



Globally Competitive

A report on the international
student experience

RUSSELL GROUP
STUDENTS' UNIONS

UKCISA UK Council
for International
Student Affairs

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About Russell Group Students’ Unions

Russell Group Students’ Unions represents the collective voice of the students’ unions of the Russell Group, a group consisting of the UK’s 24 leading research intensive universities. Together, we represent more than 700,000 students across Russell Group universities.

Students’ unions are independent membership organisations and registered charities, led by elected student leaders. They are the recognised representative bodies for students at UK universities, representing the issues that most affect the lives of their members.

About UKCISA

The UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) is the UK’s national advisory body serving the interests of international students and those who work with them.

Our membership includes every university in the UK, many FE colleges, independent schools, students’ unions and organisations who support international students in the UK.

As well as giving advice directly to students, we support our members by providing training, up-to-date guidance about relevant rules and information such as immigration, student finance and fees, and student experience. We work collaboratively with our members to raise areas of concern with government departments and raise awareness of the benefits that international students bring to the UK.

I Foreword

As co-chairs of the International Student APPG and within our other roles, we have witnessed the countless ways international students enrich our campuses, communities, and our country. Russell Group universities are globally recognised for their excellence in teaching and research, and our institutions remain a top choice for international students. Not only do these students bring huge economic benefits, contributing nearly £42 billion to the UK economy in a single year, but they also enrich our communities and help create enduring ties with countries across the globe. International students make our universities and communities better places, and we owe it to them to ensure they have an outstanding experience whilst in the UK.

We both have personal experiences of immigration to the UK.

I [Lord Bilimoria] first arrived in Britain as a trainee accountant and international student decades ago, inspired by the UK's world-class education. During those university years at London Metropolitan University and Cambridge University, the idea for Cobra Beer was born—a venture that grew from a dorm-room vision into a global brand. That journey, from newcomer to entrepreneur, Lord and later Chancellor of the University of Birmingham, was possible because this country opened its doors and helped me succeed.

I [Abtisam Mohamed MP] am the daughter of Yemeni migrants in Sheffield, a city rich in diversity and home to two brilliant universities. Having been a student at the University of Sheffield, and now serving as the local MP, I've seen firsthand the positive contribution that international students make to our city. From volunteering and working in local businesses, to sharing their traditions and making Sheffield a brilliant example of what modern Britain is today,

we are lucky that students from around the world continue to choose the UK as their destination for higher education.

Given that one in four world leaders has studied in the UK, it is obvious that international students contribute beyond their time studying here; they strengthen Britain's ties to countries right across the globe. We're sure that many people reading this who went to university will agree that the friendships formed on our campuses last a lifetime, creating global networks with the UK.

Yet, we know that welcoming students is only half the story; we must also support them to thrive. Too often, we hear about challenges that undermine the experience of studying in the UK. Complex and costly visa processes, difficulties finding housing or part-time work, moments of loneliness or discrimination—these issues highlight to us that we must do more to support international students. It is painful to learn that some of these students, who have trusted that the UK will provide them with a world-class education and spent huge sums of money, have at times felt unwelcome or treated as “cash cows”. We must continue to strive for an education system in the UK that treats all international students with dignity and respect if we are to continue to attract the brightest minds from across the world to study with us. It is important that we use this research to maximise our efforts to create an environment where international students feel safe and supported, recognising their role as valued members of our community.

Encouragingly, progress has been made. The return of the post-study work opportunity (Graduate Route visa) is one example of positive change in recent years, enabling graduates to kick-start their careers here in the UK.

Universities, students' unions, and local communities are working harder than ever to integrate international students, and many MPs and Peers from all parties now speak up in support of them. But there is more to do.

This report, produced by Russell Group Students' Unions in partnership with UKCISA, highlights the real lived experiences of nearly a quarter of a million international students currently studying at Russell Group Universities. It celebrates what we are getting right and offers clear recommendations on where we can improve. As you will read throughout this report, you'll be reassured to learn that the UK remains a top destination for talent from around the world, but we must not take our success for granted. We urge students' unions, university leaders, and parliamentarians to closely take note of the findings within this research.

The UK has a long and proud history of excellence in higher education and a well-deserved reputation as a welcoming home for international students. If we listen carefully to the concerns of international students and recognise the immense contribution they bring to this country, we will not only improve their lives but also strengthen our society and economy for years to come.



Lord Karan Bilimoria
President of UKCISA;
Co-Chair, APPG for International Students



Abtisam Mohamed
Member of Parliament for Sheffield Central;
Co-Chair, APPG for International Students

I Introduction

Every year, nearly 90,000 international students choose to begin their studies at Russell Group universities, becoming contributing member of our communities on and off campus. These students provide us with a wide range of perspectives and experiences, that contribute significantly to the cultural and academic foundation of our campuses. In deciding to study in the UK, students are investing in their future through a quality education and joining a global network rooted in collaboration, diversity, and innovation.

Russell Group Students' Unions and the UK Council for International Student Affairs have partnered to produce this original report into the experience of students studying on our campuses. Together, we are dedicated to empowering international students to drive positive policy change locally and nationally.

As the representative bodies of the UK's 24 leading research-intensive universities, Russell Group Students' Unions have a responsibility to listen to, advocate for, and empower international students. International students make an enormous contribution economically, socially, and academically however, they are often overlooked in policymaking, reduced to their economic contribution rather than recognising the value they bring to our teaching and research environment. We believe that their experiences are often misrepresented or misunderstood in the national debate. This report seeks to address that.

The Russell Group Students' Unions International Students Report provided a comprehensive overview of what international students experience before, during, and after their time studying in the UK. Bringing together the voices of nearly 5,000 students through survey responses and focus groups across Russell Group institutions, the report offers an in-depth analysis of the international student experience.

Its purpose is to explore the challenges and barriers they face, as well as shining a spotlight on the integral role these students play at our universities, on what works and how we can build on it.

This research was initiated in response to the shifting policies of previous governments, in which international students have increasingly found themselves caught between an array of welcoming words and exclusionary practices. The past few years have seen frequent changes to visa rules, public debates over immigration, and shifting government strategies, all of which have had tangible effects on how international students feel about the UK as a study destination, as well as the impact it has on their ability to succeed here. In this context, this report serves as a timely intervention that looks to present clear, evidence-based insight into the international student journey.

At its core, this report focuses on fairness and belonging. It explores how international students navigate the UK's higher education system, its immigration policies, its rental markets, and university services. It also looks at how cultural differences, financial pressures, and personal wellbeing all impact the lived experience of international students, no matter what country they come from. Crucially, it also highlights how students form deep friendships, contribute to campus life, and build community despite these challenges.

Moving beyond the comprehensive data produced by the research, this report is a call to action. We show that the UK's higher education system must not take its global reputation for granted. To remain a world-leading study destination, the UK must ensure that students feel genuinely welcome, not only through rhetoric, but in national, local and institutional policy.

This means policy frameworks that are fair and transparent, university services that are inclusive and accessible, and communities that recognise the immense value and contributions international students offer.

When developing this report, we have always been led by two principles: that student voice is central, and that actionable solutions are possible. The recommendations within this report are practical, student-informed, and made to improve the international student experience, from application to graduation and beyond. We hope they will be a resource for policymakers, sector bodies, university leaders, and students' unions, who share our commitment to making UK higher education more equitable and inclusive for all students.

We would like to express a huge thank you to every student who participated in the research, and we invite all readers of this report to engage with its findings and work with us collaboratively to deliver meaningful change.

On behalf of

**RUSSELL GROUP
STUDENTS' UNIONS**

UKCISA UK Council
for International
Student Affairs

| **Headline findings**

1

The UK remains a top destination for international students

- 7 in 10 international students choose the UK for its high-quality education and globally recognised universities.
- For 3 in 4 students, the UK is their first choice for studying abroad.
- The UK's diverse and multicultural environment, shorter study durations for certain programmes, and the opportunity to work via the Graduate Route contribute to its appeal.
- However, inconsistent government policies have impacted international students' perceptions of the UK as a welcoming destination.

2

The student visa process is a major source of stress

- 1 in 2 international students faced at least one challenge during the visa application process, with the most common issues being high application fees (27%), delays in processing (11%), and late Confirmation of Acceptance for Studies (10%).
- Students from marginalised backgrounds, such as disabled students (67%) and non-binary students (78%), were significantly more likely to report difficulties in navigating the visa system.
- Rising visa fees and the Immigration Health Surcharge add to the financial pressures faced by international students.

3

International students face financial strain, impacting their overall experience

- The median monthly living cost for international students (excluding tuition fees) is £1,402, rising to £1,635 for those in London.
- 1 in 5 international students worry about money all the time, with borrowing money or working part-time strongly correlating with financial anxiety.
- International tuition fees have risen sharply, with some students feeling they are treated as "cash cows" by universities and the government.

4

Career support needs improvement to meet international students' needs

- 46% of international students have used university careers services, but many find they are under-equipped to support with post-study visa requirements and job opportunities.
- 42% of students want to stay and work in the UK after graduation, but many cite the lack of awareness from employers of the Graduate Route visa as a barrier to securing a job.

5

Accommodation can be expensive and difficult to secure

- International students pay a median of £851 per month in rent, increasing to £1,052 in London.
- Many struggle to secure housing before arriving in the UK due to difficulties obtaining a UK-based guarantor.

6

International students face barriers to social integration

- 88% of international students make friends with other international students, but only 68% report making friends with UK students.
- 1 in 5 international students report experiences of both racism and xenophobia, contributing to feelings of isolation.
- Students who feel unsafe or unwelcome in the UK more broadly are significantly more likely to report poor mental health.

7

Mental health and wellbeing remain critical concerns

- 1 in 2 international students report experiencing poor mental health while studying in the UK
- Students from marginalised backgrounds, such as disabled students and LGBT + students, are disproportionately affected by loneliness and anxiety.
- Only 18% of international students have accessed university mental health services, with some reporting that the support available is not culturally sensitive or well-advertised.

8

Student visa restrictions limit work opportunities for international students

- Only 15% of international students work part-time, with 33% reporting that their visa conditions limit their ability to find employment.
- The 20-hour work limit during term time does not reflect the fluctuating academic workload of students, making it difficult to balance work and study.
- Restrictions on self-employment prevent international students from gaining valuable professional experience, despite the UK's need for skilled workers.



Recommendations

Supporting international student mobility

Government Policy Recommendation:

- Remove international students and their dependents from the Government's net migration figures, recognising the temporary nature of their immigration.
- Conduct a cross-departmental impact assessment on how immigration policies and public messaging affect the international student experience.

University Policy Recommendation:

- Adopt UKCISA's #WeAreInternational Student Charter as a framework to improve the international student experience.

Visa

Government Policy Recommendation:

- Freeze student visa application fees and the Immigration Health Surcharge for students.
- Work with students through RGSU and UKCISA to improve the experience of the visa application process.

Financial support

University Policy Recommendations:

- Fix international students' tuition fees at the point of entry, ensuring they pay the same amount each year through the duration of their studies.
- Ensure hardship funds are available to all international students who need them with transparent and clear eligibility criteria.

Career support

Government Policy Recommendations:

- Retain the Graduate Route visa in its current form, ensuring the post-study work visa remains internationally competitive.
- Issue specific guidance to employers to raise awareness of their understanding of the conditions attached to the Student and Graduate visa routes.

Accommodation

Government Policy Recommendation:

- Work in partnership with local authorities and universities to develop affordable, purpose-built student accommodation in areas of high demand, addressing the housing supply shortages and rising costs facing students.
- Introduce a requirement that all universities commit to a Student Living Guarantee, which asserts their belief that every student who lives away from home will be able to access housing that is of a reasonable price, a reasonable standard and a reasonable distance from where they are studying.

University Policy Recommendation:

- Work with their Students' Union to establish an accredited 'good landlords' scheme to better support students in navigating the private rental market.

Settling and making friends

Government Policy Recommendation:

- Encourage local authorities to better welcome and support international students' integration into the community.

University Policy Recommendation:

- Support tailored social and professional networks for international students.

Mental health and wellbeing

Government Policy Recommendation:

- Launch a challenge fund to support better university-NHS collaboration to achieve a more joint up approach to mental health and wellbeing care to ensure international students are able to access services.

Part-time work

Government Policy Recommendations:

- Provide greater flexibility in when students can work, with the ability to spread the total number of hours across the calendar month during term time. Such as 48 hours in 2 weeks during term-time.
- Permit self-employment for international students to promote freelancing and entrepreneurship.

1 Motivations to study in UK higher education

7 in 10 international students are motivated to study in the UK because of the UK’s high-quality education and globally recognised universities.

Every year, over 90,000 new international students enrol at Russell Group universities across the UK. By choosing to study in the UK, international students contribute significantly to the economy, enrich society, enhance the experience of domestic students, drive research excellence, and play a key role in helping to maintain the country’s position as a global leader in education.

For 3 in 4 students, the UK was their first choice for studying abroad.

Motivating factors include the high-quality education and globally recognised universities, the UK’s diverse and multicultural environment, the length of study for certain programmes, and the opportunity to utilise the Graduate Route Visa and work in the UK after graduating, as seen in Figure 1.

What motivated students to study in the UK? (Select up to 3 reasons)

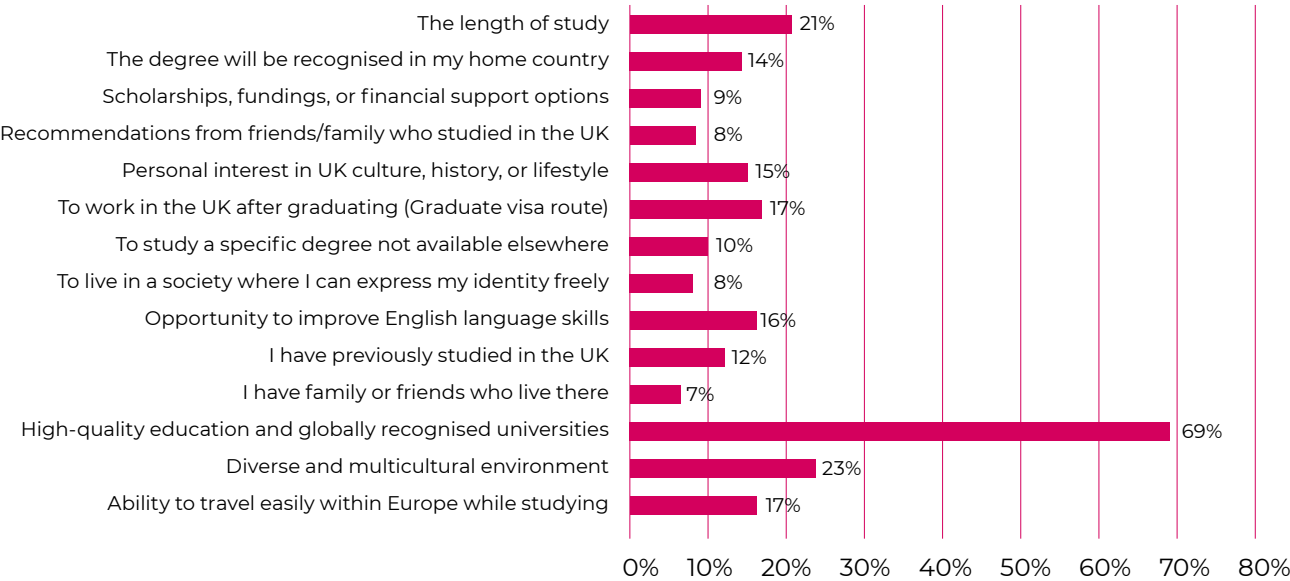


Figure 1. Bar chart showing student responses to ‘What motivated students to study in the UK? (Select up to 3 reasons)’.

“There are some genuinely good-intentioned people and regulations but many of us feel that **international students are often easy targets for unfair rhetoric, especially by politicians seeking to appease their base of supporters.** That is dangerous to us because it feeds into the negative public/societal psyche about us and makes our lives miserable”

PGR, country undisclosed

“Studying in the UK as an international student is **a transformative experience, offering access to world-class education and a chance to immerse yourself in a rich and diverse culture.** While adjusting to a new environment, different academic expectations, and practical challenges like the weather or navigating healthcare can be daunting, it also fosters resilience, independence, and adaptability. **The opportunity to meet people from all over the world, explore historic landmarks, and engage in vibrant student life makes it incredibly rewarding.**”

PGR, India

“Being an international student in the UK is exciting yet challenging. It offers great **exposure to diverse cultures, academic excellence, and personal growth.**”

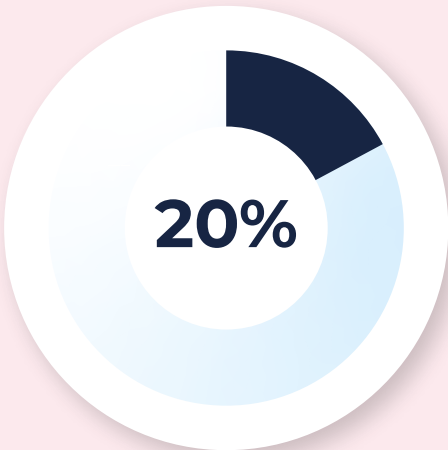
PGR, India

Only 61% of international students agree that the UK government values and welcomes international students, a proportion which declines for those with marginalised identities, with only 47% of disabled agreeing compared to 67% of non-disabled students, and 54% LGBT + compared to 66% cis-heterosexual students.



