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Student Academic Experience Survey 2024

Jonathan Neves, Josh Freeman, Rose Stephenson &
Dr Peny Sotiropoulou

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Foreword

The most notable trend this year is a positive one.

Some student surveys are useful because they provide a snapshot. Other student surveys are useful because they provide a longitudinal set of information that enables deep and meaningful comparisons over time.

This Survey is different because, over the 18 years since it began, the HEPI / Advance HE Student Academic Experience Survey (SAES) has fulfilled both these roles simultaneously.

+ Some questions have been asked year after year, whether about value-for-money perceptions, contact hours or student workload. Such questions came into their own during the pandemic, and in the years since, by allowing us to track some extreme swings. This year, the number of students saying they have had 'poor' or 'very poor' value for money is the lowest it has been since the full rollout of £9,000 fees in England, while the proportion saying they are receiving 'good' or 'very good' value is back to pre-Covid norms.

+ Other questions have come and gone from the Survey as policy and sector priorities have changed. This year, for example, we have added some new questions on students' likelihood to vote, given the impending general election, and asked more about tolerating other views as well as about edtech and artificial intelligence. The areas focused on in the report's analysis also evolve. This year, for example, we have focused more than usual on the number of hours of paid employment undertaken by students.

The main challenge for Advance HE and HEPI is how to keep the Survey fresh and relevant each year while continuing to build up an unrivalled source of information tracking how the sector is changing over time. In short, we have to make a judgement on what to keep in and what to change. We believe the pages that follow prove the lead author, Advance HE's Jonathan Neves, and the other authors, HEPI's Josh Freeman and Rose Stephenson, and Advance HE's Dr Peny Sotiropoulou, have succeeded admirably in this task and have produced a report that will be valued by the sector and policymakers for months to come.

The data produced by the SAES is increasingly used by other organisations, which we strongly welcome and encourage. For example, in the past 12 months, London Higher has produced *Living and learning in London in 2023* and TASO and the Policy Unit at King's College London have published *Student mental health in 2023*, both of which are built on last year's SAES results. Meanwhile, Professor Nicola Dandridge's team at the University of Bristol has begun a ground-breaking project based on the SAES questions on whether students would make a different choice if applying to higher education again today.

We strongly welcome other organisations using the Survey results in these ways, discovering facts we may not have had the resources to dive into ourselves and bringing their own expertise to specific areas to reveal new findings.

Higher education institutions have had a torrid time recently, with some well-publicised financial problems and softening student demand from home and abroad as well as being on the receiving end of geopolitical and domestic upheavals. Yet, as this year's SAES results attest, managers, academics and students are generally remarkably resilient, trying to make the best of what they have. That explains why the most notable trend this year is a positive one, with many of the numbers now back very close to where they were pre-Covid. But the results also reflect new challenges, such as the growth in the number of hours worked by students, which can disrupt academic work as well as beneficial extra-curricular activities.

The Survey's results have a long history of helping the higher education sector in its process of continuous improvement by showing changing student expectations. But it is not possible to do 'more for less' forever. So, the challenge for policymakers now is deciding how much further we wish to go to protect the current high standing of the UK's world-beating and open higher education system. One option is to accept managed decline, especially when compared to other countries. But another, more constructive and positive option, is to start now easing the pressures on students and institutions in line with the policy recommendations provided at the end of this report.

Alison Johns
Chief Executive of Advance HE

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

Executive summary

Looking across this year's results, 2024 represents a positive story for many aspects of the full-time undergraduate student experience. Perceptions of value for money have improved, particularly among international students and those from ethnic minority backgrounds. There has also been a positive shift in the student experience, matching or exceeding expectations. Students' propensity to consider leaving their course has also seen a marked decline, adding to this positive picture.

Contact hours and overall workload appear to have stabilised at high levels, and it is striking that satisfaction with contact hours is at its highest ever level, implying that many students appreciate relatively demanding workloads from a perception of value. Some of the most positive results this year are around teaching and assessment, providing evidence of a strong focus on this across the sector. Ratings of teaching have improved across the board, to some of their highest levels, as have ratings of assessment, which do not appear to have been negatively impacted by the 2023 marking and assessment boycott.

As we also found in 2023, the cost-of-living crisis permeates much of the student experience. Although there has been no further material increase in the proportion of students who work, the average number of hours has increased significantly, to 14.5 hours per week among students who work, representing a significant volume in addition to study time. More general financial concerns are the main reason driving perceptions of poor value for money and are increasing in significance as a reason for students considering leaving their course. Concerningly, there remain around three-quarters of students who feel their studies are significantly affected by cost-of-living concerns. In a potentially related aspect, there has been an increase in the proportion who spend time caring for others, and data also identifies that this cohort are having to manage very long hours of study and paid employment, pointing towards a clear need for specific support for students who are managing a wide range of demands alongside their studies.

One available area of support is to ensure that a flexible range of timetabling is offered alongside a choice of online and in-person teaching, and it is significant that this year's Survey results tell us that a sizeable level of online teaching continues to be provided.

Considering some of the new questions this year, results tell us that one in three students use artificial intelligence (AI) to help with their studies at least once a week, which is higher among males, international students and older demographics. A relatively high proportion – 72% – agree that their institution promotes good relations on campus. This is particularly high among international students, but lower among UK domiciled students from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Looking ahead to the forthcoming general election, four out of five (UK-domiciled) full-time undergraduate students say they are registered to vote (principally at their main home address), but only two out of three say they intend to vote – data which, when compared to a

similar HEPI study in 2023, implies reduced levels of student engagement with national politics.

1   Methodology

1.1   Approach

The Survey content was designed and developed in partnership between Advance HE and the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), with online panel interviews independently led by Savanta.[1]

Savanta's student panel includes more than 48,000 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 and Orchidea.

Between 10 January 2024 and 18 March 2024, members of Savanta's student panel, as well as respondents from other panels including Torfac and Orchidea, were invited to complete the Survey. In total, 10,319 responses were received and analysed, with 8,394 responses sourced from the Savanta panels, and 1,925 in total sourced from Torfac and Orchidea. The median completion time was 14 minutes and 15 seconds.

This year's Survey includes several areas of direct comparison to previous years, but also incorporates some new areas of coverage, such as a question on the use of artificial intelligence in academic work, a question about tolerance on campus, some deeper probing on student finances and, in reference to the upcoming general election, we have included some questions on students' intention to vote, including a follow-up on whether, and where, they are registered to do so.[2]

1.2   Sample size

This year our Survey captured the views of 10,319 full-time undergraduate students studying in the UK. Unless stated otherwise, all figures and tables relate to weighted data from the 2024 Survey.

The total sample size of 10,319, based on a full-time undergraduate population of 1,728,210 (2021-22 data), provides a margin of error of + / - 1%.[3] This is calculated at the 95% confidence level and based on a result of 50%, where the margin of error is at its maximum.

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[1] 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.

[2] At the time of writing (spring 2024) a general election has been announced for 4 July 2024.

[3] HESA (2023) '*Who's studying in HE?*' Cheltenham: HESA. Available at: www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he [accessed 3 April 2024]. This is the most recently available data.

This means 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.[4]

We have highlighted statistically significant differences between 2023 and 2024 (or in some cases, between sample groups from 2024) in bold text on each chart or table where such differences apply. These differences are calculated at the 95% level, which indicates a 95% chance that a difference between two figures is a true difference beyond any margin for error.

1.3   Weighting

A comprehensive weighting process was carried out, in partnership with Savanta, using the most recently available Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) statistics, to maximise representation while maintaining integrity of the unweighted data.[5] A full range of factors were taken into account, including 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, most charts are based on 2024 data comprising the total weighted population of 10,319. 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   Data tables

The full Excel data tables, showing the percentage answers to every question, at total level and across a range of sample groups, are freely accessible from the Advance HE and HEPI websites.

1.6   Qualifications

Students responding to the Survey are all full-time undergraduates, studying across a range of qualifications including bachelor's degrees, foundation degrees and degree apprenticeships. This is consistent with previous years, but the report and data tables now contain some further information on specific qualifications being studied for.

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[4] For a guide to margin of error see www.qualtrics.com/experience-management/research/margin-of-error/calculator

[5] HESA (2024) '*Higher education student data*'. Cheltenham: HESA. Available at: www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/studentshttps://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students [accessed 3 April 2024].

1.7 Ethnicity

For ethnicity analysis, the sample profile and main data in this report are once again based on UK-domiciled students.[6] This is a standard approach and has been done to remove the impact of international students on ethnic groups. The ethnic groups analysed are mutually exclusive, hence the Asian category does not include Chinese students, an approach that we have adopted to provide consistency of analysis with previous years.[7]

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.

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[6] 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.

[7] 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 UK full time undergraduate population and provide consistency with previous waves. The report refers to weighted data throughout.

Weighted data					
Categories		**2022** **(10,142)**	**2023** **(10,163)**	**2024** **(10,319)**	**2024** **Weighted base size**
Domicile	England	68%	69%	70%	7,192
	Northern Ireland	3%	3%	3%	313
	Scotland	7%	7%	6%	625
	Wales	4%	4%	4%	417
	EU	10%	9%	10%	1,006
	Rest of the World[8]	6%	8%	7%	766
Institutions	Russell Group	28%	28%	28%	2,879
	Pre-92 (excl. Russell Group)	21%	20%	19%	1,911
	Post-92	45%	43%	42%	4,295
	Specialist	2%	4%	5%	512
	Other	3%	6%	7%	723
Ethnicity (% among UK-domiciled students providing an answer)	Asian (excluding Chinese)	14%	16%	14%	1,089
	Chinese	1%	1%	1%	76
	Black	4%	5%	6%	515
	Mixed	5%	5%	6%	458
	Other	1%	1%	1%	84
	White	75%	72%	72%	5,712

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[8] There is an ongoing focus on increasing the number of students from outside the UK in the unweighted and weighted sample, to match official statistics from HESA more closely.

3   Value for money

3.1   Trends over time

Delivering good value for money is, and has been, a challenging concept for higher education institutions (HEIs) across the UK to convey. Although there are a range of fees and funding regimes in place across the different parts of the UK, and the static undergraduate fee has caused a decline in income to HEIs in real terms, going to university remains an expensive undertaking for many students. This in turn generates high expectations for their experience, which can be challenging to deliver for HEIs managing finite resources.[9]

Further pressure on perceptions of value has been generated in recent years by major external factors, including the Covid-19 pandemic and, specifically in the past couple of years, the squeeze on the cost of living, which has impacted student finances and changed the way some students find the money to pay for their university experience.

As measured through this Survey, perceptions of value for money fell sharply during the pandemic but have risen steadily since then. We identified in 2023 that the cost-of-living squeeze was potentially slowing the recovery in perceptions of value post-pandemic, as the annual changes in that particular year were relatively small. 2024 is more encouraging, with 39% overall feeling their experience had delivered 'good' or 'very good' value – a statistically significant increase compared with 37% in 2023. There has also been a strong, statistically significant fall in the proportion who perceived 'poor' or 'very poor' value – from 31% to 26%, the net effect being that we now have the largest (positive) gap between the green and the red lines on the graph below – 13 percentage points – since 2014.

[9] Foster, P, Gross, A, Borrett, A (2023) 'The looming financial crisis at UK universities'. *Financial Times*, 18 July. Available at: www.ft.com/content/0aca64a4-5ddc-43f8-9bba-fc5d5aa9311d [accessed 30 April 2024].
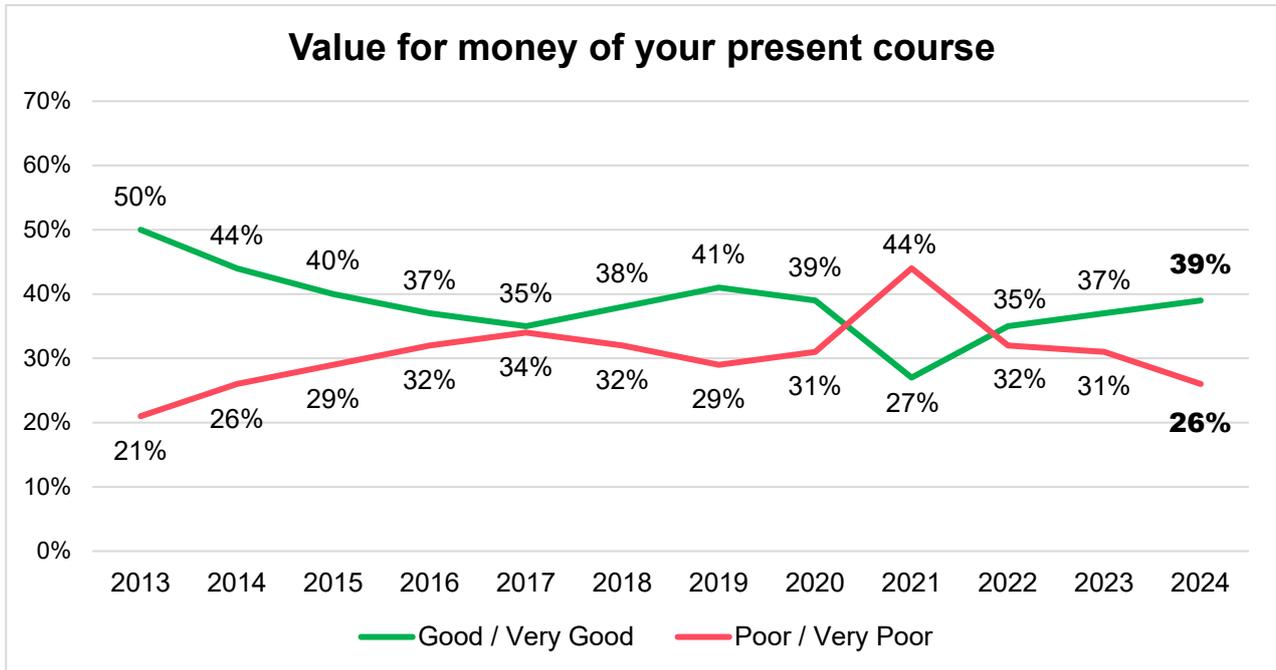
Note that students could also choose an option "neither good nor poor" (chosen by 35% of students in 2024), which is why these yearly figures do not add up to 100%.

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 (home region / domicile).[10] The chart and table below compare value ratings by domicile in detail.

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[10] Fees in different parts of the UK relate to 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.

**Value for money – by home region
(good or very good value)**
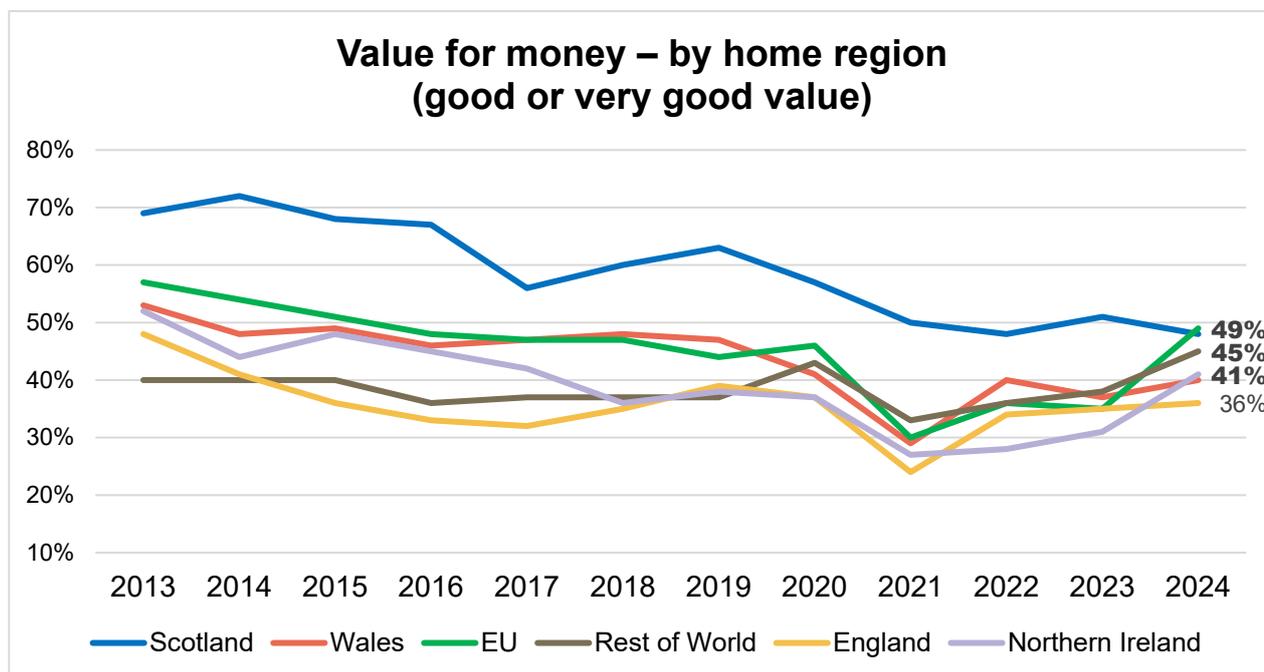
Home region / domicile						
	Scotland	**Wales**	**EU**	**Rest of World**	**England**	**NI**
2020	57%	41%	46%	43%	37%	37%
2021	50%	29%	30%	33%	24%	27%
2022	48%	40%	36%	36%	34%	28%
2023	51%	37%	35%	38%	35%	31%
2024	48%	40%	**49%**	**45%**	36%	**41%**

When we break down the sample to this level, significant year-on-year differences for this particular measure have tended to be infrequent, as base sizes are smaller, particularly for Wales and Northern Ireland. What stands out from this breakdown is that the overall increase in value for money in 2024 appears to be driven strongly by international students, with cohorts from the EU and the rest of the world showing a significant improvement in perceptions of value. This is encouraging for the sector given the importance of international students, at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, in contributing to HEI income through the higher fees charged.[11] We will see later in the report that a number of international students are aware of the higher fees they are paying compared to those from

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[11] García, C A, Weale, S, Swan, L and Symons, H (2023) 'Fifth of UK universities' income comes from overseas students, figures show'. *The Guardian*, 14 July. Available at: www.theguardian.com/education/2023/jul/14/overseas-students-uk-universities-income [accessed 1 May 2024].

the UK, and while not all are happy with this, there is strong evidence here that value for money is being delivered more frequently.

It is also encouraging to see the significant increase among students from Northern Ireland, but perceptions of value among students from England remain low and have not particularly moved over the past couple of years. It is also clear that ratings among students from Scotland – where home students do not pay tuition fees if they choose to study in Scotland – remain at levels that are some way below what they were before the onset of the pandemic.

3.3   Factors influencing perceptions of poor value

To provide further nuance 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, and factors linked to perceptions of good value.

The table below ranks the main factors which influenced the 26% of students who felt they received poor or very poor value.

Results ranked in order of 2024's top 11 answers shown. Respondents were asked to select all that apply.
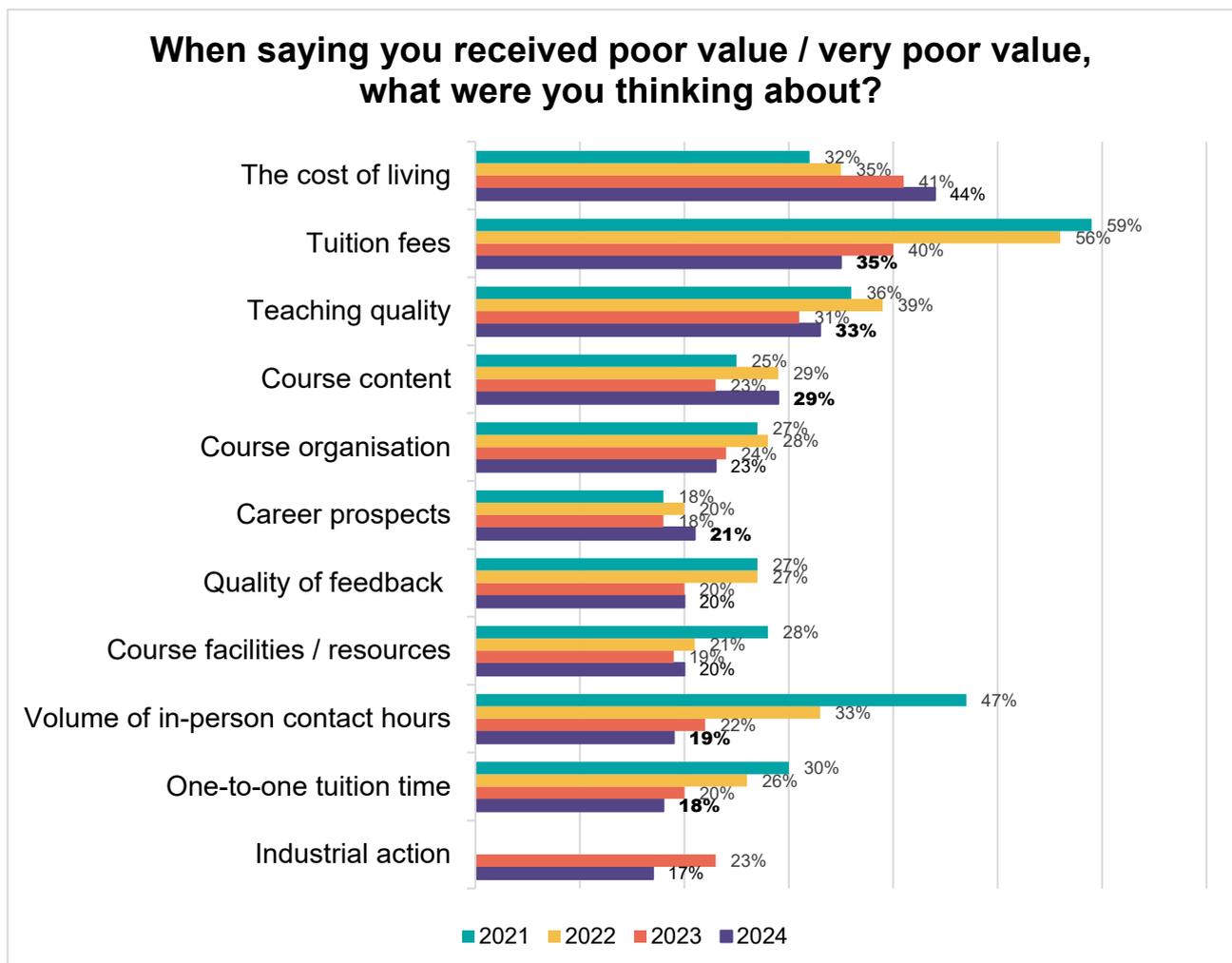
When saying you received poor value / very poor value, what were you thinking about?

Factor	2021	2022	2023	2024
The cost of living	32%	35%	41%	44%
Tuition fees	59%	56%	40%	35%
Teaching quality	36%	39%	31%	33%
Course content	25%	29%	23%	29%
Course organisation	27%	28%	24%	23%
Career prospects	18%	20%	18%	21%
Quality of feedback	27%	27%	20%	20%
Course facilities / resources	28%	21%	19%	20%
Volume of in-person contact hours	47%	33%	22%	19%
One-to-one tuition time	30%	26%	20%	18%
Industrial action			23%	17%

Going back as recently as 2022, tuition fees were the main driver of poor value perceptions. Since then, cost-of-living concerns have come to prominence as the most significant factor, being cited by 44% of students who said they received poor value – some 11 percentage points above all other aspects. Whereas the question is phrased to ask specifically about their course, this is clear evidence of how the cost-of-living, as a wider economic factor, is affecting students' studies, and impacting on their views of the value they receive on their course.

The other aspects mentioned are relatively consistent, with a few fluctuations. The content of the course is cited as more of a concern this year, while future career prospects have also seen an uplift. By contrast, the volume of contact hours and tuition time continue to be less of a concern, having peaked as an influencing factor at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In previous years, through the free text comments, and in 2023 when included as a specific option on the Survey, we have seen industrial action have a clear impact on how students view the quality of their experience. In 2024, however, in the absence of major sector-wide disputes, this has declined in prominence, even though some students who mentioned industrial action may be referring to the marking and assessment boycott from 2023.

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. These comments represented a small proportion of respondents, but there were a number of references to the price differential for international students, as well as the price of travel – an aspect that might be becoming more of an issue as commuting from home becomes a greater consideration as a more cost-effective option.[12]

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[12] Maslin, E (2023) 'I spent the last six months travelling alongside commuter students. Here's what I learned'. *Wonkhe* blog, 1 September. Available at: wonkhe.com/blogs/i-spent-the-last-six-months-travelling-alongside-commuter-students-heres-what-i-learned/ [accessed 5 April 2024].

Other reasons received for poor value – selected open comments[13]
"International fees are triple the amount. Makes it feel like we're overpaying."
"University spends so much on useless things…They charge international students a high amount but don't really provide enough support."
"Education is not a consumable, it should not be for profit."
"Cost of travel to and from placement every day, can be around £30 a week before parking."
"I don't pay for my course…however transport to the University is around £120 a month and takes an hour and a half one way."
"No uni course is ever worth £9,000 per year, it's a ridiculous price which the experience is just not worth."
"No change in cost during the Covid pandemic, despite certainly less course expense due to the lack of in-person teaching and otherwise expensive practical/laboratory sessions."

