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STUDENT
ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE
SURVEY

Student Academic Experience Survey 2025

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Foreword

As we reflect on this year's Student Academic Experience Survey (SAES), we are struck by the evolving nature of higher education in the UK. This annual collaboration between Advance HE and HEPI continues to offer valuable insights into students' lived experiences, revealing both challenges and opportunities within our sector.

The findings this year paint a picture of a fundamental shift in how students navigate their university journey. Term-time employment has become the norm rather than the exception for full-time undergraduates, representing a significant transformation from just a few years ago. This change reflects the broader economic pressures facing students and the difficult choices they must make.

In this changing landscape, we see evidence of necessary trade-offs. As more time is devoted to paid work, something inevitably gives way – in this case, the hours dedicated to independent study have notably declined. Students are making pragmatic decisions as they balance financial necessities with academic commitments.

Despite these challenges, there are encouraging signs of resilience throughout the sector. The quality and timeliness of assessment feedback have improved markedly, and a growing proportion of students report that their university experience has exceeded their expectations. This speaks to the dedication of staff across institutions who continue to prioritise educational excellence even in difficult circumstances.

However, we must acknowledge concerning trends. More students are questioning whether higher education was the right choice for them, with a growing proportion indicating they would have taken a different path given the benefit of hindsight. These findings prompt important questions for our sector as well as policymakers. How can higher education institutions and those that rely on them, including Government and employers, incentivise the practices that best serve students and society? How might we build upon the areas where expectations are being exceeded while addressing the challenges that remain? These considerations must shape our collective work in the coming years.

The SAES continues to provide vital evidence for policymakers, institutional leaders and everyone committed to improving higher education. The sector is displaying remarkable resilience in challenging times, but requires sustainable solutions that address both the financial pressures on institutions and the changing needs of today's students.

Our sincere thanks go to all the students who participated in this survey and to colleagues at Advance HE, HEPI and Savanta for their work in bringing these valuable insights to light.

Alison Johns
Chief Executive of Advance HE

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

1   Executive summary

This year's results indicate that, as we had begun to observe, the student experience has evolved away from the 'traditional' model of many students living close to campus, spending a lot of time on campus and only undertaking paid employment during the holidays.

Cost-of-living challenges permeate the current experience. Accordingly, paid work is now often expected and must be fitted around students' other responsibilities. Time spent in paid work, or simply the distance students live from campus, has a limiting influence on the time available to spend on campus. Alongside this, higher education providers across the UK are facing some of the most significant financial headwinds in recent times.

Against this backdrop, we might expect it to be difficult for institutions to maintain the quality of the student experience they have provided in recent years. Indeed, this year's findings point us to where the quality of the experience is under pressure. However, there are also several touchpoints providing real evidence of resilience among students and the wider sector.

Perceptions of value for money have declined compared to 2024, but in context, are still relatively high historically. While there is clear scope for improvement, it remains the case that markedly more students believe they receive good value (37%) than feel they receive poor value (29%). There is additional evidence that the quality and speed of returning assessments are generally very high while some teaching metrics have held up relatively well. This year's report also provides evidence of the generally positive experience of international students, and a better understanding of some of the key drivers of their choices.

Setting and meeting the expectations of students beginning university is proving as challenging as ever, but a healthy number of respondents have had their experiences exceeded, which is an endorsement of the quality of facilities and support provided.

Central to those expectations is evidence that students often expect to work for pay while studying, and one of the most noteworthy results this year is that there are now more than one in three who do so (68%), a remarkable statistic when we consider than this figure was below 50% just three years ago. While students are often prepared for working to be a key part of their life at university, there is evidence this has been at the expense of time spent in independent study. Time allocated to this has seen a strong decline while employment hours have increased, although the total number of hours worked or studied is now slightly lower on average, which may be more manageable.

There is striking evidence this year that higher education may not be the best option for all who select it. Although the majority would make the same choice of course or institution again with the benefit of hindsight, there has been a marked increase in those who would have made a different choice either within or outside higher education, from 6% last year to 11% this year. This implies that while the student experience is evolving, the needs of students and what they want from it may be changing too.

2   Methodology

2.1   Approach

The Survey questions were designed and developed in partnership between Advance HE and HEPI, with online fieldwork interviews independently led by Savanta.

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.

Between 6 January 2025 and 18 March 2025, members of Savanta's student panel, as well as respondents from other internal Savanta panels, including Cint, and external panel provider Torfac, were invited to complete the Survey. In total, 10,232 responses were received and analysed, with 8,721 responses sourced from the Savanta panels and 1,511 in total sourced from Torfac. The median completion time was 9 minutes and 52 seconds.

In order to ensure a balance between comparability and topicality, the 2025 questionnaire contained a number of core questions, while also introducing some new areas of coverage, including a question on how many members of staff know students' names, perceptions of how institutions should provide mental health and wellbeing services and how universities should be financed and the size of tuition fees within this.

2.2   Sample size

Our 2025 Survey captured the views of 10,232 full-time undergraduate students studying in the UK. Unless stated otherwise, all figures and tables relate to weighted data from the 2025 Survey.

The total sample size of 10,232, based on a UK full-time undergraduate population of 1,759,245 (2023-24 data) provides a margin of error of + / - 1%.[1] This is calculated at the 95% confidence level and based on a result of 50%, where the margin of error is at its maximum. This means 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.

We have highlighted statistically significant differences between 2024 and 2025 (or in some cases, between sample groups from 2025) 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 and not attributed to chance.

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[1] HESA (2025) '*Who's studying in HE?*' Cheltenham: HESA. Available at: www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he

2.3   Weighting

Data were weighted, in partnership with Savanta, based on a strategy to maximise representation while maintaining the robustness of the original data. A number of factors were taken into account, using data principally drawn from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). The key weighting criteria were based on ethnicity, domicile, type of school attended and discipline.

2.4   Base sizes

To reduce the amount of text, we have not generally included base size descriptions under each chart. Unless specified otherwise, charts are based on 2025 data comprising the total weighted population of 10,232. Most of the other charts are based either on time-series data or on one of the specific sub-samples identified in the sample profile below.

2.5   Data tables

The full weighted 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.

We encourage readers of this report to access and use the data tables for their own research purposes, as they facilitate the investigation of wider aspects of the student experience beyond those discussed in this report.

2.6   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 the specific qualifications being studied for as well as the pre-qualifications taken before attending higher education.

2.7   International students

To provide greater clarity on the definition of international students, we introduced a new, direct question, asking at the beginning of the survey 'are you an international student (yes / no / don't know)'.

We then used this question as a filter for the sections on domicile as outlined below.

How answered – Q. International student	How answered – Q. Domicile	How classified
No	England / Northern Ireland / Scotland / Wales	Home / UK student (England / Northern Ireland / Scotland / Wales – as specified)
	European Union or Rest of World	Home / UK student (exact domicile unknown)
Yes	England / Northern Ireland / Scotland / Wales	International student (exact domicile unknown)
	European Union or Rest of World	International student (European Union or Rest of World as specified)

This analysis indicated that in previous years, some international students were classifying themselves incorrectly as being 'domiciled' in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland or Wales. Accordingly, these students have now been classified in a more accurate way.[2]

We subsequently used the new classification of UK-domiciled students, whether the exact domicile was known or not, as a filter for analysis on ethnicity, type of school attended, POLAR analysis, social grade, distance travelled to campus and commuting category.

2.8 Ethnicity

For ethnicity analysis, the sample profile and main data in this report are once again based on UK-domiciled students.[3] This is a standard approach and has been done to remove the impact of international students on ethnic groups.

2.9 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 are fully available in the data tables. Advance HE and HEPI recognise the limits of this classification.

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[2] Due to the introduction of this filter, analysis of respondents 'domiciled' in England, NI, Scotland and Wales is not directly comparable to previous years and should be used as a guide only – but this has been done to improve accuracy.

[3] 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.

3   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		**2023** **(10,163)**	**2024** **(10,319)**	**2025** **(10,232)**	**2025** **Weighted base size**
University region	England	83%	85%	83%	8,459
	Northern Ireland	2%	3%	4%	378
	Scotland	10%	8%	7%	665
	Wales	4%	4%	6%	598
Domicile	UK student	N/A – due to change in classification question		78%	7,977
	International student			21%	2,148
Institution type	Russell Group	28%	28%	28%	2,847
	Pre-92 (excl. Russell Group)	20%	19%	18%	1,802
	Post-92	43%	42%	43%	4,438
	Specialist	4%	5%	6%	599
	Other	6%	7%	5%	546
Ethnicity (% among UK-domiciled students providing an answer)	Asian (excluding Chinese)	16%	14%	12%	930
	Chinese	1%	1%	1%	69
	Black	5%	6%	9%	732
	Mixed	5%	6%	5%	411
	Other	1%	1%	1%	84
	White	72%	72%	72%	5,725

4   Value for money

4.1   Trends over time

The perceived value for money of higher education has established itself as one of the main barometers of the overall student experience as measured by this Survey. A few years ago, this measure perhaps understandably suffered as the undergraduate experience faced a range of restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic, but we were encouraged to see an uplift in the years that followed. Since then, however, students have faced some particular and ongoing challenges around the cost of living and needing to work for pay while at university, which has in turn put greater pressure on how the overall experience has been perceived in terms of value.

Value for money of your present course
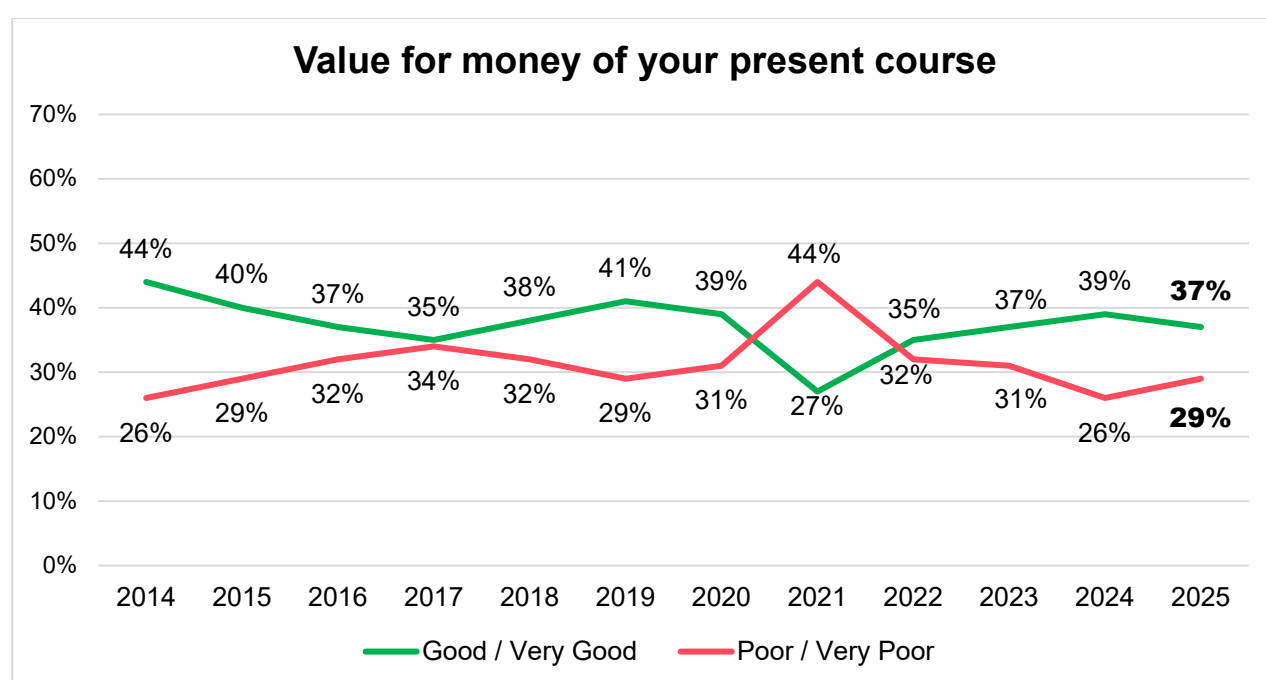
Note that students could also choose an option 'neither good nor poor' (chosen by 34% of students in 2025), hence the two lines on this chart do not add up to 100%.

Our 2025 data show that there has been a reversal of the most recent gains in this measure, with 37% of students feeling they received 'good' or 'very good' value – a statistically significant decrease compared with 39% in 2024. Matching this, there has also been a statistically significant rise in the proportion feeling they received 'poor' or 'very poor' value, although due to a relatively large number selecting the 'neutral' option on the five-point scale, there is still an eight point gap between the green and red lines on our graph, which – 2024 apart – is one of the larger gaps we have seen in recent times.

While these numbers reflect the challenges being faced by the sector, they are also reflective of a level of resilience among higher education providers in that, on balance, value is most likely to be seen as 'good' rather than 'poor'.

4.2   Value by home region

There is a range of fees and funding policies in place in different parts of the UK. Where a student is from and where they then choose to study, as well as the diversity of the university experience itself, tends to have a large influence on how value is perceived.

Value for money of course – by home region
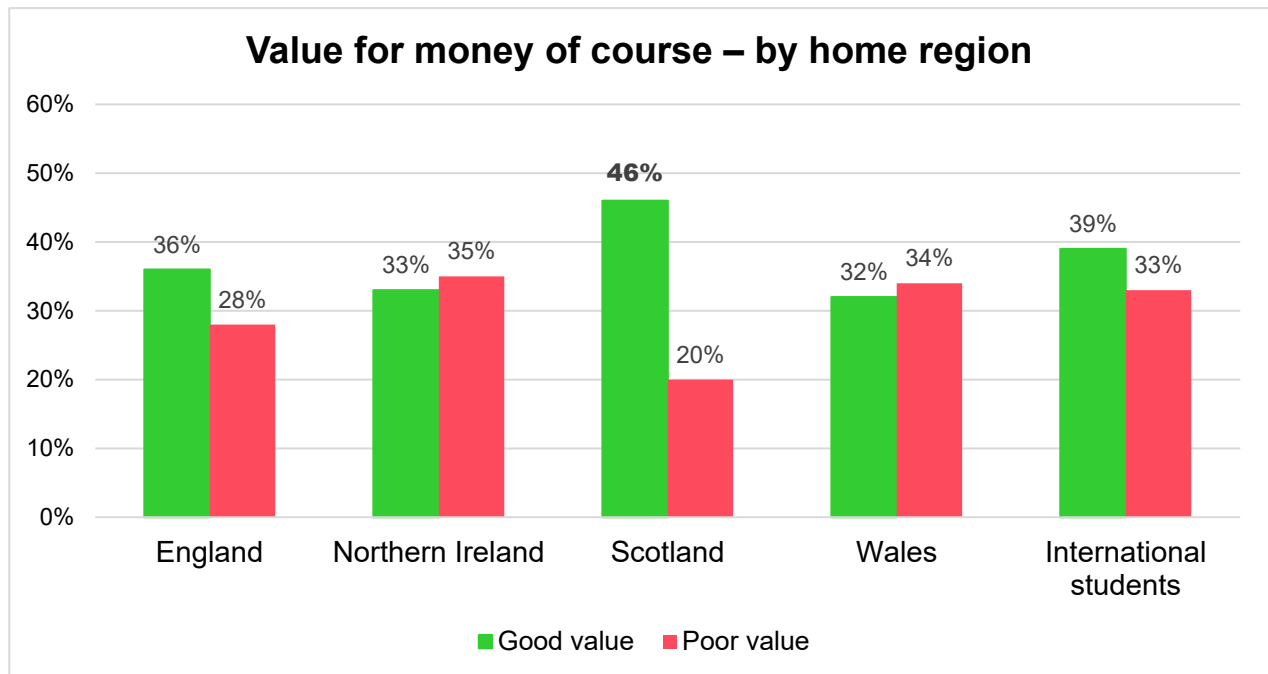
As the above chart shows, value is perceived at its highest among UK students whose 'home region' is Scotland (Scottish-domiciled students do not pay fees if they study in Scotland). Notably, those classified as being international students, even though they generally pay the highest fees, perceive relatively high value, at 39%, ahead of students whose home region is England, Northern Ireland or Wales. As we will go on to see in a later chapter, many international students have a positive experience across multiple key touchpoints, which is encouraging to see.

Students from Northern Ireland and Wales perceive the lowest value, with the data highlighting more students who perceive poor value than good value, which is a potential cause for concern.

As referred to earlier, we have made a change to how home region is defined this year in order to maximise accuracy, and hence we have not produced a time-series comparison chart. However, previous data have tended to point towards English students perceiving the lowest value, rather than those from Northern Ireland and Wales, so the low scores this year for those parts of the UK represent a potential area for further investigation.

4.3   Factors influencing perceptions of poor value

The perception of value encompasses a wide range of concepts and, although we might speculate as to what the prevailing influences are, we include a specific question asking respondents to tell us directly. This question is divided into two parts: factors linked to perceptions of poor value, and factors linked to perceptions of good value. We have detailed the answers related to the 29% who said they received 'poor value' below.

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

Factor	2022	2023	2024	2025
The cost of living	35%	41%	44%	**38%**
Tuition fees	56%	40%	35%	**28%**
Teaching quality	39%	31%	33%	**25%**
Career prospects	20%	18%	21%	21%
Course content	29%	23%	29%	**20%**
One to one time with staff	26%	20%	18%	**16%**
In-person contact hours	33%	22%	19%	**16%**
Course facilities/ resources	21%	19%	20%	**15%**
Quality of feedback	27%	20%	20%	**15%**
Course organisation	28%	24%	23%	**15%**

Results ranked in order of 2025's top 10 answers shown. Respondents were asked to select all that apply.

Although respondents had the opportunity to code a range of options as applicable, compared to previous years there were fewer answers selected, with students tending to mention the main one or two issues that impacted them. As a result of this, the actual number of responses for almost every option has fallen. Therefore, this chart is perhaps best interpreted in terms of the relative position of each response rather than the absolute percentages.[4]

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[4] This is the case across most answers beyond those stated here, and there were even fewer 'other' options selected than in the past.

Looking at the results through this lens, we can see that cost-of-living concerns are becoming even more dominant as the lead driver of perceptions of poor value – 10 percentage points ahead of any other answer. Tuition fees, which have remained static (and therefore declined in real terms) – despite the first rise since 2017 in England being imminent – have declined in relative importance, compared to as recently as 2022 when they represented the dominant answer to this question. Teaching quality has also declined in absolute and relative importance as a driver of poor value.

In terms of other factors, it appears that career prospects are increasing in relative importance, while a little further down the list there are some concerns raised about one-to-one time with staff and general levels of contact hours, which have gained in relative importance despite the total number of mentions being lower than last year – as is the case for most answer options.

Other reasons received for poor value – selected open comments[5]
"The massive discrepancy that requires overseas tuition to be more than 3x that of home fees"
"Tuition costs are far too high for what is reasonable to expect of university level study"
"Time in class - only twice a week and there's a lot of time off from lessons"
"PRINTING! they charge us for printing. once had to spend £40 to print all my coursework"
"Shockingly poor accessibility for my wheelchair"
"food and drink prices"
"additional costs of fieldwork"

Looking at the small number of 'other' factors mentioned, several of these refer to costs incurred while at university, which, while potentially related to the cost-of-living option provided, do help to paint a picture of the issues of greatest concern. Taking all the aspects in this section into account, it does imply that issues around costs are potentially dominating how higher education is perceived for some, ahead of more traditional barometers of value such as resources, class sizes, facilities and teaching quality.

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

5 Meeting expectations

5.1 Experience versus expectations

It has always been a challenge for higher education institutions to exactly meet, or even exceed student expectations, given undergraduates' wide range of backgrounds and different levels of information and preparation gained from diverse sources. This became even more pronounced during the pandemic, due to fundamental changes in how higher education was delivered. More recently, rising cost-of-living pressures have further affected students' university experience, compared to what they may have anticipated.

Experience compared to expectations
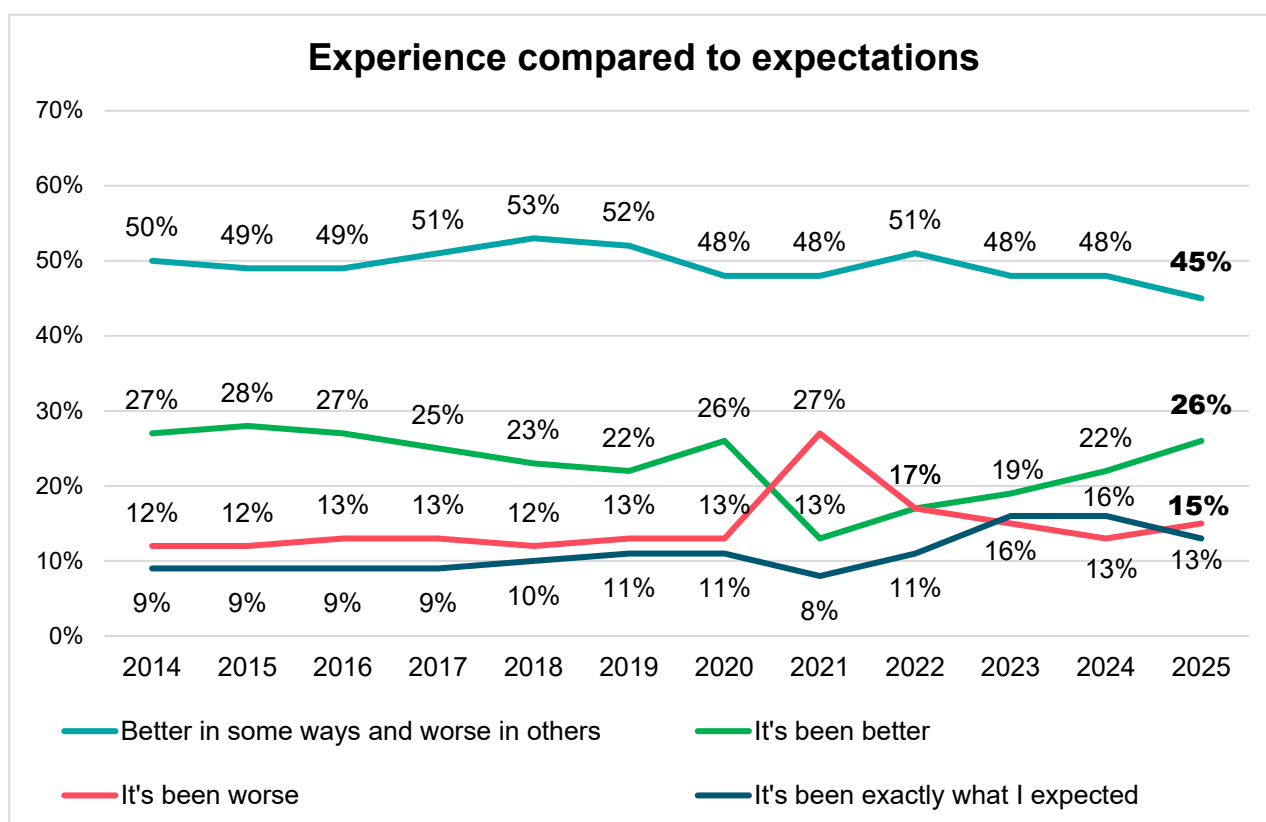
Encouragingly, however, we have seen a clear, statistically significant increase in students who feel their experience has exceeded their expectations, from 22% to 26% – a level that is now exactly double what it was as recently as 2021, during the pandemic. This points towards high levels of resilience from students in managing different challenges but is also an endorsement of everything that institutions have been doing to provide support and deliver the best possible experience where resources are limited.

