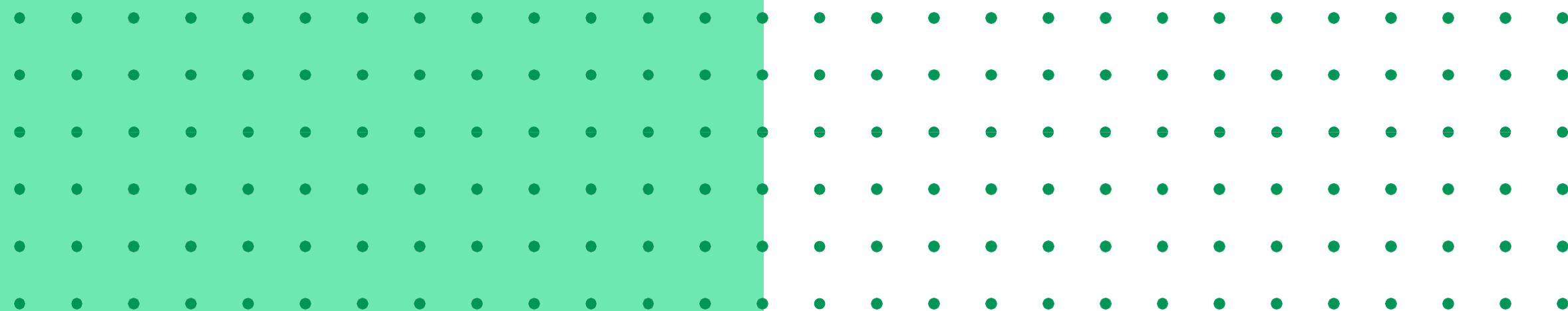


Staff perceptions of belonging and inclusion at university



June 2022



WONKHE

Introduction

It has long been known that feeling a sense of belonging while at university can make or break students’ overall experience, as it is strongly associated with academic and social engagement while at university.

Concerns about students’ sense of belonging have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite the heroic efforts of universities and students’ unions - the experience of disconnection, disengagement, and loss of academic confidence became much more widespread.

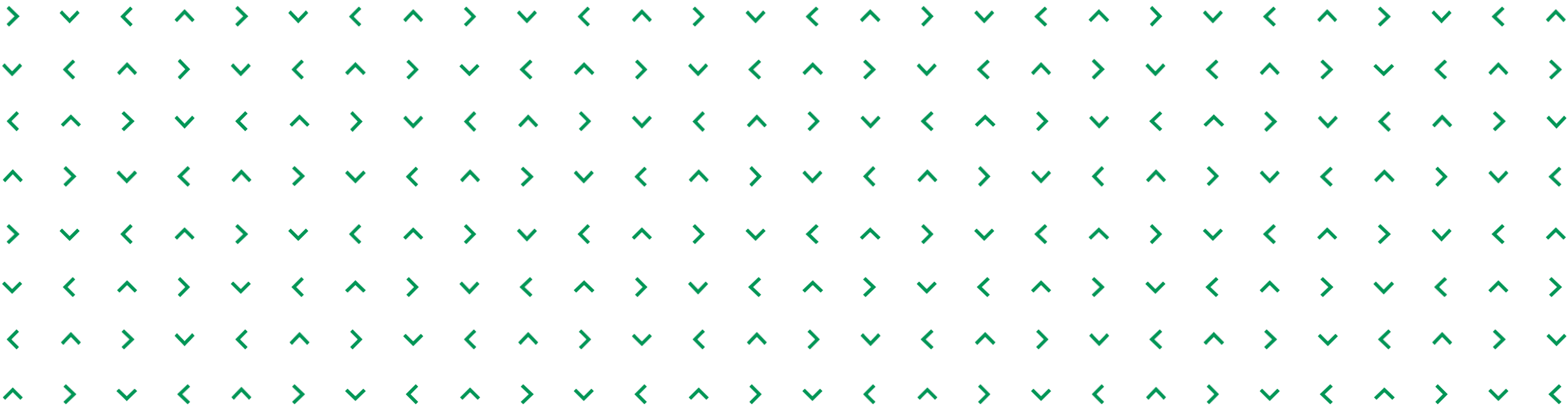
To better understand which areas impact students’ sense of belonging and support the sector in its efforts to “build back” student experience, Pearson and Wonkhe are undertaking a year-long study of belonging and inclusion.

The first project was a survey of 5,233 students, undertaken in partnership with 15 students’ unions across the UK.

The survey explored a range of possible dimensions of the experience of belonging – feeling “settled in”, personal priorities and academic confidence, the way the course is run, sense of connection and inclusion on the course, connections outside the course (extra curricular activities), inclusion in the university, sense of safety, being valued and empowered, friendships and peer connections, feelings of happiness and loneliness. The results showed clear associations between sense of belonging and all these different factors.

To add depth to our understanding of the student experience, we have been collecting monthly diary entries on an anonymous basis, and have conducted several student focus groups to explore some of the emerging themes.

As we reviewed the findings to date in Spring 2022, it was clear that we were missing the university staff and students’ union staff perspective. Which areas do they think are impacting on students’ sense of belonging, and where does responsibility lie for meeting challenges in these areas? Indeed, what initiatives are already in place and making a difference? And what can we learn from these as a sector?



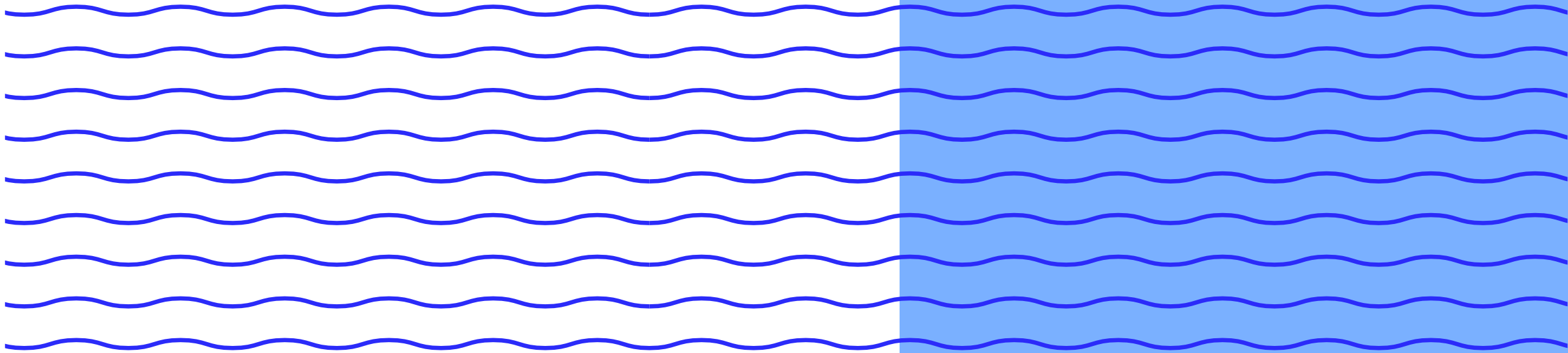
Methodology

The survey was open from Monday 11 April to Friday 6 May.

It was promoted via Wonkhe’s free weekly briefing – Wonkhe Mondays.

Of the university staff and students’ union staff who were involved, 89 per cent work for providers in England, 7 per cent work for providers in Scotland and 3 per cent work for providers in Wales.

The overall response rate was 430 and these respondents were self-selecting. We have not weighted the responses.



Key findings

The findings that follow are from a staff and students' union representative survey which asked a mixture of quantitative and qualitative questions.

- Staff and students' union representatives are keen that the working definition of inclusion is wide and recognises the role of the whole university alongside the course itself.
- The vast majority of respondents believe that institutions are making progress towards creating inclusive courses but few would describe their courses as fully inclusive as they currently stand.
- When it comes to the barriers to improving inclusion in academic courses, many staff members mentioned lack of time and competing priorities. They also acknowledged that one of the main challenges is low knowledge and confidence of staff.
- When asked what makes the most significant difference to a student's ability to develop their academic confidence during their course of study, the most popular answer was "the quality of the student's relationship with academics teaching on the course" which came way above "the quality of the student's relationship with a personal academic tutor". This discrepancy raises some interesting questions about the role of the personal tutor versus the academics teaching each course when it comes to instilling and building student confidence.
- Three quarters of respondents think that forging new connections and building peer relationships is an "essential" part of the university learning experience for all students, no matter their circumstances.
- When asked to what degree their institution should have responsibility for enabling students to build peer connections, the majority of respondents think that "Student peer relationships are something that the institution should actively try to make happen". Many respondents went on to talk about this as a collective responsibility across students, academics, support staff and the SU and the need to take a joined up approach.

Demographics

All: N=430

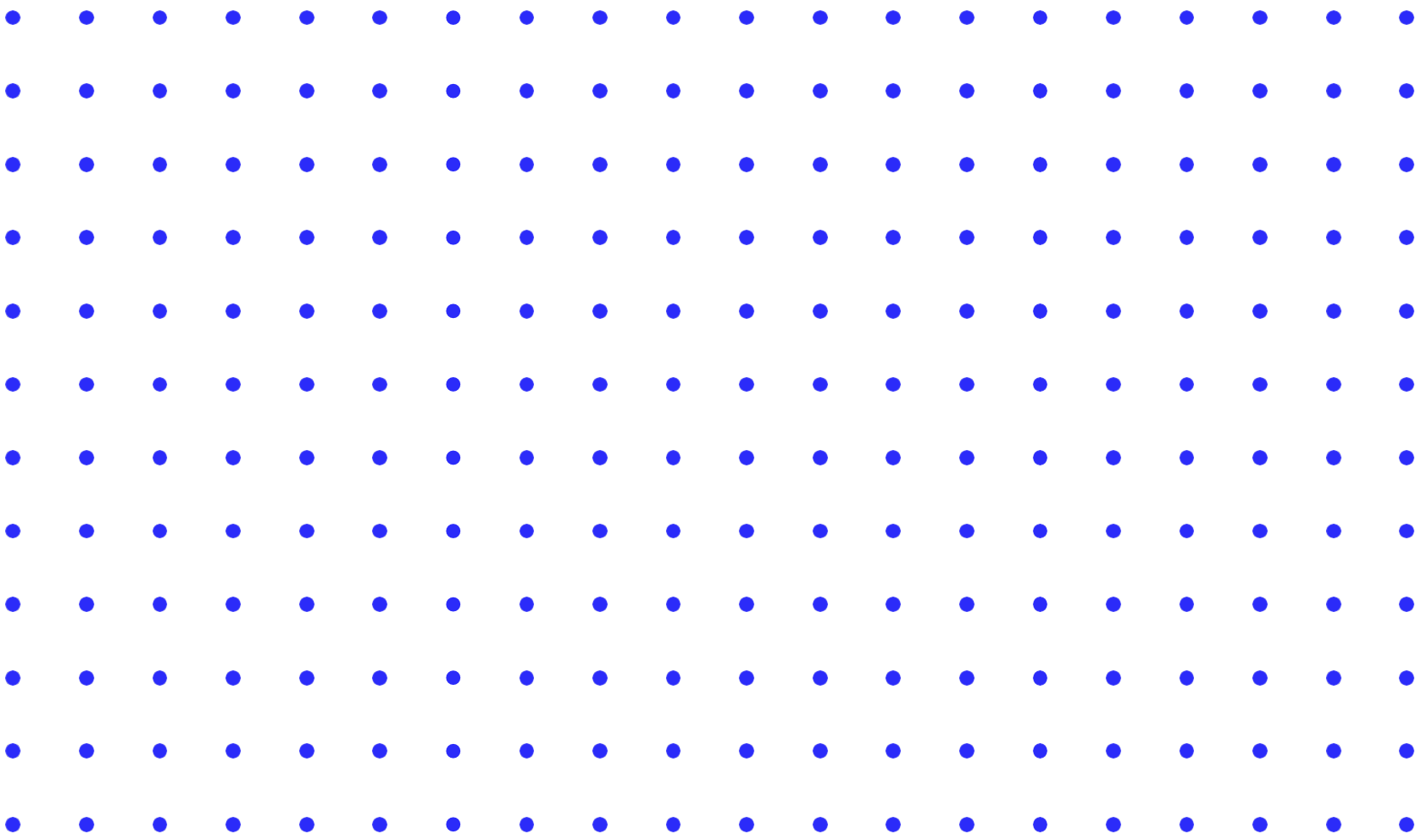
Type of institution: Large, multi-faculty 83% | Small or Specialist 14% | FE College 1 % | Other 1%

