

Student Academic Experience Survey 2023

Jonathan Neves (Advance HE)
and Rose Stephenson (HEPI)

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STUDENT
ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE
SURVEY



Contents

Foreword	5
Executive summary	7
1. Methodology	9
1.1 Approach	9
1.2 Sample size	9
1.3 Weighting	10
1.4 Base sizes	10
1.5 Qualifications	10
1.6 Ethnicity	10
1.7 Sex and gender identity	11
1.8 Sexual orientation	11
2. Sample profile	12
3. Value-for-money	13
3.1 Trends over time	13
3.2 Value by domicile	14
3.3 Factors influencing perceptions of poor value	15
4. Meeting expectations	19
4.1 Experience versus expectations	19
4.2 Why expectations are not met	20
4.3 Why expectations are exceeded	22
5. The choice to go to university	25
5.1 Whether students would make same choice again	25
5.2 Whether considered leaving	26
6. Improvements to the student academic experience	29
6.1 Examination and assessment support	29

6.2	Quality teaching and learning	30
6.3	Mental health support	31
6.4	Impact of University and College Union (UCU) strikes	32
6.5	Communication concerns	32
6.6	Support for career development	33
6.7	Cost-of-living support	33
7.	Student priorities	35
7.1	Paid employment	35
7.2	Caring responsibilities	36
7.3	Freedom of speech on campus	37
8.	Spotlight on groups of students	40
8.1	Ethnicity (UK domicile)	40
8.2	Students in paid employment	41
8.3	Students with caring responsibilities	42
8.4	Care-experienced students	43
9.	Teaching intensity	47
9.1	Workload trends	47
9.2	Online learning	48
9.3	Satisfaction with scheduled contact hours	50
9.4	Workload by HECoS subject	51
10.	Quality of teaching and assessment	52
10.1	Perceptions of the quality of teaching staff	52
10.2	Rating of assessment	53
10.3	Volume of assignments	55
10.4	Applying for an extension	58
10.5	Timeliness of feedback	59
11.	Wellbeing	61
12.	Finances and the future	64
12.1	How students' living costs are funded	64
12.2	Students mostly funded by maintenance loans and grants	64
12.3	Students mostly funded by income from employment	67

Student Academic Experience Survey 2023

Jonathan Neves and Rose Stephenson

12.4	Care-experienced students	68
12.5	Financial concerns when applying to university	69
12.6	The impact of the cost-of-living	70
13.	Conclusions and policy recommendations	73

Foreword

This year, 2023, is a year of anniversaries. Twenty years ago, in the academic year of 2002/03, both the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) and the Higher Education Academy (HEA) were founded, with the latter being subsumed within the new organisation of Advance HE exactly five years ago, in 2017/18.

The organisations involved have always regarded the Student Academic Experience Survey, which has been tracking the reality of student life since 2005/06, as central to their task of engaging with the sector on what works, what is changing and what might be improved. Policymakers, institutional managers and the media have come to rely heavily on the results when investigating what contemporary student life is really like.

The risk with a long-standing longitudinal study is that the questions gradually become less topical and the survey becomes tired as the policy caravan moves on. For two reasons, we are confident this has not happened with the Student Academic Experience Survey. First, while we maintain a suite of standard questions that are posed each year, part of the survey is always made up of new questions – and to keep the questionnaire to a manageable length, we resemble a busy student nightclub in operating a one-in, one-out policy whenever we add a new theme. Second, the old-timer questions, on issues like value-for-money, workload and wellbeing, have become – if anything – ever more salient.

This year's survey occurs during a cost-of-living crisis and when the lingering impact of the pandemic continues to cast a shadow over young people and all types of education. So it is positive to see that some important indicators – such as the proportion of students whose experience has exceeded their expectations – are moving in a positive direction, even if they have not all yet reverted to where they were before Covid so badly disrupted our society and people's education.

In normal times, one would hope that a mature and world-class higher education system, as the UK's higher education system undoubtedly is, would be constantly improving its offer to students. However, political and policy uncertainty, high inflation and the shock of the pandemic all ensure we are not living in normal times.

There is clear evidence from the responses that the cost-of-living crisis is not just journalistic shorthand for rising prices, but a real force impacting the lives of students in adverse ways. A large majority of students say their studies have been adversely affected. Sadly, the results here are not altogether surprising, given students' income has typically not risen in line with their costs.

As the policy recommendations make clear, it should be an urgent priority for those in power to look afresh at the level of maintenance support for undergraduates. There may be lessons from Wales for the rest of the UK regarding this. Longer term, there needs to be a

Student Academic Experience Survey 2023

Jonathan Neves and Rose Stephenson

new Student Income and Expenditure Survey to provide a rigorous evidence base for better policymaking.

Given where we are in the electoral cycle, with the expectation of a general election before the winter of 2024, all the mainstream political parties are expected to flesh out their approach to higher education in the coming months. We hope this year's Student Academic Experience Survey results will help in this process, by shining a spotlight on the areas of higher education that are working well and the areas that are working less well in all 4 parts of the UK.

Yet while we hope this report proves useful, we do not regard it as anything like the final word. For those who want to dive more deeply into the results, we will – as in past years – willingly share the dataset with those who are keen to explore the numbers in their own ways.

It is certain that the UK higher education sector will continue to be wrought by big changes in coming years, such as the rising number of 18-year-olds, tougher rules regarding international students and tighter external regulation. So as Advance HE passes its fifth birthday and HEPI marks its twentieth birthday, both organisations remain jointly committed to the annual Student Academic Experience Survey, which remains the broadest, most eye-opening and most reliable of all UK undergraduate surveys.



Alison Johns
Chief Executive of Advance HE



Nick Hillman
Director of the Higher Education Policy
Institute (HEPI)

Executive summary

Several of the key measures in this year's survey have moved in a positive direction, but these movements have tended to be relatively small. Value-for-money perceptions have improved, but not statistically significantly, while there has been no change in the proportion who would choose the same course and institution again. There has been a statistically significant increase in the number of students who feel their expectations were exceeded but this is relatively small in absolute terms.

One of the key factors behind these figures appears to be concerns about the cost of living, which are holding back perceptions of the student experience. Unlike during the previous three years of the survey, there have been very few, if any, restrictions on university life related to the Covid-19 pandemic in the past year or so. A large proportion of lectures and seminars are being delivered in person, which is what a range of student feedback was asking for during the period when this was more difficult for institutions to deliver. However, many of the key measures of the student experience show little sign of recovering to pre-pandemic levels.

A number of the key metrics from this year's survey are listed below:

- + Perception of receiving good or very good value-for-money has risen slightly, from 35% to 37%.
- + The proportion of students whose experience exceeded expectations increased from 17% to **19%**.¹
- + The proportion who would choose the same course and institution again remains similar at 58%, compared to 59% in 2022.
- + There has been a clear uplift in the number of students in paid employment, from 45% to **55%**.
- + The average number of hours per week spent in class, fieldwork or studying independently has risen from 30.7 to 33.4.

In a new question this year, three quarters of our sample feel their studies have been affected by the cost-of-living crisis, a figure that is disproportionately higher among some more vulnerable cohorts. On a similar theme, financial concerns were cited as the main reason behind low value-for-money perceptions. In a fundamental change in the data this year, more than half of students in our sample are now in paid work. Additionally, students are significantly more likely to be using income from employment to fund their studies. The

¹ Percentages that represent statistically significant changes year on year are in bold.

results highlight that financial concerns are felt across the board, and particularly by disadvantaged students, indicating a need for the sector to treat this as a matter of priority.

In terms of hours of engagement, students are working harder than ever. There has been a clear increase in timetabled classes across many subject areas, as well as a rise in time spent on fieldwork and placements. We have seen in previous years that students like to be challenged to work hard, but a related area of potential concern is the increase in the number of assignments that students are being asked to complete in an average term or semester. Coming on the back of previous increases, our data shows a continuing upward trend over the past few years, which is likely to be creating a pressurised environment for both staff and students alike, although staff this year are praised for meeting or exceeding expectations in terms of the turnaround time for returning assignments.²

One of the more positive elements of this year's results is that on some aspects there has been a statistically significant improvement in the experience of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students, for example on value-for-money where the experience of White students has not changed. The ethnicity gap in some perceptions has therefore started to close. Against this, however, minoritised ethnic groups are less likely to feel comfortable expressing their views on campus, even though results at a total sample level suggest most students are comfortable with the variety of views and opinions represented on campus and in the curriculum.

² Data was collected before the Spring 2023 marking and assessment boycott began.

1. Methodology

1.1 Approach

The Survey was designed and developed in partnership between Advance HE and the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), with online panel interviews independently conducted by Savanta and Torfac.³

Savanta's Student Panel (formerly YouthSight) 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 Torfac.

Between 16 January 2023 and 16 March 2023, members of Savanta's Student Panel as well as respondents from other panels including Torfac were invited to complete the Survey. In total, 10,163 responses were collected, representing a response rate of 10%. Of the 10,163 total responses, 8,459 were sourced from the Savanta panels and 1,704 were sourced from Torfac. On average, the Survey took 11 minutes 51 seconds to complete.

In order to facilitate year-on-year comparisons, we have included a number of key measures, such as value-for-money, assessment, volumes of teaching hours and experience compared to expectations. We have also added some new questions on the impact of cost of living and have probed deeper into the experiences of students who spend time in paid employment. We have also dedicated a section of this report to the analysis of the student voice through the free-text comments provided.

1.2 Sample size

This year our Survey captured the views of 10,163 full-time undergraduate students studying in the UK. Unless stated otherwise, all figures and tables relate to weighted data from the 2023 Survey.

The total sample size of 10,163, based on a full-time undergraduate population of 1,728,210, provides a margin of error of + / - 1%.⁴ This is calculated at the 95% confidence level and based on a result of 50%, where the margin of error is at its maximum. This means

³ For specific queries about the base sizes and populations in this report, or for more general information about the contents, please contact surveys@advance-he.ac.uk or admin@hepi.ac.uk

⁴ 'Who's studying in HE?'. HESA website, 31 January 2023. <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he> [Accessed 12 April 2023]

that for a result of 50% we can be confident that the true result is between 49% and 51% in 95 out of 100 cases.⁵

We have highlighted statistically significant differences between 2022 and 2023 (or in some cases, between sample groups from 2023) in bold text on each chart or table where such differences apply.

1.3 Weighting

A comprehensive weighting strategy was employed, using the most recently available Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) statistics, to maximise representation while maintaining integrity of the unweighted data.⁶ A full range of factors were processed including gender identity, ethnicity, year of study, domicile and type of school attended.

1.4 Base sizes

To reduce 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 2023 data comprising the total weighted population of 10,163. 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 Qualifications

The Survey has always been based on full-time undergraduates, but this year we have included some additional detail on the qualification being studied for. The large majority of respondents are Bachelor degree students, but the report and data tables break down some questions by students who are working towards other qualifications such as a foundation degree or a degree apprenticeship. These kinds of students have always been included in the sample across previous years, but this is the first year that the categories have been pulled out in this way.

1.6 Ethnicity

For ethnicity analysis, the sample table and main data in this report (for the ethnicity analysis only) are again based on UK-domiciled students.⁷ This has been done to remove the impact of international students on ethnic groups. The ethnic groups analysed are mutually

⁵ For a guide to margin of error see <https://www.qualtrics.com/experience-management/research/margin-of-error/#calculator>

⁶ 'Higher education student data'. HESA website. <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students>

⁷ 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.

exclusive, hence the Asian group does not include Chinese students, an approach that we have adopted to provide consistency of analysis with previous years.⁸

1.7 Sex and gender identity

To match our approach in 2022 and to reflect the status of sex as a protected characteristic, we have included a classification question on sex, as well as a question on gender identity. 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.

1.8 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 data tables. Advance HE and HEPI recognise the limits of this classification.

⁸ 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.

2. Sample profile

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

Weighted data					
		2021 (10,186)	2022 (10,142)	2023 (10,163)	2023 Base size
Domicile	England	74%	68%	69%	6,816
	Northern Ireland	3%	3%	3%	296
	Scotland	8%	7%	7%	691
	Wales	5%	4%	4%	395
	EU	7%	10%	9%	876
	Rest of the World ⁹	4%	6%	8%	803
Institutions	Russell Group	28%	28%	28%	2,863
	Pre-92 (excl. Russell Group)	21%	21%	20%	2,011
	Post-92	47%	45%	43%	4,356
	Specialist	4%	2%	4%	372
	Alternative ¹⁰	0.5%	3%	6%	560
Ethnicity (UK-domiciled providing an answer)	Asian (excluding Chinese)	13%	14%	16%	1,300
	Chinese	1%	1%	1%	112
	Black	7%	4%	5%	433
	Mixed	4%	5%	5%	380
	Other	1%	1%	1%	101
	White	74%	75%	72%	5,983

⁹ There is an ongoing focus on increasing the number of students from outside the UK in this sample, to match official statistics from HESA more closely.

¹⁰ As a result of specific targeting, the base size (weighted and unweighted) for Alternative Providers is 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

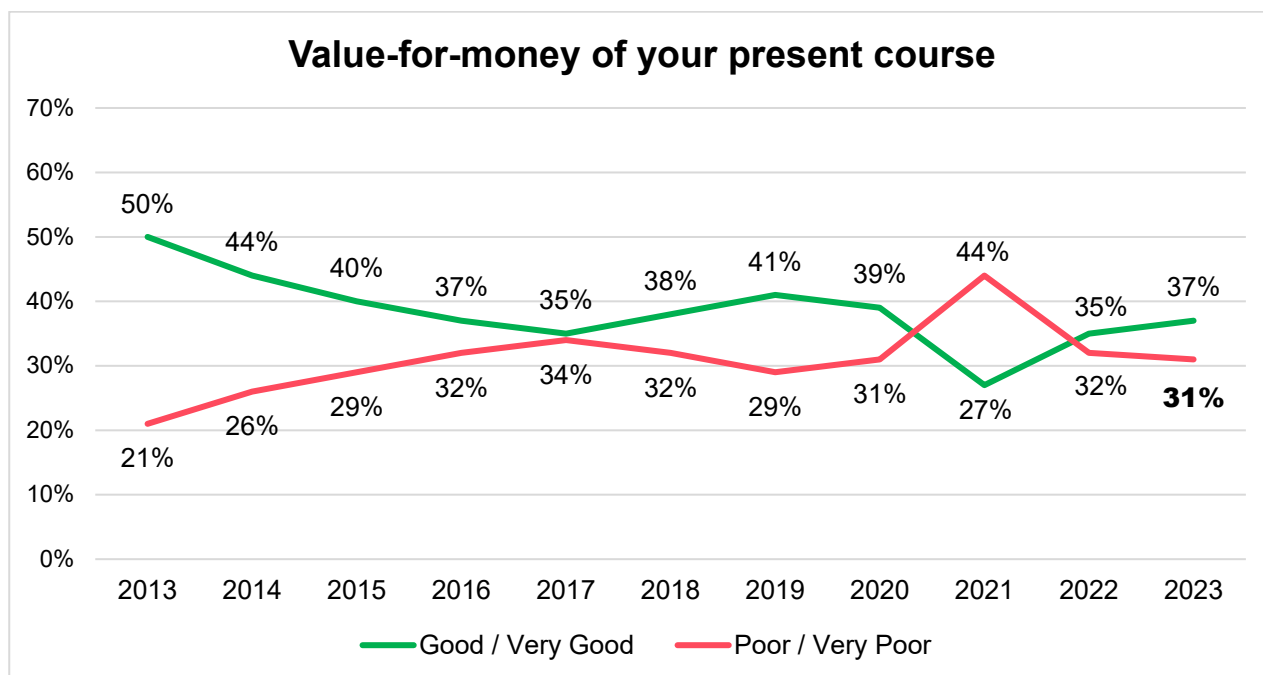
3.1 Trends over time

Across the survey, a number of key measures have been established as key barometers of the student experience. At the forefront of these has been students' assessment as to whether the experience has delivered good value-for-money, a measure which has fluctuated directly in response to policy changes and the onset and eventual easing of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Historically, this measure has set a high bar for the sector to deliver, with a relatively low number of students – typically between 35% and 40% – feeling able to say their experience represented “good” or “very good” value, a figure which fell markedly during the pandemic. 2022 represented a recovery in perceptions that appeared to be very much linked to the return of face-face teaching for many students as pandemic restrictions were lifted. In the past year, there have been very few, if any, restrictions on campus life, but the student experience has continued to evolve and be impacted by policymaking, industrial action and the economic climate, as well as the lingering impacts of the pandemic in some cases on student health and wellbeing.

Overall, 37% of students in 2023 feel they receive good or very good value, which is a 2% increase from 2022, but not a statistically significant one. Against this, there has been a 1% drop in the proportion feeling they received poor or very poor value, which is statistically significant.¹¹ As explained above, value-for-money has always been a challenging measure, but the current levels are not particularly high, almost matching those achieved in 2018 and being below the immediately pre-pandemic levels of 2019, and the years prior to 2016.

¹¹ Statistical significance is calculated from a combination of base sizes and the percentage result. The position of the result on the scale is also an influencing factor, hence a result towards the middle of a 100% scale would require a greater difference, or a larger base size, to be statistically significant, compared to a results closer to the extremes of the scale.



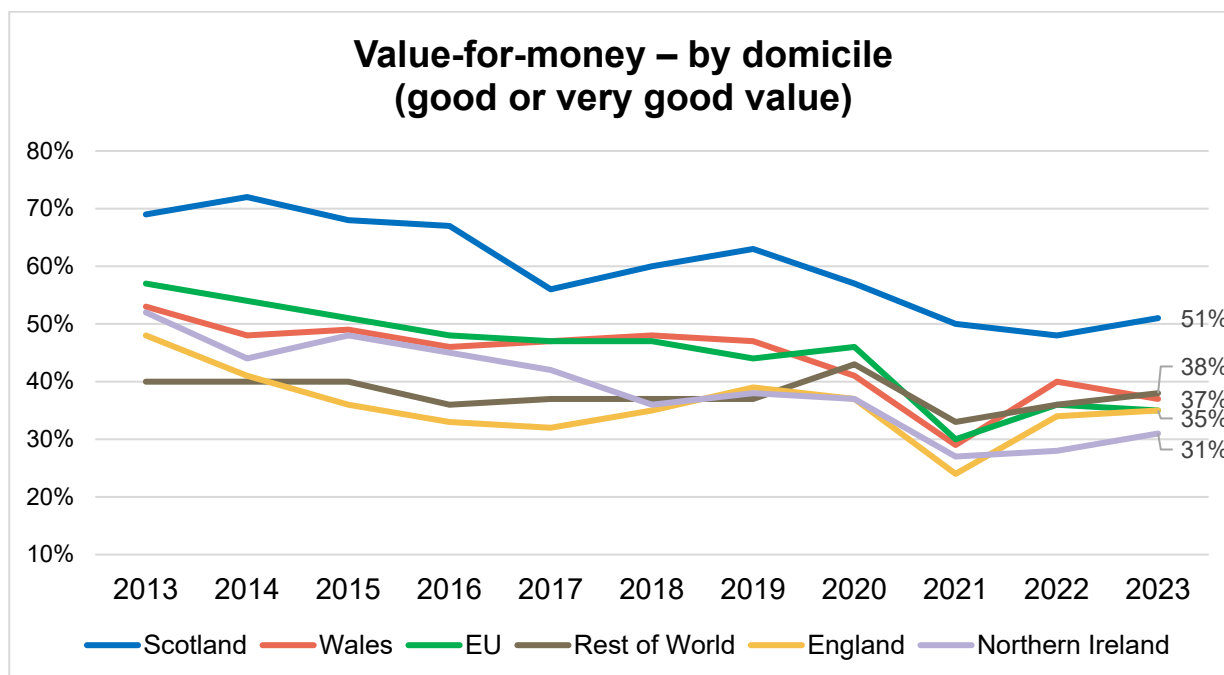
Please note that students could also choose an option “neither good nor poor”, which is why these yearly figures do not add up to 100%.

Despite the gains this year being relatively small, we once again have clear distance, moving in the right direction, between those who received good value (the green line above) and those who received poor value (the red line above), although we would hope to see this small gap widened in future.

3.2 Value by domicile

The perception of value is potentially strongly influenced by the fees and funding policies that vary depending on where a student is from.¹² Accordingly, we have broken down value perceptions by domicile in the table and chart below.

¹² Fees in some parts of the UK relate to a combination of where a student is studying and where they are from. Recognising that not all students choose to study in the part of the UK where they are from, there is an additional breakdown of domicile combined with university region in the data tables.



	Scotland	Wales	EU	Rest of World	England	NI
2020	57%	41%	46%	43%	37%	37%
2021	50%	29%	30%	33%	24%	27%
2022	48%	40%	36%	36%	34%	28%
2023	51%	37%	35%	38%	35%	31%

This year we have seen a small upturn in value perceptions across all parts of the UK with the exception of students domiciled in Wales. Strikingly, however, none of the changes shown above are statistically significant, which matches the data at the total sample level.

In terms of relative levels between different geographies, there has been little change, with students from Scotland remaining the most positive, albeit at lower levels than before the pandemic, and students from Northern Ireland being least positive.

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. This is split 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).

A major change this year is that we added a new option to the list to choose from – industrial action by staff. Over the past few years, the Survey has often taken place during or close to a period of industrial action by one of more of the unions in the sector, and this has been mentioned frequently as an “other” option as it was not previously a specific code that could be selected. Accordingly, the year-on-year comparison of the different options has been impacted by a new, significant option being added this year, but the following list of the top

10 reasons overall, and their relative change in positioning, still gives us a clear view of what is impacting the experience and potentially holding back value perceptions from recovering to their pre-pandemic levels.



Results ranked in order of 2023. Top 10 answers shown. Respondents were asked to select all that apply.

The most noteworthy change this year has been the rise of cost-of-living concerns to become the main issue that has led to students feeling they have received poor / very poor value-for-money. This is not entirely surprising given the current and recent economic climate but it is still striking to see living costs move above tuition fees and teaching quality – both of which are perennial areas of concern, but to a lesser extent this year.

The other main change in this list is the inclusion of industrial action, which is the sixth most prominent aspect influencing value perceptions. The timing of the industrial action has probably contributed to the relatively high ranking, as we may reasonably speculate that, as

with the cost-of-living concerns, this issue has become more prevalent over recent months.¹³

We have seen above how different fee regimes affecting students have an impact on value perceptions. However, there are also major variations depending on where in the UK a student is carrying out their studies. The table below highlights how value perceptions are driven by some different priorities affecting institutions across the 4 parts of the UK.

Cost of living is the dominant issue in England, Scotland and Wales, but for students at university in Northern Ireland, concerns about the level of tuition fees are the dominant factor. There is also more evidence of industrial action having an impact on the experience in Northern Ireland and Wales.

