



Opportunity blocked:

how student
opportunities and SUs
relate to student life,
belonging and outcomes

Research commissioned by

WONKHE
SUs

Introduction

At Wonkhe, we are real fans of the UK's unique Students' Union sector. Earlier this year we launched Wonkhe SUs – a subscription service designed to support SU officers and staff to represent students' effectively. We produce policy briefings and beginner's guides on key issues in higher education, a bespoke weekly news service for SUs featuring the latest developments, news coverage, analysis and opportunities for SUs – as well as access to training, webinars, the team at Wonkhe and a dedicated subsite.

Many of the team started their careers at Wonkhe in higher education by working in SUs and we know first hand the value that involvement in activities, representation and leadership can have. But we also had a hunch that right now, those opportunities – and the benefits that can come from them – are not evenly distributed across the student population. And given that our subscriber SUs were worried about that too, we decided to work with Trendence UK to find out more about said benefits and their distribution.

We began the process back in January 2019 with a small study on student belonging and loneliness at university ("Only the Lonely"), and in summer 2019 we expanded the study to look in more detail at student involvement in activities – the benefits for students of getting involved in terms of career, course and mental health; who is and isn't experiencing those benefits; and what can be done about it.

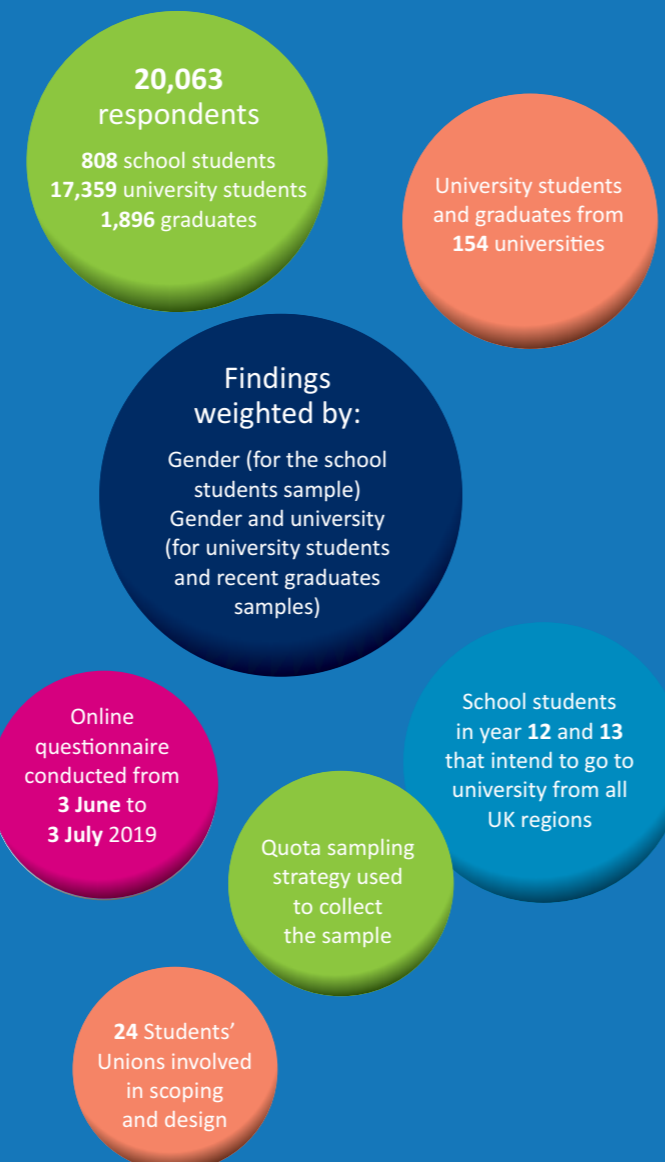
The headline results are fascinating – and show that even when we control for student characteristics, there are major positive links between student wellbeing, course and career confidence and involvement. It's also clear that a students' course is a key place to find friendships – so ensuring that academic schools/departments/faculties facilitate meaningful opportunities to build friendships is key.

It's also clear that SUs and universities should identify ways in which opportunities can be designed to reduce the level of initial commitment – be that financial, opportunity/time, and crucially emotional – and that "entry" points to involvement should exist year-round, rather than "loaded" into a busy Freshers' period.

Above all, it's clear that investment in SUs – especially targeted on social capital, friendship and diversifying the sorts of students involved in activities – could bring huge benefits to students and institutions. We're enormously grateful to the student officers and staff in SUs that helped design the work and looking forward to working with subscriber SUs to make the most of the findings.

Jim Dickinson
Wonkhe SUs

About this study



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Technical notes

This study was commissioned by a group of Students' Unions working with Wonkhe, the home of the higher education debate. The full list of participating SUs may be found at the end of this report.

Key findings

- 13% of students do not think that they have any "true friends" at university. Mature students, those who live at home with their parents/guardians and those who self-identify as having a disability are the most likely to report not having any friends.
- Almost a third (28%) of those who are not confident about their degree do not consider themselves to have any true friends at university.
- Almost 8 out of 10 students (79%) are involved in some kind of extra-curricular activity while at university. However, the level of participation varies significantly depending on students' profile. Those who live at home with their parents/guardians, postgraduate students and Black/African/Caribbean students are less likely to be involved.
- Regardless of background, students' main reasons for partaking in extra-curricular activities are to meet new people, make friends and have fun. Only a third (32%) say that they want to get involved to improve their CV.
- Almost half of the school students surveyed (47%) are expecting their SU to be an important part of their university life. However, 35% of current university students say that the SU is an important part of their university life, and recent graduates are even less positive, with 29% feeling the same.
- 83% of those who are very likely to recommend their SU feel that it represents their academic interests, compared to only 7% of those who would not recommend their SU.
- Only half of the respondents (51%) feel they are involved in the decision making at their SU, and even fewer (38%) believe that they can hold their elected student representatives to account.
- Overall, 82% of students feel confident about completing their degree, 10% are neutral and 7% do not feel confident. Students from minority ethnic groups, those who live with their parents/guardians and those who self-report having a disability (in particular mental health difficulties) are more likely to report feeling less confident about completing their degree.
- Students that are not involved in any kind of activities are twice as likely as those who are to not feel confident about their degree (11% compared to 6%).
- Only 78% of students are satisfied with the quality of their course. Students that feel lonely on a daily basis are more likely to be dissatisfied with the quality of their course.



Loneliness, wellbeing and belonging

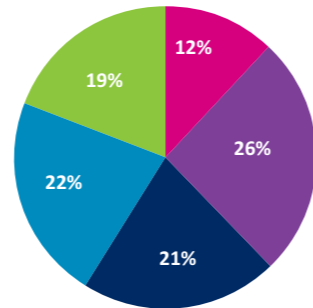
How lonely are students?

Unlike many other studies, ours was carried out at the end of the academic year – giving students a chance to reflect on the year just gone. In this study more than 1 in 10 students (12%) report feeling lonely on a daily basis and more than a quarter (26%) on a weekly basis. 73% say that there are people that they can call on if they wanted to socialise: however, 11% say that they do not have anyone to call on. Similarly, 74% of respondents say that there would be people there if they needed help, but 10% claim that they would not have anyone to seek help from.

When asked who they would call if they needed help, most respondents said their friends, however, that is not an option for everyone. Only 1 out of 4 (25%) students think that they have a large group of friends: at university, 61% have a small group of friends and 13% do not consider themselves to have any true friends at university. Mature students, those that live at home with their parents/guardians and those that self-identify as having a disability are the most likely to report not having any friends.

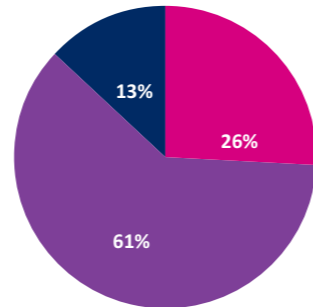
How often, if ever, do you feel lonely?

- Daily
- Weekly
- Monthly
- Less than monthly
- Never

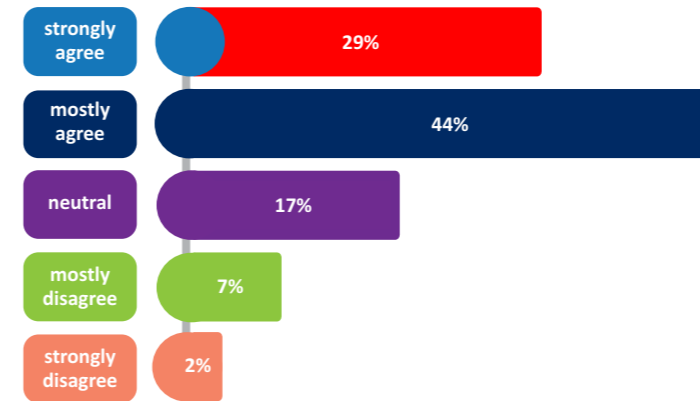


Which of the following best describes you?

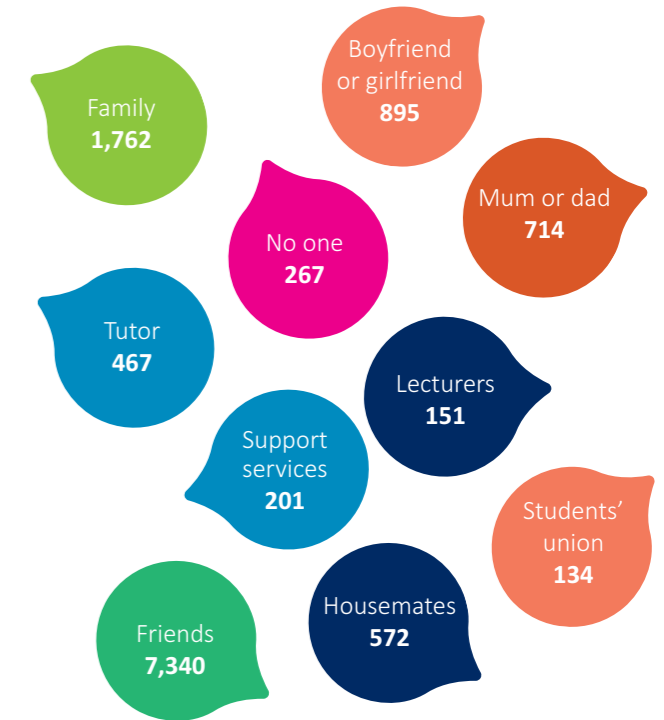
- I have a large group of friends at university
- I have a small group of friends at university
- I do not consider myself to have any true friends at university



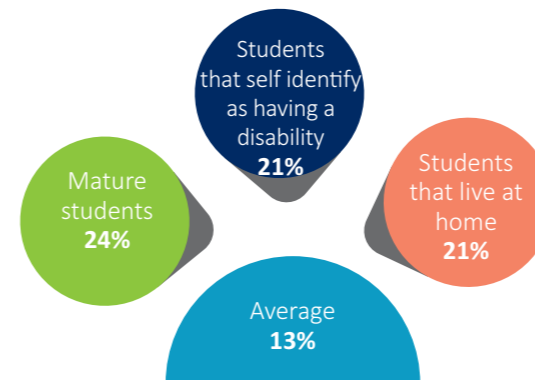
If I needed help, there are people who would be there for me



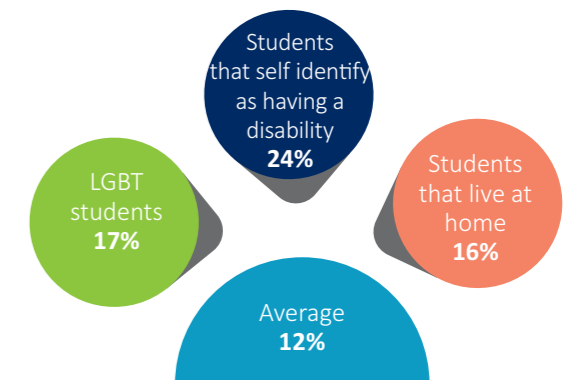
If you needed help, who would you call on?



Top 3 groups that are the most likely to report not having any friends



Top 3 groups that are the most likely to feel lonely on a daily basis



Which students are lonely and why?

Students who self-identify as having a disability, LGBT students and those that live with their parents/guardians are more likely to feel lonely on a daily basis. At the opposite end, students that attended a private school and those that live in a houseshare are less likely to report feeling lonely.

While loneliness is not synonymous with social isolation, it is linked to students' sense of belonging and fitting in. Just over a third (35%) of the students that feel lonely on a daily basis feel that they belong at their university, compared to 82% of those that never feel lonely.

Those that feel that they are part of a community of staff and students are almost twice as likely to be lonely less than monthly or never compared to those that do not feel part of a community. As being part of a community of staff and students is Question 22 in the National Student Survey (NSS), knowing that there is a negative correlation between loneliness and belonging can be used by universities and SUs to identify groups of students at risk.

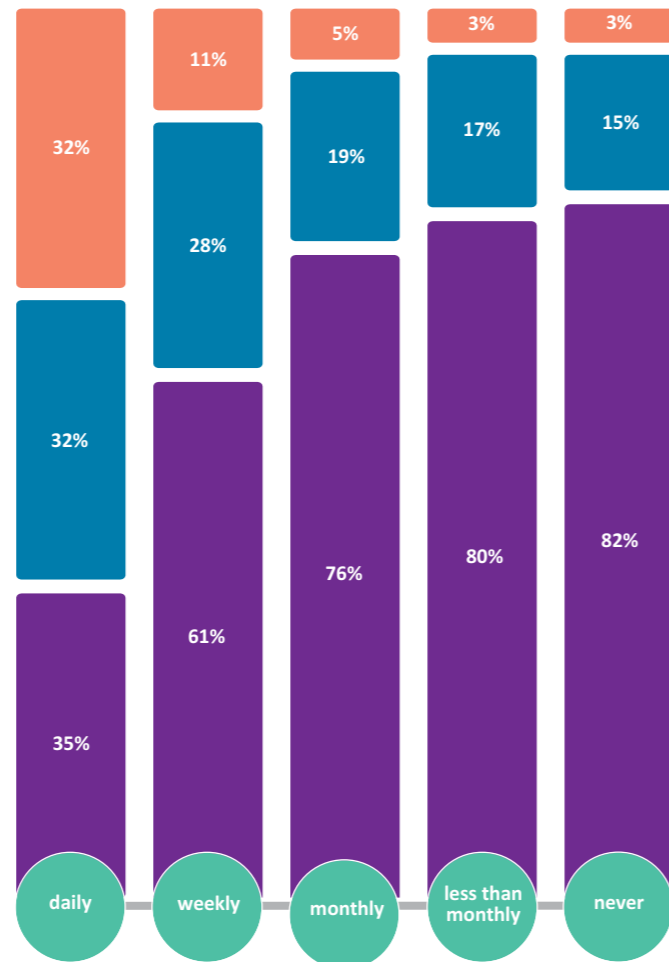
How does the experience of loneliness change depending on students' year group?

