

THE NEW REALISTS

Unite Students Insight Report 2019



In partnership with:



Higher Education Policy Institute

UNITE
STUDENTS



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FOREWORD

BY RICHARD SMITH
CHIEF EXECUTIVE UNITE STUDENTS



Never has Unite's purpose, Home for Success, felt more relevant. A record percentage of 18 year olds are, proactively and positively, choosing to invest in higher education. As the UK's leading accommodation provider, we must aim to match their commitment. However, to provide a living environment that genuinely helps students from all backgrounds get the very best out of university we must first understand how their needs are changing. We have to listen and adapt.

Our Insight Reports play an important part in helping us meet this challenge. In this year's survey, we once again looked at both students and applicants. The results confirm that the much talked-about Generation Z have well and truly arrived at universities up and down the country. It also tells us that, while many of their most fundamental instincts and motivations are the same as their predecessors', they are often expressed in a very different way.

One of the most prevalent stereotypes of students is that of emotionally insecure "snowflakes", ill-prepared for the challenges and responsibilities of adult life. I challenge this preconception vigorously.

What I see instead is a group of young people who are growing up in a world of rapid and sometimes unpredictable change, where the certainties that many of us enjoyed are in short supply. Growing up with the backdrop of 2008's recession and subsequent financial crisis has surely contributed to the cultural identity of this cohort: these 'New Realists' who know only too well the challenges and

uncertainties of the world they are entering as a newly independent adult. As we all do, they value security and stability highly but they want to achieve it on their own terms.

I see an intake that is more diverse not only by reference to traditional definitions, such as gender, race, sexual orientation or socio-economic background, but also in terms of identity, which is highly individualised.

Across different aspects of their lives, I see a generation that is adept at navigating a mix of traditional and digital mediums and highly resourceful in creating the solution that works for them.

And I see a group of people who look to their peer group for not only friendship but for practical help and support.

All this, I firmly believe, makes the university experience more relevant than ever. But, in designing it, we need to accommodate the behaviours, attitudes and preferences this research highlights. We have, for example, long recognised the importance of helping



our students settle into university life quickly. But students themselves are increasingly explicit in seeing university as a three- or four-year journey to independence, security and adulthood. So should we be looking at transition not as a moment in time to be negotiated as quickly as possible but as a more gradual, incremental process?

How, within this process, do we design and deliver flexible services that support students in creating an experience that's right for them? How do we develop our network of paid Student Ambassadors to unlock the full potential of peer-to-peer support? And how do we create a living environment that enables and encourages students to try new and different services so they can identify a combination that works best for them?

We also have to look beyond the university experience itself. I firmly believe that the seeds of the well-publicised problems that some students encounter are, in many cases, sown well before they arrive. This is a problem that requires the attention and cooperation of many different parts of society, including families, schools, universities, businesses and government.

It was against this background that our 2017 Insight Report, Reality Check, exposed a significant gap between applicants' assumptions about university life and the reality. I remain concerned that some young people are

not getting everything they could from the experience because we're not preparing them adequately, in terms of understanding what to expect and recognizing the possible consequences of different decisions.

In the light of this year's report, we're therefore asking ourselves how we can best build on our successful government-endorsed LeapSkills training module, which is currently being rolled out to schools, sixth forms and colleges across the UK¹. We're also exploring applicants' appetite for an opportunity to spend a night in our accommodation, where they can mix with students and get a taste of university life before they arrive.

There are of course no easy answers to any of these questions. We must however look carefully at what this research is telling us. We will be bold in trying new things, and share what we learn. And we will, above all, be listening to students as we do so.

Richard Smith, Chief Executive Unite Students

¹ Unite Leap Skills www.unite-group.co.uk/responsibility/leapskills

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this research we set out to understand applicants and first year students on their own terms. Three findings emerged strongly from the field research.

1

Future stability is a dominant motivator for current and prospective students within the context of a world that they perceive as uncertain and risky. As such, for many students an undergraduate degree appears to provide an important and valuable period of transition between a secure and familiar past and a stable future.

2

The current generation of applicants and students is the most diverse ever, in terms not only of traditional demographics but individual identity. They need a broad, inclusive and flexible higher education experience that reflects this and meets their needs.

3

Student friendships are highly significant to this generation of students and play a practical as well as an emotional role in their lives. Friends and peers are seen by students as fundamental to a successful student experience and play a clear role at specific points on the journey.





The research looks at three aspects of the university experience where these themes play out and, we suggest, represent potential areas for further development.

Applicants and students are strongly self-determining when it comes to their wellbeing. Far from being ‘snowflakes’, this generation of students demonstrates an unrecognised strength in the face of challenges to their wellbeing, and draw on a broad range of support, including family, peers and wellbeing apps.

Applicants and students with a pre-existing mental health condition don't necessarily see it as a problem. In fact, they may even view it as part of their (diverse) identity. However, most don't want to draw on university support or even disclose their condition to their university. There remains an engagement gap with about a quarter of first year students not using university services because of issues around confidence, fear or trust. Peer-led approaches may help to address this gap.

Freshers' Week is the traditional way of helping new arrivals to immerse themselves into university life, find their feet and get settled in. However, as currently presented it works better for some groups of students than others. There may still be some way to go to offer a Freshers' experience that meets the diverse needs of this generation of students, and we find evidence of a social

expectation that is not being fully met. We should not imagine that a single, high intensity week is enough to enable new students to adequately adapt. We need to think instead about Freshers' Week as the start of a more incremental process.

Despite the rapid proliferation of digital resources, predictions of the lecture's demise are premature. In fact, today's students appear to value a variety of different learning methods and are well equipped to create the solution that's right for them.

When asked, both applicants and students tell us they prefer face to face forms of learning, above digital only approaches. Although students rank lectures as the most useful form of learning they are not universally popular, and there is a suggestion in the qualitative research that they actually function as a social as much as a learning opportunity and are valued as such. Ultimately, however, there is no clear consensus on preferred learning approaches, suggesting a variety of different methods are needed to meet the diverse needs of this cohort.

METHODOLOGY



Unite Students worked with YouthSight to carry out both qualitative and quantitative research into applicants and students at university. Our aim was to investigate young people's transition to university, their expectations and their experiences in the first year, looking at both academic and non-academic aspects.

The research began by collating and analysing existing sources of data and insight. This was followed by three days of community focus groups in March 2019 with 15 applicants and 16 first year students, then small group of interviews with 21 further first year students.

We used the latter to gain in-depth insight into student life, including the academic and social experience as well as available support systems and their perceptions of university.

The preceding stages then informed an online quantitative survey of 2,535 applicants and 2,573 first-year students in May 2019, which analysed key areas such as wellbeing and mental health, identity, student life and 'adulting'. Participants were selected at random from the YouthSight panel and invited via email. The student sample was structured according to HESA student population data, with quotas set for EU and Non-EU respondents.

We then shared some of the early findings with four students (pictured above), who helped us put together our Student Yearbook report earlier this year. We recorded their conversations together around some of the key themes of the results and these form an important supplement to the report. You can listen to them via the online report or by scanning this QR barcode with your mobile device.

The online report, which includes a more comprehensive methodology, a full questionnaire and a demographic breakdown of survey respondents, can be found on the Unite Students' website at **www.unite-group.co.uk/campaign/new-realists-report** Alternatively you can scan the barcode using the QR reader on your mobile device to be taken straight there.



INTRODUCTION

Our 2017 reports Reality Check² and Everyone In³ highlighted the impact of a positive transition to university as playing a crucial role in students' wellbeing and success. We presented data on the areas in which applicants may be unprepared for university and carry with them unrealistic assumptions. These range widely, across the academic, practical, emotional and social fields.

In the two years since that report was written, a new generation has started to arrive at universities across the UK. Recent progress on participation together with generational trends means that today's students are more diverse than ever. They are strongly independent and self-determined in the context of a world that has changed very rapidly and that seems to them to be uncertain. They are also highly connected. Peer friendship and support is important to their wellbeing and success at the very time when these relationships are fundamentally disrupted by the move to university.

Against this backdrop, it is right to ask if the experience we offer is right for this cohort, or based on an outdated set of assumptions. To understand what they truly value from their time at university, and how they expect to navigate it, we need to see the world through their eyes. This is why we have given students a prominent place within the report, both through direct quotes from the qualitative research stage, and by podcasts of students responding to the findings.



² Unite Students/HEPI (2017) Reality Check www.unite-group.co.uk/sites/default/files/2017-07/reality-check-report.pdf

³ Unite Students/HEPI (2017) Everyone In www.unite-group.co.uk/sites/default/files/2017-10/everyone-in-report.pdf

KEY THEMES



THEME 1

UNIVERSITY PROVIDES A BRIDGE TO A STABLE FUTURE

Future stability is a dominant motivator for current and prospective students within the context of a world that is perceived as uncertain and risky. As such, an undergraduate degree is perceived as a period of transition between a stable past and a hoped-for stable future.

