

Student Academic Experience Survey 2019

Jonathan Neves and Nick Hillman

 AdvanceHE



Higher Education Policy Institute

STUDENT
ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE
SURVEY



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Foreword by Alison Johns

Thirteen, so optimists remind us, is lucky for some. Though I confess to being an optimist, I see no evidence whatsoever that 'luck' is in any way driving the year-on-year improvements highlighted here in the thirteenth Student Academic Experience Survey. On the contrary, there is strong evidence to infer that good leadership, robust strategies and excellent practice has led to a second year of significant improvement in student perceptions of value-for-money. In the increasingly choppy waters of public perceptions about the value of higher education, the student view is significantly more positive; and when it comes to their academic experience, theirs is the view that matters most.

Advance HE is delighted to be working with HEPI (the Higher Education Policy Institute) once again to deliver this report. The Student Academic Experience Survey has become something of an MOT for the sector, helping to reveal what students are thinking, confirming what is working well in the student academic experience, and providing insights into what can be enhanced. It is important to point out that the survey is carefully nuanced to segment the student audience, recognising that background and circumstance will impact on each student's experience. Clearly, 'what works' for one group of students doesn't necessarily work for another. The diversity of our sector is one of its greatest strengths, but it means simplistic, one-size-fits-all, approaches to problem-solving do not work. This report provides wide-ranging evidence to help to inform and shape enhancement in that diverse sector landscape.

The report shows that teaching remains the key factor which influences students' perception of value, and it is very encouraging to see students reporting more favourably in this area. Looking at the teaching-staff characteristics, the report identifies an overall improvement, in particular in using contact hours to guide independent study. This is an area that we have specifically highlighted previously as needing more emphasis, so that students are supported effectively in their independent learning. There has also been a positive step-change in how teaching staff provide assessment, with significant improvements in feedback to students.

However, the survey reinforces the challenge the sector faces in addressing the black and minority ethnic (BME) attainment gap. The less positive perception of teaching held by this 'group' is both revealing and a cause for concern. As a sector, we know we have a collective and institutional responsibility to address this. I am determined that Advance HE, strengthened through having leadership, teaching, and equality and inclusion under one roof, will do everything we can to support the sector in achieving this. Similarly, the challenges in student anxiety remain a concern, highlighting the difficult balance between academic challenge, which students welcome, and appropriate workloads.

We are pleased that the Student Academic Experience Survey is frequently referenced and I hope, indeed I am confident, that you will find this year's survey equally useful in informing decision-making and shaping the future.

Alison Johns

Chief Executive, Advance HE

Foreword by Nick Hillman

The Student Academic Experience Survey began in early 2006, when student fees were just £1,175 in most of the UK, Tony Blair was still Prime Minister and Bill Rammell (now a distinguished vice-chancellor) was Minister for Higher Education. There was a Research Excellence Framework but no Teaching Excellence Framework; there was HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England) but no Office for Students; and student number controls were on the verge of being tightened up.

Thirteen years later, in 2019, both politics and higher education are in a different place. For example, fees have been increased significantly (twice) in England, with comparable rises in Wales. We have had three other Prime Ministers and six other ministers for universities. Student number controls are a thing of the past.

Yet some issues do not look so different from how they were back when the Survey began. The political parties are still split on Europe. Higher education policy, having been on a sometimes uncomfortable journey through Whitehall – from the Department for Education, to the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills and then on to the Department for Business – returned to the Department for Education in 2016. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* ('the more it changes, the more it stays the same'), as the French would say.

As a result, the biggest challenge when preparing the Survey each year is deciding how much to alter and how much to keep the same when setting the questions. Policymaking can be stymied by a shortage of consistent time series data but, if we make no changes to the collection of data, you cannot improve things in the light of experience – nor add questions on new issues of interest.

So we have retained most of the questions from earlier years, improved some others and added a few more – on preparedness for higher education, how to improve feedback and two-year degrees, among other issues. We have also cut the data in some old and some new ways.

Much of the overall story about the student experience is becoming more positive, most notably in relation to value-for-money perceptions, which have continued to improve this year. This is a great testament to the work of staff and students.

Challenges remain too, for example over the 'expectations gap' experienced by people entering higher education for the first time. Indeed, some areas that the original designers of the Survey expected to change, such as total workload, have not in fact changed all that much.

The nature of the student body has altered significantly during the life of the Survey, becoming notably more diverse. As a result, we have sought to ensure the Survey, including the way the results are presented, has developed in recent years to paint a more detailed picture about students with certain characteristics – most notably ethnicity, sexual orientation and living arrangements – and this continues this year.

Our hope is that the story of continuity and change outlined in the following pages provides a useful evidence base for higher education institutions to continue improving their offer to students, despite the testing times in which we live.

Nick Hillman

Director of the Higher Education Policy Institute

Executive Summary

Our Survey takes place at the same time each year among a directly comparable undergraduate sample, enabling us to measure genuine like-for-like changes. This year's results highlight a number of positive shifts in student opinion, with evidence that the university experience is largely a challenging but rewarding one, albeit with some students who do not see things in such a positive light.

Perceptions of value-for-money have increased significantly for the second year in row, to the extent that there is a clear positive gap once again between the number of students who perceive good value compared to poor value. Perceptions in England are still lower than average but increasing strongly, with strong increases also seen in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and little change in Wales despite the removal of offsetting fee grants. In the context of a continued high profile in the sector of the cost of going to university and with the current fee regime under review, this recovery in value perceptions is a striking one.

In 2018 the increase in value-for-money perceptions was not widely matched by other increases, but this is not the case this year, as teaching quality and assessment have both improved strongly. Class sizes are also smaller this year, while students report that they are being challenged in their assignments, the volume of which has increased.

Challenge is often seen as a good thing; indeed the right level of challenge and effort lies behind delivering an experience beyond expectations. Against this, however, there is evidence of students becoming more self-critical and, in effect, blaming a disappointing experience on their own amount of effort. In this context of self-reflection, and with assignment levels increasing, it is perhaps not surprising that levels of anxiety have continued to rise.

Indeed, a key and ongoing challenge highlighted from this year's survey is that levels of wellbeing continue to be well below those of the general population of young people, and given that several aspects of the student experience are becoming more positive, it is notable that this is not following through into a more positive outlook on life.

The other main challenge to the sector is evident in the range of less positive results among UK-domiciled Asian and Chinese students, who continue to perceive less value, lower levels of learning, and less effective teaching, as well as saying that they felt less prepared. These students are particularly likely to cite their own levels of effort if their expectations are not matched but there appears to be a need to do more both before and during university to set the right expectations and maintain a level of dialogue to be able to offer tailored support if appropriate.

The same principles could be said to apply to students who live far away from campus and/or away from their fellow students, who are less likely to feel they have made the right choice in their studies and may potentially be more at risk of changing their minds after starting their course.

In a new question this year we asked students how appealing they find the concept of a two-year accelerated degree, with associated fee savings. Although respondents were not widely against the idea, neither was it greeted with particular enthusiasm, which suggests that time spent at university is clearly valued despite the costs.

Overall, results this year shine light on a student cohort that is realistic about the costs of going to university and recognises when they are challenged positively and receive good value as a result.

1 Methodology

1.1 Approach

The survey methodology has remained consistent over time, affording the opportunity for direct comparisons across the years, with large sample sizes providing a robust, reliable snapshot of the student experience.

Since 2006 (with the exception of 2013), the Survey has been designed and developed in partnership between the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) and Advance HE, with online panel interviews independently conducted by YouthSight.

Our approach for 2019 has been to maintain the core questions in the survey, which facilitate comparison across several years on key issues such as value-for-money, teaching quality, wellbeing and teaching intensity, complemented by selected questions addressing topics that are particularly relevant to the current policy debate, such as two-year degrees, how prepared students felt for university and whether institutions could contact their parents / guardians if they became worried about a student's mental health. We have also conducted fresh analysis on students' background, introducing a more detailed analysis of distance travelled to university.

Responses were sourced from YouthSight's Student Panel, which is made up of over 80,000 undergraduate students in the UK. These students are primarily recruited through a partnership with the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), which invites a large number of new first-year students to join the panel each year. About 1 in 20 current UK undergraduates contributes to the YouthSight student panel.

Between 4 February and 11 March 2019, 70,000 members of the panel were invited to complete the Survey. In total, 14,072 responses were collected, representing a response rate of 20%. On average, the questions took 15 minutes to complete. As usual, weighting has been applied to the responses to ensure the sample is balanced and reflective of the full-time student population as a whole, and to provide consistency in approach with previous years.¹

As with previous years, we have included a small but representative sample of students from alternative providers. When reporting results among this group, however, we have added together results across the last three years, in order to provide more statistically robust data.

1.2 Sample size

All respondents to the Survey are full-time undergraduate students with a representative sample across all years of study. Unless stated otherwise, all figures and tables relate to weighted data from the 2019 Survey with a weighted base of 14,072 students. The full data tables are freely available from HEPI and Advance HE.

The total sample size of 14,072, based on an undergraduate population of 1,776,540², provides a margin of error of + / - 0.82%.³ This is calculated at the 95% confidence level and based on a result of 50%, where the margin of error is at its maximum. This means that for a result of 50% we can be confident that the true result is between 49.18% and 50.82% in 95 out of 100 cases.⁴

¹ The data are weighted by gender, course year, subject area and institution type in accordance with HESA 2016/17 university population statistics.

² Source: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he> [Accessed 28 March 2019]

³ Please note that in the charts in this report, the total may not add up to 100% due to rounding to whole percentages.

⁴ Source: <http://www.comresglobal.com/our-work/margin-of-error-calculator> [Accessed 28 March 2019]

When comparing between years, the relatively large sample sizes mean that most differences in the Survey between 2018 and 2019 of 2% or greater are statistically significant. For smaller sub-samples within the Survey, the margin of error is significantly greater, and hence year-on-year differences of a few percentage points are in some cases not significant. We have highlighted statistically significant differences between 2018 and 2019 in bold text on each chart where differences apply.

To facilitate effective analysis of ethnicity data, the sample profile and main data in this report (for the ethnicity analysis only) are based on UK-domiciled students.⁵ This was done to remove the impact of international students on ethnic groups, and to allow ethnicity and international students to be analysed separately. The ethnic groups analysed are mutually exclusive, hence the Asian group does not include Chinese students, an approach that we have adopted to provide consistency of analysis with previous years.⁶

⁵ For some analyses the non-white groups have been further aggregated into a single black and minority ethnic (BME) group. This definition of BME is widely recognised and used widely 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 assumption that minority ethnic students are a homogenous group.

⁶ In the 2011 census, Chinese students were counted under the Asian ethnic group. However this survey has been running since before this date and has historically analysed Asian students separately to highlight areas where the experience is different.

2 Sample profile

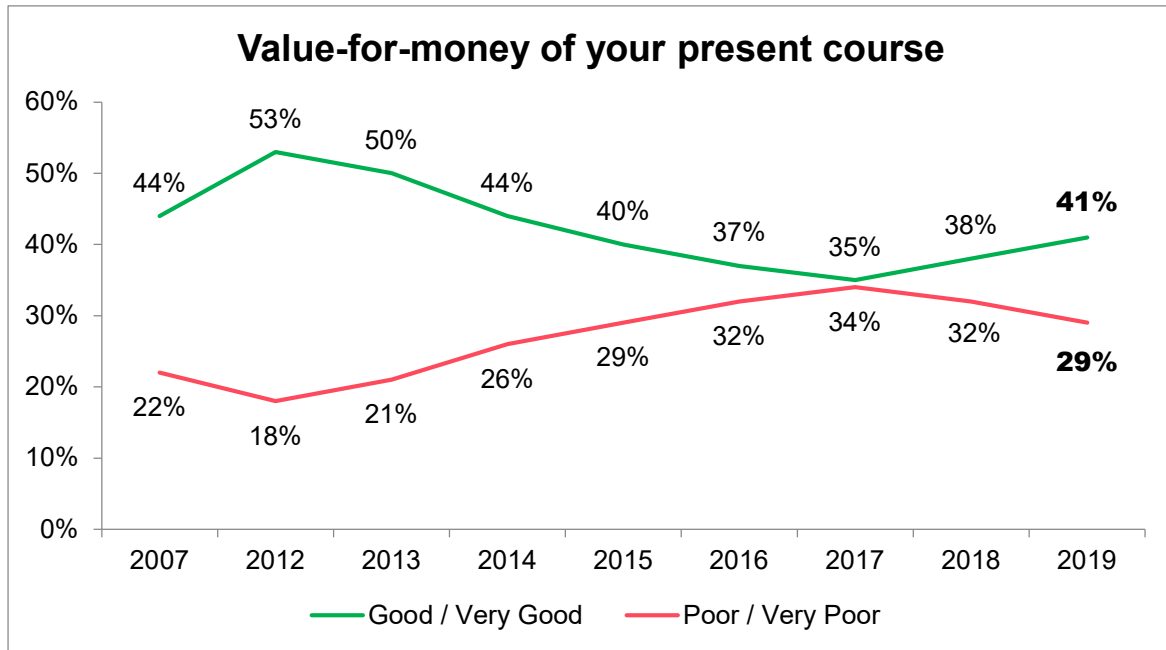
Our sample has been weighted to reflect the composition of the undergraduate population, with weighted data used throughout this report.

Weighted sample %				
		2017 (14,057)	2018 (14,046)	2019 (14,072)
Gender	Male	43%	44%	44%
	Female	57%	56%	56%
Country where studying	England	84%	85%	86%
	Scotland	9%	9%	8%
	Wales	5%	5%	5%
	Northern Ireland	1%	1%	1%
Institutions	Russell Group	28%	28%	28%
	Pre-92 (excluding Russell Group)	22%	22%	22%
	Post-92	47%	49%	49%
	Specialist	2%	2%	1%
Ethnicity (UK-domiciled)	White	79%	79%	78%
	Black	3%	3%	3%
	Asian (excluding Chinese)	12%	11%	13%
	Chinese	2%	2%	1%
	Mixed	4%	5%	6%

3 Value-for-money

3.1 Trends over time

Encouragingly, there has been a significant increase this year in perceptions of value-for-money received, from 38% to 41%, mirrored by a significant decline in perceptions of poor value. This consolidates the increase we saw in 2018, and continues to reverse the consistent decline experienced between 2012 and 2017. From a situation in 2017 where almost as many students perceived poor value as good value, we now have a clear recovery in perceptions.

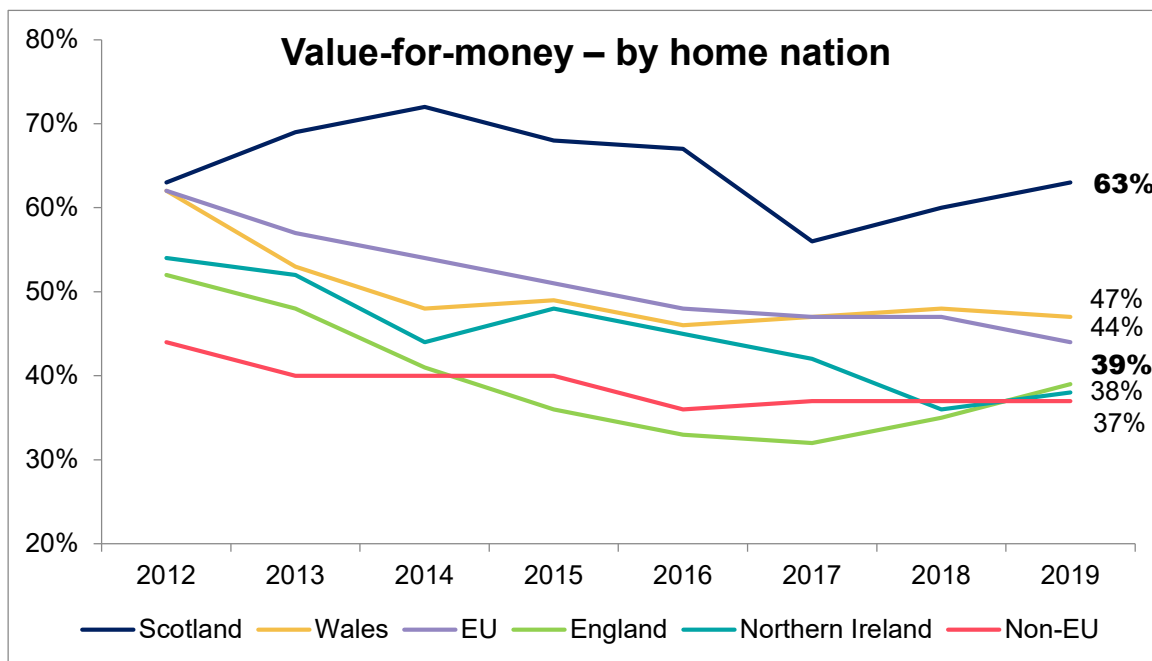


Base: All respondents. 2007 (14,859); 2012 (9,058); 2013 (17,090); 2014 (15,046); 2015 (15,129); 2016 (15,221); 2017 (14,057); 2018 (14,046); 2019 (14,072). Statistically significant differences between 2018 and 2019 in bold.

3.2 Value by domicile

Driving the increase at overall level, perceptions of value have increased significantly among students from England (35% to 39%), which contributes strongly to the overall trend due to its population size, and also for Scotland (60% to 63%), which tends to experience the most positive perceptions overall. There has also been a clear uplift in perceptions among students from Northern Ireland (36% to 38%), reversing a decline seen last year.

The one major area where perceptions have declined this year is among students from other EU countries, falling from 47% to 44%. Although not statistically significant, this potentially raises a concern around how the UK university experience is viewed as Brexit continues to dominate the news agenda.



Base: All respondents domiciled in each nation/region. Scotland (2019 – 791); Wales (492); EU (983); England (10,949); Northern Ireland (284); Non-EU (574). Value-for-money defined as Good / Very Good combined. Statistically significant differences between 2018 and 2019 in bold.

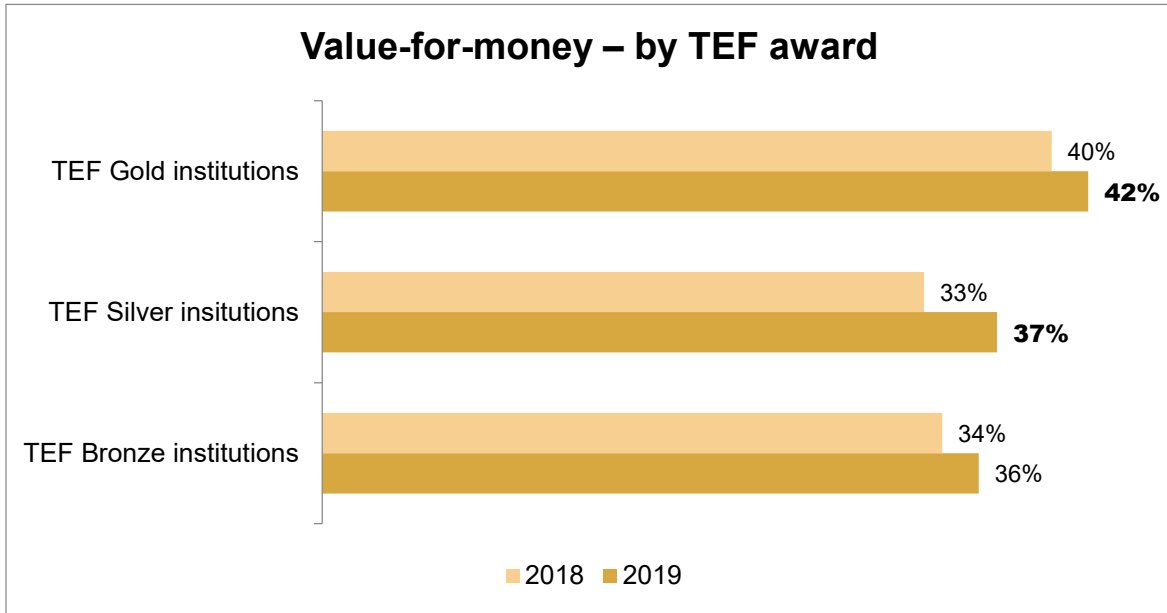
Perceptions among Welsh-domiciled students have remained broadly consistent (the slight decline from 48% to 47% is not statistically significant), which is notable given that 2018/19 is the first year that students from Wales have not had access to an offsetting fee grant and have therefore experienced an increase in fees in real terms. Indeed, targeted analysis of first-year students in Wales (the cohort specifically affected this year) has shown no material change in perceptions since the change in the fee regime.

1 st years in Wales		
	2018 (261)	2019 (191)
Good / Very Good value	48%	49%

3.3 Value by institution type

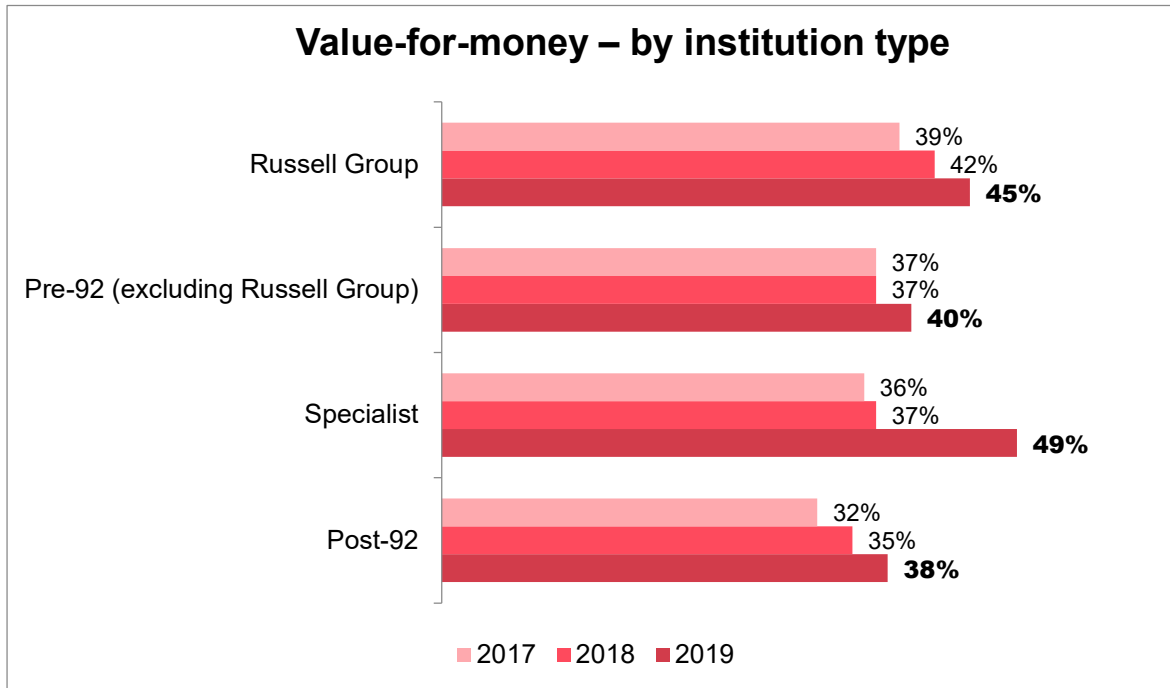
Continuing the analysis we began last year, we have again compared value perceptions between students from institutions with Gold, Silver and Bronze Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) awards.