We also asked respondents who said they received good value what their key drivers for that response were. In general, many of the same aspects were mentioned as for the equivalent question on poor value – but in a positive light around aspects such as teaching quality, course content and course facilities.

When saying you received good value / very good value, what were you thinking about?

Teaching quality: 61% (2021), 56% (2022), 54% (2023), **51%** (2024)
Course content: 56% (2021), 53% (2022), 52% (2023), **48%** (2024)
Course facilities / resources: 46% (2021), 47% (2022), 41% (2023), 43% (2024)
Quality of university buildings and campus: 38% (2021), 40% (2022), 35% (2023), 34% (2024)
Career prospects: 32% (2023), 30% (2024)

■ 2021 ■ 2022 ■ 2023 ■ 2024
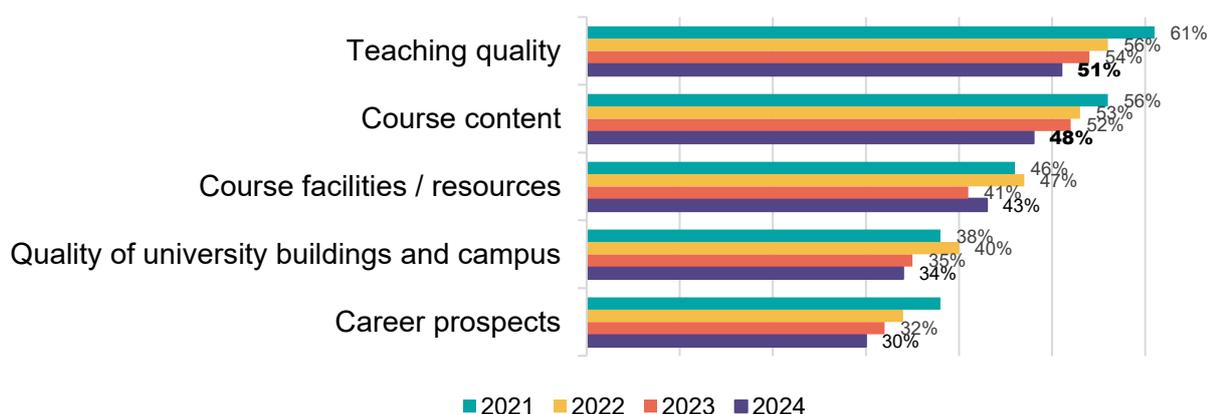
There is also positive feedback around the quality of university campuses, which implies that investment in a modern and welcoming campus infrastructure is a good way for HEIs to demonstrate value.

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

There was also a selection of free text comments which shed more light on the positive experience that many students did experience, a cross-section of which we have listed below.

Other reasons received for good value – selected open comments
"Access to summer schools and study abroad programmes."
"I receive a funded bursary from the Department of Health which is £430/month so over £5,000/year. It is not excellent, but it helps greatly towards my rent and other bills. I do not have student loans or fees to pay back which I am very grateful for."
"Lots of practicals with high quality equipment."
"Fees are less than other university and quality is often beyond what others offer."
"I do feel like I have had value for money. The lectures are good and give good feedback. Course organisation is good. Very helpful and good information."
"The amount of new skills I have learned."

4   Meeting expectations

4.1   Experience versus expectations

Students arrive at higher education with a wide variety of expectations, some of them realistic, some less so. Nevertheless, by asking a large sample of undergraduates to rate their experience compared to their expectations and comparing this over time, we can gain a view as to the quality of their experience and, by extension, whether their expectations were set realistically.

Experience compared to expectations

Legend:
- Better in some ways and worse in others
- It's been better
- It's been worse
- It's been exactly what I expected
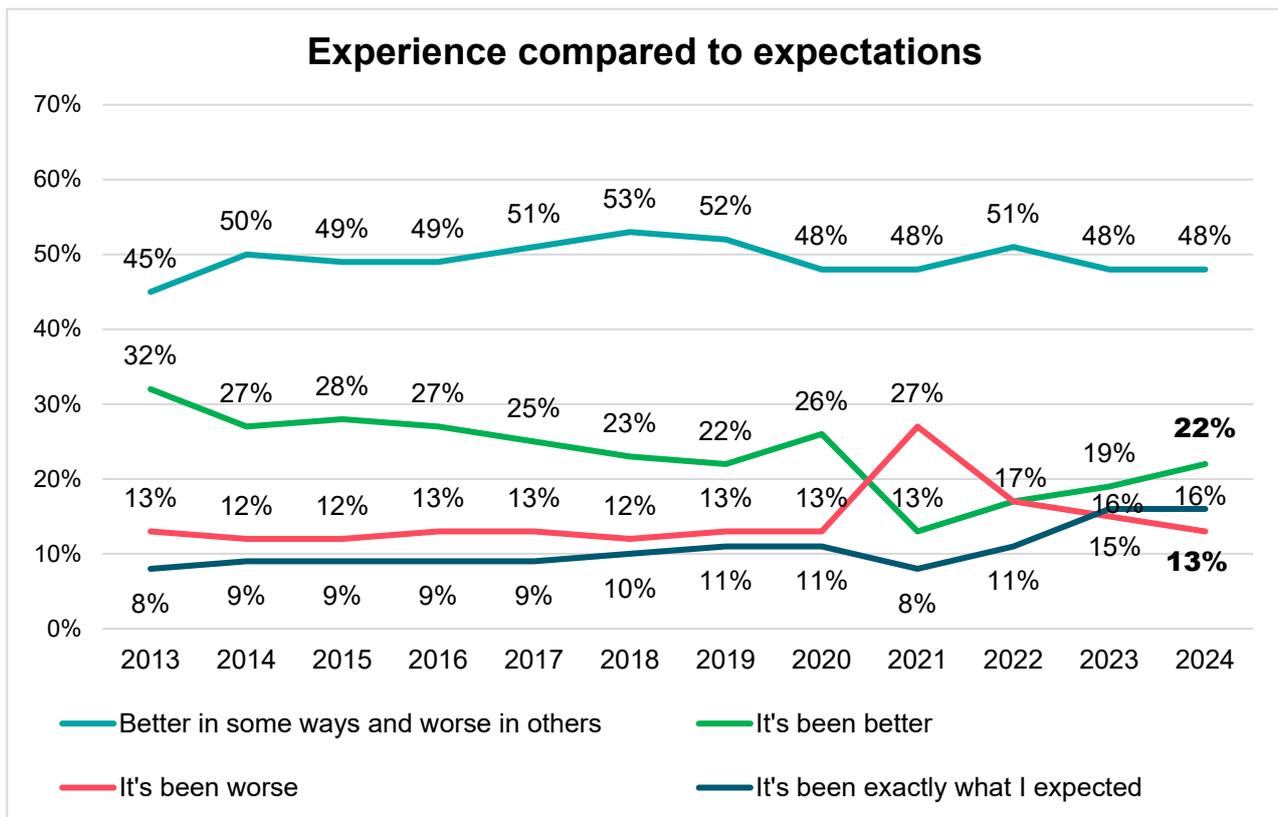
The most common response to this question remains that the experience is in some ways better and in some ways worse than expectations, which has remained on or around 48% for some time. This intuitively makes sense as going to university is such a fundamental life event that it is difficult to fully prepare for and may reasonably lead to satisfaction in some aspects and disappointment in others. However, there is evidence of more students having their expectations met or exceeded over the past year or two.

Having an experience exactly as expected is relatively rare, but at 16% this is at the joint-highest level it has been over the past 11 years. This implies that students can obtain – from social media, word of mouth and other information sources – a more realistic view of what university life is really like, something which might have been particularly difficult during the pandemic.

We have also seen a statistically significant increase in students saying their experience is better than expected (from 19% to 22%), contrasted by a significant decline in those saying their experience has been worse (15% to 13%). The net result of this is that there is now a net positive view compared to expectations, on par with pre-pandemic levels.

	Total sample	Home region / domicile Northern Ireland	Home region / domicile Wales
Better than expected	22%	13%	**29%**
Worse than expected	13%	**19%**	10%

Geographically, the most positive findings are from students from Wales (whether they were studying in Wales or elsewhere), with a significantly higher proportion who felt their expectations were exceeded. By contrast, students from Northern Ireland were more likely to find their experience worse than expected, despite their being a positive increase in value for money perceptions among this cohort this year (see previous section). This is a similar picture to that identified in 2023, which underlines this as a notable finding despite the relatively small base sizes for Wales and Northern Ireland respectively.

The maximum Government maintenance support available to students varies significantly by domicile. Within the four parts of the UK, maintenance levels are highest among students from Wales and lowest among students from Northern Ireland.[14] This might reasonably be contributing at some level to how students feel their experience has played out compared to what they expected although, as we shall see later, many students across all parts of the UK supplement their income by spending significant time in paid employment.

4.2 Why expectations are not met

There has been little material change in why expectations are not met, with responses focusing on teaching quality, course organisation and student support. Despite the relatively recent marking and assessment boycott, students are not any more likely this year to mention issues with feedback impacting on their experience – which fits with positive ratings of feedback we will go on to see later in the report.

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[14] Hill, K, Padley, M and Freeman, J (2024) *A minimum income standard for students*. Oxford: HEPI and London: TechnologyOne, p 55. Available at: www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/A-Minimum-Income-Standard-for-Students-1.pdf [accessed 16 May 2024].

Over the past two years, and continuing into 2024, there have been fewer concerns around in-person interaction with staff and / or students, which makes intuitive sense as these issues were at their most prevalent during the pandemic.
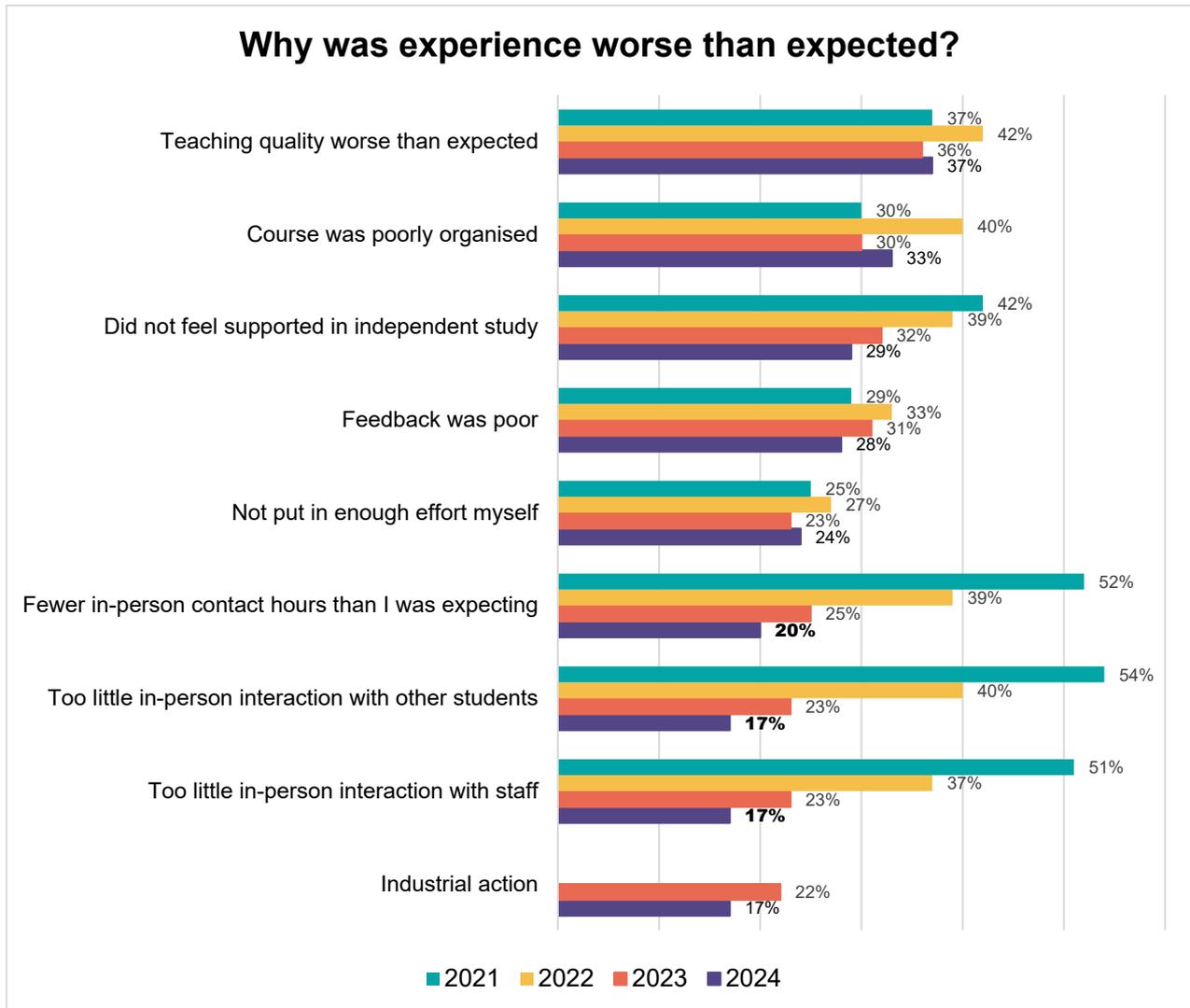
Why was experience worse than expected?

Category	2021	2022	2023	2024
Teaching quality worse than expected	37%	42%	36%	37%
Course was poorly organised	30%	40%	30%	33%
Did not feel supported in independent study	42%	39%	32%	29%
Feedback was poor	29%	33%	31%	28%
Not put in enough effort myself	25%	27%	23%	24%
Fewer in-person contact hours than I was expecting	52%	39%	25%	**20%**
Too little in-person interaction with other students	54%	40%	23%	**17%**
Too little in-person interaction with staff	51%	37%	23%	**17%**
Industrial action			22%	17%

Chart displays top 10 mentions. Ranked in order of 2024 results.

There were also a sizeable number of "other" comments this year – 7% of responses. These covered a range of issues and help bring some of the challenges to life.

Expectations not met – selected open comments
"I struggled more than I thought I would."
"The course isn't exactly what I was expecting and it's hard to talk to anyone to make friends."
"Very hard to make friends and find time to socialise as a commuter, many if not all societies are only accessible to people who live on campus as they are held late at night and transport is not available."
"The cost of living away from home causes a lot of stress."
"Lecture hours are way too late and seem catered only to campus students - 4pm to 6pm daily is ridiculous."
"Hard to participate in social aspects of university given accommodation is far away."
"Money is the main cause of my worries."
"I'm having to work more and more to cover my living costs and I think my learning and grades are being affected."
"Travelling has been worse than I imagined and the timetable is not ideal for those living off campus."

In particular, there were a number of mentions which all spoke to the theme of cost-of-living challenges, in some cases these also illustrated how commuting can impact on attendance, with other comments describing the difficulties in balancing work and study.

4.3   Why expectations are exceeded

This year it is encouraging to see significantly more students (22%) say their experience is better than expectations compared to the proportion (13%) who feel it has been worse.

Why was experience better than expected?
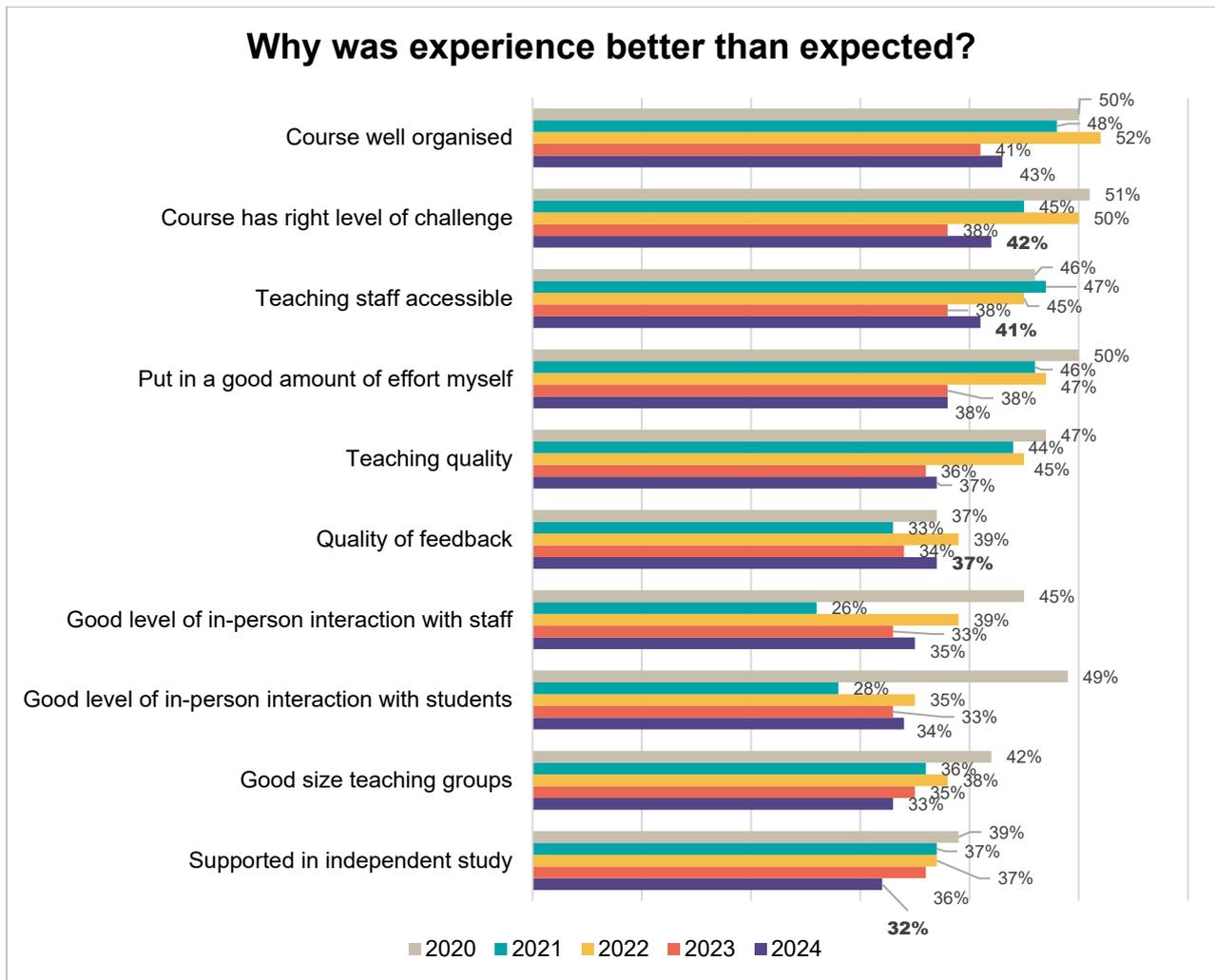
*Chart displays top 10 mentions. Ranked in order of 2024 results.*

There is general consistency in the reasons behind this, with respondents citing good organisation, good quality teaching and good quality feedback – which has increased since last year. There is also evidence of the importance of students feeling challenged by their course and recognising when they have put in a good amount of effort.

5 The choice to go to university

5.1 Whether students would make same choice again

One of the regular key 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 what they now know, whether they would have made a different decision.[15]

While keeping the core options the same, we tweaked the question slightly this year to provide more clarity on the level of apprenticeship that might be selected, splitting into degree apprenticeship or non-degree apprenticeship. Hence this aspect of the question is not directly comparable to previous years, but the other aspects are.[16]

Whether students would make the same choice again

Option	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
No change - happy with choice	64%	58%	59%	58%	60%
Different university	11%	9%	10%	9%	**8%**
Do an apprenticeship (level not specified)	4%	5%	6%	7%	
Do a degree apprenticeship					7%
Different course	8%	7%	8%	7%	7%
Different course and university	6%	5%	5%	6%	6%
Defer study to a year later		11%	7%	6%	**4%**
Get a job	3%	2%	3%	3%	3%
Do a non-degree apprenticeship					2%
Do something else outside HE	2%	1%	2%	2%	2%

Where there is no data in a particular year this denotes a new option introduced later on. The option "degree apprenticeship" was hidden in the Survey for respondents who were already enrolled on one, but for consistency they have been included in the base for all options charted.

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[15] Advance HE and HEPI are currently supporting a team led by Professor Nicola Dandridge at the University of Bristol to conduct dedicated research into what lies behind students' perceptions of their choice of course and institution and what information they may have required if they wished they had made a different decision.

[16] For completeness, we have included the previous years' figures in the graph for the option "do an apprenticeship", which was changed in 2024.

Overall, six out of ten full-time undergraduates are happy with their choice of course and institution, a small but statistically significant improvement from last year. However, this overall level does not yet match that achieved in 2020, before the most significant impact of the pandemic on university life.

Balancing this small increase, there are fewer students who would have taken a gap year – an aspect that has been declining since the end of the pandemic, and also fewer respondents who would choose a different university.

The proportion who would have chosen a degree apprenticeship is relatively strong, with indications that this is a key consideration among bachelor's degree students in particular (by some distance the largest cohort), while a non-degree apprenticeship is a clear consideration for some students currently enrolled on HE certificates or diplomas.

	Currently studying					
	Foundation certificate or degree	**Degree apprenticeship**	**Cert. or Dip. HE**	**HNC or HND**	**Bachelor's degree**	**Integrated Master's**
2024 would do a degree apprenticeship	6%	N/A	7%	7%	8%	4%
2024 would do a non-degree apprenticeship	2%	**7%**	**6%**	**6%**	1%	1%

Statistically significant differences between columns in bold.

5.2   Whether considered leaving

To complement the above question assessing the decision to choose to go to university, we added a question a few years ago asking students whether they had considered leaving their course, with a further question enquiring as to the reasons behind this.[17]

% considered withdrawing from or leaving university
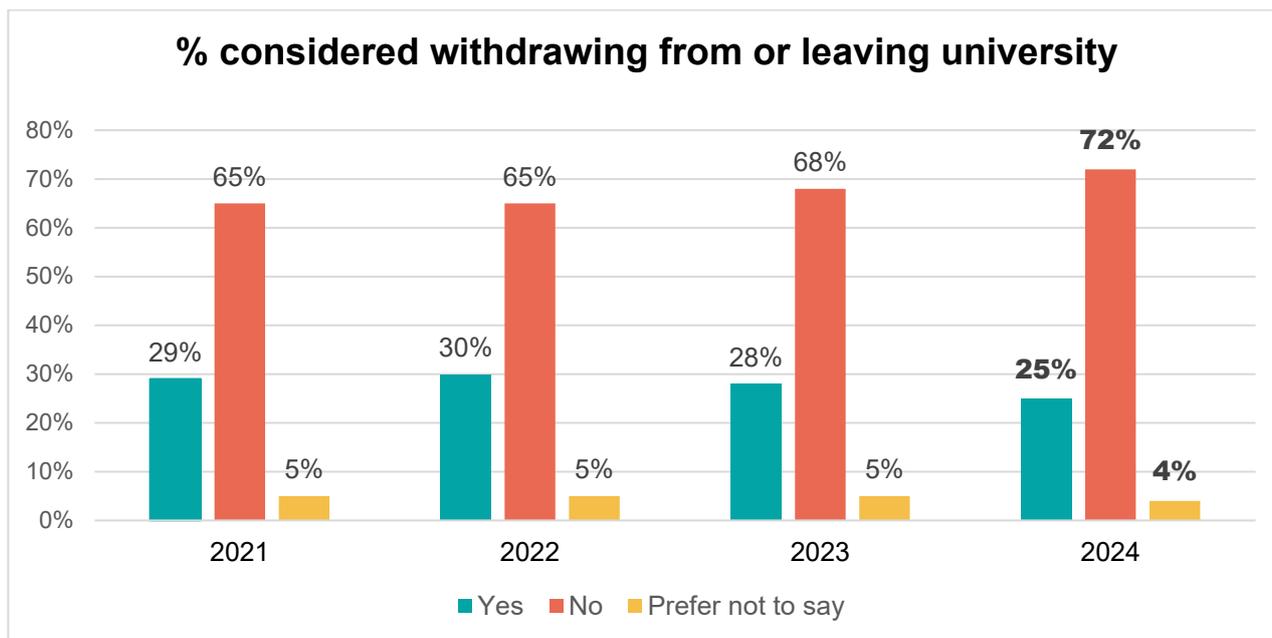
Statistically significant differences between 2023 and 2024 in bold.

In another positive movement this year, the propensity to have considered leaving has declined significantly, by three percentage points to 25%. This represents a clear change from the end of the pandemic when this was around 30%. Balancing this, it is striking to see that most of the other responses are students saying they have not considered leaving, rather than choosing not to give an answer. Accordingly, these results represent a clear positive shift over the past few years.

Although this is an encouraging story, there remains around one in four who has considered leaving, and the relative fluctuations in the reasons driving this enable us to highlight some of the main issues of concern to these students. Looking at these reasons, mental health issues continue to dominate, but at a slightly lower level. Against this, there has been a further rise in the significance of cost-of-living (ie financial) challenges, which have increased significantly again and are now a direct factor in considering leaving 11% of the time. This provides further evidence of financial concerns having a key influence on university life and creating pressure that is having a material impact on students' studies, although it should be

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[17] Hillman, N (2024) *'Dropouts or stopouts or comebackers or potential completers?': non-continuation of students in the UK*. Oxford: HEPI. Available at: www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Dropouts-or-stopouts-or-comebackers-or-potential-completers-Non-continuation-of-students-in-the-UK.pdf [accessed 16 May 2024].

considered that, when considering leaving, financial pressures and mental health concerns may be related to each other.

