

# Student Academic Experience Survey 2020

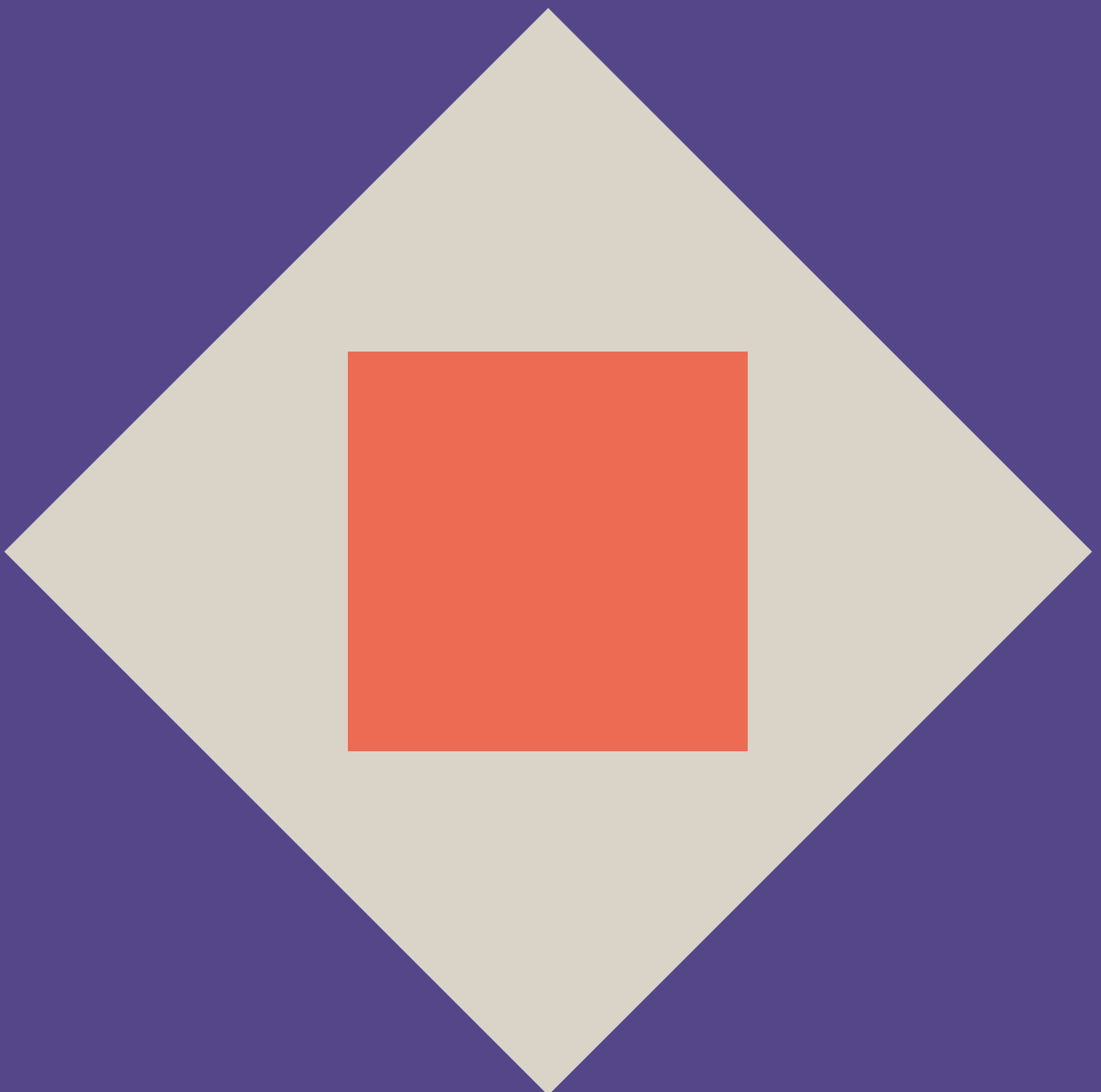
Jonathan Neves (Advance HE)  
and Rachel Hewitt (HEPI)

**AdvanceHE**



Higher Education Policy Institute

STUDENT  
ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE  
SURVEY



---

# Contents

Foreword by Alison Johns	4
Foreword by Nick Hillman	5
Executive Summary	6
<b>1. Methodology</b>	<b>7</b>
1.1 Approach	7
1.2 Sample size	8
1.3 Base sizes	9
<b>2. Sample profile</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>3. Value-for-money</b>	<b>11</b>
3.1 Trends over time	11
3.2 Value by domicile	12
3.3 Factors influencing perceptions of value	14
3.4 Information on how fees are spent	16
3.5 Most appropriate use of tuition fees	17
<b>4. Meeting expectations</b>	<b>19</b>
4.1 Experience versus expectations	19
4.2 Why expectations are not met	20
4.3 Why expectations are exceeded	23
<b>5. The choice to go to university</b>	<b>25</b>
5.1 Why decided to go to university	25
5.2 Whether would make same choice again	26
<b>6. Spotlight on different student groups</b>	<b>28</b>
6.1 Ethnicity	28
6.2 Students going through Clearing	30

---

# Student Academic Experience Survey 2020

Jonathan Neves and Rachel Hewitt

---

6.3	Disabled students	31
6.4	Students in paid employment	32
<b>7.</b>	<b>Teaching intensity</b>	<b>34</b>
7.1	Workload trends	34
7.2	Satisfaction with contact hours	35
7.3	Workload by subject	36
7.4	Class size	37
<b>8.</b>	<b>Quality of teaching and assessment</b>	<b>39</b>
8.1	Perceptions of the quality of teaching staff	39
8.2	Rating of assessment	40
8.3	Volume of assignments	41
8.4	Timeliness of feedback	43
<b>9.</b>	<b>Wellbeing</b>	<b>45</b>
9.1	Key wellbeing measures	45
9.2	Covid-19 impact?	46
9.3	Wellbeing, background and preparation for the future	47
9.4	Making parents aware	48
<b>10.</b>	<b>Funding</b>	<b>50</b>
10.1	The cost of study	50
10.2	Attitudes to cost by domicile	50
<b>11.</b>	<b>Looking to the future</b>	<b>52</b>
11.1	How to use time at university to maximise future prospects	52
11.2	Feeling prepared for the future	53
11.3	Biggest influence on future success	54
<b>12.</b>	<b>Use of technology in learning</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>Conclusion and policy recommendations</b>		<b>58</b>

---

## Foreword by Alison Johns

The power of the annual Student Academic Experience Survey lies in its authority and credibility as a channel for the student voice. For the transformation to the 'new normal' to be effective, the student voice must be heard so that they have a clear role in shaping and informing decision making.

This report points to some very encouraging improvements in the student academic experience particularly in assessment. The sector has worked hard to achieve this. It is also interesting to see that the data suggests that remote learning, post-lockdown, has brought some closer engagement between teaching staff and students; and this has even led to improved directed independent learning. We must harness and sustain this progress into the new era. For very obvious reasons, we need to listen extremely carefully to student comments about educational technology. If we are to restore the positive trend we have seen in recent years in value for money, which unfortunately has not been maintained this year, we must up our game in the use of technology. Our approach cannot be piecemeal. On the contrary, it needs to be structured, strategic and supportive to staff who will increasingly deliver teaching through technology.

While teaching has improved, it remains a considerable worry that wellbeing has not. The report identifies that the issue is particularly pronounced for LGB+ students. Institutions are trying hard to tackle these issues. We can all do more. Advance HE has been pleased to facilitate a collaborative programme to try and bring more insights. We will be sharing these with the sector. It is also a continuing concern that BAME students are still reporting less positively than White students. All students should have equal opportunity to enjoy a positive experience and look with hope to their future prospects.

At any point when significant decisions need to be made, reliable evidence, such as this report, is critical. In terms of teaching in higher education, this is our moment for big decisions. The Coronavirus pandemic has caused fundamental upheaval for the sector, not least in teaching. Now is our chance to transform quickly and reshape our thinking in how we deliver a first class student academic experience. Unwelcome though these painful and life-changing circumstances are, we have a real window of opportunity to take up the challenge and embrace the changes necessary. We must develop a compelling proposition for students. And if we listen to students, they can help us.

**Alison Johns**

**Chief Executive, Advance HE**

## Foreword by Nick Hillman

There has never been a more important moment to ask students in UK higher education institutions what they think about their own lives. The last year has been characterised by industrial action, a major global health crisis and rapid adverse changes to the graduate labour market.

The Covid-19 pandemic has served to emphasise the benefits of education as an insurance policy against economic adversity as well as the importance of university research in furthering knowledge of how to tackle truly global challenges.

The Student Academic Experience Survey has been running since 2006 and, as every historian knows, some things change and some things stay the same. Over the years, students have done broadly similar levels of academic work (though there are some positive shifts this year), their perceptions of value have fluctuated (and are down a little this year) and their wellbeing has, sadly, fallen consistently (including this year).

Next year, things could well change again, given the huge changes currently making their way through our higher education institutions. As this process of change happens, we need to listen closely to what students tell us about their own experiences. In a new section this year, we look at students' perceptions of educational technology, which may be particularly relevant in the months ahead.

When making presentations on our higher education sector, I am often struck by how many people express surprise when students act rationally in their own educational decisions and in responding to government policies. But the fact they do so is clearly evident in the following pages.

For example, students tend to recognise there are both private and public benefits in gaining a degree when expressing views on who should pay, they recognise the power of a degree in helping them find a fulfilling career and those who feel they've learnt a lot say they feel better prepared for the outside world than others.

It has been an enormous pleasure for us at the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) to work once more with Advance HE on this long-running annual project. Each year, the Survey becomes richer, more eye-opening and, hopefully, more useful to the fantastic higher education sector in which we are so privileged to work.

**Nick Hillman**

**Director of the Higher Education Policy Institute**

## Executive Summary

The prevailing circumstances as many students were responding to this year's Survey were unlike any other, with the sector, and society as a whole, facing unprecedented challenges. That there is such a range of positive results is not only an endorsement of the strength of provision across the sector as a whole, but also the agility displayed by higher education institutions in meeting student needs when moving teaching online.

Overall, students are somewhat less likely this year to feel they have received good value, an aspect that appears to be linked to disruption due to industrial action as well as the impact of Covid-19. However, while this may have impacted on contact hours, and therefore perceptions of value, there is plenty of evidence that the quality has remained high, with some key teaching measures actually improving since the beginning of the lockdown. There has also been an increase this year across the whole fieldwork period in the student experience meeting or exceeding expectations, as well as an improvement across the board in measures related to assessment.

Wellbeing remains a concern, as the "gap" between students and the rest of the younger population continues to widen, with students directly citing mental health as having an impact on their experience not meeting expectations. Accordingly, students increasingly feel it is appropriate for parents to be contacted if there is a concern over their mental wellbeing.

Contact hours have increased marginally, in spite of the timing of some of the fieldwork, but conversely satisfaction with contact hours has not, suggesting that there is a desire for a further increase in timetabled sessions. On a similar theme, average volumes of assignments have increased clearly, with findings pointing towards this being welcomed, as students look to maximise their preparations for the future.

New questions this year highlight how career focused students are, even when they apply to university. Skills, as well as academic achievements, are seen as critical to a successful future, although students from better-off backgrounds also believe in the power of social capital and feel more prepared for their futures.

As the sector considers how to support more remote and socially distanced learning, it is striking that an overwhelming majority of students feel the technology they are taught with is relatively basic in nature. Where advanced technology is used, students recognise an improvement in their experience and future potential, which provides a significant opportunity as technology assumes an even more fundamental role in how learning is delivered.

# 1. Methodology

## 1.1 Approach

The Survey was designed and developed in partnership between the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) and Advance HE, with online panel interviews independently conducted by two organisations – YouthSight, who conducted the majority of the research, and Pureprofile.

YouthSight's Student Panel is made up of over 50,000 undergraduate students in the UK. These students are primarily recruited through a partnership with the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), which invites a large number of new first-year students to join the Panel each year. To maximise the overall sample size, further responses were sourced from Pureprofile, a trusted panel partner.

Between 17 February and 4 April 2020, 48,452 members of the YouthSight panel and 7,667 from Pureprofile were invited to complete the Survey. In total, 10,227 responses were collected, representing a response rate of 18%. On average, the Survey took 18 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.<sup>1</sup>

In terms of content, we have maintained a range of core questions to provide year-on-year comparisons on key issues, such as value-for-money, teaching quality, wellbeing and teaching intensity, complemented by additional topic areas selected for their relevance to the sector at the present time. This year, new topic areas include how institutions use technology and how students feel about this, as well as a section on students' motivation for going to university and which factors they believe will have the most impact on their future. We also have new analysis of students who went through Clearing.

As we write this report, the higher education sector is experiencing severe turmoil due to the impact of Covid-19 on the lives of us all. Our fieldwork period (which followed our planned schedule) encompassed both a large proportion of interviews conducted before Covid-19 began to have significant impact on higher education institutions, and a large proportion conducted afterwards.

---

<sup>1</sup> The data are weighted by gender, course year, subject area and institution type in accordance with HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency) 2018/19 higher education population statistics.

---

We have selected 16 March (when tougher restrictions on life in the UK were announced and by when many higher education institutions had moved their teaching online) as the key date to use in our analysis of this – providing in the data tables, and in the report where relevant, an option to compare the opinions of students surveyed before and after this date.

Dates	Number of interviews (unweighted)	Percentage (unweighted)
<b>Pre-March 16</b>	5,125	50%
<b>Post-March 16*</b>	5,102	50%

\*Includes March 16 itself.

Overall, we believe the impact of Covid-19 on this year's results has been relatively small across the Survey as a whole, with some specific impacts highlighted in the report where we feel they are particularly noteworthy. The full data tables are freely available from both HEPI and Advance HE so readers can make up their own minds.

## 1.2 Sample size

This year our Survey collected the views of 10,227 full-time undergraduate students studying in the UK. Unless stated otherwise, all figures and tables relate to weighted data from the 2020 Survey.

The total sample size of 10,227, based on an undergraduate population of 1,798,240,<sup>2</sup> provides a margin of error of  $\pm 0.97\%$ .<sup>3</sup> This is calculated at the 95% confidence level and based on a result of 50%, where the margin of error is at its maximum. This means that for a result of 50% we can be confident that the true result is between 49.03% and 50.97% in 95 out of 100 cases.<sup>4</sup>

When comparing between years, the large sample sizes mean that most differences in the Survey between 2019 and 2020 of 2–3% or greater are statistically significant. For smaller sub-samples within the Survey, the margin of error is greater, and hence year-on-year differences of a few percentage points are in some cases not significant.

<sup>2</sup> Source: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he> [Accessed 14 April 2020]

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

<sup>4</sup> Source: <http://www.comresglobal.com/our-work/margin-of-error-calculator> [Accessed 14 April 2020]



We have highlighted statistically significant differences between 2019 and 2020 (or between two sample groups compared against each other) in bold text on each chart or table where such differences apply.

For ethnicity profiling and analysis, the sample profile and main data in this report (for the ethnicity analysis only) are again based on UK-domiciled students.<sup>5</sup> This has been done to remove the impact of international students on ethnic groups. 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.<sup>6</sup>

### 1.3 Base sizes

This year, to streamline the amount of text, we have not included base size descriptions under each chart, save for when we felt particular clarification of unusual base populations or calculation methods would be helpful. As standard, the majority of charts are based on 2020 data comprising the total weighted population of 10,227. The majority of other charts are based either on time-series data or on one of the specific sub-samples identified in the sample profile section overleaf.

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

---

<sup>5</sup> For some analyses the non-White groups have been further aggregated into a single Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) group. This definition of BAME 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.

<sup>6</sup> 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

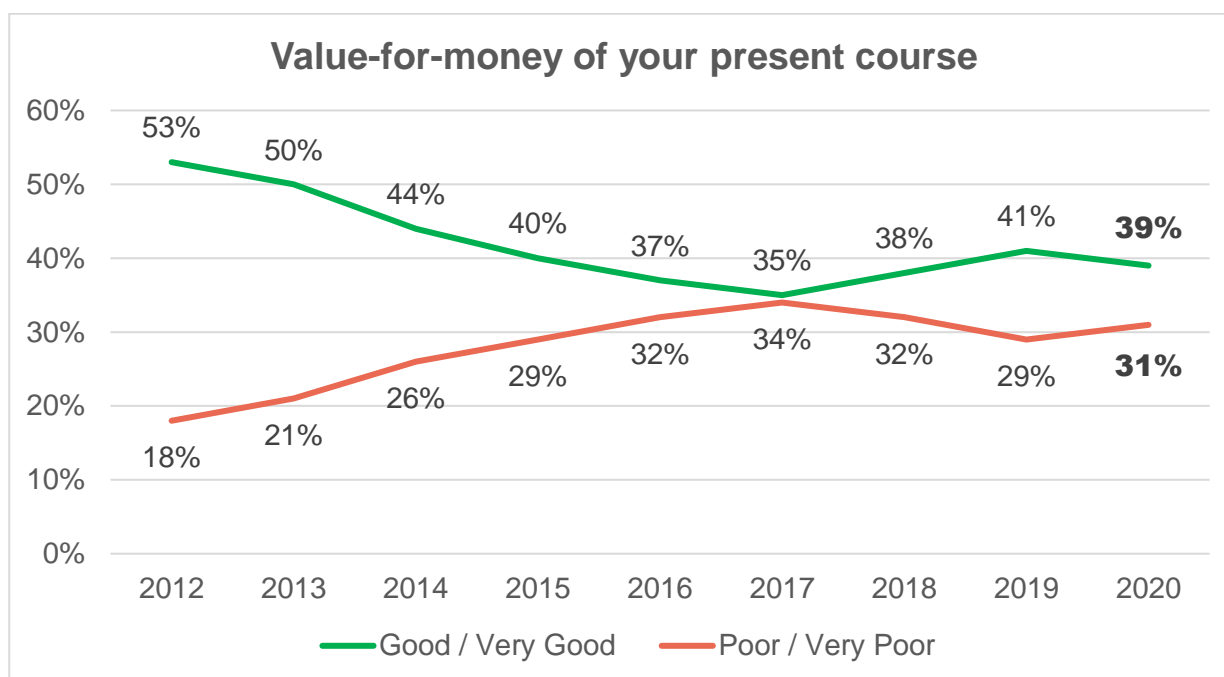
Our sample has been weighted to reflect the undergraduate population and provide consistency with previous waves.

Weighted data					
		2018 (14,046)	2019 (14,072)	2020 (10,227)	2020 Base size
Gender	Male	44%	44%	44%	4,503
	Female	56%	56%	56%	5,724
Domicile	England	78%	78%	76%	7,778
	Scotland	7%	6%	6%	577
	Wales	3%	3%	3%	351
	Northern Ireland	2%	2%	2%	219
	EU	7%	7%	6%	607
	Elsewhere	4%	4%	4%	415
	Institutions	Russell Group	28%	28%	28%
Pre-92 (excluding Russell Group)		22%	22%	21%	2168
Post-92		49%	49%	48%	4726
Specialist		2%	1%	4%	454
Ethnicity (UK-domiciled)	White	79%	78%	79%	6,411
	Black	3%	3%	3%	253
	Asian (excluding Chinese)	12%	13%	12%	963
	Chinese	2%	1%	1%	122
	Mixed	3%	4%	4%	325
	Other	1%	1%	1%	91

### 3. Value-for-money

#### 3.1 Trends over time

One of the key measures that our Survey tracks is how students assess the value they have received. Since the introduction of £9,000 tuition fees in England in 2012, this had been a measure that had fallen consistently but which had begun to recover from 2017 to 2019. Unfortunately, this recovery has not continued, with the proportion of students who feel they receive good / very good value falling by 2%, mirrored by a 2% rise in perceptions of receiving poor / very poor value. Although statistically significant, this is not a huge drop, with perceptions remaining above 2018 levels.



Note for all charts and tables: Statistically significant differences (95% level) between 2019 and 2020, or between two sample groups, are highlighted in bold.

As highlighted in the methodology section, approximately half of our fieldwork came after many institutions began to move their teaching online. Although most of the questions in our Survey (with the specific exception of the wellbeing questions – see chapter 9) are intended to reflect students’ experiences over a period of time rather than at a specific moment, it is perhaps understandable that some students may have based their opinions on a very recent experience.

Looking at how perceptions of value vary by fieldwork date, we can see that students interviewed in late March / early April were less likely to feel they have received “good” value. The differences are not huge, and there is no change for perceptions of “very good” value, but in the context of some positive results elsewhere in this report, we can speculate here that a change to teaching necessitated by Covid-19 may have impacted on value perceptions – a point backed up by analysis of open comments later in this chapter.