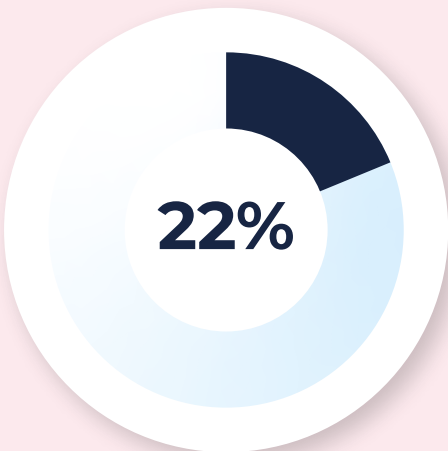
Key findings

LGBT+ students



20% of LGBT+ students selected 'Opportunity to live in a society where I can express my identity freely' in response to being asked 'What motivated you to study in the UK? (Select up to 3 reasons)', a significantly higher proportion than those who are cis-heterosexual at 4%.

Students with caring responsibilities



22% of students with caring responsibilities selected 'Scholarship, funding, and financial support options' in response to being asked 'What motivated you to study in the UK? (Select up to 3 reasons)', significantly higher compared to those who do not have caring responsibilities at 11%.

What motivated you to study in the UK? (Select up to 3 reasons)
Undergraduate

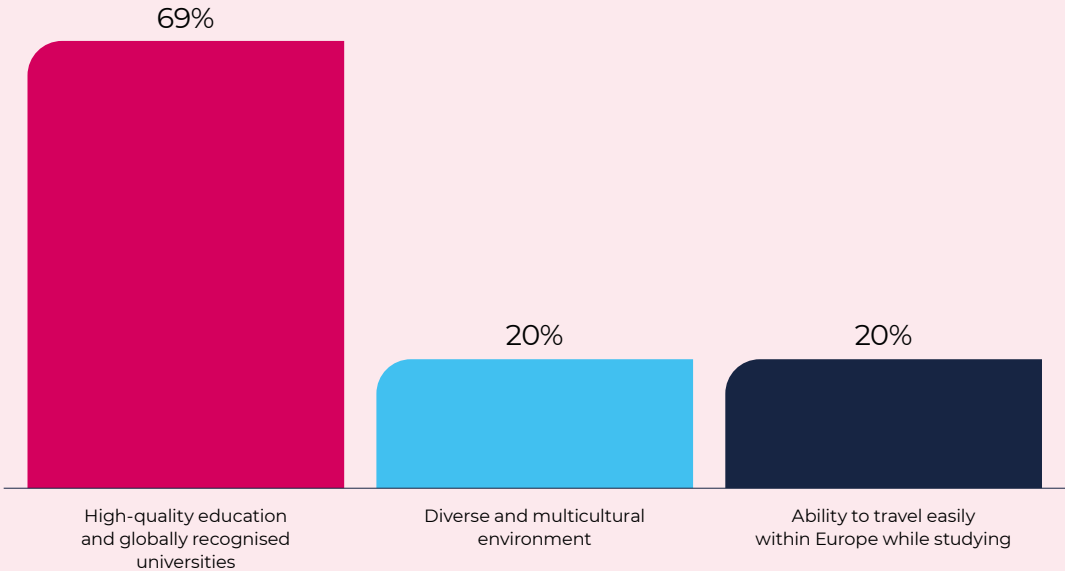


Figure 2. Bar chart showing undergraduate student responses to 'What motivated you to study in the UK? (select up to 3 reasons)'.

What motivated you to study in the UK? (Select up to 3 reasons)
Postgraduate taught

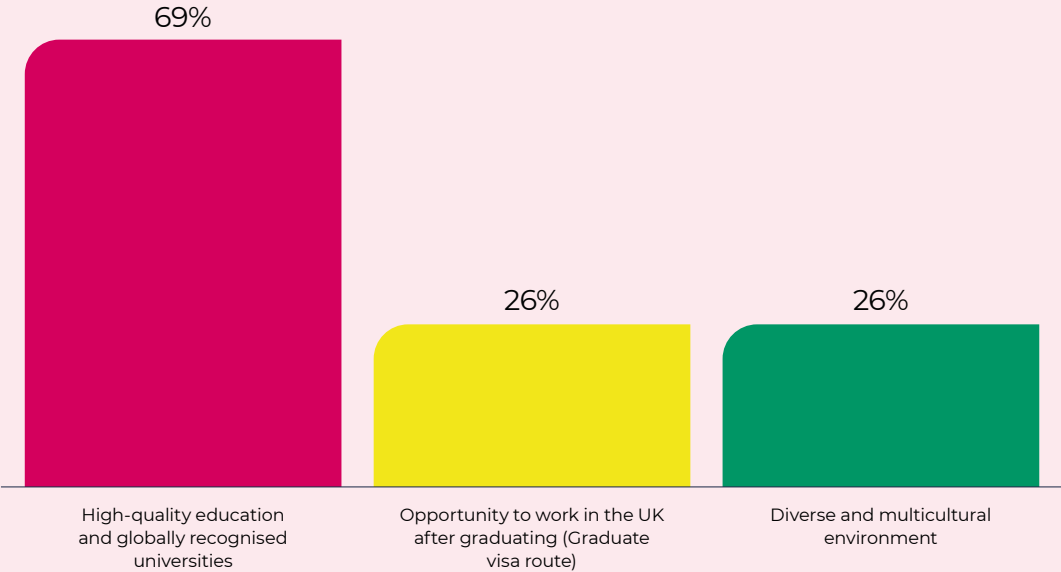


Figure 3. Bar chart showing postgraduate taught student responses to 'What motivated you to study in the UK? (select up to 3 reasons)'.

What motivated you to study in the UK? (Select up to 3 reasons)
Postgraduate research

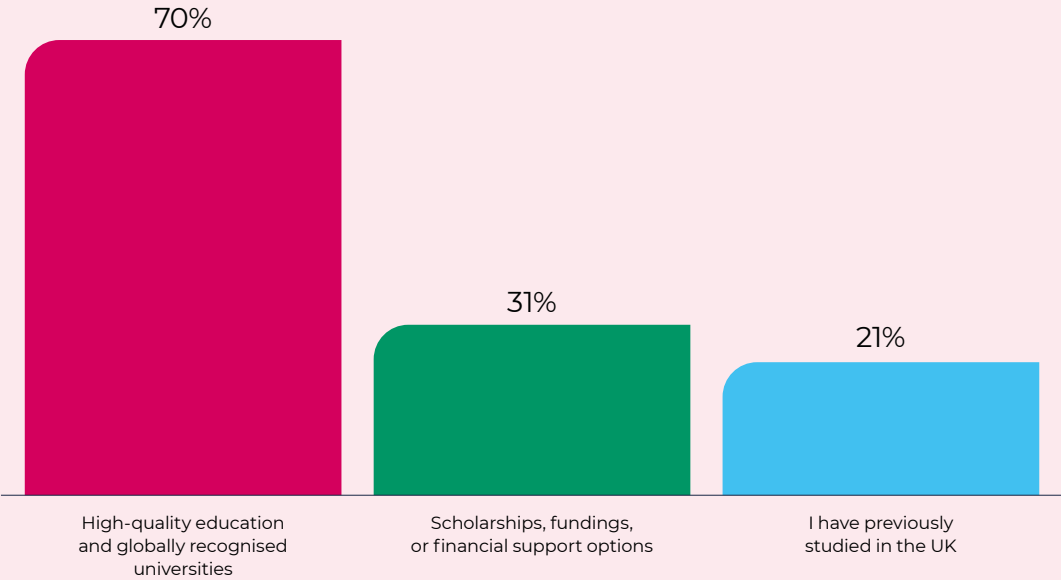


Figure 4. Bar chart showing postgraduate research student responses to 'What motivated you to study in the UK? (select up to 3 reasons)'.

The Student visa application process

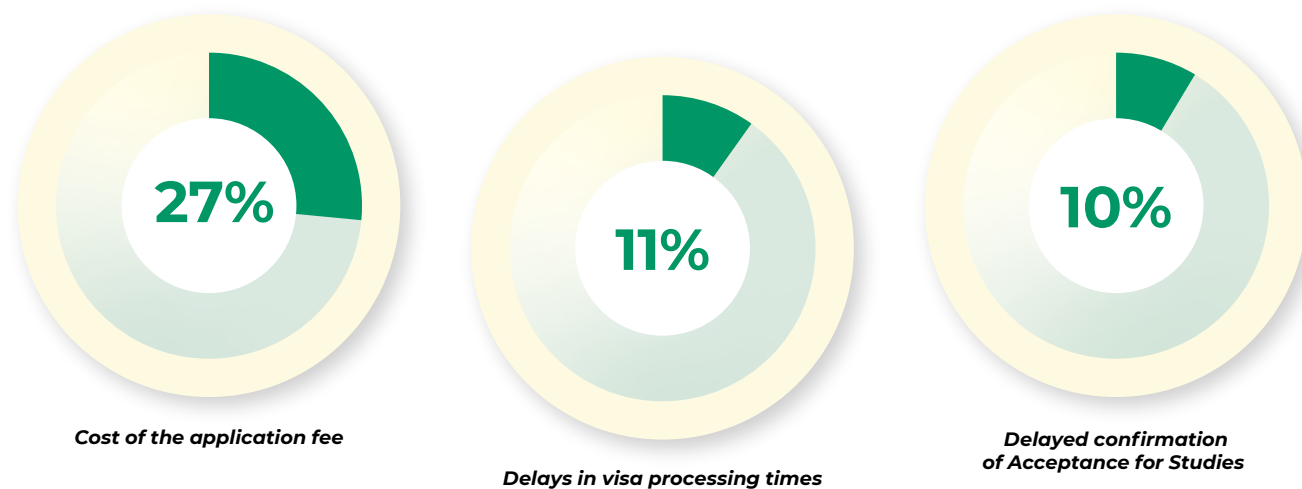
International students report that the Student visa application process is costly and complex.

43% of international students studying at Russell Group universities hold a Student visa. For many of them, the visa application process can be a significant source of stress.

1 in 2 students face challenges with the visa application process.

50% of students had to overcome at least one barrier during the Student visa application process. The most cited difficulties include the cost of the application fee (27%), delays in visa processing times (11%), and issues with receiving their Confirmation of Acceptance for Studies (CAS) on time (10%), which they need to complete their visa application process.

Percentage of respondents who said they had experienced difficulties or challenges during the Student visa application process:



The visa application process is set out below. Many students face barriers at one or more points in the process:

1. University Application:

- Students must first apply to their chosen university.
- Once accepted, the university will issue an unconditional offer.

2. Obtaining the Confirming of Acceptance for Studies (CAS):

- After accepting the offer, the university will issue a CAS. This electronic document includes a unique CAS number which is required for the visa application.
- Processing times can vary, with some students facing delays that disrupt travel and accommodation plans.

3. Financial Requirements:

- Students must demonstrate that they meet the financial requirements, proving they have sufficient funds to cover tuition fees and living costs.
- As of 2024, this means showing evidence of at least £1,334 per month for courses in London and £1,023 per month for elsewhere in the UK.
- These financial requirements can be particularly burdensome for students from countries with weaker currencies or limited access to international banking.

4. English Language Requirements

- Students must also meet English language requirements, typically by passing the International English Language Testing System (IELTS).

5. Student Visa Application:

- Once these criteria are met, students submit their Student visa application online, pay the Immigration Health Surcharge (IHS), and attend a biometric appointment at a visa application centre in their home country or, if there is none, a neighbouring one.
- Processing times can vary, with some students facing delays that disrupt travel and accommodation plans.

Rapidly rising visa fees and the Immigration Health Surcharge add to the financial pressures faced by international students.

The cost to apply for a Student visa has risen rapidly in recent years, standing at £490 per application and set to increase further to £524 from April 2025. This represents a 51% increase since 2021. The Immigration Health Surcharge has also increased rapidly, now costing students a minimum of £776 per year, compared to only £200 when it was first introduced in 2015.

One student reported that their cumulative visa fees, which included translating documents to English, return travel to the visa application centre, and the postal service to receive their passport from home, cost them £3500, a “huge amount of money [which] if converted to my country’s currency [is] around 15 times the [monthly] minimum wage”. They stated that the prohibitive cost of the Student visa had led them to “not feel welcome in the UK as an international student”.

“Getting a Visa here was very tricky. The international student support team was not very helpful for me. I was very late to get my CAS despite asking for it for months. I had to spend extra money on getting expedited visa because of a mistake on the university’s part.”

PGR, USA

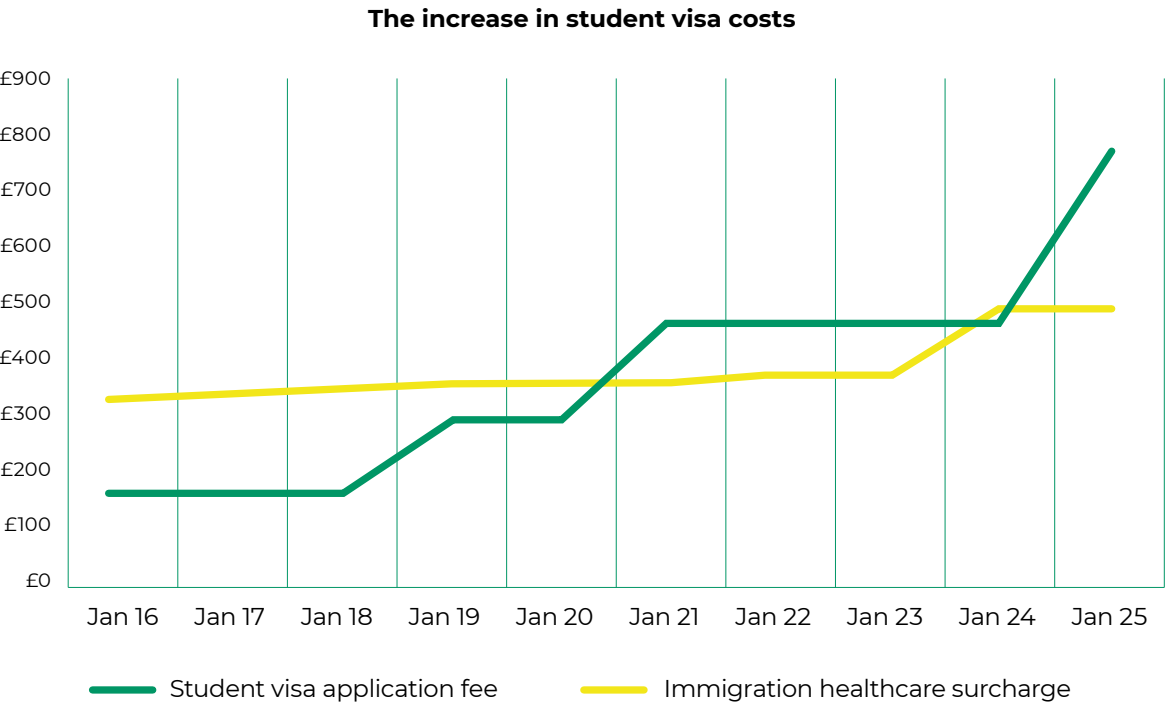


Figure 5. Line graph showing the increase in the Student visa application fee and immigration health surcharge for the last 10 years.

Delays in universities issuing a Confirmation of Acceptance for Studies can result in financial losses for students.

Many students faced multiple challenges when applying for their Student visa. 44% of students who struggled with the cost of the application fee also experienced delays in their visa processing times or delays in receiving their CAS. In both the focus groups and survey open-text comments, students relayed their experiences. One student remarked that their only challenge whilst studying in the UK related to their experience with the CAS:

“The one thing I have a bone to pick with was my CAS, because I got it the literal last day of August I had to miss freshers’ week while my visa got processed and I had to fly in the day before classes started. I resent that”

UG, Spain

Another said, ‘The visa process needs to be improved. I had to defer because my visa was not approved on time’ (UG, USA).

“Dealing with visa has caused me quite a bit of distress. Coming from a country with English as our national language (de facto) and having taken GCE O Levels and A levels in my home country, we were forced to go through hoops to justify with evidence why we should be exempted for IELTS (even though we have been communicating in English too) and subsequently delayed the issuance of my CAS letter (and visa application etc). This seems to be a common experience across UK universities.”

PGR, Singapore

Insufficient guidance on arrival leaves international students struggling and unprepared.

The need for more and better information and guidance in practical and logistical matters on arrival was also discussed in the survey open-text comments. Banking and accommodation emerged as key themes in this area with many international students reporting problems and delays in opening UK bank accounts and difficulties in securing accommodation when not yet physically in the country.

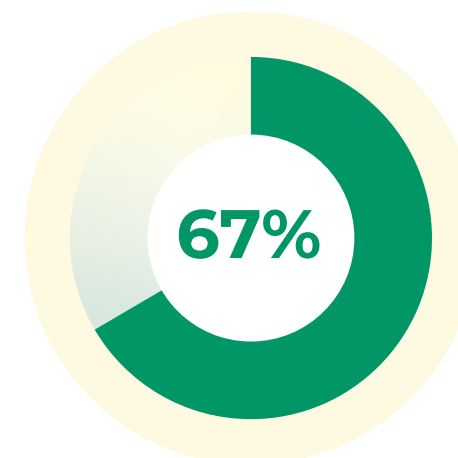
For some students, these logistical problems at the beginning of their time in the UK led to feelings of not being welcomed in the country and of being under supported. One student commented that *"I did not feel like there was any support or people that could help me find my way around a new country or help with things that home students would already have such as bank accounts and phone plans"* (UG, Switzerland).

Another reflected that they felt *"very unwelcomed in the UK as an international student"* (PGR, Germany) as a result of the banking challenges they had encountered and not received support for.



