About the survey

This slide deck gives the results of a survey of university applicants which was conducted in June 2021 by YouthSight on behalf of Unite Students.

There were just over 1000 respondents to the survey, all of which have applied to go to university this September. The sample was demographically diverse and was weighted to be representative of the applicant population.

The majority of the questions can be benchmarked against applicant survey conducted for Unite Students and HEPI by YouthSight in 2017 and/or 2019, allowing us to get an absolute fix on how applicants’ attitudes, needs and behaviours have changed over recent years.

We have included the four standard ONS wellbeing questions, which can be benchmarked against the 16-19 year old general population. We have also compared our findings with HEPI and HEA’s Student Academic Experience Survey 2021.
This cohort is less socially confident than those of previous years and they are much more keen to contact flatmates in advance. However they are slightly less keen on social events – possibly due to social anxiety.

The social opportunities offered by university are extremely important to them. Making friends and meeting new people is the top thing they are looking forward to at university.

They feel less ready and less well informed about going to university compared to 2017.

They have a higher incidence of mental health condition and neurodiversity and are more likely to have anxiety or an eating disorder than previous cohorts. The cohort as a whole has slightly lower wellbeing than in previous years.

They are less likely to drink too much or take drugs, but more likely to have issues with eating.

They also have a stronger preference for going to staff and specialist services with problems rather than other students – though many still do want peer support.

Almost all want a sense of belonging when they are at university but the majority are anxious about fitting in.

They are slightly more confident about getting a graduate job than the 2017 cohort.

They have a stronger drive towards face to face learning compared to the 2019 cohort.
Happiness in relationships with family and friends are similar to 2017.

Happiness in relationships with friends outside of school and other students who aren't friends has gone down. This is likely to be due to limited social opportunities over the last 15 months.
There are small drops in those in all of the ONS standard wellbeing questions since 2019.

Given the timescales involved, the pandemic is likely to be the most significant cause of the change.
HEPI/HEA have seen similar drops in wellbeing among the student population.

Students score lower than applicants on these questions who in turn score lower than the general 16-19 and 20-24 population.
See previous slide for commentary
Applicants are feeling more calm, relaxed and able to enjoy life compared to 2019. This is possibly because the 2019 survey took place just before their A-level exams, whereas this year’s survey came after A-levels were complete.

Other than that, it is surprising how little has changed.
Similarly, the drop in tiredness, worry and strain is likely linked to the timing of this year’s survey coming after exams rather than before. However, spending more time at home may have also have an impact.
There is a notable rise in applicants experiencing issues with eating compared to 2017. They have had much less experience with alcohol and drugs vs 2017. This may in part be due to reduced opportunity.
Mental health conditions and social/communication disorders have both increased. This may in part be linked to improved diagnosis.

Among those who have a mental health condition, eating disorders shows a notable increase of 6 percentage points.

Among those with a mental health condition, anxiety is now much more common than depression whereas in 2017 the rates were very similar.
This year’s applicants have a greater preference for members of staff they can go to if they have a problem, and counselling, vs 2017.

Although still very popular, social events during the first week and those provided by other students see notable declines.

Overall, there is a trend away from wanting to go to other students with their problems, and towards support from staff and specialist services.
Nearly three quarters of applicants want the ability to contact the people they are living with prior to arriving at University versus 55% in 2017 – a considerable increase.

Applicants would also like to be able to have a 360 degree virtual tour of their building +6 percentage points vs 2017.

The desire to talk to students who already live in the accommodation has declined.
A new question for 2021 sees applicants interested in living with students who share similar hobbies, interest and study the same subject.

Nearly half of applicants prefer to live with student's who don't take drugs.

Only 17% are happy to live with anyone.
Surprisingly, applicants are more confident about getting a job than they were in 2017.
Applicants are feeling less excited, informed and ready for university compared to 2017. They are also less impatient.

These findings are surprising given that the 2017 survey was conducted in March-April. We would have expected this year’s respondents to be more informed and ready in June.
The largest drop in confidence for applicants is having a difficult conversation with their friends, which is down 8 percentage points vs 2017.

They are also less confident in household management tasks such as paying bills, dealing with maintenance issues.
Almost all applicants would like to feel that they belong when at university but over half are anxious about fitting in.

Anxiety about fitting in may be linked to imposter syndrome as a result of disrupted schooling and cancelling of external exams.

29% think they will need additional academic support to catch up loss learning.

21% say Covid has impacted their choice of study subject.
More applicants are most looking forward to making friends than starting their course.

Reinventing themselves or being their true self is the third most popular answer.
Although the pandemic has accelerated universities’ digital capabilities, the face to face model is the overwhelming preference for this year’s applicants.

These preferences have become more pronounced since 2019.
The preference for face to face learning is underlined in this question. If lectures were discontinued, the majority would prefer a different face to face mode of learning.

Those opting for digital resources in place of lectures has declined since 2019.