

# Student Academic Experience Survey 2022

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**AdvanceHE**



Higher Education Policy Institute

STUDENT  
ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE  
SURVEY



# Contents

Foreword by Alison Johns	4
Foreword by Nick Hillman	5
Executive Summary	6
<b>1. Methodology</b>	<b>7</b>
1.1 Approach	7
1.2 Sample size	7
1.3 Weighting	8
1.4 Base sizes	8
1.5 Ethnicity	8
1.6 Sex and gender identity	9
1.7 Trans identity / history	9
1.8 Sexual orientation	9
<b>2. Sample profile</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>3. Value-for-money</b>	<b>11</b>
3.1 Trends over time	11
3.2 Value by domicile	12
3.3 Factors influencing perceptions of poor value	13
<b>4. Meeting expectations</b>	<b>17</b>
4.1 Experience versus expectations	17
4.2 Why expectations are not met	18
4.3 Why expectations are exceeded	20
<b>5. The choice to go to university</b>	<b>22</b>
5.1 Whether would make same choice again	22
5.2 Whether considered leaving	23

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<b>6.</b>	<b>How to improve the academic experience</b>	<b>25</b>
6.1	Quality of feedback	25
6.2	Quantity of in-person teaching	26
6.3	Administrative failures	27
6.4	Mental health support	27
6.5	UCU strike action	28
<b>7.</b>	<b>Student priorities</b>	<b>29</b>
7.1	Belonging and freedom of speech on campus	29
<b>8.</b>	<b>Spotlight on groups of students</b>	<b>33</b>
8.1	Ethnicity (UK domicile)	33
8.2	Trans students	34
8.3	Disabled students	35
<b>9.</b>	<b>Teaching intensity</b>	<b>38</b>
9.1	Workload trends	38
9.2	Online learning	39
9.3	Satisfaction with scheduled contact hours	41
9.4	Satisfaction with wider aspects of the learning environment	41
9.5	Workload by HECoS subject	43
<b>10.</b>	<b>Quality of teaching and assessment</b>	<b>44</b>
10.1	Perceptions of the quality of teaching staff	44
10.2	Rating of assessment	45
10.3	Volume of assignments	46
10.4	Applying for an extension	47
10.5	Timeliness of feedback	48
<b>11.</b>	<b>Wellbeing</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>12.</b>	<b>Finances and the future</b>	<b>53</b>
	<b>Conclusions and policy recommendations</b>	<b>57</b>

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## Foreword by Alison Johns

After two demanding years for everybody in higher education, and particularly for students, it is encouraging to see that in most parts of the UK, undergraduates are beginning to see better value-for-money, and fewer students are reporting poor or very poor value from their academic experience.

With much more frequent ‘face-to-face’ teaching, which students welcome, their feedback now reflects increasing scrutiny of in-person teaching quality, assessment and feedback, and of programme and course administration. Our evidence in the Student Academic Experience Survey (SAES) 2022 points to the need for even more focus on enhancing and improving teaching. I think the pandemic opened our eyes to the sector’s ability to adapt, and this attribute remains just as relevant now. We need to continue to adapt, to improve and to refine our teaching, both in its leadership and delivery. We should be informed by engaging with students, by evidence such as this report, and, most importantly, by evidence-based good practice.

SAES 2022 follows SAES 2021 in highlighting the significant challenge of student mental health. It remains a big worry. I know that many in the sector are working really hard to support students, and I believe it is imperative that we draw from this evidence that we all need to do even more together, especially in sharing good practice. We cannot afford to ignore that of the 30% of students who considered leaving university, by far and away the main reason (34%) is their emotional or mental health. It is illuminating to see in free-standing comments that students place great importance on lecture staff being able to support them, augmenting the support of mental health specialists. But lecturers can only be expected to do this if they are adequately equipped and we need to recognise that this places additional demands on their resources.

Complementing the question on mental health is an area of the report which is extremely timely: on belonging and a new question on freedom of speech on campus. I am very encouraged to see that a significant majority of students feel comfortable expressing their points of view and even more that they hear a variety of opinions expressed on campus. Similarly, most students were positive about their sense of belonging. However, the report shows that this isn’t the experience for Black students: both in these two measures and in their perceptions of value; in their experience of their expectations being met; and in whether they would choose the same university. Everyone should have an equal opportunity to flourish in higher education, and it’s up to all of us to drive the change that’s needed.

Finally, I would like to thank our colleagues at HEPI in delivering this report with us and which we trust the sector will find helpful in its work to improve the academic experience for all students studying in the United Kingdom.

**Alison Johns**

**Chief Executive, Advance HE**

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## Foreword by Nick Hillman

I used to think the Student Academic Experience Survey was more important in some years than others. But recent times – dominated by the Covid-19 pandemic, industrial action and a cost-of-living crisis – have comprehensively disproved this. Each wave of the Survey has huge value. This is undoubtedly true in 2022.

In 2020, the Survey results were little affected by Covid, perhaps because it was thought the public health challenge would be short. In 2021, in contrast, the results were the most negative they had ever been. Students struggled to see light at the end of the tunnel.

This year, the headline story is positive: important indicators have moved back towards the pre-Covid results. Given the start of 2022 was still heavily disrupted by the pandemic, including during the fieldwork for the Survey, it is good to see this improving picture.

Yet some indicators nonetheless give real cause for concern. Anxiety, for example, is worryingly high and many respondents were desperate to raise the impact of industrial action on their studies even though there was no specific question on the issue.

The Survey is a longitudinal project but with in-built flexibility, enabling new areas to be included. So alongside the old standards on value-for-money perceptions, contact hours and wellbeing, we have added illuminating new sections this year on loneliness, free speech and the curriculum. We have also made more use of the free-text boxes.

HEPI and Advance HE see the Survey as an improvement tool. Anyone who regards it as an attack on the sector has misunderstood the purpose and value. By flagging problems, as well as where things are more positive, we hope to help institutions deliver more for their students. That is why we always welcome the chance to make granular (and suitably anonymised) data available to organisations wanting to see their own students' answers.

Nonetheless, there are obstacles in the way of continuous improvement. For example, high inflation means teaching home undergraduates now makes a loss, even in England where undergraduate fees are generally £9,250 a year. The old conundrum of how best to fund undergraduate teaching may return as a big issue as the next election approaches.

The Survey confirms students in general worry more about maintenance costs than tuition fees. We urge policymakers to consider the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on students.

It has been a huge pleasure, as always, to work with Advance HE as well as the polling company YouthSight on the 2022 wave of the Survey. Each year we eagerly await the results because they light up areas no other study covers. This year, we were even more eager than usual because, with so much going on, we were less able to predict what the results would say. As you will see, we found a number of fascinating surprises.

**Nick Hillman**

**Director, Higher Education Policy Institute**

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## Executive summary

This year there has been a partial recovery in many of the key aspects of the student experience as measured by this Survey, although in several cases the results remain below pre-pandemic levels.

In the wake of a return to face-to-face teaching across much of the UK, students this year are significantly more likely to feel they experienced good value, although this was still at a relatively low level, and was only slightly higher than the proportion who felt they received poor value. This year's Survey highlights how differing Government guidance across the four parts of the UK may have impacted the student experience. In particular, value-for-money among students from Scotland continues to fall, with the results reflecting concerns about the level of face-to-face teaching, which was officially discouraged for longer in Scotland, compared to expectations.

There has also been an increase in the numbers of students whose experience exceeded their expectations, but this remains below the levels recorded in 2019 before the pandemic. One key area in which there seems to be a gap between expectations and the experience is in terms of assessment and feedback. Analysis of open comments identified this as the single area where students would most like their experience to be improved, with a number of comments relating to concerns around consistency or timeliness of feedback. In terms of assessments, the volume continues to increase, and while we know from previous feedback that students like to work hard and be challenged, for some there appears to be a gap in terms of the volume of assignments expected and experienced, which in some cases has created workload pressure that has been challenging to manage.

For many students, and indeed across society as a whole, wellbeing concerns increased during the pandemic. Encouragingly, there has been a recovery in several aspects of student wellbeing this year, with life satisfaction, life feeling worthwhile and happiness all increasing. However, anxiety levels continue to be high and have only recovered slightly compared to last year. On a similar theme, a new question on loneliness identified that higher education can be a lonely place, with nearly one-in-four feeling lonely 'all' or 'most' of the time.

In a new area covered this year, we asked students about a number of issues related to freedom of speech and the diversity of views expressed. Although we do not have a benchmark to compare with, the results highlight that many students do not have particular concerns around these issues, with around, or just over, two out of three feeling that they experience a range of different views on their campus and within their curriculum, and that they feel comfortable expressing their views. More concerningly, however, there are some particular differences by ethnicity, with Black students being significantly less likely to feel their curriculum is diverse, or that they experience a sense of belonging.

## 1. Methodology<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1 Approach

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

YouthSight's Student Panel is made up of over 45,000 undergraduate students in the UK. These students are primarily recruited through a partnership with the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), which invites a large number of new first-year students to join the Panel each year. To maximise the overall sample size, further responses were sourced from Pureprofile.

Between 9 February 2022 and 21 March 2022, 45,141 members of the YouthSight Panel and 10,000 from Pureprofile were invited to complete the Survey. In total, 10,142 responses were collected, representing a response rate of 18%. Of the 10,142 total responses, 9,258 were sourced from the YouthSight Panel and 884 were sourced from Pureprofile. On average, the Survey took 11 minutes 12 seconds to complete.

This year, we have retained a number of key questions to provide annual comparisons, such as value-for-money, wellbeing, ratings of teaching staff and time spent learning. We have also added some new questions – including on sense of belonging, perceptions of free speech on campus and the diversity of the curriculum. We have also probed deeper into the reasons for taking paid work, and, in the section on assignment volumes, into whether extensions were requested. Building on a theme from last year, we have conducted analysis on a fully open question about how the student experience might be improved.

### 1.2 Sample size

This year our Survey captured the views of 10,142 full-time undergraduate students studying in the UK. Unless stated otherwise, all figures and tables relate to weighted data from the 2022 Survey.

The total sample size of 10,142, based on a full-time undergraduate population of 2,008,525, provides a margin of error of + / - 0.97%.<sup>2</sup> This is calculated at the 95% confidence level and based on a result of 50%, where the margin of error is at its maximum.

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<sup>1</sup> For specific queries about the base sizes and populations in this report, or for more general information about the contents, please contact [surveys@advance-he.ac.uk](mailto:surveys@advance-he.ac.uk) or [admin@hepi.ac.uk](mailto:admin@hepi.ac.uk)

<sup>2</sup> [www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he) [Accessed 6 April 2022]

This means that for a result of 50% we can be confident that the true result is between 49.03% and 50.97% in 95 out of 100 cases.<sup>3</sup>

When comparing between years, the large sample sizes at total level mean that many relatively small differences in the Survey between 2021 and 2022 of 2–3% or greater are statistically significant. For smaller sub-samples within the Survey, the margin of error is greater, and hence year-on-year differences of a few percentage points are in some cases not significant.

We have highlighted statistically significant differences between 2021 and 2022 (or in some cases, between sample groups from 2022 compared against the total sample) in bold text on each chart or table where such differences apply. Where we are comparing two or more sample groups from 2022 against each other, we have not generally highlighted significant differences unless stated.

### 1.3 Weighting

A comprehensive weighting strategy was employed, using Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) 2020/21 statistics, to maximise representation while maintaining integrity of the unweighted data. A full range of factors were processed including gender, ethnicity, year of study, domicile and type of school attended.

### 1.4 Base sizes

To streamline the amount of text, we have not generally included base size descriptions under each chart. Unless specified otherwise, the majority of charts are based on 2022 data comprising the total weighted population of 10,142. Most of the other charts are based either on time-series data or on one of the specific sub-samples identified in Section 2 below.

### 1.5 Ethnicity

For ethnicity profiling and analysis, the sample profile and main data in this report (for the ethnicity analysis only) are again based on UK-domiciled students.<sup>4</sup> This has been done to remove the impact of international students on ethnic groups. The ethnic groups analysed

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<sup>3</sup> [www.comresglobal.com/our-work/margin-of-error-calculator](http://www.comresglobal.com/our-work/margin-of-error-calculator) [Accessed 6 April 2022]

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



are mutually exclusive, hence the Asian group does not include Chinese students, an approach that we have adopted to provide consistency of analysis with previous years.<sup>5</sup>

### 1.6 Sex and gender identity

In previous years, the Survey included a gender category, taken from the information gathered by YouthSight for their Panel, but not a category on sex. This gender classification included the categories of ‘male’, ‘female’, ‘other’ and ‘prefer not to say’ and was used by YouthSight in the weighting strategy comparing to HESA data as well as in some analysis in the report.

This year, to reflect the status of sex as a protected characteristic, we have included a classification question.<sup>6</sup> Our questionnaire this year also included a gender identity question which we designed differently to the previous YouthSight Panel question, to match the categories used more commonly by Advance HE.<sup>7</sup> Full data from the questions on sex and gender identity are included in the data tables which are available on the Advance HE and HEPI websites.

### 1.7 Trans identity / history

Distinct analysis has been conducted on the experience of students who identify as being trans or having a trans history, with full data available in the data tables. Please note, however, that with a low base size, there is a high margin of error for this data.

### 1.8 Sexual orientation

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

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

<sup>6</sup> “Sex” categories were “man” and “woman”, which match the categories used in the Equality Law Act. There was also a “prefer not to say” option.

<sup>7</sup> “Gender identity” categories were “male”, “female”, “non-binary”, and “in another way”. There was also a “prefer not to say” option.

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## 2. Sample profile

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

Weighted data					
		2020 (10,227)	2021 (10,186)	2022 (10,142)	2022 Base size
<b>Domicile</b>	England	76%	74%	68%	6,943
	Northern Ireland	2%	3%	3%	302
	Scotland	6%	8%	7%	704
	Wales	3%	5%	4%	403
	EU <sup>8</sup>	6%	7%	10%	1,054
	Rest of the World	4%	4%	6%	657
<b>Institutions</b>	Russell Group	28%	28%	28%	2,869
	Pre-92 (excl. Russell Group)	21%	21%	21%	2,156
	Post-92	46%	47%	45%	4,573
	Specialist	4%	4%	2%	234
	Alternative <sup>9</sup>	0.5%	0.5%	3%	310
<b>Ethnicity (UK-domiciled providing an answer)</b>	Asian (excluding Chinese)	12%	13%	14%	1,179
	Chinese	1%	1%	1%	104
	Black	3%	7%	4%	304
	Mixed	4%	4%	5%	416
	Other	1%	1%	1%	98
	White	79%	74%	75%	6,303

<sup>8</sup> There has been specific focus this year to increase the number of students from outside the UK, to better match [official statistics from HESA](#).

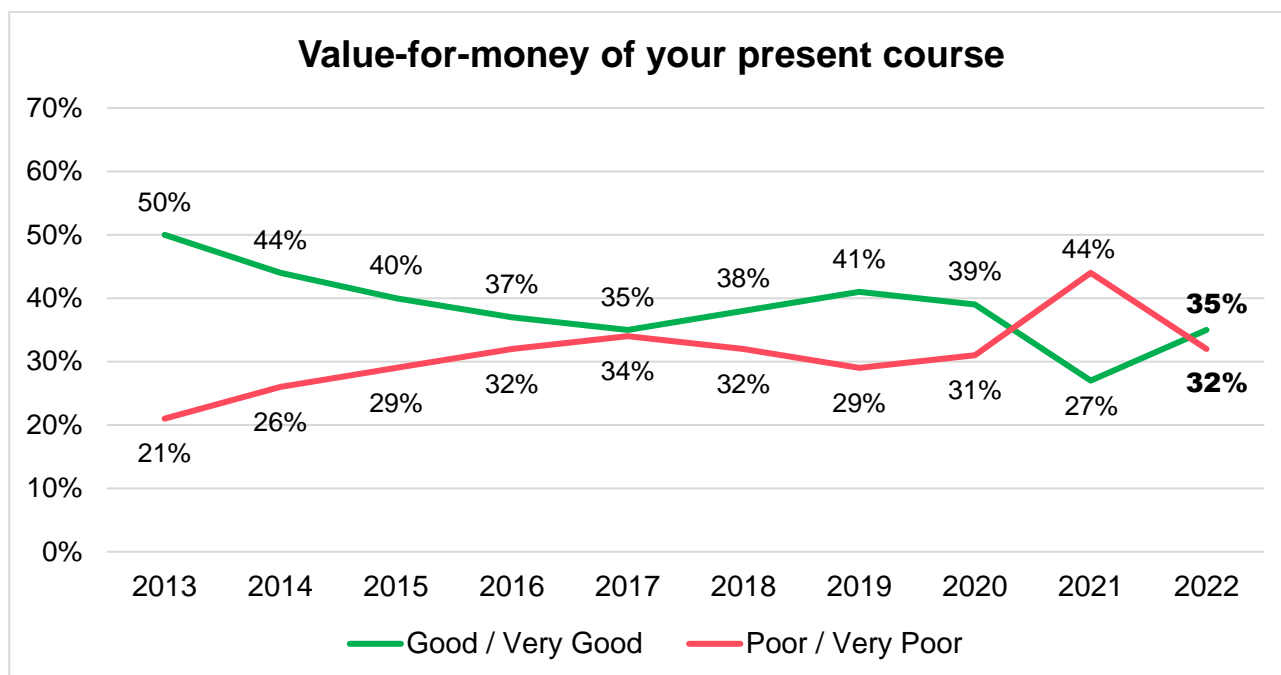
<sup>9</sup> As a result of specific targeting, the base size (weighted and unweighted) for Alternative Providers is much larger than in the past. Although not covered in detail in this report, this allows for much fuller analysis which is possible with the full data tables available on request.

## 3. Value-for-money

### 3.1 Trends over time

Over the past few years one of the most effective measures used to chronicle the fluctuations in the overall student experience has been the perception of whether the experience represents good value-for-money. Through previous editions of this report we have been able to trace the impact of major policy changes and events such as the increase in tuition fees in England and Wales and the onset of the Covid pandemic, and this year’s results provide a key touchpoint as restrictions are lifted across much of society.

Like most aspects of life, the 2021/22 academic year has still been impacted by the pandemic – but face-to-face lectures and workshops have taken place much more frequently across much of the UK, if with less certainty and greater potential for disruption than before. In this context, it is encouraging to see that perceptions of receiving good value-for-money have begun to recover, although it is very clear that many students still feel the value delivered by their experience could be improved.



Just over a third of students (35%) feel they have received good or very good value, an increase of 8% on 2021.<sup>10</sup> Crucially, this figure is (slightly) higher than the proportion who felt they received poor or very poor value (32%), which means that on the above graph the green line is once more above the red line – albeit only slightly. There were a further 32% who felt they had received “neither good nor poor” value. It is important to point out,

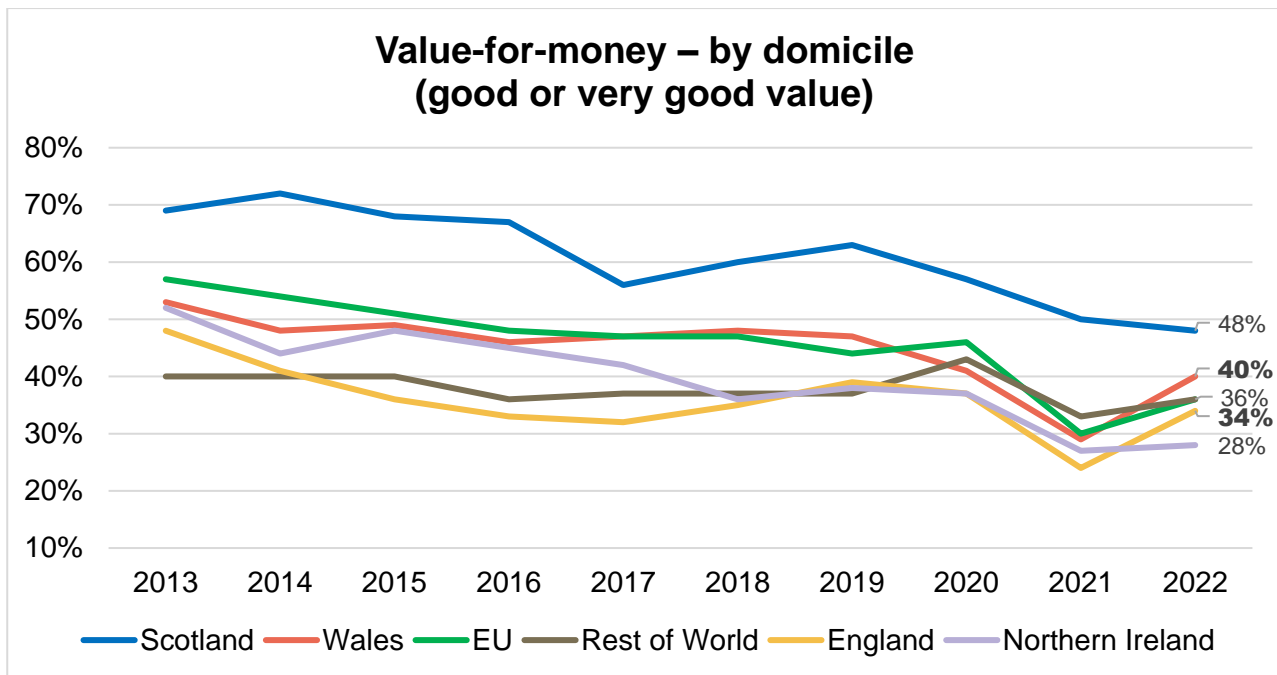
<sup>10</sup> When referring to year-on-year changes we are referring to percentage points, but use “%” for brevity.

however, that the green line (at 35%) is still below the levels achieved in 2018-20 and most previous years, which shows that while students are less likely to feel they have received “poor” value, a number of students are choosing “neither good nor poor” rather than actively feeling they have received “good” value.

Analysis over time has proved that, particularly since the introduction of high tuition fees in much of the UK, it is challenging for the sector to demonstrate value consistently, something that the pandemic impacted further. However, there has clearly been a positive reaction since last year, although numbers have not yet fully recovered to their previous levels.

### 3.2 Value by domicile

Perceptions of value have always varied significantly based on where a student is from – something that is not entirely surprising given the different fees and funding policies in place. However, we may reasonably relate fluctuations in these different levels to changes in the experience year-on-year. To add into the mix, we may also consider the different responses to the pandemic in different parts of the UK and the different policies in place.<sup>11</sup>



<sup>11</sup> Although this is based on domicile rather than university region, wider evidence does imply that generally (but not always), students are likely to study in the part of the UK where they are from (see [HEPI One for all or all four one](#)) – so we can realistically link these responses by domicile to different pandemic policies in place across the UK.

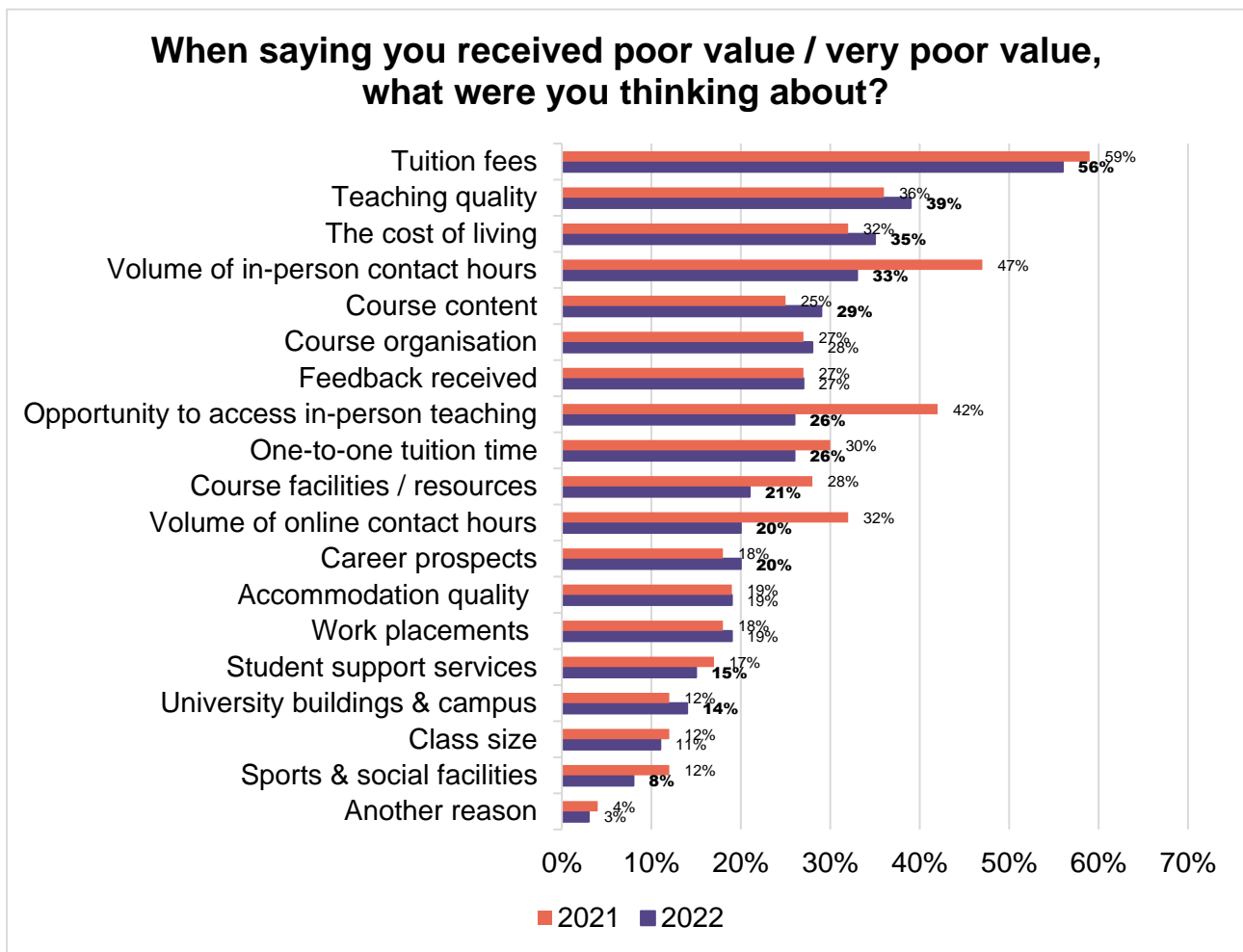
	Scotland	Wales	EU	Rest of World	England	NI
<b>2020</b>	57%	41%	46%	43%	37%	37%
<b>2021</b>	50%	29%	30%	33%	24%	27%
<b>2022</b>	48%	<b>40%</b>	36%	36%	<b>34%</b>	28%

What we have seen this year is a clear upturn in perceptions in students from England and also Wales, as well as a non-significant upturn for students from outside the UK. By contrast, perceptions among Scottish students have declined further and are some way behind the previously high level in pre-pandemic times, while Northern Irish students have the lowest value perceptions of all.

At the time of fieldwork, and indeed for much of the past two years, different rules have been in place in different parts of the UK. While we should not automatically relate all these fluctuations in scores to the role of the pandemic, the relative upturns and downturns by domicile are, at least in part, likely to result from the impact of different regulations on how students have experienced their time at university.

### 3.3 Factors influencing perceptions of poor value

As a follow-up to the key question on value, we asked students what they were thinking about when they gave their answer. We split this into two parts – factors linked to perceptions of poor value (which we have highlighted in this report), and factors linked to perceptions of good value (which are available in the wider data tables).



Respondents were asked to code all that applied.

Many of the factors with greatest significance are the same as previous years, but some have increased or decreased in importance.

Before the pandemic, the level of tuition fees was by far the dominant factor, but in 2020 and 2021 the lack of in-person contact was seen as similarly important in driving views of poor value. This year there has been a major shift in that lack of in-person contact has fallen significantly in its influence (although it is still a key factor), while wider aspects such as teaching quality, cost of living and course content are seen as more important.

Overall, the return to in-person teaching has clearly been welcomed, although there remain large numbers of students for whom the level of contact hours provided does not seem good value – something that was also the case before the pandemic.

A deeper dive into the data suggests that we can link this question to the differences in value perceptions by domicile highlighted in the chart above. It is notable that students from Scotland are more likely to cite the lack of in-person opportunities as being behind their rating of poor value than students from England – despite students from England having historically lower value perceptions.

## Student Academic Experience Survey 2022

Jonathan Neves and Alexis Brown

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Reasons for perceptions of poor value – domicile	England	Scotland
Number of contact hours	33%	36%
The opportunity to access in-person teaching	26%	33%

This implies that over the course of the 2021/22 academic year, face-to-face interaction has still been limited in Scotland – at least when compared to expectations.<sup>12</sup> This has impacted adversely on perceptions of value in Scotland which have now fallen for 3 years consistently.

It is important to point out that at the time when this year’s fieldwork began – in February 2022 – there was clear Government guidance in place in Scotland that teaching should take place online and students should not return to campus until March, and hence the perceptions of the experience among Scottish students should be considered in the context of universities following this guidance.<sup>13</sup>

Beyond the pre-defined answers listed in the Survey, students also had the opportunity to provide their own comments – with the examples below providing a flavour of some of the wider issues at play across all parts of the country.

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<sup>12</sup> [www.scotsman.com/news/politics/scottish-university-lectures-to-continue-online-in-new-term-3330128](http://www.scotsman.com/news/politics/scottish-university-lectures-to-continue-online-in-new-term-3330128) [Accessed 6 April 2022]

<sup>13</sup> [www.gov.scot/news/colleges-and-university-returns-postponed](http://www.gov.scot/news/colleges-and-university-returns-postponed)

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Other reasons – selected open comments<sup>14</sup>

“Pandemic cancelled loads of stuff and strikes cut out a load too. So paid for stuff I didn't get.”

“Lecturers striking all the time so even when I should be taught stuff I'm not getting it”

“A lot of strike action compounded by covid causing a whole semester to be cancelled with no compensation”

“Access to facilities was highly limited making their cost unjustifiable”

“Not getting a year abroad as a language student”

“The experience of 2nd year lost to Covid without any fee reduction”

“(would like) More group work to help students bond. The Pandemic really affected my / lots of students' ability to make friends”

“All of the above are not worth lifelong debt no matter what the organisation”

“The amount of strikes is ridiculous”

“My course was affected by strike action throughout all three years”

“I don't have a bad word to say about the course or quality of teaching but due to covid, strikes and having to cut my year abroad short due to war, in three years at university I've only had three terms of in person teaching.”

The main issue that stands out in these examples (and in the full list of comments) is that strike action – which was not one of the pre-defined answers available to this question – has impacted negatively on the experience and the perception of value for a clear proportion of students. This is likely to have played a role in suppressing what may otherwise have been a greater improvement in value perceptions this year. It is worth clarifying here that the fieldwork period (February to March 2022) coincided directly with a major period of strike action at many universities, following on from a number of other periods of industrial action in the previous years.<sup>15</sup>

There is also a general sentiment from these comments that some students are looking back across their whole experience and feeling a sense of regret at the disruption caused by the pandemic.

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<sup>14</sup> All open comments have been included verbatim, without any adjustments to spelling or grammar except where this impacted understanding.

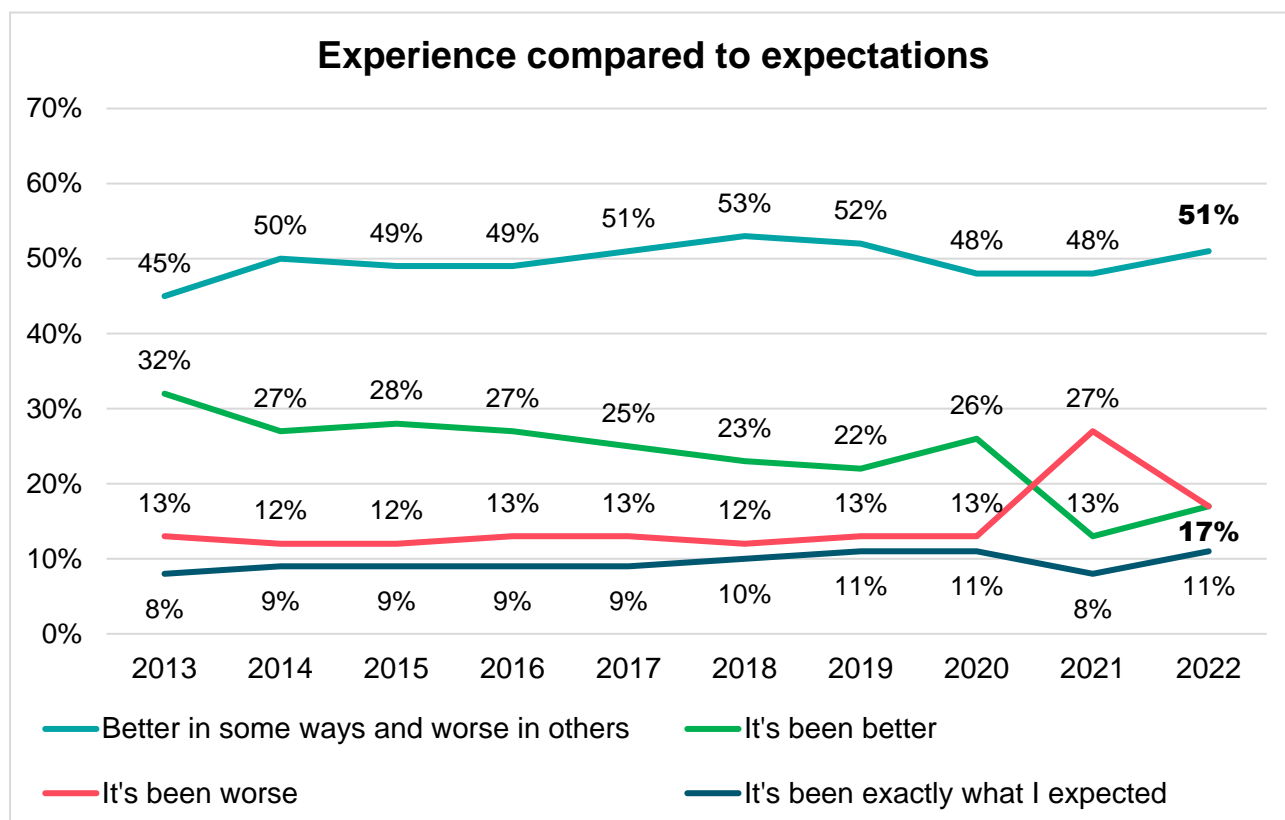
<sup>15</sup> [commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9387/#:~:text=The%20UCU%20once%20again%20balloted,February%20and%202%20March%202022](https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9387/#:~:text=The%20UCU%20once%20again%20balloted,February%20and%202%20March%202022) [Accessed 8 April 2022]



## 4. Meeting expectations

### 4.1 Experience versus expectations

Creating accurate expectations of what university will be like, and meeting those expectations, is challenging for institutions and students alike, but this has been made even more so over the past couple of years. Hence, we would expect a significant degree of variation from expectations but would also hope to see some evidence of where expectations are met or ideally exceeded.



Indeed, only around one-in-ten students feel the experience was exactly as expected, with by far the largest number saying their experience has been better in some ways than anticipated and worse in others. In terms of year-on-year comparison, perhaps our greatest interest lies in the smaller, but vital, proportions who feel their experience was markedly worse, or better than expected.

As with the scores on value-for-money, there has been a partial, but not full, recovery on these key measures. The proportion who feel their experience has been better has increased significantly from 13% to 17% while the proportion who feel their experience has been worse than expected has fallen sharply from 27% to 17%. However, there is still a long way to go to match previous results where there were around twice as many who felt their experience was better compared to those who found it to be worse.

Experience compared to expectations – domicile	England	Scotland
<b>Better than expected</b>	<b>17%</b>	14%
<b>Worse than expected</b>	18%	<b>21%</b>

As with value-for-money, we can also highlight differences between students from different parts of the UK, linked potentially to the pandemic policies in place which have impacted the campus experience in different ways. These findings show that the students from Scotland (the large majority of whom are studying in Scotland) are more likely to feel their experience was worse than anticipated – which is the reverse of previous years where students from England tended to give the lowest marks on this and other key measures.

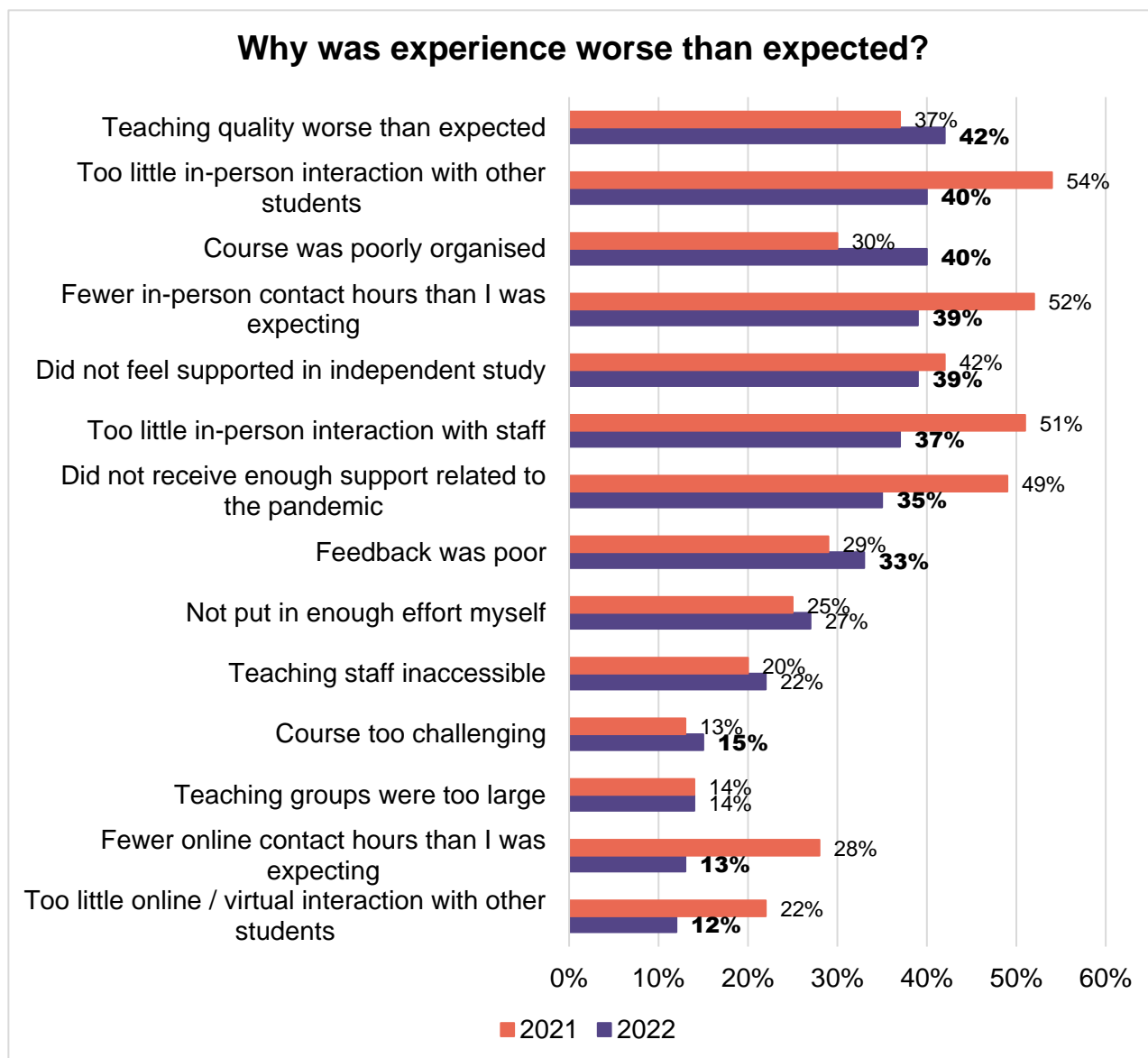
As well as domicile, another key characteristic where the impact of the experience has been felt differently is related to year of study. Current second- or third-year students will have had an experience significantly impacted by the pandemic. However, current fourth-year students may have been less impacted as they will have begun their university life before the pandemic, while those in their first year may have had different expectations coloured by the prevailing restrictions in place when they applied. This is drawn out by the table below, which pinpoints that those negative experiences compared to expectations were clearly most prevalent among second- and third-year undergraduates.

Experience compared to expectations – year of study	First year	Second year	Third year	Fourth year and above
<b>Better than expected</b>	<b>20%</b>	15%	14%	<b>19%</b>
<b>Worse than expected</b>	12%	<b>20%</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>18%</b>

Significant differences compared to the other groups in the table are in bold.

## 4.2 Why expectations are not met

Focusing specifically on students whose experience has been worse than expected, it was clear in 2021 that the main academic drivers of this were related to the absence of in-person teaching and related face-to-face interaction. These are still factors in 2022, but they do not dominate the chart below to the same extent as they did in 2021. An exception to this is among students from Scotland (not charted below), for whom the lack of face-to-face interaction with other students was the strongest driver (51% of mentions compared to 40% among the total sample), which underlines a clear feeling that perceptions in Scotland remain impacted by lingering impacts of the pandemic on campus life.



Teaching quality, course organisation and feedback are more likely to be mentioned this year, however this may also be due to a reduction in the relative level of concern about face-to-face opportunities bringing these other factors to particular attention. Indeed, we shall see below that course organisation and feedback are also mentioned positively in terms of helping drive a better experience than expectations for many, and we will see later on in this report that some of the key year-on-year scores for teaching did improve this year.

Scrutiny of the “other” comments (representing 7% of mentions) behind this question highlights a wide range of factors, some of which were provided as an option in the Survey, but where students have chosen to comment specifically.

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### Expectations not met – selected open comments

“Its new and I’m lost”
“Workload is unrealistic at times and there should be some kind of break during the semester”
“Wasn’t prepared for workload”
“Living situations and financial issues”
“The social aspect was better than I thought but the workload and pressure was much higher than I had anticipated”
“My anxiety has made it challenging to be as productive as I want to be”
“Struggle financially because I have not been able to do more than 12 hours per week paid job to provide support for my family due to the way that the timetable is structured”
“Strikes by lecturers haven’t been well compensated for by the university”
“Strikes severely impacted amount of teaching time”

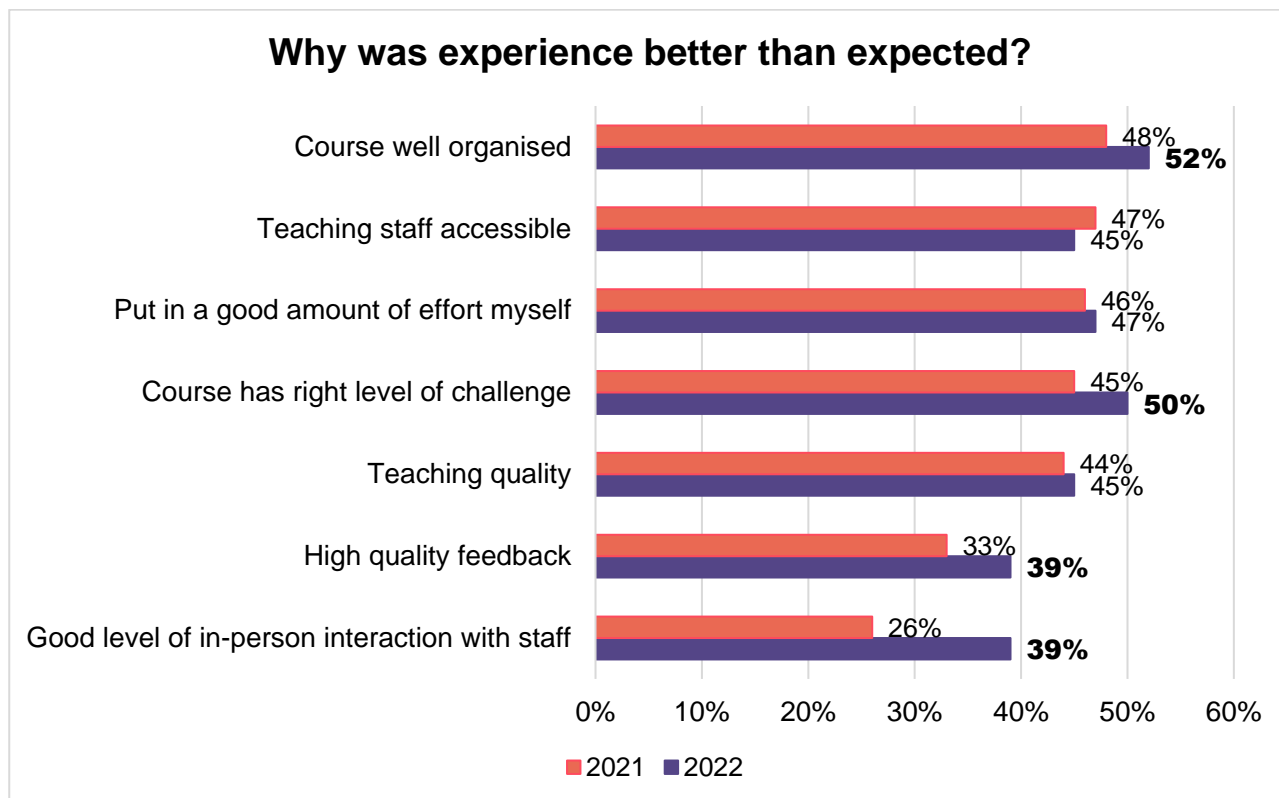
While we should clarify that the above list is a snapshot rather than a full qualitative analysis, some of the comments about needing support with finances, workload or personal issues are striking, shining a light on some of the ongoing issues impacting students beyond any direct disruption from the pandemic.

### 4.3 Why expectations are exceeded

As we saw earlier, the proportion of students whose experience was better than their expectations has increased this year, although it is still much lower than we would wish. What is relatively encouraging, however, is that there are a range of different factors that drive positive impressions, ranging from course challenge, to feedback, to organisation. There has also been a major increase in positive mentions of face-to-face interaction with staff – reflecting how the easing of restrictions enabled a return to previous delivery methods. We speculated during the pandemic that some aspects of virtual interaction would remain once restrictions were lifted. It is clear that while there may have been a permanent move to a wider range of delivery methods, face-to-face teaching remains highly valued by students and staff.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/ofs-to-launch-review-of-blended-learning/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/ofs-to-launch-review-of-blended-learning/) [Accessed 14 April 2022]



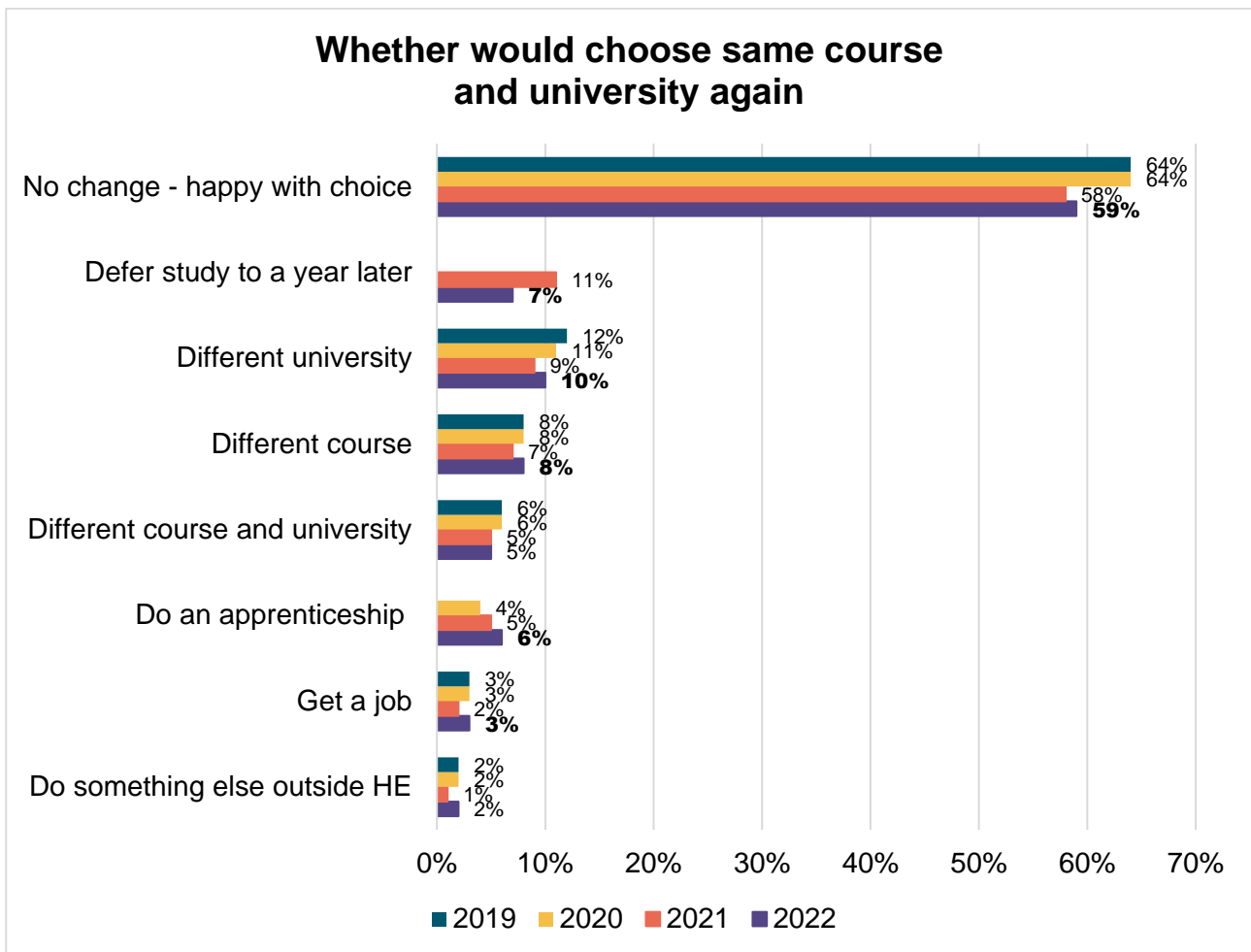
The comments below are just a snapshot of where the higher education experience has really provided opportunity and inspiration across a range of aspects.

Expectations exceeded – selected open comments
“I felt the university has taken many actions and initiatives to help in mental wellbeing and to discourage bullying. It also had good inductions and introductions and increased awareness against theft and scams. It also has helped me to grow and be independent whilst giving me useful advice and guidance”
“I did not expect to love my course as much as I do and I had never been on my campus before starting my course, I was not expecting it to be as lovely as it is”
“Better support for my disabilities than expected - Note about previous question on extensions. I've never applied for any but that's because I was given automatic extensions as part of my disability support”
“I've done things that I didn't think were previously possible for me”
“It's an amazing course and I can't imagine doing anything else”
“Some lecturers were completely inspirational and completely changed how I view my subject”
“A lot of staff are extremely supportive and willing to put in extra time to help”

## 5. The choice to go to university

### 5.1 Whether would make same choice again

A question introduced a few years ago asks students whether, knowing what they now know, they would make the same choice of university and course again. This is one of the main measures of the overall experience in the light of alternative choices available both within and outside higher education.



Where there is no data in a particular year this denotes a new option introduced later on.

Although there are clearly challenges faced, particularly in recent years, university remains a very popular choice and is one that is endorsed by the majority of students when looking back on that decision. 59% would make the same choice again, a relatively high number in absolute terms, but a figure that is still some way below the 2019 pre-pandemic level.

Among those who would make a different choice, there is no single option that dominates, as many would have changed their course and / or institution, but would still go into higher education. Unsurprisingly, the proportion who would have deferred study for a year has fallen (as we may surmise that this was originally linked to the pandemic), while the

proportion of those selecting an apprenticeship (which may be within further or higher education), or other options outside higher education, remains low.

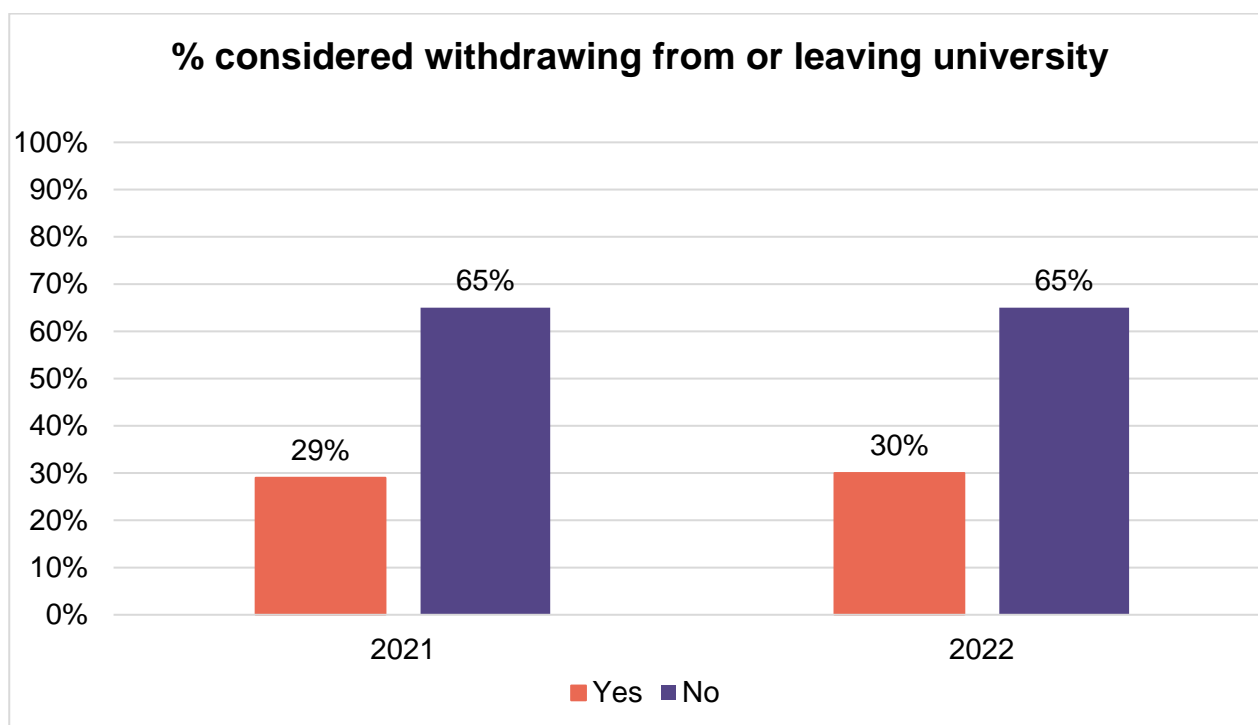
Whether would choose same course and university again	First year	Second year	Third year	Fourth year and above
<b>No change – happy with choice</b>	<b>66%</b>	55%	53%	<b>60%</b>

Significant difference compared to other sample groups highlighted in bold.

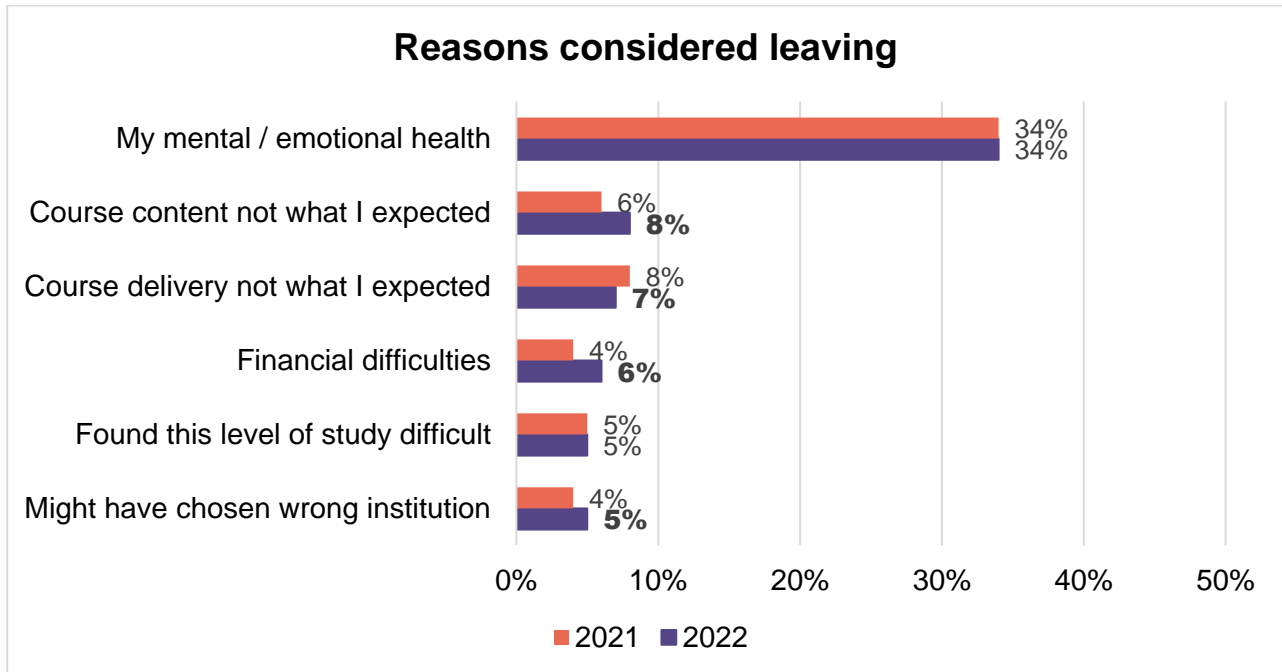
There is, however, a clear difference by year of study in terms of how the choice to go to university was viewed. Matching what we saw earlier in this report, results are less positive among second- and third-year students, which gives a picture of the extent of lasting impact of the pandemic disruption on how the university experience is viewed.

## 5.2 Whether considered leaving

To complement the above question assessing the choice to enrol at university, we have again included a question – first introduced in 2021 – which asked students whether they had considered leaving their course, with a follow-up as to the reasons behind this..



We remarked in 2021 that the figure of 29% considering leaving their course was relatively positive in the midst of the disruption caused by the pandemic. This year, however, the figure is similar – at 30% – at a time when there has been somewhat less disruption to the student experience. We may arguably be surprised that there has been no positive movement in this year’s scores, although given the way the question is worded, students could be looking back at how they felt across all their time at university and hence this score could still be impacted by less positive experiences in previous years.



In terms of specific reasons for considering leaving, there is relatively little change since 2021 (despite some of these changes being statistically significant due to the very high base sizes). Mental and emotional health remains a key issue for many students, one that has been impacted significantly by the pandemic.<sup>17</sup> The wellbeing measures in this Survey have also consistently identified challenges among the student population, and hence is it no surprise that mental health is the dominant issue impacting upon likelihood of non-continuation. Although at a relatively small level, the proportion experiencing financial difficulties is worth highlighting – given that it has increased by half and with reference to the current and predicted cost-of-living challenges that many people in the UK will face across the rest of 2022 and beyond.

<sup>17</sup> See for example T. Chen and M. Lucock (2022) *The mental health of university students during the COVID-19 pandemic: An online survey in the UK*. PLOS ONE 17(1): e0262562. [doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0262562](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0262562)



## 6. How to improve the academic experience

This section provides additional, qualitative analysis of the open text comments received in relation to the question ‘What is the one thing your institution could do to improve the quality of your academic experience?’ The analysis was carried out by Kate Precious, Researcher at Advance HE, with the aim of identifying the topics raised most frequently by those students who responded. To this end, popular topics were identified and recorded using ATLAS.ti thematic codes.<sup>18,19</sup> These were then ranked according to the number of quotations associated with each code, that is, the number of times students raised the topic. The most frequently raised topics were, in rank order: quality of feedback; quantity of in-person teaching (linked with other Covid restrictions); administrative failures; mental health support, and the University and College Union (UCU) strike action.

### 6.1 Quality of feedback

Students felt the quality of feedback provided by institutions was deficient in both timeliness and quality. Several reported waiting a long time for feedback (in some cases, up to 3 months) and regularly not receiving it in time to use it to improve for their next assignment. This made it difficult for them to use the feedback for the purpose for which it was designed.

“Try and give feedback faster so we can gauge how well we’re doing during the year”
“Faster marking”
“Mark assessment quicker and provide feedback before the next assessment is due so we know what to improve on”
“Feedback needs to be given time to be acted upon for the next assignment”

Students also requested more specific feedback to help them improve, rather than generic comments. As a result of insufficient feedback, some reported uncertainty about how they were doing on the course.

“More in-depth feedback on assignments. Its always very broad”
“I rarely felt I knew what I could have improved after getting my grade back”
“I don’t feel I know how I’m doing”

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<sup>18</sup> The comments were read in full to get an overview of what topics seemed to be the most frequently raised. Codes were then proposed and linked to certain key words to test whether the initial impression was correct. Where the theme did prove useful, the key word coding was then supplemented by additional manual coding. The top topics were then checked for overlap / duplication before being ‘sense checked’ against the wider findings of the survey.

<sup>19</sup> [atlasti.com](https://atlasti.com)

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Several students also requested 1:1 feedback or specific feedback sessions.

“More 1 to 1 conversations about progress and feedback for work”
“I would also like if feedback on work was given in person somehow, then I can ask questions on how to improve and get the feedback I will find useful”
“Organising mandatory in-person / online feedback sessions where tutors can talk to students about their assignments in more detail”

Although there were examples of good feedback some students were keen for this to be consistent across all teaching staff.

“More consistency among tutors for essay feedback e.g. a set amount of feedback they give, more clarity on how work is graded, etc”
“More regulated feedback across the board, some tutors don’t give the same level of feedback as others”
“Sometimes I received amazing and detailed feedback but with some lecturers I only got about 3 sentences and was difficult to improve based on that”

## 6.2 Quantity of in-person teaching

The second most commonly raised topic was the quantity of in-person teaching provided, with the majority of students wanting more in-person teaching.

“More in person and less online”
“Having our lectures delivered in-person rather than prerecorded”
“Increase the number of in-person contact hours”

Several students felt that this had had a detrimental effect upon their learning.

“I really missed in-person contact hours last year and my grades suffered as a result”
“More in-person activities so students can engage more since we learn from other students”
“Watching videos at home is 10 times less motivating and engaging than going in-person”

This overlapped with a general frustration that Covid restrictions seemed, from the perspective of students, to be more onerous in their university settings than they were in other environments.

“Follow Government guidance on Covid, rather than coming up with its own rules”

“Covid and strikes has impacted everyone and we have had little support or compensation for this”

“Stop blaming things on Covid, they’ve had over 2 years to adapt and yet we have no tutor, no support”

For some students, this also became an issue of value for money.

“NOT the academic experience I thought I was getting and may as well have done an open university degree without the £9,000 a year price tag”

“6 hours a week for 9 grand a year seems very poor compared to other courses of the same price with 30 hours a week!”

### 6.3 Administrative failures

Students also reported in large numbers that organisation and administration of teaching and courses had been poor. Most of the comments related to either communication between staff and students, timetabling or the overall structure of the course.

“More structured sessions, better timetabling organisation”

“Have a weekly structure so that I could get a job and earn some money”

“Have more organisation between departments, particularly when organising assignment dates”

“Better communication and organisation with regards to expectations and deadlines”

### 6.4 Mental health support

Mental health continues to be an area of concern for students, who often report that the support they need was not there when they need it. In some cases, this was due to waiting lists or staffing issues, while in others there were more systemic issues around processes. Some students feel that specialist staff gave good support but that a supportive culture had not yet embedded itself in teaching staff.

“Mental health support made more accessible and acknowledged more”

“Considering the mental health of students as a priority than to just pile assessments all at once on us when we have revision and dissertations to be focusing on. I feel like a lot of staff played down circumstances of the personal challenges I was dealing with and was told multiple times to tough it out. Because of that I felt discouraged to even seek out mental health support by the university, often turning to my friends for support.”

“Better mental health support, they are mostly OK but the lecturers should be in the know too”

## 6.5 UCU strike action

While the degree to which students were supportive or critical of the strike action varied, they were frustrated by the impact it had on their studies, and this came out in a number of comments. For many, the strike action on the back of reduced contact hours for Covid was particularly hard to accept.

“Stop constantly going on strike”

“Strike action has really affected some courses”

“Pay the staff and listen to their demands so they don’t have to strike and we don’t miss out on more teaching hours”

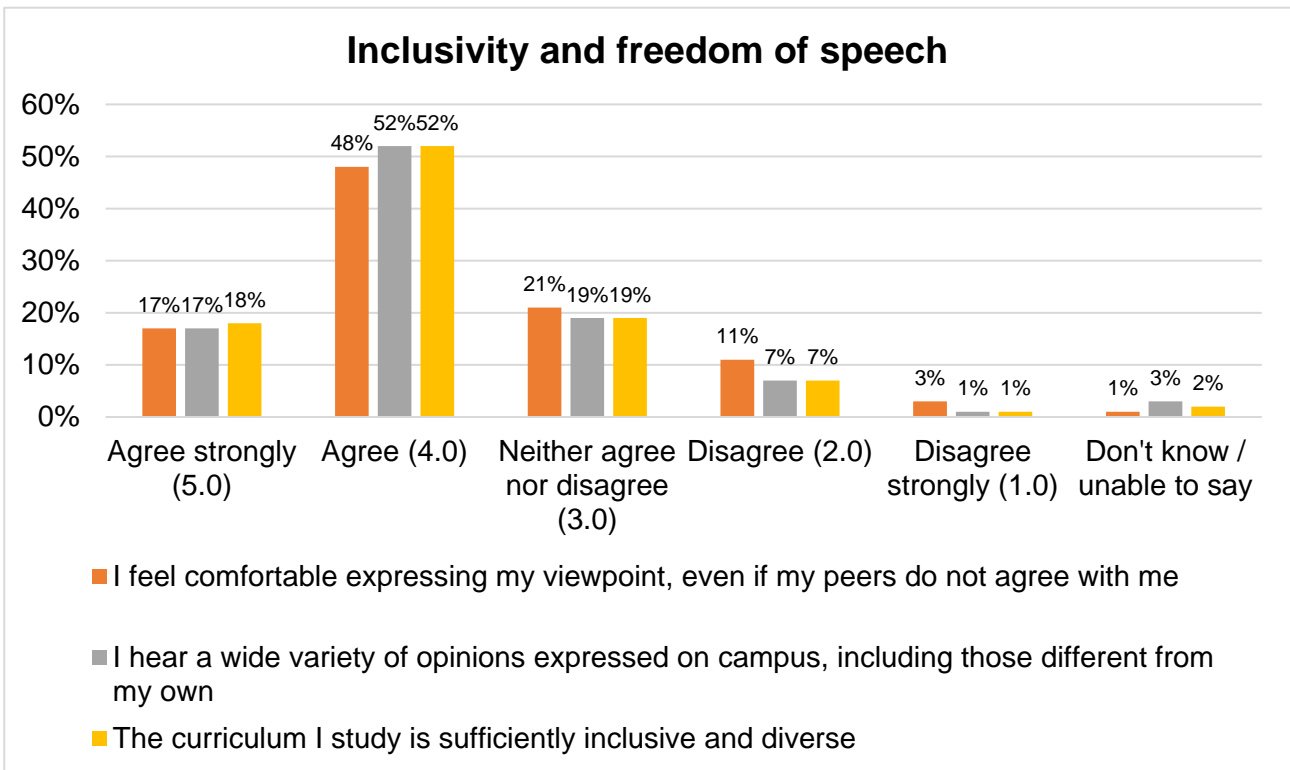
In summary, students have felt that they had a difficult year, in part due to reasons outside of universities’ direct control. However, universities could improve their students’ academic experiences by improving their feedback processes, increasing in-person teaching hours, paying more attention to timetabling, structure and communication and by working to limit any strike action.

## 7. Student priorities

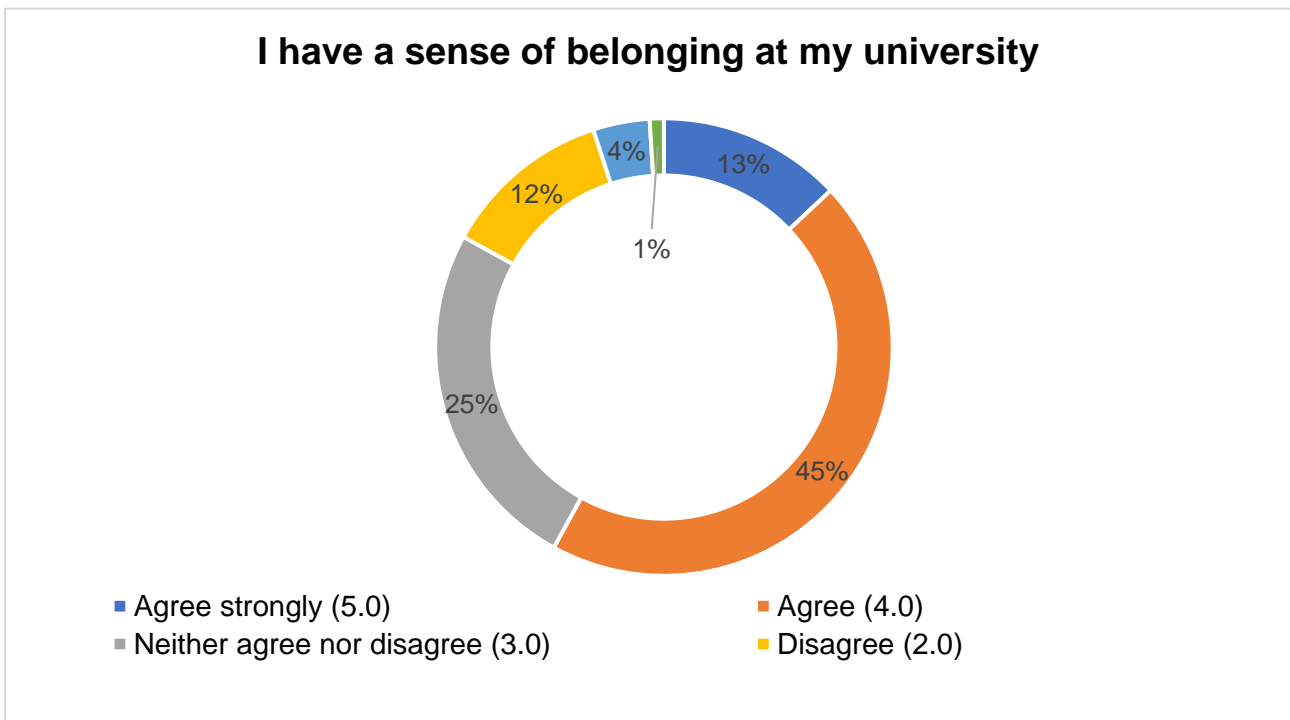
### 7.1 Belonging and freedom of speech on campus

This year, for the first time, we asked students questions that explored whether they feel there are problems around self-censorship and freedom of speech at their university. The majority of students (64%) either agreed or agreed strongly with the statement that 'I feel comfortable expressing my viewpoint, even if my peers do not agree with me', with only 14% disagreeing or disagreeing strongly. This would suggest that the majority of students feel no need to self-censor among their peers whom they disagree with. Similarly, the majority (69%) agreed or agreed strongly that they hear a variety of opinions expressed on campus, including those different from their own, while only 9% disagreed or disagreed strongly with this statement.

However, there were significant differences in answers to these questions when broken down by ethnicity. In particular, Black and Asian students were less likely to agree that they heard a variety of views on campus (58% and 61% agree versus 72% of White students). There were also disparities in terms of whether students felt comfortable expressing their viewpoint, even when their peers disagreed with them: 66% of White students felt comfortable, while only 64% of Black students, 59% of Asian students, and 61% of Mixed Ethnicity students felt comfortable. Similarly, while the majority of students also felt that their curriculum was sufficiently inclusive and diverse, with only 8% disagreeing, this proportion lowered for Black students, only 56% of whom agreed as opposed to 73% of White students.

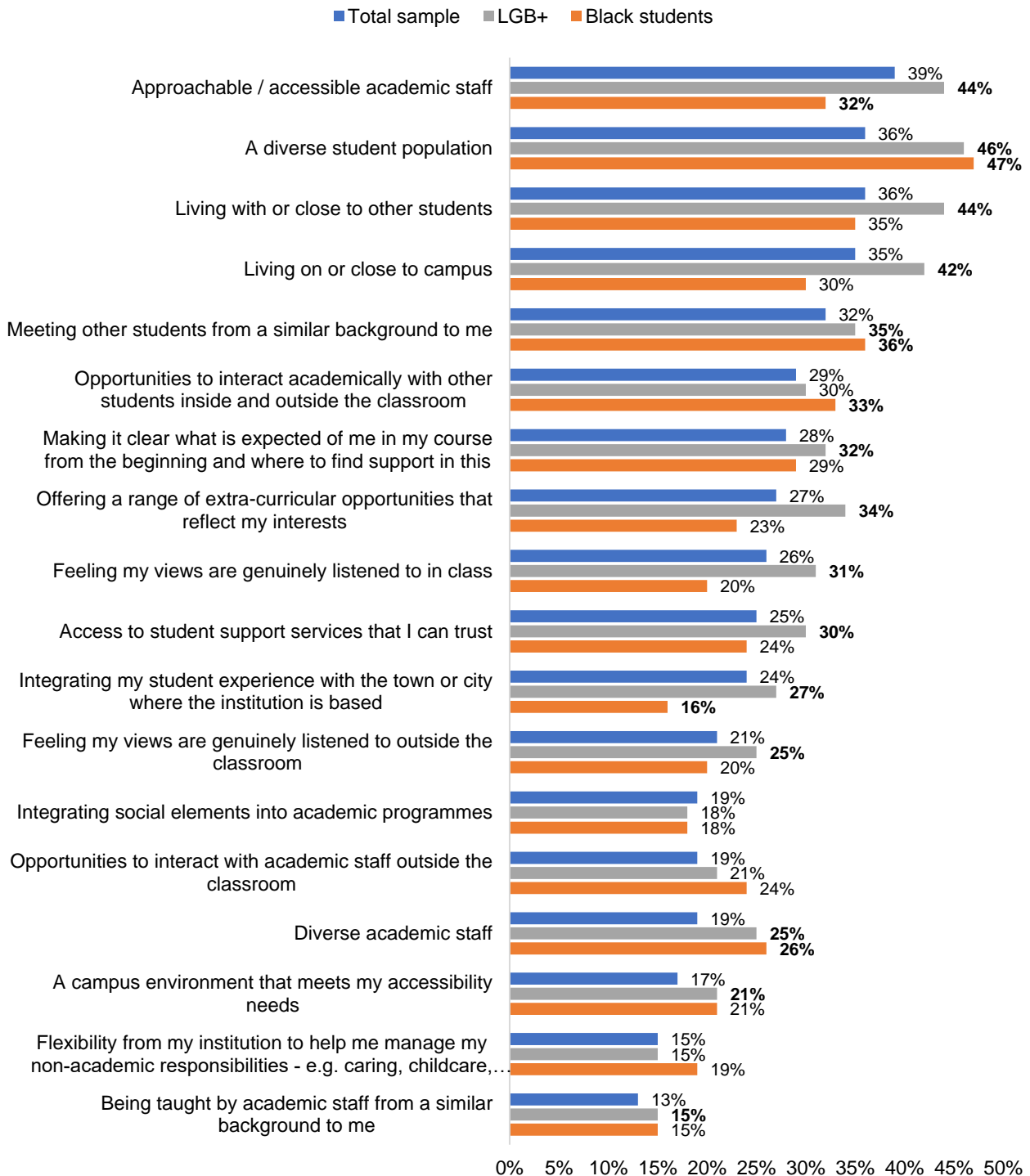


For the second year in a row, we asked students what contributed most to their sense of belonging. Similarly to 2021, approachable and accessible academic staff ranked foremost in students' perception of their own belonging. Living close to other students also continued to rank highly at 36% overall.



Having a diverse student population, however, is more important across all groups than last year, rising from 21% for the total sample last year to 36% this year. Student diversity was even more important for LGB+ students, now ranking at 46%. Black students in particular found a diverse student population to be 15 percentage points more important than White students, and for staff they found diversity 7 percentage points more important. Asian students also found student diversity to be more important, with 43% saying this contributed most to belonging as opposed to only 32% for White students, and they especially found staff diversity important (30% as opposed to only 19% for White students).

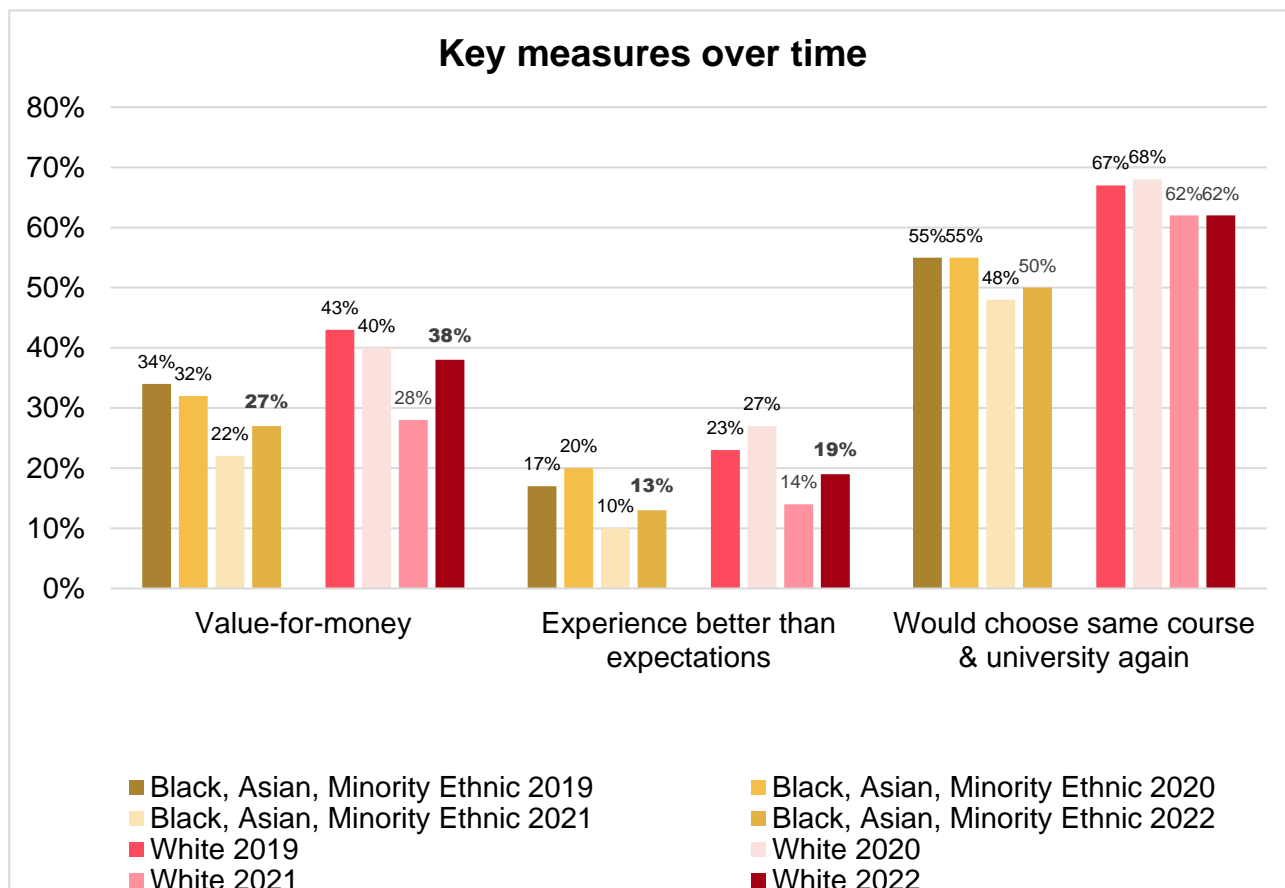
## What contributes most to your sense of belonging at your institution?





## 8. Spotlight on groups of students

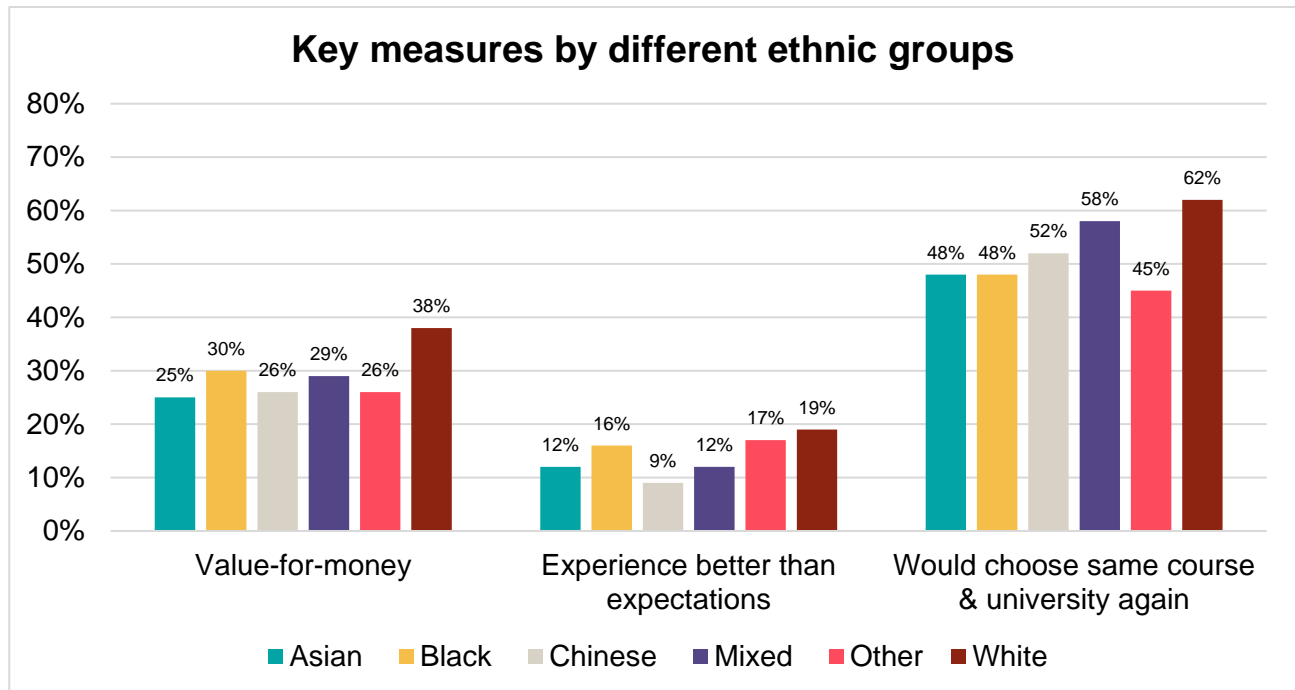
### 8.1 Ethnicity (UK domicile)



We have seen in previous years how the experience of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students appears to be less positive than the experience of White students. Unfortunately, the difference in scores on some of the key measures remains just as stark as in previous years. In fact, while perceptions on some of these key measures have improved this year, this improvement has been more modest among Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students, resulting in an increasing of the gap.

On value-for-money, the relative gap between Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic and White students has risen to 11%, while the gap for exceeding expectations has increased from 4% to 6%. In the other key measure highlighted here, only half of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students would choose the same course and university again.

We know from wider sector data that non-continuation rates are higher and attainment rates are lower among Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students and hence broadening our understanding of how and why the experience itself is less satisfactory is paramount.<sup>20,21</sup>



When we analyse the different ethnic categories in detail, we see a mixed picture, although in all cases, White students report the most positive findings. Asian students report relatively low scores on all three of the measures highlighted, while the relatively small number of students who classify themselves in the “Other ethnicity” category are relatively unlikely to choose the same course and university again. Results among Black students are less positive than for White students, but are above some other ethnic categories highlighted.

## 8.2 Trans students

Just over 2% (246) of the sample identified as being trans or having a trans history. Despite the high margin of error when assessing the data for such a small group, there is evidence of some significant differences in the experience of trans students compared to the total sample.

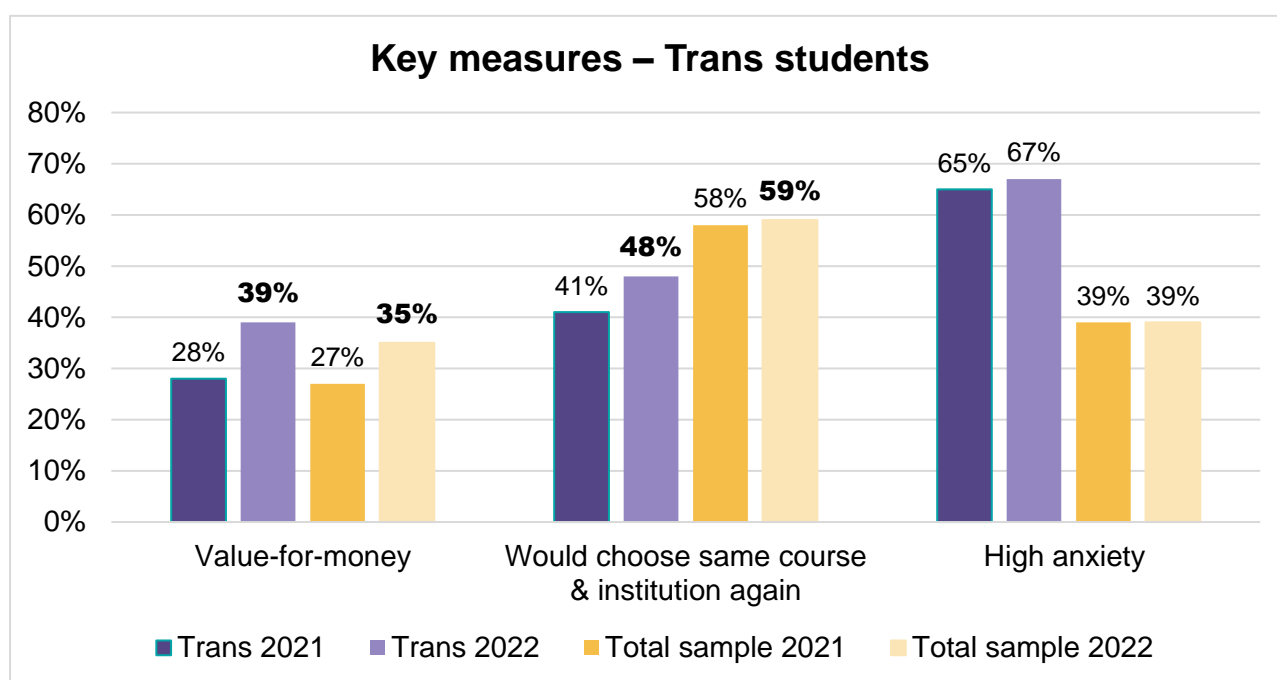
<sup>20</sup> [www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/ethnicity-awarding-gaps-uk-higher-education-201920](http://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/ethnicity-awarding-gaps-uk-higher-education-201920)

<sup>21</sup> See for example S. Kauser, S. Yaqoob, A. Cook *et al* (2021) Learning from the experiences of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) university students who withdraw from their undergraduate degree. *SN Social Sciences* 1,121. [doi.org/10.1007/s43545-021-00115-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-021-00115-8)

Trans students are highly more likely to feel anxious, with levels of anxiety at the same level as last year.<sup>22</sup> Trans students are also significantly less likely, than the total sample, to say they would choose the same course and institution again.

By contrast, the views among trans students on value-for-money are at a similar level to the total sample, with clear evidence that perceptions of value have improved over the past year, as we found with the total sample.

These data are relatively volatile, due to the small numbers, but perhaps the main point to take away is around levels of anxiety, which are twice as high as the student population as a whole, symptomatic of mental health concerns among trans students which have also been identified outside the UK.<sup>23</sup>



Significant differences compared to 2021 (for the same cohort) are in bold.

## 8.3 Disabled students<sup>24</sup>

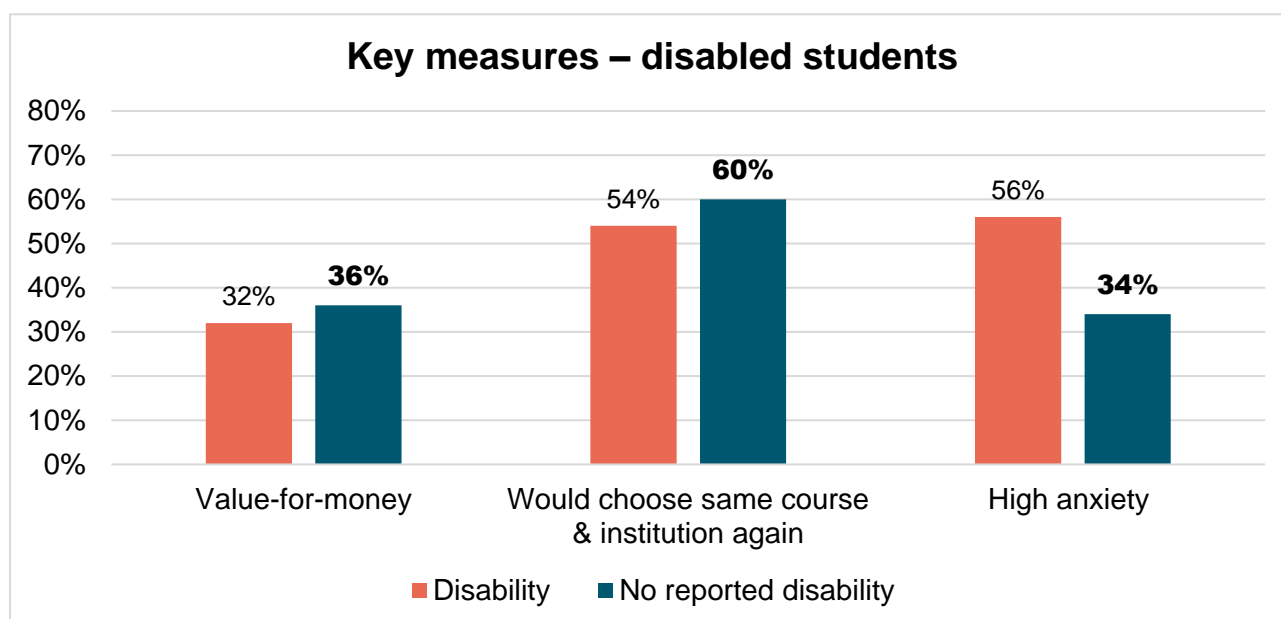
<sup>22</sup> High anxiety measured based on those answering 6–10 out of 10 for the question “How anxious did you feel yesterday?” See Section 11 for further discussion of anxiety alongside other wellbeing measures.

<sup>23</sup> N. Anderssen, B. Sivertsen, K.J. Lønning *et al* (2020) Life satisfaction and mental health among transgender students in Norway. *BMC Public Health* 20, 138. [doi.org/10.1186/s12889-020-8228-5](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-020-8228-5)

<sup>24</sup> Much of the commentary in this section was produced and authored by Hannah Borkin, Advance HE Associate.

Disabled students are by definition a more vulnerable group and the challenges that they face across higher education are significant and varied. We know that, in particular, the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on their experiences has been profound and has led to a deterioration in mental health and wellbeing. This was highlighted in a survey conducted by the Disabled Students' Commission (2021), completed by 473 disabled students, with 80% of respondents reporting that Covid-19 had a negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing.<sup>25</sup>

The Disabled Students' Commission's annual report (2022) also highlighted some of the key barriers faced by disabled students in light of the transition to online / hybrid learning and the transition back to campus.<sup>26</sup> Challenges that have always been prominent, such as the administrative burden experienced by disabled students in order to get support in place in time for the commencement of studies, or instances of inaccessible design in learning, teaching and assessment, continue to create barriers. Nonetheless, with flexibility and accessibility no doubt improving to accommodate some of the restrictions put in place as a result of the pandemic, the sector now has a real opportunity to ensure the needs of disabled students are met at the earliest possible stage.



Significant differences between the cohorts are in bold.

Unfortunately, the data suggest a clear difference in the experience of disabled students, particularly in terms of high anxiety levels, low perception of value and lower likelihood to make the same choice again.

<sup>25</sup> [www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/exploring-impact-covid-19-disabled-students-experiences](http://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/exploring-impact-covid-19-disabled-students-experiences)

<sup>26</sup> [www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/disabled-students-commission-annual-report-2021-2022](http://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/disabled-students-commission-annual-report-2021-2022)

Through the follow-up question asking for the reasons behind perceptions of poor value, we can identify some of the main issues at play for disabled students in contributing to their experience. The table below specifically highlights the factors that disabled students were significantly more likely to raise as an issue driving their perceptions of poor value.

Factors behind perception of poor value	Students with a disability (who perceived poor value)	Students with no reported disability (who perceived poor value)
<b>The cost of living</b>	<b>42%</b>	34%
<b>Number of in-person contact hours</b>	<b>38%</b>	31%
<b>Course organisation</b>	<b>36%</b>	25%
<b>Feedback received</b>	<b>33%</b>	25%
<b>Opportunity to access in-person teaching</b>	<b>30%</b>	25%

Table shows top five factors where there is a statistically significant difference between disabled students and those with no reported disability.

Cost of living is an issue that was identified in a number of the open comments this year (across the total sample) but it is clearly an even bigger issue for disabled students. There is also a greater strength of feeling that the level of in-person contact hours / teaching is not at the level required.

Many disabled students are already facing obstructive costs to ensure that their access needs are met while at university, especially when the options they are provided with are inaccessible. For one student, following the change to Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA), they found that their funding no longer covered the difference in accommodation costs they were required to spend to ensure they could reside in accommodation that met their needs.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, while not all disabled students are eligible for DSA, those with a known disability and in receipt of DSA can face insurmountable application and assessment hurdles to get support in place including sometimes spending further to fund diagnostic assessments.<sup>28</sup> Each of these examples adds to the perception that cost of living is contributing to poor value-for-money for disabled students.

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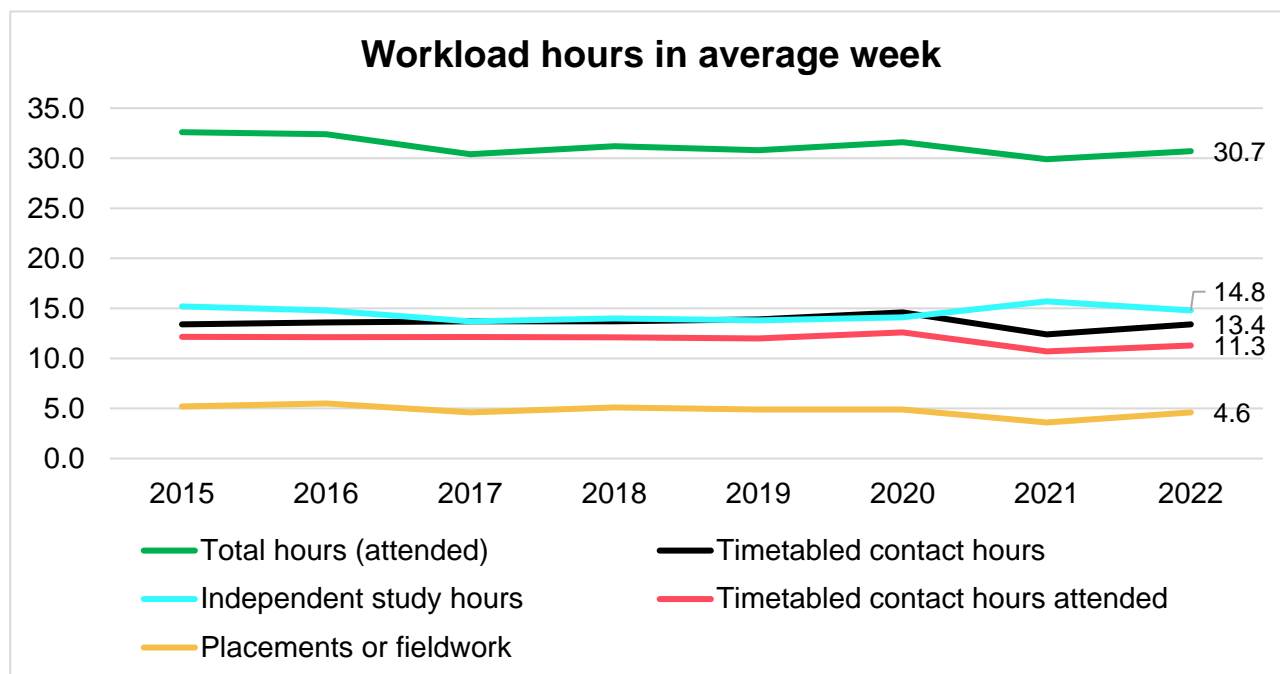
<sup>27</sup> Scope, 2022. [www.scope.org.uk/news-and-stories/disability-and-university-costs/](http://www.scope.org.uk/news-and-stories/disability-and-university-costs/)

<sup>28</sup> Lord Holmes, 2022. [lordchrisholmes.com/report-disabled-students-allowance-dsa/](http://lordchrisholmes.com/report-disabled-students-allowance-dsa/)

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## 9. Teaching intensity

### 9.1 Workload trends



	Total hours (attended in average week)	Timetabled contact hours	Independent study hours*	Contact hours attended*	Placements or fieldwork*
<b>2019</b>	30.8	13.9	13.8	12.0	4.9
<b>2020</b>	31.6	14.6	14.1	12.6	4.9
<b>2021</b>	29.9	12.4	15.7	10.7	3.6
<b>2022</b>	30.7	13.4	14.8	11.3	4.6

\* These measures contribute to the total figures

At the height of the pandemic, we saw a change in the nature of students' working hours, even though there was a decline in the overall total. However, there was a perception of increased workload among many, as there was a clear growth in the volume of assignments (see the next chapter for further discussion of assignments and assessment), and the nature of independent study often felt more challenging. This year, as we have seen across the Survey, there has been a partial, but not complete, return to the kind of volumes we saw before Covid-19 took hold. Timetabled contact hours (face to face or online) have increased, and there are marginally fewer hours of independent study. However, as we also saw in 2021, students again report a greater volume of independent study than timetabled contact hours, which remains a key barometer of the balance of workload.

The main proportionate change this year has been the volume of time spent on work placements or fieldwork, which has increased from 3.6 to 4.6 hours per week. This will have been welcomed by many students as these kinds of key developmental activities clearly suffered during the pandemic, although it should be pointed out that the average time spent on these activities is still lower than it was in 2019.

### 9.2 Online learning

The pandemic saw an unprecedented move towards teaching online. Rather than increasing support for online teaching, the pandemic has made in-person teaching more popular than ever, moving from two times to three times as popular as the online equivalent, according to the 2021 Unite Students Applicant Survey.<sup>29</sup> Once restrictions began to lift, as well, there was immediate pressure from Government ministers in England to return to face-to-face teaching, though this was less true in Scotland, where restrictions on in-person teaching remained for longer.<sup>30</sup>

Moving into the post-lockdown period, universities were faced with a choice about how much teaching should remain online, and to what extent they should return entirely to in-person teaching. There is not necessarily a dichotomy between recorded and in-person teaching; recent research from the UUP Student Future Commission has shown that 90% of students prefer in-person teaching where content is also recorded.<sup>31</sup> This issue continues to be both live and controversial; in March 2022, the Office for Students launched a review into blended learning, aimed at exploring both what blended learning looks like currently and what best practice should look like in the future when combining online and in-person course delivery.<sup>32</sup>

This year's SAES has for the first time asked questions on what proportion of students' a) lectures and b) labs/seminars have taken place online so far in the 2021/22 academic year. The results reveal a fairly even spread across proportions of lectures currently being taught online. For 13% of students, however, between 91% and 100% of lectures were taught

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<sup>29</sup> Unite Students Applicant Survey 2021. [www.unitegroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Applicant-survey-June-2021-published-version-images.pdf](http://www.unitegroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Applicant-survey-June-2021-published-version-images.pdf) [Accessed 14 April 2022]

<sup>30</sup> Meg Hill, 'Nadhim Zahawi says there are "no excuses" for online learning at universities', *Independent*. 9 January 2022. [www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/nadhim-zahawi-covid-durham-university-sunday-times-russell-group-b1989407.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/nadhim-zahawi-covid-durham-university-sunday-times-russell-group-b1989407.html) [Accessed 12 April 2022]

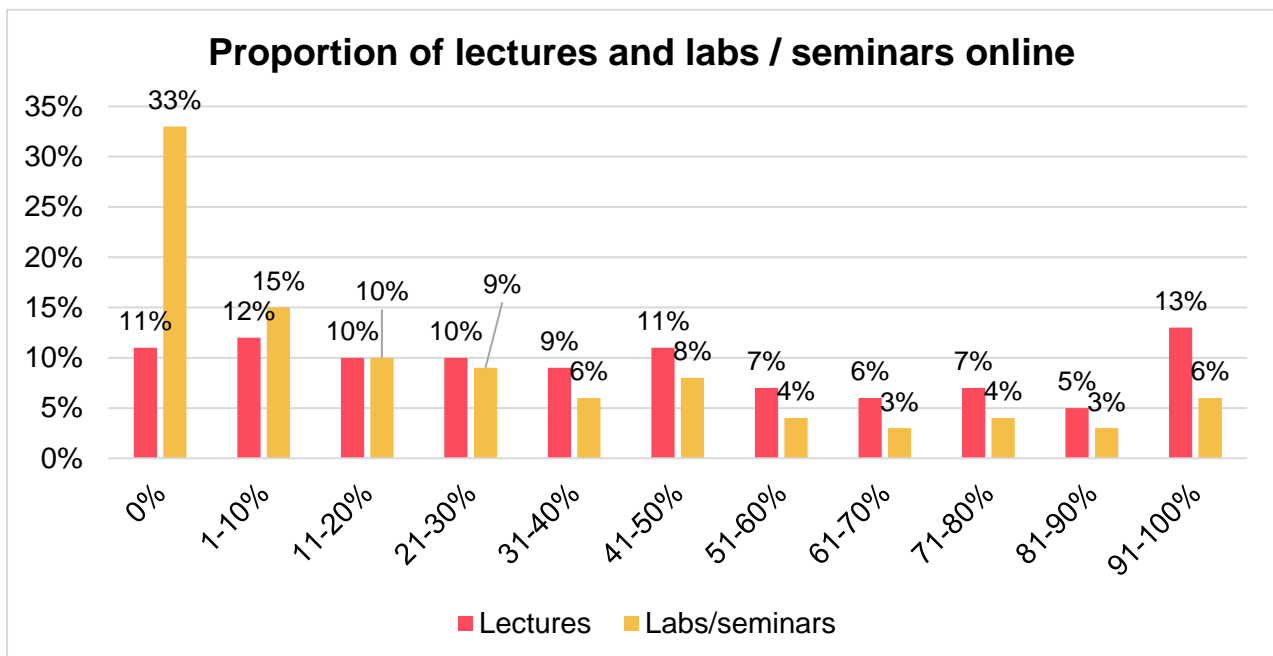
<sup>31</sup> UPP Student Futures Manifesto, February 2022. [upp-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/A-Student-Futures-Manifesto-Final-Report-of-the-Student-Futures-Commission.pdf](http://upp-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/A-Student-Futures-Manifesto-Final-Report-of-the-Student-Futures-Commission.pdf) [Accessed 11 April 2022]

<sup>32</sup> 'OfS to launch review of blended learning', 17 March 2022. [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/ofs-to-launch-review-of-blended-learning/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/ofs-to-launch-review-of-blended-learning/) [Accessed 11 April 2022]

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online – a figure that was much higher (40%) among students from Scotland. Given that 38% of students had 50% or more of their lectures delivered online, this would suggest that some element of online lectures will continue into the future even as restrictions have eased.

For seminars and labs, however, the picture looks different. Perhaps due to the more interactive nature of this teaching, labs and seminars were significantly less likely to be taught virtually, with 33% of students reporting 0% were online, and 15% reporting that 1-10% were online. By contrast to the 38% of students who said 50% or more of their lectures had been delivered virtually, only 20% of respondents said 50% or more of their labs and seminars were delivered online. These varied by university region, in particular where in-person teaching restrictions remained longer in Scotland; for example, only 5% of students in England reported 100% of their seminars and labs being online, while 13% in Scotland reported so.

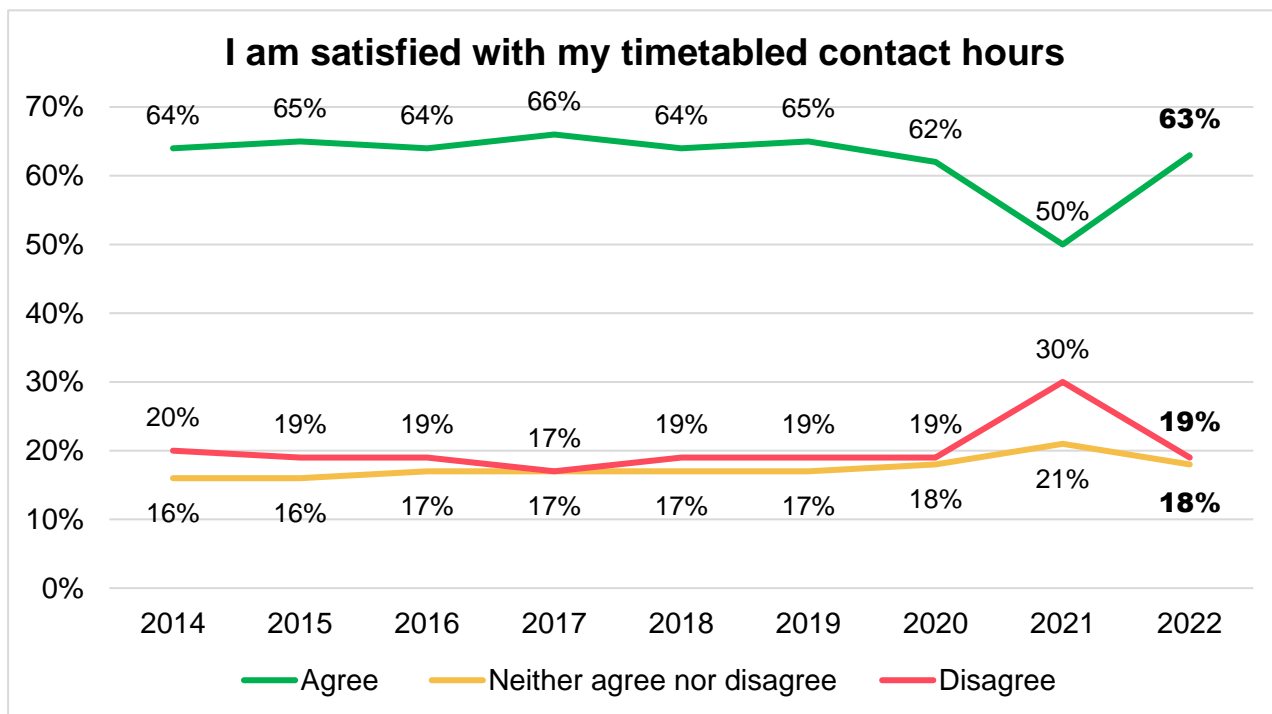


These results must be taken within the context of individual students who may have had lectures or seminars delivered online for reasons other than in-person teaching not being an option. For example, students with Covid who had to self-isolate may have taken part in lectures or seminars online where they otherwise would have joined their peers in person had circumstances allowed. Some international students may have been unable to join face-to-face sessions, for example due to travel restrictions.



### 9.3 Satisfaction with scheduled contact hours

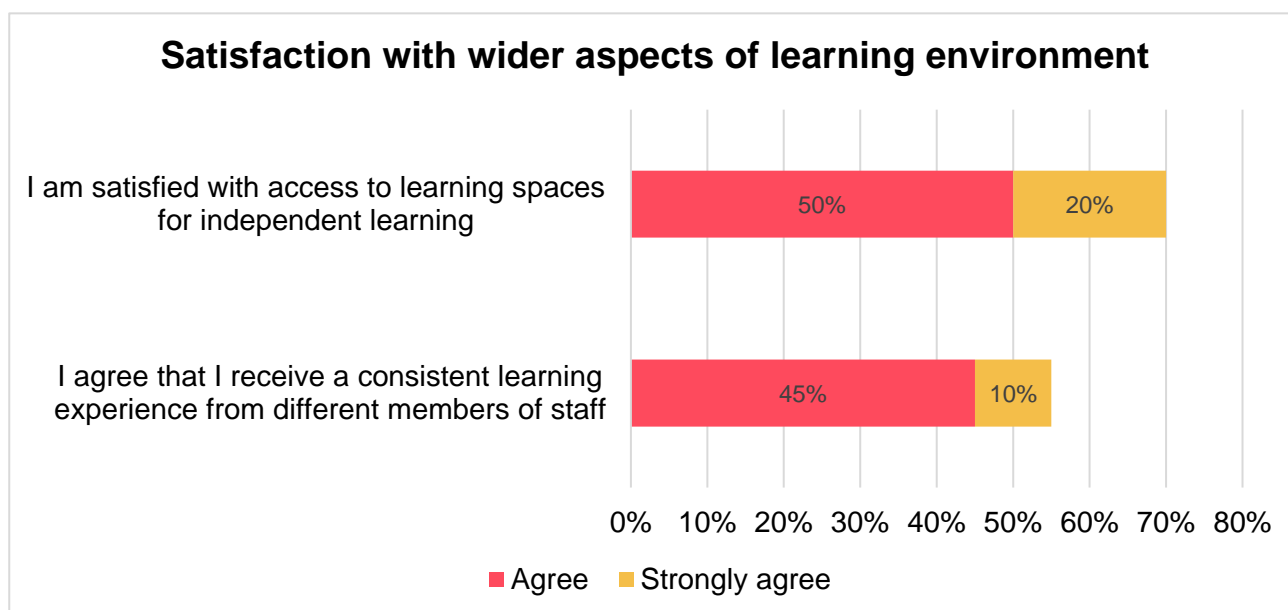
In line with other general trends this year, there has been a clear recovery in satisfaction with the volume of contact hours offered which has jumped back up – almost to pre-Covid levels.



Indeed, the level of consistency of this measure is striking, as we have seen a series of scores on or around the same level, with the clear exception of 2021. Contact hours are often one of the first issues that students, or indeed sector commentators, take issue with, and while it was clear that the volumes offered were disappointing in some cases during the onset of the pandemic, it also appears to be the case that many institutions and courses are currently setting this at what feels like the right level for many.

### 9.4 Satisfaction with wider aspects of the learning environment

As part of our set of new questions this year, we asked about two specific aspects of the learning experience – access to learning spaces for independent study and the consistency of the learning experience received from different members of staff.



We do not have past data to compare with, but our first set of results for these questions suggests that there is room for improvement in terms of general access to study spaces, and significant scope for greater consistency of learning experience.

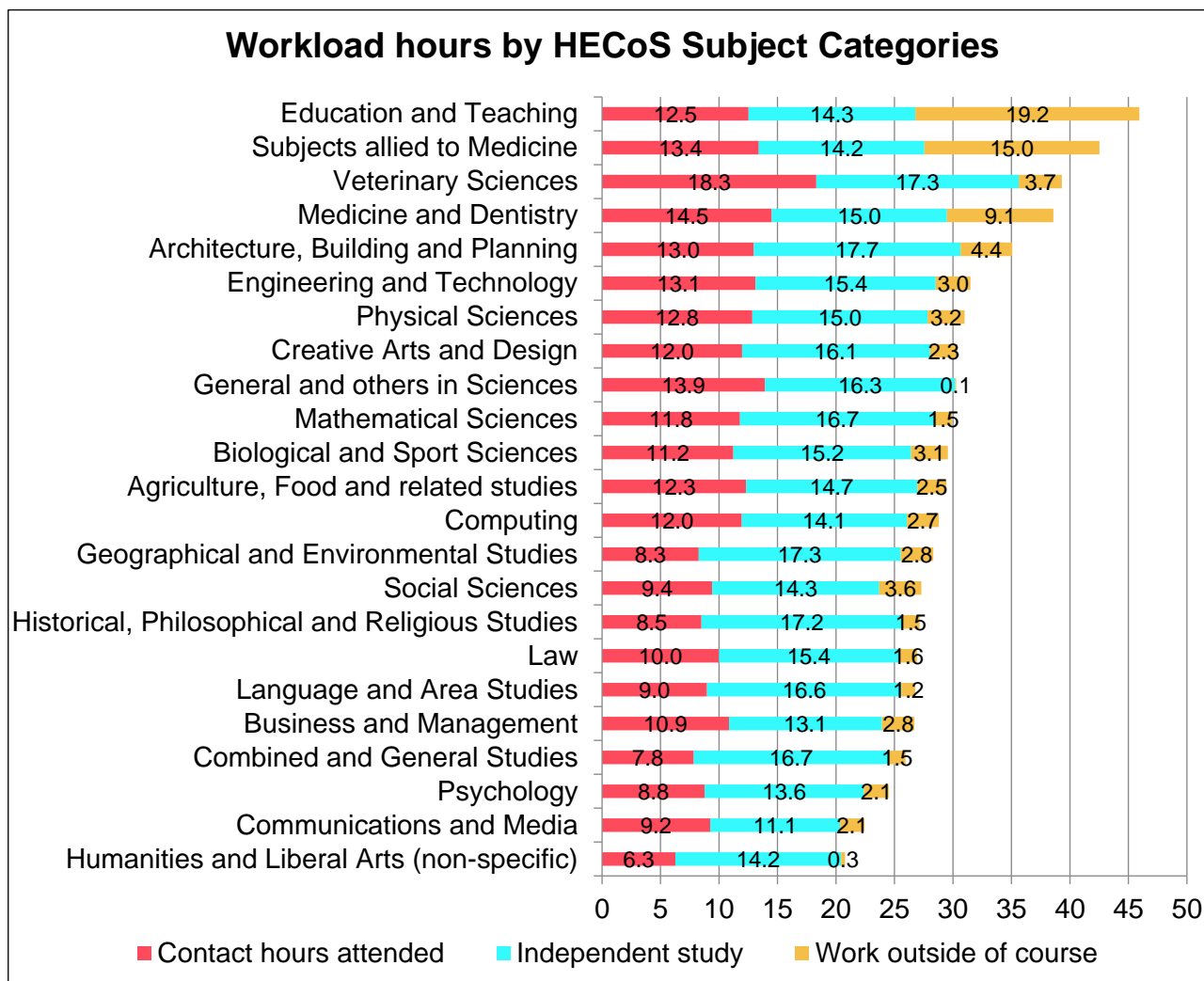
In terms of learning spaces, there is some clear difference in perceptions between different mission groups / categories of institution. Students of Specialist and Russell Group institutions were significantly more satisfied with the learning spaces available to them. By contrast, students at Alternative Providers were less happy with the spaces they could access.

	Russell Group	Pre-92 (not Russell Group)	Post-92	Specialist Institutions	Alternative Providers
I am satisfied with access to learning spaces for independent learning	<b>74%</b>	70%	69%	<b>75%</b>	65%

On this table, figures in bold denote statistical significantly higher score when compared to the non-bold figures.

On the question on receiving a consistent learning experience, there is clear evidence that students perceive their experience varies depending on who is teaching them, with only just over half of students agreeing with the statement. However, unlike the question on “Access to learning spaces”, there is little variation by category of institution.

## 9.5 Workload by HECoS subject<sup>33</sup>



In terms of overall workload, we again see Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary Science with some of the highest workloads, while Psychology, Communications and Humanities are at the other end of the scale.

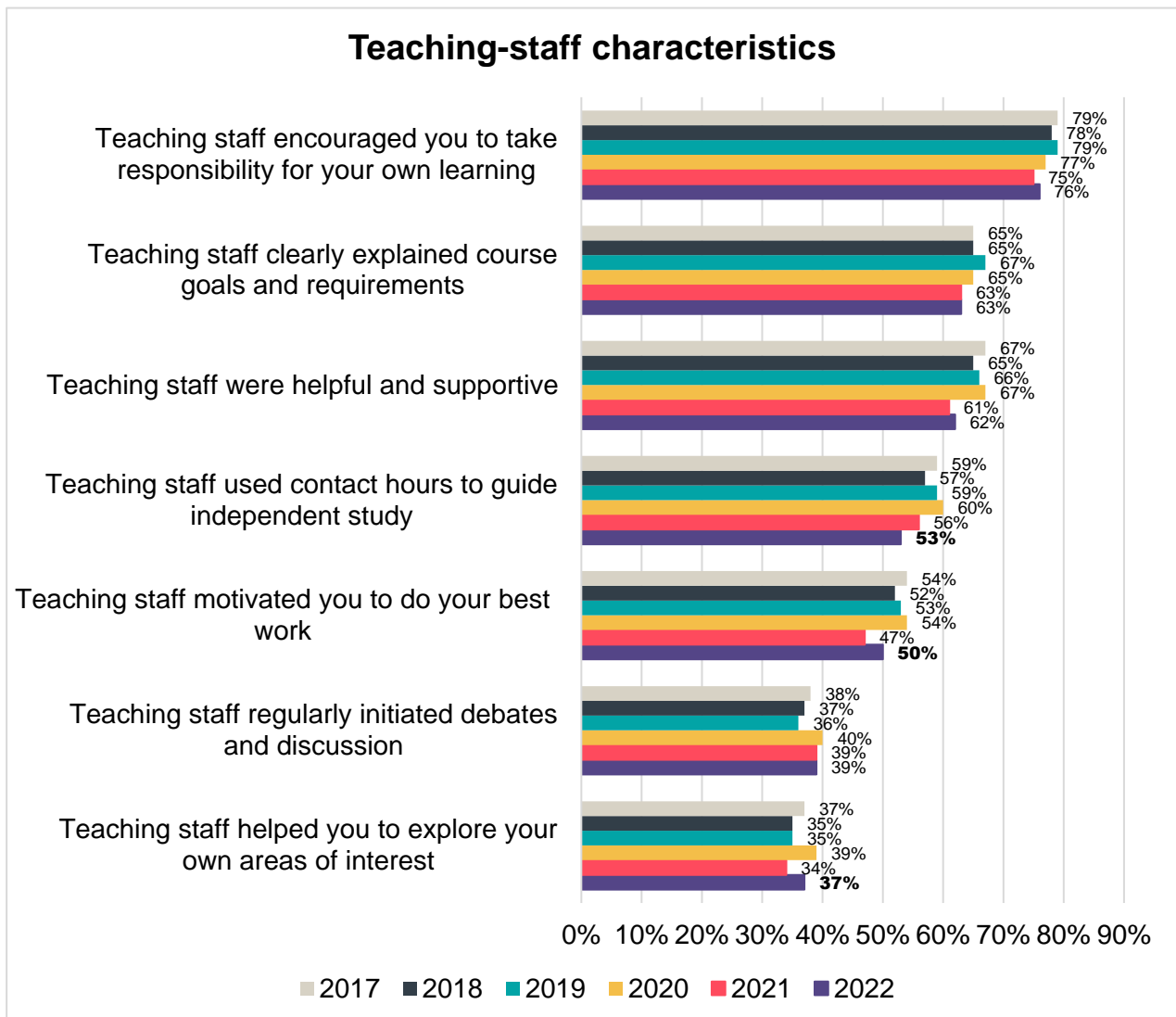
However, there has been one major change in relative positioning. Education and Teaching has emerged, for the first time, as the subject area with the highest overall workload, with a total of 46 hours compared to an average of just 34 hours in 2021. In particular, there has been a major increase in time spent on placements and / or fieldwork. We saw earlier that this has been the case across the total sample but this was particularly evidenced for Education and Teaching which has driven the strong increase in overall workload for this subject.

<sup>33</sup> [www.hesa.ac.uk/innovation/hecos](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/innovation/hecos) [Accessed 6 April 2022]

## 10. Quality of teaching and assessment

### 10.1 Perceptions of the quality of teaching staff

In the past two years in particular, teaching staff, along with HE professionals of all categories, have faced particular pressures to deliver a high-quality learning experience under constantly changing and sometimes restrictive conditions, while learning to adopt new learning technologies.



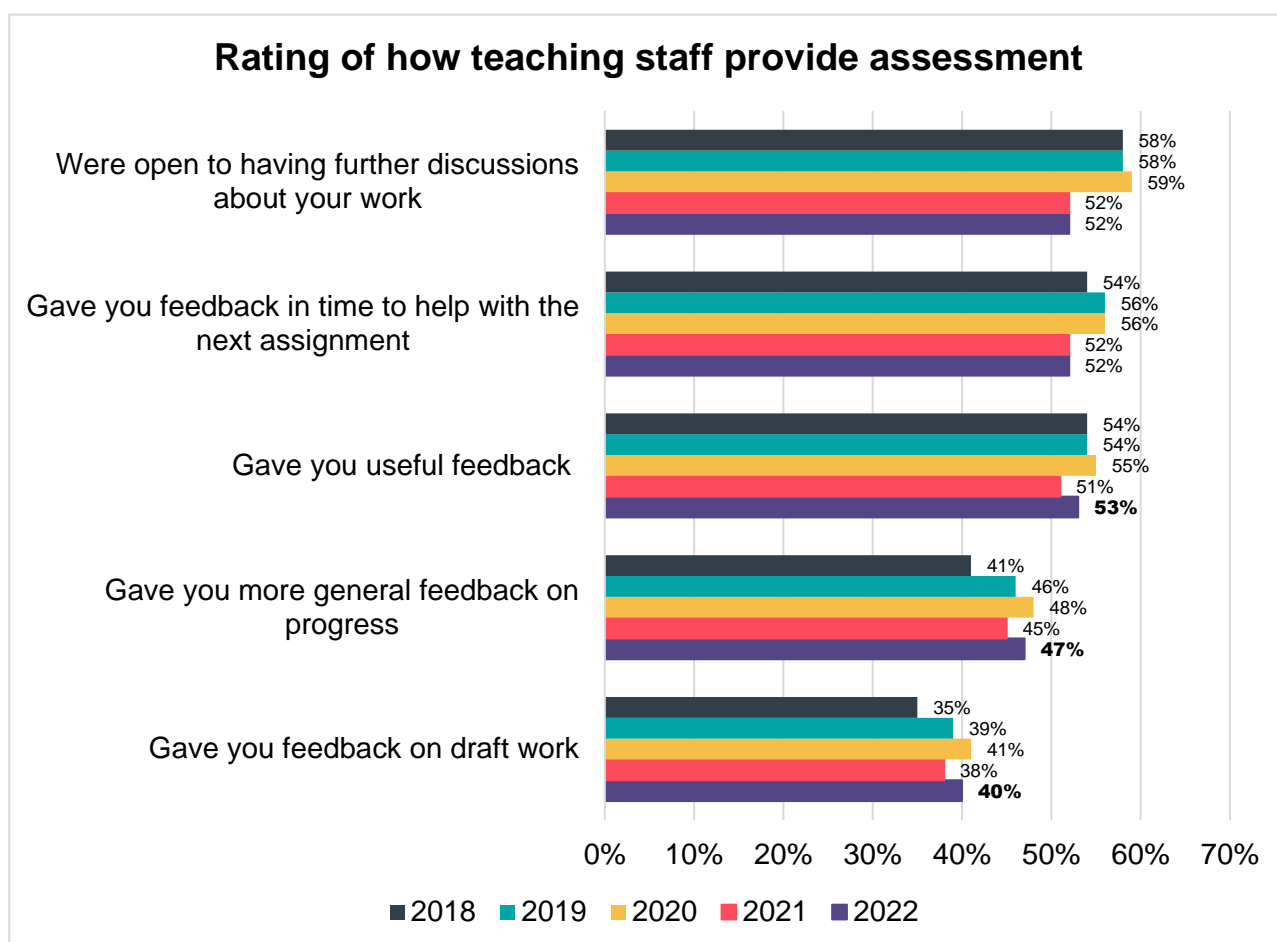
Perhaps understandably, therefore, there was a major fall across many of our regular ratings of teaching quality across 2020 and particularly 2021. Encouragingly, some of these ratings have begun to recover in 2022, particularly the ratings for “staff helping to explore areas of interest” and “motivating you to do your best work”. However, other key aspects such as “staff were helpful and supportive” and “clearly explained course goals and requirements” have not yet recovered to previous levels, indicating that there is still a period of adjustment and recovery needed for teaching staff as well as students.

## 10.2 Rating of assessment

As with many other year-on-year comparisons, students' ratings of assessment procedures declined significantly in 2021. There was also a range of wider feedback from open comments that assessment was one of the aspects where many students felt their experience could be improved.

As we have seen for several other factors throughout this report, there has been a clear recovery in 2022 in many areas of assessment, if not quite a return to the kinds of score experienced in 2019 and previously.

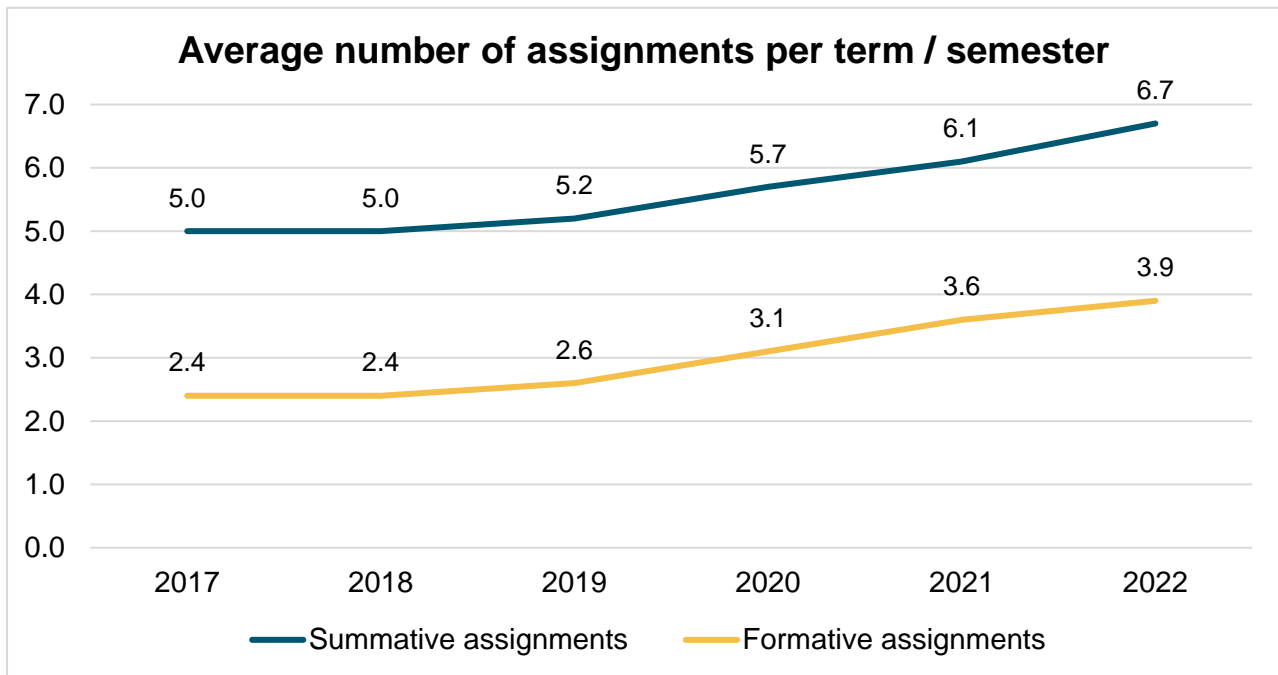
For three out of five statements, there was a statistically significant increase, but levels have not recovered for “staff are open to having further discussions” or “staff gave you feedback in time to help with your next assignment”.



Although the ratings of feedback have improved this year, we saw earlier in this report that the quality and / or timeliness of feedback is the single most frequent theme mentioned by students when considering how to improve their experience, and hence these improvements should be considered in the context that feedback is still an issue for many.

### 10.3 Volume of assignments

One of the most significant issues emerging in the past couple of years has been an ever-increasing volume of assignments. In spite of overall workload hours falling slightly in 2021, many students, as detailed in the free-text comments, have clearly been feeling some pressure around this.



In 2022, for the fourth year running, we have again seen a clear increase in both summative (assignments contributing to a grade) and formative assignments, which are considerably higher than they were as recently as 2019.

It is unclear what is driving the consistent upturn in assignment volume, although it appears that for some students this is causing a level of anxiety. We have seen from previous rounds of this Survey that students like to work hard and be challenged, and they value the opportunity for preparation that formative assessments provide. However, some students have clearly felt not fully prepared for the number of assignments and, as we shall see shortly, the time taken to provide feedback.

**Selected open comments**

“Hand assignments back within a shorter period of time, because quite often I hand in the second one before getting the first one back to know how to improve, so I just end up making the same mistakes again”

“They need to organise the course properly. The workloads between the terms is unbalanced, there are timetable clashes, assignment deadlines are all over the place and the department and university seem to have different aims”

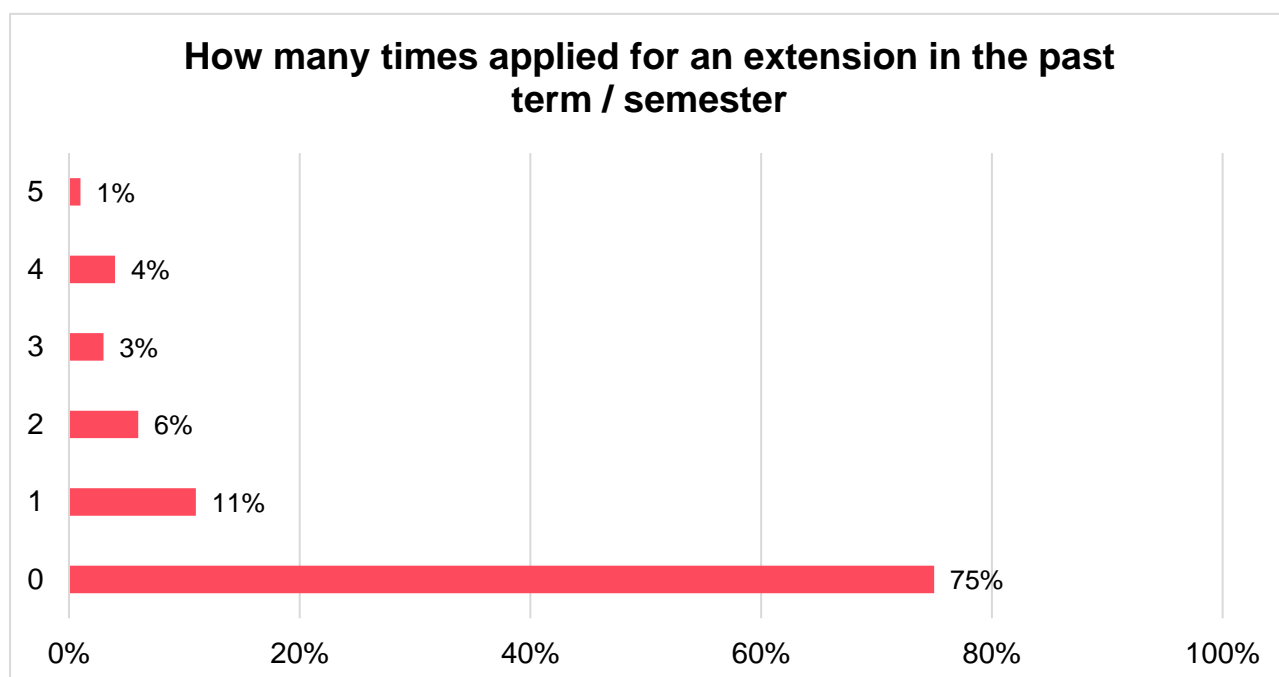
“I didn’t feel prepared for how much work there was/how long I would have to spend on assignments”

“Run workshops on how to efficiently and effectively write assignments, as well as having a healthy work life balance”

“Lighter workload- the workload is ridiculously large and we are given no credit for how large it is and the volume of work we have to generate in a small amount of time causes enormous stress and anxiety and is very hard to cope with- you have to really love the subject to be able to cope and put up with the workload which luckily I do”

### 10.4 Applying for an extension

In a new question this year, we asked students whether they had applied for an extension in this academic year to date, and if so, how often.



In general, there is no real evidence of a widespread practice of requesting extensions, with just one in four making such a request, although there are some students who have made more than one request in the last term / semester alone. It may also be the case that requesting an extension was simply not an option that was available (or known) to some who may have felt they needed it.

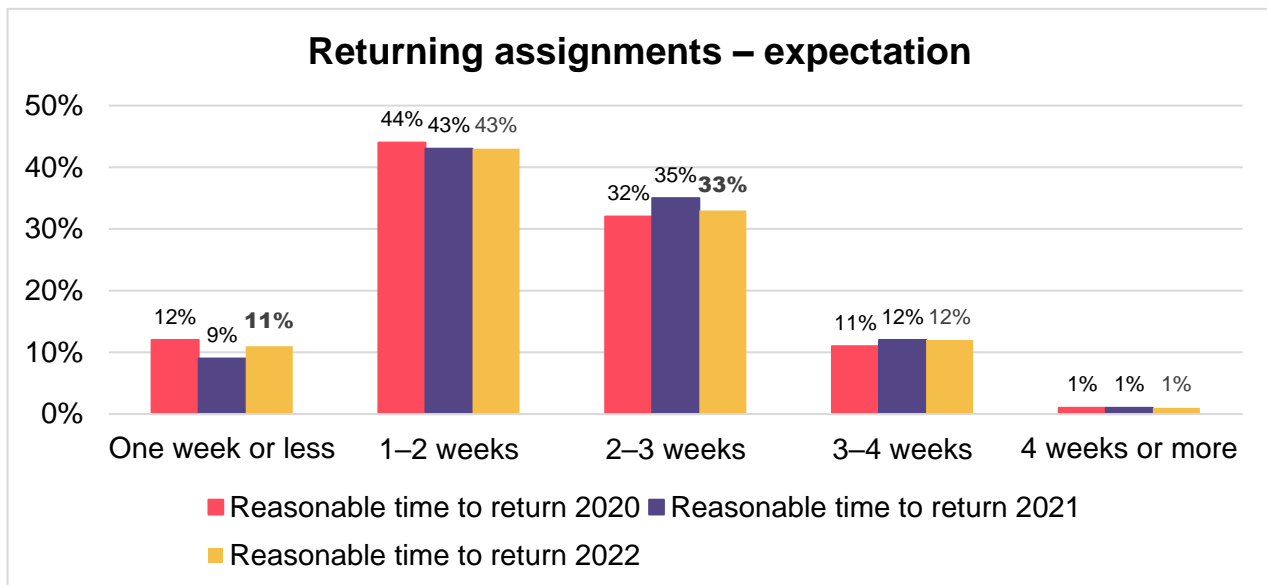
We can also see some clear differences between different demographic groups. Disabled students, trans students and Black students are significantly more likely to have requested an extension, and to have requested multiple extensions if they have done so.

	Total sample	Black ethnicity	Disabled students	Trans students
<b>Any extension request</b>	25%	<b>37%</b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>42%</b>
<b>Mean average (if requested)</b>	2.37	3.88	2.53	3.26

We saw earlier how disabled students and trans students, and to some extent Black students, are less likely to have a positive view of their experiences overall, and this evidence suggests that workload pressures may lie at the root of some of this.

## 10.5 Timeliness of feedback

In the past year there has been a slight adjustment in student expectations around turnaround times for assessment, which had softened slightly at the peak of the pandemic. The expected timescale remains at around 1–2 weeks, with a small (but statistically significant) increase this year in the proportion who expect a turnaround of one week or less.

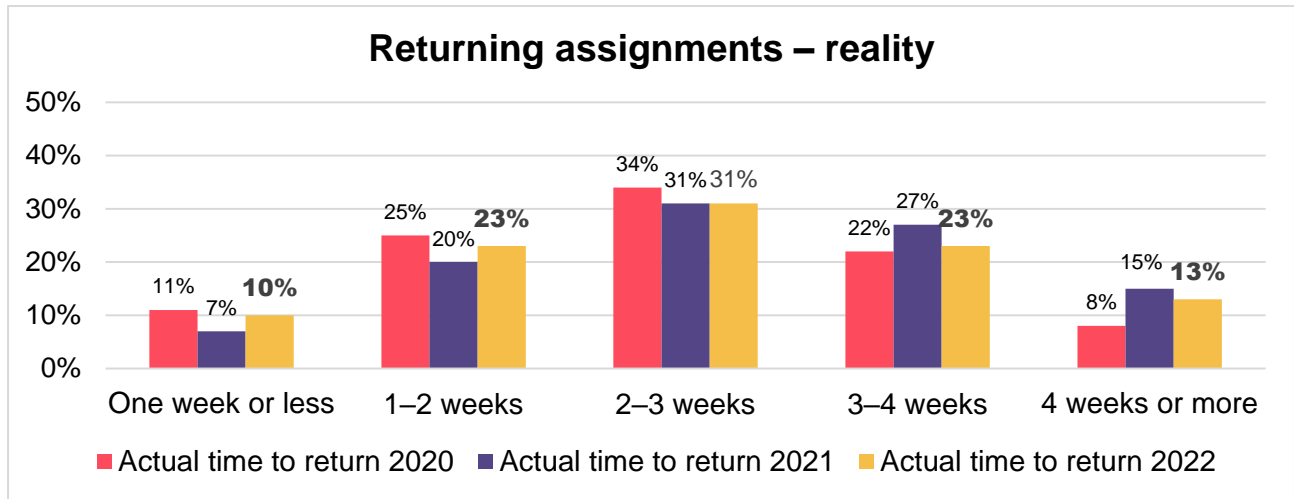




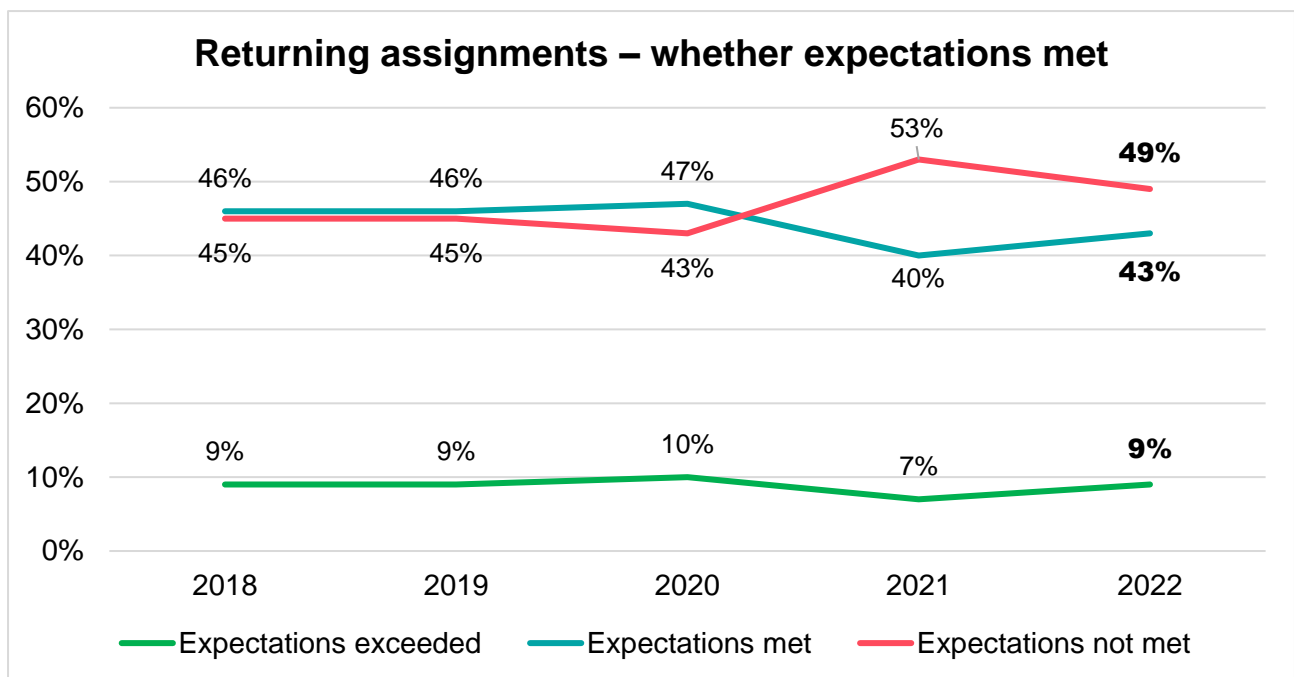
# Student Academic Experience Survey 2022

Jonathan Neves and Alexis Brown

In a positive change this year, there has also been a shortening of turnaround times on average, with a clear, statistically significant shift, to a faster timescale – more or less matching that achieved in 2019.



Accordingly, there has been a significant increase this year in the frequency of expectations being met or exceeded, which now happens on average 52% of the time, compared to expectations not being met 49% of the time – although this figure is still relatively high.



Setting and meeting expectations around feedback may always be a challenge. However, there is probably more that could be done to communicate the expected timescales, particularly in the light of the ever-increasing volume of assignments that is being processed.

**Selected open comments**

“Provide feedback for assignments faster, particularly before the next assignment is due”

“A couple of lectures did not give any feedback on assignments but the ones who did were very detailed and helpful. I would like this for all of my modules / assignments”

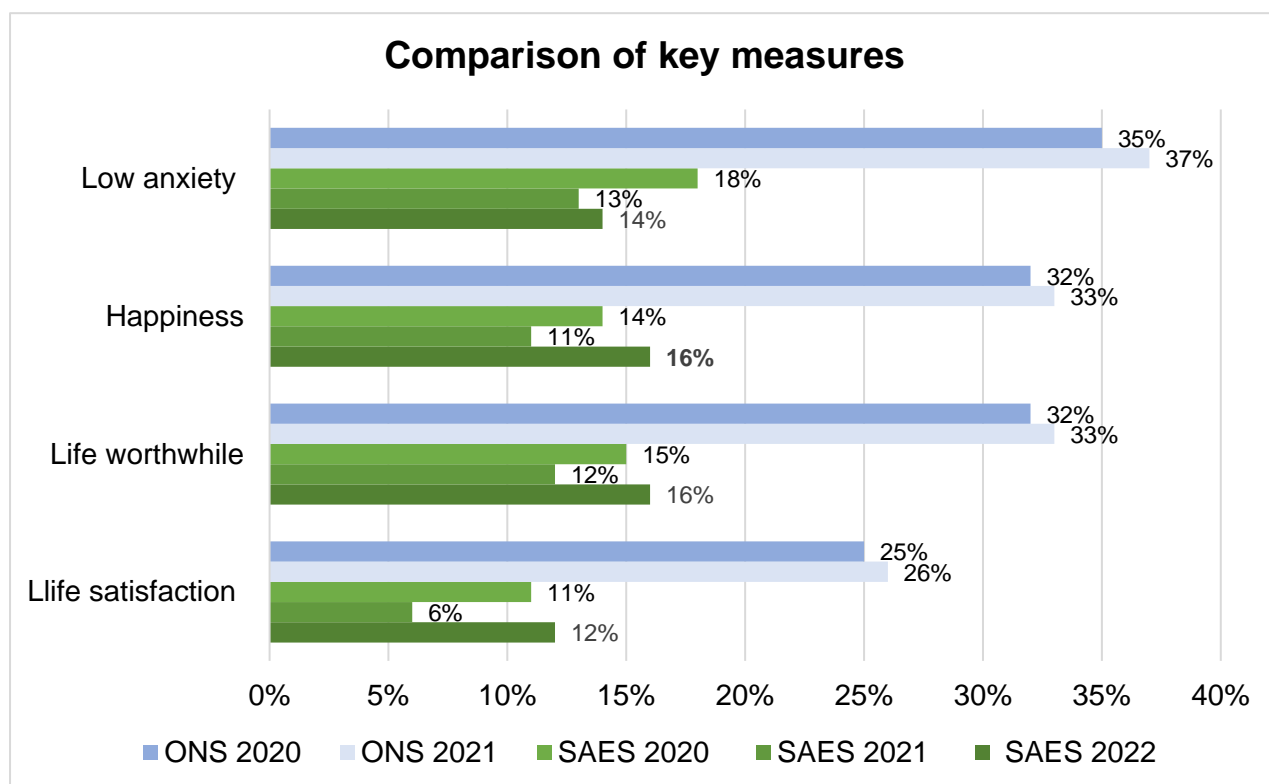
“Be more flexible with giving extensions and instead of setting assignments for 12 at noon, they change it to midnight”

## 11. Wellbeing

The key wellbeing indicators for happiness and life satisfaction have made a significant improvement from the 2021 Survey, which last year measured these indicators during the depths of the UK’s third lockdown. For questions on whether students found their life to be worthwhile, for instance, scores slightly exceed pre-pandemic levels (16% in 2022 versus 15% in 2020). The same was true for happiness indicators (16% in 2022 versus 14% in 2020).

However, if indicators of happiness and fulfilment have returned to pre-pandemic levels, students’ anxiety levels have not followed this positive trend. The percentage of students reporting low (as opposed to high) anxiety rose only 1% in comparison to 2021 and remains still 4% below the 18% who reported low anxiety in 2020.

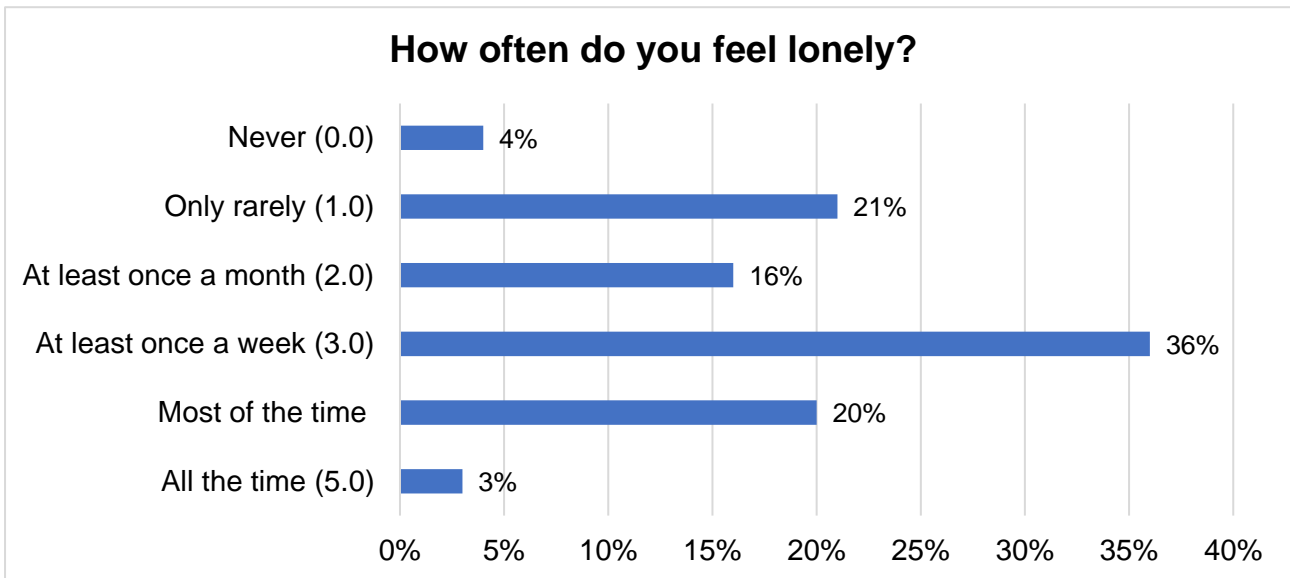
Even as life returns to normal, the disruption caused by Covid may keep student anxiety levels raised for some time yet. All indicators remain far below the general public as measured by the Office for National Statistics, regardless of whether measured during the pandemic, showing that higher education continues to be a stressful time in students’ lives.<sup>34</sup>



<sup>34</sup> See 2021 ONS data on wellbeing.

[www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/datasets/quarterlypersonalwellbeingestimatesseasonallyadjusted](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/datasets/quarterlypersonalwellbeingestimatesseasonallyadjusted)

For the first time this year, we also asked students about how often they feel lonely. Results show that university has been a lonely place for students in the last year, even as restrictions have lifted. 23% of students felt lonely 'most' or 'all of the time', compared to only 5% of the general population (in 2020) who reported that they felt lonely 'often' or 'always'.<sup>35</sup> Feeling lonely all or most of the time was a particular problem for Black students (31%), LGB+ students (30%), students with a disability (36%), and trans students (47%).

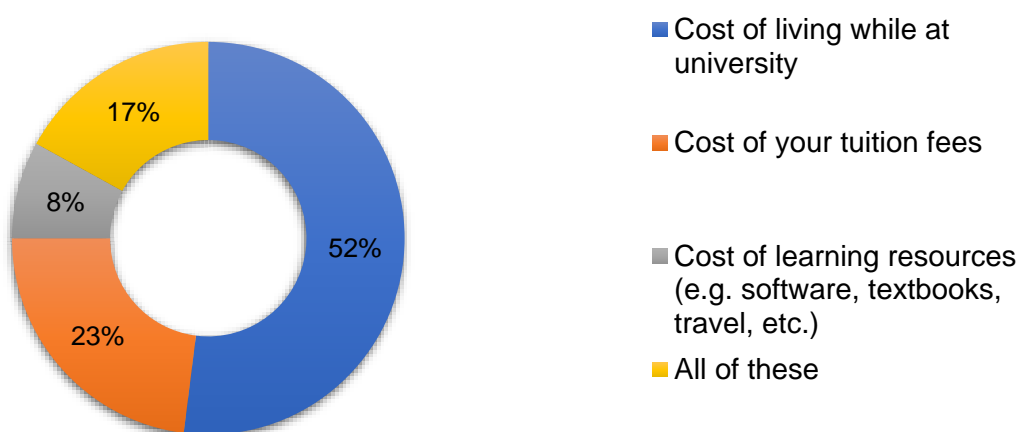


<sup>35</sup> Office for National Statistics, Coronavirus and Loneliness, Great Britain: 3 April to 3 May 2020. [www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/coronavirusandlonelinessgreatbritain/3aprilto3may2020](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/coronavirusandlonelinessgreatbritain/3aprilto3may2020)

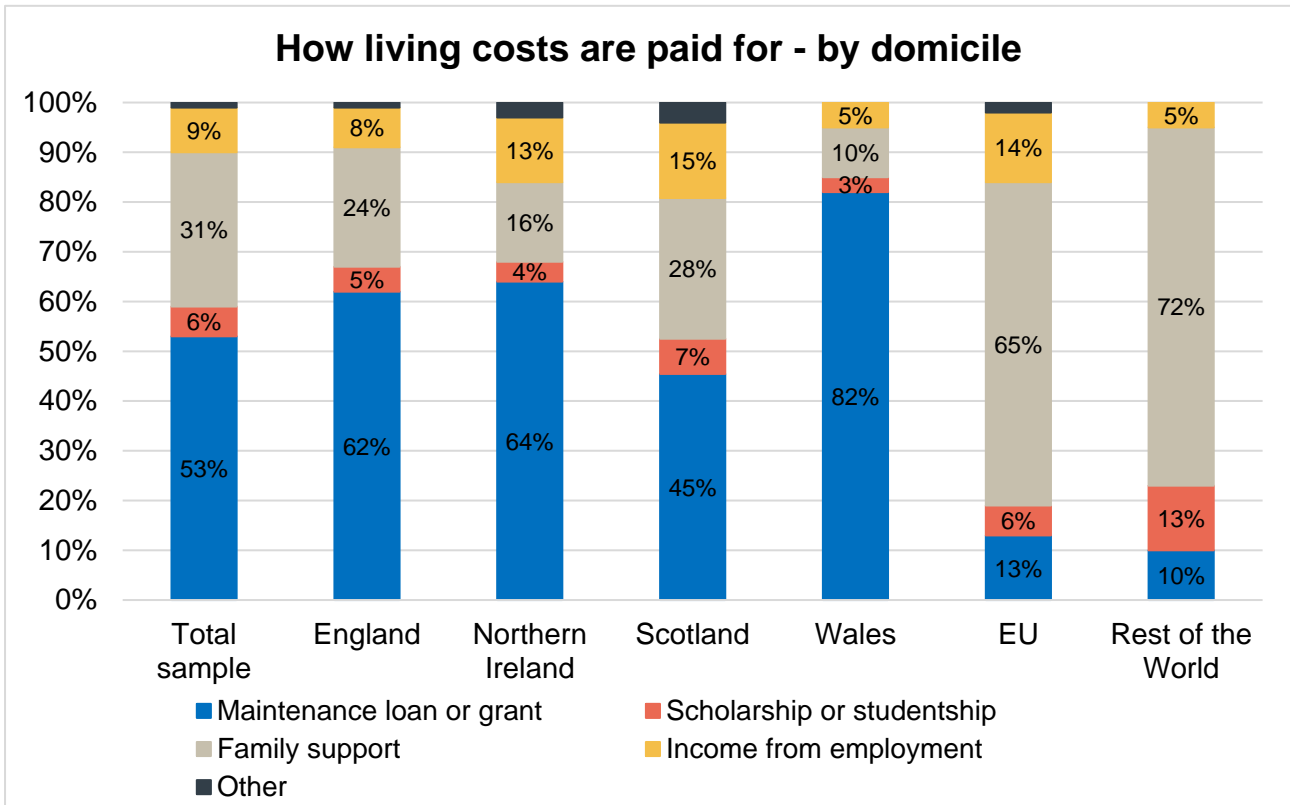
## 12. Finances and the future

We asked which costs associated with studying were of most concern to students, and for the first time, we also included the option of the cost of learning resources (such as software, textbooks, and travel), which 8% of students cited as a concern. More than twice the proportion of students who were most concerned about the cost of tuition fees were most concerned about the cost of living while at university. This concern may grow as inflation rises and students feel the pinch of the cost-of-living crisis.

**Which of these costs is of most concern to you?**

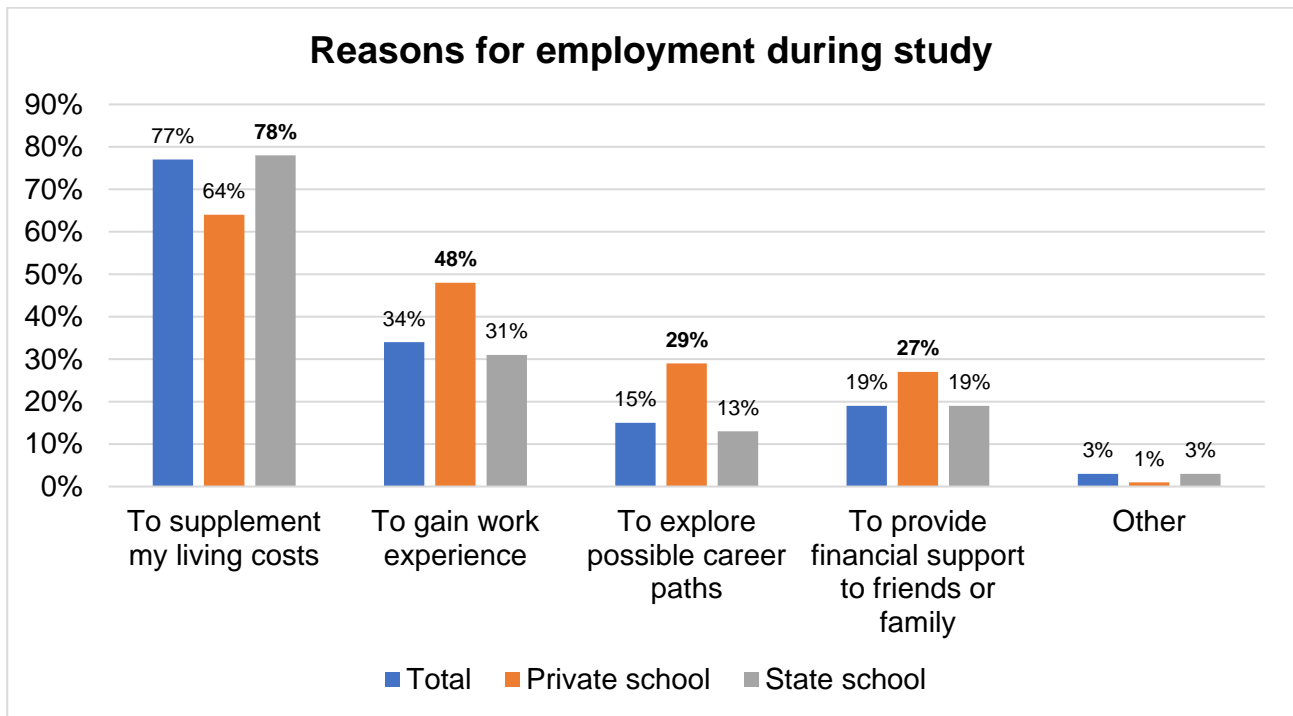


Following on from this question, we asked students how these living costs were paid for, which varied by domicile. For example, UK students rely more on maintenance loans than those from the rest of the world, who are generally ineligible for student loans from the Student Loans Company. Those from the rest of the world also rely less on employment than UK students (9% versus 5%, perhaps in part due to the 20-hours-a-week working restrictions attached to student visas) but rely more on family support than for example their UK peers (23% versus 72%). Students from Northern Ireland and Wales relied less than their English counterparts on familial support (16% and 10% respectively versus 24% for English students).

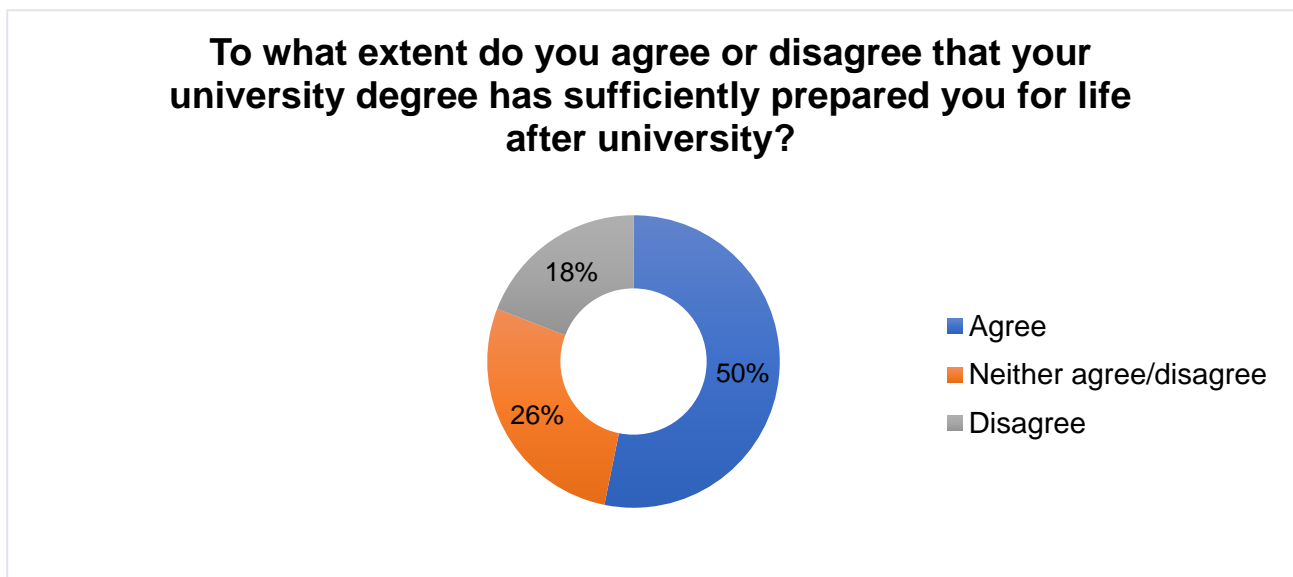


In comparison to last year, the proportion of costs paid for by income from employment has risen slightly in the total sample, and more specifically in England and Northern Ireland, by 1% and 3% respectively. Only 6% of costs overall were covered by scholarships and studentships, though this could potentially change once the newly announced £75 million national scholarship scheme comes into effect.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Higher and Further Education Minister Michelle Donelan speech on the Augar Review, 24 February 2022. [www.gov.uk/government/speeches/higher-and-further-education-minister-michelle-donelan-speech-on-the-augar-review](https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/higher-and-further-education-minister-michelle-donelan-speech-on-the-augar-review) [Accessed 16 April 2022]



Given the increasing prominence that employment plays in covering living costs during study, and the growing emphasis on employment outcomes post-graduation, for the first time this year we asked students why they chose to take on employment during study. There were significant differences in reasons for employment depending on whether the student went to a private or state school. For example, students from private schools were far more likely than those from state schools to take on employment for the sake of gaining work experience (48% versus 31%). This same disparity existed for those using work to explore possible career paths (29% from private schools versus 13% from state schools). By contrast, students from state schools were more likely to take on additional work to supplement their living costs than those from private schools (78% versus 64%).



We followed this question with another new question asking students whether they felt their university degree has sufficiently prepared them for life after university, whether that be work, further study, or other endeavours: 50% of students said they agreed that they were sufficiently prepared by their degree, while 18% disagreed and 26% neither agreed nor disagreed. The 26% who did not feel strongly either way may have answered so because of uncertainty over their future plans, as this indicator decreased sequentially by year of study (29% for those in their first year of study versus 20% for those in the fourth or higher year of study).

Those that rated the value-for-money of their degree as poor or very poor were far more likely to disagree that their degree had left them prepared (35% disagreed), while those that believed their degree was good value-for-money generally agreed that their degree had prepared them (72% agreed). Those who tended to do less paid employment during their degrees also tended to feel less well prepared for life after study; for example, of those who had no paid employment, only 46% agreed they felt prepared, while 60% of those who worked 1–9 hours a week agreed they were being well prepared.



## 13. Conclusions and policy recommendations

Overall, the picture that emerges from the 2022 SAES is significantly more positive than that of last year, when students surveyed during lockdown reported record-level lows of satisfaction with their experience. Many of these indicators – though not all – have made good progress at recovery. As we emerge from the pandemic, this year's Survey can help shape the sector's sense of what a post-pandemic education landscape should look like. The ten points below offer recommendations for how this Survey can help inform that vision.

1. Many of the comments that students voice in terms of wanting more detailed, faster feedback relate directly to staff time and the resources they have available. However, devoting additional resources to student teaching will become increasingly difficult as inflation continues to erode the real-terms value of income for domestic teaching. The final response to the Augar report also froze the tuition fee level in England until 2024/25, and in 2020, the Office for Students estimated that universities faced on average deficits of £1,000 or more per student for domestic teaching.<sup>37</sup> In Scotland as well, Universities Scotland has noted that the unit of resource for teaching has fallen by £869 since 2014/15.<sup>38</sup> Without significant increases to the funding envelope for teaching across the UK in future years, it is difficult to see how universities will be able to fulfil students' expectations, and disabled students may be particularly at risk. **Increasing the overall grant funding envelope and guaranteeing funding on a per-student basis would help mitigate these risks, particularly as the demographic of 18-year-olds rises.**<sup>39</sup>
2. The persistence of some online learning this year has not necessarily been met with reduced happiness from students, as happiness levels are largely as high or higher than they were before the pandemic. Likewise, the increasingly positive perceptions of value-for-money show that some online learning is not necessarily anathema to student satisfaction – though comments in the open text boxes indicate that at least some students are still dissatisfied with the degree of in-person versus online teaching. **The key will be to understand what elements of blended learning best fulfil students' pedagogical and social needs, and therefore the outcome of the Office for Students' review of blended learning may be crucial in helping universities understand and share best practice.**

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<sup>37</sup> Table B4 in [Development of OfS approach to funding](#), September 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Universities Scotland, [Impact of the 2022/23 budget allocation for universities](#), January 2022.

<sup>39</sup> Office for National Statistics, [Being 18 in 2018](#), 13 September 2018.

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3. While the majority of students remain happy with their choice of university and degree, those that would rather have done an apprenticeship instead has been growing slightly in recent years. Degree apprenticeships are increasingly becoming an attractive choice for students, with demand growing significantly year on year.<sup>40</sup> **Appropriate incentives and mechanisms for both universities and employers must be put in place to ensure the supply for degree apprenticeships can meet demand in coming years.**
4. For the first time this year, we asked students about their levels of loneliness, which would appear to be significantly higher among students than the general population, even during the depths of Covid lockdowns last year. Similarly, while happiness levels have risen back to pre-pandemic levels, anxiety levels among students are worryingly high. Studies have shown that adolescents were more likely to experience high rates of depression and most likely anxiety as a result of the pandemic-related isolation.<sup>41</sup> Reflecting the toll that the pandemic has taken on student mental health, in January 2021 the Westminster Government for the first time recommended £15 million of Strategic Priorities Grant funding be devoted to supporting student mental health in 2021/22.<sup>42</sup> **We strongly recommend funding of this nature is continued in future years to help universities support the mental health of their students.**
5. Outside of mental health support, there are many activities universities can undertake to help combat loneliness and build cohesion within and across cohorts of students, especially for those whose first years of university occurred during lockdown. The UPP Foundation's Student Futures Commission, for example, recommended an induction programme for every year of study, rather than just the first.<sup>43</sup> **Universities should proactively design programming that will help build cohesion among students, especially those whose courses have been severely affected by the pandemic.**

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<sup>40</sup> ['New UCAS data shows strong demand for apprenticeships from students keen to keep learning in Autumn'](#), 5 August 2021.

<sup>41</sup> Maria Elizabeth Loades *et al.* (2020), Rapid systematic review: the impact of social isolation and loneliness on the mental health of children and adolescents in the context of COVID-19. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 59, 11: 1218–39.

<sup>42</sup> [Letter from Rt Hon Gavin Williamson to Sir Michael Barber](#), Office for Students, 19 January 2021. [Accessed 2 April 2022]

<sup>43</sup> UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission, [Student Futures Manifesto](#). February 2022.

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6. Students worry more about the costs of maintenance during their study than they do tuition fees, and these anxieties will become more acute as students experience the cost-of-living crisis. It was therefore unfortunate to see the Government recommend that the Strategic Priorities Grant funding for student hardship decrease by £5 million for the 2022/23 academic year.<sup>44</sup> **Particularly in light of the current crisis, Government should consider whether increasing hardship support could help ease the burden on students.** Longer term, it should also review current living costs during study to examine whether the existing amount of maintenance support is appropriate.
7. Students' sense of preparedness for life after graduation is positively correlated to whether they have taken on paid employment during their degree. This suggests that carrying on some kind of part-time employment during study makes students feel more secure in entering the workforce or further study post-degree. **Careers services should continue to help students, including international students, find meaningful and manageable part-time employment during their study.**
8. For the first time this year, we asked why students choose to take on employment during their studies. There were clear differences in motivation depending on students' background, such as whether they went to a private or state school. This outcome suggests that students from lower income backgrounds may need additional support to explore career paths in ways that do not hinder their ability to support themselves during study. **Careers services should tailor their support to help students who need to work to supplement their living costs also find ways to explore different career paths (such as by offering accessible internships paid at the living wage).**
9. While workload remains fairly constant for many disciplines, for others such as Education and Teaching it is significantly higher, totalling 46 hours compared to an average of just 34 hours in 2021. This increase – particularly in the amount of fieldwork and placements – may have negative effects on the mental health of students in this field. **Education departments in particular should examine current workloads and what actions can be put in place to mitigate any negative effects associated with this increase.**
10. There continues to be troubling disparities by ethnicity across a number of measures. For the first time this year, we saw that although the majority of students feel comfortable expressing their viewpoints even when they differ from their peers, this was less true for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students. More research is needed to see whether these levels of comfort differ by political persuasion, as well as along ethnic lines. **We hope these findings will be taken into consideration by the new Office for Students' Free Speech Champion, once they are appointed.**

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<sup>44</sup> [Letter from Rt Hon Nadhim Zahawi to Lord Wharton](#), Office for Students, 31 March 2022.

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# Student Academic Experience Survey 2022

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