

Student Happiness Index

2025-2026

HOWDEN





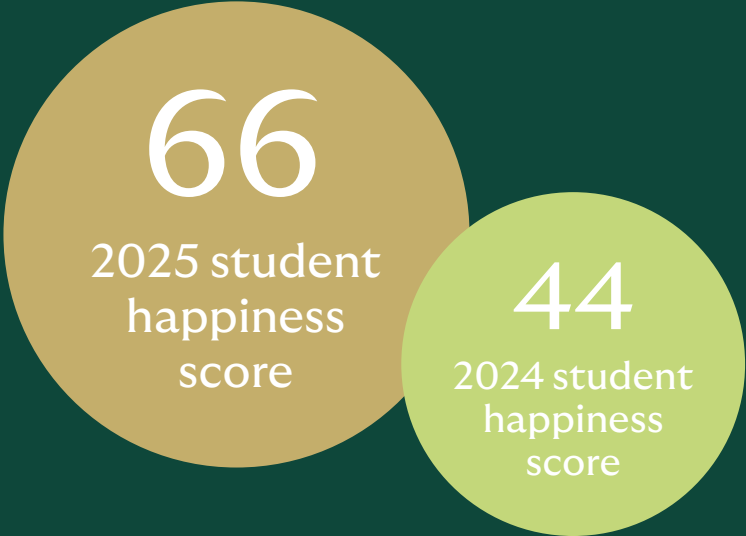
Insights into students' happiness, mental health, concerns, drivers and hopes for the future

Introduction.....	4
Methodology.....	8
Executive summary	10
01 The rise in student happiness and wellbeing	16
02 What factors are having an impact?	20
03 The mental health contradiction.....	32
Interview with Ayotunde - case study	40
04 The underlying issue – money worries	42
05 Expectation versus experience	48
Interview with Rihanna - case study	54
06 What's driving students to study?	58
07 A technologically changing world.....	64
Interview with Rosita - case study.....	70
08 Life after education.....	72
Summary	76

Introduction

Welcome to the fifth annual

Student Happiness Index



Exploring students' happiness and the different factors affecting their mental health, lifestyle and outlook on life after education.

Students today are studying at a time of significant societal, economic and technological change, so it's encouraging to see the overall student happiness score has risen to 66 in 2025 compared to 44 in 2024. Likewise, students are feeling more optimistic about the future – with the overall student optimism score coming in at 71 in 2025, compared to 57 the year before.

However, under the surface the data is telling a different story.

A range of challenges, including rising financial pressures, high levels of loneliness, and rapid shifts in technology are clearly taking a toll – reshaping students’ educational experience and future expectations, and worsening mental health.

■ 54% of students say they feel lonely most of the time

54%



In fact, nearly half (49%) of respondents say their mental health has become worse in the last 12 months, and even more (61%) worry their mental health will deteriorate over the next 12 months – both higher numbers than 2024.

It’s not hard to find reasons why. Cost of living and money worries have intensified, with more students seeking part-time jobs to make ends meet, often missing study sessions to do so, while nearly half (46%) have considered dropping out of university or college to get a full-time job or apprenticeship.

One of the prevailing issues is a growing sense of social isolation among students. More than half (54%) say they feel lonely most of the time, which has a direct impact on their mental health and underpins many of the wider concerns that students report, from financial security to the gap between their expectations and actual student experience.

AI,
student
wellbeing,



At the same time, the use of AI has become so firmly embedded in academic and professional life that it’s causing students significant concern, from its impact on their academic performance to their future prospects. In this report, we take a closer look at how AI is being used in universities, and its dual role in both feeding student anxieties and alleviating them through its use as a mental health support tool.

Taken together, the trends identified in our research offer an opportunity to reflect on how we can strengthen the overall value of education, and show how vital it is for universities and colleges to continue to engage with students to support them through their education journey. While the data indicates that the provision of mental health support has definitely improved, universities should consider building on that support to tackle some of the wider issues too, from helping students cope with financial pressures to building a stronger community for students to meet others and develop a sense of belonging. By doing so, educational institutions can build on the undeniably higher levels of happiness and help close the gap between mental health and overall wellbeing.