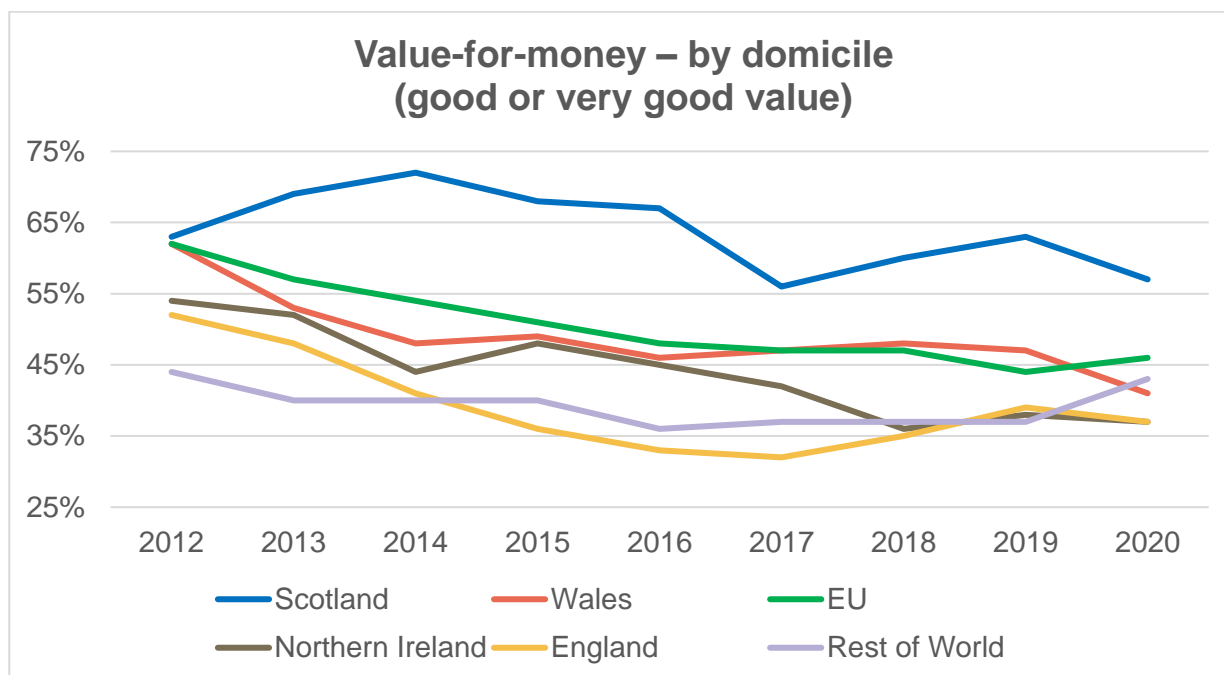
	Pre-March 16 interview date	Post-March 16 survey date
Received very good value	7%	7%
Received good value	<b>33%</b>	31%
Total: Received good or very good value	<b>40%</b>	38%

We should also point out that much of the earlier fieldwork took place on or around the time when major staff industrial action was taking place across the sector – an issue that is also identified through students’ open comments, analysed below.

### 3.2 Value by domicile

With different funding regimes in place in different parts of the UK and beyond, we might expect to see clear differences in how students assess the value they have received, and this year we again see both fluctuations by year and differences by domicile.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The 2020 HEPI publication *One for all or all four one* provides more information on how perceptions on value, funding and other issues differ across the four parts of the UK. <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/One-for-all-or-all-four-one-Does-the-UK-still-have-a-single-higher-education-sector.pdf>



	Scotland	Wales	EU	NI	England	Rest of World
<b>2019</b>	63%	47%	44%	38%	39%	37%
<b>2020</b>	<b>57%</b>	41%	46%	37%	<b>37%</b>	43%

Students from Scotland are again the most positive, but there has been a statistically significant (6%) fall this year. There has also been a significant fall (2%) among students from England (39% to 37%), and a 6% fall among students from Wales (47% to 41%) – but due to smaller sample sizes, this number for Welsh students is not significant. There has been a slight fall for Northern Irish students too – 1% – but this is not significant.

By contrast, students from outside the UK show an increase in perceived value this year, and are now among the most satisfied on this measure. As context, sterling has fallen significantly in recent years and therefore fees are cheaper in real terms for many foreign students, which may be having an impact here.

In absolute terms, students from England once again have the lowest value perceptions, as they have done most years since 2014, although it is important to point out that unlike in some earlier years (2016, 2017, 2018) there are more students who perceive good / very good value (37%) than perceive poor / very poor value (33%).

### 3.3 Factors influencing perceptions of value

As we have seen in previous years, the factors driving a positive experience often (but not always) differ from the issues contributing to a negative one and this year shows a similar picture.



The drivers of good value are familiar – teaching quality, course content, the campus buildings and student support. Against this, poor value is largely related to cost (tuition fees, cost of living) rather than quality, although tuition time is also selected more frequently by poor-value-rating students than it is by those who perceived good value.

There are some aspects which are seen by some as positive, and by similar proportions as negative – for example contact hours and feedback received (despite an improvement this year as we will see later). For these aspects, this emphasises how difficult it is to strike a balance that meets the needs of all students in the light of varying preferences while reflecting what is appropriate for learning.

The above chart is based on a set of answers students were provided to select from. However, in order to ensure we could capture the full range of influences on value perceptions, the Survey also included a free-text option for students to record any other factors that they felt had an impact, which we have investigated in detail for the first time in this year’s report.

This proved to be of particular significance, with 7% of students who said they received poor or very poor value providing a free-text response, compared to just 3% of the equivalent cohort last year, and only 1% of students who this year said they received good / very good value. Clearly, there were other factors at play driving perception of poor value, beyond those listed in the chart above, with two themes standing out among a range of issues mentioned.

<b>“Other” category:</b>	<b>Principal mention: Strikes</b>	<b>Significant additional mention: Covid-19</b>
<b>Selected comments</b>	“Missed contact hours due to strikes”	“University closed because of Pandemic – not their fault”
	“Lots of strikes & missed lectures”	“Coronavirus means I’ve paid £9k for ONE seminar this term”
	“Missing lectures due to strike action with no compensation”	“Only being at university for 2 months and having to leave by mid-March due to Covid 19 & still having to pay the 9 grand for tutoring fees”
	“Lack of support during strikes & having to pay for teaching which we did not receive”	“Since the outbreak of the covid19 our classes are going to be online, we are going to miss many opportunities to get practice in the lab and to do other activities on campus”
	“Lost out because of strikes and Covid-19”	
	“Because of strikes and Coronavirus there has been a massive gap in my learning”	

These comments highlight that many students directly measure value in terms of face-to-face contact, and the first part of 2020 has seen two major issues which have impacted upon this. February and March saw major staff industrial action at many institutions, which clearly appears to have impacted on how some students perceive their experience, while the Covid-19 crisis required many teaching schedules to be moved online from early or mid-March. Hence, while students can and do see the Covid-19 crisis from the point of view of the institutions (“it is not their fault”), it has in some cases compounded an already disrupted period.

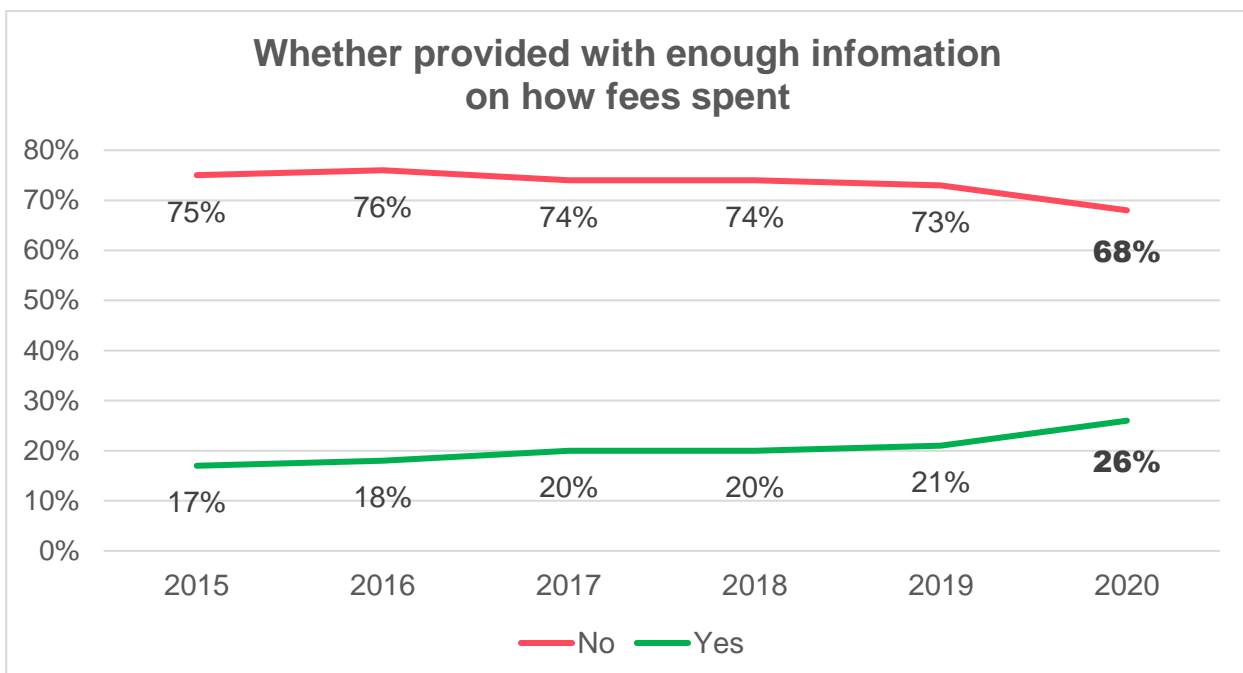
We saw earlier how value perceptions have fallen this year, albeit on a relatively small scale and these comments point towards these two events impacting directly upon this.

### 3.4 Information on how fees are spent

Given the importance of fees in contributing to value, and the inherent relationship between fees and contact hours, one way of helping to demonstrate value is to provide information on what fees are spent on.

We have seen previously that this is a challenging area for institutions, as so many students still feel that the absolute level of fees is very high, and have felt in the past that they have not received clarity on areas of spending.

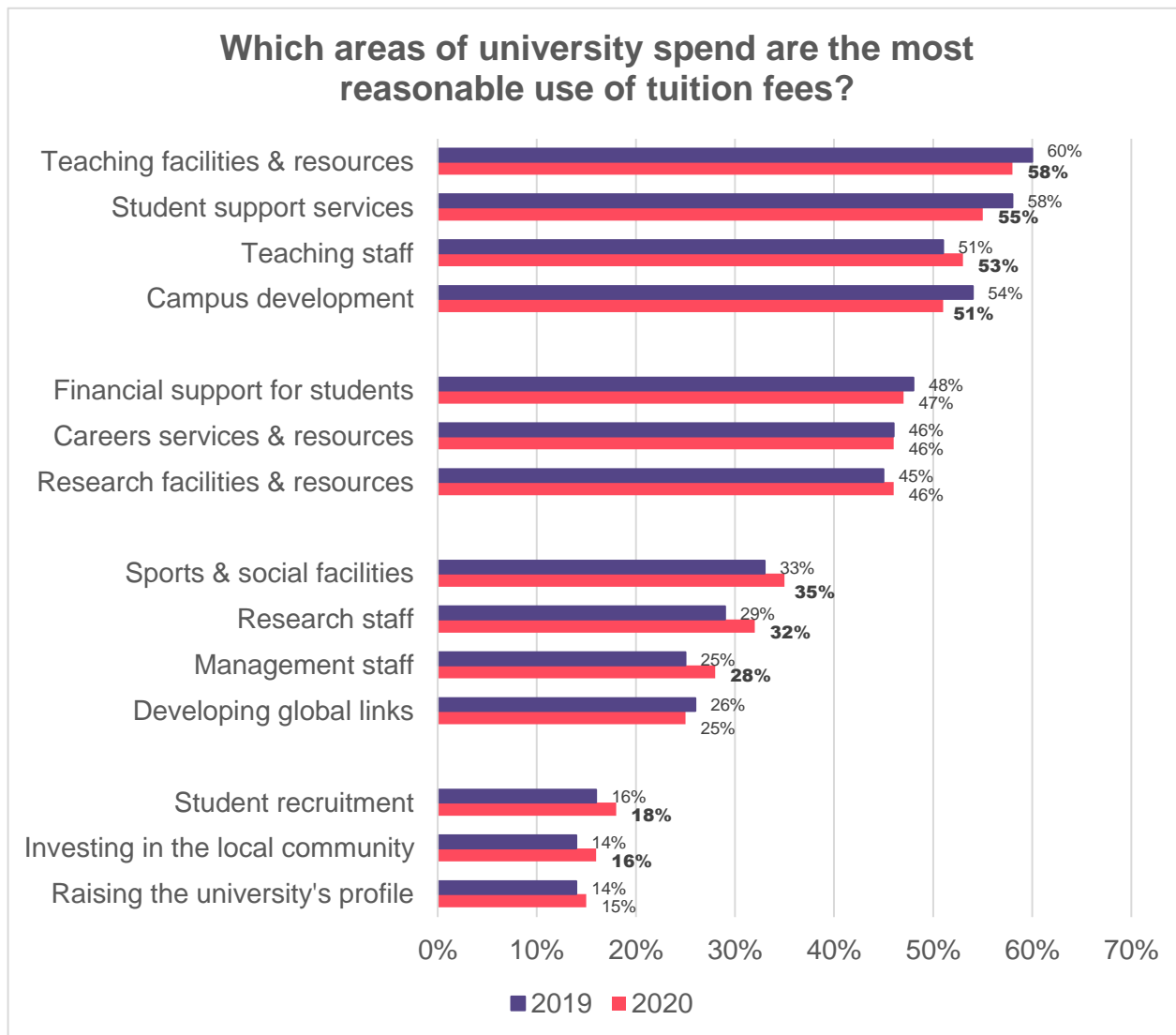
Encouragingly, however, the 2020 results show the first material increase (21% to 26%) in this measure since we introduced the question in 2015, indicating that this is an area the institutions are taking increasingly seriously, and that strategies around communication of this information are beginning to have an impact.





### 3.5 Most appropriate use of tuition fees

By asking students about the areas of spending that are the most appropriate uses of tuition fees, our Survey provides direct insight for how institutions can help provide information on where fees go, and thereby demonstrate value.



For ease of reading, the above chart is divided into four categories – those areas with very high support, generally high support, more modest support and low support.

In absolute terms, the importance of teaching (facilities and staff) and student support (pastoral and financial) is clear, as is the role played by the buildings and facilities that comprise the campus environment in helping to create the right experience.

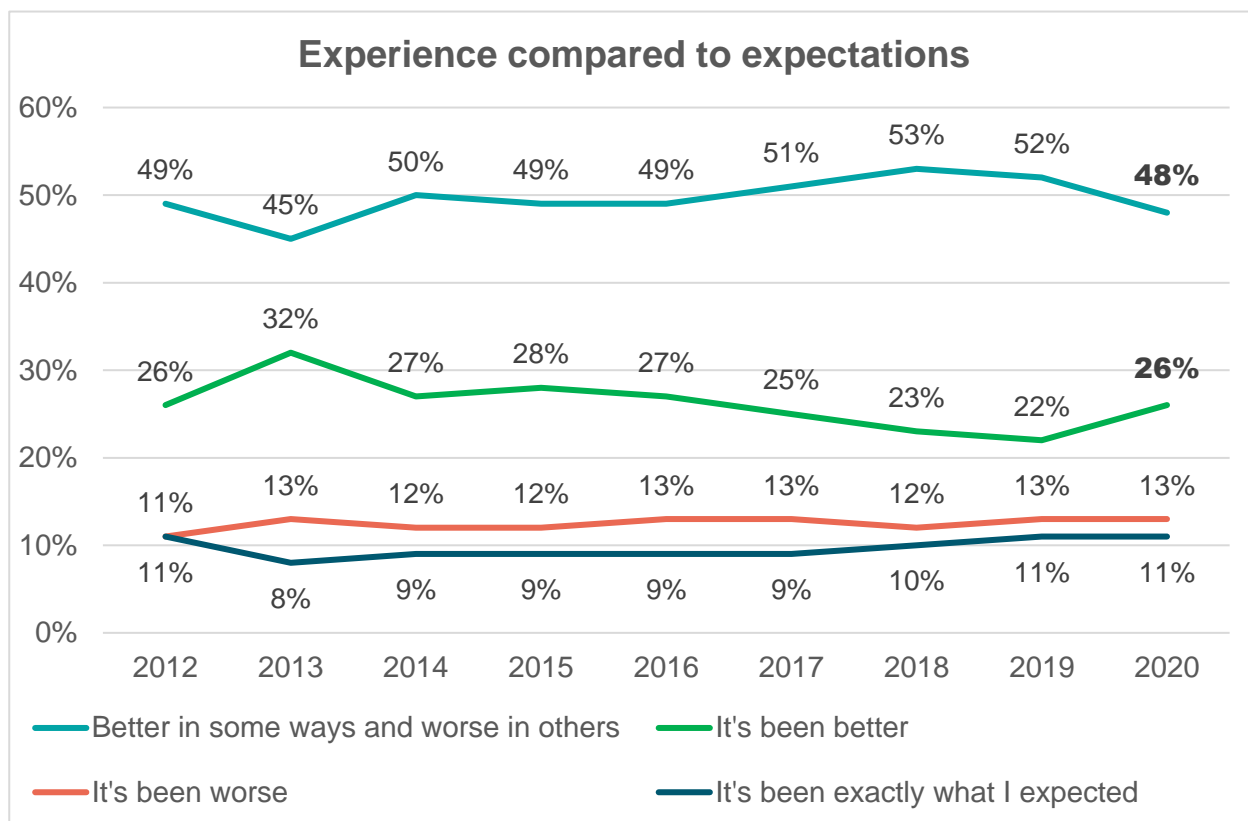
Against this, students give less priority to wider engagement work in the community and wider profile-raising and recruitment. Although these activities are of significant strategic benefit to institutions and society as a whole, they are perhaps of less immediate importance to students studying now, which may explain their lower ranking here. However, there is evidence of a change in the way students might be viewing these activities given the fact that they have increased in importance (if not ranking) this year.

Comparing 2019 to 2020, there are some noteworthy differences in priority. Although the overall ranking has changed little, all the staff measures (teaching staff, research staff, management staff) have increased significantly. The early part of 2020 has been a year when university staff have been in the spotlight during a period of significant industrial action, and we may speculate here that although students have felt the impact in terms of contact hours lost, the action may also have made students more aware of the role of staff across institutions.

## 4. Meeting expectations

### 4.1 Experience versus expectations

For many students, particularly those whose family and friends may not have gone into higher education, the experience is likely to be very new and different, and in many cases unlike any expectations they may have formed.



What we may reasonably hope for, however, is that experiences that are wholly worse than expectations are relatively rare, and are balanced by a larger number of cases where expectations have been largely exceeded. The good news is that this is what appears to be happening.

There are still more students who feel their experience has been better in some ways and worse in others – which is entirely understandable. However, there are now twice as many who feel their experience has been entirely better than expected, compared to those who feel it has been entirely worse. This is an encouraging finding, and indicates that institutions, and indeed the wider education system, may be becoming more effective at setting reasonable expectations and then working hard to exceed them.

Generally, there is strong consistency across a lot of different groups in the sample who are all equally likely to have had an experience partly or fully better than expected.

However, there are some differences by social grade, and also among students from state schools compared to private schools, which indicate that not all experiences are equal relative to expectations, while students from some backgrounds may find it difficult to know what to expect.