Factors influencing perceptions of poor value – top 7 mentions by university region			
England	Northern Ireland*	Scotland	Wales
Cost of living – 41%	Tuition fees – 79%	Cost of living – 45%	Cost of living – 42%
Tuition fees – 40%	Teaching quality – 60%	Teaching quality – 32%	Tuition fees – 36%
Teaching quality – 30%	Industrial action – 48%	Student support services – 29%	Feedback quality – 30%
Course organisation – 24%	One-to-one contact time – 43%	Tuition fees – 26%	Industrial action – 28%
Course content – 23%	Cost of living – 37%	Feedback quality – 24%	Teaching quality – 27%
Industrial action – 23%	Feedback quality – 36%	Course organisation – 23%	Course content – 25%
In-person contact hours – 22%	In-person contact hours – 35%	Course facilities – 23%	Career prospects – 23%

Question asked of those who said they received “poor” or “very poor” value-for-money. *Base sizes for students studying in Northern Ireland are very low for this particular question and should be treated with caution.

Unsurprisingly, the main factors mentioned in the overall list are present in the top 7 lists for most parts of the UK. One exception to this is Student support services, concerns over which were the third most important driver of poor value-for-money in Scotland, but across the total sample this only ranked fifteenth overall.

Beyond the pre-defined answers listed in the Survey, students also had the opportunity to provide their own comments on any other issues impacting their views. In previous years, there have been numerous references to the industrial disputes (now a pre-coded option) as well as general references to the impact of Covid, which has diminished in direct impact.

A range of comments were still made, however, with a number of mentions of the cost of equipment, and the point that for some people, paying higher fees year for their education is

¹³ Alex Finnes, ‘UCU strike dates 2023: When the university strikes are planned in March and the universities involved’. iNews website, 5 March 2023. <https://inews.co.uk/news/education/ucu-strike-dates-2023-when-university-strikes-planned-march-which-universities-2187311>

likely to always be seen as a barrier when asked about value-for-money. There were also some references to NHS placements not being paid.

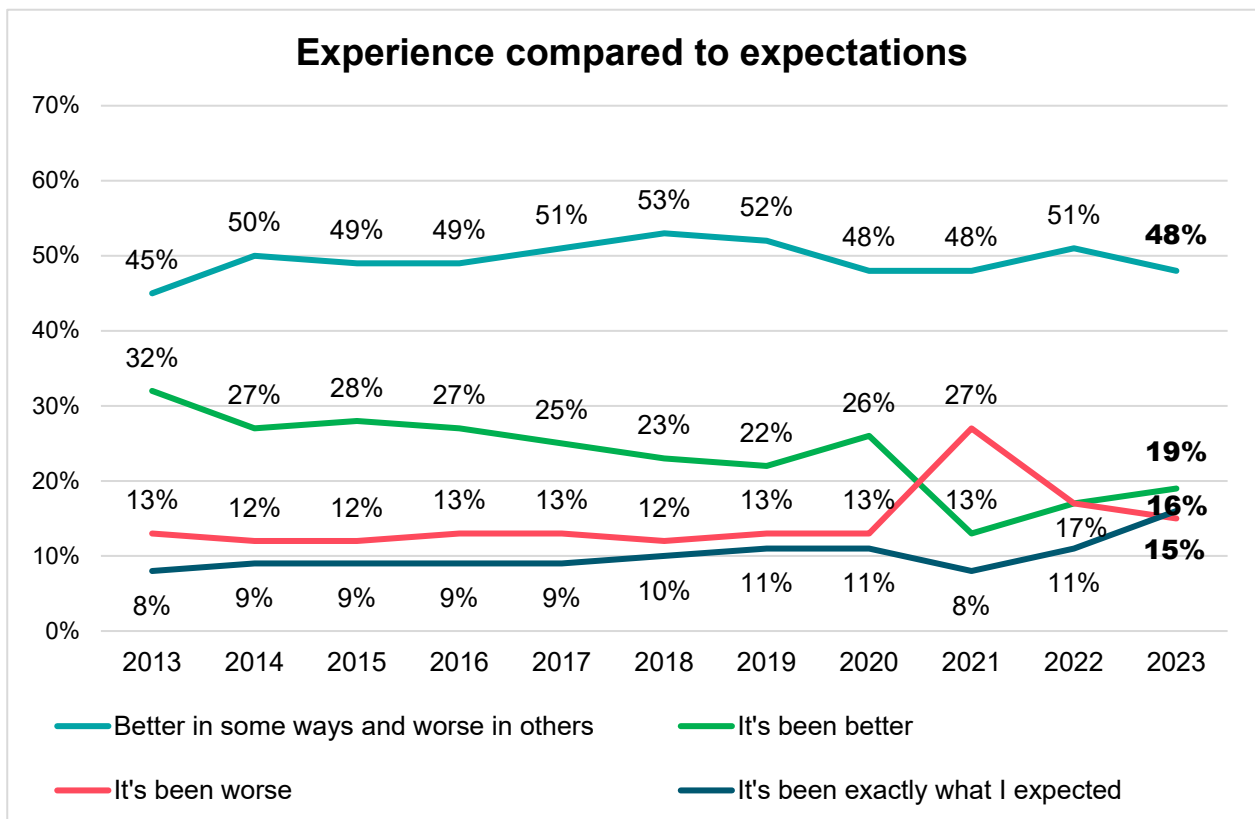
Other reasons – selected open comments ¹⁴
“Having to pay for books on top of the cost of the course and accommodation”
“The fact that university costs so much yet we still have to pay for things like our own books and printing”
“Working 2300 hours of unpaid placement hours, while having to pay university fees”
“We pay to work in the NHS on placements (you do not get money for working 34-48 hours a week)”
“I am paying for this degree with my own money. If it were a government loan it would be exceptional value”
“How Covid affected my degree and the university’s failures to properly support / reimburse students.”
“£9,000 is too much for any course”

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

4. Meeting expectations

4.1 Experience versus expectations

How the experience compares to expectations has become one of the main barometers by which this survey helps to assess the student experience. In doing this, we are not necessarily expecting the experience to match expectations all the time, but we are assessing whether the experience has been, on balance, better or worse.



What we have seen since the pandemic is that exceeding expectations is a challenge, and to a large extent this remains the case. As we saw with value-for-money, there has been a relatively small (but, this time, statistically significant) positive movement over the past year, with a fall of 2 percentage points in the proportion who have received a worse experience than expected and an identical rise in the proportion who have received a better experience. That said, however, just 19% feel their experience has been wholly better than they expected, which is some way below a high point of 32% back in 2013.

A key change in the data this year is the statistically significant increase (11% up to 16%) in the proportion who feel their experience has matched their expectations. Although expectations themselves can be both positive and negative, it is striking that this figure is the highest it has ever been – nearly double the level of 2013. Potentially, this may be a result of

the ending of Covid restrictions, or the impact of more nuanced and effective communications at institutional level about what the experience will be like. We could also consider the growing role of social media and whether this may be helping to demystify the post-Covid academic experience to potential students and help adjust their expectations before they begin.

	Total sample	Students at institutions in Wales
Better than expected	19%	25%

Geographically, the most positive findings were from students who were studying at institutions in Wales (whether they were from Wales or elsewhere), with a significantly higher proportion than the survey average who felt their expectations were exceeded.

Experience compared to expectations	Living in university halls 2022	Living in university halls 2023
Exactly the same	13%	21%

As we referred to above, there has been a major increase this year in the proportion of students whose experience matched their expectations. This has been particularly prevalent this year for students living in university halls, which implies that levels of communication, either official through institutions or unofficial among students themselves, have portrayed an accurate picture to those living in university accommodation about what the overall experience would be like. This may also be reflecting an absence of pandemic-related restrictions on university life which, when in place, are likely to have had a particular impact on those living in close proximity to others in halls.

4.2 Why expectations are not met

Over the years since we have been asking a follow-up question on why expectations are not met, responses have tended to focus on teaching quality, course organisation and support for independent studies. During the pandemic, the sentiment of these responses shifted somewhat, with concerns around the lack of one-to-one time and fewer opportunities to interact with others tending to be cited as the main reasons for expectations not being met.

Now in 2023, we have broadly returned to the pre-pandemic picture, with teaching quality, study support and feedback being the main drivers where an experience was worse than expected. As with the follow-up question on value-for-money (reported earlier), we also included an option for students to mention industrial action this year for the first time, but it is fair to say that in 2023 it has not been one of the main concerns when considering the experience compared to expectations, ranking ninth out of all factors mentioned.

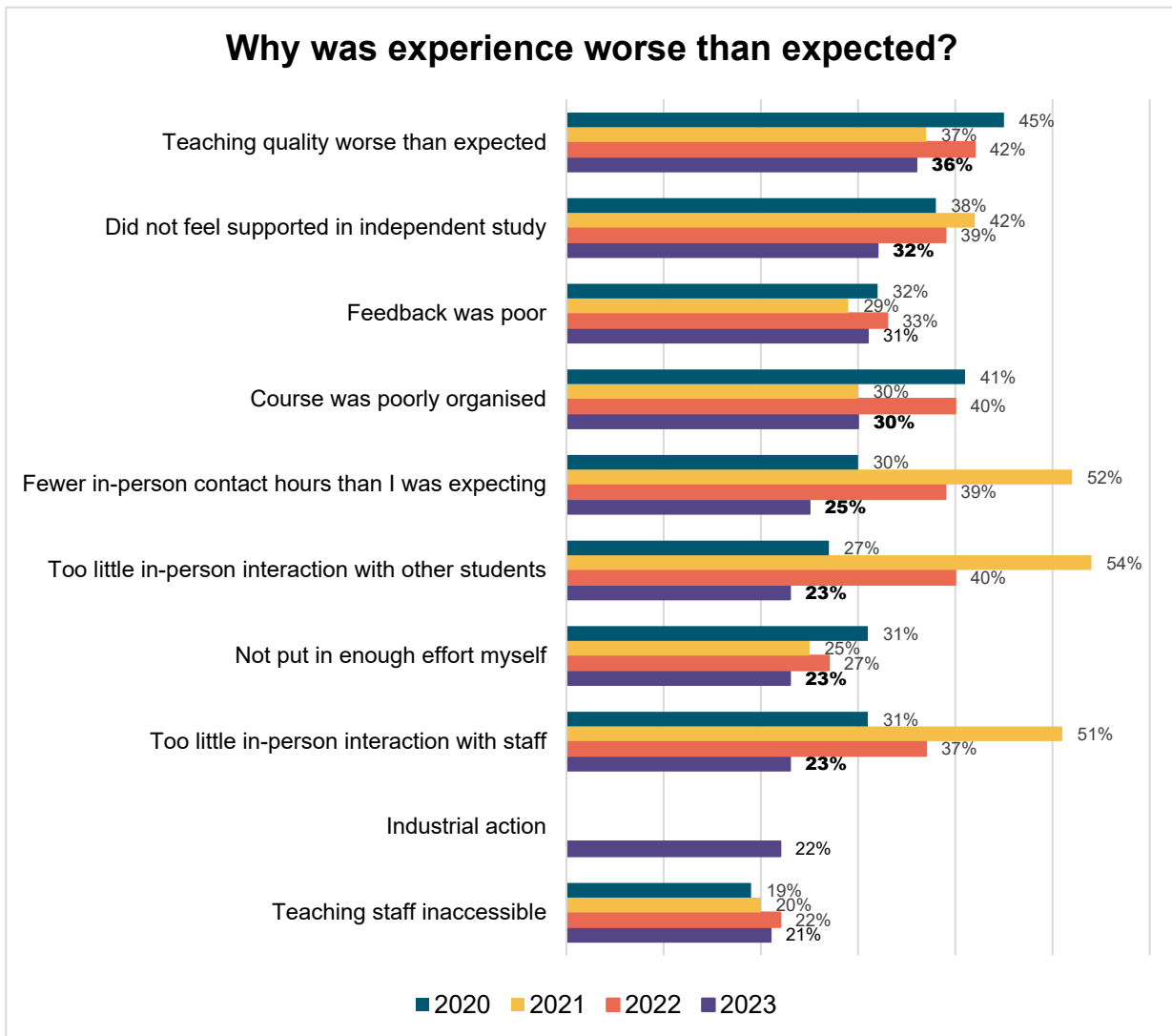


Chart displays top 10 mentions. Ranked in order of 2023 results.

There were fewer “other” comments this year behind this question (principally due to Industrial action being included as a pre-coded answer option), but the table below provides a flavour of responses where students have chosen to comment specifically.

Expectations not met – selected open comments
“Not lived up to the hype”
“Everyone on my course is very normal and I am not so I have literally no friends”
“I have discovered I have problems that affect my academic studies”
“Struggling with finances”
“Having to work as (its) expensive”
“Money and affordability since I don’t work”
“It’s very difficult study and work at the same time, and life in London it’s very expensive.”
“The support team for mental health just kept passing me around and so were unhelpful in letting me settle into uni”
“Loneliness”
“Wellbeing support is poor”

These comments can be a window into the wider issues affecting students. While the list above does not represent a full qualitative theme-based analysis, it is clear that the cost of living is a key factor impacting on the experience, while mental health and loneliness are also a concern in some cases.

4.3 Why expectations are exceeded

It is important to reflect upon the fact that slightly more students (19%) feel their experience is better than expectations compared to the proportion (15%) who feel it is worse.

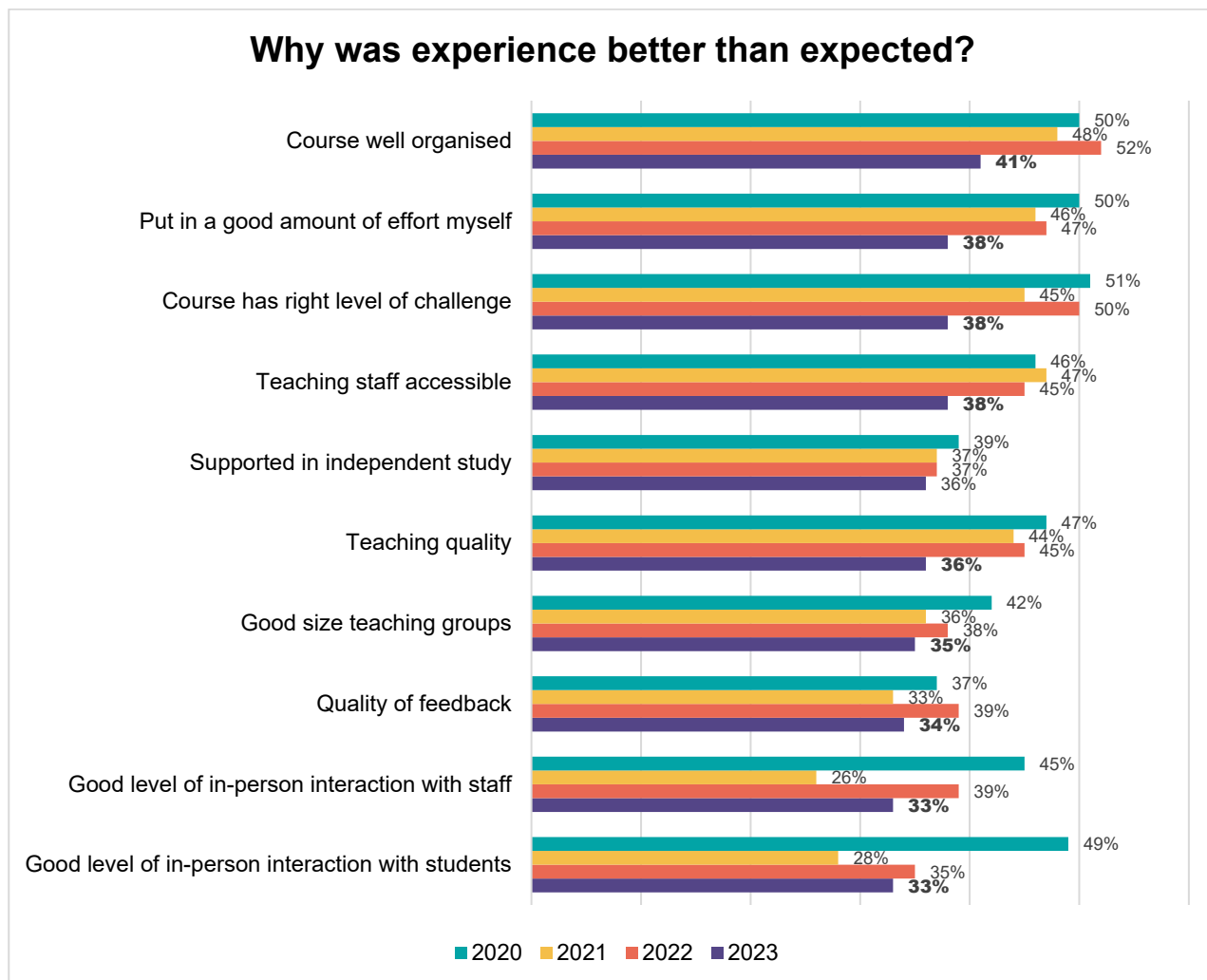


Chart displays top 10 mentions. Ranked in order of 2023 results.

Although there tend to have been fewer responses to all categories this year, it is particularly useful to consider the relative ranking of these categories. Broadly the ranking now is similar to what it was before during the pandemic, with a couple of exceptions. The level of course challenge was again identified as a positive point for these students. There is also praise for course organisation and teaching quality, just as there is relative criticism of these factors among those students whose expectations were worse than expected.

Before the pandemic one of the major factors driving an experience that exceeded expectations was in-person interaction – with students, and with staff. Understandably, this fell markedly during the pandemic years, but in relative terms this interaction is lower down the list in 2023, implying that while in-person interaction is no longer restricted, it is less often seen as a strength of the academic experience.

A change this year is the relative prominence in this ranking of the amount of support for independent study. Although the proportion of students mentioning it has declined slightly in absolute terms, it has increased in relative importance, having not been in the top group of categories in most recent years, yet being highlighted as the fifth most important factor in

2023.

We saw above that students studying in Wales were particularly likely to feel their expectations were exceeded. When analysing the reasons behind this, four factors in particular emerged compared to the total sample – course challenge, size of teaching groups, teaching quality and feedback (not charted here).

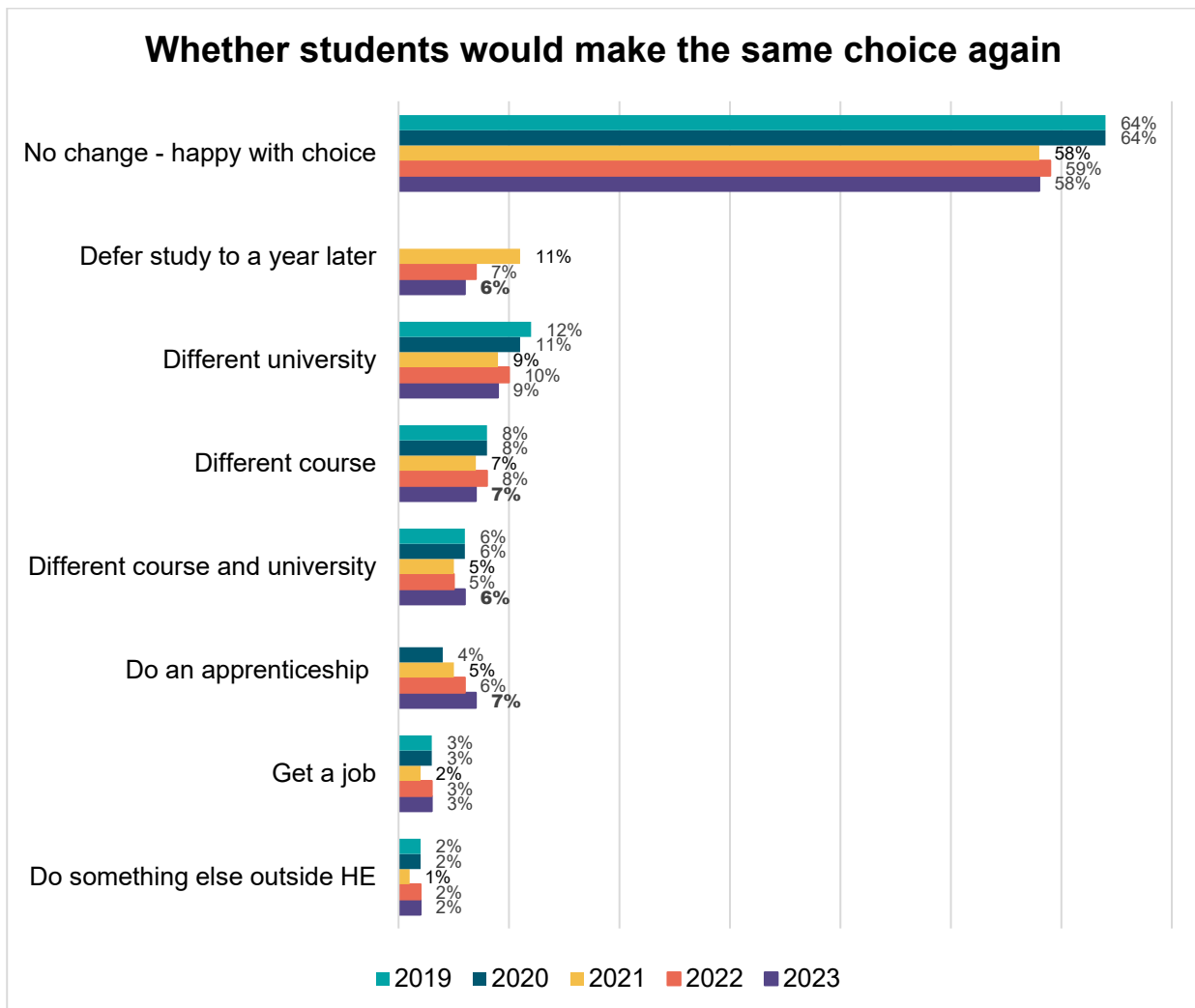
Across the total sample, there were also a (relatively small) number of wider comments from students who did not select any of the pre-defined answers, with the list below representing some of the themes being described.

Expectations exceeded – selected open comments
“Did not expect that I would have the opportunity to study abroad as well”
“Much more fieldwork involved than anticipated, something that will be highly useful in the future when applying for jobs”
“I have met good friends in sport clubs and in classes and I am learning to manage my finances and work life balance”
“The staff are very friendly and approachable”
“Overall amazing people working and taking part in the course”

5. The choice to go to university

5.1 Whether students would make same choice again

Another of the main measures of the overall experience is represented by a question on whether students are happy with their choice given their experience to date, or, given the chance again, whether they feel they would have selected one of the other options available to them.



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

Although just over half would make the same choice again, it is quite striking that there has been no real upturn in these perceptions in the past year. When the question was first introduced, around two out of three were happy with their choice and would have made the same decision again. This declined significantly during the pandemic but there has been no recovery.

The most popular alternatives are a different course and / or institution. There has been a consistent rise in the consideration of doing an apprenticeship.¹⁵ Deferring study (an option first added to this question after the onset of the pandemic) is still something that a proportion of students would have considered, and which may partly explain why the proportion of students who are happy with their choice does not match pre-pandemic levels.

