

The HEPI–HEA Student Academic Experience Survey 2014

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Higher Education Policy Institute



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Foreword by Professor Stephanie Marshall

It has become a cliché to talk about the shifting landscape of higher education, but if there is one thing that we can be sure of, it is that we are in a period of unprecedented change. As the national body for learning and teaching enhancement in higher education, the HEA's mission, however, remains the same: to work in partnership with the sector to improve the learning experience for students. To this end, it is vital that all of us have a rich understanding of what students think about their time in higher education, and this survey – a joint collaboration between the HEA and HEPI – helps us to do that.

There is good news in this report. The overall findings show high levels of student satisfaction experienced across the UK higher education system. And new questions on the wellbeing of students show that the majority of students are happy, satisfied with their lives and feel that the things they do in life are worthwhile. I was also particularly interested to see that, when asked about priorities for institutional expenditure, a significant number of students chose better training for lecturers. Students clearly want to see investment from institutions in improving the quality of learning and teaching. A key priority for us at the HEA is the initial and continuing professional development of those who teach in higher education – for the benefit of students.

But there are findings that should be of concern to all of us. Comparison with national surveys suggests students have lower levels of wellbeing than those in the general population, and that students from some black and minority ethnic groups report lower levels of wellbeing than others. We need to explore how to tackle these issues, and a collaborative approach between academic and professional services, and between students and staff will be key.

The survey also shows that the educational benefits of smaller class sizes are clearly recognised by students. Yet it shows too that students recognise that the quality of their experience is not only dependent on provision but on their own effort and input. We all have a responsibility to support strategies that will facilitate this, including a focus on independent learning and, crucially, on increasing students' engagement in their own learning.

As the report comments, the sector can be proud of the high levels of student satisfaction experienced in the UK. But it also needs to respond to the key challenge of engaging as well as satisfying students, and of safeguarding high levels of wellbeing. The future may be uncertain but our responsibility to our students remains the same.

Professor Stephanie Marshall
Chief Executive, Higher Education Academy



Foreword by Nick Hillman

Since it began in 2006, the year tuition loans were introduced and tuition fees went up to £3,000, the Student Academic Experience Survey has helped shape the higher education debate. It is broader than other assessments of the student experience. For example, it covers full-time undergraduates across the UK in all years of study – unlike the National Student Survey, which does not yet cover any students with £9,000 fees. It also delves more deeply, covering not just the number of contact hours but what happens within them. This year, for the first time, it even includes an assessment of the overall wellbeing of students, which suggests their lives may not be as carefree as is sometimes supposed.

The survey's past results have been used heavily by policymakers in Whitehall and by politicians of all stripes. In late 2013, the Minister for Universities and Science, David Willetts, published a report marking the 50th anniversary of the Robbins report that relied heavily on the Academic Experience Survey to make comparisons with higher education half a century ago. In this election year, the data is likely to be of particular interest once again in the corridors of power.

This year's survey confirms the commitment of both the Higher Education Policy Institute and the Higher Education Academy to knowing more about the teaching and learning environment and how to improve it further. However, while it shines a spotlight on a wide range of issues, we do not want it to be the final word. Indeed, the survey throws up areas where further information is needed, where institutions could make improvements and where public policy might be usefully tweaked.

All the data are freely available at www.hepi.ac.uk and we encourage others to inspect it, play around with it and learn from it.

Nick Hillman
Director, Higher Education Policy Institute



Acknowledgements

The authors¹ would like to thank John Newton and Natalie Delahunty at YouthSight for undertaking many of the analyses for this report, as well as for overseeing the conduct of the survey on behalf of HEPI and the HEA. We are also grateful for the helpful comments made on earlier drafts from Sarah Isles, Bahram Bekhradnia, Prue Griffiths, Mark Jones, Heather Jackson and Robert Davies. Finally, we would like to express our gratitude to all the students who completed the survey.

¹ Every reasonable effort has been made to ensure the accuracy and correctness of information and the data are available for others to check our conclusions against.

Executive summary

The HEPI–HEA Student Academic Experience Survey 2014 continues the series of similar surveys conducted for the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) since 2006, and this year has been undertaken in partnership with the Higher Education Academy (HEA). The survey investigates the learning and teaching experiences of students, including satisfaction with courses, reasons for dissatisfaction, experience of different-sized classes, total time spent working, perceptions of value-for-money, institutional spending priorities and, this year, we have added a focus on student wellbeing. Both first-year and second-year students studying in England in 2014 are now subject to the new fees regime and this is an opportune moment to explore any evidence of the impact of the recent changes on their expectations, perceptions and experience.

The survey was conducted in February and March 2014, with respondents drawn from YouthSight's 'Student Panel' which itself recruits students in partnership with the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). 15,046 students completed the survey, giving a substantial base for investigating sector-wide issues, for further research and for informing policy.

Student wellbeing

In order to provide a more rounded view of how students see their quality of life and how this compares to the rest of the population, this year we introduced new questions about the wellbeing of students. The results show that the majority of students are happy, satisfied with their lives and feel that the things they do in life are worthwhile. However, comparison with national surveys suggests students have lower levels of wellbeing than those in the general population, including the general population aged 20-24. Students from some black and minority ethnic groups report lower levels of wellbeing than others, though this varies by question. First-year students report slightly higher levels of positivity than those in subsequent years.

Overall academic experience

The vast majority of respondents (86%) declared themselves fairly or very satisfied with the overall quality of their course. Compared to the expectations they had on application, 27% of students in 2014 said their expectations had been exceeded compared with 12% who said their experience was worse than expected. Another 50% of students said that their experience was better in some ways and worse in others.

The survey explored why these students felt their experience was worse, or worse in some ways, than expected. Thirty-six per cent of these students said they had not put in enough effort themselves, suggesting students are acutely aware that the quality of experience is dependent on their active

engagement and thus raising a critical challenge for institutions to ensure that engagement. Other concerns included poor course organisation (32%), fewer contact hours than expected (32%), lack of support for private study (28%), teaching being worse than expected (27%), poor feedback (26%), and the low level of interaction with staff (26%).

Two thirds of students would have chosen the same course again, knowing what they do now, while 10% would definitely have chosen differently and 25% would consider it or don't know. Around half of first-year students describe the information they received before starting their course as 'informative' and/or 'useful', with over a third describing it as accurate. These are not overwhelmingly positive figures and indeed almost one-in-five first-year students found the information they received to be vague suggesting that the sector still has some way to go in improving information and advice for prospective students.

Class size, contact time and total workload

Class size is an important dimension of quality in higher education and the educational benefits of smaller class sizes are clearly recognised by students, with 89% of students feeling that they gained 'a lot' or 'quite a bit' educationally when attending sessions with no other students, with similar levels of positivity for tutorial sized classes of up to 15 students in which interactive learning with staff and other students is both most feasible and effective. However, two thirds of contact experienced by students was in class sizes of 16 students or more. There is a striking decline in the proportion of students perceiving educational benefits as the size of class increases, especially when they reach lecture-sized groups. However, even medium-sized seminar classes see notably fewer students perceiving benefits compared with tutorial-sized groups.

Scheduled contact time varies considerably by discipline, being predictably higher in the sciences, health sciences and some vocational subject areas which require greater amounts of facilitated practical and laboratory sessions. The average contact time experienced by all students (11.9 hours per week) is less than that scheduled by their institution, which amounted to 13.1 hours per week on average. The most common reasons non-attenders gave for their absence were that they did not find that the lectures were very useful (50%) and that lecture notes were available online (40%), which also suggests there is a need both to ensure and convey the added benefits of attending and participating in taught sessions. It suggests that increasing the quality of contact (which is more probable in smaller classes) is likely to be more effective in improving the student learning experience than simply increasing contact hours.

The total amount of work put in is more important for predicting learning gain than the number of contact hours, so it is vital to take into account private study hours and other forms of independent learning. The total term-time workload hours can exceed 40 hours in medical-related subjects and education, but tend to hover around 30 hours per week in most subject areas. This does not take into account academic work undertaken in vacation time, which is also required for around half of students.

Value for money, fees and spending priorities

Overall, 44% of students in 2014 believe they have received good or very good value for money, compared with 26% stating they have received poor or very poor value for money. At the same time there are considerable variations across the UK with a prominent 70% of students at Scottish institutions believing they have received good or very good value for money compared with only 41% in England. This is not unexpected given that Scottish and other EU-domiciled students from outside the UK, who constitute the vast majority of students at Scottish institutions, effectively pay no fees. Interestingly, while fee levels in Northern Ireland are around 40% of those in England for the majority of students in their first and second year, the perceived 'value for money' profile is closer to that of England than Scotland.

The survey also permits a 'before and after' comparison of the impacts of the new fees regimes by comparing the views of first-year and second-year students from England, Scotland and Northern Ireland studying at institutions in England in 2012 and 2014. While over half of students believed their course represented good value for money in 2012 (52%), this has dropped to 36% in 2014. One third of students (33%) now believe they have received poor or very poor value for money, compared with 18% in 2012. This is perhaps not unexpected given that the shift from government funding to student (loans) funding has not meant a commensurate increase in resource for learning and teaching for institutions. However, the introduction of fees has not led to a change in experience relative to expectations, and only small decreases in overall satisfaction have been found over the same time period.

Unsurprisingly, when asked about their top three priorities for institutional expenditure, 48% of students chose 'reducing fee levels'. However, four further clear priorities emerge, each chosen by over one-third of students: increasing teaching hours, decreasing class sizes, better training for lecturers and better learning facilities.

Implications for policy and practice

The findings of the HEPI–HEA Student Academic Experience Survey have a number of implications. The increase in fees in some parts of the UK is having a dramatic impact on students' perceptions of value for money. This may require greater transparency about how and where HEIs spend money; it is particularly important that students are given information on where HEIs invest their fees.

The picture regarding the impact of higher fees is however complex. The contrast in value for money perception between students studying in Scotland and the rest of the UK suggests the biggest influence on value for money perceptions may not be the difference between £3,685 and £9,000 fees, but the difference between effectively no fees and moderate levels.