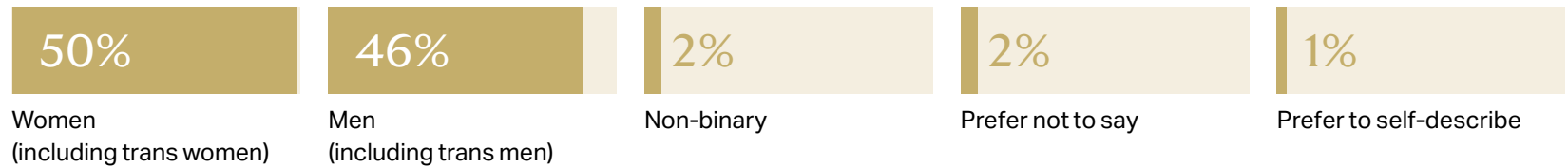
and the Future
of Education

Methodology

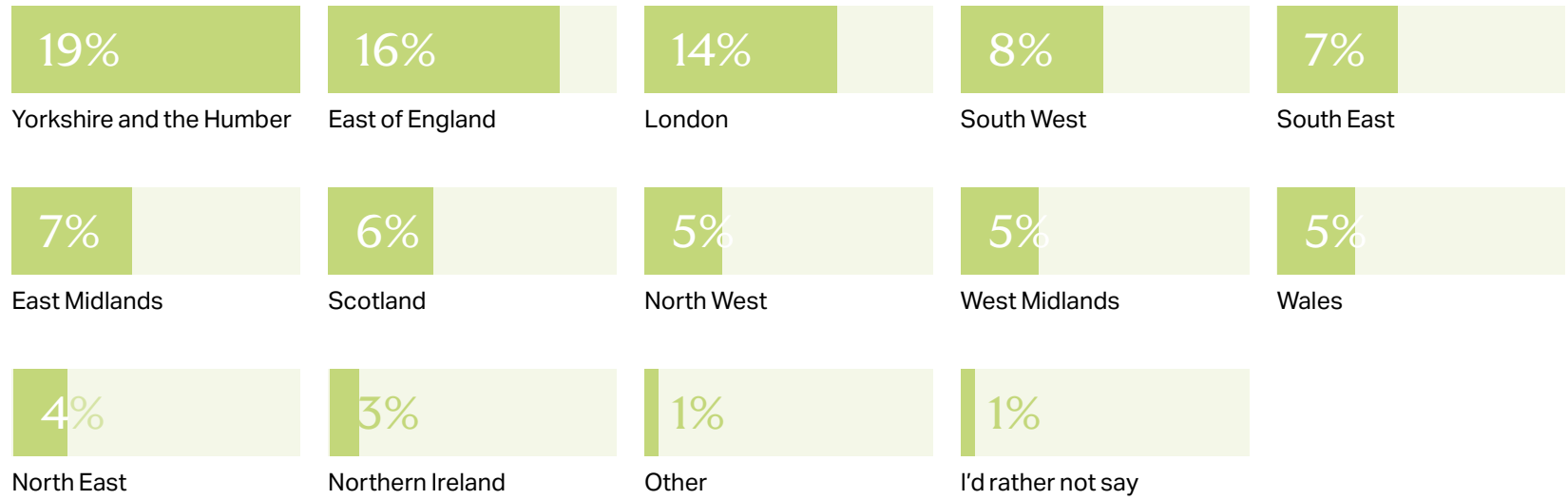
Who we surveyed

Howden surveyed 3,455 students
between 04.03.26 - 27.03.26.

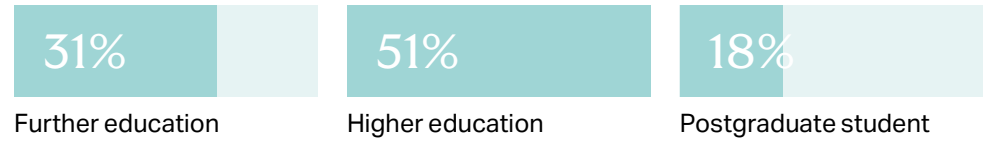
Gender



University/ college region



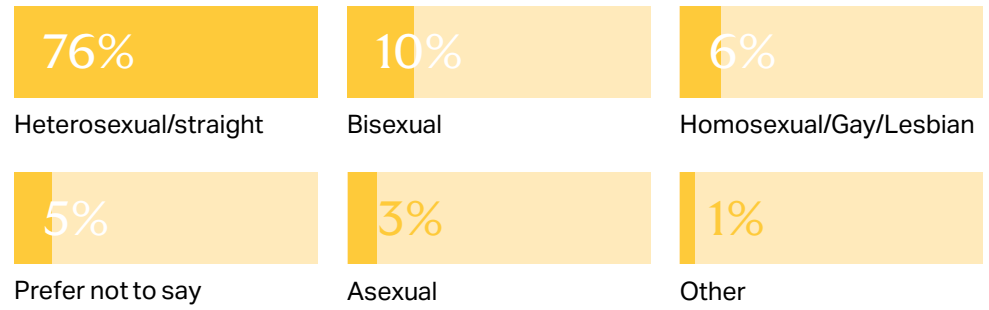
Education level



UK vs. International



Sexual orientation



About the Student Happiness Index

The Student Happiness Index scores are calculated by taking the percentage of unhappy students away from the percentage of happy students based on the survey responses given.

