



# UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission: Two Years On



Research supported by Group GTI



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# Foreword

In 2021 the UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission had an ambitious aim: to understand how the pandemic was impacting new and current students, and to identify how the higher education sector could work with students to get them back on track.

Nearly three years on, this new report shows that much of the acute impact of the pandemic has been mitigated by a sector intent on supporting successful student futures. Our polling evidence in particular shows that some of the university experience has bounced back, and students are generally satisfied with their time in higher education. But new threats to students' futures have emerged: the lost learning crisis has been replaced by a cost of learning crisis. As our report lays bare, more students are having to work because their maintenance loans simply don't cover living costs. Their parents are also less able to support them given their own financial constraints and higher mortgage payments. Being short of money and having to work long hours leads to less engagement with the university life which is such an essential part of the experience and benefit of higher education. Worse still, it means too many students having to prioritise work shifts over attending lectures and seminars or engaging with careers education and advice.

Our research points to an increasingly transactional relationship between students and their university where getting the degree certificate becomes the only aim. Too many students want to simply 'get in to get out'.

A concerning number of students are exhausted and lonely, with their mental health worsening. The UCAS data for applications before the January 2024 deadline shows demand is softening amongst both school leavers and mature students as news reports about the new realities of student life abound. Applicants from more challenged socio-economic backgrounds are even more likely to think twice about applying and first-in-family applicants will have little peer pressure if they decide not to.

Our research shows that international students are not immune to the financial pressures either and they feel all the more resentful given the higher fees they are paying.

There is always more that universities could do and they are repeatedly expected to step up to political and regulatory priorities, as well as modern student expectations and mental health challenges. But all this costs money and many universities are at the end of their financial tether. Ten years of inflation, especially recently, have eaten away at the value of the undergraduate tuition fee and new constraints on visas for international graduates have started to impact demand from non-UK markets too. Universities also face increasing costs for energy, salaries and pensions and their headroom to keep doing more for less is diminishing.

There's plenty to be pleased about in this research – including students feeling more prepared than two years ago, almost three quarters saying they feel happy at university and examples of institutions designing and delivering student manifestos. But the deterioration of government support for universities and students – political and financial – is putting at risk a generation of talent that is sorely needed to uphold a healthy society, a growing economy and the challenges of the technological age.



**Mary Curnock Cook CBE**  
Chair of the UPP Foundation  
Student Futures Commission



**Richard Brabner**  
Executive Chair,  
UPP Foundation

# Executive Summary

In 2022, the UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission set out a call for joint action between universities and students to tackle the problems caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The report set out the scale of the challenge facing the sector, and provided a blueprint - in the form of the Student Futures Manifesto - through which concrete action to improve students' experience of university could be developed collaboratively.

The Commission intended that the production of the Manifesto would help give the sector a clearer focus on the priorities of students, and to better communicate and champion its commitments to successful student futures.

Since the pandemic much has changed. Some of this has been positive: students have returned to campus, new innovative methods of teaching and learning have been sustainably embedded into the curriculum, and a renewed focus on belonging has helped rebuild university communities.

Our polling found, for example, that:

- 79% of students agreed that their university had given them all the support they needed to prepare for the start of term.
- 74% of students were working at or above the academic level they expected to be.
- 74% of students agreed with the statement "I feel happy at university", and 63% agreed with the statement "I feel I belong at my university"
- 57% agreed that university had had a positive impact on their mental health overall (though over 1/5th (22%) of students felt it had had a negative impact overall).
- 60% of students were confident that if they contact their university for support when they were struggling with their mental health, that the university would be able to help them.

It is clear that over the last two years institutions have worked tirelessly to help build back provision and campuses. Over twenty universities have pledged to develop a Student Futures Manifesto committing to co-create an approach to the student experience with their student body.

But at the same time, students and their universities are facing a wide range of challenges: increasing financial pressure – through the cost of living crisis and inflation and frozen tuition fees; increasing need for mental health support with limited resources to meet demand; and the pressure to keep up with the changes being generated through the adoption of AI in the workplace.

Alongside our more positive conclusions, we found some worrying trends across our evidence gathering.

- 44% of students said that they felt lonely at university.
- 44% of students were less engaged with extracurricular activities than they were expecting to be, and a quarter (25%) had never engaged at all.
- Over a quarter (27%) of students would be uncomfortable contacting their university for support if they were struggling with their mental health.
- 50% of students had not had any specific conversations or guidance about future careers with staff at their university;
- 72% felt there was more their university could do to integrate workplace skills into the curriculum

Whilst much is being done to support students to engage and succeed at university, there are a number of emerging challenges facing university communities.

- There is a growing gap between expectations of the student experience and reality – students in our focus group frequently reported feeling underwhelmed by the university experience; particularly international students.
- There is a growing sense of apathy and a lack of agency students feel over their university experience – this is fostering a reluctance to participate in both learning and teaching and extracurricular activities.
- This is compounded by the pressures of the cost of living crisis and the insufficiency of maintenance support – which leave students struggling to engage with the basics of the university experience (lectures, seminars, and campus facilities), never mind the opportunities to participate in wider student life that has always been seen as fundamental to the higher education offer.

This report explores the student experience in 2024, mapped against the original six themes set out by the Student Futures Commission in 2022. It celebrates some of the success that universities and colleges have had in re-imagining student engagement; and throws up some new challenges which will need sustained attention and focus in the years ahead.

# Objectives and methodology

## Aims and objectives

This research project set out to revisit the six themes of student success highlighted in the UPP Foundation Student Futures Manifesto<sup>1</sup> published in February 2022. This was done to achieve the following objectives:

- To gain a better understanding of changes to the student experience that have occurred over the last two years
- To identify and share case studies of institutions which are doing innovative work to support the student experience
- To begin to collect a time series of data to track changes to the student experience every two years

## How we approached the work

Our work sought to engage both university staff members and students across all years to understand how different elements of the student experience in the academic year 2023/24.

Therefore we conducted the following research activities:

- A comprehensive poll of 1,682 students in England in November 2023, undertaken by Cibyl, Group GTI's research platform.
- Eight in-depth interviews with representatives from institutions who are doing innovative work to support the student experience.
- Eight focus groups of undergraduate students studying in a mixture of English universities:
  - Two groups were exclusively conducted with first year students
  - Two groups were conducted with students from across all years
  - Two groups were all year international students
  - Two groups were all year home students

<sup>1</sup> <https://upp-foundation.org/student-futures-commission/news/a-student-futures-manifesto/>

# Introduction

## Two years on from the UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission

“The Student Futures Manifesto has given us a great opportunity to work together with the university in a focused way to support students throughout their studies. Given the challenges students are currently facing with the cost of living crisis it’s great to have a framework where we can support students across the whole of their experience”

**Zoe Harrison, Newman Students’ Union President**

“The publication of the Student Futures Manifesto helped guide our post-pandemic response to supporting and engaging with our students, and enabled us to close the educational and social gaps caused by the pandemic”

**Dr Tim Jones, Pro Vice Chancellor (Students), University of Worcester**

The UPP Foundation conceived of the Student Futures Commission in early 2021 when it was clear that the issues affecting aspiring and current university students were not getting adequate attention. Students, their needs and their disappointments, were in danger of being ignored in the public debate about educational “catch up”. The Commission was therefore formed to better understand the challenges and opportunities caused by the pandemic.

The report - A Student Futures Manifesto - set out six themes which the Commission believed were at the heart of successful student futures, and which should be the collective priorities for action.





**Support for students  
before they reach university**



**An induction into university life  
for each year of study**



**Support for mental health  
and wellbeing**



**A clear outline of the teaching students will receive  
and the necessary tools to access it**



**Activities inside and outside the curriculum  
that build skills, networks and communities**



**A clear pathway towards  
graduate outcomes**

The Commission issued a stark warning: that without specific action, the next generation of students could graduate feeling even more let down by their experience at university, and the education they received. It therefore called on higher education institutions to work with students to develop, create and publish a series of actions and commitments to secure successful student futures. We hoped these manifestos would act as a positive public statement of the commitments that universities and colleges were making and providing an opportunity for genuine collaboration about the road ahead. The manifesto was designed to act as a framework which could be adapted to help support students and institutions to develop the best student experience possible at their university.

We were delighted that 20 institutions committed to co-creating a manifesto with their students; and that 9 have subsequently been launched in some form.

## Institutions which have published a Student Futures Manifesto

- University of Huddersfield
- University of Lincoln
- University of Worcester
- University of Hertfordshire
- Newman University
- Manchester Metropolitan University
- Royal Holloway, University of London
- University of West England
- De Montfort University

Two years on from the publication of the Commission's original report, much has changed. An increasingly challenging landscape for providers and students alike means that the need for a clear promise to students about what they should expect from their experience is key to maintaining both the reputation and integrity of the sector.

We therefore commissioned new research with students, including polling and focus groups to test the student experience in 2024 against the six core themes and collective priorities. We wanted to explore what progress has been made, what challenges remained, and what barriers were left to improving student satisfaction. This report provides an update on each of the Commission's six themes, and explores how they are shaping the university experience today.

We also wanted to showcase how institutions across the country had used the principles of the Student Futures Manifesto – co-creation, genuine collaboration, and championing positive action and activity – to navigate new challenges facing students and universities today. We conducted a series of interviews with institutions across England and throughout the report highlight case studies and best practice within each theme.

“It helps to have a new initiative like this, and you give it a new name, like the manifesto. There’s that window, where you’ve got some impetus and momentum, and where you can try and achieve change more quickly. I think the manifesto has been a big help in that it focuses minds”

Neal Geach, Associate Professor in Learning and Teaching, University of Hertfordshire

As the fourth anniversary of the start of the Covid-19 pandemic passes, we hope this report provides the opportunity for institutions to reflect on how the sector has changed.

This is not the time to stand still: perhaps more importantly, we hope this report allows institutions to look further ahead into the future of the student experience and how to navigate the challenges ahead.

## Case study: A Student Futures Manifesto – Manchester Metropolitan University

Manchester Metropolitan University was the first institution to develop and publish a Student Futures Manifesto.<sup>2</sup> The manifesto was developed through an event in December 2022 which saw 58 staff and 82 students come together to discuss their priorities for a student futures commitment. Staff included heads of department and education leads; students included both undergraduates and postgraduates.

The second stage of development was undertaken with a small group of 12 students and 13 staff who worked to focus findings from the initial workshop into six commitments:

- We are committed to providing you with excellent teaching, innovative learning and assessment opportunities, and a dedicated personal tutor.
- We are committed to providing you with further study and career opportunities to get you ready for life after your degree.
- We are committed to creating an inclusive environment, with lots of extra-curricular opportunities and the chance to meet new people, both as you settle into university and throughout your journey with us.
- We are committed to ensuring you feel supported physically, emotionally and mentally with easily available support.
- We are committed to ensuring that you feel supported to start university, not just when you join but every semester, and that you have access to inclusive, accessible and easily available support and resources.
- We are committed to providing you with the opportunity to have your say to enhance your student experience and the experience of future students.

The commitments and links to additional supportive resources are published on the MMU's website.<sup>3</sup> Following a successful launch, more work is being undertaken this academic year to develop faculty and department-level commitments, as well as a specific International Student Futures Commitment. Commitments from the university are monitored by the Student Voice Steering Group.

