

Paying more for less?

Careers and employability support for international students at UK universities



Higher Education Policy Institute



INTERNATIONAL
PATHWAYS

HEPI Report 143

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About this research

The Higher Education Policy Institute and Kaplan International Pathways jointly commissioned research on international students' experiences of careers and employability support in UK universities. This was split between qualitative research utilising focus groups undertaken by the Careers Research and Advisory Centre (CRAC) and a survey of international students conducted by Cibyl, a market research consultancy focused on students.

The qualitative element of the research occurred via three (online) focus groups held in June 2021 that were attended by 31 international students. One group was made up of students on a range of foundation pathway courses; one was made up of undergraduates; and the third was dedicated to postgraduates.

The focus group participants were studying a range of disciplines and were attending a range of providers, including pathway colleges, reflecting the heterogeneity of the UK's international student cohorts. The participants on pathway courses were invited to attend by Kaplan and recruitment for the undergraduate and postgraduate groups was aided by the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA). A number of UKCISA ambassadors took part. Participants were given a £50 Amazon voucher to thank them for their time.

It is important to note that the focus groups were not designed to be fully representative of the international student body as a whole; rather, they were designed to enable us to delve into the issues and to reveal ideas for the quantitative stage.

The quantitative responses were gathered through an online survey of Cibyl's database of 1.5 million students from 158 UK universities, built from targetjobs registrations (which are updated annually) as well as Cibyl's previous research participants. targetjobs is a career discovery platform for students and graduates and is owned by Cibyl's parent company, Group GTI. In total, 114,307 students were invited to take part in the research and the survey was in the field for two weeks between 4 and 18 of August 2021. A total of 1,051 international students from 118 universities responded:

- 26% of respondents were from the EU and 74% were from outside the EU;
- 38% were studying for a Bachelor's degree, 45% for a taught Master's degree, 9% for a PhD, 5% for a research Master's degree, 2% for an MBA and 1% for 'other';
- 21% of respondents were in their first year at university, 21% were in their second or middle years, 35% were final-year students and 20% had already graduated; and
- 42% were male, 56% female, 1% non-binary and 1% preferred not to say.

The final sample size of 1,051 has a margin of error of +/-3%, calculated at a 95% confidence level and based on a result of 50%, where the margin of error is at its maximum. 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. Where subsets of the total numbers of respondents are discussed in the text, the marginal error is materially higher.

After the Introduction, which provides some background context on the topic of careers support for international students, the three chapters that follow intertwine the output

of the qualitative and quantitative research. However, the two strands were conducted entirely separately, by different organisations at different times, and the text makes it clear which of the two elements are being referred to at each point. Most of the text in these three chapters has been written for us by our collaborators at CRAC and Cibyl, though we take full responsibility for any errors.

All respondents are included in the results shown in the charts and tables unless otherwise signalled in the relevant chart / table headings.

HEPI and Kaplan International Pathways jointly thank CRAC and Cibyl for all their work on this project. We also thank Rachel Hewitt, the Chief Executive of MillionPlus, who kickstarted this project and helped to lead it through its early phases while in her previous role at HEPI.

This HEPI / Kaplan report has been produced in conjunction with:



Introduction

**Nick Hillman, Director of HEPI, and Linda Cowan,
Managing Director of Kaplan International Pathways**

International students studying in the UK cost the country £2.9 billion a year but they benefit the UK by ten times as much, to the tune of £28.8 billion. That is a net economic contribution of £390 for each UK resident.¹ Education is a truly great British export, whether it is students from other countries studying here in the UK or transnational education being delivered in students' home countries.

This success is underpinned by a huge range of education providers, from small English-language schools through colleges and pathway providers to universities ranked among the best in the world. It is underpinned too by all those who support the delivery of education, such as publishers, legal firms and software companies.

Matching the UK's full potential in this space calls for a conducive policy environment. For much of the 2010s, this did not exist. Other countries forged ahead while the UK saw only modest growth in the number of international student arrivals. Education Ministers from Australia were known to greet Ministers in Whitehall by thanking them for providing Australia with such a great opportunity to recruit more international students. As shown by the newly-refreshed *International Education Strategy* (2021), the UK policy backdrop has improved since 2019, particularly in relation to post-study work rules. But Brexit and COVID have limited the positive impact of this new warmer approach.

¹ HEPI / Universities UK International Unit / London Economics, *The costs and benefits of international higher education students to the UK economy*, September 2021

The benefits of hosting international students are not just economic. There are also 'soft power' benefits, which have never been so important as during this time of globalisation. In the summer of 2021, HEPI showed 57 serving world leaders were educated in the UK tertiary sector, second only to the United States on 65.²

There are other benefits from educating people from all over the world too. There is a wealth of evidence to show that diverse learning environments are more effective learning environments. Sitting next to and interacting with people from different countries, cultures and backgrounds is part of the learning experience, bringing new information to the classroom and new perspectives to bear.

For many people though, the most important benefits of education are personal. Students come to the UK because they love learning for the sake of it, to better themselves and to provide a more secure future for their families. Collectively, they will end up creating a better world but, individually, they are often more likely to be focused on their own quality of life and their own local community. This is true irrespective of whether they return to their country of origin or stay in the UK.

That makes perfect sense for studying here nearly always works out well. Satisfaction rates are high among international students, just as among home students. Graduates tend to perform better in the labour market, with less risk of unemployment, more choice of roles and higher pay. Qualifications act as an insurance policy against adversity in an ever-changing world.

² HEPI, '2021 HEPI Soft-Power Index: UK slips further behind the US (again)', Press release, 2 September 2021

The success of many British businesses rests on the shoulders of former international students, as does the education system itself, whether it is language teachers in schools, professional services staff, lecturers or researchers pushing forward the boundaries of knowledge at the cutting-edge of their disciplines (or, indeed, straddling more than one discipline).

Yet this pretty picture should not be interpreted as meaning everything is rosy. In a super-competitive environment like the recruitment of international students in the biggest developed English-speaking countries, it is never enough to stand still. If you do, you will find another country has improved their offer and is winning more market share. Or the geopolitics may shift against you, meaning your country has to work harder just to maintain its existing position.

Moreover, as international students – including, now, those from the EU – pay higher fees than others, we must be alive to the potential accusation that they pay more but receive less. Very often, this claim is unfair. For example, there are higher administration costs in supporting international students and home students pay less (or nothing in Scotland) for the same reason in-state fees are lower than out-of-state fees in the United States: they reflect the tax contributions of home students' families, which have helped to build up our education sector.

But despite such facts, the scale of fees paid by international students means we cannot – hand on heart – promise that every international student has always received every penny of value they expected before they arrived. Home students have the security of knowing they need not repay their taxpayer-

backed student loans until they find well-paid work, but this guarantee is not available to those from other countries for they cannot access the loans.

One occasionally hears the 'pay more, get less' argument applied to careers support, which explains the reason for this report. A particular challenge is that many international students want to return to their home country to work, yet no university careers service can be fully expert on all the world's major labour markets. If there were one specific catalyst for this research from my perspective, it was a comment one of us heard from an outgoing students' union president: pre-COVID, he identified the struggle to improve careers support for international students as the single biggest challenge he still faced on leaving office.

HEPI and Kaplan have not approached this issue by looking solely at anecdotal evidence or just at the numbers. Instead, we have worked with two experienced teams of experts on careers support, CRAC and Cibyl (formerly Trendence), to collect a mix of qualitative and quantitative data. We used the focus group evidence, which was collected first, to help inform the opinion polling to ensure it was as useful and robust as possible.

Like all attitudinal research taking place in 2020/21, the fieldwork was affected by COVID. For example, the focus groups had to be held online. It is likely many of our findings would have been the same without the pandemic but we nonetheless flag this important caveat, not least because of the comments of two focus group participants, who noted: 'You lose the experience when the screen switches off' and

'Campus was a ghost town. Parts of the life experience were not there.'

We believe this research is original because it delves more deeply than previous reports into the hopes and experiences that international students in the UK have in relation to their own employability. Indeed, given the importance of international students in enriching our campuses culturally, financially and educationally, there are perhaps few past HEPI reports that are so important. Careers support is understudied in relation to home students and it is doubly so in relation to international students.

