

With a
Foreword by
**Dame Diana
Johnson DBE MP**

Student Relationships, Sex and Sexual Health Survey

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HEPI Report 139

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About Brook

Brook is the only national charity to offer a holistic approach to improving the sexual health and wellbeing of under 25s. Each year Brook supports hundreds if thousands of young people through its unique combination of clinical services, education and wellbeing programmes, training and advocacy work. Brook also delivers a range of services for adults, allowing people of all ages to benefit from their inclusive, innovative and non-judgemental approach to sexual health provision, leading to better health outcomes for entire communities. For more information visit www.brook.org.uk.

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Foreword

Dame Diana Johnson DBE MP, Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Sexual and Reproductive Health

The value of high-quality relationships and sex/sexuality education (RSE) cannot be overstated.

Ensuring young people receive appropriate, timely, factual and inclusive RSE enables effective and empowered decision-making when it comes to Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare (SRH) and provides them with the necessary tools to develop healthy relationships. SRH should support all people in having a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, including access to safe, effective, affordable contraception and signposting to appropriate support and care.

As reported by the Association of Directors of Public Health, the evidence is clear that children and young people who receive comprehensive, high quality RSE are more likely to delay the first time they have sex, have consensual relationships, be aware of and report abuse, use contraception when they start a sexual relationship and be less likely to be pregnant by the age of 18 or contract an STI.

The work of the APPG on Sexual and Reproductive Health in the UK

As Co-Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Sexual and Reproductive Health in the UK – a cross-party group of Peers and MPs established to facilitate discussions between parliamentarians and others – I have worked alongside other members of the Group on SRH issues for a number of years now. I have been pleased to see positive steps in the area of education, such as the publication of statutory RSE guidance for schools in 2019.

But recent work of the APPG and other organisations has shown there are numerous opportunities for improvements in young people's access to SRH services, and made clear the crucial role of education within this. Not least, in 2019, the APPG opened an Inquiry into Access to Contraception, which then reopened in May 2020 to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on access to contraception in England.

The Inquiry collated over 70 separate submissions and highlighted a number of important findings in relation to the experience of young people and identified critical gaps in evidence, including that young people often lack knowledge about contraception and how to access it. For instance, a focus group carried out in May 2019 (in a maintained school in an area where the local authority was engaged and the school was delivering RSE) found that young people lacked basic knowledge as well as an understanding of their rights to confidentiality.

The APPG developed a number of recommendations in relation to RSE, including:

- The Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care should ensure teachers are able to access a national source of medically accurate, up-to-date and evidence-based information on contraception.

- Local authorities should support schools to fulfil their statutory duty to ensure students know how and where to access confidential sexual and reproductive health advice and treatment by providing up-to-date information on local SRH services. The requirement to liaise with schools and publicise services should be within SRH clinics' service contracts.
- Considering the higher rates of sexual activity among older teenagers, information about contraception and service access should be continued in sixth form and further education colleges and university settings.

The impact of COVID-19 on young people's access to SRH

We know the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated long-standing issues when it comes to young people's experiences of SRH. Our Inquiry heard from multiple organisations that the numbers of young people contacting and being seen by walk-in clinics dropped disproportionately. We also heard concerns that, during periods of lockdown, young people may not disclose pregnancy or STI risks for fear of being reported for breaking social distancing rules.

Implementation of statutory RSE guidance

But we are seeing positive developments with regards to education, with all schools needing to have started implementation of the statutory RSE guidance by summer 2021. While this is certainly welcome, evidence suggests there has not been sufficient support in its implementation.

In Ofsted's review of sexual abuse and sexual harassment in schools and colleges, published in June 2021, the regulator highlighted deficiencies of RSE provision in their sample of 32 schools – including a lack of trained, specialist teachers, a lack of time allocated for RSE as a curriculum subject and the failure to deliver a curriculum that is responsive to the lived experience of children and young people. So there is certainly a need to review what steps can be taken in order for the full opportunity of RSE to be realised.

It is also important to acknowledge that education on issues relating to sex and sexuality goes beyond what is taught in school, and should form a part of students' time within a higher education setting.

Empowering young people

As we emerge from COVID-19 and the world continues to re-open, it is more important than ever that we continue to call for young people to receive high-quality, factual information that will empower them to make the best decisions about their sexual and reproductive health.



Introduction by Brook

Lisa Hallgarten, Head of Policy and Public Affairs, Brook

Brook welcomes this timely report, which provides a rich picture of higher education students' diverse experiences of sex and relationships education.

The survey results chime with our own experience working in schools and universities around the country. Even among the most educated of young people, knowledge and understanding of these important subjects is inconsistent. Despite high levels of knowledge reported in some topic areas by some students, overall only 27% of students agree that school RSE prepared them for sex and relationships at university.

Data from the report helpfully highlights the unmet education needs of young people with disabilities and those from LGBT+ communities. This should encourage schools to ensure that their curriculum is not minimally Equality Act compliant, but truly inclusive of, and relevant to, everyone within the school.

It is common wisdom that parents are the primary educators of their children. This belief underpins the statutory Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) guidance, including the right of parents to withdraw children from sex education elements of the curriculum. However, data in this report challenges this view. A minority of all respondents identify parents as key sex educators. BAME students, and those who do not conform to gender or sexuality 'norms', place even less value on parents' role in their sex education. This is a significant challenge to government policy on parental withdrawal, and raises important questions of how we can support parents to be more willing, effective and supportive educators.

The nature and scale of sexual bullying, harassment and assault in schools has been forced on our attention in 2021, firstly by the Everyone's Invited initiative and in the subsequent OFSTED report.¹ Both show that incidents are not only widespread, but that teachers are ill-equipped to address the issues through Relationships and Sex Education.

Knowledge of the legal aspects of consent alone is unlikely to effect behaviour change without nuanced education about how factors around age, power and gender affect relationships and impact people's ability to ask for, provide or withhold consent; and how to actually navigate and negotiate consent. Lack of this kind of education is reflected in the finding that only half of students report that the education they received at school provided them with a comprehensive understanding of sexual consent.

As we wait for the much-delayed introduction of mandatory Relationships and Sex Education in all English schools in September 2021, the complexities and shortfalls unearthed by this survey should provide extra impetus for schools to get this right and Government to give them the support they need to do this work.

Meanwhile the role of higher education remains crucial. This report increases our understanding of young people's learning and support needs around sexual health, consent and healthy relationships as they transition into higher education, independent living and adult life.

Today's young people aspire to have enjoyable, healthy and safe platonic, romantic and sexual relationships. They are open to continued learning beyond school. Yet as this report finds, only 30% agree that there are opportunities to learn about sexual health, sex and relationships throughout their time at university.

It is incumbent on higher education institutions to act on the report's findings by including information on consent, sexual health and local services in orientation programmes. Many universities are already seeking Brook's help to do this, making use of our consent e-learning programme for students, and we would encourage more institutions to improve their support services, providing clear pathways to seek help and reinforcing learning through ongoing opportunities provided throughout a student's university career.

Higher education institutions have a vital role in plugging gaps in knowledge left by schools, but they can and should be more ambitious for their students and for wider society: promoting safe, positive cultures around relationships and sex and nurturing sexually healthy and happy adults.

Methodology

YouthSight's Student Panel is made up of over 50,000 undergraduate students in the UK, primarily recruited through a partnership with the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), which invites new first-year students to join the Panel each year. Between 11 August and 19 August 2020, 17,216 members of the YouthSight panel were invited to complete this survey.

The final sample size of 1,004 has a margin of error of $\pm 3\%$, calculated at a 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 47% and 53% in 95 out of 100 cases.

On average, the survey took 17 minutes to complete. Weighting accounting for gender, course year and institution type have been applied to the responses to help ensure the sample is balanced. Non-EU international students made up 2% of the sample and part-time students made up 2% of the sample; 86% of the sample were between the ages of 17 and 21 and the remaining 14% older than 21. Students were paid £2 to complete the survey. Results may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

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

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

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

We explore differences in responses across demographics which cover gender, disability, ethnicity and sexuality. Due to the volume of data we highlight what we think are the most relevant and statistically sound insights. There were too few respondents who did not identify as the same gender they were assigned at birth to comment on their experience, but they are a vital group to include in work and conversations around sex and relationships education.

We are keen for others to make use of our dataset, which includes further information not covered in this report and therefore will make it freely available.

Sharing information about this very personal topic comes with challenges. It is likely that this has led to under-reporting and over-reporting in different areas in our dataset.

This is an original set of questions which drew on previous knowledge in the sector including a survey executed by the University of Bristol Students' Union. We also drew on the Department for Education's *Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education* document to guide the topics which young people are expected to know about at the end of their school education.² As the first major survey of its kind, we have kept the focus broad, choosing to touch upon on a range of issues across sex, relationships and sexual health. Our survey is not intended to be exhaustive, but rather to offer an overview of some aspects of students' experiences of sex and relationships. We hope that it will serve as a good foundation for further research across the sector.

This report builds upon a shorter paper, *Sex and Relationships Among Students: Summary Report*, HEPI Policy Note 30, issued in April 2021. In this full report, we group the data thematically, provide more context for the results and explore the differences by student characteristics.

Aims of the survey

We hope the data collected from this survey will prove useful for a range of stakeholders and purposes. These include but are not limited to the following.

- **Counselling and wellbeing services:** Our data show there is more work to be done around students' awareness of, and confidence in, counselling and support services around sex and relationships.
- **Students' unions and higher education institutions:** The data show students are keen to have more opportunities to learn about sex and relationships and place a high value on their peers' understanding of consent. Furthermore, where there are specific groups of students that might need more support, students' unions are often well placed to reach student groups.
- **Students:** The data highlight that students have very diverse experiences of sex and relationships. By shedding light on a topic that is sometimes shrouded in myth and taboo, we hope students will feel less pressure or worry around these topics. We hope that sharing the complexity and different experiences of sex and relationships at university can support efforts to tackle undue stigma and pressure which can surround some aspects of sex.
- **Schools and parents:** Some of the data here shed light on a portion of school-leavers' experiences of education at school and at home.
- **Providers of relationships and sex education:** Brook, the sexual health charity for young people, Sexpression, who provide near-peer relationships and sex education and the Sex Education Forum, part of the National Children's Bureau, among others, might find these data useful in creating further positive resources for young people on the topics of relationships and sex.

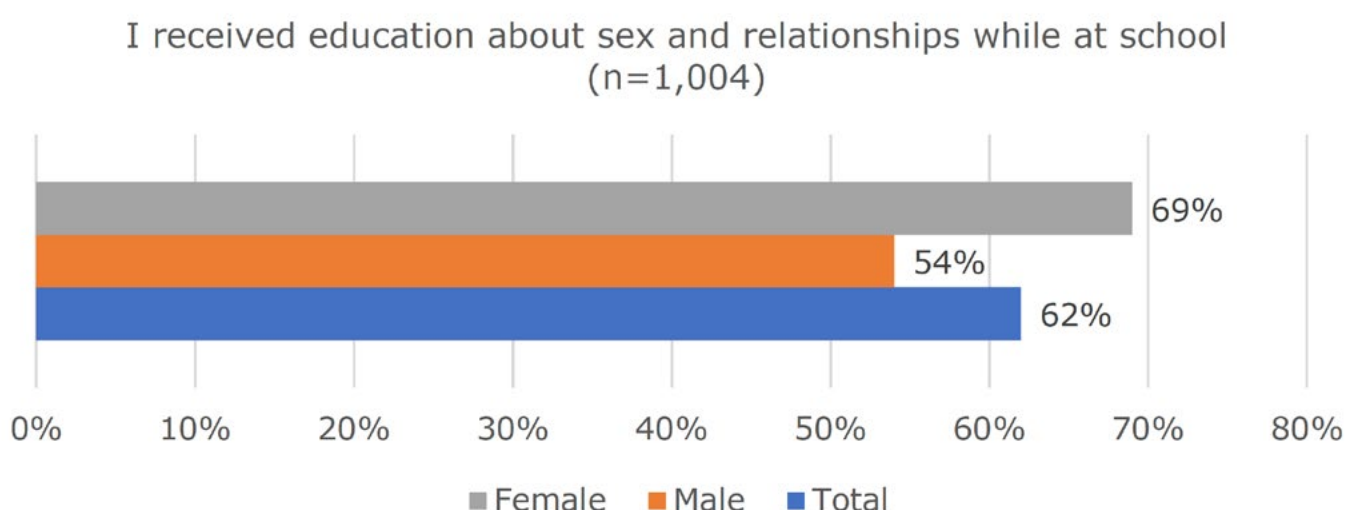
1. Education and learning before higher education

Students use a range of resources to learn about sex and relationships. A common source for most students is secondary education, where some students received Sex and Relationships Education.³

Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) or Relationship and Sex Education (RSE), as it has been referred to since the legislation that resulted from the Children and Social Work Act (2017), ensures education at school goes beyond simply the anatomical and biological sides of sex.⁴ Following an inquiry into sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools in 2015, calls to make SRE / RSE compulsory across all maintained schools in England grew until legislation in 2017 was passed to make RSE compulsory from September 2020, although schools have been permitted to delay this until the start of the academic year in 2021.⁵

Parents are not able to withdraw their child from Relationships Education at any point but can withdraw their child(ren) from sex education that sits outside the National Curriculum. However, from the age of 15, pupils have the right to opt in to sex education.⁶ Prior to the 2017 legislation, the Government's first SRE 'Guidance' put certain biological aspects of sex and reproduction in the compulsory National Science Curriculum, but wider aspects of sex and relationships were discretionary, school by school, hence the calls to make the whole subject compulsory.⁷ Scotland and Wales implemented such mandatory education before England.

Although the respondents to this survey were in higher education prior to RSE being made compulsory in England, just under two-thirds of students (62%) report having received education about sex and relationships while at school with a skew towards more female students reporting having received education (69%) than male students (54%). Throughout the dataset, female students tend to report higher confidence levels in their knowledge on almost all issues except some aspects of consent.



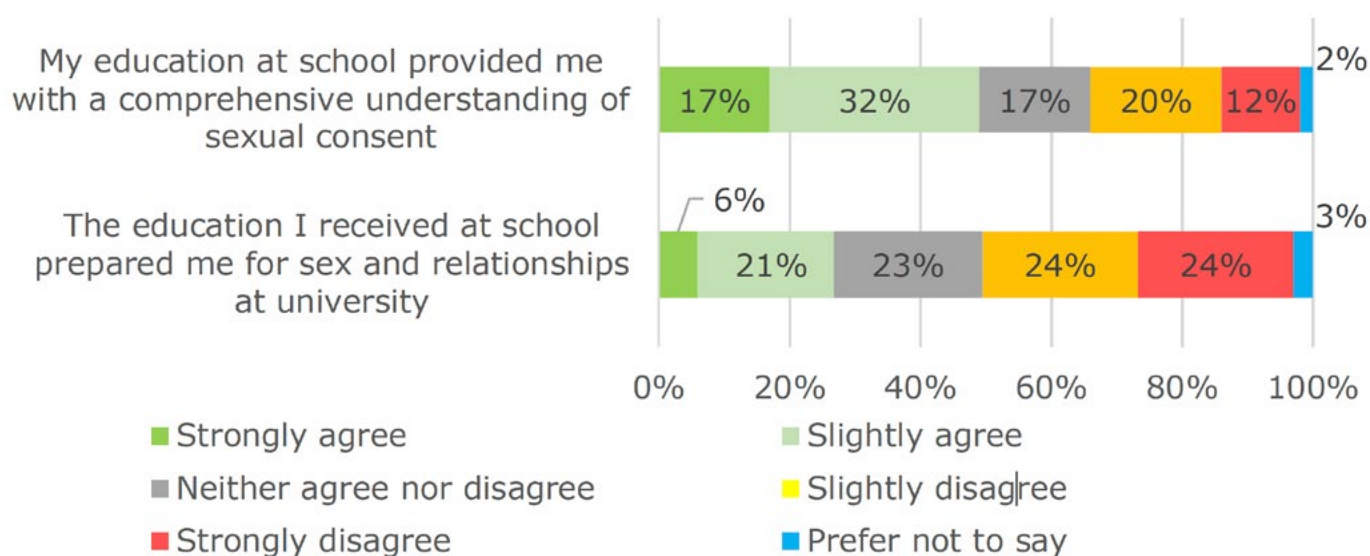
How useful was the education students received at school for navigating relationships and sex in higher education?

We asked respondents whether the education they received at school was effective under two criteria: in preparing them for sex and relationships at university; and in understanding consent.

Just over a quarter of students agree (27%) that the education prepared them for sex and relationships at university, with 21% 'slightly' agreeing and just 6% 'strongly' agreeing. Almost half of students (48%) disagree, split evenly between those who 'slightly disagree' (24%) and those who 'strongly disagree' (24%), suggesting higher education institutions could have a greater role to play in this regard. Approximately a quarter (23%) of students neither 'agree nor disagree'. Only 2% 'prefer not to say'.

Half (49%) of students report that the education they received at school provided them with a comprehensive understanding of sexual consent, split between 32% who 'slightly agree' and just 17% who 'strongly agree'. On the other hand, a third (32%) disagree, split between 12% who 'strongly disagree' and 20% who 'slightly disagree'. About one-sixth (17%) 'neither agree nor disagree'. Only 2% 'prefer not to say'. These numbers reflect how confident students report feeling about their school education, not necessarily their confidence levels about these topics at the time of polling.

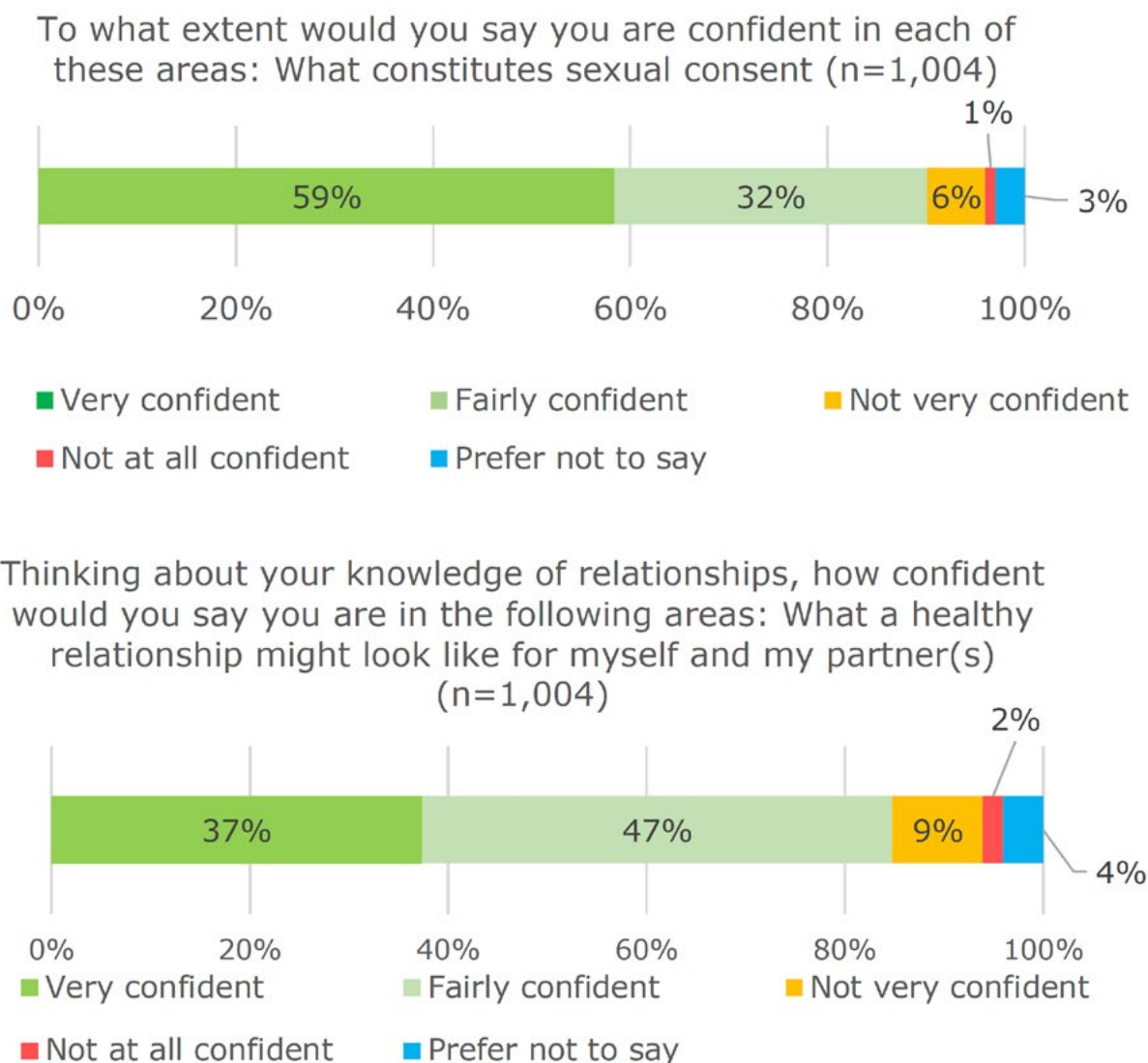
To what extent do you agree with the following statements?
(n=1,004)



A number of reported news headlines regarding knowledge about consent paint a similar picture to the one here. Based on a report called *Unsafe Spaces* published in late 2020 and the emergence of the Everyone's Invited website in early 2021, media focus draws attention to the incidence of non-consensual sex, abuse and rape in higher education across the UK. This suggests that greater and renewed emphasis on a proper understanding of consent is essential.⁸

Sources of learning beyond RSE

While just 27% of students report that their education at school prepared them for sex and relationships at university, 84% report feeling 'fairly' or 'very' confident in being able to recognise what a healthy relationship might look like for themselves and their partner(s). These data indicate that students are learning about sex and relationships outside of school.



What role do parents play in learning about sex and relationships?

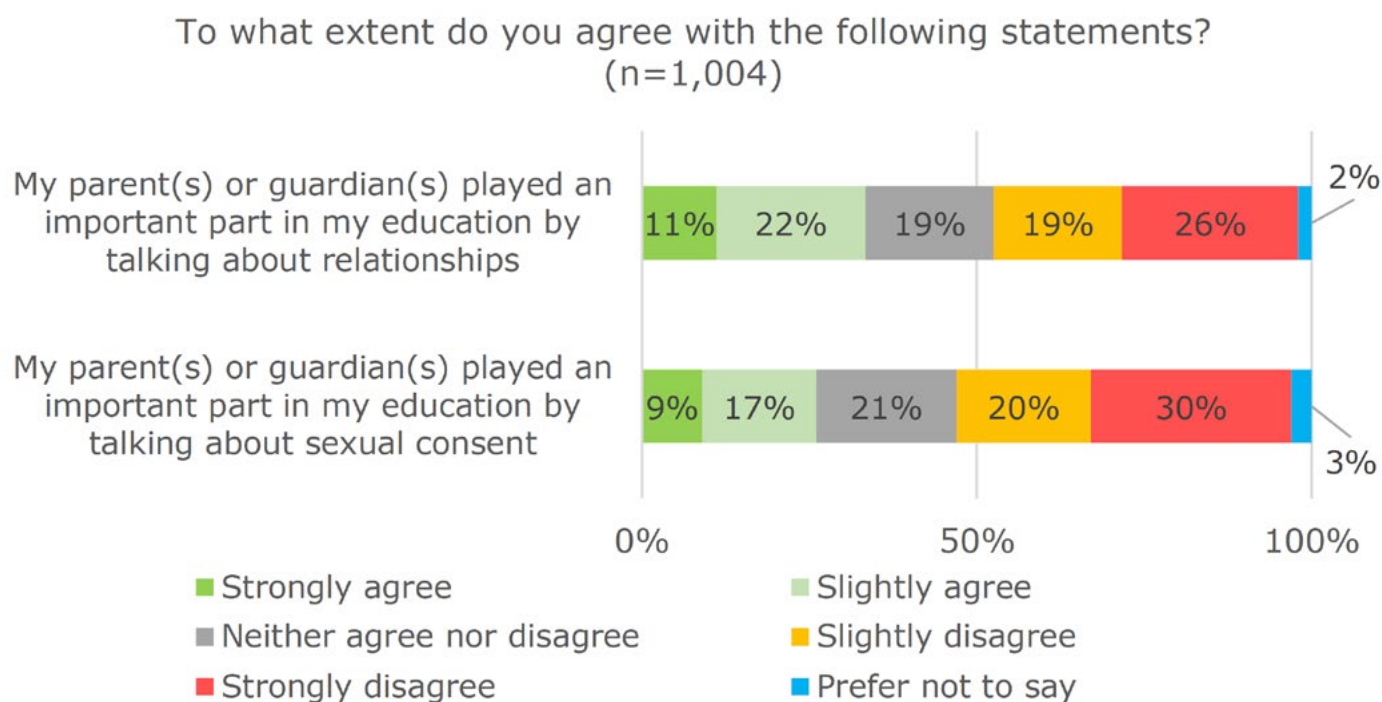
In the Ministerial Foreword to the Department for Education's statutory guidance on relationships and sex education in England, it reads:

We are clear that parents and carers are the prime educators for children on many of these matters. Schools complement and reinforce this role and have told us that they see building on what pupils learn at home as an important part of delivering a good education.⁹

Current Government policy, therefore, is guided by the principles of young people learning primarily from parents and at school. With the data above showing that for many students school education was insufficient, we asked students how important their parents or guardians were in developing their understanding of consent and knowledge of sex and relationships.

