UPP Foundation

Secret Life of Students, 2024

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About UPPF

SUPPORT HIGHER EDUCATION'S VALUE TO SOCIETY

DEVELOP GREEN AND SUSTAINABLE CIVIC UNIVERSITIES

ENABLE STUDENTS AND GRADUATES TO SUCCEED

Student Futures 2

Themes for Student Futures

Support for students before they reach university

An induction into university life for each year of study

Support for mental health and wellbeing

A clear outline of the teaching students will receive and the necessary tools to access it

Activities inside and outside the curriculum that build skills, networks and communities

A clear pathway towards graduate outcomes

#studentfutures

Why Student Futures 2?

- Revisit the six themes of student success highlighted in the UPP Foundation Student Futures Manifesto published in February 2022.

- To gain a better understanding of changes to the student experience that have occurred over the last two years

- To identify and share case studies of institutions which are doing innovative work to support the student experience

- To begin to collect a time series of data to track changes to the student experience every two years

Methodology

- Poll of 1,682 students in England in November 2023, undertaken by Cibyl, Group GTI's research platform.

- Eight in-depth interviews with representatives from institutions who are doing innovative work to support the student experience.

- Eight focus groups of undergraduate students studying in a mixture of English universities: (two first year, two all years, two international only, two all year home students)

- Report in three sections

  - Section 1: Starting university

  - Section 2: Thriving at university

  - Section 3: An education to succeed both in and after university
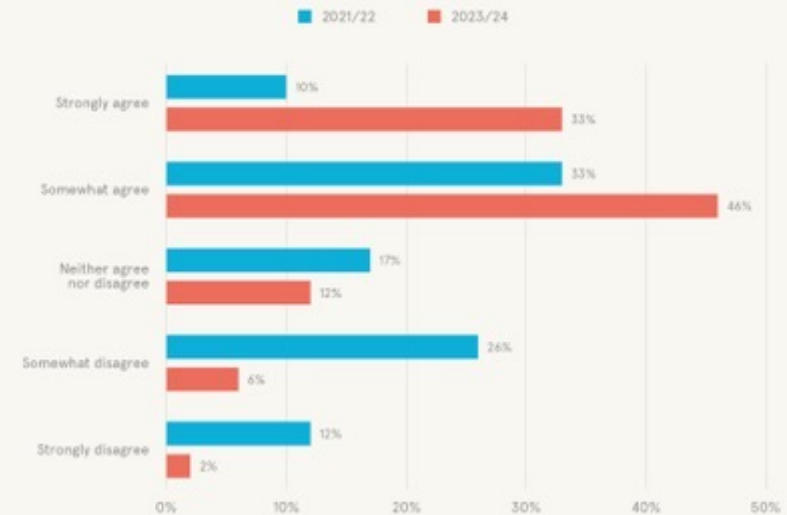
Section 1:
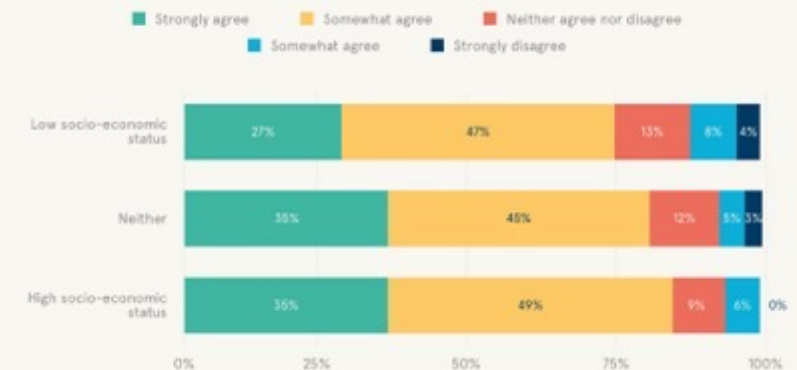# Starting university

Starting university

Students are feeling more prepared than two years ago

- 79% of students agreed that their university had given them all the support they needed to prepare for the start of term

- Only 8% felt that their university had not given them all of the support they needed to prepare for the start of term.