<sup>2</sup> <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/manchester-metropolitan-university-is-the-first-to-respond-to-the-student-futures-commission/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/student-life/student-futures-commitment#ai-81763-2>

# Two years on from the student futures commission: 2024 in context

In 2022, there was widespread concern about both the short- and long-term impacts of the Covid-19 on both existing university students and upcoming cohorts. Two years later, the direct impact of the pandemic has lessened – but new challenges have emerged which are shaping the student experience.

## 1. Inflation and the cost of learning.

Between September 2022 and March 2023, the UK experienced seven months of double-digit inflation, which peaked at 11.1 percent. Over the same time period, data from Save the Student shows that living costs for the average student increased by 17% to about £1,078 per month.<sup>4</sup> Maintenance loans have failed to keep up: for students in England, the maximum maintenance loan has increased by just 2.8% for the year 2023/24.<sup>5</sup> The average shortfall between living costs and maintenance loan per month is estimated to have increased from £223 in 2020 to £582 in 2023. The Higher Education Policy Institute and Advance HE Student Academic Experience Survey 2023 highlights that over half (55%) of all students are now in paid employment – up 10% from 2022.<sup>6</sup> Polling on behalf of the Sutton Trust found that 27% of students are now taking on a part-time work alongside their studies, or have increased their hours, and 45% are turning to their parents for additional financial support.<sup>7</sup>

Universities have attempted to bridge the gap by subsidising transport, administering financial support funds and providing services such as free breakfast on campus – but are themselves struggling with the impact of inflation when the unit of resource per home student has remained fixed. Research by the Higher Education Policy Institute highlights that over three quarters (76%) of universities help their students with food and drink and 47% support them in regards to health and 35% in respect to travel and digital.<sup>8</sup> However, a recent survey by Times Higher

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.savethestudent.org/money/student-budgeting/what-do-students-spend-their-money-on.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.savethestudent.org/money/surveys/student-money-survey-2023-results.html>

<sup>6</sup> [https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/assets.creode.advancehe-document-manager/documents/advance-he/Student%20Academic%20Experience%20Survey%202023\\_1687527247.pdf](https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/assets.creode.advancehe-document-manager/documents/advance-he/Student%20Academic%20Experience%20Survey%202023_1687527247.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/cost-of-living-and-university-students-2023/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/How-to-Beat-a-Cost-of-Learning-Crisis-Universities-Support-for-Students.pdf>

Education found that nearly half of Vice Chancellor respondents expect their university to be in deficit within the next year and nearly all expect some institutions to break agreements with banks.<sup>9</sup>

The so-called “cost of learning crisis” is having impacts on how students spend their time. For instance, the HEPI/Advance HE Student Academic Experience Survey found that 76% of students felt that their academic studies were affected by the cost of living crisis.<sup>10</sup> A study by researchers at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) found that, of the 271 students they interacted with, 52% were working part-time in order to pay bills with the students working an average of 18 hours a week – and with 29% working more than 20 hours a week.<sup>11</sup> New research from Wonkhe highlights the impact of students juggling part time work, studying and associated travel on the efficacy of said study and engagement in wider social activities.<sup>12</sup>

## 2. Increasing importance of international students

Shown in a data release by UCAS in January 2024, the number of UK 18 year olds applying for college or university has slightly increased, up 0.7% from 2023; however, as a proportion this is lower than previous years given the increasing number of 18 year olds.<sup>13</sup> This demonstrates that decline in demand is not only being driven by a decrease in mature applications but also through a relative decline in interest amongst 18 year olds. In contrast, despite predictions to the contrary, the number of international student applications in this cycle has increased by 0.7%.

International students have always been an important part of the UK higher education sector, and concerns about the impact of declining international student recruitment were high during the pandemic. Numbers bounced back strongly – but there are signs that they are starting to decline as we enter the 2024/25 recruitment cycle, with approximately one third of UK universities having seen a significant drop

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/vice-chancellors-fear-uk-sector-hurtling-financial-crisis>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2023/06/22/student-experience-academic-survey-2023/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2023/12/13/part-time-work-is-here-to-stay-but-how-can-it-be-better/#:~:text=HEPI%20research%20suggests%20more%20universities,the%20increased%20cost%20of%20living>

<sup>12</sup> <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/students-cant-get-no-sleep/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/2024-sees-more-18-year-olds-apply-higher-education>

in non-EU international student applications in 2023.<sup>14</sup> Although changes in demand are not distributed evenly across all types of institutions and level of study. The UK trades off its reputation as a great place to be a student, and its world-class universities – meaning that the experience of international students studying here is increasingly important to the stability of the sector as a whole.

### **3. Increasing demand for student mental health provision**

The number of students reporting a mental health condition to their university is reported to have increased seven-fold over the decade between 2010/11 and 2020/21.<sup>15</sup> Research by Student Minds indicated that 27% of all students had a diagnosed mental health condition.<sup>16</sup> Concerns about student mental health and wellbeing were front of mind in our 2021 report – and the demand on student services has already continued to increase, particularly given growing pressures on NHS mental health services (with estimates putting the mental health waiting list at 1.2 million people in 2023.<sup>17</sup>) As demand increases for NHS services, so too does the pressure on university services. Mental health is the most common reason for UK undergraduate students to consider dropping out; and a recent report by Cibyl found that the number of students who considered robust mental health provision as a key factor when choosing a university had increased from 32% in 2021 to 58% in 2023.<sup>18</sup>

### **4. A change of pace in the graduate employment market**

Emerging labour market trends such as an ageing population, the emergence of AI and digitisation, and supporting the transition to net zero are major factors influencing the demand for university graduates. Previous predictions about the collapse of the graduate labour market in 2020/21 proved to be unfounded, with 82% of graduates finding employment or unpaid work in the 2020/21 – 61% of which were in full time employment.<sup>19</sup> The proportion of graduates in employment

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/benjaminlaker/2024/01/28/major-blow-to-uk-universities-the-decline-of-international-students/?sh=4a7bbe437996>

<sup>15</sup> <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8593/CBP-8593.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> [https://www.studentminds.org.uk/uploads/3/7/8/4/3784584/student\\_minds\\_insight\\_briefing\\_feb23.pdf](https://www.studentminds.org.uk/uploads/3/7/8/4/3784584/student_minds_insight_briefing_feb23.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Progress-in-improving-mental-health-services-CS.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> <https://cibyl.groupgti.com/hubfs/Cibyl%20Student%20Mental%20Health%20Study%202023.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/31-05-2023/sb266-higher-education-graduate-outcomes-statistics>

or unpaid work is similar to previous years.<sup>20</sup> But demand for skilled graduates is predicted to increase: Recent research from UK suggests that by 2035 there will be a need for 11 million extra graduates in addition to the 15.3 million graduates in the UK workforce, with 88% of all new jobs by 2035 set to be at graduate level.<sup>21</sup> However, how this plays out in practice over the next decade is contested and dependent on a number of variables which are hard to predict – not least the pace of technological advancement and digitisation of businesses.

The number of degree-educated people in the workforce is predicted to move to over 50% in the coming year.<sup>22</sup> Despite this, 1 in 10 employers have a skill shortage vacancy (a vacancy that is hard to fill due to a lack of skills, qualifications, or experience among applicants).<sup>23</sup> This comes amid increasing scrutiny of the real-world application of degree level education into the world of work. As it becomes clearer that a large number of people are likely to need training to adjust to changes to the nature of work due to macro trends, the language of skills is likely to change. A recent government white paper demonstrates the case for a skills classification system which could help bridge the gap between education providers and employers.<sup>24</sup>

AI is predicted to be a significant driver in the increase of jobs at graduate level by 2035.<sup>25</sup> Much of the conversation in the sector has focused on how AI could and/or should be used in regard to assessment.<sup>26 27</sup> However, this is also likely to become an increasingly important part of graduate careers advice and guidance. Managing student queries and understanding student concerns about the role of AI in the workplace may become a growing challenge for institutions.

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/31-05-2023/sb266-higher-education-graduate-outcomes-statistics>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/field/downloads/2023-08/jobs-of-the-future.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> <https://luminare.prospectors.ac.uk/predicting-the-labour-market-in-2024>

<sup>23</sup> <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/employer-skills-survey/2022>

<sup>24</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/652fdb9d92895c0010dcb9a5/A\\_skills\\_classification\\_for\\_the\\_UK.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/652fdb9d92895c0010dcb9a5/A_skills_classification_for_the_UK.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/field/downloads/2023-08/jobs-of-the-future.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2024/02/01/new-hepi-policy-note-finds-more-than-half-of-students-have-used-generative-ai-for-help-on-assessments-but-only-5-likely-to-be-using-ai-to-cheat/>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/membership/membership-areas-of-work/generative-artificial-intelligence>





# Section 1: Starting university

“It does kind of take a bit of getting used to, but once you’ve been there for two years... I think I’ve kind of adjusted to a bit more.”

21, Male, Politics and Economics, Russell Group university, Home student

“For me it was really difficult, because I faced a culture shock - moving from my country to a new country, new academic system, new people and culture, everything. So at the beginning when I came...it was really difficult for me to adapt to everything.”

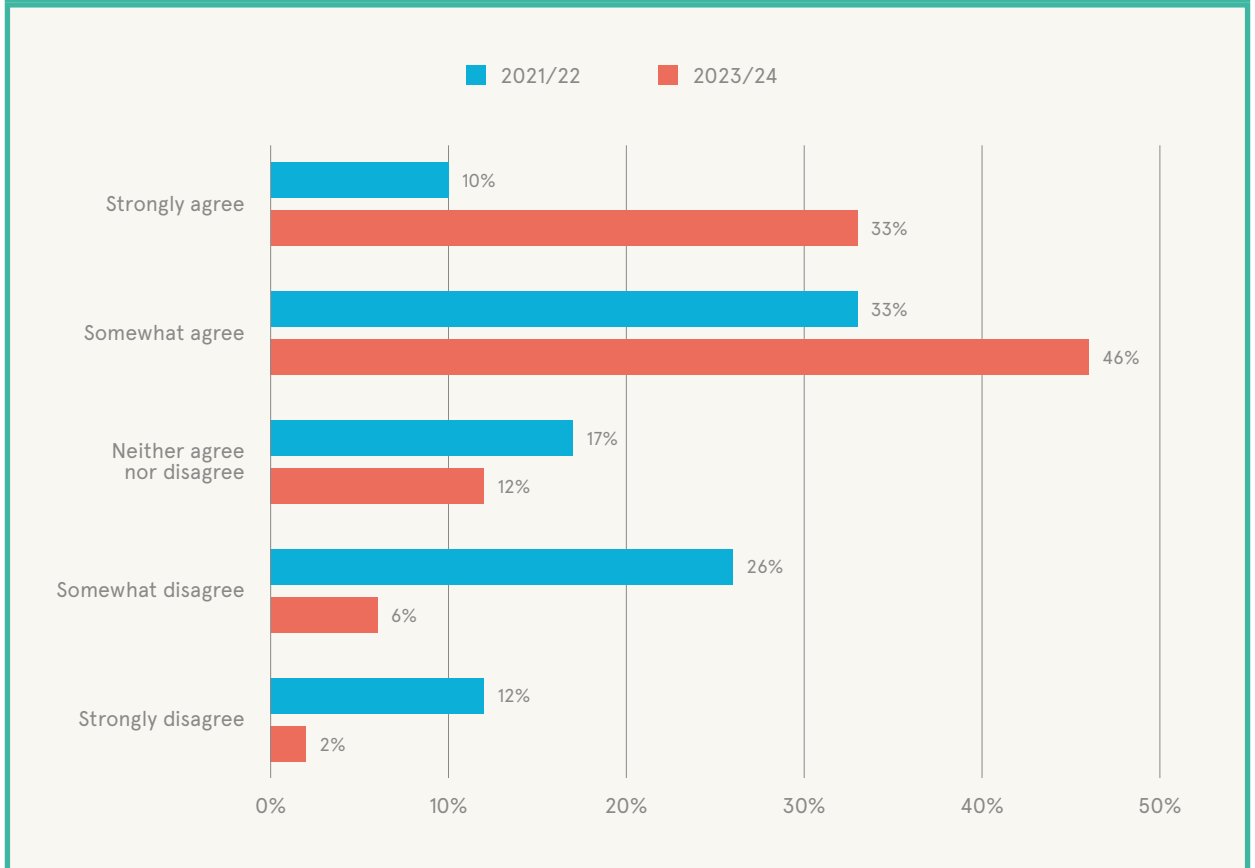
19, Female, Medical Science, post-92 university, international student

## Students are feeling more prepared than two years ago

The original student futures report set out that universities could further improve their pre-university support to ensure that students are not only prepared with the information and skills that they need to succeed but also have a clear idea of what life at university looks like. There was also widespread concern about how the impact of pandemic-era online schooling would impact students entering university both in the short and long term.

