

Living and Learning in London

**What the HEPI / Advance HE Student
Academic Experience Survey tells us
about life in the capital**

**Emily Dixon, with contributions from
students at City, University of London**



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About London Higher

London Higher is the representative body of almost 50 universities and higher education colleges across the capital. We are committed to raising the voice of London's higher education and research sector and ensuring our members are making the London higher education experience the best it can be for students and staff in the capital.

Foreword

By Dr Diana Beech, CEO of London Higher

Over the past decade, the HEPI / Advance HE annual *Student Academic Experience Survey* has become one of the most important and influential publications in UK higher education policy. While I may have a soft spot for the report from my previous role as HEPI's first Director of Policy and Advocacy, I have also seen the power the report has to promote discussion and effect positive policy change while working alongside various Universities Ministers shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic – not least shining a much-needed spotlight on student mental health and wellbeing.

Since coming to London Higher, the representative body for almost 50 universities and higher education colleges across the UK capital, I have been keen to take a deep dive into the London picture revealed by the HEPI / Advance HE survey data, so we know how London's students are feeling about their higher education experience. These insights are important, not only for higher education institutions in the capital which can use the findings to enhance their offer to students, but also for institutions across the UK given the diversity of London's student population comprising, among others, large numbers of international students, mature students, commuter students, students from 'Global Majority' backgrounds and students from some of the most disadvantaged backgrounds in the UK.

Since there is no 'single' London student experience, London students have vastly different stories that are reflected in this report. I am particularly proud that this analysis has been compiled exclusively by a group of current London students, who have helped to interpret the data and bring it to life through their own experiences of studying in the capital.

As the gateway to the UK for the rest of the world, not to mention the most densely populated UK region, the health of London's higher education sector is of relevance to us all, as graduates from

the capital go on to power UK businesses and public services, undertake further study across the country or enhance Britain's global 'soft power' as they take their talents and fond memories across the world.

London matters to the international standing of UK higher education. UK policymakers would do well to heed this report's recommendations to help the sector flourish into the future.

Foreword

By Nick Hillman, Director of HEPI

The annual HEPI / Advance HE *Student Academic Experience Survey* is our flagship project. It has changed the policy agenda for the better ever since its earliest days almost 20 years ago. In part this is because the *Survey* has covered topics that others have tended to shy away from, such as value for money, disclosure of mental health challenges to trusted loved ones and contact hours.

However, the incredibly rich database we have built up has not to date been as widely used by third parties – that is, by those outside Advance HE and HEPI – as we have long hoped. So I am absolutely delighted to be able to write a Foreword for this important report on what the *Survey* reveals about the student experience in London.

In the past, HEPI has itself used the dataset to answer bespoke questions, including *How different is Oxbridge?* (HEPI Report 107) and *Does the UK still have a single higher education sector?* (HEPI Report 129) and this London Higher project similarly reveals the power of the data to deepen our understanding of higher education and to drive improvements where resources are available.

Perhaps most importantly, this report reminds us of the diversity of our higher education system. Not only are London institutions different from those elsewhere as well as different from one another, but also the make up of London's students is different too, with different needs and backgrounds. Yet despite such differences, this report also pleasingly confirms that most undergraduates in London are having an amazing time while bettering themselves through higher level study.

Six years ago, I wrote an article for the *Guardian* headlined 'It's time to give London students more money'. My argument was that the top-up provided in the maintenance support package for students in London should be increased, given the extra hurdles faced by those studying in our capital city. The piece received around 200

overwhelmingly negative responses, generally along the lines of London already has everything it needs.

So there is clearly a big public relations job to be done in explaining how student life can differ in London and what needs to be done to ensure every student in London can thrive. After all, the benefits would be felt beyond the M25. As London Higher's CEO, Diana Beech, recently wrote in another HEPI paper, successes in the 'myriad institutions across the capital bring benefits not just to London but to other parts of the country and around the globe.'

I hope this report helps to spread understanding and serves to show those in power locally and nationally that UK higher education should never be treated as a single sector full of identical institutions when it comes to making policy.

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Executive Summary

Overall, the picture that emerges from the London look at the 2022 HEPI / Advance HE *Student Academic Experience Survey* data is a positive one, in spite of the many challenges that come with living and studying in a major world city. The results from the data also show that London students can have very different student experiences owing to the diversity of the UK capital city and the students within it.

London students are more likely than those in all other English regions to say their experience exceeded their expectations. They are also joint most likely of all English regions to say they would choose the same course and institution again (61 per cent, the same as the North West). In answering to the question 'Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?', London students were significantly more likely to rate their happiness out of 10 at either nine or 10 than those in any other part of the UK.

More students in the capital also feel their courses provide good value for money, and the results are again more positive than in the other English regions. This may be due in part to facts such as the greater number of commuter students in London, as they may have different expectations of the student experience.

International students (a group comprising a disproportionately high proportion of the London student population) are more likely to view their courses as providing good value for money than those paying 'home' fees and are also more satisfied with their lives. They may arrive well prepared for the cost of living in the capital, owing in part to the need to prove they have sufficient funds before applying for a visa. London students, including international students, are however more likely than those in all other UK areas to indicate that tuition fees are a financial issue for them.

There are also many interesting nuggets in the national data, which we can use to understand more about the London student body.

- Mature students aged 25 and over are more likely to say their experiences are better than expected than students aged 21 and under.
- Students who live at home and commute to university are more likely to say their experience has exceeded their expectations (20 per cent) than students who do not live at home (14 per cent).
- Black students are more likely to appreciate the diversity of the student population around them, although they are less likely (30 per cent) than White students (38 per cent) to view their courses as good value for money, perhaps as a result of socio-economic disparities between the ethnic groups.
- Students enrolled at small, specialist institutions tend to be happier and think their courses are serving them well, owing probably largely to smaller staff-to-student ratios and intense, specialist provision.

In London, students who feel their expectations have been exceeded list face-to-face delivery and opportunities for spontaneous in-person social interaction as the top reasons why. Students who feel their experiences have been worse than expected list teaching quality, followed by lack of in-person peer interaction as the top reasons. Industrial action is also an issue that has clearly detracted from the overall satisfaction of students in London.

Finally, London students are the most likely in the UK to say they are prepared for life beyond university, at 57 per cent – perhaps owing to the opportunities provided by their institutions, the enormous diversity of the city and the unrivalled range of employment opportunities.

1. Methodology and context

Methodology

This report was prepared using data from the 2022 HEPI / AdvanceHE *Student Academic Experience Survey*, with contributions from a group of undergraduate students at City, University of London. The full data tables can be found on HEPI's website.¹

The survey data was collected from undergraduate students in the UK by YouthSight and Pureprofile. A total of 10,142 responses were collected, giving an 18 per cent response rate. The sample excluded part time students. International students are included in the sample but excluded from the statistics on ethnic groups, which are reserved for UK-domiciled students. More detailed information on how the data were collected and weighted can be found in the HEPI / Advance HE *Student Academic Experience Survey 2022* report.²

Where possible, we have replicated the structure and order of chapters from the HEPI / Advance HE report. While some topics had more and less to say about London student populations, we chose to maintain the original structure to make this report fit as neatly alongside its national counterpart as possible.

London Higher's analysis focuses on students studying at institutions in London, whom we refer to in this report as 'London students'. Since many students whose domicile is in London choose to study in the region, there is frequently overlap between 'London students' whose place of study is in the capital and students whose family home is there.

Where the report discusses other demographic groups (for example, mature students, commuter students or students in different ethnic groups) all statistics are national figures which we discuss in a London context.

While we recognise multivariate analysis may yield further interesting results for this dataset, London Higher lacks the resources

to do this at present but would recommend this as an additional means of analysing next year's dataset.

The London study context

The London higher education sector is as diverse as it is extensive. There are almost 50 universities and higher education colleges in London Higher membership alone, making London's higher education sector a considerable part of the wider UK higher education landscape. It is therefore worthy of attention as the UK region with the largest student population as well as, arguably, the greatest breadth of provider types. These include small specialist conservatoires, postgraduate research institutes, multi-faculty universities of all sizes and missions and even 'centre' outposts of other UK universities.³

As of January 2023, data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) reveal that London's diverse mix of higher education institutions is home to over half a million students (507,470).⁴ Yet, London's student population is as local as it is global. On the one hand, London's higher education institutions already educate more local students from their 'home' region than their counterparts elsewhere in the country and the capital's domestic student population is only set to rise. An earlier HEPI report looking at *Demand for Higher Education to 2035* estimates that, of the 350,000 new full-time higher education places that are projected to be needed in England by 2035, more than 40 per cent of this demand will be seen in London and the South-East: 'universities in London [...], who take the greatest number of students from London, are set to see the greatest increase in places required'⁵

On the other hand, London's higher education sector, when compared to other UK regions, attracts a particularly high number of international students. HESA data from January 2023 reveal that roughly one-in-three London students are from overseas, with just over 35,000 students coming from the European Union (EU) and over 144,000 students coming from elsewhere in the world.⁶ As

London Higher's *International Education Strategy for London* makes clear, London's higher education sector is committed to playing its role in meeting and enhancing the UK Government's international education ambitions and institutions in the capital would do well to prepare for sustainable growth in overseas student numbers.⁷

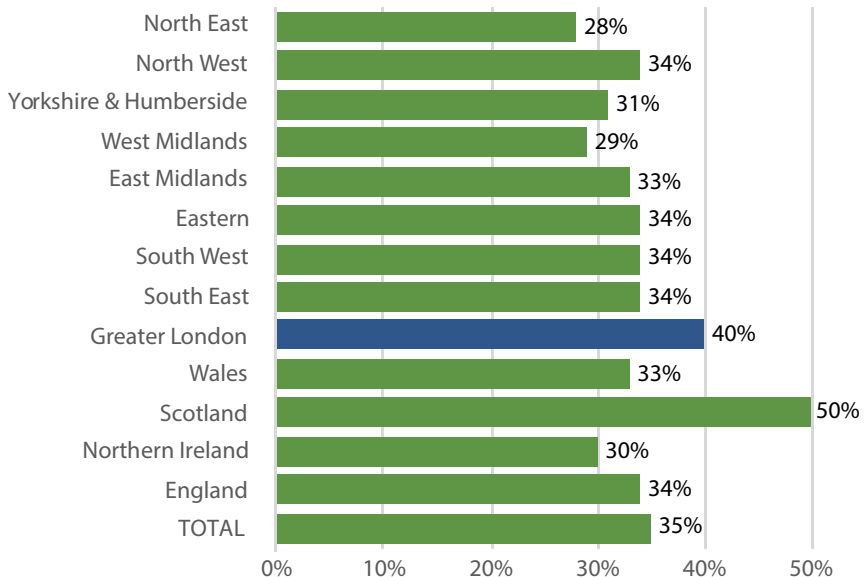
For policymakers and strategists wanting to explore how different student groups feel about their higher education experience, looking to London for the answers is an obvious first step. The capital's sizeable and growing student population must mean that London's higher education sector is doing something right and it is hoped that putting a London-lens on the latest HEPI / Advance HE *Student Academic Experience Survey* data will reveal whether London, for different students, is indeed the place to be.

2. Value for money

Trends over time / by domicile

To kick-start this analysis, we began by addressing whether London students' perception of value for money rose following the pandemic. In 2020/21 and 2021/22, some students were confined to their bedrooms away from campus and perceptions of value for money acted as a valuable proxy for overall quality of student experience. Nationally, student perceptions of value for money climbed slightly in 2022/23 after hitting an all-time low in 2021/22, but continued to trail behind all other years dating back to 2012, when the comparable dataset used for this study starts.

