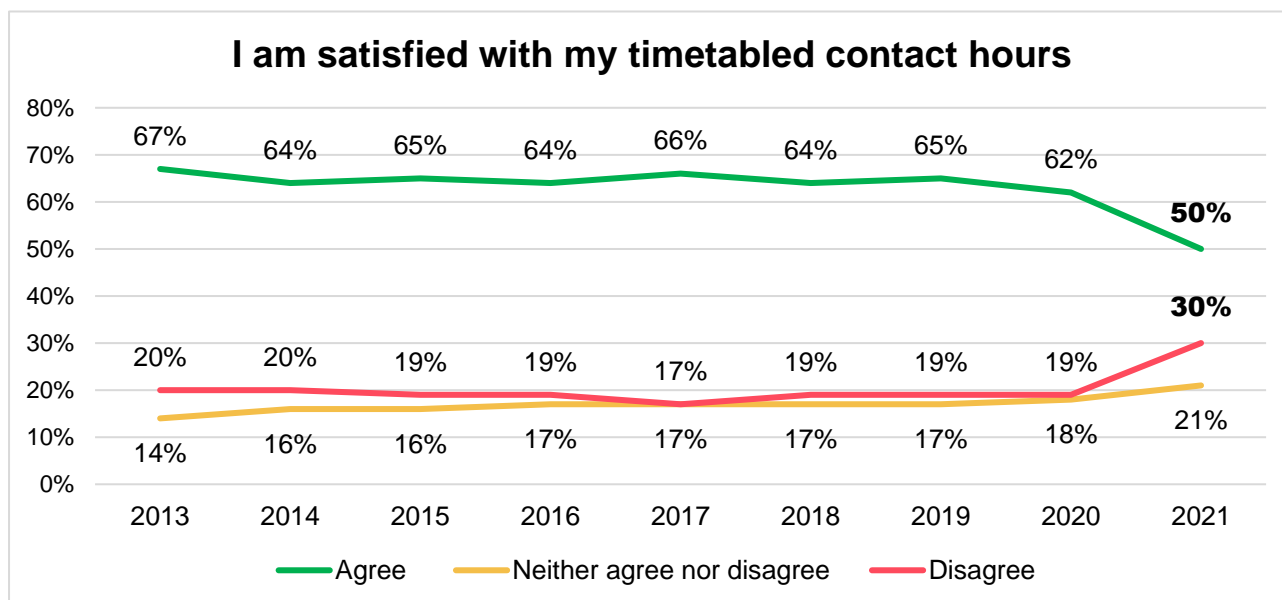
We saw earlier that the necessary move to online delivery has not been the preference for many students, but the decline in volume of contact hours scheduled (whether attended directly or afterwards) has also been felt by students and is something which is likely to have contributed to the overall assessment of the experience this year.

Selected open comments
“[would like] more contact hours, virtual or in-person”
“[would like] less fees this year and more contact hours”
““[would like] more face to face hours instead of independent work”
“More contact hours, more time in class doing different subjects”

What has not changed is that not all scheduled hours are attended – even in the light of criticism of the decline in scheduled hours, with the proportion attended to scheduled (86%) remaining exactly the same compared to 2019 and 2020.

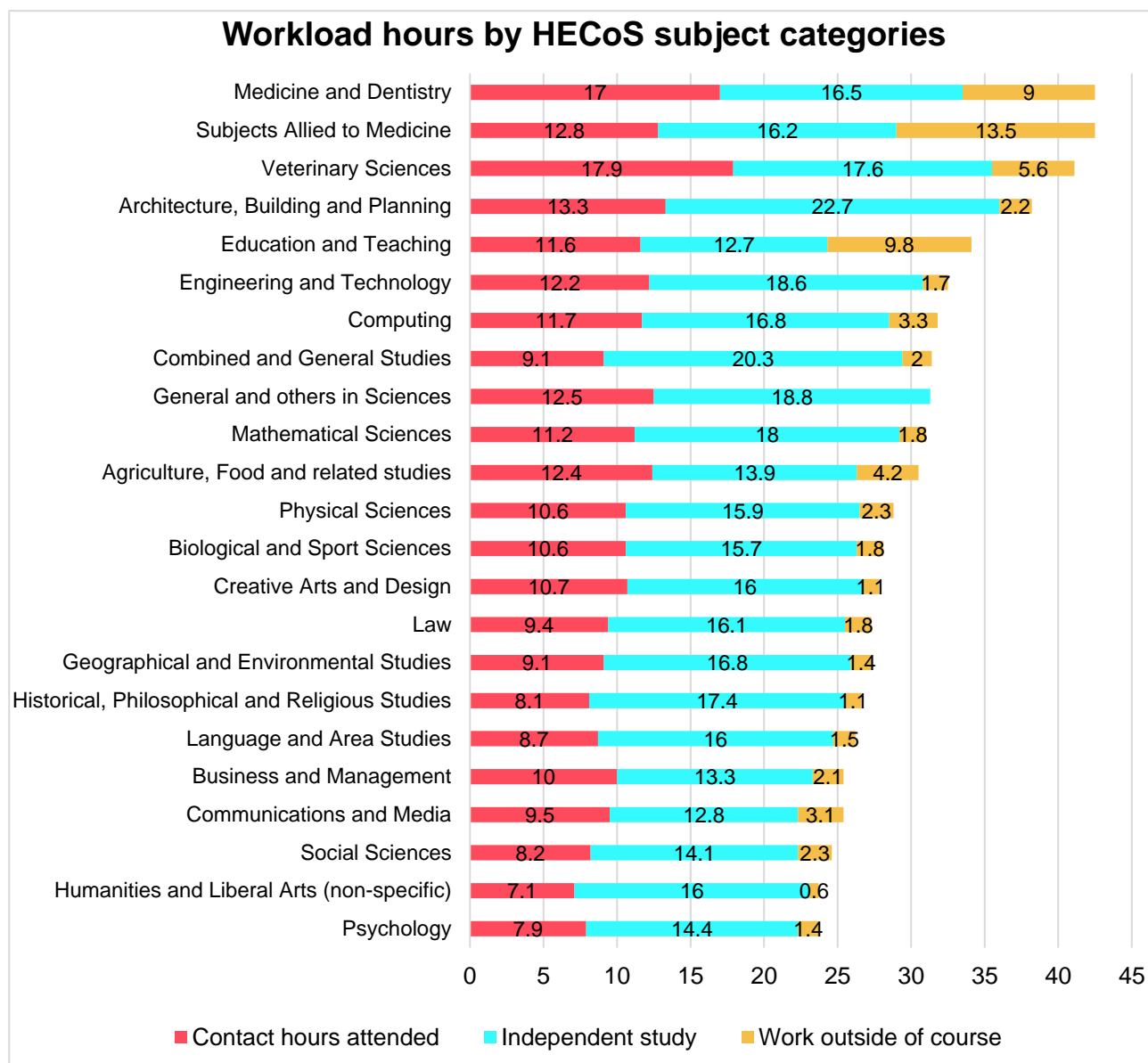
9.2 Satisfaction with scheduled contact hours

In line with some of the other declines we have seen in key measures this year, satisfaction with contact hours has declined similarly – to the lowest levels we have seen.



This is one of a number of key indicators across this year’s Survey which highlights a general feeling of dissatisfaction with the way classes have been delivered combined with fewer hours of scheduled teaching.

9.3 Workload by HECoS subject¹⁹



Despite the lower workload this year and the changes in type of workload, the overall order of subjects in terms of workload has changed little. Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary Science still see the highest workload – albeit the proportion of independent study has increased – while Psychology, Communications and Social Sciences remain those with the lowest levels.