Notably, we have also seen a clear increase in the number of students whose experience was worse than expected (although this is not as high as the increase in exceeded expectations above), which shows us that there is a range of polarising experiences despite many positive ones.

The most common answer to this question remains that the experience was better in some ways and worse than others, but this is at slightly lower levels (45%) than we have recently seen. We should also recognise that just 13% of respondents said their experiences were exactly as expected, which underlines how difficult it remains to set and meet realistic expectations around entering higher education.

5.2   Why expectations are not met

For 2025 we introduced some new options in our follow-up question on why expectations were or were not met. Although some of the response options stayed the same, we have not presented this as a time series this year, given the changes in the range of options available to select.

Why was your experience worse than expected?

Reason	%
Teaching quality worse than expected	23%
Don't feel supported in independent study	23%
Have less disposable income than expected	23%
Course is poorly organised	20%
Feedback is poor	19%
I have not put in enough effort myself	18%
I have taken on more debt than expected	18%
I spend more time commuting than expected	17%
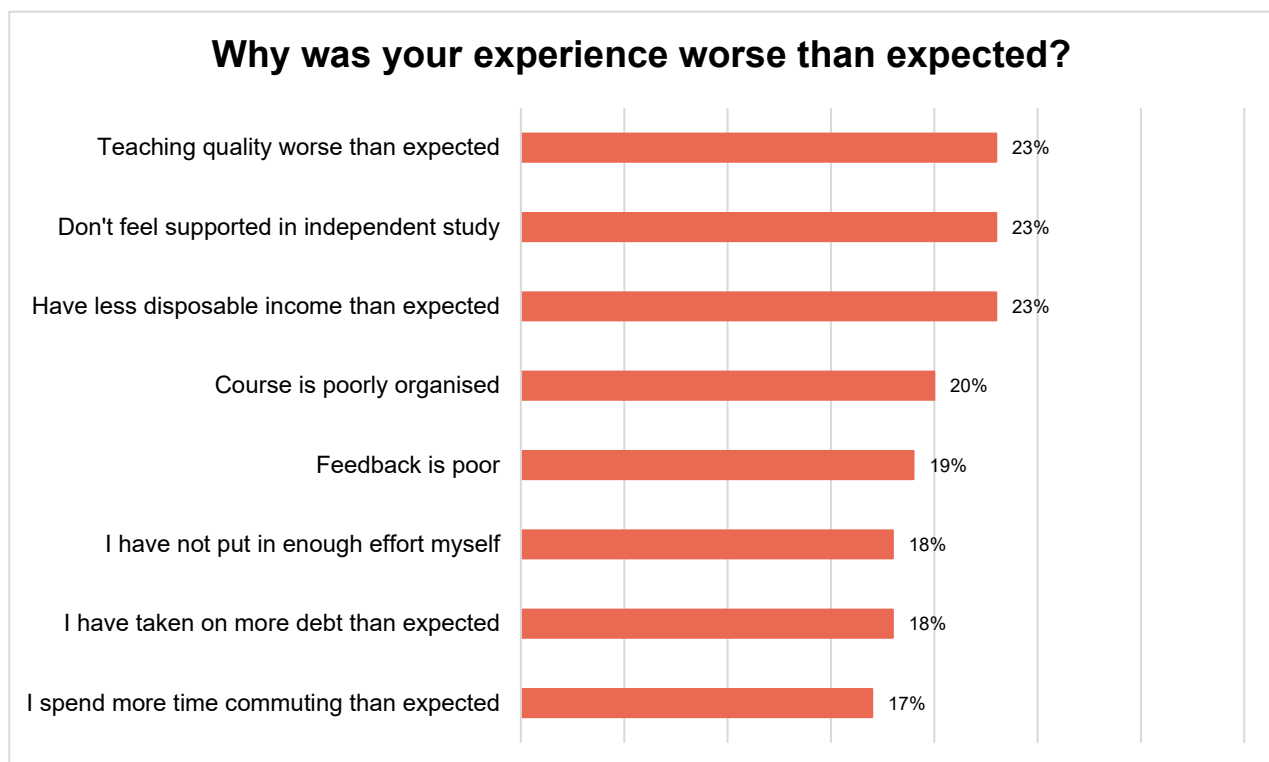
Chart displays top eight mentions.

Among the 15% of students whose experience was worse than expected, financial issues clearly played a key role, with relatively high proportions stating they did not have as much disposable income as expected and, concerningly, taking on more debt than expected.[6] As well as the regular concerns among this minority of students around teaching quality and course organisation, there were also references to commuting time being a particular issue.

Notably, and perhaps surprisingly, only a relatively small number of students in this cohort (11%) said their expectations were not met because of spending too much time in paid employment, which implies that this is now an aspect of undergraduate life that is seen as

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[6] The Sutton Trust (2024) *Time to end travesty of poorest students racking up highest debts*. Press release, 21 March. Available at: www.suttontrust.com/news-opinion/all-news-opinion/time-to-end-travesty-of-poorest-students-racking-up-highest-debts

part of the 'norm' in many cases and is potentially factored into expectations of what university life will be like.

There were a very small number of 'other' comments this year, but these are illuminating. In particular, there were some striking comments relating to loneliness and difficulty making friends. These challenges may be coming to the fore as university and campus life evolves to incorporate flexible learning and, in some cases, less presence on campus. There are also references to feeling overwhelmed in the face of various responsibilities.

Expectations not met – selected open comments
"It can feel overwhelming and just exhausting"
"Redundancies have set back our university meaning we only have 3 teachers across our department"
"Its taking more out of me than I thought"
"It's a lot of hard work with full time employment"
"I didn't make the friend group I had hoped to. I have little to no friends at University"
"I was not expecting it to be so independent"
"People attending / in my lectures aren't as approachable"
"We have to do a lot on unpaid placement which mean it is very hard to get a job leaving me with very little money and very little time to do assignments"
"it's a lot lonelier than i expected. much harder to make deep connections"
"I have struggled making friends and feel lonely"
"A lot of lecturers basically introduce the topic and expect you to essentially teach yourself through reading rather than the reading being there to support what should have been taught in a lecture"

5.3   Why expectations are exceeded

As noted above, we have relatively high levels of students (26%) saying their experiences have been better compared to their expectations.

The principal driver of this has been more students feeling that their course is well organised – which can help by providing a clear level of structure as students navigate a largely unfamiliar environment at the beginning of their course.

Other main areas of praise centre around high-quality feedback (which we shall see evidence of later in this report), high-quality teaching and accessible teaching staff. It is also notable that students recognise when they put in the right amount of effort themselves and how this can contribute to a high-quality experience.

Why was experience better than expected?

Category	Percentage
Course well organised	35%
Quality of feedback	29%
Put in a good amount of effort myself	28%
Teaching staff are accessible	26%
Teaching quality	26%
Level of challenge of the course	25%
I feel supported in independent study	24%
Good level of in-person interaction with students	23%
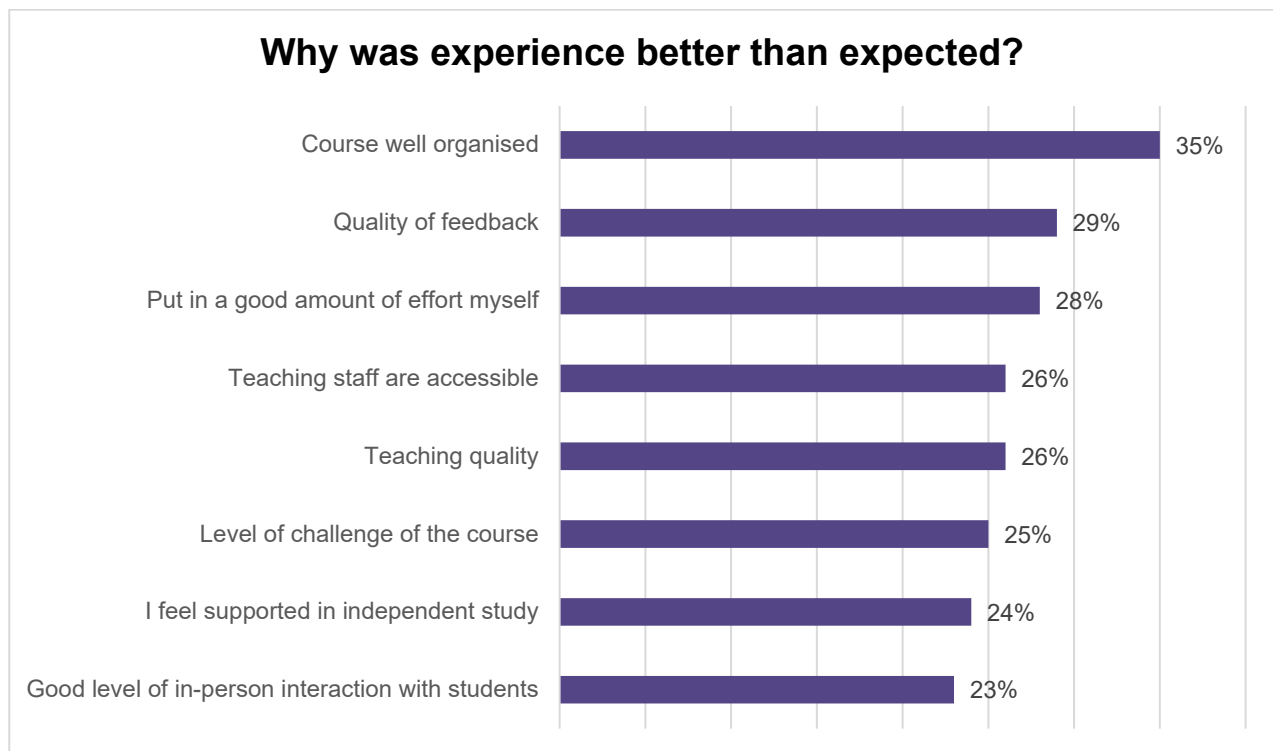
Chart displays top eight mentions.

6   The choice to go to university

6.1   The benefit of hindsight

The decision around whether or not to go to university, and then the choice of institution and course / qualification is one of the key choices in a young person's life. Such a decision will likely have a major influence on academic, professional and personal circumstances for many years to come.

To understand how full-time undergraduates view this key decision a few months or years down the line, our Survey asks participants directly whether they are happy with their choice given their experience to date, and, given what they now know, whether they would have made a different decision.[7]

Whether students would make the same choice again

Category	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
No change - happy with choice	58%	59%	58%	60%	56%
Different university	9%	10%	9%	8%	8%
Do a degree apprenticeship				7%	8%
Different course	7%	8%	7%	7%	6%
Different course and university	5%	5%	6%	6%	6%
Defer study to a year later	11%	7%	6%	4%	5%
Get a job	2%	3%	3%	3%	4%
Do a non-degree apprenticeship				2%	4%
Do something else outside HE	1%	2%	2%	2%	3%
NET: Not enter higher education				6%	11%

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[7] In 2024 we tweaked the question options by splitting up the general 'do an apprenticeship' option to specify whether this would be at degree level (an option not shown to students in our sample in degree apprenticeship courses) or not – hence these two options do not have a full time series. The same applies to the 'NET: not enter higher education' which includes the option to do a non-degree apprenticeship and hence only has two years of time series data.

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Please note the option 'degree apprenticeship' was hidden in the Survey for the 11% of respondents who were already enrolled on one, but for consistency and simplicity they have been included in the base for all options charted.

Overall, 56% of full-time undergraduates are happy with their choice and would therefore make the same decision again. However, a substantial minority – 44% – would have made a different choice. Of these, the majority would have still chosen to immediately go into higher education, but they would have selected different options, with the most popular being a degree apprenticeship, or the same course at a different institution.[8] There were progressively smaller numbers who said they would either choose a different course at the same institution, change both institution and course, or do something outside higher education, including take a gap year, choose a non-degree apprenticeship or get a job.

In terms of year-on-year comparison, the 2025 findings are significant, in that 56% making the same choice, while still a majority, is the lowest number we have seen since the question was introduced. Although the alternatives are split between a range of different options, almost all have increased by one or two percentage points, which suggests that the level of 'student regret' is at its highest so far.

What is particularly noteworthy is that the total saying they would not enter higher education (ie getting a job, taking a gap year, enrolling on a non-degree apprenticeship, or doing something else outside HE) has almost doubled from 6% in 2024 to 11% in 2025. Within this, there has been an increase from 2% to 4% in the proportion who would choose a non-degree apprenticeship.

At the time of writing, further research, building on this question, has been published by a team led by Professor Nicola Dandridge at the University of Bristol, co-funded by Advance HE, HEPI and PolicyBristol from the Research England QR Policy Support Fund. *The benefits of hindsight: Reconsidering higher education choices* conducted research among both graduates and undergraduates, with the undergraduate findings (based on fieldwork in 2024) on this specific question broadly matching those in the 2024 Student Academic Experience Survey.[9] This comparison data from 2024 provide further evidence that our findings in this year's Survey represent a clear increase in the proportion of students who may be regretting their decision, and in particular moving towards considering options outside higher education.

While there are a range of lenses through which these findings may be viewed, particularly around the potential move towards non-higher education options, the implication that a significant minority of undergraduates may have regretted aspects of their choice is striking.

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[8] As context, 11% in total were already doing a degree apprenticeship and hence were not shown this specific option
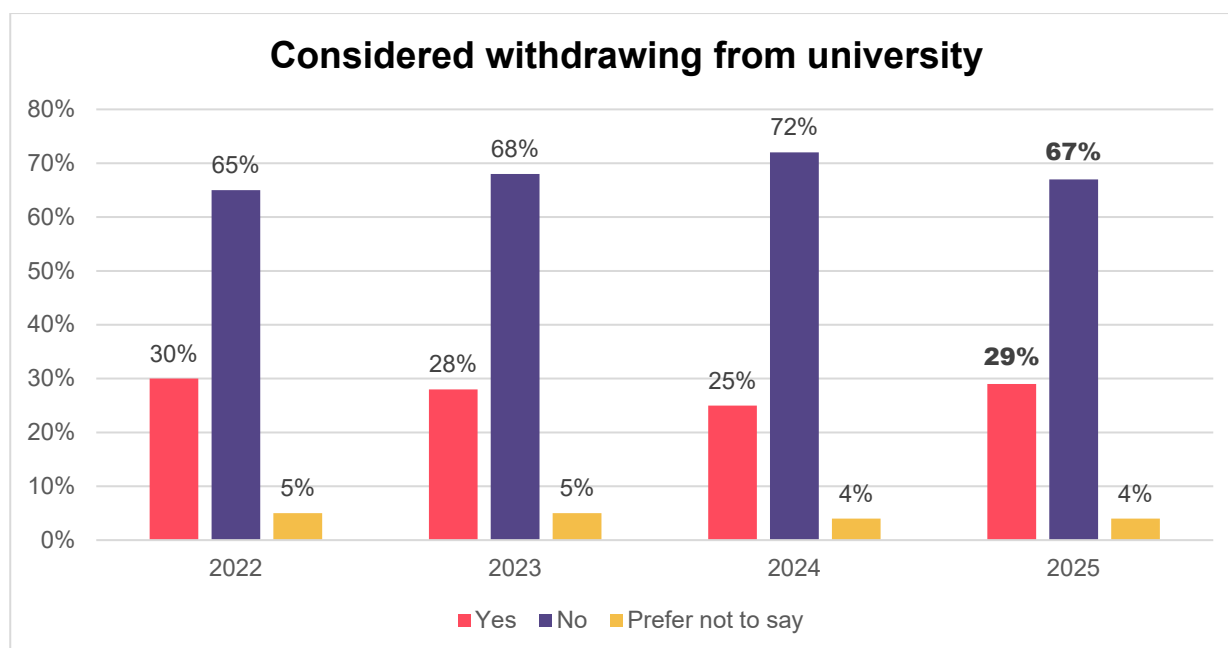
[9] Dandridge, N, Huang, Y-H I, Casoni, V P and Watermeyer, R (2025) *The benefits of hindsight: reconsidering higher education choices*. Bristol: University of Bristol. Available at: bpb-eu-w2.wpmucdn.com/blogs.bristol.ac.uk/dist/f/1210/files/2025/03/The-Benefits-of-Hindsight-Reconsidering-Higher-Education-Choices-2025-1.pdf

This provides key evidence for schools, careers advisers, further and higher education institutions as well as policymakers and Government to work collaboratively to help to ensure that more students make the right choice for them and for their future ambitions, whether or not that involves entering higher education.[10]

6.2   Whether considered leaving

Non-continuation rates at the undergraduate level in the UK are relatively low in a global context.[11] By definition, the students in our Survey have remained with their course to date, although some may potentially be at risk of non-continuation before they graduate.

As shown below, 29% of our respondents have considered leaving their course, a significant increase of four percentage points from last year. In context, these scores have generally not changed markedly over the past few years, and the fact that these students are still in full-time study does imply that they have managed to overcome their issues. However, the fact that more students are considering leaving is a strong indicator that there have been some challenging times.

Considered withdrawing from university

Year	Yes	No	Prefer not to say
2022	30%	65%	5%
2023	28%	68%	5%
2024	25%	72%	4%
2025	**29%**	**67%**	4%

Statistically significant differences between 2024 and 2025 in bold.

The overall reasons behind this have changed little over the past year or two. Mental health concerns still dominate, while financial difficulties now clearly represent the second most

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[10] Dickinson, J and Marshall, M (2025) 'Hindsight is a wonderful thing - but foresight is better'. *Wonkhe*, 2 April. Available at: wonkhe.com/blogs/hindsight-is-a-wonderful-thing-but-foresight-is-better

[11] 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

dominant driver. These two factors could be interrelated in many cases, with cost concerns increasing the likelihood of mental health challenges.

Reasons considered leaving

My mental / emotional health
- 34%
- 29%
- 28%
- 28%

Financial difficulties
- 6%
- 8%
- 12%
- 11%

Difficulty balancing study and other commitments
- 4%
- 6%
- 5%
- 6%

Family or personal problems
- 4%
- 5%
- 6%
- 5%

I don't feel connected with my fellow students
- 4%
- 3%
- 4%
- 5%

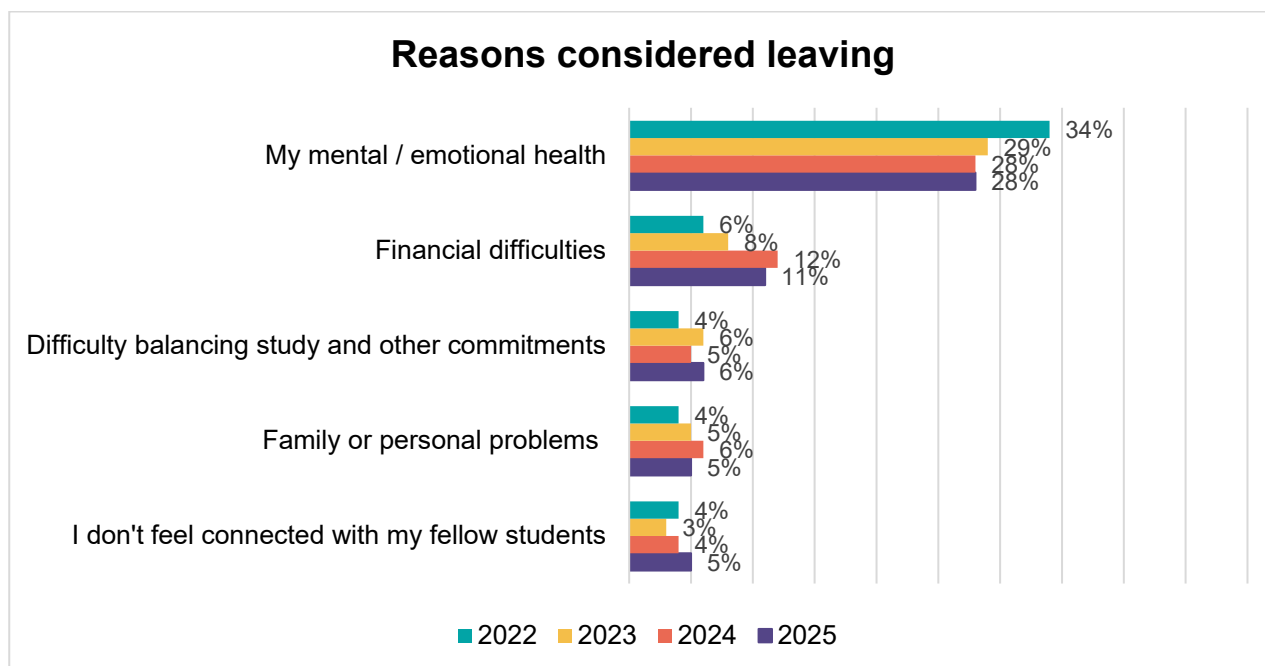■ 2022   ■ 2023   ■ 2024   ■ 2025

Chart displays top five mentions. Ranked in order of 2025 results. Chart based on all students who had considered leaving (29%).

There is also reference to the difficulties balancing the wider responsibilities that students face – which could potentially refer to paid employment, caring and commuting.

7 Improvements to the student academic experience

To analyse the qualitative data gathered from responses to the open-ended question 'What is one thing your institution could do to improve the quality of the student experience?', a thematic analysis approach was employed following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006).[12] Responses were coded systematically, generating 124 initial codes that were subsequently organised into eight major themes, which are described in detail below.

7.1 Enhanced individualised support and engagement

The need for ongoing personalised support emerged as a significant theme across participant responses. Students expressed a strong desire for more meaningful connections with academic staff, particularly in environments where they might otherwise feel anonymous. The value of these interactions was highlighted as fundamental to student engagement and overall academic success.

> "I'd say that one thing my institution could do to improve the quality of the academic experience is to provide more opportunities for one-on-one or small group interactions with staff. This would help students feel more supported and engaged, especially in larger courses where it's easy to feel lost in the crowd."

> "Improve 1 to 1 interaction with students and staff."

These perspectives underscore how direct engagement with lecturers and staff creates a sense of belonging and personalised learning. Grey and Osborne's (2024) recent study reveals that effective personal tutoring in UK higher education provides comprehensive student support while creating a sense of belonging that improves retention and academic performance.[13] Their research emphasises that successful tutoring systems require clearly defined roles and regular, structured student-tutor interactions to maximise benefits.

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[12] Braun, V and Clarke, V (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3 (2): 77-101. Available at: doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

[13] Grey, D and Osborne, C (2020) 'Perceptions and principles of personal tutoring', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 44 (3): 285-299. Available at: doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2018.1536258

7.2   Enhancing communication channels

Students emphasised the need for improved overall communication from the institution. Suggestions included having tutors or staff conduct regular check-ins to build stronger relationships with students.

> "Better communication overall."

> "Better communication with students."

> "More frequent check-ins by tutors to build a personalised relationship with more students."

Participants suggested increasing points of contact and interaction to ensure that students feel supported and updated throughout their academic journey. Some participants proposed leveraging technology, such as texting or online platforms, to improve communication efficiency.

> "Have more points of contact and interaction with the students to understand and help the student be updated and go forward with the course."

Collectively, these insights reveal how communication quality significantly impacts the overall educational experience, affecting everything from academic progress to institutional belonging.

7.3   Quality of feedback

The prompt delivery of assessment feedback and evaluation emerged as a critical concern among participants, as has been the case in past years. Despite feedback scoring high in the quantitative results, some students emphasised the importance of timely feedback and its direct impact on their ability to implement improvements and understand their academic standing. They expressed frustration with delayed responses that diminished the usefulness of instructor comments.