We hope the policy consequences of our research are clear to institutions, regulators and policymakers. They include:

- ensuring sufficient pre-arrival information on careers support;
- providing additional support for international students seeking the same work experience opportunities as home students;
- assessing how the income generated in fees from international students can best be used to provide careers support for international students; and
- staying in touch with international alumni in the early stages of their careers.

We also hope this report will stimulate further conversations. We are conscious that policy papers can sometimes be misinterpreted. There are points in the pages that follow where there are implied or even explicit criticism of the support that international students have received. We hope this will not be

read as an attack on the professionalism of those who work so hard to welcome, integrate and help international students but rather as a call for appropriate resourcing of their work. The goal of policymaking is to make things better and the most effective policy papers search out and discuss current weaknesses as a precursor to tackling them.

This is especially important in relation to supporting international students in their careers as, given their typical calibre and ambition, it is the international students of tomorrow who are likely to find the solutions to the big global challenges of our age, such as climate change, disease prevention and economic development.

Overall, it is clear that careers support is vitally important to international students and therefore it is imperative that the UK continues to enhance our offer if we are to compete effectively to educate even more international students in the future.



A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Nick Hillman".

Nick Hillman, Director of HEPI



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Linda Cowan".

**Linda Cowan, Managing Director
of Kaplan International Pathways**

Key results

The role of careers support when choosing a university

- The overwhelming majority (82%) of international students say the careers support they thought they would receive was either 'important' or 'very important' when choosing a university in the UK, while 92% of students said that employability skills were 'important' or 'very important'.
- Only just over half (52%) of international students think their university is doing well in supporting the needs of international students.

International students and employability skills

- Three-quarters (75%) of students who say employability skills are part of their course were happy with their course and university, compared to just 43% of students who say employability skills are not part of their course.
- Students who feel their courses have not covered employability skills are twice as likely to say that, in hindsight, they would pick a different institution to do the same course (18% versus 8%) and three times as likely to say they would go to a different institution to do a different course (12% versus 4%).

The realities of finding relevant work

- Students who say their university gave them sufficient information on future career prospects in their chosen field before coming to the UK are three times more likely to feel 'very confident' about their chances of finding employment than students who say they had not been given enough information (31% compared to 9%).

- International students are divided on whether their university careers service should provide tailored support about careers in their home country – 42% of students say it should, another 42% say it should not and 17% are unsure.
- International students expect careers support to continue after graduation, with half (51%) of students agreeing this should be offered to alumni for between one and five years after graduation.
- Four-in-ten (39%) international students gained no work experience during their time at university – among those who had, 23% had done paid experience unrelated to their degree, 19% had completed paid experience related to their degree, 16% had undertaken unpaid experience related to their degree and 3% had completed unpaid experience unrelated to their degree.
- The majority (71%) of international students say they plan to stay in the UK to work after graduation, at least for a while, though a quarter (25%) say they are unsure and, among those who plan to stay, over three-quarters (77%) are concerned about whether they will earn enough to support themselves.

1. The role of careers support when choosing a university

For some international students, the opportunity to live in the UK for a few years to study at a university might be enough to convince them to move across the world for higher education. For others, this may not be enough, especially if they need to overcome high financial and personal barriers. It is not surprising then that UK universities need to present an increasingly rounded higher education experience to prospective students if they wish to remain competitive, not just among themselves but against providers in other countries.

While universities have long known that careers and employability support is a crucial part of their offer, there is a question mark over how much the students themselves are aware of this and how much higher education institutions are meeting the needs of international students. Through our survey, we sought to understand whether careers and employability support are on international students' radars before coming to the UK and how much value they place on a university's offer in this area when choosing where to study.

Focus group findings on the rationale for studying in the UK

A minority of the focus group participants were only interested in the prestige of a UK degree, which they typically regarded as superior to qualifications from their own home countries. This was especially the case for those from developing nations. These participants strongly felt their period of study in the UK was likely to position them favourably in their future careers.

On the other hand, a majority of focus group participants did not assume a UK degree would be a passport to their desired career in their home nation. They acknowledged that in some countries there were now large numbers of graduates who had studied abroad, meaning that they felt less strongly positioned in what was a more competitive local labour market (impacted also by increasingly strong local higher education programmes). Thus, they had more nuanced views of the value of their prospective UK degree, taking into account issues like perceptions of an individual university's reputation, of specific disciplinary focus or strength and the level of relevance of any course to particular careers.

Some of the students had specifically identified the opportunity for related work experience in the UK as a key part of what they were seeking from UK higher education experience.

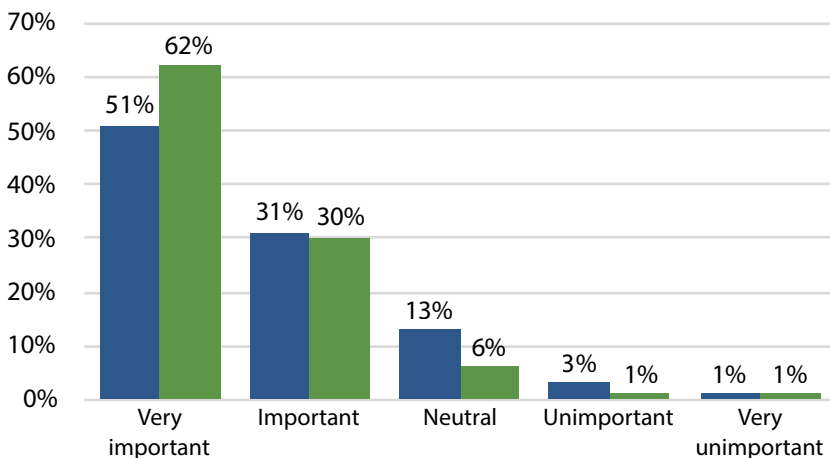
Considering careers support

Factors such as university rankings and subject strengths are often at the forefront of students' minds when choosing a university, but our polling confirms that these are not the only deciding factors. When asked how important the careers support they thought they would receive was when they were choosing a university in the UK, 82% of international students say it was either 'important' or 'very important'.

The employability skills they hope to develop are more important still: 92% of international students view these as 'very important' or 'important' when considering at which university to study. There was little difference between

undergraduates and postgraduates, and whether they come from the EU or are non-EU international students.

Careers support and employability skills



■ When choosing a university in the UK, how important was the careers support you thought you would receive?

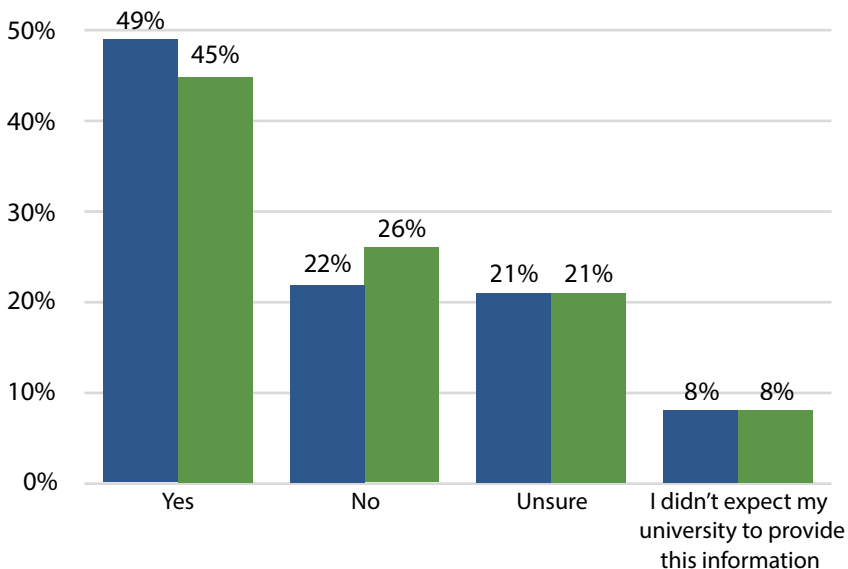
■ When choosing a university in the UK, how important were the employability skills you thought you would gain?