A higher proportion of students disagree (45%) than agree (33%) that their parents or guardians played ‘an important part in my education by talking about relationships’, while 19% ‘neither agree nor disagree’.

The picture is more negative when it comes to the parental role in talking about consent: twice as many students report that their parents did not play an important role in talking about consent (50%) as those who report their parents did play an important role (26%). A fifth (21%) ‘neither agree nor disagree’. A higher proportion of female respondents disagree (54%) than male respondents (44%).



These data suggest that, in the sample as a whole, parental conversations about consent and relationships are not universal. Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students report lower rates of agreement (17%) than white students (29%) in response to the idea that their parents played an important part in their sex education by talking about consent, and lower rates of agreement in reference to talking about sex and relationships (22%) than white students (37%).

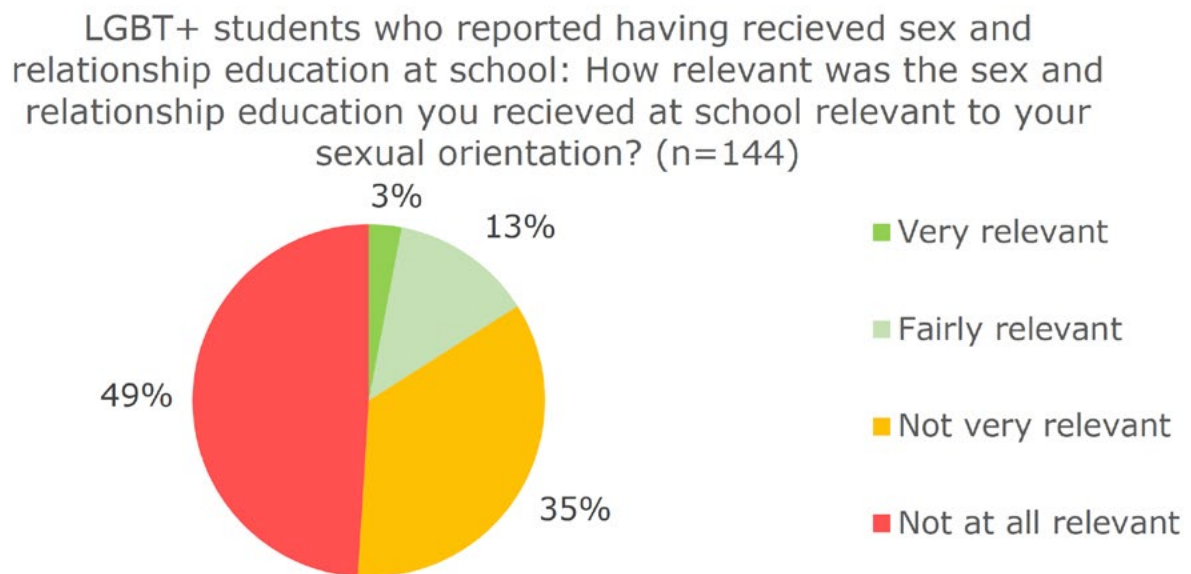
While various Department for Education reports and guidance suggest parents (first) and schools (as support) are the main and preferred sources of RSE learning for young people, young people indicate this is not always the case in practice. This is especially true among some BAME students, LGBT+ students and disabled students.

SPOTLIGHT: LGBT+ students' experiences of RSE

In this Spotlight, we distinguish between LGBT+ students who report having received sex and relationships education at school (n=144) from the full sample of LGBT+ students in this survey (n=211).

We asked LGBT+ students who report having received sex and relationships education at school how relevant that education has been to their sexuality. Almost half (49%) report that it was ‘not at all relevant’ and 35% ‘not very relevant’. Putting these figures together,

the total proportion of LGBT+ students who consider the education they received at school to have been not relevant to their sexuality is 84%, while 16% consider it to have been relevant, split between 3% who report it as 'very relevant' and 13% as 'fairly relevant'.



Our total sample of LGBT+ respondents (n=211) report differences on some other questions about learning about sex and relationships. A higher percentage disagree that their parents played an important role by talking about sex and relationships (57%) than heterosexual students (n=785) (43%).

These experiences at school and with parents might go some way to explaining why a greater proportion of LGBT+ students disagree with the statement that they learned more from school than online sources (74%), than heterosexual students (54%). This is also the case with pornography, where 50% of LGBT+ students report learning more from pornography than from school education, notably higher than for heterosexual students (32%).

As noted in the Methodology, there were too few students who identified as a different gender to the one assigned to them at birth to explore the experiences of trans students separately. However, other research shows that they too receive less relevant guidance around sex and relationships from schools and parents.¹⁰

What can universities do? Clear, best practice guidelines exist from a number of organisations to help universities work towards building communities where equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) are fully respected and promoted. Although universities have no legal obligation to backfill the lack of SRE students might have experienced in their former schools, they can be welcoming environments, supporting, respecting, representing and making visible all peoples, for example, through language, policies, organisations and visible imagery that promote EDI. Universities should also speak with their students' unions or guilds to understand what demand there is for support for groups who received less relevant SRE at school.

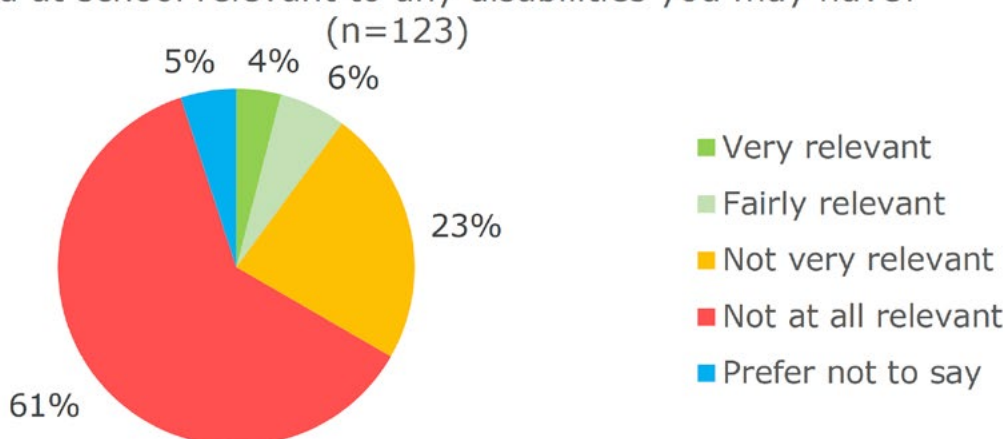
SPOTLIGHT: Disabled students on education at school and in higher education

We asked disabled students who report having received education about sex and relationships how relevant that education at school was to any disabilities they have. While a tenth (10%) report receiving 'very relevant' or 'fairly relevant' education, 23% report that it was 'not very relevant', and a further 61% report that it was 'not at all relevant' – totalling 84% of disabled students reporting that the relationships and sex education they received was not fully relevant to their disability.

Other data indicate that disabled students do not feel the RSE they received was adequate. When we asked students to respond to the statement 'The education I received at school prepared me for sex and relationships at university', a higher proportion of disabled students disagree (62%) than students without disabilities (44%).

Furthermore, a higher proportion of disabled students report more positive responses to the prospect of more education in higher education than students without disabilities. For the statement 'I think sex and relationship education should be embedded into university education' 57% of disabled students 'strongly agree' or 'slightly agree' compared to 44% of students without disabilities.

To what extent was the sex and relationships education you received at school relevant to any disabilities you may have?



Similarly, a higher proportion of disabled students (64%) than students without disabilities (53%) disagree with the idea that 'University is not the right place to teach young people about sex and relationships'. A similar picture emerges in response to the idea that 'before starting higher education, all students should have to pass an assessment to show that they fully understand sexual consent' with 69% of disabled students 'strongly agreeing' or 'slightly agreeing' in comparison to 47% of students without disabilities in strong or slight agreement.

Meanwhile, a higher proportion of disabled students report a negative experience of receiving guidance to access sexual health services at higher education institutions than students without disabilities. While 42% of disabled students 'strongly disagree' or 'slightly disagree' with the statement 'I have received clear health education on the availability of sexual health services nearby while at university', 30% of students without a disability 'strongly' or 'slightly' disagree.

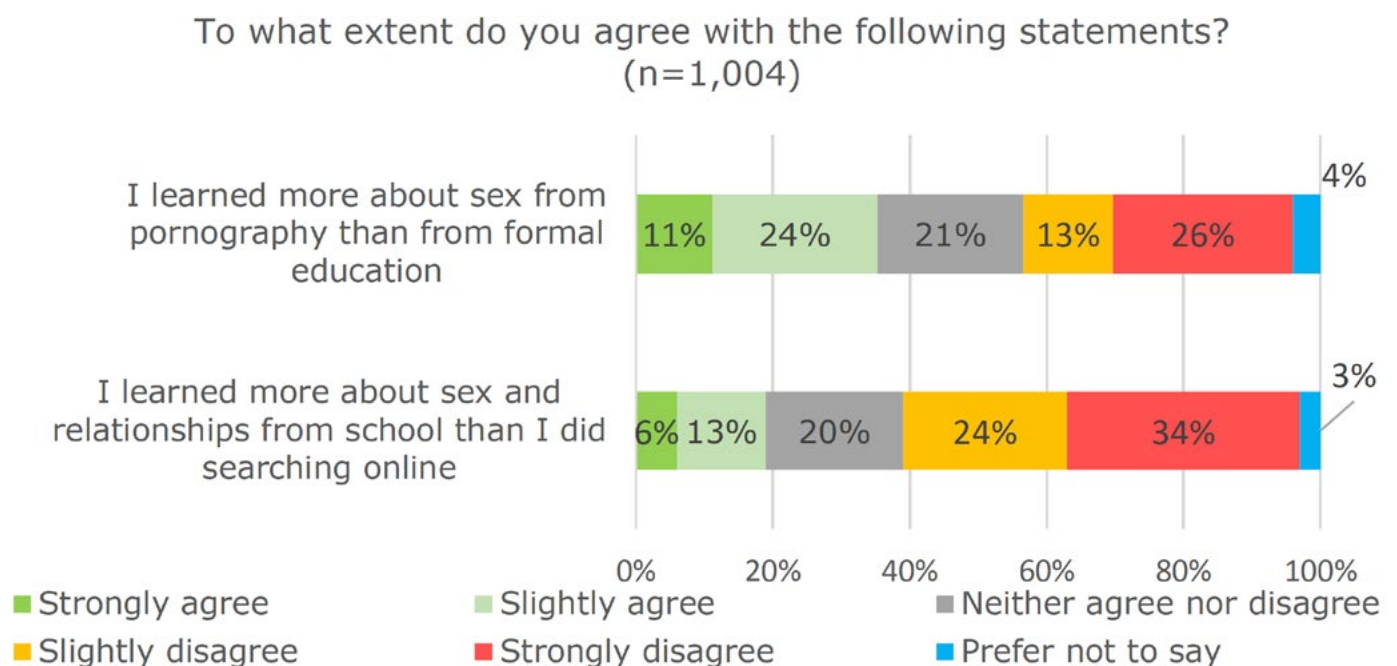
Many people living with disabilities regularly highlight ways in which their sexual health and wellbeing needs are routinely missed and / or disregarded within services and societies, including schools and universities.¹¹ Problems may stem from a lack of positive images or messages about disabled people, especially in relation to sex and relationships. They can also be caused by specific forms of stigma, prejudice and discrimination from others, especially in relation to disabilities and sexual or relationship capabilities, as well as the inaccessibility of services, resources, or even, simply, venues where people meet and have fun. Three organisations, in particular, Enhance The UK, Brook and the Sex Education Forum address key issues and signpost to further learning and development, for disabled individuals and for wider society.¹²

What other sources do students use to learn about sex and relationships?

One popular alternative source of information on relationships and sex is online material and most students say they learned more from this source than from school.

A majority of students 'strongly' or 'slightly' disagree (58%) with the statement that 'I learned more about sex and relationships from school than I did searching online' with 34% in strong disagreement and a further 24% 'slightly disagreeing'. Only 6% 'strongly agree' and 13% 'slightly agree'. More female students disagree (68%) than male students (45%) and more male students agree (28%) than female students (12%).

In the context of the low proportion of respondents who rated as significant the importance of parents (33%) and schools (27%) in providing relationships and sex education, the 58% here who report learning more from online than school indicate the importance of providing safe online learning materials for students to learn about these topics.



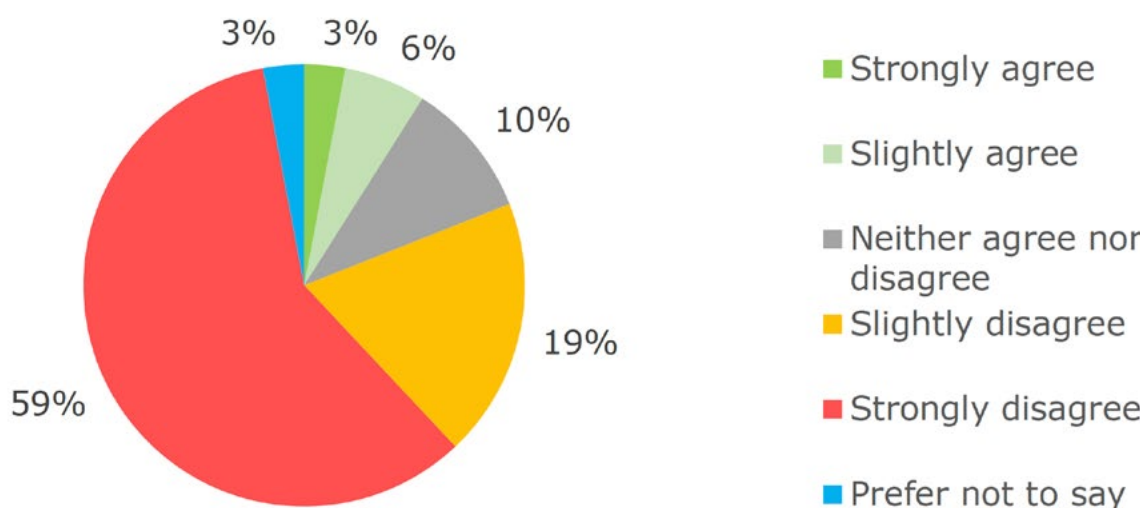
Students were divided almost evenly over whether they learned more about sex from pornography or from school education. Approximately a third (35%) agree with the idea that they learned 'more about sex from pornography than from formal education'. While about a fifth (21%) did not hold a strong opinion, 39% disagree.

There is a significant gender divide, with more male students 'strongly' or 'slightly' agreeing with this statement (41%) than those who 'slightly' or 'strongly' disagree (31%). Meanwhile fewer female students (31%) agree with this statement than those who disagree (45%).

Although previous research indicates that young males do look to pornography in part to understand sexual behaviour, our data indicate that many students are relying on – and feeling that they are learning more from – online sources and pornography than on any education they received at school.¹³ The significant proportion of students (35%) reporting pornography as more important in informing their understanding of sex and relationships than school – especially among male respondents – is concerning. Previous research has drawn attention to some immediate issues and problems found with using online pornography as a means of sex and relationship education.¹⁴ Research and clinical evidence highlight some additional common problems with a reliance on pornography as a source of sex education. These problems include: misogynistic, homophobic, racist and abusive scenarios; unrealistic physical expectations – from genital appearance to body types and performance stamina; conflicting messages on consent and safer / protected sex; lack of emotional engagement; potential for (later) difficulties in forming real-life partnerships and experiencing sexual fulfilment.¹⁵

Just 9% of students 'slightly' or 'strongly' agree with the statement that pornography presents an accurate picture of sexual behaviour. There is a gender split here, with 16% of male students 'slightly' or 'strongly' agreeing with this statement, compared to 5% of female students with the same view. This statement is widely considered to be untrue.

To what extent do you agree: Pornography presents an accurate picture of sexual behaviour (n=1,004)



2. Starting higher education and confidence about sexual consent

In this chapter, we explore how sex and relationships fit into Freshers' Week and explore students' opinions about getting guidance around consent, sex and relationships while they are in higher education.

This polling was carried out at the end of August 2020, before the 2020/21 academic year started. All of these experiences represent students' experiences in pre-COVID times during Freshers' Weeks in 2019 and before.

Sex and Freshers' Week

The image of students' sexual experiences in Freshers' Week – both in newspapers and in popular culture – tends to be towards Freshers' Week as a time in which sex plays a central part. We asked students about their expectations and experiences of sex and intimacy during Freshers' Week and how important sex was to them.

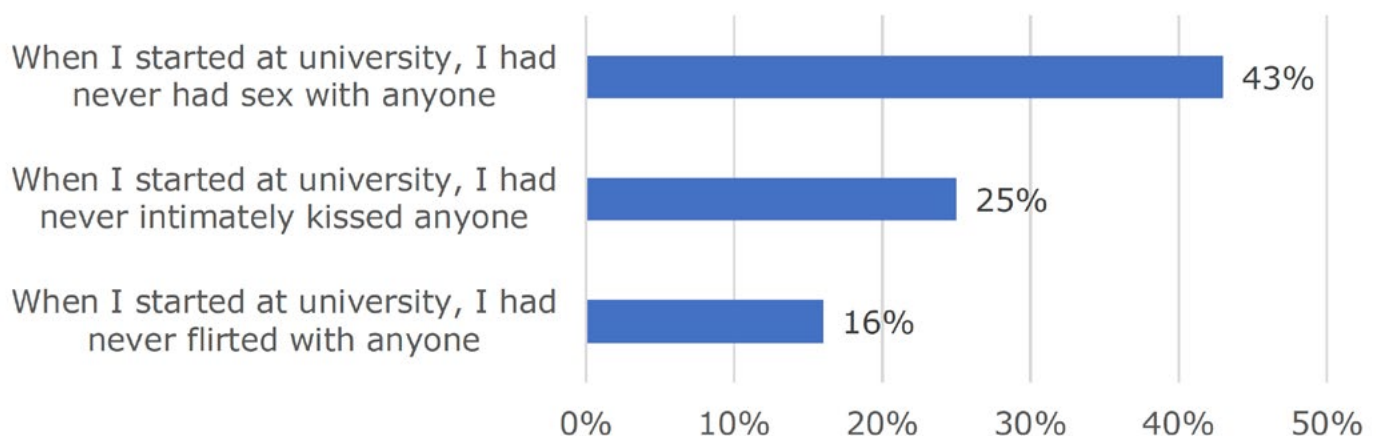
At the start of the 2020/21 academic year, a system of 'bubbles' was implemented within which students had to stay to minimise the spread of COVID-19. Many UK newspapers ran stories on how students' experiences of casual sex would be impacted, with one newspaper pointing out:

*Fresher's sex, or any casual sex at university, has always been part of the higher-educational landscape.*¹⁶

Students' experiences before Freshers' Week

We presented students with a list of options and asked them to tick all that applied. Approximately one-in-six students (16%) report that they had never flirted with anyone when they started at university.¹⁷ A quarter of students (25%) report that they had never kissed anyone when they started university. Just over two-fifths (43%) report that they had never had sex with anyone before university.

Which of the following apply to your experiences and expectations about sex and relationships when beginning university? (n=1,004)



Expectations and attitudes to Freshers' Week

When asked about expectations, approximately one-in-nine students (11%) reported that they expected to have sex with someone new in Freshers' Week. We can compare these data on students' expectations with data from the HEPI / Unite Students report *The New Realists*, which asked students about their expectations for Freshers' Week. Sex is near the bottom of the list of expectations, with the closest expectation being that they might smoke cigarettes (6%) and the next nearest being to 'drink alcohol', which 42% of respondents thought likely.¹⁸

The low expectation of sex in Freshers' Week refutes much of the coverage and presentation of students' sex lives in both the media and popular culture. Other research has explored the reasons for any pressure around sex, including the National Union of Students' work on 'lad culture'.¹⁹

Experiences during Freshers' Week

We asked students about their experiences in Freshers' Week. Approximately a quarter (23%) report having 'flirted with someone new', 13% 'intimately kissing someone new' and 9% having 'sex with someone new'.

The New Realists also includes data on students' wider experiences in Freshers' Week.²⁰ The proportion of students who report having had sex in Freshers' Week is 9% while the proportion of students who report having smoked a cigarette is 14%. Meanwhile 23% of students report having 'flirted with someone new' in Freshers' Week.

Feeling safe

We asked students who report having had sex as a student whether the first time they had sex at university they 'felt confident that [they were] safe'. Approximately half (51%) report feeling safe the first time they had sex. It is worth reading this data point in the context of reports of sexual violence at universities and the low reported use of contraception and protection against sexual infections.²²

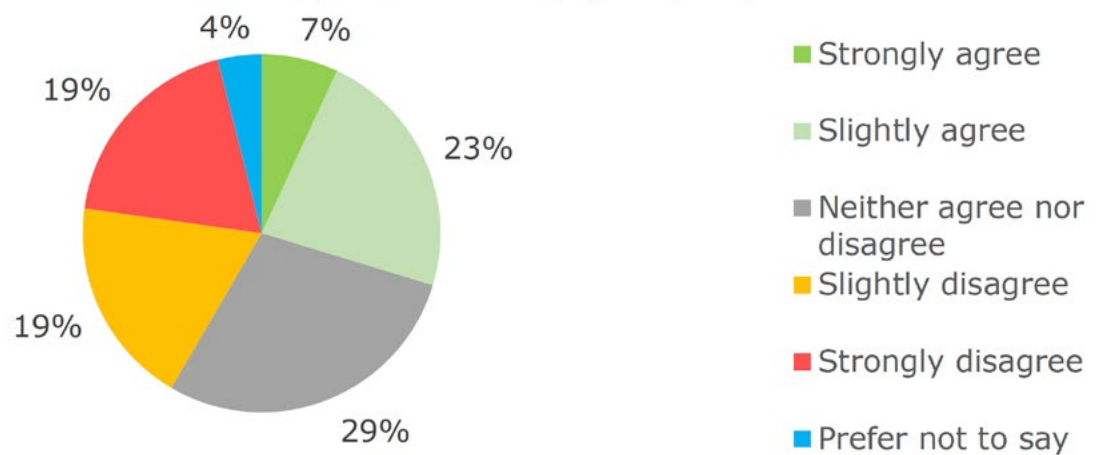
Learning about sex, relationships and consent in and after Freshers' Week

In 2019, Universities UK found that almost two-thirds of the universities they surveyed had introduced consent classes for university students.²² The focus of much of the support provided in Freshers' Week around sex and relationships tends to be on consent resources and on signposting sexual health services, rather than the broader topics of relationships and sex now taught at schools.