Reasons considered leaving

Reason	2021	2022	2023	2024
My mental / emotional health	34%	34%	29%	28%
Financial difficulties	4%	6%	8%	11%
Course delivery	8%	7%	5%	6%
Family or personal problems	3%	4%	5%	6%
Difficulty balancing study and other commitments	3%	4%	6%	5%

Legend: ■ 2021 ■ 2022 ■ 2023 ■ 2024
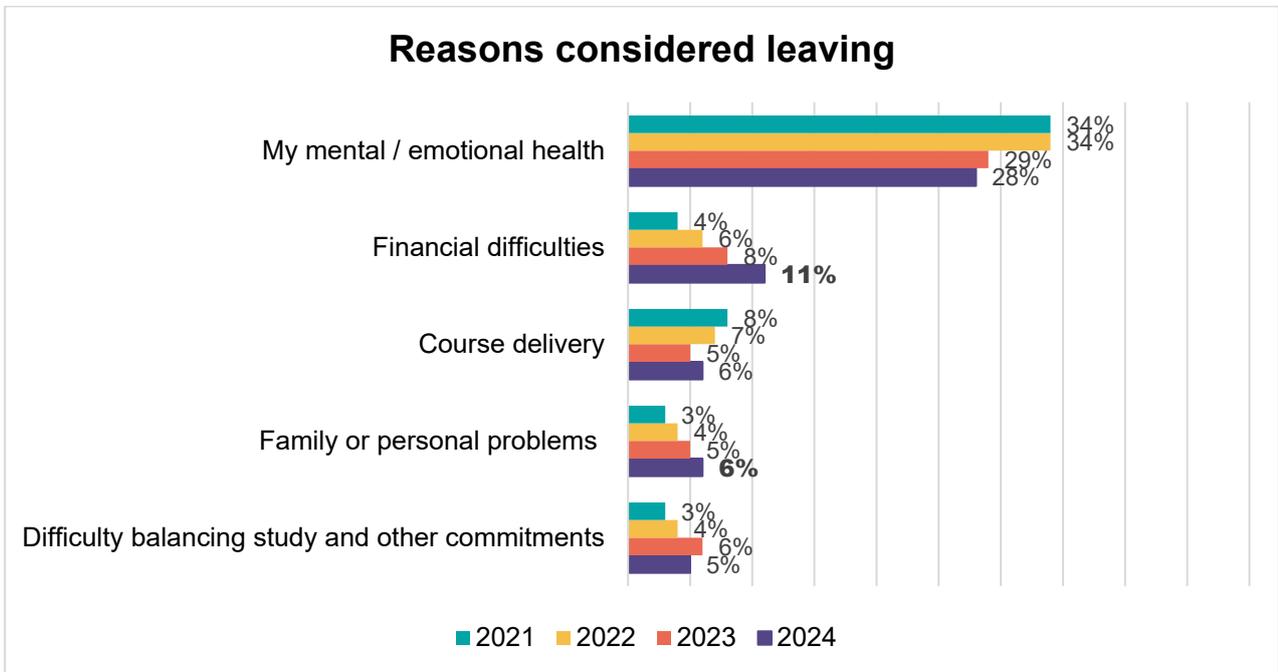
Chart displays top five mentions. Ranked in order of 2024 results. Chart based on all students who had considered leaving.

6 Improvements to the student academic experience

This section provides additional, qualitative analysis of the large number of open free-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 and written up by Dr Panagiota (Peny) Sotiropoulou, Mixed-Methods Researcher at Advance HE, with the aim of identifying the topics raised most frequently by those students who responded. The 4,317 valid responses were analysed thematically using Atlas.ti software, following an inductive approach.[18] Identified themes were then ranked according to the number of quotations associated with each one of them, that is, the number of times students raised each topic. The resulting themes identified in rank order were: quantity and quality of academic support; employability; delivery modes and practices; cost-of-living considerations; course organisation and administration; infrastructures; and mental health support.

6.1 Quality and quantity of academic support

In general, students want more and better-quality academic support. This is most often related to access to academic staff (specifically, tutors) and feedback provisions. In terms of access, students ask for more contact hours and meaningful encounters with academic staff who are supportive and responsive to their needs, echoing themes highlighted in a recent Wonkhe article.[19]

"More time with lecturers for adding questions and discussing progression / improvements relating to my work."
"Teachers are a key element of a student's academic experience. Educational institutions should promote interaction between teachers and students, including regular academic counselling, seminars, and online discussions. This helps students get more in-depth academic guidance and support."
"Meet with students to discuss their work at length and do regular check-ups with them to make sure they are coping."

When it comes to feedback, students want timelier, more personalised and standardised provisions across modules – although it should be noted that feedback in general rates strongly this year in terms of rating scales, as covered later in this report. They highlight the

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[18] https://atlasti.com/

[19] Maxwell, R and McVitty, D (2024) 'Five aspirations for effective academic support systems'. *Wonkhe* blog, 11 March. Available at: wonkhe.com/blogs/five-aspirations-for-effective-academic-support-systems/ [accessed 15 April 2024].

importance of feedback that is constructive and looks forward, indicating clear actions that they can take to improve.

"Offer more opportunities for feedback and ensure content of feedback is consistent across modules. More often than not, some tutors will provide little to no feedback while others in the same module will give more detailed feedback."
"Release the assignment feedback earlier so there is time for students to have office hours with lecturers to discuss about how to improve for the next coming assessment."
"Deliver feedback more regularly and more promptly and be more proactive about explaining what we need to do to improve."

6.2   Employability

The title of a recent academic journal article perfectly summarises the comments raised by students regarding what institutions could do to engage them more and thus improve their academic experience: offering a "relevant, practical and connected to the real world" curriculum.[20]

First, students crave more practical and context-specific learning, which will enable them to understand the application of their studies through real-world examples. In other words, students call for more authentic methods of teaching and learning, and assessment, that will make their studies more engaging while enhancing their employability.

"More engaging seminars, more real-life tasks to prepare us for the working world."
"Increased access to real world application of the course work."
"Allow more field trips so that students can have practical experience of what they are being taught."

Moreover, students highlight work-integrated learning opportunities as another aspect they want, such as placements, internships and opportunities for industry collaborations. As previous research shows, embedding such work experience elements in degree programmes are some of the most effective employability enhancing practices.[21]

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[20] O'Neil, G and Short, A (2023) 'Relevant, practical and connected to the real world: what higher education students say engages them in the curriculum', *Irish Education Studies*: 1-18. Available at: doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2023.2221663

[21] Inceoglu, I, Selenko, E, McDowall, A and Schlachter, S (2019) '(How) do work placements work? Scrutinizing the quantitative evidence for a theory-driven future research agenda', *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 110: 317-337.

"It could help me to better gain work experience while I am studying."
"I feel that having placement hours alongside teaching could be useful as it would help consolidate what we are learning in a more productive way."
"Develop partnerships with industry leaders to provide students with real-world exposure and opportunities for practical application of their knowledge."

Last but not least, students bring up the need for relevant career advice and planning to be available to them and embedded throughout their curricula.

"Provide greater support and transparency regarding what's required to get employment."
"Develop robust career development services, providing students with guidance on internships, job placements, and skill-building opportunities to better prepare them for the transition to the professional world."
"Provide career development guidance and resources, including internship placements, career counselling and information on employment opportunities. This allows students to understand the needs and trends in the professional field while studying."

6.3   Delivery modes and practices

Alongside requesting more, and more meaningful, contact with staff, as outlined earlier in this section, students also raise their preference for this to happen face-to-face. Students mention in-person teaching and learning provisions as more enriching, not only in terms of academic merit, but also because of the opportunities they provide for increased interactions and community-building with staff and peers. As Hodgson aptly puts it, "the essence of community building lies in the human encounter – empathetic, understanding, and supportive academic staff, and a community of peers who might also become friends".[22] For this to materialise, students want in-person contact.

"Less online lessons and more lectures. I believe in-person learning is always better and gets you out of the house."
"Slightly less online lectures and more in person as I believe it is more beneficial as people tend to contribute less online than in person."
"Have more time face to face with staff and students rather than spending most of it doing independent learning."

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[22] Hodgson, R (2024) 'Time to go back to basics on belonging', *Wonkhe* blog, 22 March. Available at: wonkhe.com/blogs/time-to-go-back-to-basics-on-belonging/ [accessed 15 April 2024].

Students' comments about smaller-group teaching and learning provisions, and increased opportunities for group-based work, also seem to relate to this overall idea of more close-knitted environments that nurture in-depth discussions and fruitful experiences to develop.

"More in-person contact sessions with smaller groups to have better discussions."
"I feel like there could be more in-person sessions with teaching staff. I'm not against online lectures, but I feel like there are more opportunities to ask questions and get feedback in face-to-face sessions, which also allow students to work with (and get to know) their peers."
"Smaller groups/sessions – I know this may be difficult as some courses such as mine have a large amount of people. However, smaller study focused sessions could help engage students and allow us to feel that classroom environment many of us are used to from secondary school. Furthermore, it creates a sense of community and belonging."
"They could help to arrange smaller groups of students to work together on assignments and topics. This would help as we would be gaining experience and knowledge from others, but also building friendships which is very important."

However, it should not be omitted that the flexibility provided by online options and provisions was also highlighted in students' comments, mostly as an enabling factor for access and participation as well as a supplementary means to delve deeper or catch up on module aspects. For this reason, blended learning and hybrid modes of delivery seem to remain the best option to accommodate all students.

"More flexibility - eg the option for online seminars - especially as in London there is constant strikes in the transport sector and they refuse to accommodate this."
"I personally think hybrid/remote study works for me better as I can manage and dedicate my time between work and study more efficiently, and self-independent study works better, when you study at your pace, in the right environment, especially for students who live far from campus. Thus, it would be great if flexible options can be offered to students."
"Be more flexible with attending lectures online. During the period of Covid-19, most lectures were performed online. This supports students who live in excess of 60 miles from university and also disabled students who may be well enough to listen to the lecture but not physically attend in person. This would support students with their attendance."

6.4   Cost of living considerations

Multiple publications within the last year or so have described the financial pressures current university students face (for example, the 2023 House of Commons briefing paper on students and rising cost of living;[23] Student Money Survey 2023;[24] the report published in March 2023 by the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Students;[25] the Office for National Statistics' February 2023 Student Cost of Living Insights Study;[26] HEPI and TechnologyOne's May 2024 paper[27]). This is further testament to how much of an urgent topic this is for students and their academic experience.

For this reason, it should come as no surprise that, once again, cost-of-living considerations clearly emerge from students' open-ended comments. Most frequently mentioned are requests around reduction and / or provision of more flexible payment plans for accommodation and tuition fees in combination with more financial support opportunities, such as bursaries or providing paid jobs for students.

"Financial advice on how to spend and save money. Help students who commute to university."
"Minimise fees/costs so that students feel less pressure in their day-to-day lives. It significantly increases our stress, even if we aren't below the poverty line. Token gestures are worthless and frankly insulting. We are aware that we need to save and wear an extra jumper. What would be particularly helpful would be access to financial management support – not just reminders to stay on top of it, but support to help us set up a bank account and a savings account. Related to this is increasing the amount of (reasonably priced) accommodation, because the housing shortage is severe."
"I would like to be given more of a chance to apply for sponsorship or bursaries as the financial strain is having an impact on my studies."

[23] Lewis, J (2023) *Students and the rising cost of living* (HC briefing paper 9886). London: House of Commons Library. Available at: researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9886/CBP-9886.pdf

[24] Brown, L (2023) '*Student Money Survey 2023 – results*'. London: Save the Student. Available at: www.savethestudent.org/money/surveys/student-money-survey-2023-results.html [accessed 15 April 2024].

[25] All Party Parliamentary Group for Students (2023) *Report of the inquiry into the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on students*. London: APPG for Students. Available at: appg-students.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/APPG-Students-Report-Cost-of-Living-Inquiry-220323.pdf [accessed 15 April 2024].

[26] Office for National Statistics (2023) 'Cost of living and higher education students, England: 30 January to 13 February 2023'. *ONS* statistical bulletin, 24 February. Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/educationandchildcare/bulletins/costoflivingandhighereducationstudentsengland/30januaryto13february2023 [accessed 15 April 2024].

[27] Freeman, J (2024) *A minimum income standard for students.* Oxford: HEPI and London: TechnologyOne. Available at: www.hepi.ac.uk/2024/05/09/a-minimum-income-standard-for-students [accessed 21 May 2024].

6.5 Course organisation and administration

According to Horrod, students use course organisation and administration as a benchmark on which to base their academic experience.[28] This is reflected in the current student comments, with mentions of improved timetabling and workload as well as assessment volume and distribution management.

Timetabling comments highlight the need for better facilities' management as well as timely and clear communications, which enable students to attend their sessions and plan their work and other commitments accordingly, mirroring relevant points raised in the literature.[29]

"The timetable could be better constructed […] I find that sometimes the schedules for lectures or workshops are quite far apart, so it is difficult to utilise our time well during the time in between, or that we have an online lesson right after the in-person workshop, so that we need to leave early."
"Organisation of our course – we get our timetables extremely late (a weekend before the semesters start) making it very hard to balance outside life for example finding a part time job – many opportunities were missed and also other things like booking healthcare appointments etc."
"Timetabling and cancelling sessions/seminars and lectures are the greatest challenges in my institution."
"My institution could provide better organised timetables/schedules that are not as strenuous and do not stretch into inconvenient times in order to make room for students to seek part time employment and rest."

However, distributing the required workload and assessments across modules and terms as evenly as possible is the theme raised most frequently. Ensuring that module workload and assessments are proportionately spread out and appropriately scheduled promotes a conducive learning environment. Learners are not able to produce their best work if they have multiple assignments to complete within a short timeframe and, similarly, staff have fewer chances to be able to mark and feed back in a timely manner.[30] For this reason, students think that a more collaborative approach to assessment and feedback planning, capitalising on course-level oversights, would improve their academic experience.

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[28] Horrod, S (2019) 'The recontextualisation of higher education policy in learning and teaching practices: the discursive construction of community', in Montessori, N M, Farrelly, M and Mulderrig, J (eds) *Critical policy discourse analysis*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, pp 73-96.

[29] Kaur, M and Saini, S (2021) 'A review of metaheuristic techniques for solving university course timetabling problem', in Goar, V, Kuri, M, Kumar, R and Senjyu, T (eds) *Advances in information communication technology and computing*. Singapore: Springer Nature, pp 19-25.

[30] Knight, S and Ferrell, G (2022) '*Principles of good assessment and feedback*'. Bristol: Jisc. Available at: www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/principles-of-good-assessment-and-feedback [accessed 15 April 2024].

"More well-thought deadlines. Often all of the deadlines are bunched together in one week and then we have weeks of no deadlines at all."
"Communicate with each other to spread out our deadlines rather than have them all due at once."
"Don't stuff so much work that requires time to be done well into such a short timeframe."

6.6 Infrastructures – access to study spaces and resources

Campus learning and living spaces, whether formal (such as classrooms) or informal (libraries), can impact student outcomes.[31] Moving towards the standardisation of hybrid learning modes, quality and ease of access of online resources also significantly influences the student academic experience.[32] Along these lines, student comments reveal their desire for better built and online infrastructure, allowing them to easily access spaces and resources that are appropriate and necessary for their studies. Students talk about the need for more and better study spaces as well as educational materials that are accessible to and adequate for all students. This consists, for example, of more spaces for group study or better equipped labs as well as improved online learning platforms and educational materials.

"One thing my institution could do to improve the quality of the academic experience for students is to provide learning facilities and good lecture hall for students."
"Enhance technological infrastructure to facilitate seamless online learning experiences, incorporating advanced e-learning platforms, virtual labs, and interactive multimedia resources to complement traditional teaching methods."
"Give more in-campus group study spaces to book. There is barely any group study space availability for booking even though some assignments need group work"
"Equipment is an enormous part of our course as a lot of our work and time is spent editing and producing content on computers. The computers provided in editing locations are completely unfit for purpose – they do not have the specs needed to edit properly. They constantly freeze, corrupt, and lose work that has taken hours."

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[31] Oliveira, S, Tahsiri, M and Everett, G (2022) *Campus spaces and places: impact on student outcomes. Review of evidence.* UK: AUDE/HEDQF/Willmott Dixon.
[32] Brassington, L (2022) *The future of digital learning resources: students' expectations versus reality.* Oxford: HEPI.

6.7 Mental health support

The most recent available data shows that 30.4% of the total first-degree undergraduate student population in 2021-22 disclosed a mental health condition.[33] This number is probably higher in reality, as it is based on students' self-assessment, and underreporting of mental health issues is a widely acknowledged challenge facing higher education. In recent years, the coronavirus pandemic and rises in the cost of living have been added stressors for students' wellbeing, with additional evidence showing that universities are seeing an increase in the severity and complexity of mental health issues reported by students. [34] [35] [36] The Office for Students clearly states that it is important that all students can access the mental health support and information they need while at university, as poor mental health can have a negative impact on students' ability to participate in and complete higher education courses.[37]

Following the above pattern, student comments highlight the need for appropriate mental health support to enable them to thrive academically and address adversities they might be facing.

"More mental health support, not having to wait months for counselling etc."
"Increase support services for mental health and well-being to ensure students have resources for a balanced academic and personal life."
"Expand mental health support services, including counselling and well-being programs, to address the mental health challenges that students may face during their academic journey."
"Improve mental health services for the students who are studying there. Mental health assistance is inaccessible for many students within the university, and the course is extremely mentally overwhelming and so this help should be readily available."

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[33] Advance HE (2023) *Equality in higher education: student statistical report 2023*. York: Advance HE.
[34] Office for National Statistics (2022) 'Coronavirus and higher education students: 25 February to 7 March 2022' *ONS* statistical bulletin, 21 March. Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/bulletins/coronavirus andhighereducationstudents/25februaryto7march2022 [accessed 15 April 2024].
[35] Office for Students (2023) *Studying during rises in the cost of living*. Bristol and London: Office for Students.

[36] IFF Research (2023) *HE providers' policies and practices to support student mental health*. London: Department for Education.

[37] Office for Students (2023) *Meeting the mental health needs of students*. Bristol and London: Office for Students.

7 Paid employment

A proportion of students have aways needed to and / or chosen to spend time working for pay. Going back just a few years, this represented a significant minority, between 35% and 40%. In 2022 and 2023 we saw a step change to a clear majority in 2023 who said they were in paid employment during term time. Considering this Survey comprises full-time undergraduates only, this was a major finding and clear evidence of financial pressures impacting on student life.

In 2024 the situation appears to have stabilised with little evidence of further change in the proportion of students in employment – there was a non-significant increase of one percentage point.

Students in paid employment in term time

Year	No paid employment	Any paid employment
2015	65%	35%
2016	64%	36%
2017	64%	36%
2018	63%	37%
2019	61%	39%
2020	58%	42%
2021	66%	34%
2022	55%	45%
2023	45%	55%
2024	44%	56%
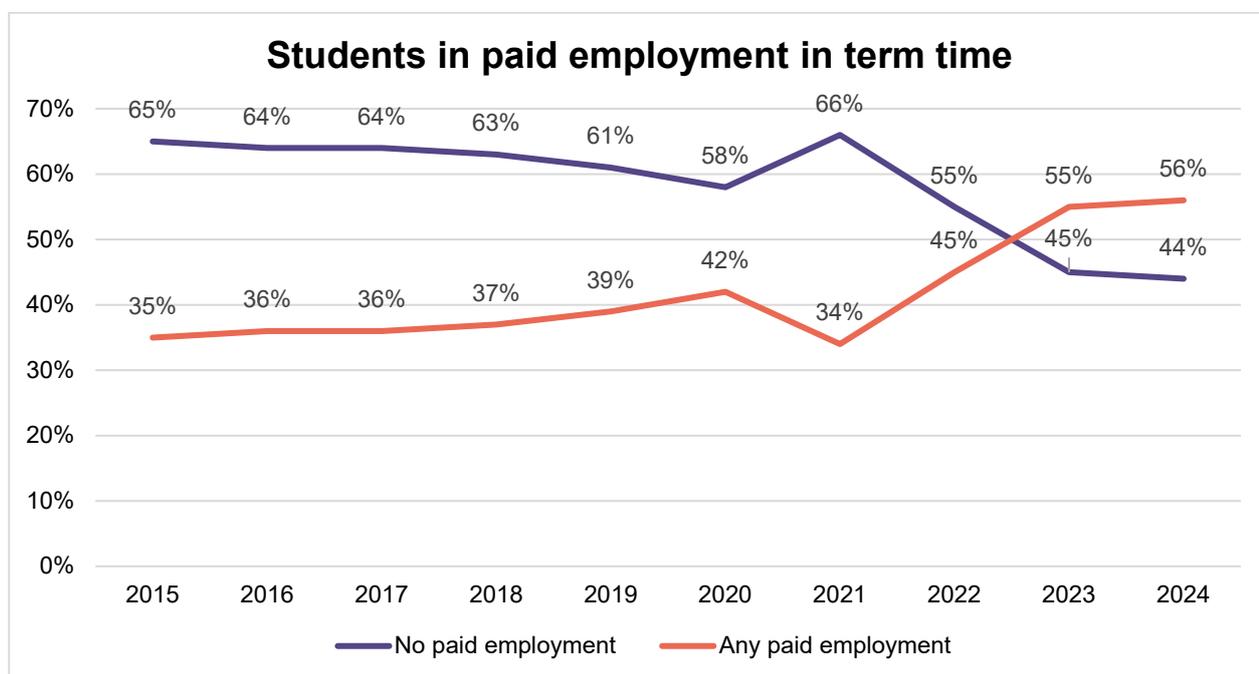
That said, although there has not been a material change in the proportion of students who are in paid employment, there is clear evidence of a major increase in the number of hours being worked by those students.

Paid employment – mean hours per week term time

Year	All students	Students in paid employment
2020	5.0	11.9
2021	4.6	13.7
2022	5.5	12.3
2023	7.5	13.5
2024	8.2	14.5

■ All students   ■ Students in paid employment
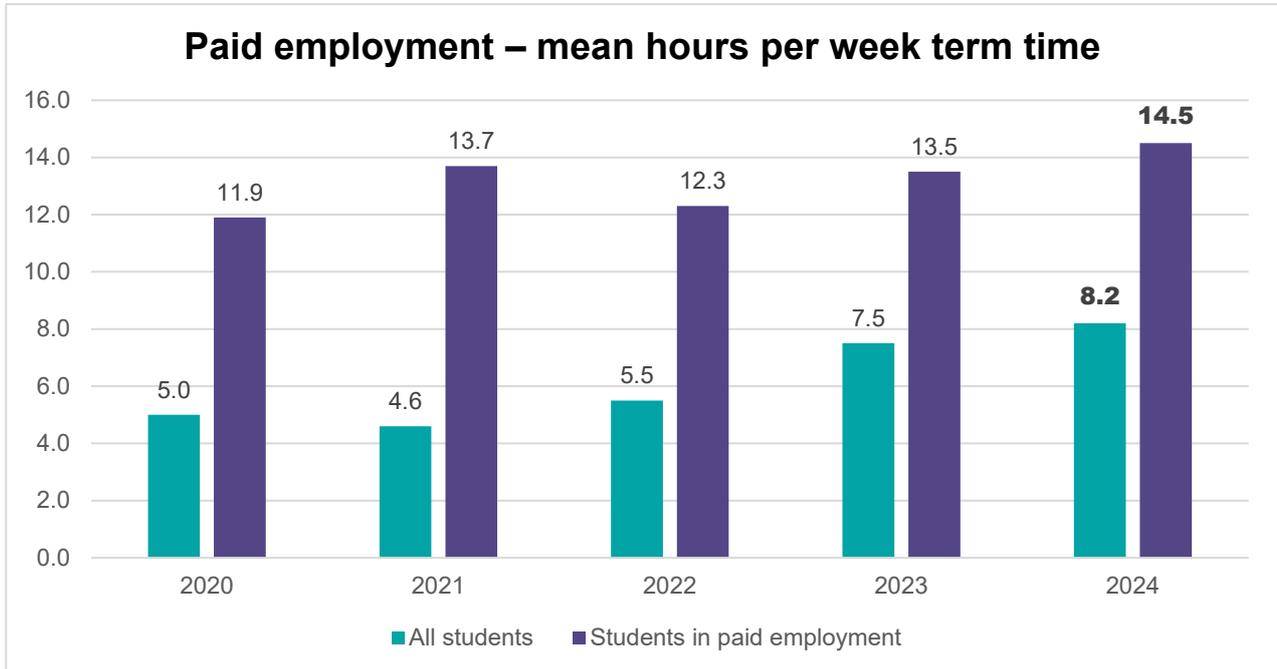
Across all students in the Survey, there is now an average of 8.2 hours spent in employment – a significant increase. This rises to 14.5 hours if we calculate this based only on students who work, which represents a sizeable number of hours, potentially the equivalent of the time some students spend in timetabled classes or independent study.