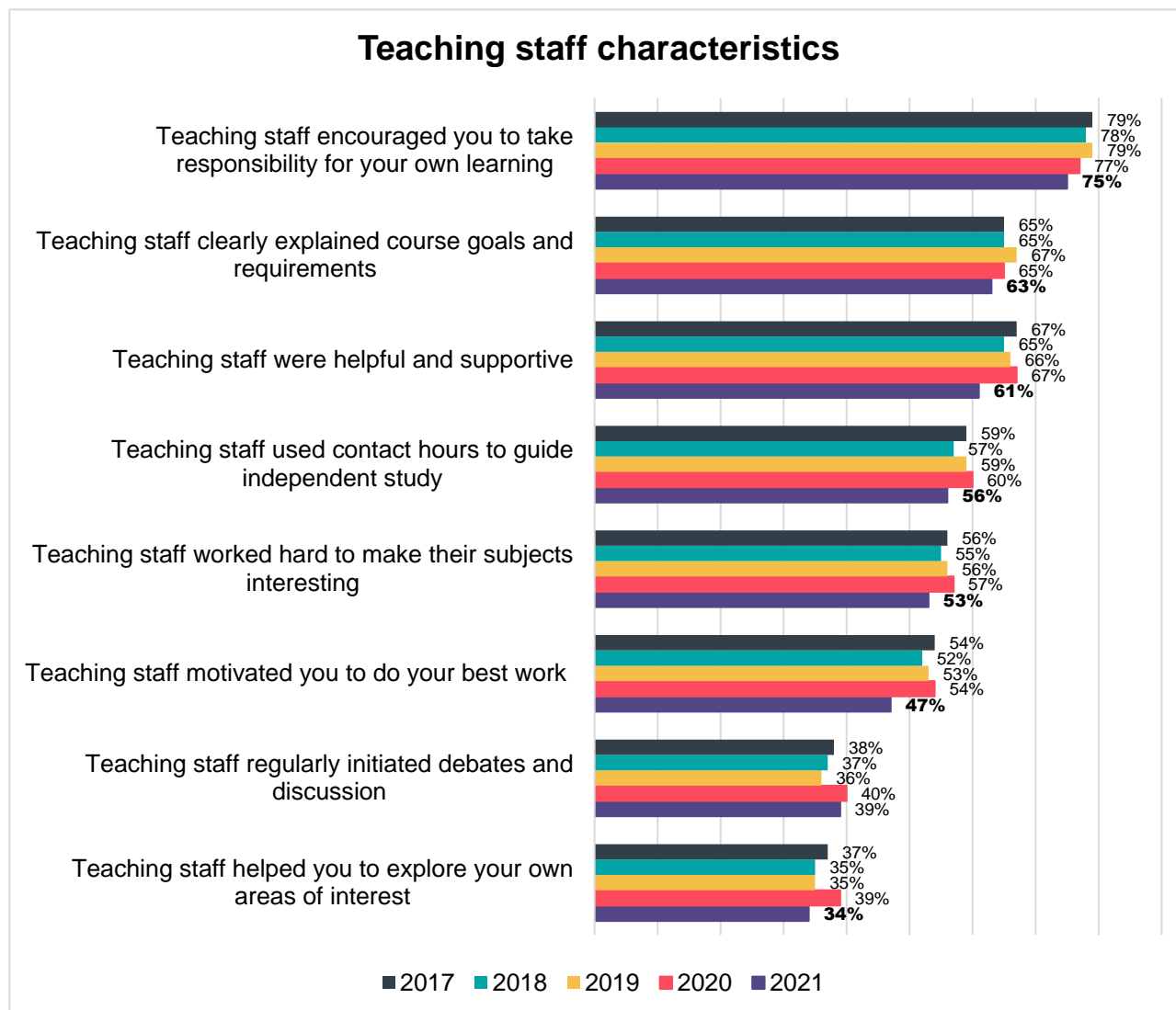
One subject area which has seen a particular fall in workload is Creative Arts & Design, with an average of 27.8 hours in 2021 compared to 35 hours in 2020.

¹⁹ Source: www.hesa.ac.uk/innovation/hecos [Accessed 20 April 2021]

10. Quality of teaching and assessment

10.1 Perceptions of the quality of teaching staff

During the life of this Survey, the role played by teaching staff has come to be recognised as one of the most important factors in determining the overall student experience. This was underlined in the regression analysis from 2017 which showcased six of the statements below within the overall top 10 drivers of a perception of good value-for-money.²⁰



In line with some of the other declines we have seen this year, all these aspects have fallen. Although in many cases these differences are statistically significant, it is important to point out that these declines are not as large as we have seen elsewhere, and there are still some relatively strong scores.

²⁰ Jonathan Neves & Nick Hillman (2017) *The Student Academic Experience Survey*, p.16. Advance HE & HEPI.

In 2020 we saw no negative impact of the pandemic on these measures and in fact some scores actually improved among those students answering during the first lockdown, in reflection of some of the agile and creative ways that teaching staff adjusted their delivery and student support in the light of the crisis. Unfortunately, this trend in the data has not continued into 2021, with increasing evidence that despite undoubted and significant commitment on behalf of teaching staff, the way students have been learning during the pandemic has impacted on their view of overall quality.

In particular, we have seen relatively disappointing results for perceptions that staff were helpful and supportive, motivated students to do their best work, or helped students explore their own areas of interest; results that reflect the level of exhaustion felt by many staff across the sector.²¹

Clearly, we cannot say for certain how much these perceptions, and indeed this experience, were influenced by the fact that most students have been predominantly learning online, as opposed to being a direct critique of how teaching staff have handled this – or both. However, these results, together with many others across the Survey, imply how challenging it is for online learning in its current form to be an effective substitute for, rather than complement to, in-person interactions.

10.2 Rating of assessment

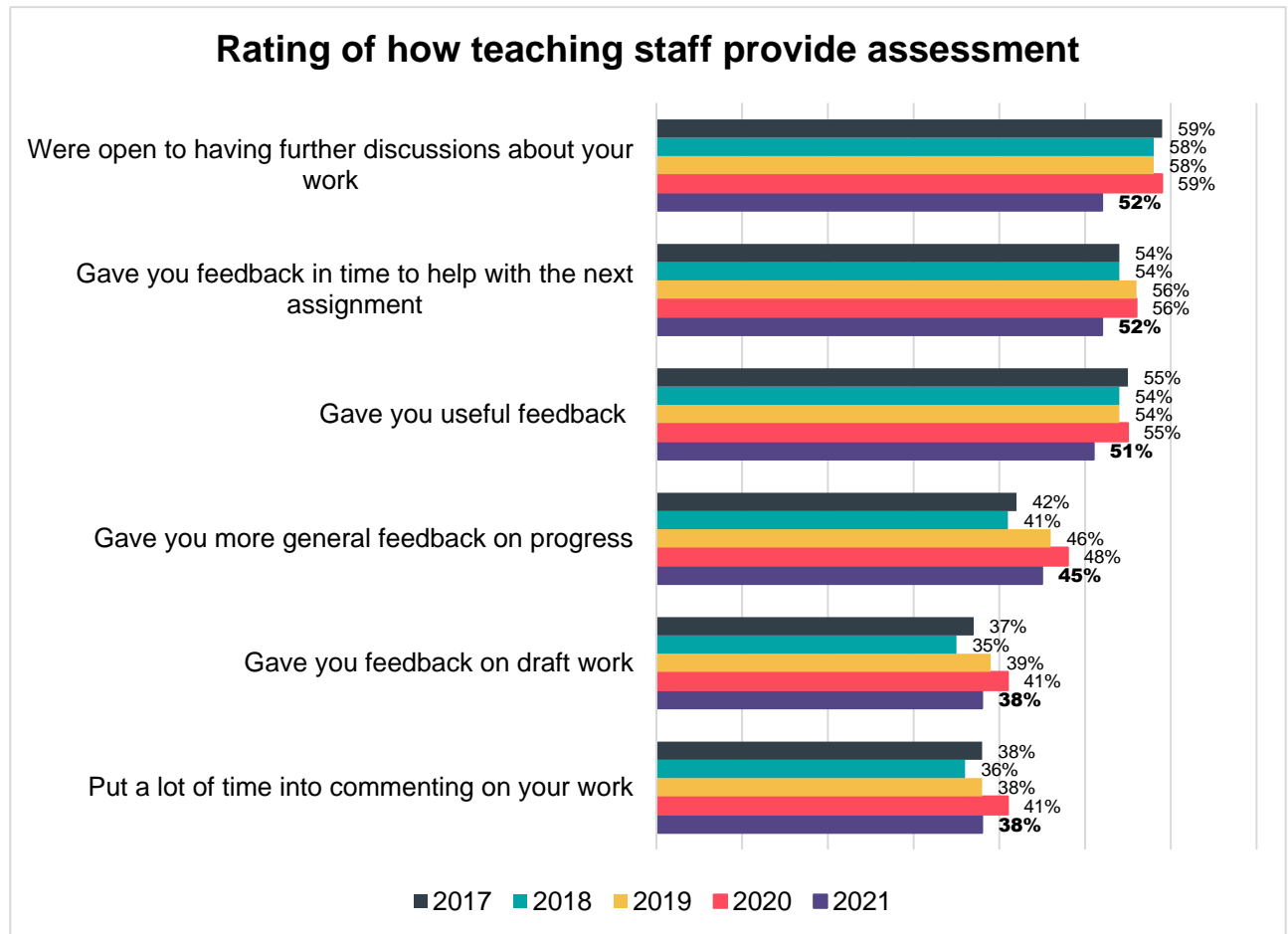
We saw in the analysis of open comments in chapter 5 that improving feedback around assessment is the main area where the current academic experience can be improved.

Like some other aspects this year, students' ratings of assessment procedures have also declined significantly, although some aspects have only declined by 3% (not a huge decline compared to other areas of the Survey this year) while others have fallen more drastically.

In terms of where ratings have declined compared to last year, students were most critical of the availability of staff to discuss academic work in more detail – an aspect which may have been impacted directly by an absence of in-person interaction.