Just under one-in-ten (9%) students report having received education about sex and relationships while at university.

Students report a variety of experiences of events about sexual health, sex and relationships while they have been in higher education. In response to the statement 'Throughout my time at university, there have been workshops, talks, assemblies and clinics on sexual health, sex and relationships at university' 30% 'strongly agree' or 'slightly agree', 29% 'neither agree nor disagree' and 38% 'slightly' or 'strongly' disagree while 4% 'prefer not to say'.

Throughout my time at university there have been workshops, talks, assemblies and clinics on sexual health, sex and relationships at university (n=1,004)



Half of students (51%) 'strongly agree' or 'slightly agree' with the idea that sex and relationships education should be 'made compulsory during the welcome period'. A fifth 'slightly disagree' or 'strongly disagree' (21%) and a quarter (25%) 'neither agree nor disagree'.

We asked respondents whether they think all students should have to pass an assessment to show they fully understand sexual consent before they start higher education. Over half of students (58%) 'strongly' or 'slightly' agree that all students should have to pass such an assessment before they start higher education, while 20% 'slightly' or 'strongly' disagree.²³ Another 20% 'neither agree nor disagree' and 2% 'prefer not to say'.

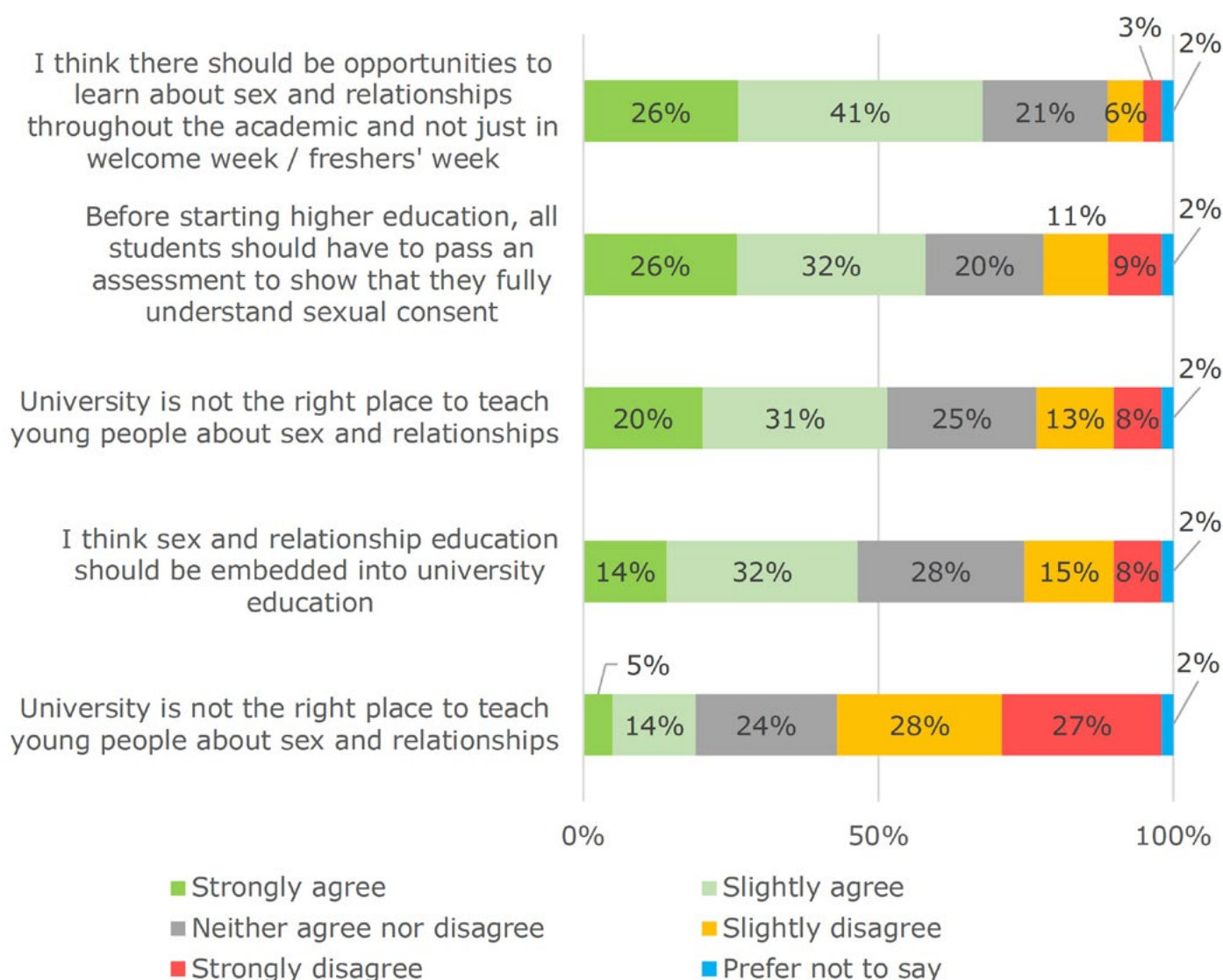
The statement with the greatest consensus is 'there should be opportunities to learn about sex and relationships throughout the academic year and not just in welcome week / Freshers' Week'. Three-fifths of students 'strongly' or 'slightly' agree with this statement (67%) – more than six times the number of students who 'slightly' or 'strongly' disagree (9%). A fifth (21%) 'neither agree nor disagree' and 2% 'prefer not to say'.

Meanwhile, just under half of students (46%) 'slightly' or 'strongly' agree that sex and relationships education should be embedded into university education while 23% 'slightly' or 'strongly' disagree. Approximately three-in-ten (28%) 'neither agree nor disagree'.

In response to the statement 'University is not the right place to teach young people about sex and relationships', 19% express some level of agreement (5% 'strongly agree' and 14% 'slightly agree') while 55% of students disagree, split between those who 'strongly disagree' (27%) and those who 'slightly disagree' (28%). A quarter (24%) 'neither agree nor disagree'.

Students are clear that they would like more access to relationships and sex education while in higher education and would like assurances their peers understand consent. However, it is likely that consent courses can only ever be a small part of a successful strategy to ensure a deep and broad understanding of sexual consent issues. According to Dr Bianca Fileborn at the University of New South Wales, 'a one-off module is far from sufficient in the absence of widespread and systemic changes within a university'.²⁴

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?
(n=1,004)



Meeting the need for a sufficient number of leaders for facilitated consent classes is another route to providing education and is an area explored in Clarissa Humphreys and Graham Towl's book *Addressing Student Sexual Violence in Higher Education*, in which they share best practice for involving students and staff in this process.

SPOTLIGHT: More support for learning opportunities among female and LGBT+ students

LGBT+ students consistently respond more favourably to the prospect of more opportunities for them and their peers to learn about sex, relationships and consent than heterosexual students. Similarly, a higher proportion of female students express interest in more education than male students.

A higher proportion of female students (58%) 'slightly' or 'strongly' agree that sex and relationship education should be 'made compulsory during the welcome period' than male students (41%). A higher proportion of LGBT+ students are supportive of this (60%) than heterosexual students (49%).

Heterosexual male students are the group least in favour of this (39%), significantly lower

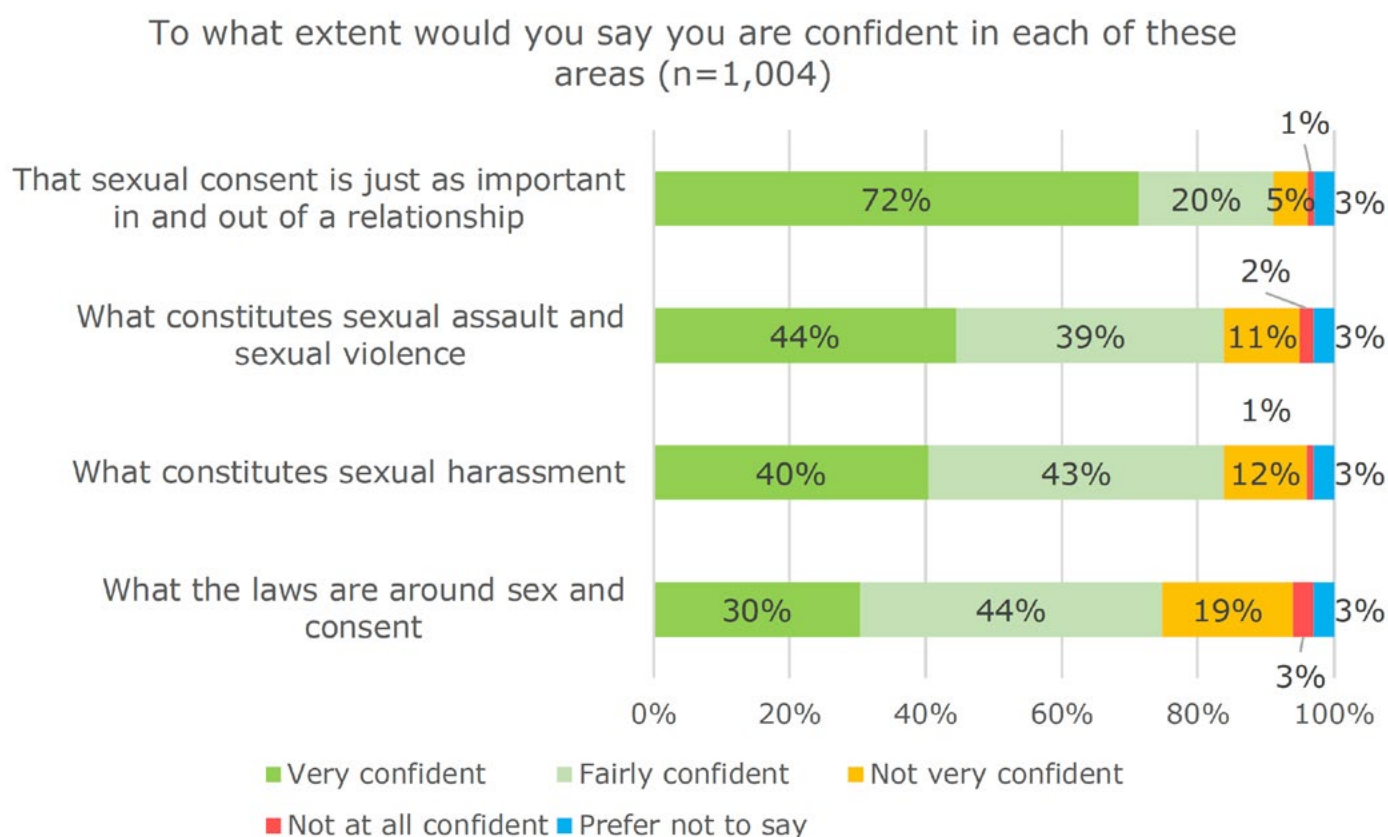
than female heterosexual students (57%), male LGBT+ students (54%) and female LGBT+ students (65%). However, heterosexual male students in favour of compulsory consent classes in welcome week still make up the largest proportion for that demographic, with 26% 'slightly' or 'strongly' disagreeing and 32% who 'neither agree nor disagree'.

A lower proportion of male students agree with the idea that all students should have 'to pass an assessment to show that they fully understand sexual consent before they start higher education' (51%) than female students (63%). A higher proportion of LGBT+ students (67%) support this idea than heterosexual students (56%).

In Chapter 1, we saw LGBT+ students report receiving less relevant education at school and female students are disproportionately more likely to experience sexual assault or rape at university. Each of these might explain the higher desire for better knowledge in the student body about sex, relationships and consent.

Confidence about consent

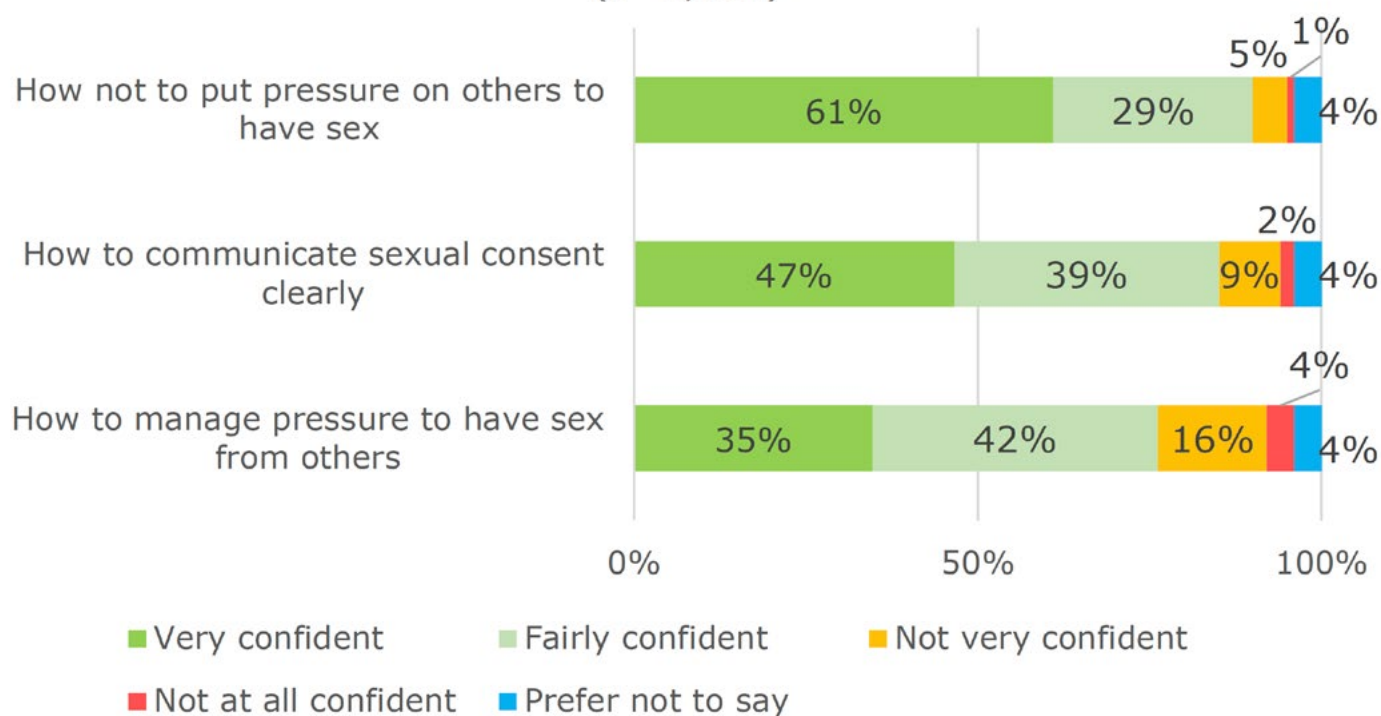
Despite the demand for more access to relationship and sex education, students generally seem confident in their conceptual understanding of consent. However, students report lower levels of confidence about the laws around consent and significantly lower levels when alcohol is involved.



Compared to the results on consent reported above, there were marginally lower levels of confidence around what constitutes sexual assault and violence (83%) and sexual harassment (83%). Although lower still, the levels remain high for confidence around the laws on sex and consent (74%).

Generally, net confidence levels remained high for practising consent: 90% report being 'very' or 'fairly' confident in 'how not to put pressure on others to have sex'; 88% are 'very' or 'fairly' confident in 'how to communicate sexual consent clearly'; and a slightly lower figure – 77% – are 'very' or 'fairly' confident about 'how to manage pressure to have sex from others'. However, when alcohol is involved, students' confidence drops.

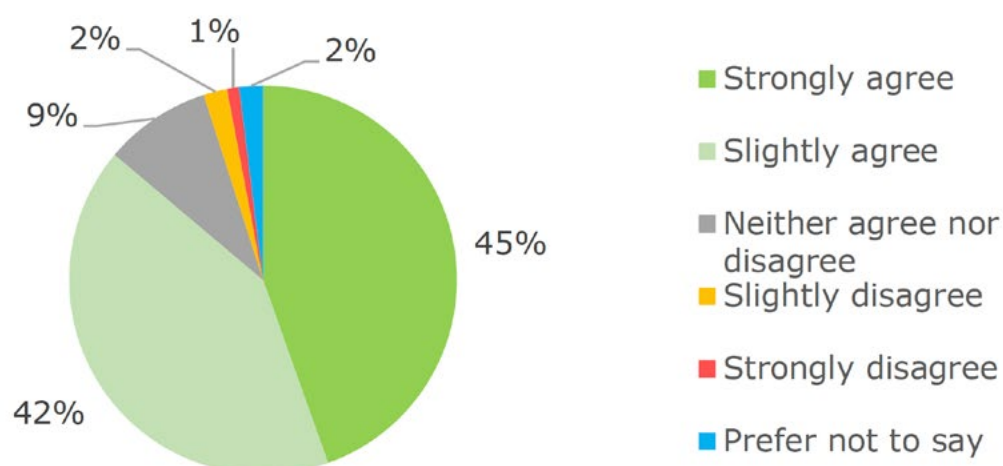
How confident do you feel in each of these areas?
(n=1,004)



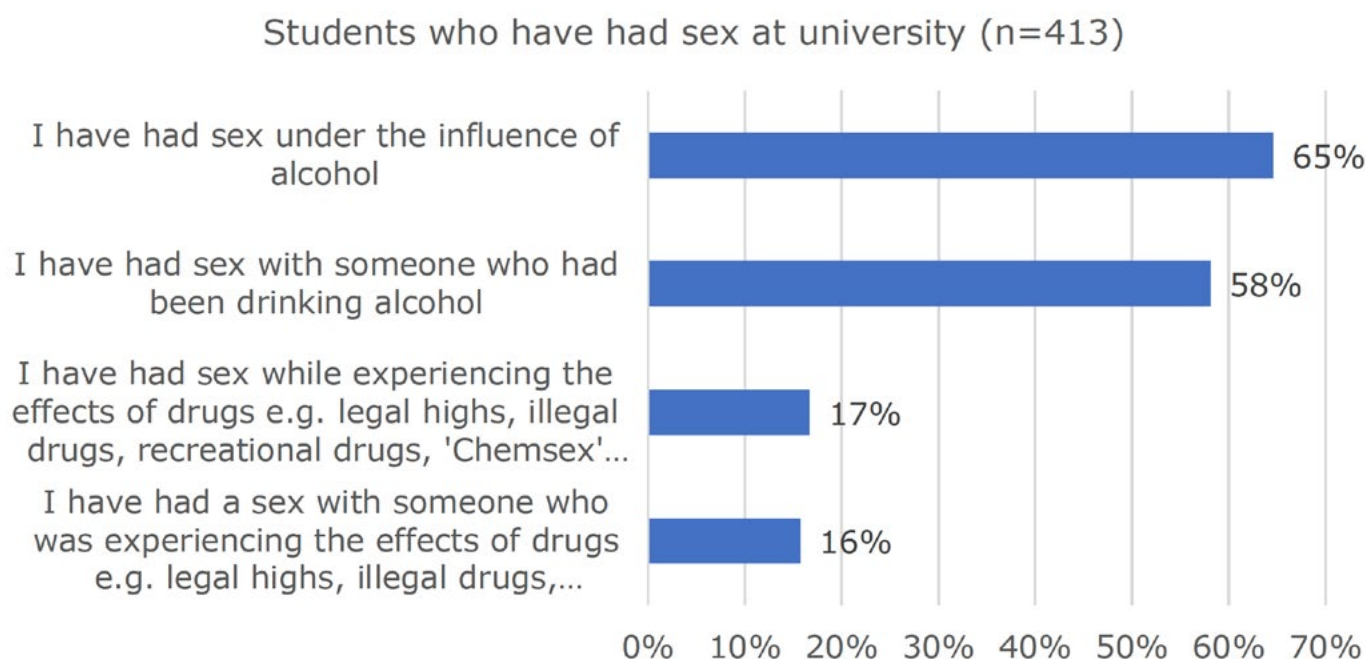
SPOTLIGHT: Consent when alcohol and drugs are involved

The majority of students (87%) 'strongly' or 'slightly' agree with the statement 'alcohol and drugs can lead to risky sexual behaviour'. Just 3% 'slightly' or 'strongly' disagree and 9% 'neither agree nor disagree' with the statement. Clear and useful information on consent, in relation to reduced capacity caused by alcohol, among other things, can be found on the website of the charity Brook.²⁵

Alcohol and drugs can lead to risky sexual behaviour (n=1,004)

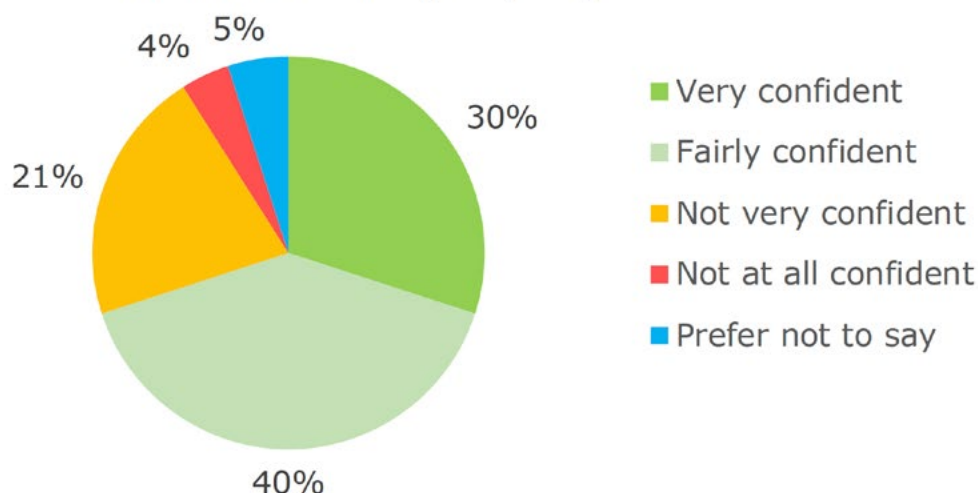


Of the students who report having had sex at university (n=413), two-thirds (65%) report having had sex under the influence of alcohol and 58% report having had sex with someone who had been drinking alcohol. When we asked about drugs, 17% report having had sex while experiencing the effects of drugs and 16% report having had sex with someone who was experiencing the effects of drugs.



We asked students how confident they are about navigating consent in situations when alcohol is involved. Three-in-ten (30%) report feeling 'very confident' and 40% 'fairly confident'. A fifth (21%) report feeling 'not very confident' and 4% 'not at all confident'. The proportion who are 'very confident' (30%) is only half the proportion of students who report being 'very confident' about what constitutes sexual consent (59%).

