

2016

# STUDENT RESILIENCE: UNITE STUDENTS INSIGHT REPORT



UNITE  
STUDENTS

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was written by Ian Neale and Laura Piggott of YouGov, and Josephine Hansom and Sam Fagence of Youthsight.

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## FOREWORD

**A degree opens doors. Doors to new careers, opportunities and experiences.**

It may be viewed by some as a commodity; an investment of time and effort and a financial investment in oneself in return for knowledge, skills and credentials that open those doors to the future. Since the introduction and subsequent increase in tuition fees, attention has rightly turned to the value of a degree.

A degree may equally be viewed as an experience; a time of curiosity and discovery, both academically and personally. Studying for a degree opens doors to new people and social situations, exploration of identity and purpose. Time spent at university can profoundly challenge students' existing world views, leading to development and growth. As a father, and as an employer, I value these things very much.

Understanding student expectations and delivering an experience to students which they will value is hugely important to Unite Students. Our business purpose, Home for Success, provides us with focus and ensures our commitment to support and enhance the experience through every aspect of our operation.

In this study of the student experience we have sought to understand what happens in the major 'non-academic' environments supporting the broader student experience. This includes university 'non-academic' services, student-led spaces such as clubs and societies – and, most significantly, students' own homes. These are all areas which contribute to the experience and in which a different learning and growth takes place.

Overall student satisfaction is high. This is consistently demonstrated through existing student surveys. However, not all students find the transition to university life a straightforward one. As the research findings demonstrate, students do face difficulties. The research findings outlined in this report identify challenges around student mental health, isolation and stress. These insights support our own operational data, in which we have seen a significant increase in welfare and resilience incidents across our accommodation over the last two years.

The analysis in this report focuses on the contributing factors, which in turn suggest new ways to improve the student experience. From these findings, and based on the rigorous and robust data set supporting it, we have created a Student Experience Index. It is our intention to track this index over time and look to identify the positive impacts that we hope Unite Students and the wider sector can have by working together.

It is also worthy of consideration that as universities continue to open their doors to an ever greater diversity of students, it is clear from this research that the benefits of higher education are unevenly distributed across the student body. The report highlights some significant differences in experience and outcome, particularly for students from lower socioeconomic groups and for those with mental health issues. We believe that it is possible to make a positive impact here.

As I write this, Unite Students is getting ready to open its doors to nearly 50,000 students for the new academic year. Providing students with the best accommodation experience has been at the heart of everything we do for the last 25 years, during which time we have housed half a million students. This is a responsibility I take very seriously, and this research has brought home to me just how influential student accommodation, and what takes place within it, can be on student wellbeing and success. We have already made many changes to our operation and service over the past few years and as a result of these research findings, I look forward to working closely with the higher education sector over the coming years on further research and practical strategies to continue to improve the overall student experience, for all of our students.

I hope you find the research findings equally valuable and a catalyst to positive change.

**Richard Smith**  
Chief Executive, Unite Students

## INTRODUCTION

The Unite Students' annual student experience survey is now in its fifth year. Conducted independently for Unite Students by YouGov and Youthsight, this survey of 6,504 students and 2,169 applicants investigates the key non-academic elements of student life including accommodation, wellbeing and life quality, financial management and expectations and employability. Our previous insight reports show, as this one does, how integral accommodation is to students and to their university experience; students who are satisfied with their accommodation are more likely to be satisfied with other student services and with their life in general.

The results of this survey sit in the context of the ongoing changes to the higher education landscape initiated in the 2015 summer budget. The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) which will be phased in over the next four years has potential to have an impact on the relative status of UK higher education institutions. Not only will it further centralise the assessment of teaching quality but, in key metrics for assessment in year two, will also factor in student satisfaction, student retention and employment rates of graduates. These measures will be attributed new importance and will have financial consequences, which will lead institutions to review how they support students to complete their course, achieve their best and prepare for graduate employment.

The results also sit within the context of what many now call a growing mental health issue among students. Recent freedom of information requests have revealed strongly escalating demand for counselling services within UK universities, and NUS research from 2013 recorded incidence of mental health issues of up to 20%. This accords strongly with Unite Students' own experience of students within accommodation. A key finding of this research – that one in eight of both applicants and students consider themselves to have a named mental health condition – quantifies this issue.

This year our report focuses strongly on social and emotional aspects of the student experience through a 'resilience' lens. This is an approach that has been used extensively in US schools and colleges and is starting to influence thinking and practice here in the UK. We are indebted to colleagues at AMOSSHE for steering us in this direction.

Higher education presents students with an array of new circumstances in an intensive way and can challenge an individual's ability to cope healthily with these situations. When a student encounters such challenges they might usefully draw on skills, traits and coping mechanisms they have learned and on their personal support networks.

For the purpose of this research, therefore, we have used a definition of resilience based on a cluster of factors that enables an individual to cope better with adverse circumstances or incidents, including innate factors such as self-management and emotional stability and interpersonal relationships and support networks.

We have found that these factors permeate every aspect of non-academic student experience within the scope of this survey and are strongly linked to retention, satisfaction and overall happiness.

Student learning outside the classroom is the major theme of this report, which includes material on financial skills (section 4) and employability skills (section 6). However most importantly, if only because it currently receives less policy attention, it highlights the opportunity to help students to actively develop the skills and experience that would help them build their personal resilience.

An invitation to have a conversation about developing student resilience is not to minimise the very real and overwhelming challenges that some students face, indeed these are highlighted throughout the report. Rather, it homes in on a fundamental and underpinning skill set that has the potential to improve outcomes for all students and to have a profound impact on some.

Within Unite Students' own sphere of influence and in line with our core purpose Home for Success, the finding that students' integration into their accommodation plays a role in developing resilience has caused us to look at concrete actions arising from this research. We look forward to working together with partners in the higher education sector and beyond to develop this conversation about student resilience and to take insight-informed actions that will support the success of future students.



## KEY FINDINGS

**This report sets out the survey findings in the context of different areas of the student experience including accommodation, finance and employability. However a major finding is the interconnectedness of student life: students having a positive experience in one area are much more likely to be having a positive experience in others and this is strongly linked to fundamental factors such as emotional resilience, positive mental wellbeing and social integration.**

Mental health is now a growing concern among the student population. The survey found that one in eight students and applicants consider themselves to have a specific, named mental health condition and more than half experienced stress, worry or strain over the four weeks leading up to the survey.

Social and emotional factors play a strong role in the overall student experience. Students who are satisfied with life are more likely to be satisfied with a broad range of university services and are less likely to think about leaving university early. Social integration is a factor for life satisfaction and consequently is an important factor for a positive student experience. Student accommodation plays a role in this: flatmates are an important source of support and students who are satisfied with the communal areas in their accommodation are more likely to feel integrated.

Emotional resilience, which includes both positive mental attitude and a range of skills such as goal setting, is linked both to retention and life satisfaction among students. It is also a strong predictor for potential mental health issues.

Similarly, financial 'preparedness' skills appear to have an impact on financial outcomes and wellbeing. Findings indicate that there could be a gap between perceived success at managing finances and practical measures of this – among the three quarters of students who consider themselves to be successful at managing their finances throughout the year, less than half set a weekly spending limit and more than a quarter say they often spend more than planned. However students who do stick to good budgeting habits are less likely to get into financial difficulty.

University support services are not generally a student's first stop for advice about managing their money – students are more likely to go to parents or the internet. The same is true for careers advice, though on the whole students believe that their university is preparing them well for future employment.

When it comes to student accommodation, services tend to be more important to students than 'bricks and mortar' features. There are four services which students identified as most valuable to them in times of difficulty when provided in their accommodation. These are counselling services, the ability to talk to wardens, information about where to find someone to talk to and talking to staff in their accommodation. Students with a mental health condition, students with a disability, those who are dissatisfied with their lives and those who have considered leaving university early are all significantly more likely than average to say that counselling in their accommodation would benefit them.

A strong theme that emerges within this research is the statistical difference from average in student experience for certain groups of students. Students with a self-reported mental health issue in particular are more likely to score lower than average on questions relating to wellbeing and satisfaction and are more likely to have considered leaving university early. Similarly, students from lower socioeconomic groups show signs of systematic disadvantage across a number of areas of the student experience, which are explored in a 'spotlight' section.

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## STUDENT EXPERIENCE INDEX

Two statistical models have developed to support the analysis of the survey findings. The first is a Student Experience Index, which benchmarks the student experience across a number of domains and which is explained in more detail below. The second is a regression analysis exploring the factors linked to retention and life satisfaction which are presented in Sections 2 and 3.

## THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE INDEX

The Unite Students 'Student Experience Index' was created by YouGov in conjunction with YouthSight, the Unite Students project team and an external steering group. The index seeks to set a baseline for the non-academic experience across five domains:

1. Student accommodation
2. Student social life
3. Student finance
4. Student employability
5. Student wellbeing

The 'Student Experience Index' uses a set of indicators to measure and underpin the five domains identified as key factors within the overall student lifestyle. These results are based on a representative survey of over 6,500 students studying at institutions in the UK<sup>1</sup>.

For each indicator, respondents were allocated a score based upon their response. These scores were standardised and aggregated to give a score for each domain. These individual scores were then aggregated to give an overall 'Student Experience Score' for each respondent. Scores have been standardised so they can be compared across the domains. All scores are between 0 and 100 and act as a benchmark of the experience of students in the UK. A full breakdown of the factors contributing to the index is given in Appendix 2.

A higher score indicates that respondents gave what the project team deemed more positive responses across the indicators in each domain. For example, those respondents who reported that they feel integrated with other students or that often felt cheerful, received higher scores than those who gave opposite responses. Overall the higher the score the more likely it is that respondents report having a more positive experience within that domain.

Please note that within this index the researchers have made a judgement on what 'good' looks like and this is the premise behind the calculations. The index is not intended to be a definitive measure of the actual student experience of all students but rather a set of indicators of the overall experience of students in the UK drawn from this survey.

The index can be used to create segments within the student population based upon their scoring on the index, as a way of organising student data and for making comparisons within the student population. The index would have potential uses within higher education institutions to benchmark their own student population against the UK average determined in this research.

## INDEX OVERVIEW

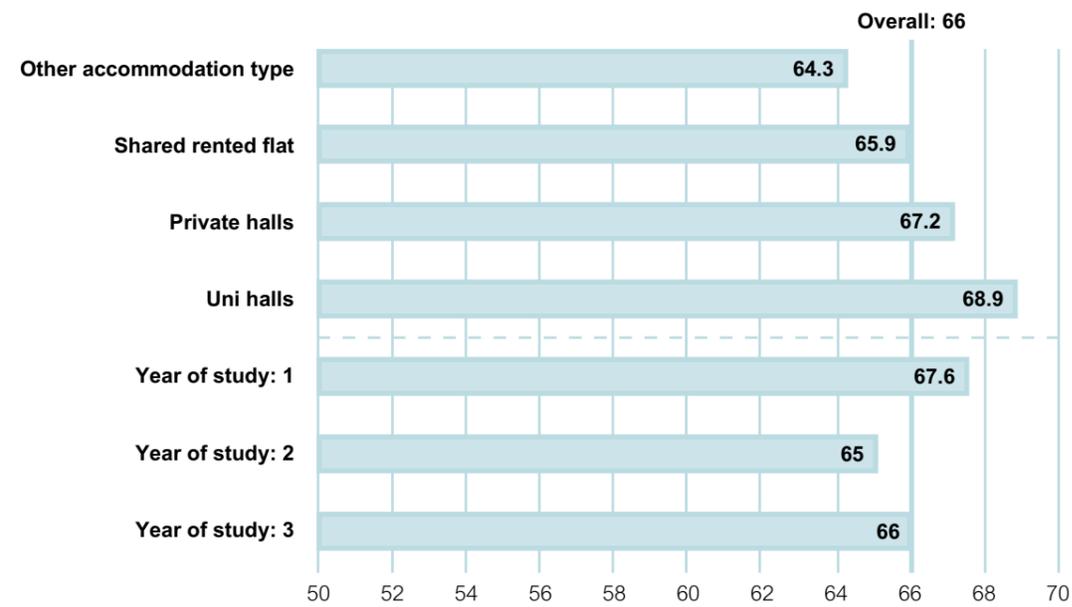
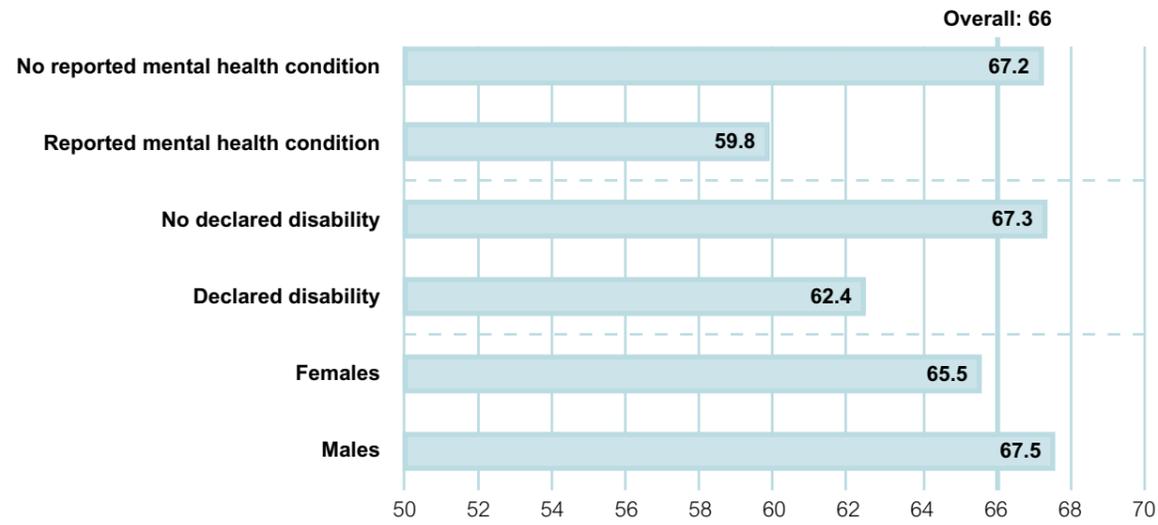
## Figure 1: 'Student Experience Index' broken down by domain

There are variations in the index domain scores between students at different stages of their university life. For accommodation, finance and employability students in year 1 provide higher scores than students in years 2 and 3+. This indicates that on these factors at least, life may be happier and easier for year 1 students but the challenges they face increase as they move through university. In contrast, as students stay longer at university the overall social life satisfaction increases. This shows that first year students face a more challenging time socially and if they can settle into university their social lives improve.

Overall Index Score	66.3
Student Accommodation Index Score	67.5
Student Social Life Index Score	71.2
Financial Life Index Score	58.9
Employability Index Score	69.0
Wellbeing Index Score	64.9

<sup>1</sup>None of the 2,169 applicant surveys was used to produce this index.

Figure 2: Comparison of overall Index Scores by demographics, accommodation type and year of study



Base: All students (n=6,504)

Male students score slightly higher than female students on the overall index. However while the data in the index points to a different lifestyle experience between male and female students, wider attainment data shows that females achieve better academic results than males.

By accommodation type, students living in university halls and private halls show higher average scores than those living in shared rented flats or other types of accommodation. This would indicate overall that there are benefits of communal living and that this may be advantageous to a student's overall experience.

A strong theme which emerges in this research is the differing experience of those students with a declared disability and in particular within this group those with a self-reported mental health issue. These students are more likely to obtain a lower overall index score than average and this will be explored in more detail in subsequent sections.

## STAYING THE COURSE - THE RETENTION CHALLENGE

Within an ever developing higher education 'market', there is increasing pressure on institutions to demonstrate the value they offer to potential applicants. Rates of retention have always contributed to the perception of value, but are likely to be more important in the future due to their inclusion in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF).

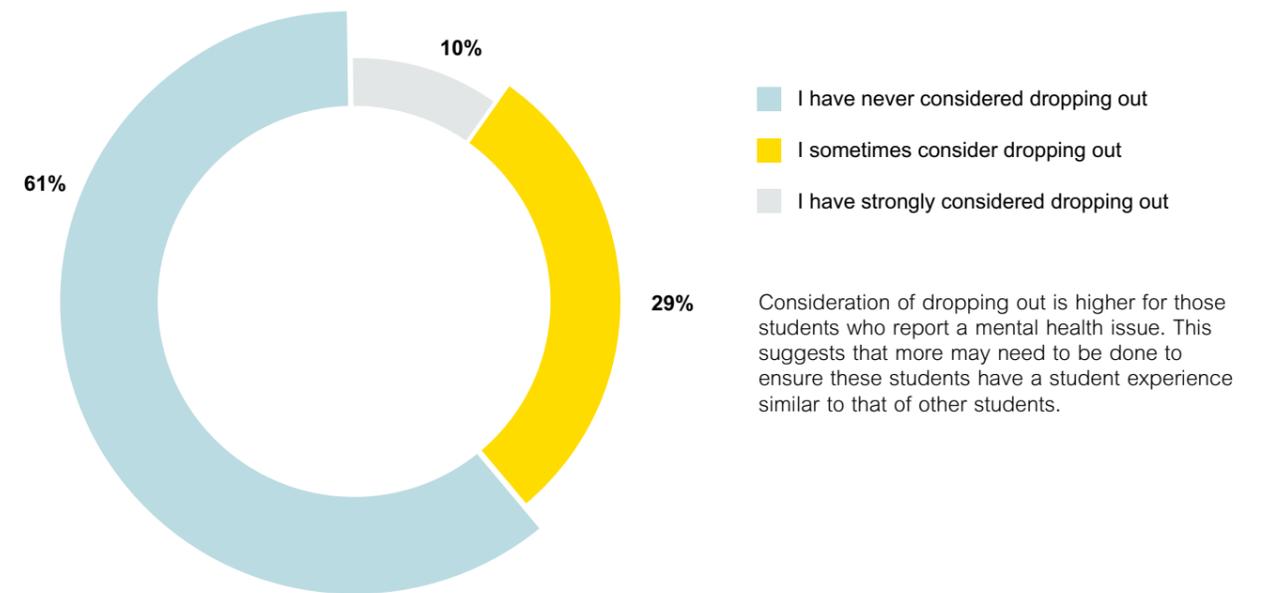
Retention is also important in relation to under-represented and vulnerable groups. Retention of these groups is likely to form part of an institution's Access Agreement under the new Office for Students.

