



# Value for money: the student perspective

Research commissioned by the Office for Students.  
Project led by a consortium of Students' Unions.

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# Introduction

On the 1st April 2018, the Office for Students (OfS) will become the government's regulatory authority for the higher education sector in England, and one of the OfS's core duties will be to ensure 'the need to promote value for money in the provision of higher education by English higher education providers'.<sup>1</sup>

An October 2017 government consultation on the OfS said that 'students will be empowered through clearer student contracts and through a transparency revolution. In the newly published regulatory framework for higher education, a new public interest governance principle will require that the governing body 'ensures that there are adequate and effective arrangements in place to provide transparency about value for money for all students'.<sup>2</sup>

Value for money is one of the OfS' four primary regulatory objectives, and its regulatory framework is designed to mitigate the risk that these primary objectives are not met.

Value for money is to be enshrined in the regulatory framework for higher education that the OfS will operate. A core proposed objective of the OfS is to ensure 'that all students, from all backgrounds, receive value for money'.

Value for money is also a key student concern. In a survey of Students' Union election candidate manifesto pledges carried out by **changesu.org** in 2017, 'value for money' was the second most mentioned issue, after student wellbeing/mental health.

Despite these pronouncements, the definition of 'value' and 'value for money' in higher education is contested. Some believe that it is about the quality of the student experience itself, while others focus on outcomes like the 'graduate premium'. While the focus tends to be on the home undergraduate fee, the OfS also has a responsibility to ensure value for money for postgraduates, for international students, and in relation to other fees and charges levied by a provider.

The purpose of this research project is not to definitively answer the question of what 'value for money' means in higher education but, rather, to explore value for money from the student perspective. Do students feel they are receiving value for money? Do student perceptions of value for money evolve as they go from school to higher education, and then into the world of work? What can higher education providers – and the OfS – do to help improve the value students perceive they are getting from the considerable investment they have made in higher education?

This report summarises our findings.

## About this study

- 31 Students' Unions involved in scoping and design
- 5,685 current higher education students in England
- 534 recent graduates (graduating between 2014–2017)
- 410 school students (in years 12 and 13)
- Current student respondents were studying at 133 different providers
- Full-time undergraduate, part-time undergraduate, and postgraduate students were all represented
- The questionnaire was conducted online
- Respondents were surveyed from 17 January–31 January 2018
- Quota sampling was used to enhance the representativeness of the sample
- Findings have been weighted by provider and by gender

## Technical notes

- 1 Respondents were given 'not applicable' as an option for many of the questions in this study. Where respondents indicated that the question was 'not applicable' to their circumstances, we omitted those responses from the final analysis.
- 2 All figures in charts have been rounded to the nearest whole number, and so may add up to slightly more or less than 100%.
- 3 Throughout the report, quotes from respondents are featured to illustrate themes in the qualitative responses.

*This study was commissioned by the OfS as a Students' Union-led research project designed to help understand what value for money means from a student perspective.*

<sup>1</sup> From *From Securing student success: regulatory framework for higher education in England*, February 2018

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

## Findings at a glance



- Only 38% of students think that their tuition fee for their course represents good value for money.
- The percentage is similar (39%) when we look at students' perception of the other fees and costs incurred during their studies.
- Just over half of students (54%) consider their investment in higher education as being good value for money.
- When considering 'cross subsidies', students feel least comfortable with their tuition fees funding teaching on other courses, wider research unrelated to their course and provider management costs (in this order).
- As students get closer to joining the workplace, they become less confident (or more realistic) about repaying their tuition fee and maintenance loans (49% of school students and 37% of higher education students think that they will repay their loan, compared to only 27% of recent graduates).
- 24% of students do not feel that they were informed about how much everything would cost as a student. The main factors cited are the costs of accommodation, books and paying for extracurricular activities.
- Provider quality measures – quality of teaching, fair assessment and feedback, and learning resources – are the top three factors that demonstrate that a provider offers good value for money. These measures come ahead of those directly focusing on student outcomes, such as having access to industry connections or securing higher earnings than non-graduates.
- The factors that demonstrate good value for money remain consistent regardless of the stage of the individual's educational journey (school, current HE student, graduated).
- There is strong support for proposals to improve transparency. When asked about usefulness, measures that allow students to compare expenditure on other courses or at other providers command more support (over 80%) than single factors such as seeing the staff student ratio (69%) or the cost of management salaries (67%).
- Students have a broad conception of value for money. This includes being concerned about inputs as well as outcomes; the full range of charges that a provider levies; and what is included and not included within the 'fee'.

# Students' overall perception of value for money

We wanted to find out whether current students feel that their tuition fees, additional charges, and overall investment in higher education each represent good value for money. To that end, we asked current students and recent graduates to indicate whether they agree or disagree with three statements:

- 1 'The tuition fee for my course represents/represented good value for money'
- 2 'Other charges/fees/costs at my university represent/ represented good value for money'
- 3 'Overall my investment in higher education represents/ represented good value for money'

The first question we posed specifically addressed tuition fees: we asked current students whether the tuition fees for their course represent value for money, and 44% disagree. A similar proportion (38%) do think that their tuition fees are good value for money, while 18% say that they neither agree nor disagree with the statement.

In other words, a majority of students (62%) do not agree that their tuition fees are good value for money. In the qualitative comments, dissatisfaction had three main themes focused on inputs and quality: contact time, quality of the contact and not knowing where the money goes. Satisfaction was broader and whilst still focused on inputs and their quality, included career aspirations and learning goals.

While we expected to see some sort of change in the perceptions of these graduates, we were surprised to find that their views closely mirror those of current students: 45% of recent graduates do not think that their tuition fees represented good value for money (21% of recent graduates 'definitely disagree' and 24% of recent graduates 'mostly disagree'), compared to 44% of current students (19% of current students 'definitely disagree' and 25% of current students 'mostly disagree'). In the qualitative comments, dissatisfaction has three main themes – employment prospects, inputs and quality and the opportunity cost of entering HE. Satisfaction is related to employment prospects, learning gain and 'rite of passage'/ adulthood.

Fees are not the only financial transaction between a student and their provider. Current students seem divided on whether 'other charges/fees/costs' represent good value for money: approximately a third of students agree and a third disagree. Qualitative comments suggest that dissatisfaction has four themes: unexpected charges, unnecessary costs, a perception of being profited from, and intersection with student hardship. Satisfaction relates to inclusivity of costs with the overall fee, the perception that elements are subsidised, and the perception that efforts are made to keep costs down.

When we then asked current students whether their overall investment in higher education was good value for money, the majority agreed: 54% said they 'mostly agree' or 'definitely agree'. About a quarter say they're undecided, while 21% mostly or definitely disagree.

When we examined the responses from recent graduates to find out whether their perception of the value for money in their overall investment in higher education and in other charges/fees/costs change after leaving higher education, we found that their responses are almost identical to those of current students.

## The tuition fees for my course represent/ represented good value for money (university students)



## Other charges/fees/ costs at my university represent/represented good value for money (university students)



## Overall my investment in higher education represent/represented good value for money (university students)



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After asking students to indicate whether they agree or disagree with the statements, we asked a follow-up question: 'Why? Please explain your answer'.

This follow-up question was open text, so the respondents were able to type anything they wanted. The answers varied from short, single-word responses to miniature essays spread across multiple

paragraphs. Here we have included a selection of the answers from students who 'definitely agree' that tuition fees are good value for money, and a selection of answers from students who 'definitely disagree'.

Significantly more students who 'definitely disagree' wrote responses.

## Students on value for money and tuition fees

'£33.40 per hour and I do 600 hours of semester of self-study time. Could've just got a part time job and a library card, but I wouldn't have the piece of paper which says I can do it.'

'£9,000 a year for a degree, are you joking? The library was always overcrowded with half the amount of plug sockets for the number of seats. I will be paying this off for the rest of my life.'

'£9,000 a year is an absolute rip off but because there's no choice you have to pay it. Other European countries' degree courses are a lot less and sometimes more beneficial than UK universities.'

'I can't comprehend how the money spent each year is used as I get the absolute bare minimum of contact with actual members of the department. I expected to have at least a weekly tutorial every week before I came to university but that isn't the case. The excess and waste of the university with regards to spending is obvious so I can only assume a tiny fraction of the tuition fee actually goes towards tuition.'

'The rise in tuition fees is something very few students agree with, but the knowledge and experience we gain is invaluable.'

'Doing a physics degree, we use a lot of special (and probably very expensive) equipment in the labs and I think that the cost of tuition fees is suitable to cover this.'

'The lecturers have an industry background and this is a great opportunity for the students to learn from them. The lecturers were sharing with us real life experiences from the manufacturing industries and, above all, there are lots of resources to support our learning.'

'The lecturers are amazing: they know their stuff and they can answer the questions that you need to know without judgement.'

'The module choices are neither inspiring nor varied. The campus is really tiny and it's very difficult to ever get into the library and restaurant/cafes because they're always packed to capacity. The small amount of hours in lectures does not seem worth the substantial tuition fees we have to pay, especially when most professors only offer one or two hours' worth of office hours a week.'

'There is no literal breakdown of what I am paying towards my tuition. I have at most two lectures a week and the rest of my studies is in my spare time. We are encouraged to spend 40+ hours on coursework/art work and I have to work part time to cover living costs.'

'The transparency of our fees is not clear to us as students; we are not out-right told where the breakdown of our £9,250 pounds a year goes. I think that these fees are restricting, in that not all young people feel as though they can go to university due to the costs, especially if they come from a low-income family. The amount of debt we have when we graduate from university and enter the 'real world' is absolutely outrageous and then there is pressure put on us to pay it back. When I signed contracts and agreed that I was delighted that Student Finance would pay my fees directly to the university, I was totally unaware that the fees would go up by £250. This is outrageous.'



## Students on value for money and other charges/fees/costs

'My basic student loan has not covered my rent and my parents have had to top it up by over £2,000 each year. Food on campus is extremely overpriced and the price of a bus ticket has increased to unaffordable levels.'

'The price for books that you 'have to have' but only look at once is disgusting. The price of trips is still too much for the average student. The price of accommodation has gone up so that it is more expensive than the amount of loan that I get. That is not including food, trips, social life and anything else the university wants us to participate in.'