However, our polling shows that students now feel more prepared at the start of term than they did in the academic year in 2020/21. Only 8% of poll respondents felt that their university had not given them all of the support they needed to prepare for the start of term.

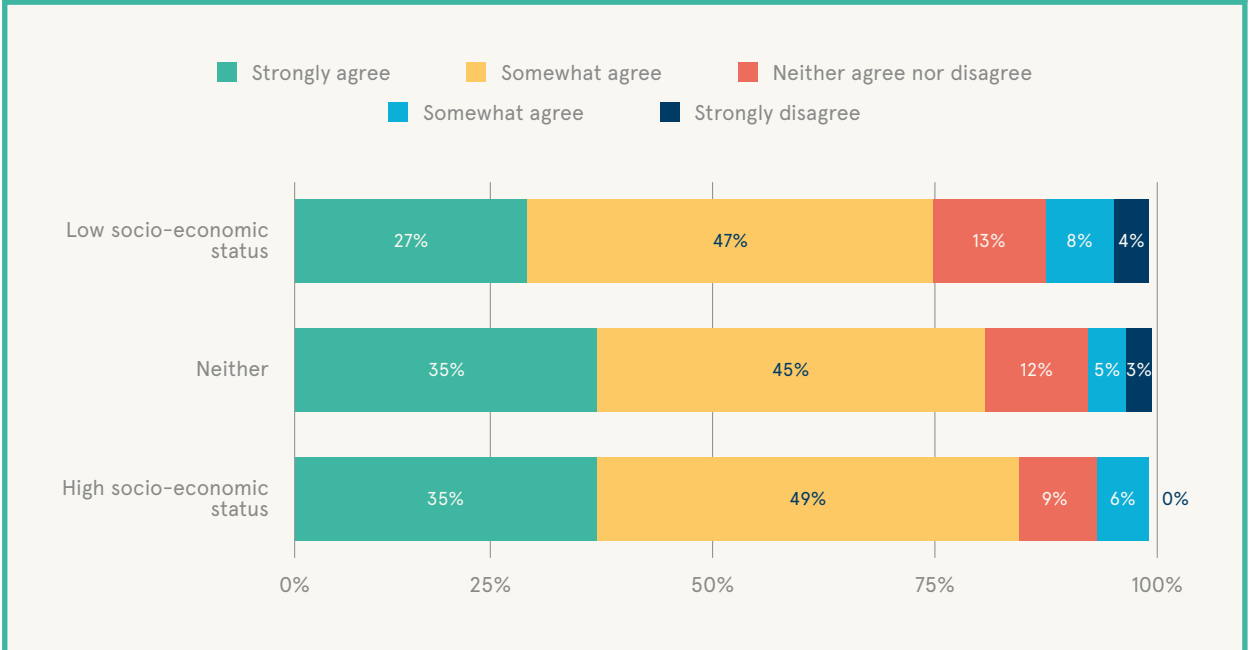
**Table 1: To what extent do you agree that your university has given you all the support you need to prepare for the start of term?**



That said, students from lower socio-economic<sup>28</sup> backgrounds were slightly less likely to report that they felt they had all the support they needed than their more advantaged peers.

<sup>28</sup> Low socio-economic status is defined as when a respondent meets at least three of the following criteria: parent(s) did not go to university, eligible for means-tested bursaries or free school meals, parents have a low socio-economic occupation, and attended a state school.

**Table 2: To what extent do you agree that your university has given you all the support you need to prepare for the start of term?**



### Case Study: Welcome to Worcester - University of Worcester

As part of their Student Futures Manifesto commitments to students, the university has launched a series of web pages called Welcome to Worcester that outline key information for students starting their university journey. Content covers a wide range of topics including advice on registering at the university, signposting to wellbeing and financial support, and information about accommodation.

The web pages also link to a 'Studying at university' study skills course that helps students assess whether they have the skills required to successfully start university as well as links to further support. These pages support students in understanding what to expect during their transition to higher education, equipping them with the skills to succeed once they have started.

It is also reassuring that students appear to be prepared academically for university study. This year's cohort of first year students are largely made up of those who did not sit GCSE exams; and subsequently would not have sat a formal examination until their final year of sixth form. In our poll, 74% of students self-reported that they felt they were working at or above the level they expected to be, with no difference between students in their first year, and those in their final year. While the long term impact of the attainment gap, particularly for more disadvantaged students, is likely to remain, it appears that students have managed to navigate the start of their university experience well – and much better than initially feared.

### Students want a longer induction period

The value of pre-university support should not be underestimated. Almost all participants said the amount of support they received prior to arriving at university enabled them to feel prepared for both their academic studies and wider university life.

Over three quarters (78%) of poll respondents shared that they had an induction or "Welcome Week" at the start of this academic year. A further 55% agree that universities should extend the induction period across the whole of the first term for new students.

Induction weeks also helped bridge the gap between the expectations students had of their time at university, and the reality of the experience. This was a particular challenge for international students – who often found that their day to day life did not quite match their expectations of prior to starting university.

**"I do somewhat feel connected, but it's not as much as I expected, because I expected things from like, the movies, or like American stuff. I expected for us to be on campus like 24/7. And, you know, between classes, like, I don't know, play a football game"**

**21, Male, Finance, Russell Group University, international student**

It's clear that the dissemination of relevant information was considered a key strength of university inductions.

“In the introductory lectures, they gave out the emails of all the different places to go for financial support and mental health support and support with work, and all kinds of different teams for different aspects of well being. And I thought that was really good. Whether those teams are helpful or not, I don’t know. They might be rubbish. But they signposted where to go very well.”

Male, 18, Philosophy, post-92 university, Home student

There is also a strong case for reaching people considering university earlier in their education. This not only allows them to understand what to expect at university, but also helps them to develop the skills they need to succeed there. Our focus groups indicate that much of the confidence and positive sentiment came from a high level of academic self-efficacy which was developed before university at school or college. Continued work with students before they enter university – particularly via access and widening participation schemes – which build up this confidence therefore remains vital.

“I think academically I was quite well prepared... my college was quite academically rigorous”

19, Female, History, post-92 university, home student

“What I did at uni was completely different compared to school... It was almost like a fresh start”

20, Male, Computer Science, post-92 university, Home student

## Case studies: Transition support

### Join the Dots - The Brilliant Club

Join the Dots is a programme run by the Brilliant Club and supported by a range of funders including the UPP Foundation, which aims to connect schools, universities and Year 13 students to prepare them for a successful transition to university.

In the first year of the programme, 90% of the 85 participants met one of the following criteria: eligible for Pupil Premium, no parental history of higher education, or living in the 40% most deprived areas. A further 166 students participated in 2023/24.

Evaluation of the programme demonstrated a statistically significant increase in academic self-efficacy and an increase in study strategy use and a sense of belonging.

### Transition pilot - Villiers Park

In 2022, Villiers Park was awarded a grant by the UPP Foundation to develop a new transition course to support young people from under-represented backgrounds. The programme aimed to equip students with the skills, knowledge and confidence to transition into university.

Evaluation of the programme is still ongoing; however, the pilot has highlighted that there is a significant gap in support for students between post-16 qualifications and results day and between results day and university starting. Research as part of the pilot also found evidence of high levels of anxiety about student finance and mental health issues.

The programme is planned to be updated based on the evaluation and will run from April 2024 into the academic year 2024/25.

## Questions for the future:

- What does pre-university support look like for upcoming cohorts?
- How can pre-admission questionnaires be used to maximise and personalise the support on offer for incoming students?
- Is there more that can be done by universities to support young people earlier on in their schooling?
- How can universities balance expectations and capacity to deliver?
- How can/should inductions move beyond information sharing?
- How will inductions work with the introduction of the LLE and a projected increase in modular learning?



## Section 2: Thriving at university

“Students now aren’t working out of want, they are working out of necessity”

Professor Janet Lord, Deputy Pro-Vice-Chancellor for the Faculty of Health and Education,  
Manchester Metropolitan University

“It sometimes feels like they’re covering their own backs because they can’t  
be the only uni that aren’t focused on mental health”

19, Female, Maths, Russell Group university, Home student

**In general students are positive about their university experience, but with two significant caveats. First, we have picked up discontent about student mental health provision, and second, there is still more to do around ‘belonging’.**

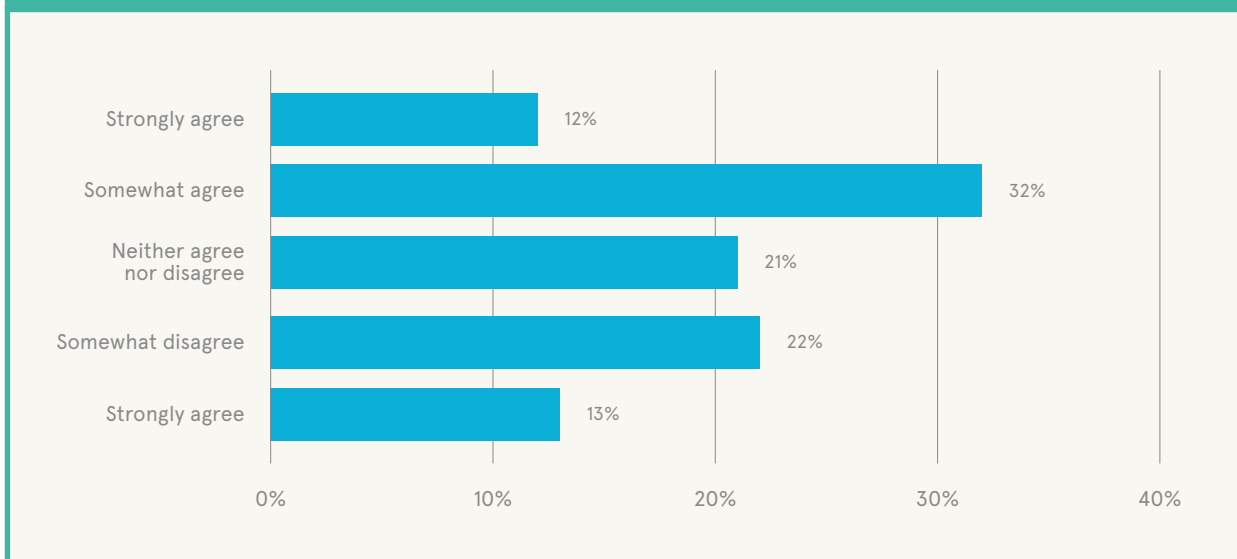
The pandemic provides an exceptionally low baseline from which to measure student wellbeing, but some indicators from our research suggest that, on the whole, students are much happier at university than they were in 2021. This latest research shows 74% of respondents said they felt happy at university; 63% agreed with the statement “I feel I belong at my university”; and 57% agreed that university had had a positive impact on their mental health overall.