To what extent would you say you are confident in: How to navigate sexual consent when one or more of the adults has consumed alcohol (n=1,004)

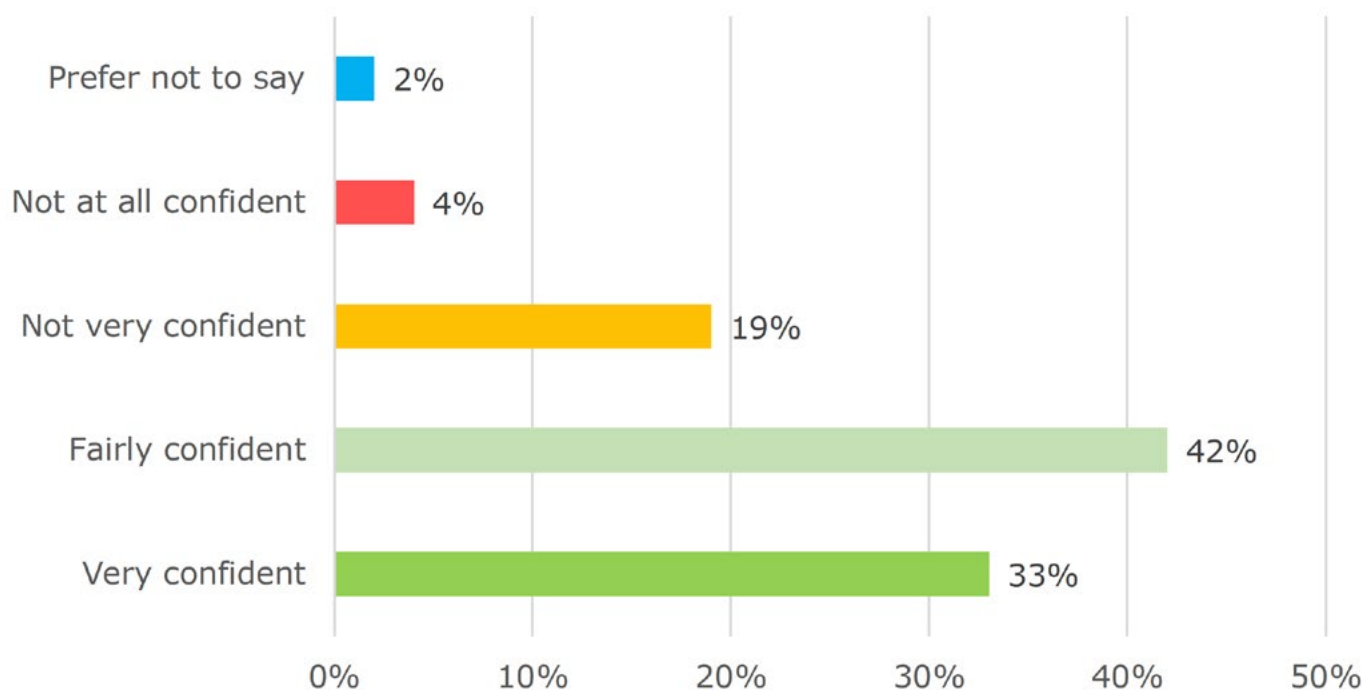


In their discussion of consent education in the context of tackling student sexual violence in higher education, Clarissa Humphreys and Graham Towl argue that 'Consent education is necessary ... There is a lack of compulsory consent education in school'.²⁶ These data suggest that it is important for consent resources to cover sexual consent in situations which involve

alcohol and drugs. One consent class facilitator criticised a resource that covered only the 'broad, vague common-sense topics' while failing to prepare students for 'the complicated sexual scenarios hurtling their way'.²⁷

Of the students who report they are either 'fairly confident' or 'very confident' about what 'constitutes sexual consent' (n=894), a quarter (23%) report being either 'not very confident' or 'not at all confident' about navigating consent when alcohol is involved.

How students who report feeling confident about consent feel about consent when alcohol is involved (n=894)

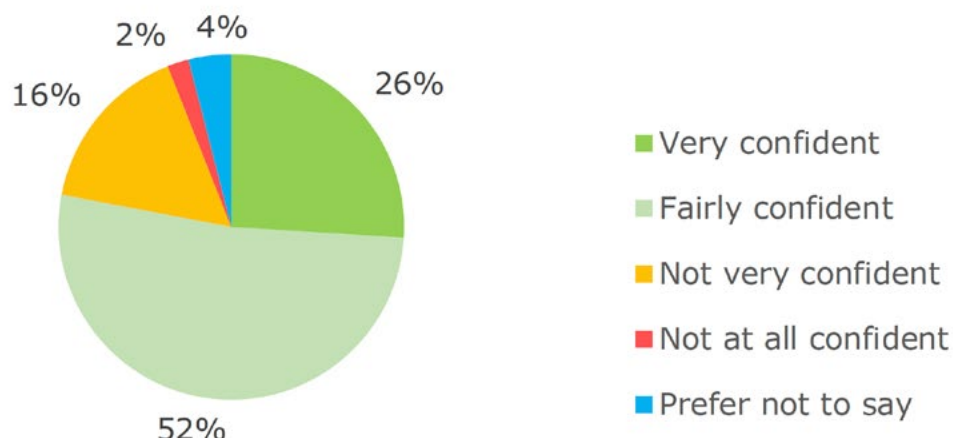


Being a positive bystander or an 'effective guardian'

In *Addressing Student Sexual Violence in Higher Education: A Good Practice Guide*, the authors propose that alongside consent education, 'effective guardians' are an important part of a healthy campus culture to 'prevent and respond to sexual violence'.²⁸ 'Effective guardians' and 'positive bystanders' are people – students and staff – who can support survivors, promote a positive culture on campus and intervene so that where prevention has been unsuccessful, intervention and support is effective.

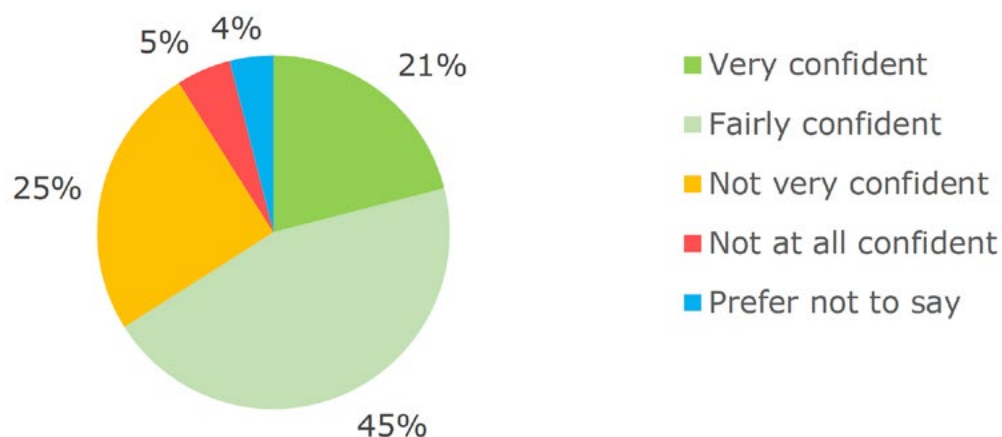
We asked students how confident they are about recognising 'if a friend's relationship is unsafe'. A quarter (26%) report feeling 'very confident' and half (52%) 'fairly confident' while 2% are 'not at all confident' and 16% 'not very confident'. Overall, more than four times more students report a positive response than a negative response.

How to recognise if a friends' relationship is unsafe (n=1,004)



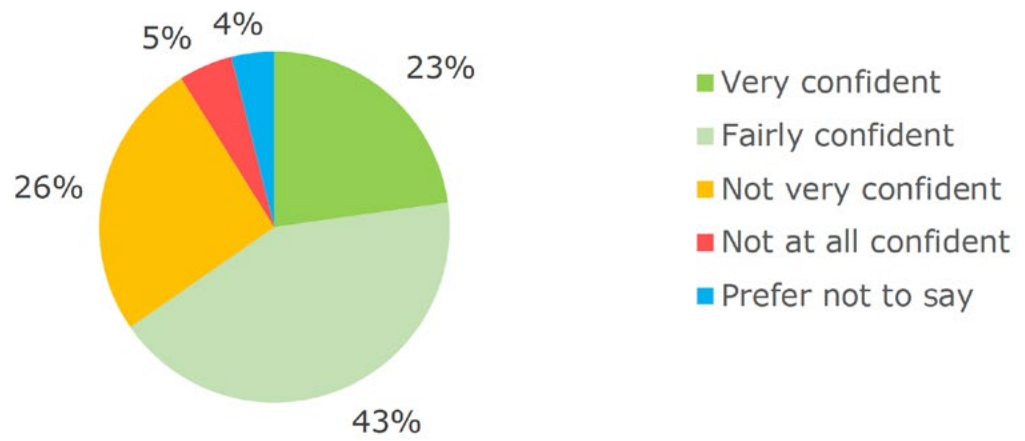
We asked students how confident they are about what to do if someone they know is in a harmful or abusive relationship. Two-thirds (66%) report they are confident about what to do, while 30% report not being confident, with 4% preferring not to say.

What to do if someone I know is in a harmful or abusive relationship (n=1,004)



Confidence levels are similar among students when asked how confident they are about 'how to challenge inappropriate sexual behaviour'. Two-thirds (66%) of students report that they feel 'very' or 'fairly' confident about how to challenge inappropriate sexual behaviour while 31% report feeling 'not very' or 'not at all' confident while 4% 'prefer not to say'. A higher proportion of male students (71%) report feeling 'very' or 'fairly' confident about this than female students (61%).

How to challenge inappropriate sexual behaviour (n=1,004)



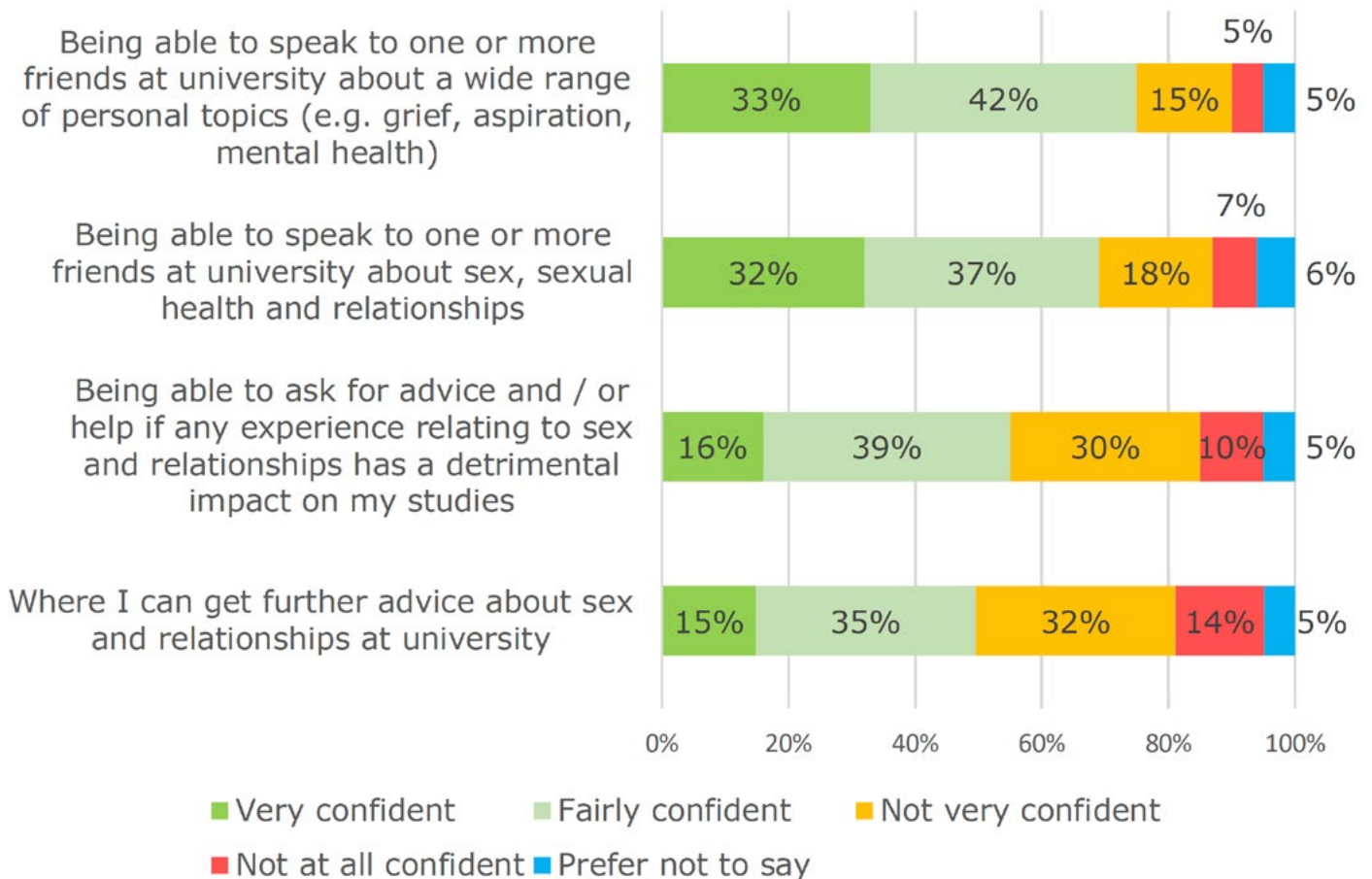
3. Experiences and support around sex, relationships and sexual health

Confidence about general support

Seven-in-ten (69%) students feel 'very' or 'fairly' confident about being able to talk to friends at university about sex, sexual health and relationships while a quarter (25%) are 'not very' or 'not at all' confident and 6% 'prefer not to say'. This is marginally less than the proportion who are either 'very confident' or 'fairly confident' (75%) about 'being able to speak to one or more friends at university about a wide range of personal topics (e.g. grief, aspiration, mental health)'.

Students are less confident when it comes to getting advice at university. Half of students (50%) are 'very' or 'fairly' confident about where to get further advice about sex and relationships at university while 46% report being 'not very' or 'not at all' confident and 5% 'prefer not to say'. A little over half of students (55%) report being 'very' or 'fairly' confident about knowing who to speak to if any experience relating to sex and relationships has a detrimental impact on their studies, while 40% report being 'not very' or 'not at all' confident with a further 5% preferring not to say.

How confident do you feel about each of these areas (n=1,004)

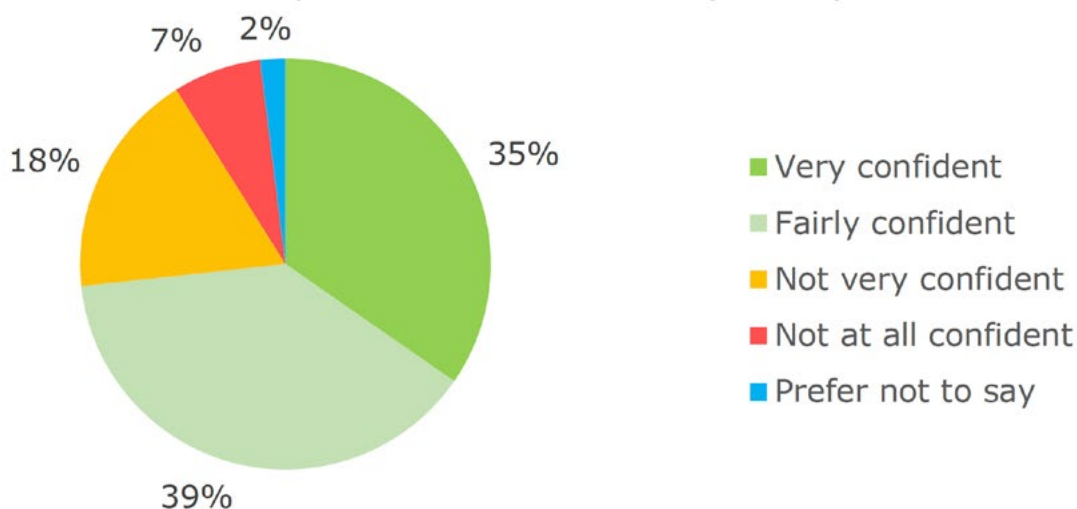


Support for LGBT+ students

In Chapters 1 and 2 we saw that LGBT+ students report both less good experiences of guidance about sex and relationships from parents and school, and that they are a group in favour of more learning opportunities in higher education.

We specifically asked LGBT+ students about how confident they are in being able to speak to someone about matters relating to sex, relationships and sexual health relevant to their sexual orientation. The majority report feeling 'very confident' (35%) or 'fairly confident' (39%), while a quarter (25%) report feeling either 'not very confident' (18%) or 'not at all confident' (7%) and 2% 'prefer not to say'.

LGB+ students: In relation to feeling supported at university, how confident do you feel you are able to talk to someone about matters relating to sex, relationships and sexual health which is relevant to your sexual orientation (n=211)

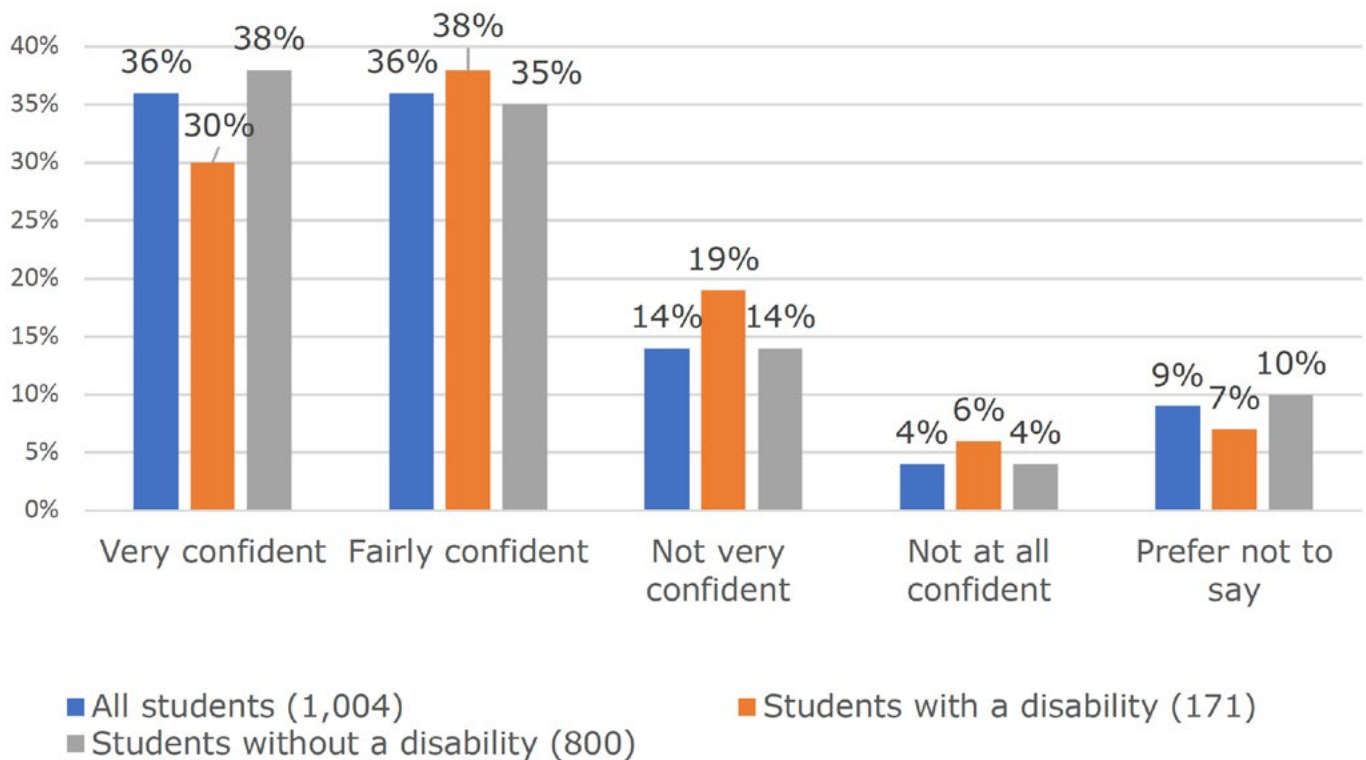


Support for disabled students

In Chapter 1, we saw a majority of disabled students report that the sex and relationships education they received was not relevant to their disability.

We asked students with and without a disability how confident they were about being able 'to talk to someone about matters relating to sex, relationships and sexual health which is relevant to any disability you or a current or future partner may have'. Confidence levels were high among students with disabilities (68%) and students without disabilities (73%).

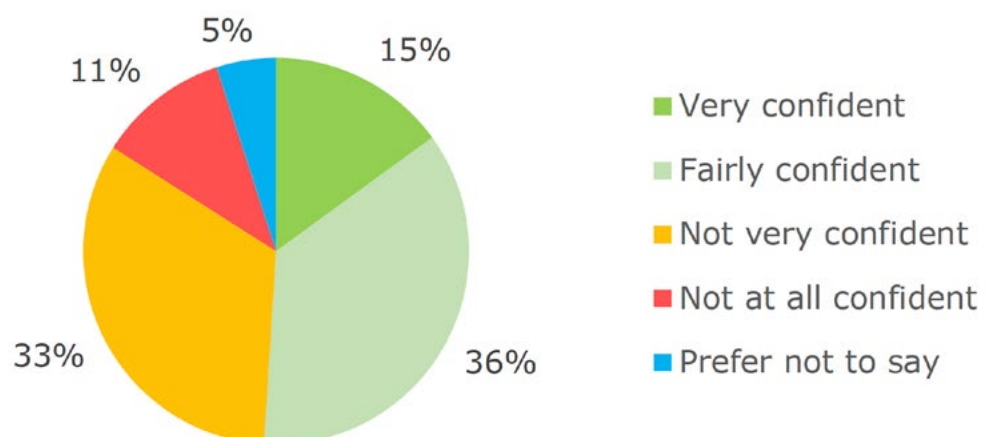
In relation to feeling supported at university, how confident do you feel you are able to talk to someone about matters relating to sex, relationships and sexual health which is relevant to any disability you or a current or future partner may have?



Disclosure of sexual violence

Only half of students report being 'very' or 'fairly' confident (51%) about 'who and how to contact someone if they are concerned about an aspect of sex including bullying, coercion or regret'. A slightly lower number (44%) report that they are not confident and 5% 'prefer not to say'. Male and female students report similar levels of confidence as do students with and without disabilities, despite evidence showing that females and disabled people are more likely to be victims of sexual violence.²⁹

Who and how to contact someone if I am concerned about an aspect of sex including bullying, coercion or regret (n=1,004)



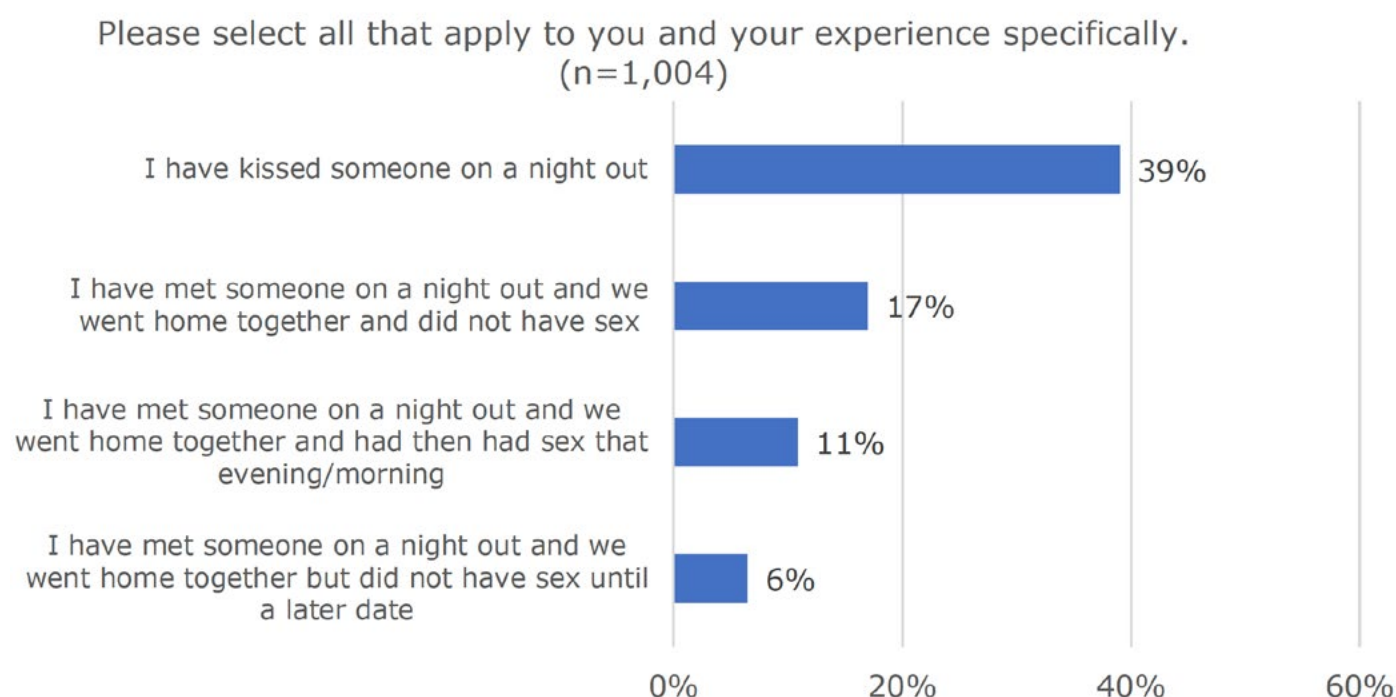
SPOTLIGHT: 'Going back together' and meeting partners on a night out

In a similar way that Freshers' Week is often depicted in the media and wider culture as a time in which sex plays a central role, students going home with someone after a night out to have sex is often presented as a standard experience.³⁰ Often, this is connected to the idea of a 'one-night stand'. In student-run media, there are titles ranging from 'The definitive list of one night stands you'll have this year' to 'A Freshers' Guide to One Night Stands'.³¹ In these articles, the phrase 'one-night stand' often merges with the phrase 'going back together'.