Employability has been recognised as a major objective of higher education for many years, and future earnings is a strong theme in the current higher education policy conversation around value. A 2018 Quality Assurance Agency report⁴ found that students' dominant view of the purpose of higher education was "a pathway to advance your career". They found that students were focused on getting "a good job" by which they meant an interesting and purposeful career over and above financial remuneration. By contrast, our own Reality Check⁵ report (2017) found that applicants responded with "to gain a higher level of education" and "interest in my chosen subject" as their main reasons for going to university, though employability came in a close third.

In this research we are able to look deeper into these findings, and during the qualitative phase a new angle on employability emerged. Applicants

talked about employability, but often framed in terms of their future financial stability and quality of life rather than traditional definitions of achievement. Their aspirations are fairly modest, and appear to centre around "living comfortably" rather than being wealthy.

In the quantitative survey we asked both applicants and students about their long term life goals. Of the options given, "being financially stable" is a goal for half of applicants and more than half of first year students. By contrast, being wealthy, attaining a senior position and even being able to help others are far less popular.

This suggests that financial success is not a key motivation: stability and job satisfaction are the features of future employment that most attracts them.

Graph 1

What young people want to ideally have achieved in life

Base:

All respondents: 5,111

Able to select all that apply

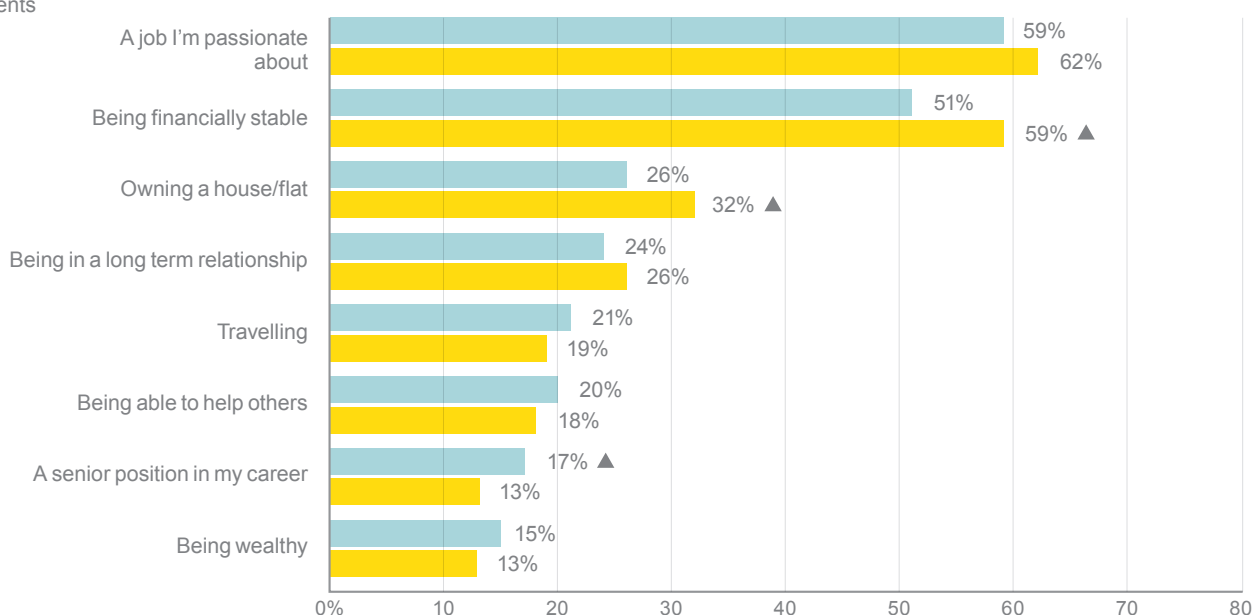
▲ Significantly higher than counterpart @ 99% CI

Question:

Q6. Which of the below would you ideally have achieved in your life?

Applicants

Students



⁴ www.kcl.ac.uk/study/learningteaching/kli/People/Research/DL/QAARReport.pdf

⁵ Unite Students/HEPI (2017) Reality Check www.unite-group.co.uk/sites/default/files/2017-07/reality-check-report.pdf

As per our 2017 findings, the intrinsic motivations of wanting a higher level of education and interest in their chosen subject still dominate at 52%, followed by needing a degree for their chosen career (42%). This year we included the option “long term financial stability” which came in fourth at 36%; as a motivator in its own right.

This drive towards future security is almost certainly motivated by this generation’s perception of the world as a more uncertain place than when their parents were young. Across both applicant and students surveyed, 78% believe that it will be harder for them to find a job than it was for their parents, and 69% believe that going to university presents a potential path to get the life they want.

Graph 2

Top motivations for going to university

Base:

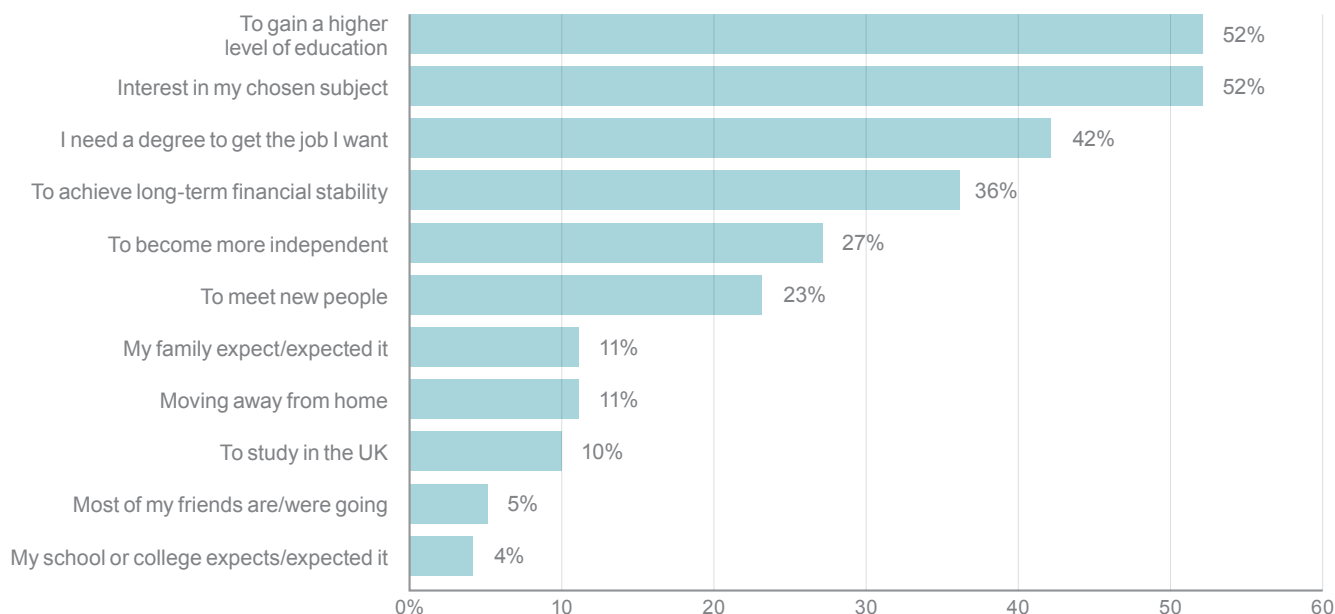
All applicants: 2,535

Able to select up to three options

Question:

Q3A. What are your top motivations for going to university?

■ Applicants



Graph 3

Perception of the world

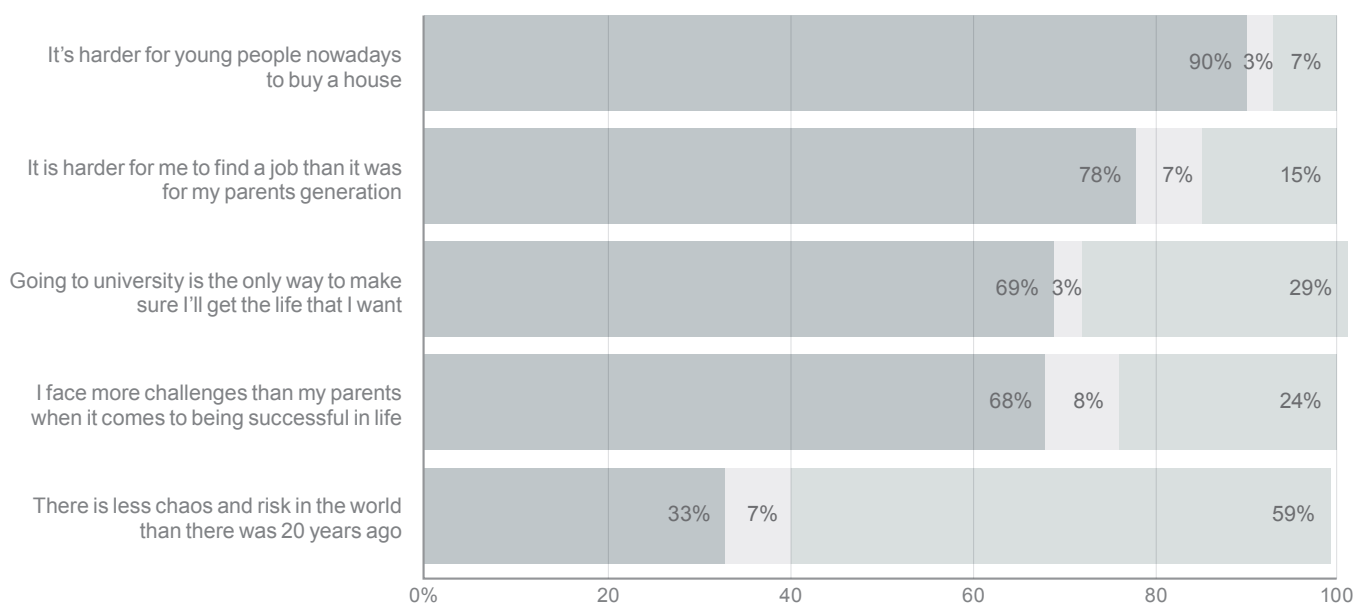
Base:

All respondents: 5,111

Question:

Q7. What extent do you agree with these statements?