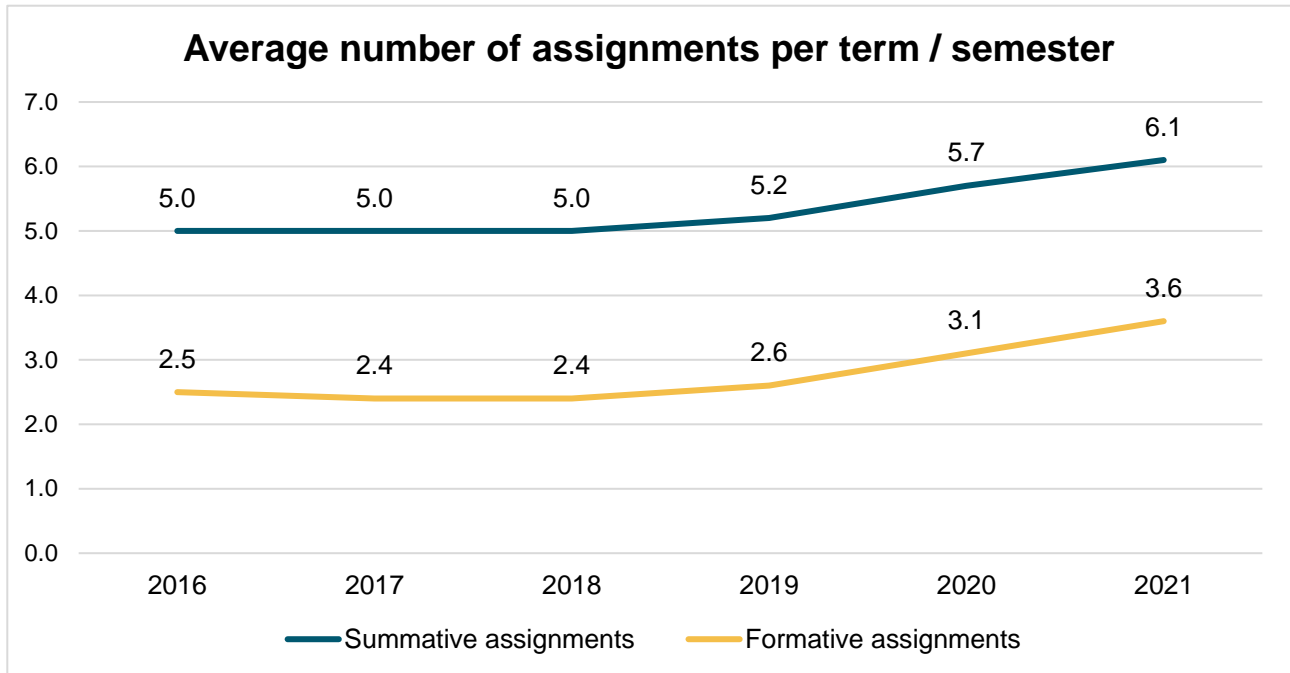
²¹ Source: '[I feel out of my depth': university lecturers in England on the impact of the pandemic | Lecturers | Guardian](#)' [Accessed 7 May 2021]

By contrast, the rating for staff putting time into commenting on work is at the same level as it was in 2017 and 2019, and has only fallen 3% this year, which implies that some students do recognise the effort that staff have put in, despite the wider challenges faced by all.



10.3 Volume of assignments

Over the past few years the number of assignments has been increasing, and this has continued at a pace, with the volumes of both summative (assignments contributing to a grade) and formative assignments reaching their highest levels to date.



In general, students want to work hard and expect to be challenged. Too little workload is rarely seen as a positive, and hence those students with higher levels of assignments are typically those who report higher value perceptions (not charted here).

However, the volume of assignments during the pandemic, combined with other challenges faced, has in some cases contributed to difficulties handling workload, as illustrated in some of the comments below.

Selected open comments

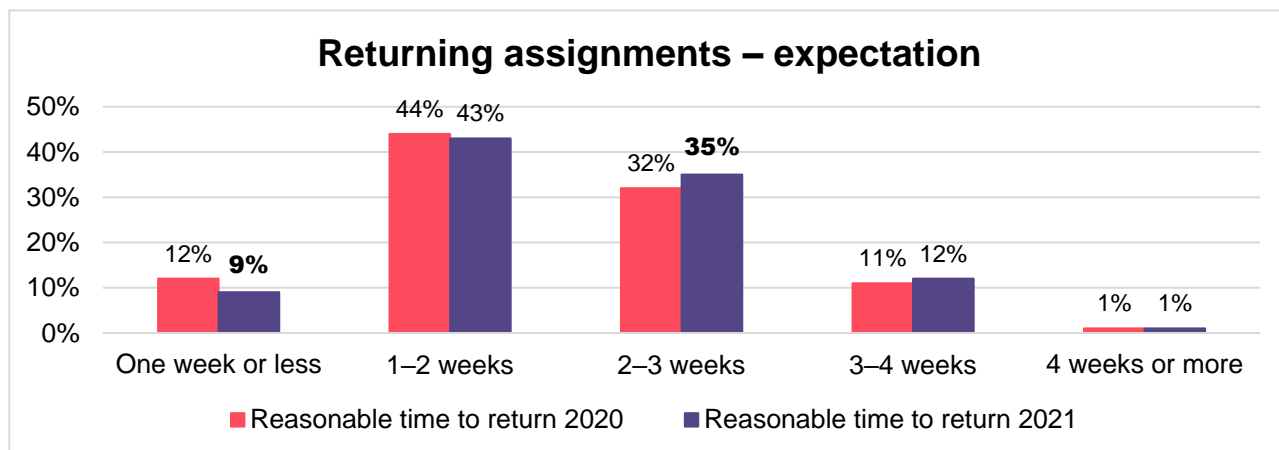
“Making sure that the assignments and exams are well adapted to the current situation of students to ensure that we remain engaged and motivated and not burn out and anxious about the situation and the workload”

“(need) Better information on assignments - my uni introduced completely new assignments in the FINAL year without properly briefing students on how to succeed so everyone did worse than expected”

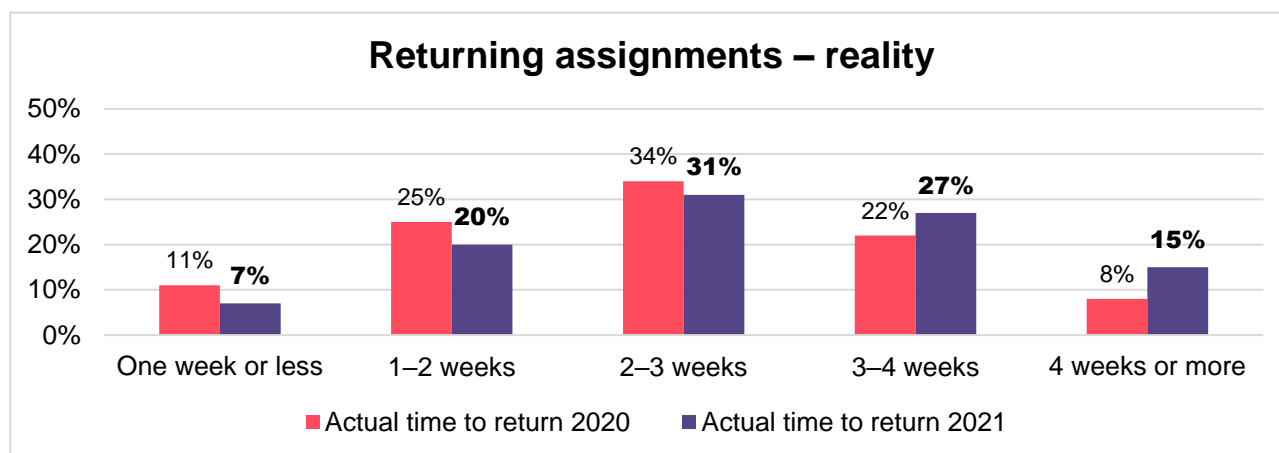
“Struggled completing assignments during lockdown alongside personal and family issues”