	Private school	State school	AB social grade <sup>8</sup>	DE social grade
Better than expected	<b>29%</b>	25%	<b>28%</b>	24%
Worse than expected	13%	13%	11%	<b>17%</b>
Partly better/ partly worse	43%	<b>49%</b>	47%	48%
Exactly as expected	12%	10%	11%	9%

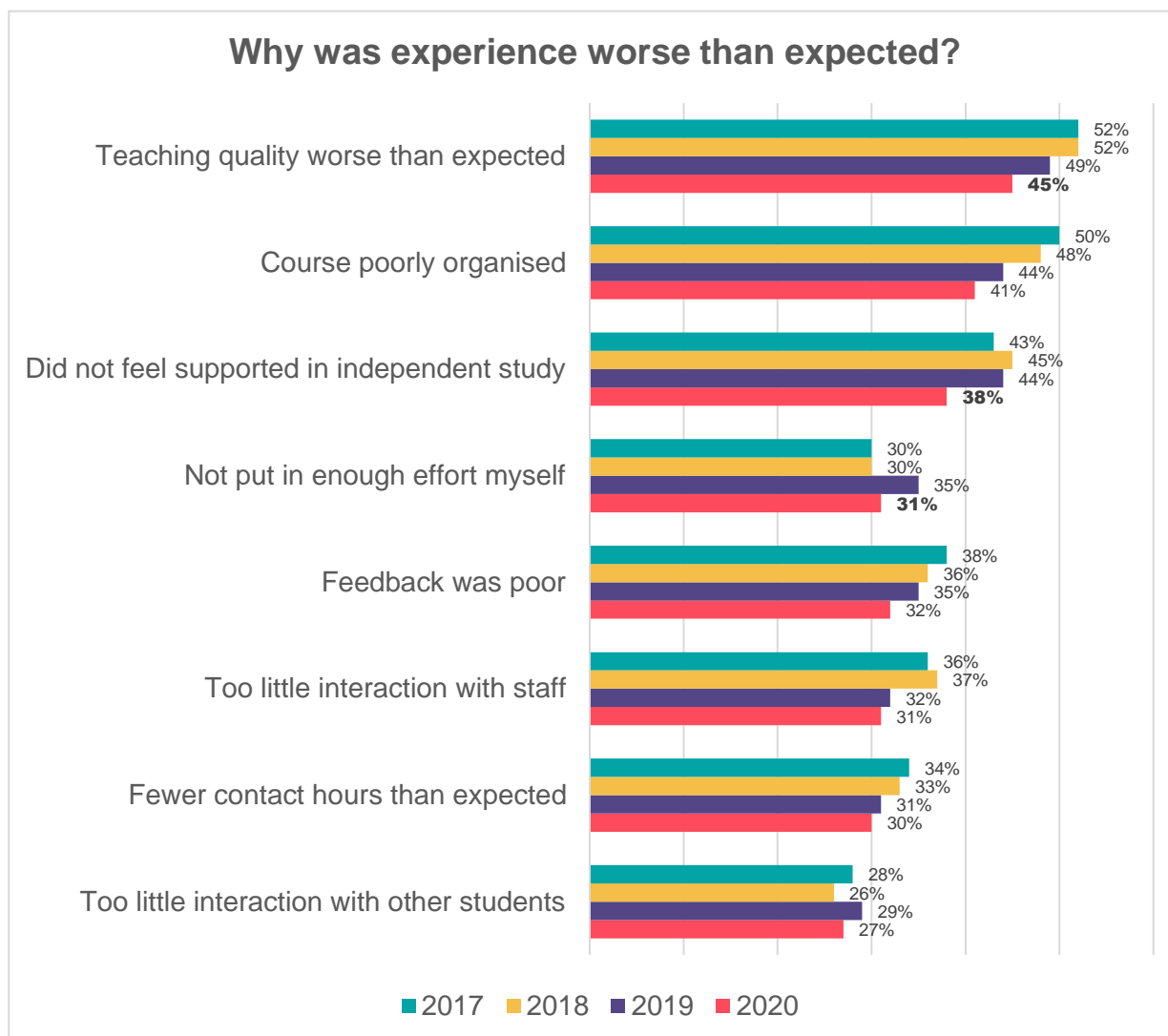
## 4.2 Why expectations are not met

Looking specifically at students whose experience was wholly worse than expected, the main drivers of this were teaching quality, course organisation and lack of support.

Encouragingly, however, this cohort of students is significantly less likely to feel these aspects were an influence than the equivalent cohort back in 2017.

Other aspects such as contact hours and interaction with others continue to be an important driver of a negative experience among some students, while some students continue to feel they have not put in enough effort – albeit to a lesser extent than in 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Source: <http://www.nrs.co.uk/nrs-print/lifestyle-and-classification-data/social-grade/>  
[Accessed 13 May 2020]



The 2020 results are striking in that students are less likely to mention all of the options listed, some of which have fallen significantly compared to 2019. Although a lot of these options played a major role in their experience, this also implies that other factors not in our list may be influencing the findings this year.

Almost one-in-ten (9%) of respondents used a free-text box to mention another issue that was not in the list of reasons charted above, submitting a range of open-ended comments which provide significant additional insight into the experience.

Understandably, a wide range of themes were mentioned, but in terms of volume there were three areas in particular that stood out – strike action (with some additional mentions of Covid-19), workload and mental health issues.

We saw that strike action was also raised as a concern when assessing value perceptions and, through its role in restricting contact hours, it has also impacted on the overall experience of some students.

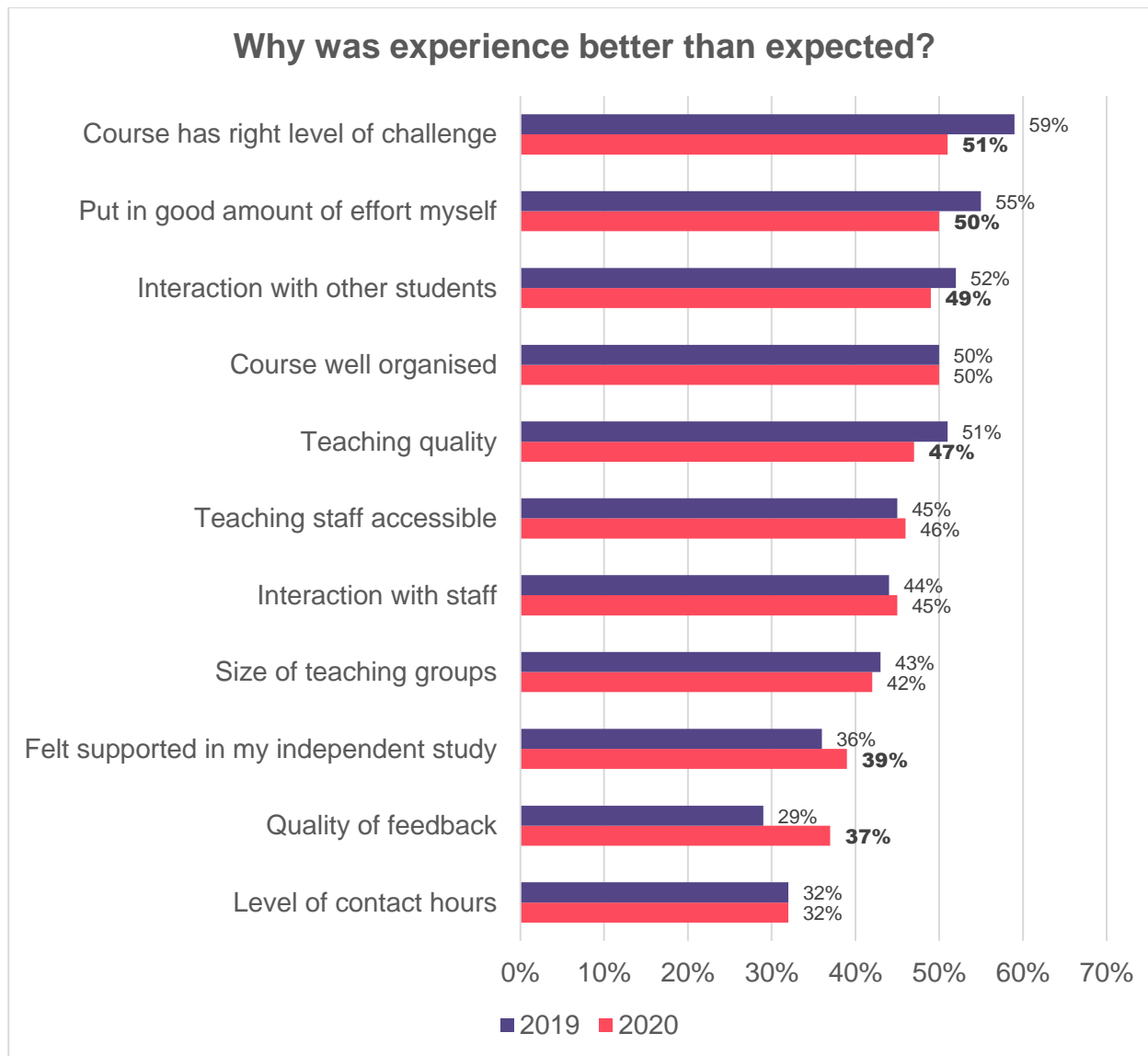
The role of workload is potentially a polarising one, in that we know that many students assess the quality of their experience in terms of being challenged and kept busy through contact hours and assignments – as the data on satisfaction with contact hours later in this report shows us. However, this can often come with pressure which some students – often those juggling other issues – find difficult to cope with.

Student mental health is undeniably an area of major focus across the sector and among young people in general, and clearly students are recognising this themselves as being a barrier to getting the most out of their time at university.

“Other” category:	Strikes	Workload	Mental health
Selected comments	“Strikes and the pandemic have been disruptive but of course I know that’s not the department’s fault”	“A lot more stressful and more pressure than I was expecting”	“I’ve suffered from mental health issues and this has resulted in me not obtaining the best I could have “
	“Strikes caused me to have 3 weeks of no studies”	“Balancing work and uni is a challenge”	“Mental health and not feeling as though I fit in with the other students who were all from much wealthier backgrounds than me”
	“Strikes preventing feedback in time for other assignments”	“Exams have been more stressful than I expected and required much more work than expected”	“My mental health was not as strong as I thought it was and this hampered me”
	“Been good overall but strikes have severely impacted on my chance to learn effectively”	“Its hard to juggle everything sometimes”	“Diagnosed mental disorders and new treatment hugely affected my attitude and outlook”

### 4.3 Why expectations are exceeded

As we saw earlier, around one-in-four students praised their experience for being better than expected, and the reasons for this are analysed below.



Students highlight the importance of being challenged in their course and putting in enough effort – which fits with what we have seen in previous years in terms of most students with higher workloads having a better experience (although there are others who find the experience stressful). Students also cite being able to interact with other students as a key driver of their positive experience, although it should be recognised that live-at-home students (43%) are less likely to mention this as a factor, presumably as they have less scope for this.

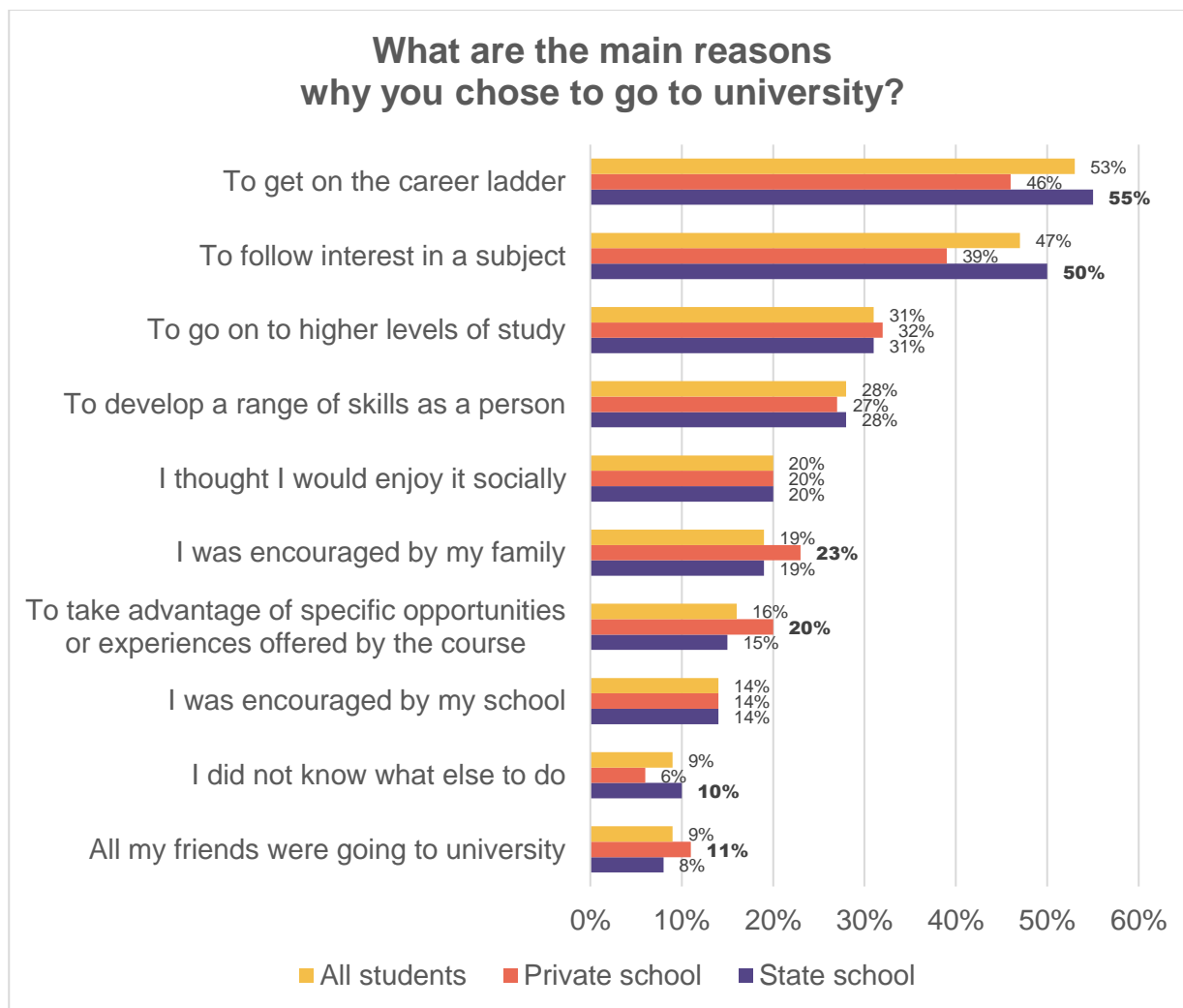
There has been a change in the relative importance of several different aspects this year, perhaps the most notable of which is the strong increase (29% to 37%) in students mentioning the quality of feedback. It appears from this that feedback is becoming more effective at meeting students' needs, something that is underlined from the strong results on assessment that we will see later in this report.



## 5. The choice to go to university

### 5.1 Why decided to go to university

In a new question this year we asked students to select up to three main drivers of their decision to go to university, with the results detailed below.

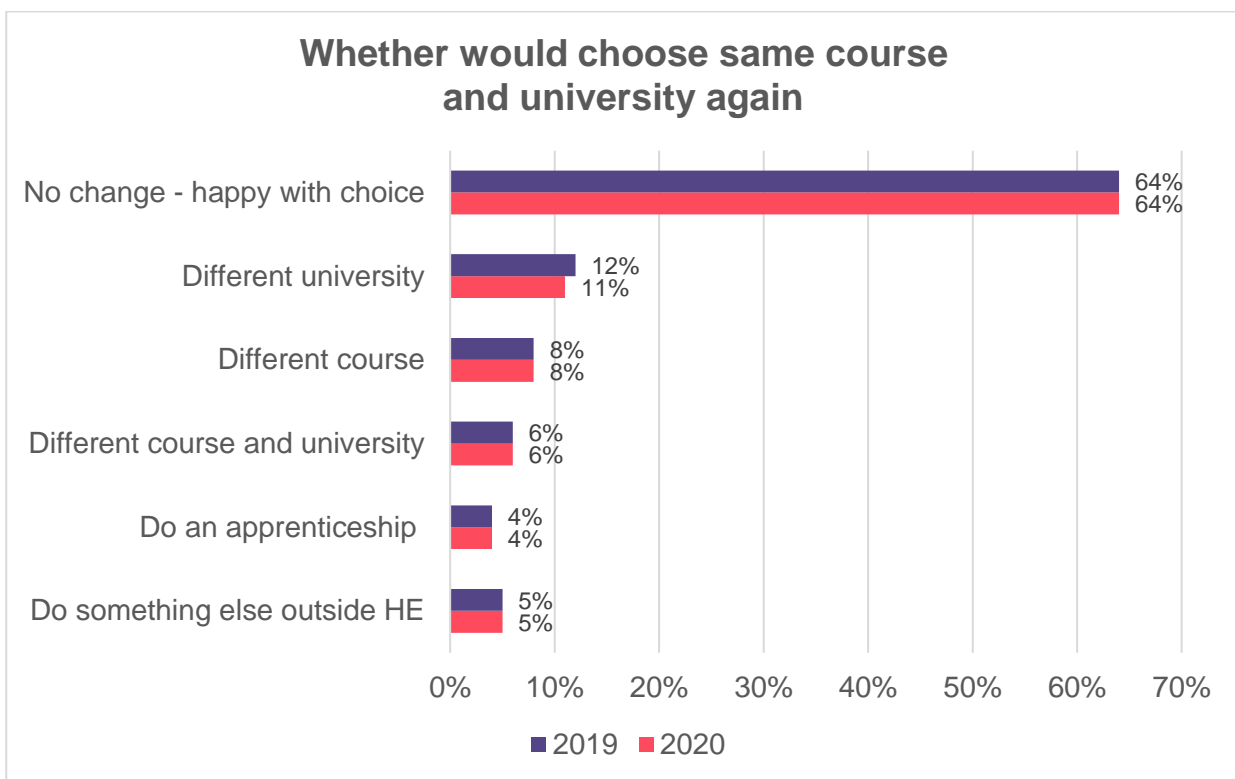


Students are clearly aware of their career desires, even at the relatively young age at which they typically made these choices, although academic ambitions are also prominent in driving choices. All the other reasons are some way behind in terms of importance and it is notable that social considerations are not especially strong drivers. Clearly, many students are making an informed choice driven by ambition and practical considerations.

Where there are differences in choice, it tends to be between students of different backgrounds, specifically private and state schools. Those from state schools are significantly more likely to mention career factors and subject interest (but conversely also to say that they did not know what else to do). Students from private schools tend to have the same overall range of reasons, but are also more likely to make their choice based on family and friends, as well as to take advantages of specific opportunities offered by a course.

## 5.2 Whether would make same choice again

A question introduced in 2018 (with some revisions in 2019) asks students whether, knowing what they now know, they would make the same choice of university and course again.



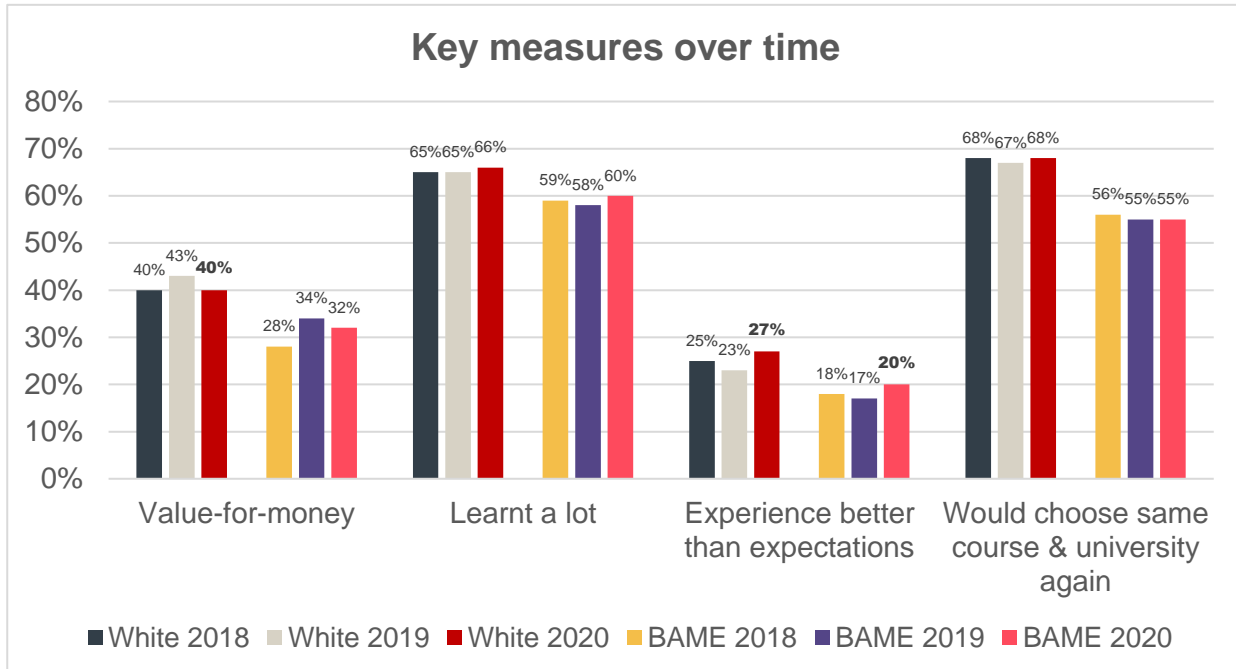
What is striking about these findings is how consistent they are. There is virtually no movement year-on-year – and this is also the case when compared (not on the chart) with the slightly different set of options asked in 2018.

Two-thirds of students are happy with their choice and would do the same again. This is a strong endorsement of the experience overall and this does not seem to be changing, despite the slight fall in perceived value-for-money this year. More students would change their institution rather than their course, but overall the profile of different options beyond traditional higher education is still low. Just 4% of students would choose an apprenticeship – at whatever level – and only 5% would do something else outside higher education.

It should be recognised, however, that there are some cohorts who are less happy with their choice and in some cases are more likely to question their decision to enter higher education. Some of these are explored in more detail in the next chapter.