Specific subgroups with a high propensity to be in paid employment

Subgroup	2023	2024
All respondents	55%	56%
Scheduled contact hours 20+	60%	63%
Studying in Greater London	63%	65%
Studying in Northern Ireland	70%	65%
Aged 26+	71%	71%
Commmute 10 miles or more	66%	67%
Caring for others	75%	72%
Care experienced	85%	80%

■ 2023   ■ 2024
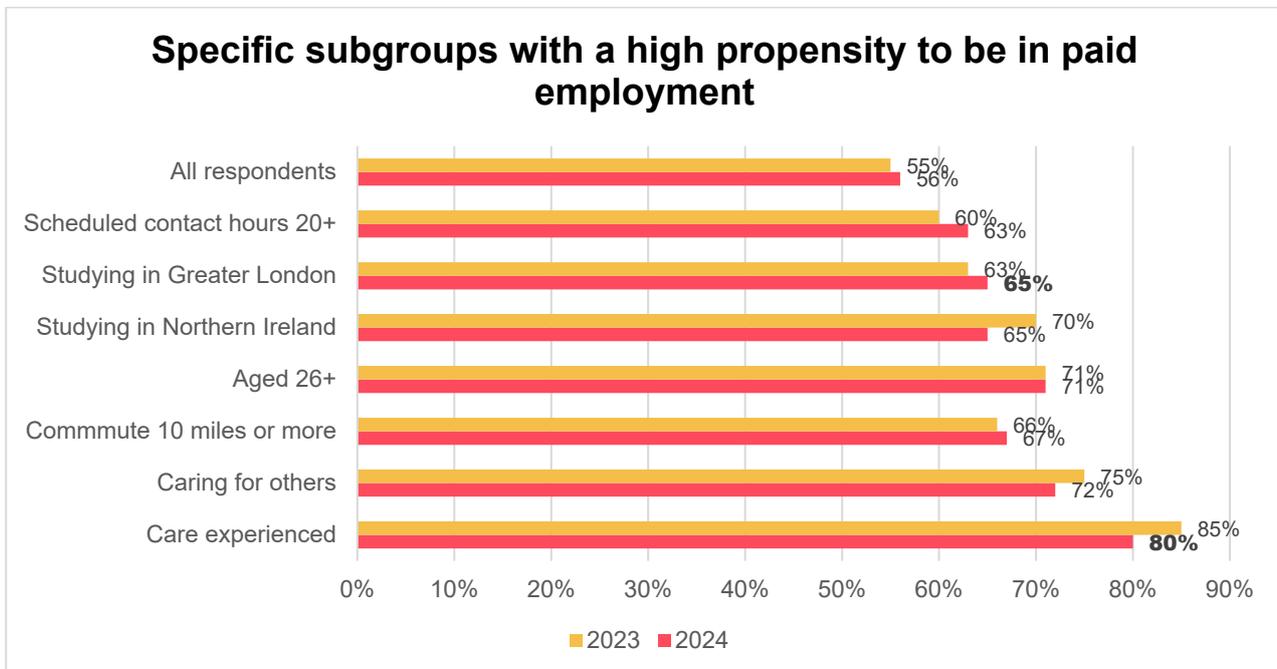
In the context of these extended working hours, the data tells a clear story around the extent to which students are having to balance paid employment with other pressures. Employed students are more likely to have high volumes of contact hours, as well as needing to spend time commuting and / or caring for others. This range of demands potentially requires specific support mechanisms to enable students to organise their time and ensure their studies are prioritised.

The above chart also highlights the very high proportion of students studying in Northern Ireland and London who work, as well as those from care-experienced backgrounds, all of which potentially relate to a greater financial need due to location and / or background.[38] In the case of students in London, a more buoyant job market is also likely to be a factor in more students being able to work to help counteract the greater expenses of living and studying in London.[39]

7.1   Paid employment and the Minimum Income Standard (MIS)

In May 2024, HEPI and TechnologyOne published a detailed report into how much income students need if they are to have an acceptable minimum standard of living (MIS).[40] Among the new areas of analysis in the report, there is an assessment of how the proposed annual MIS of £18,632 outside London and £21,774 within London would only likely be partially covered by Government maintenance support – set at different levels across the four parts of the UK.[41]

Accordingly, paid employment is one of the ways in which this shortfall could be made up, with the report identifying how many hours of paid work per week, at the minimum wage, would need to be worked on average in order to fill the gap.[42] Due to the size of the shortfall being based on the different levels of maintenance support available by domicile, this analysis was conducted separately for each of the four parts of the UK.

Given we have robust data from our Survey for how many hours per week students are working (during term term) we have taken the opportunity to compare this broadly with the analysis in the HEPI and TechnologyOne report. As seen in the chart below, this high-level comparison shows that, for England, Scotland and Wales, students who work are doing so at levels not far removed from the levels required to make up the average maintenance shortfall, and in the case of Wales, this is

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[38] Allen, B (2023) 'More Northern Ireland students taking on part-time work'. *BBC News*, 28 August. Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-66597965 [accessed 16 May 2024].

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

[40] Freeman, J (2024) *A minimum income standard for students.* Oxford: HEPI and London: TechnologyOne. Available at: www.hepi.ac.uk/2024/05/09/a-minimum-income-standard-for-students [accessed 21 May 2024].

[41] The report features analysis by the Centre for Research in Social Policy at Loughborough University.

[42] This assumes no parental support or other income source.

slightly above the shortfall. However, for students from Northern Ireland, such is the size of the MIS shortfall that, even with high volumes of working hours (close to the Survey average), the data implies that there is still a substantial shortfall in income that would need to be made up elsewhere or else have a major impact on the quality of student life.

Hours per week - comparison by domicile
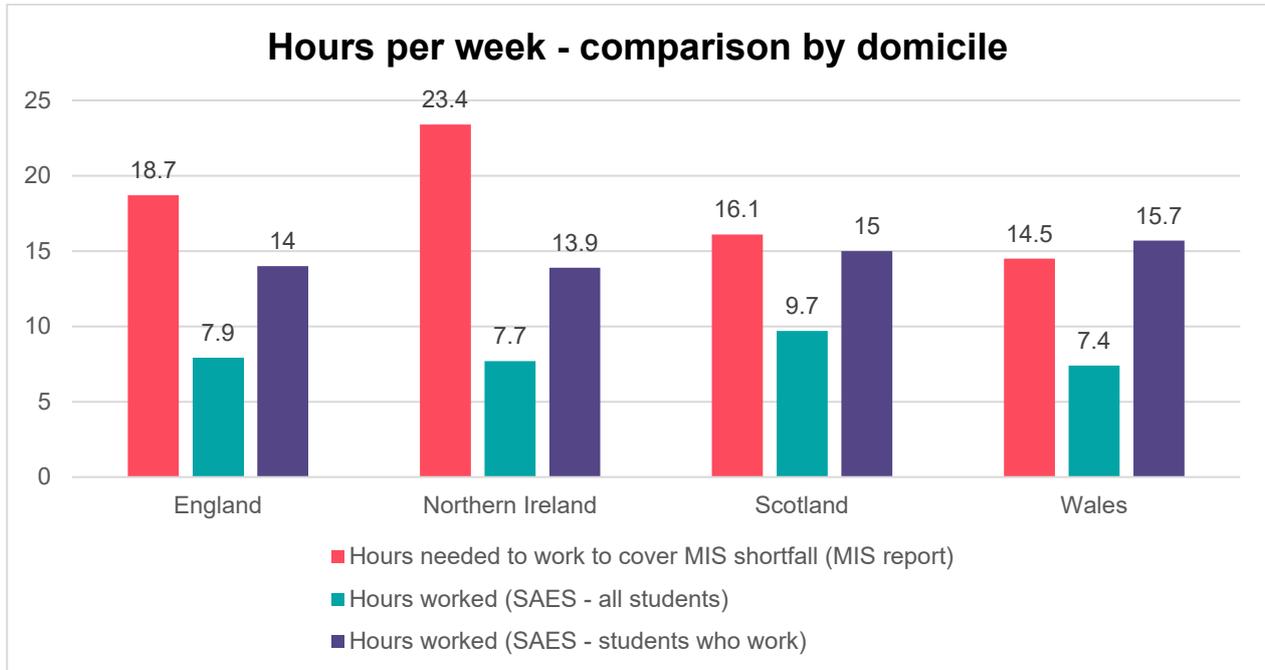
Note: this is not a direct comparison as MIS report data is based on figures for students outside London. SAES data is based on students from each domicile studying anywhere. However, for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales in particular, the proportion studying in London is very small hence the "outside London" data has been chosen for the best comparison. We should also note that SAES data is based on term-time employment.

One potential implication from this comparison is that volumes of working hours may be unlikely to rise much higher for England, Wales and Scotland, but if economic conditions allow, they have clear potential to do so for Northern Irish students.

8 Student priorities

8.1 Caring responsibilities

In 2023 we included a question on whether students had caring responsibilities (for children and / or other adults), and we are now able to make a comparison to 2024.

Do you have any caring responsibilities?

Chart comparing caring responsibilities: 2023 = 11%, 2024 = 14%
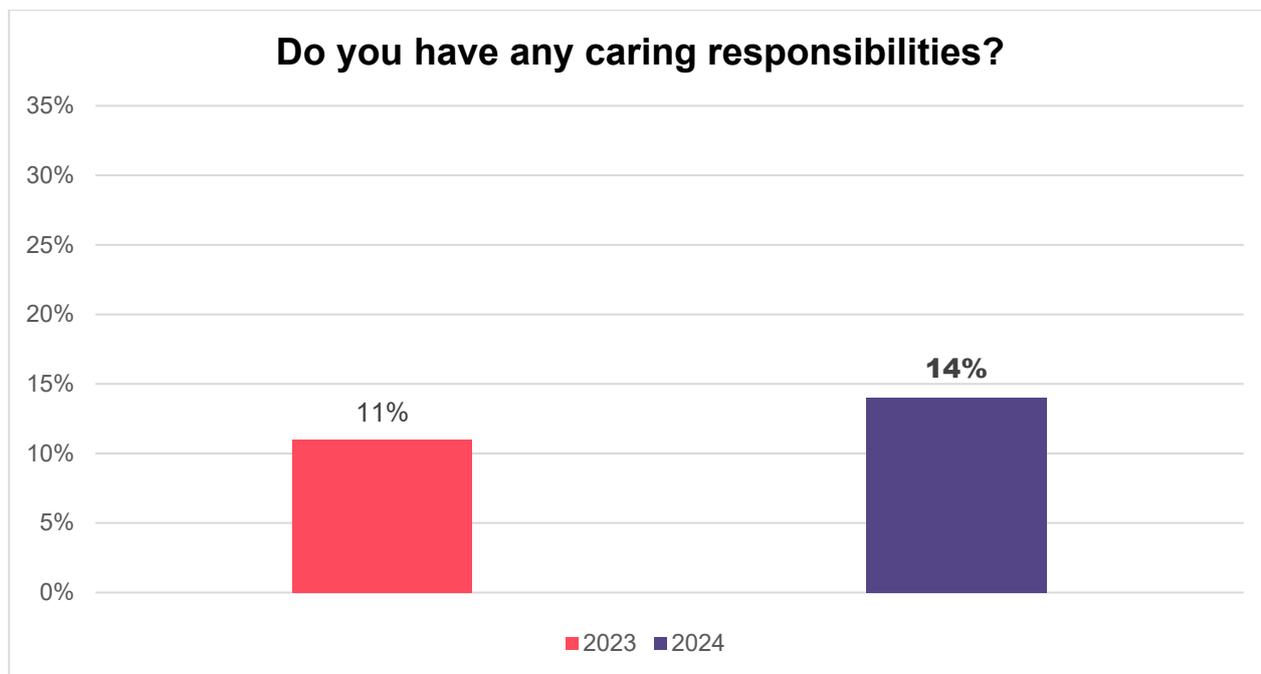
We can see there has been a statistically significant increase over the past year. This may potentially be related to the cost-of-living crisis, which could be impacting on the ability of some households to access professional care. This data also brings to light the importance of considering the needs of students with caring responsibilities, as they are a sizeable and growing cohort.

If we look at the profile of some selected demographic groups where caring responsibilities are particularly prevalent, we can see that significant numbers of students are having to balance a range of pressures alongside caring responsibilities.

Specific subgroups with a high propensity to be carers
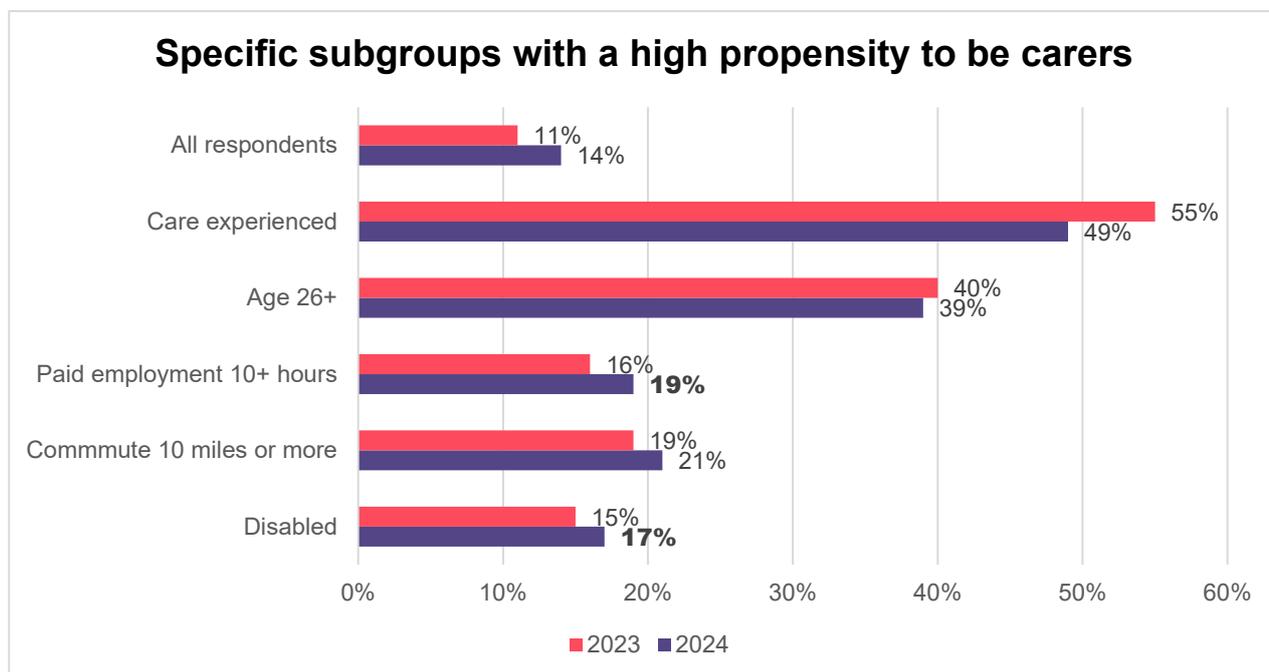
In particular, there is a clear link between spending time working, commuting and caring. We also see how disabled students are more likely (than the total population) to be carers, while nearly half of care leavers are in a caring role.

8.2 Freedom of speech on campus

Promoting freedom of speech and demonstrating an inclusive environment continues to be one of the major challenges facing HEIs in the UK.[43] We first introduced a series of questions to consider this in 2022, which we have compared over time, and for 2024 we introduced a new question on good relations on campus, which we have charted separately.

Since we introduced the questions shown in the charts below on freedom of expression, results have shown that students have, in general, been relatively satisfied on this issue. Over two thirds of our sample agree that they are comfortable expressing their views and they hear a wide variety of opinions, both of which have increased gradually over the past couple of years. Disagreement levels are relatively low – 13% for the first statement and just 7% for the second statement.

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[43] Cooper, B (2023) '*What's really happening with free speech at universities?*' London: Universities UK. Available at: www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/latest/insights-and-analysis/whats-really-happening-free-speech [accessed 16 April 2024].

I feel comfortable expressing my views even if others disagree
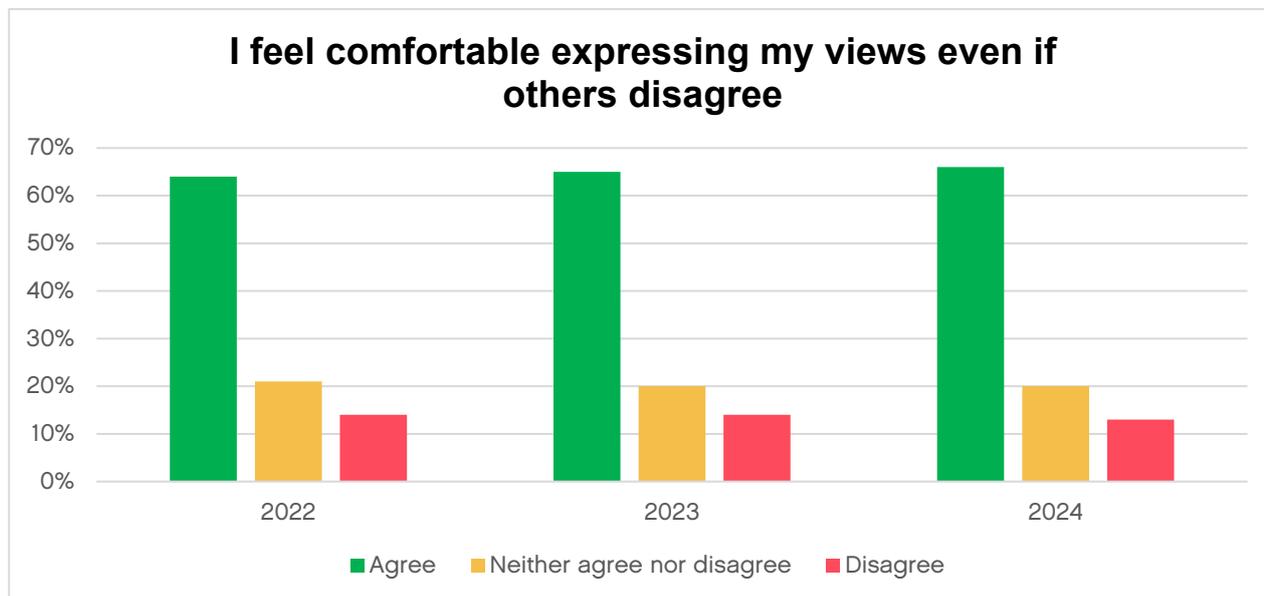
At a total sample level, therefore, a combination of the 2024 results and the findings from the last two years, particularly the low levels of disagreement with the statement, appear to point towards freedom of expression on campus not being one of the major issues of concern.

I hear a wide variety of opinions on campus, incuding those different from my own
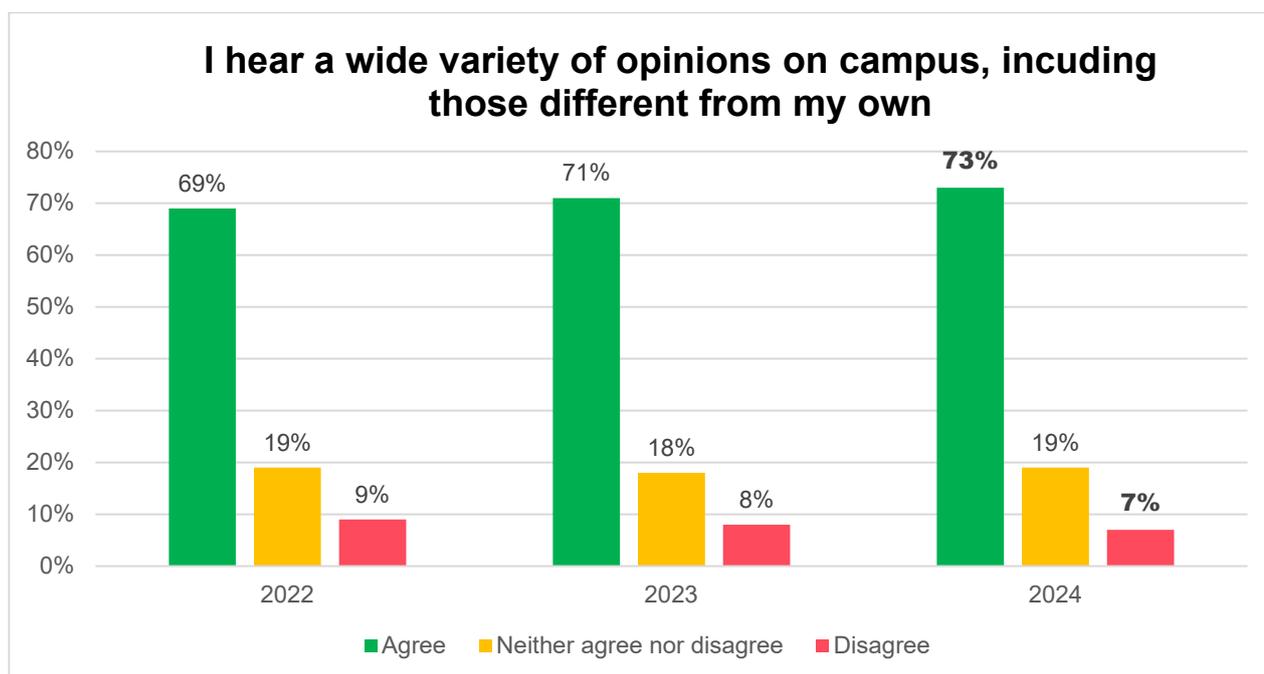
In the wake of a range of work being done across the sector to promote good relations on campus, we added a new question referring to this issue.[44] [45]

My institution promotes good relations on campus

- Agree strongly ■ Agree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Disagree ■ Disagree strongly ■ Don't know
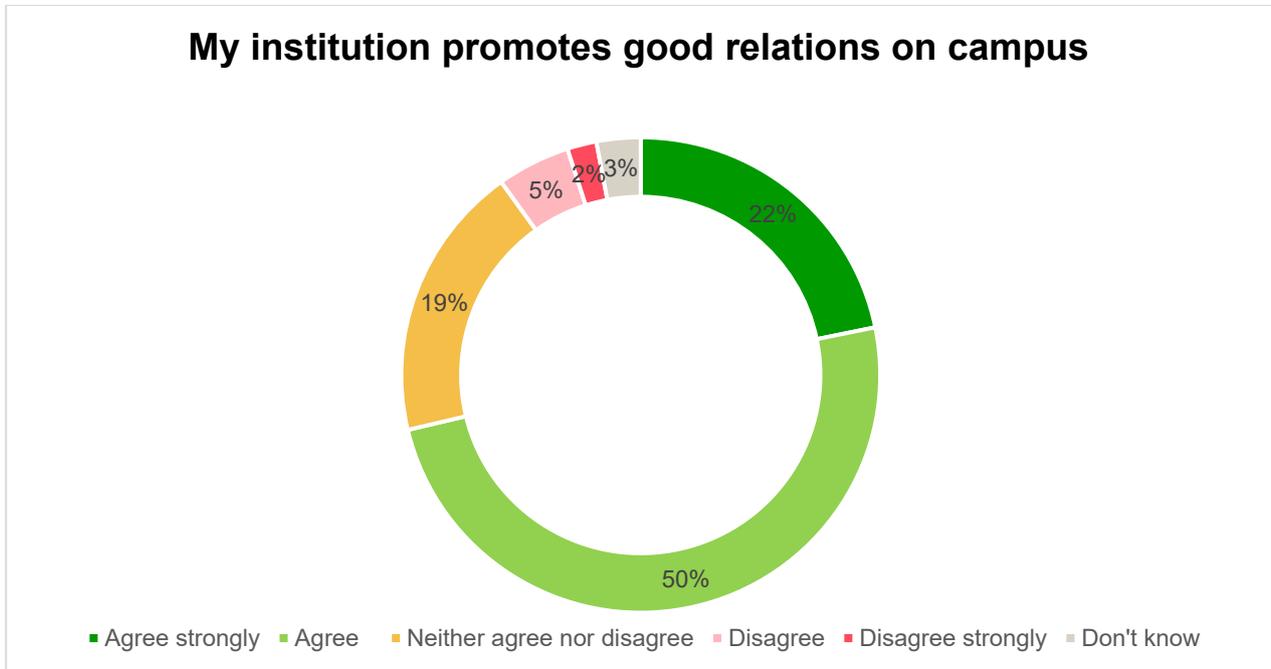
As with the other questions on freedom of expression, our respondents in general did not identify major concerns on this point, with three out of four agreeing or agreeing strongly that their institution does promote good relations on campus. As with the other questions, disagreement levels were relatively low.

While this is generally a positive story, it is important to consider the extent to which these general levels of agreement might not be matched across a range of different student cohorts, particularly among minority groups.

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[44] Advance HE / ECU (2013) *Promoting good relations on campus: a guide for higher and further education.* York: Advance HE. Available at: www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/promoting-good-relations-campus-guide-higher-and-further-education [accessed 16 April 2024].

[45] The question in full was "My institution promotes good relations between different groups on campus (for example, by tackling intolerance and promoting understanding of diversity and respect for all)".

% agreement with the following statements:	Ethnicity (UK domicile)		Sexual orientation		Domicile	
	Black, Asian and minority ethnic	**White**	**LGB+**	**Heterosexual**	**UK**	**EU / Rest of the World**
I feel comfortable expressing my viewpoint	61%	**66%**	**69%**	66%	65%	**74%**
I hear a wide variety of opinions expressed on campus	66%	**74%**	74%	73%	72%	**76%**
My institution promotes good relations on campus	68%	**72%**	73%	71%	71%	**79%**

Significant differences between cohorts within each category marked in bold.