- Agree
- Don't know
- Disagree



For this generation, it seems that going to university is a way of insuring themselves against future uncertainty, and pursuing a particular quality of life that includes an enjoyable career and freedom from financial worries.

Students in the qualitative research echoed this idea of university as a transitional period, characterising

themselves as 'independent but not adults' and, in some cases, actively rejecting the adult label. As such, universities could usefully offer a safe place for challenge and experimentation, helping students to develop adaptability and resilience against future uncertainty as well as traditional employability skills.



THEME 2

STUDENTS ARE MORE DIVERSE THAN EVER

The current generation of applicants and students is the most diverse ever, in terms not only of traditional demographics but individual identity. They need a broad, inclusive and flexible higher education experience that reflects this and meets their needs.

The UK higher education sector's efforts to widen participation in higher education have been broadly successful. While there remain some challenges around social mobility and the diversity of some parts of the sector, there is no longer such a thing as the 'typical student'. This diversity has also in part been driven by generational changes in attitudes towards conformity. As set out later in this section, this generation is less likely to follow trends than previous generations, and both tolerates and actively curates individual identity.

Writing in 2006, David Watson argued that the growing diversity of the student body meant it would become more important to listen to students. He warned against stereotyping and the assumption that all students have the same needs⁶.

On demographic factors alone, UCAS data show that the percentage of students declaring a disability has risen from 12% to 15% between 2014/15 and 2017/18. Over the same period, the proportion of BAME students rose from 21% to 24% and the proportion from low participation neighbourhoods has continued to edge up from 11.4% to 11.6%.

We have similarly seen changes among the applicant samples in our own research between

the years 2017 and 2019. These samples were recruited using the same approach and during that time we have seen applicants who self-report a disability rising from 23% to 25%⁷, and BAME applicants from 26% to 32%. Applicants identifying as LGBT+ rose from 16% to 18% over the same two year period.

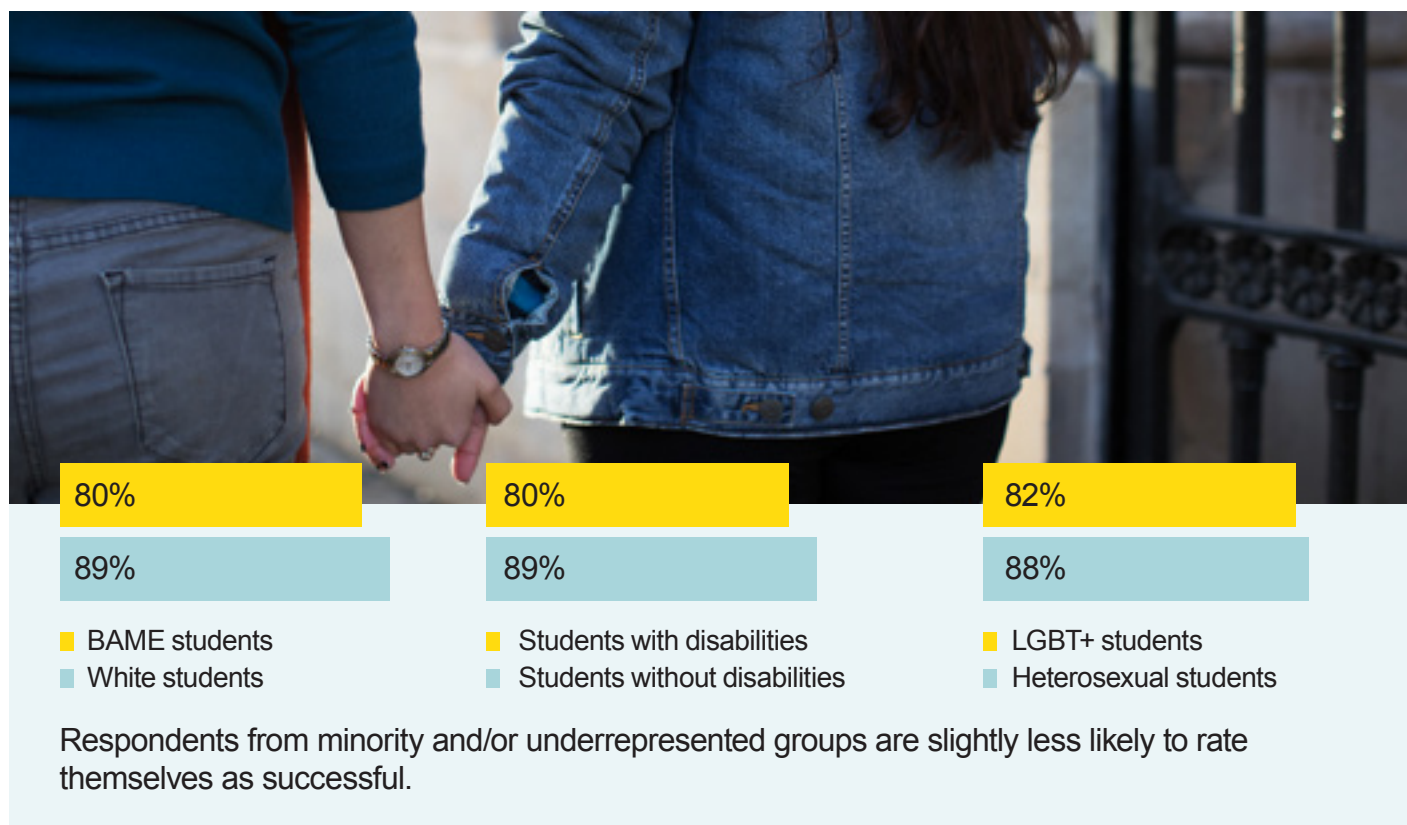
This greater level of diversity is a real asset to universities and their students, offering opportunities for students to learn from one another within a broad and diverse learning community. However, it also presents a practical challenge to the HE sector to adapt to this rapid change. Among first year students in our study, 87% consider themselves to be successful. This is encouraging but we note that respondents from minority and/or under-represented groups are slightly less likely to rate themselves as successful.

While these students still overwhelmingly regard themselves as successful, this suggests there may still be some way to go to ensure that students who 'get in' all feel equally able to 'get on'.

But this is not just about under-represented groups. We also see diversity in attitudes, image and lifestyles among both applicants and students. A recent report by YouthSight and the Institute of Practitioners⁸ found no generational consensus

⁶ <http://escalate.ac.uk/downloads/2808.pdf>

⁷ The disparity between the levels reported in this survey and those in the HESA data suggest under-reporting to formal sources, a theme that is picked up on page 23.



on trends among their youth panel, with 68% not following trends and 23% paying little or no attention to them. This was apparent among the applicants and students in our survey who embraced a diversity of lifestyles and beliefs rather than following clear trends:

- Under a quarter of students say they dress a certain way to fit in, whereas half dress for themselves, not caring what others think
- Both applicants and students are split across the political spectrum. The most popular party is Labour at 19%, followed by the Green Party at 8% and Conservatives at 7%; all other parties attracted between 1-3% each. However, 40% do not support a current political party
- When it comes to eating and drinking, 58% of applicants report at least one dietary restriction with 22% teetotal for a variety of different reasons and 19% meat-free

The report 'Building Brilliant Futures Today'⁹ found that compared to previous generations, young people aged 16-22 were more fluid about their identity than previous generations, adapting themselves to situations rather than adopting a fixed identity.

Over the last few years there has been a focus on carrying out market research to discover 'what Generation Z is like'. Perhaps it is more useful to understand that, while in some respects they share certain attitudes, they are most notable for their diversity, fluidity and non-conformity. A one-size-fits-all offer to this generation of students will almost certainly not be enough.

⁸ www.youthsight.com/blog/gen-z-exile-on-mainstream Sample of 1041 Gen Z young people.