- 74% of students self-reported that they felt they were working at or above the level they expected to be

- But students from lower socio-economic backgrounds were slightly less likely to report that they felt they had all the support they needed than their more advantaged peers

To what extent do you agree that your university has given you all the support you need to prepare for the start of term?

■ 2021/22   ■ 2023/24

Strongly agree: 10% / 33%
Somewhat agree: 33% / 46%
Neither agree nor disagree: 17% / 12%
Somewhat disagree: 26% / 6%
Strongly disagree: 12% / 2%

To what extent do you agree that your university has given you all the support you need to prepare for the start of term?

■ Strongly agree   ■ Somewhat agree   ■ Neither agree nor disagree
■ Somewhat agree   ■ Strongly disagree

Low socio-economic status: 27% | 47% | 13% | 8% | 4%
Neither: 35% | 45% | 12% | 5% | 3%
High socio-economic status: 35% | 49% | 9% | 6% | 0%

Starting university

Students want a longer induction period

- (78%) of poll respondents shared that they had an induction or "Welcome Week" at the start of this academic year

- 55% agree that universities should extend the induction period across the whole of the first term for new students

"In the introductory lectures, they gave out the emails of all the different places to go for financial support and mental health support and support with work, and all kinds of different teams for different aspects of well being. And I thought that was really good. Whether those teams are helpful or not, I don't know. They might be rubbish. But they signposted where to go very well."

Male, 18, Philosophy, post-92 university, Home student

Section 2: Thriving at university

Thriving at university

In general students are positive about their university experience

- 74% of respondents said they felt happy at university

- 63% agreed with the statement "I feel I belong at my university

- 57% agreed that university had had a positive impact on their mental health overall.

BUT….

Thriving at university

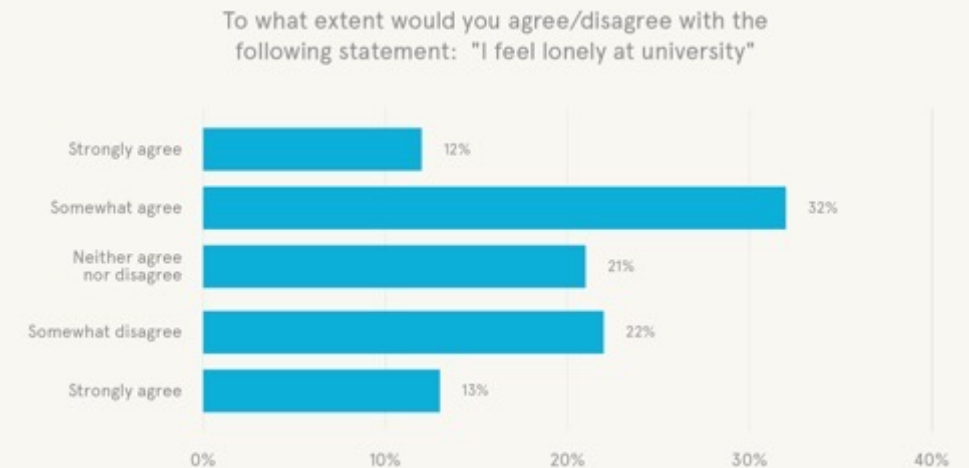Challenges around loneliness and student mental health provision

- 44% of students agreed with the statement "I feel lonely at university"

- 22% felt that their university experience had had a negative impact on their mental health overall

- 27% of students would feel uncomfortable contacting their university for support if they were struggling with their mental health

"My uni does a lot of yoga for mental health, and "woof Wednesdays" where it's like "oh if you're feeling bad mental health, come pat these dogs!", that's nice. It's not really actual help"

19, Female, History, research intensive university, Home student

"Last year, I sort of like fell through the net, just because I had circumstances that they didn't really notice. Like, I stopped showing up. Nobody noticed. My friend as well: similar circumstances, she stopped showing up, she stopped submitting assignments, nobody noticed."