The onset of the pandemic impacted on the student academic experience in substantial ways, which led to some students questioning the choice they had made, but given the absence of restrictions and the return to campus life in the past year or so, it appears that there are other factors at play that have made some students reconsider.

One of these factors is potentially the cost-of-living crisis, and concerns around the impact on the university experience of financial challenges and time constraints caused by working as well as studying.

Whether would choose same course and university again	No paid employment	Paid employment 1–9 hours per week	Paid employment 10+ hours per week
No change – happy with choice	65%	52%	53%
Would do an apprenticeship	5%	9%	10%

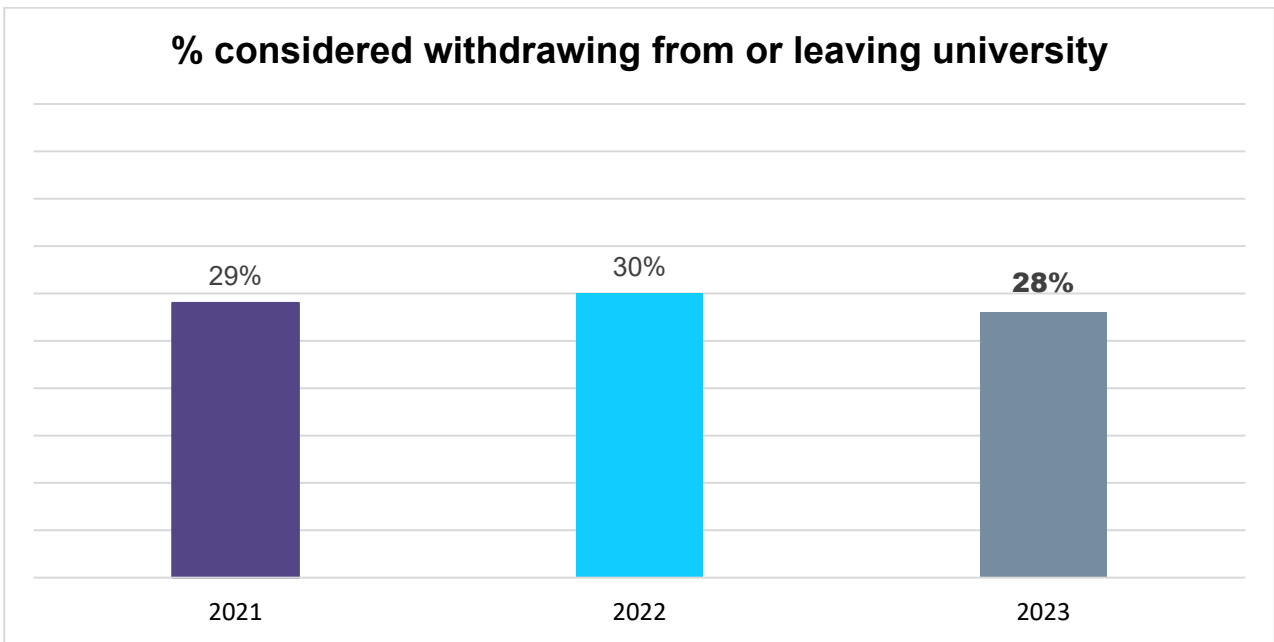
Significant differences compared to other sample groups highlighted in bold.

This hypothesis is backed up by the table above, which illustrates how students in paid employment are significantly less happy with their choice. There is no real difference by whether a student works a lot of hours or relatively few hours of paid employment, but those who do no paid employment are much less likely to consider other choices. Among the other choices available, students in paid employment are a lot more likely to consider choosing an apprenticeship, which makes sense if we assume cost-of-living concerns are a driver of their (hypothetical) choice.

5.2 Whether considered leaving

To complement the above question assessing the decision to choose university, we added a question in 2021 asking students whether they had considered leaving their course, with a further question enquiring as to the reasons behind this.

¹⁵ Apprenticeships can be at a range of levels including degree level. We aim to clarify this in future iterations of this question, as to the level of apprenticeship being considered.



In the main pandemic years of 2021 and 2022, the proportion who considered leaving was perhaps not as high as may have been expected. This year, there has been a 2 percentage points decline – which is a positive, and represents a significant difference – but overall there appears to be little fundamental change in the proportion considering leaving, which remains around or just under three out of 10.

Of potentially greater significance here is the supplementary question around the reasons for considering leaving the course.

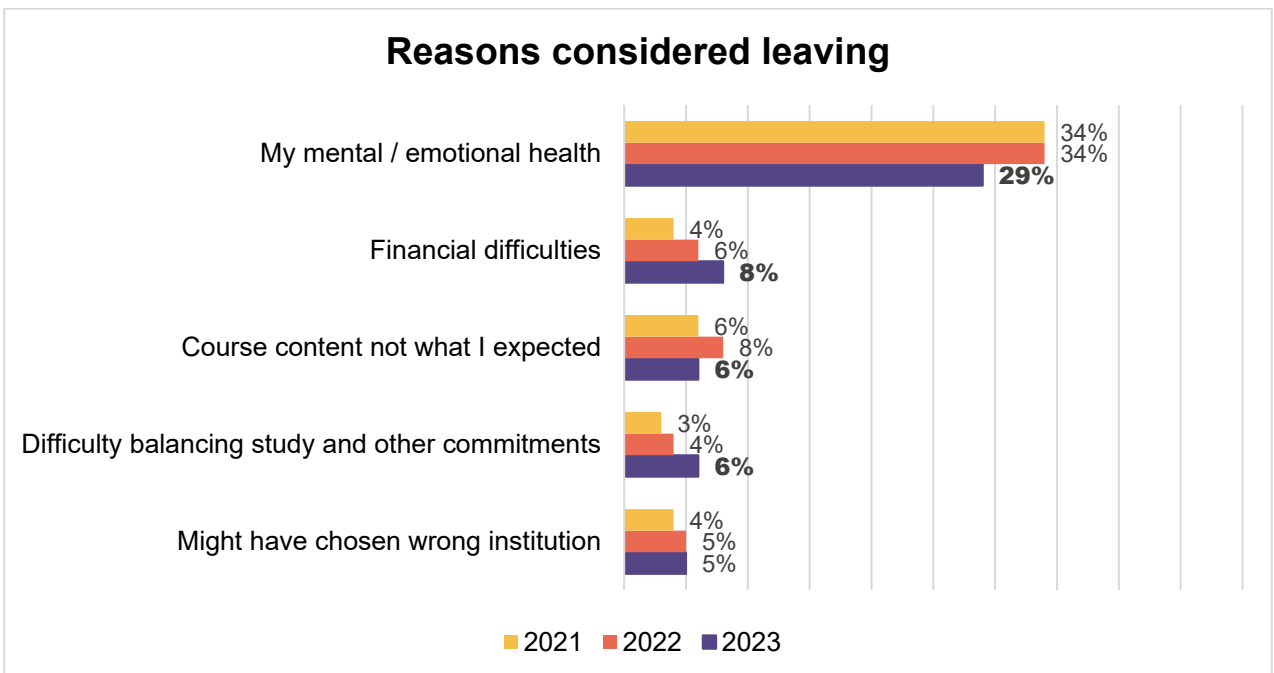


Chart displays top 5 mentions. Ranked in order of 2023 results.

The relative influence of mental health concerns is still dominant but has declined in significance. This does not necessarily mean that there are fewer mental health concerns among the student population, but in this case, there are other factors that are growing in influence.

In particular, the concerns around cost of living are rising significantly. Proportionally, there are twice as many students who have considered leaving due to cost concerns than was the case in 2021. On a similar theme, the proportion citing difficulty balancing study and other commitments has also doubled since 2021, and we may reasonably infer here that the commitments in question are related to paid employment in many cases.¹⁶

We have seen earlier in this report how the cost-of-living crisis is impacting on perceptions of value-for-money and other overall views of the experience, and there is further evidence here of its growing influence.

¹⁶ Serena White, 'Cost of living. I worry about money more than my uni assignments'. BBC News website, 23 April 2023. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-nottinghamshire-65301400>

6. Improvements to the student 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 Anne Rowan, Researcher at Advance HE, with the aim of identifying the topics raised most frequently by those students who responded. Popular themes were identified and recorded using Atlas.ti thematic codes.¹⁷ 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, in rank order according to responses, were: examination and assessment support; quality of teaching and learning; mental health support; the impact of University and College Union (UCU) strike action; communication concerns; career development; and cost-of-living challenges.

6.1 Examination and assessment support

It is evident from the qualitative survey findings that students are eager to receive greater support from the institution in preparation for assessment practices. This is particularly important in the context of increasing volumes of assessments being set – as we will see later in this report. A key aspect of this was the importance of individualised, quality and timely feedback from academic staff, as illustrated in the quotations below – that support students not only in making improvements, but also allows them to assess their own strengths and weaknesses.

“Give more detailed individual feedback”
“Some lecturers give great feedback and really useful, but others give very minimal or generalised feedback and whilst I can appreciate there’s a lot of students and a lot of essays to mark, it doesn’t help me to receive a general feedback answer”
“More detailed feedback that tells you exactly how to improve to get to the next grade boundary, rather than just putting ‘good’ in a few places”

Michael Eraut reports that, “When students enter higher education the type of feedback they then receive, intentionally or unintentionally, will play an important part in shaping their learning futures”.¹⁸ As reflected in the findings, it is imperative that academic staff ensure

¹⁷ <https://atlasti.com>

¹⁸ Michael Eraut (2006) ‘Feedback’. *Learning in Health and Social Care* 5:111–118.

student feedback on both formative and summative assessment supports clear development pathways and areas for improvement, while meeting individual student needs. While in some cases feedback was deemed useful, this was not always the case.¹⁹

Pre-exam support was also reported as a concern by survey participants, with an amplified need for exam preparation classes, access to exemplar exam materials, and enhanced support for academic skills.

“Providing course material and assessment help earlier on so the students that want to can get ahead”

“Offer more support to mature students as to what a good essay looks like. I have been out of education a long time, and I find myself obsessively going over assignments again and again trying to find any little thing I can improve”

“Provide more workshops and practice questions”

“Provide assignment workshops where teachers are on hand to help with assignments”

6.2 Quality teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning was a key theme raised by participants, with multiple students reporting that increased “creativity”, “innovation” and “engagement” was needed by lecturers within their lectures and seminars. Students noted the need for a shift from being passive observers of knowledge to being actively engaged in the learning process. Furthermore, participants reported that smaller classes would increase engagement and allow for increased rapport with lecturing staff and engagement with the programme content.

“Teach with passion and be realistic with how useful dense anachronistic readings actually are in engaging students”

“The worst thing you can do for a student is make them sit passively and quietly, looking at a presentation It’s barely educational, and doesn’t develop the student’s own ability to think about what they’re learning”

“Better teaching”

“Give more in person contact hours to build rapport with staff”

There was also a strong preference for more in-person teaching to enable greater contact with peers, academic staff and a more enjoyable on campus experience. This mirrors findings from the recent Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey 2022, in which the

¹⁹ Summative assignments contribute to an overall grade or mark. Formative assignments are to help a student improve but do not count towards an overall mark.

proportion of teaching delivered online contributed to concerns around the enabling of discussions with peers and staff, and contact with peers.²⁰

“Provide more in-person lectures. Whilst I enjoy the freedom and flexibility of online lectures, having most of my lectures this way means less in person interaction with both peers and lecturers.”

“Most students do not want online teaching and would rather be in person, but they acknowledge that it suits a minority of students to have teaching online, so a compromise must be reached..”

“Provide more in person contact hours.”

6.3 Mental health support

Mental health concerns and support continue to be a key challenge for students. As noted by Felicity Mitchell, Independent Adjudicator at the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA), 2022 was “another difficult year for students and providers and we are seeing increasing levels of distress among students who are struggling to cope”.²¹ This resonates with comments in the Survey in which students stress the need for enhanced mental health support provisions within institutions, as well as increased understanding from academic staff.

“Ensure appropriate mental health support is available for students”

“Make adjustments for those struggling with mental health and accept their situations as being different and support them accordingly.”

“They could definitely offer more support in regard to mental health as these last two years have been immensely challenging for everyone”

²⁰ J. Leman (2022) *Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey 2022: Findings for the sector*, London: Advance HE.

²¹ Hazel Shearing, ‘University student complaints hit record high in England and Wales for fourth successive year’. BBC News website, 20 April 2023. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-65324664> [Accessed 26 April 2023]

The Office for Students (OfS) reports that students with mental health conditions tend to have lower rates of continuation, attainment and progression into skilled work or further study.²² The findings suggest that higher education institutions must consider and exert readiness in supporting the needs of students with mental health conditions and make certain that appropriate support provisions can be accessed with regularity and ease.

6.4 Impact of University and College Union (UCU) strikes

While participants were supportive of the strike action and the need to review pay structures, they were frustrated by the impact it had on their studies, and this came out in a number of comments. Within the comments, students noted that universities should have mitigating measures in place or refund tuition fees, in the event classes were cancelled.

“Improve resources available when the staff are on strike because at the moment we have ended up just skipping a week of content”
“Meet UCU demands and reduce strikes as well as refund students on days that staff went on strike.”
“If lecturers decide to strike for a large proportion of time where our learning is affected that amount of money should be paid back to us.”

6.5 Communication concerns

Survey participants voiced concerns over a lack of timely and appropriate communication between students, academic staff and administrative staff within departments. This lack of communication often means students do not receive information or information is delayed. Participants note communication could be enhanced in areas such as timetabling, pastoral guidance and academic support.

“There were multiple issues with timetabling and administration staff which slowed down projects, classes, and made classes inaccessible in one way or another.”
“Improve communication within departments, between departments and with university administration.”
“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.”
“Communicate with students better, for example giving information on all timetable changes in advance.”
“Listen to student academic concerns in a timely matter as opposed to taking months to resolve issues.”

²² ‘Student mental health’. Office for Students website, 13 October 2022.

<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-wellbeing-and-protection/student-mental-health/what-we-re-doing/> [Accessed 26 April 2023]

It is clear from the findings that students value the support of academic staff, not only in communicating guidance regarding their academic progress, but also in offering pastoral care and guidance.

“Have 1-to-1 meetings with students to check on their wellbeing, rather than just having tutorial groups.”

“Have lecturers available for you to talk about anything you want from mental health to study life balance.”

6.6 Support for career development

A key finding emerging from the survey is student desires to be able to understand and apply the knowledge they acquire on their university course to future career development. Participants report that they wished to acquire skills that would help them in the ‘real world’,

“Focus more on career prospects rather than finishing with a degree and have nothing to do with it”

“Teach and provide skills that will be used in practical work, not only on theory, which will help in future job roles”

“Lecturers (not specifically career consultants) should give more career directions to students.”

“Help organise more on job placements to get 'real world' experience”

Charles Hardy (in July 2022) notes a clear interest in the extension of practical work, enterprise and volunteering experiences within the higher education curriculum, echoing the themes emerging in these comments.²³

6.7 Cost-of-living support

As we shall also see later in this report via some dedicated questions, Survey participants raised concerns regarding the cost-of-living increases and pressures on financial stability, urging universities to react and provide monetary support.

²³ Charles Hardy, 'What is the future for student careers services?' Wonkhe website, 18 July 2022. <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/what-is-the-future-of-student-careers-services/> [Accessed 25 April 2023]

Student Academic Experience Survey 2023

Jonathan Neves and Rose Stephenson

“Help with day-to-day life. Its hard work doing a university course then having to worry about surviving. Rents are terrible and the grants are not enough to keep up with it all anymore.”

“The cost of living is crippling and having to work to pay bills while studying is a nightmare.”

“Provide more subsidies for rising living costs.”

Participants also noted the requirements for increased flexibility around course delivery, to allow students to take up employment or to reduce costs associated with attending university.

“More understanding of needing employment to supplement living costs”

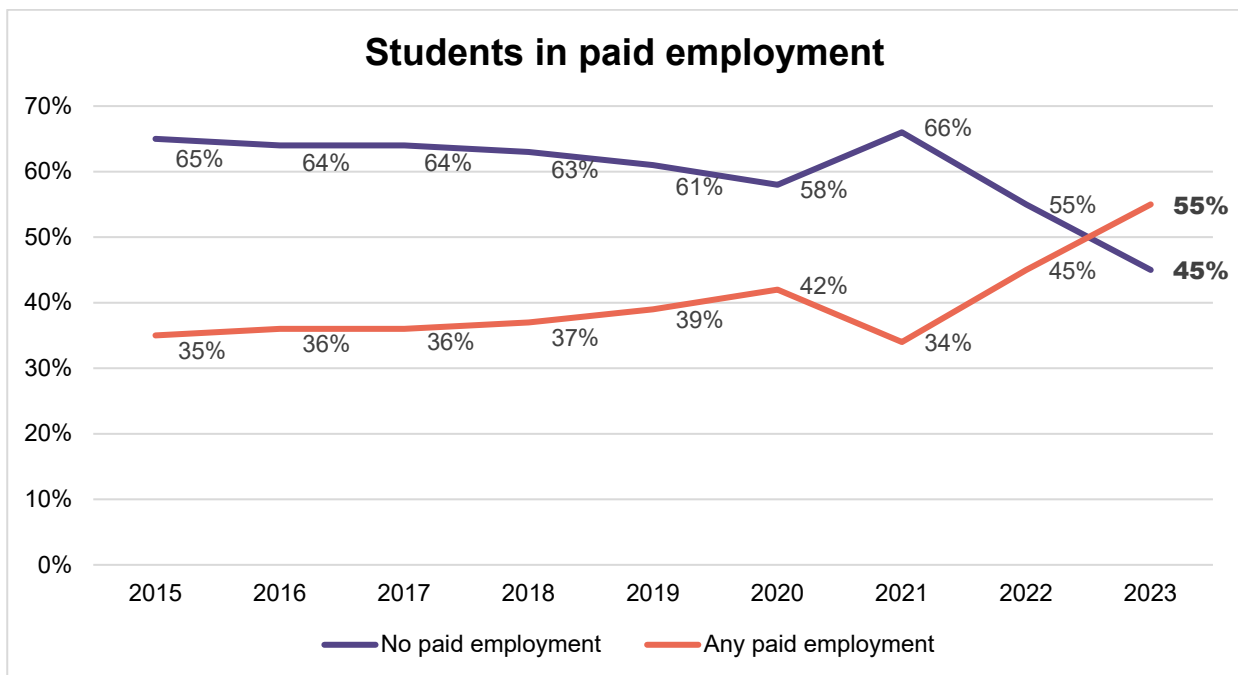
“Include more online material to reduce parking / fuel costs.”

7. Student priorities

7.1 Paid employment

The range of demands on a student's time can have a major impact on the quality of their experience. In some cases this can be positive and developmental, particularly in the case of sports and societies or volunteering, but it can also create stress and challenges in balancing the requirements of the course timetable and independent study.²⁴

Paid employment has always been a necessity for large numbers of students. However, we see from the data below that taking part in paid employment has increased significantly over the past year, to a level that is a lot higher than before the pandemic, and indeed is comfortably at the highest level since the survey began.



Significant differences between 2022 and 2023 are in bold.

Strikingly, there are now more students in our Survey in paid employment (55%) than those who are not (45%). This appears to be a key reflection of pressure on the affordability of

²⁴ Jonathan Neves, *UK Engagement Survey 2019*. Available at https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/assets.creode.advancehe-document-manager/documents/advance-he/Advance%20HE%20UKES%202019_1572367661.pdf. See Section 6.3.

being an undergraduate student and an escalation of this in the past couple of years, as highlighted in recent polling from the Sutton Trust.²⁵

Paid employment	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Mean ²⁶ hours per week	4.8	5.0	4.6	5.5	7.5

Linked to the above increase in participation, there has also been an increase in the mean number of hours per week in paid employment. Across all students in the Survey, there is now an average of 7.5 hours spent in employment. These volumes are potentially concerning in terms of how much they might impact a student's attendance in class and time available to dedicate to study, but this does appear to be a reflection of the financial pressures that many students are under.

7.2 Caring responsibilities

In 2023 we included a new question on whether students had caring responsibilities, in order to collect data and represent the experience of a key group of students on whom there has been relatively little focus in wider sector-level data.²⁷ This included caring for children (so could include students who are parents) and / or other adults.

Overall, just over one in 10 defined themselves as having caring responsibilities. Logically, this appeared to be principally related to age / life stage, with carers comprising 40% of mature students (aged over 25) and just 4% of those aged under 22.

If we analyse some of the other demographic groups where rates of caring were particularly high, we can see that in some cases, caring responsibilities are potentially compounding the challenges already faced.

²⁵ 'New polling on the impact of the cost of living crisis on students'. The Sutton Trust website, 6 March 2023. <http://www.suttontrust.com/news-opinion/all-news-opinion/new-polling-on-the-impact-of-the-cost-of-living-crisis-on-students/>

²⁶ Mean calculated based on all answers, including zero. When calculated excluding those not in paid employment, the mean average in 2023 is 13.5 hours.

²⁷ Jessica Iyamu and Ellie Brown, 'The invisible minority: what is needed to support students with caring responsibilities'. *Times Higher Education* website, 11 July 2022. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/invisible-minority-what-needed-support-students-caring-responsibilities>

	All students	Aged 26 and over	Paid employment 10 hours+	Disability	Commute 10 miles or more in term time	Care-experienced
Caring for others	11%	40%	16%	15%	19%	55%

Significant differences compared to the total sample in bold.

For example, students who work long hours in paid employment are more likely to be carers, as are students who commute long distances. It is possible that caring responsibilities have influenced the decision (or need) to work for pay, or travel a long way each day, but this is likely to put further pressure on what for many is a delicate balance between academic studies and wider responsibilities.