The findings this year consolidate the clear view that students from Gold-rated institutions are more likely to perceive they have received good value.



Base: Students from TEF Gold institutions (4,828 / 5,976); TEF Silver (6,377 / 6,481); TEF Bronze (1,496 / 729). Value-for-money defined as Good / Very Good combined. Statistically significant differences between 2018 and 2019 in bold.

Again, there is no material difference between Silver and Bronze-rated institutions, but there has been an increase across the board, reflecting the overall improvements we have seen across the total student population.



Base: Russell Group (3,899 / 3,913 / 3,920); Pre-92 (3,054 / 3,071 / 3,073); Specialist (296 / 218 / 203); Post-92 (6,730 / 6,804 / 6,833). Value-for-money defined as Good / Very Good combined. Statistically significant differences between 2018 and 2019 in bold.

Reflecting the increase at total level, value-for-money perceptions have improved across all our main categories of institution. Specialist institutions lead the way on this measure, with Russell Group institutions also performing strongly. There is relatively little difference between perceptions at Pre-92 institutions (excluding Russell Group) and Post-92, with both looking a lot more positive than they were back in 2017.

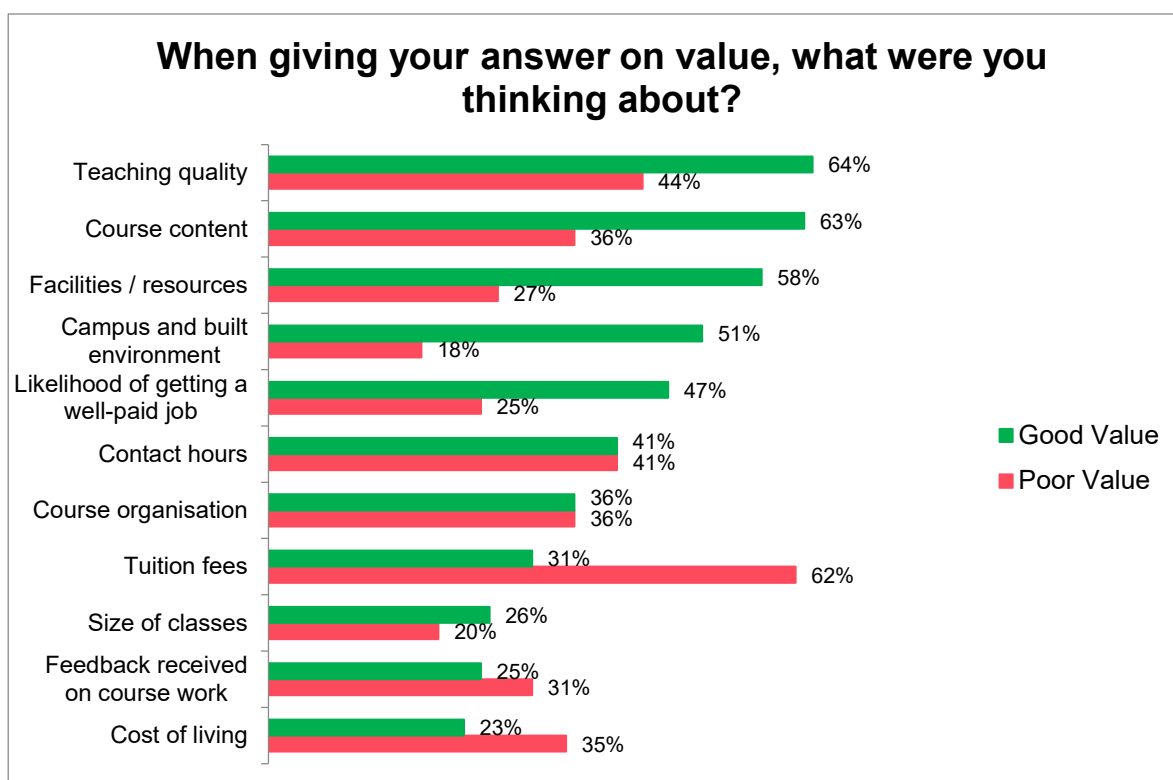
As we will see later in this report, Russell Group institutions do not perform any higher (or lower) than the average in terms of perceptions of teaching quality, but despite this, students from Russell Group institutions are more likely to feel they have received good value. This indicates that wider factors such as facilities and the campus environment, and/or perceived reputation, may be driving opinions of value-for-money at Russell Group institutions rather than any substantive difference in the teaching experience.

3.4 Factors influencing perceptions of value

Given the diversity of the academic experience, opinions on a key overall measure such as value may be driven by a wide variety of factors, both substantive and emotive. To provide some clarity as to what contributes to good or poor value, and by implication, what matters most to students, our Survey includes a follow-up question covering this. From a pre-defined list of answers, presented in a random order, students could choose as many or as few options as they wished.

The results reveal that in some cases several of the main drivers of a positive experience differ from the main drivers of a negative one. Satisfied students – i.e. those perceiving good value – are particularly happy with the teaching quality (we will see later in the report that teaching quality rates highly this year), as well as course content, resources and facilities. The role played by a high-quality campus environment is also key, underlining the importance of universities investing in developing and modernising their estates when they can.

For less satisfied students, the dominant driver of low value perception is cost, specifically the level of fees, which does not necessarily imply that they have had a poor-quality experience. The other aspect mentioned as driving perceptions of poor value is contact hours – although, as we will see later in the report, contact hours have risen slightly in 2019.



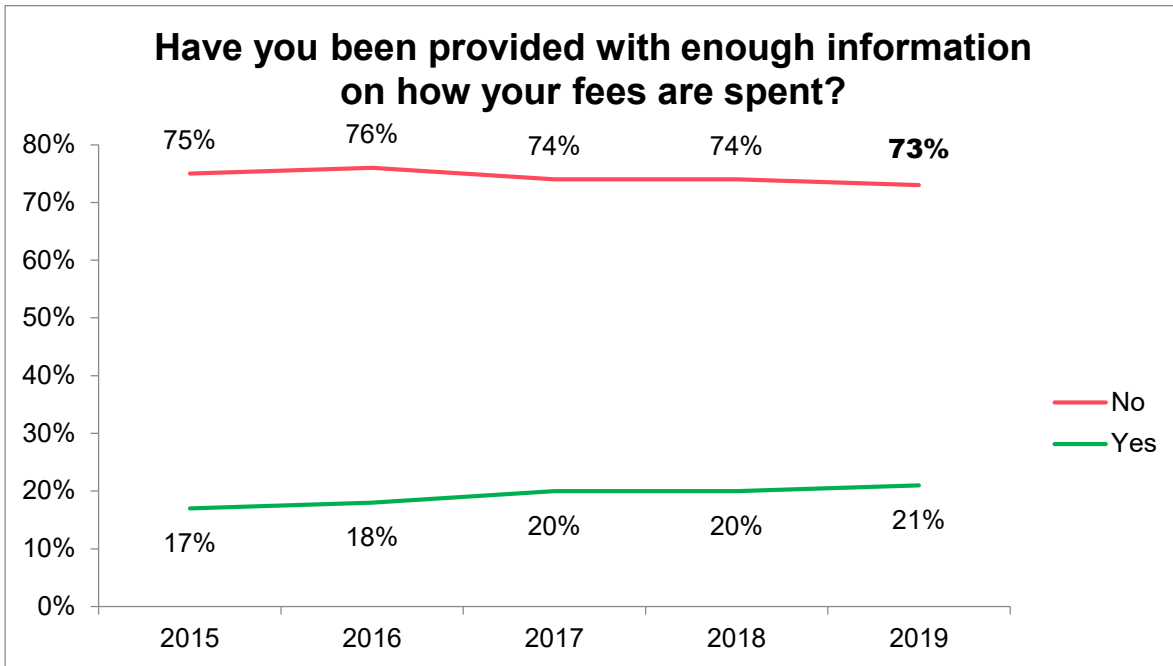
Base: All respondents perceiving Good / Very Good value (5,723); Poor / Very Poor value (4,078). Main mentions for each area – ranked in order of Good / Very Good.

The relative ranking of the responses has remained consistent year on year, underlining the importance of making sure that the overall experience delivers on these areas. The one main change in year-on-year ranking is that in 2018 the joint fourth most important driver of poor value perceptions was the cost of living (beyond tuition fees), but in 2019 this has fallen behind course organisation in the relative ranking.

This decline in concern over living costs, together with the general improvement in value perceptions, implies that while the cost of going to university has not necessarily changed, students may be becoming more accepting of this and may be more prepared for the impact.

3.5 Information on how fees are spent

One of the consistent questions in the survey asks students to consider whether they are provided with sufficient information about their fees.

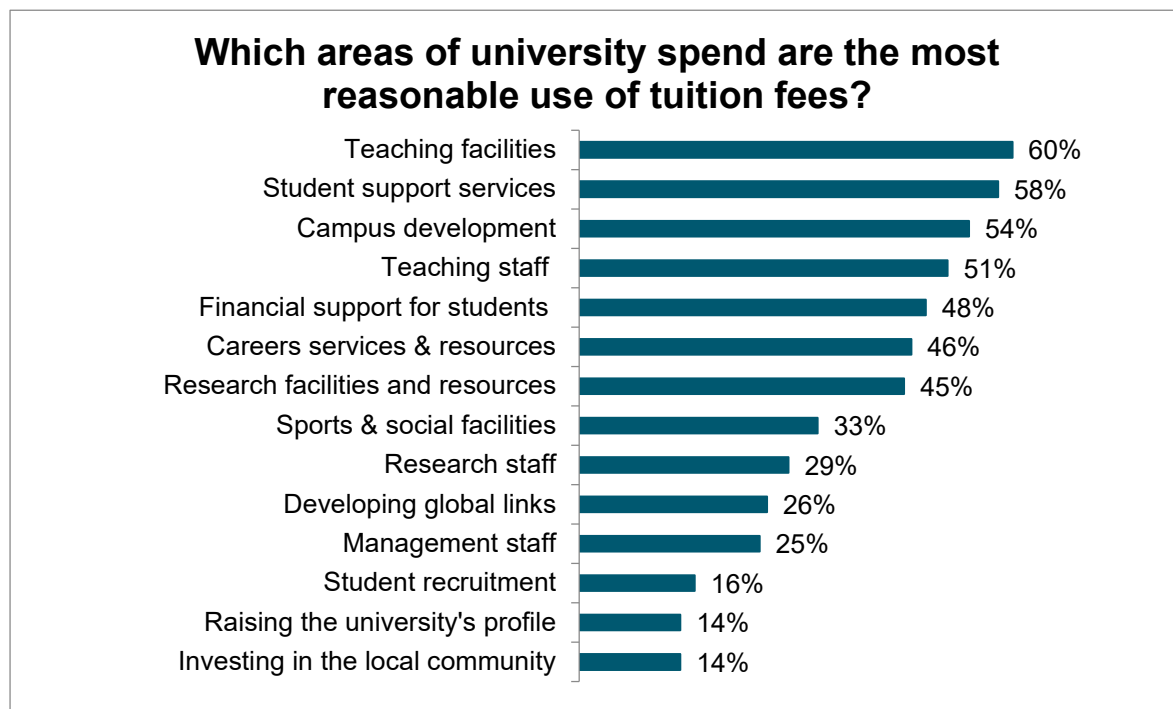


Base: All respondents (14,072). Statistically significant differences between 2018 and 2019 in bold.

Overall, most respondents are quite clear that they do not receive enough information, which requires institutions to continue to focus on this issue. However, slowly but surely the picture is changing, with a consistent upward trend going back to 2015, when just 17% felt that they received enough information, compared to 21% in 2019. There is still a long way to go but in the context of improvements in value-for-money, this is another upward trend which provides encouragement this year.

3.6 Most appropriate use of tuition fees

Perceptions of value are highly influenced by the cost of going to university, as well as the quality of that experience. Therefore, how the fees are spent to deliver the experience is something that we would expect students to have an opinion on.



Base: All respondents (14,072).

The presence of teaching facilities and teaching staff towards the top of the list is unsurprising, given the role played by teaching in delivering good value. Student support services are also seen as a positive investment, which is significant in light of the current, and welcome, sector focus on student wellbeing support.

It is significant that investment in campus development is cited as the third most appropriate use of tuition fees. There is and has been an ongoing debate in the sector about the merit or otherwise of universities spending on their estates, but this result provides clear evidence that the campus environment can play a key role in contributing to a positive experience.⁷

For several areas of spend (charted below), there is a clear difference between younger undergraduates and mature students, and also between students who commute and those who do not. More traditional undergraduates (e.g. younger, do not commute) are more likely to feel that these areas are an appropriate use of tuition fees, with mature / commuting students less likely to mention any such areas. This implies that mature and non-traditional undergraduates are less focused on the wider investment of the university in providing a holistic experience given the other demands on their time.

⁷ Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/apr/09/universities-building-frenzy-who-actually-impressed>
[Accessed 11 April 2019]

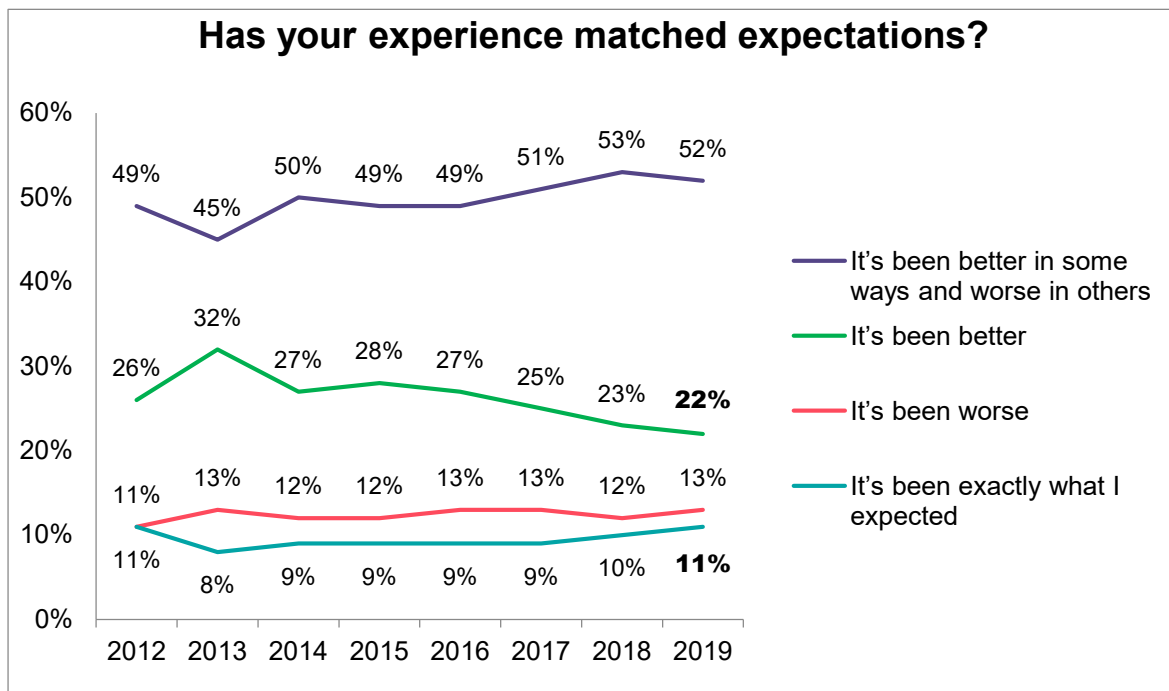
	Aged 21 and under (11,133)	Aged 26 and over (881)	Commute under 1 mile (1,528)	Commute 10 miles or more (2,841)
Student support services	59%	51%	63%	53%
Campus development	55%	44%	59%	48%
Careers services & resources	47%	37%	48%	41%
Sports & social facilities	34%	17%	38%	25%
Statistically significant differences between comparative cohorts in bold.				

4 Meeting expectations

4.1 Experience versus expectations

Such is the diverse and varied nature of the undergraduate experience that we continue to see a large proportion of students who found their experience better in some ways than expected but also worse in some ways. This is a logical finding and reflects a range of different starting points in terms of students' preparation – something which we explore via a new question covered in the next section.

Only just over one in five students (22%) found their experience wholly better than expected. Although this is declining, it is still a lot higher than the proportion that found their experience wholly worse than expected (13%).

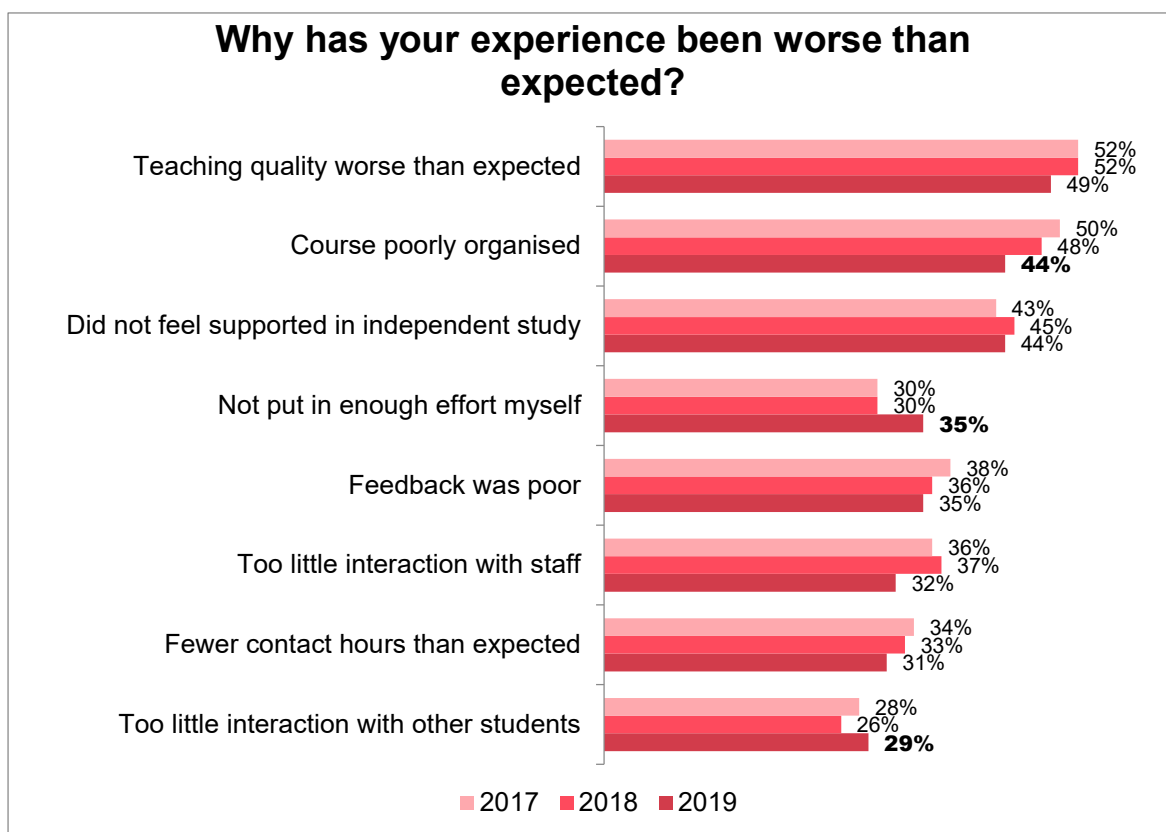


Base: All respondents. 2012 (9,058); 2013 (17,090); 2014 (15,046); 2015 (15,129); 2016 (15,221); 2017 (14,057); 2018 (14,046); 2019 (14,072). Statistically significant differences between 2018 and 2019 in bold.

What is perhaps most striking this year is the steady and consistent increase in the number of students that felt their time at university had been exactly as expected (11% this year, up from 8% back in 2013). This implies that the range of sources of information for students, either from institutions, schools, career services or from other dedicated forums, may be becoming more effective at preparing students for higher education.

4.2 Why expectations are not met

There are a range of reasons for expectations not being matched, some of which have grown in importance this year, while others have decreased in significance.



Base: All respondents whose experience has been wholly worse than expected. 2017 (1,769); 2018 (1,725); 2019 (1,763). Chart based on top eight mentions 2019. Statistically significant differences between 2018 and 2019 in bold.

The principal change has been in terms of students not putting in enough effort themselves – which is significantly more likely to be cited as a factor behind a less positive experience. This points towards students being aware of how they can shape their own experience, and indicates a willingness to take a certain amount of responsibility.

There is less evidence this year of poor course organisation or lack of access to staff, but by contrast the amount of interaction with other students is criticised somewhat, with a higher proportion of this cohort expecting more in this area.

4.3 Why expectations are exceeded

To complement the above analysis, we have introduced a new question this year which asked students why their experience has been better than expected.

The two most popular mentions are both related to challenge and effort – echoing the point made above that many students recognise their own responsibilities in terms of what they contribute to their own experience. Students clearly like to be challenged, and reasonably expect that they will be, often being prepared to make significant effort in return.