Just over half (54%) of respondents said they felt comfortable approaching their university for support with their mental health, with 60% expressing confidence that their university would be able to help them.

However, sitting behind these more positive findings are a significant number of students who are still struggling with their mental health, wellbeing, and sense of belonging when at university. 44% of students agreed with the statement “I feel lonely at university”; 22% felt that their university experience had had a negative impact on their mental health overall; 27% of students would feel uncomfortable contacting their university for support if they were struggling with their mental health.



**Table 3: To what extent would you agree/disagree with the following statement: "I feel lonely at university"**



Findings from our focus groups highlighted that there is some variation in perception of the services on offer at university. Some students were keen to see more promotion of support for more acute needs. Whilst other students shared that they often felt there was a disconnect between 'university policy' as a whole and the experience of trying to engage in university support services.

**“My uni does a lot of yoga for mental health, and “woof Wednesdays” where it’s like “oh if you’re feeling bad mental health, come pat these dogs!”, that’s nice. It’s not really actual help”**

**19, Female, History, research intensive university, Home student**

**“Last year, I sort of like fell through the net, just because I had circumstances that they didn’t really notice. Like, I stopped showing up. Nobody noticed. My friend as well: similar circumstances, she stopped showing up, she stopped submitting assignments, nobody noticed.”**

**21, Female, Psychology, research intensive university, Home student**

## Case Study: Student Minds University Mental Health Charter, Cohesiveness of support across the provider

The Student Minds University Mental Health Charter, which was established with support from the UPP Foundation, looks to support universities to embed a whole university approach to mental health and wellbeing. One of the themes of the Charter is 'Cohesiveness of support across the provider'. Research has found that when different teams within an institution are able to collaborate and work well together, support for students improves and becomes more effective.<sup>29</sup> This is considered a key part of the enabling themes which help an institution deliver on a whole university approach to mental health providing resourced, effective and accessible mental health services as well as proactive interventions.

Below are the five principles of good practice within this theme:

1. Universities ensure cohesion and appropriate collaboration between different support services.
2. Universities ensure cohesion and appropriate collaboration between support services and academic teams.
3. Universities facilitate appropriate sharing of information across the institution to support individual students.
4. Universities ensure effective signposting and triage across the institution.
5. Universities work to develop a shared vision and understanding between different parts of the university community, towards mental health.

Interviews with institution leaders highlighted the growing demands on university mental health and wellbeing services. It is clear that the knowledge, awareness and confidence in the services available vary considerably amongst different students at different institutions. Both institutional leaders and students in our focus groups shared that they felt the most effective interventions were those which are those which are early, often and clear about what was on offer for students.

<sup>29</sup> [https://www.studentminds.org.uk/uploads/3/7/8/4/3784584/180129\\_student\\_mental\\_health\\_the\\_role\\_and\\_experience\\_of\\_academics\\_student\\_minds\\_pdf.pdf](https://www.studentminds.org.uk/uploads/3/7/8/4/3784584/180129_student_mental_health_the_role_and_experience_of_academics_student_minds_pdf.pdf)

## Students think belonging is important, but opportunities to engage and build up a community and connection are not guaranteed

91% of our poll respondents agreed that it was important for students to feel part of the university community. Students in our focus groups shared that they felt the social connections they made were one of, if not the most important part of their university experience, and a fear of missing out on opportunities to build these connections featured heavily.

“The social [aspect], especially when you first get to uni, can be lonely. If you don’t have a good flat, if you’re constantly thinking, what am I doing here, why can’t I get on with these people, that definitely contributed more to my mental health than my work load.”

19, Female, History, research intensive university, Home student

“You worry about work, but if you haven’t got a good social life, that’s a lot more important”

21, Male, Neuroscience, Russell Group university, Home student

Factors influencing belonging are well documented in research by Wonkhe and Pearson<sup>30</sup> - including the barriers to engagement which stop students from making connections with others. In the original report, findings highlight that students are more likely to feel a connection with their course (55%) than with their university (39%). This gap has widened: now, 56% of students feel a sense of attachment to their course, and only 17% to their university overall.

“We’ve seen a large uptick in the number of commuter students at our institution and we’ve been working hard to make sure our communications and activities on offer reflect that and work for all of our students.”

Dr Casey Cross, Associate Academic Dean for Students, University of Lancaster

<sup>30</sup> <https://wonkhe.com/wp-content/wonkhe-uploads/2022/10/Building-Belonging-October-2022.pdf>

Our focus groups and polling found that university life did not always live up to expectations, and students struggled to feel attached to the university as a whole. They often built their sense of belonging via attachments to their course, and through social interactions with other students - and those we spoke to often feared "missing out".

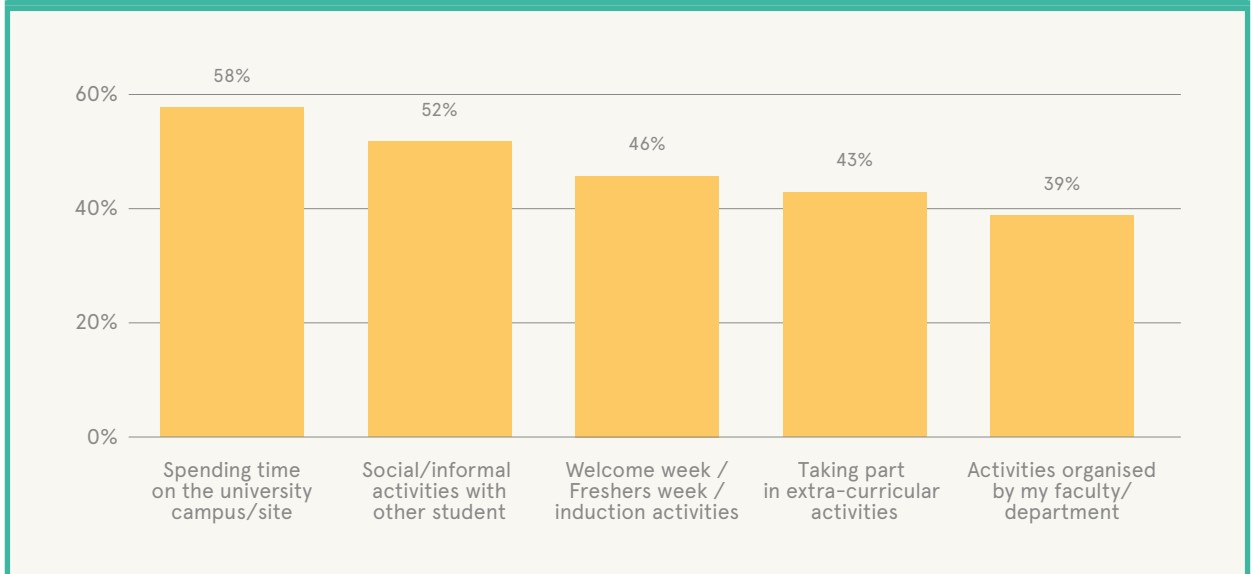
**"I feel like there's a lot of anxiety about missing out. I was constantly told about this uni experience, but then my flatmates were quite quiet, didn't really go out, I was constantly anxious about whether I was missing the uni experience. When you don't find the right people, it's really difficult"**

**19, Female, History, research intensive university, Home student**

**"I feel like I belong on the course that I'm doing. At the uni, I don't know. But I think that's more because our teaching campus is like completely different, is completely separate to the main university campus."**

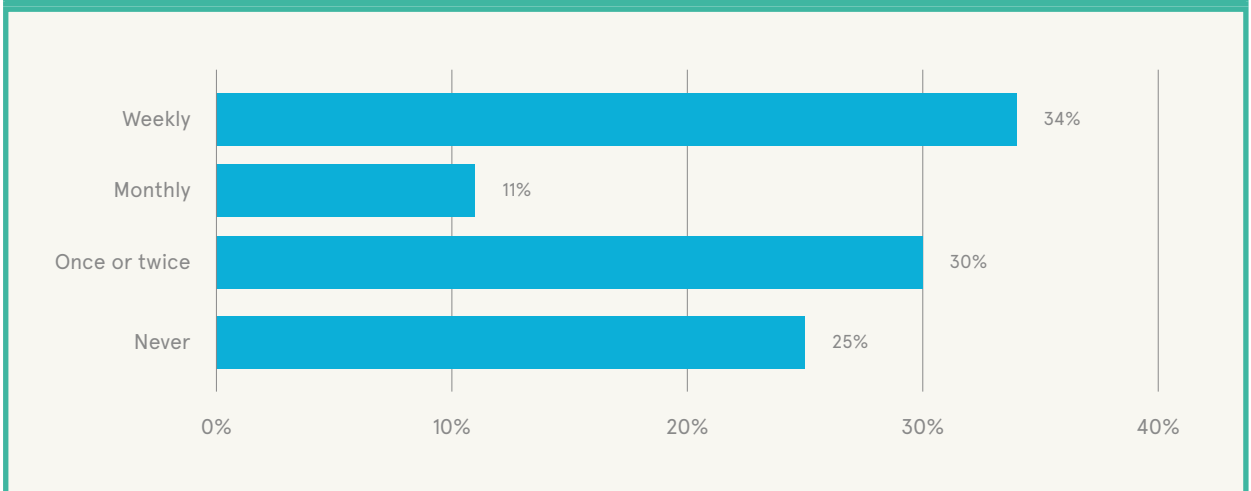
**20, Female, Primary Education, redbrick university, Home student**