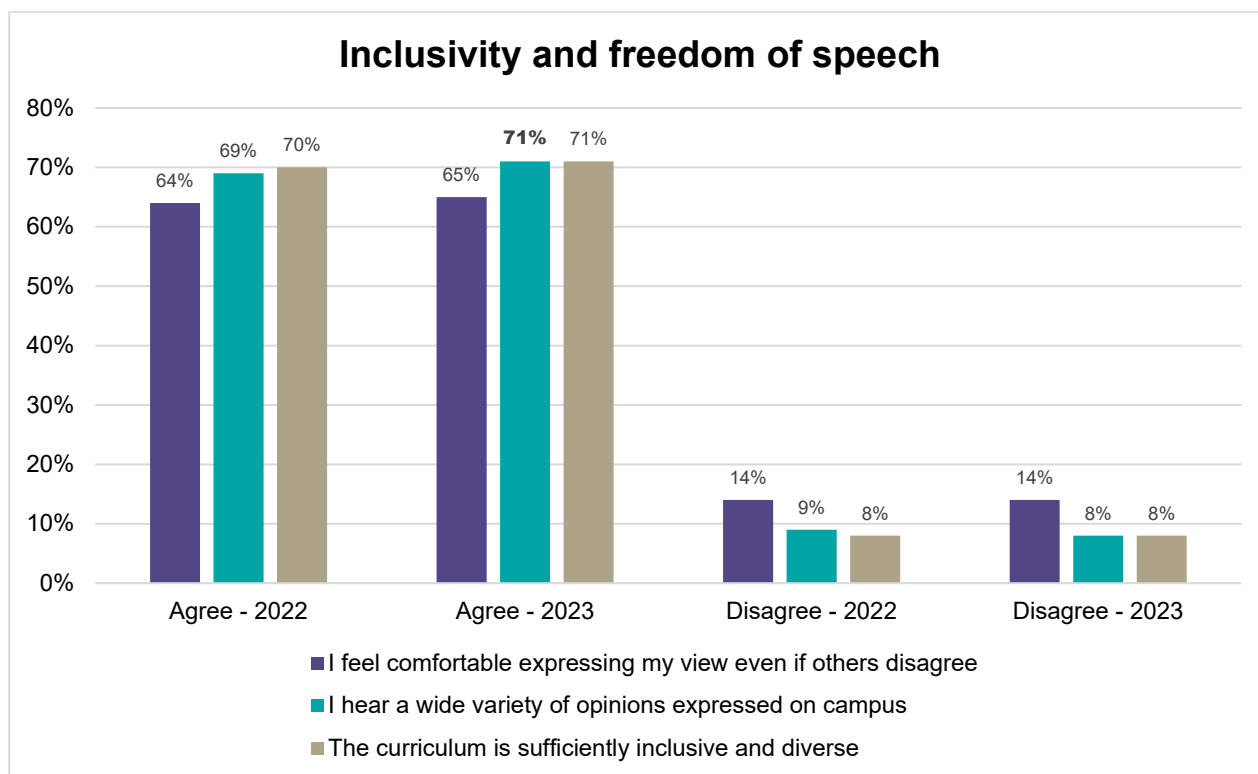
The data also tell us that students with disabilities are much more likely to be carers (15%) than those with no disability (9%). Additionally, students who have spent time in care (see later in the report for further discussion) are also very likely to be caring for others. Again, this implies a further set of challenges faced by cohorts for whom higher education may already represent a number of obstacles.

This data highlights the need for institutions to take into account a range of often-related factors when considering the level of support and adjustment that a student may require in order to take advantage of the opportunities provided while at university.

7.3 Freedom of speech on campus

In the wake of coverage in the sector around the freedom-of-speech agenda, we first introduced a series of questions in 2022, which we have revisited this year, asking students whether they feel they can express their opinions and whether they feel their campuses and curricula are sufficiently diverse.²⁸

²⁸ 'What's really happening with free speech at UK universities?' Universities UK website, 17 March 2023. <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/latest/insights-and-analysis/whats-really-happening-free-speech>



Significant difference year on year for each statement in bold. The scale also contained a “neutral” option that is not charted here.

Across all three statements, there were relatively high levels of agreement, and very little disagreement. The majority (between 65% and 71%) of students across the total sample feel they are comfortable expressing their views, that they hear a wide variety of opinions, and that the curriculum is sufficiently diverse. Only around one in 10 disagrees with these statements. Comparing views year on year, there has been relatively little movement, except for the statement around the variety of opinions on campus, for which the level of agreement has increased significantly, from 69% to 71%.

Across two years of data, we have a clear view that concerns around free speech and inclusive curricula are not particularly widespread among full-time undergraduates as a whole, a conclusion which has broad similarities with a relatively recent poll conducted by King’s College London.²⁹

When considering issues around inclusion and diversity of views, it is important to consider the perspective of a range of minoritised groups as well as the overall student sample.

²⁹ Richard Adams, ‘Most students think UK universities protect free speech, survey finds’. *The Guardian* website, 29 September 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2022/sep/29/most-students-think-uk-universities-protect-free-speech-survey-finds>

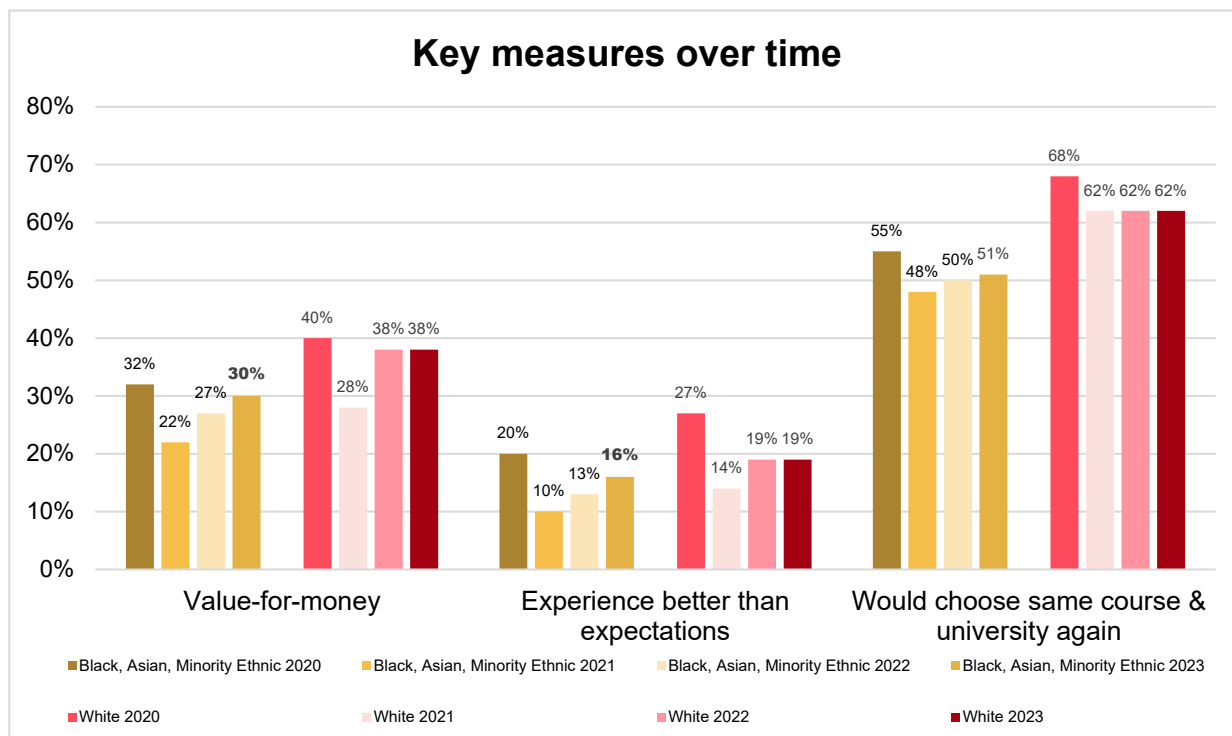
% Agreement with the following statements	Ethnicity		Sexual orientation		Disability	
	Black Asian & Minority Ethnic	White	LGB+	Heterosexual	Disabled	No disability
I feel comfortable expressing my viewpoint	60%	66%	66%	66%	61%	67%
I hear a wide variety of opinions expressed on campus	66%	73%	75%	71%	70%	72%
The curriculum I study is sufficiently inclusive and diverse	65%	72%	68%	72%	68%	72%

Significant differences between cohorts within each category marked in bold.

The table above illustrates that students from a range of minority groups are significantly less convinced about the inclusivity of their campus and their curricula. Students from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds are significantly less likely than White students to agree with all three statements, while disabled students are less likely than non-disabled students to agree with two out of three statements. It is important to point out that for all groups highlighted above, for all statements, agreement levels are between 60% and 71%, so it may be argued that these results still represent a relatively positive opinion of the levels of diversity and openness to different views, although there is still some way to go in order for all students to feel similar levels of confidence.

8. Spotlight on groups of students

8.1 Ethnicity (UK domicile)

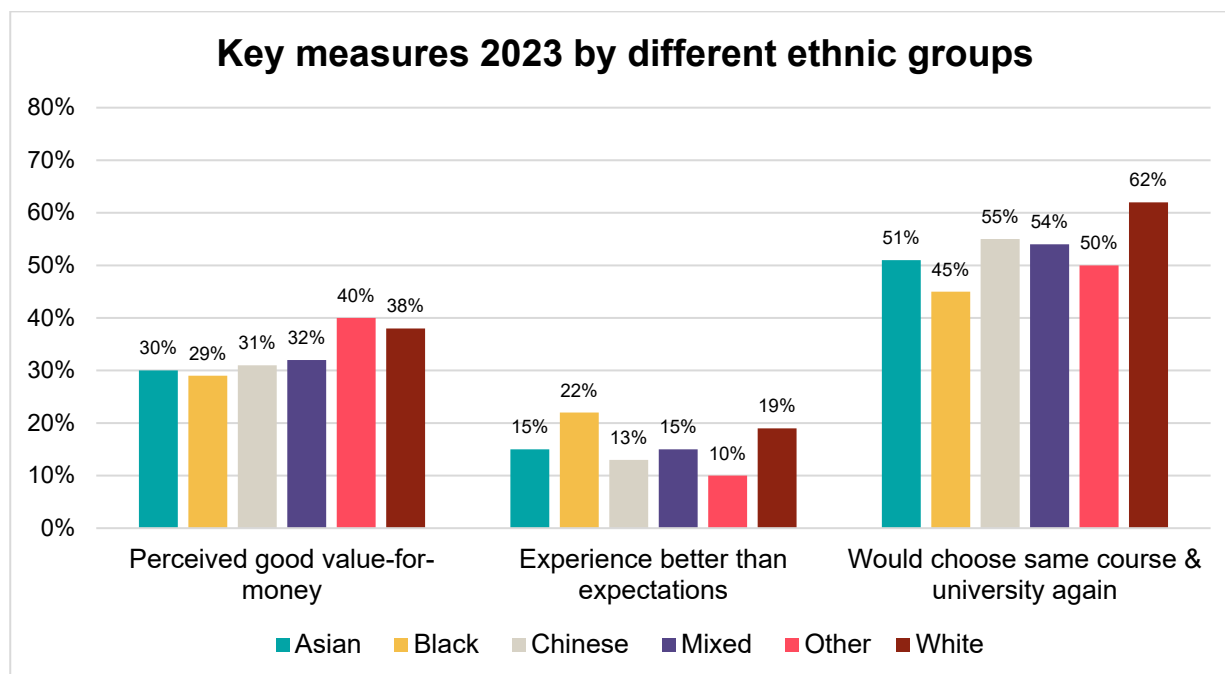


Data from previous years of our Survey, and indeed wider literature across the sector, has highlighted how students from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups do not always have the same quality of experience as White students. In our Survey there has been a consistent gap on some key measures, including those highlighted here around value-for-money, experience compared to expectations and whether they would make the same choice again.

Although gaps remain, a key finding this year is that the figures for White students have stayed exactly the same on all these measures – despite a modest increase across the total sample – but that there has been an improvement for minority ethnic students, which is statistically significant in two out of the three measures on this chart. Encouragingly, for the first time since we began comparing this data in detail, the gap between White and Minority Ethnic students has begun to close, and indeed it is the experience of the latter that is helping to drive the small positive change we have seen in these measures at an overall level.³⁰

³⁰ The data at total sample level also includes students domiciled outside the UK, who are not included in the ethnicity data.

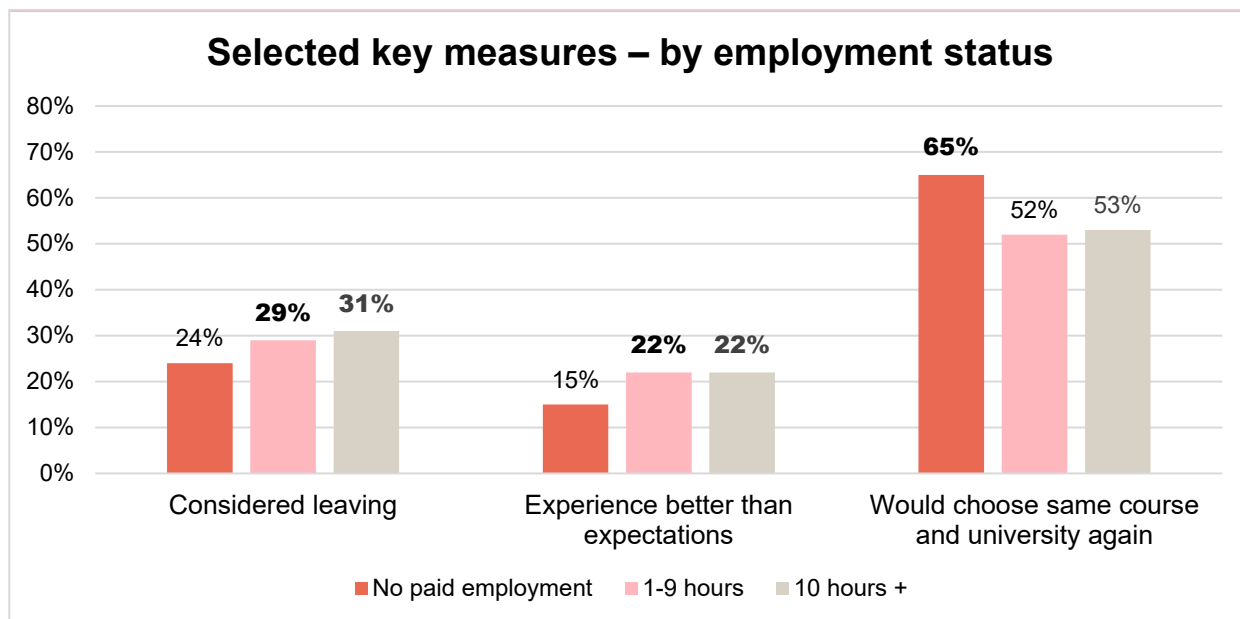
When we break down the experience by specific ethnic groups, we see some variations, but also some positive evidence. For example, Black students are the most likely to have had their expectations exceeded, while students from “Other” minority ethnic backgrounds are the most positive among all groups in terms of perceived value-for-money.



Conversely, still fewer than half of Black students would select the same course and institution again, which remains a concern, particularly given what remains a substantial gap compared to White students on this particular measure.

8.2 Students in paid employment

We saw earlier that there has been a major increase in the number of students who spend time working for pay while at university. Accordingly, we have focused here on the experiences of this group in order to highlight some of the challenges they may be facing.



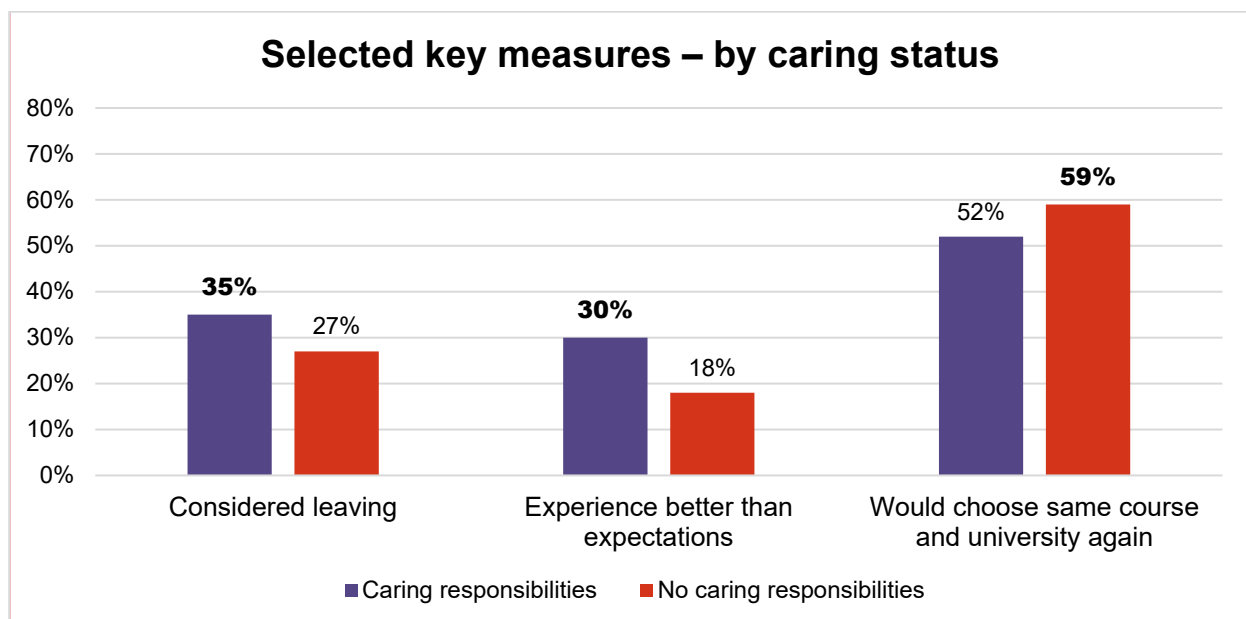
Significant differences between sample groups in bold.

The data show a mixed picture. Encouragingly and perhaps surprisingly, students who spend time working for pay are more likely to say their expectations were exceeded. This could of course be related to expectations being fairly low in the first place, but it does suggest that these students are managing to find the resources, resilience and support to balance their commitments.

Against this, however, there is also evidence that paid employment does cause challenges. These students are significantly more likely to have considered leaving their course, and in a potentially related finding, are less likely to say they would make the same choice of course and university again. A reasonable assumption here is that the demands of balancing work and study are creating pressures that are leading to the prospect of non-continuation for some. In terms of the alternative choices that students would have considered, students in paid employment were significantly more likely to say they would have enrolled on an apprenticeship (10%, compared to 5% of those not in employment), which is a logical conclusion given the nature of an apprenticeship as a paid qualification across a range of levels. Greater consideration of alternative choices may also be influenced by participation in the labour market creating awareness of a different set of opportunities that are potentially available.

8.3 Students with caring responsibilities

As shown earlier in the report, around one-in-ten students have caring responsibilities, but this rises significantly for mature students in particular.



Significant differences between sample groups in bold.

Among these students, there is again evidence of some of the pressures being felt when juggling different responsibilities, with a relatively high propensity to consider leaving the course, as well as a clear shortfall in the proportion who would have chosen the same course and institution again.

However, it is particularly encouraging to see that 30% of students with caring responsibilities feel their experience is better than expected – which is much higher than the Survey average for this question (19%). Analysis of the reasons behind this (not charted here) tells us that students with caring responsibilities were particularly likely to cite higher than expected levels of interaction with staff and students, especially via online methods. This points towards students being able to access staff and work with their peers in way that best suits them and implies that there are positive levels of support being provided for those students who are balancing a range of external responsibilities. This is also potential evidence of the importance of peer support networks at university.

8.4 Care-experienced students

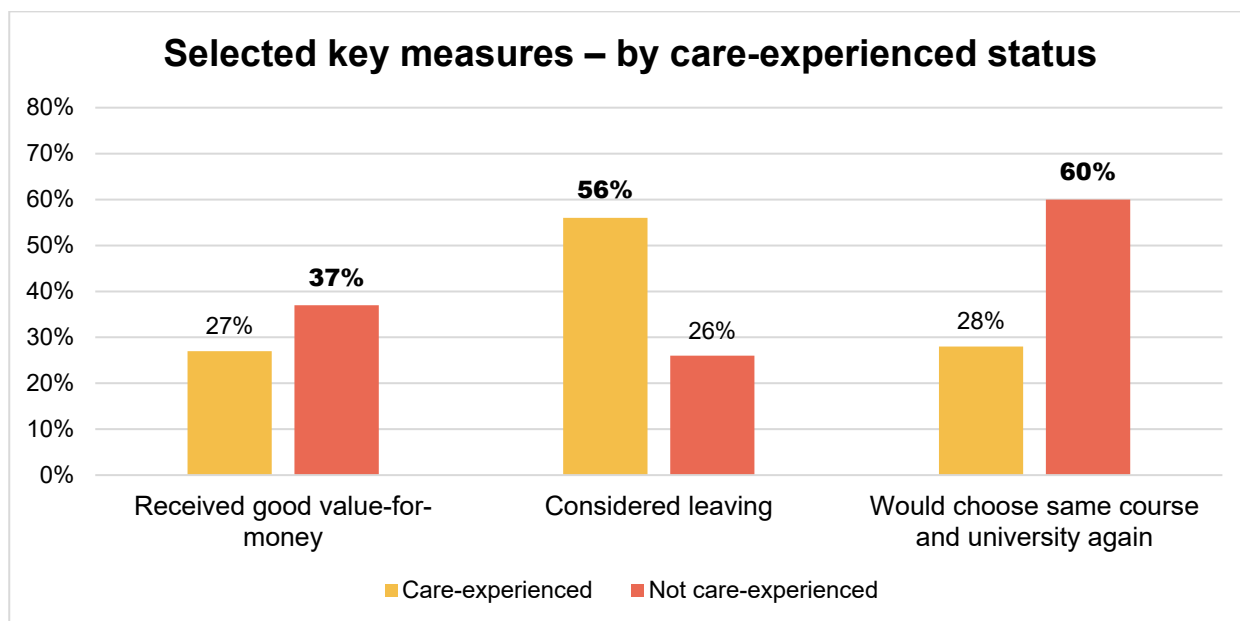
We included a new question this year, on whether a student is, or has ever been, in local authority care.³¹ At sector level, there has been a call for more extensive data collection on this group of students, the definition of which is continually evolving.³² By including a

³¹ We worked with the Unite Foundation (www.unitegroup.com) to include the question “Are you currently in local authority care, or have you ever been in care?”

³² ‘Care experienced students and looked after children’. Office for Students website, 31 January 2022. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/effective-practice/care-experienced/advice/> [Accessed 11 May 2023]

question this year, we have been able to begin to assess at an overall level how the academic experience may differ for these students, although we would encourage wider use of this and other complementary data across the sector to build a greater shared understanding.

Overall, 4% of our sample stated that they are or have been in care, but as the chart below illustrates, the experience among those particular students is often less positive.



Significant differences between sample groups in bold.

Perceptions of value-for-money are significantly lower among care-experienced students, while the proportion who have considered leaving is more than double the level among those who have not been in care. Similarly, the percentage who would choose the same course and institution again is less than half of the level found among students who are not care-experienced.

