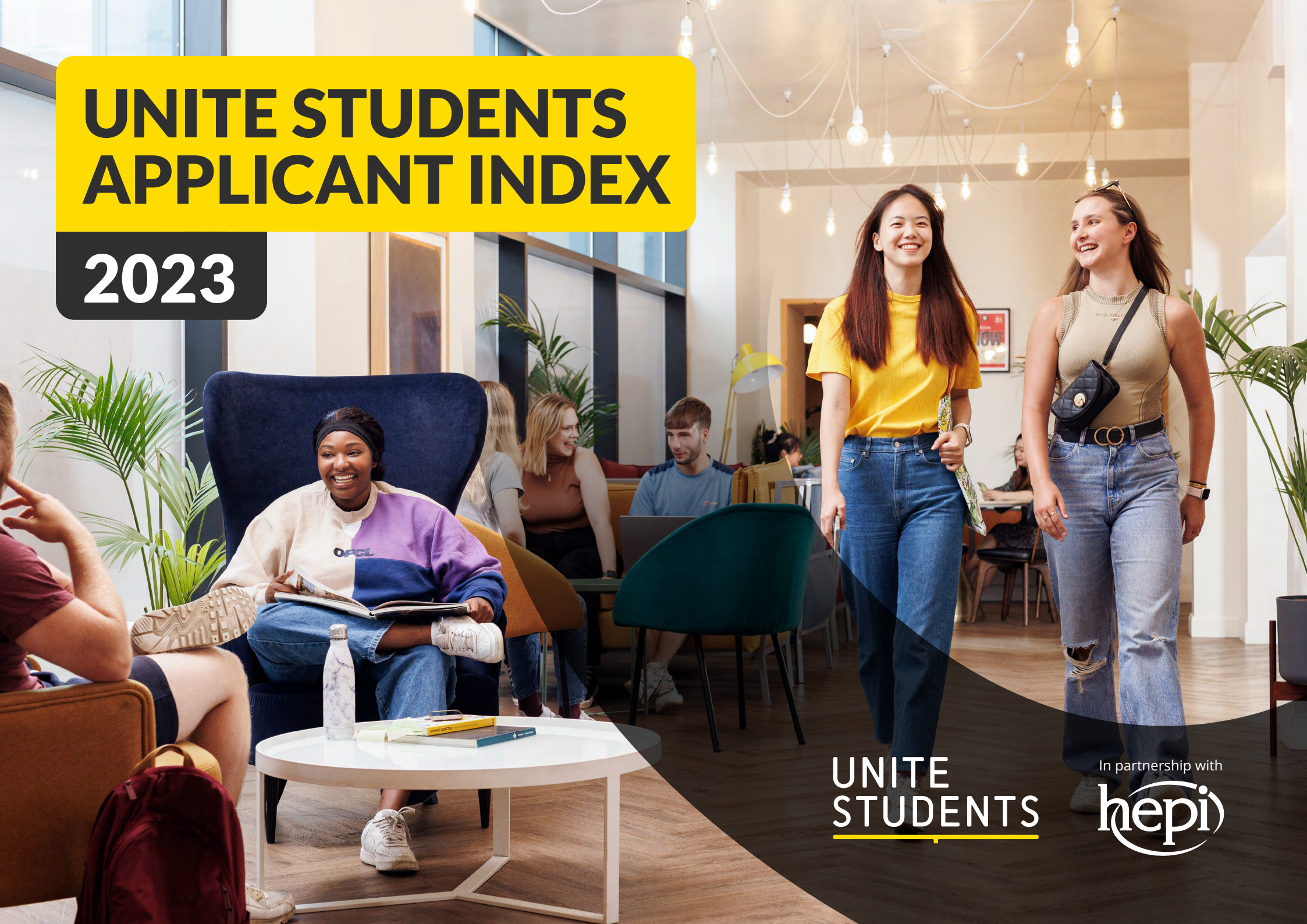


# UNITE STUDENTS APPLICANT INDEX

2023



UNITE  
STUDENTS

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hepi



**Richard Smith**

Chief Executive at Unite Students

# FOREWORD

This autumn sees the thirteenth cohort of new students arriving at university since I first came into the student accommodation sector in late 2010. Many things have remained the same over those years; most new students are keen to make new friends, they expect a rounded student experience and have a strong desire to belong. They are looking towards the future, in the sense that employability is front of mind, but also through the causes that they care about and the world they want to create.

But the world around us has changed in the intervening years - technologically, economically and socially. The student body is significantly bigger, more diverse and more international than it used to be. Students are now coming to university just a few years after their lives and their education were significantly disrupted by Covid. The Applicant Index provides tracking, and endeavours to make sense of the impact these changes have on university applicants.

At the time of writing the cost of living is front of mind for most families in the UK and beyond, and it is no surprise that this is having a continued and meaningful effect on university applicants. This year's applicants have a higher

level of budgeting skills than last year's cohort and there is a sense that they are beginning to adapt to a reality that was still very new this time last year. The majority of applicants have already undertaken paid work and this seems to have provided them with valuable additional skills and benefits, but the [Student Academic Experience Survey 2023](#) has shown that over-reliance on paid work can be detrimental to student wellbeing and study. I'm particularly mindful of those who do not have family and friends to fall back on. They are particularly vulnerable in a difficult financial climate, and I am determined that we will continue to provide financial and community support to care experienced and estranged students through the [Unite Foundation](#).

It is encouraging to see a small bounce-back in student wellbeing this year, but this sits within a context of a downward trend. Although the proportion of applicants with an existing mental health condition has not gone up this year the fact remains that one in five are affected, and for many new students this has already affected their education. The level of anxiety among applicants is a particular concern, and the fact that half are anxious that they will not fit in at

university. Higher education offers a valuable opportunity for human interaction in an increasingly digital world and we could go further to reassure applicants about the welcoming and inclusive community that they will be joining.

I have been struck by the disadvantage and poorer wellbeing experienced by LGBTQ+ applicants, which is especially acute for Trans applicants. This is a group that has been the subject of heated debate on points of principle, and yet in practical terms here is a group of young people who experience very high levels of anxiety, poor wellbeing and a higher incidence of disabilities and health conditions. The relative reluctance among LGBTQ+ applicants to share important information as part of the application process suggests a lack of trust in universities and their partners, and yet there is already plenty of inclusive practice within the higher education sector that could be communicated more clearly to applicants. Next year we will carry out further research on the experiences of LGBTQ+ students in their accommodation with the aim of improving their wellbeing and sense of belonging, and their confidence about going to university.

Working towards a fairer and more inclusive society is everyone's business. Within the property sector this is usually categorised as the "S" within ESG – the "Social" which typically receives a lot less attention than the Environmental and Governance aspects. Over the last two years I have seen universities and private accommodation providers come together to address the poorer experience of Black students in their accommodation, and commitments to action that will enable a

better accommodation experience for neurodivergent students. This is encouraging, but there is much more to do to ensure diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging in both education and employment. I would particularly like to encourage the property sector to step forward further into this space and consider what difference we could make if we work together for social impact.

Those who start university this autumn do so in a time of economic and political uncertainty. They will graduate in a world dominated by technological and social change and, most likely, a period of continued inequality and division. What they learn and experience at university needs to prepare them for this. The Applicant Index shows us that, despite the anxieties they face, they show a level of adaptability and resilience that will serve them well and we must ensure that we all play our part in preparing them for the challenges ahead. This cohort of students, and those that will follow, will shape our world - and we should remain positive about their ability to make it a better one.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Richard Smith". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of "Richard" and "Smith" being significantly larger and more stylized than the rest of the letters.

Chief Executive at Unite Students



**Nick Hillman**

Director of the Higher Education Policy Institute

# FOREWORD

When I was a classroom teacher, one of the hardest things I had to do was prepare pupils for higher education. At the time, there was very little useful and accessible information available. In the intervening decades, this has gradually changed, with more student surveys and other forms of data being produced, and often made available for free and online. However, different people need different information and there are now over three-quarters of a million higher education applicants each year.

Despite the growth in participation, many groups are still severely underrepresented among the undergraduate population – such as those from disadvantaged households, those with experience of care (who have, rightly, been a key focus of the Unite Foundation) and those from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities (as explained in a recent [HEPI report](#)). The pages that follow reveal in particular how people from these communities could be supported better.

Continuing improvements in access among these groups, combined with an overall increase in qualified young people, mean UCAS now expect to see one million applicants by 2030. Our work at HEPI looks further ahead, suggesting we could

have an additional 350,000 full-time first-year students in England alone by 2035. If the exciting opportunities offered by the new Lifelong Loan are rolled out in such a way that the policy meets its full potential, there will be more part-time, mature and lifelong learners too. They will also need good information, suitable preparation and better support.

Moreover, the higher education sector is always changing, with institutions shifting shape and focus, new disciplinary areas taking off while others decline and growing interest in interdisciplinary work. So even if the backgrounds of people applying were not becoming more diverse, there would still be a big job to do in making sure applicants and those who advise them – such as teachers, parents and careers advisers – had up-to-date and relevant information.

The annual HEPI / Advance HE Student Academic Experience Survey confirms that, after enrolment, 6-in-10 students say they would choose the same course and university again. While this is positive, it means 4-in-10 students say they might have opted for something else. Some people will doubtless always change

their minds after they have enrolled, as they mature or have their eyes opened to other opportunities. But applying careful thought to the emerging information about applicants could reduce the likelihood of people making the wrong choices solely because they had insufficient information, which can be stressful, time-wasting and expensive.

The present generation of school and college learners have faced unprecedented challenges. The mental health of young people had taken a big knock even before the shock of the pandemic and it only worsened during the crisis. It has not been a good time to be a young person. So it is pleasing to see there has been no further deterioration in mental health this year. Yet while educational institutions and many learners have proved remarkably resilient, the pandemic will leave an adverse impact behind on some people's lives for many years to come.

Because of COVID, most of this year's A-Level and BTEC candidates have never taken a public examination before, for their GCSE examinations were replaced by Teacher-Assessed Grades. As they wait for their grades, no one seems absolutely certain whether the results will move back to pre-pandemic norms (despite what policymakers might say). So there is greater uncertainty than usual for applicants – and also, incidentally, for higher education institutions trying to match applicants to places as best they can.

It is for all these reasons that I am a strong supporter of this Unite Students annual applicants' survey. Before the survey existed, there was – amazingly – no regular stocktake of the views of those on their way to higher education. The following pages show clearly why the exercise is

so important. No cohort of entrants is the same. Different groups have different expectations before enrolling in higher education and different experiences afterwards. So key indicators change each year.

For many students, higher education is a key transition point in their lives and part of the shift to independent adulthood, so it will never be an entirely smooth journey for all involved. Nonetheless, knowing what applicants think about higher education before they matriculate is incredibly useful, irrespective of whether they each have an accurate picture or one with blurry edges.

Finally, it is worth noting that this annual survey from Unite Students is part of a wider stream of work aimed at helping applicants directly and bolstering institutions' understanding of how applicants change over time. Unite Students have separately produced materials under The Leap banner that help people make the transition from the compulsory phase of education to the voluntary stage after the age of 18. At HEPI, we have also produced our own resources for use by Year 12 and Year 13 students – these are freely available on our website as well as on our YouTube channel. Such information provides a vital resource for those who want to know what being a student at a UK university is really like as we approach the second quarter of the twenty-first century.



Director of the Higher Education Policy Institute



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This year's applicants will enter higher education with a greater level of confidence and wellbeing in most areas compared to last year's cohort, but almost a third have already had their education disrupted due to mental health issues, and not all have the important life and self-care skills that they will need to thrive at university.

This year for the first time we assess applicants' level of independence. Most applicants are confident about living independently and making their own decisions. However, just short of two-thirds are confident about registering with a doctor, and a similar proportion are confident about managing a conflict with a housemate – two areas in which universities and accommodation providers can provide support.

A surprising finding in this year's survey is an improvement in financial confidence, though applicants appear to be realistic about the level of financial support available. They feel more prepared to budget than last year's applicants and have greater confidence in family and friends to help out if needed. However, support from family is not equally distributed and financial issues are more likely to affect the mental health of applicants from less affluent households.

Compared to last year, wellbeing has slightly improved this year and this cohort is less anxious, though levels of anxiety have not dropped back to pre-pandemic levels. There is also a small decrease in the proportion of applicants with a mental health condition, and although this is within the margin of error for the sample size, this is the first time in five years we have not seen a rise. But some groups are affected more than others: over a third of LGB+ applicants and half of Trans applicants have a mental health condition. Black students are happier and more likely to feel loved than any other ethnic group, driven by a higher rate of happiness, greater feeling of being loved and a stronger belief that they are capable of making decisions but, as our previous work on Living Black at University showed, these feelings do not necessarily persist when moving away to university.