Confi, a women's health social venture, propose that 'perception gaps [are] a setup for assault'. In their report *Campus Sexual Assault: Conflicting Expectations and Beliefs*, with support from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, they set out to pinpoint 'what beliefs and misaligned expectations students may have that could promote sexual violence'. In the context of returning to accommodation with someone after a night out, they found more male students thought it likely that vaginal sex would take place (45%) than female students (30%).³² Tackling harmful myths like these is a common topic in consent workshops.

We asked students about their experiences of going home with someone they did not previously know following a night out, to explore how far sexual relations played a part in those experiences.

Our data show that one-night stands are a part of student life just as they are in the general population, but that within the trope of 'going back together' students' experiences are more complex.



Approximately two-fifths (39%) of students report having kissed someone on a night out and a tenth of students (11%) report having met someone on a night out which resulted in going home together and having sex. Meanwhile one-in-six (17%) students report having met someone on a night out before going home together but not having sex. A small proportion (6%) report having met someone and going back together and not having sex until a later date.

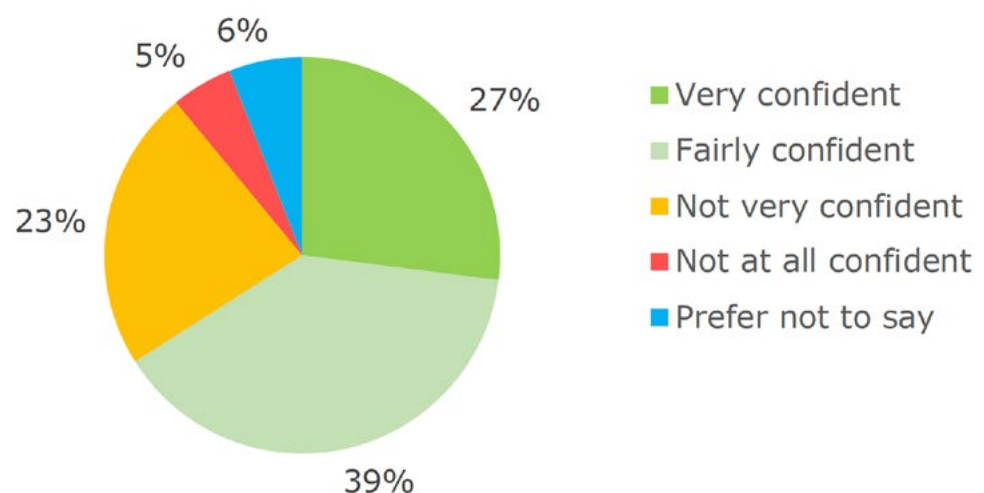
Clearly one-night stands are an aspect of some students' experiences on nights out and students' experiences of sex, just as with many other people in non-educational environments. However, the phenomenon of students going home together and not having sex may signal a gap in perceptions between how students are thought to behave and how they often behave in practice. These data are useful for better understanding the picture of student life and to address dangerous 'perception gaps' not only via facilitated consent workshops, but through more accurate reporting and informed conversations in the wider population.

Pleasure

We asked students how confident they are about pleasure in sex. Often, pleasure has been overlooked in teaching about relationships and sex. For example, in the current English RSE guidance, sexual pleasure is not mentioned at all. In the Sex Education Forum 2019 poll, 'sexual pleasure' was the topic that their respondents were least likely to have learnt anything about and most likely to put as an area which they didn't 'learn all [they] needed to'.³³

While 27% of students report feeling 'very confident' and 39% report being 'fairly confident' about communicating 'about pleasure and wants with any partners', 23% report feeling 'not very confident' and 5% 'not at all confident'.

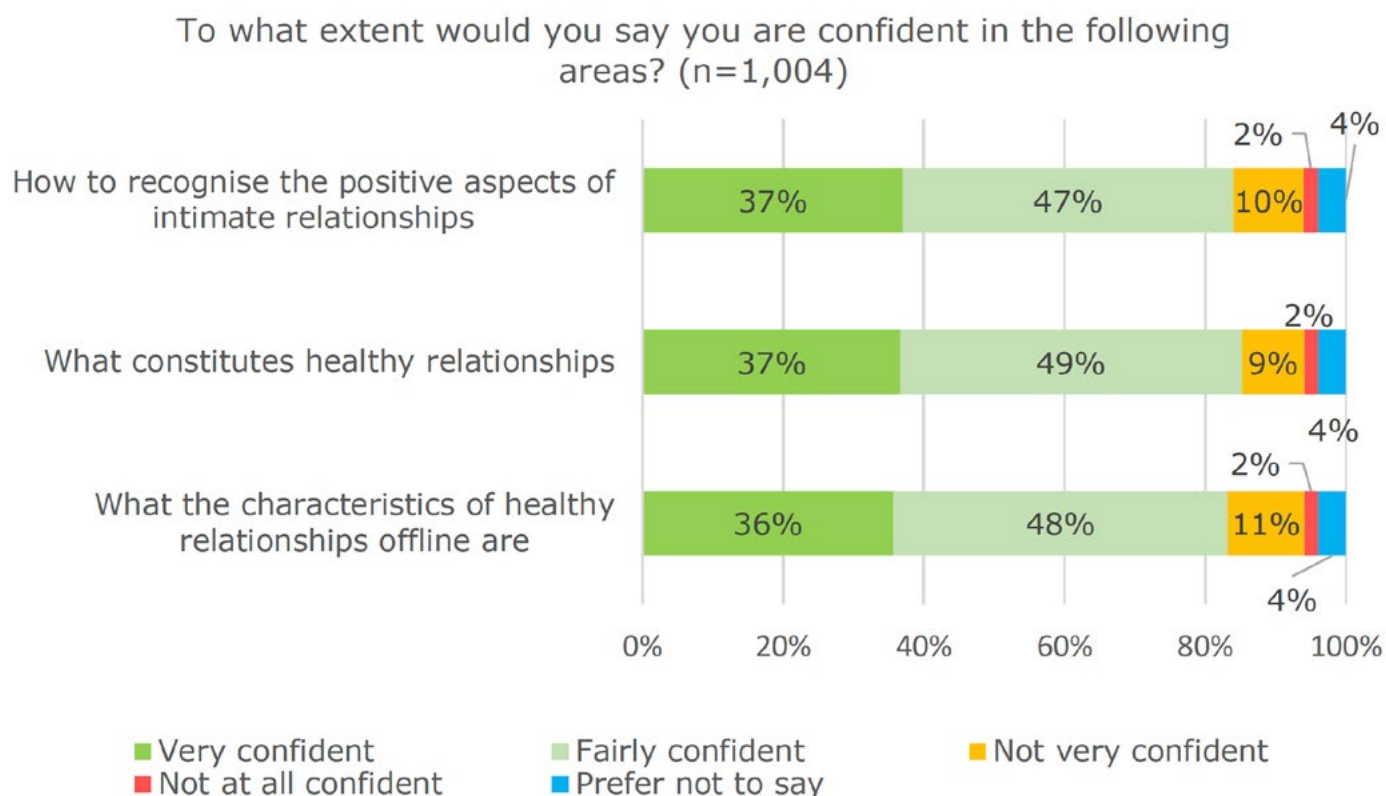
How to communicate about your pleasure and wants with any partners (n=1,004)



The fact that England's formal RSE is not teaching or profiling the importance of sexual pleasure (despite our respondents claiming to be fairly positive, both in talking of pleasure and understanding their rights in relation to it) would appear at odds with the international *Declaration on Sexual Pleasure* by the World Association for Sexual Health (WAS).³⁴ The WAS is the 'pre-eminent global organisation concerned with sexual health and rights', which influences other important bodies such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations (UN) as well as national governments. Point 5 of the *WAS Declaration*, in particular, states that 'sexual pleasure shall be integrated into education, health promotion and service delivery, research and advocacy in all parts of the world'.³⁵

Relationships at university

We asked students how confident they are in a range of areas connected to relationships.



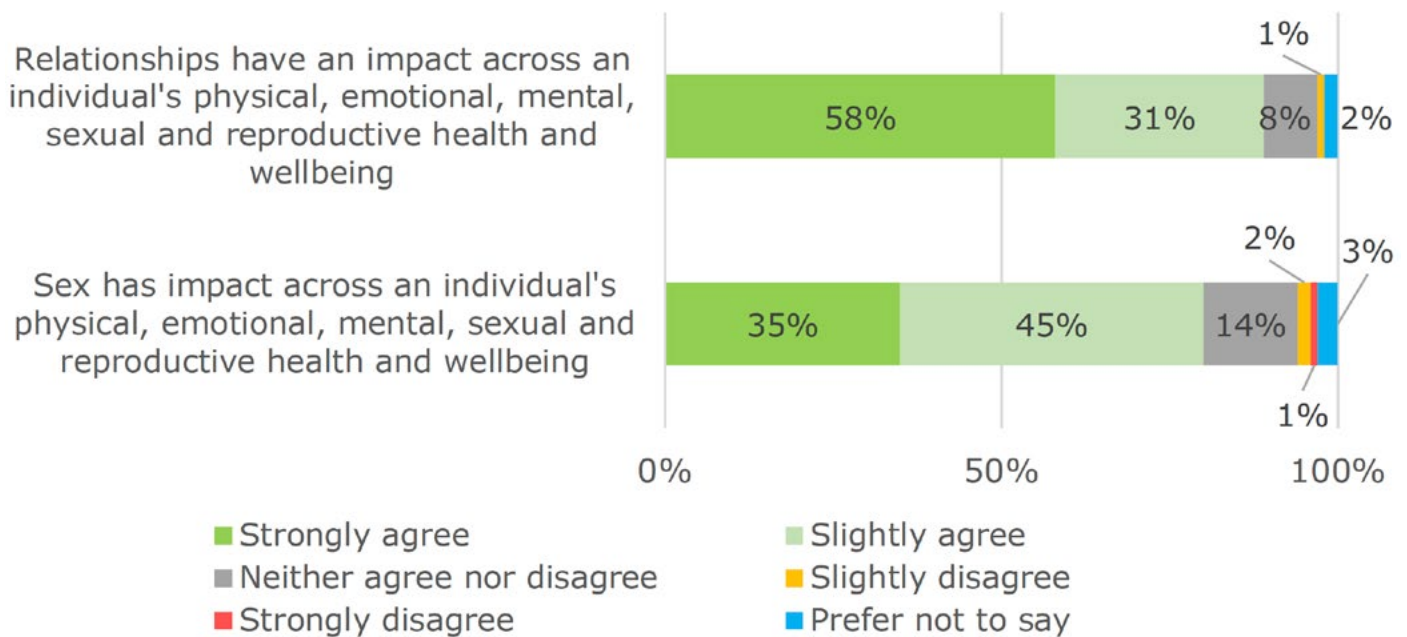
The proportion of students who report feeling 'very' or 'fairly' confident are similar across 'how to recognise the positive aspects of intimate relationships' (84%); 'what constitutes healthy relationships' (86%); and in recognising 'what the characteristics of healthy relationships offline are' (84%).

Supporting students around sex and relationships

Sex and relationships have a significant impact on wellbeing, a point which is now acknowledged as an integral part of the learner's experience.³⁶ We asked students how they feel about sex and relationships and how they feel they are supported by their higher education institution. The majority of students (89%) 'slightly' or 'strongly' agree that relationships have an impact across an individual's health and wellbeing while just 1% 'slightly disagree' and 8% 'neither agree nor disagree' and 2% 'prefer not to say'.

Overall the picture is similar for the impact of sex on health and wellbeing, with 80% 'strongly' or 'slightly' agreeing, 14% neither agreeing nor disagreeing and 3% 'strongly' or 'slightly' disagreeing and 3% preferring not to say.

To what extent do you agree with each statement? (n=1,004)

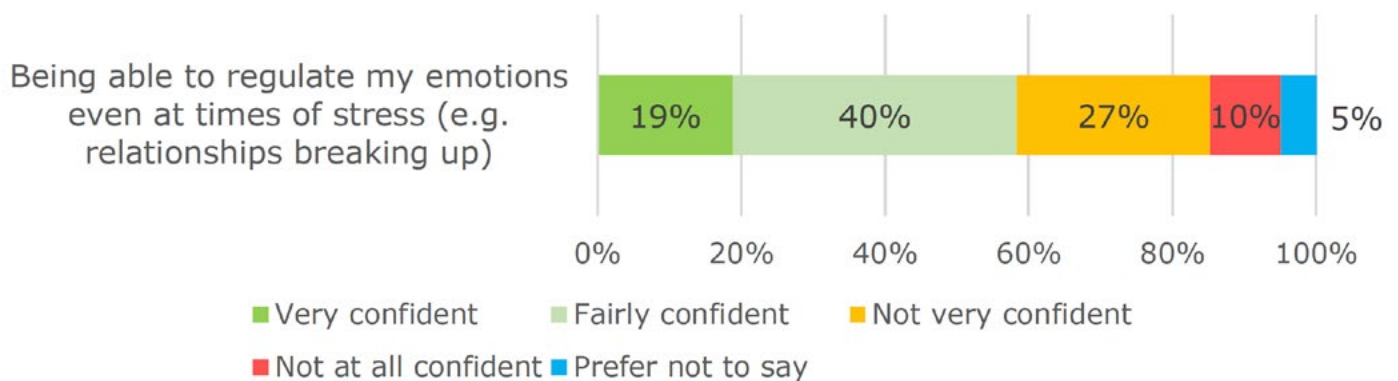


Relationship break ups

Three-fifths (59%) of all respondents report being confident about how to regulate emotions at times of stress, which includes relationships breaking up, although 37% report being 'not very confident'.

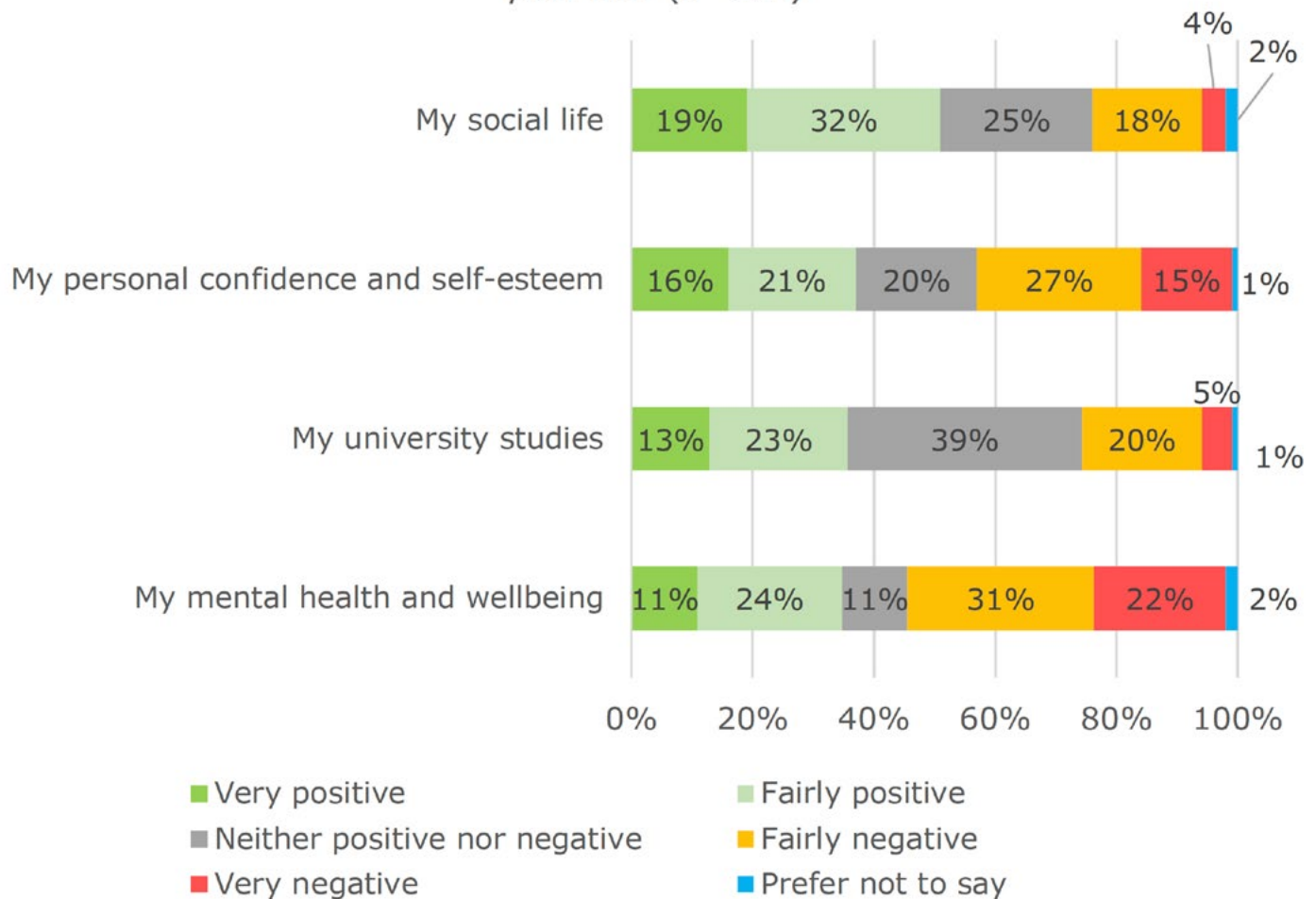
Disabled students report lower levels of confidence with 49% reporting being 'very confident' or 'fairly confident', while 47% report being 'not very confident' or 'not at all confident'.

How confident would you say you are in the following area?
(n=1,004)



In the context of the UN Standard Rules on the 'Equalization of Persons with Disabilities', Dr Sonali Shah at the University of Nottingham emphasises the rights of young people living with disabilities to 'experience sexuality, have sexual relationships [and] information in accessible form on the sexual functioning of their bodies', all of which clearly presupposes that they have equally a sound understanding of how to deal, positively, with 'breaking up' and safeguarding their own emotional wellbeing.³⁷

Thinking about the most recent relationship which ended, to what extent did it have an impact on the following aspects of your life? (n=222)



We asked all students who have had a relationship end at university (n=222) what impact it had on various aspects of their life. More than half of these students (55%) report break ups having a 'fairly negative' or 'very negative' effect on their mental health and wellbeing with 35% reporting a 'very positive' or 'fairly positive' effect. 13% report 'neither a positive nor negative' effect, while 2% 'prefer not to say'. A fifth (22%) of these students report break ups having a 'very negative' impact on their mental health and wellbeing.

Understanding online relationships and sexuality

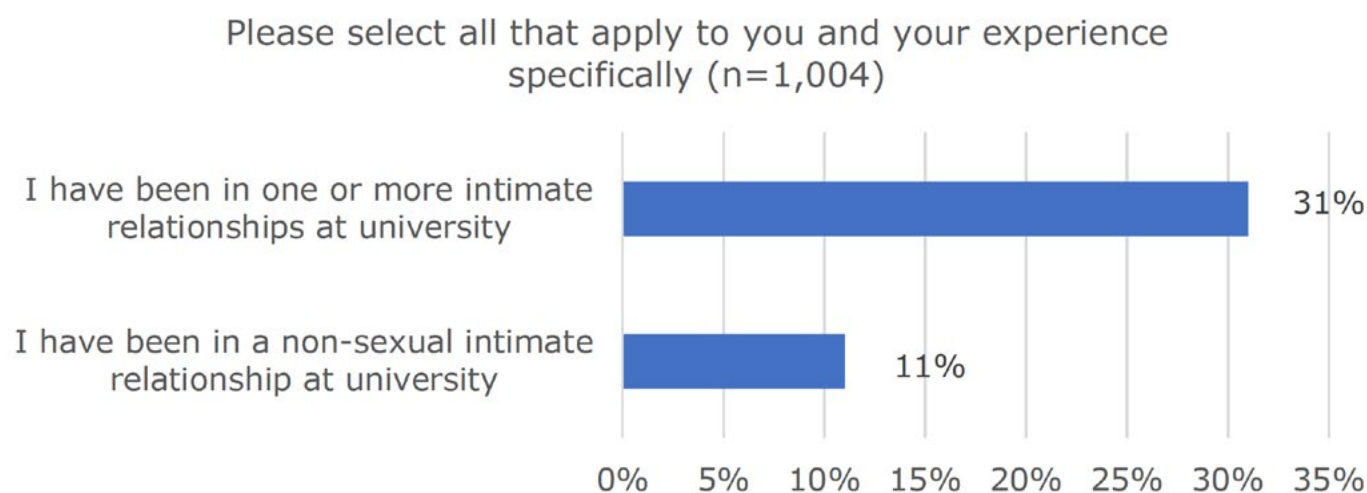
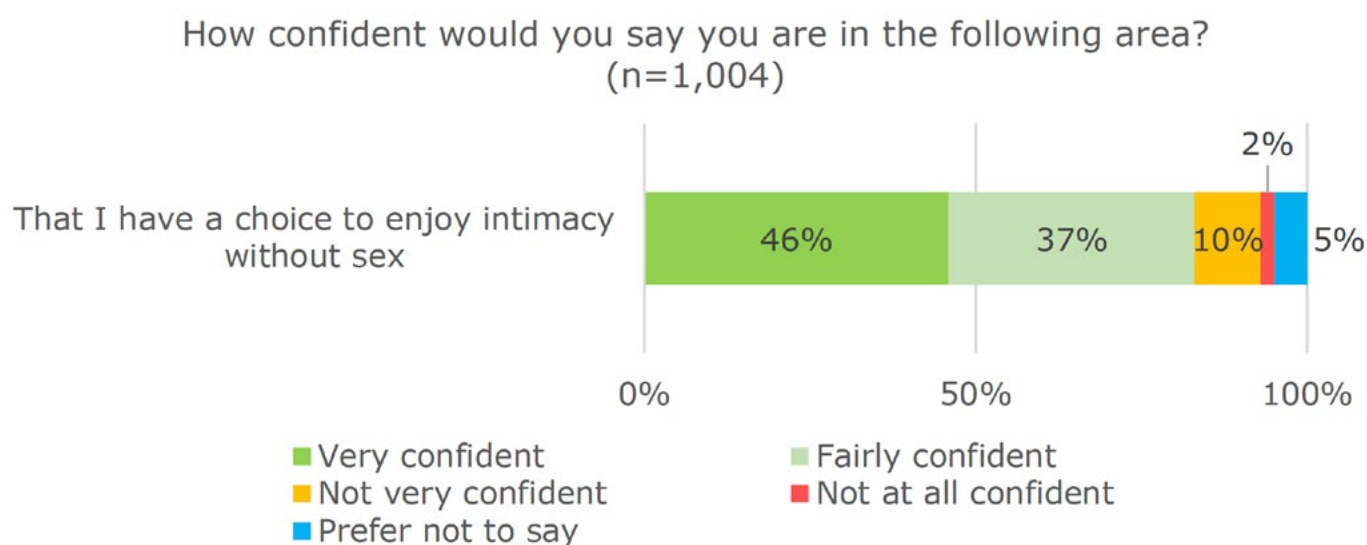
Students feel confident about the risks of online relationships, with 40% reporting feeling 'very confident' and 46% 'fairly confident'. On the other hand, 10% are not confident and 4% 'prefer not to say'.