Information overload

Some international students feel their university did not tell them enough about careers and employability before they moved to the UK. Half (49%) of the international students surveyed think they had sufficient information from their university on future career prospects before coming to the UK, but 22% say they did not and most of the rest (21%) are unsure. Only 8% of students did not expect their university to provide this information.

Furthermore, international students feel similarly about their prior knowledge of the support they would get from their university in looking for employment. Under half (45%) of international students feel they were given sufficient information on this, 26% say they were not and 21% are unsure. Again, only 8% did not expect their university to provide this information before they started their studies in the UK.

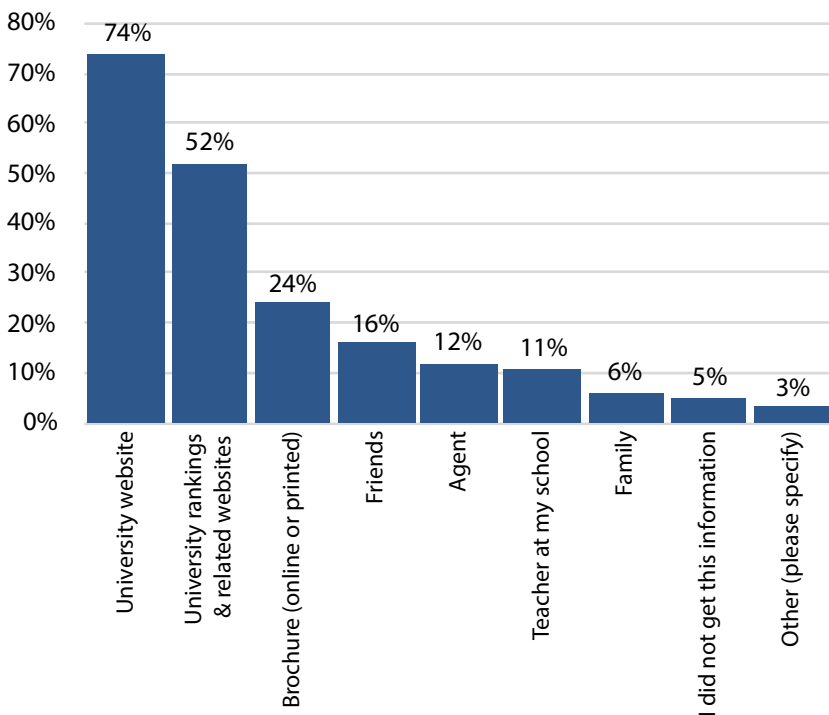
Expectations on information and support



- Did you feel you had sufficient information from your university on future career prospects in your chosen field before coming to the UK?
- Did you feel you had sufficient information from your university on the type of support you'd receive in looking for employment before coming to the UK?

Three-quarters (74%) of international students cite university websites as their most common source for details on the careers and employability support that would be available to them. Over half (52%) say they also got information from university rankings and related websites and a quarter (24%) mention online or printed brochures. A minority of students (5%) did not get any information on employability and careers support when considering where to study.

Where did you get information about what employability and careers support is available at the colleges / universities you were considering?



Expectations vs experiences of careers support at university

Focus group participants' experiences with careers services

Pathway and undergraduate students were aware of the availability of distinct careers support, such as help with CVs, job applications and interviews. This was particularly the case for undergraduates, although several pathway students mentioned that the full range of these services designed for undergraduates was also made available to them.

While not all students had made use of specific career-related support, they knew how and where to access it. In some cases they reported that it had been very well promoted to international students, while one student felt that the services were there but the outreach to international students was poor, meaning she had had to find out for herself.

"The careers service seems to be promoted at every opportunity, for example in the international student newsletter."

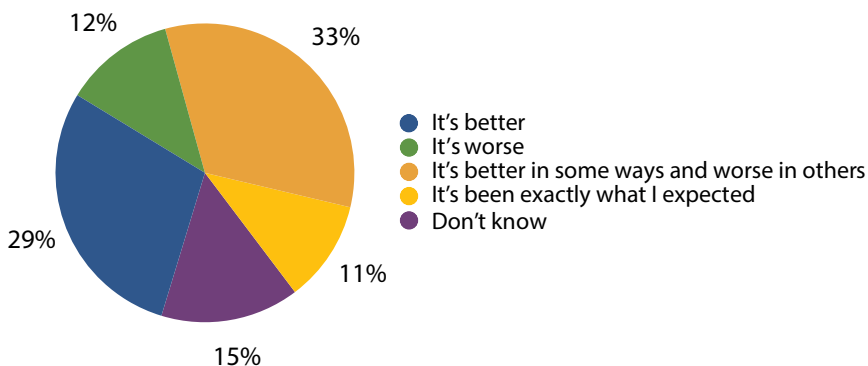
"The Law School has its own career programme, apart from the main careers service. It really helped us international students to be aware of the UK jobs market."

"The careers service does not do much outreach to international students. I have had to find out for myself. On reflection this has pushed me to realise things about myself."

International students' experiences and opinions of their careers service are mixed. For some, it has matched or exceeded their expectations. Thinking back to when they were applying to university, 11% of students say the reality of the careers support they have received is exactly what they expected and 29% say it has been better. However, other international students are not fully satisfied with the support they have received, with at least some areas falling short of what they had hoped for before they came to the UK. The most common response, given by one-third (33%) of students, is that their university's careers support has been better in some ways and worse in others. Roughly one-in-eight international students (12%) found the careers support they have received to be worse than they had expected.

Clearly universities which provide the sort of information their future students find most useful stand to have a useful competitive advantage at relatively little cost.

Thinking back to when you were applying to university, has the reality of the careers support you received matched your expectations?



There appears to be a drop in positive opinions as international students progress through their university education, with students in the later stages of their degree more likely to say that the careers support they have received has not met their expectations. While 37% of first-year students say the careers support they have received has been better than anticipated, this falls to 27% for other students and 26% for those who have already graduated. This suggests students' expectations change as they progress, perhaps wanting less generic and more specific information over time.

Thinking back to when you were applying to university, has the reality of the careers support you received matched your expectations?

	First year	Second / middle years	Final year	Already graduated
It's better	37%	27%	27%	26%
It's worse	9%	6%	14%	16%
It's better in some ways & worse in others	24%	32%	37%	38%
It's been exactly what I expected	16%	12%	11%	7%
Don't know	14%	23%	12%	12%

Prior expectations of the focus group participants

International students arrive in the UK with varying expectations of employability-related learning within their UK degree programmes.

"All the additional employability things are the cherry on the cake. I didn't come to the UK for those aspects."

"I did hear about the careers support when considering the UK. But 90% of the value is the mobility benefits and the [UK] prestige, 10% is the employability benefits."

"The UK gives you lots of exposure to work experience or career opportunities, much more than Estonia."

In contrast, many participants had no idea that this aspect of studying in the UK was an integrated part of the deal. In this respect, they could be said to have been somewhat naïve in their expectations, which perhaps suggests they either had little advice at home in this respect and / or that UK universities have not been promoting this aspect of the offer strongly.

"I did have motivation to come to the UK because of the benefits of being an international student and the possibility of work experience. But I did not have strong expectations about these so I have been surprised."

"I met the employability team at [university] which showed is all the services it would offer an undergraduate; I was shocked at how comprehensive it was."

The unique careers support needs of international students

Just over half (52%) of international students say their university is doing well at supporting their needs. On the other hand, 15% of respondents feel their university is not doing well at meeting their needs and 4% believe the needs of international students are not being met at all.

How well does the careers support provided by your university meet the needs of international students in your opinion?