'Accommodation has increased by 30% as of two years ago; library fees (due to returning laptops a few minutes late) from a year ago are being chased up with monthly emails, affecting my anxiety and adding further stress. Gym is expensive. Canteen food is disgusting and overpriced – no healthy options whatsoever.'

'I find the cost of resources fair. It definitely helps that the university invests in additional resources to help reduce the cost to students, eg textbooks and online textbooks.'

'Most other charges are for books, which are all well-chosen, and for clubs and societies, from which we can benefit significantly.'

'The fieldtrips, use of lab equipment and buying of extra items is very good value as the fees and university department have covered most of the costs.'

'So far, I've never had any other expenses at the university, which makes me satisfied and comfortable with it. This helps me to completely to focus on my studies without thinking of any other fees.'

'The gym has gone up from around £150 to £260 since I started. There has been minimum improvement in the facilities to justify this increase and if you join a sports team you have no choice but to buy the membership. The uni shop/cafes are overpriced and poor quality.'

'Most student-facing services are expensive and of unsatisfactory quality. This includes on-campus cafeterias and other services, as well as accommodation facilities (laundrettes especially are exceptionally expensive, unreliable and poorly maintained).'

'Students' union is ridiculously overpriced. University acts as a business rather than school.'

'We are required to print a lot of A3 pages, multiple times a year for presentations and hand-ins. We also need to buy our own equipment and materials for model making. Furthermore, we have yearly international study trips which are also very over-priced. If we were to pay for the exact same trip ourselves, it usually works out to be roughly half the price that we pay to the university. This all adds up to be fairly expensive and can put students with lower incomes at a disadvantage to their classmates, as they miss opportunities and can't produce work to the best of their ability.'

## Students on value for money and overall investment in HE

'I am in nearly £40,000 worth of debt and often wonder why I went to uni.'

'I don't see what my tuition fees are being spent on, other than the wages of professors and government workers. I see/feel no benefit from that money and receive bare minimum teaching.'

'Past generations received this education for free and people paid a third of the price merely a few years ago. Universities are becoming more like businesses than educational facilities and you should not be required to pay thousands of pounds to have an improved education. It's not accessible for all backgrounds.'

'A degree can open doors to better jobs, which should lead to a good salary, so the investment is definitely worth it.'

'For one to be put in a position where their contribution to making our world a better one is relevant enough that it requires high-quality education. Investing in higher education gives me this opportunity.'

'During the past two years of university I have had the opportunity to take on extra activities, whether that involves part-time jobs or an internship. The university offers a range of services that have helped me to gain further knowledge about the options I have for

after graduating at university, such as doing part-time job, internship or placement year. The careers fair that was arranged by the university has helped me to network with other employers to understand what their requirements are from an applicant/student and has helped me to understand how I can develop as a person to become that perfect candidate in the future to get a job.'

'International students are being used as cash cows to support a big chunk of the university's operational costs – but we were never given additional support to integrate into the local community, nor guidance on how to access local healthcare services.'

'I feel ripped off. They do the bare minimum and I honestly don't see where my money is going.'

'There is no chance I can pay back my loans as a mature student. The university experience has not been anywhere near as intellectually stimulating as I'd expected.'

'How my course was sold to me is not how it turned out. Much of the time I am learning by myself so unsure where my money is going. Resources such as special software and virtual learning were a big incentive of the course but we rarely have access to them.'



### England vs. Scotland: do more Scottish students feel as though they're getting value for money?

Although the largest sample we collected was from students studying in England (5,685), we also collected a sample of 310 students studying in Scotland, so that we could make comparisons.

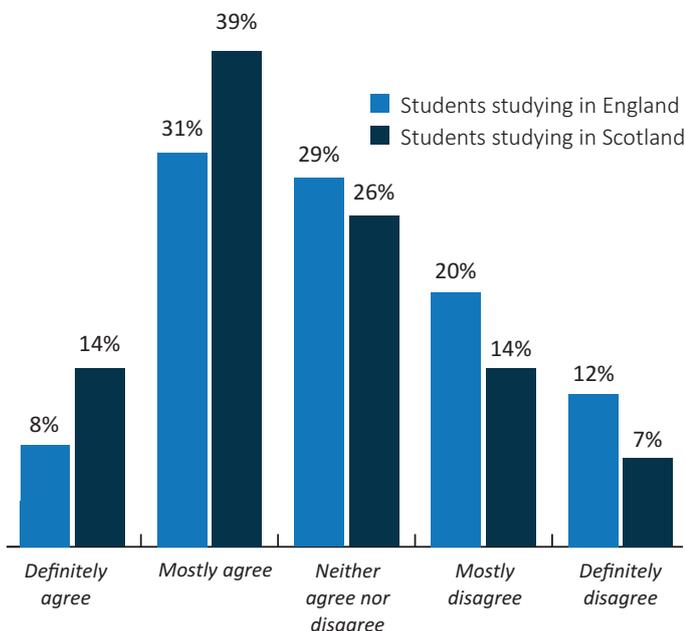
This sample of students currently studying in Scotland contains a mix of Scottish students studying in Scotland and English students studying in Scotland, therefore the fees paid by students in this Scottish sample will vary.

When we look at Scottish students' perceptions of their overall investment in higher education and compare them to students studying in England, the differences are stark: 70% of those studying in Scotland agree that it has been good value for money, compared to just over half (54%) of those in England.

More than half of the students studying in Scotland (53%) believe that other costs at their university represented good value for money, compared to only 39% of those studying at English institutions.

When we examine how informed students are about the overall costs of their degree, however, there are not any significant regional differences, suggesting that even though Scottish students are more satisfied with their investment, they have still faced unexpected charges. The open-text comments reveal the same worries as English students in terms of the costs of accommodation, textbooks, and the general costs of living.

### Other charges/fees/costs at my university represent/represented good value for money



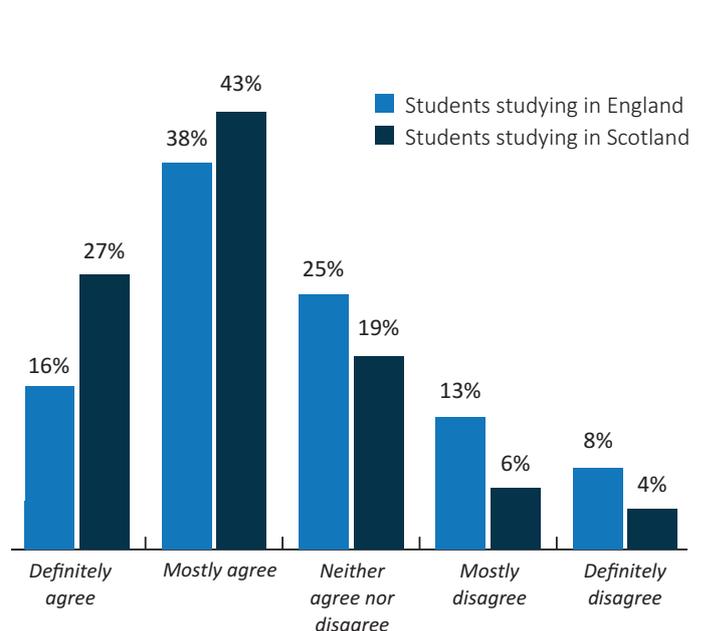
### Students on the value of their tuition fee in England

'I had a great time at university and I wouldn't have had any of the experiences and made the friends I have without investing in higher education. However, when the Student's Union charge such high prices for food and nights out without putting the necessary safety measures in place to ensure everyone gets home or training staff appropriately in security roles, it makes it seem like a lot of money for the service and quality of care you receive.'

'For the degree it's good value because of the opportunities that are now open to you, but the process of getting the degree (ie the teaching) isn't always up to the standard.'

'The education I am currently pursuing will hopefully lead to a successful career. But I wonder whether university degrees in other countries, where tuition is a lot cheaper, provide the same opportunities...'

### Overall my investment in higher education represents/represented good value for money



## Value for money at different types of provider

### Alternative provision

As part of our sample, we collected responses from a small number of students from alternative providers and those engaged in distance learning including those at the OU. Their direct comments on value for money were enlightening.

These students seem to be divided: while they appreciate that the costs of their degree were lower, the comments show that there is a little understanding on what their money is being spent on. Students often cite a lack of support and not enough facilities to justify the costs.

### New and smaller universities

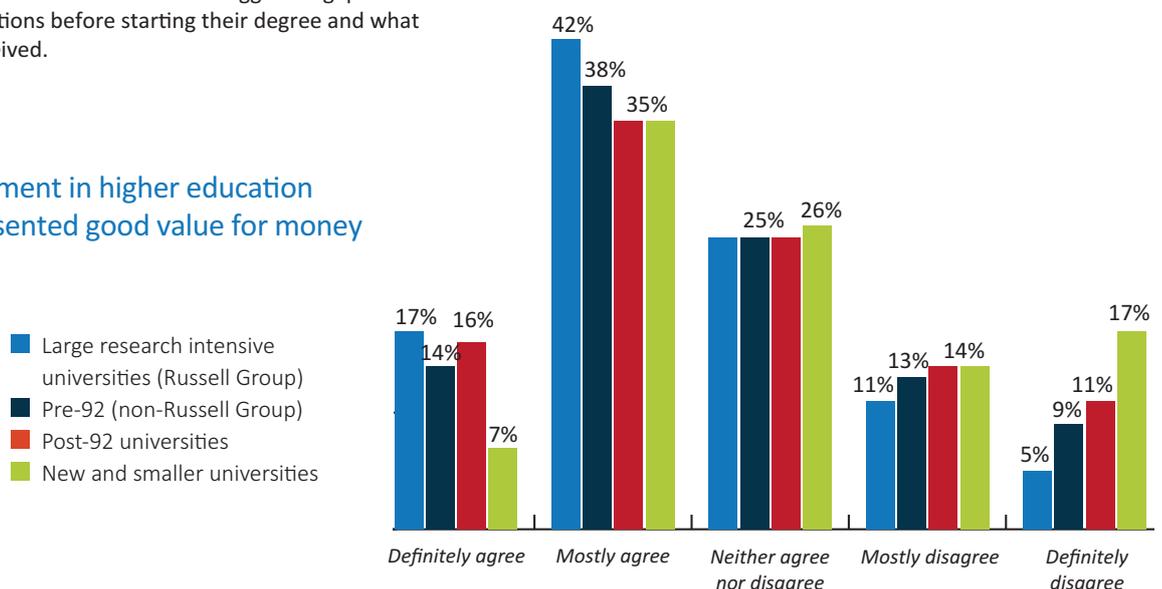
Our sample included responses from students attending a range of institutions and opinions are quite different depending on the type of institution attended.