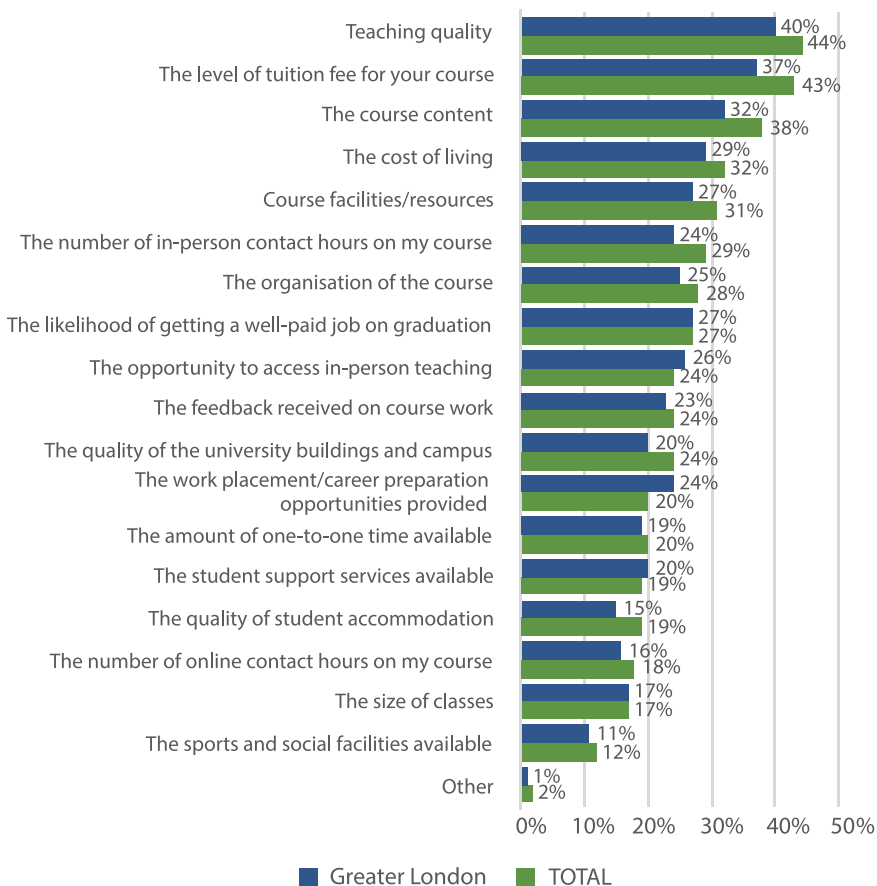
Proportion of students who indicated their course was good or very good value for money by region of the UK



Students in the capital are more likely to say their courses provide good value for money than students in other regions of England

(40 per cent say they regard value for money as 'good' or 'very good', six percentage points higher than the cluster of regions at 34 per cent – the South East, South West, East and North West). Students in London are also less likely to say their courses offer poor value for money (28 per cent, four percentage points lower than the South West and South East at 32 per cent).

Factors affecting student perception of value for money in London and on average across the UK



For a city with the highest cost of living in the UK and well-publicised issues of affordability and availability of student accommodation, the fact that students in London are among the most likely to find their experiences good value – second only to students in Scotland where higher education is free for ‘home’ students – tells us there are factors at play in the capital beyond cost that make London’s students feel they are getting good value out of their studies.

London’s diverse student population is made up of many sub-populations. For example, London has a significant population of mature students, who are likely to interact with their institutions differently from younger students, more likely to live in their own accommodation and tend to commute daily to their place of study, rather than having a separate term-time address. Nationally, the survey data tell us that mature students are more likely to see their course as good value for money than younger students, with 39 per cent of students aged 26 or over rating their value for money as ‘good’ or ‘very good’, compared to 34 per cent of students under 21. This may reflect the different expectations that older and younger students have of their degrees.

Commuter students, likely to be living either at home with family or alone, had significantly higher positive value-for-money perceptions. London has large numbers of commuter students choosing to live at home with their families for financial or other reasons.⁸ Nationally, the responses from students who choose to live at home indicates they are slightly more likely to find their course provides positive value for money compared to students who do not live at home (37 per cent compared to 34 per cent) and the same likelihood of finding the course ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’ value for money (33 per cent).

Commuter students in London choosing to live in their own homes may well make this choice thinking it will save them money but then find themselves faced with significant costs associated with travelling to campus, often at peak times, and with the time commitment that comes with commuting. In the current cost of

living crisis, higher education institutions should examine what they are doing already that is working well for their commuter students and consider any extra support that might be necessary if there is an increase in students wanting to commute or live in student accommodation further from campus as budgets tighten.

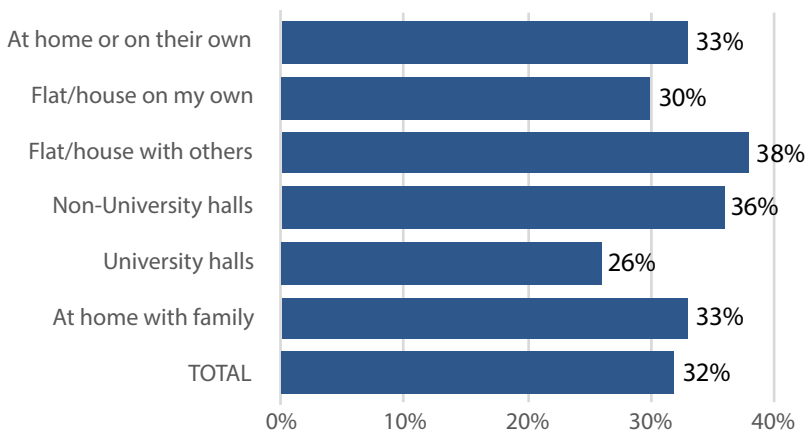
London has long been home to many students who choose to commute to study and its institutions can provide examples of good practice that makes these students feel valued and engaged with student life. In the HEPI *Homeward Bound* report on defining and supporting commuter students, David Maguire and David Morris call for commuter students to be defined by how far they must travel between their residence and study location, irrespective of whether they live in their family home or privately-rented accommodation during term-time. This definition better fits the London student experience, as students in the capital are more likely to travel significant distances to study whether living at home or in halls.⁹

As explained earlier, London contains a wide range of higher education providers. If we zoom in on the different provider types that exist in the capital, we can see varying levels of student satisfaction with value for money at the different types of institution. These national figures on how satisfied students at different provider types feel has much to tell us about the London landscape, with its particular mix of institution types. The most satisfied students appear to study at either specialist institutions (with 53 per cent rating their value for money 'good' or 'very good') or alternative providers (57 per cent). While these two types of providers are different in many ways, and are likely to teach less mainstream subjects, the institutions in these categories tend to be small institutions, where fewer numbers of students can potentially develop close personal relationships with relatively small numbers of faculty members. Where this leads to a greater sense of support and connection, for example at London's many world-class performing arts conservatoires, the students who are able to access close personal attention from faculty members may well see this as particularly good value for money. This increased

student support is also no doubt reflected in the ‘world-leading specialist provider’ status of many of the capital’s small specialist institutions.¹⁰

International students from outside the EU are more likely to view their courses as good value for money than students who pay ‘home’ fees – and, as of January 2023, around a quarter (144,000) of the 560,000 non-EU international students in the UK are enrolled in higher education institutions in London.¹¹ Among students paying international fees, 41 per cent rate their experience as ‘good’ or ‘very good’ value for money, compared to 35 per cent of students paying ‘home’ fees. This sends an encouraging message about London’s higher education institutions’ ability to meet the expectations of students who have travelled a long way from home and are paying higher fees than their domestic counterparts. It also hints that the providers and subject clusters might be attracting the most international students are creating better perceptions of value for money among their student cohorts.

Proportion of students who describe their course as poor or very poor value for money by accommodation type



UK students who live in university-owned halls are the least likely to rate their experience as poor value for money (26 per cent, four percentage points less than students who live in their own home). This may be due to students in university-owned accommodation being closer to sources of institutional support and less likely to be affected by drastic price hikes in the capital's private rental market. Many students living in university-owned accommodation will also only be paying for accommodation during term-time, lessening the financial burden for students who spend the vacations at their family home – though there are important exceptions to this, including care leavers, estranged students and international students. The groups most likely to rate their studies as 'poor' or 'very poor' value for money are students living in shared flats and houses with others (38 per cent) or non-university-owned halls (36 per cent). In London, the students in these two accommodation types may well face additional travel time and costs getting to their institutions, and in some cases even lower living standards, worsening their perceptions of value for money.

Looking at the data for different ethnic groups, we can see that across the UK, White students are the most likely to view their courses as offering positive value for money, with 38 per cent of White students seeing their value for money as 'good' or 'very good', with a significant gap between them and the next most satisfied group, Black students at 30 per cent. This is likely to, at least in part, due to socio-economic disparities between different ethnic groups, but questions should be asked about what causes students of different ethnicities to see different levels of value in their courses. These questions are particularly worth asking in London where the student body is the most diverse in the country.

UK-domiciled Chinese students, a group that both lives and studies in London in high numbers, are significantly more likely to rate teaching quality and tuition fees as important factors in their perceptions of value for money.¹² At the same time, Chinese students are less likely (along with other Asian groups) to cite the

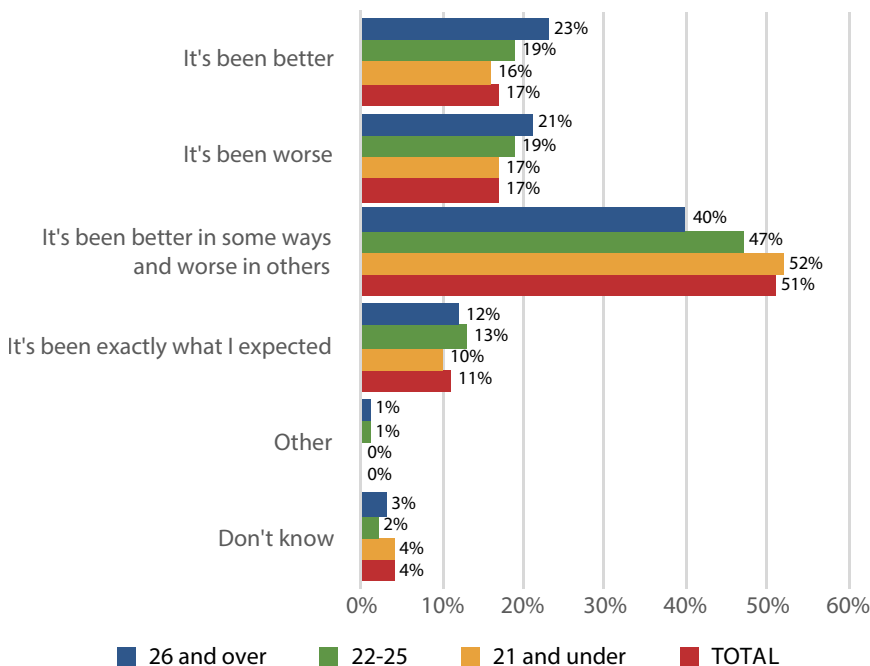
cost of living as a particular concern. For Black students, the cost of living is close to the same level of concern as teaching quality, only one percentage point behind. More research could be conducted into the individual feelings and situations of different groups in this sample to understand better the factors that mean the most to different groups.

3. Meeting expectations

Experience vs expectations

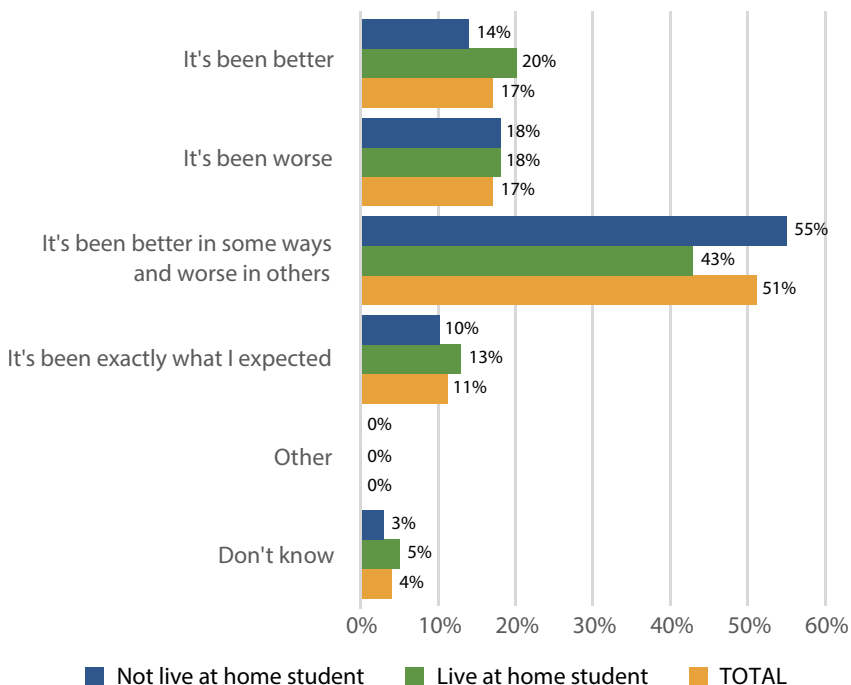
Students entering higher education in 2021 did so in the context of two years of COVID-induced restrictions. The London students we spoke to while preparing this report described their expectations for 2021/22 as different from what they might have been in the past, influenced by the constraints of the pandemic. Yet London students were more likely than all other English regions to say their experience exceeded their expectations and less likely to say it failed to meet them. To think more about what is working well for students in London, and the students whose struggles may be obscured by averages, we can look closer at specific demographic groups.