The results in the table above highlight that minority ethnic groups are less comfortable when it comes to expressing their views, and do not feel they hear as wide a variety of opinions, with agreement levels for Black, Asian and minority ethnic students being significantly lower than for White students. It is important to clarify that levels of disagreement with these statements (between 8% and 14%, not charted) are still relatively low among minority ethnic groups, which indicates that these figures should perhaps not be a major cause of concern. However, it is important to consider how students of all ethnic backgrounds can be made to feel equally comfortable when navigating sensitive topics in the public sphere.

A notable finding from the above table is that on two out of three statements there appears to be no major difference in perceptions by sexual orientation, with LGB+ students just as likely as heterosexual students to look positively on their institutional environment when it comes to free speech. However, there is significant higher agreement among LGB+ students with the statement on feeling comfortable expressing a viewpoint.

We have also compared perceptions of students domiciled in the UK to those of international students. What is noticeable is that although the views of UK students are relatively positive, they are a lot more positive among international students, for whom around three out of four (or higher) say they agree with the statements. International

students will comprise people from a range of different societal and political environments, in some cases being particularly sensitive to the high-level debates being played out on UK campuses and beyond. It is therefore striking to see evidence that international students, as a whole, have a positive view of how UK campus environments support these kinds of debates and the different viewpoints they entail.

8.3   The use of artificial intelligence

This year, in light of the growing interest in artificial intelligence (AI) tools, we asked students how often they use AI tools in a way allowed by their institution. Previous research by HEPI has suggested a large proportion of students are now familiar with AI tools and are using them often.[46] In some ways, our findings here, covering many more students, confirm those results. Some 62% of students use AI at least a little and nearly a third of students (31%) do so at least once a week.

How often do you use artificial intelligence (AI) tools in a way that is allowed by your institution?

Every day	At least once a week	At least once a month	Less than once a month	Never
8%	23%	16%	14%	38%
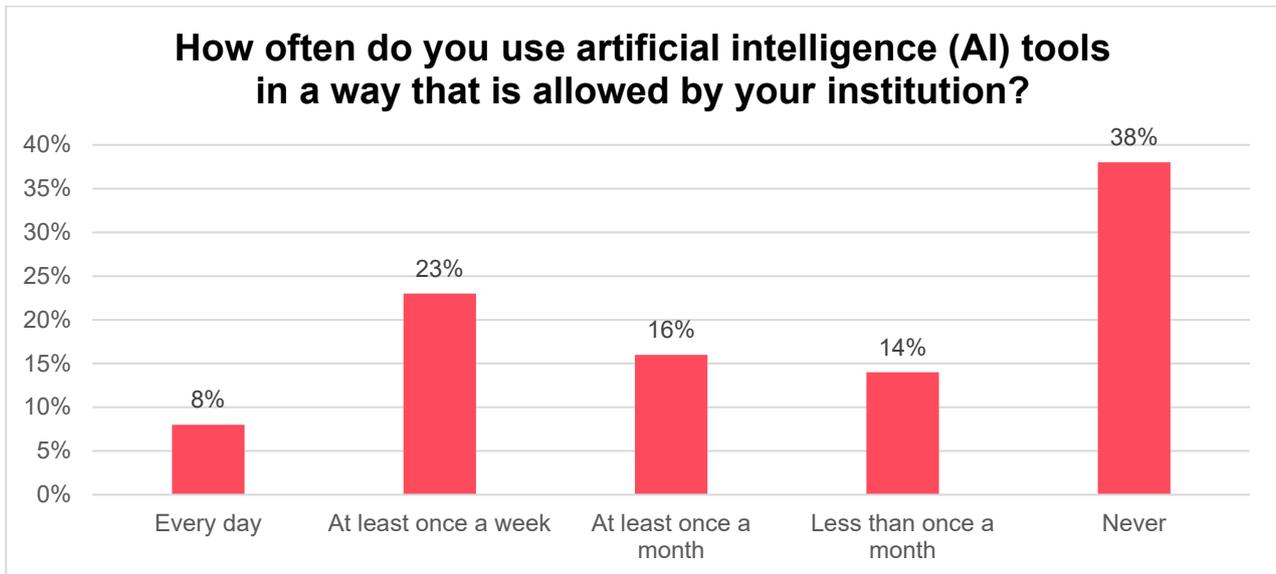
When looking at the use of AI by some demographics, there is some evidence of a 'digital divide' in use between different groups. Men are more likely to use AI tools at least once a month (57%) than women (41%) or non-binary students (32%). However, in contrast with HEPI's previous findings, which were based on a smaller sample size, older students appear more likely and not less likely to use AI tools. International students also use them more frequently than home students.

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[46] Freeman, J (2024) *Provide or punish? Students' views on generative AI in higher education*. Oxford: HEPI. Available at: www.hepi.ac.uk/2024/02/01/provide-or-punish-students-views-on-generative-ai-in-higher-education

Students who use AI tools at least once a month – by demographic

Demographic	Percentage
Man	57%
Woman	41%
Non-binary	32%
21 and under	44%
22-25	53%
26 and over	51%
UK-domiciled	44%
EU-domiciled	50%
Overseas domiciled	59%
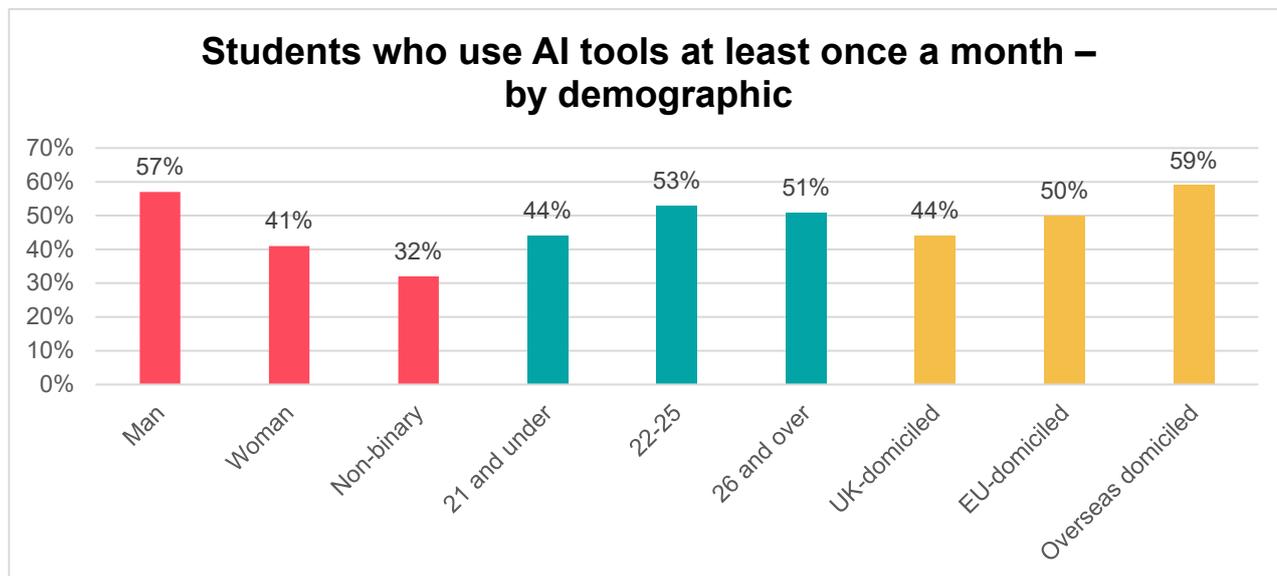
A further 45% of those from the lowest social grades D and E do not use AI tools at all, compared with 32% from the highest social grades A and B.

Why are students using AI? The data shows that students who have more contact hours, students who do more intensive courses like medicine, those who do more hours of paid employment and those who commute a longer distance are all more likely to use AI tools daily. This suggests AI tools are being used by at least some students to save time in busy schedules. Some students may also be using AI while doing paid work.

9 Spotlight on selected groups of students

9.1 Ethnicity (UK domicile)

Key measures over time

Legend:
- Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic 2021
- Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic 2022
- Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic 2023
- Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic 2024
- White 2021
- White 2022
- White 2023
- White 2024
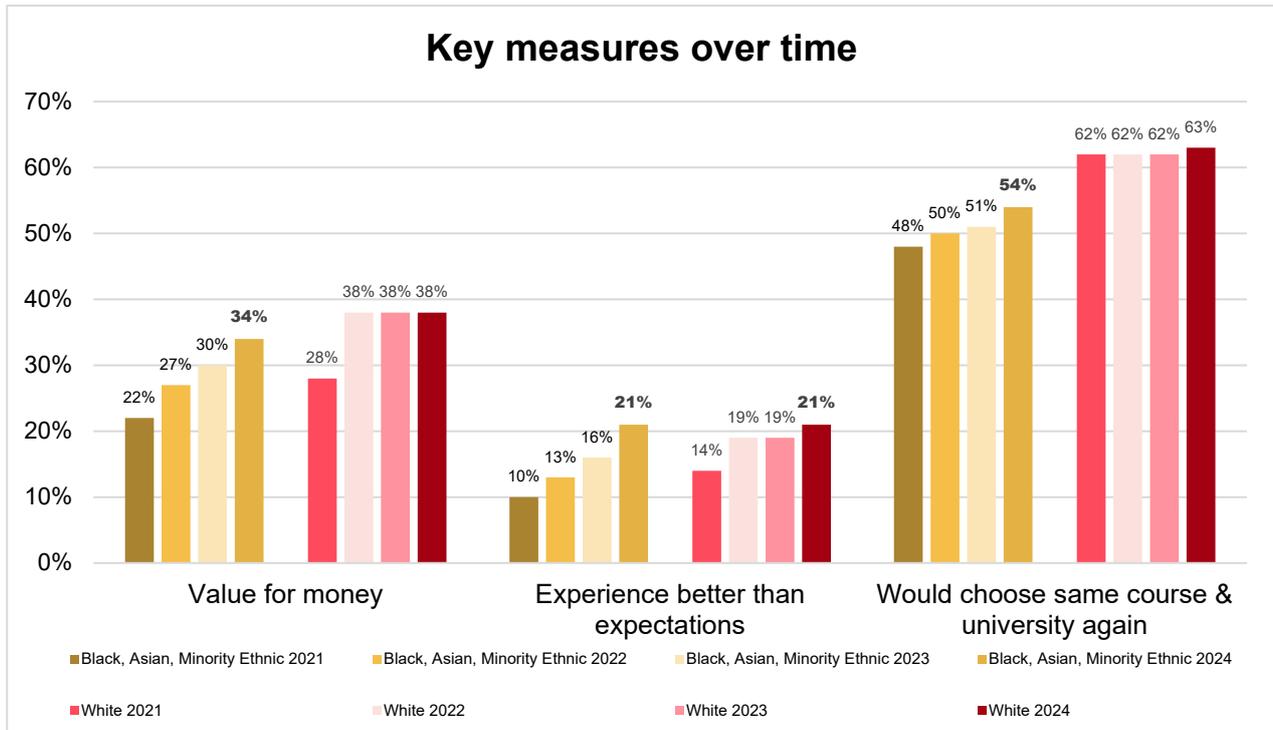
Across past iterations of this Survey, and in accordance with wider data across the sector, students from Black, Asian and minority ethnicities have tended to report a less positive experience compared to White students. This is despite spending more time engaging in their learning.[47]

In our Survey this gap has been closing on several measures and it is encouraging to see that this has continued in 2024. There is still a sizeable gap in terms of being likely to make the same choice of course and university again, but this is smaller than in recent years. Value for money has a relatively small gap of four percentage points, while the results for the experience being better than expectations are now at the same level for both minority ethnic and White cohorts. On these measures the results are the closest we have come to being able to evidence a parity of the experience by ethnicity.

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[47] Neves, J (2019) *UK Engagement Survey 2019.* York: Advance HE, p 12. Available at: s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/assets.creode.advancehe-document-manager/documents/advance-he/Advance%20HE%20UKES%202019_1572367661.pdf [accessed 16 May 2024].

Looking at value for money specifically, it is the experiences of UK domiciled minority ethnic groups, together with those of international students, that have driven the positive uplift at an overall level – with the experiences of UK domiciled White students showing no overall change.

When we break down the experience by specific ethnic groups, we see some fluctuations, but also some evidence of how the experience of UK-domiciled Black students, in particular, is generally positive in terms of value for money and meeting expectations.
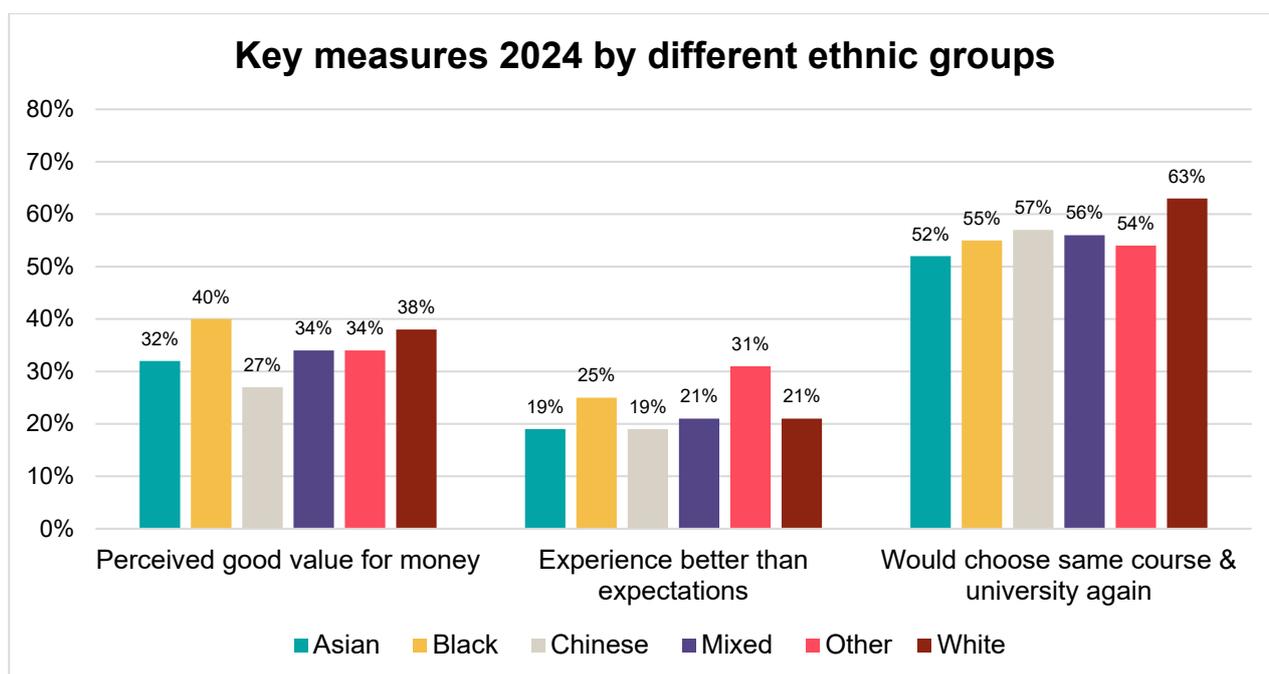
The table below highlights in detail the extent to which the scores on these measures have increased for Black students across the past year. The scale of some of these changes is strong, which is a very positive story for a minoritised group that had often reported a less positive experience and associated outcomes.

	Value for money		Experience better than expectations		Would make same choice again	
	2023	**2024**	**2023**	**2024**	**2023**	**2024**
Black ethnicity	29%	**40%**	22%	25%	45%	**55%**

9.2   Care-experienced and estranged students

In 2023 we included a new question on whether a student is, or has ever been, in local authority care – the wording of which has been updated this year. For 2024 we have also introduced a supplementary question on whether the respondent is estranged from their parents.[48]

This is in response to wider debate in the sector around the need for more extensive data collection on this group of students.[49]

Profile – student cohorts most likely to be care experienced / estranged

	Care experienced	Estranged
All students	6%	8%
Age 26+	11%	15%
Black ethnicity	11%	6%
Trans	29%	27%
Caring for others	20%	22%
Commute 10 miles +	8%	11%
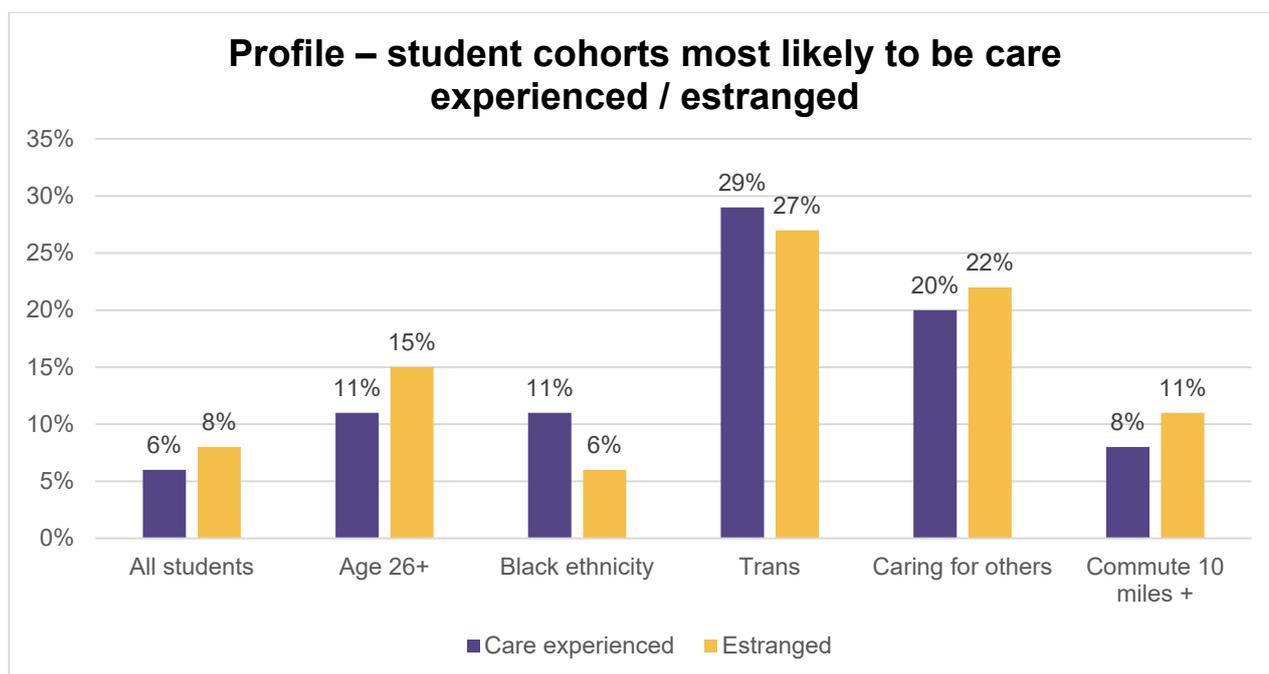
Across the total sample, 6% are care experienced, and 8% are estranged (note that the two categories are not mutually exclusive). However, there are some demographic groups where the propensity to be care experienced and / or estranged is a lot higher. Among trans students this is extremely high – just under one in three – while it is also very high among mature students and students who currently care for others. There is also evidence that students from care experienced or estranged backgrounds spend more time commuting. We saw earlier in the report that students who work or care for others often face a range of other

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[48] We worked with the Unite Foundation (www.thisisusatuni.org/unite-foundation/) to include the questions: **"Have you been in care?** Select yes if you've ever lived in public care or as a looked-after child" and "Would you consider yourself estranged from your parents (i.e. you're not in contact with and supported by your parents)?" (Full wording available on request).

[49] Office for Students (2022) '*Care experienced students and looked after children*'. Bristol and London: Office for Students. Available at: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/effective-practice/care-experienced/advice/ [accessed 11 May 2023].

pressures on their time (for example, commuting), and we can see here that a potentially vulnerable group of students faces a range of challenges including an overlap with other vulnerable groups and living far away from campus.

10 Teaching intensity

10.1 Workload trends

Workload hours in average week
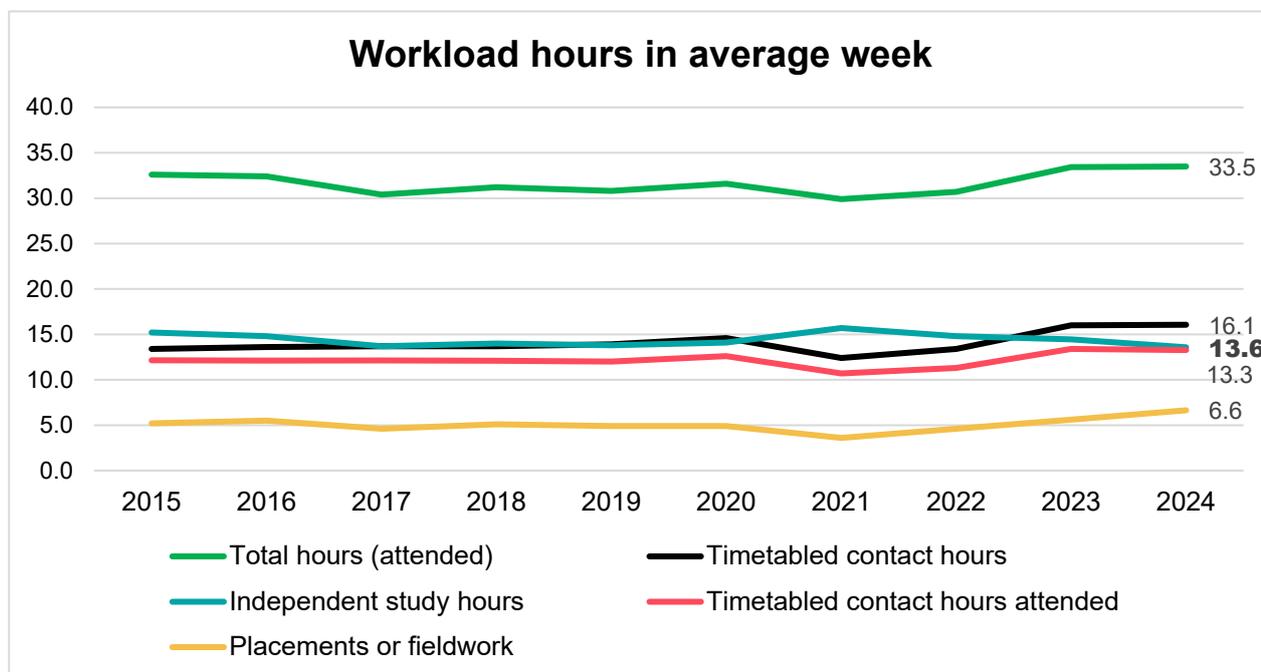
	Total hours (attended in average week)	Timetabled contact hours	Independent study hours*	Contact hours attended*	Placements or fieldwork*
2019	30.8	13.9	13.8	12.0	4.9
2020	31.6	14.6	14.1	12.6	4.9
2021	29.9	12.4	15.7	10.7	3.6
2022	30.7	13.4	14.8	11.3	4.6
2023	33.4	16.0	14.5	13.4	5.6
2024	33.5	16.1	**13.6**	13.3	**6.6**

* These measures contribute to the total figures

High levels of working hours are, in general, appreciated by students who want to be tested and to receive what many perceive as "value" for their tuition fees. However, a high overall average can mask some extremely high workloads in particular subjects, which in some cases needs to be incorporated alongside paid employment and caring responsibilities. Hence, there is potentially a natural ceiling to the volumes of workload hours that are sustainable.

In 2024, working hours have remained consistent overall, which suggests that they might have just about peaked following a post-pandemic increase. However, within this there are some key fluctuations in how the overall workload volumes are comprised.

Timetabled hours have increased marginally and are at the highest levels we have seen. Against this, the number of contact hours attended has fallen slightly, but is still at a high level. The main changes have been in the volume of independent study, which has fallen significantly from 14.5 to 13.6 hours per week. Counteracting this there has been an equal (and proportionately greater) increase in time spent in placements and fieldwork, which at 6.6 hours is the highest level we have seen. During the pandemic we did see several comments around the (understandable) absence of field trips and in-person placements and how this was impacting the quality of the experience. It therefore appears that this is an aspect being prioritised by HEIs across the sector and is playing an increasing role in the workload mix.

10.2 Online learning

Since the pandemic, when a high proportion of lectures took place online, we have seen a gradual return to face-to-face interactions, but it is striking that a significant proportion of online delivery remains.

In 2022, nearly 90% of students had at least some of their lectures online, and while this has reduced gradually, to 69% in 2024, it does appear that a significant proportion of online delivery is set to stay in place. It is likely that a proportion of this online delivery was already in situ before the pandemic, but potential changes in students' preferences, and advances in the ability to use technology to maximise flexibility and inclusiveness, are likely to have played a role to help shape the level of hybrid delivery that is established across multiple courses in many institutions.