As students progress through university, their expectations change and this will influence their experience of loneliness. Those in their final year of study are more likely to be worried about their mental health, having enough money to get by, their work-life balance and finding a job after graduation. Almost half (45%) of first-year students are concerned about making the most out of university life, and while the percentage gradually decreases, this still remains one of the top 3 concerns for 41% of final year students.

Students' daily concerns also change depending on their year group. A third (29%) of first-year students are concerned about making friends/meeting new people, and while the proportion halves, still more than 1 in 10 finalists (16%) consider this to be one of their top worries. This is even more concerning when we consider that more than 1 in 10 final year students (12%) do not think that they have any true friends – only marginally fewer than first-year students (15%). Furthermore, almost half (44%) of the students in their first year of study report feeling lonely on a daily or weekly basis, and while the percentage slightly decreases, 4 out of 10 (40%) of middle year(s) students and 35% of finalists feel the same.

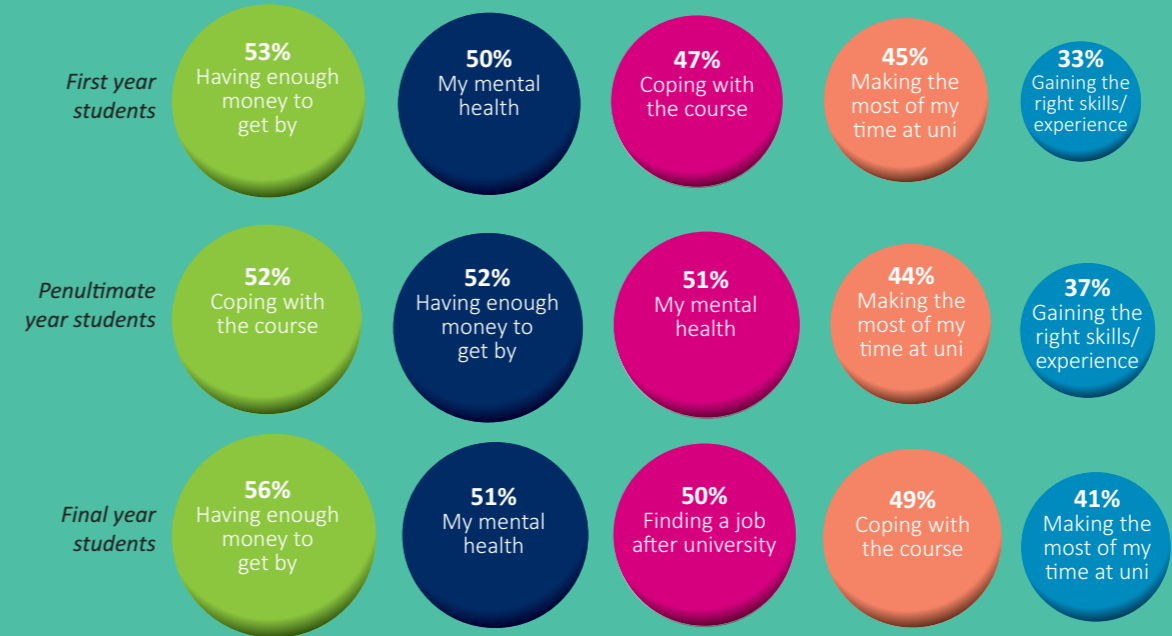
As being part of a community of staff and students is Question 22 in the National Student Survey (NSS), knowing that there is a correlation between loneliness and belonging can be used by universities and SUs to identify groups of students at risk.

Frequency of feeling lonely vs belonging at university

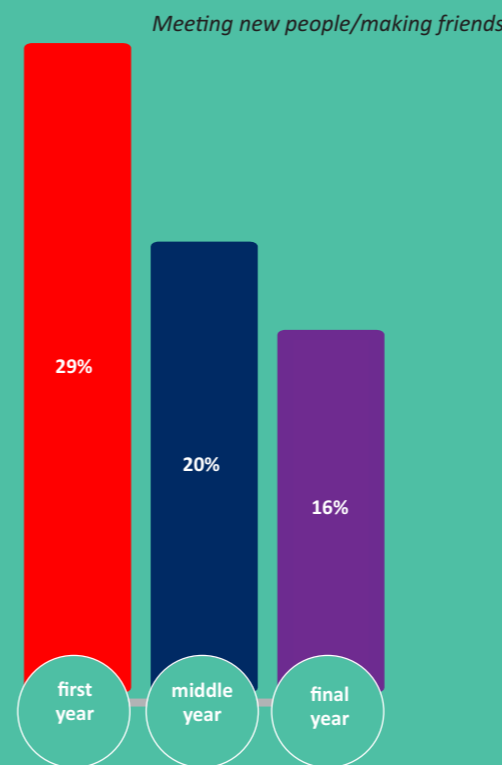


● Agree or strongly agree
● Neutral
● Disagree or strongly disagree

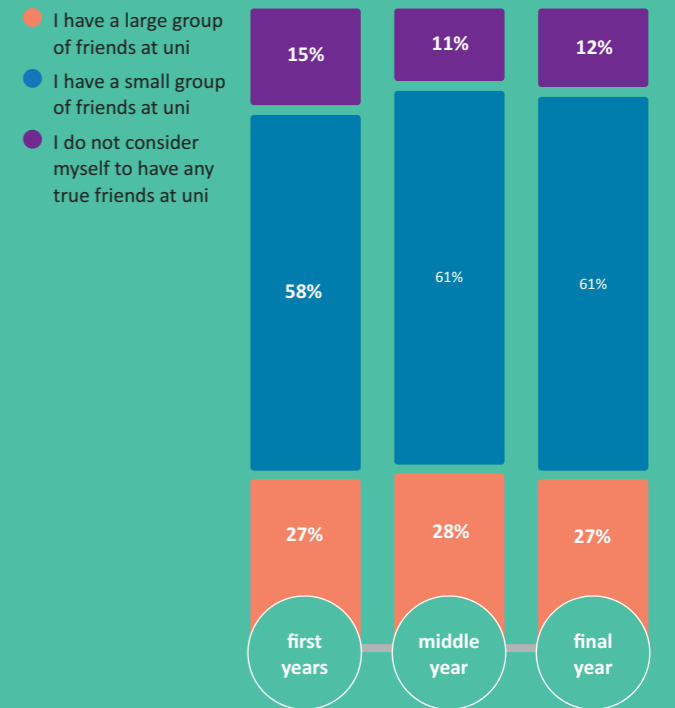
What concerns you on a daily basis? (by year group – top 5)



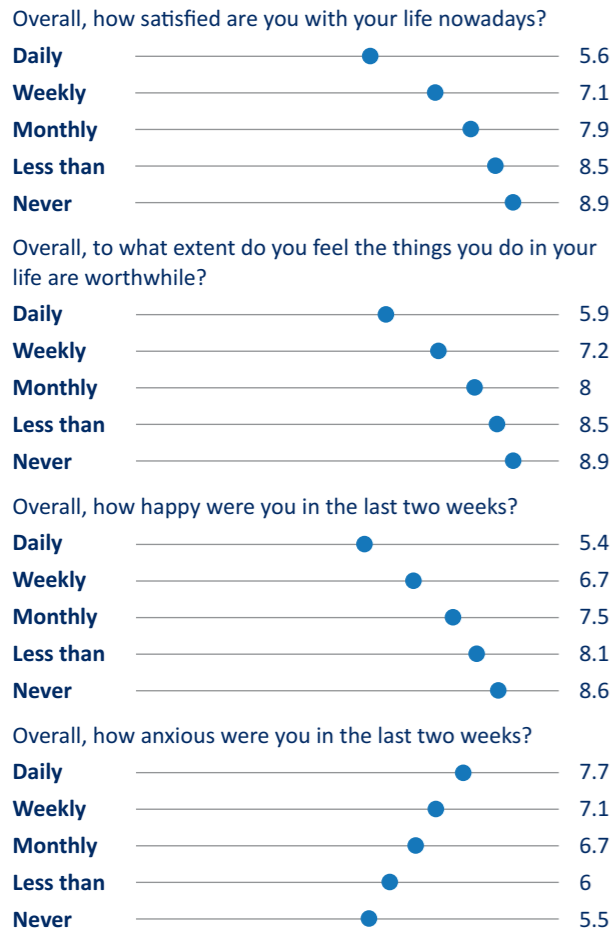
What concerns you most on a day to day basis at university/your HE provider?



Which of the following best describes you? By year group



Satisfaction scores vs frequency of feeling lonely



Satisfaction scores by different diversity metrics

Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?	
Students that self identify a disability	7.1
LGBT students	7.4
Asian/Asian British ethnicity students	7.4
Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?	
Students that self identify a disability	7.2
LGBT students	7.3
Asian/Asian British ethnicity students	7.6
Overall, how happy were you in the last two weeks?	
Students that self identify a disability	6.6
LGBT students	6.9
Asian/Asian British ethnicity students	7.2

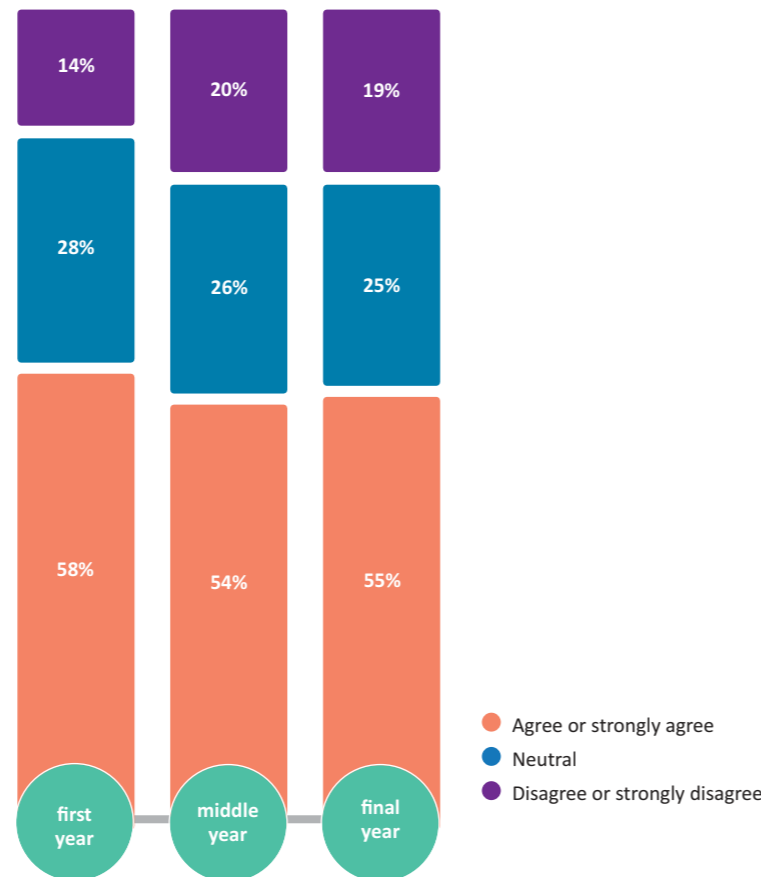
What are the consequences of loneliness?

The lonelier the students are, the more likely they are to report feeling unhappy and dissatisfied with their lives. The students that are the most likely to feel lonely on a daily basis – in particular, LGBT students, those that self-identify a disability and those living with their parents/guardians – are more likely to report lower wellbeing scores compared to the average.

Loneliness may even influence students' outcomes and career prospects. One in 10 (11%) of those feeling lonely on a daily basis are thinking about dropping out of their course and over a third of these (32%) think about it on a daily basis. By comparison, overall, 4% of students are thinking about dropping out and 16% think about it on a daily basis.

Yet just over half of all students (55%) believe that their university cares about their mental health, and a similar proportion of students (56%) believe that there has been sufficient provision of student wellbeing and support services at their university. Black/African/Caribbean ethnicity are less likely compared to white students to believe that their university cares about their mental health and wellbeing.

My university cares about my mental health and wellbeing



How can universities and SUs help those that feel lonely?

We've seen that loneliness is linked to sense of belonging. In order to answer the above question, it is essential to consider what influences students' sense of fitting in and sense of belonging.

82% of the students that feel comfortable expressing themselves also feel that they belong at their university, twice as many compared to those that do not feel comfortable. Out of all student groups, Black/African/Caribbean ethnicity students report being the least comfortable expressing themselves on campus (49% compared to 56% of the total sample).

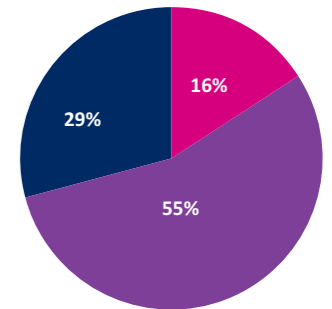
How can universities and SUs ensure that more students feel comfortable expressing themselves and being part of the community? One possible way is by creating safer environments. Students that feel safe at their university are 5 times more likely than their counterparts to also feel comfortable expressing themselves. Black/African/Caribbean students who feel safe on campus are more than 4 times more likely to feel comfortable expressing themselves than their counterparts who feel unsafe.

Another suggestion would be to encourage participation in various aspects of university life. Students that are involved in extracurricular activities are twice as likely to report having a large group of friends (29% compared to 14% of those that do not take part) and more likely to report having people to call on if they wanted to socialise or if they needed help. 72% of them feel they belong at their university, and they are twice as likely as their counterparts to feel part of a community of staff and students.