Very well	17%
Well	35%
Neutral	29%
Not well	15%
Not at all	4%

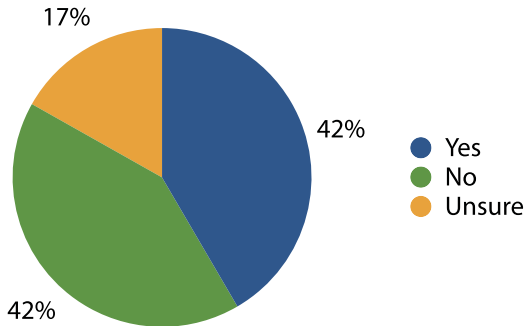
As well as exploring whether international students feel their needs are being met, we wanted to learn more about what these needs might be – particularly if they expect the careers support provided by their university to be tailored to career opportunities in their home country. The response was split exactly evenly between ‘Yes’ and ‘No’, with 42% of students opting for each.

International students from beyond the EU feel more strongly that their careers service should be able to offer tailored support, with almost half (47%) saying they expect this, compared to 25% of EU students.

There is also a difference of opinion between postgraduate and undergraduate students: only one-third (32%) of

undergraduate students expect such tailored advice from their careers service compared to one-half (48%) of postgraduate students. Just shy of half (48%) of the postgraduate students.

Do you expect the careers support provided by your university to be tailored to career opportunities in your home country?

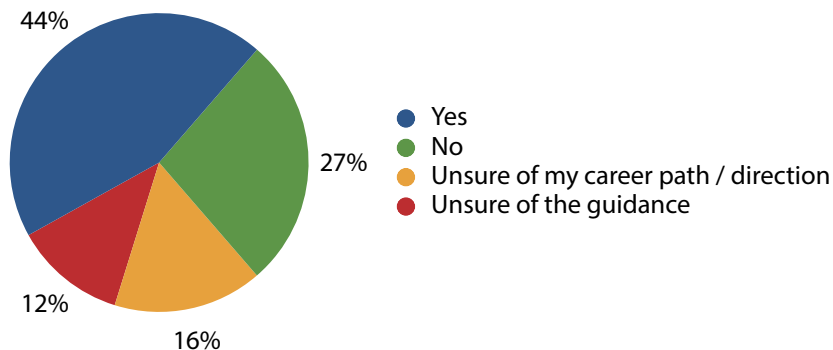


Do you expect the careers support provided by your university to be tailored to career opportunities in your home country?

	EU International Students	Non-EU International Students	Undergraduate	Postgraduate
Yes	25%	47%	32%	48%
No	56%	37%	52%	35%
Unsure	18%	16%	16%	17%

Overall, around half (44%) of international students believe the careers guidance they have received at university has been specific enough for their chosen career path, 27% say that it has not been specific enough and 16% are unsure of their career path / direction.

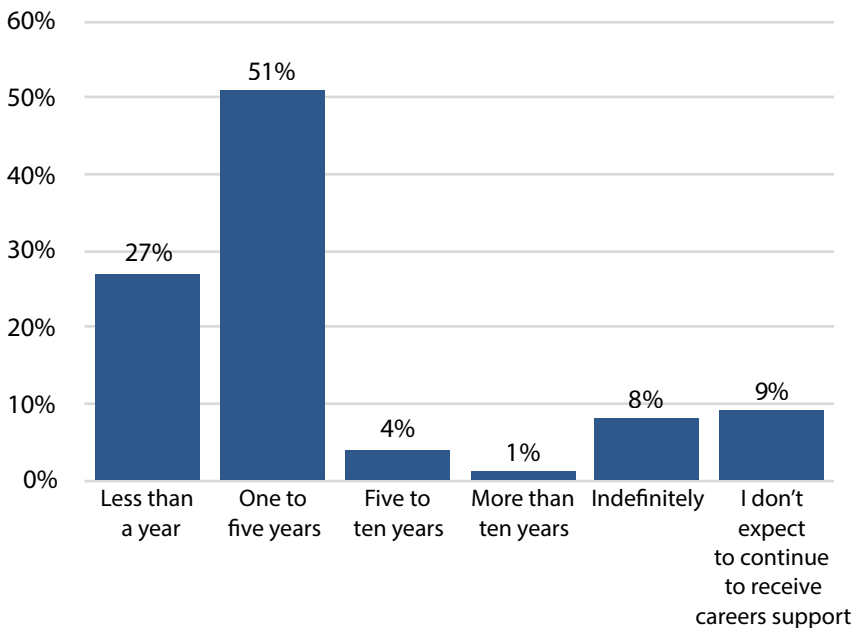
Has the career guidance you received at university been specific enough for your chosen career path?



How long support should be in place after graduation

Not every graduate is fortunate enough to walk into a job immediately and some may not want to, so access to careers support later on can be valuable. Only 9% of respondents did not expect to receive careers support after graduation. In contrast, half (51%) expect to access careers support for between one and five years after graduation, while a further quarter (27%) expect support to be available for less than a year after leaving university. A small minority of students (8%) expect to have access to careers support from their university indefinitely.

How long after graduation do you expect to continue to receive careers support from your university?



2. International students and employability skills

The survey explored whether international students have had the opportunity to develop employability skills not only through their course but also through optional work experience – whether a formal summer internship, a part-time job or voluntary work. It also explored obstacles blocking the take-up of work experience.

Developing employability skills

A majority of survey respondents (58%) have found employability skills to be embedded within their academic course, with equal proportions for undergraduates and postgraduates. A quarter (25%) say this has not been the case, while 17% are unsure. (It is possible some students are less familiar with the term ‘employability skills’.)

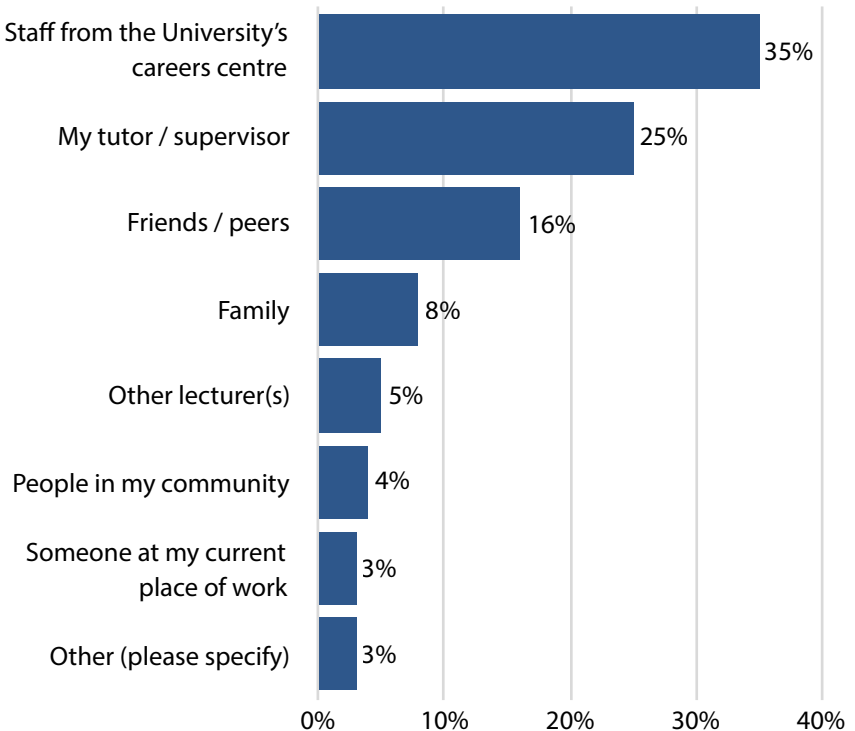
Have you found employability skills to be embedded in your academic course?

Yes	58%
No	25%
Unsure	17%

There are, however, some considerable differences by field of study. For example, three-quarters (75%) of those studying Biological and Sports Sciences have found employability skills embedded in their courses but the same is true for just one-quarter (24%) of those studying Historical, Philosophical & Religious Studies.

When asked who has been most helpful with employability support, no answer secured majority support, though staff from the university's careers service came top: 35% of international students say they have been most helpful, while 25% give most credit to their tutor or supervisor. Smaller proportions have found the most support from friends and peers (16%), family (8%) and lecturers (5%).

Who in your higher education experience has been most helpful with employability support?