Location: England 89% | Wales 3% | Scotland 7% | Northern Ireland 0% | Outside UK 0%

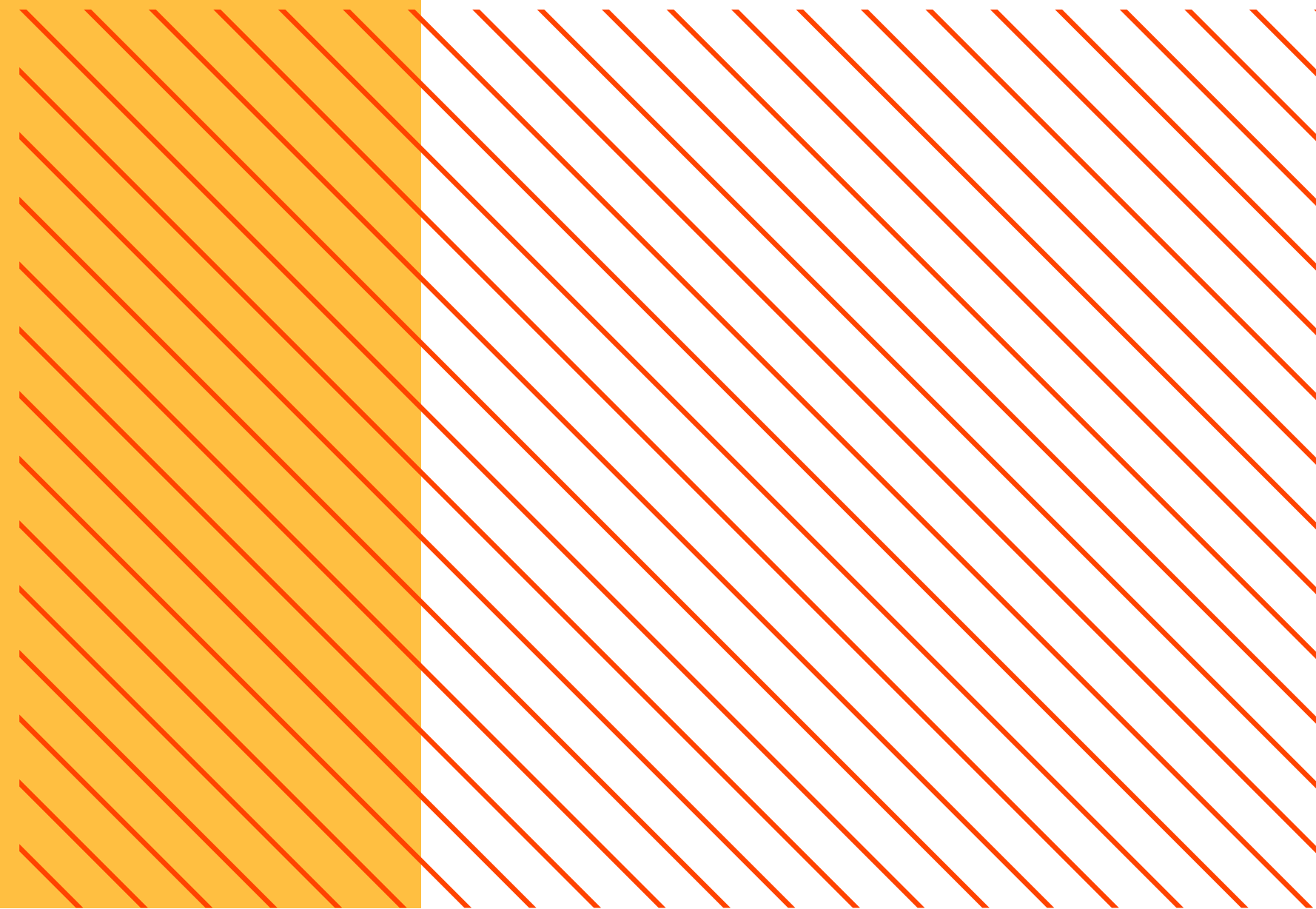
Role: Academic engaged in teaching and learning 32% | Staff engaged in supporting students’ academic learning 9% | Staff engaged in supporting students’ wider experience 32% |Students’ union staff or representative 19% | Other - please specify 9%

Main area of expertise N= 137) Medical and health sciences 21% | Agriculture, food, and related subjects 1% | Physical, mathematical, computing, engineering, or technological sciences 12% | Social sciences 37% | Humanities 15% | Design, creative and performing arts 5% | Other 8%

Where notable, we have broken down data by demographic.



Inclusion



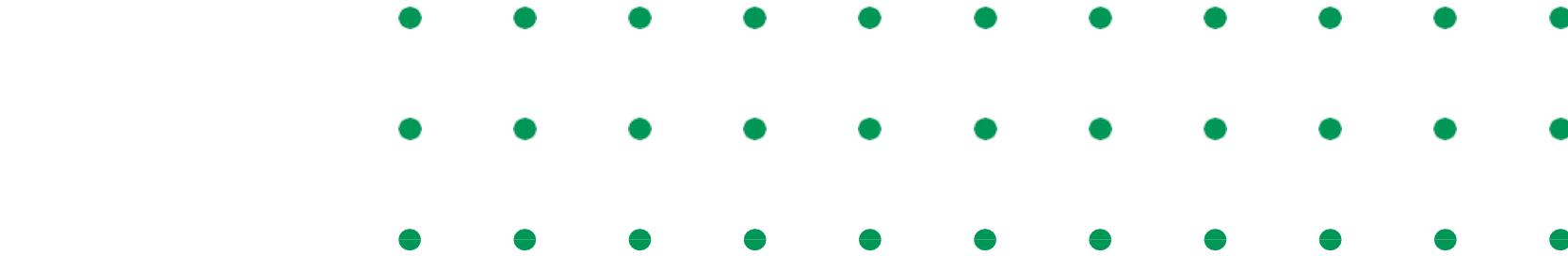
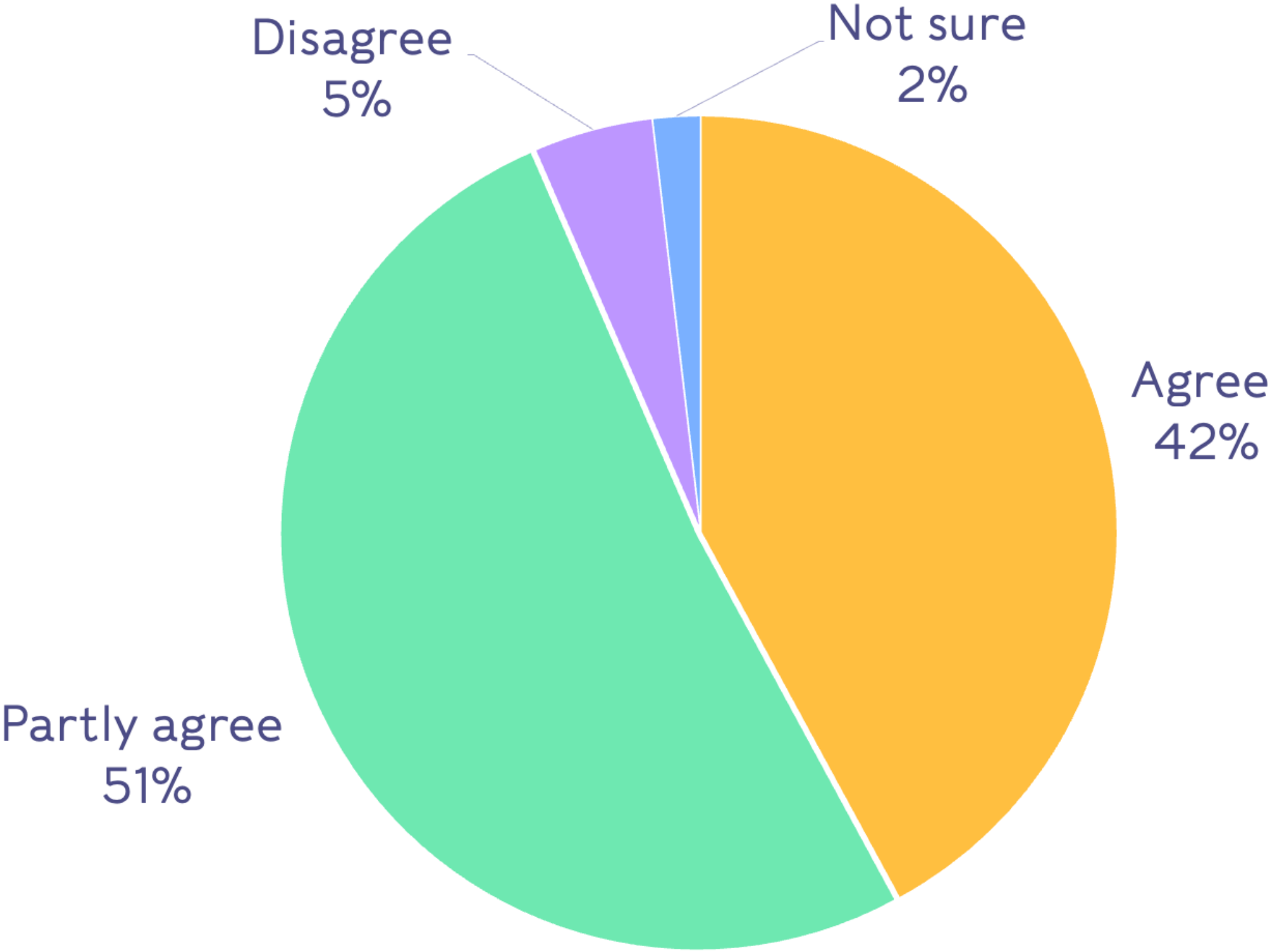
To what extent do you agree with this definition of inclusion?

In our original survey of students, we defined “inclusion” as the ways the constituent parts of a course (e.g content, teaching style) create a space in which you (i.e students) feel comfortable and confident to be yourself.

In the staff survey we asked respondents to what extent they agreed with this definition.