> "To improve the turnaround time for assignment feedback and provide more detailed comments to help students understand areas for improvement."

This sentiment reflects the view that feedback loses considerable value when received too late to meaningfully inform subsequent work, highlighting an area where institutional processes could be significantly enhanced.

Students also emphasised the need for feedback that provides clear, actionable guidance rather than superficial or vague comments. Students indicated that more frequent, lower-stakes feedback opportunities allowed for iterative improvement and ongoing awareness of their academic standing. They sought evaluative information that specifically identified strengths and weaknesses while offering concrete suggestions for improvement. Concurrent

with this finding, Harvey (2011, 23) suggests the need for institutions to develop "a clear analysis of the purpose and use of student feedback, a structure for implementing and communicating changes designed to improve the student learning experience, as well as a clear linkage between feedback from and feedback to students on their learning and progress".[14]

> "All staff should provide more useful feedback to students."

> "They could improve [the] feedback system."

International students highlighted the challenges of adapting to new educational expectations without adequate support or useful feedback.

> "I think feedback on assignments is important because mostly international students don't know the way of writing assignments (every student comes from different countries, different styles of study). This is a very challenging time; teachers should tell students the ways of writing assignments…so that everyone gives their best."

Personalised feedback interactions were highly valued by participants, who emphasised the unique benefits of direct dialogue with instructors. The responses suggest that individualised conversations allowed for more nuanced understanding and clarification than written comments alone could provide – although it should be noted that such a solution will not necessarily be affordable across the board.

> "More opportunities for 1 on 1 feedback."

> "Make it more interactive e.g., communicate more with students 1 on 1 while drafting mock work."

Transparency regarding assessment standards emerged as a significant concern, with some participants expressing confusion about how their work was evaluated. Students indicated that, without clear understanding of marking criteria, they struggled to interpret feedback meaningfully or implement improvements effectively.

> "They could give more proper feedback on assignments and explain the criteria for marking better."

Some participants suggested innovative approaches to feedback delivery through peer mentoring systems. They proposed leveraging experienced students as additional sources of guidance, potentially addressing resource constraints while creating valuable peer learning opportunities.

> "Better use of mentors (senior year reps) within the course."

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[14] Harvey L (2011) 'The nexus of feedback and improvement', in Nair, C S and Mertova, P (eds) *Student feedback: the cornerstone to an effective quality assurance system in higher education*. Oxford: Chandos.

7.4   Curriculum improvements

The siloed nature of academic departments emerged as a significant limitation in current educational approaches. Participants articulated a vision for more integrated learning experiences, suggesting that structured opportunities for cross-disciplinary interaction could significantly enhance both student engagement and learning outcomes.

> "One thing I think my institution could do to improve the academic experience for students is to offer more opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration. Many students, like me, come from diverse backgrounds and have multiple interests, yet the curriculum often feels quite siloed. Having more projects or events where students from different departments can work together on real-world problems could spark creativity and innovation."

Beyond theoretical frameworks, participants expressed a strong desire for educational experiences that incorporated authentic expertise from industry professionals and real-world contexts. They noted how theoretical knowledge alone often failed to prepare them adequately for the practical challenges of their intended professional fields. It was suggested that a useful approach would be diversifying learning approaches to include more dynamic engagement with practitioners and workplace environments.

> "They could have more interactive lectures, teach more practical knowledge by means of guest lectures, activities, industrial trips etc."

> "The course does not have a ton of field work and experience which to me is a big part of the conservation biology course."

> "Maybe more interactive sessions and take students on field trip[s] for experiencing everything in real time."

The connection between academic content and evolving workplace requirements featured prominently in participant responses. Multiple students expressed concern about curriculum currency, particularly regarding technological skills and practical competencies in the workplace. Participants recognised the growing importance of technology in both education and future employment, suggesting that institutions should prioritise developing these capabilities among staff and students alike.

> "Just make university overall more interesting and relevant overall too in terms of real-life skills that will be employed."

> "Provide a real scenario of what the work environment could look like."

> "Increase technology awareness."

To support this, Cheong, Leong and Hill (2021) argue that higher education should shift from traditional textbook-centred approaches toward experiential learning methods that develop essential life skills alongside academic knowledge.[15] Ultimately, this transition creates dual benefits: students gain improved employability and economic prospects while universities enhance their reputational standing (Donald, Baruch and Ashleigh, 2019).[16]

Time constraints were identified as a limitation in current educational structures. Some participants suggested that increased instructional time would allow for deeper exploration and more comprehensive skill development.

> "Have longer semesters."

> "Put more lecture hours."

These suggestions reflect a desire for curricula that are dynamic, inclusive of practical applications, interdisciplinary in nature and aligned with current industry standards while providing ample opportunities for experiential learning.

7.5   Increased emotional and mental support

According to recent research, the proportion of students who disclosed a mental health condition to their university increased rapidly from under 1% in 2010/11 to 5.8% in 2022/23 (Lewis and Stiebahl, 2025).[17] Reflecting this increase in disclosure rates, students in this Survey clearly identified mental health services as a critical area requiring institutional attention and enhancement. Their comments reflected concern about both the availability and comprehensiveness of current support systems.

> "More mental health support."

> "Improve the amount of emotional and mental support for student that may be struggling."

> "More disability and mental health support."

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[15] Cheong, K C, Leong, Y C and Hill, C (2021) 'Pulling in one direction? Stakeholder perceptions of employability in Malaysia', *Studies in Higher Education*, 46 (4): 807-820. Available at: doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1654449

[16] Donald, W E, Baruch, Y and Ashleigh, M (2019) 'The undergraduate self-perception of employability: human capital, careers advice, and career ownership', *Studies in Higher Education*, 44 (4): 599-614. Available at: doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2017.1387107

[17] Lewis, J and Stiebahl, S (2025) *Student mental health in England: statistics, policy, and guidance* (Research briefing CBP-8593, 25 April). London: House of Commons Library. Available at: commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8593 [accessed 6 May 2025]

Some comments focused on the need for deeper institutional understanding of emotional challenges rather than simply providing services. Respondents suggested that current support systems often lack sufficient depth in understanding the complex nature of student stress and its impact on academic performance.

> "More in depth understanding of emotional stress."

This perspective aligns with growing recognition that academic success is deeply intertwined with psychological health, requiring institutions to develop more nuanced, empathetic approaches that acknowledge the emotional dimensions of the learning experience.

7.6   Increased financial support

Financial concerns continue to weigh heavily on many students' minds. As measured by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), students reported a rise in the cost-of-living in comparison to the year before, impacting not only their current studies but their desire to further their education (ONS, 2023).[18] It is evident from the responses in this data that the financial strain extends beyond just tuition, with some students specifically mentioning the need for reduced living costs as crucial for improving their academic experience. The desire for greater institutional support is clear, with multiple students requesting institutions to be supportive of their financial needs.

> "Reduce living costs."

> "More financially supportive institutions."

Some international students feel the payment structure itself could be more accommodating, suggesting institutions "give students [a] more flexible instalment tuition fee plan" and "makes school fee payment easy".

The frustration with high costs without corresponding value is palpable.

> "Provide more tangible teaching and career support for the massive
> amount of money I'm paying."

7.7   Support for international students

As we will see later in the report, many metrics in the survey among international students are positive. However, the financial burden of international education emerged as a significant concern among some participants, with multiple students highlighting specific economic challenges faced by non-domestic students.

> "Reduce the fees for international students and well as current student[s]."

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[18] ONS (2023) *Cost of living and higher education students, England: 30 January to 13 February 2023*. Newport: Office for National Statistics. Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/educationandchildcare/bulletins/costoflivingandhighereducationstudentsengland/30januaryto13february2023 [accessed 6 May 2025]

Others focused on supplementary funding mechanisms,

> "Provide more international scholarships or bursaries."

> "Provide some sort of funding for international students."

Recent HEPI research has identified concerning financial vulnerability among international students in UK universities who, despite satisfying visa requirements for financial self-sufficiency, frequently arrive with insufficient funds to sustain themselves through their studies. This growing trend of international student financial precarity is particularly problematic as many institutional hardship funds exclude non-domestic students, creating an unsupported population at heightened risk of financial distress (HEPI, 2023).[19] The repeated emphasis on financial support mechanisms for international students suggests this remains a critical area where many institutions could enhance their approach.

Participants also emphasised the importance of proactive inclusion efforts that create authentic belonging for all students, regardless of their academic performance or background. It is evident from the findings that institutions may continue to face significant challenges in fostering genuine inclusion for some international students within campus communities.

> "Let international student[s] feel they are part of the university by any possible methods."

> "Caring more for international students."

Perhaps most fundamentally, participants highlighted the need for comprehensive support extending beyond academic matters for international students.

> "I feel my university should provide more facilities other than academics for international students as we are far from home."

This perspective underscores how international students' needs encompass social, emotional and practical dimensions beyond classroom learning.

7.8   Teaching quality

Concerns for some centred on the need for improved teaching methods and more qualified instructors throughout the programme. A number of comments expressed a strong desire for more engaging and interactive teaching approaches that would enhance their learning experience. Many highlighted frustrations regarding inconsistent teaching quality across different courses, which they felt impacted their overall educational development.

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[19] Freeman, J (2023) *How to beat a cost-of-learning crisis: Universities' support for students* (HEPI Report 157). Oxford: HEPI. Available at: www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/How-to-Beat-a-Cost-of-Learning-Crisis-Universities-Support-for-Students.pdf [accessed 6 May 2025]

Additionally, there was a significant request for increasing the number of in-person classes and implementing better class structure to optimise learning outcomes.

> "The teachers need to be more engaging and consistent; it is very common for staff at this university to leave halfway through a semester which makes getting any type of support harder. I also think more teachers should be more open to 1-1 learning, only one of my teachers is."

> "Make lectures more interactive rather than just PowerPoints."

> "Smaller groups learning and more interactive."

7.9   Summary

The free text comments from 2025's Student Academic Experience Survey identify some key areas requiring institutional attention – where resources allow. Students strongly desire increased personalised support and engagement, particularly valuing one-to-one interactions with staff to create meaningful connections in potentially impersonal learning environments. The comments emphasised the need in the eyes of some students for enhanced communication channels with regular check-ins and multiple contact points, alongside timely, detailed feedback that provides clear guidance for improvement rather than vague comments. Curriculum improvements could focus on interdisciplinary collaboration, practical knowledge integration, and real-world experiences that better prepare students for workplace environments. Mental health support emerged as critically important, with some participants requesting not just more services but deeper institutional understanding of emotional challenges. International students highlighted specific needs, including financial assistance through reduced fees and bursaries, proactive inclusion efforts to combat isolation and discrimination, and comprehensive support extending beyond academics. These findings collectively suggest institutions should prioritise more personalised, supportive learning environments addressing both academic and non-academic needs while ensuring real-world relevance.

8   Paid employment

Working for pay while at university has always been a factor for some students, but going back just a few years, and certainly if we go back a decade or so, it was more common for students to work during holidays or before starting university than to work during term time. In the UK, non-study time spent in a 'traditional' university experience tended to involve sports and societies and other career building activities (as well as more social activities) for a cohort who were largely living close to other students, within a relatively short travel distance to their studies and potentially with more free time.

At present, things look to be very different for most. In 2023, we saw a sea change in that the proportion of full-time undergraduates who spent time working during term time increased from a large minority to a slight majority. This remained largely the same in 2024, although the mean average of hours worked increased significantly. In 2025, however, there has been a major acceleration, with now 68% of our sample working for pay during term time – a 12-percentage point increase. Considering that our sample comprises full-time undergraduates rather than anyone studying part-time, this is a very striking finding and is reflective of a financial, and therefore campus, environment that is significantly changed.

Students in paid employment in term time
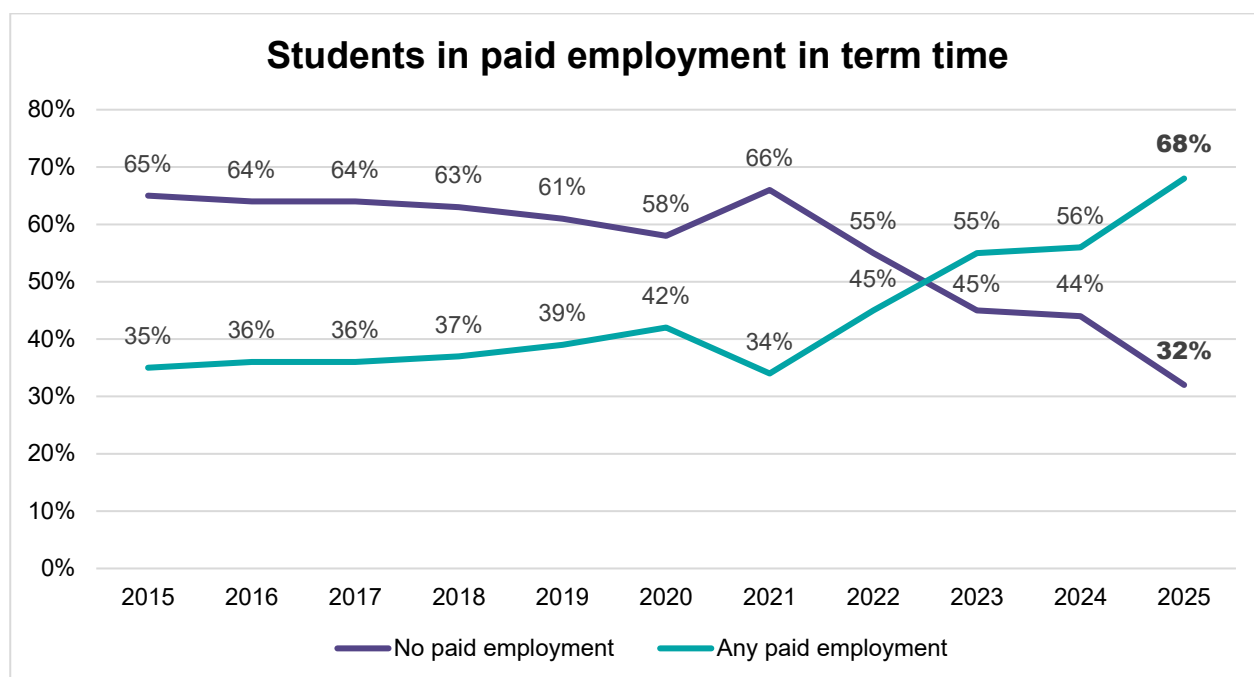
In terms of hours worked, however, it looks as though, for students who do work, this may have peaked for now. In 2024 this was an average of 14.5 hours per week during term time, and this has fallen to 13.1 hours in 2025. This is perhaps understandable in that with such a large proportion who work, it might not be necessary for all to take jobs that involve long hours of work alongside their studies, and instead some of those who have begun working in the past year may have taken jobs with more moderate – perhaps more manageable – hours.

Paid employment – mean hours per week term time

Year	All students	Students in paid employment
2021	4.6	13.7
2022	5.5	12.3
2023	7.5	13.5
2024	8.2	14.5
2025	8.9	13.1
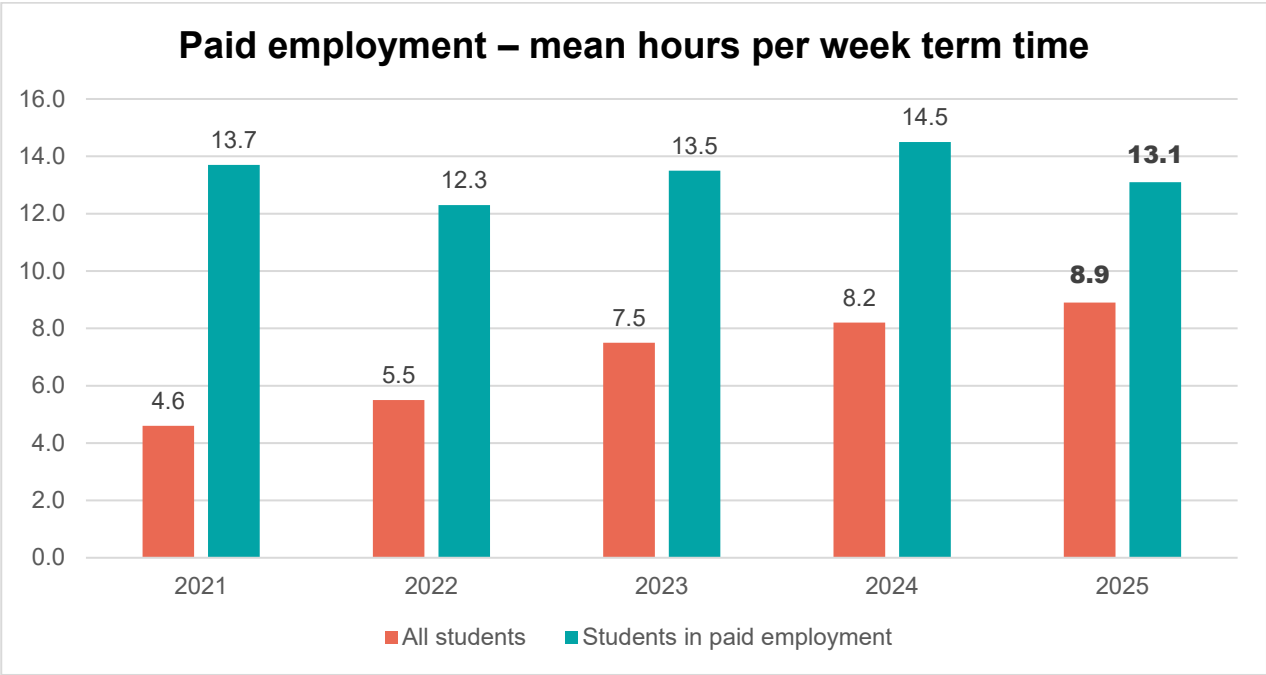
In terms of the average across all students (whether they work or not), it is logical that this has increased, given how many more students are in paid work compared to previous years. This year's data tell a powerful story that paid employment is now the norm, and a large number of students undertake long hours in paid employment. As we will see later, this may be impacting the time available for study.

Hours per week in paid work - over time

Hours	2022	2023	2024	2025
0	55%	45%	44%	32%
1-5	11%	12%	11%	16%
6-10	13%	15%	14%	18%
11-15	8%	9%	10%	12%
16-20	8%	11%	12%	12%
20+	5%	8%	9%	10%
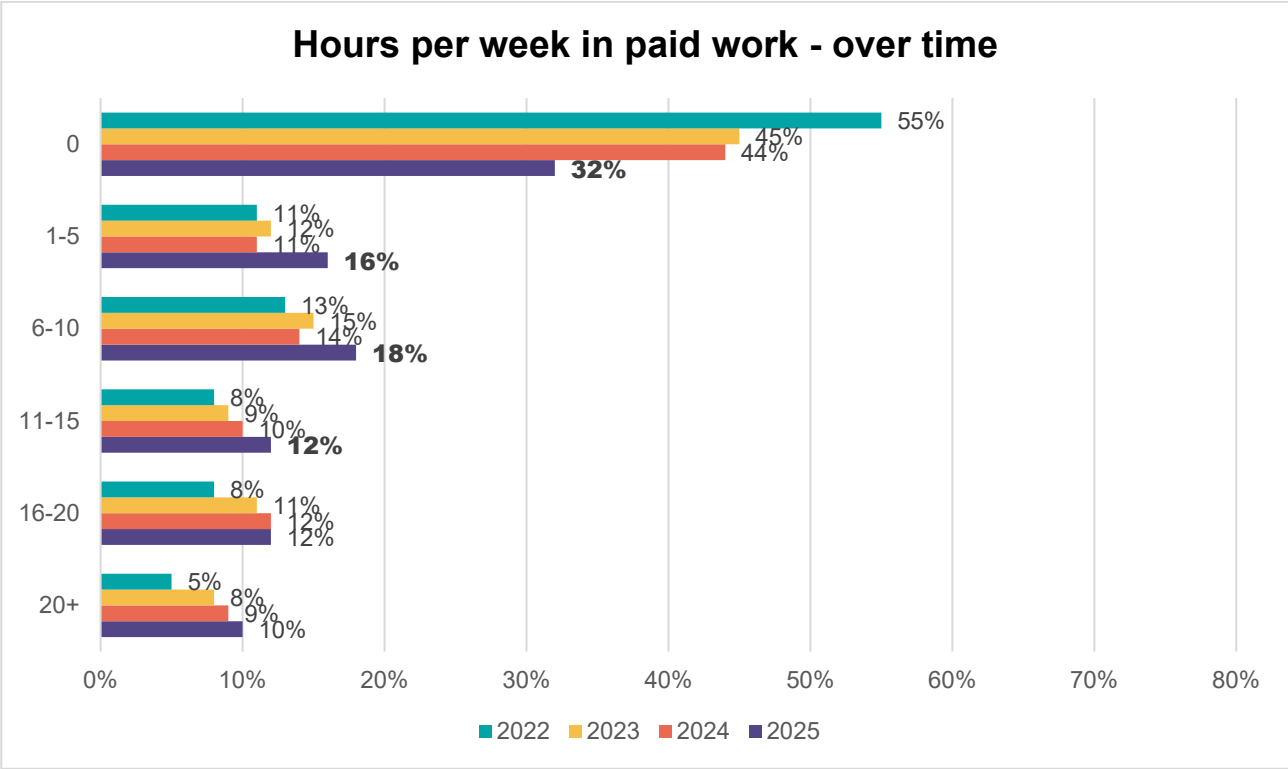
As shown in the chart above, there have been particular increases in the proportion who carry out relatively few hours of paid work – particularly at 10 hours a week or fewer. While there remain large numbers who undertake large volumes of paid work, the notable increase in employment across the sample this year appears to be driven by students taking up paid work for the first time but at relatively low volumes – albeit at volumes that could still put pressure in the time available for study or to carry out additional responsibilities.

Selected cohorts with a high propensity to be in paid employment

Cohort	2024	2025
All respondents	56%	68%
Care experienced	80%	88%
Caring for others	72%	85%
4th year or higher	68%	79%
Studying in Northern Ireland	65%	76%
Commmute 10 miles or more	67%	74%
Males	61%	72%
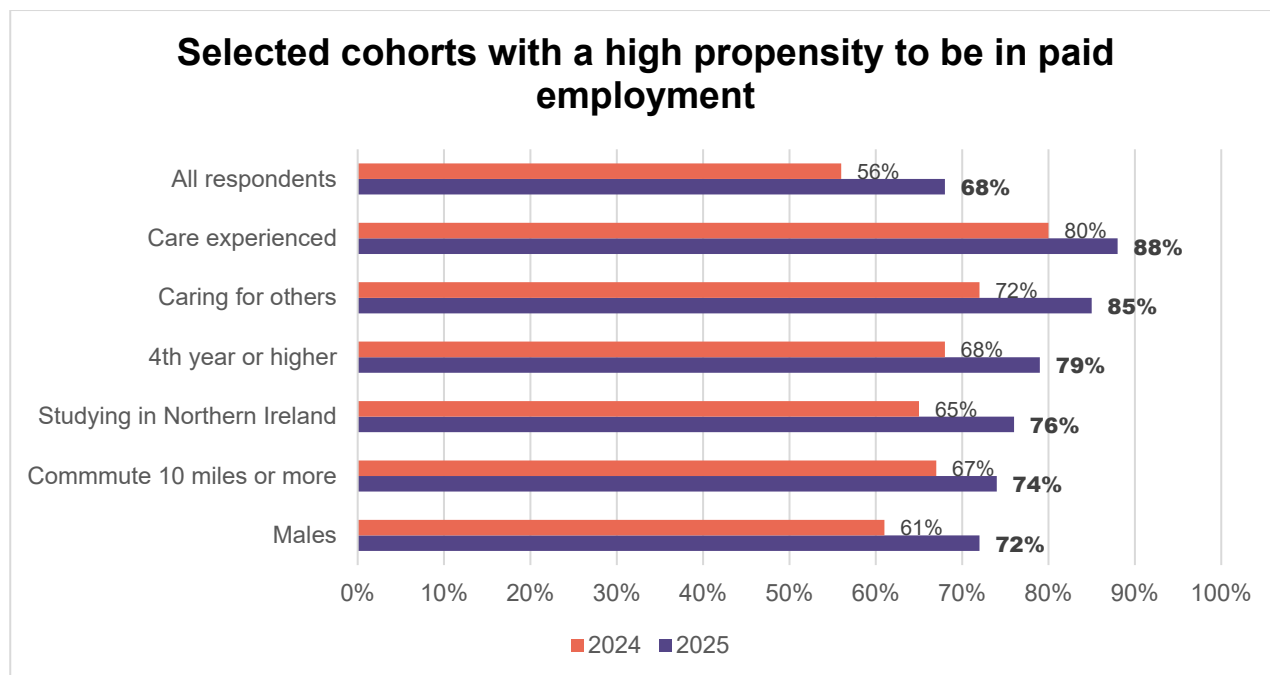
We saw in 2024 how some of the student cohorts with the highest propensity to work for pay were often those with higher levels of additional responsibility in other areas outside their studies – therefore compounding the challenges faced. This is also the case this year, with extremely high numbers of commuters and carers also in paid employment, with only a small majority of these cohorts who do not work.