Employability skills experienced by the focus group participants

The pathway students had discrete 'applied learning' weeks to develop a range of skills embedded within their programme, some of which were specifically focused on employability (several students referring to at least one 'employability week'). This was also supported by their Learning Adviser. While many of the skills these modules or weeks were aiming to foster were study-related, including development of language skills, group-working, communications, critical thinking, research and analytical skills, most of these can also be considered as employability-related: intercultural skills development is a widely known benefit from mobility which is highly valued in many international employment settings. Some pathway students reported that they had also developed more specific career skills such as building a LinkedIn profile and writing a CV.

Undergraduate focus group participants also reported that their curricula contained modules or elements which focused on developing skills and employability, some of which were mandatory. In addition, several had taken part in collaborative projects through which they interacted with industry, which could also involve student peers. One suggested that their course leaders were consistently pushing a message that 'you need to be employable'. Participants also spoke about access to additional workshops, masterclasses and mini-courses aimed at developing specific career skills, such as job interview techniques.

"I'm surprised how embedded it all is within the curriculum."

"There are lots of mini-courses, I did one on leadership."

"I spent a week in the Crown Prosecution Service. You would not get that sort of opportunity elsewhere, not outside the UK."

Employability skills and the link to international students' satisfaction levels

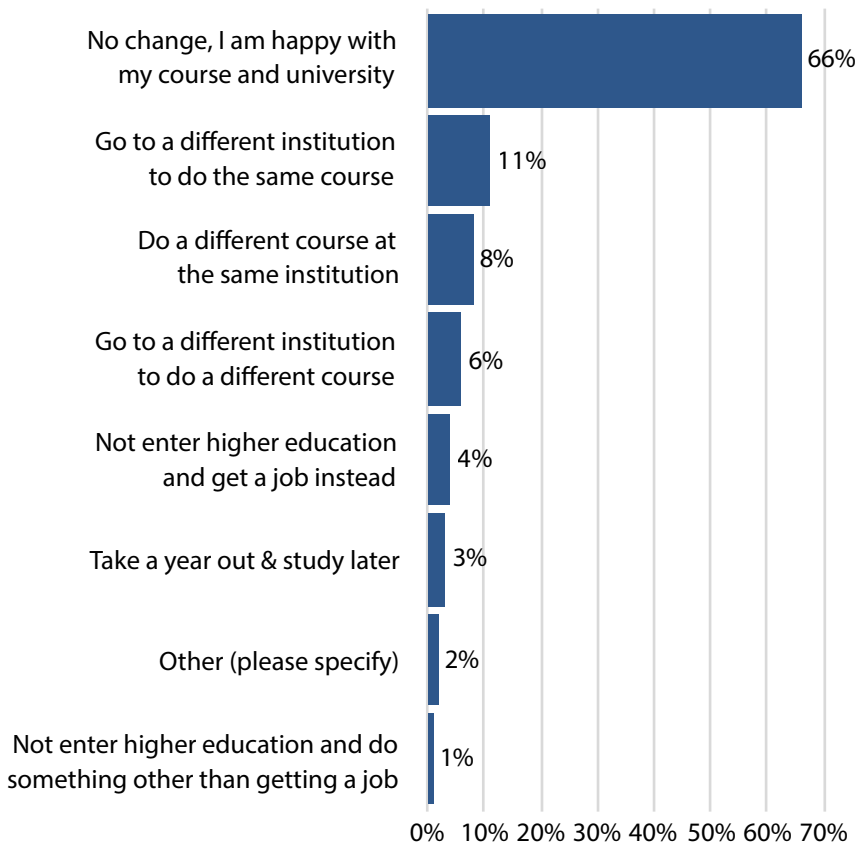
Upon reflection about the employability skills they have gained, two-thirds (66%) of international students express satisfaction with their experiences and would not do anything differently with regards to their choice of university and course. Of those who would make a change, 11% would go to a different institution to do the same course, 8% would do a different course at the same institution and 6% would go to a different institution and do a different course. Very few (just 4%) say they would not enter higher education and get a job instead and similarly few (3%) would take a year out. (These results are notably similar to the responses to a comparable question in the annual HEPI / Advance HE *Student Academic Experience Survey*.³)

International students who have found employability skills to be embedded in their course are less likely to feel they would make a different decision about university if they could go back. Three-quarters (75%) of those who say employability skills are part of their course are happy with their course and university, compared to just 43% of students who say employability skills are not part of their course. Students who feel their courses have not covered employability skills

³ Jonathan Neves (Advance HE) and Rachel Hewitt (HEPI), *Student Academic Experience Survey 2021*, HEPI Report 138, June 2021

are twice as likely to say that, in hindsight, they would pick a different institution to do the same course (18% versus 8%) and three times as likely to say they would go to a different institution to do a different course (12% versus 4%).

Thinking about the employability skills you have now gained, would you do anything differently with regards to your university choice?



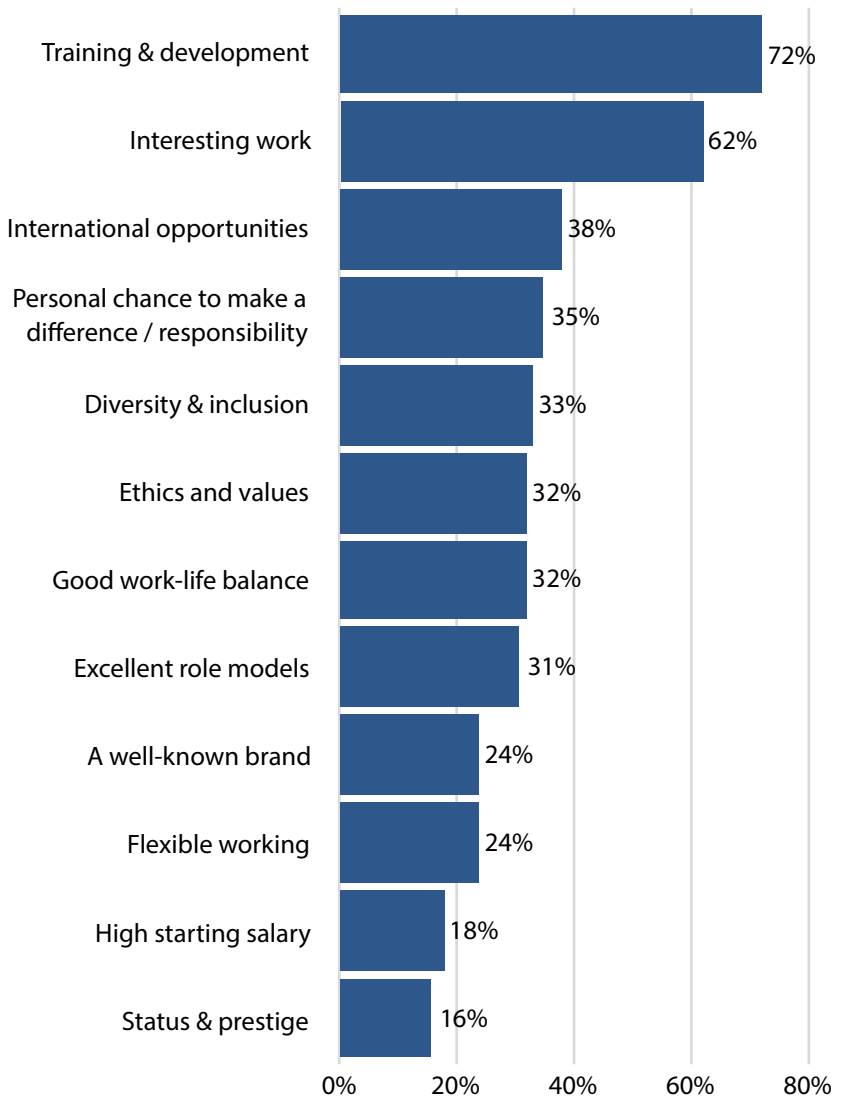
Thinking about the employability skills you have now gained, would you do anything differently with regards to your university choice? By have you found employability skills to be embedded in your academic course?