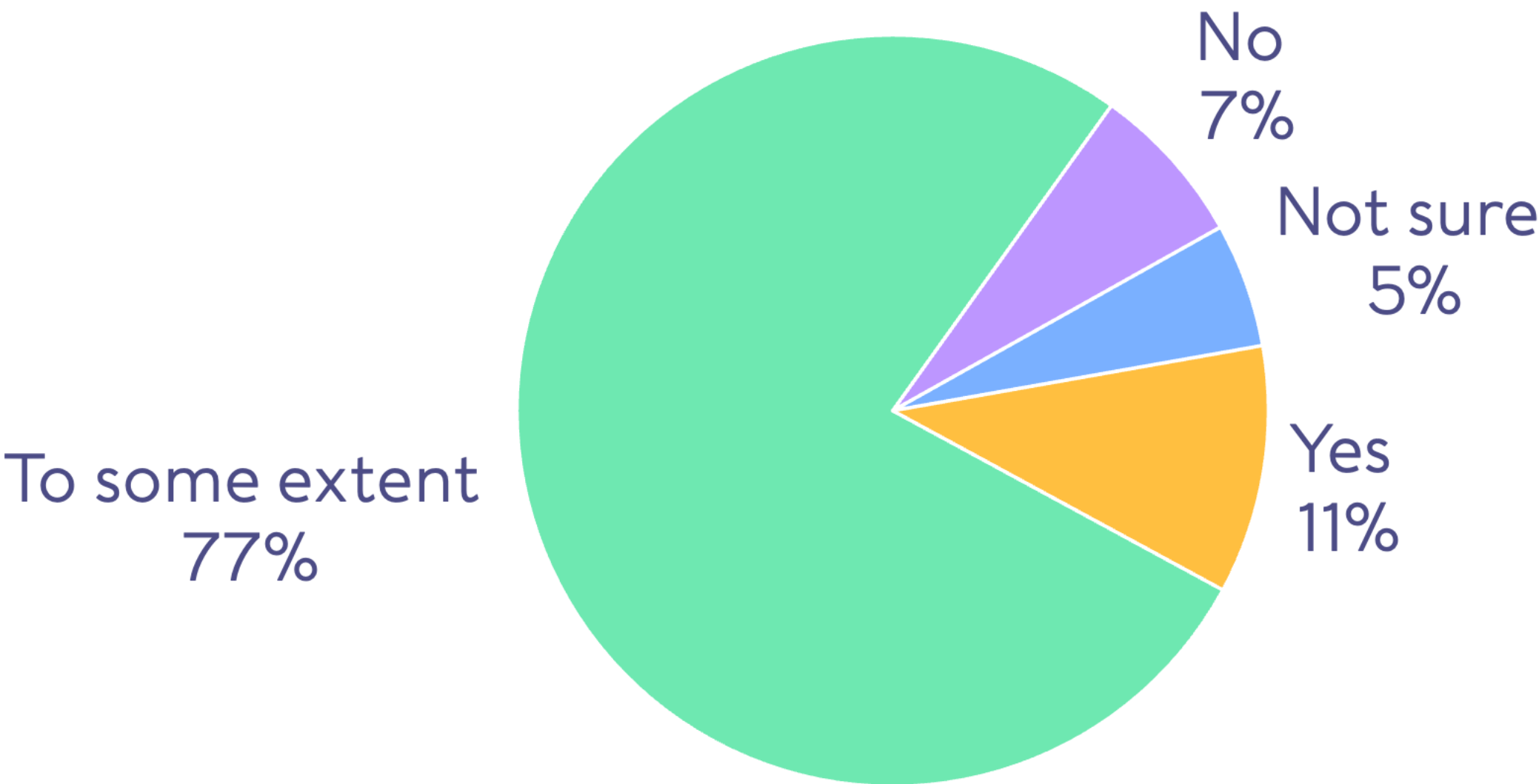
For those who partly agree or disagree, many feel that the definition is too centered on the course, and does not recognise the role of the wider university when it comes to inclusion i.e. the culture of the university and the support, environment, communication, accommodation, study spaces and extra-curricular activities.

“To me, this definition focuses more heavily on the individual and therefore individualises inclusion... we need to focus more on the social relational element in our definitions”



11 per cent of respondents believe that courses at their institution are inclusive and 77 per cent believe they are inclusive “to some extent”.

Do you think that the academic courses in your university, HE provider, or college are inclusive?



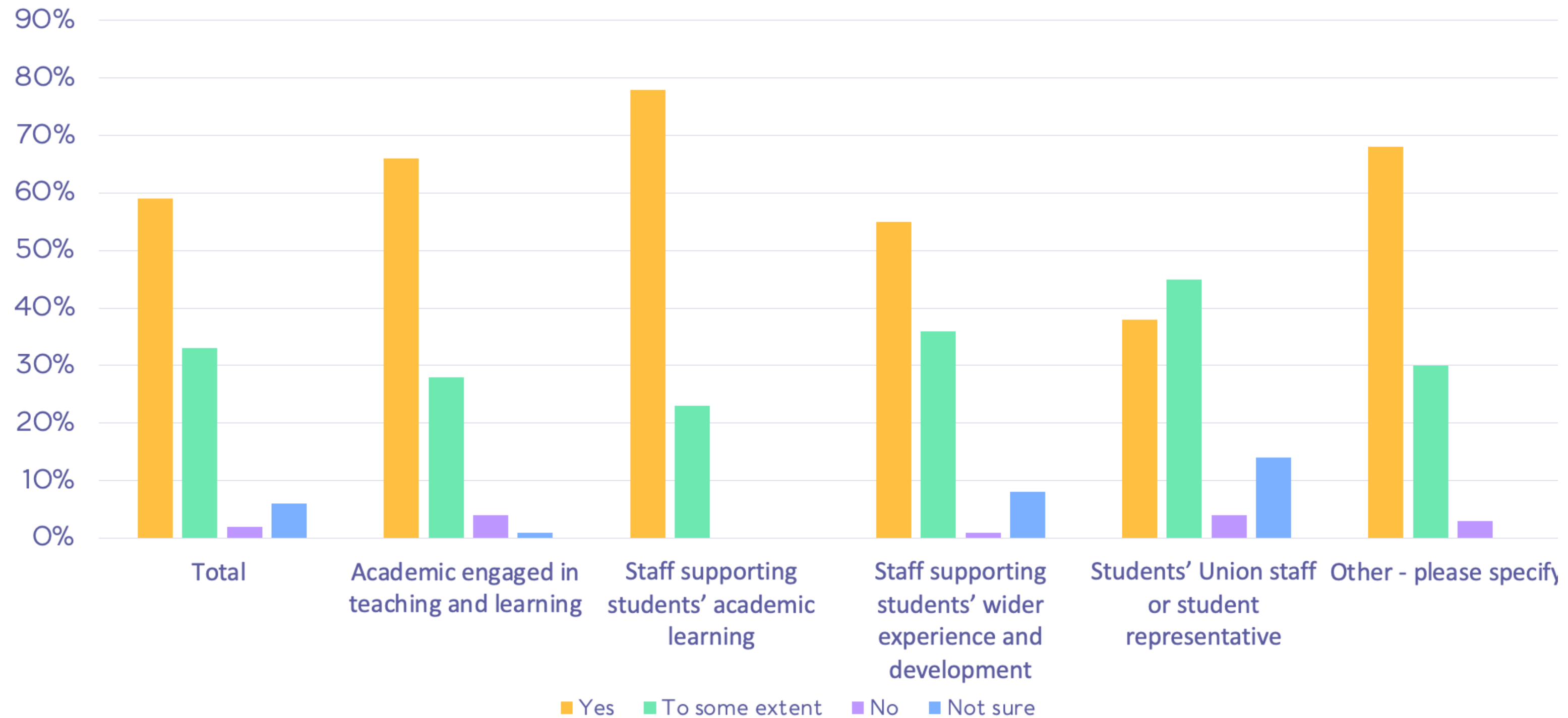
“Who is teaching matters (alongside teaching style). My students have responded very positively to guest lecturers who can speak to a topic in a different (more authentic) way to me because of their lived experience.”

STUDENT VIEW

Inclusive course materials was most common theme arising from our April student diary entries. Students said that the lack of inclusion and representation in their course content caused them concern about their academic ability and/or competency in the graduate workplace. E.g. the use of black skin in a textbook. Notably, students saw this inclusion as appropriate academic rigour.

- 93 per cent** of respondents agreed with our definition of inclusion
- 22 per cent** neither agree nor disagree
- 9 per cent** disagree or strongly disagree

Is your university, HE provider or college actively working on improving academic inclusion? (split by role)

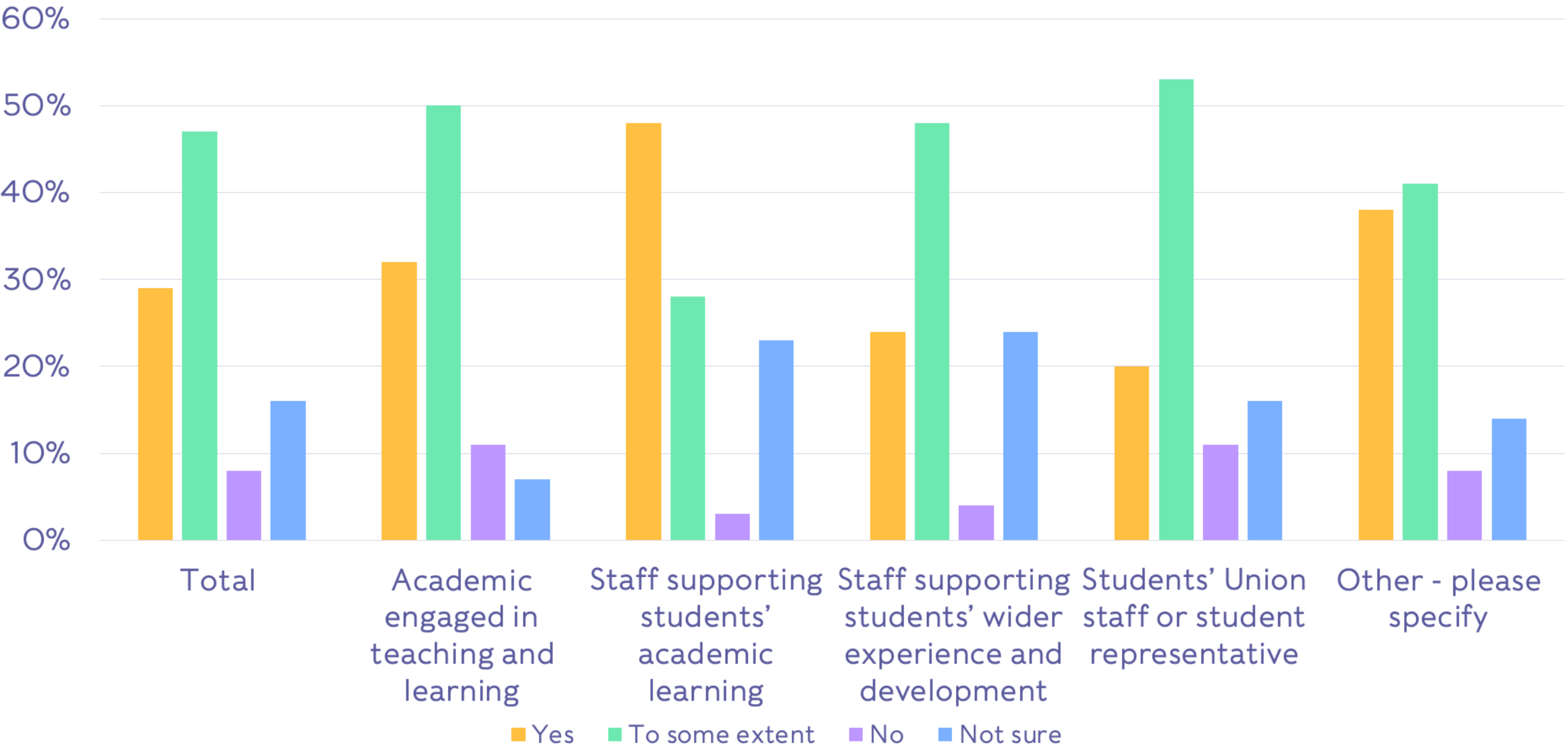


59 per cent of all respondents believe that their **institutions are working on improving academic inclusion** and a further **33 per cent** say this is happening **“to some extent”**.

Examples of improving inclusion on courses included throughout our research include:

- Diverse curriculum
- A choice of assessment styles
- Accessibility of online resources
- Diverse external speakers.