Key findings

Disabled students



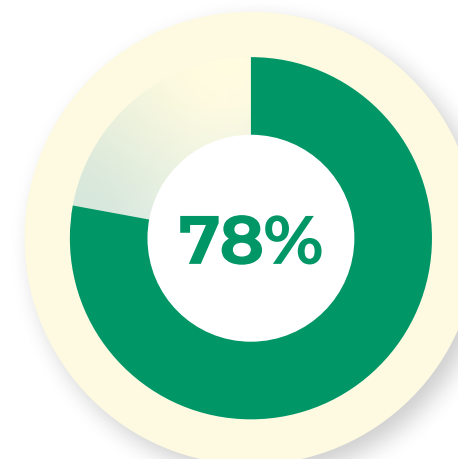
67% of disabled students reported that they had experienced challenges or difficulties when asked 'Did you face any of the following difficulties or challenges during the Student visa application process? (Select all that apply).' This was significantly higher compared to non-disabled students at 47%.

Postgraduate research students



60% of postgraduate research students reported that they had experienced challenges or difficulties when asked 'Did you face any of the following difficulties or challenges during the Student visa application process? (Select all that apply).' This was significantly higher than postgraduate taught students at 43% and undergraduate students at 52%.

Non-binary students



78% of non-binary students reported they had experienced challenges or difficulties when asked 'Did you face any of the following difficulties or challenges during the Student visa application process? (Select all that apply).' This was significantly higher compared to women at 54% and men at 44%.

These findings highlight the disproportionate impact navigating the visa system has, with students from minoritised backgrounds and those on postgraduate research courses who face additional hurdles before arrival.

3

Experiences of higher education in the UK

The UK’s higher education system continues to hold global appeal.

Russell Group universities pride themselves on offering an innovative, high-quality, research-intensive learning environment that provides students with the skills they need to succeed.

84% of international students are satisfied with the quality of their teaching.

The quality of education was a prevalent theme. Students commented on on the breadth and depth of their curriculum, successful teaching methods, and positive supportive learning environment. Even when students were dissatisfied with other aspects of their student experience, they often reflected that their academic experience was positive.

The quality of education was a prevalent theme, students commented on the innovative nature of the content taught at some universities. Students praised universities that are willing to adapt to new pedagogical methods and technologies and spoke of being drawn to specific courses above others because of these factors. Access to leading professionals in their respective fields and potential research or training opportunities was another factor that influenced the decision to study in the UK.

“The UK is among the top three places in the world to be a legal academic, I have exposure to the best minds and research opportunities in the UK”

PGT, India

Some student groups are significantly more likely to have a negative perception of the quality of teaching.

This theme came through strongly in the open-text comments. One disabled student said that they “pay a disproportionate amount of money to get the same education as their British counterparts” yet are still treated terribly by their peers and professors (PGT, country undisclosed). Another disabled student commented that they are “disappointed [...] especially in terms of academic[s]” (PGT, Japan).

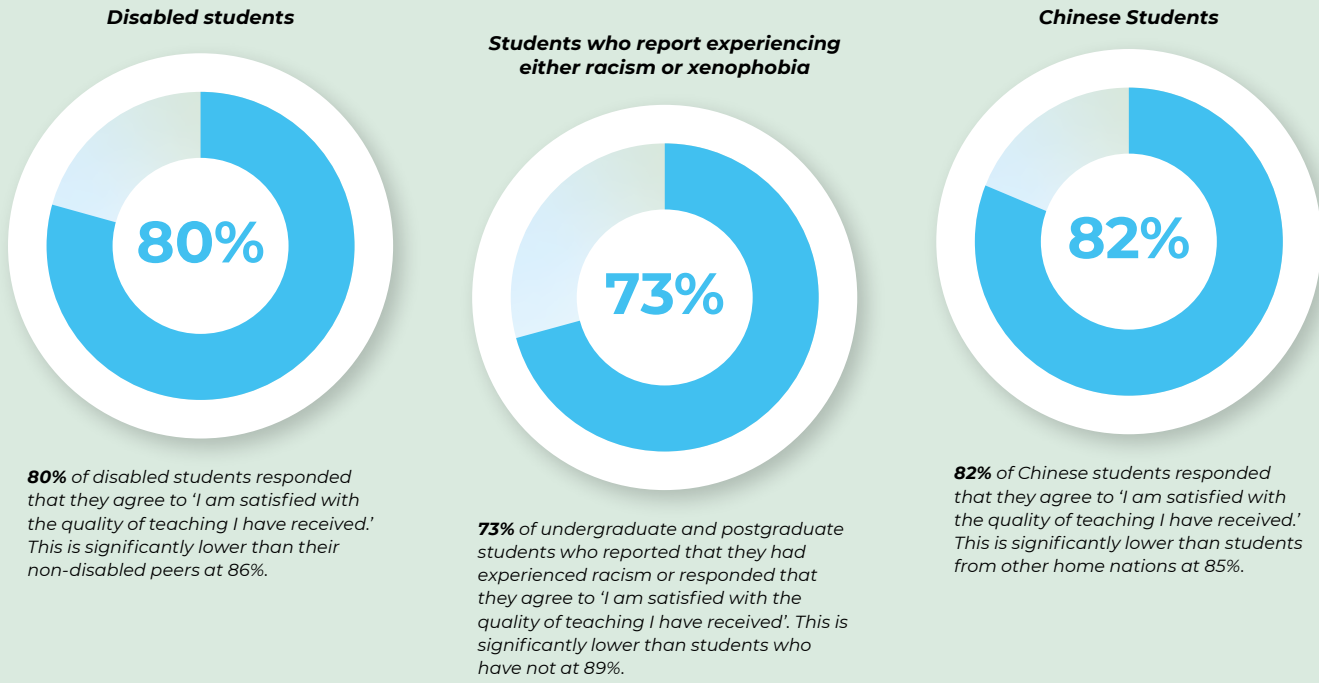
“I think it’s currently good in most aspect, but I think **more academic writing support is required for international students** to gain a better understanding of the academic performance.”

PGT, China

“The level of study is also phenomenal. [It] has allowed me to **develop practical skills that will help me in the future.**”

PGT, Pakistan

Key findings



Students report that it takes time to adjust to the UK higher education system.

Despite high satisfaction with the quality of teaching, students report that adapting to the UK higher education system can be a challenge, remarking that it takes time to adjust: 'It took me some time to adjust to the education system in the UK but I find that I'm learning a lot of interesting new things.'

Academic anxiety was particularly pronounced for students who had come from an education system that was more didactic than their studies in the UK. These students highlighted the shift to a more self-directed learning approach and the emphasis on critical thinking as key challenges. However, while the adjustment took time, many students described the experience as ultimately beneficial, with one noting that the *"challenging yet rewarding academic environment"* had *"enhanced"* their critical thinking (UG, Malaysia).

Another said, *"It's been great thus far. The support we get from [the] university is more than enough and the lecturers encourage students to apply themselves instead of merely learning"* (PGT, South Africa). This suggests that while the transition can be difficult, the UK's academic approach fosters intellectual growth for many international students.

9 in 10 postgraduate research students are satisfied with the quality of their research environment.

Almost 60% of all postgraduate research students in the UK study at Russell Group universities. Of these, 46% are international students.¹

89% of postgraduate research students expressed satisfaction with the quality of their research environment. However, they are significantly less likely than taught students to recommend studying in the UK to prospective students. In the focus groups, research students often reflected on the solitary nature of their degree and the loneliness they experience. 76% of postgraduate research students report that they have felt lonely or isolated while studying in the UK, compared to 54% of postgraduate taught students, and 59% of undergraduates.

"As a PGR/PhD student I am more than happy with the education process and academic opportunities my University has to offer."

PGR, Russia



63% of students believe that their degree is good value for money.

Value for money was consistently raised in focus groups and open-text comments across the Russell Group, with students studying in London significantly less likely to agree that their degree is good value for money, as seen in Figure 6.

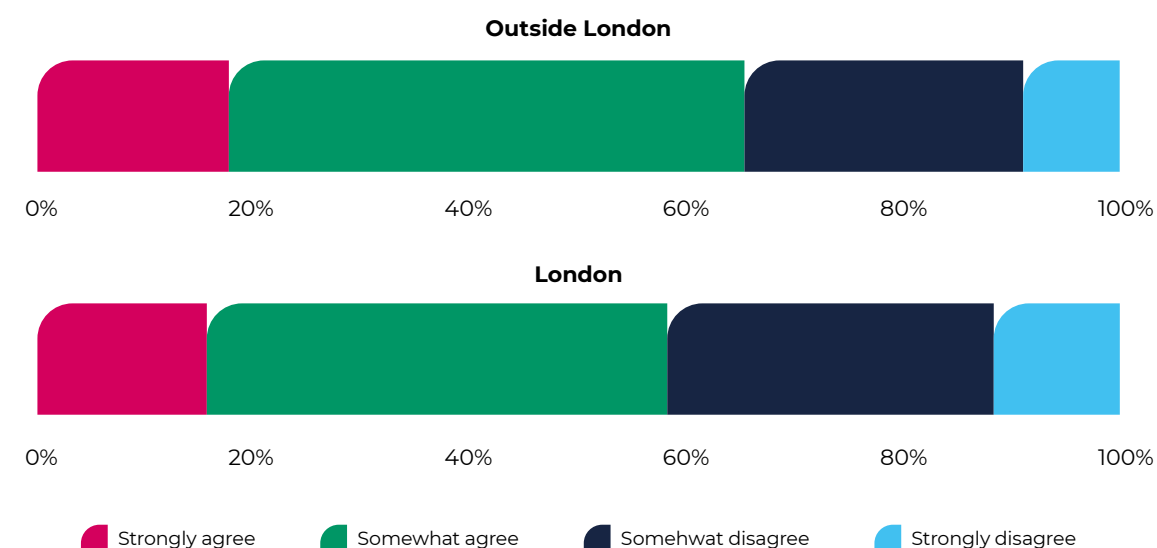


Figure 6. Stacked bar chart showing responses to 'I think that my degree is good value for money' by location.

"My experience in the UK is really bad [...]. My tuition fee is increasing by £2,000 every single year. And with this amount of money paid, the university is still having problems providing standard experience because they took in too many students. It is unacceptable."

UG, China

High international tuition fees leave students feeling exploited and undervalued.

The sector has become increasingly dependent on international tuition fees. Today, international students can expect to pay between £20,000 and £30,000 per year, with some universities charging over £50,000 for clinical degrees. A Guardian analysis of data returned to the Higher Education Statistics Agency found that, in total, fees for international students had increased by 71% in five years, from £5.4 billion in 2016-17 to £9.7 billion in 2021-22, with international student fee income contributing 21.5% of the total income of UK universities.² Understandably, because they pay considerably more than home-domiciled students, international students have increasingly high expectations of studying in the UK. The financial instability of the UK higher education sector is therefore impacting its attractiveness for international students.

Concern regarding the cost of tuition fees was a dominant theme throughout the focus groups, with many survey respondents reporting that they felt like 'cash cows' who are being 'made use of'. One student said:

"Schools don't offer as much as we pay for. International student fees are incredibly high, but as PhD students, what we generally get is a screen in a hot-desking room and monthly meetings with supervisors. [...] This is very poor value for money."

PGT, Indonesia

Another student highlighted that whilst they are taught by "very passionate academics [who] truly care about their students", they find it hard to comprehend the cost of their tuition fees: "I personally don't think that anybody should be charged £29,000 for education [...] I truly feel like we're simply being treated as cash cows".

4 | The cost of studying in the UK

1 in 5 international students worry about money all of the time.

*"The **cost of being an international student is significantly high**, from visa and NHS surcharge fees to rent and living in general."*

PGT, Sri Lanka

The rising costs facing international students have the potential to deteriorate the reputation of UK universities and damage students' educational experience. 83% of international students worry about money always, often, or sometimes.

"I find the lack of access to housing [...] very draining."

PGR, Argentina

How often do you worry about money?

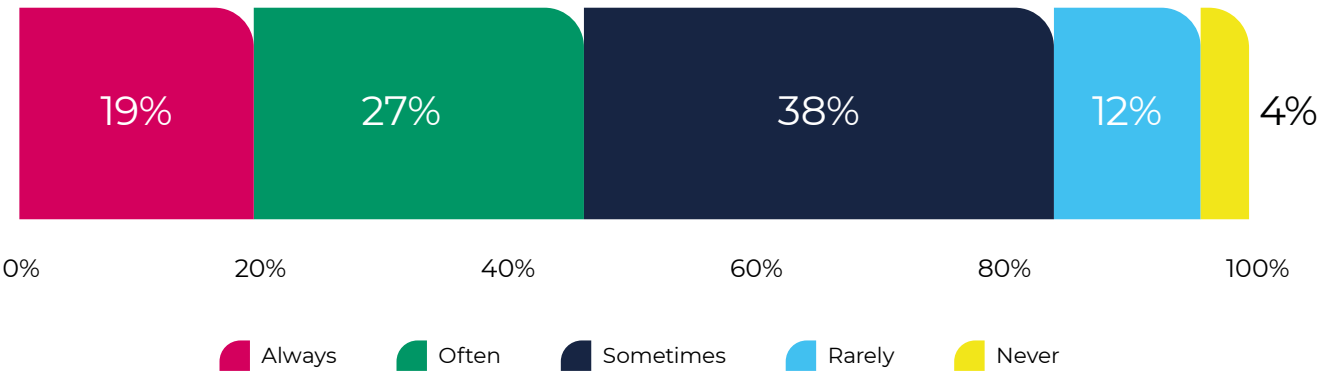


Figure 7. Stacked bar graph showing responses to 'How often do you worry about money?'

The median spend per month for international students, excluding tuition fees, is £1,402.

This includes rent, utilities, transport, groceries, and leisure (see Figure 8). For students living in London, this rises to £1,635. Disabled students are more likely to have a higher median spend per month at £1,423 compared to £1,288 for their non-disabled peers.

These costs, as well as tuition fees, are funded through a range of sources, with family, guardians, or friends (74%), savings (24%), and scholarships/ bursaries (22%) the three most common sources of funding.

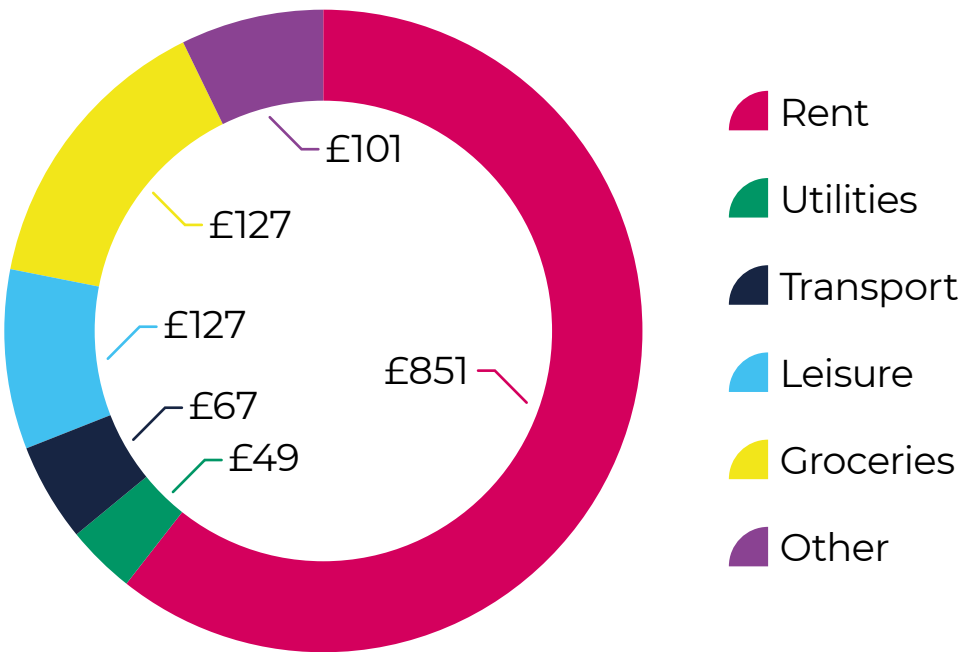


Figure 8. Pie chart showing responses to 'Please provide an approximate breakdown of your monthly expenses in the following categories'.

Students from marginalised backgrounds are more likely to worry about money.

Disabled students and students with caring responsibilities are significantly more likely to worry about money. 65% of disabled students reported that they always or often worry about money, compared to 50% of non-disabled students. Just 1% of disabled students respond that they never worry about money. One student with a chronic illness commented that they had chosen to study in the UK in part because they believed the UK had free healthcare, but that the combination of the surcharge and prescription medication costs had been a shock. They stated: “I also find [it] unacceptable that I pay 850 pound of NHS surcharge and then I still have to pay for my prescription medication” (PGR, Chile).

62% of students with caring responsibilities report that they often or always worry about money. One student commented:

“It’s quite difficult to [cover]... basic necessities of life with [the] funding levels [for] international students in the UK especially when one has caring responsibilities.”