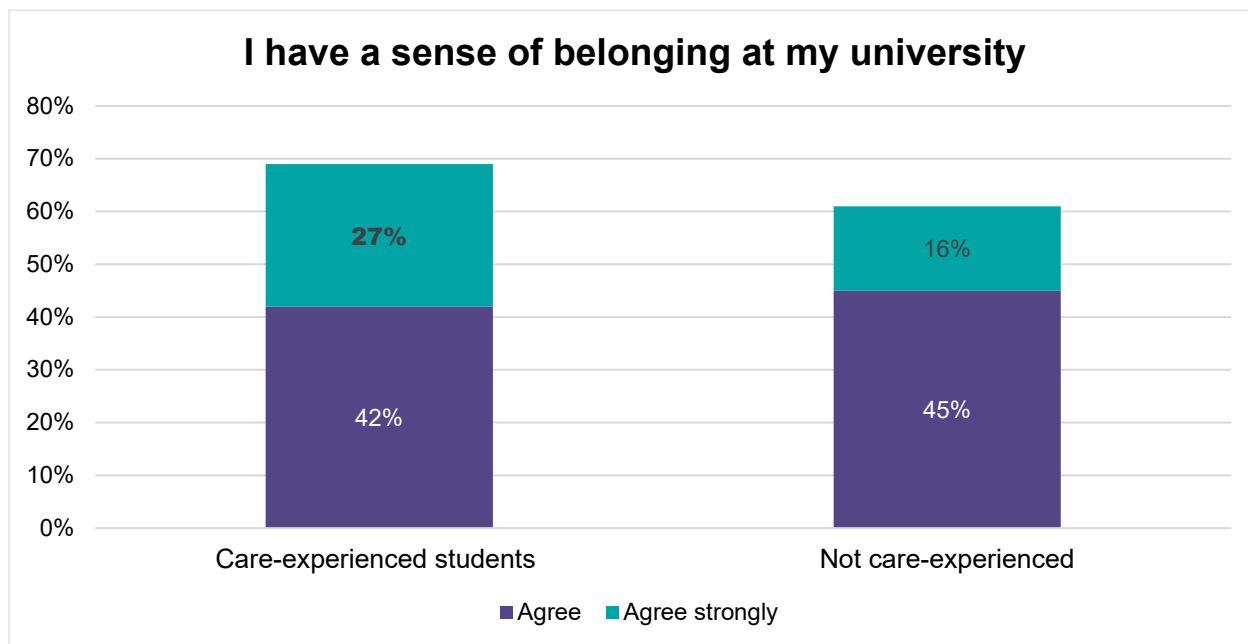
Assessing the reasons for considering leaving, it is striking that while students across the total sample are predominantly worried about mental health and the cost of living, students from care backgrounds cite a wider range of issues at play, including lack of interaction with staff, physical health issues and general issues about the experience not being what they expected.

Reasons for considering leaving (selected answers)	Care-experienced	Not care-experienced
Might have chosen the wrong institution	12%	5%
Difficulty balancing study and other commitments	9%	5%
There is too much work	7%	4%
There is not enough interaction with teaching staff	7%	2%
The wider student experience is not what I was hoping for	6%	3%

Assessing the alternative choices that care-experienced students would have made, given the chance, there is evidence of a feeling among some care-experienced students that higher education may not have been the best choice.

If you had a second chance to start again, would you do any of the following? (selected answers)	Care-experienced	Not care-experienced
Defer study to a later year	10%	6%
Not enter higher education and get a job	5%	3%
Not enter higher education and do something other than getting a job	13%	2%

In the interests of balance, it is important to stress that not every metric in the Survey was a relatively negative one when considering care-experienced students.

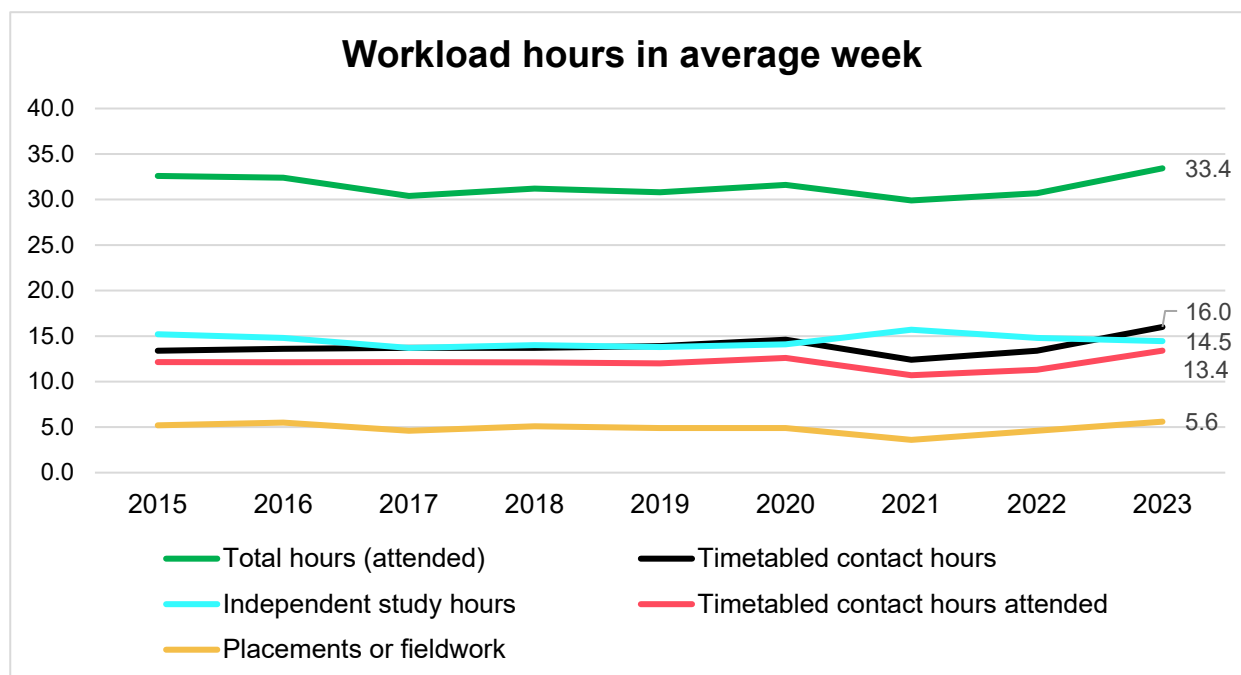


The concept of student belonging has received a lot of coverage in recent times, with its links to student success being widely documented.³³ In this context it is encouraging to observe that care-experienced students are significantly more likely to agree strongly that they have a sense of belonging at their institutions. This implies that higher education institutions have a key role to play for care-experienced students in particular through helping to provide a sense of inclusion and community.

³³ Anna Jackson, 'What have we learnt about student belonging and inclusion?' HEPI website, 23 May 2022. <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2022/05/23/student-belonging-and-inclusion/> [Accessed 11 May 2023]

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*
2019	30.8	13.9	13.8	12.0	4.9
2020	31.6	14.6	14.1	12.6	4.9
2021	29.9	12.4	15.7	10.7	3.6
2022	30.7	13.4	14.8	11.3	4.6
2023	33.4	16.0	14.5	13.4	5.6

* These measures contribute to the total figures

Over the past few years and earlier, the total number of working hours completed had remained fairly consistent, at around 30 to 31 hours per week, with only a relatively small decline during the pandemic. In those pandemic years of 2020 and particularly 2021 there was a decline in placements and contact hours attended, against an increase in independent study, while in 2022 there was a reversal of this trend with placements increasing and independent study declining.

2023 represents one of the most significant developments we have seen in this data series. There has been a clear increase across the board, in particular in contact hours timetabled and attended, while placements are also at very high levels, against a slight decrease in independent study. The net result of this is the highest number of workload hours

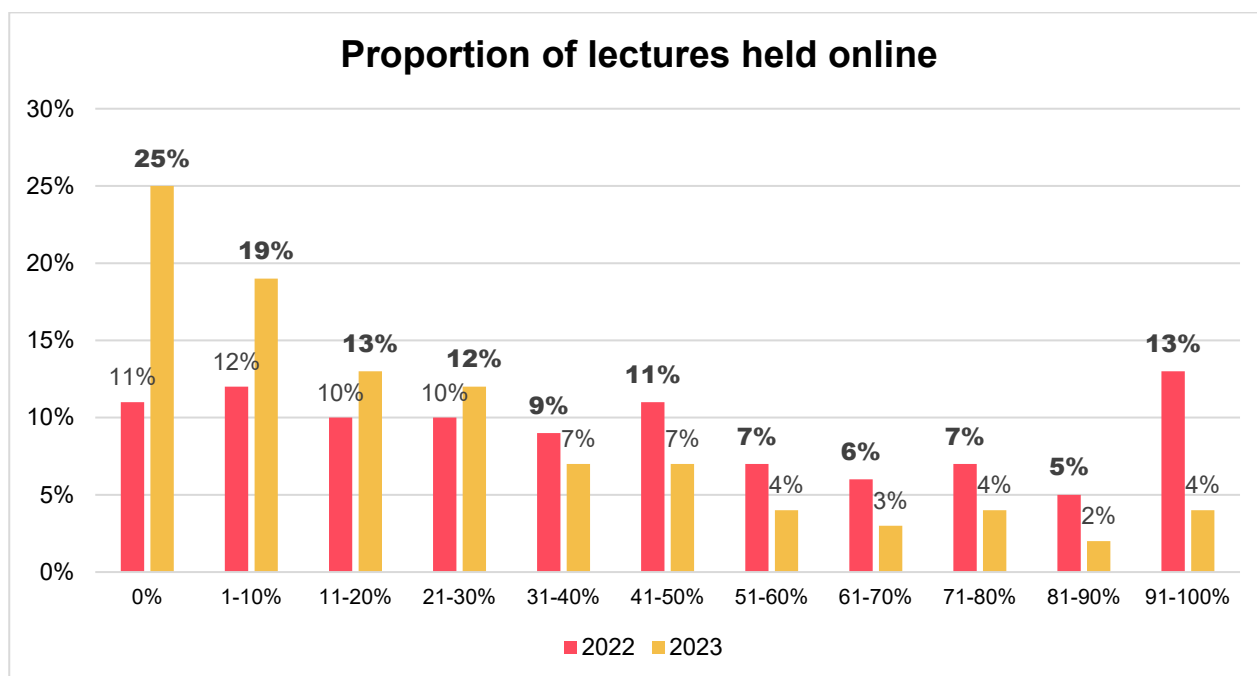
(scheduled or attended) in any recent year, with the exception of 2013 when there was an unusually high average of 40 hours. In 2023, these volumes of workload hours are dominated by contact hours, with independent study representing one of its lowest proportions in recent times.

As we have seen in previous years, students like to be challenged, and to feel they have development opportunities. Timetabled contact hours, as well as placements, can be seen as indicators of good value-for-money, but it is important that workload volumes are realistic in the face of increasing time in paid employment.

9.2 Online learning

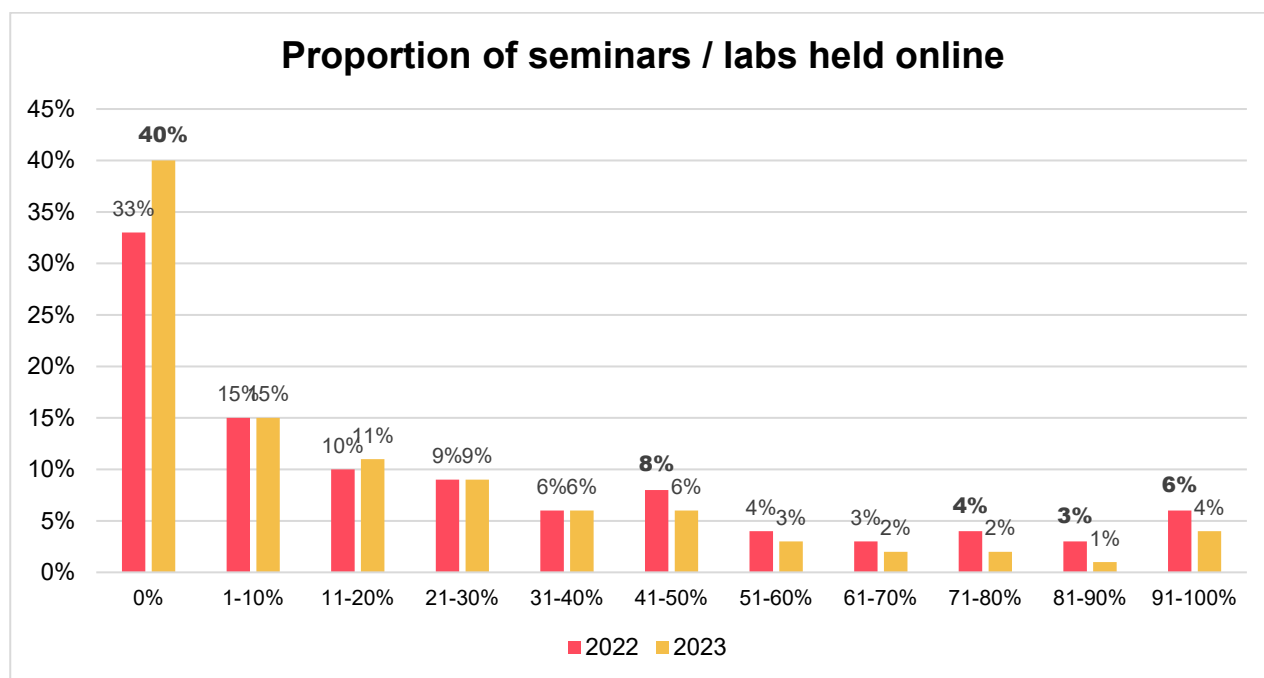
While online learning was a necessity across much of 2020 and 2021 due to pandemic restrictions, since then institutions have had a choice of a mix of delivery methods that make sense for student requirements.

In 2022, we introduced a new question to assess how much course teaching was conducted online, and by comparing the same question in 2023 we can see some major changes. In terms of lectures, there is evidence that 2022 represented an interim situation where institutions were gradually reintroducing in-person teaching, while making significant use of online facilities alongside this. In 2023, as the chart below shows there appears to be little doubt that there has been a gradual (but not complete) return to the physical classroom in many cases, with 1 in 4 students reporting that they had no online lectures at all, compared to 11% in 2022.



Seminars and labs, however, are significantly less likely to be taught virtually, potentially due to their more interactive nature. Accordingly, the move away from the smaller level of virtual delivery has been more nuanced, but the data tell us that there has still been some level of movement, even further towards face-to-face delivery, with 4 out of 10 students responding

that they did not have any seminars or labs held online this year – an increase of 7 percentage points from 2022.



In terms of the mean average proportion of lectures and seminars / labs held online, this was higher among students who work for pay, and also students with caring responsibilities. It is logical that students with these additional demands on their time would perhaps seek out, or take advantage of, an opportunity to learn online for a greater part of the time, as this could save valuable travel time (and money) and have logistical advantages. However, it is also significant that these students appear to be provided with these opportunities to learn this way and is positive evidence of how particular needs are being met.

%	Employment			Caring	
	No paid employment	0-9 hours	10+ hours	Caring responsibilities	No caring responsibilities
Mean average proportion online					
Lectures	20.4	29.4	29.2	36.4	23.8
Seminars / labs	14.4	24.3	23.4	31.9	17.9

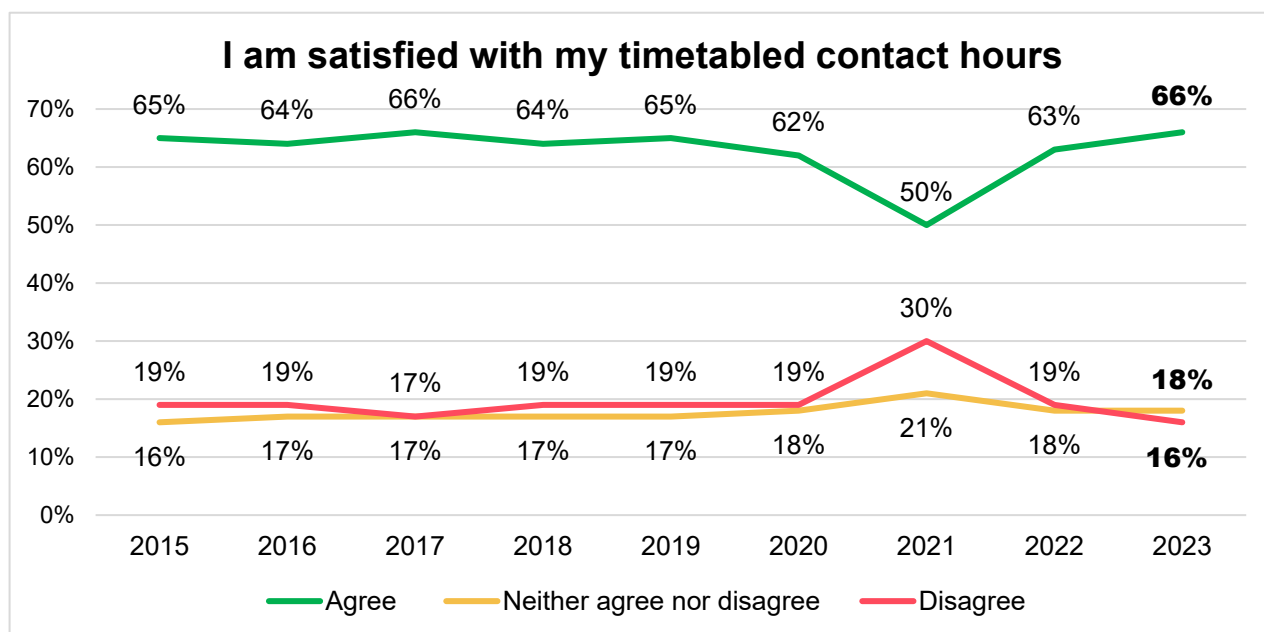
When we first asked this question in 2022, students studying in Scotland were still experiencing a level of pandemic restrictions that impacted directly on the capacity of institutions to deliver teaching face to face. This was reflected at the time, in Scotland being a major outlier in terms of the high proportion of seminars and particularly lectures being delivered online.

%	All students		Studying in Scotland	
	2022	2023	2022	2023
Mean average proportion online				
Lectures	44.1	25.3	71.3	27.9
Seminars / labs	26.6	19.6	38.6	17.4

As the above table shows, there has been a major change in the past year. The proportion of lectures and seminars delivered online at institutions in Scotland has fallen by more than half, bringing it broadly into line with the average across the UK – which has also fallen significantly.

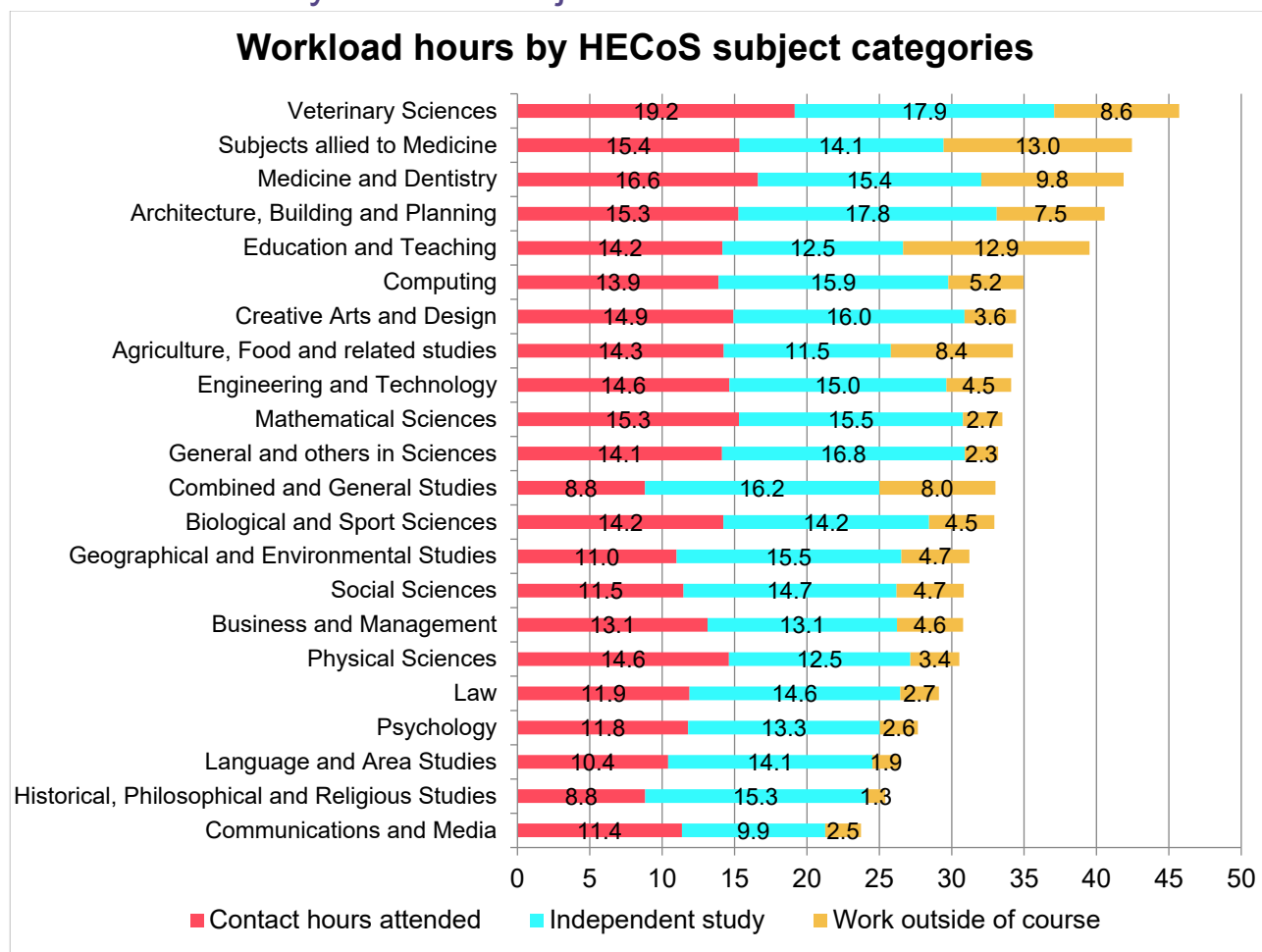
9.3 Satisfaction with scheduled contact hours

With the exception of a significant decline in 2021 which we may reasonably link to the impact of the pandemic, this is a measure which had remained remarkably consistent since it was first introduced, irrespective of any increase or decline in the actual number of contact hours offered.



Encouragingly, there has been a strong increase in satisfaction this year which has taken the level to one of the highest experienced so far. We saw earlier in this section that the volumes of timetabled classes are at their highest level for a number of years, which is likely to be a key contributing factor in the increase in satisfaction levels here. Broadly, students who are assigned higher numbers of timetabled classes tend to be more satisfied with this. However, it is important to point out that students who are assigned more than 30 hours per week are not quite as satisfied as those who are assigned 20–29 hours, and hence we need to be aware that the continued increases in the volumes of timetabled classes may eventually have a negative effect for some.

9.4 Workload by HECoS subject³⁴



Subjects ranked in order of overall workload.³⁵

In terms of overall workload, there are a number of consistencies with previous years, with Veterinary and Medical subjects again at the top and Communications and Historical Studies again reporting the lowest workload hours.

