



# UNITE STUDENTS APPLICANT INDEX

2022

UNITE  
STUDENTS

# INTRODUCTION

New students due to arrive at university in autumn 2022 have experienced disruption across the last three academic years of their education, and most severely while majority were taking their Level 2 (GCSE, National 5s) and the first part of their Level 3 (A-level, Highers) qualifications, or international equivalents. In addition to the educational implications of the pandemic, the Government's Covid-19 Mental Health and Wellbeing Surveillance Report concludes that some young people's mental health and wellbeing has been significantly impacted during the pandemic. As yet, we do not know what this will mean as they make the transition to university and – for most – take their first steps into independence.

Indeed, over the coming decade, successive cohorts will have experienced the pandemic and lockdowns at different stages of their development and education, and it is difficult to predict how this will affect them. Will their needs and expectations be different? Will existing inequalities be widened? Can their academic and wellbeing needs be met?

We have created the Unite Students Applicant Index to answer these questions.

It will do so by tracking trends in the attributes and attitudes of university applicants over the coming years. It will provide an early indication of the needs and attitudes of each cohort, and a 'health check' in topical areas of the student experience.

The index is also a barometer of the requirements each cohort has of higher education providers, and the extent to which they believe these can be met. In this sense it tracks how well institutions are communicating with their potential students and adapting to their changing needs.

## About the survey

This report is based on a survey of 2,038 university applicants planning to start an undergraduate degree in the 2022-23 academic year. It was conducted via the YouthSight panel in the UK between 25th June and 11th July 2022. A full methodology, including demographic breakdown of the sample and weighting applied, can be found in the Methodology section towards the end of this report.

# OVERVIEW

This is the first Unite Students Applicant Index report. It paints a picture of a cohort that is academically confident, but appears to be experiencing the highest level of mental health challenge of any new intake in recent times. It is also a cohort that is diverse and wants to join a diverse and inclusive student community.

This year's new students are very community-minded and draw on robust existing social networks. They have strong feelings about climate change and show commitment to sustainable behaviours.

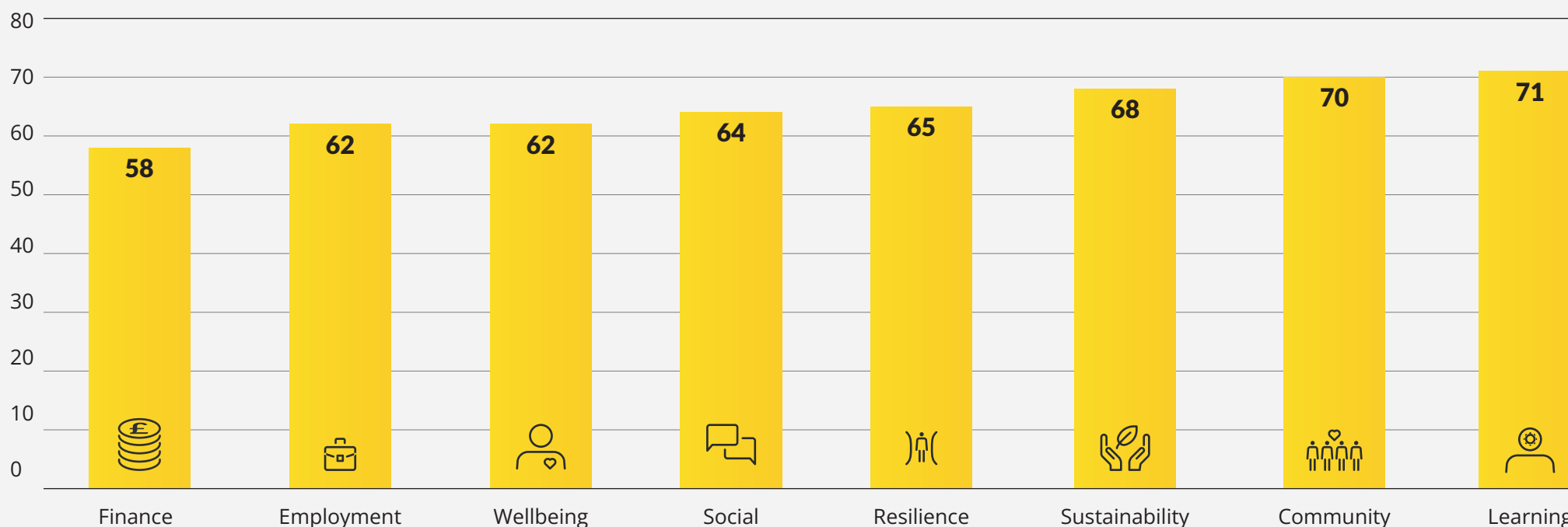
They are not completely sure they have the funds to meet their financial commitments, but fairly confident in their budgeting skills. They are optimistic about their graduate job prospects and have already taken steps to improve their skills and experience.

The survey includes key demographic factors that allow for the data to be analysed in depth. As well as the usual characteristics and demographics, we have for the first time created a new category for applicants with ADD/ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) or autism spectrum disorder. This recognises the current interest in the experiences and requirements of neurodiverse students, and we hope that this will make a useful contribution to understanding and improving their experience.

We are also able to compare responses from applicants who are care experienced or estranged from their families with the general applicant population, in line with our commitment to the Unite Foundation.

# APPLICANT INDEX SCORES 2022

The Applicant Index combines the responses to 36 survey questions to generate a cohort score between 0 and 100 against eight different themes, where 0 represents the most negative possible score for the theme and 100 the most positive. These scores provide a visual barometer for the cohort as a whole, allowing for comparison between different demographic groups and, over time, between different cohorts.



We present overleaf the headline findings against eight key themes, including responses to supplementary questions where relevant, and pick out some of the significant demographic differences that warrant action and targeted support. However, this is a substantial and rich dataset, and this analysis does not attempt to be exhaustive. We have published the full question set, the algorithm for calculating the index scores and the full dataset on our website: We invite others to run their own bespoke analysis of the data and look forward to seeing the results.



# INTRODUCING THE THEMES



## Finance >

This combines self-rated financial means with confidence in budgeting skills to provide an overall financial health check on the cohort as a whole. A high score indicates a cohort who believe they have sufficient means and skills to meet their costs while at university, and a demographic breakdown may reveal disadvantaged subgroups within the cohort. Questions in this section were informed by the Unite Students 'Climbing Cost of Living' survey from Spring 2022. Given the level of current and future financial uncertainty, we anticipate that year-on-year changes in these scores will be of interest to wider stakeholders as well as to HE institutions and accommodation providers.



## Social >

This theme combines the strength of existing social networks with level of confidence about "fitting in" at university. A high score in this theme indicates a cohort not only with high social confidence, but also one that has confidence in the university, and – where relevant – accommodation provider, to provide an inclusive environment.



## Community >

This theme measures the level of motivation among applicants to be part of a community while at university. A high score in this theme also indicates a cohort that wants to belong to a diverse group of peers and is prepared to contribute to building that community. Changes in the theme score over future years would indicate a rise or fall in the community-orientation of the cohort and, potentially, an increased level of division between different parts of the student body.



