



Explorations: Preparation for the transition out of Higher Education report

Office for Students

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Contents

1	Executive summary	3
2	Introduction and methodology	6
3	Methodology	8
4	Motivations and goals	11
5	Preparedness for life beyond HE study	14
6	Factors impacting student readiness for employment, further study and personal growth	18
7	Engagement with institutional support services	23
8	Satisfaction with institutional support	29
9	Recommendations for future support	32
10	Conclusions	34
11	Annex A: Profile of respondents	37

1 Executive summary

This report explores the progression of students from higher education (HE) into employment, further study, or other life paths. This is informed by findings from three focus groups involving 18 recent graduates, and an online survey of 1,671 recent graduates. All graduates who participated in the research graduated from their higher education course within the 2022/23 to 2024/25 academic years. This research aims to inform policy and practice by examining how graduates felt that institutions prepared them for life after graduation, and the barriers and enablers that shaped these transitions, to support the OfS's regulatory aims to ensure positive outcomes for students.

Throughout the report, it is worth noting that the views expressed by graduates reflect their own personal perceptions of support and their preparedness for life after university, rather than an objective assessment of these factors.

Graduates who were surveyed were asked, retrospectively, about what their goals were after graduating. Securing employment was the primary goal of the majority of graduates surveyed upon finishing their course (76 per cent), while 16 per cent hoped to embark on further study. During focus groups, it was clear that some graduates chose their course with a specific career path in mind, while others hoped to use their course to build on their interests and develop their transferable skills. The extent to which graduates knew what they hoped to do after graduating varied. Postgraduates and those who studied Engineering and Technology, Health and Medical Sciences and Mathematics and Computer Science courses were more likely to know what they wanted to do next, which, for the majority, involved securing work in their desired field or industry. Comparatively, undergraduates, particularly those who studied Humanities and Arts, were more likely to want to keep their options open and be focused on securing any employment, including jobs outside their field of study. Those who graduated in academic year 2022/23 were more likely to aim to secure any employment than those who graduated in 2024/25.

Only half of graduates (50 per cent) surveyed felt prepared for life after graduation. The lowest perceived preparedness was reported by undergraduates (46 per cent) as well as those who studied a Humanities, Arts or Social Science subject. Graduates of STEM-related and vocational courses were more likely to feel prepared for their next steps. The most recent graduate cohort (who graduated in 2024/25) were least likely to report feeling unprepared (30 per cent, compared to 33 per cent overall). Around a third (32 per cent) of all recent graduates who completed the survey did not feel prepared to secure work in their desired field or industry, despite this being a key motivation for choosing their course. This may also reflect a general sense of uncertainty and concern about future economic prospects among this population.

Overall, 62 per cent of graduates felt confident about achieving their post-graduation goals. The highest levels of reported confidence were found among graduates from higher education in further education (FE) (80 per cent) and postgraduates (70 per cent), with undergraduates again showing lower confidence levels overall (56 per cent).

During the focus groups, most graduates felt their institutions had been helpful in developing the skills that would be important for life after graduation such as self-motivation and resilience, communication and time management, and organisation skills. However, graduate viewpoints suggested a disconnect between the importance that graduates placed on financial literacy and

budgeting skills and the extent to which they felt their institution supported them to develop these skills.

Almost all (98 per cent) graduates who were interested in securing work reported taking steps to prepare for this, and the same was true of those interested in further study (96 per cent).

Many graduates (69 per cent) found support from their family and friends useful. A higher proportion of graduates (56 per cent) felt that informal or ad hoc support from their institution, for example from an individual member of staff, was useful compared to formal support (50 per cent). However, this varied by a range of demographic factors including whether they were an international or domestic student, whether they had a disability or long-term health condition, ethnicity and whether one or more of their parents had a HE qualification.

Financial challenges and a lack of relevant work experience or a professional network were also identified by graduates who completed the survey as barriers impacting preparedness for post-graduation life. Arts and Humanities graduates (50 per cent) and those who attended high-tariff institutions (46 per cent) were more likely to feel that a lack of a professional network had impacted their preparedness (compared to 40 per cent overall among graduates polled).

The vast majority of recent graduates surveyed (88 per cent) reported having received support from their institution to help them prepare for their next steps post-graduation, most commonly through academic staff and course teaching. A third (33 per cent) of graduates had utilised their institution's career service.

Graduates who studied vocational courses were more likely to have engaged with support, especially support through integrated work placements, which were identified as a key facilitator of employment readiness among focus group participants. In the survey, 24 per cent of students reported that they received support from work placements that were part of their course.

Engagement and satisfaction with institutional support varied. Graduates of high-tariff institutions were more likely to report that they had engaged with institutional support, particularly through academic channels (through academic staff, departmental events), but reported lower levels of satisfaction with support. Satisfaction with institutional support also decreased with study level, with the highest levels of satisfaction among Level 4/5 graduates (76 per cent) and the lowest among postgraduates (54 per cent).

Graduates felt that greater tailoring of support around level of study, subject area and career objectives, as well as increasing awareness and accessibility of support services, were necessary. Additionally, perceived gaps in financial and broader life skills were seen as an area where institutional support could be further developed, to best support transitions into post-graduation life.

Throughout the findings, there were relatively few differences based upon cohort, with a few exceptions. This is perhaps surprising given the differences in context in which these graduates undertook their transitions out of HE, including different labour market circumstances, and differences relating to proximity in time to the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic.

Generally, findings indicate that despite the majority of graduates being broadly positive about the institutional support they received, there is inconsistency around the level and effectiveness of support relative to student expectations based on a variety of factors, most notably subject and level of study. Variability in experiences reported across a range of demographic factors also suggests

risk around ensuring equality of opportunity for all students. It is worth noting that these factors may co-occur with other aspects, including external factors such as labour markets, or variance in expectation of support level across subject areas or demographic factors.

2 Introduction

This report presents findings from an exploration into the progression of students from higher education institutions, undertaken on behalf of the Office for Students (OfS), the independent regulator of HE in England.¹ The transition from HE courses to the next stage of life is a critical period for graduates. This report seeks to illuminate the pathways that graduates pursue, into employment, further study, or other destinations, and to understand the factors that affect these transitions, or progression out of higher education.

Progression out of higher education courses, and outcomes for students, are central to the work of the OfS. In the 2022-2025 strategy, the OfS set out as a core aim the goal to ensure that “all students, from all backgrounds, can progress into employment, further study, and lead fulfilling lives, in which their qualifications hold their value over time.”² Similarly, and central to this exploration, is Condition B3 of the OfS’ regulatory framework, which requires registered institutions to deliver positive outcomes for students.³ These outcomes are assessed through indicators such as progression into employment or postgraduate study, and are used by the OfS to monitor institutional performance and drive sector-wide improvement.

This report contributes to that monitoring effort by offering both quantitative and qualitative insights into graduate experiences, preparedness, and barriers encountered. The research also attempts to provide a more holistic understanding of progression, beyond headline metrics covering progression into employment and postgraduate study. Part of this is a focus on the support services offered by institutions to their students, and their role in preparing students for life after graduation. Institutions offer a range of support services, from careers advice and placement opportunities to wellbeing and personal development programmes.

Research by the OfS has highlighted persistent disparities in graduate outcomes.⁴ In particular, students from disadvantaged backgrounds, certain ethnic groups, and those with disabilities have often faced additional barriers to successful progression. The OfS has responded by encouraging institutions to enhance careers support, embed employability within curricula and deliver targeted interventions for underrepresented groups through institutions’ access and participation plans.

The core research objectives of this exploratory study are:

- To assess the level of preparedness for life after HE among HE students about to complete their course and recent graduates, and to explore similarities and differences by key personal characteristics.

¹ For the sake of readability in this report we may use “institutions” to refer to what the OfS regulatory framework and other more formal documents call “higher education providers”.

² Office for Students (2022), Office for Students Strategy 2022 to 2025, <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/1d6ad023-366a-4538-b931-03aa60a78f88/ofs-strategy-2022-final-for-web.pdf> [Accessed October 2025]

³ Office for Students (2022), Condition B3: baselines for student outcomes indicators, <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-framework-for-higher-education-in-england/part-v-guidance-on-the-general-ongoing-conditions-of-registration/condition-b3-student-outcomes/> [Accessed January 2026]

⁴ Office for Students (2023), Risk 12: Progression from higher education <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-providers/equality-of-opportunity/equality-of-opportunity-risk-register-eorr/risk-12-progression-from-higher-education/> [Accessed October 2025]

- To identify the key factors influencing students' preparation for employment, further study, and personal development.
- To gather insights on the effectiveness of institutions' support services in aiding students' transition out of HE.

This report focuses on the views of students from the 2022/23, 2023/24, and 2024/25 academic years. Throughout, it is worth noting that the views expressed by graduates reflect their own personal perceptions of support and their preparedness for life after university, rather than an objective assessment of these factors.

The report aims to inform future policy and practice, helping the OfS to support institutions to enhance the quality and relevance of their provision to meet the evolving needs of graduates and the labour market.

Findings throughout the report will draw upon relevant institutional, socio-demographic, and cohort-related characteristics to note differences across the graduate landscape. It is worth noting that the three academic years covered here all graduated in different contexts, and so where differences are noted by cohort, this must be taken into consideration. Two such examples of these changing contexts are the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, which will have been felt unevenly across years, and the ever-evolving labour market.

3 Methodology

This exploration used a mixed methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research methods. It draws upon survey data of 1,671 graduates and focus groups involving 18 graduates. All graduates included in the research were from three sets of graduate cohorts: those graduating in the academic years 2022/23, 2023/24, and 2024/25.

Graduate focus groups

Three focus groups were conducted in August 2025, which were made up of 18 participants in total. They explored graduates' in-depth views on how their institution helped them prepare for life after graduating.

The focus groups covered:

- An introduction, in which graduates introduced themselves and the course they studied;
- Their views on their preparedness for life after graduating;
- Graduate awareness of institutional support services, and their access of them;
- The role their institution played in preparing them for life after graduation; and
- Ways to improve institutional support, including developing a conception of an ideal support offering.

The focus groups were made up of an even split across graduate cohort years (six per year). A spread was achieved across socio-demographic characteristics, study level and subject, as well as provider typology as shown in Table 2 in Annex A.

Graduate survey

This exploration also incorporates findings from a quantitative a survey of 1,671 recent graduates. The survey was conducted in September 2025. The survey design was informed by the qualitative strand of the research.

The survey asked questions of graduates covering:

- Their goals after graduating and how prepared they felt to achieve them;
- The factors influencing their preparation for life after graduation;
- Their engagement with institutional support services, and their satisfaction with them;
- Screening questions to establish relevance of the survey; and
- Demographic questions.

A spread of responses across the three years was achieved across demographic characteristics, study level and subject, as well as provider typology as shown in Table 3 in Annex A.

Weighting was applied to the dataset, covering a matrix of region of institution by sex, with a Random Iterative Method (RIM) weight then applied over this weight to cover the level of the provision (undergraduate compared with postgraduate). Region, sex and level were chosen as the core weighting variables because they weight by learner characteristic, institution characteristic, and study characteristic. Another reason was that other key variables were deemed to be unsuitable: for example, provider typology may have been an obvious choice, but many of the cells in the dataset are small for this variable, and it is not always clear the best way to merge the groups. Age is also

difficult to use for these ends, because there is no dataset covering the ages of graduates from HE between one and three academic years on from graduation.