⁹ *Building Brilliant Futures Today: Why and how businesses should prioritise connecting with Emerging Adults, We are Futures (2018)* <https://wearefutures.com/brilliantfuturestoday>

THEME 3

PEERS PLAY A PIVOTAL ROLE IN A SUCCESSFUL STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Student friendships are highly significant to this generation of students and play a practical as well as an emotional role in their lives. Friends and peers are seen by students as fundamental to a successful student experience and play a clear role at specific points on the journey.

When first year students were asked what they considered to be the most important parts of a successful student experience, 58% of respondents selected at least one answer directly relating to the social aspects of the experience. This was mirrored in the qualitative research in which both students and applicants talked at length about the social side of university.

Friendship groups tend to shrink slightly between school/college and university, for example 20% of applicants say they have 'a big circle of friends' before university, whereas only 15% of first year students say the same towards the end of their

first year. However, although friendship groups at university may be smaller, they are also slightly more diverse – 37% of applicants say their friends are similar to themselves compared with 32% of students.

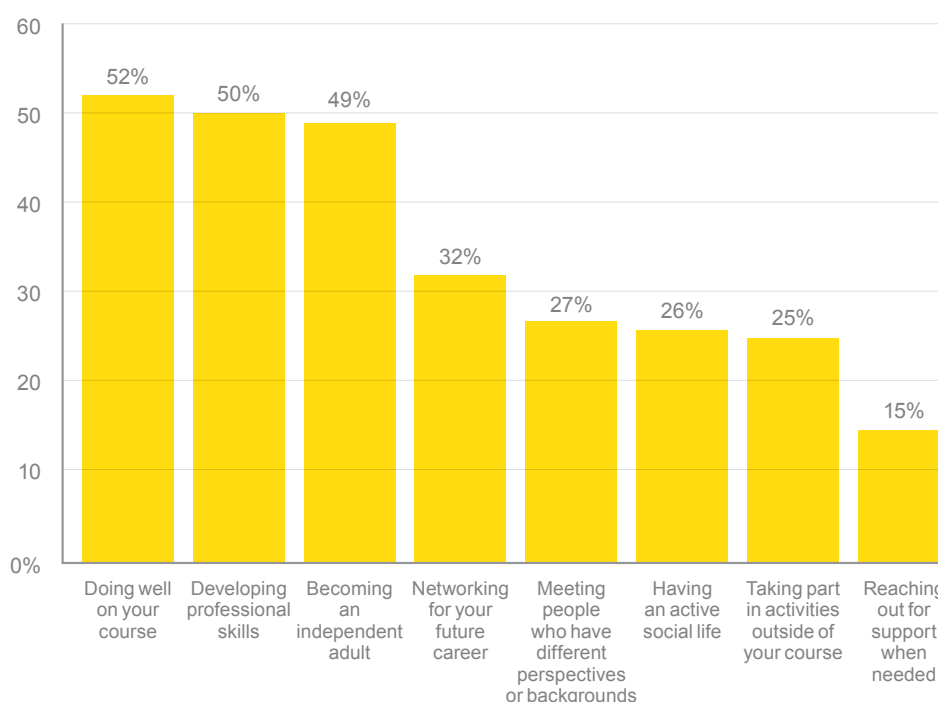
The qualitative research gave a deeper insight into the lived experience of student friendships and social life. A common pattern among first year students is to focus on university work during the daytime. Even this can be a social experience, with interaction via social media, and some students studying together either in person or via group calls.

Graph 4
Aspects of a successful student experience

Base:
All students: 2,573
Able to select up to three options

Question:
Q4. Which of the below do you think are the most important parts of a successful student experience?

■ Students





Evenings, however, are for socialising. Our previous research has shown the importance of, and drive towards, making friends at university¹⁰. This year we found in the qualitative research that applicants are acutely aware of the need to make friends at university.

“In the evenings I’ll either be going to sports practice or I’ll be hanging out with friends.”

Laura, student

“Meeting new people is difficult as it can be overwhelming but it would be nice to expand my friendships...”

Crystal, applicant

Although the traditional student drinking culture is still apparent among some students, it is far from the only way to socialise. As well as going out, many first year students still spend time hanging out in university social spaces, playing cards, having movie nights or watching TV. The kitchen remains the social hub for those in halls and students reported congregating here most nights to watch TV together (somebody always has a Netflix or Amazon account), chat, or play games such as Articulate. Students in halls still talk into the night, challenging one another’s world views on topics such as politics and religion.

For some, socialising is directly related to their future aspirations as a form of networking. Others simply wanted to meet like-minded people and had found friends with similar backgrounds.

However, we found that the vast majority of students report feeling lonely and this echoes recent reports by Wonkhe¹¹ and iQ/Relate¹². Our research suggests that for most, this is just an occasional problem. 4% of students feel lonely all the time, and a further 22% often feel lonely. Loneliness therefore seems to be an issue for about a quarter of first year students, and this was consistent across all accommodation types including parental home.

¹⁰ Unite/HEPI (2017) *Everyone In*. www.unite-group.co.uk/sites/default/files/2017-10/everyone-in-report.pdf

¹¹ Wonkhe (2019) *Only the Lonely*. <https://wonkhe.com/blogs-sus/only-the-lonely-loneliness-student-activities-and-mental-wellbeing>

¹² IQ/Relate (2019) *Opening Up*. www.iqstudentaccommodation.com/sites/default/files/inline-files/iQ%20Opening%20up%20online.pdf

Graph 5

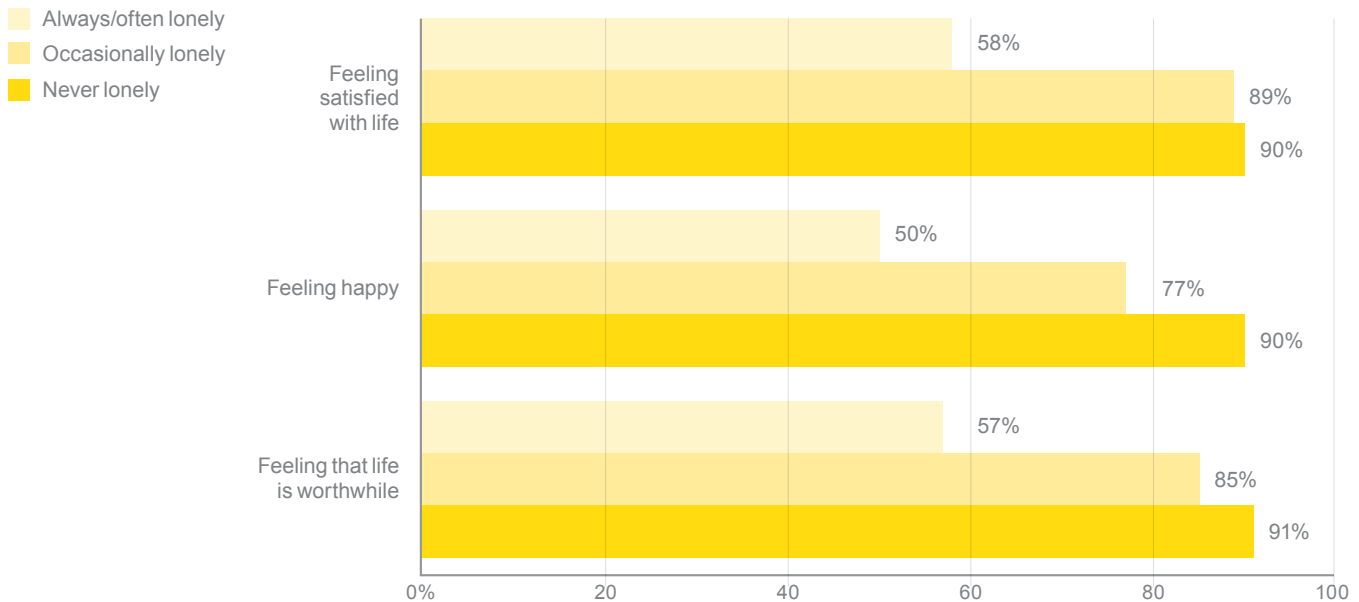
Impact of loneliness on wellbeing measures

Base:

All students. Q13. 694 students answering "I often feel lonely" or "I always feel lonely", 1434 answering "I occasionally feel lonely", 445 students answering "I never feel lonely"

Question:

Q0. A. Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays? B. Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile? C. Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday? % of respondents answers 6 or above out of 10



Students themselves make the link between social connectedness and wellbeing, and students who feel lonely are more likely to report poorer outcomes in terms of life satisfaction, happiness and feeling that life is worthwhile.

"I am most happy when I am with friends..."

Esme, applicant

"Friends regularly support me even if they don't realise..."

Caleb, student

"I socialise regularly to keep my spirits high..."