Students from new and smaller universities are less likely to be satisfied with their overall investment in higher education: more than a third of these students (31%) believe that it was not good value for money, compared to 16% and 25% of their counterparts attending large research intensive (Russell Group) or post-92 institutions, respectively.

Almost half of new and smaller universities students (45%) do not think that they were prepared for how much everything would cost. The percentage is more than double compared to students attending large research intensive providers students (Russell Group) (19%).

Students often cite living costs being higher than expected, as well as a lack of support from their institutions. It suggests a gap between their expectations before starting their degree and what they have actually received.

## Overall my investment in higher education represents/represented good value for money



### Students on alternative provision

'It's difficult to value an education but, given the fees are comparable to other institutions yet the services available and quality of teaching are less than I have experienced at other institutions, I would say the value is certainly less than I have known elsewhere.'

'Everything is online. What are we paying for?'

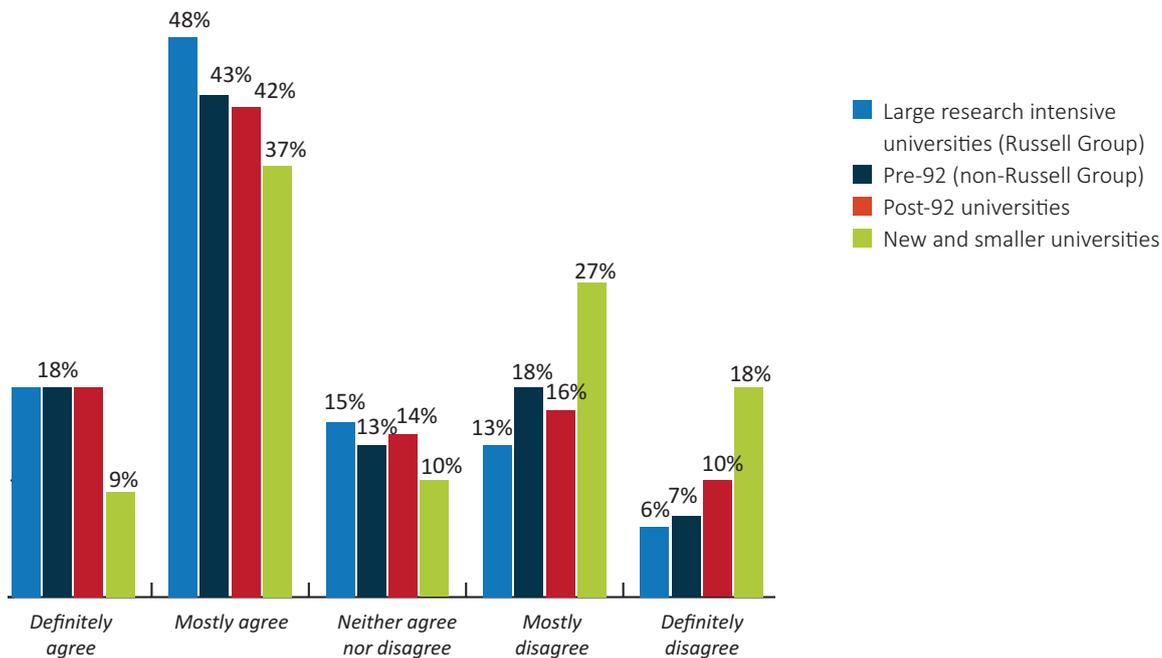
'Much cheaper than a brick built university, but I sometimes feel a bit frustrated with the quality of the learning materials and the assessment methods.'

'We need more support to students on their courses by providing face-to-face opportunities to discuss any issues and difficulties faced during studying, most importantly studying as a distance student. At this moment it feels like distance study is very stressful and there is no support, which causes stress and depression as we all like to achieve good marks.'

'The course was mis-sold to me, I have learned very little, haven't had the freedom to explore subjects I'm interested in and have no guarantee of attaining a job related to my course.'

'I don't yet feel confident that I'll be able to use my degree in a job after uni, and so far both the academic side and social side of uni haven't been as positive as I expected.'

I was informed of and prepared for how much everything would cost as a student at university



Students on additional costs

'I was in the first year of the increased tuition fees when I started my undergraduate. It was not made clear how much interest would accrue on my loan and the end figure was so much more than I had expected, living at home and borrowing as little as possible. I seriously costed out the fees for my masters and how I would fund myself through my course. This is why I work full time and study part time.'

'No support, advice or any type of intervention person was designated or made available to me. This support is available but nonetheless it certainly was not forthcoming and a lot had to be worked out for myself. This should be part of the induction on every course.'

'Repaying the loans was made to seem much worse than it was. However, my university is in an area with expensive housing and it was hard to compare with other universities and if I could afford it. The buses are also very expensive as students are now made to get a year pass and the service was cut so it is not good value for money.'

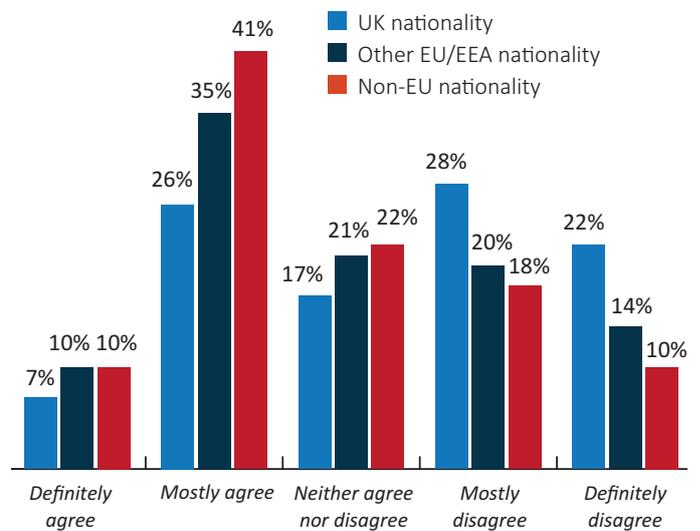
### Value for students ‘from all backgrounds’: gender, ethnicity, socio-economic profile, and nationality

When we analyse how different groups of students perceive value for money and what is important to them, there are no significant differences in terms of gender or ethnicity. The highest fluctuations appear when we look at students’ social profile. 58% of those that attended a private school believe that their overall investment in higher education has been good value for money, compared to only 50% of those that attended a state school. The same differences exist when we look at those that followed a traditional route to higher education (ie they studied for A levels) and those from a non-traditional route to higher education (ie foundation degree, BTEC or other).

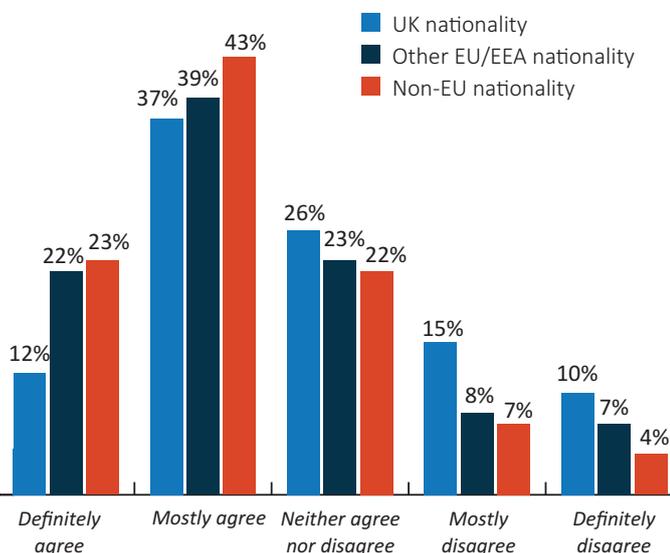
A similar gap exists when we look at fluctuations depending on a students’ provider type. 59% of the students from large research intensive universities (Russell Group institutions) think that the investment has been good value for money, compared to only 50% of the students from post-92 universities.

When we look at nationality, UK students are the least likely to consider their investment as good value for money (49%), compared to 61% of the students from other EU countries and 66% of those from non-EU countries. Nationality is also an indicator of how students perceive the value of their tuition fees: only 33% of UK students believe that it represented good value for money, compared to 45% of other EU-national students and 51% of those from outside the EU.

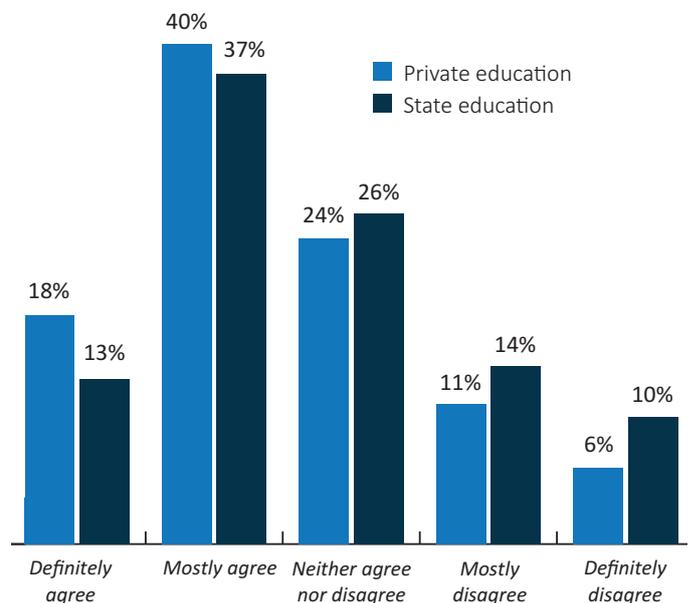
### The tuition fee for my course represents/represented good value for money



