



Higher Education Policy Institute

Handshake

How can you help me?: Students' perspectives on careers services and employment

Josh Freeman and Nick Hillman

HEPI Policy Note 40

December 2022

Key findings

We polled 1,105 students online through the National Union of Students (NUS) to enquire about their experiences with careers services and their perspectives on graduate employment.

- Students are split on whether or not they regard it as the responsibility of their higher education institution to find them a job, with one-third (34%) believing it is and only a slightly lower proportion (30%) saying it is not.
- A majority of students look to their careers service to offer help with finding an internship or placement (63%), writing their Curriculum Vitae (63%), interview preparation (61%), finding a career (60%) and hosting careers fairs (52%). Providing mentoring and life skills also has substantial support (49%) while far fewer students expect help with finding a holiday job (22%).
- A majority of students (53%) think 'all university courses should be designed mainly with future employment in mind' and a further 37% say 'some university courses should be'. Very few students say only 'a small proportion' (4%) or no university course (4%) should have a focus on employment.
- However, most students oppose the proposal in England to provide reduced access to student finance to those opting for courses with poor employment prospects; 53% 'strongly disagree' and an additional 16% 'disagree'.
- Nearly one-half of students are either 'very confident' (14%) or 'quite confident' (32%) that they are likely to find their desired job on graduation, but a substantial minority are 'quite unconfident' (21%) or 'very unconfident' (9%).
- When it comes to the type of employer, many students say they do not mind (34%) what size their future employer will be. Of those with a preference, a similar proportion chose larger employers (28%) with 250 or more staff than small-to-medium sized enterprises (31%) with 249 staff or fewer.
- More students prefer employers who consider characteristics such as work experience and extra-curricular activities (41%) than prefer employers who mostly care about degree results (30%).
- Around half (49%) of students have not used their careers service to date, which is slightly higher than the proportion who have (43%).

- Those who have used a careers service are more satisfied than unsatisfied, with 59% saying they were 'very happy' or 'quite happy' with the service they received. However, 13% were 'quite unhappy' and 7% were 'very unhappy'.
- Those who have not used their careers service were given an opportunity to explain why. Some do not know what their careers service has to offer, some believe the careers service would not support their specific career needs and some feel they are too early in their course to think about career planning.

Foreword by Clare Adams, Head of Education Strategy, Handshake UK

While universities clearly have a broad range of objectives, employability will always be a key function. This HEPI Policy Note reveals most students (53%) want courses to be designed with employment in mind and are more likely to want future employers to recognise their work experience and extra-curricular activities than their degree qualifications.

This means careers professionals play an increasingly key role in the university ecosystem, yet they face a number of structural challenges. At Handshake, we see the innovation and dedication towards driving student engagement and equitable outcomes – and we strive to be the platform to amplify those efforts. This is particularly important, as, based on our own interviews and surveys, many careers' professionals feel they are simply having to do more with fewer resources.¹

The research shows the help and guidance offered is instrumental both to students' shorter term employment goals and longer term 'employability'. However, there is scope for more students to benefit. The research suggests that many students are not yet engaging (only 43% of respondents had used their careers service either 'a lot' or 'a little'), with uncertainty over what help is on offer one important factor. Meanwhile, others only engage towards the end of their course.

As such, using technology to identify and target student needs better, with personalised guidance resources and content at scale, is key to expanding reach. We all expect the platforms we use each day to be tailored to our needs, and students are certainly no different.

Technology also has the potential to help students understand and articulate the skills they are developing both in relation to their curriculum and to employers. It can help show how these skills map to the student and graduate labour market and signpost the support that is on offer to help students develop the skills they need before graduating.

That is why we are developing new ways to support skills-based recruitment, which helps students not only provide evidence for their skills but also means those skills are the basis of how employers hire students on Handshake.

Providing the location and network to connect proactively with employers and alumni throughout the duration of a degree course is likely to have a positive impact on student confidence. Offering more of a two-way street between students, peers and employers means candidates can do more to lay the foundations for their future career, cultivate relationships and end their degree with more of the skills and experiences they need.

There is clearly room for growth in the role that technology plays but, as we move forward, the insight, expertise and experience of careers professionals must remain central to meet future challenges. Technology and data should be the amplifying force that helps careers professionals to help more students – ultimately helping graduates achieve more and be more satisfied in the world of work.

Introduction

Interest in students' employment prospects is growing. In England, for example, the Department for Education and the Office for Students are looking to clamp down on higher education courses they believe lead to less good outcomes. Earlier HEPI research shows how higher education institutions have been shifting to a more careers-focused approach.² Central to the process of getting students hired are careers services, which provide advice, support and training.³

In order to understand better students' relationship with their careers teams and also to explore their wider attitudes to employment, we worked with the National Union of Students (NUS) on an online poll of 1,105 higher education students in August 2022.

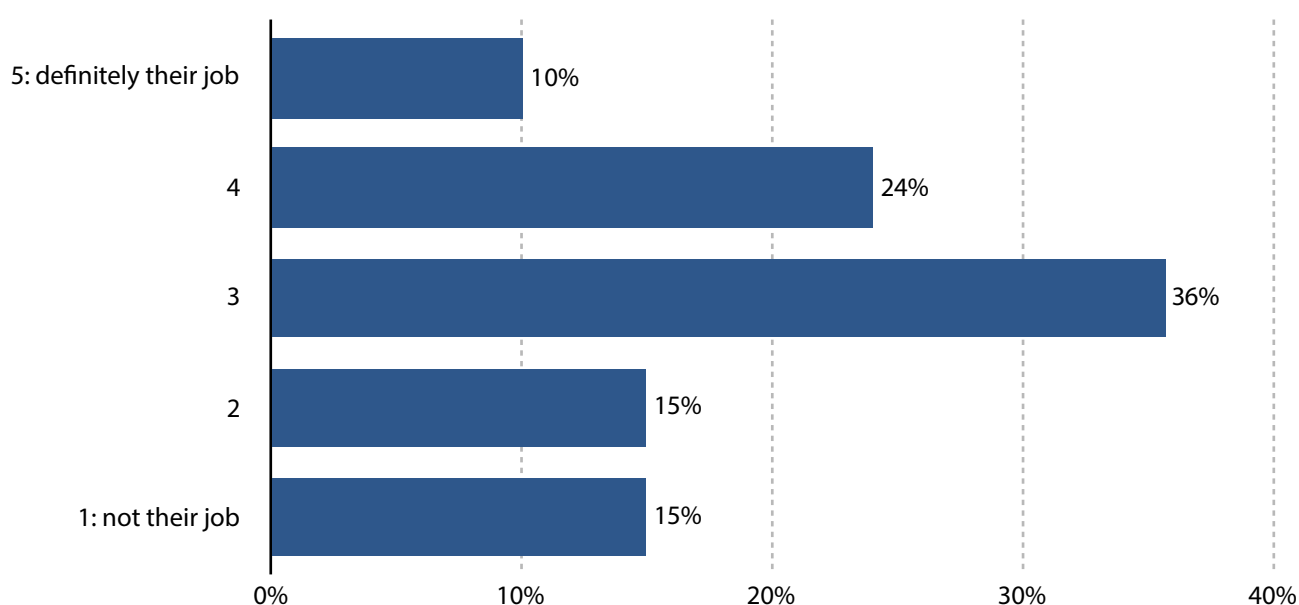
The respondents were two-thirds (64%) undergraduates and one-third postgraduates (36%), with the undergraduates split fairly evenly between students in their first (32%), second (34%) or later (33%) years.