Jordan, student



Graph 6

Top 5 sources students found were most accurate

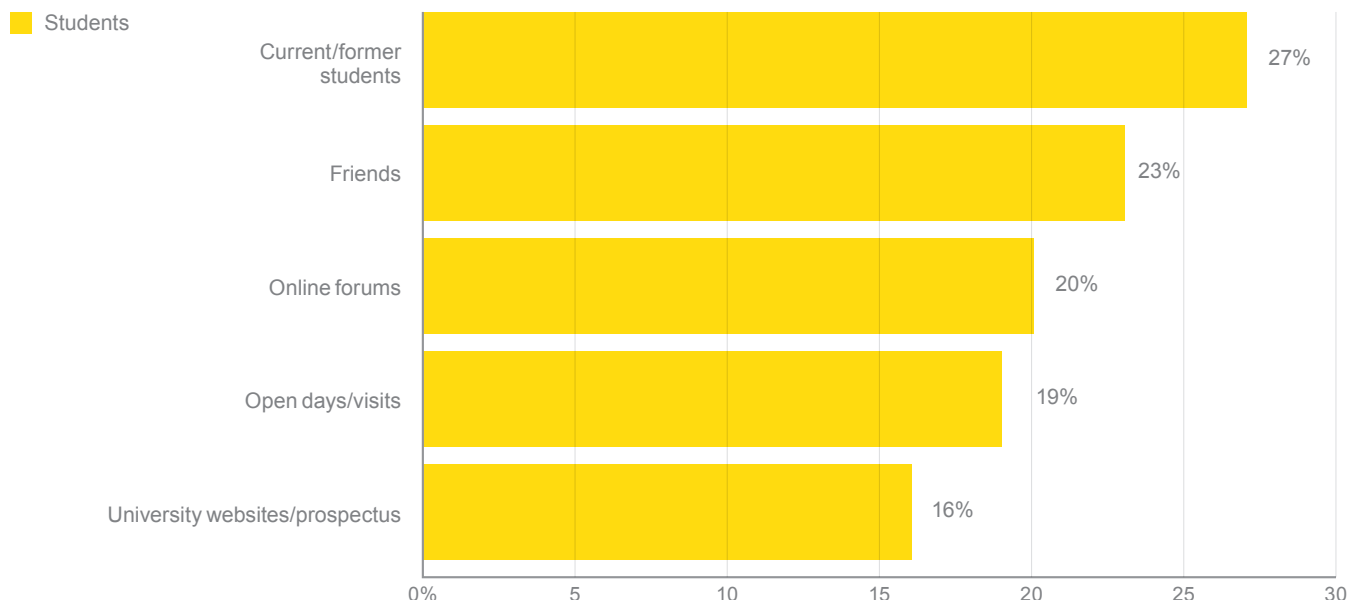
Base:

All students who remember which source used: 2,553

Able to select up to three options

Question:

Q2. Which of the below sources was most accurate about what student life is like?



Friends and peers play a strong role in helping applicants and students navigate their way into and through university. For example, university prospectuses are the most popular source of information for applicants in preparing for university, but only 16% of first year students consider that they are the most accurate source of information. By contrast, 58% cite at least

one peer-to-peer source as the most accurate, including current and former students, friends and online forums such as The Student Room.





FINDINGS IN PRACTICE

This section explores the three themes in the context of specific aspects of the first year experience: Freshers' Week, Learning and Teaching, and Wellbeing and Mental Health.



WELLBEING AND MENTAL HEALTH

FINDING

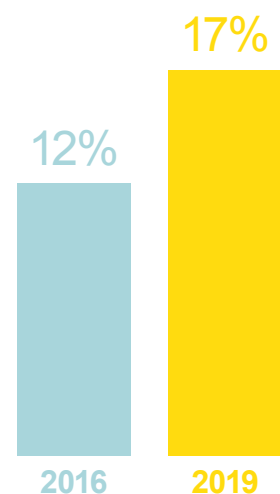
1

As in other areas, applicants and students are strongly self-determining when it comes to their wellbeing. Far from being 'snowflakes', this generation of students demonstrates an unrecognised strength in the face of challenges to their wellbeing, and draw on a broad range of support, including family, peers and wellbeing apps. Applicants and students with a pre-existing mental health condition don't necessarily see it as a problem, and may view it as part of their (diverse) identity. However, most don't want to draw on university support or even disclose their condition to their university. There remains an engagement gap with about a quarter of first year students not using university services because of issues around confidence, fear or trust. Peer-led approaches may help to address this gap.

Once again, the percentage of students who consider that they have a mental health condition has risen, and now stands at 17%. This has risen from 12% in 2016 when we first began to ask this question. As in previous years, anxiety and depression – often both – are the most commonly reported conditions.

However, this generation's approach to mental health appears to be largely accepting and pragmatic. From the qualitative research, students and applicants think about their wellbeing regularly and see it as an ongoing day to day process, looking after themselves physically and making sure to socialise and avoid isolation. Those applicants with a pre-existing mental health condition were found to have their own coping mechanisms that they plan to draw on when at university.

Among first year students who have a mental health condition, there is no clear consensus on what it means to them and how they would prefer to manage it.



Percentage of first year students who have a mental health condition

"I guess I try to just keep myself healthy, along with making sure to keep social connections so that I don't feel alone."

Lewin, Student

Graph 7

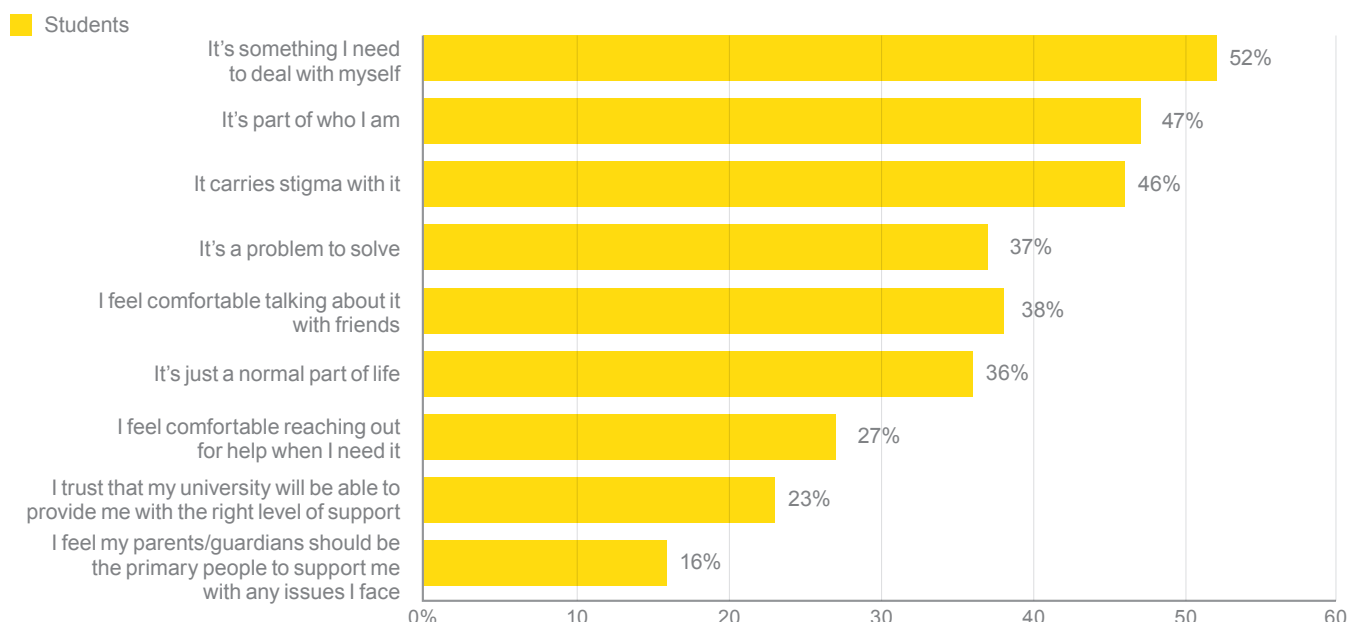
Feelings about mental health

Base:

All students who have a mental health condition: n=452

Question:

Q30. When it comes to your mental health, which of the statements below apply to you?



Just over half believe it is something they need to deal with themselves. Among applicants in the qualitative research there was a perceived pressure to solve their own problems independently or with peers, within an overall view that they are transitioning to adult life.

However, only 37% of students with a mental health condition believe it is a 'problem to solve'. In fact 47% of this group consider it to be a part of who they are, suggesting it forms part of a unique identity within a diverse community. Yet just under half think it carries a stigma, suggesting there is still some way to go to normalise this view within wider society.

More students felt comfortable talking to friends about their mental health than said they trusted their university to provide the right level of support. Other students seem to be providing front line support when students face problems.

The word 'trust' often arises in these stories as an important aspect of seeking help. Just 23% of students with a pre-existing condition say they trust their university to provide the support they need. Moreover, just 53% of students with a mental health condition have disclosed their condition to their university. This paints a very different picture than the 'snowflake' student. Instead, students seem to be managing their mental health independently and determining who they will approach for help.