**Table 4: What activities, if any, make you feel more part of the university community? (Select any that apply)**

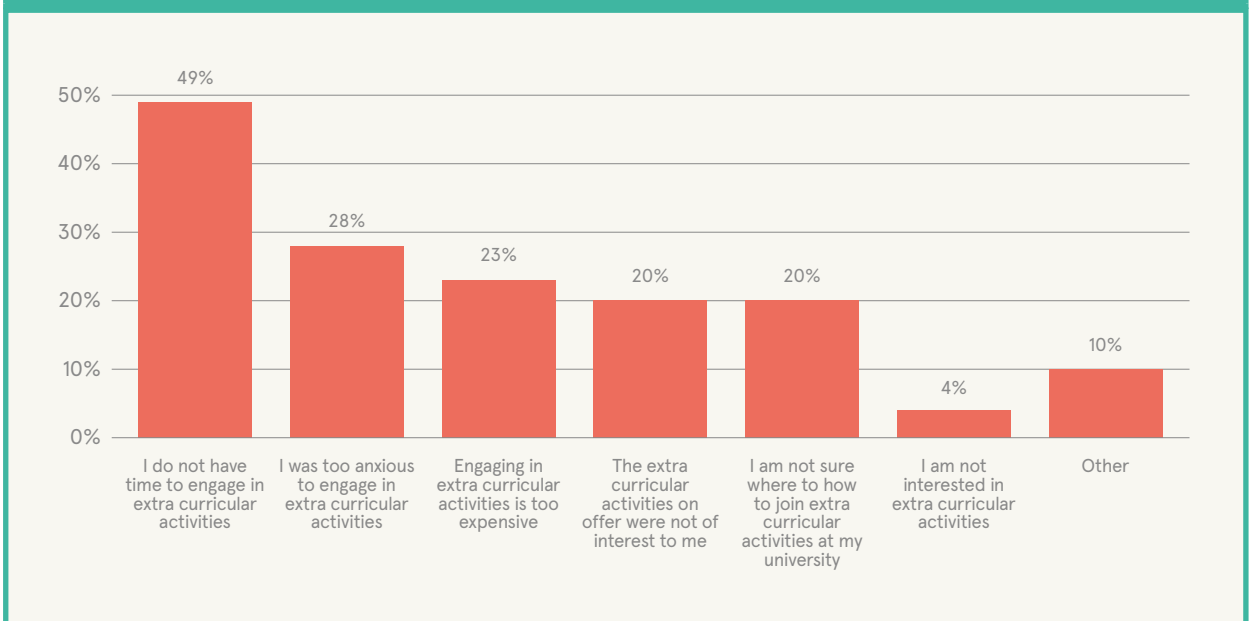


Time on campus was ranked the most popular activity for making students feel more part of the university community. However, a fifth of respondents shared that they had never engaged in extracurricular activities outside of their scheduled teaching hours. 44% of respondents expected to be less engaged with activities outside of the classroom than they have been. Respondents said that there were a number of barriers to engaging in extracurricular activities including a lack of time (49%), feeling anxious (28%), and the expense (23%).

**Table 5: Since the start of first term in Autumn 2023, how regularly have you engaged in extra curricular activities?**



**Table 6: What stopped you from engaging in extra curricular activities?**



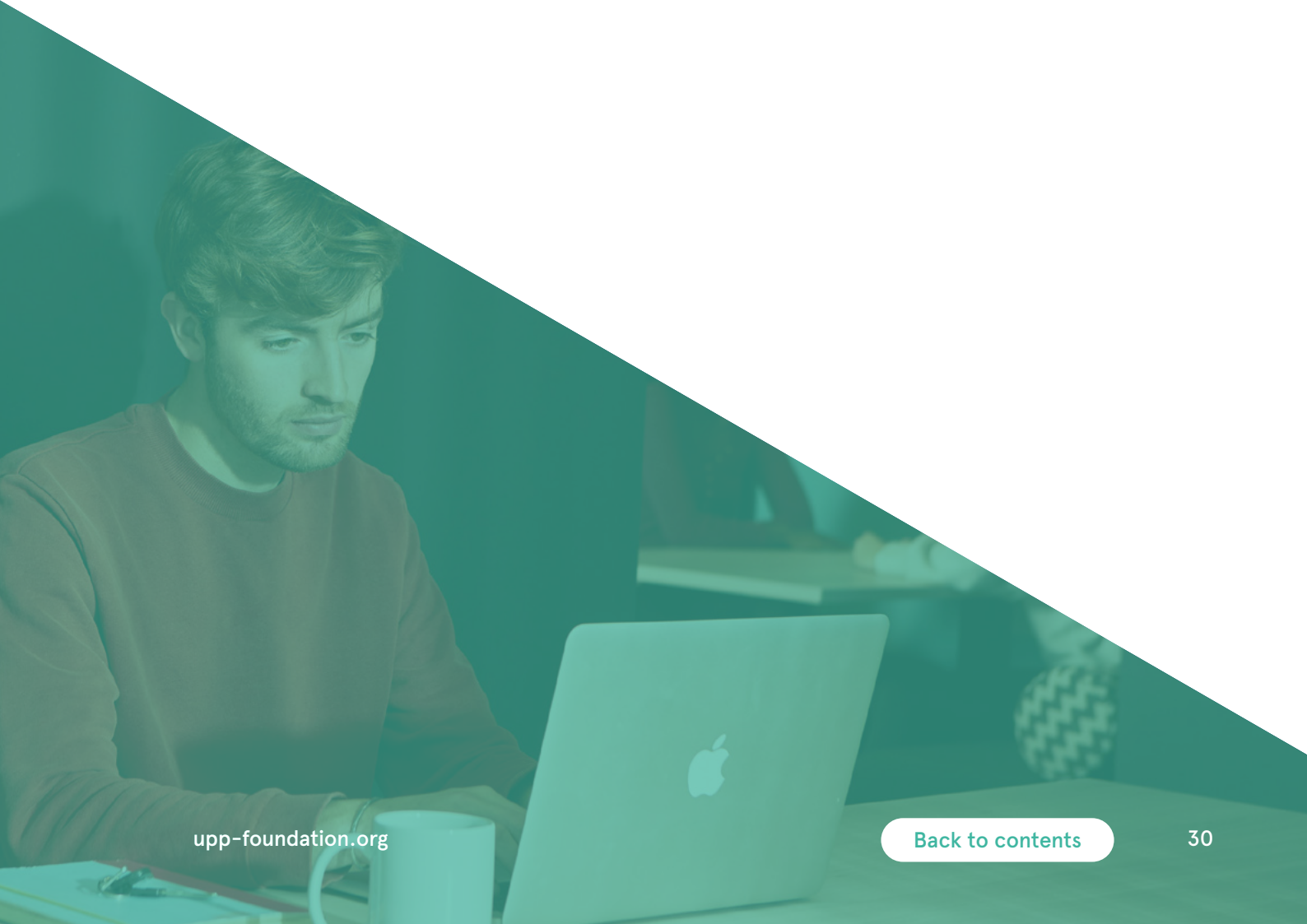
Whilst extracurricular activities were seen as a key part of developing a sense of belonging, many of the students in our focus groups also felt that contact hours were the foundation of developing connections with their peers something we return to later in this report.

**“In my first year, I didn’t really know many people on my course. But then in my second, and now my third year, I met some people through another module I did. And I found that actually helped me engage a lot more”**

**21, Female, Zoology, Russell Group university, Home student**

**“So, like, I want maybe a bit more hours but not for academic reasons like maybe a bit more social reasons”**

**21, Male, Finance, Russell Group university, Home student**



## The cost of living crisis is also negatively impacting participation

The pressures of the cost of living crisis and the insufficiency of maintenance support is leaving students struggling to engage with the basics of the university experience (lectures, seminars, and campus facilities), never mind the opportunities to participate in wider student life that are fundamental to wider the higher education offer.

**“I don’t know if it’s for every uni, but for sports clubs like hockey, apparently it’s £150 something ridiculous, if you want to be on the team. I don’t think it’s accessible for everyone”**

**19, Female, Environmental Geoscience, Russell Group university, Home student**

**“Sometimes I miss uni because I’ll prioritise taking a shift over to university, just because the amount of rent to pay is crazy, and you don’t get enough support for that”**

**21, Female, Zoology, Russell Group university, Home student**

**“My rent is already £210 a week. And then you think on top of that, to buy food, and then go into campus just to get a coffee for no reason? It’s just not viable”**

**20, Female, Biomedical Sciences, post-92 university, Home student**

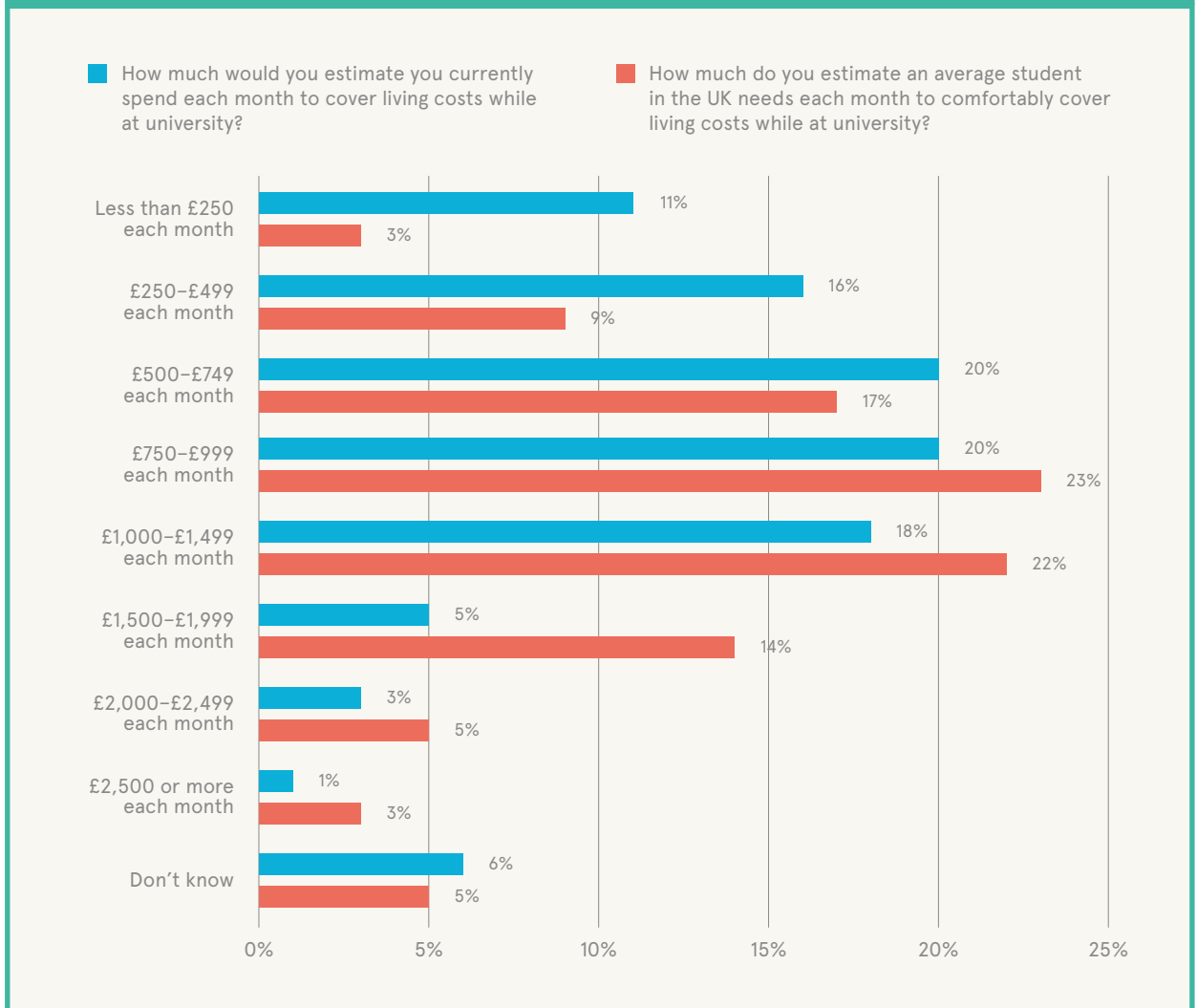
With an increased number of students taking on part-time work, and spending less time on campus to reduce travel or other costs, it was clear from our research that the cost of living was reducing the time students spent interacting with the university, with staff, and with their peers.

