

**STUDENT**

**ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE**

**SURVEY**

**2026**

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# Foreword

This report shows that the HEPI / Advance HE Student Academic Experience Survey continues to go from strength to strength as it enters its third decade, having originally started in 2005-06.

Despite the Survey's long-standing and longitudinal nature, the 2026 results include many new areas of importance – for example, on the experience of students living in rural areas, the likelihood of being harassed while at a place of learning and the proportion of students who have changed their course or institution since first enrolling in higher education.

These new topics appear alongside the tried-and-tested older issues of enduring importance that have featured throughout the Survey's long life. These include students' value-for-money perceptions, how the student experience differs (or not) from prior expectations, and student workload.

Between the new issues and the more long-standing ones, the Survey has also become the go-to place for information on various topics that have risen to particular prominence in recent years. These include the proportion of students undertaking paid employment during term time, the number of students who might or might not make a different choice (of course or institution) if applying afresh with hindsight, and students' sense of wellbeing and belonging. In each of these three areas, the pages that follow dive more deeply than in the past to paint a more precise picture.

Perhaps the single most striking overall finding from this year's Survey is a positive one. Some of the key indicators are moving in a more positive direction than might have been expected, given the financial pressures that higher education institutions and students are suffering from. This good news is a testament to the staff in our sector who are often being asked to do more with less.

However, as always, these positives are tempered by the fact that many individual students face particularly high barriers when trying to get the most out of their time in higher education. This year's report provides (even) more colour than its predecessors on who these students are, which barriers are hindering them and what more might be done to help them.

We hope this report will prove valuable to everyone – whether staff, student or governor – who wants to learn more about how students are experiencing higher education in the UK in the mid-2020s. But despite its breadth and depth, no single report on the results can be completely comprehensive because the underlying dataset is huge and growing.

The good news is that the data remain open and free to access. So we encourage higher education staff, independent researchers, students looking for a good dissertation topic, mission groups, representative bodies, regulators, policymakers and interested members of the public – in short, anyone who cares for or about students – to consult the underlying numbers to look for their own patterns and come to their own conclusions. We hope you will let us know what you find!



**Alistair Jarvis**

Chief Executive of Advance HE



**Nick Hillman**

Chief Executive of the Higher  
Education Policy Institute  
(HEPI)

# 1 Executive summary

In many ways, the 2026 results of the Student Academic Experience Survey make encouraging reading. Perceptions of value for money are at their highest levels for more than a decade and are relatively strong among students from all parts of the UK, albeit with room for improvement in absolute terms.

Alongside this, expectations are more likely to be exceeded or met than at any time in the same time period, and a clear majority of students are happy with their choice of course and institution, despite indications in the previous year's Survey that pressures of paid employment may have been causing some to reassess their choice of higher education. We should note, however, that there are a number of degree apprenticeship students who would consider options outside higher education if they could choose again.

Continuing the overall positive theme, ratings of teaching are relatively high and are improving across most of the measures in the Survey. This is broadly matched when looking at ratings of the quality of feedback on assignments. Generally, there are low levels of concern when considering freedom of speech and good relations on campus, although a new question on incidences of harassment points to some worrying findings. Student wellbeing remains lower than the general population but has recovered from the low levels experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic and is improving slowly.

All these are key barometers of the student experience and are generally positive in 2026. Yet, students are still under pressure. As with last year's findings, around two-thirds of our sample of full-time undergraduates carry out paid employment during term time. The average number of hours worked per week remains significant, although it is encouraging to see data this year showcasing institutions that provide support for paid employment, particularly among international students. Timetabled contact hours are consistently high, although it is potentially concerning that independent study levels are at historically low levels, possibly pointing towards students needing to make difficult choices in how they spend their time. There are also significant minorities of students who commute for long periods of time and live in rural communities, and these both correlate with a less positive experience overall.

Overall, the results provide evidence of high-quality provision being delivered to students who understand the challenges, benefits and opportunities of higher education. Although these data do not yet represent a clear upward trend, the results suggest that students are better placed than in recent years to make the most of the opportunities they have while learning to manage a range of pressures. Financial challenges and the likely need to carry out paid employment have changed the student experience for many, but for those who are fully prepared, the overall experience is often a very positive one.

## 2 Methodology

### 2.1 Approach

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

Savanta's student panel includes more than 25,000 undergraduate students in the UK. Savanta recruits students in various ways, including via social media, online communities, publishing networks and through partnerships with organisations such as the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) to boost panel numbers.

Between 6 January 2026 and 7 April 2026, members of Savanta's student panel, as well as respondents from other internal Savanta panels (including Simplify) and external panel providers (Audience Align, Probity and Pure Profile), were invited to complete the Survey. Data quality was checked and monitored to achieve a balance of respondents across regions, courses and several personal characteristics. In total, 10,065 responses were received and analysed: 9,094 from Savanta panels and 971 from external panels. The median completion time was 11 minutes and 4 seconds.

In designing the Survey, we aim to strike a balance between consistency across various key measures (for example, value for money and wellbeing), while adding new questions to reflect current and emerging issues. One key principle adopted in selecting the questions is to remove a question for each one that is added, ensuring the questionnaire length (and therefore the 'ask' of the students) is kept at a proportionate level.

Among the new areas introduced for 2026 were more detailed questions on the type of paid work being conducted, as well as the support provided by institutions in this area. We also amended our coverage of commuting students, switching from distance travelled to time spent, and supplemented this with an analysis of the type of geographic area the respondents commuted from. Building on the Survey's recent coverage of free speech, we added a new question on any experiences of harassment by protected characteristics while on campus, supplementing this with new analysis on respondents' religion.

Further information on the history of the Survey can be found in the recently published 20-year report 'What Matters Most: 20 years of the student experience'.<sup>2</sup>

### 2.2 Sample size

Our 2026 Survey canvassed the views of 10,065 full-time undergraduate students studying at higher education institutions across the UK. Unless stated otherwise, all figures and tables relate to weighted data from the 2026 Survey.

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1 [savanta.com](https://www.savanta.com)

2 Turner, G and Stephenson, R (2026) *What Matters Most? 20 years of the student experience*. Oxford: HEPI/TechnologyOne. Available at: [www.hepi.ac.uk/reports/what-matters-most-20-years-of-the-student-experience](https://www.hepi.ac.uk/reports/what-matters-most-20-years-of-the-student-experience)

The total sample size of 10,065, based on a UK full-time undergraduate population of 1,789,360 (2024-25 data) provides a margin of error of  $\pm 1\%$ .<sup>3</sup> This is calculated at the 95% confidence level and based on a result of 50%, where the margin of error is at its maximum. 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 2025 and 2026 (or in some cases, between sample groups from 2026) 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.

## 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, age, type of school attended, qualification type 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 2026 data comprising the total weighted population of 10,065. 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.

All previous reports on the Survey remain available on the Advance HE and HEPI websites.

## 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 (often referred to as 'first degree'), 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.

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3 HESA (2026) 'Who's studying in HE?' Cheltenham: HESA. Available at: [www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he)

## 2.7 International students

From 2025, 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)

Previous work on data up to 2024 indicated that some international students were classifying themselves incorrectly as being ‘domiciled’ in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland or Wales. From 2025, and repeated in 2026, these students have now been classified in a more accurate way.<sup>4</sup>

We subsequently used the new classification of UK-domiciled students as a filter for analysis on ethnicity, type of school attended, POLAR analysis, social grade, distance travelled to campus, commuting category and settlement type.

## 2.8 Ethnicity

For ethnicity analysis, the sample profile and main data in this report are once again based on UK-domiciled students.<sup>5</sup> This is a standard approach and has been done to remove the impact of international students on ethnic groups.

## 2.9 Sexual orientation

In the data tables, results have been reported 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. Advance HE and HEPI recognise the limits of this classification.

4 Due to the introduction of this filter, analysis of respondents ‘domiciled’ in England, NI, Scotland and Wales is not directly comparable to data from 2024 or earlier.

5 For some analyses in the data tables, 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.

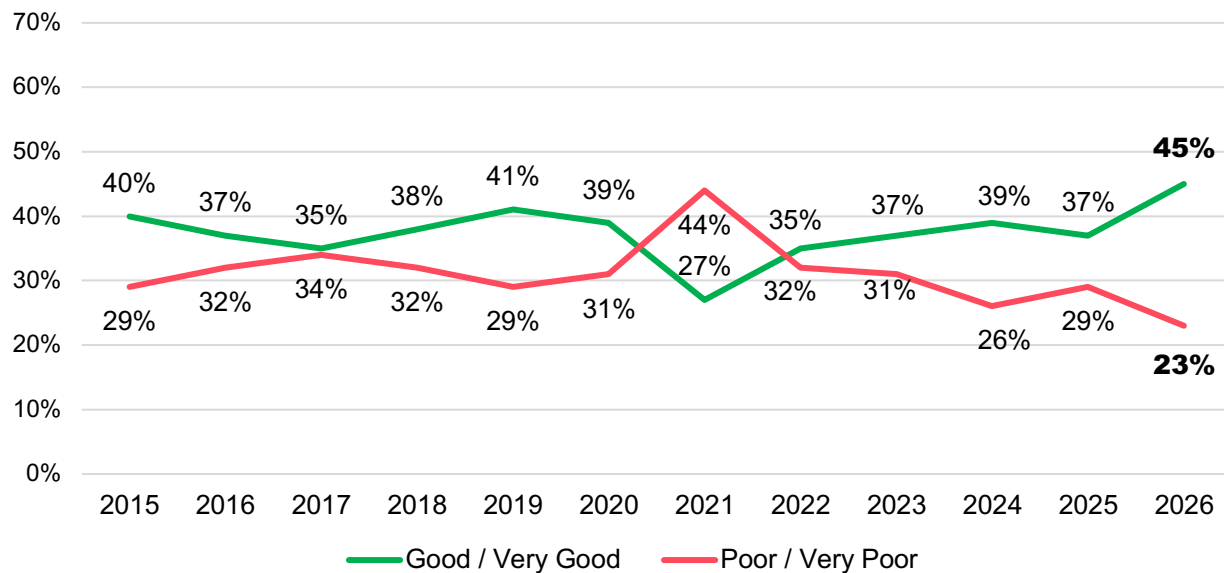
Weighted data					
Categories		2024 (10,239)	2025 (10,232)	2026 (10,065)	2026 Weighted base size
University region	England	85%	88%	83%	8,328
	Northern Ireland	3%	4%	2%	223
	Scotland	8%	7%	8%	765
	Wales	4%	6%	5%	517
Domicile	UK student	N/A	78%	86%	8,616
	International student	N/A	21%	14%	1,403
Institution type	Russell Group	28%	28%	28%	2,799
	Pre-92 (excl. Russell Group)	18%	18%	18%	1,788
	Post-92	42%	43%	45%	4,484
	Specialist & Other	13%	11%	10%	994
Ethnicity (% among UK-domiciled students providing an answer)	Asian	14%	12%	11%	933
	Chinese	1%	1%	1%	75
	Black	6%	9%	13%	1,129
	Mixed	6%	5%	6%	526
	Other	1%	1%	1%	89
	White	72%	72%	68%	5,848

## 4 Value for money

### 4.1 Trends over time

Across the last decade and more, there have been several macro factors that have influenced how students perceive the value for money that higher education provides. This has encompassed the raising of the cap on tuition fees in England in 2012, the significant disruption to campus learning during the Covid-19 pandemic and, more recently, the widespread cost-of-living challenges affecting much of society. Consequently, the Survey's long-established question on value for money has become one of the most high-profile indicators of how student perceptions are holding up in any given year of the Survey.

**Value for money of your present course**



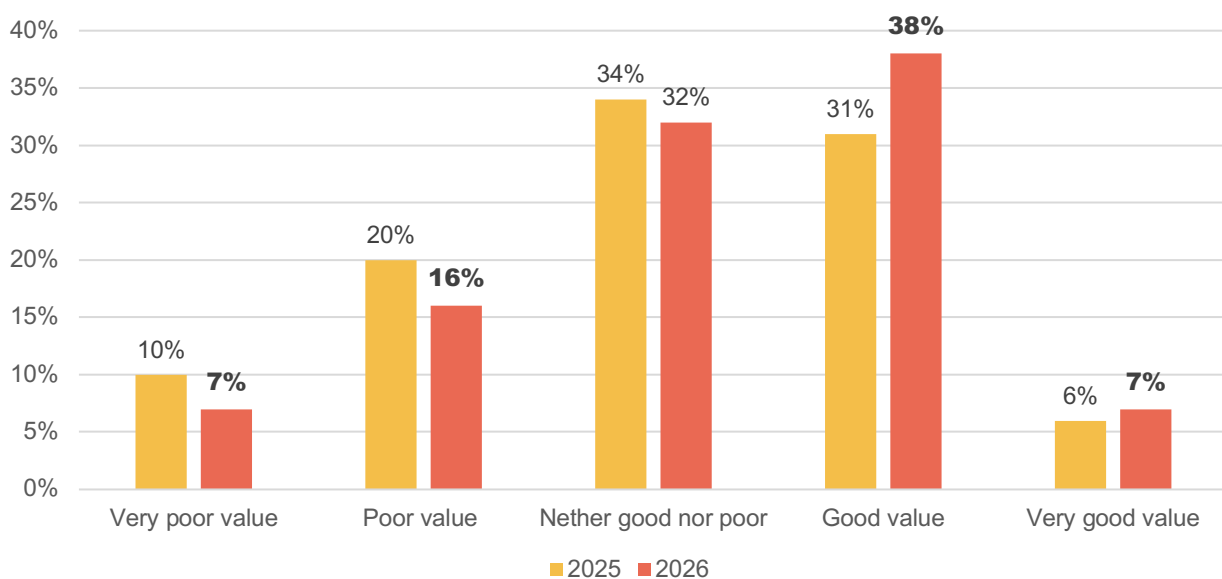
*Note that students could also choose an option 'neither good nor poor' (chosen by 32% of students in 2026), hence the two lines on this chart do not add up to 100%.*

The 2026 findings are striking. Across the total sample, perceptions of good or very good value for money are the highest we have seen in more than a decade, representing a very large single-year change. Indeed, we have to go back as far as 2013 (with a score of 50% - not charted here) for the last time a higher figure was reported. To show the scale of the change across different types of students, we have highlighted below comparative figures across a range of different student demographics. What stands out is how so many different groups of students give significantly higher value for money scores in 2026, which gives us confidence that we have seen a fundamental positive shift on such a key measure beyond any influence of year-on-year changes in demographic composition.

Good/Very good value	2024	2025	2026
Age – younger (21 and under)	37%	37%	<b>43%</b>
Age – older (26 and over)	45%	31%	<b>52%</b>
White	38%	37%	<b>45%</b>
BAME	34%	35%	<b>44%</b>
Home students	N/A	37%	<b>45%</b>
International students	N/A	39%	<b>51%</b>
Bachelor students	38%	41%	<b>46%</b>
Non-Bachelor students	40%	33%	<b>41%</b>

Digging a little deeper into this year’s data, the main scale of change is in terms of respondents feeling they have received ‘good’ value for money (increased from 31% to 38%) as opposed to ‘very good’ (increased from 6% to 7%). This is evidence of a sizeable number of respondents moving one point up the scale in terms of their response – a logical progression as opposed to a significant leap that may have been more difficult to explain.

### Value for money – strength of feeling



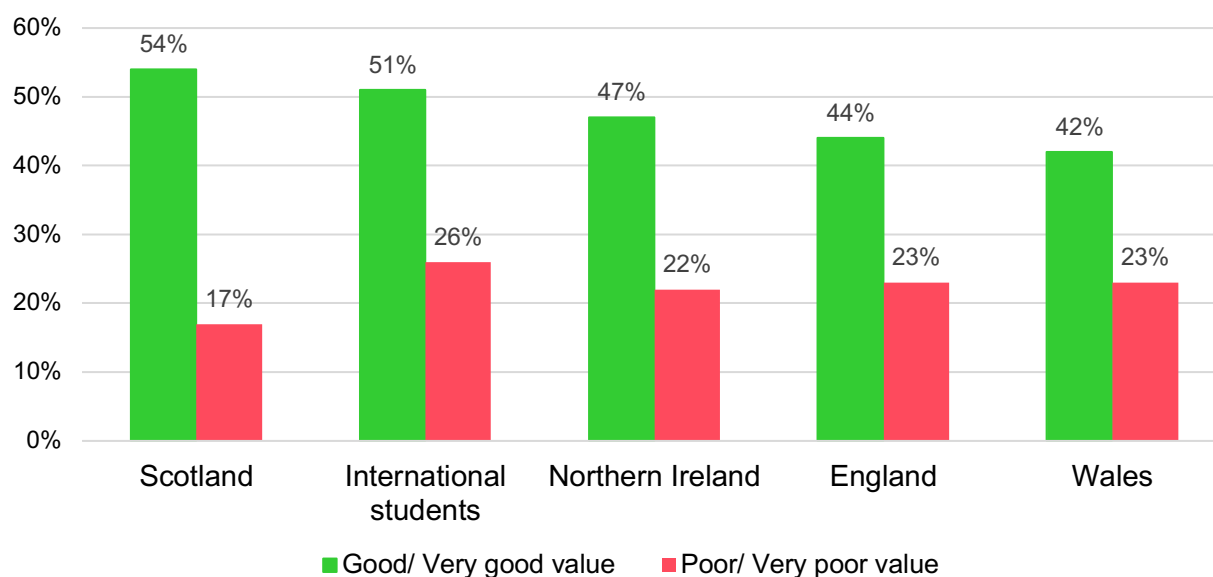
## 4.2 Value by home region (domicile)

The fees and funding policies that apply to full-time undergraduate students studying in the UK vary depending on where a student is from and where they choose to study. At one end of the spectrum, international students typically face the highest fees, while at the other end of the scale, students from Scotland who choose to study in Scotland can be eligible to have all their fees covered.<sup>6</sup>

6 [Student Awards Agency Scotland](#)

Although there are a range of other factors that influence value, fee levels do play a role, and we tend to see significant variation in how value is perceived depending on where a student is from, but we can also assess this over time to understand the extent to which the experience may be improving, or otherwise, given varying fee regimes in place.

### Value for money of course – by home country / region



As might be expected given the above reference to differential fees and funding, value for money is usually perceived at its highest among UK students whose ‘home region’ is Scotland – and this is also the case in 2026. However, the scores this year are notable for the uniformly clear (and positive) differences between good / very good value and poor / very poor value for students from all domiciles – including international as well as home students.

As detailed in the chart below, the positive shift in value for money described at the beginning of this chapter is reflected across all parts of the UK and internationally, with notable year-on-year increases and some of the highest scores we have seen across most domiciles.

Home region / domicile					
	Scotland	International students	NI	England	Wales
<b>2020</b>	57%	N/A	37%	37%	41%
<b>2021</b>	50%		27%	24%	29%
<b>2022</b>	48%		28%	34%	40%
<b>2023</b>	51%		31%	35%	37%
<b>2024</b>	48%		41%	36%	40%
<b>2025</b>	46%	39%	33%	36%	32%
<b>2026</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>51%</b>	<b>47%</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>42%</b>

The largest proportion of Survey responses are from England, where value for money has often been difficult to demonstrate in light of the highest fee levels. However, despite the fees in England now increasing again with inflation, scores are the most positive in the past decade, which is encouraging news and an endorsement of the quality of the experience.

Turning to Wales and Northern Ireland, there has traditionally been quite a bit of fluctuation in scores over time, potentially linked to the smaller base sizes in the sample. However, perceptions in 2026 are very positive, representing statistically significant increases which are highly likely to be over and above any potential sampling fluctuation.

As we mentioned above, international students are typically charged the highest fees. Despite this, their value-for-money scores this year are very positive. We saw in our 2025 SAES report that the experience of international students was generally a positive one; in 2026, as we will see later, international students are particularly likely to feel their experience exceeded their expectations.<sup>7</sup> This points towards the quality of the experience having an influence which outweighs the relative cost of fees when considering value.

While this range of improvements is clearly good news, it is important to note that the actual proportion of students who perceive good value is not especially high in absolute terms and still stands at less than half of all students. There is still some way to go until a large majority of students feel they receive good value in higher education. While acknowledging some very positive scores, we should perhaps also show some caution in that these results represent one year of very strong findings, and do not yet represent a clear upward trend.

### **4.3 Factors driving perceptions of value for money**

Digging a little deeper into perceptions of value, we asked students to select from a pre-coded list to identify the main factors driving their opinion, splitting the question between those with a positive opinion and those with a negative opinion.

In analysing responses to follow-up questions asked in this way, it is particularly instructive to focus on the relative ranking of the reasons stated within a particular year, as opposed to focusing narrowly on their percentage answers, which are prone to fluctuate.

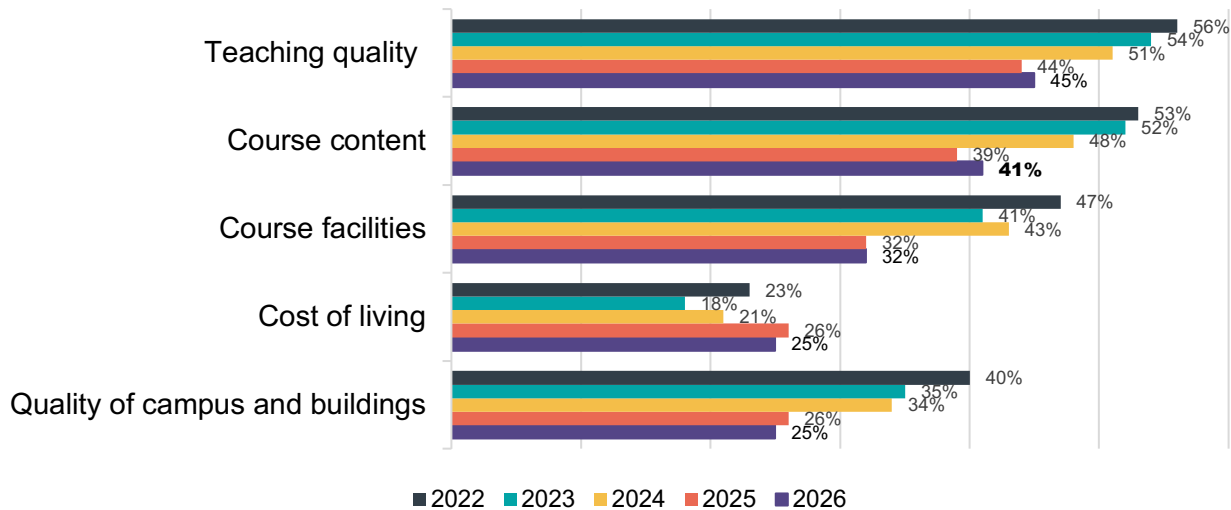
Beginning with the main causes of good value, we see teaching quality again as the main factor, with the quality of courses, facilities and the campus environment also coming through. These factors are relatively consistent in ranking across years – although, as mentioned earlier, the percentage responses often vary.

It is notable that cost of living is mentioned in a positive light here and has become one of the top five reasons cited among those who have received good value (by contrast, in 2024 it was a lot lower down the ranking). This is potentially surprising but may be coming from students who have been able to feel in control of their finances (and supported by their institution to do so), potentially against their expectations.

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7 See chapter 10 in Neves, J, Freeman J, Stephenson R and Rowan, A (2025) *Student Academic Experience Survey 2025*. York: Advance HE. Available at: [www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/student-academic-experience-survey-2025](http://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/student-academic-experience-survey-2025)

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

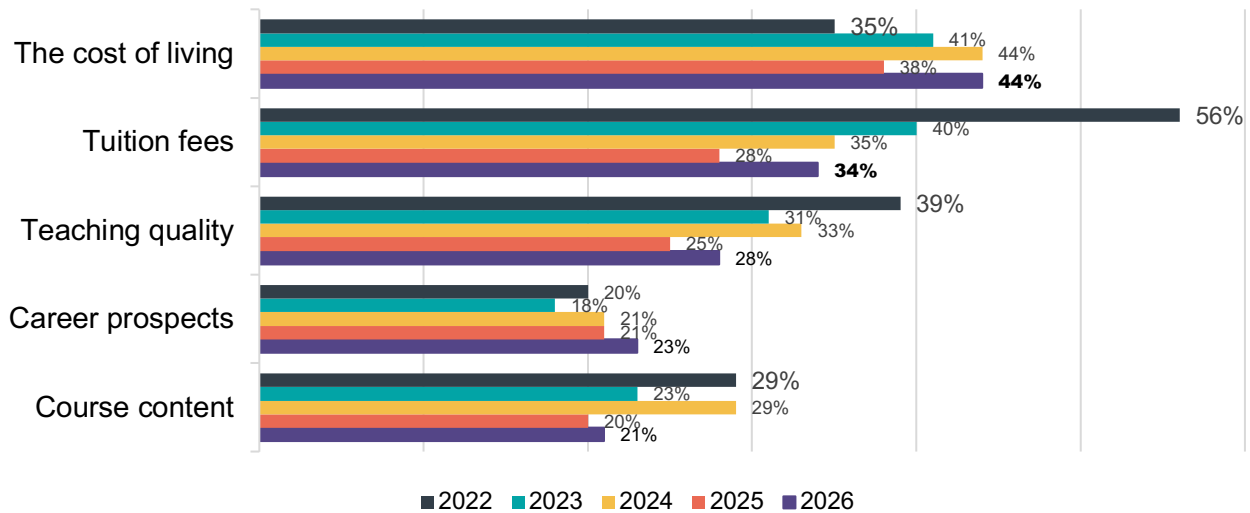


Turning now to the significant minority of students who perceive poor value, we see some of the same factors as mentioned above – but this time viewed in a negative light. It is notable that although some of the percentage answers have fluctuated, the ranking of the top five answers remains the same as last year. Cost of living remains the dominant concern, with tuition fees also a major factor – perhaps not surprising given we have just seen the first inflationary rise in several years in England and the recent media coverage of student loans.<sup>8</sup>

As context, however, it is important to reflect that despite this, the proportion of the sample who feel they received poor value is at relatively low levels this year.