PGR, Nigeria

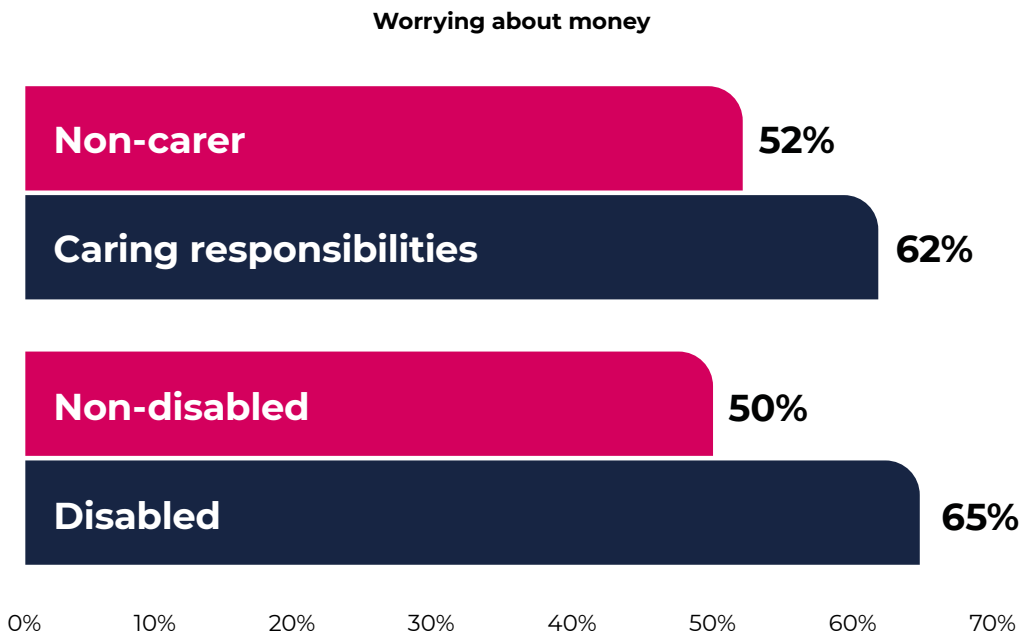


Figure 9: Stacked bar chart showing 'always' or 'often' responses to How often do you worry about money?'

Key findings



Students studying in London spend a median of £1,635 per month on their living expenses (excluding tuition fees).



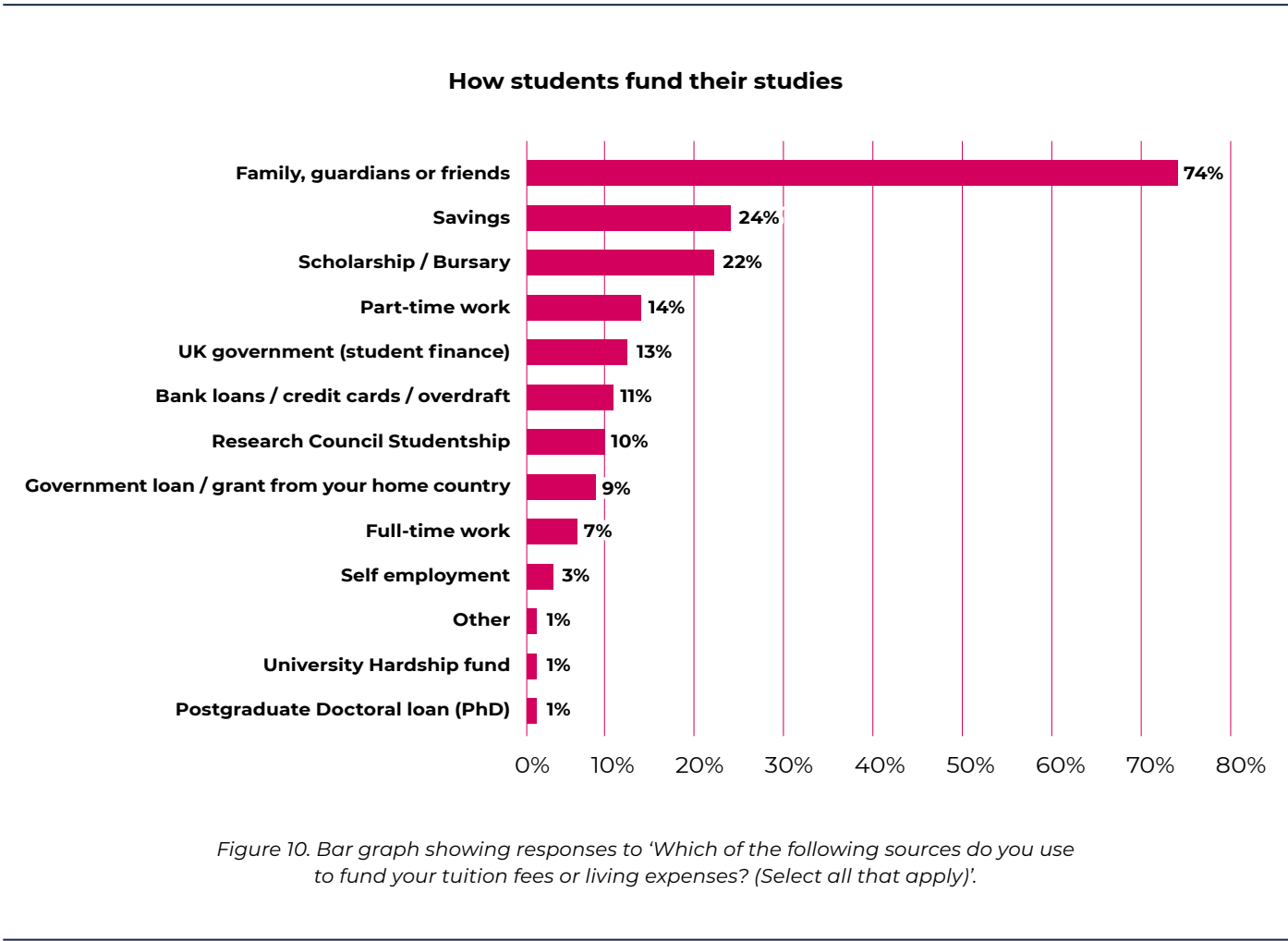
Students studying outside of London spend a median of £1,103 per month on their living expenses (excluding tuition fees).



Disabled students spend a median of £1,423 per month on their living expenses (excluding tuition fees).

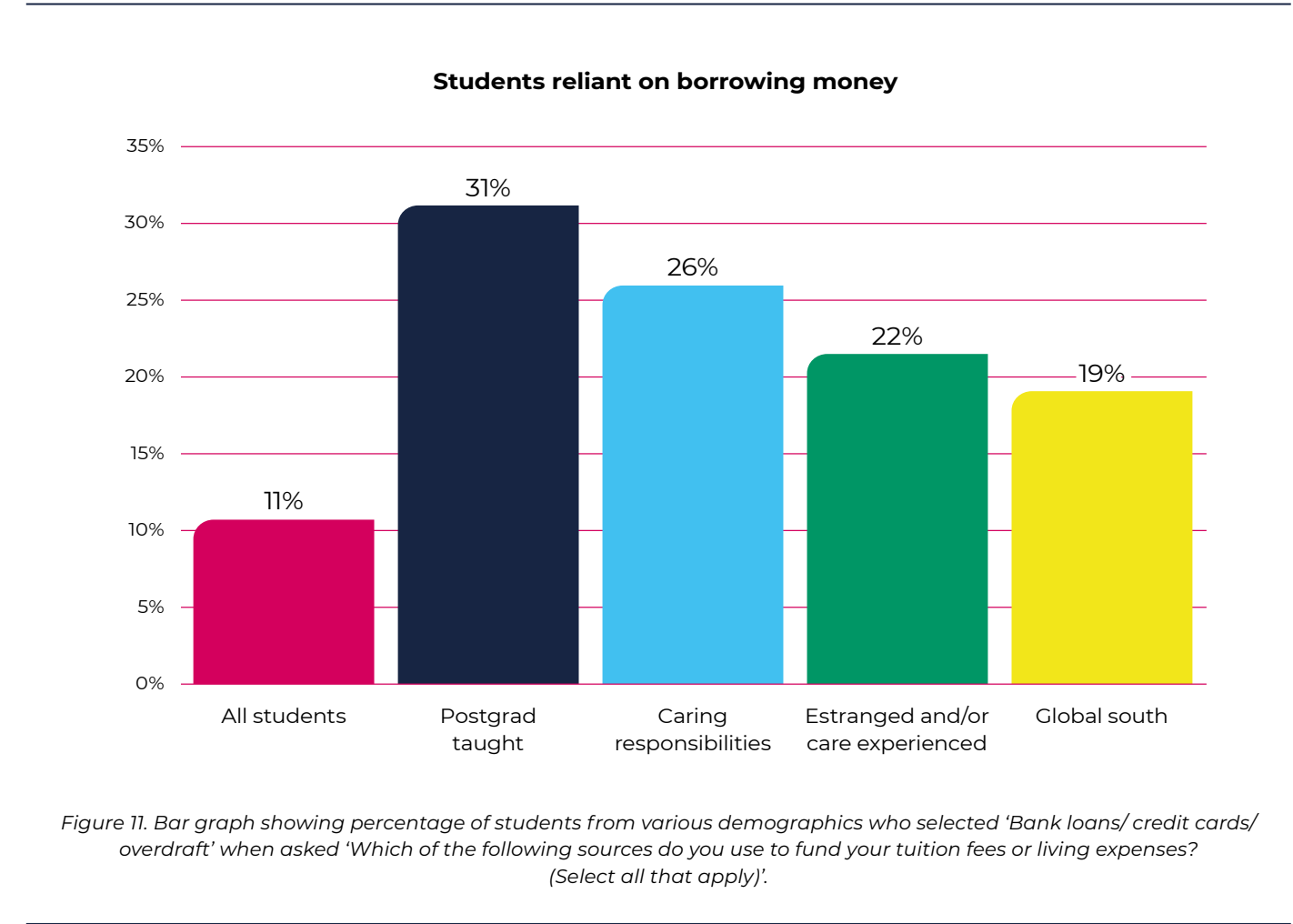


Non-disabled students spend a median of £1,288 per month on their living expenses (excluding tuition fees).



3 in 10 postgraduate-taught students are borrowing money to fund their tuition fees and living expenses.

Concerningly, 11% of students are borrowing money through credit cards, bank loans, or overdrafts to fund their living expenses or tuition fees. This rises to 31% for postgraduate taught students, 26% for students with caring responsibilities, and 22% for those who are estranged and/ or care experienced.



Students who are reliant on borrowing money or working part-time are more likely to report poor mental health.

Those who borrow money to fund their living expenses or tuition fees, as well as those who work part-time jobs, that are significantly more likely to worry about money. These students are also more likely to report that they have experienced poor mental health whilst studying in the UK.

One student acknowledged this connection, stating:

"I've had a great time studying in the UK, but I have enough financial support from others that I don't need to worry about paying for school or the cost of living in London."

PGT, USA

"I am so glad I have a scholarship - it is too expensive to live here without one."

PGR, Australia



Financial instability and inflationary fee policies can deepen hardship for international students.

Currency fluctuations and unfavourable exchange rates can cause additional financial pressures for international students studying in the UK. Many Russell Group Universities raise international tuition fees annually by inflation, meaning fees year on year are not predictable.

"The fees for international students PGRs are incredibly high, and the exchange rate of the currency in countries from the Global South makes it really hard to be able to endure studying abroad."

PGR, Chile

The financial support available to international students is inconsistent and inequitable.

International students are excluded from much of the financial support available to domestic students, including tuition fee and maintenance loans, and disabled students' allowance. On top of this, only half of Russell Group universities offer international students and the disabled access to the same hardship funds as their domestic counterparts. Hardship funds aim to support students facing unexpected circumstances. Our research found that just 1% of international students have accessed university hardship funds, while a quarter had accessed scholarships or bursaries.

One student commented *"I find it frustrating that a lot of support in the University is only for home students and I am told that I should look for support in my home country, which offers students little to no support as it is expected that universities will provide the support."*



5 | Student accommodation

International students also face financial challenges when it comes to finding affordable, good-quality accommodation. Our research found that international students are now paying a median of £851 each month on rent and a further £49 on utility bills. For students studying in London, this increases to a median spend of £1,052 per month on rent. Given the student housing crisis across the UK³, this is perhaps unsurprising. The decline in availability of university owned accommodation has exacerbated the issue, with rising student numbers outstripping supply and the cost of renting continuing to climb.

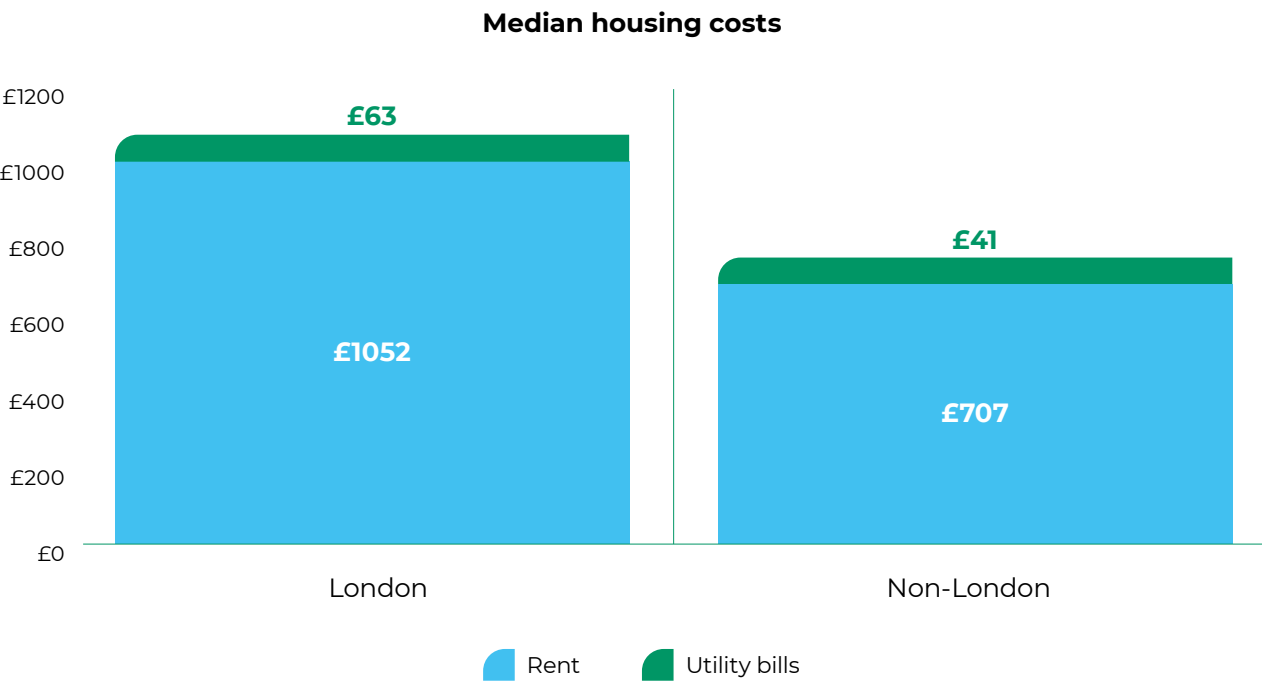


Figure 12. Bar graph showing median response to the rent and utilities categories of 'Please provide an approximate breakdown of your monthly expenses in the following categories'

While housing is a key issue for all students, there are particular challenges facing international students. Students highlighted the difficulties associated with searching for accommodation before moving to the UK and having had a chance to view it. One student stated: “I could have benefited from more actionable guidance from the university on how to find accommodation and how to check if it’s good enough and what a rental agreement looks like.” (PGT, India)

Many landlords will only accept a student with a UK based guarantor, something international students are less likely to have than home students. While some universities and companies provide guarantor services, these are often not accepted by landlords, often without giving a reason. One student commented that “if you are an international student with no family in the UK, you are going to struggle to find a place, because you literally have no guarantor they accept” (PGR, Spain). Another reflected on the stressful nature of the process, commenting that:

“the housing situation puts us in a disadvantaged situation, as the need for a UK based guarantor bars us from accessing certain housing options. [...] It makes international students feel like we are not valued by the UK.”

UG, Peru



6 | Navigating part-time work

International students struggle with the inflexible nature of the Student visa conditions.

International students on the Student visa can work up to 20 hours per week during term time, with full-time work permitted only in official vacation periods or the final four months after the official course completion date. International students on part-time Student visas are not permitted to work at all.

15% of international students report that they work part-time alongside their studies. Students were clear that working positively impacts their studies, with 40% expressing that it had a positive impact compared to only 17% who reported a negative impact. Given the financial challenges and rising living costs and tuition fees facing international students, part-time work provides a crucial opportunity for many students to meet their living costs.