## Wellbeing >

The wellbeing theme draws on the ONS standard wellbeing questions combined with levels of positive and negative feelings that we have found in previous surveys to be indicative of overall wellbeing. Together, they produce an overall gauge of applicants' wellbeing and allow for demographic breakdown to help identify vulnerable groups. A high score indicates a cohort with high levels of wellbeing.



## Resilience >

This theme draws on our report '[Student Resilience: Exploring the Positive Case for Resilience](#)' published in 2017. It uses questions from the 'self-management' and 'emotional control' domains of the research, drawing on Duckworth's concept of 'grit' and Seligman's concept of 'learned optimism'. A high score in this theme shows a cohort that is able to work effectively towards clear goals.



## Sustainability >

We have become used to the idea that Gen Z feels passionate about climate change and is prepared to take part in activism on this issue. The sustainability theme combines strength of concern about climate change with behaviours and personal commitments to sustainability. A high score indicates a cohort that is highly concerned about climate change and already taking action. The demographic breakdown will pinpoint sub-groups of students with the most and least commitment to sustainability, opening up new approaches to behavioural change.



## Learning >

As already noted, the pandemic has caused significant disruption to learning. This theme assesses academic confidence and commitment to the chosen course. A high score in this theme indicates a cohort that feels academically prepared and confident about their learning.



## Employment >

Although our previous research has shown that interest in the course is still the main motivator for going to university, employability is now a key consideration. This theme assesses the level of optimism about finding a graduate job together with the amount of work-related skills and experience applicants already believe they have. A high score indicates a cohort that is already feeling prepared for the future job market and confident about their prospects.



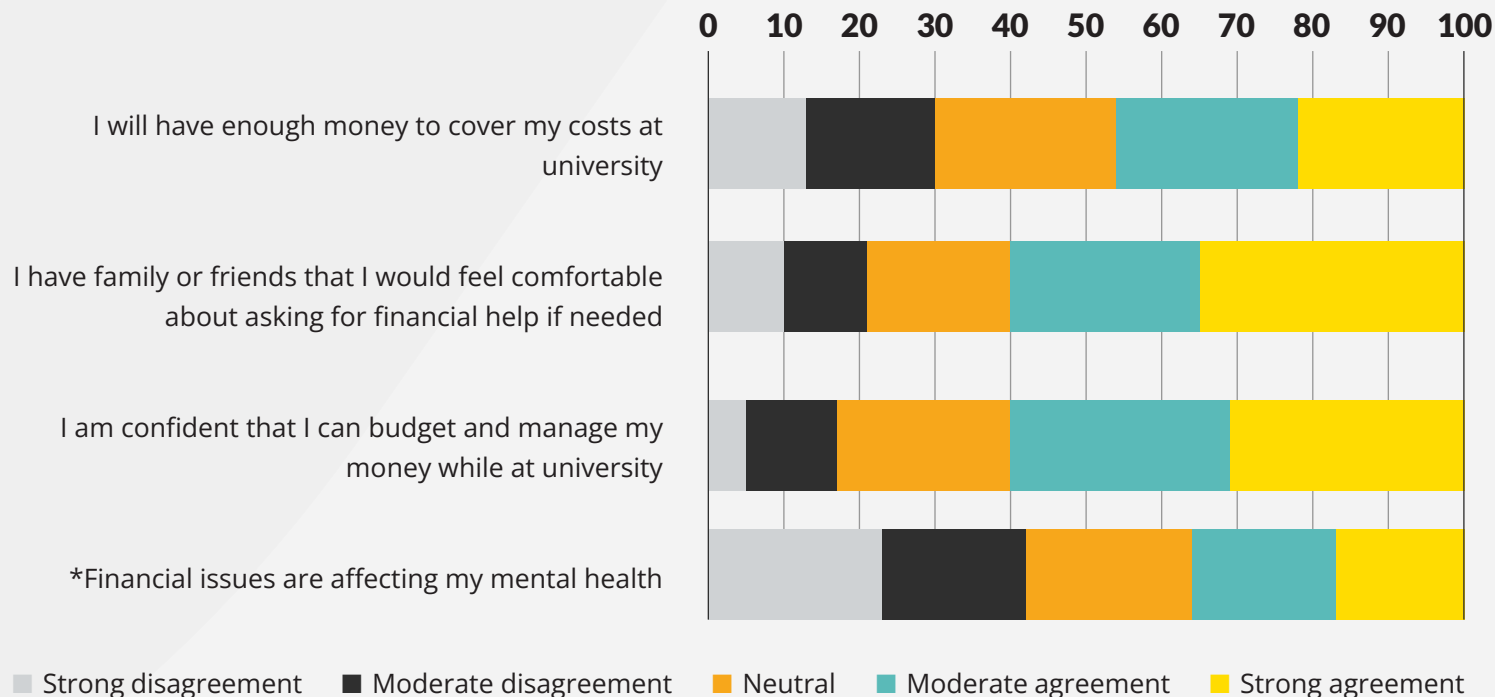
# FINANCE 58

The Finance score indicates the level of confidence in financial means and skills among the cohort.

\*For this question, agreement indicates a negative response; the score for this question was reversed when calculating the index score.

## THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Figure 1: Breakdown of responses to finance theme questions



This year’s new students are preparing for university at a time of rising inflation and global financial uncertainty. Like many in the workforce, students are seeing their finance package falling in real terms against the cost of living. Given this context, it is perhaps unsurprising that this is the lowest score in the index.

About half (47%) of applicants agree they will have enough money to cover their costs at university, and the majority (60%) are confident about budgeting. Male applicants are more confident about their financial means and budgeting skills than females. However, over a third of all applicants (36%) agreed that financial issues

are affecting their mental health. This can be compared with the 50% of students that said financial issues were affecting their mental health in the Unite Students Cost of Living Survey (April 2022).

Applicants with a disability, and those who are care experienced or estranged from their parents, have a lower index score for Finance. They are equally likely to believe they will have enough money to cover their costs as other applicants, but less comfortable about reaching out to family and friends, and less confident in their budgeting skills. They are also more likely to report that financial issues are affecting their mental health.