**“I have had to compromise taking classes that I wanted to take just because it doesn’t fit with my [work] schedule.”**

**21, Female, Media and Communications, redbrick university, international student**

Many students say maintenance loans are not high enough to achieve a basic standard of living. For instance, nearly two-thirds of respondents to a Save the Student survey shared that they had skipped meals to save money and 18% said that they were now using foodbanks.<sup>31</sup> The Russell Group has warned that if maintenance loans continue to rise in line with inflation forecasts, which are lower, instead of actual inflation, this will leave students £1,900 worse off.<sup>32</sup> Our own polling found a stark mismatch between the amount students were spending each month and the amount they estimate they need to live comfortably while at university.

**Table 7: Living costs: expectations vs. reality**



<sup>31</sup> <https://www.savesthestudent.org/money/surveys/student-money-survey-2023-results.html>

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/maintenance-loan-increase-leave-students-ps1900-worse#:~:text=The%20loans%20are%20set%20using,the%20first%20quarter%20of%202024>



Our focus group findings also supported this, highlighting that the cost of living was still a major concern for many.

**“It costs so much to like rent, and then tuition fees, and then actually living as well, like I’ve got loans for the rent and the tuition fees, but the loan doesn’t cover my rent. So I’ve got to think about that. And then I’ve also got to think about eating and stuff. But then there’s also just extra spending sometimes like that it costs to wash my clothes. It’s £6 to wash and dry. So cost and budgeting is definitely the hardest thing”**

**18, Male, Arts and Humanities, research intensive university, Home student**

This is not just an issue of costs, but a much wider question about what students expect from their time at university, vs the reality of what they actually experience. When universities talk about value for money, they often point to the wider student experience as a core part of the higher education offer. But for many students, there is a distinct reluctance to fully engage with university life, with institutions we spoke to all reporting declining number of students on campus, attending lectures, and participating in extracurricular activities.

The additional barriers put in place by the cost of living crisis demonstrate that as extracurricular activities become more of an “add on” rather than an integral part of the university experience, the importance of formal touch points like contact hours are key for students to not only develop relationships with their peers and lecturers but to feel a wider sense of community and belonging to the university as a whole.

Interviews with institution leaders highlighted that it has become challenging to support students to engage with campus life, even though this is integral to helping them build a sense of connection and belonging. Alongside the cost of living crisis, a general sense of apathy and a collection of competing priorities has led some students to no longer seek to be part of the university community to the extent that they may have in the past.

**A lack of agency is driving a broad feeling of apathy towards university life – and this apathy is contributing to a decline in engagement**

There is a growing sense of apathy and a lack of agency students feel over their university experience which is fostering a reluctance to participate in both learning and teaching and extracurricular activities. This is seen in the statistics above about low engagement in extra curricular activities – but also came out in our focus groups:

**“I go to uni, do my work, and get out as quickly as possible...I don’t care about anything apart from getting my piece of paper at the end of it”**

**20, Male, computer science, post-92 university, Home student**

**“I’m only on campus for maximum two hours a day. So it’s just a very little part of my life, I don’t really feel like I belong there.”**

**19, Female, international relations, Russell Group, International student**

**“If the uni is putting less effort into your course, then why should I put as much effort into my course as well? I’m paying a lot of money to basically have a blended course of two things that’s not actually relevant and not what was advertised to me.”**

**21, Male, ecology and conservation, research intensive university, Home student**

**“I only ever really feel like I’m at uni when I go in, for labs or a tutor session. Otherwise, you don’t really feel like a student just like you’re living with a lot of people your age....I guess I wish I felt a bit more connected, but I don’t think I need it now”**

**21, Male, neuroscience, Russell Group university, Home student**

Many of the students we spoke to felt a complete lack of agency over their experience and felt they had little choice in how to build and develop their own route through the institution. Whether that started in the conscious nature of their choice to go to university – “you just have to go nowadays” – or the experience itself – “it’s just how it is” – is unclear.

There was an overwhelming lack of truly positive feeling about the university experience which should be a cause for concern for institutions. A widespread apathy towards teaching, learning and other activities could prove to be an increasing challenge for co-creating a forward-looking student experience in the sector.

“Everytime I go to campus, it’s more of a hassle than anything else... I don’t have anything against the way things are right now, and the university is trying, but it’s just not realistic for them to try and make everyone feel part of the university”

19, Female, International Relations, Russell Group university, Home student

“I’m more concerned about how I’m going to eat for seven days a week than if I’m going to my lectures, and I’m here to do my lectures, but then I’m missing my lectures... it’s a toxic circle”

20, Male, Geography, Russell Group university, Home student

## Questions for the future:

- How will demand on university mental health services change?
- How can universities provide cost efficient yet effective support for students?
- How can universities ensure that support from across the institution is aligned and cohesive?
- How do projected financial challenges affect the delivery of extracurricular activities and what impact might this have on different student groups?
- How might the introduction of the LLE change student views towards belonging? How might this change the approach of universities to extracurricular activities?



## Section 3: An education to succeed both in and after university

“At the end of the day, I’m here to get a qualification, something that will make, you know, someone who’s interviewing me for a job look twice at my application”

20, Male, Geography, Russell Group university, Home student

“I do think that technological advances will play a big part in teaching in the next five years. And I even think that maybe the fees depending on how expensive this new technology is going to be, the fees may actually decrease”

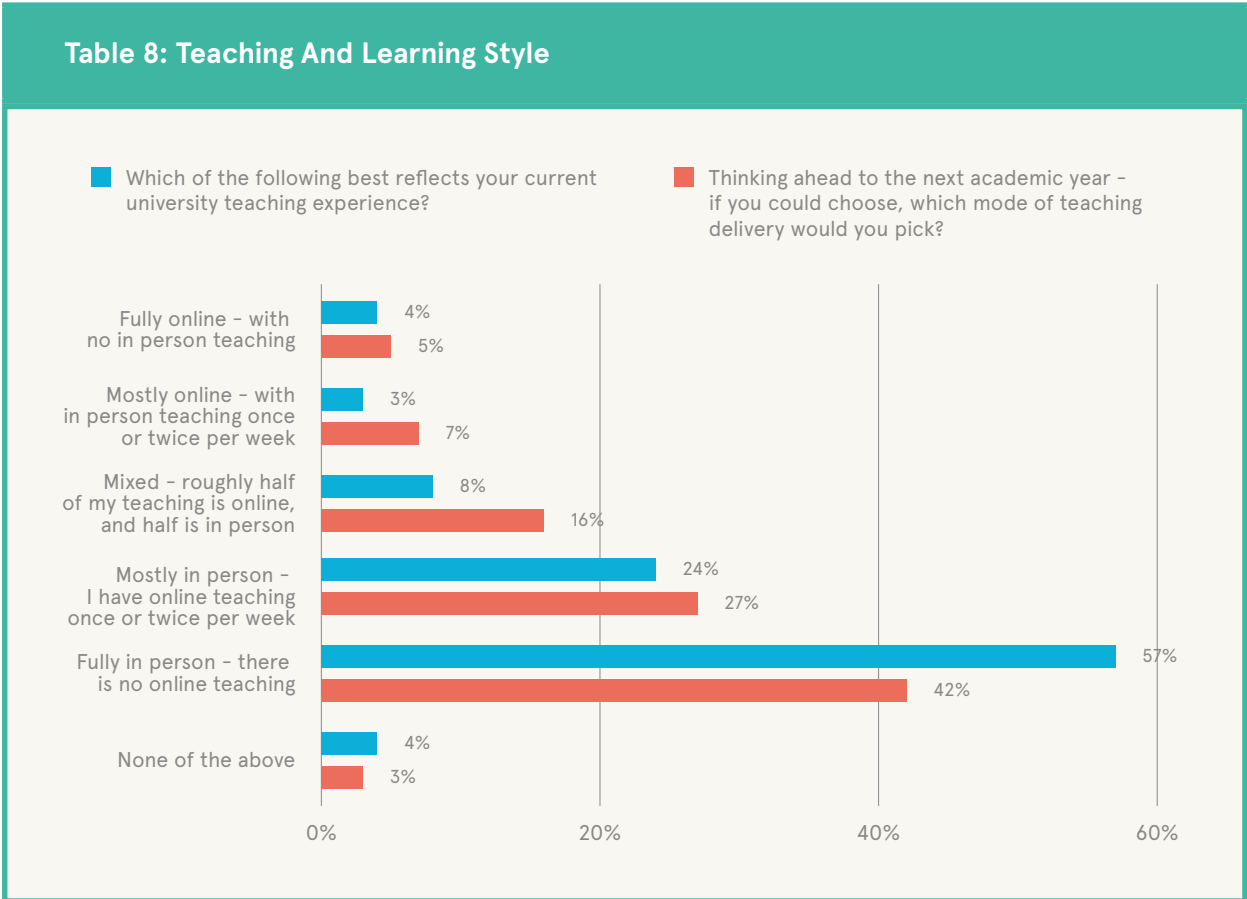
19, Female, International Business Management, research intensive university, international student

### Access to high quality learning and teaching is a priority for students

The pandemic has caused some radical shifts in how teaching is delivered and how learning takes place in higher education. The speed at which universities had to switch from in-person to fully online teaching was unprecedented and has now been sustainably embedded into the higher education offer.

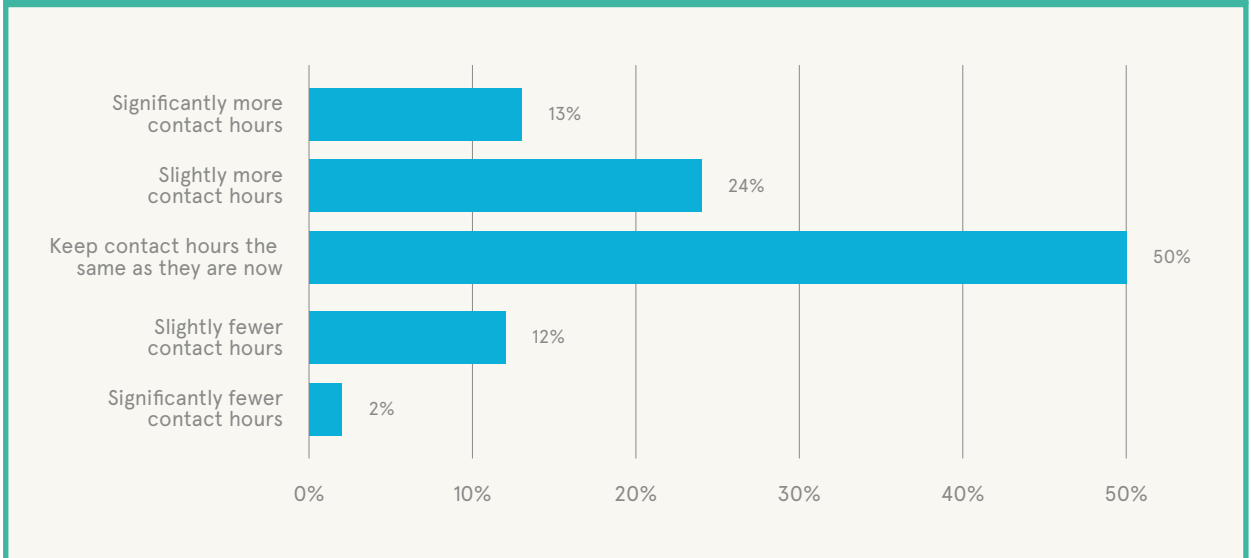
And the tools for learning and teaching look set to change again, with the rapid development and launch of new generative AI tools finding their way into lecture halls and classrooms.