This research provides data to help understand the issue of retention in a holistic way. It asked students the extent to which they had ever considered dropping out of their course. As the survey sample only included existing students this does not necessarily relate directly to actual retention, rather it highlights the factors important in ideation around dropping out, including confidence, resilience, support networks and various sources of stress. Moreover, by comparing different demographic groups it highlights groups of potentially vulnerable students.

### THE RETENTION CHALLENGE

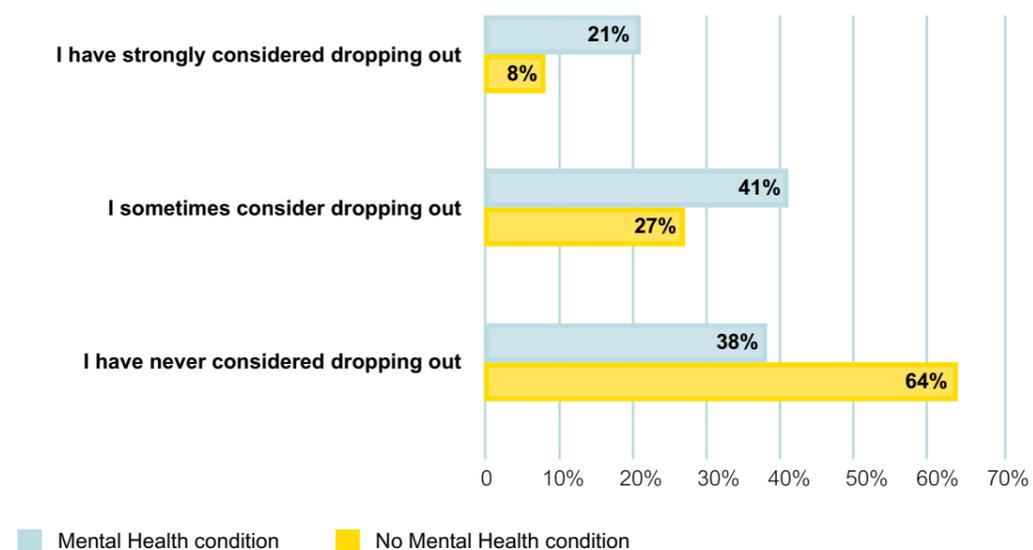
Nearly two thirds of students have never considered leaving university early. However one in ten current students reported that they have strongly considered dropping out of university and a further 29% have sometimes considered doing so.

Figure 3: How often students have ever considered dropping out of their university course



Base: All students (n=6,504)

Figure 4: Proportion of students who have strongly, sometimes or never considered dropping out by presence of self-declared mental health condition



Base: All students (Mental health condition n=853; No mental health condition n=5,651)

Moreover, students from socioeconomic groups DE are somewhat more likely to have considered dropping out (43%) than those from AB (34%).

## RELATED FACTORS: REGRESSION ANALYSIS

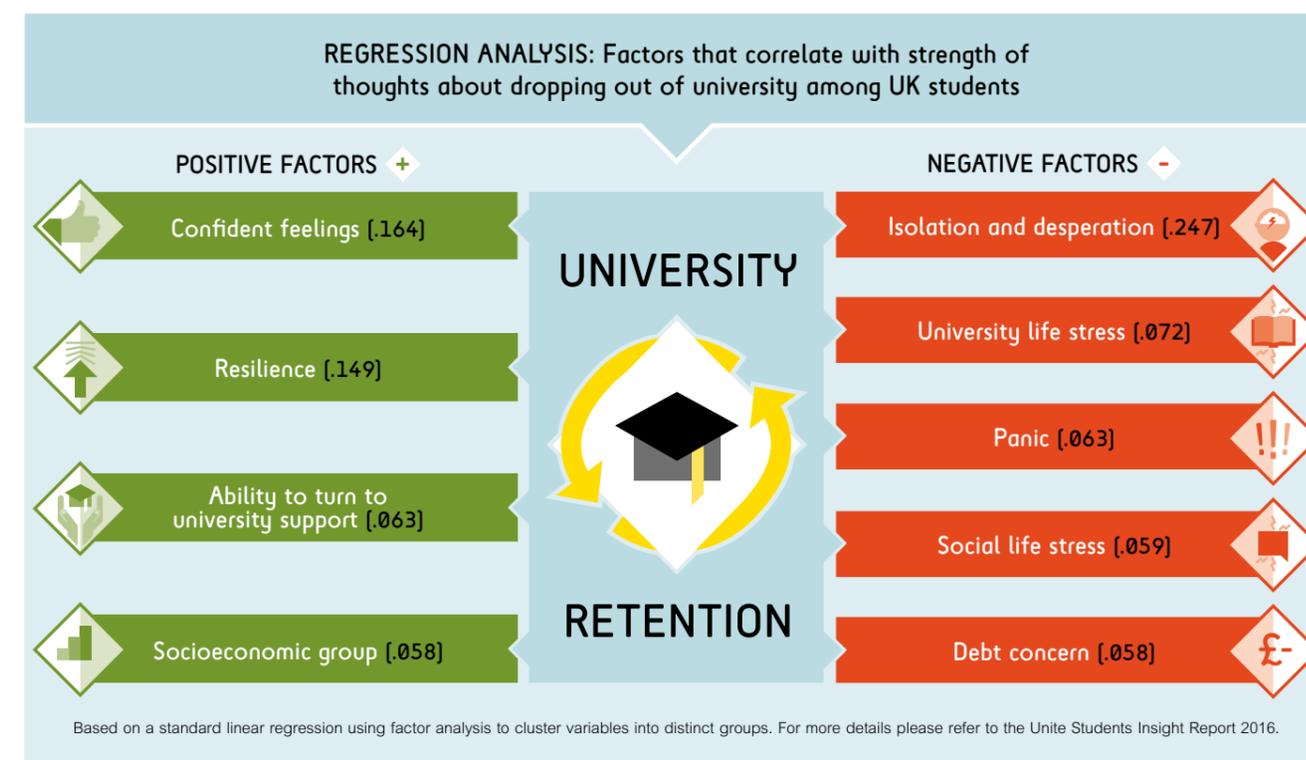
A regression analysis was carried out to identify the key factors that are correlated with consideration of leaving university. Standard linear regression was used to identify the factors with the strongest relationship with the consideration to leave a university course. In order to make the model more manageable, factor analysis was undertaken on the questions which allowed them to be reduced into 12 thematic areas plus contextual issues such as debt concern, social grade, gender etc. (Please see Appendix 3 for a full list of the factors included.)

Many of the factors related to feelings, emotions and behaviours. Alongside this, factors related to areas of student support and causes of stress and concern were also included. Finally the model contained standard demographics such as social group, disability, mental health issues and gender.

Through this analysis, we can identify four positive factors that statistically are significantly more likely to be present in students who have never considered leaving, and five negative factors linked to considerations of leaving early.

These positive and negative factors give clues as to traits and behaviours that underpin a more positive student experience and those that may act as early indicators of students who are at risk of leaving their course early. Each of these factors is explored in more depth below.

Figure 5: A visual summary of the 'key factors' related to student retention<sup>2</sup>



The model explains just 19% of a student's decision 'to have ever considered dropping out of university'<sup>3</sup>. As such, it does not fully explain retention. However as the first analysis of its kind at a national level it helps uncover the range of factors – some of them unexpected - that could be further explored. It also provides a steer on actions that could be taken to support retention.

## FACTORS RELATED TO CONSIDERATION OF LEAVING UNIVERSITY

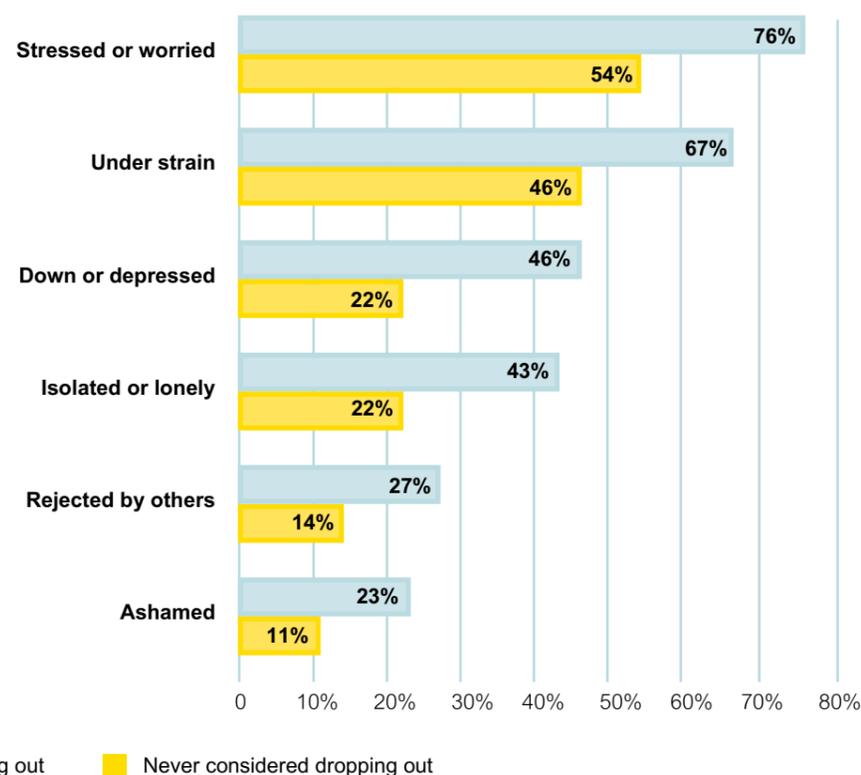
The strongest negative factor is having feelings associated with desperation or isolation. Any student who regularly has feelings such as 'isolated or lonely', 'stressed or worried' and 'down or depressed' is more likely to consider leaving university early.

The range of emotions that students who have strongly or sometimes considered dropping out, often or always feel, varies considerably in comparison with those who have never considered dropping out.

<sup>2</sup> Please see Appendix 3 for a detailed breakdown of the key themes.

<sup>3</sup> There are other factors that are important in a student's decision to have considered dropping out of university. Much of the data used in this survey relates to recent experiences and these may not be related to a decision to have ever considered dropping out of university i.e. that consideration may have been a longer time ago when there were a number of other factors at play in their lives that caused this.

Figure 6: Proportion of students who have often/always felt various negative feelings in the last 4 weeks by consideration of dropping out of university



Base: All students (Considered dropping out n=2,613; Never considered dropping out n=3,891)

In contrast the strongest positive factors linked to student retention are feelings themed around confidence. Where students report having feelings such as being 'cheerful', 'loved', and 'calm and relaxed' they are much more likely to have never considered leaving university early.

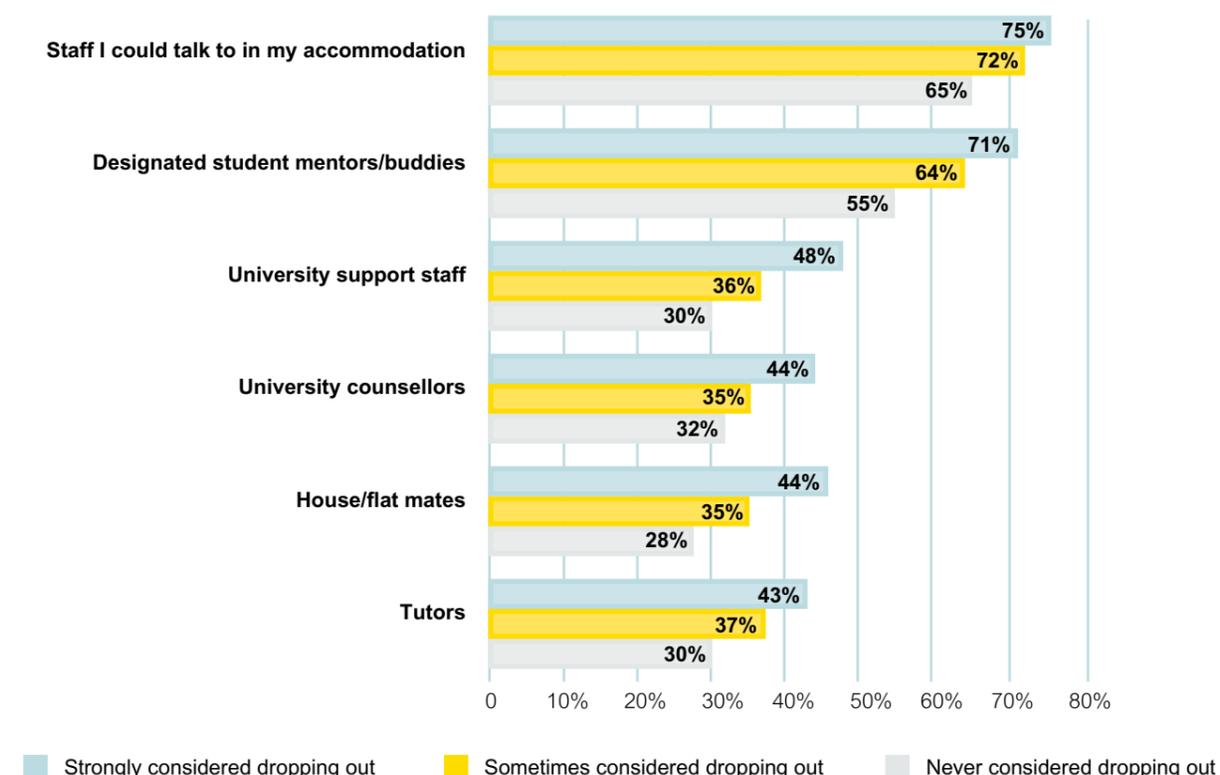
Important within this factor are feelings such as being 'capable of making decisions about things', 'coping well with problems' and 'playing a useful part in things'. Consideration could be given by both universities and accommodation providers as to whether these attitudes can be purposefully developed and encouraged.

Students who have never considered leaving university before the end of their course report happier relationships in multiple areas of their lives at university compared with those who have considered leaving early. They are happier in their relationships with house/flat mates, other students on their course and other friends at university who they don't live with.

Another key factor is related to personal motivation or goal setting – factors that are often linked to resilience. A series of attitudes emerged that related to the ability to 'plan my way out of negative situations', 'disappointment not stopping me trying again' and 'having a clear idea of goals'. Where students hold these beliefs or, alternatively believe they have these skills - they are much more likely to be able to have a positive experience and remain at university. This cluster of factors suggests the importance of encouraging and promoting self-efficacy within the student population.

Formal support networks provided by universities also play a role, though this is more linked to whether students themselves believe they are able to turn to these services. Where students reported that they would be able to turn to a variety of support services (such as 'wardens or residential assistants', 'counsellors', 'tutors') students are less likely to have considered dropping out of university.

Figure 7: Proportion of students reporting that they would **not** be able to turn to support networks by consideration of dropping out of university



Base: All students (Strongly considered dropping out n=685; Sometimes considered dropping out n=1928; Never considered dropping out n=3,891)

However access to services also plays a role, particularly within the accommodation setting. Students who have **strongly** considered dropping out are more likely than those who have **never** considered dropping out to say that various support services are not provided in their accommodation, suggesting that access to services via accommodation could play an important role in promoting retention.

Stress related to university life – 'keeping up with study', 'getting enough support from your university' and 'managing money' – is the second strongest negative factor involved in student retention. Again this demonstrates the importance of student services – including academic support services – in retention.

Stress from social situations (such as 'finding new friends' and 'getting on with flatmates/housemates') has also been identified as a factor, underlining the importance of positive social integration.

The analysis identified that stress caused by debt is correlated with thoughts about dropping out, however this appears to be less significant than some of the social and emotional factors outlined above.

### THE RETENTION CHALLENGE: KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Ensuring students are integrated, do not feel isolated and have support in place for the stress caused by practical aspects of university life (such as meeting deadlines and managing money) can mitigate against identified negative factors linked to considering leaving university early.
- One in ten current students has strongly considered dropping out of university at some point and 29% have sometimes considered doing so.
- Consideration of dropping out of university is more common among students who report having some form of disability and in particular those within this group who report having a mental health issue. Students from DE socioeconomic groups are also somewhat more likely to have considered dropping out.
- The strongest positive factors linked to student retention are confident feelings and a motivated or goal-focussed outlook on life.

# STUDENT MENTAL WELLBEING AND HAPPINESS

This section discusses the survey findings around student stress, life satisfaction, mental health, emotions and behaviours. It does so, in part, through the lens of resilience. Resilience describes a cluster of factors that enables an individual to cope better with adverse circumstances or incidents. Specific questions relating to resilience were included in the questionnaire and consolidated into the wellbeing domain of the overall Student Experience Index, allowing us to analyse the impact these may have on the actual experience of students and to show differences between groups of students.

The student experience includes factors that may present specific challenges to an individual's ability to cope healthily with stressful and difficult situations, these may include:

- finding accommodation
- adapting to a new culture and lifestyle
- increased independence, freedom and responsibility
- the possibility of losing old support networks
- establishing new friends
- managing finances
- achieving a manageable study/life balance

When a student encounters such challenges they might usefully draw on existing emotional resilience skills to cope. However, where these skills have not been adequately developed and are not readily adoptable within the student environment, students may struggle to cope with these challenges.