21, Female, Psychology, research intensive university, Home student

To what extent would you agree/disagree with the following statement: "I feel lonely at university"

Response	Percentage
Strongly agree	12%
Somewhat agree	32%
Neither agree nor disagree	21%
Somewhat disagree	22%
Strongly agree	13%

Thriving at university

Students think belonging is important, but opportunities to engage and build up a community and connection are not guaranteed

- 91% of our poll respondents agreed that it was important for students to feel part of the university community

"The social [aspect], especially when you first get to uni, can be lonely. If you don't have a good flat, if you're constantly thinking, what am I doing here, why can't I get on with these people, that definitely contributed more to my mental health than my work load."

19, Female, History, research intensive university, Home student

"You worry about work, but if you haven't got a good social life, that's a lot more important"

21, Male, Neuroscience, Russell Group university, Home student

"I feel like there's a lot of anxiety about missing out. I was constantly told about this uni experience, but then my flatmates were quite quiet, didn't really go out, I was constantly anxious about whether I was missing the uni experience. When you don't find the right people, it's really difficult"

19, Female, History, research intensive university, Home student

"I feel like I belong on the course that I'm doing. At the uni, I don't know. But I think that's more because our teaching campus is like completely different, is completely separate to the main university campus."
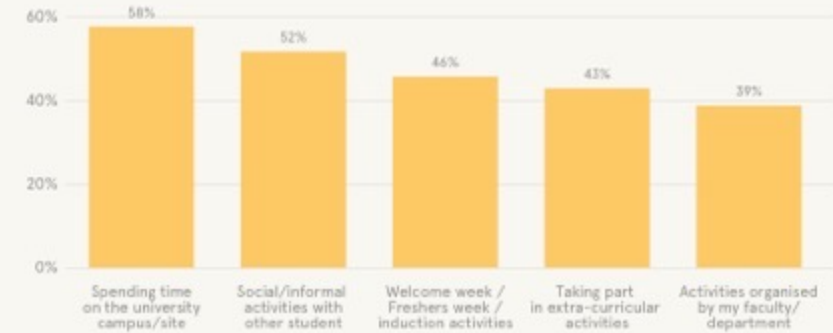
20, Female, Primary Education, redbrick university, Home student

Thriving at university

- Time on campus was ranked the most popular activity for making students feel more part of the university community but...

- 20% have never engaged in extracurricular activities outside of their scheduled teaching hour, and a further 30% had only engaged once or twice

- 44% of respondents expected to be less engaged with activities outside of the classroom than they have been

- Respondents said that there were a number of barriers to engaging in extracurricular activities including a lack of time (49%), feeling anxious (28%), and the expense (23%).
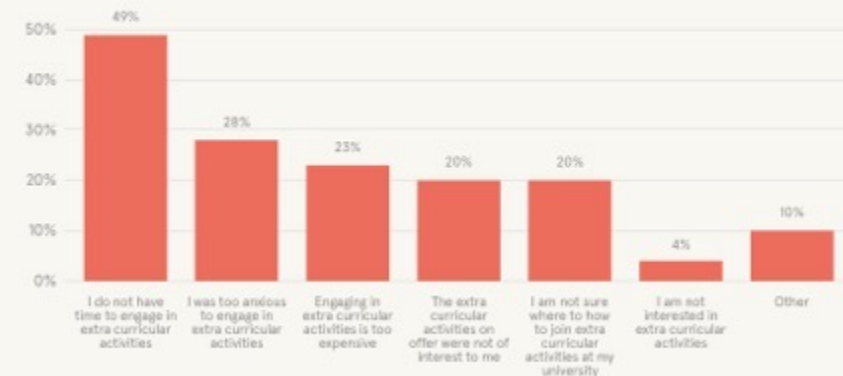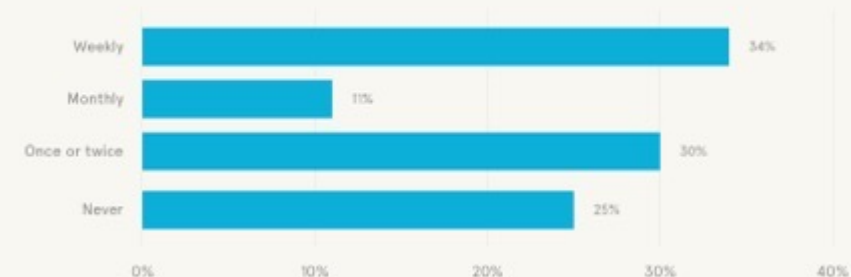
Thriving at university