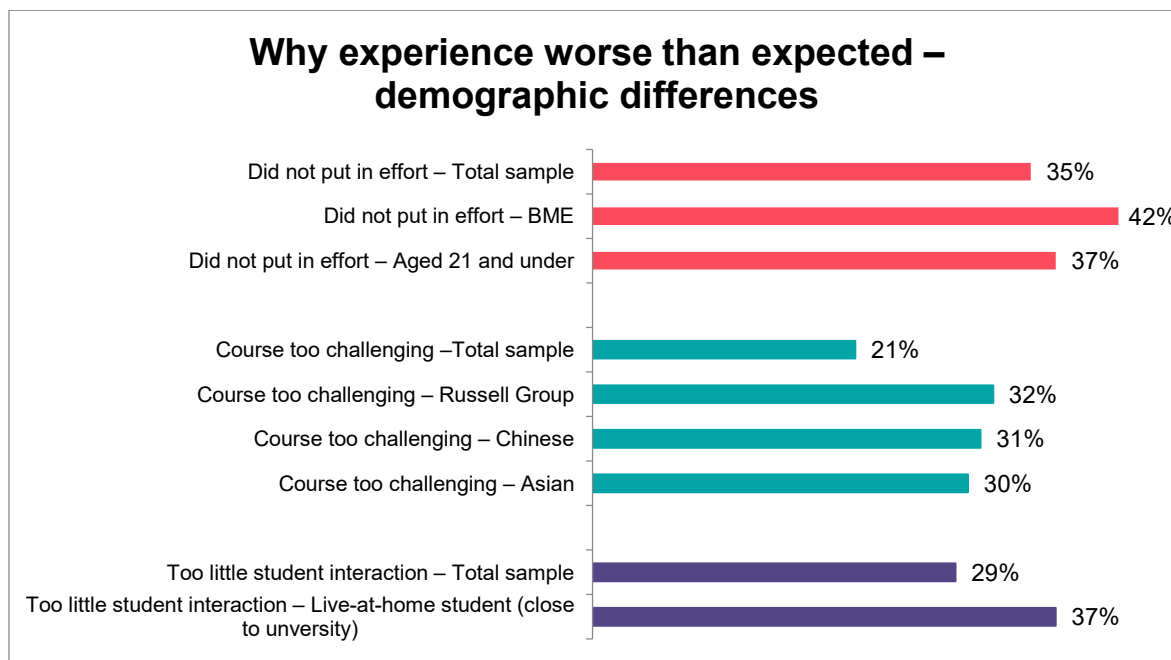
The other aspects cited also show what students regard as critical to the overall experience – student interaction, teaching quality, staff availability and course organisation.



Base: All respondents whose experience has been wholly better than expected (3,097).

4.4 Highlighting different expectations

Deeper analysis of the data identifies some key differences across the sample in terms of how expectations are met, and specifically the reasons for expectations not being met.



Base: All respondents whose experience has been wholly worse than expected (1,763).

The chart above identifies some major demographic differences in terms of three areas.

We discussed above how students are increasingly likely to feel they should have put in more effort themselves, and this is particularly prevalent among UK-domiciled BME students, who are significantly more likely to feel that their perceived lack of effort has hampered the quality of their experience.

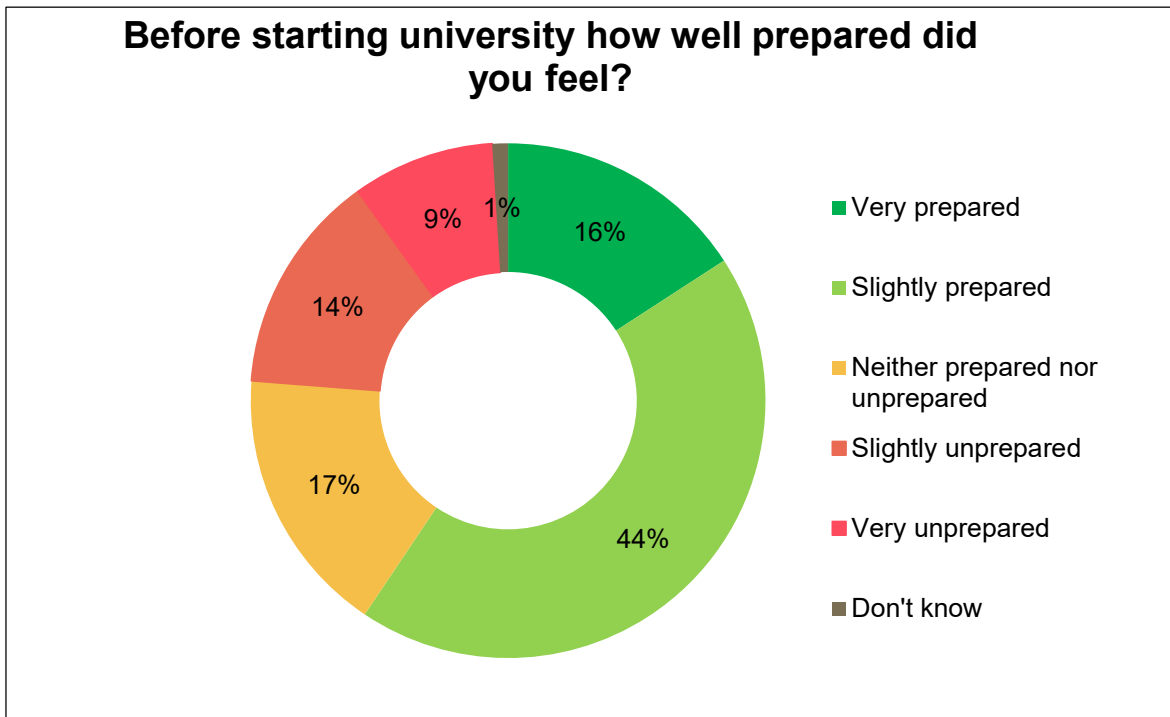
Although this displays an attitude which may be seen as admirable, it is perhaps concerning that this is polarised strongly towards the BME population – a group that we know from this year and previous years tend to have less positive views of their experience. Younger students are also likely to be critical of their own efforts. This implies that mature students tend to develop a more realistic view of the effort required in order to get the most out of their course.

The level of course challenge is also a concern among certain cohorts, despite generally being seen as a positive factor for many. Russell Group students are much more likely to cite the level of challenge as a concern, indicating that in some cases they were not ready to be tested in the way they were. It is also significant that course challenge is raised by Asian and Chinese students, which may partly explain their lower levels of learning gain and value-for-money perception, and may indicate a need for more targeted support.

One further area where there are differences among the sample is the opportunity to interact with other students. Students who live at home but who do not commute are particularly likely to feel that there is not enough interaction.⁸ For these students distance is not a barrier, but it appears that because they do not live with other students then the amount of interaction with their peers is proving to be less than they expected. As such, this group may benefit from learning methods which require specific partnership working.

4.5 How prepared are students before they begin university?

To add further context to the themes of expectations and value-for-money, the survey introduced a new question this year to ask how prepared students felt when they began university. Students have access to a wide range of information from numerous sources, including schools, family members, peer advice, public information portals, and private guidance forums, in addition to the role played by universities, and the results below show that in general there is a fairly good perception of preparation.

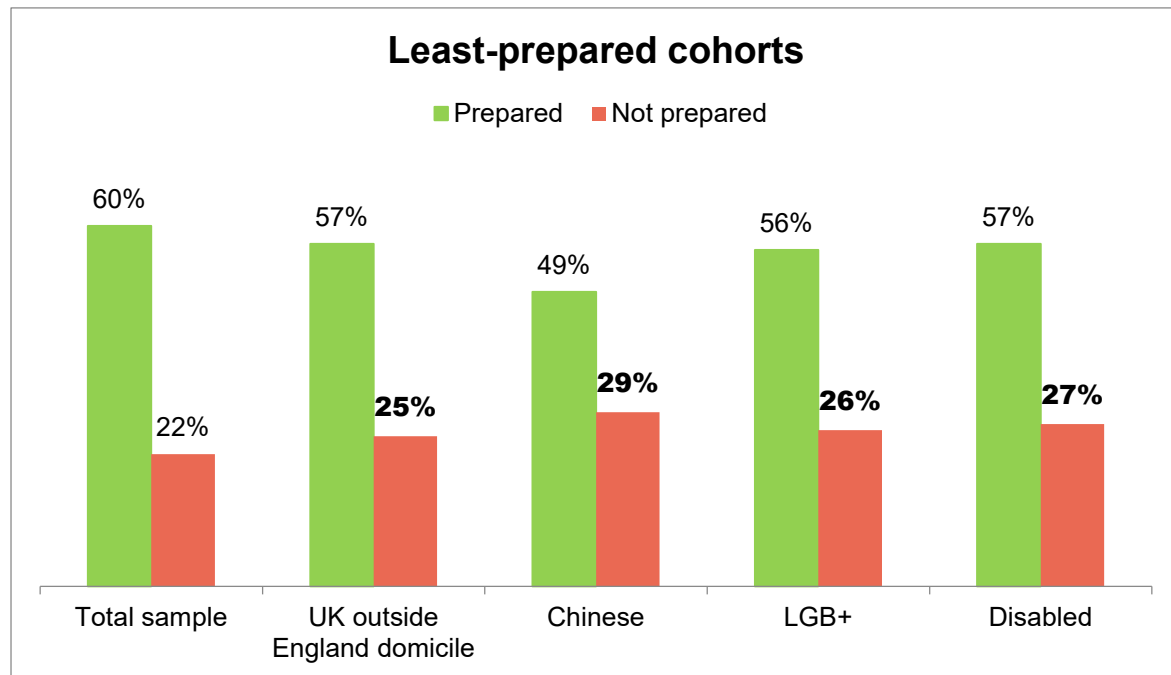


Base: All respondents (14,072).

⁸ Defined here as students living at home / with family or on their own and no more than 5 miles from campus.

Only around one in five students (22%) felt unprepared, which is relatively encouraging. Nearly three times as many (60%) did feel prepared to some extent. There were relatively few students (16%) that said they felt very prepared, which is perhaps understandable for such a watershed moment in life, and hence feeling fully prepared is not necessarily to be expected as all the information available cannot substitute for actual experience.

This question also pinpoints students from different backgrounds who said they feel less prepared than others.

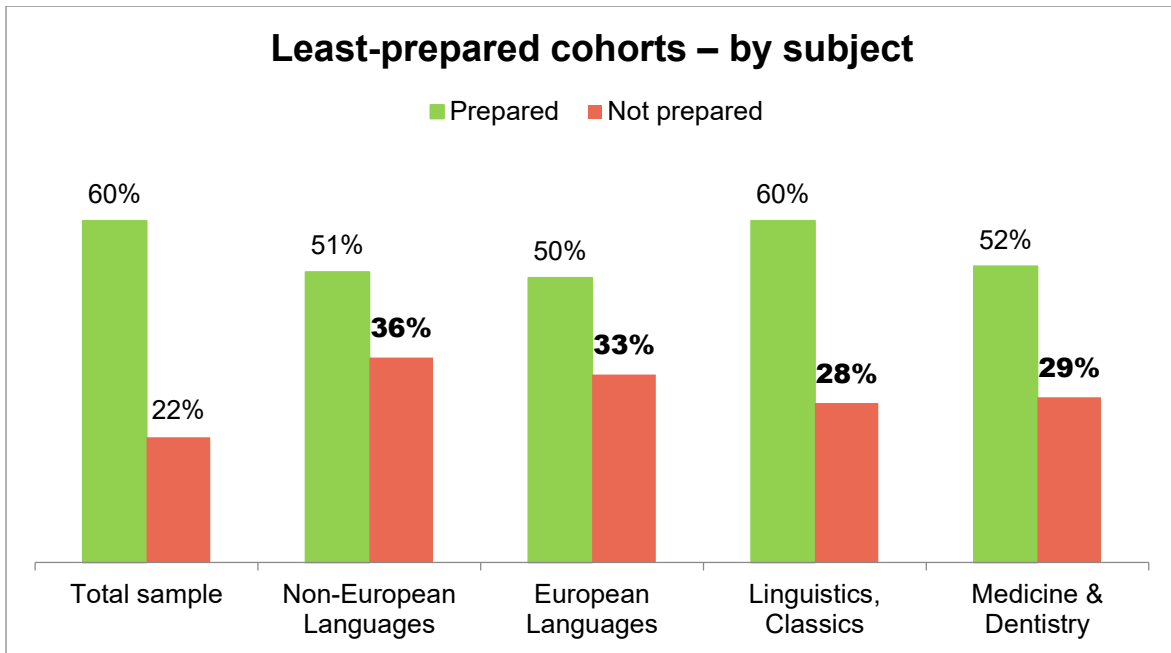


Base: Total sample (14,072); UK outside England (1,567); Chinese (177); LGB+ (2,131); Disabled (2,298). Statistically significant differences compared to total sample in bold.

Chinese students were the least prepared demographic group, 29% of whom felt unprepared compared to an average of 22%. We will see later in our analysis of learning gain that Chinese students are less likely than average to report they have learnt a lot, and hence a perceived lack of preparation may be a contributing factor. LGB+ and disabled students also felt less prepared than average which points towards a need for targeted information and guidance.⁹

There also appears to be a difference between students from different parts of the UK, with students from England being more likely to say they feel prepared (61% – not charted here) compared to students from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (57% – see chart).

⁹ The term LGB+ denotes 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.



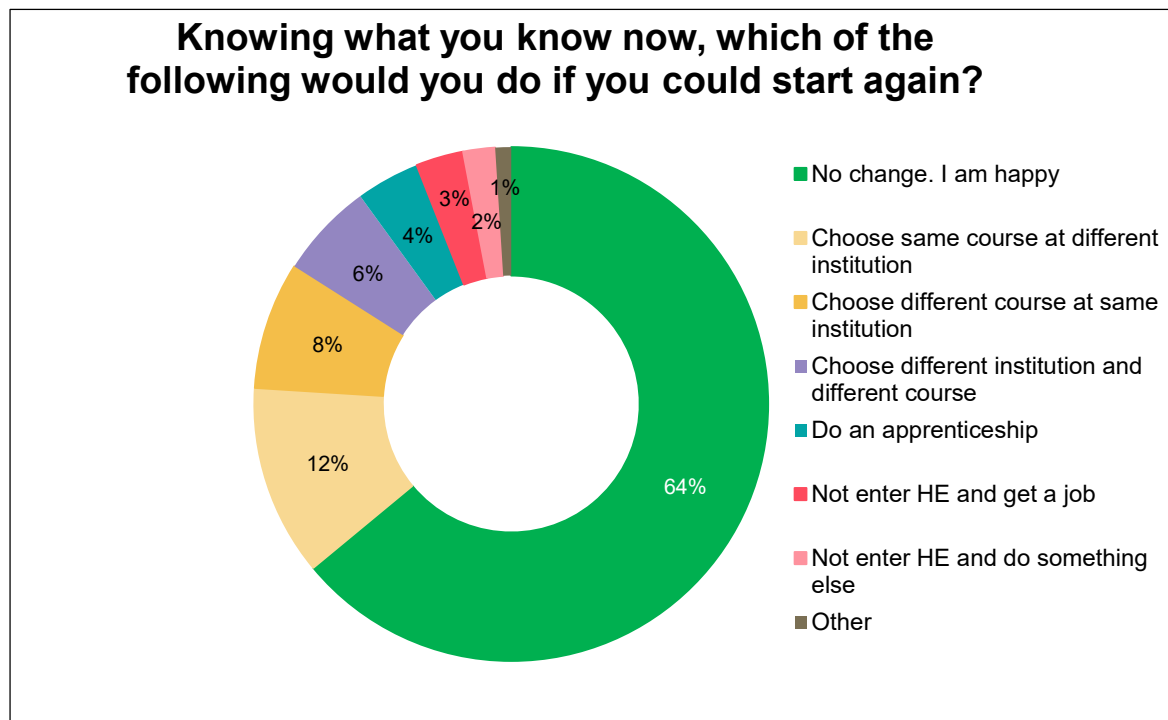
Base: All respondents (14,072), by JACS subject areas. Statistically significant differences compared to total sample in bold.

When it comes to students feeling prepared, there is strong variation between subjects. It is significant that 3 of the 4 subjects with lowest levels of preparedness are Languages, along with Medicine, which we will see later in the report are the subjects where learning gain is the highest.

What may be behind this is the perceived high level of learning and progression required upon embarking on the course and how this compares to the prior attainment achieved in school or college – something that is explored later in this report in the section on learning gain.

5 Appraisal of choice made

Last year (2018) we introduced a new question to probe more thoroughly into students' assessment of their choices, and whether, given the chance again, they would have chosen a different course, institution, or both. This year we have improved this question to better reflect the range of options available, including choosing an apprenticeship.

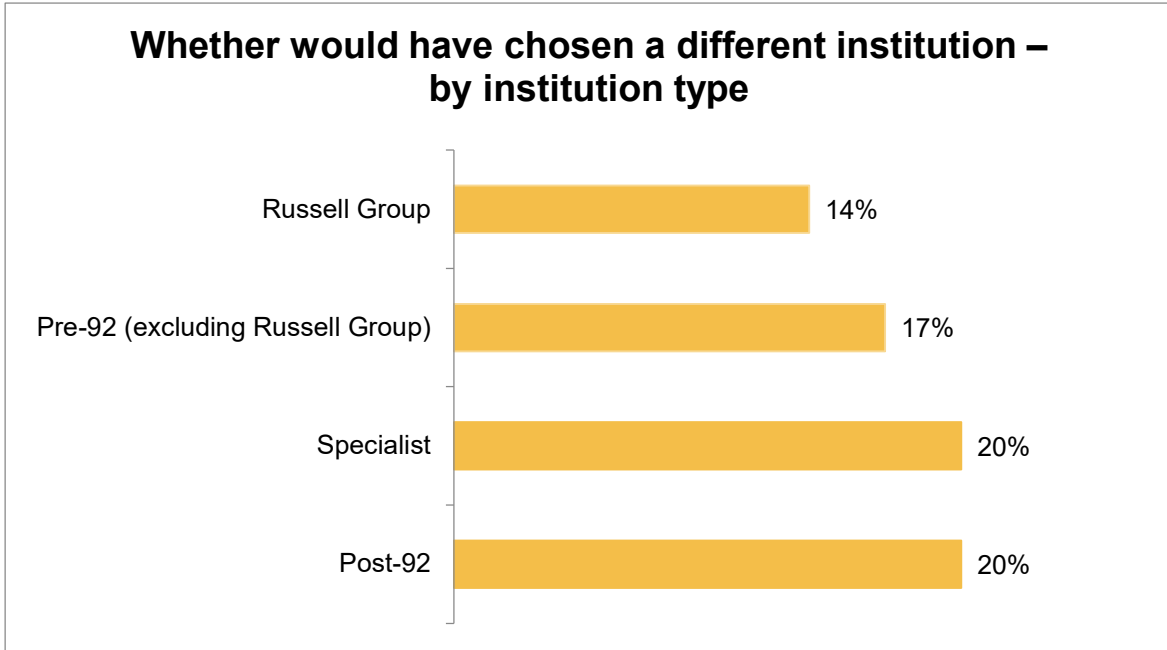


Base: All respondents (14,072).

Overall, a high proportion of students (64%) are happy with their choice, with most of those who are not entirely happy feeling they would change institution and / or course. Just 4% would choose an apprenticeship, but it will be interesting to see if this proportion increases over time as apprenticeships become more embedded within higher as well as further education.

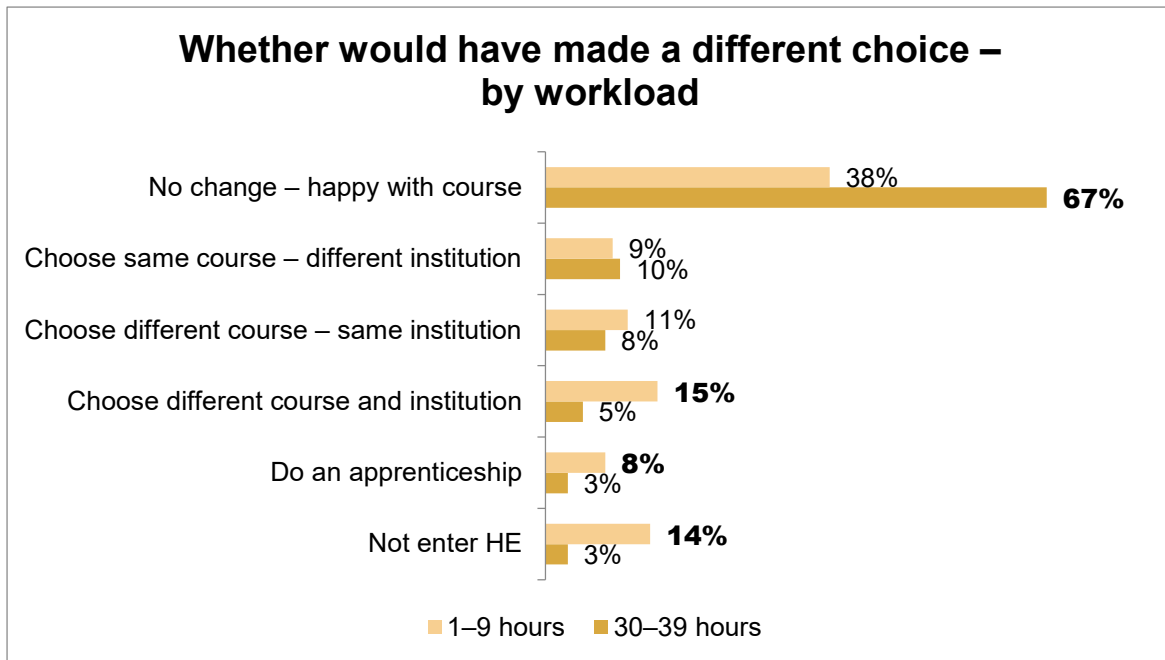
Although we have extended the range of options, the results are broadly comparable to last year, when 65% were happy with the choice they made, indicating that despite different expectations and feelings of preparedness, significant regret about the choices made tends to be relatively uncommon.

If they were to make a different choice, students would be most likely to seek a change in their institution rather than the course, and as the chart below shows, this is particularly prevalent among Post 92 as well as Specialist institutions. We have seen that Specialist institutions are generally associated with strong value-for-money, and indeed a positive overall experience so this result is perhaps surprising, but may indicate a desire to follow a less specialist path.



Base: Russell Group (3,920); Pre-92 (3,073); Specialist (203); Post-92 (6,833).

There are arguably three main factors that are strongly related to whether or not a student is satisfied with their choice – workload, ethnicity and living arrangements, each of which are illustrated below.