Both the number of contact hours and the size of classes are priority areas for students. Yet students recognise that the quality of their experience is not only dependent on provision but also on their own effort and input. That means institutions have a vital responsibility to facilitate and ensure effort, engagement, interaction and active and deep learning. Benchmarking how engaged students are, rather than simply measuring how satisfied they are, could be helpful to inform the enhancement of institutional teaching and learning policies and practices.

Finally, that students generally feel lower levels of wellbeing than the general population is of some concern. Students may require further support from institutions – not only from dedicated support services, but also through peer networks and mentoring programmes that, coincidentally, may also help to boost student engagement.

Overall the sector can be proud of the high levels of student satisfaction experienced across the UK higher education system. But it also needs to respond to the challenges of engaging as well as satisfying students, of safeguarding high levels of wellbeing, and of ensuring – and conveying – the value of their academic experience.

I. Introduction

This is a report on the HEPI–HEA Student Academic Experience Survey that has been conducted on behalf of the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) since 2006. Initially the report focused on universities in England but this year – for the second time – the survey has a UK-wide remit. The 2014 survey is a partnership between HEPI and the Higher Education Academy (HEA).

The survey's beginnings coincided with the new funding realities for the higher education sector in the UK after the Higher Education Act of 2004. Under the Act, universities in England were given the right to charge fees of up to £3,000 a year for students enrolling from the academic year of 2006-07 onwards, while other parts of the UK had the option to follow a different approach.

An initial rationale of the surveys was to explore whether learners' expectations, perceptions and experiences changed as a result of paying more for university education. Of particular interest was whether students sensed they were receiving a higher level of service and an improved academic experience – perhaps indicated by smaller teaching groups, more time spent studying (whether in class or independently), and higher levels of satisfaction. But just because students pay more, this does not mean universities are financially better off. The picture is complicated by the fact that alongside the increase in fees, direct public funding for higher education and a variety of related government grants have been reduced, largely offsetting the increased income from students.

Following the Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance (commonly known as the 'Browne review'), universities in England were given the power to charge new undergraduates enrolling from September 2012 up to £9,000 per year. In practice most higher education providers opted to charge at, or close to, the full £9,000, with relatively small variations between universities and courses. The other UK nations adopted substantially different policies,² resulting in Scottish-domiciled students receiving free education in Scotland; Northern Ireland-domiciled students paying a maximum of £3,685 in Northern Ireland; and Welsh-domiciled students paying a maximum of £3,685 regardless of where in the UK they study. Fees for students domiciled elsewhere in the European Union (EU) vary across the UK as they replicate the fee levels for local students in each of the four nations of the UK.

2 How the student finance scheme works: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-26957757>

The 2014 survey reported here includes full-time undergraduate students from all year groups. This includes two cohorts – current first and second years – under the new fees regime, and it is thus an opportune moment to explore any evidence of the impact of the recent changes on their expectations, perceptions and experience.

In order to maintain continuity and facilitate useful comparisons, the methodology and questions used in this year's survey are similar to previous surveys. Nonetheless, improvements have been made and where the questions have been changed, we avoid making comparisons with previous years or note caution when we do.³ Furthermore, we have introduced new questions about students' overall wellbeing, which have also been used in national surveys of the general population. For the first time, we have a rounded view of how students see their quality of life and how this compares to the rest of the population.

1.1 Methodology

This year's survey was conducted on behalf of HEPI and the HEA by an independent research agency, YouthSight, which has been running the survey on behalf of HEPI since it was first commissioned in 2006. Respondents were drawn from YouthSight's 'Student Panel' which primarily recruits students via a partnership with the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). All students who apply via UCAS to study at higher education institutions are invited to join and between 16,000 and 18,000 new first-year students join the panel each year. The panel comprises around 65,000 university and college students in total, equating to about one in twenty of all current UK undergraduates.

The survey took place between 24 February and 26 March 2014 and 61,116 full-time undergraduate students across year groups and UK higher education institutions (HEIs) were invited to participate.⁴ All completers received a £1 incentive in the form of an Amazon gift voucher. In total 15,046 students responded, giving a response rate of around 25%, and their responses form the basis for most of the analyses in this report.⁵

3 Minor revisions to question order made in 2013 were reversed this year. This means comparisons of 'total independent study hours' and 'total workload' can only be made between 2014 and 2012. Improvements were also made to response options for questions on the perceived benefits of different class sizes, on reasons for expectations not being met and on spending priorities. These results are not compared with those from previous years.

4 No quotas were set in order to achieve as many interviews as possible, but weights were applied post-fieldwork to ensure the sample was balanced and reflective of the overall student population. Targets for the weights were acquired using data for the 2011-12 academic year (the most recent available) supplied by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA).

5 The comparisons between years draw on respondents from 2006, 2007, 2012 and 2013. Further details about these populations can be found in the individual reports for those years, available on the HEPI website: <http://www.hepi.ac.uk/category/publications/>

Sixty-seven per cent of respondents to the survey were female, and 33% male, reflecting the greater propensity of women to respond to surveys (and partially the gender imbalance in the undergraduate population). Weightings were applied to raise the contribution of male students to the analyses to a more representative 43%. Eighty-eight per cent were normally domiciled in the UK, with 7% from elsewhere in the EU and 5% from outside the EU with further detail shown in Table I. The distribution of respondents among institutions in different parts of the UK is also shown.

Table I: Location of students' domicile and their institution of study – showing unweighted% (weighted%)

UK nation / world region	Student's domicile	Student's institution
England	75% (76%)	82% (83%)
Northern Ireland	2% (2%)	2% (2%)
Scotland	7% (7%)	10% (10%)
Wales	4% (4%)	6% (5%)
EU (excluding UK)	7% (7%)	-
Non-EU	5% (4%)	-

Base: all respondents to Student Academic Experience Survey (15,046).

Thirty-six per cent of respondents were studying at post-1992 institutions, 35% at Russell Group institutions, 25% at other pre-1992 institutions and 4% at other types of institutions.⁶ In terms of year of study, 43% of the population were in their first year, 29% in their second year, 23% in their third year, and 5% in their fourth year or above.⁷

It should be noted that the survey is not designed or intended to facilitate comparisons or rankings in relation to individual courses, degree programmes and/or universities. The sample size of 15,046 gives a substantial base for investigating sector-wide issues for further research and for informing policy. However, it is approximately one-twentieth the size of the annual National Student Survey (NSS) sample and we do not recommend making individual course comparisons with the data. Results

⁶ Weightings were applied by mission group, raising the contribution of respondents at post-1992 institutions to the analyses to 47%, and reducing the contribution of students at Russell Group and other pre-1992 institutions to 26% and 22% respectively.

⁷ Weightings were applied by year group so that first years contributed 34% to the analyses, second years 32%, third years 28% and fourth years and later 7%.

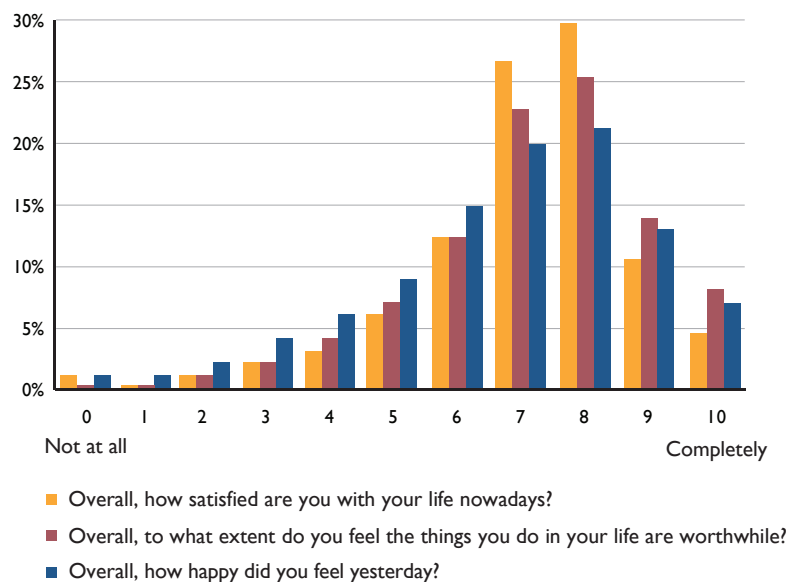
are more stable when aggregated into broad subject areas or over years, though these can combine experiences across quite different courses and programmes. At whole-institution level, the mix of disciplines present can have such a significant impact on experience that, as with most student surveys, it is not generally appropriate to compare overall institution scores unless discipline is controlled for.

2. Student wellbeing

Four new questions were added to the survey this year based on the national 'personal wellbeing' questions developed by the Office of National Statistics (ONS). These aimed to compare and contrast the wellbeing of student respondents to this survey with the general population. Of these questions, the results of three are reported here, with further adaptations required to the fourth question (on anxiety).⁸

Figure 1 shows the responses of students on each of the three questions on a scale from zero to ten where ten equals completely satisfied/happy. It clearly shows that the majority of students feel satisfied and happy, and that the things they do feel worthwhile.

Figure 1: Personal wellbeing of students in 2014



Base: all respondents to Student Academic Experience Survey (15,046).

⁸ The personal wellbeing questions are normally asked by an interviewer rather than via an online survey. In using the questions online we suspect the responses to the fourth item ("Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday?") were unreliable with many respondents seemingly not having accounted for the negative wording of this question following the previous three items which were worded positively. Further instructions to respondents will be included in future iterations of the survey to enable reporting of this question.