Weighting figures were drawn from Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) student data related to the 2023/24 cohort, the most recently available year at the time of the study.⁵ Data related to female and unknown sex students was necessarily merged due to small base sizes in the unknown sex demographic grouping.⁶

Table 1 Weighting grid for quantitative data

	Female / unknown	Male
East Midlands	4.3%	3.4%
East of England	3.6%	2.9%
London	12.1%	9.1%
North East	2.7%	2.2%
North West	6.2%	4.4%
South East	9.2%	6.9%
South West	4.6%	3.7%
West Midlands	5.6%	4.3%
Yorkshire and the Humber	5.1%	3.8%
Unknown	3.2%	2.8%
Total	56.6%	43.4%
Undergraduate	70.8%	
Postgraduate	29.2%	

Where comparisons are made between groups of graduates within the report (i.e. based on cohort, degree type, subject) this will be done using the quota classifications outlined in ‘Annex A: Profile of Respondents’. Please note, where ‘HE in FE graduates’ are referred to in the report, this refers to the typology of their institution of study (i.e. Level 4/5 institutions). The report also refers to graduates of Level 4 and Level 5 courses, which refers more explicitly to their level of study and may also include those who studied Level 4/5 courses at a university.

All reported differences within survey data are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level, unless otherwise stated. This means that statistically we can be confident that 95% of the time, differences are ‘real’ differences and not a result of findings being based on a sample of the target populations (those that responded to each survey) rather than a census.

The survey had a headline margin of error of ± 2.4 percentage points for a finding of 50% at the 95% confidence level, and ± 1.4 percentage points for findings of 90%/10%. Margin of error provides the range of true results that a survey may provide for each finding in the survey. This means we can be 95% confident that the true figure for a 50% finding lies within plus or minus 2.4 percentage points

⁵ HESA (2025), Who is Studying in HE, <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he> [Accessed October 2025]

⁶ The weighting approach taken requires data to be present in each cell of the weighting grid. Figures for unknown (unknown in HESA data, and “prefer not to say” in survey data) were small enough to require it was merged with another category, and female was selected as the larger out of female/male.

of the figures generated through the survey, and within 1.4 percentage points for a finding at 90% or 10%.

Limitations of methodology

While this research has been inclusive of graduates across a range of demographic criteria, to ensure the sample is representative of the broader graduate population, results cannot be assumed to reflect the full range of feelings and experiences of the total graduate population. As such, these results should be treated as indicative.

The survey base of 1,671 means that when looking at subgroups, bases can become small relatively quickly. This prevents analysis by some subgroups, and means that all findings must be caveated as indicative of the broader population.

This research is not benchmarked against broader population data on similar themes, to understand how these levels of preparedness and confidence about the future might vary against the broader population. Responses to questions on confidence and perceived preparedness for future employment in particular are likely to be influenced by broader economic, social and personal factors.

4 Motivations and goals

Future aspirations were a significant factor in graduate decision-making, based on their descriptions of how they chose where and what to study. These aspirations were largely focused on gaining employment or pursuing further study. During qualitative interviewing, many graduates described specific long-term career goals they hoped to achieve through their studies, while others hoped to develop their transferable skills and use their studies to explore possible careers and other progression paths. Personal interests also influenced the courses that graduates studied, often informed by the subjects they had enjoyed in prior education. The flexibility of courses was often a consideration for these graduates, so they could tailor their course around their evolving interests.

“I chose English because it's quite an open-ended degree to do... You can choose a lot of different career pathways and I wasn't quite sure what I wanted to go into.”

2024/25 Graduate, Undergraduate course, Arts and Humanities

Some also considered the extent to which the institution would help with more holistic goals around self-development and gaining independence.

“Apart from the intellectual side of things, I wanted to, sounds a bit cheesy, but grow as a person... I wanted to be a good distance [away from home] and have the independence.”

2024/25 Graduate, Undergraduate course, Social Sciences

Graduates who studied courses oriented towards specific careers and vocations, such as engineering or healthcare-related courses, often had a much clearer idea of what they wanted to do after graduating. These graduates often highlighted the importance of integrated work experience and industry placements (e.g. clinical practice) when selecting their course, to help them gain practical experience to aid their transition into work.

“[A three-month intern internship] drew me to the programme, because it would add to my resume in terms of work experience and then based on that work experience, I would know which aspect of the industry I would want to get into once I finished my postgrad degree.”

2022/23 Graduate, Postgraduate course, Business and Management

Additionally, graduates who had been in work prior to starting their course, worked during their studies, or been on long clinical qualification pathways, often had clearer ideas about how their course would help them with their professional ambitions.

“You've got that clinical practice and then you complete that job and that training course, then you can then go on to other pathways, which is another reason why I wanted to go this route, opened up a few more doors.”

2022/23 Graduate, Postgraduate course, Health and Medical Sciences

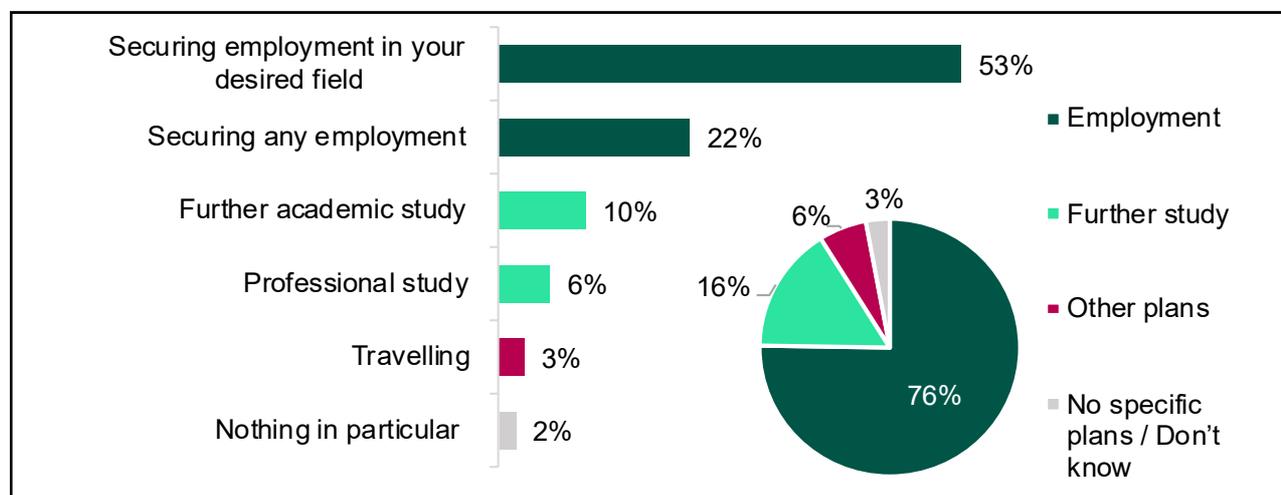
These differences were supported by quantitative findings. While nine in ten (90 per cent) of the graduates polled had at least some idea of what they wanted to do next, this proportion rose to 96 per cent among graduates who studied courses in Engineering and Technology, Health and Medical Sciences and Mathematics and Computer Science (all 96 per cent). This was lowest among Arts and Humanities graduates (78 per cent). Course differences were also evident by level, with those

who had studied a Level 5 qualification (98 per cent) or postgraduate qualification (96 per cent) more likely than those who had studied an undergraduate qualification (86 per cent) to have at least some idea of what they wanted to do next.

Graduates who had a parent with a degree qualification were also somewhat more likely to have an idea of what they wanted to do after graduating (93 per cent) compared to those without (89 per cent).

In terms of the main goal after graduation, most graduates were interested in gaining employment. For three quarters (76 per cent) of graduates their main goal for the 12 months after graduating was to secure employment. Over half (53 per cent) specifically wanted to secure employment in their desired field, while 22 per cent were open to any employment. One in ten (10 per cent) were aiming to pursue further academic study and 6 per cent hoped to pursue professional study, as shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1 Graduates' main goal for the 12 months after graduation



Base: All recent graduates (1,671). Responses with 1 per cent or less excluded from bar chart. 'Other plans' code in pie chart includes 'travelling' (3 per cent), 'volunteering' (1 per cent), 'continue in previously secured employment' (1 per cent) and other responses (1 per cent). 1 per cent answered 'don't know'.

Graduates of postgraduate courses were more likely to want to find work in their desired field (59 per cent). While this was also the case among the majority of undergraduates (51 per cent), they were more likely to report a focus on securing any employment (25 per cent) compared to postgraduates (15 per cent). This is likely linked to how postgraduates largely had a clearer idea of what they hoped to do after completing their studies, as discussed above.

By subject, graduates who studied courses with an industry focus were more likely to aim to secure work in their specific field. This includes graduates of Engineering and Technology (64 per cent) and Mathematics and Computer Sciences (63 per cent), as well as those who studied Law and Legal Studies (64 per cent) and Education (64 per cent). Conversely, those who studied Social Sciences (39 per cent) and Arts and Humanities (44 per cent) courses were notably less likely to be aiming to secure a job in their field. This aligns with qualitative findings, which suggest graduates of these subjects were less likely to have a clear career path in mind after graduating. Social Sciences graduates were also most likely to want to pursue further academic study (15 per cent).

Aims after graduating also varied by how recently the graduates had completed their course. Those who graduated in the 2022/23 academic year were more likely to aim to secure any employment

within 12 months of graduating (26 per cent) than more recent graduates, particularly those who graduated from the 2024/25 academic year (17 per cent).

Graduates were asked about their current working status. A majority of recent graduates were in employment (79 per cent) at the time of the survey, with 7 per cent in further study. One in ten recent graduates were unemployed at the time of the survey (10 per cent). Around eight in ten of those who had a goal of employment as a goal for the 12 months after graduating had found employment at the time of the survey (84 per cent), although one in eight were unemployed (16 per cent).

5 Preparedness for life beyond HE study

Graduates surveyed had mixed feelings of preparedness for life beyond HE study, with half (50 per cent) feeling prepared, a third (33 per cent) feeling unprepared and 16 per cent feeling neither prepared nor unprepared. This reflects a large proportion of graduates for whom levels of reported preparedness for life after graduation could be improved.

Feelings of preparedness varied by institution and stage of study. Postgraduate students who completed the survey were more likely to feel prepared (61 per cent) compared to undergraduates (46 per cent). HE in FE learners were also more likely to feel prepared (69 per cent) compared to undergraduate and postgraduate university leavers (50 per cent). When comparing by cohort, the most recent graduates (from academic year 2024/25) were least likely to report feeling unprepared (30 per cent, compared to 33 per cent overall).

Similarly, feelings of preparedness differed by subject area. Graduates who had studied Arts and Humanities (43 per cent) and Social Sciences (41 per cent) were more likely to feel unprepared compared to those who studied Health and Medical Sciences (25 per cent), Engineering and Technology (22 per cent) and Education (19 per cent).