## HOW HAPPY ARE STUDENTS?

Life satisfaction is commonly used as a measure of happiness<sup>4</sup>. Almost three quarters of students surveyed (73%) are satisfied with their life at the moment, while around one in ten (13%) are not satisfied with their life. Levels of life satisfaction are somewhat lower than the 16-19 and 20-24 age groups within the general population, a finding that was borne out by the *HEPI/HEA Student Academic Experience survey* which also returned similar findings.<sup>5</sup>

How much does this matter? This study finds that life satisfaction makes a difference to the student experience in a number of areas. Specifically it is correlated with:

- satisfaction with university facilities and services
- retention (i.e. have never considered leaving university)
- self-reported mental health issues

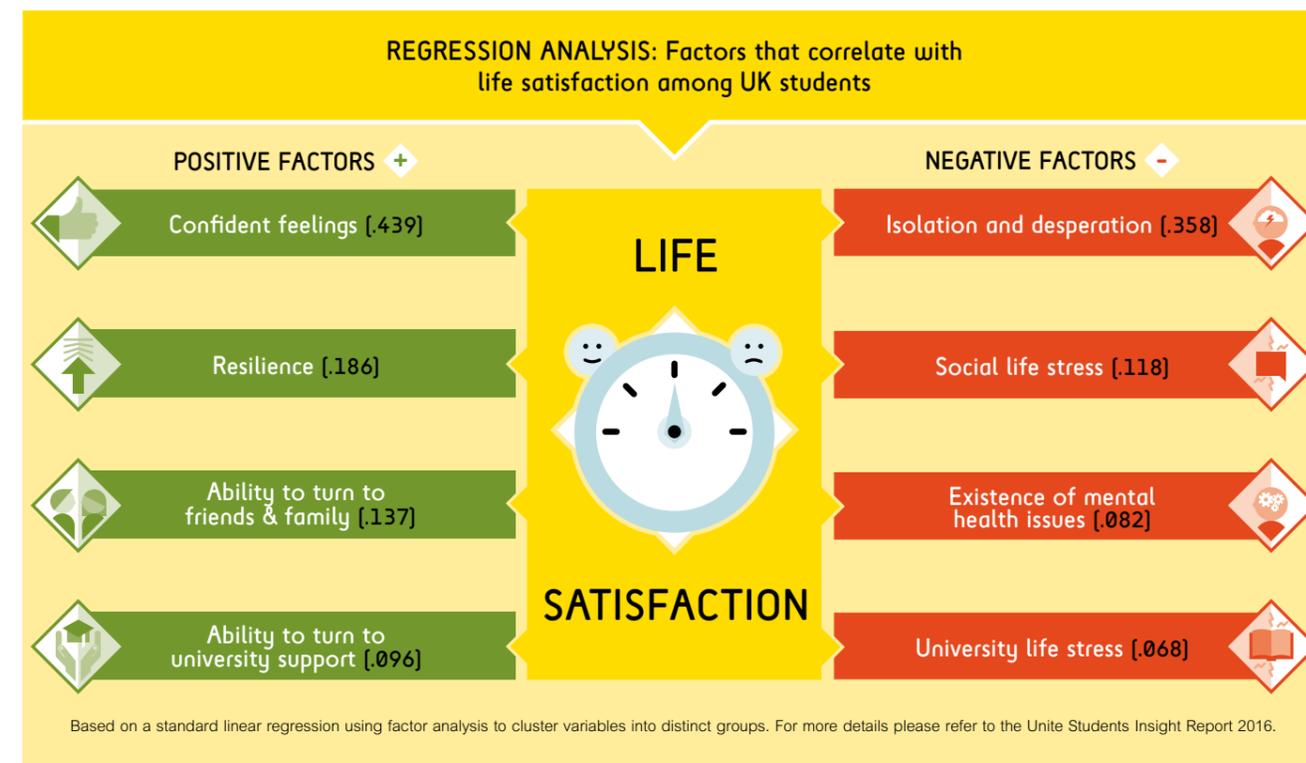
## FACTORS LINKED TO LIFE SATISFACTION

A second regression analysis was carried out to identify the key factors that are correlated with a student's life satisfaction, using the same method as that in Section 2 above. Through this analysis, we can identify four factors that are linked to life satisfaction in a statistically significant way and may provide some clues as to how this can be enhanced for specific groups or across the board. In contrast, four negative factors emerge which may act as early indicators of growing unhappiness.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/measuringnationalwellbeing/2015-09-23>

<sup>5</sup> The 2016 Student Academic Experience Survey, Jonathan Neeves & Nick Hillman (HEPI/HEA).

Figure 8: A visual summary of the 'key factors' of student life satisfaction<sup>6</sup>



The strongest factor related to student life satisfaction is the existence of a variety of feelings themed around confidence. Where students report having feelings such as being 'cheerful', 'loved', and 'calm and relaxed', they are much more likely to be satisfied with their life. Another important aspect of this factor is being able to solve problems, specifically being 'capable of making decisions about things', 'coping well with problems' and 'playing a useful part in things' – ultimately students who have these feelings and are 'confident in themselves' are most likely to be happy students.

The remaining positive factors are all related to resilience, as defined in the introduction: a cluster of attitudes and skills; ability to 'plan my way out of negative situations', 'disappointment not stopping me trying again', 'having a clear idea of goals' and the availability of support networks. These factors were also linked to retention, and suggests that resilience skills and attitudes together with a focus on developing interpersonal networks have potential to improve quality of life for students if developed while at university or during their transition period.

Four factors emerge as having a negative relationship with overall life satisfaction. The strongest cluster is feeling associated with desperation or isolation. Students who regularly have feelings such as being 'isolated or lonely', 'stressed or worried' and 'down or depressed' are more likely to have lower levels of life satisfaction.

The second most significant negative factor is stress related to social life – 'making friends', 'getting on with flatmates/ housemates' and 'dating and relationships'. This underlines the finding above, that positive networks and relationships are an important factor in wellbeing. Purposefully supporting student social integration is likely to have an impact on life satisfaction for students; however a diverse and inclusive approach would be required to ensure this is accessible to all students. This is particularly the case for students with a self-reported mental health condition who consistently reported lower levels of social integration.

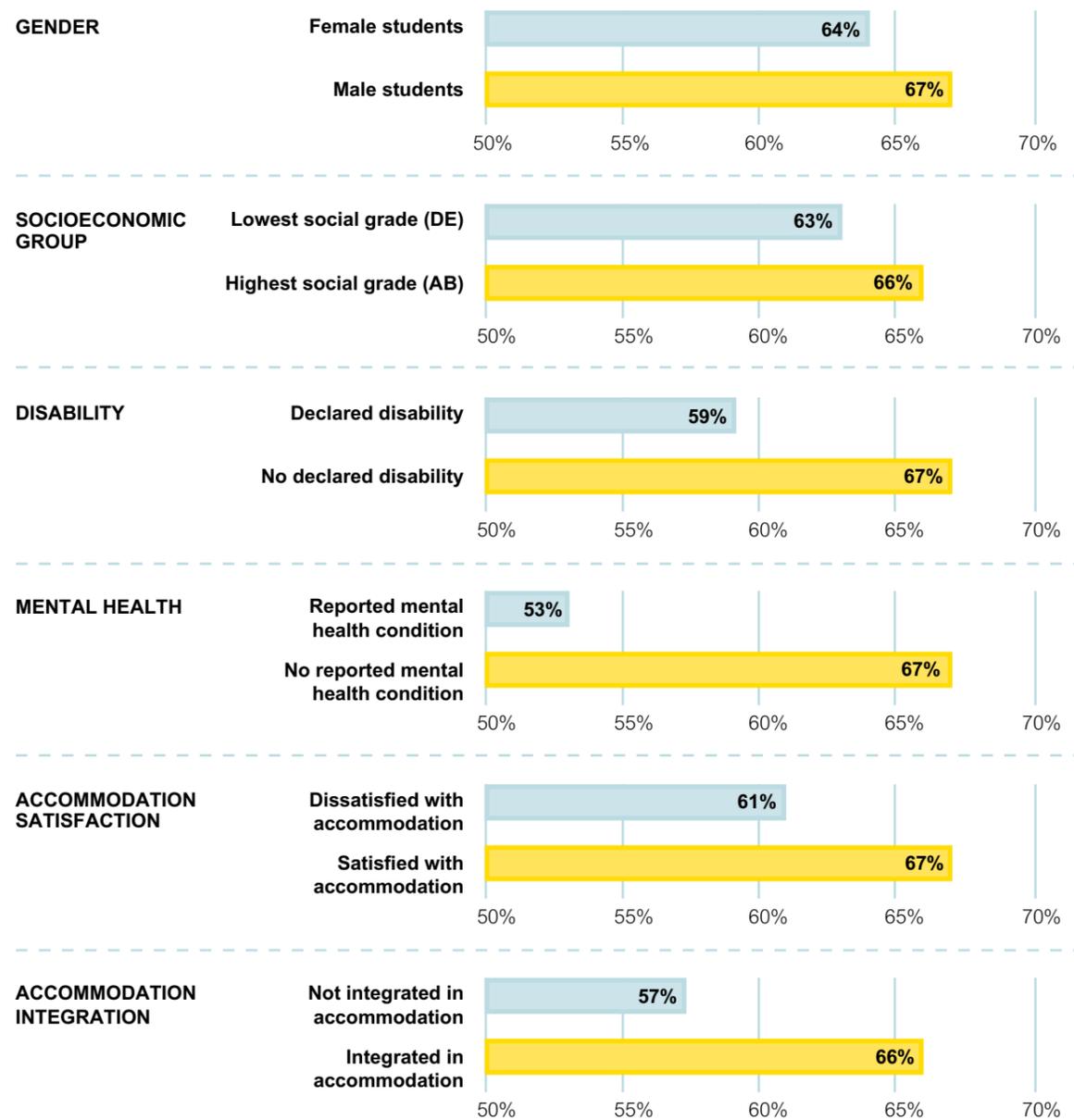
<sup>6</sup> Please see Appendix 3 for a detailed breakdown of the key factor themes.

## DIFFERENCES IN WELLBEING BETWEEN DIFFERENT STUDENT GROUPS

Using the wellbeing domain from the Student Experience Index, which takes measures across different aspects of mental wellbeing, the average score for students in the UK is 65.<sup>7</sup> The wellbeing index consists of four dimensions (overall life satisfaction, measures of positive and negative feelings, measures of positive and negative behaviours and considerations of leaving a course). A number of indicators measure how students score on each of these dimensions and an average score is created through standardised scores.

An immediate finding is the variation in score between different groups. The charts below illustrate a number of key variations in wellbeing scores within the student population, both demographically and in relation to other beliefs and attitudes.

**Figure 9: Comparison of Wellbeing Index Scores by demographics and attitudes to aspects of university life**



Base: All students (n=6,504)

<sup>7</sup> See Appendix 1 for methodology.

A quarter of students (27%) are identified as having a wellbeing score within the top quartile of the index, with an average wellbeing score of 82. This is a group within the student population with high levels of mental wellbeing and who experience positive feelings. For institutions, understanding who these students are within their student population could provide clues to the factors that contribute to positive mental wellbeing within their institution.

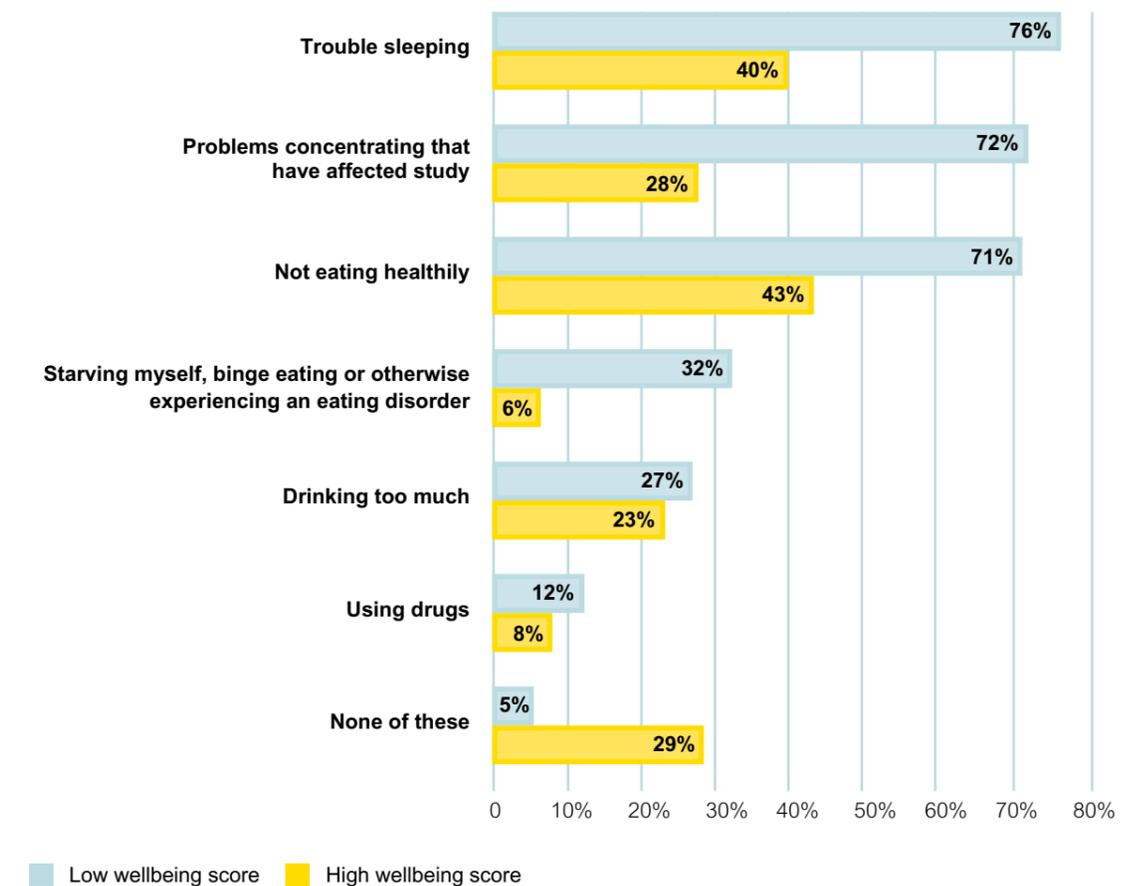
Just under a fifth (16%) of all current students score between 0 and 49 on the Wellbeing Index. The average score for this group is just 40 points compared to the overall student average of 65 points, so this segment represents a vulnerable group within the student population.

For this segment there seems to be a cycle of dissatisfaction in many areas of their student life, as this group are more likely than students in the top quartile:

- To be dissatisfied with their accommodation
- To be dissatisfied with the communal areas in their accommodation
- Not to feel integrated in their accommodation

Students with lower Wellbeing Index scores (score of 0-49) are much more likely than those with higher scores (75-100) to experience trouble sleeping, have problems concentrating that affects their study, not eat healthily and experience potentially problematic eating behaviours. They are also much more likely than average to have strongly considered dropping out of university.

**Figure 10: Incidence of negative behaviour while at university by low and high wellbeing scores among students**



Base: Low wellbeing (n=1,067); High wellbeing (n=1,769)

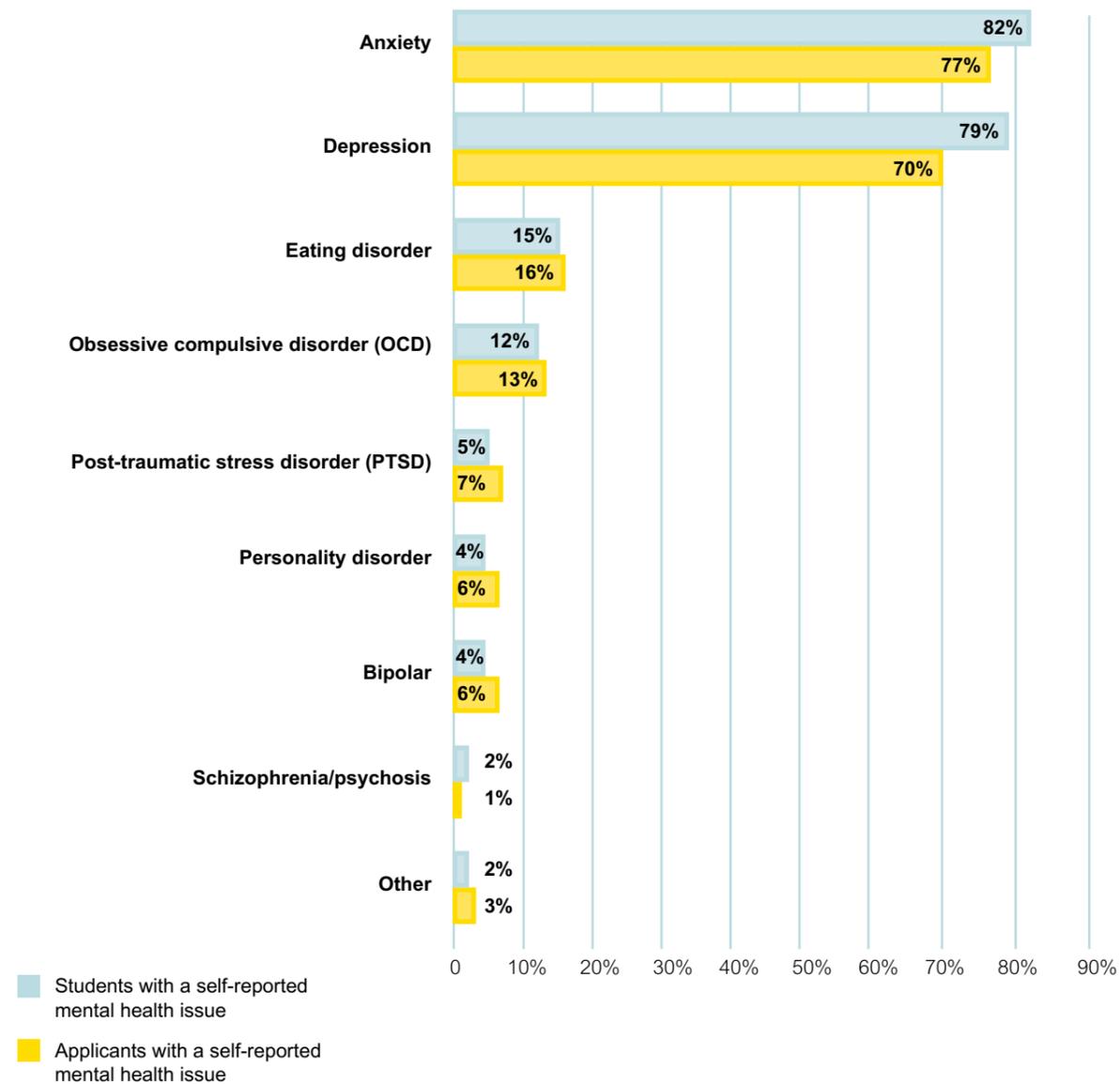
## PREVALENCE OF MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

So far in this report, students with a self-reported mental health condition have consistently been highlighted as over-represented among those who are the least happy and those who have considered dropping out of university. But how many students are affected by mental ill-health?

The survey found that 12% of students and the same proportion of applicants consider themselves to have a mental health condition. The most common reported conditions were anxiety and depression.

While we see some differences in different types of reported mental health issues between applicants and students, such as depression and anxiety being higher amongst the student population, the overall levels of reported mental health issues are similar for students and applicants. This is an important finding as much can be understood about the future intake from applicants.