	Yes	No	Unsure
No change, I am happy with my course and university	75%	43%	65%
Go to a different institution to do the same course	8%	18%	8%
Do a different course at the same institution	7%	12%	9%
Go to a different institution to do a different course	4%	12%	6%
Not enter higher education & get a job instead	3%	7%	5%
Take a year out & study later	2%	4%	4%
Other (please specify)	1%	3%	2%
Not enter higher education & do something other than getting a job	0%	1%	1%

Are international students getting work experience?

Experience in the workplace is key to developing employability skills and, when asked what is most important when thinking about internships, the most popular answer is ‘training and development – a job where you can gain a wide variety of skills’, with 72% of respondents selecting this as one of their top five considerations. The second most popular option is ‘interesting work’ (62%). There is also material support for ‘international opportunities’ (38%), ‘personal chance to make a difference/responsibility’ (35%) and ‘diversity and inclusion – a range of talent and people in the organisation’ (33%). Less popular considerations are a ‘high starting salary’ (18%) and ‘status and prestige’ (16%).

In thinking about internships, what is most important to you?



The experiences of focus group participants when seeking work experience

Despite our judgement that the focus group participants were exceptionally motivated students, many of those who had sought out work experience opportunities reported having real difficulty in obtaining one, citing high competition from both UK and other international students.

"I've been applying for work experience but have had no success after six months of trying."

"Competition has been really high trying to get placements, COVID has made it worse. I've had lots of rejections. There is a small team in the careers service working with international students. I'm hoping now to do a placement in Hong Kong."

"I think UK companies are timid in the face of a hostile immigration system – they are cautious about hiring international students and so it is much harder to get the work experience you need."

There is a widely held impression that it is harder for international students to gain work experience in the UK (or a long-term job) than it is for UK students. In some cases, this reflects practical limitations – for example, international students' visas only permit work for up to 20 hours per week, which would be insufficient for a full-time internship, whether long or short. In other instances, it seems employers are uncertain about whether they could hire international students legally. In addition, COVID has impacted on the availability of placements and internships,

possibly reducing opportunities by one third between 2019 and 2020.⁴

Some pathway students, who are at an early stage in their higher education trajectories, planned to undertake a future placement or internship but were perhaps a little naïve in expecting they would enjoy a broad choice of internships that are relevant to their course and career interests.

We also asked international students whether they have completed some work experience already. Most (61%) had done some sort of experience, but four-in-ten international students (39%) have not yet done so.⁴

Respondents have gained a variety of experiences, but only a small proportion of international students have undertaken formal paid internships, such as insight weeks, summer internships and industrial placements. Just one in five (19%) students have gained paid experience related to their degree. Almost one-quarter (23%) have completed paid experience unrelated to their degree, 16% have undertaken unpaid experience related to their degree and 3% described their experience as unpaid and unrelated to their degree. Unpaid experience might include unpaid internships or extracurricular activities and volunteering opportunities.

Have you gained any work experience during your time at university?

Yes, paid experience related to my degree	19%
Yes, paid experience unrelated to my degree	23%
Yes, unpaid experience related to my degree	16%
Yes, unpaid experience unrelated to my degree	3%
No	39%

⁴ *Early Careers Survey 2021: Work experience during a crisis*, Prospects 2021

Postgraduate international students, particularly Master's students whose degrees are shorter than undergraduate degrees, are less likely to have gained work experience. For example, one focus group participant complained that their course was 'so compressed there is no time to do anything else other than academic work and self-study. Some of the key skills are missed.'

Have you gained any work experience during your time at university?

	Undergraduate	Postgraduate
Yes, paid experience related to my degree	19%	19%
Yes, paid experience unrelated to my degree	24%	22%
Yes, unpaid experience related to my degree	20%	13%
Yes, unpaid experience unrelated to my degree	3%	4%
No	34%	42%

Other focus group evidence on work experience

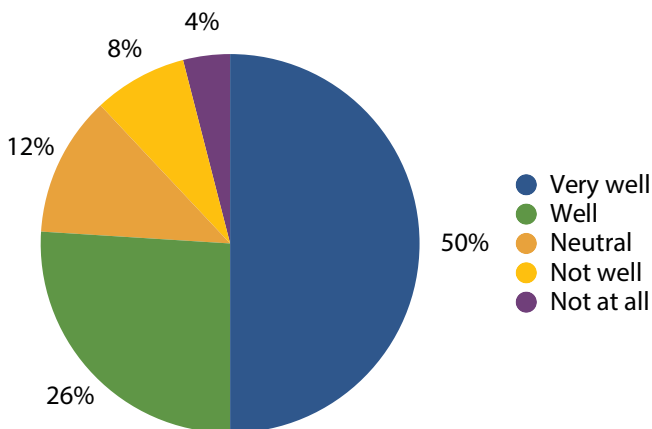
The aspect of employability-related development that the focus group participants perceived as most important was formal work experience, with several students expressing some disappointment that to date they had found access to internship or placement opportunities very competitive and, in several cases, impossible to obtain. There was a common view that international students not only had to work harder – just to cope with study in the UK and the cultural challenges – but that it was also harder for them to obtain such work experience.

If UK universities do push the offer of employability in this respect, suggesting that work experiences are valuable and should be available, there needs to be greater support for international students to access and achieve them.

International students' knowledge of the working-while-studying rules

When asked how well they understand the restrictions on working while studying, three-quarters (76%) of international students say they have a good understanding, most of whom (50%) say they understand them 'very well'. Only 12% of international students say they understand the rules 'not well' or 'not at all'. A lack of understanding on visa restrictions seems not to be the primary reason why 39% of international students are yet to gain any work experience while studying in the UK.

How well do you understand the visa restrictions on how much you can work while studying?



EU students are considerably less likely than non-EU students to say they have a ‘very good’ understanding of visa restrictions on working while studying (30% versus 57%) and five times more likely to say they do not understand them ‘at all’ (10% versus 2%). However, given the rules for EU students have been in flux as a result of Brexit, these particular findings can only provide an accurate snapshot for the exact period when the fieldwork was undertaken.

How well do you understand the visa restrictions on how much you can work while studying?

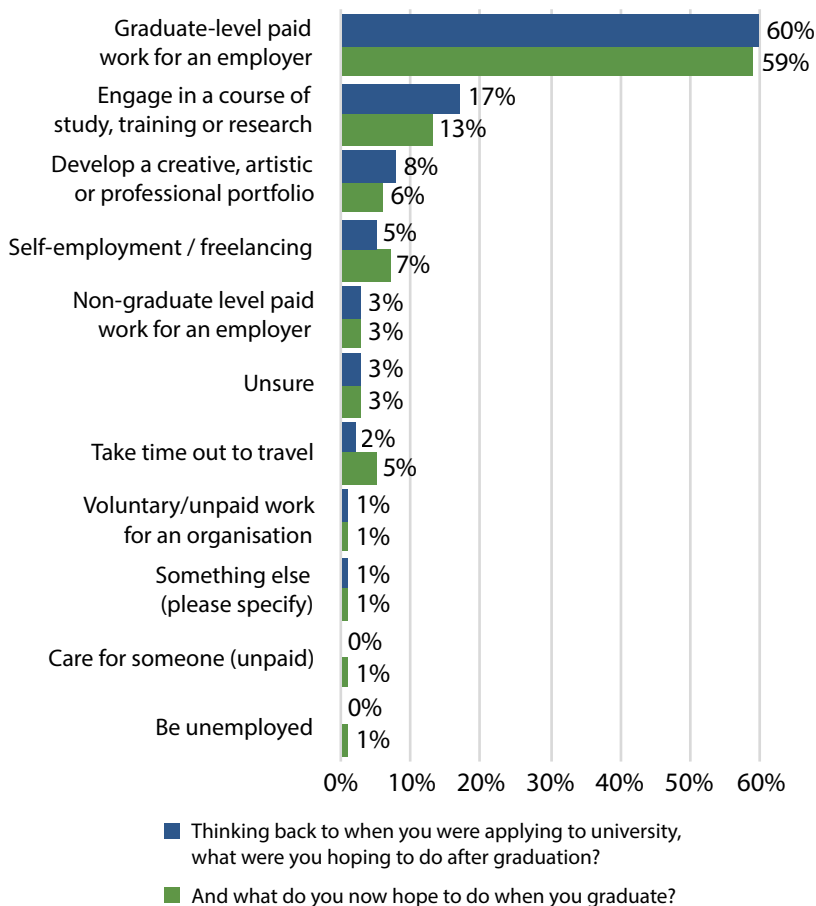
	EU International Students	Non-EU International Students	Undergraduate	Postgraduate
Very well	30%	57%	40%	57%
Well	27%	26%	29%	25%
Neutral	20%	10%	17%	9%
Not well	13%	6%	9%	6%
Not at all	10%	2%	5%	3%

Postgraduate international students have a better grasp of visa restrictions than undergraduate students, with only 40% of undergraduates saying they have a very good understanding compared to 57% of postgraduates.