Aspects of preparedness

Graduates were asked how prepared they felt for different aspects of life after graduation, as shown in Figure 2. Graduates reported feeling most prepared to use the skills they developed from their degree (69 per cent), for example in employment or further study. In general, a majority of graduates felt prepared for each of the aspects of life after graduation shown in Figure 2, although in each case a substantial proportion did not feel prepared for that specific aspect.

Around a third (32 per cent) of recent graduates did not feel prepared to secure work in their desired field or industry. This was despite this being the most common goal among graduates (53 per cent), as outlined in Figure 1 above. The qualitative focus groups suggest that graduates perceived industry experience as an enabler for feeling more prepared to secure work in their chosen field. Graduates highlighted how the experience also provided practical skills and an understanding of workplace expectations, which they felt helped to ease their transition into work.

“I think the internship experience was really beneficial in terms of understanding how the industry works in terms of deadlines and handling multiple projects.”

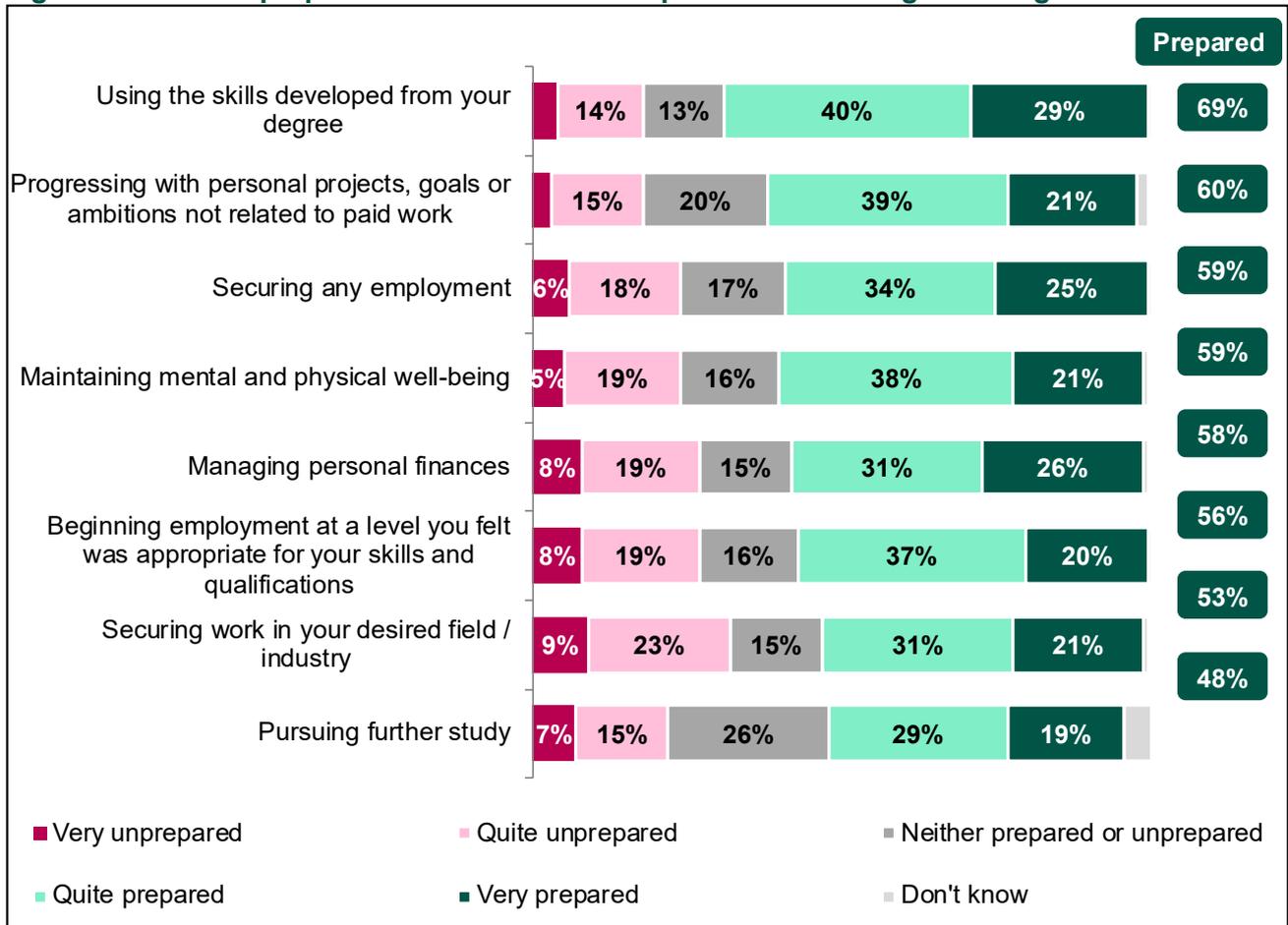
2022/23 Graduate, Postgraduate course, Engineering and Technology

Fewer than six in ten (59 per cent) graduates surveyed felt they had the skills to maintain their mental and physical wellbeing after graduation. Feeling unprepared for these aspects of life was more common among undergraduate students, with 28 per cent feeling unprepared, compared with 24 per cent overall. While this may be beyond the scope of institutions' responsibilities, this indicates an area where further support may be beneficial in aiding students' transition to post-graduation life.

In terms of finding work that matched their skill level, around three in ten (27 per cent) felt unprepared. Those who studied Arts and Humanities were more likely to feel unprepared (43 per cent) than other graduates for beginning employment at a level that was appropriate for their skills

and qualifications. Additionally, graduates with a long-term illness, health condition, or disability were more likely to feel unprepared (36 per cent) for this than those without (24 per cent).

Figure 2 Levels of preparedness for different aspects of life after graduating



Base: All recent graduates (1,671)

Confidence in achieving goals

In terms of specific future plans of surveyed graduates, around two thirds (62 per cent) felt confident in achieving their post-graduation goals. This was higher among postgraduate taught (70 per cent) and HE in FE graduates (80 per cent). Confidence also differed by age; it was lowest among 21 to 24 year olds (55 per cent), and highest among those 30 and over (70 per cent). However, graduates from the 2022/23 academic year were more likely to report not feeling confident (24 per cent) compared to graduates across 2023/24 and 2024/25 (20 per cent).

As with preparedness for life after graduation, there were differences by subject area in terms of graduate confidence in achieving goals. Self-reported confidence in achieving their goals was lower for Arts and Humanities graduates (47 per cent) compared to other graduates, while it was higher for those who studied Engineering and Technology (76 per cent), Education (72 per cent), and Health and Medical Sciences (71 per cent).

In focus groups, graduates felt that the period of time when they began their job search was a reality check, with aspirations seeming less attainable than expected. Some cited experiencing a knowledge gap about role requirements when searching for jobs. An example of this was that some graduates discovered that entry level jobs in their field required one to three years of industry

experience, which they were not aware of during their studies. Fine Arts and Architecture graduates especially felt they lacked connections or sufficient work experience to enter their chosen industry.

“In terms of looking for work in my industry, you don't usually find that on Indeed, it's more useful to find them on LinkedIn... and also I think connections are quite important there.”

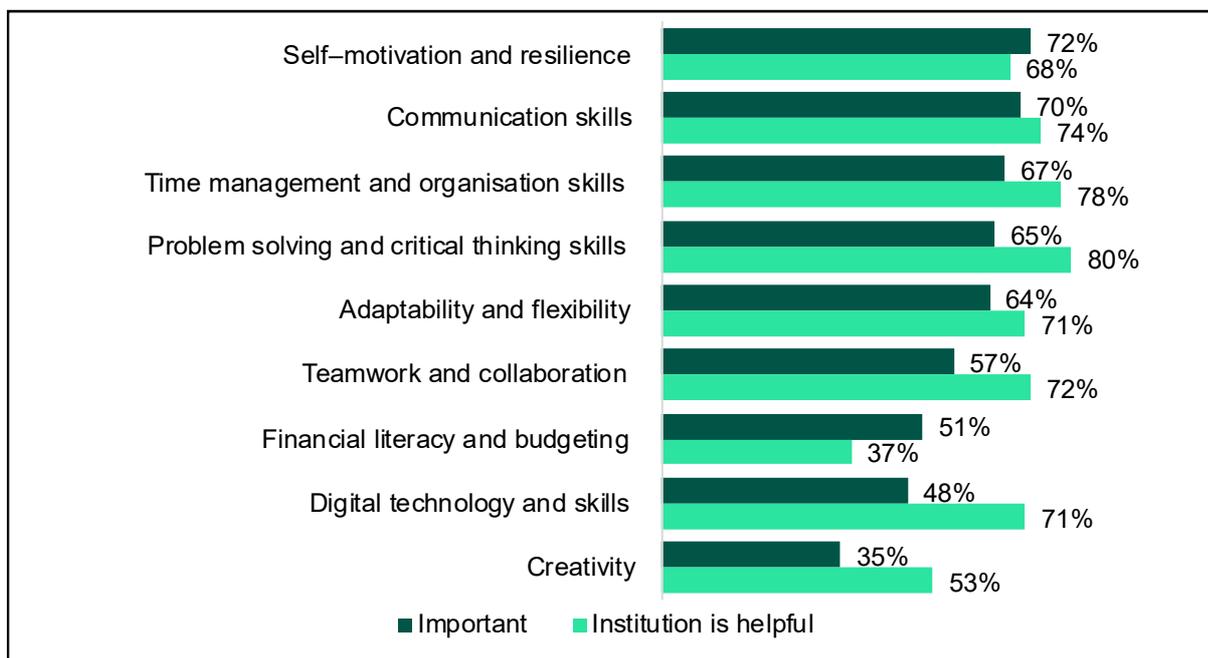
2023/24 Graduate, Postgraduate course, Architecture and Design

Skills important for after graduation

The personal skills or attributes that graduates most commonly thought to be important for life after graduation were self-motivation and resilience (72 per cent), and a similar number (68 per cent) thought that their institution was helpful in developing these skills. The proportions of graduates who completed the survey who viewed each skill as important, and who rated the institution as helpful in developing these skills for life after graduation, is shown in Figure 3.

A few elements stand out, with financial literacy being felt to be important by about half of graduates, but only 37 per cent feeling that their institution was helpful in developing this. Digital technology and skills had almost the reverse relationship, with a higher proportion viewing their institution as helpful in this regard (71 per cent) than those who thought it was important (48 per cent).

