

Office for Students – student insight

**Students' perceptions of their higher education
providers' response to financial challenges**

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A report by

Savanta:

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Executive summary

The higher education sector in England is currently navigating significant financial challenges, necessitating changes by higher education providers to ensure financial sustainability. While institutions strive to minimise the impact on students and uphold educational quality, these financial pressures inevitably affect multiple stakeholders, including students themselves. This report, commissioned by the Office for Students (OfS), presents insights from a survey of students regarding their awareness and perceptions of institutional financial measures.

Research background and objectives

The OfS commissioned Savanta to conduct a poll of students attending OfS-regulated colleges and universities in England, regarding student perceptions and awareness of perceived cost-cutting measures and concerns about financial sustainability of institutions.

Topics covered include:

- Awareness and perceptions of financial risks and institutional closure
- Specific changes and difference to expectations
- Perceptions of institutional preparedness and expectations of support.

Key findings

Around half (52%) of respondents reported noticing cost-cutting measures at their institutions. When asked which specific cost-cutting measures they noticed, respondents cited increased class sizes (40%) and differences relating to staff availability and capacity (44%).

Students reported becoming aware of these changes through various channels, including email communications from their provider and social media, and direct observations such as larger class sizes and reduced resources.

While quality of teaching is deemed a priority by the majority of respondents (56%) for what universities should protect, financial support and student services also emerge as critical priorities, especially among ethnic minority groups.

Just over half (56%) were aware of perceived financial risks to their university or college and just under half (46%) were concerned about the possibility of their course or department closing as a result of cost-cutting measures. However, the majority of these are “quite concerned” (32%) rather than “very concerned” (15%). Those aware of financial risks were significantly more likely to report noticing cost-cutting measures and express concerns about their educational experience.

When asked to reflect on the impact of cost-cutting measures, 83% of students reported they noticed a gap between the higher education experience that they believed had been promised by their institutions, and the reality.

Responding students were more likely to be unaware of what would happen should their course or department close than aware (54% vs. 44%) and over half were unaware of student protection plans (58%). Most expected to receive support from their university or college to finish their courses or transfer to another institution during potential closures: for example, a majority (61%) expected help to transfer to another institution, ensuring a smooth transition with provided information, and the same proportion (60%) anticipated support to finish their course and obtain qualifications, or at least complete the current term with credit transfers.

Research methodology

Savanta conducted an online survey with a sample of 1,256 students currently studying (at all stages) at universities or colleges regulated by the OfS. Fieldwork took place from the 8th to the 15th of April 2025.

The sample was designed to provide a view across a number of different demographics and student characteristics. During fieldwork, quotas were set on age, sex and ethnicity to ensure the people recruited for the survey resembled the populations of interest, obtained from Higher Education Statistics Agency data and the OfS Access and Participation data dashboard.

The data has been analysed at a total level as well as by the sub-groups of age, sex, and degree level. All reported differences flagged as 'significant' between sub-groups are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. In addition, a sample size of 1,256 respondents has a margin of error of +/- 3%.

Sample breakdown

Below is a summary of the sample profile for the survey. Please note that in presenting figures as a percentage, figures are rounded for easier interpretation so totals may exceed or fall short of 100% by 1-2% points.

Age

18-20	37%
21-24	26%
25+	37%

Level of degree being studied for

Undergraduate	51%
Postgraduate	49%

Ethnicity

White	59%
Minority ethnic groups	40%

Sex

Male	46%
Female	53%

Provider tariff¹

High tariff	26%
Medium tariff	25%
Low or unknown tariff	34%
Large level 4/5	7%
Small level 4/5	6%
Specialist: Creative	2%
Specialist: Other	2%
Postgraduate	0%

¹ The provider tariff refers to a system used to categorise and group higher education providers in England based on factors like student entry points, student characteristics, and financial attributes.

Section 1: Awareness and perceptions

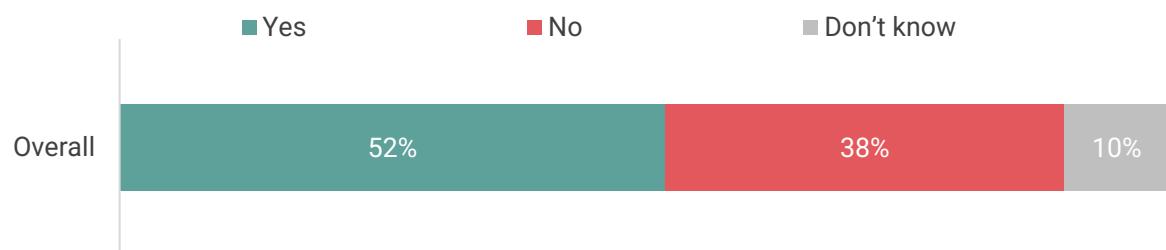
Overview

This section asked students about their awareness of perceived cost-cutting measures and financial risks, as well as how they noticed or learned about these measures.

