



Higher Education Policy Institute



The 2016 **Student Academic Experience Survey**

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Foreword by Professor Stephanie Marshall

Barely is the ink dry on the Government's white paper, *Success as a Knowledge Economy*, than we read evidence in this report reinforcing why the sector must, in the words of Jo Johnson (Minister for Universities and Science) ensure "excellence of the teaching matches the excellence of the research".¹

In the report, students make it abundantly clear that they are passionate about the quality of teaching they experience. And this year's survey provides ample evidence that they often equate value with excellent teaching, being taught by staff who continually develop their teaching skills, and in environments where investment has been made in the resources available to support this. This is all the more important now that we have independently verified analysis which establishes a positive link between institutional investment in a professional development programme for teaching staff aligned to the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF), and strong levels of engagement reported by students in our UK Engagement Survey (UKES).

And while this survey shows students are generally satisfied, it is clear they are increasingly concerned about value for money. In fact, several years of the Student Academic Experience Survey shows that students from all parts of the world, studying in all parts of the UK, are becoming more demanding and putting 'value' under increasing scrutiny.

Students' perception of value for money points towards the importance they place on a high number of contact hours. In the event of having to make a choice, it would appear that many students would opt for high contact hours above small class sizes. But in *Dimensions of Quality*, Graham Gibbs concludes that the number of contact hours has very little to do with educational quality, independently of what happens in those hours, what the pedagogical model is, and what the consequences are for the quantity and quality of independent study hours. Gibbs is blunt in suggesting that what students want is sometimes flatly contradicted by research evidence of what is good for them.²

I would argue that we need to work more closely with students about their understanding and expectations of their teaching and learning experience. Students are right to expect high-quality contact hours. But higher education is characterised by independent learning. Helping students to learn independently, through directed independent learning, is critical to their future success. We know, for example, that employers greatly value this type of learning, and the skills that come with it. It is also incumbent on us in the sector to help students to become effective lifelong learners, and independent learning is a crucial part of that.

We cannot ignore student perception about the number of contact hours in relation to value for money – far from it, we must address it along with their other concerns and anxieties highlighted in the survey.

It therefore becomes all the more important that we provide all staff involved in teaching with opportunities for initial and continuing professional development throughout their teaching careers to help them engage students as innovatively and effectively as possible both within and outside direct contact hours.

Engaging in ongoing dialogue with students to share expectations so as to prepare and equip them well for the world beyond higher education – that is the key lesson from this year's survey.

**Professor Stephanie Marshall,
Chief Executive, Higher Education Academy**

1. Johnson, J. (2016). Foreword. *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*. London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, p.5.

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

Foreword by Nick Hillman

The annual HEPI-HEA Student Academic Experience Survey has had a dramatic impact on policymakers since it began over a decade ago. Last year's survey has been regularly quoted by Jo Johnson, the Minister for Universities and Science, and it is referenced in both last year's higher education green paper and this year's higher education white paper. It has helped push the quality of teaching and learning in UK universities to a prominence that has not been seen for decades, if ever.

That is not surprising, because the survey is an unparalleled source of information and provides data on topics that other surveys – including the official National Student Survey – have avoided, such as contact hours attended, the number of assignments, and even student wellbeing. Over the years, many of the questions have stayed the same, allowing year-on-year comparisons, but the survey has also been regularly refreshed through the modification of questions that have become outdated and the addition of wholly new topics.

This year, the new areas include:

- the gap between what students expect from their lecturers and their lecturers' perceived characteristics;
- knowledge of access to counselling services;
- expectations of the time it takes academics to return assignments.

Just as importantly, we have cut the data in new ways and linked up the answers in ways that reveal crucial new facts. In particular, this has allowed us to paint a more detailed picture on what raises student satisfaction and what drives perceptions of value for money. We can see, for example, that students who live at home, or on their own, face bigger challenges.

Perhaps the starkest finding is the high levels of anxiety among full-time undergraduate students. Moving into higher education often means leaving home for the first time, having to build a new network of friends and learning in new ways. It can also bring financial, relationship and workload worries. It is time for the high levels of anxiety among students to be discussed more openly so that we can all search for appropriate responses.

It has been a pleasure to work on this survey with the Higher Education Academy once again. Our hope is that policymakers, those working for higher education institutions, and everyone else who cares about improving our higher education system, respond by learning the lessons to ensure an ever-improving student experience.

Nick Hillman
Director of the Higher Education Policy Institute

Executive summary

Overall academic experience

The large majority of students (85%) are satisfied with their course. This has broadly remained consistent, although there is evidence of a slight decline over time in the proportion who are very satisfied with their experience.

For the first time, we have access to statistical analysis to shed light on these findings by showing us which aspects measured in our survey have the strongest correlation with high satisfaction. The analysis provides solid evidence of the vital role played by teaching staff in delivering an excellent academic experience, highlighting particularly how students place value on being taught by staff who continuously develop their teaching skills and subject expertise.

The factor that was most strongly correlated with satisfaction was whether student expectations were met (or exceeded), and encouragingly for three-quarters of students the experience has been better than expected in at least some ways. There do appear to be some potential lessons in terms of giving students the right information to ensure they have realistic expectations, but in general the experience is a positive one.

In terms of demographics, there are some potential concerns around Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students, who show lower levels of satisfaction, and who, particularly in the case of Asian students, are less likely to feel supported in their studies.

Value for money

Students' perception of value for money continues to fall, representing one of the main year-on-year differences. Strikingly, although value perceptions remain higher among students studying at UK universities outside England, they are falling across all parts of the UK, with just 37% of respondents feeling they receive good value for money compared to 53% in 2012.

As with overall satisfaction, correlation analysis identifies the importance of teaching quality in driving perceptions of value. However, another key aspect identified as having a clear correlation with value is satisfaction with teaching hours. Ahead of other aspects such as class sizes, speed of marking assignments and staff research expertise, we have solid evidence that students do equate contact hours, and indeed general levels of workload, with value.

There are key differences in perceptions of value for money by institution type, with higher perceptions among specialist institutions and the Russell Group, and lower among post-92 universities.

Despite, and perhaps linked to, falling perceptions of value for money, the large majority of students still do not feel they receive enough information on how their fees are spent, an aspect which does not appear to be improving over time.

Characteristics of teaching staff

As found in 2015, students place a premium on staff demonstrating teaching skills, ahead of research expertise. New questions added in 2016 reveal students also value staff who demonstrate continuing professional development in teaching and subject knowledge.

There appears to be a disconnect between student expectations and reality in terms of staff demonstrating they are research active, with a higher proportion of students (38%) feeling that this is well demonstrated by their teachers, compared to the proportion of students (26%) who feel it is a very important characteristic. This gap between expectations and reality is particularly evident among Russell Group institutions, providing evidence of differing priorities for institutions compared to their students.

Quality of teaching

The analysis highlights teaching quality as being critical to the overall experience, and results in this area are generally encouraging. Three-quarters of students feel that most of their teaching staff encourage them to take responsibility for their own learning, with the majority also feeling that their teaching staff clearly explain course goals, and are helpful and supportive – both overall and in guiding independent study.

Less positively, only one in three respondents feel that most staff help them explore their own areas of interest, a characteristic related to independent learning that also received relatively disappointing scores last year.

There are clear differences in perceptions of teaching by type of institution, with further evidence of different priorities. For example, specialist institutions score particularly highly on ratings of teaching staff. By contrast, Russell Group institutions do not score particularly highly on some teaching aspects such as providing support to students or helping them explore their own areas of interest, but do tend to set a larger volume of assignments, balancing formative and summative assignments effectively.

Wellbeing

Results provide strong evidence that the undergraduate student population have lower levels of wellbeing than the rest of the population, and young people as a whole when measured against Office for National Statistics (ONS) data.

Among the four wellbeing measures, there is a particular difference in anxiety levels with low levels of anxiety far less common among our student sample. This makes intuitive sense in that young people balancing study deadlines, part-time work, decisions about their future, and potentially concerns about debt while living away from home, might be expected to display raised levels of anxiety, placing the onus on institutions and support groups to have services in place to offer help.

However, there is evidence that not only are these services in place, but institutions work hard to communicate this to their students, as more than two out of three respondents say they would know how to contact their counselling services if they needed them. For something that we may not necessarily expect to be top of mind, this result is relatively encouraging.

Students' views on policy options

Building on questions introduced in 2015, the survey asked students where they would most and least prefer their institutions to save money. As might be expected, there was a clear priority placed on teaching and learning facilities, ahead of wider estate development, even though this development can play a key role in regeneration and creating jobs. What was particularly illuminating within the ranking of answers was the clear priority placed on maintaining contact hours and learning facilities, ahead of (if forced to make the choice), class sizes and staff research time.

When it was put to respondents that institutions should be allowed to raise their fees in line with inflation if they demonstrate excellent teaching, the reaction was unequivocal, with 86% feeling that this was not a good idea, and just 8% agreeing. Despite the undoubted recognition of the importance of teaching and its clear link to satisfaction, the issue of fees and their levels remain an emotive issue for our audience.

Conclusions

The student experience is still a positive one, but students as consumers are becoming more demanding. They are looking for evidence of value for money and are prepared to put in the effort themselves as long as they feel this is matched by being offered an involved experience with high-quality teaching, staff who continuously develop their skills, and appropriate levels of contact hours for the subject they choose.

1. Introduction

1.1 Methodology

The Student Academic Experience Survey has been running since 2006, providing valuable insight into the nature of how full-time undergraduates at Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) funded institutions rate their time in higher education and their attitudes towards relevant policy issues which have impacted upon them. 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 (HEA), from panel interviews independently conducted by YouthSight.

The 2016 survey contained a number of consistent questions to enable comparison with previous years, as well as newly-introduced question areas, including the relative importance of the characteristics of teaching staff, an expanded wellbeing section including awareness of counselling services available, the extent to which assignments are returned within expected timeframes, and attitudes towards the potential for future fee rises.

As in previous years, respondents were drawn from YouthSight's student panel, which is made up of over 78,000 undergraduate students in the UK. They 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.

Almost 75,000 members of the panel were invited to complete the survey between 16 February and 24 March 2016. In total, 15,221 responses were collected, comprising a response rate of 20%. All respondents who completed the survey received a £1 Amazon gift voucher and, on average, the questions took 13 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 whole³).

While the size of our sample permits a detailed picture of the higher education sector, the nature of a panel approach provides a cross section of students at institutions rather than a bespoke design at institutional level – although more than 100 institutions are represented by more than 30 respondents. Accordingly, we have included insight between types of institution but have not focused our analysis on comparisons between individual institutions. Please note that the figures on graphs throughout are rounded up to the nearest percentage point, and accordingly the total of these rounded percentages does not always add up to 100%. All base sizes quoted throughout this report are weighted.

1.2 Sample size

All respondents to the survey were full-time undergraduate students. Unless stated otherwise, all figures and tables relate to the 2016 survey with a base of 15,221 students. The full data tables are freely available from the HEPI website.

The total sample size of 15,221 provides a margin of error of +/- 0.79%. 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 49.21% and 50.79% in 95 out of 100 cases.

In the report, there is some specific analysis on ethnicity, with the main categories outlined below in our sample profile. Please note that in general this analysis includes everyone in the sample and is not limited to students from the UK, although in most cases UK students comprise the majority of the sample. For example, the Chinese ethnic group contains students from the Far East studying in the UK as international students, as well as UK-domiciled students of Chinese ethnicity. The one exception to this is the analysis on ethnic groups who are most/least satisfied, where in order to distinguish the impact of ethnicity from the impact of overseas students, we have looked at ethnic groups specifically among UK-domiciled students.

3. The data are weighted by gender, course year, broad subject area and institution type.

1.3 Statistical analysis

To identify the questions in the survey with the strongest link to overall satisfaction and value for money, Pearson's correlation analysis has been conducted by YouthSight. Pearson's is the most widely used measure of correlation. It measures the strength of the linear relationship between two variables, giving a value between +1 and -1, where +1 is a perfect positive relationship; 0 shows no relationship; and -1 is a perfect negative relationship. The analysis does not prove a causal link, but highlights the questions in the survey with the strongest correlation in their distribution of responses to the distribution of responses on overall satisfaction and value for money respectively.

1.4 Sample profile

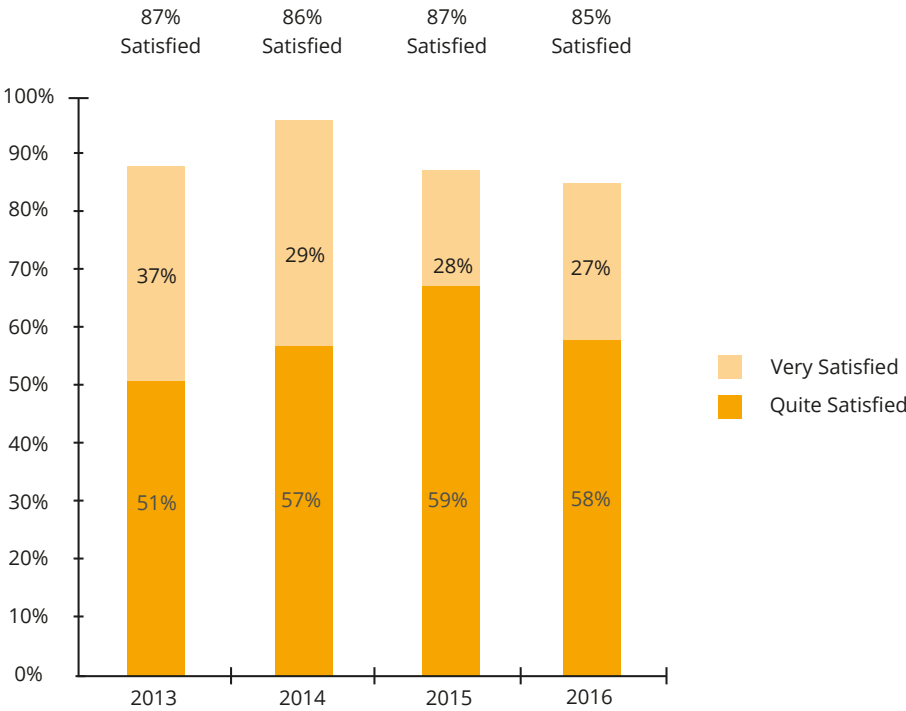
Our sample has been weighted to reflect the undergraduate population and how it is evolving.

Weighted sample %		2016 (15,221)	2015 (15,129)
Gender	Male	43%	42%
	Female	57%	58%
Country where studying	England	85%	83%
	Scotland	9%	10%
	Wales	5%	5%
	Northern Ireland	1%	1%
Institutions	Russell Group	28%	26%
	Pre-92 (not including Russell Group)	22%	22%
	Post-92	47%	49%
	Specialist	4%	3%
Ethnicity	White	78%	81%
	Black	3%	3%
	Asian (not including Chinese)	10%	9%
	Chinese	3%	3%
	Mixed/Other	5%	4%

2. The overall academic experience

2.1 Satisfaction

The majority of undergraduates remain satisfied with their course experience. Although there has been a 2% decline compared to 2015, with such large sample sizes we tend to look for evidence of long-term trends to represent a notable change, and in our case the data back to 2013 show broadly consistent levels of overall satisfaction – although there has been a slight decline over time in the proportion who are ‘very satisfied’. Satisfaction levels do vary by demographics, which we have examined below, as well as assessing the aspects of the experience that most strongly link to satisfaction.