However some differences with the wellbeing of the general population do emerge. Table 2 compares the results of the current survey of the student population, with data for the general population drawn from the Office of National Statistics' Annual Population Survey for 2012-13. A clear difference can be seen in this table, with the respondents to the student survey expressing less positivity than the general population, as well as the general population aged 20-24.⁹

Table 2: Personal wellbeing of students in 2014 compared with the general population in 2012-13

	Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays? (7-10)	Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile? (7-10)	Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday? (7-10)
General population	77%	81%	72%
General population aged 20-24	79%	78%	70%
Student population	74%	72%	62%

Base: student population, all respondents to Student Academic Experience Survey (15,046); General population, Annual Population Survey 2012-13 (approximately 165,000).¹⁰

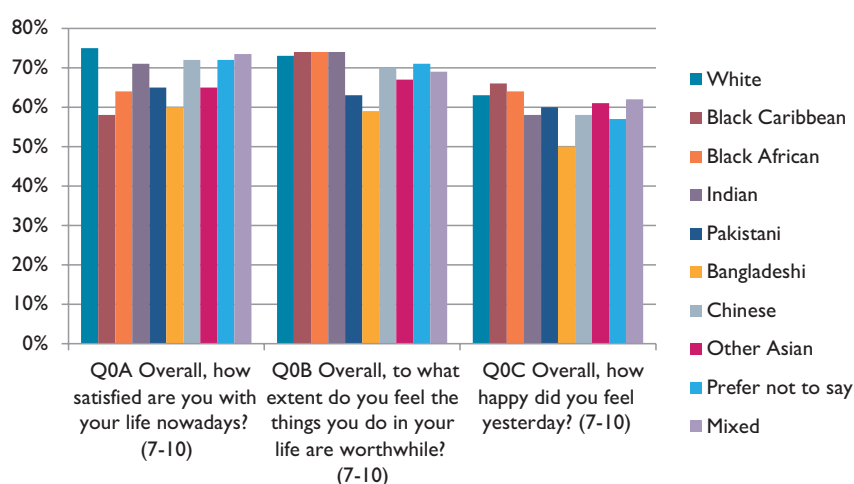
Figure 2 shows the differences in wellbeing for students from different ethnic groups. Black Caribbean and Bangladeshi students report the lowest level of satisfaction with their lives nowadays, though it should be noted that these groups are numerically small in the sample. Pakistani and Bangladeshi students are less likely to report that the things they do are worthwhile and Bangladeshi students are less likely to be happy currently than students from other groups.

Figure 3 suggests that female students are marginally less likely to report high levels of wellbeing than their male counterparts. The difference is slight but it is persistent across the questions.

⁹ Undergraduate students do, of course, come from every age group from around the age of 17 upwards, but many are aged in the 18-22 age range so we wanted to check whether the difference from the general population was accounted for by age rather than student status. However, it is clear from Table 2 that age cannot explain the lower levels of positivity among students.

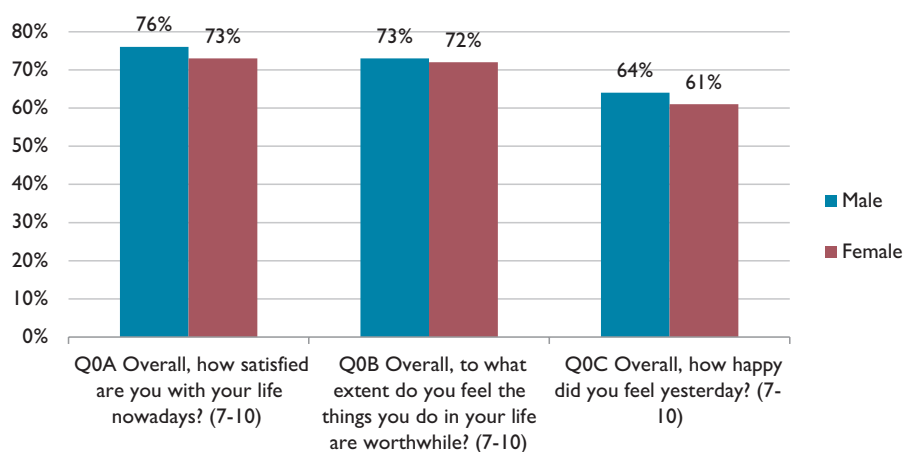
¹⁰ Measuring National Well-being, Personal Well-being in the UK, 2012-13, Reference Table 2: Personal Well-being Datasets, April 2012 to March 2013: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/re-reference-tables.html?edition=tcn%3A77-313452>

Figure 2: Personal wellbeing of students in 2014 by ethnic group



Base: all respondents to Student Academic Experience Survey (15,046).¹¹

Figure 3: Personal wellbeing of students in 2014 by gender

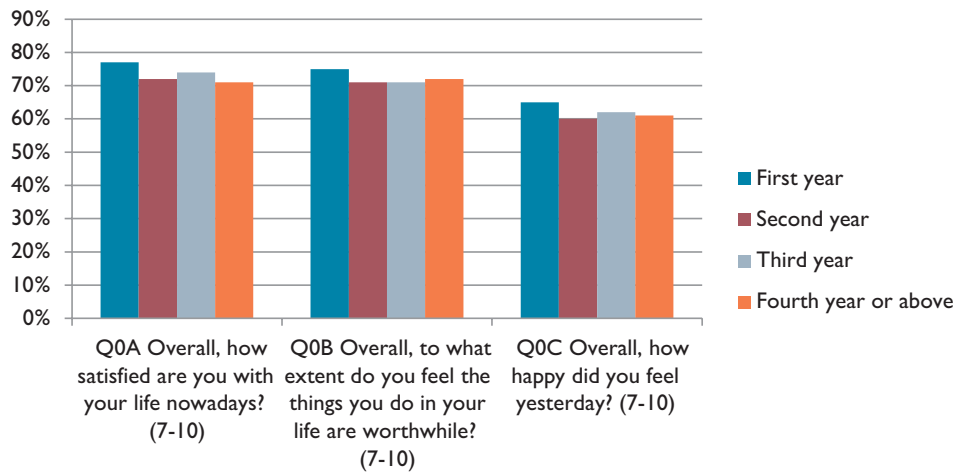


Base: male (4,900), female (10,146).

Figure 4 shows levels of wellbeing for students in different year groups, and suggests a small but clear and persistent difference between first-year students and other students, with first years showing higher levels of wellbeing on all measures.

¹¹ Base size (ethnicity): White (12239), Black Caribbean (120), Black African (279), Indian (450), Pakistani (330), Bangladeshi (143), Chinese (464), Other Asian (234), Prefer not to say (236), Mixed (437).

Figure 4: Personal wellbeing of students in 2014 by year-group



Base: first year (6,501), second year (4,309), third year (3,416), fourth year or above (820).

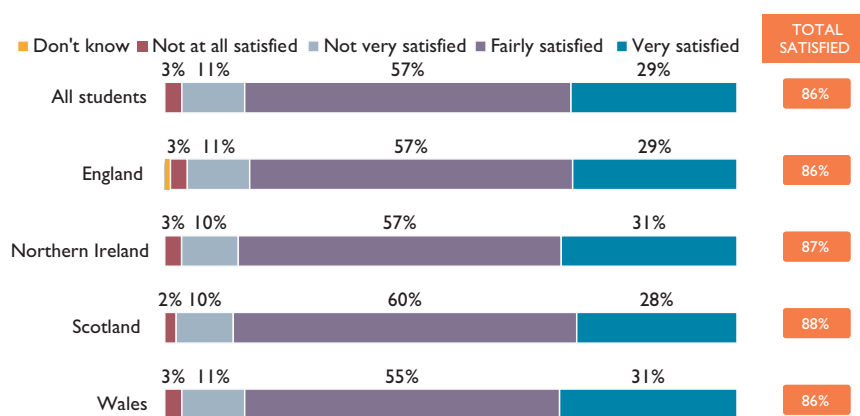
3. Overall academic experience

A number of questions in the survey attempt to capture students' views about their overall academic experience, including their satisfaction with their course, whether or not their original expectations have been met and whether they would have chosen the same course and institution if they were to apply again.

3.1 Overall satisfaction

Figure 5 shows that the vast majority of respondents (86%) declared themselves fairly or very satisfied with the overall quality of their course. This is consistent with results from previous iterations of this survey and the NSS.¹²

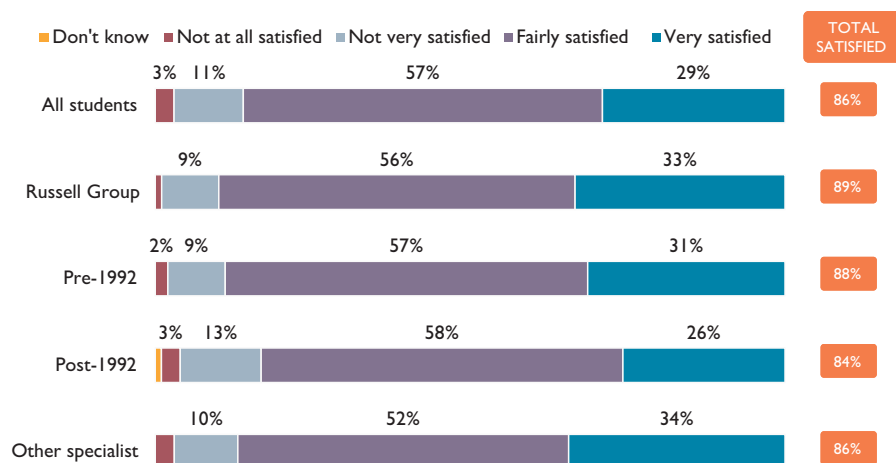
Figure 5: Satisfaction with overall quality of course, UK-wide and by university location



Base: all respondents (15,046); Students studying in: England (12,344), Northern Ireland (260), Scotland (1,528), Wales (905).

¹² The National Student Survey (NSS): <https://www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/lt/publicinfo/nationalstudentsurvey/>

Figure 6: Satisfaction with overall quality of course by university type



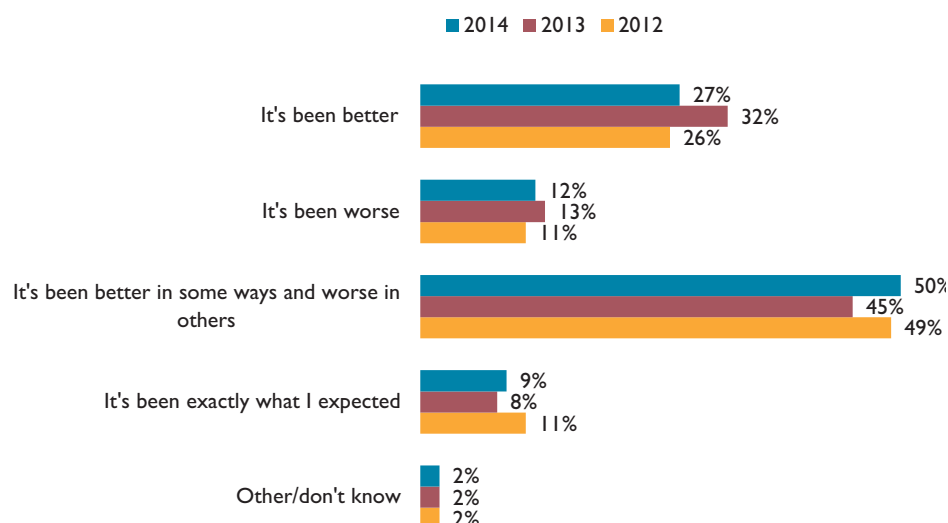
Base: all respondents (15,046); Russell Group (5,207); pre-1992 (3,804); post-1992 (5,405); Other (630).