It's presented as a score on a range of -100 (if all students were unhappy) to +100 (if all students were happy). Consequently, a neutral result would be a score of zero. We applied the same methodology to calculate scores for optimism.

Executive summary

increasingly optimistic

financial pressures

mental health struggles

Overall, student happiness has risen since 2024.

However, more students are facing mental health struggles, financial pressures, and loneliness, while AI is now firmly embedded in student life with its own pros and cons.

Despite these challenges, students are increasingly optimistic about life after education, showing resilience amid technological and economic change.

Meanwhile universities have the chance to improve the student experience by strengthening communities and ensuring support services are accessible and well-signposted, especially within the LGBTQ+ community.

loneliness

Key findings

Happiness and mental health

66 in 2025

The student happiness index score has risen from 44 in 2024 to 66 in 2025.

78%

of students surveyed say they've felt happy this year, compared to 61% in 2024.

49%

agree their mental health has worsened in the past 12 months.

77%

of the LGBTQ+ community agree they've struggled with their mental health in the past 12 months – no improvement from last year



Howden



Student concerns

40%

of students say the cost of living and money worries is their top concern

62%

of students are worried that AI will have a negative impact on their job prospects

Student Happiness Index



Expectation vs experience

51%

of students say they have enjoyed their university/college experience less than expected – a sharp rise from 33% in 2024

Student loneliness

54%

of students agree they feel lonely most of the time



Life after education

71 optimism score

The overall student optimism score for 2025 is 71 – up from 57 in 2024

81%

of students say they feel optimistic about their life after university/college

70%

are concerned about their career prospects after university/college

01

The rise in student happiness and wellbeing

tension

socialising

Good news for students, colleges and universities alike – according to our latest survey, student happiness is notably higher.

In fact, nearly 4 in 5 (78%)¹ of students said they've felt happy, compared to 3 in 5 (61%) in 2024², and three quarters (74%)³ of respondents say their wellbeing is better compared to last year.

This data shows a positive trend for students – but there is tension. Just 31% of students say they are very happy and 1 in 25 say they have felt very unhappy⁴.

78%
of students said they've felt happy in 2025¹



74%
said their wellbeing is better compared to last year³



Top drivers of student happiness



66

The overall Student Happiness Score for 2025 has risen to 66 from 44 in 2024



What factors are having an impact?

international students

LGBTQ+

A closer look at the data reveals that not all university/college experiences are created equal, with a range of factors having an impact on students' happiness levels.

When it comes to education level, further education students are the happiest, while higher education students show the lowest happiness and wellbeing levels – suggesting students may face greater academic, financial, and social pressures at this stage in their education.

The transition to higher education could be a pressure point, with the move to university coinciding with a decline in wellbeing – highlighting an opportunity for universities to engage with students early on and clearly signpost their wellbeing and support services so students know and understand how to get help.