8 Conlon, G, Halterbeck, M, Booth, J and Patrignani, P (2026) *Understanding the Plan 2 loan repayment system*. Oxford: HEPI. Available at: [www.hepi.ac.uk/reports/understanding-the-plan-2-loan-repayment-system](http://www.hepi.ac.uk/reports/understanding-the-plan-2-loan-repayment-system)

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



One notable factor in recent years (specifically 2022 and 2023) was large-scale industrial action by academic staff. This action often took place in the winter / spring, which coincided with the Survey period, and was highlighted by some students as impacting perceived value for money. This year, by contrast, there has not been widespread strike action (at least in the recent few months), which is likely to have been a contributor to this year’s results.

Overall, the rise in value perceptions this year is encouraging, and potentially unexpected given the range of challenges that students still face, although it will be important to monitor this as we look to see if this uplift becomes a clear trend.

We may speculate on what the main reasons are for this year’s increase. For instance, it could reasonably be that more students are resolving to make the most of their experience in the light of the sacrifices they are making and are in a better position than their recent peers to appreciate the provision they are receiving. Working in paid employment is now common (as will be shown later in this report), and many students are likely to be better prepared for this. Considering another angle, we are several years on from the Covid-19 pandemic and current undergraduate students will have been impacted earlier in their school experience.

This relative ‘distance’ from the pandemic period may have created a more stable environment for the current undergraduate cohorts to prepare for and choose their post-18 options and hence benefit from a clearer choice and better preparation.

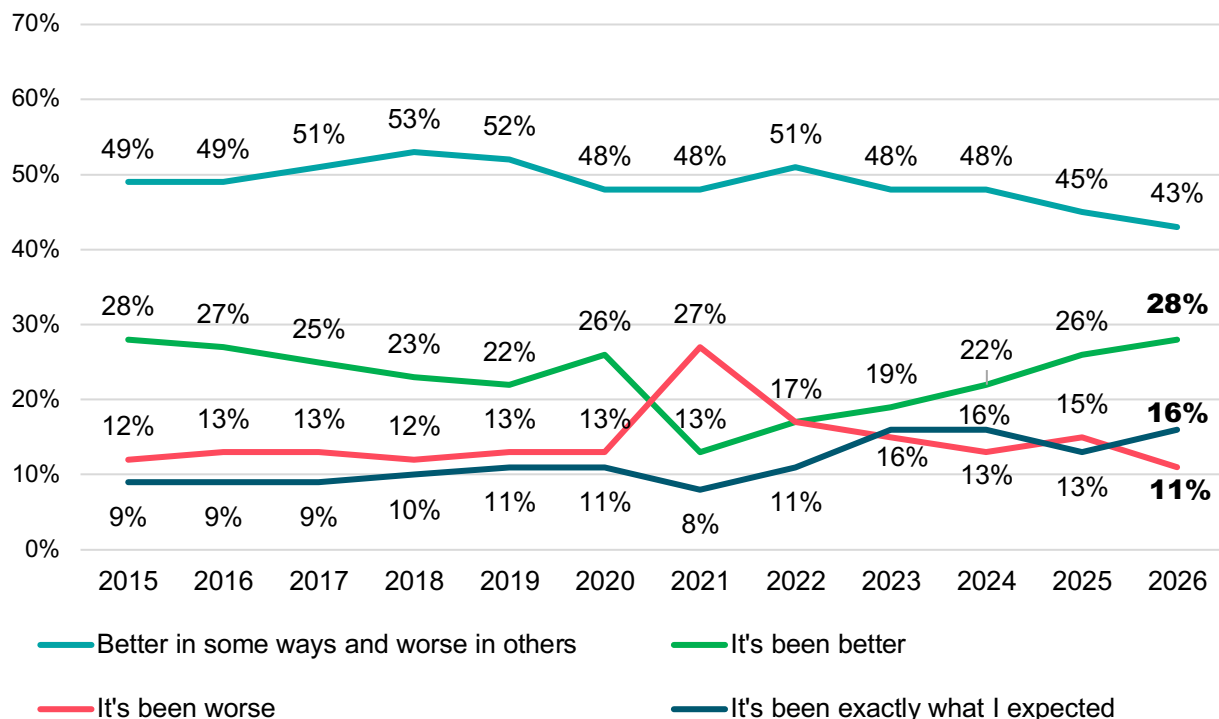
## 5 Meeting expectations

### 5.1 Experience versus expectations

Given the positive changes in value for money discussed above, we might reasonably expect to see some further increases across the Survey on some of the other main barometers of the student experience. One such measure asks students the extent to which they feel the expectations they held upon joining their university have been met or potentially exceeded – the results of which are discussed here.

As discussed above, there are a range of macro factors that have impacted value-for-money perceptions in recent years and many of these have influenced how the university experience has played out compared to what might have been expected – or promised. Major examples include the Covid-19 pandemic, staff industrial action on varying scales and financial challenges impacting the ability of students to spend time on campus and with their peers. Accordingly, meeting or exceeding expectations has been particularly challenging in recent years, although the most recent results on this measure have given some cause for optimism.

**Experience compared to expectations**



Continuing from the positive increases in value for money, the 2026 data on this question show a continued, statistically significant increase in the proportion of students who feel their expectations have been exceeded – a score which is at its highest level since 2013. Mirroring this, there has also been a clear decline in the proportion whose experience was worse than expected. Consolidating a general positive trend – if we assume that meeting expectations is a positive thing – we also see an increase in the proportion whose expectations have been matched, with the score of 16% equalling the highest scores we have seen since in recent times.

Looking across the different answer options to this question over time, there has been a positive movement towards experiences being exceeded or directly met, as opposed to being partially met.

Looking deeper into the data, it is particularly striking to see that 41% of international students have had their expectations exceeded, compared to 26% of home students (a figure that is also positive), which may be contributing to the strong scores we saw earlier on value for money.

	Home students	International students
<b>Experience better than expectations</b>	26%	<b>41%</b>
<b>Experience worse than expectations</b>	12%	<b>9%</b>

## 5.2 Why expectations are met

For a number of years, we have included follow-up questions in this section, providing pre-coded options (as well as options for free text) for respondents to elaborate as to why they feel their experiences have exceeded their expectations or fallen short of them.

### Why was experience better than expected?

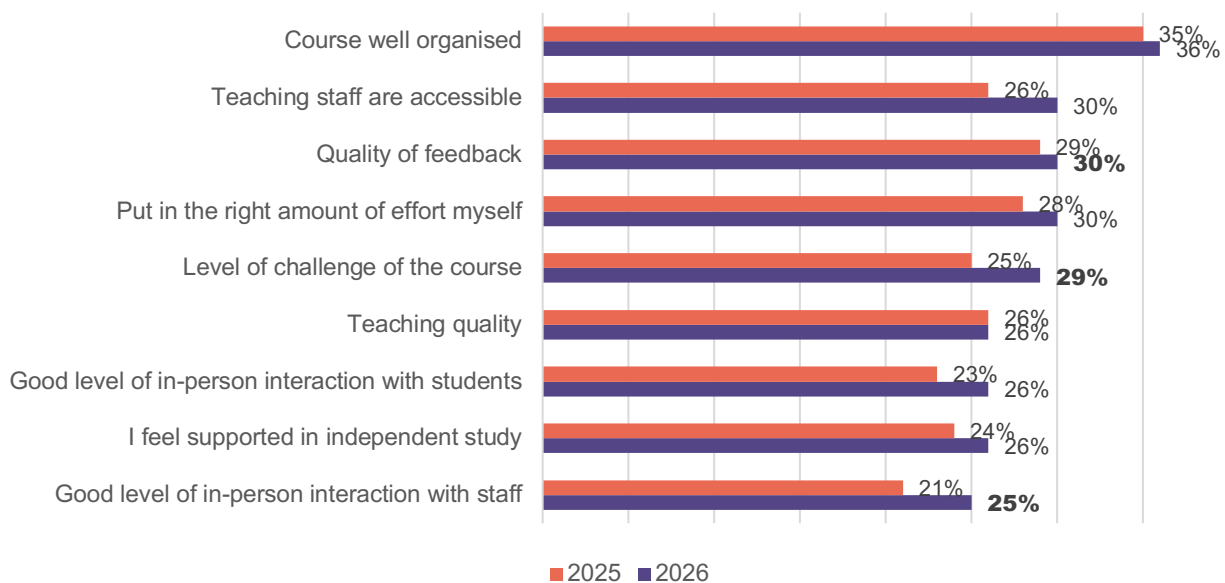


Chart displays top eight mentions for 2026 data. Based on all who rated their experience as better than expected.

Expectations are exceeded for a relatively consistent range of reasons, generally relating to good practice around the quality of the teaching, the accessibility of staff and the organisation of the course. There have been relatively few major changes in this ranking this year, but it is worthy of note that two of the factors with the clearest increase in influence this year relate to the availability / accessibility of staff. This was a factor which was often linked to a lower quality experience during the pandemic, as opportunities for all types of interaction came under pressure, but it appears that students are now benefiting from consistent opportunities to interact with their teachers.

To continue on a positive note, there are a range of free text comments that were not allocated to a category above, but which strikingly refer to the social aspect of university life. There were some students who were apprehensive about this or who potentially expected to be lonely, but the comments below provide evidence that making good friends can hold the key to a positive experience.

#### Expectations exceeded – selected open comments

“The people I met have become really close friends”

“I joined a society I like and made good friends”

“The uni experience... independence and friends”

“Socially I am finding myself in positive situations”

We should also acknowledge the likely role played by institutions and schools in helping to set expectations, which suggests that there has been dedicated activity to help ensure that these are framed as accurately as possible.

### 5.3 Why expectations are not met

Although we should recognise that, in comparison with most recent years, there are fewer students this year whose expectations have not been met, it is still helpful to try to understand more about why this is the case.

The list of reasons below highlights that cost-of-living concerns are still very much in evidence for many students. Levels of disposable income are often less than they would have been in the recent past, and this is clearly a key influence which impacts on how the experience meets up to expectations. On a similar theme, there is a striking increase (both in absolute and relative terms) in students saying that taking on debt was a major factor in how they view the quality of their experience.

### Why was your experience worse than expected?



Chart displays top eight mentions for 2026 data.

Beyond the two finance-related mentions referred to above, the other reasons are relatively consistent, relating to a minority of students who were dissatisfied with teaching quality, support and / or feedback.

Perhaps surprisingly, although there were pre-listed options for students to cite commuting time or paid work having a negative impact on their experience, these factors were not raised by particularly large numbers of respondents. This implies that students preparing themselves – or being prepared for – university are often realistic about likely commuting time and / or the need for paid work, while those who commute because they live at home may also recognise some logistical advantages in doing so.

Taking this theme as a whole, it is positive to see expectations often being met or exceeded. Financial concerns still exist but there is more evidence this year to suggest that greater preparation for financial challenges – by students themselves, their institutions or their schools – is helping to set expectations which are realistic but which provide more of a platform for well-organised students to make the most of their undergraduate experience.

## 6 Paid employment

### 6.1 Proportion in paid employment

One of the standout stories from the most recent years of the SAES has been the remarkable increase in the proportion of (full-time) students who spend time in paid employment during term time. As recently as five years ago this was less than four out of ten students, but in 2023 we saw a major change when this became a slight majority of students (up to 55%). This was consolidated in 2024 and then increased to 68% in 2025.

These data provided clear evidence that there had been a substantive change in the student experience, with paid work becoming the norm rather than the exception for large cohorts of students. There was also evidence in last year's Survey that students were very resilient around this, often shaping their expectations accordingly. However, the need to balance employment and studies (as well as wider pressures such as commuting and caring) was clearly proving a challenging environment that was potentially linked to some students questioning their choice of entering higher education (see next chapter).

Within this context, it is perhaps not surprising that the 2026 results again show a very high propensity to be in employment, although not quite at the levels experienced last year. As shown below, 65% of our sample are in paid employment, which is still extremely high. This consolidates the 2025 results and provides further evidence as to how widespread paid employment is among students across the UK. We should also acknowledge that, as well as being a response to economic factors, the prevalence of paid employment is also linked directly to labour market factors, as students need to be able to find a job. This can be a significant challenge, particularly to those who are new to the job market.<sup>9</sup>

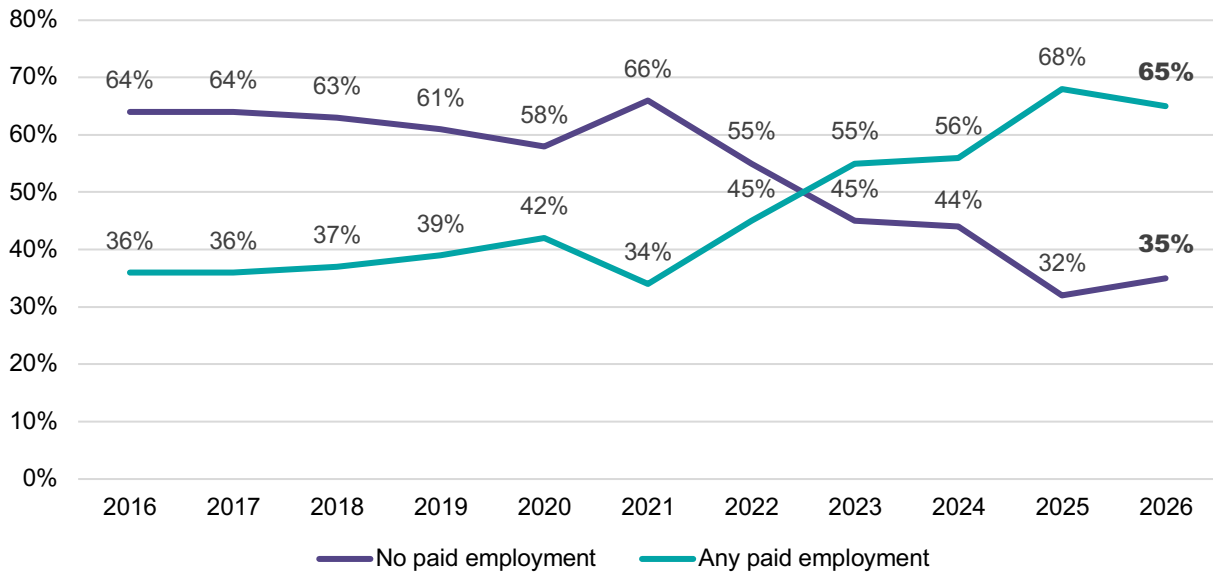
These data are given context by the recently published results from the Pre-Arrival Questionnaire (PAQ) national pilot for England, which found that just under half of undergraduates (47%) and postgraduates (48%) on entry expected to carry out paid employment during term time across the course of their degree. This tells us that the expectation to take paid employment is very much in students' thinking when they begin their studies, but that the eventual level of participation is still likely to be underestimated.<sup>10</sup>

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9 Staton, B (2025) 'It's been a terrible year to graduate and find a job'. *Financial Times*, 30 August. Available at: [www.ft.com/content/867fba45-3d8e-4d84-bedc-0dd9a4e53a11?syn-25a6b1a6=1](https://www.ft.com/content/867fba45-3d8e-4d84-bedc-0dd9a4e53a11?syn-25a6b1a6=1)

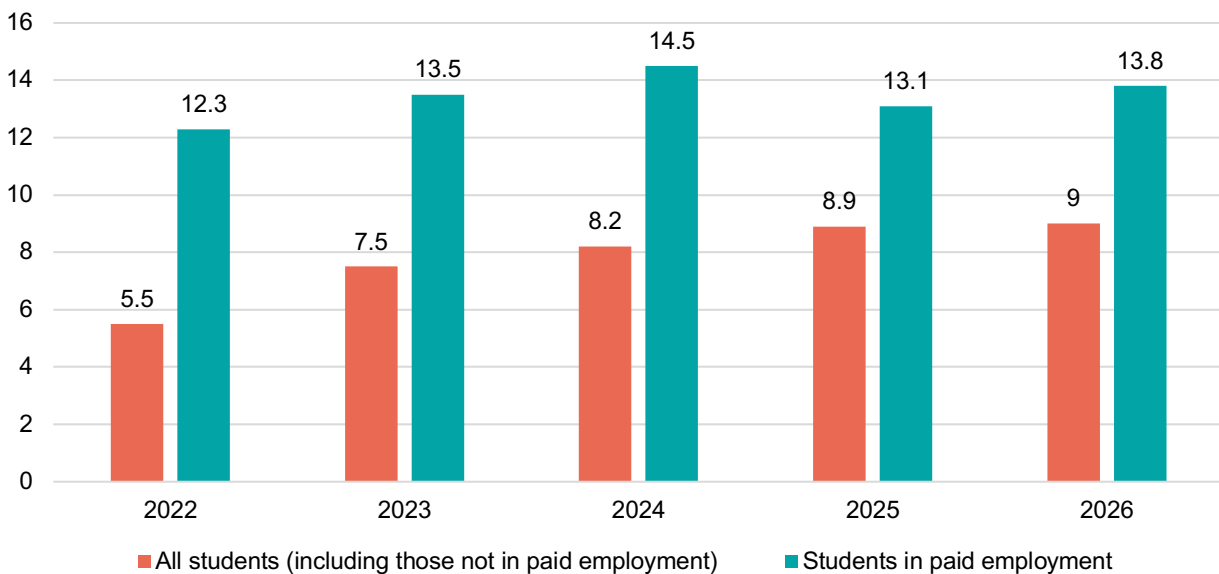
10 Gilder, T (2026) *Pre-Arrival Questionnaire national pilot: wave one initial results* (p24). York: Advance HE. Available at: [advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/pre-arrival-questionnaire-national-pilot-wave-one-initial-results](https://advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/pre-arrival-questionnaire-national-pilot-wave-one-initial-results)

### Students in paid employment in term time



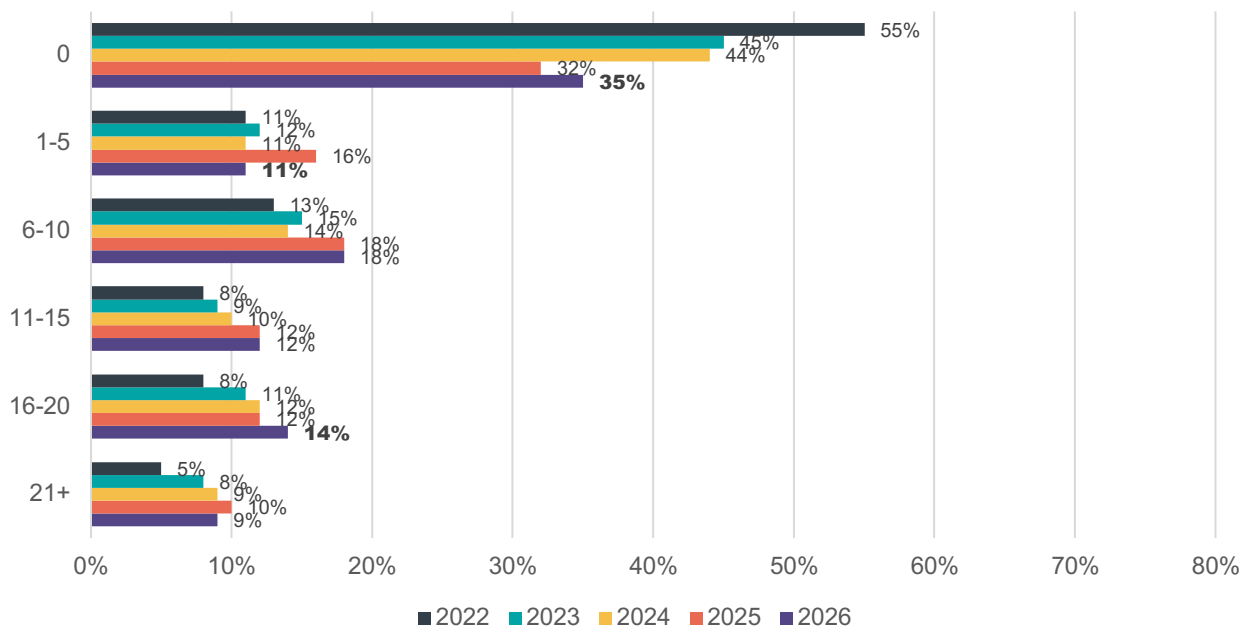
In terms of hours worked, we see a further consolidation of very high levels. For students in employment, the average hours per week is now just under 14 hours, which is an increase since 2025 but slightly lower than the peak in 2024. However, if we look beyond individual fluctuations, the last four years of data tell us that students in paid employment do so for an average of 13-14 hours each week, which is a major undertaking on top of study responsibilities and shows no immediate sign of declining substantively.

### Paid employment – mean hours per week term time



The above graph also illustrates the average across the total sample (including those who are not in employment), which is again very consistent with last year and at high levels, driven by the large numbers of students and high volumes of hours.

### Hours per week in paid work - over time



Looking in more detail at the intensity of paid work, there are relatively consistent proportions this year and at all levels of intensity. There are some groups of students who work at relatively low levels, but there are broadly equal numbers who work at medium levels of intensity and higher. At the higher end, it is striking, and perhaps concerning, that there are consistently around 9% to 10% who are employed for more than 20 hours per week. The choice to take part in paid work is often an economic necessity, but the number of hours worked is also likely to be a combination of the nature of the job, the demands of the course and the time available after balancing other responsibilities.

As context, there has been recent coverage that lower jobless figures nationally are being driven by fewer students looking for work, although our Survey data still points to paid work being undertaken by many.<sup>11</sup>

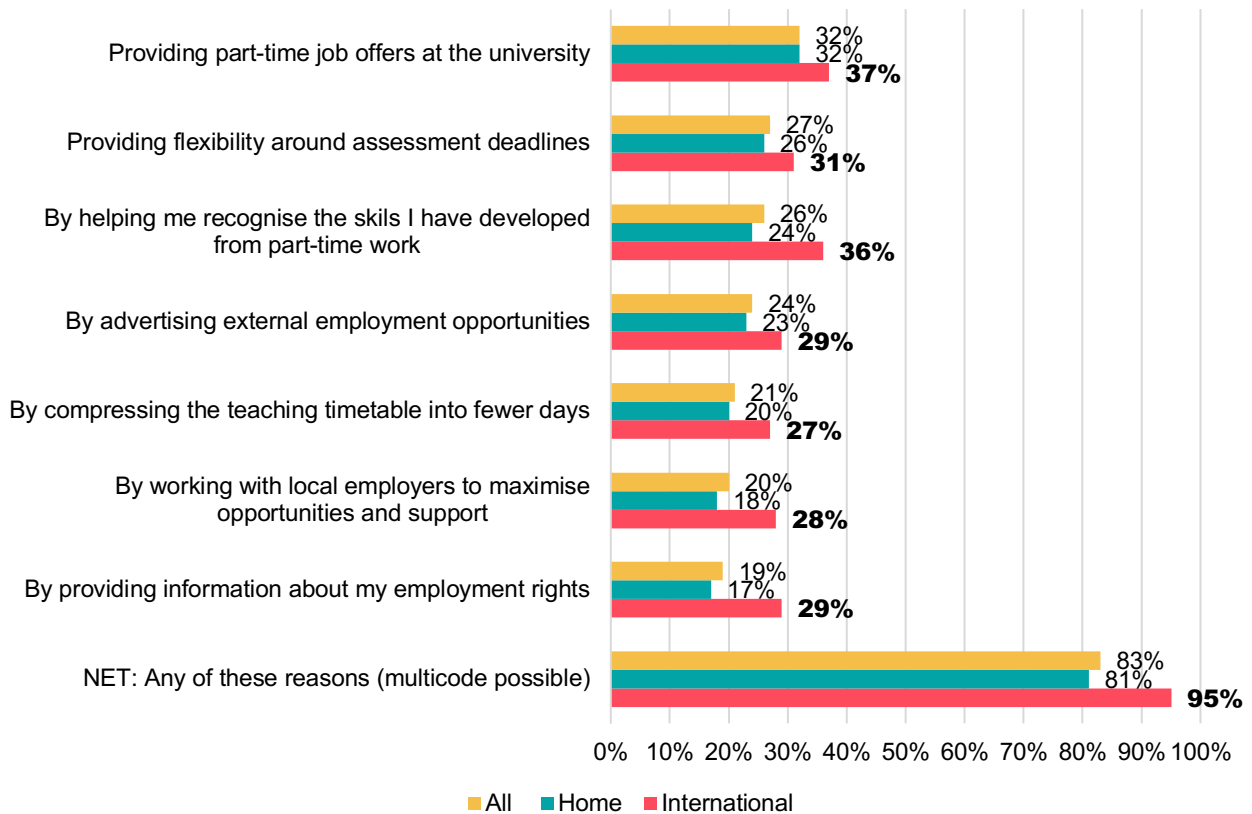
## 6.2 Support provided to students in employment

It has become clear from the data over the past few years that paid employment is the norm rather than the exception, with high volumes of hours that have the potential to disrupt how students engage with their courses. Hence, it could be argued that institutions need to reach out and engage with this reality, providing appropriate support and adjustments to ensure academic progress is not impeded.

With this in mind, we included a new question this year, which used a pre-coded list to ask which kinds of support, if any, institutions were providing to those students in paid work.

<sup>11</sup> Edser, N (2026) 'Unemployment rate unexpectedly falls as fewer students look for work'. *BBC News*, 21 April. Available at: [www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cjd84pkkjgpo](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cjd84pkkjgpo)

## Ways in which institutions provide support around paid employment



Encouragingly, more than eight out of ten employed students report that their institution has provided support in one or more of the ways specified. The most common form of support is through providing part-time job opportunities, but there is also evidence of institutions amending timetables and schedules to be more accommodating to full-time students who have to work – which may often be during core class hours.<sup>12</sup> Wider support, such as helping students recognise skills being developed, as well as working in partnership with local employers – potentially beyond traditional placement work – can all play a key role in establishing a culture where students are supported to manage their responsibilities but also harness the gains from holding a part-time job.

Notably, international students are significantly more likely to have accessed support to find, or to manage, paid employment. We saw in recent iterations of this Survey that international students often find it more challenging to find paid work, even though their need can be just as great as home students. It is therefore possible that international students are more likely to look for specific support in this area, or to be aware of where help is at hand as they try to navigate the local labour market while balancing their studies.