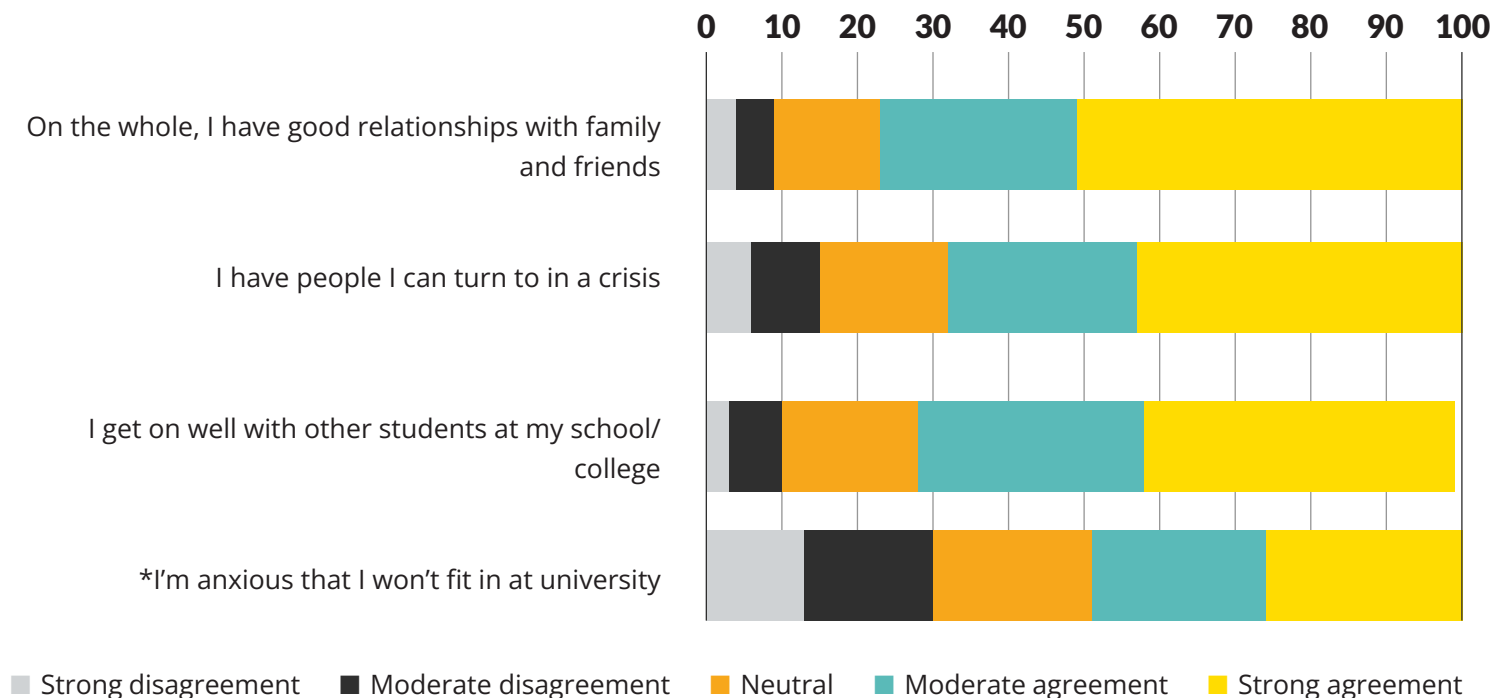


## SOCIAL 64

The Social score measures the strength of existing social relationships and social confidence in the context of going to university.

\*For this question, agreement indicates a negative response; the score for this question was reversed when calculating the index score.

Figure 2: Breakdown of responses to finance theme questions



Overall, this year's applicants have good relationships with friends, family and other students, and have people to turn to in a crisis. International students report poorer relationships with family and friends than UK/EU students and are less likely to have people they can turn to in a crisis.

About half of all applicants (49%) are anxious that they won't fit in. This rises to 63% among LGB+ applicants and 64% among applicants with a mental health condition, and yet the demographic breakdown of survey suggests that this year there will be more LGB+ students, and students with a mental health condition, than ever before.



# COMMUNITY 70

The Community score measures the orientation of the cohort towards being part of a student community, and the importance they place on this.

\*For this question, agreement indicates a negative response; the score for this question was reversed when calculating the index score.

I would like to feel that I belong when I'm at university

I look forward to making friends from different backgrounds

\*I have little interest in the social side of university

I want to be an active part of the student community while I'm at university

■ Strong disagreement ■ Moderate disagreement ■ Neutral ■ Moderate agreement ■ Strong agreement

This cohort has a strong drive towards community, wanting not only a sense of belonging but also to join a diverse community in which they can make friends from different backgrounds.

The majority of applicants (80%) agreed that they would like to feel that they belong at university with the majority of them indicating the strongest level of agreement. However, over a quarter (27%) say they have little interest in the social side of university, and this is more common among students over the age of 21 and those who were privately educated. The majority of students want to be an active part of the student community, and this is stronger among those who are planning to live in university or private halls.

Figure 3: Breakdown of responses to community theme questions

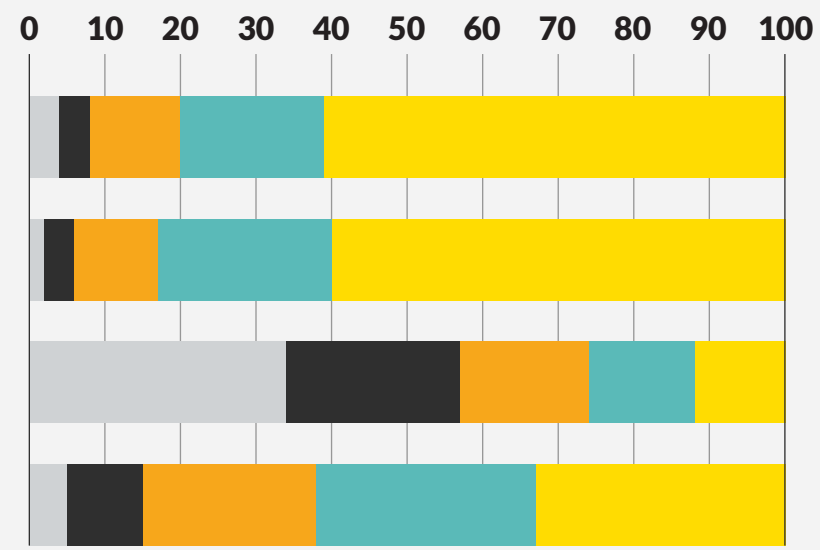


Figure 4: Response to supplementary question "I feel confident when talking to people from different backgrounds than my own".



The vast majority (83%) are looking forward to making friends from different backgrounds (Figure 3), but we were also interested to know if they felt confident in doing so. In response to a supplementary question (Figure 4) we found that only two thirds (66%) are confident about talking to those from different backgrounds to their own. This suggests both a need and an appetite for support in this area during the transition and induction to university.