General awareness

Chart 1.1 Perceived awareness of cost-cutting measures at university/college

Q8. Have you noticed any cost-cutting measures being implemented at your university or college?²



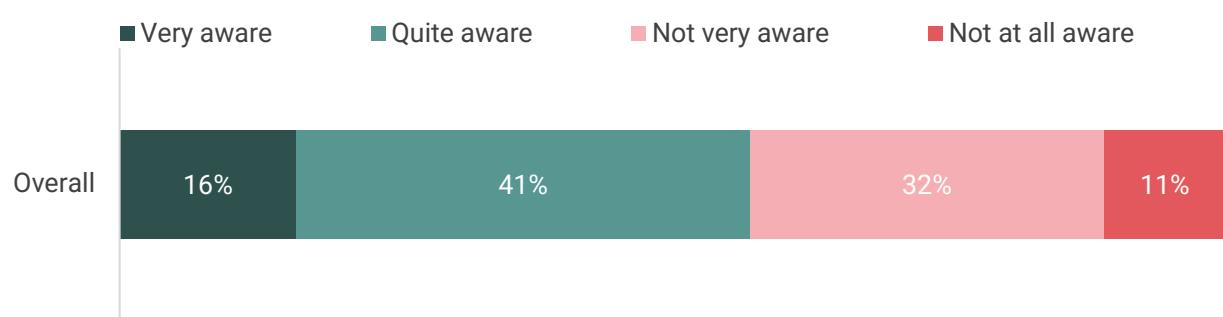
Around half (52%) of respondents said they had noticed perceived cost-cutting measures being implemented during their time at university or college; of the remainder, over 38% had not and 10% were not sure.

A significant difference was observed between younger and older students. Significantly higher numbers of older students (25+) were likely to have noticed the measures (58%) compared to younger students (18-24; 48%). This is reflected in postgraduate students also having reported significantly higher awareness (60%), compared to undergraduate students (44%).

Those who were aware of financial risks to the institution they attend were also significantly more likely to note these measures than those not aware (62% compared to 38%).

Chart 1.2 Awareness of financial risks to university/college

Q15. How aware are you, if at all, of any financial risks to your university or college?³



² Base: All respondents (n = 1,256).

³ Base: All respondents (n = 1,256).

56% of students were aware of any perceived potential financial risks within universities or colleges, with the remaining 44% of respondents having been unaware of financial risks.

As with findings from other questions, awareness was significantly higher among postgraduates (68%) compared to undergraduates (45%). Male students (67%) were also significantly more likely to be aware than female students (47%).

Sources of information

When asked how they became aware of cost-saving strategies, students reported a variety of channels. Respondents mentioned finding out about these measures through university communications and conversations with friends and fellow students. Other sources that survey respondents raised included newsletters, social media, noticeboards, and in-class announcements from lecturers and professors. Some students also noticed what they perceived to be cost-cutting measures, such as larger class sizes, staff reductions, reduced resources, and reduced services, without formal communication. These observations were reported as occurring from 2022 through early 2024.

The following quotes give a sense of how some students reported becoming aware of perceived cost-cutting measures.

Open-ended response

Q11 Where did you notice this or were you informed about these cost-cutting measures?

"We were first notified by emails that went out to all full and part-time students."

Undergraduate

"The university management board sent out emails explaining various cost-cutting measures." **Undergraduate**

"I noticed reduced hours of opening on the music studios and the library."

Undergraduate

"I noticed the cuts in extracurricular because of my societies I was involved in, they got less funding from the university, so many activities that took place over the past few years are not happening anymore." **Postgraduate**

"My teachers told me about lay-offs." **Undergraduate**

"We were informed by our lecturer." **Postgraduate**

"I noticed some of these changes firsthand, such as the longer waiting times for counselling services and the reduced number of extracurricular activities. However, I was also informed about some of the cost-cutting measures through the university's student union newsletter and social media channels, which reported on changes to IT support services and careers advising." **Postgraduate**

"It was obvious given that the previous master's class had five students, and this one has over 50. Social media platforms also discussed it." **Postgraduate**

Section 2: Specific changes and differences

Overview

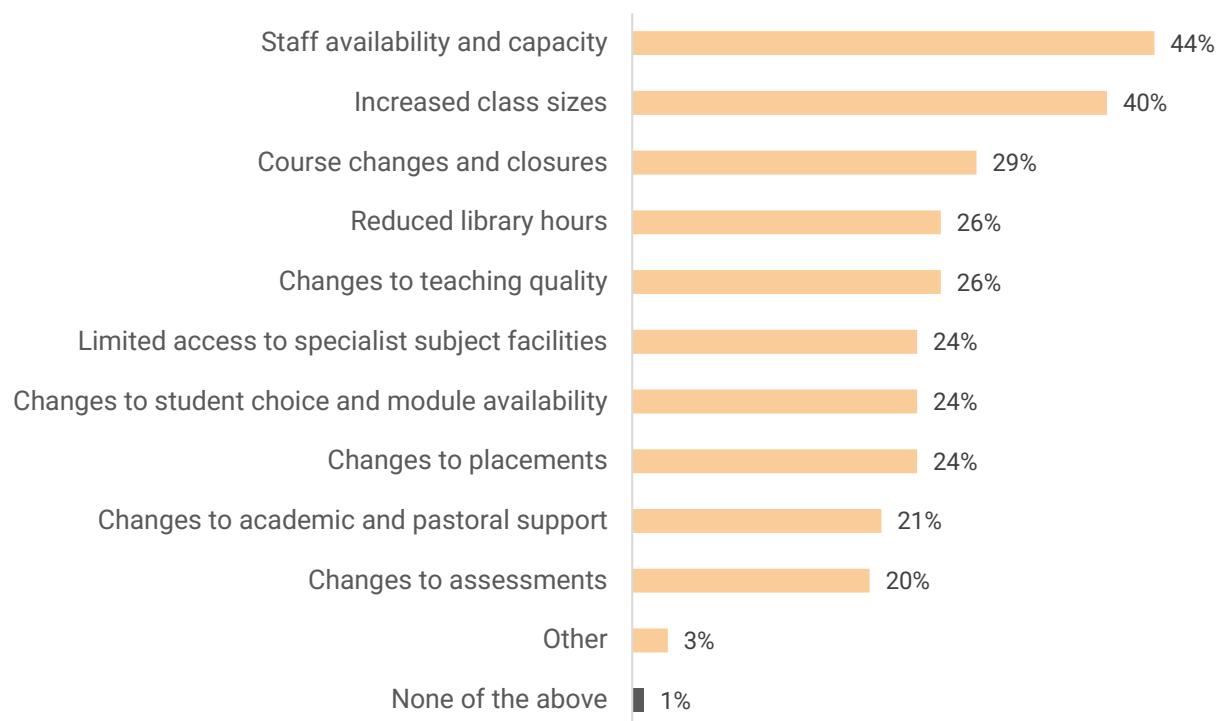
This section explores how certain measures affect academic experiences and extracurricular activities, focusing on the discrepancies between student experiences and what they believed had been promised by their institutions.