There is also a geographical element in that students studying in Northern Ireland are again very likely to be in paid employment. Given we saw earlier that students from this part of the UK were less happy with their value for money, levels of paid employment might potentially be impacting on the overall experience. Historically, levels of maintenance grants available to students from Northern Ireland have been relatively low compared to other parts of the UK – with an increase recently announced – and this may be contributing to the need for more students to seek employment alongside their studies.[20]

Notably, students in the fourth year or higher of their undergraduate degree are much more likely to be in paid employment. This may be related to those who have been studying longer (and are doing a longer degree) being more likely to need to finance the later phases

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[20] Northern Ireland Executive (2025) *Murphy announces 20% increase in student maintenance loans from 2025/26*. Press release, 31 January. Available at: www.northernireland.gov.uk/news/murphy-announces-20-increase-student-maintenance-loans-202526

of their studies, compared to those who have just started and have other finances in place for the moment.

There is also a divide by sex, with males being a lot more likely to work during term time than females, although this is mainly driven by males taking up relatively low volumes of work (one to five hours), with both males and females equally likely to be working longer hours.

On a similar note, analysis of students who attended private and state schools tells us that students from private school backgrounds are much more likely to undertake any paid employment (77% compared to 63%), but this is weighted strongly towards lower volumes.[21] However, when we look at paid employment in larger volumes, this is in fact weighted to students from state schools. This is potentially an area for further investigation, but this could be explained by more private school students taking up work for career reasons rather than purely for living costs, while more state school students want to work for economic reasons but are being disproportionately affected by barriers to finding employment – as outlined by the data below.

	Attended private school	Attended state school
Paid employment	**77%**	63%
Paid employment 1-5 hours	**27%**	12%
Average hours worked by those who work	12.6	**13.7**
(If took up paid work) – did so to supplement living costs	45%	**69%**
(If took up paid work) – did so to explore possible career paths	**28%**	18%
(If did not take up paid work) – due to being unable to find a job	22%	36%

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[21] Direct comparison data to 2024 on school type is not available as we have amended our definition this year to improve accuracy.

9   Belonging and on-campus relations

9.1   Belonging

In recent years there has been significant focus through research and wider activity on the importance of fostering a sense of belonging to enable students to have the best opportunities during and after university.

I have a sense of belonging at my university
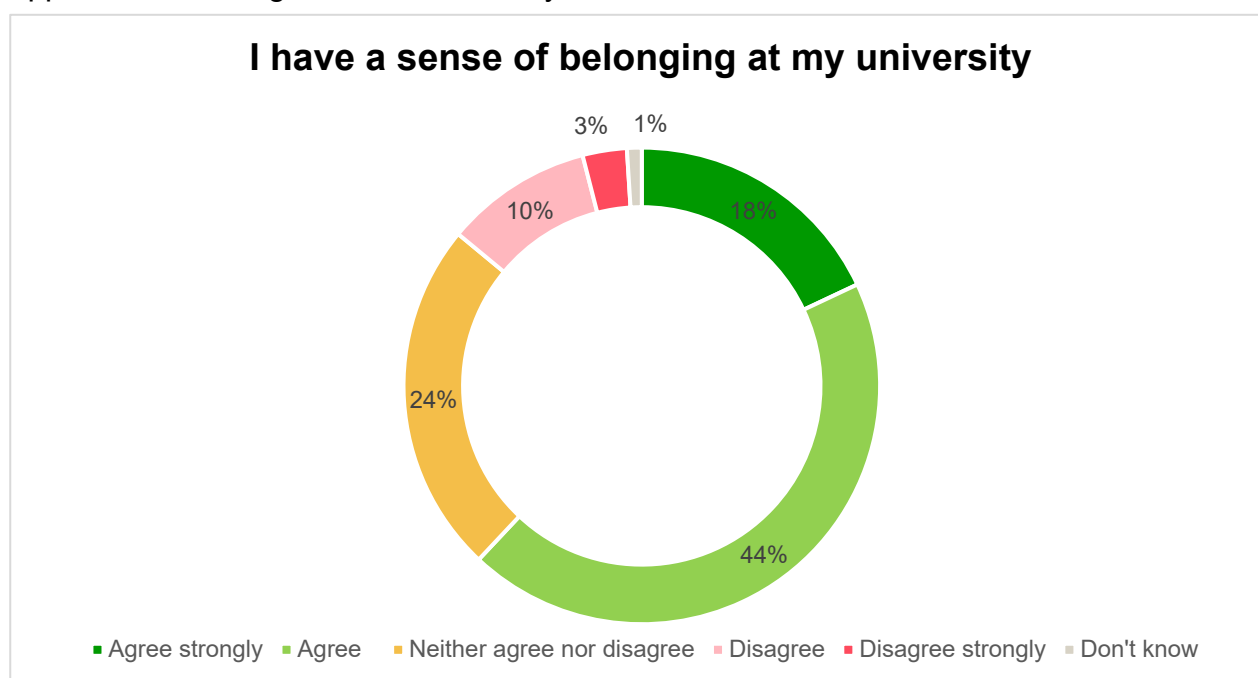
In our Survey the level of belonging has changed little since we first introduced the question, with around 18% agreeing strongly and 44% agreeing slightly (ie circa 62% overall) that they feel a sense of belonging to their institution. Although this figure has stayed pretty much the same, it is instructive to delve a little further and identify which groups of students are most and least likely to agree with this.

	Age		First in family		International student	
	21 and under	26 and over	Yes	No	Yes	No
Sense of belonging - Agree strongly	17%	**24%**	15%	**20%**	**25%**	17%

As the above table demonstrates, a sense of belonging appears to link somewhat to age and background. Younger students (representing a large proportion of our sample) are much less likely to feel they belong, while those who are the first in their immediate family to attend university also score lower on this measure. This might be expected as these

students may be less clear as to what to expect from university, which would then feed through into lower levels of confidence and assurance.[22]

There are also key differences by domicile, with international students as a whole reporting a much higher sense of belonging. This is encouraging in that it implies that these students have been made to feel welcome in coming to the UK, and that there may have been strong levels of support pre and post enrolment dedicated to international students, although as we will saw earlier with our analysis of open comments, not all international students feel the same way.

9.2   How well do academics know their students?

Students' working relationships with academic staff are important to their academic progress and sense of belonging. In a new question in 2025, we asked respondents how many academic staff know their names and have some idea of the progress they are making on their course. One reasonable expectation may be that students are known by at least five members of staff – one academic advisor (or similar) and one associated with each of the (for example) four 30-credit courses a student might be taking that year – though different institutions and courses will vary significantly in the number of members of academic staff a student will engage with.[23]

The greatest proportion of students (42%) said that only one to three staff know their names and how much progress they had been making, with slightly fewer (33%) saying this was true

How many academics know their name and their course progress

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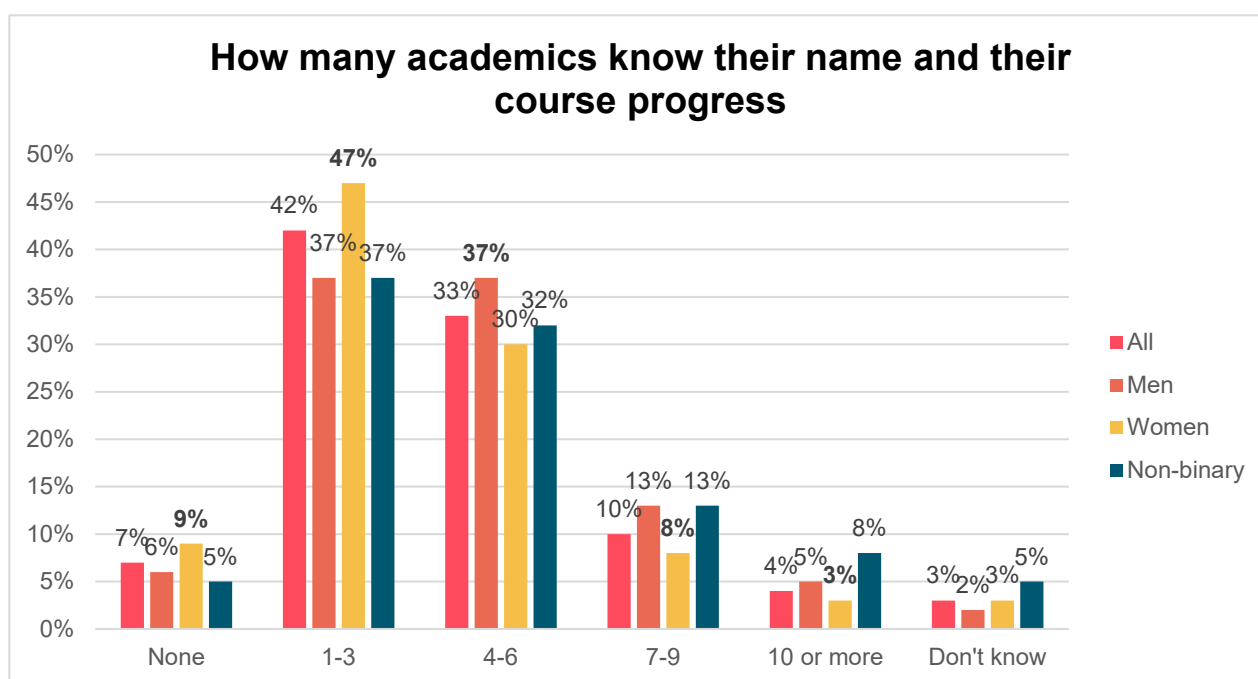
[22] Coombs, H (2022) *First-in-family students* (HEPI Report 146). Oxford: HEPI. Available at: www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/First-in-Family-Students.pdf

[23] QAA (2021) *What is Credit? A guide for students*. Gloucester: The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. Available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/what-is-credit-guide-for-students.pdf

of four to six academic staff members. On average, students said around four academics know their name.

There are large gender differences in the results, with men reporting that more academics know them than women: for example, 37% of men said four to six academics know them, but just 30% of women gave the same answer. First-in-family students also report having fewer academics who know them than other students, perhaps because they are less familiar with navigating academic environments or because they are spending more time off campus.[24] More students at Russell Group and other pre-92 universities say no academics know their names.

	Russell Group	Pre-92 excluding Russell Group	Post-92	Specialist institutions	Overall
Zero academics know my name	**9%**	**10%**	6%	5%	7%

9.3   Freedom of speech on campus

Ensuring freedom of speech for all remains a major issue facing the UK's higher education institutions. However, since we introduced some direct questions on this area in 2022, a majority of students responding to the survey have tended to be content on these issues although, as we will see below, there has been a small but significant decline in 2025.

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[24] Coombs, H (2022) *First-in-family students* (HEPI Report 146). Oxford: HEPI. Available at: www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/First-in-Family-Students.pdf

I feel comfortable expressing my views even if others disagree
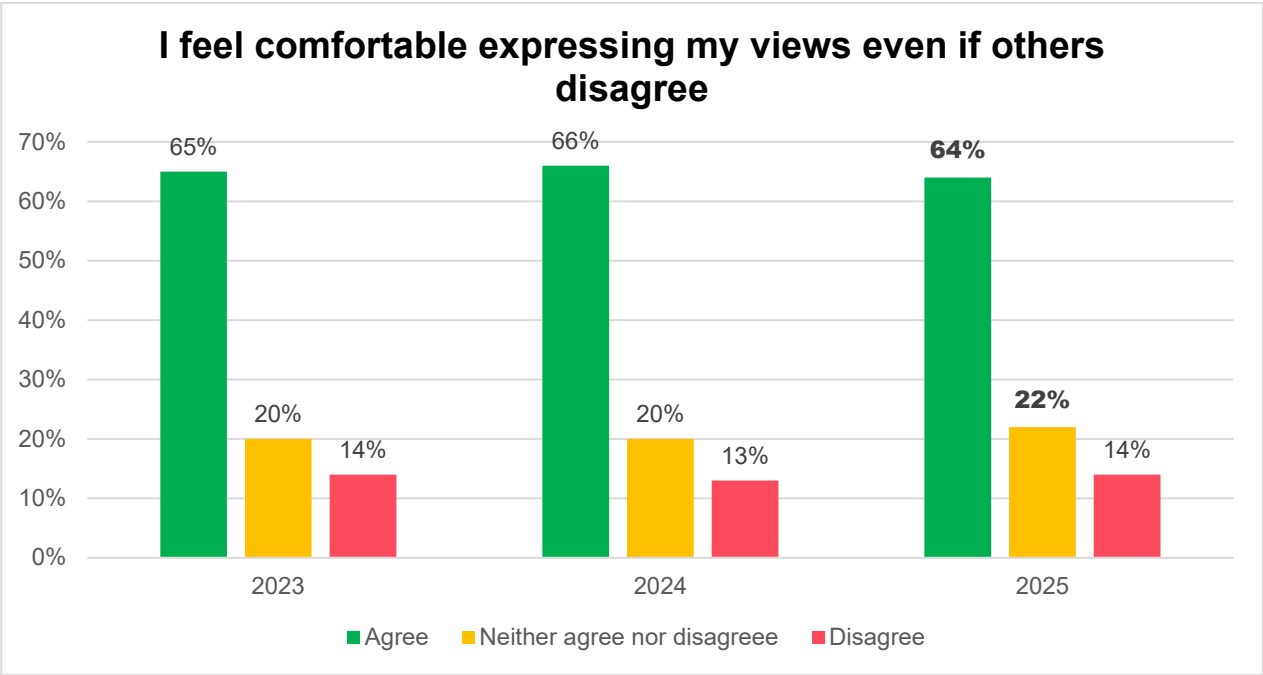
Just under two-thirds of students feel comfortable expressing their views on campus, which is a two-percentage point (statistically significant) decline from 2024. However, there has not been a material increase in disagreement with this measure and instead students have moved from saying they 'agree' to 'neither agree nor disagree'.

I hear a wide variety of opinions on campus, incuding those different from my own
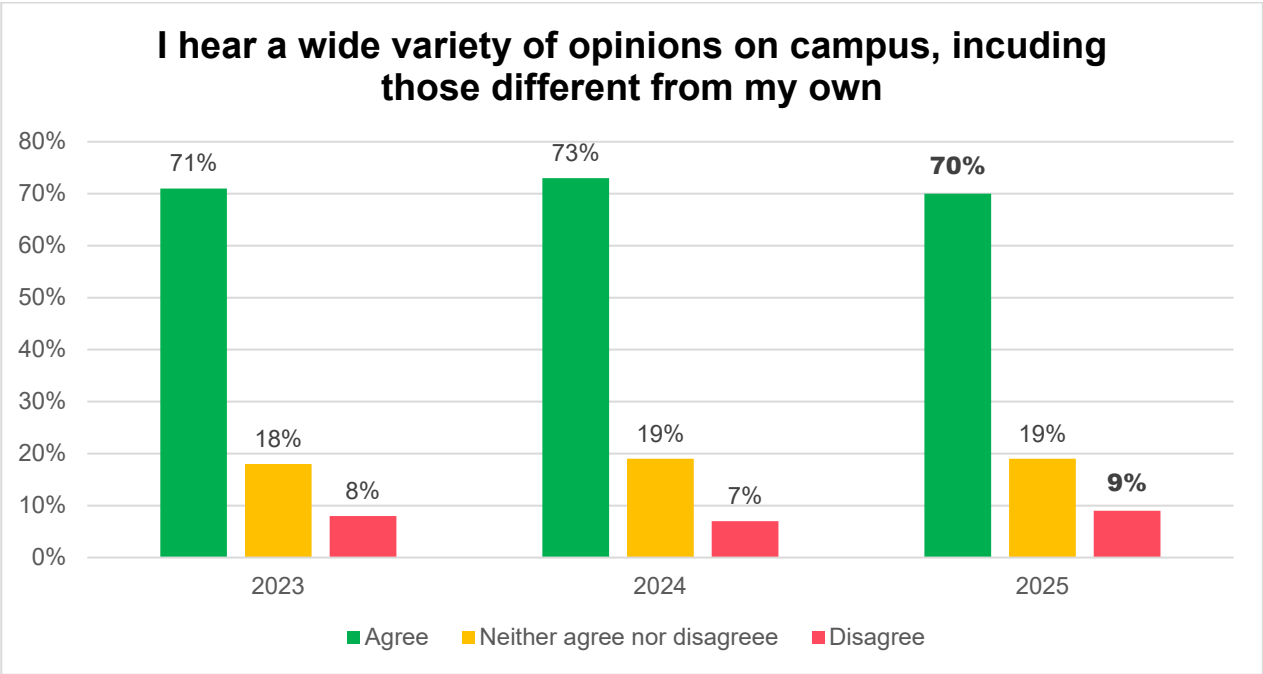
With seven out of ten agreeing that they hear a variety of opinions on campus, and less than one in ten disagreeing, there is little evidence of major concerns on this issue. However, there has been a decline in those agreeing of three percentage points, which appears to have partly translated into higher levels of disagreement.

My institution promotes good relations on campus
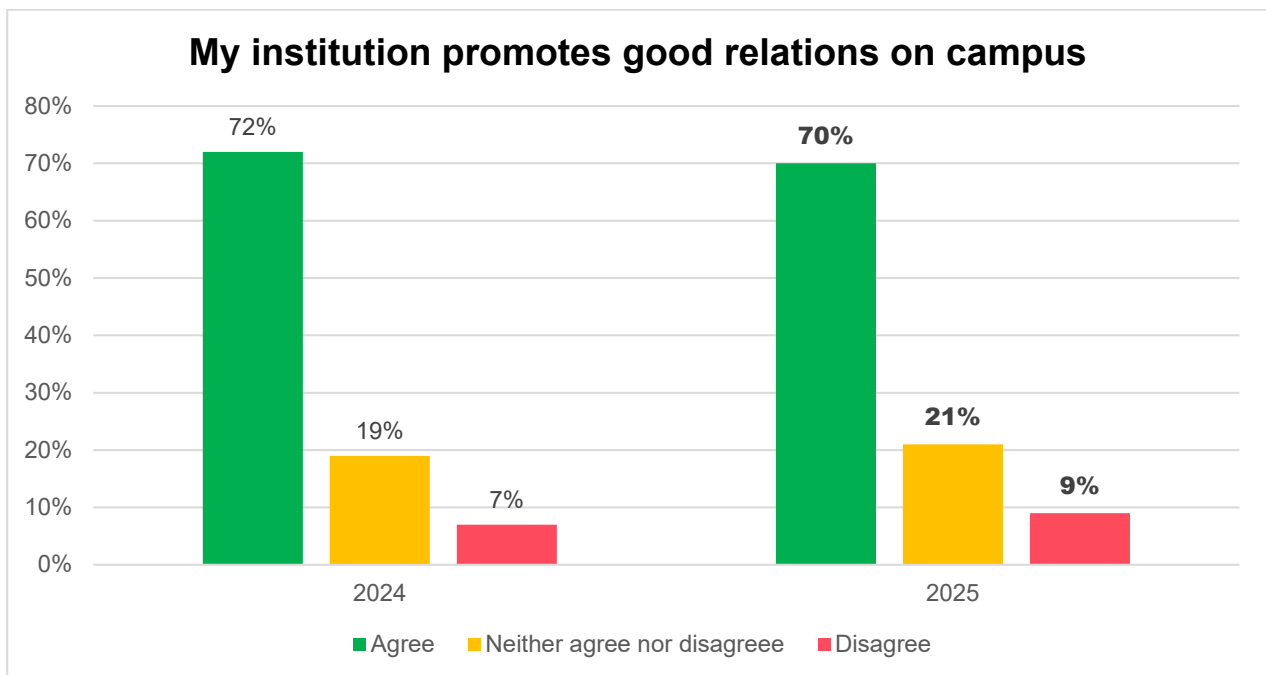
With our final question in this theme, introduced in 2024, we asked about the extent to which students agreed that their institution promoted good relations on campus, (for example, by tackling intolerance and promoting understanding of diversity and respect for all)'. In both years we have seen relatively high levels of agreement and low levels of disagreement, but as with the other two measures there has been a two percentage point decline in agreement matched by the same level of increase in disagreement.

Although results across this section do not suggest a significant issue, the small but consistent decrease in levels of agreement across all three statements does suggest some potential areas of concern at the overall sector level that may need to be monitored sensitively.[25]

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[25] Jeffreys, B (2025) 'Students want free-speech clarity but universities fear catch-22'. *BBC News*, 29 March. Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cn52527gk69o

10 Spotlight on international students

10.1 The quality of the experience

An area that our reports over the years have not focused on in detail is the experience of international students. One of the reasons for this has been the difficulty of defining this cohort based on asking a student which is their home region or domicile (as opposed to where they study), as our analysis has identified there is a propensity for some students to answer this question based on where they are currently living and studying.

As explained at the beginning of the report, we introduced a new question for 2025 which asks respondents directly if they are an international student, and we have therefore used this for our definition here to improve accuracy.

International students currently represent 16.5% of the full-time undergraduate population.[26] As well as contributing a significant proportion of fee income due to higher overseas fees, research by HEPI and London Economics has found that international students contribute significantly to the economies of the constituencies where they study.[27]

The section below highlights some of the key measures in our survey as reported by international students this year.

These key measures create a mixed picture, which on further investigation reveals different sets of priorities. Among international students, value-for-money perceptions are higher (although there is some polarisation, with 33% saying they received poor value), and they are a lot more likely to feel their expectations have been exceeded.