<sup>12</sup> Henry, J (2023) 'UK universities offer three-day-week to let students find part-time work'. *The Guardian*, 26 August. Available at: [www.theguardian.com/education/2023/aug/26/uk-universities-offer-three-day-week-to-let-students-find-part-time-work](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/aug/26/uk-universities-offer-three-day-week-to-let-students-find-part-time-work)

## 6.3 Types of employment

We introduced another new question this year to understand more about the kind of jobs that students carry out and whether this varies by key demographic groups. We used a list of standard employment sectors that was also used in the 2025 Student Working Lives project published by HEPI and the University of Lancashire.<sup>13</sup>

As we can see below, the main types of employment were focused around retail and hospitality, particularly for home students, which is perhaps to be expected. However, there were a range of other sectors where significant numbers of students were working.

Across the sample, there was little variation by geography or institution type. However, there were some notable differences by sex and fee status as referenced below.

**Types of paid employment (students who work)**

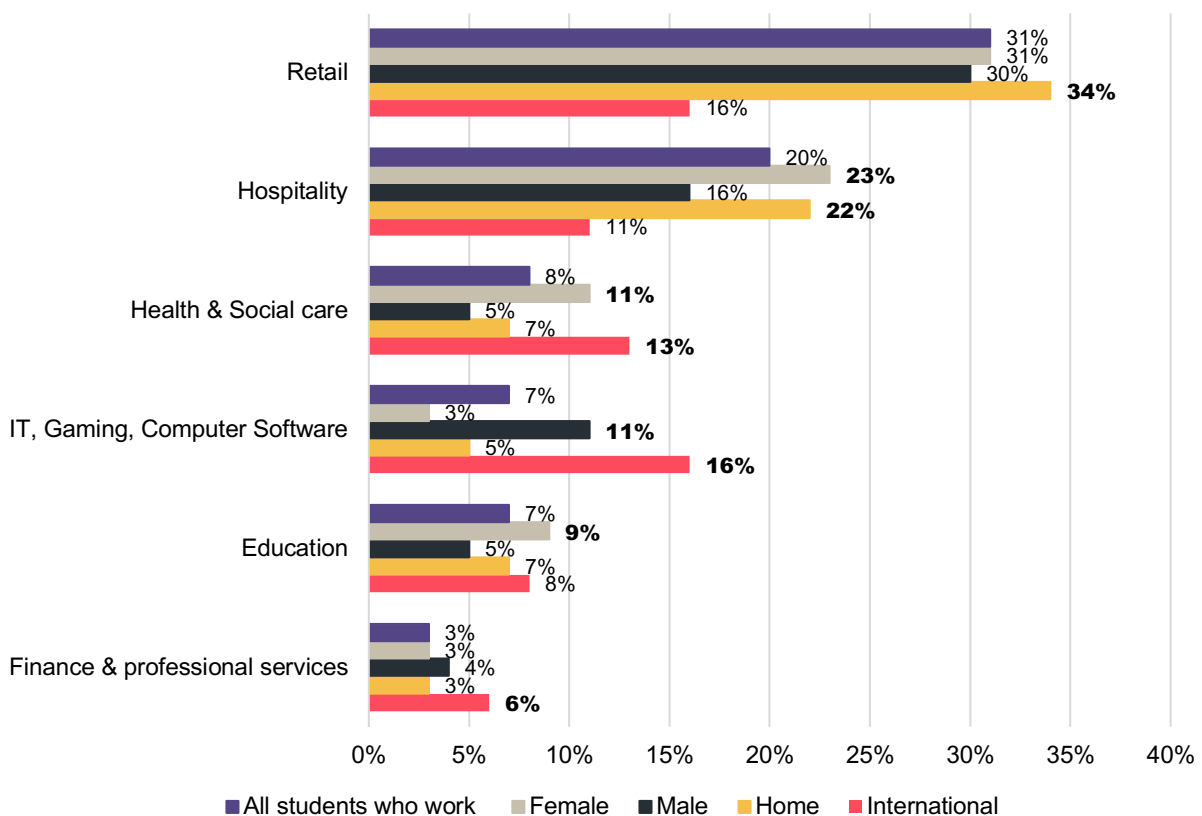


Chart shows top six mentions. Significant differences by sex or fee status are in bold.

13 Wright, A, Wilding, M, Lawler, M and Lowe, M (2025) *Student Working Lives*. Oxford: HEPI. Available at: [www.hepi.ac.uk/reports/student-working-lives](http://www.hepi.ac.uk/reports/student-working-lives)

Retail is the most common type of employment and is equally common among males and females. However, there are major differences in terms of employment in Hospitality, Healthcare and Education, all of which are more common among females. By contrast, working in IT, Gaming and Software is more common among male students.

There is also evidence that international students are particularly likely to work in specific types of jobs, with some major differences compared to home students. For example, working in Retail and Hospitality (although still prevalent) is a lot less common among international students, who are in turn a lot more likely than home students to find work in the Healthcare, IT (the most common sector for this group) and Financial sectors.

This is particularly striking. We saw last year that international students are more likely than home students to take up paid employment for career-related reasons (although financial reasons were still important), which may suggest that choices to work in IT and Computers, Finance and Healthcare could be driven by career planning. It could also be the case that international students may find it more difficult to access Retail and Hospitality work, potentially due to having fewer connections, less experience in those sectors or possibly speaking English less fluently.

## 7 The choice to go to university

### 7.1 The benefit of hindsight

The decision that students at school or college are faced with, typically at age 16 or 17, around whether or not to apply to higher education is one that can shape lives for decades to come. While many people end up being very happy with whichever decision they made, it is understandable that not everyone will make the exact choice that proves to be right for them. While mechanisms are in place to change path, either within the university or externally, these are not always widely known or fully understood, although we will discuss this in more detail later in this chapter.

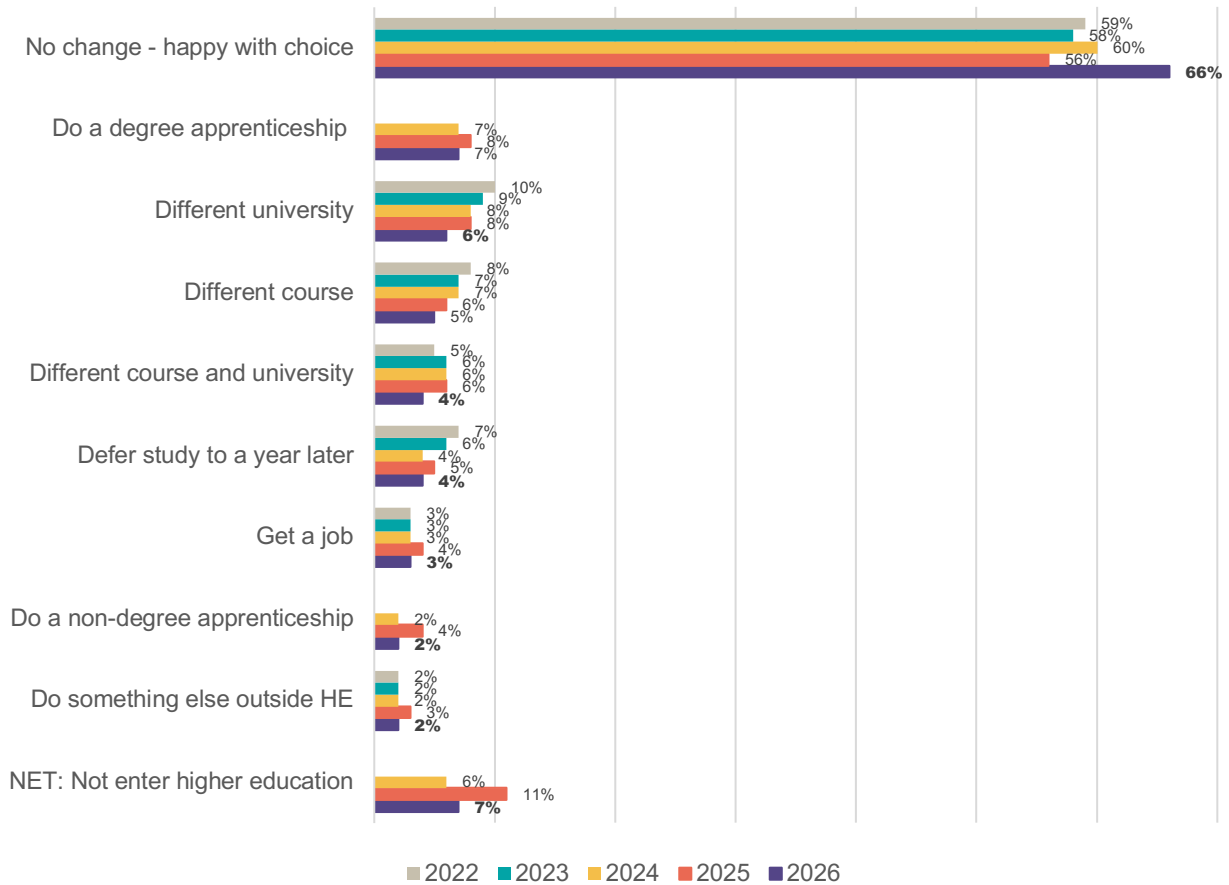
One of the most widely referenced questions in this Survey covers exactly this point, asking participants directly whether they are happy with their choice given their experience to date, and, given what they now know, whether they would have made a different decision.<sup>14, 15</sup>

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14 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.

15 For further analysis from a separate but related study comparing how both graduates and undergraduates feel about their choice please see 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](https://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)

## Whether students would make the same choice again



*Please note the option 'degree apprenticeship' was hidden in the Survey for the 2% of respondents who were already enrolled on one.*

In line with some of the positive year-on-year changes we have seen earlier in this report, there has been a striking increase in the proportion of students who say they are happy with their choice and would not change anything. This now stands at 66%, which is a positive endorsement of their higher education experience to date.

There is still evidence of a clear interest in degree apprenticeships, but almost every alternative option, be it making a change while at university, or exploring non-education options, has declined in potential popularity. Accordingly, just 7% of our sample would have chosen an option outside higher education, which is a clear reversal from the significant increase we saw in 2025.

<b>No change – happy with choice</b>	<b>2024</b>	<b>2025</b>	<b>2026</b>
<b>Age – younger (21 and under)</b>	61%	58%	<b>67%</b>
<b>Age – older (26 and over)</b>	63%	42%	<b>67%</b>
<b>White</b>	63%	60%	<b>71%</b>
<b>BAME</b>	54%	52%	<b>62%</b>
<b>Home students</b>	N/A	58%	<b>68%</b>
<b>International students</b>	N/A	49%	<b>56%</b>
<b>Bachelor’s students</b>	60%	60%	<b>67%</b>
<b>Non-Bachelor’s students</b>	60%	52%	<b>61%</b>

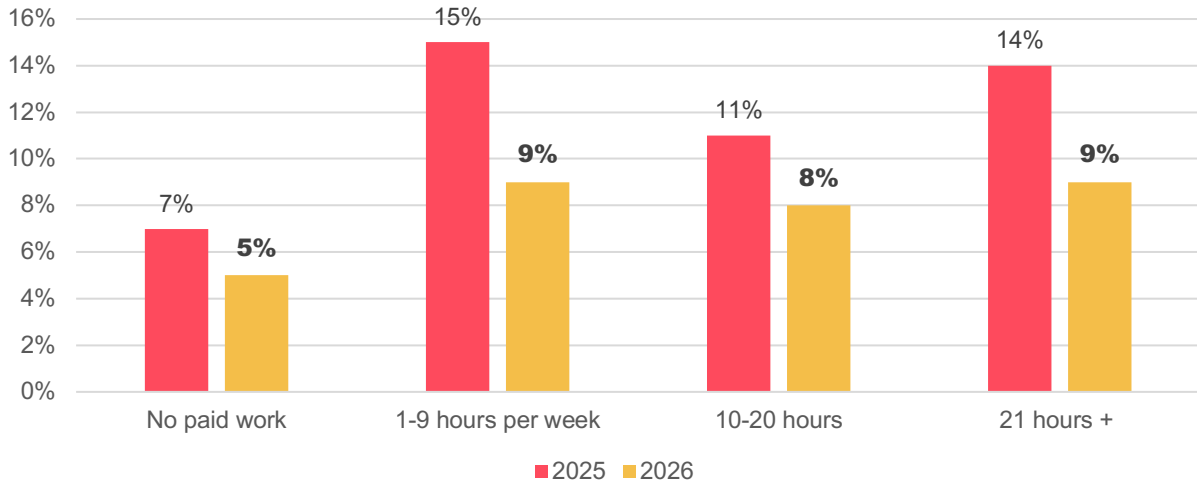
To emphasise the level of change we have seen in this measure, we have compared the results in recent years from different demographic groups across many sections of the sample. What is unequivocal from the table above is that the clear increase in students being happy with their choice can be seen across the sample – by age, domicile, ethnicity and qualification type.

In 2025, as referred to above, we saw a strong increase in the consideration of options outside higher education. This was even more apparent among students who spent large amounts of time in paid employment, who were on average around twice as likely to consider non-higher education choices.<sup>16</sup> In response to these data, we might reasonably have considered whether the high levels of time spent in paid work were, among other issues, prompting students to consider their choice of going to university in a different light. It is notable therefore that, despite students in the 2026 also experiencing very high levels of paid work, more of these students this year are happy with their choice. We still see a greater propensity among working students to consider different options, which is perhaps logical, but not to the extent we saw in the 2025 data.

In keeping with the high scores we have seen in the 2026 data so far in this report, this is a further endorsement of a positive experience all round. This points towards high levels of resilience and organisation among students, as well as strong levels of support to enable more students to fully appreciate higher education when they get there, in the light of the opportunities and challenges faced.

<sup>16</sup> Moss, A and Neves, J (2025) *The risks of eroding work and study conditions for students.* York: Advance HE. Available at: [www.advance-he.ac.uk/news-and-views/risks-eroding-work-and-study-conditions-students](http://www.advance-he.ac.uk/news-and-views/risks-eroding-work-and-study-conditions-students)

### Proportion who would have chosen options outside higher education (given the choice again) – by levels of paid work

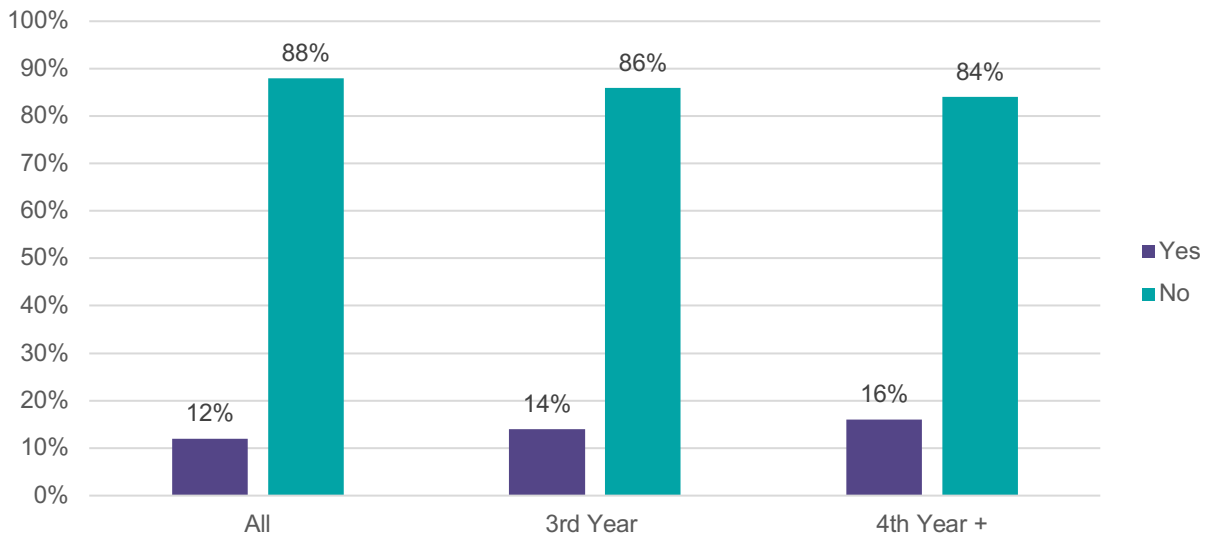


## 7.2 Changing course or institution

In a new question for 2026, we asked students whether they had changed their course or institution during their time at university, and, if so, how easy they found the process. The vast majority of respondents (88%) had not done so.

However, when looking only at third-year students, the percentage who had changed course or institution was higher, with 14% reporting having done so. When looking at those in fourth year or above, the figure is higher still – at 16%. These findings are logical as these students have spent longer at university and so have had more opportunity to change. The total figure includes a significant proportion of first-year students, many of whom will have had little opportunity – or need – to change institutions or courses so far.

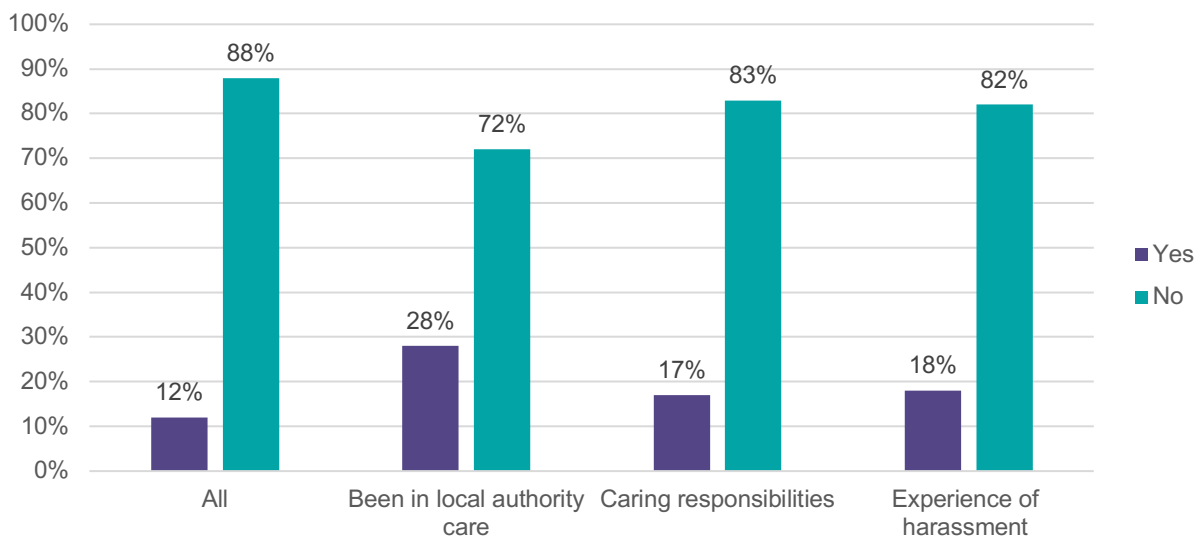
### Have you changed course or institution during your time at university?



Some groups of students are more likely to have changed course or institution. This includes 28% of students who have experience of being in local authority care, 17% who have caring responsibilities, and 18% who have experienced harassment in a university or college environment. Interestingly, although the percentage of students who have experience of being in local authority care, who have changed course or institution is above the average, when looking at students who are estranged from their parents, the percentage who have changed course or institution is 13%. This is much closer to the average of 12%. The difference in response between care experience students and estranged students highlights how these two groups have different experiences and should not be conflated by institutions.

Scotland has a more flexible articulation model. More students move between college and university study as part of their higher education pathway, with many students amending their precise course of study as they make this change. However, the data collected for this report do not demonstrate a higher rate of change among Scottish students, perhaps because this process is seen as a 'normal' part of a student's journey rather than a change to their original plans.

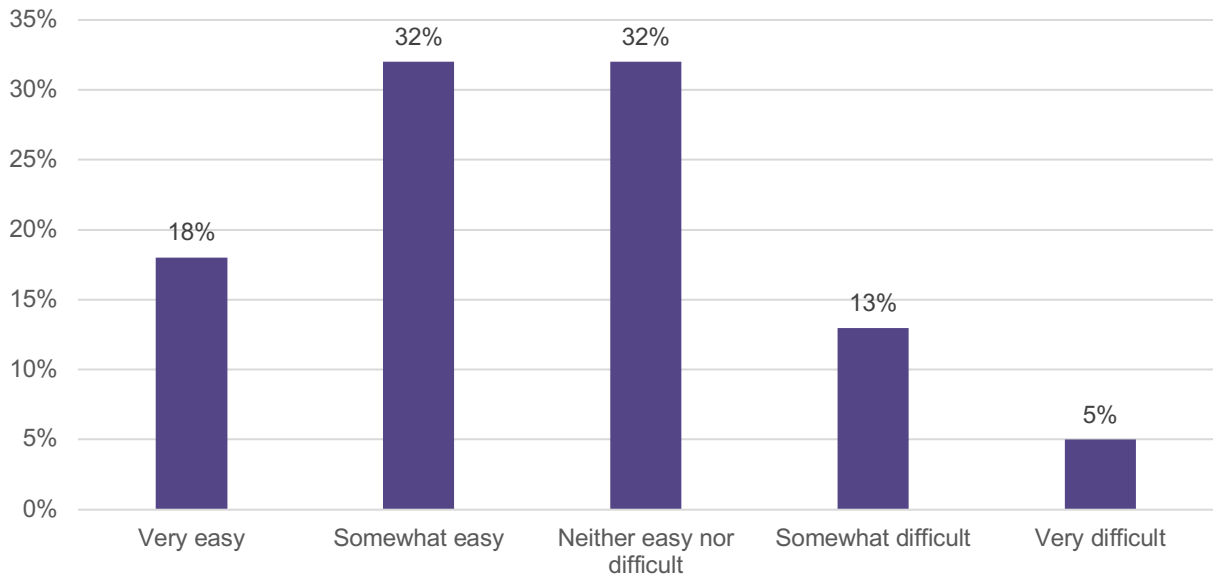
### Have you changed course or institution during your time at university?



Perhaps unsurprisingly, a higher proportion of students who say that the reality of their academic experience is worse than their prior expectations were more likely to have changed course or institution, at 16%. Additionally, 17% of students who said the value for money of their current course was poor or very poor report having changed course or institution. This latter statistic indicates a proportion of students are dissatisfied with their education even after taking proactive steps to change things, through altering course or institution, and raises questions as to why this may be the case.

Of those who had changed course or institution, 50% of students report finding the experience easy and only 18% report finding this difficult. A considerable minority of students, 32%, say they found the process neither easy nor difficult.

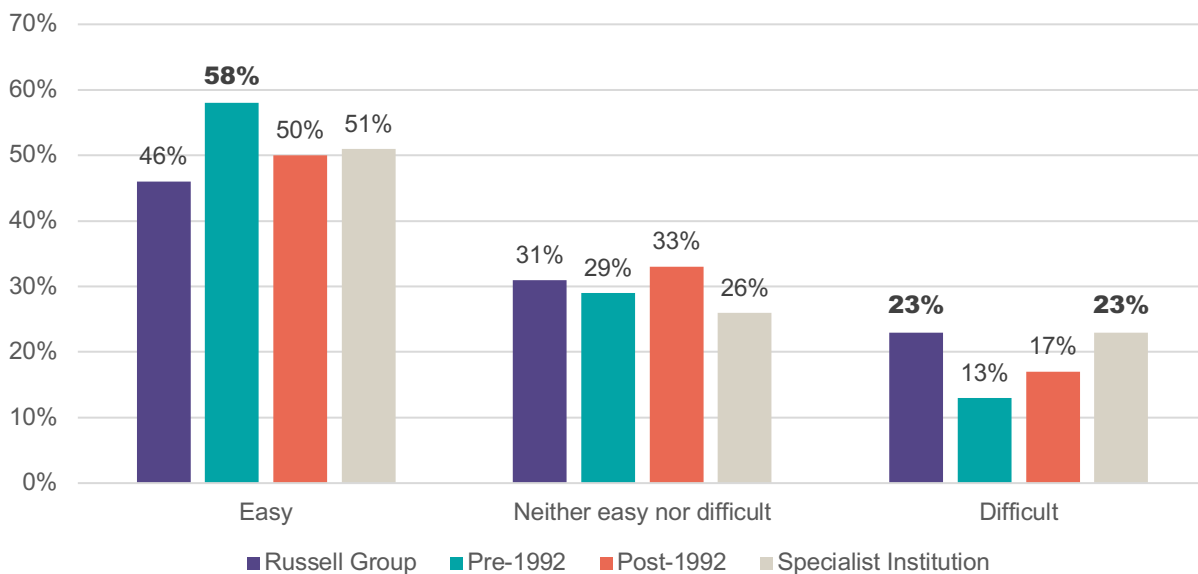
### How easy was it to change course or institution?



Students attending pre-1992 institutions tend to find changing course or institution the easiest, with 58% of these students reporting the process to be somewhat or very easy.