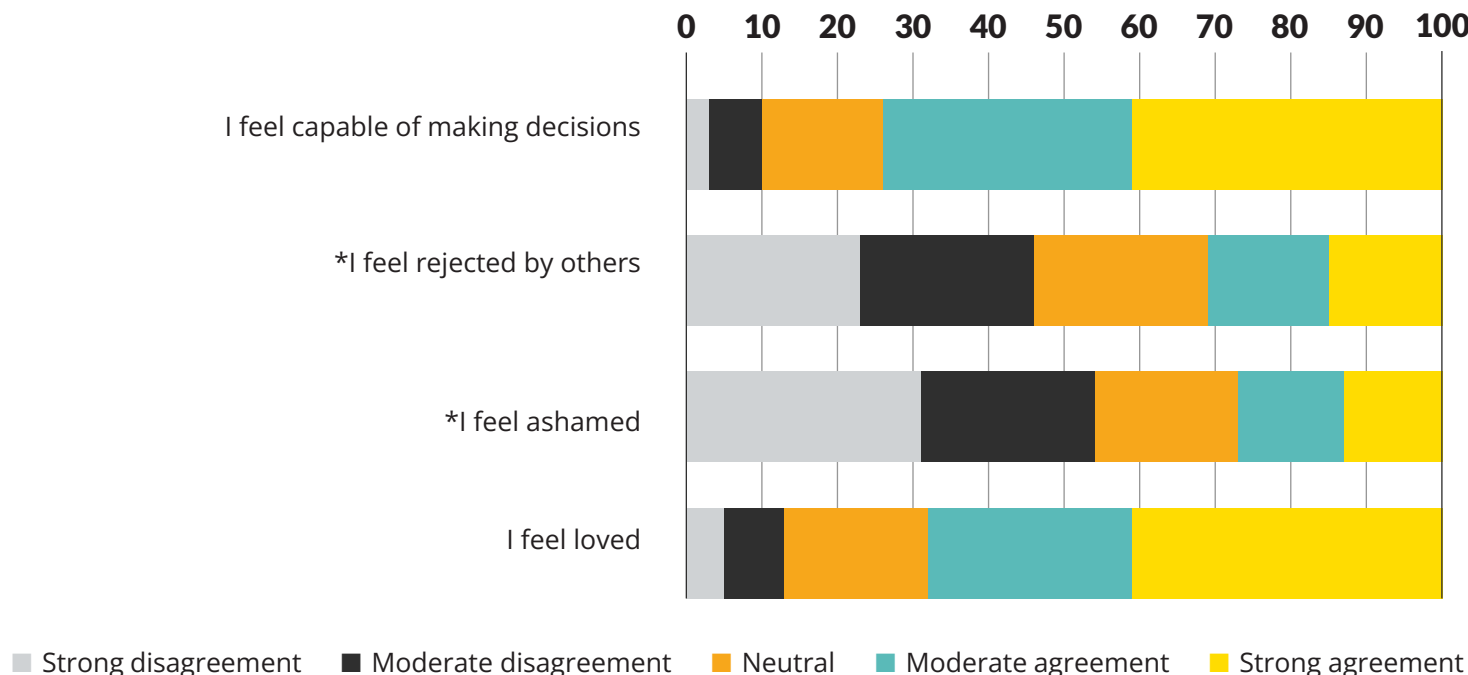


## WELLBEING 62

The Wellbeing score combines two different sets of questions to take a snapshot of the mental wellbeing of the cohort.

\*For this question, agreement indicates a negative response; the score for this question was reversed when calculating the index score.

Figure 5: Breakdown of responses to wellbeing theme questions



We asked their level of agreement with four items that in the past have shown a correlation with overall wellbeing. Overall, most applicants feel loved and that they are capable of making decision. However, 30% feel rejected by others and 26% feel ashamed. While we do not know the reasons for these feelings, they were stronger among LGB+ students, Trans+ students, care experienced and estranged students and students with a disability. They were also stronger among White and Mixed Race students and those who had attended private schools, though this may be due to the higher rate of disability reported by these groups. This is an area that would benefit from further research.

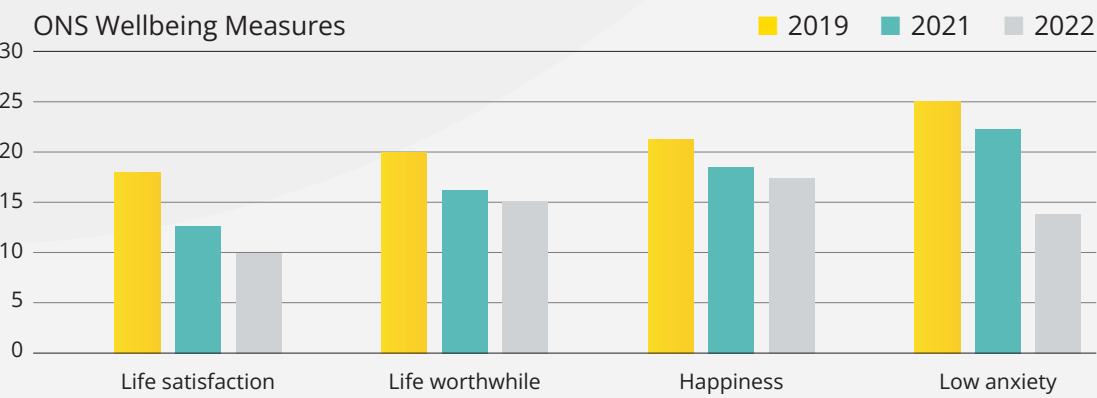
For this theme, we have additionally used the ONS standard wellbeing indicators: four questions that are used by the Office for National Statistics and others to assess the wellbeing of a group, or of the whole population.

The questions in full are:

- Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?
- Overall, to what extent do you feel that the things you do in your life are worthwhile?
- Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?
- Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday?

The standard way to present responses to these questions is to report the percentage who select either of the two highest categories for the first three questions. For the question about anxiety, the percentage who select either of the two lowest categories is reported, representing the proportion who feel a low level of anxiety. Therefore, a higher score for the group being surveyed indicates a higher level of wellbeing in each case.