Figure 3 Important skills after graduation and how helpful institutions are in preparing graduates for these



Base: Importance; All recent graduates (1,671), Helpful; All who believed any skill to be important (1,665)

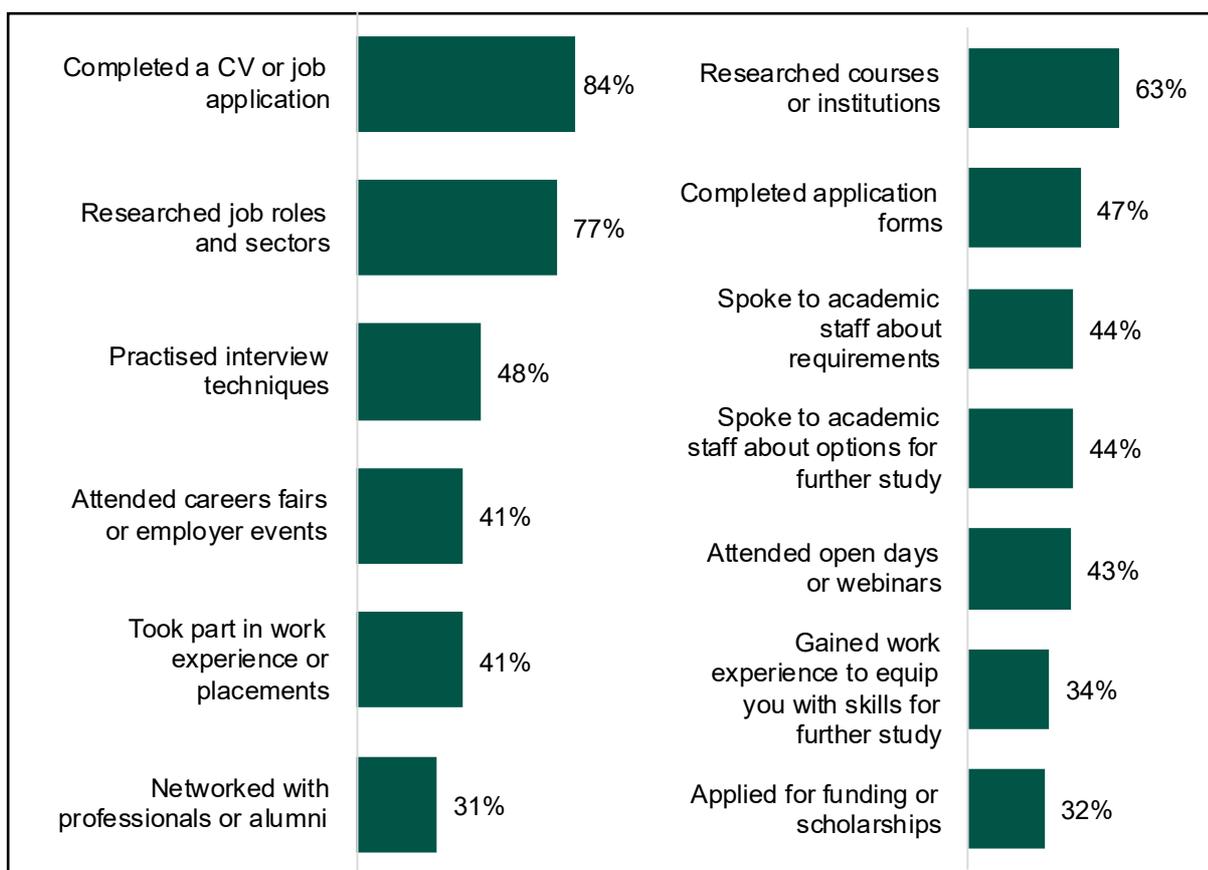
Law students were less likely to see their institution as helpful in their development of their communication skills at their institution (27 per cent reported that their institution was unhelpful, compared with 13 per cent overall). Despite this, Law students were no more likely to think this was an important skill for life after graduation – this may reflect, based on their perceptions, a higher expectation of what good communication skills look like.

A smaller number (51 per cent) of graduates thought that financial literacy and budgeting were important skills for life after graduation. However, there were mixed feelings about how helpful their institution was in developing this, with 39 per cent rating their institution unhelpful, and 37 per cent ranking it helpful.

6 Factors impacting student readiness for employment, further study and personal growth

Almost all (98 per cent) graduates who completed the survey and were interested in finding employment took steps to prepare. Postgraduates were more likely to report having networked with professionals and alumni than undergraduates (41 per cent compared to 27 per cent). Similarly almost all (96 per cent) of those interested in further study said that they took steps to prepare for this. The most commonly reported steps taken for both work and further study are shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4 Steps taken to prepare for work and further study



Base: All interested in work (1,354); All interested in further study (521)

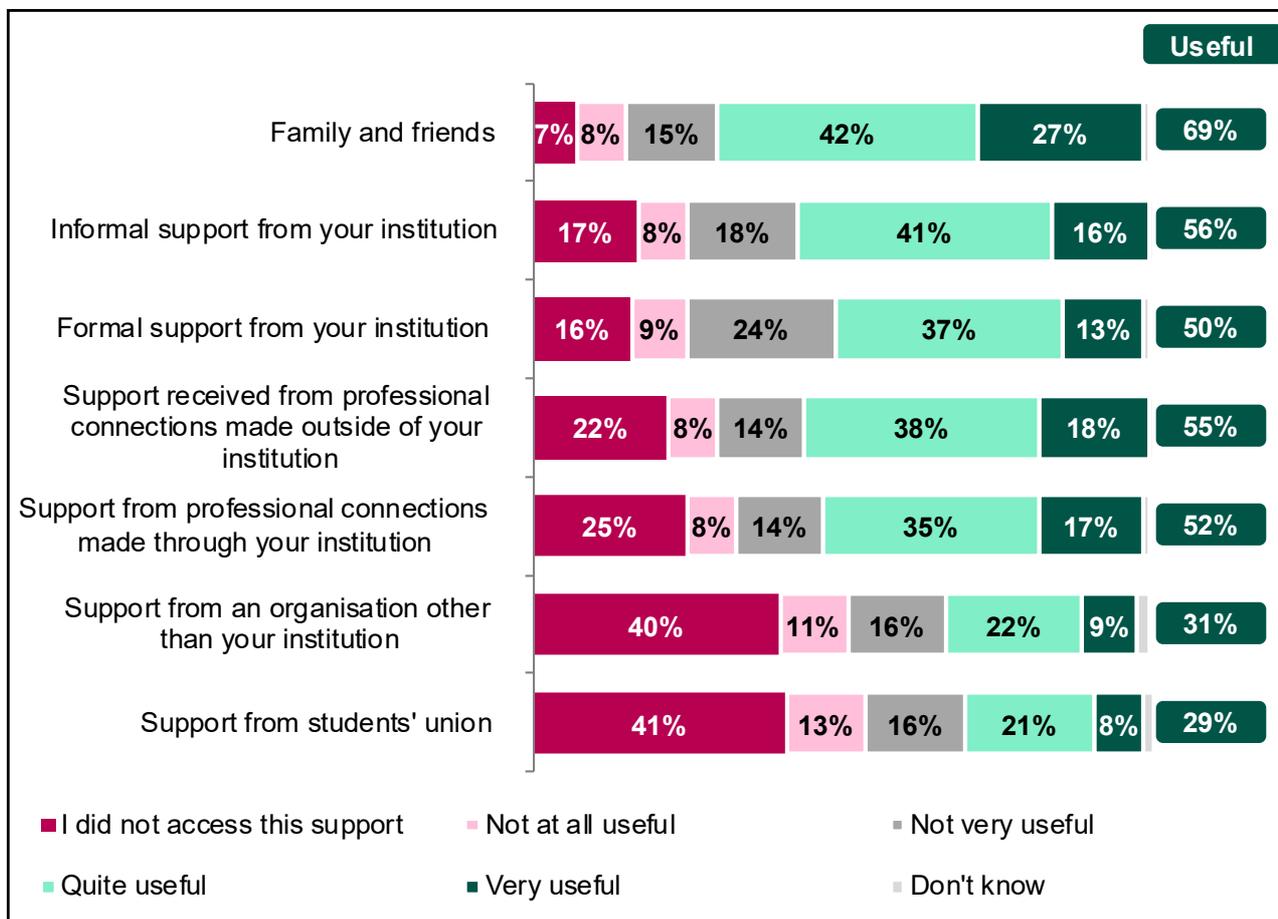
Sources of support

Graduates felt that the most useful source of support were family and friends (69 per cent). As shown in Figure 5, this ranked higher than any types of institutional support. This was more notable for those with a parent with a HE qualification (74 per cent compared to 65 per cent for those without), which could reflect greater access to support from family and friends who have undertaken higher education. Those who had received free school meals were less likely to access support from family and friends (10 per cent compared to 6 per cent who did not receive free school meals) and find it useful (64 per cent compared to 71 per cent who did not receive free school meals).

Those who studied Health and Medical Sciences were more likely (76 per cent) to find support from family and friends useful. Additionally, those who were over 30 were less likely to access support

from family and friends (10 per cent said they had not accessed this compared to 6 per cent for those under 30) and find it useful (66 per cent compared to 71 per cent for those under 30), perhaps reflecting different support needs for mature students.

Figure 5 Experience and use of types of support



Base: All recent graduates (1,671)

Institutional support

Graduates surveyed reported that support from different sources was broadly useful. A higher proportion of graduates (56 per cent) felt that informal or ad hoc support from their institution, for example from an individual member of staff, was more useful than formal support (50 per cent).

Some groups were more likely to find formal support from their institution useful, including:

- International students from outside of the EU (62 per cent) and within the EU (61 per cent) compared to domestic students (49 per cent);
- Those without a long-term illness, health condition or disability compared to those with one (52 per cent compared to 44 per cent);
- Those who had a parent with a HE qualification compared to those who did not (55 per cent compared to 47 per cent);
- Those who were non-white compared to white (56 per cent compared to 48 per cent); and
- Those who studied Engineering and Technology (60 per cent) and Business and Management (58 per cent) compared to Arts and Humanities (44 per cent).

Graduates with a parent who held a higher education qualification were more likely to report having accessed informal support than those without (14 per cent did not access, compared with 19 per cent) and were also more likely to find it useful (61 per cent compared with 53 per cent). Both formal and informal support was not as effective in targeting those whose parents did not have a HE qualification, and in terms of its utility when it was accessed.

Qualitative focus groups showed that while many graduates had a good level of knowledge about the support available to them, some graduates saw the proactive approach needed to access both formal and informal support at their institution as a barrier. They found this to be an adjustment from the “hand-holding” style of support they had received in school, and found that in their institution support was available but only to those who had the confidence to seek help.

“I think other people coming from different types of schools or colleges... that was a lot more normal to them, but for me, like it just wasn't a normal thing to just like, go up to tutors and talk to them and like, ask for help and that kind of thing”

2023/24 Graduate, Undergraduate course, Law and Legal Studies

Support and guidance from student's unions was seen as less useful, and many had not accessed such support (41 per cent). Around a third reported this as ‘useful’ (29 per cent) and the same proportion as ‘not useful’ (29 per cent).

Networks

Over half of graduates that completed the survey felt that support and guidance they received from professional connections made through their institution (e.g. through course work placements, industry guest speakers) was useful (52 per cent). Those with a parent with a HE qualification were more likely to find these connections useful than those without (57 per cent compared to 48 per cent). This builds on the qualitative focus groups, where confidence to seek guidance may translate into how deeply graduates feel able to benefit from guidance.

Those who studied Social Sciences courses were less likely to report having accessed support through professional connections established outside of their institution (e.g. through employment) compared to overall (29 per cent of Social Sciences graduates did not access this type of support compared to 22 per cent overall). Those who studied Health and Medical Sciences were most likely to find this type of support useful (70 per cent compared to 55 per cent).

Some graduates from the qualitative focus groups reported a desire to have more formalised support from their peers on their course after graduation. For example, one Nursing graduate described the difficulties of their first few months of work after graduation. They described the isolating experience of struggling with the transition while all their peers had been placed at different posts across the country. Without a formalised peer-to-peer support system established, many felt alone in their experiences, despite it being a common one.