10.4 Timeliness of feedback

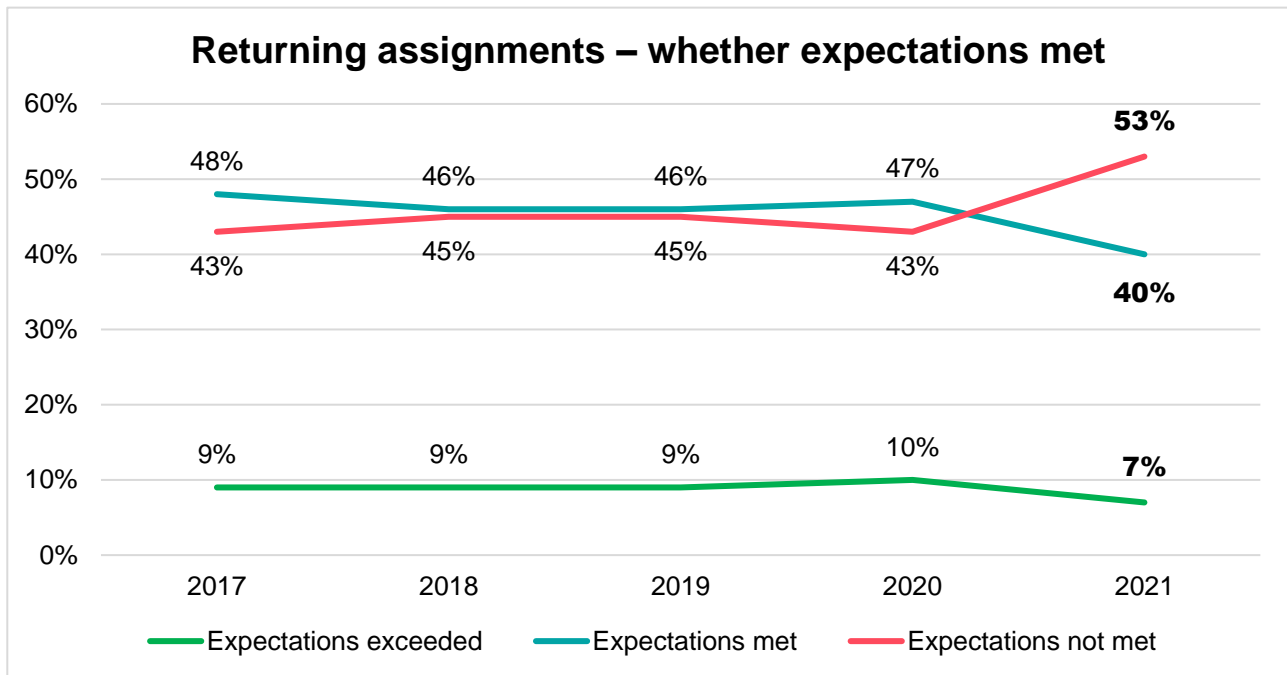
There is evidence of some adjustment of expectations around the speed of marking assignments. Fewer students this year expect their assignments to be returned within 1 week, which has been matched by an increase in those who see 2–3 weeks as reasonable – although 1–2 weeks is still the most-expected timeframe.



In terms of assignments being returned, there has generally been a longer wait for students this year, with over 1 in 4 students now needing to wait 3 weeks or more.



The net result of this is that despite a softening of expectations this year, the increase in turnaround time has led to a significantly increased number of students whose expectations were not met.



Managing expectations is key. It may be understandable, or even planned, for feedback to take longer than in the past, but there is evidence here that this has not always been communicated to students. The result has been a level of frustration around timescales, which, combined with a general increase in volume, has contributed to students feeling under pressure.

Selected open comments

“The University should make sure to hold the staff to the same level of expectations as they do with students. For example, students are expected to complete and hand in assignments just like last year (without a reading week even), while lecturers and tutors are allowed to take twice the time than usual marking them.”

“Give more contact hours. I was told I would get 12 a week, I get 6. Every single assignment feedback I have received has been delayed a week.”

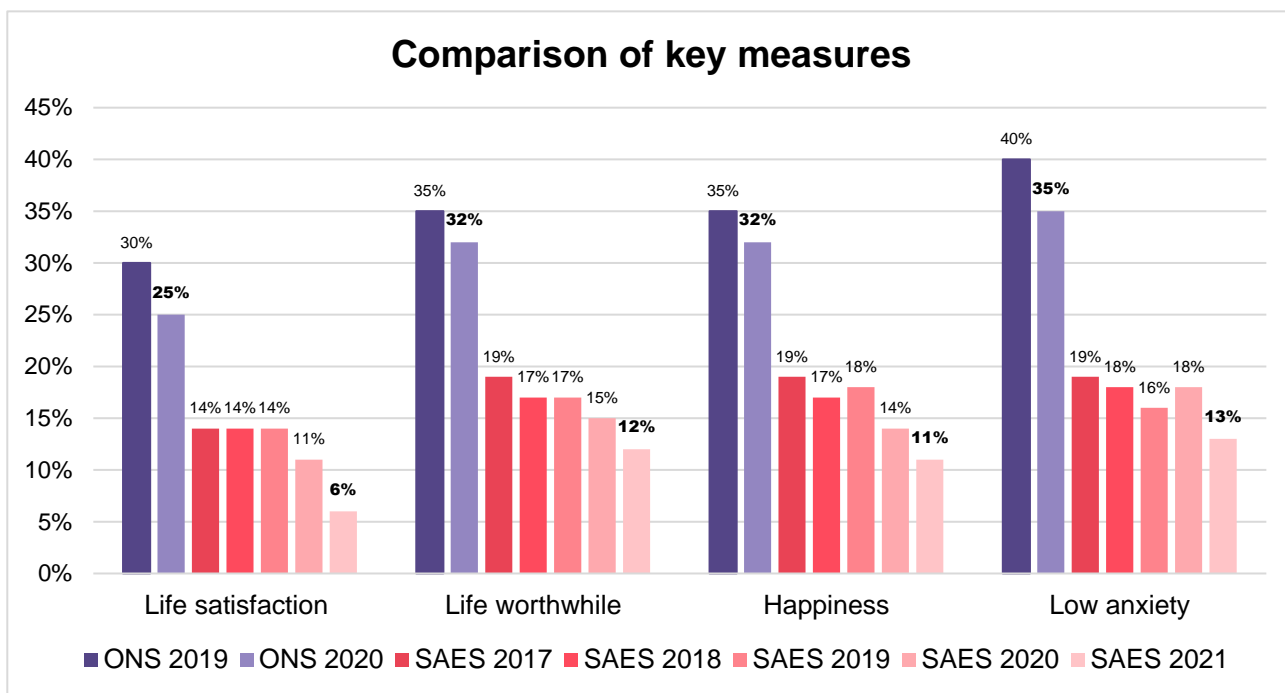
“Give feedback sooner and in time for my next assignments”

11. Wellbeing

11.1 Key wellbeing measures

Even in normal times, the student experience for many is a time of stress and anxiety – and we have seen in previous years how the overall wellbeing of undergraduate students is relatively low compared to the general population.

In 2021, we see student wellbeing measures at their lowest levels yet, with all four measures falling significantly. Since the onset of the pandemic, the wellbeing of the total population has been impacted significantly, and hence the fall in these measures for our student population is not particularly surprising, although the low absolute levels point towards a situation that has significant implications for specialist support levels within institutions as well as wider support networks and the NHS.



Percentages calculated from all respondents scoring 9–10 out of 10 for life satisfaction, life worthwhile, happiness; 0–1 out of 10 for anxiety.

We saw in chapter 5 that mental health concerns are the main driver for students considering leaving their course, and these very low levels of wellbeing are given context by the comparison to the Office for National Statistics (ONS) general population data (all age groups) from September 2020, which are at lower levels than seen before the pandemic, but still much higher than the levels seen among our student population.²² Comparison of these sets of data shows that both ONS and SAES wellbeing levels have fallen by similar levels over a one-year period, for ONS from 2019 to 2020 and for SAES between 2020 and 2021.

²² Source: ONS (2021), *Quarterly personal well-being estimates – seasonally adjusted*, July to September 2020

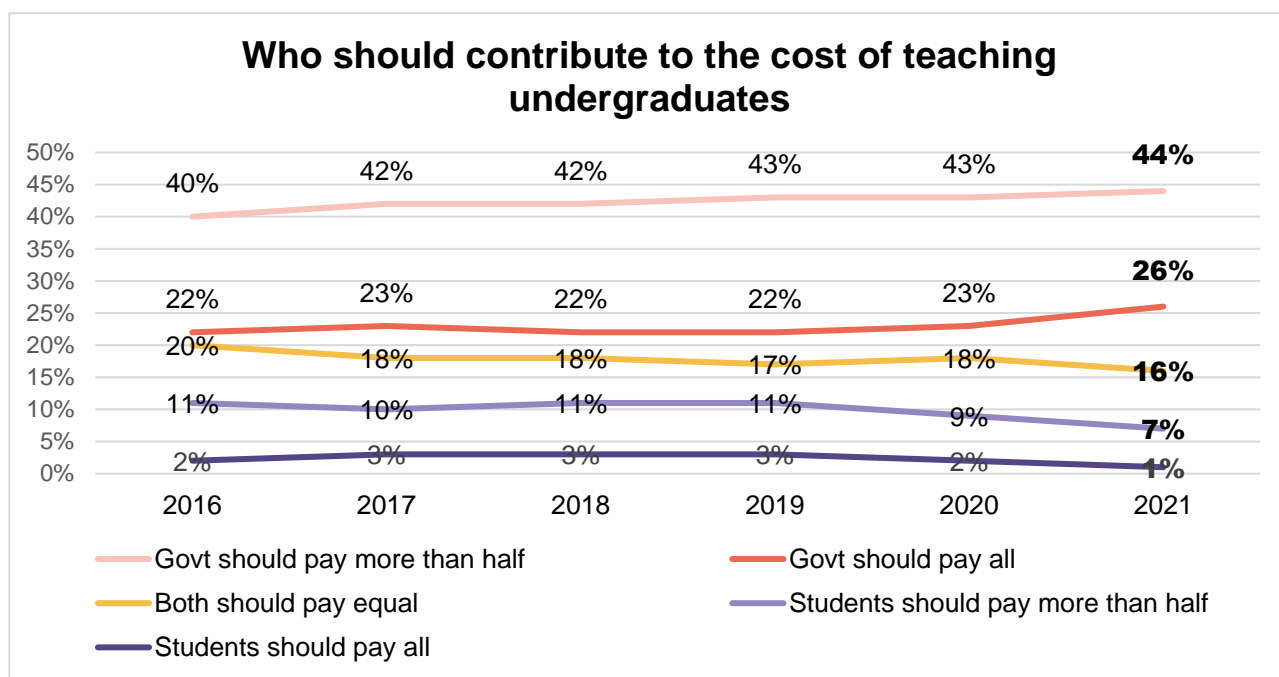
www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/datasets/quarterlypersonalwellbeingestimatesseasonallyadjusted [Accessed 19 April 2021]

Unlike previous years, this comparison is based on the general population of all ages, as young-population breakdowns are not yet available for this period.