Does your university, HE provider or college engage with students on assessing how inclusive courses are and working to make improvements? (split by role type)



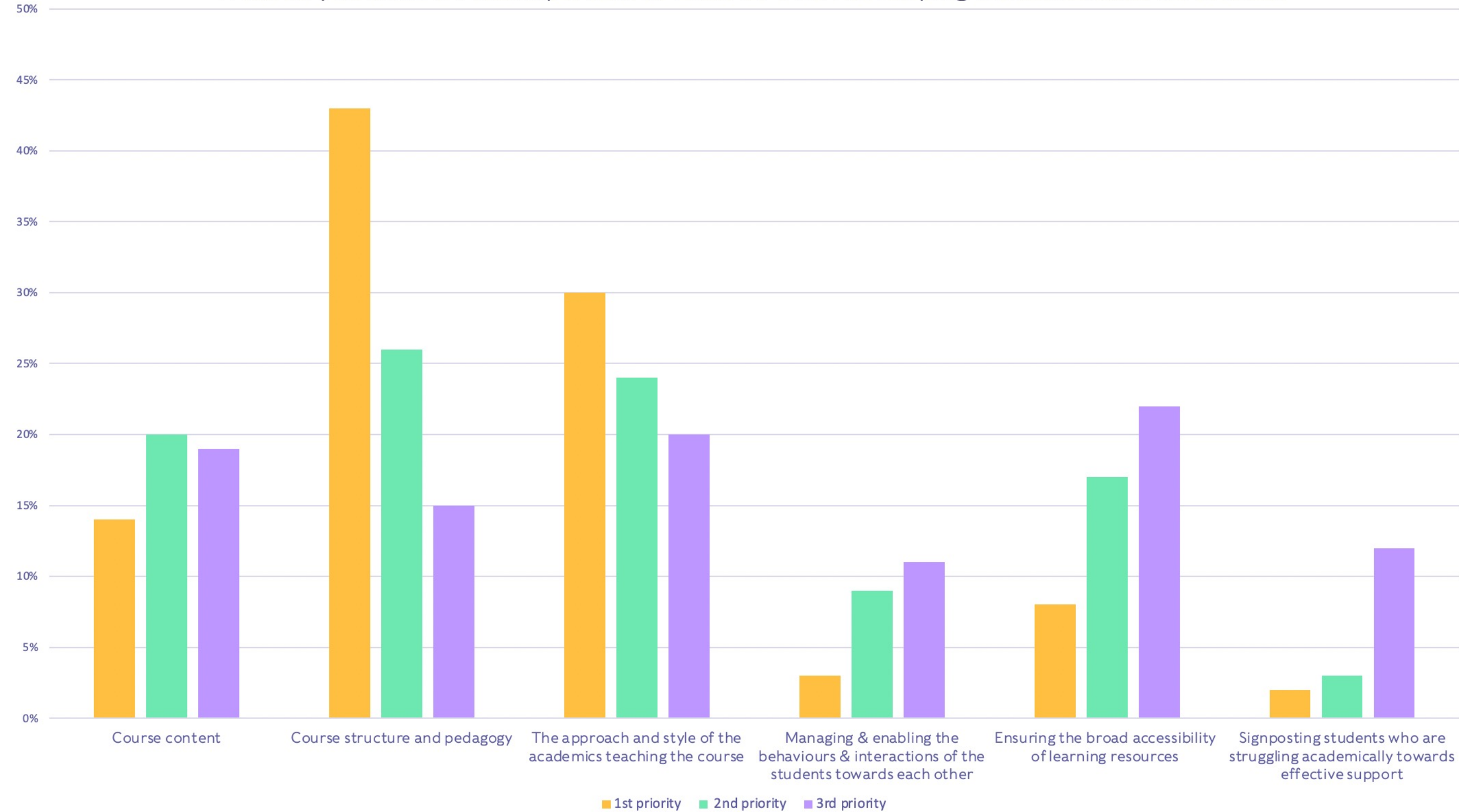
“The key thing is always to involve students at all stages of decision-making and action - e.g from the initial ideas stage, to planning, implementation and evaluation. ‘Belongingness’ does not come from having things done ‘to’ you - it’s all about collaboration and co-construction.”

29 per cent of total participants agree that their institution **engages with students when accessing and improving inclusion** on courses and a further **47 per cent** agree that this happens “**to some extent**”.

STUDENT VIEW

This corresponds with positive themes from our student diary analysis – where students described how being actively involved in processes to improve inclusion fosters both academic confidence and a sense of belonging.

What do you think is most important to focus on when developing inclusive academic courses?



Only **8 per cent** prioritised the **broad accessibility of learning resources** when developing inclusive courses as their first priority.

STUDENT VIEW

This is surprisingly low in light of the heightened awareness of accessibility needs, the fulfilment of these needs through online resources since Covid-19, and the comments from our student diaries where many students viewed the accessibility of content and resources as an indicator of inclusion.

This included the availability of books in both the online library and physical libraries (and the opening hours of the latter), the availability of online slides and recordings of lectures and how quickly they were made available online after the class, and the affordability of textbooks. Students with disabilities, part time jobs or caring responsibilities felt most strongly about this aspect of inclusion.

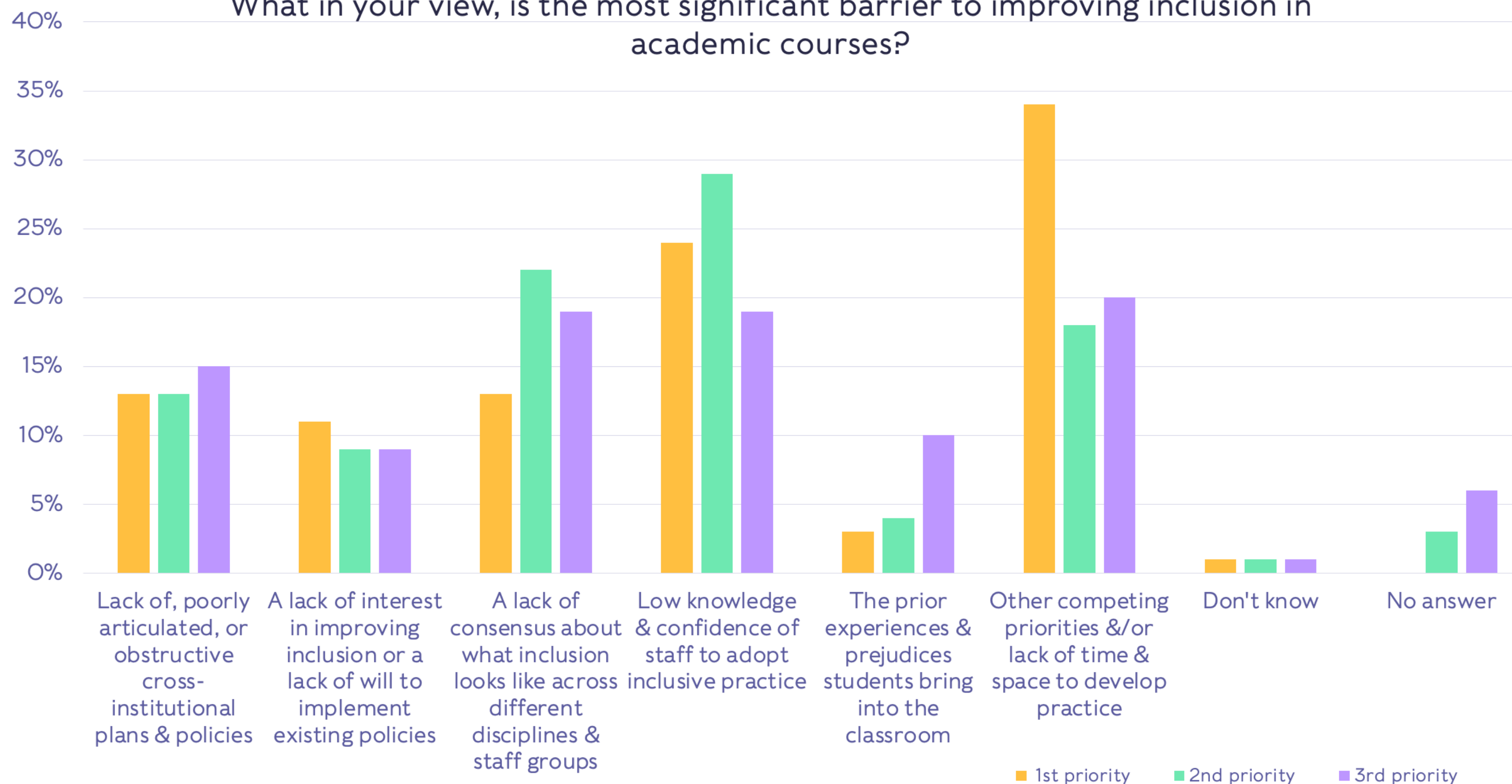
“High level, clear leadership is essential to be able to create change in large, complex institutions and I feel that we are currently stuck in the process of talking about wanting better outcomes without the focused attention on action. Wide ranging best practice examples for all departments would be very helpful as well as cross-institution research and evaluation which can be used to evidence interventions.”

When asked what the first **most significant barrier to improving inclusion in academic courses** was, just over **a third** of all respondents selected **“other competing priorities”**. Excessive workload is a topic which has emerged many times throughout this research and is something which will need to be addressed carefully before any recommendations are actioned.

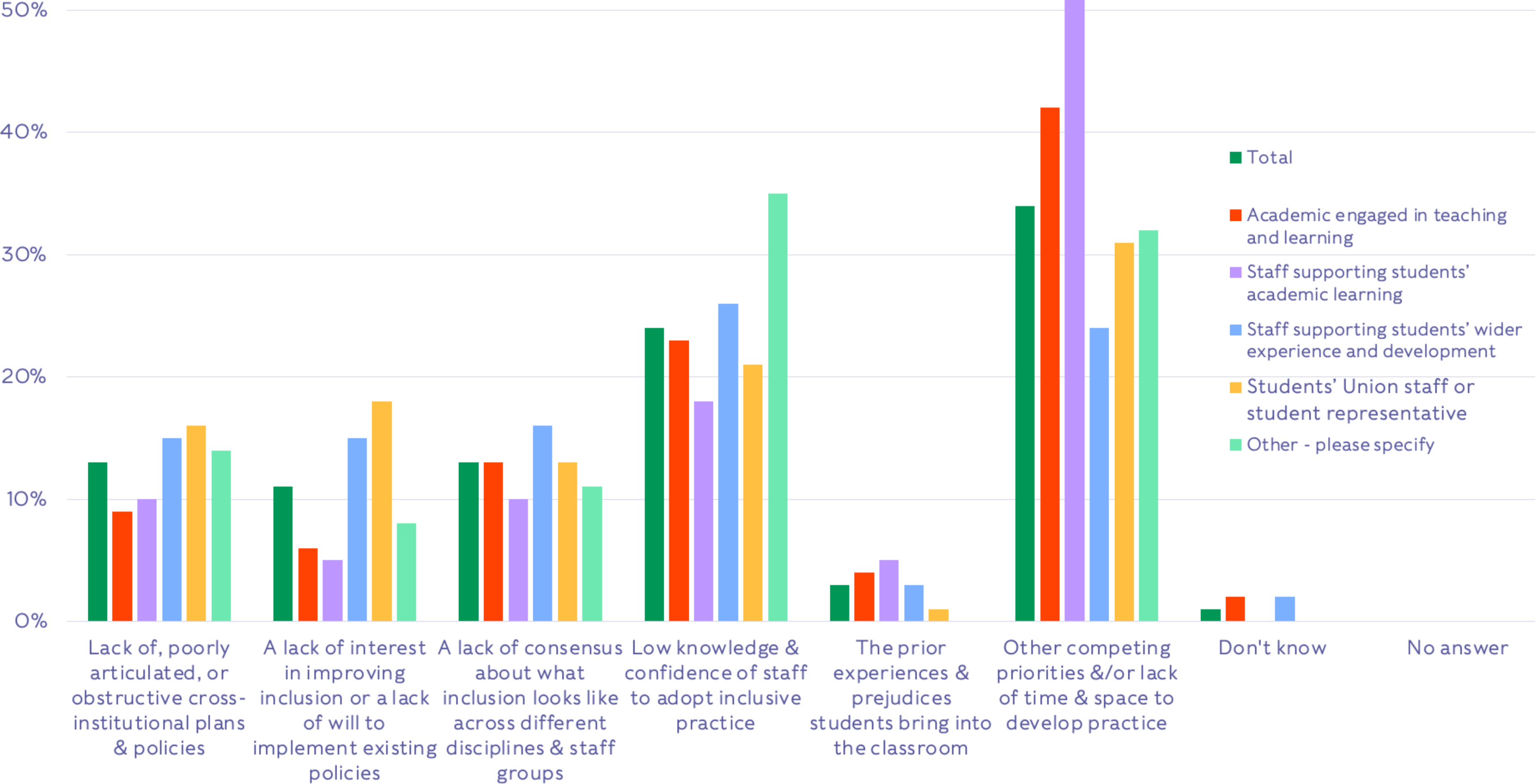
“I believe many staff wish to improve academic inclusion, However, the approach is disjointed across the institution and the resources required - staff time in particular - are lacking.”