Differences between students studying in the different nations of the UK are minimal, although marginally more students studying in Scotland are fairly or very satisfied. Whether this is related to different course lengths or different perceptions of 'value-for-money' as a result of different fee levels is explored later. Figure 6 shows that variation in satisfaction levels by broad institution type is also relatively small, with total satisfaction being slightly higher at Russell Group universities, with 89% fairly or very satisfied.

3.2 Experience compared with expectations

The survey also asked students to think back to when they applied to register on their current course and compare their expectations then with the reality of their academic experience so far. Figure 7 shows that 27% of students in 2014 said their expectations had been exceeded compared with 12% who said their experience was worse than expected. Another 50% of students said that their experience was better in some ways and worse in others. While there is a decline in positivity compared with 2013, the pattern remains very similar to that found in 2012, even if year group is controlled for, so there is no clear trend.

Figure 7: Academic experience compared to expectations



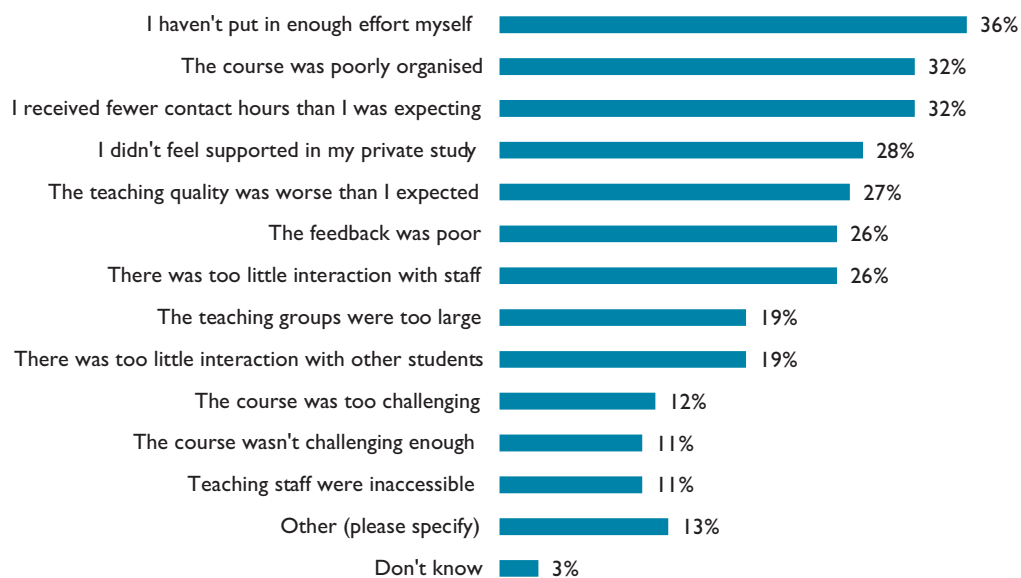
Base: all respondents; 2014 (15,046); 2013 (17,090); 2012 (9,058) NB: 2012 included first and second years only.

Understanding why 62% of students feel their experience was worse than expected – or better in some ways and worse in others – is important if we want to enhance their experience. Figure 8 shows the reasons those students gave (they could select as many reasons as they wished) for their experience being worse, or worse in some ways, than their expectations. We added some additional options this year to explore whether problems with engagement in learning resulted in expectations being missed, including the possibility that students' might not have put in enough effort themselves.¹³ It is a striking finding of this survey, in this supposed age of the student-as-consumer, that this was the most commonly selected reason, chosen by over one-third of students. It suggests that students are acutely aware that the quality of their educational experience is not simply about being 'provided' with their education, but also dependent on their active engagement with it. This is not to downplay the responsibility of universities. Their role in encouraging, supporting and ensuring students' active engagement in learning is vital. The finding supports the HEA's development of the UK Engagement Survey (UKES). UKES aims to inform enhancements to learning and teaching in UK higher education institutions, drawing on a wealth of experience from North America and Australasia, as well as research, testing and adaptation for the UK context.¹⁴

¹³ Other new options were: "The course was too challenging"; "There was too little interaction with staff"; and "There was too little interaction with other students".

¹⁴ See: <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/surveys/engagement>

Figure 8: Reasons why academic experience was worse/worse in some ways than expectations

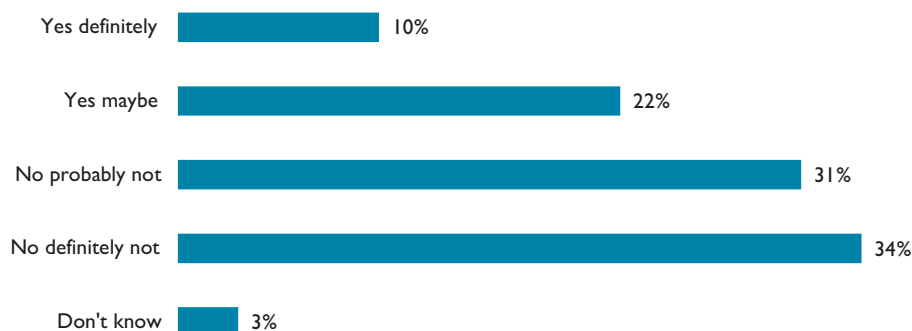


Base: all who thought their academic experience was worse than expected or better in some ways and worse in others (9,364).

Other reasons students selected for feeling that their academic experience had not matched expectations were “the course was poorly organised” and “I received fewer contact hours than I was expecting” both at 32%. In addition, there were further concerns about the delivery of teaching with the most common criticisms including lack of support in private study (28%), teaching being worse than expected (27%), poor feedback (26%), and insufficient interaction with staff (26%).

Students were also asked whether, given their academic experience so far, they would have chosen a different course. Figure 9 shows that 10% would definitely have done so and a further 25% would consider it or do not know. Two thirds of students say they would definitely or probably have made the same choice again.

Figure 9: Whether students would have chosen a different course knowing what they do now

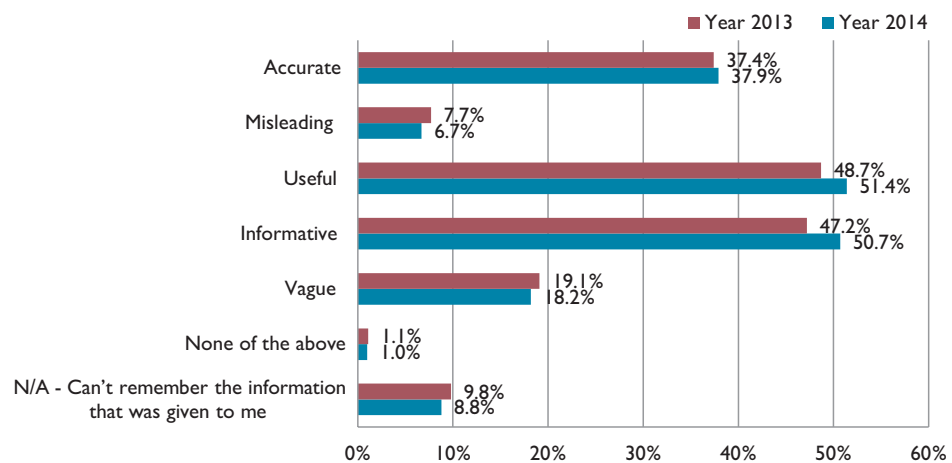


Base: all respondents (15,046).

Improving information for students (including the recent introduction of the Key Information Set) to help them make better choices is a current policy priority. Recent research has cast doubt on the impact of public information, arguing that it needs to be accompanied by better advice and guidance.¹⁵

Around half of first-year students describe the information they received before starting their course as “informative” and/or “useful”, with over a third describing it as “accurate” (see Figure 10). Encouragingly there has been a slight year-on-year increase in the percentage of students reflecting positively on information provision and a very slight decrease in those reflecting negatively. Nonetheless, these are not overwhelmingly positive figures; almost one-in-five first-year students found the information they received to be “vague” suggesting that institutions still have some way to go in improving information and advice for prospective students.

Figure 10: Views on information provided by the institution before commencement



Base: all first-year students (2013: 6204; 2014: 5058).

¹⁵ Diamond et al. (2014) UK review of the provision of information about higher education: Advisory Study and Literature Review Leicester CFE Research.

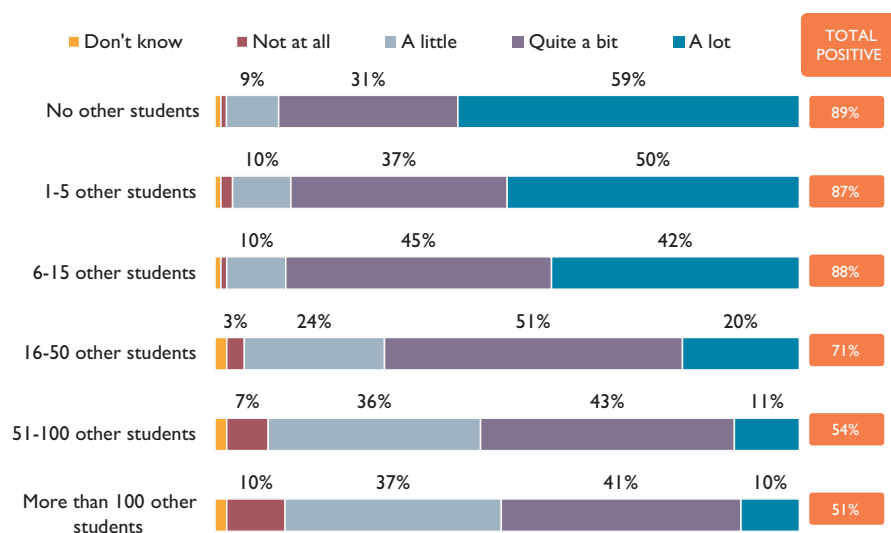
4. Class size, contact time and total workload

A core focus of this survey is and has been the amount of contact time that students receive in different-sized groups. It is important to stress that class size is a somewhat better indicator of quality than contact time (although what is done with the contact time to facilitate study in and out of class is of course crucial).¹⁶ That is, it is often better to have a few hours of high quality contact time that facilitate engaged, active, independent learning than to have many hours of contact time that involve passive note-taking or even ‘spoon-feeding’.