It's clear that teaching and learning is mainly back to in-person. On the whole, students' experience of teaching and learning broadly matched what they would want if they could choose themselves. There was a slight preference for hybrid methods, with some in-person teaching and some online, over fully in-person teaching.



Contact time and engagement with academics were still considered to be the most important part of the learning and teaching experience. Almost two thirds (64%) of respondents shared that they had between 5 and 15 hours of contact time each week. A similar percentage (63%) said that their teaching and learning experience currently matched what was outlined to them by their university prior to starting. However, 31% said it was slightly different to what was outlined to them, and almost a quarter (24%) said that they felt their contact time was less than what their university set out. Just over a third (37%) of students would like more contact hours in the next academic year.

**Table 9: Thinking about the next academic year – if you could choose, would you pick:**



Due to the size of our sample, we are unable to establish from the polling exactly which groups of students would like more contact hours. However, international students in our focus groups were particularly vocal about how they considered contact time with lecturers to be a key part of what their tuition fee was paying for.

“I think as it stands now, especially with international fees, it’s way too expensive for the amount of contact time that we get... because I think essentially, we’re paying for what, access to readings or the library and just having them tell us what readings to read? It’s a bit... you know, it doesn’t really make sense.”

21, Female, Media and Communications, research intensive university, international student

## Case Study: Queen Mary University of London – Peer-led Team Learning

Peer-led team learning is where students who have previously been successful on a course or module are recruited to support a new group of students as peer leaders. Peer leaders help small groups of students through facilitating discussions and supporting them to engage with course materials.

The aim of peer-led team learning is to help improve student success rates, with some programmes observing “significant positive effects on student outcomes and self-efficacy”.

### Flexibility and stability are key to supporting engagement for students with increasing responsibilities

When discussing contact hours in our focus groups, two factors were raised time and again: flexibility and stability. Despite the contrast between these two attributes, they were held highly, and often spoken about together by many students across our focus groups. One reason that students prized a stable teaching schedule was because it allowed them to take on paid work, which they see as an increasingly crucial way of supporting themselves. Students said that some lecturers were better at supporting this than others.

**“I have had to compromise taking classes that I wanted to take just because it doesn’t fit with my [work] schedule”**

21, Female, Media and Communications, Russell Group university, international student

**“My work as well, I have set hours. So I’m with them from 3-6pm, Monday through Thursday. I’ve been able to adjust my schedule, but the way that my university does scheduling is not I mean, they just give it to you. And then if it doesn’t work for you, it’s kind of like, figure it out”**

21, Female, Media and Communications, research intensive university, international student

“I don’t think it’s good for students who actually want to do part time work because you don’t have specific days that you can give to your employer for you to work, because the timetable constantly changes every week”

19, Female, Medical Science, post-92 university

On the other hand, students felt let down by a lack of stability and consistency, such as where instructors changed from one week to the next. Where teaching was inconsistent, flexibility was not a bonus, but a prompt for disengagement: rather than the teaching acquiring value by dint of being more widely accessible, it seemed less valuable to students because of its unreliability.

“I’ve got a couple of modules where every other lecture is a completely different researcher or lecturer, so you lose that personal thing. And you’ve got someone that isn’t that interested in it, or isn’t explaining it well because they’re levels above everyone else in the room... I’ve just stopped going to lectures because they’re all recorded, so I just do them from home.”

21, Male, Neuroscience, Russell Group university, Home student

“For me, personally, sometimes I evaluate the lectures after I’ve had them for a bit of time. So there’s this particular lecture that I just, I just think it might be a waste. Not a waste of time. I don’t want to say like that. But it’s just like it doesn’t. It doesn’t have a lot of value”

19, Female, International Business Management, Russell Group university, international student

Universities may wish to think about the relationship between stability and flexibility in their offer to students. Rather than seeing them as acting in tension, perhaps they can be framed as acting in concert: the more stable staffing, academic and logistical arrangements are, the more flexibility course convenors can offer, and the more satisfied students will be. The difficulty of achieving this, though, attests to the financial difficulties the sector faces, which makes it harder to achieve.



**Students are increasingly driven by employment outcomes, and for many this is now the single most important factor in the university experience**

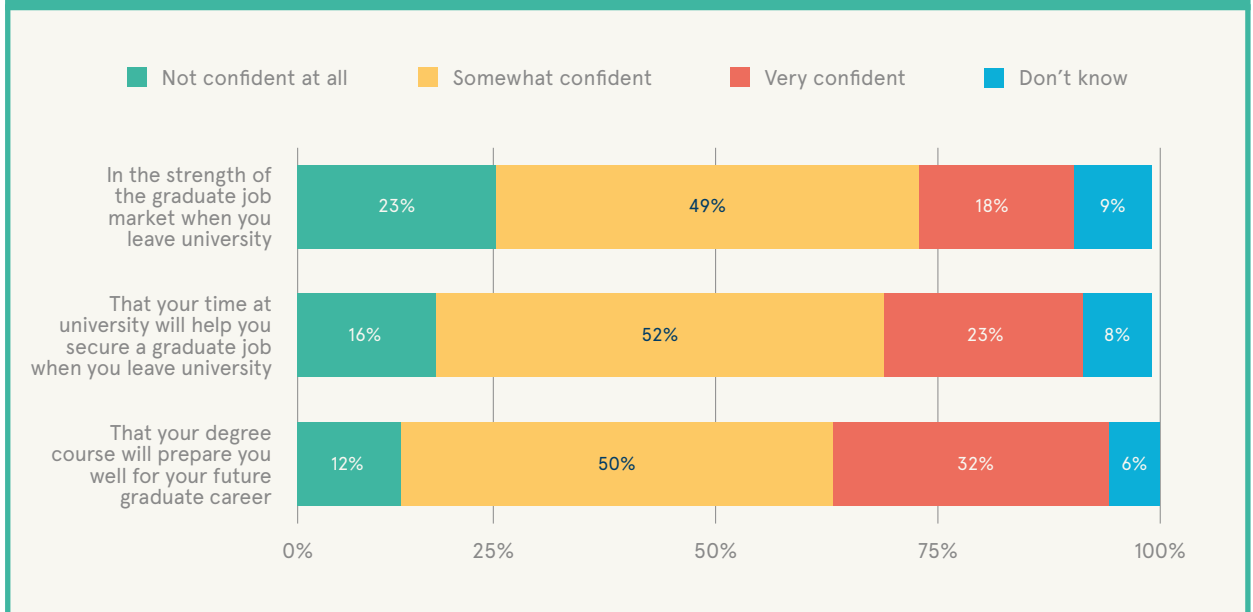
“It’s made out to be so exciting in the movies and in high school, so exciting to go and get your degree, [but] it’s been really difficult... I’m just so excited to get my degree so I can finally start to leave”

20, Male, Geography, Russell Group university, Home student

Students in our focus groups increasingly saw their degree in a very transactional way: the most important thing was getting a good degree in order to secure a good graduate job.

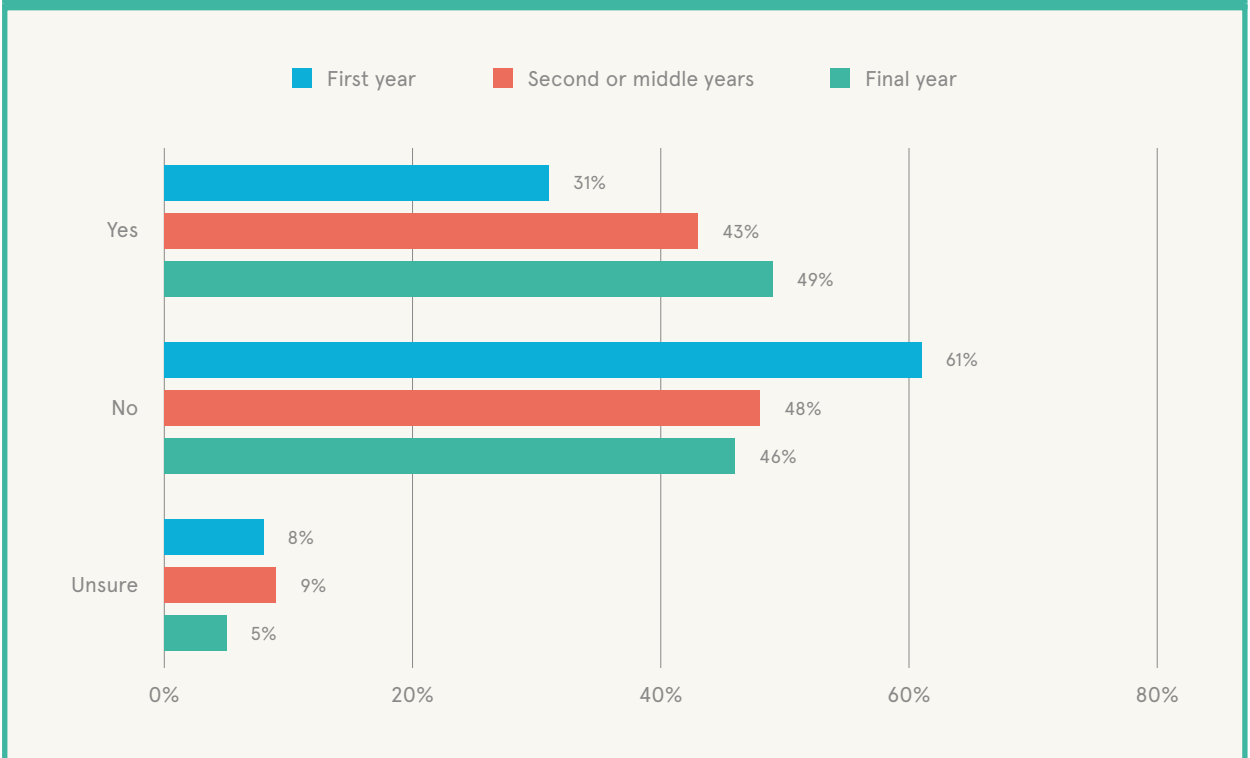
It is important therefore that confidence in the graduate job market has rebounded significantly, with 72% confident in the strength of the labour market when they leave university, compared to 36% in the original Student Futures report. 75% of students were confident that their time at university would help them secure a graduate job when they left university; and 82% felt their degree course would prepare them well for a future graduate career.