The survey was promoted by emails sent out by the NUS and students were offered the chance of winning a share of £500 for taking part. The results have been weighted by gender to help ensure they are representative of the UK student population.⁴

Expectations of institutions

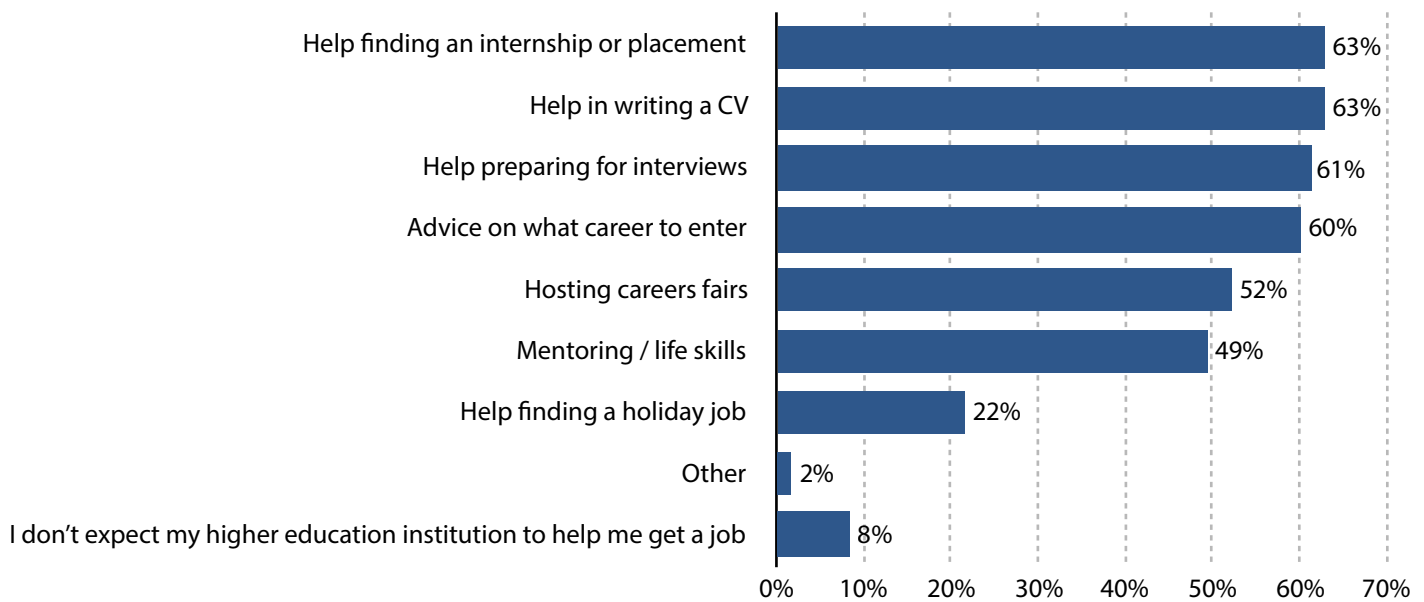
Respondents were split evenly on whether their institution should be responsible for finding jobs for their students. One-third of students (34%) gave a score of four or five on a five-point scale, indicating that it was 'definitely' or mostly the responsibility of their institution. Slightly fewer (30%) believe it is not or mostly not their responsibility. Full-time and international students feel somewhat more strongly that it is an institution's responsibility – this and other breakdowns are shown in the full results, which are available on the HEPI website.

To what degree do you think it is your institution's responsibility to help you find a job after you graduate?



When asked about the different possible types of help, students most want support with finding internships and placements (63%), writing CVs (63%), preparing for interviews (61%) and general careers advice (60%). Around half look to their institution to host careers fairs (52%) and to provide access to mentoring and life skills training (49%). Fewer (22%) want help finding a summer job.

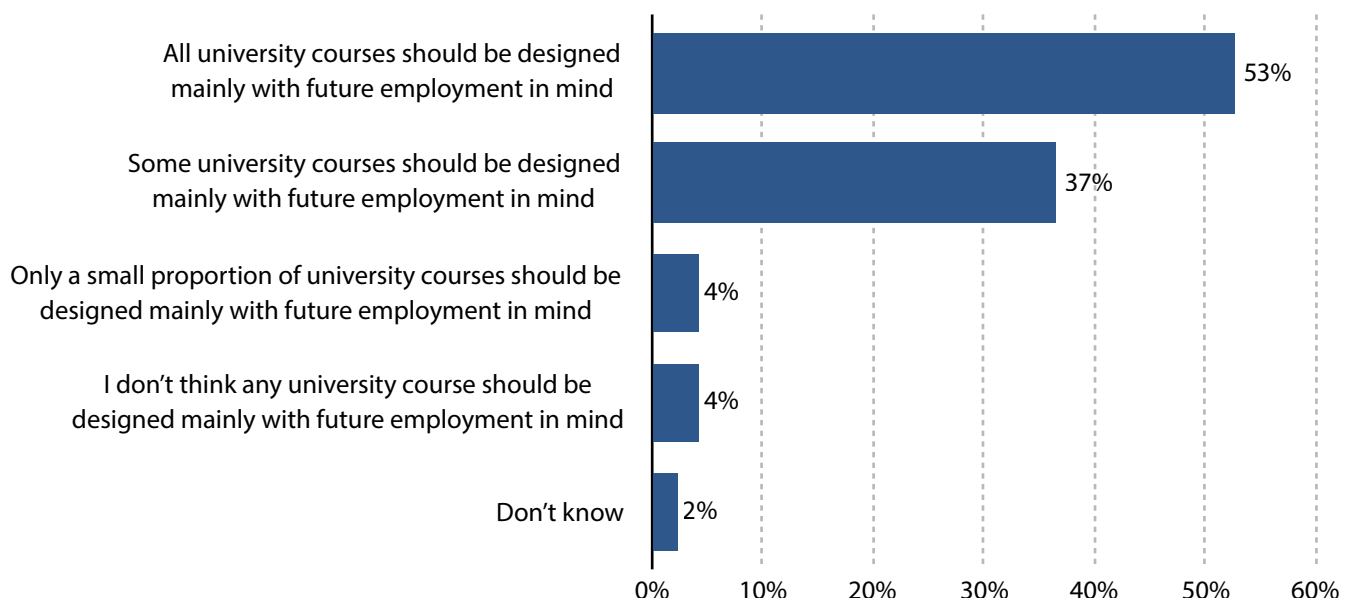
In which of the following ways would you want your institution to help you look for a job?