13 per cent of respondents believed that **poorly articulated policy, or obstructive cross-institutional plans and policies** prevented improving inclusion on academic courses.

What in your view, is the most significant barrier to improving inclusion in academic courses?

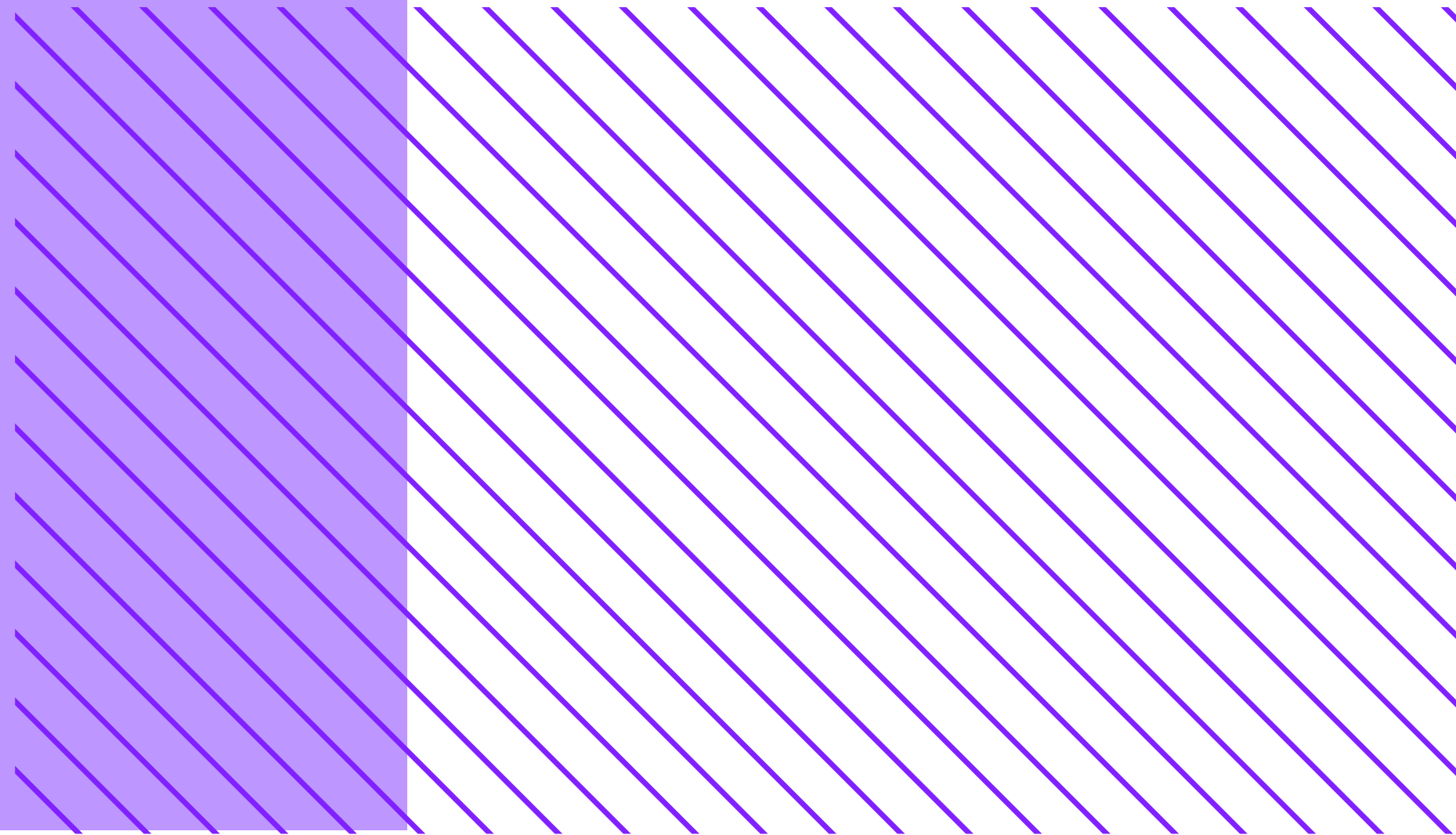


What is the most significant barrier to improving inclusion in academic courses? –
1st priority, split by role.



Only **6 per cent of academics** believed the first most significant barrier was a **“lack of interest in improving inclusion or a lack of will to implement existing policies”**.

Academic confidence



What in your view, makes the most significant difference to whether a student feels confident about their academic skills on arrival at university?



Most staff believe that **“the student’s demographic background and personal socio-economic circumstances”** makes the most significant difference to whether they feel confident about their academic skills on arrival at university’ although the results are relatively evenly split.

A fifth believed that “the student’s personal efficacy” made the most significant difference to whether they feel confident about their academic skills.

Personal efficacy is the ability to manage time, motivate oneself, and ask for help if needed. It is worth institutions exploring how they help students develop these skills.

The even distribution of answers, as well as different answers based on area of expertise may indicate a range of factors contributing to academic confidence.

When broken down by role type staff supporting students’ academic learning tend to see students’ background as the most significant influence on their confidence, whereas Students’ Union staff or student representatives see this as the quality of their induction.

“Why take the time to develop a student's academic confidence when you have a research proposal to develop. The research will get you promoted - working with students won't”

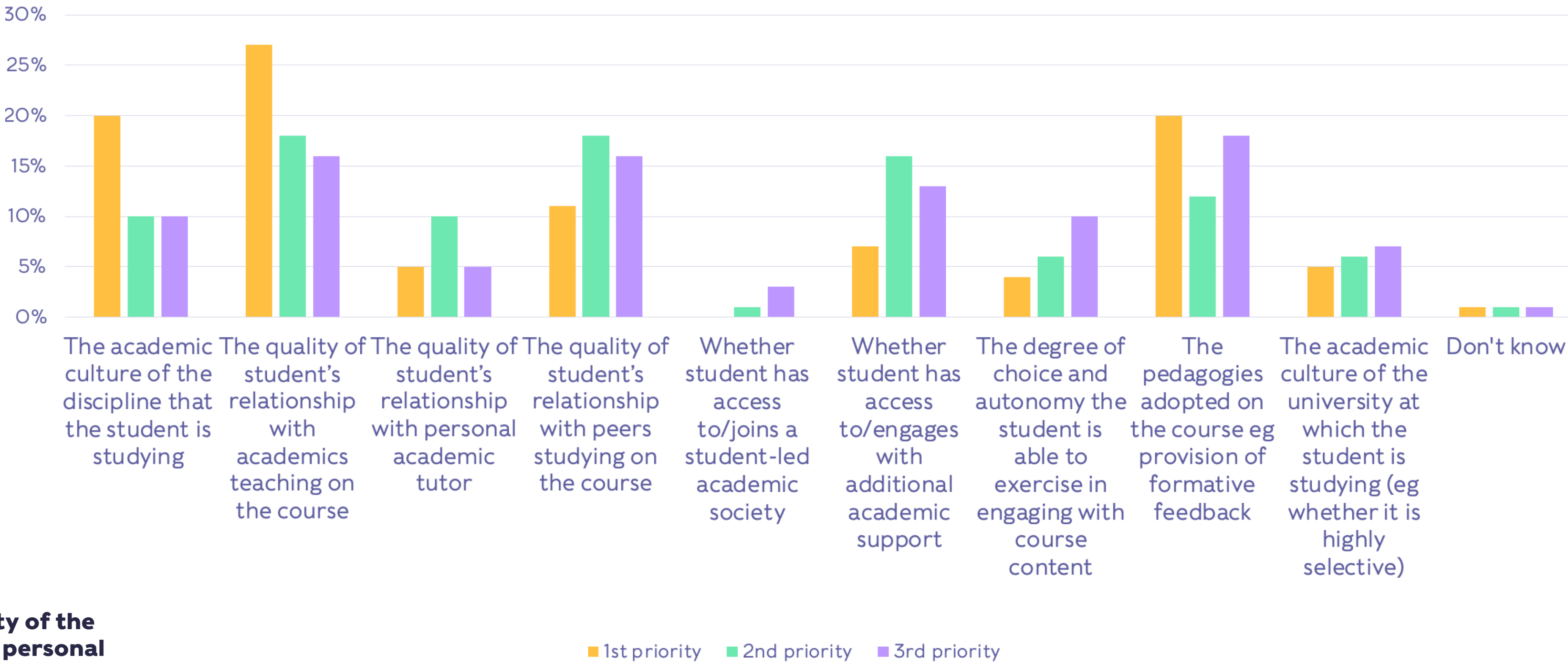
27 per cent of respondents believe that **“The quality of student’s relationship with academics teaching on the course”** makes the most significant difference to their academic confidence.

This position was also verified by students themselves in the learner survey and diary analysis.

However, the open text comment raised dwindling resources and growing student numbers.