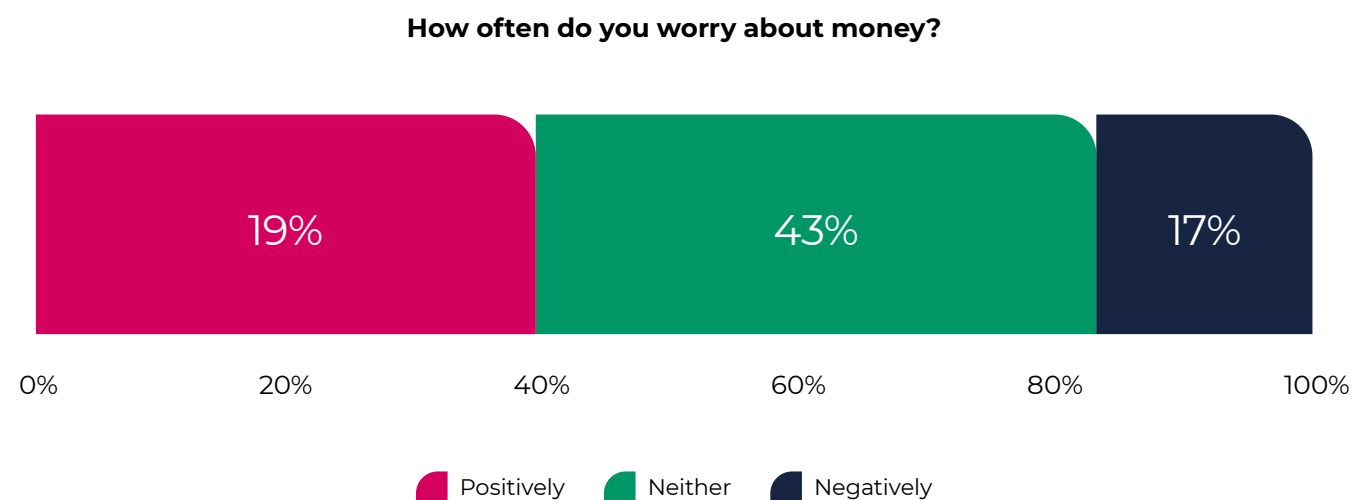


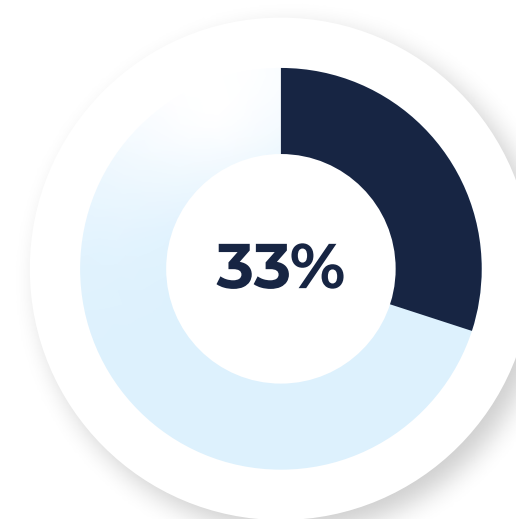
Figure 13. Stacked bar graph showing responses to 'How does paid work impact your studies?'

Many students, however, expressed frustration with the visa conditions that prevent them from working more flexibly around their studies. This theme came through strongly from students.

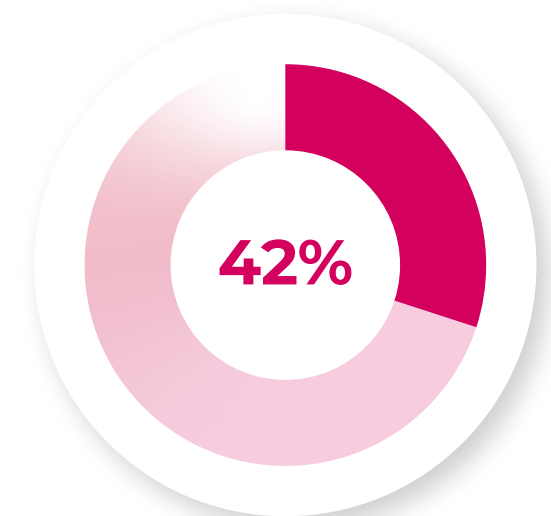
"Finding part-time work here is way too difficult. High expenses and no income make it difficult to recommend [to others]."

PGT, India

| Key findings



33% of students stated that their visa conditions limited their ability to find a part-time job whilst studying.



42% of students who stated that their visa conditions limited their ability to find a part-time job whilst studying also said that it **restricted the types of work that they would like to do.**

Rigid work restrictions do not match the reality of student' lives.

Students highlighted that academic workload varies throughout the term, making it undesirable to work the full 20-hour work limit each week, especially close to assessment deadlines. One student said that "it would be nice sometimes with some weeks [if] I can work full time" (PGT, Ukraine). Another commented that "options for earning additional money, as my stipend is very limited, are very restrictive".

They suggested freelance work—which is not permitted for students on the Student visa – would be “a generally good option as a PhD researcher to increase income”. With the increasing cost of living pressures, students are left struggling to balance financial stability with their academic responsibilities.

These restrictions also limit the sectors in which international students can find part-time work, with international students on the Student visa explicitly prohibited from self-employment. Of those who said their visa conditions limited their ability to work, 42% specified that it restricted the types of work they would like to do.

*“[The visa conditions are] **quite discriminatory** because [of] not only like the limited amount of hours, but also the type of jobs you can get.”*

PGR, Italy

“It would be great if international student can work as an entrepreneur so they can start their business as soon as possible.”

PGT, Indonesia

Nearly half of those who work part-time are employed in retail, food, or customer service. These areas of employment are often associated with zero-hour contracts. Fewer students had found employment in a job related to their field of study (31%), or an internship related to their field of study (16%). This can have negative implications for a students’ employability when looking for employment after graduation.

Some students face the issue of not being able to work at all due to conditions imposed on their scholarships or grants. One student on a scholarship stated that their scholarship is insufficient to live off but that despite being offered supervision work, they were “*afraid to do it because I’ll be thinking when they give me money will I be going against my scholarship*”. (PGR, Nigeria).



7 | Friendships, safety, and support

Russell Group universities provide a safe and welcoming environment for international students.

As a group, international students report a high sense of belonging to their university. 94% agree that they feel welcome and safe at their university. This trend is broadly consistent across different student demographics. Many students reflected on the factors contributing to them feeling welcome and safe at their university.

Students said that being supported by the university to express their identities made them feel more safe and welcome. One student stated, “My experience here so far has been great, I feel welcomed and accepted in my university” (UG, Turkey). These students are also significantly more likely to experience positive mental health outcomes.

“It’s amazing to feel welcomed.” PGT, Bangladesh

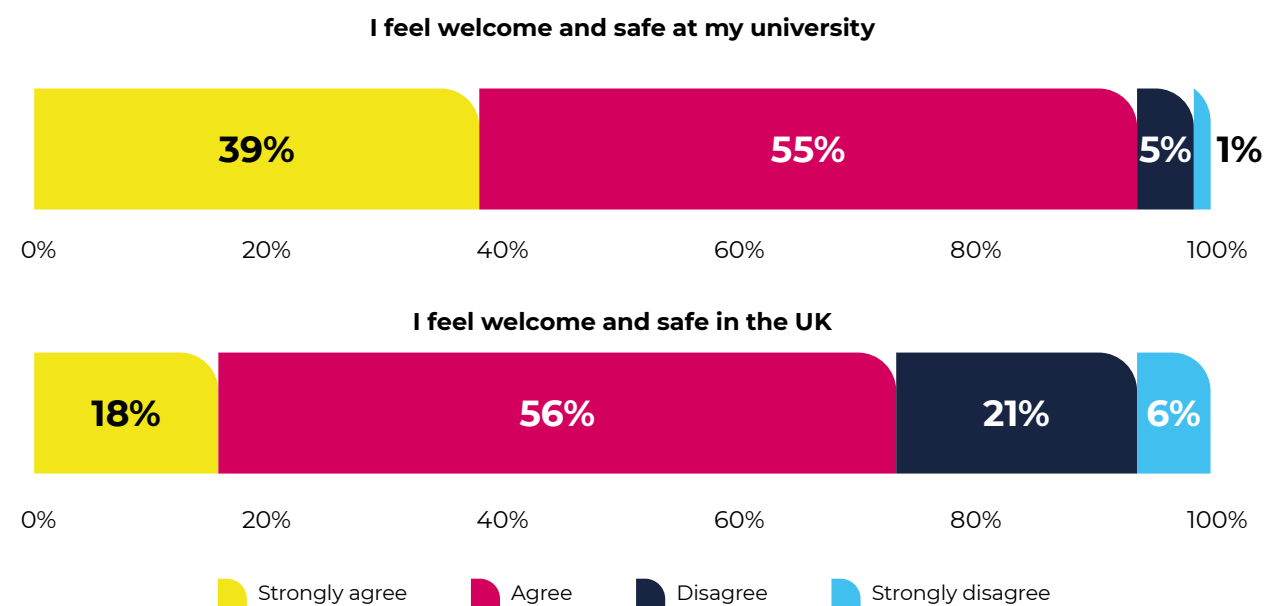


Figure 14. Stacked bar graph showing responses to ‘I feel welcome and safe at my university’ and ‘I feel welcome and safe in the UK.’

“I am happy and blessed to be an international student at QMUL. As a Muslim who comes from a Muslim-majority country, I feel like I am in my home country. I can easily practice my religion on campus. I am also happy to meet many people who also pray in the multi-faith room facilitated by the Students’ Union. Why is this important? Practicing my religion easily or even comfortably supports my mental well-being, so I can enjoy my studies until I get my PhD.”

PGR, Indonesia

Jewish international students are significantly less likely to agree that they feel welcome and safe within their university. Only 77% of Jewish students report feeling safe and welcome on campus, with some students referencing specific experiences of antisemitism in their responses. This is in line with wider sector findings of antisemitism on campus.⁴

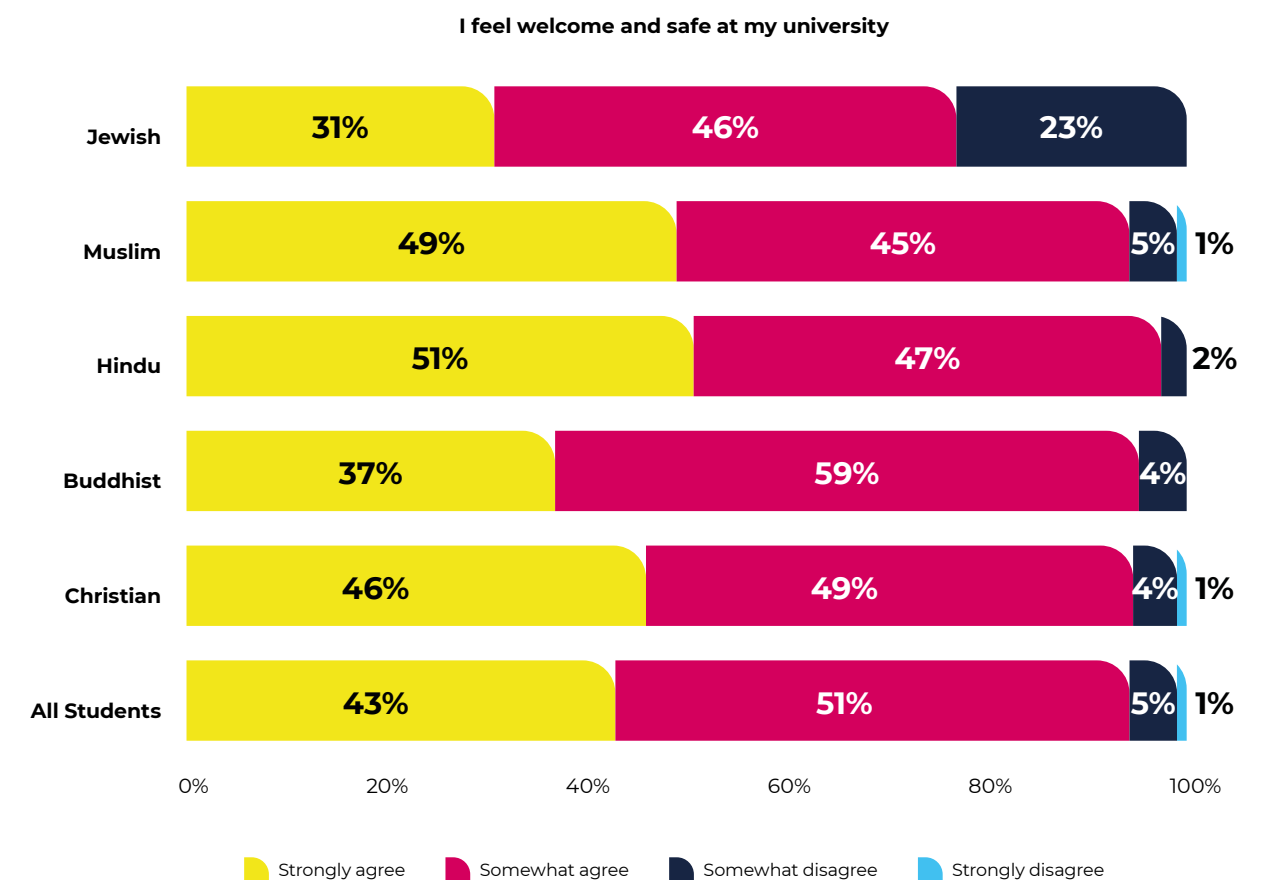


Figure 15. Stacked bar graph showing responses to ‘I feel welcome and safe at my university’ by faith

International students are significantly more likely to make friends with other international students.

Contributing to this sense of belonging, 88% of students report that they have made friends with other international students. This is perhaps unsurprising given the international appeal of Russell Group universities. Across the entire Russell Group, 35% of students are international with university populations ranging between 20% and 65% international students, including three London-based universities being over 50% international.

"I like [the] international community here." PGT, Kazakhstan

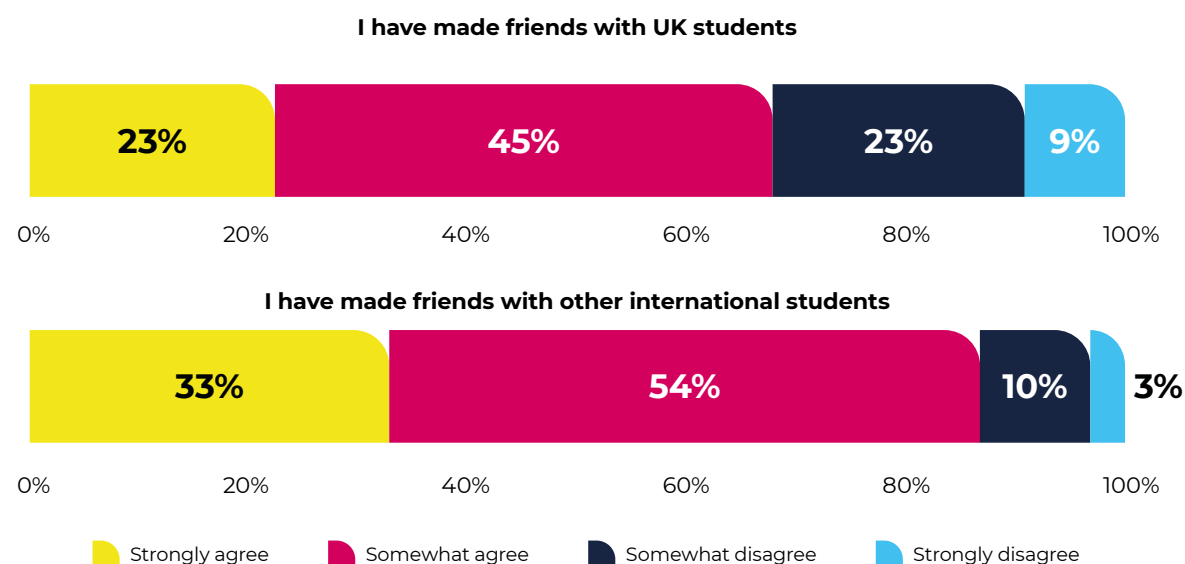


Figure 16. Stacked bar graph showing responses to "I have made friends with UK students" and "I have made friends with other international students"

For many international students, they find community with those who share their experiences.

Students reflected that they often feel drawn to other international students because they are going through similar experiences whilst adjusting to life in the UK. Many students also commented on finding it easier to make friends with students from similar cultural backgrounds or who spoke the same language. For example, a student from Latin America commented that, while they had British friends, they feel a more instantaneous affinity to other Spanish-speaking students: *"The language is always a thing, like when I met someone that speaks Spanish, it's like we're bonding automatically"* (PGT, Paraguay).

This finding aligns with previous UKCISA research which found that international friendship preferences—either by culture, religion, recreational activities or academic interests—connotes safety.⁵ A focus group attendee from Nigeria illustrated this when discussing being instantly drawn to chat to the other Nigerian student present – whom he had never met before – when waiting for the focus group to start:

"It's natural to be drawn to whoever is from your country or someone you can [...] speak the same local dialect. [...] I think it's just natural when you see someone you that looks like you, who speaks your language. You'll feel like, oh, OK, I think I'm safe here. I think everybody's just trying to, from a sociological aspect of it, is trying to be safe."

PGT, Nigeria

"Studying in the UK as an international student is a mixture of feeling as it is diverse and I was able to make lots of new friends. However, I am more able to make friends with international students and the UK students are not that willing to talk or communicate with us."

UG, Thailand

Many international students felt that they lacked the opportunities to befriend UK students.

One area where students repeatedly report feeling less welcome pertained to making friends with UK students, with 68% of students stating that they had made friends with students from the UK. This struggle was discussed in both the survey comments and focus groups. One student wrote, *"Sometimes I notice that British students only communicate with themselves"* (PGT, Russia), while another stated, *"Some UK students can be very unwelcoming, their body language seems show that they do not want to interact with international students"* (UG, Thailand).

A range of students expressed that this feeling extends beyond just the student community: *"I find international students (including international lecturers, employees etc.) more friendly and open to other international individuals compared to local UK students/citizens"* (PGT, Malaysia). These comments suggest that international students sometimes feel unwelcomed, or even ostracised, from their British peers.

"It's not as mixed, as internationalist as I imagined before." UG, China

Some international students felt that they lacked the opportunity to befriend UK students.

23% of students are motivated to study in the UK because of the diverse and multicultural environment they perceived it to offers.

Some students suggested that the reason they had not befriended UK domiciled students was not due to a lack of desire from either party, but rather a lack of opportunity. For some students, this lack of opportunity was a source of frustration:

“As an international student in the UK, I really want to learn about British cultures, people, customs and values. I’m living in a student residence hall [and] most of the students living there are international. I can hardly make friends with local people (I don’t have chances to connect with them).”