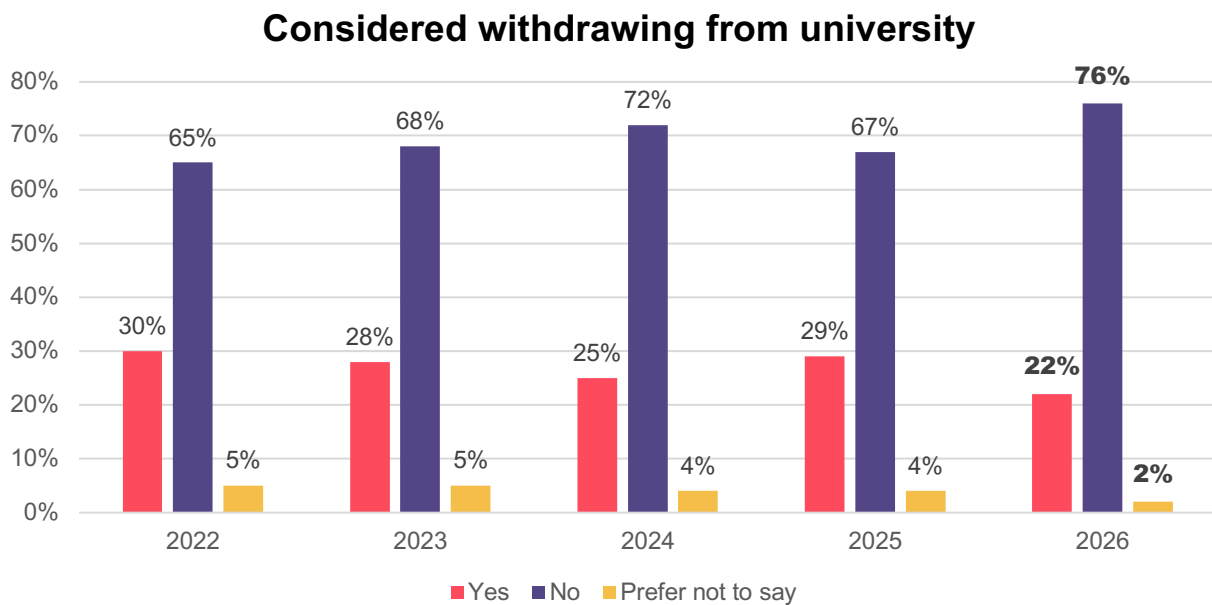
These findings have interesting implications for the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) as they imply not only that a proportion of students are changing course or institution already, but that the majority of them are not finding it a difficult process. This implies that internal and inter-institutional mobility exists, aligning with the government’s ambitions for the LLE and potentially suggesting that the system may be more successful than some within the sector currently expect.

### How easy was it to change course or institution?



## 7.3 Whether considered leaving

Further evidence that students in our sample are happier with their experience than their peers have been in recent years is shown in the 2026 data on whether respondents had considered leaving their course. Just 22% say they have thought about leaving – the lowest in recent years. By contrast, a positive 76% have not thought about making a change, with only 2% who were unsure or unable to say. Although this does not guarantee that all the students in this sample will continue to the end of their course, it does represent a strong endorsement of their experience to date.



*Statistically significant differences between 2025 and 2026 in bold.*

The main reasons for considering leaving are consistent and well established, with mental health concerns dominating. However, the relative importance of financial difficulties has more than doubled over the past few years, and is continuing to increase, albeit among a smaller proportion this year who said they had considered leaving.

### Reasons considered leaving

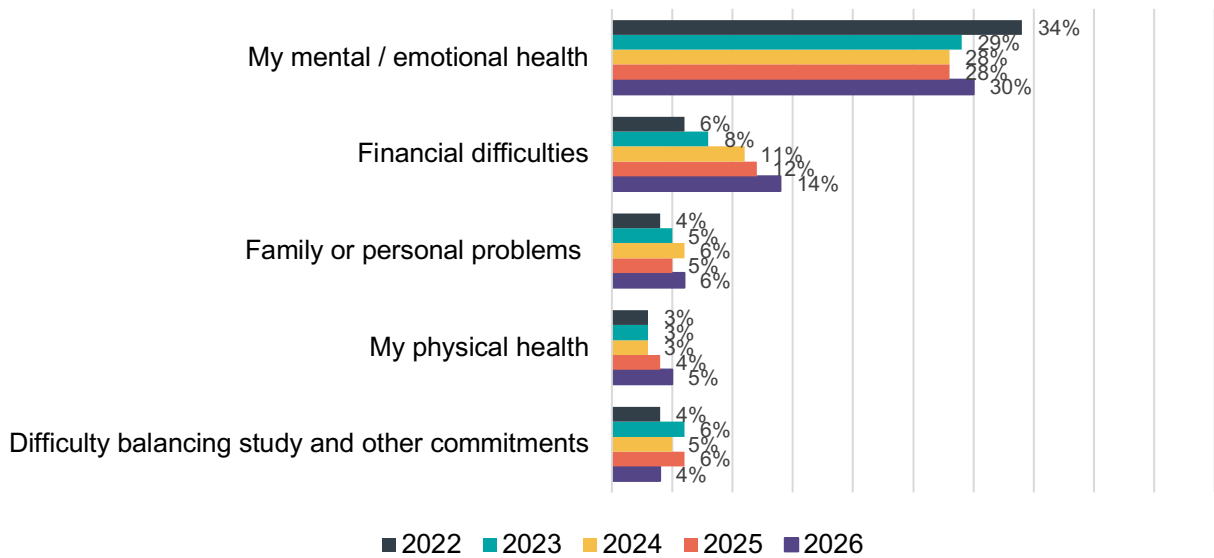


Chart displays top five mentions. Ranked in order of 2026 results. Chart based on all students who had considered leaving (22%).

There is evidence across many of the indicators in the Survey that more students are learning to expect – and how to handle – many of the financial challenges that they face, but these challenges can still cause major disruption for some.

This is evidenced further when we combine the propensity to consider leaving among students with the perceived impact that cost-of-living concerns have had on their studies – a question we have included in the Survey for the last few years. As outlined below, those in the sample who have experienced disruption from cost-of-living concerns are significantly more likely to consider leaving, which is logical. Against this, however, it is notable that students in paid employment (irrespective of whether cost of living has impacted them) are no more likely to consider leaving, which suggests that there are many students this year who adjust well to a range of challenges and responsibilities.

	Cost-of-living impacted on studies		In paid employment	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
<b>Considered leaving – yes</b>	<b>26%</b>	9%	22%	23%

It may also reasonably be the case that the most financially challenged young people are being put off from entering higher education, which is a hypothesis that is worthy of further consideration beyond this report.<sup>17</sup>

17 UCAS (2024) ‘UCAS announces new initiatives to encourage students from low-income families to apply for university’. Cheltenham: UCAS. Available at: [www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/ucas-announces-new-initiatives-encourage-students-low-income-families-apply-university](http://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/ucas-announces-new-initiatives-encourage-students-low-income-families-apply-university)

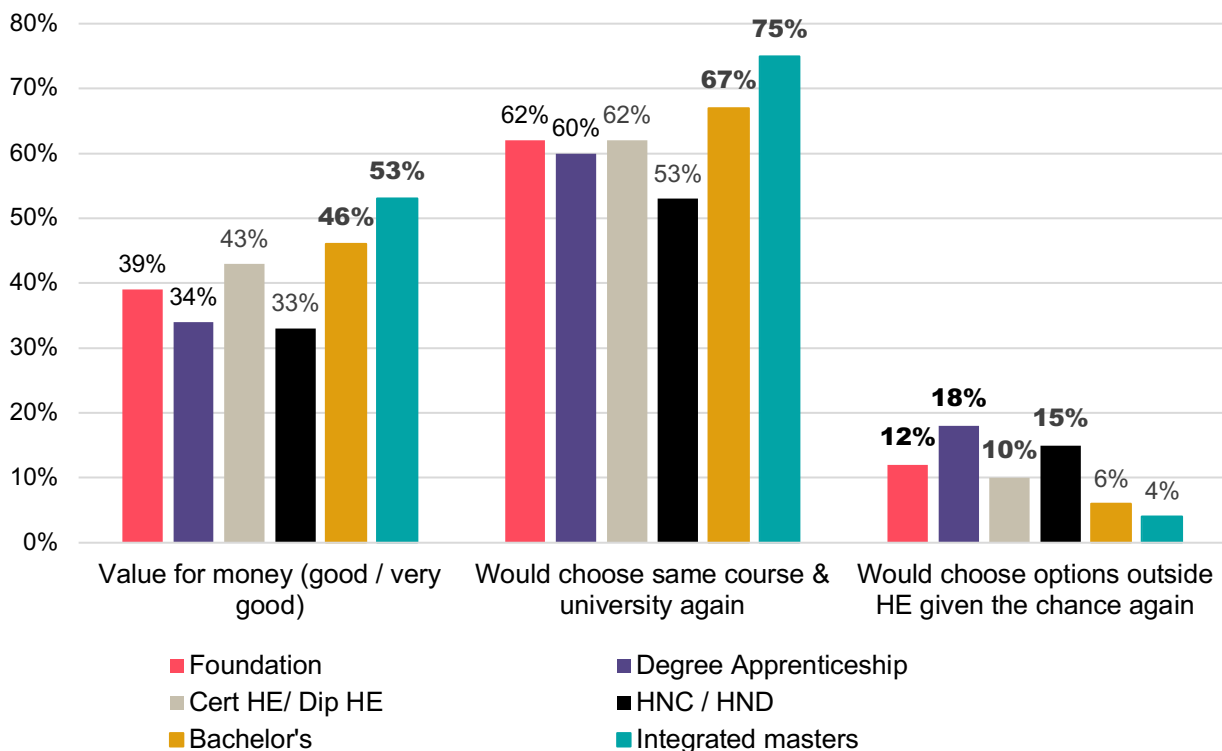
## 8 Spotlight on students studying different qualifications

Since its inception, our Survey has always been based on full-time undergraduates studying in the UK. However, there has not previously been extensive focus on the different types of degree qualification being studied for, and how experiences may vary. Two years ago, we introduced a classification question to enable analysis by qualification type, and in this section we dig a little deeper into the range of those experiences.

Based on HESA data, the large majority of UK undergraduates are studying for a ‘first degree’ (i.e. Bachelor’s degree) and our sample broadly reflects this with a base size of 8,542.<sup>18</sup> In addition, we have analysable results across a range of qualification types, namely Foundation (base size of 408), Degree Apprenticeship (240), Certificate or Diploma of Higher Education (265), Higher National Certificate or Diploma (271) and Integrated Masters (339).

We now go on to look at some key metrics in the Survey and how the results may differ across these qualification types.

### Qualifications being studied – selected key measures



18 HESA (2026) ‘Who’s studying in HE?’ Cheltenham: HESA. Available at: [www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he#accordion-commentary-2](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he#accordion-commentary-2)

The above data provide evidence of some differing experiences. Undergraduates studying the more ‘typical’ Bachelor’s degree perceive relatively strong value for money and are likely to have made the same choice again. Notably, Integrated Master’s students, who are studying for an undergraduate degree and then progressing to Master’s level are also very happy with their value for money and their choice of degree / course / university.

However, when we look at students studying more vocational courses such as Degree Apprenticeships and Higher National Certificate / Diplomas, the results are not as high for either value for money or choice of degree. This is also the case with students studying at Foundation level.

What is particularly striking is the much higher proportion of students studying vocational or foundation level courses who would choose an option outside higher education if they had their chance again. The table below explores this in more detail, highlighting the specific options outside higher education that vocational and foundation level students would select.

	Foundation degree	Degree Apprenticeship	Cert / Dip HE	HNC / HND	Bachelor’s degree	Integrated Master’s
Would do a non-degree apprenticeship	6%	6%	5%	8%	2%	0%
Would defer study to a later year	7%	6%	3%	7%	4%	4%
Would get a job	1%	8%	3%	3%	3%	2%
Would do something else outside higher education	4%	4%	3%	4%	2%	1%

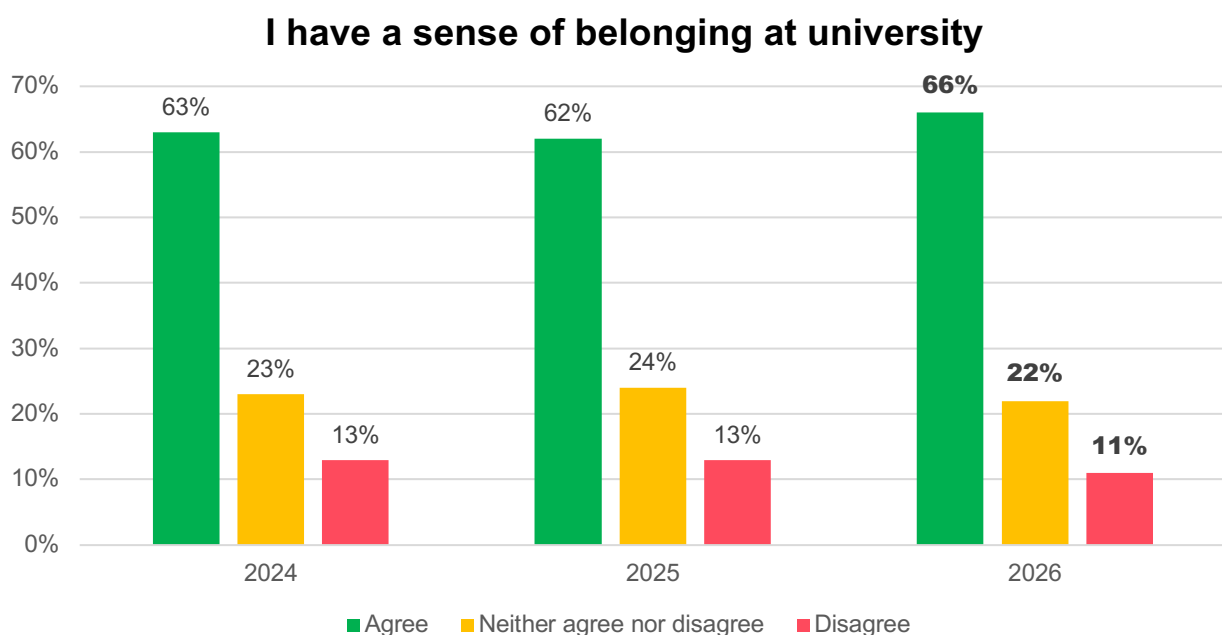
Although it is important to remember that more than half would make exactly the same choice, and value for money – among all qualification types – is clearly higher than in the past few years, it is still worth highlighting that vocational students in particular are not as convinced that the choice of entering higher education has proved to be the right one for them. In particular, some degree apprenticeship students would make the choice to get a job or would have considered deferring their studies. This analysis provides evidence, within the context of a range of positive results across the 2026 Survey, that institutions providing undergraduate qualifications beyond the ‘traditional’ Bachelor’s degree may need to pay particular attention to understanding student expectations to ensure these are fully met.<sup>19</sup>

19 Patel, J (2025) ‘Degree Apprenticeships in England: What Can We Learn from the Experiences of Apprentices, Employers, and Education and Training Providers?’ Oxford: HEPI. Available at: [www.hepi.ac.uk/2025/01/30/degree-apprenticeships-in-england-what-can-we-learn-from-the-experiences-of-apprentices-employers-and-education-and-training-providers](http://www.hepi.ac.uk/2025/01/30/degree-apprenticeships-in-england-what-can-we-learn-from-the-experiences-of-apprentices-employers-and-education-and-training-providers)

## 9 Belonging, free speech and on-campus relations

### 9.1 Belonging

Going to university can be a lonely time, amid the upheaval of moving away from home and being separated from friends and family. Accordingly, there has been a lot of discussion and focus on the importance of creating a sense of belonging to enable new students to settle in fully and get the most out of higher education academically and socially.<sup>20</sup>



Overall levels of belonging are not especially high in absolute terms, but they do represent a marked improvement from recent years. Indeed, since we began measuring this in 2022, this year's results are the most positive that we have seen. However, to put this into context, just 20% 'agree strongly' that they feel a sense of belonging, which suggests that the concept of belonging remains an area that would benefit from continued focus across the sector.

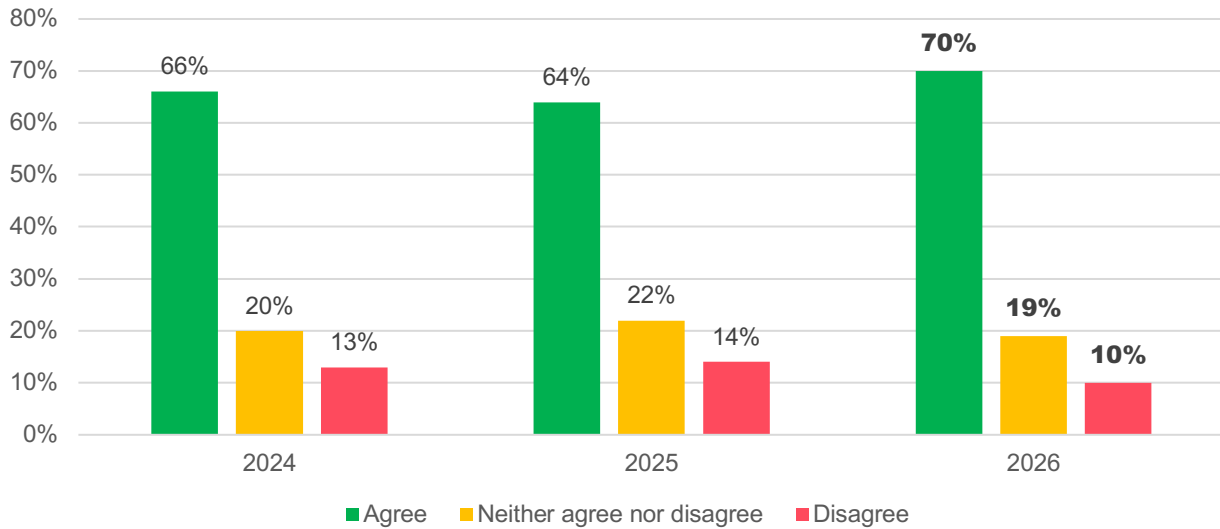
### 9.2 Freedom of speech on campus

When considering the following data points around freedom of speech, tolerance and campus relations, it is important to bear in mind that the large majority of fieldwork (although not all) took place before the conflict in the Middle East.

<sup>20</sup> Morgan, J (2024) 'Fostering belonging in higher education: Implications for student retention and wellbeing'. York: Advance HE. Available at: [www.advance-he.ac.uk/news-and-views/fostering-belonging-higher-education-implications-student-retention-and-wellbeing](http://www.advance-he.ac.uk/news-and-views/fostering-belonging-higher-education-implications-student-retention-and-wellbeing)

Since we introduced these questions (freedom of speech, exposure to a wide variety of views, good relations on campus) several years ago, the results have provided generally positive evidence of full-time undergraduates experiencing positive relations and a diversity of views on campus, and the latest wave of data consolidates this even further.

### **I feel comfortable expressing my views even if others disagree**

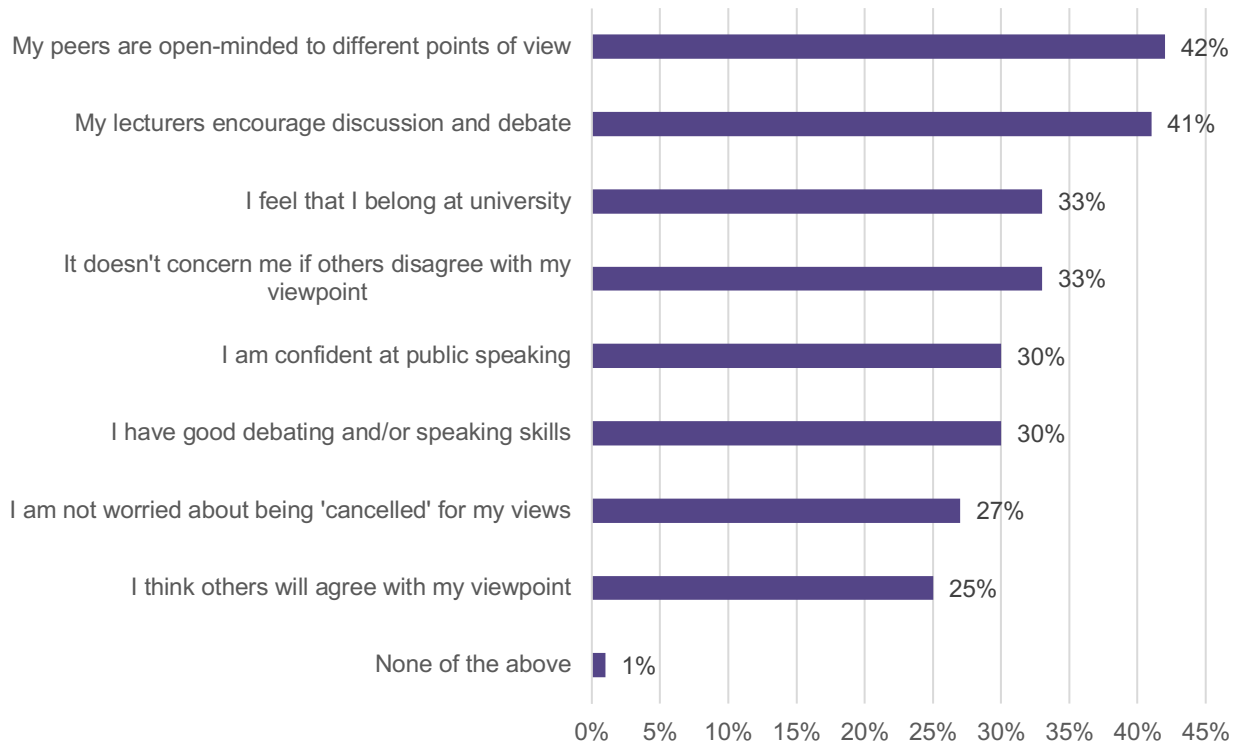


Seven out of ten students feel comfortable expressing their views on campus, which is a six-percentage-point (statistically significant) increase since 2025. This has been mirrored by a clear decline in the proportion who disagree with this statement, representing a generally positive picture.

Age seems to be a factor here, with 76% of students aged 26 or older feeling comfortable expressing their viewpoints compared to 71% of students aged 22-25 and 67% aged 21 and under. In addition, 74% of international students felt comfortable expressing their viewpoint compared to 69% of home students. However, students with a disability were significantly more likely to disagree with the statement 'I feel comfortable expressing my views even if others disagree', with 14% of students with disabilities doing so compared to 8% of students without a disability.

This year, we introduced two new questions on the theme of free speech, asking students what makes them feel comfortable and uncomfortable expressing their viewpoints. Respondents who were comfortable were presented with a list of reasons about why they felt this way; they could select as many reasons as they wanted. Respondents who said they were uncomfortable expressing their viewpoint were presented with a list of reasons as to why they felt that way and again, could select as many reasons as they wanted.

## What makes you feel comfortable expressing your viewpoint?

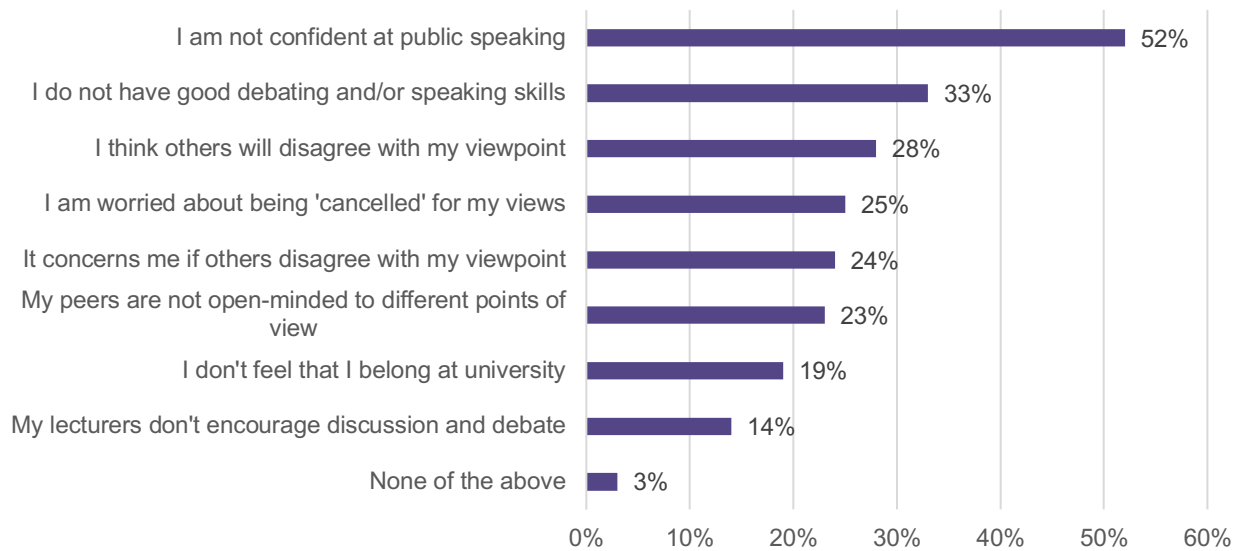


*'Other' was less than 1% and has been omitted from the chart above.*

The data show that the most common driver of students feeling comfortable was their peers being open-minded. This was cited by 42% of students who felt comfortable expressing their views, followed by 41% who cited their lecturers encouraging discussion and debate. Thinking that others would agree with their viewpoint was the option selected least often, although 25% of students selected it.

Some 35% of students who have caring responsibilities, 37% who have been in local authority care and 35% who are estranged from their parents stated that their confidence in public speaking made them comfortable expressing their views. This is significantly more than other student groups. While it is difficult to say precisely why that is, one possibility is that students in this group may have considerable experience, outside of university, having to advocate for themselves and others, thus making them more confident in their skills.

## What makes you feel uncomfortable expressing your viewpoint



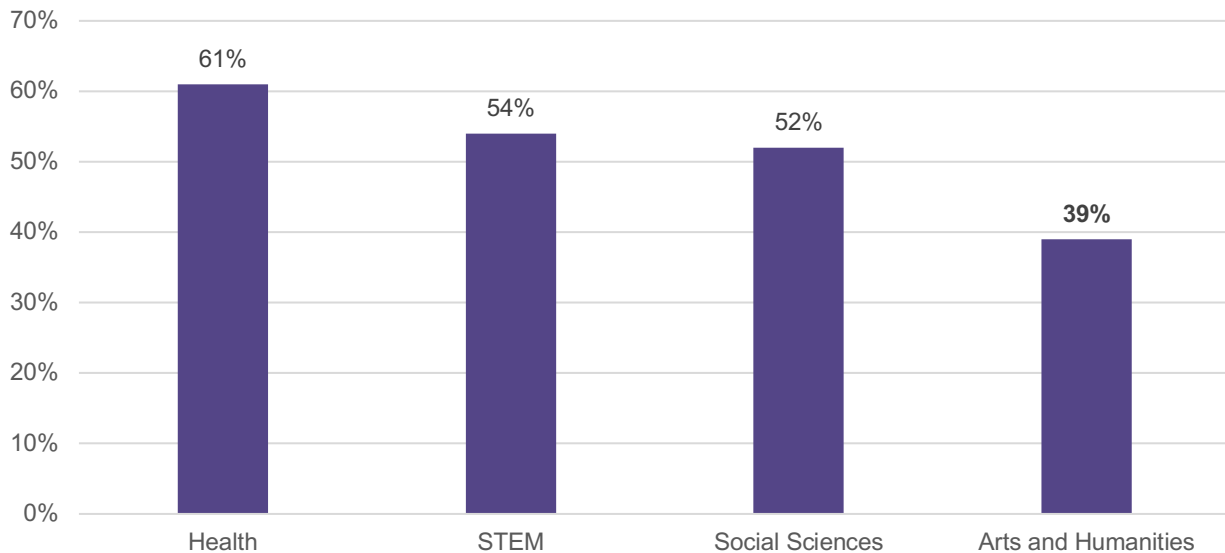
*'Other' was 1% and has been omitted from the chart above.*

When it comes to reasons why students are uncomfortable expressing their viewpoints, personal factors rank the highest. The most common reason students feel uncomfortable expressing their viewpoints, selected by over 52% of respondents, was a lack of confidence in public speaking. The next common response, selected by 33% of students, was similar: they felt they did not have good debating and/or public speaking skills.

