

+ Pre-arrival questionnaire national pilot

Wave One initial results

Dr Thandiwe Gilder, Researcher, Advance HE



Contents

Forewords	3
Executive summary	6
1 Methodology	7
1.1 Background	7
1.2 Content of the pre-arrival questionnaire	7
1.3 Participation	9
2 Access, participation and transitions	11
2.1 Demographic profile	11
2.2 Routes into university	12
2.3 Prior educational background	17
3 Patterns that shape early continuation	19
3.1 Academic preparedness and confidence	19
3.2 Social transition and fitting-in	22
3.3 Practical and life circumstances affecting engagement	23
3.4 Financial pressures and stability	26
4 Learning and teaching	29
4.1 Preparedness and expectations for learning	29
4.2 Assessment and feedback experiences	32
4.3 Engagement with learning, technology and AI	33
4.4 Expectations for outcomes and future prospects	35
5 Wellbeing	38
6 Conclusions	41
Appendix 1. List of participating institutions for Wave 1	43
Appendix 2. Working group membership	44
Appendix 3. Steering group membership	45

Foreword

Rationale for the Pre/Post-arrival Academic Questionnaire

Through my own student experience of higher education as a mature, working-class, mixed-race female and through the various roles I have undertaken in higher education, I know the importance of the transition into higher education in helping a student survive, thrive and succeed throughout their study.

Despite all the information provided to applicants via open days and prospectuses and to students through the pre-arrival, welcome and orientation activities, it felt to me that the information we were providing was too generic given the diversity of the student body entering the institutions in which I worked.

So, more than 15 years ago, I started undertaking Entry to Study surveys, later renamed the Pre-arrival Academic Questionnaire. This questionnaire has numerous practical aims and objectives.

- + It delivers a meaningful pre-arrival course activity that provides parity of initial academic experience for students across courses. The course leader is critical in encouraging engagement.
- + It gets students reflecting on how they previously studied, how they expect to study in higher education and to think about any concerns and worries they may have on entry.
- + It provides staff across academic and professional support spheres with vital information that will assist them in developing and evolving their provision in real time to bridge the perceived and actual skill and knowledge gaps of students.
- + It offers students feedback, with headline findings and advice, within three weeks of starting.

This national pilot funded by the Office for Students Innovation fund also has a range of overarching objectives.

- + Establishing consistency in how the sector collects and acts on information from students upon arrival around their learning styles, expectations, challenges and requirements.
- + Driving dedicated activity at local level to close the gap between expectations, requirements and the actual experience upon arrival.
- + Providing robust data-led evidence to enable institutions to address inconsistencies in how different groups of students (distinguished, for example by social background, qualification type, geography and demographics) begin their learning and develop a platform to progress to good outcomes.
- + Creating a fuller understanding across the sector of the pre-arrival experience, providing evidence for wider policymaking and cross-sector activity.

- + Supporting providers in delivering a range of practical outcomes across different student groups, including improved wellbeing and belonging, continuation and attainment. Earlier and preventative intervention should further contribute to higher progression to further study or employment.

This initial report and the benchmarking data affirm many things we know already but many findings are also shattering the assumptions held by universities about incoming students. Sector experts on the PAQ working and steering groups will be producing focused blogs in their specialist areas over the coming months which we hope will be of interest to the sector.

Dr Michelle Morgan, Dean of Students, University of East London

Foreword

The transition into higher education is a pivotal moment for students, shaping not only their early academic confidence but their wider experience of university life. In recent years Jisc's digital experience insights have consistently shown a wide range of learning and teaching preferences across students and staff in higher education, and recent research into the digital experience of international students has surfaced the additional challenges and digital shocks this group faces during their transition. While these insights have been typically gathered partway through programmes of study, the PAQ project recognises the added value of understanding students' experiences and needs at the point of arrival - when well-informed induction, early intervention and targeted support can make the greatest difference to the student experience and outcomes.

At Jisc we are delighted to be a delivery partner in this important pilot and research project, powering the surveys and contributing sector insight. The findings from the first wave already offer powerful evidence across several dimensions of the student experience. The scale and nature of digital poverty and diversity of digital experience and competency among new entrants is a key insight, with almost one fifth encountering digital approaches to learning for the first time at university. Levels of confidence with widely used digital tools vary, and there are clear mismatches between expectations shaped by approaches to teaching and feedback at schools vs. the realities of contemporary higher education study. The questionnaires also explore a broad range of financial concerns, wellbeing needs and confidence levels among students with special educational needs, really showing the value of proactively understanding the prevalence of these concerns at the outset and underlining the importance of accessible advice and support.

Together, these factors shape the overall higher education experience. Establishing the prior experiences, expectations and needs of new entrants is a vital step in enabling institutions to support students to thrive.

This is only the first wave of the project. We look forward to the next phase, expanding participation across the sector, increasing engagement from entrants, and generating further insights to inform induction, support and teaching practice for the benefit of students, participating institutions and the wider higher education sector.

Dr Kathryn Heywood, Head of Business Intelligence Data Analytics, Jisc

Executive summary

- + **Students arrive at university with diverse learning histories and uneven preparedness**, shaped by school/college environments, qualification pathways, pandemic experiences and pre-arrival support. These differences strongly influence confidence in academic, social and practical readiness, with disabled students, commuters, carers and older entrants reporting lower initial confidence.
- + **Variation in expectations for learning and teaching is substantial**. While most students feel digitally confident, experience with essential academic tools is uneven. Learning modes prior to university also differ widely. Students also hold mismatched expectations about contact hours, independent study and feedback, highlighting the need for clear and early academic orientation.
- + **Financial pressures and paid employment are central to the transition experience**. A large majority expect to work during term time but tend to underestimate how common this is sector wide. Students already facing structural disadvantages, such as carers, commuters, disabled students and first-in-family, are disproportionately likely to anticipate high working hours, increasing risks to engagement and continuation.
- + **Belonging, social confidence and loneliness are significant pre-arrival factors**. Prior experiences of loneliness strongly predict concerns about making friends, fitting in and receiving support. Disabled students and carers report elevated concerns, underscoring the importance of proactive belonging-building during the early weeks.
- + **Employability expectations are high and widespread**. Students overwhelmingly believe university will improve their employment prospects and provide practical, applied experience, even though relatively few anticipate engaging with careers services. This signals an expectation-engagement gap with implications for curriculum design and early employability messaging.
- + **Wellbeing needs are present before arrival and often intersect with other vulnerabilities**. While many students feel confident about managing their wellbeing, a substantial minority report prior mental health challenges, social anxiety or low self-esteem. Barriers to physical activity, cost pressures and limited confidence in accessing support services indicate the need for early, integrated wellbeing support and signposting.

1 Methodology

1.1 Background

In 2025, Advance HE, with the University of East London (UEL) and Jisc, were awarded funding from the Office for Students' (OfS) Equality in Higher Education Innovation Fund to conduct a national pilot of a pre/post-arrival questionnaire for incoming students at the undergraduate and postgraduate-taught level across institutions in England. Although a range of pre-arrival questionnaires had been developed across the sector over the past five years and used across different institutions, this provided an opportunity to streamline the approach. This national pilot set out to establish a consistent pre-arrival approach, standardise effective practice and produce evidence on the impact of wider participation in establishing a pre-arrival questionnaire as a national resource.

The pre/post arrival questionnaire (PAQ) takes incoming students through a journey of reflection on how they previously learnt, their concerns and expectations. By gathering data from students across different backgrounds, the questionnaire helps identify where increased levels of support are needed. The insights gathered directly drive targeted activity to enhance provision at the arrival stage, helping to provide equality of opportunity by tackling barriers facing students from different backgrounds.

This project drew on the established pre-arrival questionnaire developed by Dr Michelle Morgan, Dean of Students at UEL. It is based on some of her previous work on prior learning experience, study expectations of A-Level and BTEC students on entry to university and the impact of Covid-19,¹ and the Postgraduate Experience Report.² Working in co-creation with a dedicated working group and steering group (See Appendix 2 and 3 for group membership), we adapted the questionnaire to create a version suitable for the first large-scale cross-institutional comparison. Through the national pilot, institutions received a detailed set of results, benchmarked against others taking part, enabling comparison by a range of student characteristics and providing a rounded understanding of where specific action is required to facilitate a smoother transition into higher education (HE).

1.2 Content of the pre-arrival questionnaire

The PAQ is comprised of seven sections addressing several areas of interest for those who are coming into university study at undergraduate (UG) or postgraduate taught (PGT) level.

In the order they appear in the questionnaire, the seven different areas are:

¹ Morgan, M (2023) *Prior learning experience, study expectations of A-Level and BTEC students on entry to university and the impact of Covid-19*. York: Advance HE. Available at: advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/prior-learning-experience-study-expectations-level-and-btec-students-entry-university

² Morgan, M and Direito, I (nd) *Widening and sustaining postgraduate taught (PGT) STEM study in the UK: a collaborative project*. Kingston upon Thames: Kingston University. Available at: www.improvingthestudentexperience.com/library/PG_documents/Postgraduate_Experience_Report_Final.pdf

- + Previous study qualifications
- + Previous educational experience
- + Motivations and funding for study level (UG or PGT*)
- + Expectations for study level (UG or PGT)
- + Current learning expectations
- + Attitudes towards study and technology experience
- + Biographic/demographic details

*PGT includes some more detailed questions around fees and funding.

The question set includes different types of questions, including multiple choice with single answer and multiple answer options, questions scored on Likert scales with varied ranges, and open-ended questions that allow participants to include free comments.

Most results in this report are presented at the individual-item level. Although items are grouped thematically for reporting purposes, they are generally not combined into theme indices. However, in a small number of cases, we constructed measures by combining responses from related items. These were used when items captured different aspects of the same underlying construct or when a consolidated metric improved reporting clarity. Each constructed measure is described in the results, including the items used and the scoring method.

1.2.1 Question types and scoring rules

Multiple choice (single response) items were used for factual, demographic or opinion-based questions. They are reported as the percentage selecting each category. Responses coded as *don't know*, *unsure*, or *prefer not to say* are either shown as separate categories or excluded from analysis as shown in the results.

Multiple response items allowed respondents to select more than one option. These are reported as the percentage of respondents selecting each option. In some cases, these are grouped into categories, for example, finance-related concerns, preferred types of feedback etc.

Some questions were presented using Likert scales, with the number and type of scales varying depending on the item (eg from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*, *very confident* to *not confident at all*, or *very useful* to *not useful at all*). Likert scales were generally 4- to 5-point formats, often with an additional *don't know* or *unsure* option. Results from Likert-type items within this question set are reported as the percentage of positive responses (eg combining *agree* and *strongly agree*).

For some questions, we used statistical tests to check whether differences in responses were likely to be meaningful rather than due to chance. Where relevant, we report a p-value, which indicates the probability that the observed difference could have occurred randomly. In this report, a lower p-value suggests stronger evidence that the difference reflects a real pattern in the data. A p-value lower than 0.05 is considered statistically significant.

1.3 Participation

Participating institutions were able to select optional questions for their dataset, which included departmental and course level information. Respondents were also asked for their student ID. This data was accessible to participating institutions only so that, as part of the implementation plan, they could identify and support students who might benefit from more targeted transition interventions. Institutions participating in the pilot ran the questionnaire via the [Jisc Online Surveys platform](#). Jisc Online Surveys also provided technical support to participating institutions as well as support in analysis. Individual institutions were responsible for the distribution of the questionnaire and were able to select which students to include in the sample, in line with guidance provided by Advance HE. Institutions took different approaches; some invited all incoming students to complete the questionnaire while others targeted specific courses where they identified that the data would be useful. There was also variation in when the questionnaire was run; some pre-arrival, some on-arrival and some post-arrival. Some institutions ran it as an online questionnaire only while others scheduled it as an in-class activity. Data was collected between 3 September 2025 and 15 November 2025. Within this window, individual institutions could decide when to run the PAQ and for how long, within a minimum opening time of two weeks.

There was a high level of interest in participating in Year 1 of the PAQ pilot despite some timescale challenges. However, some institutions reported challenges in turning initial interest and verbal confirmation into final approval at senior level. Some institutions were undergoing major strategic challenges and were unable to prioritise taking part in the pilot but expressed interest in taking part in the second wave. With support from the steering group, led by the chair Professor Sir Les Ebdon, and the working group, we secured participation from 15 institutions in the undergraduate questionnaire and 13 in the postgraduate taught questionnaire (see Appendix 1 for list of participating institutions). These institutions were varied in size and grouping. Due to the smaller sample size overall, this report concentrates on sector-level findings rather than more standard grouping levels.

However, in line with established approaches used in surveys such as PTES and PRES, participating institutions were also given access to benchmarking data via the Jisc Online Surveys platform. This enabled them to view their results alongside the wider pilot group. They additionally received tailored benchmarking reports that disaggregated their data by demographic groups and highlighted themes of sector importance, including access and participation, continuation and continuation risk, student satisfaction, and learning and teaching.

Table 1. PAQ Wave 1 Pilot 2025: number of participating institutions and number of responses received

	Undergraduate	Postgraduate-taught
Number of institutions	15	13
Responses	5,548	2,285

Given the pilot nature of this study, detailed analysis focused on the undergraduate cohort, which provided the most robust dataset for initial exploration. Postgraduate-taught results are incorporated for comparative context where appropriate; however, a full dual-cohort analysis will be undertaken in future iterations once the questionnaire is fully established.

Findings of this report are categorised broadly into four areas:

- + factors impacting access, participation and transition
- + factors impacting continuation and retention
- + factors impacting learning, teaching and satisfaction, as measured in metrics such as Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES)³
- + factors relating to mental and physical wellbeing.