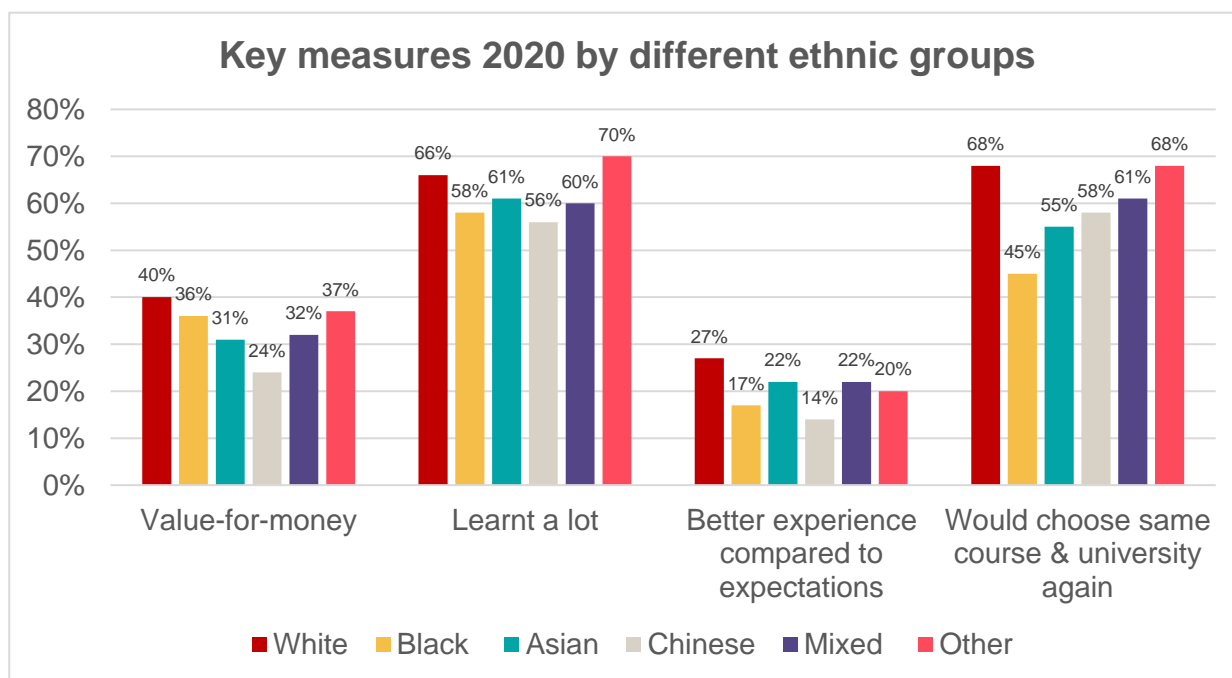
## 6. Spotlight on different student groups

### 6.1 Ethnicity



We have identified over previous years how (UK-domiciled) students from BAME backgrounds tend to have a less positive experience across a range of aspects, and this is also the case in 2020. Students from BAME backgrounds are less likely than White students to perceive they have received good value, learnt a lot, or enjoyed an experience that was better than expected. They are also less satisfied with access to teaching staff – a key aspect that may well be contributing to some of the measures charted here. Accordingly, they are significantly less likely to have chosen the same course and institution again given the choice.

In 2020, there is little change in the relative difference between White and BAME results, with both cohorts reporting a fall in value-for-money, a slight rise in learning a lot and a more substantial rise in the experience being better than expected. The net result of this is that a clear and consistent gap between White and BAME experiences remains.



Within the overall White / BAME comparison there are a range of different experiences reported by individual ethnic groups. UK-domiciled Chinese students are a small group but continue to report a relatively disappointing experience, potentially linked to particularly high expectations in terms of workload.

Mixed and Other ethnic groups tend to be less widely analysed, as they are small and comprise a range of different categories encompassing a range of varying experiences, but the results here suggest that these groups often have a relatively positive experience.

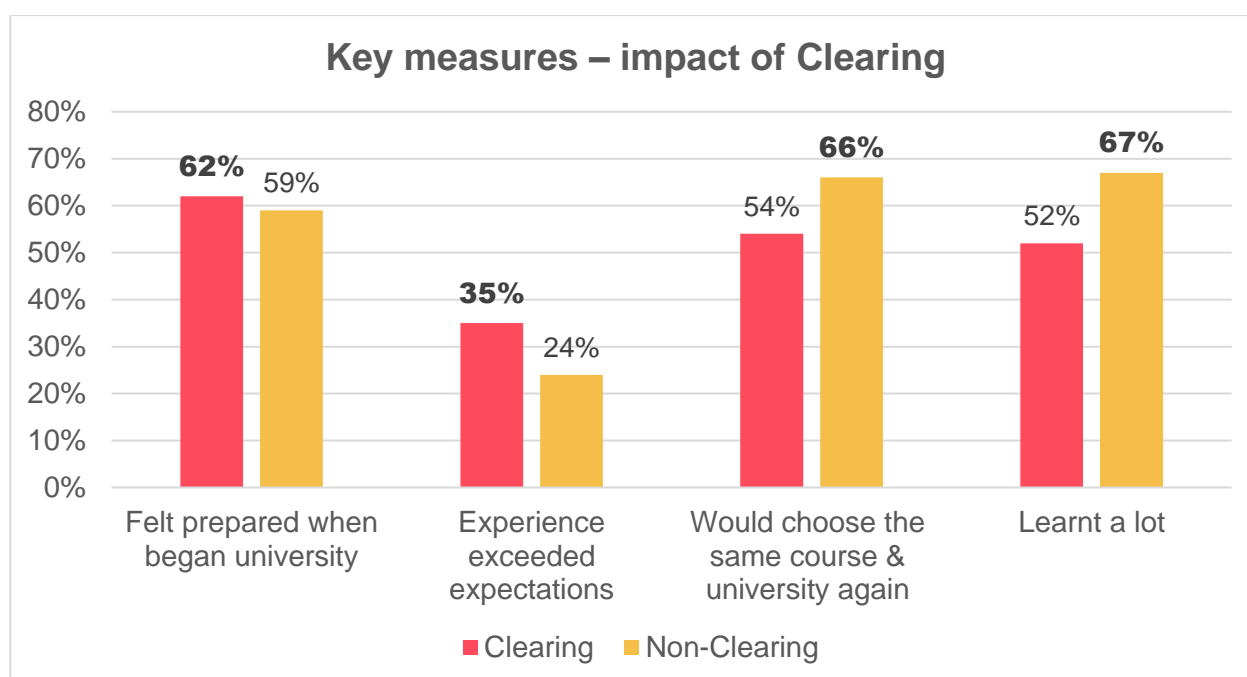
Black students are less likely to report an experience that was better than expectations, and are the only group where less than half (45%) would choose the same course and institution again. In fact, Black students were twice as likely than average (8%) to say they would choose an apprenticeship, and also twice as likely (6%) to say they would get a job instead of entering higher education. Clearly the overall experience has been disproportionately disappointing for some Black students which has made them question whether traditional higher education is for them.

One potential factor which may link to a less positive experience for some Black students is a high propensity to be in paid employment (48% compared to 42% for all students) – and as we will see later in this chapter, paid employment is linked to a less positive experience in terms of the knowledge they have gained in particular.

## 6.2 Students going through Clearing

In our Survey just under one-in-five (18%) of students went through the Clearing process – i.e. they were matched to a course that had not been filled during the main application process. This was particularly the case for students at Specialist institutions (29%) and those studying at an institution in Greater London (28%).

Due to the nature of the process, many of these students did not necessarily end up on the course of their choice at the institution of their choice, and the evidence below points towards a mixed experience.



Most encouragingly, Clearing students are significantly more likely to say their expectations (across the whole academic experience) had been exceeded. This might be a function of expectations being tempered due to the circumstances in which they began, but it is a positive endorsement of how their institutions have supported them through their enrolment and during their course.

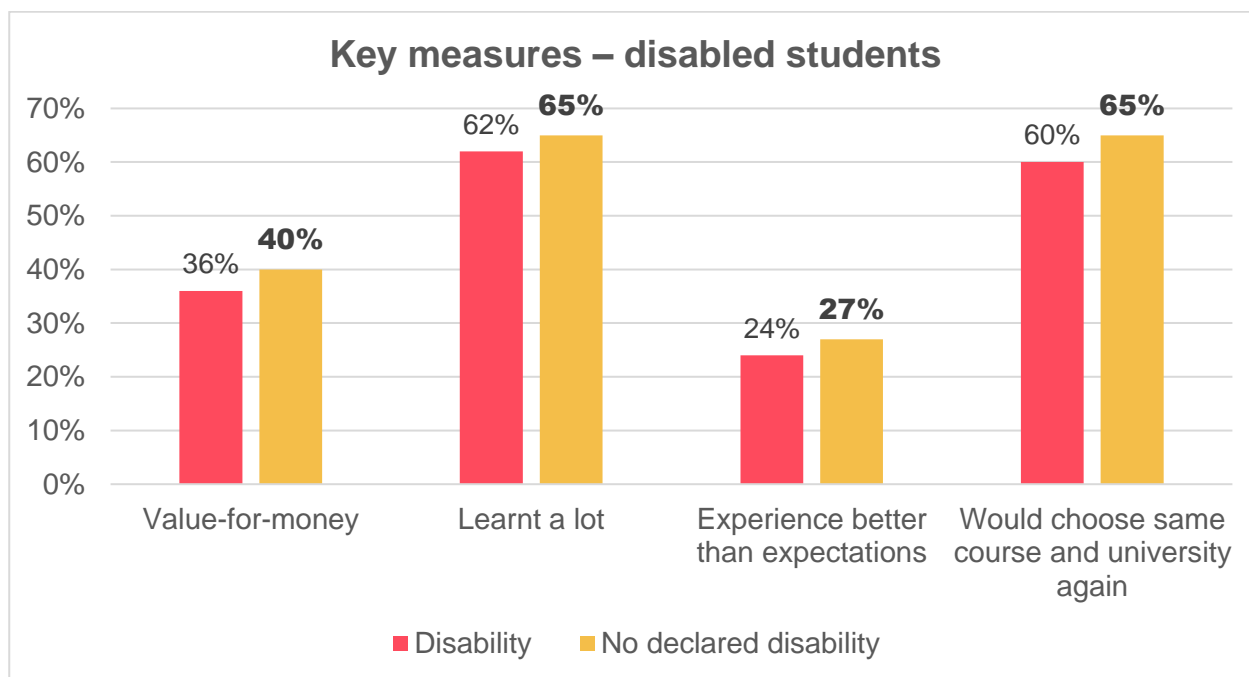
Clearing students were also more likely to say they felt prepared when they began university, which again is an endorsement of the process.

More worryingly, Clearing students were significantly less likely to say they had learnt a lot at university. Despite the overall experience being positive, when it comes to the actual learning, these students do not feel they are gaining the same level of knowledge, which may be a function of enrolling on a course that they feel may not have been best suited to their skills, knowledge or interests.

Related to this, Clearing students are less likely to say they would make the same choice again (54% compared to 66%) – being twice as likely (10%) than non-Clearing students to say they would change course and university if they had the chance. It is important to recognise that just over half are happy with their choice and say they would not change anything, but these results do potentially have implications for the lower retention rates among Clearing students and how they can best be supported during their learning.

### 6.3 Disabled students

Just under one-in-five students in our Survey (18%) classify themselves as disabled, a proportion that has been steadily increasing since 2015 when the proportion was 13%. This could be due to a variety of factors, such as increased willingness to declare, or the evolving nature of the composition of the panel from which these students are drawn. However, such a material change over time can clearly have an influence on the overall results. It is notable that HESA data also show an increase in the proportion of disabled students, indicating that these changes in the survey sample reflect the sector overall.<sup>9</sup>



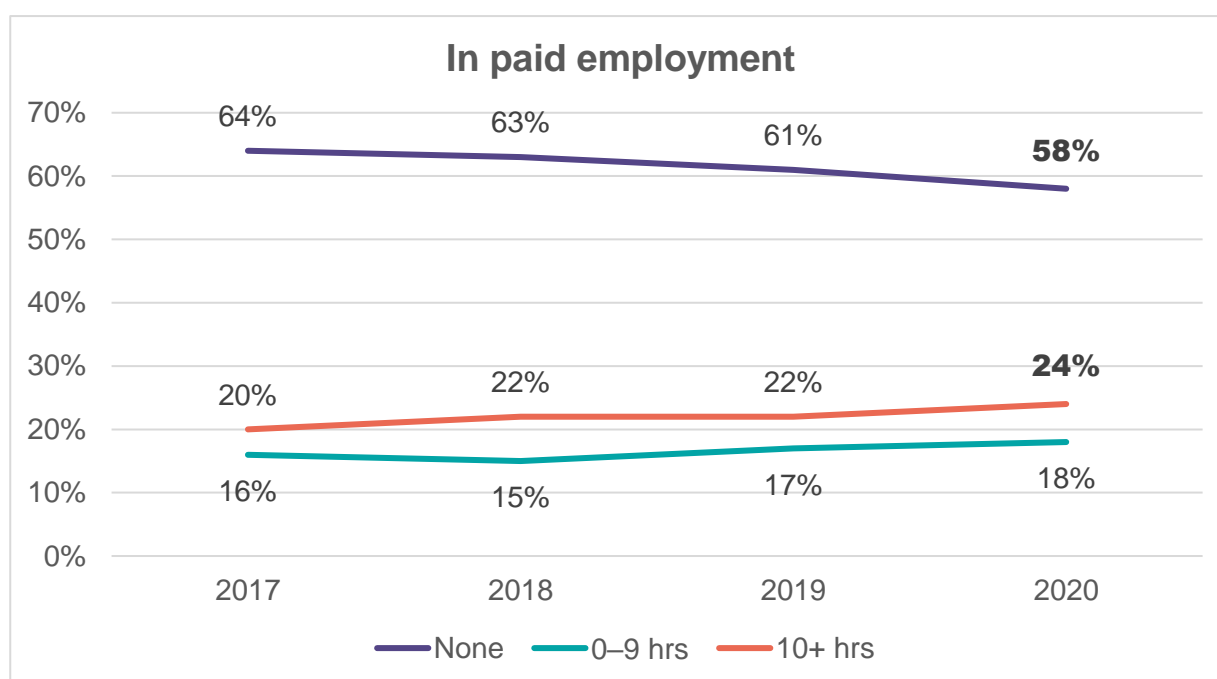
---

<sup>9</sup> Source: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/equality-and-diversity/equality-and-diversity-data/> [Accessed 1 May 2020]

The experience of disabled students is often less positive, which is a concern, but by the standards of the gaps we have seen for different ethnic groups, the differences are not huge – and have remained at similar levels over the past few years. Clearly, any difference in the likely experience linked to a protected characteristic such as disability is something to address, but it is to be hoped that the relative size of this gap makes doing so a realistic prospect.

## 6.4 Students in paid employment

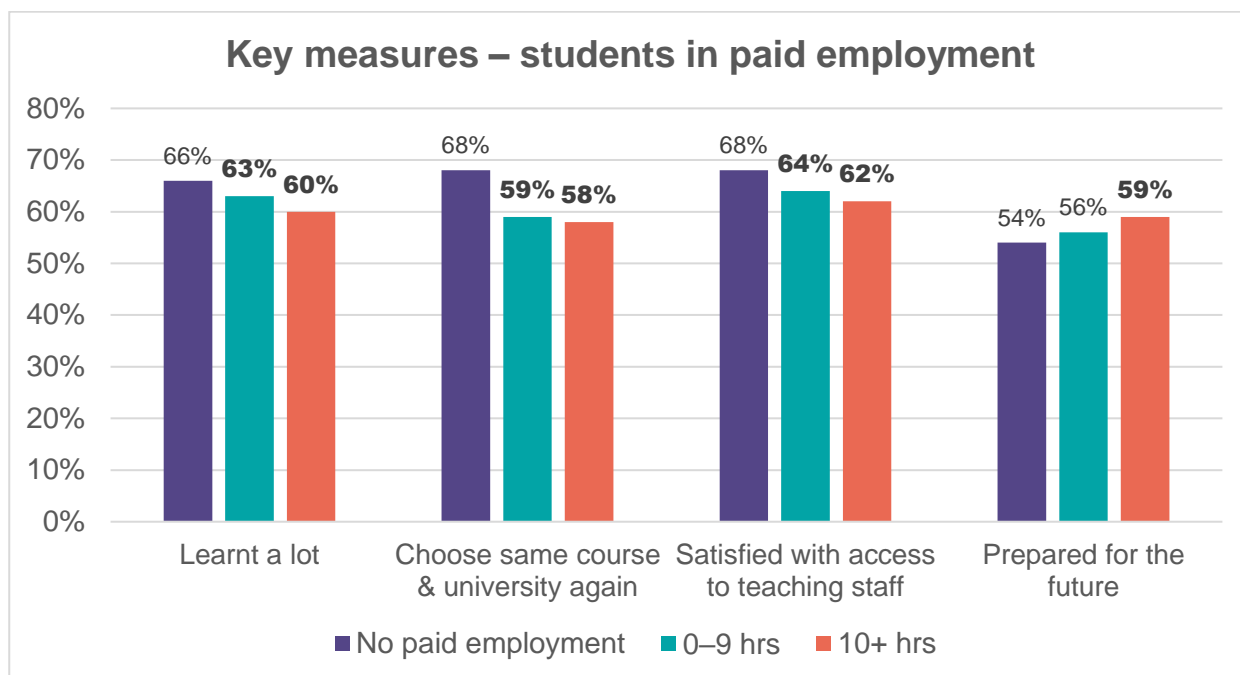
The final cohort we are looking at in detail in this section is students who spend time working for pay during term time – a cohort that has also grown significantly over the past few years.



The proportion who spend any time in employment has grown by 6% over the past few years, with this increase being seen particularly in the numbers who spend 10 hours or more working per week. This is likely to reflect an evolving student population in terms of the broad sections of society which it represents, as well as greater financial pressure on students from a range of backgrounds, but as a result there are large sections of the student population with greater demands on their time. Further investigation into this issue has been conducted by Advance HE, who found that the amount of time students spend in sports and societies may be taking a back seat due to employment pressures, which in turn may be limiting opportunities for skills development.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Neves (2019), *UK Engagement Survey*. York: Advance HE



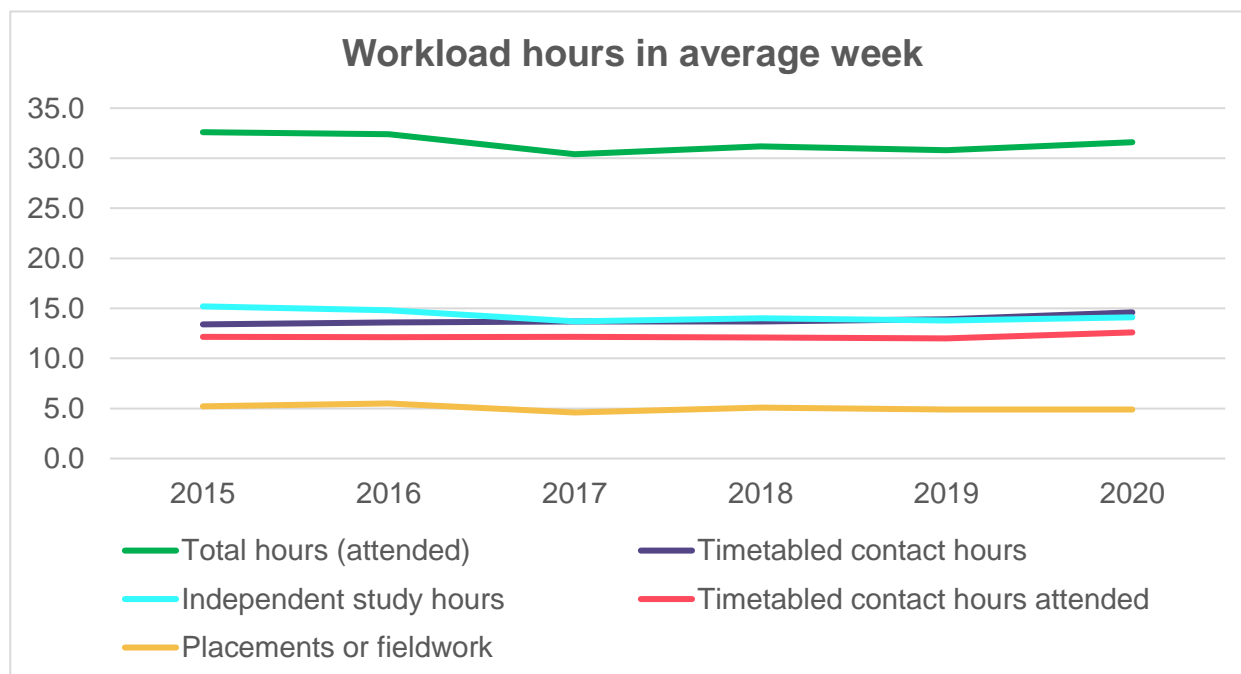


These data suggest balancing the pressures of work and study can have a negative impact on some aspects of the experience, in particular the crucial aspect of how much students feel they learn, which is 6% lower for students with high levels of paid work. Those with high levels of paid work are also less satisfied with their access to teaching staff, which perhaps makes sense if they are finding it more difficult to balance their own time and accessibility. Potentially as a result of the challenges experienced, working students are less likely to say they would make the same choice of course and university again.