PGT, Vietnam

For others, they accepted that whilst this was not what they expected, they recognised that people seek familiarity when they see it:

“As for making friends with other students, actually, I would say there are more Chinese students than I thought. Even at PhD level. We have 10 freshers this year and half of them are Chinese including me. And the truth is that I spent more of the time talking with Chinese students than the other students, and I think the reason comes from that Chinese students have a lot of commonalities, [...] the language. We know how to make others comfortable.”

PGR, China

“Overall, the school environment is wholesome and nice, and the students very kind and welcoming. However, the wider society can be intimidating and sometimes racist, especially following any acts of violence or terrorism or changes in government policies.”

UG, Singapore

Perceptions of safety drop significantly for international students outside of their university environments.

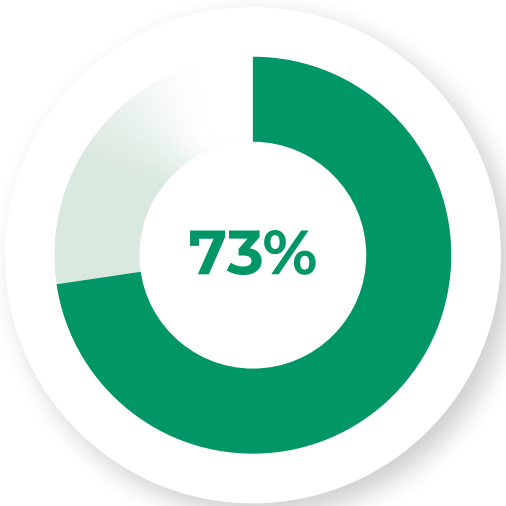
A considerable proportion of students do not feel safe and welcome in the UK more broadly. Students are significantly less likely to feel safe in the UK compared to within their university, with only 77% agreeing. This experience of feeling considerably less welcome off campus is consistent across all student demographics, with larger discrepancies evident for students with marginalised identities.

Personal safety and crime, particularly in London, were commonly discussed by students based in a London, exploring the perceived lack of safety in the city. Students studying in London are significantly less likely than those studying outside of London to agree that they feel safe and welcome in the UK (74% vs 81%).

“I feel unsafe on the street, there is a lot of theft and antisocial behaviour.”

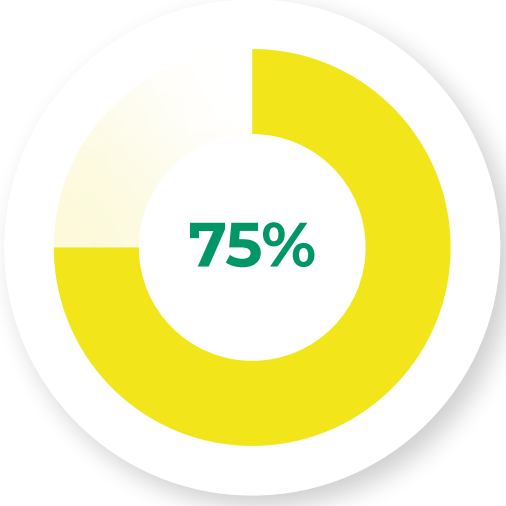
PGT, Russia

Disabled students
I feel safe and welcome in the UK



73% of disabled students agreed to the statement ‘I feel welcome and safe in the UK’, significantly lower compared to their non-disabled peers at 80%.

LGBT+ students
I feel safe and welcome in the UK



76% of LGBT+ students agreed to the statement ‘I feel welcome and safe in the UK’, significantly lower compared to their cis-heterosexual peers at 80%.

1 in 3 students report that they have experienced racism in the UK.

32% of students report experiences of racism and 30% xenophobia. Understandably, these students are significantly less likely to report feeling safe and welcome in the UK.

"I had not expected the international student experience in the UK to be as racist and xenophobic as I've found it to be, sadly. I know that other international students I've met (from all over Asia and Europe) have had the same experience."

PGT, Singapore

Ethnicity is also a determining factor for whether students feel welcome and safe in the UK, with Black, Asian, and Mixed-race students significantly less likely than their counterparts to agree that they do.



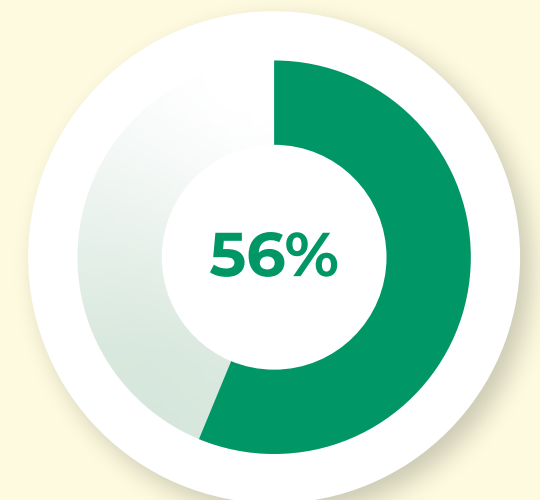
Key findings

Experience of xenophobia



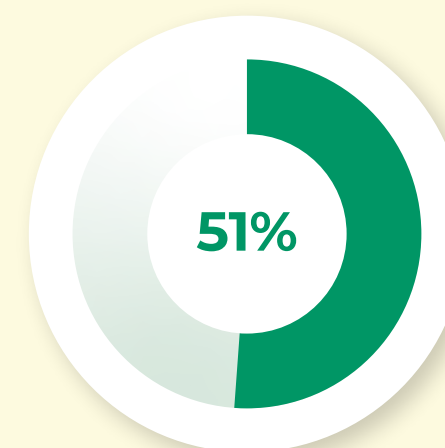
Only **60%** of students who report that they have experienced xenophobia agreed to the statement 'I feel welcome and safe in the UK'. This is significantly lower than students who have not experienced xenophobia, at 89%.

Experience of racism



Only **56%** of students who report that they have experienced racism agreed to the statement 'I feel welcome and safe in the UK'. This is significantly lower than students who have not experienced racism, at 90%.

Experience of racism and xenophobia



Only **51%** of students who report that they have experienced both racism and xenophobia agreed to the statement 'I feel welcome and safe in the UK'. This is significantly lower than students who have not experienced either, at 92%.

Students from marginalised backgrounds are more likely to experience racism and xenophobia while studying in the UK.

Significant disparities emerge when considering the experiences of students from marginalised backgrounds. Black (35%) and Asian (35%) students are significantly more likely to report having experienced racism, while Asian (31%) and mixed-race (30%) students are significantly more likely to report having experienced xenophobia.

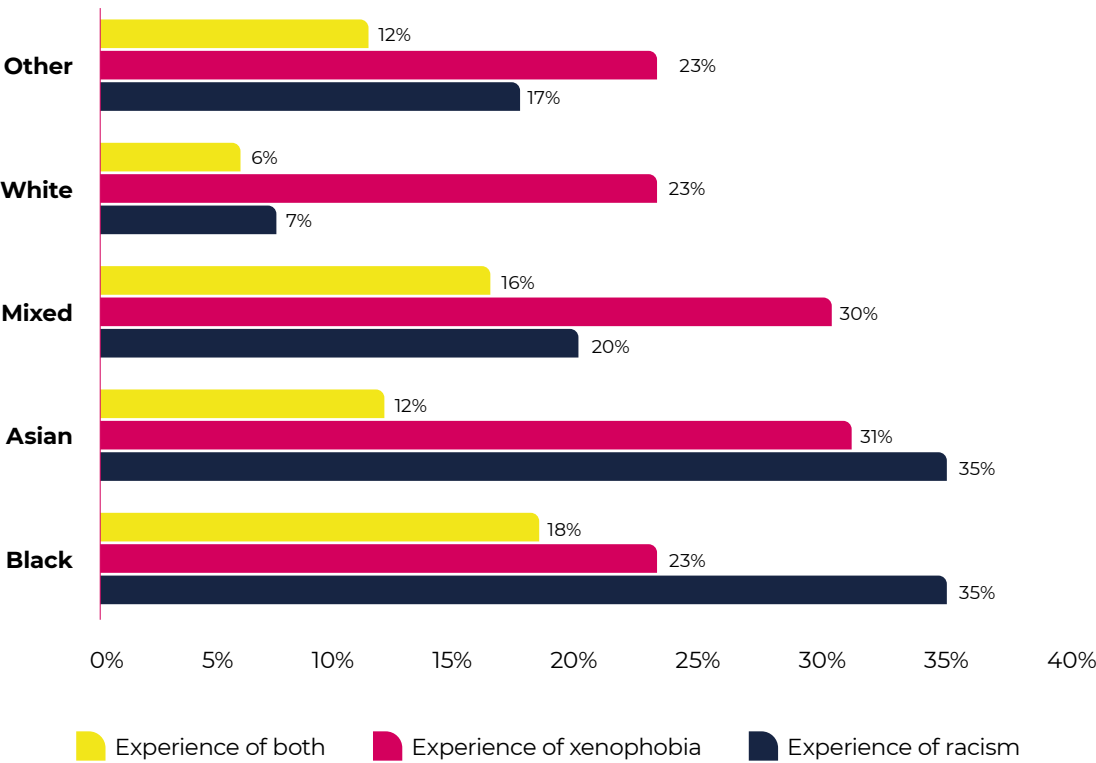


Figure 17. Clustered bar graph showing 'Yes' responses to 'Have you experienced racism whilst studying in the UK?' and 'Have you experienced xenophobia (the dislike of or prejudice against people from other countries) whilst studying in the UK?'.

Students who report experiences of racism and xenophobia are more likely to report that they have experienced poor mental health.

Students who report that they have experienced racism or xenophobia are significantly more likely to report poor mental health outcomes. Among those who report experiencing racism, 62% also report poor mental health, and 69% state that they have felt lonely or isolated while studying in the UK. Similarly, 63% of students who report experiencing xenophobia also report poor mental health, with 70% feeling lonely or isolated.

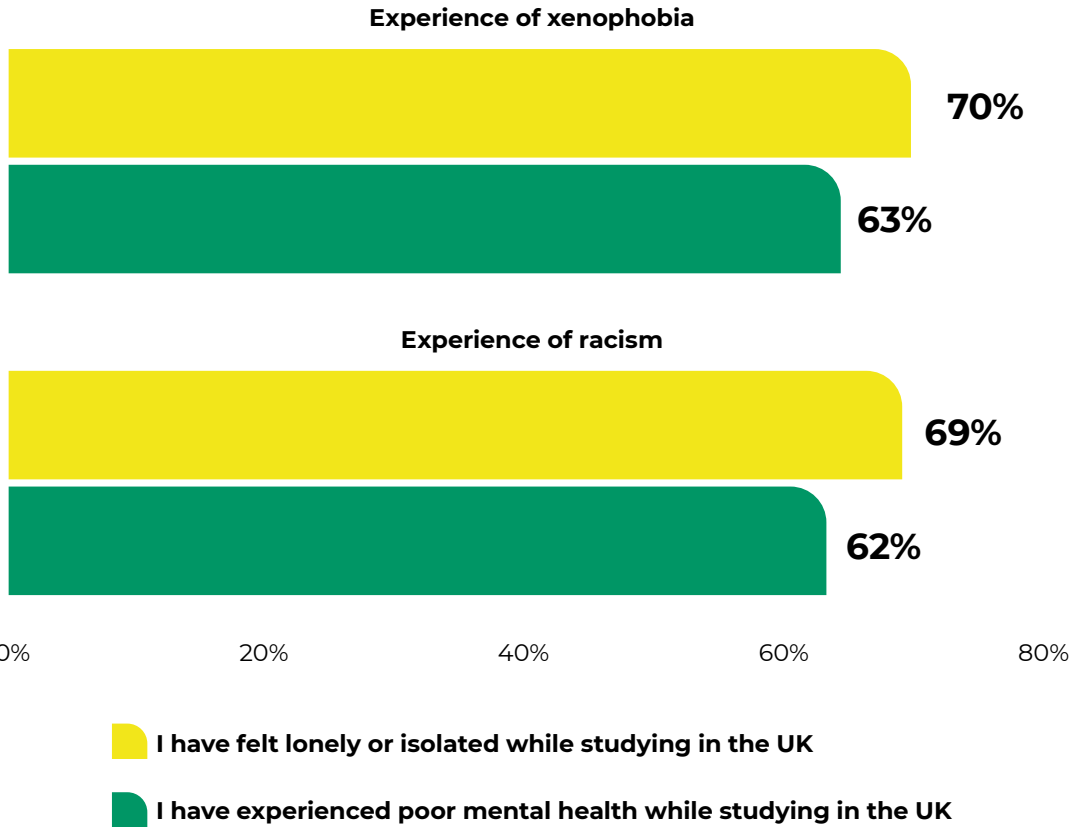


Figure 18. Clustered bar graph showing agree responses to 'I have felt lonely or isolated while studying in the UK' and 'I have experienced poor mental health while studying in the UK' by experience of racism and xenophobia'.

"I have been fortunate to be admitted into [the university]. The xenophobic and racist experience I have faced are outside the campus. I have always felt safe in the campus."

PGR, India

"The discriminatory and racist experiences I mentioned have taken place mostly outside the university environment."

PGR, Mexico

"Students are xenophobic to people in my country, and I am lonely often."

PGT, USA

While there was limited discussion of racism and xenophobia in the focus groups, when these did occur, students recounted instances of hate crime and hate incidents. Students cite significant experiences of racism and xenophobia both on and off campus. This ranged from international students feeling excluded by UK students to hostility in the local community. One student wrote that they felt that “most British students are not welcoming Asians. They would deliberately avoid being in a group project with us Asian student” (UG, China). In comparison, another student remarked that “the discriminatory and racist experiences” they have experienced have “taken place mostly outside the university environment” (PGR, Mexico).

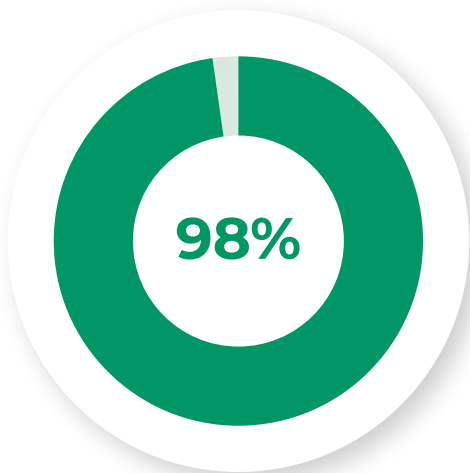
Students are accessing support in significant numbers, but the support does not always meet students’ expectations.

Despite the popularity of university careers services, both the focus groups and open-text comments suggest that satisfaction with the careers support on offer is mixed, with students criticising the lack of opportunities to gain work experience or otherwise network, and the absence of specific support for navigating Graduate visa requirements. There is a general sense of international students desiring careers guidance which is tailored to their specific needs, and which considers current and future visa conditions. This is in keeping with the wider sector, as demonstrated by a recent report by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) and Kaplan which found that only 52% of international students think that their university is meeting their needs in terms of careers support.⁶ Given that 82% of the students surveyed by HEPI and Kaplan placed careers support as either an ‘important’ or a ‘very important’ factor in their selection of university, the significance of career support cannot be underestimated.⁷

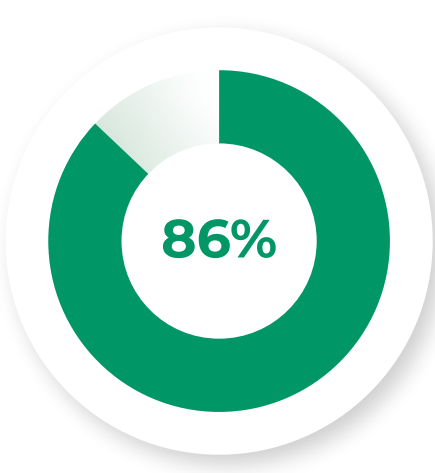
“It felt like I was thrown in the deep end to figure it all out on my own, while the home students got help and people assigned to show them around”

UG, Switzerland

Key findings



98% of international students are aware of at least one of their university support services.



86% of international students have made use of at least one of their university support services.

**Which of the following university services are you aware of?
(Select all that apply)**

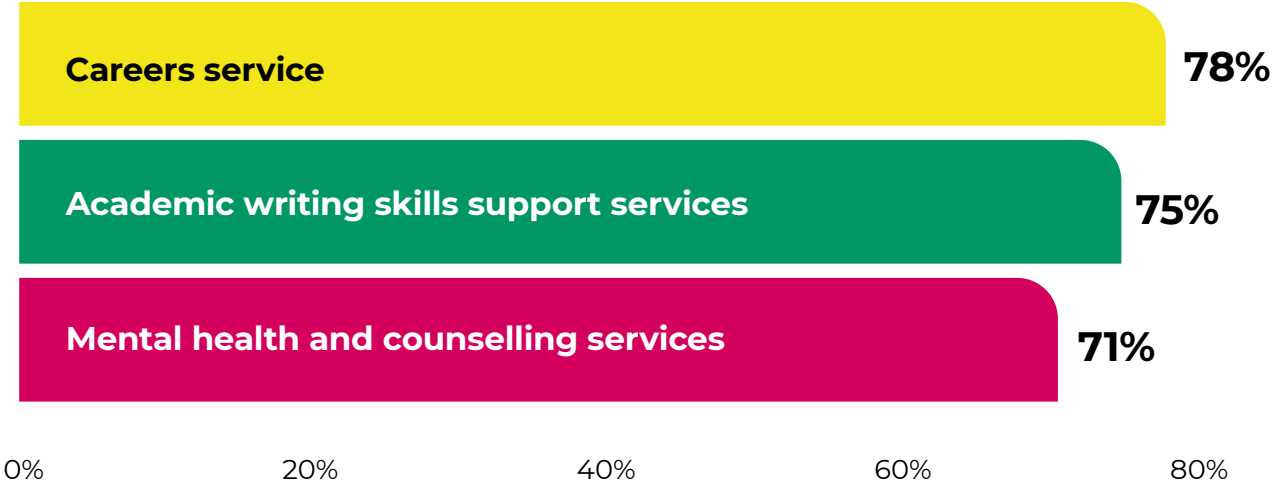


Figure 19. Bar graph showing responses ‘Which of the following university services are you aware of? (Select all the apply)’.