Figure 11: A comparison of the incidence of self-reported mental health issues between those students and applicants who report having a mental health issue



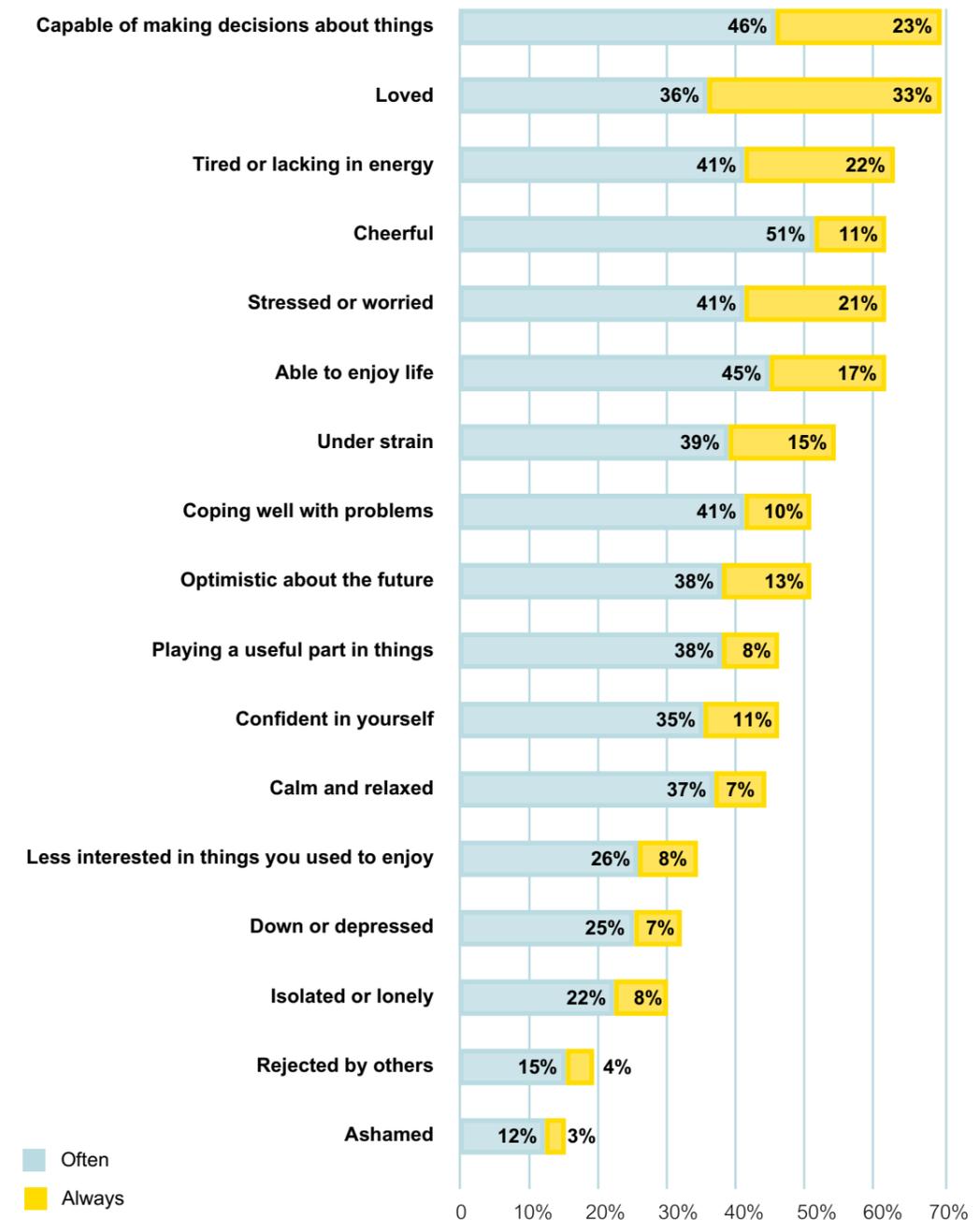
Base: All students and applicants who report having a mental health condition (Students n=859; Applicants n=277)

## EMOTIONAL WELLBEING IN THE GENERAL STUDENT POPULATION

In general students report a high incidence of positive feelings, though there are also signs of systematic stress and strain. However for a sizeable minority of students, negative feelings are a significant part of their life. A third of current students reported that in the last four weeks they had always or often felt down or depressed and a similar proportion that they always or often felt isolated or lonely. One in five often or always felt rejected by others.

As identified in Section 2, experiencing these negative emotions is closely linked with a consideration of leaving university early.

Figure 12: Incidence of students always or often having the listed feelings over the four weeks prior to the survey



Base: All students (n=6,504)

## WHAT EMOTIONS DO APPLICANTS EXPERIENCE?

Students and applicants have similar feelings.

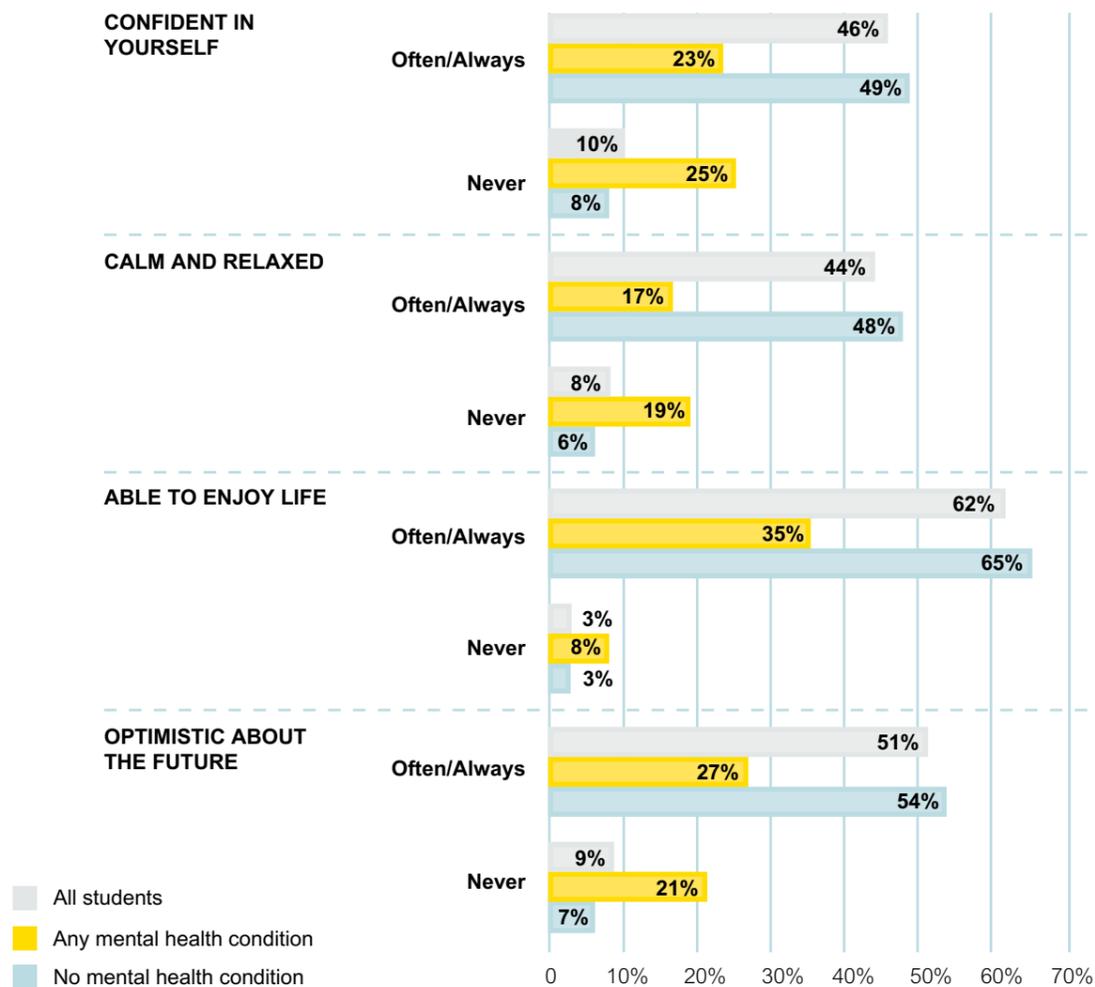
Young people who are applying to university experience similar levels of positive and negative feelings to those who are already at university. For example, six out of ten (60%) report that they have always or often felt like they can enjoy life or felt cheerful (vs. 62% of students).

This suggests that the stresses of university life are at an equal level to those experienced by applicants. In taking exams and making big decisions about their futures, applicants are already under some stress.

## MENTAL HEALTH AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

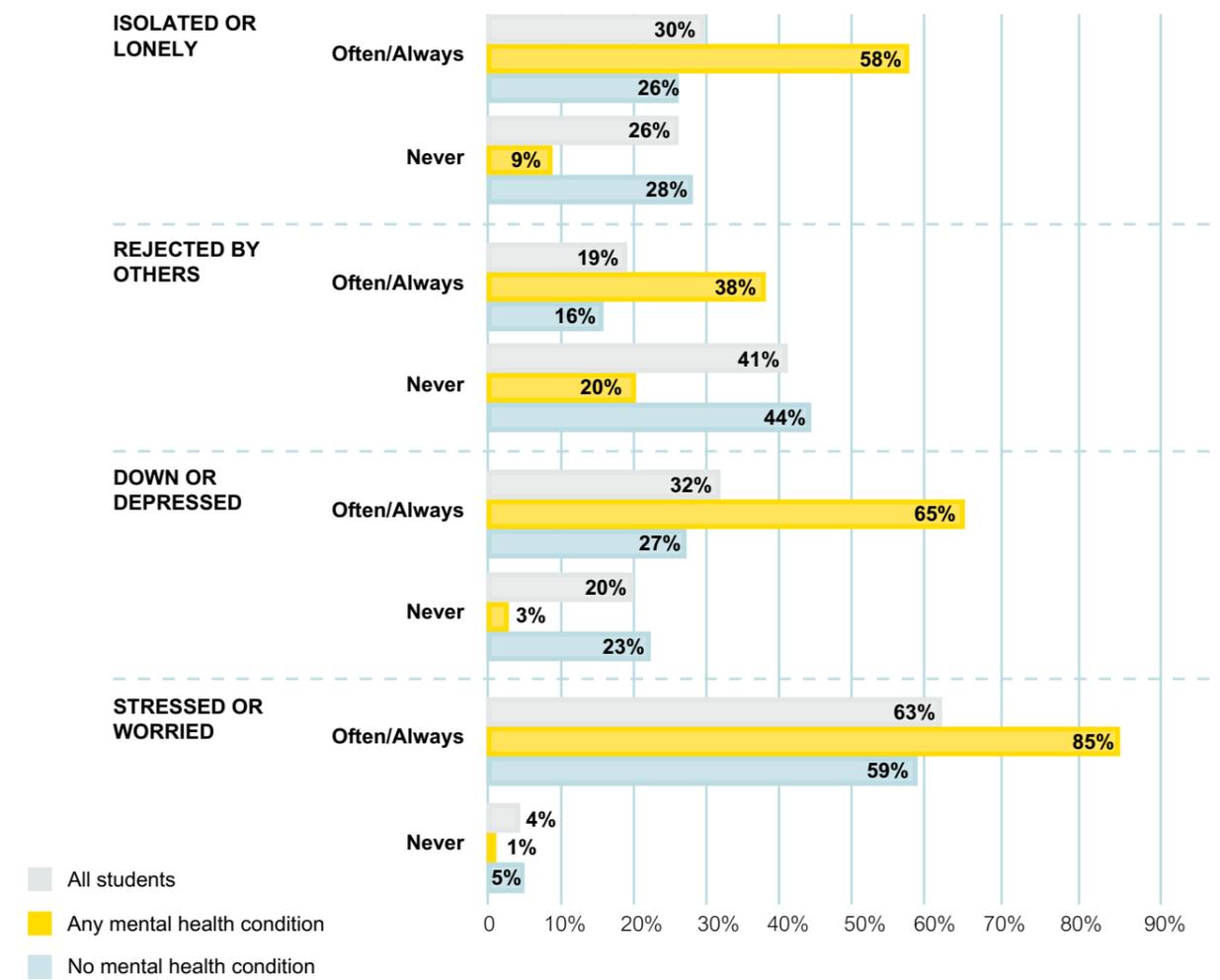
Perhaps unsurprisingly, the prevalence of negative feelings was higher among those with a mental health condition.

Figure 13: Frequency of having positive feelings by mental health issues



Base: All students (n=6,504); Any mental health condition (n=853); No mental health condition (n=5,651)

Figure 14: Frequency of having negative feelings by reported mental health issues



Base: All students (n=6,504); Any mental health condition (n=853); No mental health condition (n=5,651)

This demonstrates the challenge that students with a mental health condition face on a regular basis and highlights the need to account for these issues in the design of services. Issues of confidence and optimism, in particular, may have an impact on the ability to access services.

## HOW RESILIENT AND HAPPY ARE STUDENTS TODAY? KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Three quarters of students (73%) are satisfied with their life at the moment, while around one in ten (13%) are not satisfied with their life. Life satisfaction correlates with satisfaction with a number of different university services and facilities, with retention and with mental health.
- Close to a fifth (16%) of the student population score low in the wellbeing domain of the Student Experience Index. Having a lower wellbeing score is highly correlated with experiencing more negative aspects of student life – those students with the lowest resilience score are much more likely than those who score highest to experience trouble sleeping, have problems concentrating that affect their study, not eat healthily and experience eating disorders.
- Within the student and applicant populations, 12% of each group report that they consider themselves to have a mental health condition.
- Satisfaction with accommodation and a sense of integration with others in their accommodation are factors related to overall happiness and to retention. Accommodation therefore has a role to play in both.

# FINANCIAL PREPAREDNESS

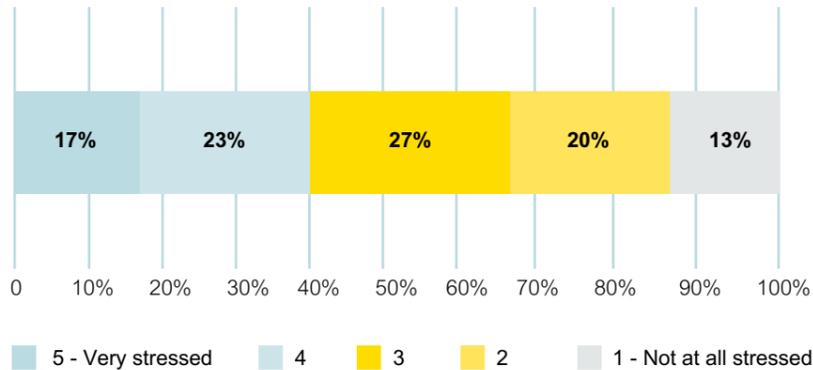
**As students continue to attend university under potentially more challenging financial circumstances, the need to manage their money effectively is especially important. Students have perhaps a unique set of financial circumstances to deal with. The majority make an overnight transition from living in the parental home to managing a challenging budget that includes significant debt and an income stream that needs to stretch over several months.**

This section explores student attitudes and experiences around managing money through the lens of budgeting skills and financial preparedness. It looks at the extent to which students take positive action to manage their finances and where they choose to cut back expenditure.

## STUDENT CONFIDENCE AND STRESS AROUND MANAGING MONEY

Three quarters of students consider themselves to be successful at managing their finances throughout the year and the same proportion of applicants feel prepared to manage finances. Confidence levels around money management therefore appear to be reasonably stable between the application stage and being a student. This could imply that applicants are already well prepared for managing their finances as a student, however it may also imply that students are applying the same money management skills at university that worked for them at home, but which may or may not be fit for purpose. The findings on financial stress tend to bear this out, at least for some students, as two in five students (40%) indicate that managing their money at university causes them stress.

Figure 15: Level of stress caused by managing money



Base: All students (n=6,504)

Students from lower socioeconomic groups and female students are more likely to feel that managing their money causes them stress.

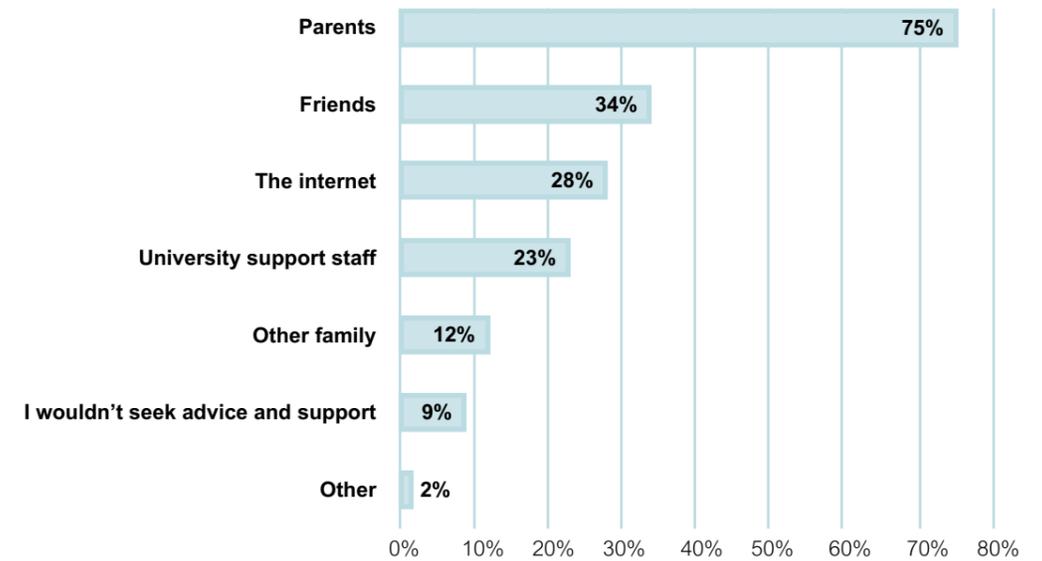
## SUPPORT WITH FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

Roughly one in ten students (9%) say they often need help with financial matters. This means that the majority of students who are stressed about their finances are not accessing frequent financial support.

Students are much less likely to say that they often need help with financial matters (9%) compared to applicants (18%). While this is a positive finding in terms of developing self-efficacy and skills, the level of financial stress reported across the student body suggests that some students are under-utilising the support available through their university.

University support services are not generally students' first stop for advice about managing their money. Only one in four students say they would go to university support staff for advice or support on money management or financial worries. They are overwhelmingly more likely to go to their parents and are also more likely to turn to friends, or to the internet.