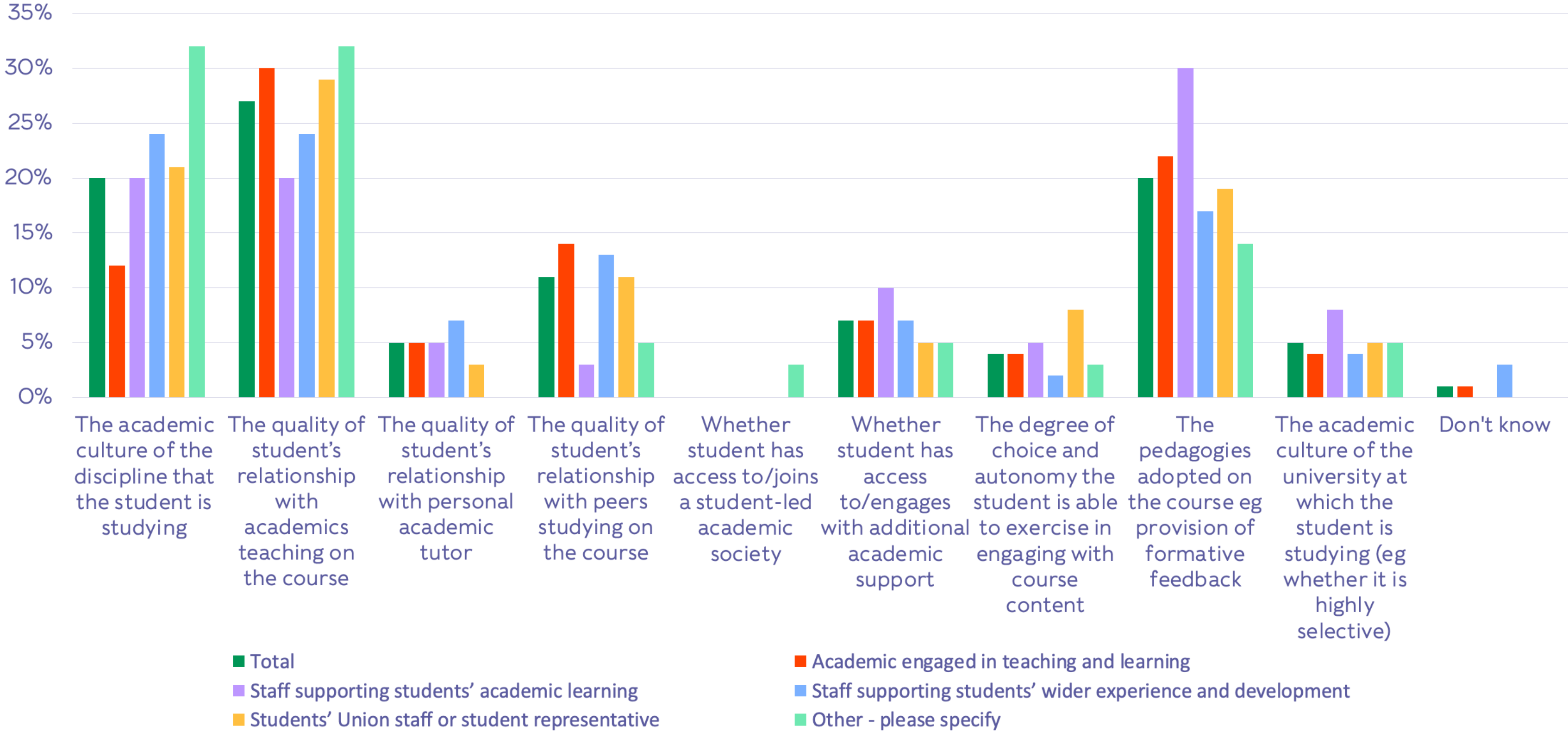
Only **5 per cent** ranked **“the quality of the student’s relationship with their personal academic tutor”** as their first priority which raises questions about the role of the personal tutor versus the role of the academic when it comes to building student confidence.

What in your view, makes the most significant difference to a student’s ability to develop their academic confidence during their course of study?



“We are exhausted and are continually getting asked to do things by management that take away time and energy from developing that sort of culture. It is all cutting budgets, streamlining/cutting services, etc. You can't build a good programme in that atmosphere when the university efforts and headwinds are all against it.”

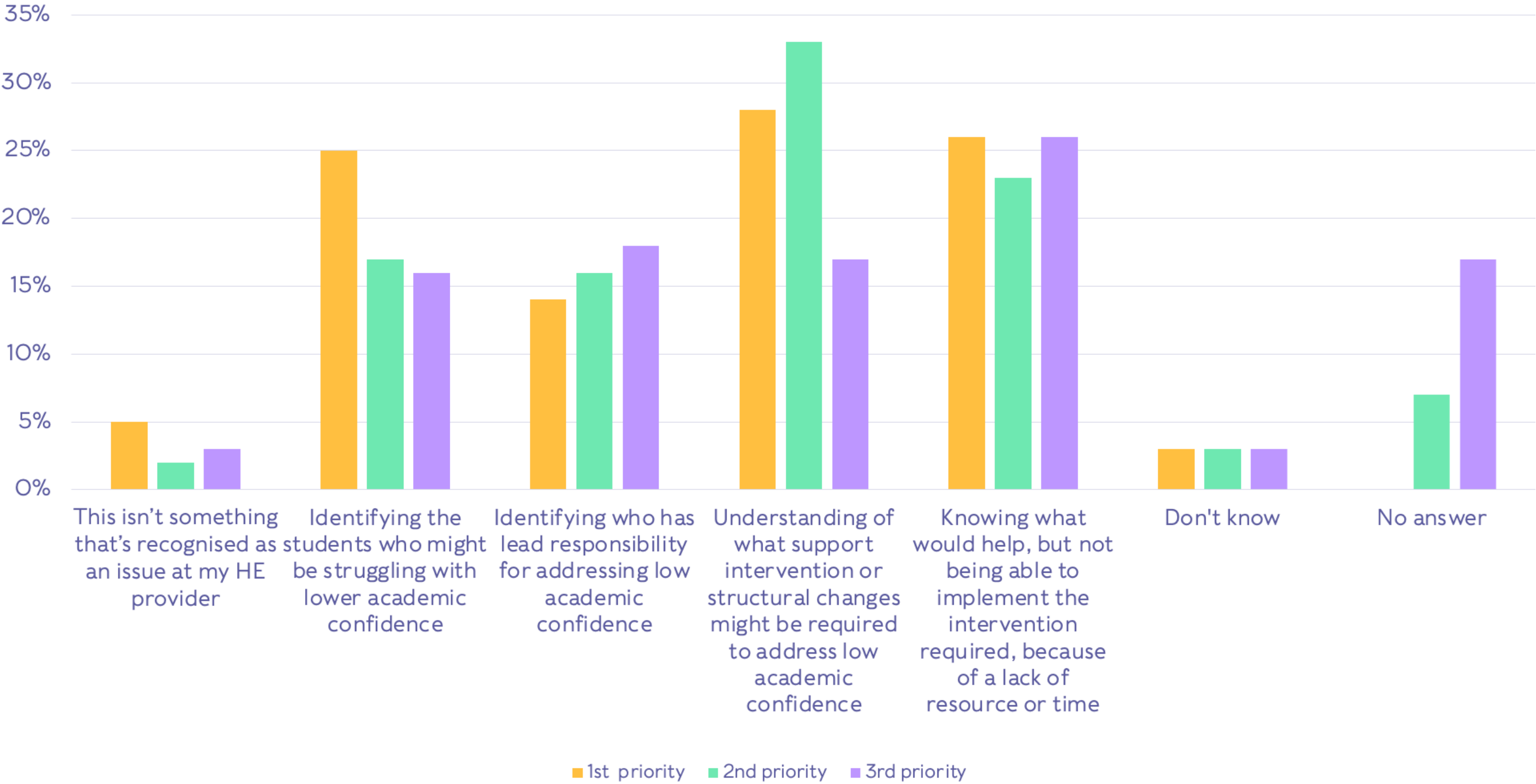
What makes the most significant difference to a student's ability to develop their academic confidence during their course of study? 1st priority, role split



40 per cent of overall respondents believed that **“The academic culture of the discipline that the student is studying”** made a -significant difference to their academic confidence. This raises questions about whether there are certain courses which are seen as competitive or collaborative, and whether student confidence is considered when these are designed.

“Interventions around academic confidence are often located within WP or Success departments, which reinforces a deficit model. Academic confidence should be nurtured and supported as standard, rather than re-actively when a student is considered to be struggling with course content”

What in your view, is the most significant barrier to supporting the development of students’ academic confidence?



“On our larger intake courses there are many students slipping through the net, particularly in the first term, we are not realising they are falling behind until the first tranche of results”

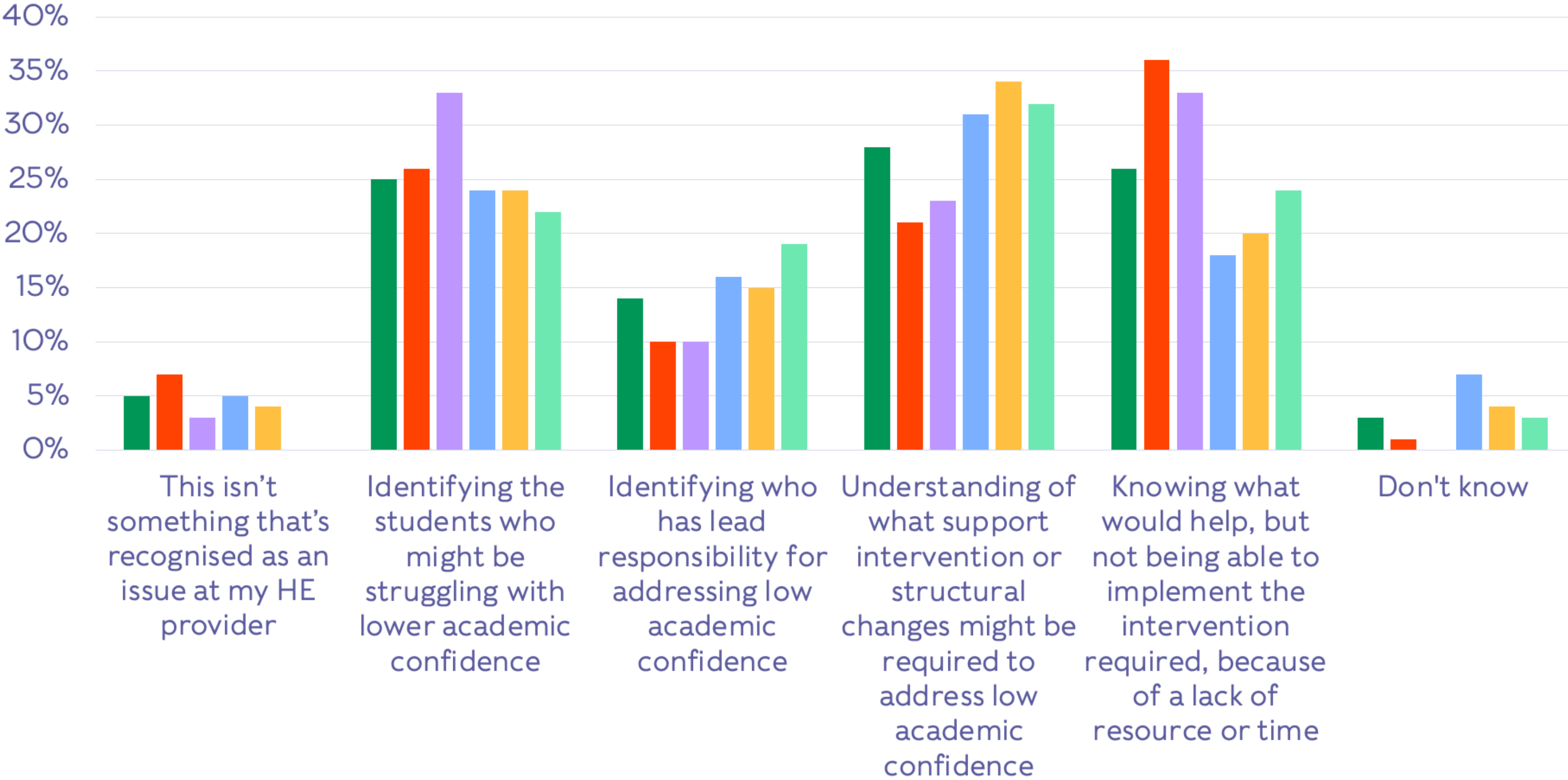
The top three barriers – selected by respondents - to support the development of students’ academic confidence are

- 1. Understanding of what support, intervention, or structural change might be required to address low academic confidence’
- 2. Knowing what would help, but not being able to implement the intervention
- 3. Identifying the students who might be struggling with lower academic confidence

“Students seem to be given wrong or just strange advice on where and how to seek additional support. This is top down. Vital help pages are hidden on the university intranet. Academic staff themselves do not know what support.”