**Which of the following university services have you accessed?
(Select all that apply)**

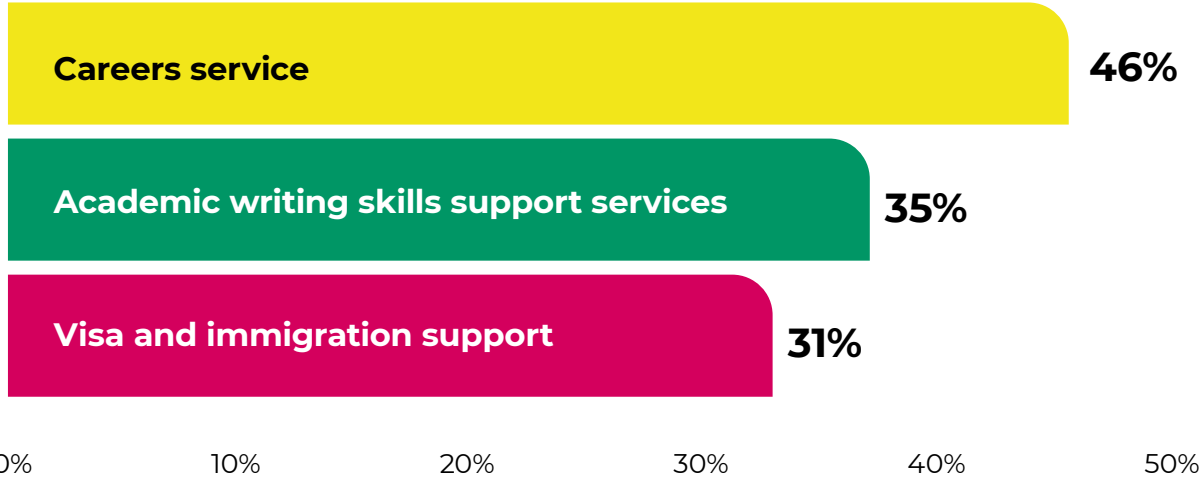


Figure 20. Bar graph showing responses ‘Which of the following university services have you accessed? (Select all the apply)’.

Mental health and wellbeing

1 in 2 students report experiencing poor mental health whilst studying in the UK.

Half of all international students report experiencing poor mental health and 58% have felt lonely or isolated while studying in the UK. As Figure 21 demonstrates, 75% of disabled students report experiencing poor mental health or loneliness while studying in the UK compared to 41% and 51%, respectively, for non-disabled students. Similarly, Figure 22 shows that LGBT+ students are also more likely to report experiencing both poor mental health and loneliness than their cis-heterosexual peers.

"It's hard sometimes to find friends and [I] often feel very lonely" UG, India

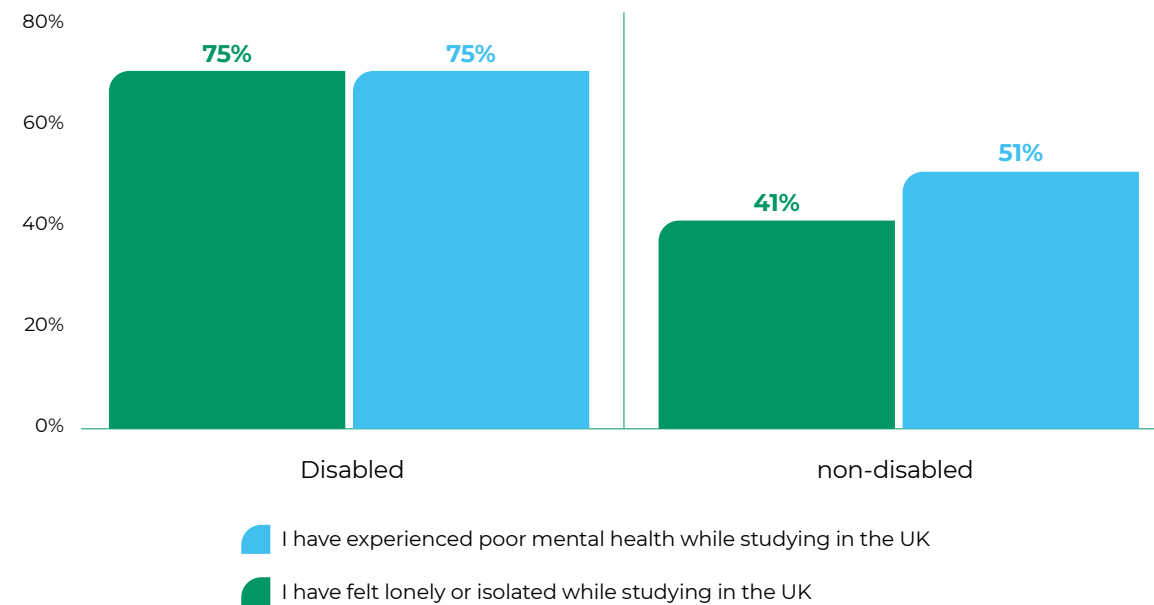


Figure 21. Clustered bar graph showing agree responses to 'I have felt lonely or isolated while studying in the UK' and 'I have experienced poor mental health while studying in the UK?' by disability status.

3 in 5 students have felt lonely or isolated whilst studying in the UK.

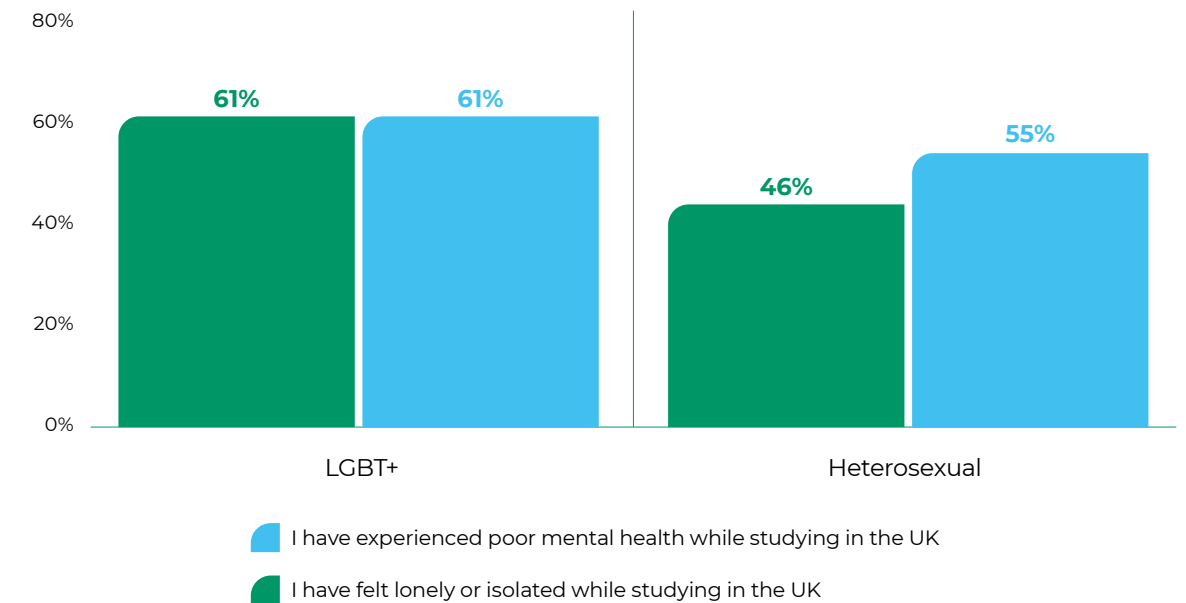


Figure 22. Clustered bar graph showing agree responses to 'I have felt lonely or isolated while studying in the UK' and 'I have experienced poor mental health while studying in the UK?' by sexual orientation.

"Generally, my experience has been positive. It does get a tad lonely and feeling like I miss having that sense of home community"

PGT, Singapore

Students' experiences of belonging, safety, friendship, and discrimination are closely tied to their mental health and overall wellbeing.

Students who report experiencing racism or xenophobia are more likely to report poor mental health, whilst those who have formed friendships with UK students tend to report better mental wellbeing. Similarly, these factors influence feelings of loneliness, with students with poor mental health significantly more likely to feel lonely or isolated.

Beyond interpersonal factors, financial concerns also play a role in students’ mental health and loneliness.

Students who worry about money report worse mental health outcomes, and students with higher overall spending while studying in the UK are more likely to report feeling lonely. This reflects broader sector trends, with previous Russell Group Students’ Unions research indicating that as many as 78% of international students reported that the cost of living crisis had a negative impact on their mental health.⁸

1 in 5 respondents have accessed their university mental health and wellbeing services.

“I faced difficulties with mental health which I think [is a] common thing to face for international [students].”

UG, Japan

Despite international students reporting high levels of poor mental health and being aware of mental health services offered by their university, only 18% of students have accessed them, with disabled students being most likely to.

*“The mental health support was very disappointing, **not necessarily needing more of it but the right support.**”*

UG, Spain

3 in 4 students think that there is broadly enough mental health support available for at their university, with 36% completely happy with the support available and 36% broadly happy but reporting that there could be more. Only 10% of respondents reported that the support offered is insufficient. For students who felt this way, their reasons varied, with some students saying it was due to the support’s limited nature, a lack of awareness, poor administration and to Eurocentricity. One student said, *“I feel that cultural diversity and differences from Eurocentric norms may not have been considered in mental health support”* (PGT, China).

However, these overall figures obscure significant discrepancies in experience between students who have reported poor mental health and those who have not. This can be seen in Figure 23, which shows 60% of those who have experienced poor mental health say the support is insufficient or that more support is needed.

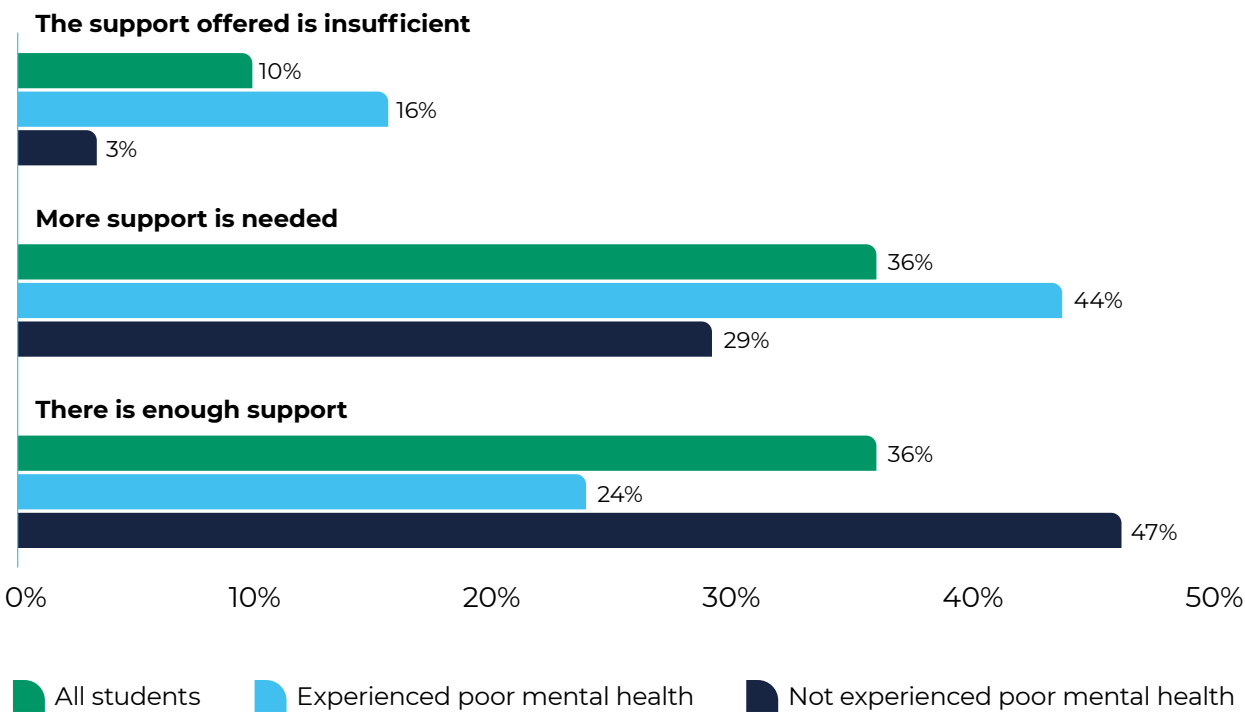


Figure 23. Clustered bar showing responses to “Do you think that there is enough mental health support available for international students at your university?” by experiences of poor mental health

Where mental health was mentioned in the open text comments, students discussed the desire for increased provision that is better communicated and more easily accessible. They also said it was important for the provision to be sensitive to the particular needs of international students. 41% of all international students report that there could be improvements made to the cultural sensitivity of their university’s mental health provision. 36% are completely satisfied, and only 7% believe that this provision is not culturally sensitive. For instance, one student said:

“Most part of my experience is good, however, there are a good amount of it could be improved by universities’ support, such as more support in mental health for international students as we are away from home country. Mental health is extremely important, next to physical health, hence, I believe, more support should be given to international students.”

UG, Malaysia

9

| Extra and co-curricular activity

7 in 10 students participate in extra and co-curricular activities while studying in the UK.

International students enrich campus life through their leadership and participation in extracurricular and co-curricular activities.

Many international students take full advantage of university life by joining academic and cultural societies, playing sports, or engaging in student representation (see Figure 24). Students’ unions and universities offer a vast range of opportunities, including volunteering, leadership development, employability programmes, and social events, all of which help students build networks, gain new skills, and feel a sense of belonging. Academic research has shown that participation in non-academic activities improves students’ performance across a range of skills and competences ‘associated with employability, including teamwork, problem solving and communication.’⁹

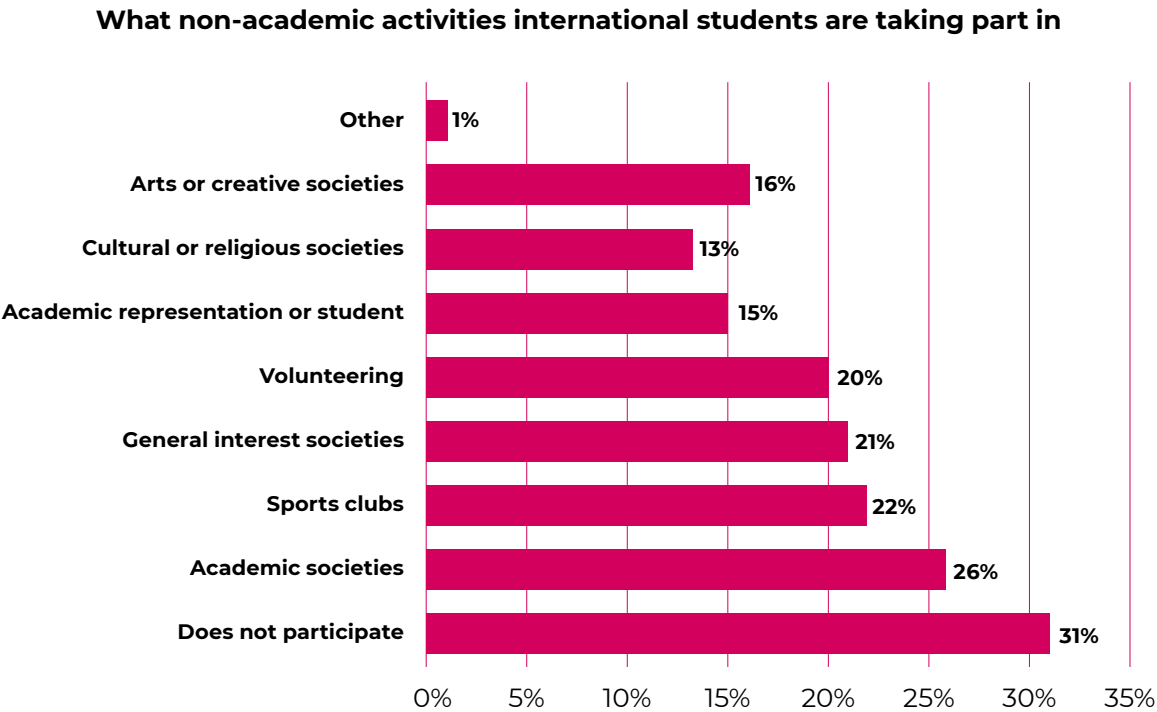


Figure 24. Bar graph showing responses to “Do you currently participate in any of the following activities? (Select all that apply)”

Alongside the high-quality education being the primary motivating factor for most students, our research clearly demonstrates that international students seek to be active participants in wider university life, with 69% engaging in societies, sports clubs, and volunteering. Undergraduate students are most likely to engage in the wider student experience, with only 16% not participating (see Figure 25).