3. The realities of finding relevant work

In the final section, we explore international students' post-graduation ambitions and their confidence in achieving these. We also seek to understand international students' attitudes towards remaining in the UK to work.

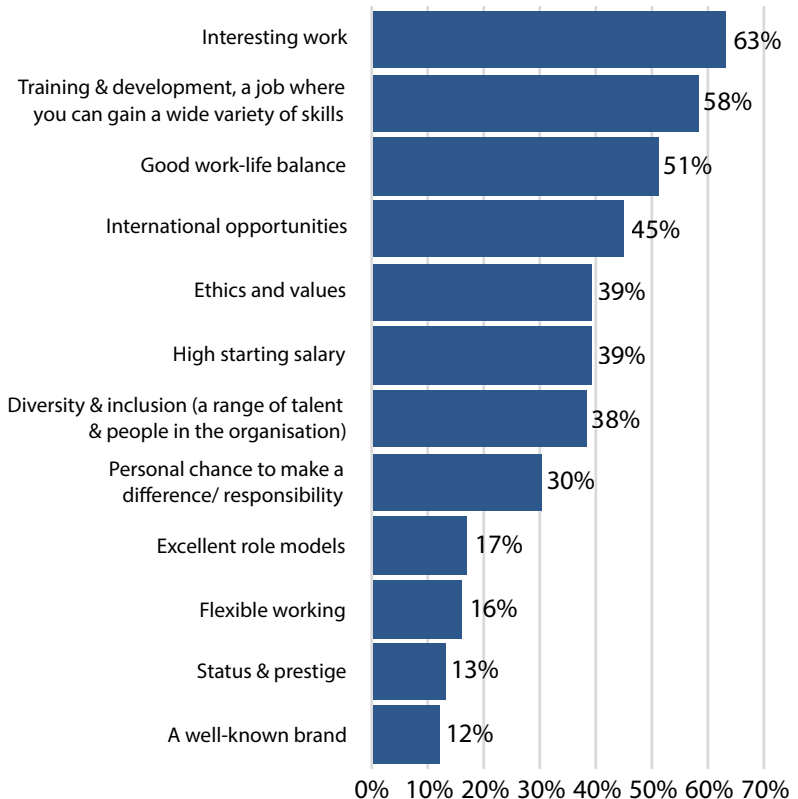
Students' future plans



International students' post-graduation plans

When applying to university, most international students (60%) intended to use their degree to secure graduate-level paid work, 17% planned on doing another course of study, training or research, 8% wanted to develop a creative, artistic or professional portfolio and 5% held ambitions to become self-employed or work as a freelancer.

In thinking about your graduate employment, what is most important to you?



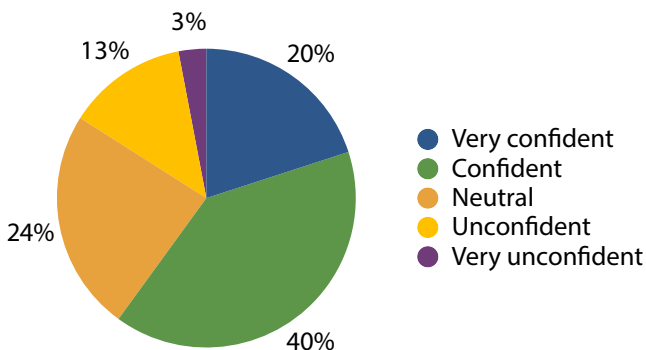
Only 3% were unsure of their future plans before applying to study in the UK. The results suggest future plans do not typically change much overall over time: when asked what they now hope to do after graduation, the responses seem very similar.

We also asked respondents to identify five important considerations when thinking about graduate employment. The top answer was 'interesting work' (63%) but 'training & development' (58%) and a 'good work-life balance' (51%) also both had majority support.

Job prospects and confidence levels

On the whole, international students are optimistic about getting a job in their chosen field, with 60% of our respondents expressing some confidence in this (20% are 'very confident' and 40% are 'confident'). A quarter (24%) of respondents are 'neutral' and only around one-in-six are either 'unconfident' (13%) or 'very unconfident' (3%).

How confident do you feel about the prospects of getting a job in your chosen field?



Crucially, students who say their university gave them sufficient information on future career prospects in their chosen field before coming to the UK are three times more likely to feel ‘very confident’ about their chances of finding employment than students who say they had not been given enough information (31% compared to 9%). While only 1% of students armed with sufficient information on future career prospects express feeling ‘very unconfident’, the proportion is 10% for students who say they were not given ‘sufficient information’.

How confident do you feel about the prospects of getting a job in your chosen field? By ‘Did you feel you had sufficient information from your university on future career prospects in your chosen field before coming to the UK?’

	Yes	No	Unsure	I didn't expect my university to provide this information
Very confident	31%	9%	7%	11%
Confident	44%	31%	38%	49%
Neutral	18%	25%	36%	24%
Unconfident	6%	25%	17%	16%
Very unconfident	1%	10%	2%	0%

It is a similar picture for international students who feel they received sufficient information on the careers support available to them before reaching the UK, as well as among students who say that employability skills have been embedded in their academic course. In both cases, these students feel notably more confident about their career prospects.

How confident do you feel about the prospects of getting a job in your chosen field? By 'Did you feel you had sufficient information from your university on the type of support you'd receive in looking for employment before coming to the UK?'

	Yes	No	Unsure	I didn't expect my university to provide this information
Very confident	30%	9%	13%	14%
Confident	44%	33%	41%	41%
Neutral	20%	26%	29%	26%
Unconfident	5%	24%	16%	16%
Very unconfident	1%	8%	2%	2%

How confident do you feel about the prospects of getting a job in your chosen field? By 'Have you found employability skills to be embedded in your academic course?'

	Yes	No	Unsure
Very confident	28%	7%	10%
Confident	45%	29%	42%
Neutral	20%	29%	27%
Unconfident	6%	25%	19%
Very unconfident	1%	10%	2%

Do international students want to stay in the UK?

Of the international students surveyed, most (71%) say they are interested in staying in the UK to work after they graduate, at least for a while, recognising this may make them even more employable when they return to their home country or look for employment elsewhere in the world. A quarter (25%) are unsure and 6% plan not to do so. Non-EU students seem

slightly more inclined to find employment in the UK than EU students (74% versus 62%).

Do you intend to stay in the UK to work after you graduate?

	Total	EU International Students	Non-EU International Students	Undergraduate	Postgraduate
Yes	71%	62%	74%	66%	73%
No	6%	9%	5%	6%	6%
Unsure	24%	29%	22%	28%	21%

Overall, postgraduate students are a little more fixed on staying in the UK: while two-thirds (66%) of undergraduates say they intend to stay and find work here, almost three-quarters (73%) of postgraduates say the same.

Respondents were fairly evenly split when asked whether their future plans had changed after arriving in the UK to study, with four-in-ten (40%) saying they had and a similar proportion (45%) saying they had not.

Has your view on staying to work in the UK changed since you've been here?

Yes	40%
No	45%
Unsure	15%

What the focus groups reveal about staying in the UK to work

The most common desired trajectory for foundation / pathway students and undergraduates was a desire to return ultimately to their home country to work. However, a significant number of the undergraduates had already identified that they would seek postgraduate

study in the UK. They believed the UK higher education qualifications and experiences would enable and accelerate their vision of a positive career in their home country. Whether or not they sought further study in the UK, many also wanted some years of working experience in the UK after studying here before they returned home. They believed this would stand them in even better stead to achieve long-term career aims.