Relationship between course design and employment

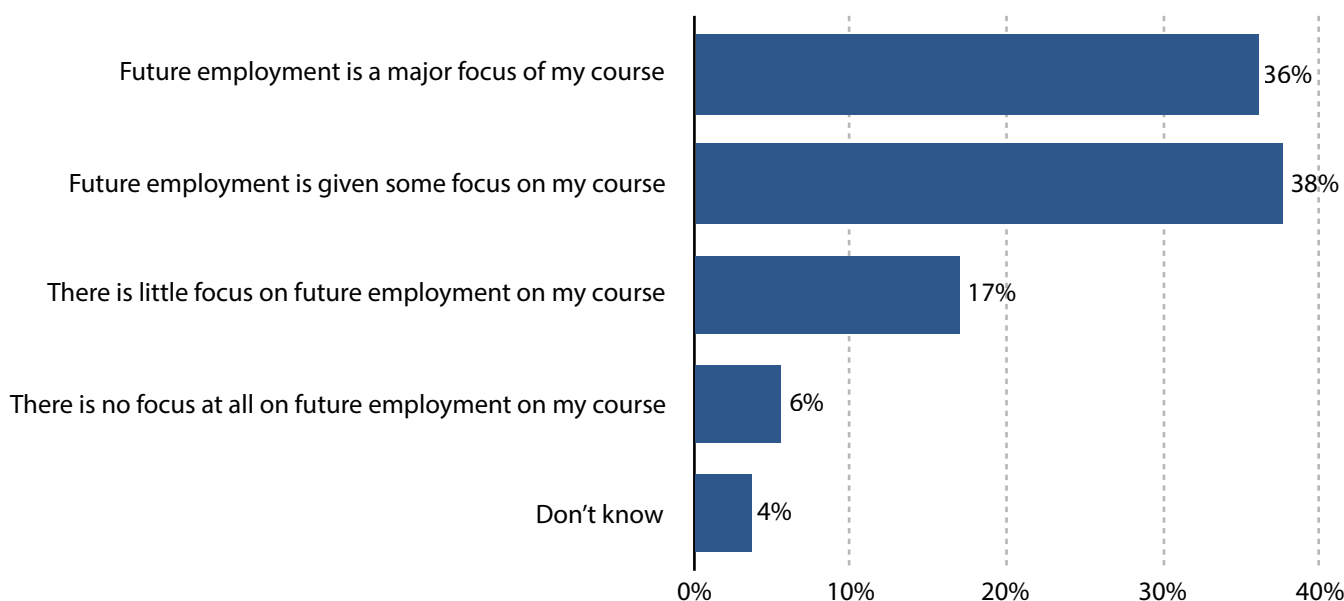
Students feel strongly that institutions should design their courses with employment in mind. A majority (53%) say 'all university courses should be designed mainly with future employment in mind' and a further 37% say 'some university courses should be'. Only a few say 'a small proportion' or no university course should have a focus on employment (each 4%).

Which of the following statements about institution courses and future employment do you most agree with?



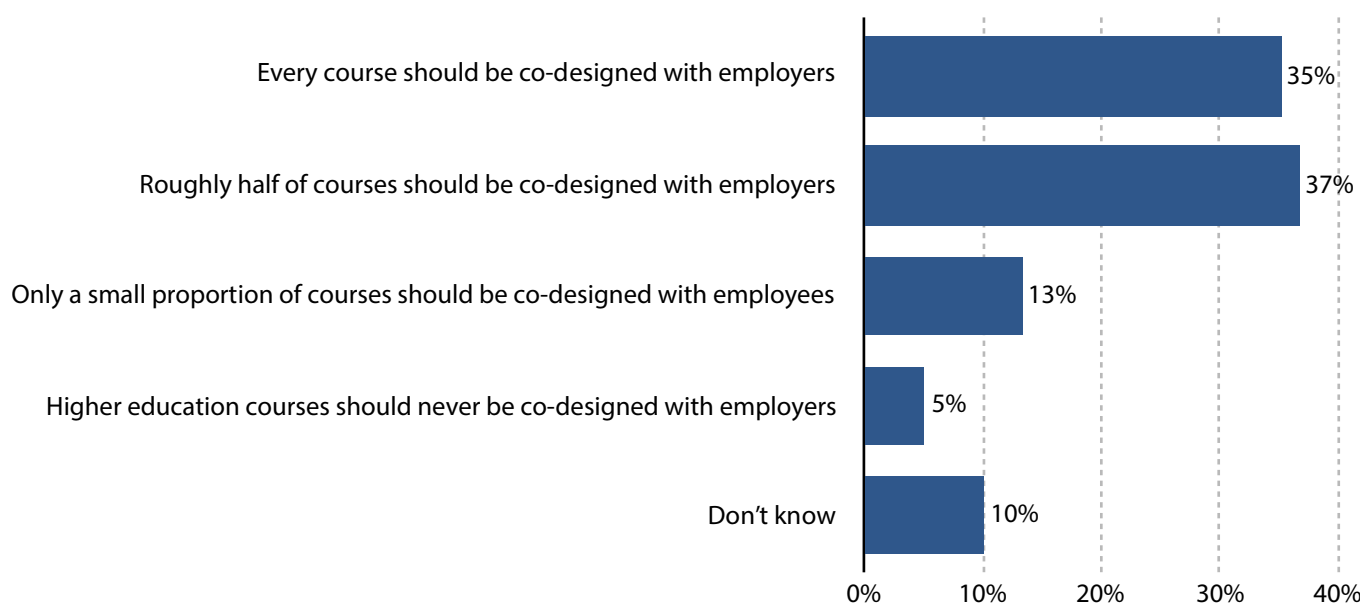
In practice, it seems that a lower proportion of courses have a strong focus on employment than students say they want. Just over one-third (36%) of students say future employment is a 'major' focus of their course. However, 38% say employment is given 'some' focus while nearly one-in-four (23%) say that future employment has been given 'little' or 'no' focus on their course, and this response is more common among part-time and postgraduate students.