4.1 Class size

The benefits of smaller class sizes are recognised by students, as shown in Figure 11. This shows – quite strikingly – the decline in perceived benefits as class size increases. Accordingly, 89% of students felt they gained “a lot” or “quite a bit” educationally when attending sessions with no other students, with similar levels of positivity for tutorial-sized classes of up to 15 students in which interactive learning with staff and other students is most feasible. There is a striking decline in the proportion of students perceiving educational benefits as the size of class increases, especially when they reach lecture-sized groups. However, even medium-sized seminar classes see notably fewer students perceiving benefits compared with tutorial sized groups. When interpreting these data, it is also important to remember that some students get no tutorial-sized sessions.

Figure 11: Perceived educational benefit of attending different sized groups

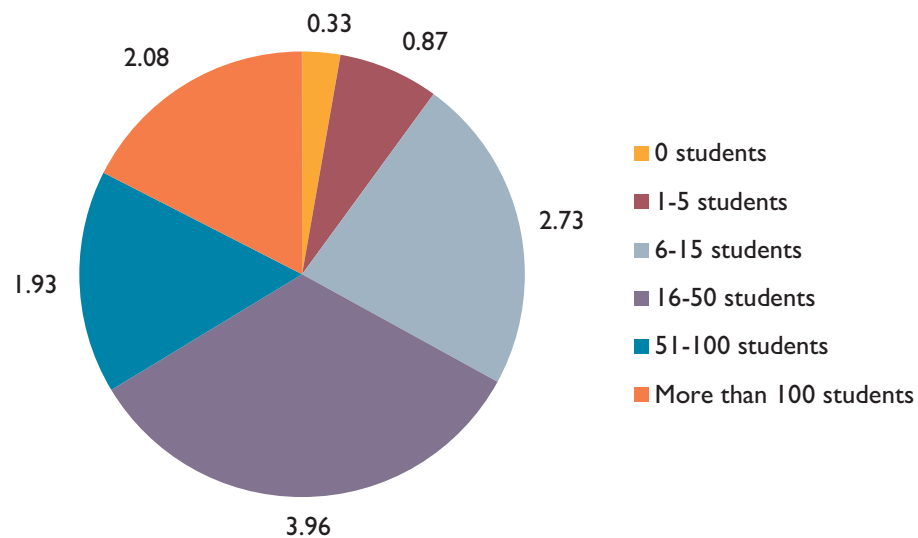


Base: all who attended groups with no other students (2,089); 1-5 other students (4,407); 6-15 other students (9,191); 16-50 other students (9,793); 51-100 other students (6,096); More than 100 other students (5,747).

¹⁶ Gibbs, G. (2010) *Dimensions of Quality*, York: Higher Education Academy.

Despite the educational benefits perceived of smaller groups by students (and echoed by Gibbs), Figure 12 shows that two-thirds of the mean 11.89 hours of contact time per week experienced by students in 2014 is spent in classes of 16 students or more.¹⁷ Table 3 (which is restricted to first and second years to facilitate comparisons), however, shows that there appears to have been a very modest increase in contact time in small groups and a corresponding small decrease in contact time in medium groups over the years of the survey – although much of the variation might be year-on-year ‘noise’¹⁸.

Figure 12: Mean contact hours spent in groups of different size



Base: all respondents (15,046).

Table 3: Trends in time spent in selected class sizes (first and second years only)

	2006	2007	2012	2013	2014
Time spent in small teaching groups (0-15)	3.64	3.85	3.52	3.85	3.93
Time spent in medium teaching groups (16-50)	4.31	4.52	4.37	4.25	4.13

Base: first and second-year respondents: 2014 (10,810); 2013 (12,413); 2012 (9,058); 2007 (14,819); 2006 (14,616).

¹⁷ Not all students experience each of these class sizes.

¹⁸ By ‘noise’ we mean small, unexplained statistical variations that may, for example, be caused by differences between samples.

4.2 Mean contact time

To facilitate comparisons over time the hours in Table 4 (and in Figure 13) are restricted to first-year and second-year students. Generally it can be seen from Table 4 and Figure 13 that there have been marginal increases in scheduled contact time overall and in most subjects between 2006 and 2014.

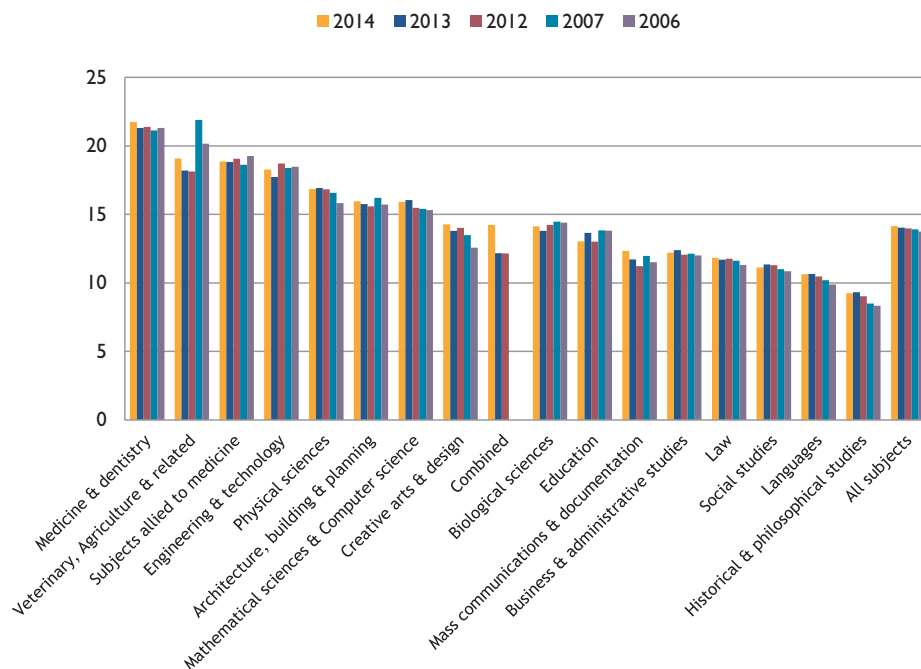
Table 4: Trends in overall scheduled contact time (first and second years only)

	2006	2007	2012	2013	2014
Scheduled contact hours	13.75	13.91	13.98	14.04	14.15

Base: first and second-year respondents: 2014 (10,810); 2013 (12,413); 2012 (9,058); 2007 (14,819); 2006 (14,616).

Contact time also varies considerably by discipline which is clearly shown in Figure 13. Those subjects in the sciences, health sciences and some vocational subject areas which require greater amounts of facilitated practical and laboratory sessions have predictably higher amounts of contact time than others.

Figure 13: Mean scheduled contact time in different disciplines (first and second years only)

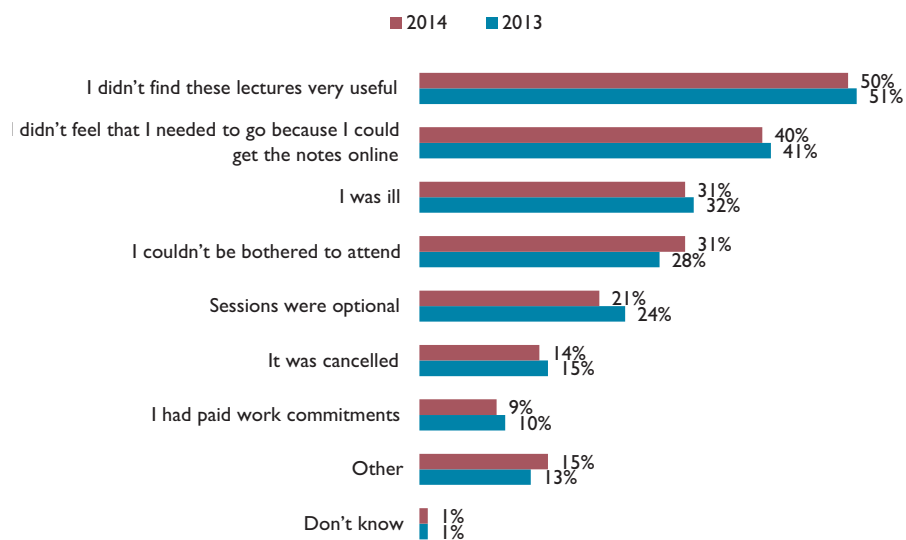


Base: first and second-year respondents: 2014 (10,810); 2013 (12,413); 2012 (9,058); 2007 (14,819); 2006 (14,616).

It should be stressed that the contact time experienced by all students (11.9 hours per week on average) is less than the contact time they were aware had been scheduled by their institution, which amounted to 13.1 hours per week. We were therefore interested to find out why students missed, on average, around 9% of the contact time provided. Figure 14 shows the reasons cited by those students who missed scheduled contact time. The most common reason was not finding the lectures very useful, suggesting more needs to be done either to make the sessions more useful or, also importantly, to convey to students why they are useful. Similarly, while technology has considerable benefits in increasing the flexibility of learning for students, the 40% of respondents to this question who cited availability of lecture notes online as a reason for non-attendance also suggests there is a need for institutions both to ensure and convey the value of active participation in taught sessions.

Despite this, and as discussed in section five, increasing contact hours remains a high priority for around one-third of students. However, the findings here suggest that increasing the quality of contact (which is more probable in smaller classes) is likely to be more effective in improving the student learning experience than simply increasing contact hours.

Figure 14: Reasons for attending fewer hours than timetabled



Base: all who attended fewer hours than timetabled 2014 (5,395); 2013 (5,738).

4.3 Total workload

While contact hours are crucial to students' course experiences, the total amount of work (sometimes called 'time on task') is in many ways more important for predicting learning gain. And of course, becoming a more confident and effective independent learner is a key outcome of higher education. Therefore, it is important not to focus exclusively on contact hours but also on private study hours and other forms of independent learning.

Table 5: Trends in private study and total workload over time (first and second years only)

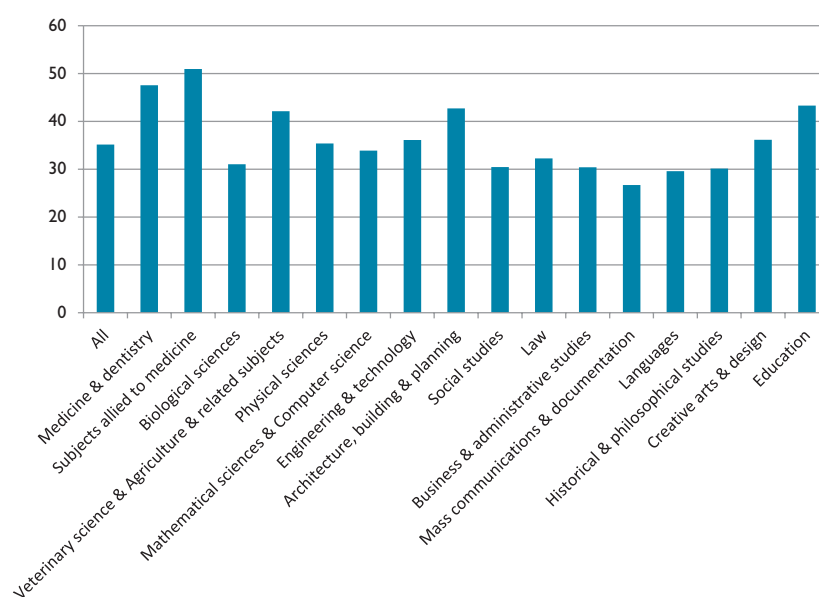
	2006	2007	2012	2013	2014
Private study hours	12.81	12.45	14.37	14.13	14.27
Other independent study hours (time spent working outside the university or college as part of your course + time spent studying with friends where not included as 'private study')	N/A	N/A	6.53	N/A	5.40
Scheduled contact hours	13.75	13.91	13.98	14.04	14.15
Total workload hours (Scheduled contact hours plus private and independent study hours)	N/A	N/A	34.88	N/A	33.82

Base: first and second-year respondents: 2014 (10,810); 2013 (12,413); 2012 (9,058); 2007 (14,819); 2006 (14,616).

Table 5 shows trends in private study hours which have also shown large increases, particularly between 2007 and 2012. Total workload hours (which are only comparable for the 2012 and 2014 surveys) appear to show a marginal decrease, but further iterations of the survey are required to assess whether this is more than year-on-year noise.

As with contact time, total workload varies by discipline although many disciplines hover around the 30 hours per week mark.¹⁹ While variations in contact time are understandable given the nature of different disciplines, fewer contact hours should, in theory, be balanced by greater amounts of independent study giving similar levels of overall workload. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) provides guidance that students should expect to study for ten hours per 'credit'.²⁰ Given most degrees are 360 credits over three years, this equates to 1,200 hours over a typical 30 teaching-week year or 40 hours per week. It should be noted that Table 5 (and Figures 15 and 16) do not include work undertaken outside of term-time which is explored further in Figure 17.

Figure 15: Total workload hours by discipline

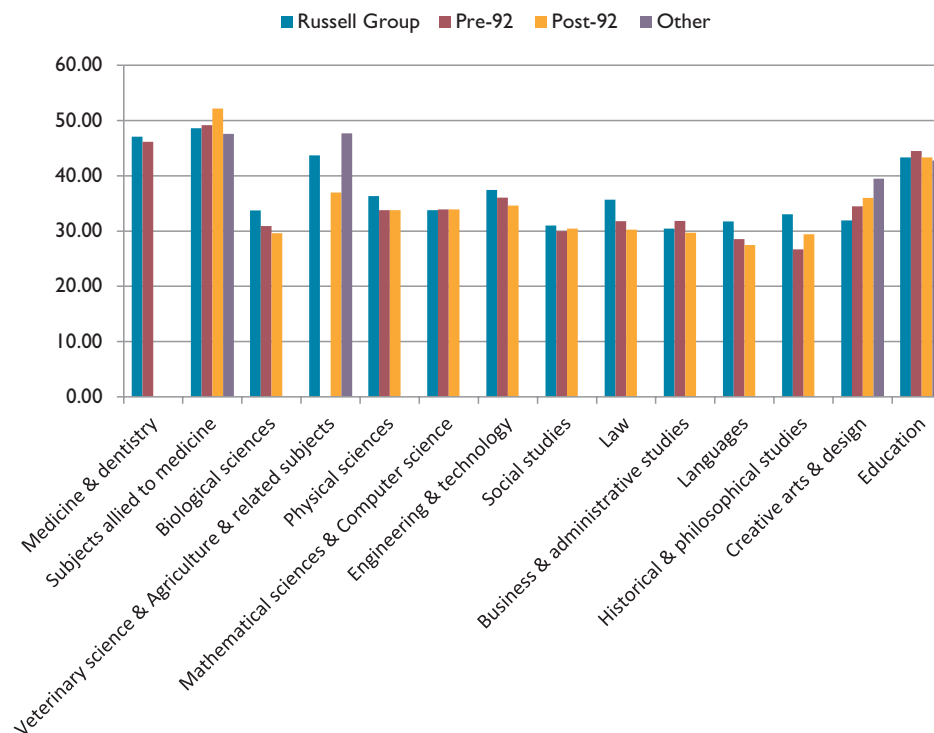


Base: all respondents (15,046).

¹⁹ The total workload is made up of the scheduled contact hours, private study, study with friends and study outside the university but part of the course.

²⁰ QAA (2013) Explaining student workload: Guidance about providing information for students: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/explaining-student-workload.aspx>

Figure 16: Total workload hours by discipline and institution type



Base: Russell Group (5,207); pre-1992 (3,804); post-1992 (5,405); Other (630). Results have not been shown where there are 50 respondents, or fewer.

Figure 15 suggests that total term-time workload hours vary from under 30 hours per week in some subjects (such as languages) to 50 hours per week in subjects allied to medicine in some institutions. There are also generally modest variations by institution type as shown in figure 16 (those subjects with larger variations generally have smaller numbers and are more susceptible to 'noise'), with Russell Group institutions having slightly higher workload in eight out of 14 subject areas shown, though each of the institution types reports the highest workload for at least one subject area. Note that the Russell Group figures are very slightly inflated by the influence of weekly workload at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge which have fewer teaching weeks than other institutions.

There is also variation between institutions in terms of the total term-time workload hours within the same broad subject area. Caution is required in interpreting these variations as the number of respondents from within a particular subject area within a particular institution can be very small, despite aggregating various degree programmes together. Table 6 compares the lowest, median and highest institution workload hours for selected

broad subject areas where there were at least 20 responses.²¹ It suggests considerable variation in total hours between institutions, even where discipline is controlled for. For example, total workload in biological sciences ranges from under 22 hours in one institution to just under 48 hours in another, with 30 hours being more typical.

Table 6: Institutional ranges of total workload (unweighted)

Subject area	Lowest institution mean	Median	Highest institution mean	Number of institutions
Medicine & dentistry	36.38	46.96	51.23	11
Subjects allied to medicine	32.75	45.96	64.42	23
Biological sciences	21.70	30.14	47.83	40
Physical sciences	29.79	35.07	45.60	21
Mathematical sciences & computer science	30.36	33.26	45.74	9
Engineering & technology	30.71	36.25	46.12	12
Social studies	24.42	29.52	43.39	16
Business & administrative studies	23.59	26.76	33.58	8
Languages	23.23	29.36	43.45	17
Historical & philosophical studies	26.91	34.96	40.48	8
Creative arts & design	27.88	33.64	44.72	11

Base: 2014 respondents; All institutional subject areas with 20 or more respondents

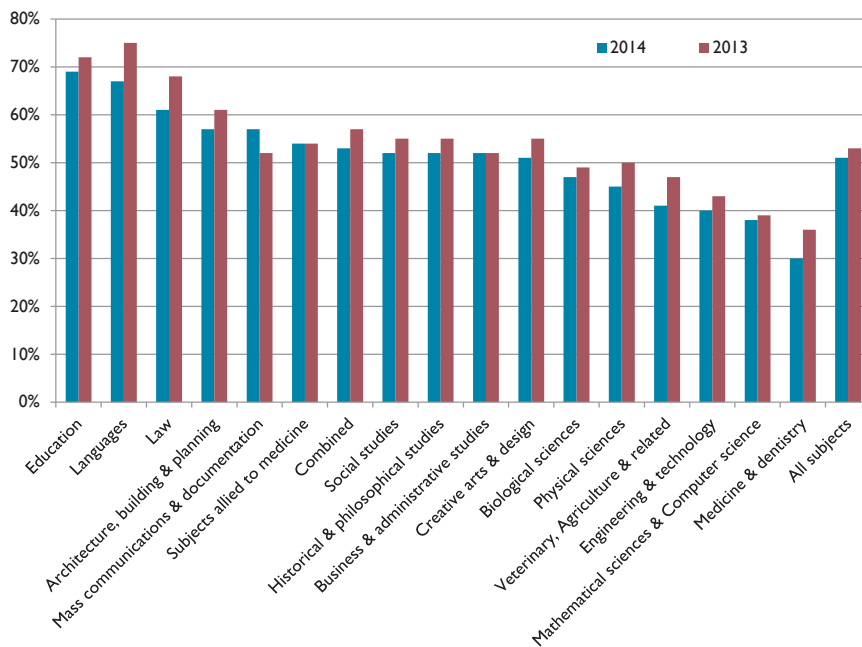
Further academic work may be undertaken by students outside of term-time. The requirement to undertake work over the holidays can provide opportunities for additional learning and valuable independent academic experience, but needs to be balanced against the need for many students to

²¹ Extreme responses have also been omitted from the analysis as they are likely to represent errors.

undertake paid work during vacation time in order to fund their living costs, as well as other career and personal development opportunities and, of course, rest and relaxation.

Figure 17 shows the percentage of students reporting being given mandatory study/reading/assignments during their most recent holidays and shows marked variations between disciplines with, on average, around half of students being given mandatory work. Some subjects with lower levels of term-time workload are more likely to set mandatory workload in the holidays, though there is by no means a perfect relationship. It also suggests that over the last year there has been a decline in this requirement and, while this is only a year-on-year comparison, it is consistent across all but three of the 17 discipline areas.

Figure 17: Requirements to do work over holidays

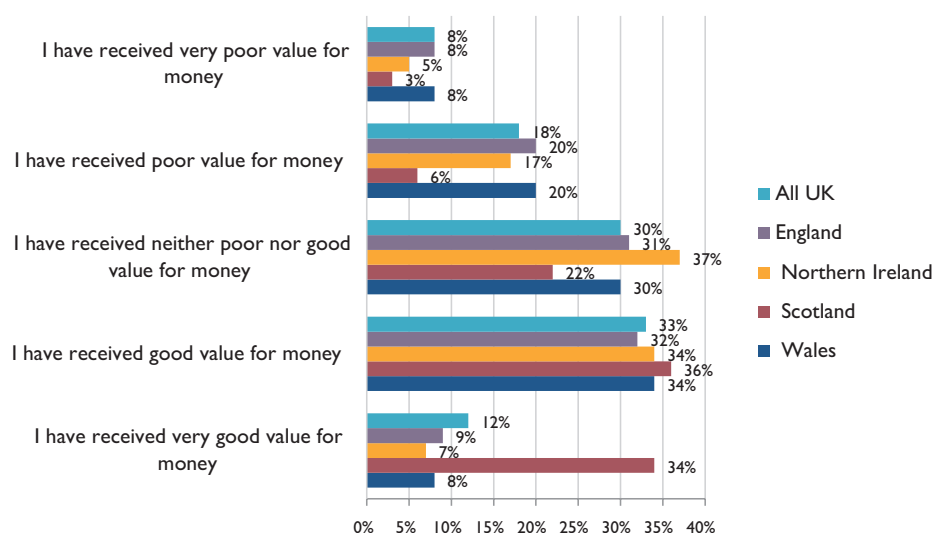


Base: all respondents 2014 (15,046); 2013 (17,090).

5. Value for money, fees and spending priorities

Education is, of course, about a lot more than simply being 'provided' with teaching, resources and facilities. It is not a simple consumer relationship, but a partnership which requires effort and engagement from the student and it is the responsibility of their institution to encourage and facilitate this. Nonetheless, this survey provides us with an opportunity to investigate their sense of value-for-money and whether this has changed.

Figure 18: Students' views of the value for money of their course, by location of institution

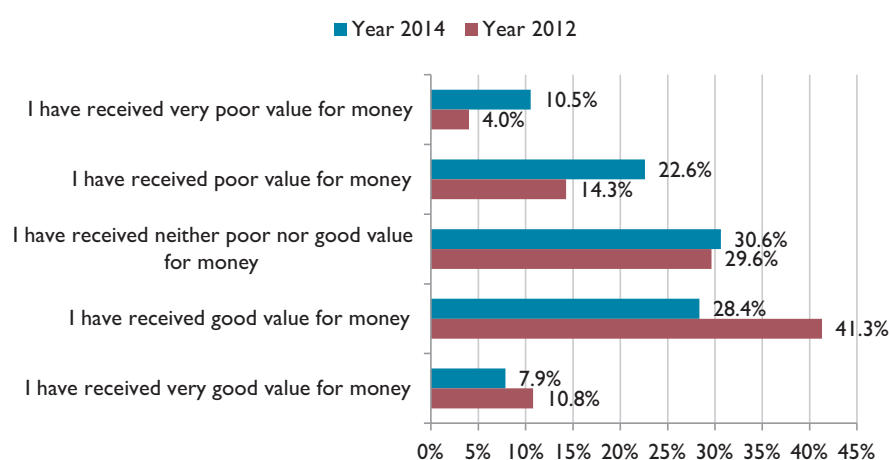


Base: all respondents (15,046); students studying in England (12,344), Northern Ireland (260), Scotland (1,528), Wales (905).

Figure 18 shows the views on value for money of all respondents to the 2014 survey and breaks this down by the location of their institution. Overall, 44% of students believe they have received at least good value for money with 26% stating they have received poor, or very poor, value for money. There are considerable variations across the UK nations with a striking 70% of students at Scottish institutions believing they have received at least good value for money compared with 41% in England. Eighty-three per cent of respondents at Scottish institutions were either from Scotland or other EU countries and effectively pay no fees. There is little difference in the views of students at Welsh and English universities, probably reflecting the 60% of respondents at Welsh institutions liable for paying full fees of up to £9000. Interestingly students at universities in Northern Ireland, who mostly pay £3,685 per year, only have marginally more positive views on value for money than their counterparts in England (and in contrast to Scotland). This perhaps suggests that the bigger impact on value for money perceptions may come from having any fees at all, rather than the difference between £3,685 and £9,000.

Nonetheless, Figure 19 attempts to provide a 'before and after' comparison of the impact of new fees regimes by comparing the views on value for money held by students surveyed in 2014 with their counterparts in 2012. It is limited to first and second-year students from England, Northern Ireland, and Scotland studying at institutions in England, who were liable for fees of up to £3,375 per year in 2012 and up to £9,000 in 2014²². It shows that one third of students (33.1%) now believe they have received poor or very poor value for money, compared with 18.3% in 2012. Conversely, while over half (52.1%) of students believed their course represented good value for money in 2012, this has dropped to 36.3% in 2014.

Figure 19: Students' views of the value for money of their course, pre- and post-new fees regime (first and second years at institutions in England)



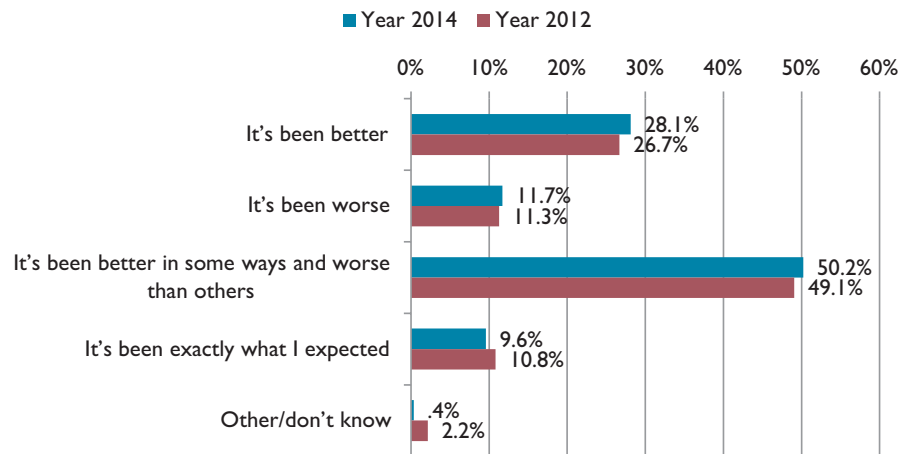
Base: all first and second-year students with home domicile as England, Scotland or Northern Ireland, studying at an institution in England in 2012 (7,868) and 2014 (7,890).

A decline in perceived value-for-money is not unexpected, given that student funding has largely replaced previous government funding, rather than adding to the resources institutions have to enhance the student experience. That is, students are paying more but are unlikely to be receiving more. But it is also interesting to examine whether views on the overall academic experience have changed over the same time period, given that higher fees may have changed quality expectations. Figure 20 again compares the experience of first-year and second-year students at English institutions from England, Northern Ireland, and Scotland in 2012 with their counterparts in 2014. It suggests there has been a negligible impact of the new fees regime on students' experience relative to their original expectations, with an insignificant 0.4% increase in students saying their experience was worse than expected and a small – 1.4% – increase in

22 Students domiciled in Wales but studying in England receive a non-means tested bursary of £5,315 from the Welsh Government, effectively reducing their net fees liability to levels prior to the new fees regime. We have therefore not included these students in the analyses, although it is still possible that their perceptions and experiences have been indirectly affected by the shift to a new fees regime.

respondents saying their experiences were actually better than expected. So, while higher fees have certainly altered perceptions of value for money, there is no evidence from this survey that they have raised students' expectations of their higher education experience.

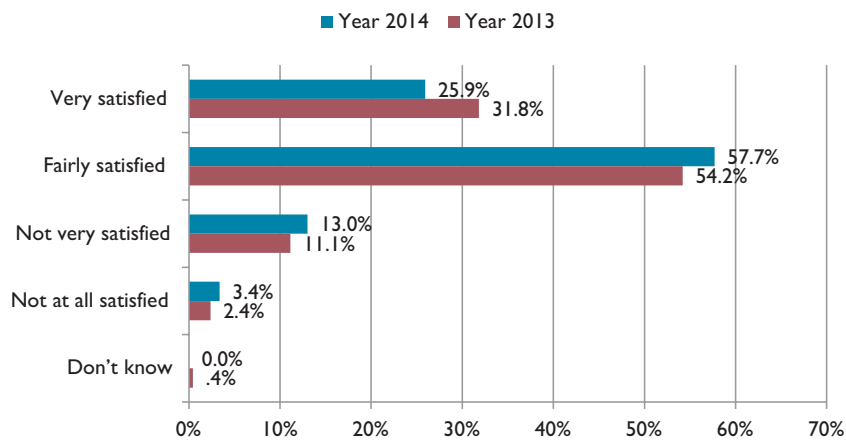
Figure 20: Academic experience compared to expectations, pre- and post-new fees regime in England



Base: all first and second-year students with home domicile as England, Scotland or Northern Ireland, studying at an English institutions, 2012 (7,868), 2014 (7,784).