How student experience matches expectation by age

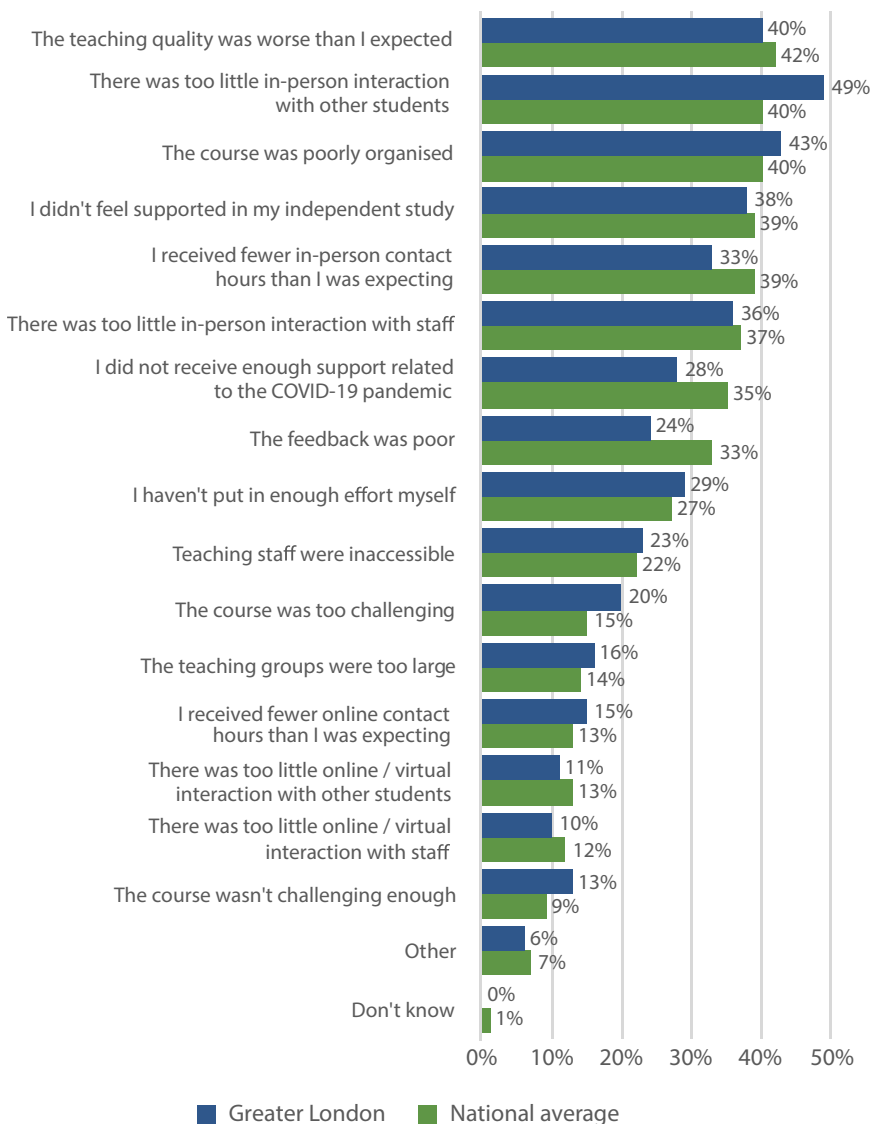


Mature students, aged 25 and over, were more likely to say their experiences had been better than expected than students aged 21 and under, but also more likely to say their experiences had been worse. London's students aged 25 and above are more likely to be studying with particular career goals in mind than their younger counterparts, and therefore tend to be less focused on the 'student experience' more generally. This may explain why their answers to this question are less ambiguous than those of younger students. Students aged 21 and under are significantly more likely to say their experience had been 'better in some ways and worse in other ways' (52 per cent) than mature students (40 per cent), indicating they may be taking a wider range of factors into account when answering the question.

How student experiences match expectation by type of accommodation



Perceived reasons for expectations not being met among London students who indicated experience was worse than expected



Students who live at home and commute to their higher education institution were more likely to say their experience had exceeded their expectations (20 per cent) than students who do not live at home (14 per cent). The two groups had the same likelihood of saying their experience had been worse (18 per cent). The previous chapter highlighted some of the many factors that are likely to explain why London's commuter student population have different expectations and experiences from students who move away to live in their place of study. We cannot tell from these data how the expectations of these two groups compared to each other differed before they started studying; however, this could be a space where a future survey could help, comparing the expectations of prospective students who intend to move house and those who intend to stay at home.

Why expectations are not met

Between 2020/21 and 2021/22 in the national survey data, teaching quality has overtaken lack of interpersonal interaction as the most common factor selected by students to explain why their expectations had not been met.

London was one of three English regions where the lack of in-person peer interaction was identified as a significantly bigger issue than lack of in-person contact hours. Of the four areas where this was the bigger factor of the two, London had the greatest gap. Among students who said their experience was worse than they expected (as opposed to worse in some ways and better in some ways), the proportion of students who said that a lack of interactions with other students was a major issue climbs to 49 per cent, a significantly higher number than in other areas of the UK. Big cities can still be lonely places.

In the UK's largest and most expensive city, where students are more likely to live, study and socialise across large areas of the city, it is likely that the cost of living crisis is hitting them hard. Students may be cutting back on social plans due to costs such as public transport,

food and drink rising in price. However, London's students were the joint least likely in England (alongside the South-West) to say that they did not feel supported through issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic. This reflects well on the support provided by London's higher education institutions and suggests that lack of in-person socialising is not likely to be due to anxiety over COVID-19 infection, as was more likely to be the case in previous years.

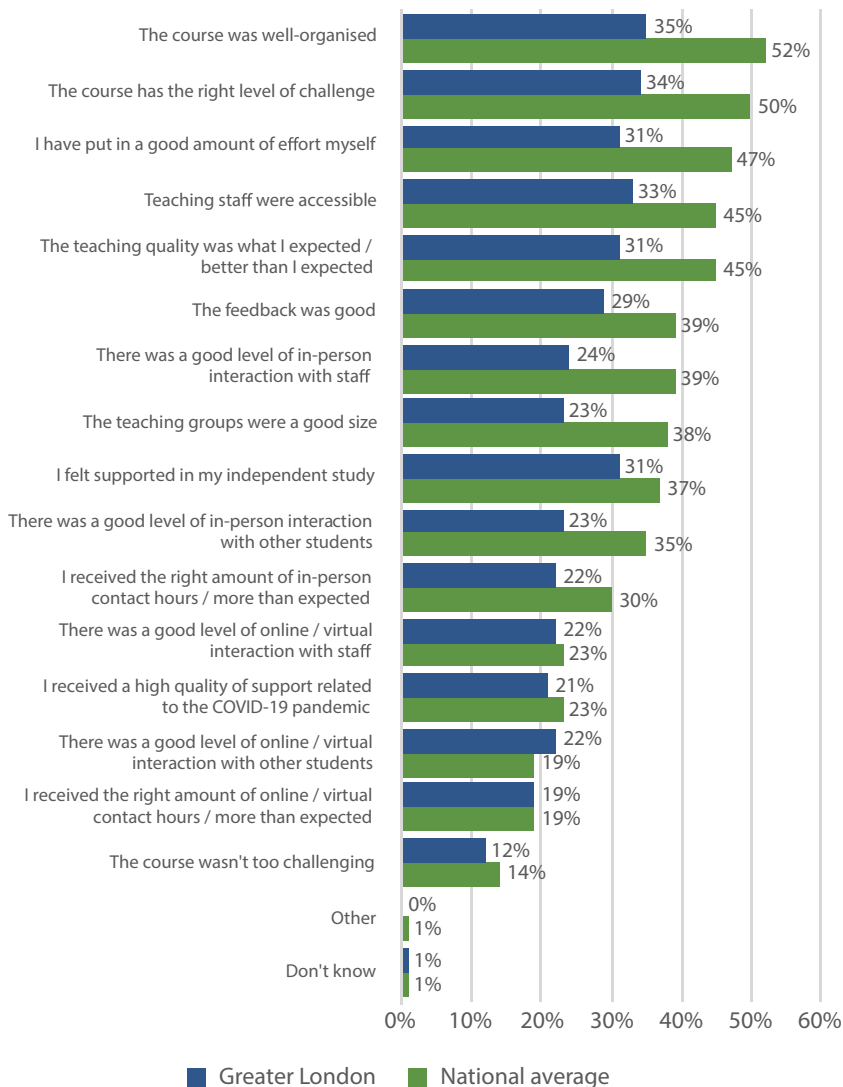
The escalation of industrial action across UK universities has affected students, however. In the conversations with London students that informed this report, industrial action, which has affected students' ability to interact with and receive feedback from teaching staff, was brought up multiple times as an unexpected issue with their higher education experience. It is likely to impact satisfaction levels in the next tranche of national data.

Why expectations are exceeded

The increase in face-to-face delivery and opportunities for spontaneous in-person social interaction, the typical 'student experience', is likely to be responsible for the national rise in the proportion of students saying their experience had exceeded their expectations. In particular, the 13 percentage point increase in students being impressed by the quality of in-person interaction between students and staff speaks to how much students across all demographic groups, courses and areas value face-to-face interactions with their teaching faculty.

While students in all other English areas rated 'the course was the right level of challenge' as their top reason for their experience exceeding their expectations, London students were the least likely to select this option (35 per cent). London students were also less likely to be impressed by teaching group size and quality of course organisation. London students were slightly less likely to indicate their level of online / virtual interaction with staff was better than expected than other regions, but slightly more likely to say this about online / virtual interaction with other students.

Perceived reasons for expectations being exceeded among London students who indicated experience was better than expected



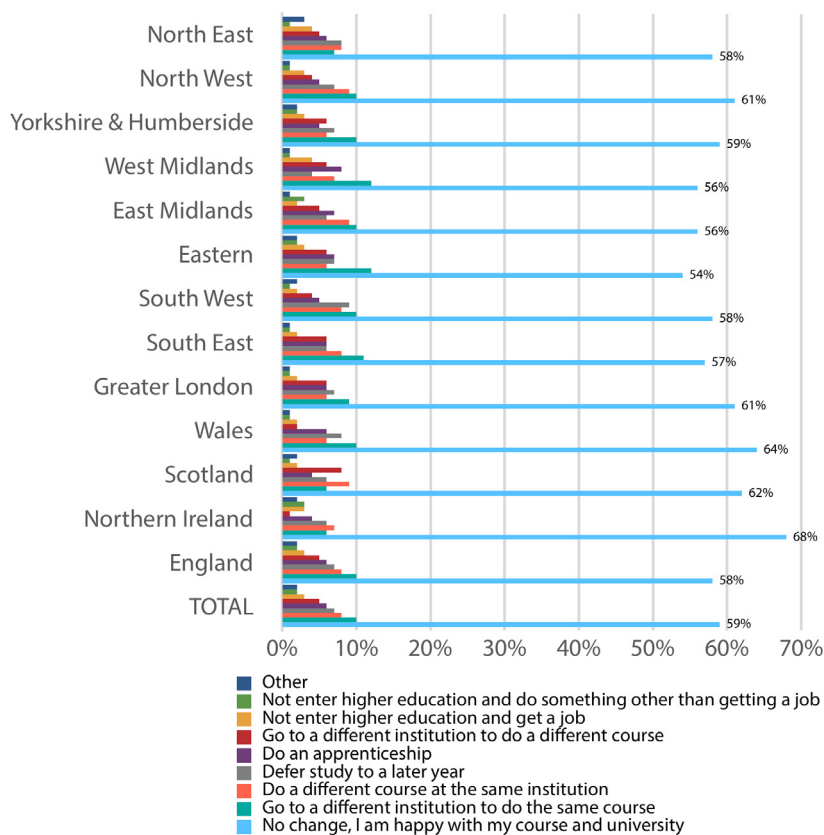
This, together with the frustration felt by some London students over the lack of in-person teaching and social opportunities, may result from the fact that many different kinds of students call London home, and they all have different expectations and study needs. While 18-year-old undergraduate students are likely to be keen to interact in person in social and educational contexts, students who are mature or otherwise 'non-traditional' may value opportunities to study and socialise from home in ways that fit in with their jobs and caring responsibilities. In London's diverse student body, there is no single answer to how much online socialising is too much or not enough.