Conversely, however, working students are actually more likely to feel prepared for their future. This is logical in that as we have seen, a focus on future employability is the main consideration for students choosing to go to university, and while much of the time spent in employment is unlikely to be in high-skilled work or related to a future career choice, students appear to feel that the work experience gained will help them once they graduate.

## 7. Teaching intensity

### 7.1 Workload trends



	Total hours (attended)	Scheduled contact hours	Independent study hours*	Contact hours attended*	Placements or fieldwork*
2019	30.8	13.9	13.8	12.0	4.9
2020	31.6	14.6	14.1	12.6	4.9

\* These measures contribute to the total figures

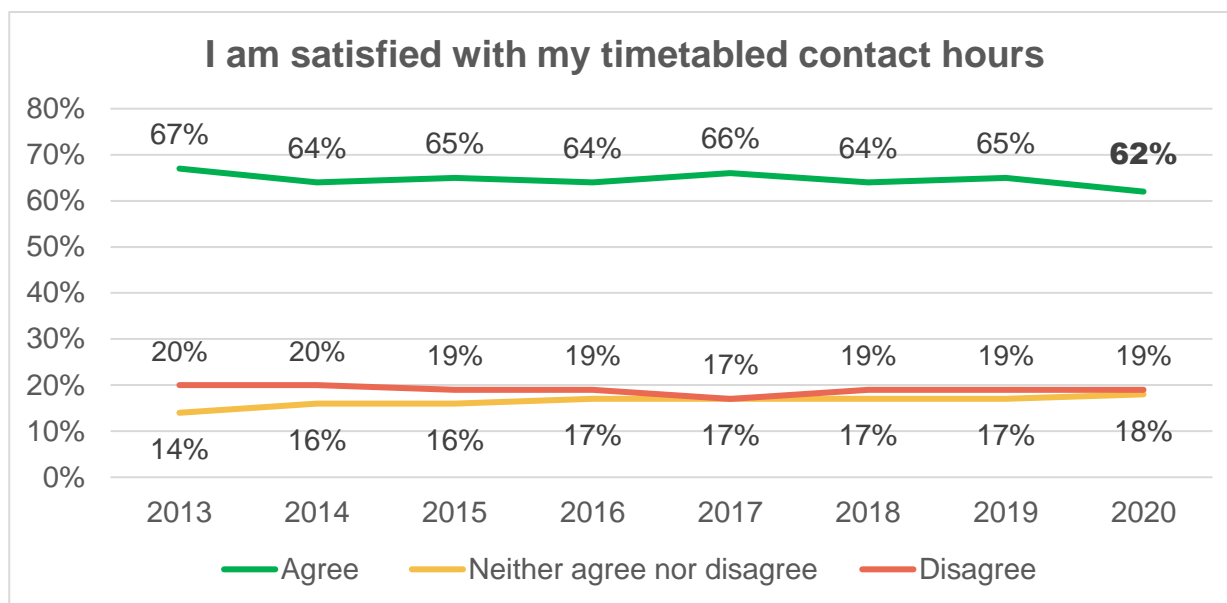
The different elements of workload have remained remarkably consistent over time, underlining the reliability of these metrics measured through our Survey as a key barometer across the sector.

However, there are often some nuanced changes year-on-year which point towards how workload is evolving. In 2020, the main change is in terms of contact hours, both timetabled and attended. Notwithstanding the disruption which is likely to have impacted on the actual number of hours around the time of the fieldwork, students are reporting higher levels of scheduled hours this year than last year, and also higher levels attended compared to last year, driving a net increase in total hours of workload from 30.8 to 31.6.

Hours spent on placement or fieldwork have changed little, as have hours of independent study, which suggests that students have based their answers across the whole semester rather than just on the prevailing situation when the survey took place.

## 7.2 Satisfaction with contact hours

Despite the small increase in contact hours, it is perhaps surprising that satisfaction with the volume of contact hours has declined significantly from 65% to 62%. There does not appear to be any impact of Covid-19 on this measure, as there is no real difference by survey date, which tells us that this is, as intended, a wider reflection of student opinion across the year.

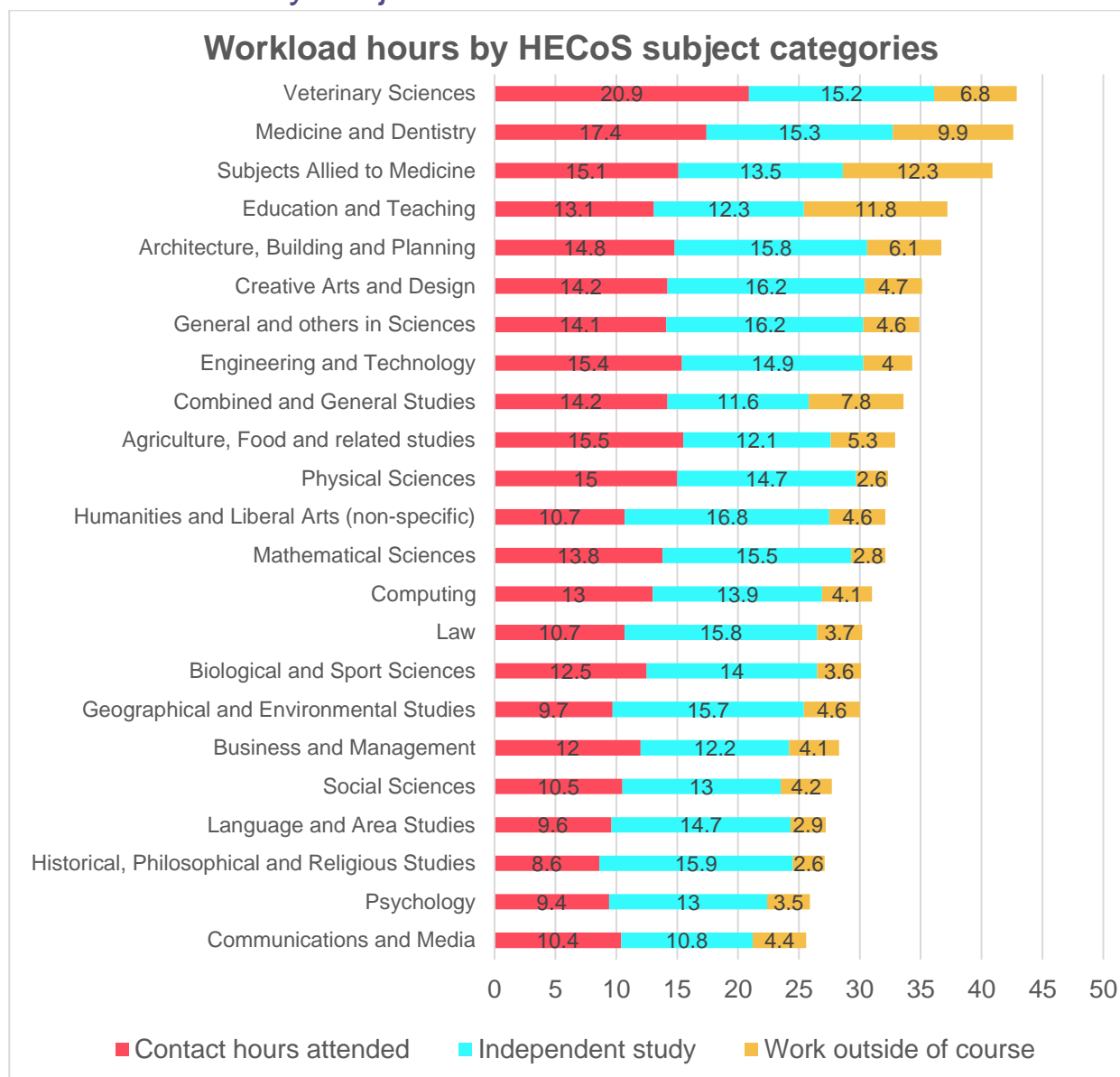


A reasonable summation from this is that students' expectations are changing and becoming more demanding: they expect a certain volume of contact hours, and as we shall see later, assignments and assessments. Hence, this creates a challenge for institutions to balance other methods of study that are necessary or sufficient for the needs of the course, while still delivering volumes of contact hours that are appropriate based on resource levels.

		Scheduled contact hours per week			
		0-9	10-19	20-29	30+
I am satisfied with my contact hours	Strongly agree	12%	16%	16%	22%
	Strongly disagree	10%	4%	3%	4%

The table above highlights that satisfaction with contact hours increases depending on the number of contact hours a student has, up to and including 30+ hours per week, which underlines that, in spite of some important concerns about stress and wellbeing, high volumes of contact hours are seen as important to many students.

### 7.3 Workload by subject



This year, across the sector, a new subject coding system – the Higher Education Classification of Subjects (HECoS) – has been introduced to replace the JACS system, with the Common Aggregation Hierarchy (CAH) also introduced to aggregate HECoS subjects into a smaller number of categories. We have reflected this for our subject analysis, comparing HECoS CAH1 categories in terms of volume and types of workload.<sup>11</sup>

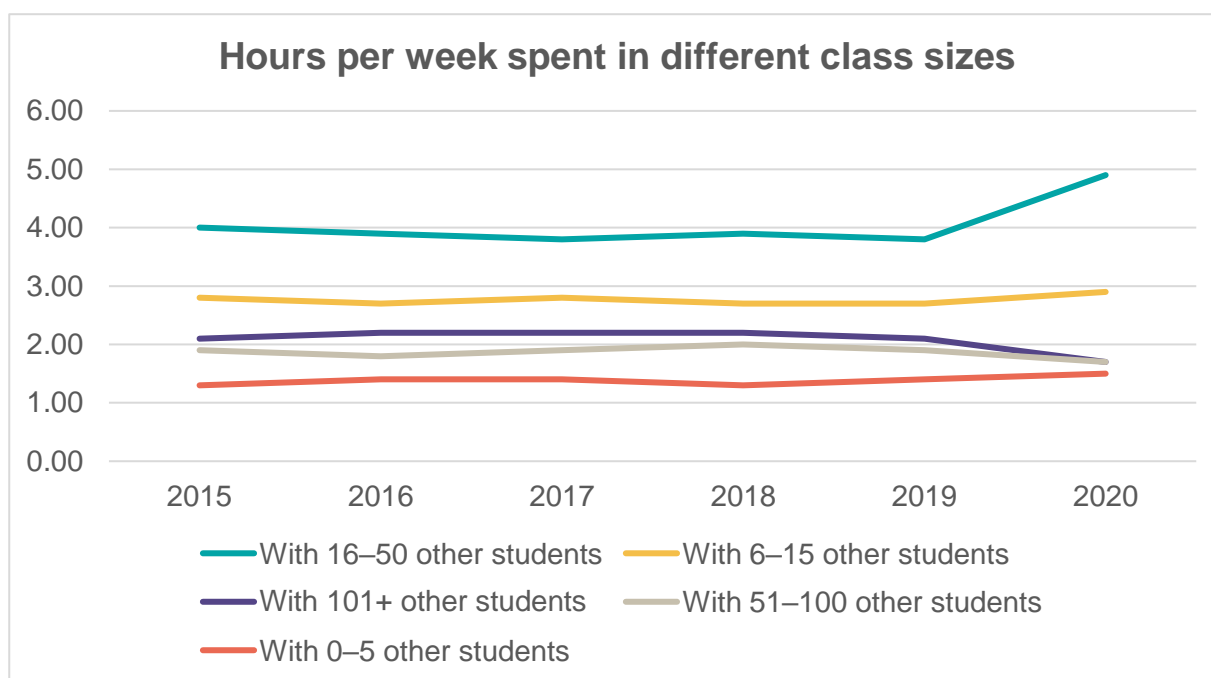
Veterinary Sciences and Medical students have the highest overall workload, driven by particularly high levels of contact hours. Independent study is also high for these students, but is highest for Liberal Arts and Creative Arts. Placement hours are particularly high for Education and Teaching, Subjects Allied to Medicine as well as Medicine and Dentistry.

At the other end of the scale, workload levels are lowest, on average, in Communications and Psychology, with contact hours also low for Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies.

### 7.4 Class size

The size of classes appears to be reducing.

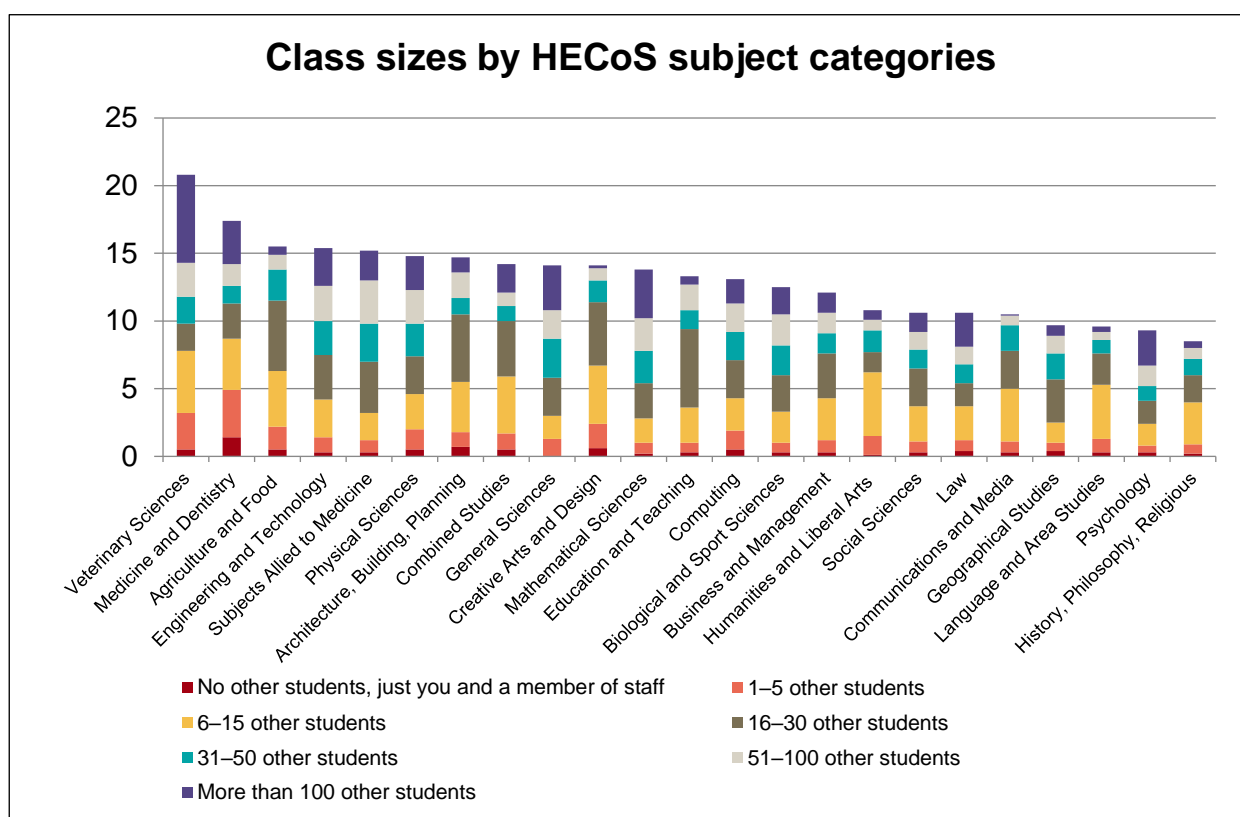
Compared to recent years, there is less time being spent in large classes (51–100 / 101+ other students), and significantly more time being spent in medium-sized classes (16–50). There is also a growth in the time being spent in the smallest classes of all (0–5 / 6–15).



<sup>11</sup> Source: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/innovation/hecos> [Accessed 13 May 2020]

Hours per week spent in different class sizes					
	0–5 other students	6–15	16–50	51–100	101+
2019	1.4	2.7	3.8	1.9	2.1
2020	1.5	2.9	4.9	1.7	1.7

When asked to list the factors they associate with good value and with tuition-fee spending, students do not tend to mention class sizes, large or small, as being one of their top-of-mind concerns. However, it is nonetheless a significant finding to see how class sizes have reduced this year alongside a gradual increase in the volume of timetabled classes.



The above chart breaks down the total contact hours in different subjects by class size. Veterinary Sciences, being the subject with the largest overall workload, has a high volume of hours in a range of different class sizes, but in particular the teaching in this subject is weighted towards the largest class sizes of all. Proportionally, General Sciences and Mathematical Sciences are also focused on very large class sizes.

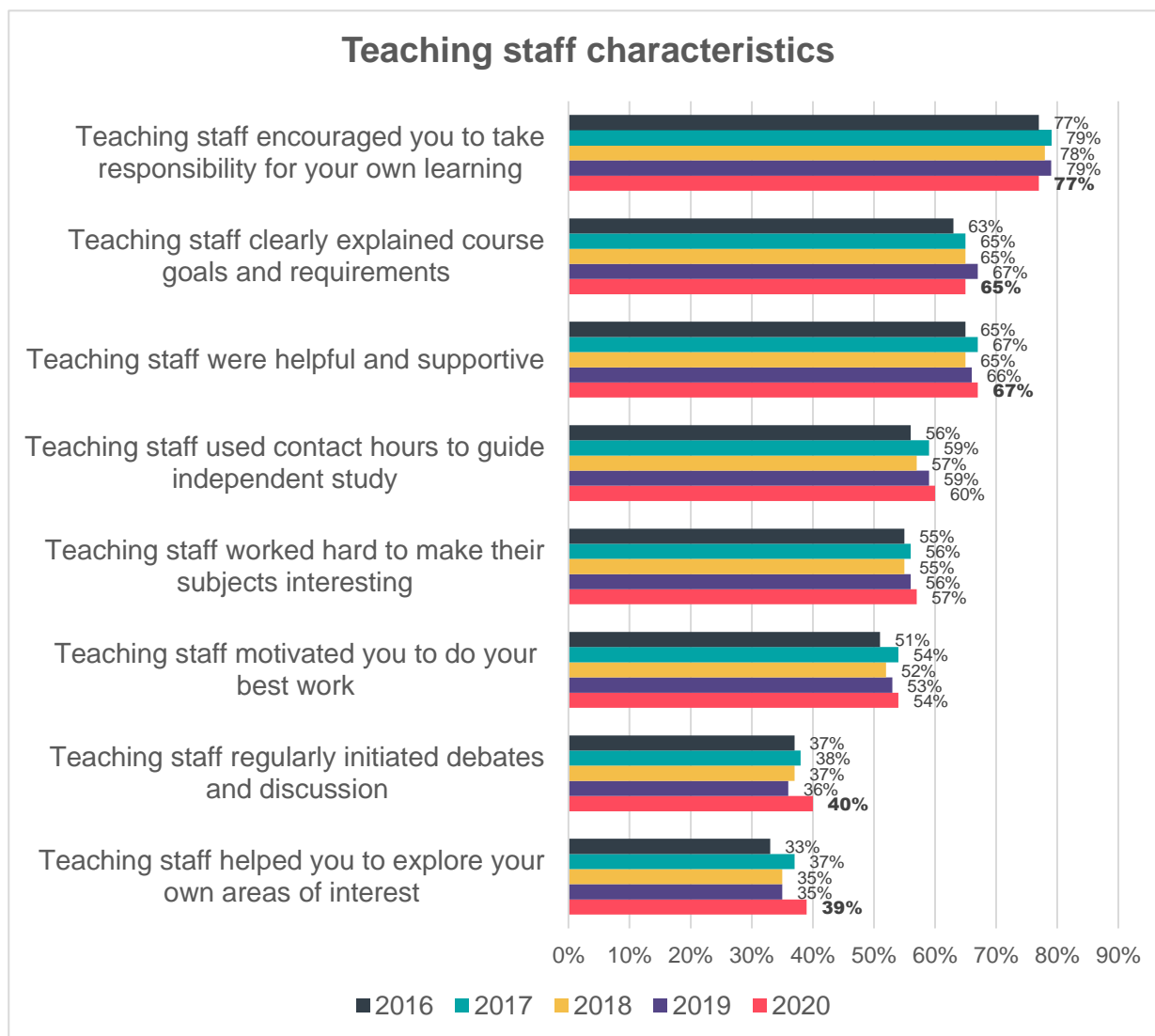
In contrast, Arts subjects tend to have small class sizes, with a high proportion of hours spent with 0, 1–5 or 6–15 other students. Medicine and Dentistry students spend the largest amount of time in the smallest classes of all, but also spend a significant proportion of their high workload in both medium- and large-scale teaching forums.

One notable point from these data is that for all subjects there is a real variety of class sizes, with no real evidence of a dominant format.

## 8. Quality of teaching and assessment

### 8.1 Perceptions of the quality of teaching staff

We know from analysis of previous versions of the Survey how central the role of teaching staff can be in contributing to a positive overall experience, a finding that was underlined in recent analysis by HEPI, which pinpointed how the characteristics of teaching staff can help contribute to more positive levels of wellbeing.<sup>12</sup>



<sup>12</sup> Blackman, T. (2020) *What affects student wellbeing*. HEPI Policy Note 21.