Students who attended a private school were significantly less likely (36% for those who attended private school versus 55% for those who attended a state school) to say that a lack of confidence in public speaking made them uncomfortable in expressing their viewpoint. Similarly, when asked what made them more comfortable expressing their viewpoint, 37% of students who attended private school selected confidence in public speaking as a reason, compared with 28% of those who attended a state school. Additionally, students who attended a private school were significantly more likely to be concerned about being 'cancelled' for their views (38% for those who attended private schools versus 24% for those who attended a state school).

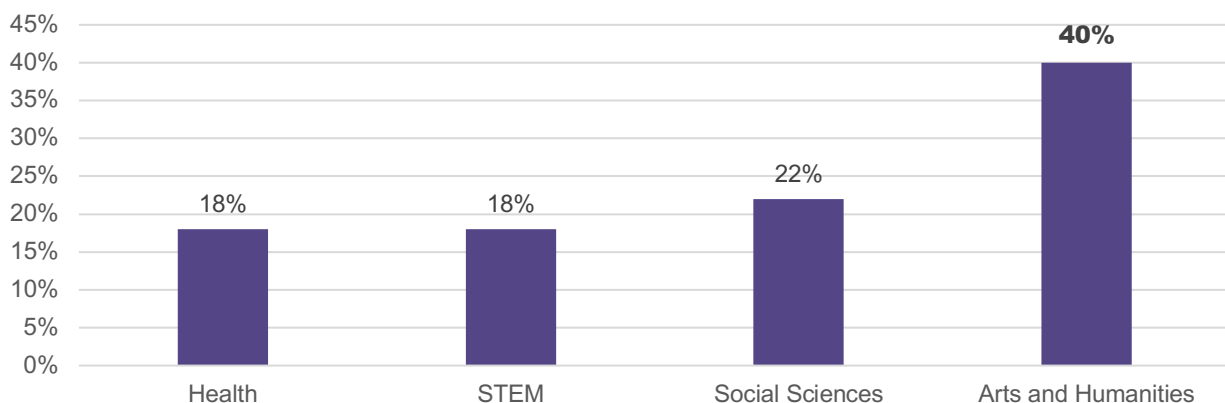
On a subject level, Arts and Humanities students were significantly less likely to list a lack of confidence in public speaking skills as a reason why they did not feel comfortable expressing their viewpoint than students studying other subjects. One possible explanation for this may be that Arts and Humanities courses require more debate and interaction during class, giving those students the opportunity to develop confidence in their public speaking skills.

### What makes you feel uncomfortable expressing your viewpoint: I am not confident at public speaking



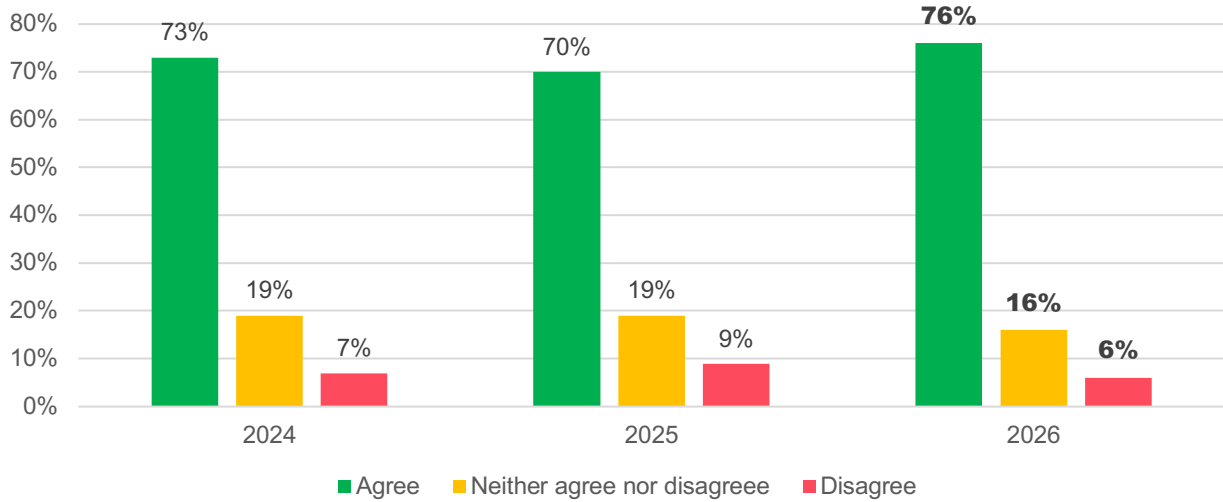
Additionally, Arts and Humanities students were significantly more likely than students studying any other subject area to say that their peers not being open-minded to different points of view made them uncomfortable expressing their viewpoint.

### What makes you feel uncomfortable expressing your viewpoint: my peers are not open-minded to different points of view



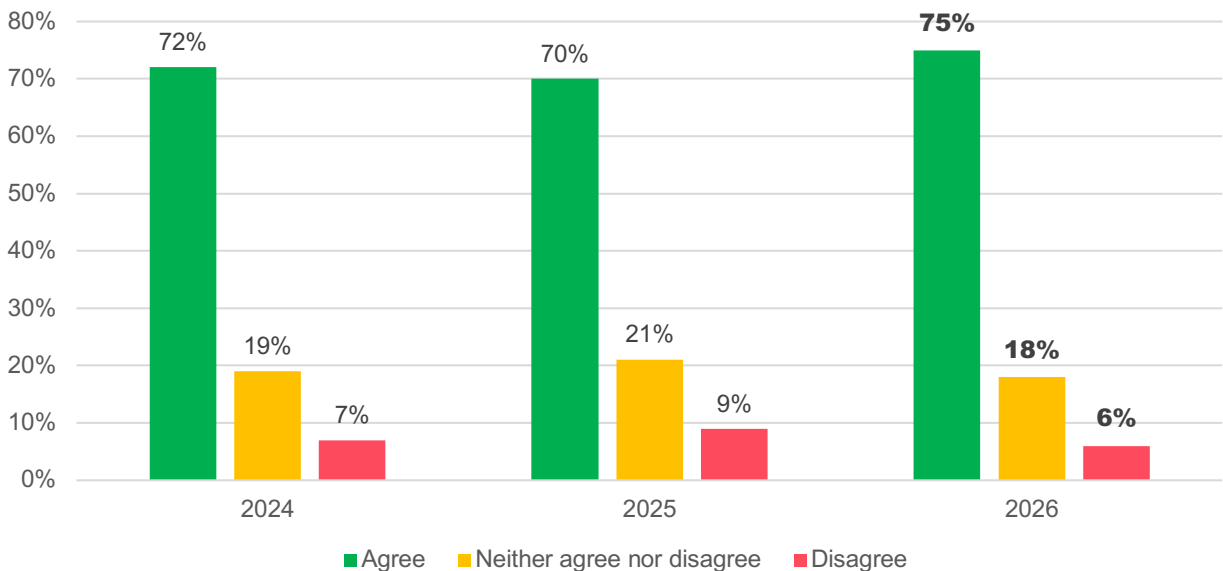
Turning now to the next question, with just over three-quarters agreeing that they hear a variety of opinions on campus, and only 6% disagreeing, there is little evidence of major concerns on this issue. Furthermore, there is a statistically significant increase in the number of students agreeing with this statement. This raises a question of whether students might be hearing a variety of opinions, but within the bounds of an 'echo-chamber' or monoculture on campus. However, given that only 6% of students disagreed with this question, which in full states, 'I hear a wide variety of opinions on campus, including those different from my own', this is unlikely. Nevertheless, further investigation into how pluralistic campus discussions are would make for interesting future research.

### I hear a wide variety of opinions on campus, including those different from my own



With our final question in this theme, first introduced in 2024, we asked about the extent to which students agreed that their institution ‘promotes good relations on campus, (for example, by tackling intolerance and promoting understanding of diversity and respect for all)’. Across three years of data we have seen consistent positive scores, with 2026 representing a statistically significant increase – as we saw for the above two questions in this section.

### My institution promotes good relations on campus



Although this is a positive result, which is generally mirrored across different student groups, it is important to flag that there is a specific spike in levels of disagreement among UK-domiciled students of Chinese ethnicity. Although base sizes are small (hence we have not charted this data point), levels of disagreement among Chinese students stand at 17% – a potential concern in the light of these positive scores.

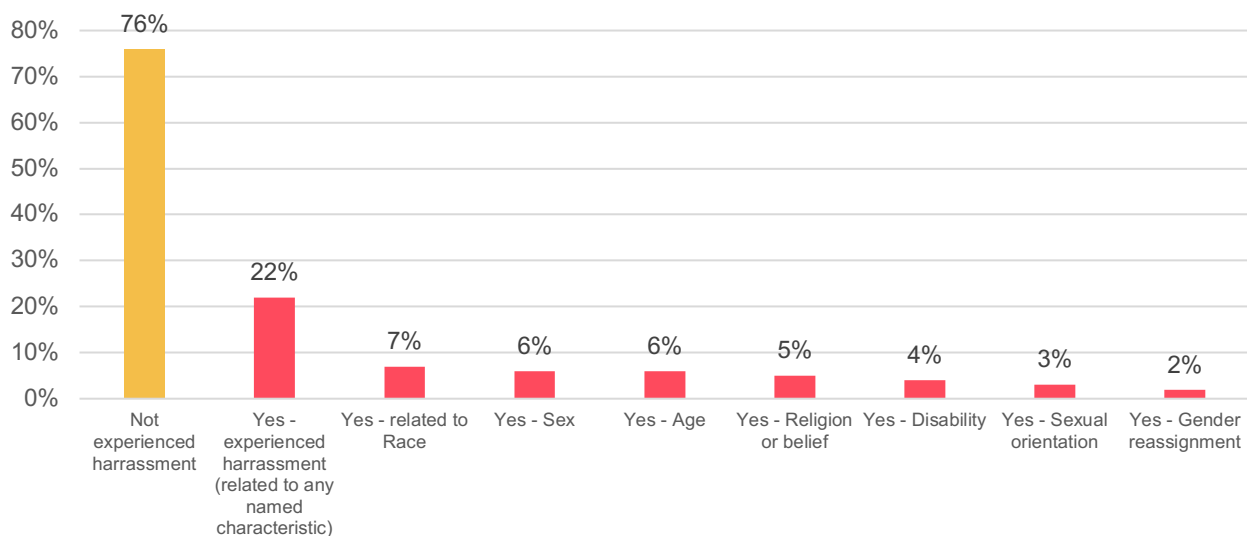
Overall, the results on free speech for this edition of the Student Academic Experience Survey suggest a broadly positive and improving environment for freedom of speech on campus, with the 2025 dip appearing anomalous rather than indicative of long-term decline. Students report increasing confidence in expressing their views and broadly perceive their institutions as spaces where diverse opinions are present and supported. The data indicate a positive trajectory with regard to free speech on campus.

The findings also suggest that barriers to expression are more closely tied to individual confidence and social dynamics than to institutional restrictions. To safeguard free speech on campus, institutions should actively foster the skills, confidence and cultures that enable all students – particularly those from underrepresented or disadvantaged groups – to participate in campus discussions and debates.

### 9.3 Harassment related to protected characteristics

In a new question this year, we asked students whether they had experienced harassment in a university or college environment in the last 12 months based on a list of protected characteristics.<sup>21</sup>

**Whether experienced harassment in a university or college environment in last 12 months**



Please note multiple answers were possible.

21 We'd like to ask about any experiences of harassment relating to protected characteristics you may have had in the past 12 months, specifically in a university or college environment. For this question, "harassment related to protected characteristics" means: Unwanted behaviour that violates someone's dignity or creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating, or offensive environment. Examples can include serious one-off incidents, repeated actions, spoken or written words, images, graffiti, gestures, mimicry, jokes, pranks, or physical behaviour. Source for definition: Acas (2025) 'Discrimination at work. Harassment'. London: Acas. Available at: [www.acas.org.uk/discrimination-and-the-law/harassment](http://www.acas.org.uk/discrimination-and-the-law/harassment)

We have no time series for these data so it is difficult to fully assess the implications of these initial findings, but given that just over one in five students (22%) said they experienced harassment (as defined in the Survey question – see footnote) related to one or more named protected characteristic in the past 12 months, this appears to underline the importance of including this theme within the Survey to prompt discussion and monitor over time.

To put the scale of the responses to the overall question into context, it is helpful to filter them demographically, as per the table below.

This analysis identifies high levels of harassment in particular among trans students, Jewish students, Black students and those reporting their sexual orientation as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Asexual, Queer or Other.<sup>22, 23</sup>

Whether experienced harassment by specific protected characteristic below	Proportion in these cohorts who experienced harassment by this characteristic**
Race	Black: 14% / Chinese*: 11% / Mixed: 11% / Asian: 10% / Other*: 8% / White: 3%
Sex	Female: 8% / Male: 4%
Age	26+: 11% / 22 to 25: 5% / 21 and under: 4%
Religion or belief	Jewish: 19%* / Muslim: 11% / Other religion: 9% / Hindu: 9% / Sikh: 8% / Christian: 7% / Buddhist: 3% / No religion: 2%
Disability	Disabled: 10% / Not disabled: 1%
Sexual orientation	LGB+ 12% / Straight: 1%
Gender reassignment	Trans identity or history: 23% / No trans identity or history: 2%

\*\*Chart shows, for example, Black students experiencing harassment by race. Listed in order of size of response.

\*Caution: small base (under 100).

This evidence aligns with reports of rising rates of antisemitism and anti-Muslim hate following the 7 October 2023 attack and war in Gaza. Separately, when looking at instances of Sexual Misconduct, the Office for Students Sexual Misconduct Survey (2025) found a higher prevalence of sexual harassment and violence for female respondents, LGB+ respondents, disabled students, and respondents reporting as Jewish, No religion and Any other religion or belief.<sup>24</sup>

22 Brown, T (2025) 'Reported rise in antisemitic incidents on university campuses', in Brown, T *Antisemitism on university campuses*. London: House of Lords Library. Available at: [lordslibrary.parliament.uk/antisemitism-on-university-campuses/#heading-5](https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/antisemitism-on-university-campuses/#heading-5)

23 Faith Matters (2025) *The New Norm of Anti-Muslim Hate*. Tell MAMA report 2025. London: Faith Matters. Available at: [tellmama.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/TheNewNormofAnti-MuslimHate-TellMAMAReport2025.pdf](https://tellmama.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/TheNewNormofAnti-MuslimHate-TellMAMAReport2025.pdf)

24 Office for Students (2025) *Sexual misconduct survey 2025*. Bristol: Office for Students. Available at: [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/qs3j3kjz/sexual-misconduct-survey-2025-analysis-report.pdf](https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/qs3j3kjz/sexual-misconduct-survey-2025-analysis-report.pdf)

It should be noted that respondents could have answered 'yes' to harassment based on any or all of the named characteristics, irrespective of whether they self-recorded as holding these characteristics; additionally, respondents could indicate multiple instances or types of harassment. Therefore, while the Survey evidence cannot in its current form identify instances of 'intersectional' harassment, it is likely that some respondents' experience of harassment will have been compounded by multiple marginalised identities, as noted in other research.<sup>25</sup>

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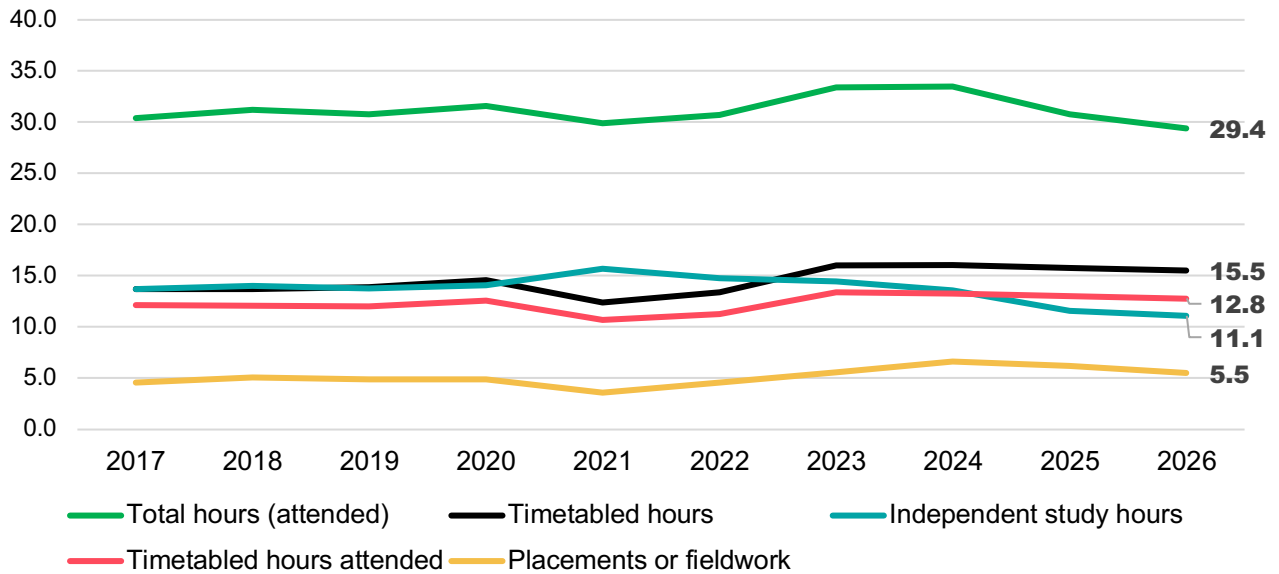
25 Gunby, C, Machin, L, Smailes, H, Ansari, S, Chantler, K, Bradbury-Jones, C, Butterby, K, and Donovan, C (2025) 'Sexual violence in higher education: staff knowledge, understanding and confidence in supporting minoritized students who disclose sexual violence', *Gender and Education*, 37 (4), 419-436. Available at: [www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/09540253.2025.2471304](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/09540253.2025.2471304)

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# 10 Teaching intensity

## 10.1 Workload trends

Workload hours in average week



In an average week	Total workload hours (attended / studied)	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
2026	29.4	15.5	12.8	11.1	5.5

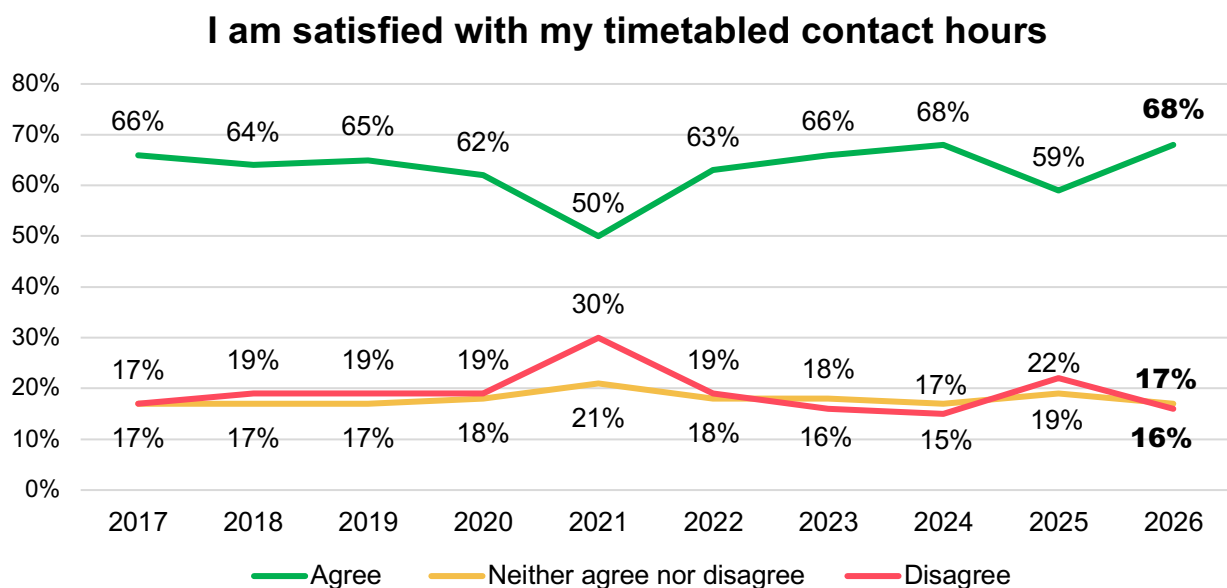
\* These measures contribute to the total figures.

Over a number of years, our Survey has developed a robust benchmark dataset used by policymakers in the analysis of study workload hours over time. Accordingly, these data points have become key reflections of the teaching intensity across different courses, and also the choices students may have to make when faced with other responsibilities.

The 2026 results are characterised by a clear fall in the volume of study hours across the board. Timetabled contact hours have fallen to a relatively small extent (but are still high compared to just five years ago) and accordingly the volume of hours attended has dipped by a similar amount.<sup>26</sup> However, there has been a more substantive proportional drop in the volume of independent study hours, which is now at the lowest level we have seen since we began measuring it in this way, while there has also been a notable dip in time spent on fieldwork and placements. Hence, although many students are happy on many levels this year, there is still evidence of necessary choices needing to be made in terms of how much time students can spare to devote to their course, particularly outside the classroom.

## 10.2 Satisfaction with scheduled contact hours

Although overall levels of timetabled contact hours (and wider study workload) have risen in recent years, levels of satisfaction with this have tended to be strong as well. Hence, it was potentially surprising in 2025 to see a decline in satisfaction despite the volume of timetabled contact hours showing little change.



This year, we see a return to high satisfaction with contact hours, which is in keeping with recent trends (2025 excepted). The level of contact hours is often associated with good value for money and, even though levels of overall workload, particularly when combined with demands of paid employment, can and do cause high levels of challenge for undergraduates, these data suggest that courses offering relatively high levels of contact hours, when considered on their own terms, are seen in a positive light.

<sup>26</sup> Due to the large base sizes overall, even some of the smaller changes in absolute terms are statistically significant.

This is evidenced by the table below, which tells us clearly that the level of satisfaction with contact hours increases as the average number of hours goes up. We might reasonably expect there to be a cut off as levels of workload become difficult to manage but, strikingly, there is no evidence of these satisfaction levels tailing off at the higher end.

The table below also shows, on the right-hand side, the connection between paid employment and perceptions of contact hours. Given that contact hours are still relatively high in the context of earlier years of the Survey, we may reasonably expect students in work to be less satisfied with these volumes given the other responsibilities they face, but this does not appear to be the case, even when hours of paid work are also high. This provides further evidence not only that students value relatively high levels of contact hours, but also that students are becoming more comfortable with the demands of paid employment which, while still taking up a significant amount of some students' time, does not appear to be dominating their perceptions of university as much as in the past.

	Timetabled contact hours				Spent time in paid employment		
	0-9	10-19	20-29	30+	No	Any	10 hours +
<b>Satisfaction with timetabled hours</b>	61%	<b>71%</b>	<b>70%</b>	<b>69%</b>	69%	67%	68%

### 10.3 Workload per week by subject

Although the volume of different aspects of workload can change each year, there is often general consistency in terms of which Higher Education Classification of Subjects (HECoS) subjects are linked to the highest and lowest levels of workload.

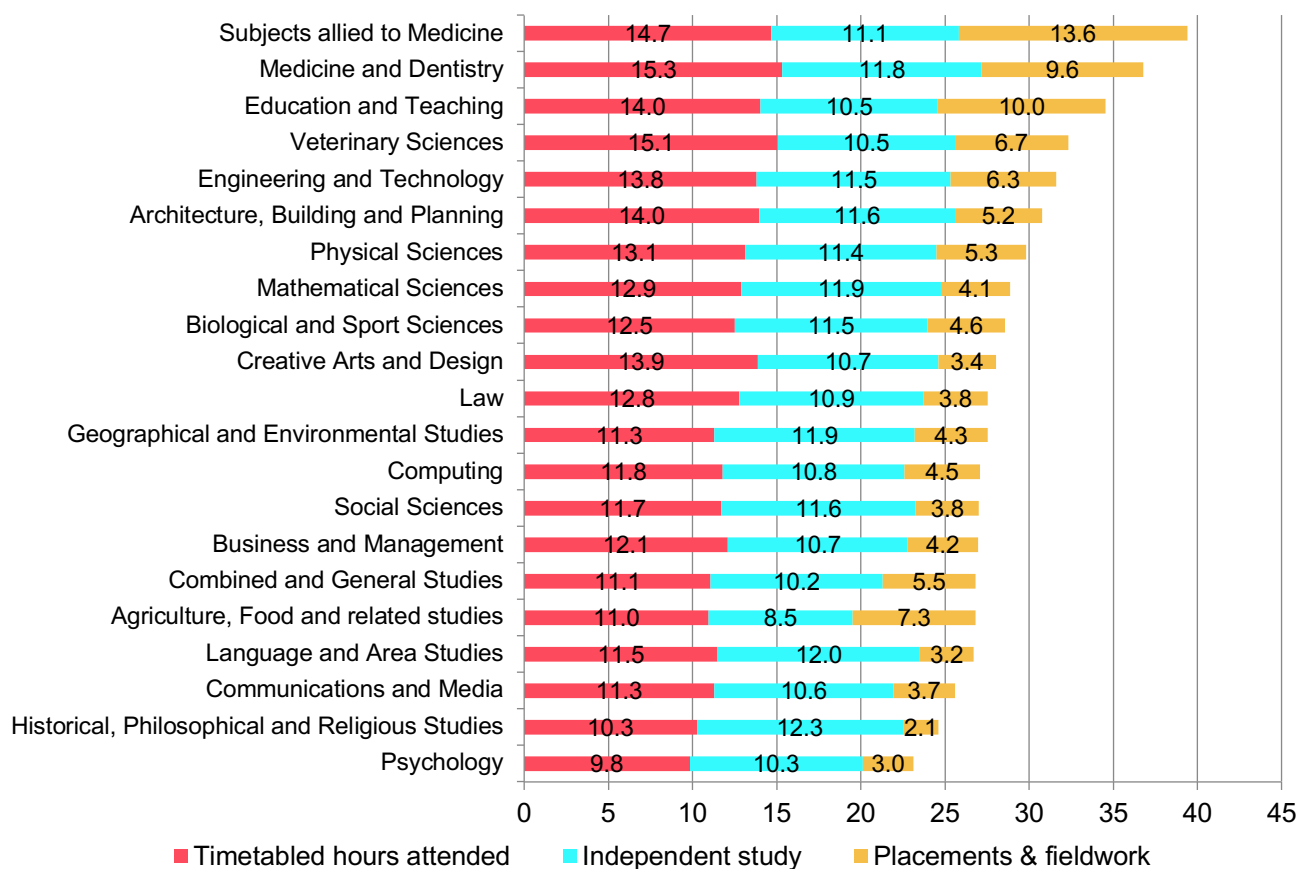
As we have broadly seen before, students studying Medicine, Veterinary Science and Technology report the highest levels of overall workload, in particular in terms of contact hours, while Education and Training is characterised by particularly high volumes of time spent on placements.