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[26] HESA (2024) 'Higher education student statistics: UK, 2022/23 - where students come from and go to study'. *HESA Statistical Bulletin*, 8 August. Available at: www.hesa.ac.uk/news/08-08-2024/sb269-higher-education-student-statistics/location

[27] HEPI, Kaplan International Pathways, Universities UK International and London Economics (2023) *International students boost UK economy by £41.9 billion*. Press release, 16 May. Available at: www.hepi.ac.uk/2023/05/16/international-students-boost-uk-economy-by-41-9-billion

International and home students - selected key measures
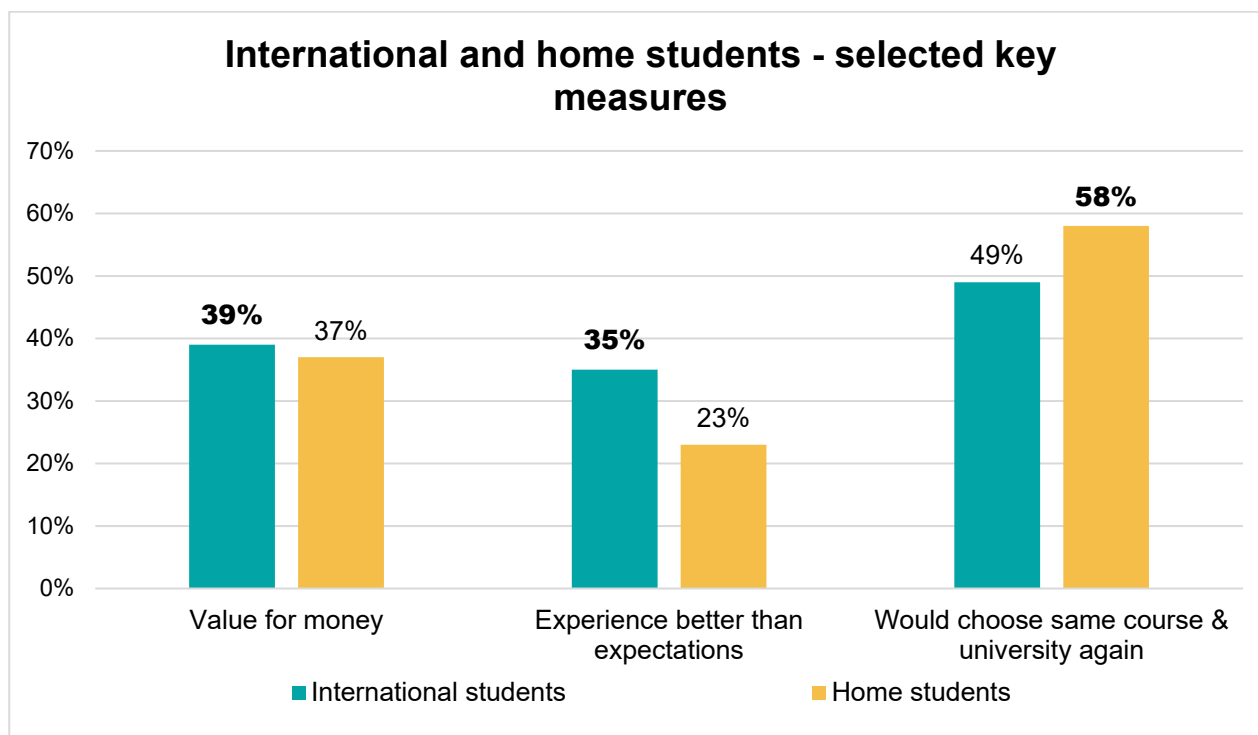
However, despite this, non-UK students are much less likely to feel they would have made exactly the same higher education choice again. On the face of it, these findings appear contradictory, but further analysis does help to put this into context.

Top 10 reasons for perceptions of poor value	
International students	**Home students**
Cost of living – 28%	Cost of living – 42%
Tuition fees – 24%	Tuition fees – 29%
Teaching quality – 20%	Teaching quality – 27%
Career prospects – 18%	Career prospects – 22%
Work placement opportunities – 18%	Course content – 21%
Course facilities / resources – 16%	One-to-one contact time – 18%
Course content – 15%	Contact hours – 17%
Class sizes – 15%	Quality of feedback – 16%
Course organisation – 14%	Course organisation – 15%
Quality of campus & buildings – 14%	Class sizes – 15%
Sports and social facilities – 13%	Student support services – 15%

Looking specifically at those students who perceived poor value (33% of international students versus 29% of home students), there are some key differences in what international and home students appear to value in their course and wider experience. International students are, in general, slightly less concerned about the cost of living in terms

of value, but are notably more focused on work placement opportunities, the quality of facilities (course and sports / social) and the overall campus environment.

Similarly, if we compare the reasons for the course not living up to expectations (not charted here but available in the full data tables) we see some evidence of differing priorities, with international students being significantly more likely to say that the course had not been challenging enough.

Accordingly, although international students are generally happy with their experience, there are aspects about their relative preference which could point towards why they might feel they would make a slightly different choice if given the chance again.

As outlined below, in many cases, international students would be particularly likely to make a different choice of institution and / or course. This might be related to preferences or expectations around facilities, campus environment or career-related placements, which may not have met their value expectations. Although not listed as a specific option, we should also consider the possibility that some international students would have chosen to go to university in a different country.

Options international students would choose with the benefit of hindsight

Option	International students	Home students
Do the same course at a different institution	9%	7%
Do a different course at a different institution	8%	5%
Do a different course at the same institution	7%	5%
Do a degree apprenticeship	7%	8%
Take a gap year	5%	5%
Do a non-degree apprenticeship	5%	4%
Do something else outside HE	5%	3%
Get a job	4%	4%

10.2 International students and paid work

Over the past few years (including this year – see Chapter 9) we have identified the significant volume of students spending time in paid work, but we have not particularly focused on how this impacts international students.

Although much of the coverage around students in paid employment has tended to focus on UK students who are working for purely financial reasons, the chart below highlights that international students are actually more likely than home students to spend time working for pay – a potentially surprising finding.

Nearly eight out of ten international students spend time working, which is a very significant number, although the data on the right-hand side of the chart below identify that UK students who work tend to do so for longer hours. This is likely to be related to visa restrictions, which do not prevent international students from working but do impose limits of 20 hours per week in term time.[28]

Proportion who work for pay and average hours per week
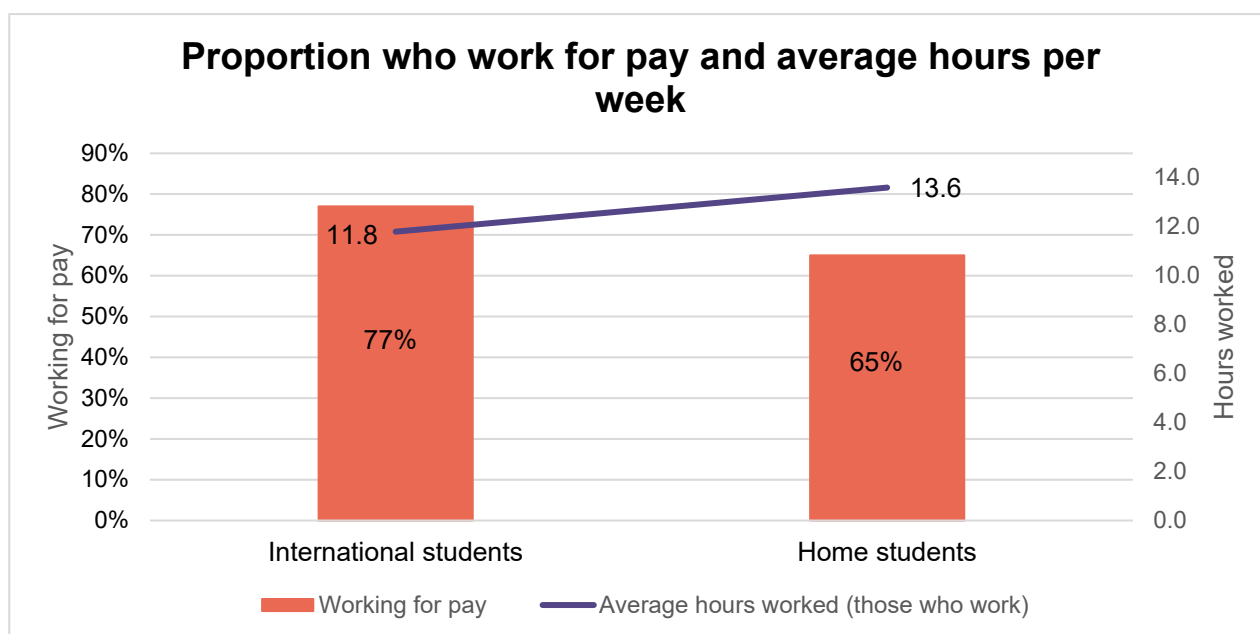
When we look at the reasons for paid work, we can see some contrasts between international and home students.

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[28] UKCISA (2025) '*Student work*'. London: The UK Council for International Student Affairs. Available at: www.ukcisa.org.uk/student-advice/working/student-work

Reasons for paid work (those in paid employment)

Reason	International students	Home students
Supplement living costs	49%	**66%**
Gain work experience	**47%**	36%
Explore possible career paths	**26%**	19%
Provide financial support to friends or family	**31%**	24%

■ International students ■ Home students
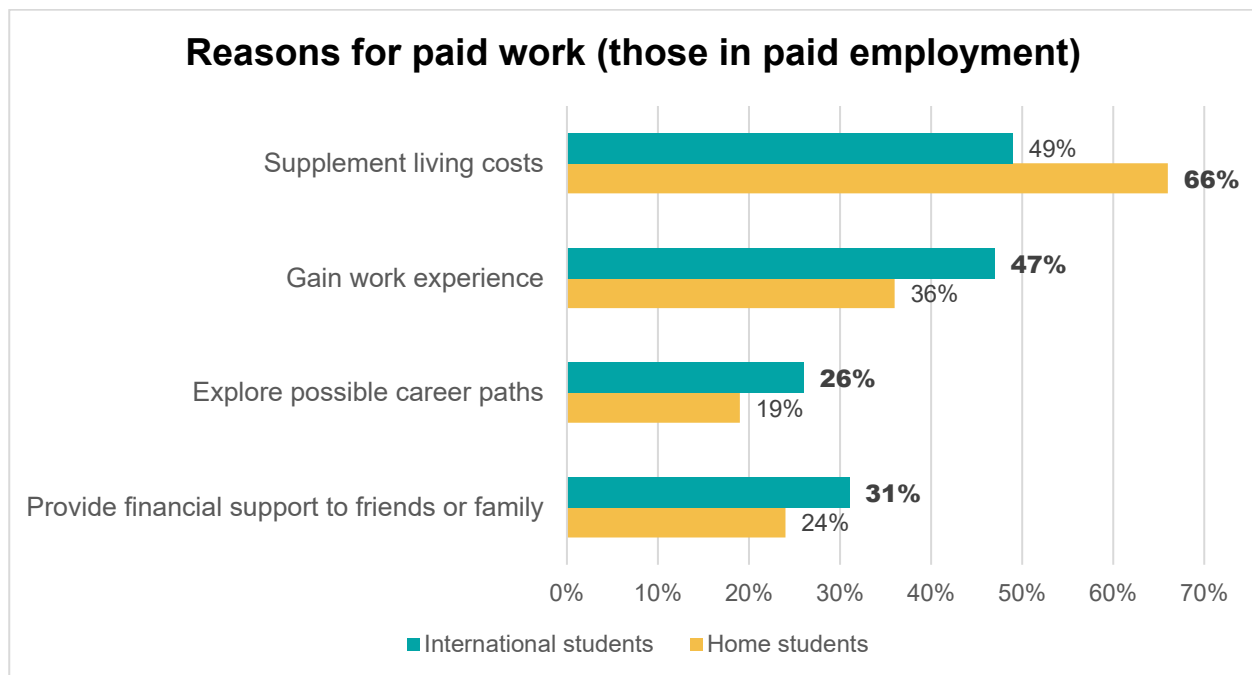
Financial reasons dominate the choice of home students. They are also key (if less dominant) for international students, both for their own living costs and to provide support for dependents back home. For international students, career reasons are also a key driver, and they are clearly looking for opportunities to develop their skills and position themselves for their future careers while earning money. Home students are likely to be more focused on the financial drivers and / or necessities of working and are not as inclined to be career-focused in their choice of work.

That said, however, as the below chart illustrates, it is clear that even more international students (and home students) would work if they could find work, or if their studies or wider commitments allowed them the time to work.

Reasons for not being in paid work (those not in paid employment)

Reason	International students	Home students
I do need the income but cannot find a job	**49%**	35%
I do need the income but do not have time to work due to my studies	26%	30%
I do need the income but do not have time due to outside responsibilities	16%	15%
I don't need the income	15%	18%
I do need the income but do not have time due to other factors	12%	13%

■ International students ■ Home students

Among international students, the key reason for not working (among the relatively small proportion of around one-in-four who do not work) is being unable to find a job, which is significantly more likely to be reported as a barrier for international compared to home students. As noted above, visa restrictions limit the number of hours, but there is evidence here that despite the large number who do work, there are sections of the international population who are experiencing barriers to finding work. In December 2024 a HEPI publication on the integration of Chinese students highlighted a number of factors which may be limiting employment opportunities, including language barriers, lack of social capital and local contacts and lower use of campus career services.[29]

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[29] Ebel, C P (2024) *How can UK universities improve their strategies for tackling integration challenges among Chinese students?* (HEPI Report 183), Oxford: HEPI, p 33. Available at: https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2024/12/12/how-can-uk-universities-improve-their-strategies-for-tackling-integration-challenges-among-chinese-students/

11 Spotlight on pre-entry qualifications

Another new area we have explored in depth this year is the type of qualifications that students take before entering higher education, and the extent to which this may be impacting on different perceptions of the experience on entry.

In the UK sector, the extent to which experiences and expectations can differ relating to pre-entry qualifications has gained greater coverage in recent years through pre-arrival questionnaire activity, in particular through the work of Dr Michelle Morgan at the University of East London, whose 2023 report directly compared the experiences of A-level and BTEC students on entry.[30]

To spotlight how previous qualifications may have an impact on the experience, we added a new multi-option question this year which captured the main qualifications held on entry, including A-levels / Scottish Highers (7,768 respondents), BTEC (1,722), International Baccalaureate (575) and T-levels (333).[31]

Pre-entry qualifications – selected key measures

Legend: A-levels/ Scottish Highers, International Baccalaureate, BTEC, T-levels

Value for money: 38%, 40%, 35%, 42%
Experience better than expectations: 26%, 28%, 25%, 35%
Would choose same course & university again: 58%, 48%, 50%, 44%

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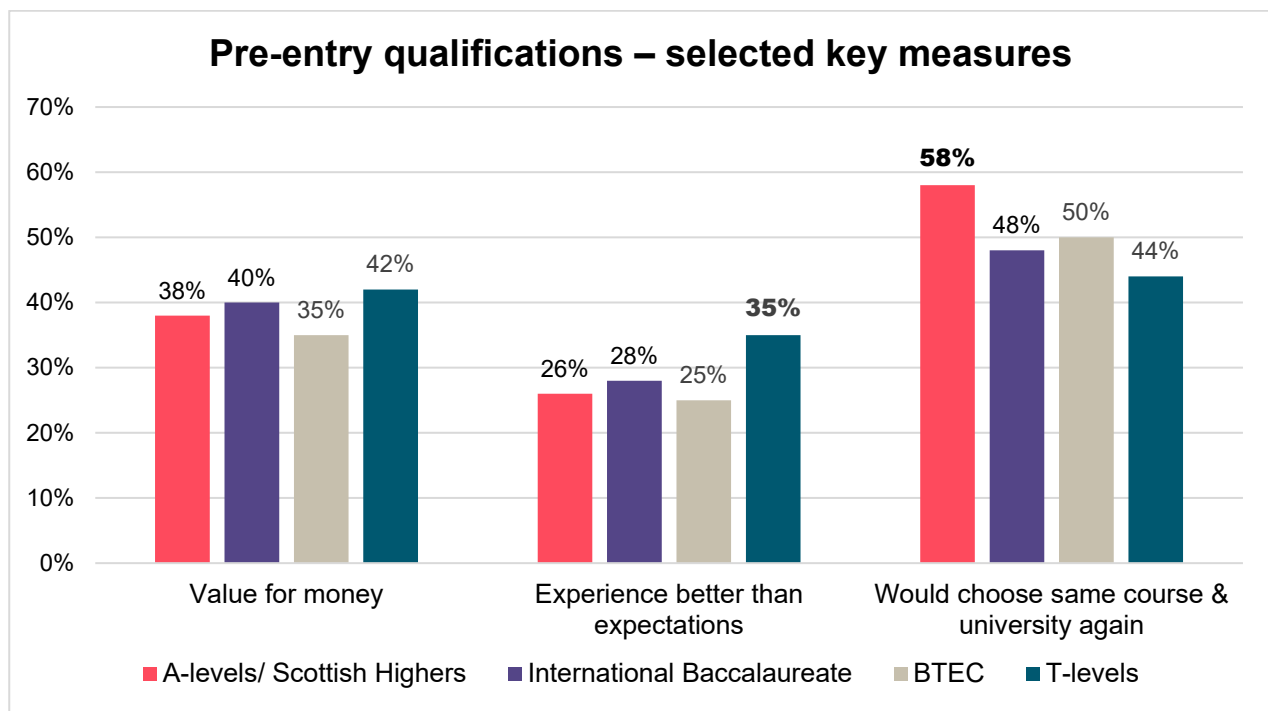
[30] Morgan, M (2023) *Prior learning experience, study expectations of A-level and BTEC students on entry to university and the impact of Covid19: findings from the undergraduate Pre-Arrival Academic Questionnaire 2019 and 2021*. London: University of East London. Available at: s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/assets.creode.advancehe-document-manageR/documents/advance-he/Prior%20learning%20experience%2C%20study%20expectations%20of%20A-Level%20and%20BTEC%20students%20on%20entry%20to%20university%20and%20the%20impact%20of%20Covid19_1700668598.pdf

[31] Our question also included GCSE as an option but given that almost all respondents choosing this option also chose another option, we have excluded it from our comparative analysis. For the International Baccalaureate, this included a mix of home and international students.

These comparisons provide a mixed picture, with different prior qualifications being linked to either higher or lower scores depending on the comparison question used.

In general, the data suggest that there is not a major difference in the quality of the experience between students coming in through A-levels / Scottish Highers and those coming in from BTEC. This is significant in the context of some of the major differences in expectations highlighted in the University of East London pre-arrival report referenced earlier.

In terms of the differences between other qualification types, value for money is perceived to be slightly higher among T-level and International Baccalaureate students, while T-level students are the most likely to feel their expectations have been exceeded. There is little difference between the other cohorts on this measure.

In terms of the benefit of hindsight, there are some perhaps more fundamental differences, in that A-level / Scottish Higher students are much more likely to be happy with their choice, with International Baccalaureate and T-level students most likely to say they would have made a different decision (despite relatively high value-for-money scores). In fact, there are distinctly more students in these cohorts who would have made a different choice compared to those who would have kept things the same.

For International Baccalaureate students, a significant minority would not have chosen to enter higher education at all, which is notable and perhaps surprising given that value-for-money perceptions were relatively high among this cohort.

For BTEC students, the option of a degree apprenticeship was relatively appealing, as were a range of options outside higher education, including taking a gap year and enrolling on a non-degree apprenticeship.

Options students would choose with the benefit of hindsight (selected options)

	Do a degree apprenticeship	NET: Not enter higher education (e.g. get a job, non-degree apprenticeship, gap year, something else)
A-levels/ Scottish highers	8%	10%
International Baccalaureate	6%	15%
BTEC	11%	13%
T-levels	12%	14%
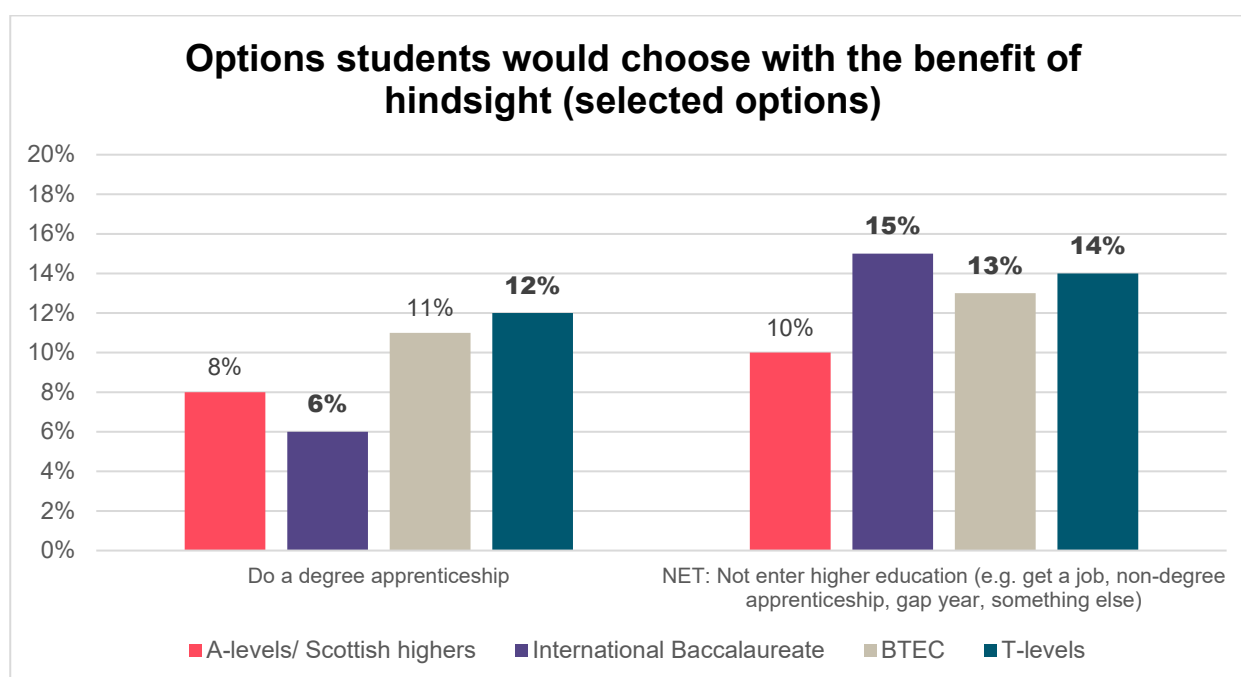
T-level students were also relatively likely to consider options outside higher education. This is potentially a significant finding, given the more technical nature of T-levels in particular and may partly reflect the fact that T-levels were originally intended for students who did not plan to attend higher education.[32]

[32] Busby, E (2025) 'Government must boost student numbers on T-levels to realise full benefits – NAO'. *The Standard*, 28 March. Available at: www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/nao-government-geoffrey-cliftonbrown-alevels-gareth-davies-b1219369.html

12 Teaching intensity

12.1 Workload trends

Workload hours in average week
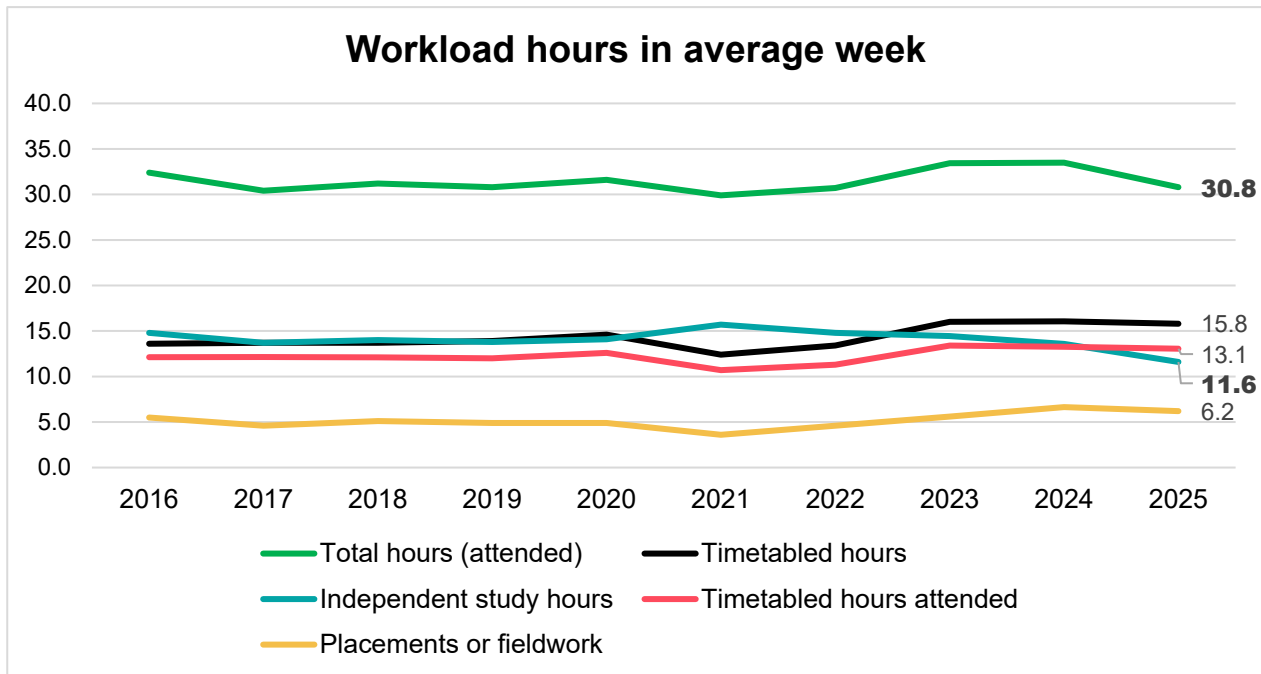
	Total workload hours (attended / studied in average week)	Timetabled contact hours	Timetabled hours attended*	Independent study hours*	Placements or fieldwork*
2019	30.8	13.9	12.0	13.8	4.9
2020	31.6	14.6	12.6	14.1	4.9
2021	29.9	12.4	10.7	15.7	3.6
2022	30.7	13.4	11.3	14.8	4.6
2023	33.4	16.0	13.4	14.5	5.6
2024	33.5	16.1	13.3	13.6	6.6
2025	**30.8**	15.8	13.1	**11.6**	6.2

* These measures contribute to the total figures

Contact hours – timetabled or attended – have changed little this year and remain close to the highest levels we have seen. However, the overall workload has declined strongly. The major driver of this is independent study hours, which have decreased significantly.