Nearly three-quarters (72%) of students are confident about the characteristics of healthy online relationships, split between 25% who are 'very confident' and 47% who are 'fairly confident'. Meanwhile, 21% report feeling 'not very confident' and 3% 'not at all confident', while 4% 'prefer not to say'.

Student confidence is lower on how to express oneself sexually online, with 15% reporting that they are 'very confident' and 28% reporting that they are 'fairly confident'. The net level of confidence (43%) is similar to the net non-confidence level (48%) which is split between 18% reporting being 'not at all confident' and 30% reporting being 'fairly confident'.

Non-sexual intimacy

More than four-fifths of students report feeling 'very confident' or 'fairly confident' that they have a choice to enjoy intimacy without sex (83%) while 12% report feeling 'not very confident' or 'not at all confident'.

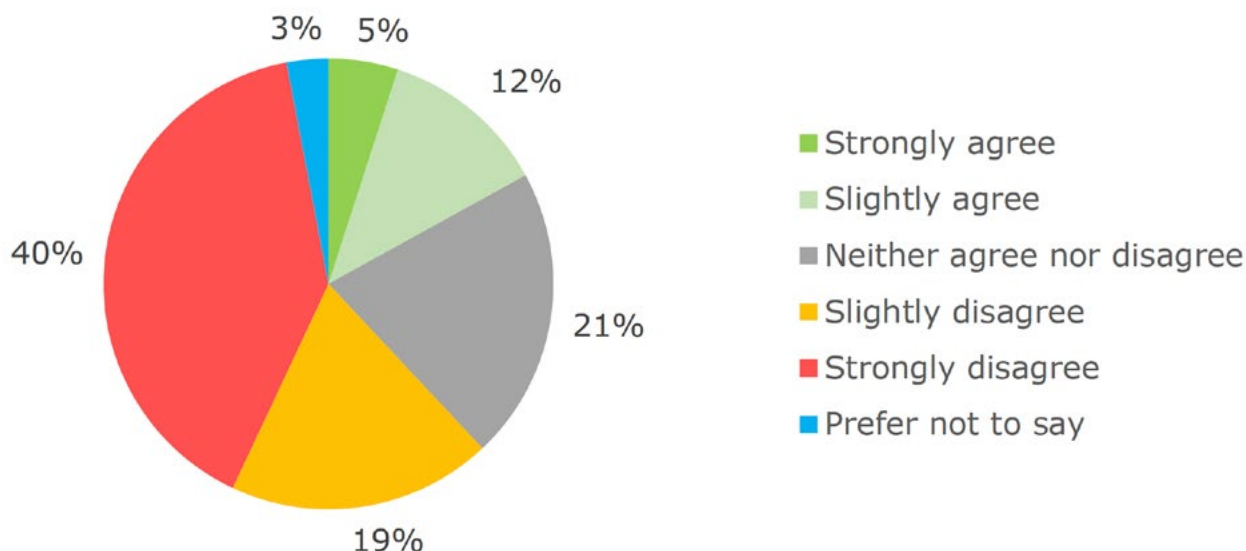


We asked about students' experiences of sex and relationships at the start of higher education and one-tenth (11%) said they 'felt pressure to have sex'.

At the time of polling in August 2020 one-in-ten students (11%) reported they were 'voluntarily abstaining from sex' due to reasons other than the lockdown.

We also asked how far the formal education students had received at school 'discouraged [them] from having sex outside marriage'. While three-fifths (59%) 'strongly' or 'slightly' disagreed, 17% 'strongly' or 'slightly' agreed.

The formal education I received at school overall discouraged me from having sex outside marriage (n=1,004)

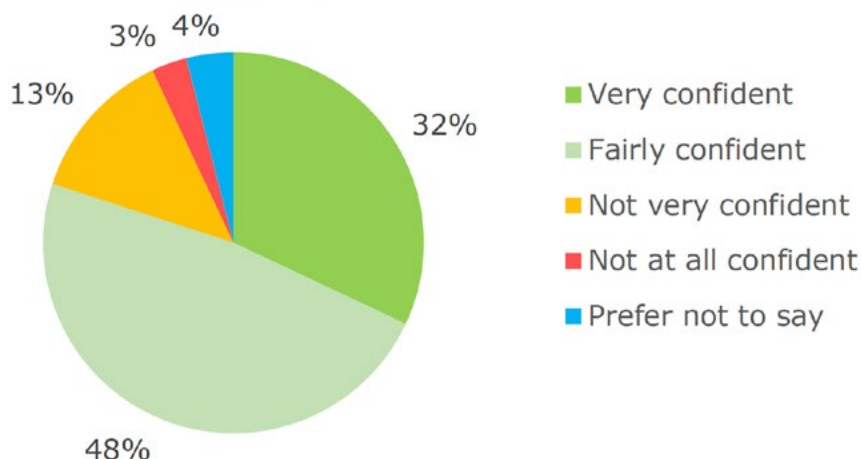


Reproductive health

Most students feel confident about reproductive health, with 32% reporting feeling 'very confident' and 48% feeling 'fairly confident'. While 4% 'prefer not to say', 3% feel 'not at all confident' and 13% report feeling 'not very confident'.

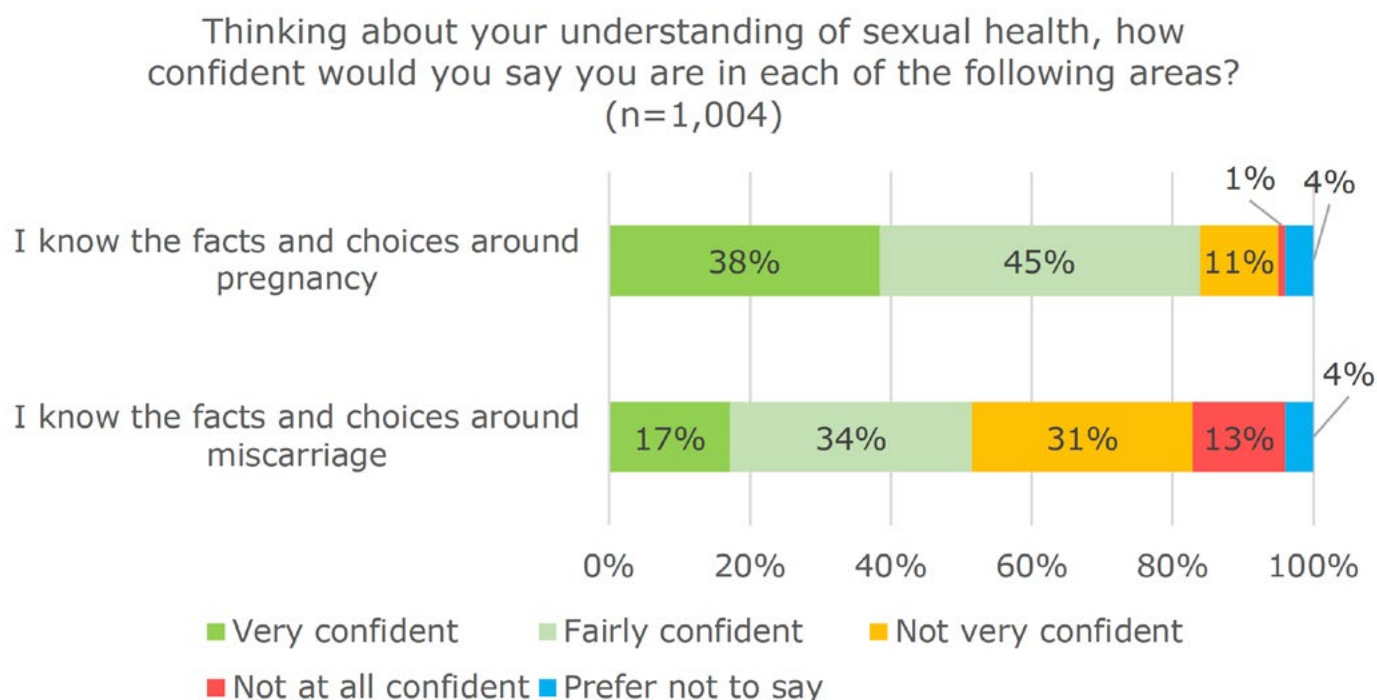
Official figures from Public Health England show sexual infection rates in the under-24 age group vary by gender, age, ethnicity and sexual orientation. Therefore it remains very important for higher education institutions to signpost all services relating to contraception, emergency contraception, abortion advice, sexual health (genito-urinary) and free condoms.

How confident would you say you are in each of the following areas: the details of reproductive health for male and female bodies (n=1,004)



Pregnancy matters

Students' net confidence levels are higher around facts and choices regarding pregnancy (83%) than the net confidence levels concerning miscarriage (51%).



We asked students about their experiences of unplanned pregnancy and abortion while at university. A small proportion of students (3%) report having, or their partner having, experienced an unintended pregnancy while at university. A similarly small proportion (2%) of students report having had an abortion while at university or report their partner having had an abortion while at university. It is expected that around 1-in-3 women in England and Wales will have (at least one) abortion during their lifetime.³⁸

Sexual health and knowledge of sexual health services

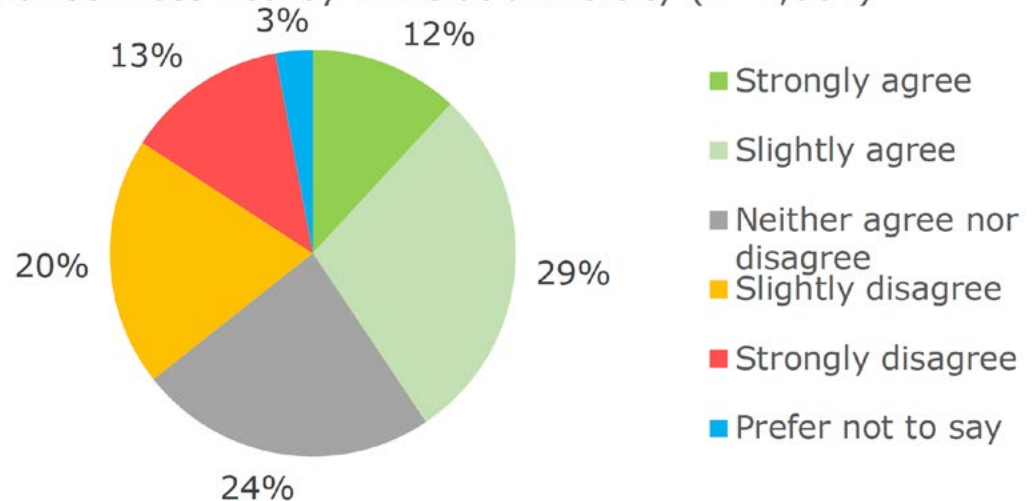
We asked all students how far they agree with the statement 'I have received clear health education on the availability of sexual health services nearby while at university'. Students' responses were split, with 41% 'strongly' or 'slightly' agreeing, a quarter neither agreeing nor disagreeing (24%) and a third 'strongly' or 'slightly' disagreeing (33%).

It is important that sexual health and contraceptive services are advertised clearly and easily across a range of student health and wellbeing platforms.

Although the majority of students (78%) are 'very confident' or 'fairly confident' that sexual health services are confidential and free, 17% are not confident about this fact and 5% prefer not to say. This might put off some students visiting sexual health centres which would be detrimental to their health.

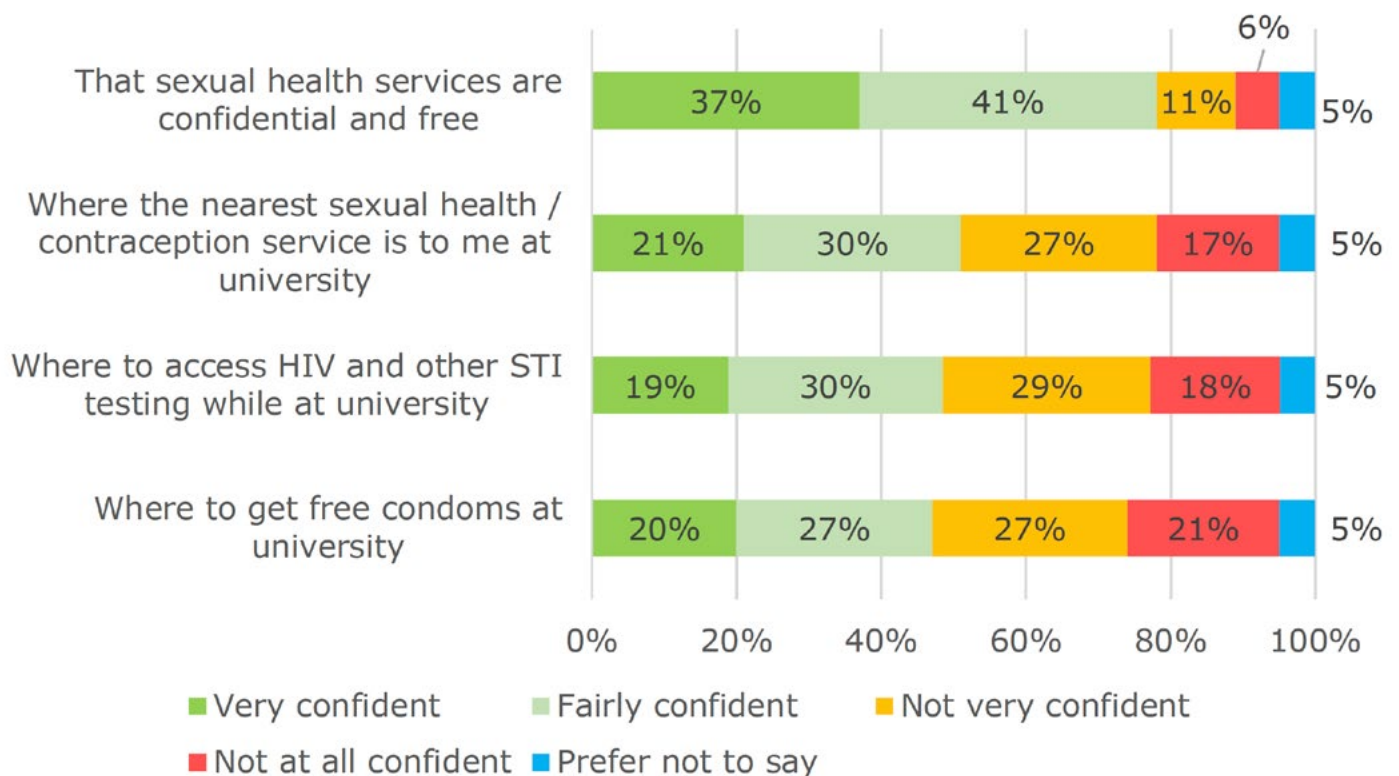
Half (51%) of students are 'very confident' or 'fairly confident' about where the nearest sexual health / contraception service is to them at university, but 44% are 'not very confident' or 'not at all confident', hence the importance of making such information easily accessible and routine.

I have received clear health education on the availability of sexual health services nearby while at university (n=1,004)



Similarly, 49% of students are 'very confident' or 'fairly confident' about where they can access HIV and sexually transmitted infection (STI) testing while at university, while 47% are 'not very confident' or 'not at all confident'. Confidence is higher among students in their third year of study or later (54%) than those in their first year (41%). Since the various UK national lockdowns due to COVID, the majority of sexual health services have ensured an online provision of asymptomatic sexual infection and HIV testing services.

How confident do you feel about each of these areas?
(n=1,004)

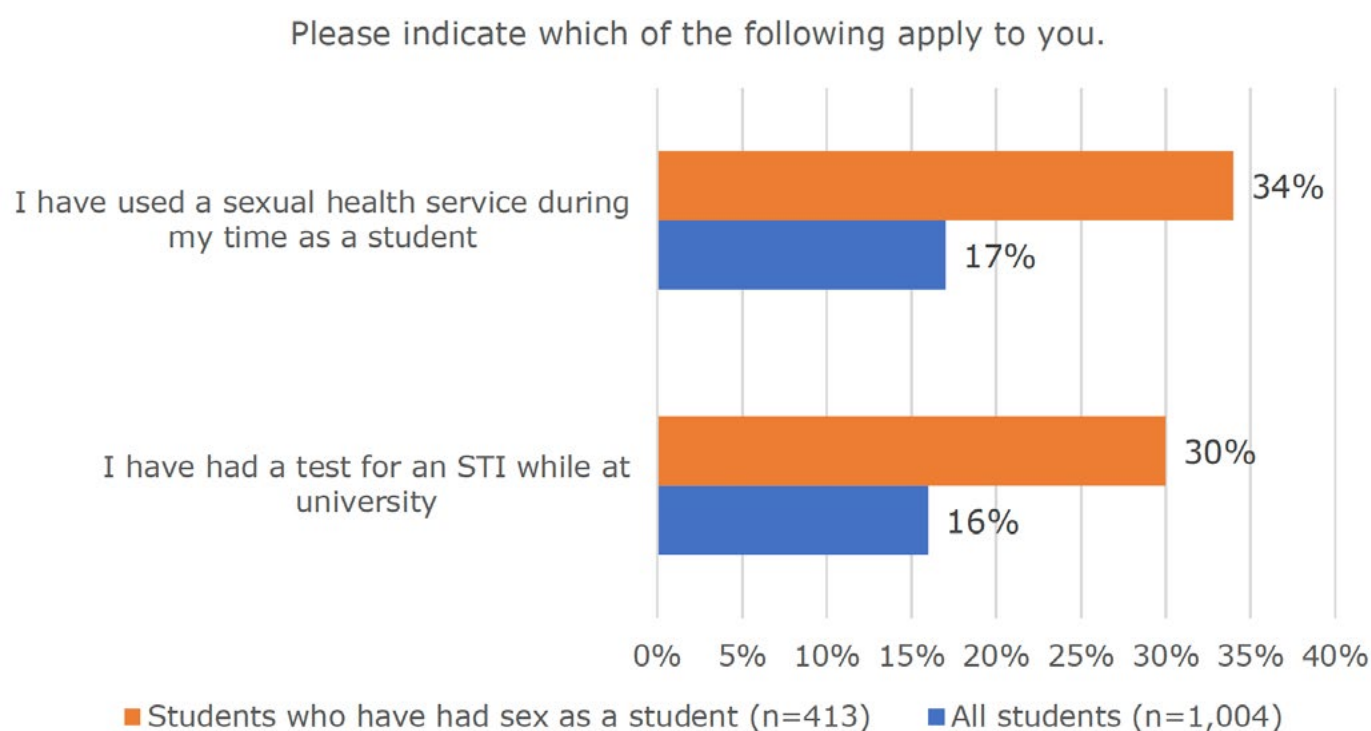


Almost a half of students (47%) are also 'very confident' or 'fairly confident' about where to get free condoms at their higher education institution but a similar proportion (48%) are 'not very confident' or 'not at all confident'.

Similar to the previous section, the picture here is one of students split fairly evenly between those who are aware and knowledgeable about sexual health services and those who are not. Given the increasing numbers of sexual infections, emphasising free access to condoms is critical, along with enhancing knowledge, attitudes, skills and habits of using condoms for sexual infection prevention, not simply as a method of contraception.³⁹

Testing for sexually transmitted infections (STIs)

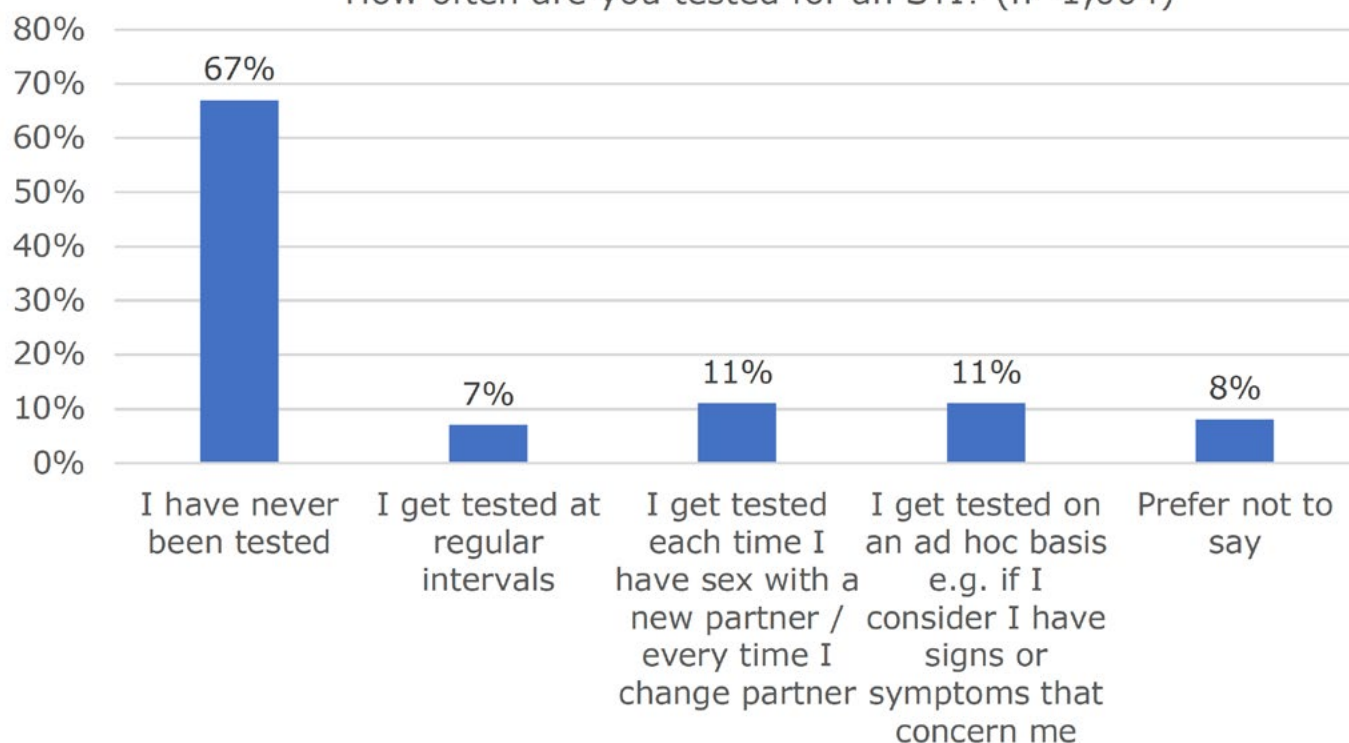
Approximately a third of students who have had sex at university report that they have used a sexual health service during their time as a student (34%). Three-in-ten (30%) students who report having had sex at university (n=413) report having had a test for a sexually transmitted infection while at university. Of the total student population, approximately a sixth of students (16%) report having had an STI test while a student.