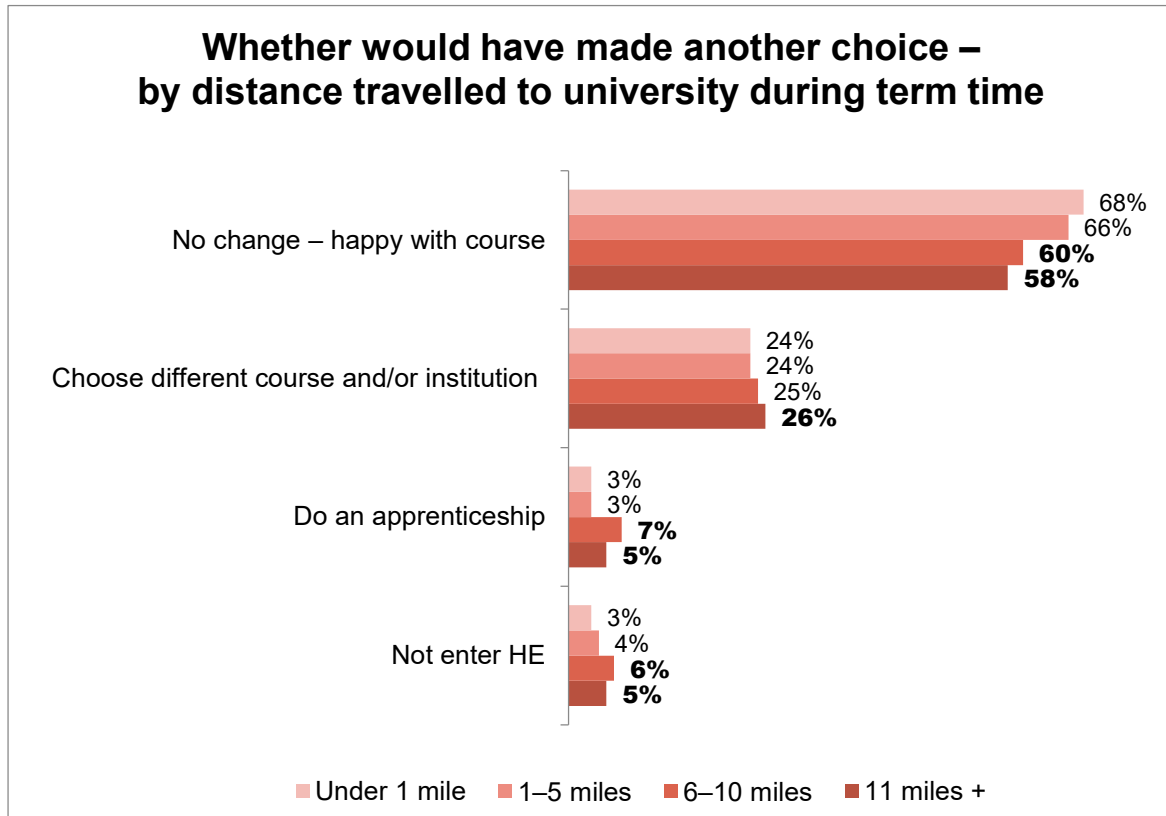


Base: 1–9 hours total workload (233); 30–39 hours total workload (2,913). Total workload includes taught and independent study as well as time on fieldwork / placements. Statistically significant differences between cohorts in bold.

The difference in perceptions by workload is striking. Among the small proportion of students with a weekly workload of less than 10 hours, the majority would have made another choice, including a notable proportion that would have begun an apprenticeship or not entered higher education at all. By contrast, if a student has between 30 and 39 hours of total workload then they are highly likely to be satisfied with their choice. Interestingly, above 40 hours of workload still leads to general satisfaction with the choice, but not quite as high as between 30 and 39 hours.

At the other end of the scale, there is a large jump in satisfaction between 0–9 hours (28% happy with their choice) and 10–19 hours (58%), indicating that it is mainly at very low levels of workload where the most problems arise.

In addition to differences by course and workload, there are also differences by distance travelled to university.

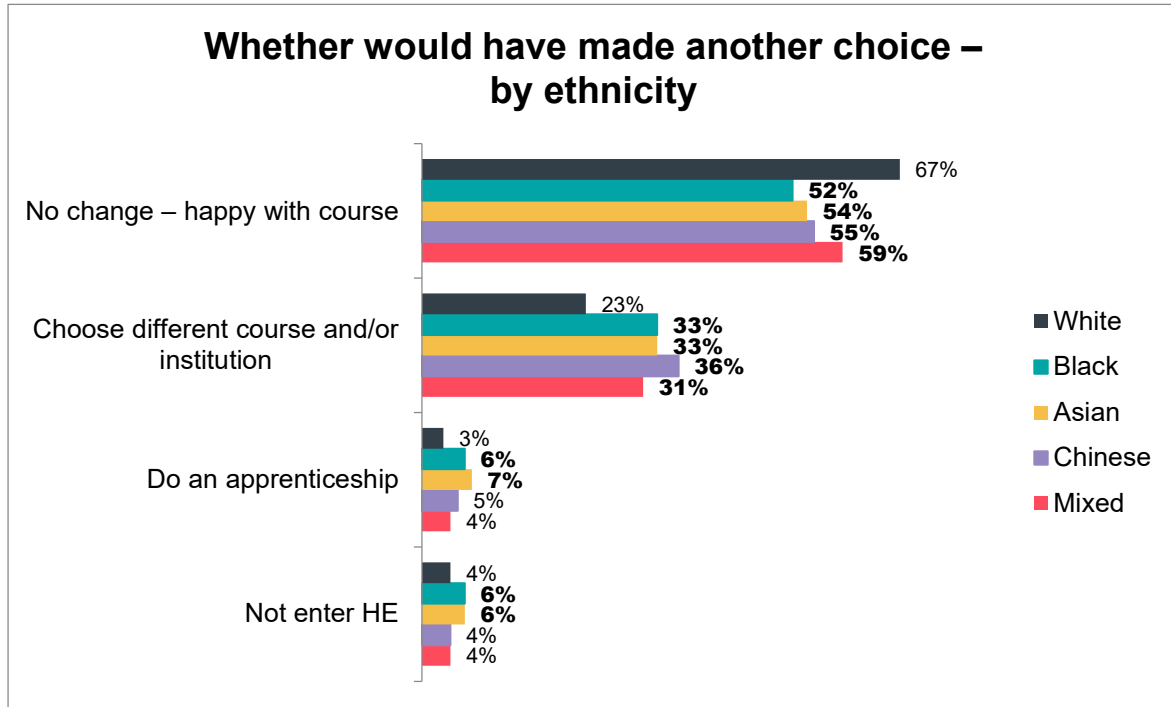


Base: Under 1 mile (1,528); 1–5 miles (7,145); 6–10 miles (1,077); 11 miles+ (2,841). Distance travelled based on term-time address. Statistically significant differences compared 'Under 1 mile' cohort in bold.

Those who travel on a daily basis for more than five miles to get to campus are less satisfied with their choice and more likely in particular to consider an apprenticeship or not entering higher education at all. There is relatively little difference between travelling under one mile or travelling up to five miles, which is logical given that a great deal of student accommodation in larger towns and cities is spread throughout the urban area and not always right next to campus. Commuting relatively long distances is particularly common in London (6–10 miles in particular) and Eastern England (10 miles or more). Accordingly, students studying in London are least likely (56%) to be happy with their choice, while students from universities in the East of England are most likely (17%) to say they would have gone to a different institution to do the same course.

Perhaps the most striking differences across this aspect of student opinion, as displayed below, is between UK-domiciled students of different ethnic backgrounds. There appears to be a major contrast in the experience between White and BME students, who are much less likely to be completely satisfied with their choice. BME students of all categories are particularly likely to say they would have chosen another course and / or institution, implying that they are still keen on the idea of higher education, but that for whatever reason(s), they do not feel they have made the right choice.

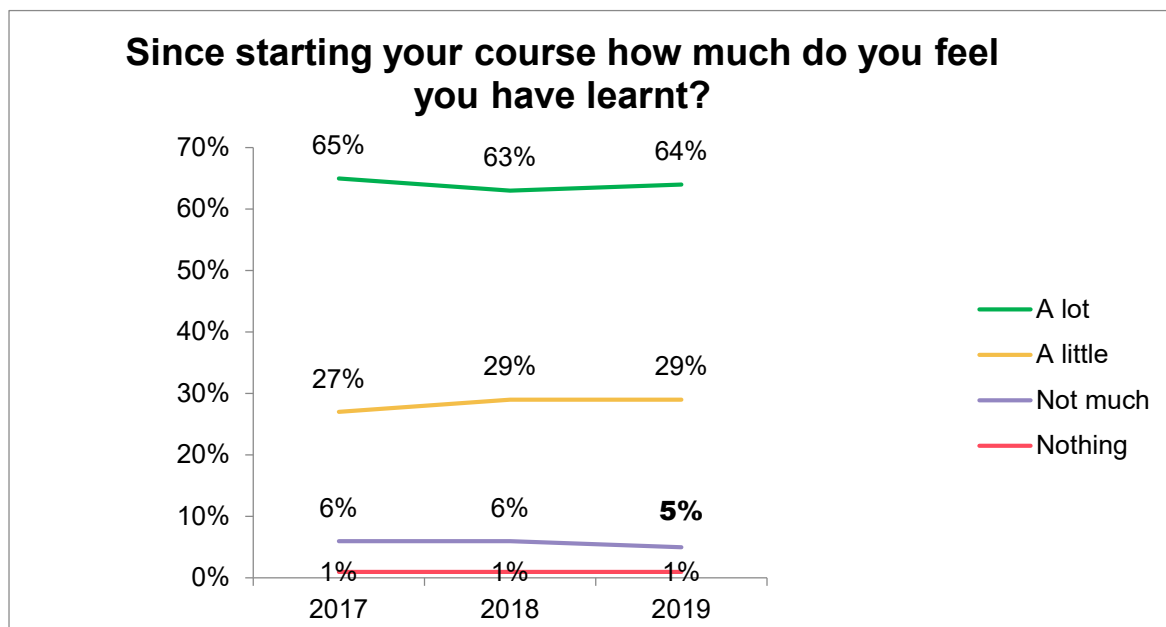
We know that relatively high proportions of Asian students in particular live at home, which can cause isolation from other students, but we also know from previous analysis in 2018 that living arrangements alone do not explain the differing experiences of BME students. Hence, while we have seen generally that levels of expectations, preparedness and satisfaction with choice are generally positive among the sample in general, there appears to be more work to do across the sector to ensure that BME students are provided with the right information and guidance so that they have realistic expectations and that they choose the right course and institution for them.



Base: UK-domicile. White (9,255); Black (362); Asian (1,493); Chinese (177); Mixed (548). Statistically significant differences compared to White cohort in bold.

6 How much do students learn?

In 2017 we introduced a question asking students how much they felt they had learnt from their higher education experience. We refer to this question as ‘learning gain’ and include it here as a straightforward measure of self-assessment, while recognising that the concept of learning gain itself has been addressed elsewhere in the sector through a range of more technical approaches.



Base: All respondents. 2017 (14,057); 2018 (14,046); 2019 (14,072).

As this chart demonstrates, there has been no change in overall learning over time. This is perhaps to be expected, as this survey represents a snapshot of undergraduate students at different stages of learning rather than a longitudinal study of one particular cohort over time. However, given the presence of the TEF and the Learning Gain initiative, and the continuous focus on improvement across the sector, we may reasonably hope to see a change in this measure over the longer term.

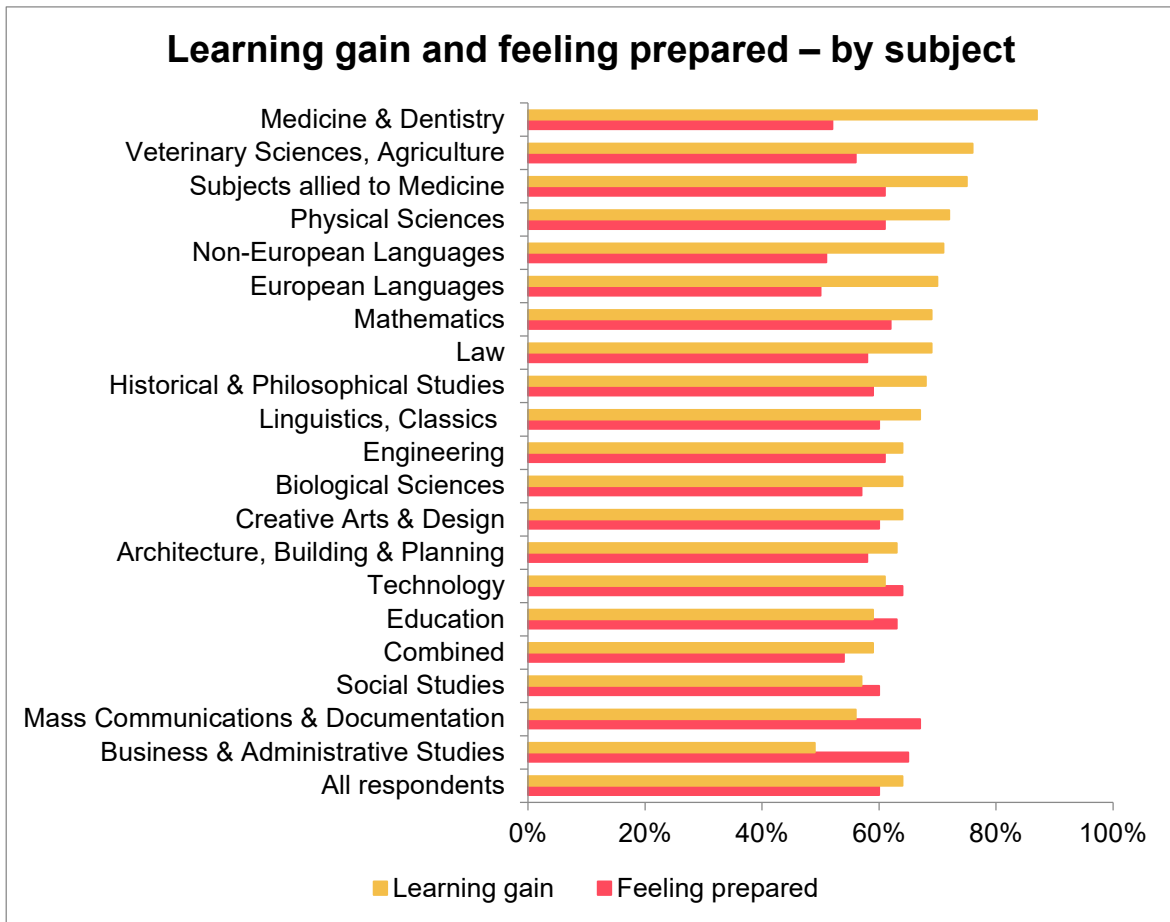
What this does tell us, however, is that students do consistently recognise they are learning and developing, and that they generally feel this is substantial. Two-thirds of students (64%) feel they have learnt a lot, a further 29% feel they have learnt a little, and just 6% feel they have learnt not much, or nothing.

Although learning gain is generally high, there are some differences by institution. We have seen in previous reports how Russell Group and Specialist institutions tend to score higher on this question (which is again the case this year), while we have also identified stronger perceptions among students at TEF Gold institutions, as illustrated below. However, as we will see later in the report, Russell Group and TEF Gold institutions do not necessarily score highest in terms of teaching or assessment quality, which implies that higher perceived learning gain may be related to other factors such as facilities, resources, student support or even perceived reputation. This in turn may be influencing higher value-for-money perceptions of TEF Gold and Russell Group institutions, as seen earlier in the report.

Learning Gain – by TEF award			
	Gold (5,676)	Silver (6,481)	Bronze (729)
Learnt a lot	66%	62%	62%

Statistically significant differences compared to Gold institutions in bold.

One area where there are major differences in perceived learning is by subject, as evidenced in the following chart, which also compares learning gain to levels of preparedness, identifying a potential reverse link between the two.



Base: All respondents (14,072), by JACS subject areas. Learning gain defined as ‘Learnt a lot’. Feeling prepared defined as ‘Very or slightly prepared’.

Health subjects stand out as being associated with high levels of learning, which is in keeping with high value-for-money perceptions (not charted this year but shown in previous reports) and high levels of workload (charted in the following sections). What is also evident is the position of Languages towards the top of this list, despite the generally low levels of taught workload.

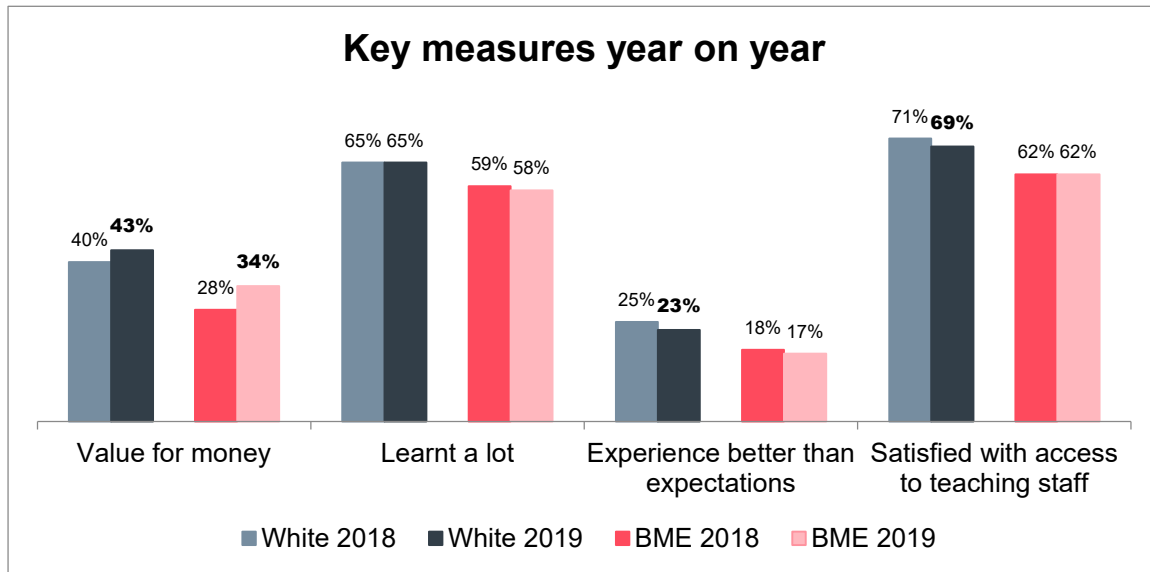
When we compare learning gain with levels of preparedness, however, we see a notable contrast, in that broadly the subjects with the highest learning gain are those where students (subsequently said they) felt less prepared, and vice-versa. This may imply that students studying Languages and Medicine, for example, did not always feel that their previous studies at school / college prepared them for the academic challenge and development that was required of them.

By contrast, this appears to suggest that for some undergraduates in social science subjects such as Business and Communications, their courses may not always be stretching their knowledge significantly beyond what they already feel they knew.

These data also challenge the concept that feeling prepared is always a good thing, or that not feeling prepared is always a bad thing, as it may be argued that feeling slightly prepared but then being challenged is an ideal middle ground.

7 Spotlight on different student groups

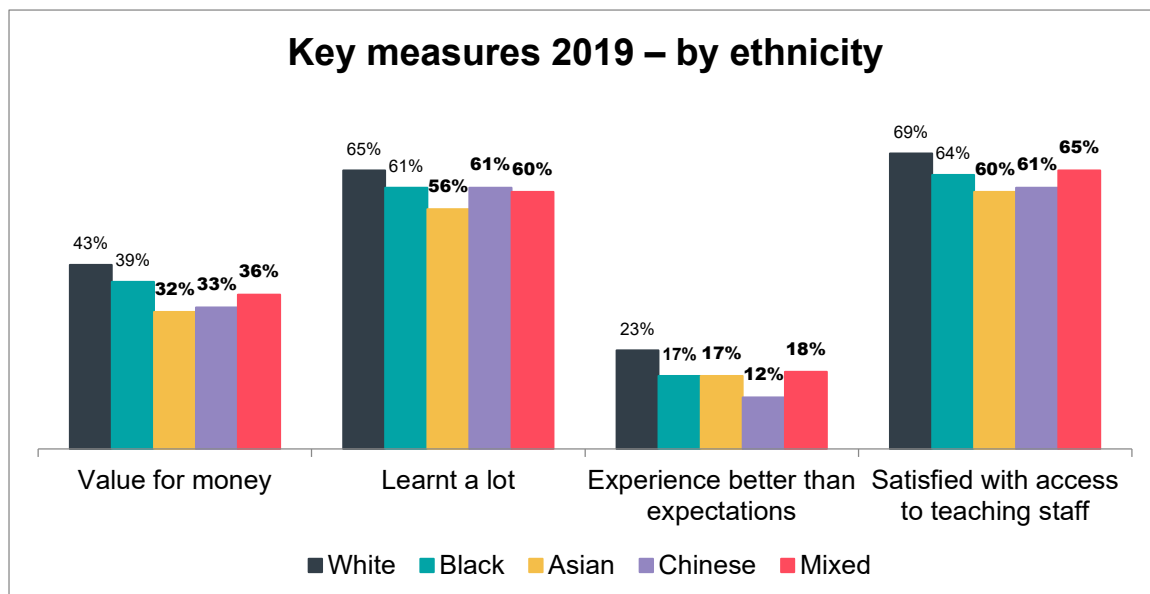
7.1 Ethnicity



Base: UK-domicile. White (2018: 9,492 / 2019: 9,255); BME (2,521 / 2,579). Statistically significant differences between 2018 and 2019 in bold.

Comparing four key measures in the Survey – value-for-money, learning gain, meeting expectations and access to teaching staff – by ethnicity clearly highlights how the BME experience is often less satisfactory overall. Although this chart highlights the last two years, this difference in experience has been fairly consistent over a longer period of time. We also know from other sections in this report that BME students are less satisfied with teaching, and are more likely to feel they have not put enough effort into their studies.

On a more encouraging note, it is good news that value-for-money has increased significantly among BME students as well as White students, reflecting the trend across the total sample.



Base: UK-domicile. White (9,255); Black (362); Asian (1,493); Chinese (177); Mixed (548). Statistically significant differences compared to White cohort in bold.

Looking specifically at different ethnic groups within the BME category, Asian and Chinese students tend to have the least satisfactory experience, while the results among Black and Mixed students are much closer to the average – something we have also seen in previous years. We now have consistent robust evidence that Asian and Chinese students in particular have different expectations of university that are not always matched by aspects of their experience, such as the way they are taught, the content of the course or access to the staff. Hence, there appears to be a need for a tailored approach to providing information to help these students feel more prepared and to know how to obtain more support from teaching staff if they need it.