12. Finances and the future

12.1 The cost of study

One of our established questions in the Survey asks about attitudes to fees, specifically whether the Government or students should fund the costs of teaching.



Although scores this year are significantly different from 2020, in reality these differences are relatively small in the context of the kind of changes we have seen elsewhere in the Survey this year.

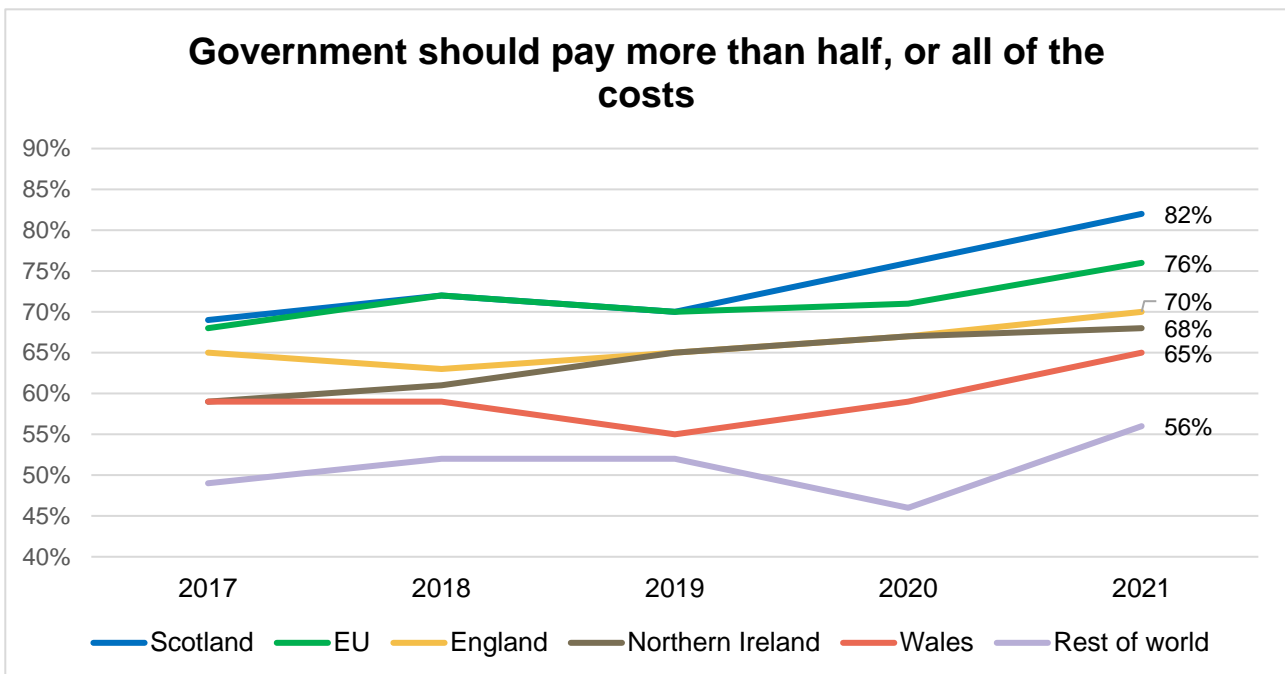
That said, however, there is evidence of a clear shift in opinion, towards a perception that the Government should contribute all or most of the cost, with just 8% feeling that students should contribute more than half of any fees. Given that the results to this question had remained remarkably consistent over time, we may reasonably make a connection to the impact of the pandemic on this change in perceptions this year, as more students feel their experience this year has been one that they would be less inclined to pay for given the opportunity.

12.2 Attitudes to cost by domicile

With any question that relates to fees (including value-for-money as seen earlier in the report), it is important to be aware of how attitudes differ among students by domicile, reflecting where different fee regimes are in place.

As depicted below, results do vary widely, but the one consistent view is that the Government should contribute more, with an increase in the prevalence of this view across all domiciles. Students from Scotland are highly likely to feel the Government should pay most or all of the costs, slightly ahead of students from the EU, England, Northern Ireland and Wales.

Students from outside the UK or EU are the least likely to feel the Government should pay, but this is still a majority view which has increased markedly this year.



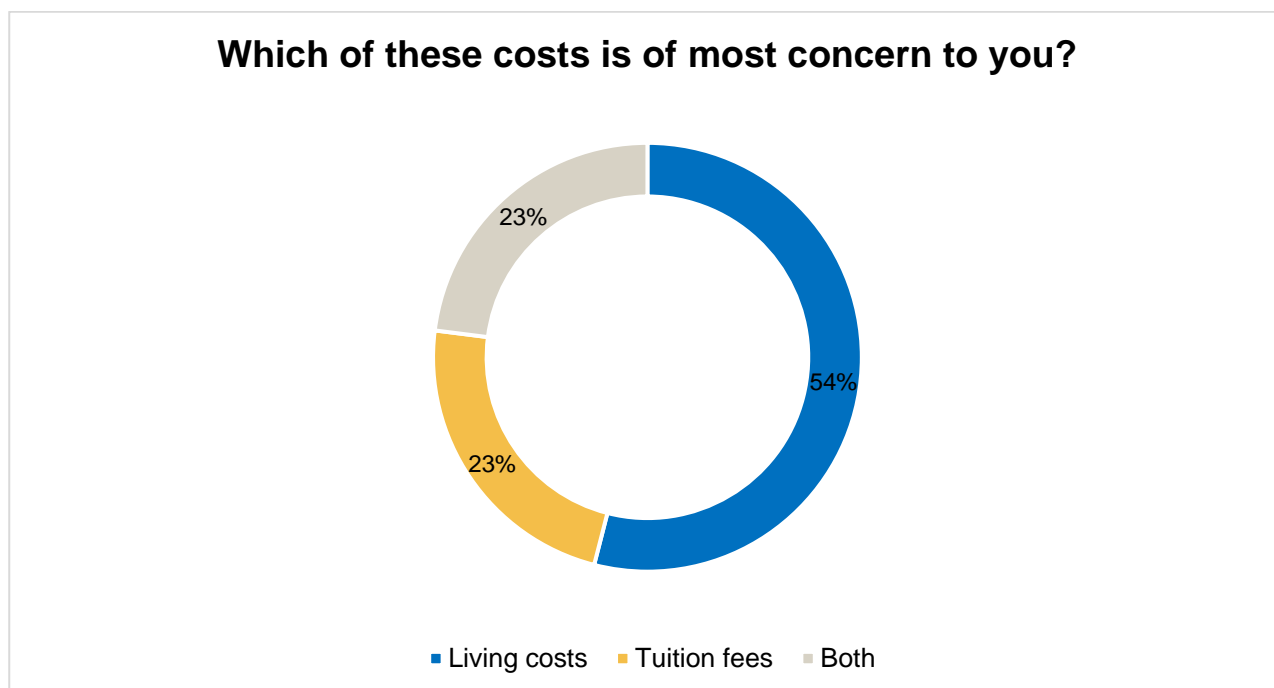
	Scotland	EU	England	NI	Wales	Rest of world
2019	70%	70%	65%	65%	55%	52%
2020	76%	71%	67%	67%	59%	46%
2021	82%	76%	70%	68%	65%	56%

This analysis underlines how opinions have shifted during the pandemic, with a clear movement towards Government funding as the preferred model.

12.3 Living costs

In a new question this year, we asked which kinds of cost were the main concern to students – living costs, fees, or both.