49

This represents one of the key findings this year, one that is perhaps understandable given the large majority of students who work for pay. Placement hours have also declined, although this is not statistically significant. The net result of this is that the total average workload hours have decreased from 33.5 to 30.8 hours – the largest year-on-year change we have seen in recent times.

12.2 Satisfaction with scheduled contact hours

Although the timetabled (as well as attended) contact hours, as shown in the table above, have declined only slightly, it is perhaps surprising to see the data charted below which show a significant decline in satisfaction with contact hours, to its lowest level in the past 10 years except for the midst of the pandemic in 2021.

I am satisfied with my timetabled contact hours

Year	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree
2016	64%	17%	19%
2017	66%	17%	17%
2018	64%	17%	19%
2019	65%	17%	19%
2020	62%	18%	19%
2021	50%	21%	30%
2022	63%	18%	19%
2023	66%	18%	16%
2024	68%	15%	17%
2025	59%	19%	22%
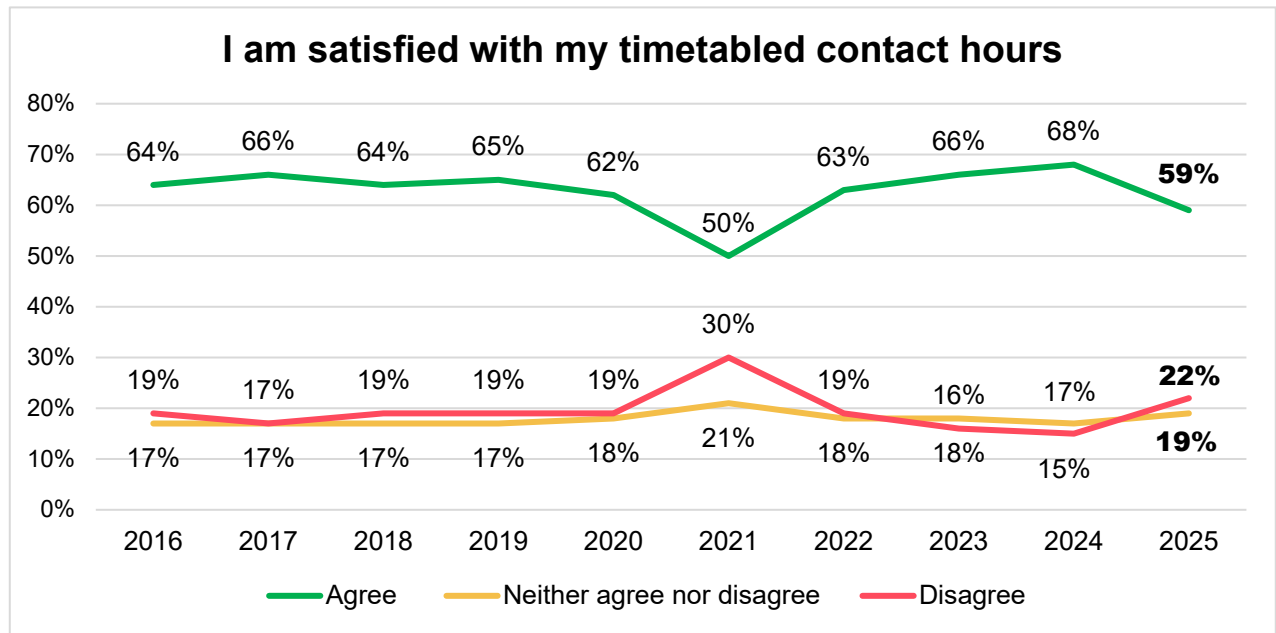
This measure has previously tended to remain very stable over time, but in 2025 there has been a nine-percentage point decline in satisfaction and a seven-percentage point increase in dissatisfaction. Given contact hours have not changed this year, but remain at high levels, it is not immediately clear as to whether the dissatisfaction is due to students on balance wanting the workload to be higher, or lower. However, when we compare satisfaction levels between students who spend time working for pay, and those who do not, the data do provide some clues.

	Timetabled contact hours		Spent time in paid employment	
	0-9	10+	Yes	No
Satisfaction with timetabled hours	52%	**62%**	57%	**64%**

In general, students value contact hours, and have certain expectations of what value for money represents – as we can see on the left-hand portion of the above chart which shows students with 10+ hours per week are more satisfied. Yet, we have seen in recent years that students in our sample were generally happy with the levels of contact hours (around 15-16 hours provided, and around 13 hours attended on average) that their course provided. These volumes have stayed the same this year, but satisfaction has declined significantly. However, time spent working for pay has reached unprecedented levels, and the right-hand portion of the table above highlights that students who do not work for pay are happier with contact hours (64%) than students who do (57%).

This does not override the requirement for the right levels of contact hours but it appears clear that some students who are in paid employment are finding their total levels of commitment to be a challenge. This is likely to impact how satisfied students are with their timetabled contact hours, as well as limiting the amount of independent study that is manageable.

The data also point towards students being less satisfied with contact hours as they progress through their degree.

	1st year	2nd year	3rd year	4th year +
Average contact hours assigned (typical week)	**16.1**	**16.0**	14.9	**15.9**
Average contact hours attended	**13.6**	**13.2**	12.1	12.6
Average hours of paid work	7.7	**9.1**	**9.2**	**10.8**
Satisfaction with timetabled contact hours	**63%**	59%	56%	55%

As shown in the table above, students are assigned slightly fewer contact hours in the later stages of their degree, but with only a small difference compared to the beginning of their degree. However, they tend to attend markedly fewer of these. Against this, they tend to have more hours of paid work commitments. Accordingly, while we cannot be certain of what is driving the lower satisfaction with timetabled hours, it may be related to challenges balancing wider commitments and a potential requirement for fewer contact hours to make this more manageable.

12.3 Workload by subject

Workload hours by HECoS subject categories

Subject	Timetabled hours attended	Independent study	Work outside of course
Subjects allied to Medicine	14.5	11.6	11.7
Veterinary Sciences	15.6	13.0	8.1
Architecture, Building and Planning	15.3	13.7	6.4
Education and Teaching	12.9	10.7	11.1
Engineering and Technology	15.0	12.2	6.8
Medicine and Dentistry	12.8	11.7	8.9
Agriculture, Food and related studies	13.4	11.8	7.4
Mathematical Sciences	13.8	13.0	4.7
Physical Sciences	13.6	12.1	5.3
Language and Area Studies	12.2	14.7	3.9
Computing	13.7	11.2	5.5
Law	13.0	11.3	5.6
Creative Arts and Design	14.7	10.9	3.7
Communications and Media	13.0	11.3	4.8
Biological and Sport Sciences	12.4	11.2	5.3
Business and Management	12.4	10.4	5.6
Geographical and Environmental Studies	11.3	11.8	5.2
Social Sciences	10.8	12.5	4.3
Combined and General Studies	10.4	10.8	6.1
Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies	10.8	12.1	3.2
Psychology	10.2	11.2	4.4

Subjects ranked in order of overall workload.

As might be expected, the general ranking of overall workload by HECoS subjects has remained relatively consistent with previous years, with Health and Technology subjects at the top, together with Architecture and Education. By contrast, levels of workload are much lower for Psychology, History and General and Combined Studies.[33] [34]

Across the board, levels of independent study do not vary particularly between disciplines, with the difference between the highest volume (Architecture) and the lowest volume (Business and Management) relatively small at just 3.3 hours. What is striking for independent study is that there is now less independent study time on average than timetabled contact hours attended for almost all subjects, whereas in previous years

[33] For information on the Higher Education Classification of Subjects (HECoS), see HESA (nd) '*The Higher Education Classification of Subjects (HECoS)*'. Cheltenham: HESA. Available at: www.hesa.ac.uk/support/documentation/hecos [accessed 9 April 2025]
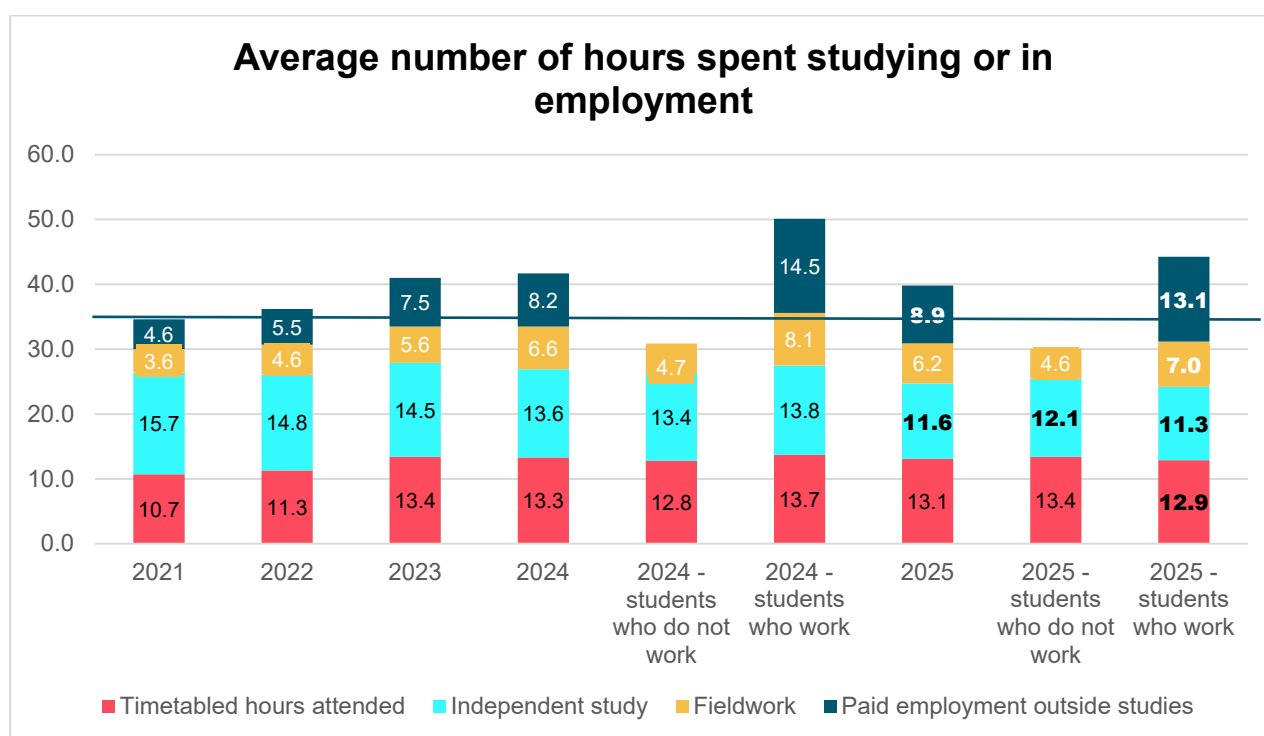
[34] For comparative results, see Neves, J, Freeman J, Stephenson R and Sotiropoulou, P (2024) *Student Academic Experience Survey 2024*. York: Advance HE. Available at: advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/student-academic-experience-survey-2024

independent study hours were often higher than contact hours, particularly for some Arts and Humanities subjects.

By contrast, there are some major differences by subject in terms of volumes of fieldwork and placements, ranging from an average of nearly 12 hours for Subjects allied to Medicine, to just 3.2 hours for Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies. The nature of these mean averages is such that they can fluctuate year-on-year due to a small number of particularly low or particularly high responses. Indeed, there are large fluctuations compared to 2024 for Subjects allied to Medicine and Education and Teaching, both of which had very high levels of placements last year – around 20 hours, falling this year to around 11 hours, which is much more consistent with other subjects in the chart. These declines may potentially be to do with fluctuation in relatively small samples, as the data do suggest that these previous high figures may have been an outlier.

12.4 Number of hours in study and employment

Compared to pre-pandemic times, employment demands have increased significantly and are now a major factor for most students to consider alongside study workload.

Average number of hours spent studying or in employment

	Timetabled hours attended	Independent study	Fieldwork	Paid employment outside studies
2021	10.7	15.7	3.6	4.6
2022	11.3	14.8	4.6	5.5
2023	13.4	14.5	5.6	7.5
2024	13.3	13.6	6.6	8.2
2024 - students who do not work	12.8	13.4	4.7	
2024 - students who work	13.7	13.8	8.1	14.5
2025	13.1	11.6	6.2	8.9
2025 - students who do not work	13.4	12.1	4.6	
2025 - students who work	12.9	11.3	7.0	13.1

Unless otherwise stated, the figures represent the mean averages across all students, including those who do not spend any time in a particular activity. Significant differences compared to the equivalent figure for 2024 are in bold. The dark blue line represents the average full-time work commitment in the UK as measured by ONS.

As an average across all students, total paid and study workload is now 39.8 hours, which is a slight fall from the peak of 41.7 in 2024. On the face of it, this is initially surprising given the large increase in the proportion of students who work, but it does imply that perhaps something had to give. These hours spent in employment have partly come at the expense of independent study time, which has declined significantly overall and, as shown in the

detailed columns above, has fallen both among those who work and also among those who do not work.

As we saw earlier in this report, there has also been a decline in the average hours worked by students in employment – again pointing towards a tipping point perhaps being reached in terms of hours worked in employment, if not by measure of the proportion of students who do work.

Across students who work, the average total study and employment workload is 44.3 hours, which is significantly higher than the average full-time job in the UK – measured by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) at 36.6 hours (in dark blue on the chart above) – but lower than the equivalent figure for 2024 which was a potentially unsustainable 50.1 hours.[35]

[35] ONS (2025) '*Average actual weekly hours of work for full-time workers (seasonally adjusted)*'. Newport: Office for National Statistics. Available at:
www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/timeseries/ybuy/lms
[accessed 9 April 2025]

13 Quality of teaching and assessment

13.1 Perceptions of the quality of teaching staff

Levels of teaching quality have been measured consistently in our survey over several years.

Teaching staff characteristics

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

Teaching staff clearly explained course goals and requirements
- 65%
- 63%
- 63%
- 63%
- 65%
- **62%**

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

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

Teaching staff motivated you to do your best work
- 54%
- 47%
- 50%
- 52%
- 59%
- 58%

Teaching staff regularly initiated debates and discussion
- 40%
- 39%
- 39%
- 42%
- 47%
- 45%

Teaching staff helped you to explore your own areas of interest
- 39%
- 34%
- 37%
- 41%
- 48%
- 49%

■ 2020 ■ 2021 ■ 2022 ■ 2023 ■ 2024 ■ 2025

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

Results in 2024 reached a peak across most of these statements about teaching, which was a very positive story. In 2025, there are still some very high scores, particularly in terms of staff motivating students to do their best work and helping them to explore their own areas of interest. However, some of these measures have declined since the peak of 2024, to levels consistent with earlier years. In particular, the score for staff encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning has fallen by six percentage points – although this level of decline is not repeated across these measures in general.

Given the number of institutions across the sector who have recently undergone, or are undergoing, significant restructures involving cutting courses and / or reducing staff numbers

including teaching staff, the fact that many of these teaching scores have generally held up well and are ahead of some earlier years is a relatively encouraging story.[36]

13.2 Rating of assessment

The content and quality of assessments are among the core issues contributing to student development. Many students identify them as key to delivering an overall high-quality experience.

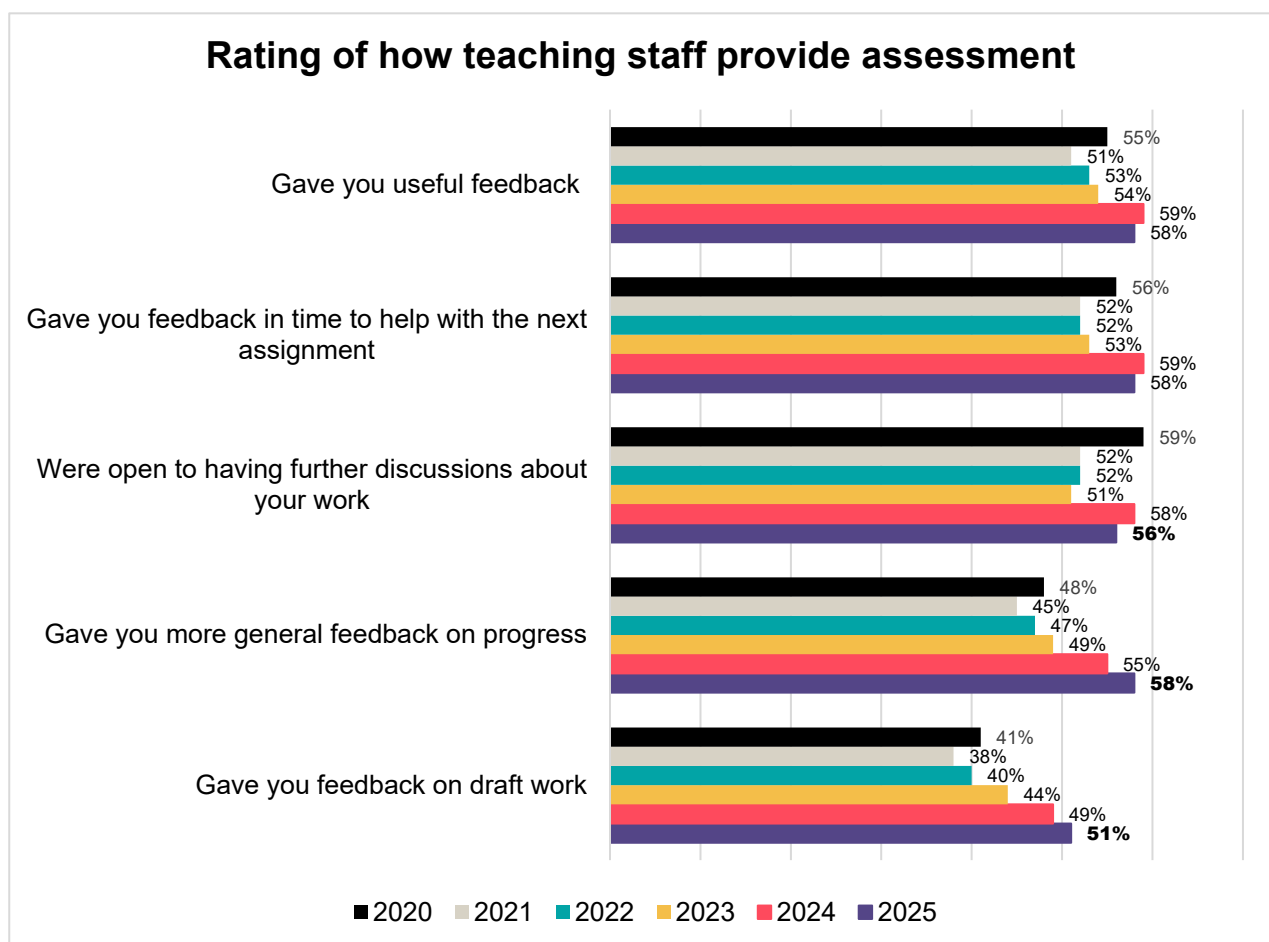In a positive news story for the sector, the quality ratings in this space have been relatively high for the past few years, and on some of the measures in 2025, we have seen the highest figures in recent times.

Rating of how teaching staff provide assessment

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Gave you useful feedback	55%	51%	53%	54%	59%	58%
Gave you feedback in time to help with the next assignment	56%	52%	52%	53%	59%	58%
Were open to having further discussions about your work	59%	52%	52%	51%	58%	**56%**
Gave you more general feedback on progress	48%	45%	47%	49%	55%	**58%**
Gave you feedback on draft work	41%	38%	40%	44%	49%	**51%**

Scores for providing useful feedback and prompt feedback remain very high, only slightly behind the peak scores achieved last year. However, there has been a two-percentage point decline for staff being approachable and open for discussion.

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[36] Universities UK (2025) *Universities grip financial crisis – but at what cost to the nation?* Press release, 27 May. Available at: https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/creating-voice-our-members/media-releases/universities-grip-financial-crisis-what

Positively, however, there have been statistically significant improvements (from levels that were already very high) in providing more holistic feedback on progress and providing feedback in draft work. Both of these levels are the highest we have seen since we began measuring them in this way, and by way of illustration of the progress made, are more than 15 percentage points higher than the scores achieved as recently as 2018 (which were 41% and 35% respectively).

There appears to have been a major focus on meeting student expectations in terms of assessment quality across the sector over the past few years, which is helping to drive higher and higher scores.

13.3 Volume of assignments

Compared to pre-pandemic times, there has been a sea change in the volume of both summative and formative assignments.[37] This appeared to have levelled off in 2024 but in 2025 there has been a further significant increase – to 5.8 summative assignments per semester and 4.1 formative assignments.