Figure 16: Where students would turn to for financial advice and support



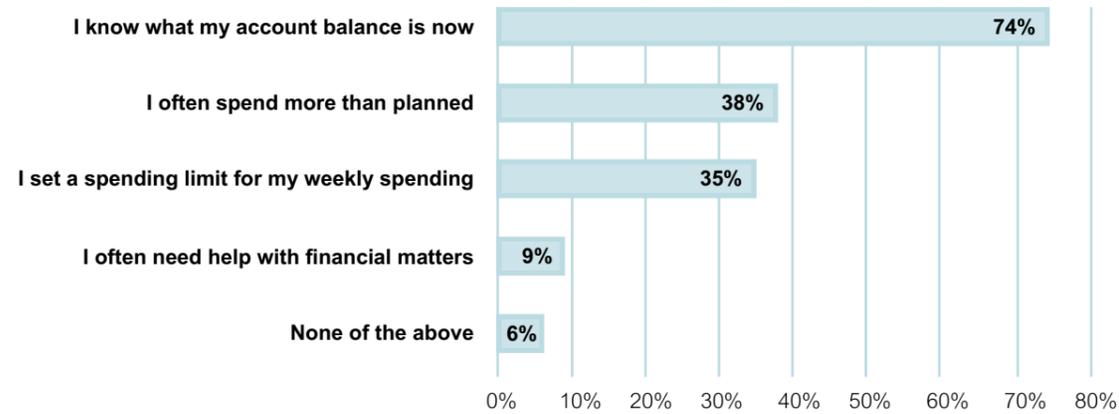
Base: All students (n=6,504)

Notably, students from a lower socioeconomic group are significantly less likely to say they would go to their parents for advice about money (65% among DE compared with 75% among C1C2 and 80% among AB).

## ACTIONS TAKEN BY STUDENTS TO MANAGE THEIR FINANCES

Although the majority of students consider themselves successful in managing their money, they often spend more than they mean to. This research finds that more than one third say they often spend more than planned and only a third set a weekly spending limit.

Figure 17: Prevalence of actions taken to manage money



Base: All students (n=6,504)

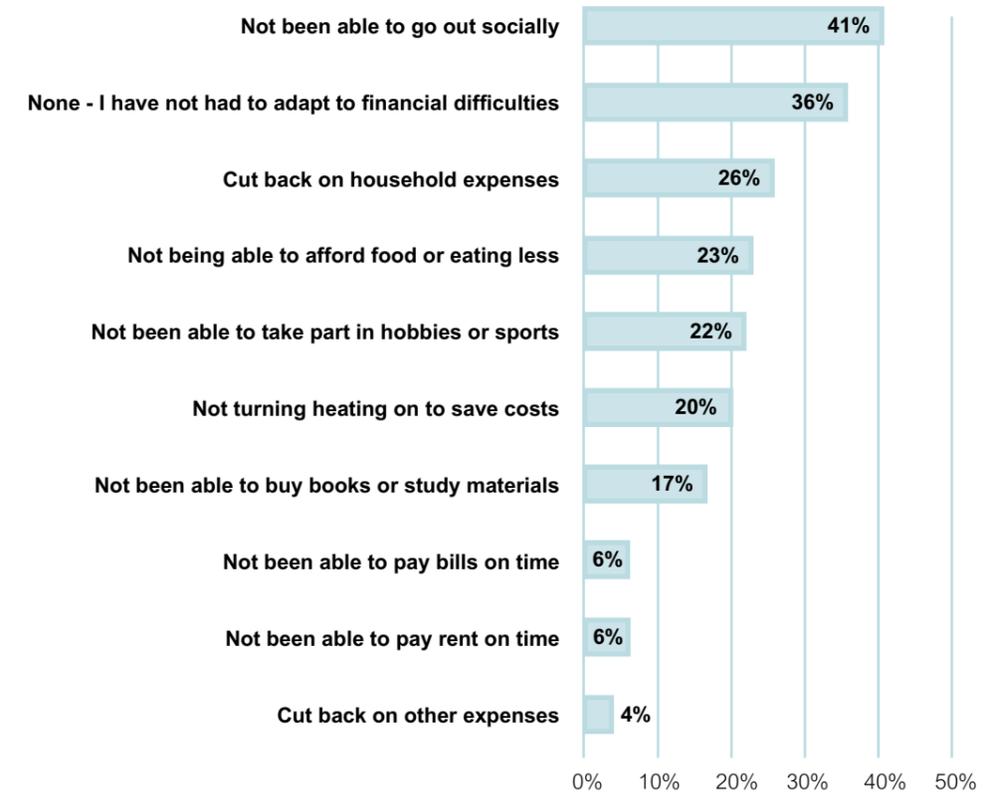
Applicants have good intentions with budgeting and while they likely will succeed in keeping track of their account balance (74% of students say that they do), only around half of those who intend to keep spending limits are likely to do so. While 68% of applicants intend to set a weekly spending limit, only 35% of students report actually doing this.

Further, applicants may underestimate the extent to which they will overspend at university. Under a quarter (23%) can see themselves spending more than they intended from week to week while 38% of students actually do report spending more than intended.

This suggests that applicants' preparedness to manage their finances on a day to day basis does not match their positive intentions.

Within the context of a restricted budget, most students have had to make tough choices in order to manage their finances.

Figure 18: Which of the following, if any, have occurred due to financial difficulties during your time as a student?



Base: All students (n=6,504)

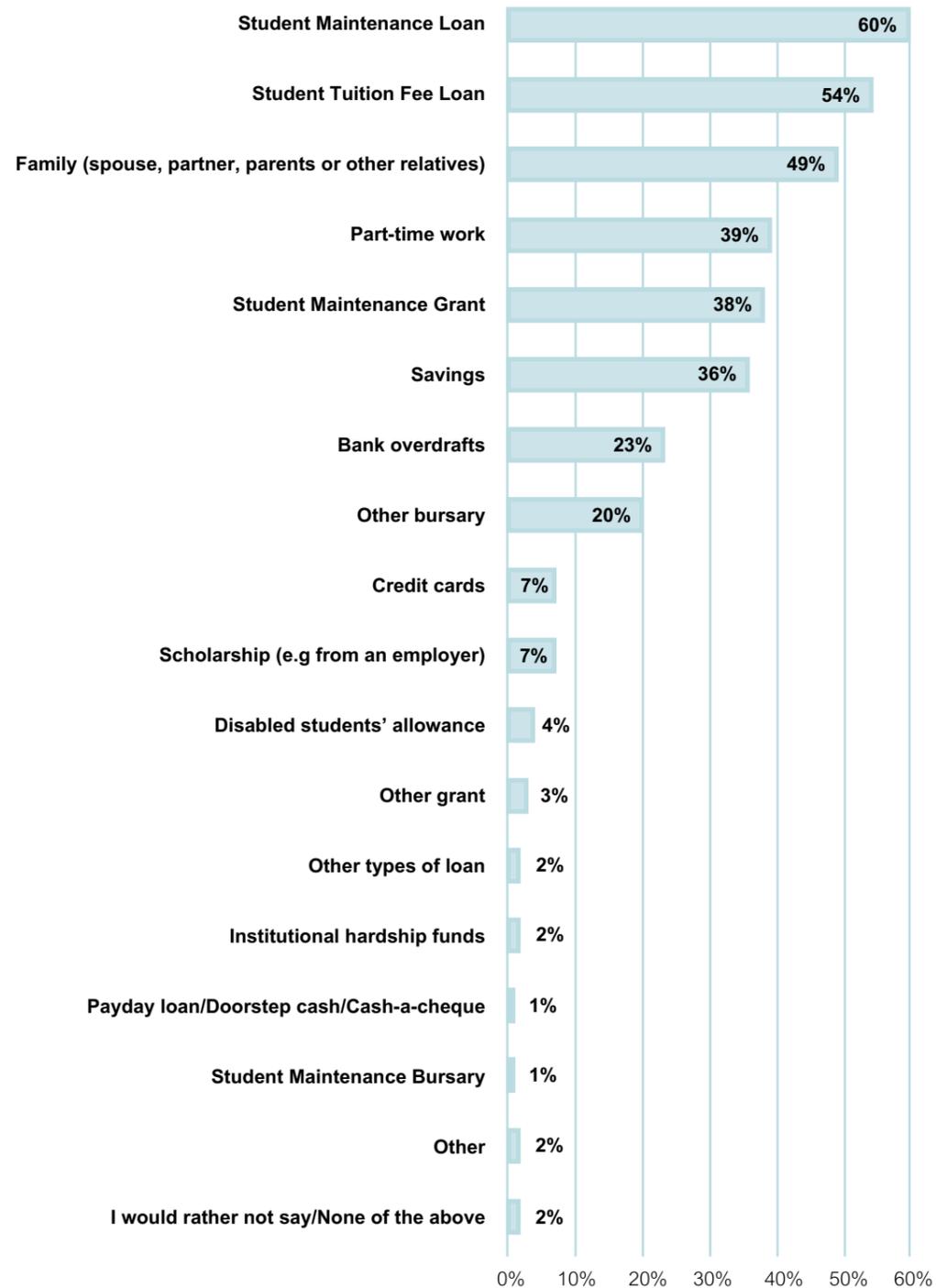
Students who set themselves weekly spending limits were more likely to restrict their social life and household expenses and to make different food choices. However those who didn't set themselves a spending limit were more likely to have experienced more serious financial difficulties, including falling behind with rent and bills. This suggests that students who were actively managing their finances tended to be in better control, even though they may have had to make sacrifices in order to do so.

## SOURCES OF STUDENT FUNDING

Students report that the most common source used to finance their time at university is a Student Maintenance Loan, followed by a Student Tuition Fee Loan. This seems to underreport the usage of loans as there was an estimated 92% take up of tuition fee loans and 90% take-up of maintenance loans by those eligible among English domiciled, full-time students in the academic year 2014/15.<sup>8</sup> Instead, the numbers reported here may reflect the proportion that actively rely upon their loan to pay for expenses on an ongoing basis or those who are aware of doing so.

<sup>8</sup> Source: SLC, Student Support for HE in England. <http://www.slc.co.uk/media/6669/slcsfr052015.pdf>

Figure 19: Sources students use to finance their time at university



Base: All students (n=6,504)

Beyond student loans, family is the main source of funding being used; half of students report that a family member helps them to finance their time at university. This is consistent with the proportion of applicants (50%) who expect family/friends to finance them while at university. This has two ramifications. Firstly, those whose family cannot help them to fund their study are at a distinct disadvantage. Secondly, this reliance places greater financial burden on middle income parents, something that has been a minor news story over the last few years, especially following the 2012 tuition fee reforms.<sup>9</sup>

Applicants are much more likely to intend to finance their time at university through a part-time job (66%) than students report doing so in reality (39%). However, the number of students that report doing part-time work during the academic year is significantly lower than that reported in the 2011/2012 BIS Student Income Expenditure Survey (SIES) which was 52%, suggesting a seasonality and irregularity to part-time work rather than a true reduction or overestimation.<sup>10</sup>

Further, applicants underestimate the extent to which they'll be using their bank overdrafts. Only 8% expect to use them, while in fact nearly a quarter of students say they use their overdrafts for funding.

## STUDENT CONCERN AROUND LEVELS OF DEBT

Students most commonly say they've taken on as much debt as they expected to, but one in four feel they've taken on more debt than they expected to suggesting that they had initially underestimated their living costs. Differences remain between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds – with a third (34%) of those from the lowest socioeconomic group reporting that they have taken on more debt than they expected to compared with a quarter (25%) of those from a C1C2 group and a fifth (19%) of those from an AB socioeconomic group.

Two in five students are concerned about being able to repay student debt when they start working after their studies and a similar proportion of applicants feel the same way. This suggests that some students do not view their student debt as an 'income tax' as some have suggested but view it in much the same way as regular debt.

## FINANCIAL PREPAREDNESS: KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Three quarters of students (76%) consider themselves to be successful at managing their finances throughout the year, though 40% feel stressed about managing their money at university.
- Findings indicate that there could be a gap between perceived success at managing finances and practical measures of this – among students who consider themselves to be successful at managing their finances throughout the year, less than half (40%) set a weekly spending limit and more than a quarter (28%) say they often spend more than planned.
- Roughly one in ten students (9%) say they often need help with financial matters – this means that the majority of those who are stressed about their finances do not frequently seek help.
- University support services are not generally a student's first stop for advice about managing their money – while one in four students (23%) say they would go to university support staff for advice/support on money management or financial worries, they are more likely to go to their parents (75%), friends (34%) or the internet (28%).

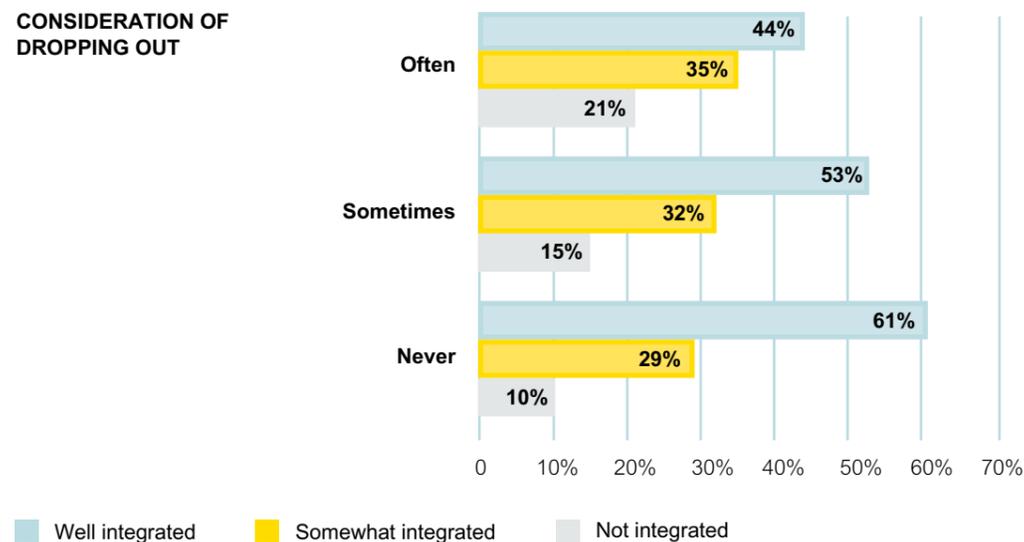
<sup>9</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2013/oct/21/parents-students-support> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-31028467>

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/301467/bis-14-723-student-income-expenditure-survey-2011-12.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/301467/bis-14-723-student-income-expenditure-survey-2011-12.pdf)

# ACCOMMODATION AND INTEGRATION

Students who are well integrated with the other students in their flat or house are less likely to consider dropping out of university than those who are poorly integrated.

Figure 20: Integration with flatmates by how often students have considered dropping out of their course



Base: All students in shared accommodation (n=4909)

Moreover, integration within accommodation has an impact on wellbeing. 70% of students who feel satisfied with their lives are integrated with their flatmates, whereas only 40% who are very dissatisfied with their lives feel integrated. Moreover, almost seven in ten (69%) students say they could turn to flatmates in times of difficulty and almost one in three have already done so (29%), making them a more significant source of support than tutors, university support staff or designated residential assistants or mentors.

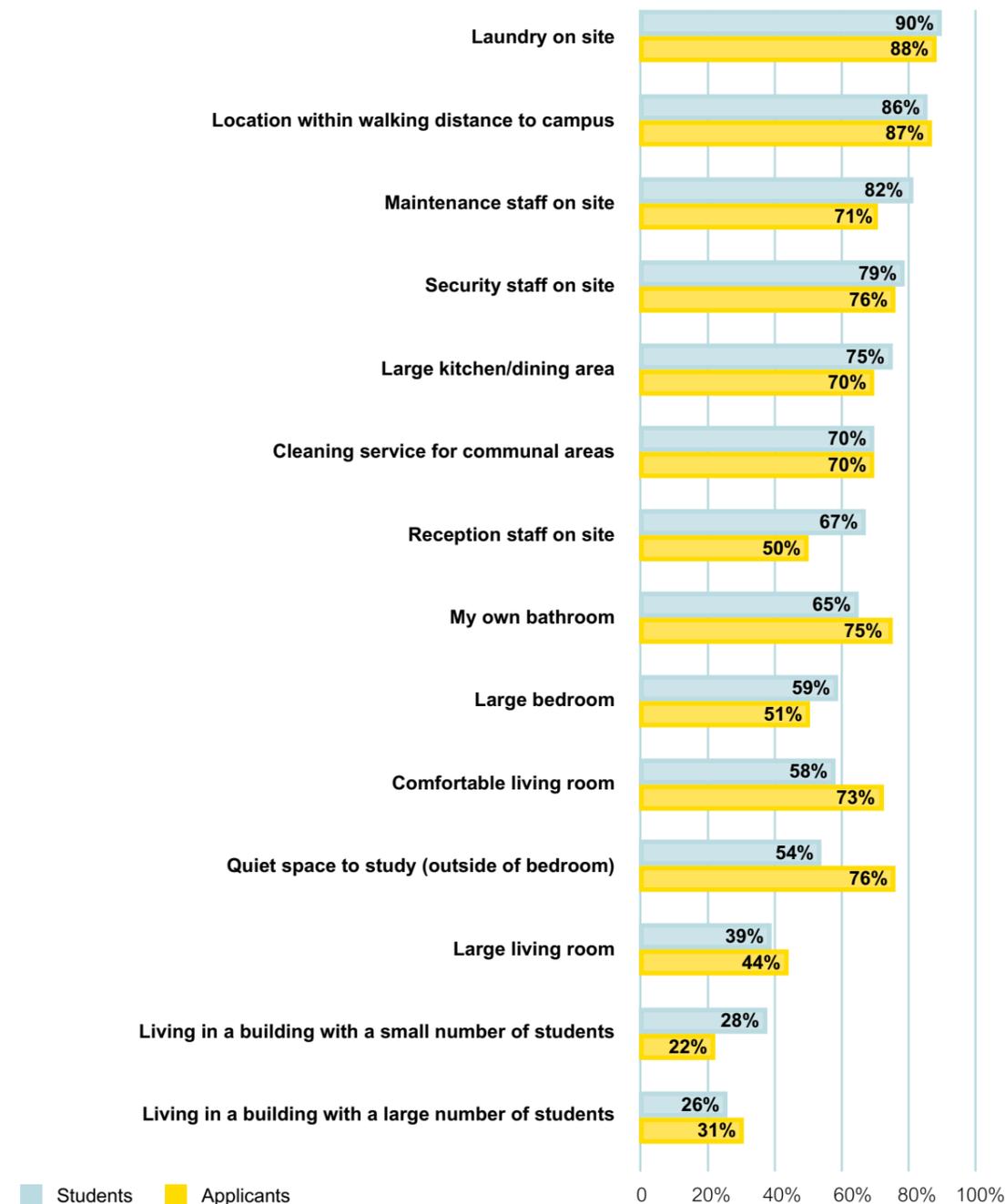
Overall accommodation satisfaction is also important to wellbeing. Those students who say they are very satisfied with their accommodation are also much more likely to say they are satisfied with their life overall.