In 2019 we saw a gradual but consistent improvement in perceptions of teaching staff behaviour, and while these have not been maintained across the board this year, there have been some positive improvements, particularly in terms of teaching staff helping students explore their own areas of interest (35% to 39%) and regularly initiating debates and discussion (36%, up to 40%).

For many students, the experience of teaching changed significantly from around mid-March as most courses were moved online. Although we do not have a specific question about the online experience, these general measures about teaching do throw up some interesting differences in the data that highlight some positive aspects of how institutions have provided remote support.

	Pre-March 16 interview date	Post-March 16 interview date
Teaching staff regularly initiated debates and discussions	37%	<b>43%</b>
Teaching staff used lectures / teaching groups to guide and support independent study	58%	<b>62%</b>
Teaching staff helped you explore your own areas of interest	36%	<b>42%</b>

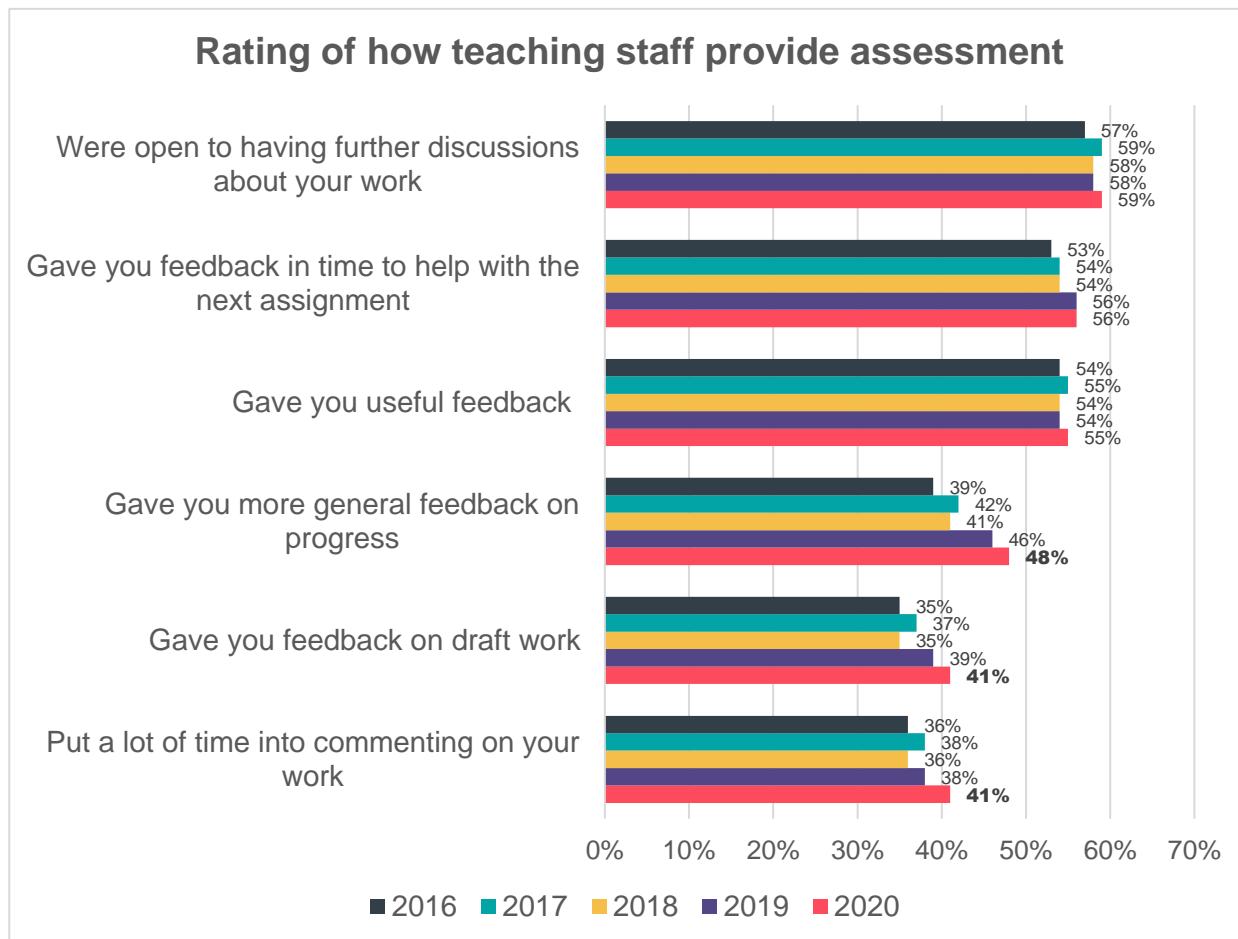
These three particular teaching metrics relate directly to how teaching staff support independent study, so it makes sense, but is still encouraging, that we see a positive difference among students surveyed from late March onwards. Among the rest of the teaching metrics charted on the previous page, there is no real difference in the experience pre- or post Covid-19 impact. Hence, while we saw earlier that students felt the lack of face-to-face classes due to Covid-19 coloured their view on value-for-money, there is little evidence that the quality of the teaching has been impacted.

## 8.2 Rating of assessment

Results across a number of areas in the Survey point towards assessment being one of the main areas that has seen a particularly clear improvement in 2020. In terms of the core questions on how staff provide assessment, five out of six aspects have shown an improvement, as charted below, with the other aspect (providing feedback in time to help with the next assignment) matching the 2020 score.

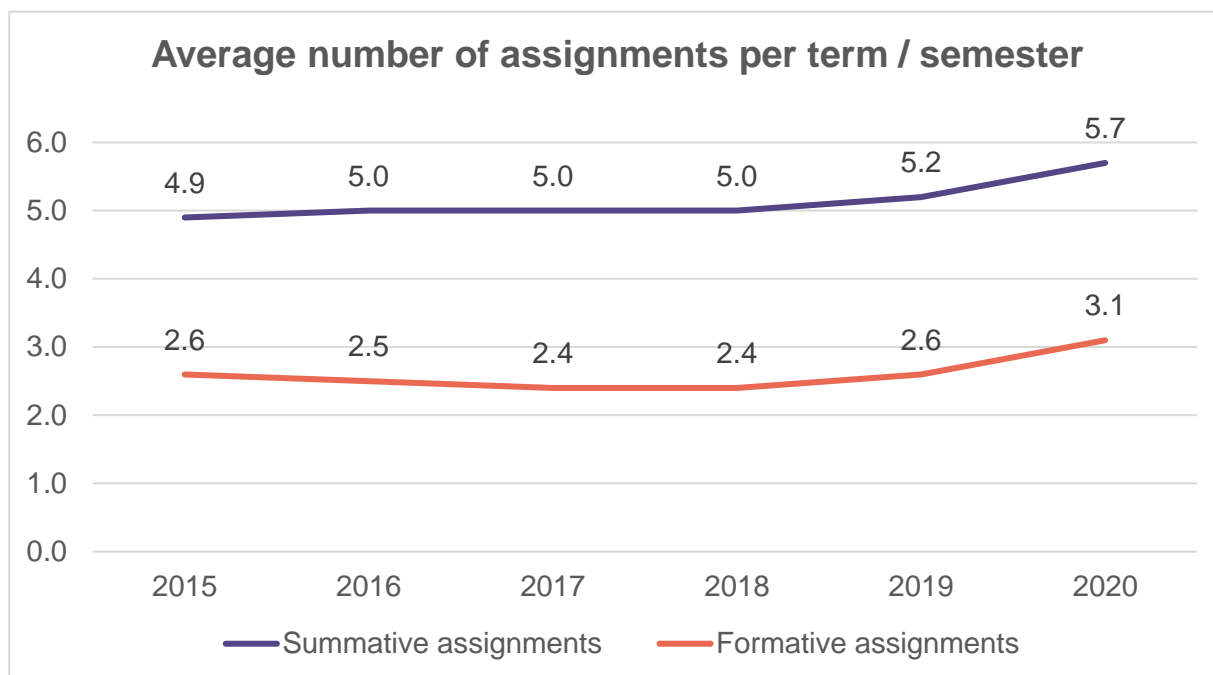


These improvements are relatively small, but with so many measures moving in the right direction we can be highly confident that they reflect positive improvements in terms of assessment across the sector. It is also worth pointing out that in the case of three of these metrics (providing general feedback on progress, providing feedback on draft work and putting a lot of time into commenting on work), the 2020 results represent a major positive difference compared to how they were rated back in 2016.



### 8.3 Volume of assignments

In 2019 the number of assignments began to increase, both in terms of those contributing to a mark (summative) and those contributing to learning (formative), and this has continued with 2020 seeing a sharp increase.



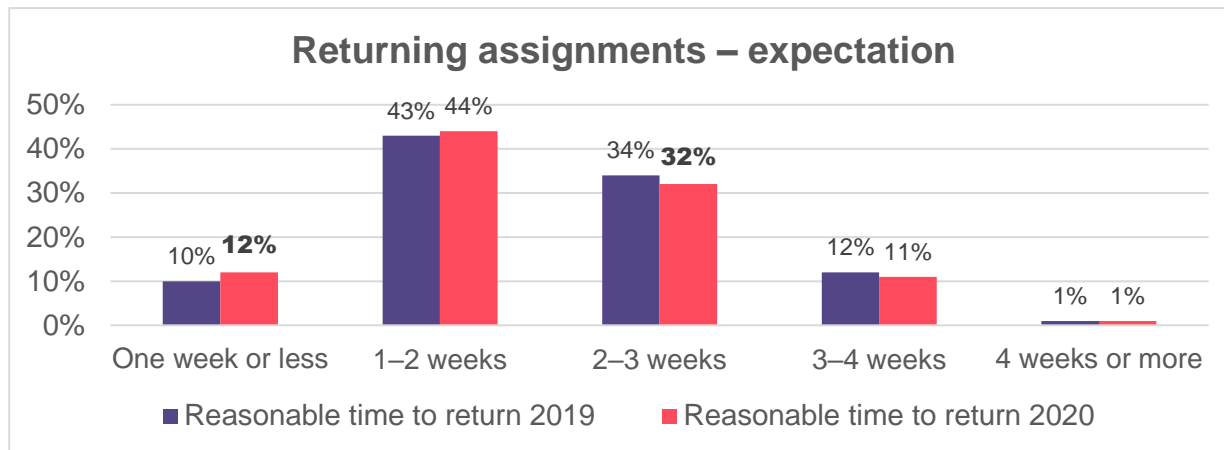
In general, this will be seen as good news among those who assess the overall value of their experience through tangible measures such as the number of contact hours and assignments. This is borne out by the data in the table below which illustrate how students who feel they have received good value are those who have been set higher volumes of assignments than those who feel they have received poor value, with a similar principle being observed for students whose experience has exceeded expectations compared to those whose experience has been worse.

	Good value	Poor value	Better than expectations	Worse than expectations
Formative assignments (mean)	5.8	5.4	6.7	5.5
Summative assignments (mean)	3.6	2.4	3.9	2.4

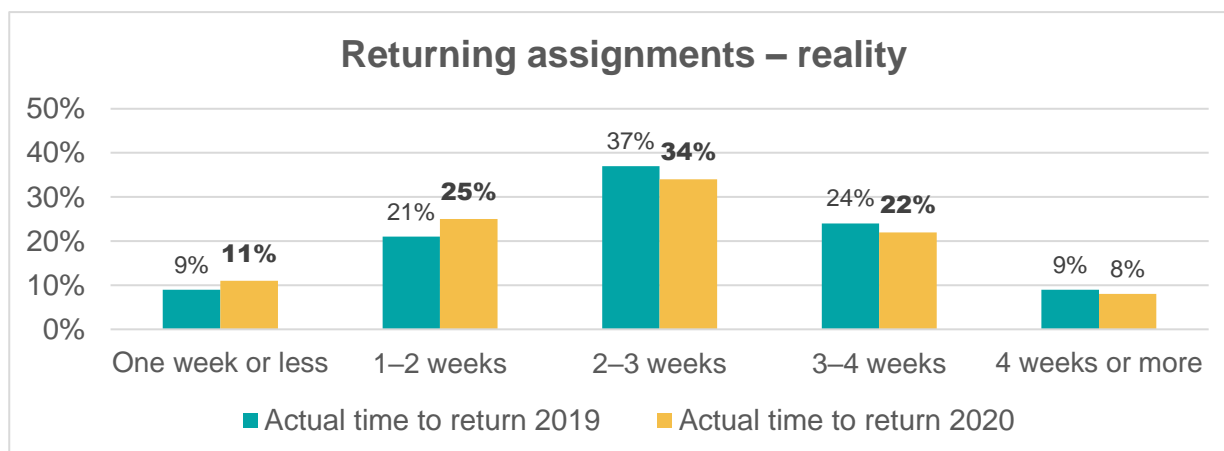
In reporting this apparent link between workload and value, it is important to acknowledge that high volumes of assignments can also contribute to stress, which in turn can impact on wellbeing and mental health. Hence it is important to ensure that the volume of assignments is manageable and appropriate, and that adequate support is provided for students, particularly those with extracurricular responsibilities, who may be feeling particular pressure.

## 8.4 Timeliness of feedback

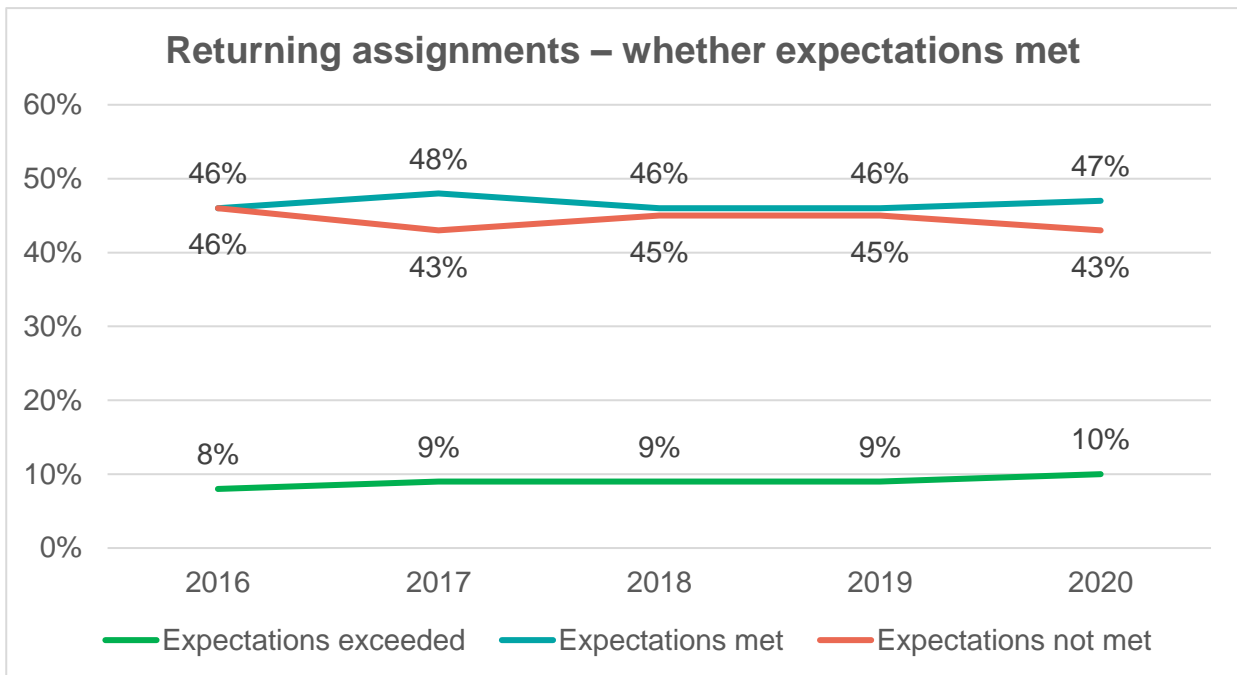
There is evidence that students are expecting faster and faster turnaround in marking assignments, with 1–2 weeks, or even less, being frequently expected.



Encouragingly however, and in keeping the with positive results on assessment we have already seen this year, there has been real progress made in terms of returning assignments within, or close to, expectations. In particular, there has been a significant increase in returning work within 1 to 2 weeks or less.



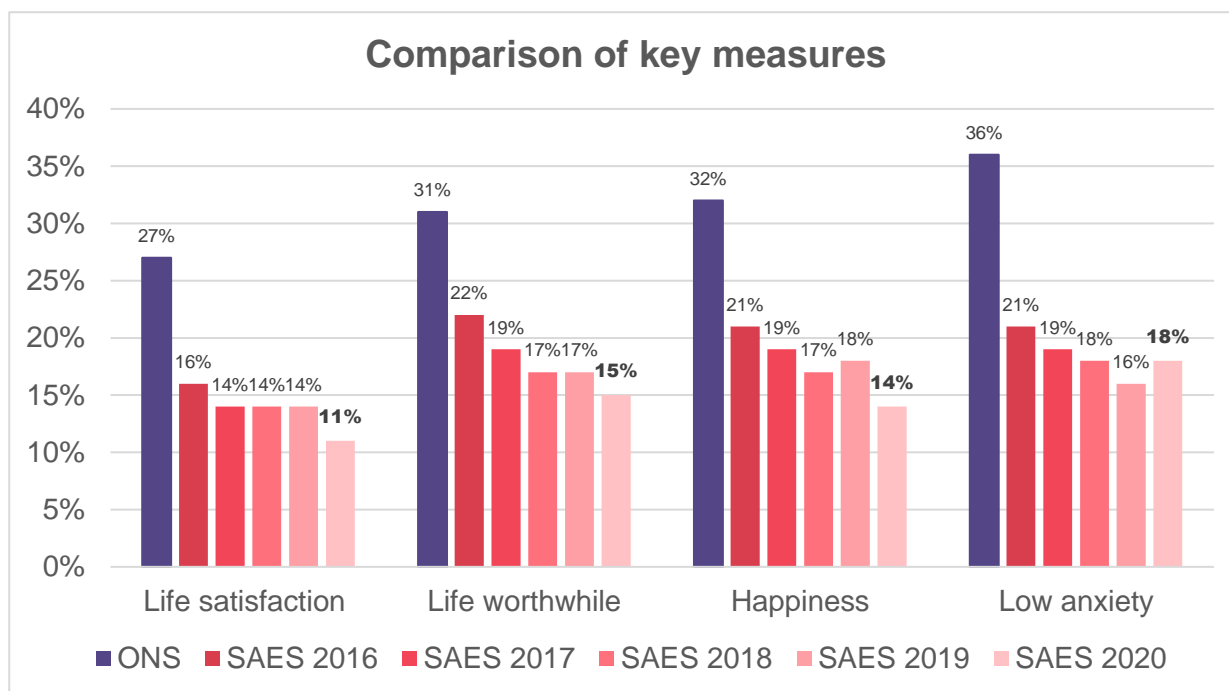
Accordingly, 57% of students feel their assignments were returned when expected or before expected, although this is a measure that is only increasing slightly each year as students' expectations become more demanding as they evolve.



## 9. Wellbeing

### 9.1 Key wellbeing measures

We have seen earlier in this report how students highlight mental health concerns as having a major impact on their experiences, and this is borne out by data which capture student wellbeing using the four key measures set out by the Office for National Statistics (ONS).<sup>13</sup>



Percentages calculated from all students scoring 9–10 out of 10 for life satisfaction, life worthwhile, happiness; 0–1 out of 10 for anxiety.

We have established from previous versions of the Survey how students report much lower levels of wellbeing compared to young people in the general population (as measured by ONS), and the latest findings further reinforce this. Undergraduate students in our Survey are significantly less likely than the general population to feel satisfied or happy with their lives, to feel their lives are worthwhile or to feel low levels of anxiety.

<sup>13</sup> Source: ONS (2019), *Measuring National Well-being: Domains and Measures, April 2018 to March 2019*

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/datasets/measuringnationalwellbeingdomainsandmeasures> [Accessed 14 April 2020]

Furthermore, this year's data continue a negative trend in that three out of four aspects are lower this year than in previous years, all of which are statistically significant. The only aspect that has shown an increase this year is anxiety, with students more likely to report low levels of anxiety than they were in 2019 – in spite of any Covid-19 impact. However, the overall picture underlines that wellbeing levels among the undergraduate population remain a major concern, and do not appear to be improving, despite a genuine and extensive focus on tackling this across the sector.

