

**UNITE
STUDENTS**

In partnership with



UNITE STUDENTS APPLICANT INDEX

July 2024



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Introduction



Foreword

Joe Lister

Chief Executive
of Unite Students



This is a challenging time for young people taking their early steps into adult life. We are all of us living through a period of change in which political and financial issues continue to unfold across the globe, some of which have already escalated into conflict. What is more, for many of this year's applicants the Covid pandemic affected their learning and social development at a critical time, their early teens.

Against this backdrop the decision to go on to higher education, and the preparation for that transition, seems to be less straightforward. This year's Applicant Index – which tracks the attitudes and needs of higher education applicants – illustrates some of these tensions and concerns, but it also provides evidence of a resilient and pragmatic cohort of new students who are already taking strategic decisions in the face of challenge. This year we have invited applicants to tell us in their own words about the impact of the financial situation and the Covid pandemic on their lives and decisions, and these comments can be both challenging and moving.

I see these tensions playing out for my youngest daughter who has just finished her A-levels. Unlike her older sisters, going to university does not feel like a straightforward choice for her and she has been weighing up her options carefully. Compared to my other daughters the decision seems to be much more complicated and uncertain, and the data presented in this report shows that she is far from alone.

Overall financial confidence is lower among this year's applicants, and a greater proportion say that financial issues are affecting their mental health. The cost of living while at university is a particular concern for them, as it is for us. However, there is some upside to this: applicants are already taking steps to address the challenge, with the majority of them working part time, and this has led to a greater confidence about their employability.

This year we have seen a further rise in those who have missed school or college due to their mental health. This sits alongside a drop in academic and social confidence compared to last year. There is also a persistent fear among applicants that they won't fit in at university, and yet we know that a sense of belonging is important for both learning and wellbeing. It is clear from the data that some groups of students already feel at a disadvantage before they even start their course, and the differences between socioeconomic groups are especially striking.

These inequalities, not all of which are obvious, require careful attention from us all. It may be made easier by the greater propensity of applicants to share their data with the higher education sector this year. This is particularly the case for the higher rates of sharing sexuality data, which speaks of a higher level of trust and the expectation of an inclusive approach.

The Applicant Index has been designed to provide useful insights for all those working with applicants and students to support positive change. I know from my conversations with university leaders that our Insight programme has already inspired some ground-breaking initiatives across the UK. Above all, I hope its impact will be felt by new students themselves, and it is with this in mind I am delighted to present this year's report.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J Lister'.

Foreword

Nick Hillman

Director of the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI)



Enrolling in higher education is a key life moment for more than half of young people in the UK. Many school leavers will have been studying alongside the same people throughout their secondary education, and many of them might even have transferred from primary school to secondary school en masse. Even those with more recent experience of educational transitions, such as those who moved from a school to a sixth-form college, have generally faced nothing like the scale of transition that enrolling in higher education tends to be.

The shift to higher education very often represents the biggest change young people have faced in their lives up to that point. Moreover, applying to become a full-time undergraduate student is risky. If you manage to secure the place you want, you will then likely leave your family, friends and existing support networks and quite possibly move to a city in a completely different part of the country in order to study a discipline in greater depth than before, while taking on a whole new level of financial independence.

There are plenty of opportunities for things to go wrong – perhaps you will struggle to click with your classmates or flatmates, perhaps you will find it challenging to live on the very modest maintenance support available and / or perhaps you will find the shift to a more independent learning style challenging.

Each year, as confirmed by the separate HEPI / Advance HE **Student Academic Experience Survey**, some people discover they have not made as wise a choice as they had hoped. They may not have had good enough information when applying or they may have matured as an individual in the months between applying and enrolling – or something might have changed with the course or institution that originally appealed to them. When such things happen, more resilient students, typically those with more confidence and from better-off backgrounds, are better able to cope. Others, such as those who are estranged from their families, are less likely to have the networks that serve as a safety cushion.

The one finding that comes through repeatedly in the pages that follow is how unequal the student experience can be for people from different backgrounds. If equity in education is the goal – and society would clearly benefit from people having more equal chances – then there is great progress still to be made. As the new Government finds its feet and builds its educational policy programme, Ministers should consider what more can be done to deliver an education system that is fairer to those who currently have to fight the hardest to overcome the obstacles in their way.

This important report should help in this endeavour by showing the sorts of actions that policymakers, the higher education sector and applicants themselves can take to make the transition to higher education less fraught – and to help guarantee success after enrolment.

Finally, one reason why this survey of applicants is so important is that we know less about the applicant experience than we do about people's experiences while they are school pupils or university students. So I congratulate Unite Students for not only shining a spotlight on the applicant journey but also for doing so consistently year after year, thereby building up a useful longitudinal picture. The annual nature of the survey allows for incremental adjustments as well as changes to those areas covered in more depth. This year, there is a notable focus on international students alongside home students, raising many instructive similarities and differences between these two groups that have not been much discussed in detail before.

Executive Summary

This year's applicants will enter higher education with a higher level of optimism about their future employability, but less financial confidence and with significantly lower confidence in their academic skills compared to the previous two cohorts. Furthermore, about a third think it likely that they will not take up their place at university, though the majority of these only think it 'somewhat likely'.

Qualitative data suggests that this cohort is carrying a strong sense of loss due to the pandemic which, for most respondents, took place in their early teens. This encompasses both learning and social losses, leaving a legacy of missed opportunities, poorer concentration and motivation, and a strong sense of social anxiety.

Learning confidence may also have been affected by school absence due to mental health, which has increased further this year from last year's already high base of 30%. Over a third (36%) of this year's applicants have missed school or college over the last two years due to their mental health, rising to 39% among UK applicants.

Rates of absence due to mental health are higher among female applicants than male, and significantly higher among LGBTQ+ applicants. While most absences due to mental health are short, almost one in ten (9%) of all applicants have been absent for more than 20 days due to mental health. Among those who had been absent, 43% thought they would need to miss teaching time at university due to their mental health. This represents a significant minority (15%) of the total applicant population.

Overall, financial confidence among this year's cohort is slightly lower than last year and on a par with attitudes in 2022. Confidence in budgeting skills

is down on last year, and two in five applicants say that financial issues are affecting their mental health, which is an increase from last year: cost of living is their area of greatest concern. Applicants described in their own words the impact of cost of living on their choice of university, with one in five mentioning location. Comments suggested that some applicants were choosing cheaper options, including limiting their choices to more budget-friendly cities. Others had made a financial choice to live at home, though when asked about their accommodation intentions, there was no evidence that we will see a higher rate of living at home this year.

There has been a notable rise in confidence about future job prospects this year. Two in five strongly agree that they are confident about getting the job they want after graduation, up 6 percentage points on last year. This year's applicants also have higher levels of perceived work experience and employability skills, and are slightly more likely to have done paid work in the last two years.

International applicants are more confident than their UK domiciled counterparts when it comes to their employability. For UK applicants, those from the higher socioeconomic groups are the most confident in their job prospects. This is not the only example of socioeconomic disadvantage found in this survey – in fact it affects a range of applicant attitudes and experiences.

Socioeconomic status affects financial confidence, which was anticipated, but, less predictably, it also affects social and learning confidence. Applicants from lower socioeconomic groups are more likely to be anxious about fitting in at university, and they anticipate a lower level of welcome and belonging. They have less confidence in their ability to learn the knowledge and skills needed for their course, and they are more likely to have missed education due to their mental health. They are also lonelier than their peers. In other words, applicants from D and E socioeconomic groups (semi-skilled, unskilled and workless households) are having a poorer experience now and are not necessarily confident that things will improve when they go to university.





About the Applicant Index

While there are many student surveys, there are few that focus on higher education applicants and none that track the attitudes of each cohort systematically over time.

Now in its third year, the Unite Students / HEPI Applicant Index combines the responses to 36 questions, each measured on a 7-point scale of agreement, to generate nine composite scores in areas such as finance, learning and community. These scores range from 0 to 100 and are based on four equally weighted questions, except for the Wellbeing score which also incorporates the ONS standard wellbeing indicators. In each case, 0 is the least positive and 100 the most positive score.

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

The 2024 Applicant Index is based on a survey of 2,190 higher education applicants planning to start an undergraduate degree or degree apprenticeship in the 2024-25 academic year. It was conducted via the Savanta panel between 8th-29th April 2024 and was weighted to be representative of the applicant population. This year, the survey achieved representative samples of Chinese and Indian domiciled applicants, and translation services were used to support Chinese respondents to engage with the survey. An overview of the sample, including 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.

Notes on data categories

Gender and sexuality

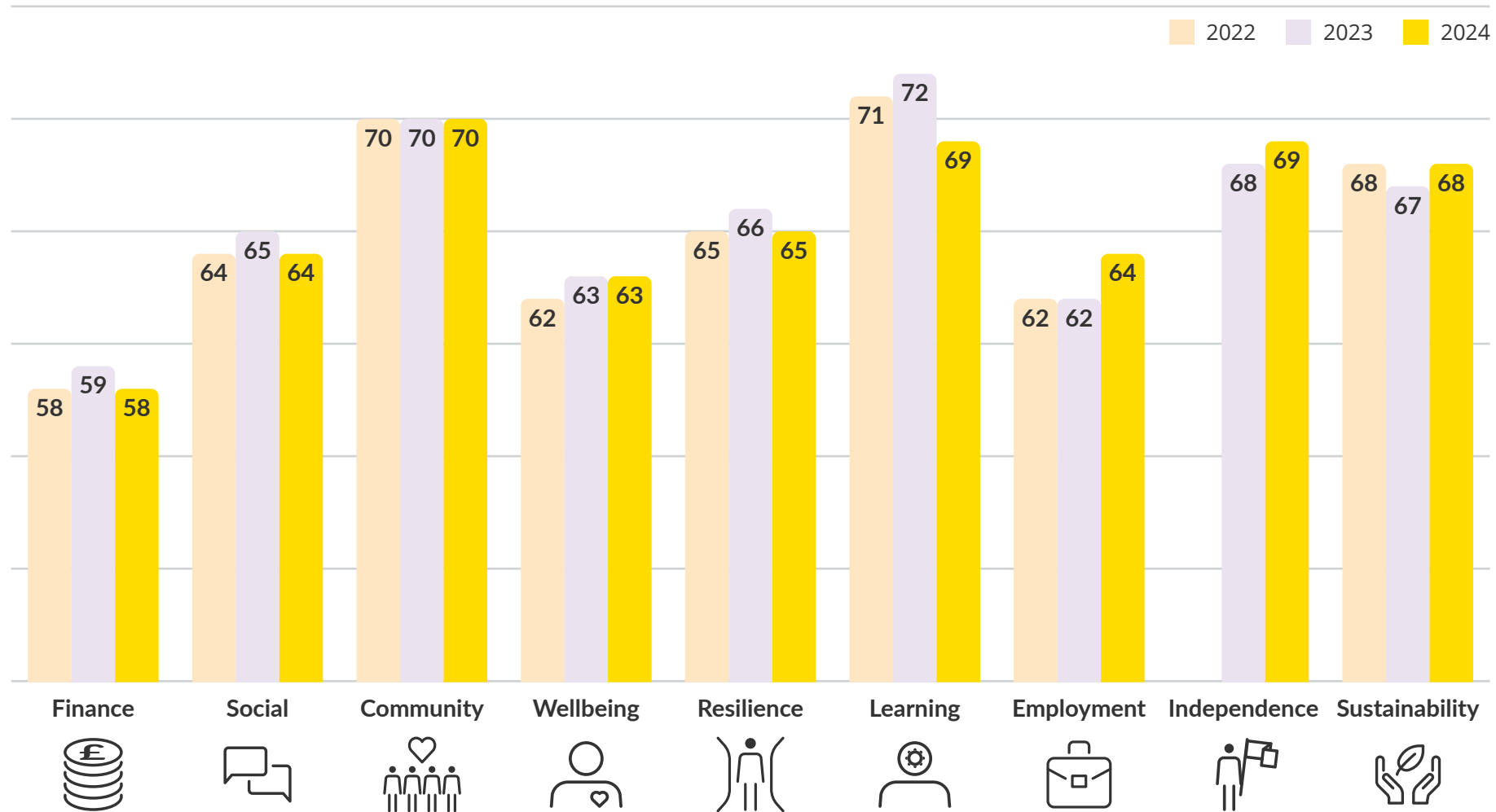
Demographic data about gender identity and sexuality was collected via three distinct questions: a question about sexuality, a question about gender and the question 'Do you consider yourself to be trans?' Responses from applicants that answered 'Yes' to this latter question, and/or gave 'non-binary' as their gender identity, are categorised trans/non-binary in the report. A separate 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/non-binary applicants, they are categorised as LGBTQ+.

Socioeconomic group

Socioeconomic breakdown of the results uses the NRS (National Readership Survey) Social Grade system, which assigns a category based on the main wage earner in the participant's current household. There are six categories: A, B, C1, C2, D and E. Roughly, A represents the most affluent households and E the least affluent. A full definition of these categories can be found in the Methodology section.



The Applicant Index Scores 2022-24



Introducing the Themes



The **Finance** theme brings together self-rated financial means with confidence in budgeting skills to provide an overall financial health check on the whole cohort. 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.



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 together with confidence in the university - and accommodation provider where relevant - to provide an inclusive environment.



The **Community** theme measures the level of motivation among applicants to be part of a community while at university, and their 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 each cohort.



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. These scores are combined to gauge applicants' level of wellbeing and allow for demographic breakdown to help identify vulnerable groups. A high score indicates a cohort with high levels of wellbeing.



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 recover from setbacks.



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.



The **Employment** theme assesses the level of optimism about finding a graduate job together with self-rated level of work-related skills and experience. A high score indicates a cohort that is already feeling prepared for the future job market and confident about their prospects.



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



The **Sustainability** theme combines the 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.

2

Thematic Analysis



Finance

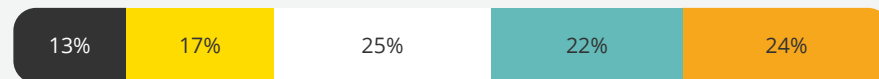
58

▼ Down 1 from 2023

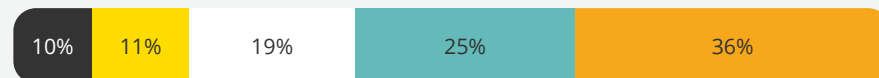
The Finance score indicates the level of confidence in financial means and skills.

Figure 1: Breakdown of responses to Finance theme questions

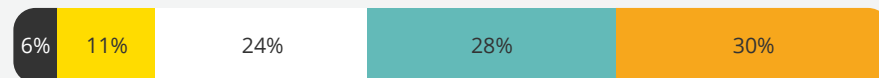
I will have enough money to cover my costs at university



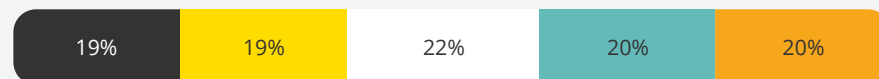
I have family or friends that I would feel comfortable about asking for financial help if needed



I am confident that I can budget and manage my money whilst at university



*Financial issues are affecting my mental health



Strongly disagree
Moderately disagree
Neutral
Moderately agree
Strongly agree

Overall, financial confidence among this year's cohort is slightly down compared to last year, and equal to 2022 – the early stages of the cost of living crisis. The main changes are in relation to confidence in budgeting skills, which is slightly lower than last year. This year 58% of applicants are confident in their budgeting skills compared to 63% last year. Additionally, two in five applicants (40%) agree that financial issues are affecting their mental health, an increase from 37% last year.

International applicants are significantly more confident in their level of funds, family support and budgeting skills than UK applicants, and yet they are also more likely to say that financial issues are affecting their mental health at 47%, compared to 38% among UK applicants.

Among UK applicants, there is no indication of a 'squeezed middle', as for each of the finance index questions the higher the social-economic group, the higher the confidence in financial support and sufficiency of funds. Similarly, those in socioeconomic groups C2 and D are significantly more likely than A-C1 groups to agree that financial

issues are affecting their mental health. Additionally, 45% of applicants who have qualified for free school meals say that financial issues affect their mental health.

Those who were applying for a degree apprenticeship scored lower in this theme than those applying for a traditional degree. They were less likely to agree they have family and friends they could turn to, and less confident in their budgeting skills.

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

Paid work

Slightly more applicants have undertaken paid work this year (70%) compared to last year (68%). They worked a range of weekly hours with the most common being 10-19 hours per week (44%), however 9% were working more than 40 hours. Age is the most significant driver of higher levels of paid work, with no real independent demographic effect. The lower level of paid work seen among LGBTQ+ applicants last year was not replicated, with LGBTQ+ applicants being just as likely to have carried out part time work this year.

Applicants who have worked are more likely to think they will have enough money to cover their costs in higher education, though there is no effect on the other three questions within the Finance theme.

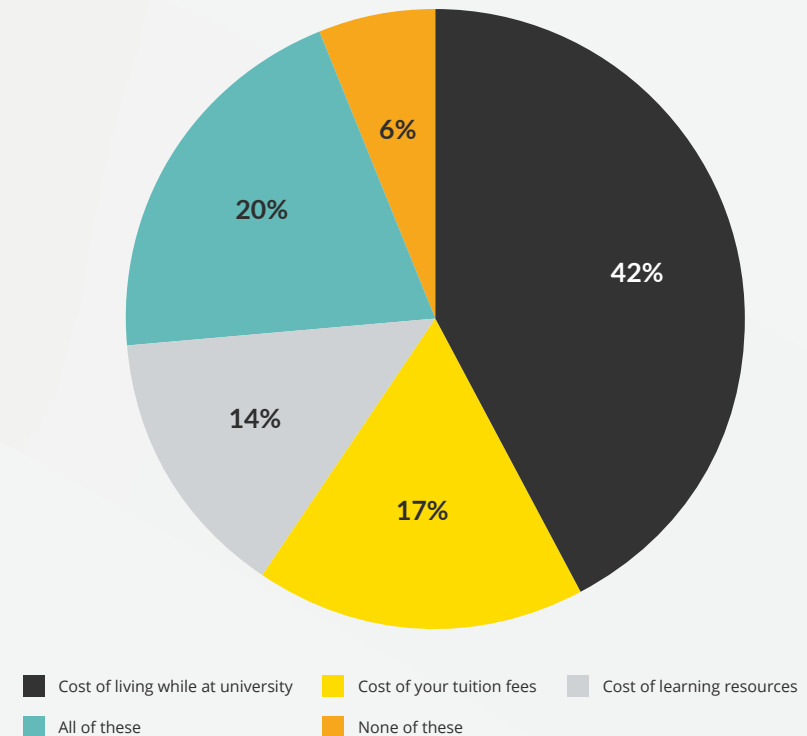
Cost concerns

The cost of living while at university is the greatest single financial concern among applicants (42%) though one in five are concerned about all the costs associated with university. Female applicants are more concerned than male applicants when it comes to living costs, and 9% of male applicants are not concerned about any of the costs compared with 5% of female applicants.

International applicants pay a higher tuition fee, so it is unsurprising to find that they are more concerned about this cost (23%) and around a quarter (24%) are concerned about all areas of cost. However, compared to UK applicants they are less likely to have living costs as their primary concern.

There are no significant differences in the profile of cost concern by socioeconomic group, but those who have qualified for free school meals are more likely to be concerned about all costs.

Figure 2: When thinking about the cost of going to university, which of the following is of greatest concern to you?



Planning for living costs

We asked applicants how they expect to cover the majority of their living costs while at university. A third intend to draw on maintenance loans or grants, and about a quarter (24%) plan to depend on family for the majority of their costs. The 17% who said they would use income from employment mostly (though not entirely) intend to live in their own or parents' home.

Female applicants are more likely to anticipate relying on maintenance loans whereas male applicants are more likely to anticipate drawing on family support and scholarships. As might be expected, international applicants are much more likely to use family financial support and scholarships, though 9% still expect to draw on student loans or grants. This may indicate that they or their families are taking out loans in their home country to support them to attend a UK university.

Figure 3: How do you expect to cover the majority of your living costs while at university?

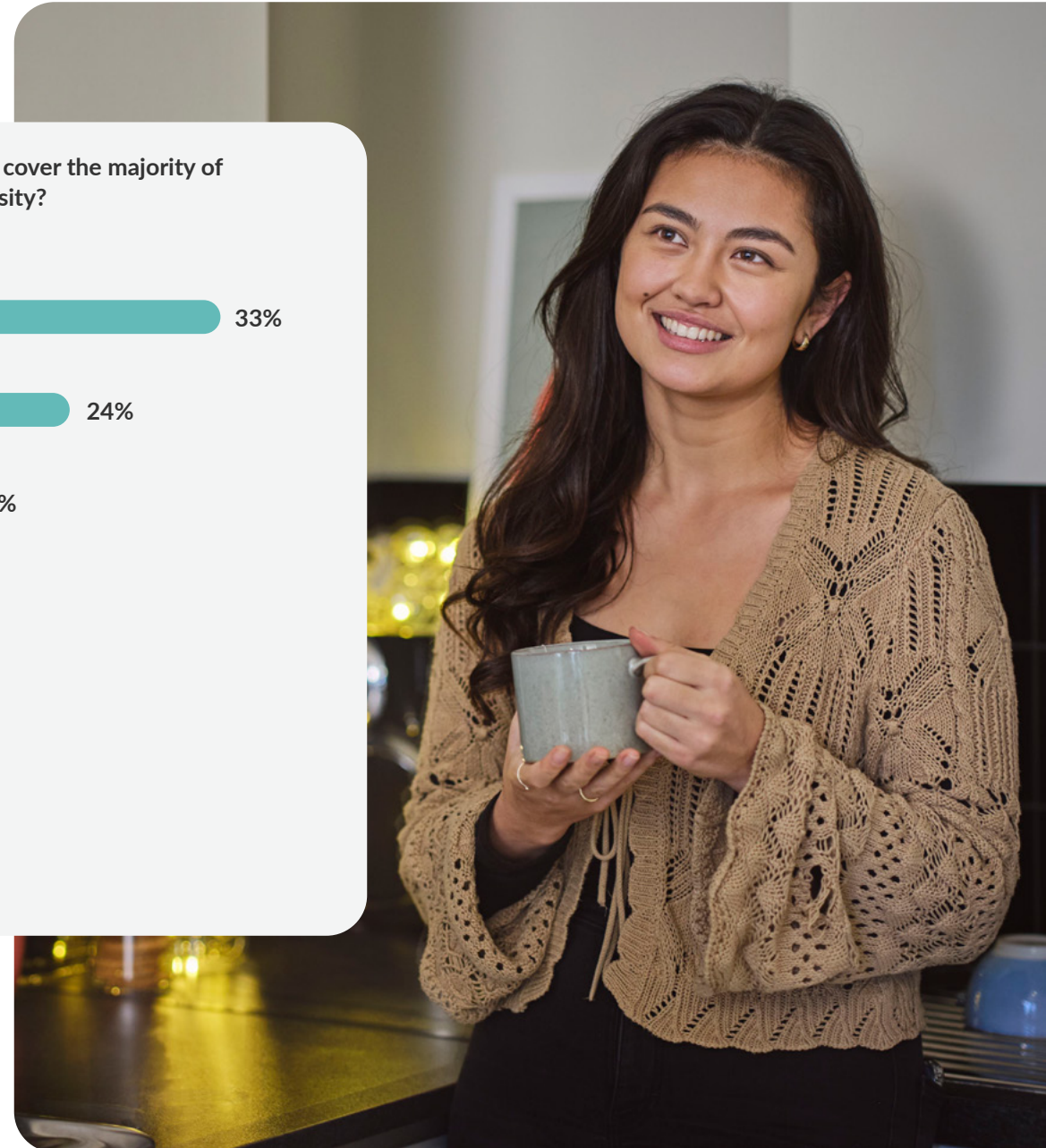
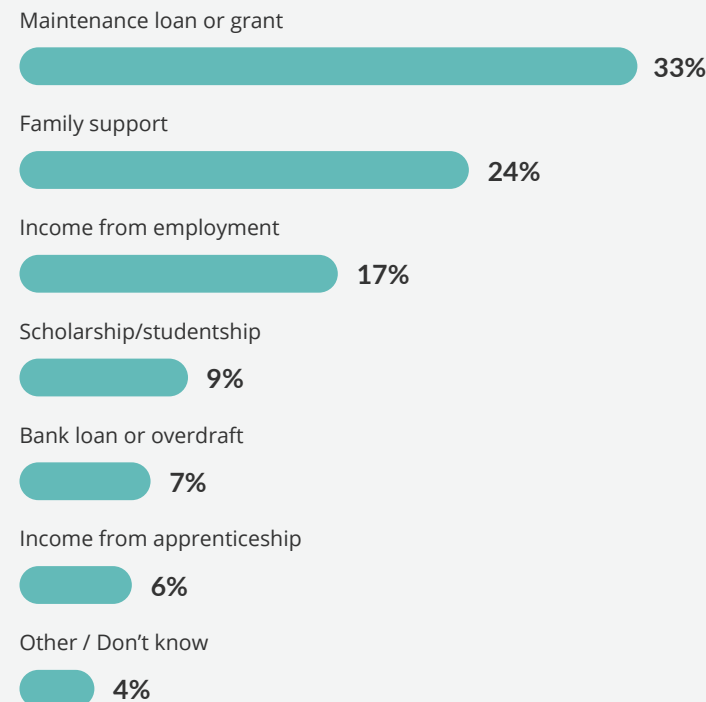
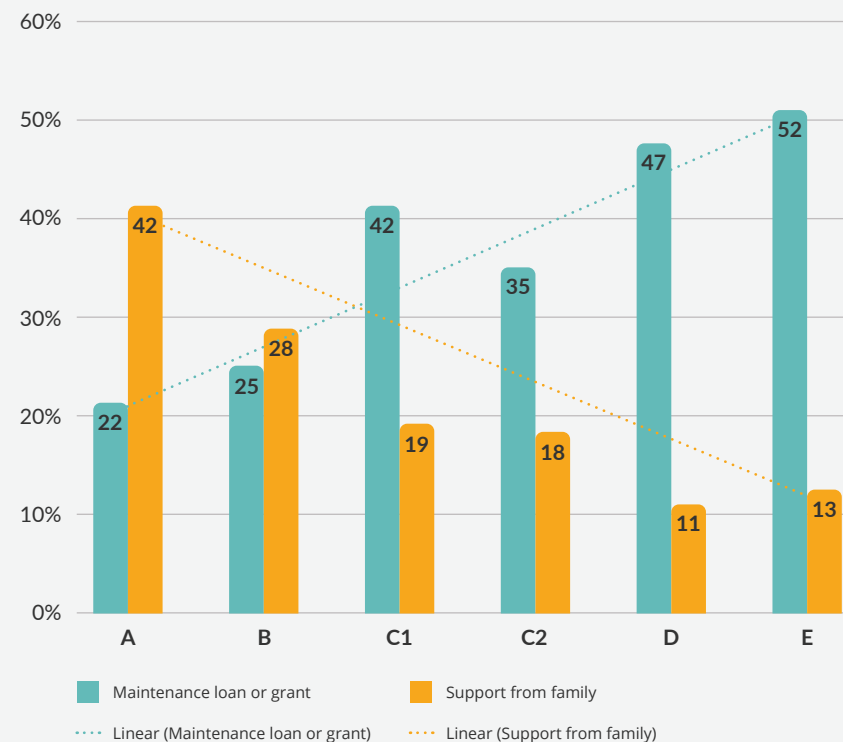




Figure 4: How do you expect to cover the majority of your living costs while at university – broken down by socioeconomic group*



There is a clear trend in planned use of maintenance loans and grants versus family support between socioeconomic groups, whereas use of scholarships and other methods are

more consistent across these groups. This means that students from more affluent backgrounds are more likely to enter the workforce with lower debt, perpetuating wealth inequality.

*For more information about socioeconomic groups, please refer to our notes on socioeconomic groups on page 9 and 43.

Accommodation choices

Overall, 39% of applicants intend to live in university halls in their first year, with a further 9% intending to live in private purpose-built student accommodation. About a quarter (23%) intend to live at their parents' home. Surprisingly, international applicants were less likely to intend to live in halls, and more likely to want to live in private rented housing or in a home that they own. This is possibly due to different cultural understandings of student accommodation options.

Among UK applicants there are marked differences between socioeconomic groups. In groups AB, only 18% intend to live in their parents' home. This increases incrementally by social grade, with 33% of groups DE intending to live at home. UCAS **End of Cycle Data 2023** showed that 33% of all applicants intended to live at home, suggesting that the actual rate is more common in practice than the Applicant Index data suggests.

Nonetheless, despite rising living costs (and 42% of applicants indicating living costs as their greatest cost concern) there does not yet seem to be a large scale move towards commuter student life.

Impact of cost of living on university choice

Applicants were asked to describe, in their own words, how the cost of living has affected their university choice, if at all. While the majority of responses were neutral, 22% shared negative themes related to costs associated with university. The location of the university was mentioned by one in five, and 17% mentioned that their choice of university would be affected.

In terms of location, a common theme was making a choice constrained by financial considerations. This included choosing to live at home although, as mentioned above, rates of living at home do not seem to have increased.



“

I know tuition fees are expensive and I'm not sure how I'd pay for them so I chose universities close to my home or in my city to save on costs such as accommodation.

“

Neither me or my household members can afford for me to move out, so I had to only look into universities that are in London that I can access through public transport.

“

My parents are divorced; the parent I live with is unemployed. I took a gap year to earn my own money from employment, and have chosen a university close to home so I do not have to cover accommodation costs.

Others talked about moving away to university but living closer to home so that travel back would be cheaper. Comments about choosing more budget-friendly cities – or sometimes cheaper locations within a city – were also common. A number of applicants were specifically avoiding London due to cost of living there, and some were purposely focusing their choices on towns and cities in the North of England.

“

I chose more northern cities in hopes it would be a bit cheaper. I did not apply to London universities even though one had a course I liked.

Some wrote of their disappointment at not being able to apply to their preferred choice, and concerns about their future student experience.

“

There was one university that I loved but I can't afford accommodation which meant I had to go for a university closer to home rather than moving away.

As this is the first time we have asked this question of applicants, we don't know how much this differs from the usual choice-making process that applicants experience, but it is an area that would benefit from further research.

“

Chosen universities that are closer to home to minimise transport costs.

“

The uni that is currently my first choice I feel is definitely more on the expensive side in terms of living and currently with everything getting more expensive I may have to decide to choose a city which is definitely cheaper.



Social

64

▼ Down 1 from 2023

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

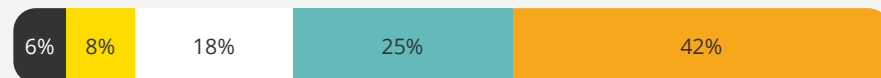
Compared to last year, 2024 applicants are a little less likely to have good relationships with family and friends (77% v 80%), and to have people they can turn to in a crisis (67% v 70%). This year there is a 25 percentage point difference in having good relationships with family and friends between socioeconomic group A (83%) and group E (58%).

Figure 5: Breakdown of responses to Social theme questions

On the whole, I have good relationships with family and friends



I have people I can turn to in a crisis



I get on well with other students at my school/college



*I'm anxious that I won't fit in at university



Strongly disagree Moderately disagree Neutral Moderately agree Strongly agree

Over two thirds (67%) of applicants agree that they have people they could turn to in a crisis, though female applicants show a stronger level of agreement compared to male applicants. Care experienced and estranged applicants are, understandably, less likely to agree. There is also a socioeconomic effect, with applicants from the DE groups significantly less likely to have people they could turn to in a crisis.

This effect is likely to compound existing disadvantage unless strategies are in place to normalise the use of university support channels among applicants from these groups.

In line with last year's results, about half (49%) of this year's applicants are anxious that they won't fit in. Female applicants are more anxious that they won't fit in (54%) than male applicants (41%).

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



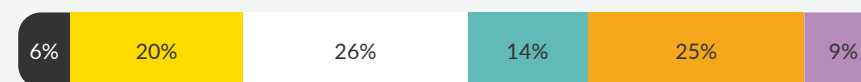
Loneliness

Levels of loneliness among applicants seem to be more polarised this year. More applicants are lonely all or most of the time (26% compared to 24% in 2023) but at the same time more are rarely or never lonely this year (34% compared to 31% in 2023). For this year's applicants, loneliness tends to co-exist with disadvantage: applicants with a disability or health condition are considerably more likely to be always or often lonely (43%) and loneliness increases dramatically between socioeconomic group A (22%) and group E (54%).

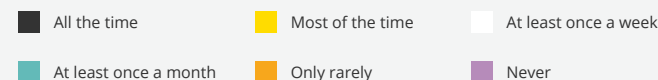
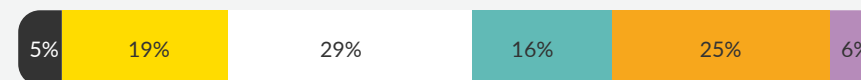
For this year's applicants, loneliness tends to co-exist with disadvantage: applicants with a disability or health condition are considerably more likely to be always or often lonely.

Figure 6: How often do you feel lonely?
Comparison of 2023 and 2024 data

2024



2023





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 7: Breakdown of responses to Community theme questions

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



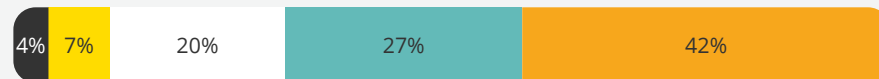
I look forward to making friends from different backgrounds



*I have little interest in the social side of university



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



Strongly disagree Moderately disagree Neutral Moderately agree Strongly agree

Overall, little has changed in this theme over the last two years, with consistent interest in the community aspects of higher education and a strong desire to belong among all demographics. However, this year's applicants are more likely to say they have little interest in the social side of university (31% v 25%).

International applicants, and Chinese applicants particularly, are significantly less interested in the social side of university compared to domestic applicants. The improved representation of Chinese students in this year's sample is partly – though not entirely – responsible for the change.

Despite current concerns about the widening divisions in society, it is reassuring that the proportion of applicants who look forward to making friends from different backgrounds is both high (81%) and stable.

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

Welcome and Belonging

International applicants feel more assured of their level of welcome and belonging when they arrive at university compared to UK applicants. But despite many years of widening participation efforts, working class applicants are much less confident of their welcome and sense of belonging compared to their more affluent peers.

Around two thirds (68%) of applicants think they will be welcome at university, and this rises to almost three quarters (73%) among international applicants. However, working class applicants are much less sure of their welcome with a 20 percentage point difference between socioeconomic groups A and E. Those who

qualified for free school meals expected to feel welcome at a lower rate (60%) than those who did not (70%). Similarly, disabled applicants are less confident of their welcome. Almost a fifth (18%) of those with a physical or sensory disability did not expect to feel welcome compared to 6% of applicants with no disability.

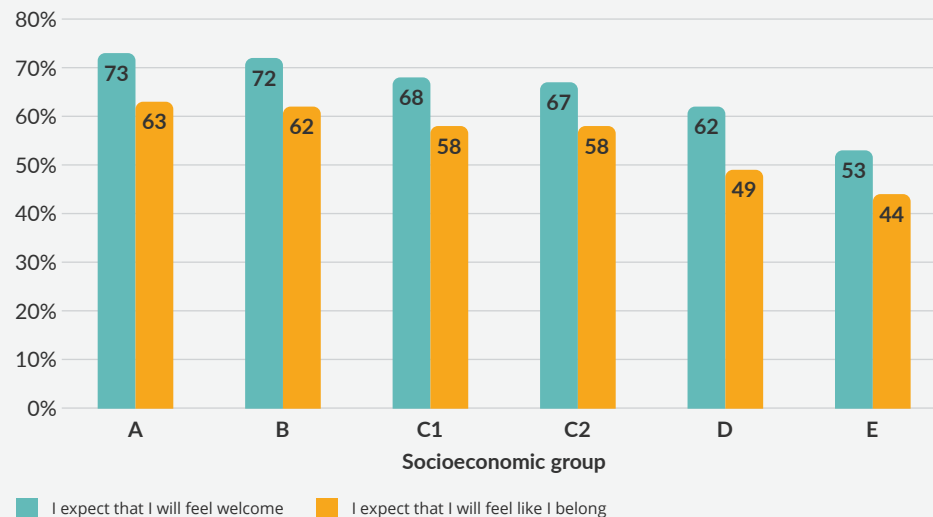
When it comes to belonging, well over half (58%) of applicants expect to feel like they belong when they first go to university. Female applicants are less confident about this at 52%, whereas two thirds of male applicants (67%) agree. An anticipated sense of belonging is higher among international applicants (69%) and, poignantly, among applicants who have been in care (64%). However LGBTQ+ applicants, and those who are neurodivergent or have a mental health condition, are less likely to believe they will belong.

There is also a strong socioeconomic effect here too, with anticipated sense of belonging declining steadily from group A to E. And yet the vast majority (80%) of applicants from all socioeconomic groups are equally keen to belong.

Culture shock

International applicants are not alone in anticipating a culture shock when they first arrive at university. While 57% of international applicants agree that it will be difficult to get used to the culture, 46% of UK applicants also agree. Care experienced applicants are more likely even than international applicants to anticipate a culture shock, at 63%.

Figure 8: Comparison of the percentage of applicants that agree they expect to feel welcome and a sense of belonging by socioeconomic group



Working class applicants are much less confident of their welcome and sense of belonging compared to their more affluent peers.

Wellbeing

63

◀▶ No change

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

Figure 9: Breakdown of responses to Wellbeing theme questions

I feel loved



*I feel ashamed



*I feel rejected by others



I feel capable of making decisions



Strongly disagree
Moderately disagree
Neutral
Moderately agree
Strongly agree

The scores for this theme are the same as last year, sustaining the improvement between 2022 and 2023.

However, there are higher levels of shame among the applicant population this year. Male and non-binary applicants have higher levels of shame than female applicants. LGBTQ+ applicants are more likely to feel ashamed, as are care leavers. Additionally, more than half of applicants who are ethnically Chinese (58%) feel ashamed – the overwhelming majority of these are international students from China.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) Standard Wellbeing Measures use a 0-10 scale to assess the level of self-reported life satisfaction, feeling that life is worthwhile, happiness and anxiety across the population. Results are reported in terms of the percentage of the population that reports the highest levels (score of 9 or 10) in the first three questions, and the lowest levels (0 or 1) of anxiety.

For the first time, applicant wellbeing scores using the ONS standard measures have returned approximately to pre-pandemic levels, as shown in Figure 10. Scores in each of the questions have increased meaningfully, beyond the margin of error. However, this encouraging finding has been strongly affected by the increasing proportion of international applicants in the sample over recent years, reflecting their growth within the student population. International applicants score more positively on each of the four indicators, and when comparing results for UK applicants the scores are still somewhat lower than they were five years ago - see Figure 11.

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

Figure 10: Responses to ONS Standard Wellbeing Measures for higher education applicants 2019-2024

Results are reported in terms of the percentage of the population that reports the highest levels (score of 9 or 10) in the first three questions, and the lowest levels (0 or 1) of anxiety.

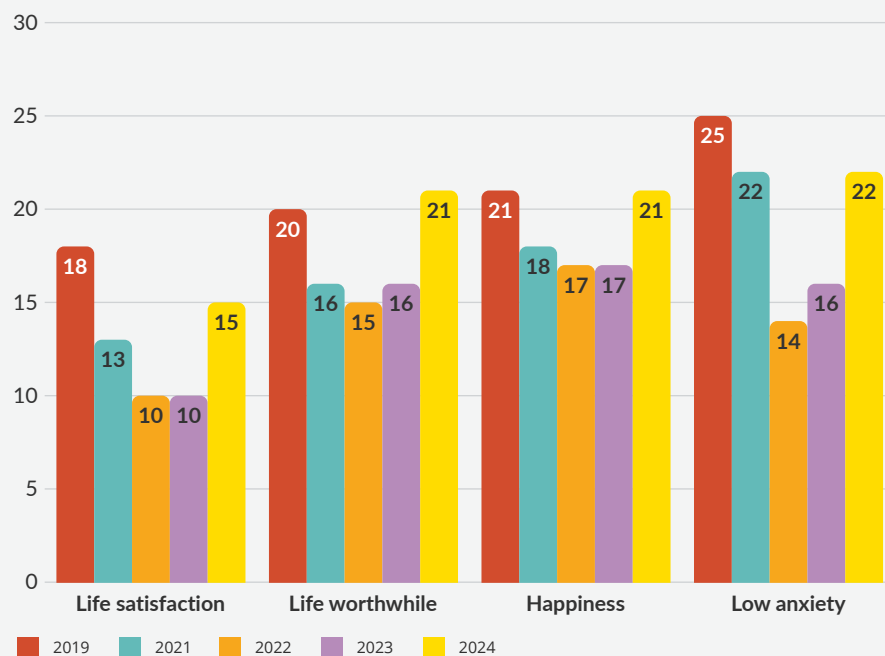
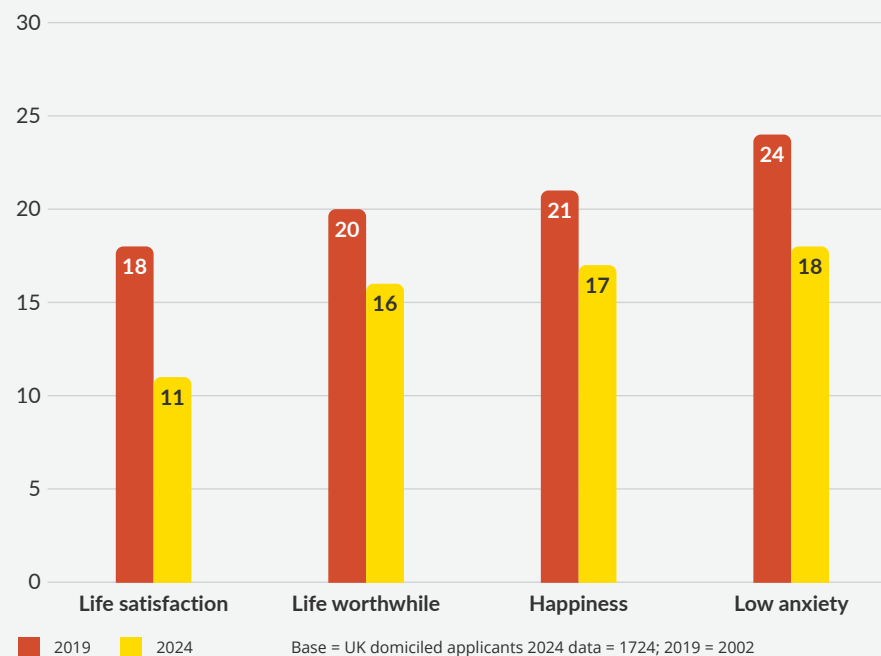


Figure 11: Responses to ONS Standard Wellbeing Measures for higher education applicants 2019-2024 – UK domiciled applicants only

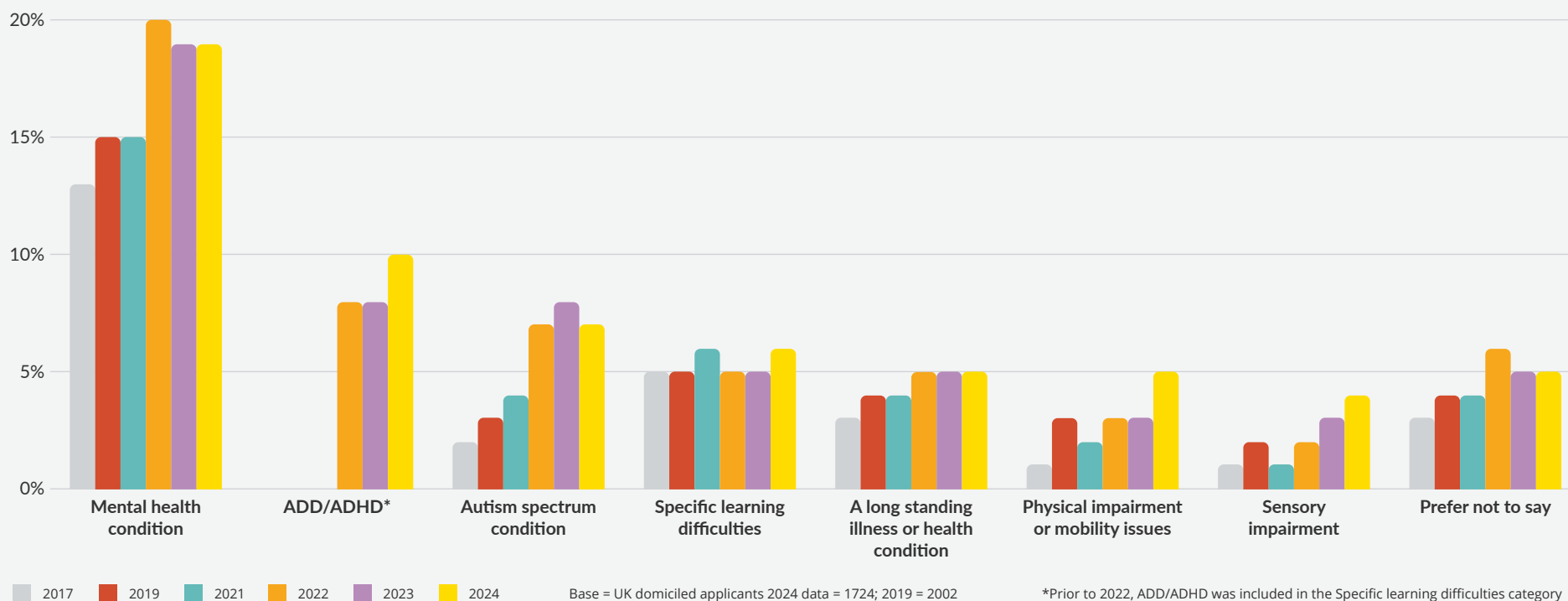


Disabilities and health conditions

Rates of disability and health conditions rose sharply among the applicant population between 2017 and 2021. They have remained largely stable over the last three years, but there are rises in the proportion of applicants with ADHD, physical or mobility impairments and sensory

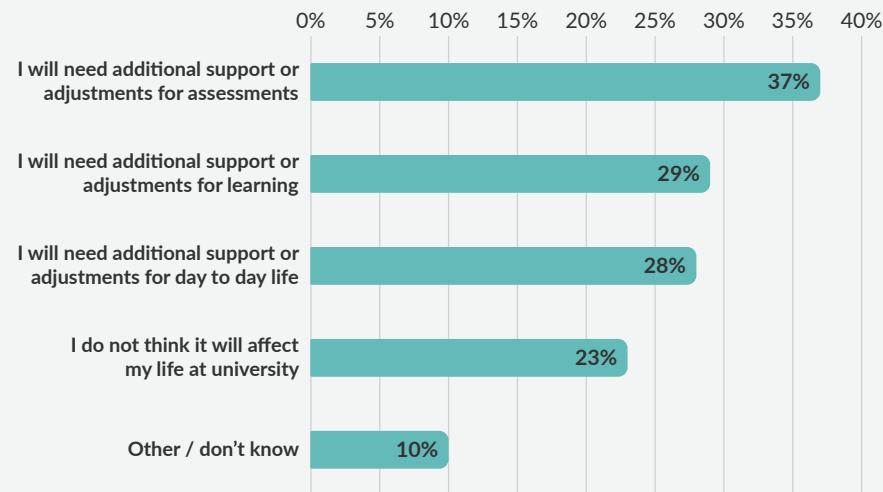
impairments. Improved awareness and diagnosis may be driving the higher incidence of ADHD, but the rise in physical and sensory impairments within the applicant population may be linked to improved support for disabled students in schools, colleges and universities.

Figure 12: Incidence of self-reported disability among the applicant population 2017-2024



Applicants with a disability were asked how they thought it would affect their life at university. Over a third (37%) will need additional support or adjustments for assessment, equating to 13% of the applicant population.

Figure 13: How, if at all, do you think your disability or condition will affect your life at university?

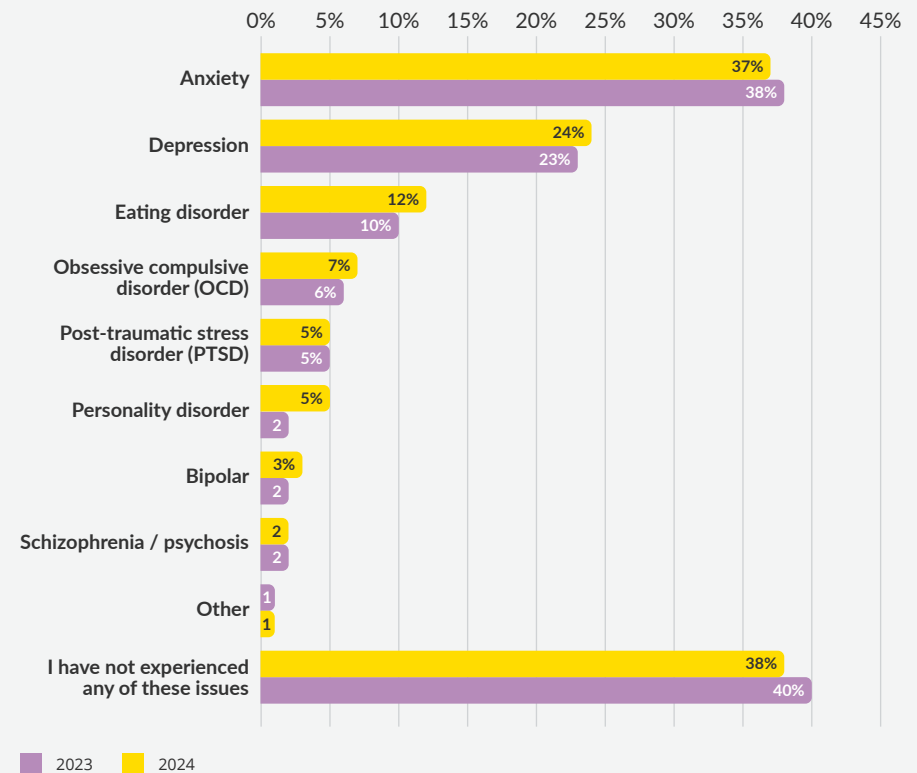


Base = 798 (applicants with a disability or health condition)

Mental health

Separately from the disability questions, all applicants were asked about their experience of mental health issues over the last two years. As was the case last year, there are more applicants who consider themselves to have experienced one or more mental health condition over the last two years than those who consider they have a mental health condition in the context of a question about disability.

Figure 14: Which, if any, of the following best describe any mental health issues you have experienced in the last two years. Comparison of 2023 and 2024 data



The pattern of mental health issues experienced is similar to last year, with over a third (37%) experiencing anxiety and about quarter (24%) experiencing depression. The prevalence of personality disorders within the cohort has more than doubled from 2023 to 2024, rising to 5%. The rate of eating disorders (12%) has also increased this year and is more common among female applicants and those who are LGB+.

Neurodivergent applicants are more likely to experience a mental health issue than average, with only 11% reporting they have not experienced any mental health issues. Anxiety and depression are particularly elevated within this population, but there are also higher rates of eating disorder and OCD.

Resilience

65

▼ Down 1 from 2023

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

This year's applicants are slightly less confident in their self-efficacy skills compared to last year. They are less likely to agree that they always meet deadlines (67% v 71% in 2023). They are also less persistent in the face of failure – this year 34% agree that if they do badly at something they don't like to try again, compared to 32% in 2023.

International applicants – and especially those from China – score themselves significantly higher in each of these areas except the fourth: they are less likely to try again after failure.

Lower scores in the first three areas are seen among applicants who may be marginalised: those who are LGBTQ+, and those with disabilities and health conditions. Care experienced applicants are less likely to take on discomfort for long term gain, or to have a clear idea of their goals.

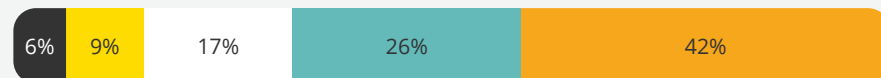
There are few differences between socioeconomic groups, but applicants from group A are significantly clearer about their goals.

Figure 15: Breakdown of responses to Resilience theme questions

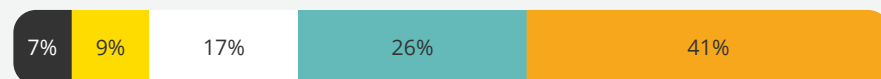
I am willing to take on short term discomfort for long term gain



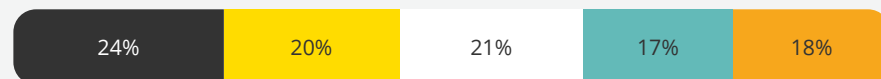
I have a clear idea of my goals



I always meet deadlines



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



Strongly disagree
Moderately disagree
Neutral
Moderately agree
Strongly agree

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

Learning

69

▼ Down 3 from 2023

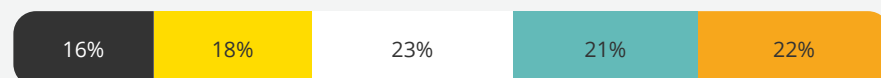
The Learning score measures academic confidence among the cohort, combined with the level of comfort with course choice.

Figure 16: Breakdown of responses to Learning theme questions

My chosen course is a good fit for me



*I think I will struggle to keep up with other students on my course



I am sure I will complete my course



I'm confident I can learn the knowledge and skills needed for my course



Strongly disagree
Moderately disagree
Neutral
Moderately agree
Strongly agree

This theme has seen the largest change in score since last year, with a three-point drop overall compared to 2023. This change is driven by more negative responses overall in each of the four questions.

This year, 43% of applicants – and almost half of male applicants (47%) – think they will struggle to keep up with other students compared with 35% in 2023. Although the last three cohorts were directly affected by the pandemic there seems to have been a stronger impact on academic confidence among this year's cohort. Over half of international applicants (55%) think they will struggle to keep up with others on their course, rising to 62% of applicants who are ethnically Chinese, of which the vast majority are international students from China. Care leavers are also more likely to think that they will struggle to keep up with others (61%) but levels are no higher than the average among estranged applicants.

Most applicants are confident that they will complete their course, but Asian and Asian British applicants are slightly less confident. LGBTQ+ and care experienced and estranged applicants are also less confident about completing their course, as are applicants with a disability.

While most applicants are confident they can learn the knowledge and skills needed for their course, White applicants (86%) are more confident than Asian (78%) and Black (76%) applicants, which has relevance to the BAME awarding gap. There is also a lower level of confidence among care experienced (70%) and estranged applicants (66%). For this question there is a steady decline in confidence between socioeconomic groups A (85%) and E (68%) – a pattern that is not replicated in other questions within this theme.

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

The impact of the Covid pandemic

Those leaving school this year had the first part of their GCSE years, or equivalent, disrupted by the Covid pandemic. This year we offered participants the opportunity to talk about the impact of the pandemic in their own words in a free-text box, responding to the question “How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected your life since 2020, if at all?”

Most participants chose to answer this question and a common theme arising from these comments was loss. Applicants felt a sense of loss in several different areas – learning, social opportunities, trips and work experience – and a sense of lost time.

“

Put a pause on my learning, I felt robbed of two years of growth and development.

In addition to missing out on sections of the curriculum, and their experience of poor-quality learning during lockdowns, a sizeable number said they were struggling with motivation, concentration and study skills in the aftermath of the pandemic.

“

Affected me a lot haven’t been able to concentrate academically since the pandemic.

“

Felt like I missed out on a lot of my teenage years, time kind of stopped and now all of a sudden I’m supposed to be going to uni.

“

I feel that I was not able to gain exam skills and various other school skills during my GCSE exams which then reflected and transferred to my A-Levels.



The impact of the Covid pandemic

A few wrote about taking an additional year or more to complete their A-levels or equivalent, or mentioned taking time out of education altogether.

Mental health impacts were also mentioned frequently, especially anxiety. A common theme was the loss of social opportunities, leading in some cases to ongoing social anxiety and isolation. Words such as “lonely”, “shy” and “introverted” were used to self-describe the way they have felt since the pandemic.

“

I think it made me more shy and less comfortable around many people because I didn't have contact with other people for a long time.

“

I now prefer to work and study at home rather than outside.

“

Not as social/few social skills so more anxious about socialising.

In some cases, this has affected their confidence in relation to university.

“

I think I became more anxious and found public speaking more difficult afterwards. I became less social too so I'm a bit scared for uni.

The prevalence of these comments suggests that this cohort may find it particularly challenging to make social connections when they first go to university. Although they are not the first cohort to have their social development interrupted, previous cohorts were older and had more established social skills when the lockdowns began.

Additionally some struggled with health anxieties, including OCD, both during and after the pandemic. Others had experienced temporary or ongoing ill health directly relating to Covid, or had lost loved ones in the pandemic.

However the pandemic was not a negative experience for all. Some were neutral about it and few experienced a period of calm and self discovery.

“

I've become more religious and I used that time to get to know myself, my roots & my values which helped me to figure out what I wanted from life and where I want to go. It definitely helped me mentally as well because I got a break from the pressure of school.

Sadly, comments like these were very infrequent.



School absence

School absence due to mental health* has increased sharply this year and may lead to higher levels of absence from formal learning at university.

Over a third (36%) of this year's applicants have missed school or college over the last two years due to their mental health; a significant increase from 30% last year. The figure rises to 39% among UK domiciled applicants. Given the qualitative feedback outlined in the previous section, this finding is disappointing but not surprising. The sharp increase in school absence compared to last year lends support to the theory that social anxiety is particularly acute in this cohort.

Over one in four (42%) female applicants have missed education due to mental health compared to 27% of male applicants. Female applicants were also more likely to have experienced longer absences. Other groups affected are those dealing with neurodivergent conditions, of which 65% said they have missed school (up from 49% in 2023).

Almost two thirds (64%) of LGB+ applicants and 81% of trans/non-binary applicants had missed education due to their mental health. Rates are also significantly higher among care experienced and estranged applicants, those from the lowest socioeconomic group and those who had qualified for free school meals, risking a perpetuation of disadvantage.

The duration of absence due to mental health is very similar to last year, with a quarter being absent for 20 or more days. This equates to 9% of all applicants having missed more than four weeks of learning, and 12% of female applicants. Additionally, around one in five (19%) of all LGB+ applicants have missed more than four weeks' learning. The data also suggests that care experienced and estranged applicants, and working class applicants, will also have significantly higher rates of long term absence due to mental health, but sample sizes are too small to generate a reliable figure.

Among those who had been absent, 43% thought they would need to miss teaching time at university due to their mental health, equating to 15% of the total applicant population. Rates were significantly higher among care leavers and those with a disability or mental health condition.

*Questions in this section were only asked of respondents who had been in education in the last two years (base=2132)



Employment

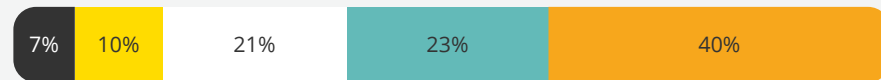
64

▲ Up 2 from 2023

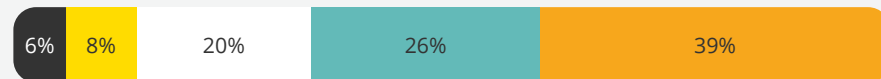
The Employment score measures applicants' confidence in their graduate employment prospects together with their employability skills and experience.

Figure 17: Breakdown of responses to Employment theme questions

I am confident about getting the job I want after graduation



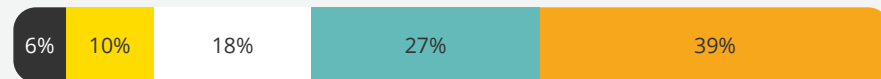
I have skills and experience that employers want



I already have a lot of work experience



I have taken part in activities to develop my skills for employment



Strongly disagree
Moderately disagree
Neutral
Moderately agree
Strongly agree

The employment theme score has increased by two points this year, partly due to increased confidence, however there are demographic differences across these scores.

This year, 40% strongly agree that they are confident about getting the job they want, compared with 34% last year. This may be driven by better opportunities for work experience among this cohort. This year's applicants have higher levels of perceived work experience (52% v 47% in 2023) and are slightly more likely to have taken on paid work (70% v 68%).

International applicants score notably higher across all questions than UK applicants. Among UK applicants, those from AB socioeconomic groups are the most confident in their job prospects.

When it comes to getting the job they want after graduation, those who have done paid work have a similar level of confidence than those who have not, even though they agree more strongly with the other three statements in this theme.

Against each of the statements, male applicants scored themselves higher than female applicants did.



Independence

69

▲ Up 1 from 2023

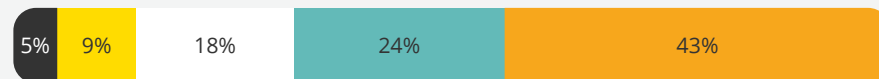
The Independence score measures confidence in self-efficacy skills relevant to starting university, including ability to access support.

This year, confidence is slightly up across all statements in this theme, with male applicants and international applicants being particularly confident. For example, three quarters (75%) of male applicants are confident about living independently at university compared to under two thirds (63%) of female applicants.

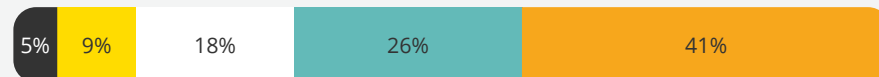
Applicants with a disability, mental health condition or who are neurodivergent, and LGBTQ+ applicants, are less confident than their peers in each of these areas.

Figure 18: Breakdown of responses to Independence theme questions

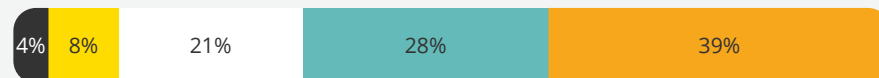
I am confident about living independently at university



I know where to go to access external support (healthcare etc) if I need it



I feel confident about addressing issues related to my studies and living situation independently



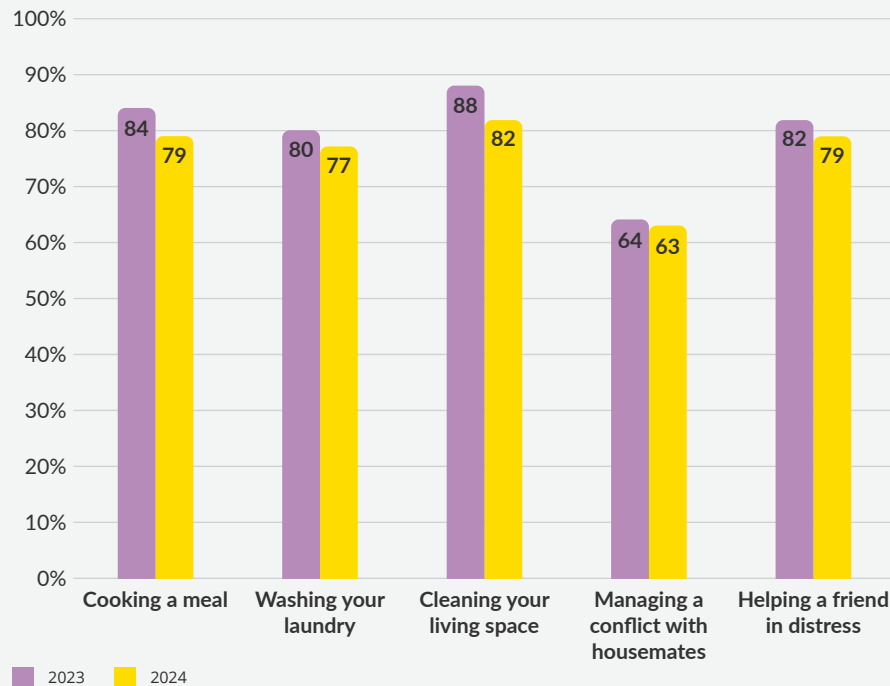
I feel confident in making decisions for myself



Strongly disagree
Moderately disagree
Neutral
Moderately agree
Strongly agree

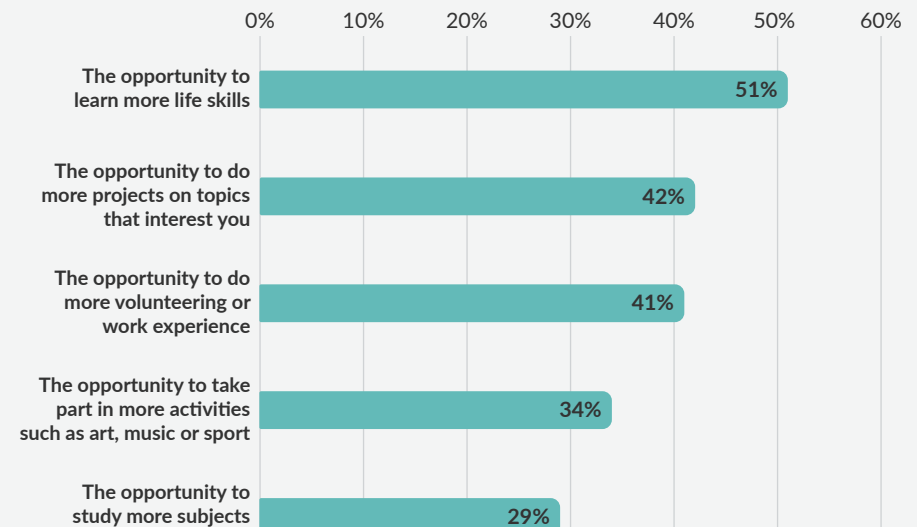
When it comes to specific practical life skills (cooking, laundry, cleaning), and helping a friend in distress, this year's cohort are less confident than last year's.

Figure 19: Percentage of applicants that agree they are confident about key life skills, comparison between 2024 and 2023



When asked how they have learned their skills, half of all applicants learned practical skills from their parents (female applicants significantly more than male). However, when it comes to the relationship skills (managing conflict, helping a friend in distress) only 22% have learned these from parents. Almost a third (29%) are self-taught and 20% have learned from friends. A minority (7%) have learned these skills from social media, rising to 9% among male applicants.

Figure 20: Thinking about your education of the past two years, which of the following opportunities would you have liked?



About half (51%) of applicants would have liked to learn more life skills as part of their education over the past two years. There was also support for an enriched curriculum with more projects, work experience, arts and sport. There was, however, limited support for learning a broader range of academic subjects.

Sustainability

68

▲ Up 1 from 2023

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

Commitment to sustainability has increased this year, largely driven by more applicants making sacrifices to live more sustainably (53% compared to 48% in 2023).

Male applicants (58%) and applicants over 21 (64%) are more likely to agree with this statement, as are international applicants (70%). Apart from these differences, applicants from different backgrounds are united in their largely positive attitude towards sustainability.

Figure 21: Breakdown of responses to Sustainability theme questions

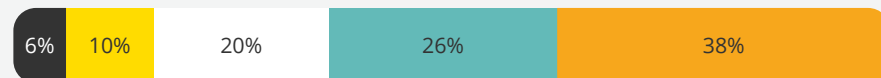
I recycle



I have made sacrifices so that I can live more sustainably



I am careful about my use of water and electricity



It is extremely important to address climate change



Strongly disagree
Moderately disagree
Neutral
Moderately agree
Strongly agree

3

Topical issues



The Transition to Higher Education

This section provides additional insights based on this year's survey. The transition from school or college to higher education is an important policy issue which we have tracked since our 'Reality Check' report in 2017. Earlier this year, Unite Students published a [report on the transition to university](#) in partnership with the Office of the Higher Education Student Support Champion.

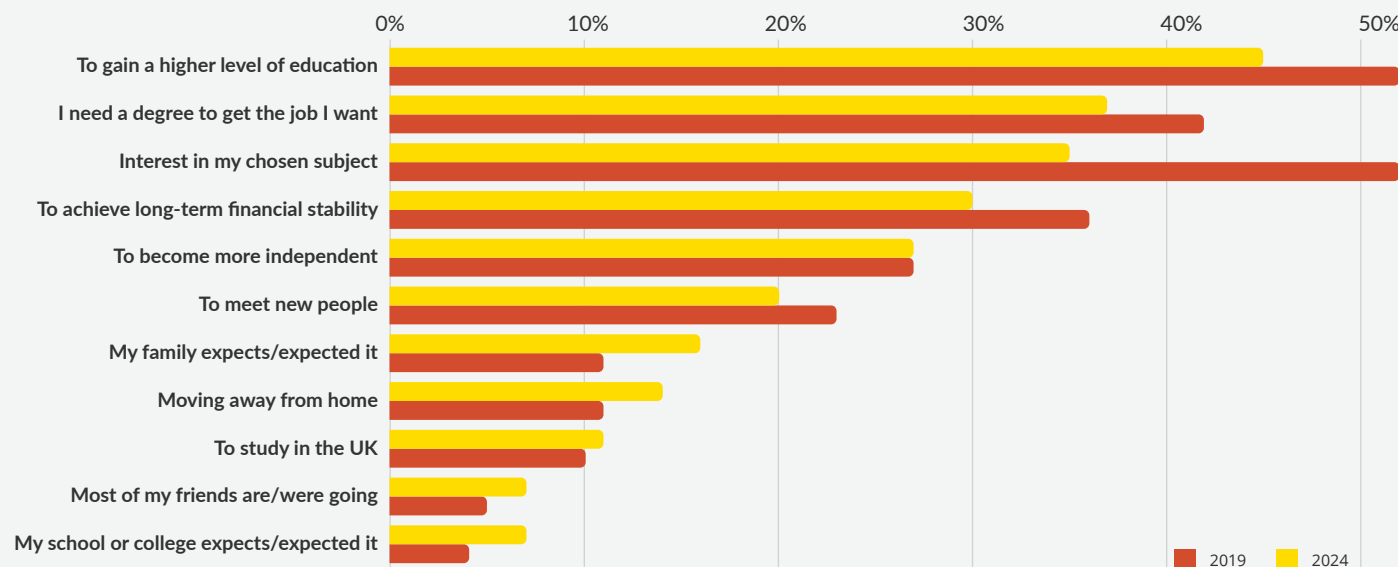
Why go to university?

In 2019, we asked applicants what their top motivations were for applying to university, and they were able to select up to three options from a list. This year, we repeated the question to see what, if anything, had changed over the last five years.

The top three choices remain the same, though in a slightly different order. Applicants are still motivated by education itself and interest in the subject, but less so. "I need a degree to get the job I want" has moved up to second place, and yet it is a less popular response than it was five years ago, as is achieving long term financial stability. Moving away from home has become a more

popular motivation, possibly driven by the experience of Covid lockdowns. The expectations of family and schools are also more significant than they were five years ago. Some of these changes may be driven by the changing demographics of the applicant population: for example 28% of Chinese applicants say their family expected them to go to university.

Figure 22: What are your top motivations for going to university? Comparison of 2019 and 2024 responses*

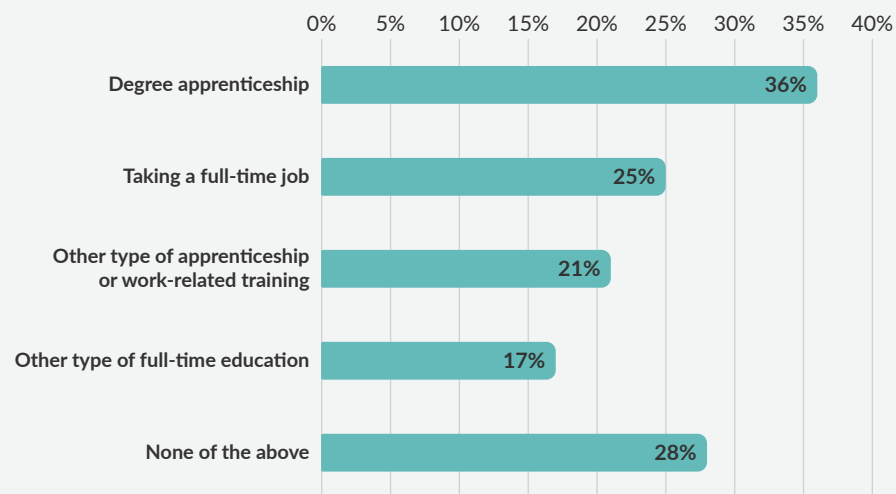


*Respondents could select up to 3 choices.

Alternatives to university

We asked applicants to traditional university courses whether they had seriously considered other options when applying to university. Just over a quarter (28%) have not considered other alternatives; 36% had considered a degree apprenticeship and a quarter considered a full-time job. Those planning to live at home are significantly more likely to consider a degree apprenticeship than those planning to move away. Care leavers are more likely to consider taking a full-time job as an alternative.

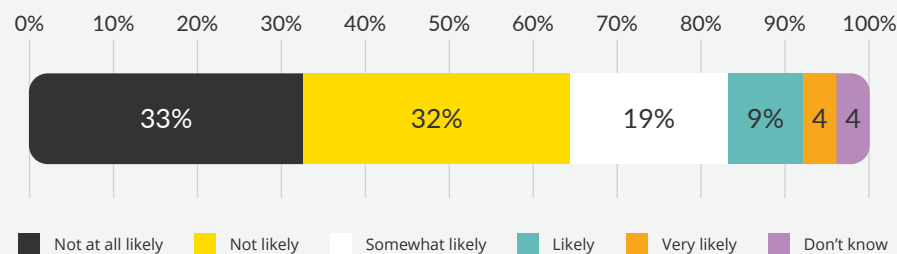
Figure 23: When applying for university did you seriously consider any of the following options as an alternative?



Withdrawing before enrolment

About a third (32%) of applicants think it likely that they will not take up their place at university, however the majority of these only think it 'somewhat likely'.

Figure 24: How likely is it that you will not go to university, for example because you withdraw your application or you don't take up the place that is offered?

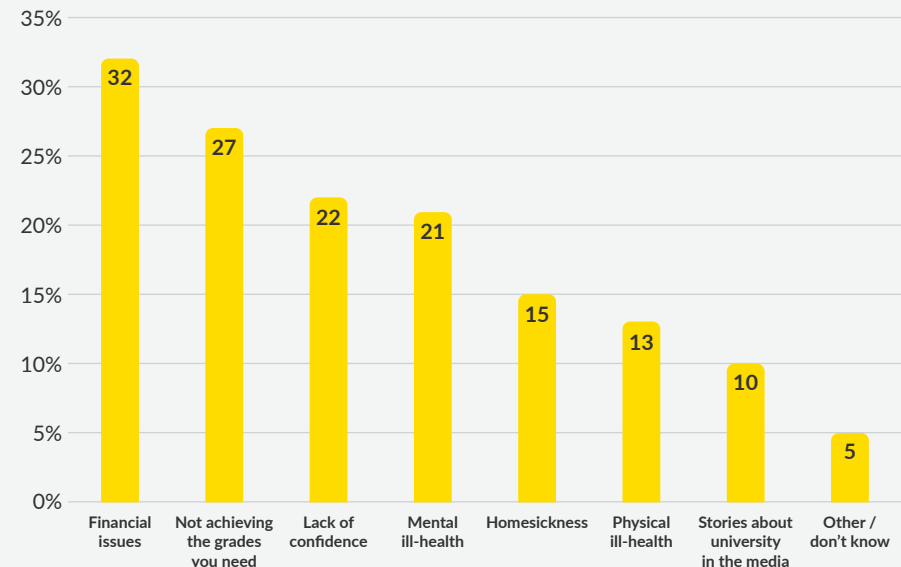


Broadly, these feelings are more prevalent among male applicants and those who are aged 19 or over. There is no significant difference between UK and international applicants, though applicants who are ethnically Chinese (85% of which are international students from China) are much less likely to think they won't take up their place, suggesting a higher level of uncertainty among other international student groups. These feelings are also more prevalent among care experienced and estranged applicants, those with a disability, health condition or neurodivergence, and LGB+ applicants.

Data from the UCAS 2023 End of Cycle report shows that 26% of last year's applicants were not placed, so we know not all applicants end up in higher education. Nonetheless, it is impossible to infer how many of those who think they might drop out of the applicant process will indeed do so. The overall strength of feeling – only 'somewhat likely' – suggests that, for many, these are concerns rather than strong doubts.

Respondents were able to choose multiple reasons from a list, including an 'other' option. Financial issues are the most common reason closely followed by not achieving the required grades. However, lack of confidence, mental ill-health and homesickness were also significant.

Figure 25: If you don't go to university, what is most likely to be the reason?



Base: Applicants who think it likely that they will not go to university (704)

Mental ill-health was the most significant concern for applicants with a disability or mental health condition, neurodivergent applicants, estranged applicants and those who are LGB+.

Data sharing

Sharing sexuality and gender identity data

Over a quarter of applicants identified themselves as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Pansexual, Asexual, or Non-Binary (27%). The proportion of this group willing to share this information with their university has increased from just over half in 2023 to two-thirds this year. This might reflect a greater confidence in higher education as an inclusive sector. Nonetheless, it still implies that some applicants are choosing not to share this information, meaning data collected by UCAS underrepresents diversity within the cohort.

Sharing disability data

For those with disabilities (41% of the cohort), the proportion of those who have already informed their university has dropped slightly since 2023, from 56% to 52%. The percentage of those who do not intend to share this information at all has risen slightly from 18% to 20%.

Data sharing between schools/colleges and universities

Over one in four (42%) applicants would give consent for their school/college to share any data with their university, and 38% would give consent to share some information. There were no significant differences in this figure between demographic groups.

Just over half of applicants (53%) assume that schools and colleges regularly share safeguarding information with universities, with a similar proportion believing they share information about mental health conditions, disabilities and reasonable adjustments. While safeguarding data is rarely shared in practice, these assumptions suggest that there is already a broad acceptance for data sharing between schools/colleges and universities.



4

Methodology



Methodology

Unless otherwise stated, all data in this report has been drawn from a survey administered via the Savanta Panel between 8-29 April 2024, with 2,190 respondents who were planning to start a full-time degree or degree apprenticeship course in the 2024-25 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% to the 95% confidence interval and 3% to the 99% confidence interval.

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	4.8%
Male – State or other	39.4%
Female – Fee paying school or college	4.8%
Female – State or other	51%

The sample does not include applicants to part-time courses.

The Applicant 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 7-point scale of agreement. From this, an average score from 0-6 is calculated for the whole population and sub-populations, and each item is weighted equally within the theme score 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 are measured on an 11 point scale. These questions represent 40% of the theme's overall score, with four 7-point scale items contributing the remaining 60%.

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

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

The questions that form the index scores are items to which respondents indicate their level of agreement on a seven-point scale, from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. For the purposes of discussion we have used the following interpretation when reporting the result:

7-point scale:	0-1	Strongly disagree
	2	Moderately disagree
	3	Neutral
	4	Moderately agree
	5-6	Strongly agree

Elsewhere in the survey, there is a small number of questions that have been asked against a 5-point scale and which are interpreted as follows:

5-point scale:	1	Strongly disagree
	2	Disagree
	3	Neutral
	4	Agree
	5	Strongly agree

Reported demographic differences in the data are significant to the 99% confidence level unless otherwise stated.

Definitions of socioeconomic groups

Demographic data about socioeconomic status was collected via a question about the occupation of the chief income earner in the respondents' parental household. Responses were as below and were subsequently grouped using the NRS Social Grade system. The percentage of applicants who fell in each category is shown below, compared to the most recent NRS population percentages dating back to 2016 - which have stayed consistent since the Ipsos 2008 frequency and are expected to be consistent in 2024.

Chief income earner's occupation	Social grade	Frequency in 2016 - NRS	Frequency in the Applicant Index responses
Professional / higher managerial (e.g. doctor, lawyer, chairperson or managing director of medium or large firm)	A	4%	18%
Manager / senior administrator (e.g. senior manager, owner of small business, head teacher)	B	23%	26%
Supervisor / clerical / skilled non-manual (e.g. teacher, secretary, junior manager, police constable)	C1	28%	21%
Skilled manual worker (e.g. firefighter, plumber, electrician, hairdresser)	C2	20%	15%
Semi-skilled / unskilled manual worker (e.g. assembler, postal worker, shop assistant)	D	15%	10%
Receiving state benefits for sickness, unemployment, old age or any other reason	E	10%	4%



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