³ Advance HE (2025) '*Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES)*'. York: Advance HE. Available at: <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/postgraduate-taught-experience-survey-2025>

2 Access, participation and transitions

2.1 Demographic profile

To contextualise the findings from the pilot, this section provides an overview of the demographic profile of the student population across the participating institutions, alongside comparable sector-level data from 2024-25 where possible. While the pilot sample is not intended to be representative of the wider sector, understanding the composition of the current sample is important for interpreting the patterns observed in relation to access and participation plan (APP) priorities. The comparison helps to illustrate where the pilot group aligns with, or diverges from, national trends and supports a clearer reading of the APP-relevant themes emerging from the analysis. These themes map closely onto the OfS baseline requirements, highlighting the areas of transition and early engagement that institutions are expected to address.

Table 2. Demographic composition of undergraduate respondents from pilot institutions compared to sector data (2024-25)

Demographic group	Indicator	UG pilot sample (%)	UG HESA data ⁴ 2024-25 England only (%)
Ethnicity (UK domicile students)	Asian	20	16
	Black	15	11
	Mixed	6	6
	White	55	65
	Other	4	3
Sex	Female	64	56
	Male	36	44
Age	Young (21 and younger)	75	48 ⁵
	Mature (22 and older)	25	52
Disability status	Declared disability	42	19
	No disability	58	81
Parental HE experience	First in family	54	41

⁴ HESA (2025) 'Who's studying in HE?' Cheltenham: HESA. Available at: www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he

⁵ Advance HE (2026) 'Student equality data dashboards'. Seattle, WA: Tableau Public. Available at: public.tableau.com/app/profile/advance.he/viz/2025StudentEqualityDataDashboards/UserGuidance

Carer	Has caring responsibilities	10	5 ⁶
Commuter	Travels over an hour to university	15	7-10% ⁷
Domicile	UK (home)	88	83
	Outside UK	12	17

The demographic profile of the undergraduate pilot sample shows some notable differences compared with sector-level data for 2023-24. The pilot group includes a higher proportion of Asian (20% vs 13%) and Black students (15% vs 9%), alongside a smaller proportion of White students (55% vs 70%), indicating a more ethnically diverse cohort than the sector as a whole. Students in the pilot are also more likely to be younger than 21 (75% vs 48%). In terms of participation background, over half of students in the sample are first in their family to attend higher education (54% vs 38% nationally). The pilot sample has a larger percentage of students with caring responsibilities (10% vs 5%) and a larger proportion of commuter students (15% vs 7-10%).

These differences serve as a prompt to examine our assumptions about who our students are and how they experience higher education. Student populations vary meaningfully across providers and judgements and interventions targeted at access, participation, transition and induction are therefore most effective when they allow for proportionate, context-sensitive implementation. The comparisons presented here are offered as calibration, helping readers locate their own context relative to the pilot rather than as claims of sector-wide representativeness.

2.2 Routes into university

2.2.1 Entry via clearing

The predominant method of entry into undergraduate study is via Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS)⁸ for both UK domiciled and international students. Students in the standard UCAS cycle will have access to early communication campaigns from their prospective institution that will begin to bridge the gap between prior education and the transition into university. However, those who enter through clearing often show up on the institutions' communications databases later than those who come through the standard route. They therefore need tailored orientation and induction to study programmes, which must include all the information they need in a format that is not too overwhelming.

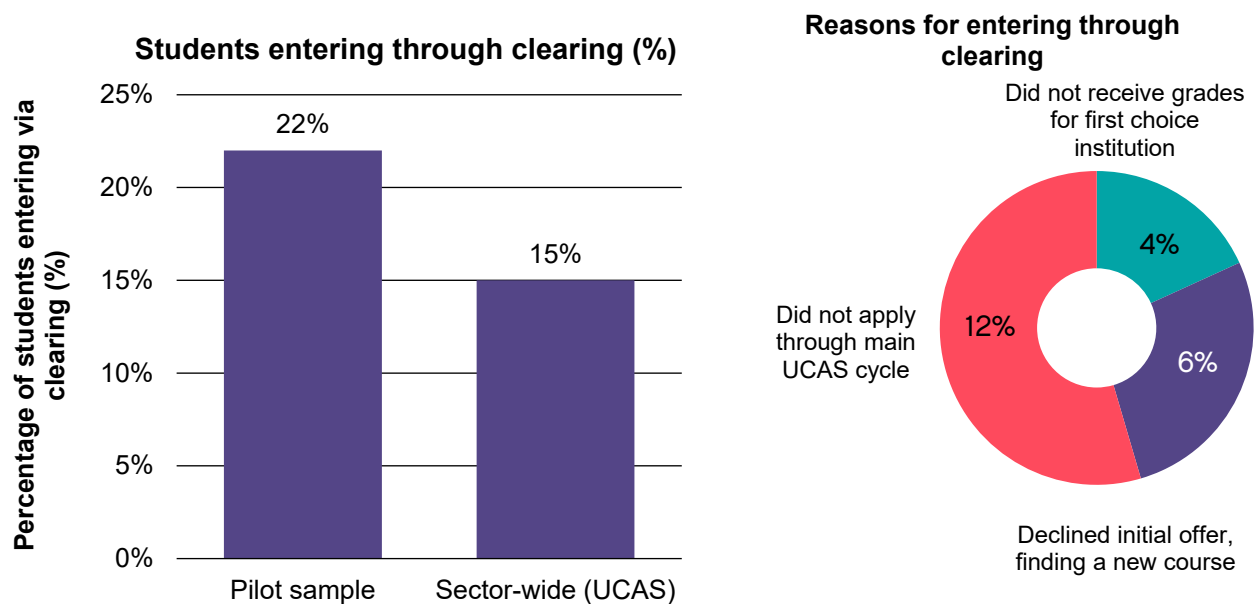
⁶ UCAS (2023) '*Fair access snapshot (2023)*'. Cheltenham: UCAS. Available at: www.ucas.com/about-us/news-and-insights/fair-access-snapshots

⁷ Estimate is based on London Higher's 2024 UK commuter-student briefing (21%- 26% live at home) and sector research indicating 30%-40% travel over an hour.

⁸ UCAS (2026) '*UCAS*'. Cheltenham: UCAS. Available at: www.ucas.com

In this sample, 22% of respondents came through clearing, compared to 15% sector-wide, according to UCAS 2025 End of Cycle data.⁹ Of those students in this pilot sample who came through clearing, 4% applied as they did not receive the grades required for their first-choice institution, 6% entered clearing to find a new course after declining their initial offer and 12% used clearing as they had not applied through the main UCAS cycle. The 12% who did not apply through the UCAS cycle are at a potential disadvantage in terms of the information they receive about transitioning to university. These students may therefore require targeted communication and support to help them prepare for the transition, which this dataset enables institutions to provide.

Figure 1. Percentage of sample who entered university via clearing and their reasons



Further analysis explored whether any student characteristics were linked to coming through clearing. Two factors showed meaningful differences. Older students were more likely to enter through clearing than those aged 21 and under, and this difference was statistically significant ($p < .001$). Commuter students were also significantly more likely to come through clearing ($p = .002$). In contrast, first in family, students with disabilities, and students with caring responsibilities did not differ significantly from their peers in their likelihood of entering through clearing. It is worth noting that these characteristics commonly overlap, suggesting that some students may experience multiple factors that shape how and when they enter HE and that the clearing route is used differently across groups. As discussed above, students who enter via clearing typically have less lead-in time before enrolment and fewer opportunities to engage with pre-arrival communications, orientation materials or early transition activities. For students who are already balancing additional responsibilities,

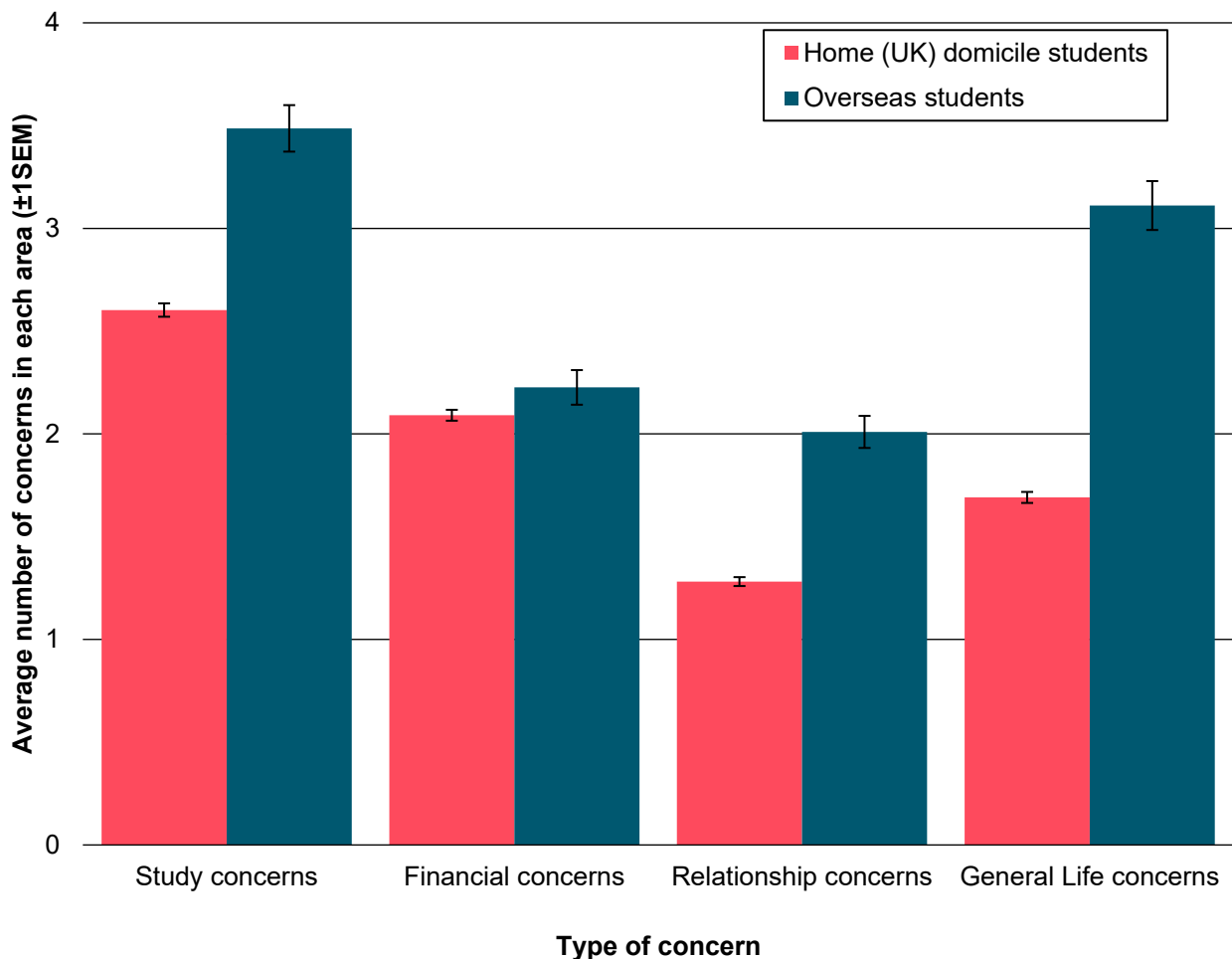
⁹ UCAS (2025) 'UCAS Undergraduate end of cycle data resources 2025'. Cheltenham: UCAS. Available at: www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-end-of-cycle-data-resources-2025

travelling longer distances, or managing complex life circumstances, reduced preparation time may compound existing pressures. Recognising the intersectional nature of these experiences is important: the combination of entry route and personal context can show in how students navigate the start of their studies and the extent to which they feel supported during transition.

2.2.2 International students

Although students entering through clearing face notable uncertainties, the data indicates that entering university as an international student is associated with even greater concerns across multiple areas. The undergraduate pilot sample comprised 88% UK domicile students (similar to 83% from HESA 2024-25 sector data). While students travelling to the UK for education usually have a different timeline in terms of route to entry – ie they likely have more structured pre-arrival support – the data shows that these students report more concerns than students coming in from the UK. This data comes from multiple answer questions where respondents were invited to indicate which areas they had concerns about. These were split into study concerns, financial concerns, relationship concerns and general life concerns, which included concerns around pragmatic issues such as childcare, balancing work or family and study. A count of concerns (from a maximum of eight) in each area was calculated for each respondent and compared across UK-domicile and international students. International students consistently showed higher levels of concern than UK-domiciled students across academic, social and general life areas.

Figure 2. Average number of concerns about upcoming study reported by home and overseas undergraduate students



Error bars = ± 1 standard error of the mean (SEM). Error bars show how much the average might naturally vary. Shorter bars mean the result is more consistent. Non-overlap typically suggests clearer group differences.

2.2.3 Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

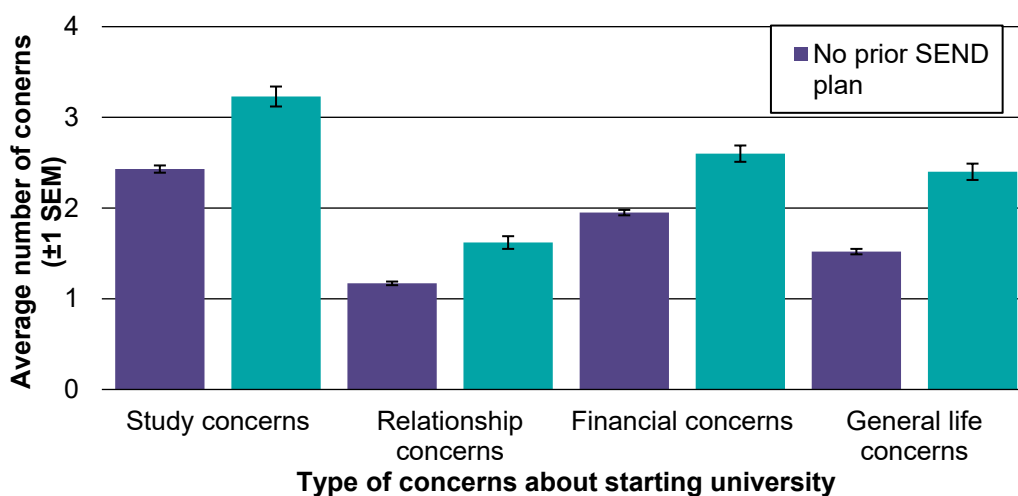
Of the 10% who reported a SEND plan at their previous place of study, most (73%) had already engaged with support services to access their learning. This suggests that many of these students are entering university with pre-existing support needs which may shape their transition experience. In the PAQ, of those students with a SEND plan, 73% expected to need to access university support for disability and additional learning needs, 55% expected to access university support for mental health and wellbeing and 56% expected to access academic support. While most of these students have experience of accessing support in their previous educational settings, there is some work to be done to ensure that they are aware of what support is available to them. Additionally, students with a SEND plan also reported significantly more concerns about transition into university than those without.