Figure 6: ONS Wellbeing Indicator scores over time

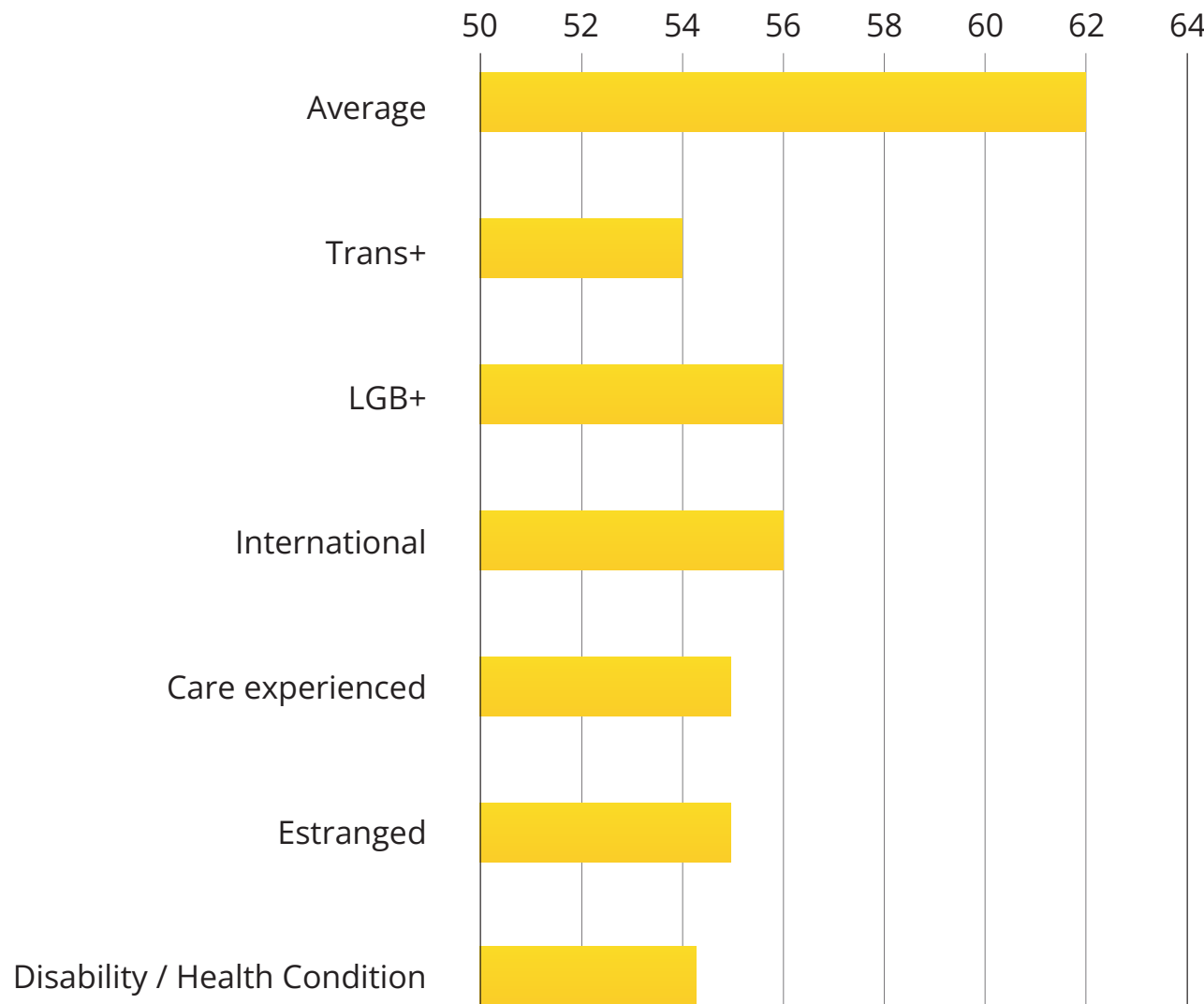


One benefit of using these measures is the ability to compare scores over time, using scores gathered from previous applicant cohorts by the Unite Students Applicant Survey 2021, and the Unite Students / Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) applicant report The New Realists in 2019. This analysis reveals a small but consistent decline across all the four indicators, with a particularly sharp decline in those reporting the lowest levels of anxiety. This is consistent with the high level of self-reported anxiety within the cohort (see below).

In all cases, the scores for this year's applicants are within two percentage points of the scores recorded for the student population in the [Advance HE-HEPI Student Academic Experience Survey](#) (May 2022). Given that the applicant scores were consistently higher than the Advance HE-HEPI Report student scores last year, this is a cause for concern and may be an early indicator of further drops in the student scores next year.

LGB+ and Trans+ students, international students, care experienced and estranged students and students with a disability had poorer scores across this theme as a whole, which is reflected in a lower index score for Wellbeing.

**Figure 7:** Wellbeing theme index scores by key demographic groups



As in previous surveys we have published, we asked applicants: “Do you consider yourself to have a disability, impairment or long-term health condition”, including a mental health condition as one of the options. Using the same question, we found that this year’s applicants are more likely to have a mental health condition than any other cohort in recent years. This year 20% report that they have a mental health condition, up from 15% in 2021. The most common mental health conditions reported are anxiety and depression.

In fact, when all applicants in the survey were asked about the mental health issues that they had experienced over the last two years, 49% reported experiencing anxiety, and 30% depression. 12% of all applicants reported an eating disorder, which equates to about 90,000 applicants based on last year’s UCAS applicant data.

Furthermore, 7% have autism spectrum disorder, up from 4% in 2021, and 8% have ADHD/ADD. In total, only 59% of applicants didn’t have any kind of disability or health condition, with a further 6% preferring not to answer.

Over a quarter (29%) of applicants with a disability don’t plan to tell their university – for applicants with a mental health condition this stands at 30%. Based on last year’s applicant numbers, this equates to approximately 45,000 applicants with an undisclosed mental health condition who do not plan to tell their university.



# RESILIENCE 65

The Resilience score measures the ability of this coming year's students to plan towards goals and to bounce back after a setback.

\*For this question, agreement indicates a negative response; the score for this question was reversed when calculating the index score.

I am willing to take on short term discomfort for long term gain

I have a clear idea of my goals

I always meet deadlines

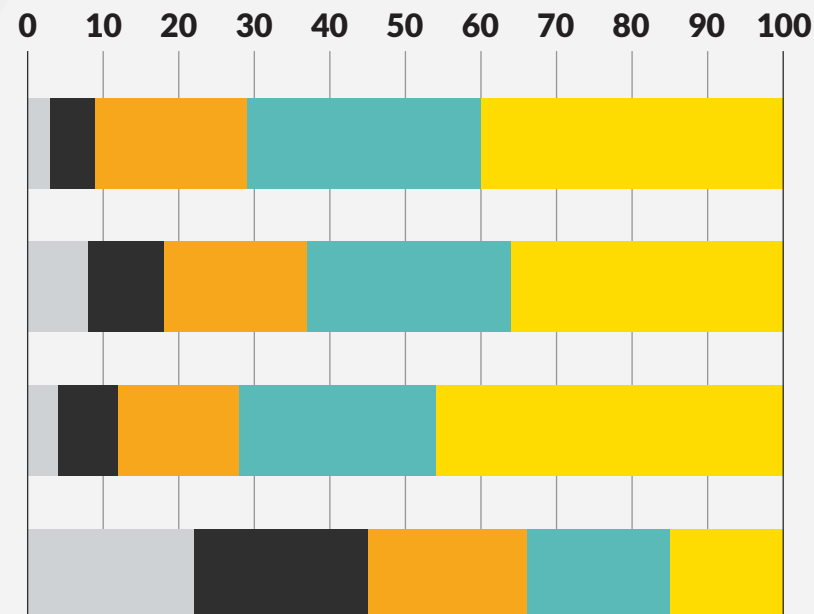
\*If I do badly at something, I don't like to try again

Strong disagreement   Moderate disagreement   Neutral   Moderate agreement   Strong agreement

Most applicants are willing to take on short-term discomfort for long-term gain, and they tend to meet their deadlines. Both are important skills for success at university and may reflect their achievements to date in applying for, and working towards qualifying for, university.

However, a third (33%) agree that if they do badly at something they don't like to try again. Persistence is also a key skill for learning, especially at higher

Figure 8: Breakdown of responses to resilience theme questions



level. Students over the age of 21, LGB+ students and privately educated students were more likely to agree with this statement, as were care experienced students and students with disabilities. Developing students' confidence to fail, and to learn from that failure, has the potential to be a useful intervention, both at a cohort level and targeted at vulnerable subgroups.



# SUSTAINABILITY 68

The Sustainability score measures the strength of feeling about climate change together with personal commitment to living sustainably.

\*For this question, agreement indicates a negative response; the score for this question was reversed when calculating the index score.

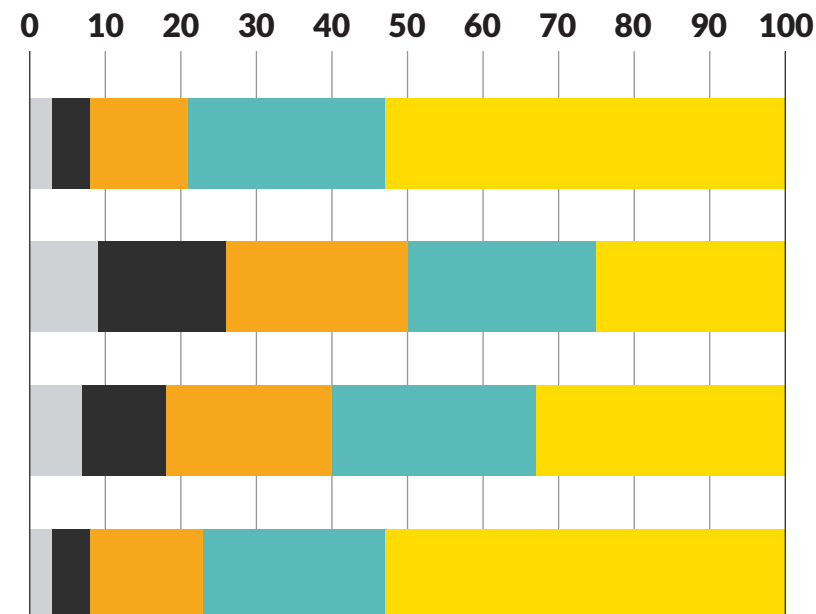
I have made sacrifices so that I can live more sustainably

Strong disagreement Moderate disagreement Neutral Moderate agreement Strong agreement

Sustainability is front of mind for this cohort of applicants. Over three quarters (77%) agree that it is extremely important to address climate change, with only 8% actively disagreeing. The item was purposely phrased using strong language, so this level of agreement demonstrates a very high level of feeling about climate change.