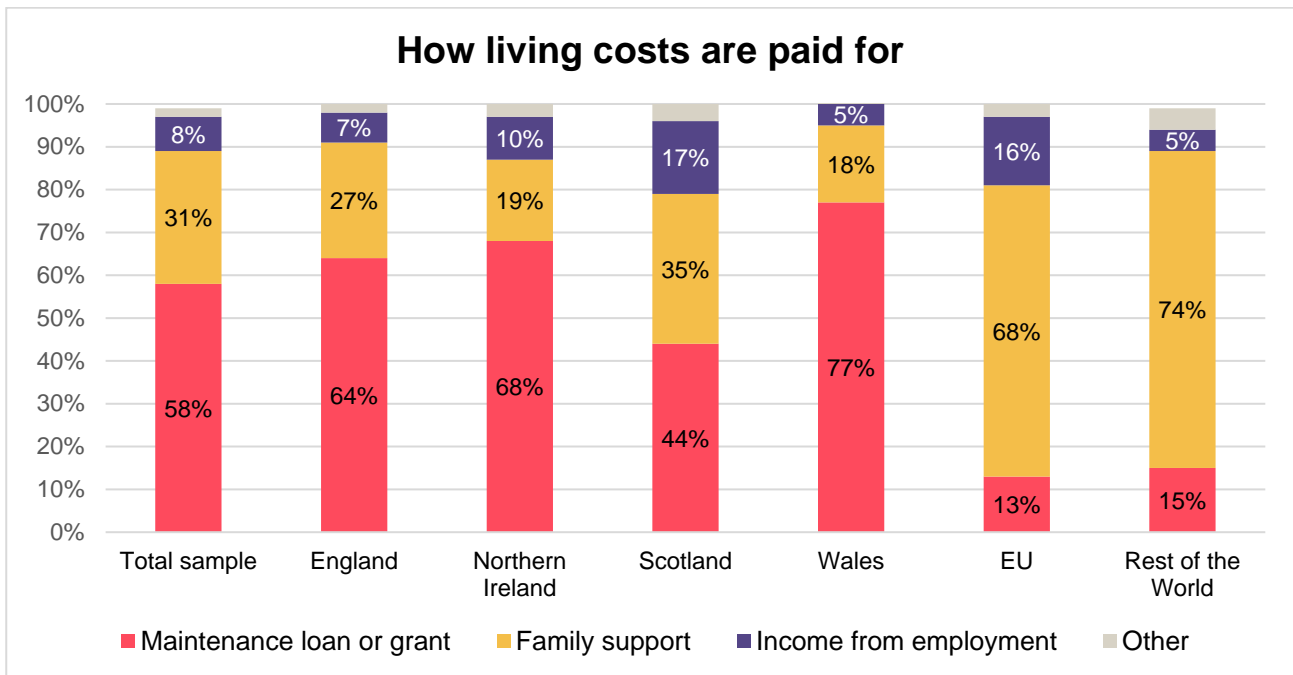
In the majority of cases, the main cause of concern is about living costs rather than fees, although a proportion are equally concerned about both. It is also possible that not everyone differentiates between the two categories, for what in many cases is a high level of debt linked to their time at university irrespective of what it went towards.



There are some differences in attitudes to these costs based on the type of school attended, with state school students being significantly more concerned about living costs rather than tuition fees.

	School attended	
	Private	State
Living costs	46%	55%
Tuition fees	28%	23%
Both	25%	22%

We followed this up with another new question, about how living costs – the area of most concern for a majority – were paid for.



Perhaps unsurprisingly, findings varied significantly by domicile. Maintenance loans/grants were dominant in Wales, and were also the principal method for covering living costs in England and Northern Ireland. In Scotland there was more of a balance between maintenance and family support, while self-funding through employment is also a factor. For most students from outside the UK, the cost of living is funded through family support.

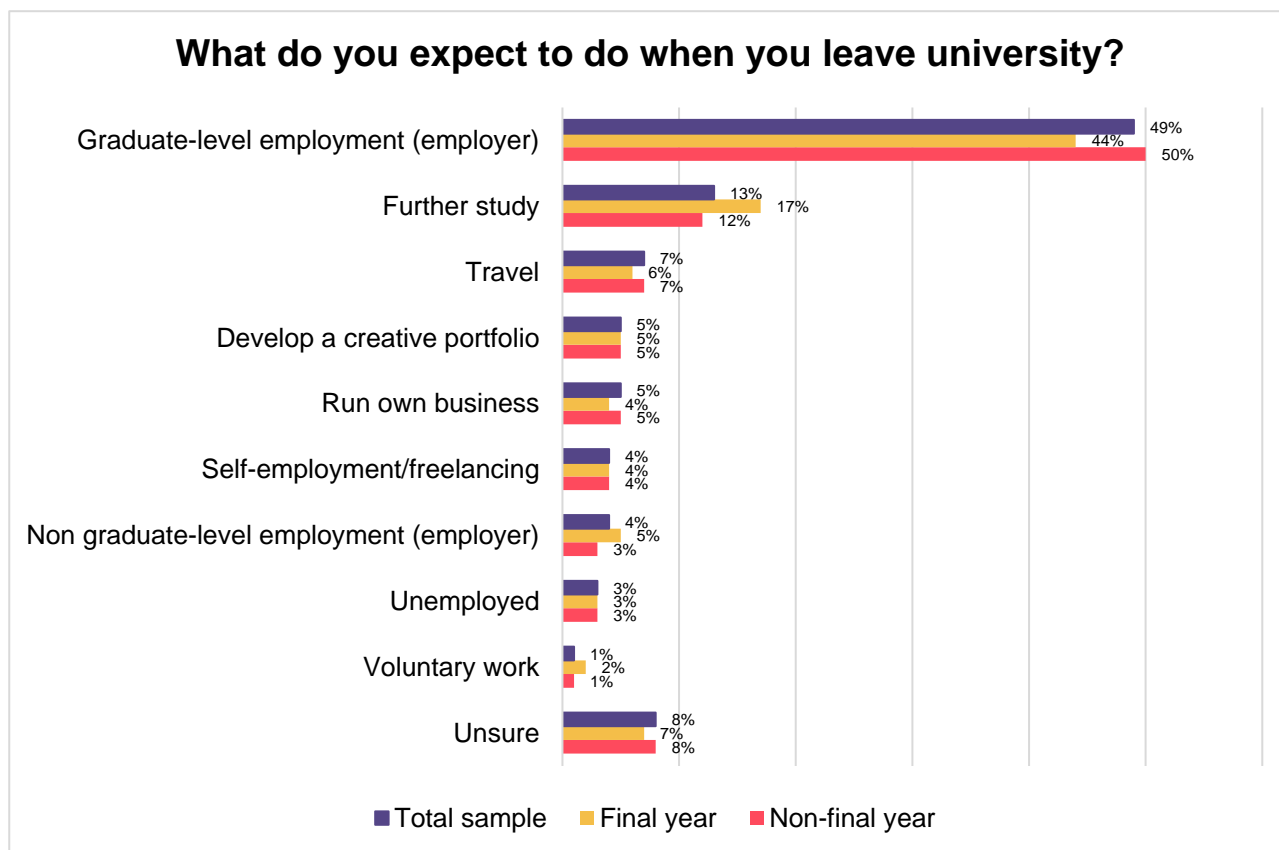
	Paid employment			School attended	
	None	0–9 hours	10+ hours	Private	State
Maintenance loan or grant	63%	52%	48%	33%	61%
Family support	32%	37%	24%	59%	28%
Income from employment	2%	9%	27%	6%	8%

As we see in the table above, paid employment is strongly linked to those students who are less likely to have received maintenance or family support, but income from employment is rarely the main source of funding, which makes sense given our Survey only includes full-time undergraduates.

In terms of background, there is a major contrast by type of school attended. Private school students' cost of living is mainly funded through family support, while state school students are twice as likely to rely on a loan or grant.

12.4 Future intentions

As a counterpoint to graduate outcomes data,²³ we included a question this year on intended outcomes, to assess how students at university see their futures after they graduate (recognising that in the case of those in their first and second years there may be a lot of change in this view before they reach that particular stage).



The dominant intention is to move into graduate-level employment (for an employer), but this only accounts for half of choices.

There are a wide range of further options, but answers are spread evenly across these at fairly low levels, with the intention to go into further study being the only other option selected by more than 10% of respondents.

There are relatively few differences by demographics or background, but the year of study does appear to have an impact on choice. By the final year, students are more likely to be intending to go into further study. Among those intending to work for an employer, there is an increase in the expectation by the final year that this will be not in a ‘graduate-level’ job, although this may either be out of choice (perhaps while deciding on other options), or alternatively as a result of the pandemic’s impact on the job market.