Figure 3. Anticipated support needs at university for students with SEND plans



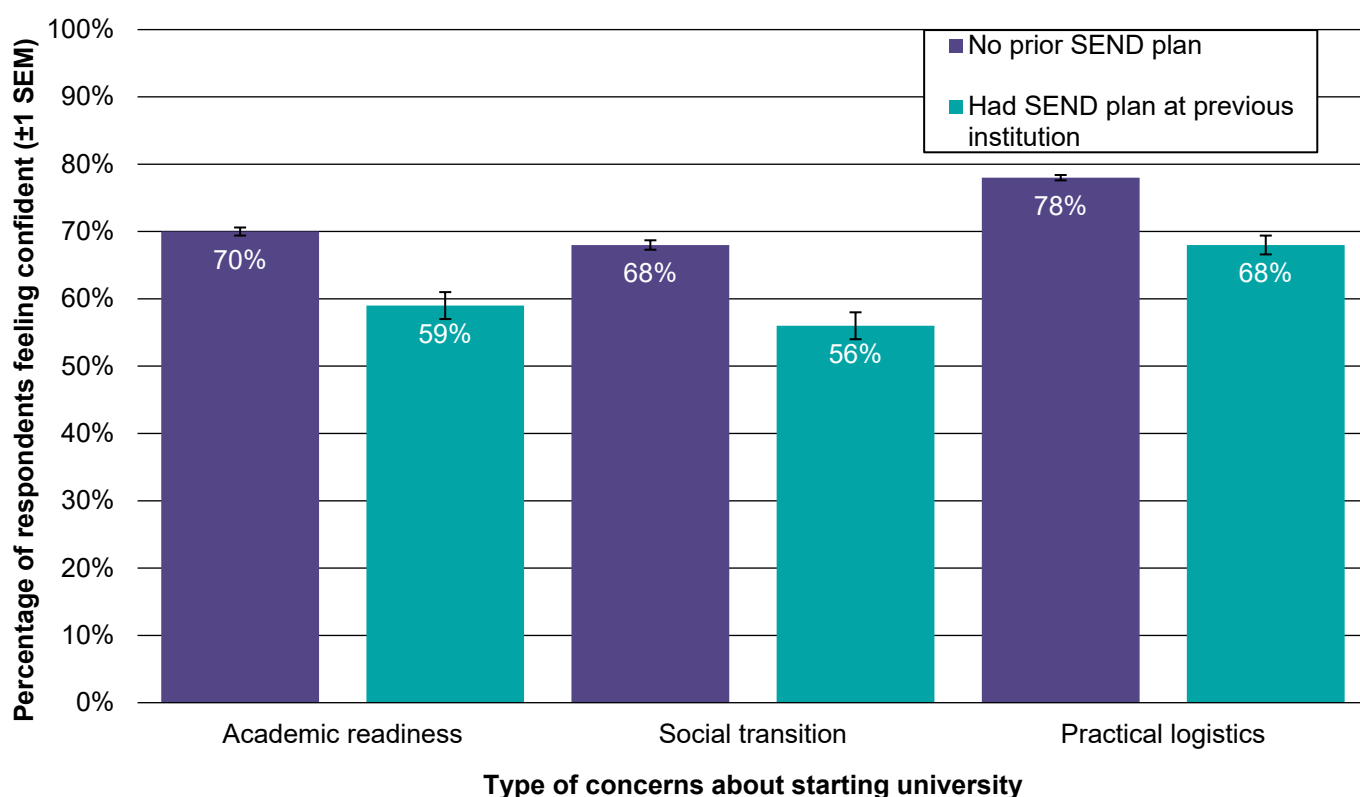
Confidence also differed across students with a SEND plan and those without. Respondents were asked how confident they were feeling about various elements of their course from very confident to not confident at all. A positivity score was calculated for each measure and then subscales were created grouping together confidence measures in different areas: confidence about academic readiness and being prepared for the level of study, confidence about the social transition (meeting new people etc), and confidence about their ability to manage the practical logistics of starting the degree, such as finding accommodation, travelling to university. Students with a SEND plan at their previous institution reported significantly less confidence in all three areas compared to those who did not have a SEND plan in place, suggesting tailored support would be very beneficial to this group.

Figure 4. Average number of study-related concerns among students with and without SEND plans



Error bars = ± 1 standard error of the mean (SEM). Error bars show how much the average might naturally vary. Shorter bars mean the result is more consistent. Non-overlap typically suggests clearer group differences.

Figure 5. Confidence in upcoming study reported by students with and without previous SEND plans.



Error bars = ± 1 standard error of the mean (SEM). These indicate the precision of each mean (shorter bars = more precise). Non-overlap typically suggests clearer group differences.

2.3 Prior educational background

Over the past decade, university access in England has expanded significantly as a result of sustained widening participation policy initiatives, with the number of disadvantaged young people entering higher education at a record high.^{10,11} This expansion has been accompanied by an increase in the use of non-traditional routes, reflecting a more diverse set of pathways into higher education.¹²

This diversity is recognised in the highest entry qualifications held by participants in the current sample. While 38% entered with A-Levels, a substantial portion entered via

¹⁰ Hubble, S and Connell-Smith, A (2018) *Widening participation strategy in higher education in England*. London: House of Commons Library. Available at: commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8204

¹¹ Department for Education (2025) *Widening participation in higher education: 2025*. London: GOV.UK. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/widening-participation-in-higher-education-2025

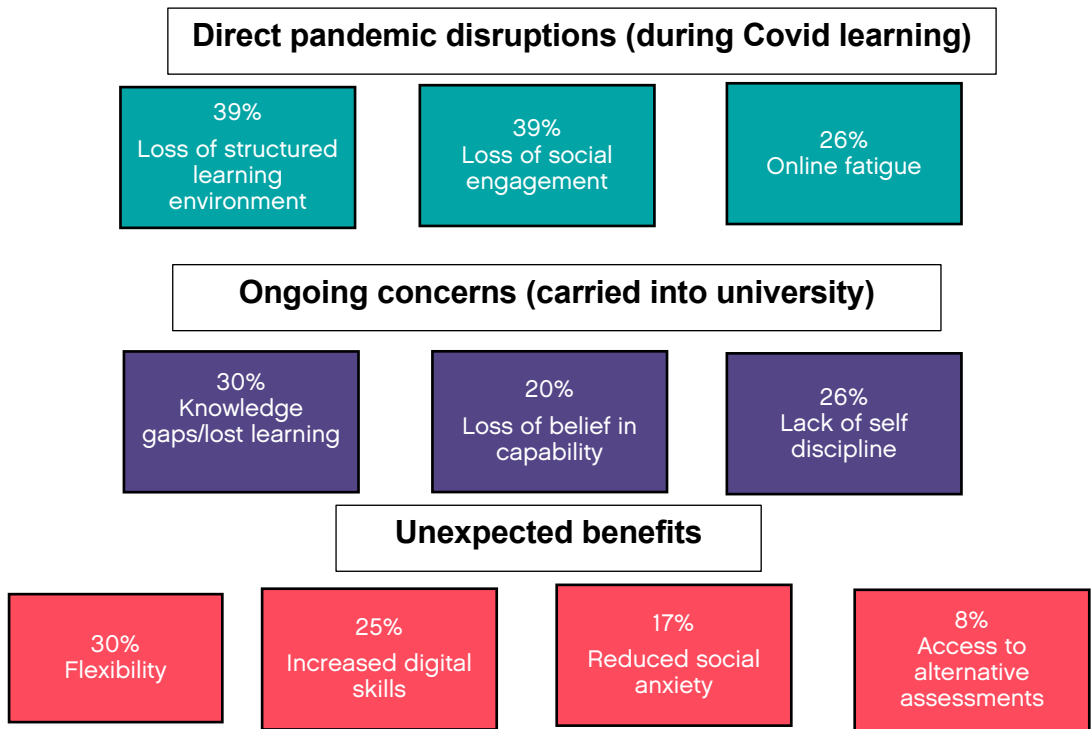
¹² Department for Education (2025) 'Participation measures in higher education: academic year 2022/23'. London: GOV.UK. Available at: explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/participation-measures-in-higher-education/2022-23

alternative routes: 16% had a BTEC, 9% had A-Levels and BTEC, 4% had done a foundation year course, 5% had done a University of the Arts London (UAL) diploma or extended diploma, and 5% had undertaken an Access to HE course. In line with national patterns of widening access, most participants (97%) had attended state-funded schools. This is close to sector-level data that shows that 92% of pupils attend state-funded schools.¹³

Assessment outcomes at the end of prior study also varied. Around a quarter of respondents (26%) received lower grades than expected, 11% reported high-than-expected grades and 63% achieved the grades they anticipated. These patterns contextualise the diversity of prior academic experience that students bring into higher education.

A significant proportion of undergraduate respondents (74%) were studying during the Covid-19 pandemic. Although these students since transitioned into post-pandemic education prior to university, the experiences they describe show that the effects of the pandemic have not fully dissipated. The most salient negative impacts of the pandemic were a loss of structured learning environment (39%), loss of social engagement with friends at school/college (39%), online fatigue (26%), and lack of self-discipline (26%). In addition, 20% of respondents reported a loss of belief in their capability to study caused by the pandemic and concerns about lost learning and knowledge gaps (30%) caused by disruptions to education during that period.

Figure 6. Impact and ongoing effects of Covid-19 pandemic on study



¹³ HESA (2024) 'Higher education student statistics: UK, 2022/23 - student numbers and characteristics'. Bristol: Jisc.

However, there were some benefits that also came from studying during the pandemic – for example, respondents found that learning at home provided flexibility (30%), increased their digital skills (25%) and reduced social anxiety (17%). A small proportion (8%) of respondents benefited from access to alternative assessments that were not previously made available to them. This mix of strengths and challenges shows that the pandemic's influence continues to shape student readiness in nuanced and unexpected ways.

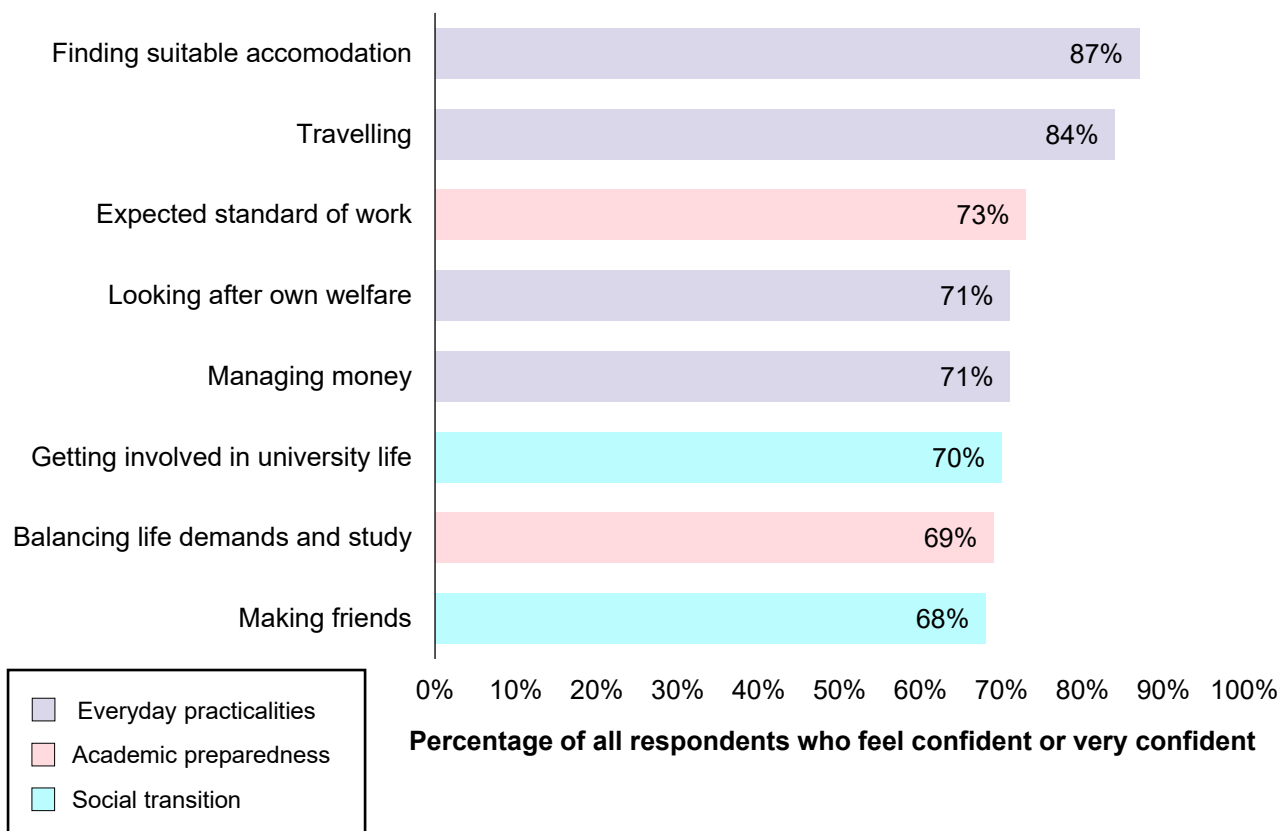
3 Patterns that shape early continuation

3.1 Academic preparedness and confidence

Students' sense of academic preparedness before arrival is an important contributor to early continuation, with uncertainly linked to lower engagement, reduced participation and early doubts about fit and belonging. Across the eight areas we measured, confidence levels varied. Here we calculated confidence as the percentage of respondents who said that they were confident or very confident in the identified areas. While most students feel prepared for the practical aspects of transition, such as finding suitable accommodation (87%) and travelling (84%), confidence in social and academic elements is more mixed. Around seven in ten feel confident about understanding the level of work expected of them (73%), getting involved in university life (70%) and managing their money (71%). Confidence is slightly lower for balancing study with wider life demands (69%) and forming new friendships (68%).