Applicants are also prepared to take action, but not fully in line with their level of concern. While 79% agree that they recycle, 60% are careful about their use of electricity and

Figure 9: Breakdown of responses to resilience theme questions



water, and 50% have made sacrifices in order to live more sustainably.

Commitment to environmental sustainability is relatively stable across demographics, but UK applicants show higher levels of commitment compared to international applicants. LGB+ and Trans+ applicants and those with ADHD, autism spectrum disorder and mental health conditions also scored higher within this theme.

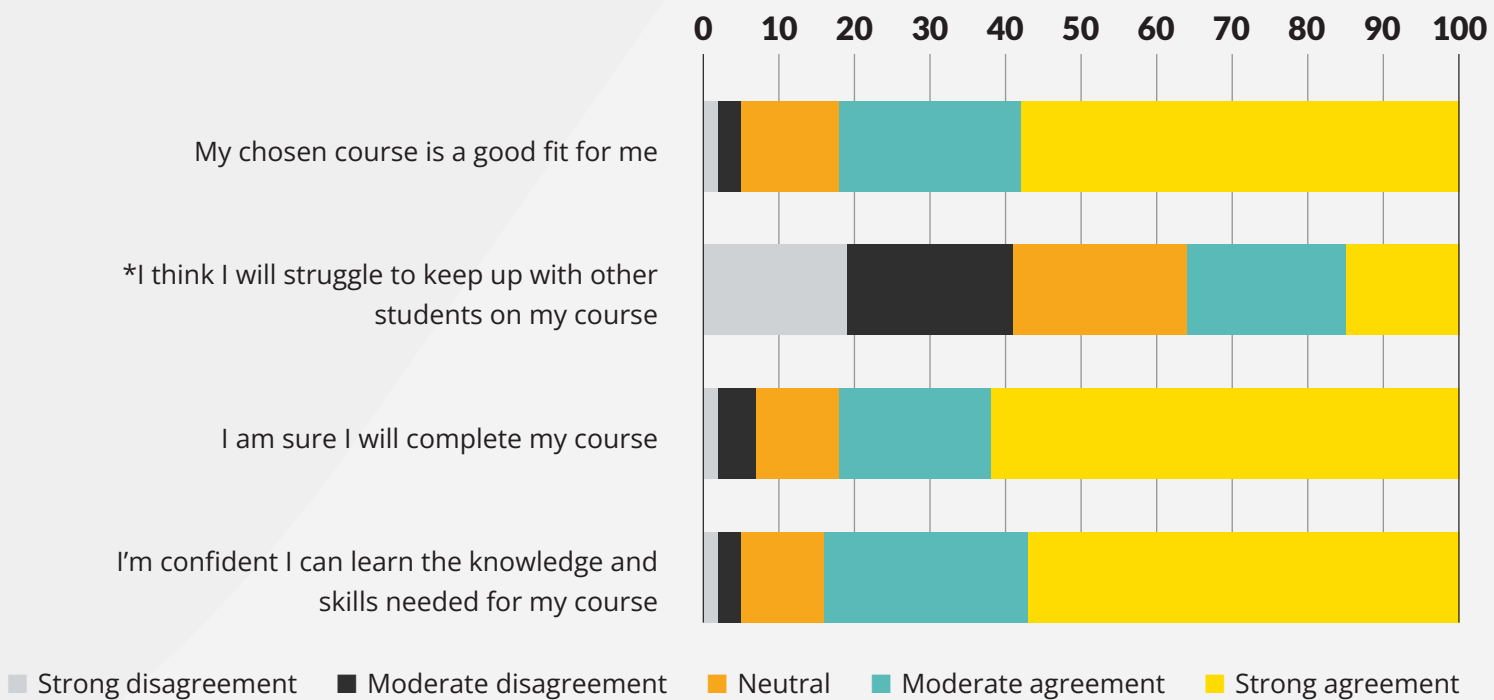


# LEARNING 71

The Learning score measures academic confidence among the cohort, combined with the level of comfort with course choice.

\*For this question, agreement indicates a negative response; the score for this question was reversed when calculating the index score.

Figure 10: Breakdown of responses to learning theme questions



Overall, applicants show a high level of confidence about their course choice, their ability to learn and to complete their course. However, there are some signs of “imposter syndrome” with 37% agreeing that they will struggle to keep up with other students on their course.

Female students show a higher level of agreement that their course is a good fit for them. Asian/Asian British students have a lower level of agreement than average, as do international students. As there is a crossover between these two categories, this suggests that international students from Asian countries may have a

lower level of personal affinity for their chosen degree subject. Asian/Asian British students are more likely to believe that they will struggle to keep up with others on their course, and international students are less likely to believe that they will complete their course.

Care experienced and estranged students, and students with a disability, are also less confident in their ability to complete their course.