As a contributor to resilience this is significant and indicates that supporting students to integrate well in their accommodation and ensuring an overall satisfactory experience could help to develop resilience and consequently support retention and wellbeing.

# ACCOMMODATION FEATURES

When considering the most important features of the student accommodation they will live in, applicants are drawn towards service features and location rather than physical features such as room size. Current students also tend to prioritise these features.

Figure 21: Importance of elements of student accommodation to students and applicants



Base: All students who live in halls (n=2,192); All applicants who intend to live in halls (n=1,595)

Please note that Wi-Fi did not feature as a choice in this year's questionnaire as it is now considered a given.

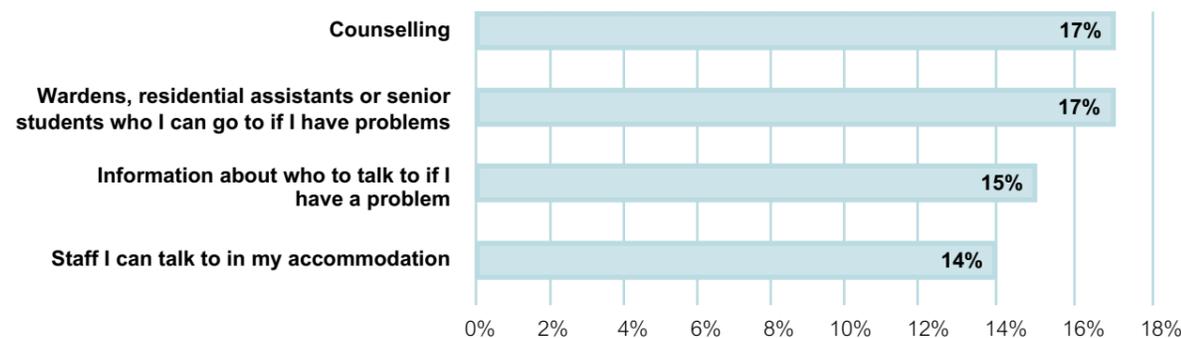
Applicants place greater value than students on having their own bathroom, a comfortable living room and a quiet space to study, whereas students are more likely than applicants to prioritise maintenance and reception staff on site.

Both applicants and students rate the size of the kitchen/dining area as important, and this is rated as more important than the size of their own bedroom. This links to the evidence already presented that students in halls who are satisfied with the communal space in their accommodation are more likely to be satisfied with their life.

## SUPPORT SERVICES IN ACCOMMODATION

There are four services which students identified as most valuable to them in times of difficulty when provided in their accommodation. These are counselling services, the ability to talk to wardens, information about where to find someone to talk to and talking to staff in their accommodation.

Figure 22: Services offered by how beneficial they would be in a time of difficulty

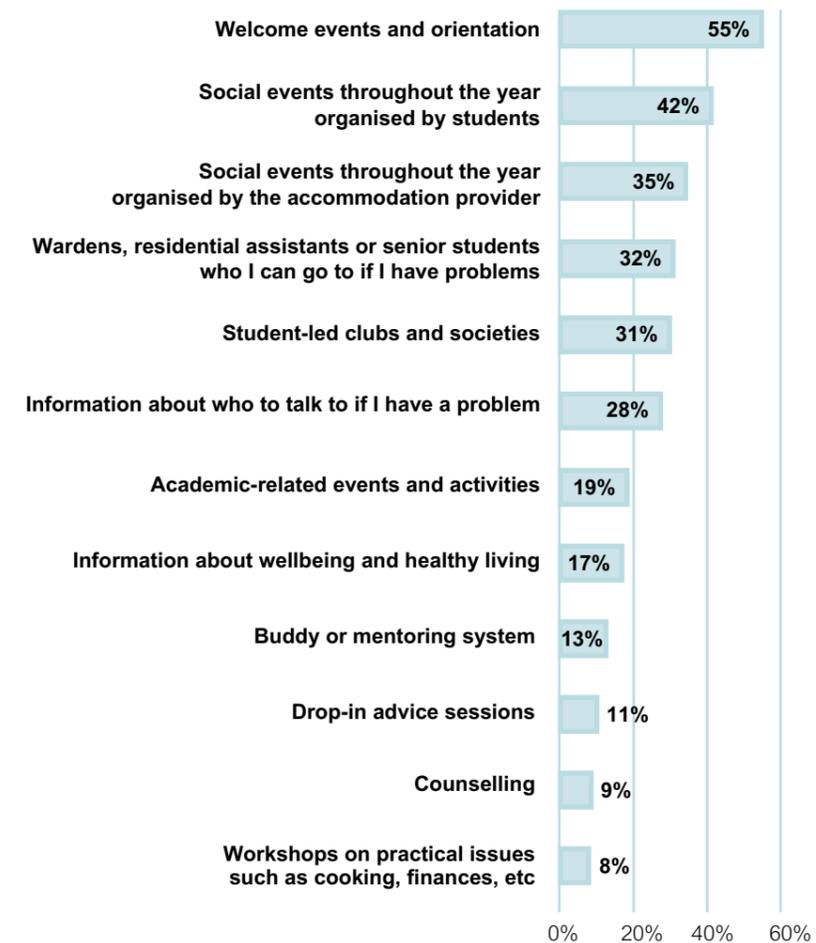


Base: All students who live in halls (n=2,192)

Professional mental health services such as counselling are not available to all students within their accommodation; under half of those in the study who lived in halls reported that this was available. However the evidence suggests that they could play a role for vulnerable students, to support retention and general wellbeing. Students with a mental health condition, with a disability, who are dissatisfied with their lives and who have considered leaving university early are all significantly more likely than average to say that counselling in their accommodation would benefit them.

We also asked about the availability and use of proactive services that could help students to avoid difficulties and keep themselves well.

Figure 23: Proportion of students who have used/attended services in their accommodation

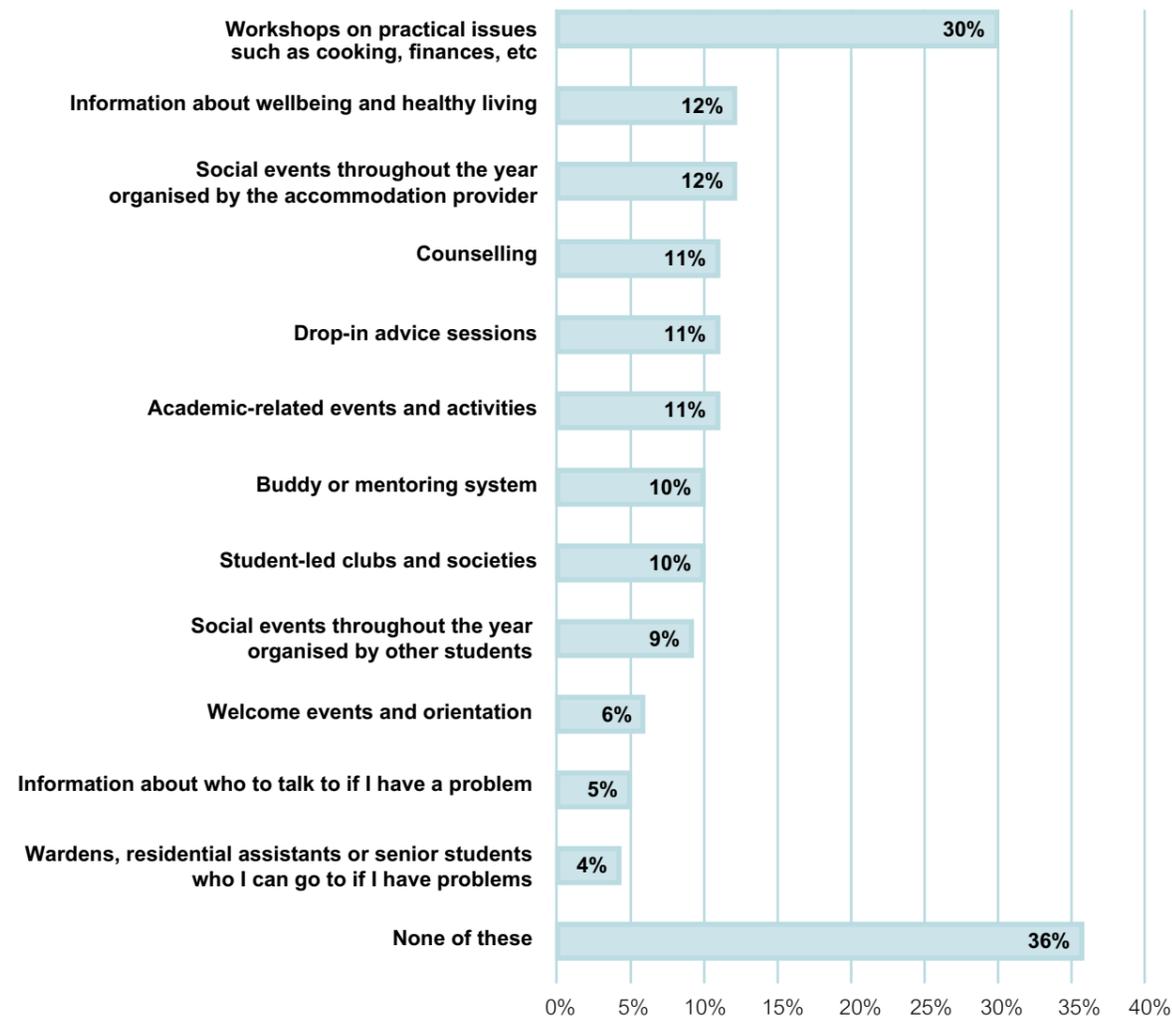


Base: All students who live in halls (n=2,192)

Currently, the most used services are those to help introduce students to new people and integrate into student life and unsurprisingly these were also the most popular among applicants. However, around a third of students also use services to support on problems, specifically going to wardens, residential assistants or senior students or accessing information about people to talk to.

There was some evidence of unmet demand for these services. The following chart shows demand for the services listed among students who live in halls but do not have these services provided to them already.

Figure 24: Services applicants and students would like provided in their accommodation



Base: All students who live in student accommodation and do not have all services provided (n=1,912)

The greatest area of unmet demand was for workshops on practical 'lifeskills' issues such as cooking and finance. As a proactive measure, this could offer real benefits in terms of developing resilience skills and confidence, which as demonstrated earlier in this report are important both to life satisfaction and to retention.

Students living in university halls are significantly more likely to report having access to and using these services compared to those in private halls. Students in private halls are more likely to say these services are not provided where they live, which suggests an opportunity to extend these services into privately run halls and therefore reach more students.

## ACCOMMODATION AND INTEGRATION: KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Satisfaction with accommodation and level of integration with flatmates are factors which contribute to student resilience and are positively linked with life satisfaction and retention.
- Accommodation-related services are often more important to students than 'bricks and mortar' features – when considering what are the most important features of the student accommodation they will live in, applicants (and current students) are drawn towards service features and location rather than more physical features such as room size.
- There are four services which students identified as most valuable to them in times of difficulty when provided in their accommodation. These are counselling services, the ability to talk to wardens, information about where to find someone to talk to and talking to staff in their accommodation.
- Students with a mental health condition, with a disability, who are dissatisfied with their lives and who have considered leaving university early are all significantly more likely than average to say that counselling in their accommodation would benefit them.
- Applicants are drawn to events and services in their accommodation that will help them make friends and integrate more effectively. However among current students there is unmet demand for workshops on 'lifeskills' such as cooking and finance.

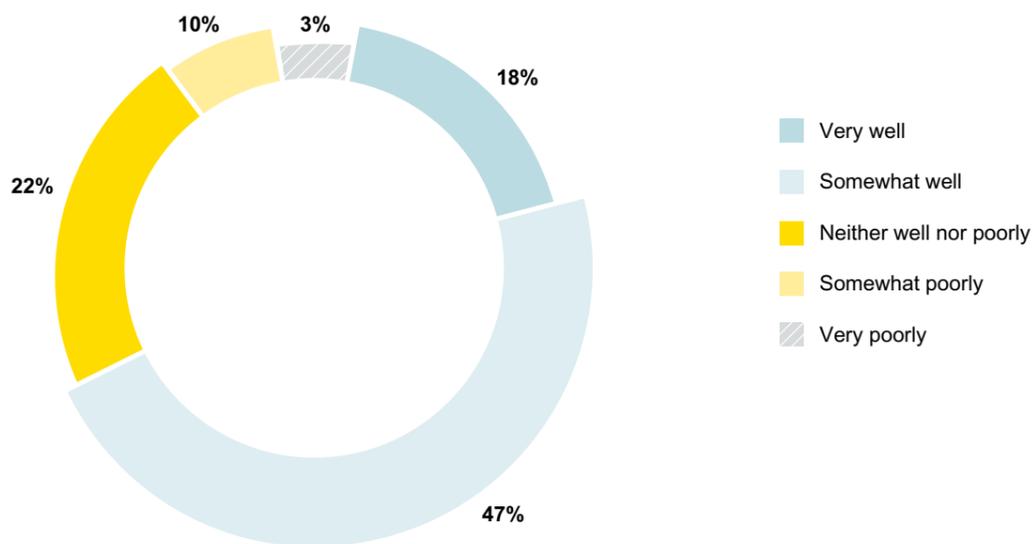
<sup>9</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2013/oct/21/parents-students-support> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-31028467>

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/301467/bis-14-723-student-income-expenditure-survey-2011-12.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/301467/bis-14-723-student-income-expenditure-survey-2011-12.pdf)

# PREPARING FOR EMPLOYMENT

The majority of students at UK universities recognise the support and development they receive from their university to prepare them for the workplace. Two thirds of students feel that their university is preparing them well for employment after graduation. This is made up of 18% who feel 'very well prepared' for employment after graduation and 47% who feel 'somewhat well prepared'. A much smaller proportion, 13%, feel their universities prepare them poorly for employment after graduation.

Figure 25: How well or poorly students feel their university is preparing them for employment after graduation



Base: All students (n=6,504)

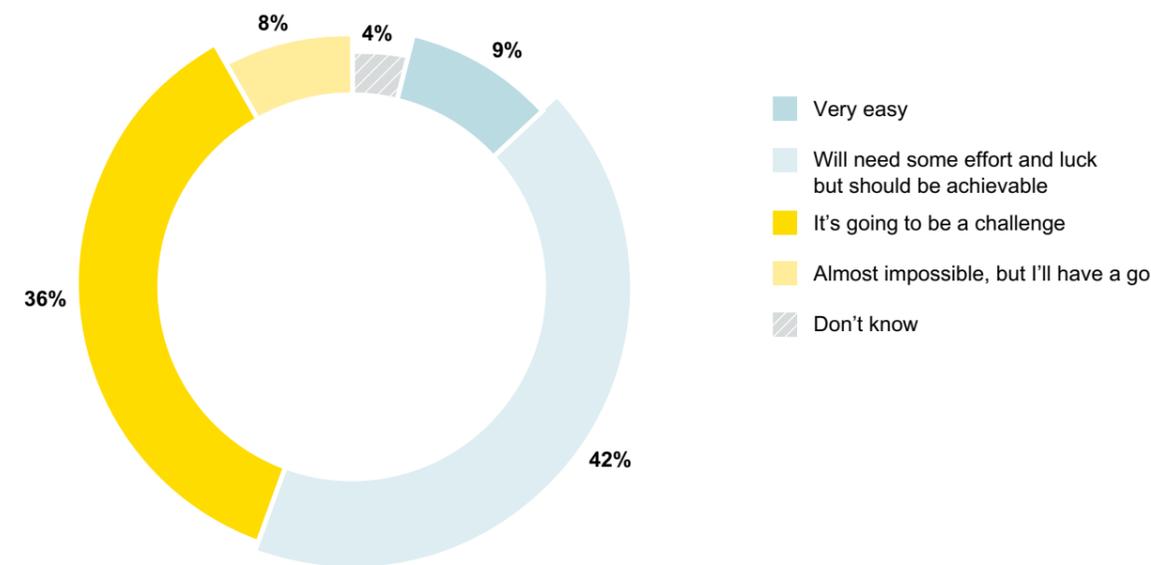
There are groups who are more likely to feel that their university is not preparing them well for employment after graduation. These groups are:

- Students in Year 3 and beyond (and therefore closer to graduation): 17% feel poorly prepared compared with 8% of Year 1 students
- Students from lower socioeconomic groups are more likely than those from higher socioeconomic groups to feel poorly prepared by their university for employment after graduation: 17% of those from a DE socioeconomic groups compared with 13% from a C1C2 socioeconomic groups and 11% from an AB socioeconomic groups

Moreover, students who are satisfied with their life are almost twice as likely to believe their university is preparing them well for employment than those who are dissatisfied with life.

Students are less optimistic than might be expected about their graduate employment. Only one in ten students (9%) feel that it will be very easy to get the job that they want after graduating. The majority of students are less optimistic with close to two fifths (36%) feeling that it is going to be a challenge and a further 8% assuming it will be almost impossible to get a job they want when they graduate.

Figure 26: Students' perception of how easy/difficult it will be to find a job they want after graduating

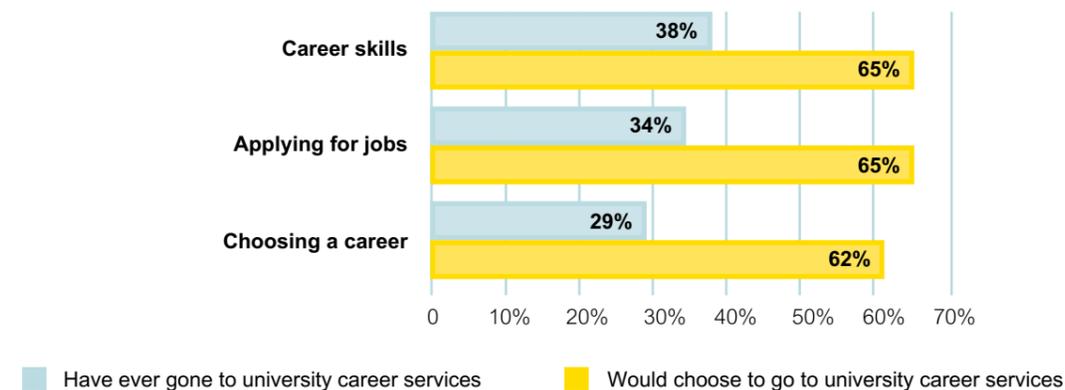


Base: All students (n=6,504)

## USE OF CAREERS AND EMPLOYABILITY SERVICES

About two thirds of students say they would go to a careers service at their university for help applying for jobs (65%), for career skills (65%) and for advice or support about choosing a career (62%). However the proportion of students that have actually done so at the time of survey was far lower: 38% had gone to the careers service for career skills, 34% for help applying for jobs and 29% for help choosing a career.