"I would like to work through my problems with friends and independently rather than relying on parents and support from home as a way to bridge the gap into adult life."

Mahtab, applicant

"I only reach out to a couple of friends that I know I can trust to not tell others. I don't feel comfortable speaking to anyone else..."

Caleb, student



Across all students, with or without a pre-existing condition, 23% have used a university wellbeing, support or mental health service. The fieldwork took place in May and so this finding covers the majority of the first year of study. We found from the qualitative research that the reputation of university wellbeing services is widely known whether positive or negative, and that perceived quality could vary depending on the anecdotes that were shared between students.

However, among students in the survey who had used a service, the quality is generally found to be high.

When those who had not used these services were asked why, only half said it was because they didn't need them, and about a third said they already had the support they needed. The good news is that most students are getting the support they believe they need, from the university or elsewhere. However 26% of all students gave at least one of the following responses:

- I don't think they can help me (14%)
- I was too anxious or afraid to talk to anyone (13%)
- I didn't feel comfortable with the university knowing about the issue I had (12%)
- I don't think the service is for people like me (11%)

(Respondents were able to select more than one response.)

Graph 8

Those who have used university support services think that...

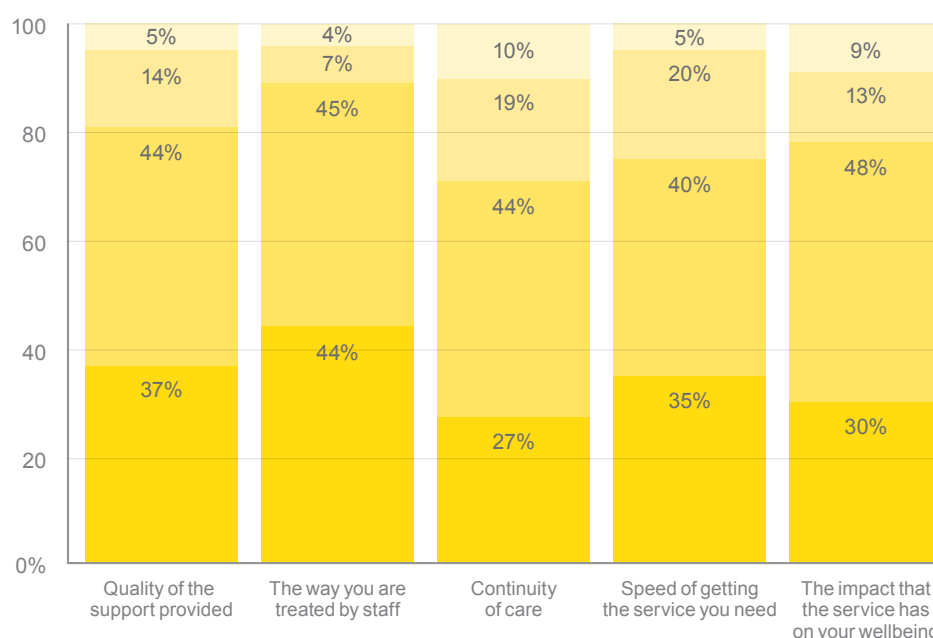
Base:

All students used university support, wellbeing or mental health services: 615

Question:

Q34B.1. When it comes to university support, wellbeing or mental health services, how would you describe your experiences in the following areas?

- Don't know/prefer not to say
- Worse than I expected
- Similar to what I expected
- Better than I expected



There may also be a perceived stigma still attached to using support services. Those who have used a university support service are less likely to consider themselves successful students compared to those who have not (83% v 88%).

While the quality of university support services is believed by students to be high, there does seem to be an issue of engagement for a significant minority of students. This is particularly concerning given the relatively low level of disclosure among those who have a mental health condition, and suggests that a significant number of students who would benefit from services are not accessing them. The findings on friends as the first line of support suggests that peers may have a strong role to play in engaging students with the right services, especially those who could be vulnerable. However, as young people making a transition into adult life, some students may simply prefer to deal with wellbeing issues on their own.





FINDING

2

FRESHERS' WEEK

Freshers' Week is the traditional way of helping new arrivals to immerse themselves into university life, find their feet and get settled in. However, as currently presented it works better for some groups of students than others. There may still be some way to go to offer a Freshers' experience that meets the diverse needs of this generation of students, and we find evidence of a social expectation that is not being fully met. University itself is viewed by this generation as a gradual transition into adult life, and in that context we should not imagine that a single, high intensity week is anything like enough to enable new students to adapt.

Although still popular, Freshers' Week is not an unqualified success, scoring an average of 6.5 out of 10 among current first year students. It was clear from the qualitative research that

Freshers' week works better for some students than others. While at its best it can be useful, informative and social, others find it awkward, boring, lonely and with too much to take in.

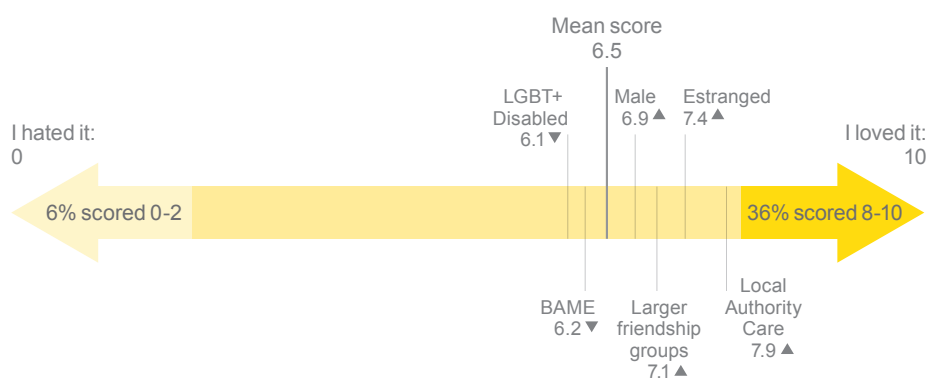
Graph 7 Experience of Freshers' Week

Base:

All students: 2,573
LGBT+: 446, Disabled: 870,
BAME: 675, Male: 1,015, Larger friendship groups: 1,187,
Estranged: 156, Local Authority Care: 182
▲▼ Significantly higher or lower than counterpart @ 99% CI

Question:

Q14A. Which of the below best describes your experience of Freshers' week?



Graph 10

Difference between applicants' expectations and students' reality when it comes to Freshers' Week

Base:

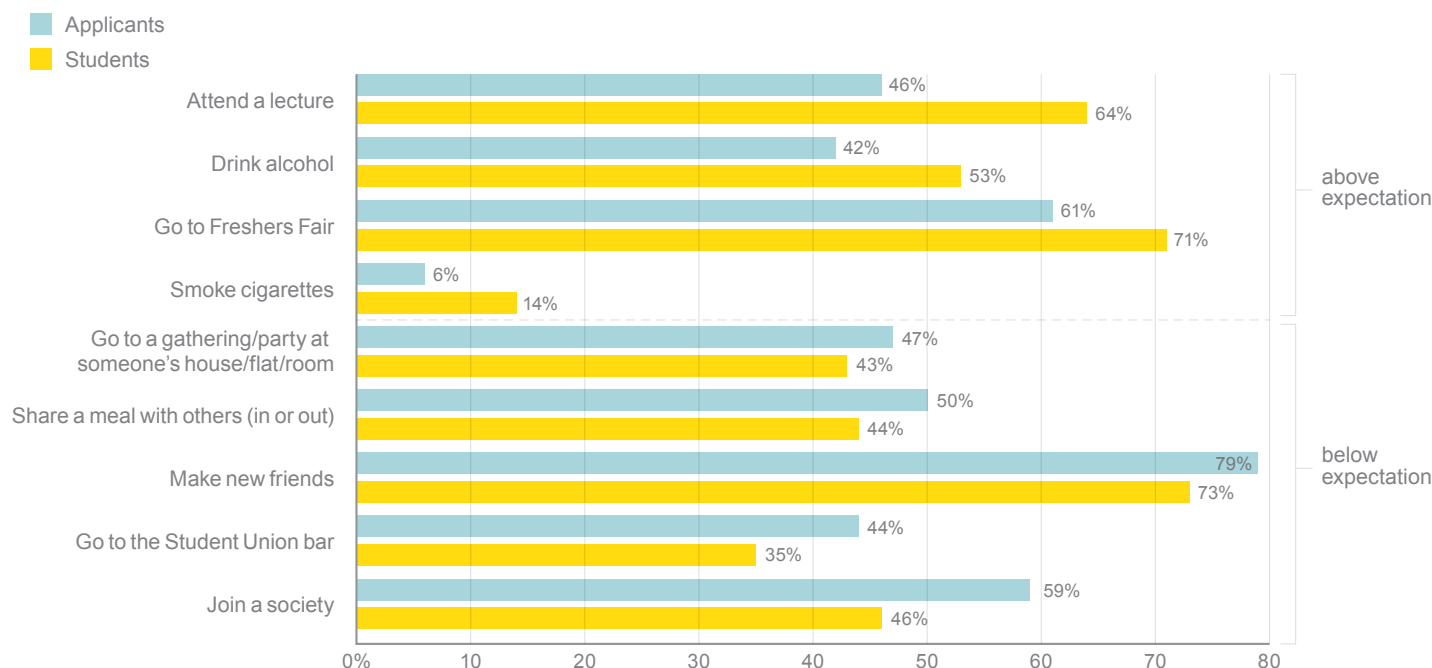
All students who attended Freshers' week and all applicants: 4,838

Able to select all that apply

Question:

Q14B. Which of the below did you do during Freshers' week?/

Which of the below do you expect to do during Freshers' week?