“I know a lot of people went straight into our job immediately after graduation and... I think three of my friends had already quit three months into the job.”

2024/25 Graduate, Undergraduate course, Health and Medical Sciences

Qualitative findings suggested that a solution to this could be institutions setting up peer-to-peer support groups ahead of course completion, so a cohort of students can lean on each other as they navigate their first few months after graduation. Formalised peer support in this way could bridge the gap for students who may be less likely to make professional connections through their institution.

In terms of support and guidance from professional connections outside of their institution, for example through employment, 55 per cent found this support to be useful. Those with a parent with a HE qualification were more likely to report having accessed this support than those without (19 per cent who did not access compared to 24 per cent), and to say that they found it useful (60 per cent compared to 52 per cent).

Qualitative focus groups showed a mix in access to support through peers or professional contacts made through placements. Some graduates also benefitted from personal networks or financial and accommodation support from their family, with not all graduates receiving a similar level of support.

“I’d definitely say family is a big one [source of support], like being able to get that support from parents who have been in careers for 30 years is, you know, a lot of knowledge that isn’t as easily accessible [to everyone].”

2022/23 Graduate, Undergraduate course, Business and Management

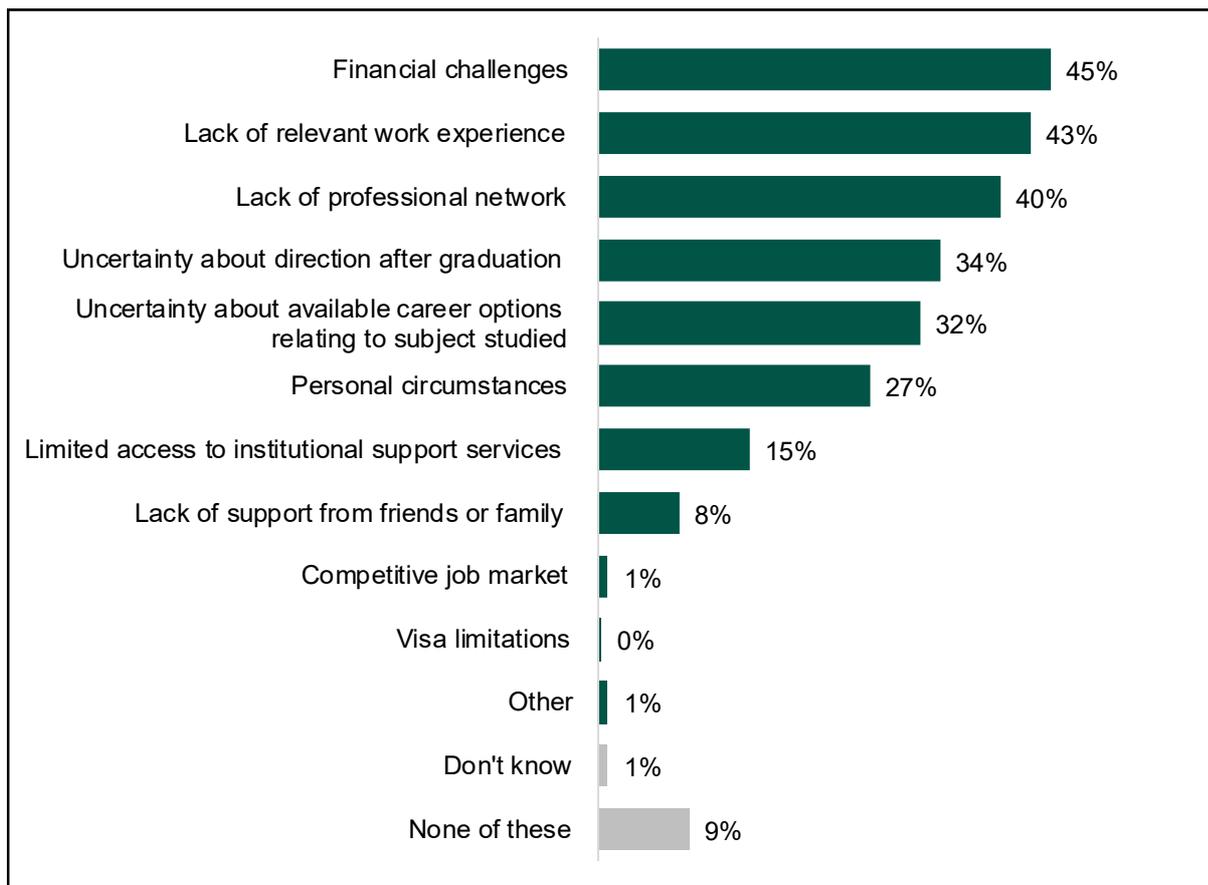
Connections made through placements years and other professional experiences were also regarded as invaluable by graduates, some of whom attributed their career progression to guidance from these networks. Support or guidance from an organisation other than their institution (e.g. external coaching, Job Centre) was seen as less useful than support from the institution itself (31 per cent compared to 50 per cent).

Barriers

Most (90 per cent) of the graduates surveyed reported facing at least one barrier to their preparedness for life after graduating. As shown in Figure 6, the most common barriers impacting preparedness for life after graduating were:

- Financial challenges (45 per cent);
- Lack of relevant work experience (43 per cent); and
- Lack of professional network (40 per cent).

Figure 6 Barriers impacting preparedness for life after graduating



Base: All recent graduates (1,671)

A lack of a professional network was more likely to be reported as a barrier by certain graduates. Those at high-tariff institutions were more likely (46 per cent) to report a lack of professional network as a barrier than those at low/unknown tariff institutions (33 per cent). Additionally, HE in FE graduates were less likely (23 per cent) to report lack of professional network as a barrier compared to those graduating from undergraduate or postgraduate university courses (40 per cent). Those studying Arts and Humanities courses also saw this as a greater barrier (50 per cent). Alongside this, those who were non-white (44 per cent) and aged 21 to 24 (48 per cent) were more likely to see a lack of professional network as a barrier.

Around a third of graduates (34 per cent) reported that uncertainty about their direction after graduation was a barrier. This was more commonly felt by those whose main goal was securing employment in any field (51 per cent).

Although support from family and friends was seen as more useful (69 per cent) than formal institutional support services (50 per cent), the perceptions of barriers differ. Graduates were around twice as likely to identify a limited access to institutional support services as a barrier (15 per cent) compared with those who identified a lack of support from family and friends as a barrier (8 per cent). Those who had received free school meals were more likely to identify both as a barrier (19 per cent and 13 per cent respectively).

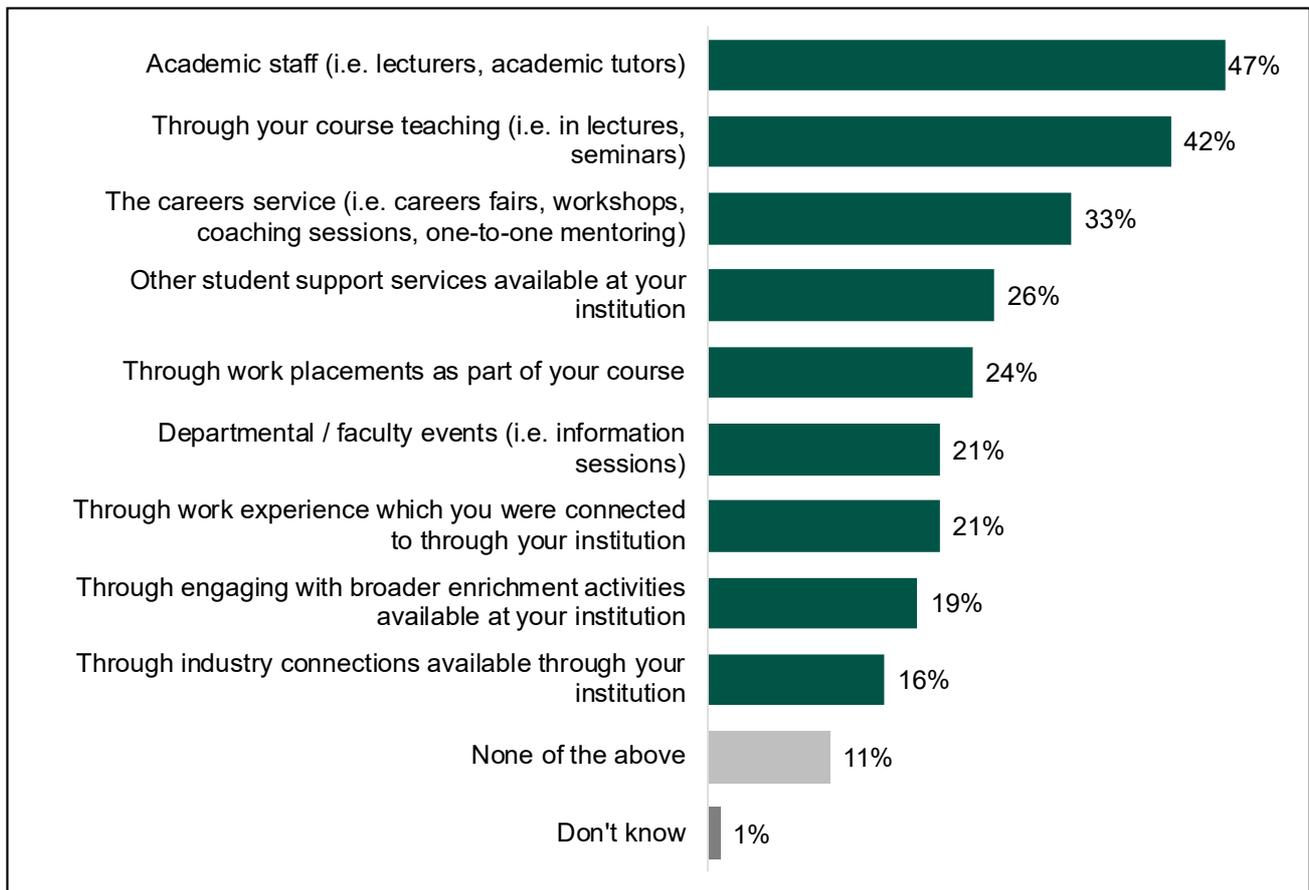
7 Engagement with institutional support services

Sources of support

A large majority of recent graduates (88 per cent) reported that they had received support from their institution to help them prepare for their next steps post-graduation (see Figure 7 for the full list of support services accessed). This is consistent with qualitative findings that show, while the degree of engagement in a range of services varied, graduates broadly had interacted with support services at some point during their student journey.

When asked which specific sources they had received support from, the most common source was through academic staff (46 per cent) and course teaching such as lectures or seminars (41 per cent). A further third had received support from the careers service (33 per cent), and around a quarter had received support from other student support services (26 per cent), or through work placements as part of their course (24 per cent).

Figure 7 Proportion of graduates who received support from different institutional sources



Base: All recent graduates (1671). Results under 2 per cent not displayed.

There were some differences in the proportions of graduates who got support from different institutional sources by level and subject of study. Graduates of postgraduate degrees were more likely to have received support from academic staff (53 per cent) than those who completed a Level 4/5 or undergraduate course (43 per cent).