### Overall my investment in higher education represents/represented good value for money



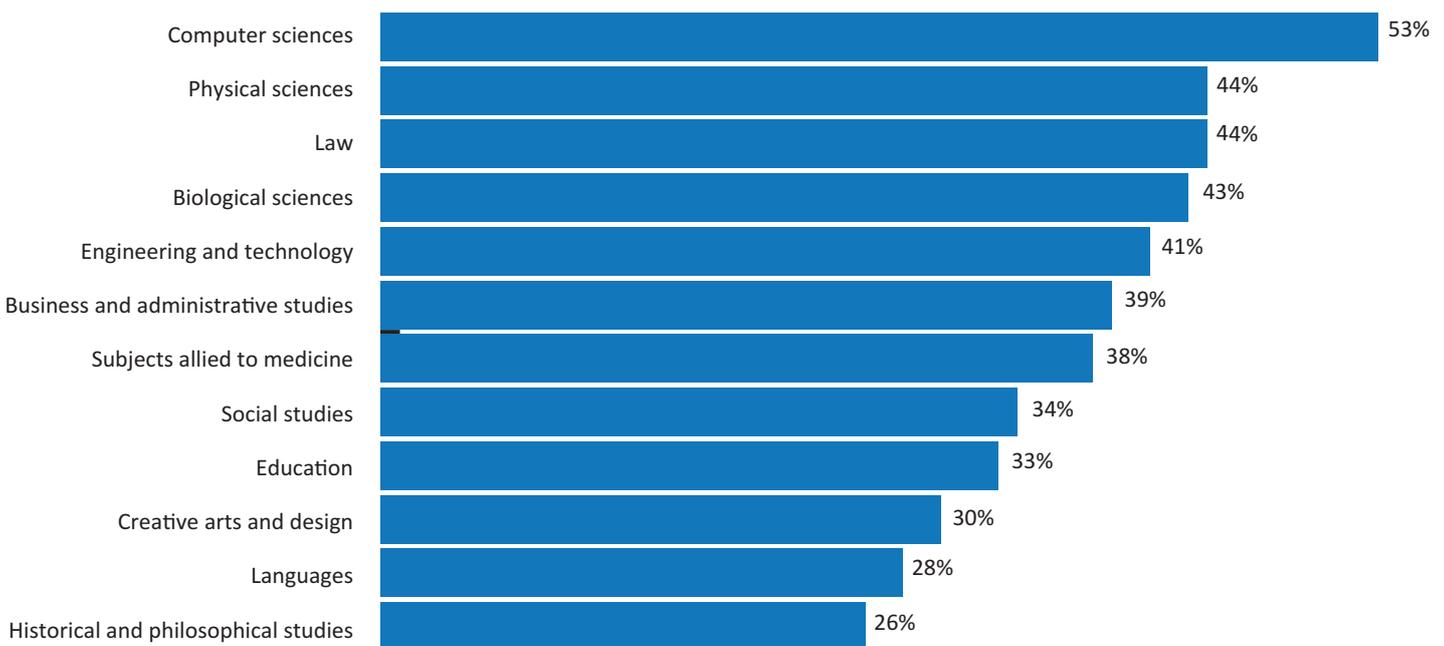
### Overall my investment in higher education represents/represented good value for money



## Does subject of study determine value for money?

A major factor that influences students' perception of their tuition fees is their subject of study. Computer science students and those doing physical sciences and law are the most likely to say that the tuition fees represented good value for money. At the other end, those doing historical and philosophical studies, languages and creative arts and design are least satisfied with the value they have received.

### The tuition fees for my course represents/represented good value for money



## What do students studying different subjects think of their tuition fee?

'As an arts student, I don't feel I receive £9,000 worth of contact time and resources. I currently have the equivalent of 5 hours per week contact time with staff. I have to purchase all of my own reading and printing materials. Although I have access to a lot of online material, I fail to see where my money has been spent other than on new campus development, staffing and subsidising degrees in other disciplines.'

'Chemistry is an expensive course to run. It actually costs more than £9,000 a year but is paid for by other courses.'

'Doing an economics course, I believe the graduate schemes available will overshadow the cost of the tuition fees. A career in

economics/finance has significant monetary benefits where the tuition fees are only a fraction of your potential lifetime earnings.'

'I have very few contact hours as an English and film student and so most of my work is independent. I am still required to pay for all my course books – which are mandatory for learning. Science students have labs, expensive equipment and many more contact hours. Personally I don't think I should be paying the same as them as they are paying for the use of specialist equipment; I am paying £9,250 for only 2–3 hour lectures a week and seminars. I feel we should pay less or at least some of our books should be subsidised. They are as essential to our learning as the special equipment is to a science student.'

## Using students' tuition fees: what should fees fund?

Students' Unions involved in the design of the study suggested that students are particularly interested in cross subsidies. When we asked students to expand upon tuition fees and value for money in their own words, quite a few students suggested that 'tuition' fees may be something of a misnomer: the money students pay as a tuition fee goes towards a variety of different departments and services.

When we asked students what, in their opinion, should be funded by their tuition fees we found that they are very happy for their fees to go towards library resources, student welfare and IT resources (in that order), but they are not happy with their fees funding research outside of their subject area or teaching on other courses.

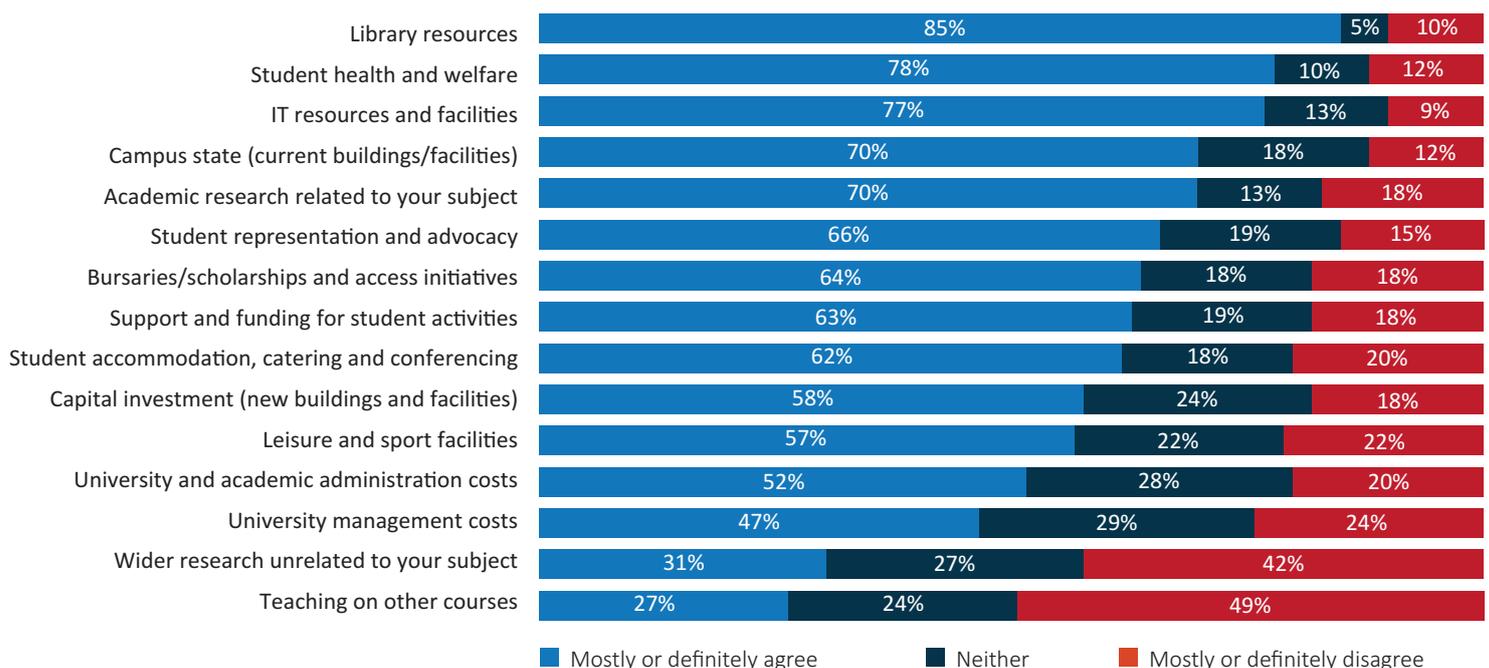
Students' Unions also suggested that students are surprised by what is and isn't included within the 'fee' – this varies hugely from course to course and provider to provider, and there is a suggestion that many students are surprised by additional costs. So, after identifying how students think their fees should be used, we then asked them to tell us whether they think individual costs should be paid for wholly by higher education providers, wholly by the student, or paid for partly by the student and partly by the provider (via subsidy).

In general, students seem to believe that examination resit fees and stationery should be wholly paid for by the student. The students think that every other cost on our list, however, should either be subsidised or wholly paid for by their higher education provider.

Furthermore, students say that placement travel, field trips, printing, leisure/sports and accommodation should be subsidised by the higher education provider; whereas the institution should be wholly responsible for paying for specialist software, DBS checks, final year project costs, core textbooks and professional association fees.

Socio-economic profile influences how comfortable students are about their fees being used to fund scholarships or bursaries: 72% of those eligible for means-tested funding agree that their fees should be used for access initiatives, compared to only 60% of those who are not eligible for means-tested funding. It is important to note that neither going to a state or private school nor the education levels of their parents/guardians has an impact on students' attitudes towards scholarships and bursaries.