**Table 10: How confident are you...**



Given this, some of our findings around careers support and guidance are cause for some concern. While just over half of students were satisfied by the support available to help them plan their future career, only 38% were satisfied with the support their university had provided to help them find a job or work experience over the last 12 months. 50% of students had not had any specific conversations or guidance about their career from university staff, including 46% of final year students.

**Table 11: Have you had any specific conversations or guidance about careers with staff at your university?**



From our focus groups, it was clear that the issue was not necessarily a lack of support, but a lack of guidance in how to navigate it and to make time for it. Again, the decreased engagement with the university campus as a whole seems to be a driving factor of this.

**“I mean, you get emails all the time about careers advice, and there is like a whole careers team, you could go and see and talk to, but you know, just within day-to-day uni life, they’re not pushing it too hard”**

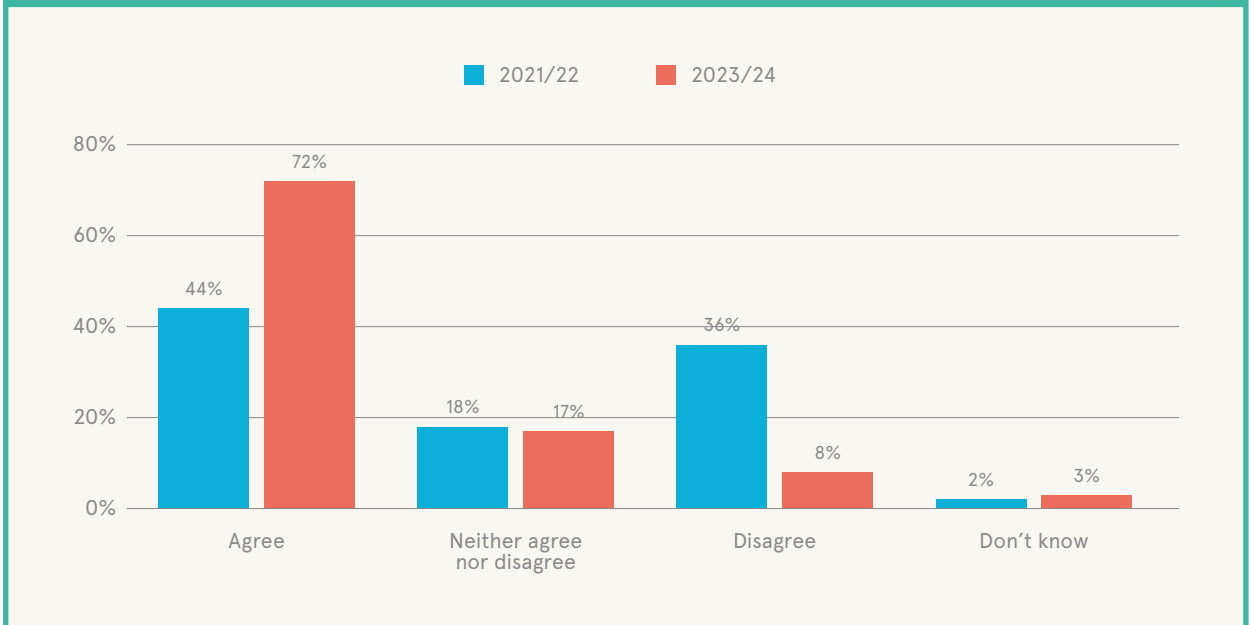
**21, Male, Ecology and Conservation, research intensive university, Home student**

“I haven’t done enough with career fairs and stuff like this. I probably need to do a lot of that myself. But I think I’ve limited myself doing that because I’m trying to... if I’m in uni I want to do work. I don’t know how to make time”

21, Male, Politics and Economics, Russell Group university, Home student

While many students appear to be satisfied with the quality of careers support when they experience it, many are keen to see more evidence of job skills being integrated into their curriculum.

**Table 12: To what extent do you agree with the following statements: “there is more my university can/could do to integrate job skills into my curriculum”**



“I had an interview today, we had to do a 10 minute presentation, and I sort of froze, [but] a lecture from last year gave me like three hours of his time to help me prepare for it. Like I said, the one thing that you need is really good employability. So they really help you out”

19, Female, Maths, Russell Group university, Home student

The cost of living crisis is likely to have been a driving factor in this. For example, a 2022 survey by the Institute for Student Employers found that 88% of the students and recent graduates they polled said that they anticipated that the cost of living crisis would impact their career.<sup>33</sup> In the same survey almost half of respondents said that they would not be able to afford to move to their preferred location for a job.<sup>34</sup> Therefore this perceived limited mobility puts pressure on being work ready for any roles which are financially viable either locally or further afield.

**“I’d say there’s not a heavy focus on employment until after the degree is finished but one of the reasons I actually chose this uni is because they have one of, if not the highest employment rate, post-degree. So that was a very encouraging thing. And so I know that there are many pathways directly from where I am. They haven’t gone into it heavily yet. It’s a fourth year focus, but I trust them”**

**19, Male, Music Production, post-92 university, Home student**

There are a number of institutions who are looking towards both embedding employability into the curriculum as well as offering a range of extracurricular activities which clearly lead to increased employability, skill development and/or an increased ability to articulate the skills gained in their degree.

<sup>33</sup> <https://insights.ise.org.uk/attraction-and-marketing/blog-rising-cost-of-living-is-influencing-how-young-people-think-about-their-careers/>

<sup>34</sup> <https://insights.ise.org.uk/attraction-and-marketing/blog-rising-cost-of-living-is-influencing-how-young-people-think-about-their-careers/>

## Case Study: A whole-university approach to employability - Newman University

Newman University is implementing a whole-university approach to employability. This includes supporting staff to embed employability throughout the curriculum at all levels of study.

In addition, all students at the university have a placement in their course. This includes courses where students are not required to do placements by regulatory bodies. Every student not only has the opportunity to engage with employers through their placements they also have an enhanced extra-curricular offer with opportunities for students to network.

Underlying all of the work contributing to Newman's whole-university approach is the ability for students to develop a personalised portfolio of experiences with multiple engagements with employers and content which is designed to enhance their employability.

Interviews with institution leaders highlighted concerns about facilitating engagement in placement activities. For example, one university leader shared that due to the pressures of the cost of living, the university is supporting students with costs associated with placements, including travel and clothing.

**“We’re working hard to support placement students in particular due to their increased costs of going into placement – we’ve got financial support funds but we’ve also been running schemes to help them get suitable clothes for placements and helping subsidise transport costs”**

**Dr Annabel Kiernan, Pro Vice Chancellor Academic, University of Staffordshire**

## Questions for the future:

- Where are there opportunities for universities to use generative AI to support effective learning and teaching?
- What is the balance between individualisation of experience and providing cohort/community based provision? Is this different for each institution?
- How can approaches to contact be adjusted to ensure that students are able to get the most from their degree?
- Can Local Skills Improvement Plans be better leveraged to support students into employment and help universities plan their portfolio to address local skills needs?
- How can AI be used to enable students to engage in meaningful work experience whilst navigating time and cost pressures?
- How can universities develop their relationships with employers to ensure that graduate skills are easily articulated, understood and, at least to some extent, match employer needs?

# Conclusion

“We felt we were ahead of the curve, now we’re not even sure where the curve is. Students don’t really know what they want anymore and the pace of change is challenging”

Institution leader

The UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission started life as a response to the Covid pandemic when there were acute consequences for aspiring and current students. Now, three years on, these hardships have been replaced by a cost-of-learning crisis that has fundamentally challenged the university model. Increasingly, students from a range of backgrounds are foregoing some of the essential elements of the rounded university experience and interacting minimally with their studies as they make room for earning a living.

Our research has shown that there is much to be celebrated about the work of institutions in supporting students to be prepared for and thrive in and after their time at university. It is clear that universities are working tirelessly to try to protect students from the cost-of-learning crisis. Yet the mounting challenges laid out in this report - including the ongoing challenges suggested by the cost of learning crisis, feelings of apathy, the expectation gap - shows that there is no room for complacency.

Part of the research for this report included asking students what they thought was the future of the university student experience. After several years of rapid and unpredictable change in the sector, there was a pervasive sense that in spite of universities offering greater innovation, diversity and flexibility than ever before, the student experience is on a downward trajectory.

A major aspect of anxiety surrounding the student experience going forward was the world into which universities are sending their graduates. In particular, students are very worried about whether university degrees lead to solid, stable jobs in the way that society has tended to assume they do; if this is no longer guaranteed, universities must do more to respond to changes in the employment landscape. For example, respondents stressed the growing importance of flexible and relevant degrees which could help people succeed in the world of work.

The impact of generative AI on university study also prompted reflection. Although it forms only a small part of the university experience at present, its considerable potential to disrupt teaching, learning, assessment and working was a source of some concern. There was an explicit view that the sector was at risk of falling behind when it comes to implementing innovative methods of learning, teaching and assessment, and keeping pace with innovation, including AI, in the world of work. Taken together, these two matters point to an anticipated disruption of undergraduate education's linear tradition. Degrees will not progress straightforwardly towards an academically-focused outcome as they have tended to in the past. Instead, new ways of working that take greater account of labour market demands will become more common.

Such changes are likely to exacerbate the existing gap between expectations and reality of the student experience in UK higher education institutions. In turn, the loss of agency and ensuing apathy that students feel about their studies could well increase, leading to a situation where undergraduate study seems ever more ubiquitous while offering ever-diminishing satisfaction.

Amid feelings that fees provide poor value for money, the offer of a 'minimum viable product' to students in order to shore up gaping holes in university finances will do little to reassure students that university can be what they hoped and dreamed of as schoolchildren, and what they rely on as adults entering the workplace. Students and universities alike recognise the potential power that universities have to impact the course of students' academic, social and professional lives. However, with universities offering an inconsistent experience, an extra-curricular life that students are sacrificing to undertake paid work, and careers support that students struggle to make time for amid academic pressure and work, it is difficult to build a positive and well-defined picture of the offer being made to students.

If universities wish to avoid spiralling dissatisfaction and the associated detrimental impact on student wellbeing, this can only be achieved through understanding how future generations want to engage, reevaluating communications between universities and their students, and empowering students to define their own relationship with their institution and engage at a level that fits in with their wider commitments. Such a shift in thinking will incur a considerable financial cost,



but failure to act risks rising outlay on applying sticking-plasters to the crisis in student mental health and wellbeing.

Our research shows that the momentous effort from institutions to increase transition support, enable access to mental health services and encourage extracurricular activities has not been misplaced. The positive gains demonstrated in our polling show that students are broadly in a better place than they were two years ago. However, there remain a number of key challenges for the sector:

- Responding to increasing demands on mental health services both internally and externally
- Ensuring provision is flexible and accessible for all given increases in financial and other pressures on students
- Paying particular attention to experience of placement and international students

It is clear from our research that what it means to be a student at a UK HEI is changing. As the funding model for higher education continues to come under scrutiny in the coming months and years, the nature of the relationship between students and their institutions is likely to change further.

**Understanding what young people, in particular those currently in school, are expecting of the university experience should be a priority for research moving forward.**

As students and their needs become more diverse, the demand on institutions to meet these expectations will only increase. How the sector self-organises to navigate these challenges will be key to developing a positive student experience, where students are able to define their own relationship with their institution and engage at a level which fits in with their wider commitments. Increasingly, universities will need to change their offer to meet students where they are at.



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