

Briefing: Student Academic Experience Survey - 2021

November 2021

Introduction

The Student Academic Experience Survey (SAES) 2021¹ – conducted with 10,186 full-time undergraduate students by Advance HE, the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), and YouthSight (a research consultancy and data services provider) between February and March 2021 – has shown substantial declines in several key measures including value for money, meeting expectations, and student wellbeing. The prolonged use of online teaching and learning methods due to the Covid-19 pandemic, reductions in timetabled contact hours, fewer opportunities to interact with fellow students and staff, and lower quality assessment feedback are significant factors contributing to poorer student experiences this year.

Value-for-money

Just 27% of respondents feel they have received **good value-for-money** in their course, which is the lowest level ever recorded in the survey. Conversely, 44% feel they have received **poor value**, which is the highest level on record. Respondents noted that tuition fees, in-person contact hours/teaching, and teaching quality are the top factors contributing to their perceptions of poor/very poor value-for-money. Overall, students felt that online teaching and learning was not worth the tuition fees charged, especially in cases where students missed out on **practical, placement, and field-based elements** of their courses.

Meeting expectations

27% of respondents feel their experience has been **worse than expected**, up from 12-13% over the last several years. Only 13% of respondents feel their experience has been **better than expected**, down from 26% last year. Students in their first or second year were more likely to be disappointed by their experience than third-year students. Factors such as lack of in-person teaching, limited interaction with staff and fellow students, and insufficient pandemic-related support contributed to worse-than-expected experiences.

Teaching intensity & Quality of teaching and assessment

Respondents reported higher levels of independent study as well as **fewer timetabled contact hours** and placement or fieldwork hours. Only 50% of respondents were satisfied with their timetabled contact hours (down from 62%+ in previous years) and 30% were unsatisfied (up from 19%). Student perceptions of **teaching quality** has declined, with fewer respondents agreeing that staff were helpful and supportive, motivated students to do their best work, or helped students explore their own areas of interest.

¹ <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2021/06/24/the-student-academic-experience-survey-2021/>

Student ratings of **assessment procedures** have also declined, partly due to the perception that staff were not as available to discuss academic work in detail. **Marking of assignments** has slowed with 42% of students waiting 3+ weeks for feedback (up from 30% of students last year). Accordingly, 53% of respondents (the highest level yet) reported their expectations around returning assignments were not met, although 40% of respondents reported their expectations were met.

Use of technology in learning

66% of respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with the use of **educational technology**, while only 8% were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. However, 57% of respondents reported that their preference was to **learn mostly in-person**, while only 12% preferred to learn mostly online. 31% favoured a blended approach.

Finances

The majority (60%) of respondents feel that the government should pay at least half of **fees**, with 26% responding that the government should pay all university fees. Conversely, only 8% believe students should pay half or more of fees. While these rates have remained consistent over time, this year saw a shift to more respondents wanting to put the burden of fees on the government.

54% of respondents noted greater concern about **living costs**. Respondents in England have mainly utilized **maintenance loans or grants** (64%) to cover living costs, followed by family support (27%), and paid employment (7%). State school students are more likely to be concerned about living costs and twice as likely to rely on a loan or grant to cover living costs, while private school students are mainly funded by family.

Student priorities & wellbeing

Student **sense of belonging** is an important part of building a university community, and respondents noted access to academic staff, other students, and campus, as well as clear expectations for students, as key factors. 67% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their institution is committed to **eliminating racial inequalities** for students, however Black and Chinese students were more likely to feel that their universities could be doing more. 43% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their **voice is heard and represented**, while 18% disagreed.

Spotlight on specific student groups

Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) students have consistently reported a less-positive university experience compared to white students. Although key measures have fallen for both groups this year, a significant gap remains, especially in perceptions of value-for-money and experiences vs. expectations. **Trans students** are less likely to feel like they learnt a lot and less likely to feel that they would choose the same course and institution again, but they are more likely to feel their experience was better than their expectations and more likely to feel their voice is heard and represented by the university. However, 65% of trans respondents noted high anxiety (compared to 39% of the total sample).

The choice to go to university

Despite the concerns and challenges of this year, 58% of respondents (down slightly from 64% in previous years) agreed that they would **choose the same university and course** knowing what they now know, while 11% would have chosen to defer their studies by a year. Overall, 29% of respondents considered **withdrawing from or leaving university**, though this was significantly higher among amongst disabled (43%), LGB+ (39%), and trans (64%) students. The main reason respondents considered leaving was due to mental and emotional health.

Improving the academic experience

When asked about the one thing their institution could do to improve the quality of the academic experience for students, respondents highlighted **improving assessment feedback** so that it is timelier and more detailed; implementing more **in-person teaching** and on-campus activities, especially for practical and lab-based course elements; and facilitating **better communication**.