4. The choice to go to university

Whether students would make the same choice again

In a city with plenty of choice for employment, study and apprenticeships, asking students if they would choose the same pathway again is a useful proxy for general satisfaction to ask all students.

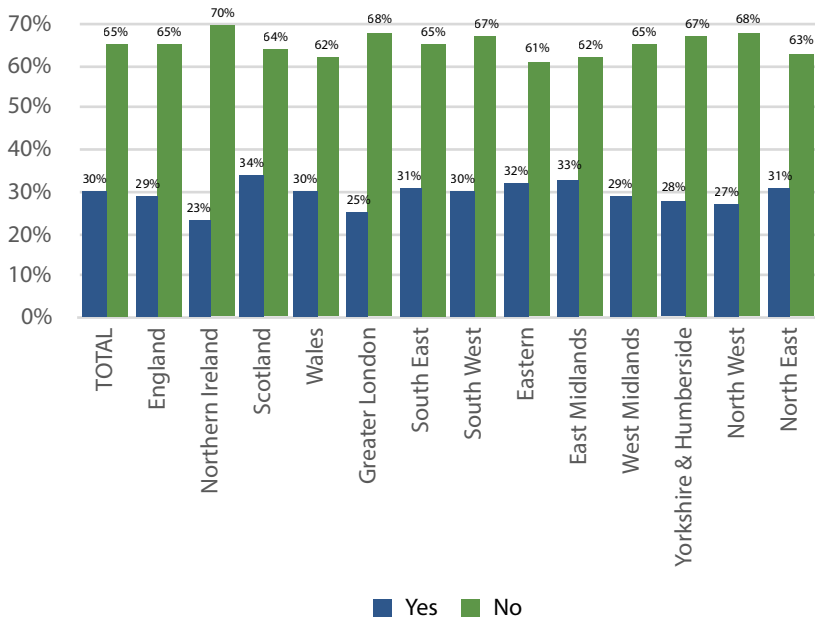
'Thinking about your academic experience, knowing what you know now, if you had a second chance to start again, would you do any of the following?'; split by region



London is the joint most likely of all English regions where students say they would choose the same course and institution again (61 per cent, the same as the North West), although all English regions are behind the proportion of students in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in this regard. London students' desire to choose pathways other than higher education was low, at nine per cent, joint least likely among English regions alongside the South West. This gives us a clear sign that London's students are, in general, satisfied with the choices they have made and feel that the experiences they are having in the capital are worth it.

Whether students are considering leaving

Proportions of students who have considered withdrawing or leaving



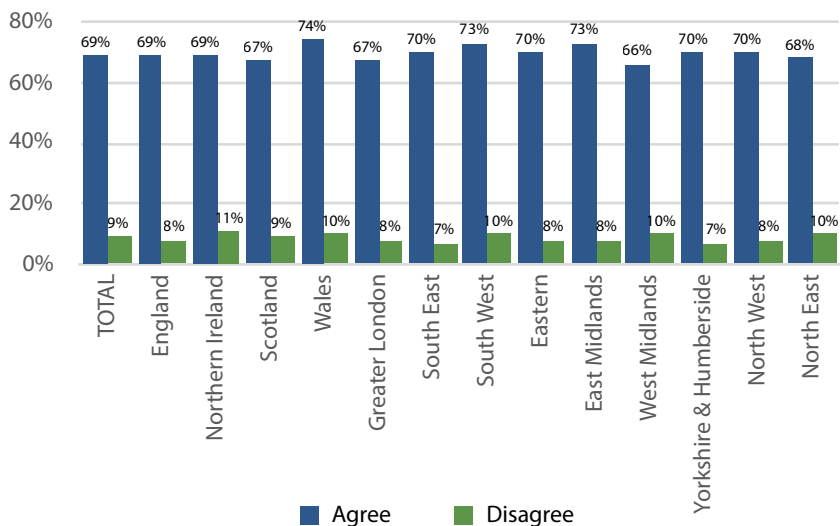
London students scored the lowest of any English region when it comes to saying they have considered leaving their higher education

studies, at 25 per cent. Among other regions, only Northern Ireland at 23 per cent has a lower rate. Looking at the demographic groups who are least likely to indicate they have considered leaving university, namely UK-domiciled Chinese students (23 per cent) and non-EU international students (20 per cent), these student groups are particularly prevalent in London and will likely be contributing significantly to London's lower score.

5. Student priorities

In addition to questions about students' sense of belonging, the 2022 HEPI / Advance HE *Student Academic Experience Survey* included questions on how much students feel able to express their views on campus, and how far they feel exposed to a diverse range of opinions and viewpoints in their places of study. While most students agree they can comfortably express their views with their peers whether or not people agree with them (64 per cent) and also that they hear a wide variety of views expressed on campus (69 per cent), not all groups experience this equally. Students from some ethnic minorities (Black, Asian and Mixed) are more likely to say they feel either uncomfortable expressing their views or that they do not hear a wide variety of views. This represents a particular challenge for London's higher education institutions, given their broad student mix.

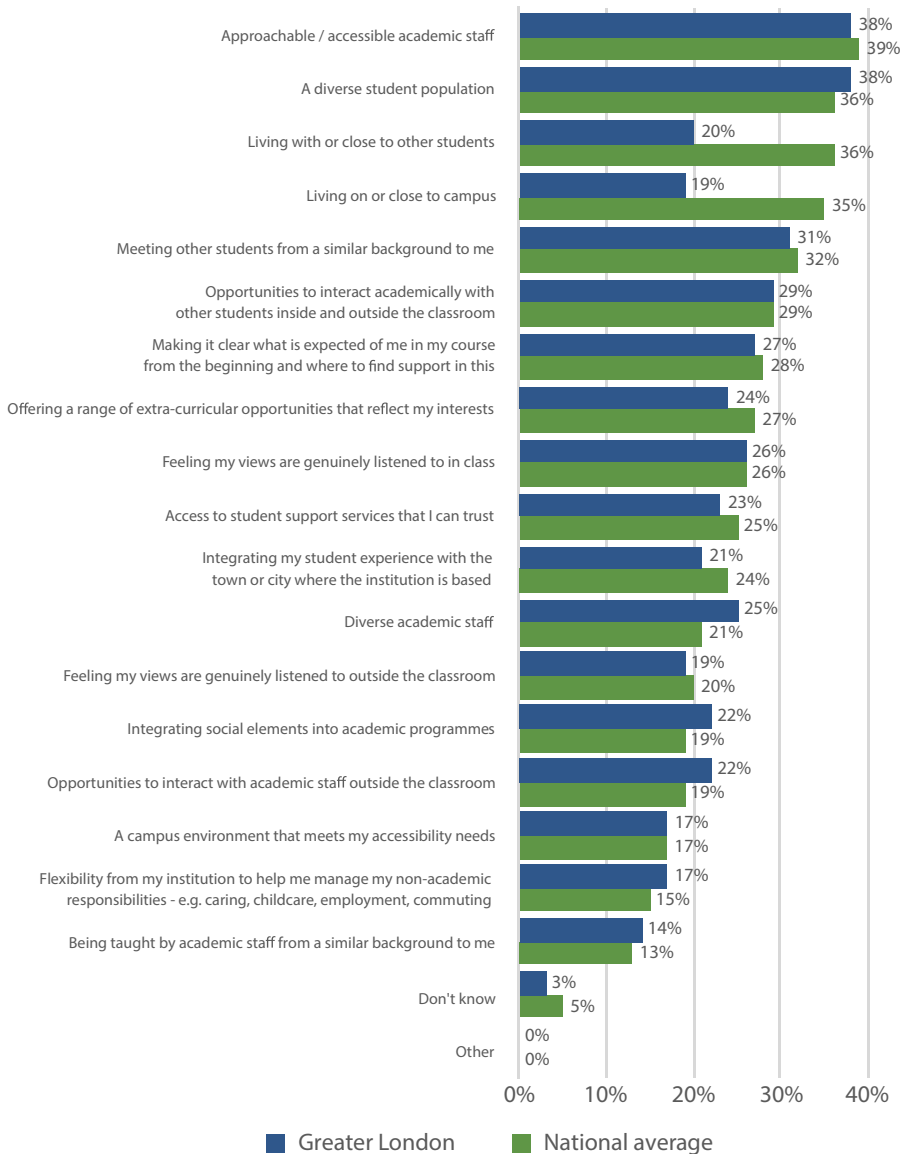
Proportion of students who agree they hear a wide variety of views on campus



London students are less likely than their peers in all but one other area of the UK to agree that they hear a wide variety of views expressed on campus, at 67 per cent. London students are three percentage points more likely than the national average to agree their courses cover material that is diverse and inclusive, which points to any perceived issues with diversity and expression not coming from inside the lecture hall. The London students we spoke to while preparing this report noted difficult political conversations at university can cause tensions among students who do not agree with each other, potentially encouraging self-censorship. This might be more of an issue in London than in other areas of the country due to the diversity of the student population. International students, for example, are slightly more likely than domestic students to say they heard a wide variety of views on campus, as are students who live in university halls, students at Russell Group universities and alternative providers, students with paid jobs and young students aged 21 and under. London's relatively high numbers of commuter and mature students, as well as students from ethnic groups other than White, could therefore be contributing factors in its outlying score here.

Students' sense of belonging ties in closely with issues of student wellbeing, which will be explored in a later chapter. When asked what factors affect their sense of belonging at their institutions, and for UK students as a whole, students rank 'approachable / accessible academic staff' as the top factor, with 39 per cent of students agreeing it is important. In London, this factor shares the top spot with 'a diverse student population.' Students of all ethnicities other than White are more likely than the national average to value this. The groups with the highest regard for diversity are Black (47 per cent) and Chinese (56 per cent) students, both of whom are well-represented in London and its higher education institutions. In keeping with London's status as the most ethnically diverse city in the UK, it seems that London's students particularly prize studying in environments with students of diverse backgrounds. They may well therefore expect their study environments to reflect the diversity of their home areas.

Factors affecting sense of belonging for London students



London respondents are significantly less likely than those in other regions to value 'living with or close to other students', with a gap of more than 10 percentage points between London and the region next least likely to value this. This is likely because students in the capital accept that living in a big city means being separated from their peers – something which is especially true for students continuing to live in the family home. Among students aged 25 and over, who are less likely to live in student accommodation, only 12 per cent thought living close to other students was important. There is a stark gap between mature students and students under 21, of whom 40 per cent thought this was important. London's overall statistics will therefore be influenced by the views of its large population of mature and largely commuter students.

6. Spotlight on groups of students

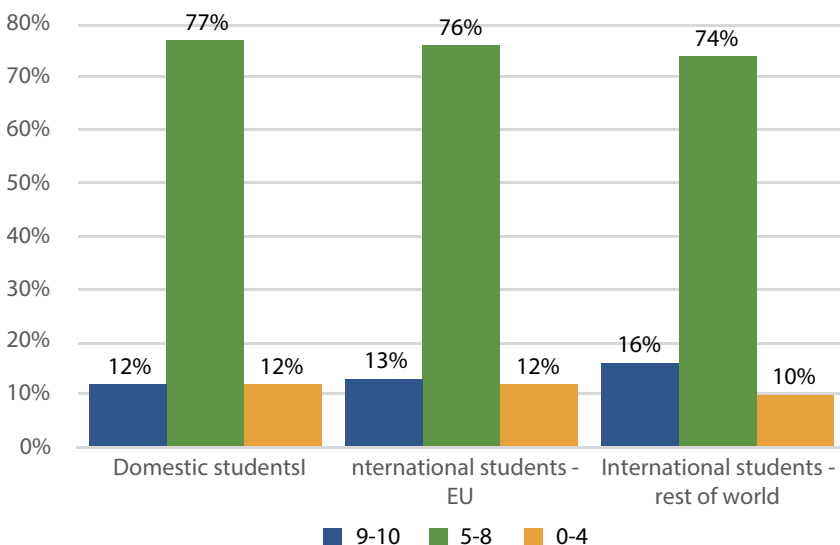
International students

Analysis by London Economics in 2021 showed how just one cohort of first-year international students in London bring in an average impact of £88 million in net benefit per parliamentary constituency in the region, equating to a total net benefit of £6.4 billion to the UK economy.¹³

London Higher's *International Education Strategy for London* (October 2022) examines some of the reasons international students choose to study in London, the challenges that face them when they arrive and what they intend to do with their degrees after graduation.¹⁴

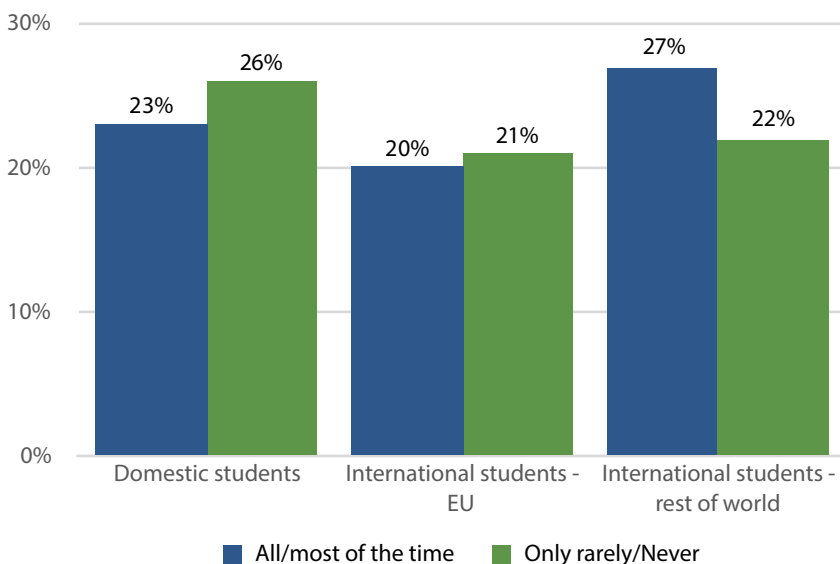
With the HEPI / Advance HE survey data, we can also get a sense of how international students feel about their experiences while studying in the UK and what they feel about how they are spending their time studying.