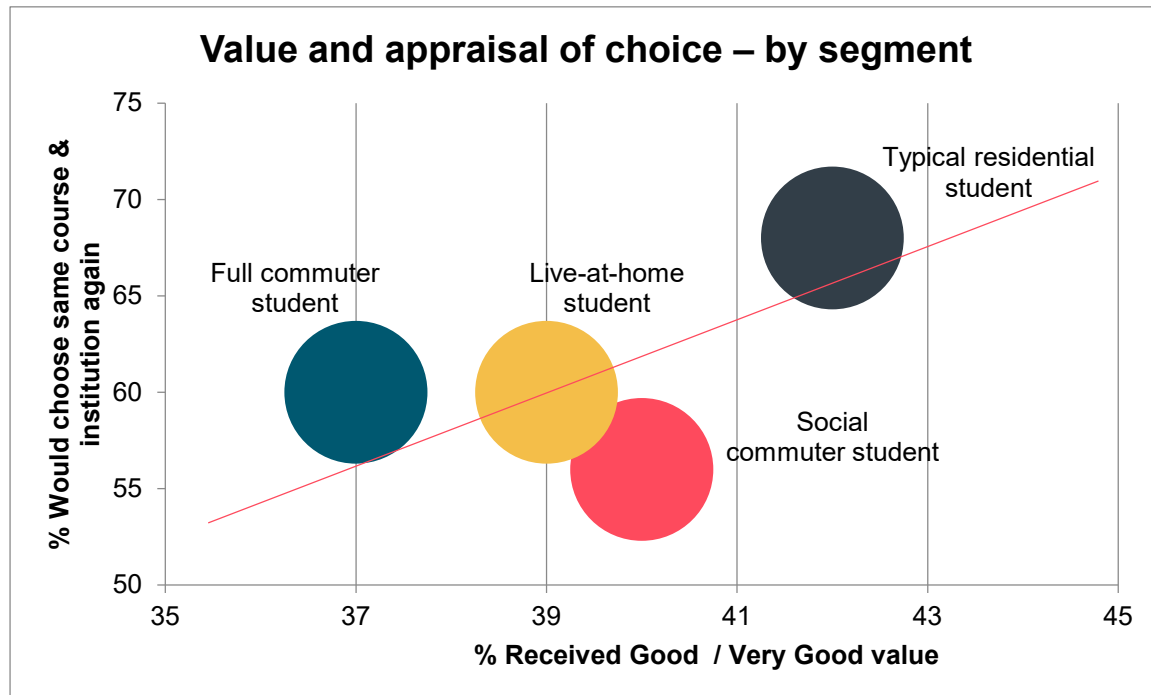
7.2 Accommodation and distance travelled

We know from previous editions of this report that both living arrangements and commuting distance can impact significantly on the student experience. Analysis conducted by HEPI late in 2018 took this analysis a step further by combining both elements to create four distinct segments which we have broadly aimed to replicate using the data from our Survey.¹⁰ The table below details the four segments, along with their definitions, and identifies the demographic and classification groups that they have a higher propensity than average (according to the data) to fall within.

	Close to campus (up to 5 miles)	Far from campus (more than 5 miles)
Live with other students	<p>‘Typical’ residential student</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No paid employment • Russell Group • England outside London university region • Aged 21 and under • White • Chinese • POLAR 5 • From rural area 	<p>‘Social’ commuter student</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1–9 hours paid employment • Pre-92 • South East outside London university region • 4th year + undergraduates • Black • Northern Ireland domicile • Disability
Live with parents / family / on their own	<p>‘Live-at-home’ student</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Post-92 • London university region • Scotland domicile • Asian • POLAR 1-2 • From urban area 	<p>‘Full’ commuter student</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10+ hours paid employment • Post-92 • London university region • Scotland domicile • Aged 26+ • First in family

¹⁰ David Maguire and David Morris, *Homeward Bound: Defining, Understanding and Aiding ‘Commuter Students’*, HEPI Report 114, December 2018

As this profile shows, there are major geographical and demographic differences between the segments. Typical residential students tend to display many characteristics opposite to those of 'full commuter' students (i.e. younger, from more affluent backgrounds, Russell Group, outside London), who in turn share some characteristics with the 'live-at-home' segment (i.e. older, BME, Post-92, less affluent). 'Social' commuter students tend to have their own set of characteristics.



Base: UK-domicile. Typical residential student (7,263); Social commuter student (1,284); Live-at-home student (1,349); Full commuter student (2,390).

There is a clear and logical link between value received and opinion of the choice made of course / institution. In terms of the segments in our analysis, the link between commuting and living arrangements on the quality of the experience is clear, with typical residential students significantly more likely to report good value and satisfaction with their choice than full commuter students, who report the least satisfactory experience overall.

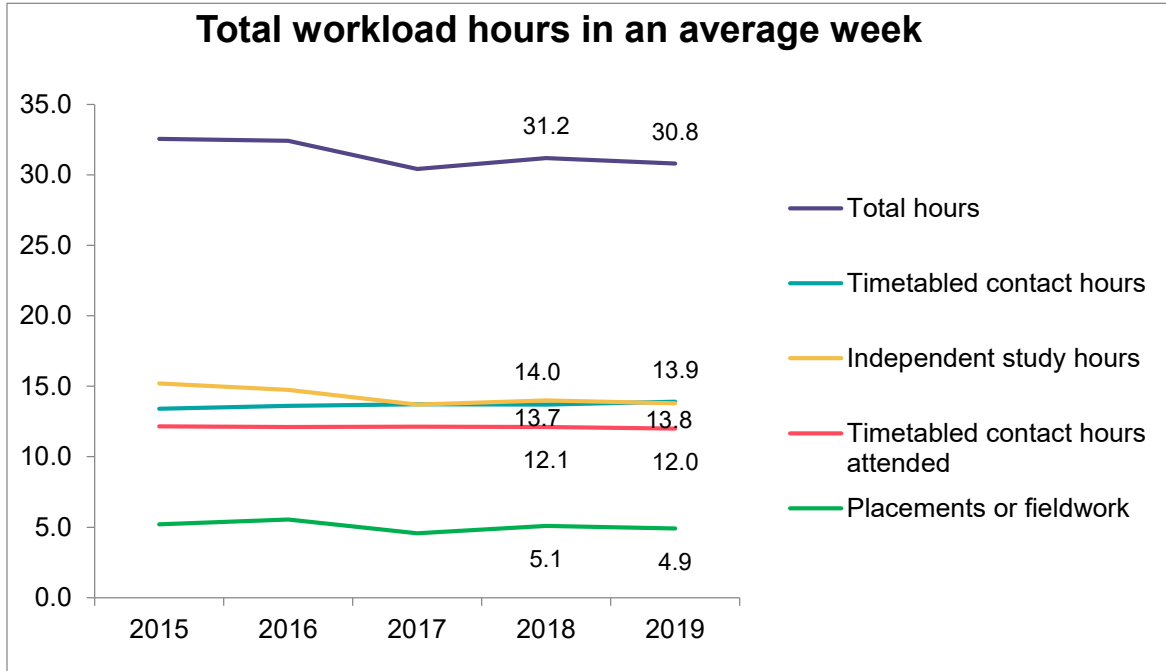
The difference between the other two segments is more nuanced, with live-at-home students (i.e. close to university) more likely to say they would make the same choice again but less positive on value, while social commuter students (live with other students but far away) are more positive on value-for-money but the least likely to say they would make the same choice again.

These findings may be seen to imply that a typical residential experience (living with other students, close to university) is somehow necessary in order to get the most out of university. However, there are a range of reasons – economic, personal, geographic – which drive other choices being made, and the more that institutions can continue to make provision for students living in a variety of different situations and locations, the more inclusive the experience will become.

In conducting the analysis in this section, we recognise that there is an element of overlap between living arrangements and ethnicity, with Asian students in particular being more likely to live at home rather than with other students. However, in statistical analysis from 2018 we identified that there were still differences in results by ethnicity and living arrangements even when the overlap between groups was removed, and hence we have discussed both elements separately in this report, as they are both believed to be important factors in their own right.

8 Teaching intensity

8.1 Workload trends



Base: All respondents. 2015 (15,129); 2016 (15,221); 2017 (14,057); 2018 (14,046); 2019 (14,072).

There is evidence of a small but continuing decline in independent study (13.8 hours in 2019 compared to 15.2 in 2015), against a small but regular increase in timetabled study hours (13.9 hours in 2019 compared to 13.4 hours in 2015).¹¹

Despite this increase in timetabled hours, the proportion of these hours being attended is falling, which, together with a slight decline in work outside the university and independent study, has contributed to a small drop in overall workload this year.

Overall, however, many of the figures on this chart have remained remarkably consistent over time, with perhaps the most lasting change being that timetabled hours have overtaken independent study, representing quite a shift since 2015.

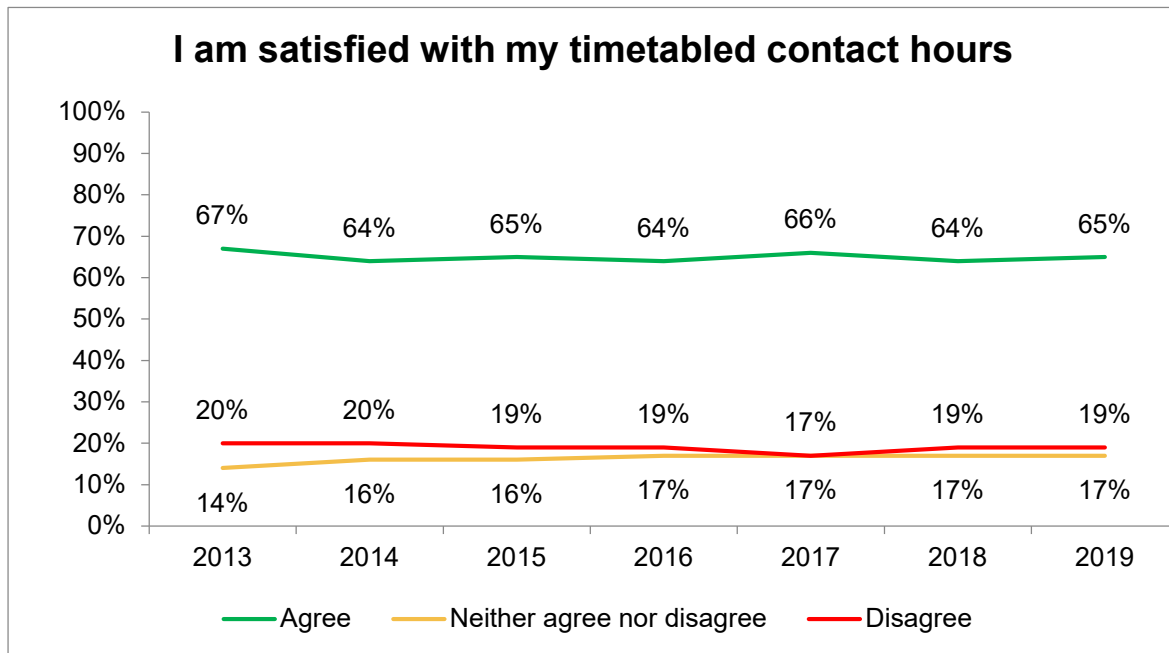
In analysing workload, we need to take into account that students often need to balance this with significant amounts of time spent in paid employment. It is striking that time spent in employment is increasing consistently, which is likely to be increasing pressure on how students manage their time.

Time spent in paid employment			
	2017 (14,057)	2018 (14,046)	2019 (14,072)
Hours spent in paid employment unrelated to your course	4.4	4.7	4.8

¹¹ For all references to workload hours, mean including zero used. No exceptions.

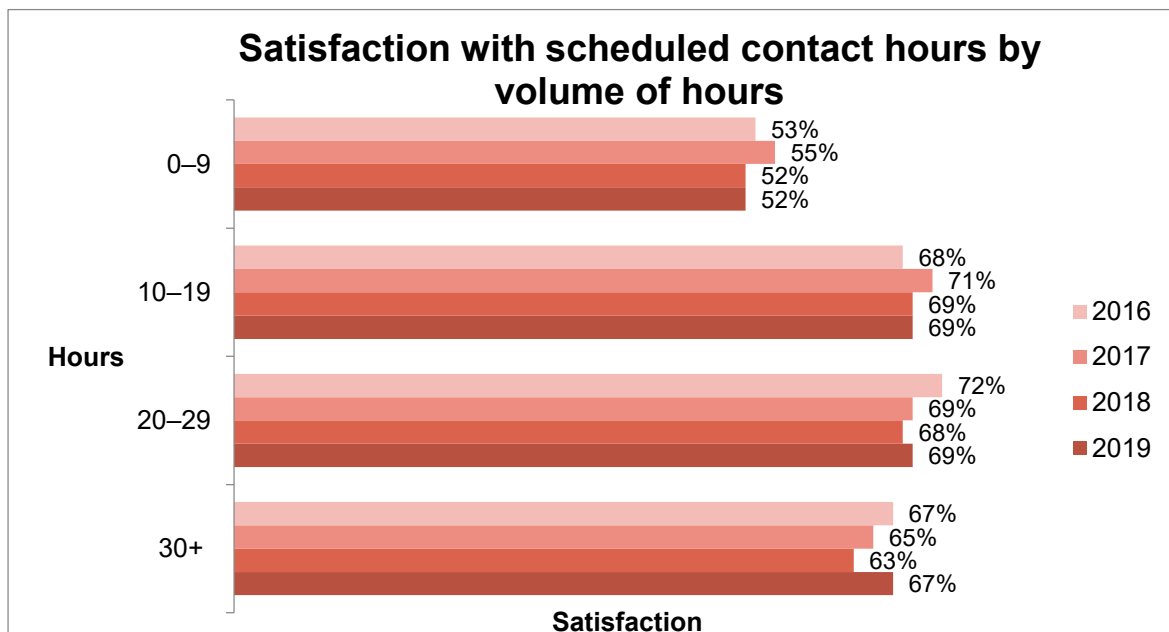
8.2 Satisfaction with contact hours

Just as the number of timetabled contact hours has increased slightly, so has the level of satisfaction with it, although the increase from 64% to 65% overall is not statistically significant.



Base: All respondents. 2013 (17,090); 2014 (15,046); 2015 (15,129); 2016 (15,221); 2017 (14,057); 2018 (14,046); 2019 (14,072). Statistically significant differences between 2017 and 2018 in bold.

Satisfaction levels are directly linked to the number of contact hours, with only around one in two students feeling satisfied if they have fewer than 10 hours per week. In previous years we have seen a peak in satisfaction linked to an optimal range of contact hours: either 10–19 or 20–29. This year, however, students with the highest number of hours (30+) are still very likely to be satisfied, indicating that they see this as one of the main barometers of their experience.

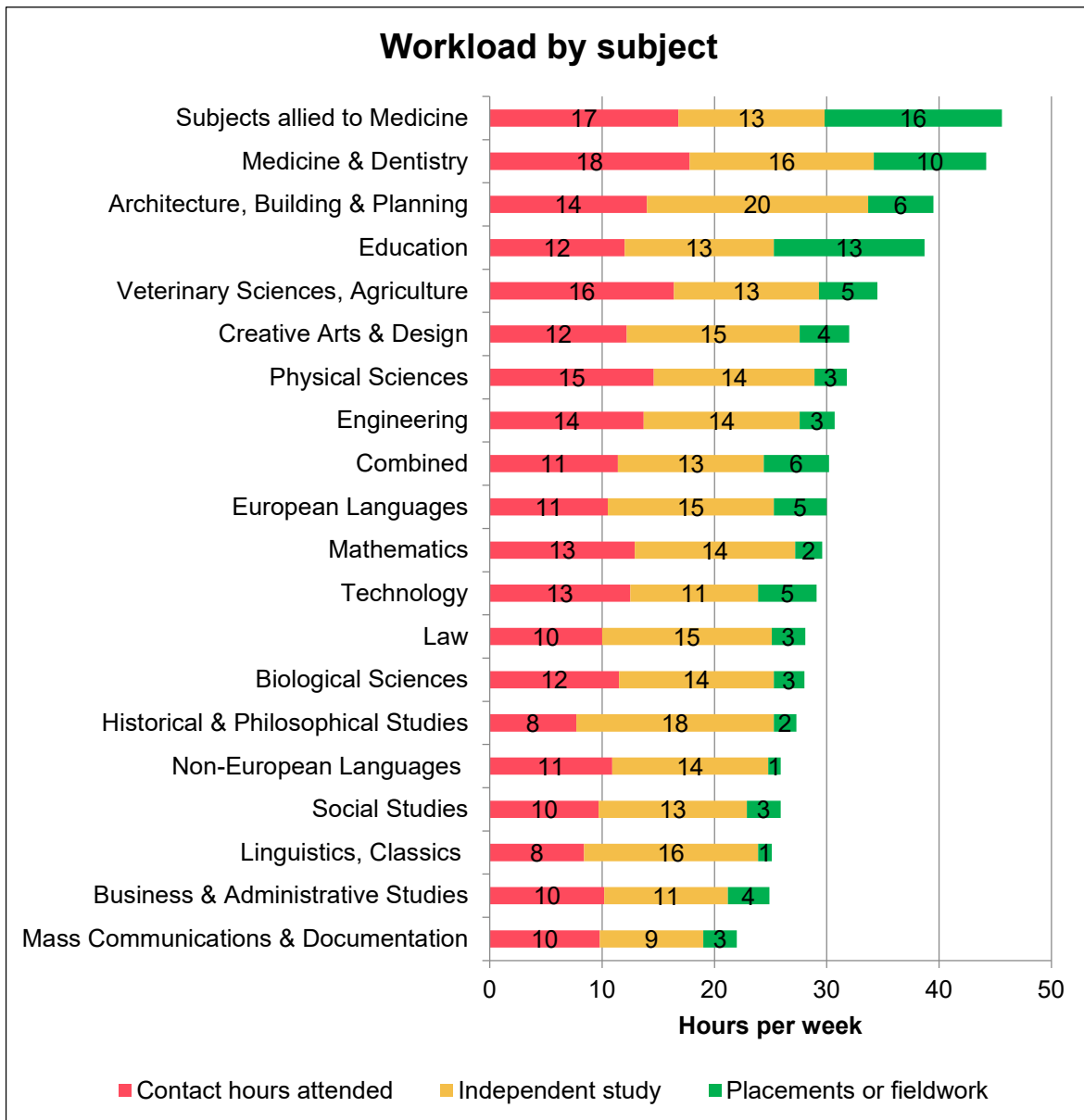


Base: 0–9 hours. (4,395 in 2016 / 4,054 in 2017 / 4,056 in 2018 / 3,849 in 2019); 10–19 hours (8,006 / 7,380 / 7,369 / 7,477); 20–29 hours (2,097 / 1,939 / 1,936 / 2,064); 30+ hours (723 / 685 / 685 / 682).

8.3 Workload by subject

Once again we see Subjects allied to Medicine, and Medicine itself, reporting the highest overall workload, contrasting with a much lower reported workload in Communications, Business and Linguistics.

Looking at types of workload, we see how independent study is of particular importance in Languages and History, and taught contact hours are relatively high for STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) subjects, while fieldwork and placements are a key element for Health disciplines.

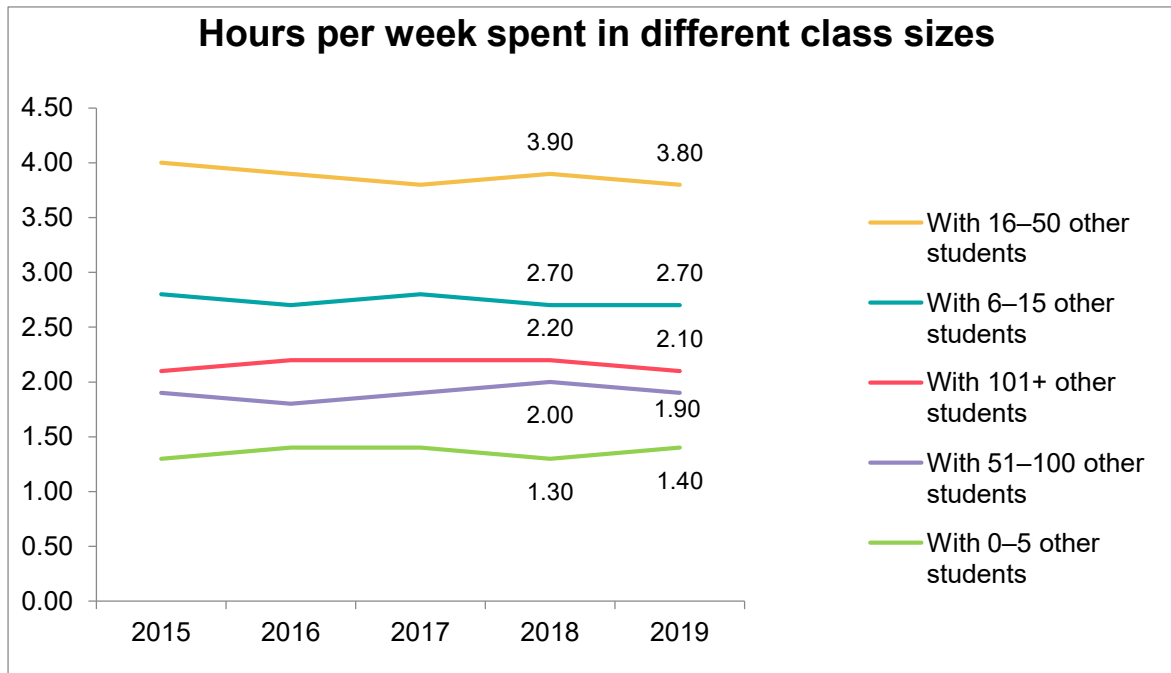


Base: All respondents (14,072), by JACS subject areas.

We can infer from this data that workload itself is not the only driver of learning gain, as workload hours for Languages are towards the bottom of the scale but levels of learning gain are among the highest.

8.4 Class size

As well as tracking workload, another key aspect of teaching intensity that we have been able to monitor over several waves of the Survey is the amount of time spent in classes of different sizes.