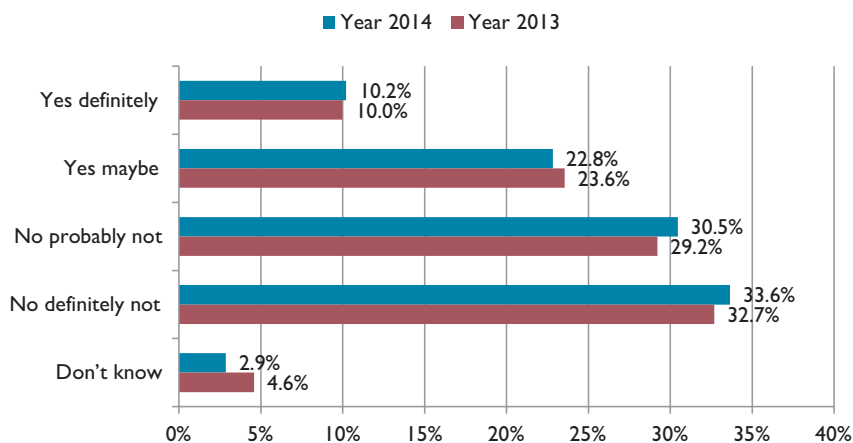
Questions on overall satisfaction and whether students would have chosen a different course if they knew what they did now were not asked in 2012. Therefore, Figures 21 and 22 compare the overall satisfaction of second-year students in 2014 with those in 2013 (who, unlike first years, had been admitted under the old fees regime), again limited to those from England, Northern Ireland, and Scotland, studying at institutions in England. Figure 21 suggests a reduction in total satisfaction from 86.0% to 83.6% in 2014, with a larger reduction of six percentage points in those “very” satisfied. Nonetheless, in contrast with the value for money perceptions, the vast majority of students paying higher fees remain at least “fairly satisfied” with their course.

Figure 21: Satisfaction with overall quality of course, pre- and post-new fees regime (second years at institutions in England)



Base: all second-year students with home domicile as England, Scotland or Northern Ireland, studying at an English institution, 2013 (3,662) 2014 (3,226).

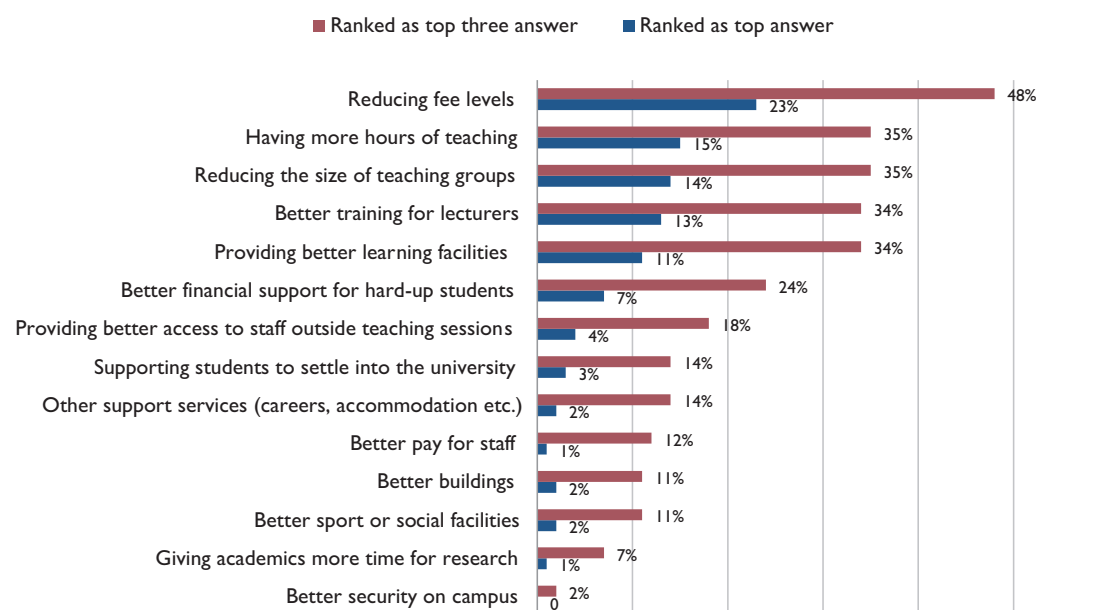
Figure 22: Whether students would have chosen a different course knowing what they do now, pre- and post-new fees regime (second-year students at institutions in England)



Base: all second-year students with home domicile as England, Scotland or Northern Ireland, studying at an English institution, 2013 (3,662) 2014 (3,239).

Furthermore, Figure 22 shows that the proportion of students who say they “probably” or “definitely” would have not have chosen a different course with hindsight has actually increased slightly (but statistically significantly) from 61.9% in 2013 to 64.1% in 2014. It is clear that while fees may have strongly affected perceptions of value for money, measures of student satisfaction have not changed dramatically. However, it is of course possible that other processes (such as better information or more careful choices) are playing a role.

Figure 23: Students’ spending priorities for institutions



Base: all respondents (15,046).

Given the decline in perceived ‘value for money’ with the introduction of the new fees regime, but less movement in measures of overall academic experience, it is perhaps unsurprising that when asked about their top three priorities for institutional expenditure, 48% of students chose “reducing fee levels” as one of their priorities (Figure 23).²³ Beyond that main priority, four clear areas emerge as priorities: increasing teaching hours; decreasing class sizes; better training for lecturers; and better learning facilities (as distinct from better buildings, which is not ranked so highly). It is notable that the higher ranked areas relate to improving the quality of teaching and learning and the lower ranked areas relate more to extra-curricular and environmental issues such as sports facilities and better security on campus. Giving academics more time for research was not ranked highly despite the promotion of ‘research-led teaching’ in many institutions.

²³ This year we asked students to rank their top three priorities rather than select as many as they wished. The results are therefore not directly comparable with those from previous surveys.

6. Implications for policy and practice

The findings of the HEPI–HEA Student Academic Experience Survey 2014 have a number of implications for policy and practice. Most obviously, it appears that the increase in fees in some parts of the UK is having a dramatic impact on students' perceptions of value for money. This is hardly surprising, given that students in England are largely paying more, but the amount institutions have to invest in their education has remained largely unchanged. These resources are likely to continue to be under pressure. This may require greater transparency about how and where HEIs spend money; it is particularly important that students are given information on where their fees go²⁴ and recent research for the QAA recommended that the sector needed to better explain the relationship between fees and the quality and value of degrees.²⁵ The findings of this survey also provide useful information about how students would prioritise spending. Institutions and policymakers may not generally prioritise reducing fees, but it is vital at the very least to understand students' views and to engage in dialogue if they are to understand and perhaps even accept alternative priorities.

The picture regarding the impact of higher fees is however complex. The contrast in value for money perception between students studying in Scotland and the rest of the UK suggests the biggest influence on value for money perceptions may not be the difference between £3,685 and £9,000 fees (impactful though that is), but the difference between effectively no fees and relatively low levels. Furthermore, despite students being less convinced about value for money, measures of their overall academic experience, including satisfaction relative to expectations, have not changed substantially. Indeed recent research suggests that, while the increase in fees and consequent indebtedness is perceived with some degree of concern, “students are resigned to its reality and take comfort from the income-contingent nature of fee repayment”.²⁶

The number of contact hours, as in previous years, emerges as an area of concern for students, both as a priority for institutional spending, and as an explanation for their experiences not matching expectations. However, the size of classes – which research suggests has a bigger impact on the quality of teaching and learning and the achievement of learning outcomes – is also seen as a priority.

In any case, students recognise that the quality of their experience does not simply hinge on what they are provided with, but is also linked with their own effort and engagement with their courses. One of the most striking findings in this report is that the most commonly selected reason for experience not matching expectations is the lack of effort put in by students themselves. This survey also revealed a discrepancy between the number of scheduled contact hours and the number actually attended, which is often explained by claims that the lectures were not useful or because notes were available online.

24 Tomlinson, M. (2014) Exploring the impact of policy changes on students' attitudes and approaches to learning in higher education, York: Higher Education Academy.

25 Kandiko, C. B. and Mawer, M. (2014) Student expectations and perceptions of higher education. A study of UK higher education. Commissioned by the Quality Assurance Agency. London: King's College London.

26 Tomlinson, M. (2014) Exploring the impact of policy changes on students' attitudes and approaches to learning in higher education. York: Higher Education Academy.

If that sounds like excusing institutions from responsibility for ensuring a high quality academic experience, we would argue it is precisely in facilitating and ensuring effort, engagement, interaction, and active and deep learning that institutions can really enhance the student academic experience. After all, other reasons for non-attendance were feeling unsupported in their private studies or that they had “too little interaction with staff”. And a significant number of respondents are concerned with the quality of teaching and request investment in better training for lecturers.

There are clearly challenges for institutions in engaging students in active learning and while new technologies provide opportunities in this regard, this survey found that simply putting lecture notes online can also encourage non-attendance. It is vital to ensure students benefit from participating in class and that they understand the value of doing so for their learning experience. At an institutional level, benchmarking how engaged students are, rather than simply how satisfied they are, can help to inform enhancements to learning and teaching. A growing number of UK institutions are joining their counterparts in Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa and the United States in surveying students about their engagement in learning by using the HEA’s new UK Engagement Survey (UKES).²⁷ It is also welcome that the current review of public information about higher education included in its remit the investigation of the value of questions about student engagement within the National Student Survey.

The new questions on wellbeing, introduced for the 2014 survey, raise questions for those involved in higher education. That students generally feel lower levels of wellbeing than the general population is of some concern and perhaps contrasts with caricatures of students as having the time-of-their-lives. Higher education is, and should be, challenging for students in many ways. However, those challenges can also be daunting and are often accompanied by major life transitions and indebtedness. Ensuring students’ wellbeing requires support from institutions, including (but by no means only from) dedicated support services. Peer networks and mentoring programmes might also be effective – they are two of the very things that can help improve engaged and active learning. Further research into levels of wellbeing and its relationship with engagement, success and retention is to be welcomed.²⁸

By design, the HEPI–HEA Student Academic Experience Survey raises as many questions as it does answers. Its aim is to provoke informed discussion, reflection and debate rather than to pass judgment on the quality of individual courses and institutions. The sector can be proud of the high levels of student satisfaction experienced across UK higher education. But it also needs to respond to the challenges of engaging as well as satisfying students, of safeguarding high levels of wellbeing, and of ensuring – and conveying – the value of their academic experience.

27 See: <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/surveys/engagement>

28 For example, research for the HEA and Action on Access funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation is investigating links between engagement, belongingness, retention and success: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/retention/PHF/retention_and_success_change_programme_2012-2015

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