It provides insights into how financial challenges influence student decisions, such as choosing to drop out, transfer, or defer. Additionally, it identifies student groups seen as most impacted by financial challenges by other students, offering examples and analysis.

Academic and wider experience

Chart 2.1 Specific measures noticed – Academic experience

Q9. What specific cost-cutting measures have you noticed in place at your institution, in relation to your academic experience?⁴



When asked to reflect on the impact of cost-cutting measures, the most commonly reported measures were related to staffing; two in five (44%) respondents observed changes related to staff availability and capacity. Half (50%) of older students (those aged 25+) were significantly more likely than younger students (18-24; 40%) to notice changes to staff availability and capacity.

⁴ Base: All who said they have noticed any cost-cutting measures being implemented at their university or college (n = 651).

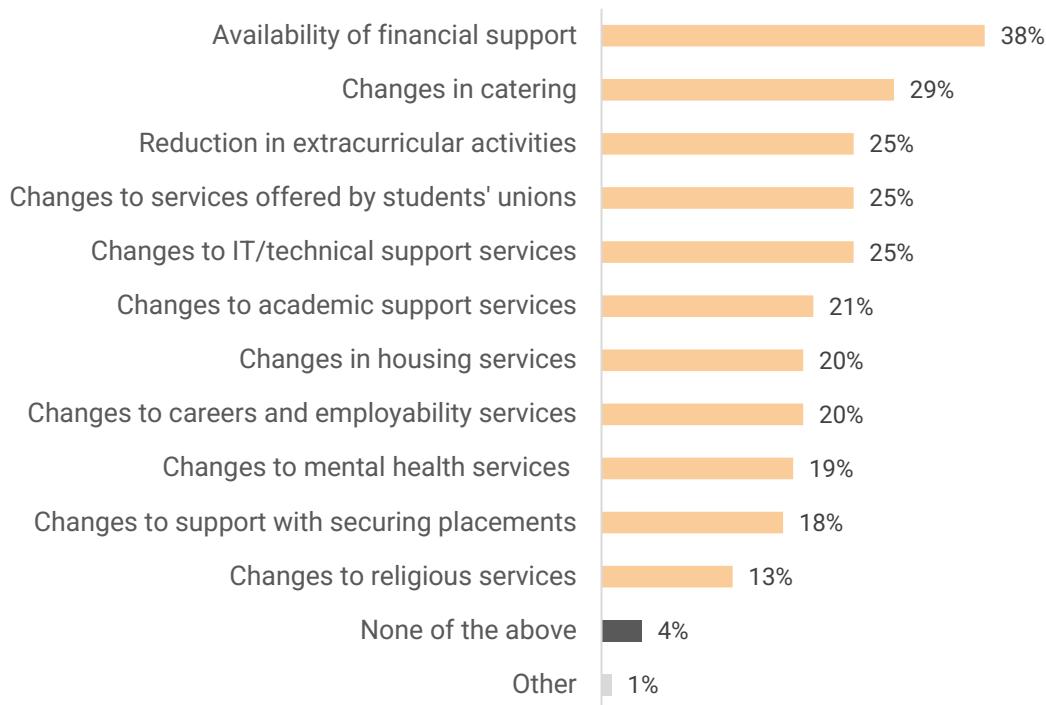
Again, related to staffing, increased class sizes were flagged by 40% of respondents. Postgraduates reported increased class sizes significantly more (44%), compared with undergraduates (35%).

Other options all scored between 20% and 29%, with the next three down relating to learning (teaching quality, library hours and course changes), whereas those less frequently noticed related to less direct forms of support, such as academic support and placements.

In general, respondents who were aware of financial risks were significantly more likely to notice “indirect” measures such as changes to industry placements (28% vs. 15% unaware of changes to placements and 24% vs. 14% for changes to academic and pastoral support).

Chart 2.2 Specific measures noticed – Wider experience

Q10. What specific cost-cutting measures have you noticed in place at your institution, in relation to your wider academic experience?⁵



Looking at wider measures in relation to academic experience, findings indicate several areas where respondents noticed changes. A substantial minority (38%) of respondents who noticed any measures identified the availability of financial support as a major change, with lower but similar proportions selecting the other options tested. Looking at changes to all support services, 93% of those who said they have noticed changes highlighted changes to support services.⁶

⁵ Base: All who said they have noticed any cost-cutting measures being implemented at their university or college (n = 651).