Which of the following best describes how you feel your current course has been designed with regards to future employment?



Students also support collaboration between institutions and employers on course design. More than one-third (35%) say 'every course should be co-designed with employers'. Only one-in-20 (5%) say 'courses should never be co-designed with employers'.

Which of the following best describes your thoughts on universities / institutions and employers collaborating on the design of new courses?

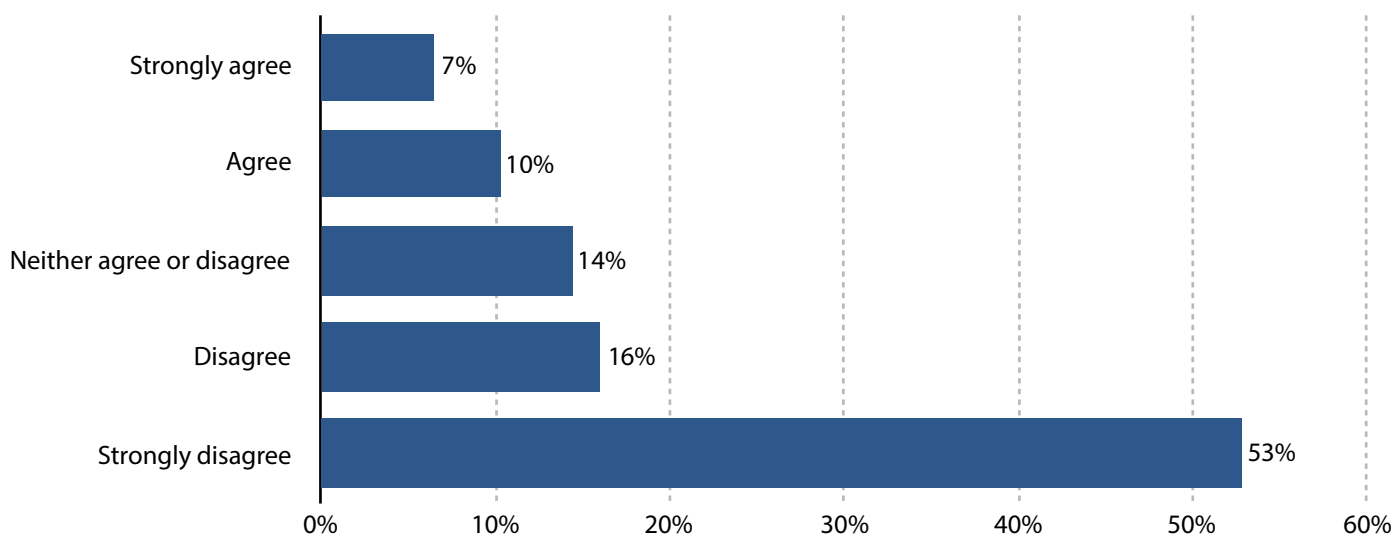


The Office for Students' revised B3 registration condition enables 'regulatory action to be taken where too many students drop out or do not go on to professional employment or further study after graduation'.⁵ This could result in a financial penalty, suspension of access to student support funding or even being removed from the Register of institutions officially recognised by the Office for Students.

However, most students do not support limiting access to student loans for courses with poor employment outcomes. Only 17% feel students on courses with low returns should be ineligible for financial support. A majority (53%) 'strongly disagree' with reducing student loans for these

courses and a further one-in-six (16%) 'disagree'. So it is clear that there is a significant gap between policymakers and students on how to encourage higher education institutions to focus on the employability of their students.

The Government has suggested higher education courses where most students struggle to find well-paid work should not be eligible for financial support. This means students on these courses would not be able to access student loans. To what extent do you agree that this is a good idea?

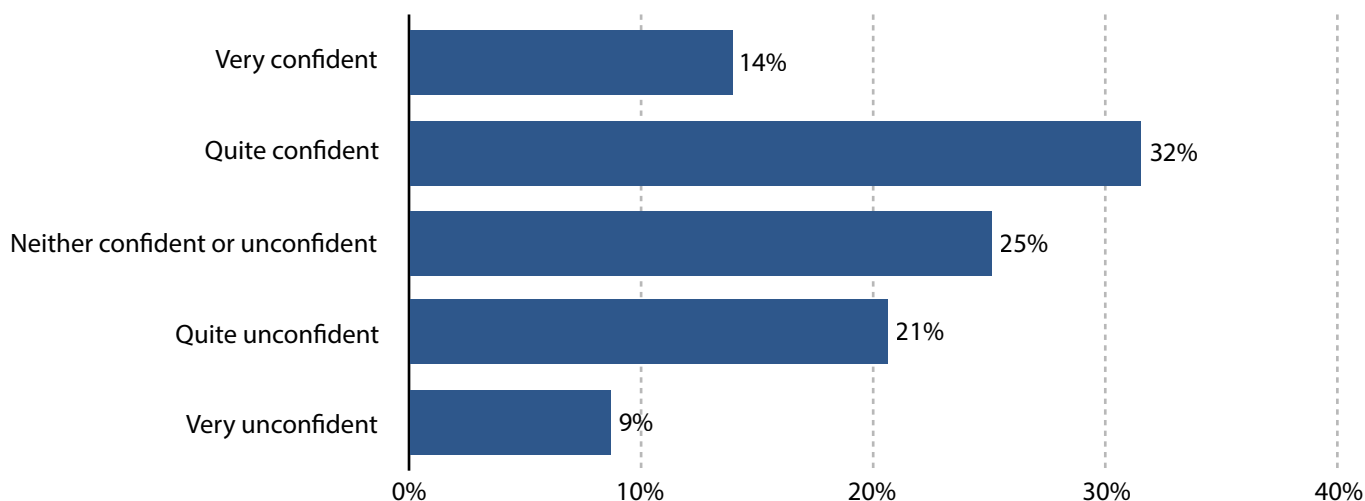


Employment prospects

Students feel differently about whether they are likely to find their desired job on graduation. Many students are either 'very confident' (14%) or 'quite confident' (32%), but a minority are 'quite unconfident' (21%) or 'very unconfident' (9%). Men tended to express more confidence, while postgraduates and Design, Creative and Performing Arts students are among the least confident.