There were various differences in terms of subjects studied. This included graduates of disciplines likely to feature vocational courses being more likely to report having received support through work placements as part of their course than average: 41 per cent of those from Health and Medical Sciences, and 39 per cent of those from Education, compared to 24 per cent of all graduates. Conversely, graduates of Arts and Humanities and Social Sciences programmes were less likely than other graduates to report having received support through work placements (both 18 per cent). During focus groups, several graduates from these disciplines highlighted that they would have valued these types of opportunities when graduates of other, especially vocational disciplines, highlighted the usefulness of these elements of their courses.

“You just got to speak to the people that are actually in the profession, how they got there, how they're enjoying it, what they want to do next... while I was in placement. It's a treasure trove of information about what you can do next with this degree.”

2024/25 Graduate, Undergraduate course, Health and Medical Sciences

There was also a relationship between the type of institution attended and whether graduates reported that they had received support from other sources. Graduates of high-tariff institutions were more likely to have received support from the following sources than those from low or unknown tariff institutions: events run by academic departments or faculties (29 per cent compared to 17 per cent), engagement with academic staff (51 per cent compared to 42 per cent), and engagement with broader enrichment activities (25 per cent compared to 16 per cent). Indeed, a higher proportion of low or unknown tariff institution graduates had not received support from any institutional sources (14 per cent) than their counterparts from high-tariff institutions (8 per cent).

Graduates whose parents were not educated to degree level were significantly less likely to report having received any support from their institution than those who did have parental history of higher education (86 per cent compared to 91 per cent). There were notable gaps between these groups on reported support received through the careers service (30 per cent compared to 37 per cent), departmental events (16 per cent compared to 27 per cent), work experience (19 per cent compared to 25 per cent), engagement with broader enrichment activities (16 per cent compared to 25 per cent), and through industry connections (14 per cent compared to 19 per cent).

This indicates generally lower levels of reported engagement with or access to support services for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. These groups may also have less prior understanding of how to go about accessing support while studying at HE level – as explored in Chapter 3, this was a theme which emerged from qualitative findings, where many graduates felt that a proactive approach to seeking out help was an important precondition to support being made available.

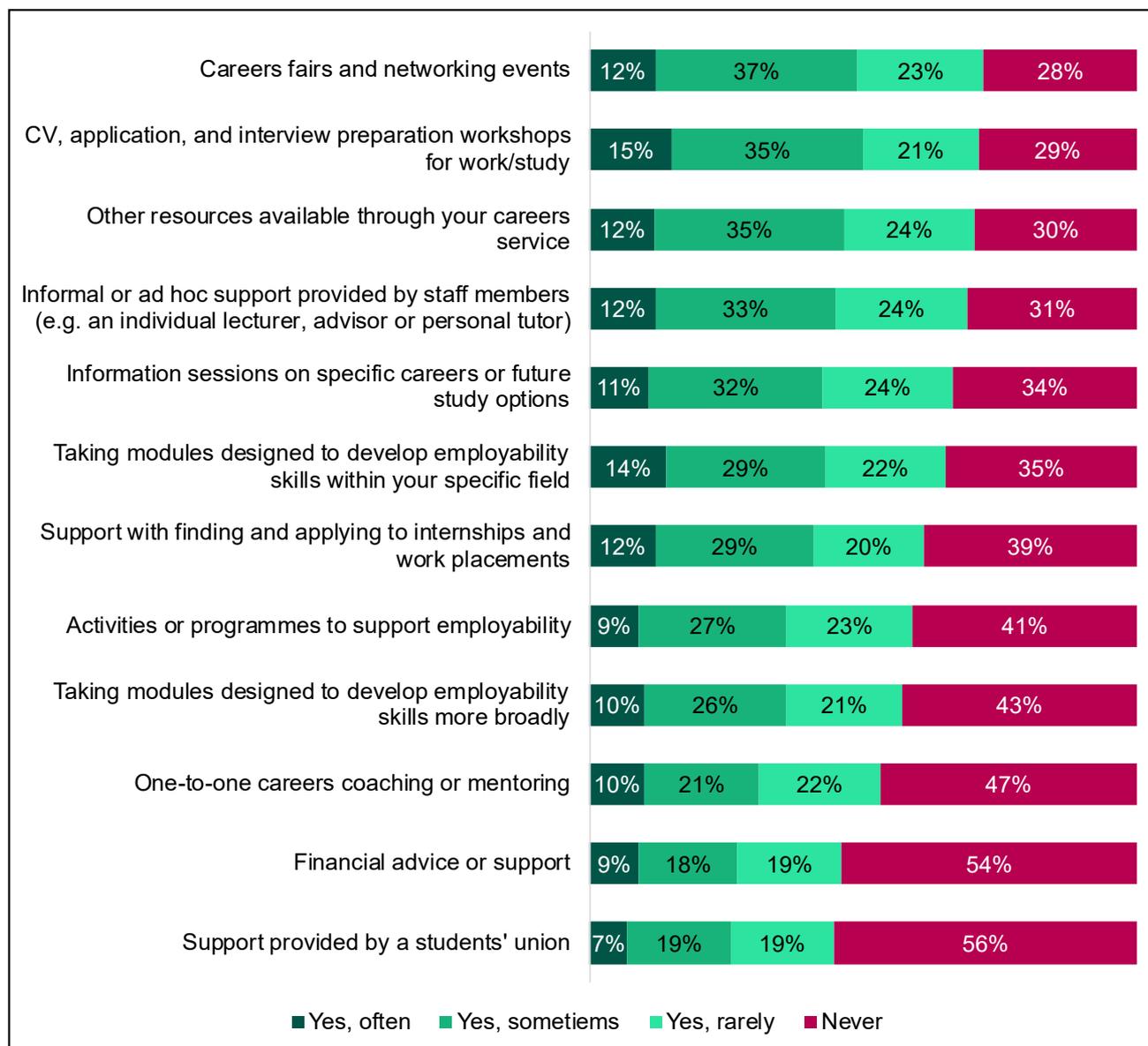
There was also a greater likelihood of white graduates reporting having received support from academic staff than non-white graduates (49 per cent compared to 40 per cent), while white graduates were less likely to have received support from the careers service than non-white counterparts (30 per cent compared to 40 per cent).

Types of support

The most common specific types of support graduates reported engaging with on at least one occasion (as shown in Figure 8) were career fairs and networking events (72 per cent), support with preparing CVs, applications and for interviews for work or further study (71 per cent), and wider

careers service resources (70 per cent). Most graduates had never engaged in support related to financial advice (54 per cent) or provided by their students' union (56 per cent).

Figure 8 Levels of engagement with different types of support offered by institutions



Base: All recent graduates (1,671)

Across the types of support, graduates of some subject areas were consistently more likely to report that they engaged than those from other disciplines, for example:

- On career fairs and networking events, the most highly engaged graduates by subject area were those from Engineering and Technology (85 per cent), and Business and Management (83 per cent), while engagement rates were lower for Arts and Humanities (64 per cent) and Social Sciences (70 per cent).
- On CV, application and interview support, Natural Sciences and Engineering and Technology graduates had higher levels of engagement (84 per cent and 82 per cent respectively), while Arts and Humanities and Social Sciences graduates again had lower levels of engagement (both 66 per cent).

- On financial advice and support, graduates of Business and Management (61 per cent), Engineering and Technology (68 per cent), and Maths and Computer Science (57 per cent) were again more likely to engage than those from Arts and Humanities (44 per cent) or Social Sciences (36 per cent), indicating that this gap is not isolated to types of support relevant to career or education progression, but wider post-HE life.

In focus groups, graduates often said they would have benefitted from greater tailoring in the support they received from central services, and an ability to access one-to-one guidance which was sensitive to their career aspirations.

“I would have liked if my university maybe spoke more about the unconventional routes to qualifying as a solicitor because my university was really heavy on pushing like the magic circle law firms... But then for someone like myself, who was looking to either slightly small international firms or to move back to [my home city] and maybe train at some of like the really strong regional firms..., my uni weren't really helpful in talking about these alternatives.”

2024/25 Graduate, Undergraduate course, Law and Legal Studies

Exceptions to this were graduates on vocational courses, including those on specialist postgraduate courses with professional pathways such as Mental Health or Legal Practice. One-to-one careers coaching or mentoring was the third least engaged with type of support by recent graduates, which could be due to low student take-up or low availability. Despite only 53 per cent of all graduates having engaged in this, 67 per cent of Business and Management, and 71 per cent of Engineering and Technology graduates had done so. This indicates unevenness of engagement with support between students of different subjects.

Consistent with findings around sources of support explored above, graduates with parental history of HE study were significantly more likely to have report having received ad hoc support from individual staff members such as lecturers or advisers than those without this background (74 per cent compared to 65 per cent). They were also less likely to have received one-to-one coaching or mentoring (49 per cent compared to 58 per cent) or engaged in programmes or activities intended to support employability (53 per cent compared to 67 per cent). This type of activity sometimes formed part of widening participation initiatives run for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, one focus group participant who had participated in an institutional mentoring scheme intended for students from disadvantaged backgrounds felt that this support came at the expense of more holistic support from their institution.

My university had, like alumni mentoring scheme that you could apply to if you fit certain criteria... so I was matched with like a qualified solicitor who had previously been a [institution] student and it was quite helpful because he kind of talked me through my questions I had on like the application process and what kind of activities I should be doing as a student to be able to highlight in my CV.”

2024/25 Graduate, Undergraduate course, Law and Legal Studies

Notably, graduates who were unemployed at the time of the survey were significantly less likely to report having engaged in financial advice or support (39 per cent compared to 46 per cent all other graduates) or to have received informal or ad hoc support provided by staff members (58 per cent

compared to 70 per cent). However, they were significantly more likely to have engaged in CV, application or interview support (77 per cent compared to 70 per cent).

Reasons for engaging or not engaging

Graduates who engaged with services most commonly said they did so to get help finding a job (16 per cent), to get help to decide what to do next (15 per cent) or to increase their employability (13 per cent). Just under one in ten said they wanted to get ready for the world of work or were looking for further advice or information in general (both 9 per cent). This is consistent with the emphasis graduates placed on accessing support in order to aid their career progression during the focus groups.

In the survey, graduates whose feelings of preparedness were negatively affected by feeling they lacked knowledge or resources related to career progression were significantly more likely to have engaged in support for reasons related to professional progression. In particular, those who felt a lack of relevant work experience made them feel less prepared were more likely to want help finding a job (21 per cent compared to 16 per cent of those who did not say lack of work experience was a barrier), while 20 per cent of those who felt uncertain about subject-relevant career options available to them wanted help finding a job and 18 per cent wanted help to decide what to do next (compared to 15 per cent of those who did not say they felt uncertain about this). Around a fifth (21 per cent) of those who felt they lacked a professional network wanted help finding a job. This indicates a small level of additional engagement by those who feel uncertain or concerned about their next professional steps.

For the 5 per cent of graduates who reported that they did not engage with any support provided by their institution, around half (51 per cent) said this was because they didn't feel it was necessary. However, a quarter (25 per cent) said they did not do so because they did not know support was available. In focus groups, graduates tended to emphasise issues with accessibility due to difficulty finding time in their own schedules to make use of support, or campus locations.