Figure 27: Proportion of students who say they would choose to go to university career services for advice in comparison with the proportion who have ever actually done so



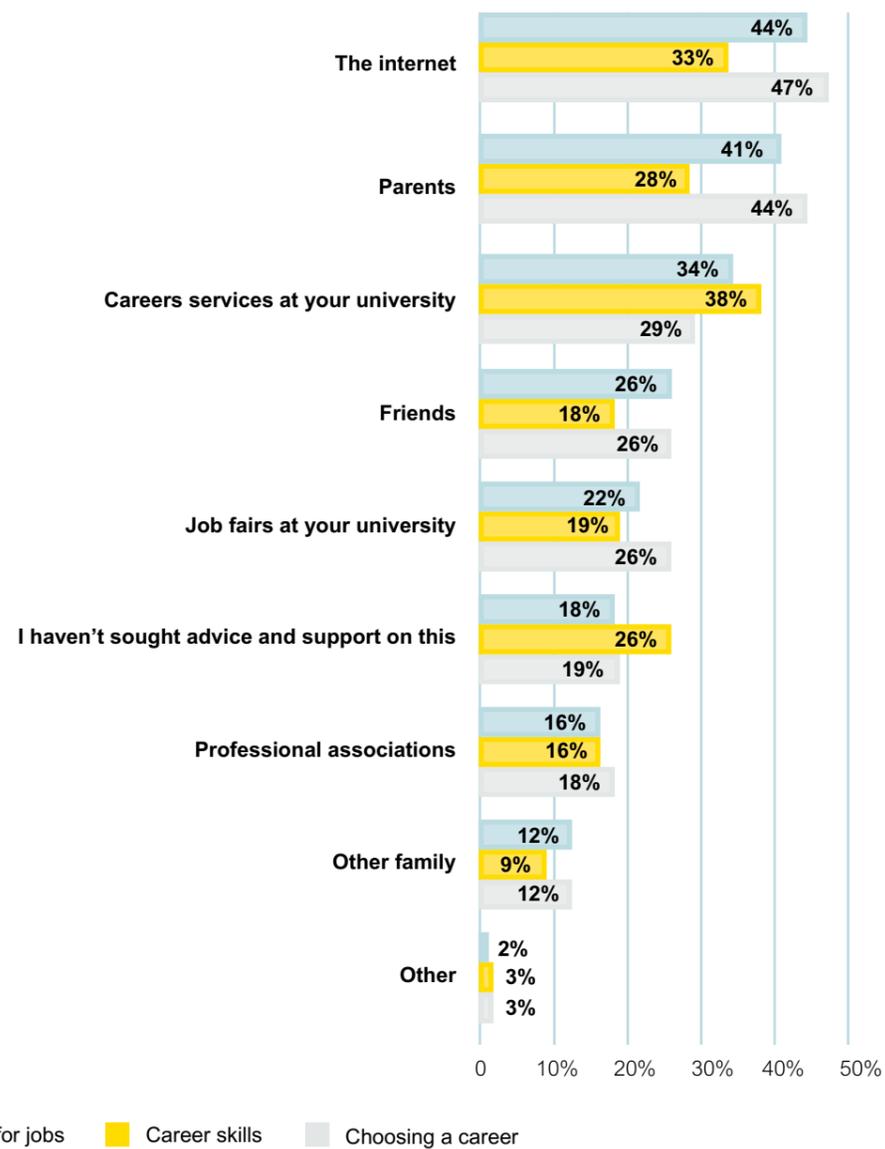
Base: All students (n=6,504)

Students are more likely to say that they would consult university careers services than the internet to develop career skills (65% vs. 49%) and this is reflected in their actual behaviour. Students say that they would consult university careers services and the internet to get advice about applying for jobs and choosing a career in roughly equal numbers. However, this is not the case in practice as more students report actually having used the internet for each of these (see Figure 28).

Similar numbers of students speak to their parents about career advice as access the internet for this advice. However, when it comes to advice and support about career skills specifically, students tend to use university careers services more than either their parents or the internet.

Parental support around career choice, career skills and applying for jobs is more likely to be accessed by those students from a higher socioeconomic group. Just over half of students from the AB group (54%) would choose to turn to their parents for advice on choosing a career, compared with a third (35%) of those from DE. Similarly, half of students from AB (48%) would turn to their parents for advice on applying for jobs compared with 28% of those from DE. To what extent getting parental help is advantageous was not measured in this study, however it would be reasonable to assume that having parents available to talk about career choices, when needed, would benefit those students.

**Figure 28: Where students have ever gone for career advice and support**



Base: All students (n=6,504)

When students who have not used their university career services are asked why this is, they most commonly attribute it to a lack of desire or need; 31% are not yet sure what career they want (especially those in the earlier years of study). A quarter of students surveyed (27%) say they have already decided on their career and this is more common among Year 3+ students.

One in five students who have not used their careers service say they do not feel confident enough to use the service (20%) or that they do not know where to go or what is on offer (18%). Female students are more likely than males to say that they feel this way.

### CAREERS AND EMPLOYABILITY: KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The majority of students believe their university is preparing them well for their future employment.
- Students have most commonly gone to their parents and the internet for advice about choosing a career and applying for jobs; it is less common that they have used career services at their university for advice.
- Parental support is not equally accessible to all students; parental support around career choice, career skills and applying for jobs is more likely to be accessed by those students from a higher socioeconomic group.
- Many students are not confident about their future job search: 44% believe that finding a job will be either 'challenging' or 'almost impossible'.
- A lack of confidence in using employability services as well as a general lack of awareness remain barriers to some students benefiting from these services – one in five of those who haven't used careers services say they do not feel confident enough to use the service (20%) or that they do not know where to go or what is on offer (18%).

# SPOTLIGHT: SOCIOECONOMIC GROUP DISADVANTAGE

Questions surrounding disadvantage in higher education continue to be a focus, following the release of UCAS data earlier this year that show that students who live within most advantaged areas were more than twice as likely to enter higher education.<sup>11</sup>

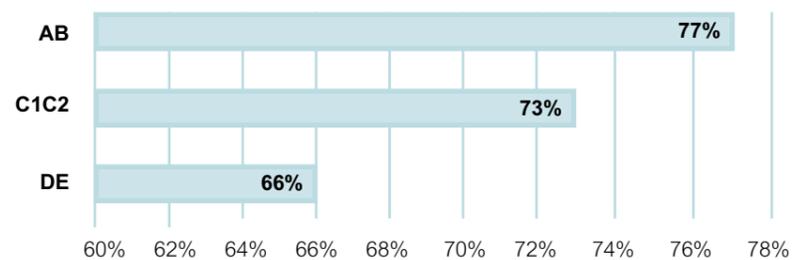
However, the policy focus has recently broadened to include measures of retention and success rather than just access under the new Office for Students. As well as this coming within the remit of the Director of Fair Access, the Teaching Excellence Framework score will be, "broken down to include those from disadvantaged backgrounds".<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, improving retention among disadvantaged students was also pinpointed as an aim in guidance sent to universities in February, along with hopes that lifting the cap on student numbers would help to widen access.<sup>13 14</sup>

This research fully supports this policy direction; as noted earlier, students from lower socioeconomic groups are also more likely than those of higher groups to consider leaving their course (43% among DE and C1C2, and 34% among AB).

Across this research, findings suggest that students from DE socioeconomic groups are systematically disadvantaged in a number of ways in the context of the university experience.

Overall, students from lower socioeconomic groups are less likely to be satisfied with their life at the moment than those from higher socioeconomic groups.

Figure 29: Life satisfaction by socioeconomic group



Base: All students (n=6,504)

This section examines four possible contributory factors, including lower satisfaction with accommodation and relationships with flatmates, financial challenges, lower career confidence and lower levels of accessing parental advice and support.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/ucas-publishes-first-equality-reports-individual-universities>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

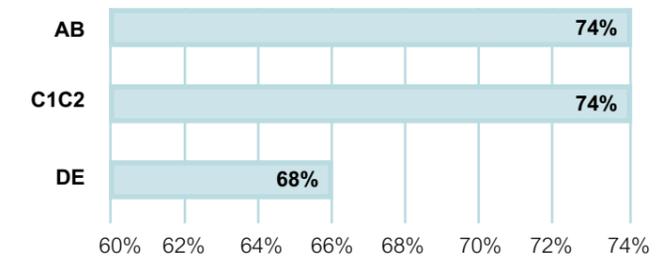
<sup>13</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/universities-told-to-reach-out-to-students-from-poorest-neighbourhoods-under-new-guidance>

<sup>14</sup> "Improving access so that more students can go to university is one of government's key higher education priorities. Lifting the cap on student numbers this upcoming academic year is a key part of this, and we remain committed to doubling the proportion of people from disadvantaged backgrounds entering higher education by the end of this Parliament, from 2009 levels." Jo Johnson. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-33537265>

# WHERE THEY LIVE: HAPPINESS AND INTEGRATION

Students from socioeconomic groups AB and C1C2 are generally more satisfied with where they live at university than those from socioeconomic group DE.

Figure 30: Satisfaction with where they live at university



Base: All students (n=6,504)

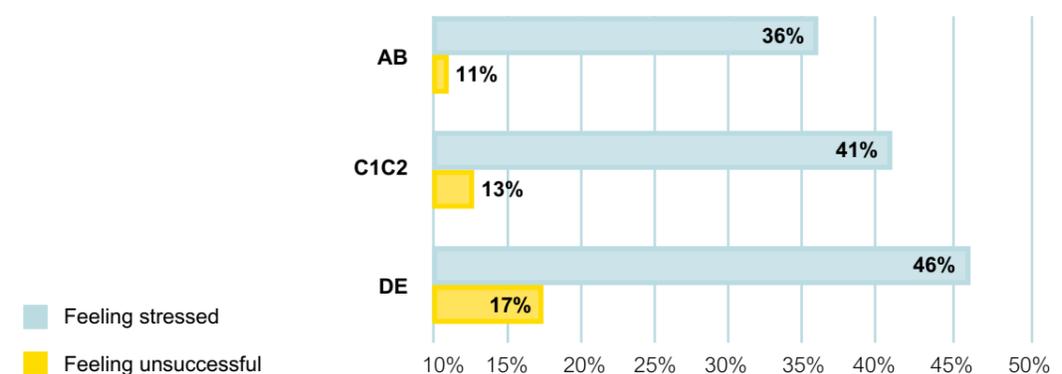
Overall, the lower the socioeconomic group, the less likely the student is to feel happy with their relationships with their house/ flat mates (56% DE compared with 64% C1C2 and 69% AB). Similarly, the lower the socioeconomic group, the less likely the student is to feel well or somewhat integrated in their student accommodation block (40% DE compared with 47% C1C2 and 56% AB).

More specifically, students from lower socioeconomic groups are less likely to report a positive social experience living in their student accommodation. They are less likely to state that main benefits of living with other students are making friends (70% DE compared with 76% AB and 75% C1C2) and having support in times of difficulty (38% DE compared with 44% AB and C1C2). Students of lower socioeconomic groups are more likely to say that getting on with housemates/flatmates is a challenge within their student accommodation (33% DE compared with 27% AB).

# FINANCIAL CHALLENGES

Students from lower socioeconomic groups are more likely to feel stressed about managing their money at university and feel more unsuccessful at doing so.

Figure 31: Managing money at university by socioeconomic group



Base: All students (n=6,504)

Overall, students from lower socioeconomic groups are somewhat more likely to say they often need help with financial matters (12% DE compared with 8% C1C2 and 9% AB) or have had to adapt to financial difficulties (68% DE compared with 64% C1C2 and 61% AB) such as not buying books or study materials (22% DE compared with 17% C1C2 and 15% AB) and not taking part in hobbies or sports (25% DE compared with 22% C1C2 and 20% AB).

Similarly, students from lower socioeconomic groups are more likely than those from higher groups to be concerned about being able to repay their student debt when they start working (48% DE compared with 42% C1C2 and 36% AB). The abolishment of student grants earlier this year means that the amount of debt (albeit student loan debt) that students from lower socioeconomic groups will have on graduation is likely to be even higher in the future.

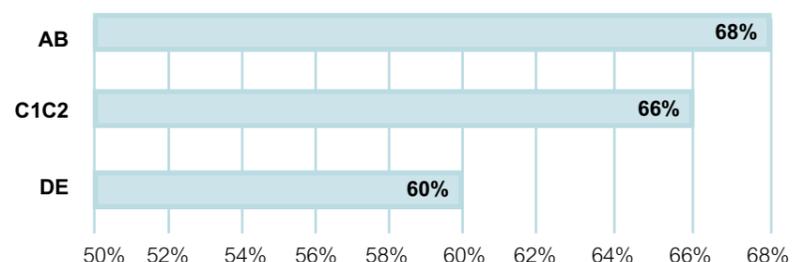
## CAREER CONFIDENCE

Overall, students from lower socioeconomic groups demonstrate a somewhat lower degree of confidence in their future career. Students from socioeconomic group C1C2 are slightly less likely than those from AB to believe that six months after graduation they will be in a job for which they need an undergraduate degree as a pre-requisite which is not dependent on the subject they are currently studying (16% compared with 19%) and somewhat more likely to say they don't think they will be in a job requiring a degree (8% DE and C1C2 compared with 6% AB).

The published statistics support their concerns over their employment changes. A HEFCE report published last year comparing data from 2008 to 2009 suggests that disadvantaged students are less likely than others to find graduate employment even at 40 months since graduation.<sup>15</sup>

The lower the socioeconomic group, the less likely the student is to feel that their university is preparing them well for employment after graduation.

Figure 32: University preparation for employment by socioeconomic group



Base: All students (n=6,504)

However, these feelings may be partly attributable to students' own actions as those from higher socioeconomic groups have more actively sought out advice and support; they are more likely to have gone to university careers services (36% AB compared with 31% C1C2) and job fairs at their university (24% AB compared with 20% C1C2) for advice about applying for jobs. This may indicate some of the intangible benefits associated with higher social capital. The more proactive that careers advice services and events (supplied by institutions or even perhaps accommodation providers) are able to be in reaching out to students, the more it could potentially benefit those from lower socioeconomic groups.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/ucas-publishes-first-equality-reports-individual-universities>

## THE INFLUENCE OF PARENTAL SUPPORT

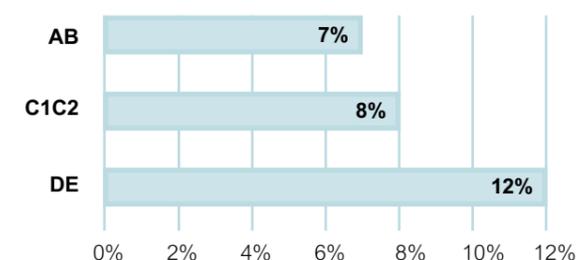
The findings indicate that students from higher socioeconomic groups have greater access to advice and support from their parents.

These students are more likely to say they would go to their parents if they needed advice and support on money management or financial worries (80% AB compared with 75% C1C2 and 65% DE). Similarly, they also more often say they would go to their parents if they needed advice or support about their career; whether about choosing a career (54% AB compared with 42% C1C2 and 35% DE), career skills (35% AB compared with 27% C1C2 and 20% DE), or applying for jobs (48% AB compared with 39% C1C2 and 28% DE).

The lack of this parental support availability – whether parents are perceived as unwilling or unable to help - is likely a strong source of disadvantage for members of the DE socioeconomic group that may have an underestimated impact on their student experience and ability to complete their degree.

When it comes to advice or support on money management or financial worries, students of lower socioeconomic groups are in fact more likely to say they would not seek any support.

Figure 33: Choosing not to seek advice and support on money management or financial worries



Base: All students (n=6,504)

This illustrates the importance of student support and advice services to students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and where possible, the benefit of trying to reach out to them proactively rather than relying on them to access the services when needed.

## CONCLUSION

**This report has highlighted the important role played by learning and development that takes place outside the academic sphere and in some cases, outside the direct influence of the university. The analysis and statistical modelling indicates that this learning and development can have an impact on the overall student experience in a way that could be measured in retention, satisfaction and employment data, which of course is significant in light of the Teaching Excellence Framework. While some of these areas of learning are already well developed within the higher education sector, such as financial management and employability skills, learning and development around emotional resilience is still emerging within the UK and appears to offer significant potential.**

Unite Students is committed to taking action as a result of this year's survey. Working with AMOSSHE we are bringing together those in the sector who are already researching student resilience to share data and potentially, to conduct further research. Equally importantly, we will work with professional bodies within the sector to share and discuss findings relevant to student accommodation, finance and employability professionals. We also plan to work with a number of our university partners to carry out pilot work informed by the research, aimed at boosting retention and student satisfaction.

The insights we have gained from this research will inform our core business, with an initial focus on supporting social integration within our accommodation through the transition from home to university and beyond. We are in the process of creating insight-informed video content for the 2017 student intake using material from a quantitative phase of research to help ease the transition and support students to develop resilience, particularly social networks.

More broadly, we offer the data and analysis from this research to the higher education sector as a whole and to other organisations who work with students. We are committed to making this as available and useful as possible through a variety of content, including access to data files, infographics and video.

The data and analysis presented in this report is very much an early, formative indicator of the potential offered by a resilience approach. It does not provide all the answers, but it does suggest further areas for research and the development of services for students. The findings also suggest that those who partner with universities to deliver aspects of the student experience need to be a part of this journey. Accommodation, in particular, appears already to be a factor in students' resilience, and offers further opportunity for development in this area. Over the next few years we look forward to seeing the fruits of this research and its impact on the coming generation of students.

## METHODOLOGY

### ABOUT YUOGOV AND YOUTHSIGHT

**This year, Unite Students has asked YouGov and YouthSight to form a partnership to deliver the 2016 Unite Students Insight Report.**

YouGov is an international full-service market research agency. The core offering of opinion data is derived from a highly participative panel of 4 million people worldwide. This continuous stream of data is combined with a deep research expertise and broad industry experience into a systematic research and marketing platform. The YouGov public services team, who led this research, are experienced in delivering robust and actionable insights for clients across the education sector. The data is trusted and the results are valued by clients in the work they deliver.