At the other end of the scale, levels of workload are again much lower for Psychology, History, Communications and Languages.<sup>27, 28</sup>

27 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](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/support/documentation/hecos)

28 For comparative results, see Neves, J, Freeman J, Stephenson R and Rowan, A (2025) *Student Academic Experience Survey 2025*. York: Advance HE. Available at: [www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/student-academic-experience-survey-2025](http://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/student-academic-experience-survey-2025)

### Typical week workload hours by HECoS subject categories



Subjects ranked in order of overall workload.

As we have also seen before, there is a relatively large difference between subjects with the highest and lowest timetabled hours (a difference of 5.5 hours between Medicine and Dentistry and Psychology), and also between subjects in terms of fieldwork / placements (a difference of 11.5 hours between Subjects allied to Medicine and Historical studies). By contrast, levels of independent study are relatively consistent by subject, often around 10 to 11 hours. What is striking for independent study, however, is that, for most subjects, volumes are markedly lower than they were as recently as 2024.

We have seen that overall levels of independent study have fallen notably in the past two years, but analysis of different HECoS subjects tells us that this appears to be the case across the board as students make difficult choices to manage the time they have available.

One potential choice widely available to students that would not have been so accessible several years ago is the use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools, the extensive use of which may be speeding up some aspects of independent study, although whether this is always desirable or helpful to students and institutions is the subject of widespread ongoing debate.<sup>29, 30</sup>

29 Attewell, S (2025) *Student perceptions of AI 2025*. Bristol: Jisc. Available at: [www.jisc.ac.uk/reports/student-perceptions-of-ai-2025](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/reports/student-perceptions-of-ai-2025)

30 Stephenson, R and Armstrong, C (2026) *Student Generative AI Survey 2026 (HEPI Report 199)*. Oxford: HEPI. Available at: [www.hepi.ac.uk/reports/student-generative-ai-survey-2026](http://www.hepi.ac.uk/reports/student-generative-ai-survey-2026)

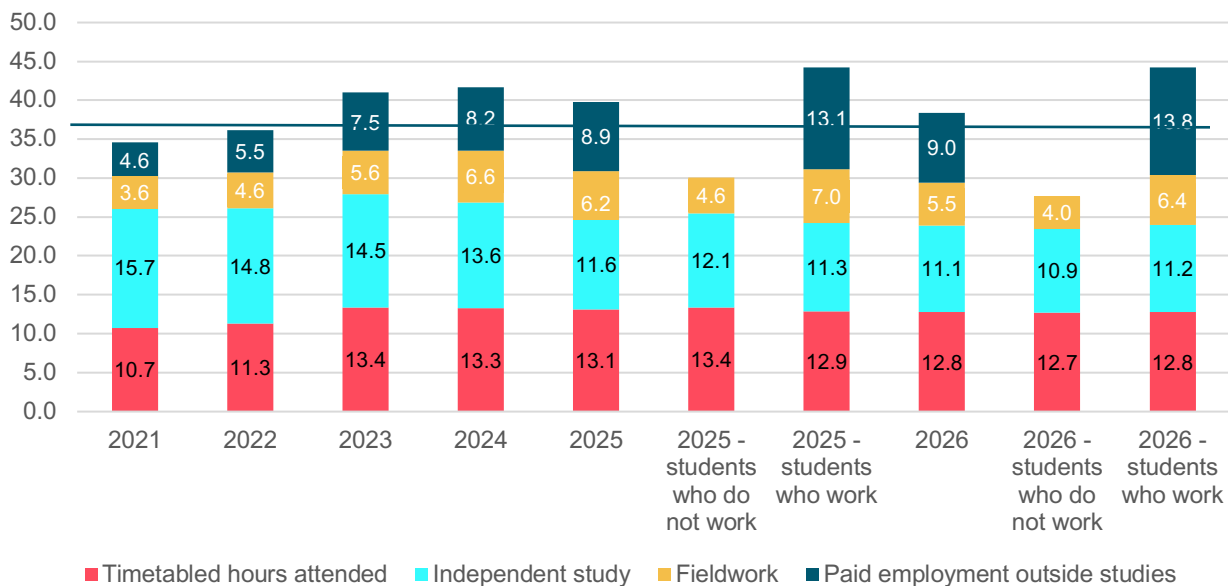
HECoS subject (selected)	Independent study hours per week 2024	Independent study hours per week 2026
Languages and area studies	15.3	12.0
Mathematical sciences	15.4	11.9
Architecture	15.7	11.6
Subjects allied to Medicine	14.1	11.1
Psychology	12.4	10.3

## 10.4 Number of hours in study and employment

Earlier in this report, we analysed the volumes of time spent in paid employment which remain very high compared to pre-pandemic times. When we combine these volumes of paid work with time spent on course – in classes, placements or independent study – we can see a fuller picture of how students need to balance their time during term time.

As an average across all students, total paid employment and study workload is now 38.4 hours, which is a reduction from the peak of 41.7 hours in 2024, and indeed lower than both 2025 and 2023. As evidenced in the graph, paid employment levels remain very high, so this dip in the overall total is driven by time spent on course, particularly independent study, which, as discussed earlier in this chapter, is at historically low levels in the context of this Survey.

**Average number of hours spent studying or in employment**



Unless otherwise stated, the figures represent the mean averages across all students, including those who do not spend any time in a particular activity. The dark blue line represents the average full-time work commitment in the UK as measured by ONS (36.6 hours).

Across students who work, the average total study and employment workload is 44.2 hours, which is almost identical to 2025 (44.3 hours), although lower than 2024 (50.1 hours – not charted here). These volumes are 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), providing evidence of the high demands on many students – at levels which remain high despite this year’s high satisfaction levels reported earlier.<sup>31</sup>

Digging a little further into the data shown in the above graph, it is striking that for 2026 those students in paid employment also spend more time on average in independent study (compared to those not in paid employment), although it is unclear whether this is a result of a positive choice or a feeling of necessity – or a mixture of both. By contrast, students who do not work have on average a less intense workload, which potentially leaves more time for developmental activity as well as the more traditional elements of university life.<sup>32</sup>

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31 ONS (2026) ‘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](https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/timeseries/ybuy/lms)

32 Although many students also face additional responsibilities and demands on time, such as caring and commuting.

# 11 Quality of teaching and assessment

## 11.1 Perceptions of the quality of teaching staff

One of the consistent areas in our survey comprises an established group of statements to assess views of teaching quality.

### Teaching staff characteristics

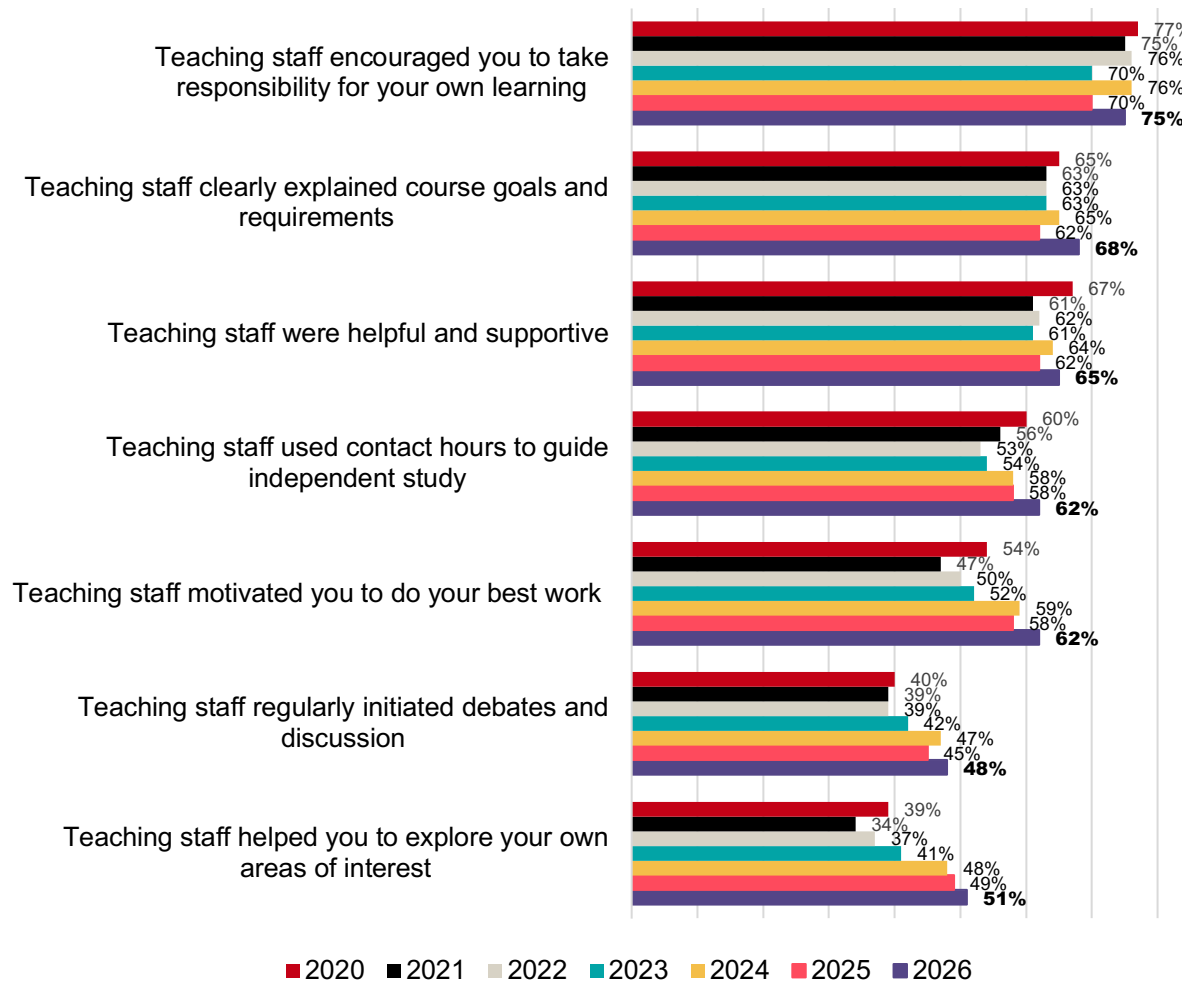


Chart shows the proportion who agree that 'all' or 'the majority' of staff display these behaviours.

Results have fluctuated across the years, with satisfaction in this space often being a reliable barometer of (and likely a contributor to) the general level of satisfaction across a range of other measures in the Survey.

In keeping with the generally positive results seen elsewhere this year, the scores for teaching quality are strong, representing a statistically significant increase from last year for all measures. In some cases, these scores are the highest since the Survey began, for example in terms of staff motivating students to do their best work or using contact hours to guide independent study.

Among a set of positive scores, there have been particularly strong increases for staff encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning – despite the fact that we have seen independent study hours decline – and clearly explaining course goals and requirements.

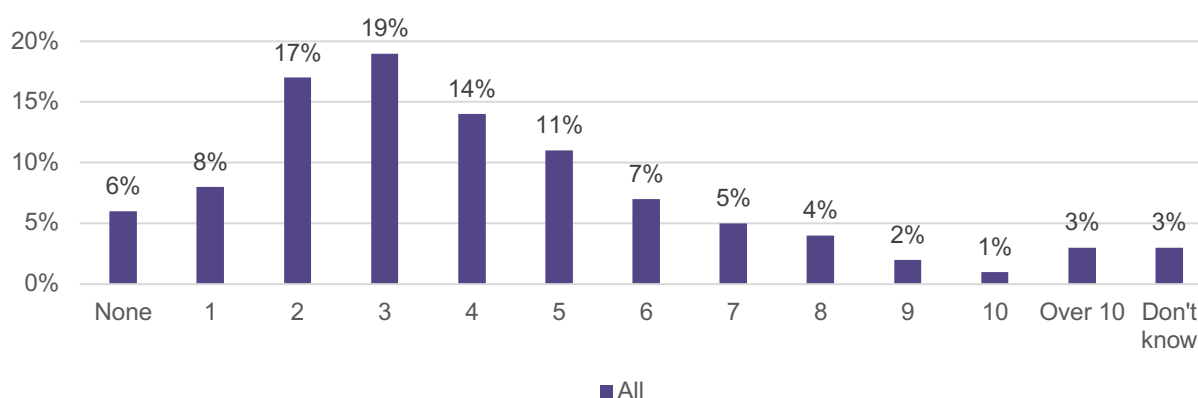
These results are an endorsement of a strong commitment to teaching quality across the sector and are further evidence of more students this year recognising the positive aspects of their higher education experience.

## 11.2 How well do academics know their students?

Students' working relationships with academic staff are important to their academic progress and sense of belonging. 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.<sup>33</sup>

Our findings are slightly below this expected figure as the greatest proportion of students (19%) said that only three staff know their names and how much progress they had been making, with the next highest responses being two academic staff (17%) and four staff (14%). A third of students said that five or more academics know their name and the progress they are making on their course. On average, students said 3.95 academics know their name.

### How many academics know their name and their course progress?



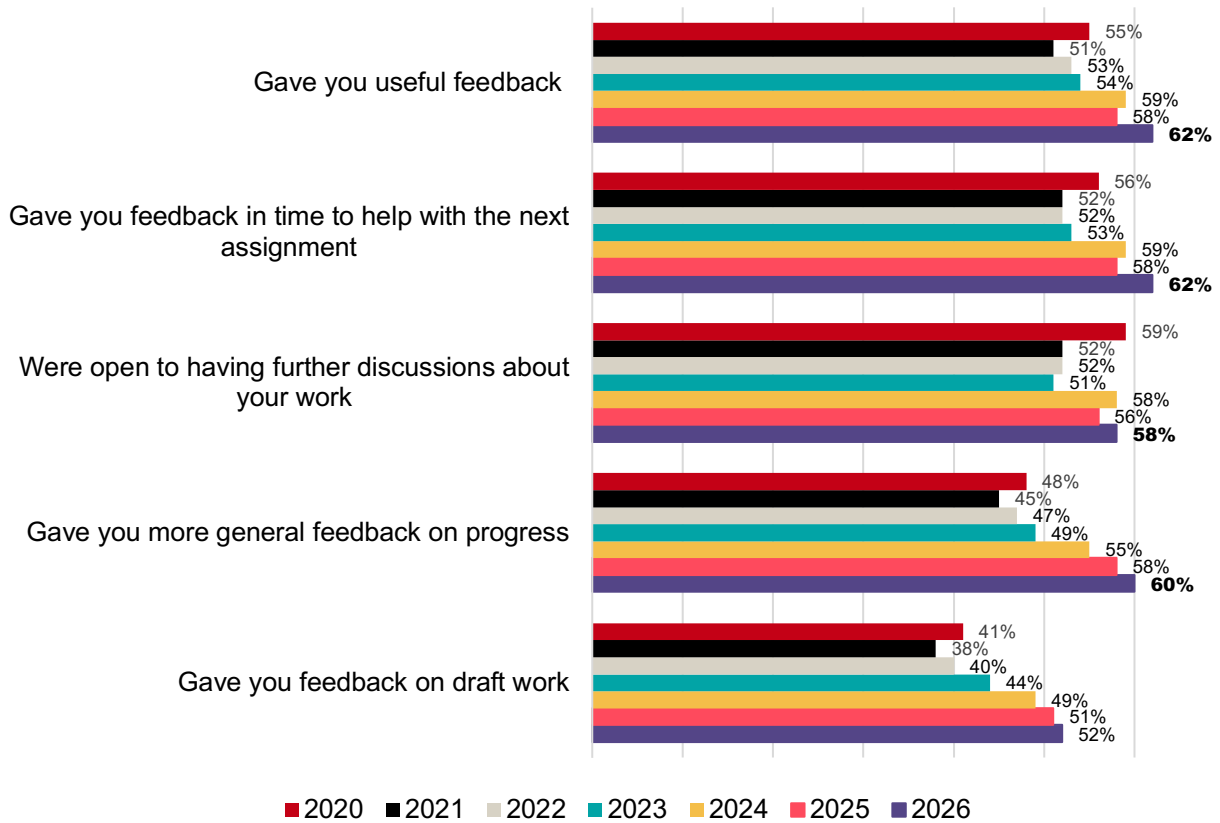
33 QAA (2021) *What is Credit? A guide for students*. Gloucester: QAA. Available at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/what-is-credit-guide-for-students.pdf](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/what-is-credit-guide-for-students.pdf)

### 11.3 Rating of assessment

Providing constructive, timely feedback is a crucial element in paving the way for a positive and successful student experience. However, the potential role of AI has brought both opportunities and complications in terms of what is permitted within assessments (for both students and staff), as well as expectations of faster turnaround times.

In this context, it is a strong endorsement of teaching staff across the sector that ratings of assessment are again high, representing a statistically significant improvement from 2025 (where scores were already strong) for most of the statements included in the Survey.

#### Rating of how teaching staff provide assessment



As we saw for teaching quality above, students’ ratings of the quality of their assessments are at historically high levels on several statements, the scale of which is outlined by the table below which compares selected scores to their prevailing levels 10 years earlier (2016).

Assessments: Comparison across 10-year period – selected measures	2016	2026
Staff gave you more general feedback on your progress	39%	<b>60%</b>
Gave you feedback on draft work	35%	<b>52%</b>
Gave you feedback in time to help with the next assignment	53%	<b>62%</b>

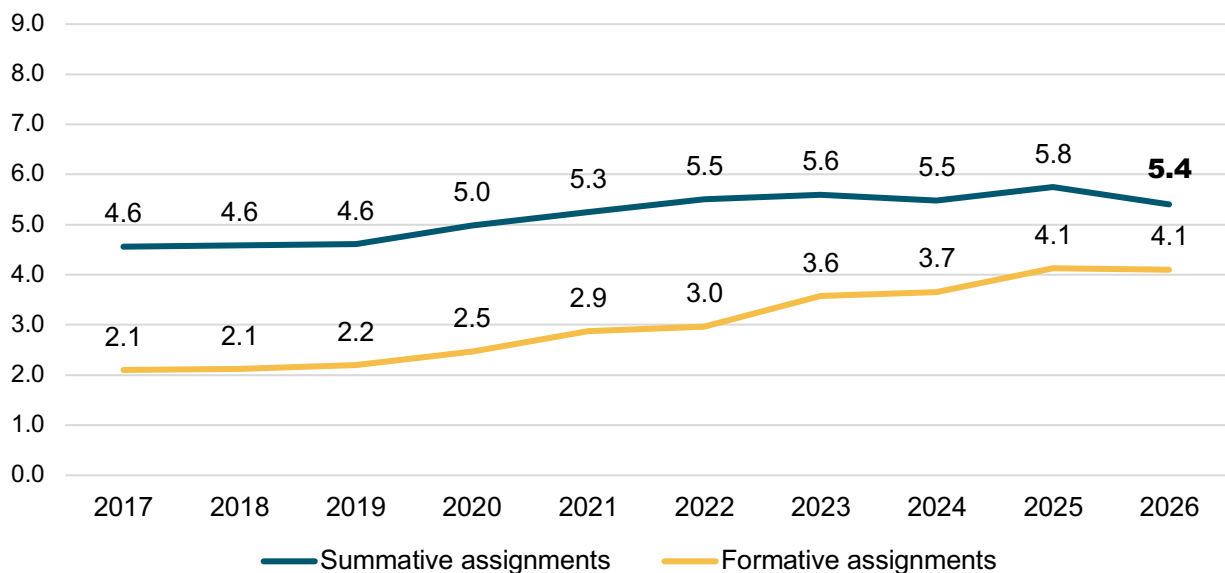
The above comparisons provide positive evidence of a significant and consolidated change over time in how teaching staff across the sector are approaching how feedback is delivered in order to provide the best possible platform for students to progress.

## 11.4 Volume of assignments<sup>34</sup>

Data across the previous couple of years provided evidence that students were being assessed with greater frequency than in the past, both in terms of summative and formative assessments.<sup>35</sup>

In 2026 these volumes remain high, particularly for formative assessments, and although there has been a decline in summative assessments, the mean average per term / semester is still above nine (in fact, the average of 9.5 is the second highest we have seen).

**Average number of assignments per term / semester**



34 Mean scores calculated excluding outliers above 30 responses per week.

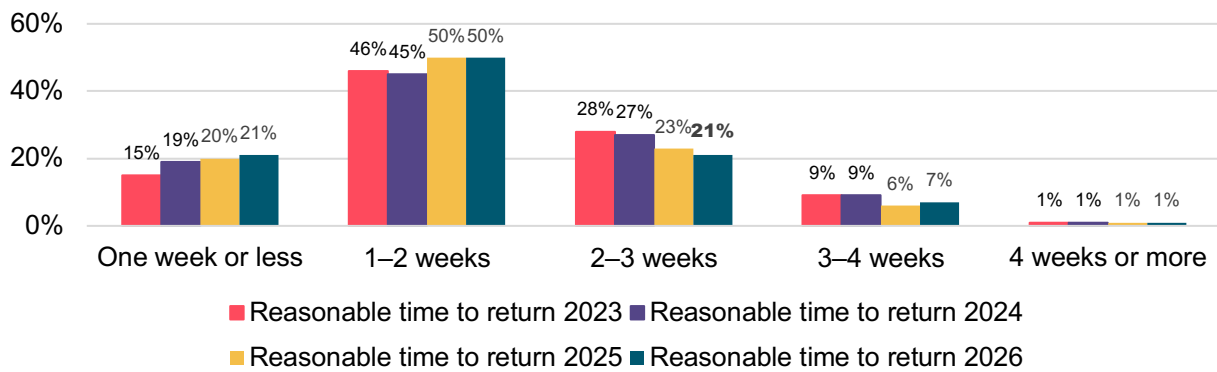
35 Summative assignments are described as those that contribute to the overall mark. Formative assignments are those that aim to aid improvement.

High volumes of assignments look to be here to stay, and we have previously seen evidence that this is an important factor that students consider when assessing the value for money they have received. We also saw a little earlier that the quality of staff feedback is rated very highly. However, given the large proportion of students who are balancing their studies with significant volumes of paid work, we may reasonably speculate that any substantive increase in the number of assignments being set would not be widely welcomed.

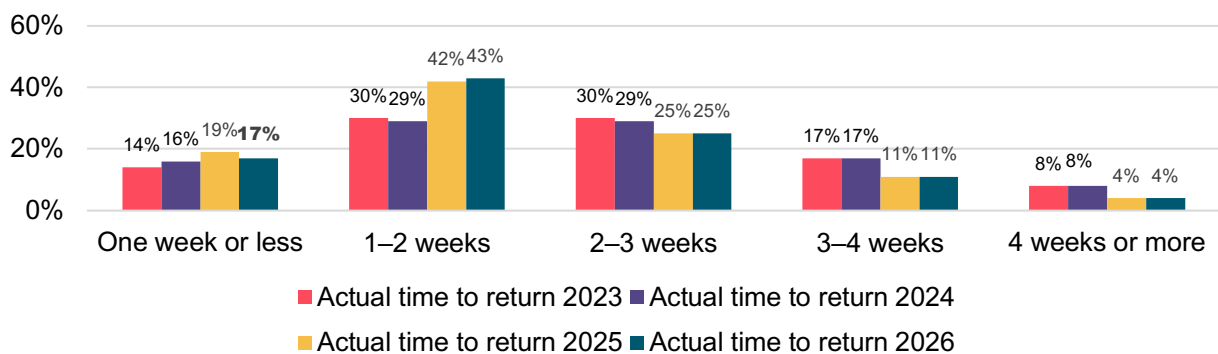
## 11.5 Timeliness of feedback

Over the medium term, student expectations for timescales for returning work have increased. The opportunity offered by AI is likely to play a role in this in that if AI is used in permitted ways by students to speed up their independent study or elements of their assignments, then they might reasonably expect their teachers to be doing the same in assessing elements of their work.<sup>36</sup>

**Returning assignments – expectation**



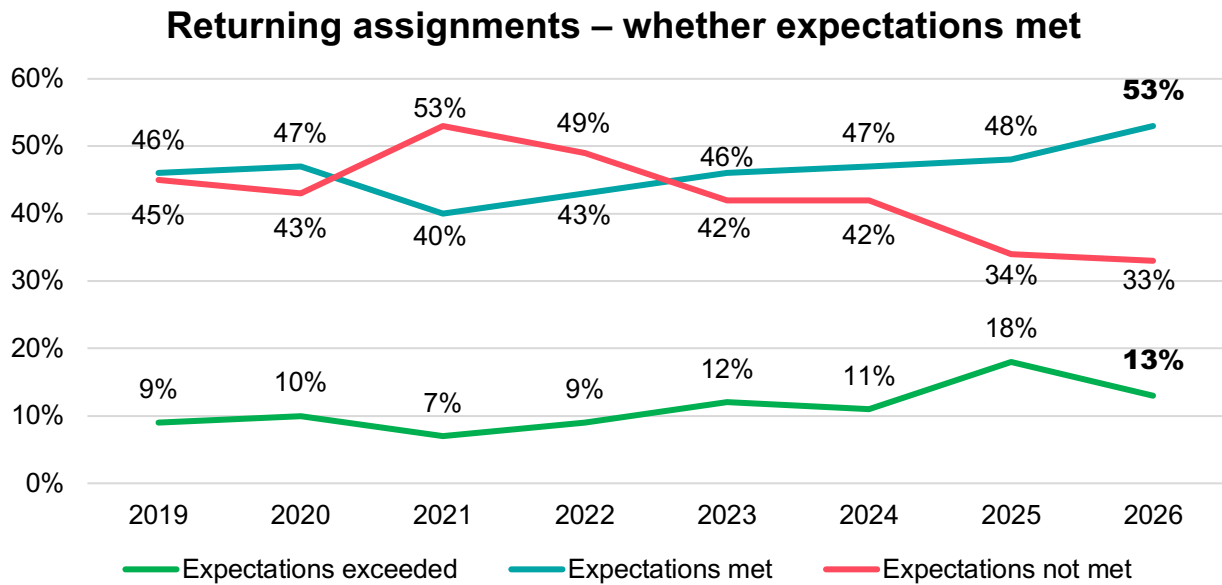
**Returning assignments – reality**



This year, by contrast, there has been effectively no change in student expectations, while there has been only a slight change in turnaround times. There are fewer assignments returned within one week but, generally, the speed of returning work remains impressive.