Base: all respondents; 2013 (17,090); 2014 (15,046); 2015 (15,129); 2016 (15,221).

2.2 Analysis: what makes a satisfied learner

In order to provide further insight into which aspects of the student experience have the strongest links with overall satisfaction, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted, using modelling built and calculated by YouthSight.⁴ The analysis identified the strength of the relationships between overall satisfaction and a wide range of questions in the survey in order to highlight which questions representing the student experience have the strongest link with satisfaction, and the strength of those links.

Top 10 correlations with overall satisfaction			
Measure	Pearson correlation value	Strength of correlation with overall satisfaction ⁵	% agree score
Experience matched expectations	0.537	Strong	76
Teaching staff helpful and supportive	0.505	Strong	65
Teaching staff gave you useful feedback	0.485	Moderate	53
Teaching staff motivated you to do your best work	0.482	Moderate	51
Teaching staff made their subjects interesting	0.477	Moderate	54
Teaching staff put a lot of time into commenting on your work	0.441	Moderate	35
Teaching staff were open to having further discussions about your work	0.420	Moderate	54
Teaching staff maintain and improve their teaching skills on a regular basis	0.419	Moderate	56
Teaching staff gave you feedback in time to help with the next assignment	0.416	Moderate	51
Teaching staff maintain and improve their subject knowledge on a regular basis	0.407	Moderate	78

What is striking about the strongest correlations is that teaching quality (e.g. continuous professional development in teaching and the role of teaching staff) has a major impact on satisfaction, representing nine of the ten strongest correlations with overall satisfaction – meaning that a student completing the survey who rates their teaching strongly is statistically likely to be satisfied overall.

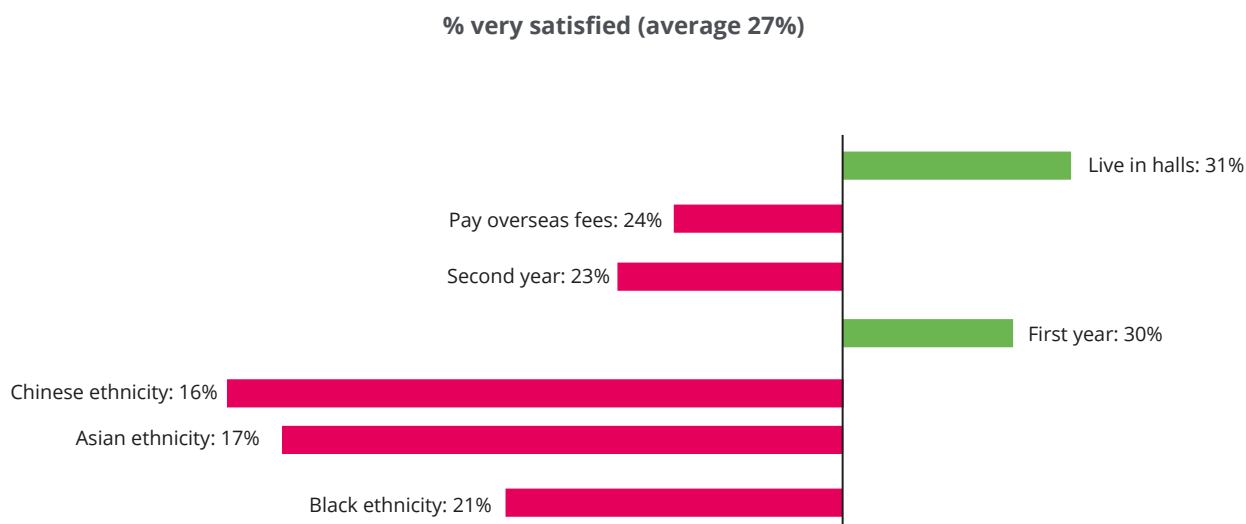
It should be pointed out that the survey did contain a large number of questions on teaching quality, but it is still notable that these questions emerged from the correlation work ahead of any other aspects measured – such as, for example, independent study, class sizes or speed of marking assignments.

The one question in the top 10 which does not relate specifically to teaching quality – in fact the strongest correlation overall – is whether a student's expectations are met. This makes intuitive sense in that we may expect a student whose expectations are met to be satisfied, but meeting expectations is in itself likely to be achieved by delivering positively across the range of the student experience.

4. Full methodology and results available on request from www.youthsight.com

5. Statistical definitions using Pearson's correlation guidelines where 0.50+ is strong, 0.30 to 0.50 is moderate and 0.10 to 0.30 is weak. All correlations are significant at 99%.

2.3 Profile: the most and least satisfied student groups



*All ethnicities in this chart are UK domiciled

As well as different aspects of the experience impacting on satisfaction, there are also particular types of student who are most and least likely to be satisfied – potentially due to their expectations, but also their experiences. In terms of accommodation, students who live in halls are most satisfied – and we explore in more detail later on how accommodation can have an impact on access to a full range of opportunities and support networks. There is also a real contrast between first and second year students – providing further evidence of the “second year slump”.

Demographically, the most significant aspect is ethnicity. For this question, we have specifically looked at ethnic differences between UK-domiciled students, so we can identify any differences as distinct from the lower levels of satisfaction among students who pay overseas fees (as also shown above).

Our analysis shows that UK students of Black, Asian, or Chinese ethnicity are much less likely than average to be very satisfied with their experience. A potential explanation for this can be found when we examine the aspects of the experience with highest impact on satisfaction – teaching quality and meeting expectations – and identify that Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students are consistently least likely to be satisfied on these key aspects. The results imply that there are demographic characteristics which may impact on different expectations among BME students, as well as differences in how they perceive their experience.

Identifying where needs differ in terms of interaction and support in order to cater adequately for them is key to achieving consistent perceptions of an excellent experience.

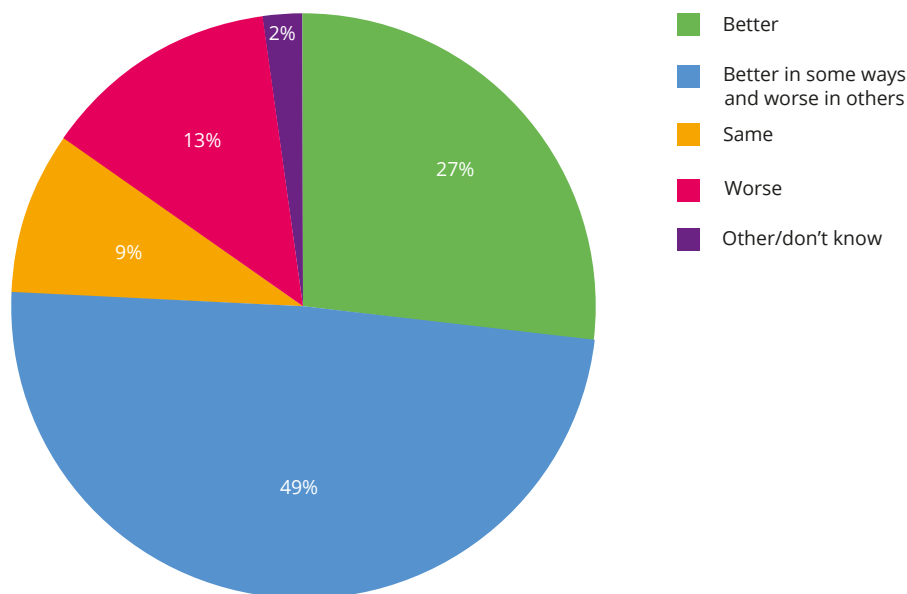
With reference to the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), any propensity for differences among different ethnic groups, as described above, could have significant implications for individual institutional scores. Accordingly, it will be critical that individual institutional results are contextualised properly to take into account major differences in their student cohort, and ensure that demographic profile alone does not lead to variances in scores between institutions.

6. Thompson, S., Milsom, C., Zaitseva, E., Stewart, M., Darwent, S. and Yorke, M. (2013) *The Forgotten Year: Tackling the Second Year Slump* [Internet]. York: LJMU and Higher Education Academy, p.4. Available from: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/projects/liverpool_john_moores_ntfs_2010_project_final_report.pdf [Accessed 27 May 2016].

2.4 Experience versus expectations

As in previous years, students were asked how their experience to date had matched up to their original expectations. The results show that the experience rarely matched their expectations exactly; indicating the challenge for undergraduates to obtain fully formed and realistic expectations of what university will be like. What is encouraging, however, is that there are more than twice as many students who felt their experience had exceeded their expectations (27%) than those who had been disappointed (13%).

Whether expectations were met

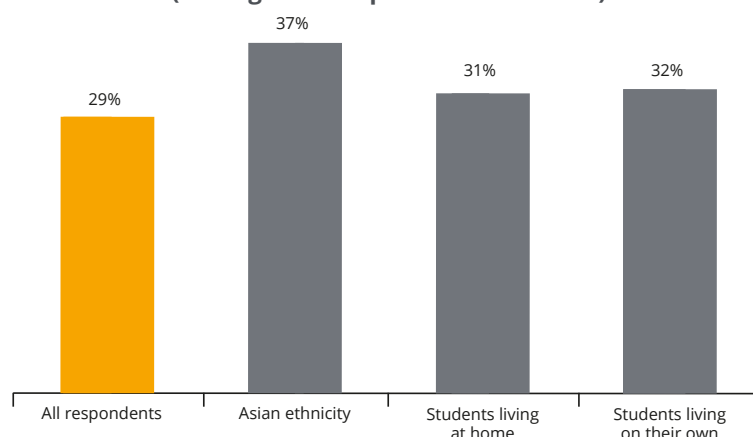


Base: all respondents (15,221).

Among the types of students most likely to be disappointed, students from Asian ethnic backgrounds stood out, with 17% feeling that their experience had not lived up to expectations. The type of accommodation, and environment, was also linked to meeting expectations, with students who live at home with their family, or live on their own, being more likely to feel their experience had not matched what they expected.

One of the specific reasons for expectations being met, which explains the differences between student groups, is the support provided to study independently. Overall, among students whose expectations were not met (in full or in part), 29% cited a lack of support for independent study as one of the reasons for this, but this was markedly higher among Asian students and those who live at home or on their own. This is particularly striking when we find that the large majority of Asian students (53%) do live at home, compared to just 23% overall. As well as the potential social benefits of living in close proximity to their peers, the analysis here provides evidence that students who do not live with their peers may be missing out on some of the study support networks that living in halls or shared houses provide, and that institutions need to consider how to ensure that students living with family or on their own do not feel isolated from either the social experience or the peer-to-peer support that can benefit study.

Groups most likely to feel they were not supported in independent study (among those expectations not met)

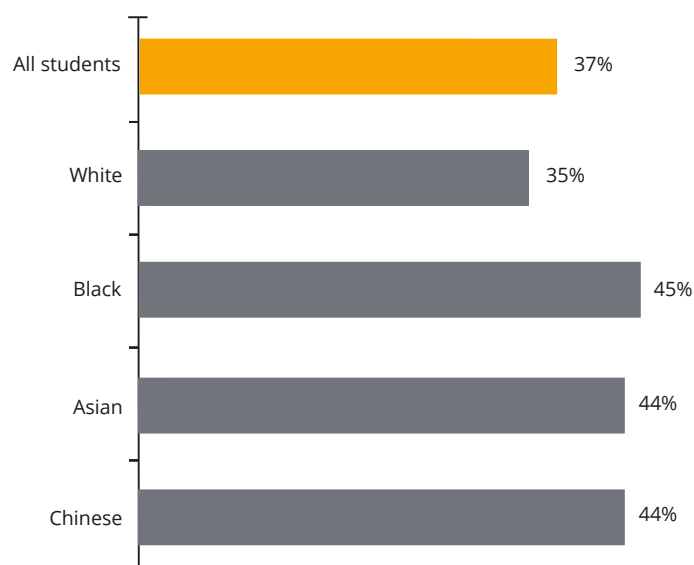


Base: all respondents whose expectations were not met (9,449), Asian ethnicity (956), Living at home (2,197), Living on their own (378). (Please note: ethnicity in this analysis is based on all students and not limited to those domiciled in the UK.)

Given the importance of independent study in contributing to students engagement, as identified by HEA's UK Engagement Survey (UKES), and the generally positive scores for how teaching staff encourage independent study (see later section on teaching quality)⁷, it is important to ensure that students who live away from their peers do not feel isolated or disadvantaged in this area.

Once again, the single most cited reason for expectations not being met in the 2016 survey was that students felt they did not put in enough effort themselves. This finding is illuminating in that it shows how students recognise their own limitations and the role they need to play in a fully rounded university experience. The finding echoes results from engagement studies which illustrate how the effort that students put in has a positive impact on the development of their skills, and has implications for how universities can encourage students to push themselves more by communicating the benefits of a more involved and rewarding experience.

Expectations not met because student did not put enough effort in themselves-ethnic differences



Base: all whose expectations were not met (9,449), White (7,246), Black (312), Asian (956), Chinese (315). (Please note: ethnicity in this analysis is based on all students and not limited to those domiciled in the UK.)

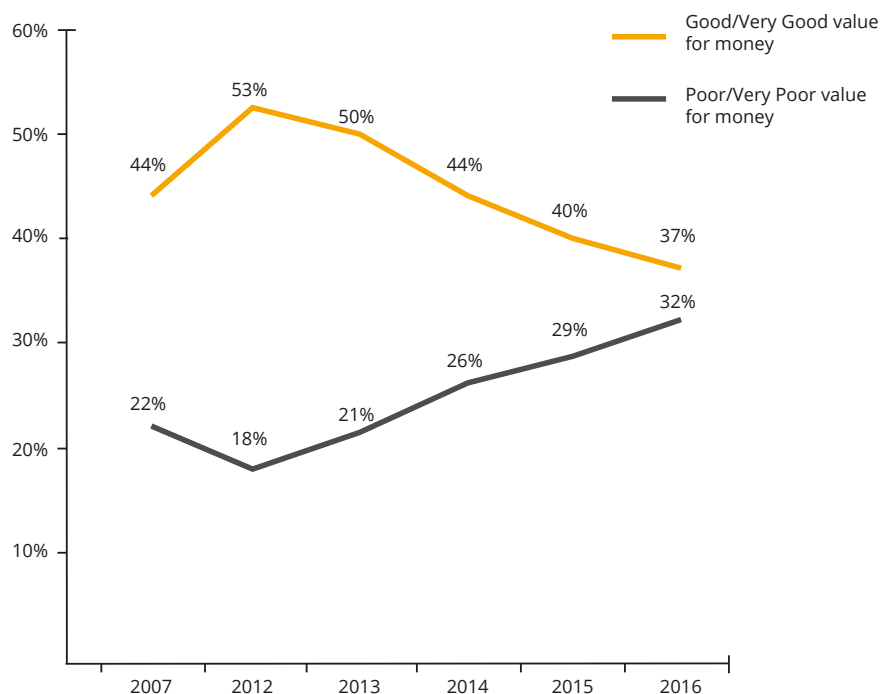
7. HEA (2015) UKES 2015: *Students' Perceptions of Skills Development* [Internet]. York: Higher Education Academy. Available from: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/ukes_2015.pdf. [Accessed 20 May 2016].