Proportion of lectures held online

Range	2022	2023	2024
0%	11%	25%	31%
1-10%	12%	19%	21%
11-20%	10%	13%	12%
21-30%	10%	12%	10%
31-40%	9%	7%	7%
41-50%	11%	7%	5%
51-60%	7%	4%	3%
61-70%	6%	3%	2%
71-80%	7%	4%	2%
81-90%	5%	2%	2%
91-100%	13%	4%	4%
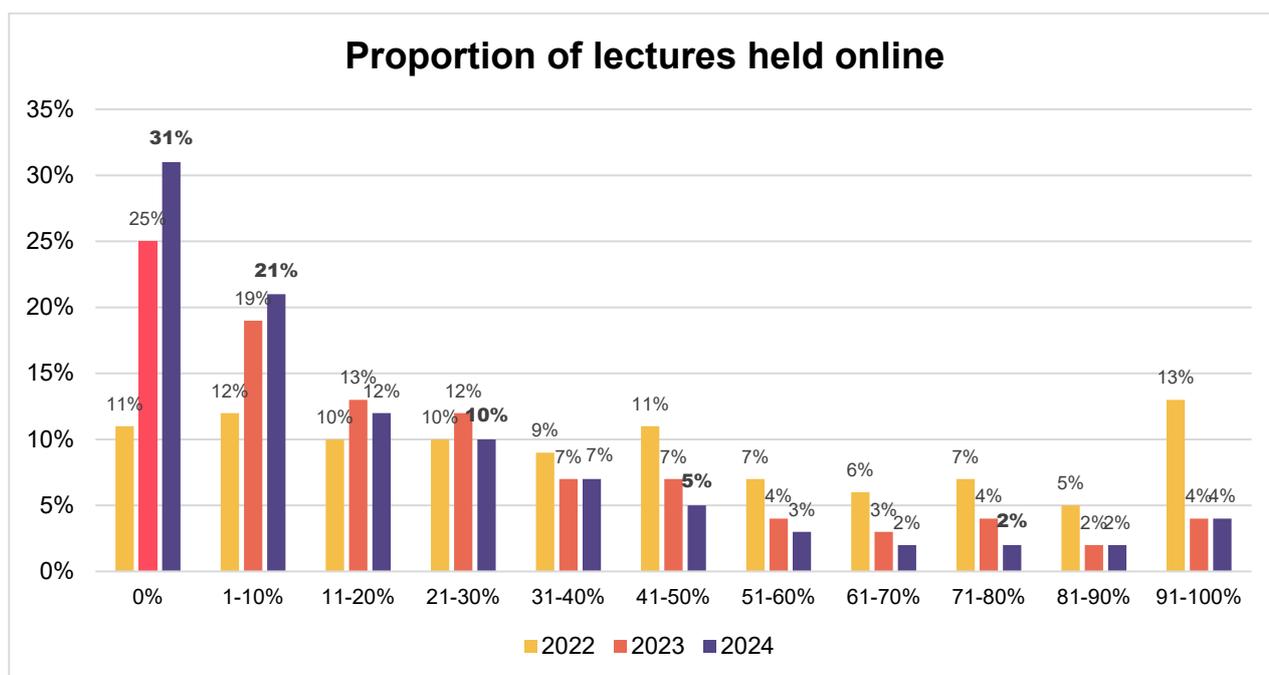
Some of the main drivers of student preference are likely to be represented by extra-curricular demands on their time, such as paid employment, caring and commuting. We can see the impact of this in the table below, which infers that students with extra-curricular demands seek out or take up the opportunity to carry out a higher proportion of their learning online.

	Paid employment		Commuting		Caring	
	None	**10 hrs +**	**None**	**10 miles +**	**No**	**Yes**
Any lectures online	59%	**79%**	58%	**77%**	67%	**84%**

10.3 Satisfaction with scheduled contact hours

Satisfaction with contact hours has been a very consistent measure across several years with the only material fluctuation in 2021 during the pandemic. Although this year has seen a relatively small change in absolute terms, it does signify a statistically significant increase in students being satisfied with their contact hours, with 68% representing the highest figure we have yet seen on this measure.
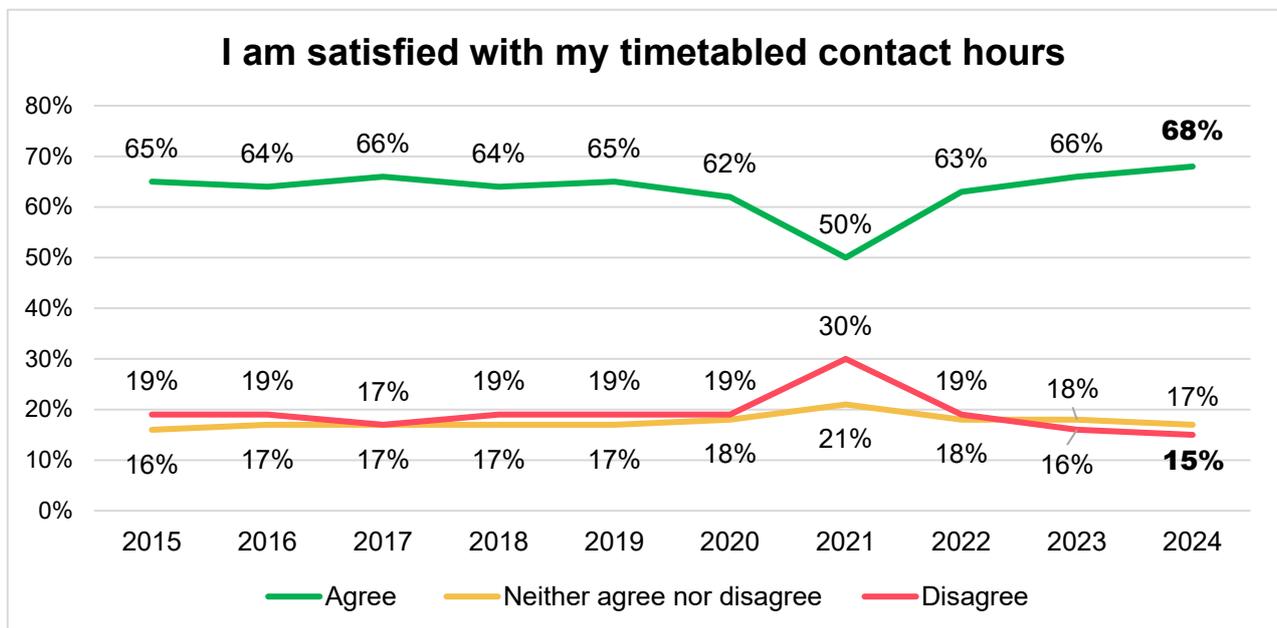
I am satisfied with my timetabled contact hours

Reinforcing this, the proportion who disagree with this statement is at its lowest level, hence providing a clear picture that current volumes of contact hours are at the right level for many.

	Total contact hours				Paid employment		Caring	
	0-9	**10-19**	**20-29**	**30+**	**None**	**10+ hours**	**No**	**Yes**
Agree they are satisfied with contact hours	61%	**72%**	**71%**	**68%**	69%	68%	69%	67%

Looking at how this differs (or not) by curricular and extra-curricular workload, we can see clearly that students in general are happy with relatively high volumes of contact hours. Although the nature of individual course delivery – and expectations around this – does vary, some students are less satisfied when they are assigned fewer than 10 timetabled hours. However, it is notable that satisfaction levels increase significantly between 10-19 hours and remain high even up to 30 hours plus.

We may reasonably have speculated that students with working or caring responsibilities would be less satisfied with the number of timetabled contact hours. However, it is evident from the above table that relatively high levels of paid employment, or caring for others, do not appear to impact on how contact hours are perceived. Students with these additional responsibilities are still likely to require support regarding flexible times and ways of accessing their classes, but this data provides evidence that, irrespective of how wider demands are being managed, sufficient contact hours remain a key barometer of a positive student experience.

10.4 Workload by HECoS subject

Workload hours by HECoS subject categories

Subject	Contact hours attended	Independent study	Work outside of course
Subjects allied to Medicine	16.0	14.1	19.9
Education and Teaching	14.6	12.1	20.1
Veterinary Sciences	18.7	13.4	6.6
Architecture, Building and Planning	14.4	15.7	7.2
Medicine and Dentistry	13.7	12.8	9.3
Agriculture, Food and related studies	12.7	13.3	9.0
Engineering and Technology	15.0	14.3	4.7
Mathematical Sciences	15.0	15.4	3.4
Computing	14.5	13.4	5.0
Physical Sciences	15.1	13.7	3.8
Biological and Sport Sciences	13.2	13.5	4.8
Communications and Media	14.2	12.4	4.2
Combined and General Studies	11.9	11.3	7.4
Creative Arts and Design	14.9	12.7	2.7
Law	11.0	15.3	3.8
Business and Management	12.3	12.4	5.0
Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies	9.2	17.0	2.8
Social Sciences	11.5	13.9	3.4
Language and Area Studies	10.0	15.3	2.9
Geographical and Environmental Studies	10.3	13.9	2.7
Psychology	10.7	12.4	3.2

Subjects ranked in order of overall workload.[50] Some individual subjects have relatively low base sizes and hence are sensitive to annual fluctuations.

When ranking the HECoS subject by workload, there are some quite major differences in terms of contact hours (for example between Veterinary Sciences and Historical Studies), while volumes of independent study are a lot more consistent between the different subjects. [51] Where volumes vary the most, however, is in terms of fieldwork and placements, which is the element with the largest influence on where different subjects are ranked in terms of overall workload. Many subjects (often in Arts and Humanities) have very low volumes but in some areas, such as subjects allied to Medicine and Education and Teaching, the time

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[50] Humanities and Liberal Arts, and Others in Science were not included in the table this year due to small base sizes.

[51] For information on the Higher Education Classification of Subjects (HECoS), see www.hesa.ac.uk/support/documentation/hecos [accessed 9 April 2024].

spent in external work for their course is very significant and leads to the highest overall workloads.

When we look at these individual subjects, some of the base sizes are relatively small, hence we do get some year-on-year fluctuation in these results which impacts the relative ranking.

Comparing to 2023, we again see medical subjects towards the top and subjects such as Psychology, Languages and History towards the bottom. By contrast, the amount of time spent externally has fluctuated for Education and Teaching – increasing significantly this year so it is now once again one of the subjects with highest workload. At the lower end of the scale last year was Communications and Media, but students this year report higher volumes of all types of workload, resulting in a mid-range position this year.[52]

10.5 Number of hours in study and employment

Given the increases in the last few years (less so this year) in workload hours, as well as the acceleration in time spent in paid employment, in the chart below we have combined these two key measures of time spent to provide an overall picture of the number of hours per week that students are having to devote to study and paid working.

Average number of hours spent studying or in employment

Year	Timetabled hours attended	Independent study or fieldwork	Paid employment outside studies
2021	10.7	19.3	4.6
2022	11.3	19.4	5.5
2023	13.4	20.1	7.5
2024	13.3	20.2	8.2
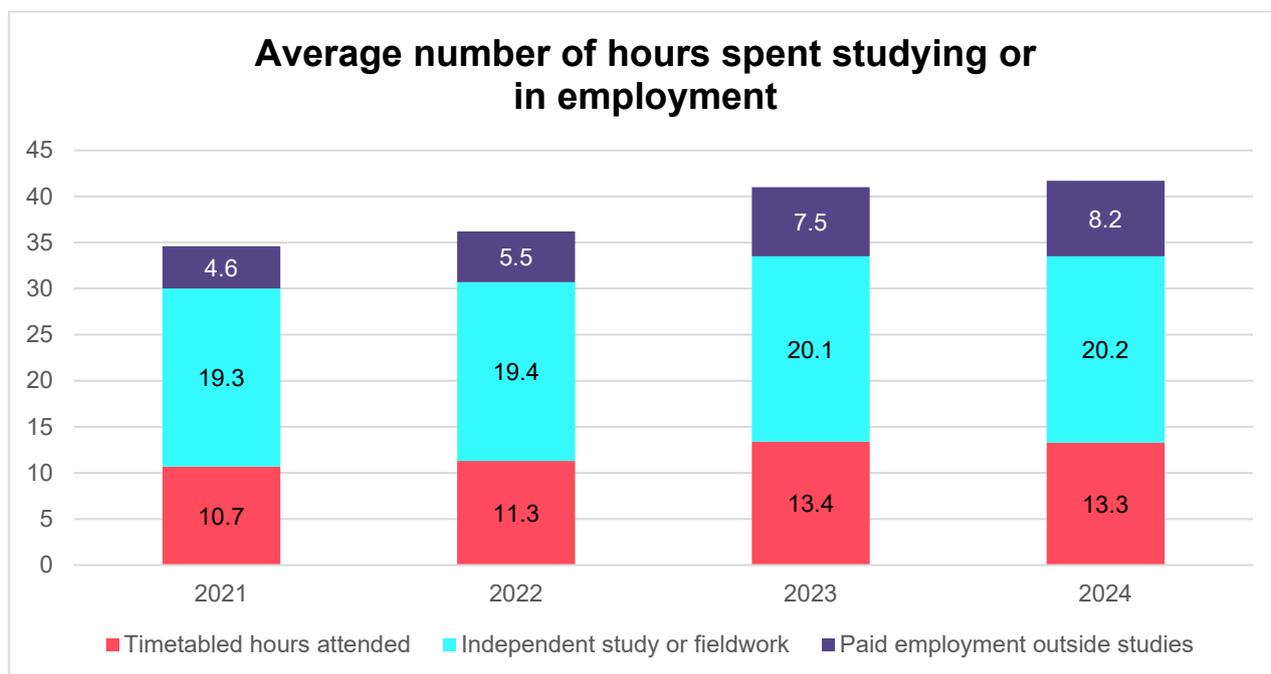
The figures represent the mean averages across all students including those who do not spend any time in a particular activity.

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[52] For comparative results, see SAES 2023 at https://advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/student-academic-experience-survey-2023

At a total sample level, students spend an average of 42 hours per week in paid work and study, and this has been rising steadily.

This level is clearly above the UK average number of paid working hours for the full-time working population, which currently stands at 36.9 hours, providing strong evidence that the undergraduate student population has to manage a substantial combination of study workload and extra-curricular responsibilities.[53]

These figures are based on our sample as a whole, but when we look into the data in more detail we can identify particular cohorts whose responsibilities in terms of classes, wider study and / or employment are much higher, equating to high numbers of hours per week.

Students studying health subjects (for example, Medicine, Dentistry, Veterinary Studies) have been regularly identified in this Survey as working long hours as part of their course, but rather than compensating for this by spending relatively few hours in paid employment, we can see from this data that the volumes of paid work are in fact just above the average, providing a net combined workload of over 55 hours per week, which is a significant volume.

	Aged 26+	University region Northern Ireland	Caring responsibilities	Health subjects
Contact hours or other study (average = 33.5)	38.6	40.9	37.5	47.3
Paid employment (average = 8.2)	12.6	9.8	12.7	8.6
Total (average = 41.7)	**51.2**	**50.7**	**50.2**	**55.9**

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[53] Office for National Statistics (2024) '*Average actual weekly hours of work for full-time workers (seasonally adjusted)*'. Newport: ONS. Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/timeseries/ybuy/lms [accessed 03 May 2024].

There are also high combined workloads for mature students, those with caring responsibilities, and those studying at HEIs in Northern Ireland. For these groups we saw earlier that their propensity to be in paid employment was high, but this is put into a specific context when we see that their study workload is also above average, potentially compounding the pressures these groups, and others, are facing.

11 Quality of teaching and assessment

11.1 Perceptions of the quality of teaching staff

Our Survey contains a set of consistent measures that have been designed to assess overall teaching quality and have been running for a number of years.

Teaching staff characteristics

Teaching staff encouraged you to take responsibility for your own learning
- 79%
- 77%
- 75%
- 76%
- 70%
- **76%**

Teaching staff clearly explained course goals and requirements
- 67%
- 65%
- 63%
- 63%
- 63%
- **65%**

Teaching staff were helpful and supportive
- 66%
- 67%
- 61%
- 62%
- 61%
- **64%**

Teaching staff used contact hours to guide independent study
- 59%
- 60%
- 56%
- 53%
- 54%
- **58%**

Teaching staff motivated you to do your best work
- 53%
- 54%
- 47%
- 50%
- 52%
- **59%**

Teaching staff regularly initiated debates and discussion
- 36%
- 40%
- 39%
- 39%
- 42%
- **47%**

Teaching staff helped you to explore your own areas of interest
- 35%
- 39%
- 34%
- 37%
- 41%
- **48%**

■ 2019   ■ 2020   ■ 2021   ■ 2022   ■ 2023   ■ 2024

Chart shows the proportion who agree or agree strongly with each statement.

The results in 2024 represent a clear good news story. For every one of the seven aspects, agreement ratings have increased significantly – which is the first time we have seen such consistent and marked improvements across the board. In particular, there have been sizeable improvements for staff motivating students to do their best work, and helping to explore their own areas of interest – both of which achieved the highest scores seen since they have been included in the Survey.

It is potentially significant that these strong and consistent improvements in ratings of teaching quality among full-time undergraduates have come relatively soon after the

publication of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) ratings in 2023, which represented the first time HEIs had been officially rated on their teaching quality since 2019.[54] This greater focus on teaching across the sector may have played a positive role in driving quality and making more students aware of where resources and efforts are being focused within the teaching space.

	Russell Group	Pre-92	Post-92	Specialist
Encouraged your responsibility for own learning	**78%**	**78%**	74%	74%
Clearly explained goals and requirements	63%	68%	65%	69%
Were helpful and supportive	61%	64%	65%	**70%**
Used contact hours to guide independent study	58%	58%	59%	56%
Motivated you to do your best work	54%	54%	**61%**	**64%**
Regularly initiated debates and discussions	42%	45%	**49%**	**52%**
Helped you explore your own areas of interest	41%	44%	**51%**	**57%**

Significant differences between cohorts in bold.

Comparing the results on teaching quality across a range of types of institution, we can see some statements show a clear contrast between Russell Group and other pre-92 HEIs on the one side, against post-92 and specialist providers on the other side. Russell Group and

[54] McCabe, G and Bhardwa, S (2023) 'What is the TEF? Results of the Teaching Excellence Framework 2023'. *The Student*, Times Higher Education, 18 December. Available at: www.timeshighereducation.com/student/news/tef-2023-results [accessed 16 April 2024].

pre-92 are strongest in terms of responsibility for independent learning, while the other types of HEIs receive stronger scores in terms of motivation, creating collaborative environments and exploring their own field of interest.

On some aspects, such as clearly explaining course goals and guiding independent study, the results are consistent across all types of HEI.

11.2 Rating of assessment

The quality and depth of marking and assessments is an issue of real importance to students, as evidenced by the large number of open comments on this topic across the years.

Except for 2021 (one of the main pandemic years), ratings of assessment have been relatively consistent over a number of years. The fieldwork for 2023 took place before the marking and assessment boycott, and we speculated at the time that this may impact on the 2024 results if it were to end up lasting several months.[55]

While the assessment boycott did last a significant amount of time, and there are likely to have been large numbers of students affected in the summer of 2023, it is striking that this has not had a major impact on results in this Survey for 2024. In fact, every one of the five key measures has improved significantly, in some cases with the largest increases, to some of the highest levels seen to date. The overall picture for quality of assessment is therefore the most positive we have seen.

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[55] UCU (2023) 'Marking and assessment boycott to hit 145 UK universities from tomorrow'. *UCU*, 19 April. Available at: www.ucu.org.uk/article/12879/Marking-and-assessment-boycott-to-hit-145-UK-universities-from-tomorrow-UCU-confirms [accessed 3 April 2024].

Rating of how teaching staff provide assessment

Gave you useful feedback
- 2019: 54%
- 2020: 55%
- 2021: 51%
- 2022: 53%
- 2023: 54%
- 2024: **59%**

Gave you feedback in time to help with the next assignment
- 2019: 56%
- 2020: 56%
- 2021: 52%
- 2022: 52%
- 2023: 53%
- 2024: **59%**

Were open to having further discussions about your work
- 2019: 58%
- 2020: 59%
- 2021: 52%
- 2022: 52%
- 2023: 51%
- 2024: **58%**

Gave you more general feedback on progress
- 2019: 46%
- 2020: 48%
- 2021: 45%
- 2022: 47%
- 2023: 49%
- 2024: **55%**

Gave you feedback on draft work
- 2019: 39%
- 2020: 41%
- 2021: 38%
- 2022: 40%
- 2023: 44%
- 2024: **49%**

Legend: ■ 2019 ■ 2020 ■ 2021 ■ 2022 ■ 2023 ■ 2024
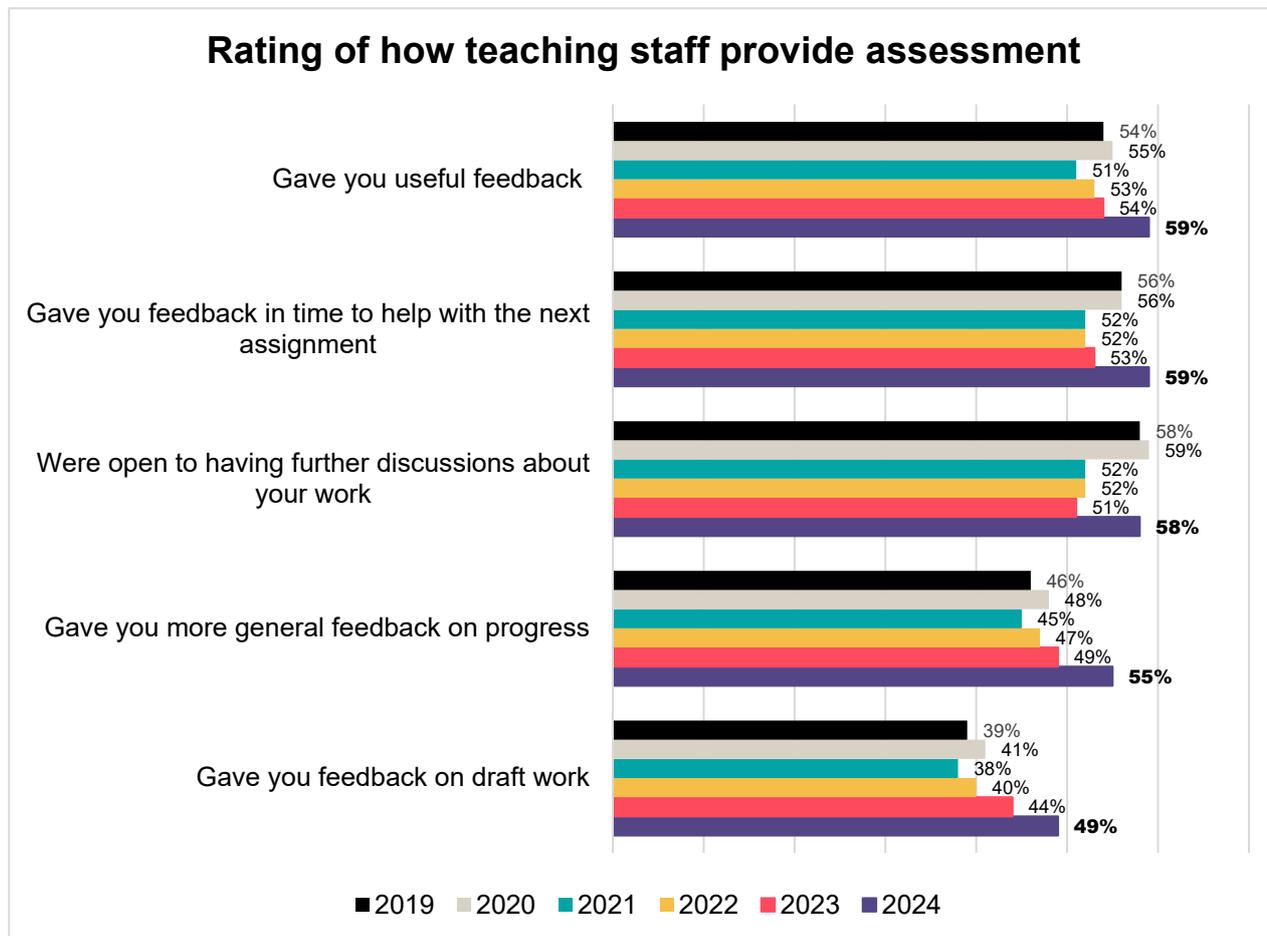
Potentially this might partly be a reaction to the ending of the boycott, but it does imply a strong sector-wide commitment in this space.

11.3 Volume of assignments

The volume of assignments – either summative or formative – increased strongly around the time of the pandemic, and then continued to rise up to 2023.[56] This represented a potentially high workload for both students and staff, in the context of a parallel rise in the volume of workload hours and paid employment.