36 Rowsell, J (2026) 'AI marking trial 'not looking to replace humans'. *Times Higher Education*, 27 March. Available at: [www.timeshighereducation.com/news/ai-marking-trial-not-looking-replace-humans](http://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/ai-marking-trial-not-looking-replace-humans)

As a result of fewer assignments being returned within one week (with expectations staying the same), there are fewer students this year whose expectations are exceeded but, as context, there are still two-thirds of our sample whose (often demanding) expectations are either met or exceeded.



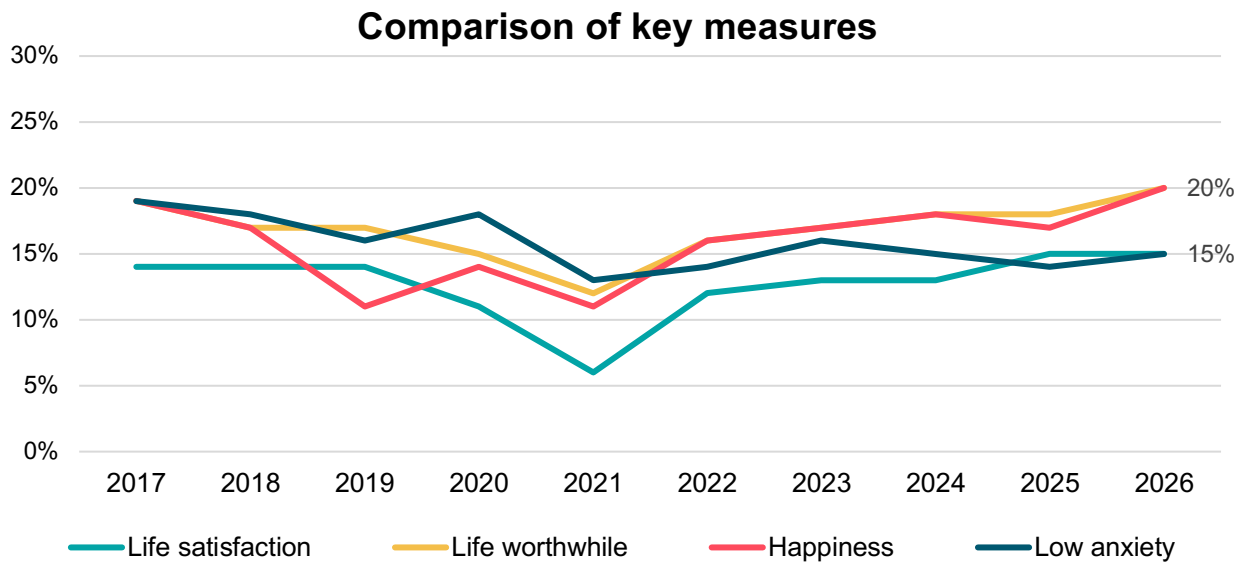
Indeed, the proportion whose expectations of turnaround times that have not been met is substantively lower than just a couple of years ago, and – positively – is at the lowest level since we first introduced these questions in 2016.

# 12 Wellbeing

## 12.1 Key wellbeing measures

Since 2014 our Survey has included a battery of statements assessing wellbeing. Matched directly to the Office for National Statistics (ONS) wellbeing measures, the four statements are each on a 11-point scale (measuring from 0 to 10) covering Life satisfaction, Life worthwhile, Happiness and Anxiety.<sup>37</sup>

Levels of wellbeing among the undergraduate population have tended to fluctuate around relatively low levels, compared to the general population, reaching their lowest point at the height of the pandemic. Since then, we have seen a gradual recovery, which has gained greater pace this year with clear improvements in some of our measures.



*Proportion reporting the top two scores (note: for anxiety, this is the bottom two scores) – representing the highest wellbeing – on an 11-point scale.*

As context, these levels of wellbeing among full-time undergraduates remain much lower than the general UK population – as measured by the ONS, although even though both studies use the same question wording, we should be slightly wary of directly comparing different studies among different populations.<sup>38</sup>

37 Question text is as follows “How satisfied are you with your life nowadays?” / “To what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?” / “How happy did you feel yesterday?” / “How anxious did you feel yesterday?”. Results shown represent those scoring 9-10 for Satisfaction, Worthwhile and Happiness. For Anxiety the wording of the question is such that scoring low on the scale is ‘positive’ and hence the graph measures scores of 0-1 out of 10.

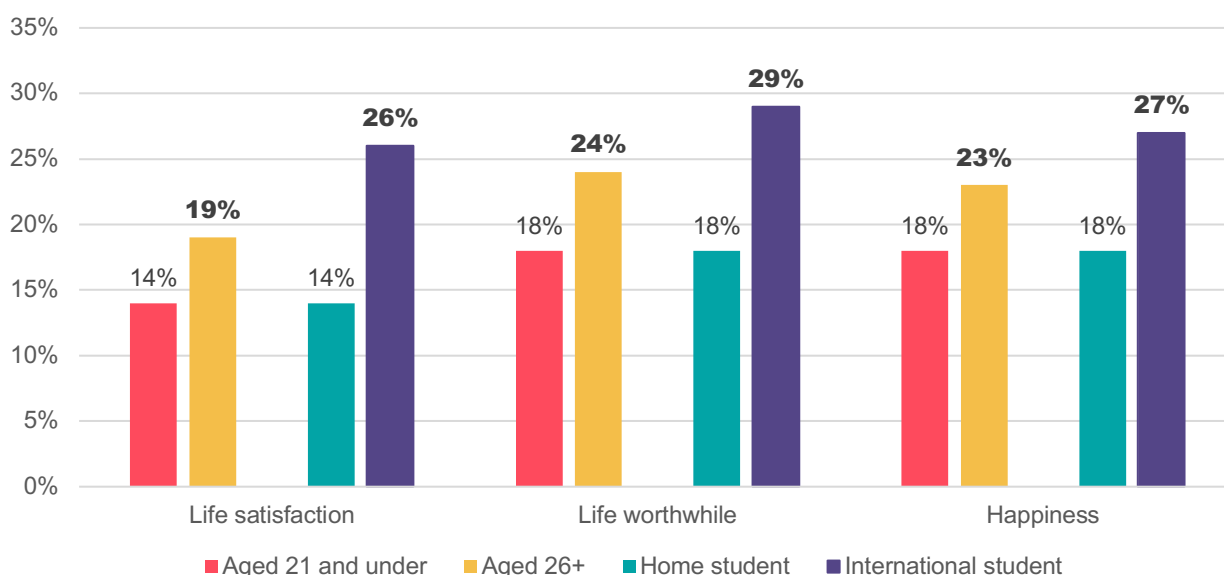
38 See Office for National Statistics (2025) ‘Quarterly personal well-being estimates – seasonally adjusted’. July to September 2025 edition. Newport: Office for National Statistics. Available at: [www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/datasets/quarterlypersonalwellbeingestimatesseasonallyadjusted](http://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/datasets/quarterlypersonalwellbeingestimatesseasonallyadjusted)

	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
<b>2020</b>	11%	25%	15%	33%	14%	32%	18%	34%
<b>2021</b>	6%	26%	12%	33%	11%	33%	13%	37%
<b>2022</b>	12%	24%	16%	32%	16%	30%	14%	35%
<b>2023</b>	13%	24%	17%	33%	17%	31%	16%	34%
<b>2024</b>	13%	25%	18%	34%	18%	32%	15%	35%
<b>2025</b>	15%	27%	18%	34%	17%	36%	14%	35%
<b>2026</b>	15%	N/A	<b>20%</b>	N/A	<b>20%</b>	N/A	<b>15%</b>	N/A

Despite this less than favourable comparison with the ONS data, it is encouraging to see the improvements within our sample on some of these measures which are now up around the levels last seen around a decade ago. In the context of significant cost-of-living challenges and the pressures faced by many students, these small improvements in wellbeing levels still reflect positively on the resilience shown by students and the measures put in place to support them.

While wellbeing levels have improved, they remain relatively low in absolute terms, although this is not equally the case across the sample. As the analysis below demonstrates, international students report much higher levels of wellbeing on three of the four indicators (there was no difference for anxiety, which is not charted), as do students aged 26 and over.

### Wellbeing levels by age and domicile



39 The most recently available ONS data is from July to September 2025, with no direct comparison yet available from 2026.

There is likely to be some intersectional effect here, in that international students in our sample were a lot more likely to be older (37% aged 26 and over, compared to 23% of home students), but there is clear evidence which points towards the most acute wellbeing concerns being experienced by younger students (across domiciles) and UK domiciled students (across ages). The lower scores among younger students are perhaps not surprising given the potential upheaval of entering higher education at a young age, particularly away from home, as well as wider concerns about the post-pandemic impact on young people.<sup>40</sup> However, given the range of challenges facing international students, including high fee levels, potential language difficulties or challenges finding employment, the relative high levels of wellbeing are encouraging and perhaps slightly unexpected.

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40 McCrory, E and Chokhani, R (2025) 'Young people's social worlds are 'thinning' – here's how that's affecting wellbeing'. *The Conversation*, 19 December. Available at: [theconversation.com/young-peoples-social-worlds-are-thinning-heres-how-thats-affecting-wellbeing-272111](https://theconversation.com/young-peoples-social-worlds-are-thinning-heres-how-thats-affecting-wellbeing-272111)

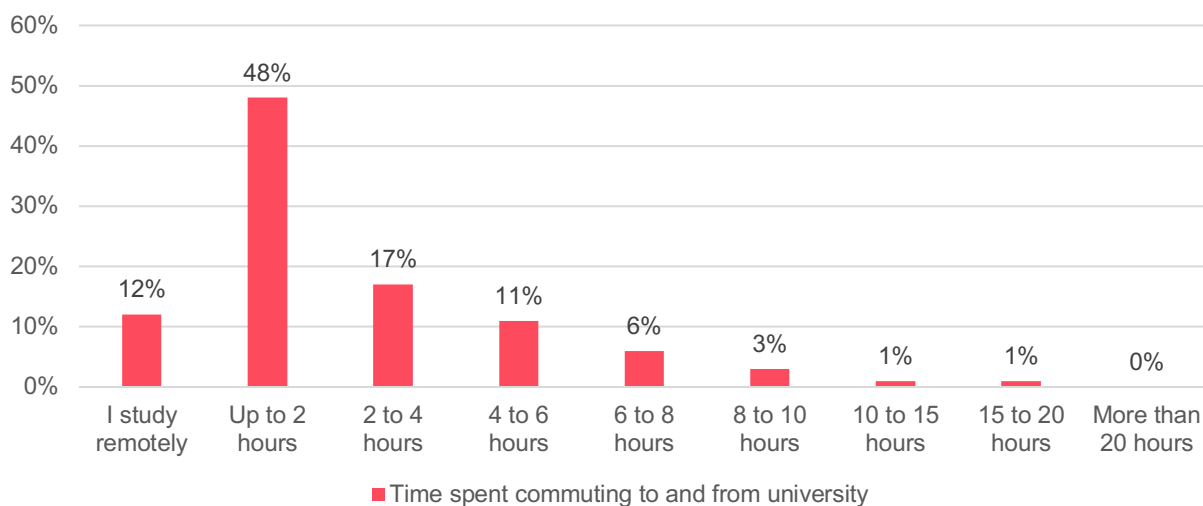
# 13 The impact of geography on the student experience

## 13.1 Commuting time to and from university

An increasing proportion of students intend to complete their studies while living ‘at home’, with UCAS reporting that 31% of 18-year-olds and 35% of students of all ages choose to live at home. This change in demography is driven by younger students, with the proportion of 18-year-olds living at home rising from just 22% in 2016.

To monitor these changes on the student academic experience, questions were added to this year’s Survey, focusing on the commuting experience. Respondents were asked how many hours they spend commuting to and from university each week. Some 12% of students report studying remotely and not commuting. (While this question was intended to capture those who study a distance-learning course, some students on in-person courses who largely access their materials online may have selected this response.) Almost half of students, 48%, spend up to two hours commuting each week, suggesting that they live on or close to campus. A total of 12% of students are spending more than six hours commuting each week and 2% of students spend over 10 hours commuting each week.

**Time spent commuting to and from university each week**



International students are more likely to have a longer commute, with 19% of international students commuting for more than six hours per week (compared to 11% of home students) and 4% of international students commuting for more than 10 hours per week (compared to 2% of home students).

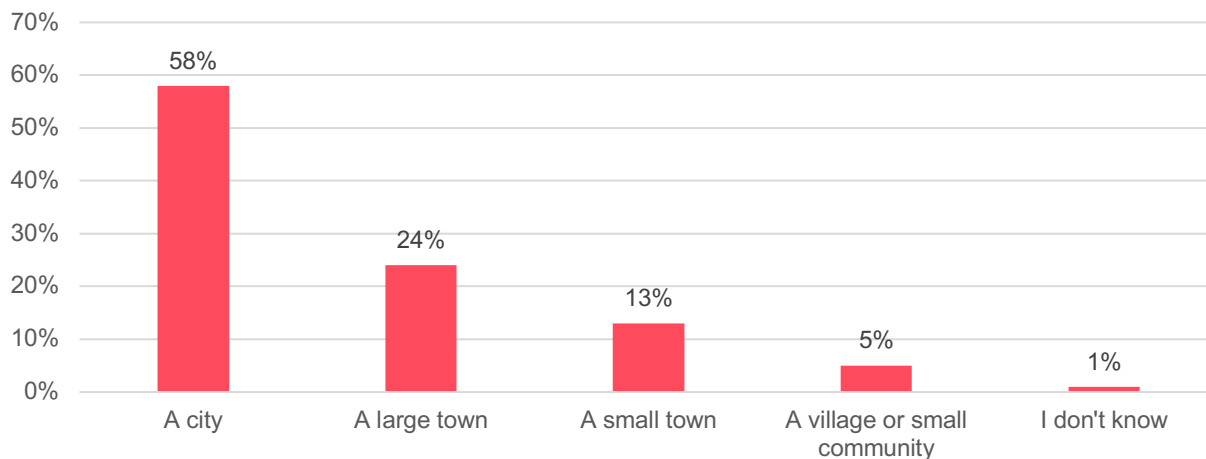
There is no significant difference between value-for-money responses based on commuting time. Similarly, there is no significant difference between students who find their experience better or worse than expected, based on commuting times. However, for students with longer commutes who report their experience as ‘worse than expected’, commuting is more likely to be a factor. Some 29% of

students who had a 'worse than expected' experience and commute more than six hours a week selected 'I spend more time and money commuting to campus than I expected / wanted to' as a factor in this. This compares to 15% of students with shorter commutes and a 'worse than expected' experience. This is perhaps unsurprising, but it is noteworthy that long commuting times are burdensome enough to become a major factor in the student experience for some students.

## 13.2 Urban and rural student living

This year's Survey also sought to understand how living in different types of communities may impact the student experience. Students were asked to describe the area they live in during term time. The majority of students (58%) live in a 'city'. A quarter of students (24%) live in a 'large town' with more than 10,000 residents. Some 13% of students live in a 'small town' (fewer than 10,000 residents), and 5% live in 'a village or other small community'. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) designates settlements with populations of over 10,000 people (classified in this Survey as cities and large towns) as 'urban'. Settlements with populations of under 10,000 people (small towns, villages and other small communities in this Survey) are designated as 'rural'.<sup>41</sup> This question was restricted to home students.

### Where students live during term time

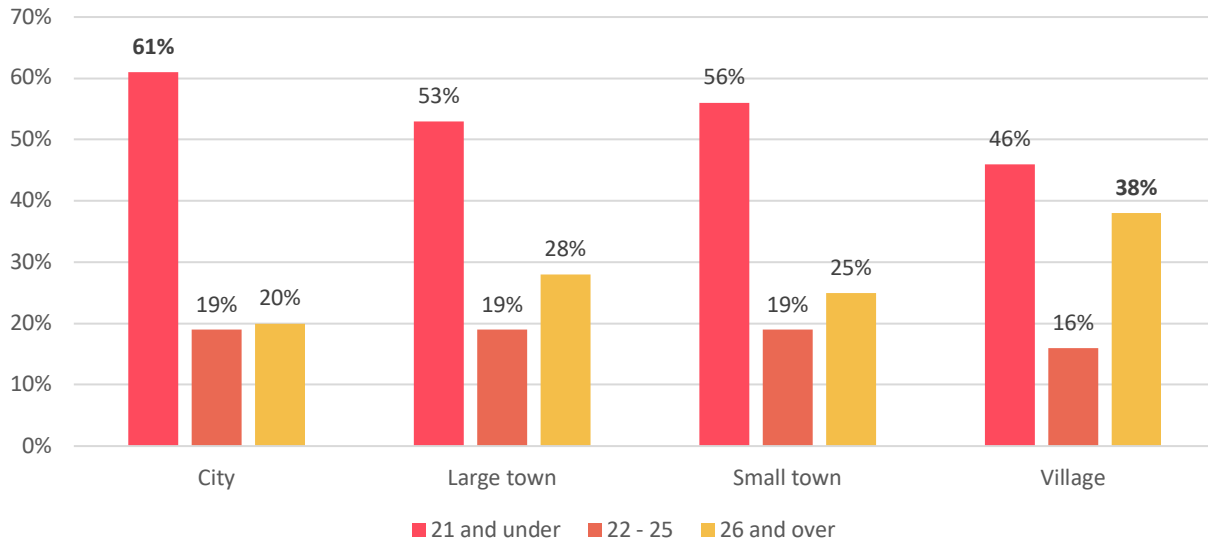


### 13.2.1 The urban and rural student demographic

Students living rurally are more likely to have caring responsibilities (23% of village-based students and 17% of small town-based students, compared to 16% of all students). Students living in rural areas are also more likely to be older.

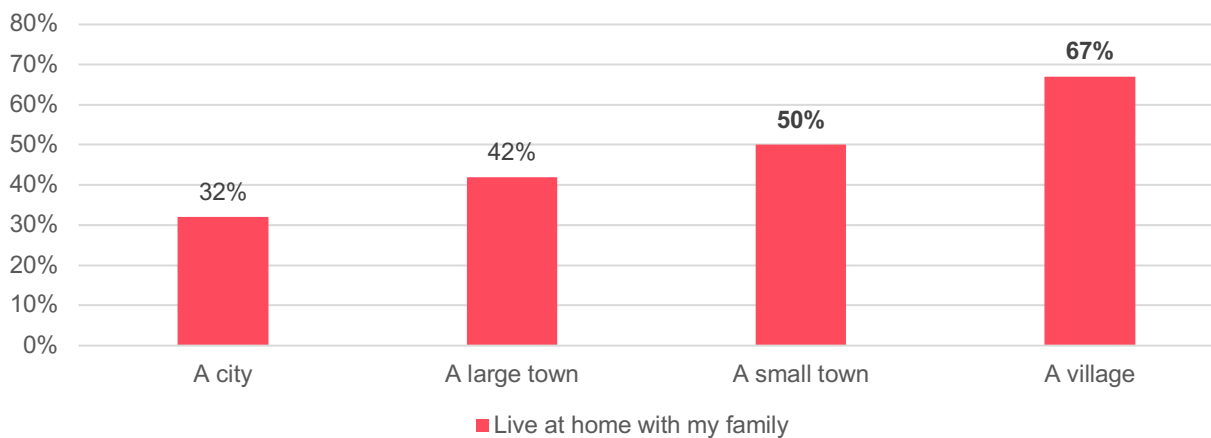
41 Office for National Statistics (2016) 'Rural / urban definition (England and Wales)'. Newport: Office for National Statistics. Available at: [www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/geography/geographicalproducts/ruralurbanclassifications/2001ruralurbanclassification/ruralurbandefinitionenglandandwales#:~:text=The%20definition%20adopts%20a%20settlement,hamlet%20and%20isolated%20dwellings](http://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/geography/geographicalproducts/ruralurbanclassifications/2001ruralurbanclassification/ruralurbandefinitionenglandandwales#:~:text=The%20definition%20adopts%20a%20settlement,hamlet%20and%20isolated%20dwellings)

### Student age by settlement type



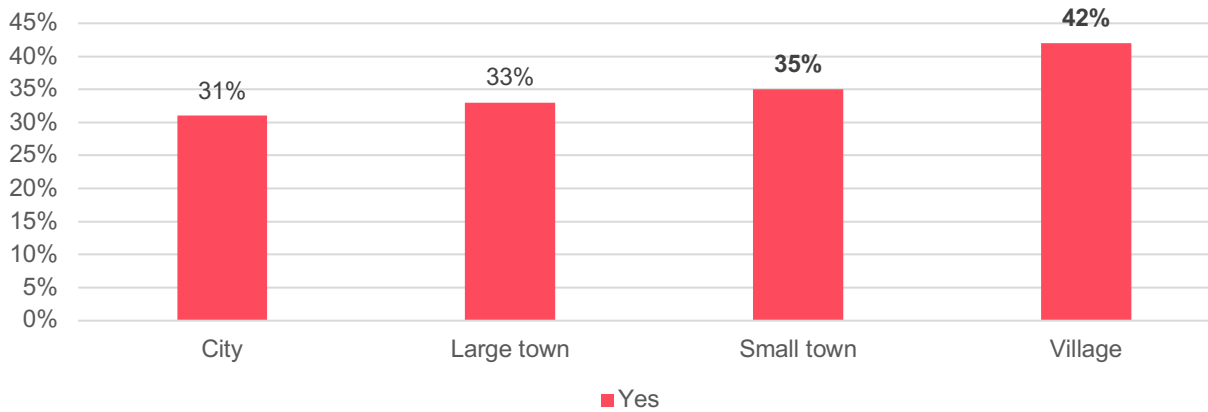
Further, students from a small town or village are more likely to live at home with family. Some 50% of students living in a small town and 67% of students living in villages during term time live at home with their family. This compares with 42% of students living in a large town and 32% living in a city. Given that universities – and therefore halls of residence and shared university housing – are more likely to be present in cities and large towns, this is perhaps an unsurprising finding, but it helps to illustrate some of the collective differences between the urban and rural student experience. (The data collected for this Survey under the category ‘living at home with family’ do not differentiate whether students live in a parental home, or live in a house with a partner, spouse and / or children. This more granular level of data will provide an interesting research angle for future iterations of the Student Academic Experience Survey.)

### The proportion of students living at home with family by settlement size



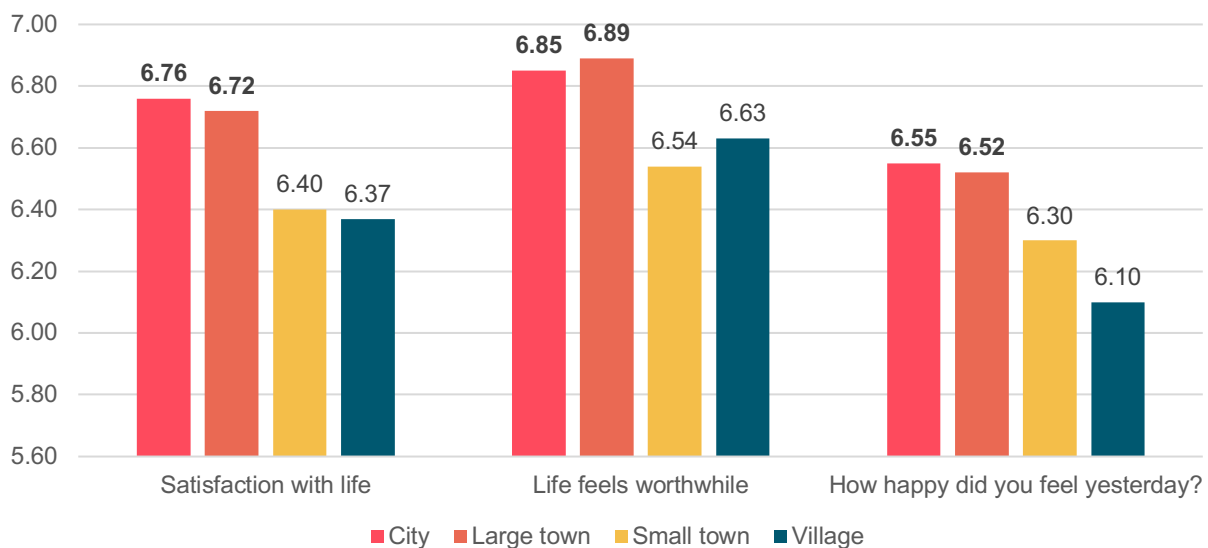
Rural students are also more likely to be ‘first-in-family’ students, with 35% of students living in small towns and 42% of students living in villages being first-in-family students. This compares to 31% of city-dwelling students and 33% of students living in large towns.