With such a diverse cohort of students, it is more of a challenge to create an inclusive experience that meets everyone's needs. For example, with over a fifth of applicants (22%) now identifying as teetotalers, traditional alcohol-focused freshers' events are no longer going to be universally popular.

There are differences in satisfaction with Freshers' Week between different demographic groups. The higher levels of satisfaction among non-disabled, white and male students suggests that Freshers' Week is still better at meeting the needs of a more traditional student cohort.

However, it seems to be more successful in meeting the needs of students who are estranged from their parents or have been in local authority care; these groups are more satisfied by some way. This is a positive

finding for two groups who otherwise are disadvantaged in terms of access, participation and success at university¹³.

Freshers' Week differs quite significantly from applicants' expectations in a number of respects.

"I didn't go to many Freshers events. I think it's overrated; I felt catfished. People hyped up freshers so much that I had high expectations where I would be doing something every second but I found myself bored."

Ryan, student

¹³ Unite Foundation and StandAlone (2015) *New Starts: The challenge of higher education without a family network*. www.unitestudents.com/foundation-new-starts-2015



Students are more likely to attend a lecture during Freshers' Week than applicants had expected (18 percentage points difference) or attend the Freshers' Fair (10 percentage points difference), underestimating their participation in formal events organised by the university and students' union.

On the other hand, when it comes to more informal social events students are less likely to go to a party (4 points difference), share a meal with others (6 points difference) or go to a students' union bar (9 points difference) than applicants had expected. They were also less likely to say they had made new friends.

In the light of the data on student loneliness and wellbeing on page 18, this unmet social expectation suggests that more could be done to help students connect, make friends and integrate when they first come to university. Moreover, viewing university itself as an extended period of transition to adult life means we have to think of Freshers' Week as the start of a journey rather than a one-off immersion. This in turn raises the question of whether the traditional approaches to, and activities of, Freshers' Week are right for this generation.

FINDING 3

LEARNING AND TEACHING

Predictions of the lecture's demise are premature. In fact, both applicants and students reported that they prefer face to face forms of learning above digital-only approaches. However, although students rank lectures as the most useful form of learning they are not universally popular, and there is a suggestion in the qualitative research that they actually function as a social as much as a learning opportunity and are valued as such. Ultimately, however, there is no clear consensus on preferred learning approaches but rather a variety of different methods are needed to meet the diverse needs of this cohort.

In our 2017 report Reality Check¹⁴, we revealed the mismatch between applicant expectations and student reality when it comes to learning and teaching. Whilst 60% of applicants expected to spend more time in lectures than in the classroom, in reality this was only the case for 19% of students.

HEPI and Advance HE¹⁵ found that student dissatisfaction with the level of contact hours

and staff interaction had increased between 2017 and 2019, and a study by Sodexo¹⁶ found greater satisfaction with contact hours linked to a better perception of value for money.

In this study we were interested in both applicant and student perceptions of different forms of learning. There was no overall consensus on this, though face to face approaches occupy the top three spots.



¹⁴ Unite Students and HEPI (2017) Reality Check. www.unite-group.co.uk/sites/default/files/2017-07/reality-check-report.pdf

¹⁵ HEPI/Advance HE (2019) Student Academic Experience Survey. www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Student-Academic-Experience-Survey-2019.pdf

¹⁶ Sodexo (2017) University Lifestyle Survey. [http://cn.sodexo.com/files/live/sites/sdxcom-cn/files/050C_Country.com_China_\(English\)/EN_International%20University%20Lifestyle%20Survey%202017_China.pdf](http://cn.sodexo.com/files/live/sites/sdxcom-cn/files/050C_Country.com_China_(English)/EN_International%20University%20Lifestyle%20Survey%202017_China.pdf)

Graph 11

Most useful way to learn

Base:

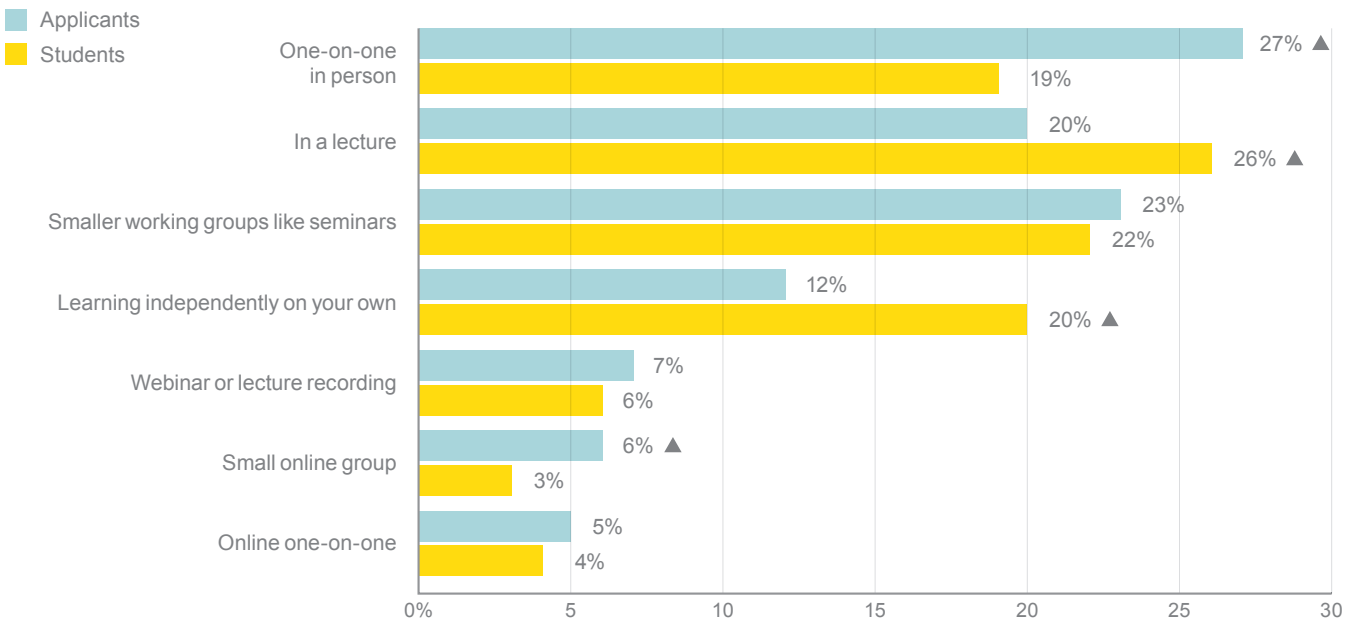
All applicants: 2,535

All students: 2,573

▲ Significantly higher than counterpart @ 99% CI

Question:

Q38A. Rank the below ways to learn, from most useful to least useful for you/in order from those you think would be most to least useful for you. - Ranked as 1st



Although lectures are ranked as most useful among current students, in the qualitative research students reported finding interactive forms of learning such as seminars and practical workshops to be more engaging and enjoyable. Lectures, by contrast, are “challenging” to listen to for extended periods of time, especially if the lecturer is not engaging. Students are sensitive to teaching quality, and particularly value engagement:

“If a lecturer keeps you interested, you’ll feel passionate. A bad lecturer will make you feel turned off and it becomes almost impossible to learn.”

Jordan, student

It may be that lectures are valued as a traditional “product” in which students are investing and, although not necessarily enjoyable, are an expected part of the deal.

Lectures may also be meeting a social need. Students talk about chatting via social media during “boring” lectures, and it may play a role in group bonding over a shared experience.

“The time we use Snapchat the most is in lectures.”

Rhianna, student

The marked preference for face to face approaches to learning tends to support this conclusion, and this trend is demonstrated even more strongly when students are asked about alternatives to lectures. When asked what should take the place of lectures if they were to be discontinued, 55% chose the option “more face to face learning that isn’t lectures” with 30% opting for digital forms of learning.