In the open text responses, the first the two barriers were largely attributed to inconsistent pedagogy across the institutions as well as a lack of resource. Some respondents said that they knew what “top down” approaches were recommended but that they did not have the capacity or resources to implement them, others said that they were unsure of what university services were available to recommend to students.

What is the most significant barrier to supporting the development of students' academic confidence? - 1st priority

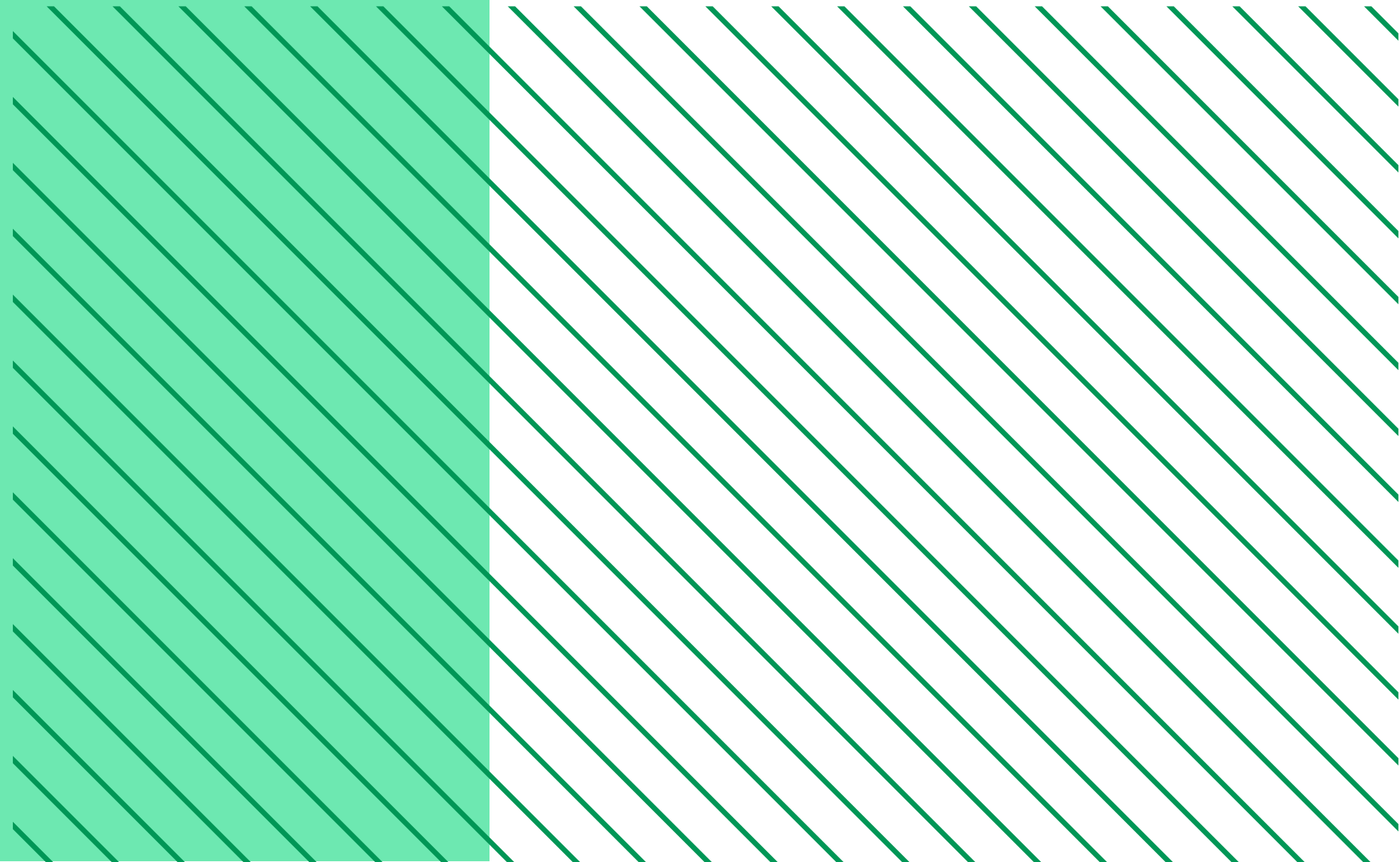


The third most significant barrier - selected by respondents - to supporting the development of students' academic confidence is **"identifying which students may be struggling"**. In the open text responses, many respondents elaborated that intervention strategies often rely on deficit models – particularly those aimed at widening participation students – which may result in students being reluctant to draw attention to themselves as lacking ability.

"Confidence itself is a barrier to asking and taking help"

- Total
- Academic engaged in teaching and learning
- Staff supporting students' academic learning
- Staff supporting students' wider experience and development
- Students' Union staff or student representative
- Other - please specify

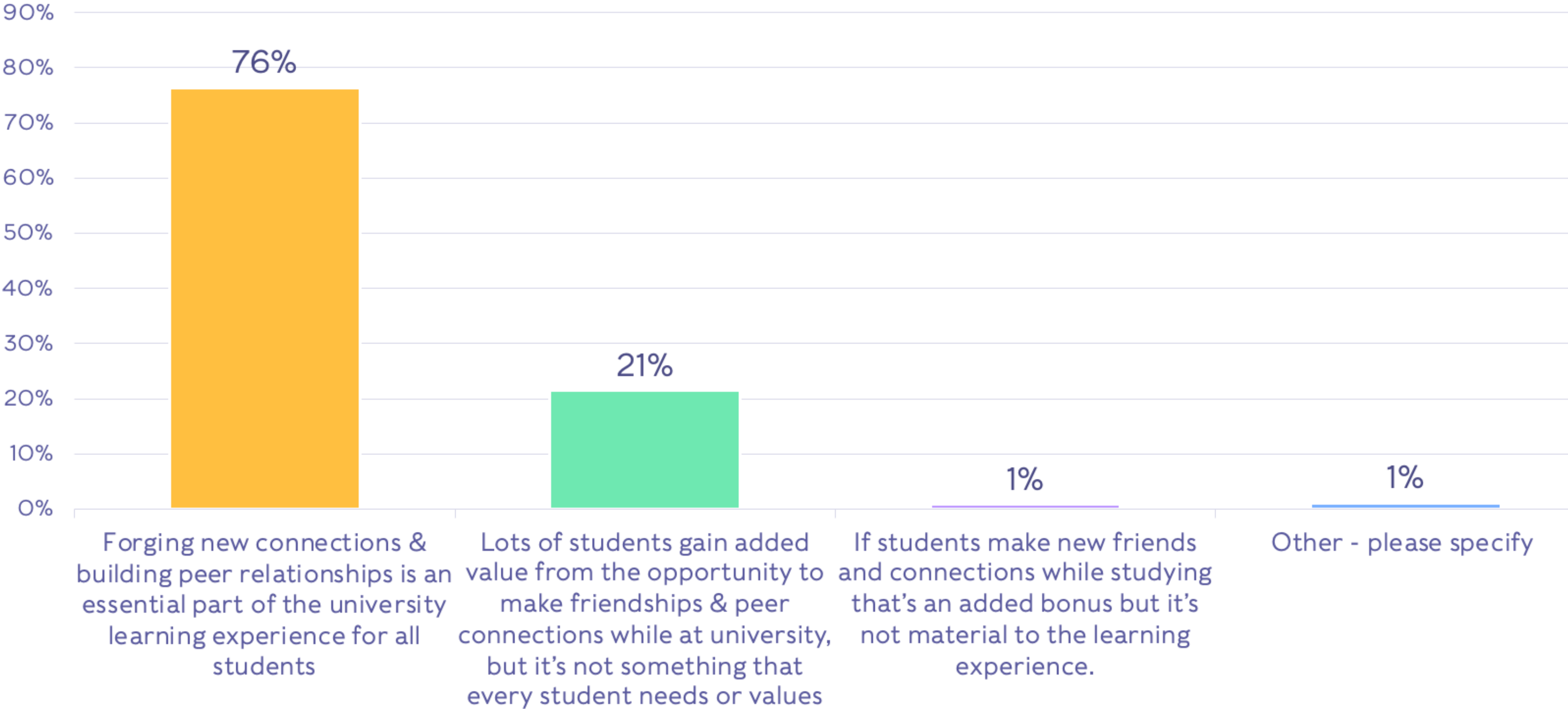
Peer connections and networks



If you think about the degree of importance that is afforded to students developing peer connections as part of their university learning experience, how would you characterise your general view of the issue?

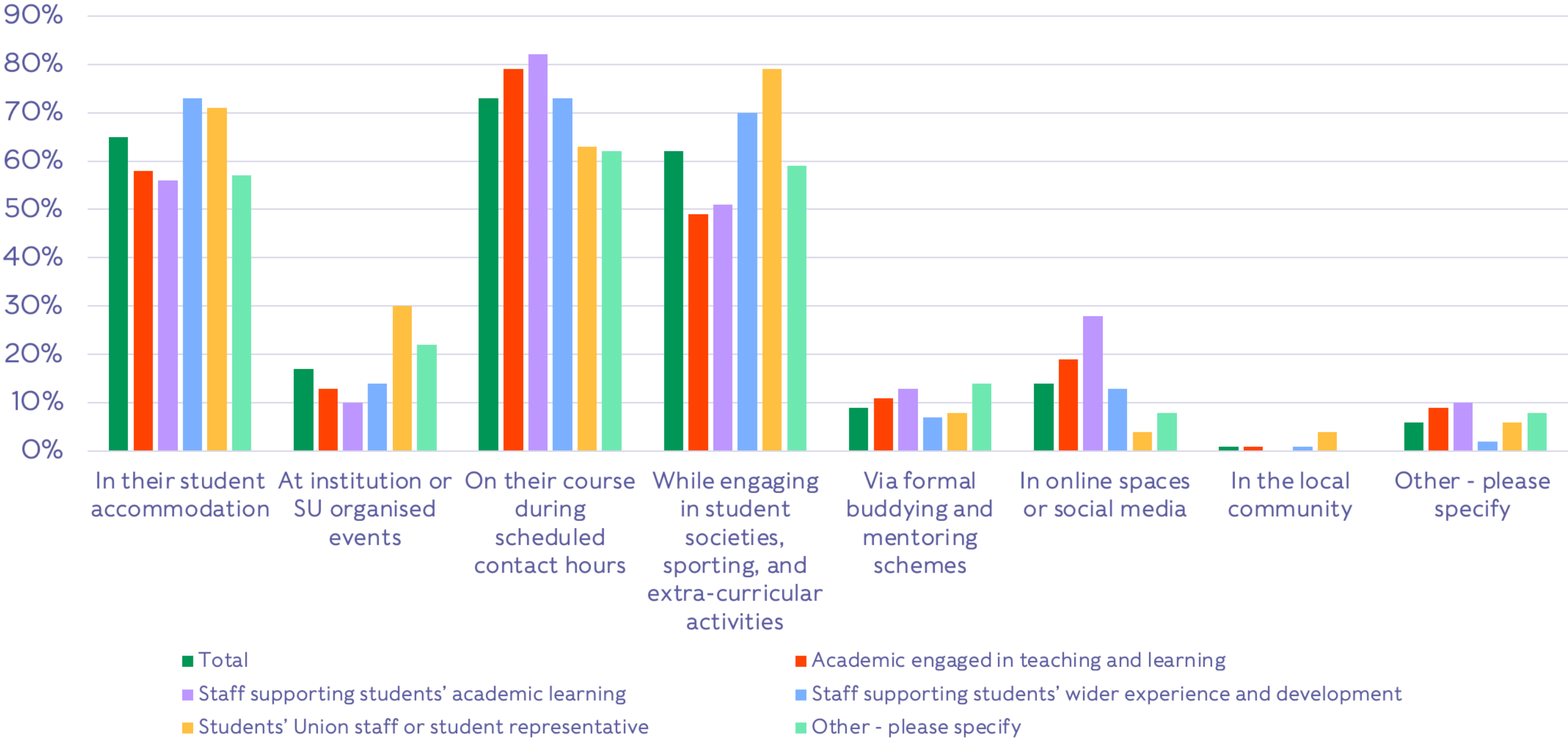
76 per cent of respondents believe that **“Forging new connections & building peer relationships is an essential part of the university learning experience for all students”** compared with 1 per cent who saw it as “an added bonus” but “not material to the learning experience.”