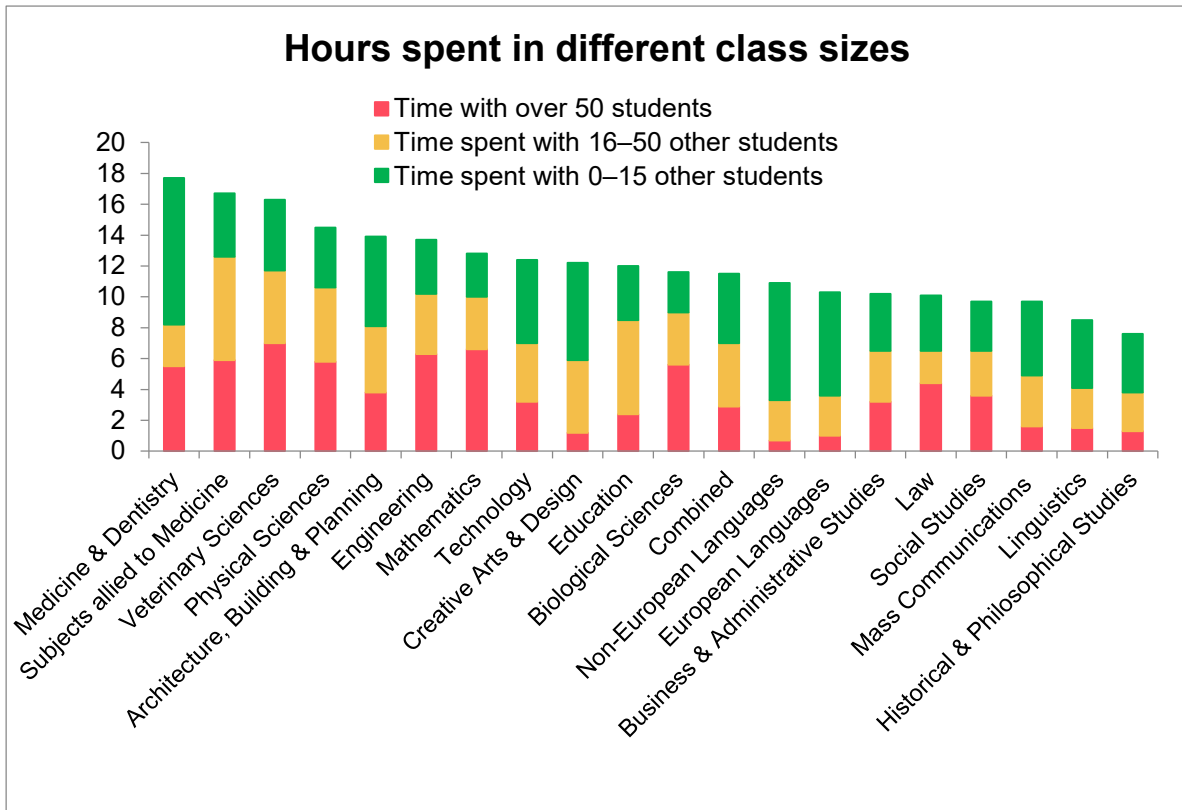


Base: All respondents. 2015 (15,129); 2016 (15,221); 2017 (14,057); 2018 (14,046); 2019 (14,072).

The most common class size by some distance is in the 16–50 range, although smaller sizes of 6–15 students are also widespread. Generally, relatively large sizes are fairly commonplace, with very small classes of 0–5 students being relatively infrequent.

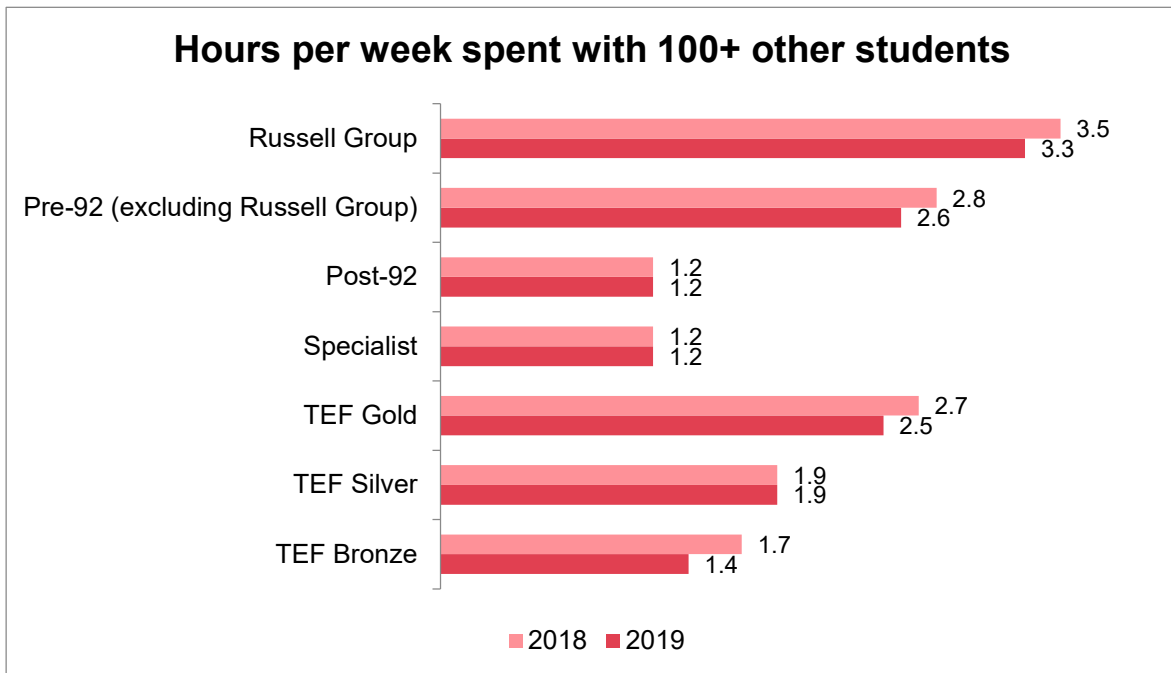
In previous years we saw a small but regular increase in class sizes, but this year there is evidence of smaller class sizes, as time spent with 0–5 other students has increased slightly and the number of hours spent in classes of 51–100 or 101+ has decreased.

In terms of volume, STEM students spend the most time in large classes, although Social Science subjects with lower overall workload such as Law and Social Studies deliver a relatively high proportion of their lessons in large classes. Small class sizes are most prevalent in Languages and Medicine, and it is potentially significant that these subjects are the ones where students report they have learned the most – as described in the earlier section on learning gain.



Base: All respondents (14,072), by JACS subject areas. Chart displays number of hours spent.

As might be expected, class sizes also differ by institution type, with Russell Group institutions tending to deliver more of their teaching in the largest class sizes of all, compared to Post-92 and Specialist institutions. As we saw across the total sample, however, there is evidence this year of a reduction in time spent in these larger classes.



Base: All respondents (2018 – 14,046 / 2019 – 14,072). Russell Group (3,913 / 3,920); Pre-92 (3,071 / 3,073); Post-92 (6,804 / 6,833); Specialist (218 / 203); TEF Gold (4,828 / 5,976); TEF Silver (6,378 / 6,481); TEF Bronze (1,493 / 729). Mean average calculated from all responses including respondents citing zero.

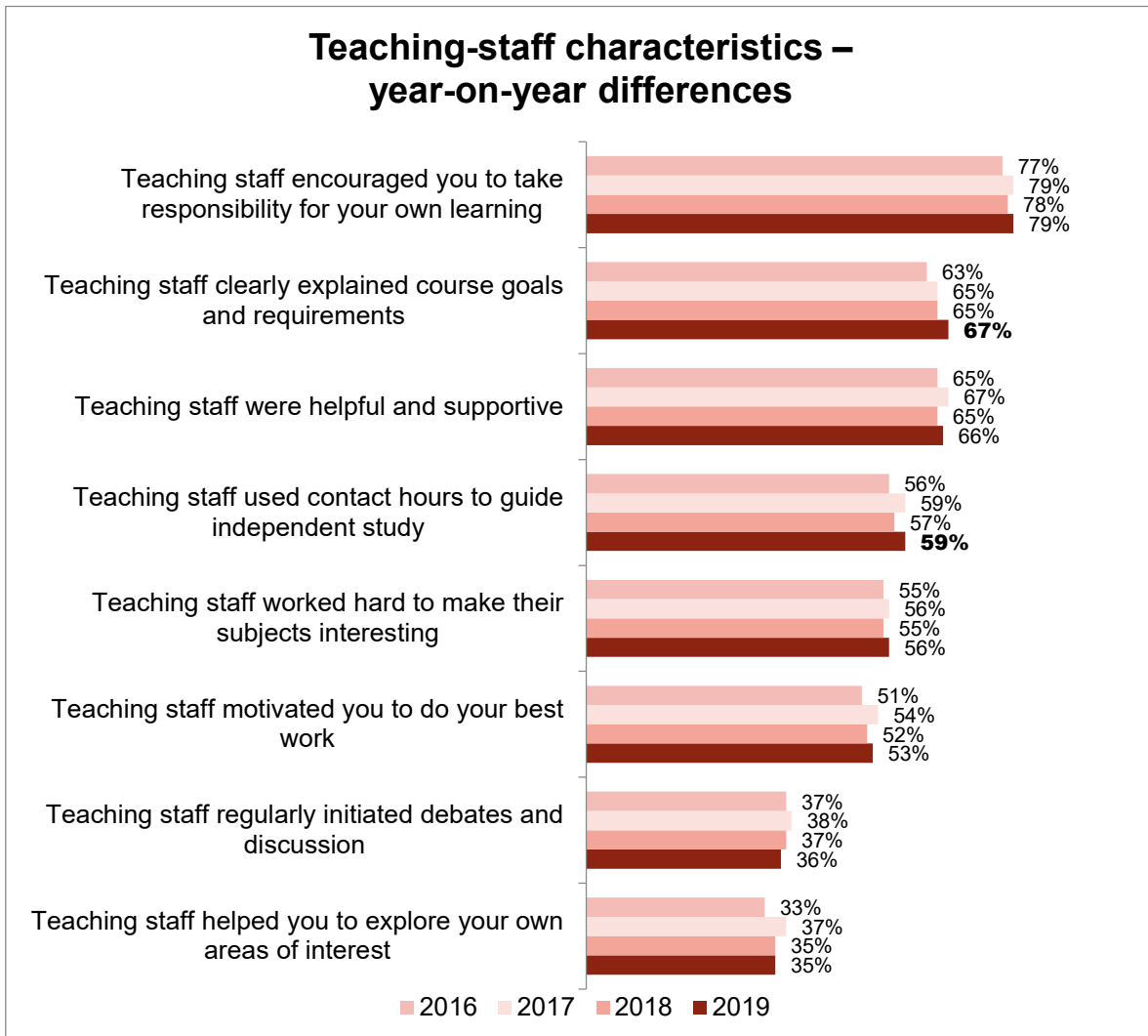
In terms of TEF award, there appears to be an inverse relationship between the level of award and class size, with TEF Gold institutions being much more likely to deliver their learning in large class sizes – albeit with a decline in 2019.

We saw in Section 3 how both Russell Group and TEF Gold institutions are associated with the highest perceived value-for-money (and highest learning gain), which implies that small class sizes, while still important, are not critical to value perceptions.

9 Quality of teaching

9.1 Perceptions of the quality of teaching staff

We know from the earlier questions on value-for-money that teaching quality is one of the main aspects that drives a positive experience, and it is therefore logical that in the context of an increase in value, we see that teaching quality has improved across the board.



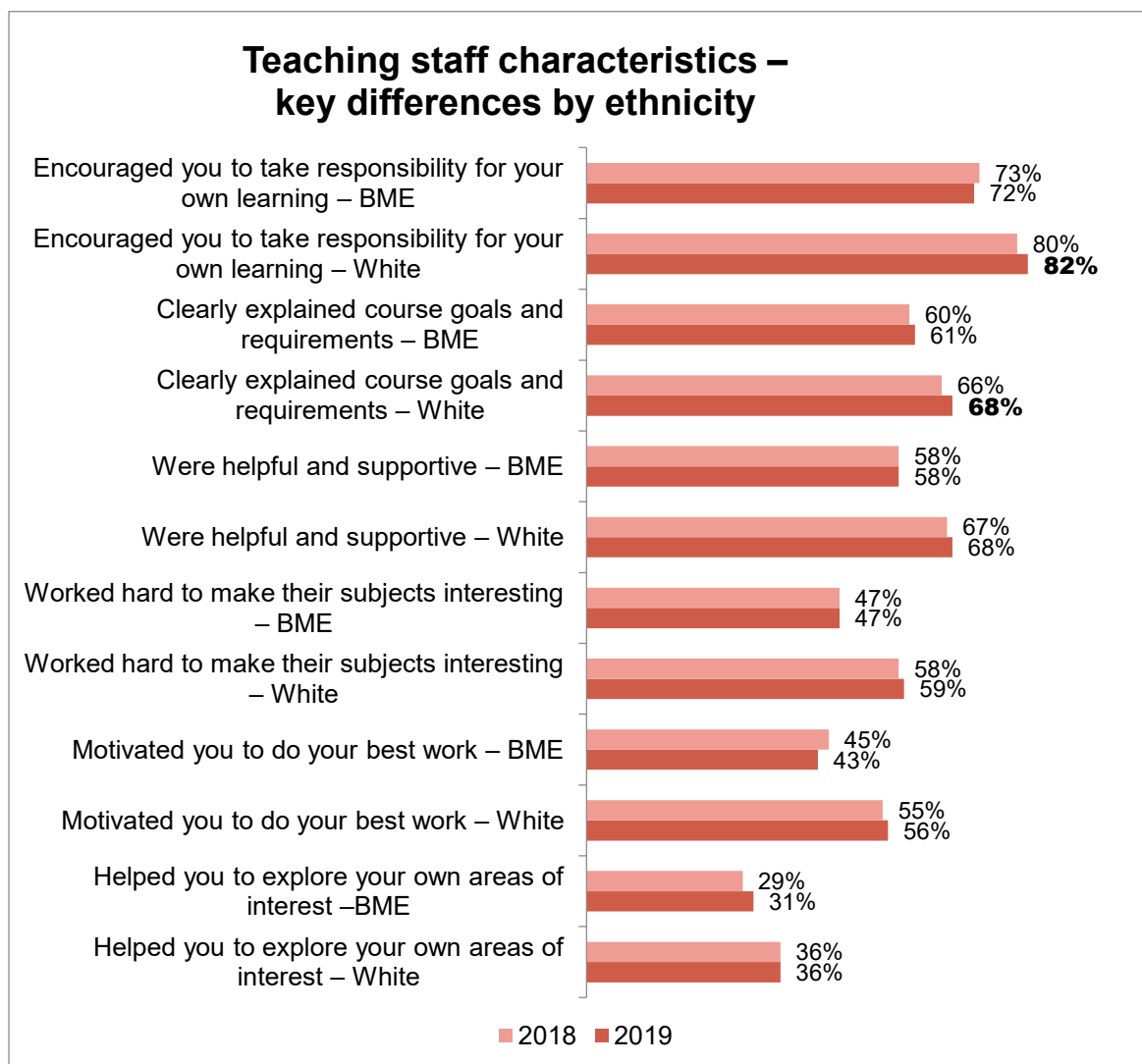
Base: All respondents excluding not applicable. 2016 (14,989); 2017 (13,854); 2018 (13,805); 2019 (13,827). Chart displays % who say all or most of their teaching staff demonstrate the above characteristics. Statistically significant differences between 2018 and 2019 in bold.

Six of the eight areas displayed above show improved perceptions in 2019, with a decline in just one area. There are two statistically significant increases – clearly explaining course goals and requirements, and using contact hours to guide independent study – but we can reasonably infer from such a consistent range of increases that wider perceptions have improved overall this year.

One point to note here is that the 2018 Survey took place during a period of industrial action by University and College Union (UCU) members, and hence perceptions may have recovered this year in comparison with this.

We continue to see some worrying differences in teaching quality by ethnicity. On each and every aspect, BME students are significantly less likely to be satisfied with the teaching quality and, as shown below, there are some very large differences.

Moreover, while the perceptions among White students have improved slightly year on year, the picture among the BME cohort is more mixed, with some aspects actually declining between 2018 and 2019 – although these changes are not significant due to relatively small base sizes. Results are low across all BME groups, but particularly so among Asian and Chinese students.



Base: All respondents excluding not applicable. White (9,356 / 8,854); BME (2,449 / 2,437). Chart displays % who say all or most of their teaching staff demonstrate the above characteristics. Statistically significant differences between 2018 and 2019 in bold.

These findings do not necessarily reflect a difference in how White and BME students are taught but instead reveal differences in perception, and expectations. We know from wider sector work that BME students are highly likely to engage in their course,¹² but these results tell us that broadly they do not get as much out of the teaching they receive. In the context of a widely recognised BME attainment gap these differences in perceived teaching quality are a clear concern.¹³

¹² Jonathan Neves (2018), *UK Engagement Survey*. York: Advance HE

¹³ Source: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/universities-bame-students-attainment-gap-a-level-grades-degrees-uk-nus-a8384771.html> [Accessed 5 April 2019]

Teaching-staff characteristics – by institution type				
	Russell Group (3,863)	Pre-92 (3,024)	Post-92 (6,741)	Specialist (198)
Encouraged responsibility for your own learning	80%	80%	77%	80%
Clearly explained course goals and requirements	67%	68%	66%	65%
Were helpful and supportive	68%	65%	65%	66%
Worked hard to make subjects interesting	57%	55%	56%	66%
Motivated you to do your best work	51%	50%	55%	63%
Helped you to explore your own areas of interest	32%	33%	38%	52%

In terms of type of institution, perceptions of teaching quality are fairly consistent on several aspects between students at Russell Group, Pre-92 and Post-92 institutions, although results are in general higher for Specialist institutions. Post-92 institutions do stand out, however, on motivating students and helping them to explore their areas of interest.

Individual teaching ratings do vary by TEF award, but the data does not identify any consistent picture. In some areas, TEF Gold institutions are highly rated (encouraging responsibility for your own learning) but elsewhere (helping you to explore your own areas of interest) it is Bronze institutions that score highest.

Student Academic Experience Survey 2019

Jonathan Neves and Nick Hillman

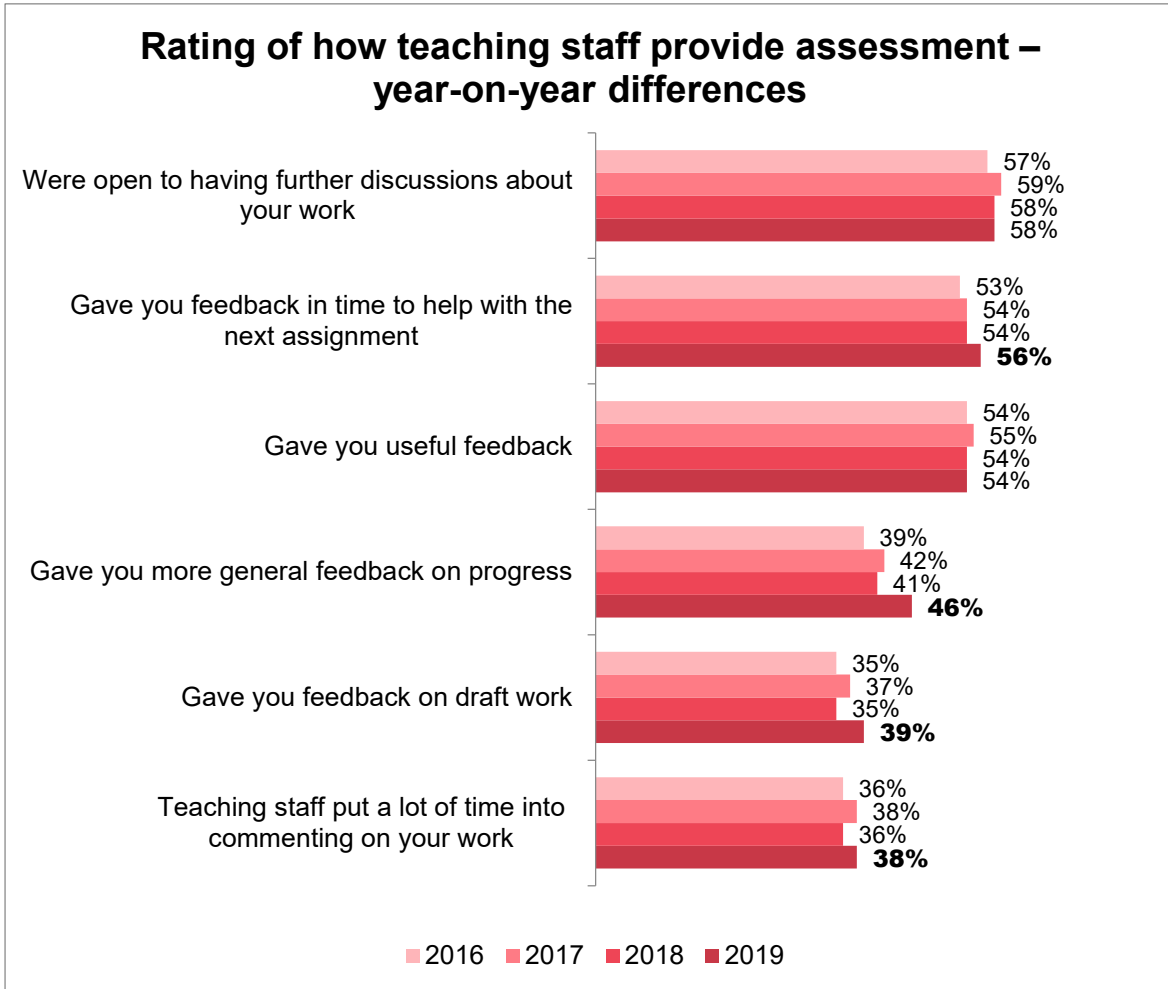
Teaching-staff characteristics – TEF award			
	TEF Gold (3,863)	TEF Silver (3,024)	TEF Bronze (6,741)
Encouraged responsibility for your own learning	80%	78%	76%
Clearly explained course goals and requirements	67%	67%	63%
Were helpful and supportive	68%	65%	64%
Worked hard to make subjects interesting	57%	55%	57%
Motivated you to do your best work	53%	52%	53%
Helped you to explore your own areas of interest	34%	36%	42%

We saw earlier in this report that TEF Gold and Russell Group institutions score higher on value and learning gain, but this data suggests there are likely to be other factors at play beyond teaching quality.