It is positive that a higher proportion of students express confidence in finding the sort of job they want after graduation than admit to a lack of confidence on this, but the numbers are somewhat less positive than a similar question put recently by Unite Students to people who had applied to higher education. This separate poll, which was based on a seven-point scale from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree', found over six-in-ten students (62%) had some confidence in 'getting the job I want after graduation' compared to just one-in-five (19%) who lacked such confidence.⁶

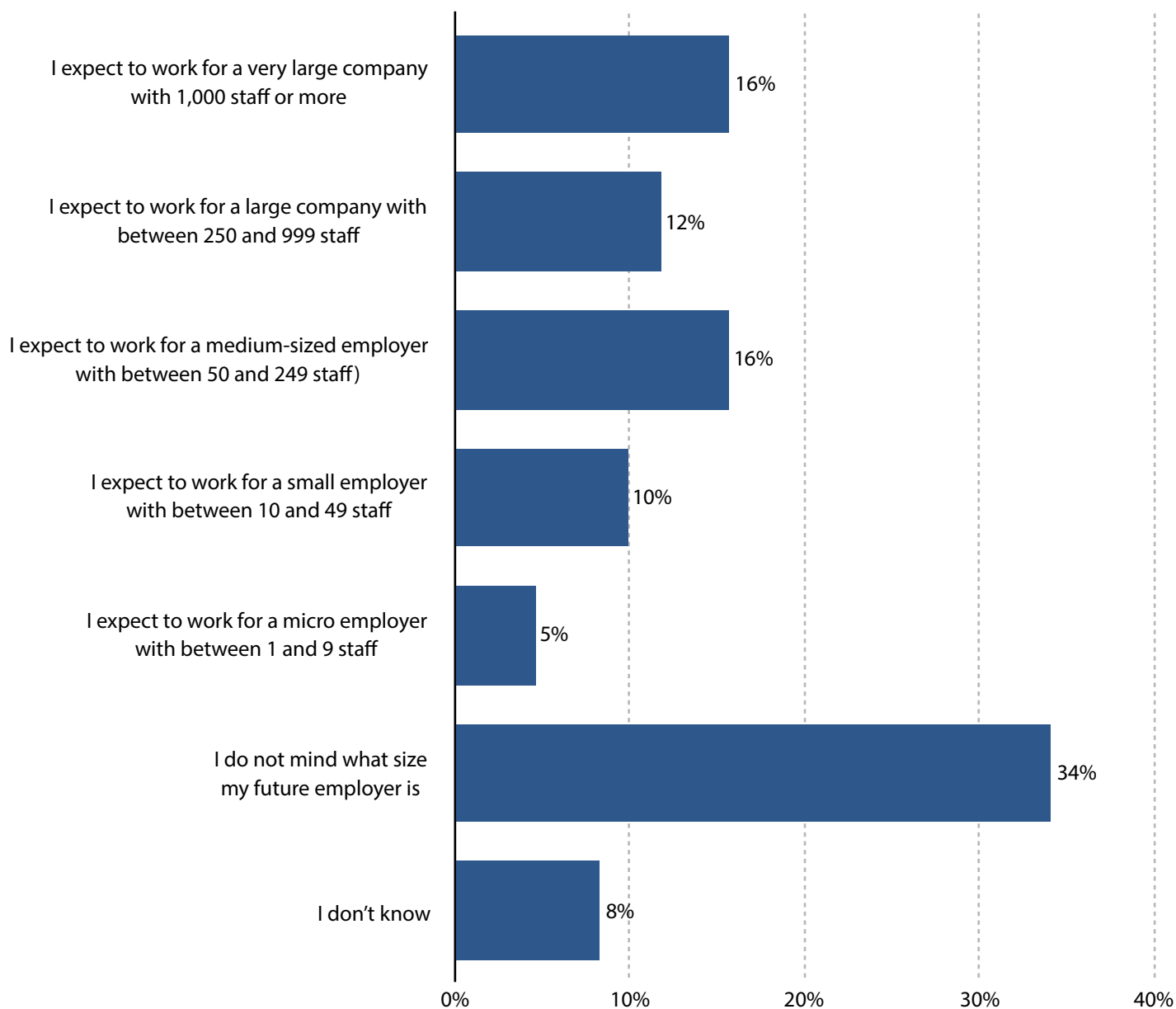
How confident are you that you will find the sort of job you most want after you leave your current higher education course?



When asked about the likely size of their future employer, the most popular answer was 'I do not mind what size my future employer is', which was selected by 34% of respondents. Among those expressing a preference, a similar proportion chose larger employers (28%) with 250 or more staff than small-to-medium sized enterprises (31%) with 249 staff or fewer.

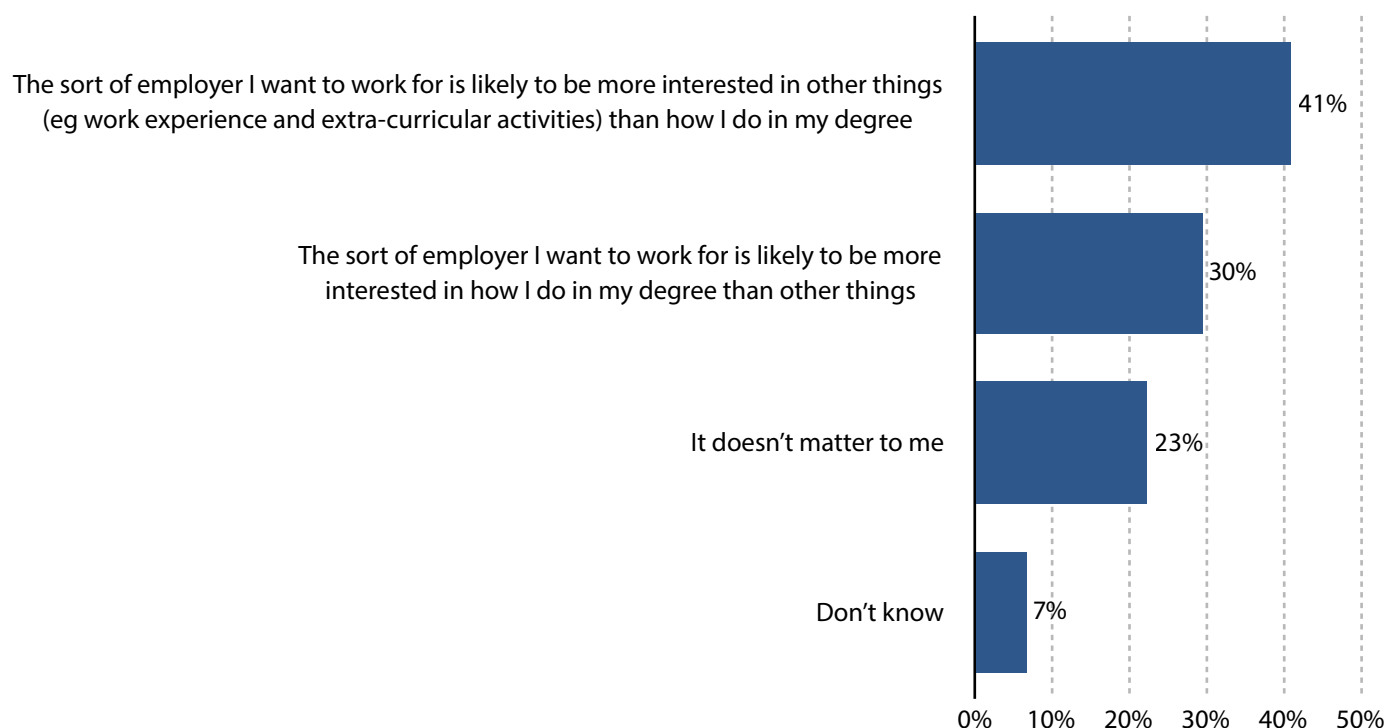
Among the UK workforce as a whole in 2022, 39% worked for employers with 250 staff or more and 45% worked for organisations with 249 staff or fewer (with the remaining 16% working for organisations with no employees).⁷