To understand the broader patterns in these data, the individual indicators are grouped into three overarching themes: academic preparedness, social transition, and the practical elements of university life. The figure below shows the confidence levels for each individual item while colour coding them into the three themes. The following sections explore these themes in more depth and examine how levels of confidence, and therefore factors potentially influencing retention, may vary across different student groups.

Figure 7. Reported confidence about elements of future study



Further analysis across academic, social and practical confidence shows a broadly consistent pattern: younger students, disabled students, commuter students, and those with caring responsibilities tend to enter university feeling less prepared than their peers. Age and disability emerged as the most influential factors, with older students reporting higher confidence across all domains, while students with a declared disability consistently reported lower confidence in academic readiness, social transition and managing practical aspects of university life. Commuter students also showed reduced confidence socially and practically compared with those living closer to campus, reflecting the additional challenges of distance and less immediate access to campus-based networks. In contrast, first-in-family students generally report similar confidence levels to their peers once other characteristics are accounted for.

These patterns underline that transition confidence is shaped by a combination of structural and contextual factors, rather than any single characteristic alone. Because lower confidence at the point of entry is linked to slower adjustment and uncertainty about academic and social fit, these findings highlight the value of targeted early-transition support: clear academic expectations, structured welcome activities, accessible onboarding information and proactive signposting.

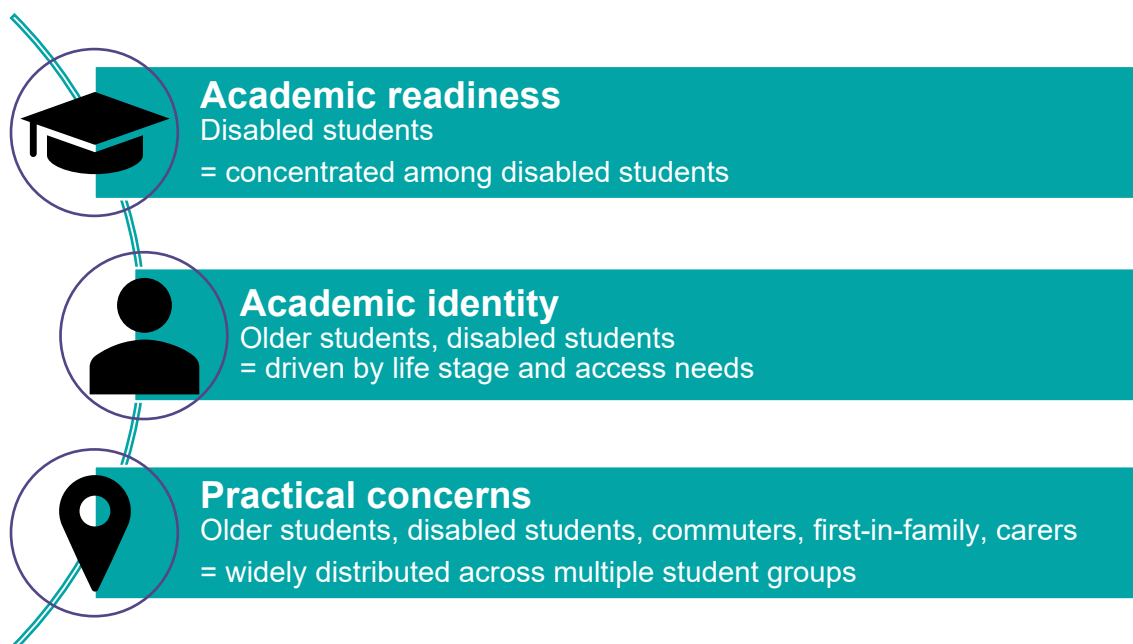
Students were also asked about specific concerns relating to the transition into university. While confidence indicators showed how prepared students feel, these concerns reveal the

areas where uncertainty may hinder early engagement. Here, the strongest pattern relates to disability: students with a declared disability were substantially more likely to worry about their academic readiness – for example, ability to study at the expected level – than those without. Other characteristics (age, commuter status, first-in-family status and caring responsibilities) showed little difference on this measure when considered together, suggesting that academic-readiness concerns are particularly concentrated among disabled students and emphasising the importance of accessible, well-scaffolded support.

Concerns about academic identity, including questions around course fit, or returning to study after a break, were shaped mainly by age and disability. Older students and disabled students were more likely to express uncertainty in this area, indicating that these concerns relate to life stage and access needs.

Practical and logistical concerns were more widely distributed across student groups. Older students, first-in-family students, disabled students, commuters and students with caring responsibilities all reported elevated worries in this area, reflecting the additional complexity these groups may face when navigating university systems. This suggests that clear, timely and accessible communication about practical arrangements is particularly important for students whose circumstances may make the early weeks more demanding.

Figure 8: Transition concerns (by student characteristics)



The questionnaire also explored expectations about academic workload, revealing substantial variation in how students imagine university study will operate. Just over a third expected more than 16 hours of taught sessions each week, and around a quarter anticipated spending more than 16 hours on independent study. Two indicators were developed to assess mismatched expectations. Around one in six students held assumptions that diverged from patterns typically seen across UK higher education, where programmes generally combine moderate contact time with substantial independent study. Seventeen per cent expected a very independent-heavy workload (high independent study, low

contact) while 16% expected the reverse (high contact, low independent study). Although the majority held expectations closer to sector norms, the size of these mismatched groups is still meaningful, given strong links between expectation-fit and early adjustment. These findings underscore the importance of clear communication and academic orientation so that students arrive with a realistic understand of how learning and teaching are structured.

3.2 Social transition and fitting-in

Feeling connected and able to build relationships is a central part of early student experience. Government research shows that 92% of students felt lonely at least once in the previous year, showing how important relationship building is.¹⁴ This questionnaire explored students' social transition and activities that contribute to belonging. Thirteen percent of respondents reported feeling lonely frequently in their previous place of study, indicating that for some students, concerns about social connection pre-date their arrival at university. These worries were particularly common among students with a declared disability, and to a lesser extent among those with caring responsibilities. Other characteristics did not show meaningful differences once these factors were considered together. This suggests that, for some groups, loneliness is a pre-existing challenge that could shape expectations of belonging and social adjustment at university.

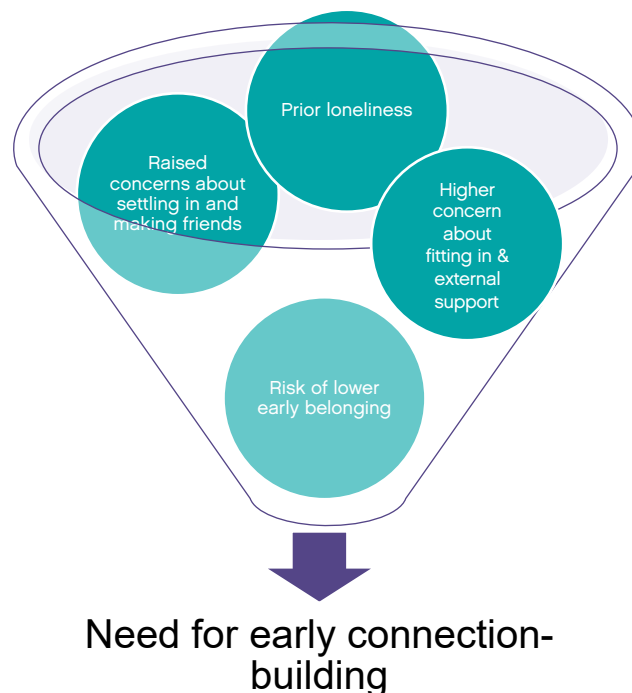
In fact, students who had experienced frequent loneliness before starting university were much more likely to express concerns about making friends and getting involved once they arrived. Those with high prior loneliness were substantially more likely to anticipate difficulties with social integration, highlighting how prearrival experiences can act as a lens through which students imagine their transition. This reinforces the value of early activities that support people in settling into university, particularly in the first weeks, so that students do not carry these expectations into their university experience unchallenged.

To understand relationship concerns, two types of worry were explored: concerns about fitting in with peers, and concerns about support from relationships outside the university (such as family, friends or employers). Around 45% of students had concerns about peer belonging, while 17% were worried about how external relationships might support them during transition. Concerns about peer belonging were most common among older students and those with a declared disability, suggesting that these groups may be particularly unsure about whether they will feel part of the student community. Concerns about external support were more common among first-in-family students and students with disabilities, pointing to uncertainty about the strength or availability of networks outside the university context.

¹⁴ Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Andrew, S and Halfon, R (2023) 'New government research shows 'lonely' seems to be the hardest word for students'. Press release, 19 September. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/news/new-government-research-shows-lonely-seems-to-be-the-hardest-word-for-students

Prior loneliness was strongly linked to both types of relationship concern, suggesting that early social experiences shape how students anticipate their ability to belong and be supported. Together, these findings highlight the importance of enabling early belonging and connection-building opportunities, particularly for disabled students, older entrants, carers and first-in-family students so that social confidence can be established early and the risk of disengagement reduced.

Figure 9. How pre-arrival loneliness shapes transition



3.3 Practical and life circumstances affecting engagement

Students' wider life circumstances can play a major role in shaping how ready they feel to engage with university study. The questionnaire asked about a range of practical and personal concerns that students were carrying into the transition, revealing several areas where uncertainty may affect early engagement.

3.3.1 General life concerns at transition

Across the sample, a substantial proportion of respondents reported concerns about the practical and personal aspects of starting university. Eleven percent were worried about balancing study with work or caring responsibilities and around one in five had concerns about ongoing health issues or the disclosure of health-related information. Concerns about relocating or settling into new accommodation were reported by 23% while 29% were worried about commuting or finding a suitable place to study.

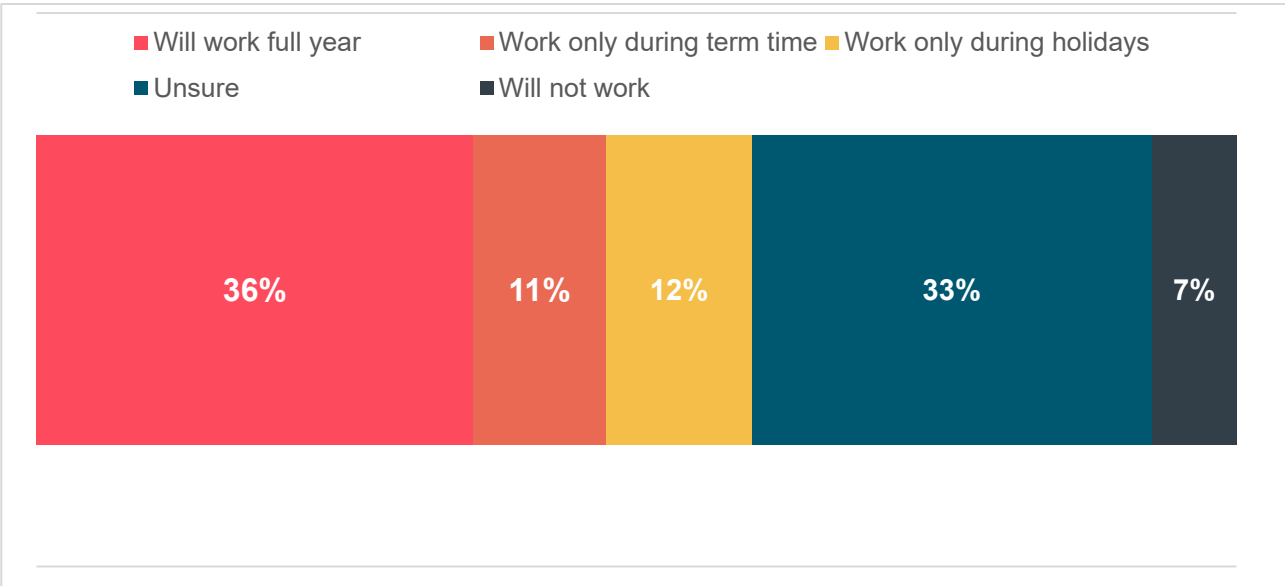
These concerns varied by student group. Students with caring responsibilities were more likely to be worried about managing competing demands (35%) and about commuting or finding a suitable study space (45%). Among students with a declared disability, concerns were common across several areas, including balancing responsibilities (15%), settling

somewhere new (28%) and having a suitable study space or commute (34%). Thirty-nine percent were concerned about disclosing disability-related information or navigating ongoing health issues. Students arriving from outside the UK also reported elevated worries, particularly about living independently and adjusting to a new country (57%), followed by concerns about commuting and study space (39%) and managing health disclosures (31%). These patterns reflect the layered and often intersecting challenges some students face as they begin university life.