⁶ Defined as those who selected any of the following options: Changes in catering, Changes in housing services, Changes to services offered by students' unions, Changes to careers and employability services, Changes to mental health services (including counselling), Availability of financial support,

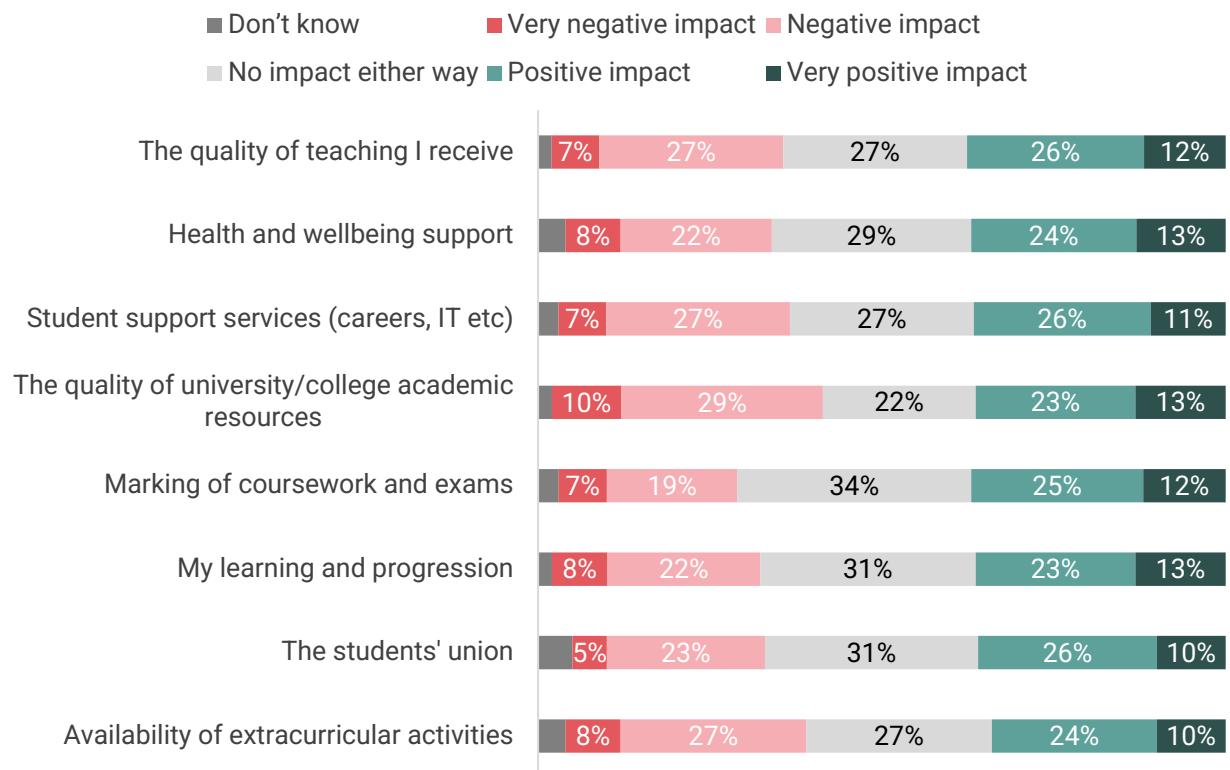
Looking at the other options tested, there are a few trends to note. As with the previous question, those who said they were aware of financial risks to their university or college were significantly more likely than those not aware to identify any of the above (96% vs. 90%).

There were also differences by age group, with 30% of respondents aged 25+ and 22% of the younger age group having noticed changes to extracurricular activities. Likewise, this was evident in changes to academic support services (26% vs. 17%), a difference that was less significant than when looking at degree level studied for.

Postgraduates appeared to notice some measures more than undergraduates. According to 20% of respondents, careers and employability services saw changes. Notably, 24% of postgraduates noticed changes compared to 15% of undergraduates (a significant difference). This is reflected in the significantly higher proportion saying they had noticed changes to IT/technical support services (29% vs. 20% of undergraduates).

Chart 2.3 Perceived impact of measures on various aspects of the student experience

Q12. How, if at all, have these cost-cutting measures affected the following?⁷



Responses to this question reflect students' perceptions of the impact of cost-cutting measures on their wider experience. Those who had noticed any measures at their university or college were most likely to cite a negative impact on the quality of academic resources (39%), followed by the availability of extracurricular activities (35%) and the quality of teaching (34%). They were least likely to report a negative impact for marking of coursework and exams (26%), the students' union (28%) and health and wellbeing support (29%).⁸

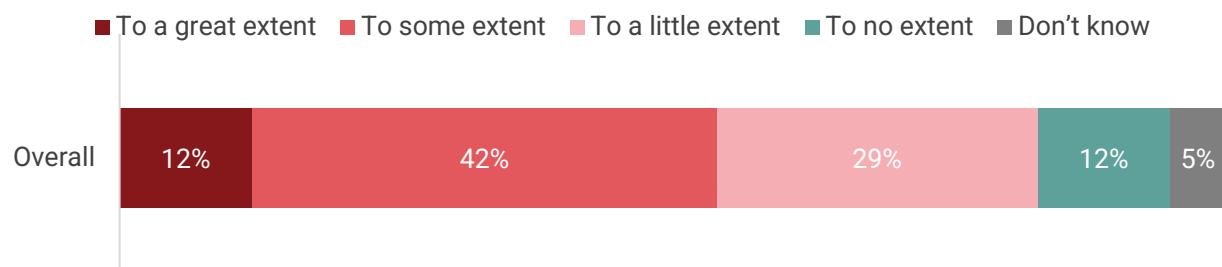
⁷ Base: All who said they have noticed any cost-cutting measures being implemented at their university or college (n = 651).