### First-in-family status by settlement type

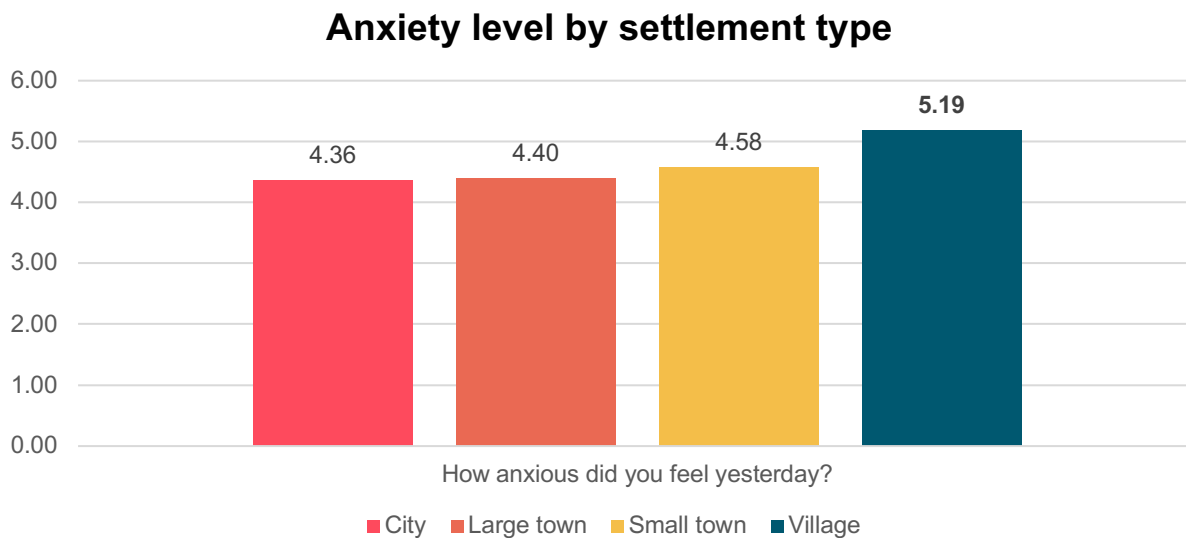


Rural students report lower wellbeing scores than the average. This is true across the scores for life satisfaction, life feeling worthwhile, happiness and anxiety (for which the scoring is reversed, with a low score denoting lower levels of anxiety). What is unclear from the data is whether rural students have poorer wellbeing scores because they are studying in a rural location, or whether they have remained in a rural location – remembering that the majority of rural students are living at home with family – because they are experiencing challenges to their wellbeing. There could, of course, be many reasons rural students return lower wellbeing scores or choose to live rurally, but the apparent correlation between these data points is interesting.

### Wellbeing scores by settlement type



*Note: Higher scores are more positive for these three wellbeing measures.*



*Note: Lower scores are more positive for the 'how anxious did you feel yesterday' measure.*

To summarise the demographic differences between urban and rural students:

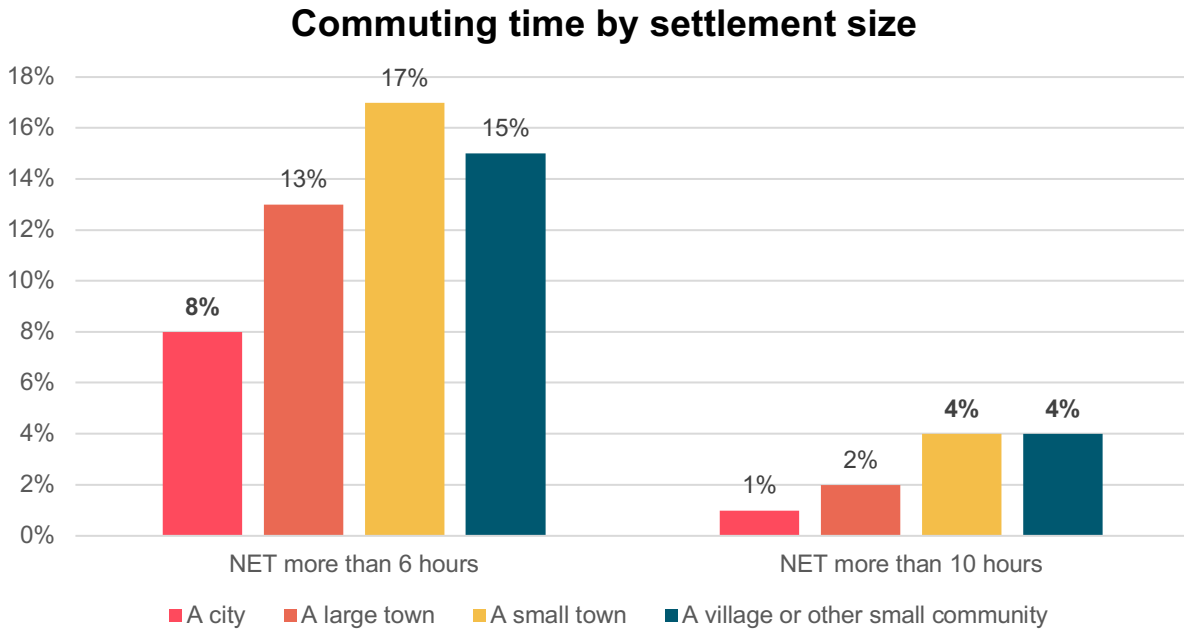
- + 28% of rural students are over the age of 26, compared to 22% of urban students
- + 18% of rural students have caring responsibilities compared to 13% of urban students
- + 37% of rural students are first-in-family, compared to 32% of urban students
- + 55% of rural students live at home with family, compared to 35% of urban students
- + rural students report lower levels of wellbeing than urban students.

Where each of these demographics is higher among rural students, this difference is even more pronounced among those living in villages or other small communities (except for life feeling worthwhile, which is marginally higher among village-based students than among those in small towns).

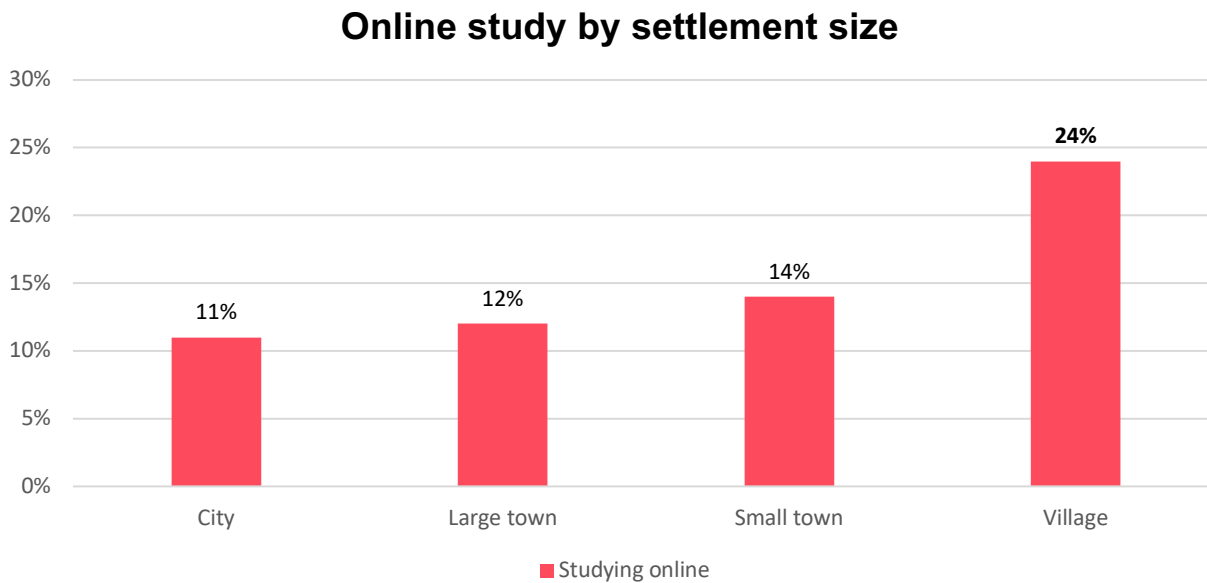
### 13.2.2 The urban and rural student experience

This report considers how settlement type impacts the student experience. However, the demographic differences between urban and rural students outlined above may also affect the responses students provide.

Where students live during term time affects the time they spend commuting. Only 8% of students living in cities spend more than six hours a week commuting to and from university. This rises to 13% among students living in a large town, 17% among students living in a small town and 15% among students living in a village. Similarly, only 1% of city-based students spend more than 10 hours commuting. This rises to 2% among students living in large towns and 4% among those living in small towns or villages.



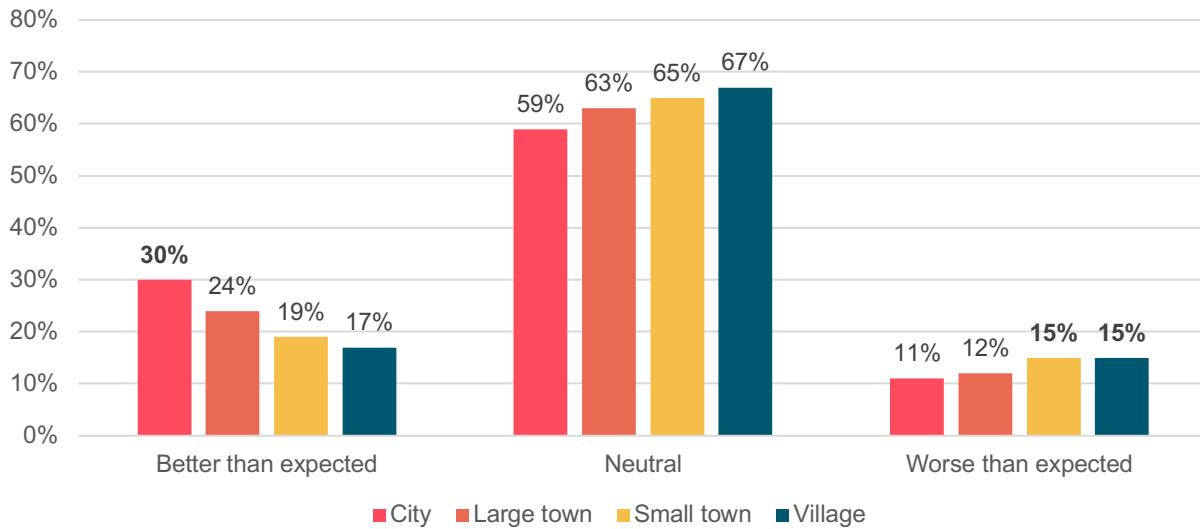
Perhaps relatedly, the decision to study remotely rather than commute to campus may depend on where the student lives. Almost a quarter of students who live in a village choose to study remotely, although the demographic differences may also have an impact here.



If students choose to study online because it meets their requirements as they juggle studying with work, family life or wellbeing challenges, then this should be welcomed. However, if students are studying online because they cannot reasonably access in-person provision due to poor transport infrastructure in rural areas, then this becomes a policy and a widening access issue.

Urban students are more likely to report that their experience has been better than expected, while rural students are more likely to report that their experience has been worse than expected.

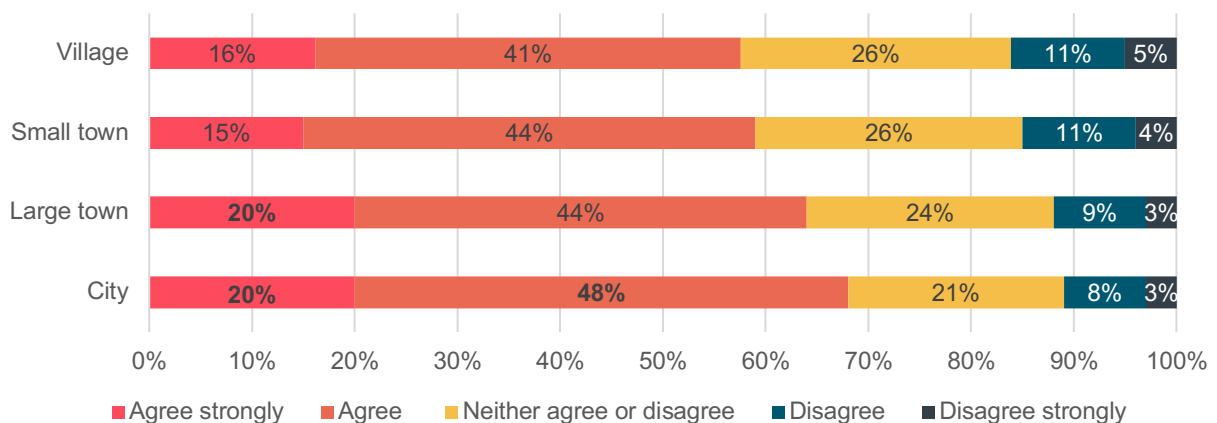
### Experience compared to expectation by settlement type



Analysing the reasons students selected ‘poor / very poor’ value for money and a ‘worse than expected’ experience does not yield strong themes explaining this more negative response among rural students. However, the sample sizes for these questions become quite small and further research into the experiences of rural students would be beneficial.

Additionally, rural students are less likely to agree that they have a sense of belonging at their institution. 57% of students who live in a village and 59% of students who live in a small town agree that they have a sense of belonging at their university. This compares to 64% of students living in a large town and 68% living in a city.

### Sense of belonging by settlement type



It is unsatisfying not to be able to provide concrete reasons why the rural student experience seems to be more challenging, although lower wellbeing scores, students juggling study with family life and longer commutes, and a poorer sense of belonging may all contribute. This is an area that needs further research. However, it may be worth reflecting on the key themes from HEPI and TechnologyOne's report analysing 20 years of Student Academic Experience Survey data, which found that a positive student experience included high-quality teaching, in-person contact with teaching staff and a strong sense of belonging. Institutions may wish to begin by considering what this looks like for their rural students.<sup>42</sup> For online providers, careful consideration should be given to how these three themes can be maintained and amplified in the online space.

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42 Turner, G and Stephenson, R (2026) *What Matters Most? 20 years of the student experience*. Oxford: HEPI. Available at: [www.hepi.ac.uk/reports/what-matters-most-20-years-of-the-student-experience](http://www.hepi.ac.uk/reports/what-matters-most-20-years-of-the-student-experience)

# 14 Conclusions and policy recommendations

## 14.1 Conclusions

The survey data this year suggest a shift in the student experience, with students reporting a higher perception of value, that their expectations are more likely to have been exceeded and that they are more satisfied with their choice of course and institution than in previous years.

Healthy criticality should be applied to such significant changes in reporting trends. Monitoring should be undertaken over time to determine whether this is a peak or a pattern. Advance HE and HEPI will continue to monitor this closely in future iterations.

However, several factors may have contributed to a more positive student experience over the last 12 months. Since 2020, the student body has experienced a series of shocks and challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis and periods of industrial action across the sector.

Students in the 2020/21 and 2021/22 academic years experienced university during the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by two further cohorts whose school and college years had been heavily disrupted. Many of these students missed out on the normal social experiences associated with being 16 and 17 years old, which appeared to have an ongoing impact on social confidence and preparedness for university. By contrast, the current cohort are more likely to have experienced the pandemic as younger teenagers and have had several years to adjust to a post-pandemic 'new normal'. The survey findings suggest an element of 'pleasant surprise' regarding the social side of university life, which may reflect this greater social confidence and preparedness.

In addition, students also appear better prepared for the financial challenges of university life, including the rising cost of living and the need to balance paid work with study. While these pressures remain significant, they seem less of a shock than they have been for recent cohorts. Students are entering higher education expecting to be in part-time work. In addition, some institutions are supporting students who combine study with employment, although these best-practice approaches could be applied across the sector.

It is also notable that this academic year has not been marked by significant periods of industrial action, unlike several recent years.

Further, in 2026, it feels as though students finally have a little more 'breathing room'. There has been a slight reduction in both the number of assessments students are undertaking and the hours they report spending on independent study. The latter may be related to the use of AI tools. If this is the case, the efficiency gains may be positively affecting the student experience, but this raises questions about the depth of study students are achieving.

Taken together, these findings may point towards a more settled picture for students after a prolonged period of disruption and uncertainty. This greater sense of stability may help to explain the improvement in perceptions of value for money identified in this year's Survey. However, the higher education sector faces several ongoing challenges that risk affecting the student experience, including financial instability, cost-cutting programmes and a seeming decline in political and public support for higher education. Ensuring that students have the best academic experience and remain satisfied with their choice to undertake higher education qualifications will be key to the long-term support of the sector. Accordingly, policy recommendations for the sector and the Government are outlined below.

## 14.2 Recommendations

### 14.2.1 A culture of continuous improvement

While there is good news in this year's report, there are figures that cause concern and a culture of continuous improvement should be adopted. This includes:

- + A third of students are either neutral or disagree that they have a sense of belonging on campus. This is a significant minority of students. Given that this is such an important factor in the student experience, focus should be applied to ensuring that more students feel they belong at their institution. As such, taking measures to identify those who do not feel they belong would be a good first step.
- + There have been marked improvements over time in student ratings of assessment quality – the hard, consistent work of teaching staff is evident here and should be noted and welcomed. However, more than 10% of students report that their assessment feedback is provided after three weeks or more, and a third report that their expectations for assignment returns are not being met. A continued focus on feedback timeliness, with the aim of returning the vast majority of assessments within three weeks, should be maintained.

The impact of job losses across the sector may make maintaining these positive trajectories difficult. Students value in-person interactions with their teaching staff, initiatives that foster a deep sense of belonging, and timely and helpful feedback from their lecturers. As such, decisions to cut teaching staff numbers must be carefully weighed against the impact on these core elements, which provide so much value to students. Where job losses are sadly unavoidable, mapping exercises to understand and mitigate the impact on the student experience should be undertaken.

### 14.2.2 Supporting student choice

There are two concerning figures in this year's report on student choice. Firstly, that 28% of students who have been in local authority care have changed course or institution, considerably higher than the average of 12%. Secondly, that 18% of degree apprenticeship students would choose options outside of higher education if given the choice again.

- + Institutions should adopt the 'Supporting care experienced students' handbook published by the Children's Commissioner.<sup>43</sup> Specific attention should be taken to support students in the application process to ensure they have access to all the information they need to make an informed choice about their course and provision. (For example, the report recommends calling care-experienced applicants on results day to discuss their place and what will happen next.) Following the handbook, support should be provided for students throughout their higher education journey to ensure that the barriers these students are more likely to face (including gaps in accommodation provision, the lack of access to a rent guarantor, and the lack of familial financial support) do not cause unnecessary disruption to their studies.

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43 Children's Commissioner (2024) *Supporting care experienced students: A handbook for professionals working in higher education*. London: Children's Commissioner. Available at: [assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2024/10/cc-higher-education-handbook-spreads.pdf](https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2024/10/cc-higher-education-handbook-spreads.pdf)

- + The Department for Education (for England) should undertake research to understand why degree apprentice students are more likely to regret their choice of course and institution. Given that only 65% of degree apprentices achieve their apprenticeship in the expected timeframe, understanding why apprentices are unhappy with their choice to study could be key to improving these achievement figures.<sup>44</sup>

### 14.2.3 Promoting free speech

The additional questions on free speech in this year's Survey demonstrate that over half of students who feel uncomfortable expressing their viewpoint attribute this to a lack of confidence in public speaking skills. Students who attend state schools are more likely to report that their lack of public speaking confidence is holding them back than their privately educated peers. The Westminster Government's response to the recent Curriculum Review outlined a new oracy framework for primary education and a new oracy, reading and writing framework at the secondary level for English schools.<sup>45</sup>

- + Institutions should consider developing, encouraging and assessing public speaking in all higher education programmes. These programmes would need to consider that some students are extremely anxious about public speaking and be tailored to support students in developing their skills in a supportive environment at their own pace. Done well, this could increase students' confidence and help develop a vital employability skill. Further, for institutions in England, this work should build on the new oracy frameworks. This could form part of their duty to 'promote' free speech on campus by tackling one of the underlying issues.
- + The Office for Students should consider the importance of developing speaking and debating skills when publishing guidance on its expectations on how institutions should promote free speech.

### 14.2.4 Supporting students who work

Many students entering higher education now expect to work in paid employment alongside their studies. This increased awareness of the financial challenges of student life is helping students better prepare to manage competing responsibilities. However, working long hours or being in low-quality unemployment can have a detrimental impact on student outcomes.<sup>46</sup>

- + Institutions must redouble their efforts to continue to support students who work. This might include working with local employers to maximise opportunities and support, and condensing timetables into fewer 'on campus' days to allow more time for part-time working.

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44 Department for Education and Department for Work and Pensions (2026) 'Apprenticeships'. London: GOV.UK. Available at: [explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/apprenticeships/2025-26](https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/apprenticeships/2025-26)

45 UK Government (2025) *Government response to the Curriculum and Assessment Review*. London: UK Government. Available at: [assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/690b2a4a14b040dfe82922ea/Government\\_response\\_to\\_the\\_Curriculum\\_and\\_Assessment\\_Review.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/690b2a4a14b040dfe82922ea/Government_response_to_the_Curriculum_and_Assessment_Review.pdf)

46 Wright, A, Wilding, M, Lawler, M and Lowe, M (2025) *Student Working Lives*. Oxford: HEPI. Available at: [www.hepi.ac.uk/reports/student-working-lives](https://www.hepi.ac.uk/reports/student-working-lives)

There are innovative parts of the sector offering courses that respond to the multiple challenges students face, including working alongside study and perhaps living at home, and therefore further from campus. The ‘two-day degrees’ offered by University College Birmingham and the two and three-day timetables offered at the University of East London provide for a cohort of students with complex and competing priorities.<sup>47</sup>

#### 14.2.5 Developing a better understanding of rural students

The results from this year’s Survey suggest that rural students return lower wellbeing scores, indicate a poorer sense of belonging and that their experience is more likely to be worse than expected. More research is needed to understand whether rurality affects student outcomes as well as the student experience. HESA already collects students’ term-time postcodes, and for those with access to the data (postcode data is sensitive and rightly protected), this can be used to determine whether students are living in urban or rural communities using Office for National Statistics lookup tables.

- + The Office for Students should undertake a small-scale study using a representative sample of HESA student records to determine whether rurality affects student outcomes. Such research would need to consider multiple variables, including the specific demographics of rural students and the potential for poorer employment opportunities in rural areas. If this research indicated an issue, a larger-scale survey should be undertaken to determine if rural students should be added as a category in the revised Equality of Opportunities Register.
- + Similar research should be undertaken in the devolved nations of the UK, noting that Wales and Northern Ireland have significantly larger proportions of their populations living rurally than England or Scotland.<sup>48</sup>
- + A question on rurality, similar to the one asked in this Survey, could be added to wave two of the Pre-Arrival Questionnaire (PAQ) pilot so institutions involved can identify their rural students and support their transition into higher education, particularly focusing on opportunities to build a sense of belonging and knowledge about support services.<sup>49</sup>

#### 14.2.6 Improving access to higher education through better transport links

In rural areas, there is a well-recognised and increasing challenge in accessing both further and higher education via public transport, with research by the County Councils Network demonstrating that one-in-five rural bus routes ceased to exist between 2019 and 2024.<sup>50</sup> Given that a quarter of village-based students are studying online, this raises serious questions about the realities and limitations of student choice and access for those living in rural areas.

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47 University College Birmingham (nd) ‘Two-Day Degree’. Available at: [www.ucb.ac.uk/university/two-day-degree](http://www.ucb.ac.uk/university/two-day-degree)

48 Barton, C, Zayed, Y and Ward, M (2024) Depopulation in rural areas. London: UK Parliament. Available at: [commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2024-0119/](https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2024-0119/)

49 Gilder, T (2026) *Pre-Arrival Questionnaire national pilot: wave one initial results* (p24). York: Advance HE. Available at: [advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/pre-arrival-questionnaire-national-pilot-wave-one-initial-results](https://advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/pre-arrival-questionnaire-national-pilot-wave-one-initial-results)

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The Department for Transport publishes a Transport Connectivity Metric which measures an individual's ability to reach employment, services and social engagement. However, in relation to education, the document states:

*“Education covers primary and secondary schools, further education (ages 16-18), special needs schools and private education. Universities are excluded due to the complexity in pinpointing single access points, as they typically consist of numerous buildings, including administrative and non-educational facilities.”*

With an increased number of students choosing, or having to, live at home, there is a real risk that some students will be unable to access higher education or will only be able to access their course through an online provider, restricting their choice of course and institution.

- + The Department for Transport should develop a more focused approach to transport and higher education, particularly for students living in rural areas. This approach should ensure that higher education is included in future Transport Connectivity Metrics and that gaps in provision are addressed.

#### **14.2.7 Improving student financial support**

Some of the challenges students are facing – including long hours in paid work and choosing to live at home and endure long commutes to university – are driven by the under-provision of student financial support. The Westminster Government has announced the introduction of subject-specific maintenance grants for England. While this move is welcome, grants are likely to be too small to have a significant impact on the student experience, and their subject-specific nature means that not all students in financial difficulty will receive these grants. The maintenance support for Welsh students is the most generous across the UK, with Welsh students studying in London receiving over £4,000 more per year than their Northern Irish peers.

- + The Westminster Government should take this opportunity to develop a more robust maintenance offer to support its mission of breaking down barriers to opportunity.
- + The Northern Irish Executive should continue to review and uprate maintenance support for students domiciled in Northern Ireland, who receive significantly lower levels of funding than their peers in other parts of the UK.
- + The Future Framework steering group (which is reviewing university funding in Scotland) should ensure that the funding support package for students is considered in its work.

# Contact us

## All enquiries

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