Student satisfaction with their lives overall (scored from 0 to 10)



International students (both from the EU and elsewhere) are, in general, slightly more likely to be very satisfied with their lives and slightly less likely to be unsatisfied. International students from outside the EU in particular are four percentage points more likely than domestic students to rate their satisfaction a nine or a 10 out of 10. This small tendency to be more highly satisfied with their lives is impressive, given that international students will likely be paying higher fees, living further from their families and other support networks, and adjusting to the culture shock of a new country.

Student levels of feeling loneliness



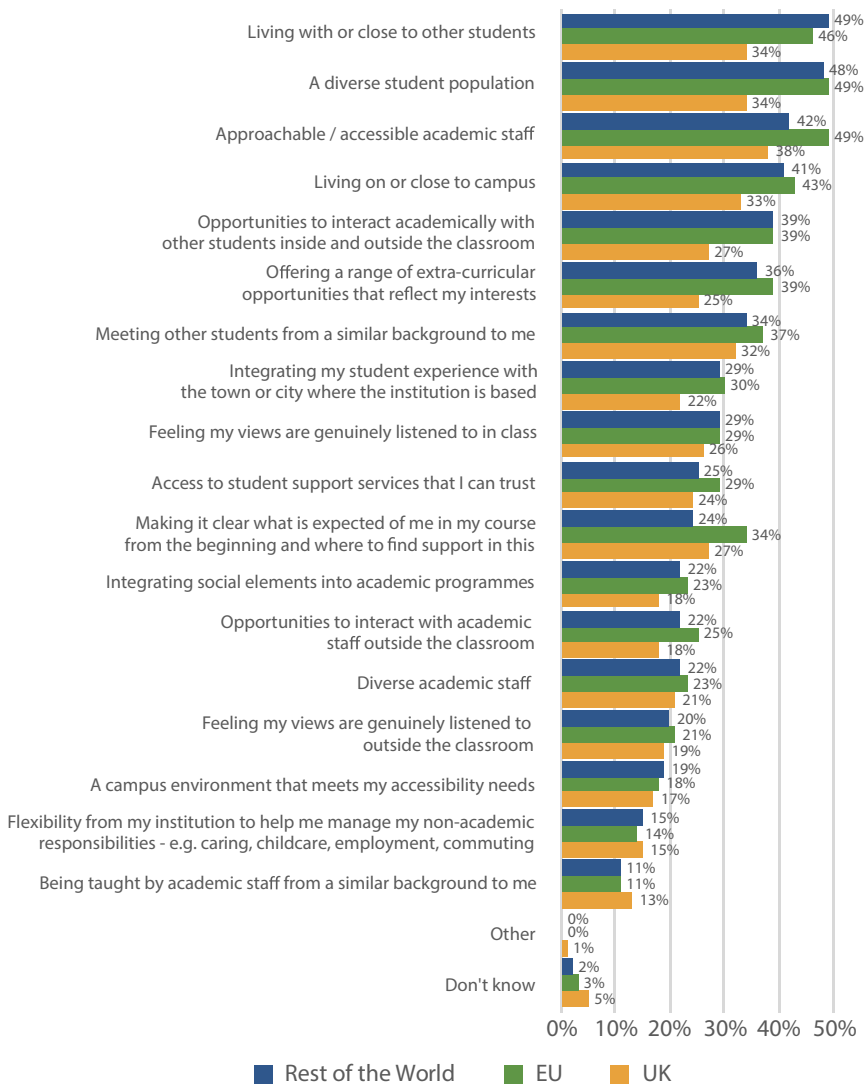
Despite their general satisfaction with their lives while studying in the UK, international students are nevertheless slightly more likely than their peers to say they feel lonely all or most of the time.

While for domestic students, more students said they only rarely or never felt lonely than indicated they felt lonely all or most of the time, for EU students these numbers were close to even. Moreover,

students from outside the EU were five percentage points more likely to say they felt lonely all or most of the time than only rarely or never. International students appear to be both satisfied with their lives in general but also living more isolated lives than domestic students, with a higher incidence of loneliness. Particularly in the aftermath of COVID-19 and the isolation associated with pandemic lockdowns, it may be the case that international students faced ongoing issues with social integration. These may be made worse by language barriers for some international students who began their degrees during the pandemic and missed out on opportunities to be immersed in everyday English language use.

When asked what factors contribute to their sense of belonging at their institution, international students are more likely than domestic students to indicate the items on the list in the survey question were important to them. Some of the biggest gaps between international and domestic students tell us that international students are more likely than domestic students to value opportunities for extracurricular activities, living near other students and being part of a diverse student population. Bearing in mind what we saw in the previous chart about international students being more affected by loneliness than domestic students, this could point towards international students having a general desire for more opportunities to build interpersonal connections with their fellow students, both in the structured form of extracurricular activities and more ad hoc encounters with other students. Higher education institutions in London, in particular, should bear this in mind since the large city does not always make it easy to facilitate casual or spontaneous student interactions, with for example student accommodation spread across a large area.

Factors affecting sense of belonging for domestic and international students

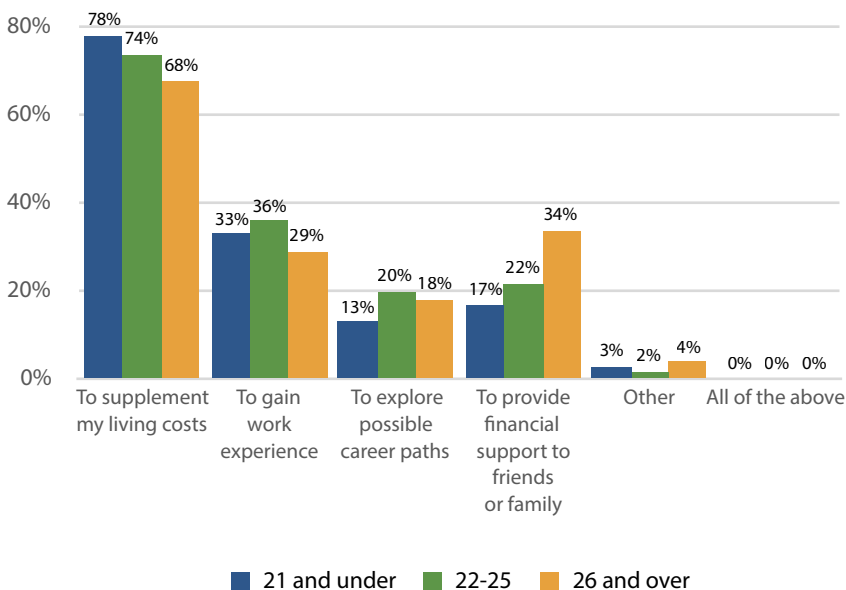


Mature students

Mature students tend to experience higher education differently from their younger peers. (For more detail on this, see the 2020 Office for Students' insight brief on the topic.)¹⁵ London's many mature students may be more likely to have children or other caring responsibilities, they may live at their own permanent address rather than a separate term-time address, and they may choose different, more applied subjects from younger students.

Further to being significantly more likely to have paid work during termtime (56 per cent of students aged 26 or over compared to 42 per cent of students aged 21 and under), mature students gave different reasons for why they choose to work.

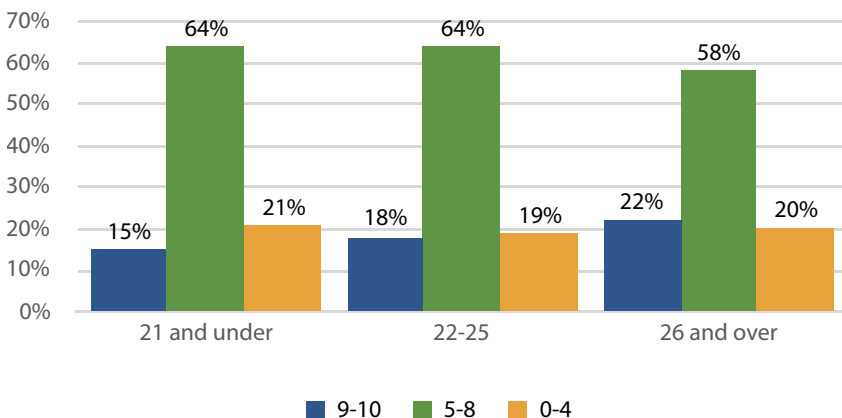
Reasons for taking on paid employment while studying for students in different age groups



The chart above (focused on national data) shows us that, while mature students are less likely to take on paid employment while studying to supplement their living costs, they are considerably more likely to work in order to provide financial support to friends or family. This illustrates how many mature students are juggling their studies with supporting dependents.

The wellbeing questions, which ask students about aspects of their lives such as their happiness and levels of loneliness, show mature students are largely happier than their younger peers. Indeed, nationally students aged 26 and over are significantly more likely than students aged 25 or under to rate their general happiness as a nine or 10 out of 10. This may be related to the different expectations mature students are likely to have for their higher education experiences and may be related to mature students being more likely to have well-developed support networks outside their institution. While mature students are similarly likely as younger students to say they feel lonely all or most of the time (one percentage point higher, at 23 and 24 per cent respectively), they are significantly more likely to indicate never or only very rarely feeling lonely (38 per cent compared to 23 per cent of students aged 21 and under).

Levels of happiness for students in different age groups (scored from 0 to 10)

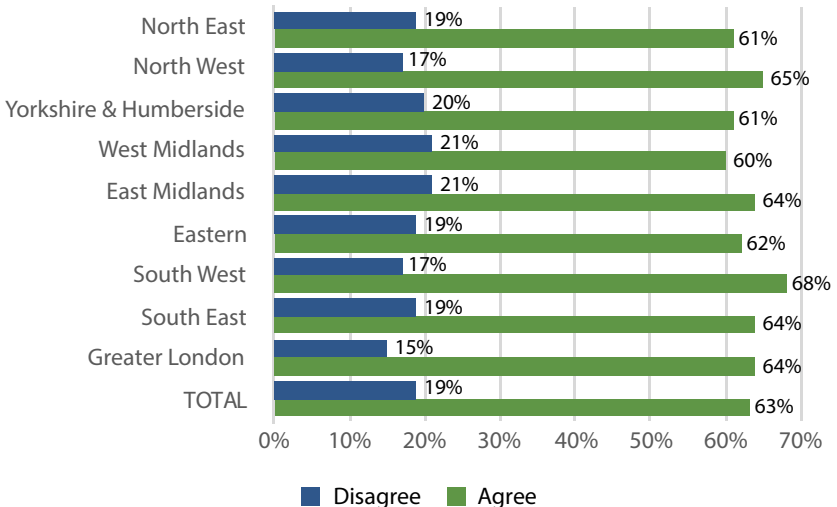


7. Teaching intensity and quality and assessment

Workload trends

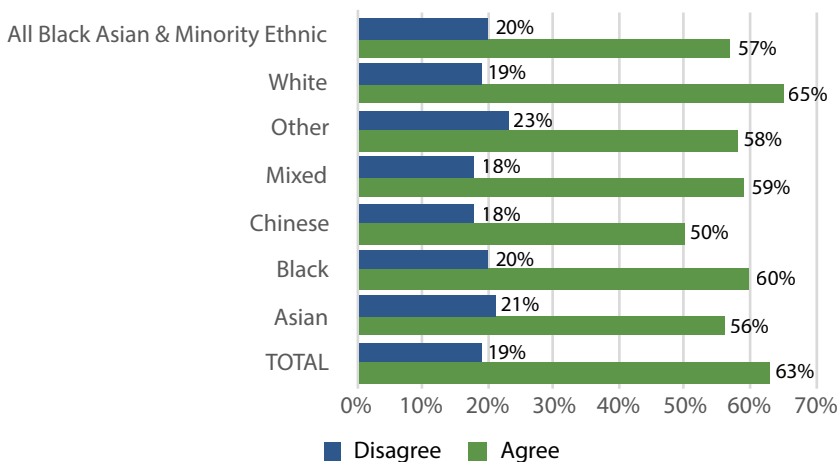
The 2022 HEPI / Advance HE survey saw something of a national return to the number of hours worked by students in a standard week before the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. After several years of disruption, during which students described theoretical workloads increasing but the number of actual hours worked decreasing, the total number of hours worked in a week (30.7 on average) has climbed back up towards the 2020 figure. For the group of London students we spoke to while preparing this report, there was something of a return to 'real life' in the 2021/22 academic year, with the face-to-face 'student experience' they may have imagined before starting university finally back within reach. They told us about how much they valued socialising and joining extracurricular clubs in person, and for the international students who started study during COVID-19 restrictions, they spoke of having their first opportunity to be truly immersed in London and UK life.