⁸ Some of the findings reported here are difficult to interpret and/or implausible. This may suggest that respondents were not always clear what the question was asking. We recommend exercising particular caution when interpreting the findings.

Differences from expectations

Chart 2.4 Extent of experience differences due to perceived cost-cutting

Q13. To what extent, if at all, has your experience at university/college differed to what you were promised when you enrolled because of cost-cutting?⁹



Students were asked to reflect on how they perceived cost-cutting measures to have contributed to a divergence between their actual experiences and what they believed had been promised by their institution. Reflecting on their perceived impact of these measures, 83% of students reported they noticed a difference.

Just over half said that their experience differed to what they felt was promised by some extent or a great extent (54%). Postgraduates appear to have felt this impact more acutely, with 90% having acknowledged differences compared to 77% of undergraduates. Differences by sex were evident, with males significantly more likely to have said their experience differed (86%) than females (81%). Additionally, awareness plays a crucial role; those who said they were aware of cost-cutting were notably more likely to perceive changes, at 94%, compared to 71% of those unaware.

Open-ended response

Q14. How and in what way has your experience at university/college differed to what you were promised when you enrolled because of cost-cutting?

Many respondents reported disappointment in the gap between what they believed they had been promised at enrolment and their actual university experience, due to perceived cost-cutting measures. It's important to note the difference between institutional promises and student expectations. Though the question refers to institutional commitments, responses mixed unmet personal expectations with unfulfilled promises. The open-ended responses highlighted gaps in students' academic experience, as well as financial support, which largely reflected the quantitative findings in the survey.

Regarding academic experience, respondents highlighted reduced resources and support services (for example, reductions in available resources such as libraries, labs, and sports facilities as well as services such as careers and mental health services). Respondents also reported the size of classes (larger than expected), and class delivery (more hybrid and online learning than expected) did not match their expectations at their time of enrolment. In both these cases, these were cited as a negative in terms of how it differed from expectations.

⁹ Base: All respondents (n = 1,256).

Additionally, many respondents pointed out that costs such as living expenses were higher than expected, citing the increased costs of food, accommodation, and unexpected fees for items like printing. While these financial pressures were widespread, a smaller number of respondents reported receiving less financial aid than promised and shared instances where promised funding or scholarships were either reduced or not delivered.

Finally, there was a gap between students' expectations of university facilities and the reality they encountered. Several respondents noted receiving less in-person teaching than anticipated, which they attributed to building closures linked to budget cuts. Access to laboratories and student spaces were also constrained, and a smaller proportion of respondents mentioned the absence or limited availability of equipment.

"Many lectures were moved online permanently after the pandemic even though we were back on campus." **Postgraduate**

"The support I get as a student has reduced compared to what I was told I would get when I enrolled." **Undergraduate**

"Classes are much larger than expected and some courses and/or resources they promised were either cut or moved online due to budget cuts." **Undergraduate**

"I was promised a class of 15 but now there are 25 students per class." **Undergraduate**

"The support I get has reduced compared to what I was told I would get when I enrolled." **Undergraduate**

"Tuition fees increased slightly, but alongside living expenses and unexpected costs, it's a lot more than I anticipated when enrolling." **Undergraduate**

"Prices have gone up for food and accommodation, and unexpected fees for items like printing." **Undergraduate**

"When I enrolled, I was promised access to regular in-person lectures and state-of-the-art facilities. However, due to the budget cuts, many of my lectures were moved online." **Postgraduate**

"They promised to provide us with all the learning equipment in school, but now I have to bring my own laptops." **Undergraduate**

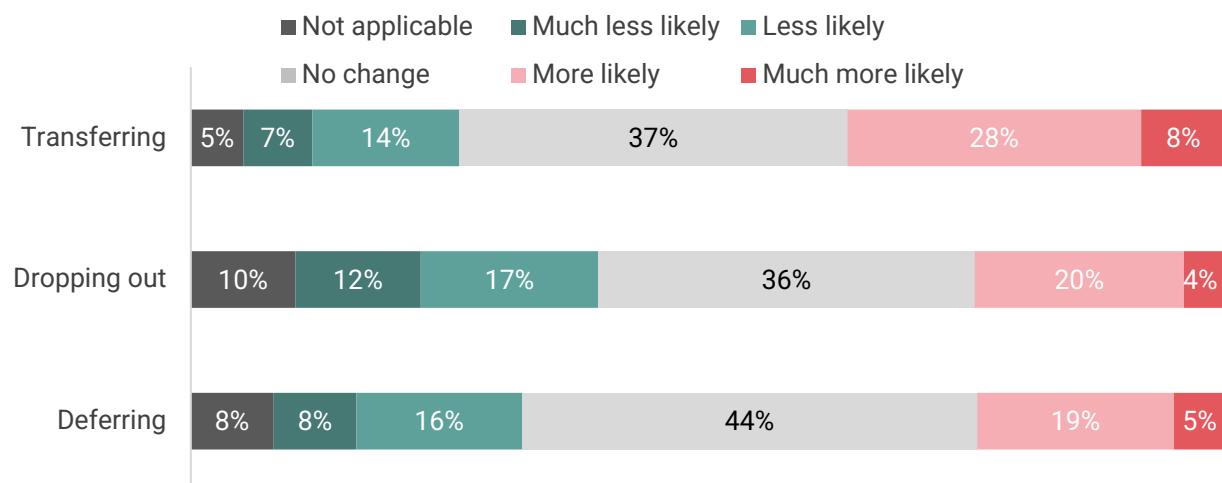
"My university experience has differed quite a bit from what was initially promised, mainly because of some minor cost-cutting measures. When I enrolled, they promised modern facilities and extensive student support. There is limited access to academic support, and modern facilities like labs and student spaces have seen budget cuts." **Postgraduate**

"There are fewer staff and bigger classroom sizes, and there are lots of cutbacks on IT equipment." **Postgraduate**

Student decisions

Chart 2.5 Likelihood of considering dropping out, transferring, or deferring

Q21. Have recent financial challenges at your university or college made you more or less likely to consider the following?¹⁰



A quarter (25%) of students said they were more likely to consider dropping out as a result of facing financial challenges at their university. Specifically, those who were aware of financial risks were significantly more inclined, with 29% considering dropping out compared to 19% of those unaware.