In terms of relative changes, Education and Teaching has fallen down the list after being the subject with the highest workload last year. This is principally due to a fall in the number of placement / fieldwork hours, which was very high in 2022 at 19.2 hours. By contrast, Computing has become one of the subjects with the highest workload this year, due to an increase in all types of workload (independent study, placements, timetabled hours).³⁶

³⁴ For information on the Higher Education Classification of Subjects (HECoS), see <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/support/documentation/hecos> [Accessed 25 April 2023]

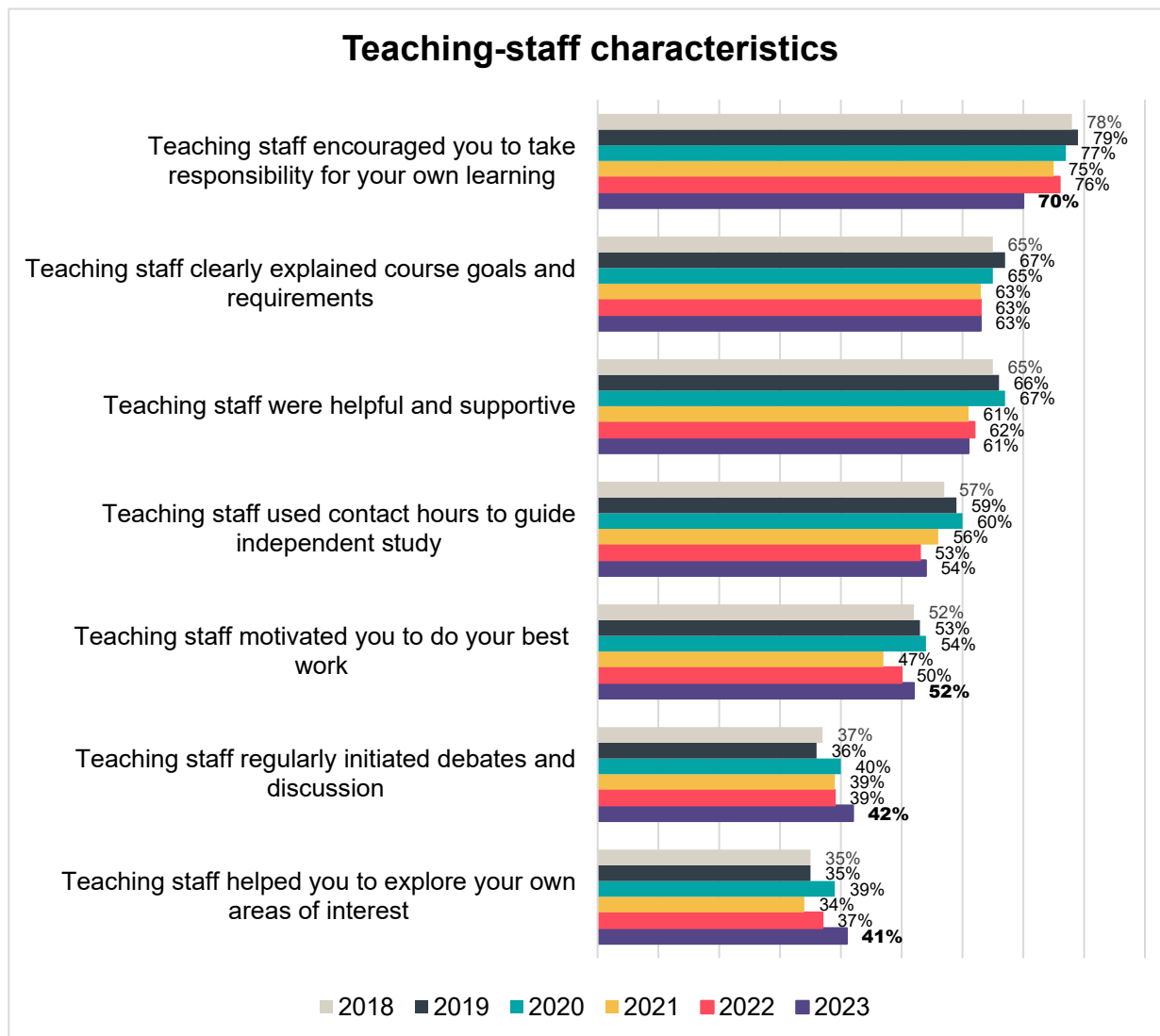
³⁵ Humanities and Liberal Arts was not included in the table this year due to a small base size.

³⁶ For comparative results, see Jonathan Neves and Alexis Brown, *Student Academic Experience Survey 2022* (Section 9.5). https://documents.advance-he.ac.uk/download/file/document/10419?_ga=2.45040993.49227459.1685893756-1845092659.1685893756

10. Quality of teaching and assessment

10.1 Perceptions of the quality of teaching staff

Some of these measures had declined in 2020 and 2021, reflecting a pressurised period of adjustment for both staff and students.



Encouragingly, in the past two years some of these ratings have recovered, particularly around motivating students to do their best work, regularly initiating debates and discussion and helping students explore their own areas of interest. These latter two measures have reached their highest levels in recent years, which is a strong endorsement of how high standards have continued to be delivered and even improved upon within an environment of increasing contact hours and greater expectations around the flexibility by which different types of students may wish to conduct their learning.

One key outlier within these data, however, is that there has been a significant reduction in the proportion of teachers who have encouraged students to take responsibility for their own learning, which has reached its lowest level so far across all the years of the Survey. In the light of a number of increases in the other measures, such a large decline here is potentially surprising, on such a key indicator of positive academic development.³⁷

We may speculate as to whether this is a reflection of, or contributor to, higher levels of taught classes and (proportionately) lower levels of independent study this year – as highlighted in the previous section. But it is fair to say that such a significant decline is potentially a cause for concern.

Looking deeper into the data for this particular aspect of teaching quality, there are some marked variations by geography of institution.

	University region				University region (England)	
	England	NI	Scotland	Wales	London	NE
Staff encouraged you to take responsibility for learning	69%	77%	76%	68%	59%	75%

Significant differences within sample categories in bold.

Students at institutions in England and Wales were a lot less likely to feel they were encouraged to take responsibility for their learning. Within England, this appears to be driven strongly by institutions in London, where there is a particularly low score on this issue.³⁸ The reasons behind any geographical trends in this aspect of teaching may require further investigation. In the case of London, it is worthy of note that in 2022 London was also behind several other English regions on this particular score (70%) but there has been a considerable fall in the past 12 months. On other measures, however, a recent HEPI / London Higher report based on earlier years' results suggests London students often compare well with those studying in other parts of the UK.³⁹

10.2 Rating of assessment

In the past couple of years, the quality of marking and assessments has emerged as a major theme in the free-text comments – identified as an area that is particularly important to students and where the experience could be improved. This was potentially compounded by

³⁷ <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1224347.pdf>

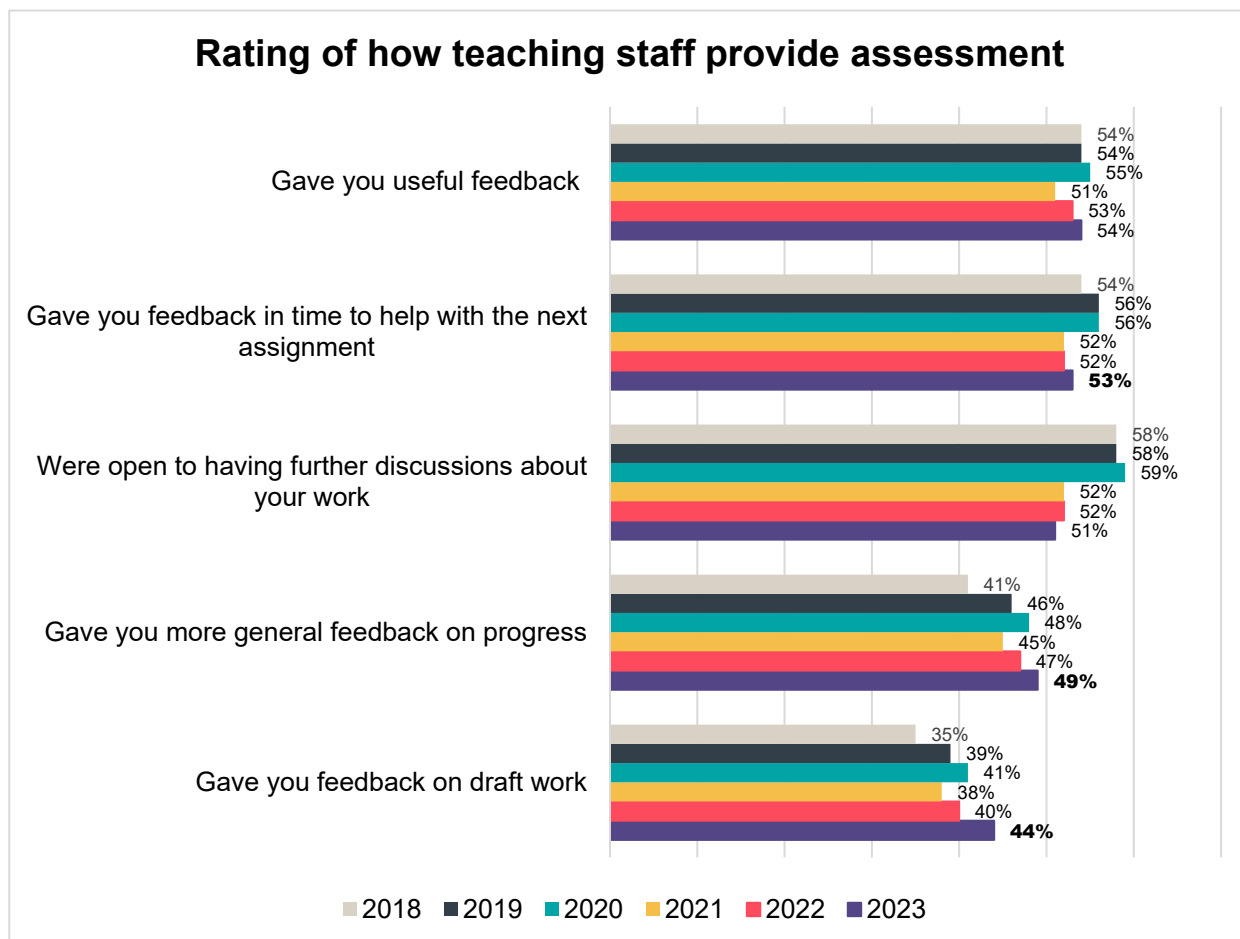
³⁸ For a more in-depth analysis of results from students based in London across previous years of the Survey, see <https://londonhigher.ac.uk/london-students-most-satisfied-with-student-experience-out-of-all-english-regions/>

³⁹ Emily Dixon, *Living and learning in London: What the HEPI / Advance HE Student Academic Experience Survey tells us about life in the capital*. HEPI and London Higher, HEPI Report 158, March 2023.

the fact that this was a section of the Survey where ratings declined significantly during the pandemic.

Of the five core measures across this theme, three have remained relatively consistent, but in some cases at levels below what they were pre-pandemic – for example, providing feedback in time to help with the next assignment and being open to having further discussions about the work. In terms of the measure around providing feedback in time for the next assignment, we will see later in the report how the volume of assignments is increasing and therefore this is a particularly critical measure.

More encouragingly, there have been clear improvements in providing more general feedback on progress, and in particular, providing feedback on draft work. Hence, there are encouraging signs of improvements in the quality and / or depth of feedback, but perhaps less so in terms of timeliness. As context to these results, the fieldwork for the Survey took place before the current marking and assessment boycott began, but this has the potential to impact future ratings in this area.⁴⁰



⁴⁰ 'Marking and assessment boycott to hit 145 UK universities from tomorrow'. University and College Union website, 19 April 2023. <https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/12879/Marking-and-assessment-boycott-to-hit-145-UK-universities-from-tomorrow-UCU-confirms>

The way feedback is delivered, and how students judge this, varies significantly by type of institution. Typically, ratings are a lot higher for Specialist and Alternative providers. By contrast, students at Russell Group institutions are often the least positive about the type of feedback received.

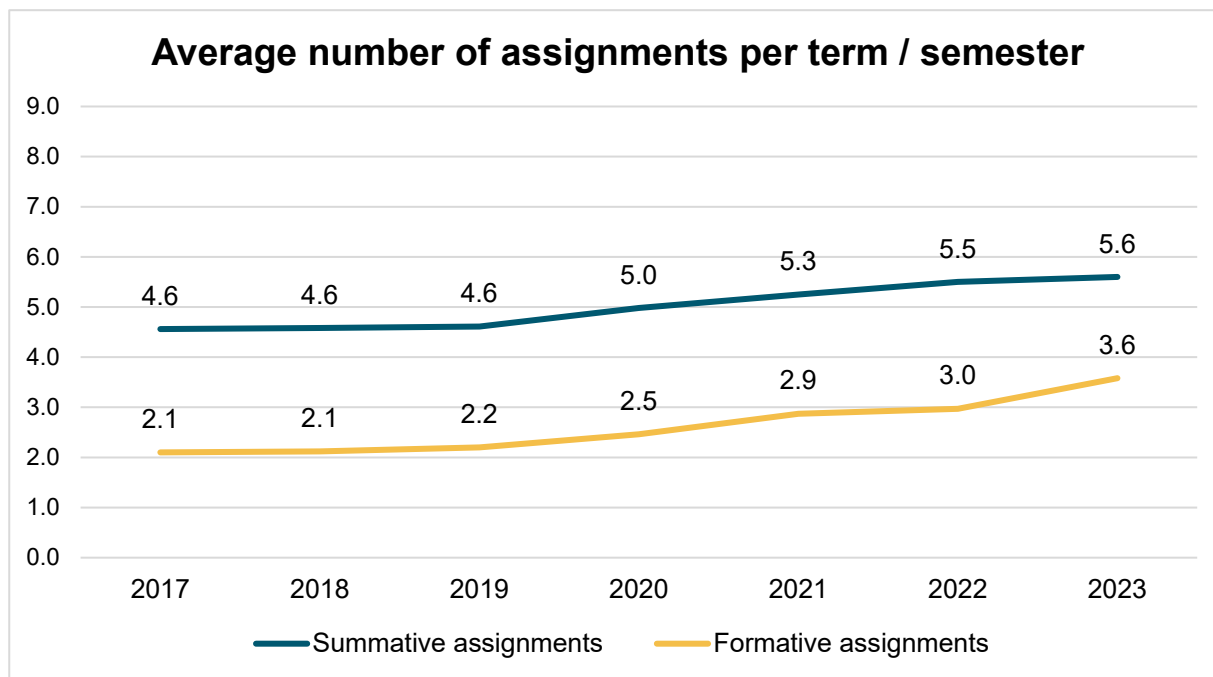
	Russell Group	Pre-92	Post-92	Specialist	Alternative
Gave you useful feedback	49%	55%	56%	62%	63%
Gave you feedback in time to help with the next assignment	49%	55%	54%	60%	62%
Were open to having further discussions about your work	48%	53%	52%	56%	57%
Gave you more general feedback on progress	46%	50%	51%	51%	50%
Gave you feedback on draft work	36%	42%	47%	57%	57%

Significant differences between cohorts in bold.

10.3 Volume of assignments

The volume of assignments – either summative or formative – is a measure within the Survey that has been increasing consistently over a number of years. This accelerated during the pandemic, potentially as a reaction to institutions not being able to deliver face-to-face teaching. However, despite face-to-face teaching returning, the number of assignments is continuing to increase.

In particular, there has been a marked increase in formative assignments, which are now at a much higher volume than in 2017.⁴¹ In the context of increasing hours of timetabled classes, such volumes are likely to be concerning for many students, which raises the question as to whether a further increase would be sustainable or even helpful for both students and staff.



Taking into account all aspects of feedback, including volume of assignments and quality of the feedback received, the free-text comments below build from the analysis in Section 6 to provide a flavour of where students feel improvement is needed in what is a key aspect of the academic experience and one where the increased volumes are focusing greater levels of attention.

⁴¹ The chart shows a consistent time-series of data using a mean average for the question with an upper limit of 30 and including zero. Mean averages are influenced by some students providing very high scores, hence our use of the upper limit of 30 in this year's report. The way the question has been asked has not changed.

Selected open comments

“More spacing between assignment / assessment dates would also decrease the workload on students, spreading it out more over the year and allow students more time to focus on individual assessments rather than juggling many.”

“The volume of work is higher than expected with little time for recovery”

“Provide more opportunity for written feedback before assessments that count towards the grade”

“More clarity on assessments and not placing them all together at the start of the year then having loads of time where there’s nothing at the end even though we’re still in class”

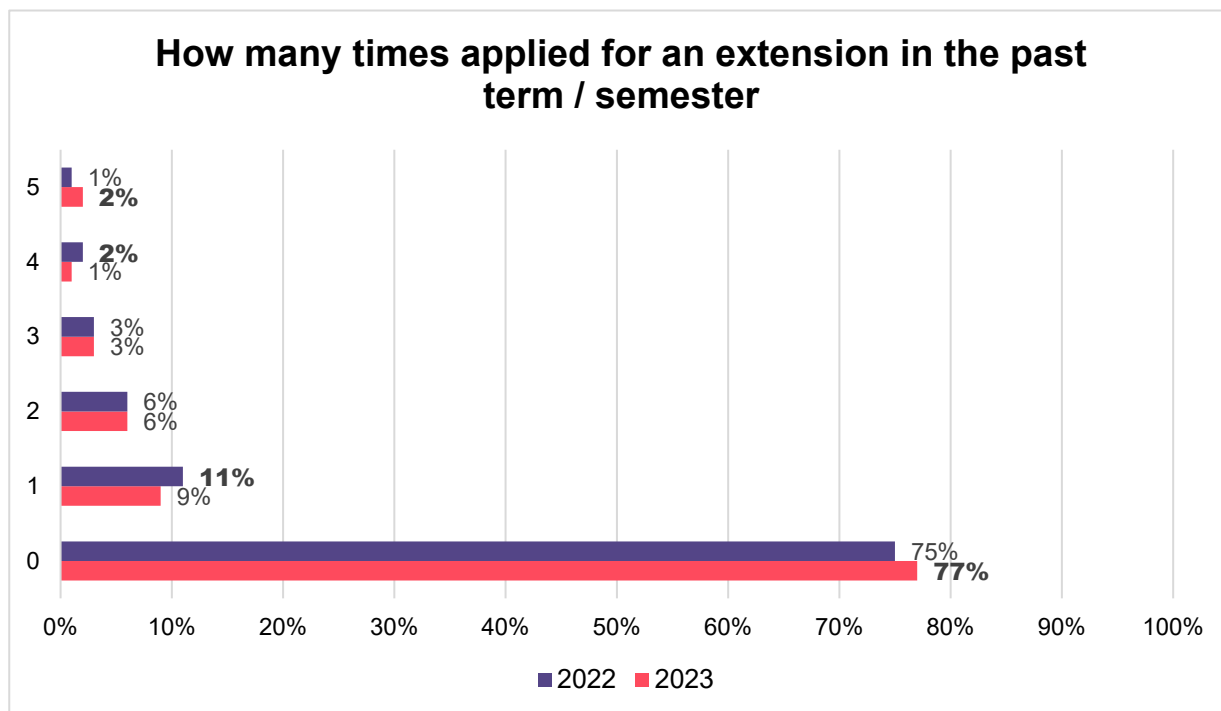
“They should give us more detailed feedback for formative assessments at an earlier time”

“One way they could improve is ensuring that there is more support through assessment periods, especially from going from A levels to university, it feels like everything you've done is wrong and the way you write is wrong also, I feel if there was more focus on helping students with how to write essays or do certain assessments a lot of students would do a lot better within their degree”

“A huge problem at my university is that students are regularly set huge amounts of work which encourages us to sometimes work very late and not actually focus properly on the content, but simply 'getting it done'. A lot of staff are very conscious of our workload, but a minority would do well to set us slightly less reading.”

10.4 Applying for an extension

Despite the increase in the volume of assignments, there has not been an increase in students applying for an extension. In fact, there has been a decline in the frequency of this happening, with 23% overall making a request, compared to 25% in 2022.



Whatever the reasons for requesting (or not requesting) extensions, and the range of institutional policies around this, it appears that students are being asked to handle significant volumes of work and are managing to do so without extending their deadlines.

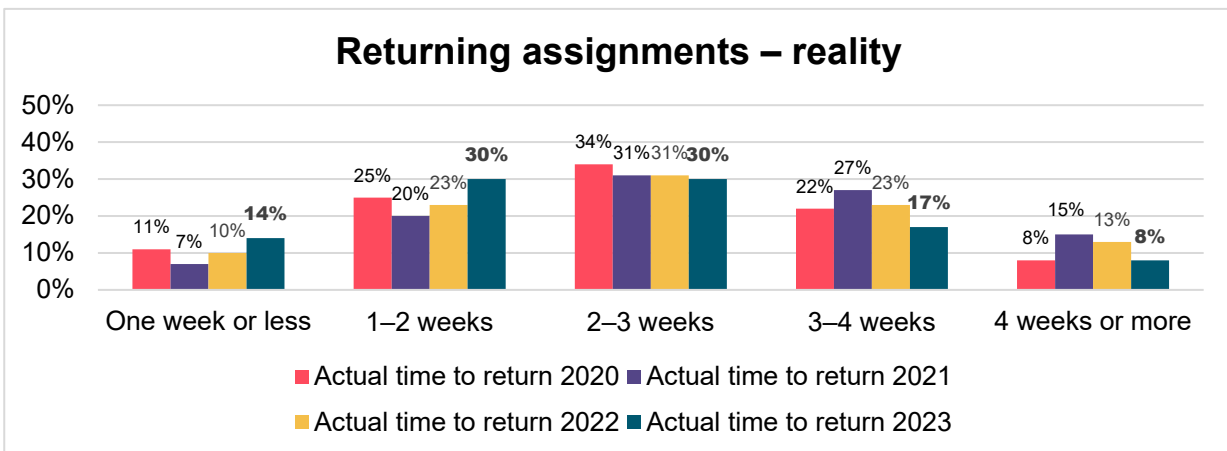
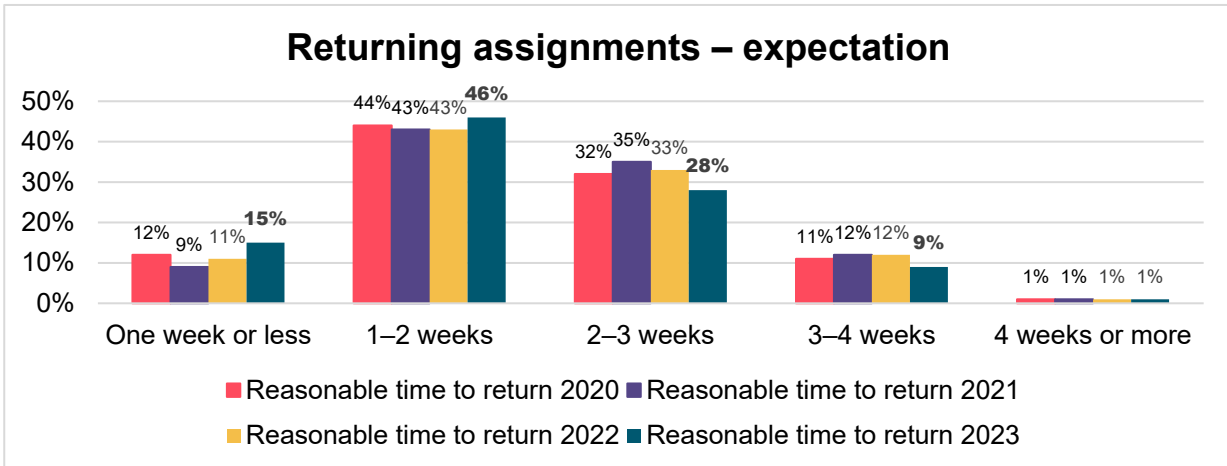
We have seen earlier in the report that some students have specific additional responsibilities, including paid employment (which is increasing significantly) and caring for children or others. The table below illustrates that extension requests are significantly more likely among these groups, which implies that the combination of workload volumes and external demands on their time are causing issues in some cases.