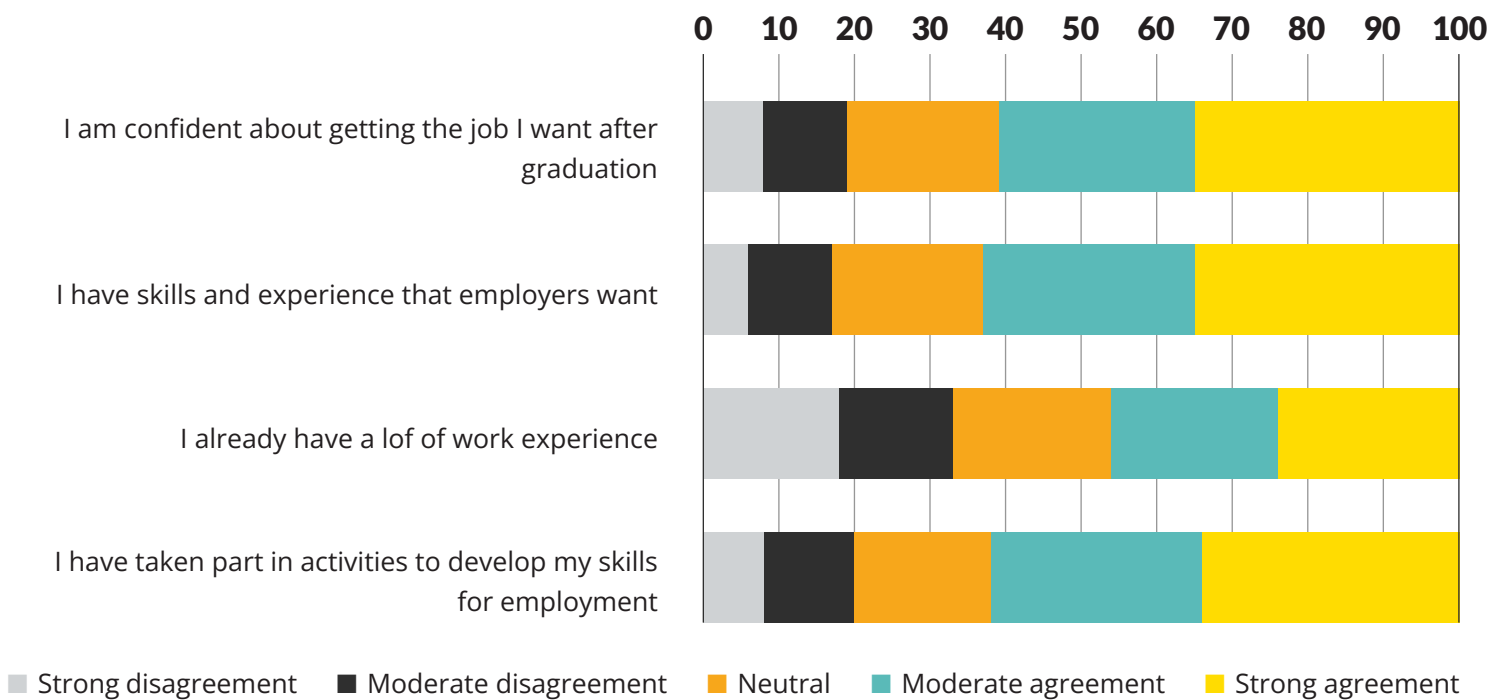
# EMPLOYMENT 62

The Employment score measures applicants' confidence in their graduate employment prospects together with their employability skills and experience.

Because this is an applicant rather than a student survey, it was anticipated that the scores for these questions may be relatively low with plenty of opportunities to gain further skills and experience during their time at university.

\*For this question, agreement indicates a negative response; the score for this question was reversed when calculating the index score.

Figure 11: Breakdown of responses to employment theme questions



Applicant confidence in their ability to get the graduate job they want is strong, reflecting the buoyancy of the current graduate job market. Only 19% indicated they were not confident about getting the job they want after graduation. It is also reflective of their own perception of their relevant skills and experience, which is positive – 63% agree that they have the skills and experience that employers want. The majority have taken part in employability related activities, an encouraging finding which endorses the efforts made to deliver employability skills throughout secondary education.

Male applicants were more confident than female applicants about their ability to get the graduate job

they want. Black/Black British applicants were the most confident of all the ethnic groups, and this may be because they are more likely to agree that they already have a lot of work experience and that they have taken part in activities to develop their skills.

Care experienced and estranged applicants were more likely to agree that they had a lot of work experience, but this did not translate into greater confidence about their graduate employment prospects.

LGB+ applicants and those with a mental health condition were less confident than average in their ability to get a graduate job, and were less likely to have taken part in activities to develop employability skills.

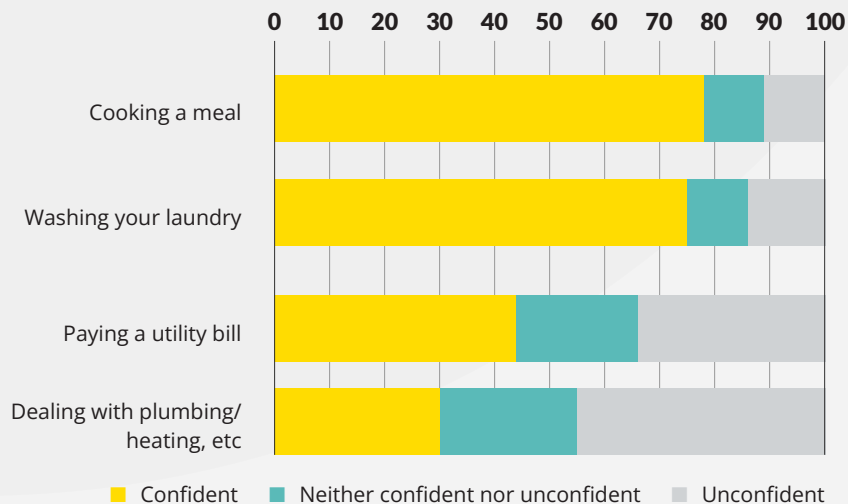
# TOPICAL ISSUES

This section draws on wider survey questions to provide a brief analysis of topical issues.

## Independence

Just over half of applicants (55%) agree they will find it easy to take care of themselves while at university. Applicants are generally confident about their ability to cook a meal (78%) and do laundry (75%), but less confident about paying utility bills (44%) and dealing with plumbing, electric or heating issues (30%).

**Figure 12:** Responses to the question “If you were asked to do the following tomorrow, how confident are you that you would be able to do them?”



While 29% want their parents to be involved in their day-to-day life when they are at university, this level of involvement may be driven by parents themselves - 43% of applicants believe that their parents will want to be involved in their day-to-day lives.

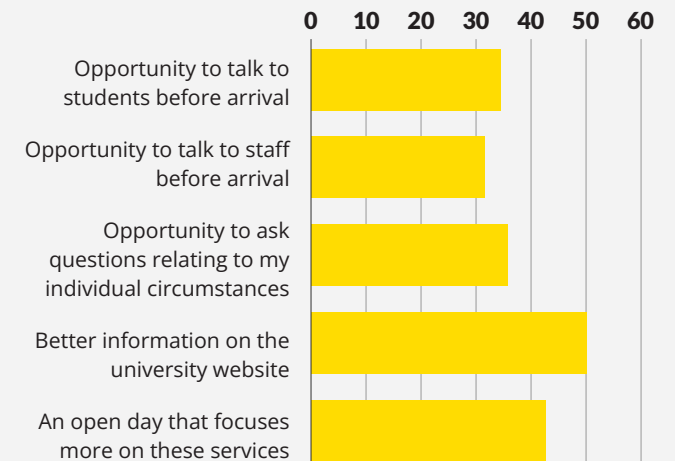
## University Services

Many applicants would have liked to be able to learn more about university services before they applied to university: 41% would have liked more information about student accommodation and about careers and employability, and 35% would have liked to learn more about student support services.

LGB+ students and those with a disability were more likely to say that wanted to learn more about student support services. Those who chose to live in university halls were more likely to say that they would have liked more information about student accommodation.

There was no clear consensus on the best method for universities to convey this information, but also little difference in preference between different demographic groups. This suggests that a mixed-channel approach would be most successful in reaching the widest range of students, along with targeted messaging to relevant groups.

**Figure 13:** How applicants would have liked to learn more about university services before applying.



Most applicants believe their chosen university can meet their needs, with only 6% disagreeing. However these rates of disagreement are higher among international applicants (15%) care experienced applicants (16%).

Only 55% of applicants agreed it was easy to find out how their chosen university would meet their needs. Levels of strong agreement are higher among care experienced applicants, and those with ADHD or autism spectrum disorder, but levels of disagreement are also higher among these groups. This suggests that targeted messages are landing well with some applicants from these groups but are not reaching all of them.