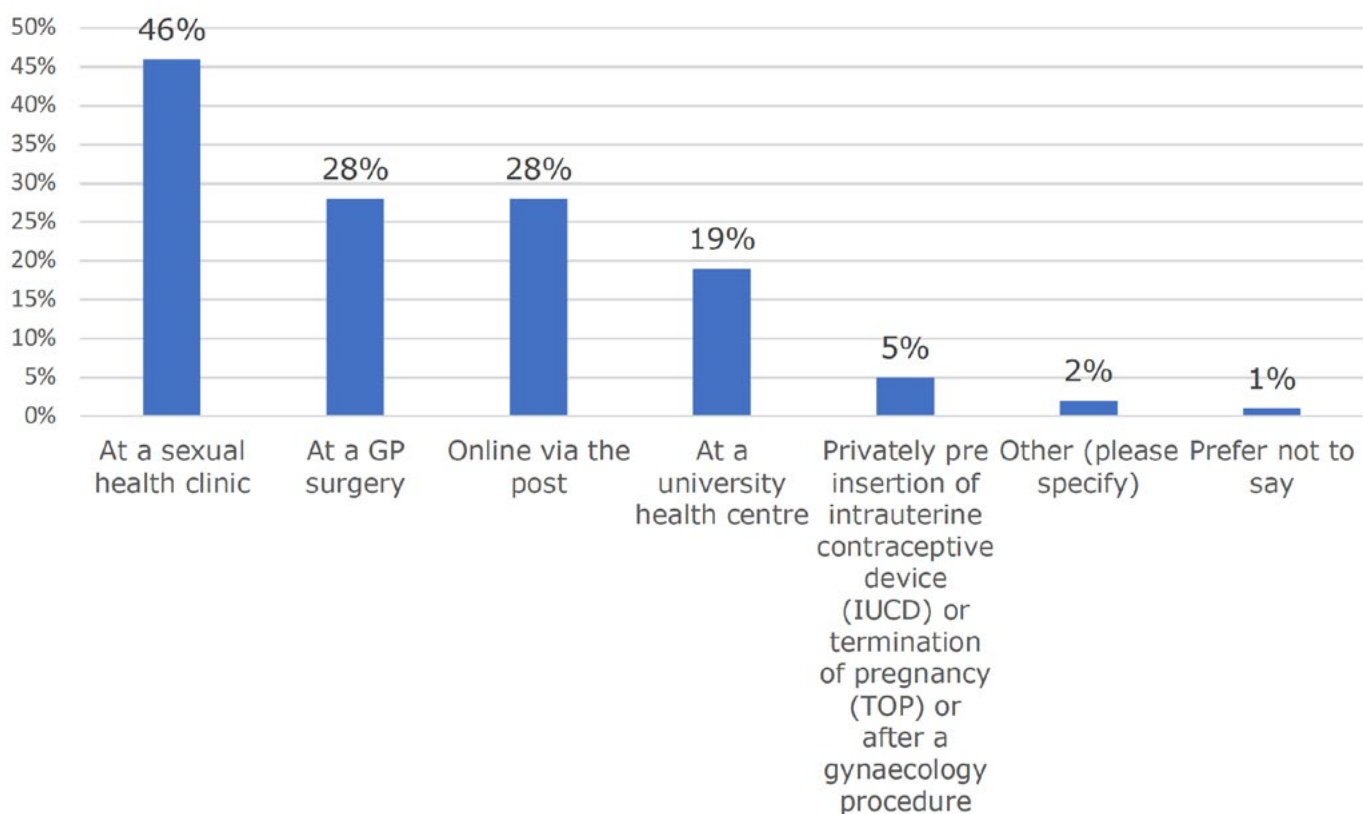
We asked all students how often they get tested for an STI (giving them the option to choose more than one). Two-thirds of students (67%) report never having been tested, either as a student or prior to attending higher education, while 7% of students report that they get tested 'at regular intervals' and 11% when they 'have sex with a new partner' or if they think they 'have signs of symptoms' that concern them (11%).

Over half of students who have had sex as a student have never been tested (56%) compared to about three-quarters (74%) of students who have not had sex as a student.

How often are you tested for an STI? (n=1,004)



Students who report having been tested for an STI before: Where or how have you received testing? Tick all that apply (n=253)

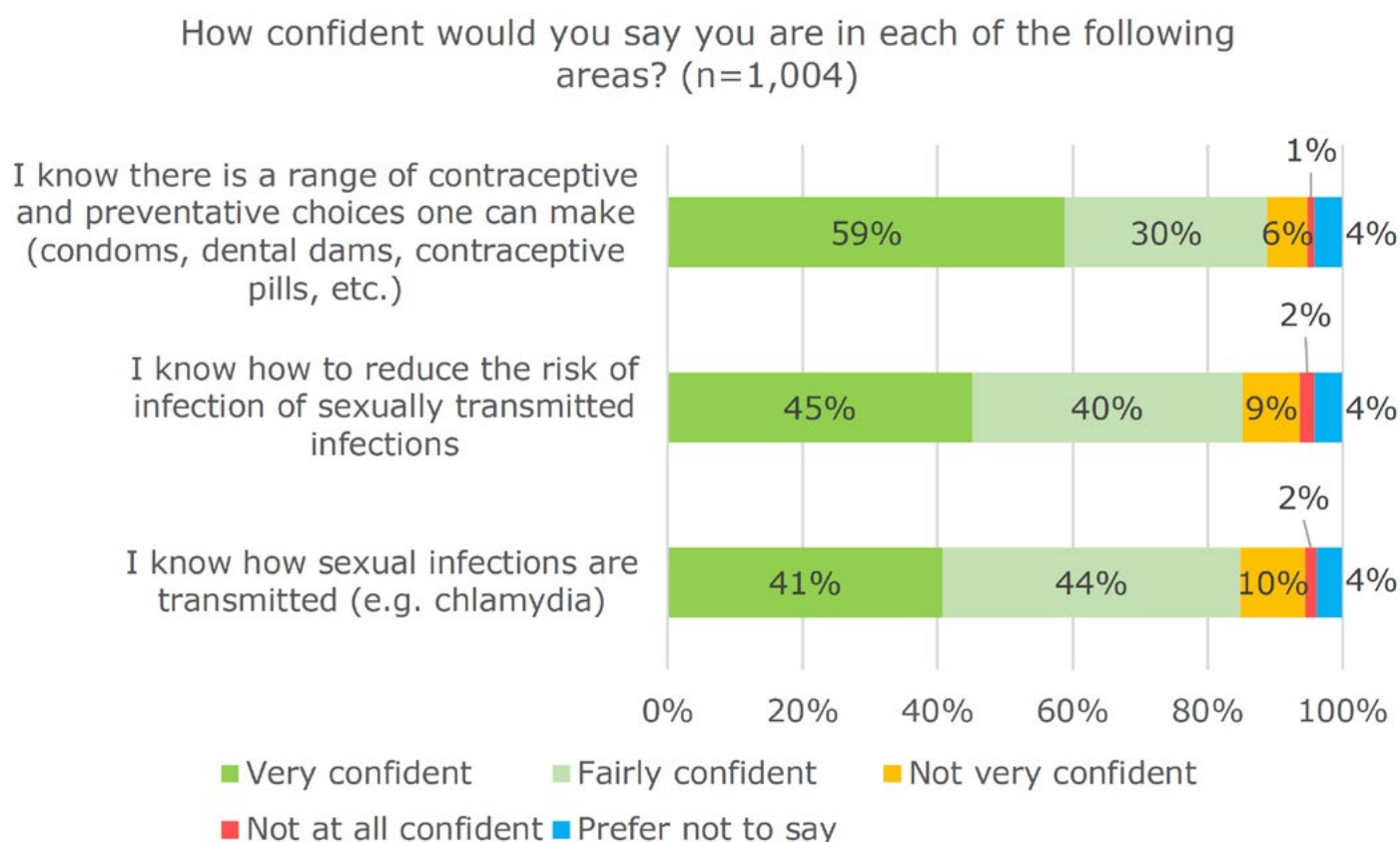


These figures are significantly lower than the recommended number of tests for young people having sex, where, for example, the NHS advises sexually active under 25-year olds to have a Chlamydia test at least once every two years and / or each time they have a new partner.⁴⁰

Of those students who report having been tested for an STI before, almost half (46%) report having been tested at a sexual health clinic. Similar numbers report testing for an STI at a GP surgery (28%) or via a postal test (28%), with a fifth (19%) having been tested at a university health centre and 5% privately in connection with a gynaecological procedure. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers noted an increase in young people opting for online (e-STI) testing, where tests are done at home.⁴¹ Many mainstream sexual health services have since routinely provided asymptomatic testing via this method.

Knowledge of sexual health topics

We asked students how confident they are in understanding topics around sexual health. The net confidence rates across a range of questions about two commonly talked about issues – contraception and protection against sexually shared infections – were high. Nine-in-ten (89%) students are 'very confident' or 'fairly confident' about the range of contraceptive and preventative choices; and 85% feel 'very confident' or 'fairly confident' about how to reduce the risk of STIs. Meanwhile, 85% feel 'very confident' or 'fairly confident' about how sexual infections are transmitted.

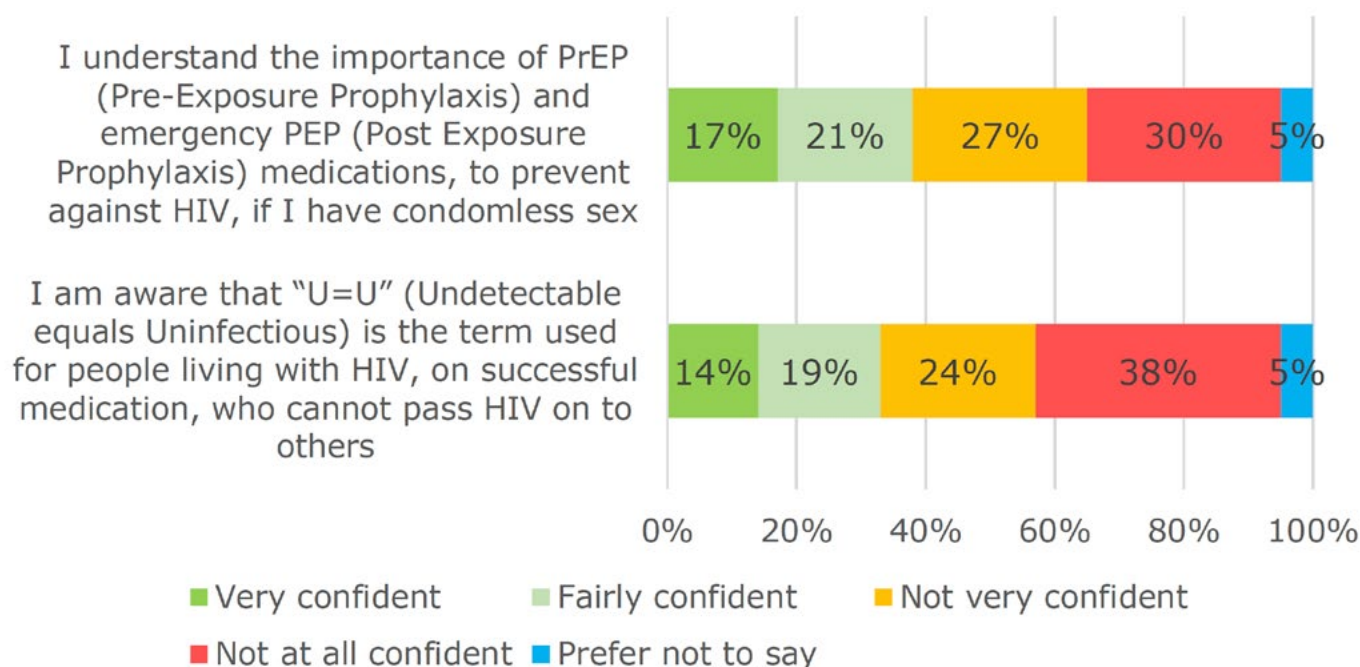


SPOTLIGHT: Key HIV knowledge

While students report general confidence across some areas of sexual health, confidence levels around HIV are significantly lower. We asked students questions around HIV prevention. Problems with low levels of HIV awareness lead to a greater chance of late diagnosis, which has a detrimental impact on disease progression and the potential for passing the virus on to others.⁴² Over and above condom use for HIV prevention, more recent prevention strategies have widened to include an emphasis on HIV testing ('know your status' campaigns) and rapid starting of anti-HIV medication by those diagnosed with the virus, to double-up as 'Treatment as Prevention' (TasP).⁴³ Lowering a person's viral load through such medication leads to a state of 'Undetectable equals Uninfectious', which means it cannot be passed on. Post Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP) and Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) are two other HIV prevention strategies, with the latter being the most recent addition. PEP is taken for about 28 days after an incident of potential exposure, whereas PrEP is taken before a potential exposure.⁴⁴ Each still require greater awareness-raising for every person who may be at risk of acquiring the virus.

A sixth (17%) of students report feeling 'very confident' and 21% 'fairly confident' about the importance of PrEP and PEP medications to prevent against HIV if they were to have condomless sex. On the other hand, 30% report feeling 'not at all confident' and 27% report feeling 'not very confident', while 5% 'prefer not to say'.

HIV focus: Thinking about your understanding of sexual health, how confident would you say you are in each of the following areas? (n=1,004)



Gay and bisexual male students report higher levels of confidence about PrEP and PEP medications with 39% reporting feeling 'very confident' and 33% reporting being 'fairly confident', meaning almost three-quarters (72%) express confidence.

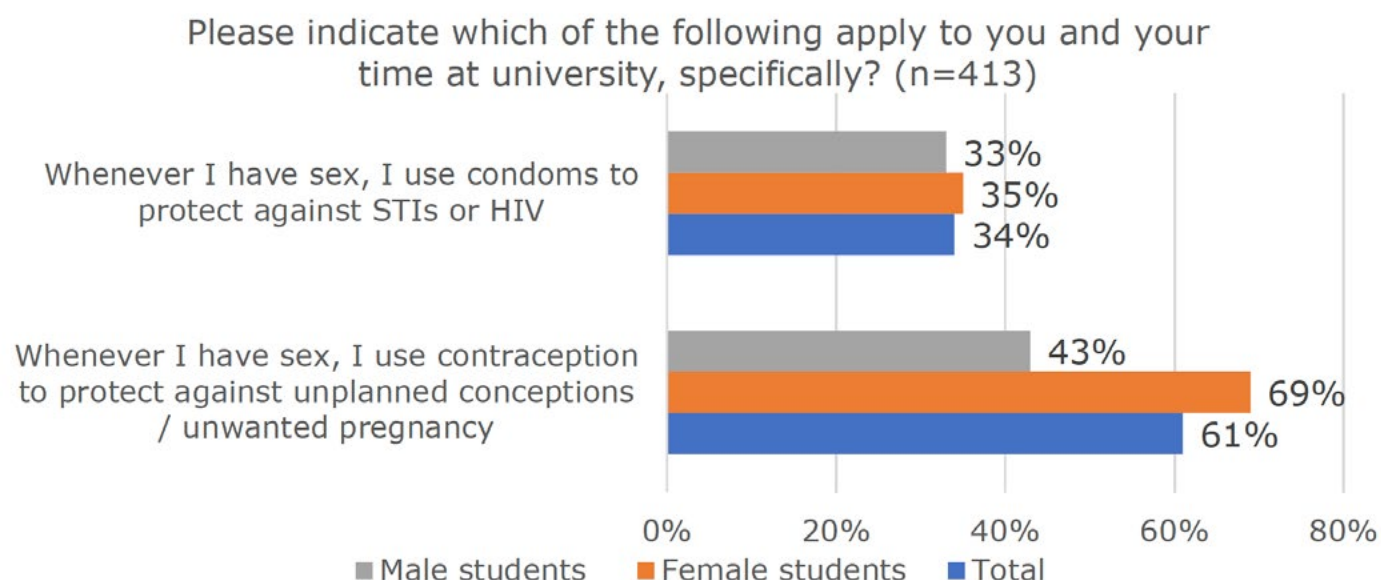
The picture is similar in reference to 'U=U' (Undetectable equals Uninfectious) with 14% of

all respondents reporting feeling 'very confident' and 19% 'fairly confident' about the term. However, approximately three-fifths (62%) report not feeling confident, split between 38% who are 'not at all confident' and 24% who are 'not very confident', while 5% 'prefer not to say'.

Contraception and protection against STIs

We asked students who report having had sex as a student whether they use contraception when they have sex. Approximately a third (34%) of students who report having had sex while at university say they always use condoms to protect against STIs or HIV. Three-fifths of students report always using some form of contraception when they have sex (61%).

Similar numbers of male and female students use condoms to protect against STIs or HIV. Significantly more female students report using contraception against unplanned conceptions / pregnancies (69%) than male students (43%).



There was not a statistically significant difference between heterosexual and gay or bisexual males in condom usage. Given the decades-long campaigns – especially in gay venues and the media – of condom use to protect against HIV in male-to-male sex, this result may appear low. However, condom usage has been declining since the advent and increasing availability of PrEP (Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis), and this is potentially compounded by the low level of Sex and Relationship Education awareness about HIV reported in Chapter 1.⁴⁵

While contraception use reduces unplanned conceptions / pregnancies, STIs continue to rise for most infections in this age group. Therefore, a sexual health promotion message that encourages condom use as a prevention against sexual infections is highly desirable.⁴⁶

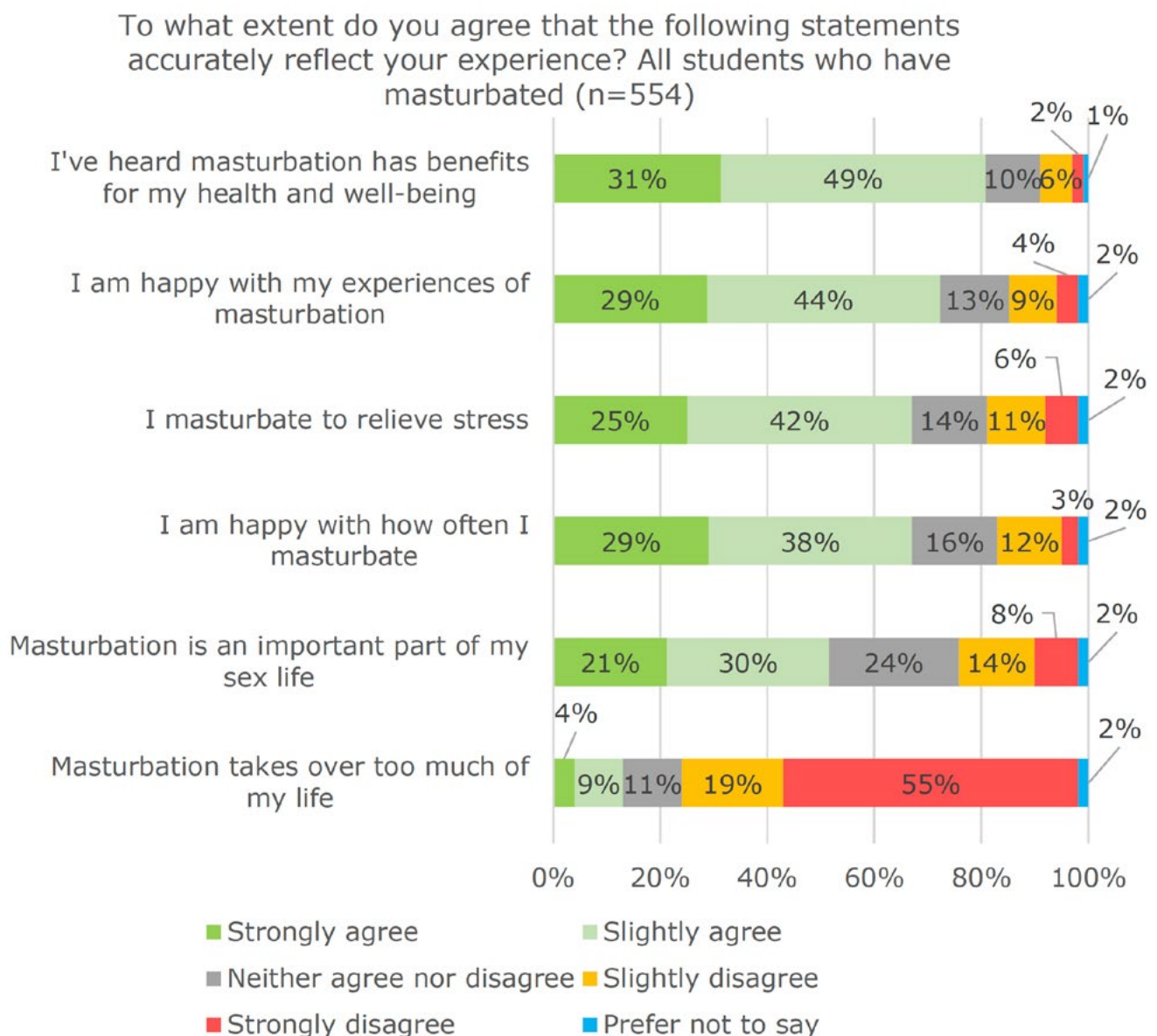
4. Masturbation and pornography

Masturbation

We presented students who acknowledged they had masturbated previously (n=554) with statements about masturbation to understand their knowledge, habits, feelings and responses. Overwhelmingly the picture is positive. Many young people grow up with negative messages about masturbation, messages which as one prominent piece of research put it 'contrive to foster a mythical cloud around the facts of life'.⁴⁷

Four-in-five (80%) of these students feel 'very' or 'fairly' confident that masturbation has benefits for their health and wellbeing. Approximately three-quarters (73%) report being 'happy with [their] experiences of masturbation' while 13% are not. Two-thirds (67%) 'slightly' or 'strongly' agree with the idea that they are happy with 'how often [they] masturbate', while only 15% 'slightly' or 'strongly' disagree.

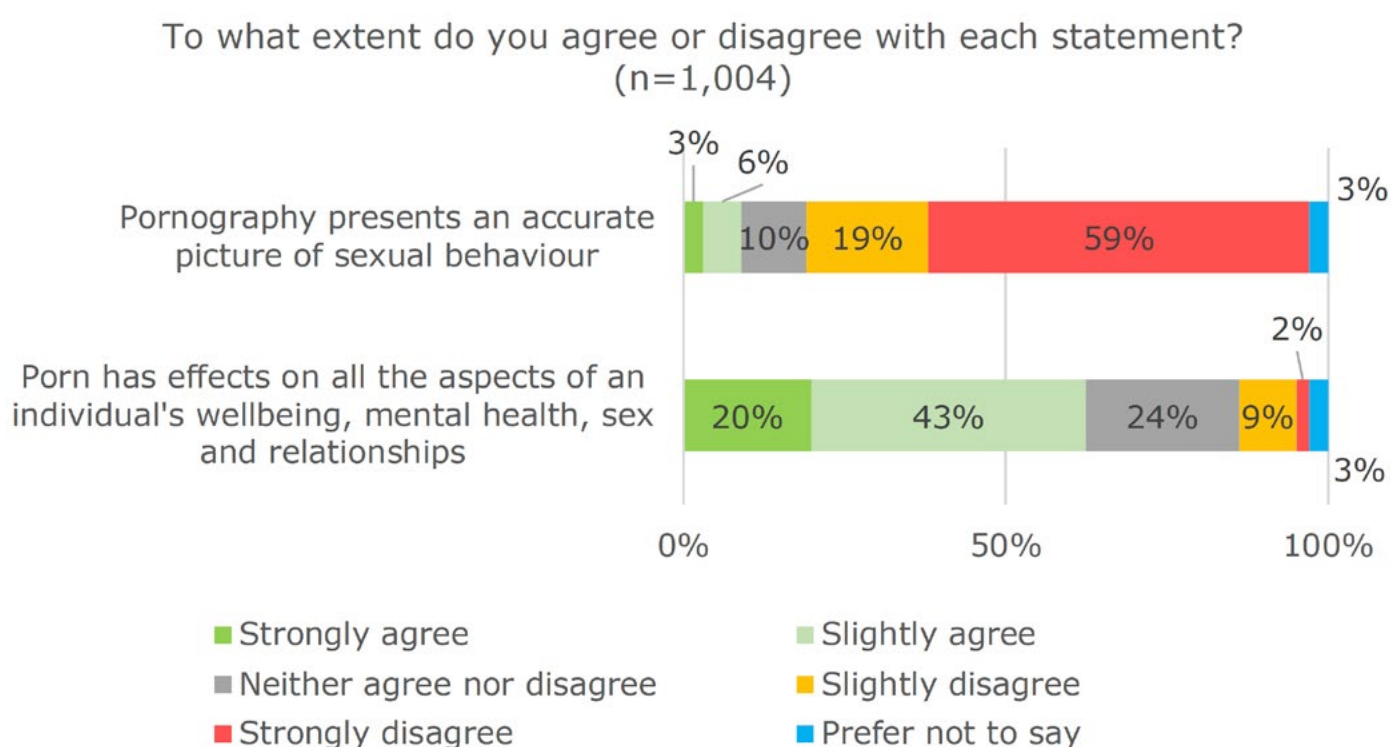
Three-quarters (74%) of students who acknowledged they had masturbated 'slightly' or 'strongly' disagree with the statement that 'masturbation takes over too much of my life' while 13% report that they 'slightly' or 'strongly' agree.