The main differences on this aspect are by ethnicity – with students of non-white ethnicity more likely to feel they could/should have put more effort in themselves.

3. Value for money

3.1 Trends over time

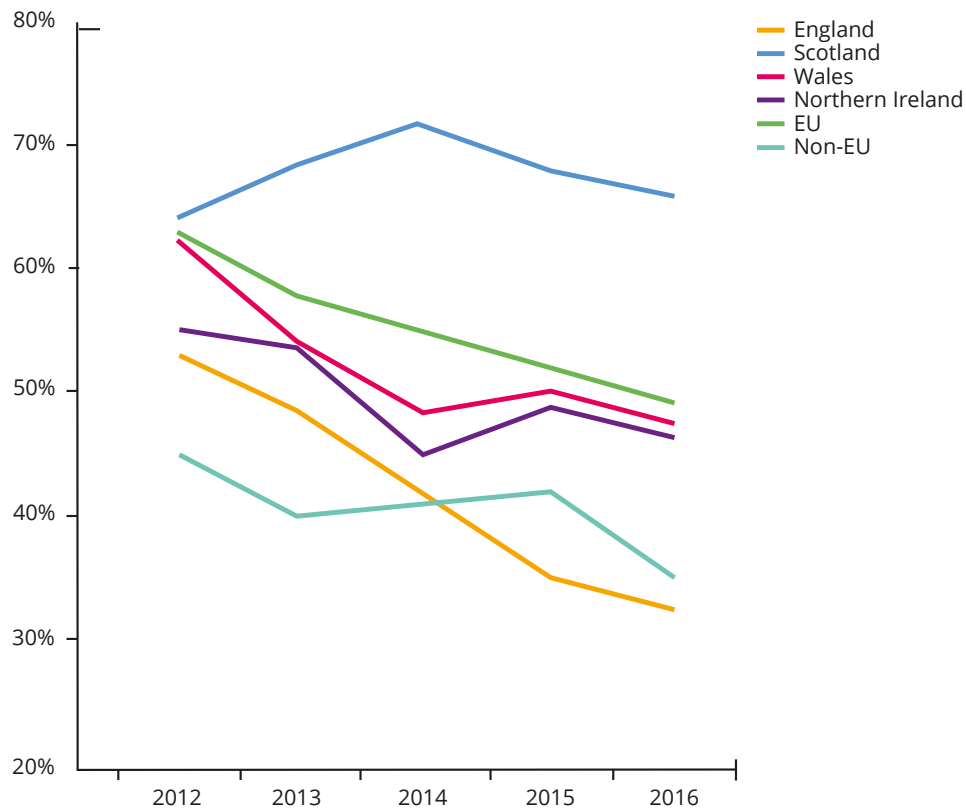
Although levels of satisfaction, and overall experience (versus expectations) have remained consistent, one of the key year-on-year differences is that student perception of value for money has fallen significantly;⁸ from 40% in 2015 to just 37% this year. This decline is given further weight when we take into account trends over recent years, which clearly highlight falling perceptions over a period of time since 2012.



As might be expected, and seen in previous years, there is a major difference in perception of value for money between the four parts of the UK, with a large majority of students from Scotland believing they are receiving value for money, just under half of students from Wales and Northern Ireland, and only around a third of students from England.

8. Statistically significant at the 99% confidence level. This represents a genuine difference that cannot be attributed to chance in 99 out of 100 cases.

Value for money over time by home nation



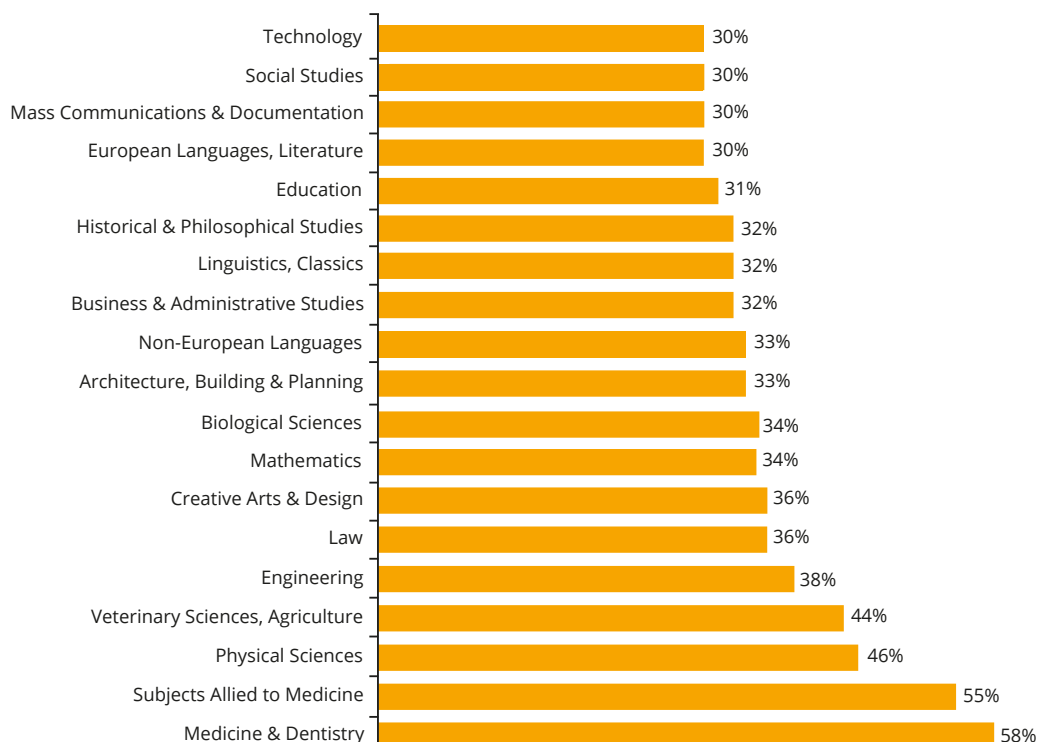
Base: all respondents in each nation – 2016 England (11,597), 2016 Scotland (945), 2016 Wales (520), 2016 Northern Ireland (312), 2016 EU (1,051), 2016 Non-EU (796).
Value for money defined as Good/Very Good value for money combined

Interestingly, the downward trend across the years is broadly replicated across the nations, even though it is most pronounced in England. This decline is likely to be partly explained by the fact that students are incurring much larger debts than in the past even though universities' teaching income has not increased commensurately.

Looking at students from overseas, there is a big difference between those from the EU (outside the UK), who are more positive and those from outside the EU, who pay the highest fees and are less likely to feel they have received value.

Different subject areas involve different levels of contact hours, and different combinations of resources that, together with the overall quality of teaching, could be said to impact on perceived value for money. With this in mind, comparison of perceived value by subject area throws light on some notable differences.

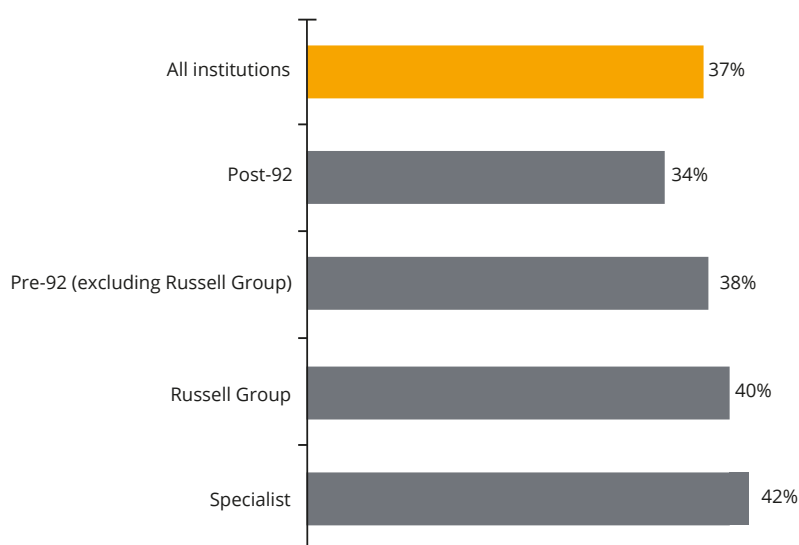
Value for money 2016 by subject area



Base: all respondents (15,221), by JACS 3.0 subject areas. Value for money defined as Good/Very Good value for money combined

Differences between subject areas are striking, with more than half of Medicine and Dentistry students generally content on this measure, compared to less than one-third of Technology students. In addition to Technology, which scores a lot lower than other Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects, low perceived value for money tends to predominate within Social Sciences.

Value for money 2016 by institution type



Base: all institutions (15,221), Post-92 (7,094), Pre-92 (3,327), Russell Group (4,219), Specialist (581). Good/Very Good value for money

In terms of types of institutions, there are clear differences, with specialist institutions and Russell Group universities achieving more positive value perceptions than post-92 institutions in particular. This is in spite of post-92 institutions tending to have smaller class sizes, and strong scores for teaching quality – but is potentially linked, among other things, to these institutions having lower contact hours (see below).

3.2 Analysis: what drives value for money perceptions

As with overall satisfaction, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted across a range of questions in the survey to assess which aspects of the student experience are the greatest drivers of value-for-money perceptions.

Top 10 correlations with Good/ Very Good value for money			
Measure	Pearson correlation value	Strength of correlation with overall satisfaction	% agree score
Experience has matched expectations	0.386	Moderate	76
If you knew what you do now, would you have chosen a different course	-0.35	Moderate	33
Teaching staff were helpful and supportive	0.348	Moderate	65
Teaching staff motivated you to do your best work	0.33	Moderate	51
I am satisfied with the amount of time-tabled sessions I have had	0.325	Moderate	64
Teaching staff made their subjects interesting	0.324	Moderate	54
Teaching staff were poor at explaining things	-0.303	Moderate	9
Teaching staff maintain and improve their teaching skills on a regular basis	0.294	Weak	56
Teaching staff gave you useful feedback	0.293	Weak	53
Teaching staff maintain and improve their subject knowledge on a regular basis	0.293	Weak	78

As with the overall satisfaction correlation, teaching quality measures predominate – including ratings of teaching staff and how they continue to develop professionally. However, a notable finding in this analysis is the importance of timetabled sessions in driving value for money, which is the fifth strongest driver among all the questions tested across the survey.

By contrast, although the questions on class sizes were tested in the same model, they were actually found to have a weak relationship with both overall satisfaction and value for money.

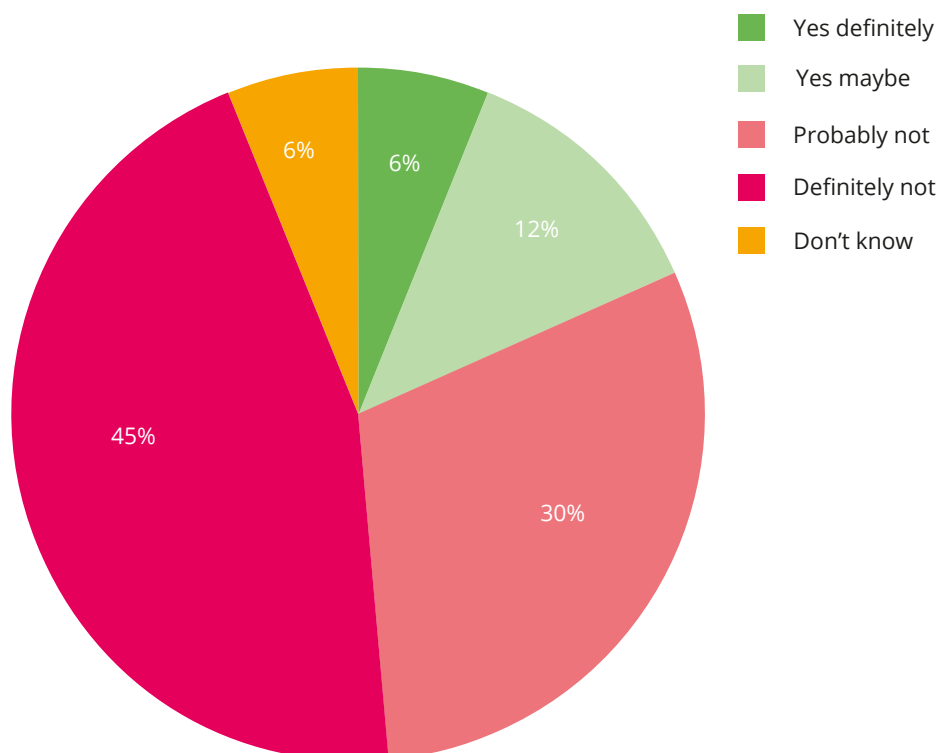
Narrowing this analysis down to a discussion of the merits of smaller classes versus higher contact hours is, by nature, overly simplistic as the needs, practices and resources available vary within disciplines. However, it does raise an important point – that even though students do recognise the learning benefits of smaller classes, greater contact hours show a greater link with perceived value for money.

We should also point out that correlation levels are not as strong as for overall satisfaction, which we would expect as value for money is typically a more nuanced perception related to a range of issues.

3.3 Information on how fees are spent

Despite (and perhaps linked to) falling perceptions of value for money, the majority of students do not feel they receive enough information on how their fees are spent. Just 18% think they have been given enough information – exactly matching the results from 2015 when this question was first introduced.

Been given enough information about how fees are spent



Base: all respondents (15,221).

Although on the face of it there has been no progress made in this area since last year, it is interesting that first year students are significantly⁹ more likely than second or third years to feel they have been given enough information (1st years, 21%; 2nd and 3rd years, 17%), which could potentially be a result of them being exposed to different, or newly-developed marketing material upon applying for university.

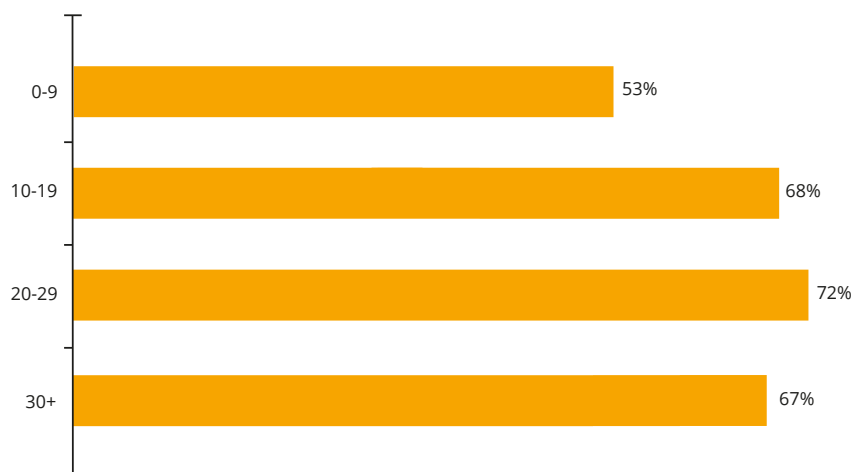
4. Workload and class size

4.1 Workload

Hours in an average week ¹⁰	2016 (15,221)	2015 (15,129)	2014 (15,046)	2013 (17,090)	2012 (9,058)
Independent study hours	14.26	14.53	N/A	N/A	N/A
Timetabled (contact) hours	13.49	13.32	13.04	13.06	13.79
Timetabled (contact) hours attended	12.19	12.20	11.99	12.16	12.77
Hours working outside the university	12.04	12.49	12.63	15.61	10.75
Total workload ¹¹	32.88	33.07	N/A	N/A	N/A

There has been little change in reported workload over time, although contact hours appear to be increasing slightly since 2014. As we have seen before, evidence points towards students being more comfortable with a higher workload, and more specifically longer contact hours. However, there appears to be a limit to this, as satisfaction with contact hours tails off above 30 hours per week.