“There were quite a few weekly classes that you could go to that would cover a different skill every week, but if I was on placement I am working shifts that I have no control over – quite often they're night shifts. And a lot of the time I would miss really important ones like the one that I wanted to go to would be on the day when I'm working a night shift. So they're not particularly accommodating for that.”

2024/25 Graduate, Undergraduate course, Health and Medical Sciences

These barriers also related to graduates who did engage in support but did so less frequently than they would have liked.

Mode of engagement with support

Recent graduates were also asked whether they typically engaged with support services in person or online. A large majority said that they engaged mostly through one mode or the other: 48 per cent said they engaged mostly in person, 35 per cent said they engaged mostly online, and 17 per cent said their typical mode varied. Notably, graduates from the 2024/25 academic year were more likely to engage online than those who graduated in 2022/23 (39 per cent compared to 31 per cent), and were similarly less likely to engage in person (44 per cent compared to 52 per cent).

There was little variation in the engagement mode between subgroups of recent graduates on the whole; however, graduates of low or unknown tariff institutions were significantly more likely to have engaged with support online than graduates from institutions of all other tariff types (39 per cent compared to 31 per cent).

8 Satisfaction with institutional support

Satisfaction with support services

Over half of the graduates surveyed who had engaged with services were satisfied overall with the support they received from their institution (59 per cent), while 14 per cent said they were dissatisfied and a quarter (25 per cent) felt neutral. These satisfaction levels varied significantly according to the level of study and type of institution graduates had attended:

- While graduates of undergraduate courses had satisfaction levels consistent with the average, those who had studied Level 4 or Level 5 courses had higher levels of satisfaction (73 per cent and 75 per cent, respectively). Those who had completed postgraduate courses had lower levels of satisfaction (54 per cent) than all other graduates.
- Graduates of low or unknown tariff institutions had higher levels of satisfaction (61 per cent) than those from high-tariff institutions (54 per cent). This is despite higher levels of engagement in support by higher tariff graduates, as explored in Chapter 7.

Older graduates were more satisfied with the support received than young age groups (62 per cent of those aged 30 or over, and 61 per cent of those aged 25 to 29 compared to 52 per cent of those aged 21 to 24). This is consistent with earlier findings that these age groups felt more prepared for life after completing their HE course, and indeed 75 per cent of those who felt prepared said they were satisfied with support received compared to 38 per cent of those who felt unprepared.

Graduates who were 30 or over were also most likely to feel positively about the relevance of the support they accessed to their post-HE paths (64 per cent compared to 59 per cent of all other graduates).

Given higher satisfaction with support services among older groups of graduates, who are de facto more likely to have experience of the working world, this suggests that students perceive that how much they enter HE with a clear idea of what to “do” with their degree matters for their satisfaction with the support they receive. Taken from the other direction, graduates who entered their course with less experience or a less clear idea of their professional ambitions, were less satisfied with the support they received.

Reported satisfaction levels varied between graduates with and without long-term illnesses, health conditions or disabilities. Almost a quarter of those with any of these conditions felt dissatisfied with the support received (23 per cent), and they were less likely to feel satisfied (51 per cent) than those without (61 per cent). This group was significantly less likely to positively rate the quality of advice or support they received than those who did not have any conditions or disabilities (58 per cent compared to 65 per cent).

Role of institution in supporting with wider preparedness for post-graduation life

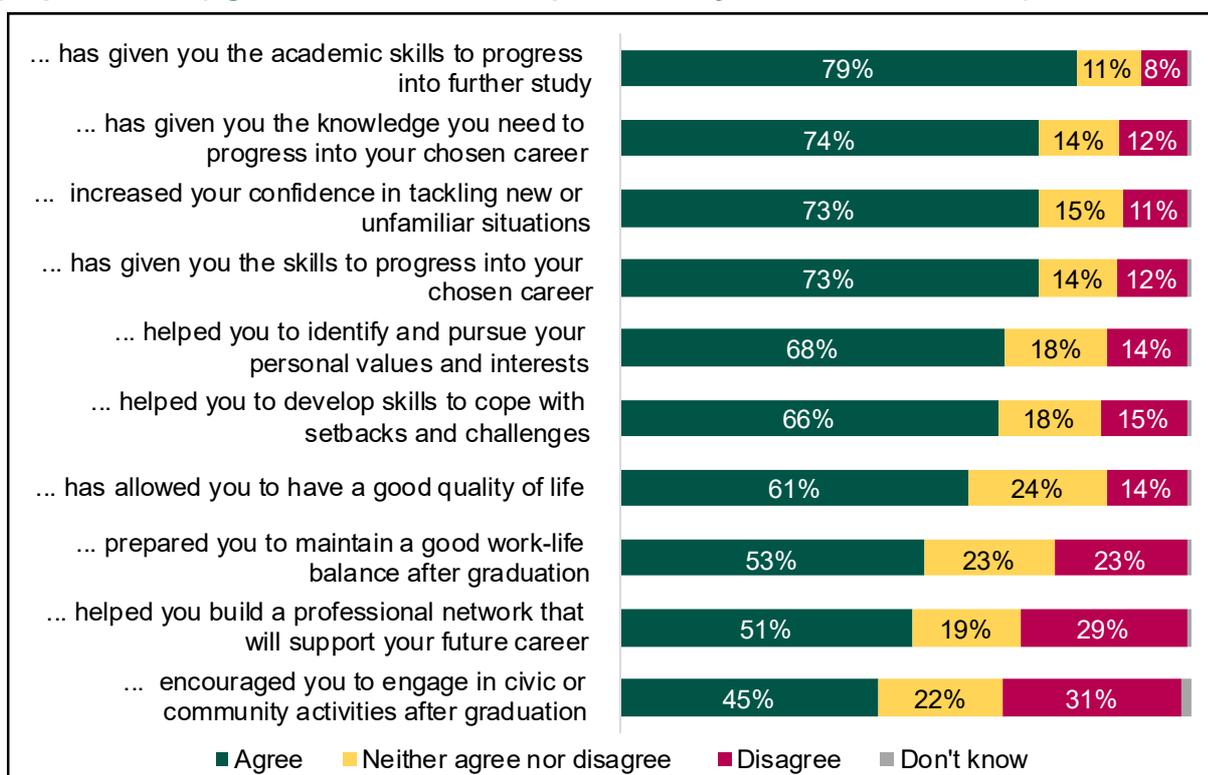
On most types of wider behaviours, skills and knowledge, the majority of graduates agreed that their higher education institution had helped to develop these (see Figure 9). However, the degree of agreement indicates scope for improvement.

The area where institutions were seen as most helpful was in support developing academic skills to progress to further study (79 per cent), and almost three quarters felt their HE experience had helped with the knowledge (74 per cent) and skills (73 per cent) needed for progression to chosen

careers. On other areas directly relevant to next steps with study and work, graduates were less positive, with 29 per cent disagreeing that their experience at their institution helped with building a professional network, and 23 per cent disagreeing that it helped prepare them to maintain a good work-life balance.

There was also less strong agreement on softer skills and general outlook, with 68 per cent agreeing they had been helped to identify and pursue personal values and interests, and 61 per cent agreeing their HE experience had helped them have a good quality of life (61 per cent). Less than half (45 per cent) of graduates felt encouraged through their experience in HE to engage in civic or community activities.

Figure 9 Agreement that institutions have helped graduates with wider aspects of preparedness (agreement that “Your experience at your HE institution...”)



Base: All recent graduates (1671). All values of ‘Don’t Know’ were 2 per cent or less.

These findings are reflective of a general sense of unease or lack of confidence reported by some graduates in focus groups about their next steps. In particular, graduates felt the transition out of HE was more challenging than they expected and did not feel the support they received from their institution had made clear the difficulties of this transition.

“What I wasn't prepared for was how difficult it would be for me to get into that area of law, so I felt prepared for the work, not prepared for the unemployment and that's been quite difficult at times and it's just, it wasn't something that was spoken about very much.”

2023/24 Graduate, Undergraduate course, Law and Legal Studies

In focus groups, some graduates highlighted that these next steps could be more challenging for individuals who face additional social barriers. On several personal characteristics, there were differential outcomes for how graduates felt their HE experience had supported them:

- Students of non-white ethnicities were more likely to agree they had been helped to build a professional network (57 per cent compared to 48 per cent of white graduates), and engage in civic or community activities (52 per cent compared to 42 per cent).
- On every aspect, except help to pursue personal values and interests and develop academic skills for further study, graduates with long-term illnesses, health conditions or disabilities were around 10 percentage points less likely to agree their HE experience had been helpful than those without any conditions.
- Graduates with parental history of HE were more likely to agree with every aspect than those without parental history of HE.

Gaps in support

In focus groups, graduates put a heavy emphasis on the lack of tailoring of their institutions' support services to their academic backgrounds, level of knowledge and experience of the job market, and career aspirations.

“There was nothing industry-specific, there was nothing course-specific. There was nothing person-specific. It was all just like generic CV tips.”

2022/23 Graduate, Undergraduate course, Social Sciences

Some graduates also felt that career support (through careers services and other sources) tended not to be realistic about the challenges they may encounter with the job market. When asked in the survey what areas of support could be improved, the two most common responses (apart from “don't know”) were to offer more tailored or specific advice and to improve the accessibility of student services (both 8 per cent). Graduates identified various areas of support which would help respond to these gaps, which are explored in the next chapter.

9 Recommendations for future support

Graduates in the focus groups were asked what they thought could improve the support services at their higher education institution. Key areas for improvement identified by graduates related to how tailored the support was to different progression pathways, as well as considerations of how to make it accessible and available to all students. All of these recommendations are those reported by graduates, rather than overarching OfS or IFF Research recommendations to improve support.

Making support more accessible

Improving awareness of the support services available to students was seen as key to improving access. Another possible improvement that was noted was advertising services in a way that reduces barriers to access such as having to undertake extensive independent research. Providing more opportunities for structured check-ins with academic staff would also help to remove discomfort or unease around reaching out to staff for advice.

“It was kind of a steep learning curve to realise that the support services were there, but if you wanted to access them, you had to be ask [for it yourself]. No one was really going to check in on you, which was like different to, you know, from being at school.”

2023/24 Graduate, Undergraduate course, Law and Legal Studies

Offering more tailored advice

Participants in the focus groups expressed a desire for access to support that was subject-specific, that explored possible career routes linked to their area of study. Focus group participants felt this support could be integrated into course teaching, to ensure all students were encouraged to consider their next steps, throughout their studies. This included greater considerations of alternative pathways, to help students better understand the range of options available to them. A wider range of more in-depth careers sessions, that focused on a range of industries and job roles, was seen as a way to improve the tailoring of student services, so support meets the needs and objective of different students.

“[To improve support] I would make sure that [at institutions] there's different people who can be specialised in the different areas... [so students can] find out a bit more because it's so competitive, the job market these days, and you need so much specialist guidance.”

2022/23 Graduate, Postgraduate, Health and Medical Sciences

Gearing support around students' current stage within the student lifecycle was also seen as an area for development. This included providing support from the start of studies that helps students to prepare for graduation and consider future options. Support in later stages of studies would then focus on transitioning out of their course, and support after graduation.