Average number of assignments per term / semester
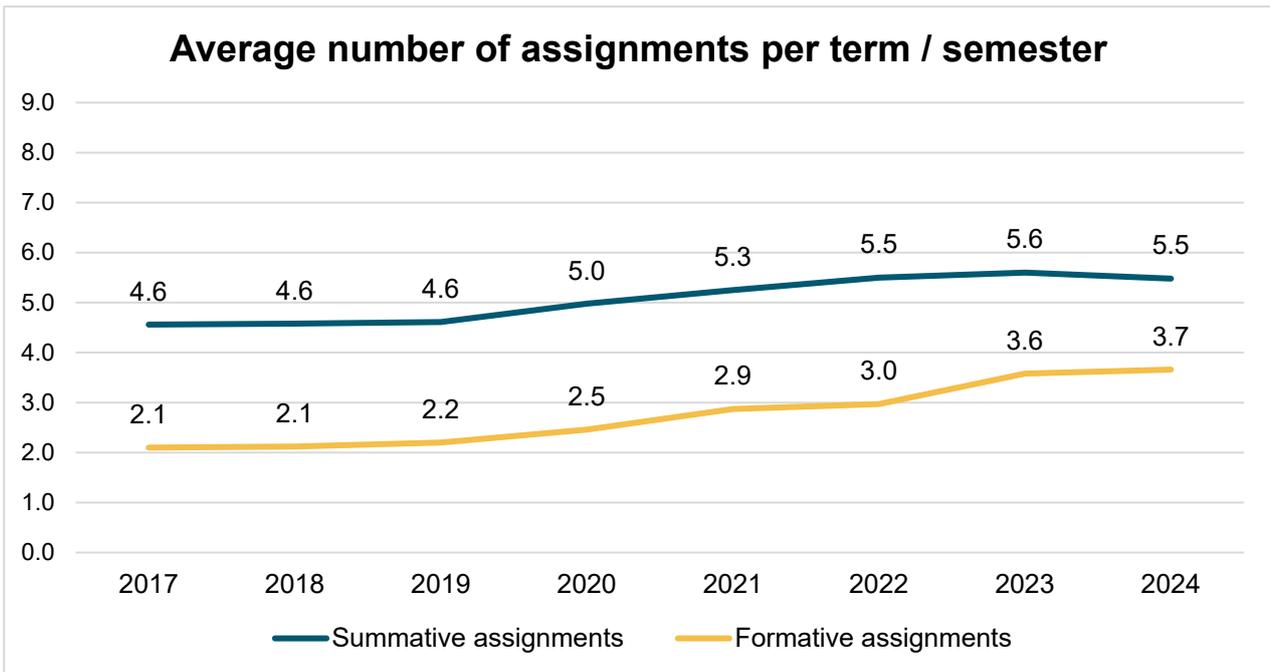
Chart uses mean calculations excluding scores above 30.

We saw earlier that total workload appears to have stabilised this year, and this is mirrored when we look at the volume of assignments. We have seen in previous iterations of this report that, in general, students like to work hard and feel tested, but in 2023 there was feedback about the number of assessments causing pressure in some cases. It is therefore significant that the situation appears to have stabilised, potentially at a level which many students and staff find challenging, but at which others may feel represents a good return for their investment.

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[56] Summative assignments are described as those that contributed to the overall mark. Formative assignments are those that were to aid improvement.

11.4 Timeliness of feedback

Students have been, and remain, relatively demanding in terms of their expectations for returning marked assessments and the analysis of results over time tells us that as assessments are returned quicker, student expectations then tend to increase. While this

Returning assignments – expectation

	One week or less	1–2 weeks	2–3 weeks	3–4 weeks	4 weeks or more
Reasonable time to return 2021	9%	43%	35%	12%	1%
Reasonable time to return 2022	11%	43%	33%	12%	1%
Reasonable time to return 2023	15%	46%	28%	9%	1%
Reasonable time to return 2024	19%	45%	27%	9%	1%

Returning assignments – reality

	One week or less	1–2 weeks	2–3 weeks	3–4 weeks	4 weeks or more
Actual time to return 2021	7%	20%	31%	27%	15%
Actual time to return 2022	10%	23%	31%	23%	13%
Actual time to return 2023	14%	30%	30%	17%	8%
Actual time to return 2024	16%	29%	29%	17%	8%

undoubtedly causes pressure on teaching staff, it also helps drive improvements, in many cases providing students with relatively timely feedback, even if this does not always match their very high expectations.

Comparison of the two charts above show us that expectation, on average, is for assignments to be returned after just over one week, on average, with a significant increase in those who expect turnaround within one week or less.

Alongside this, it is encouraging to see a significant increase in the proportion of assignments that are marked within one week, while it is now relatively rare for marking to take more than three weeks.

### Returning assignments – whether expectations met
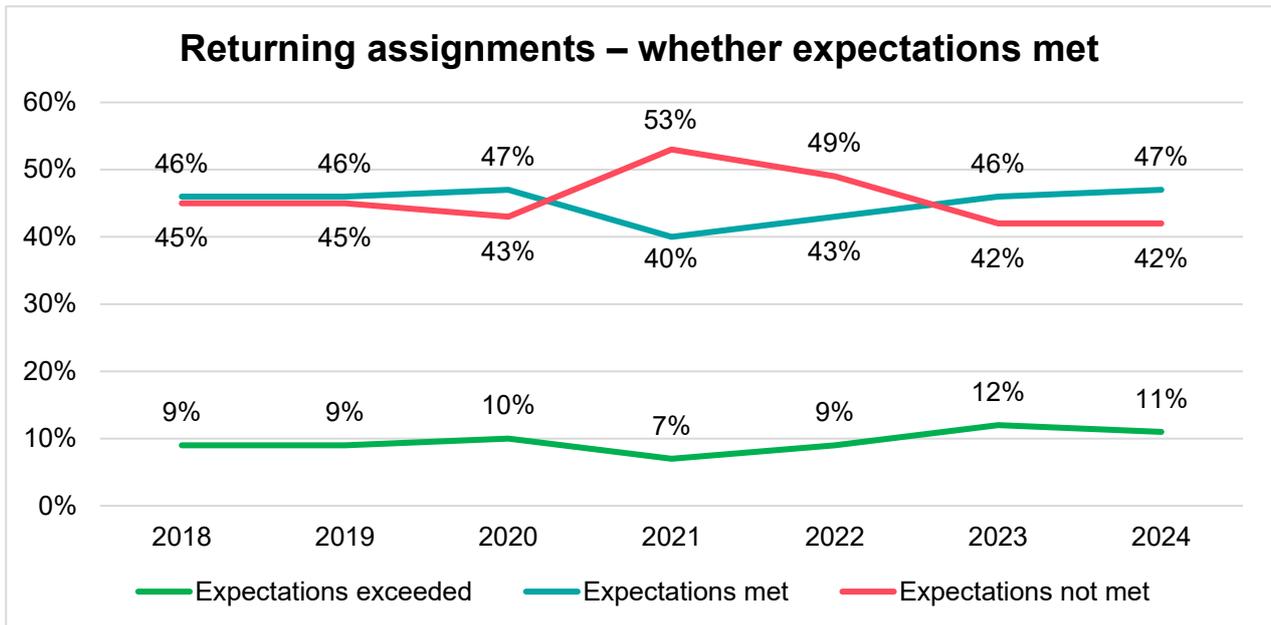
The net result of this is that there has been no change at all in meeting or exceeding expectations in terms of returning assignments. This is a positive situation, in that the 'goalposts' in terms of expectations are moving each year and this provides evidence that turnaround times are largely keeping up with this.

This is particularly striking in the context of the 2023 marking and assessment boycott, with these results providing further evidence that the boycott does not appear to have had an ongoing impact on the quality of feedback, which in fact seems to be improving in the wake of high expectations.

12 Wellbeing

Student wellbeing has been an issue of significant focus over many years. Levels of wellbeing among students and young people were a major area of concern before Covid-19, and deteriorated significantly as pandemic restrictions took hold – as they did among large sections of the wider population. Recovery since the lifting of restrictions was relatively slow, which is perhaps not surprising in the wake of cost-of-living concerns which began to be a major issue in the lead up to the 2023 wave of the Survey.

Comparison of key measures
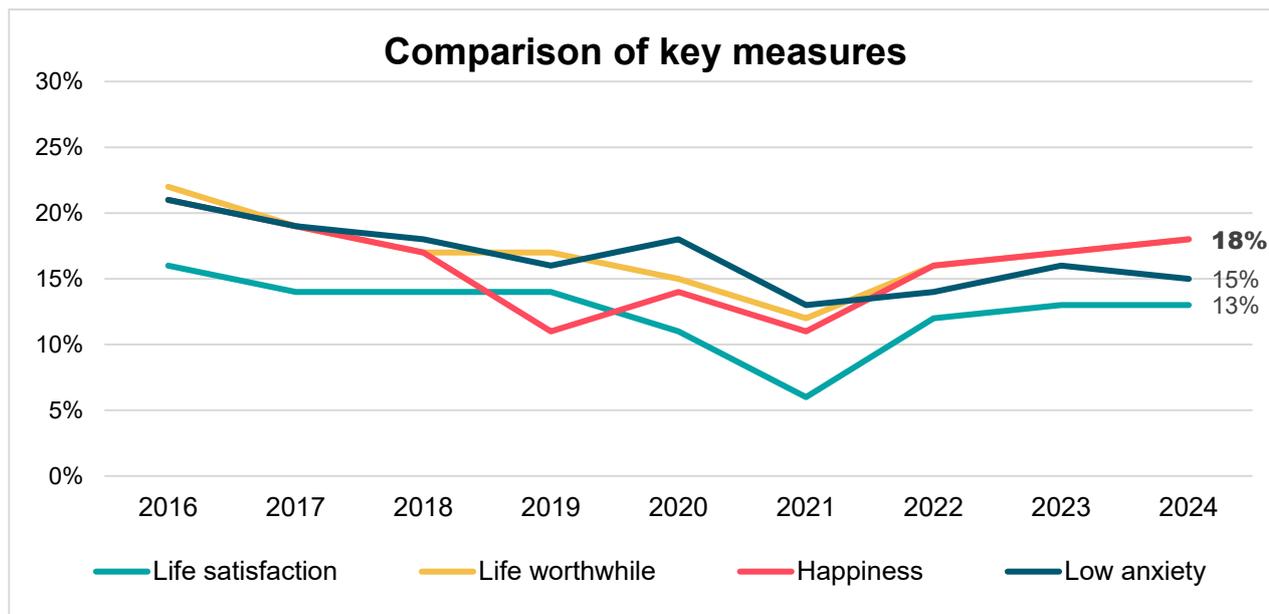
For 2024 we have seen little material change, which underlines how difficult it is to move the dial on this issue.[57] Two out of four measures have improved by one percentage point, one measure has decreased by one percentage point, while one measure has stayed the same. Accordingly, we have wellbeing levels lower than they were before the pandemic, but higher than the lowest levels in 2021.

In absolute terms, wellbeing levels remain low, and are around half the levels for the general population (all ages) as measured by the Office for National Statistics (ONS).[58] As measured through this Survey and compared to the ONS figures over several years, we have consistent evidence that students' levels of wellbeing while at university are often relatively low – something that shows little sign of changing.

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[57] Wellbeing measures, using questions originally developed by the Office for National Statistics, are measured on a 11-point scale, from 0-10. Results shown comprise those scoring 9-10 for Satisfaction, Worthwhile and Happiness, and 0-1 for Anxiety.

[58] See ONS quarterly estimates on wellbeing. July to September each year. All adults. Data available up to 2023. Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/datasets/quarterlypersonalwellbeingestimatesseasonallyadjusted [accessed 12 April 2024].

	Satisfaction (9-10 out of 10)		Worthwhile (9-10 out of 10)		Happiness (9-10 out of 10)		Low anxiety (0-1 out of 10)	
	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%	24%	17%	33%	17%	31%	16%	34%
2024	13%	N/A	**18%**	N/A	**18%**	N/A	15%	N/A

We have seen in recent years, and earlier in this report, that students are facing high demands in terms of time in employment, and levels of contact hours and assessments that are higher than they have previously been, albeit no longer rising as quickly. It may reasonably be conceived that these pressures of workload and responsibility will be contributing to stress and having a negative effect on wellbeing. However, while we would not claim that busier students are not under stress, there is potentially a counter-intuitive link between workload (curricular and external) and wellbeing as highlighted below.
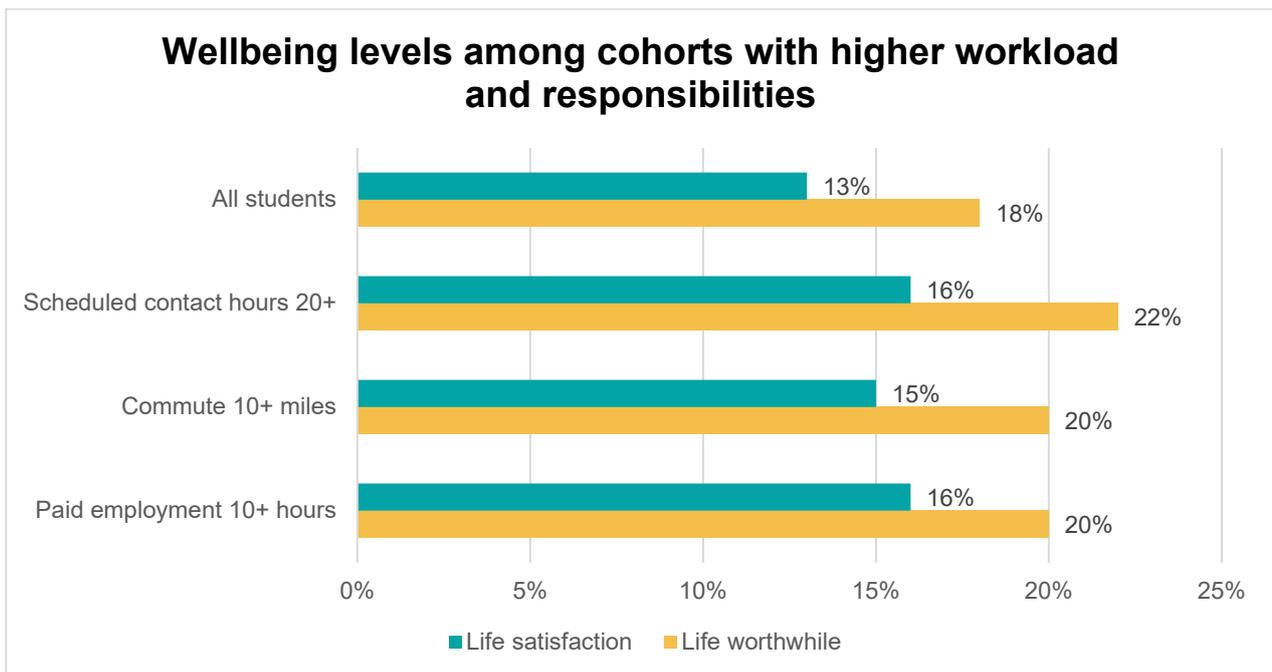

Looking at two of our four wellbeing measures, it is striking that some of the 'busier' students are significantly more satisfied with their life and / or feel their life is worthwhile, with high contact hours and higher levels of paid employment being connected to more positive levels of wellbeing.

We have seen in previous waves of this Survey, that students do like to be challenged and to be busy with their studies, but there is evidence here that wider levels of responsibility can also help with feeling fulfilled. That said, wider responsibilities do also bring their own

challenges and difficulties and indeed, there are students in these cohorts who are likely to need significant support and flexibility to help them make the most of their studies. However, when balanced correctly, high levels of workload and responsibility can be seen positively.

An aspect that has not been discussed in sufficient detail in previous reports is the very strong link between age and wellbeing.

Wellbeing by age

	Life satisfaction	Life worthwhile	Happiness	Low anxiety
Age 21 and under	11%	16%	16%	14%
Age 22-25	13%	16%	18%	14%
Age 26+	19%	24%	21%	18%
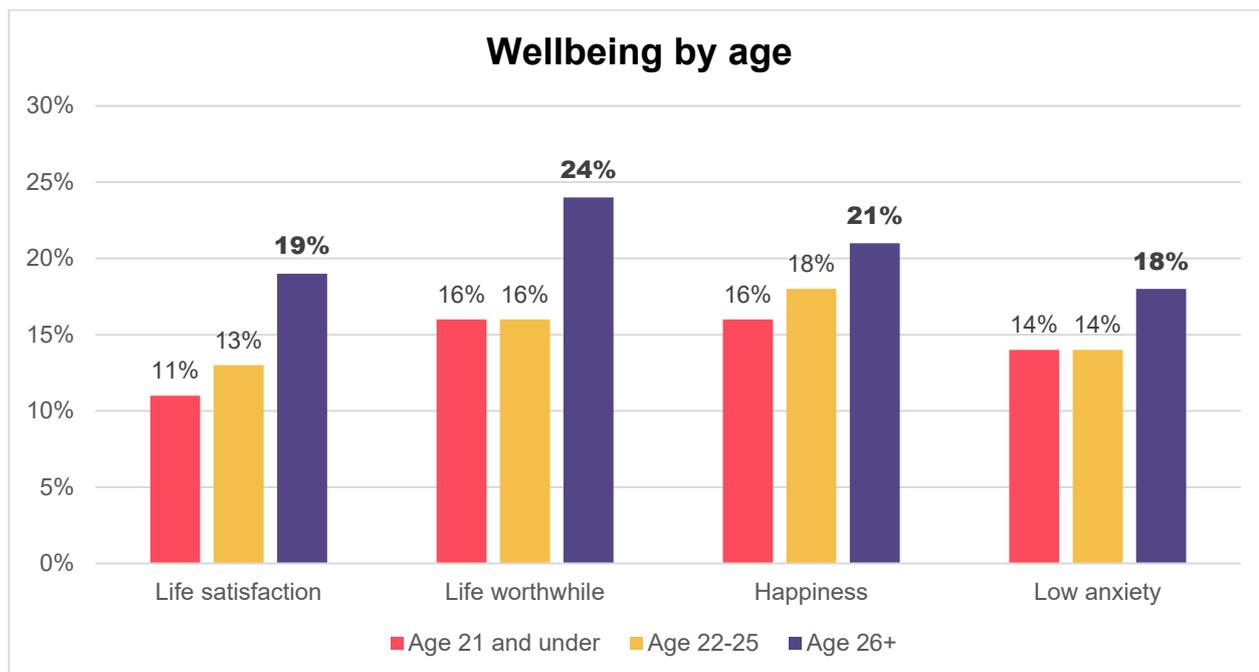
Older students (age 26+) are significantly more likely to report better levels of wellbeing, with large differences, in particular, in terms of "I am satisfied with my life" and "my life is worthwhile". This points towards a potential link between the stresses of university life having more of an impact among younger undergraduates, and potentially being handled more effectively by mature students, despite those students being more likely to be working for pay, and caring for others, as we saw earlier in the report.

Potentially linked to this, levels of loneliness are not as high among older students, as demonstrated below.

	Age 21 and under	Aged 22-25	Aged 26+
Feel lonely rarely / never	26%	26%	**37%**

We have seen earlier how older students (even those studying full time) are more likely to have a wider range of responsibilities. They are also more likely to have families of their own (for example 46% of those aged 26 or above live "at home with their family" compared to 34% of all students). This appears to be mitigating the propensity to feel lonely, and therefore contributing to higher wellbeing. By contrast, the very nature of (in many cases) moving away to university at a young age has the potential to cause loneliness and relatively low levels of wellbeing.

Analysis of loneliness by accommodation type shows us that the highest frequencies of loneliness are not experienced by students staying in university halls. However, it is important to note that occasional loneliness is actually very prevalent, with students living in and around others (in halls, in shared accommodation) being quite likely to say they feel lonely once a week.

| Feel lonely	Type of 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	25%	24%	**30%**	20%	**38%**
Once a week	28%	**36%**	**34%**	**35%**	24%
Rarely or never	**35%**	22%	21%	**29%**	**27%**

It appears that living in close proximity to others can mitigate the worst effects of loneliness, but the very nature of this experience for students of a young age can still lead to some students requiring support.

13 Finances and the future

13.1 How students' living costs are funded

In the 2023 Survey, we asked students for their main source of income. This year, we asked students to indicate all their sources of income to better understand what students depend on. Maintenance support is used by more students than any other source, followed by family support and income from paid employment. These figures may be underestimates of the total numbers drawing on each source if respondents still selected their primary source of income or interpreted 'living costs' to exclude rent and utilities.

Students studying for a degree apprenticeship are discussed separately below.

Which of the following do you use to cover your living costs?
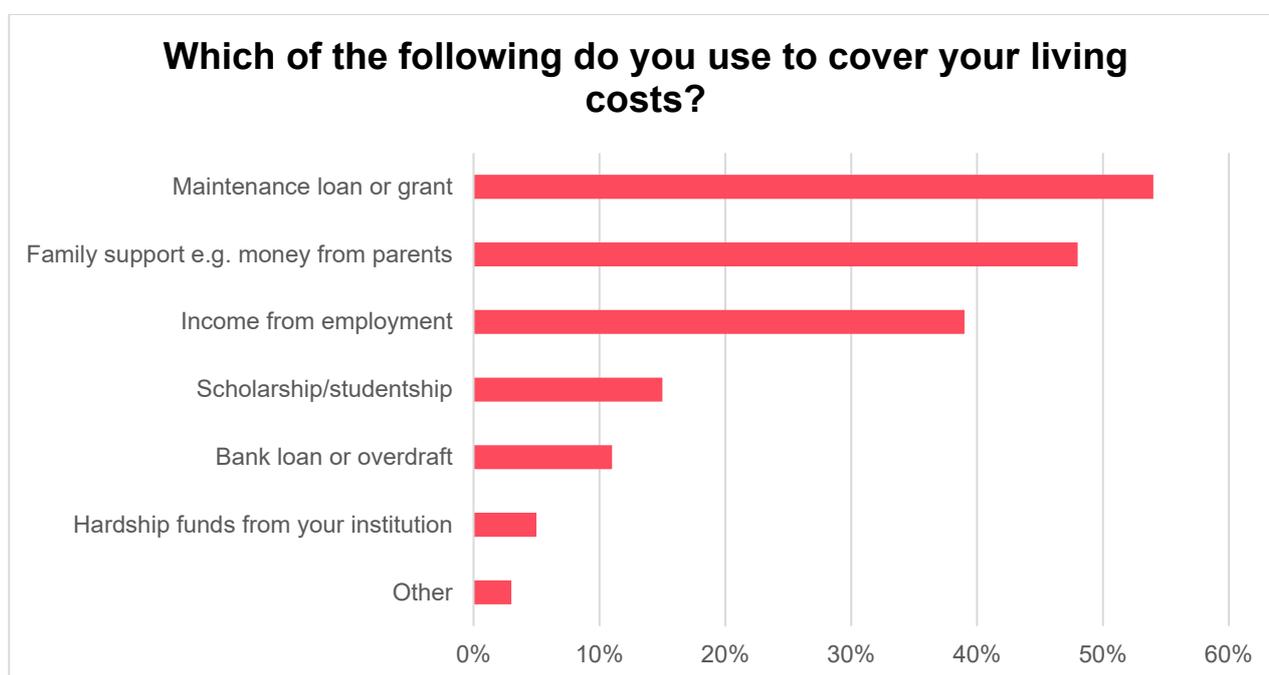
Overall, around 5% of students have drawn on hardship funding from their institution, but this rises to 12% among non-binary students, 8% of Black students, 8% of students in their fourth or higher year, 10% of students who are estranged from family and 9% of care-experienced students. Hardship funds often have a lengthy application process and can require many detailed and / or sensitive documents to be submitted. This may deter some students from applying and it is possible the number of eligible students exceeds these figures.[59]

Those studying for a degree apprenticeship receive a salary during their course and therefore may have different sources of income. We considered this group, a base of 534, separately. Despite being often advertised as an opportunity to 'earn while you learn',

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[59] Freeman, J (2023) *How to beat a cost-of-learning crisis: universities' support for students*. Oxford: HEPI. Available at: www.hepi.ac.uk/2023/09/14/how-to-beat-a-cost-of-learning-crisis-universities-support-for-students

degree apprentices draw on family support more often than from their employment as an apprentice. As in the previous graph, these results may be underestimates of the number drawing on each source of income. However, it is clear the wage degree apprentices receive is not sufficient to cover students' costs and they often depend on several other sources of income.

Which of the following do you use to cover your living costs? (Those studying for a degree apprenticeship)

Source	Percentage
Family support e.g. money from parents	~45%
Income from employment as an apprentice	~33%
Scholarship/studentship	~26%
Income from other paid employment	~25%
Bank loan or overdraft	~14%
Hardship funds from your institution	~6%
Other	~1%
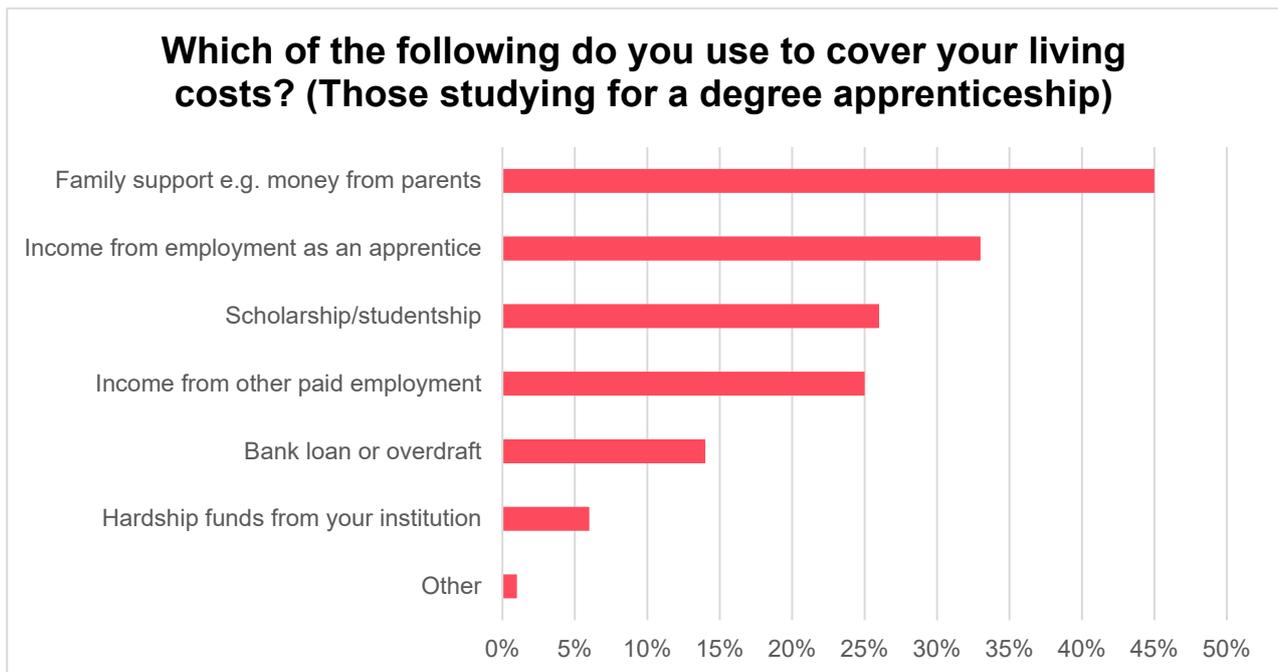
13.2 The impact of the cost-of-living crisis

This is the second year of asking how the cost-of-living crisis impacts students' studies. The results are mostly unchanged from last year, suggesting the crisis continues to bite but has not greatly worsened. However, a small but significant increase in the number responding 'A lot' is balanced by a reduction in those saying 'A little', suggesting the challenges of meeting their costs have intensified for some students.