Level of satisfaction with number of timetabled sessions



The extent to which students are satisfied with their timetabled sessions nevertheless varies between student groups. National data show that, while students from the EU agree with UK students that they are happy with the amount of scheduled contact hours (63 per cent for both groups), international students from outside the EU were slightly more likely to agree with the statement (65 per cent) and slightly less likely to disagree (16 per cent, compared to 19 per cent of domestic students). This difference likely reflects the prior experiences that students from different educational contexts bring with them in respect to scheduled contact hours and workloads, as they will inevitably be comparing British degree courses to those in their own countries. A more detailed and international student-specific survey could tease out some of the specifics of what students from different countries expect in terms of workload and scheduled contact hours when they arrive in the UK.

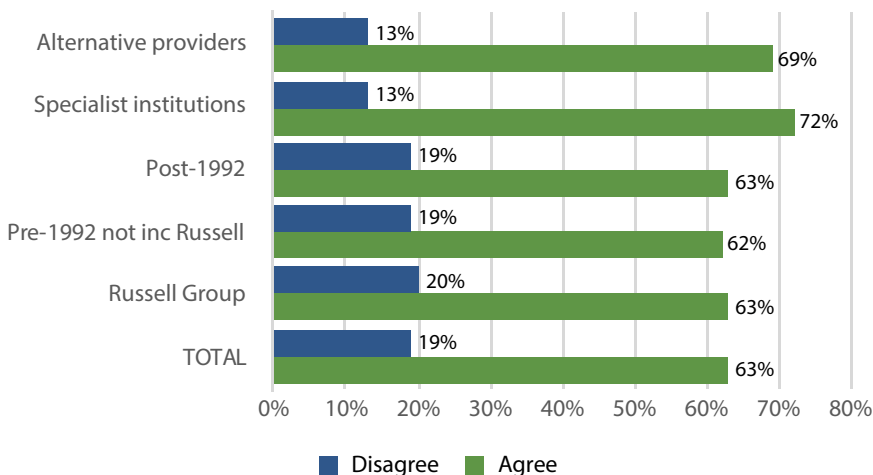
Level of satisfaction with number of timetabled sessions by ethnicity (UK-domiciled)



Moreover, students of all ethnicities other than White are significantly less likely than White students to agree they are happy with the

number of timetabled sessions. The group least likely to agree with this statement are UK students of Chinese heritage, at just 50 per cent. Across all ethnicities other than White, the average proportion agreeing with the statement was 57 per cent, compared to 65 per cent for White students. The ethnicity gap here is striking and could link to differences in levels of satisfaction according to subject area. Some subjects that are relatively more popular with White students have very high levels of student satisfaction with timetabled hours (such as Psychology, 67 per cent, and Veterinary Science, 68 per cent) while subjects relatively more popular with Black and Asian students have lower rates (such as Subjects Allied to Medicine, 56 per cent).

Level of satisfaction with number of timetabled sessions by provider type



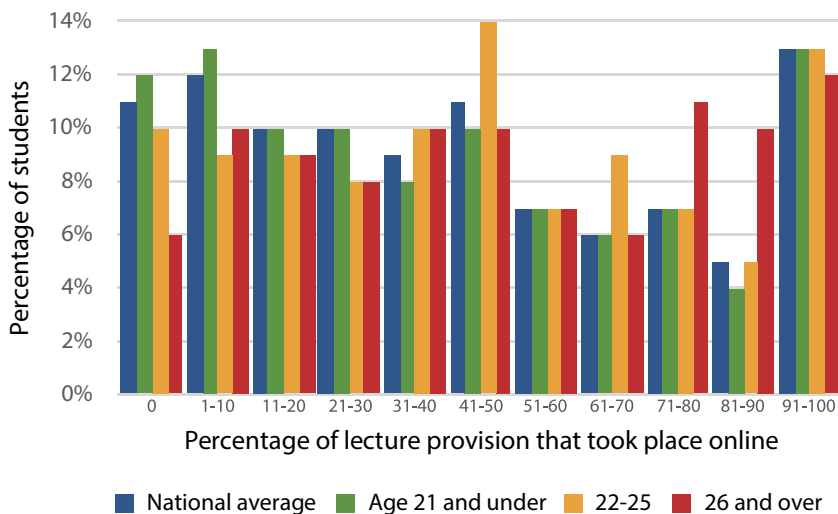
Specialist providers once again, though, stand above other provider types when it comes to students indicating satisfaction with their number of timetabled sessions, at 72 per cent. This figure reflects the individualised subject-specific tutoring given to many students at specialist higher education providers, including for example, at London’s Performing Arts conservatoires, adding weight to the need

to protect funding for such institutions to maintain this high quality student experience.

Online learning

The 2021/22 academic year has seen a return to face-to-face teaching for almost all UK students, and though the amount of online provision is likely to remain higher than it was in 2019 following the expansion in online teaching and technological improvements that were accelerated during the COVID-19 lockdowns. In a new question added to the *Student Academic Experience Survey* in 2022 asking students what proportion of their seminars or labs have taken place online, the most popular answer was zero per cent, with 33 per cent of students saying none of their provision had been online in the academic year so far. Lectures were slightly more likely to be online.

Proportion of online lectures for students of different ages



London students were more likely than the national average to indicate they had had online provision in the academic year so far. In London, 14 per cent of students indicated they had had more

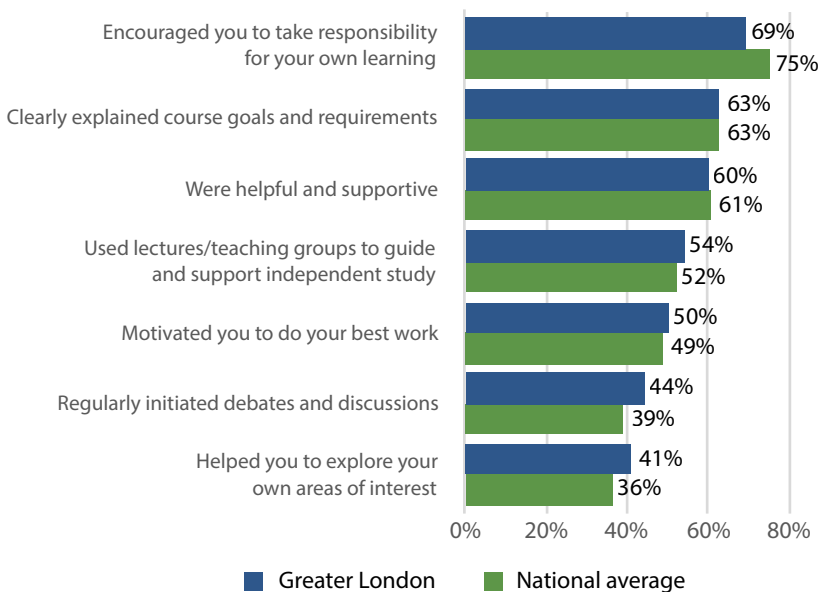
than 91 per cent of their lectures online – telling us that many of these students had purposefully chosen online courses rather than doing hybrid courses or face-to-face courses. This reflects the needs and preferences of London’s many mature students, for whom online study may fit better around their work and caring responsibilities. Students aged 21 to 25 and students aged over 26 indicated that they were significantly less likely to have purely face-to-face teaching (six per cent for students over 25, 10 per cent for students between 21 and 25 and 12 per cent for students under 21). The only region with more students having more than 91 per cent online lectures was Scotland, where regulations responding to the COVID-19 pandemic differed considerably from the rest of the UK at the point the poll was conducted. Face-to-face learning was consequently considerably less of an option in Scotland at this time.

Perceptions of the quality of teaching staff

Nationally, 49 per cent of students said their teachers motivated them to do their best work, and greater proportions said their teaching staff are helpful and supportive (62 per cent), clearly explain course goals and requirements (63 per cent) and encourage them to take responsibility for their own learning (76 per cent). This represents a significant recovery from the lows of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the switch to virtual teaching caused many of these ratings to fall under 50 per cent.

London students, in general, agree closely with the national averages on how they rated the quality of their teachers, although London students are slightly more positive about how their teachers regularly initiate debates and discussions (44 per cent) and help students explore their own areas of interest (41 per cent). The only area where London students are more than one percentage point behind the national average is on teachers encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning, which London students score six percentage points fewer.

Proportion of London students who agreed all or the majority of their teachers did these behaviours (per cent)



Across the many demographic groups that make up London's diverse student population, there was relatively wide variation in how they answered these questions. National data show us that mature students over the age of 25 are more likely to agree that all or most of their teaching staff are helpful and supportive (66 per cent), regularly initiate debates and discussions (46 per cent, compared to 37 per cent of young students) and help them explore their own areas of interest (42 per cent, compared to 35 per cent of young students). This higher level of satisfaction among mature students than young students may tell us something about the way mature students engage with their faculty. As adults themselves, they may well be more comfortable discussing their thoughts and concerns with their teaching staff, initiating conversations and asking for help pursuing their areas of interest.

Continuing the same trend we have seen in some other areas of the survey data, two institution types stand out as having significantly higher levels of satisfaction among students with their teaching staff. Across the questions about staff helping students follow their own areas of interest, clearly explaining goals and requirements and being helpful and supportive, specialist and alternative providers were in the lead, sometimes by more than 10 percentage points. Low student-to-staff ratios on courses with focused curricula and many contact hours appear to be leading to a greater proportion of students feeling close and positive relationships with their teaching staff. Russell Group institutions were consistently either bottom or joint bottom on many of these metrics of satisfaction with teaching staff. HEPI's *How different is Oxbridge?* report, based on previous waves of *Student Academic Experience Survey* data, found the same trend in answers to several of these questions, with levels of satisfaction in Russell Group institutions often lower than national averages.¹⁶ This could point to the fact that it is harder to feel a personal sense of connection with busy staff who are focused on research as much as they are on teaching with large student bodies.