Satisfaction with scheduled contact hours



Base: 0-9 hours (4, 395), 10-19 hours (8, 006), 20-29 hours (2, 097), 30+ hours (723)

Despite the implication that contact hours, at the lower end, are fewer than would be expected, a high proportion of students (40% overall) admit that they did not attend all the contact hours in their timetable, although as might be expected this is less prevalent (28%) among those with under ten contact hours.

9. Statistically significant difference at the 99% confidence level. This represents a genuine difference that cannot be attributed to chance in 99 out of 100 cases.

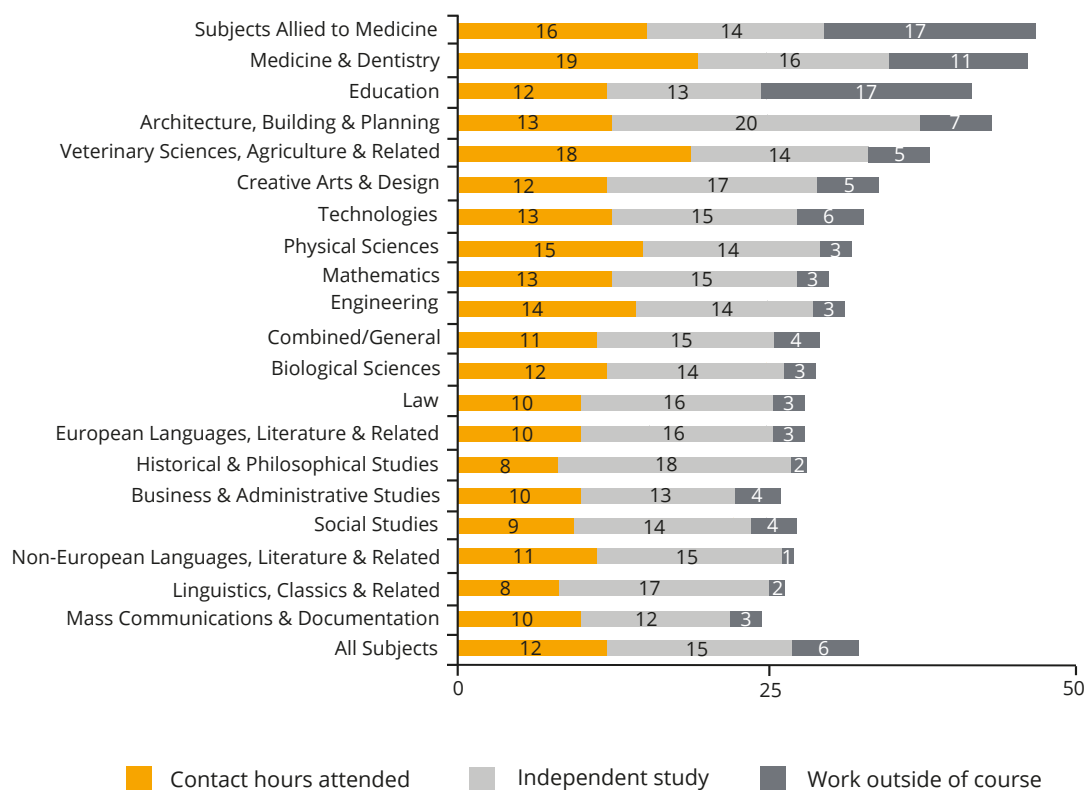
10. Trimmed means have been used – discounting zero and excluding high outlying responses.

11. This is the average (trimmed mean) of each respondent's total workload, so is not intended to equate to the sum of the figures in this chart.

Among the various reasons given for not attending timetabled sessions, one of the main reasons was that students felt they could get the notes online instead – this was particularly the case for Russell Group universities. Although the use of online platforms such as Moodle or Turnitin can play a key role in accessibility of learning materials and delivering learning through new technologies, their potential impact on physical attendance needs to be considered.

Again, there are some strong differences in overall workload and contact hours reported by subject area. Students in Medicine and Dentistry report that they have more than twice as many contact hours, on average, as students in History or Linguistics, while overall workload is highest in Medicine and lowest in Communications.

Total workload hours by subject



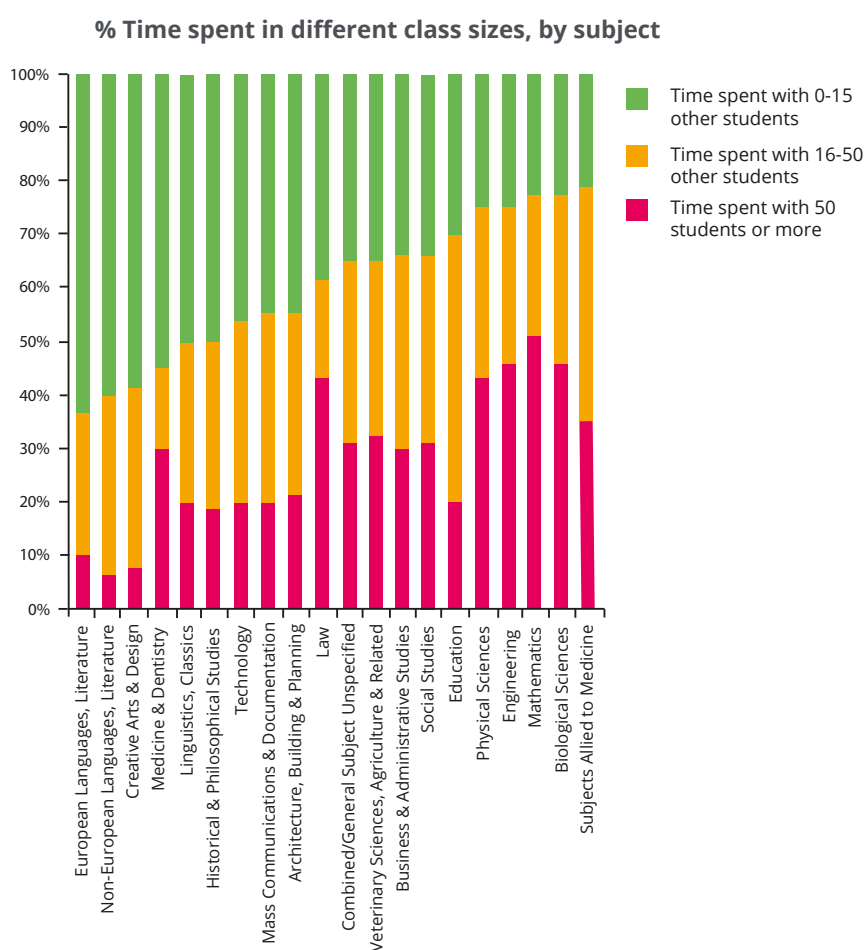
Base: all respondents (15,221), by JACS 3.0 subject areas.

Although there are some differences, it is striking that the ranking here shows a similar pattern to the ranking of subject areas on providing value for money, with health-related subjects having the highest contact hours, and workload, as well as the highest perception of value for money, contrasting with Languages and Social Studies towards the opposite end of the scale. An exception to this is Technology, which has the lowest perceived value for money but relatively high contact hours, indicating there are other factors at play impacting on value perceptions for this subject.

Hours in an average week ¹² - Institution type	Russell Group (4,219)	Pre-92 excluding Russell Group (3,327)	Post-92 (7,094)	Specialist (581)
Independent study hours	16.15	14.08	13	16.68
Timetabled (contact) hours	14.33	13.21	12.94	15.8
Hours working outside the university	11.41	11.12	12.71	11.06
Total workload ¹³	33.07	29.79	30.93	37.24

As well as subject differences, there are also some institutional differences, with evidence of higher workload hours at specialist and Russell Group institutions. This is particularly the case with regards to timetabled contact hours and independent study. Again, although we would expect there to be other factors impacting on value for money and the overall experience, it is striking that the institution types with the highest workload also have the highest value for money perceptions.

4.2 Class size

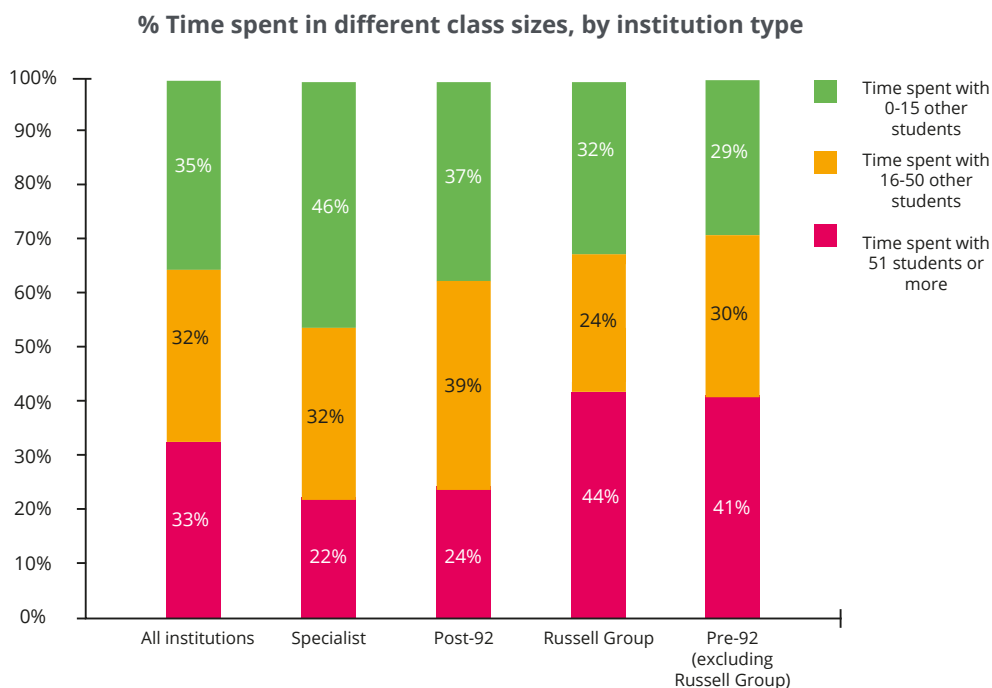


Base: all respondents (15,221), by JACS 3.0 subject areas.

12. Trimmed means have been used – discounting zero and excluding high outlying responses.

13. This is the average (trimmed mean) of each respondent's total workload, so is not intended to equate to the sum of the figures in this chart.

Broadly, there is an inverse relationship between contact hours and class sizes. Arts and Languages students tend to spend more of their contact time in smaller classes – but their contact hours are fewer. By contrast, scientific and health-related subjects have much higher contact hours but a larger proportion in larger classes.



Base: all institutions (15,221), Specialist (581), Post-92 (7,094), Russell Group (4,219), Pre-92 (3,327).

Looking at institutions, we see a major difference in particular between pre-92 and post-92, with evidence of smaller class sizes at post-92 and specialist institutions.

When asked how they benefit educationally, students are more likely to say they benefit from attending classes with fewer students, than more students. However, as evidenced above, our correlation analysis implies that although students recognise the benefits, smaller class sizes are not one of the main drivers of a positive overall experience.

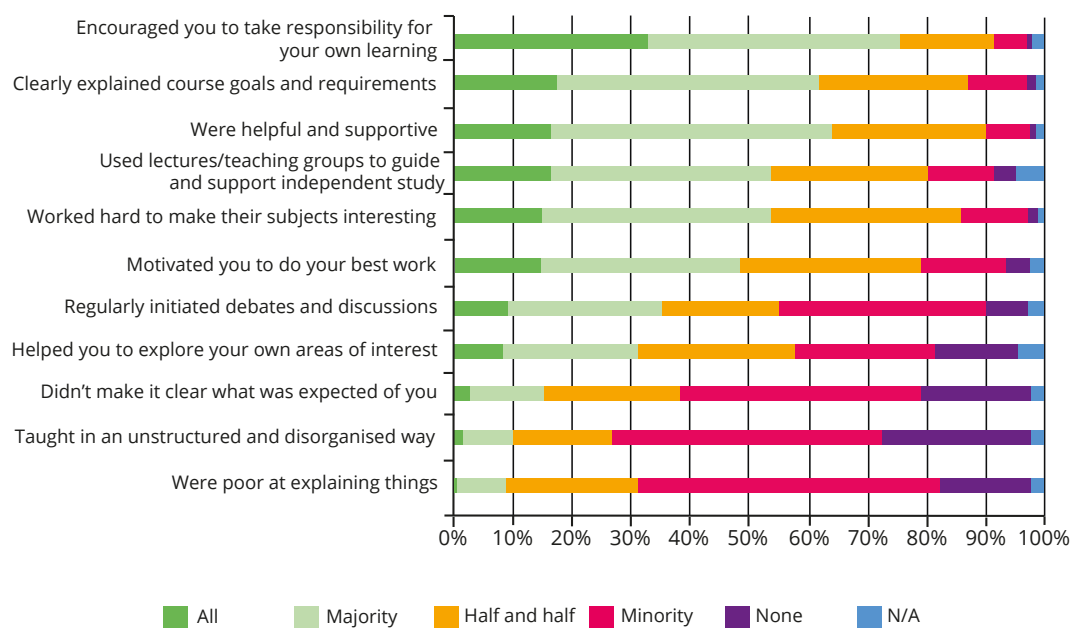
5. Quality of teaching and learning

5.1 Perceptions of the quality of teaching staff

Teaching quality is central to the current policy agenda, and this survey features a large number of established measures in this area. As highlighted earlier, our correlation analysis identified many of these aspects as being among the most important drivers of satisfaction, as well as value for money. In general, the scores on teaching quality are positive, with three-quarters of students feeling that most of their teaching staff encourage them to take responsibility for their own learning, a characteristic previously identified by the UK Engagement Survey¹⁴ as being crucial to undergraduate engagement levels.

Students are also positive in feeling that their teaching staff clearly explain course goals, and are helpful and supportive – both overall and in guiding independent study. Continuing in a positive vein, only 9% feel that the majority of their lecturers are poor at explaining things, and just one in ten feel that they are taught by a majority of staff who teach in an unstructured way.