3.3.2 Intentions to work during study

Students were asked whether they expected to undertake paid work during their studies. Among those who had already decided about working, 89% anticipated taking up paid work at some point during the academic year. Of this group, most expected to work throughout the year (61%), with smaller planning to work only during term time (19%) or only during holidays (20%). Interestingly, although a high proportion of students in this sample expect to work at some point during their studies, the number expecting to work during term time (47%) appears to be significantly underestimated as the Student Academic Experience Survey (SAES)¹⁵ reported that 68% of full-time undergraduates were undertaking paid work during term time. A significant minority (33%) were unsure whether they would need to work, which may reflect uncertainty about financial pressures, course demands, or the realities of managing time at university. This uncertainty mirrors the wider financial pressures highlighted in the SAES, which describes a significantly changed financial environment pushing more students into paid work than at any point in the last decade.

Figure 10. Percentage of students intending to work during study



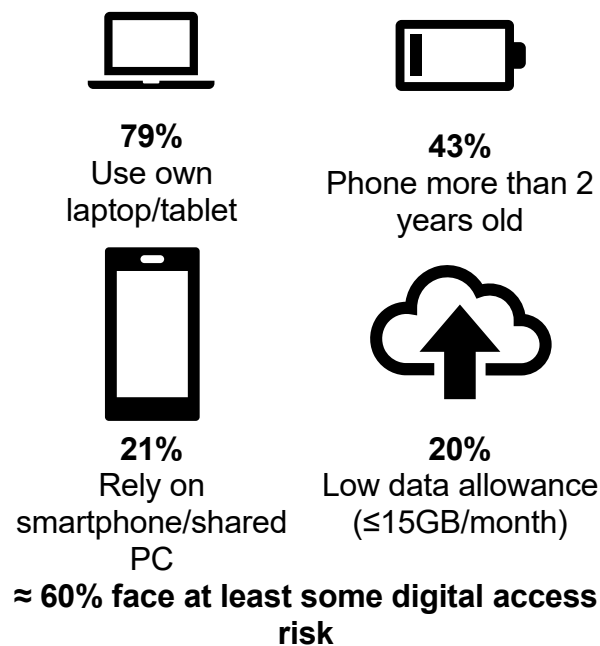
¹⁵ Neves, J, Freeman, J, Stephenson, R and Rowan, A (2025) Student Academic Experience Survey 2025. York: Advance HE and Oxford: HEPI. Available at: www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/SAES-2025_FINAL_WEB.pdf

Among students who had made a clear decision, some groups were less likely than others to say that they intended to work during their studies. Older students, first-in-family students, and those with caring responsibilities were all less likely to report definite intentions to undertake paid work. This may reflect the different pressures these students face: older students and carers often juggle significant responsibilities outside university, while first-in-family students may be less certain about how employment will fit alongside academic demands. For these groups, the decision about whether to work may be shaped not only by financial need, but also by time constraints, confidence in managing competing demands or uncertainty about expectations of university study. SAES findings also suggest that as more students take on employment, working hours are being moderated (falling from 14.5 hours per week in 2024 to 13.1 in 2025), reflecting attempts to balance academic commitments with financial necessity.

These findings highlight the importance of providing clear, accessible information about academic workload, financial support and the implications of working alongside study. Supporting students to make informed decisions about employment during their course, particularly those who may already be managing additional responsibilities, can help reduce early stress and support a smoother transition into university life. These findings also align closely with evidence from the 2025 SAES report, which shows that paid work is no longer peripheral but embedded within the undergraduate experience (and their expectations), reshaping how students manage their studies, finances and participation in university life.

3.3.3 Access to technology

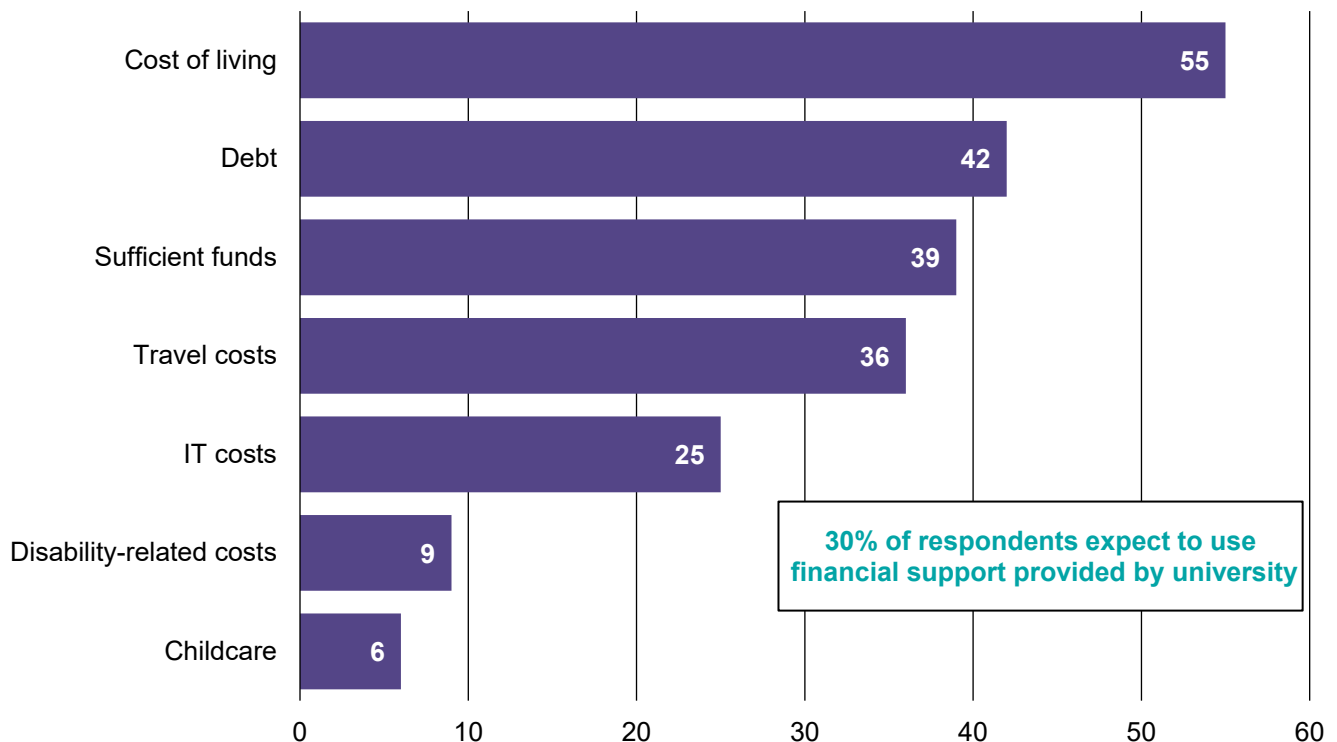
Access to reliable digital equipment is increasingly central to students' capacity to participate in their learning. The questionnaire therefore explored what technology students expected to rely on during their studies. The majority (79%) anticipated primarily using their own laptop, desktop computer or tablet. However, 21% expected to rely mainly on their smartphone or shared institutional computers, indicating that personal access to dedicated study technology is far from universal.

Figure 11. Expected access to technology for learning

Smartphone data also highlighted potential digital access risks. Seventy-three percent of respondents reported using an iOS device and 21% an Android device, with noticeable differences between UK-domiciled students (72% iOS) and those from outside the UK (52% iOS). This variation underscores the importance of ensuring that learning platforms and resources are tested across operating systems so that particular groups are not inadvertently disadvantaged. Furthermore, 43% of respondents had a phone more than two years old and 20% had a data allowance of 15GB/month or less. There was a pronounced difference in UK-domiciled and international students, with international students more likely to have restricted data allowance. Combining these factors, around 60% of respondents faced at least some risk of technological limitations, either because they were using older devices, or because they had limited data, potentially affecting their ability to access learning materials consistently.

3.4 Financial pressures and stability

Financial pressures continue to be one of the persistent risks to student engagement and continuation, particularly in the context of ongoing cost-of-living pressures. The questionnaire asked students about the financial concerns they were carrying into the start of their university experience. The results show that financial worries were widespread: 39% were concerned about having sufficient funding, 42% about getting into debt, and over half (55%) were worried about the cost of living. A further 36% were concerned about the cost of travel, while specific groups reported additional pressures; 6% were worried about affordable childcare, 25% about the cost of IT resources, and 9% about costs associated with a disability. Three in ten students expected to need support from university financial services.

Figure 12. Percentage of respondents with specific financial concerns

Most students did not experience a single financial worry in isolation. Seventy-four percent reported three or more financial concerns, and students on average selected just over two concerns each. Despite this, many indicated that the cost of living had not changed their choice of institution. Around 73% said that their decision had not been affected, although 9% chose a different university and 19% chose to live at home rather than move away because of cost pressures.

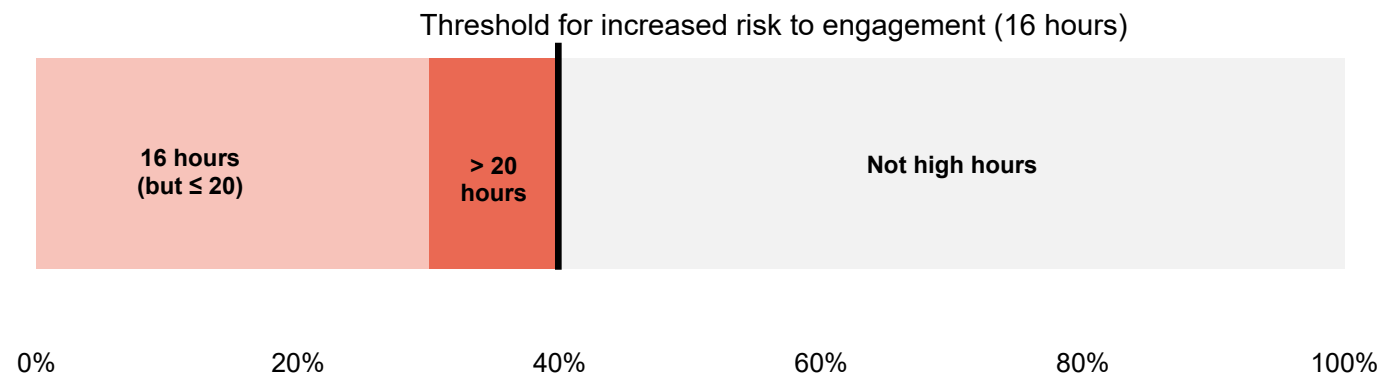
Beyond asking whether students expected to undertake paid employment, the questionnaire also explored how many hours they anticipated being employed during their studies. Working more than 16 hours a week was considered a high level of employment. Forty percent of respondents expected to work about this threshold, and 10% anticipated working more than 20 hours per week. These levels are associated in sector research^{16,17,18} with increased risks to engagement, wellbeing and continuation, particularly where work is undertaken out of financial necessity rather than choice.

¹⁶ Callender, C (2008) 'The impact of term-time employment on higher education students' academic attainment and achievement', *Journal of Education Policy*, 23 (4): 359-377. Available at: www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02680930801924490

¹⁷ Wright, A, Wilding, M, Lawler, M and Lowe, M (2025) *Student working lives*. HEPI report 195. Oxford: HEPI. Available at: www.hepi.ac.uk/reports/student-working-lives

¹⁸ Neves, J, Freeman, J, Stephenson, R and Rowan, A (2025) *Student Academic Experience Survey 2025*. York: Advance HE and Higher Education Policy Institute. Available at: www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/SAES-2025_FINAL_WEB.pdf

Figure 13. Students' expected weekly working (ie paid employment) hours during study: identifying those at risk with high workloads (over 16 hours and over 20 hours)



Among those who expected to work, several student characteristics were associated with a greater likelihood of planning to work long hours. Older students were around three times more likely to anticipate working long hours, first-in-family students around twice as likely, and commuter students also more likely to expect extended working hours. These groups may be managing multiple responsibilities, such as family commitments, commuting time, or financial independence, creating pressures that make long working hours feel necessary. Students from outside the UK were also more likely to expect to work long hours, which may reflect additional financial demands linked to relocation, limited access to family financial support or lack of clarity about visa restrictions.

Taken together, these patterns suggest that financial pressures are layered and intersecting: students who already face structural or contextual challenges in their lives are also those most likely to feel pushed towards extensive employment during their studies. Supporting students to navigate realistic workload expectations, access financial advice and understand available support, such as bursaries, is therefore central to strengthening continuation. Having this data at the start of the university journey means that targeted signposting and support can be delivered to those who really need it and can make use of it.