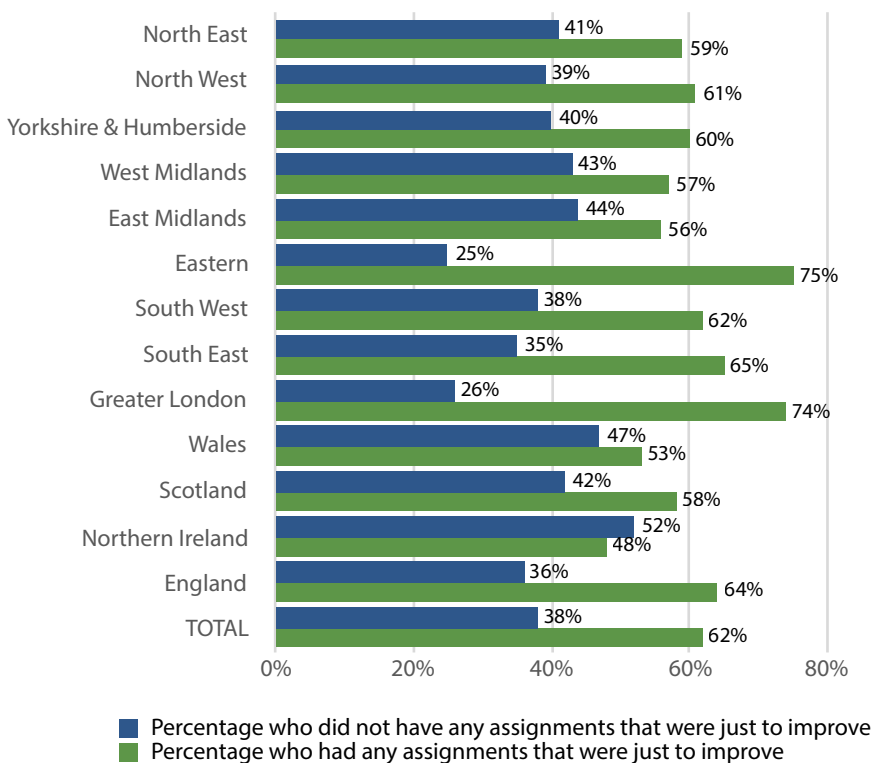
Volume of assignments

Students at London institutions are significantly more likely to have completed formative assignments, which do not contribute to their grades, in the previous term. London saw 74 per cent of students indicate they had completed an assignment that was just to improve, compared to a national average of 62 per cent.

This apparent higher workload for London students is interesting in the context of the varied higher education landscape in London. The city contains more higher education institutions than any other area of the country, representing a broad range of institution types. At specialist institutions (including London's many Performing Arts conservatoires), only 22 per cent of students had completed formative assessments in the previous term, while 43 per cent of post-1992 institution students had. We can see how the requirement

for formative assessment differs when we split the data by subject area, where we see that 82 per cent of Medicine and Dentistry students had completed formative assignments, compared to only 51 per cent of Education and Teaching students. The fact that London contains so many courses that came in above and below this average indicates that this high average figure of 74 per cent is likely being lifted by the courses with the highest number of assignments, by the medics, dentists, linguists (70 per cent) and physical scientists (72 per cent).

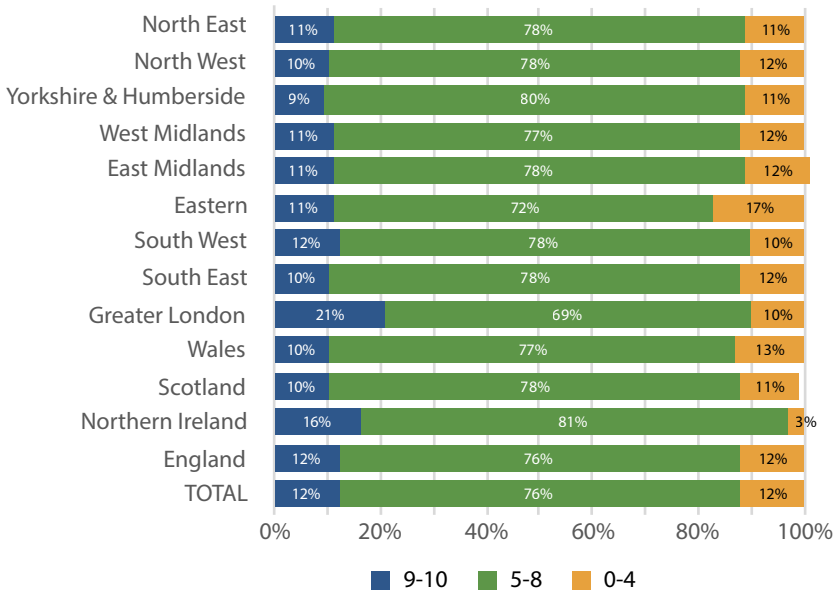
Proportion of students who had formative assignments as part of their degree by area



8. Wellbeing

Much of the commentary surrounding student life during the COVID-19 pandemic, and also the pressure that student mental health services have been under for considerably longer, suggests that UK students' wellbeing is likely to remain a key aspect of conversations about the student experience for a long time. The ongoing impact of COVID-19 on students who were in higher education or at school during the disruption caused by the pandemic is one key theme here. The national survey data indicate that overall levels of happiness among students have climbed slightly higher than their 2020 levels, with the proportion of students saying they feel very happy two percentage points above 2020 (16 per cent and 14 per cent respectively).

Students' ratings of how satisfying their life is in general for them (scored from 0 to 10)



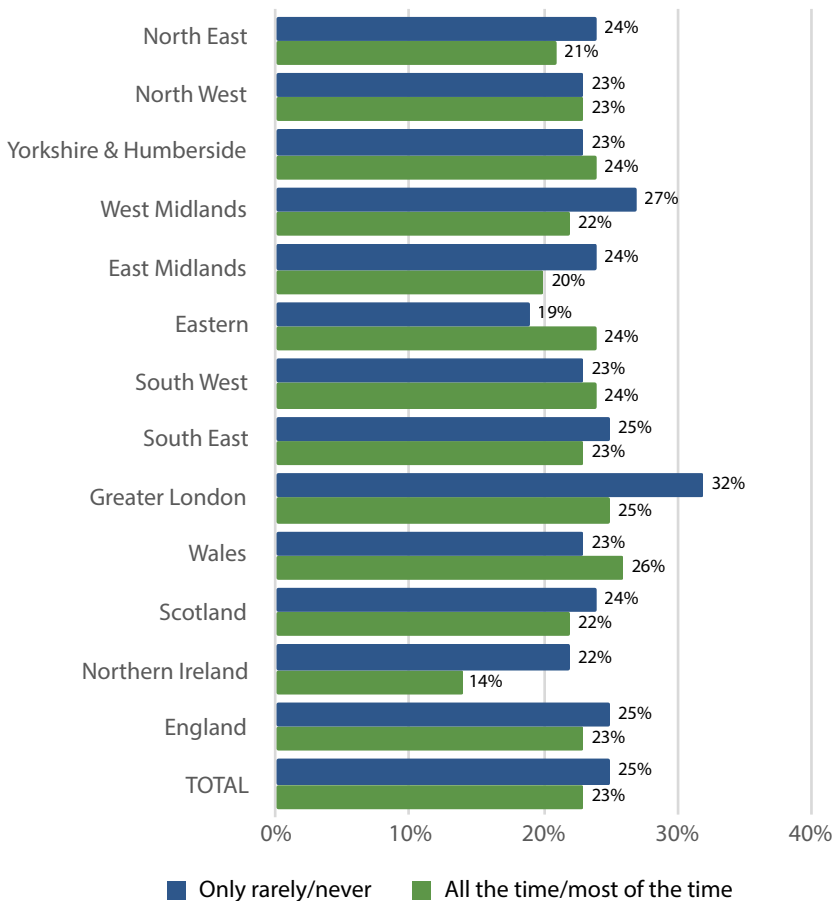
The students we spoke to in preparing this report spoke about the ongoing impact of the pandemic for student wellbeing in several different areas of their lives. Financial difficulties in London as an expensive city, feeling confined in small student rooms and dissatisfaction with levels of student support available through their institutions were all mentioned. In the conversations we have had, the impact of the pandemic lockdowns was seen as still very much present and continuing to affect the wellbeing of students in the capital.

In answering the question 'Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?', London students are significantly more likely to rate their satisfaction at a nine or 10 out of 10 than any other part of the UK, at 21 per cent, five percentage points greater than the next most satisfied area at 16 per cent (Northern Ireland). London students are also the group with the second smallest proportion rating their level of satisfaction with their life at zero to four out of 10.

There is no single answer to the question of what London is doing well or what it could do better in future with regard to student happiness and wellbeing. There will likely be many strategies having separate impacts across the wealth of providers and student types in the capital, from small-scale conservatoires and research institutes to large multi-faculty institutions with campuses spread across the city. While the proportion of London's students unsatisfied with their lives is comparatively low, more can still be done to help the one-in-10 students in the capital who say their life is not satisfying. Continued investment in student support services and work to understand how students develop a sense of belonging at their institution (which will be explored in a later chapter) and which groups are excluded, is essential.

In the new question asked to students in 2022 on how lonely they feel most of the time, London occupies an interesting position. London students are the most likely of students from all UK areas to say they never or almost never feel lonely (32 per cent, with the

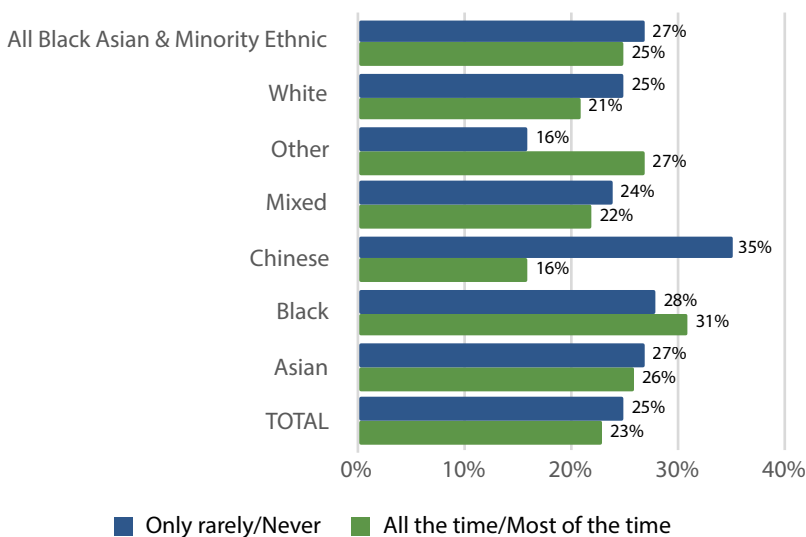
Proportion of students who feel lonely frequently or rarely by area



West Midlands in second place at 27 per cent) but also among the most likely to say they feel lonely all or most of the time (25 per cent, only one percentage point behind Wales, which is the top-scoring region). These two very different statistics point to a wide variety of student experiences in London, with some students experiencing serious ongoing loneliness associated with big city life, and some

students feeling very well-connected and supported thanks, in part, to the region's good public transport links and the wealth of opportunities to socialise, but also the city's large commuter student population. Among mature students over the age of 25, 38 per cent say they only rarely or never feel lonely, one of the highest numbers for any demographic group. For London's many mature students, their studies and their life on campus form only a limited proportion of their social networks. Just as there is no one archetypal London student, there is no one London experience of loneliness.

How often students feel lonely by ethnicity



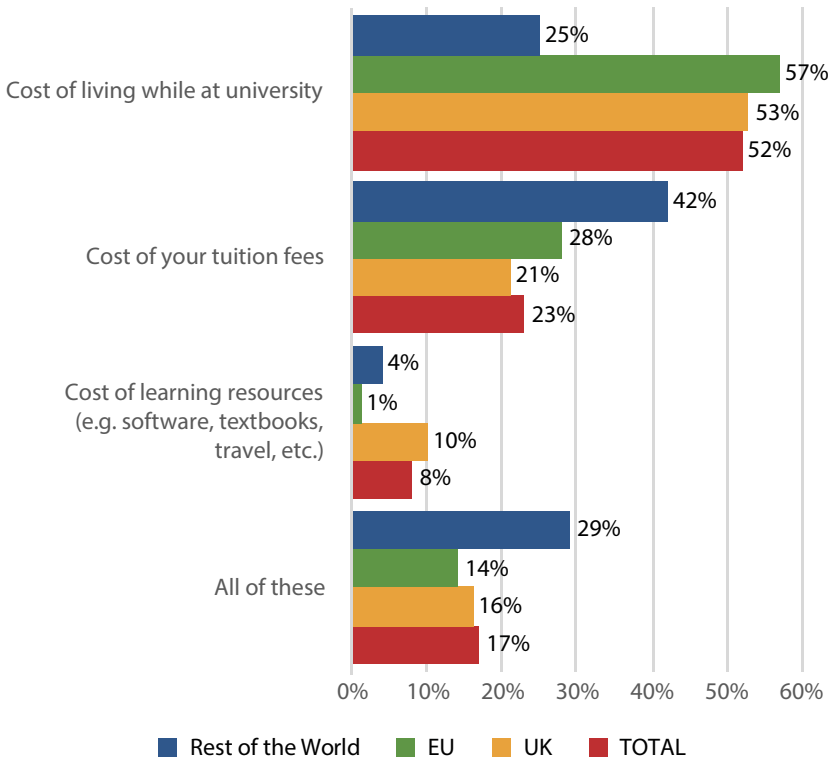
UK-domiciled students with ethnicities other than White had a broad range of experiences with loneliness, with wide variation in how often different groups typically feel lonely. Chinese students, for example, are the least likely to feel lonely all or most of the time (16 per cent), while Black students are the most likely to feel lonely (31 per cent), perhaps due to a higher proportion living at home while studying, more detached from 'campus life'.