In terms of transferring, demographic differences are notable. Postgraduate students were more likely to consider transferring, at 43% compared to 30% of undergraduates. Additionally, male students were more likely to consider transferring than female students, at 41% versus 32%. Minority ethnic groups showed a higher likelihood (41%) of considering transferring, compared to white students (33%). Furthermore, students who said they were aware of cost-cutting measures were more likely to consider transferring, with 43% indicating likelihood versus 29% of those who were not.

For deferring, older students aged 25+ exhibited a stronger inclination to consider it, with 27% likely to defer compared to 22% of younger students. Similarly, postgraduates had a higher likelihood of considering deferring at 28%, contrasted with 20% for undergraduates. Male students were more likely to consider deferring than female students, at 28% versus 21%. Minority ethnic groups showed a higher likelihood of considering deferring (27%) compared to white students (22%). Awareness significantly impacts this decision, with those informed having showed a 31% likelihood of considering deferring compared with 18% of those unaware.

¹⁰ Base: All respondents (n = 1,256).

Section 3: Perceptions of institutional preparedness and expectations of support

Overview

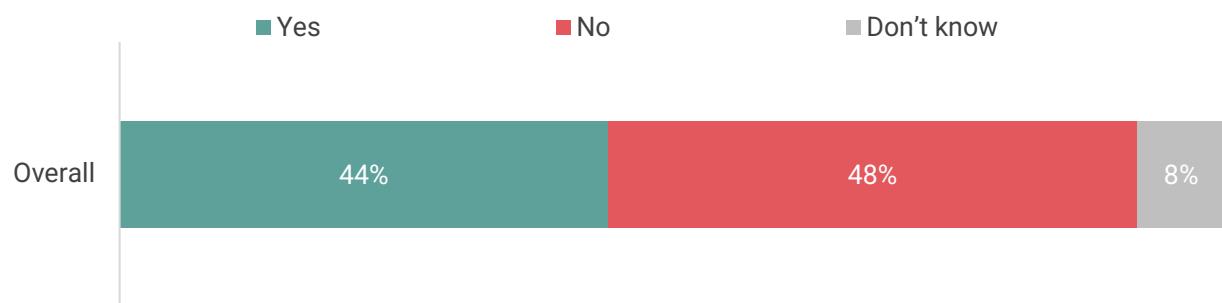
This section considers what students expect when their providers experience financial difficulties, in terms of the level of concern and amount of support available.

Students were also asked what their providers should prioritise in such an event, as well as how aware they were of student protection plans. As elsewhere, this is broken down by student type to reflect differences between groups.

Preparedness

Chart 3.1 Awareness of options in the event of course/department closures

Q16. If, in the unlikely event that your university or college was not able to continue to offer your course, or if your university or college were to close, do you know what options might be available to you?¹¹



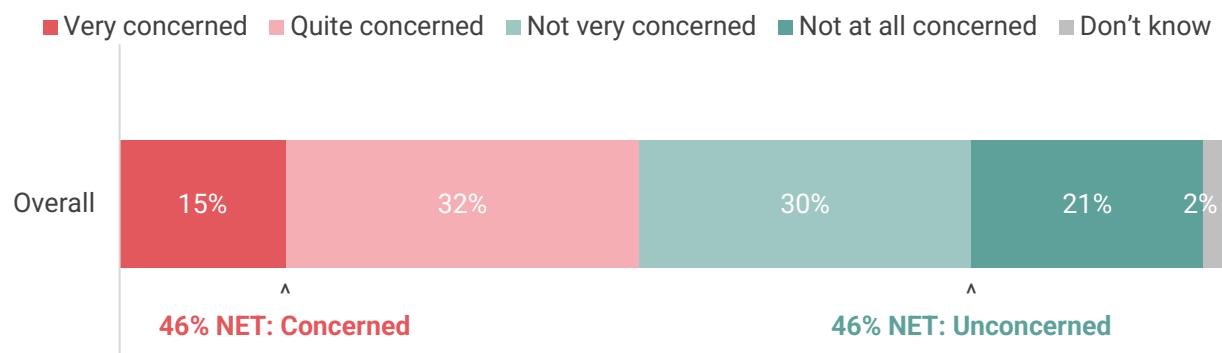
This question explored options available if a university or college could not continue offering a course, which shows diverse responses across demographic groups. Overall, 48% of respondents felt they would **not** know what options are available, with a higher incidence among undergraduates (53%) compared to postgraduates (43%). This lack of awareness was also more pronounced among those not aware of financial risks, with 61% reporting uncertainty compared to 37% who are aware. Females were also significantly more likely to have said they are uncertain (54% vs. 40%).

Conversely, 44% of respondents acknowledged knowing the options available.

¹¹ Base: All respondents (n = 1,256).