Employers range from the tiny to the huge. Do you expect to work for a micro, small, medium, large or very large employer after leaving higher education?



Students often expect their future employers to recognise their work experience and participation in extra-curricular activities: only 30% want to work for an employer most interested in their degree results, compared to two-in-five (41%) who prefer employers being more interested in these other things. Nearly one-quarter (23%) don't mind what their employer is more interested in.

Thinking about your future employer, would you most like to work for one who is more interested in how you do in your degree, or one who is more interested in work experience and extra-curricular activities?



Graduate-level jobs

The concept of 'a graduate-level job' has come to hold great sway in higher education policy – for example in assessments of the balance between the supply and demand for graduates. Yet there is no agreed definition of the term. For example, it is sometimes applied to jobs that are explicitly reserved for graduates or, separately, jobs that are generally done by graduates but for which a degree is not compulsory. Earlier HEPI output based on semi-structured interviews with recent graduates found some link their perception of graduate-level work to whether or not the role in question pays a salary above the student loan repayment threshold.⁸

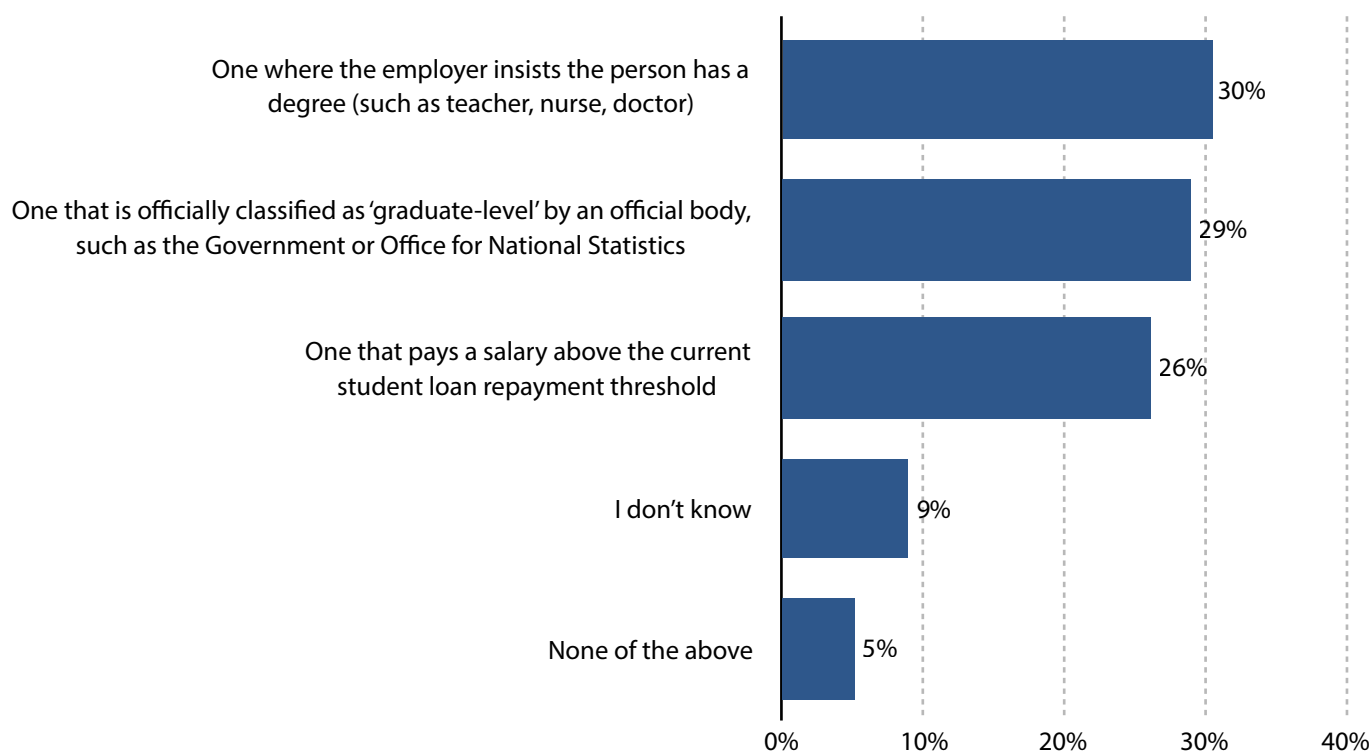
Irrespective of the definition used, the term 'graduate-level job' has generally come to be associated with a growing number of roles, as the labour market has changed and access to higher education has improved.

Given the lack of clarity, we felt it was important to ask students what they regard graduate-level work to mean. They are split in their opinions, with between one-quarter and one-third of students opting for each of the three definitions they were offered:

- when an employer requires the applicant has a degree (30%);
- when a role is officially classified as a 'graduate-level job' (29%); and
- when a position pays more than the loan repayment threshold (26%).