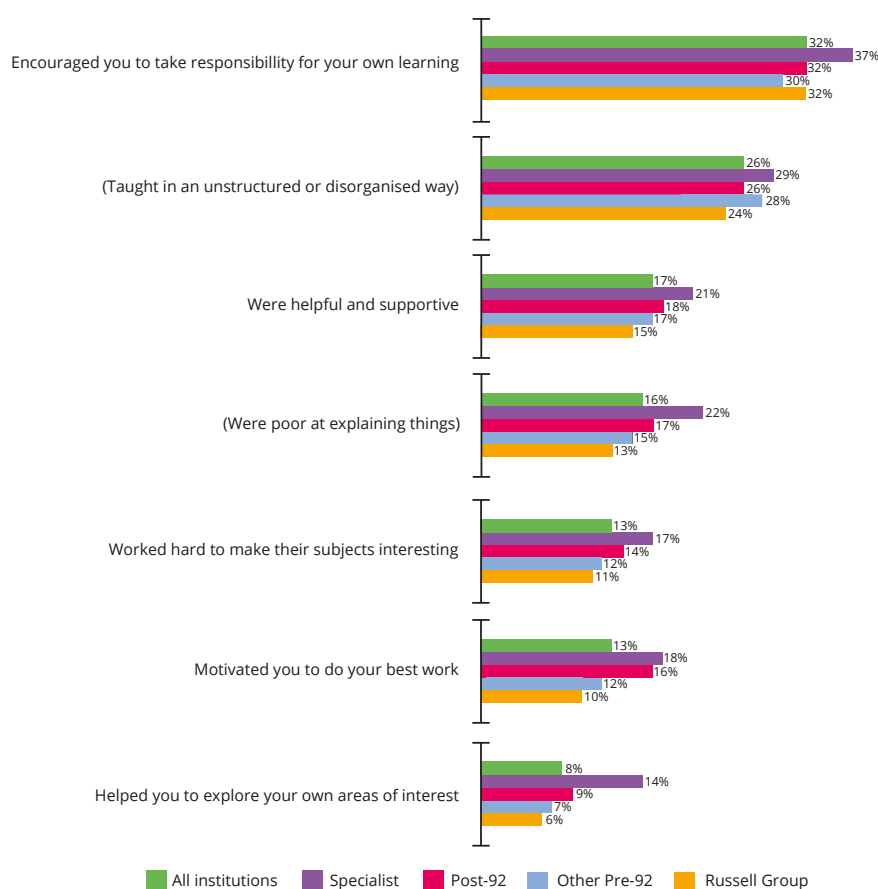
14. HEA (2015) *UKES 2015: Students' Perceptions of Skills Development* [Internet]. York: Higher Education Academy. Available from: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/ukes_2015.pdf [Accessed 20 May 2015].



Base: all respondents (15,221).

Less positively, only one in three feel that most staff help them explore their own areas of interest, a characteristic related to independent learning that also received a poor score last year.

Teaching quality - key differences by institution type



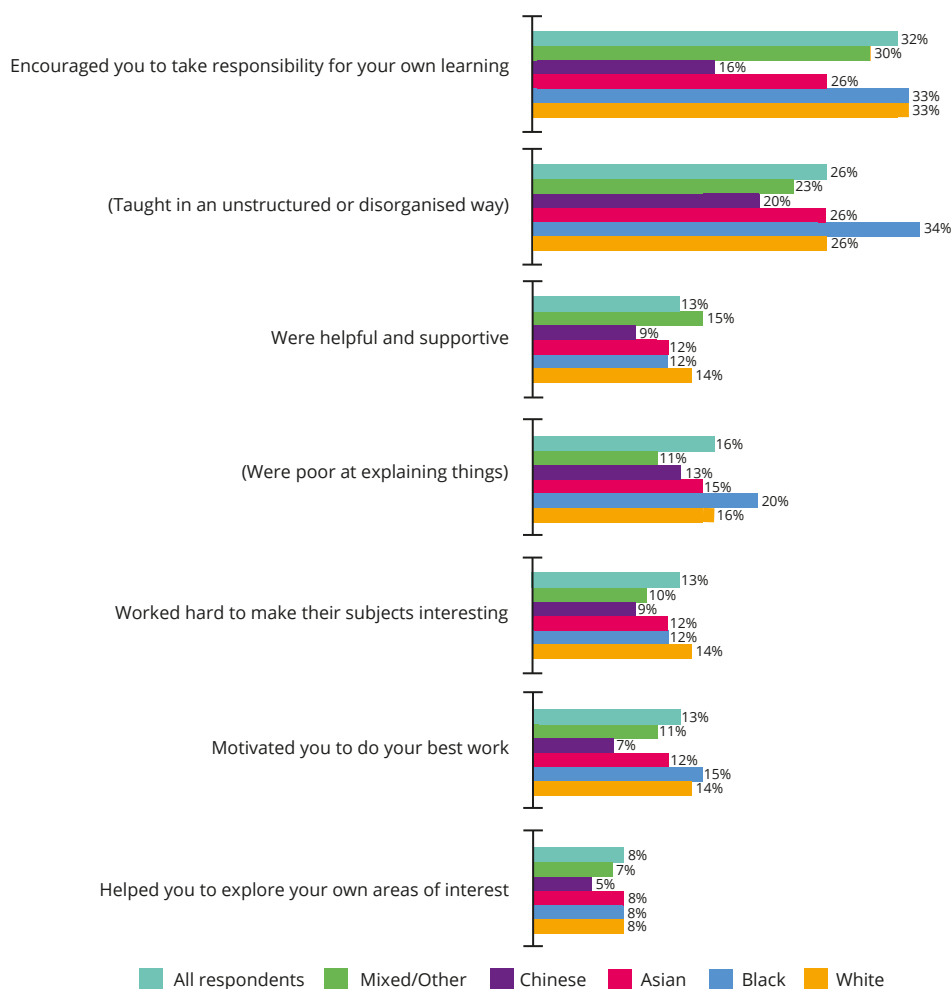
Base: all institutions (15,221), Specialist (581), Post-92 (7,094), Pre-92 (3,327), Russell Group (4,219).

% who said all their teaching staff demonstrated these characteristics/none of these characteristics for the negative statements in brackets.

Comparison of institutions on some aspects of teaching quality provides a number of key differences. On aspects such as helping students explore their own areas of interest, working hard to make subjects interesting, and motivating respondents to do their best work, it is the specialist institutions that stand out positively, whereas Russell Group institutions collectively do not score as well.

These measures represent only a specific view of teaching quality from the students' point of view, and there are a range of other factors that can and should be taken into account, such as the balance of summative versus formative assessments, and the quality of feedback. However, there can be little doubt that the results point towards different approaches and priorities being given by institutions to different aspects of teaching. There are also key differences in perceptions of teaching by gender, with males tending to be more critical, particularly when rating their teaching for being structured and organised.

Teaching quality - key differences by ethnicity



Base: all respondents (15,221), Mixed (732), Chinese (450), Asian (1,480), Black (486), White (11,832). (Please note: ethnicity in this analysis is based on all students and not limited to those domiciled in the UK.) % who said all their teaching staff demonstrated these characteristics/none of these characteristics for the negative statements in brackets.

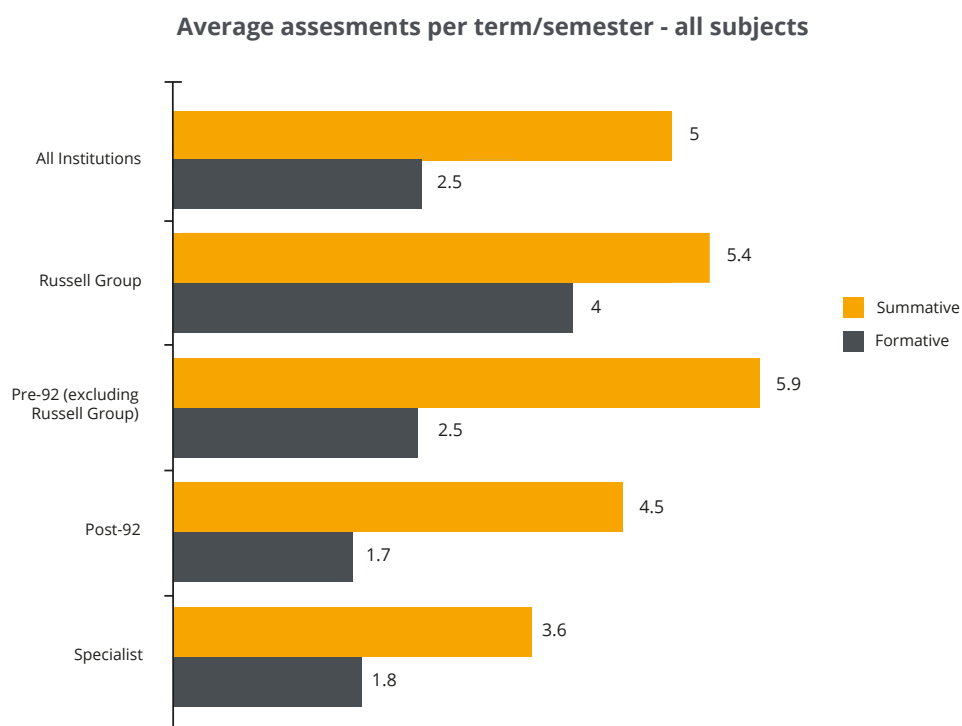
As well as gender differences, there are also marked differences in perceptions of teaching quality between ethnic groups. Consistently, Asian and Chinese students have lower perceptions of their teaching than their White counterparts. In particular, students of Chinese ethnicity are less likely to feel that teaching staff motivate them to do their best work, or help them to explore their own interests.

As identified in the correlation analysis, these perceptions map strongly to differences in overall satisfaction, with BME students, and in particular those of Chinese ethnicity, reporting relatively low levels of satisfaction with their course.

5.2 Volume of assignments

The survey asked in detail about the number of assignments students were given that contributed to their grade or degree class (summative assessment) compared with the number of assignments that did not contribute to their grade but were designed to aid improvement (formative assessment). Previous research published by the HEA has identified the key role that formative assessment can play in the quality of learning, and the survey results here identify big differences by types of institution in the balance between the two.

On average, students report completing five summative assignments per term/semester, and 2.5 formative assignments – a ratio of 2:1. What is striking, however, is how institution types differ. There is real evidence of students being set more assignments in total at more established universities – Russell Group and other pre-92, but the Russell Group stands out for achieving a much more balanced ratio between formative and summative testing (a ratio of 1.35:1).

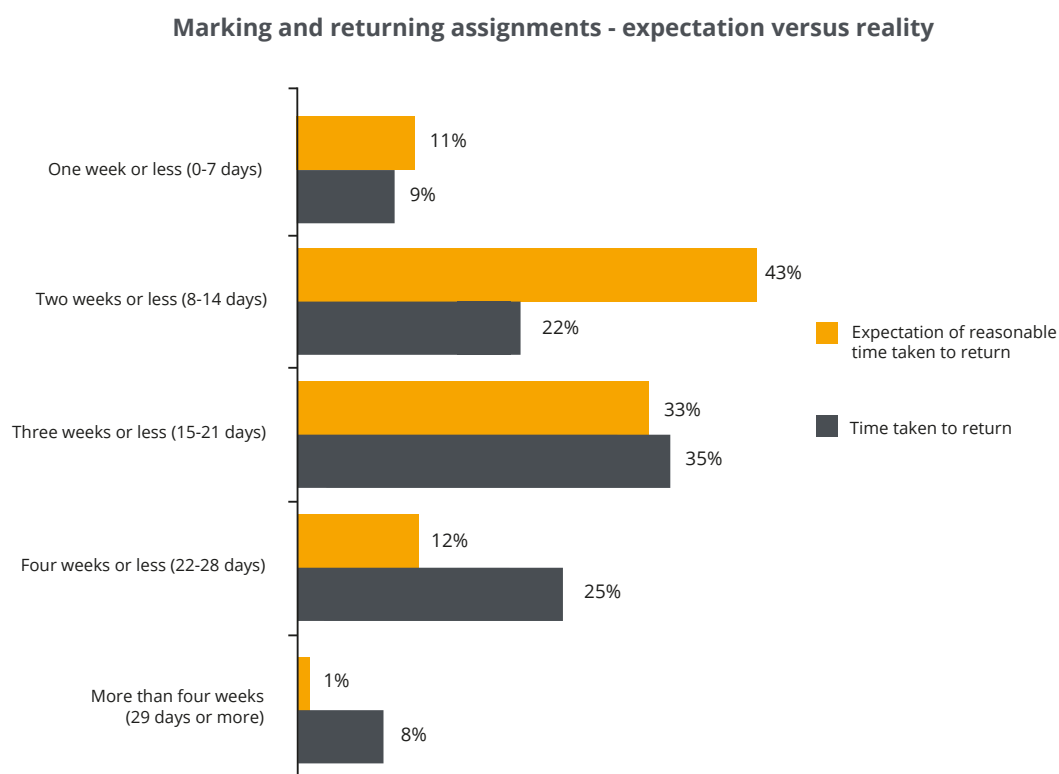


Base: all institutions (15,221), Russell Group (4,219), Pre-92 (3,327), Post-92 (7,094), Specialist (581). Mean average calculated from all responses including respondents citing zero assessments.

5.3 Perceptions of feedback

Students were asked about the time it took for their assignments to be marked and handed back to them, and as a new question for 2016, how long they felt would be reasonable – to facilitate analysis of whether student expectations are being met.