YouthSight's focus is on young people. This includes understanding and interpreting the language and trends of Gen Y and Gen Z for the benefit of brands, policy organisations and over 100 universities and HE policy-makers. In addition, YouthSight has strong fieldwork capabilities, owning and managing The OpinionPanel Community – the UK's largest youth research community, comprising 135,000 16-30 year olds. YouthSight is well positioned as a partner to help Unite Students gain and share deep insights into the student market.

### METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLING

As in previous years, the methodology for this research was an online survey that took respondents roughly 20 minutes to complete. The study was fielded between 24th March and 22nd April 2016 and hosted by YouthSight using its MRS-award winning, mobile optimised survey platform.

To allow for comparison to previous years, many questions were maintained from the 2015 survey, though some improvements and updates were made (as detailed below). The questionnaire and early results were disseminated for feedback among a steering group of relevant bodies for the key areas of the higher education experience that the survey investigates.

In total, the results of this survey represent the feedback from **8,673** participants (2,169 applicants and 6,504 students), an even larger total sample than in any previous year of this survey.

### STUDENT SAMPLE

The student sample was further expanded this year to **6,504** respondents (up from the 4,364 reached last year). All students were undergraduates studying at UK universities.

As in previous years, this data was structured according to HESA student population data<sup>16</sup>, though the methodology was updated. To ensure the correct proportions of EU and non-EU international students, recruitment quotas for these populations were set. For the remaining sample of domestic students, representative interlocking quotas were set across gender, course year and university group. During analysis, the data was weighted in line with these representative quotas.

<sup>16</sup> Data used this year was from 2014/15.

## APPLICANT SAMPLE

The applicant sample comprised **2,169** applicants to UK universities.

As with the student sample, recruitment quotas for EU and non-EU international students were set<sup>17</sup>. For the remaining sample of domestic students, representative interlocking quotas were set across gender, age and school type, using UCAS 2015 data. During analysis, the data was weighted in line with these representative quotas (a new feature for the applicant sample in the Unite Students Insight Report).

## SAMPLE SOURCE

All respondents were existing members of YouthSight's OpinionPanels. The research panel is of the highest quality, in part due to YouthSight's longstanding agreement with UCAS where applicants and new starters at university are invited to join YouthSight's research community.

Qualifying students were selected at random from the panel and invited via email. All participants were given an incentive for taking part (one point towards a collection of 15 points for a £25 pay out).

## THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE INDEX

Theme	Domain	Dimension	Indicator	Scoring
Student accommodation	Living areas	Overall satisfaction with where students live	<b>C2a. How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with where you live whilst at university?</b>	1 Very dissatisfied 2 Somewhat dissatisfied 3 Neither 4 Somewhat satisfied 5 Very satisfied
		Satisfaction with the social spaces students have to interact	<b>C4. And how satisfied, if at all, are you with the living spaces/ communal areas in your current student accommodation?</b> - Common areas / Social spaces	Exclude not applicable 1 Very dissatisfied 2 Somewhat dissatisfied 3 Neither 4 Somewhat satisfied 5 Very satisfied
Student social life	Integration	Reported levels of integration with others	<b>E5. How integrated, if at all, do you feel at university in the following areas?</b> - Students in my flat/ house - Students in my accommodation block - Students at my university overall	For each measure Exclude not applicable 3 Well integrated 2 Somewhat integrated 1 Not integrated
	Relationships	Happiness with relationships with others	<b>I1. On the scale below, please indicate how happy or unhappy you feel about each of the following relationships.</b> - Relationships with my house/flat mates	For each item 0 Yes 2 No 5 None of these
	Stress	Stress of living with others	<b>I4. To what extent, if at all, do each of the following cause you stress while at university?</b> - Getting on with housemates/flatmates - Finding new friends	For each item 0 Yes 2 No 5 None of these
Student finance	Success in managing money	Reported success in managing money	<b>F1a1. How successful or unsuccessful do you consider yourself to be at managing your finances throughout the year?</b>	5 Very successful 4 Somewhat successful 3 Neither 2 Somewhat unsuccessful 1 Very unsuccessful
		Avoiding negative impacts of managing money	<b>F1c. Which of the following, if any, have occurred due to financial difficulties during your time as a student?</b>	<b>Yes 0 No 1</b> Not been able to go out socially <b>Yes 0 No 1</b> Not been able to take part in hobbies or sports <b>Yes 0 No 2</b> Not been able to buy books or study materials <b>Yes 0 No 3</b> Not being able to afford food or eating less <b>Yes 1 No 0</b> Cut back on household expenses <b>Yes 0 No 2</b> Not been able to pay rent on time <b>Yes 0 No 2</b> Not been able to pay bills on time <b>Yes 0 No 1</b> Not turning heating on to save costs <b>Yes 0 No 5</b> None - I have not had to adapt to financial difficulties

<sup>17</sup> Using HESA data for 1st year students as a proxy for applicants. As many international applicants do not apply through UCAS, UCAS data was not considered suitable for setting these quotas.

Theme	Domain	Dimension	Indicator	Scoring
Student finance continued	Taking control	Positive behaviours/ actions undertaken around managing money	<b>F1a2. Which of the following statements, if any, apply to you?</b> - I set a spending limit for my weekly spending - I know what my account balance is now - I often spend more than planned	For each item <b>2</b> Yes <b>0</b> No  <b>0</b> Yes <b>2</b> No
	Mindset	Stress related to managing money	<b>I4. To what extent, if at all, do each of the following cause stress while at university?</b> - Managing your money	<b>Yes 0 No 1</b> Not been able to go out socially <b>Yes 0 No 1</b> Not been able to take part in hobbies or sports <b>Yes 0 No 2</b> Not been able to buy books or study materials
		Attitude to debt	<b>F5. How concerned are you about being able to repay student debt when you start working after your studies?</b>	Exclude not applicable <b>1</b> Very concerned <b>2</b> Fairly concerned <b>3</b> Neither concerned nor unconcerned <b>4</b> Fairly unconcerned <b>5</b> Completely unconcerned
Student employability	Preparing for the future	University support	<b>G3a. How well or poorly do you feel your university is preparing you for employment after graduation?</b>	<b>5</b> Very well <b>4</b> Somewhat well <b>3</b> Neither well nor poorly <b>2</b> Somewhat poorly <b>1</b> Very poorly
		Work experience	<b>G5. Have you taken up, or do you intend to take up, the work placement opportunity that has been offered?</b>	<b>2</b> Yes - the work placement integrated into my current course <b>2</b> Yes - the internship arranged by my university <b>3</b> Yes - a work placement organised by myself <b>3</b> Yes - an internship I arranged myself <b>0</b> No <b>0</b> I have not yet decided or do not know
	Confidence	Ease of finding a job after graduating	<b>G9. How easy do you think it will be to find the job that you want after graduating?</b>	Exclude Don't know <b>5</b> Very easy <b>4</b> Will need some effort and luck but should be achievable <b>3</b> It's going to be a challenge <b>2</b> Almost impossible, but I'll have a go

Theme	Domain	Dimension	Indicator	Scoring
Student wellbeing	Life satisfaction	Overall satisfaction with their life	<b>R1. How satisfied are you with your life at the moment?</b>	<b>5</b> Very satisfied <b>4</b> Somewhat satisfied <b>3</b> Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied <b>2</b> Somewhat dissatisfied <b>1</b> Very dissatisfied
	Positive mental health	Measures of positive/ negative feelings	<b>R2. Feelings come and go. Over the last 4 weeks, how often, if at all, have you felt the following?</b>	For each item <b>0</b> Always <b>1</b> Often <b>3</b> Sometimes <b>5</b> Never
		Measures of positive/ negative behaviours	<b>R5. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?</b> - I am quick to get help from others when I encounter problems - I consider the impact of my actions on others - I have clear idea of goals I would like to achieve in the year ahead - Disappointment doesn't stop me from trying again - I am able to plan my way out of negative situations - I tend to panic under pressure	<b>5</b> Strongly agree <b>4</b> Somewhat agree <b>3</b> Neither <b>2</b> Somewhat disagree <b>1</b> Strongly disagree
		Consideration of leaving course	<b>R4. To what extent, if at all, have you considered dropping out of your course?</b>	<b>0</b> I have strongly considered dropping out <b>2</b> I sometimes consider dropping out <b>5</b> I have never considered dropping out

# REGRESSION ANALYSIS

## MULTIPLE LINEAR REGRESSION

This is used to identify the most important factors influencing student satisfaction and student retention.

In linear regression analysis only those variables that are not correlated against each other are included in the model as long as their impact upon it is statistically significant.

The model combines responses to attitudinal questions with data on levels of stress, emotions/ feelings, support networks and demographic characteristics.

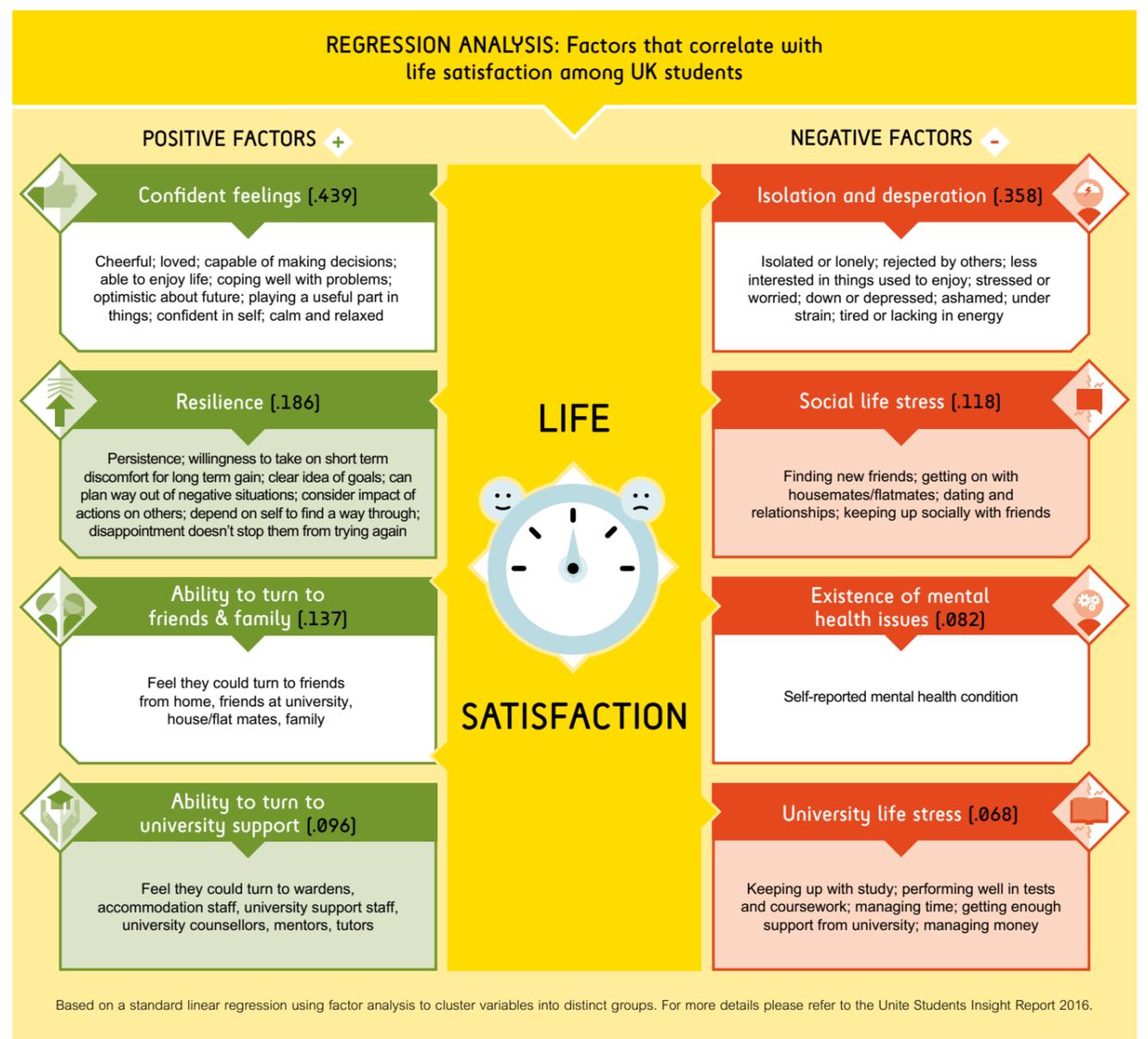
## FACTOR ANALYSIS

In order to make the model more manageable factor analysis was undertaken on the questions, which allowed them to be reduced into eight distinct groups.

Within each grouping variables are highly correlated with each other but there tends not to be correlation between groups.

## THEMES AND FACTORS INCLUDED IN THE REGRESSION MODEL

- Confident feelings
- Feelings of isolation and depression
- Ability to turn to university support
- University life stress
- Social life stress
- Motivated personality
- Ability to turn to friends and family
- Negative behaviours related to eating and sleeping
- Overreactions
- Negative behaviours related to drink and drugs
- Lack of confidence
- Panic
- Debt concern
- Social grade
- Gender
- Disability
- Mental health issues
- Current year



**REGRESSION ANALYSIS: Factors that correlate with strength of thoughts about dropping out of university among UK students**



**POSITIVE FACTORS +**

**NEGATIVE FACTORS -**

**Confident feelings [.164]**

Cheerful; loved; capable of making decisions; able to enjoy life; coping well with problems; optimistic about future; playing a useful part in things; confident in self; calm and relaxed

**Isolation and desperation [.247]**

Isolated or lonely; rejected by others; less interested in things used to enjoy; stressed or worried, down or depressed; ashamed; under strain; tired or lacking in energy

**Resilience [.149]**

Persistence; willingness to take on short term discomfort for long term gain; clear idea of goals; can plan way out of negative situations; consider impact of actions on others; depend on self to find a way through; disappointment doesn't stop them from trying again

**University life stress [.072]**

Keeping up with study; performing well in tests and coursework; managing time; getting enough support from university; managing money

**Ability to turn to university support [.063]**

Feel they could turn to wardens, accommodation staff, university support staff, university counsellors, mentors, tutors

**Panic [.063]**

Tend to panic under pressure; can become upset when things don't go to plan; quick to get help from others when encountering problems

**Socioeconomic group [.058]**

Socioeconomic group AB

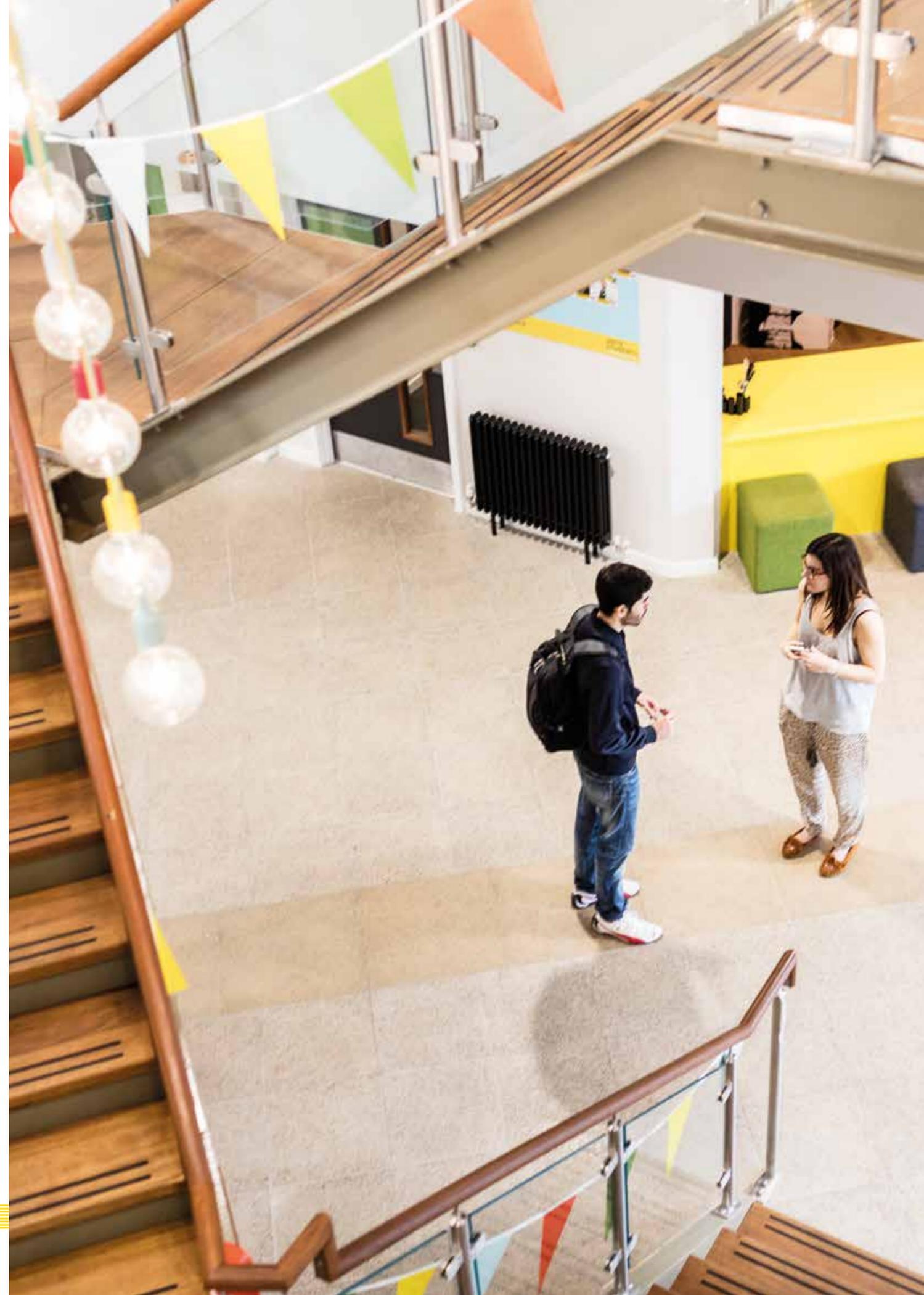
**Social life stress [.059]**

Finding new friends; getting on with housemates/flatmates; dating and relationships; keeping up socially with friends

**Debt concern [.058]**

Concerned about repaying debt after graduation

Based on a standard linear regression using factor analysis to cluster variables into distinct groups. For more details please refer to the Unite Students Insight Report 2016.





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