Chart 3.2 Concern over course/department closures

Q17. How concerned, if at all, are you about the possibility of your course or department closing during your studies?¹²



Overall, 46% of respondents were **concerned** about the possibility of their course or department closing during their studies, with a higher level of concern for those aged 25+ (64%), compared to 18–24-year-olds (36%). Likewise, there was a higher level of concern among postgraduates (59%), compared to undergraduates (34%).

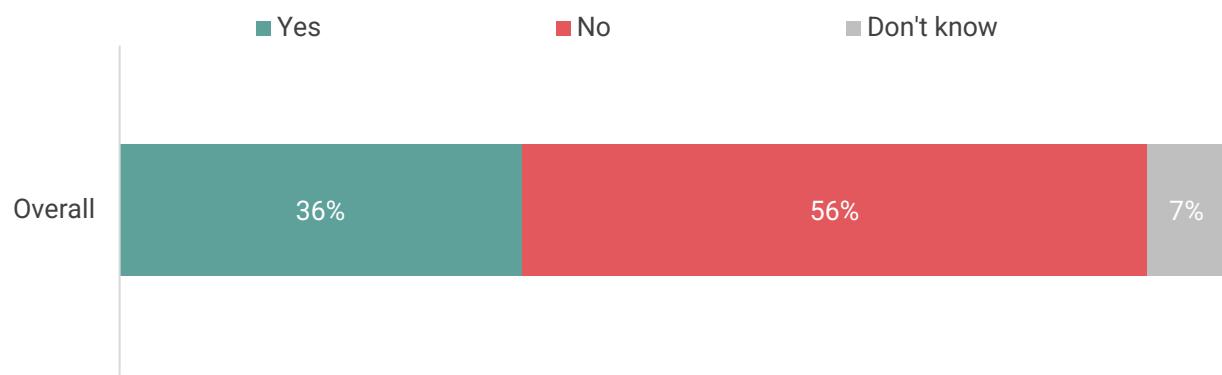
Higher concern levels were also evident for male respondents (51%), compared to female (42%), and minority ethnic respondents (53%), compared to white (42%).

Those who said they were aware of financial risks or cost-cutting measures were also significantly more likely to be **concerned** (61% and 57%), compared to those unaware (28% and 36%).

Finally, respondents studying engineering and technology were the most likely to be **concerned** about the possibility of closure (64% vs. 46% average). By contrast, those studying subjects allied to medicine were among the most likely to be **unconcerned** (66% vs. 52% average).

Chart 3.3 Awareness of published student protection plans

Q18. Again, in the unlikely event that your university/college was not able to continue to offer your course, or if they were to close, do you know about your university/college's published student protection plans?¹³



¹² Base: All respondents (n = 1,256).

¹³ Base: All respondents (n = 1,256).

Reflecting the findings in question 16, students were more likely **not** to know about or be aware of what would happen in the event of the course no longer being offered. A majority (56%) indicated that they were not aware of any published student protection plans. This lack of awareness was particularly prevalent among undergraduates (68%), compared to postgraduates (45%). Additionally, 72% of respondents who are not aware of financial risks reported not knowing about these plans, in contrast to 45% who are aware.

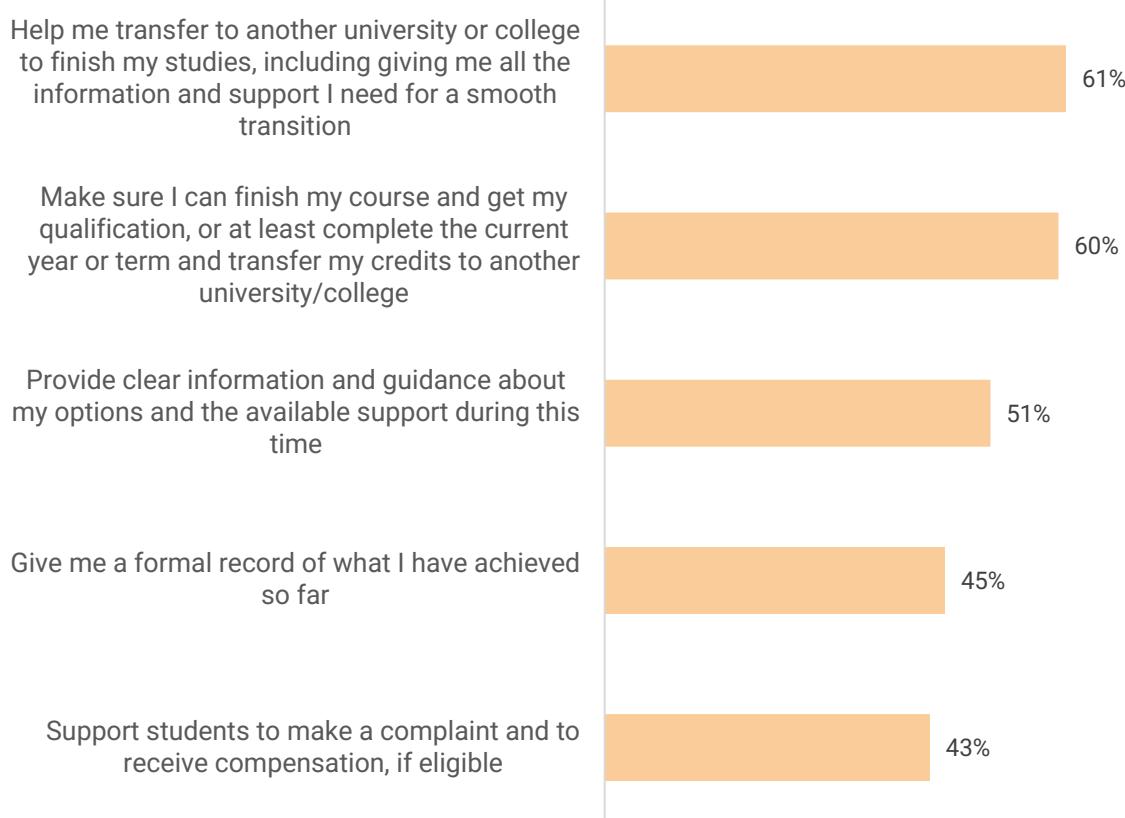
Conversely, 36% of respondents confirmed their awareness of student protection plans, with higher levels of awareness among postgraduates (49%) than undergraduates (25%). Males reported higher awareness at 45%, while females noted lower awareness at 30%. Those aware of financial risks showed substantial awareness (50%), compared to just 19% among those not aware.