9. Finances and the future

Financial concerns

Nationally, 52 per cent of students indicate the cost of living while at university as a financial concern. Perhaps surprisingly, in London, despite being known as the most expensive city in the UK, only 38 per cent of students say this was an issue for them. Of all UK regions, London students were the least concerned about the cost of living while they study.

Concern about costs of study for domestic and international students

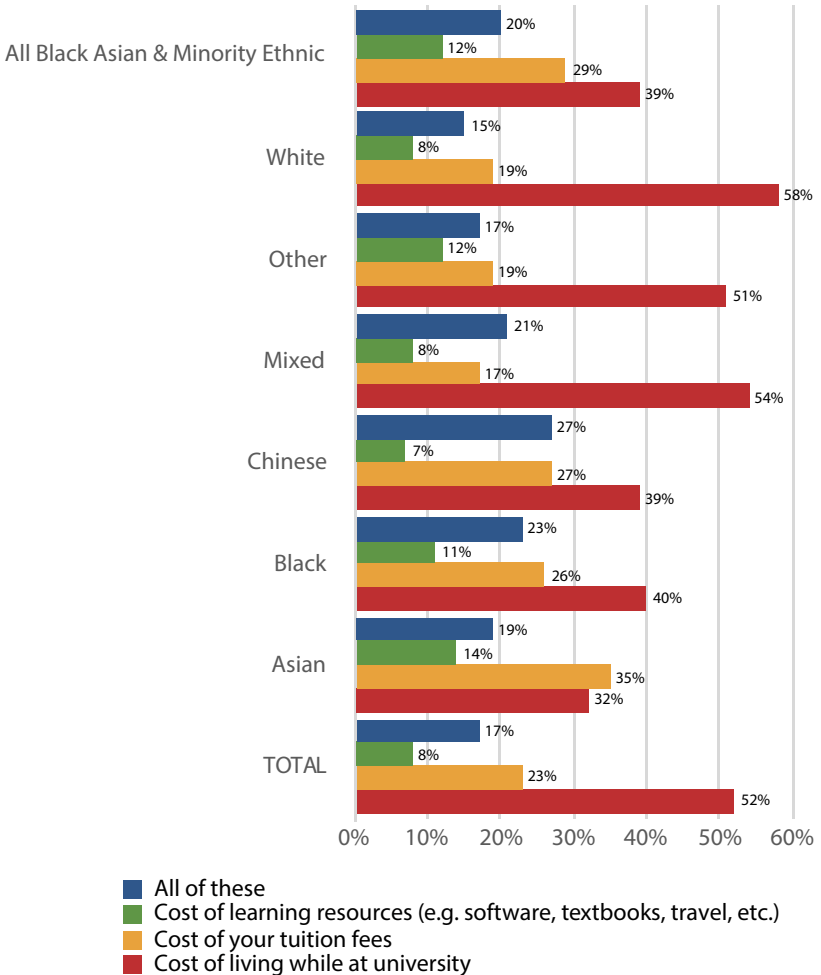


In large part, this difference can be explained by the high numbers of international students in London. Among students whose home region is outside the UK or EU, only 25 per cent indicate the cost of living is a concern. This is significantly lower than the 53 per cent of students domiciled in England who say it was an issue for them. International students, paying significantly higher fees than domestic students and ineligible for student loans and some other forms of financial support, need to prove to UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) that they have enough money to pay for their course fees and living costs when applying for a student visa. At the time of writing, international students coming to study in London must have enough money to pay for fees for the first year of their course (or for their entire course if it less than one year), and are required to show they have £1,334 in maintenance for each month (or part of a month) of their course, for up to nine months.¹⁷ As a result of the rigorous student visa application process, international students are therefore arguably more prepared for the cost of living in London before embarking on their studies, explaining their relative lack of concern compared to other student groups.

London students are nevertheless more likely than those in all other UK areas to indicate tuition fees are a financial issue for them. The large numbers of international students will likely contribute to this because they do not qualify for the loan. At 32 per cent of London students, this is nine percentage points higher than the national average (23 per cent). The same international students who made London on average less worried in the paragraph above may also be making London more worried on this question. The proportion of non-EU domiciled students who were concerned about their tuition fees was 42 per cent, significantly higher than the 22 per cent of England-domiciled students who were concerned. For international students paying higher fee levels, the cost of living may pale in comparison to overall course costs, even in an expensive city like London. Greater levels of concern around tuition fees from London students is also likely reflective of the diverse student body

in the capital, comprising a larger proportion of debt-averse mature students, higher fee-paying postgraduate students, as well as students from Muslim faith backgrounds which may preclude them from taking out conventional student loans.

Concerns about cost of study by ethnicity (UK-domiciled)



Nationally, students of ethnicities other than White are, in general, less likely to be concerned about the cost of living while at university than White students. In some cases, the gap is more than twenty percentage points; 58 per cent of White students and 32 per cent of Asian ethnicity students say they are concerned about this issue. This may reflect the fact that White students are more likely than other groups to leave the family home and move across the country to study, while students of other ethnicities are more likely to live at home and commute or study close to home. Students who live at home with their family have only a 31 per cent rate of saying they are worried about the cost of living, while students living in university halls have a 60 per cent rate. This trend could be interpreted as meaning living at home is a smart move for students concerned about the cost of living impacting their studies, or it could mean that the cost of living is keeping students living at home and missing out on the 'residential' student experience for reasons of cost. We do not know how many of the students choosing to live at home might have wanted to live elsewhere. A question to extrapolate this information could well be added to future iterations of the national survey.

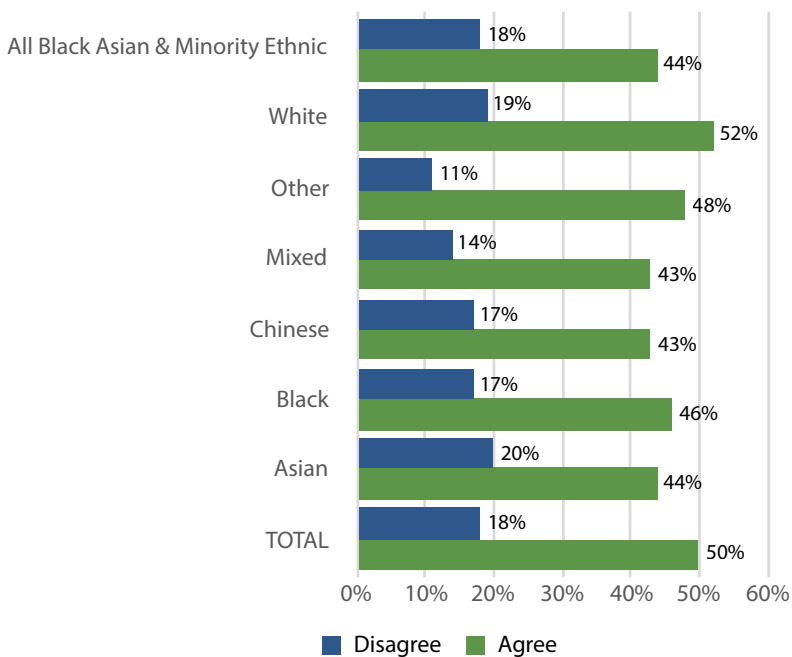
Preparedness for life after university

The survey question on whether students feel their degree has sufficiently prepared them for life beyond university was asked for the first time in the 2022 survey. Many students will have interpreted this as a question about readiness for employment (the most popular pathway after university for many) but 'further study' and 'other' pathways after university were also mentioned in the question. Compared to a national average of 50 per cent of students agreeing or strongly agreeing they felt prepared for life after university, London students had the highest rates of indicating they felt prepared out of all UK regions, at 57 per cent. This could be because of the close proximity to employers in a wide range of sectors, increasing the visibility of pathways into those jobs. London's higher education institutions have strong links with industries in the

city relevant to the courses they offer and encourage their students to engage with them through careers service events, internships, sandwich degrees, industry placements and extracurricular work experience. For a student wanting to work in finance, law, politics or the theatres of the West End, studying in London gives some of the best opportunities to engage with these industries and feel confident in their decisions after graduation.

While the London average figures paint a flattering picture of London institutions' ability to prepare students for life after university, there is variation between groups within the city which should not be ignored.

Perception of preparedness for life after university by ethnicity (UK-domiciled)



Students of different ethnicities have varying levels of confidence in their level of preparedness for life after their degrees; there is a nine percentage point 'preparedness gap' between White students (52 per cent) and Chinese and Mixed ethnicity students, the least confident ethnic groups (43 per cent). Students aged 22 and over are more likely to feel prepared than young students (51 per cent for students over 25, 57 per cent for students aged between 21 and 25, and 48 per cent for students aged 21 and under). This may reflect clarity of purpose and confidence in one's own decision-making, being traits individuals are more likely to develop with age. Mature students are also more likely to enter university with clear and specific career goals in mind.

10. Conclusions and recommendations

Overall, the picture that emerges from the London look at the 2022 HEPI / Advance HE *Student Academic Experience Survey* data is positive. This is in spite of the challenges that come with living and studying in a major world city, where life is often assumed to be lonely, impersonal and expensive. That is not to say that the London student experience is not without its challenges, and more can always be done to help students in the capital from different student groups. The five points below offer recommendations on how providers and policymakers can build on the findings of this report to ensure the London higher education sector is better meeting the diverse needs of its students.

1. London data show there are different London student experiences. While some students relish immersion in a campus experience, other students, especially mature students who are fitting their studies around work or caring commitments, appreciate flexible learning conditions, including the provision of online and hybrid teaching and are, as such, less likely to be dissatisfied with remote learning. **We therefore recommend more research into how students with different situations relate to different teaching provision and how London's universities can best meet the needs of its diverse student body.**

2. Students in London are more likely to live some distance from their institution – either commuting to campus daily from their family homes or living in student accommodation which is usually located further away from their higher education institutions, owing to both cost pressures and supply constraints. **We therefore urge providers to concentrate on providing support for London's broad 'commuter' student population to help them feel a sense of belonging to their institution and a connection with other London students.**

3. While international students in London tend to be better prepared financially for the cost of living in the capital, owing in large

part to the need to prove they have sufficient funds upfront before applying for a visa, the survey data show London's 'home' students are more concerned about the costs associated with student life in the city and overall tuition fee costs. **We encourage providers to prioritise information, advice and guidance for both current domestic students and prospective domestic students to help them budget for the costs of living in London and manage their expectations prior to arrival in higher education.** The cost of living guide for sixth-form students produced by the AccessHE division of London Higher is a good example of material that can be used and distributed by university outreach teams.¹⁸ Unite Students' 'Leapskills' work is another example of practical resources targeted at students, aiming to improve the skills they need to live independently.¹⁹

4. The survey data show that students enrolled at the capital's small and specialist institutions tend to be happier and think their courses are serving them well, owing largely to lower staff:student ratios and more intense specialist provision. **To maintain this high-quality student experience among the capital's conservatoires and specialist institutes, we urge policymakers to recognise the funding levels needed to continue such specialist provision and avoid further subject-specific or geographical funding cuts.**

5. While this analysis has revealed more detail about the attitudes of London's students towards different aspects of their student experience, it is clear more research could be undertaken to uncover the motivations of different student groups behind their higher education choices, such as accommodation options, study choices and work opportunities. **We therefore recommend more questions be added to future iterations of the annual *Student Academic Experience Survey*, for example to understand the impact of the rising cost of living on students' choices.** This would help inform student choices not just in London but across the UK.

Endnotes

- 1 Jonathan Neves and Alexis Brown, 2022 *Student Academic Experience Survey*, 9 June 2022, accessed 5 January 2023, available at: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2022/06/09/2022-student-academic-experience-survey/>
- 2 Jonathan Neves and Alexis Brown, *Student Academic Experience Survey 2022*, HEPI and Advance HE, 9 June 2022, available at: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2022/06/09/2022-student-academic-experience-survey/>
- 3 For a full list of London Higher members, including a list of 'Centre' members, see: <https://londonhigher.ac.uk/members/>
- 4 'Where do HE students come from?', HE Student Data, HESA, 31 January 2023, available at: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-from>
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