	Paid employment			Caring	
	No paid work	0-9 hours	10+ hours	No caring responsibilities	Caring responsibilities
Any extension request	18%	30%	26%	22%	33%

10.5 Timeliness of feedback

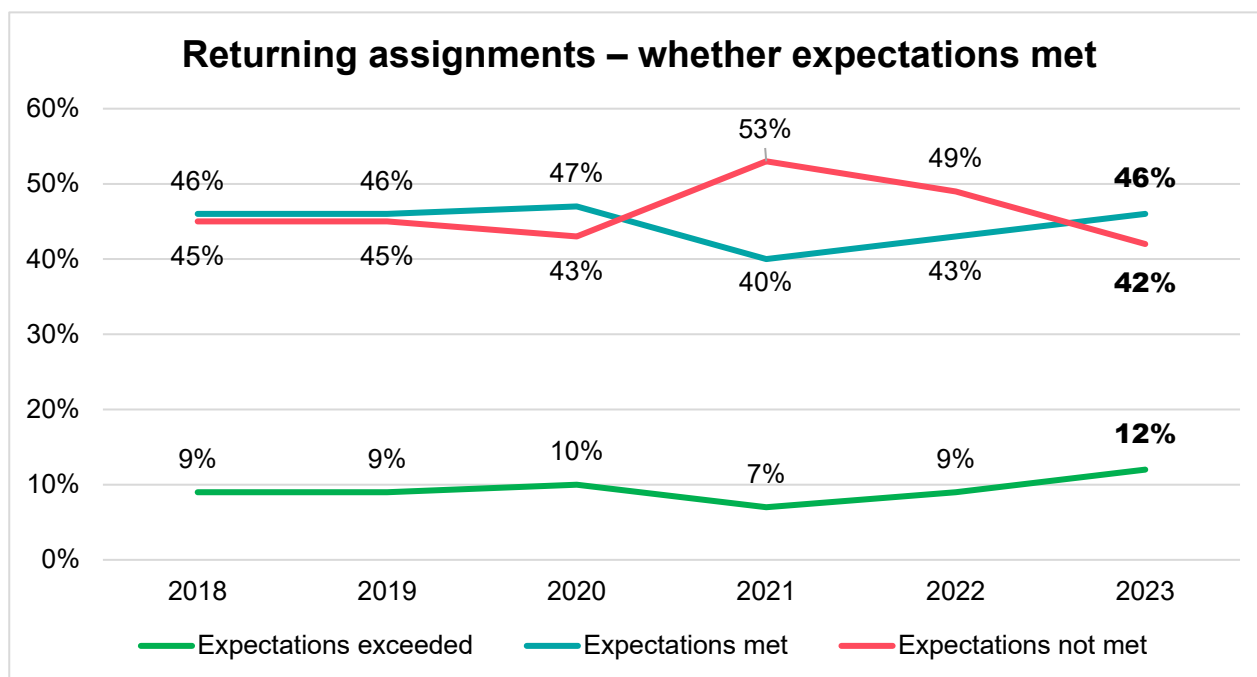
Student expectations around turnaround times for assessments are typically 1–2 weeks, although there has been a move towards students setting a higher bar over the past year in particular, with an increase in those expecting a turnaround in one week or less, and a matching decrease in those expecting their marks after 2–3 weeks or more.

In a climate of increasing volumes of assignments, then it appears logical that students expect a fast turnaround in order to help prepare for the next one.



Matching this tightening of expectations, there is evidence that assignments are being returned within a shorter timescale, with up to one week, or 1–2 weeks, being a lot more common than in the recent past. This is likely to be necessary given the volume of assignments being set across many institutions and disciplines.

The net result of this is that expectations in terms of returning assessments have been met 46% of the time – which is a strong increase on the previous two years. Expectations have been exceeded 12% of the time, which is the highest figure we have seen since the question was introduced, in 2016.⁴²



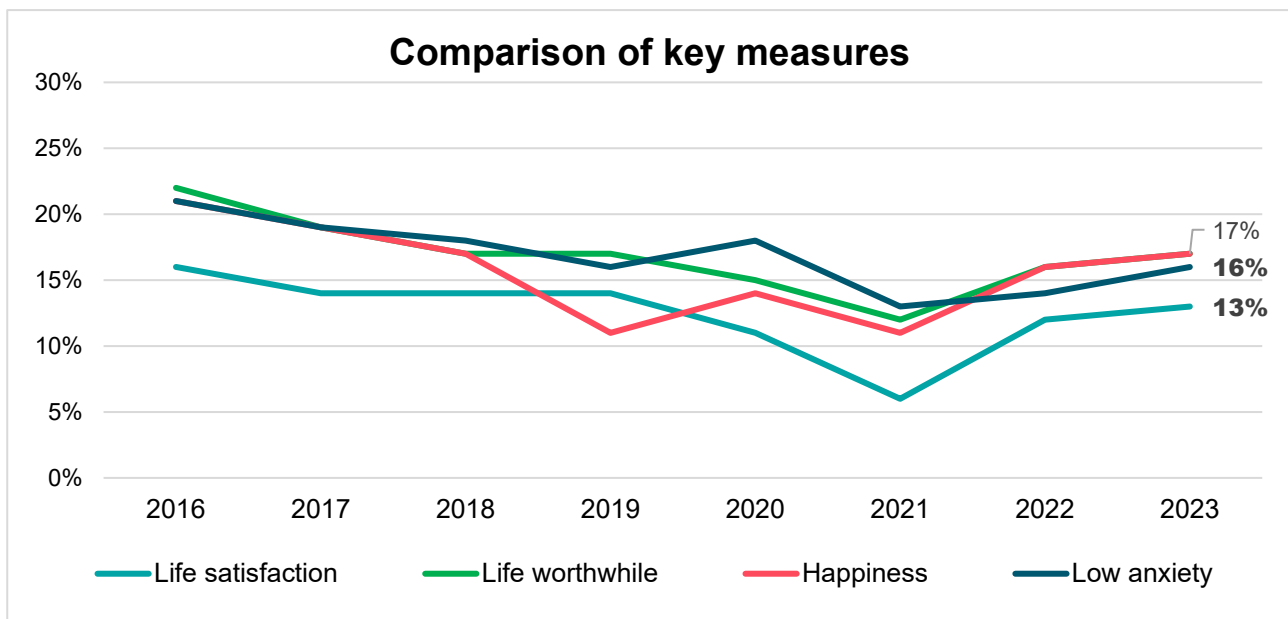
The increase in the volume of assignments has also raised the stakes for feedback in terms of how quickly it is expected and needed, and the results suggest that these expectations are being met in many cases. This is likely to be creating significant demands on staff and students in a high-pressure environment.

⁴² Meeting or exceeding expectations around assessments is not asked as a direct question. It is calculated by comparing the time taken to respond compared to the time that would be considered reasonable – on an individual respondent basis.

11. Wellbeing

Overall levels of student wellbeing have improved in 2023 but although the improvements for 2 out of the 4 main indicators are statistically significant, they are relatively small improvements in absolute terms. It is still fair to say that wellbeing levels are relatively low, particularly when compared to the total population as measured, using the same set of questions, by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), but these levels have recovered to be close to what they were before the onset of the pandemic.⁴³

Since we first began making the comparison, student levels of wellbeing have been some way below that of the general population (using the most recently available year for comparison) and this shows no sign of changing for the better. There has been a recovery in student wellbeing since the pandemic, when wellbeing levels among the student (and wider) population were historically low, but we had seen a declining trend before the impact of the pandemic and the current levels of wellbeing are relatively low compared to 2016, for example.



⁴³ See ONS quarterly estimates on wellbeing. July to September each year. All adults.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/datasets/quarterlypersonalwellbeingestimateseasonallyadjusted> [Accessed 28 April 2023]

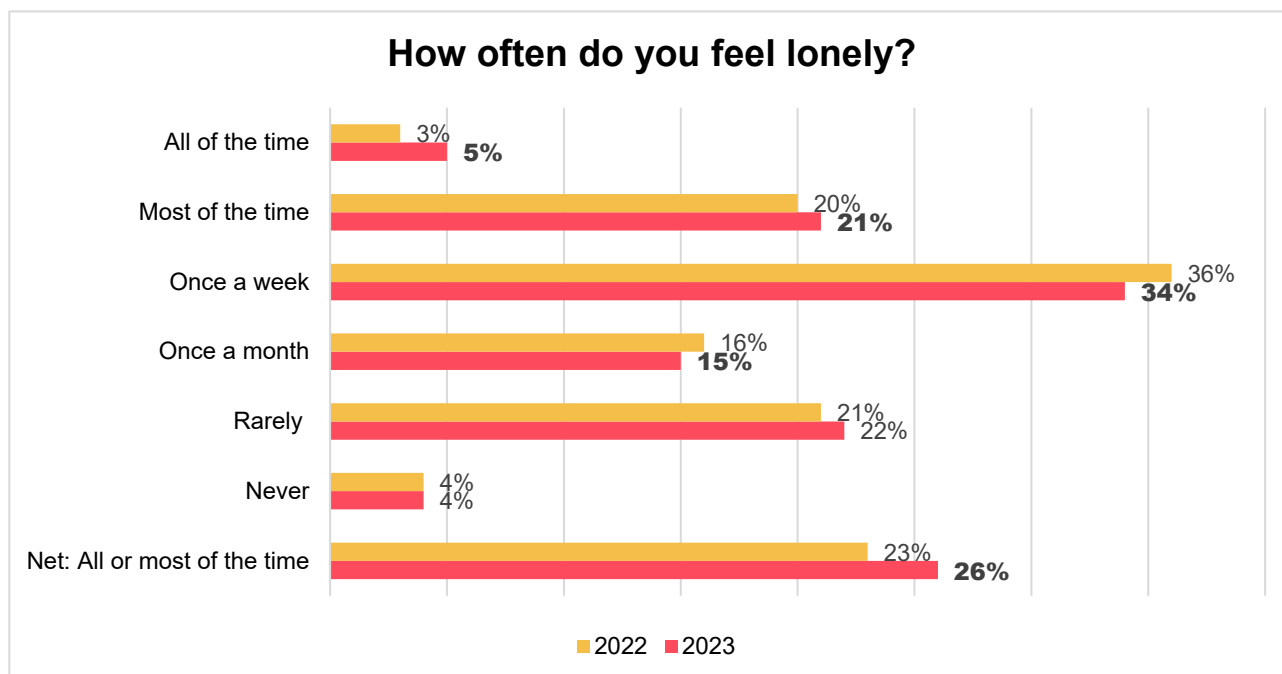
Student Academic Experience Survey 2023

Jonathan Neves and Rose Stephenson

	Satisfaction		Worthwhile		Happiness		Low anxiety	
	SAES	ONS	SAES	ONS	SAES	ONS	SAES	ONS
2020	11%	25%	15%	33%	14%	32%	18%	34%
2021	6%	26%	12%	33%	11%	33%	13%	37%
2022	12%	24%	16%	32%	16%	30%	14%	35%
2023	13%	N/A	17%	N/A	17%	N/A	16%	N/A

It may be reasonable to assume that the pandemic and its impact are no longer dominating how students feel about their wellbeing, but we are in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis which may well be having a similar impact. University can be an inherently stressful time, involving moving away from home (in many cases) and facing new challenges and opportunities both academically and socially. We have also seen how levels of workload, including timetabled cases and assignments, are the highest we have seen, which is potentially another factor contributing to stress and wellbeing concerns for some.

In a related question, first introduced in 2022, we asked students about how often they feel lonely. Around one-in-four students feel lonely all or most of the time, while at the other end of the scale, a similar proportion feel lonely on rare occasions or not at all. Overall, although we do not yet have a lengthy time series of data, loneliness has increased, with a statistically significant 3 percentage point increase in the proportion who feel lonely all or most of the time.



In considering relative levels of loneliness, it is helpful to consider the range of undergraduate experiences and which types of students may be most at risk. Many students live in purpose-built accommodation and / or live in close proximity to others. However, significant numbers of students live on their own or with families, and the table below

provides evidence that accommodation type can be linked to levels of loneliness. This is perhaps logical, in that being away from other students may make it difficult to achieve the same level of connections that are available to other students. However, the levels of loneliness reported by students who live on their own are very high.

Feel lonely	Type of degree accommodation				
	At home with family	University halls	Non-university halls	Flat / house with others	Flat / house on my own
All or most of the time	30%	24%	30%	19%	38%

Significant differences between cohorts in bold.

On a similar theme, students studying Bachelor degrees make up the highest proportion of undergraduates students, but those students who are studying other qualifications, including apprenticeships or foundation degrees, are significantly more likely to suffer from loneliness. For some of these students studying non-Bachelor degrees, loneliness could be related to a propensity to be mature students and therefore not living in more typical undergraduate accommodation. However, it is important to highlight this data in order to show the range of undergraduate experiences and to help drive consideration of how all students studying all qualifications can be best supported both in their studies and in their interactions with their peers.

Feel lonely	Type of degree qualification					
	Foundation	Apprenticeship	Cert HE or Dip HE	HNC or HND	Bachelor degree	Integrated masters
All or most of the time	34%	30%	35%	35%	24%	21%

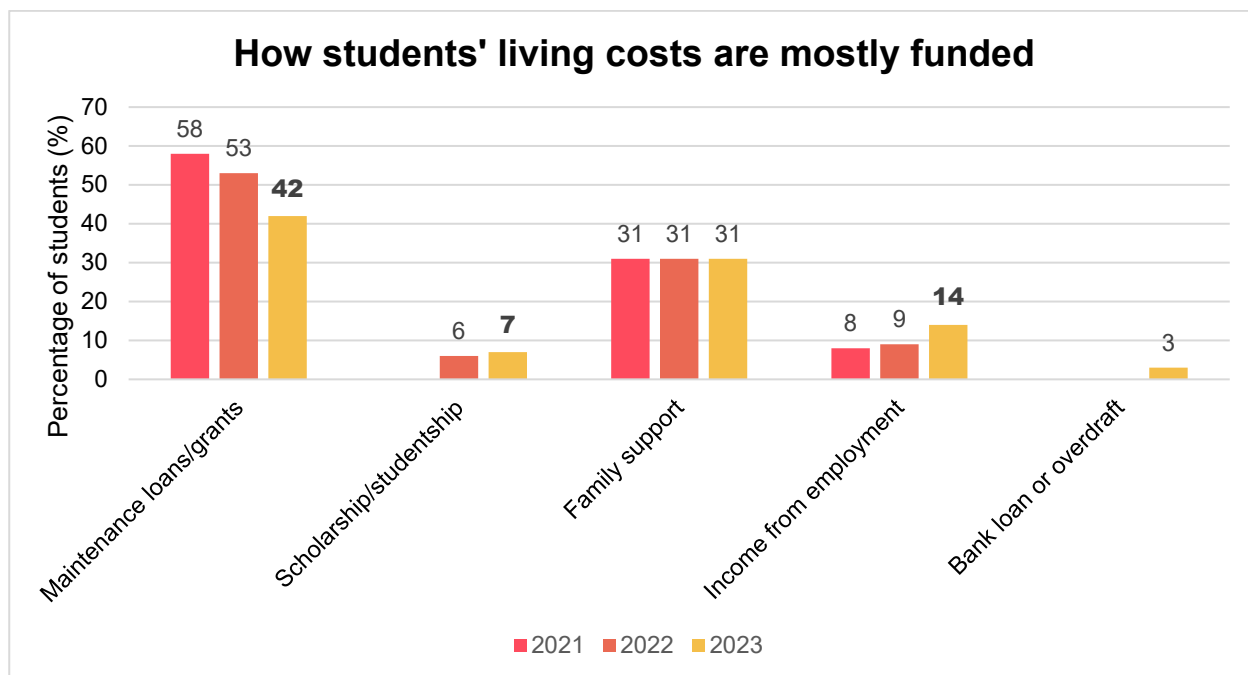
Significant differences between cohorts in bold.

By their very nature, some types of qualification, such as apprenticeships, provide a very different experience to the “typical” undergraduate experience but this data potentially points towards a greater need for institutions and wider sector communication to explain how different this experience is likely to be.

12. Finances and the future

12.1 How students' living costs are funded

We asked students what type of funding mostly covers their living costs. Responses showed a significant decrease in students whose living costs were mostly covered by maintenance loans or grants: 42%, compared with 53% in 2022 and 58% in 2021. (While maintenance grants no longer exist in England, they do exist in other parts of the UK.) This suggests that students are becoming more reliant on alternative sources of funding. Despite this, there was no increase in the number of students stating that their living costs were mostly covered by family support, which remains static at 31%. This may suggest that families navigating cost-of-living challenges themselves are unable to provide significant additional resources to their student children. Instead, the shortfall is being made up through other means, with 14% of students stating that their living costs are mostly covered by income from employment (an increase from 9% of students last year) and, concerningly, bank loans or overdrafts. This year, 3% of students are using bank loans or overdrafts as their main source of income.⁴⁴

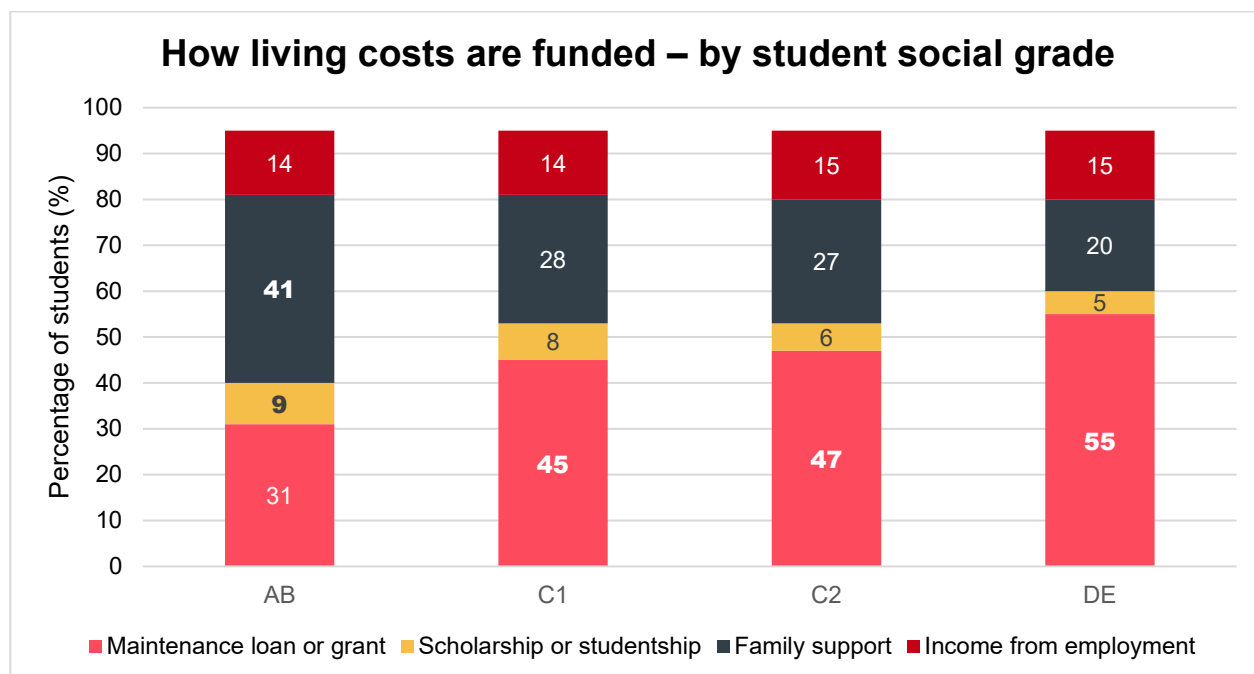


12.2 Students mostly funded by maintenance loans and grants

There is a clear correlation between a student's social grade and their main source of funding. 55% of students from social grades DE state that maintenance loans or grants are their main source of income, and 20% state that this comes from family support. This

⁴⁴ The option of bank loan or overdraft was a new addition to the question this year.

compares to 31% of students from social grades AB mostly using maintenance loans and grants to cover their living costs, while 41% are mostly funded by family support. (For the purposes of readability, the small percentage of students selecting bank loans or other as their main source of funding was excluded from the graph.)



We see similar patterns for students who went to state school (45% maintenance loan, 29% family support) compared with students who went to private school (22% maintenance loan, 49% family support). And for students from POLAR4 Quintiles⁴⁵ 1 and 2 (52% maintenance loan, 21% family support) compared to those from POLAR4 Quintiles 3, 4 and 5 (48% maintenance loan, 28% family support).