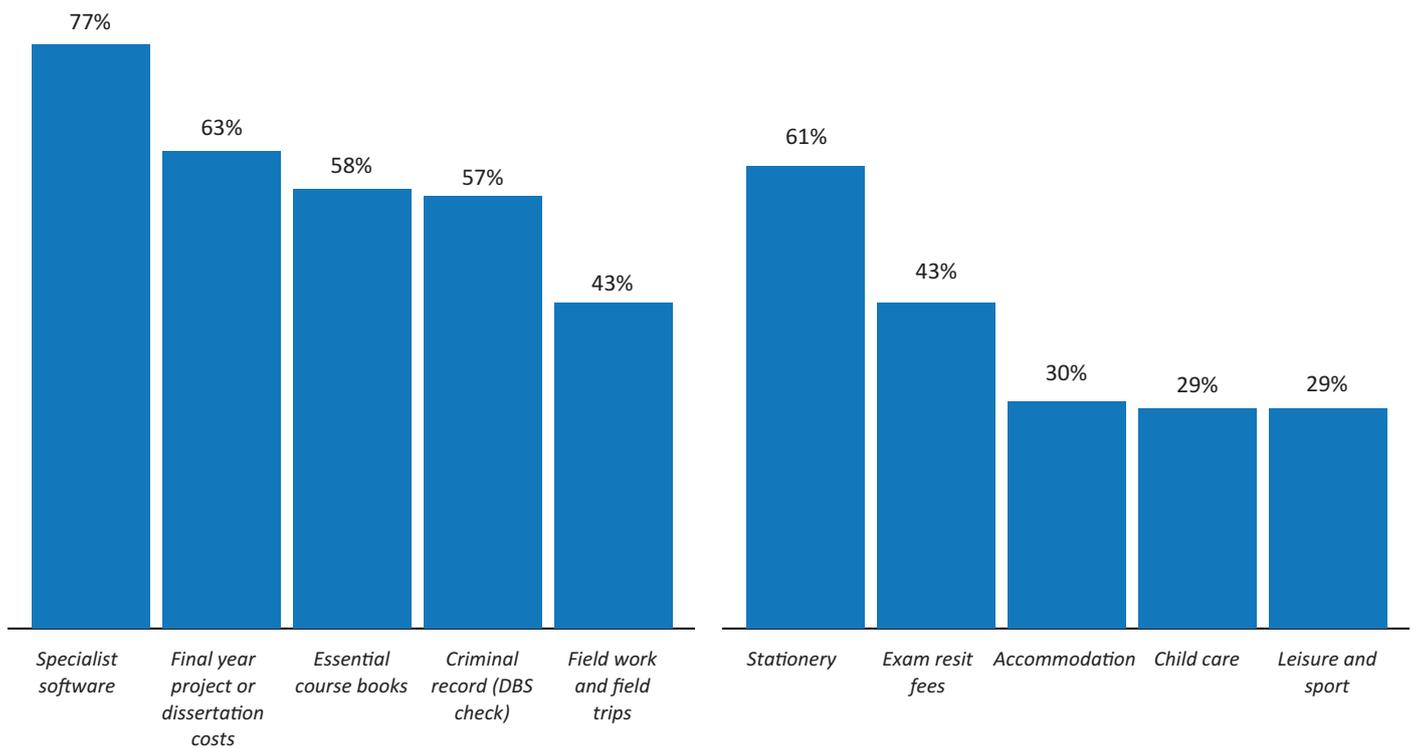
### To what extent do you agree that your student fees should be used to fund the following:



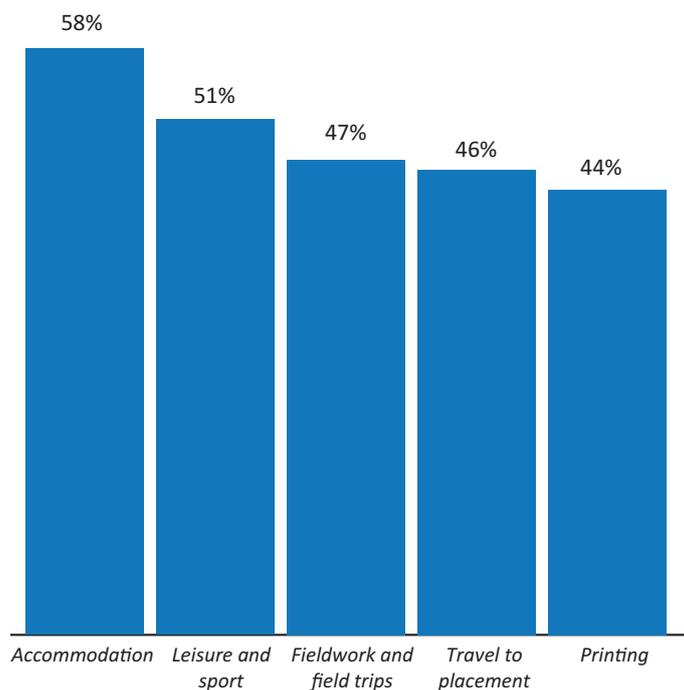
# Who should cover these costs?

Entirely covered by the university (with money that comes from funding or student fees)

Entirely paid for by students (via upfront costs/ additional charges)



Partly subsidised by the university, partly paid for by students via upfront costs/charges



# What does value for money mean to students?

## Quality, inputs and outcomes

There are a number of things that can be measured within a provider- including inputs (like library spend or the staff:student ratio), quality (including perceptions from students) and outcomes (such as the graduate premium). The Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF), for example, features a mixture of these aspects. HEP’s 2017 Student Academic Experience survey has shown that perceptions of value for money are principally driven by students’ views on the quality of the teaching that they receive.

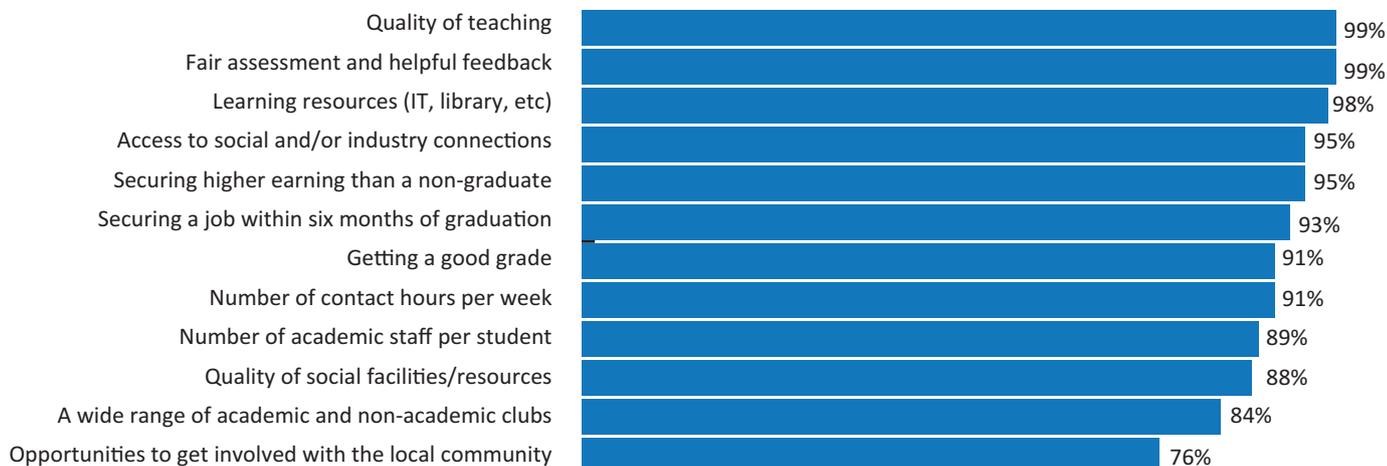
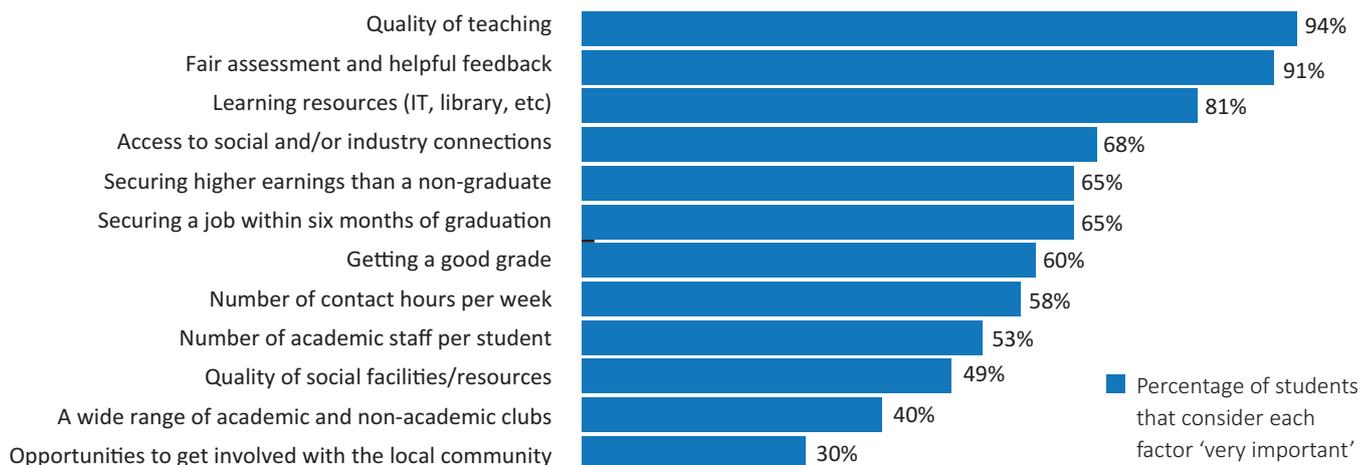
We asked students to assess different factors: quality, inputs and outcomes. In our survey, when students are asked how important different factors are for determining whether their university offers good value for money, the vast majority of students (94%) say that

‘quality of teaching’ is ‘very important.’ Fair assessment and feedback are ‘very important’ for 91% of our respondents.

When it comes to inputs, the percentage of students who say that the available resources (IT, library) were ‘very important’ is lower (81%), and contact hours lower still (58%).

Furthermore, we found that students are far more likely to consider quality and inputs measures as proxies of value for money, rather than thinking about the outcomes of getting a degree. Measures related to outcomes came lower on their priority list. Access to social and/or industry connections is ‘very important’ for 68% of our respondents, and 65% prioritise securing higher earnings than a non-graduate.

### Which factors demonstrate value for money



Percentage of students that consider each factor ‘very important’ or ‘somewhat important’

The priority list does not change when we look at school students or recent graduates. It is also consistent when we look at different groups of students.

This demonstrates that when assessing value for money, students think about graduate outcomes but place a higher priority on the services and resources provided by their higher education provider, and the graduate outcomes. However, it also shows that the former has priority, challenging some of the mainstream discourse regarding students' perception of higher education.

### Students on what should their tuition fee should fund:

'Access is the key. I believe that once a person is aware of what is available they may be inspired or motivated to find a way to continue looking for better opportunities.'

