

2018 Student Academic Experience Survey

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AdvanceHE



Higher Education Policy Institute

STUDENT

ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE

SURVEY



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Foreword by Alison Johns

I am delighted that the Student Academic Experience Survey (SAES), published in partnership with the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), is the first substantial survey produced by Advance HE.

The Survey, now in its twelfth year, has an impressive pedigree of providing important insights and evidence which have helped to shape policies, strategies and practice to enhance the student academic experience.

Reading the Survey through the lens of a new sector agency, I am struck by how it serves to illustrate the important synergies between Advance HE's three forming organisations; and how leadership, teaching and learning, and equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) combine to impact the student academic experience. The wider point is the need for holistic approaches to enhancement, whether at sector, institutional or local level.

With so much debate in and beyond the sector about 'value for money', this year's Survey pinpoints the things students really think about in forming their perceptions of value. The Survey reinforces that the majority of students regard teaching quality as the top contributor for good value, and tuition fees the most significant indicator of poor value.

Of particular note this year is the improvement students report in the value for money of their course. This bucks a five-year downward trend and is clearly, very welcome news.

The Survey also indicates concern that students of British Asian ethnicity still do not share the more positive experience of their peers. Our analysis disproves suggestions that this may mainly be because more of this group lives at home, restricting their access to a full higher education experience. I would strongly support further work in this area so that this important group get the opportunity to enjoy the full potential of their academic experience.

Finally, in a new question this year appraising 'course choice', students report high levels of satisfaction with the choice they made, suggesting that both the support given in course selection and the overall higher education experience has been a positive one. This too is very encouraging and in my view suggests increasingly effective engagement of students as they transition into and through their undergraduate studies.

Alison Johns

Chief Executive, Advance HE

Foreword by Nick Hillman

This Survey is the most influential student survey in the UK for three reasons: topicality; consistency; and breadth. It is a large survey, with millions of data points gathered since it first began thirteen years ago – and, unlike the National Student Survey of those who are about to graduate, it covers undergraduate students in all years of study.

Although the Student Academic Experience Survey has improved every year since it began in 2006, it is not perfect. No survey is. To understand its value, you need to understand what it is and what it is not. It is a high-definition and panoramic snapshot of what full-time students think, how they feel, how hard they work and what they believe is important in terms of staffing, institutional strategies and government policies.

So, for example, when we ask students about value for money, we discover their subjective opinions on this important issue. They may be right or they may be wrong, when compared with more objective evaluations. But it is an accurate picture of what they think, and what they say matters. This is doubly true in the new regulatory environment, in which the sector is overseen by a new Office for Students and when the current Minister for Universities and Science, Sam Gyimah, has unilaterally declared himself to be the ‘Minister for Students’.

This year’s Survey includes all the old favourites, such as workload and wellbeing, a deeper dive into students’ perceptions of value for money, as well as a greater focus on how students’ accommodation choices affect their views (or not). There is a similar wealth of data on teaching quality, feedback and learning gain as last year alongside new detail on students’ views about where their fees should go, new results on international students and new findings on the prospect of differential fees.

As usual, the data will be available to institutions that support HEPI and Advance HE, so they can interrogate the numbers in their own ways and compare their own institutions’ performance against others on a like-for-like basis. In the past year, we have ourselves shown more of what is possible with the data: HEPI has published reports on what affects students’ self-perceived learning gain and how Oxbridge differs from other institutions across a range of factors. We plan to follow this up with further work but we will still welcome it when others want to conduct their own research using the rich levels of data we have collected over more than a decade.

As a sector, we now need to replicate the wealth of information we have at our fingertips about the student experience with similarly rich information on applicants and graduates. In line with this and in conjunction with Unite Students, we dipped our toe in the water last year when we published another survey-based report, *Reality Check*, that looked at what applicants expect of higher education.

However, we still know little about, for example, how value-for-money perceptions about higher education change as people emerge from higher education and move through the labour market. We also need richer information on the experiences of postgraduate students and of staff.

Between the start and finish of this year’s project, the Higher Education Academy (HEA) was merged with the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education and the Equality Challenge Unit to create Advance HE.

So now is the right moment to express our huge gratitude to the HEA and its staff for all they have done to support the Survey – a truly joint enterprise – since it first began. It has perhaps never been needed more than it is today.

Nick Hillman

Director of the Higher Education Policy Institute

Executive summary

This year we have seen an increase in the proportion of students who feel they have received good value for money for their higher education, with students across England in particular reporting a clear increase, even though there remains a sizeable cohort of students who question the value they have received.

For the first time, we have evidence around what lies behind these opinions, which points towards cost being a key driver of poor value perceptions, and teaching quality being a key contributor to good value perceptions. There is also evidence of the importance of institutions continuing to invest in campus development to help provide an overall impression of value for money.

Analysis of results by Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) ratings – available for the first time – provides an interesting but mixed picture. Value for money is highest at TEF Gold-rated institutions, which also have strong levels of independent study. By contrast, class sizes tend to be highest at Gold-rated institutions, and there is no evidence that their students rate teaching staff any higher.

Institutions continue to find it a challenge to provide evidence as to how fees are spent. However, we have gathered new evidence around the kind of information required, to help convince students of value, with consistent areas emerging such as investment in teaching, student support and estate development.

The past gains in teaching quality have not been built upon, with students' ratings of teaching staff being marginally lower than last year; although it should be said that quality teaching still underpins the experience of those who perceive they have received good value.

Levels of student wellbeing remain relatively low, and are still falling. Despite the tangible focus on addressing these issues across the sector, there is more work to be done as students continue to deal with a range of pressures and challenges.

Analysis of students from different backgrounds is revealing. Asian students tend to face barriers in getting the most out of their experience, which our analysis shows is over and above any impact related to barriers faced by students (including a lot of Asian students) who live in the family home and commute. More work must be done across the sector to understand the barriers at play for different ethnic groups. The same applies to students who spend large amounts of time engaged in paid work.

Despite these very real concerns, it is important to recognise that the student experience remains positive. The majority of students feel they have learned a lot, and tend to be happy with their choice of course and institution. Even students who are not entirely happy would be overwhelmingly likely to go into higher education if given the chance again, which is positive given the level of financial challenge that students take on and the broadening range of alternative options available.

1 Methodology

1.1 Approach

The Student Academic Experience Survey has adopted consistent methodology over time, in order to facilitate comparison across what has become a significant dataset in the UK higher education landscape.

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

For the 2018 Survey we have retained many key questions on the overall student experience, which enables us to track the evolution of student opinion across a number of years, including key areas such as value for money, learning gain, experience compared with expectations and quality of teaching / assessment. To complement these well-established areas, we have introduced newer, topical questions focusing on issues including differential fees, attitudes to studying alongside international students and how students would best like to see their tuition fees spent. We have also included a question to unpick what students mean when they say they have received good or poor value for money.

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

Over 70,000 members of the panel were invited to complete the Survey between 5 February and 10 March 2018. In total, 14,046 responses were collected, representing a response rate of 20%. All respondents who completed the Survey received a £1 Amazon gift voucher and, on average, the questions took 16 minutes to complete. Weighting has been applied to the responses to ensure the sample is balanced and reflective of the full-time student population as a whole, and to provide consistency in approach with previous years.¹

As with 2017, we have also included a small sample of students from alternative providers. When reporting results among this group, however, we have added together results from both years, in order to provide more statistically robust data.

¹ The data are weighted by gender, course year, subject area and institution type. All percentages and base sizes in the report are based on weighted data from 2018 unless specified otherwise.

1.2 Sample size

All respondents to the Survey are full-time undergraduate students. Unless stated otherwise, all figures and tables relate to the 2018 Survey with a weighted base of 14,046 students. The full data tables are freely available from HEPI and Advance HE.

The total sample size of 14,046 provides a margin of error of $\pm 0.82\%$.² This is calculated at the 95% confidence level and based on a result of 50%, where the margin of error is at its maximum. This means that for a result of 50% we can be confident that the true result is between 49.18% and 50.82% in 95 out of 100 cases.³ For results at the higher or lower end of the scale the margin of error is smaller than this. This means that most differences in the Survey between 2017 and 2018 of 1% or greater are statistically significant. For smaller sub-samples within the Survey, the margin of error is significantly greater, and hence year-on-year differences of a few percentage points are in some cases not significant. We have highlighted statistically significant differences between 2017 and 2018 in bold text on each chart where differences apply.

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

² Please note that in the charts in this report, the total may not add up to 100% due to rounding to whole percentages.

³ Source: <http://www.comresglobal.com/our-work/margin-of-error-calculator> [Accessed 3 April 2018]

1.3 Sample profile

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

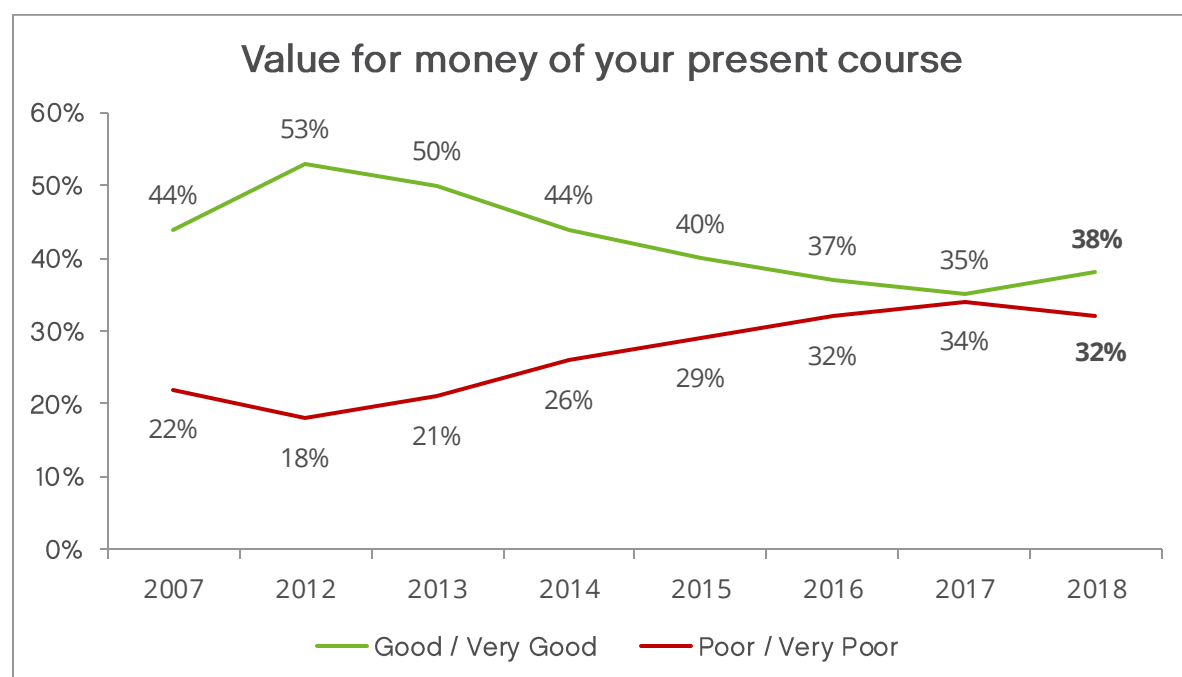
Weighted sample %				
Year		2016	2017	2018
Base size		(15,221)	(14,057)	(14,046)
Gender	Male	43%	43%	44%
	Female	57%	57%	56%
Country where studying	England	85%	84%	85%
	Scotland	9%	9%	9%
	Wales	5%	5%	5%
	Northern Ireland	1%	1%	1%
Institutions	Russell Group	28%	28%	28%
	Pre-92 (excluding Russell Group)	22%	22%	22%
	Post-92	47%	47%	49%
	Specialist	4%	2%	2%
Ethnicity (UK-domiciled)	White	82%	79%	79%
	Black	3%	3%	3%
	Asian (excluding Chinese)	8%	12%	11%
	Chinese	2%	2%	2%
	Mixed	4%	4%	5%

2 Value for money

2.1 Trends over time

From as far back as 2012 until 2017, we experienced a consistent decline in perceptions of value for money, until almost equal numbers of students felt they received poor value for their higher education experience as good value. This has, rightly, caused concern and prompted debate across the sector.

This year, however, we have seen a promising upturn, with 38% of students perceiving their experience of higher education to date as representing good value for money – an increase of three percentage points – compared with 32% (a 2% decline) who feel they have received poor value. Although the prevalence of nearly one third of students citing poor value should remain a concern, this is clearly an encouraging improvement.

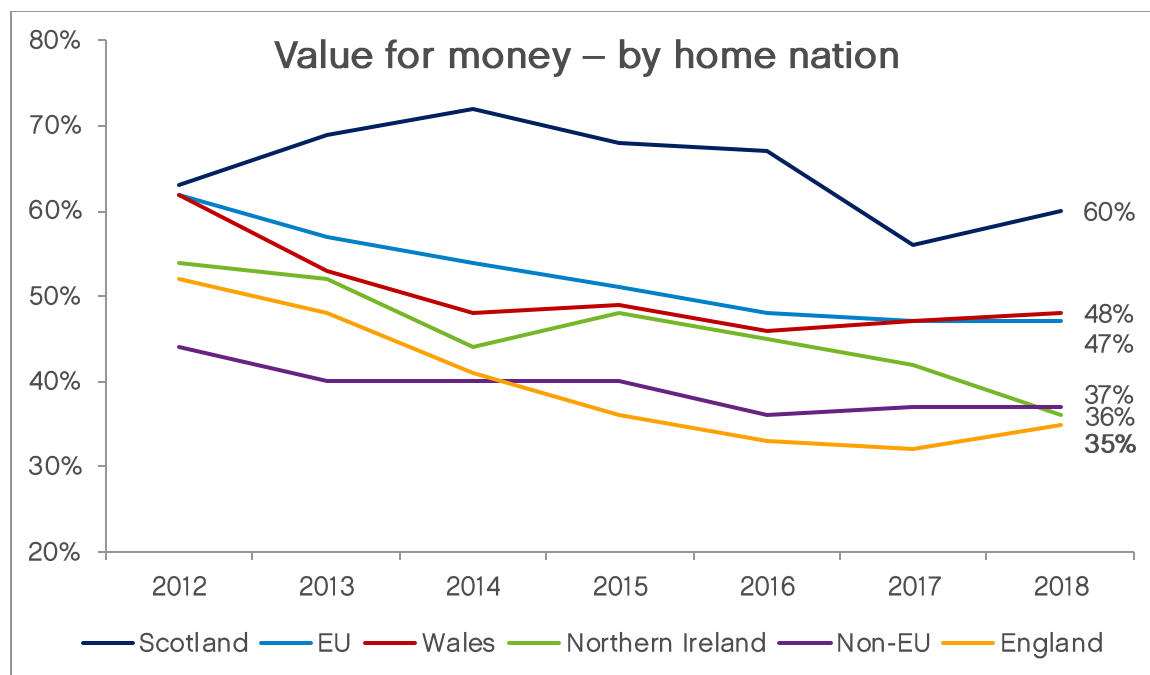


Base: All respondents. 2007 (14,859); 2012 (9,058); 2013 (17,090); 2014 (15,046); 2015 (15,129); 2016 (15,221); 2017 (14,057); 2018 (14,046). Statistically significant differences between 2017 and 2018 in bold.

As shown in the following chart, results from students across different domiciles continue to vary, although the consistent downward trend has been halted.

There has been a clear, statistically significant improvement in England (representing the largest number of students and therefore driving the overall trend), so that there are now an equal number of students citing good value for money as poor value (35%). There has been a directional increase since 2017 in perceptions of value for money among students from Scotland (56% to 60%) which continues to report the most positive opinions overall. This reverses a clear decline between 2016 and 2017 but it should be noted that due to relatively small base sizes, this difference is not statistically significant and hence is within the margin of error that applies.

Across the other home nations, Northern Ireland experienced the largest drop in terms of percentage points (42% to 36%) while Wales has increased by one percentage point, to 48%. However in both these cases, these changes are not statistically significant.

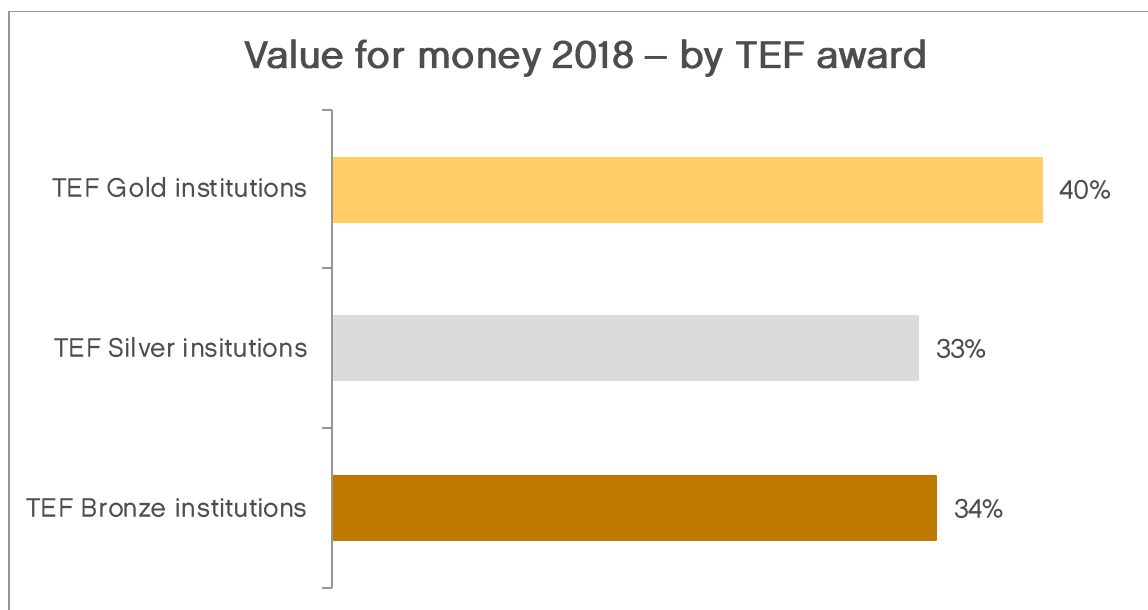


Base: All respondents domiciled in each nation 2018. Scotland (955); EU (929); Wales (457); Northern Ireland (249); Non-EU (565); England (10,891). Value for money defined as Good / Very Good combined. Statistically significant differences between 2017 and 2018 in bold.

Outside the UK, students from the rest of the EU continue to perceive relatively good value for money (47%) with those from outside the EU (i.e. the rest of the world) remaining fairly critical on this issue.

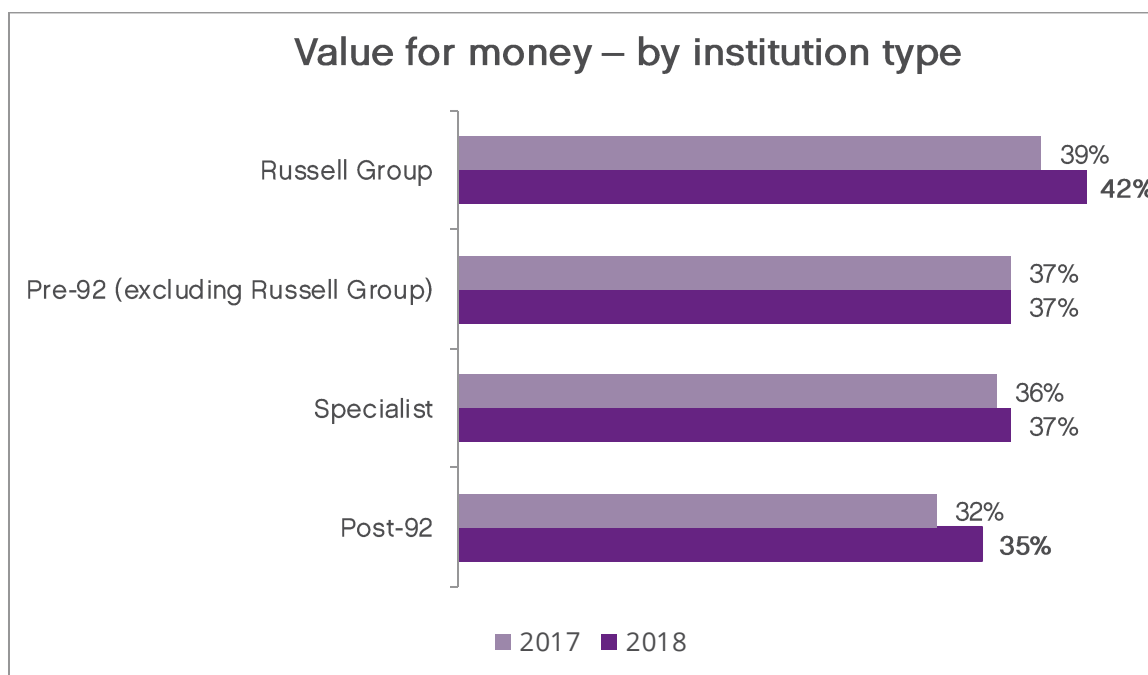
2.2 Value by institution type

A new analysis option available to us this year is to assess how the key measures across the Survey – including value for money – differ between students from institutions with Gold, Silver and Bronze Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) awards.



Base: Students from TEF Gold institutions (4,828); TEF Silver (6,377); TEF Bronze (1,496). Value for money defined as Good / Very Good combined.