# APPENDIX

The index is based on a survey administered via the YouthSight Panel between 25th June and 11th July 2022 to 2,038 respondents who were planning to start university in the 2022/23 academic year. The sample has been constructed and weighted to be broadly representative of the applicant population as a whole. Known limitations of the dataset are that it under indexes non-EU international applicants, and that it is over indexes towards younger applicants (21 and under). Significant differences between international and UK/EU students and between young and mature students have been highlighted where relevant.

The survey questions have been informed by the applicant survey published by Unite Students in 2021, and by two major pieces of research in partnership with HEPI – The New Realists (2019) and Reality Check (2017). Financial questions were informed by the student cost of living survey published by Unite Students in April 2022.

The index provides a cohort score out of 100 for each of eight different themes. The scores for seven of these themes – not including Wellbeing - are based on responses to 28 different statements on a 7-point scale of agreement. From this, an average score from 0-6 is calculated for the whole population and sub-populations, and each item is weighted equally within the theme score. For the Wellbeing theme, we have also included the ONS wellbeing questions which represent 40% of the theme's overall score, with four 7-point scale items contributing the remaining 60%.

A high index score is indicative of a positive response in relation to each of the themes, however it should be remembered that there are many valid reasons why an individual applicant may give a low score in one or more themes. They may not have had opportunities to develop key skills or may have faced challenging circumstances. A demographic breakdown of the scores highlights groups that may require targeted support, and in some cases only a systemic change will produce equality of outcomes.

Further questions have been included in the survey to address topical issues within the sector. These are discussed in relation to a relevant theme, or in a separate section.

The majority of the questions in the survey are items to which respondents indicate their level of agreement on either a seven-point or five-point scale, from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. For the purposes of discussion, we have used the following interpretation when reporting the result and have also used “agree” and “disagree” in the narrative to mean “net agree” and “net disagree”.

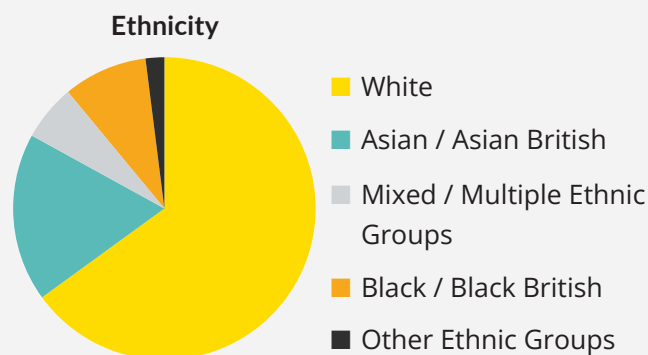
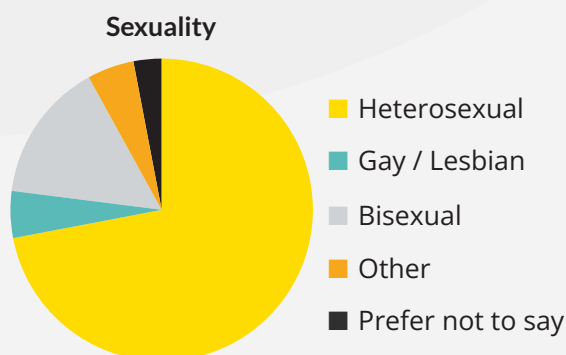
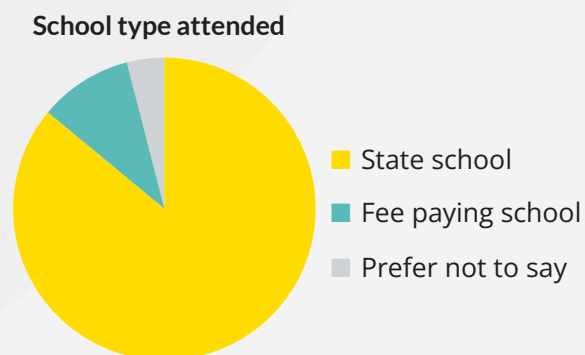
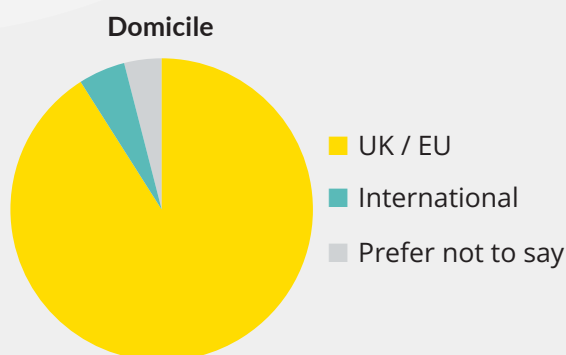
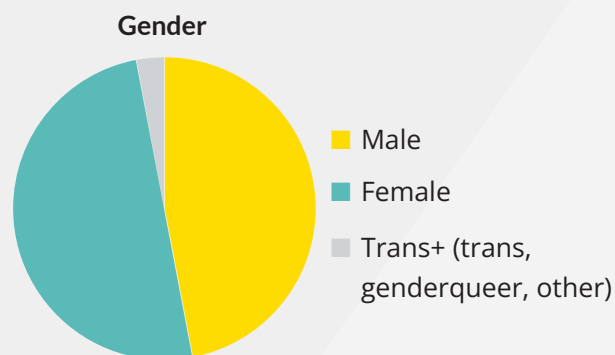
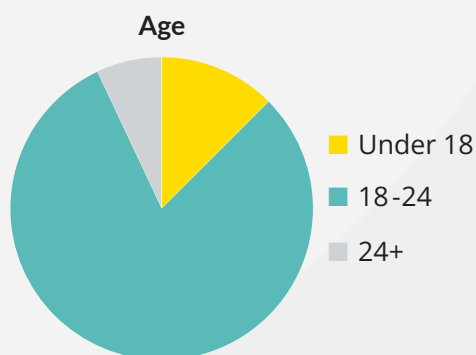
## Five point scale

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 1 | Strongly disagree                       |
| 2 | Disagree                                |
| 3 | Neutral<br>(neither agree nor disagree) |
| 4 | Agree                                   |
| 5 | Strongly agree                          |

## Seven point scale

- |     |   |
|-----|---|
| 0-1 | Strongly disagree                       |
| 2   | Moderately disagree                     |
| 3   | Neutral<br>(neither agree nor disagree) |
| 4   | Moderately agree                        |
| 5-6 | Strongly agree                          |

# DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE SAMPLE



\* Those giving their sexuality as Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual or Other are grouped together as LGB+ in the analysis

<b>Disability</b>	
Specific learning difficulties such as Dyslexia, Dyscalculia, Dyspraxia.	5%
ADD/ADHD.	8%
Blind or serious visual impairment uncorrected by glasses.	1%
Deaf or a serious hearing impairment.	1%
A physical impairment or mobility issues, such as difficulty using arms, using a wheelchair or crutches.	3%
A mental health condition, such as depression, schizophrenia or anxiety disorder.	20%
A long standing illness or health condition such as cancer, HIV, diabetes, chronic heart disease or epilepsy.	5%
A social/communication impairment such as Asperger's syndrome/other autistic spectrum disorder.	7%
Prefer not to say.	6%
No known disability or health condition.	59%
<b>Care Experienced</b>	
Care experienced	6%
Estranged from family (but not care experienced)	4%



UNITE  
STUDENTS