'Access to the library, both on campus and the online resources, is one of the most important things on a degree that can be the difference between a pass and a fail.'

'Learning infrastructure is pivotal to a course and accessing costly learning resources for free is a major draw of being a part of a university.'

'Leisure and sport have a huge impact on quality of life. Rather than the strict focus on mental health services, invest in sport and leisure to reduce mental health issues. Universities should train us to become sustainable humans in the workforce and pay attention to health wellbeing.'

'One of the most important things to me is a good learning environment and an excellent library filled with good study spaces and resources. It just makes the academic experience at university so much better.'

'Sports and leisure are one of the most important aspects in university as students need to be healthy physically and emotionally.'

'Along with the funding for the course and research, activities and clubs and societies form an integral part of the enjoyment and experience of university. People can take a break from studies and enjoy time with people with similar interests to them – but those who can't afford certain aspects such as the competition payments etc end up missing out.'



# Whether students were well informed, loan repayments

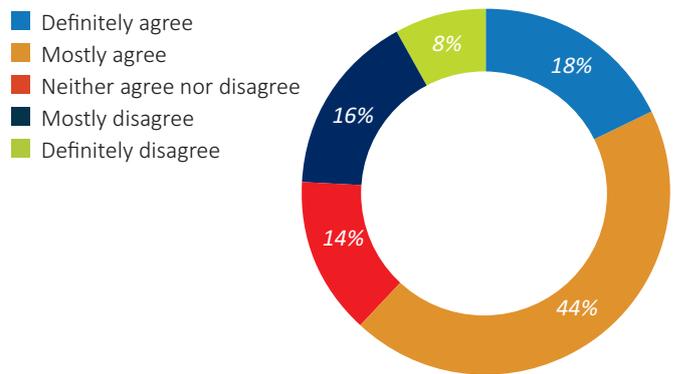
To analyse students' perceptions of the value of their education, Students' Unions indicated that it was necessary to investigate how much students were prepared for the costs associated with their degree. 24% of our respondents say that they were not informed or prepared for how much everything would cost as a student.

This is significant as it shows that a large minority of students did not have a complete picture of the costs they would face on their degree, and the qualitative comments suggest that this may have implications both for their academic performance and non-continuation.

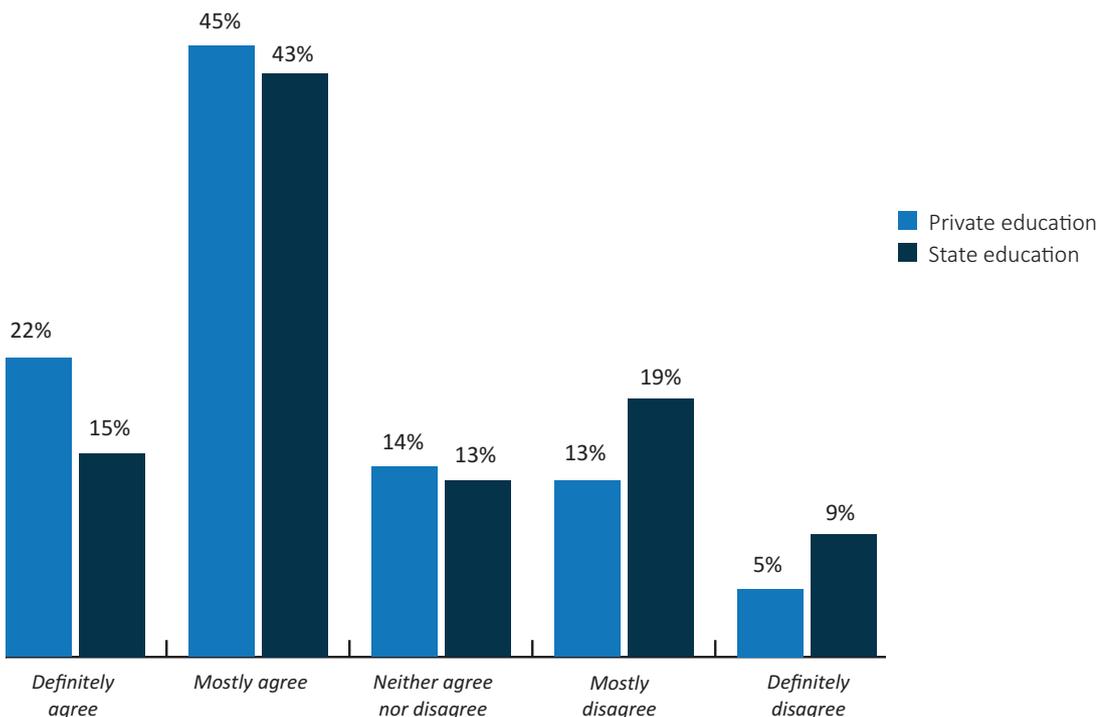
Socio-economic profile does slightly change how well informed students are about costs before going to university: 67% of privately educated students agreed that they were 'informed and prepared', while only 58% of state-educated students agreed.

In the qualitative comments, disagreement on costs preparedness and information had three main themes – lack of information on participation costs, a perception that costs levied by provider are unnecessary, and maintenance funding not covering costs. Agreement is related to clear information regarding direct costs, social capital factors (such as support from family) and access to information about the overall costs of participation.

## I was informed of and prepared for how much everything would cost as a student at university



## I was informed of and prepared for how much everything would cost as a student at university

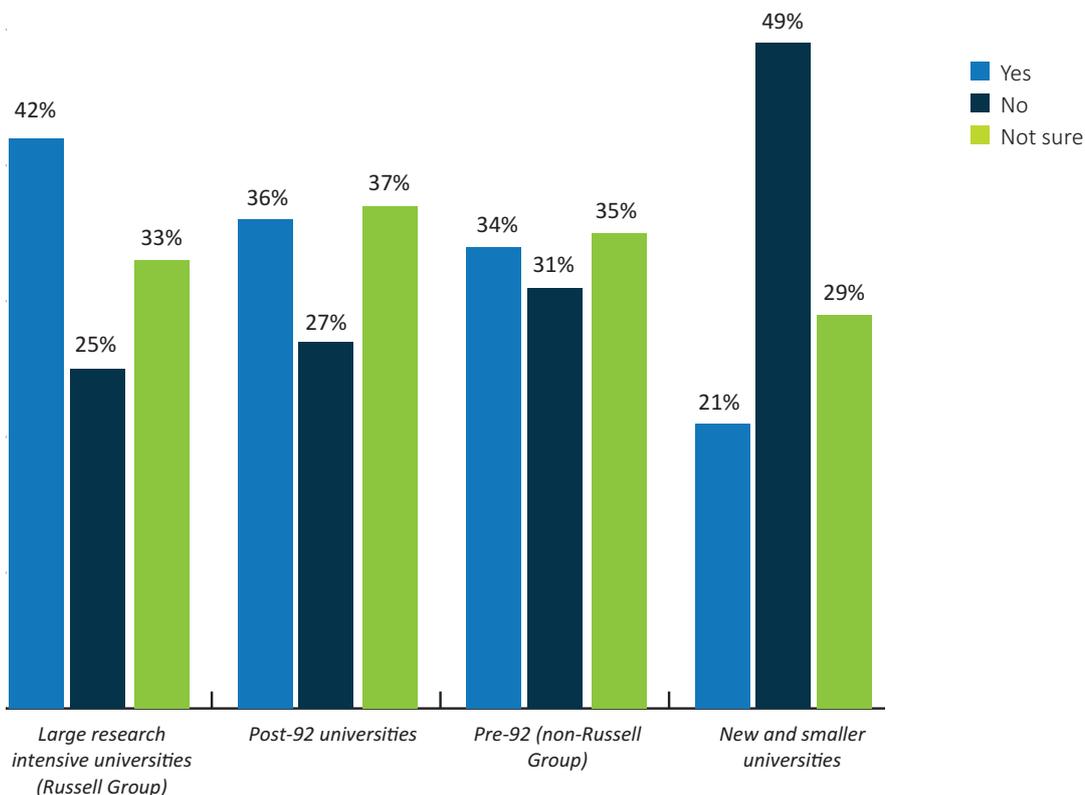


We also investigated students' confidence that they would repay any loans they've taken out for tuition or maintenance. When we asked students if they believe that they will repay their loan by the end of the repayment period, students are pessimistic: only 37% think that they will pay it and an additional 35% are unsure.

There are significant differences in terms of their level of confidence depending on students' profile. Students from private schools are the most confident about paying back their loan, 49% saying that they will, compared to 33% of those who have attended a state school.

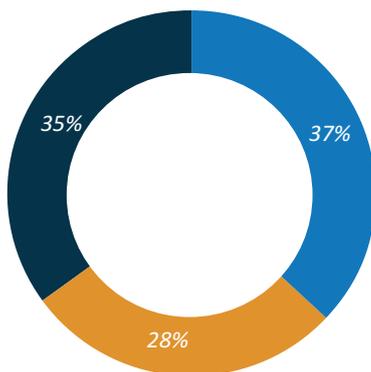
42% of the students from research intensive institutions think that they will repay loans, compared to 36% of those attending post-92 institutions. This demonstrates a discrepancy between social profile and students' confidence in securing jobs that will allow them to repay the loans.

### Do you expect to repay your loan by the end of the repayment period? (The repayment period is 30 years, after which the loan will be written off.)



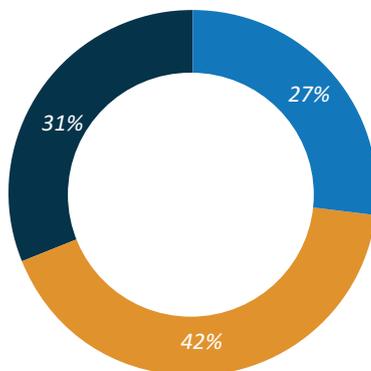
Do you expect to repay your loan by the end of the repayment period? (university students)

■ Yes  
■ No  
■ Not sure



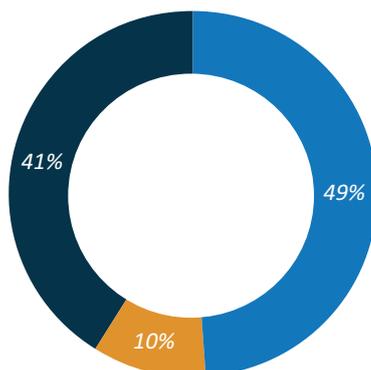
Do you expect to repay your loan by the end of the repayment period? (recent graduates)

■ Yes  
■ No  
■ Not sure



Do you expect to repay your loan by the end of the repayment period? (school students)

■ Yes  
■ No  
■ Not sure



### Students on extra university costs

'At school I was always told 'everyone can afford to go to university'; however if your parents, like mine, earn just over the cut off point for loans it is actually quite unaffordable. [...] There isn't any support or warning about how expensive it all really is, and unless your parents are on very low wages you don't get any help whatsoever despite any other circumstances.'