About a quarter (24%) of applicants are lonely most or all of the time, and this figure is similar to the level of loneliness among students (26%) according to the 2023 Advance HE/HEPI Student Academic Experience Survey. This suggests that going to university neither worsens nor improves loneliness within the cohort as a whole, though individual applicants may find themselves more or less lonely at university. In fact, a demographic breakdown suggests some students are more likely to be lonely after going to university (Black students, Trans students) and others experience a decrease in loneliness (students with a disability or health condition).

A new finding for this year is that a third of applicants are going to university with a history of missing education due to their mental health, and this proportion is higher still among LGBTQ+ applicants. Not all of those who missed school for their mental health consider themselves to have a mental health condition. While it was most common to miss a week or less, 1 in 14 of all applicants had missed over 20 days of school because of their mental health.

Most applicants from the UK will have had some kind of personal, social and health education from their school or college, but under two-thirds rated this as excellent or good. Applicants with mental health conditions and LGBTQ+ applicants tend to be more negative about how well it has prepared them.

Nonetheless, applicants are open to schools and colleges sharing personal data about their health and wellbeing with universities as part of the application process, with around four in five comfortable with at least some of this information being shared.

And yet applicants themselves are cautious about sharing data with universities. Only 58% of LGB+ applicants had shared this information as part of the application process, which has implications for the validity of national data as well as individual institutions and students. Just over half of applicants with a disability or health condition have told their university already, but 18% do not intend to share this information at all, potentially depriving them of reasonable adjustments and support.

The only index theme that has seen a decrease in score since last year is Sustainability. Applicants this year are more likely to have been careful about their use of electricity and water, probably due to pressure from hard-pressed parents, but less likely to recycle or to have made sacrifices in order to live more sustainably. A factor may be their perceived lack of agency – just over half believe that their actions have an impact on climate change.

# ABOUT THE INDEX

While there are many student surveys, there are few that focus on higher education applicants and none that tracks the attitudes of each cohort systematically over time. Last year, we set out to fill this gap with the Unite Students Applicant Index, a new type of report but one that was built on the experience of many years of applicant and student surveys.

The Index itself combines the responses to 36 questions, each measured on a 7-point scale of agreement, together with the ONS standard wellbeing indicators to generate nine composite scores in areas such as wellbeing, learning and community. These scores range from 0 to 100 and are based on four equally weighted questions, with the exception of the Wellbeing score which also incorporates the ONS measures. In each case, 0 is the least positive and 100 the most positive score.

By tracking these year by year we are able to provide an early indication of the needs and attitudes of each cohort. These scores are supplemented by additional follow-up questions which explore the themes in more depth and provide a snapshot on topical issues.

The 2023 Applicant Index is based on a survey of 2,141 university applicants planning to start an undergraduate degree in the 2023-24 academic year. It was conducted via the Savanta panel between Friday 5 May and Friday 19 May 2023. A full overview of the sample, including demographic breakdown of the sample and weighting applied, can be found in the Methodology section towards the end of this report. All demographic differences noted in the report are significant to the 99% confidence level unless otherwise stated.

All charts are based on responses from the full survey sample (2,141) unless otherwise noted.



## Notes on demographic categories around gender and sexuality

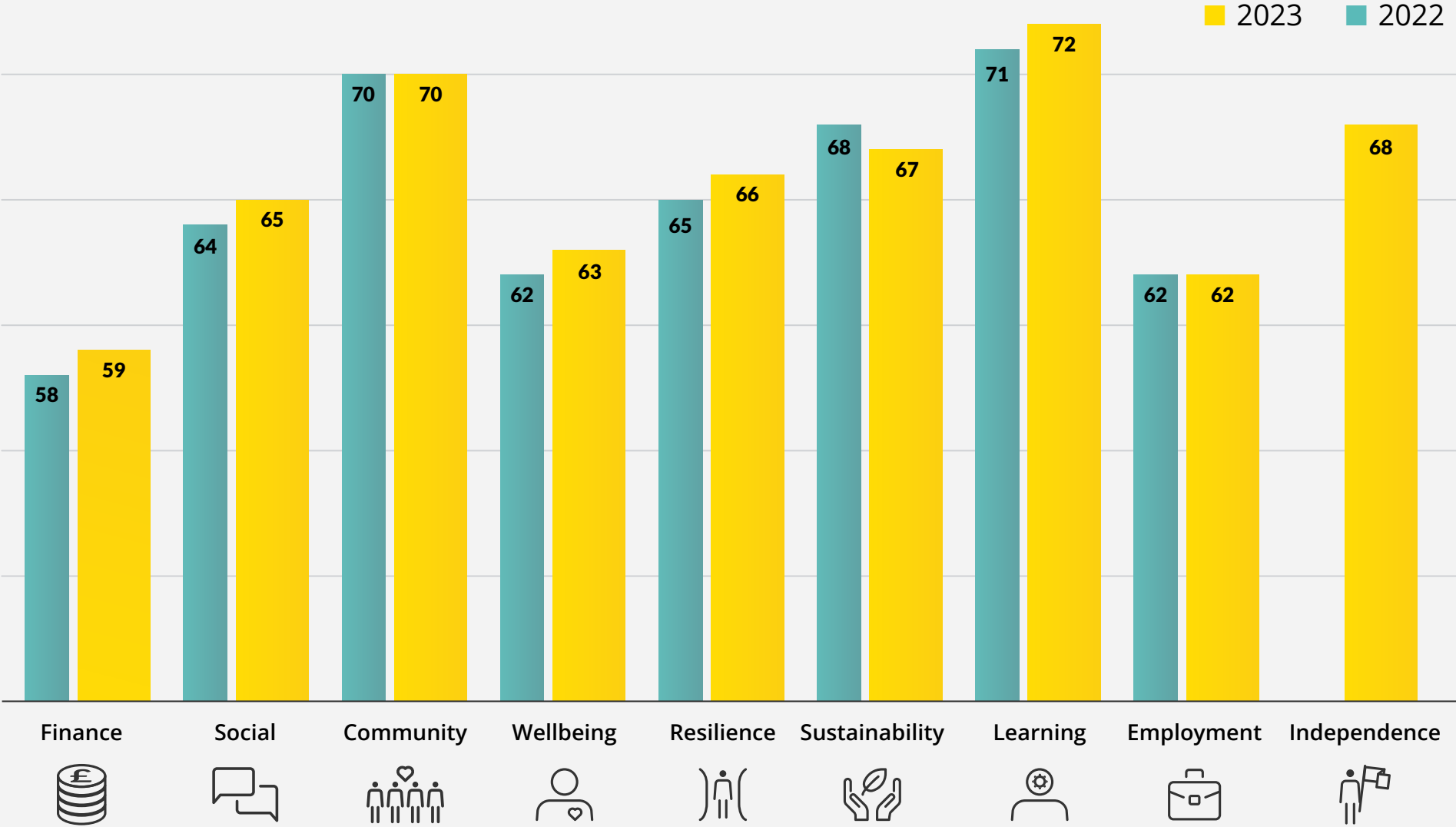
Demographic data about gender identity and sexuality was collected via two distinct questions, one of which was “Do you consider yourself to be trans?”. Responses from the group that answered “Yes” to this question are categorised as Trans in the report. The other question asked applicants how they think about themselves, with a list of different sexualities including “in another way”. Those who selected any other option apart from “heterosexual” or “prefer not to say” have been categorised as LGB+ within the report. Where there are significant differences in response to a survey question for both LGB+ and Trans applicants, they are categorised as LGBTQ+.

### A note on confidence

Some of the measures used in the Index relate to applicants’ self-rated confidence in their abilities and their prospects at university and beyond. Self-confidence is generally considered a positive trait, linked to wellbeing and self-efficacy, however it is possible for applicants to be over-confident about their academic readiness or their life-skills. Our 2017 report [“Reality Check”](#) highlighted some of the misconceptions that applicants hold about life at university. This highlights once again the importance of good quality guidance and preparation for all applicants. Done well, this should not negatively affect confidence but rather ensure that the confidence is well founded.



# APPLICANT INDEX SCORES 2023



# INTRODUCING THE THEMES



## Finance >

The Finance theme brings together 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 that applicants 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.



## Social >

The Social theme measures the strength of existing social networks together with level of confidence about “fitting in” at university. A high score in this theme indicates a cohort with high social confidence and confidence in the university, and accommodation provider where relevant, to provide an inclusive environment.



## Community >

The Community theme measures the level of motivation among applicants to be part of a community while at university and a desire to belong. 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 indicate a rise or fall in the community-orientation of the cohort.



## 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 >

The Resilience theme draws on previous academic research on resilience including the concepts of ‘grit’ and ‘learned optimism’. A high score in this theme shows a cohort able to work effectively towards clear goals and who can recover from setbacks.



## Sustainability >

The Sustainability theme combines strength of concern about climate change with behaviours and personal commitments to addressing environmental sustainability and climate change. A high score indicates a cohort who is highly concerned about climate change and is 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 >

The Learning 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 >

The Employment theme assesses the level of optimism about finding a graduate job together with the level 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.



## Independence >

New for 2023, the Independence theme measures how prepared the cohort is to live independently, take decisions for themselves and access support when needed.



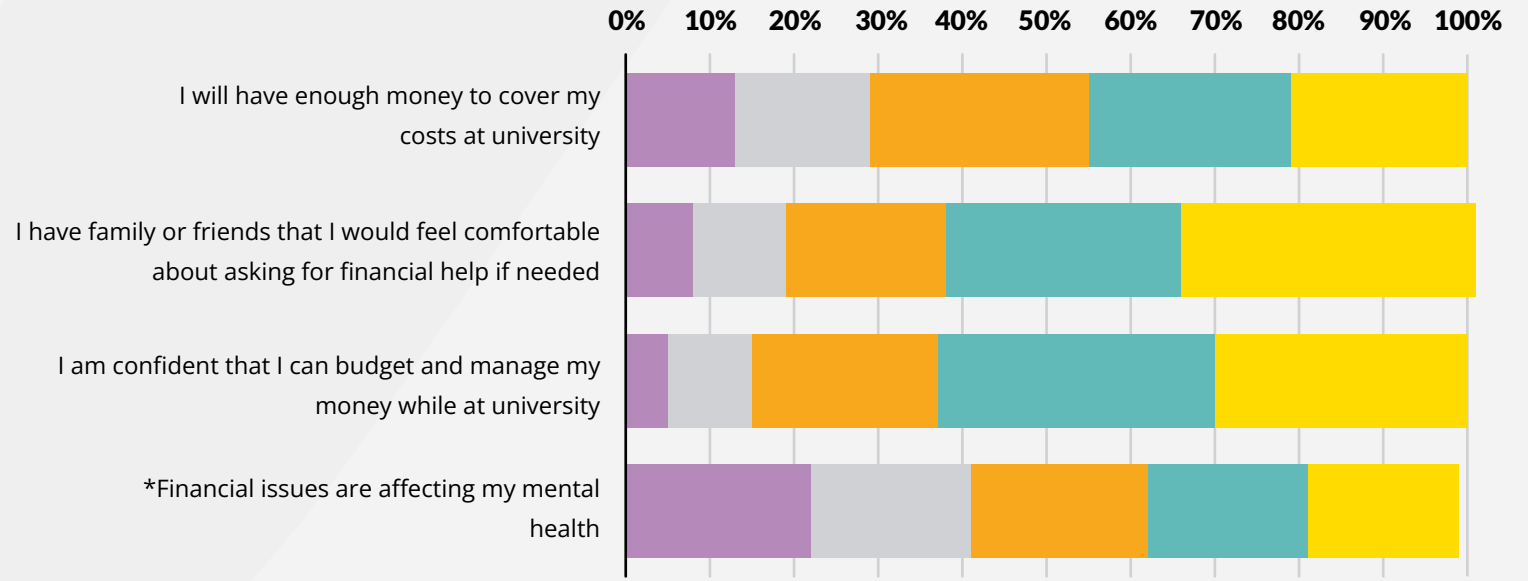
# FINANCE

# 59▲

+1 from 2022

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

Figure 1: Breakdown of responses to finance theme questions



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

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

As the cost of living crisis continues to affect most people’s day to day lives, it is perhaps surprising to find that financial confidence is higher among this year’s applicants than it was last year. Confidence in ability to budget has risen three percentage points, perhaps reflecting a greater emphasis on financial education. This year’s applicants are also more likely to believe that they have family and friends that they can reach out to for financial support. However the realities of the real-term reduction in the student maintenance package in England appear to have had an impact, and they are less likely to believe that they will have enough money to cover their costs.

The proportion reporting that financial issues are affecting their mental health is 37% overall, which is similar to last year<sup>1</sup>, and some groups are affected more severely than others.

<sup>1</sup>The percentage has risen from 36% to 37% but this is within the margin of error for the size of the research sample.



Unsurprisingly, there are differences between socio-economic groups in the Finance theme scores. Applicants from ABC1 groups have a combined theme score of 60, compared to 55 for C2DE groups. The biggest driver of this difference is having friends or family that can help financially. Applicants from less affluent households are going to university with less financial support than their peers, and this has a knock-on effect on their mental health: 44% of applicants from C2DE households say financial issues are affecting their mental health compared to 35% from ABC1 households.

There are also differences in scores between genders, reflecting a lower level of general confidence among female students and applicants seen consistently in our previous polling. Female applicants score 58 on the Finance theme compared to 60 for male applicants. Female applicants score slightly lower on all of the items, but particularly on the belief that they will have enough money to cover their costs.

Both Black and Asian applicants have a lower score (57) than White applicants (60) on this theme. For Black applicants the main difference is the impact on their mental health, whereas Asian applicants are less confident in their budgeting skills and less likely to feel that they will be able to reach out to family and friends for financial help.

Care experienced applicants are more likely than average to believe that they will have enough money to cover their costs. However they are less confident in their budgeting skills and their mental health is much more affected by financial issues than the cohort as a whole. Estranged applicants' mental health is similarly affected by financial issues, but in contrast to care experienced applicants, estranged applicants are much less likely to believe that they will have enough money, and are less likely to have friends or family who can help financially. This reflects the differences in formal support mechanisms for the two groups.

LGBTQ+ applicants score lower across all the financial items, with a particularly strong impact on mental health among Trans students. The reasons for this are unclear, but it may be linked to lower wellbeing overall within this group.



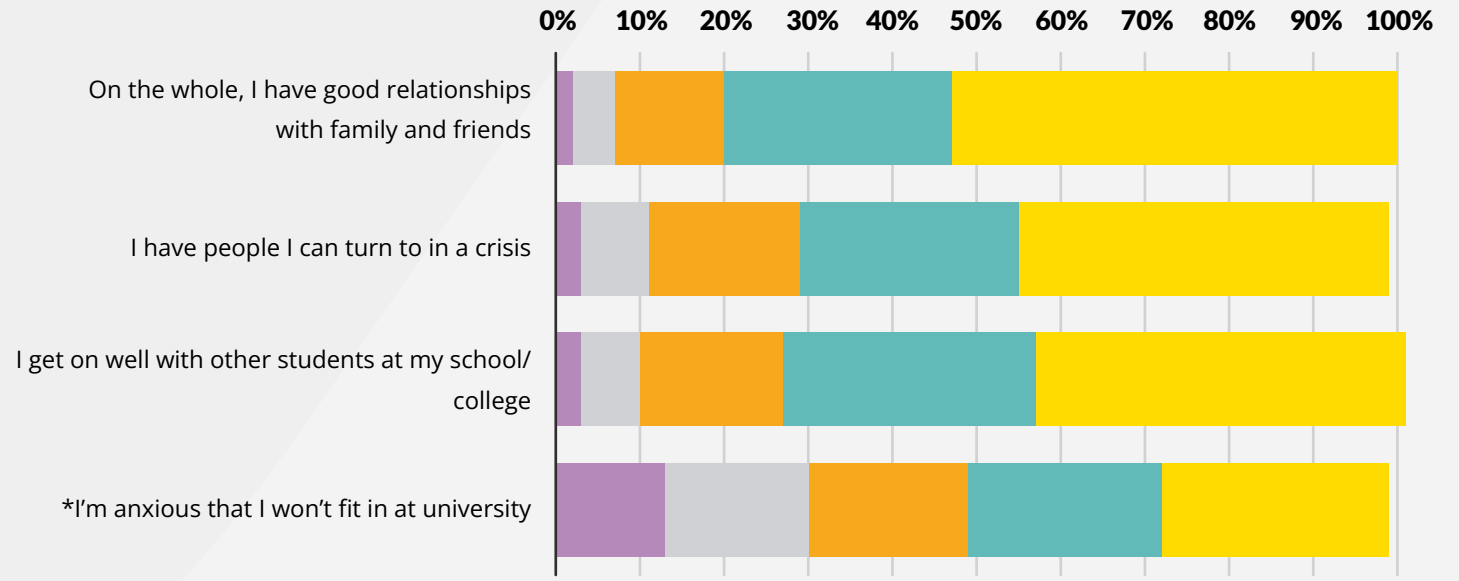
# SOCIAL

# 65 ▲

+1 from 2022

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

Figure 2: Breakdown of responses to social theme questions



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

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

Social confidence is higher than it was last year. It is too early to say whether this indicates a sustained recovery from the impact of the pandemic lockdowns, and next year's data should give a better understanding of the underlying trend.

Compared to last year, current applicants are more positive about their relationships with friends, family and other students, and more likely to think they have people they can turn to in a crisis. However half of applicants (50%) are anxious about fitting in at university. This anxiety is notably more acute

among applicants who are female, White, LGBTQ+, neurodivergent, and those with a mental health condition.

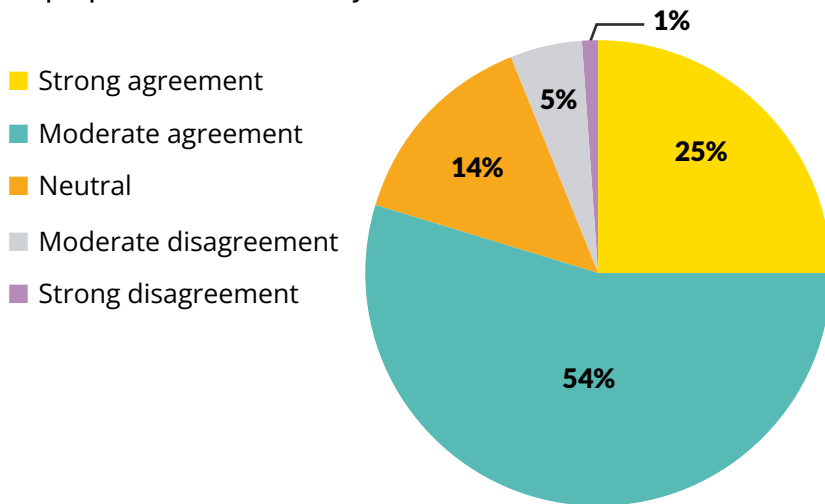
There is a lower overall Social theme score for LGBTQ+ applicants: 61 among LGB+ and 56 among applicants who are Trans (there is some overlap between these groups). Both groups have a more negative score against each of the questions in this theme, and are more anxious about fitting in. Trans students are particularly anxious about this – around three quarters (73%) of Trans applicants are anxious about fitting in compared with half (50%) of all applicants.



This suggests there is a further need to create and communicate a welcoming and inclusive environment for LGBTQ+ applicants and, within this group, for Trans applicants in particular.

Most applicants think there will be people like them at their chosen university. The exception is care experienced and estranged applicants, suggesting that there is still further to be done to raise their visibility as part of the student body and to communicate relevant services and support measures.

Figure 3: Breakdown of responses to "I think there will be people like me at university"





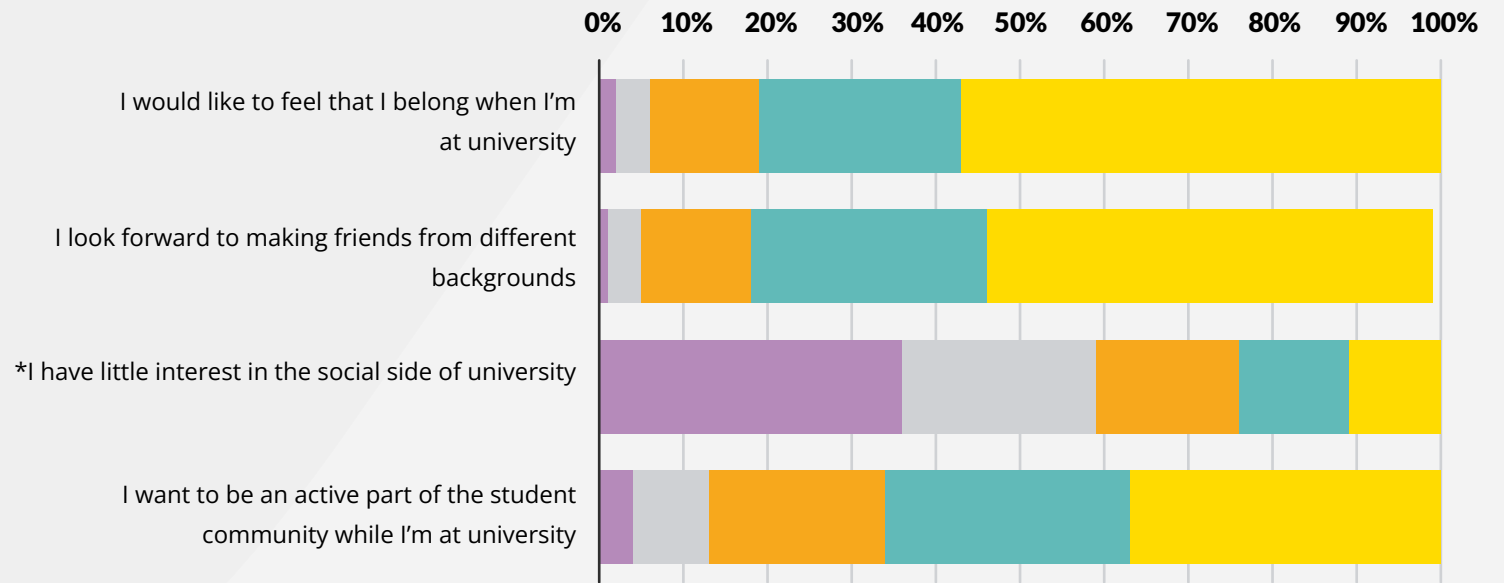
# COMMUNITY

# 70

No change

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

Figure 4: Breakdown of responses to community theme questions



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

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

There has been no change in the Community theme score overall since 2022, but some movement in the answers to specific questions.

A sense of belonging at university is just as important to this year's cohort, with the level of agreement at 81% (80% last year). This year, applicants are also more likely to want to be an active part of the student community, possibly because there are more opportunities to do so now that Covid restrictions are fully lifted.

However agreement is less strong than last year when it comes to looking forward to making friends from different backgrounds. This may simply be because

students have already had better opportunities than last year's applicants to meet people from different backgrounds. Compared to last year they are much more confident about talking to people from different backgrounds (78% compared to 66% in 2022). This confidence is even higher among those who have done paid work, and it seems likely that greater opportunity to work and to socialise has both increased confidence and rendered diversity less of a novelty for this cohort.

Female applicants are on average more community minded than male applicants, scoring more positively on almost all questions and with an average theme





score of 72 compared with 68 for males. LGB+ applicants score 73 overall and have a stronger than average desire to belong. Their higher Community score may reflect the opportunities to be more open about their sexuality at university, in line with the findings of the UCAS/Stonewall [Next Steps report \(2021\)](#).

When it comes to choosing a university, however, applicants are influenced more by location than community. More than half of applicants (54%) rated location as the most important factor, compared to the academic community (36%) and the student community (10%).

The university's location comes with its own community context however, and 64% of all applicants want to be involved with the local community while at university.

Additionally, about half (51%) of applicants would like to volunteer when at university. Black and Asian applicants are more likely to want to volunteer, as are care experienced applicants.

Figure 5: Which of the following were most important to you when deciding where to go to university?

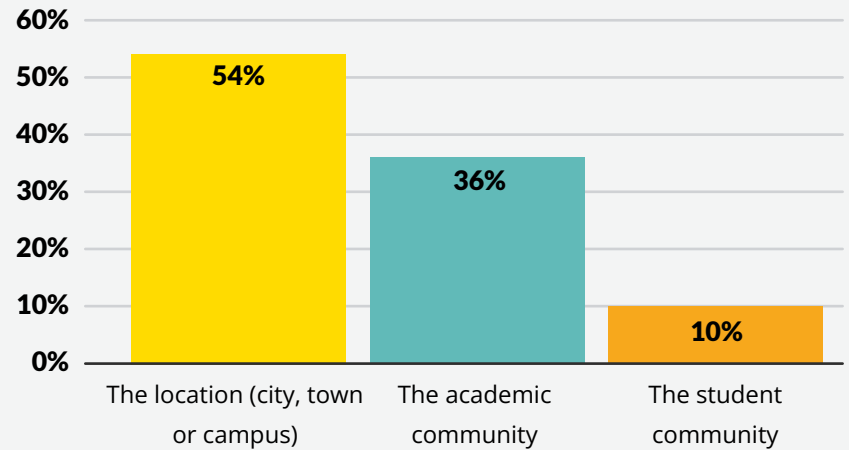
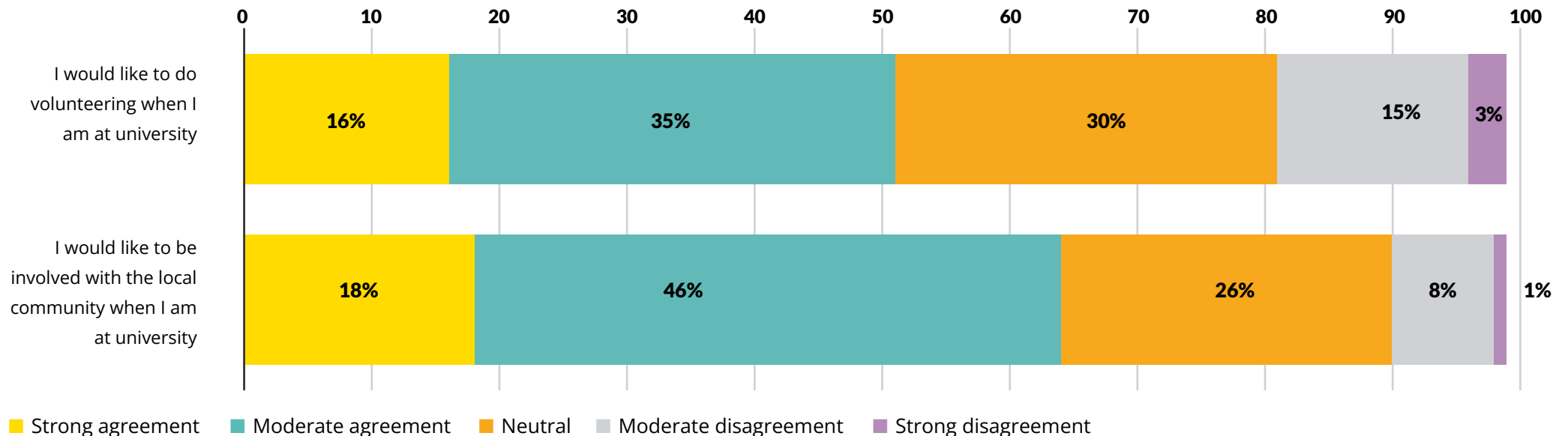


Figure 6: Interest in volunteering and community involvement at university





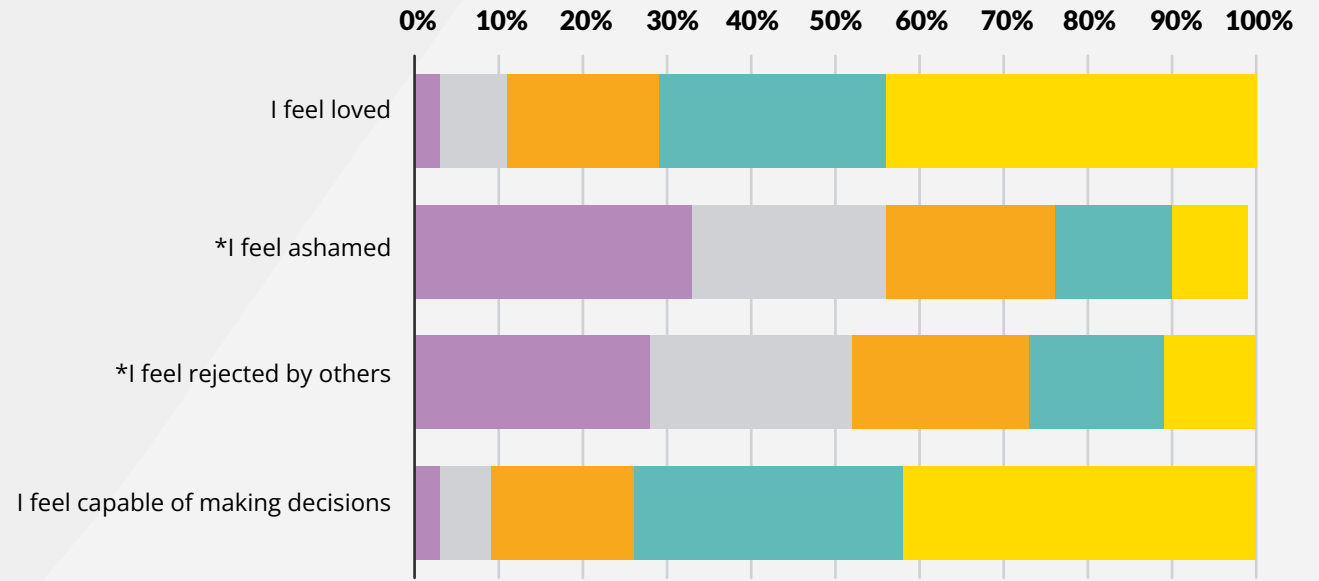
# WELLBEING

# 63 ▲

+1 from 2022

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

Figure 7: Breakdown of responses to wellbeing theme questions



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

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

The overall Wellbeing index score has improved this year. There is cause for optimism, but some areas for action. This year’s cohort fares better on the ONS wellbeing indicators than last year: they are somewhat less anxious, though more than they were in 2021 and before the pandemic. There has also been a rise this year on the ONS wellbeing measure “to what extent do you feel that the things you do in your life are worthwhile”. In addition, this year’s applicants are less likely to feel ashamed or rejected, and more likely to feel loved.

However there are some stark demographic differences. Over a third (36%) of LGB+ applicants and half of Trans applicants have a mental health condition. This is reflected in lower Wellbeing theme scores: 58 for LGB+ and 51 for Trans applicants made up of more negative scores across all measures.

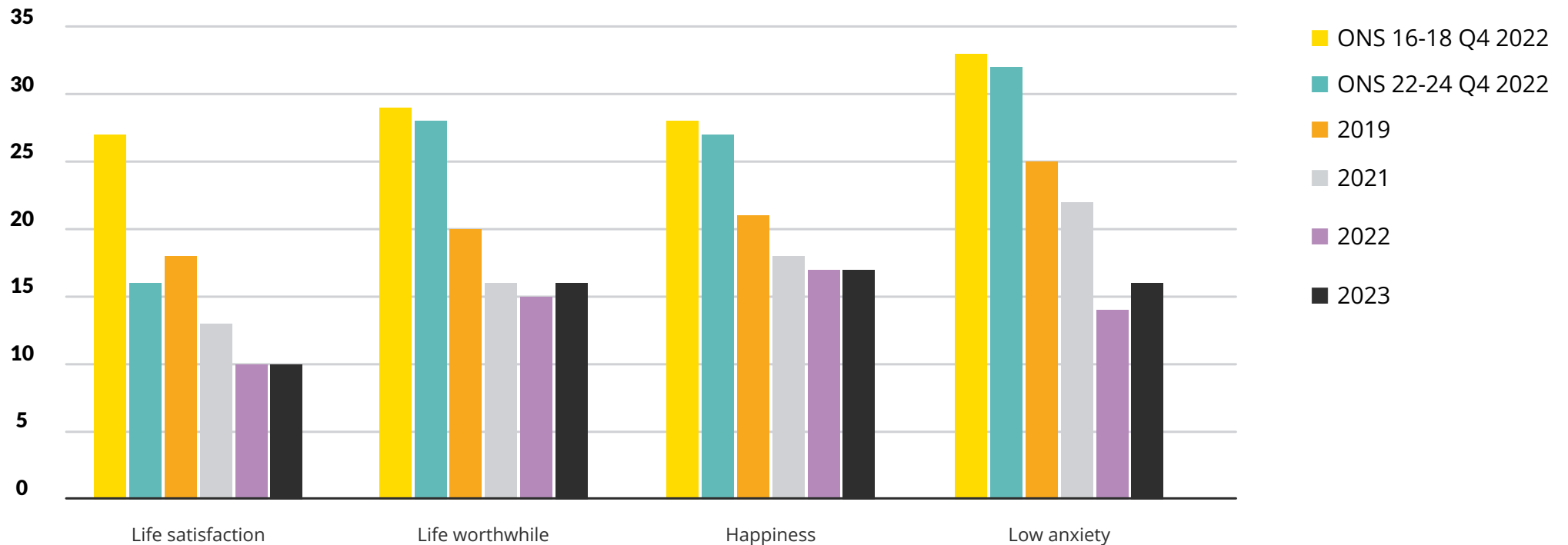


Black students have a higher overall wellbeing score (65) than any other ethnic group, driven by a higher level of happiness on the ONS standard question, higher feeling of being loved and a stronger belief that they are capable of making decisions. This may be due to supportive family and/or community, and is particularly relevant to the Living Black at University research and the ongoing work of the [Commission](#). For Black students moving away to university, the impact of any racism or exclusion they experience at university may be stronger still when compared to this positive home environment.

Applicants from C2DE socioeconomic groups have a lower wellbeing score (61) compared to those from ABC1 households (64). Applicants from the less affluent households are less likely to feel loved, and score lower against all the ONS wellbeing indicators.

This graph also shows the scores for the entire 16-19 and 20-24 age categories in the national ONS wellbeing measures taken in the last quarter of 2022 (the most up to date available measures). As we have seen consistently in the past, students and applicants tend to score more negatively than the wider population in these age brackets.

Figure 8: ONS wellbeing measures for university applicants 2019 - 2023





## Disability and mental health

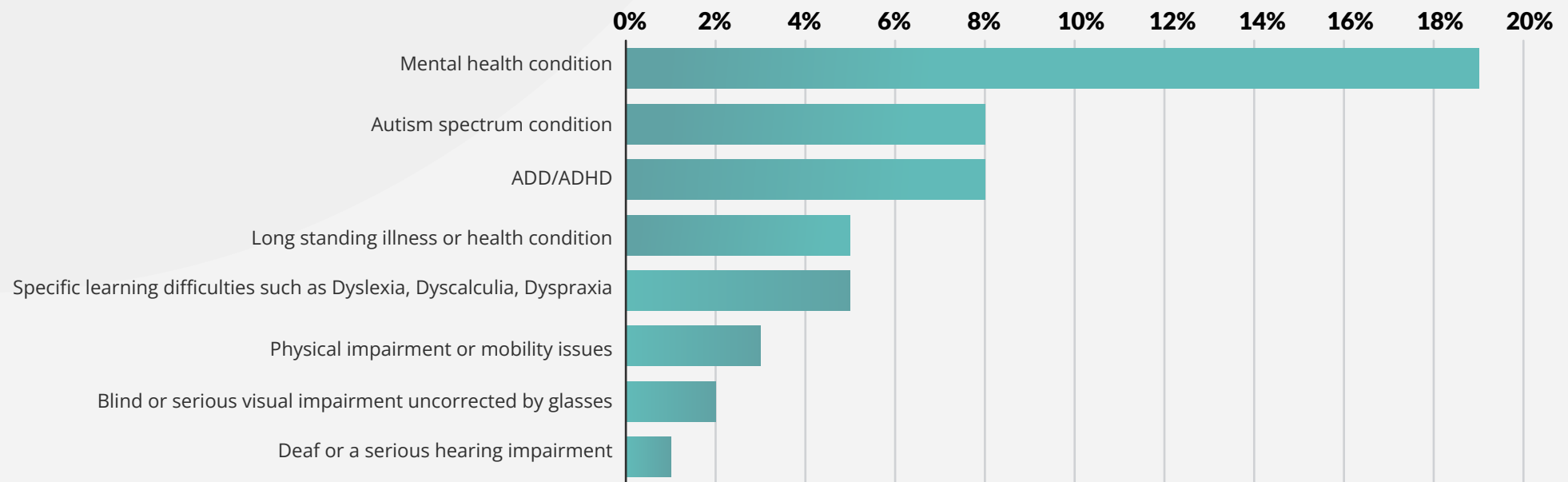
As we have seen in previous years, mental health issues are the most common disability or health issue. Just under a fifth (19%) of applicants have a mental health condition, compared to 20% last year. Although this is within the margin of error for the sample, it is the first time since we began to measure the prevalence of mental health conditions among students (2013) and applicants (2017) that this proportion has not risen.

Mental health conditions are much more likely among LGBTQ+ applicants, with over a third of LGB+ (36%) and half of Trans applicants having a mental health condition. Anxiety, depression, eating disorders, OCD, PTSD and personality disorders are all more common among LGBTQ+ applicants than among the general applicant population.

Just over half (56%) of those with a disability (including mental health conditions) have disclosed it to their university and a further 26% plan to do so. But almost one in five (18%) applicants with a disability say they have no plans to disclose to their university. They are more likely to be applicants with a mental health condition and/or to be neurodivergent.

The most common reasons given for non-disclosure are that they don't think it will make a difference, or are not formally diagnosed. However, a few think it will affect their chances of getting a place (more likely among LGBTQ+ applicants) or don't want their family to know.

Figure 9: Incidence of disability and health conditions



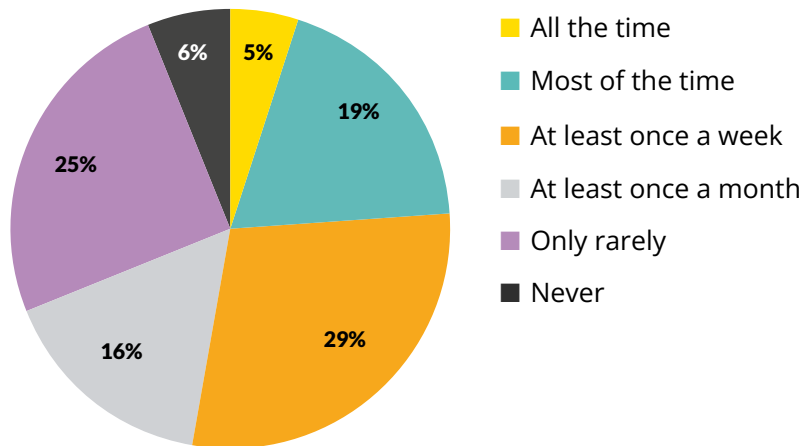
Base: Applicants with a disability, impairment or long term health condition (698)



### Loneliness

A quarter (24%) of applicants feel lonely all or most of the time. Rates of loneliness are higher among female applicants compared to male. Mature applicants (over 21), LGBTQ+ applicants and care experienced and estranged applicants are more likely to feel lonely. Almost half (47%) of applicants with a mental health condition feel lonely all or most of the time.

Figure 10: How often do you feel lonely? (all applicants)



Across the whole applicant population, the rate of loneliness is similar to that found among undergraduate students. The Advance HE/HEPI Student Academic Experience Survey (SAES) 2023 found that 26% of undergraduates felt lonely all or most of the time. This similarity in score suggests that, at a population level, going to university neither causes nor alleviates loneliness. However, using the SAES as a comparison, there is evidence that university is associated with a rise in loneliness for some groups of students, and a reduction for others.

The table below shows the applicant and student rate of “often or always” loneliness among particular demographic groups.

Group	Applicant loneliness	Student loneliness
Black	24%	*29%
Trans	41%	50%
LGB+	30%	32%
Disability or health condition	44%	38%

\* The figure from the SAES is for Black UK domiciled students only

According to these figures, being at university decreases loneliness among disabled students but increases it among both Black and Trans students. For LGB+ students loneliness remains similar but, given that some LGB+ students are also Trans, loneliness may decrease among LGB+ applicants who are not Trans.

Due to relatively small sample sizes in the applicant survey these results should be considered provisional, but this is an area that warrants further investigation. Does university provide a more supportive community than home for some groups of students but a more alienating environment for others? How does loneliness change between first and final year for these groups? What differences are there across different parts of the HE sector? Is the effect more or less pronounced for students living in purpose-built student accommodation? Answering these questions will help universities and accommodation providers build on existing good practice and target support towards students who may be at greater risk of loneliness.



### Meeting student needs

Four in five (79%) applicants believe that their preferred or chosen university can meet their needs, up from 67% last year. Applicants with a mental health condition are somewhat less likely to agree (71%), however this has risen compared to last year.

There is also a difference in level of agreement between applicants from different socioeconomic groups. Agreement is somewhat lower among applicants from C2DE socio-economic groups (75%) compared to those from ABC1 (80%)<sup>2</sup>.

This year applicants are more positive about how easy it was to find information about how the university will meet their needs, with only minor demographic differences.

Figure 11: I think my chosen university can meet my needs

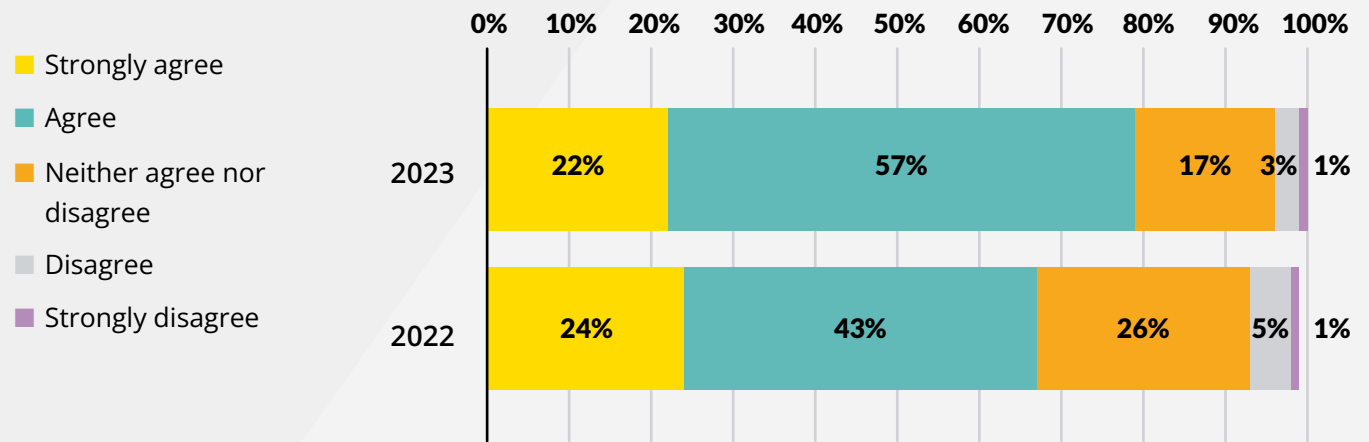
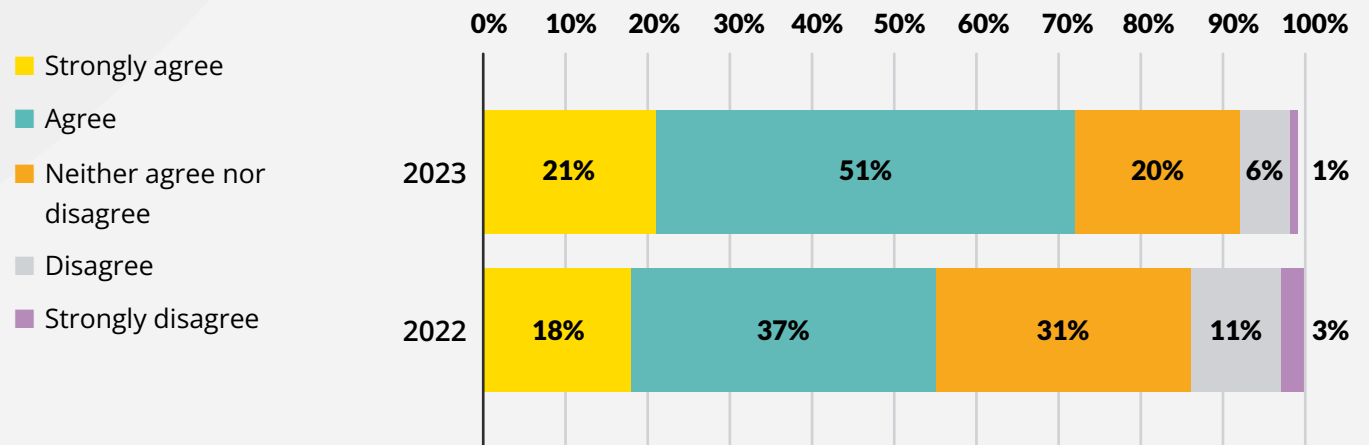


Figure 12: It was easy to find information about how the university will meet my needs



<sup>2</sup>The difference is significant to the 95% confidence interval



### Safety

Most applicants (81%) believe they will be safe at university. Compared to last year, a greater proportion of applicants believe they will be safe with only a very small minority disagreeing.

However White students had a stronger sense of safety compared to Black (72%) and Asian (75%) students which reflects the findings of the [Living Black at University research](#).

Figure 13: I will be safe at university (by ethnicity)

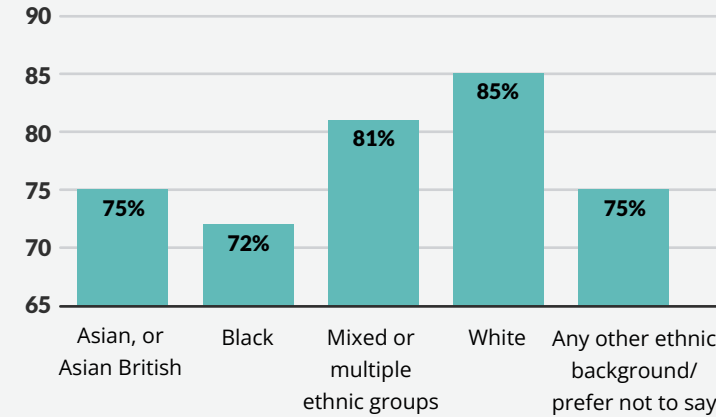
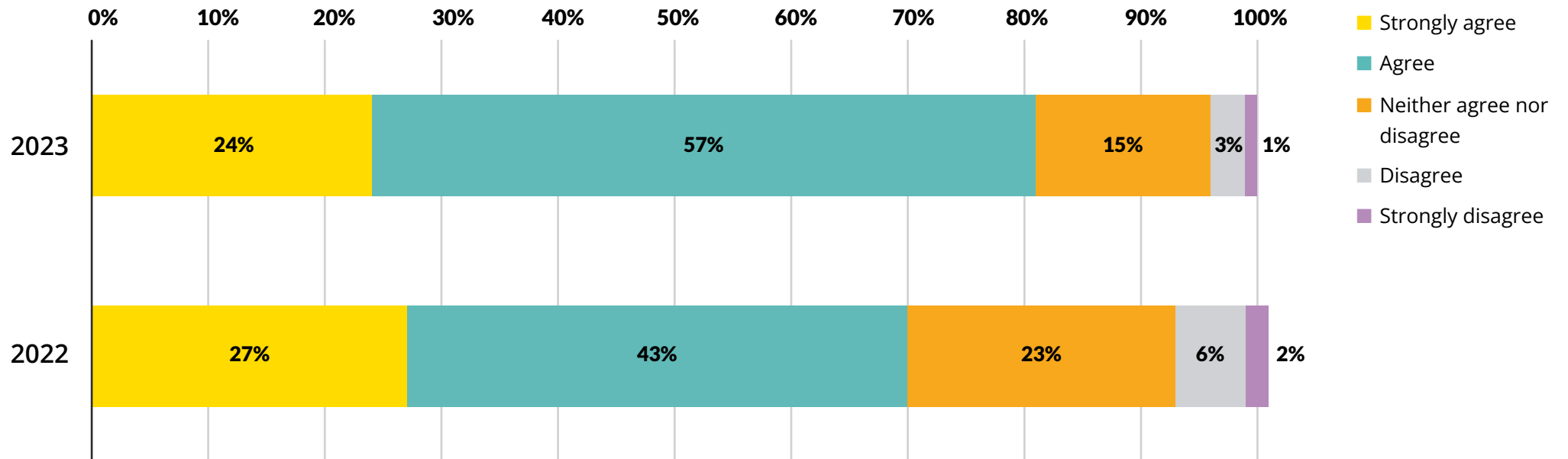


Figure 14: I will be safe at university

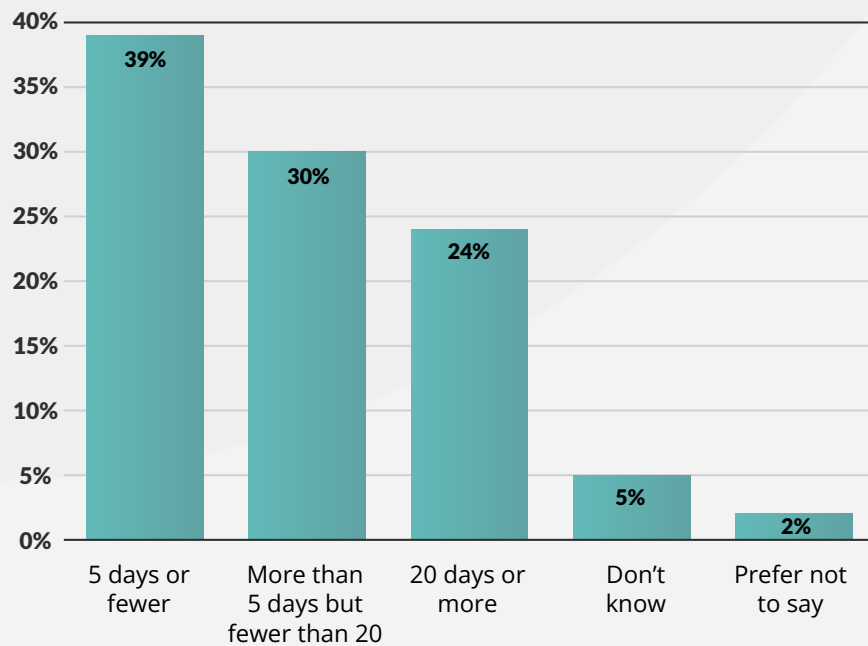




## Absence due to mental health

There is currently a great deal of debate about school absence across all years of study, with a particular focus on persistent absenteeism. The questions in this survey focus in on a specific sub-issue – absence due to mental health among university applicants. We asked applicants whether they had been absent from school or college in the last two years due to their mental health, and almost a third (30%) said that they had, which equates to 153,800 applicants<sup>3</sup>. This rises to 35% for female applicants, 45% for LGB+ applicants and 56% for Trans applicants.

**Figure 15: Amount of education missed in the last two years due to mental health issues**



Base: Those who have missed school/college due to mental health (589)

Care experienced applicants were far more likely to have missed school due to mental health (64%). This question was only presented to those who have been in education over the last two years (1,943 respondents).

Asking the question this way complements data collected by schools and colleges themselves in one important respect – it allows applicants to disclose the reason for their absence confidentially, whereas they may have hidden it from their school and/or parents, especially for shorter periods of absence.

A quarter (24%) of those who missed school or college because of their mental health have missed more than 20 days in the last two years, which equates to about 36,900 applicants<sup>4</sup>. White applicants and applicants from mixed or multiple ethnic backgrounds are more likely to have missed school due to mental health than Black and Asian applicants.

Unsurprisingly, missing school due to mental health is more prevalent among students with a mental health condition, neurodivergence and other disabilities. However, 15% of students with no disability or mental health condition had also missed school/college due to their mental health. These students were likely to have had a shorter period of absence.

A high level of absence due to mental health and wellbeing issues is now normalised to the extent that schools have dedicated strategies and resources to addressing it. This opens a debate about whether there will be a growing demand for further flexibility for a sizeable minority of the student population over the coming years. There is a current interest in reviewing a university's duty of care, and the extent to which higher education should be a supportive and compassionate environment, and these findings provide additional context for this debate.

<sup>3,4</sup> The percentage has been applied to the number of applicants of age 19 or under in the last year for which we have a full data set from UCAS (2022) and should be treated as indicative





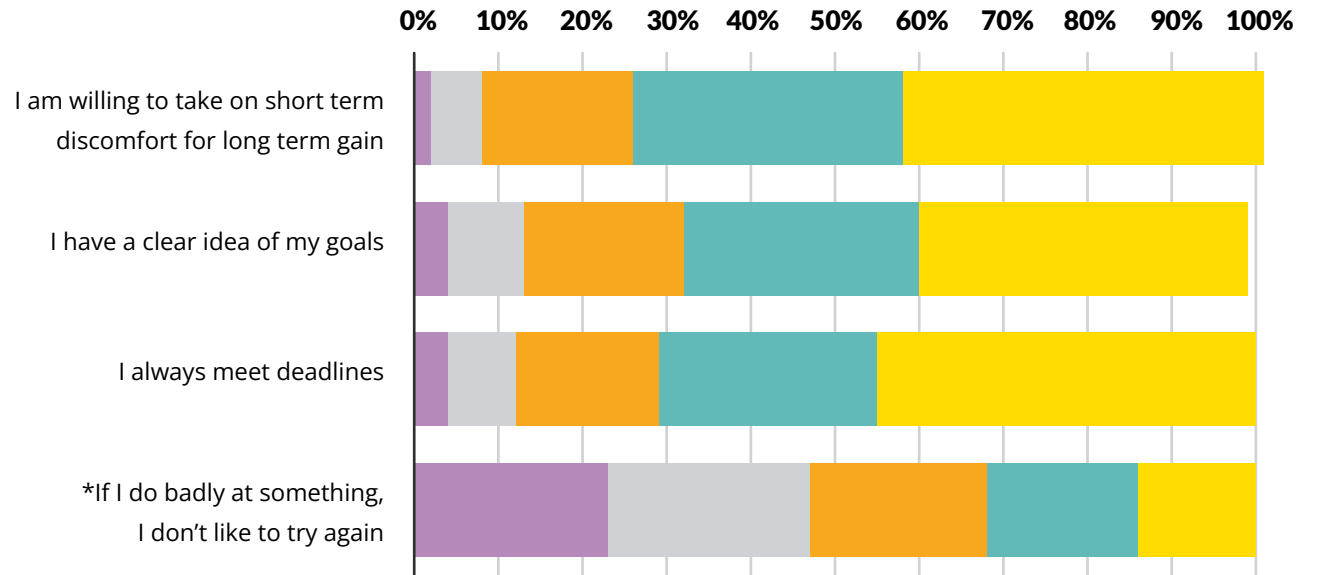
# RESILIENCE

# 66▲

+1 from 2022

The Resilience score measures the ability of applicants to plan and work effectively towards goals and to bounce back after a setback.

Figure 16: Breakdown of responses to resilience theme questions



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

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

The Resilience theme score is higher than it was last year. This year's applicants are a little clearer about their goals and more likely to take on short term discomfort for long term gain. There are few major differences between demographic groups except for Trans applicants who score 59 and have lower scoring results across all four questions. Care experienced and estranged applicants, LGB+ applicants, neurodivergent applicants and those with a mental health condition also score somewhat lower.

Black applicants score slightly higher: they have a clearer idea of their goals and are more willing to take on short term discomfort for long term gain. Applicants who have taken on paid work in the last year also score higher (67) compared to those who have not (64). They score more positively across all questions but in particular are clearer about their goals.



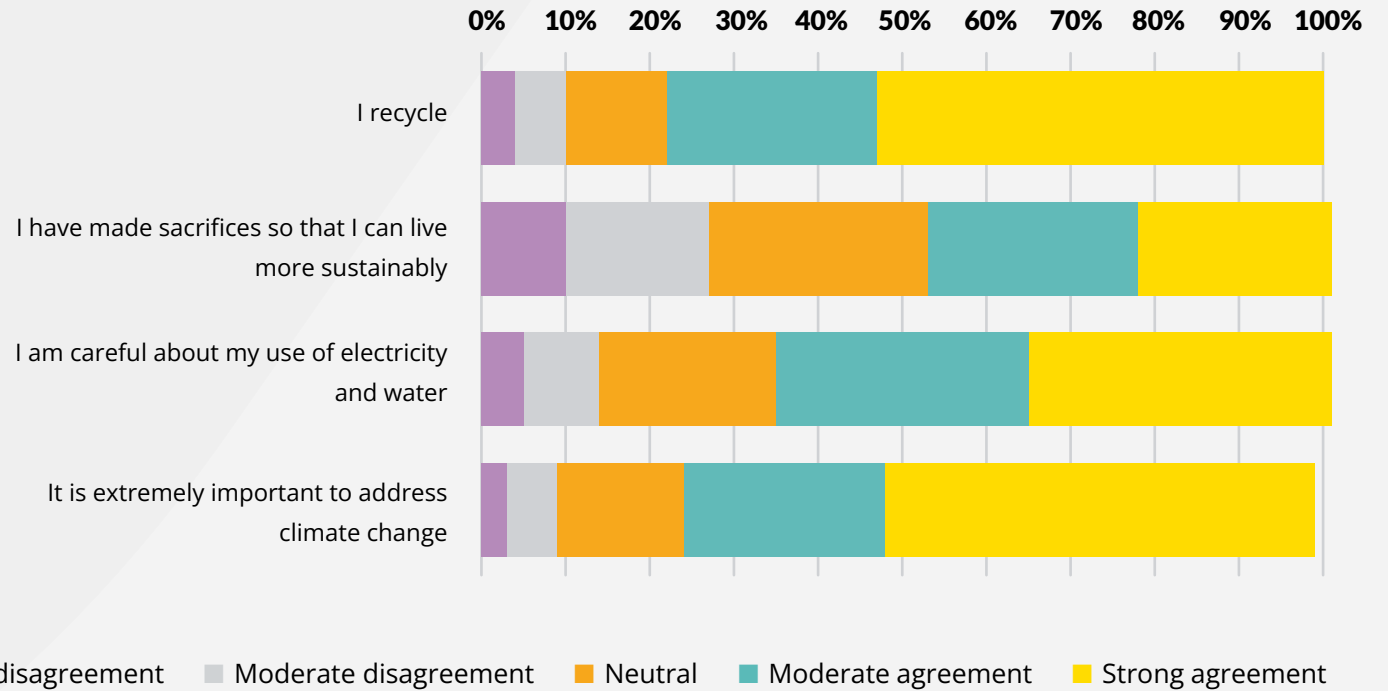
# SUSTAINABILITY

# 67

-1 from 2022

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

Figure 17: Breakdown of responses to sustainability theme questions



This theme score is the only one to have decreased compared to 2022, which is perhaps surprising given that Generation Z are popularly believed to be passionate about climate change. There have been small drops in score against three of the questions within this theme. The exception is that applicants are somewhat more careful about use of electricity and water than last year. This is likely to be due to the cost of living on families and parental pressure to minimise utility costs.

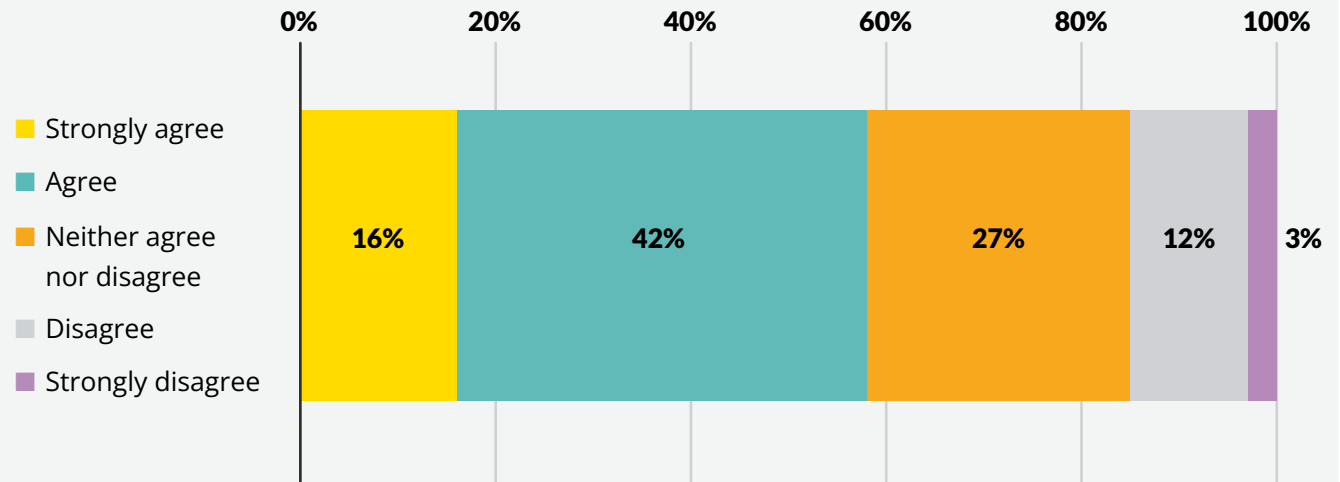
Female applicants score four points higher than male applicants with positive differences across all questions and are much more likely to think that tackling climate change is extremely important. In line with last year’s results, LGBTQ+ applicants score more highly, as do applicants with a mental health condition.



One reason for the apparent reduction in sustainable behaviours may be that only a slim majority of applicants believe that their actions make a difference. When asked whether they believe that their actions have an impact on tackling climate change, 58% agree and 15% actively disagree, rising to 20% among male applicants.

This has important implications for those encouraging students to behave more sustainably, especially in student accommodation. Communications that emphasise the contribution of their own behaviours alongside those of the wider student community may challenge these beliefs and empower sustainable behaviours.

Figure 18: I believe that my actions have an impact on tackling climate change





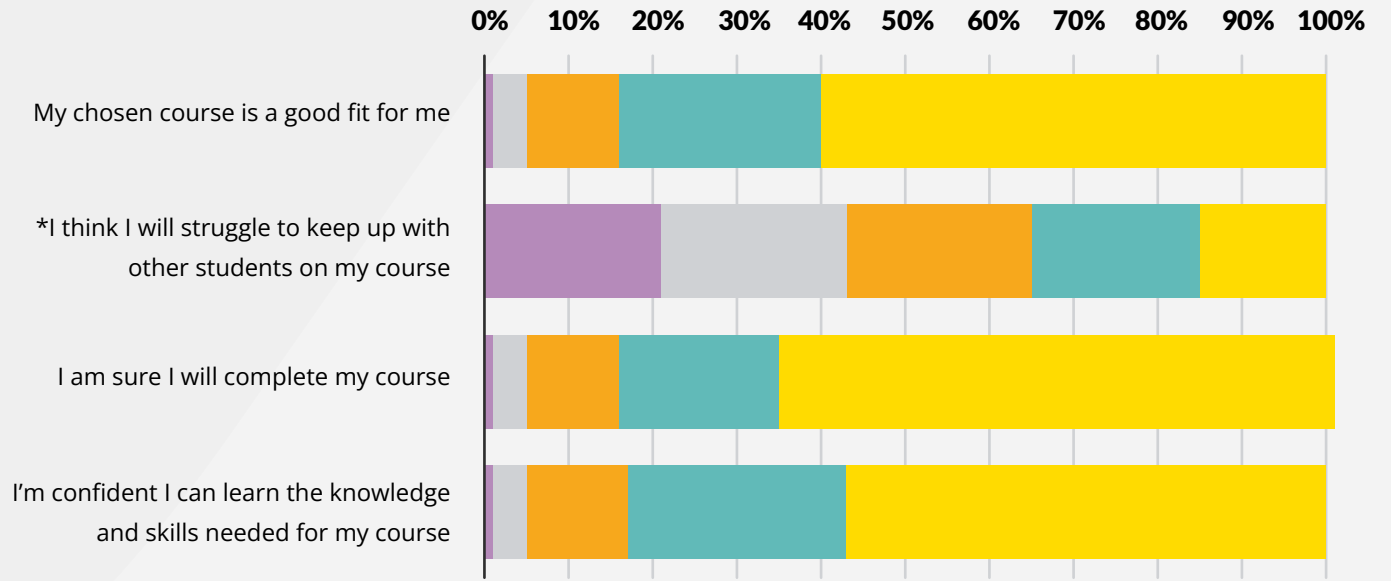

# LEARNING

# 72▲

+1 from 2022

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

Figure 19: Breakdown of responses to learning theme questions



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

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

Compared to last year, this year's applicants scored more positively against all questions, although once again over a third (35%) believe they will struggle to keep up with others on the course.

Female applicants score more positively than male applicants in this theme. Applicants from minoritised ethnic groups score somewhat lower on this theme, as do applicants from less affluent households.

Neurodivergence and mental health conditions seem to affect applicants' confidence to learn and complete the course, with lower scores for both (overlapping) groups in all but the first question in this theme.

Care experienced and estranged applicants score lower than average, and care experienced applicants have a particularly low level of confidence about their academic abilities with an overall Learning theme score of 63.



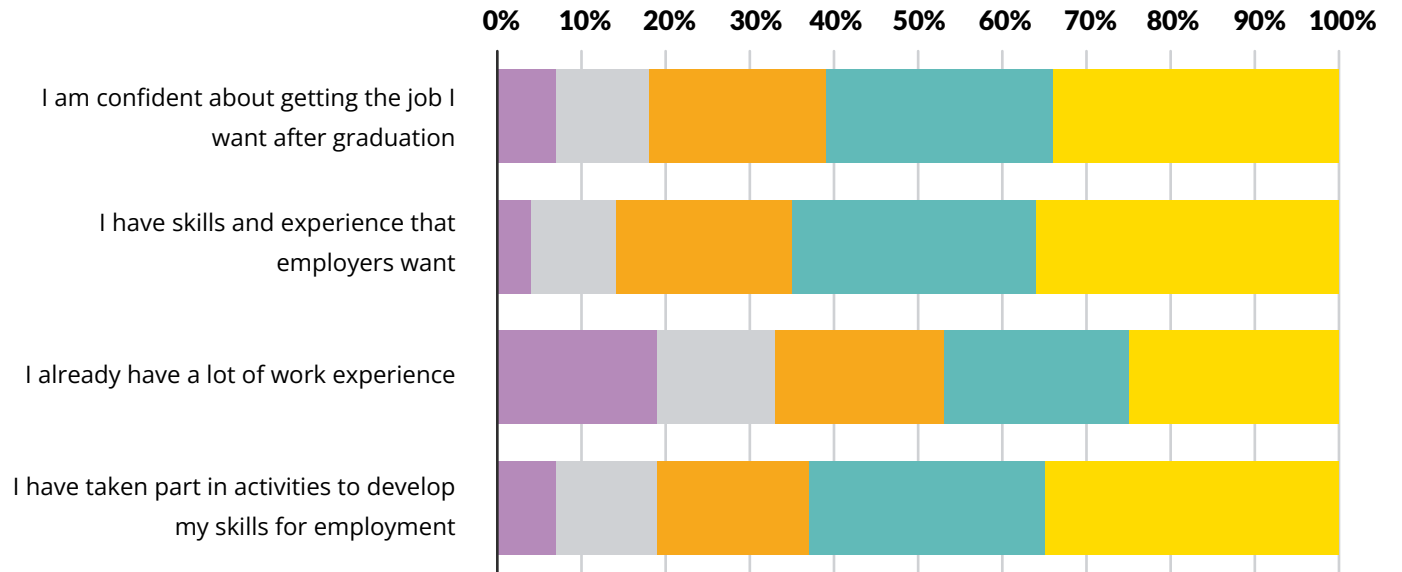
# EMPLOYMENT

# 62

No change

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

Figure 20: Breakdown of responses to employment theme questions



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

Very little has changed since last year when it comes to applicants' confidence about their employability.

In line with last year's findings, Black applicants are more confident in all areas and had a score of 67 for this theme. By contrast, Asian applicants scored 59 and are less likely to believe they have work skills or experience. Unlike last year, neurodivergent applicants scored somewhat higher than average. Although their confidence is slightly lower, they are more likely to have work experience and employment skills.

Trans applicants consider themselves to have less work experience, even though they are just as likely to have

done paid work as other applicants. Additionally, only 45% are confident about getting the job they want after graduation compared to 62% of applicants who are not Trans.

However, on average, applicants who have taken on paid work over the last year score significantly higher in the Employment theme overall (66) compared to those who have not (53). Paid work is strongly associated not only with self-perception about being work experience but also with confidence about getting the job they want after graduation and their appeal to potential employers.

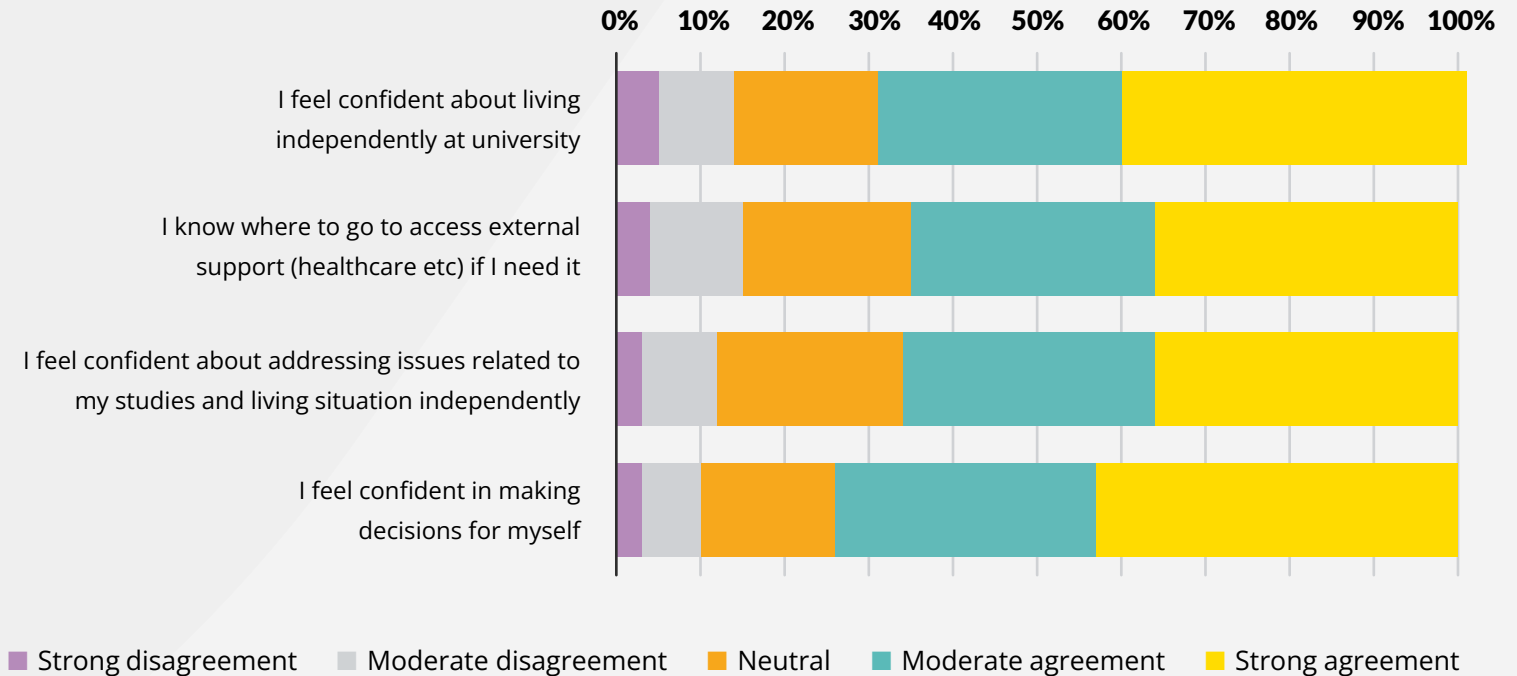


# INDEPENDENCE

## 68<sup>NEW</sup>

New for 2023, the Independence score measures confidence in self-efficacy skills relevant to starting university, including ability to access support.

Figure 21: Breakdown of responses to independence theme questions



Overall confidence is relatively high within this theme, but far from universal. One in ten applicants are not confident about making decisions for themselves, 14% are not confident about living independently and 15% do not know where to go to access support such as healthcare.

Among applicants who have a mental health condition and/or are neurodivergent there is a lower level of confidence about living independently and addressing issues. Interestingly, they are more likely to have lived away from home before, which suggests that for some this was not a positive experience. They are just as likely as other applicants to be planning to live with other students while at university, and so may benefit from targeted support around independent living and negotiation skills.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, applicants who have chosen to live with parents while at university are significantly less confident about living independently at university and somewhat less confident in making decisions for themselves. By contrast international students, a group that has self-selected to study in a different country, are more confident than average in these areas.



Applicants from fee paying schools and those from more affluent households feel more confident about living independently and addressing issues than other applicants.

Male applicants score two points higher than female applicants on this theme. Although they have more confidence, they are less likely to know where to go for support.

Applicants who have undertaken paid work over the last year score 69 on this theme compared to 63 for those who have not, and there are significant differences in score on each of the four questions. It is difficult to know whether work experience has led to greater confidence or if those who work do so because they are more independent. It may be a combination of the two, and age may play a role – older applicants are more likely to have worked than younger ones.

We also asked applicants whether they agreed with the statement “I will find it easy to take care of myself at university.” Over two-thirds (69%) agree and only one in ten disagree. LGBTQ+ applicants and applicants with a disability or health condition are less likely to agree. Almost a quarter (23%) of Trans applicants disagree.





### Life skills

We asked applicants about their confidence in completing tasks relevant to their life at university. Applicants are generally confident about household chores, but less confident about essential healthcare and life skills. While 84% are confident about cooking and 88% about cleaning, only 63% are confident about registering with a GP and 60% in dealing with a medical emergency. Female applicants are consistently a little more confident than male applicants about doing household tasks, which may reflect differences in upbringing.

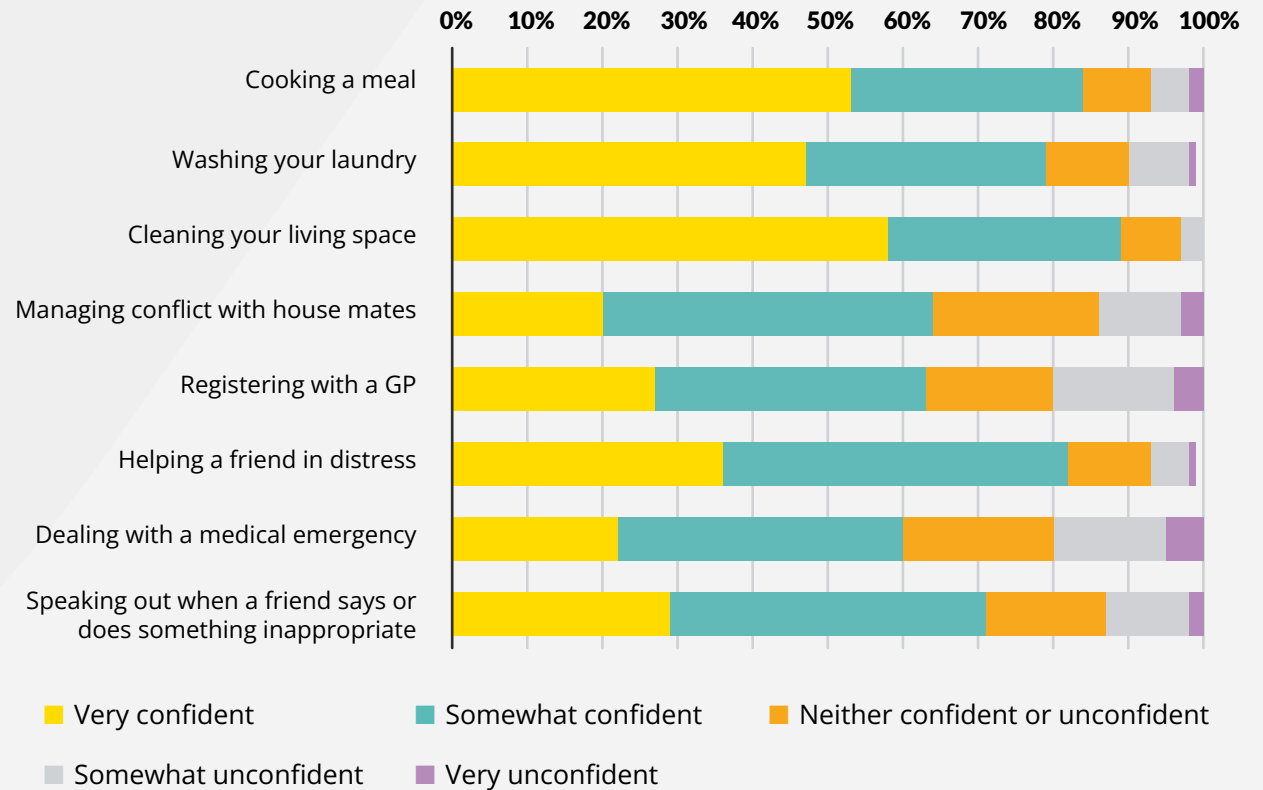
Only 64% are confident about managing conflict with housemates which suggests an opportunity to help develop these skills as part of the transition and settling in period for those moving into PBSA or shared housing.