## 9.2 Covid-19 impact?

There has been widespread media coverage about how the Covid-19 pandemic can impact mental health, and given the widespread declines in student wellbeing scores this year, it is important to identify the relative impact or otherwise of Covid-19 on our data, particularly given that the latest full ONS general population data used for comparison (2019) is taken from long before the current pandemic.<sup>14</sup>

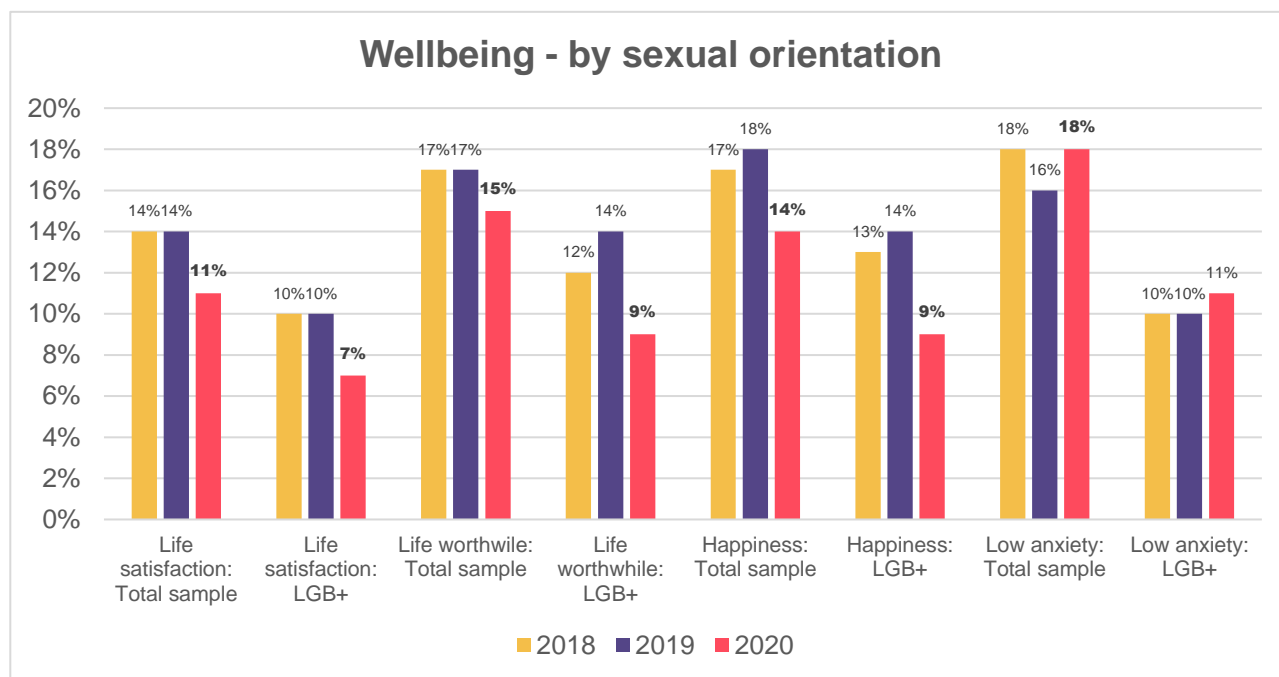
The data tells us that Covid-19 appeared to have an impact on the Happiness measure, which looks to be lower than it may otherwise have been, but that the other measures are not particularly impacted. Therefore, we can say with reasonable confidence that this year's general declines in student wellbeing (both overall and compared to the national population) do not appear to be due to the timing of this year's Survey. This is particularly relevant given that, unlike the rest of the questions in the Survey, which ask for views across a term or semester, the wellbeing measures ask specifically about how a respondent was feeling "nowadays" or "yesterday".

	Pre-March 16 interview date	Post-March 16 interview date
Life satisfaction (scoring 9–10 out of 10)	11%	11%
Life worthwhile (9–10)	16%	15%
Happiness (9–10)	<b>16%</b>	12%
Anxiety (0–1)	18%	19%

While levels of wellbeing across the total sample are concerning, they are even more worrying among students identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual or other (referred to here as LGB+). In previous years, we have identified lower levels of wellbeing among these students, but in 2020 this has been exacerbated, with life satisfaction, life worthwhile and happiness all dropping to their lowest levels yet.

<sup>14</sup> Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/news/audio/2020/apr/24/what-is-the-covid-19-crisis-doing-to-our-mental-health-podcast> [Accessed 27 April 2020]

We saw that levels among the general population have fallen but the declines among the LGB+ population are even more striking. Low anxiety is a slight exception to this, showing a slight increase (as was the case with the total sample) but notwithstanding this increase, these results highlight a clear cause for concern.



### 9.3 Wellbeing, background and preparation for the future

As well as the concerning links between wellbeing and sexuality, there is also evidence of a strong link between students feeling prepared for higher education and their level of wellbeing. In cases where students do not feel as well prepared when beginning university, their levels of wellbeing tend to be lower (and levels of anxiety higher). This is a logical finding, as we might expect this lack of preparation (once it becomes apparent) to manifest itself through stress levels, but it does underline the importance of students themselves, as well as institutions, their schools and other support networks doing everything they can to maximise the level of preparation.

	Prepared for university	Not prepared for university	Prepared for the future	Not prepared for the future	Learnt a lot	Learnt little / nothing
Life satisfaction	<b>14%</b>	6%	<b>15%</b>	6%	<b>13%</b>	6%
Low anxiety	<b>21%</b>	13%	<b>22%</b>	11%	<b>20%</b>	14%

As we will see in more detail in chapter 11, we introduced a new question this year which asked students how prepared they felt for the future after leaving university – a question we have also cited in this chapter as the data shows a clear link to wellbeing. In this analysis, it is striking how students who feel unprepared report much lower levels of wellbeing. By contrast, for those who feel ready for the future, levels of happiness are greater and anxiety is lower. Clearly, the prospect of what the future has in store can be a cause of concern for many students, and those who are able to get themselves as prepared as possible stand to gain in terms of wellbeing as well as potentially in their future outcomes.

### 9.4 Making parents aware

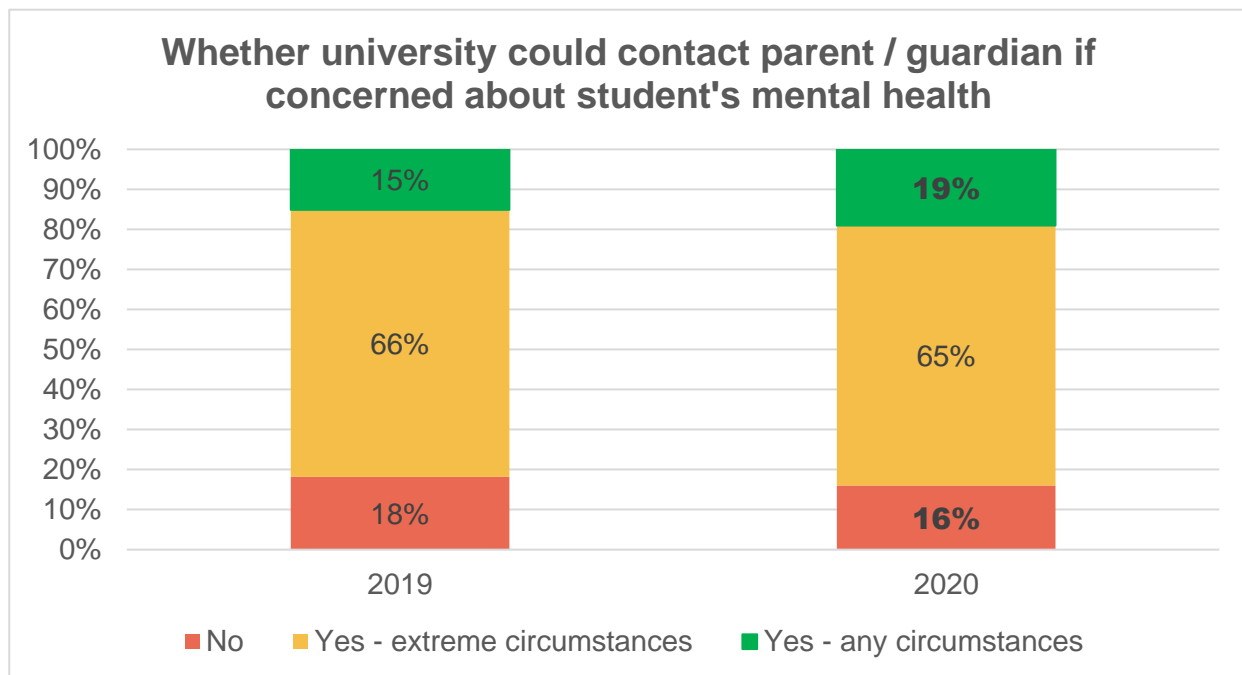
Mental health concerns are handled by institutions as sensitive and confidential information, and this does not automatically involve informing parents, the arrangements for which can vary between institutions.<sup>15</sup>

However, many students appear clear that they would want their parents / guardians to be informed about mental health concerns, either in extreme circumstances, or for a sizeable proportion of students, in any circumstances. Fewer than one in six would not wish their parents to be informed at all, while there has been a clear increase this year in the proportion who would want their parents to be informed of a mental health concern in any circumstances.

---

<sup>15</sup> Source: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-51414090> [Accessed 27 April 2020]



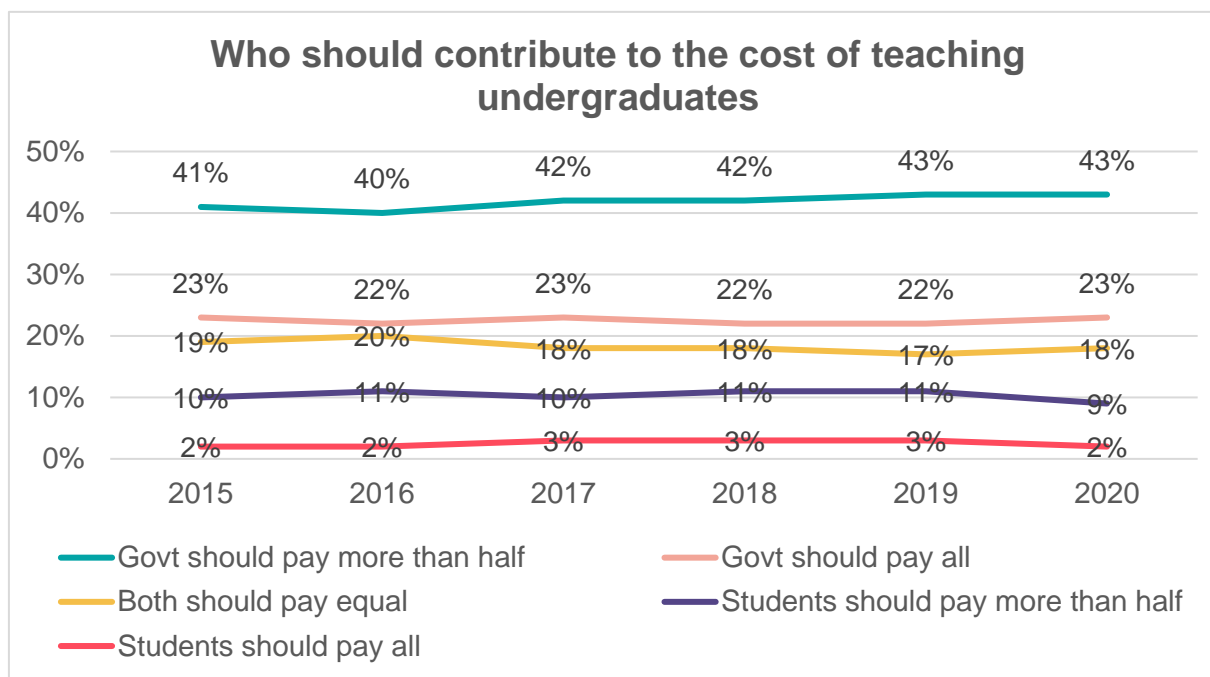


These results point towards a clear feeling among most students that parents / guardians should be told about significant concerns, and the findings provide evidence for institutions to take into account as they consider how best to develop strategies to offer the appropriate level of assistance and support.

## 10. Funding

### 10.1 The cost of study

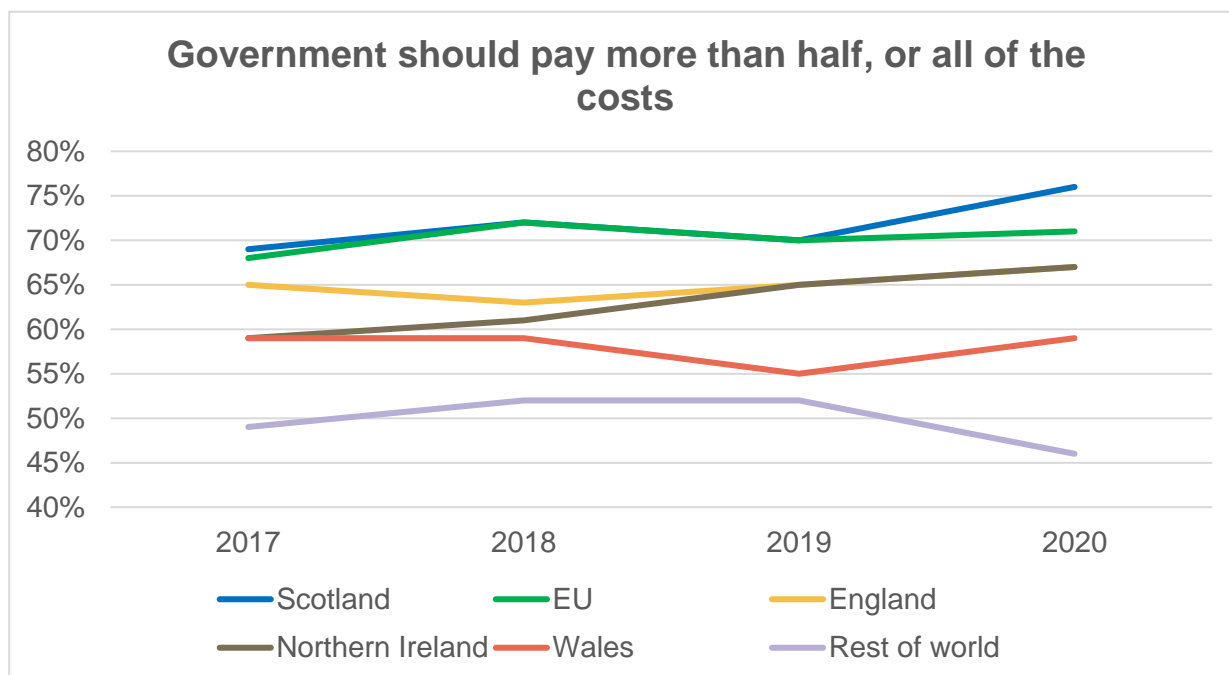
One of our longer-running questions in the Survey asks about attitudes to fees, specifically whether the Government or the students should fund the costs of teaching.



We are used to seeing little change year-on-year on this measure and this year is no exception. Indeed, the results for 2020 are extremely similar to the results from 2015: students feel the Government should pay more than half of the costs but not necessarily all.

### 10.2 Attitudes to cost by domicile

Our time-series of results may be seen to imply that this is a measure that appears to be largely immune to the variations of policymaking. However, despite the lack of change overall, a deeper look at the data reveals some notable trends by domicile. Although the absolute scores vary significantly between the different parts of the UK (for example, Scottish students are much more likely to expect the Government to contribute the majority of costs compared to Welsh students), what all four parts of the UK have in common is an increasing propensity for the Government to be expected to pay. For students from England and Northern Ireland this has been increasing over the past few years, while for Scotland and Wales it has increased for 2020.



	Scotland	EU	England	NI	Wales	Rest of world
<b>2019</b>	70%	70%	65%	65%	55%	52%
<b>2020</b>	<b>76%</b>	71%	67%	67%	59%	<b>46%</b>

In contrast, attitudes of students from the outside the EU have changed significantly this year, in favour of the costs being shared, while views of EU students remain consistent – strongly in favour of the Government contributing the bulk of the costs.

## 11. Looking to the future

### 11.1 How to use time at university to maximise future prospects

Among a number of new questions this year addressing the wider theme of future prospects and what the key influences are, we asked students to name up to three key things they feel they need to focus on most during their time at university, in order to maximise their post-university success.

Overall, it is striking that gaining the right kind of work experience is seen as most critical, slightly ahead of the more academically focused goal of getting the best degree possible. Many current courses have an employability focus running through them, with placements often forming a key element. However, with the current Covid-19 crisis there is understandable concern as to whether the same level of placements will be available to students this year and next.<sup>16</sup>

Beyond employment and qualifications, there was a clear focus on personal and professional networking as well as a recognition of the importance of developing personally. Yet, despite the potential for extracurricular activities (i.e. sports and societies) contributing to skills, it is notable to see these activities being relatively low down the list of priorities.



<sup>16</sup> Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/apr/10/recruitment-is-on-hold-the-students-graduating-into-the-covid-19-recession> [Accessed 1 May 2020]

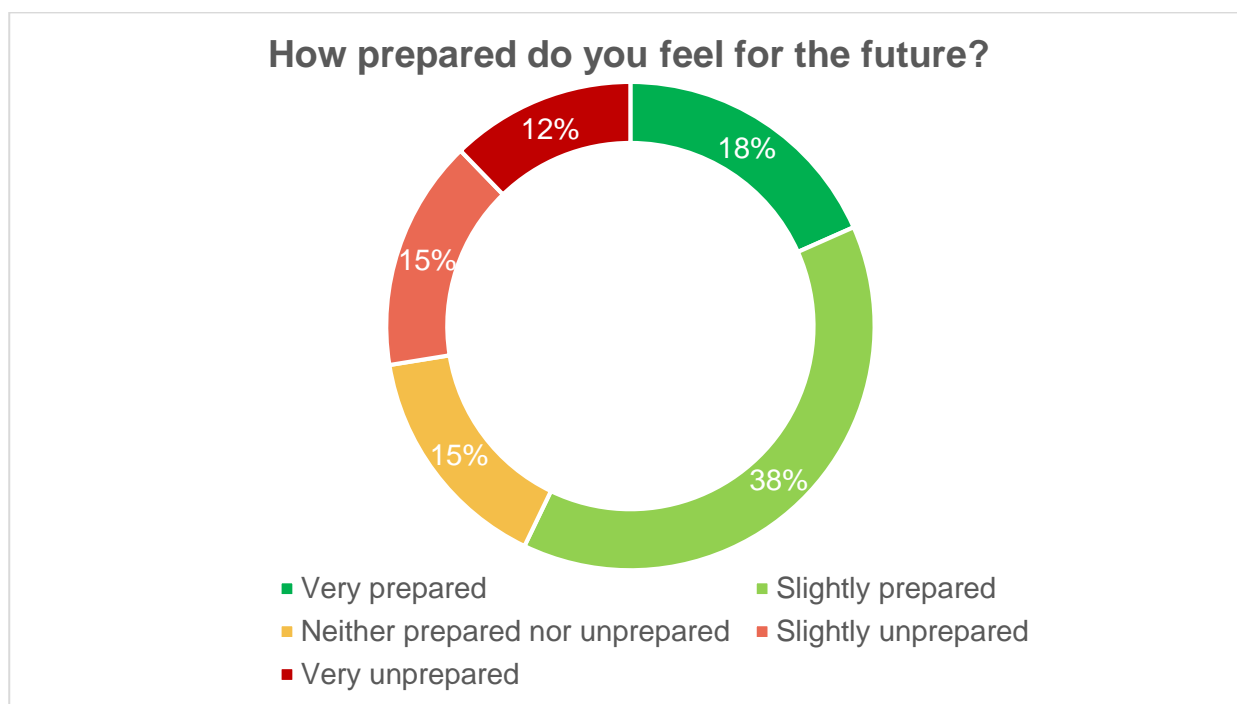
There is relatively little divergence in these priorities between students at different types of institution although it is significant that at Specialist institutions the class of degree is less important (37% – not charted here) and only just ahead of developing networks (35%), while adopting an entrepreneurial focus is also seen as a somewhat higher priority (14%).

Although respondents were asked to choose from a list of answers provided, they could also use free-text comments to specify any other reason that applied to them. Among a relatively small proportion of additional themes mentioned, it is significant that there were a number of comments which referred to dealing with mental health problems, for example “focussing on my mental health first”, “work on my mental health”. This is significant in that clearly some students recognise their issues with mental health and identify this as something that they need to focus on themselves during university in order to help their future.

### 11.2 Feeling prepared for the future

Another new question this year addresses the extent to which students feel prepared for the future.

Only just under one-in-five students (18%) said they feel very prepared, with a further 38% who feel slightly prepared, against 27% in total who feel either slightly or very unprepared. Given that the Survey included students across all stages of an undergraduate degree, these results are perhaps to be expected. However, what is more surprising is that this did not vary by year of study, with final-year students being no more likely to say they were prepared, which is potentially a cause for concern.



Further analysis of these data pinpoint an apparent link between workload and preparedness, which appears logical, but also what appears to be a clear link between students' background and how prepared they feel.