"Ideally I want a year in industry [as part of my course] and to get my MSci degree in biomedical science. I'd then like to work in a pharma company in the UK for a few years and then consider where to work long-term after that."

"I've applied for an MSc in urban planning. After that I hope to work in the UK for a few years."

The picture was different for postgraduates. At the point of research, at least, most stated that they would like to stay in the UK for at least the medium term. We suspect this is partly a function of the composition of the group, within which 7 out of 10 were doctoral students. Their perceptions of the high quality of the research environment in the UK meant that they did not wish to return to what they saw as inferior opportunities for a research career in their own countries.

Some of the postgraduates sponsored by their home countries to study in the UK expressed a strong preference for remaining here after graduation to continue their research in their field of study. However, their sponsorship agreements required them to return to their home countries for employment.

Those who wish to stay in the UK are keen to support themselves financially. For example, the overwhelming majority (77%) of students thinking about remaining in the UK are worried about financially supporting themselves: 42% are 'very concerned' about earning enough to support themselves and 35% are 'concerned'.

International students from outside the EU are more concerned about earning enough money than students from the EU (45% versus 29% for 'very concerned'). Postgraduate students also express more concern than undergraduates (46% versus 33% for 'very concerned'), while undergraduates were three times as likely not to be concerned (12% versus 4%).

How concerned are you about earning enough to support yourself?

	Total	EU International Students	Non-EU International Students	Under-graduate	Post-graduate
Very concerned	42%	29%	45%	33%	46%
Concerned	35%	42%	33%	36%	34%
Neutral	16%	19%	16%	18%	15%
Not concerned	7%	10%	6%	12%	4%
Not at all concerned	0%	1%	0%	1%	0%

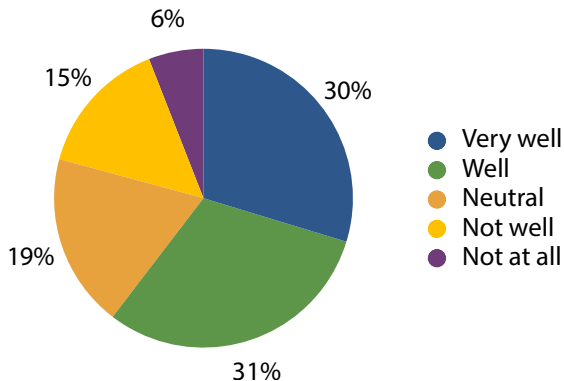
Of the few international students who say they are not concerned about earning enough to support themselves financially, 63% say they have confidence in the UK job market while 27% say they have access to financial support from their family.

What are the key reasons you are not concerned?

I am confident in the UK job market	63%
I have financial support from my family & so am less worried about earnings	27%
Other (please specify)	10%

Finally, we asked our student respondents how well they understand the rules on the new Graduate Route Visa for staying in the UK to work after study. Around one-third of students (30%) say they understand the rules 'well' and a similar proportion (31%) say they understand them 'very well'. However, 21% say they understand them 'not well' or 'not at all'.

How well do you understand the rules around the new graduate route, ie staying in the UK to work after graduating?



Students from beyond the EU are more likely to have a good understanding, with 33% of non-EU students saying they understand the rules 'very well' compared to 23% of EU students.

How well do you understand the rules around the new graduate route, i.e. staying in the UK to work after graduating?

	EU International Students	Non-EU International Students
Very well	23%	33%
Well	24%	33%
Neutral	23%	18%
Not well	19%	13%
Not at all	12%	3%

Understandably, students who definitely intend to stay in the UK after graduating are more likely to be familiar with the rules. While 65% of students with plans to remain here and find work say they understand the rules either 'well' or 'very well', just 37% of students who plan to leave after graduating say the same. The big question here is whether the lack of understanding around the new rules has contributed to these students' decision not to stay.

How well do you understand the rules around the new graduate route, i.e. staying in the UK to work after graduating? By 'Do you intend to stay in the UK to work after you graduate?'

	Yes	No	Unsure
Very well	34%	13%	22%
Well	31%	24%	30%
Neutral	18%	24%	22%
Not well	12%	21%	20%
Not at all	4%	18%	7%

Conclusion

Dr Robin Mellors-Bourne, Director of Research and Intelligence, CRAC

International students in the UK have often had to overcome various steep obstacles before travelling here, but the majority of them hope studying in the UK will provide a boost to their future career prospects.

It seems to work out. Research with recent graduates from UK universities who had been international students suggests most (c.80%) thought their degree helped them get their job and / or (c.70%) that they were progressing more quickly than locally educated peers as a result of studying in the UK. However, only 2% said they had found that job through their UK university's careers advisory service.⁵

Over the past 10 years or so, UK higher education providers have placed employability more prominently within their offer to students, increasingly embedding employability-related learning within the curriculum (although the extent varies by subject) in addition to providing discrete career support services to students. The UK offer places emphasis on the value of extracurricular opportunities that build student experiences and contribute to a strong CV. Schemes and awards within individual universities to recognise these aspects of learning have proliferated.

Yet the actual experiences of international students in relation to career and employability support while at UK universities have been under-researched. One recent report on supporting international graduate employability in the UK, based on the

⁵ Universities UK International, *International Graduate Outcomes*, 2019

views of careers professionals, questions whether careers services currently have the capacity to support international students. The same research shows that, while many universities do provide some information to students about working outside the UK, around half do not provide tailored support to international students while a substantial minority cannot meet the demand from them.⁶

The focus groups on which much of this report is based highlighted that there is a need for careers services to develop stronger awareness of what is legally possible in terms of the employment in the UK of international students – rather than this knowledge residing predominantly in universities' international offices, among international student advisers or UKCISA, to help international students access work experience or a post-degree job. Employers need more support from careers services in this respect too.

While some students from certain countries retain the 'traditional' view that the inherent benefits of mobility and the prestige of a UK degree are sufficient for their needs, there is evidence that many recognise the need for more than this and seek out a more rounded higher education offer that includes employability development, particularly as graduate job markets becomes more competitive. That said, in our research by no means do all students know what employability and careers support would be available to them when they apply – several expressed surprise at how comprehensive that support could be or how well it is embedded in their learning programme. This suggests there is further scope for universities to promote the value of existing services in their

⁶ Universities UK International, *Supporting international graduate employability: Making good on the promise*, 2020

offer and how international students can access them.

Perhaps the biggest remaining issue for international students is whether they can get the placements or internships that they want. They appear to find access to opportunities very competitive at best and impossible at worst and they typically believe it is harder for them than it is for UK students. If the UK offer to potential international students includes a strong basis of employability development, including access to placements, as everyone involved in this report believes it should, then international students need to have equal access to placements.

The UK single-year Master's course structure, which attracts many international students because of its short duration and compactness, limits opportunities for work experience or employability support. The new Graduate Route gives a further two-year window to gain experiences of related work in the UK and complements this very well; careers services will need to respond to what we expect to be a rising demand from international students as a result.

Meanwhile, international PhD students feel much of the careers support available is tailored to undergraduates. To some extent, this seems to be due to a lack of awareness of the support and opportunities that are available. As other HEPI work has shown, PhD students typically make little use of specialist careers consultants and are more likely to look to others, such as their supervisors, for support.⁷

This report adds a new layer of information to an under-researched area. The quantitative and qualitative strands of

⁷ Bethan Cornell, *PhD students and their careers*, HEPI Policy Note 25, July 2020, p.8

the research, combined with other recently published work on the experiences of careers specialists who work with international students, together hugely increase the evidence base, which has been thin to date. However, we still do not have a complete answer to many of the challenges raised by international students with high ambitions and the higher education sector needs to reflect upon their demands more than we have historically done.

The hope of all those involved in this research is that it makes that task a little easier.

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October 2021 ISBN 978-1-908240-85-9

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99 Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 6JX

Tel: 01865 284450 www.hepi.ac.uk

Printed in the UK by BCQ, Buckingham

Typesetting: Steve Billington, www.jarmanassociates.co.uk