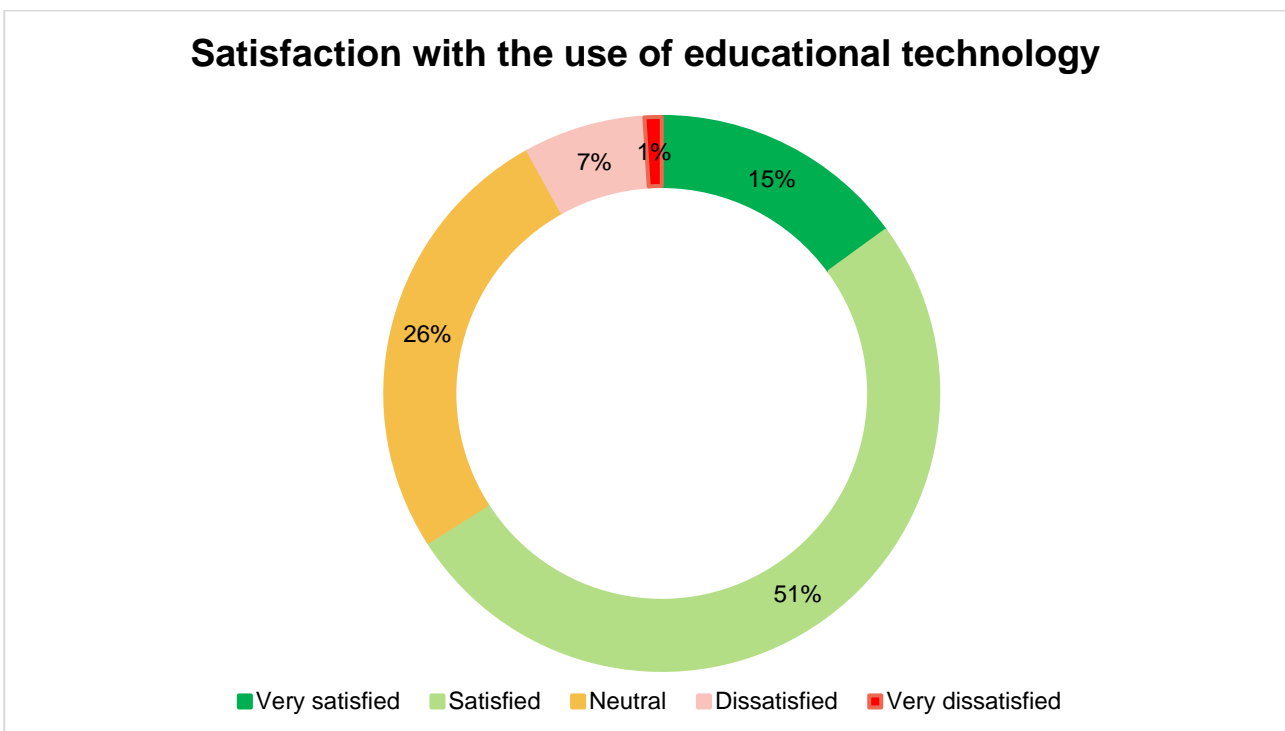
²³ Source: www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/graduates/activities [Accessed 19 April 2021]

13. Use of technology in learning

13.1 Satisfaction with technology

The last year has seen a sea change in how technology is being used in learning across the sector, and like many aspects in life, the opportunities offered by technology have not only helped mitigate the impact of the pandemic, but have also introduced some potentially permanent changes in how things are done.

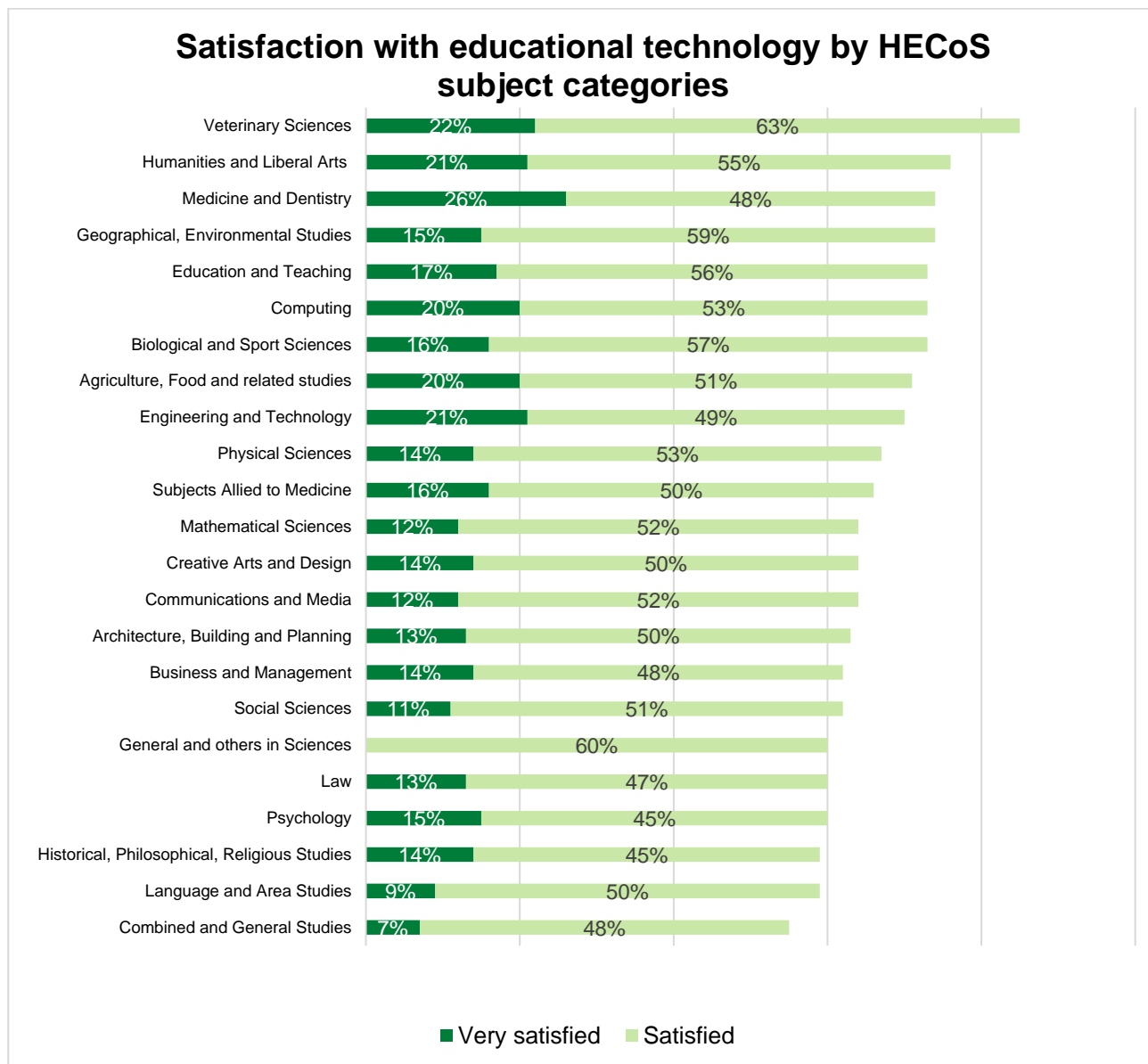
However, to what extent are students satisfied with how technology is used? The successful deployment of technology depends directly on students being able to access it and having the confidence to use it, so it is vital that all students feel included as delivery methods evolve.



Overall, two-thirds of students are “very satisfied” or “satisfied”. Encouragingly, just 8% are “very dissatisfied” or “dissatisfied”. This is a clear endorsement of how technology has been deployed, in terms of the content and accessibility.

While this is clearly a positive result, we should recognise that this is in the context of low scores seen earlier in this report for value-for-money. What these differing findings imply is that while the technology itself is accessible and has been deployed appropriately, this does not necessarily allay concerns about the relative value or perceived quality of technology-led learning, or even blended learning, when compared with in-person teaching.

There were some clear differences in satisfaction by subject area, with a 30% difference between Veterinary Science and Combined and General Studies.

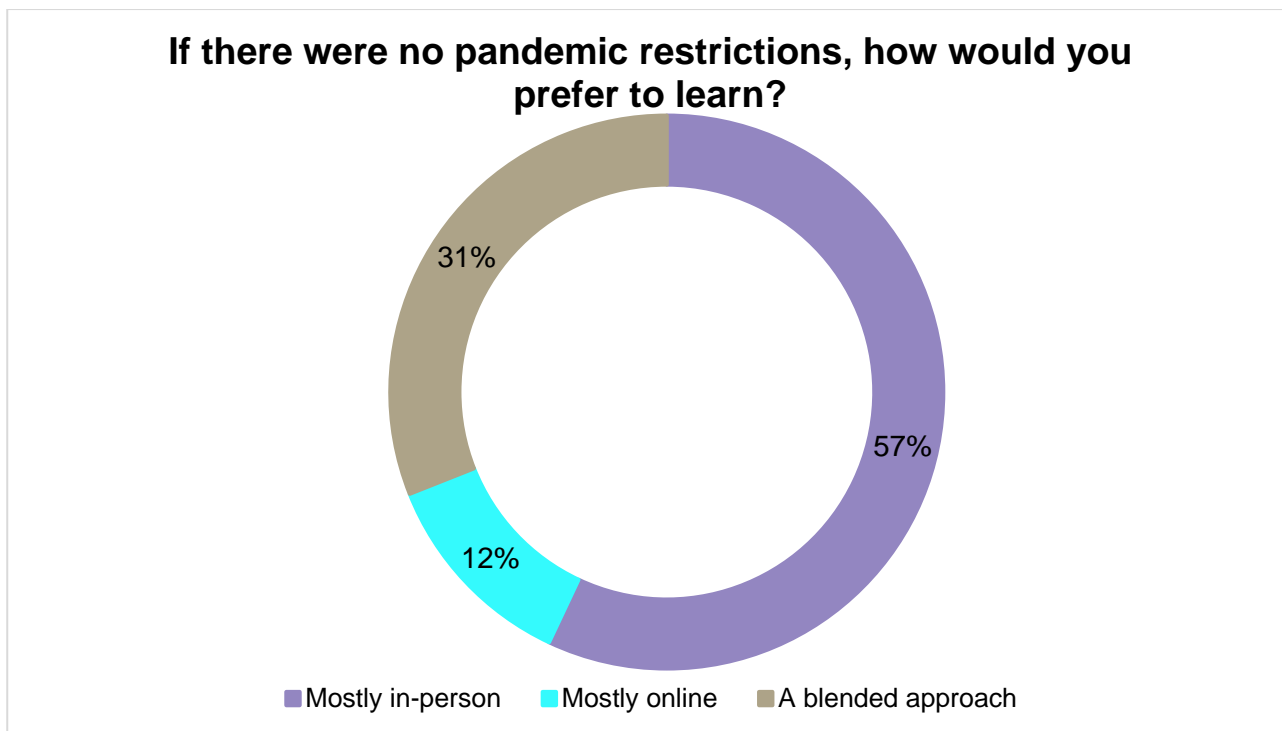


In general, students studying health subjects were the most satisfied, and those studying subjects classified under Arts & Humanities the least satisfied. That said, however, the subject of Humanities and Liberal Arts saw very high satisfaction, unlike some other subjects such as Languages and Historical Studies.