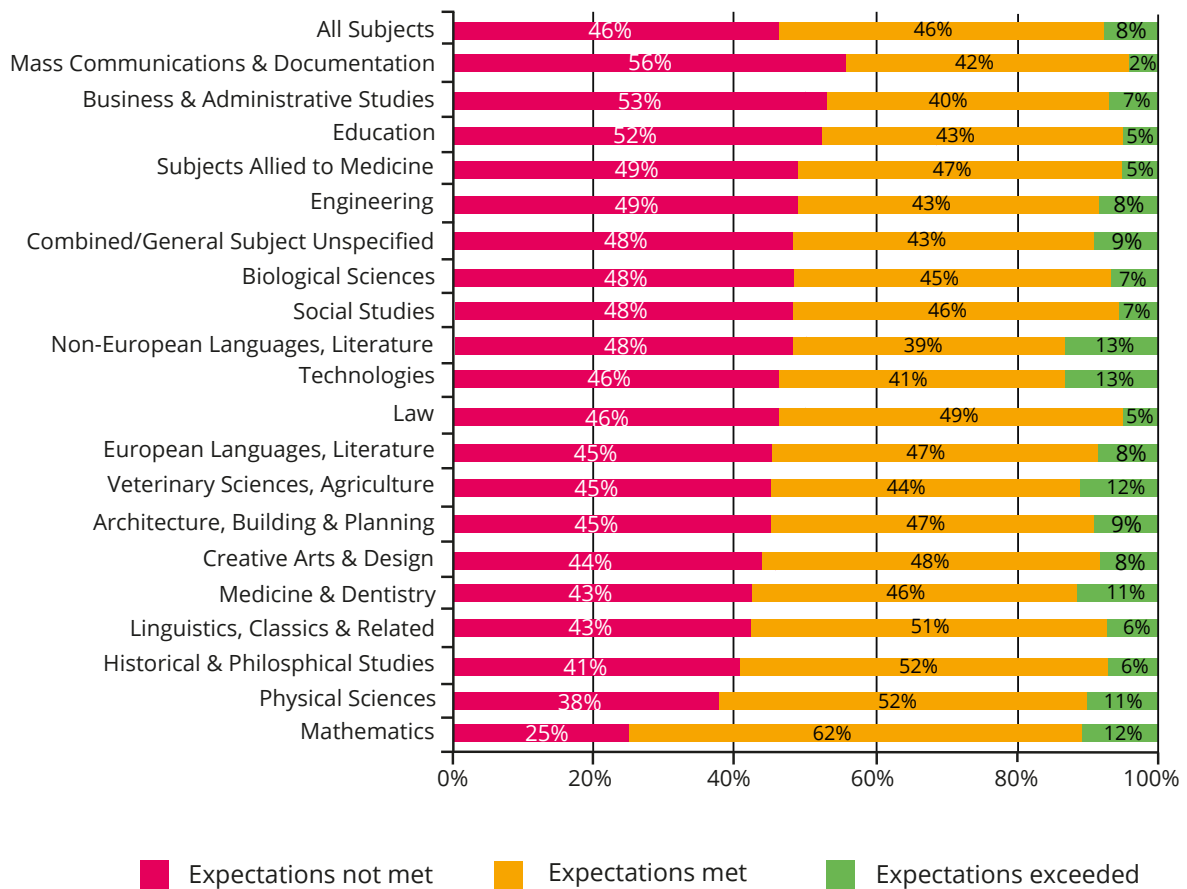
As shown below, expectations do not always match reality. There are major variations by institution, and subject area, but overall many students have their assignments returned to them after three weeks, with around two weeks often deemed to be reasonable.



Base: all respondents (15,221).

This gap does not suggest evidence of a widespread concern, however, as expectations around assignments are met or even exceeded more than half the time, but there are some subject areas, Business and Administrative Studies and Education in particular, where many students would appreciate more timely returning of assignments. By contrast, there is evidence of particularly good practice around timely marking and returning of assignments for Mathematics students across the sector.

Marking and returning assignments - subject differences

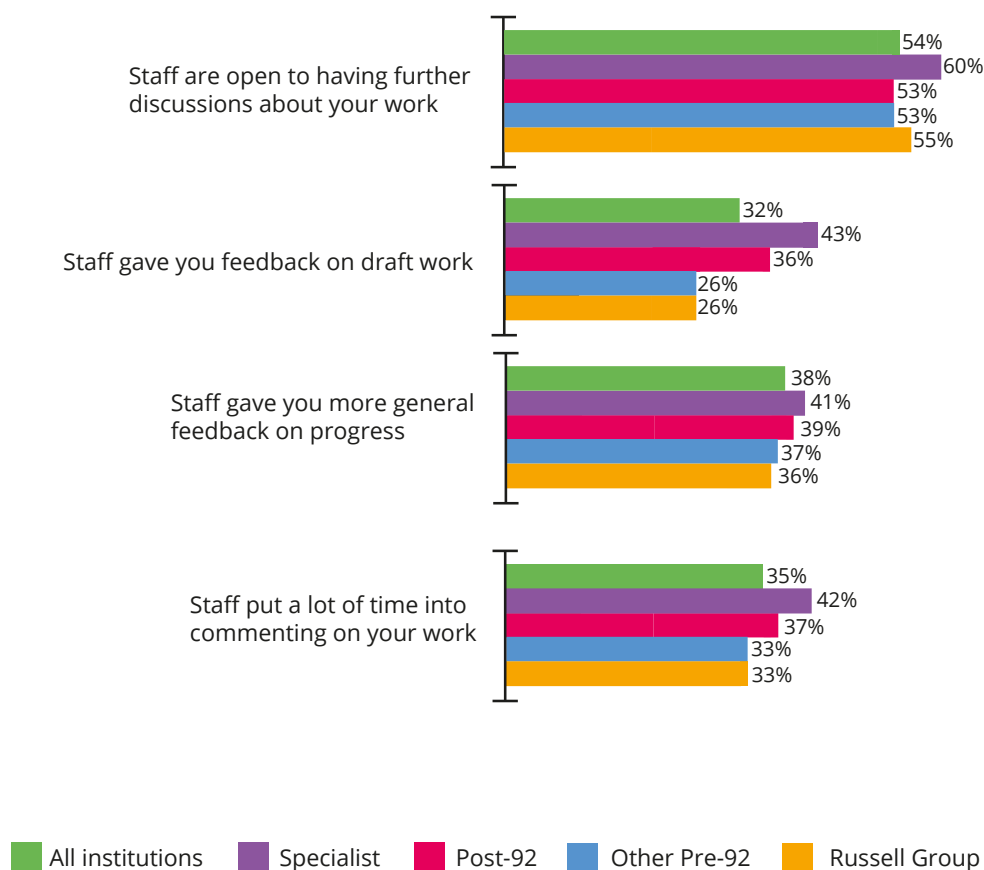


Base: all respondents (15,221), by JACS 3.0 subject areas.

Interestingly, although it is clearly laudable to aim for improvements in the speed of handing back assignments, there is evidence that at present, despite expectations sometimes not being met, this is not a major area of concern for students. In fact, even among those whose expectations on handing back assignments are not met, 79% are still satisfied overall with their learning experience.

As well as measuring the speed of feedback, the survey also measured the depth/quality of the feedback given.

Depth of feedback - key differences by institution type (all/majority of staff)



Base: all institutions (15,221), Specialist (581), Post-92 (7,094), Pre-92 (3,327), Russell Group (4,219).

As with overall perceptions of teaching, there were differences by type of institution. Again, specialist institutions received praise for the depth of feedback typically given. Interestingly, despite the Russell Group being more likely to provide a balance of formative/summative assessment, there is evidence from student perceptions that the feedback is not as detailed – a factor which could potentially be related to the volume of assignments going through the system.

5.4 Perceptions of staff/student interactions

Institution type	All institutions (15,221)	Russell Group (4,219)	Pre-92 excluding Russell Group (3,327)	Post-92 (7,094)	Specialist (581)
Whether have discussed work with academic staff outside timetabled hours since January	55%	54%	52%	57%	61%
How often have discussed work with academic staff outside timetabled hours since January (mean average including 0)	1.77 times	1.64 times	1.62 times	1.85 times	2.61 times
% feel they have sufficient access to academic staff outside timetabled hours	68%	72%	70%	65%	70%

Interactions with staff are key to a student's development. In the relatively short time between the beginning of 2016 and this research taking place (February to March), just over half of students had been able to discuss their work with academic staff outside timetabled sessions, equating to 1.77 occasions on average.

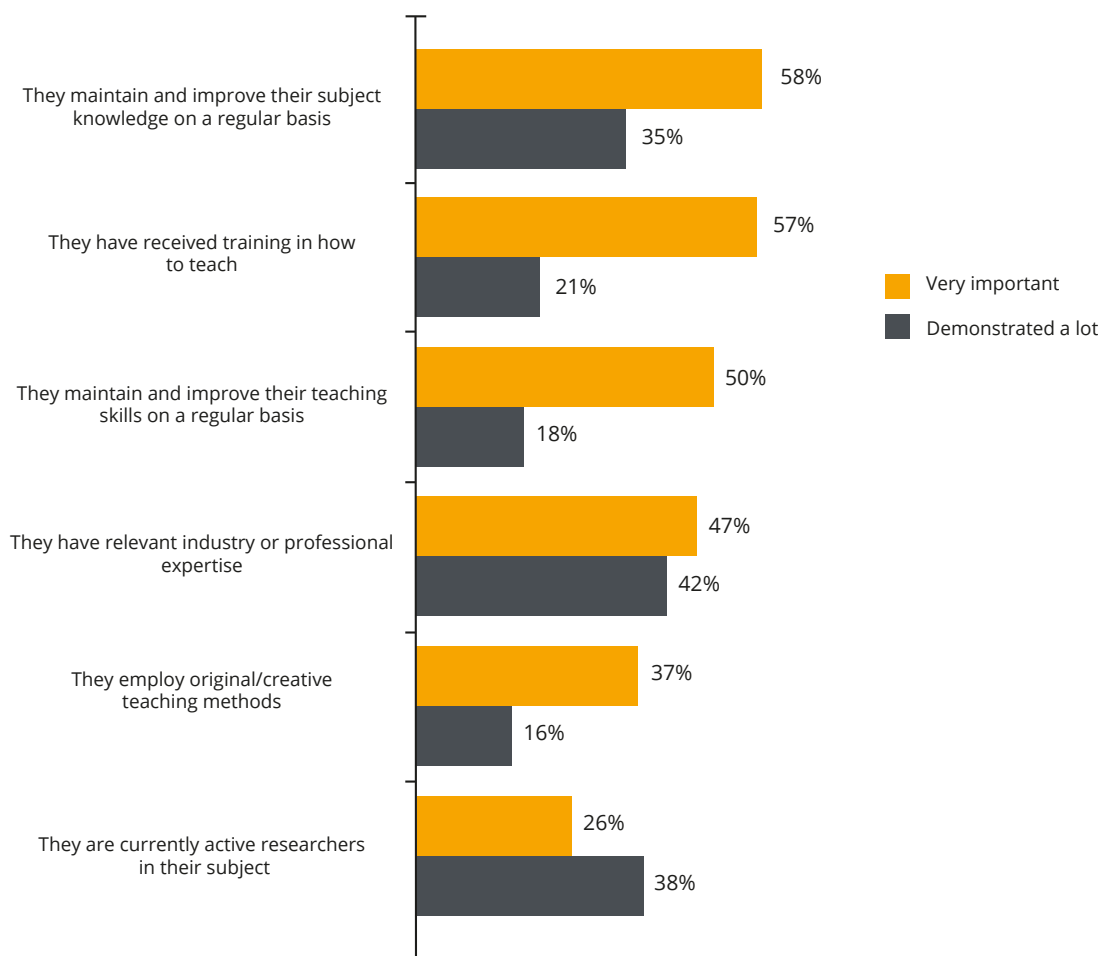
Although this number was markedly higher among specialist institutions (with little difference among other groups), it is interesting that students' satisfaction with this level of interaction did not tend to vary – and that more than two-thirds feel they have sufficient access to their lecturers and tutors.

5.5 Teaching staff characteristics

In light of the continued debate around the relative priority being given to teaching skills and research-led teaching, students were asked to rank the importance of different characteristics of teaching staff. In addition to the categories used last year – received training in how to teach, active researchers in their subject and relevant industry or professional expertise – three further categories were added this year, specifically to capture opinions of the importance of staff undergoing and demonstrating continuous professional development. Each of the statements was asked individually, so that students had the option to rate any and all of the items as being high or low in importance, rather than forcing a choice between them.

In addition to rating the importance of characteristics, a follow-up question was introduced to assess the extent to which students felt that each of these characteristics had been demonstrated by their teaching staff.

Importance versus demonstrating characteristics of teaching staff



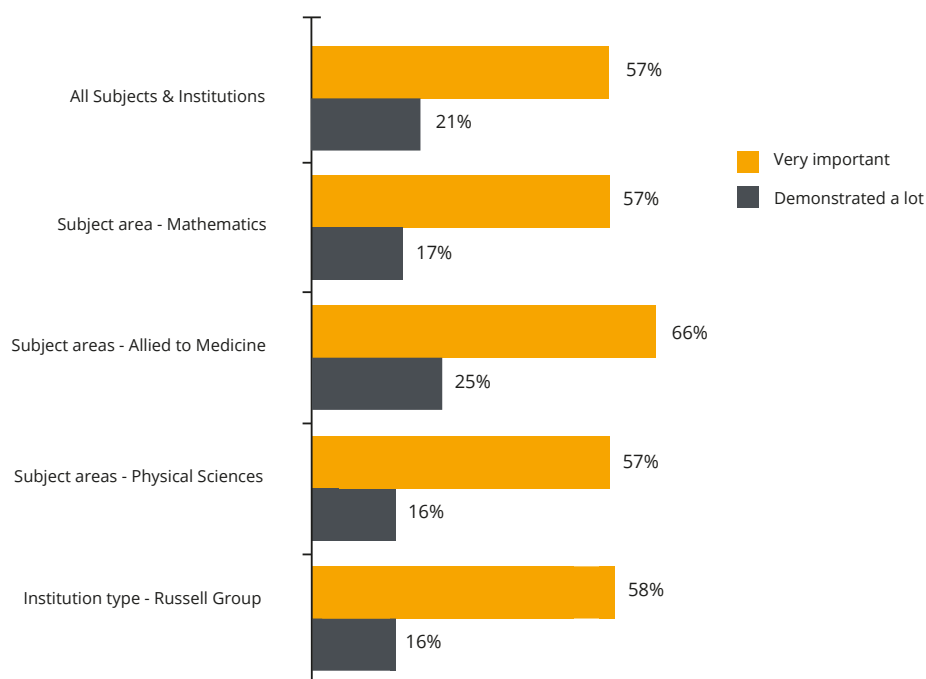
Base: all respondents (15,221).

Results demonstrate that students place a high level of importance on teaching skills and the continued professional development of teaching staff, both from a knowledge and skills perspective. By contrast, respondents place much less emphasis on the staff who teach them being research active.

The new question, on whether students feel these characteristics are demonstrated, pinpoints some significant gaps between expectations (relative importance) and reality (being demonstrated). The largest gaps are in demonstrating teaching training and evidence of regularly updating their teaching skills. By contrast, staff do tend to show evidence in their teaching of being active researchers, despite the lower perceived importance placed on this by the end user.

Looking specifically at “demonstrating training in how to teach”, analysis of the largest gaps highlights particular subject areas and types of institution where students perceive a lesser emphasis on teaching skills. Students at Russell Group institutions, and those studying Mathematics and Physical Sciences are least likely to see their staff demonstrating this quality, even though it is just as important to these respondents as for their peers elsewhere.

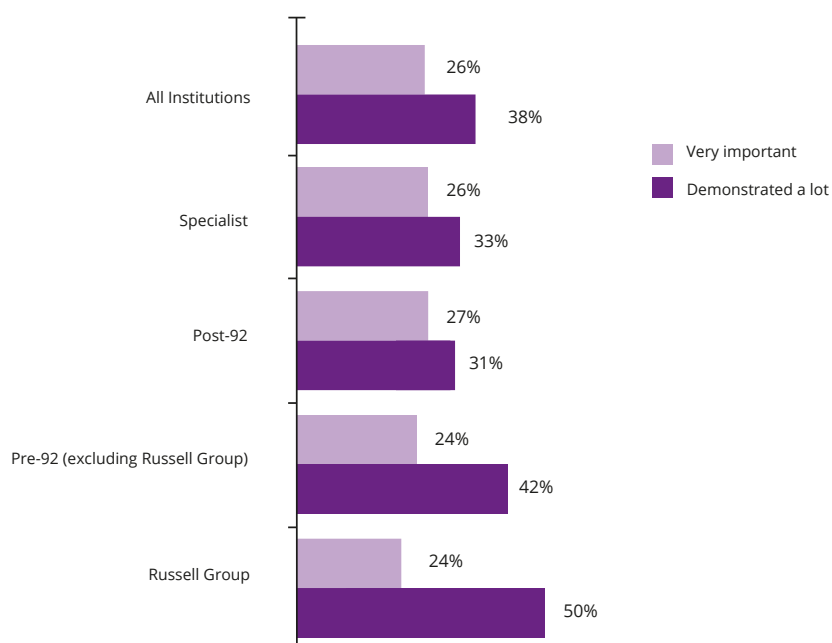
Importance compared with demonstrating training in how to teach - largest gaps by subject and institution type



Base: all subjects and Institutions (15,221), Mathematics (390), Allied to Medicine (1,221), Physical Sciences (846), Russell Group (4,219).

For the Russell Group, there is evidence of strategic focus on research expertise, as 50% of respondents feel their staff demonstrate this characteristic a lot in their teaching (cf. 38% among the total sample), even though these respondents from the Russell Group are no more likely to feel it is especially important (24% cf. 26% total sample).

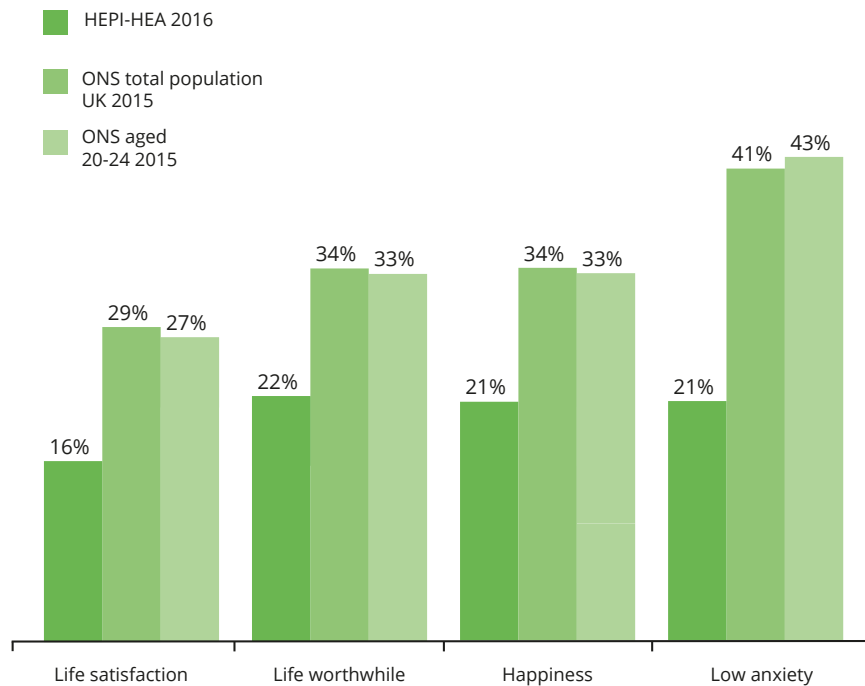
Importance compared with demonstrating being active researchers - by institution type



Base: all institutions (15,221), Specialist (581), Post-92 (7,094), Pre-92 (3,327), Russell Group (4,219).

6. Student wellbeing

6.1 Overall wellbeing



Base: HEA-HEPI data (15,221); ONS total UK (circa 165,000); ONS aged 20-24 UK (circa 6,600).¹⁶ Percentages calculated from all students scoring 9-10 out of 10 for life satisfaction, life worthwhile, happiness/0-1 out of 10 for anxiety

Within our student population, scores on wellbeing have remained consistent year upon year.¹⁷ However, to give important benchmark context to this, we can compare the scores to the latest Office for National Statistics (ONS) data, which uses the same questions and scales.

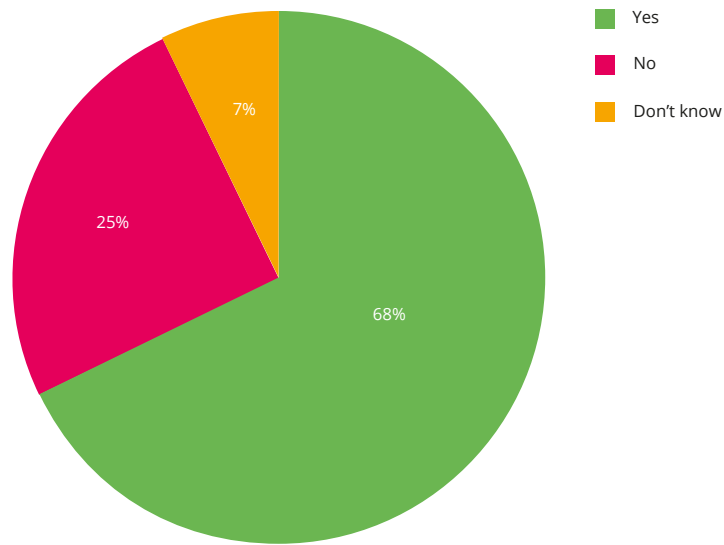
The key insight from this comparison is that undergraduate students appear to have a lower sense of personal wellbeing than the rest of the population. Analysis of ONS data shows that young people in general do not necessarily display a low sense of wellbeing, but there are marked differences when looking at perceptions of the undergraduates in our survey. What gives us further confidence in highlighting this finding is that a similar picture was found in 2015 and 2014 when we previously compared this data.

Among the four measures, there is a particular difference in anxiety levels. This makes intuitive sense in that young people balancing study deadlines, part-time work, decisions about their future and potentially concerns about debt, might be expected to display raised levels of anxiety, placing the onus on institutions and support groups to have services in place to offer help.

16. ONS. (2015). *Measuring National Well-being: Personal Well-being in the UK, 2014 to 2015* [Internet]. Available from: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/measuringnationalwellbeing/2015-09-23 [Accessed 25 May 2016].

17. With the exception of anxiety levels which are lower in 2016 after a note was included in the questionnaire to point out that a low score meant low anxiety and vice-versa. The question, consistent with the ONS, reads "Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday – where 0 = not at all and 10 = completely?"

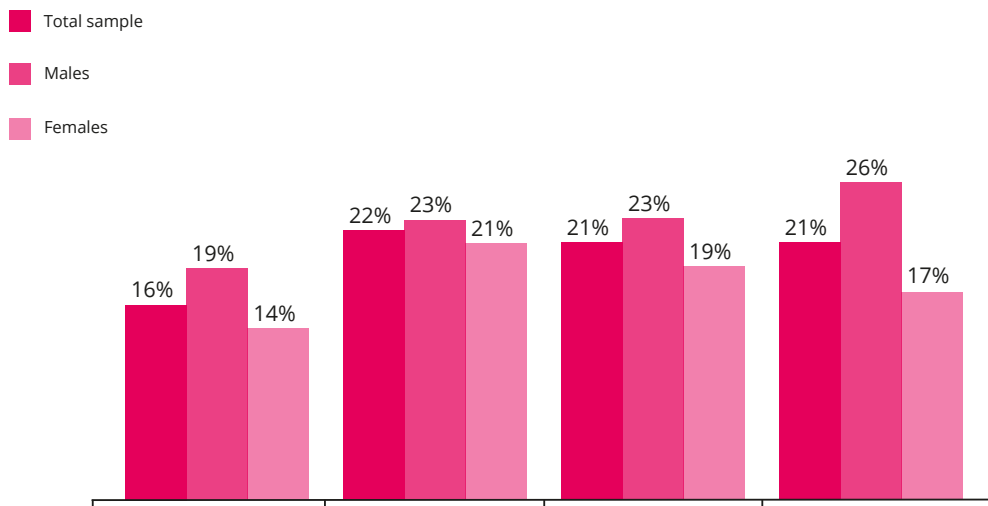
Awareness of how to contact counselling services



Base: all respondents (15,221).

With this in mind, we asked for the first time whether students know how to contact their institutions' counselling services, to identify if this support is on their radar. The results were encouraging; with more than two out of three saying that they were aware of how to contact counselling support. This implies that the issue is taken seriously by institutions, and with good reason. Older students (aged 26+) are much more likely to be aware of how to contact their counselling services, (77%), which may be a function of a greater level of awareness of this as an issue acquired with life experience.

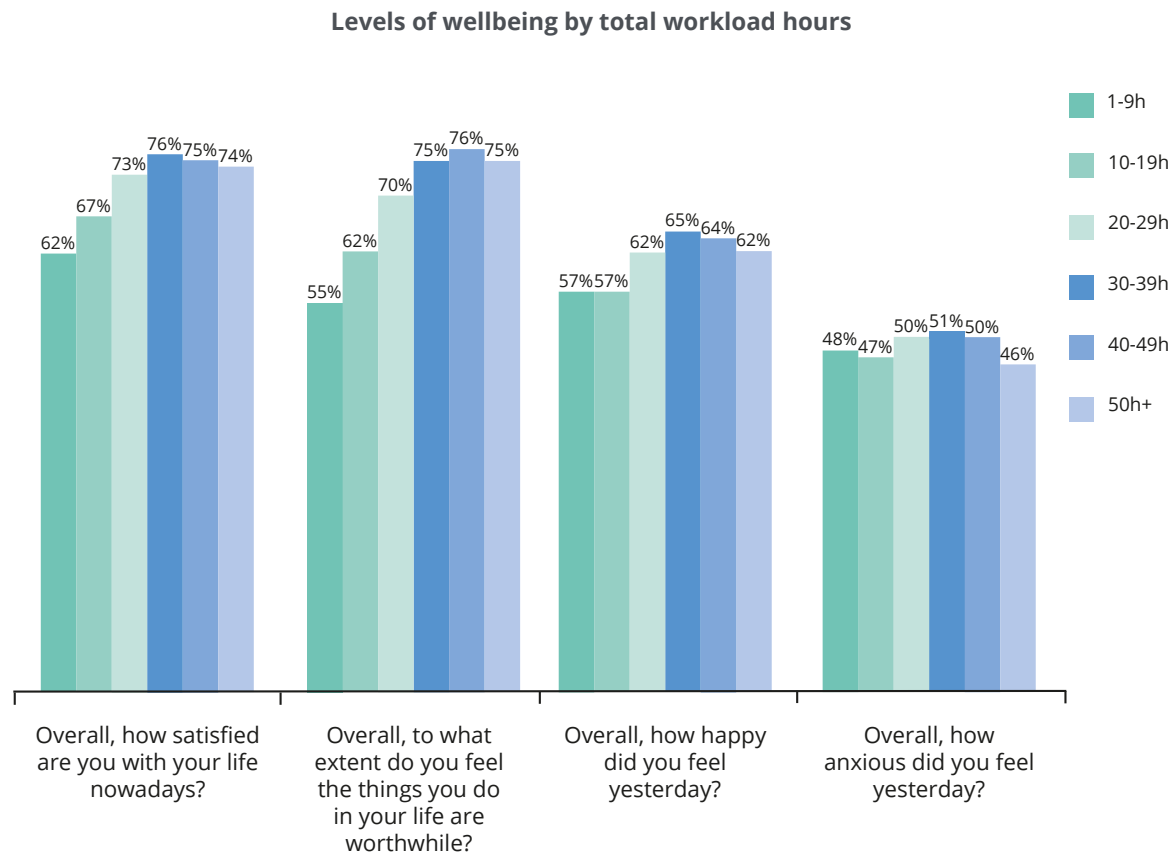
Overall wellbeing by gender



Base: total sample (15,221); males (6,501); female (8,720). Percentages calculated from all students scoring 9-10 out of 10 for life satisfaction, life worthwhile, happiness/0-1 out of 10 for anxiety

As we have seen before, there are differences in wellbeing levels by gender. This year this is particularly true for anxiety levels, with just 17% of females in our survey showing low anxiety, compared to 26% of males in our survey, and 40% of all females nationally in the ONS data. However, just as many females (68%) know how to contact counselling services on campus as males.

6.2 Wellbeing and workload



Base: 1-9 hours (214), 10-19 hours (3,034), 20-29 hours (4,507), 30-39 hours (3,242), 40-49 hours (1,870), 50+ hours (2,332). Percentages calculated from all students scoring 7-10 out of 10 for life satisfaction, life worthwhile, happiness/0-3 out of 10 for anxiety.

There is a strong link between greater workload and higher wellbeing. Workload has the greatest impact on feeling worthwhile and satisfied with life, as opposed to anxiety where there is less of a clear picture. Greater workload may cause greater anxiety, but it may also contribute to a greater sense of feeling worthwhile, which may in itself reduce anxiety – so it is a fine balance.

7. Students' views on policy options

7.1 Budget priorities

Introduced in its current form in 2015, the question on students' preferences as to how institutions might save money provides a clear view of their priorities as consumers. Priorities clearly highlight how, on the face of it, teaching and learning resources, and student support services, are valued more highly than campus buildings and sport facilities, for example.

As with any poll of consumer opinion, there is the danger of more indirect brand-building activity (in this case campus investment) not being directly valued unless it is missing, and there can be little doubt that modern high-profile campus facilities can contribute significantly to wider issues such as regeneration and job creation. However, these results do represent a clear statement of the value of learning and teaching.

Picking up specifically on the issue of value for money explored earlier in this report, we have seen how teaching hours impact strongly on value perceptions, and this is backed up here, in that far more students would prefer universities to save money by increasing class sizes, than reducing teaching hours.

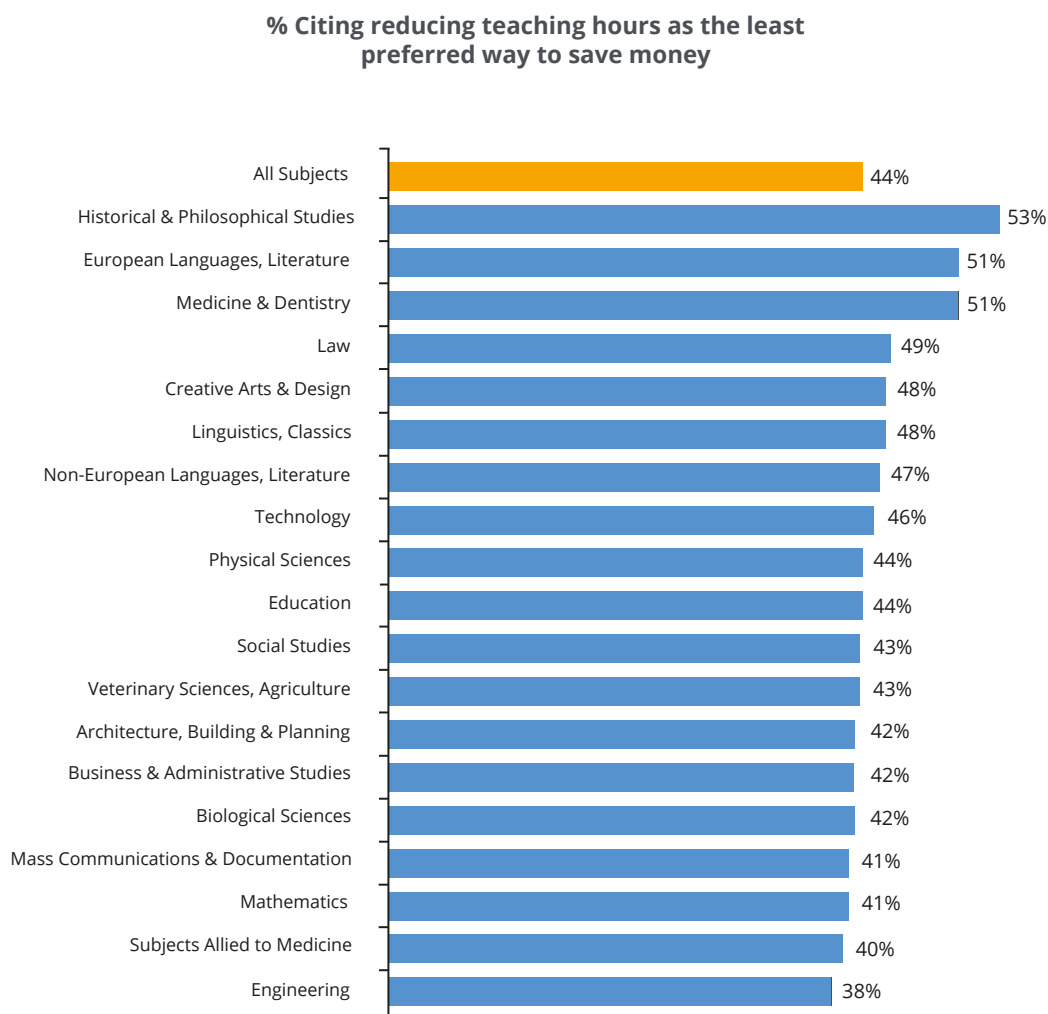
Preferred ways for universities to save money



Base: all respondents (15,221).

The previous chart shows preferred ways to save money. To provide balance, and to verify the logic of the findings, we also asked for students' least preferred ways to save money. As might be expected, the ranking was broadly reversed, with students' least preferred areas being reducing investment on learning facilities (45%) and fewer hours of teaching (44%).

Focusing specifically on teaching hours, it is striking how there is a strong objection to a reduction in teaching hours across all subject areas, with this being either the least preferred or second-least preferred way to save money among students of almost all subjects. Looking back at the average contact hours per subject shown earlier, it is significant that students in many of the subjects with fewer contact hours are least open to the prospect of their hours being reduced as a way of saving money – Historical and Philosophical Studies, and Law and Languages being key examples. An exception to this is Medicine and Dentistry, where workload hours are highest but there is still a strong objection to any (hypothetical) prospect of cutting these.



Base: all respondents (15,221).

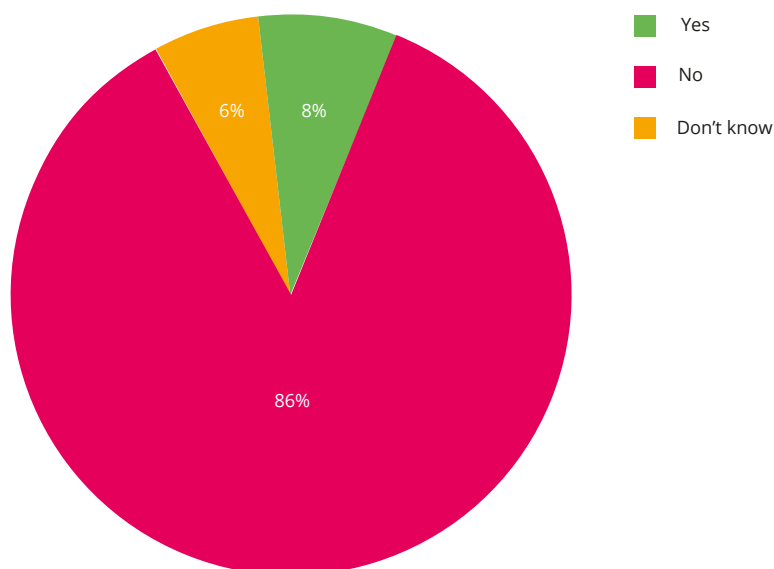
7.2 Funding and fees

The survey asked about how the costs of teaching undergraduate students should be funded – by students, the Government, or a mixture of the two.

Very few respondents (2%) feel students should pay the full cost, whereas around one in five (22%) feel that the Government should pay the full cost. The large majority (71%) feel the costs should be shared, with the balance leaning towards the Government paying more. Students in Scotland are much more likely to feel that the Government should contribute all of the costs (35%), perhaps reflecting what they are used to.

As a new question for 2016, students were asked directly, yes or no, whether it is a good idea that universities which prove they deliver excellent teaching should be able to raise their fees in line with inflation.

Are fee rises for excellent teaching a good idea?



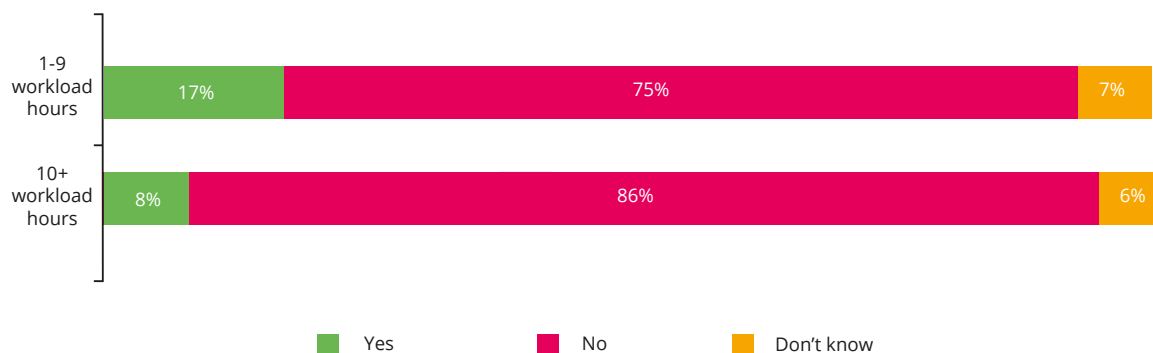
Base: all respondents (15,221).

The answer was emphatically “No” – for 86% of respondents, and as shown below, there was a similarly clear opinion among all home countries. This indicates that despite the support for teaching quality shown elsewhere in the survey, the issue of fees is an emotive one and among a generation still learning to live with fees, any prospect of raising these further, whatever the rationale, is likely to meet with objection.

Are fee rises for excellent teaching a good idea?	England (11,597)	Scotland (945)	Wales (520)	Northern Ireland (312)	EU (10,151)	Outside EU (796)
Yes	8%	10%	9%	9%	11%	12%
No	88%	79%	86%	85%	80%	77%

Despite this level of objection, further analysis has pinpointed that students whose workload is lowest are twice as likely as average to be open to the idea of raising fees for excellent teaching – albeit still strongly against the idea. This is interesting in that it implies that low levels of workload, and by implication short teaching hours, leave some students questioning the quality, as well as the value, of their experience, and they are open to ideas about how it could be improved.

Are fee rises for excellent teaching a good idea? - By total workload



Base: 1-9 hours (214), 10+ hours (14,985).

8. Conclusion

Although generally satisfied with their experience, analysis of trends across several years of the Student Academic Experience Survey suggests students from all parts of the world, studying in all parts of the UK, are becoming more demanding and beginning to question the value for money they receive.

More clearly than ever, this year's survey has provided real evidence that students often equate the value they receive with excellent teaching, being taught by staff who continually develop their teaching skills, in environments where investment has been made in the resources available to support this. We also have clear evidence which points towards the value of high contact hours, and that in the event of having to make a choice, many students would opt for high contact hours above small class sizes.

Students also appear to value structure in the way they are taught and assessed, reacting positively to large numbers of assignments and a good balance between summative and formative assessment.

The above information creates an illuminating picture of how approaches differ between different institutional types. Students at post-92 institutions perceive greater evidence of teaching skills being demonstrated. However, contact hours, and class sizes tend to be lower than at other types of institutions. Teaching staff at Russell Group institutions by contrast, demonstrate less evidence of developing their teaching skills, but operate in an environment of higher contact hours and a high volume of assessments which appears to be valued by the students.

Student engagement is crucial to the overall experience. Students themselves recognise when they do not put enough effort in, but providing opportunities to engage with their peers and with staff can have a major impact on students feeling supported and getting the most out of their experience. One of the most significant findings this year has been how some students, particularly of Chinese and Asian ethnicity, may be missing out on expected levels of interaction and support, as an indirect result of their heightened likelihood of living at home with their family rather than in halls or other shared accommodation. This provides a clear opportunity for universities to act upon these concerns, and ensure that students who are living away from campus have access to the expected levels of support and interaction equated with a high-quality academic experience.

Within the context of value being questioned, it is striking that students are overwhelmingly against the concept of higher fees, even if linked to high-quality teaching – a concept that students clearly appreciate. However, if student opinion is to be influenced to move towards a more positive demonstration of value and a constructive debate around higher fees, then this year's survey provides clear evidence as to what institutions and policymakers should focus on in communications to help position this more effectively.

9. Policy recommendations

1. The data show a more direct and material link between student satisfaction and the quality of teaching than has been revealed before. Raising students' satisfaction levels has never been such an important way to protect and enhance the reputation of individual institutions, and now it is clear that the most effective way for institutions to do this is to prioritise excellent teaching as well as to ensure they meet their entrants' prior expectations. There is also a clear link between value for money, meeting expectations, maximising teaching hours and teaching quality. Given the evidence of lower value for money perceptions, the onus is on institutions to do more to demonstrate value.

2. It is also clear that some particular student characteristics are associated with lower satisfaction. Notably, students who live at home seem to find it harder to integrate into student life. This important finding may help explain the conundrum of why BME students fall behind during higher education, as some BME groups have a higher likelihood of living at home while studying. For example, the University of Manchester has adopted a strategy to tackle the higher non-continuation rate of students who live off campus that includes appointing an 'Off-Campus Students Project Coordinator Officer' to work in the Students' Union. Predictions that £9,000 tuition fees would lead to a big shift in the proportion of students living at home have not come true, but there are fears that the abolition of maintenance grants could put pressure on more students to choose this option in future.

3. For the second year running, a huge majority of students say they are not receiving sufficient information about how their tuition fees are spent. It would be impossible to disaggregate each student's fees, even were it to be desirable, but there is clearly an appetite among students for considerably more information on where institutional teaching income goes. In response to last year's similar finding, Jo Johnson, the Minister for Universities and Science, said: "It is not at all clear to some students what their tuition fees of up to £9,000 a year actually pay for, and this has led to calls, which I support, for greater transparency from providers about what they spend fee income on".¹⁸ While this might not always be a popular idea on university campuses or with finance directors, it is likely to be better for higher education institutions to decide how and when such information can be provided than to have it imposed upon them by policymakers.

4. The additional work undertaken this year comparing the results of different questions proves beyond doubt that students care deeply about contact hours, and that the number of contact hours links to satisfaction levels and perceptions of value for money. University staff may regularly point out that contact hours are a poor proxy for quality and difficult to measure because, for example, seminars are different to lectures. Yet such messages are not currently resonating with students. Institutions may wish to redouble their efforts to show why contact hours alone are a poor dimension of quality.¹⁹ But the demand for additional contact hours from students in certain disciplines is unlikely to disappear and may need to be tackled in other ways too – including giving consideration to courses where there could be a strong argument for contact hours to be increased.

5. Given the importance students apply to the number of contact hours, any discipline that combines high contact hours with low value for money is a particular cause for concern, with Technology as a notable example. Further work is necessary to determine the full causes, which might include poor course choice, the quality of teaching and learning during the available contact time or a lack of focus on post-study employment.²⁰

6. The survey suggests research-intensive universities score relatively well on issues around value for money and the balance of summative versus formative assignments, whereas teaching-focused universities score relatively well on aspects of teaching staff and their characteristics. Deciding how to account fairly for such differences in the new Teaching Excellence Framework will need to be investigated thoroughly during the pilot phases.

18. Johnson, J. (2015). *Higher education: fulfilling our potential*. 9 September, University of Surrey. Available from <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/higher-education-fulfilling-our-potential> [Accessed 31 May 2016]

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

20. BIS (2016) *Shadbolt Review of Computer Sciences Degree Accreditation and Graduate Employability* [Internet]. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/518575/ind-16-5-shadbolt-review-computer-science-graduate-employability.pdf Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. Available from: [Accessed 25 May 2016].

7. Surveys, including the NSS and engagement surveys such as UKES, have repeatedly shown the importance of timely and useful feedback in the learning process. They have also found relatively high dissatisfaction levels on this issue among students. The Student Academic Experience Survey provides further support for placing a renewed emphasis on the time it takes academics to mark and comment on work by highlighting the gap between expectations and experience. A new approach should include, where appropriate, an explanation to students of expectations that are unrealistic and which risk putting the time taken to mark work above the quality of the feedback.

8. According to the survey, there is also a disconnect between expectations and reality on the characteristics of staff with, for example, a greater proportion of students thinking their teachers demonstrate research activity than believing this is an important characteristic. Given current debates over the right depth of connections between teaching and research, partly stimulated by the higher education reforms being implemented by the Government, this is an important finding. At the very least, institutions should address the gaps in students' perceptions of what is important in their lecturers' characteristics and the provision they are receiving. For example, where an institution believes a course benefits from being taught by active researchers, the advantages need to be explained more clearly to students.

9. Students' anxiety levels are markedly high and notably above those of the population as a whole, including young people. In the past, the survey found such high levels of anxiety that we avoided publicising them due to concerns about the robustness of the data. But, after improvements to the questions, the levels of anxiety remain so high as to be a matter of serious concern. Other information sources corroborate this: for example, anxiety is the single most common reason why students attend counselling.¹ On average, attending higher education provides lifelong benefits, including better health, but the period spent in higher education is a stressful and anxious time for many students. Helping students deal with the consequences of studying at a higher level is a perennial problem, especially when they arrive in higher education without sufficient knowledge of what to expect, but the further expansion of support services should be an urgent priority.

10. The survey identifies very strong opposition to higher fees, even when they are linked to excellent teaching. This suggests students are not completely insensitive to the price they are paying (and the debt they are incurring), even though this may not typically determine what and where they study. Institutions tend to argue that continuing to fix the full-time undergraduate fee cap at £9,000 would inevitably lead to a gradual deterioration in the student experience. But there is a substantial gap between institutions and students, the vast majority of whom dislike even modest fee rises. If policymakers are to deliver the extra resources that institutions want via higher tuition fees, then they need sufficient covering fire from institutions which shows how extra fee income will directly benefit students, in particular by further enhancing the quality of teaching with which they are so concerned.

21. Gani, A. (2016) *Tuition Fees "Have Led to Surge in Students Seeking Counselling"* [Internet]. *The Guardian*, 13 March 2016. Available from: <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/mar/13/tuition-fees-have-led-to-surge-in-students-seeking-counselling> [Accessed 25 May 2016].



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