Despite this mostly positive picture, a small proportion of these students report potentially negative experiences and attitudes to masturbation. In addition, the data show that as students report varying attitudes and ideas about masturbation, any education about sex and relationships should take this into account. They also highlight the fact that although topics such as masturbation and self-stimulation are not part of the compulsory RSE curriculum, young people, nevertheless, learn about sex and health in diverse ways, including through personal experience and interpersonal relationships.

Pornography

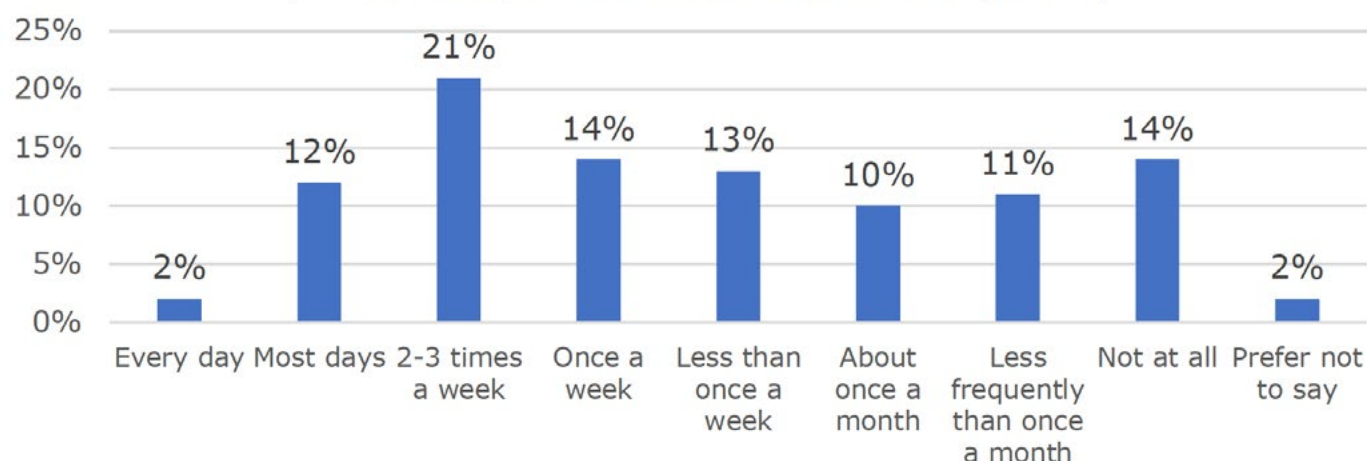
We asked students about their knowledge of pornography. While 59% 'strongly disagree' and 19% 'slightly disagree' with the idea that 'pornography presents an accurate picture of sexual behaviour', 3% 'strongly agree' and 6% 'slightly agree'. A tenth (10%) neither agree nor disagree.



We asked students about their perceptions of the impact of pornography on various aspects of their life. Approximately two thirds (63%) 'strongly agree' or 'slightly agree' with the idea that 'porn has effects on all the aspects of an individual's wellbeing, mental health, sex and relationships' while 11% either 'slightly disagree' or 'strongly disagree'. About a quarter (24%) 'neither agree nor disagree'.

We asked students who acknowledged having previously watched pornography how often they had watched it in the two months prior to the polling. These datapoints, therefore, represent students' experiences through the summer of 2020. Just as there was no typical experiences around masturbation, students' accounts of how often they watched pornography varied too. About half of students (49%) report having watched pornography at least once a week, with 23% reporting watching pornography less frequently than that but at least once a month. Approximately a tenth (11%) of students report that they watched pornography less than once a month and 14% report not having watched it at all in the period.

Students who have watched pornography before: How often have you watched porn in the last two months? (n=522)



Online pornography has been growing in recent years and now receives a huge amount of web traffic every day. According to web analytics service SimilarWeb, of the most visited websites in the UK, three pornography websites took the 13th, 14th and 15th position on the table in 2020, above sites like *The Daily Mail* (20th), *Guardian* (23rd) and Netflix (25th).⁴⁸ Pornography draws criticism and scrutiny yet it is a part of life for millions of people in the UK. We asked students about their experiences and feelings to understand how those who report having watched pornography feel about it.

The picture is mixed, with some areas of concern coming to the surface.

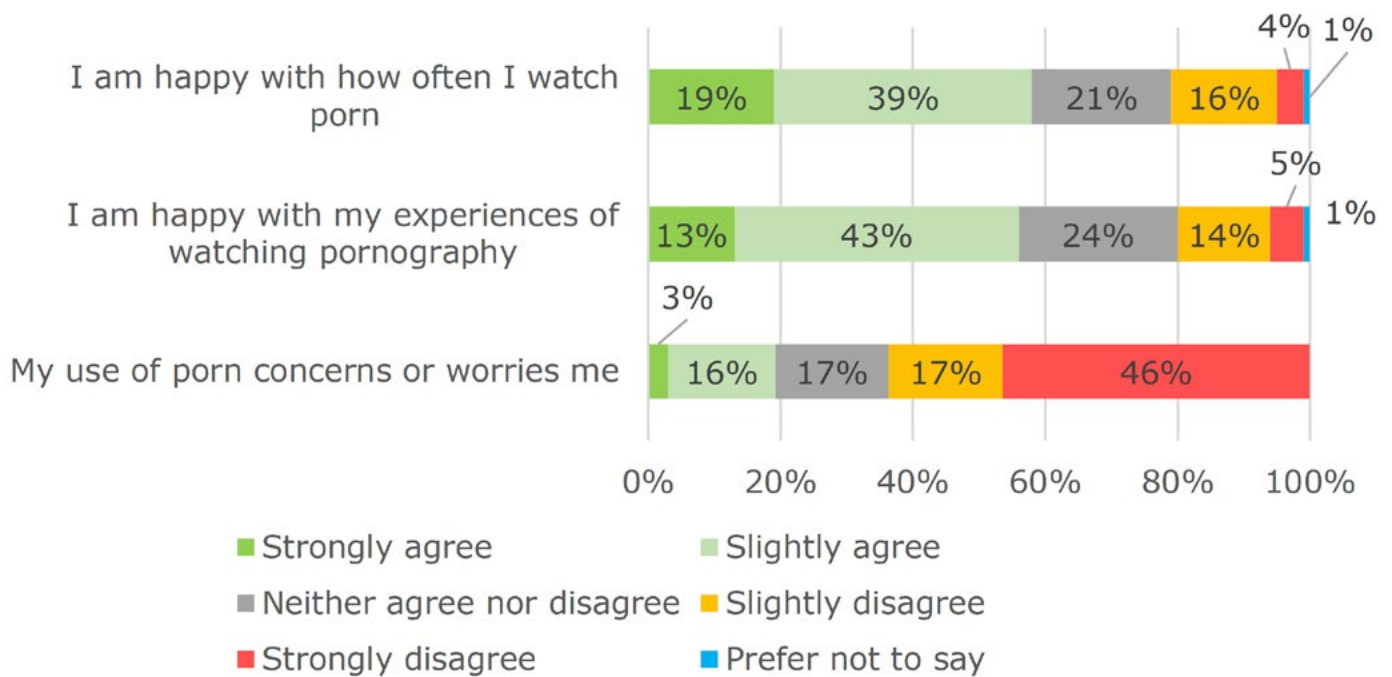
Of those respondents who report having watched pornography as a student, 56% agree that they are happy with their experiences of watching it. A quarter (24%) 'neither agree nor disagree' and a fifth (19%) disagree. The proportion of students who report concern is similar in response to other statements: 19% agree their use of pornography concerns them and 20% would not say they are happy with how often they watch pornography. Brook's wide-ranging webpage on pornography explores issues from healthy pornography use and legal issues to when pornography becomes harmful and issues related to addiction.⁴⁹

Research has been useful in highlighting issues of expectations versus reality, young people's learning about pornography (or lack, thereof) and poor emotional health. For example:

*[some] young people highlight concerns regarding sexual expectations from relationships, including body image, duration of sex and the "need" to perform certain acts with partners. Alongside this, they would also mention watching pornographic material and feeling a pressure to emulate this.*⁵⁰

We also asked students specific questions around their experiences of watching pornography, where a mixed picture emerges. Although half of students (51%) do not compare themselves unfavourably to pornography actors, a third of students (34%) report that they do, with 15% neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the statement.

All those who have watched pornography before as a student:
To what extent do you agree that these statements apply to
your experience? (n=450)

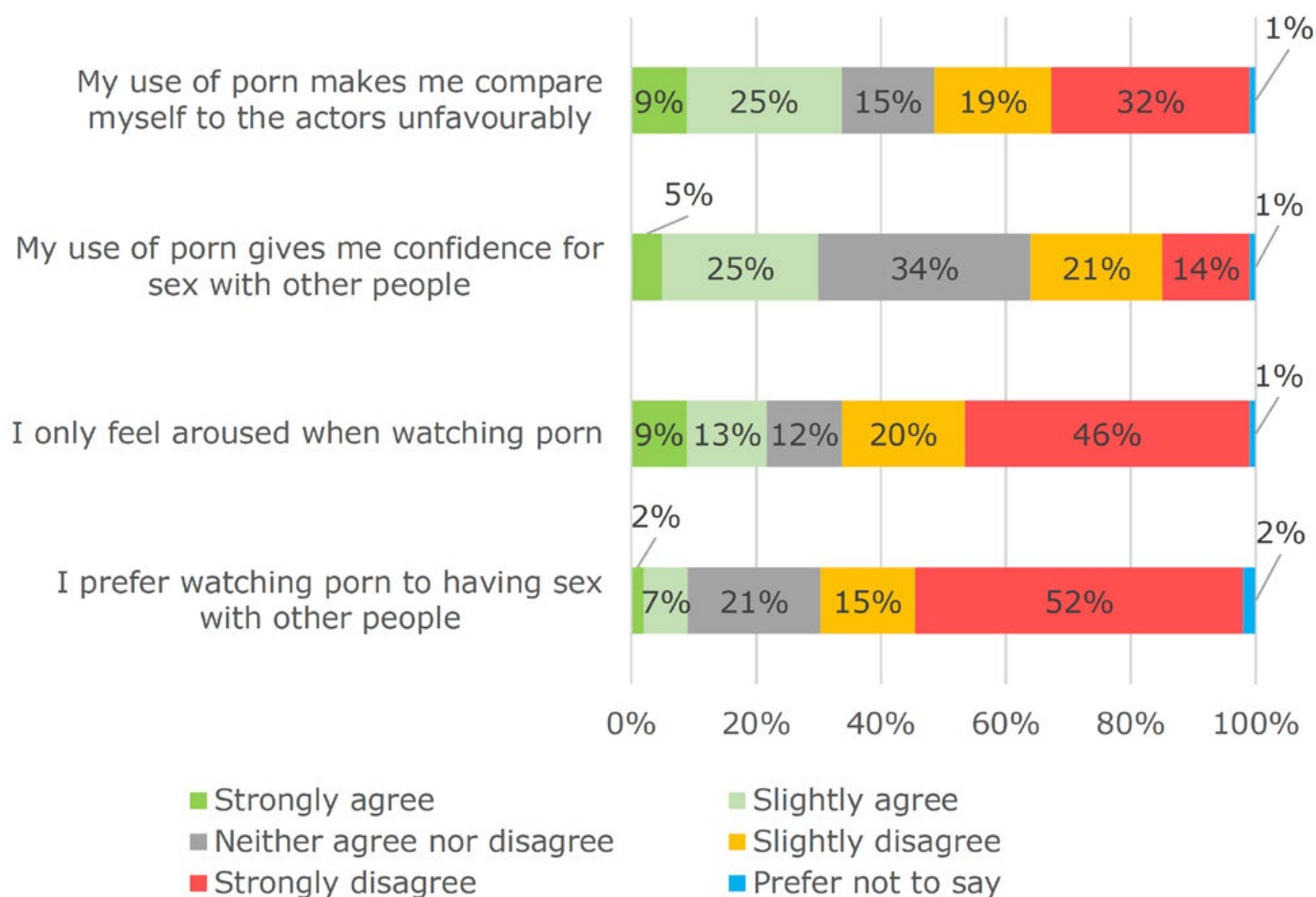


Three-in-ten (30%) of students who have watched pornography as a student agree that their use of pornography gives them confidence for sex with other people with a similar number disagreeing (35%) or not holding a strong opinion (34%). Although improved confidence might seem to be positive, it is concerning that students are using pornography as an educational resource.

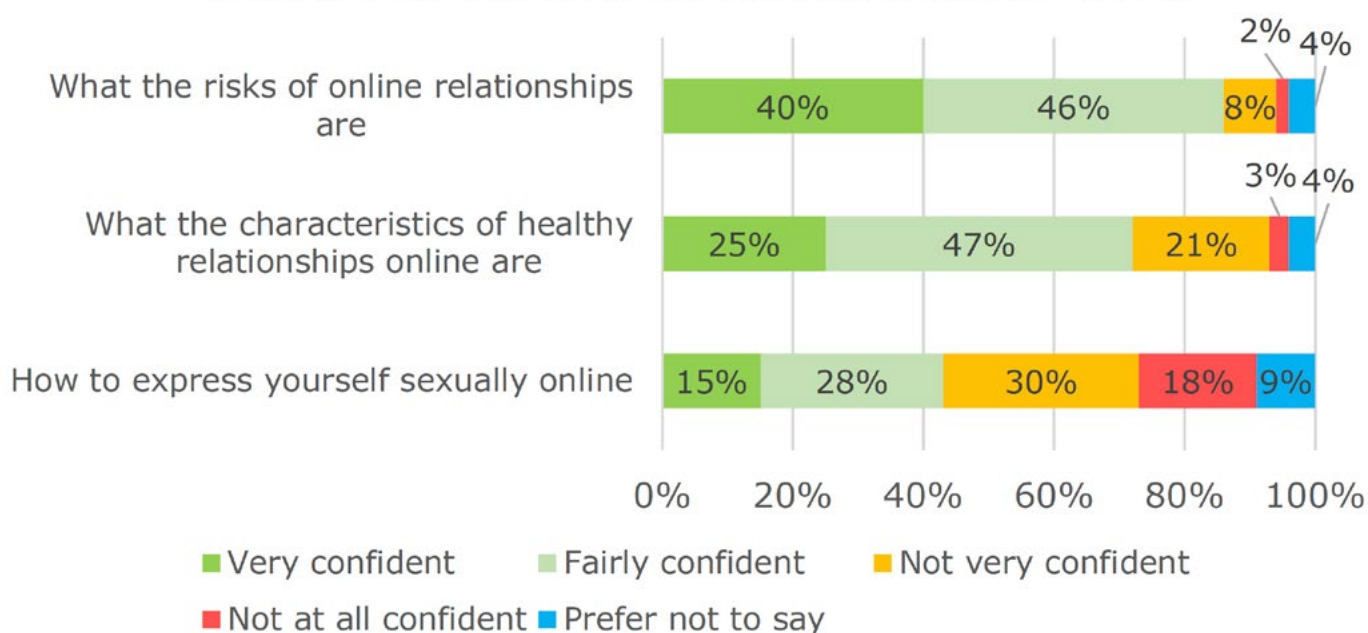
A fifth (22%) of students agree with the statement that they only feel aroused when watching pornography while two thirds disagree (66%) and 12% 'neither agree nor disagree'.

A small proportion of students who have watched pornography as a student (9%) report preferring to watch pornography than have sex with other people. Two-thirds disagree (67%) with this statement and a fifth (21%) 'neither agree nor disagree'. In addition, a small proportion of students report having paid (3%) for pornography.⁵¹

All those who have watched pornography before as a student –
To what extent do you agree that these statements apply to
your experience? (n=450)



Thinking about your knowledge of relationships, how confident
would you say you are in the following areas? (n=1,004)



Conclusion

The data in this report shed light on a range of topics and we invite the higher education sector to reflect more on what role institutions might play to support their students' wellbeing through the lens of sexual health and personal relationships.

Traditionally, education about sex and relationships has not been something higher education institutions have provided. In the first chapter, many students report they do not think the education they have received is sufficient from school or parents – often considered the two primary sources for such education. This is especially the case among LGBT+, disabled and BAME students. Although compulsory RSE is now being rolled out in England and may improve the confidence of school-leaver students in these areas, the first cohort who have had compulsory RSE all the way through their education will not apply for higher education until the latter half of this decade. Therefore, this is an area in which higher education institutions should consider more support for their students.

In recent months, there has been a growing focus on the widespread problem of sexual violence at higher education institutions. The second chapter highlights how much students would like consent education to be an important part of higher education for them and their peers. One area that comes out as particularly problematic is navigating sexual consent when alcohol has been consumed. This is an issue universities need to work with students to address. As universities plot their strategies to confront sexual violence, data from across this report might be useful in considering what role higher education institutions should and can play to build a more positive culture around sex and relationships.

The second half of the report shifts the emphasis from learning about sex and relationships to building a picture of students' sexual experiences and sexual health. Sexual health provision varies from institution to institution as with other health services. The data in the third chapter indicate that although students generally feel confident in being able to discuss issues in relation to their sexual health, they could be encouraged to adopt healthier and safer sexual practices, especially around protection against and testing for sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Students recognise that sexual health, sex and relationships intersect with mental health and wellbeing. Across the third and fourth chapters students share their reflections on topics ranging from sex to relationships, masturbation and pornography and how these impact their wellbeing. Higher education institutions are already aware that mental health and wellbeing is an area in which students need support and so may wish to consider if they have the resources to provide further support on sex, relationships and sexual health.

Endnotes

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- 2 Department for Education, *Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education*, 2019 ([https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/908013/Relationships Education Relationships and Sex Education RSE and Health Education.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/908013/Relationships_Education_Relationships_and_Sex_Education_RSE_and_Health_Education.pdf))
- 3 It is clear from research elsewhere that students also learn from speaking to peers and siblings, for example Brook's *Digital Romance* report. This is not an area we explored: it is likely that many of those conversations would draw on information from the sources outlined above, namely, online sources, school education and conversations with parents or guardians.
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- 5 Will Hazell, 'Schools allowed to delay compulsory sex education lessons until next summer because of coronavirus', *Independent*, 5 June 2020 (<https://inews.co.uk/news/compulsory-sex-education-relationships-delayed-schools-coronavirus-434523>)
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16 Quote from Chloe Meley, 'Sexual distancing: Will coronavirus spell the end of casual university hookups?', *The Independent*, 23 September 2020 <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/love-sex/coronavirus-university-freshers-week-sex-halls-lockdown-b484713.html>; Coverage was also in Sian Griffiths, 'Welcome to freshers' week coronavirus-style: no wild parties and no sex', *The Times*, 2 August 2020 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/welcome-to-freshers-week-coronavirus-style-no-wild-parties-and-no-sex-zjprw7qrg>; Bhvishya Patel, 'Fined for having sex on Fresher's Week: The new normal for university students in the era of coronavirus', *The Mail Online*, 2 August 2020: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8585157/Students-face-freshers-week-no-wild-parties-no-sex.html>; Brodie Owen, 'Sex ban for freshers (apart from housemates) to slow coronavirus', *Metro*, 3 August 2020 <https://metro.co.uk/2020/08/03/sex-banned-university-students-freshers-week-13074488/>; Amy Walker, 'Online and off the booze: 2020's new-model freshers' week', *Guardian*: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/aug/14/online-and-off-the-booze-2020s-new-model-freshers-week>; and The i: <https://inews.co.uk/news/education/sex-free-freshers-week-university-of-brighton-overnight-guests-halls-of-residences-572389>

17 This data-point aligns with work done by sexual health charity Brook's *Digital Romance* report, which report 84% of young people (14-to-24-year olds) had flirted at least once: https://www.brook.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/DR_REPORT_FINAL.pdf

18 There is a difference in how the data was collected: the *New Realists* data are from applicants to higher education recording their expectations of higher education while our new data are from current students reflecting on their expectations.

19 http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/49011/1/That's_what_she_said_full_report_Final_web.pdf

20 <https://www.unite-group.co.uk/sites/default/files/2019-09/new-realists-insight-report-2019.pdf>

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23 This broadly aligns with the survey the *Tab* ran which found that 74% of their respondents thought that there should be compulsory consent classes before university <https://thetab.com/uk/2017/09/05/nearly-half-of-freshers-are-worried-about-sexual-assault-during-freshers-47925>

24 Bianca Fileborn, 'Making sexual consent matter: one-off courses are unlikely to help', *The Conversation*, 14 February 2018 (<https://theconversation.com/making-sexual-consent-matter-one-off-courses-are-unlikely-to-help-91574>)

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- 32 <https://confi.co/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/3pg-Summary-Conf-College-Sexual-Assault-Study.pdf>
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- 34 Claire M.A. Salisbury and William A. Fisher, "Did You Come?" A Qualitative Exploration of Gender Differences in Beliefs, Experiences, and Concerns Regarding Female Orgasm Occurrence During Heterosexual Sexual Interactions', *The Journal of Sex Research*, Volume 51, Issue 6, 2014, pp.616-631 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00224499.2013.838934>
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- 36 https://worldsexualhealth.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/declaration_of_sexual_rights_sep03_2014.pdf
- 37 Sonali Shah, "Disabled People Are Sexual Citizens Too": Supporting Sexual Identity, Well-being, and Safety for Disabled Young People', *Frontiers in Education*, 2017 <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2017.00046>
- 38 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/891405/abortion-statistics-commentary-2019.pdf
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- 43 <https://www.tht.org.uk/hiv-and-sexual-health>
- 44 <https://www.tht.org.uk/hiv-and-sexual-health/prep-pre-exposure-prophylaxis>
- 45 <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/jun/06/rapid-rise-in-anti-hiv-prep-pills-linked-to-drop-in-condom-use#:~:text=Between%202013%20and%202017%2C%20the,from%2046%25%20to%2031%25>
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- 48 <https://www.similarweb.com/top-websites/united-kingdom/>
- 49 <https://www.brook.org.uk/your-life/porn/>
- 50 Richard H. Ainsworth-Masiello and David T. Evans, 'Expectations vs Reality: In which ways might watching porn online, as male and female adolescents, contribute to poor emotional health?', *Education and Health, The Schools and Students Health Education Unit*, Volume 37, Issue 4, 2019 <http://sheu.org.uk/sheux/EH/eh374ram.pdf>
- 51 Notably, of the 26 respondents, all 26 described their gender as male. No students who identified as 'female' or 'another gender' report having paid for pornography.

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There is little robust data on students' experiences of relationships, sex and sexual health.

In this report, which is based on a detailed poll of undergraduate students, we explore how higher education institutions can better support their students and what more can be done to ensure better sexual health among students.

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

We are UK-wide, independent and non-partisan.

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