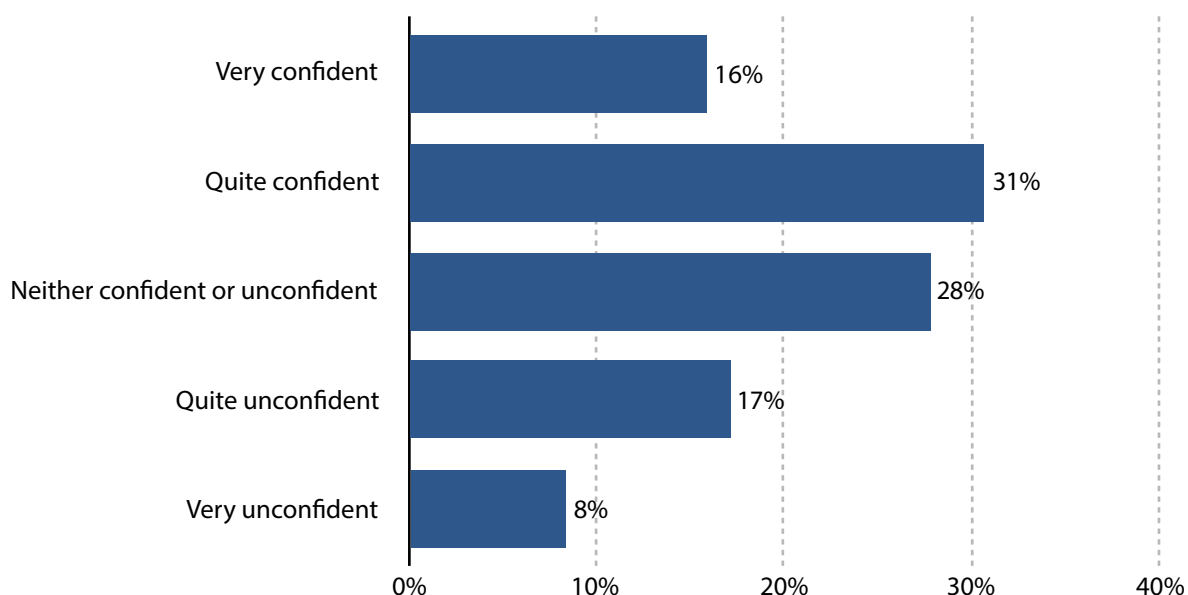
Only one-in-20 students (5%) rejected all three of the definitions proffered.

Which of the following do you think is the best definition of a 'graduate-level job'?



When asked how confident they are about achieving a graduate-level job, just under half of students (47%) say they are either 'very' or 'quite' confident and, unexpectedly perhaps, there is particularly high confidence among students studying courses linked to specific careers, such as Medicine and Dentistry. In contrast, one-quarter of respondents (25%) are either 'quite' or 'very' unconfident they are on course for a graduate-level job.

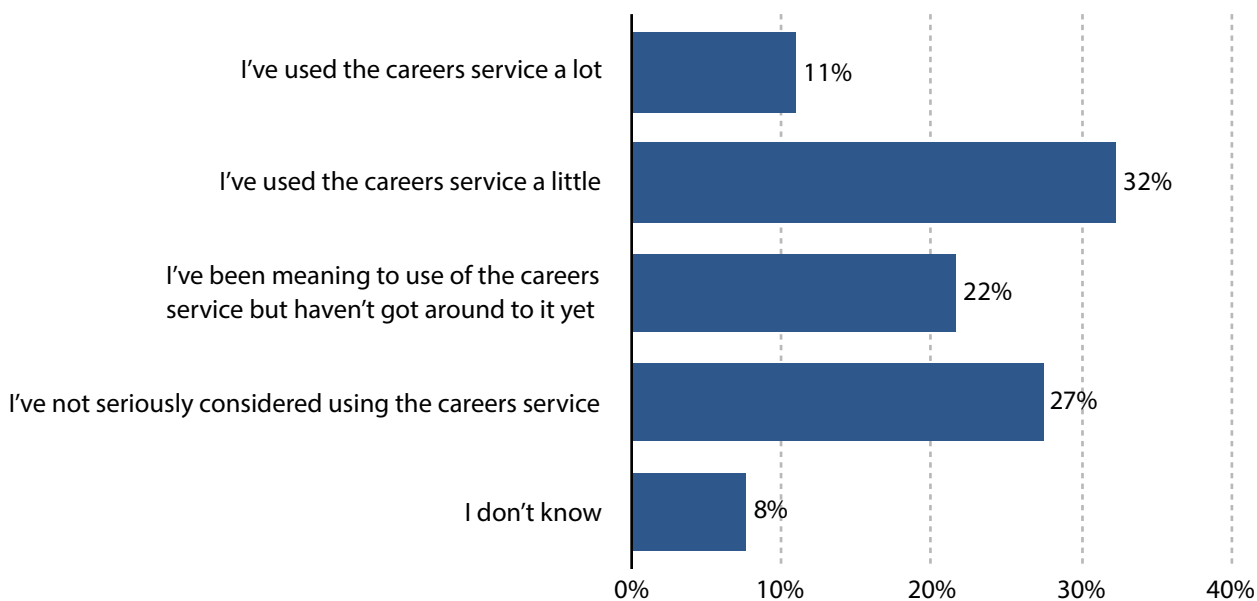
How confident are you of achieving a graduate-level job when you leave university?



Using careers services

Around four-in-10 respondents had used their careers service either 'a lot' (11%) or 'a little' (32%). Around one-fifth (22%) had intended to but had not 'got around to it' while more than a quarter (27%) had not 'seriously considered' using their careers service.

Which of the following best describes your interactions with your institution's careers service since starting your course?

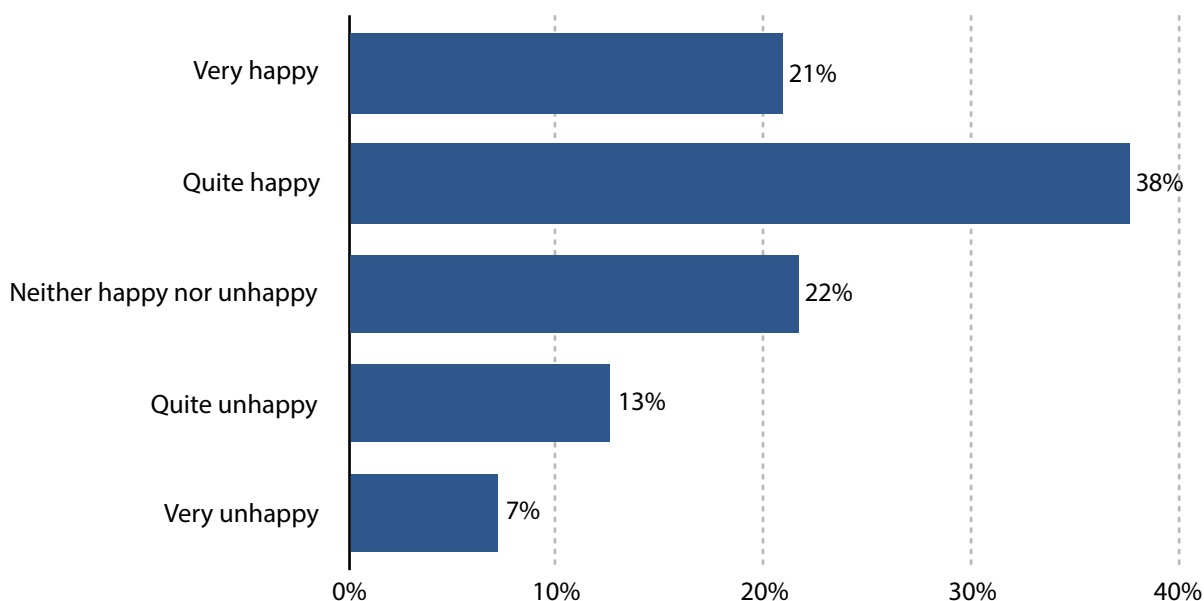


Older students, part-time and distance learners and those studying Education or Medicine are among those least likely to have used their careers service.

When those who had not used their careers service were asked to give a reason why, many indicated they knew nothing about their careers office, the services it provided or, in some cases, whether there even was one at their institution. Of those who knew more, some believed their careers service would be unable to support their career needs, others felt it was the wrong time to use their service but intended to do so later in their course and some felt they were too busy. A final group already had a career lined up, so thought they had no need for the service.

Of those who had used their careers service, a majority (59%) were either 'quite happy' or 'very happy' with their experience. This is three times the 20% who were 'quite unhappy' or 'very unhappy' with the service.

To what extent are you happy with the help your institution's careers service has given you? (Base: 474 respondents)



Conclusion

Institutions wanting to encourage their students to think more deeply about their future careers should assess what they currently offer against what students have told us in this poll. Much of the support students look for – such as CV help, interview training and careers advice – is already widely on offer and embedded across the higher education sector (and where this is not the case, it clearly should be). More notable perhaps is the strong demand for integration between courses and careers, especially when compared to the smaller number who say this integration already happens.

The fact that more than half of students think all higher education courses should be designed with employers in mind has much in common with the agenda of the incoming team of Ministers in the Department for Education: for example, before taking on his current role, Rob Halfon said: 'Every single course that a student does, whether it is history or archaeology, or whether it is science, should be about work.'⁹ Not everyone will agree with this strong emphasis, as the purpose of higher education has always been about more than getting a job, but this new polling shows courses will often be considered more attractive if they are co-designed with employers and come with a likely clear employment trajectory.

Other areas represent possibilities too. Students clearly want employers to ask about and recognise the so-called 'soft skills' accrued via extra-curricular activities and past work experience, for example. For institutions looking to boost their students' career confidence, one key finding is that employment outreach and support must not be an afterthought, but should be threaded throughout a student's period of study and placed high on any institution's list of priorities for the future.

Higher education institutions may take heart from the relatively high levels of student satisfaction with careers services. Nonetheless, there is clearly some scope for further improvement, particularly in the reach and prominence of careers teams on campus, as many students still do not know what their institutions' careers teams can offer them. Others delay important conversations about their careers until they have almost finished their course. Separate HEPI work published with Kaplan in 2021 similarly found the needs of international students have not always been met when it comes to careers support.¹⁰

This quiet disengagement leads to lower confidence than might otherwise exist among some students on their own employment prospects. The fifth of students waiting to 'get around to' using the services represent a bigger potential reach that proactive careers teams should have some success in targeting.

However, raising the profile and workload of university careers services is likely to necessitate additional resources and therefore needs to be based on a deep commitment from institutional managers and governors. The constrained financial environment, with fixed home tuition fees and high inflation, is making it difficult to increase spending on any support services on campus. But the rewards for both institutions, which are increasingly assessed on the work-readiness of their students, and for students and recent graduates, who want to make rapid progress in an ever-changing labour market, are potentially enormous.

Endnotes

- 1 See <https://www.joinhandshake.co.uk/careers2032>
- 2 Rachel Hewitt, *Getting on: graduate employment and its influence on UK higher education*, HEPI Report 126, March 2020, p9 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Getting-on.pdf>
- 3 Gabi Binnie, *What are university careers services doing to bridge the outcomes gap between white and BAME graduates?*, HEPI Blog, 28 October 2020 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/10/28/what-are-university-careers-services-doing-to-bridge-the-outcomes-gap-between-white-and-bame-graduates/> Riddi Viswanathan, *Five ways careers services can expose students to opportunities in digital technology*, HEPI Blog, 22 January 2020 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/01/22/how-university-careers-services-could-expose-students-to-the-immense-opportunities-in-the-digital-technology-sector/>
- 4 Higher Education Statistics Agency, *Who's studying in HE?: Personal characteristics*, February 2022 <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he/characteristics>
- 5 Office for Students, 'Office for Students to implement new approach to regulating student outcomes', 26 July 2022 <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/office-for-students-to-implement-new-approach-to-regulating-student-outcomes/>
- 6 Unite Students, Applicants Survey data <https://www.unitegroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Raw-data-with-data-labels.xlsx>, accessed 5 November 2022
- 7 Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, *Business population estimates for the UK and regions 2022: statistical release*, 6 October 2022 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/business-population-estimates-2022/business-population-estimates-for-the-uk-and-regions-2022-statistical-release-html>
- 8 Claire Callender and Ariane de Gayardon, *Hidden Voices: Graduates' Perspectives on the Student Loan System in England*, HEPI Report 145, November 2021 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Hidden-Voices-Graduates-Perspectives-on-the-Student-Loan-System-in-England.pdf>
- 9 Fiona McIntyre, 'Halfon: All university courses "should be about work"', *Research Professional News*, 5 October 2021 <https://www.researchprofessionalnews.com/rr-he-government-other-politics-2021-10-halfon-all-university-courses-should-be-about-work/>
- 10 Nick Hillman (ed.), *Paying more for less? Careers and employability support for international students at UK universities*, HEPI Report 143, October 2021 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Paying-more-for-less-Careers-and-employability-support-for-international-students-at-UK-universities.pdf>



Higher Education Policy Institute

Handshake

99 Banbury Road
Oxford OX2 6JX
admin@hepi.ac.uk
www.hepi.ac.uk