Average number of assignments per term / semester

Year	Summative	Formative
2017	4.6	2.1
2018	4.6	2.1
2019	4.6	2.2
2020	5.0	2.5
2021	5.3	2.9
2022	5.5	3.0
2023	5.6	3.6
2024	5.5	3.7
2025	5.8	4.1
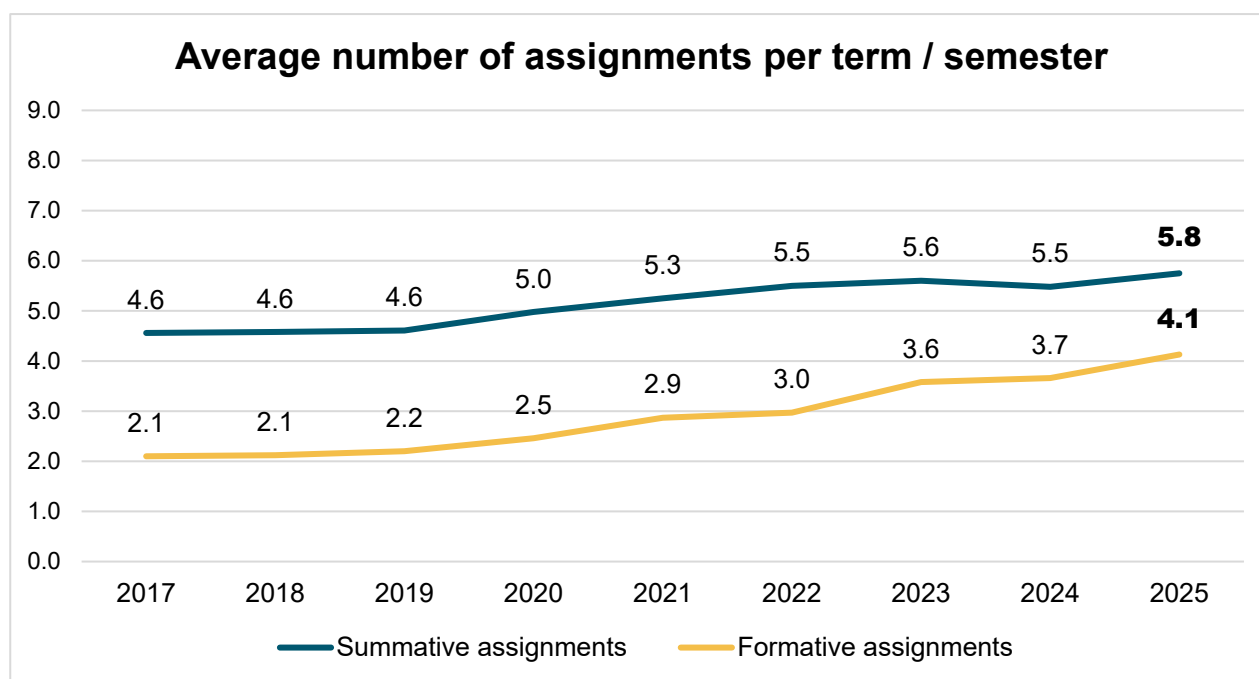
Chart uses mean calculations excluding scores above 30.

This is potentially surprising in that we speculated last year that the volume of assignments, while high, was, for many, achieving a good balance between demonstrating value and enabling students to make the required progress while taking into account wider workload pressure. However, this year we have seen the amount of paid work increasing significantly, but the demands on students (and staff) in terms of assignment pressures appear to have also increased. It may be the case that assignments are smaller in size (and more frequent)

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

than in the past. Artificial intelligence (AI) within the whole assessment and feedback cycle is also a factor that might be influencing the volume and speed of assignments, as both institutions and students grapple with the potential opportunities and challenges posed by AI in this space.[38]

13.4 Timeliness of feedback

The speed of returning assignments has increased strongly over the past few years. As context, the most recent large-scale marking and assessment boycott took place in 2023, so the two years we have now had without any major disruption is likely to have played a role in this. Along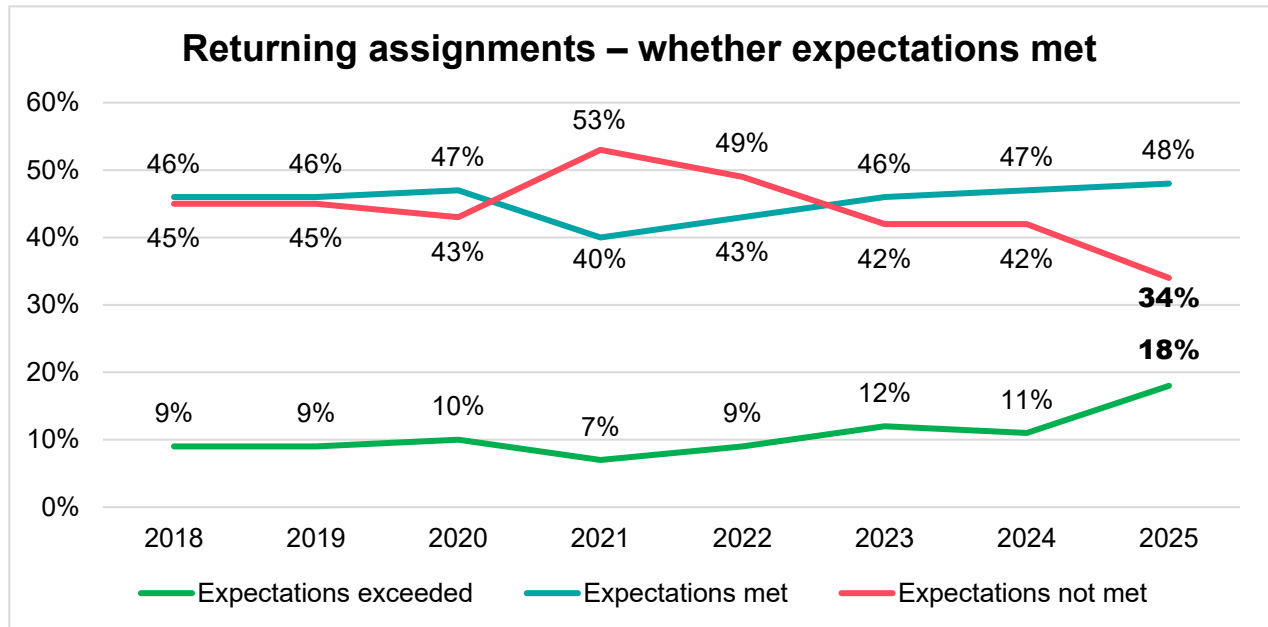side this, however, student expectations are also evolving, with the two being potentially linked in that faster turnarounds could realistically lead to increased student expectations.

Returning assignments – expectation

Legend: Reasonable time to return 2022, Reasonable time to return 2023, Reasonable time to return 2024, Reasonable time to return 2025

- One week or less: 11%, 15%, 19%, 20%
- 1–2 weeks: 43%, 46%, 45%, 50%
- 2–3 weeks: 33%, 28%, 27%, 23%
- 3–4 weeks: 12%, 9%, 9%, 6%
- 4 weeks or more: 1%, 1%, 1%, 1%

Returning assignments – reality

Legend: Actual time to return 2022, Actual time to return 2023, Actual time to return 2024, Actual time to return 2025

- One week or less: 10%, 14%, 16%, 19%
- 1–2 weeks: 23%, 30%, 29%, 42%
- 2–3 weeks: 31%, 30%, 29%, 25%
- 3–4 weeks: 23%, 17%, 17%, 11%
- 4 weeks or more: 13%, 8%, 8%, 4%

Student expectations have become more demanding in 2025, with 70% expecting their assignments to be returned within two weeks or less. However, it is very encouraging to see

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[38] Fischer, I (2025) 'Get students on board with AI for marking and feedback'. *Times Higher Education (Campus)*, 3 March. Available at: www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/get-students-board-ai-marking-and-feedback

that the timescale for returning has increased in 2025 at a rate that is even faster than changing student expectations. Some 61% of assignments are now being returned in two weeks or less – a significant increase compared to 2024 when the equivalent figure was 45%. For context, as recently as 2022 this figure was just 33%.

Returning assignments – whether expectations met

Year	Expectations exceeded	Expectations met	Expectations not met
2018	9%	46%	45%
2019	9%	46%	45%
2020	10%	47%	43%
2021	7%	40%	53%
2022	9%	43%	49%
2023	12%	46%	42%
2024	11%	47%	42%
2025	18%	48%	34%

This results in expectations being exceeded for 18% of students – by far the highest figure we have seen. Alongside a further 48% whose (often demanding and evolving) expectations are met, this leaves only around a third of students who feel they would have expected their assignments to be turned around in a faster timescale.

Such a positive set of results is a strong testament to institutions and staff across the sector who have made quality and turnaround times for assessments a priority in meeting student needs, while facing challenges posed by stretched finances and restructuring at many institutions.

14 Wellbeing

14.1 Key wellbeing measures

In recent years, levels of wellbeing have been some of the key measures in our Survey, with the figures being used to highlight the extent to which the full-time undergraduate population experiences relatively low wellbeing during one of the key phases of their lives.[39]
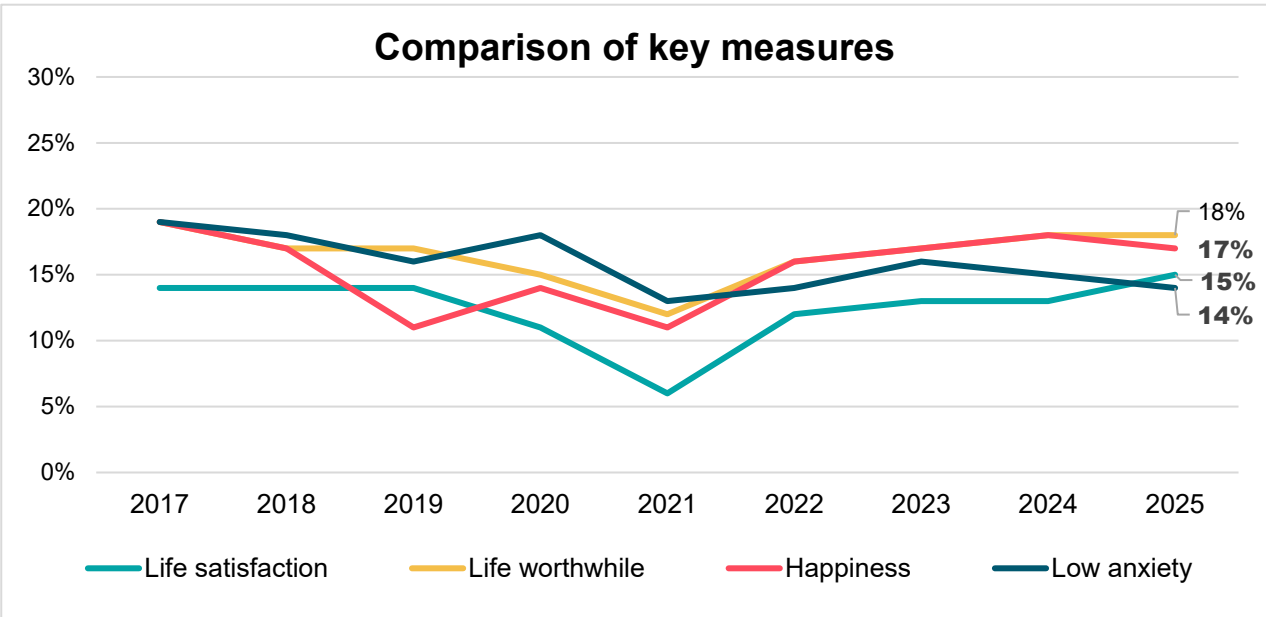
Proportion reporting the top two scores – representing the highest wellbeing – on an 11-point scale.

The prevailing levels of wellbeing remain low for our 2025 sample. Overall levels are more positive than during the pandemic, but there has been little recent change, with just 14% to 18% giving positive scores on these measures (calculated by combining the top two points on a 11-point scale, where high scores represent more positive wellbeing), representing a small change year-on-year.

This is given context when compared with the wellbeing levels of the general population, as measured by ONS. As shown in the table below, wellbeing levels for the general population – all ages – are around twice as high as for our student population, although comparing two different populations using different surveys and approaches is not intended to provide an exact comparison.[40]

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

[40] See ONS (2025) '*Quarterly personal well-being estimates – seasonally adjusted*'. Newport: Office for National Statistics. Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/datasets/quarterlypersonalwellbeingestimatesseasonallyadjusted [accessed 12 April 2025]

	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%	25%	18%	34%	18%	32%	15%	35%
2025	**15%**	N/A	18%	N/A	**17%**	N/A	**14%**	N/A

14.2 Mental health support

An increasing number of students are seeking mental health support from their institutions.[41] In response, universities are providing a growing set of services, from preventative programmes to substantial counselling services, including for those experiencing significant distress.[42] These services put a considerable financial and resource burden on institutions.[43]
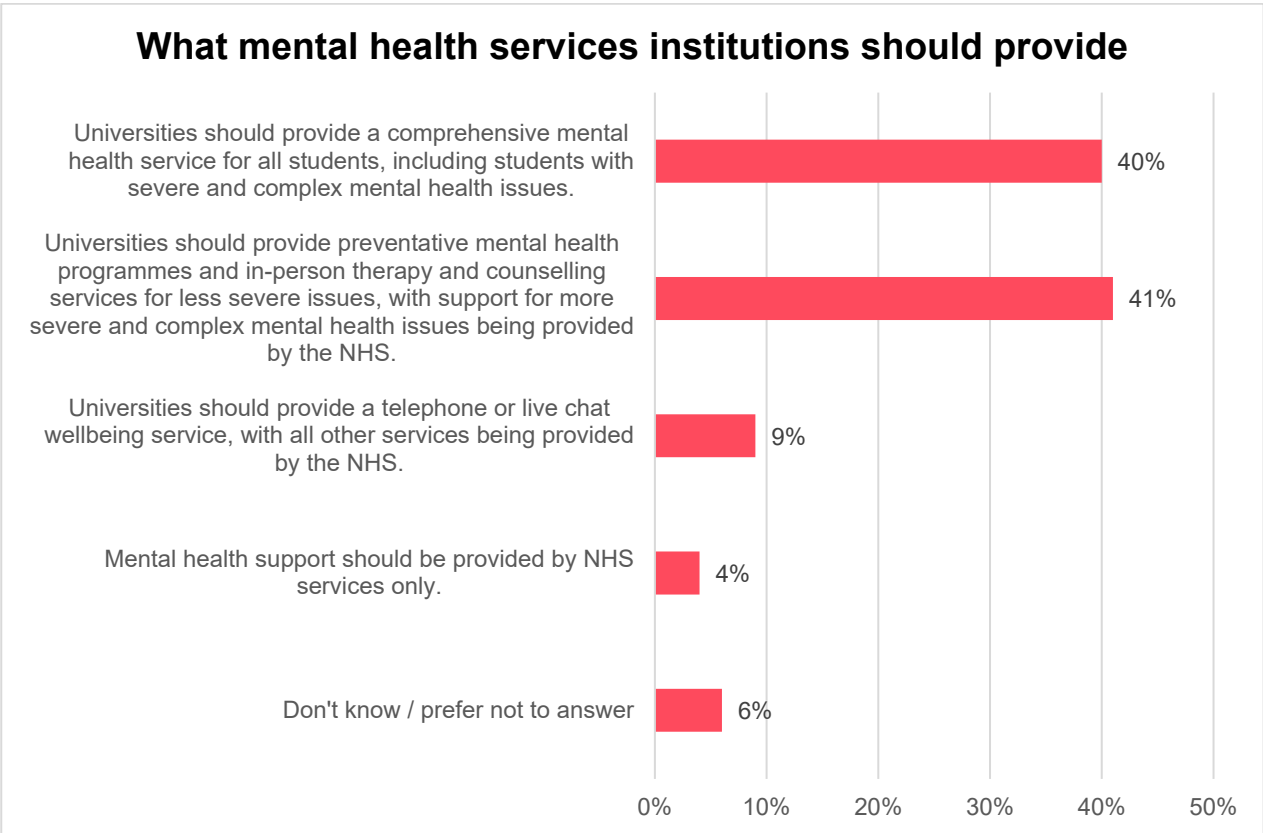
We sought to understand what services students expect institutions to provide and what they believe should be delivered by the NHS. Respondents were asked to choose between four statements, ranging from all support being provided solely by the NHS to universities offering comprehensive services, including for complex and severe cases of mental ill-health.

The results show that students have very high expectations of the mental health support they should get from their institutions. Some two-fifths (40%) think universities should provide 'a comprehensive mental health service for all students', including for 'severe and complex mental health cases'. Around the same number (41%) think universities should provide 'preventative mental health programmes' and 'in-person therapy and counselling services' but that 'more severe and complex' issues should be treated by the NHS. Relatively few students think universities should provide only limited mental health services.

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[41] Bennett, J, Kidger, J, Haworth, C, Linton, M J and Gunnell, D (2024) 'Student mental health support: a qualitative evaluation of new well-being services at a UK university', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 48 (4): 372-387. Available at: doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2024.2335379

[42] Lewis, J and Stiebahl, S (2025) *Student mental health in England: statistics, policy, and guidance* (Research briefing CBP-8593, 25 April). London: House of Commons Library. Available at: commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8593 [accessed 6 May 2025]

[43] McVitty, D (2024) 'It is not sustainable to expect universities to offer specialist mental health support'. *Wonkhe*, 14 March. Available at: wonkhe.com/blogs/it-is-not-sustainable-to-expect-universities-to-offer-specialist-mental-health-support

What mental health services institutions should provide

Category	Percentage
Universities should provide a comprehensive mental health service for all students, including students with severe and complex mental health issues.	40%
Universities should provide preventative mental health programmes and in-person therapy and counselling services for less severe issues, with support for more severe and complex mental health issues being provided by the NHS.	41%
Universities should provide a telephone or live chat wellbeing service, with all other services being provided by the NHS.	9%
Mental health support should be provided by NHS services only.	4%
Don't know / prefer not to answer	6%

Those who report having mental health difficulties have even higher expectations for their university's provision of mental health support.[44] Nearly half of these students (47%) think their university should provide comprehensive support, compared with 38% of other students. Perhaps because those facing mental health challenges must often rely on private therapy services, those who report being more significantly affected by the cost-of-living crisis also have higher demands of their university's mental health services.

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[44] Information about students with mental health concerns was taken from the Savanta panel data.

Selected demographics who say their institution should provide a comprehensive mental health service

Demographic	Percentage
Mental health challenges	47%
Trans identity/history	45%
Cost of living impacts 'A lot'	45%
First-year students	44%
Studying in Scotland	44%
Average, all students	40%
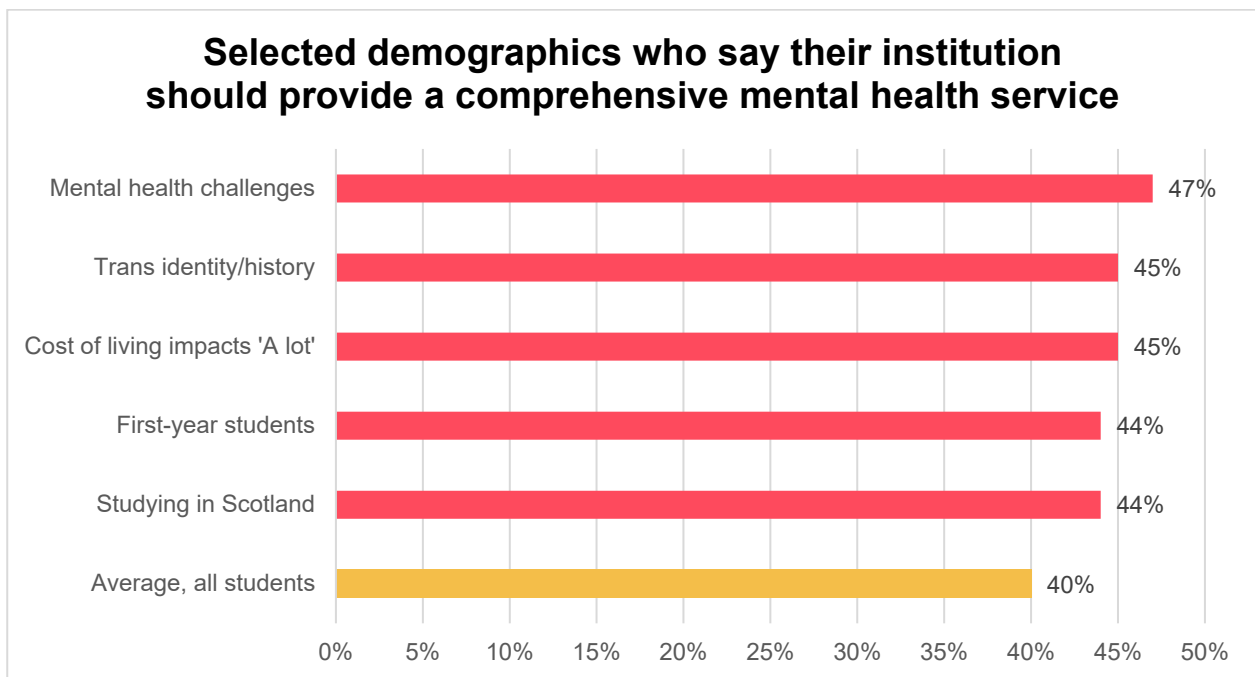
15 Tuition fees

Institutions across the UK are facing financial challenges, with a large majority expected to be in deficit by the next academic year. Furthermore, the sector is facing a potential loss of up to 10,000 jobs through redundancies.[45] HEPI polling in November 2024 found that one-third of students worry their institution could go bust.[46] In response to these challenges, the UK Government raised the tuition fee limit in England from £9,250 a year to £9,535 for students starting their courses in 2025, and the Welsh Government subsequently did the same for Welsh institutions.
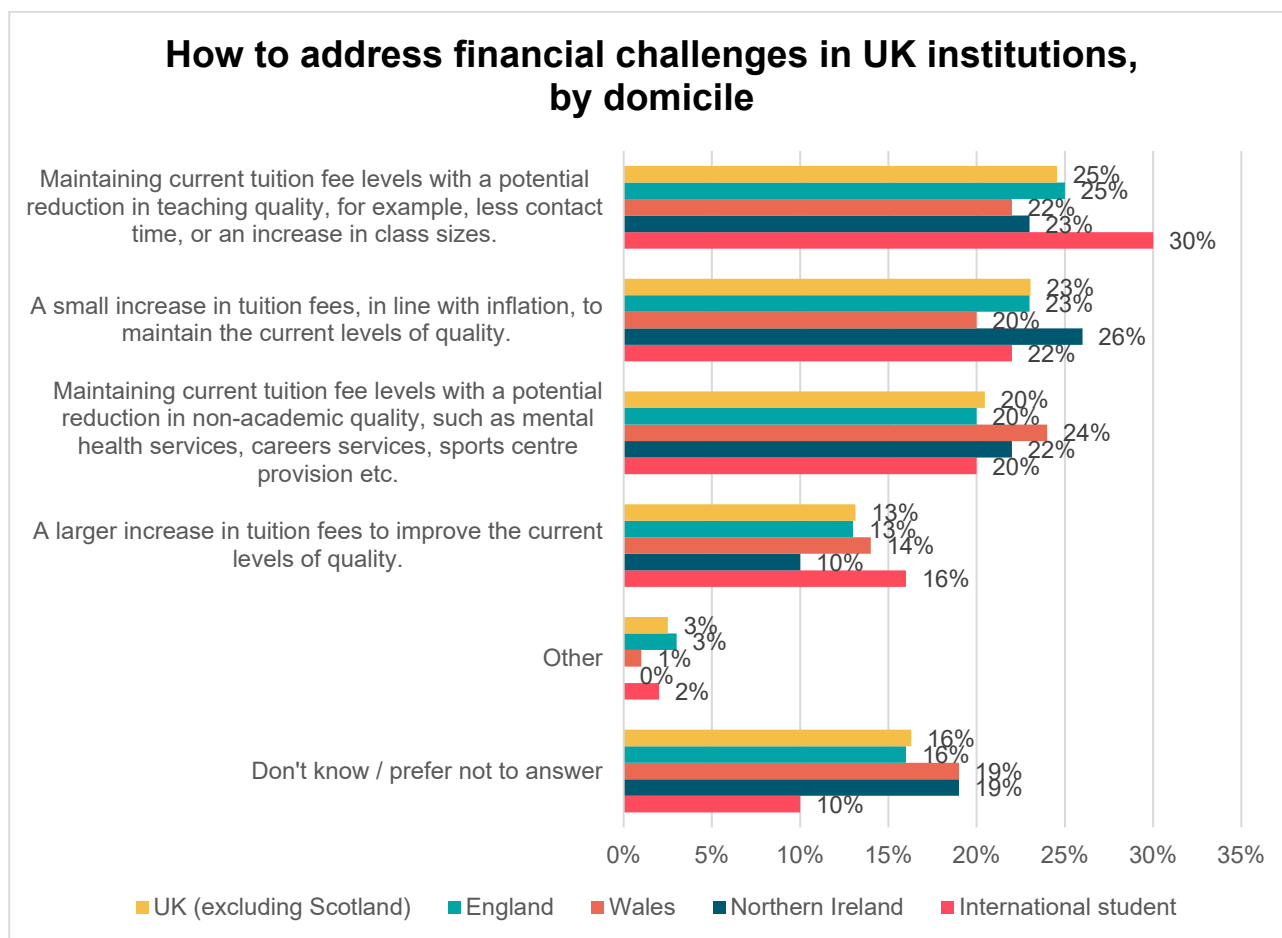
In polling conducted in late 2024, HEPI found that, while students are strongly opposed to a rise in tuition fees, their opposition fell significantly when the rise was contextualised in terms of the additional maintenance support they could receive.[47]

We wanted to know how students felt about fee rises when these were traded off against, for example, falling quality of teaching provision or other services that might occur if fees do not increase. We provided students with four options, including large and small fee increases, or maintaining fees at the current level with reductions in the quality of teaching or other services, and asked them to choose the best fit.