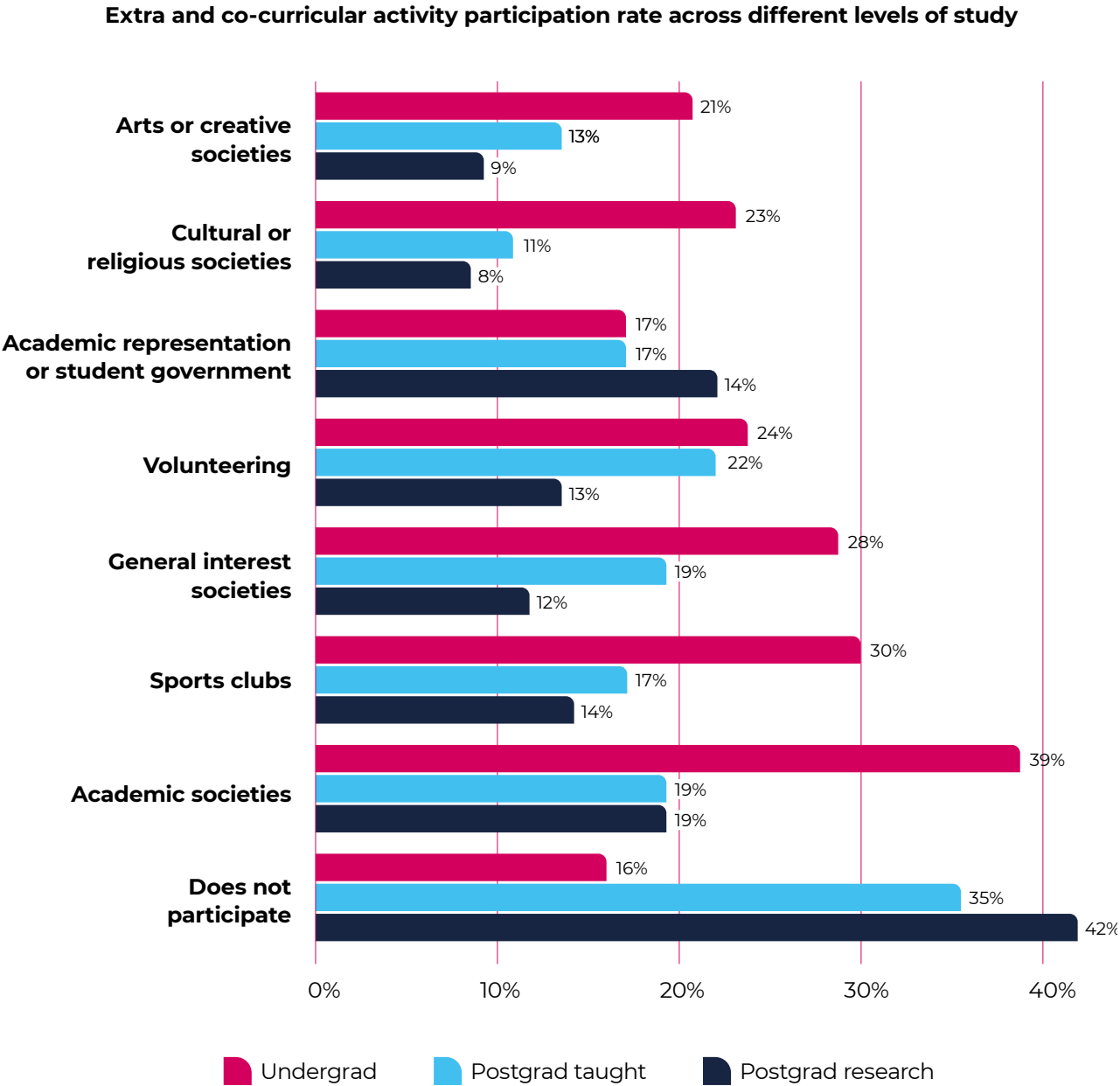


Figure 25. Clustered bar graph showing responses to “Do you currently participate in any of the following activities? (Select all that apply)” by level of study.

1 in 5 international students volunteer during their time at university.

Reflecting international students’ commitment to giving back to the local community, 1 in 5 international students participate in volunteering. This not only benefits local communities but also helps students build social networks and develop further skills.

International students engage in university life to build connections and find community.

When asked what motivated them to participate in the wider student experience, students said they wanted to meet new people who share similar interests (67%), to try something new (56%), to have fun (47%), or to feel part of a community (41%). Emphasising the personal growth and sense of belonging that comes from studying abroad and participating in wider university life, one student wrote:

“In my experience of studying in the UK until now, **it has been amazing**. I have international friends and **participated in various activities** including academic societies, representing students and volunteering **these experiences have been beneficial**.”

PGT, India

“Studying abroad as an international student may not be as easy as staying in my comfort zone, but it makes me a better person. Living alone can be lonely. I have tried to connect with local society as much as I can, like attending local events and university events. Generally, all events in university are fantastic; I felt cared for.”

PGT, China

Reasons for participating in extra and co-curricular activities



Figure 26. Bar graph showing responses to “What are the main reasons that you participate in student activities? (Select all that apply)”

“I think **gaining a new skill not only makes you more employable, it also helps you improve your wellbeing and make new friends**.”

UG, Hong Kong

Despite these positive experiences, many international students also experience challenges such as social integration difficulties, a lack of awareness regarding the opportunities available, and a lack of tailored support for postgraduate students. When asked about the barriers to participating in the wider student experience, the most common reasons included a lack of time due to academic commitments (62%), not knowing anyone else who takes part (27%), language or cultural differences making it difficult (24%), and not being aware of the opportunities available (18%).

Barriers to taking part in extra and co-curricular activities

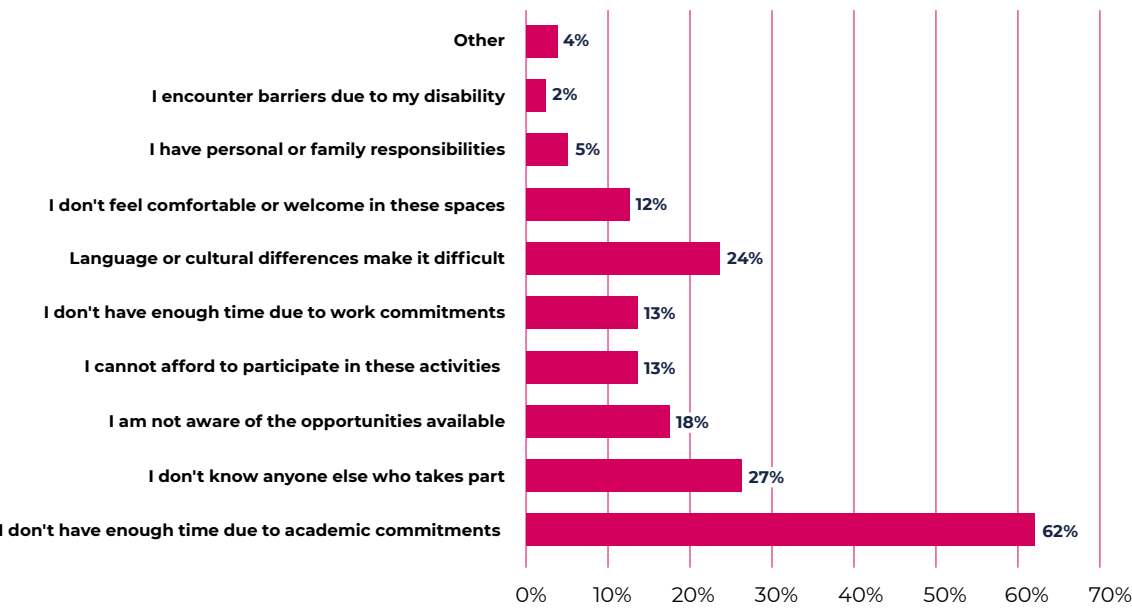


Figure 27. Bar graph showing responses to “What are the main reasons that you do not participate in student activities? (Select all that apply)”

Particularly at the postgraduate level, many find it difficult to participate in extracurricular activities due to heavy academic workloads, with 2 in 3 international postgraduate students citing their academic commitments as one of the reasons why they do not participate in non-academic activities (65%).

“My course, in particular, is quite intense in terms of the time commitment, which limits my ability to take complete advantage of being a student here and working in London. This is feedback for course developers to take into account that master’s students who are here for a year do need time to learn via other means such as participation in societies, attending events, and engaging in part-time work.”

PGT, Sri Lanka

Postgraduate students are less likely to engage in the wider student experience.

Our research highlights the limited availability of extracurricular opportunities tailored to the needs of postgraduate students, as well as the challenges they face in finding time to participate. As seen in Figure 27, 39% of postgraduate international students do not participate in any extracurricular activities, compared to just 16% of undergraduate international students. For example, a postgraduate research student shared their frustration in the survey comments:

“I feel like a lot of the support offered, especially in social contexts, are directed towards undergraduate students. There aren’t many opportunities to interact with other students with common interests (i.e., as part of a society) as a postgraduate student. Considering this, I have found it very difficult to make friends with similar interests.”

PGR, Canada

Students with caring responsibilities are significantly less likely to participate in the wider student experience than non-carers.

30% of carers who do not participate in non-academic activities cited their personal and family responsibilities as a barrier. One student reflected on the significant challenge of balancing parenthood alongside their studies:

“I’m a parent to a young child, and balancing the demands of parenthood with my studies is a significant challenge. I believe that student parents like myself require additional support from the university, such as access to daycare and flexible options like extensions, to succeed.”

PGR, Lebanon

Disabled students are significantly less likely to feel comfortable or welcome.

Disabled students are more than twice as likely as non-disabled students to cite not feeling comfortable or welcome in these spaces as a reason why they don’t participate in non-academic activities. International disabled students face additional barriers to participating in non-academic activities and require much more support from universities to address this gap in participation rates.

However, one student commented on the progressive nature of the UK in comparison to their home country when it came to support for disabled people:

“As a disabled person, (a) the accessibility systems available here are miles ahead of my own country; and (b) I would give the British, as a nation, an impressive 7/10 on their attitudes to disability and how they support disabled people to lead full lives in which they can thrive.”

PGT, India

1 in 4 international students listed language and cultural differences as a reason why they do not participate in extracurricular activities.

Specifically, students who identify as Chinese or Latinx were significantly less likely to participate due to cultural or language differences. This is likely because students from countries where English is less commonly spoken or taught in a more prescriptive way may feel less comfortable engaging in these environments compared to students from countries such as India, where English is more widely used. A Chinese student emphasised this by sharing: “As a student from China, language barriers are major concerns for me” (PGT, China)

Compared to home students, international students often face much higher financial burdens, including higher tuition fees, visa costs, and the NHS surcharge. These expenses can limit their ability to fully participate in student life. This was reflected in previous Russell Group Students’ Union Cost of Living research which found that 65% of international students had reported they had stopped taking part in extra-curricular activities because they cannot afford to do so.¹⁰

“The cost of being an international student is significantly high, from visa and NHS surcharge fees to rent and living in general.”

PGT, Sri Lanka

10

Navigating the Graduate visa and beyond

2 in 5 international students would like to stay in the UK to work after graduation.

Russell Group universities have a strong record of offering an innovative, high-quality, research-intensive learning environment that provides students with the skills they need to succeed in their future careers.

When asked about their aspirations after graduating 42% of international students said they would consider staying in the UK to work, while 33% are considering returning to their home country for work, 25% were considering further study. 72% of those who said they would consider returning to their home country for work, are also considering staying in the UK for work.

Despite minimal impact on migration, international graduates face significant barriers to remaining in the UK.

The latest review by the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) found no evidence of significant abuse of the Graduate Route. MAC concluded that the route is working as intended and should continue in its current form. Their findings confirm the high compliance rate of international students with 98% of those required to leaving the UK after their studies.¹¹

The Graduate Visa was introduced to enable international students to transition from education to employment in the UK without immediate sponsorship from an employer. However, students report significant barriers in securing stable employment within the timeframe provided by the visa. Additionally, the combined cost of the Graduate Visa and one year of the Immigration Health Surcharge is almost £2,000,¹² creating greater financial barriers to post-graduation employment. These costs, combined with the high salary threshold required for a Skilled Worker Visa, make it even more difficult for international graduates to remain and contribute to the UK workforce.

However, students regularly report feeling that they are treated as part of the problem. A PGT student from the US reflected on their frustration about the government's approach to the Graduate visa route, stating *"I am appalled by how difficult it is to get a job as an international student with a UK degree. I cannot fathom how the UK government declares that it supports and welcomes international students, yet makes it increasingly difficult for those students to remain and work here. Why throw away that investment, and force them to take the skills and education they learned in the UK away from this country/economy/workforce?"*

There is a lack of understanding amongst UK employers about the Graduate visa.

One cause of these attitudes may be the lack of understanding amongst UK employers about the Graduate visa. A HEPI / Kaplan poll showed that 27% of employers not familiar with the Graduate visa scheme.¹³ A further 20% of employers who are familiar with the Graduate visa but have no plans to employ a graduating international student using it. For many students, this is a source of stress. The prevalence of these attitudes towards the Graduate visa reduces the number of opportunities available for graduating international students and contributes to poor perceptions of graduate employment opportunities.

Barriers to taking part in extra and co-curricular activities

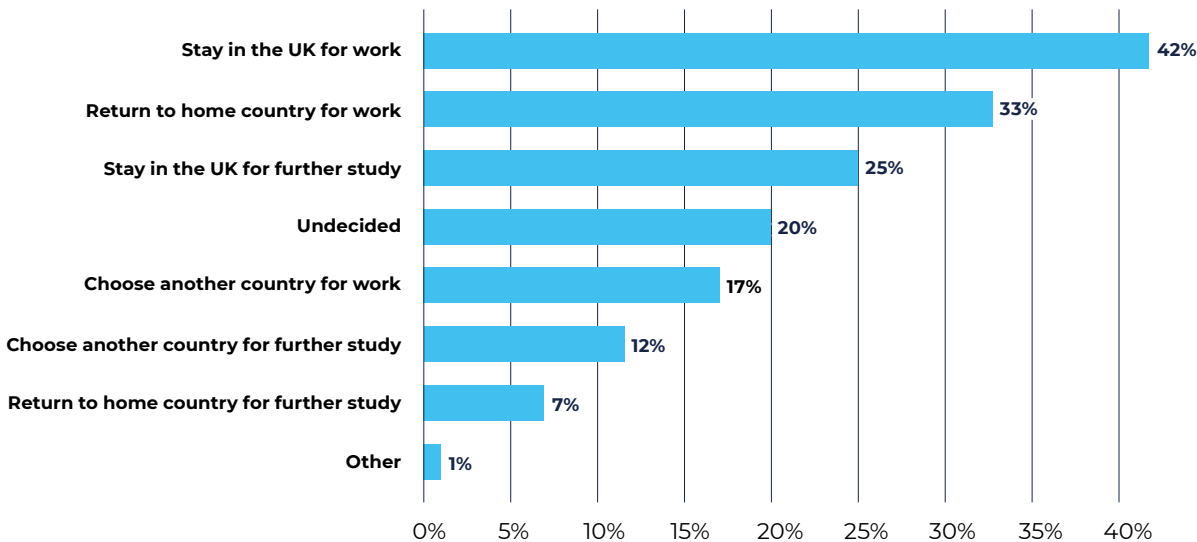


Figure 28. Bar graph showing responses to “After graduating, what would you like to do? (Select all that apply)”

One student commented on the need for more awareness among employers, stating that:

"It would be really good if UKCISA and the Student Council worked to raise more awareness among employers on the Graduate visa, to inform them that international students have the right to work without visa sponsorship for at least 2 years and encourage them to employ them on that visa [...] It would be a good chance to gain the value that international students bring to organisations, even if only for the period of the Student/ Graduate Visa."

PGT, Kenya

Some international students also raised concerns about the potential for discrimination in the hiring process: *"here I am struggling to try and change my location and making sure I don't stand out as an Indian, because I know that there is discrimination when it comes to jobs and how they select CVs, so they don't want to sponsor your visa."*

For some students, the Graduate visa is not an option due to the significant financial commitment required.

The costs associated with visa applications (£822) and the NHS surcharge (£1035 per year),¹⁴ coupled with the uncertainty of securing employment, make the graduate visa route much less attractive. One student said:

"The Graduate Visa Route is a lot of commitment, and I think you don't have enough time to find a job after the course ends or to be sponsored. It's a lot of money."

PGR, Italy



Methodology

The survey was open from Monday 9 December 2024 to Friday 28 February 2025. 22 Students' Unions participated. It was promoted via Students' Unions to their respective international student populations. The overall response rate was 4,918 and these respondents were self-selecting. The results were weighted by respondents' home countries and the margin of error is approximately ±1.5%.

Where results are described as significant, this refers to a 0.05 confidence level. Minor grammatical edits were made to some free-text responses for clarity, without altering their original meaning.

Demographics

All: N = 4918

Gender: 64% women | 33% men | 2% non-binary | 2% prefer not to say

Level of study: 45% undergraduate | 38% postgraduate taught | 15% postgraduate research | 2% foundation course

Ethnicity: 60% Asian | 5% Black | 3% Mixed | 12% Other* | 19% White | 2% prefer not to say

Disability: 17% disabled | 75% non-disabled | 8% prefer not to say

***Other includes:** Arab, Hispanic/ Latino/ Latinx, Other mixed background, Romani or Traveller, and ethnic background not listed

About the authors

This study was commissioned by Russell Group Students' Unions and carried out by the Policy and Research Team at Students' Union UCL. The report was written by Meg Haskins, Policy and Research Manager, Vanessa Baptista, Policy and Research Coordinator, Jake Simms, Policy and Research Coordinator, Edward Lidington, Policy and Influence Coordinator, and Ana Salazar Londoño, Research Assistant.

Queries regarding the research should be directed to hello@rgsu.co.uk.

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