The cost of learning crisis is negatively impacting participation

- The pressures of the cost of living crisis and the insufficiency of maintenance support is leaving students struggling to engage with the basics of the university experience (lectures, seminars, and campus facilities)

"I don't know if it's for every uni, but for sports clubs like hockey, apparently it's £150 something ridiculous, if you want to be on the team. I don't think it's accessible for everyone"

19, Female, Environmental Geoscience, Russell Group university, Home student

"Sometimes I miss uni because I'll prioritise taking a shift over to university, just because the amount of rent to pay is crazy, and you don't get enough support for that"

21, Female, Zoology, Russell Group university, Home student

"I have had to compromise taking classes that I wanted to take just because it doesn't fit with my [work] schedule."

21, Female, Media and Communications, redbrick university, international student

Thriving at university

A lack of agency is driving a broad feeling of apathy towards university life – and this apathy is contributing to a decline in engagement

"Everytime I go to campus, it's more of a hassle than anything else… I don't have anything against the way things are right now, and the university is trying, but it's just not realistic for them to try and make everyone feel part of the university"

19, Female, International Relations, Russell Group university, Home student

"I'm more concerned about how I'm going to eat for seven days a week than if I'm going to my lectures, and I'm here to do my lectures, but then I'm missing my lectures… it's a toxic circle"

20, Male, Geography, Russell Group university, Home student

"I go to uni, do my work, and get out as quickly as possible…I don't care about anything apart from getting my piece of paper at the end of it"

20, Male, computer science, post-92 university, Home student

"I'm only on campus for maximum two hours a day. So it's just a very little part of my life, I don't really feel like I belong there."

19, Female, international relations, Russell Group, International student

'If the uni is putting less effort into your course, then why should I put as much effort into my course as well? I'm paying a lot of money to basically have a blended course of two things that's not actually relevant and not what was advertised to me."

21, Male, ecology and conservation, research intensive university, Home student

'I only ever really feel like I'm at uni when I go in, for labs or a tutor session. Otherwise, you don't really feel like a student just like you're living with a lot of people your age….I guess I wish I felt a bit more connected, but I don't think I need it now"