4 Learning and teaching

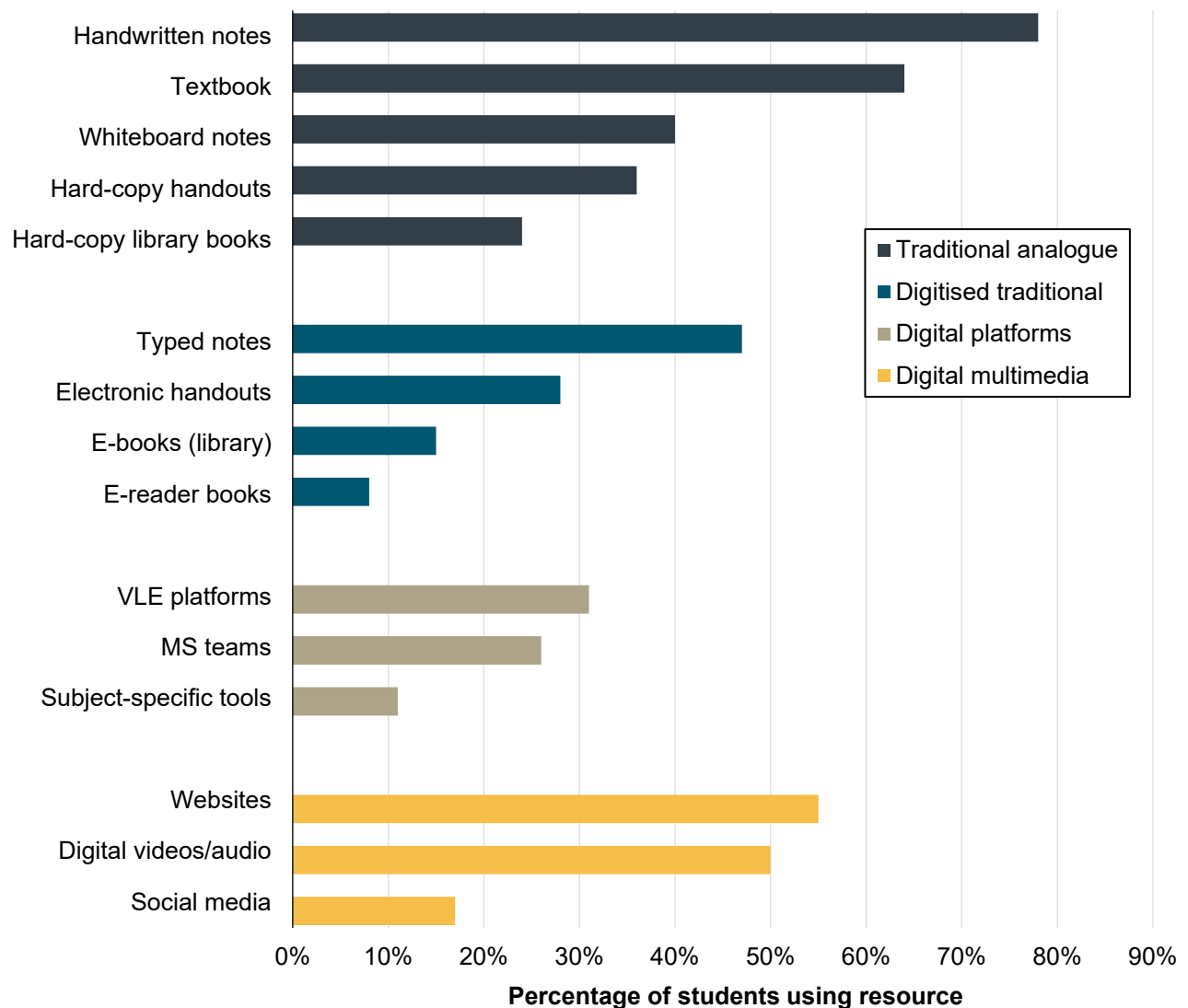
This section explores students' prior learning experiences and what they expect from learning and teaching at university. We are particularly interested in factors that feed into student satisfaction, such as feedback and assessment, as well as how respondents imagine university experience connecting to future employment.

4.1 Preparedness and expectations for learning

Students arrive at university with diverse learning histories, shaped by their school or college environment, their access to technology and the types of feedback and support they were accustomed to. As institutions seek to design effective transition programmes and manage student expectations, it is important to understand what students think learning at university will look like, and the assumptions they bring with them from earlier stages of education.

In 2026, it is easy to assume that most students have come through technology-rich learning environments. The prominence of digital learning during and since the pandemic has created a sense that most schools and colleges now rely on digital tools, virtual classrooms and digital resources. Although students report using a wide mix of materials, their learning remains firmly grounded in traditional analogue tools. Handwritten notes (78%), textbooks (64%) and whiteboard-based teaching (40%) were all used far more frequently than digital-first platforms or resources. While half of respondents engaged with digital media such as educational videos (50%), most digital items represented digitised versions of traditional materials (typed notes, PDFs, e-books) rather than innovative digital tools. This suggests that digital supplements, rather than replaces, conventional, hard-copy study practices.

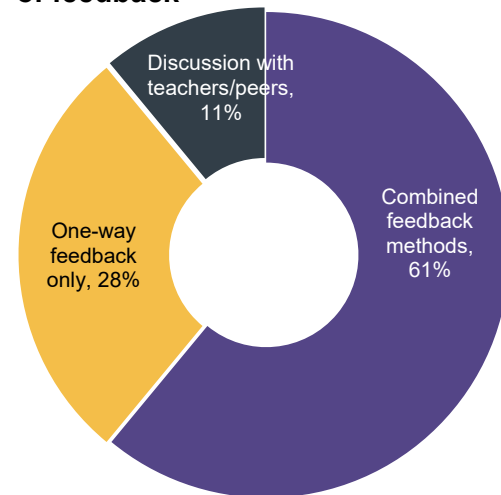
Figure 14. Materials used in learning for highest qualification: traditional, digitised and digital resources



Despite this variation in learning modes, access to technology itself was high: 93% of respondents had access to their own technology in the form of a laptop, desktop or a mobile phone. However, when looking at the primary use of technology to access learning, 54% used their own laptop or desktop, 25% primarily used their mobile phone and 21% primarily used devices shared with family or school/college. A very small minority reported no access to technology at all. While almost all students technically had access to some form of digital device, many do not have access to, or make full use of, the type of device that best supports independent high-level academic study. Only around half primarily use a laptop or desktop, while the rest rely on mobile phones or shared devices, both of which may constrain learning.

Feedback practices in earlier education also play a significant role in shaping expectations. Given the significance of feedback in student satisfaction indicators, such as the National Student Survey (NSS) and Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES), as well as on academic confidence, understanding the early experiences is crucial. Most respondents (61%) reported having received a mix of feedback that involved some discussion with teachers or peers alongside one-way feedback such as written comments, recorded comments or simple grades. However, 28% had only experienced one-way feedback, and 11% had only received feedback through discussion. These findings highlight that students arrive with quite different expectations about the accessibility of feedback, the opportunities they will have to discuss their progress, and the degree of relational connection they anticipate with their lecturers.

Figure 15. Previous experience of feedback



Students' motivations for pursuing an undergraduate degree also shape the expectations they bring to learning and teaching. In this sample, 83% reported reasons linked to intrinsic motivation, such as enthusiasm for the subject, desire to keep learning, or a wish to prove their capability in a university environment. These motivations may partly explain why some students anticipate a high level of contact or structured learning, as they associate academic engagement with formal timetabled activity rather than independent study.

When asked about how they expected to spend their time at university, more than a third (37%) anticipated receiving more than 16 hours of contact time per week. Meanwhile, 24% expect to spend more than 16 hours per week on independent study. These expectations contrast with the 2025 Student Academic Experience Survey (SAES) which found that students typically spend around 11.6 hours per week on independent study. Together, these findings underscore the need for institutions to communicate clearly and early about course structures, typical workloads, and the balance between contact and independent learning, especially for students whose expectations may not align with disciplinary norms. Although the questionnaire shows some differences in expected contact hours across subject areas, these patterns are uneven and do not consistently reflect the wide variation in actual teaching models across disciplines. This makes it especially important for institutions to set clear, discipline-specific expectations about how time will be spent, so that students understand what is typical for their field and are better prepared for the balance between contact and independent learning.

Finally, students were asked about the skills they expect to develop during their degree. A striking 92% expect university to provide them with practical experience, a finding that is particularly salient given the growing emphasis on placements and applied learning. Interestingly, when looking across major subject groups with sufficient respondent numbers

(N ≥ 50), agreement was high, ranging from 88% to 96%, suggesting that expectations of practical experience are widespread across disciplines. While opportunities for practical engagement are inevitably shaped by subject area, this expectation cuts across disciplines. Additionally, 64% expect to gain specific employment-related skills, and 52% expect to develop transferable skills. Collectively these expectations point to a strong orientation towards work readiness and applied learning, even among students motivated primarily by academic interest.

Understanding these varied starting points is essential for universities seeking to build effective transition pathways and ensure that students are well-prepared for the realities of HE learning. Students begin their degree with different assumptions about technology, feedback, contact hours and skills development. Making these expectations visible, and providing thoughtful and prompt feedback through communications, induction and early curriculum design, can play a key role in supporting student success from the very beginning of their academic journey.

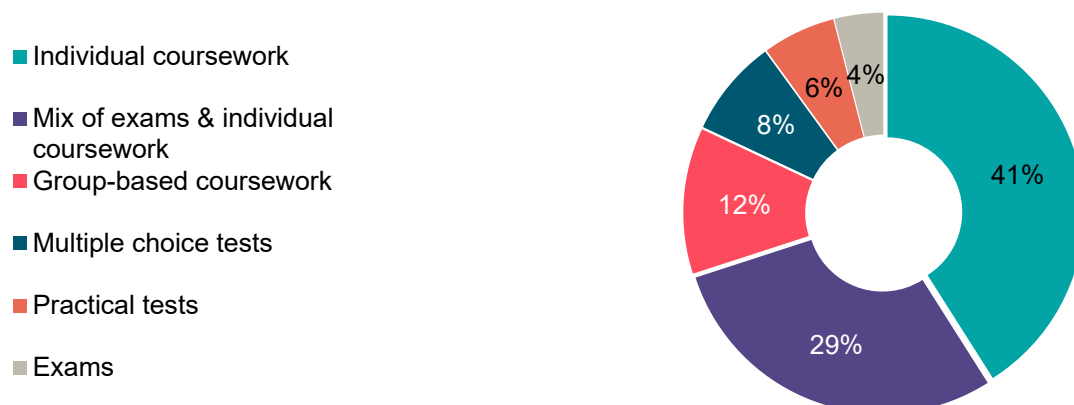
4.2 Assessment and feedback experiences

Though there were mixed experiences of what types of feedback had been received, students seem to prefer conversational feedback (56%) ie feedback offered in conversation with a teacher/tutor either individually or in groups, whereas 44% would prefer transmissive feedback ie written/audiovisual/grade feedback provided on a piece of work. Interestingly, 8% of respondents who reported a preference for conversational feedback did so despite having no experience of conversational feedback in their previous education experience.

As feedback is one of the areas that seems to negatively impact student satisfaction most strongly, it is also important to understand respondents' experience of feedback and what they find the most useful. This data must, of course, be used with pedagogical knowledge to inform feedback practices going forward but it is useful to understand what students expect and want to be able to broach those conversations. Seventy-three percent of respondents find developmental feedback to be the most useful, ie telling them what they can improve. Sixty-six percent find confidence-building feedback useful and 32% find feedback that is given in discussion with peers, either informally outside of class or formally within the classroom environment, as useful.

Students were asked about their preferred methods of assessment and results were varied. Forty-one percent of students prefer to undertake individual coursework, while 29% prefer a mix of exams and individual or group coursework. Twelve percent preferred group-based coursework, 8% preferred multiple-choice tests, 6% preferred practical tests and 4% showed a preference for exams. While assessment decisions should be made on pedagogical merit, it is important to note these preferences so that assessment justifications and decisions can be shared and explained openly with students. This has the potential to reduce the dissatisfaction that comes through in assessment feedback.

Figure 16. Preferred methods of assessment based on previous educational experience



The low numbers of students who prefer exams is not surprising. The switch away from exams to more coursework-based assessment during the pandemic saw an increase in different ways of assessing students. The return to exam-based assessment as an attempt to reduce the use of AI has been challenging across the sector, not just for students with additional learning needs who may have flourished with alternative modes of assessment, but also for all students who were able to succeed in this more inclusive assessment environment. When asked about exam anxiety, 81% of respondents reported finding exams anxiety provoking with the top reasons being worry that they will forget what they have learnt (55%), struggle to remember under pressure (44%), worry about failure (44%) and finding the exam environment stressful (38%).

4.3 Engagement with learning, technology and AI

Students arrive at university with a wide range of digital experiences, shaped by what they used in school, college, or in their personal lives. The data suggests that while students live and socialise digitally, their learning experience at school remains largely traditional. Understanding this landscape is essential for institutions aiming to design effective transitions, manage expectations around digital learning and support students in developing the skills they need for contemporary HE environments.

Overall, respondents reported a strong level of digital confidence: 58% described themselves as having strong or very strong digital skills, and when those rating themselves as adequate are included, this rises to 92%. At first glance, this suggests a cohort that feels broadly comfortable navigating digital tools. However, self-perception does not always align with actual fluency, and a closer look at the specific platforms students have experience with shows a much more uneven pattern.