However almost three quarters (71%) are ready to be active bystanders, agreeing that they would be prepared to speak out if a friend said or did something inappropriate.

A concerning finding is that 15% of applicants do not know where to go to access external support such as healthcare, and 20% of applicants do not feel confident registering with a GP. This is particularly the case for LGBTQ+ applicants; almost a third (31%) are not confident about registering with a GP, and this is an issue that would benefit from further research.

Asian applicants tend to be less confident about cooking and laundry. They are much more likely (35%) to intend to live with parents or guardians while attending university compared to the average of 19%.

Figure 22: Breakdown of responses to confidence in completing key tasks







## The role of schools and colleges

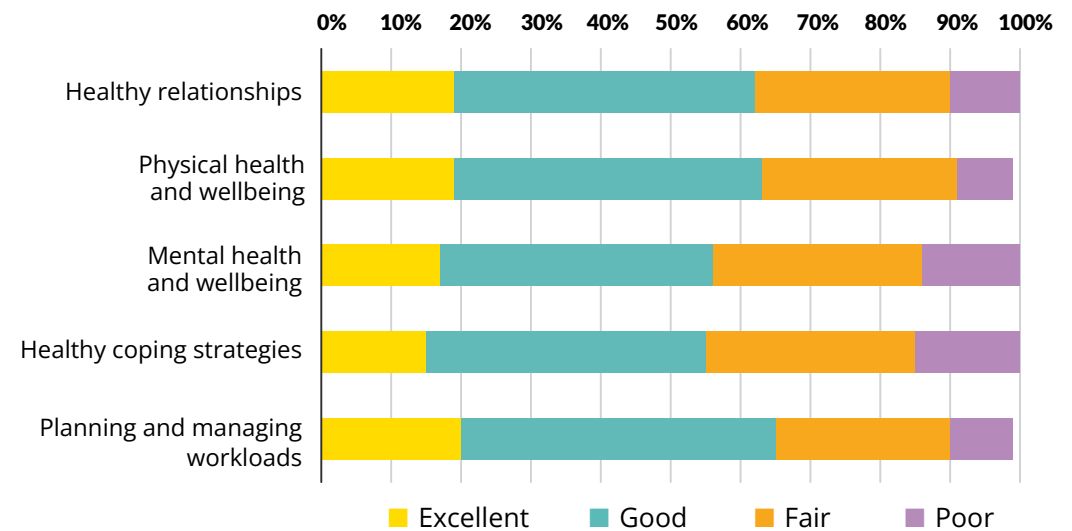
Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHEE) in England and its equivalents in the devolved administrations (Health and Wellbeing in Scotland, Personal and Social Education in Wales and Personal Development and Mutual Understanding in Northern Ireland) aim to provide a comprehensive education that promotes the wellbeing and development of students. Key topics covered include personal wellbeing, emotional and mental health, healthy relationships, consent, diversity and inclusion, physical health, substance misuse, financial literacy, online safety, personal safety, careers and employability, and sexual health education.

These programmes emphasise students' social skills, resilience, decision-making abilities and awareness of wider society, equipping them with the knowledge and skills necessary for leading healthy, safe and fulfilling lives. State schools will usually follow all or most of the recommended curriculum. Private schools are not obliged to do so, but most offer education on these topics.

We asked applicants how effective they thought their school or college had been in preparing them in key areas of the PHSE curriculum. Overall, responses were somewhat mixed. Up to a fifth consider the preparation to be excellent in each of the areas, and between nine and 15% consider it to be poor. The lowest ratings are against mental health and wellbeing, and healthy coping strategies against which 56% and 55% rated the preparation as excellent or good. This does not necessarily mean that applicants feel unprepared in these areas. Families play a strong role in modelling and teaching healthy behaviours and most will also be drawing on online information of variable quality. In future surveys it would be useful to understand the overall level of preparedness and the main sources of this information.

LGBTQ+ applicants and applicants with a mental health condition (two overlapping demographics) are less positive about the effectiveness of the preparation, suggesting that the curriculum doesn't fully meet their needs.

Figure 23: How effective do you think your school or college has been in preparing you in the following areas?



In England, the PSHEE curriculum was updated in 2020 to ensure greater LGBTQ+ inclusion and the impacts of this may be seen more fully over future years. Applicants with a mental health condition may know more about certain aspects of mental health than those teaching them, and they may also consider that other services such as counselling have prepared them better in these areas compared to their school or college.

Applicants from minoritised ethnic groups are more positive than White applicants across all areas. Care experienced applicants are also more positive about the preparation they have received, and in their case the guidance from school and college may have filled a gap created by reduced or missing family support.

Applicants from fee-paying schools are also more positive across the board. Private schools are not obliged to follow the national curriculum for PSHEE, and these results suggest that fee-paying schools offer a programme that meets their pupils' needs more effectively than those in the state sector. However, this may equally be due to better resources and longer hours (including boarding) within the private school sector.



### Data sharing

The vast majority (81%) of students who have declared their disability as part of the application process have been supported by their school to do so.

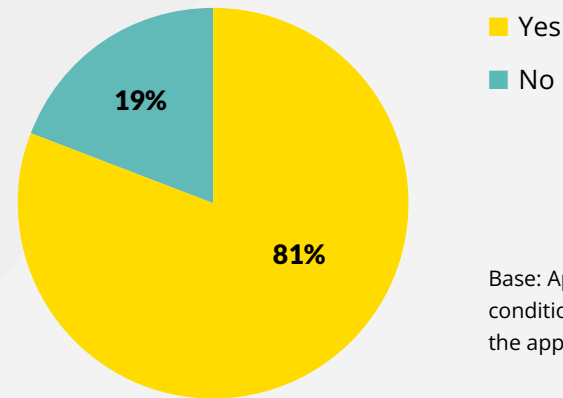
There is no current expectation or formal process for schools and colleges to share information routinely about disability, health or wellbeing as part of the application process, though they can mention it in the reference section with the permission of the applicant. The findings of this survey open up a debate about whether schools and colleges should be able to share this information more systematically, subject to consent, either on an opt-in or opt-out basis.

We asked applicants if they would give consent if their school or college wanted to share the following information with their university:

- A disability you have, and reasonable adjustments you may require
- Information about your mental health
- Information about your status as a care experienced person
- Safeguarding information that your school may hold about you

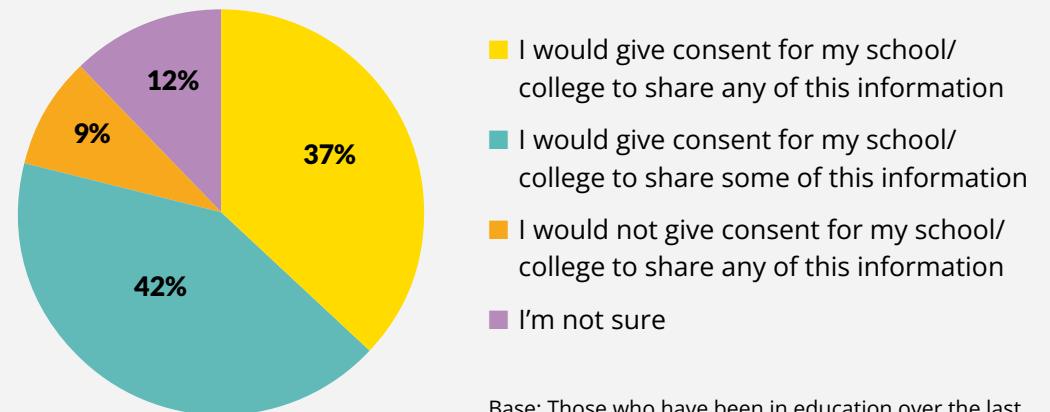
Almost four in five (79%) would give consent for some of this data to be shared and, within this, over a third (37%) of all applicants would give consent for any of this information to be shared. There were few demographic differences among those who would consent to share at least some data, though applicants from 'mixed' and 'other' ethnic backgrounds were less sure.

Figure 24: Has your school / college supported you with your decision to declare your disability?



Base: Applicants with a disability or health condition that have disclosed it as part of the application process (354)

Figure 25: Consent to share personal data with university



Base: Those who have been in education over the last two years (1,943)

# TOPICAL ISSUES

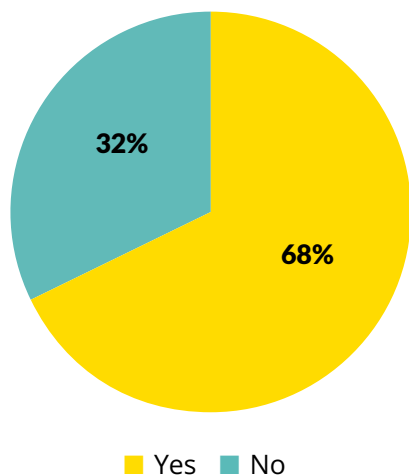
This section draws on wider survey questions to provide a brief analysis of topical issues.

## The impact of paid work

As discussed above, undertaking paid work is associated with improved social confidence and greater independence as well as a higher level of confidence about employability. Overall 68% of applicants have done paid work over the last year. They are more likely to be mature applicants, and to be White or mixed race. LGBTQ+ applicants were less likely to have done paid work.

It seems likely that applicants who already have a higher level of confidence and independence are more likely to undertake paid work, including mature applicants who may have been in the workforce before applying to university. Yet work experience does have clear benefits, especially when it comes to employability, and it enables younger applicants to practise communication skills in a wider environment.

**Figure 26:** Have you done paid work during the last year?



These findings suggest that taking on paid work before going to university has positive benefits, but it also poses further questions. How much paid work is optimal? Are the benefits greater if the work aligns with future career ambitions? At what point does paid work become detrimental to wellbeing and academic performance?

It is also not clear why LGBTQ+ applicants are less likely to have been in paid work, and this would benefit from further research. Are there groups of students who find it more difficult to access paid work, and why is this the case?

## Diversity and non-disclosure

The results of the demographic questions in the survey suggest that this cohort is more diverse than has previously been assumed. While almost a quarter (23%) of applicants self-identified their sexuality as lesbian, gay, bi, queer, asexual, pansexual or 'in another way', just over half (58%) of them shared this information when applying for university. This implies that diversity data collected by UCAS under-report the actual number of LGBTQ+ applicants, and therefore that current national statistics under-estimate the diversity of the cohort.

When it comes to disclosing a disability or health condition, just over half (56%) of those with a disability or health condition have already shared this information with their university but nearly one in five (18%) do not intend to share this information at all.

## Voting

This year we asked UK applicants if they intended to vote in the next general election, and whether they had registered to vote. 70% of applicants intend to vote, and 69% are already registered to vote. Only 15% are not intending to vote.

However some demographic groups are less likely to vote. One in five (20%) male applicants, 21% of applicants from socio-economic groups C2DE and a quarter (25%) of Black applicants don't intend to vote in the next general election. Around a third of Black (30%) and Asian (34%) applicants are not registered to vote compared to an average of 23% across the applicant population.

# METHODOLOGY

Unless otherwise stated, all data in this report is from a survey administered via the Savanta Panel between 5th May – 19th May 2023 with 2,141 respondents who were planning to start university in the 2023/24 academic year. The sample has been constructed and weighted to be broadly representative of the applicant population as a whole. The margin of error is approximately +/-2.1%. Reported demographic differences in the data are significant to the 99% confidence level unless otherwise stated.

The sample was weighted and split by Gender and School Type (state or private). The following weighting matrix was used:

Male - Fee paying school or college	4.80%
Male – State or Other	39.40%
Female – Fee paying school or college	4.80%
Female – State or Other	51.00%

As far as possible, survey numbers and quotas aimed to replicate those achieved in the [2022 Unite Students Applicant survey](#).

A known limitation of the survey sample is that it under-indexes international applicants. Within this group there is a very low percentage of Chinese students, meaning that it is not representative of the UK's population of international students. Because of this limitation, care should be taken in interpreting differences between Home status and International status applicants in the data, and there are few references to them in the report.

The sample also under-indexes mature applicants, and does not include applicants to part time courses.

The index provides a cohort score out of 100 for each of nine different themes. The scores for eight of these themes are based on responses to 28 different statements, four in each theme, on a seven-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 to provide a maximum score of 100 and a minimum of 0 for each theme.

For the Wellbeing theme, we have also included the ONS wellbeing questions which represent 40% of the theme's overall score, with four seven-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:

## Five point scale

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

## Seven point scale

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

# UNITE STUDENTS

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