To what extent, if at all, have concerns or challenges around the cost of living negatively impacted your studies?

	A lot	A little	Not much	Not at all
2023	26%	50%	19%	6%
2024	28%	47%	19%	6%
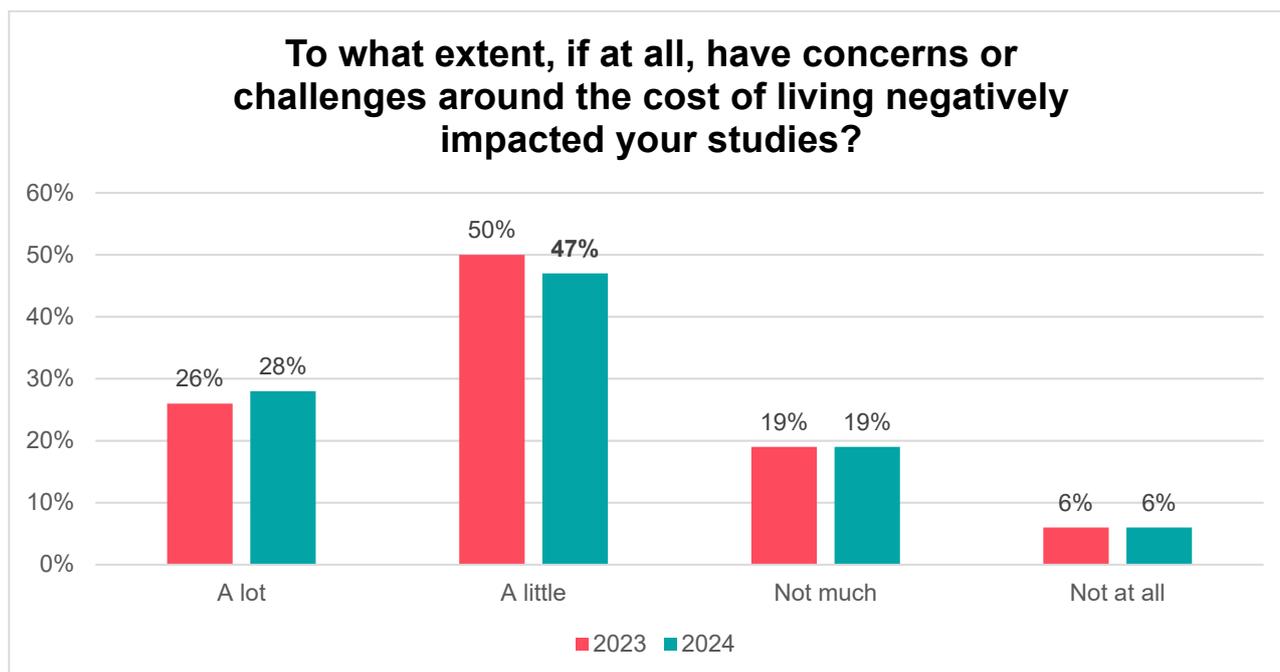
As noted in Chapter 7, one significant impact of the cost-of-living crisis is the rise in part-time employment among full-time students during term time. For the third year running, we asked students who undertake paid employment why they do so. In results that are consistent with previous years, the most popular reason by far is to supplement students' living costs, chosen by three-quarters (74%) of respondents.[60]

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[60] An option to choose 'All of the above' was included in 2023, which may be why the figures for that year are slightly higher; that option was removed for this year's Survey.

If you chose to take on paid employment during your study, was it for any of the following reasons?
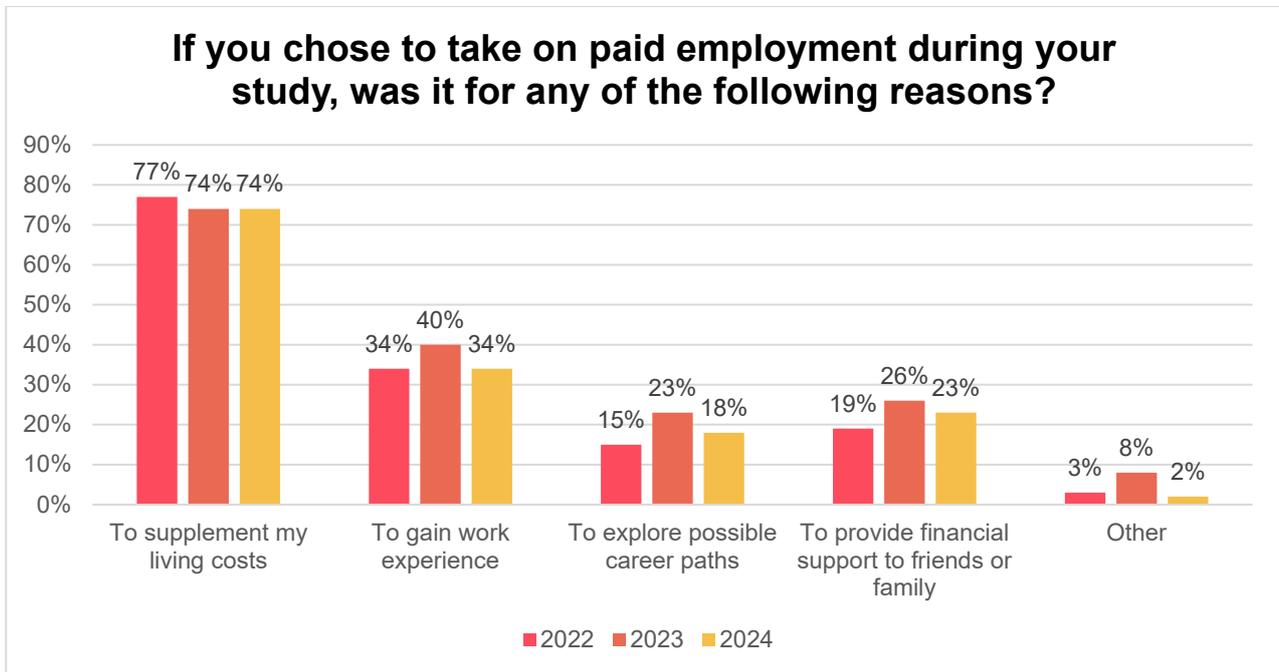
In a new question in 2024, we also asked students who do not undertake paid employment during term time why they do not do so. Less than a quarter (23%) indicated they do not need the income, including a third of men (32%) but only one-sixth of women (18%). The rest said they do but that there were other reasons preventing them from working. The most common of these were concerns about the effect on their studies (33%) and being unable to find a job (32%).
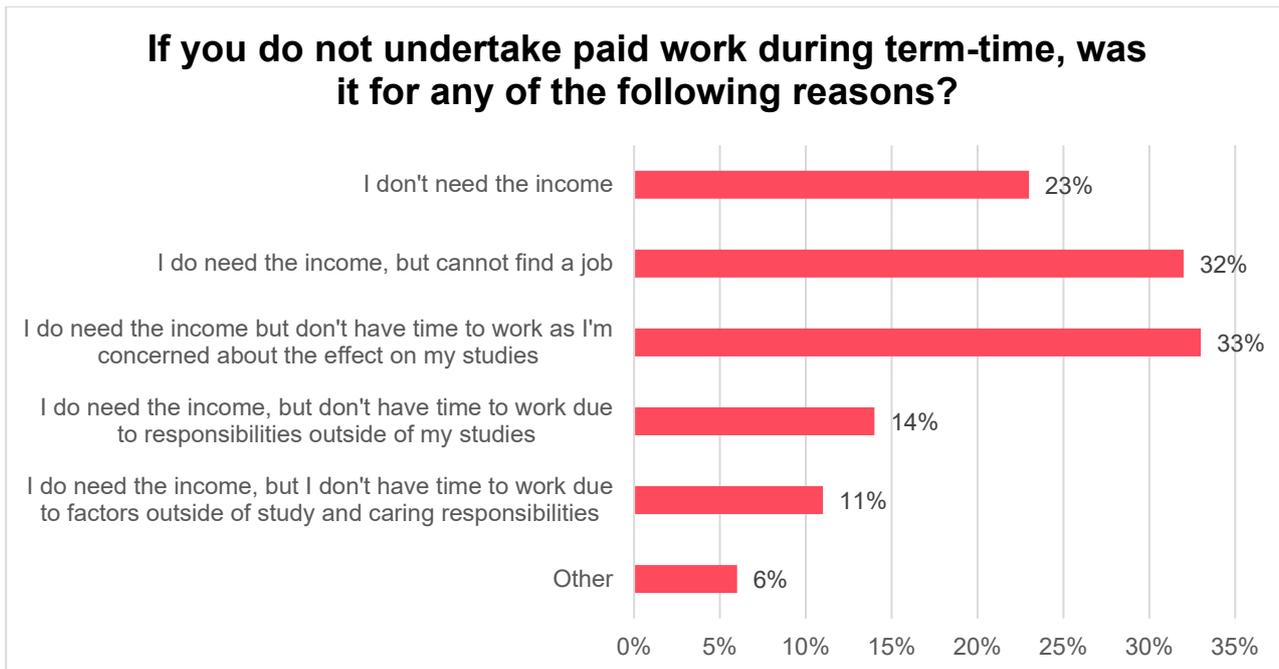
If you do not undertake paid work during term-time, was it for any of the following reasons?

Other reasons for not working – selected open comments
"My university does not allow students to do paid work during term time."
"I need the income but due to changing timetable every week, cannot find a suitable job. Instead I work seasonally at my job from home."
"My mental health is too poor for me to manage the extra responsibility and stress."
"I lack the time and energy due to disability."
"I do need the income but have decided to start working next year, giving myself the first year to enjoy uni life."

Students domiciled in the rest of the world were significantly more likely to say they could not find a job (50%) than students from the UK or EU (30% and 32% respectively). This may be connected to the fact that international students are not permitted to work more than 20 hours per week, as a condition of their student visa, potentially narrowing the range of jobs they can do and making them less attractive to employers. There was no significant difference in the proportion of home versus international students saying they have enough income.

14 Voting intentions

Previous research by HEPI suggests the student vote may have been decisive in several seats in the 2019 general election.[61] As there was expected to be a general election in 2024, we also asked students permanently domiciled in the UK, a base of 8,547, whether they are registered to vote and whether they intend to do so.

HEPI last published polling of students in May 2023, in which students were asked identical questions on voter registration and intention to vote.[62] Though the sample size was considerably smaller, the research is otherwise comparable: the questions are the same and the student population asked also consisted of full-time undergraduates domiciled in the UK.

In those results, 89% of students indicated they were registered to vote and 85% intended to do so. We find a striking decrease of 17 percentage points in the proportion of students planning to vote, down to 68%, or around two-thirds of students. There has also been a less substantial, but still notable, decrease of nine percentage points in the proportion of students registered to vote.
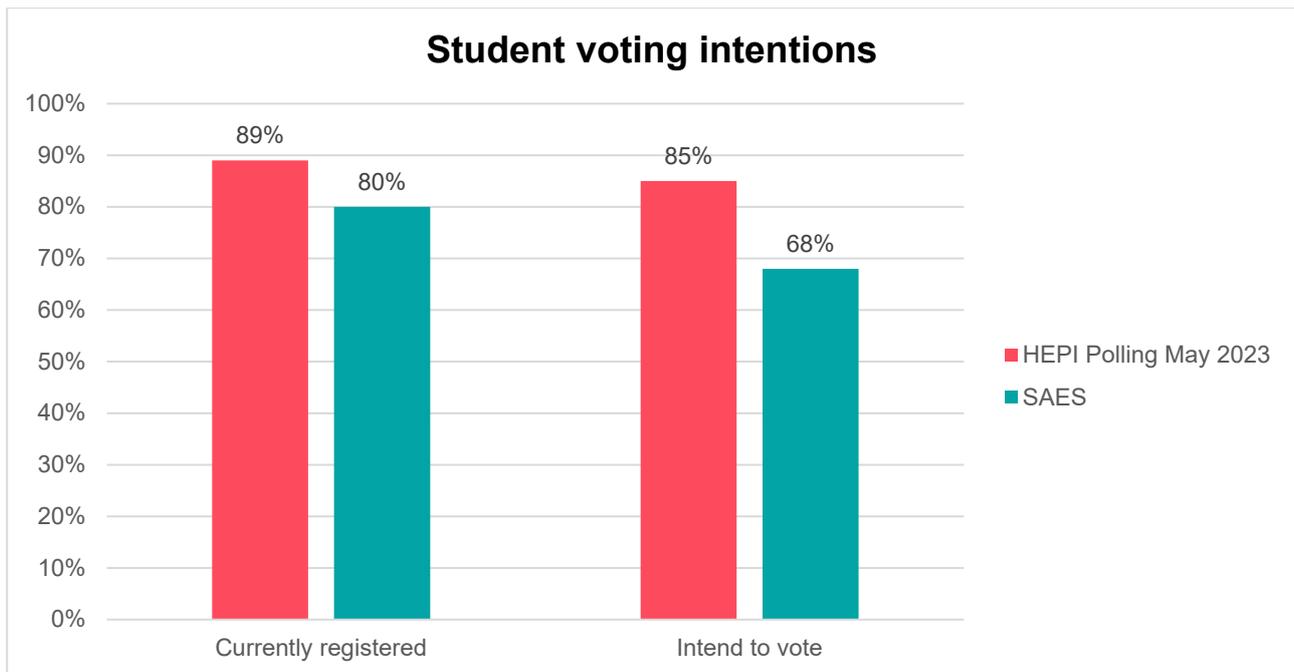
These results suggest a dramatic decrease in students' engagement with national politics over the last 12 months. One possible explanation is that the cohort of students who graduated from three-year courses in the summer of 2023, who began their higher

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[61] Hillman, N (2020) *Student voters: did they make a difference?* Oxford: HEPI. Available at: www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/09/17/student-voters-did-they-make-a-difference

[62] Hillman, N (2023) 'New polling shows over eight-in-10 students expect to vote at the next general election, that nearly half of students support Labour – and 7% the Conservatives – but that students are split on what policies Labour should adopt on tuition fees and loans'. *HEPI*, 2 May. Available at: www.hepi.ac.uk/2023/05/02/new-polling-shows-over-eight-in-10-students-expect-to-vote-at-the-next-general-election-that-nearly-half-of-students-support-labour-and-7-conservative-but-that-students-are-split

education qualifications during the Covid-19 pandemic, were significantly more politically engaged than the cohorts who remain in higher education. It may also reflect an attitude that students have been left behind by the major UK political parties. In recent polling published by HEPI and TechnologyOne, most respondents in all the UK nations felt politicians do not consider students a priority.[63]

By demographic, older students are more likely both to be registered and to plan to vote. Students aged 21 and under are the least likely to intend to vote (66%) though nearly three-fifths of them (78%) are registered. Women and White students are also more likely to be registered (82% and 84% respectively).

% responding Yes	Gender identity			Age		
	Man	**Woman**	**Non-binary**	**21 and under**	**22-25**	**26 and over**
I am registered to vote	78%	**82%**	81%	78%	80%	**86%**
I intend to vote	68%	68%	75%	66%	68%	**74%**

By ethnicity, Asian and White students are much more likely both to be registered and to be intending to vote, with around five in every six Asian and White students registered and around seven in every 10 intending to vote. However, registration levels drop to around three-quarters among Black and Chinese students. There may therefore be a particular risk that these groups of students vote in lower numbers.

% responding Yes	Ethnicity					
	Asian	**Black**	**Chinese**	**Mixed**	**Other**	**White**
I am registered to vote	**82%**	77%	75%	79%	69%	**84%**
I intend to vote	**69%**	61%	58%	67%	64%	**72%**

We then asked students who are registered to vote whether they are registered at their home address, their term-time address, or both, or if the student lives at home during term-time and the two addresses are therefore the same. A significant majority (69%) are registered only at their home address.

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[63] Freeman, J (2024) HEPI polling shows only a third of students think England's system of maintenance support is fair – and most are financially worse off than a year ago'. *HEPI*, 2 May. Available at: www.hepi.ac.uk/2024/05/02/new-polling-shows-students-consider-the-welsh-system-of-maintenance-support-the-most-fair-and-englands-the-least

This is broadly consistent with previous HEPI research, which found that 64% are registered only at their home address.[64] However, with the election now confirmed to be on 4 July, this is unlikely to be a significant problem as most students will have returned to their home address.

Are you registered to vote at...

Category	Percentage
Your main home address only	69%
A term time address only	7%
At both your home and term time address (the addresses are different)	15%
At your home and term time address - as these addresses are the same	6%
Don't know	4%

[64] Hillman, N (2023) 'New polling shows over eight-in-10 students expect to vote at the next general election, that nearly half of students support Labour – and 7% the Conservatives – but that students are split on what policies Labour should adopt on tuition fees and loans'. *HEPI*, 2 May. Available at: www.hepi.ac.uk/2023/05/02/new-polling-shows-over-eight-in-10-students-expect-to-vote-at-the-next-general-election-that-nearly-half-of-students-support-labour-and-7-conservative-but-that-students-are-split

15 Conclusions and policy recommendations

This is the 18th wave of the Student Academic Experience Survey. The data collected over this time has given valuable insight into the student experience and allows us to monitor and respond to changes and trends. This has been particularly important in recent times as both the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis have impacted the student experience.

It has been pleasing to see several positive outcomes in the 2024 Student Academic Experience Survey, including students reflecting more positively on the teaching they experience. The obvious disruptions of Covid-19 are fading into memory, with measures such as value-for-money and 'experience versus expectations' returning to pre-pandemic levels. Some changes due to the pandemic are here to stay, such as hybrid learning, and the choice this offers students should be embraced and clearly explained.

However, as we celebrate moving beyond the restrictions of the pandemic, and the impact this had on the student experience, students are now embattled by the cost-of-living crisis. While Covid-19 changed the higher education delivery model – to include the hybrid offer – we must consider whether the cost-of-living crisis will also change the model if its impact remains unaddressed.

There has, of course, always been a cohort of students who have worked alongside their studies. However, most students now work, and the average number of hours worked by those students is teetering on levels that may impact their studies.[65] Should this trend continue, there is a risk that 'full-time study' becomes unsustainable for an increasing number of students. The cost-of-living pressures may also force a further move to commuting, rather than residential living. This raises some important questions about the future of higher education in the UK.

+ With the Lifelong Learning Entitlement and more modular-based learning on the horizon, and an increased interest in degree apprenticeships, is there a possible risk, or opportunity, that the higher education model evolves?

+ Are we going to see a slow shift towards studying alongside work, over a longer period? Will the 'typical' 18-year-old student become more like a part-time mature student, living at home and undertaking qualifications alongside their day job?

+ Is there a risk that the most affluent students can continue to access the full-time, residential model, while all others study alongside pressing financial commitments?

+ What does this mean for institutions where most of their students are currently full-time and residential?

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[65] Blackman, T (2018) *What affects how much students learn?* Oxford: HEPI. Available at: www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/HEPI-Policy-Note-5-What-affects-how-much-students-learn08_01_17.pdf

+ What are the impacts for outcome measures in this scenario?

+ What are the consequences for the job market, with school leavers taking longer to graduate?

+ Will more students leave higher education with Level 4 and 5 qualifications, rather than the traditional Level 6 degree?

Of course, part-time and commuter students already exist – with commuter students making up a third of the UK undergraduate cohort. However, the current system is not primarily designed with these students in mind.

We should consistently and repeatedly hold the higher education sector to account on its flexibility, accessibility and accountability. However, it feels as though we are being forced to ask these questions now, not through a strategic plan to fill skills gaps, or widen access, but because students might not be able to afford the traditional higher education model. This conundrum does offer opportunities: a greater focus on Level 4 and 5 qualifications has the potential to fill skills gaps, and having a flexible, commuter-friendly experience is great for accessibility. However, such a change in direction should be purposeful, not accidental.

The seven recommendations below highlight areas that the Government, higher education institutions and others should consider in response to this report.

1 The cost-of-living crisis is the most stated factor influencing perceptions of value for students who state that they received poor, or very poor, value for money. One-in-ten students who have considered withdrawing from higher education have done so due to financial difficulties, and three-quarters of students state that their studies are affected by the cost-of-living crisis. Students who undertake paid work alongside their studies work an average of 14.5 hours per week. This is an unsustainable system that, unaddressed, will impact student outcomes. **Governments of the four UK nations should urgently review their maintenance systems to ensure that students are adequately funded while completing their studies.** The HEPI and TechnologyOne Student Minimum Income Standard report should be considered within these reviews.[66]

2 **Institutions should consider that part-time work for students is the 'new normal' and continue to facilitate this where possible. This might involve compressing timetabled hours into fewer days per week or providing paid work – where possible – to students on campus.**

3 **Institutions should consider where quality part-time work can be provided on campus.** This could be within faculties, or central services, allowing students to add to their subject and professional knowledge while they are working, rather than detract from it. Quality part-time working opportunities could also be provided within accommodation and hospitality teams or ambassadorial roles.

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[66] Freeman, J (2024) *A minimum income standard for students.* Oxford: HEPI and London: TechnologyOne.

Available at: www.hepi.ac.uk/2024/05/09/a-minimum-income-standard-for-students [accessed 21 May 2024].

Quality part-time work should involve a CPD (Continuing Professional Development) programme and advice for students on using their professional experience to demonstrate their employability on graduation. Working with local employers to develop quality part-time work opportunities would also be welcome.

4   **Institutions should consider asking key welfare questions during the registration process.** This may include asking students about their caring responsibilities, commuting time and intended hours of paid work. This would allow an opportunity to tailor support for busy students and allow for direct communication about financial hardship funds to students at risk of working more than 15 hours per week. A survey of this nature would also highlight students who have 'less busy' lives and may need support or guidance on the opportunities available to them. An additional consideration may include working with students' unions to highlight students who have not joined societies, sports clubs or volunteering groups, and may be at risk of being under-fulfilled in their student experience – particularly for those without busy lives outside of their studies. **External partners of institutions, such as technology companies which provide academic engagement monitoring and wellbeing predictions, may want to consider adding these additional factors to their processes.**

5   Almost half of degree apprentices are using financial support from their families to cover their living costs, and a quarter are undertaking additional paid work. Previous research by the UCAS and the Sutton Trust has shown that a quarter of former applicants cited affordability as a reason they did not pursue an apprenticeship, with those from lower socio-economic backgrounds twice as likely to cite affordability as a barrier.[67] **The Department for Education should review the need for additional financial support for degree apprentices, particularly for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and those who do not receive financial support from their families.**

6   It is good news that 'agreement responses' have significantly improved across all seven aspects of teaching quality this year. While there was still an increase in positive responses relating to debate and discussion, only 47% of students stated that teaching staff regularly initiated debates and discussion. **This provides an opportunity to develop subject-based debating and discussion skills, which could be used as part of institutions' broader work on promoting free speech. There seems to be a particular opportunity here for Russell Group and pre-1992 institutions, whose students are the least likely to state that their teachers regularly initiate debates and discussions, compared to other groups of providers.**

7   Higher education institutions should consider providing electoral 'auto-enrolment' for students – where eligible students register to vote as they register at their institution. For institutions where this is not already in place, there is guidance available to support setting up auto-enrolment.[68] This work should ensure that students can vote from their term-time address if needed.

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[67] UCAS and The Sutton Trust (2023) *Where next? What influences the choices of would-be apprentices?* Cheltenham: UCAS and London: The Sutton Trust. Available at: www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Where-next-What-influences-the-choices-of-would-be-apprentices.pdf

[68] Purpose Union (2023) *Registering students to vote*. London: Purpose Union. Available at: static1.squarespace.com/static/6441491cef82d36317e9c0b3/t/64c90c329e5a875ba4058dd2/1690897477226/Auto-Enrolment-Guidance

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All enquiries

Email: communications@advance-he.ac.uk

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

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