Graph 12

What should replace face to face lectures

Base:

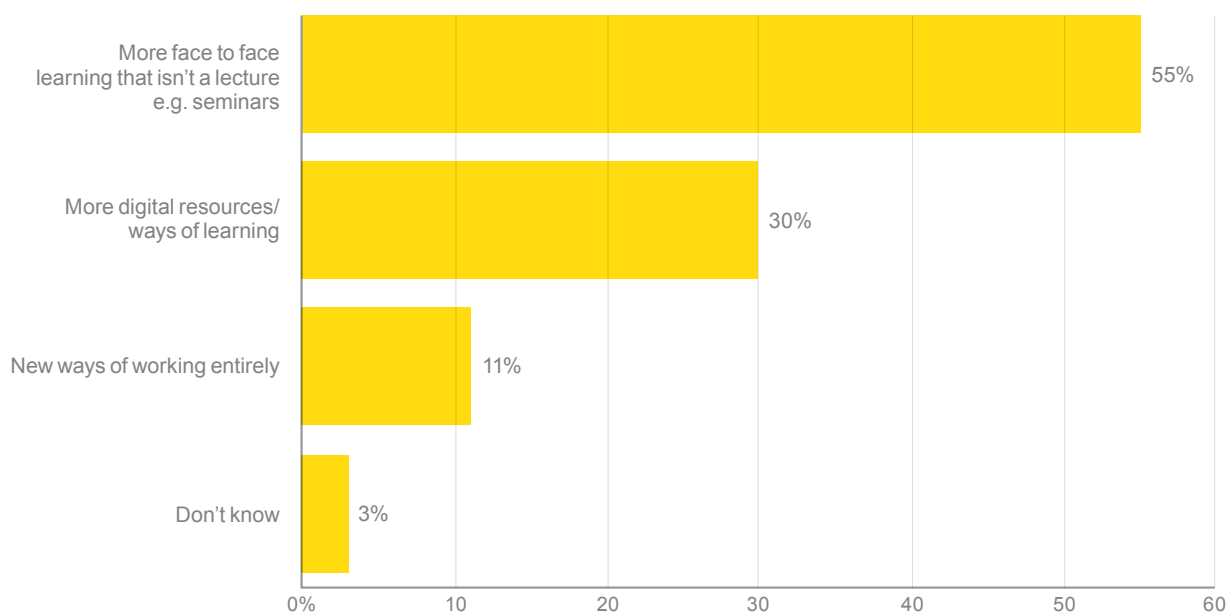
All applicants: 2,535

All students: 2,573

Question:

Q39B. If face to face lectures at university were discontinued, which of the below would you most like to take their place?

Students



However, this doesn't mean that digital learning is rejected. In fact the qualitative research showed that applicants want their university to offer a strong digital option, though they expect it to be well designed and intuitive and they may become frustrated if that's not the case. Moreover, 44% of students use apps independently to help them to study.

Instead, it suggests that today's students require a diverse approach to learning and teaching within a predominantly face to face setting, supported by high quality, intuitive digital tools, so they can create the learning experience that's right for them. Face to face learning seems to play an important social role for a cohort that is so strongly driven towards peer relationships.





CONCLUSIONS

NICK HILLMAN, DIRECTOR HEPI



CONCLUSIONS

BY NICK HILLMAN
DIRECTOR HEPI

There is a caricature of students which suggests they are lazy, too quick to take offence and are much softer than earlier generations. It is often summed up in a one-word insult: 'snowflake'. This important new research punctures these notions. Students are keen to prepare themselves for the world beyond higher education. They want to build the social capital that will allow them to tackle the challenges they may face during their lives. They recognise that life is a journey, with ups and downs.

Students come from more diverse backgrounds than ever before. Yet, wherever they hail from, this new report confirms they tend to be rational, responding to the world in which we all live. They worry about how hard it is to put down secure roots and know the value of education. They want to set themselves up as well as they can for the future.

Part of the misunderstanding about today's school leavers comes from an unwarranted assumption that people miraculously become fully-fledged adults between leaving school in the summer and starting at university in the following autumn.

The law needs a cut-off, so assumes independent adulthood begins for most people on their 18th birthday. Yet neuroscientists tell us the brain continues to mature until around the age of 30. **So when students say they feel on a path to adulthood but have yet to reach the final destination, they are expressing an underlying scientific truth, not just a personal opinion, and it is one that needs to be more widely recognised.**

University offers a controlled environment for transitioning to adulthood. Time spent as a young undergraduate can be daunting and stressful but it is also transformative.

On average, those who pass through higher education outperform non-graduates in all sorts of ways. **This report shows students 'smoke and drink' more than applicants expect, but we also know that graduates smoke less, commit less crime, are more likely to be active citizens, have better health and live longer than others**¹⁷. Higher education is not for everyone but, for those who do find a place, it works out most of the time.

There is a vogue for assessing the value of different university courses according to the graduate earnings they deliver. But this is only part of the story. **Today's students are not, in the main, going to university because they want to be rich; they are going because they want to absorb the lifelong transferable benefits that degrees continue to confer.** Higher education acts as an insurance policy against adversity, and one that is more important than ever given the pace of change of modern life. Perhaps this explains why 97% of the mothers of young children want their offspring to go to university¹⁸.

Decades ago, people feared mass higher education would be worse than elite higher education. Time has refuted this, with – for example – employers still willingly paying a

¹⁷ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/254101/bis-13-1268-benefits-of-higher-education-participation-the-quadrants.pdf

¹⁸ *Millennium Cohort Study Fourth Survey: A User's Guide to Initial Findings* by Kirstine Hansen, Elizabeth Jones, Heather Joshi and David Budge (2nd Edition, December 2010)



substantial graduate earnings premium. But mass higher education is different from elite higher education. Once upon a time, a typical student was an upper middle-class male from a private or grammar school. **There is no longer such a thing as a typical student and people arrive at university with a wide range of experiences, backgrounds and needs. While further progress still needs to be made, we should celebrate the fact that the student body reflects wider society more closely than ever before.**

Nonetheless, as Shakira Martin, the former President of the National Union of Students (NUS), likes to point out, “getting in isn’t the same as getting on”. There is a wealth of evidence, which this new survey supports, showing some people fall behind others after making it into higher education. Aspects of the higher education experience still score best for the sort of people who once made up the majority of students. **So personal characteristics matter and they need to be reflected in the delivery of both educational and non-educational services.**

The student experience in the UK differs from the mainstream student experience in many other countries. In particular, students in the UK are more likely to move away from home to study¹⁹. Paul Wellings, who has led one UK university and one Australian university, has said “the focus on the student experience in

Australia is less coherent as many students travel back to their parental home each day and make their social arrangements with existing networks often derived from high school”²⁰. **The residential nature of much UK higher education makes the experience of being a student a more all-encompassing one and puts extra onus on staff, taxpayers and students themselves.**

The predominance of the residential model also means students’ social networks are different in the UK. Indeed, this new research shows people’s networks become more diverse but fall in size between school and university. This latter point may seem counter-intuitive but schools are closer-knit environments than universities, so can be more conducive to fostering close friendships. **University is not big school but no part of the education system should shy away from learning from other parts.**

One consequence of the change in lifestyle experienced on enrolling in a university is a relatively high incidence of loneliness, with over one-in-four students feeling lonely ‘all the time’ or ‘often’. The underlying data prove lower levels of social interaction affect students’ lives in all sorts of negative ways, like reducing life satisfaction and happiness. The importance students ascribe to the issue of loneliness even seems to help explain their continuing preference for face to face

¹⁹ www.timeshighereducation.com/features/why-do-students-study-so-far-from-home

²⁰ www.hepi.ac.uk/2014/11/26/2014-hepi-annual-lecture-paul-wellings-architecture-plumbing-features-higher-education-systems-uk-australia-common

lectures over other ways of learning. **Students recognise the benefits of new technology but they do not want to learn alone in front of a screen.**

Freshers' Weeks are one intervention designed to lessen the shock of entering university, but they can seem daunting and superficial. **Some students' unions have usefully explored re-fresher weeks, which serve a similar purpose but can take place at other times, like the start of the calendar year. These are worth exploring further.**

Mental health challenges are often dealt with informally, with the support of friends, family members and technological tools. Sometimes, this is not appropriate or not the preferred way of tackling the issue and students need more official, more professional and more personalised support.

Some people still find it difficult to ask for help and students who do so may fear being accused of showing signs of weakness. But it is the opposite of 'snowflakery' because **it takes bravery to open up about such issues as a way of dealing with them. The whole higher education sector should continue encouraging this – including via the expanded roll-out of opt-in disclosure regimes.**

There has been considerable criticism of universities' support services in recent years, but our survey **suggests students who seek help and access official forms of support generally value them highly.**

We need to lower remaining barriers to such access and there is still a need for some universities to fill in gaps in their support – although this could prove excessively difficult if they enter a period of under-funding.

In general terms, the most enjoyable and successful higher education experiences are had by those who feel well integrated at their institutions. This can be facilitated by **the provision of more social areas, improved access to welfare services, thriving students' unions, vibrant societies and well-designed and affordable living spaces.**

There are many good stories to tell across the higher education sector in all these areas. But the changing make-up of the student body, the growing need for more high-tech skills and rapid improvements in higher education in other countries mean policymakers and institutions need to continue improving the offer to students. That is the best way to maintain the relative strengths of UK higher education and ensure the maximum benefits accrue to students.

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