STUDENT VIEW
This supports findings from our learners’ survey. When we asked students what would help them feel a greater sense of belonging at university, the top answer was **“getting to know other people on my course better”**, closely followed by **“developing closer or more friendships.”**



“Peer support is so important as it can make it much easier for students to ask what they worry might be 'silly' questions and demystify some of the different experiences on the course.”

In your opinion, what is the most significant “space” in which students are most likely to forge sustained peer connections and develop friendships while at university?
Split by role.

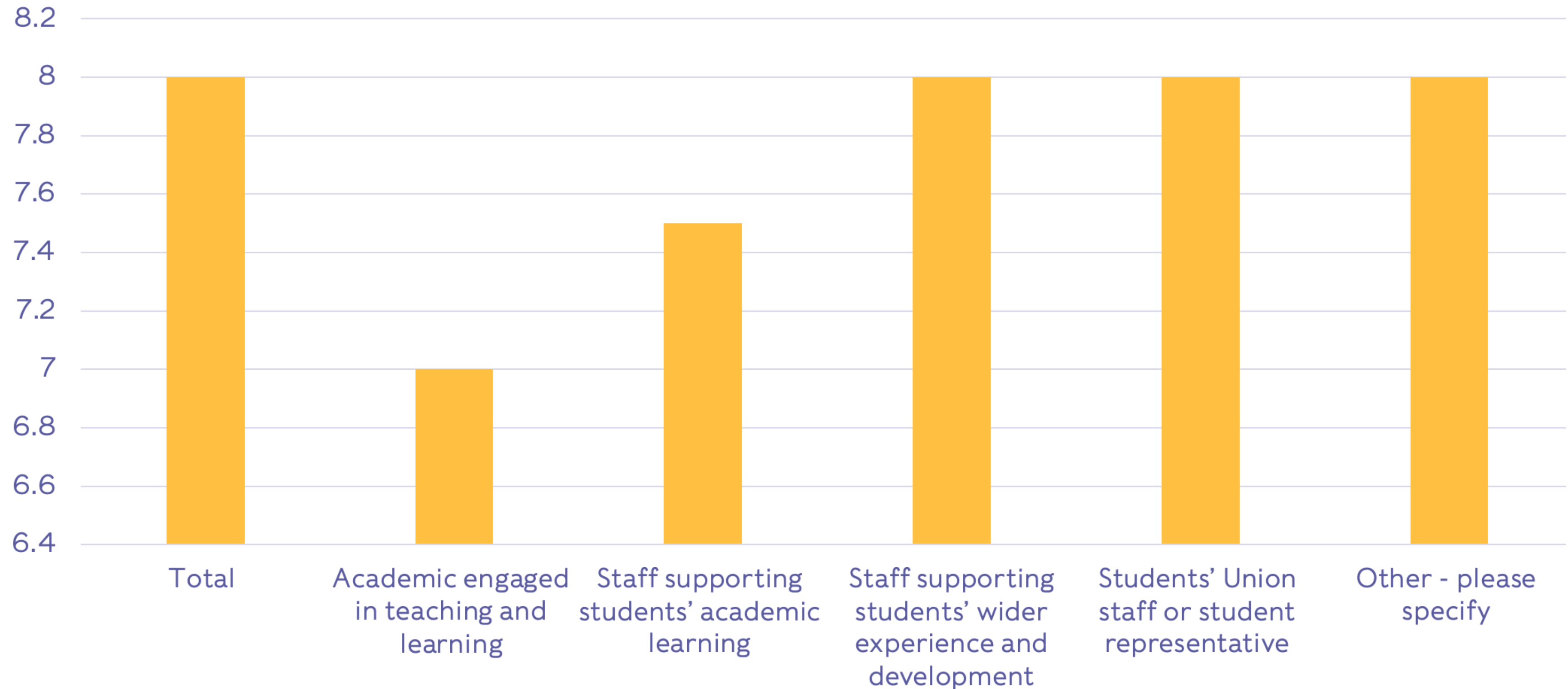


When we asked respondents what in what “space” students are most likely to forge connections with their peers, the majority of respondents selected **“on their course during scheduled contact hours.”**

This was followed by **“in their student accommodation”** which was closely followed by **“while engaging in student societies, sporting, and extra curricular activities”** course.

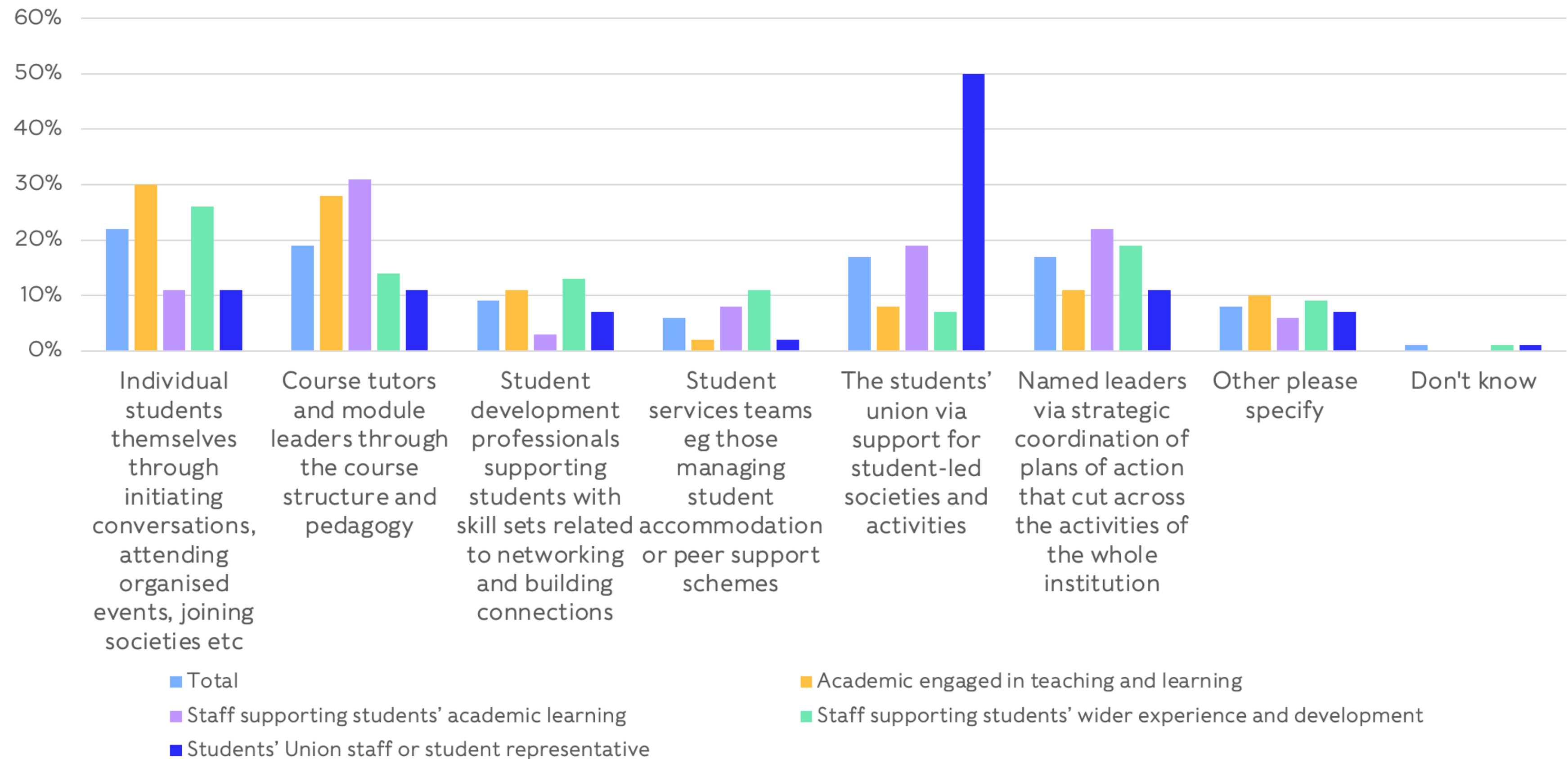
“The course is the one central place we know all students will interact and the one place we can definitely influence in a way which is a core part of the learning experience, instead of as a bolt-on”

What degree of responsibility do you believe your institution has for enabling students to build peer connections? Split by role



When asked to rate the level of responsibility the institution has for enabling students to build peer connections, the median score was **8 out of 10** (10 being the highest and most active level of involvement).

Who, in your view, should have lead responsibility for facilitating peer connections and friendships among students? Please select just one.
(split by role)

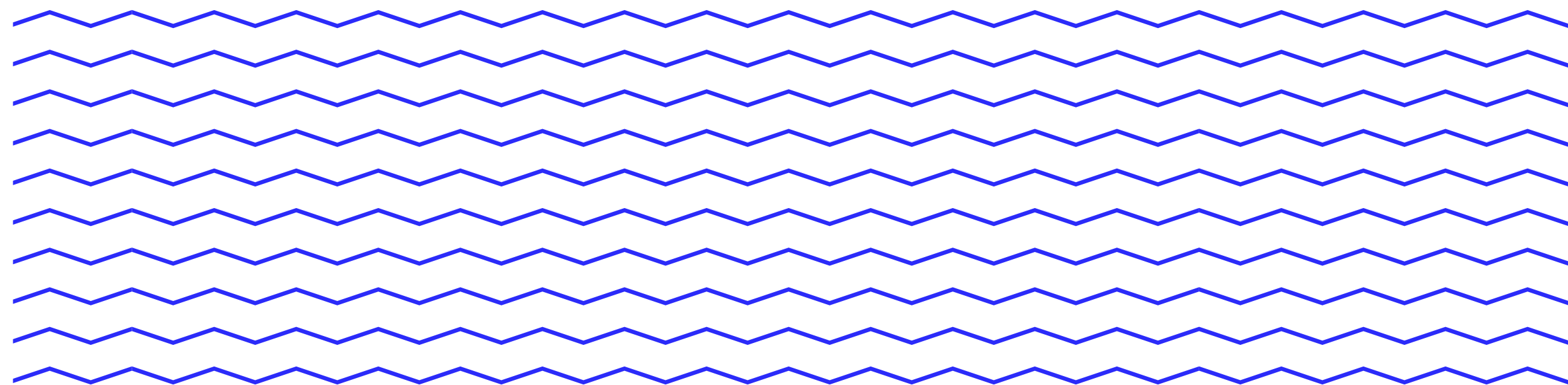


In terms of who should have lead responsibility for enabling students to build peer connections, the three top choices were **the students themselves, the course tutors and module leaders, and the students' unions**. Many respondents felt it was a collective responsibility but that the course was where all students would definitely interact – particularly given that extra-curricular activities such as clubs and societies would not work for all students.

In the open comments, there were differences of opinion about the extent to which academic staff should have lead responsibility:

“The course is the one central place we know all students will interact and the one place we can definitely influence in a way which is a core part of the learning experience as instead of a bolt-on”.

“It would muddy the waters (let alone break teaching staff) to also have the responsibility to facilitate the building of social connections”.



Thank you



Wonkhe and Pearson would like to thank all the staff and students who took part in this survey.

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