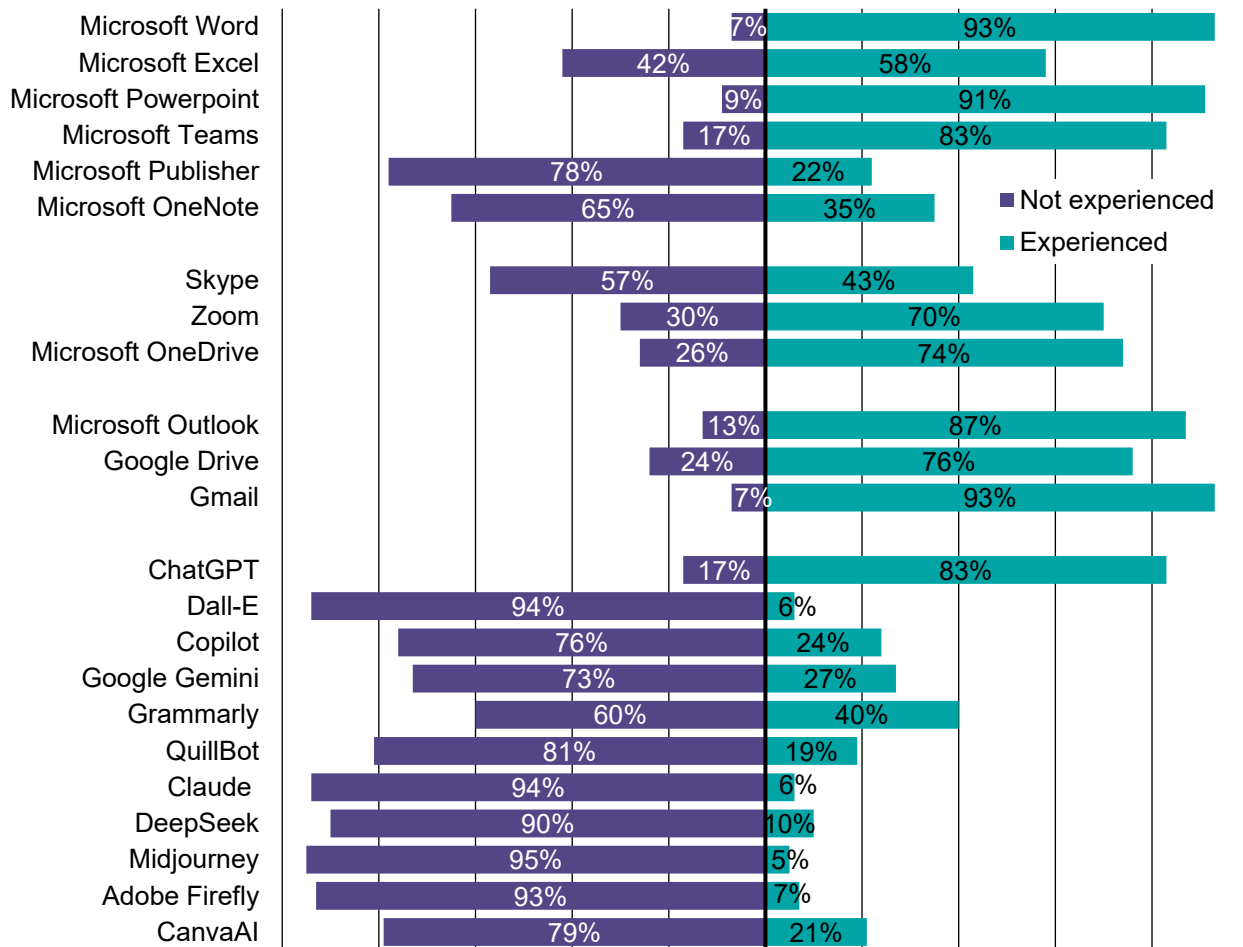
Students were most experienced with the tools traditionally embedded in school and everyday life. High levels of experience were reported for Microsoft Word (93%), PowerPoint (91%), Outlook (87%) and Teams (83%). Even platforms such as Zoom (70%) and Google Drive (76%), widely used for remote learning during and after the pandemic, showed strong familiarity. By contrast, only 58% felt experienced with Excel, a tool central to data handling

and academic work in many disciplines. Some platforms commonly used in HE also showed low pre-arrival exposure, such as OneNote (35%) and Publisher (22%). These differences indicate that students' confidence may stem from familiarity with communication and presentation tools rather than the wider suite of digital systems required for effective learning.

The picture becomes even more varied when considering AI. Overall, 61% reported at least some experience with AI tools, but this headline figure masks large disparities in specific platforms. ChatGPT was by far the most familiar (83%), aligning with its rapid mainstream adoption. However, experience with other major tools was far lower: Copilot (24%), Google Gemini (27%), Grammarly (40%) and CanvaAI (21%) show moderate levels of use, while tools such as Dall-E (6%), Claude (6%), MidJourney (5%) and AdobeFirefly (7%) were largely unfamiliar to students entering university. Despite this uneven experience, students reported active use of AI for academic purposes even before arrival: 41% had used AI tools for writing support, and 46% had used them for broader learning support. There were some differences between experiences of using Generative AI (GenAI) by student characteristics – for example, older students were less familiar with GenAI tools, and international students were more familiar with the tools. This suggests that many students are already experimenting with GenAI in their learning, even if their experience is limited to a small number of well-known tools. As a result, many will arrive expecting AI to feature in their learning, but will also require structured support in learning how to use the broader set of tools available in HE.

For institutions, these findings carry several implications. First, students' declared confidence in digital skills may mask important gaps, particularly in tools used for academic data management, note-taking or discipline-specific tasks. Transition programmes should therefore consider offering early, targeting digital skills refreshers, ideally positioned as normalised, inclusive support rather than remedial interventions. Second, the uneven exposure to AI tools indicates a need for clearer, more structured guidance on appropriate academic use of AI. Many students are already incorporating these tools into their study practices before they arrive, but universities need to ensure that students understand not just how to use AI, but also when its use is appropriate, ethical and academically legitimate.

Finally, these insights reinforce the importance of transparent communication about digital expectations from the outset. Understanding the tools students already know, and the ones they do not, can help curriculum teams shape induction activities, scaffold digital learning early in programmes, and ensure that all students, regardless of background, can participate fully and confidently in the digital aspects of university life.

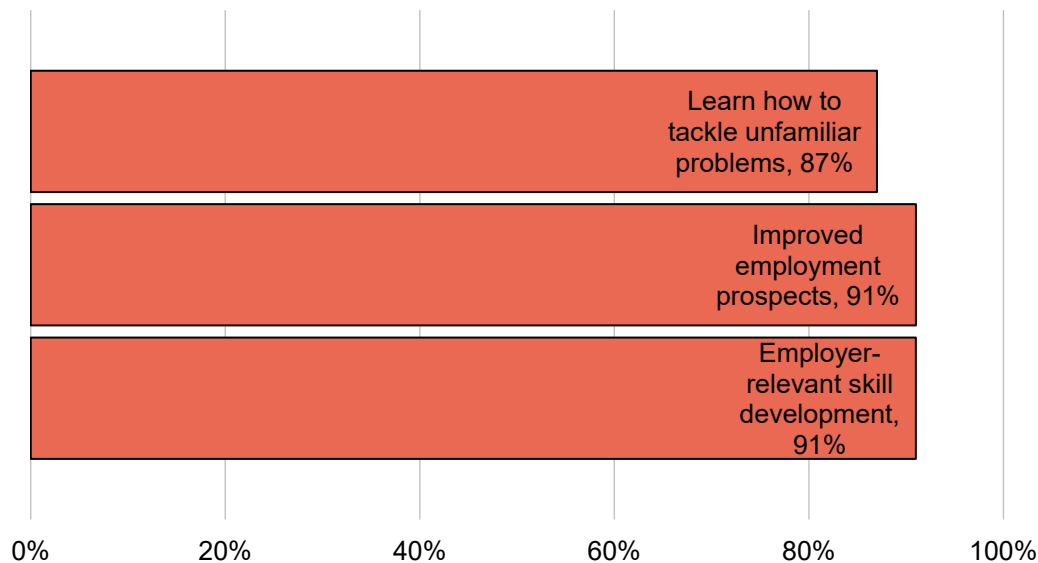
Figure 17. Digital and AI tool experience

4.4 Expectations for outcomes and future prospects

Although respondents are right at the start of their degree experience, it is important to understand the expectations they bring around employability, skills development and prospects. While students' expectations inevitably shift over time, establishing this baseline enables institutions to anticipate needs, align early interventions and shape the learning environment in ways that support realistic, evidence-informed expectations.

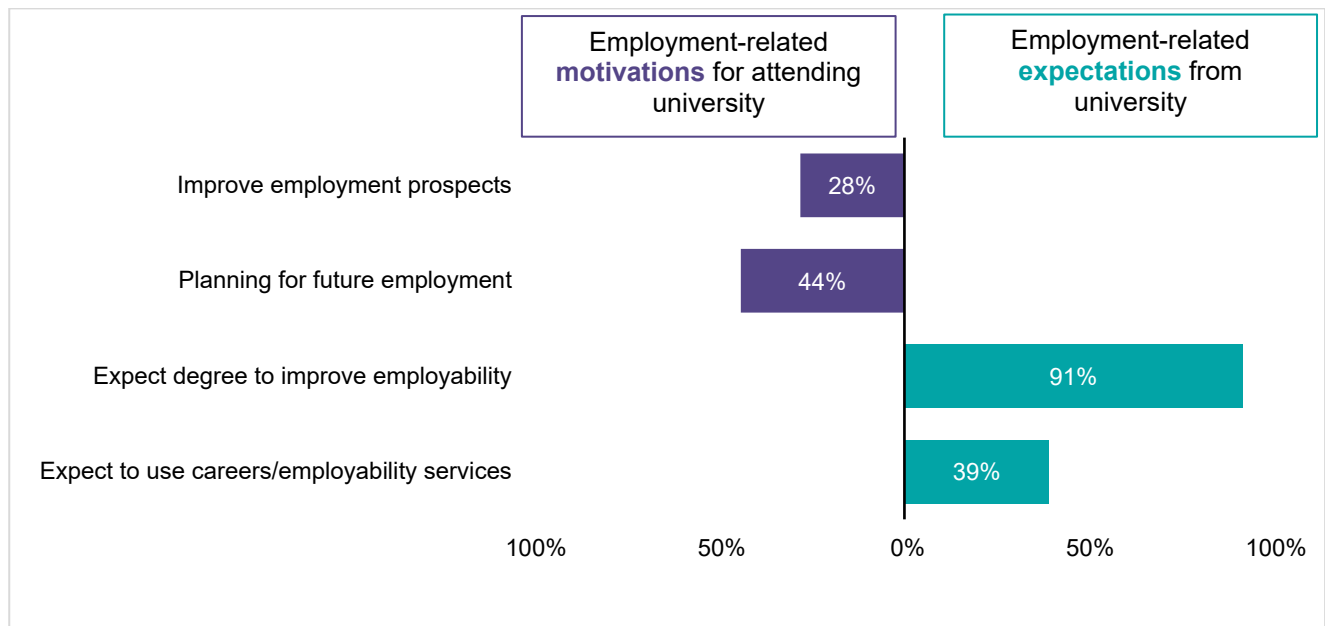
Incoming undergraduates express strong confidence that university will support their future employability. Around nine in ten expect that their studies will develop employer-relevant skills and improve their employment prospects (91% agreement to both measures). A similarly high proportion (87%) believe that university will help them tackle unfamiliar problems, signalling an appetite for authentic, applied learning approaches.

Figure 18. Anticipated employability benefits of university study



Students also hold relatively positive views of the labour-market value of a degree. Two-thirds (68%) believe employers value an undergraduate qualification above school/college qualifications, although more than one in five (22%) report uncertainty about how employers view a degree. This level of uncertainty suggests scope for universities to improve how they communicate the value and relevance of academic study to contemporary labour-market expectations, particularly early in the student journey.

Employability features in students' motivations and priorities, though in different ways across the decision-making journey. Around one quarter (28%) say they chose to enter HE to improve their employment prospects while a larger share (44%) list 'planning for future employment' as a priority for their degree experience. These figures sit well below the proportion who expect university to improve their employability (91%) suggesting that while employability is not always the primary reason for entering HE, or choosing where to study, it is nonetheless viewed as a universal outcome of the university experience, an assumed baseline rather than a differentiating factor.

Figure 18: Employability: what motivates students vs what they expect

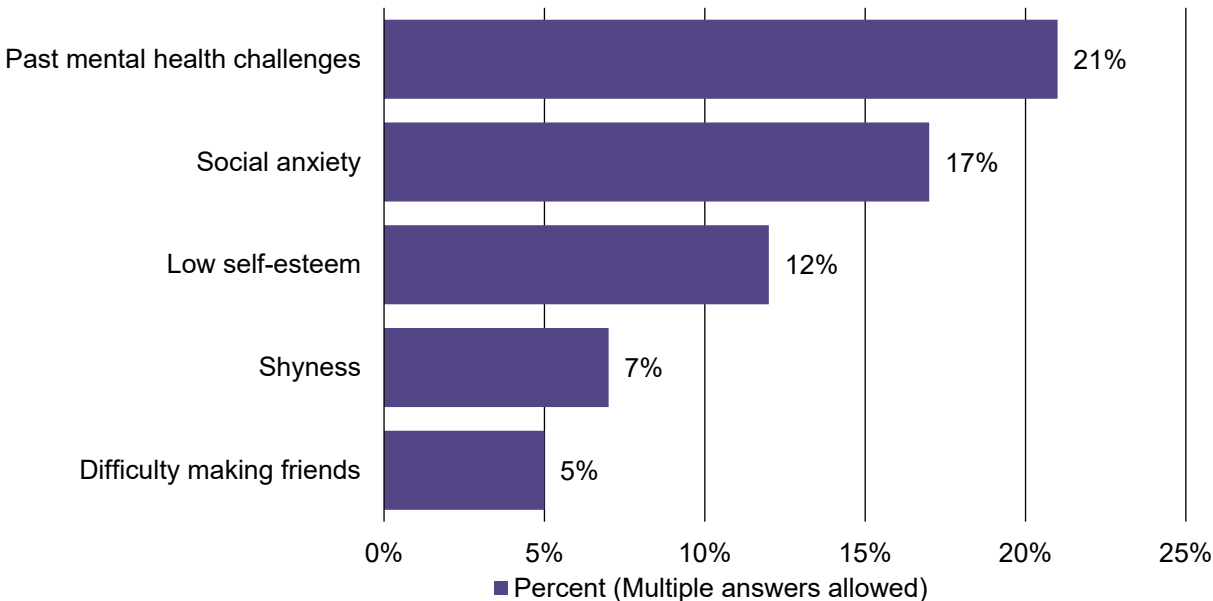
Despite these strong expectations, only 39% anticipate making use of their institution's careers and employability services on entry. This is considerably lower than the proportion expecting employability benefits from their degree, suggesting a possible expectation-engagement gap. One interpretation is that many students may expect employability development, such as skills, guidance and labour-market preparation, to be delivered primarily through the curriculum, rather than through separate optional support services.

Taken together, these pre-arrival findings indicate that students largely equate the value of university with readiness for future employment, and that expectations around skills development, particularly around problem-solving and employer relevance, are part of the cognitive framework that students bring into the first term. Providers who make these links explicit within learning and teaching design, and through authentic assessment, embedded employability and early skills framing, may see smoother alignment between expectations and later satisfaction measures relating to intellectual stretch, skills development and the learning community.