10 Quality of assessment

10.1 Rating of assessment provided

As well as an increase in teaching quality, as seen in the previous section, the 2019 survey also provides clear evidence of an improvement in how students' work is assessed by teaching staff.



Base: All respondents excluding not applicable. 2016 (14,989); 2017 (13,854); 2018 (13,674); 2019 (13,715). Chart displays % who say all or most of their teaching staff demonstrate the above characteristics. Statistically significant differences between 2018 and 2019 in bold.

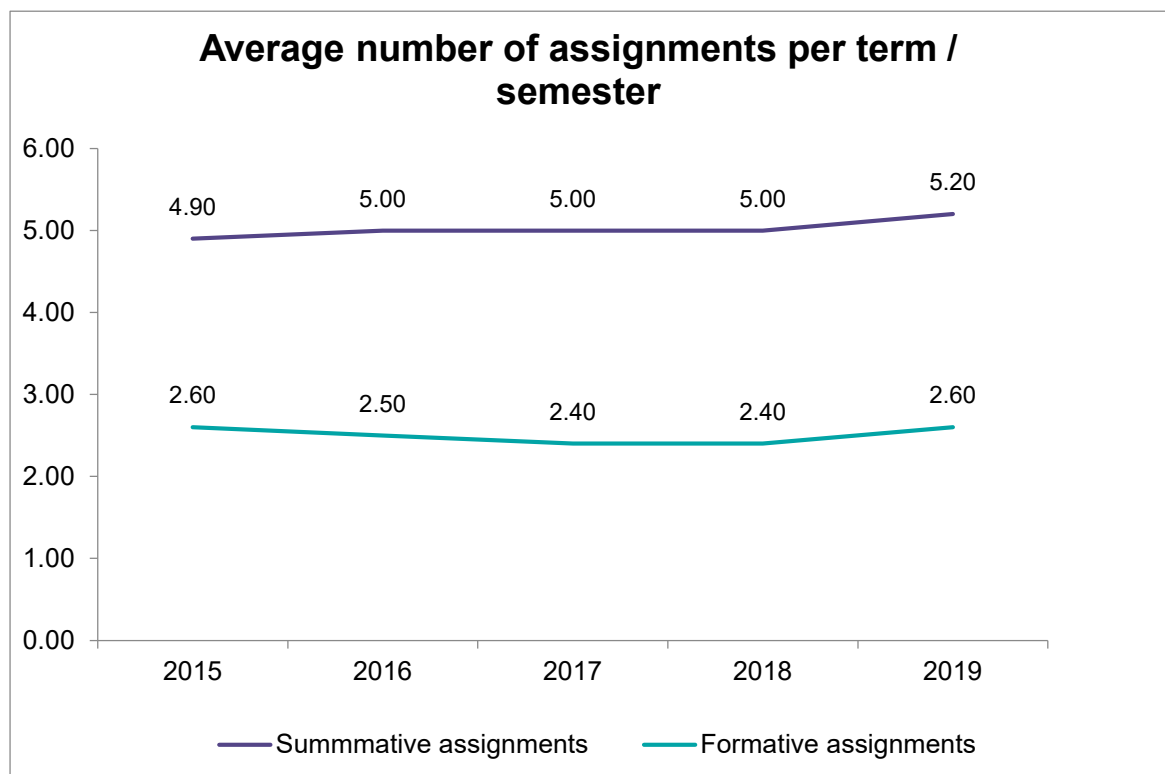
There are a number of statistically significant improvements, including giving general feedback on progress (beyond discussion of marks) and commenting on draft work. In several of these aspects the 2019 score is the highest achieved in recent years, which is a very encouraging result, albeit from a relatively low base.

Although results are generally positive, there are some major differences by institution type. Specialist institutions stand out positively on most aspects of assessment, with the exception of being open to having further discussions about work – an area where Russell Group institutions score highest.

Rating of Assessment – by institution type				
	Russell Group (3,804)	Pre-92 (2,995)	Post-92 (6,678)	Specialist (196)
Open to having further discussions about your work	61%	58%	57%	59%
Gave you feedback in time	58%	55%	55%	63%
Gave you useful feedback	53%	52%	55%	61%
Gave you general feedback on progress	44%	45%	46%	52%
Feedback on draft work	33%	35%	43%	51%
Put a lot of time into commenting on your work	35%	36%	40%	54%

10.2 Volume of assignments

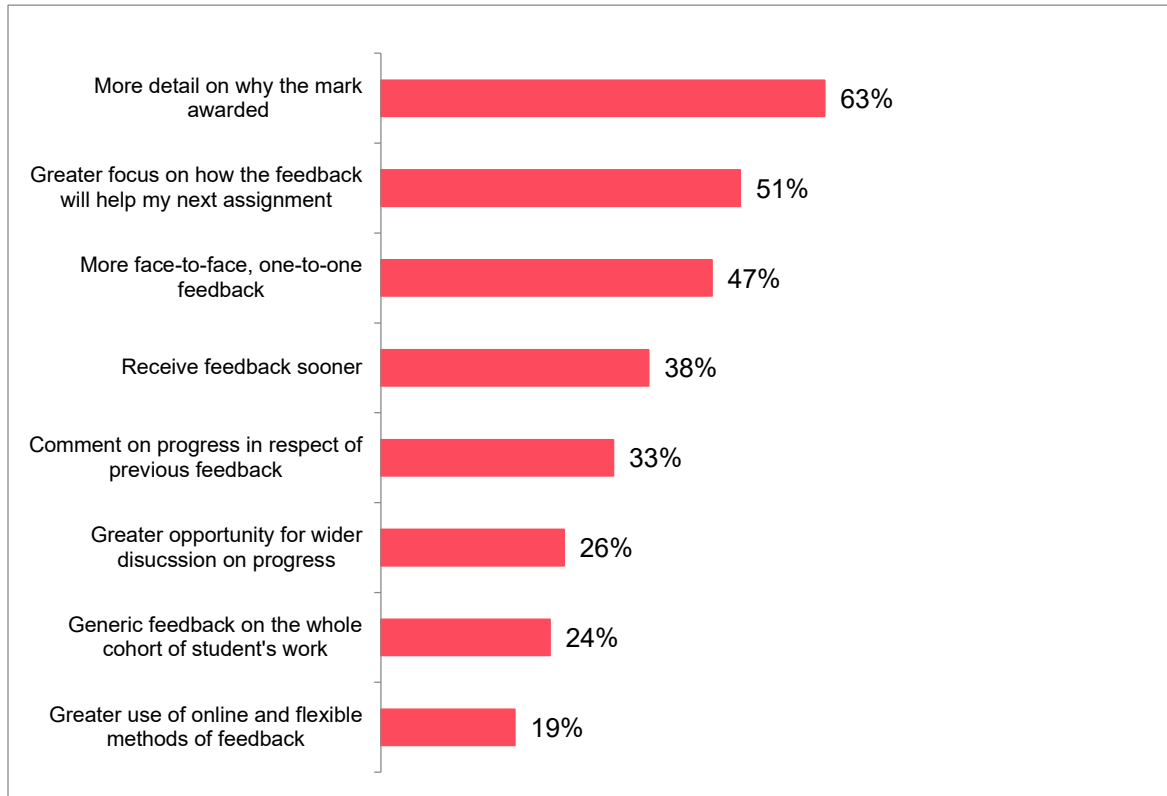
At the same time as an increase in satisfaction with assessment, there has been a clear upturn in the volume of assessments. It is notable that the ratio between the two types of assessment has remained the same despite this increase, with around one formative assessment (designed to help students develop) to two summative ones (assessments that contribute to the final mark or grade).



Base: All respondents. 2015 (15,129); 2016 (15,220); 2017 (14,056); 2018 (14,046); 2019 (14,072). Mean average calculated from all responses including respondents citing zero assignments.

10.3 How might assessment be improved?

In a new question for 2019, we asked for more information as to how feedback could be improved, from a pre-defined list, with respondents able to choose as many or as few options as required.



Base: All respondents. 2019 (14,072).

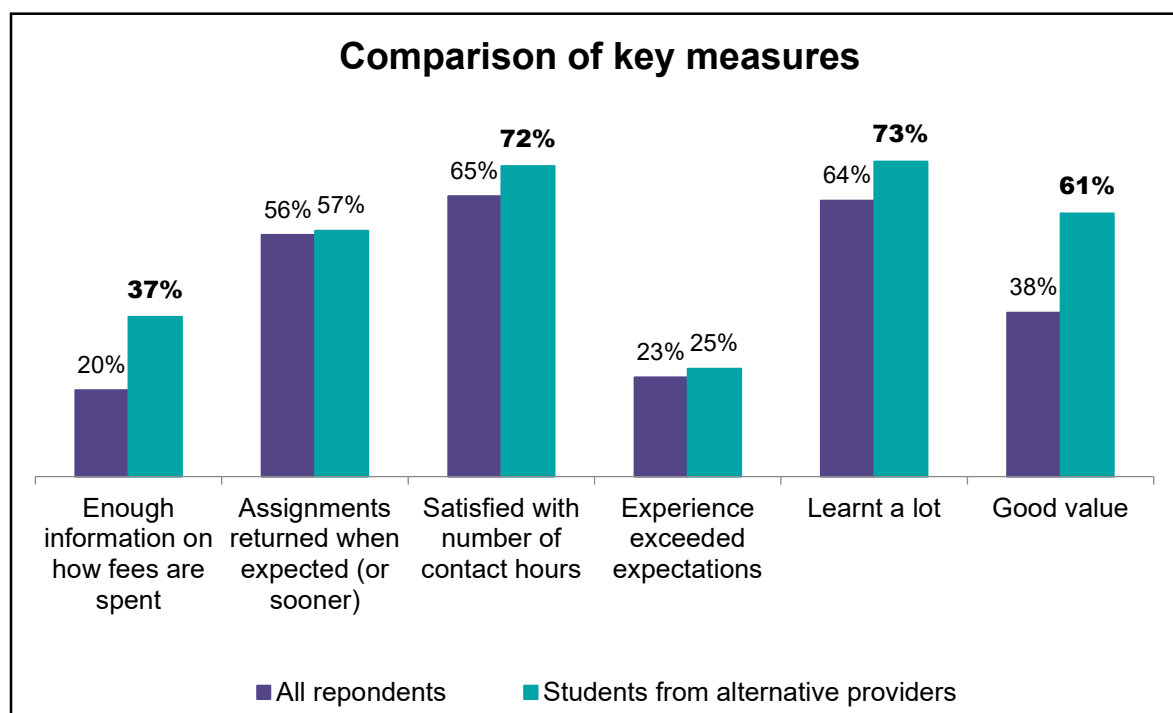
The main aspect that students would like to see more of is more detail on why the mark was awarded, as well as more emphasis on how the feedback will help follow through to the next assignment. They also expressed a desire for more face-to-face feedback, but not an overwhelming demand for feedback to be received sooner, implying that in general the timeliness of feedback is not an overriding concern.

There appears to be relatively little demand for the methods of feedback to evolve, with relatively few respondents looking to receive more online or flexible feedback.

11 Focus on alternative providers

The fieldwork for the 2019 survey focused specifically on obtaining a representative sample of students from alternative providers, achieving a sample of 55, which was weighted downwards to 44 in the final data.¹⁴ This data was included in the overall sample of 14,072 cited throughout this report.

Although our sample size does not facilitate in-depth analysis of alternative providers within the 2019 data, it does provide a robust sample of 165 students from alternative providers across the last three years, which we have used for the analysis in this section.



Base: 2017 to 2019 combined data. All respondents including alternative providers (42,175); alternative providers (165).¹⁵ Statistically significant differences between sample groups in bold.

Across a wide range of key measures, students at alternative providers are very positive about their experience. Perceptions of value-for-money in particular are very strong, as are impressions of learning gain and contact hours. One aspect where most students overall tend to give less positive scores is in terms of being provided with information on how fees are spent, but although results are still low, students at alternative providers are significantly more likely to give a positive rating.

Although we have seen similar results previously, now that we have three years combined and a base size above 100 we can take even greater reliability from these findings, which underline the strong alternative provider experience.

¹⁴ Weighted in accordance with the representation of alternative providers in HESA 2016/17 university population statistics.

¹⁵ The total unweighted sample of alternative providers combined over 2017, 2018 and 2019 is 176, with a weighted sample of 165. A list of alternative providers in the Survey is available on request.

Teaching quality and workload		
	All respondents (41,529)	Students at alternative providers (162)
All teaching staff encouraged you to take responsibility for your own learning	33%	40%
All teaching staff clearly explained course goals and requirements	21%	24%
All teaching staff motivated you to do your best work	14%	23%
All teaching staff helped you to explore your own areas of interest	9%	12%
Total contact hours attended	13.25 hours	13.58 hours
Total workload	30.80 hours	30.37 hours

Statistically significant differences between sample groups in bold.

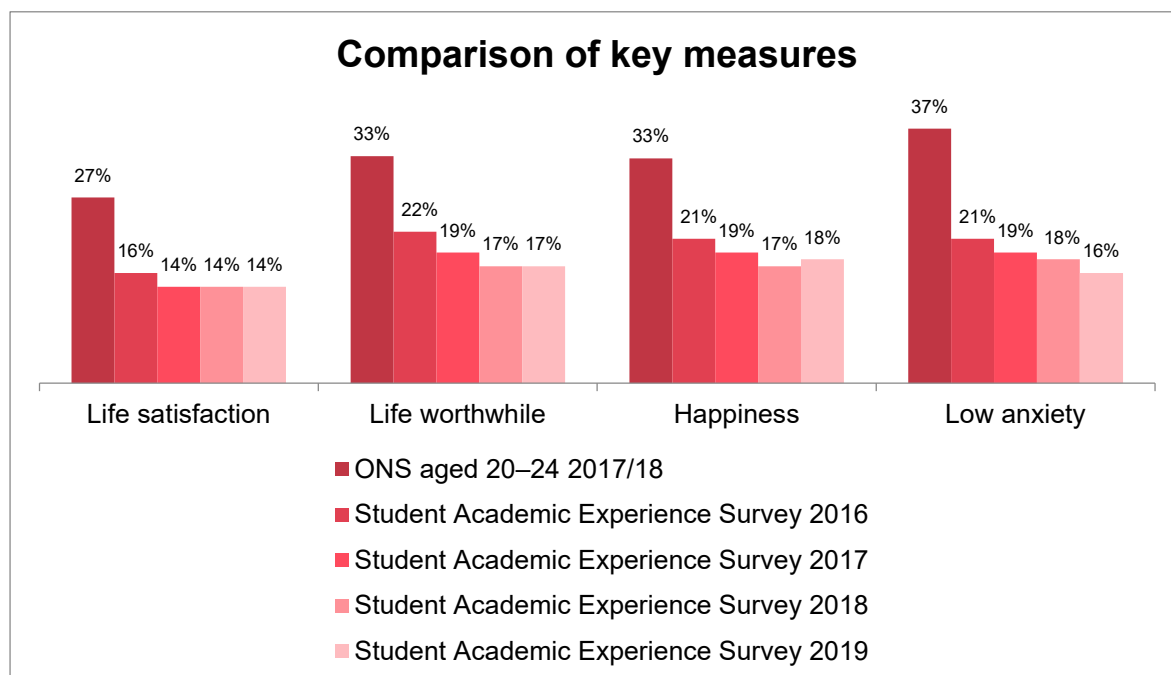
As well as the key measures described on the previous page, there is also evidence of stronger perceptions of teaching quality, particularly in terms of staff motivating students to do their best work – a statistically significant difference. Despite these strong results it is notable that teaching hours and overall workload at alternative providers are very similar to the sector average which indicates that courses are being delivered particularly effectively and efficiently.

12 Student wellbeing

12.1 Wellbeing measures

Although it is quite clear that levels of wellbeing among the student population remain some way below the general population of young people as measured by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), the decline seen over the past few years appears to have ceased, with the exception of the anxiety measure.

Three out of four measures are consistent with 2018, although levels of anxiety have increased, with just 16% of students now reporting that they have low levels of anxiety.



Base: ONS aged 20–24 UK (circa 5,260); Student Academic Experience Survey (2016 15,221 / 2017 14,057 / 2018 14,046 / 2019 14,072).¹⁶ Statistically significant differences between 2018 and 2019 in bold. Percentages calculated from all students scoring 9–10 out of 10 for life satisfaction, life worthwhile, happiness; 0–1 out of 10 for anxiety.

There is no question that the issue of wellbeing and mental health is being taken extremely seriously across the sector, with a range of dedicated support that is well established. It is encouraging that levels of satisfaction, life being worthwhile and life happiness are no longer in decline (albeit still at concerning levels), but the issue of anxiety is an increasingly serious problem.

The results earlier in this report pinpointed an increase in the volume of assignments. We also have evidence that a minority of students feel too challenged by their course and also blame themselves for their experience not meeting their expectations. In this context, perhaps an increase in anxiety is not surprising, as evidenced by the chart below. Although workload and challenge often contribute to a rewarding experience, too high a level of challenge may also be having negative impacts.

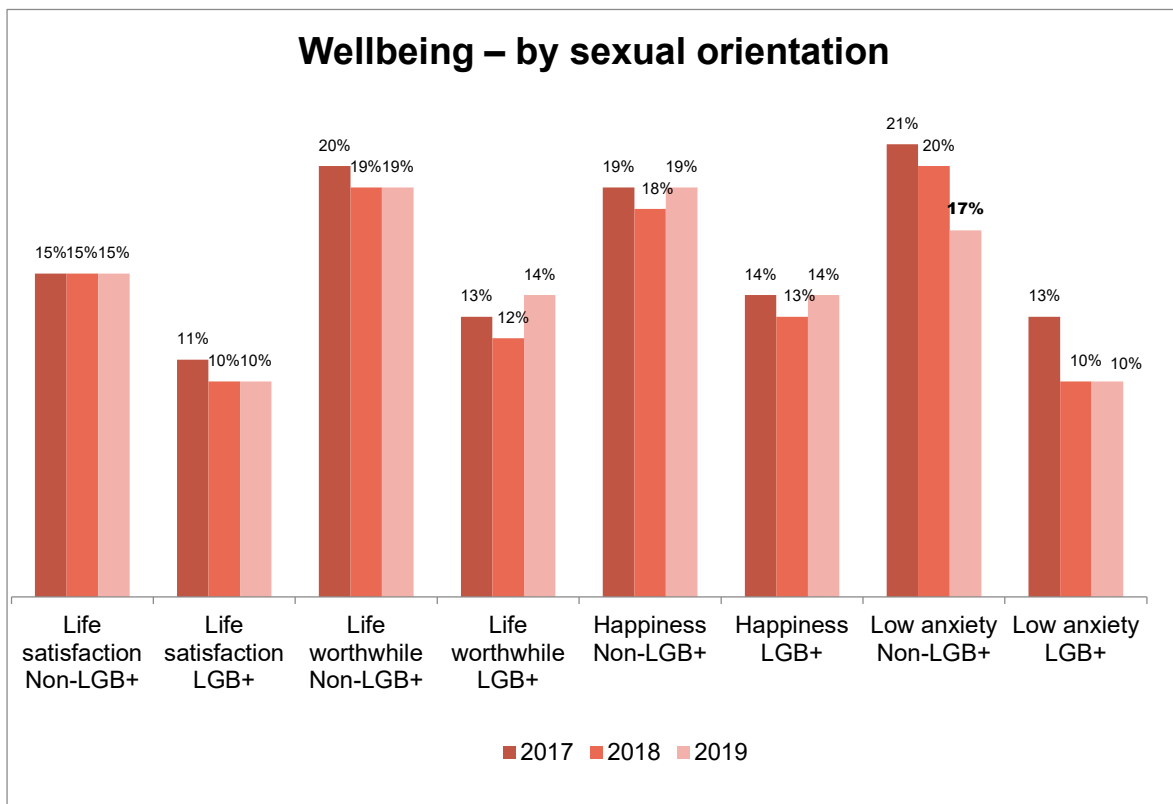
¹⁶ ONS (2018), *Measuring National Well-being: Domains and Measures, April 2017 to March 2018*

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/datasets/measuringnationalwellbeingdomainsandmeasures> [Accessed 29 March 2019]

	All respondents	Experience worse than expected because the course was too challenging	Experience worse than expected because I did not put in enough effort myself
	(14,072)	(1,600)	(3,228)
Low anxiety (0-1 out of 10)	16%	9%	11%

Statistically significant differences compared to all respondents in bold.

There remains a clear difference in wellbeing levels by sexuality, with students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual or other (referred to here as LGB+) reporting significantly lower levels of wellbeing, to a concerning extent.



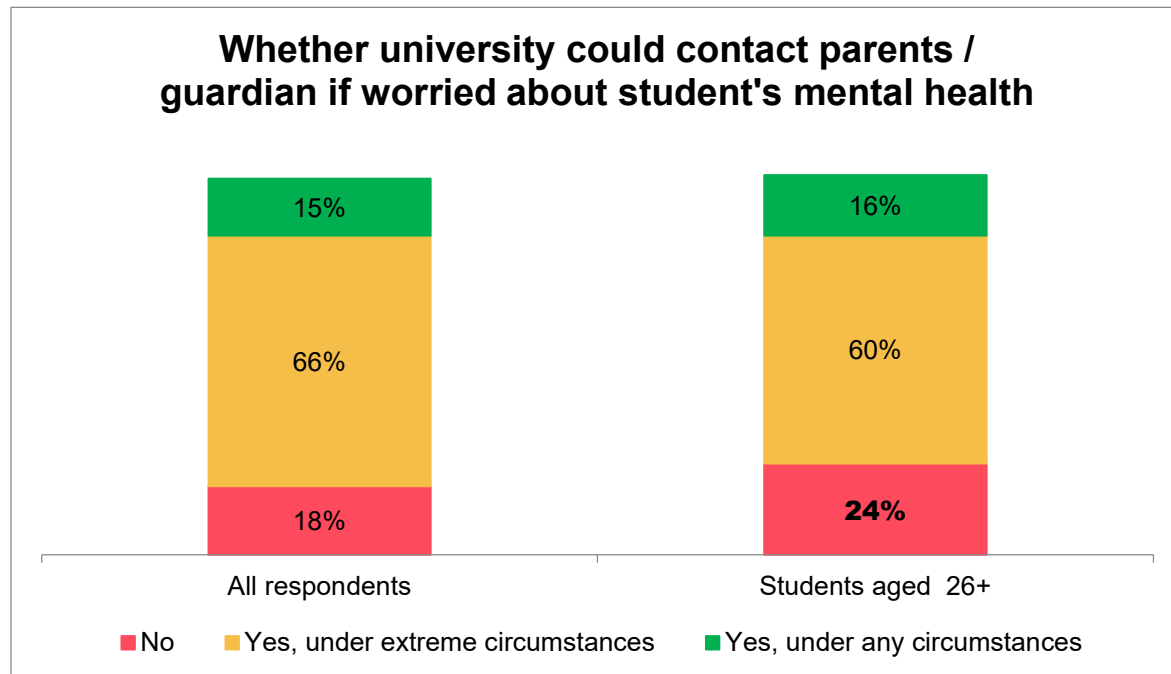
Base: Non-LGB+ (2017 11,480 / 2018 11,373 / 11,120); LGB+ (2,118 / 2,080 / 2,131). Statistically significant differences between 2018 and 2019 in bold. Percentages calculated from all students scoring 9–10 out of 10 for life satisfaction, life worthwhile, happiness / 0–1 out of 10 for anxiety.