21, Male, neuroscience, Russell Group university, Home student
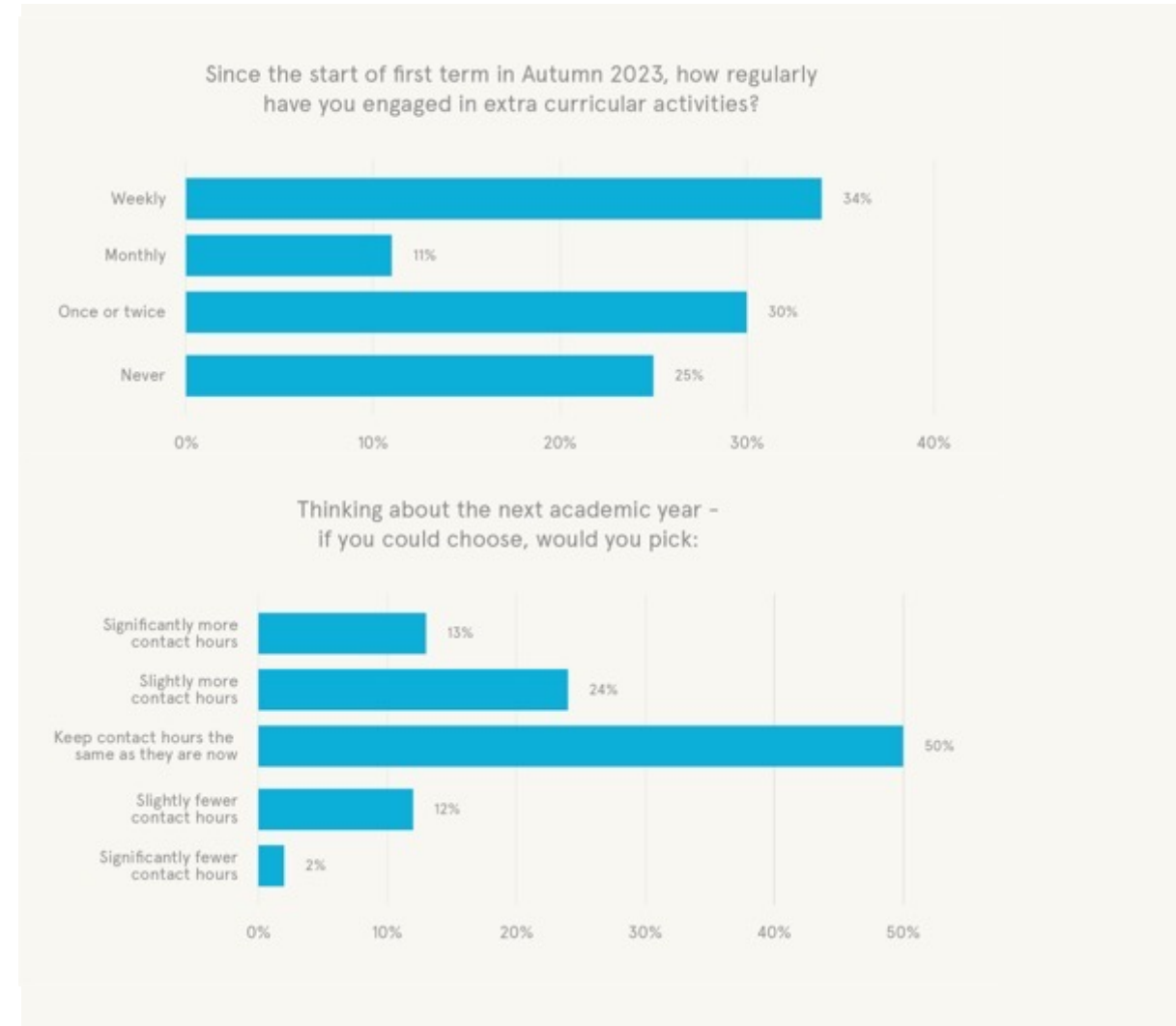
**Section 3:
An education to
succeed both in and
after university**

An education to succeed both in and after university

Access to high quality learning and teaching is a priority for students

- On the whole, students' experience of teaching and learning broadly matched what they would want if they could choose themselves.

- Contact time and engagement with academics were still considered to be the most important part of the learning and teaching experience.

- (64%) of respondents shared that they had between 5 and 15 hours of contact time each week, with 63% said that their teaching and learning experience currently matched what was outlined to them by their university prior to starting

- 31% said it was slightly different to what was outlined to them, and almost a quarter (24%) said that they felt their contact time was less than what their university set out

- (37%) of students would like more contact hours in the next academic year

Since the start of first term in Autumn 2023, how regularly have you engaged in extra curricular activities?

- Weekly — 34%
- Monthly — 11%
- Once or twice — 30%
- Never — 25%

Thinking about the next academic year – if you could choose, would you pick:

- Significantly more contact hours — 13%
- Slightly more contact hours — 24%
- Keep contact hours the same as they are now — 50%
- Slightly fewer contact hours — 12%
- Significantly fewer contact hours — 2%

An education to succeed both in and after university

- International students in our focus groups were particularly vocal about how they considered contact time with lecturers to be a key part of what their tuition fee was paying for.

"I think as it stands now, especially with international fees, it's way too expensive for the amount of contact time that we get... because I think essentially, we're paying for what, access to readings or the library and just having them tell us what readings to read? It's a bit... you know, it doesn't really make sense."

21, Female, Media and Communications, research intensive university, international student
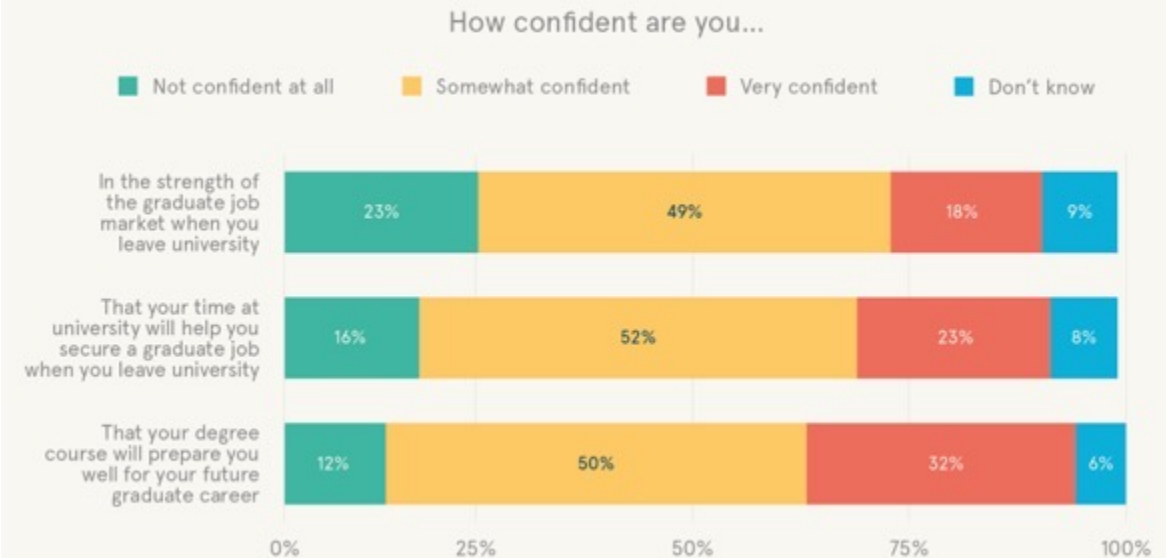
An education to succeed both in and after university

Students are increasingly driven by employment outcomes, and for many this is now the single most important factor in the university experience

The good news…

- 72% confident in the strength of the labour market when they leave university, compared to 36% in the original Student Futures report

- 75% of students were confident that their time at university would help them secure a graduate job when they left university

- 82% felt their degree course would prepare them well for a future graduate career

How confident are you...

■ Not confident at all   ■ Somewhat confident   ■ Very confident   ■ Don't know

|	Not confident at all	Somewhat confident	Very confident	Don't know
In the strength of the graduate job market when you leave university	23%	49%	18%	9%
That your time at university will help you secure a graduate job when you leave university	16%	52%	23%	8%
That your degree course will prepare you well for your future graduate career	12%	50%	32%	6%