Students from Gold-rated institutions are more likely to perceive they have received good value, but there is no notable difference on this measure between Silver and Bronze-rated institutions.



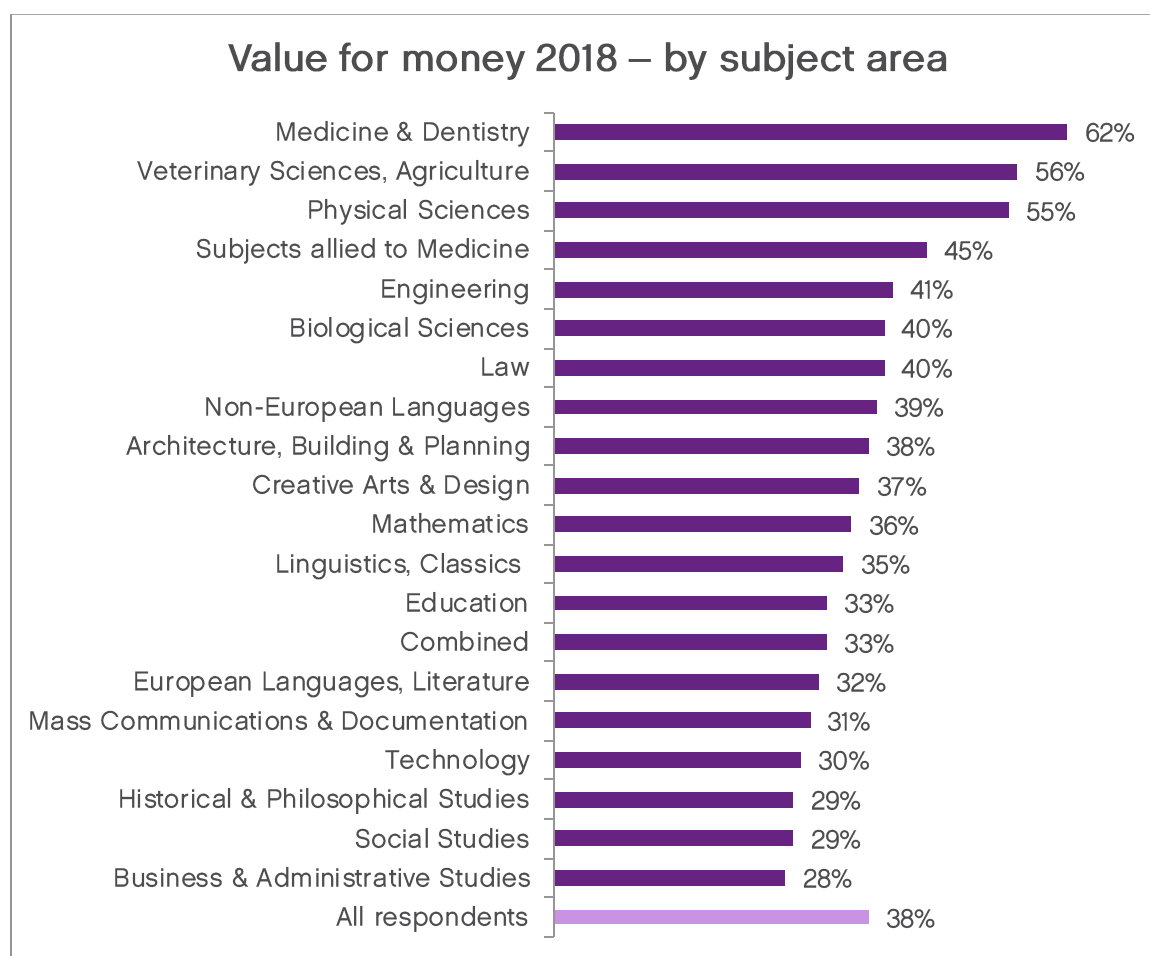
Base: Russell Group (3,899 / 3,913); Pre-92 (3,054 / 3,071); Specialist (296 / 218); Post-92 (6,730 / 6,804). Value for money defined as Good / Very Good combined. Statistically significant differences between 2017 and 2018 in bold.

Looking now by type of institution, Russell Group students continue to be the most positive about the value they feel they have received, and report a clear increase year on year. Post-92 institutions have also experienced an increase since 2017, although they continue to perform least well overall on this measure.

Results highlighted later in this report on learning gain (section 5) potentially hold the key to explaining these differences – in that, students in Russell Group institutions are more likely to feel they have learned a lot, compared with Post-92 students in particular, even though class sizes in Russell Group institutions tend to be larger.

2.3 Value for money by subject

As we will see later in the report (section 7), there is a strong relationship between the subject studied and the perception of value for money. This is logical in that teaching methods, hours of teaching, class sizes, and approaches to feedback can all vary significantly between courses (as well as between institutions), and all these aspects can impact on the overall experience.

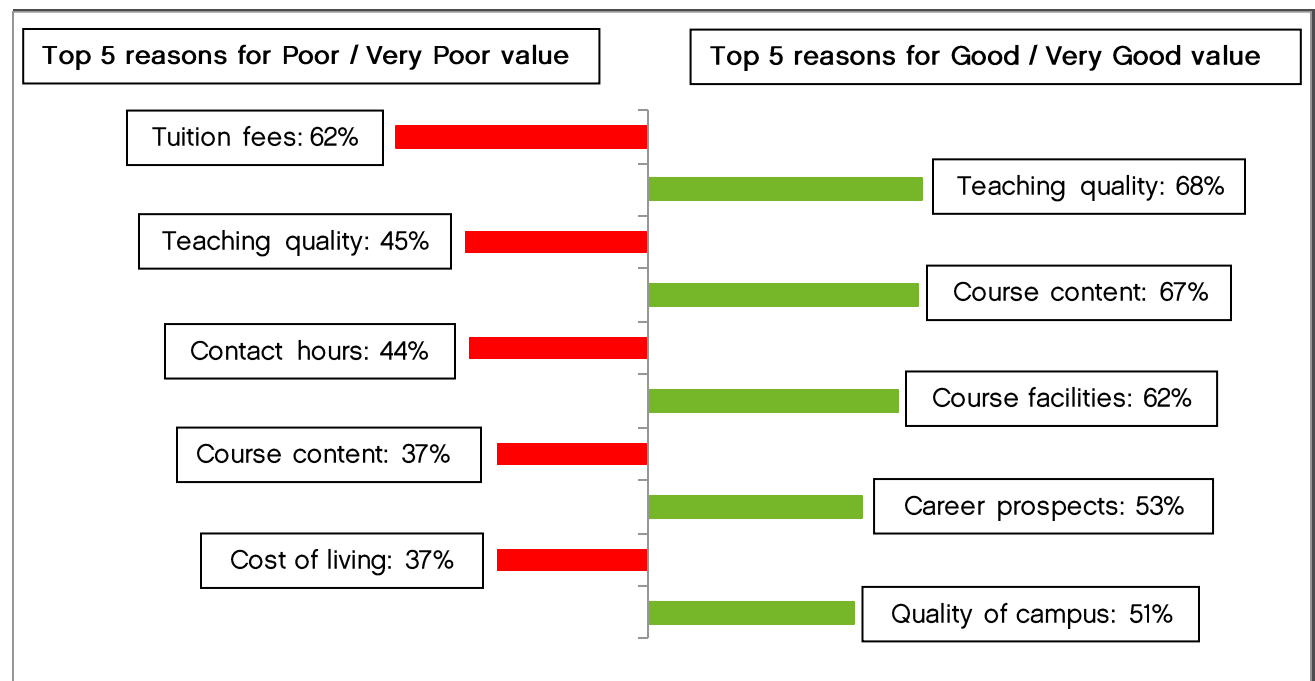


Base: All respondents (14,046), by Joint Academic Coding System (JACS) subject areas. Value for money defined as Good / Very Good combined.

Health subjects stand out as delivering the best value, with more than twice as many Medicine & Dentistry students reporting good value compared with Business & Administrative studies at the other end of the scale. Social Science subjects tend to be associated with the lowest value, while Technology is unique among STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) subjects in being ranked towards the bottom of this scale.

2.4 Factors influencing perceptions of value

A new section in the Survey this year complements the value for money question by asking what students are predominantly thinking of when they say they receive good or poor value for money. From a pre-defined list of answers, presented in a random order, students could choose as many or as few options as appropriate.



Base: Figures in red – all respondents perceiving Poor / Very Poor value (4,499); figures in green – all respondents perceiving Good / Very Good value (5,283).

The results are revealing, in that the factors that have influenced perceptions of poor compared with good value are broadly different, with price dominating the list for poor value and quality dominating the list for good value. This is arguably an intuitive finding but it is the first time that we have obtained evidence to back up any previous assumptions.

If we look at the ranking for poor value we can see that two of the five most popular answers are related to cost (fees and cost of living). This indicates that cost and value are difficult to separate in the minds of students and, even though there may be no criticism of quality or facilities, a perception of good value for money can be difficult to achieve given the level of prevailing fees.

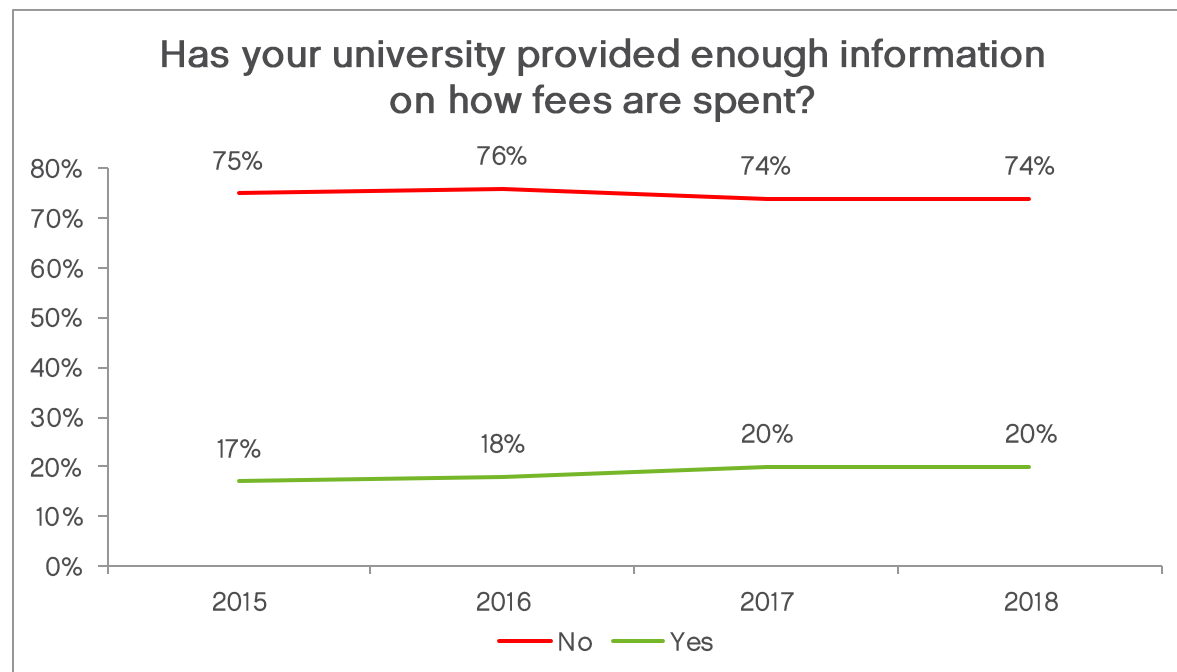
This ranking also highlights the importance of contact hours to students in influencing their views on value – although as we see later in the report there appears to be an optimal number of contact hours where students are most satisfied.

In terms of the factors driving good value, teaching quality, course content and facilities are key to the overall experience, while students cite their career prospects as a significant factor in how they judge the value they receive. What is also notable is the notion that the campus environment and university buildings also influence an overall feeling of value. There has been debate about where spending on the physical environment of the university should sit among varying priorities, but these findings point towards estate development as a major contributor to the experience.

3 How fees are spent

3.1 Information provided

Following on from our focus on value, we now look at students' perceptions of the information received on how their fees are spent.



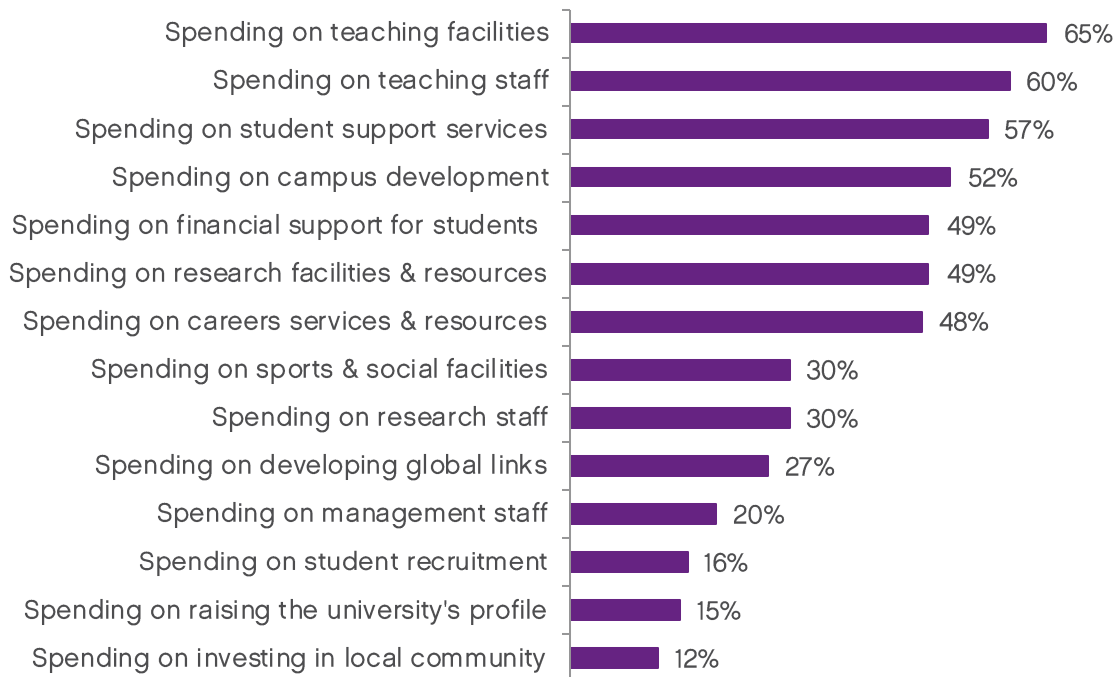
Base: All respondents. 2015 (15,129); 2016 (15,221); 2017 (14,057); 2018 (14,046).

Overall, students consistently report that they do not receive enough information on how their fees are spent, a viewpoint that has remained static over time. Again, first-year students and students from overseas are most likely to be satisfied in this area (22% and 23% respectively).

3.2 Most appropriate way of spending fees

For several years this Survey has tracked students' perceptions of the information received on how their fees are spent, but without having the opportunity to provide more detail on what students mean or what institutions can do to address this. With this in mind, we have introduced a new question for 2018 which asks specifically which areas of spending students think are the most appropriate use of tuition fees, providing a student-focused view of the kinds of areas that institutions may wish to focus on when they invest.

Which areas of university spend are the most reasonable use of tuition fees?



Base: All respondents (14,046).

The results imply that if institutions can prioritise investment, in particular in teaching, student support and estate development, then they can go some way to creating an environment and academic experience that provides the value that students are hoping for. As saw earlier in section 2.4, value for money itself is often linked to cost, and even though fees and living costs are likely to remain high, these results have given us some insight into how value can best be demonstrated.

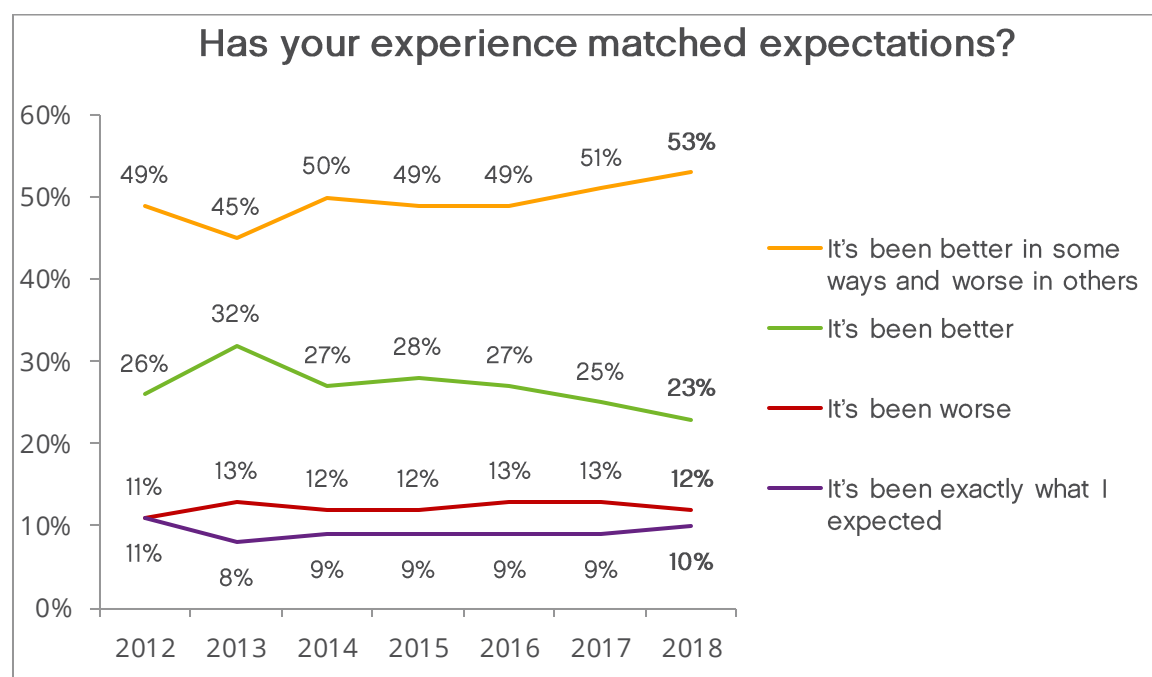
4 Meeting expectations

4.1 Experience versus expectations

Meeting expectations is crucial to delivering value.

A large proportion of students continue to find some aspects of their higher education experience different from their prior expectations. It is relatively unusual for an experience to be wholly worse than expected (12% of students), while around one in four students (23%) find the experience has exceeded what they anticipated.

The majority of students (53%) recognise a mixed experience, with some aspects exceeding and some aspects falling below their expectations. What is significant from this data is that more and more students are reporting this mixed picture, with a decline in the proportion of students who felt their experience was wholly better or wholly worse than expected.



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

4.2 Why expectations are not met

There are a range of reasons why expectations are not matched, but these have tended to remain consistent, with no statistically significant changes.



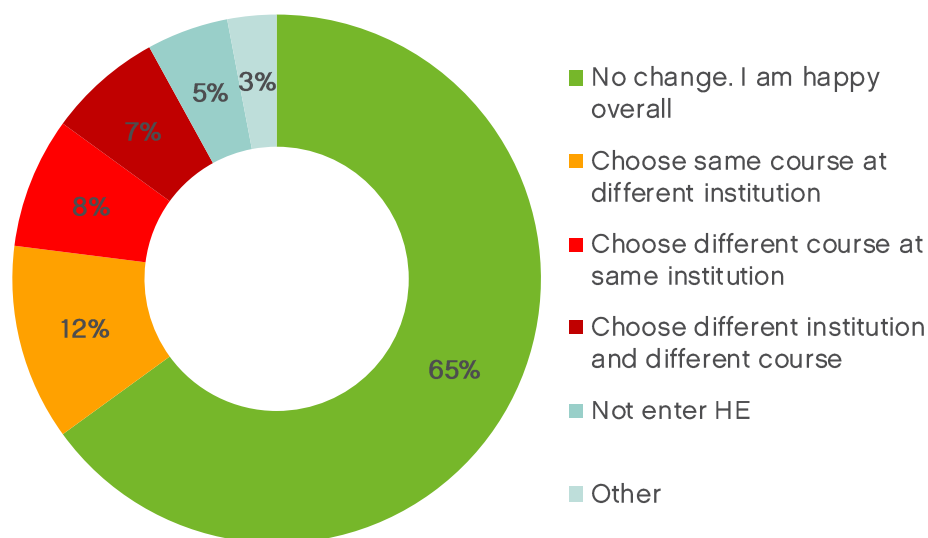
Base: All respondents whose experience has been wholly worse than expected 2017 (1,769); 2018 (1,725).
 Chart based on top eight mentions 2018.

As we saw earlier in section 2.4, teaching quality is key, while students appear to expect their institutions to provide certain levels of feedback and support as well as to facilitate interaction with others in order to deliver the anticipated experience.

4.3 Appraisal of choice made

In 2018 we introduced a new question to probe more thoroughly into students' assessment of their choice, and whether, given the chance again, they would have chosen a different course, institution, or both.

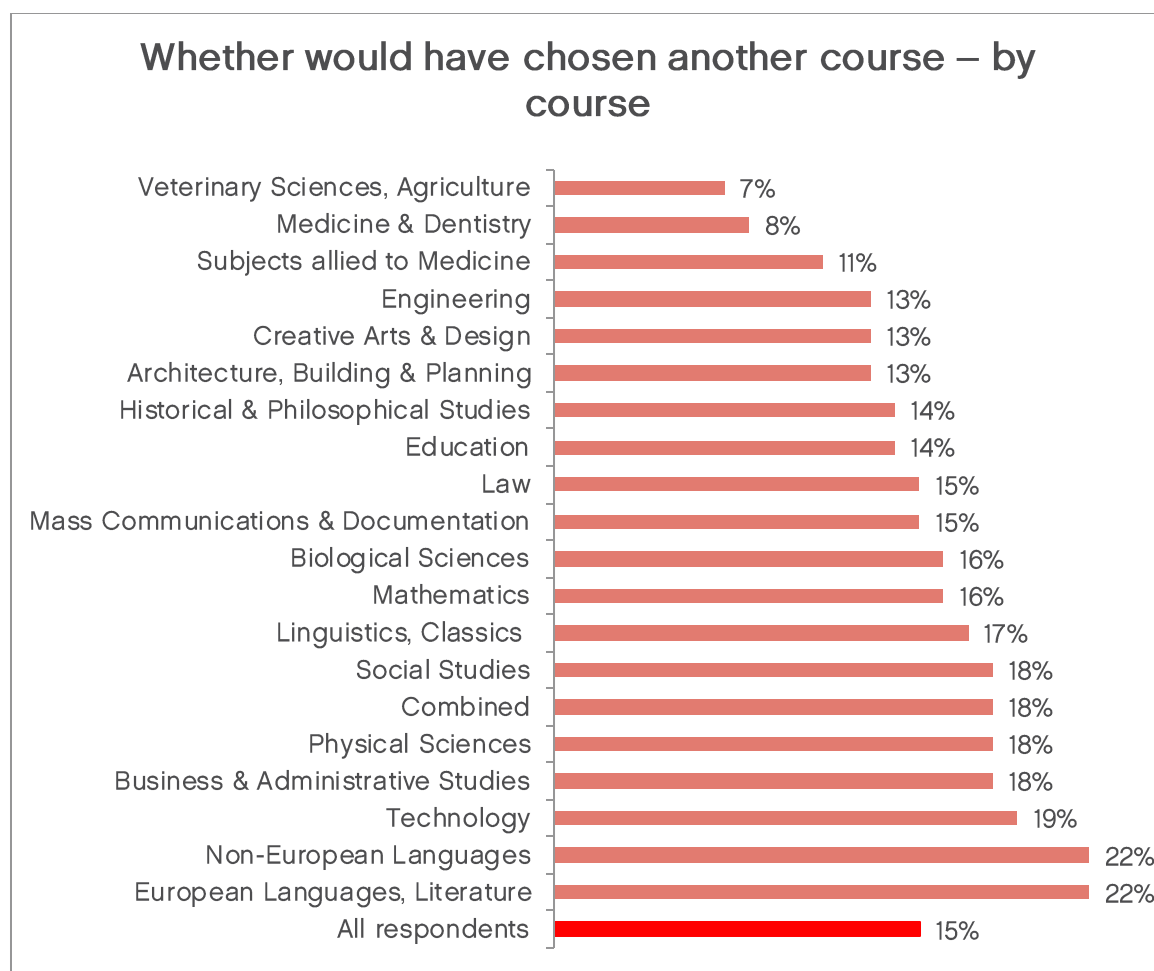
Knowing what you know now, which of the following would you do if you had a chance to start again?



Base: All respondents (14,046).

Overall, two out of three students are happy with the choice they made. Beyond this, students would be more likely to seek a change in their institution rather than the course. Despite the widening range of alternative options available instead of going to university, just 5% of our sample felt that they would not go into higher education at all if given a second chance, although as we will see in the next chart there are some cohorts where this number is quite a bit higher.

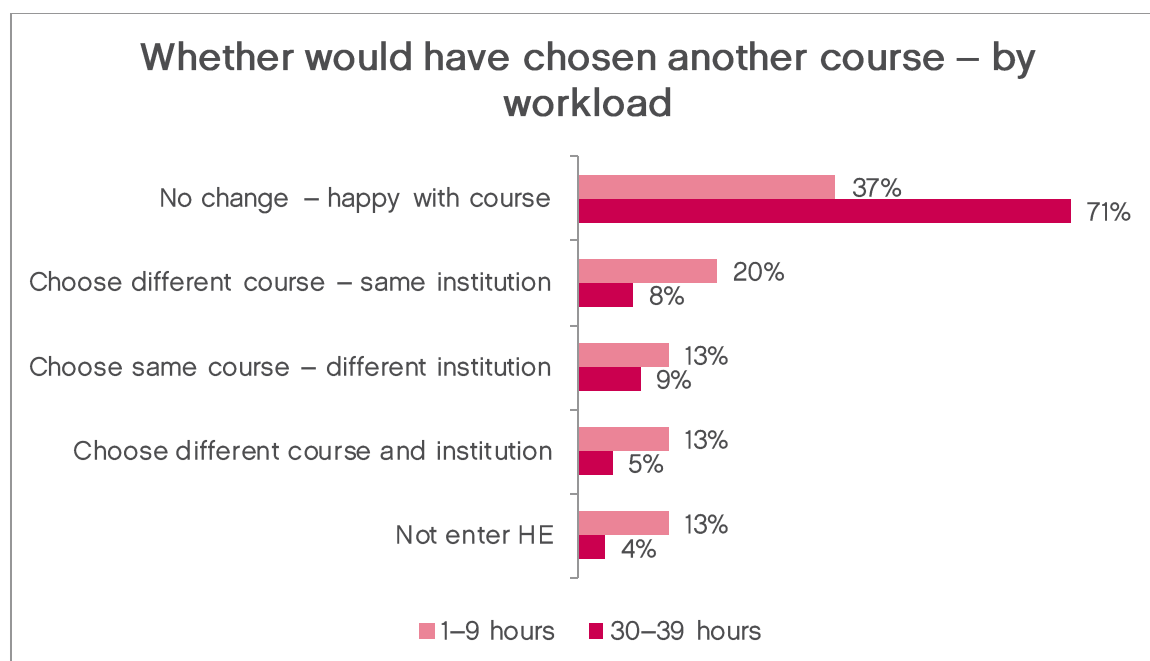
Thanks to the new questions in the Survey, we can now examine students' preference to have chosen another course, ranked by the actual course chosen. Although not a direct match, the ranking in the following chart shows similarities with the ranking later in this report which compares subjects on their overall workload – i.e. time spent in timetabled classes, independent study and fieldwork or placements. Students studying many of the subjects with the lowest workload (such as Languages, Business & Administrative Studies and Combined Studies) are more likely to feel they should have chosen another course.



Base: All respondents (14,057), by JACS subject areas. Chart displays % saying they would have chosen another course at either the same or a different university.

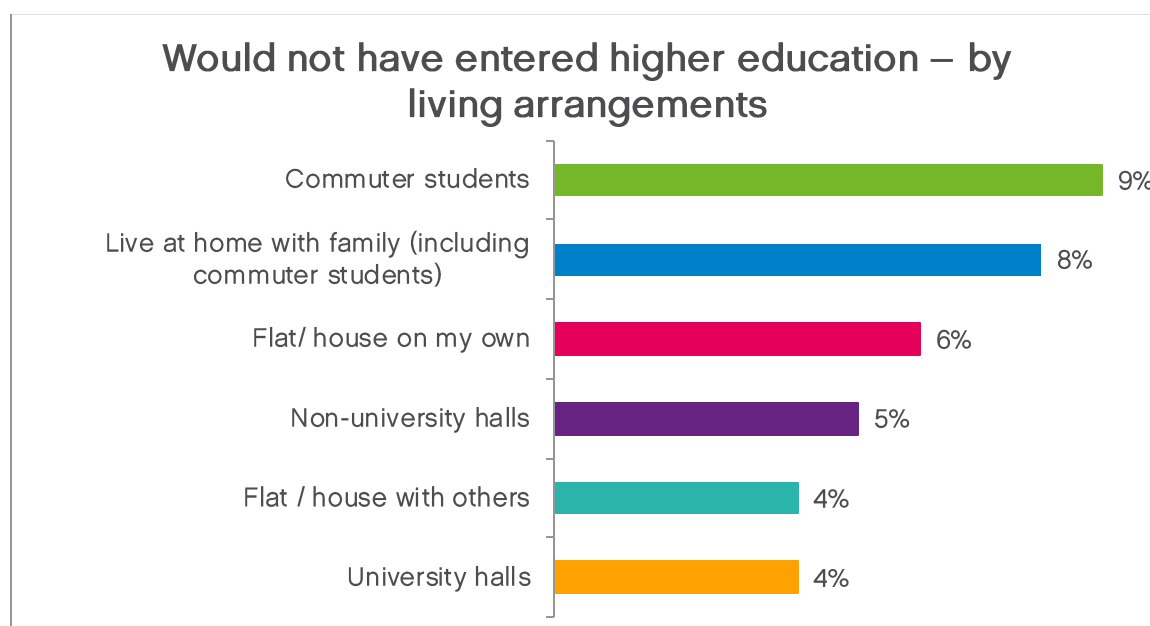
A notable exception to this is Physical Sciences, which has an above average workload (see later) but a relatively high propensity among its students to say they would have chosen something else.

This link between workload and satisfaction with choice is backed up by analysis displayed in the next chart. This highlights that students with just 1–9 hours of total workload per week (the lowest level) are significantly less likely to say they would do the same course again at the same institution than students with 30–39 hours workload (a more typical level). Indeed the scale of these differences is striking, with low workload clearly contributing to students questioning their choice of course, and in some cases, their overall decision to go into higher education.



Base: 1-9 hours total workload (257); 30-39 hours total workload (2,861).

In addition to differences by course and workload, there are also differences by type of accommodation, with students who are geographically further away being more likely to question their choice to go into higher education.



Base: Commuter students⁴ (1,690); Live at home with family (3,503); Flat / house with others (34,973); Non-university halls (686); Flat / house on my own (421); University halls (4,311).

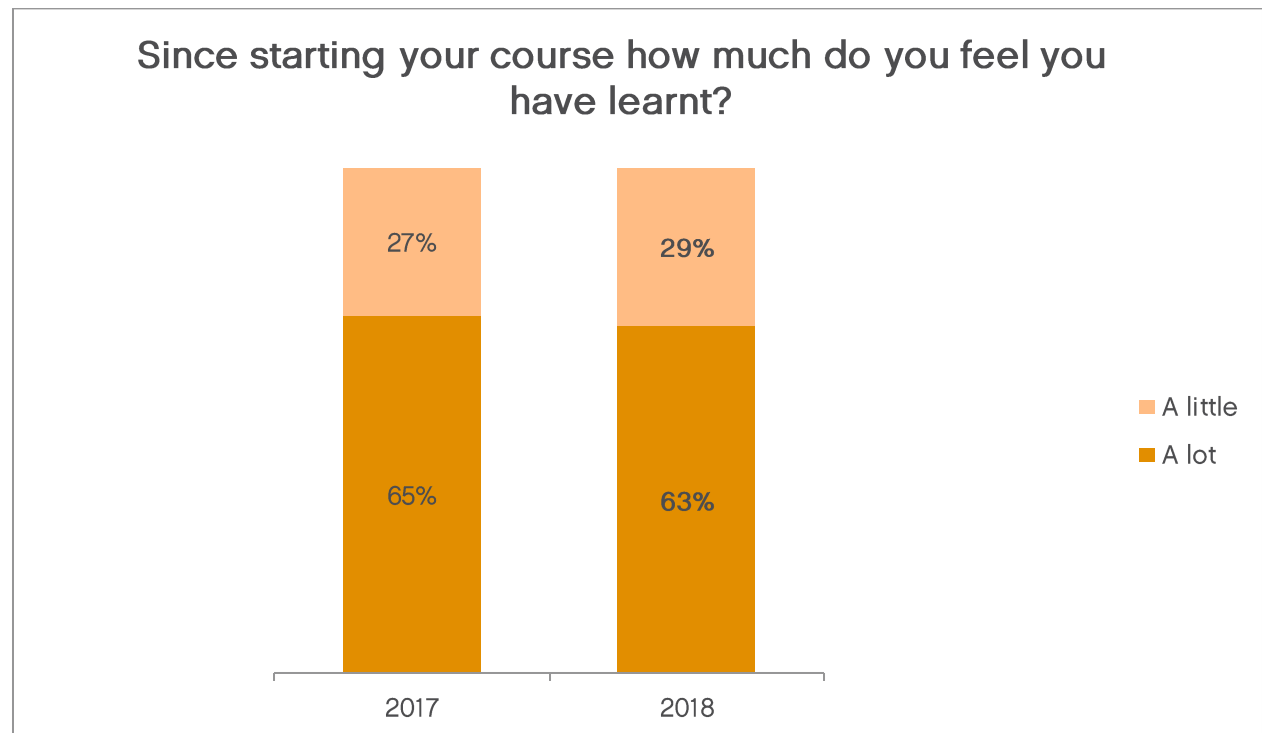
⁴ Commuter students are defined here as a subset of students who live at home with their family – specifically those who live 11 miles or more away from their institution.

We have seen in previous years how students who live at home with their family can feel less connected to staff and fellow students. This also appears to be the case here, with commuter students (comprising students living at home and more than 10 miles away) in particular being much more likely to question their decision to move into higher education. This contrasts with students who live in university halls, who are overwhelmingly happy with their choice.

5 How much do students learn?

5.1 Students' assessment of learning gain

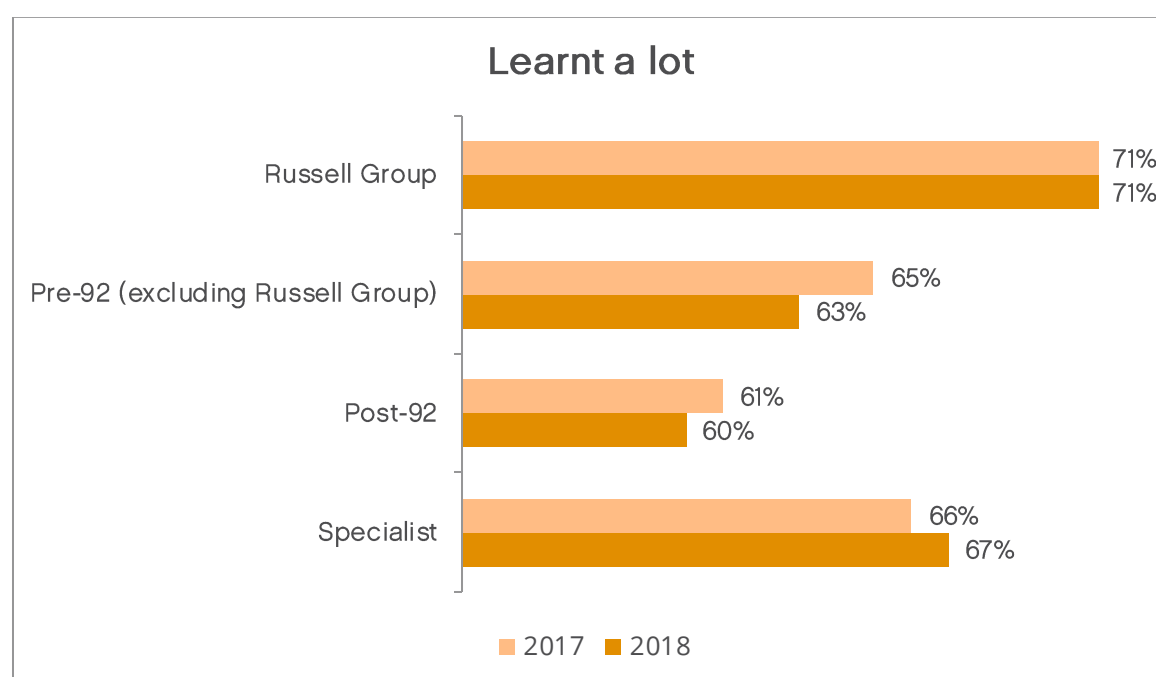
First introduced in 2017, the Survey contains a question asking students how much they feel they have learnt from their higher education experience. For simplicity we refer to this measure here as 'learning gain', although we recognise that there are a range of methods currently in use for measuring learning gain across the sector. This question is a snapshot of self-perceived learning gain, and is not designed to offer a technical or longitudinal assessment.



Base: All respondents (14,057). Statistically significant differences between 2017 and 2018 in bold.

Two-thirds (63%) of students feel they have learnt a lot, a further 29% have learnt a little, and just 7% feel they have learnt not much, or nothing. Although this is a significant decline from 2017 – in terms of students feeling they have learnt a lot – it is too early to say that this is a trend. What appears clear from these results over two years is that in spite of debate and discussion which may suggest otherwise, students' own view of learning at university is that they recognise clear academic benefits, and continue to do so.

5.2 Learning gain – institutional differences



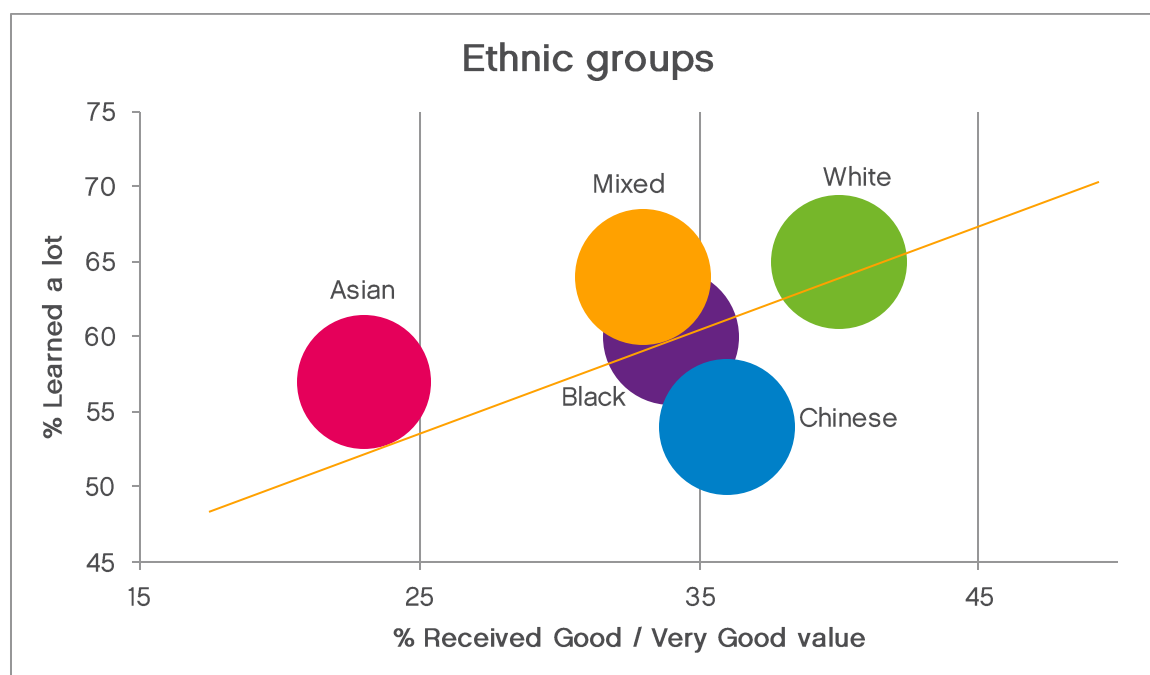
All respondents (2017: 14,057 / 2018: 14,046); Russell Group (3,899 / 3,913); Pre-92 (3,054 / 3,071); Specialist (296 / 218); Post-92 (6,730 / 6,804).

Russell Group institutions stand out for being associated with high levels of reported learning gain, with Post-92 institutions performing least well on this measure. This is potentially significant in that, as we saw earlier in this report (section 2.2), students at Russell Group institutions report the highest value for money. Statistical analysis we conducted in 2017 highlighted a clear link between value and learning gain, and we can therefore speculate that high scores in both areas among Russell Group institutions are linked.

There are also major differences in learning gain by ethnicity and working status, something that we now go on to explore in the next chapter as well as continuing to highlight the link between learning gain and value for money.

6 Spotlight on different student groups

6.1 Ethnicity⁵



Base: UK-domicile. White (9,492); Black (372); Asian (1,419); Chinese (206); Mixed (524).

Comparing two key measures in the Survey – value for money and learning gain – by ethnicity throws up some clear differences while also shedding light on a correlation between both measures.

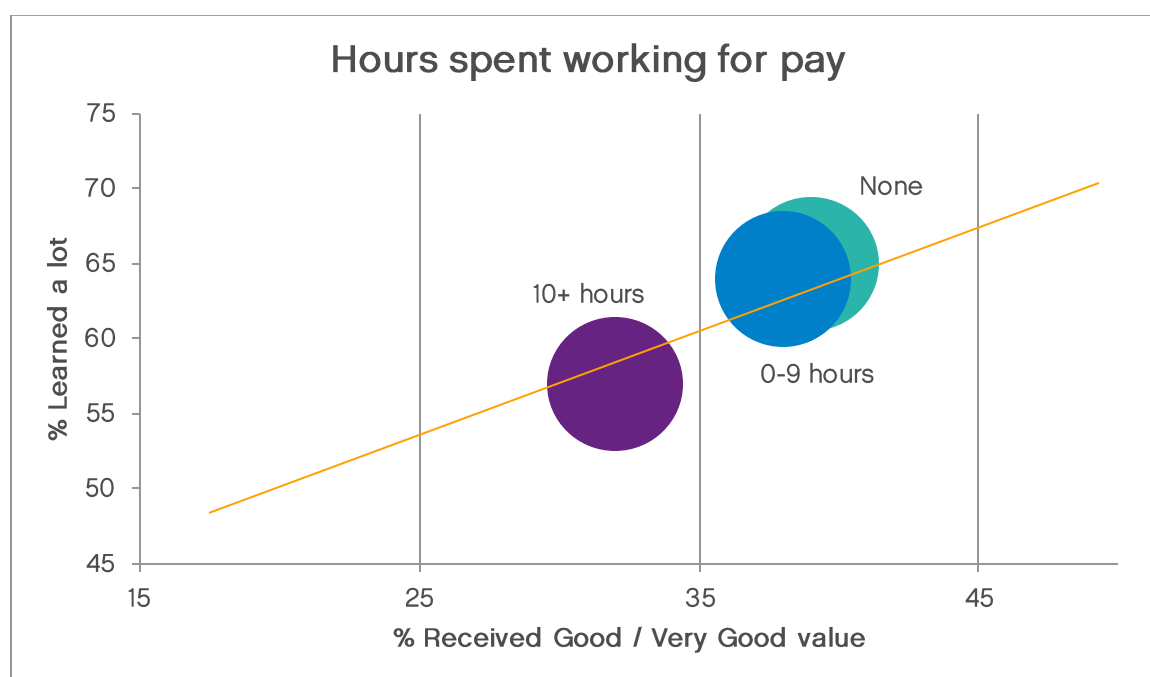
Broadly speaking, different ethnic groups are aligned on a linear scale, ranging from White students with high levels of learning gain and relatively high perceptions of value for money, to Asian students who report low levels of learning gain and particularly low value for money. This matches what we have found in previous years and underlines that there is a clear issue in terms of the experience of many Asian students who do not appear to get the most out of their higher education experience.

Chinese students are more of an outlier, in that they do perceive better value for money than average, but they are the least likely to report they have learnt a lot.

The results on learning gain are backed up by results from later in this report (section 9.1) which pinpoint how Chinese students and Asian students are markedly less satisfied with the teaching quality received – something which may have fed through into the perception of how much has been learnt.

⁵ All ethnicity analysis is based on UK domiciled students only. The Asian and Chinese categories are mutually exclusive.

6.2 Working status

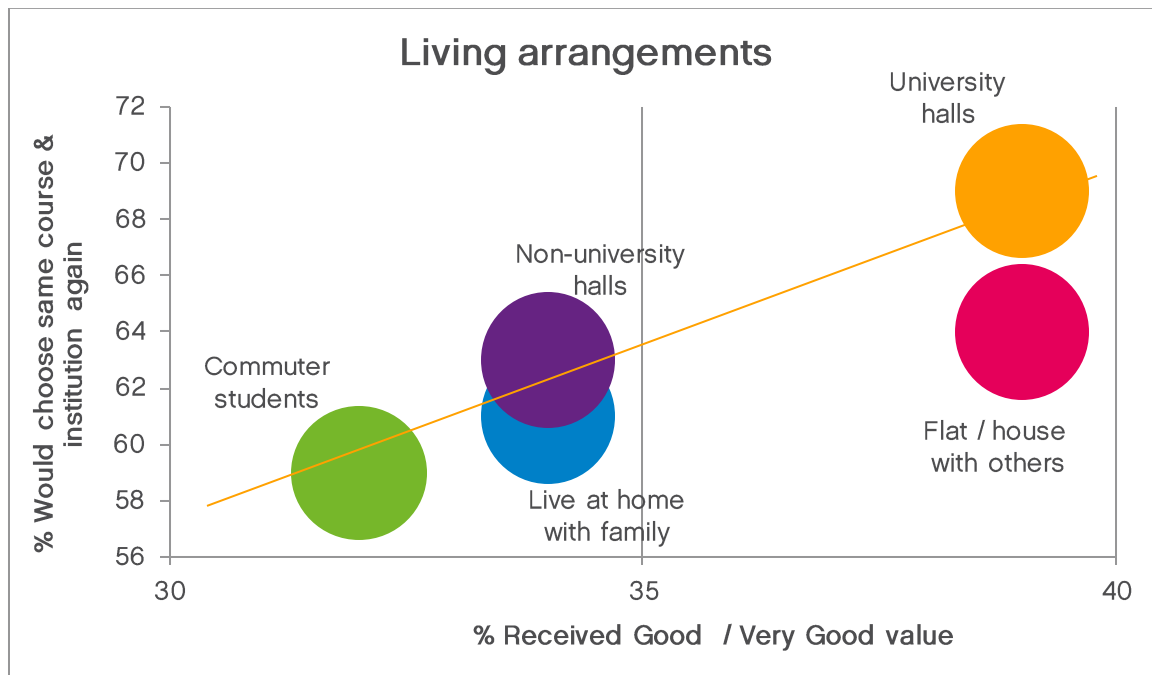


Students who spend time working for pay alongside their studies face understandable challenges to balance demands on their time. Analysis conducted by the HEA on the 2017 UK Engagement Survey has highlighted how working for pay does not have the same benefits for student development as time spent in other extracurricular activity such as volunteering or sports.⁶ We see here how high working commitments can potentially restrict the student in their academic gains, linking through to how they view value for money.

A potential conclusion from this is to encourage students to limit the time they spend in paid employment, and although economic realities will often make earning money a necessity, there may be more that universities can do to provide logistic support and guidance for students faced with these demands. It is notable that students who work fewer than 10 hours a week for pay do not report significantly different results than students who do not work at all, which highlights a clear cut-off point where working for pay begins to have a negative impact.

⁶ Neves, J (2017), *UKES: Student participation and skills gain*. York: Higher Education Academy.

6.3 Accommodation type



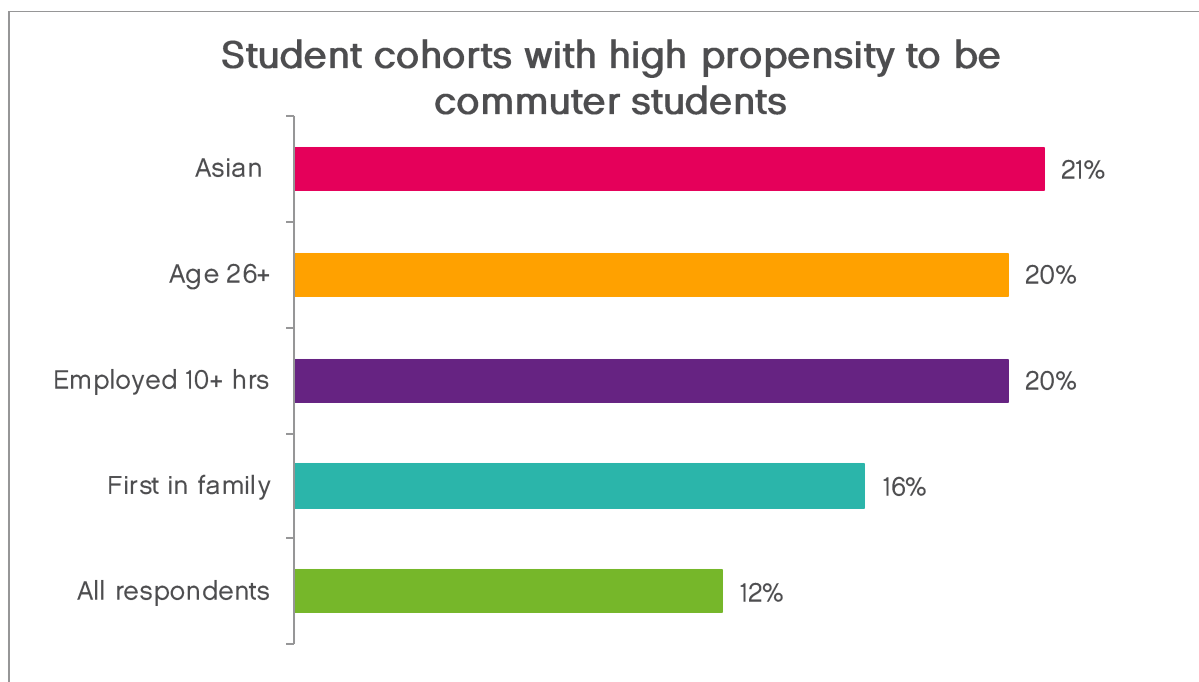
Although student responses on learning gain do not especially vary by accommodation type, as we saw earlier in this report (section 4.3) there is a clear variation by accommodation in terms of whether students would choose the same course and institution again. There is also a clear difference in terms of value for money, and we have charted these two measures together, which sheds light on a linear link between the two.

Students who live further away and/or live at home perceive lower value for money and potentially as a result, would be less likely to choose the same course and institution again. By contrast, students in more traditional student accommodation, living closer to others and often to university, perceive better value for money and are happier with their choice in the end.

6.4 Profile: Commuter students

Commuter students are a group we have defined and analysed for the first time this year, highlighting some significant differences as displayed in the previous graph.

We have therefore looked into the composition of this group a little more, identifying which demographic groups are most likely to live at home and commute.



Base: All respondents (14,046). Chart displays % of each cohort who live at home and commute more than 10 miles.⁷

Overall there are four demographic groups with a higher propensity to be live-at-home commuter students – namely Asian students, mature students, working students and those who are the first in their family to go to university.

This points towards a mixture of cultural and economic factors playing a role in the decision of where to live. We have seen earlier in this section that Asian students and students who are engaged in paid employment report lower perceptions of value for money – as do commuter students. So we appear to have a complex picture emerging, with ethnicity, employment and accommodation all being linked with low value for money, while there is overlap between the groups.

What this does not tell us, however, is the extent to which the lower scores among Asian or working students can be explained by the fact that they are also highly likely to live at home and commute, or whether there is a difference that exists even when we take these factors into account.

⁷ 'First in family' is defined as students who classify themselves as the first person in their immediate family to attend university.

7 Modelling the impact on gain and value

Many factors influence student perceptions of learning gain and value for money, from background to goals, from expectations to experience.

All the factors have some interaction with each other. Some have a particularly strong interaction, such as between ethnicity and type of home, hours worked, course studied, institution type, and year of study. We have therefore conducted a statistical analysis to help iron out the overlap between different factors and focus on the impact of particular factors on gain and value.

A regression analysis was carried out to explore which factors (i.e. independent variables) were the main contributors to differences in perceptions of gain in learning and value for money (our dependent variables).⁸ We have focused in particular on the demographic factors that we have identified in the previous chapter – ethnicity, working status and living status – although we have also modelled additional factors such as age, disability and year of study, as well as key issues such as subject studied, in order to build a picture of relative importance.

7.1 Ethnicity

Accounting for a number of interactions, the differences observed around ethnicity persisted, particularly for Asian students. In particular, students describing themselves, within the Asian category, as Pakistani or Bangladeshi were significantly less likely to be positive around value for money than students describing themselves as White. Students who described themselves as being ‘Asian Other’ (e.g. within the Asian category but not Pakistani or Bangladeshi or Indian) were less likely to be positive around both learning gain and value for money. These results provide a statistical reinforcement of the earlier observed findings around the perceptions of Asian students, and highlight that greater focus and investigation may be required across the sector to uncover fully the issues that impact on the expectations and experience of Asian students beyond a focus on their accommodation type or working status.

7.2 Working status

Whether a student is undertaking paid work of more than 10 hours per week also has a significant impact on perceptions of both learning gain and value. This persists as an important predictor after allowing for strongly connected variables such as type of accommodation, and whether the student is 25 or over.

It is possible that this may be related to finer-grained variations that are not explored here, such as particular institution, family responsibilities, and life stage.

⁸ “Regression analysis is a statistical tool used to compare relationships between dependent and independent variables” (www.djsresearch.co.uk/glossary/item/regression-analysis). Regression analysis conducted by Advance HE using data file provided by YouthSight.

However, given this sample was of full-time students, it would be expected that these students would experience significant pressures if working alongside their studies and our statistical analysis has confirmed this.

7.3 Accommodation type

In general, there is little significant impact from accommodation type on students, once the overlap between different factors has been accounted for. Factors such as family background and ethnicity are strongly related to the likelihood of a student living at home. However it is these factors, rather than a student's accommodation status, that appear to be the main contributors to the differences observed in perceptions of gain and value.

Interestingly, however, there does appear to be some correlation between those living in a house / flat with others and being more likely to report learning gain. This could be a benefit of sharing accommodation and therefore being more likely to engage in peer-to-peer discussion, support and collaboration either of an interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary nature.

7.4 Commuter students

Exploring the experience of commuter students, the difference persists even when taking into account other factors. This suggests that for students commuting over 10 miles to their place of study (and living in the family home), there is a real impact on value for money. A qualifier is that this is a relatively minor effect compared with factors such as discipline, ethnicity, year of study and amount of paid work.

7.5 Other factors

In order to make the analysis more comprehensive, we assessed other factors, which highlighted that out of all the demographic and classification characteristics, the subject studied by the student has the strongest link with both gain and value, with year of study, and whether the respondent is studying at a Russell Group institution also playing a role.

However, our analysis does show that the issues identified in the previous chapter appear to be worthy of further investigation to understand how best to meet the needs of students from different ethnic backgrounds and also students who work long hours in paid employment.

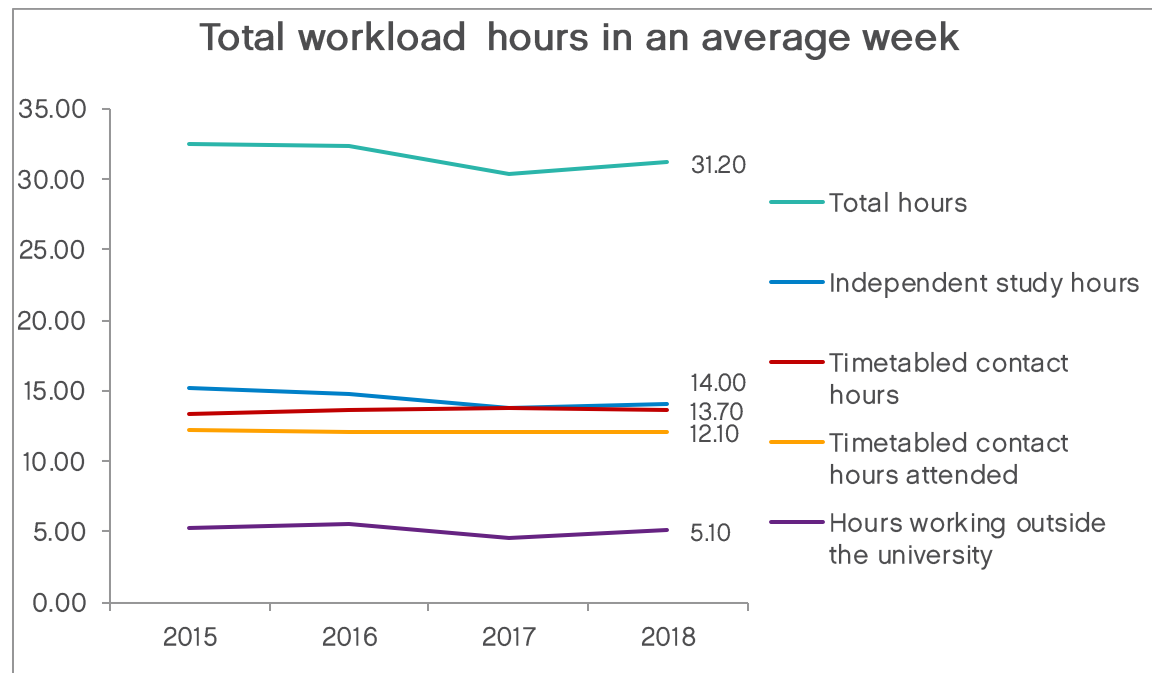
7.6 Overall model hierarchy

Relationship	Value for money	Learning gain
Relatively strong relationship (Beta value ⁹ 0.05+)	Subject studied Time spent in paid work Ethnicity Year of study	Subject studied Live in house / flat with others Time spent in paid work Mission group; Russell Group
Less strong relationship (Beta value 0.02+)	Disability Gender Live in house / flat with others Commuting	Age 25+ Disability Ethnicity Gender Year of study
No statistical relationship	Living at home or in halls	Living at home or in halls Commuting

⁹ Beta values available on request.

8 Teaching intensity

8.1 Workload trends



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

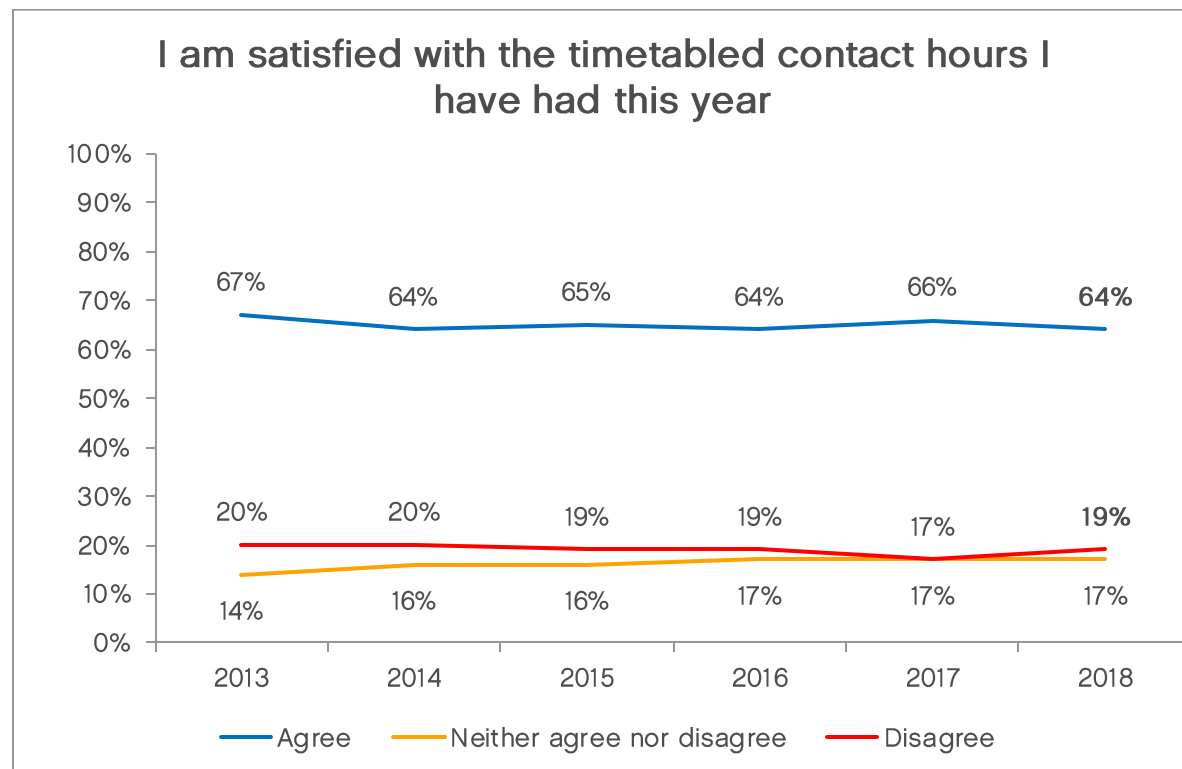
The decline in total workload appears to have been arrested, driven principally by an increase in time spent on studies outside the university, for example on work placements and fieldwork.¹⁰ Timetabled contact hours are marginally higher than they were a few years ago (13.7 hours in 2018 and 13.4 hours in 2015), but strikingly the proportion of hours attended is not increasing, resulting in an almost constant number of contact hours attended (circa 12.1) over the past few years.

Back in 2015 there was a greater volume of independent study than timetabled contact hours, but by 2018, due to a decline in independent study volumes, these measures are broadly equal.

¹⁰ For all references to workload hours, mean including zero used. No exceptions.

8.2 Satisfaction with contact hours

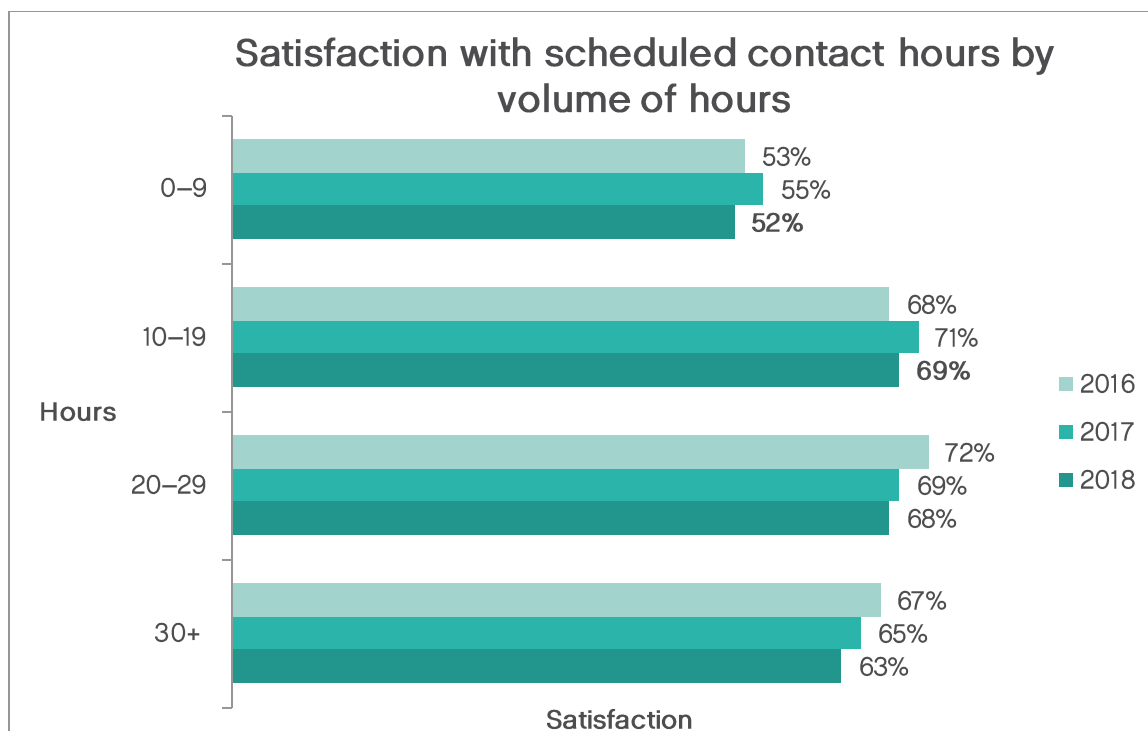
The majority of students remain satisfied with the hours scheduled, although as we saw earlier in the report (section 2.4), dissatisfaction in this area can impact on overall perceptions of value for money. It should also be noted that dissatisfaction with contact hours has increased in the last year despite the volume of hours remaining the same.



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

Clearly, the volume of contact hours is important to students, although there is consistent evidence that there is an optimal number of hours that students may feel is appropriate to their experience and/or their course.

As evidenced below, satisfaction with contact hours tends to peak at a medium-high level, rather than the highest level of all, with students who have 10–19 or 20–29 hours being more satisfied with this than those with fewer than 10, or more than 30 hours. This has remained the case, although there are proportionately fewer students in 2018 who are satisfied if they have fewer than 20 scheduled hours per week.



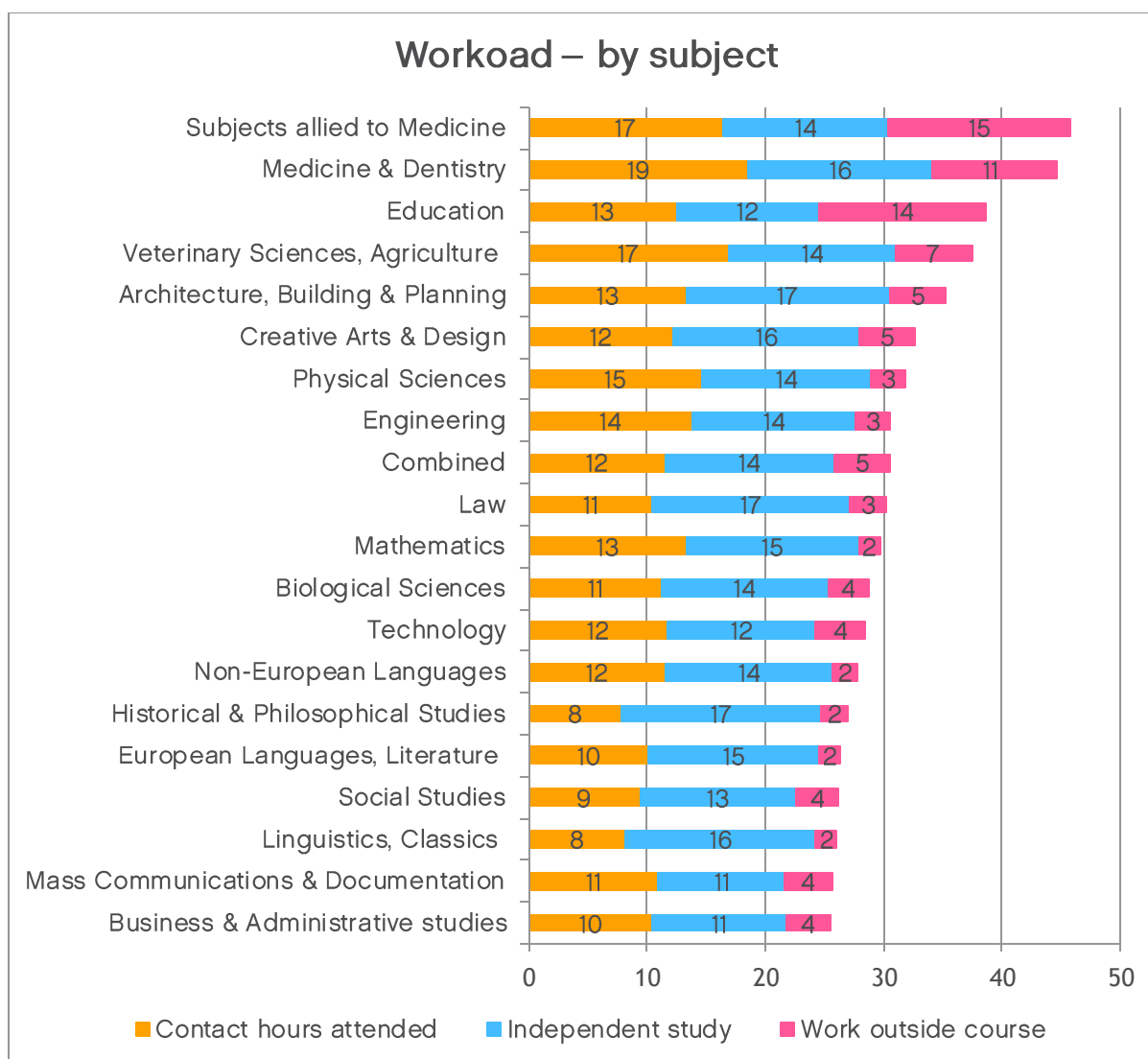
Base: 0–9 hours (4,395 in 2016 / 4,054 in 2017 / 4,056 in 2018); 10–19 hours (8,006 / 7,380 / 7,369); 20–29 hours (2,097 / 1,939 / 1,936); 30+ hours (723 / 685 / 685). Statistically significant differences between 2017 and 2018 in bold.

8.3 Workload by subject and institution type

Overall workload and the elements within it (contact hours, independent study and time spent on placements and fieldwork) continues to vary significantly by subject area.

Overall workload is highest in Medicine and related subjects, while it is lowest in Business & Administrative Studies and Mass Communications.

Looking specifically at types of workload by proportion, contact hours represent a particularly high proportion across most Science subjects, while independent study tends to dominate in Social Sciences – particularly Languages and Historical Studies. Placements and fieldwork are particularly prevalent in Education and Health subjects.



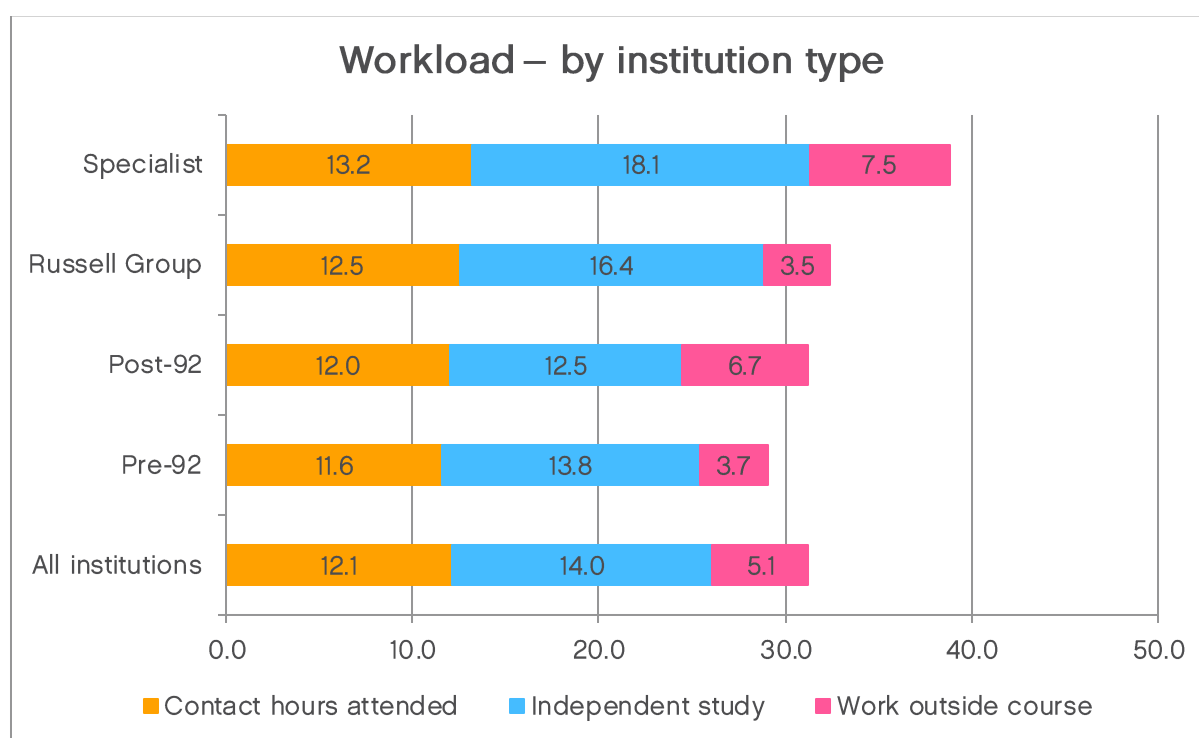
Base: All respondents (14,046), by JACS subject areas.

The ranking here shows a comparable pattern to the ranking on whether students would have chosen another course – highlighted earlier in the report (section 4.3). Generally, students studying subjects with the highest workload are least likely to say they would have chosen another course, suggesting contact hours are one of the key barometers by which students assess their experience.

As well as subject differences, there are also some institutional differences, with highest amounts of independent study, as well as slightly higher contact hours, at TEF Gold-rated institutions. By contrast, the time spent on placements is in reverse order of the TEF rating awarded, with students at Bronze-rated institutions reporting the highest volumes.

Hours in an average week – TEF award			
TEF award	Gold	Silver	Bronze
Base size	(4,219)	(3,327)	(7,094)
Timetabled (contact) hours attended	12.4	11.8	12.1
Independent study hours	14.6	13.7	13.2
Hours working outside the university	4.5	5.3	6
Total workload	31.5	30.8	31.3

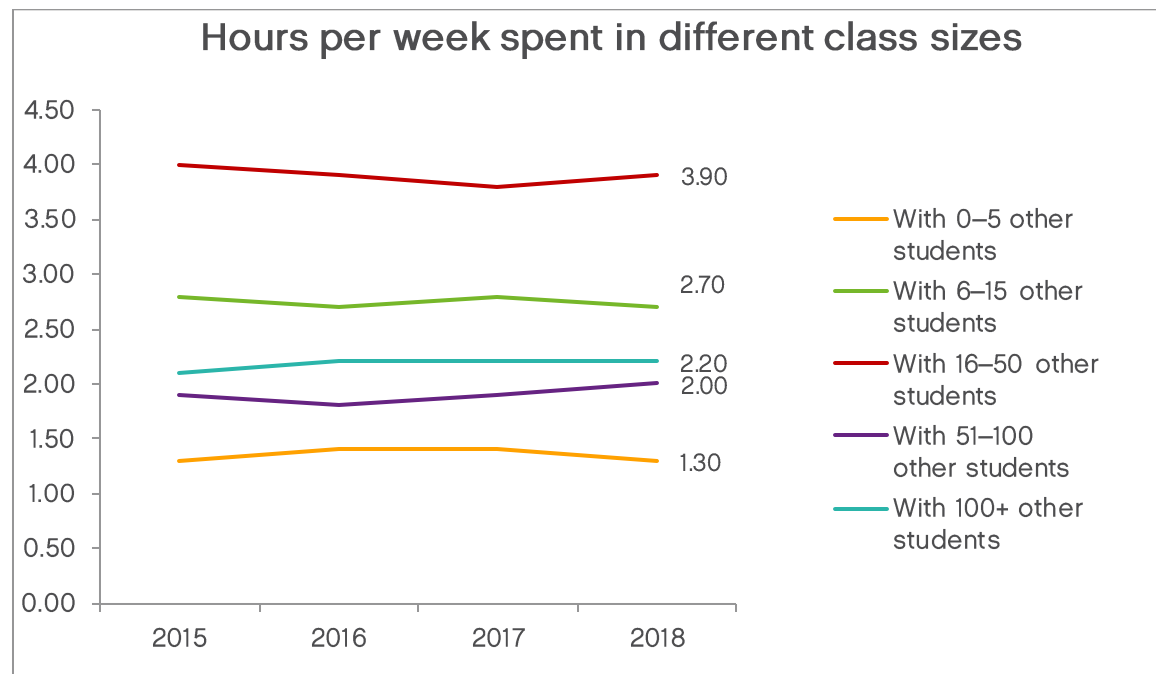
In terms of institution type, students at Specialist institutions report the highest volumes of workload hours, in particular on independent study. Students at Russell Group institutions also tend to have an above average workload, with large amounts of independent study, while students at Post-92 institutions have relatively high volumes of work outside the university. Students at Pre-92 institutions not in the Russell Group have the lowest levels of workload, in particular contact hours attended.



Base: All respondents 2018 (14,046); Pre-92 (3,071); Post-92 (6,804); Russell Group (3,913); Specialist (218).

8.4 Class size

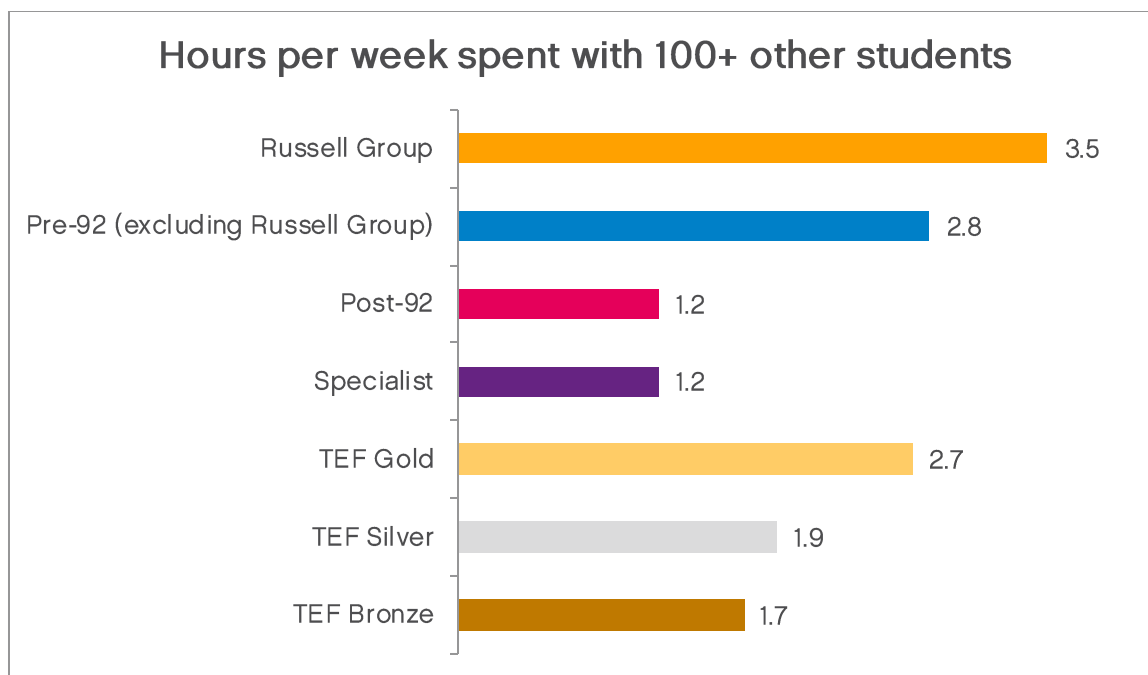
As well as tracking contact hours, another key aspect of teaching intensity that we have been able to monitor over several waves of the Survey is the amount of time spent in classes of different sizes.



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

Although experiences vary considerably, the most common class size is in the 16–50 range, although smaller sizes of 6–15 students are also fairly common. The largest size of all (100+ other students) is more common than very small classes of 0–5 other students.

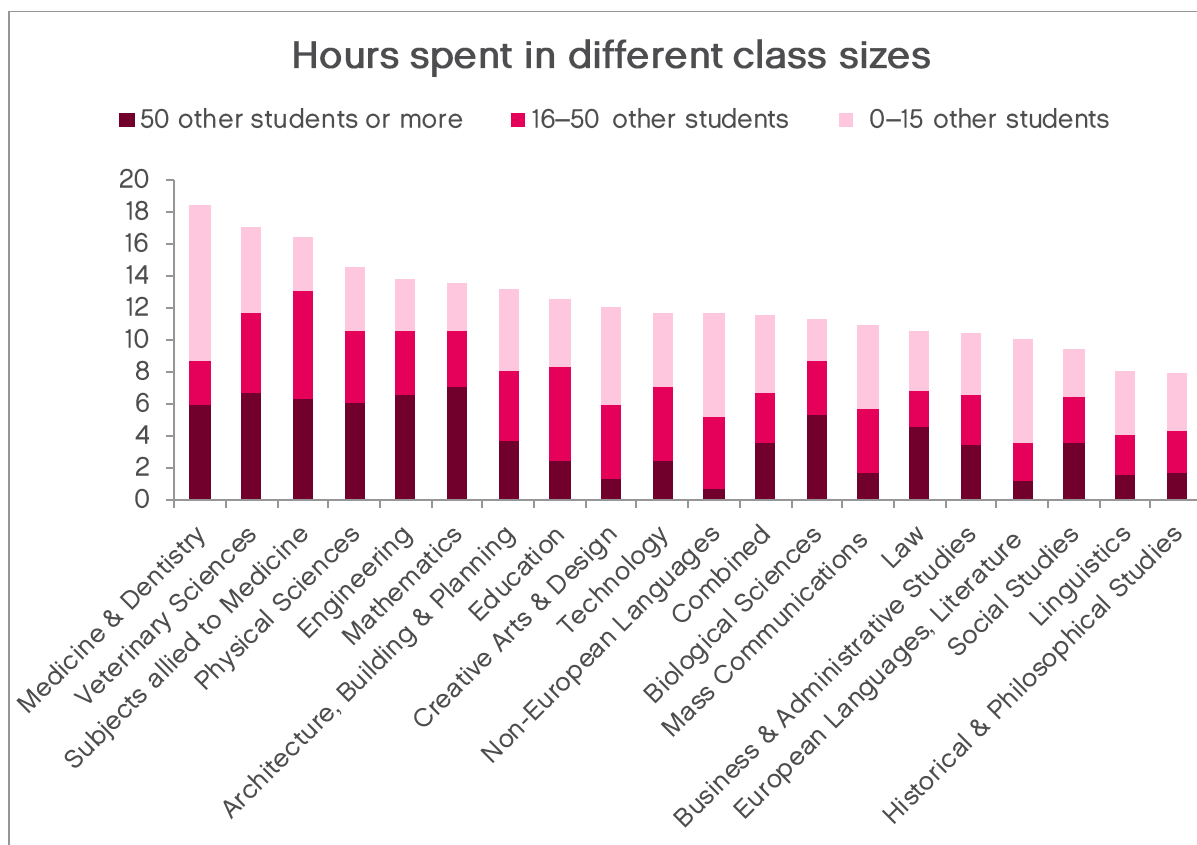
Although we have not seen huge changes over time, there does appear to be a slight move towards larger class sizes, with a marginal increase in the 100+ and 51–100 ranges, and a marginal decrease in the 0–5 and 6–15 range.



Base: All respondents 2018 (14,046); Russell Group (3,913); Pre-92 (3,071); Post-92 (6,804); Specialist (218); TEF Gold (4,828); TEF Silver (6,378); TEF Bronze (1,493). Mean average calculated from all responses including respondents citing zero.

As well as varying by course, class sizes also differ by institution type and TEF award, with Russell Group institutions and those awarded TEF Gold being more likely to have students spending time in the largest class sizes of all. As we saw earlier, however, both these types of institution score relatively highly on value for money, indicating that, unlike the volume of contact hours, the size of the class is not necessarily a strong driver of value perceptions.

The data below show that large class sizes are actually fairly common across a large range of subjects. Although the volume is highest in Health subjects, other subjects such as Language, History and Communications have fewer hours overall but a relatively high proportion of these are spent in large classes.



Base: All respondents (14,046), by JACS subject areas. Chart displays number of hours spent.

Small class sizes are also more prevalent in Health subjects as well as Mathematics and Engineering – although in all of these cases there are also a large number of hours spent in larger classes – i.e. a large volume of hours overall.

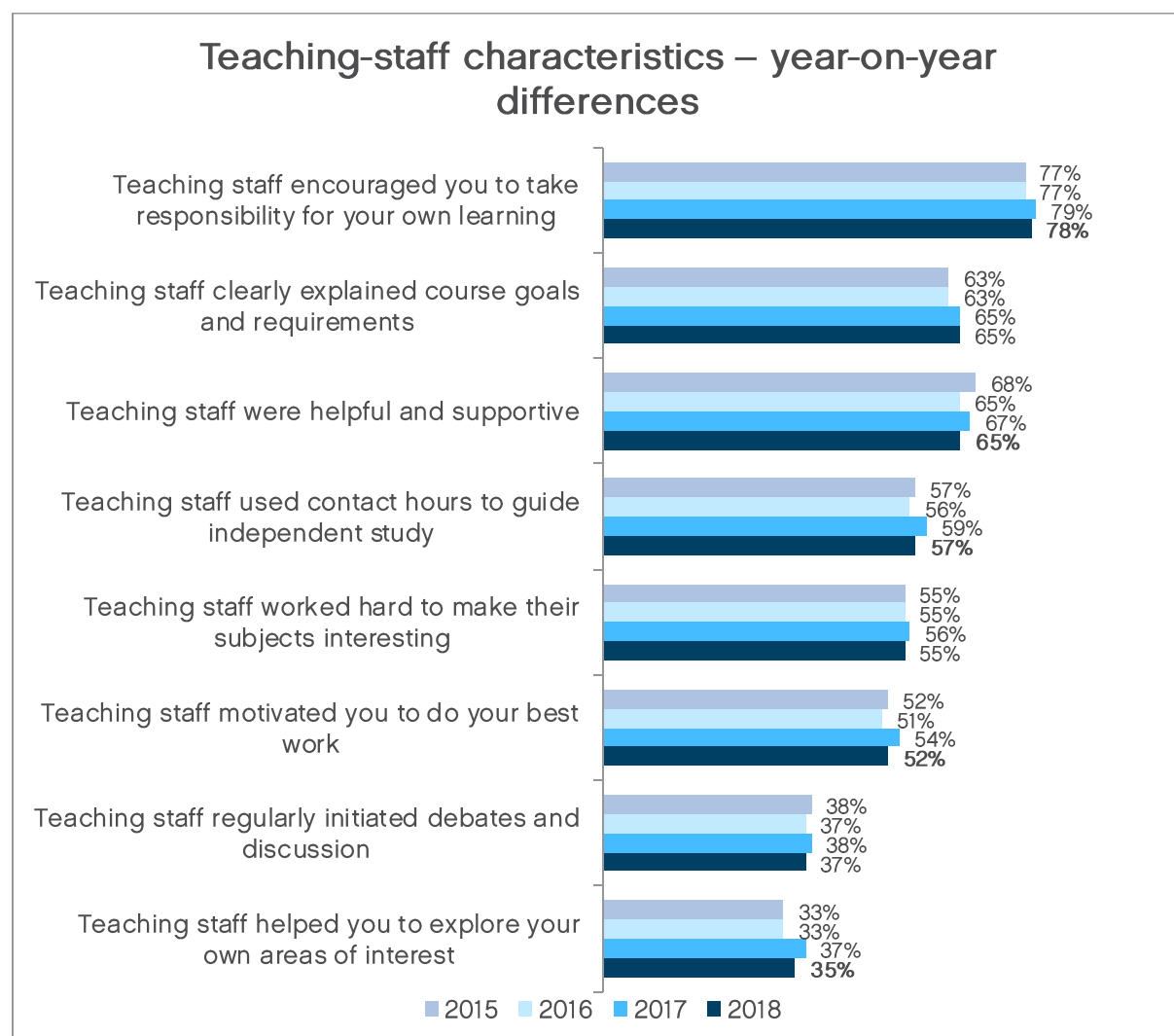
9 Quality of teaching

9.1 Perceptions of the quality of teaching staff

Teaching quality is central to the student experience and is highlighted by students earlier in this report as underpinning their views on value.

Last year, despite a decline in value, we did see a slight upward trend in perceptions of teaching quality, which unfortunately has not been maintained this year. Although results have changed little on these measures, there has been a decline in a few of the areas covered, including a 2% decline in staff being helpful and supportive, motivating students to do their best work or helping them to explore their own areas of interest.

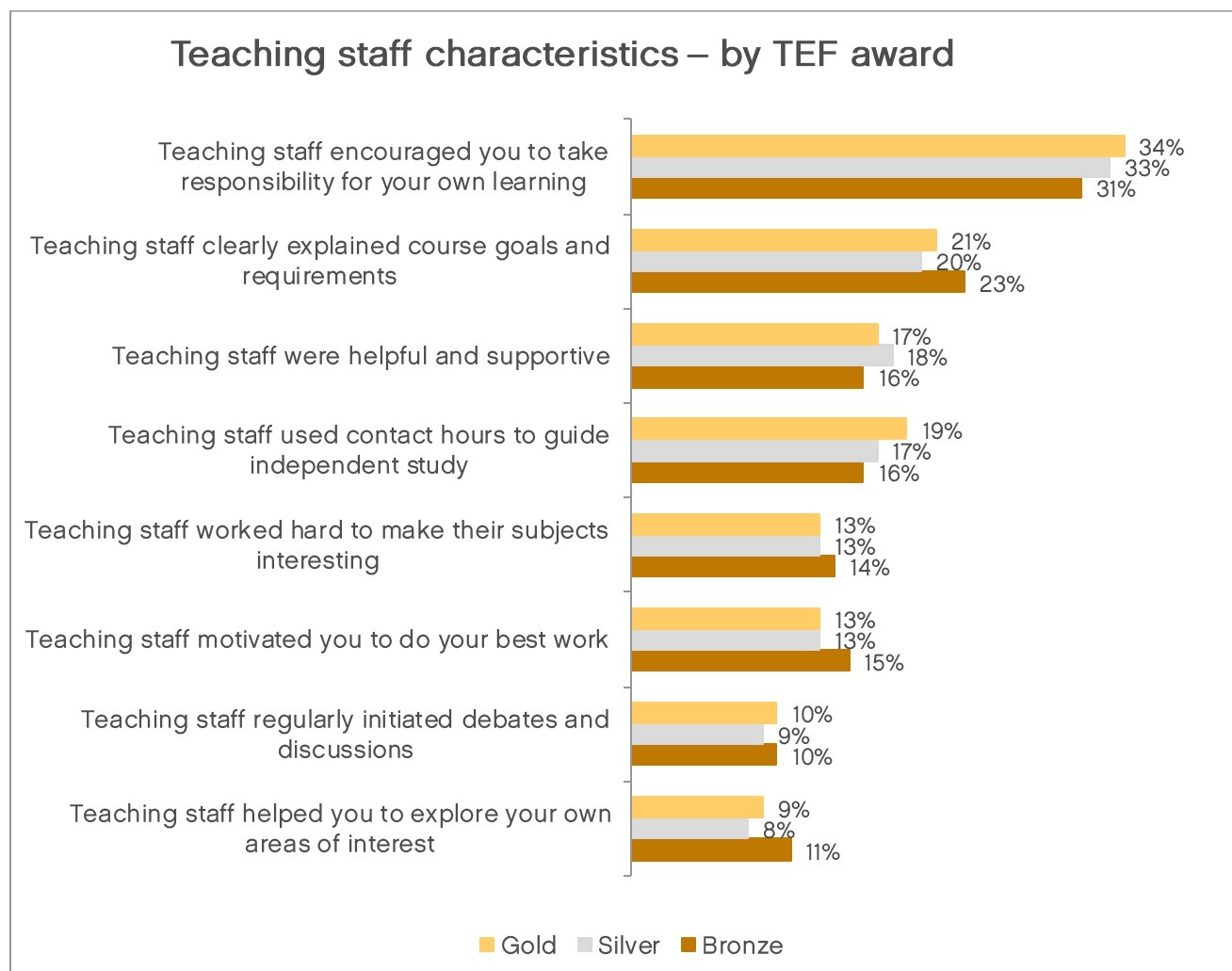
One point to note here is that this Survey took place during a period of industrial action by University and College Union (UCU) members, which may have impacted on student perceptions of staff characteristics.



Base: All respondents excluding not applicable. 2015 (14,947); 2016 (14,989); 2017 (13,854); 2018 (13,805). Chart displays % who say all or most of their teaching staff demonstrate the above characteristics. Statistically significant differences between 2017 and 2018 in bold.

Comparing institutions on aspects of teaching quality by TEF award is notable in that there does not appear to be a clear link between Gold-rated institutions and high scores awarded by students.

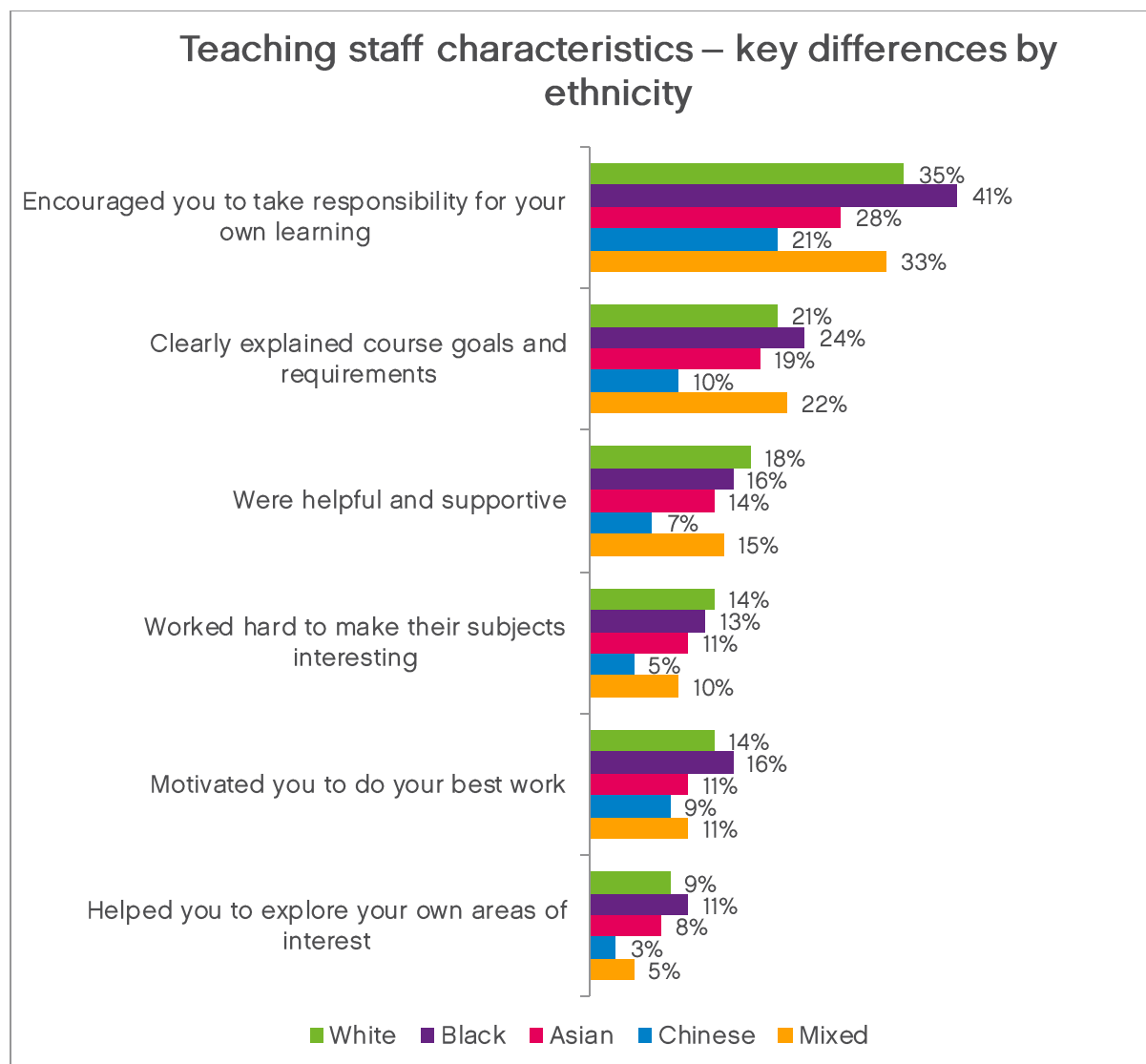
In fact, Bronze-rated institutions score highest on several of these aspects, including staff clearly explaining requirements and motivating students to do their best work.



Base: All respondents excluding not applicable. Gold (4,716); Silver (6,279); Bronze (1,478). Chart displays % who say all their teaching staff demonstrate the above characteristics.

The criteria covered in this Survey were not designed to attempt to predict or mirror the range of metrics contained in the TEF but intuitively we may have expected to see some connection between high TEF ratings and high ratings of staff teaching. However, the results show this is not the case.

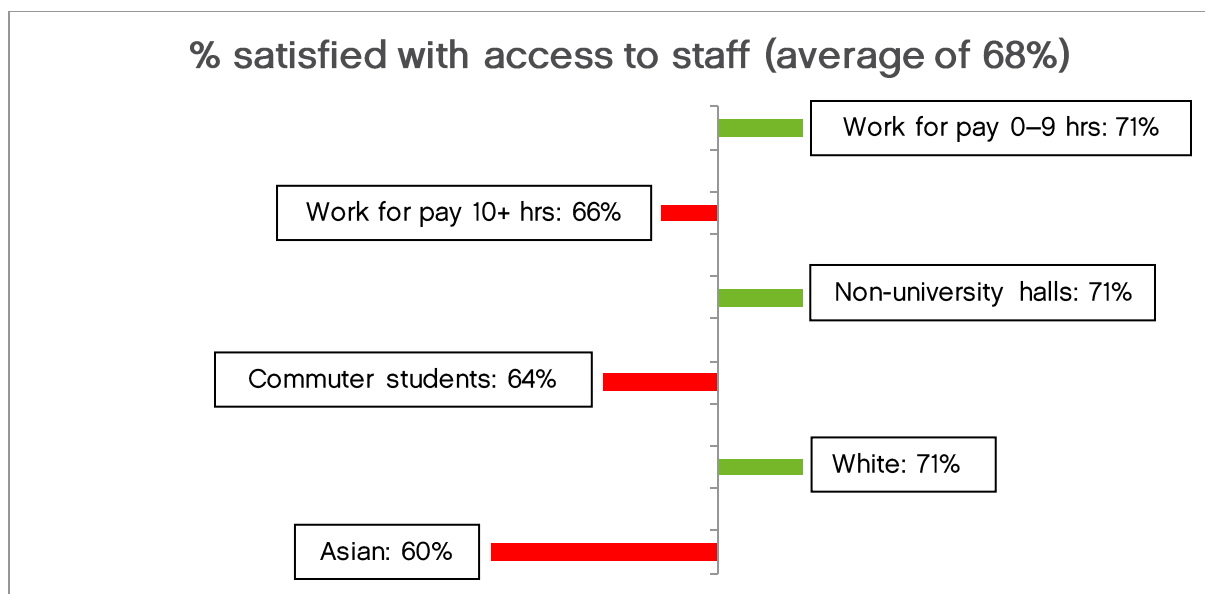
Teaching quality also differs significantly by ethnicity. Asian and Chinese students are a lot more critical across most aspects of teaching staff, which as we speculated earlier is likely to be impacting negatively on students' perceptions of learning gain.



Base: All respondents excluding not applicable. White (9,344); Black (364); Asian (1,386); Chinese (201); Mixed (504). Chart displays % who say all their teaching staff demonstrate the above characteristics.

9.2 Access to academic staff

Access to staff is a factor related to teaching quality which shows clear differences among types of student group, potentially following through into perceptions of value for money and an overall view of the experience compared with expectations.



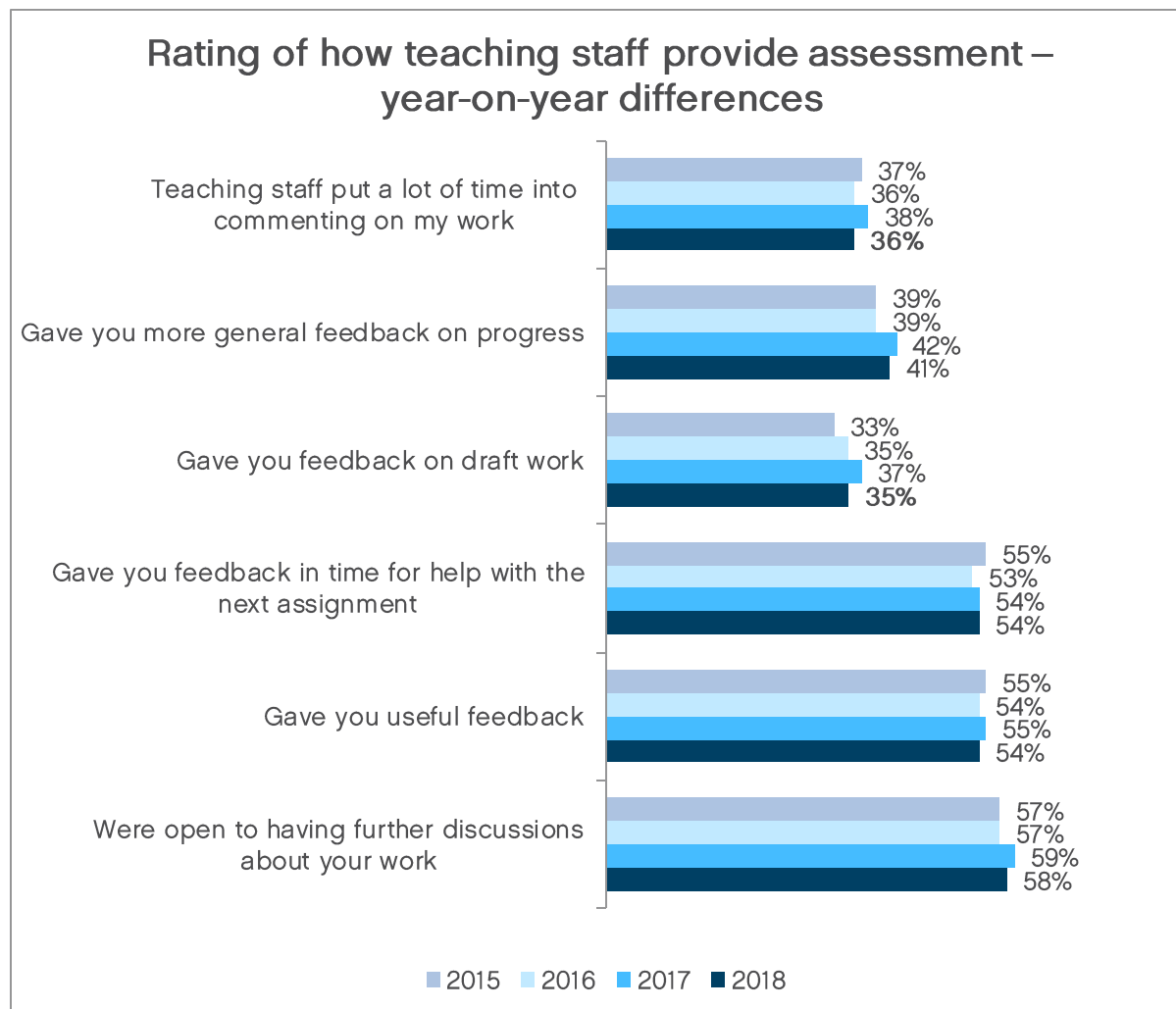
There are major differences by three main aspects – namely ethnicity, accommodation and working status. Students who engage in paid work for long hours outside their course, students who live in the family home while commuting long distances to campus, and students of Asian ethnicity are least likely to be satisfied on this key measure. It is perhaps no coincidence, therefore, that these categories of student appear to have had a less satisfactory higher education experience overall – either in terms of learning gain, value for money or overall assessment of the choice made.

As highlighted earlier in the report (section 6), these are issues that merit full investigation in order to understand the full range of issues and barriers at play.

10 Quality of assessment

10.1 Rating of assessment provided

As well as assessing staff on teaching quality, the Survey contains a section on how staff provide feedback to students on assignments, and the usefulness of that feedback.



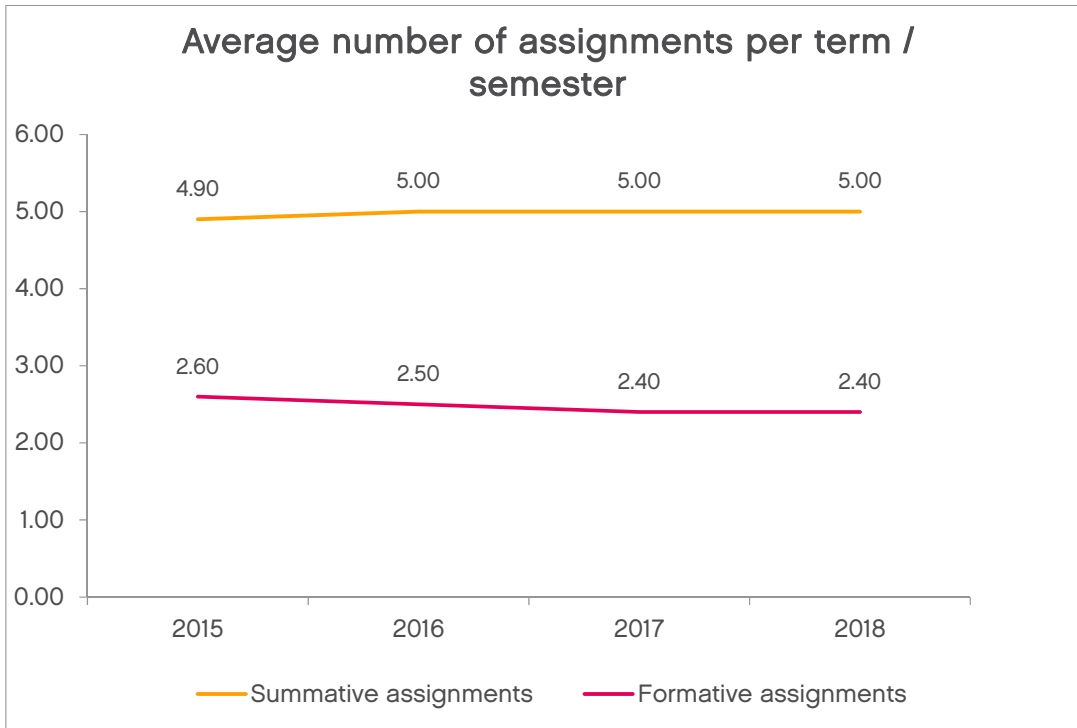
Base: All respondents excluding not applicable. 2015 (14,947); 2016 (14,989); 2017 (13,854); 2018 (13,674). Chart displays % who say all or most of their teaching staff demonstrate the above characteristics. Statistically significant differences between 2017 and 2018 in bold.

As we saw with staff characteristics on teaching, these results also describe a broadly similar picture when compared with 2017. However there are some areas where there has been a decline, specifically staff putting time into commenting on work, and providing feedback on draft work.

Specialist institutions (not charted here) stand out on these measures, with students tending to rate their staff more highly across the board.

10.2 Volume of assignments

Since we began measuring the volume and types of assignments students are set, the picture has remained very consistent, with around five summative assignments (which contribute to grades) and 2.4 / 2.5 formative assignments (designed to aid improvement) per term or semester – a ratio of 2:1.



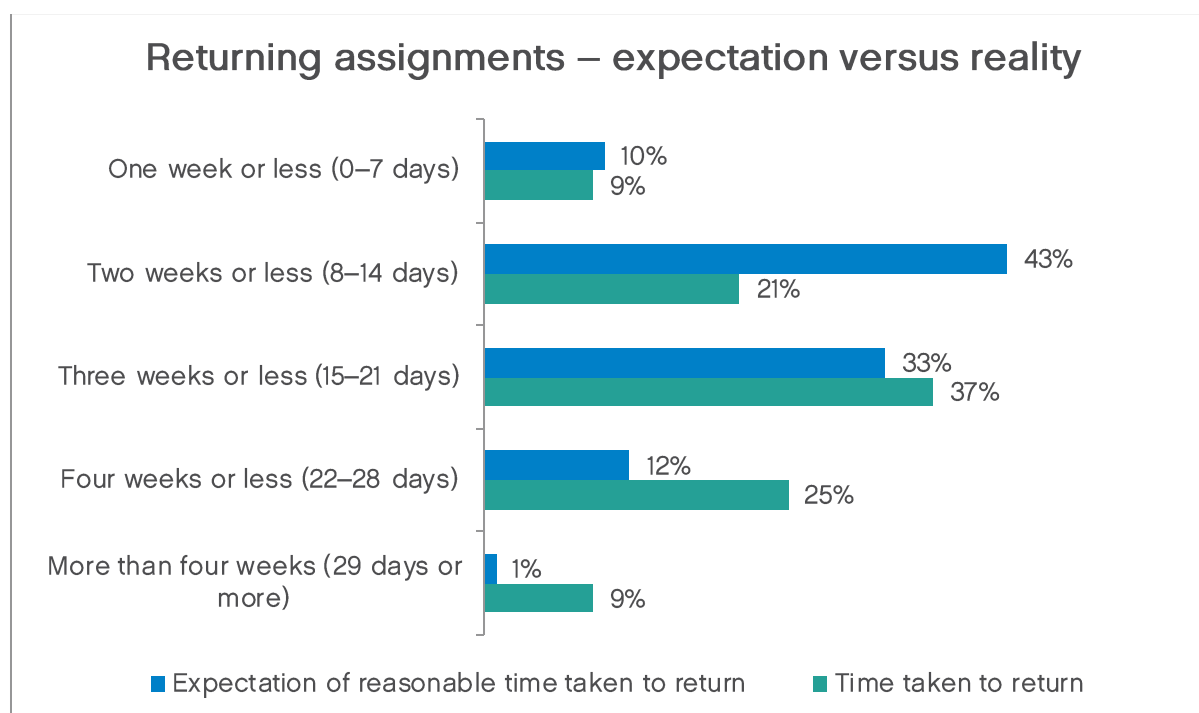
Base: All respondents. 2015 (14,947); 2016 (14,989); 2017 (13,854); 2018 (14,046). Mean average calculated from all responses including respondents citing zero assignments.

Once again, the more detailed data (not charted here) provide evidence that Russell Group and Specialist institutions place a lot of emphasis on both types of assessment, while other institutions tend to focus on summative assessments in particular.

10.3 Timeliness and type of feedback

Students are asked in the Survey about the time it took for their assignments to be marked and handed back and, crucially, how long they feel would be reasonable. This facilitates analysis of whether expectations are being met and whether the expectations themselves are realistic.

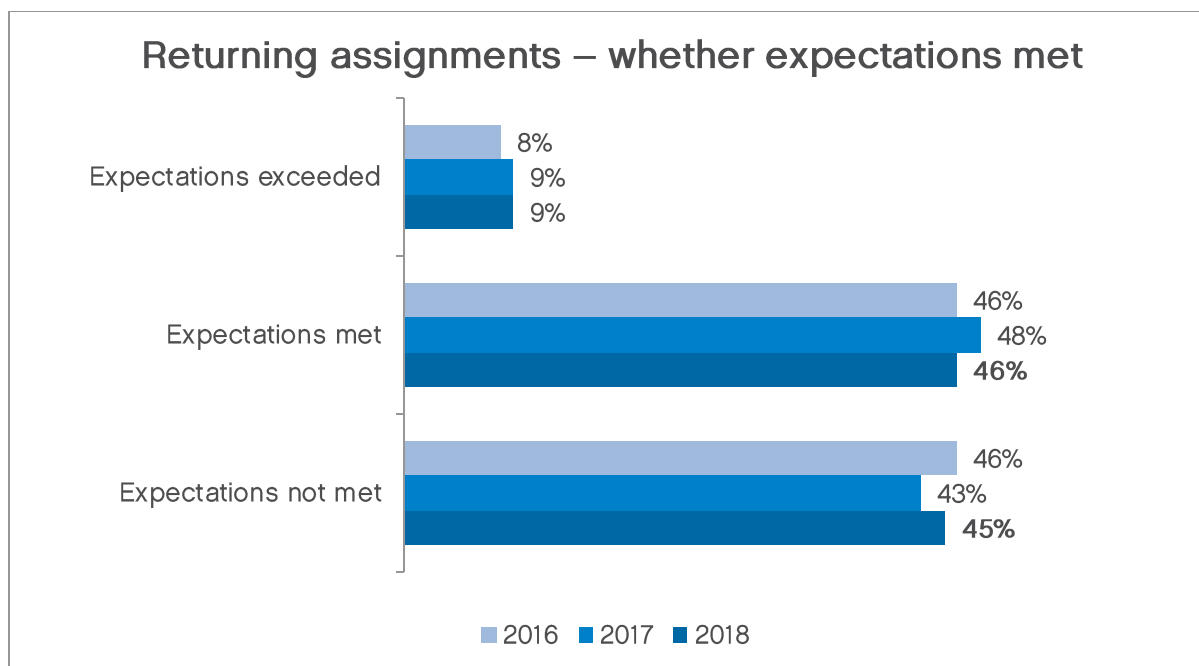
On average, assignments are returned within three weeks, while up to two weeks would usually be seen as ideal, so there is a gap in expectation, which is consistent with previous years.



Base: All respondents (14,046).

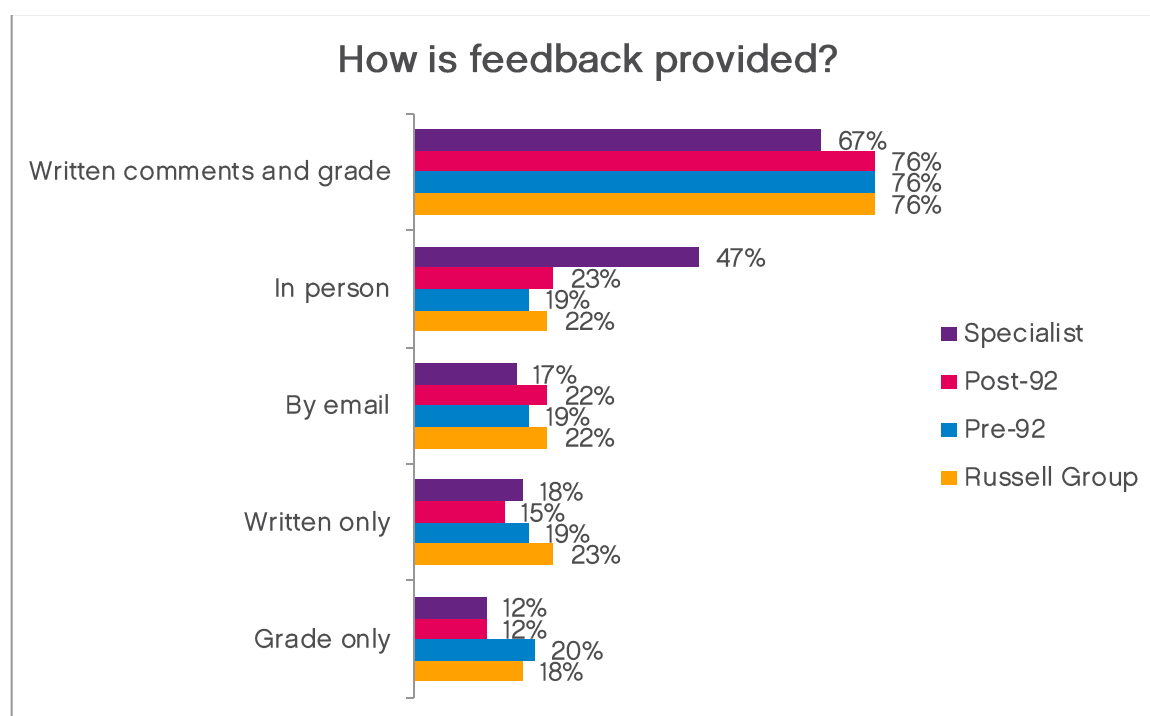
Comparing expectations with reality, there are more students overall whose expectations around returning assignments are met or exceeded than not met, although there has been a decline this year.

Specialist institutions again stand out in this area, with 71% of students saying their assignments are returned within or ahead of what would be seen as a reasonable time, compared with 55% of all students.



Base: All respondents. 2016 (15,221); 2017 (14,057); 2018 (14,046). Statistically significant differences between 2017 and 2018 in bold.

Staff at Specialist providers are more than twice as likely to feed back in person which implies a fundamental difference in how feedback is approached (we saw earlier in this section how staff approach to assessments is rated more highly at Specialist institutions). Beyond this, there is very little difference in how feedback is provided, with written comments the most popular method and grade only the least used method.

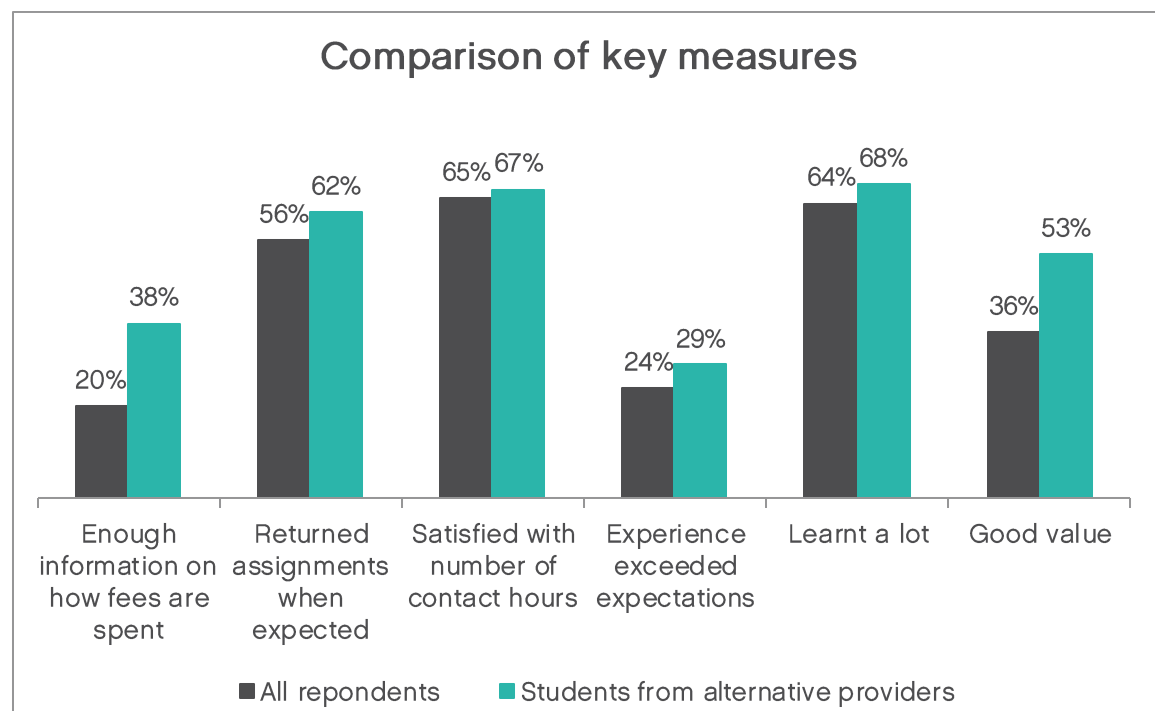


Base: Specialist (296); Post-92 (6,804); Pre-92 (3,071); Russell Group (3,913).

11 Focus on alternative providers

Consolidating our initial analysis from 2017, we have an additional number of responses in 2018 from alternative providers, which we have added to the 2017 data in order to provide a slightly more robust sample of 115 responses for combined analysis across both years.

This combined analysis across the key measures of the Survey underpins the initial findings from 2017 that the experience at the alternative providers covered in our Survey is generally positive. Again, we should state that this does not purport to be a full representation of a heterogeneous range of providers, but it does enable us to continue to shine a light on this part of the sector.



Base: All respondents (28,103); alternative providers (121).¹¹

As depicted above, students at our alternative providers rate their experience highly across the board, in terms of assignments, information about fees, learning gain, overall experience and value for money.

¹¹ Weighted figures. The actual (unweighted) total from alternative providers across both waves was also 121. A list of alternative providers in the Survey is available on request.

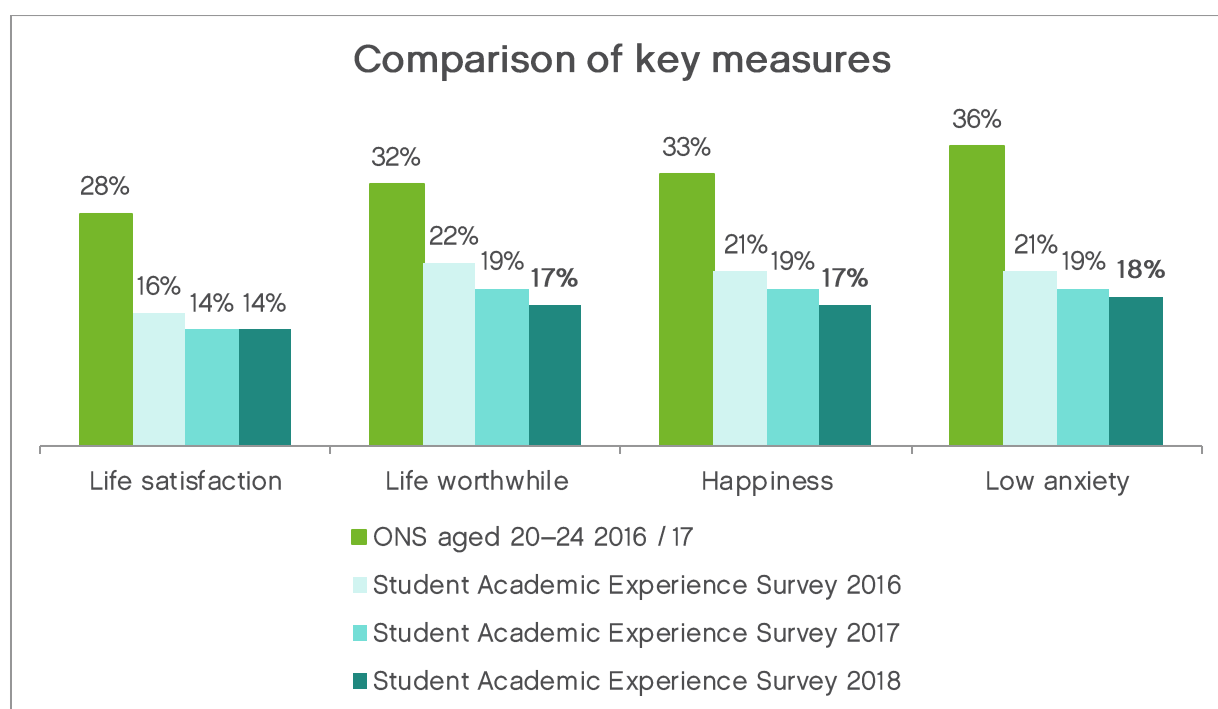
Teaching quality and workload		
Sample	All respondents	Students at alternative providers
Base size (all respondents excluding n/a)	(28,103)	(121)
All teaching staff encouraged you to take responsibility for your own learning	33%	42%
All teaching staff clearly explained course goals and requirements	21%	23%
All teaching staff motivated you to do your best work	14%	25%
All teaching staff helped you to explore your own areas of interest	9%	12%
Total contact hours attended	12.91 hours	13.45 hours
Total workload	30.80 hours	29.71 hours

This is backed up – as evidenced above – by strong scores on several aspects of teaching quality, particularly in terms of staff encouraging and supporting the students in their work. Workload hours are similar to the average, however, indicating that the positive experience reported is driven by a range of factors beyond hours spent in the classroom or studying.

12 Student wellbeing

12.1 Wellbeing measures

Levels of wellbeing among the student population have continued to decline. There have been significant declines in three out of the four key measures, with one measure (life satisfaction) remaining the same. In all cases, the levels of wellbeing are generally low, and below that of a comparable age group in the general population as measured by the ONS (Office for National Statistics).

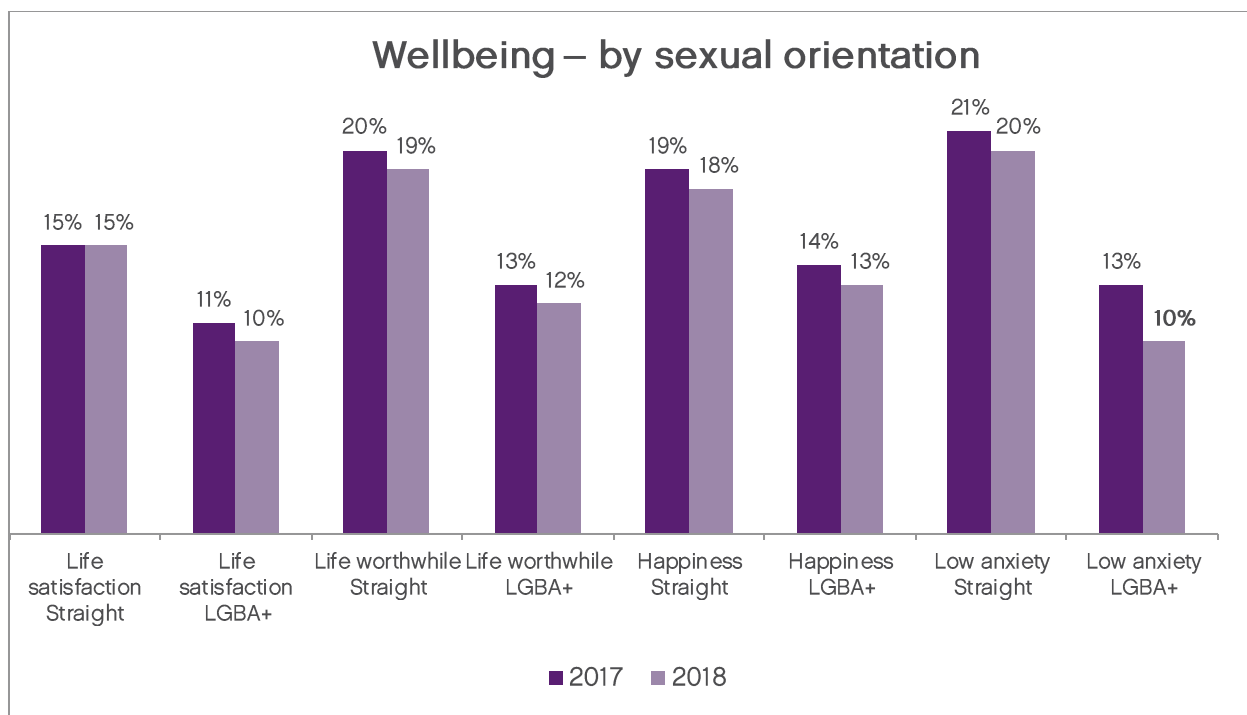


Base: ONS aged 20–24 UK (circa 5,260); Student Academic Experience Survey (2016 15,221 / 2017 14,057 / 2018 14,046)¹². Statistically significant differences between 2017 and 2018 in bold.

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

The issue of wellbeing is very much on the agenda across the sector, and there is a wide range of initiatives under way at local and national levels. However, these results suggest that there is still a way to go before the issue of student wellbeing is fully understood and supported in order to influence a positive change.