However, a prominent finding from this year’s data is that LGB+ wellbeing levels have risen slightly in two out of four measures (not statistically significant due to the small base size) and remained consistent in the other two measures. This matches what we saw across the total sample, in that scores are no longer declining and, indeed, the relative year-on-year picture for the LGB+ cohort is actually slightly more positive.

12.2 Making parents aware

In order to understand the range of options available to institutions to help students with wellbeing and mental health issues, we introduced a new question which asked, hypothetically, whether students would be happy for their institution to contact their parents if there were a concern about their mental health.

Overall most students (66%) were happy for their parents to be contacted in the event of extreme circumstances, with a further 15% happy in any circumstances and only 18% not happy for their parents to be contacted at all. This shines a light on the role institutions are expected to play in protecting students in the light of mental health issues and a general recognition among undergraduate students that parents may reasonably be expected to become involved.



Base: All respondents (14,072); Students aged 26+ (881). Significant differences compared to all respondents in bold.

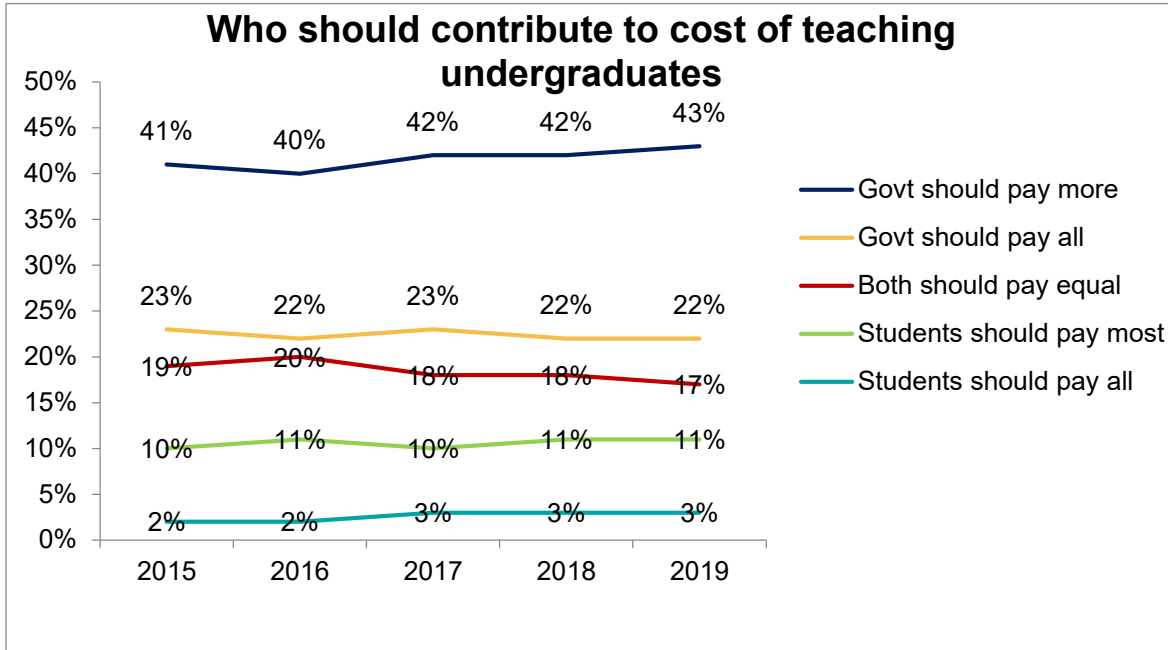
Where we see a clear difference within the data is when we compare older undergraduate students (those aged 26+) against the total sample. These mature students are significantly less likely to feel it is acceptable for parents to be made aware of any mental health concerns.

It is entirely logical that some mature students respond differently to this question – they are more likely to feel fully independent and in some cases may have less of a direct connection to their parents. It should be noted, however, that only one in four mature undergraduates were completely against the idea of contacting their parents, which emphasises how institutions, in working with parents / guardians, can play a key role in helping to tackle mental health issues across the board.

13 Policy options

13.1 Funding

An established question in the Survey addresses whether the costs of teaching undergraduate students should be funded by students, the government, or a mixture of the two. In the context of the continued high profile of fees in the media and across the sector, it is quite striking how little that opinions have fluctuated over time.

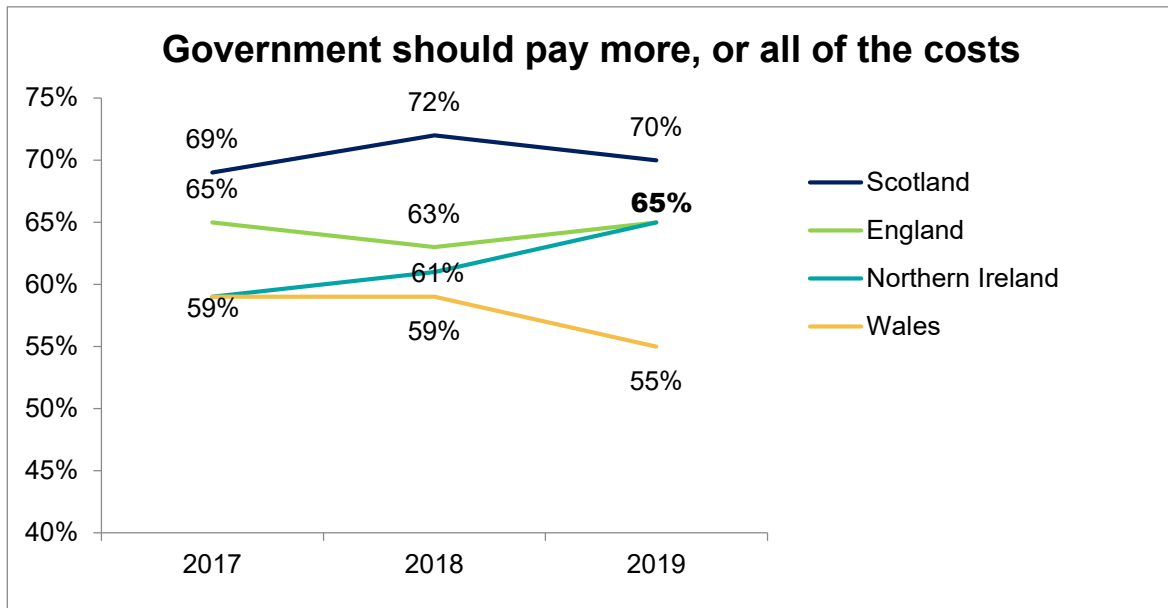


Base: All respondents. 2015 (15,129); 2016 (15,221); 2017 (14,057); 2018 (14,046); 2019 (14,072).

There has consistently been a clear perception that the government should pay most or all of the costs, with the most popular option being that both students and the government should pay but the government should pay more. None of the options has moved by more than a few percentage points over the past years, although this year there has been a statistically significant 1% decline in the proportion that feel both should pay equally, balanced against a matching 1% (statistically significant) increase in the proportion that feel the government should pay more.

Students from Scotland are the most likely to feel that the government should pay more, which is perhaps unsurprising given the nature of the fee regime, although there has been a slight decline. England and Northern Ireland have both seen an increase in the perception that government should pay more, although both are still below Scotland on this measure.

Although not statistically significant, due to a small base size, perhaps the most notable change here is among students from Wales, who are less likely in 2019 to feel the government should meet most of the costs, and much more likely than the average to feel that both should pay an equal amount (23% compared to 17%). This change in Wales is potentially a key one given the introduction this year of fee changes in Wales, with students no longer able to claim offsetting fee grants. Given that perceptions of value-for-money – as discussed at the beginning of this report – have not declined notably for Wales, then this potentially reflects a positive reaction to this fee change.

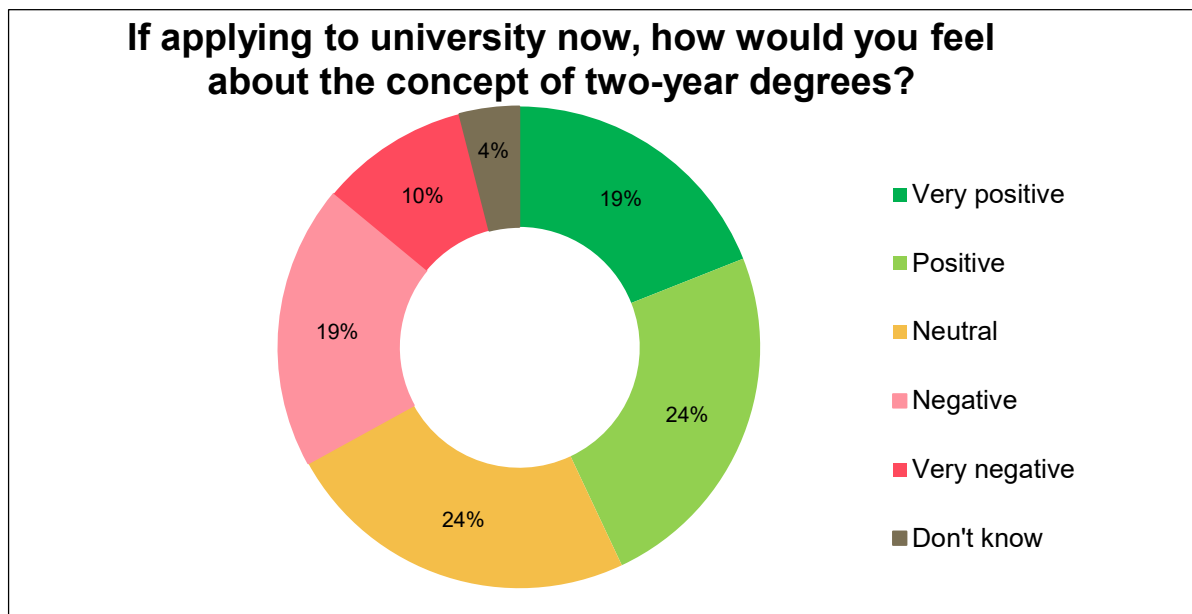


Base: All respondents domiciled in each nation. Scotland (2019 791); England (10,949); Northern Ireland (284); Wales (492). Statistically significant differences between 2018 and 2019 for England in bold.

13.2 Accelerated degrees

In a new question for 2019 we asked respondents what they felt about the concept of two-year degrees: specifically, whether they would have found the idea appealing had it been an option when they were making their choice. Students were given an illustrative example which described a two-year degree costing around £11,000 each year in tuition fees, thereby representing a saving in the region of £5,000 against a three-year course.

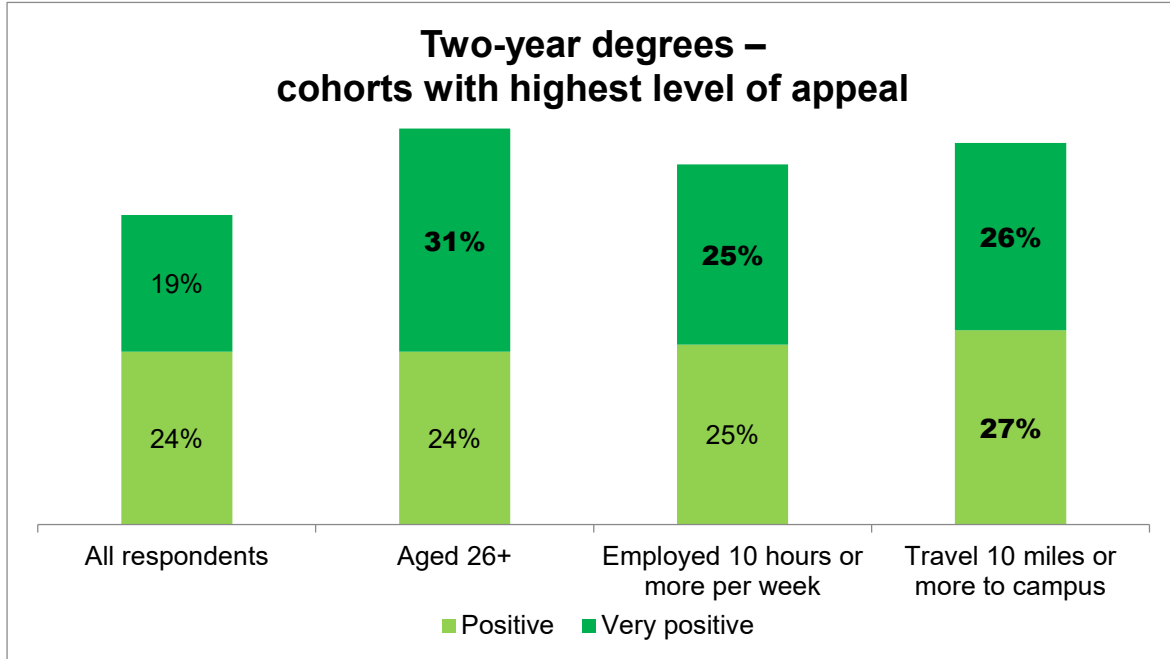
Overall, students were not especially positive about this concept. Just 43% were positive (19% very positive), while 29% were negative towards it, and a further 24% were neutral. Although students were not overwhelmingly against the concept, these results clearly imply that any expansion of two-year accelerated degrees would need to be fully tested among the audience in order to prove its worth.



Base: All respondents (14,072).

The results also imply that making a saving on tuition fees is not necessarily a dominant driver of student choice. Time at university is in itself valuable and giving up a year’s undergraduate experience is not something that is taken lightly.

Despite the less-than-enthusiastic response overall, the concept of accelerated degrees is clearly more appealing among mature students and /or those with specific demands on their time such as working or travelling.



Base: All respondents (14,072). Aged 26+ (881); Employed 10 hours or more (3,099); Travel 10 miles or more (2,841). Significant differences compared to all respondents in bold.

Given these commitments, and associated challenges, these groups may logically be looking for a reduction in the length of their degree.

14 Conclusion and policy recommendations

1. A notable increase in value-for-money perceptions shows last year's comparable increase was not just a quirk or a blip. Two years ago, we noted the proportion of students who believe they are receiving 'poor' or 'very poor' value-for-money looked like it would soon overtake the proportion who believe they are receiving 'good' or 'very good' value-for-money. Instead, the gap has increased twice since, and now stands at 12%. Perhaps the public debate about higher education costs has focused minds on the education students receive in return for their fees. However, there is still a sizeable proportion of students who believe they are receiving poor or very poor value. **The most effective ways for higher education institutions to continue improving value-for-money perceptions may be to make faster progress in telling students where their fees go and further improving the quality of teaching and learning.**ⁱ Some of the factors that feed into perceptions of value-for-money are beyond higher education institutions' direct control, however, including the headline level of fees and loans. Given the big drop in value-for-money perceptions after fees increased in England from 2012, any significant reduction in fees could improve value-for-money perceptions further.
2. The large expectations gap, between what people expect higher education to be like and what they find it really is like, suggests only a small proportion of entrants are really well prepared. It is likely to prove impossible, unrealistic and perhaps even undesirable to ensure every new student is completely prepared for what is to come. Nonetheless, **our results suggest schools, colleges and universities could all do more to help prepare potential students, especially in the context of a growing number of students from non-traditional backgrounds (such as first-in-family students).** The growing literature on the differences in how schools and colleges perceive 'independent learning', which is one defining feature of higher education, explains one particular gap in perceptions.ⁱⁱ The notable contrast between the idea of higher education as a time when you can be true to yourself and the specific groups that feel least well prepared, such as LGB+ students, suggest targeted interventions could also help raise preparedness.
3. Although under two-thirds of students say they would choose the same course and institution if they were starting again, only 1 in 25 full-time undergraduates say they would opt to undertake an apprenticeship instead. This suggests the common idea that apprenticeships are set to become a straight alternative to a more traditional undergraduate experience may be (largely) hype. **The big expansion in apprenticeships that many want to see could depend more on finding new learners rather than persuading people who are already on course for a more traditional university experience to change direction – or else, we need to convey the perceived benefits of apprenticeships more persuasively.**
4. Notwithstanding our other recommendations, in one area in particular the Survey identifies an issue that could benefit from further research: **the results pose a challenge to the overall idea that levels of preparedness for higher education should always be high in all respects** – at least, to the extent that learning gain seems to correlate inversely with preparedness. It would therefore be useful in future to explore three different elements: social preparedness; preparedness in terms of study skills; and preparedness in relation to academic content, given the last of these three may actually reduce scores for self-perceived learning gain.

5. **The Survey suggests the optimal total student workload – for example, in relation to overall student satisfaction and satisfaction with course and institution – is in the 30–39 hours category.** This chimes with the evidence on the best work–life balance for people in the labour market.ⁱⁱⁱ This level of commitment leaves more time for student activities – such as involvement in clubs and societies, part-time employment and socialising – than is available to those students with the longest working hours (such as those preparing to work in the health sector). Students with the lowest workloads of all, of under 10 hours a week, in contrast face a range of challenges that affect their quality of life and their quality of learning. Regulators may well wish to ask whether any student can secure the full benefits of higher education at such a minimal level.
6. The Survey provides evidence to help explain the already well-documented BME attainment gap – for instance, there are notable differences by ethnicity in perceptions of teaching quality. **It remains controversial in some quarters to suggest curricula, the make-up of academic staff and the provision of support services should reflect the changing demographics of students, but the evidence base for doing this is strong.**
7. The Survey adds to the growing evidence on the relationship between students' living arrangements and their quality of life.^{iv} **While some students will always choose to live at home for a variety of reasons, any attempt by policymakers to reduce students' costs by encouraging more students to live at home risks encouraging less good outcomes – unless accompanied by specific, and potentially quite costly, actions to address the challenge.** Moreover, it would risk limiting the choice of higher education applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds relative to the choices of those from richer households.
8. The Student Academic Experience Survey began in early 2006 as a way of measuring how the academic experience of students changes in response to funding reforms. However, **despite the big shifts in funding, most obviously for students from England and Wales, the workload of students has only changed marginally – the most notable shift being the number of timetabled hours moving from being slightly behind the number of independent learning hours to slightly ahead.** Advocates and opponents of so-called 'neo-liberal' student funding systems may well have over-exaggerated the effect that changes to student funding have on the way students and institutions approach teaching and learning.
9. For many years, one of the lowest-scoring areas in a number of student surveys, including the official National Student Survey, has been assessment and feedback on academic work. While our Survey shows modest improvements on this issue, the responses to one of the new questions could help drive greater improvements. **A majority of students want more detail on why they have been awarded the marks they receive and more focus on how any feedback relates to their next assignment. This suggests a useful congruence between what students want and the things that are known to improve learning.**

10. A new question on disclosure of mental health issues to a student's parents or guardian finds high levels of support, with two-thirds of students supporting disclosure 'in extreme circumstances' and a further 15% supporting it 'in any circumstances'. These results are similar to those provided by university applicants in another survey back in 2017, suggesting that views have not changed much since enrolment.^v Some higher education staff have, rightly, pointed out the legal and practical difficulties in disclosing mental health issues experienced by their (adult) students to others, although some have recently changed practice in this area. **Our results provide support to politicians, the families of students who have taken their own lives and others, such as some university staff, who have sought to encourage debate on current disclosure practices.**
11. **A majority of students across all four parts of the UK continue to believe the costs of higher education tuition should be covered entirely or mainly by taxpayers via the government.** This is out of kilter with the post-2012 English system as well as the post-2018 Welsh system, in which students / graduates are expected to cover more than half of the costs. Moreover, a recent decision by the Office of National Statistics on the accounting treatment of student loans has shone a spotlight on the true costs to taxpayers of the current rules. At Westminster, the Labour Opposition support the abolition of student fees and the Conservative Government are reviewing post-18 education and funding. In Scotland, the Scottish National Party continues to run a higher education system with no upfront fees for either local students or students from other EU countries.
12. A new section of the Survey for 2019 finds some support for a policy typically favoured by politicians who want to reduce the costs of higher education: two-year degrees. Nearly twice as many full-time undergraduates say they would feel 'very positive' about such accelerated learning if they were applying to university now as say they would be 'very negative' about it (19% versus 10%). There are somewhat higher levels of support among students aged over 25, who might particularly appreciate the option of taking less time out of the labour market in order to secure a degree. **The results suggest there is some demand for the expansion of two-year degree provision, recently bolstered by funding changes in England.** On the other hand, as the proportion of school leavers entering higher education continues to improve, the expectation that support for two-year degrees among older people will convert into much greater demand may not be as robust as some policymakers hope.

ⁱ Nick Hillman, Jim Dickinson, Alice Rubbra and Zach Klamann, *Where Do Student Fees Really Go? Following the Pound*, HEPI Report 113, November 2018

ⁱⁱ Julie Money, Sarah Nixon and Linda Graham, 'Do Educational Experiences in School Prepare Students for University? A Teachers' Perspective', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 2019

ⁱⁱⁱ See, for example, Andrew Merle, 'This is how many hours you should really be working', 10 June 2018 at <https://medium.com/@andrewmerle/this-is-how-many-hours-you-should-really-be-working-ff1e8a6ad958>

^{iv} David Maguire and David Morris, *Homeward Bound: Defining, Understanding and Aiding 'Commuter Students'*, HEPI Report 114, December 2018

^v HEPI / Unite Students, *Reality Check: A Report On University Applicants' Attitudes and Perceptions*, July 2017, p.19

2019 Student Academic Experience Survey

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