Managing expectations around securing work

Graduates reported challenges transitioning to post-graduation life which they attributed, in part, to having unrealistic expectations around the ease of finding work. As such, graduates wanted to see more discussions around navigating the job market, guidance on entering competitive industries and effective networking approaches, as well as how economic conditions would impact their

employment prospects. Some felt that hearing from other recent graduates about their experiences would help to combat a sense of isolation graduates felt when faced with challenges securing work.

“You understand it is competitive, but you don't know the nitty gritty of why it's competitive, which kind of gives you hope until you actually have to face it.”

2024/25 Graduate, Undergraduate course, Arts and Humanities

Practical advice on personal and financial management

Greater availability of information and advice on financial management, civic responsibilities (e.g. taxes, interactions with local authorities) and securing accommodation after graduating was also highlighted as an area where additional support would be beneficial. Some noted that due to the relative security of life at a higher education institution, the shift to full independence would have been aided by more discussion around the practicalities of their more immediate next steps (e.g. moving to a new city). Peer networks were seen as an ideal means for allowing graduates to share their experiences and provide informal guidance on broader aspects of life after higher education. Graduates felt institutions could more proactively create, facilitate and publicise these forums leading up to and following graduation.

“You didn't know that what you were going through was the exact same as what everyone else was going through. So I think somewhere where we could have all talked again would have solved that.”

2024/25 Graduate, Undergraduate course, Health and Medical Sciences

10 Conclusions

Levels of preparedness for life after HE among recent graduates

Graduates had mixed feelings of preparedness for life after HE study, with around a half feeling prepared (50 per cent) and a third feeling unprepared (33 per cent). Postgraduate students were more likely to feel prepared (61 per cent) compared to undergraduate leavers (46 per cent). Similarly, HE in FE graduates were more likely to feel prepared (69 per cent) than university graduates (50 per cent).

In general, graduates felt prepared for using the skills developed during their degree (69 per cent). However, when considering preparedness for work, it is notable that a third did not feel prepared to secure work in their desired field or industry (32 per cent), despite this being the most common goal of graduates for the 12 months after graduation. Differences existed between graduates from different courses, with Arts and Humanities students more likely to feel unprepared to find work matching their skill level (43 per cent compared to 27 per cent of other graduates), and those who studied Social Sciences courses more likely to feel unprepared progressing with personal projects, goals, or ambitions (25 per cent compared to 16 per cent of other graduates).

Around two thirds of graduates felt confident in achieving their post-graduation goals (62 per cent). This was again more common among HE in FE graduates (80 per cent). Broadly, confidence increased with age, with 55 per cent of 21 to 24 year olds confident, compared to 70 per cent of 30 and over.

One area in which graduates described themselves as unprepared after graduation was during job searches. During focus groups, this was described by some graduates as a reality check, with aspirations feeling more difficult to attain than they had expected. A particular challenge could be the lack of workplace experience that most graduates described themselves as having.

Of graduates surveyed, the majority reported that they were in employment (79 per cent) at the time of the survey, with 7 per cent in further study. One in ten recent graduates stated that they were unemployed and looking for a job at the time of the survey (10 per cent).

Key factors influencing students' preparation for life after graduation

Almost all graduates who were looking to the world of work (98 per cent) or further study (96 per cent) within 12 months of graduating stated that they had taken steps to prepare for this (98 per cent).

Qualitative focus groups showed that support from peers or professional contacts made through placements were key to preparedness for life after graduation, particularly for the world of work. Familial support was also key, both in terms of networking but also in term of support with finances and accommodation. Connections made through placement years and other professional experiences were often regarded as invaluable for graduates.

Family and friends were seen as the most useful source of support by graduates (69 per cent), ranking higher than any form of institutional support. This, of course, is not something that can be controlled by institutions, and may serve as an unbalancing force given that it was more commonly

felt to be useful among graduates who had parents that had an HE qualification (74 per cent) than among those who did not (65 per cent).

Despite family and friends being seen as the most useful source of support by graduates, both informal support from with their institution (56 per cent) and formal support from the institution (50 per cent) were commonly felt to be useful by graduates. Fewer graduates reported having accessed support from their students' union (41 per cent had not), but still 29 per cent of all graduates found it to be useful. Formal support was less likely to be seen as useful for those with a long-term illness, health condition, or disability (44 per cent) as well as those who had a parent with a HE qualification compared to those who did not (55 per cent compared to 47 per cent). Non-white graduates were more likely to find this useful (56 per cent) than white graduates (48 per cent).

Most graduates identified themselves as facing a barrier to their levels of preparedness for life after graduation (90 per cent). Most common among these barriers were financial challenges (45 per cent), lack of relevant work experience (43 per cent), and lack of a professional network (40 per cent). Around a third saw uncertainty about their direction as a barrier (34 per cent).

Overall, graduates feel that institutions prepare students well for life after graduation, but with significant headroom for improvement still available. Experiences in the workplace, and the soft skills and networks that this develops, were often seen by graduates as important ways to improve readiness for life after graduation.

The effectiveness of institutional support services in aiding transitions out of HE

Graduates reported that institutional support was received from a variety of sources. Approaching nine in ten of graduates accessed any form of support (88 per cent). Most commonly this was from academic staff (46 per cent) or through their course teaching (41 per cent), followed by through the careers service (33 per cent). Graduates who did not have parents with an HE qualification were less likely to state that they had engaged with many of these forms of support.

Graduates were more likely to be satisfied with the support that they received from their institution (59 per cent) than dissatisfied (14 per cent). Satisfaction levels were higher for those who had studied Level 4 or Level 5 courses (73 per cent and 75 per cent respectively). Those older than 24 at the time of the survey were also more satisfied with the support (62 per cent of those aged 30 or over, and 61 per cent of those aged 25 to 29, compared to 52 per cent of those aged 21 to 24).

In most areas, graduates felt that their institution had helped to develop their skills for post-graduation life, but in most instances survey findings reflect scope for improvement. The area where institutions were seen as most helpful was in support developing academic skills to progress to further study (79 per cent), and almost three quarters felt their HE experience had helped with the skills and knowledge needed for progression to chosen careers (73 per cent and 74 per cent). In some other areas there were fairly sizeable numbers disagreeing that their institution had prepared them well for life after graduating, with 29 per cent disagreeing that it helped with building a professional network, and 23 per cent disagreeing that it helped prepare them to maintain a good work-life balance. Six in ten felt that their HE experienced helped them to have a good quality of life (61 per cent).

In focus groups, graduates emphasised the lack of tailoring of support to their circumstances as the key issue with the support offered. This included adapting support to their academic backgrounds, level of knowledge and experience of the job market, and career aspirations.

Qualitative focus groups highlighted a desire among some graduates to have more formalised support after graduation, including from their course peers. Graduates described how the transition out of institutional life could be difficult, with the experience feeling at times isolating. Particularly for those struggling to find work, there was a sense that this fairly common experience could feel isolated, leaving graduates feeling alone in their experiences.

In general, the support that exists is seen by graduates as effective and widely used, but potential for improvement is clear. One way for this to be improved would be for graduates to feel that the support is more tailored to their specific requirements.

11 Annex A: Profile of respondents

Table 2 Profile of focus group participants

Grouping	Sub classification	No. of participants
Graduation cohort	2024/25	6
	2023/24	6
	2022/23	6
Gender ⁷	Female	8
	Non-binary	1
	Male	9
Ethnicity	White	11
	Non-white	7
Socio-economic indicator – parents with HE qualification or equivalent	Yes	10
	No	8
Study level	Undergraduate	12
	Postgraduate	6
Domestic / international	Domestic	15
	International	3
Subject area of study	Arts and Humanities	4
	Social Sciences	2
	Business and Management	1
	Natural Sciences	1
	Mathematics and Computer Science	2
	Engineering and Technology	1
	Health and Medical Sciences	1
	Law and Legal Studies	3
	Education	1
	Architecture and Design	2
Type of institution	High tariff	7
	Low or unknown	5
	Medium tariff	3
	Postgraduate	1
	Specialist: other	2
Total		18

⁷ The sample source for qualitative interviews only held data about respondents' gender rather than sex. Gender has therefore been used as a proxy for sex for qualitative recruitment; however, gender is not part of the analysis of data. Sex is used elsewhere in the report.

Table 3 Profile of survey respondents

Grouping	Sub classification	No. of participants	%
Graduation cohort	2024/25	663	40%
	2023/24	561	34%
	2022/23	447	27%
Sex	Female	990	59%
	Male	673	40%
	Prefer not to say	8	0%
Ethnicity	White	1,161	69%
	Mixed	103	6%
	Asian	202	12%
	Black	167	10%
	Other	20	1%
	Prefer not to say	18	1%
Socio-economic indicator – parents with HE qualification or equivalent	Yes	750	45%
	No	877	52%
	Don't know / prefer not to say	44	3%
Study level	Level 4	111	7%
	Level 5	130	8%
	Undergraduate	821	49%
	Postgraduate taught	487	29%
	Postgraduate research	71	4%
	PGCE	51	3%
Domestic / international	Domestic	1,443	86%
	International	222	13%
	Don't know	6	0%
Subject area of study	Arts and Humanities	228	14%
	Social Sciences	290	17%
	Business and Management	273	16%
	Natural Sciences	97	6%
	Mathematics and Computer Science	145	9%
	Engineering and Technology	164	10%
	Health and Medical Sciences	250	15%
	Law and Legal Studies	85	5%
	Education	141	8%
	Architecture and Design	29	2%
	Performing Arts	28	2%
	Agriculture and Environmental Studies	20	1%
	Hospitality, Leisure and Tourism	29	2%
	Other	117	7%
None of these	20	1%	
Type of institution	High tariff	521	31%
	Medium tariff	407	24%
	Low or unknown	554	33%
	Large Level 4/5	32	2%
	Small: Level 4/5	15	1%
	Postgraduate	7	0%

	Specialist: creative	21	1%
	Specialist: other	17	1%
	Unknown	97	6%
Region	East Midlands	142	8%
	East of England	86	5%
	London	261	16%
	North East	84	5%
	North West	214	13%
	South East	302	18%
	South West	129	8%
	West Midlands	186	11%
	Yorkshire and the Humber	168	10%
	Unknown	99	6%
Total		1,671	100%

“

IFF Research illuminates the world for organisations businesses and individuals helping them to make better-informed decisions.”

Our Values:

1. Being human first:

Whether employer or employee, client or collaborator, we are all humans first and foremost. Recognising this essential humanity is central to how we conduct our business, and how we lead our lives. We respect and accommodate each individual's way of thinking, working and communicating, mindful of the fact that each has their own story and means of telling it.

2. Impartiality and independence:

IFF is a research-led organisation which believes in letting the evidence do the talking. We don't undertake projects with a preconception of what "the answer" is, and we don't hide from the truths that research reveals. We are independent, in the research we conduct, of political flavour or dogma. We are open-minded, imaginative and intellectually rigorous.

3. Making a difference:

At IFF, we want to make a difference to the clients we work with, and we work with clients who share our ambition for positive change. We expect all IFF staff to take personal responsibility for everything they do at work, which should always be the best they can deliver.



IFF Research

5th Floor
St. Magnus House
3 Lower Thames Street
London
EC3R 6HD
Tel: +44(0)20 7250 3035
Website: iffresearch.com

Contact details: