



# Student Experience Research 2012

## Part 4: First Year Student Experience

Student experience research to gain insight into the quality of the learning experience



national union of students



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# Forewords

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# Foreword

Welcome to the final section of the NUS/QAA Student Experience Report which provides an overview of the first year experience. It is a pleasure to work with QAA to produce this research which we hope will be useful to students' unions, institutions, and the government in improving the quality of higher education in the UK.

Starting university can be a stressful experience for students. Many students will be living away from home for the first time and as well as acclimatising to their new surroundings and routines, they can often feel isolated. This research shows that orientation and social activities are a vital part of students starting university to ensure that students build support networks quickly and these are appreciated by new students. For students who have not moved away university can still be quite a overwhelming experience and students must be given the confidence that they will be supported, and have the ability to complete their studies with other life pressures which surround them. Many universities now run successful mentoring schemes which support students from the beginning of their studies, but it is important that students are given pre-enrolment support so that they feel confident that they are prepared for the next few years of study.

With the introduction of the Key Information Set (KIS) in 2012, prospective students will have access to comparable information in order to inform their choices. Universities must not be complacent in thinking that by providing this information students will be more prepared for their university experience. The KIS only goes so far, providing students with useful information about what studying at a particular institution will be like, and students will still need advice once they begin their course and guidance about what studying higher education is like. This research suggests that students appreciate being told early on about what good academic practice looks like and how to use their independent learning time effectively and I think all

institutions could include more information about this during induction.

Fundamentally this research shows that first year students need to be comfortable in their surroundings quickly and confident that they are doing the right thing in order to succeed. Institutions need to ensure that the induction is built throughout a students' time at university developing students confidence in their academic abilities and skill sets. Regardless of what a students personal circumstances are; whether young or mature, UK or international, they will not know what studying in UK higher education is like unless they already have a degree. This is why it is so important for institutions to run a comprehensive induction programme which covers good academic practice and introducing them to their surroundings (both on campus and around the town and cities). If a student is not comfortable in these areas they could be at risk of dropping out.

This research will be invaluable to students' unions as they campaign for changes and work with their institutions to improve the experience of first year students at their institution. I look forward to seeing the positive changes that students' unions can make when equipped with this data.

Usman Ali  
Vice President (Higher Education)  
National Union of Students

# Foreword from QAA

**M**aking sure that students get the best possible educational experience they can is a vital part of what QAA does. Our aim is to meet students' needs and be valued by them. We do this by working with students as partners, responding to their views and needs, and protecting their interests. And we support higher education providers as they aim to meet and shape students' expectations.

Students play an active part in shaping our strategic direction, the judgments we make about higher education standards and quality, and in developing national guidance for higher education institutions. Our student Board member and Student Sounding Board influence QAA's policy direction, and we employ a student reviewer on all of our Institutional Review teams.

This year, we have taken student engagement to the next level by entering into a 12-month partnership with NUS that includes:

- research by NUS into the 21st century student's experience of UK higher education
- training and development to engage students in quality assurance
- bespoke support for 16 self-nominated students' unions that want to develop their quality agenda.

In this final of four research reports, NUS has surveyed 5,000 UK higher education students on their experience of studying in the first year. Previous reports have included teaching and Learning, independent learning and contact hours and the context for Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) subjects. The findings provide food for thought in our rapidly changing higher education environment. I trust these reports will stimulate debate and inform our thinking on the whole learning experience.

Anthony McClaran  
Chief Executive  
Quality Assurance Agency



# Executive Summary

Students received a variety of information before arriving on campus for the start of their course and this has increased compared to students in the second year who we asked. The most common information included accommodation options, financial support information, course content and induction information although compared to second year students we asked, first year students received less induction information than second year students.

When asked about their induction, students mainly focused on their time during the first few weeks of term, commonly referred to as 'fresher's'. Students felt that induction lectures during the first few weeks were repetitive, boring and in groups which were too big. Students wanted more interactive and fun induction tasks and favoured activities which involved them trying something out rather than hearing about how something worked. They also appreciated more informal ways of receiving information, through social activities peer support initiatives.

Students commented that the timeliness of information during induction was an issue, and students often found that they were given information too late such as being inducted into the library. That said, they also felt that too much information was being given to them in a short space of time and that they would have appreciated more information before they arrived.

The focus groups emphasised a good induction would include social activities within their courses so that they could get to know each other quickly. There was a general sense by students that they were apprehensive that they would not acclimatise quickly to their new surroundings so initiatives such as team building and town tours were also useful in helping them to feel settled in.

First year students wanted more information about accommodation, even though 94.5 per cent of students said that they received information about accommodation options before arrival. Again students were mainly worried about unfamiliar surroundings and fitting into their accommodation and making friends.

Students put their fellow classmates and lecturing staff as central to their support whilst at university and were

reassured to know that there were central support services available if their course could not provide them with support or guidance.

The average number of lecture hours decreases from 7.9 for first years, to 5.8 for those students in their third year of study. Conversely the average number of interactive group teaching sessions / tutorial contact hours increase from 2.2 for first years to 3.7 for third years.

First year students had a good understanding of what independent learning was and what their contact hours meant. They appreciated guidance in how to use independent learning time effectively and expected independent learning hours to increase as they progressed through their course.

Students developed an affinity to their university through their course and also accommodation blocks. This highlights how much emphasis students place on friendships in feeling a part of the university.

Finally students felt that their course would prepare them for future employment. First year students were aware that careers services were available although did not form part of their priorities in their first year.

# Methodology

The research consisted of a multi method approach combining the breadth of a national online survey, along with an in-depth qualitative approach through in-person focus groups at 8 locations nationally, followed by an online discussion group to validate the findings. These combined methodologies provided a holistic approach, creating synergy and allowing for exploration of issues to emerge through the various fieldwork activities.

Two initial 120 minute focus groups in Manchester on November 14th 2011 kicked-off the qualitative research strand as pilots and these were then examined and the discussion guide tweaked for improvements.

The focus groups then ran until November 23rd 2011, overall covering eight locations across the UK, and resulting in an ultimate total of 135 student respondents. Focus groups were video recorded and subsequently transcribed.

The sample sizes utilised are reflective of the student strata and were driven by HEFCE student data statistics, with a key focus on university type, year of study, age, and gender. Recruitment was purposive to this effect, building on a number of routes to students. Respondents were offered incentives to encourage participation and thank them for their time.

The online discussion group provided additional qualitative research and representation, where students got the opportunity to get involved in the research who might not practically be able to make a focus group or have the confidence, etc. Questions posed in this online group validated the findings of the online survey and focus groups.

All research was conducted in accordance with the MRS code of conduct.

The following documents can be downloaded by visiting: [www.nus.org.uk/studentexperience](http://www.nus.org.uk/studentexperience)

- Online Survey Sample Profile (Demographics)
- Institution Groupings Definitions
- Focus Groups Sample Frame
- Focus Groups Discussion Guide
- Online Discussion Group Discussion Guide

# Findings

In the online survey students were asked to indicate what year of their current course they were in. Using this information the data has been segmented into first year and second year and above, to try and understand how the first year experience compares to the rest of students' time whilst at university.

Similar analysis has taken place of the 16 nationwide focus groups that took place, where transcripts have been analysed based on those who were first years, versus those who were second years and above.

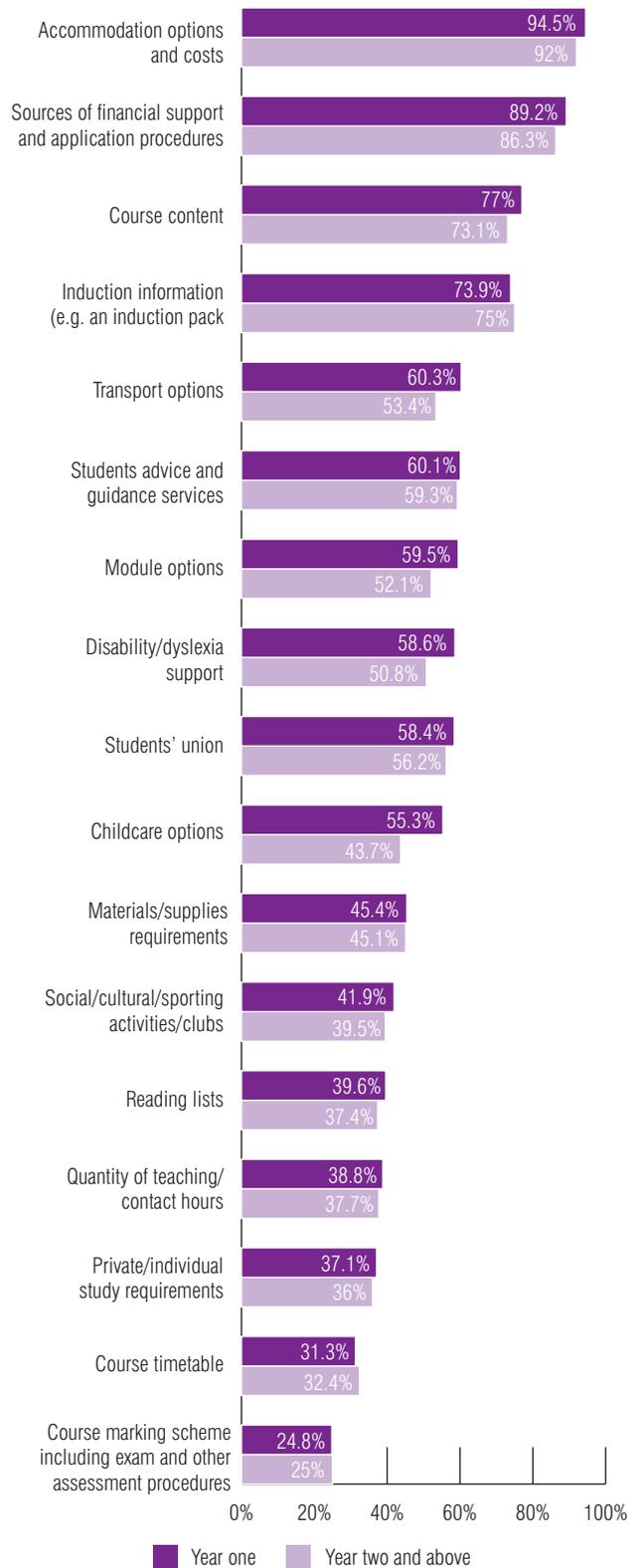
## Information for starting university

From the online survey the majority of students received information about accommodation options and costs, sources of financial support and application procedures, and course content before starting their course. As shown in chart 1 opposite, it can be seen that in the majority of cases current first years are generally receiving more information before they start university compared to two or more years ago.

Once enrolled students said that receive a lot of additional information. First year respondents in the focus groups felt that the amount of information they received during their induction activities were overwhelming. They commented that if an introductory information pack was mailed to them on acceptance at a university/college, they felt that they would have more of an opportunity to read it, when they were keen to get as prepared as possible for their new university life and there is far less competing with their time. This information would then act as a useful reference to return to during their time at university if they needed any reminders or further information. Good pre-arrival information examples such as student handbooks and online resources were identified; including specific information like course reading lists assessment criteria and what books they needed to buy. These quotes illustrate this point:

*“... you still end up with a big stack of paper and you just think, “I really can't be bothered to read all of that, it's Fresher's' Week”.* (Male, Russell Group, First Year)

Chart 1: Q20 – What information, if any, did you receive from your university? For each of source below please indicate if you received this information before or after starting your course? (n=4222)



*“They should also give you information on stuff like WebCT, online learning resources and the Students’ Union, so you know where to go for what. Paper information gets lost. If there was less of it I might look at it at some point. If there is too much I won’t bother. Having talks and having information online in case you get stuck.”* (Male, Russell Group, First Year)

*“Someone mentioned a package that was sent to students before lectures. I think that they should do that for all students. If we got the package early we can read it and it would help before we start”.*  
(Male, Million + Group, Masters)

*“When I was applying for university, X sent me a massive pack of information and that was amazing... It had all the stuff I’d have needed to know. Whereas Y were more like ‘work it out yourself, you’ll be fine.”*  
(Female, Non-aligned, Second Year)

## Induction

As part of the focus groups, specific questions were asked to participants about the induction they received during their first year. Overwhelmingly students concentrated their responses around the first few weeks of their university experiences which they referred to as ‘Fresher’s’.

Many focus group respondents from across the years had shared issues with their inductions. The most prominent of these was the lectures being repetitive. Respondents tended to find that as they went to subsequent lectures, the same information was being covered. This either meant they didn’t attend future sessions, or they saw a declining turn-out as they progressed.

*“We had a lot of inductions...in our first few weeks in our first year. The first few weeks, every single tutor we had was just saying the same thing over and over again... obviously they need to reiterate it to you to ensure you know about it. Things like using your student card, or computer things. After every tutor saying the same thing you get a bit sick of it”.*  
(Male, University Alliance Group, First Year)

This repetition problem was linked to the next most prominent issue that respondents had had with their induction experience, which was disorganisation. Participants commented on receiving unstructured timetables which led to confusion about where students needed to be. Some respondents had also been frustrated by not receiving a timely induction for certain facilities before they needed to use these for their course. The following quotes illustrate these points:

*“My induction was kind of messed up. Everything seemed random and no one seemed to know what they were doing. We didn’t get the tour of the uni, we were told that we were going to get it from one of the students but we didn’t... They gave us a leaflet, and it had information on the library and stuff like that, but we didn’t even know where it was”.* (Female, Million + Group, Second Year)

*“They did ridiculous things like sending the first week timetable without the lecture rooms on it. It was amazing that they could do that. I’ve had to turn up and not know where I was going or anything like that. You do just get used to it. You spend the first few days panicking, but after that you get used to it. It makes you incredibly independent...”* (Female, Russell Group, Second Year)

*“We had a lecture on using the library facilities, and although it covered all of the important information it was too late. I had been told to do a lot of reading earlier that week which required access to electronic journals and things like that... I had to figure all of that out on my own. It was time consuming... then to have the information in a lecture later that week was a bit of a slap in the face really”.* (Male, Russell Group, First Year)

Focus group respondents also commonly voice a sense of disappointment in the approach that was typically taken by institutions to their induction. Respondents described many large-scale lectures, which were very dry and therefore generally regarded as boring. (As such more interactive Inductions and Fresher’s’ Fairs were often in contrast referred to positively). Quotes from students included:

*“...there are the lectures. As I remember it, it was quite boring. You’re new at uni and you want something more exciting than everyone just sitting in a room getting told to read this and that”.* (Female, University Alliance Group, Third Year)

*“I went to them but I remember thinking that I’m not going to enjoy my first week of university if I am stuck in lectures”.* (Female, University Alliance Group, Third Year)

Some respondents commented that they were not satisfied with was the feeling they were being treated as a generalised body and did not recognise their individual needs.

What was clear by the few international students who participated in the focus groups was that they particularly appreciated their induction programme, as it helped them adjust to their new surroundings.

Respondents were asked during the focus groups to design their own ideal induction programme, which revealed a lot of potential solutions to the issues that they had previously aired.

Although the following recommendations were made by respondents from across university years, they were particularly emphasised by first years. The first and foremost of these was a call for inductions to take place with smaller groups of students because some respondents found it impossible to attend inductions due to over-subscription, as this quote shows:

*“I found, especially in the Business School, that there were so many people in our Fresher’s week that when you got to the lectures there wasn’t room for you and you had to come back the next day. I found it so annoying. I missed loads of information because I didn’t go”.* (Female, University Alliance Group, Third Year)

Moreover, smaller groups were less intimidating to them as first years and gave more of an opportunity to meet and get to know fellow students. Some respondents described experiences of ice-breakers being used effectively in some of their inductions.

This discussion led to respondents envisioning some sort of social aspect to their course inductions. In an informal, fun atmosphere they would be even more likely to get to know other students, as well as university staff. The following quote was seen by students as an example of best practice:

*“We also had a start of the year social. Everyone from the School of Natural Applied Sciences was at a hired out hall where we had a day of group activities and we got to know everyone. It included people in the years above so we got to know people there too. The staff were there, there was a band as well. Some of the lecturers were in the band! We got to know the lecturers informally as well”.* (Male, University Alliance Group, First Year)

First year focus group respondents called particularly strongly for a peer assisted approach to be taken in their ideal induction. Their ideal would feature talks by students in later years, talking them through their personal experiences of the course. This would make a question and answer session more approachable than with a member of staff who they had just met, being more on their level and would give them insight into real-life student experiences, hearing it straight from the horse’s mouth. These quotes illustrate this idea:

*“In the last week of September there is a welcome for the newcomers but it also a symposium for the second and third years as well because you can give oral and visual presentations of the work. It’s a central thing and it brings together the students and the faculty teachers and people coming in to visit”* (Male, Russell Group, First Year)

*“There should be a group meeting with different departments and introduce people who have been in the field before so they could talk from experience. Sometimes they talk and we don’t seem to get what they are saying. If we could hear from people who have been past students, who still have fresh memories of it, they should talk to us so that we can understand better”.* (Female, University Alliance Group, First Year)

When it came to their teaching staff, these first year respondents felt that ideally their inductions would include their lecturers, etc. introducing themselves informally, as this would set an approachable tone for their relationship moving forward.