'I'm quite surprised by how much I have learned throughout this survey. For example, I had no idea that my fees paid for research completely unrelated to my field of study. I don't think we were even told what our fees would pay for actually.'

'The course had additional costs for printing and binding of theses which were not mentioned. No further information was offered about living costs, travel expenses etc.'

'I was not told all the extra costs and how expensive activities from societies would be, which means I can't join many... How expensive books would be that are compulsory for the course we have to pay on our own.... How much accommodation outside of campus would be... there should be reduced schemes.'

'Although my student loan was received and covered my student accommodation rent, it failed to cover living costs and I had to get a part-time job in order to support myself. Which meant I was unable to concentrate solely on my studies alone[...].'

'If I had such support I would have been able to make more informed choices when selecting my course/modules. I feel that some things were purposely not said in the induction as staff knew that it would have deterred some students. But the knock-on effect was that after the first year students would leave or transfer to another university because the support that was promised was not there and tutors/lecturers can be very aggressive when being challenged as to the information they are giving.'



# Improvements and solutions: making value for money in higher education more transparent

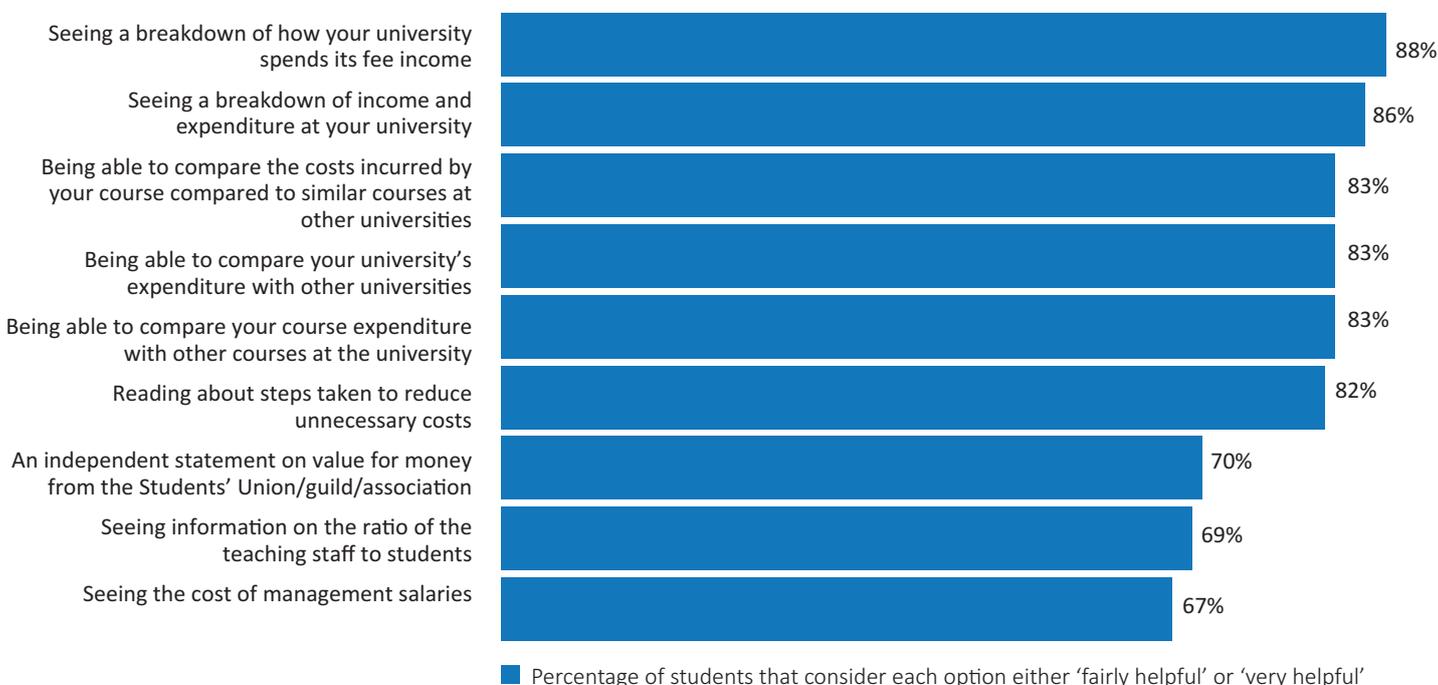
The OfS aims to promote transparency around securing value for money in what ministers have called a ‘transparency revolution’. Part of this initiative is to give students more information on how their providers spend their tuition fee money.

We asked students what type of information would be helpful to allow them to assess if their provider offers good value for money and the responses showed a strong support for transparency in a variety of forms. The most popular option was seeing a breakdown of how the provider spends its fee income (88%). 86% would like to see top-up information on the income and expenditure at their provider, while 83% of our respondents would find it helpful to compare the costs incurred by their course compared to other courses at other universities. The same percentage would like to be able to compare the provider’s expenditure with other courses at their provider.

Even the less popular options commanded significant support – being able to see information on the ratio of the teaching staff to students, for example, received 69% support. The least popular option was seeing the costs of management salaries – only 67% of students indicate that this would be helpful.

Students are strongly supportive of a range of transparency measures, particularly those that allow them to compare income and expenditure between different courses and different institutions.

## How helpful would these factors be when assessing whether your university provides value for money?



Finally, we asked students if there is anything else that the Government or the higher education regulator could do to ensure that students receive value for money. In the qualitative comments revealed a range of themes. Some were extrinsic and related to

socioeconomics, student profile, course type; as well as the overall funding model and fees review. Some were regulatory in nature suggesting actions for the OfS, but many were within a providers' sphere of influence and control.

### Can you think of anything else the government or the higher education regulator could do to ensure that students receive value for money?

'Actually listen to what we have to say, rather than pretending to, and take it seriously, take it on board. We're the future of this place, our say should matter. And not expect our parents to spend the money they have earned to constantly help us just make it through the week. I always feel so much guilt when I need to turn to my parents for help because just paying rent puts me hundreds and hundreds into my overdraft so I struggle to afford food.'

'Allow students to have more of a say on investments – eg make universities consult the student body on investments like new buildings/maintenance which sometimes seem unnecessary/overpriced.'

'[...]Appoint a HEFCE/Office for Students student rep at each university to be visible and report on how students feel about value for money. Put a question about value for money in the NSS.'

'If people are passionate about their degree they shouldn't be put off because one degree is cheaper than the other, so we should be wary about this. I am aware a science degree costs a lot more than a languages degree. I worry that it will put people off doing what they love out of fear of not getting the best value for money. But I still think we should know clearly what we are actually getting for our money. It's a difficult situation.'

'Allow students to complete an annual survey for every year they spend at university, where they are able to express their views on the course studied, the university attended, the support received and the costs incurred in their studies. The survey should be submitted to both the university involved and the higher education regulator, so that immediate actions can be taken in case the overall satisfaction of students is below average. In this way, students are able to judge if any improvements have been made throughout their course of studies and hence if their suggestions have been taken into consideration, thus hopefully improving their overall university experience.'

'Just try and be as transparent as possible with the students. I have no idea what my £9,000-a-year tuition is going towards and I feel like the popular opinion of universities is that they are just taking these tuition fees and pocketing them without using any of it for investment into the university.'

'Stop assuming that the only reason students go to uni is to get a job that earns them lots of money! There are lots of things that provide value for money that are not about money itself. Personal

development and growth, becoming a more engaged citizen and having more knowledge are also good outcomes of HE and getting these things from your experience also provide "value for money".'

'Reducing highly paid, unrealistic management costs with the distribution of these savings going to those in greater need, ie the students who need to work to provide an income in supporting their studies.'

'Regular updates on the investment projects, improvements across the university both in facilities and staff, accreditation by industry bodies, data for employability of students, and employer networks with the university are some suggestions that present a clear evidence the university will provide a good value for money. At the end of the day it is the quality of the education that we receive and the better life that it offers us that determine our decisions and satisfaction with our choice.'

'Regular independent checks on the standards of teaching and facilities. Facilities are poor because the money is not invested to maintain buildings properly.'

'Should stop referring to education as a value for money item. Education should not be commodified.'

'Showing us where our money would go or for us to choose where our money goes, so a fixed fee that everyone has to pay but you can choose where some of it goes so that you can have a bit more control.'

'The government could reduce the costs of tuition fees to match the university guidelines and teaching that they provide. also to improve value for money I think that the universities could give a breakdown of the cost of where the tuition fees go because at the moment no one knows how their money is being utilised. Also universities should provide help for families on a lower income even if students are getting student finance payments because it is a big strain to only work with what student finance gives out.'

'Value for money is the incorrect measure for university. It does not reflect the true value of university, which is unquantifiable, cultural, and social, as well as economic. Tuition fees should be removed and universities given more central funding from government so the cost does not fall on individual students. Cost should never be a barrier to access. And students should not be focused on taking courses that offer 'value for money' or jobs, but on courses that they enjoy and which add to our collective wellbeing and development.'

## SU Officers' response to the research: issues to consider

*Written by Joe Cox, Middlesex SU Officer  
& Mary Leishman, UEA SU Officer*



As is made clear in the introduction, the purpose of this research project was not to definitively answer the question of what 'value for money' means in higher education but, rather, to explore value for money from the student perspective. We are also conscious that the OfS is a new regulator with a developing agenda, and that by the time this work is published the government will have launched a review of tertiary provider fees and funding.

We nonetheless think it is important that providers (and their Students' Unions), the OfS (particularly its student panel) and the government considers the results and responds appropriately with action or further interrogation.