	30+ contact hours	0–9 contact hours	Learnt a lot	Learnt nothing	Private school	State school	AB Social grade	DE Social grade
<b>Feeling very prepared</b>	<b>32%</b>	14%	<b>23%</b>	6%	<b>22%</b>	16%	<b>20%</b>	13%

High volumes of contact hours contribute significantly to helping students feel prepared for their future, as does the related measure of high levels of learning. Students clearly feel that what they learn will prepare them well and, if they don't feel they are working hard or learning enough, then this leads to feeling ill-equipped, which in turn links to anxiety, as we saw earlier in the report.

What is also striking here is the link to students' backgrounds. Previous attendance at private school is linked strongly to feeling well prepared, as is a family background of the most affluent social grade (AB), contrasted strongly with students from a DE family background who feel significantly less prepared for the future.

The salient point here is that rather than students directly saying that their background will impact on them, this is based on implicit perceptions. This in turn may be influenced by a level of confidence, or understanding of how to tackle the future, that students from a better off and / or private education background may feel has been instilled in them somewhere along the line.

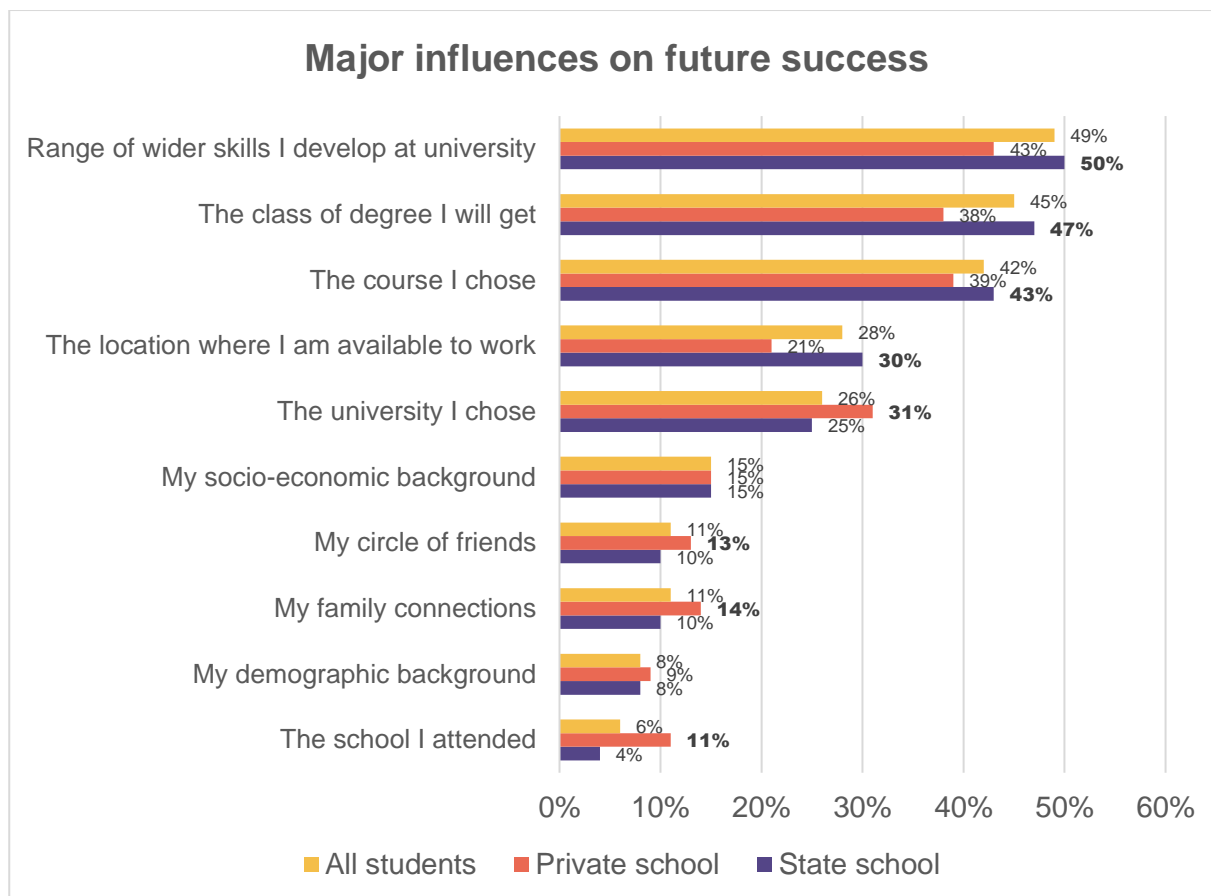
This is not to say that background cannot be overcome but it does imply that there are aspects which can continue to impact on students' own views of their potential during and after university.

### 11.3 Biggest influence on future success

In another new question this year we asked students which aspects of their background, personal situation or achievements they would expect to have the greatest influence on their future successes.

When thinking explicitly about this issue, students tend to believe in the power of their own accomplishments, which is encouraging. Skills are cited as slightly more important than qualifications, but both aspects are seen as fundamental. The importance of the course studied also comes to the fore (42%), clearly ahead of the choice of university (26%). It should be noted however that Russell Group students tend to see this rather differently, with a significantly higher proportion – 40% – believing their choice of university will have a major impact. There is also a recognition that practical aspects such as location will have an impact.

Issues such as demographic background, school attended and family connections come towards the bottom of the list (for most, if not all students), which implies that whatever the barriers faced in reality by students from different backgrounds, students themselves tend to believe in their own potential. That said however, there is evidence from earlier in this chapter that students from less privileged backgrounds may still feel less confident about their future success, even if they do not explicitly link this to their background.

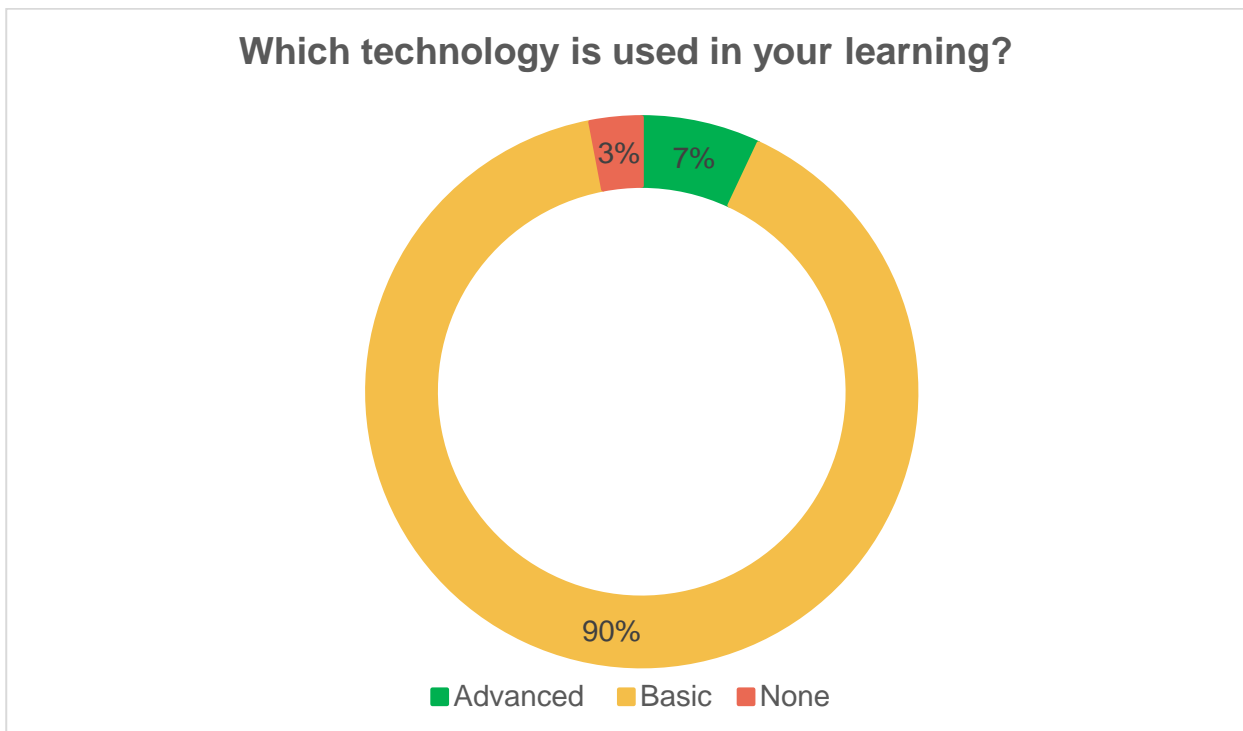


Despite the general feeling that students' achievements rather than their backgrounds will determine their future, it is significant that students from private school backgrounds subscribe to a slightly different view. Although still recognising that achievements will be the main driver, there is a clear perception among those from private schools that where they came from and who they know will play more of a role. They assign less importance to a practical aspect such as location, but believe the choice of university itself will be particularly influential.

Whether these views reflect reality or not, they reflect a wide degree of awareness of the different aspects which comprise social capital and how issues such as family or personal connections might be used as a stepping stone towards a choice of career after university.

## 12. Use of technology in learning

Technology is being used in new and evolving ways across the sector, with the Covid-19 crisis placing a particular spotlight on how institutions are implementing different delivery methods. This directly links to a new question this year which asks about the level of sophistication currently being used in classrooms (virtual or physical), to help understand whether this might be impacting on a different kind of overall experience.



There are only a small proportion of students – 3% – for whom no technology is used (this is most common among Mathematical Science students – 10%), but of the rest, the overwhelming majority report that the technology is basic, rather than advanced. This is perhaps surprising given the innovative approaches that are showcased regularly through conferences and events across the sector, but these data imply that such innovation is currently the exception rather than the rule. It is also important to point out that there was no impact at all in the data from Covid-19, as students surveyed before and during lockdown reported exactly the same picture.

That said, there were a number of specific “advanced” types of technology mentioned, with the most common of these outlined in the table below.

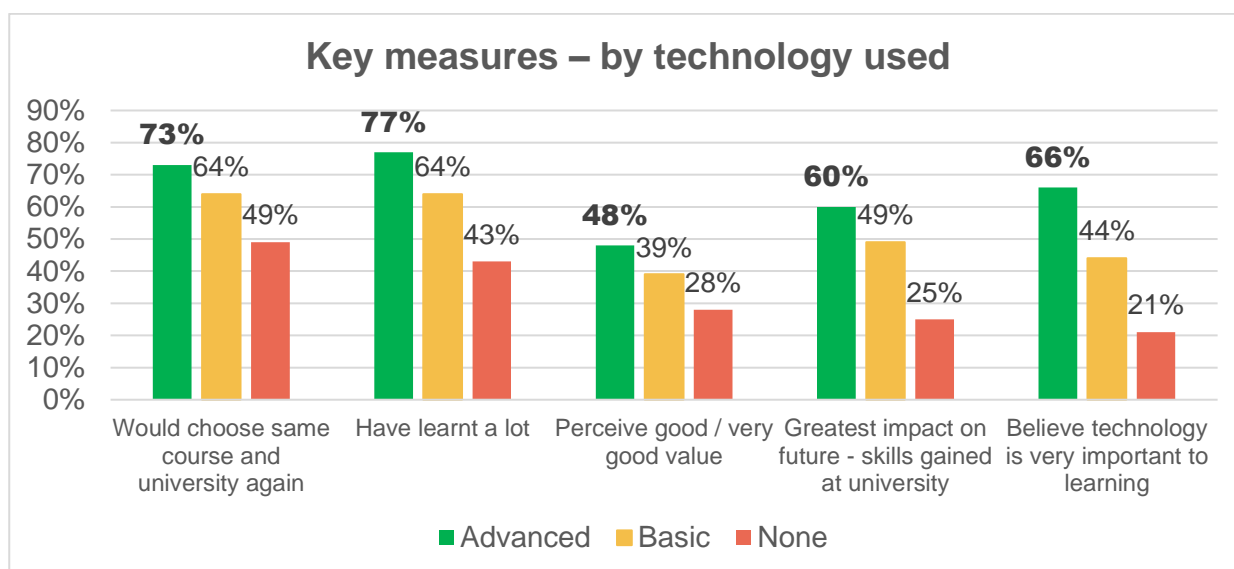


**Types of advanced technology used – main mentions\***

Adobe Creative
Blackboard
Lecture Capture
Panopto
RStudio
SPSS

\*Selected by respondents using free text.

Use of basic technology is clearly the norm, but to what extent is advanced technology linked to a more positive and productive academic experience? The chart below highlights that, where advanced technology is used, students are significantly more likely to feel they have received good value and, perhaps more significantly, to feel they have learnt a lot and that their skills gained will play a key role in their future.



Students who have been taught through advanced technology are also significantly more likely to say they would choose the same course and university again – a strong endorsement of how using the right technology, which complements the subject matter, can make a material difference to how students view their experiences.

This is backed up by a follow-up question which asks how important technology is to learning. Overall, a large proportion – 45% – feel technology is very important (not charted here) but, logically, those exposed to the most advanced technologies are the most likely to be convinced of its importance, with 66% believing technology is very important to learning.

This data should provide evidence to help drive the continued advancement of learning technologies at a time when circumstances are likely to require it.

---

## Conclusion and policy recommendations

We are now into the fourteenth year of running the Student Academic Experience Survey. The continuity of many of the questions asked over this period provides an opportunity to consider how the student experience has changed or, in many cases, stayed the same. As well as year-on-year changes, the results provide an interesting insight into the circumstances of the year in which the Survey was conducted. This year that becomes particularly important, given the current global pandemic which means we are facing greater challenges than in any previous iteration of the Survey. The fifteen points below highlight areas of importance to students that higher education institutions and Government should consider as we move through and beyond this crisis.

1. Students' perceptions of whether they are receiving value-for-money, while still higher than in 2018, are declining for the first time since 2016. This may not be surprising, given the disruption has brought to both their higher education experience and their lives more broadly. However, given that they may have to continue to operate remotely, or with social distancing measures in place as we enter the next academic year, **higher education institutions will need to consider even more deeply than usual how they offer good value to students in these new circumstances.** One way to do so might be to tackle applicants' misconceptions about what higher education will be like, as previous research has identified these misconceptions can negatively impact their experience.<sup>17</sup> This is particularly critical as students entering higher education this year may have a unique experience compared to previous cohorts.
2. Students are starting to believe they have better information on how their tuition fees are spent, although there is still a fair way to go. This has been accompanied by students becoming more supportive of tuition-fee spending on areas which are important to higher education institutions but not necessarily student facing, such as investing in the local community, research, management and recruitment of prospective students. This may be explained by greater transparency, including work by Universities UK over the last year, helping students to understand how their fees are spent.<sup>18</sup> **Higher education institutions should bear in mind students' priorities for spending their fees when many will have to make cuts through the challenging financial period ahead.**
3. Higher education institutions should take note of the differences in experience of students who access higher education through Clearing. UCAS have continued to build the functionality of Clearing, including introducing Clearing Plus for this year's entrants. This offers greater choice to students in a time of uncertainty. However,

---

<sup>17</sup> Source: <http://www.unite-group.co.uk/sites/default/files/2019-09/new-realists-insight-report-2019.pdf> [Accessed 15 May 2020]

<sup>18</sup> Source: <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Pages/value-for-money-guide.aspx> [Accessed 12 May 2020]

while these findings show Clearing students are more likely to enter higher education feeling prepared, they are less likely to pick the same institution and course if they had their time again and less likely to feel they have learnt a lot. **Students accessing higher education through Clearing may not only require more support in the application process, but also throughout their studies.**

4. More students are undertaking paid employment alongside their studies, which has been shown to negatively impact their studies. This may be related to students' concerns over the costs of living, which previous HEPI research found to be students' greatest cost concern.<sup>19</sup> Research from the National Union of Students (NUS) and Unipol has also shown accommodation costs to be climbing.<sup>20</sup> **Government should consider whether the maintenance package offered to students is sufficient to cover students' cost of living.** This may become even more important as recent research shows 29% of students have lost their jobs due to the pandemic.<sup>21</sup> Students should also be made aware of individual institutions' hardship funds as an alternative to raising hours of work.
5. Students' wellbeing continues to decline. Wellbeing results are particularly poor for LGB+ students. Being a student does not, sadly, remove the obstacles faced by people in wider society and our campuses need to become even more welcoming places. **Higher education institutions should consider how they can best support more vulnerable student groups, particularly when they are delivering services at a distance.**
6. Despite the impact of the strikes, students are still reporting more timetabled and attended contact hours, in smaller class sizes. They are also doing more assignments, receiving a higher quality of feedback faster and feeling more supported in independent study. Despite all this, students' expectations around their contact hours continue to exceed the true picture. In the meantime, higher education staff are needing greater mental health support.<sup>22</sup> **Higher education institutions should be realistic with students and applicants about the contact they should expect to receive from academic staff.**
7. EU students continue to be one of the groups with the strongest belief that Government should pay more than half or all of their fees, below only Scottish students who pay no fees if they are studying in Scotland and above English students. **These views should be taken into account in the Brexit negotiations**

---

<sup>19</sup> Source: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Policy-Note-17--At-what-cost-Students'-views-on-Augar-funding-and-the-cost-of-living-8-Page.pdf> [Accessed 12 May 2020]

<sup>20</sup> Source: <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/nus-and-unipol-accommodation-cost-survey-2018-full-report> [Accessed 12 May 2020]

<sup>21</sup> Source: <https://luminare.prospects.ac.uk/graduating-into-a-pandemic-the-impact-on-university-finalists> [Accessed 12 May 2020]

<sup>22</sup> Source: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/04/30/pressure-vessels-ii-an-update-on-mental-health-among-higher-education-staff-in-the-uk/> [Accessed 12 May 2020]

---

- 
- over the rest of this year, when considering whether to raise EU students' fees to the levels paid by international students.
8. Most students feel well prepared for their future, but a significant minority do not. **Given the unstable labour market students will be entering, higher education institutions should consider what additional support can be provided to them in their transition out of higher education.**
  9. To improve preparedness, students feel they should gain work experience. However, while social distancing measures remain in place and while many businesses go through an economic downturn, these opportunities may be more limited. **Higher education institutions should work with employers to explore what opportunities they can make available to students.**
  10. Before Coronavirus, while educational technology was being used, it was often at a basic level, for example PowerPoint. Students gain more from their higher education experience where greater use of educational technology is made. This is going to be especially significant through this uncertain period in terms of face-to-face teaching. It is equally important that the right technology is used to enhance teaching and learning, rather than seeking to move to the most advanced platforms in every case. **Higher education institutions, which have radically stepped up online learning provision through this crisis, need to think strategically about how to utilise educational technology better going forward.**
  11. Many of the written comments from students in the survey highlight the impact that the strikes have had on their experience, as well as the impact of Covid-19. There is a need for better industrial relations in the higher education sector: there has been a growing gulf between the managers and the managed and students can lose out. **This will not be easy to fix, especially in the constrained spending environment we are about to enter, but is necessary for the smooth functioning of the sector.**
  12. The results from this Survey, as with other research, show many people go into higher education to raise their skills in the labour market. We should accept that higher education is not only about gaining knowledge but also gaining employability skills. **Higher education institutions should seek to support students in fulfilling both these aims, including by continuing to embed careers support in the curriculum.**<sup>23</sup>
  13. Alternatives to higher education remain unpopular among students – except, worryingly, among Black UK-domiciled students for whom things are clearly often going wrong. **As HEPI has previously reported, more work must be done to tackle racial inequalities in higher education.**<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Source: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/03/05/getting-on-graduate-employment-and-its-influence-on-uk-higher-education/> [Accessed 12 May 2020]

<sup>24</sup> Source: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2019/09/19/the-white-elephant-in-the-room-ideas-of-reducing-racial-inequalities-in-higher-education/> [Accessed 12 May 2020]

---

14. However, policymakers who believe too many people go into higher education should recognise that their views do not align with student choices. Higher education remains a positive choice for by far the majority of young people who enter it.  
**Entering higher education can provide a positive choice for young people, particularly in a time of economic downturn.**
15. Students are even more supportive than last year – when the question was first asked – of their parents being contacted if the higher education institution has any concerns about their mental health. **On this basis, all higher education institutions should have arrangements, such as an opt-out service to allow students to provide details for their parent or guardian to be used by their higher education institution if they are concerned about their mental health.** This should no longer be controversial, as it is so clearly the preference of students to have these arrangements in place.

# Student Academic Experience Survey 2020

---

## • AdvanceHE

### General enquiries

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

**t in f** @AdvanceHE

### Media enquiries

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

We are Advance HE – we believe excellence is achieved by people. Removing the barriers, so all can succeed; driving positive change, to make higher education better for all.

Advance HE is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales no. 04931031. Registered as a charity in England and Wales no. 1101607. Registered as a charity in Scotland no. SC043946. The Advance HE logo should not be used without our permission.

---



Higher Education Policy Institute

### General enquiries

+44 (0) 1865 284450  
admin@hepi.ac.uk  
www.hepi.ac.uk

**t in f** @HEPI\_news

HEPI's mission is to ensure that higher education policymaking is better informed by evidence and research.

We are UK-wide, independent and non-partisan (company no. 4503712; registered charity no. 1099645).

---