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[45] Maguire, D and Bols, A (2024) 'Delivering economic growth: the case for a financially secure higher education sector'. *HEPI Blog*, 22 November. Available at: www.hepi.ac.uk/2024/11/22/delivering-economic-growth-the-case-for-a-financially-secure-higher-education-sector

[46] HEPI (2024) *Around one-third of students worry their university could go bust and one-half expect the Government to take over if it does*. Press release, 4 November. Available at: www.hepi.ac.uk/2024/11/04/around-one-third-of-students-worry-their-university-could-go-bust-and-one-half-expect-the-government-to-take-over-if-it-does

[47] Freeman, J (2025) 'New HEPI polling shows Labour's tuition fee rise made more palatable by maintenance support increase'. *HEPI*, 9 January. Available at: www.hepi.ac.uk/2025/01/09/new-hepi-polling-shows-labours-tuition-fee-rise-made-more-palatable-by-maintenance-support-increase

How to address financial challenges in UK institutions, by domicile

Maintaining current tuition fee levels with a potential reduction in teaching quality, for example, less contact time, or an increase in class sizes.
- UK (excluding Scotland): 25%
- England: 25%
- Wales: 22%
- Northern Ireland: 23%
- International student: 30%

A small increase in tuition fees, in line with inflation, to maintain the current levels of quality.
- UK (excluding Scotland): 23%
- England: 23%
- Wales: 20%
- Northern Ireland: 26%
- International student: 22%

Maintaining current tuition fee levels with a potential reduction in non-academic quality, such as mental health services, careers services, sports centre provision etc.
- UK (excluding Scotland): 20%
- England: 20%
- Wales: 24%
- Northern Ireland: 22%
- International student: 20%

A larger increase in tuition fees to improve the current levels of quality.
- UK (excluding Scotland): 13%
- England: 13%
- Wales: 14%
- Northern Ireland: 10%
- International student: 16%

Other
- UK (excluding Scotland): 3%
- England: 3%
- Wales: 1%
- Northern Ireland: 0%
- International student: 2%

Don't know / prefer not to answer
- UK (excluding Scotland): 16%
- England: 16%
- Wales: 19%
- Northern Ireland: 19%
- International student: 10%

Legend: UK (excluding Scotland), England, Wales, Northern Ireland, International student

Across the three parts of the UK that charge students tuition fees (in Scotland, fees are paid by the Scottish Government), there was no clear consensus on the best approach. A slight plurality of students support maintaining current fee levels and accepting a reduction in teaching quality. But almost as many students support a small increase in fees to maintain quality levels.

Students domiciled in Northern Ireland are more supportive of small increases in fees, possibly because fees are far lower than in England and Wales and because they increase by small amounts each year. Overall, across the three parts of the UK other than Scotland, a slightly larger number would maintain fee levels than raise fees, but no approach ever comes close to majority support.

International students typically pay significantly higher fees than domestic students, so they may have different attitudes towards fee increases. A clear plurality favours maintaining current fee levels. However, more international students support a large increase to improve quality than UK-domiciled students.

Many students, including 16% of UK-domiciled students, opted not to take a view, saying either 'Don't know' or 'Prefer not to say'. Evidence suggests students often find the fees system complex and confusing and some misconceptions are widely held, so students may
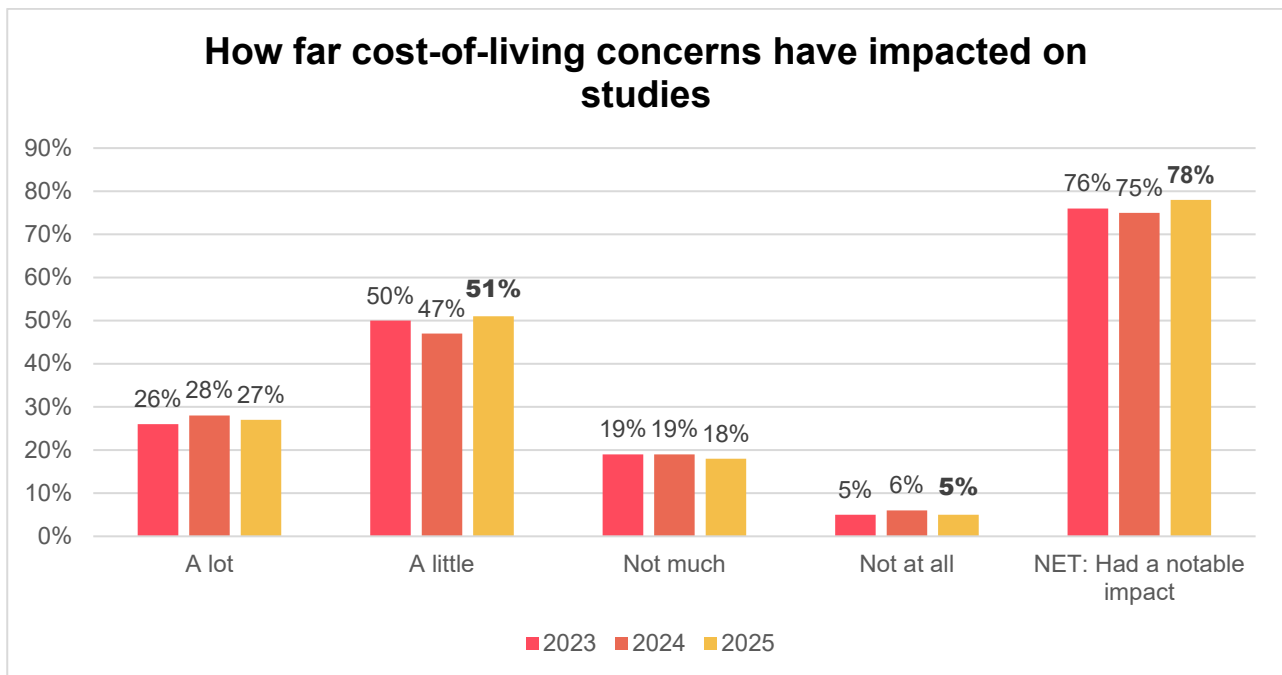
not have felt confident answering.[48] International students were much more likely to take a view, perhaps reflecting their higher fees.

[48] Payne, D and Gollings, J (2024) *Things worth knowing: the role of assumed knowledge in youth transitions from education to employment*. London: The Social Market Foundation. Available at: www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Things-worth-knowing-Oct-2024.pdf
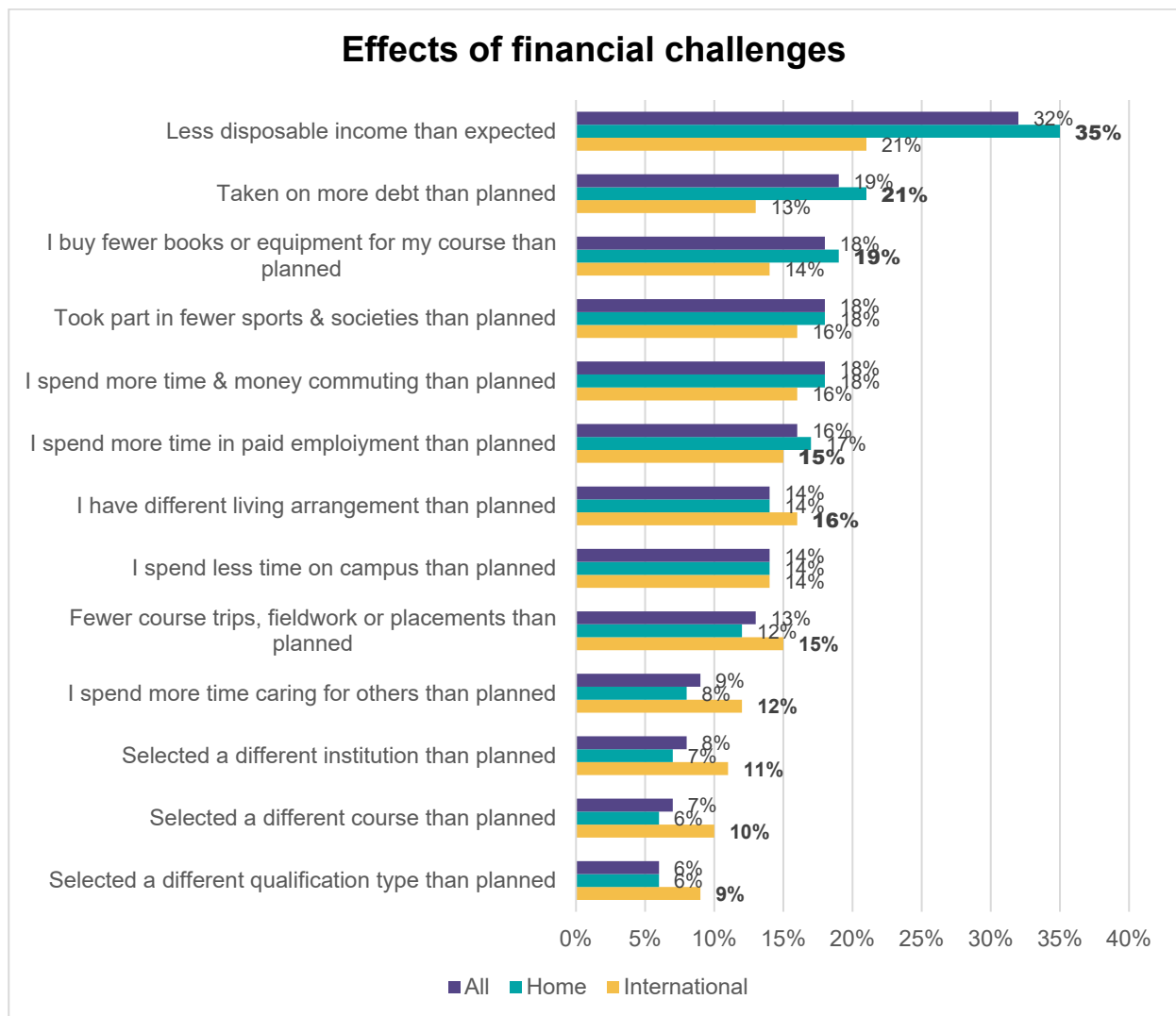
16 Finances and the future

16.1 The impact of the cost-of-living crisis

We now have a three-year consistent dataset of the negative impact of cost-of-living concerns on students' studies. There has been relatively little change on this measure, which has remained steady at just over three-quarters of our sample saying there has been a notable impact (a lot or a little) on their studies. In 2025, there has been a small movement towards more students saying they have been affected 'a little' compared to fewer students who have not been affected 'at all.'

How far cost-of-living concerns have impacted on studies

	A lot	A little	Not much	Not at all	NET: Had a notable impact
2023	26%	50%	19%	5%	76%
2024	28%	47%	19%	6%	75%
2025	27%	51%	18%	5%	78%

To supplement this question and to understand some of the ways in which students feel they have been impacted, we introduced a follow-up question in 2025, comprising pre-coded answers (respondents could choose as many as they wished), which we have charted below.

Effects of financial challenges

Effect	All	Home	International
Less disposable income than expected	32%	35%	21%
Taken on more debt than planned	19%	21%	13%
I buy fewer books or equipment for my course than planned	18%	19%	14%
Took part in fewer sports & societies than planned	18%	18%	16%
I spend more time & money commuting than planned	18%	18%	16%
I spend more time in paid emploiyment than planned	16%	17%	15%
I have different living arrangement than planned	14%	14%	16%
I spend less time on campus than planned	14%	14%	14%
Fewer course trips, fieldwork or placements than planned	13%	12%	15%
I spend more time caring for others than planned	9%	8%	12%
Selected a different institution than planned	8%	7%	11%
Selected a different course than planned	7%	6%	10%
Selected a different qualification type than planned	6%	6%	9%

Legend: All, Home, International

Students in our sample have been affected in multiple ways as a result of financial challenges. By far the main impact, which is a logical one, is that students generally have less disposable income than they expected to. However, in terms of specifics, it is concerning to see that nearly one-in-five have taken on more debt than planned – particularly home students.

Other impacts include having less money to buy course equipment, more time and money spent commuting and taking part in fewer extra-curricular opportunities. Given the mental health challenges faced by the student population, this reduction in opportunities to exercise and socialise is concerning and may reflect the growing number of hours spent in paid work.

Perhaps surprisingly, despite the sky-high levels of paid employment we have discussed throughout this report, students did not see paid work as one of the most unexpected challenges on this list. This implies that in many cases students entering higher education, from home or abroad, are fully expecting to carry out paid work alongside their studies and are broadly aware of how much work they will need to do.

Across the board, there appears to be a lower propensity to provide multiple answers among international students, and hence their scores are lower on almost all aspects. However, international students are significantly more likely than home students to have changed their course, institution or even qualification type because of cost-of-living pressures, while amounts of disposable income and debt are less of a concern than for home students.

Financial challenges mean that 6% of home students selected a different course than they had planned to, and 7% of home students selected a different institution than they had planned to. (Respondents could choose more than one answer for this question, so there may be respondents who selected both due to financial challenges.)

In England, the Secretary of State for Education, Bridget Phillipson, recently invoked the Robbins Principle in a speech to the House of Commons, reminding us:

"that courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so."[49]

And similarly, in a letter to vice-chancellors dated November 2024, Phillipson urged universities to play a stronger role "in expanding access and improving outcomes for disadvantaged students".

Without improvements to the maintenance support system, it appears that for some students, financial challenges mean that only some courses or institutions are available to all. With a Governmental focus on "breaking down barriers to opportunity", ensuring that all students can afford their first choice of course or institution should be a high priority.[50]

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[49] Hansard (2024) *Higher Education Reform*. Vol 756, col 46, 4 November. Available at: hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2024-11-04/debates/76221982-95A9-4F6F-854A-CBFA301F35C8/HigherEducationReform

[50] Labour (2024) 'Break down barriers to opportunity', in Labour, *Labour's manifesto*. London: The Labour Party. Available at: labour.org.uk/change/break-down-barriers-to-opportunity

17 Conclusions and policy recommendations

17.1 Trends over time

This is the 19th wave of the Student Academic Experience Survey. Following the upheaval of the Covid-19 pandemic at the start of this decade and the shock of the cost-of-living crisis that followed, it feels as though the student experience has settled into a new, albeit challenging, normal. The Covid years had a significant impact on the student experience at the time, and it continues to be felt in many ways. This impact is not to be underestimated. Given the upheaval of the last five years, it is important to consider medium- and long-term trends in the student academic experience.

Considering value for money, there was a downward trajectory among those who perceived higher education as good or very good value for money from 2014 to 2017. If we set aside the results from 2021 and 2022, which were impacted by Covid-19 restrictions and may have led to outlying figures, the data from 2014 to 2025 form a relatively flat trend, oscillating by a maximum of six percentage points across this period. This is reflected in the trend of students reporting that they receive poor or very poor value for money. Without the outliers of 2021 and 2022, this measure remains relatively stable. While there are statistically significant year-on-year variations, these fluctuate by just three percentage points between 2017 and 2025. Value-for-money perceptions remain a challenging measure for the sector. However, given the at best slow growth and at worst freezing of the unit of resource per student during this time, it is perhaps reassuring to see that this measure has not dipped over the medium term.

Comparing expectations to experience, we observe an early period of relative stability. The percentage of students reporting that their experience was worse than they expected varied by only one percentage point from 2013 to 2020, with 12% or 13% of students providing this response during this period. However, if we omit the 2021 and 2022 data and resume our analysis in 2023, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of students indicating that their experience was worse than expected. Specifically, 16% of students noted this in 2023, 13% in 2024, and 15% in 2025.

Broadly speaking, students reporting a better experience than they expected saw a steady yet persistent downward trend from 2014 to 2019 (with a rise in 2020). If we revisit the data from 2023, we observe a year-on-year increase in this measure over the most recent three years.

One measure where we have seen a definite and dramatic change over time is the number of students working in paid employment in term-time. 35% of students undertook paid employment in term time in 2015. Without the 2021 and 2022 figures, we have seen an increase almost every year, until we reach 2025, when 68% of students are now in paid employment. The number of students working in term time has almost doubled since 10 years ago.

We have also seen a consistent upward trend in the number of summative and formative assessments students are set each semester. In 2017, students were completing a total of 6.7 assessments per semester. This figure now sits at 9.9 assessments.

One standout trend when looking at these last two measures is that students are working hard, in their studies and in paid employment, and by these measures at least, are working harder than in previous years.

Perhaps this is the 'new normal', even the new expectation. The data suggest that students are now starting their course expecting to work a significant number of hours in paid employment, and with perhaps a more informed expectation of the realities of higher education.

17.2 Areas of concern

Despite the work ethic and resilience demonstrated by many students, we must not underestimate the impact of balancing work and study on the student experience. This year, the number of hours students spend on independent study has decreased. Perhaps even more concerningly, students are reporting struggles developing friendships on campus.

We must also note with concern that the number of students who say they would choose not to pursue higher education if given the chance to make the same choice again, while still low, has nearly doubled from last year.

This leads to three reflections.

1 What can be improved in the pre-application / application phase to support students in making informed decisions about their post-18 options?

2 What can be improved within the system to relieve the pressure faced by students juggling multiple responsibilities?

3 How can flexibility be built into the higher education system to allow students to adjust the trajectory of their studies, or move in and out of studies to accommodate their competing responsibilities?

The recommendations below address each of these reflections, alongside additional recommendations inspired by the data in this year's report.

17.3 Recommendations

1 Higher education applicants and potential applicants should be supported to explore all the options available to them and to take the time to make an informed choice about their next steps. Detailed recommendations on this can be found in the recent University of Bristol / HEPI / Advance HE report, *The Benefits of Hindsight: reconsidering higher education choices*. We reflect some of these recommendations here, including:

    a. Schools and colleges should be funded and supported to provide comprehensive careers advice and guidance that offers a broad range of

   options to school and college leavers, including options outside of going to university.

  b. The Department for Education in England should take into account the substantial number of undergraduate students who may wish to change their course or institution when developing the Lifelong Learning Entitlement. Consideration should be given to incentivising accredited end-of-year qualifications as standard.

  Further, graduate salary data and comparative salaries should be included on the UCAS site to ensure students understand the financial differentials between course choices.

2 Undertaking paid work alongside studying is now normal, with most students studying this way. As more students work, the number of hours available for independent study will decrease. Institutions and the Office for Students (in England) should monitor completion rates and degree or qualification grades to better understand the additional risks to student outcomes and then address these risks effectively.

3 As students find themselves with less disposable income than expected, they are taking on more debt and cutting back on academic and non-academic aspects of their degrees. Institutions should provide pre-arrival guidance that focuses on money management, as well as helping to set the scene for what may be an experience with less time on campus and more limited resources than in the past. We look forward to the results of a national 'pre-arrival survey' currently being undertaken in England by Advance HE, the University of East London and Jisc and funded by the Office for Students.[51]

4 The Westminster, Welsh and Scottish Governments and the Northern Irish Executive should review their maintenance support systems to ensure they are fit for purpose. With 6% of home students selecting a different course and 7% of home students selecting a different institution than they had planned to due to cost-of-living pressures, it is clear that less affluent students feel they have fewer choices in accessing higher education.

5 In England, the upcoming Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) offers the opportunity for the higher education sector to pivot to a more flexible model. Students who need to work long hours alongside their studies could study over a longer period, allowing them to complete the number of hours of independent study needed for a successful outcome. The Department for Education must recognise that institutions are financially disincentivised from engaging with the LLE. Offering 'off-ramps' or the flexibility for students to extend their studies or move institutions, rather than hold onto them and their fees for three full years, is unattractive to institutions at a time of financial unsustainability. The Department for Education will need to incentivise this process and

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[51] Office for Students (2025) '*Equality in Higher Education Innovation Fund*'. Bristol and London: Office for Students. Available at: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-providers/equality-of-opportunity/equality-in-higher-education-innovation-fund

work with institutions to plan and prepare for the financial risks and opportunities this approach will bring.

6   The number of assignments students complete is continuing to climb. Institutions should monitor and, where appropriate, review their assessment burdens carefully, particularly in light of the pressures students face regarding competing responsibilities.

7   There is an increasing expectation that higher education institutions should offer comprehensive mental health provision. Clarification should be provided from policymakers and regulators as to where this responsibility sits between higher education providers and the NHS. If institutions are being required to fill gaps that the NHS cannot, then this should be appropriately funded by governments in addition to the tuition fee and teaching grant funding currently provided.

8   As we see a slight dip in the proportion of students stating that they hear a diversity of views on campus, institutions should work with their academics and student bodies to co-produce plans to promote free speech on campus. This approach should be woven into curricula, encouraging students to understand where their own opinions and perceptions originate from and consider and engage with ideas and values that differ to their own. Institutions should support students to develop resilience skills in having their own views and perceptions challenged, and the skills and confidence needed to challenge the perceptions of others.

9   Data throughout the survey show the value students experience through high-quality one-to-one and small group interactions. Institutions should seek to increase these opportunities, such as developing cross-curricular problem-based group work. This offers the chance to build connections, develop employability skills and prevent the sometimes-siloed nature of academic study. Further, while we recognise the challenges of this given job cuts across the sector, ensuring that effective personal tutoring systems that link to the broader university offer (such as careers development and financial management support) are in place will ensure a more personalised student experience.

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