There was generally little difference by type of institution, with the exception of Specialist institutions, which stood out positively with 74% satisfaction overall (not charted here) – compared to 66% across all institutions.

13.2 Preferred mode of learning

Despite the high levels of satisfaction with learning technology seen above, this does not automatically imply that learning online via technology is the preferred approach.



In a new question this year, we asked directly what the preferred method of learning would be, with data identifying a clear preference for in-person learning. Only just over one-in-ten (12%) preferred online learning outright with nearly one-in-three (31%) preferring a blended approach.

Despite the effective deployment of educational technology, the stated preference for in-person learning is clear, which potentially has implications for any plans to increase blended learning once the restrictions of the pandemic are no longer in place.²⁴ There is a possibility that these results are in some way a reaction to the length of the lockdown period and a return to campus which has been delayed in many cases, and it would be interesting to see if these data change in future after restrictions have eased and if more blended learning is introduced.

The preference for online learning is relatively consistent across all types of student, from different backgrounds, domiciles and institutions. Where we do see a difference, however, in terms of strength of preference, is by year of study and type of school attended.

²⁴ Source: www.theguardian.com/education/2020/dec/18/the-pandemic-is-a-chance-to-rethink-education-not-settle-for-online-lectures [Accessed 21 April 2021].

Student Academic Experience Survey 2021

Jonathan Neves and Rachel Hewitt

	Year of study				School attended	
	1 st year	2 nd year	3 rd year	4 th year or above	Private	State
In-person	59%	57%	55%	54%	51%	58%
Online	10%	13%	14%	14%	19%	11%
Blended	31%	30%	31%	32%	30%	31%

Students in their third year and above (and to some extent in their second year) will have had clear experience of in-person teaching earlier in their degrees as would have been originally planned. First year students, by contrast, would have been asked to learn predominantly online. This may have impacted on their relative preferences as, while in-person learning is strongly preferred across the board, there is more support for online learning among students in the later stage of their degree. It is possible that first year students are basing their choice on what they expected (or hoped) would be their main way of learning and that in some cases those who are further on in their degree may be beginning to see more benefits of learning online.

In terms of type of school attended, students from private school backgrounds show significantly more support for learning online (although the clear preference is still for in-person learning). We can only speculate as to the reasons for this, but this may reasonably be related to higher levels of confidence online and/or preparation in learning this way.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

In many ways, this is the most unique year of the Survey since we started the Student Academic Experience Survey in 2006. The global pandemic has had a tremendous impact on the higher education sector, beyond what we could have predicted in the 2020 Survey, where we were just starting to see the effects of Covid-19 on students' experiences.²⁵

Despite the distinctiveness of this year's results, there are still lessons that can be learnt for the future. What do students think about what the "new normal" should look like? How far should we seek to revert to pre-pandemic higher education and what should we seek to maintain from the last year? The ten points below highlight areas of importance to students that higher education institutions and Government should consider as we move through and beyond this crisis.

1. This year's results make for a tough read. Throughout the Survey, students have shown ways in which they are looking for more from their higher education experience, such as more input from staff, quicker feedback on assessments and more in-person teaching but with the opportunity to access online materials. Undoubtedly, making changes on this basis would be costly for universities. This, therefore, does not seem to be the moment to cut universities' funding as proposed in the Augar report, which we are expecting to see the full Government response to in the Autumn.²⁶
2. Equally, the last year has placed a focus on fees, with students' questioning whether their experience has provided value-for-money and on-going debates about fee rebates. However, it should not be forgotten that tuition fees are not the only important element of student funding. When we asked students whether living costs or tuition fees were of greater concern to them, 54% of students said living costs, compared to 23% who said tuition fees (and 23% who said both). By focusing on tuition fees in the public debate, we may be missing the importance of how students support themselves while they study. In a new question added to the Survey this year, we found 59% of students who attended private school predominantly relied on family support to cover living costs, compared to just 28% of students who attended state schools. While the funding system remains under debate, we should ensure we do not forget the impact of maintenance funding on students' experiences.

²⁵ Source: www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/The-Student-Academic-Experience-Survey-2020.pdf [Accessed 17 May 2021]

²⁶ Source: www.gov.uk/government/publications/post-18-education-and-funding-review-interim-conclusion [Accessed 17 May 2021]

3. The radical shift that universities have delivered over the last year to online learning has led some to proclaim that this move should be permanent. However, these results clearly show that most students are not seeking a mostly online experience. If they had the choice, more than half of students (57%) say would prefer to learn mostly in-person, compared to just 12% who would like to learn mostly online (and 31% who would prefer a blended option). However, in parallel with this, two-thirds of students say they are satisfied with the role of educational technology in their learning. Therefore it seems online learning and educational technology have a role to play, but not as a replacement to in-person teaching for most students. Where online is used, live lectures seem to be preferable to pre-recorded content, highlighting the importance of engagement between staff and students in the learning experience.
4. Much of the focus on what students have been missing out on in the last year has been on the face-to-face teaching, such as lectures, seminars and one-to-one support. However, the results of this Survey highlight other factors beyond face-to-face teaching. The loss of field trips, placements and practical elements of study such as labs has been keenly felt by students and the lack of access to these have limited their perceptions of the value gained from their higher education experience. This highlights that we should think more broadly when we consider what constitutes students' learning experience.
5. For a number of years, students' wellbeing has been concerningly low, particularly in comparison to the general population. The pandemic has only exacerbated this, with significant falls across all wellbeing categories (although this has been matched by comparable falls in wellbeing among the general population). For the first time this year, we asked students who had considered leaving higher education what factors had driven this consideration. Their mental and emotional health came out by far the greatest factor. This suggests that funding better mental health support could help to minimise the numbers of students' dropping out. While the UK has higher levels of retention than international comparators and we do not appear to have seen falls in continuation rates through the pandemic, the Government has highlighted retention as one of the key metrics they will be judging universities on and it is important to ensure that those who choose to enter higher education are supported to continue in their studies.²⁷

²⁷ Source: www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/A-short-guide-to-non-continuation-in-UK-universities.pdf [Accessed 17 May 2021]

6. The Government has also placed greater focus on graduate outcomes from higher education as a measure of universities delivering value for their students, particularly focusing on whether graduates go on to enter 'graduate-level' employment shortly after graduation. However, these results show the Government's views are out of kilter with students' expectations. Fewer than half (44%) of final year students expected to enter graduate-level employment with an employer when they leave university. Almost a fifth (17%) expected to go on to further study, which is also seen as a positive outcome by Government, but the remainder expected to travel, focus on building a business or self-employment, enter non-graduate level employment or were simply unsure. Should the Government's judgement of success be more closely aligned to students' expectations?
7. This year we have seen a review of the National Student Survey, triggered by concerns that the Survey was leading to a 'dumbing down' of courses and a focus on reducing burden in institutions.²⁸ However, when we asked students whether their voice was heard and represented by their institution, only 43% agreed that it was, suggesting there is more, not less, work needed in listening to the student voice.
8. Student wellbeing clearly needs to be a focus as we move through and beyond the pandemic. However, institutions also need to be mindful of staff wellbeing in delivering for students. It has been a particularly challenging year for university staff, who have had to operate in a completely different way, under increasing pressure. While there is clearly more to be done to meet students' expectations from this year's results, it is critical that this is not done at the expense of staff mental health and wellbeing.
9. It is positive to see that two-thirds of students believe their institution is committed to eliminating racial inequalities for students, a view that is largely shared across students of different ethnicities. Similarly, it is good to see some similarities across the key measures when comparing between students from different ethnic groups. However, there is clearly more work to be done to ensure an equitable experience for all students, for example Asian students are 16% less likely to say they would choose the same course and university again than white students.
10. Despite all the challenges of the last year, it is positive to see most students do not regret entering higher education. If they had their choice over again, only 3% would have rather chosen to get a job or do something else outside higher education. This suggests that, while the Government seems to seek to push away from growing university participation, students still see it as a positive choice even in the challenging circumstances of the last year.

²⁸ Source: www.gov.uk/government/publications/reducing-bureaucratic-burdens-higher-education/reducing-bureaucratic-burdens-on-research-innovation-and-higher-education [Accessed 17 May 2021]

Student Academic Experience Survey 2021

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