0%   25%   50%   75%   100%
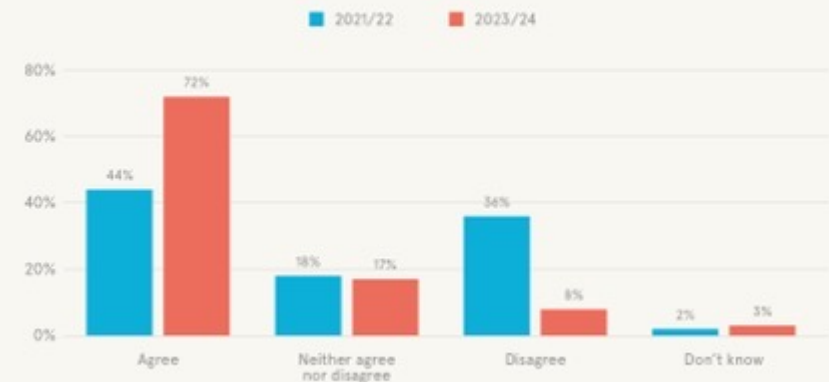
An education to succeed both in and after university

The challenge...

- only 38% were satisfied with the support their university had provided to help them find a job or work experience over the last 12 months

- 50% of students had not had any specific conversations or guidance about their career from university staff, including 46% of final year students

- 72% of students believe that their universities could do more to integrate workplace skills into the curriculum

Have you had any specific conversations or guidance about careers with staff at your university?

■ First year   ■ Second or middle years   ■ Final year

Yes — 31% / 43% / 49%
No — 61% / 48% / 46%
Unsure — 8% / 9% / 5%
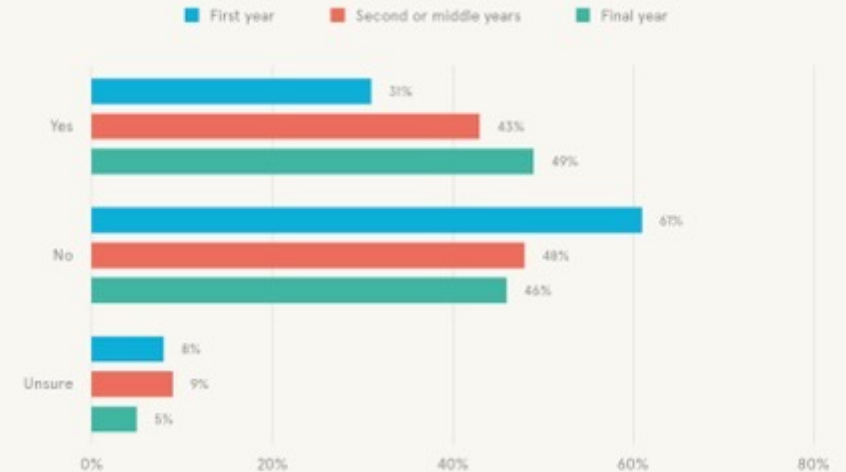
To what extent do you agree with the following statements: "there is more my university can/ could do to integrate job skills into my curriculum"

■ 2021/22   ■ 2023/24

Agree — 44% / 72%
Neither agree nor disagree — 18% / 17%
Disagree — 36% / 8%
Don't know — 2% / 3%

Summary of key findings

- Much of the **academic student experience has bounced back from the pandemic** and students are generally positive about their student experience (particularly teaching and learning).

However…

- **There is a growing gap between expectations of the student experience and reality** - students in our focus group frequently reported feeling underwhelmed by the university experience; **particularly international students.**

- **There is a growing sense of apathy and a lack of agency students feel over their university experience** - this is fostering a reluctance to participate in both learning and teaching and extracurricular activities.

- **This is compounded by the pressures of the cost of living crisis and the insufficiency of maintenance support** - which leave students struggling to engage with the basics of the university experience (lectures, seminars, and campus facilities), never mind the opportunities to participate in wider student life that has always been seen as fundamental to the higher education offer.

- **Different groups of students impacted more severely by this** (see Jim Dikinson's article on disabled students). This has exacerbated the gaps in the student experience exposed by Covid. **BUT** it would be a huge mistake to think of this as simply WP issue or even something which only really impacts non-selective universities.

- **Nuanced differences between the polling and focus groups**, with the former more positive and latter more pessimistic/disengaged.

UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission: Two Years On

Research supported by Group GTI | gti

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