We've also asked students to tell us in their own words what their university and SU can do to support those that feel lonely. Not surprisingly, a lot of the comments addressed encouraging more people to take part in activities, but also creating more inclusive events and improving the support services available.

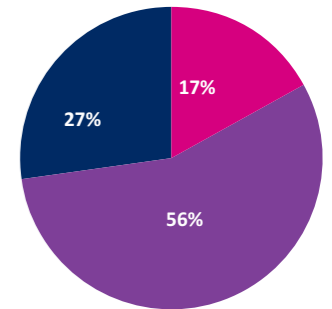
'My university/HE provider cares/cared about my mental health and wellbeing'

Agree or strongly agree
Neutral
Disagree or strongly disagree

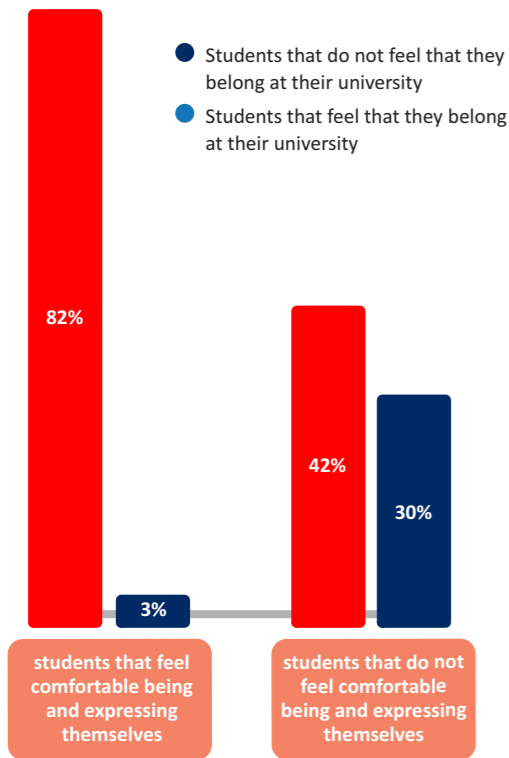


'There is/was sufficient provision of student wellbeing and support services to meet my needs'

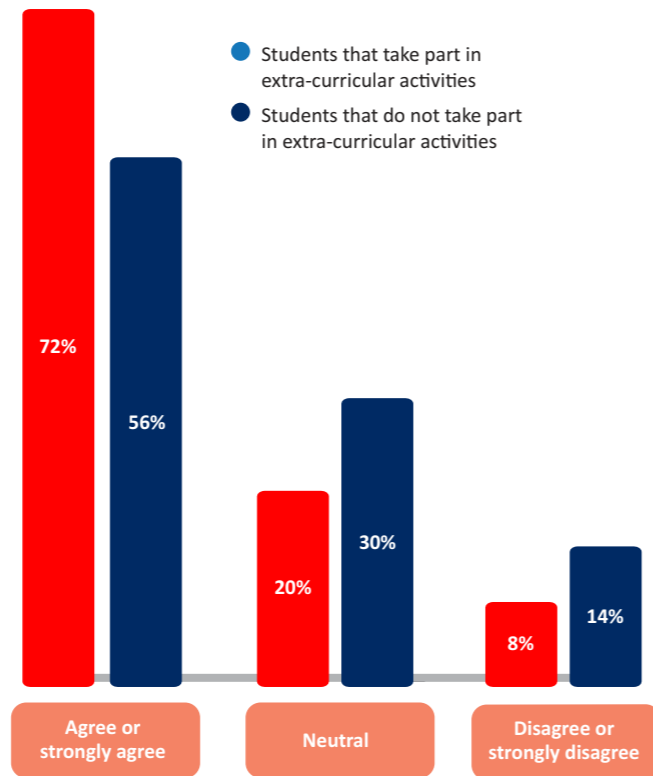
Agree or strongly agree
Neutral
Disagree or strongly disagree



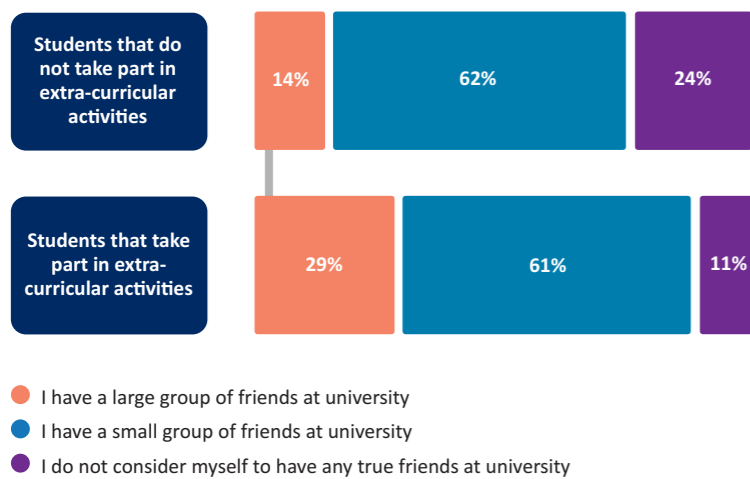
Expressing themselves vs belonging



Overall participation cut by 'I belong at my university'



Participation in activities vs friendship group



Key takeaways

1. Students report that their course is a key place to find friendships – ensuring that academic schools/departments/faculties facilitate meaningful opportunities to build friendships is key.
2. Ensure that there are regular opportunities throughout an academic year to build friendships.
3. To identify ways in which opportunities can be designed to reduce the level of initial commitment (be that financial, opportunity/time, or emotional).
4. Create more inclusive environments by making sure that a wide range of activities are provided, (especially day time activities that do not involve consuming alcohol as this excludes certain student groups).
5. Raise awareness of the support services available.



What could your university/students' union do to support students who feel lonely while at university?

Students' comments

Identify those students that haven't signed up for any sports clubs or societies and encourage them to join one.

Actually being there for them? Hold support groups that are easily accessible! Hold activity groups to help people meet new people! Work in plenty of team building activities into lectures instead of death by PowerPoint in a depressing lecture theatre!

Advertise support services more, rather than only providing sufficient adverts for things that are less important like entertainment. I understand networking is key in a university, which can be done through entertainment, but we have to also consider those who don't attend such events due to feeling out of place. If support is put first, then everyone's confidence can be heightened and everyone can feel like they are part of a family.

Although the university does run a lovely range of daytime activities and services, I believe they could be better advertised to students. Certain advertised activities are very easy to miss. Students who don't drink alcohol can feel like they are missing out or being purposely excluded, so I think there should be an encouragement of acceptance towards non-drinkers and that universities shouldn't be all about alcoholism.

Create confidence-boosting workshops. Have pals to talk about the importance of supporting each other even if you barely know them, or how to get to know other students when cultural or other differences seem intimidating.

Have some way of checking in with students throughout their degree, and have some things specifically targeting them to provide support to identify those who are struggling encouraging them to reach out.

They should organise more multicultural activities so that everyone can feel welcomed.

Have more visible and open mental health services. Have sessions that are one to one and don't feel so formal. Many people who are lonely won't want to admit to it.

Student lifestyle – involvement and impact

Who gets involved in extracurricular activities?

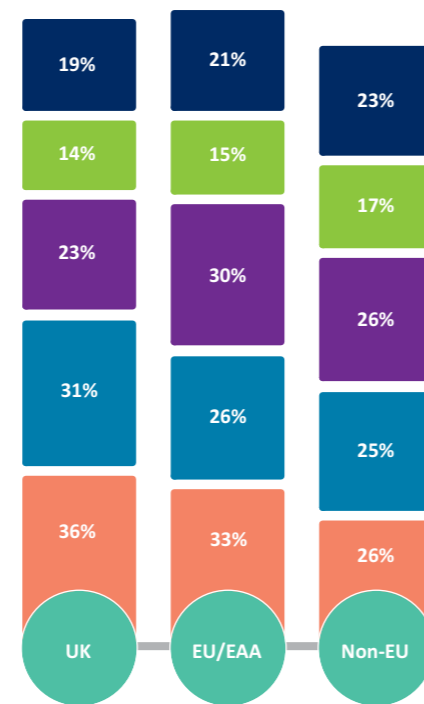
Overall, almost 8 out of 10 students (79%) are involved in some kind of extra-curricular activity while at university. However, the level of participation varies significantly depending on students' profile. Only two thirds (65%) of the students that live at home take part in university activities. Postgraduate students, those from a Black/African/Caribbean background and students that work during term time (more than 15 hours a week) are also less likely to be involved. At the opposite end, the students that are most likely to take part in extracurricular activities are those living in a university-owned property, those who have attended a private school and those who are doing an undergraduate degree.

A student's background has a significant influence on the type of activities they partake in. 54% of students that attended private schools are part of a student society, compared to 43% of those that attended a state school. Those that have attended private schools are also 14% more likely than their counterparts to be part of a sports club, and twice as likely to be involved in student enterprise.

Fewer than 1 in 3 postgraduate students (29%) are part of a student society and less than 2 out of 10 (18%) are involved in a sports club. These students are also less likely to be involved in both daytime and night time events compared to undergraduate students, but are more likely to be part of liberation or equality networks.

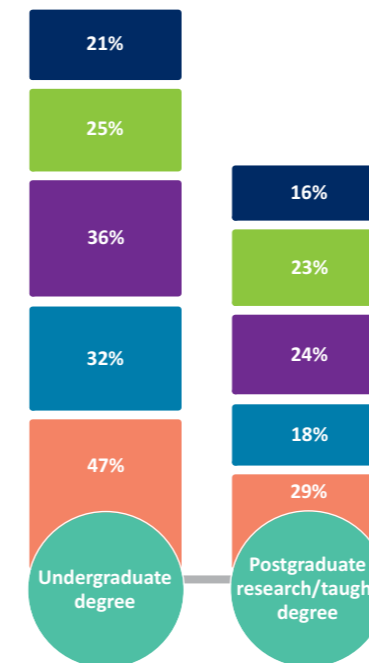
Ethnicity and nationality influence students' participation in night-time events, with just over a quarter (26%) of international students attending these kinds of events, compared to 36% of home students. Gender has an influence on students' involvement in sports clubs – 25% of female students being part of one, compared to 35% of male students. The opposite pattern is evident in terms of volunteering, with 16% of male students doing charity work compared to 24% of female students.

Engagement in different activities by nationality



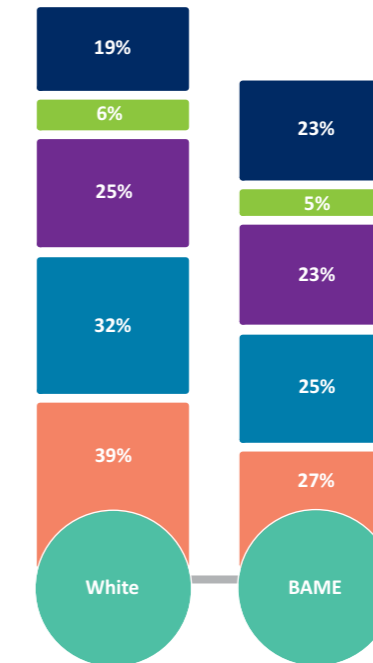
- Student social events (night time)
- Sports club
- Student social events (day time)
- Course/department/faculty/school rep
- Volunteering/charity fundraising

Engagement in different activities by degree type



- Student society
- Sports club
- Student social events (night time)
- Student social events (day time)
- Student media
- Volunteering/charity fundraising

Engagement in different activities by ethnicity



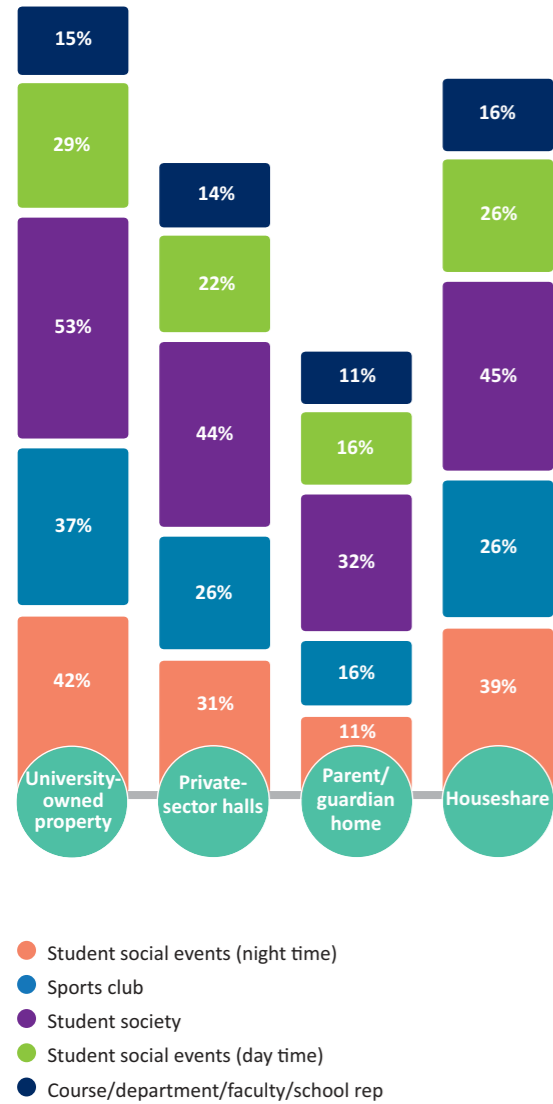
- Student social events (night time)
- Sports club
- Student social events (day time)
- Student media
- Volunteering/charity fundraising

Engagement in different activities by school type



- Volunteering/charity fundraising
- Course/department/faculty/school rep
- Student social events (day time)
- Sports club
- Student social events (night time)

Engagement in different activities by accommodation type



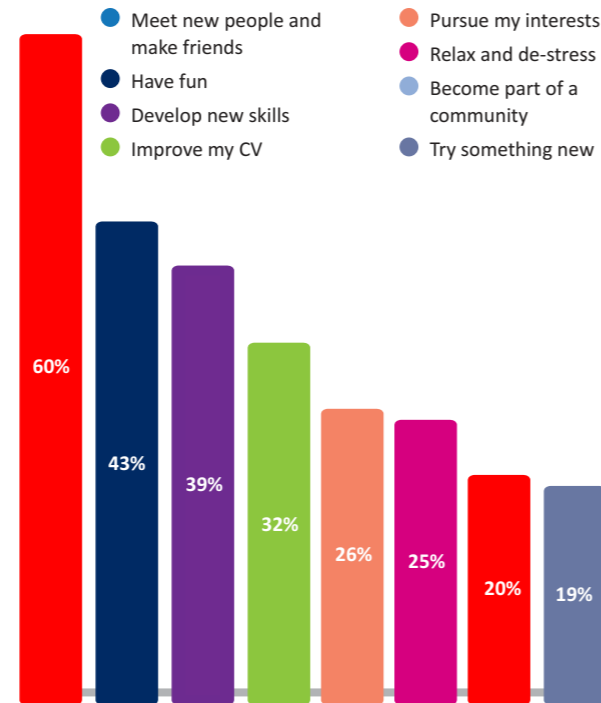
What prevents students from getting more involved?