5 Wellbeing

Students enter university with a wide range of prior experiences that shape their expectations, confidence and concerns around wellbeing. Their previous educational environments appear to have offered mixed levels of social and emotional support: just under half report feeling supported by teachers or tutors (55%) or through connecting with others on their course (58%), while fewer cite support networks outside of study (39%) or personal support (21%) as helpful. These patterns resonate with the earlier findings on loneliness and settling in (see section 3.2), where a notable minority had experienced regular feelings of isolation. Twenty-one percent of respondents indicated that they had experienced mental health challenges in the past, and 17% reported social anxiety, 12% low self-esteem, 7% shyness and 5% reported difficulty in making friends in their last places of study. While each of these groups represents a minority, together they highlight a notable level of vulnerability within the incoming student body. This background context matters, as students' prior social dynamics form part of the emotional landscape they bring into the university environment.

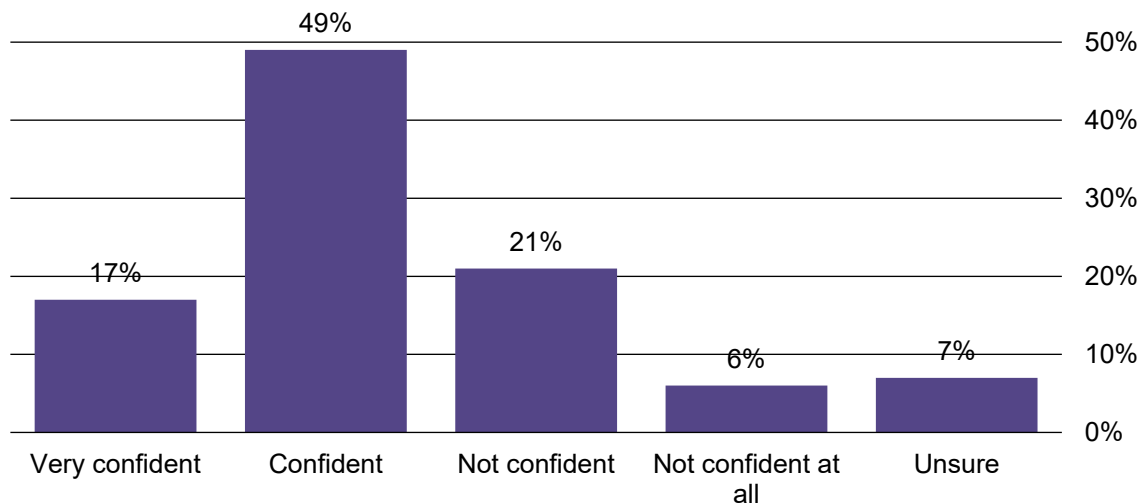
Figure 19. Social and emotional vulnerabilities reported at previous place of study



Alongside these relational factors, students' own mental health outlooks reveal a blend of confidence and vulnerability. Two-thirds feel confident about looking after their mental health at university (66%), yet more than one in four report low confidence or uncertainty (27%). Concern about ongoing illness or missing classes is less widespread – fewer than one in five express concern – but nonetheless relevant for a substantial minority. Together, these responses indicate that while many students feel reasonably self-assured, a significant proportion anticipate needing support to manage the transition into more independent study.

Importantly, this experience varies across student characteristics (such as sex and domicile) making it important for institutions to shape their support across their student body.

Figure 20. Respondents' confidence in looking after their mental health at university



Expectations around institutional support mirror this mix of self-reliance and anticipated need. Around one-third expect to make use of mental health and wellbeing services (35%), health services such as a GP (31%), or university sports facilities (35%). However, only a small minority expect to draw on broader support services (14%), suggesting that students may view wellbeing support in relatively narrow, functional terms rather than as part of a broader network of provision. This pattern aligns with findings elsewhere in the questionnaire where expectations for outcomes are high, but anticipated engagement with support services is comparatively modest.

Students' physical activity patterns and barriers offer further insight into the everyday factors shaping wellbeing. Just over 70% are at least moderately active, with sizeable minorities participating in wellbeing activities (40%) or gym-based (37%) classes. However, barriers to participation are common: time constraints (44%), cost (32%) and lack of motivation or confidence (28%) represent the most substantial obstacles, with smaller proportions citing caring responsibilities, accessibility issues or part-time employment. These findings illustrate that while many students aim to maintain an active lifestyle, their capacity to do so is shaped by both structural and personal constraints, some of which may intensify during transition into higher education.

Wellbeing priorities reinforce this picture of mixed capacity and high aspiration. A majority of incoming students identify life/study/work balance as a priority of their degree experience (58%), with substantial proportions also prioritising physical (41%) and mental health (40%). These priorities sit alongside uncertainties and concerns identified elsewhere in the data, suggesting that students place considerable value on maintaining balance and wellbeing, even if their confidence, previous experience or perceive barriers complicate their ability to do so.

Taken together, these findings present a picture of students arriving at university with high wellbeing aspirations, uneven prior support and a mix of confidence and vulnerability. They recognise the importance of balance, activity and mental health, yet anticipate engaging selectively with support structures, and face logistical, financial and personal barriers that could limit their capacity to sustain healthy routines. For providers, the challenge is to create environments where wellbeing is supported proactively and holistically: integrated into teaching, community-building and the design of campus life, rather than positioned solely within discrete services that only some students anticipate using.

6 Conclusions

The findings from the first national pilot of the pre-arrival questionnaire offer a detailed picture of the expectations, prior experiences and early transition concerns that incoming undergraduates bring with them into HE. Although the participating institutions represent a diverse cross-section of providers, the patterns emerging across the dataset point to shared challenges that affect the early student journey and shape engagement across the critical first weeks, providing headline insights aligned with the OfS baseline requirements for student support and success transition.

Students arrive at university with distinct learning histories, reflecting a range of educational pathways and school/college environments. Their prior exposure to teaching methods, learning modes and feedback practices vary widely, and these differences strongly inform how they imagine university learning will work. Many expect high levels of timetabled teaching, structured contact and readily accessible feedback, often rooted in assumptions carried over from school or influenced by intrinsic motivations for study. Yet these expectations do not always align with contemporary HE models, where independent study, blended learning and self-directed engagement play a prominent role. Misalignment between expectation and reality is well established as a risk factor for early disengagement; the PAQ findings emphasise the need for clear academic orientation, transparent communication and early scaffolding around how learning is organised.

Beyond academic expectations, students also begin their degrees with uneven levels of confidence in their social, academic and practical preparedness for university. Patterns of lower confidence, particularly among disabled students, commuters, carers and first-in-family entrants, illustrate how structural inequalities and life circumstances shape readiness for university. Students with prior SEND plans report higher levels of concern about academic readiness and social transition as well as greater expected need for support across academic, wellbeing and disability services. These insights emphasise the importance of tailored, accessible transition provision that recognises the layered realities that students bring with them.

The PAQ data also highlights the profound impact of wider life circumstances, especially financial pressures and paid employment. Nearly six in ten students expect to work during their studies (including in holidays) but tend to underestimate how common term-time work actually is. Given sector-wide evidence of the impact of extensive working hours on continuation and wellbeing, this mismatch is particularly significant. Financial concerns related to cost of living, travel, debt and essential resources are widespread, and are especially pronounced among students already facing structural disadvantages. These pressures can limit students' capacity to engage socially and academically at the point of arrival. Clear information about financial support, realistic workload expectations and time-management guidance therefore form an essential part of a fair and effective transition offer.

Students' social transition and relationship expectations also matter. A notable minority arrive with experiences of loneliness or social anxiety, and these factors strongly predict concerns about belonging, fitting in and building new relationships. For disabled students

and carers, concerns about relational support are particularly high. This reinforces the need for intentional belonging-building interventions, from peer networks to early social opportunities, that enable all students to establish connection and confidence from the outset.

Finally, students hold strong expectations around employability and future prospects, with the majority expecting their degree to provide applied, practical experience and improve employment outcomes. Yet relatively few expect to engage with careers services, suggesting many assume employability development will occur primarily through the curriculum. Providers therefore face a critical opportunity to embed employability more clearly within early learning experiences and make explicit the mechanisms, both curricular and co-curricular, through which development occurs.

Overall, the PAQ pilot demonstrates the considerable value of pre-arrival insight. Understanding where students begin, academically, socially, practically and emotionally, provides institutions with the evidence to design responsible, proportionate and equitable transition support. By making these expectations visible and acting early to address areas of mismatch or vulnerability, universities can strengthen belonging, reduce early barriers and lay the foundations for improved engagement, satisfaction and continuation across diverse student cohorts.

Appendix 1. List of participating institutions for Wave 1

Arts University Bournemouth
Aston University
Bath Spa University
Courtauld Institute
Leeds Trinity University
Liverpool Hope University
Norland College
Portsmouth University
Royal Agricultural University
SOAS
Solent Southampton University
UCEN Manchester
University of Bradford
University of East London
University of Worcester

Appendix 2. Working group membership

Name	Institution/Organisation (Role)
Professor Liz Austen	Sheffield Hallam University (Associate Dean Learning and Teaching)
Sue Beckingham	Sheffield Hallam University (Associate Professor Learning and Teaching)
Sunday Blake	Guild HE (Policy Manager)
Mark Bennett	Keystone Education Group (Vice President Research and Insight)
Dr Tiffany Chiu	Imperial College London (Principal Teaching Fellow in Educational Development)
Rachel Ditchfield	BPP Education Group (Associate Director of Market Intelligence)
Vivi Friedgut	Blackbullion (Founder and CEO)
Professor Wendy Garnham	Sussex University (Professor of Psychology)
Dr Thandi Gilder	Advance HE (Researcher)
Professor Debbie Holley	Bournemouth University (Professor of Learning Innovation)
Patrick Johnson	University of Law (Pro Vice-Chancellor Student Success, Diversity and Inclusion)
Professor Deborah Johnston	London South Bank University (Deputy Vice Chancellor)
Professor Rose Luckin	Educate Ventures Research (Founder and CEO), University College London (Emeritus Professor of Learning Centred Design)
Dr Emma Maslin	AMOSSHE (Senior Policy and Research Officer)
Dr Emily McIntosh	Harper Adams (Chief Student Officer)
Dr Michelle Morgan	University of East London (Dean of Students)
Jonathan Neves	Advance HE (Head of Research and Surveys)
Lydia Pell	University of East London and Student Minds (Student Minds Assessor)
Professor Liz Thomas	University of York (Research Centre Lead: Centre for Research on Education and Social Justice)
Professor Paul Wakeling	University of York (Dean of York Graduate Research School)
Dr Dom Walker	Jisc (Business Intelligence and Surveys Consultant)
Professor Billy Wong	University of Reading (Director of Research and Evaluation Access and Participation)

Appendix 3. Steering group membership

Name	Institution/Company (Role)
Professor Sir Les Ebdon	Chair of the Advisory Board
Professor Bugewa Apampa	University of East London (Pro Vice Chancellor Education and Experience; Learning and Teaching, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion)
Ruth Arnold	Study Group (Executive Director; International & Education Charities)
Professor Graeme Atherton	University of West London and Ruskin College, Oxford (Associate Pro-Vice Chancellor for Regional Engagement – UWL; Vice Principal Ruskin College; National Policy, former Director of NEON)
Dr Diana Beech	City St George's University (Director of Finsbury Institute and former CEO London Higher)
Dr Owen Gower	UK Council for Graduate Education (Director)
David Grey	UKAT National Personal Tutoring and Academic Advising (CEO)
Dr Kat Heywood	Jisc (Head of Business Intelligence Data Analytics)
Nick Hillman	Higher Education Policy Institute (Director)
Dr Gareth Hughes	Student Minds (Charter Content Development Lead and Psychoeducational Lead)
Ben Jordan	UCAS (Head of Policy Recruitment and Data)
Dr Omar Khan	TASO (CEO)
Dr Michelle Morgan	University of East London (Dean of Students)
Johnny Rich	Engineering Professors' Council (CEO)
Jenny Shaw	The Unite Group (HE External Engagement Director)
Alex Stanley	National Union of Students (VP Higher Education)
Dr Brooke Storer-Church	Guild HE (Chief Executive)
Sue Williamson	Schools, Students and Teachers Network (SSAT; Director and Chief Executive)

Contact us

All enquiries

Email: enquiries@advance-he.ac.uk

Advance HE helps HE institutions be the best they can be, by unlocking the potential of their people.

We are a member-led, sector-owned charity that works with institutions and higher education across the world to improve higher education for staff, students and society. We are experts in higher education with a particular focus on enhancing teaching and learning, effective governance, leadership development and tackling inequalities through our equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) work.

Our strategic goals to enhance confidence and trust in HE, address inequalities, promote inclusion and advance education to meet the evolving needs of students and society, support the work of our members and the HE sector.

We deliver our support through professional development programmes and events, Fellowships, awards, student surveys and research, providing strategic change and consultancy services and through membership (including accreditation of teaching and learning, equality charters, knowledge and resources).

Advance HE is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales no. 04931031. Company limited by guarantee registered in Ireland no. 703150. Registered as a charity in England and Wales no. 1101607. Registered as a charity in Scotland no. SC043946. Registered Office: Advance HE, Innovation Way, York Science Park, Heslington, York, YO10 5BR, United Kingdom.

© 2026 Advance HE. All rights reserved.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and not necessarily those of Advance HE. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any storage and retrieval system without the written permission of the copyright owner. Such permission will normally be granted for non-commercial, educational purposes provided that due acknowledgement is given. The Advance HE logo should not be used without our permission.

To request copies of this report in large print or in a different format, please contact Advance HE: enquiries@advance-he.ac.uk

advance-he.ac.uk

in **X** **f** **@AdvanceHE**