If we consider data about the wealth of families of students from different social grades,⁴⁶ initial research from HESA suggesting a link between POLAR4 quintiles and economic disadvantage⁴⁷ and research linking family income and private school attendance,⁴⁸ one could suggest that the funding system is working. Students from (likely) more affluent backgrounds are less likely to receive a maintenance loan that covers most of their living costs, and therefore are supported by family money. Students from (likely) less affluent

⁴⁵ The participation of local areas (POLAR) classification groups areas across the UK based on the proportion of young people who participate in higher education. Quintile one shows the lowest rate of participation. Quintile five shows the highest rate of participation. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/young-participation-by-area/about-polar-and-adult-he>

⁴⁶ <https://nrs.co.uk/nrs-print/lifestyle-and-classification-data/social-grade/>

⁴⁷ Jenny Bermingham, Siobhan Donnelly and Tej Nathwani *Using census data to generate a UK-wide measure of disadvantage*. HESA. <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/files/UK-wide-measure-disadvantage-20211005.pdf>

⁴⁸ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09645292.2021.1874878>

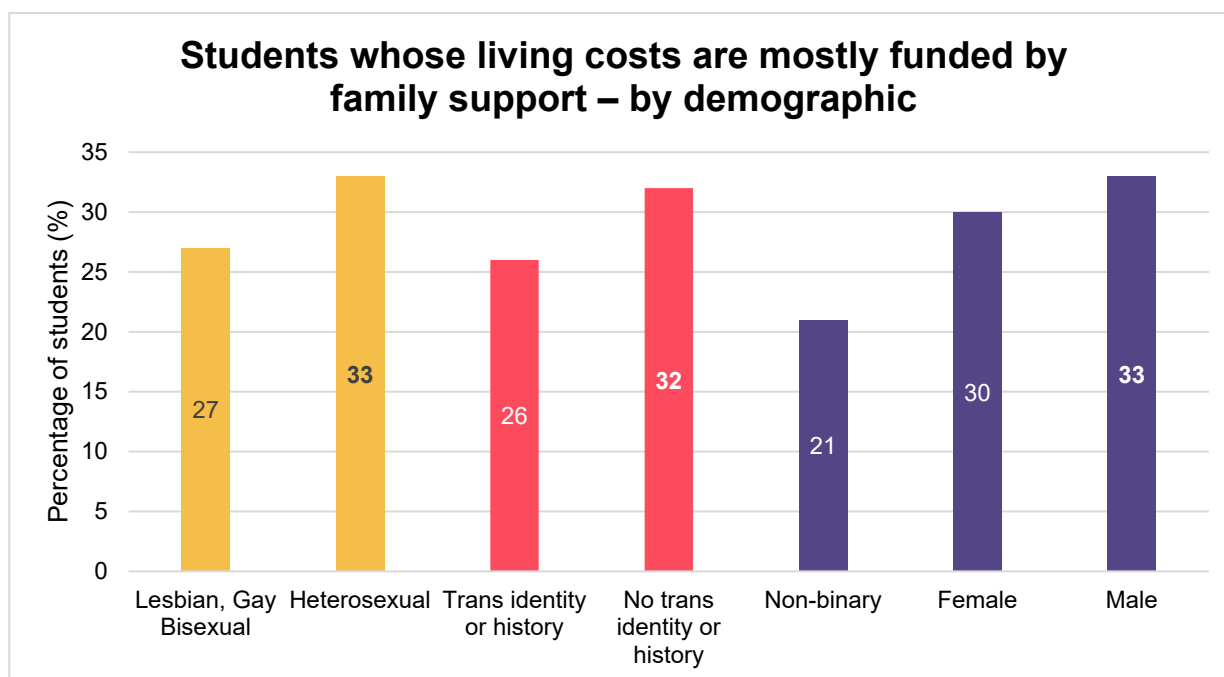
backgrounds, whose families may be less able to offer significant financial support, are more likely to receive and use a maintenance loan to cover most of their living costs.

16% of students from net lower POLAR4 quintiles report paid employment as covering most of their living costs, compared to 12% of students from net higher POLAR4 quintiles. This is a significant difference. There is no significant difference in students stating that income from paid employment covers most of their living costs for students from different social grades, or students attending state or private schools.

What this question does not tell us is whether students who are relying on a maintenance loan, family support or income from paid employment are finding that university is affordable. The Student Money Survey states that students have seen a 14% increase in their living costs.⁴⁹ Maintenance loans have failed to increase by a similar amount, with maintenance loans in England rising by just 2.8% for the academic year 2023, but 9.4% in Wales.

Other inequalities are seen in how students fund their living costs at university. 27% of LGB+ students state that their living costs are mostly covered by family support, compared to 33% of heterosexual students. There is a similar picture for students identifying as trans or as having trans history, at 26%, compared with 32% of students who do not identify as trans or as having trans history.

We also see a difference in family support by gender identity. Non-binary students are the least likely to receive most of their funding from family support, at 21%, followed by female students at 30% and male students at 33%. Female and non-binary students are more likely to rely on a maintenance loan or grant as their main source of income.



⁴⁹ <https://www.savethestudent.org/money/surveys/student-money-survey-2022-results.html#key>

Research from the Unite Foundation has shown that applicants who are estranged from their families are 5 times more likely to identify as LGBT than other young people of a similar age.⁵⁰ Perhaps due to this, and the resulting difference in family support for some LGB+ and trans students, these students are more reliant on maintenance loans or employment to fund most of their living costs.

- + 48% of LGB+ students rely on maintenance loans to cover most of their living costs, compared to 41% heterosexual students – a significant difference.
- + Students with a trans identity or history are more reliant on income from paid employment – 19% of trans students, compared with 14% of students without a trans identity or history. This is also a significant difference.

We also see that disabled students are significantly more likely to rely on a maintenance loan or grant (48%) than non-disabled students (41%). Disabled students are less likely to state that their main source of income is from family support (27%) compared to non-disabled students (33%). Whilst it is not clear why this is the case, colleagues working in disability services have suggested that this could be due to higher instances of familial occurrence of disability, such as parents or siblings with high support needs leading to limits on some parental income.

12.3 Students mostly funded by income from employment

As seen earlier in this report, the majority of students are now doing paid employment while studying. Of those students, the average time spent working is 13.5 hours per week.⁵¹ It is important to remember that this report focuses on full-time students, when we look at the following information.

We saw a rise in the number of students relying on income from employment to cover most of their living costs at 14% of all students, a rise from 9% of all students in 2022 and 8% of all students in 2021.

There are some groups of students who are more likely to state that they use income from employment to cover most of their living costs. These include:

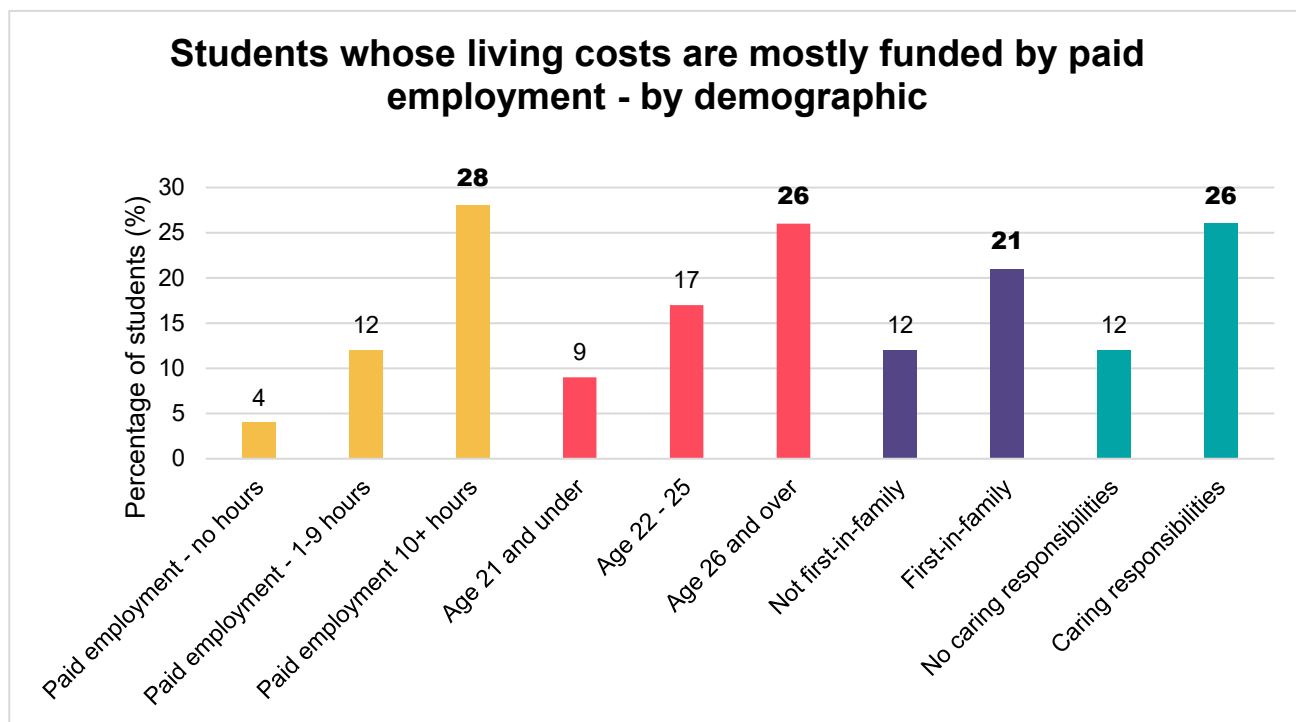
- + Students working 10+ hours of paid employment, 28% of whom use income from employment to cover most of their living costs.
- + Older students, above 26 years of age, 26% of whom use income from employment to cover most of their living costs.
- + First-in-family students, 21% of whom use income from employment to cover most of their living costs.

⁵⁰ 'LGBT students and family estrangement: How to help'. Unite Students website.

<https://www.unitegroup.com/articles/lgbt-students-and-family-estrangement-how-to-help>

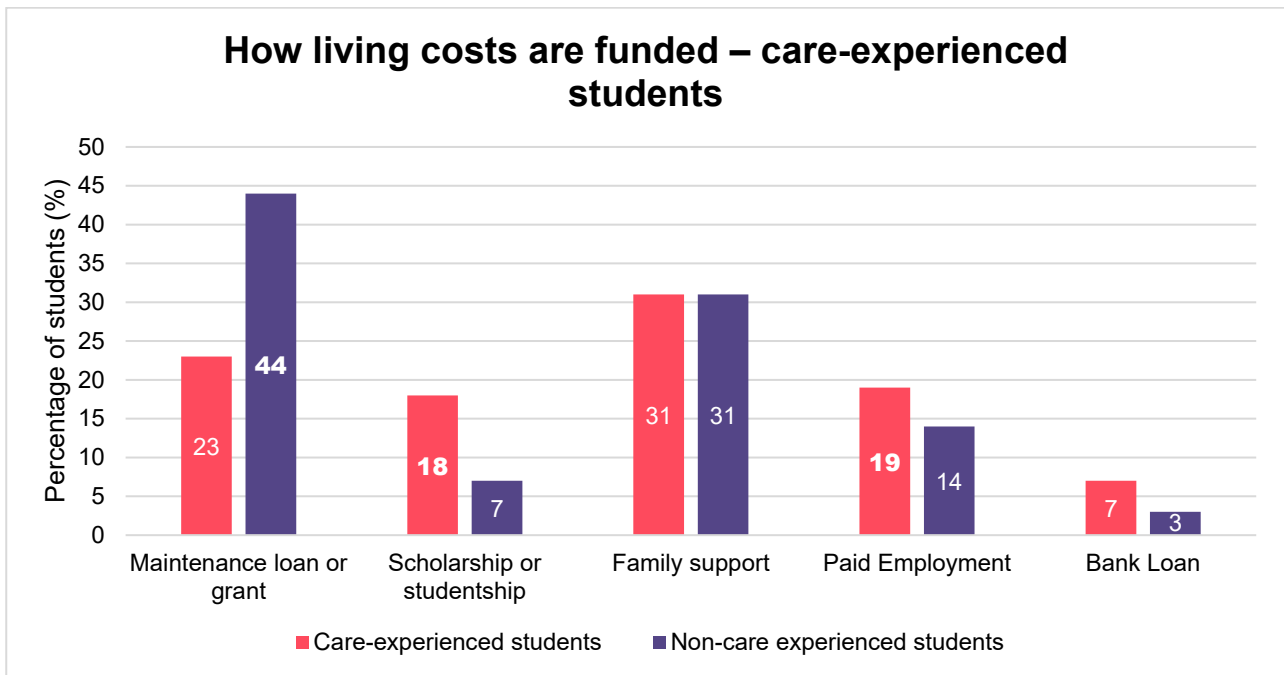
⁵¹ Based on a mean calculation excluding those who are not in paid employment.

+ Students with caring responsibilities, 26% of whom use income from employment to cover most of their living costs.



12.4 Care-experienced students

The number of care-experienced students using family support to cover most of their living costs is the same as for students who have not experienced care (31%). Care-experienced students are less likely to state their maintenance loan or grants cover most of their living costs (23%) compared to other students (44%) The difference is made up through scholarships (18% of care-experienced students, compared to 7% of other students), income from employment (19% of care-experienced students compared to 14% of others) and, concerningly, bank loans (7% of care-experienced students, compared to 3% of others).



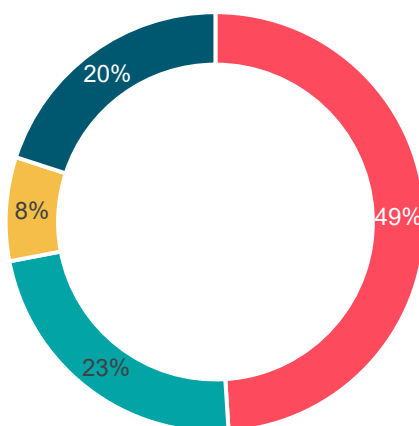
39% of care-experienced students said that the cost-of-living crisis impacted their studies a lot, compared to 26% of students who are not care experienced. This is a significant difference.

The provision of scholarships here is welcome, and consideration should be given to expanding these to ensure that some care-experienced students are not falling through the cracks and having to rely on paid employment or bank loans to cover most of their living costs.

12.5 Financial concerns when applying to university

When we asked students about their financial concerns when applying to university, we saw a significant decrease in students stating that the cost of living was their main concern, at 49%, down from 52% in 2022. However, there was the same-sized significant increase in students stating that their main concern was “all of these”, at 20% up from 17% in 2022. Concerns about the cost of tuition fees and learning resources stayed the same, at 23% and 8% respectively.

Main financial concerns when applying to university



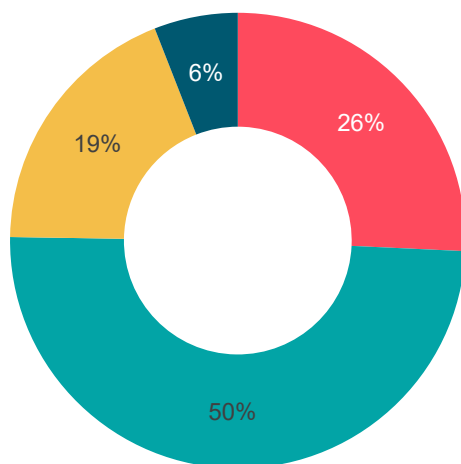
■ Cost of living ■ Tuition fees ■ Learning costs ■ All of the above

12.6 The impact of the cost-of-living

We added a new question this year, asking students whether the cost-of-living has negatively impacted their studies:

- + A lot
- + A little
- + Not much
- + Not at all

How the cost of living is impacting students' studies



■ A lot
■ A little
■ Not much
■ Not at all

A total of 76% of students feel that the cost-of-living crisis has affected their studies. 50% state that their studies were impacted “a little” and over a quarter (26%) state that their studies were affected “a lot”. Only 6% of all students state that their studies have not been affected at all by the cost-of-living crisis.

If we look at the groups of students who appear to be more reliant on maintenance loans – students from social grade DE, POLAR4 Quintiles 1 and 2, LGB+, and non-binary students – we see the following:

- + A third (33%) of students from social grade DE report that their studies have been affected a lot, compared with a quarter (24%) of students from social grades AB
- + 29% of students from POLAR4 Quintiles 1 and 2 report that their studies have been affected a lot, compared with 23% of students from POLAR4 Quintiles 3, 4 or 5
- + 34% of LGB students state that their studies have been impacted a lot, compared to 24% of heterosexual students
- + 38% of non-binary students state that their studies have been impacted a lot, compared to 26% of male and 25% of female students

These are all significant differences.

There was also a significant difference between students who attended different types of schools. More private school students stated their studies have been impacted a lot (28%), compared with 26% of state school students.

It is worth noting that in these comparisons of the demographics of students who seem to be less impacted by the cost-of-living crisis, around a quarter of these students are still reporting that their studies have been impacted ‘a lot’ by the cost-of-living crisis. However, there is a correlation here between the groups of students who rely on maintenance loans or grants, and the level of impact that the cost-of-living crisis has had on their studies. Is the failure to keep maintenance loans in line with inflation entrenching inequity through the higher education system?

In addition to the students mentioned above, the students whose studies are more likely to be significantly affected by the cost of living are:

- + Those working 10+ hours of paid employment
 - + Older students, above 26 years of age
 - + First-in-family students
 - + Those with caring responsibilities
 - + Students with a trans identity or trans history
-

+ Care-experienced students

As seen above, each of these student groups are more likely to report that they rely on income from paid employment to cover most of their living costs, compared to their student counterparts.

The Office for Students' Equality of Opportunities Risk Register (EORR) notes "costs pressures" as a risk. The EORR states:

- + *Increasing costs of living, if not adequately addressed, may result in an increasing number of students undertaking part-time or full-time employment alongside their studies, poorer mental and physical health for students, reduced attendance on-course, and less time to study.*
- + *Together, these may increase the risk of lower on-course attainment rates and lower continuation rates.*

However, the groups of students the EORR states as being vulnerable to these pressures is limited to students who are:

- + *estranged*
- + *care experienced*
- + *mature*
- + *been eligible for free school meals in the past six years*
- + *disabled*

The data from this report suggests that this list of students should be further expanded.

The findings above should be of concern. Students whose studies are being significantly impacted by the cost-of-living crisis are those more reliant on maintenance loans or income from paid employment. This includes students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, LGB+, trans and non-binary students, older students, those with caring responsibilities, care-experienced and first-in-family students. Failing to address these inequalities risks embedding inequality within the higher education system and beyond.

13. Conclusions and policy recommendations

This is the seventeenth wave of the Student Academic Experience Survey. The data that has been collected over this time has given valuable insight into the student experience and has allowed us to monitor and respond to changes through the last three years of Covid. As a sense of normality resumes post-Covid, we see that students are faced with new challenges, particularly around the cost-of-living crisis. The 13 points below highlight areas that the Government, higher education institutions and others should consider in response to this Survey:

1. If we adjust for Covid figures, value-for-money perceptions over the last 6 years have changed little. Value-for-money perceptions are not getting worse, but they are also not getting better. **Higher education institutions should consider using the data in this report, and engaging with their student body, to understand how factors affect this perception.** While factors such as tuition fees are out of the control of institutions, explaining how tuition fees are spent, and how this impacts the student experience, could be one way to address these perceptions.
2. The number of students who, if they could make their choice again, would consider an apprenticeship is increasing. This may be linked to cost-of-living pressures or the higher profile that apprenticeships now receive. **The Government should consider how to incentivise increasing the number of degree apprenticeships available. This should include consideration of reducing the regulatory burden.**
3. A total of 22% of current students would choose a different course, university, or both – if they could have their choice again. **Given the potential within the Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE), policymakers should consider whether students enrolled in a full-time, three or four-year course should be able to access the flexible benefits of the LLE by transferring their current credits to another course or institution.** It is unclear in the LLE documentation whether full-degree students will have the same rights to flexibility as modular students. Ensuring that they do may be challenging for university planners but could lead to greater student satisfaction. If this were the case, the regulatory framework may need to adapt to view continuation in a more flexible light.
4. The most stated factor for considering leaving a course is a mental health concern and students state mental health support as an area that would improve the academic experience. Many institutions offer significant wellbeing provision for students, yet this remains a concern. Higher education institutions may want to focus on preventative work, as well as supporting students already experiencing mental health challenges. We see elsewhere in the report that the number of pieces of assessment are increasing, and more students are working more paid hours than previously seen. **Careful course design to spread out assessment dates, and monitor their frequency, would be worthwhile. Timetables that stack in-person learning sessions into a few days a week would also support those in paid employment.** Students state that they wish to be challenged at university – and this should be the case – but wellbeing can still be built into curricula.

5. The impact of industrial strikes was noted throughout the Survey. **Where mitigation is not possible, institutions should ensure that complaints processes are accessible and swift, so that students can apply to seek remedy for loss to their experience if necessary. This will include ensuring that complaints teams are suitably resourced to handle a large number of cases.**
6. **As the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act is implemented, the Office for Students and institutions should note the groups of students who feel that free speech is most constrained – including Black Asian and Minority Ethnic, LGB+ and Disabled students. Promoting these voices in free speech campaigns will be key to their success.**
7. It is pleasing to see that so many care-experienced students feel that they belong at their university – and tribute should be paid to the advocates and teams working in this area to ensure that suitable provision and support is made for care-experienced students. However, 56% of care-experienced students have considered leaving their course – for a wide variety of reasons. **Higher education institutions should ensure that care-experienced students have opportunities to disclose this status in addition to during the UCAS process, and that they feel safe to do so. Ensuring that these students are supported through accommodation, mentoring and financial interventions should be considered.**
8. As we transition out of the Covid era, we see the proportion of lectures that are held online decrease. This is a relatively new question in the Survey, and one of continued importance. It is unclear whether students are accessing the remaining online lectures through choice, or because they are only offered in this format. Challenges faced by students with caring responsibilities, those working to fund their studies, and those who travel long distances to study, may benefit from accessing online learning. **HEPI and Advance HE plan to look at trends in online teaching in more detail in next year's Survey, and encourage research from other groups into this.**
9. Students living at home with family, in non-university halls or in a house on their own are more likely to experience loneliness than those in university halls, or in a flat or house with others. **Institutions should consider tailoring their work on supporting students who experience loneliness, based on different forms of accommodation. For example, ensuring that social activities are available to those who live at home with their families and those who live on their own. Providers of non-university halls may also want to consider their social networking and support offers.**
10. Students on foundation degrees, apprenticeships, HNDs, HNCs and certificates and diplomas of higher education are more likely to suffer from loneliness than those on Bachelor degrees. **Providers of these courses should also consider their social networking and support offers.**
11. We have seen an increase in the number of students in paid employment, and the number of hours students are working – 13.5 hours on average. This suggests more students may be undertaking so much paid work it could adversely affect their studies.⁵² Students who work in paid employment are more likely to consider leaving their course and are less likely to say they would choose the same course and university again. Whilst part-time paid work can be beneficial, students must be able to prioritise their academic work. We have also seen that the cost-of-living crisis is more likely to impact

⁵² Tim Blackman, *What affects how much students learn?*, HEPI Policy Note 5, January 2018.

<https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2018/01/08/5266/>

the studies of those who rely on maintenance loans to cover their living costs. Ensuring that maintenance loans and grants are at a suitable level to support students will be key to their academic success. **The Government should prepare the next Student Income and Expenditure Survey as a matter of urgency. The Government should review the mechanism used to increase student maintenance loans, to ensure that these increase in a timely fashion, in line with inflation.**

12. LGB+, trans and non-binary students are less likely to state that their living costs are covered by family support, and more likely to state that their studies have been affected by the cost-of-living crisis. **The Student Finance bodies of the 4 nations should consider reviewing their communications and processes for estranged-student applications to ensure it is clear that LGB+, trans and non-binary students may be eligible for this.**
13. This report shows that older students, first-in-family students and students with caring responsibilities are more likely to rely on paid employment to cover most of their living costs. These groups also state their studies are more affected by the cost-of-living crisis. **The Government and institutions should consider funding or scholarships for older students and students with caring responsibilities. Consideration should be given as to whether first-in-family students, or first-in-family students who also meet other widening participation criteria, should also be eligible for additional financial support.**

As we enter the next electoral cycle and minds focus on the next general election, it is important that these issues get due consideration. However, some are more urgent than others and it is to be hoped that at least some of them start to be addressed before the election takes place.

Student Academic Experience Survey 2023



General enquiries

+44 (0) 3300 416201
enquiries@advance-he.ac.uk
www.advance-he.ac.uk

   @AdvanceHE

Media enquiries

+44 (0) 1904 717500
communications@advance-he.ac.uk
www.advance-he.ac.uk/contact-us

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Higher Education Policy Institute

General enquiries

+44 (0)1865 819393
admin@hepi.ac.uk
www.hepi.ac.uk

  @HEPI_News

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