**Objective 4: that all students, from all backgrounds, receive value for money**

*(Source: The Office for Students Regulatory Framework, Regulatory Framework Consultation, 2017)*

Providers have a responsibility to ensure that students are able to secure value for money for their investment in their education, just as students have a responsibility to engage with their own learning and take the opportunities higher education offers.

Value for money runs through all of the risks highlighted, from whether a student receives a good quality education through to the ongoing value of the qualification they achieve.

The OfS will also act on individual issues where there are concerns that value for money for students is not being delivered across the sector, working where appropriate with sector bodies, government or both.



## Issues to consider from SU Officers



**"What matters:** When assessing value for money, students do consider outcomes measures like the graduate premium, but consider quality measures such as teaching quality to be more important – because while the responsibility for achieving outcomes is shared between students, providers and others, only the provider is responsible for its quality. It would appear that a simplistic link between 'price' and a basket of the extrinsic factors would not help students to believe they had value for money.

**"Overall perceptions:** It is clear that students are concerned about, and not confident about, the value for money they are receiving, either from their tuition fees or other charges levied by providers. These become more acute for different groups, but do ease when considering overall investment in higher education. The national debate will focus on home undergraduate fees, but the survey demonstrates that students are worried about where funding goes regardless of whether they are home undergraduates that have taken out a loan or not; and that they are concerned about efficiency, cross subsidy and transparency regardless of the wider design of the student finance system.

**"Dissatisfaction:** There is a strong sense in the comments that there are hygiene factors – where dissatisfaction is related to inputs and quality, that need to be addressed before students focus on motivator factors such as outcomes. It is also clear that given students' fees fund more than just 'tuition', they need to understand expenditure on academic services, non-academic services, and cross subsidies.

**"Cross subsidies:** It is not surprising that students are more comfortable with their fees being spent on provision that directly impacts them, less comfortable with centralised costs and even less with provision related to other academic subjects. But results do suggest that not knowing where money goes or not being able to compare expenditure is the biggest issue that vexes students. We believe that active consideration should be given to developing transparency that makes sense to students, uncovers inefficiency and encourages providers to offer better 'value' whatever the fee (and whoever it is paid by).

**"Other charges:** Fees are not the only financial transaction between a student and a provider where there is a value for money concern – not least, for example, because there are some providers where 'printing' is provided for free, some where some is and others where none is. Students we talk to have a desire for action to be taken in relation to all of their financial transactions with providers; and it is in the interests of applicants and students that we consider the comparative clarity of regulation on fee limits when compared to the lack of clarity on what is and is not **included** at a given provider in the fees.

**"Unanticipated charges:** The research demonstrates that the sector still has some way to go in being able to appropriately prepare students about the total cost of participation in higher education. This is not just about information or external maintenance support – some of these costs are within providers' control, so we believe that consideration should be given to the way in which these might be reduced at every level, from reading lists to accommodation costs. This is more acute for students from a widening participation background and could also be an issue for access and participation planning. We are not convinced that providers should be able to profit from their own charges and services to students given their dominant market position.

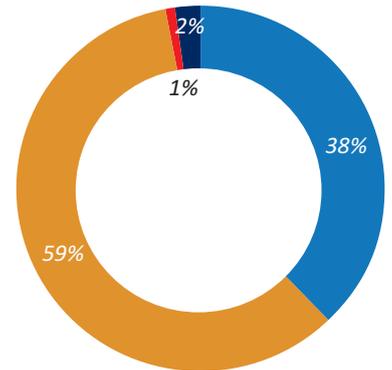
**"Engagement:** Free text comments in the research suggest that students are passionate and engaged in the issue of value for money. They have strong opinions and interesting ideas that could be applied by the government, the OfS and providers. We think that it is crucial, as this agenda develops, that students are engaged as partners in ongoing efforts to improve both actual and perceived value for money – and that students are able to scrutinise and influence where their money is going"

## Profile of respondents



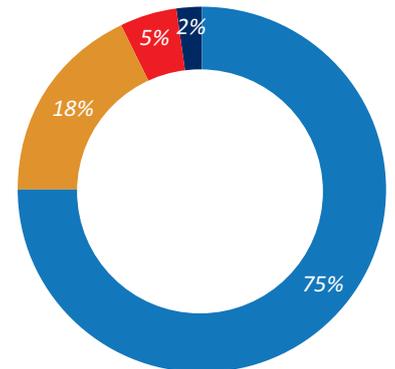
### Gender

- Male
- Female
- In another way
- Prefer not to say



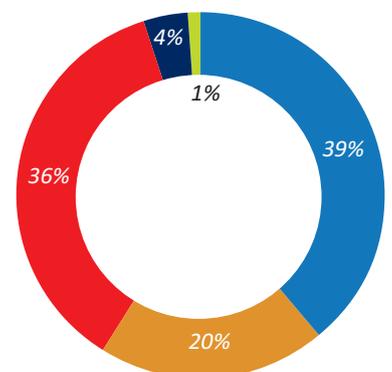
### Course type

- Undergraduate degree
- Postgraduate taught degree
- Postgraduate research degree
- Foundation degree

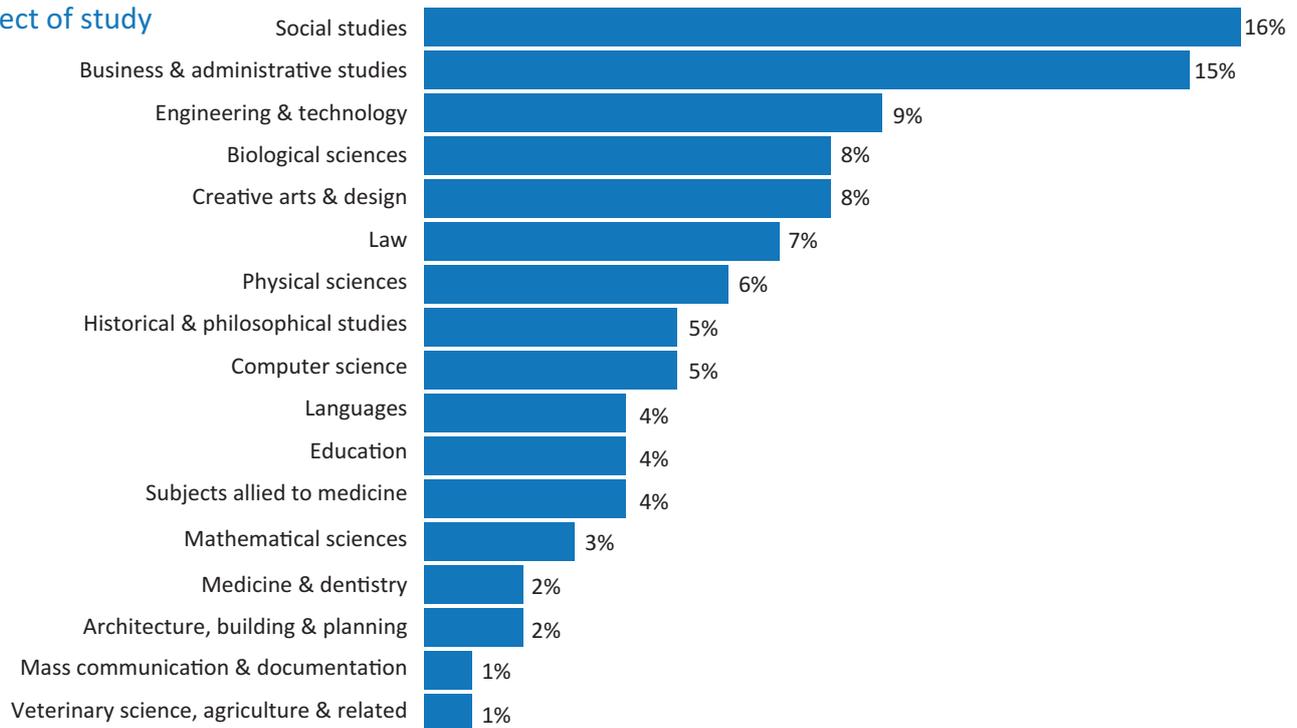


### Type of provider

- Large research intensive universities (Russell Group)
- Pre-92 (non-Russell Group)
- Post-92 universities
- New and smaller universities
- Alternative providers



## Subject of study



For the purposes of this report, we have categorised HE providers/institutions in the following way:

Large research intensive universities (Russell Group)	Pre-92 (non-Russell Group)	New and smaller universities	Post-92 universities
Imperial College London King's College London School of Economics Queen Mary, University of London University College London Durham University Newcastle University University of Birmingham University of Bristol University of Cambridge University of Exeter University of Leeds University of Liverpool University of Manchester University of Nottingham University of Oxford University of Sheffield University of Southampton University of Warwick University of York	Birkbeck, University of London City University Goldsmiths College Royal Holloway University SOAS, University of London Aston University Brunel University Keele University Lancaster University Loughborough University Queen Margaret University University of Bath University of East Anglia University of Essex University of Hull University of Kent University of Leicester University of Reading University of Surrey University of Sussex	St Marys University, Twickenham Arts University Bournemouth Bath Spa University Bishop Grosseteste University Falmouth University Hartpury College Norwich University of the Arts Royal Agricultural University University College Birmingham Southampton Solent UCA (The University for Creative Arts) University of Chichester University of Winchester University of Worcester York St John University	Kingston University London Metropolitan University London South Bank University Middlesex University University of East London University of Greenwich University of West London University of Westminster Anglia Ruskin University Birmingham City University Bournemouth University Buckinghamshire New University Canterbury Christ Church University Coventry University De Montfort University Edge Hill University Leeds Beckett University Liverpool Hope University Liverpool John Moores University Manchester Metropolitan University Northumbria University Nottingham Trent University Oxford Brookes University Sheffield Hallam University Staffordshire University Teesside University University of Bedfordshire University of Bolton University of Bradford University of Brighton University of Central Lancashire University of Chester University of Derby University of Gloucestershire University of Hertfordshire University of Huddersfield University of Lincoln University of Northampton University of Plymouth University of Portsmouth University of Roehampton University of Salford University of Sunderland University of the West of England University of Wolverhampton

Please note that this report focuses on students studying in England, unless otherwise specified.



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