It is essential to understand why students choose to get involved in the first place. For 60% of our respondents, the main reason is meeting new people and making friends. 43% of students say that they want to have fun and 39% want to develop their skills. Improving their CV is only cited by 32% of respondents. Interestingly, meeting new friends is the main reason why students get involved – regardless of their profile.

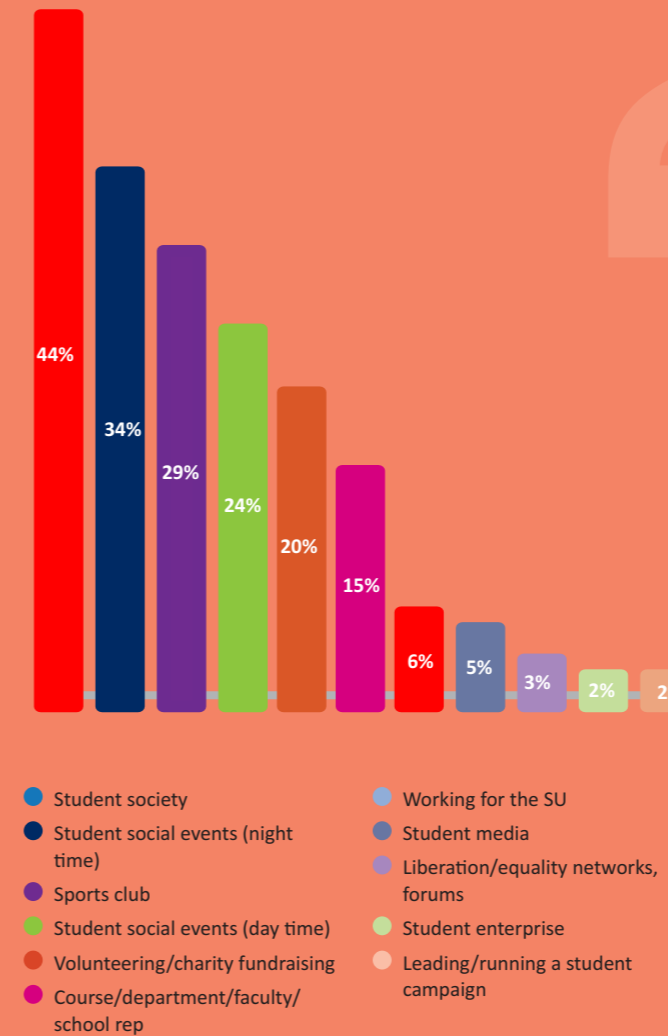
Key reasons why students don't get more involved in activities

- Practical considerations/barriers:
 - Commute
 - Time-constraints
 - Living arrangements (ie living with parents/guardians)
 - Part-time work
 - Financial circumstance
- Course commitments
- Feeling 'out of place', mental health and confidence
- Limited entry points throughout the year
- Lifestyle choices/personal/religious beliefs

What are your main motivations for getting involved?



Overall engagement in different kinds of activities



Is there anything that prevented you from getting more involved in these activities?

Students' comments

A lot of SU events feature alcohol, and I am uncomfortable around drunk strangers.

As a postgraduate, I feel they are more targeted at undergraduates. I am only at the university for a year and sometimes I feel like this isn't appreciated.

Being based at a small campus away from the main university means that we are often left out. I'd love to be involved in more activities and societies if we had them available at our campus.

Being bullied at university by a student.

Being very shy, I was scared of approaching people.

Everything they do, they just ask for money from the students.

I am a mature student and single parent. There are very few activities aimed at parents and mature students.

Lack of financial support meant that I had to work during 'sociable hours'.

Student societies are very cliquy in nature. When I was on the committee for one society, I found that once I no longer "fitted with the group" I was shunned. It's also fairly obvious with sports teams if you're part of the in-group you get on the better teams.

I worry about meeting new people and if I will be good at the activity.



Understanding Students' Unions satisfaction

How satisfied are students with their SU?

When asked what comes to mind when they hear 'SU', there were three main themes:

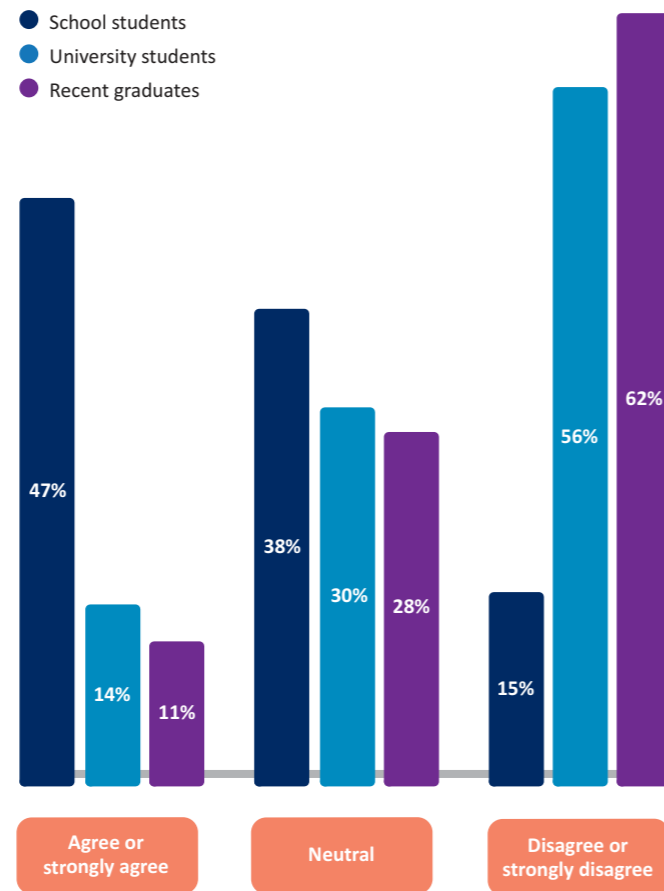
- Some respondents related it to **emotionally** – a community, a family, a group of people that are there to help students make the most out of their time at university.
- Some felt it is a **provider of services** place where (for example) they can get impartial advice and guidance.
- For others, it is simply a **physical location** with social spaces that provide discounted food and drinks.

Almost half of the school students surveyed (47%) are expecting their SU to be an important part of their university life. However, 35% of current university students say that the SU is an important part of their university life, and recent graduates are even less positive, with 29% feeling the same. There is thus a discrepancy between students' expectations from their SU and their lived experience. This may indicate an increase in negative opinions about the SU through the student journey – or show a realisation that people's perception of what is important in their lives changes over 3 years.

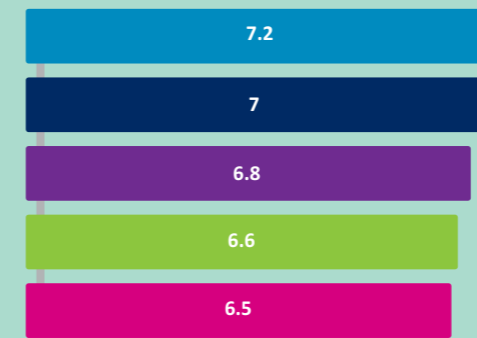
When asked to rate how represented they feel in the decisions about their SU on a scale from 0 (not at all well represented) to 10 (very well represented), students gave an average score of 6.6. By comparison, they feel less represented in their SU than they feel in the decisions about the country they live in (6.8), their university (7.0) and their course (7.2), but more represented in the SU than in the local area they live in (6.4).

While students' background does not have a significant impact on how well represented they feel in the decisions about their SU, course and university, their perception changes depending on if they feel part of a community of staff and students.

'The SU will be/is/was an important part of life at university'

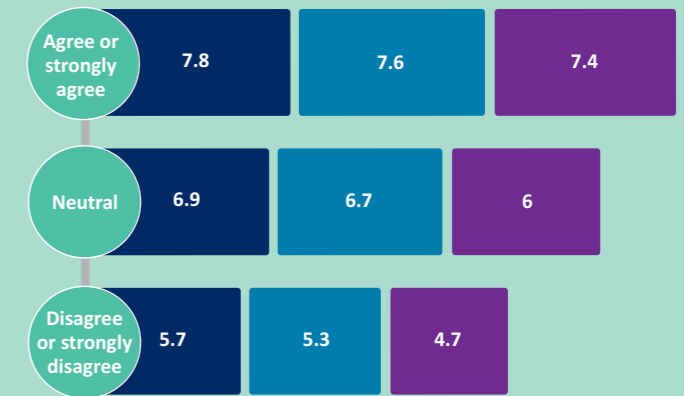


Scores on how represented students feel in different environments



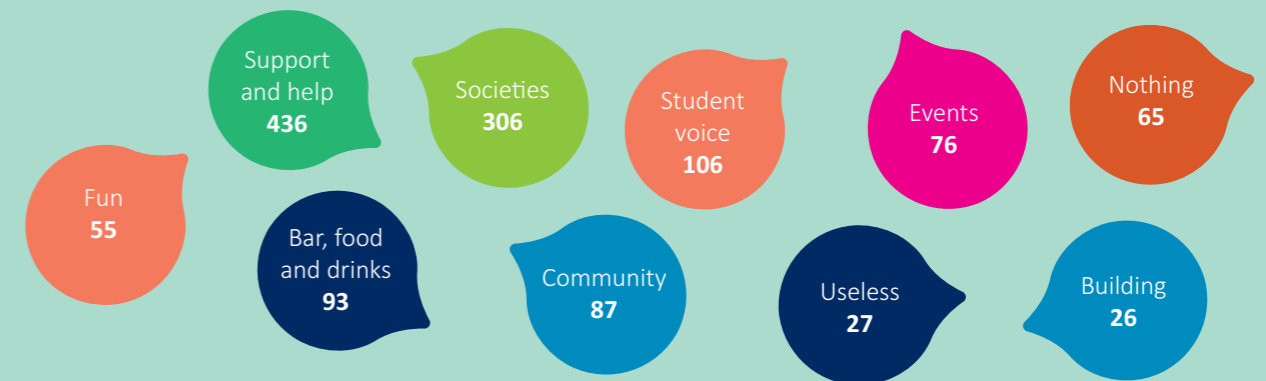
- Your course
- Your university/HE provider
- The country that you live in
- Your students' union
- The local area that you live in

'I feel part of a community of staff and students'



- Your course
- Your university/HE provider
- Your SU

What comes to mind when you hear SU?



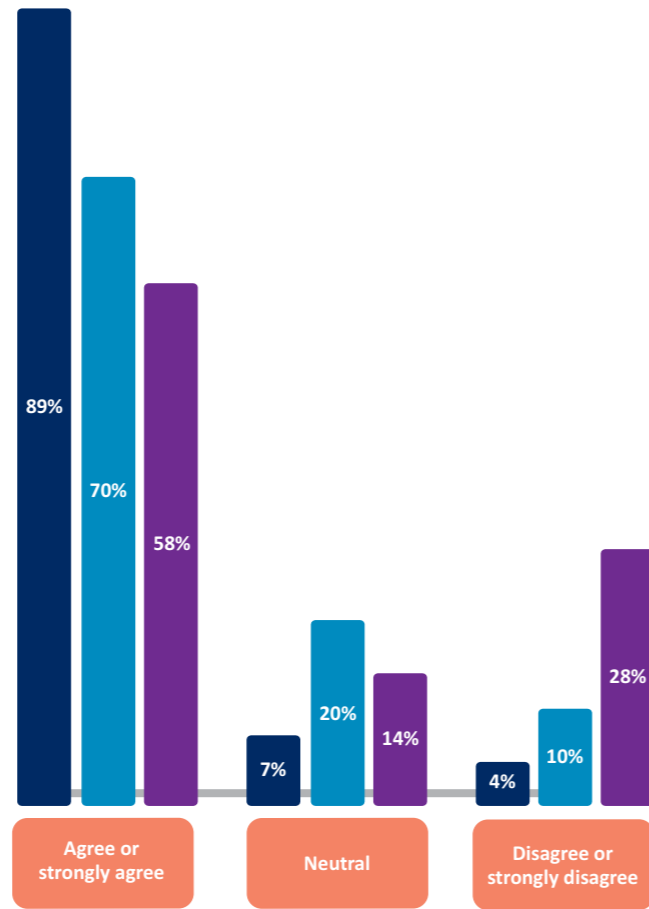
What do students expect from their SU?

One key aspect that students would like their SU to focus on more is supporting their day to day academic interests and their future career. Only half of the students surveyed (49%) think that the SU effectively represents students' academic interests. However, feeling that the SU effectively represents their academic interests has a significant impact on students' overall satisfaction with their course and university. 89% of those that feel that the SU represents students' academic interests are satisfied with their course compared to 58% of those that feel otherwise.

Overall, just over half of the students would recommend their SU (53%); however, the more satisfied students are with their SU, the more likely they are to feel that the SU represents their academic interests, 83% of those that are very likely to recommend their SU feel that it represents their academic interests compared to only 7% of those that would not recommend their SU. Those that are very likely to recommend their SU are also 8 times more likely to believe that students were actively involved in the decision making at their SU (81% compared to 12%).

Students that worked for the SU and those that stood in SU elections or ran a student campaign are the most likely to recommend their SU – thus showing that students who are more involved with their SU, particularly those who hold leadership positions, are more likely to be satisfied with their SU.

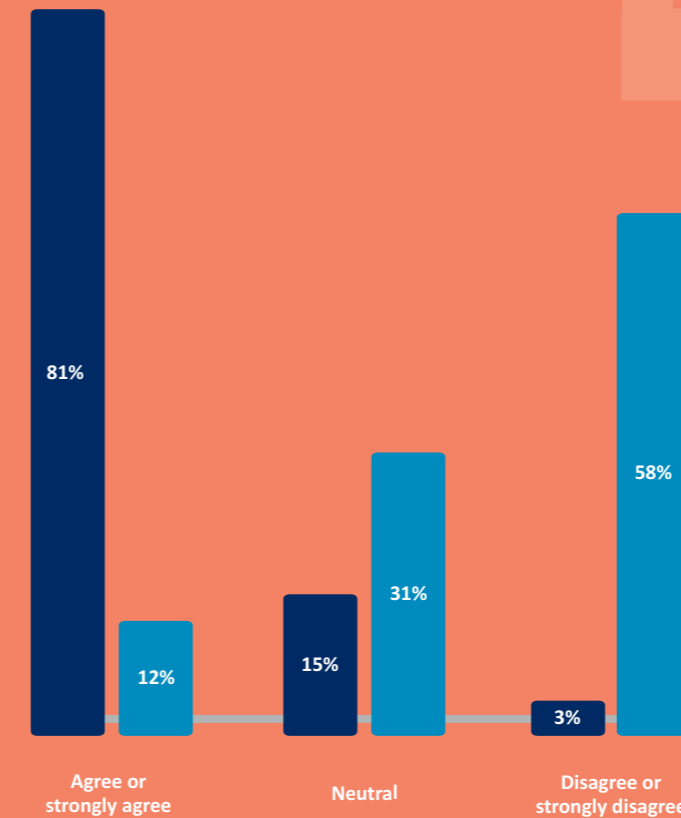
How effectively does the SU represent your interests? By satisfaction with course



- Students that think the SU effectively represents their academic interests
- Students that feel neutral
- Students that do not think that the SU effectively represents their academic interests



How likely are you to recommend your Students' Union? By students' involvement in decision making



- Very likely
- Not at all likely

The Students' Union works to represent students and improve the student experience. What are the issues

Students' comments

International student support should include people from all backgrounds, not just a certain country or ethnic group. Have activities that are also age-appropriate, eg include mature students when having activities, forums, clubs societies.

Being more accessible. No idea of half of what they do even now.

I'd like for things to be more accessible and inclusive. A lot of people can't afford to spend a lot of money on societies but the go karting society is something I dreamt of joining. I just didn't think it would be so expensive.

I would have liked to see the Students' Union focus on serious critical issues such as more international students, functions, debates focused on the topic of reducing the school fees of most students (particularly the international students who pay a higher amount of wages), talks focused on how to gain work experience, improving student CVs and cover letters.

More mental health issues and having a society where students can go and talk about their mental health or any problems they may have in a student-led environment.

Teaching issues, particularly the lack of feedback and tutorial type engagement.

Key themes

- 1 Being clear about the day to day academic issues that the SU is working on (timetabling, car parking, teaching quality, assessment feedback)
- 2 Visible representation of marginalised student groups
- 3 Prioritising work on the improvement of support services
 - i Mental health
 - ii Careers service
 - iii Advice – academic accommodation, managing finances etc.

What influences students' views of their SU?

Only half of the respondents (51%) feel they are involved in the decision making at their SU and even fewer (38%) believe that they can hold their elected student representatives to account. However, those that feel they are involved in the decision-making process are almost 4 times more likely to feel that the SU represents students' academic interests (72% compared to 19%) and almost 5 times more likely to feel that they can hold elected student reps at their SU to account (59% compared to 12%).

Participation in extracurricular activities has a significant impact on students' views of the SU. More than half of those that take part in extracurricular activities (53%) believe that the SU effectively represents students' academic interests, compared to only a third (32%) of those that are not involved. Standing or voting in the SU election, working for the SU and taking part in daytime social events have the highest impact on students' views of their SU.

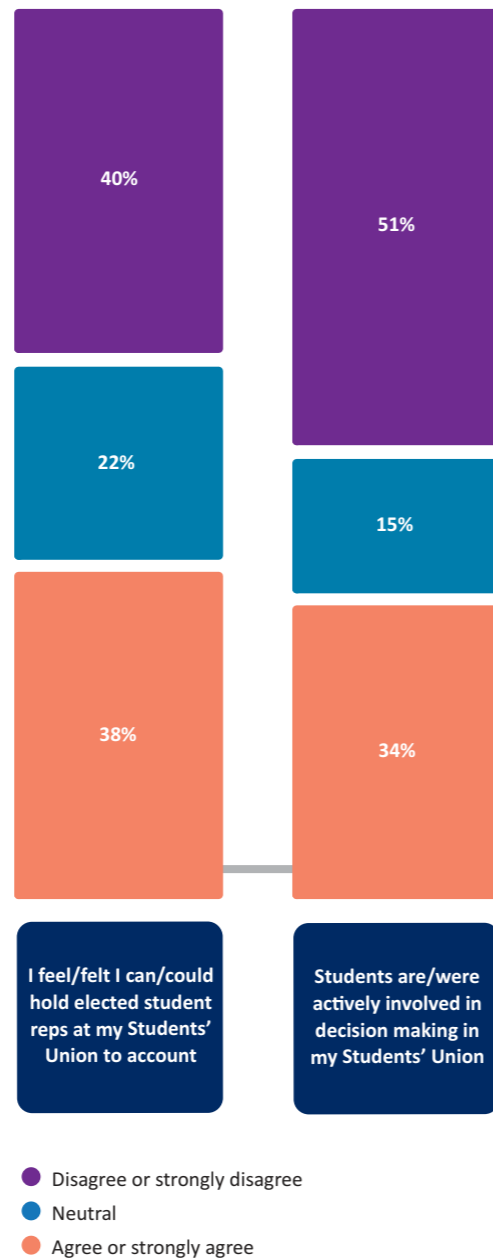
Students' satisfaction with their SU goes hand in hand with being satisfied with their course. 89% of those that feel that the SU effectively represents students' academic interests are satisfied with the quality of their course, compared to just over half (57%) of their counterparts.

What are the key differences between commuter vs non-commuter students?

For the purposes of this study, we defined commuter students as those that live off-campus and travel 20 minutes or more (one way) to their university, and non-commuter students as those that either live on-site or travel for less than 20 minutes.

37% of commuter students live with their parents/guardians and are twice as likely as their counterparts to undertake part-time work during term time (20% compared to 12%). This will influence their involvement in extracurricular activities. 30% do not take part in any activities – double compared to non-commuter students (17%). Out of those that take part in activities, just over a third (36%) are part of a student society and only 24% take part in night-time social events. In comparison, 49% of non-commuter students are part of a student society and 30% take part in night time social events.

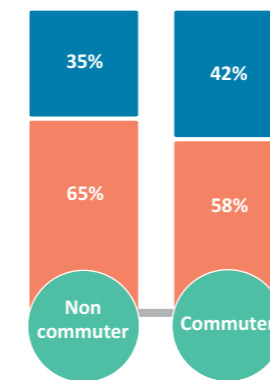
Meeting new people and making friends is the top reason for both commuter and non-commuter students to get involved in the SU. When asked if anything prevented commuters from getting more involved, students mentioned both practical considerations (time constraints, difficult commute), and the fact that they don't really know how to get more involved or they don't feel welcomed. Some felt that they are underrepresented and most activities are at unfriendly times or require a high level of commitment.



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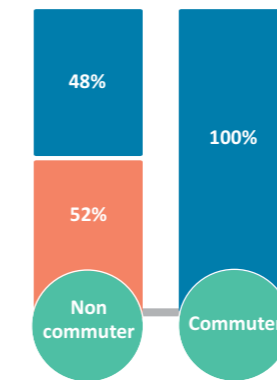
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How would you describe your ethnicity?



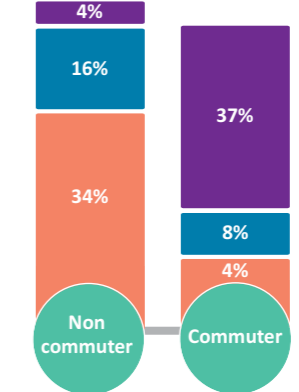
● White
● BAME

Where do you live?



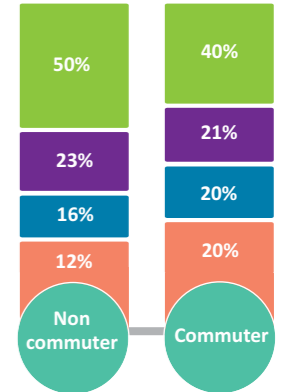
● On-site at your university/HE provider
● Away from the main university/HE provider site

What type of accommodation do you live in during term-time?



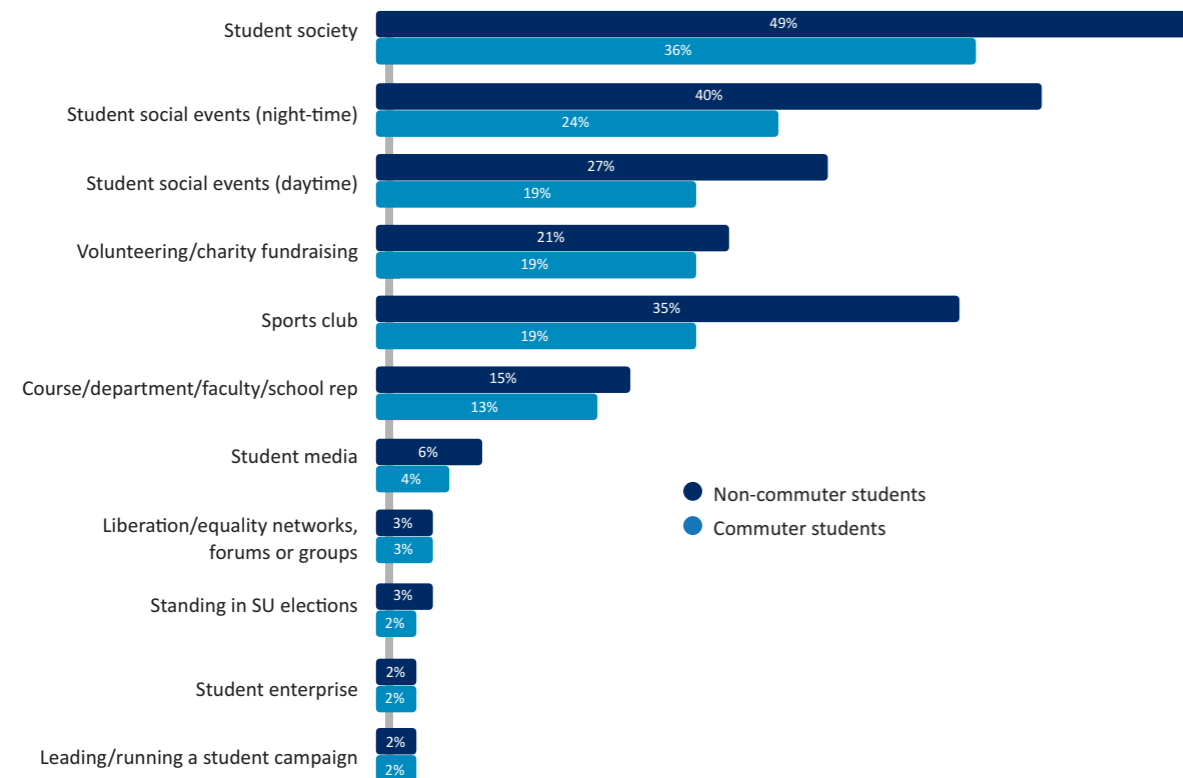
● University-owned property
● Private-sector halls
● Parental/guardian home

Do/did you undertake paid work during term time?

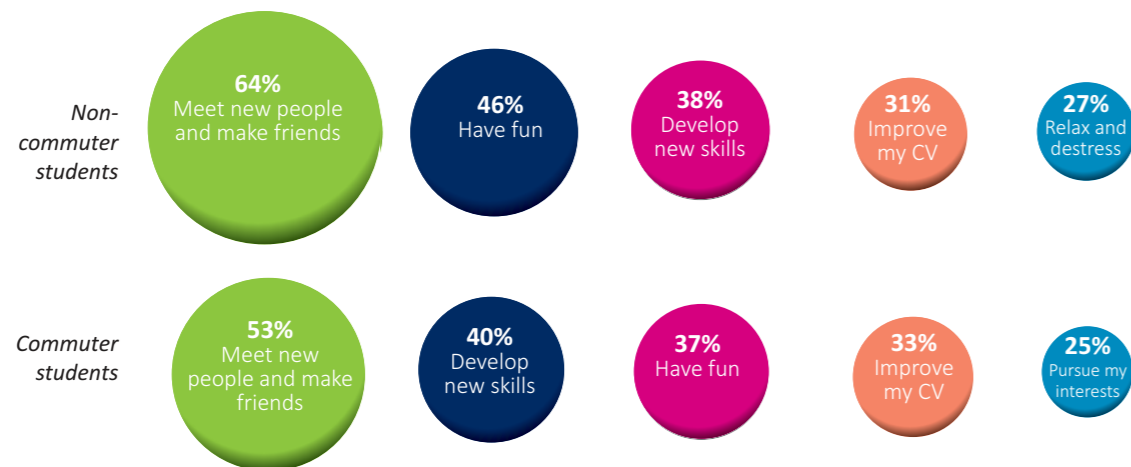


● Yes, regular work (more than 15 hours a week)
● Yes, regular work (less than 15 hours a week)
● Yes, but only occasionally
● No

Involvement in extra-curricular activities: commuter vs non-commuter students



Main reasons to get involved in activities: commuter vs non-commuter students (top 5)



Is there anything that prevented you from getting more involved in these activities?

Students' comments

Working to fund my studies, living expenses and trying to be a good parent to my toddler.

Time constraints, and there weren't many options for mature students.

Went to one society, unwelcome response and then didn't have time to try anything else.

Yes, the SU feels like an élite. It's always the same unapproachable people.

I don't know. I don't really know about most things because they all seem kinda intimidating and info online seems rubbish to do with them.

I am a mature student and single parent. There are very few activities aimed at parents and mature students.

I never knew where to apply how to apply, and how to join these groups.

They were often on at times I didn't have childcare for, so I was unable to join most societies.

Key themes

- 1 Practical considerations
 - i Time-constraints
 - ii Difficult commute
 - iii Other responsibilities (work, parenthood)
- 2 Feeling unwelcome
- 3 Not enough information on what is available

Commuter vs non-commuter students

Are commuter students lonelier?

We have previously discussed the link between participation and a sense of belonging, and since commuter students are less likely to be involved in university life, they are less likely to think that they fit in at their university and that they belong. Only half of commuter students (56%) feel that they are part of a community of staff and students (compared to 63% of their counterparts).

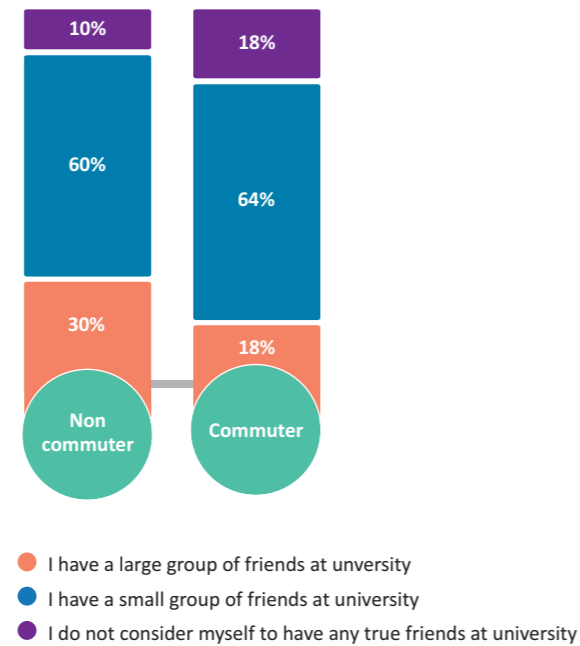
Almost 2 out of 10 commuter students (18%) have not made any true friends at university. Furthermore, only 66% report having people to call if they wanted to socialise, 10% less than their counterparts. Commuter students are also more worried about coping with their course and their work-life balance.

What do commuter students think about their SU?

Only 28% of those that commute say that the SU is an important part of their university life (compared to 38% of non-commuter students). They are also more likely to be dissatisfied with their university and SU, and less likely to feel that they are represented. In fact, less than half (49%) would recommend their SU and only 77% would recommend their university.

When asked what their SU should focus on, commuter students talked about organising more events, creating a sense of community and visibly tackling day to day issues such as the cost of transportation and accommodation.

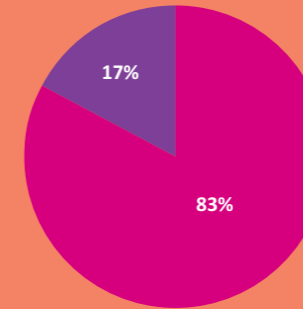
Friendship group: commuter vs non-commuter students



Would you recommend your university? Commuter vs non-commuter students

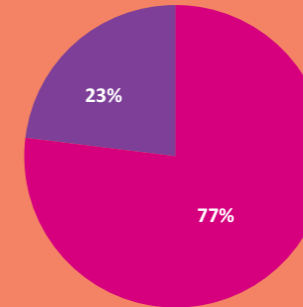
Non-commuter students

- Likely or very likely
- Not likely



Commuter students

- Likely or very likely
- Not likely



What are the issues you would like/would have liked to see the Students' Union focus on?

Students' comments

More coverage across campuses. My uni has different campuses, and most of the societies are based at a specific one, making it harder to get involved if you are from another campus (mainly because of the commute). As a consequence, you usually find that in any society the majority of people are from that campus in particular. This makes social networking harder, because if you are from a different campus you are unlikely to find the people you meet during the gatherings.

A stronger sense of community; more encouragement and support for those more hesitant to get involved.

The SU seems to be focused on full-time students which I understand and which makes logistical sense for the most parts as a majority of students are full time and they are the ones regularly on campus and attending lectures etc. However, this alienates and forgets a significant population of part-time students, specifically those who work full time. Universities often use statistics and rankings for things such as "% of students in full-time employment upon graduation" as a method of advertisement and celebration, yet those (part-time students) who most contribute to figures such as this are overlooked for the most part which is a disappointing stance. By both the university and students union. Clubs, societies and events are mostly directed towards and usually only accommodate full-time students again outcasting part-time students, in addition to the existing limitations they possess in terms of restricted university access and engagement.

Being relevant to mature students with children and bills.

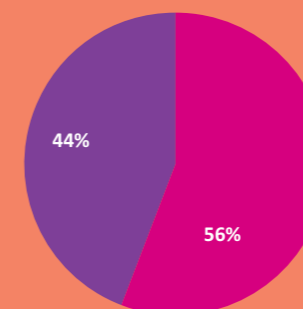
Commuting students: it is harder for me to get involved when the scheduling is late and I have to stay at the university till late and then it takes even longer to get home. I also have to go home and then do my work for the next day at university.

For societies to put on more day events rather than just going clubbing all the time as I cannot attend events in the evening due to me not living close to the university.

Would you recommend your Students' Union? Commuter vs non-commuter students

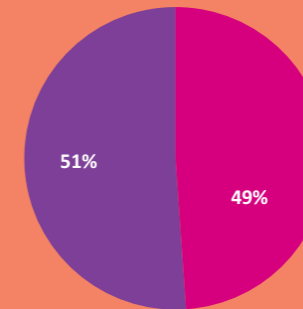
Non-commuter students

- Likely or very likely
- Not likely



Commuter students

- Likely or very likely
- Not likely



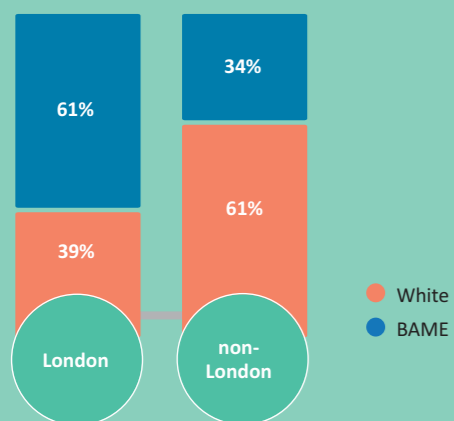
London vs non-London students

London students – how are they different?

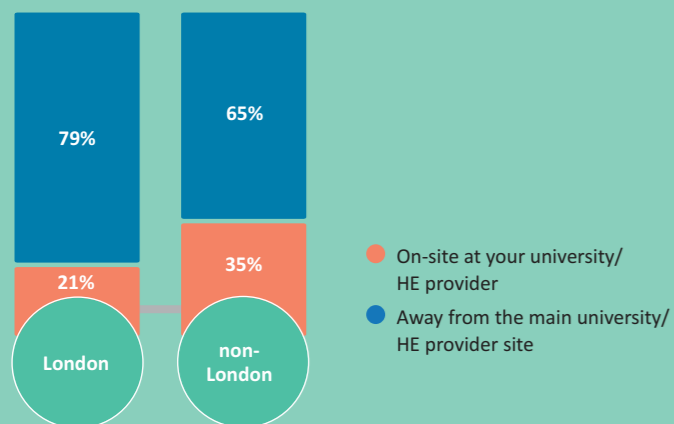
Considering the unique mix of the London student population, it is essential to review these students' experiences of loneliness as well as their expectations from their SU.

First of all, the majority (79%) of the students studying in London live away from their university/HE provider and the same proportion have to travel for more than 20 minutes to their university. A third of them (32%) live with their parents or guardians. These students are also more likely to undertake regular part-time work compared to those studying outside of London.

How would you describe your ethnicity?



Where do you live?



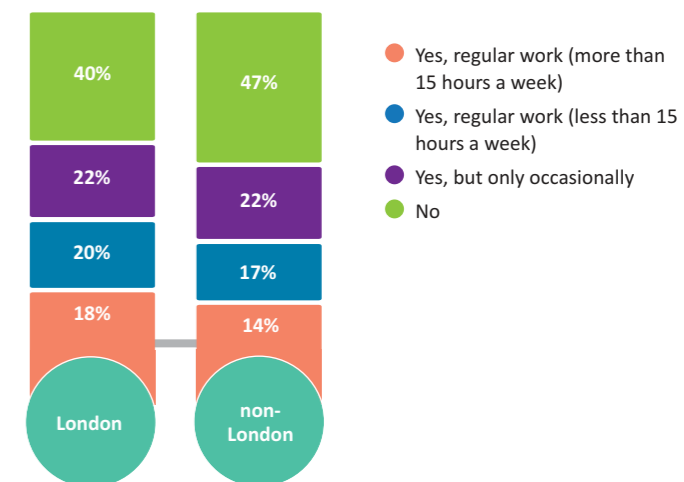
Are students in London satisfied with their university experience?

Generally, students in London feel more negative about their university and degree. 1 out of 10 (11%) do not feel at all confident about completing their degree and 2 out of 10 (22%) do not feel confident about their future career. By comparison, only 7% of students outside of London do not feel confident about completing their degree and 17% do not feel confident about their career.

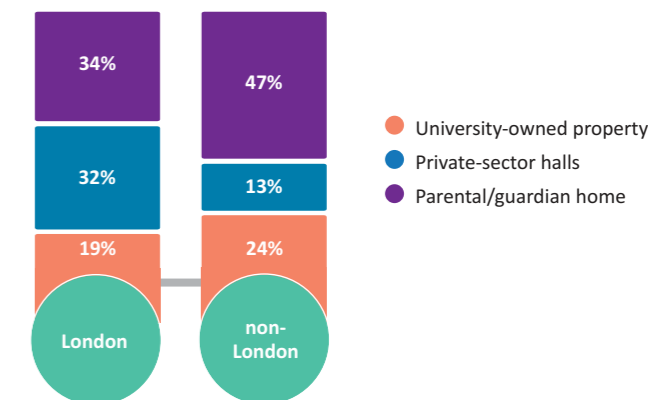
Only half (53%) of the students in London feel part of a community of staff and students and only 6 out of 10 (61%) feel that they belong at their university. These students also report having lower levels of satisfaction with their SU, with just a third considering the SU an important part of their life at university and 47% being likely to recommend their SU.

The comments reveal that students in London feel more disconnected from their SU, with some respondents never interacting with the SU, not even knowing what it stands for or why they should get involved. Others feel that the SU does not focus enough on practical concerns like supporting students with their degree and career, providing facilities and improving the support services.

Do/did you undertake paid work during term time?

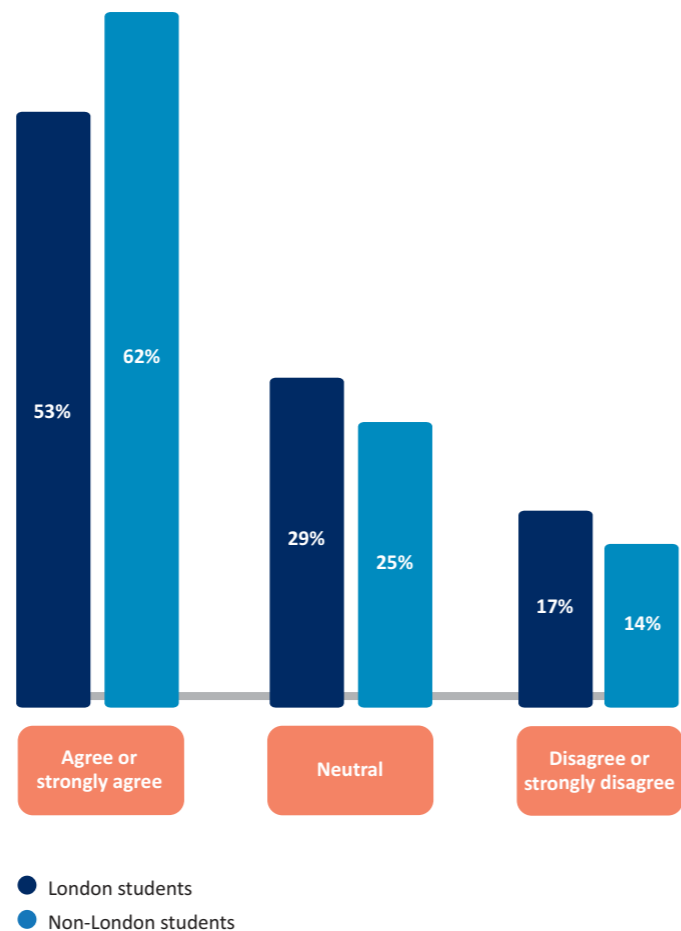


What type of accommodation do you live in during term-time?





'I feel part of a community of staff and students'

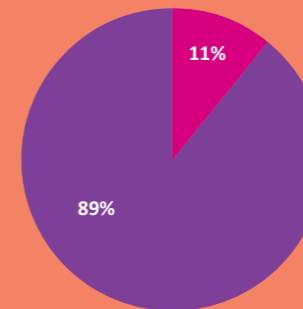


● London students
● Non-London students

Are students confident in their university degree?

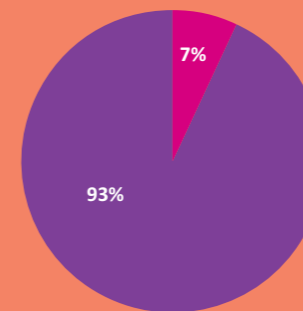
London students

- Not very confident or not at all confident
- Confident



Non-London students

- Not very confident or not at all confident
- Confident



What are the issues you would like/would have liked to see the Students' Union focus on?

Students' comments

How to make the transition from university to work easier.
I didn't feel I had a face to face connection with the Student Union. I only really heard of the Student Union when it came to elections at the end of the term.

I feel that the SU represents a very small amount of students in the crowd. I think they do excellent work in tackling wider issues around campus such as racism, sexual harassment and discrimination, but it feels hollow a lot of the time. Like they're doing it to meet a quota. I've yet to see any evidence that what they're doing is working for everyone on campus.

I would like to see improvements in the services given to students, such as the way learning is supported and developed (feedback, tutorials, etc). I would also like to see improvements in facilities to enhance and provide more to student life.

I'm not into social activities or approaching others due to my mental health and therefore did not approach or utilise any services from the student union. I don't know what they do.

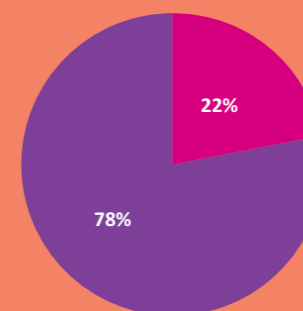
Listen more to student complaints about the course and focus on student experience.

Making yourselves more known and more easily understood – for those of us who missed induction week, it can be hard to understand what the Union does and how it works. So perhaps there should be more basic information, like a leaflet sent out in PDF form, just basically outlining the purpose and powers of the Union. Furthermore, it would be fantastic if you could use your platform to raise awareness about students struggling with their mental health, which I have seen as a big issue on campus, as well as at the University I previously attended. People really need support, and the general public needs to be made more aware. Perhaps events, conferences, campaigns, etc, could be organised, partnering for example with the Disability Learning Support team, and students who are affected by these issues themselves.

Are students confident in their career?

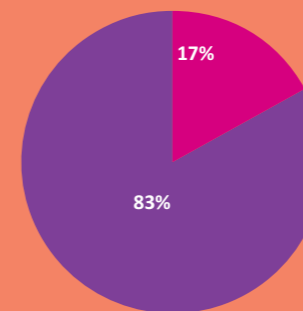
London students

- Not very confident or not at all confident
- Confident



Non-London students

- Not very confident or not at all confident
- Confident

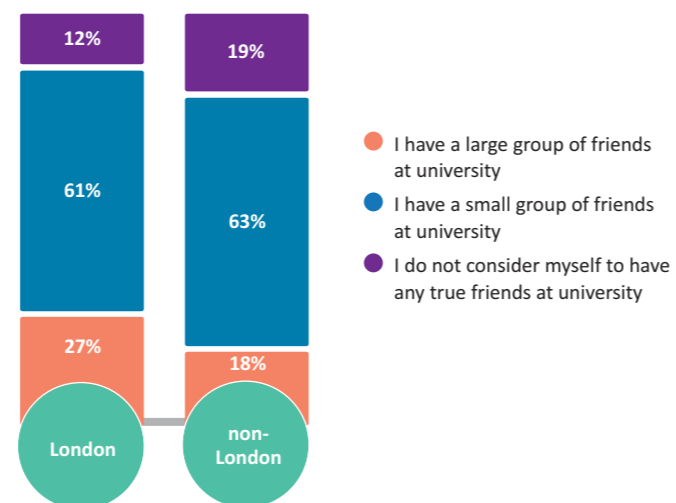


Are students in London lonelier?

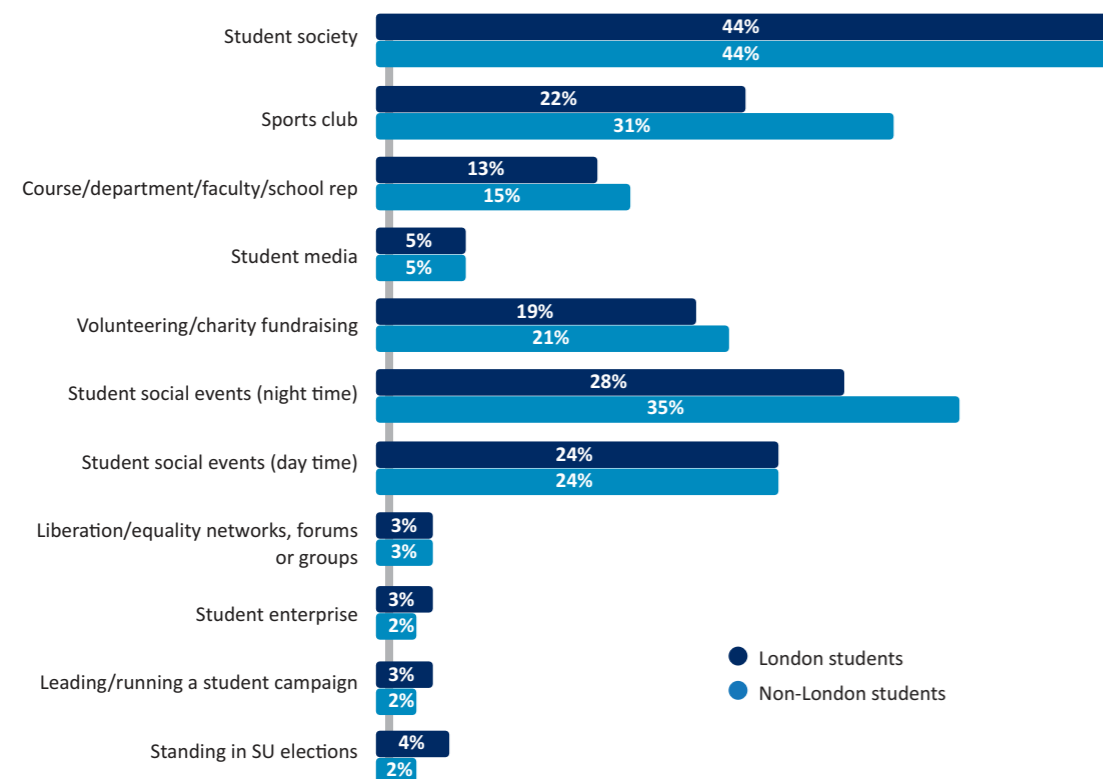
We have previously seen that sense of belonging and fitting in are closely linked to participation in extracurricular activities. Being less involved in activities, these students are less likely to have made friends while at university and to have people they can call if they want to socialise. Two out of 10 students in London (19%) do not consider themselves to have any friends – compared to 12% of those studying outside of London. Only 65% say that there are people they can call if they need help and similar discrepancies are apparent in terms of having people to call on if they wanted to socialise.

When asked if anything prevented them from getting more involved in extracurricular activities, students talked about the long commute as well as feeling anxious about going alone or that they may not feel welcomed.

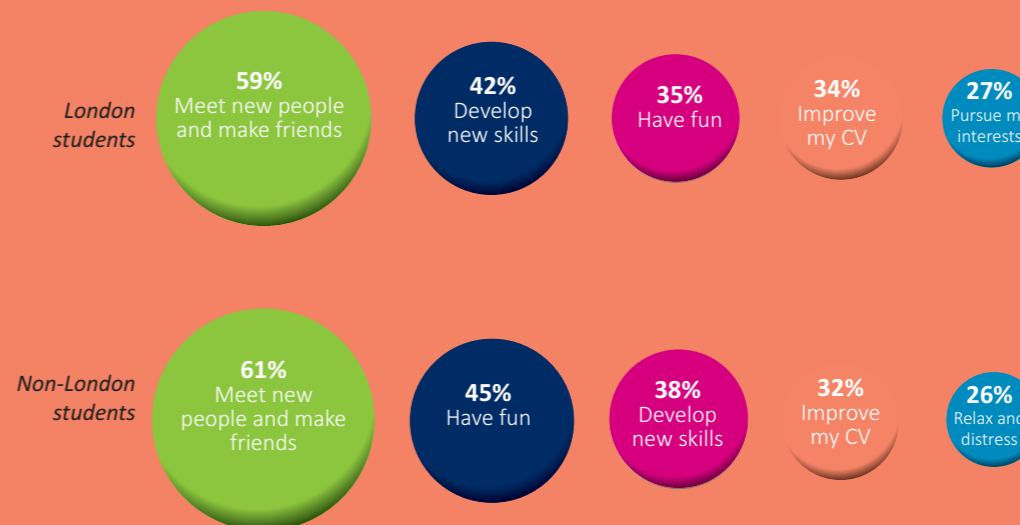
Friendship group: London vs non-London students



Involvement in activities: London vs non-London students



Reasons to get involved in activities: London vs non-London students



Is there anything that prevented you from getting more involved in these activities?

Students' comments

Long commute, often at inconvenient times.

None were at a time that I could participate in as I work full time, they're held at a distant campus or they're held while I am in class.

Working part-time and the SU being so far away from my campus.

Social anxiety and lack of diversity in events.

Afraid to go alone.

Timing, evening events are not ideal as my parents are not always available to pick me up (they are not comfortable with the idea of me returning home by myself).

I feel anxious about joining in with people I don't know.

Confidence and student outcomes

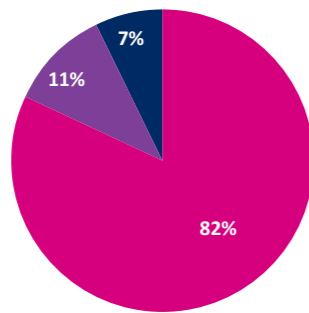
How confident are students?

Overall, 82% of students feel confident about completing their degree, 10% are neutral and 7% do not feel confident. They are even less confident about their career, with only 59% feeling confident, 23% neutral and 18% not at all confident. Students from minority ethnic groups, those that live with their parents/guardians and those that self-report having a disability (in particular mental health difficulties) are more likely to report feeling less confident about their future career and about completing their degree.

Students' subject of study, as well as the type of degree they are completing, influences their confidence. STEM and Law students are the least confident about completing their degree, while those doing business and related degrees are the most confident. Out of all subject groups, business students are also the most confident about their future career, while those studying medicine and related degrees are the 2nd most confident. Students that have a placement year embedded in their course are 10% more likely to feel confident about their future career compared to those that do not have a placement year.

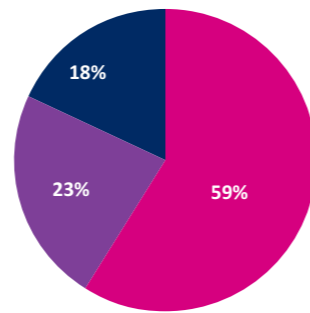
How confident do you feel about completing your degree?

- Very confident or mostly confident
- Neutral
- Not very confident or not at all confident

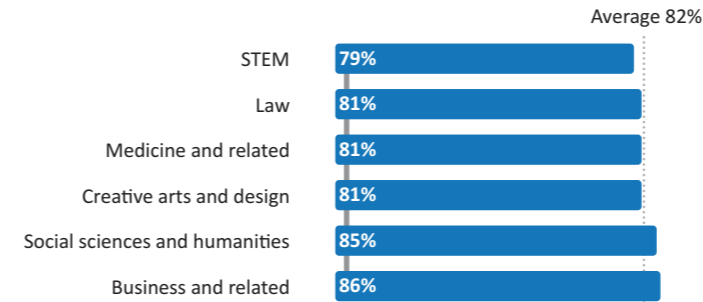


How confident do you feel about your career?

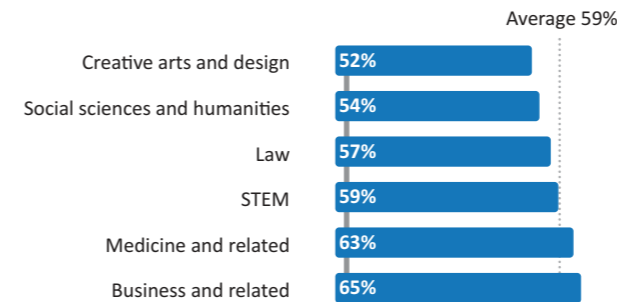
- Very confident or mostly confident
- Neutral
- Not very confident or not at all confident



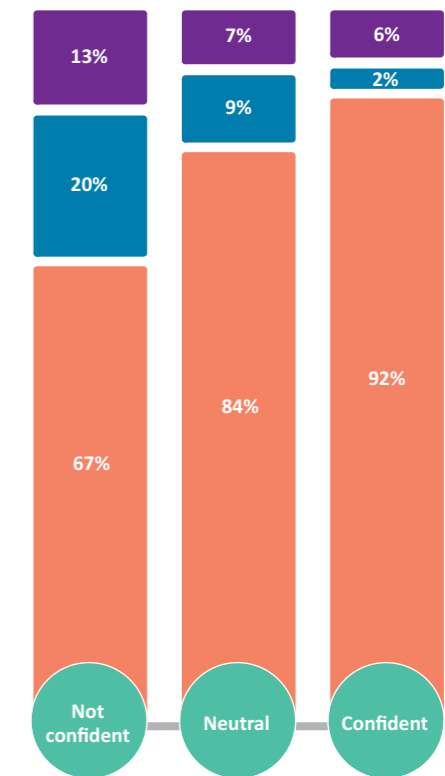
Course confidence



Career confidence



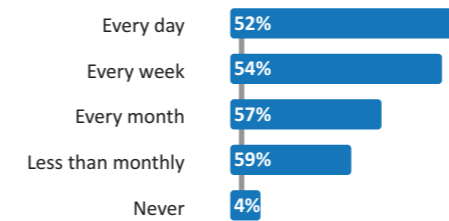
Course confidence vs whether the respondent has dropped out of a course before



How does confidence relate to rates of dropping out?

Overall, 4% of students are considering dropping out of their course. However, 2 out of 10 (20%) of those that are not confident about their course are thinking about making this decision. A third of them (32%) are thinking about it on a daily basis. Those that are not confident about completing their degree are also twice as likely to have dropped out before (13% compared to 6%).

How often do you think about dropping out? (cut by those that are considering dropping out)



- No
- No, but I am considering not completing
- Yes, I have not completed a course

What is preventing you from dropping out?

Students' comments

Constantly riding a line of choosing whether to drop out or not and then realising that by the time I finished worrying the course was over, yet all that anxiety messed up my performance in certain modules. I worry whether I will pass some of those modules and will have to redo them or be dropped out by my university.

Feeling like I need to prove to people and even myself that I can do it, and the fact that I am already so far in debt after two years that I don't want it all to be for nothing.

I don't like quitting, but at the same time, university was never really an option for me. I want to play pro football, my parents just wanted me to go to university as a backup to football.

I feel as though since so many people now go to university, a degree is now a mandatory qualification for even entry-level positions, especially in the fields of computing, finance, business management, etc that I would like to build my career in. A second reason preventing me from dropping out is that many people, both within and outside of my family, have invested a lot of time and energy in order to support me through my degree, so I would feel like I was being ungrateful if I simply dropped out now. Finally, I don't yet have a clear vision for how to progress outside of the university environment, so I need the time to plan the path I am going to take next.

In a housing contract, don't know where to find a job back home, worried I'll disappoint my family, scared my mental health will decline further if I find out I'm not smart.

My support system of friends and family, not the university. When I opened up to my tutor about how I was feeling she responded with "not everyone is made for university".

Top factors that prevent students from dropping out

- Financial reasons
- Societal and familial pressures
- Fear of being considered 'a failure'

Top reasons why students dropped out

- Dissatisfaction with the course
- Personal finances
- Mental health and wellbeing
- Feeling 'out of place' in the university environment
- Not feeling supported

Why did you drop out?

Students' comments

Acknowledgement that the course wasn't right for me.

Back then I had to drop out of University due to spouse unemployment where I became the main provider for our family, therefore continuing in full-time studies was just not possible as I had to work full time.

Distance to travel, and family commitments conflicting, causing my anxiety to be unmanageable.

Felt out of place.

Going to university really triggered my depression and anxiety. My tutors and course leaders did everything they could to get me to stay and my parents made me stick it out for months but when I came home at Christmas I was in a very dark place. At that point, I decided my happiness is worth more than a degree. I knew I loved the university, however, which helped my decision to try again on a different course. I think one of the main things that scared me about 'dropping out' was not knowing what I would do next and the fear of failing. I still don't know what I'll do after I graduate but at least I'll have a law degree under my belt!

Homesickness and not being ready for university.

I live on my own. I was granted scholarships but these covered tuition, not living costs. I wouldn't have been able to attend classes anyway, so I transferred to an online course.

I was pregnant and had no other option at the time as I wasn't given another option.

Mental health, feeling like lacked comfortable friendships, not enjoying university and experience of that city, experience not matching expectations.

When I failed my second year, I did not believe in myself and I still don't. My confidence level has dropped to a point where I feel hopeless and clueless. Every time I push myself forward I feel discouraged and I understand that sometimes I may overthink but sometimes it's not me, it's the way my situation was handled and I think it could've been handled better.

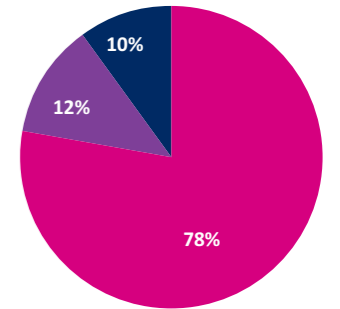
What influences students' course and career confidence?

There is a strong correlation between course and career confidence, with students that are confident about their degree being significantly more likely to be confident about their career. Overall, 78% of students are satisfied with the quality of their course, 10% are dissatisfied and the rest feel neutral. However, 2 out of 10 of the students that feel lonely on a daily basis (21%) feel dissatisfied with their course.

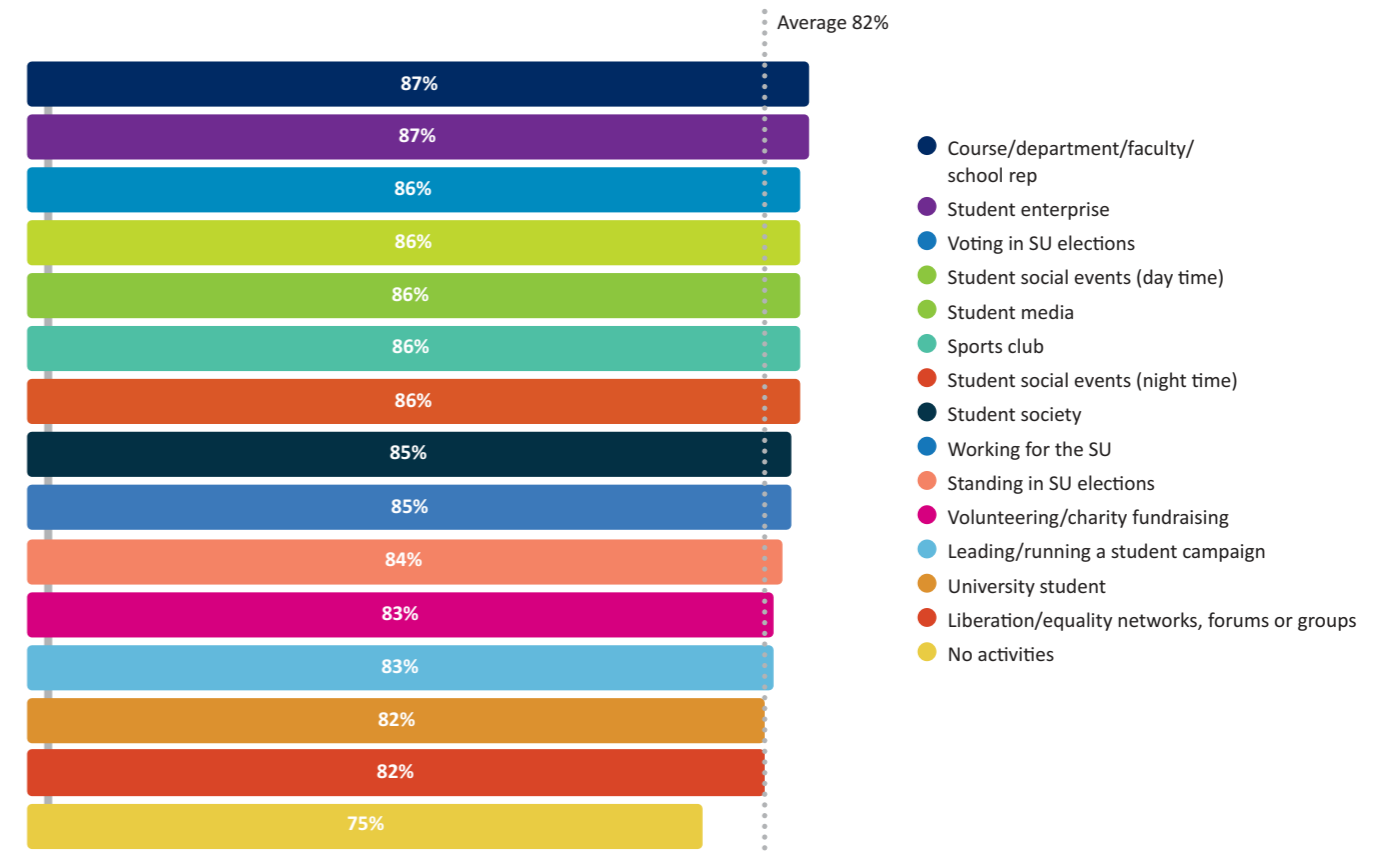
Students that are satisfied with the quality of the course are more likely to feel confident about their degree and less likely to consider dropping out. At the same time, there is a link between satisfaction with the course and participation in extra-curricular activities. Students that take part in student activities are more likely to be satisfied with their course.

Satisfied with the course: overall

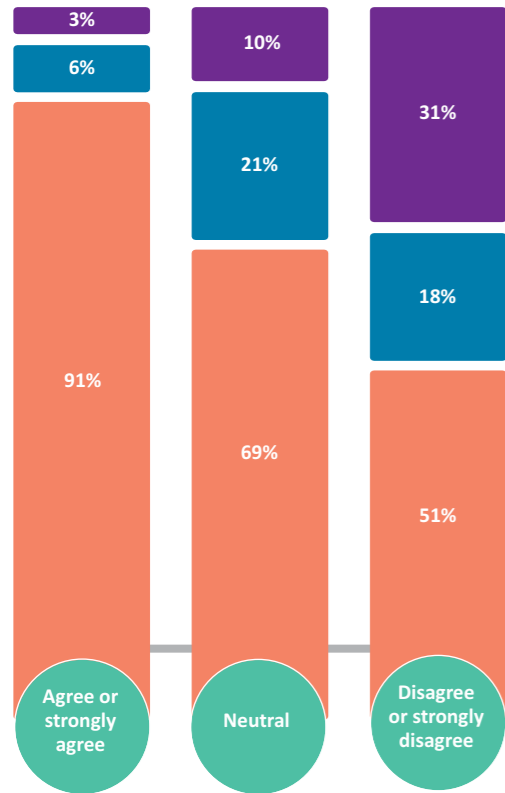
- Agree or strongly agree
- Neutral
- Disagree or strongly disagree



Different types of activities vs confidence in completing the degree



I belong to my university' vs degree confidence



- Very confident or mostly confident
- Neutral
- Not very confident or not at all confident

Students that are not involved in any kind of activities are twice as likely as those that are to not feel confident about their degree (11% compared to 6%). Partaking in university life has a positive impact even on those student groups that are more likely to not feel confident about completing their degree. 78% of the students that self-report having a disability but are involved in extracurricular activities are more confident about completing their degree, compared to 66% of those that do not take part in any activities. A similar trend is apparent when we look at students from ethnic minority backgrounds and those living with their parents/guardians.

Course confidence is not only influenced by how satisfied students are with their degree but also by how connected they feel to their university. 90% of those that feel they belong at their university are confident about completing their course, compared to just over half (51%) of those that do not feel they belong. Furthermore, those that feel that they belong at their university are twice as likely to feel confident about their future career.

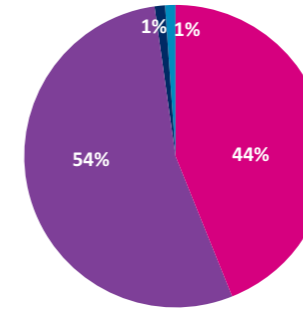
A third (33%) of the students that do not feel confident about completing their degree do not feel part of a community of staff and students. It is therefore not surprising that the lonelier the students report being, the lonelier the students report being, the more likely they are to not feel confident about their degree and future career. Almost a third (28%) of those that are not confident about their degree do not consider themselves to have any friends at university.

Confidence is also linked to satisfaction with the SU. 92% of the students that are very likely to recommend their SU are confident about their degree, compared to 66% of those that are not at all likely to do so. Similarly, those that would recommend their SU are also more likely to be confident about their career.

Profile of respondents

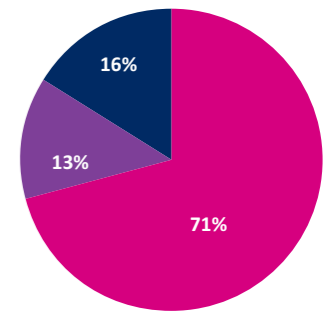
Gender

- Male
- Female
- Identify in another way
- Prefer not to say

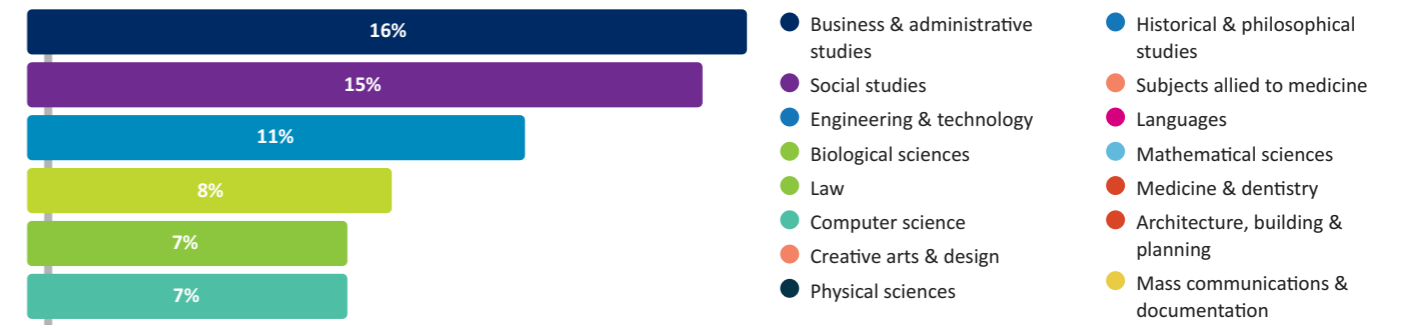


Nationality

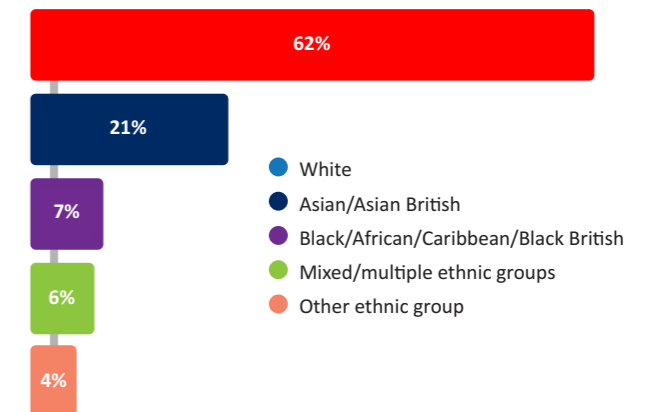
- UK
- EU/EEA
- Non-EU



Subject of study



Ethnicity



Commissioning Students' Unions

Aston Students' Union
Bournemouth University Students' Union
Christ Church Students' Union
Coventry University Students' Union
De Montfort Students' Union
Derby Students' Union
Falmouth and Exeter Students' Union (FXU)
Goldsmiths Students' Union
Hertfordshire Students' Union
Liverpool John Moores University Students Union
Middlesex University Students' Union
Oxford Brookes Students' Union
Staffordshire University Students' Union
Students' Union UCL
Surrey Students Union
The Students' Union at UWE
Union of UEA Students
University of Brighton Student Union
University of Exeter Students' Guild
University of Leicester Students' Union
University of Portsmouth Students' Union
University of Sunderland Students' Union
University of Sussex Students' Union
University of Westminster Students' Union



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