A small segment, 7%, expressed uncertainty ("Don't know") regarding the student protection plans, displaying minor demographic differences, with a slightly higher incidence of those unaware of financial risks at 9% (as opposed to 6%).

Support measures and priorities

Chart 3.4 Expected support from university/college in closure risks

Q19. If your university or college was at risk of closing, what support do you expect them to provide?¹⁴



¹⁴ Base: All respondents (n = 1,256).

Respondents were most likely to expect support from the university or college (in the event of closure) in finishing studies or getting their qualification. A majority (61%) expected help to transfer to another institution, ensuring a smooth transition with provided information. This expectation was particularly notable among females (65%) compared to males (56%). Respondents not aware of financial risks also had higher expectations (71%) compared to their counterparts (53%) who are aware.

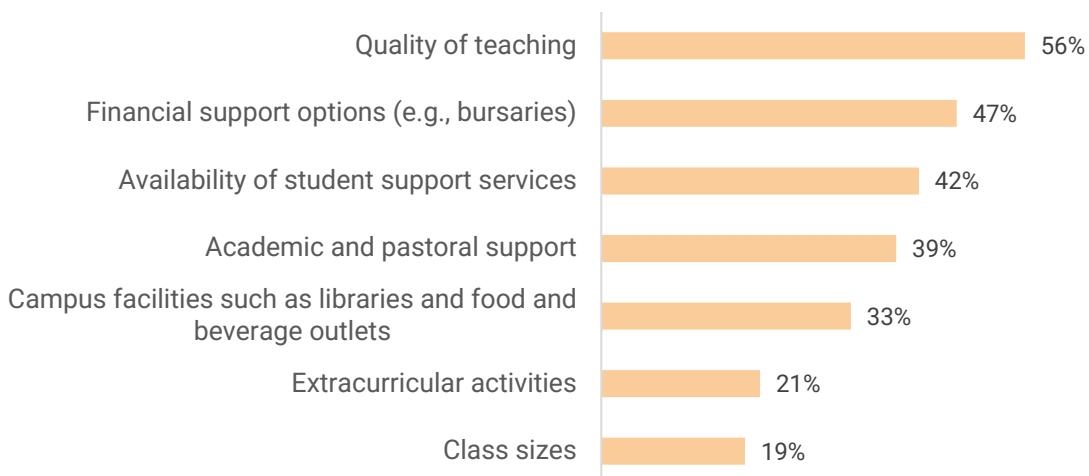
Furthermore, 60% anticipated support to finish their course and obtain qualifications or at least complete the current term with credit transfers. This expectation was more prevalent among undergraduates (64%) than postgraduates (56%). As above, the proportion saying this was higher among those not aware of financial risks (66%), as opposed to those aware (55%), and females (65%), compared to males (55%).

Clear guidance and information about available options was anticipated by 51% of respondents, with females being more likely to say this (56%) than males (45%). Those not aware of financial risks were more likely to expect this support (60%) than those who were aware (44%). As in other answer options, undergraduates were more likely to say this than postgraduates (56% vs. 46%).

The only answer option where there was a difference not seen in those outlined about was regarding supporting students to make a complaint and to receive compensation, if eligible, where 45% of white respondents said this compared to 40% of minority ethnic respondents.

Chart 3.5 Student experience aspects to prioritise amid financial risks

Q20. What aspects of your student experience should your university or college prioritise to protect in times of financial risk?¹⁵



Students surveyed were most likely to say that their university or college should prioritise quality of teaching (56% said this), followed by student support services, then academic and pastoral support. Female and white students were more likely to say this about teaching quality (59%), compared to male and minority ethnic students (both 52%). Awareness of financial risks influences priority, with 64% of those not

¹⁵ Base: All respondents (n = 1,256).

aware having said teaching quality should be prioritised, compared to 49% of those aware.

These trends were seen across the other options tested, with women and those unaware of financial risks being more likely to say they would prioritise the following:

- Financial support options (59% of females vs. 52% of males; 64% unaware vs. 49% aware)
- Availability of student support services (52% of females vs. 41% of males; 54% unaware vs. 41% aware)
- Academic and pastoral support (43% of females vs. 35% of males; 47% unaware vs. 39% aware).

Such differences were more pronounced for financial support options, where undergraduates were more likely to say that it should be a priority than postgraduates (52% vs. 42%), and ethnic minority respondents were more likely to say this than white respondents (51% vs. 44%). Minority ethnic respondents were as likely to say that financial support should be prioritised as quality of teaching (51% and 52%), the only demographic subgroup to do so.