## Accommodation and surroundings

During the online survey students commented that they received a lot of information about accommodation. During the focus groups first year respondents' commented that their ideal induction should also focus on accommodation advice. First years are keen to know as much as possible about things like their university halls of residence, where they will be living and starting their new life at university. This is not to say that older respondents didn't also at times focus on a need for such information, especially second years who were moving out of halls into private accommodation and felt quite vulnerable about this move, looking to their university for support. The following quote came from a respondent who had had a positive experience with an accommodation induction, an example that sparked interest by his fellow respondents:

*“They have that at X. They are called Fresher’s Angels. They are in halls for the first couple of weeks and they are a group of about 10 students who try to trigger interaction”.* (Male, University Alliance Group, Masters)

First year focus group respondents were especially keen on their inductions including tours, not only of their university/college, but also the outlying local area. These ‘walking tours’ could include demonstrations of where important places are (be that the library, student support services, careers centre, societies, etc. at their institution, or key shops, banks, etc. in the local vicinity). At the very least respondents requested maps for them to get their bearings. And as part of these tours there would ideally be the opportunity for them to be actually shown how to use certain university services, e.g. the process of taking a book out of the library, or how to search for something on the online resources, etc. This quote illustrates this point:

*“Whether there is a virtual tour or a physical tour, something should be available for students. You might not remember what’s on the tour but the fact that you are talking to people is an advantage and you learn where things are by experience”.* (Male, Russell Group, First Year)

And the following quote shows what can happen if these sorts of demonstrations don't happen and instead inductions default simply to the unpopular lecture approach as previously discussed:

*“Our library induction was a man standing up and talking about the library. We’d never been in the library and it was kind of hard to imagine”.* (Female, Russell Group, First Year)

As part of these tours and demonstrations, some respondents asked that sessions around their security was covered. Respondents were appreciative of safety advice talks they had received during their induction. Helpful advice recalled included areas of their local town to be avoided, not walking alone at night or getting taxis, and how to keep their student accommodation secure.

## Course Induction

When focusing specifically on their course inductions, these first year respondents asked that during induction it was mentioned how the whole of their course fits together which would help them make sense of why they were learning certain things. Some respondents talked about ‘module tasters’ being an effective way of giving them an idea of what a module would be like if they were to choose it.

*“We’ve had some about our modules. They are quite useful because they tell you when your exams are going to be. It tells you what you’re going to be doing and what it will be useful for. It gives you an overview of the degree”.* (Male, University Alliance Group, First Year)

*“For the course itself, for the programme, there wasn’t really an induction. It was almost straight into lectures. I could’ve done with an overview. It would have been good in the first week to have a proper*

*introduction and refresh us with what was coming. We were told a bit about the course when we went for the interviews to get onto the course in the first place. They went through the course content briefly but that was a while before we actually started the course".* (Male, Guild HE, First Year)

*"They said what courses we had to do and how many modules for the semesters. That was really helpful because it said this is why you have to do certain courses and what it was going to do for you in the context of the course. They give you tips on what you can do to read around it. They gave you a number of a book and you had to go to the library and take out the book, so you got to know the facilities. It was really, really good".* (Male, Million + Group, Masters)

Those focus group respondents who were in second year or above felt they would value such course inductions at the start of every year to give them the best start to every course year. This quote shows how this works well in practice:

*"There is a two hour period dedicated to each semester or each year, where they explain what will be happening in that year and they talk about module choices. I think that's a good thing because it helps you to understand what your course direction is. It's more informal but the first lecture of each module the lecturer will go through, partly or wholly, about what the module will contain. It gives you the direction and the clarity of the course. It helps with time management as well".* (Male, Million + Group, Third Year)

These older respondents also asked for networking opportunities to be included in their inductions, something that they required increasingly as they moved through university in terms of other students on their course, teaching staff and outside industry contacts.

### 'Me Maps' Creative Exercise

Respondents undertook a 'Me Maps' exercise as part of the focus groups which revealed some interesting

differences between first years and those in further years. Respondents were asked to complete a handout where they were pre-placed in the centre of a series of circles, and they wrote down people who they felt were key to their university learning experience within the rings – the closer to the center the more important that person is deemed by the respondent.

As we have discussed previously in the NUS/QAA report into independent learning and contact hours, peer support featured heavily by respondents from across the year groups. Closer investigation in this analysis of age groups shows though that these references to fellow students on their course were placed centrally even more frequently by first years.

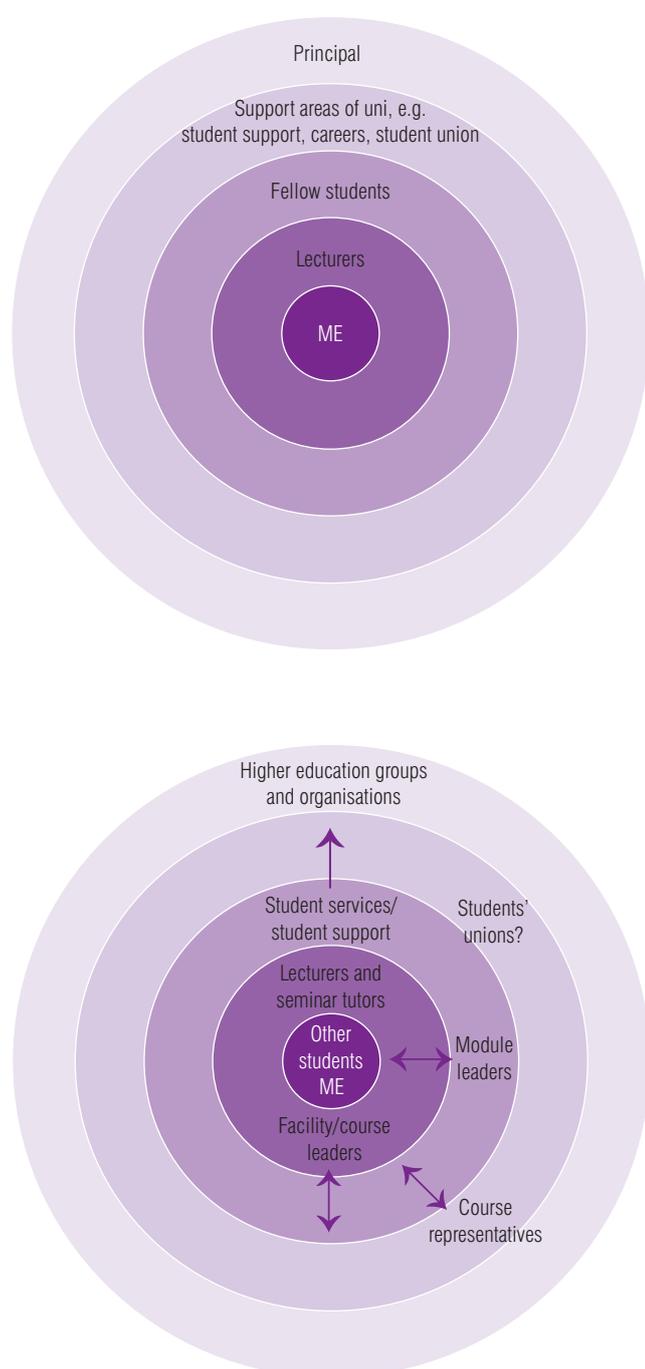
*"I've got me and the other students on the course... I've put other students because it helps to know how other students are feeling and if they are affected by the same things that you are. You don't want it to be good for one person but not for the majority. It helps you be more confident".* (Male, University Alliance Group, First Year)

Again as discussed in the independent learning and contact hours report, wider university services tended to feature on first year's maps, but more in the outer circles. Such services as student support, finance, the library and the students' union/NUS were referenced. These references came with the sense that although first years didn't necessarily need all these services right from the off, they were reassured to know that they were there, as shown in the following quote:

*"Things like student services, NUS, SU, academic staff, research fellows. Those sorts of people are on the periphery. You might not interact with them on a daily or even weekly basis, but you know they are there if you need them".* (Female, Russell Group, First Year)

This finding can be linked back to the previous induction section where we know that first year students tend to appreciate demonstrations showing them the ropes when it comes to the variety of university services to set them up for their time there.

Figure 1: 'Me Maps' showing those involved in Quality University Learning Experience



First year respondents also frequently plotted 'Lecturers' prominently on their maps. This prominent teaching relationship was also seen in the maps of further age group respondents, confirming that lecturers continue to feature strongly in students' learning experiences.

First year respondents would also often mark their family and friends on their 'Me Map'. These students were more reliant on support and motivation from such figures in their personal lives at the beginning of their new life at university as they adjusted and settled in.

Later year group respondents included careers centres or advisors more often in their 'Me Maps' as they moved through university and their next career became an increasing priority.

The 'Me Maps' to the left evidence the main findings of this section:

As part of the 'Me Maps' exercise, respondents were asked about any feelings of affinity they may or may not have with any aspect of their institution. Across all of the year group's feelings of affinity stemmed mainly from students' courses. In fact, even though first years quickly formed an affinity with their course staff and classmates, those respondents from later year groups described how this feeling only increased as they moved up through their university years. Some respondents illustrated that this was because their course class sizes reduced as they progressed through their studies and so their course became more close-knit. This quote illustrates this point:

*"I feel there is more sense of a community as you go up in the university. Because in the first year there were like three to four hundred people in a lecture, but now there is less than a hundred in each lecture. So you feel more involved and more part of the action".* (Female, University Alliance Group, Second Year)

When it came specifically to first years, their sense of affinity with their institution would also commonly stem from their accommodation, i.e. halls of residence. Where they lived and who they lived with there, very much defined these respondents and a sense of belonging came with this.

## Independent Learning and Contact Hours

In the online survey students were asked what they understood by the term ‘independent learning’. As seen in the Independent Learning and Contact Hours report, 88 per cent of students (n=4755) answered this question and the majority were familiar with this term. Focusing primarily on students in their first year again this was a term which was familiar to them.

Looking at the number of hours of independent learning required for their course, as shown in chart 2 below, a higher proportion of first year students (36 per cent, n=793) had 0-10 hours required as part of their course compared to second year and above (30 per cent, n=768). From 16 hours onwards a higher proportion of second years and above have more contact hours compared to those students in their first year.

Like the online survey, and as discussed in the previous NUS/QAA report on Independent Learning and Contact Hours, respondents in the focus groups from across the

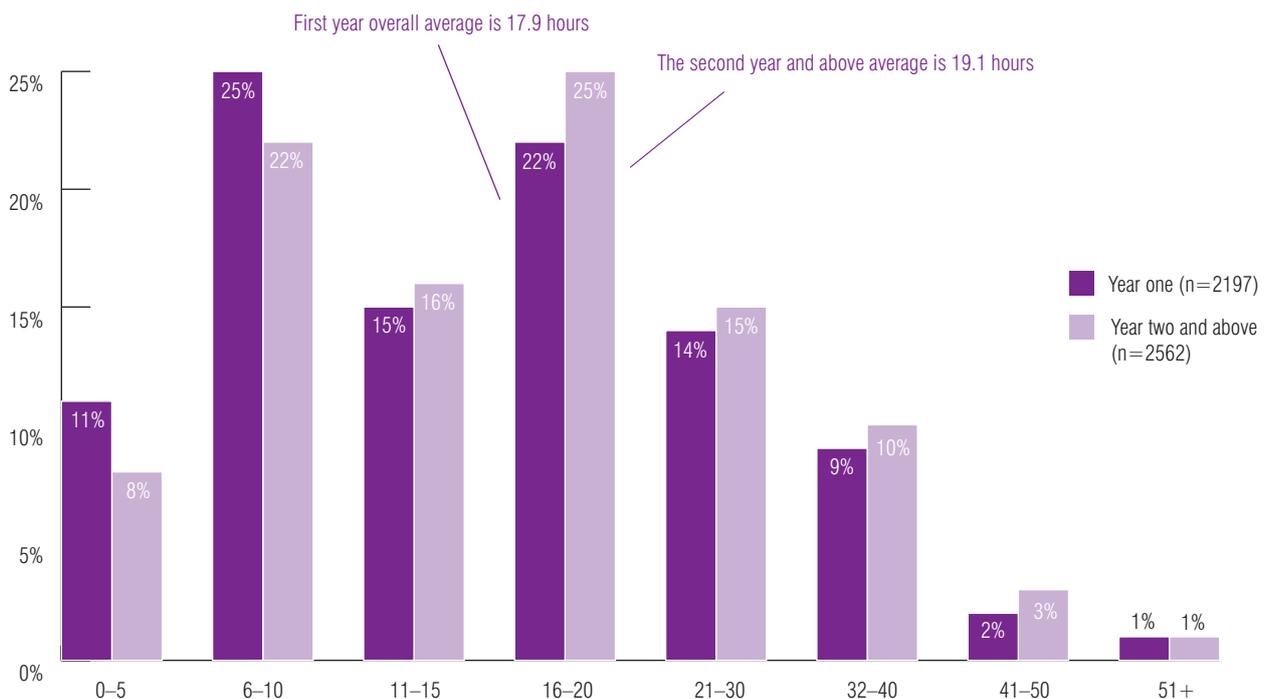
year groups displayed the same high overall awareness and knowledge of the term ‘independent learning’. Even first years regarded independent learning as an intrinsic part of their university learning experience, as shown by these two quotes:

*“It’s different from school in the sense that you’re not told about deadlines and you have to work it out yourself. You’re not told when to start essays; you just have to make sure that you get them in before a certain date. It was what I was expecting; people had told me that you had to do a lot yourself. It might have been nice to have a bit more of an indication of when we should start things. There hasn’t been much support in the transition, but you find out about stuff by talking to people who have already done it and to staff”.* (Female, Russell Group, First Year)

*“It would be funny if it wasn’t on your radar. You should expect it because you’re going to university”.* (Male, Russell Group, First Year)

First year focus group respondents would sometimes voice appreciation of being taught good independent

Chart 2: Question 44. How many hours of independent learning does your course require per week? (n=4770)



learning habits from the start, setting them up for their full university learning experience, as this quote shows:

*“In the first few weeks they gave us what we needed to read for our tutorial and they told us where it was. After the first few weeks I got into the habit of that and it set me up well for independent study for my course”.* (Male, Russell Group, First Year)

Although there was a general expectation for independent learning, in contrast to these first years above who felt they had been set on the right course, there were those who felt there were gaps in the guidance that they required for this new form of learning. This quote helps to illustrate this point:

*“What I’ve found since I’ve been at university is I’m not sure to what extent I’m supposed to do my own research. I’m not sure what they expect of you. Some topics are endless”.* (Female, 1994 Group, First Year)

As a solution to this problem of lack of guidance at times with independent learning, respondents, especially first years, recommended that seminars were

used. As discussed in the previous NUS/QAA reports on Learning and Teaching as well as Independent Learning and Contact Hours, we know that students particularly value seminars in their teaching. It’s seminars that give them the opportunity for useful discussion. As such respondents felt that it was a missed opportunity if their course didn’t incorporate independent learning to some extent in their seminars. It was here that they could discuss any issues they may be having with their reading around the course. This quote gives an example of a respondent linking independent learning to seminars:

*“But it would be good if every now and then in the seminars it would be good to have discussions about the different things that have been read. That kind of thing would be good to get people to read outside of lectures. If you have a discussion you get people motivated to contribute to the discussion”.* (Male, University Alliance Group, First Year)

First year students in the focus groups also displayed a similarly high level of awareness of contact hours to independent learning.

Chart 3: Question 46. To what extent do you feel you are able to learn through independent learning? (n=4875)

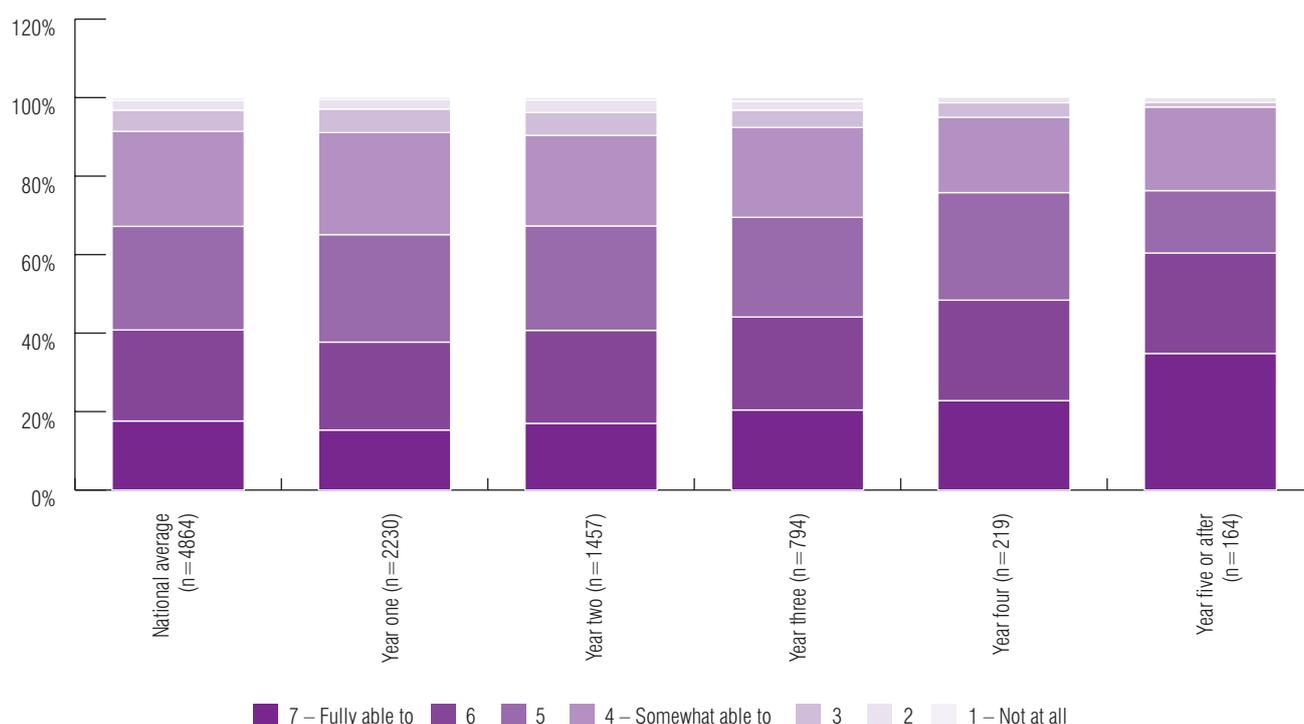


Chart 4: Question 26. For each of the following, on average how many hours a week do you have at this stage of your course? (n=4613)

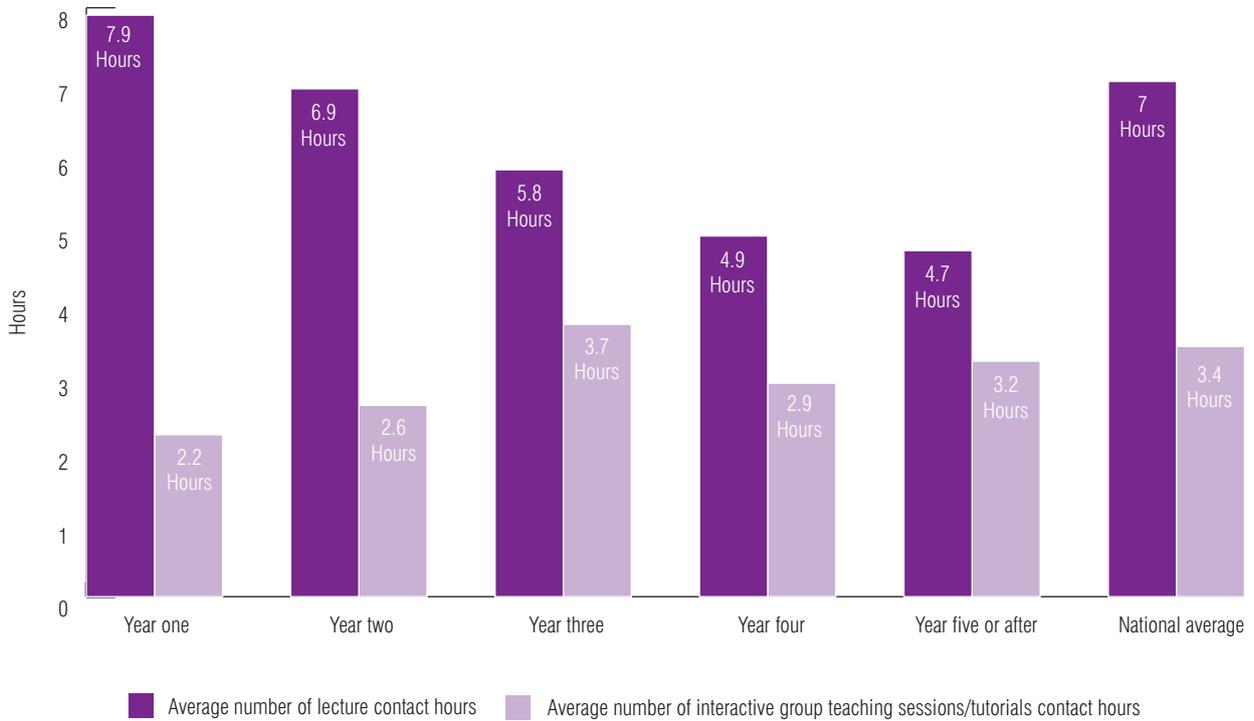
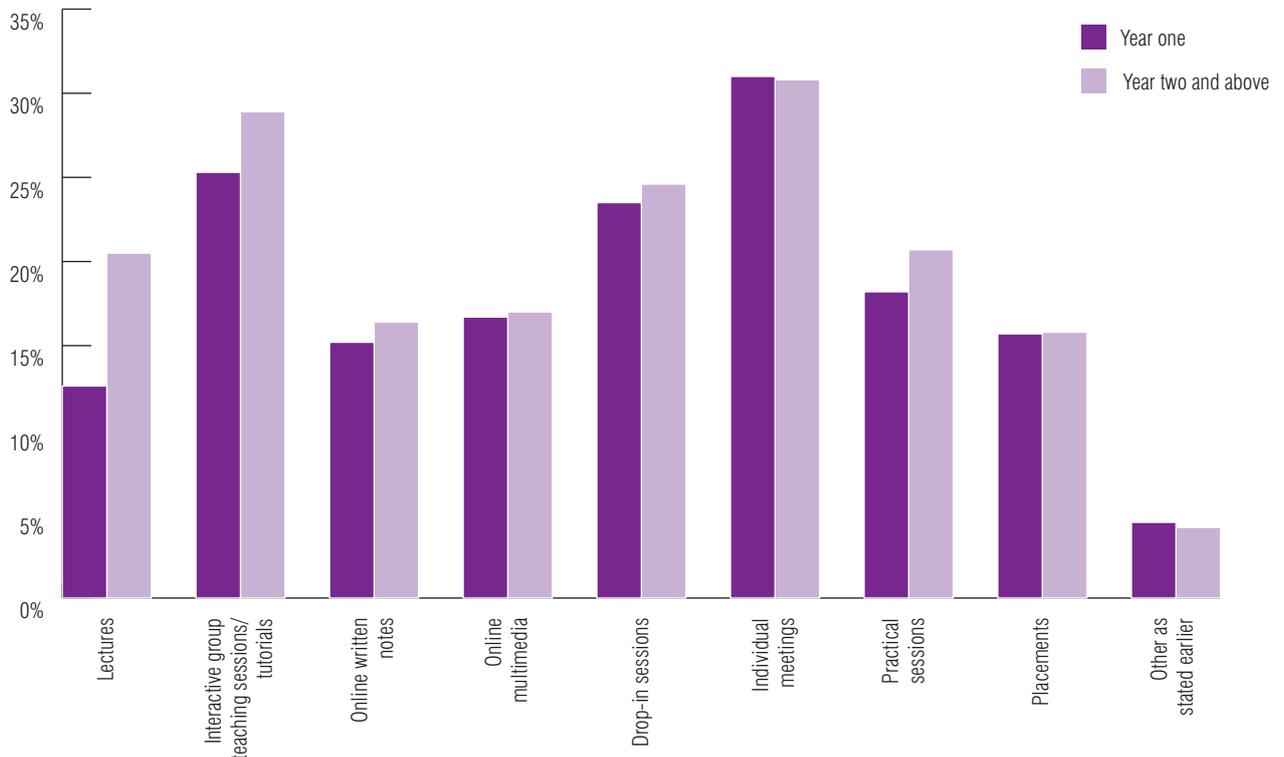


Chart 5: Question 27. For each of the following, please rate how appropriate, if at all, your amount of contact hours are? (n=4885)



Relating particularly to first years, specific references were made to contact hours being outlined in university prospectuses. As we know from previous research, in this sense, when choosing a university and course students tend to use these quantified contact hours as key criteria to judging a course.

The average number of contact hours per week varied between the various contact types. As we have seen in *the Independent Learning and Contact Hours report*, students receive the most contact hours via lectures and interactive group teaching sessions/tutorials. For the purposes of this report we have broken down these two contact types by year of study. As shown in chart 4 opposite, it can be seen that the average number of lecture hours decreases from 7.9 for first years, to 4.7 for those students in their fifth or more year of study. Conversely the average number of interactive group teaching sessions / tutorial contact hours increase from 2.2 for first years to 3.7 for third years.

In the online survey students were asked to rate how appropriate the amount of contact hours were. Focusing on those students who said 'too few', as shown in figure 8 below, in all areas (except for individual meetings) the proportion of first year students who felt that their contact hours were too few was lower than second year and above. This implies that those students in their

second year and above demand more contact hours than first years but, particular with lectures, also tend to receive less.

## Employability

Looking to the future, the majority of students agreed to some extent (78.1 per cent, n=3873) that their course would prepare them for their chosen employment field. As shown in chart 6 below from year 1 to year 3 the level of agreement decrease from 80.9 per cent to 71.8 per cent.

The majority of focus group respondents assumed a certain level of employability just from attending university. This was particularly the case when it came to first year respondents, as shown in this quote:

*"I think it is setting me up on a good platform... I think that if you study for a degree at university you are more likely to be employable overall"*. (Male, Non-aligned, First Year)

In the online survey, as seen in the previous *Subject Differences* report, when it came to the employability of their course, there were differences between the subject types, with a higher level of agreement amongst Medicine, Dentistry and Education students. In the

**Chart 6: Question 71. To what extent, if at all, do you agree your course will prepare you for your chosen employment field? (n=4950)**



focus groups there was also evidence of a split across year groups. Those doing more vocational courses characteristically felt that their course was making them more employable than those doing more non-vocational courses. This latter group of respondents focused instead more on their love of their subject, without such a long-term employability view as displayed by their vocational course counter-parts. These quotes illustrate this first year split by course type, where STEM courses are broadly more vocational in nature, versus non-STEM courses:

*“We’ve actually had a few lectures on my course that outline what people with Applied Science degrees actually do. That sort of thing gave us insights to what sort of job we could get and how to angle yourself to get them. They have given us a few ideas. One of our lectures has told us about her career and the labs that she has worked in... It wasn’t a proper lecture but it was good”.* (Male, University Alliance Group, First Year, STEM course)

*“I’m doing this degree because I enjoy it and it is a degree so it gets me to the next stage. I’ve not looked into particular employability for my course”* (Female, Russell Group, First Year, non-STEM course)

Another area of course employability that was discussed in the focus groups was their university’s careers advice offering. This was, however, less by the first year respondents than those in subsequent years. As we explored in the ‘Me Maps’ section earlier on, it was more a case for first years that although they didn’t have as much need for this university service, they were reassured to know that it was there when the need arose in the future.

# Conclusions

Overall these findings are useful to better understand the needs of first year students. Generally they articulated their apprehension for starting a new life at university and appreciated everything institutions did to ensure that they make friends quickly and have a clear grasp of their surroundings. Students generally wanted to feel like they fit in quite quickly. Once students settled in, they had very similar expectations and experiences as students in subsequent years.

### Induction

Focus groups commented heavily about the inductions they received during their first few weeks of the first year. From these findings there seems to be a need for universities to be more co-ordinated when it comes to induction activity, not only so that repetitions don't occur, but so that students are provided with things like organised timetables, given in a timely way. Students also wish to have access to more information before they arrive as they feel they have time to digest this and prepare for their new university life ahead. A good induction was articulated as something which was fun, informative, supported course unity and was delivered in small groups. Second year students commented that they did not receive any subsequent inductions after their first year and it is recommended that the induction process is seen as continual throughout a students' degree.

It is also recommended that institutions make sure that the induction timetable is delivered in a timely way, giving students the opportunities to be inducted into key services such as the library and course facilities before students need to use them.

### Accommodation and surroundings

Students who are moving away from home are naturally worried about starting a new life in a different city and acclimatising themselves to their accommodation and local facilities. Although they received a lot of pre arrival information about accommodation, they were still asking for more to be available. This may include information around contacting their fellow occupant before arrival to ease the pressure of not knowing anyone when they arrive. Many institutions now have buddying or

mentoring schemes for first year students to ensure that they have a knowledgeable friend as soon as they arrive, and students appreciate this approach. They also appreciate being shown around the local town or city and being signposted to places such as banks and food shops.

### Course induction and learning

Students place a lot of emphasis on the camaraderie felt by students on their course and so it is important for their induction to include activities which help students get to know each other. Students in this research found it incredibly useful when programme induction included events with current students so that first years could build relationships and understand what students did further down their course. These types of initiatives support a student's feeling of belonging within their course.

Students were very aware of the idea of independent learning but wanted support and guidance in how to do this effectively especially in their first year as they have no previous experience to draw from. Students like being able to understand the bigger learning outcomes of the course and having this explained to them during the induction period was seen as good practice. They like to know how their module choices and learning will have an impact on their final knowledge and understanding of a subject and this also helps them to frame their independent study,

### Employability

There is agreement by the student body that obtaining a degree is good for their employment prospects. Students understand that the transferable skills learnt by completing a degree serves a worthwhile purpose to their future employment, regardless of whether their career is directly related to the subject content. Because first year students are just starting on a learning journey, many do not choose to focus on the intended goal of becoming more employable in their first year and as such do not use the services provided by the institution such as the careers team. There is however still a way to go to be able to give graduates the ability to articulate the transferable skills gained from a degree

to employers, and first year students appreciate understanding what their course could offer them in future employment.

# Notes





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