¹² ONS (2018), *Measuring National Well-being: Domains and Measures, Oct 2016 to Sept 2017*
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/datasets/measuringnationalwellbeingdomainsandmeasures> [Accessed 3 May 2018]



Base: Straight (2017: 11,480 / 2018: 11,373); LGBA+ (2017: 2,118 / 2018: 2,080). Statistically significant differences between 2017 and 2018 in bold.

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

Whereas overall wellbeing levels are relatively low, and declining, this is even more pronounced among students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual or other (referred to here as LGBA+)¹³. In both 2017 and 2018 LGBA+ students report markedly lower levels of wellbeing than the total student population. Due to the relatively small base sizes most of the year-on-year changes are not statistically significant, but there has been a clear decline in the percentage of students reporting low levels of anxiety.

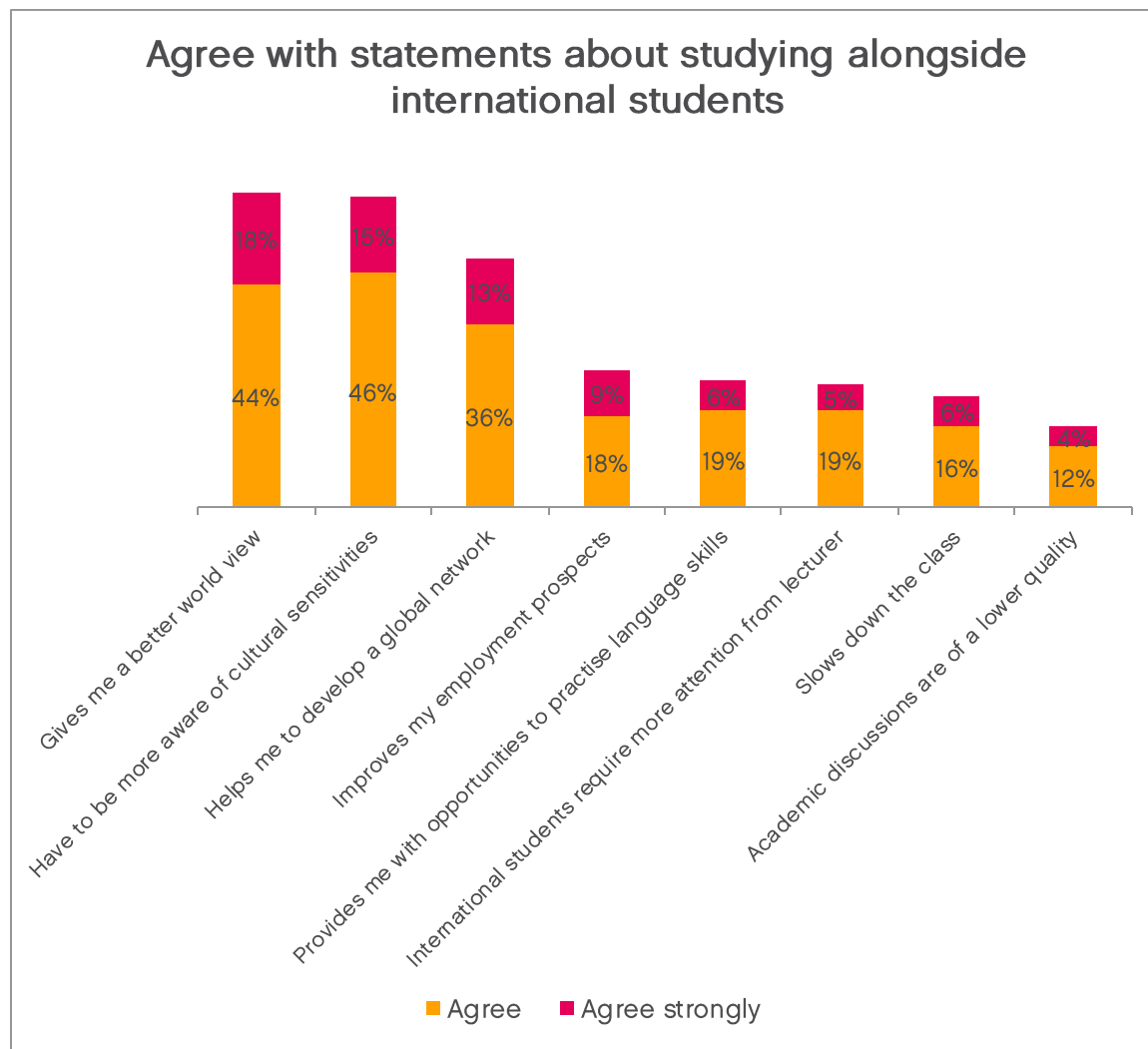
More encouragingly, results across the rest of the Survey among LGBA+ students are often broadly similar to those of students who describe themselves as straight. For instance, on value for money, experience compared with expectations and learning gain, there appears to be little or no difference by sexuality, which is a positive finding.

¹³ The term LGBA+ denotes students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual or who use a different term, such as pansexual or queer, to describe their sexual orientation. Advance HE and HEPI recognise the limits of this classification.

13 Students' views on policy issues

13.1 International students

In light of the current political climate, we introduced a new set of questions to capture the attitudes of UK-domiciled students to studying alongside international students.



Base: UK-domiciled students (12,197).

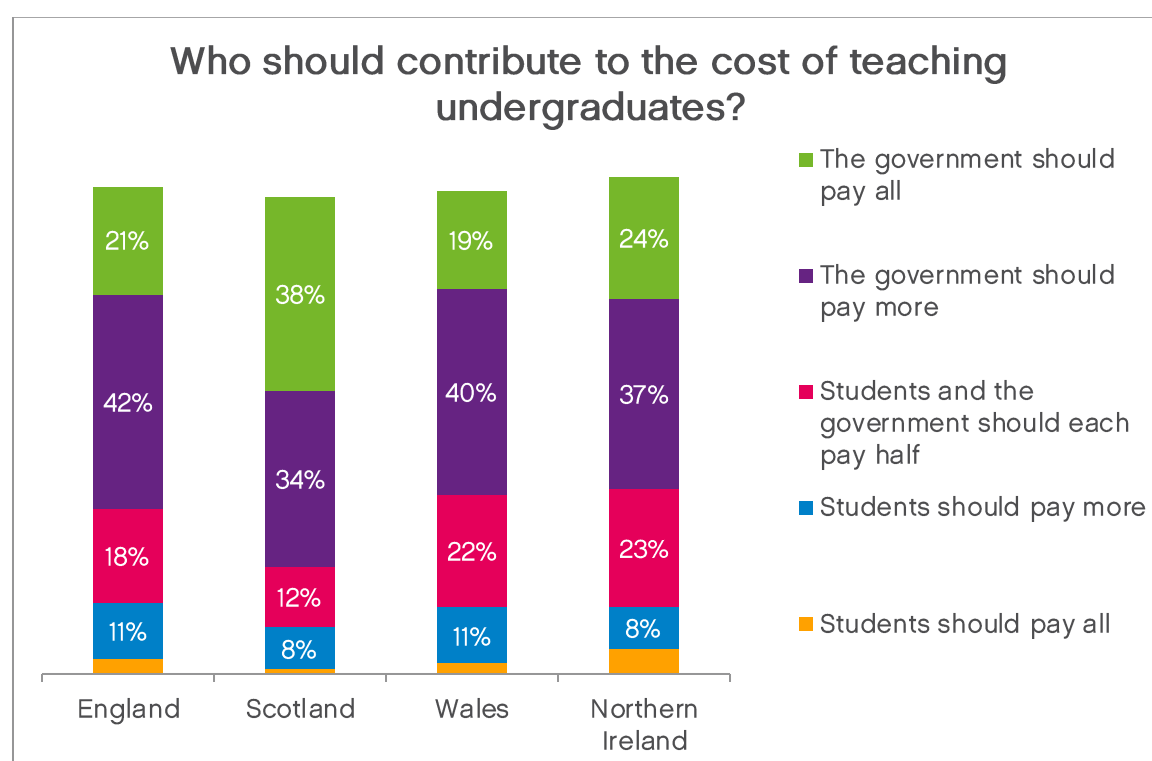
Overall, it appears that UK students see some benefits to studying alongside international students but in some aspects they are more neutral towards the experience. Although few students actively feel that international students slow down the class or create discussions of a lower quality, there is little feeling from UK students that they take the chance to practise foreign language skills or that their employment prospects benefit from diverse study groups.

There is recognition that international students help UK students develop a world view and, in some cases help with creating networks, but even in these areas there are few students who feel strongly.

We speculated last year, based on a different question, that UK students are focused on their own experience rather than considering whether they are developing through the range of other students they learn with, and this year's result would appear to back that up.

13.2 Funding

An established question in the Survey addresses whether the costs of teaching undergraduate students should be funded by students, the government, or a mixture of the two. Although the overall results are very consistent year-on-year, it is useful to break the answers down by the domicile of the respondent to see how attitudes differ in locations with different fee regimes in place.



Base: England domicile (10,891); Scotland (953); Wales (458); Northern Ireland (248).

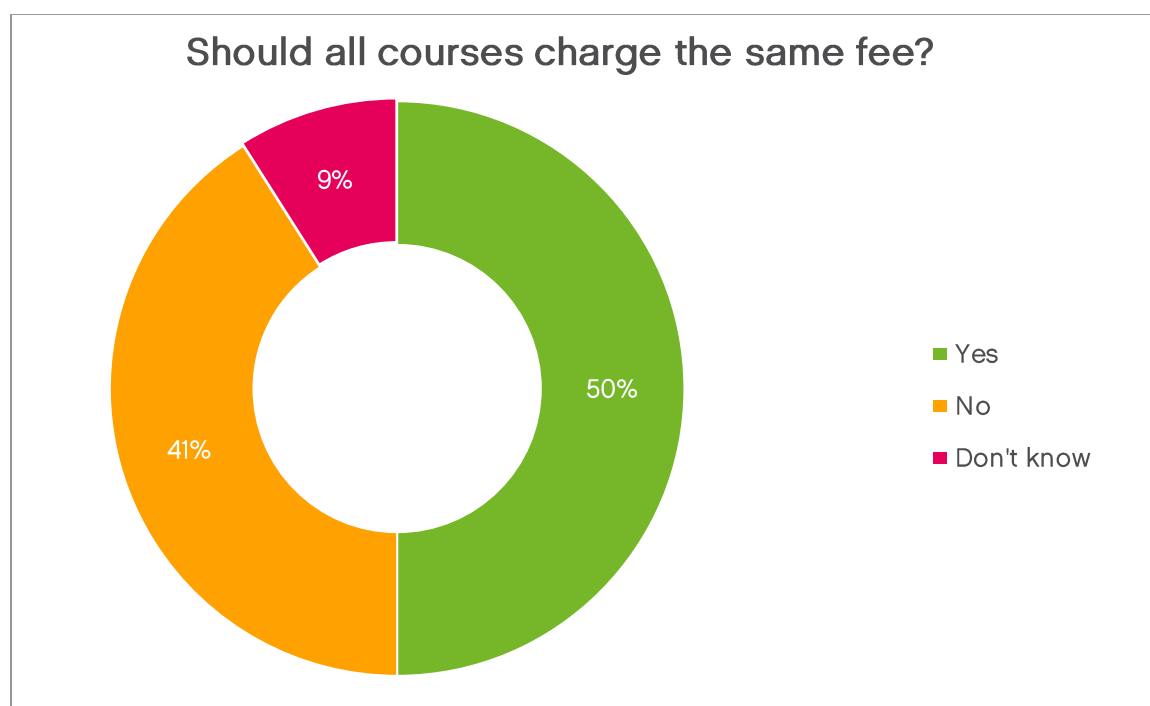
Most students feel that the government should pay all or most of the cost, and this does not appear to be changing over time, although it should be recognised that nearly four out of five students feel that students should contribute in some way. Clearly, cost remains an emotive issue, as we saw in the extent to which it influences students' value for money perceptions in section 2.

With its different fee structure, we would probably expect to see different opinions among students from Scotland and this is borne out here, with nearly twice as many students who feel the government should pay all of the cost. In 2017 we speculated as to whether views among Scottish students were coming into line with those across the rest of the UK.

However, this is not backed up in 2018 as the proportion who feel the government should pay all (38%) is actually higher than it was in 2017 (34%) and therefore more of a difference compared with the other nations.

13.3 Differential fees

A new question for 2018 asks about students' opinions of the suitability of differential fees for different courses within institutions.

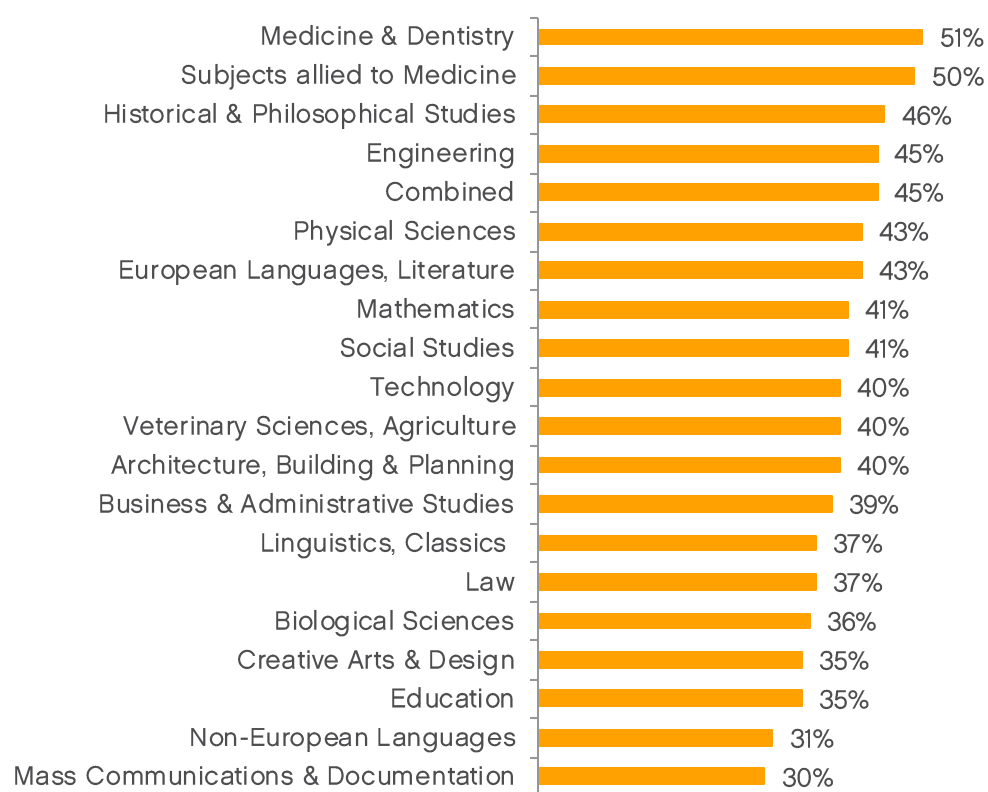


Base: All respondents who pay home / EU fees (13,252).

Exactly half of students believe fees should be the same, but a substantial number (41%) do believe that fees should vary by course. This result differs from relatively recent research conducted by HEPI in conjunction with YouthSight in November 2017, among 1,017 undergraduate students, which found that just 33% of students were open to the idea of differential fees.¹⁴ The differences between the two results potentially imply an evolution in student opinion in a short period of time, with our sample here being much more in favour of fee differentiation.

¹⁴ http://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/HEPI-Differential-tuition-fees-Horses-for-courses-Report-104_FINAL.pdf

Should all courses charge the same fee? % saying no



Base: All respondents who pay home / EU fees (13,252).

Looking at these results by course, there does appear to be a link between the more resource-intensive courses (e.g. Medicine, Engineering, Physical Sciences) and the number of students who are open to the idea of differential fees – although it should be noted that these results do not necessarily imply that the students on these courses want to pay higher fees.

14 Conclusion and policy recommendations

When the Survey began in 2006, it was designed to show how students' views of their own experiences change over time. In some areas, as in perceptions of value for money, there have been dramatic changes in the results. In others, such as workload, the changes are more slight. The ten points below discuss issues covered by the 2018 wave of the Survey where improvements could realistically occur.

1. The Survey builds up a more detailed picture than in the past of students' value-for-money perceptions. This is illuminating in part because it shows that some of the most important factors are areas where universities have little direct control. The top negative factor, the level of tuition fees, has been determined largely by the reduction in government support and the fee cap. Cost of living, another important factor affecting students' perceptions of value for money, is even less within the control of institutions. Any policymakers who are concerned about the value-for-money perceptions of students cannot therefore reasonably expect higher education institutions to solve the challenge on their own.
2. The Survey shows unequivocally that students want to work harder than is always the case. While 71% of those who work between 30 and 39 hours per week would choose the same higher education option if making their choice again, most of those with the smallest workloads (0–9 hours per week) would make a different decision about their course and / or their institution. Indeed, students who undertake only very modest amounts of academic work have always tended to perform poorly across a range of indicators covered in the Survey. It is in the interests of institutions and students to look afresh at courses where students seem to be undertaking too little work for a full time course.
3. The way some of our results differ by ethnicity show this is too important an area to ignore. Some non-White groups are less likely to be satisfied with the teaching they receive, less likely to regard themselves as receiving good value for money and less likely to feel they are learning a lot. Although there is no easy answer, the sorts of changes that can make a difference are known – for example, employing staff from a wider range of backgrounds who better reflect the diversity of the students, and redesigning curricula to raise engagement levels.

4. The evidence from our Survey and other sources shows that students who undertake heavy amounts of paid employment can see their academic work suffer. Sometimes, they have no choice – perhaps due to rent levels or parents / guardians not supporting them in the way assumed by the rules on the means-testing of maintenance support. So institutions need to look carefully at what they can do to ease the pressure on students who feel it necessary to take on considerable paid employment. Are hardship funds sufficient? Can universities act as good employers for more of their own students? What more can careers services do to ensure well-paid holiday work is available as an alternative to term-time work? What more can be done to ensure accommodation is affordable?
5. Some elements of the student experience are affected by where students live – and the type and quality of accommodation. Intriguingly, some of those who opt for potentially more expensive accommodation, such as university halls or shared houses, are more likely to say they are getting good value for money than those who opt for (usually) cheaper arrangements, such as living at home. This confirms the need for institutions to do all they can to support students who may find it harder to attend the university in person, such as ‘commuter students’.
6. In recent years, the Survey has shown a slow decline in independent study hours (with a very small increase this year) and a small increase in average timetabled contact hours (with a very small decrease this year). The overall effect has been to bring time spent on independent study down to being in line with scheduled contact hours at roughly 14 hours a week each. As a result, total workload remains lower than in years gone by (even though it is slightly higher than last year, thanks mainly to more off-campus course-related work). Satisfaction with contact hours has declined marginally since last year while dissatisfaction has risen. Despite all these modest changes, it is clear that for many full-time students time-on-task continues to be much less than for people in full-time employment. If this is to change in the near future, either contact hours need to grow or independent study needs to increase – or both.
7. Students have long been known to be less satisfied with the feedback they receive than with other features of their academic experience. Sometimes, this may be down to unrealistic expectations, or it may be down to inadequate student:staff ratios. At Pre-92 universities, 20% of students say a majority of their work is returned with just a grade on it, which is disappointingly high and makes it harder for them to know how to improve. While it could be costly to fix entirely, this feels as if it should be one of the areas highlighted by the Survey that is somewhat easier to tackle.

8. The low wellbeing scores, year after year, are clear evidence of the so-called 'crisis' in students' mental health and the need for higher education institutions to do ever more to support the wellbeing of their students. However, it is a challenge higher education institutions are unlikely to be able to solve on their own. Factors affecting mental health are myriad and only some of them are in the control of institutions. While there are undoubtedly things higher education institutions can do, any solution will, for example, need more joint working with the NHS and better support before reaching higher education.¹⁵
9. It is sometimes argued that the presence of international students provides benefits to home students as well as to those from overseas. This is not only because of the extra financial resources that international students bring, but also because learning improves in diverse settings.¹⁶ The Survey confirms that students see benefits from learning alongside people from other societies, but perhaps to a lesser degree than might be hoped – for example, only 9% 'agree strongly' with the idea that the presence of international students 'improves my employment prospects'. If the benefits are as great and as important as many people believe, the whole higher education sector should be doing more to make them obvious to students.
10. Many of the results should be of value to the Post-18 Education and Funding Review, not least the one showing only a minority of students across the UK think the government should cover all the costs of teaching. Perhaps abolishing tuition fees is not as electorally salient as is often supposed. The Survey also shows only a minority of students support the idea of differential tuition fees.¹⁷

The primary objective of the Survey is to help higher education institutions and policy makers hear the views and experiences of students. Much of what they have to say is positive and reflects the high quality of UK higher education. But, among all the good points, there are inevitably some areas where institutions perform less well in the eyes of students. Where improvements can be delivered in an affordable and effective way, we hope they will be. That is, after all, the main point of the Survey and always has been since it first began in 2006.

¹⁵ See Anthony Seldon and Alan Martin, *The Positive and Mindful University*, HEPI Occasional Paper 18, September 2017.

¹⁶ Gavan Conlon, Maike Halterbeck and Jenna Julius, *The costs and benefits of international students by parliamentary constituency*, HEPI Paper 102, January 2018.

¹⁷ For more information on differential fees, see Nick Hillman, *Differential tuition fees: Horses for courses?*, HEPI Paper 104, February 2018.

2018 Student Academic Experience Survey



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