Student happiness and wellbeing by education level

Further education student
at a college

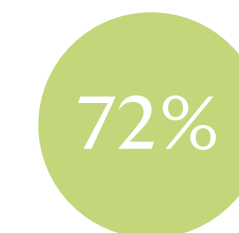


Happy

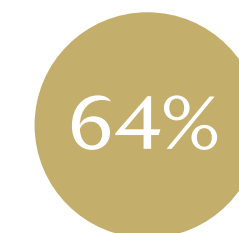


Wellbeing better
than last year

Higher education student
at university



Happy

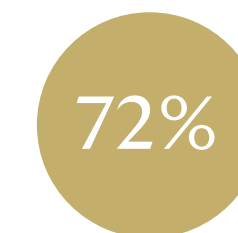


Wellbeing better
than last year

Postgraduate student
at university



Happy



Wellbeing better
than last year

Happiness by university / college region

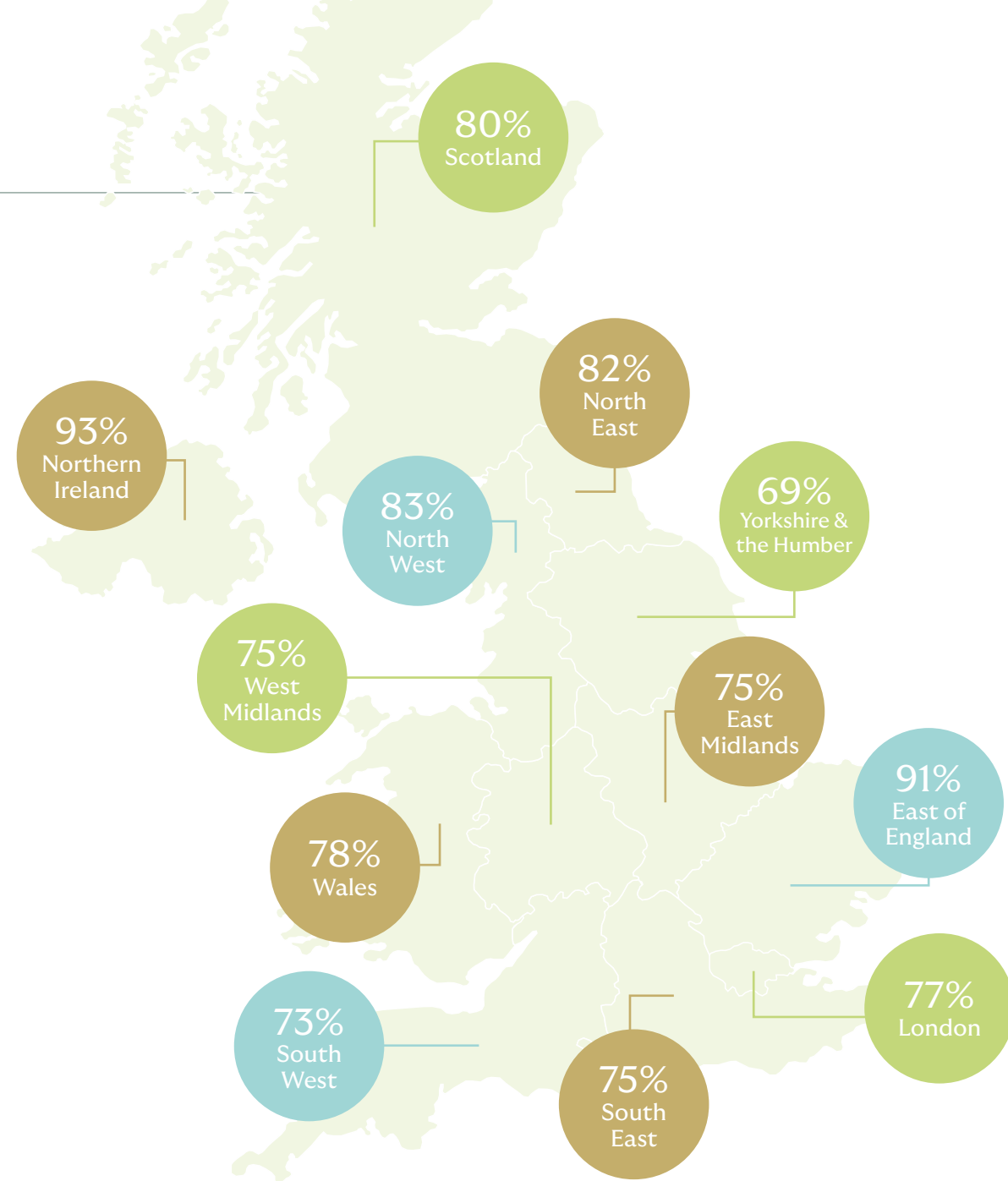
% of respondents who have felt happy¹ this year

Does region have an impact?

Where students go to study seems to have an impact on their reported happiness, with certain regions consistently outperforming others across both happiness and wellbeing

For example, Northern Ireland and the East of England lead on both measures, scoring 93%¹ and 91%¹ respectively for happiness, indicating stronger student support ecosystems or perhaps more positive living and study environments.

Meanwhile regions like Yorkshire and the Humber fall notably behind the national picture. However, differences could be driven by a combination of factors, from cost of living to access to support to campus culture and local community, rather than location alone.



Happiness by university/college region

% of respondents whose wellbeing² is better compared to last year

94%	Northern Ireland	75%	Wales
91%	East of England	72%	London
83%	North West	71%	South West
81%	Scotland	70%	South East
77%	West Midlands	69%	East Midlands
76%	North East	57%	Yorkshire and the Humber

Sexual orientation

On the whole, the LGBTQ+ community are less likely to report happiness compared to heterosexual / straight students.

Concerningly, this year’s findings reveal the same high proportion (77%) of the LGBTQ+ community have struggled with their mental health in the past 12 months as last year.

Although 73% say their college/university provides the right level of mental health support, (up from 60% last year)² there’s still room for improvement. Just over a third (33%) of respondents strongly agree they know how to access support at their university, or college perhaps a key opportunity to further support LGBTQ+ students with clearer signposting to wellbeing services on offer.

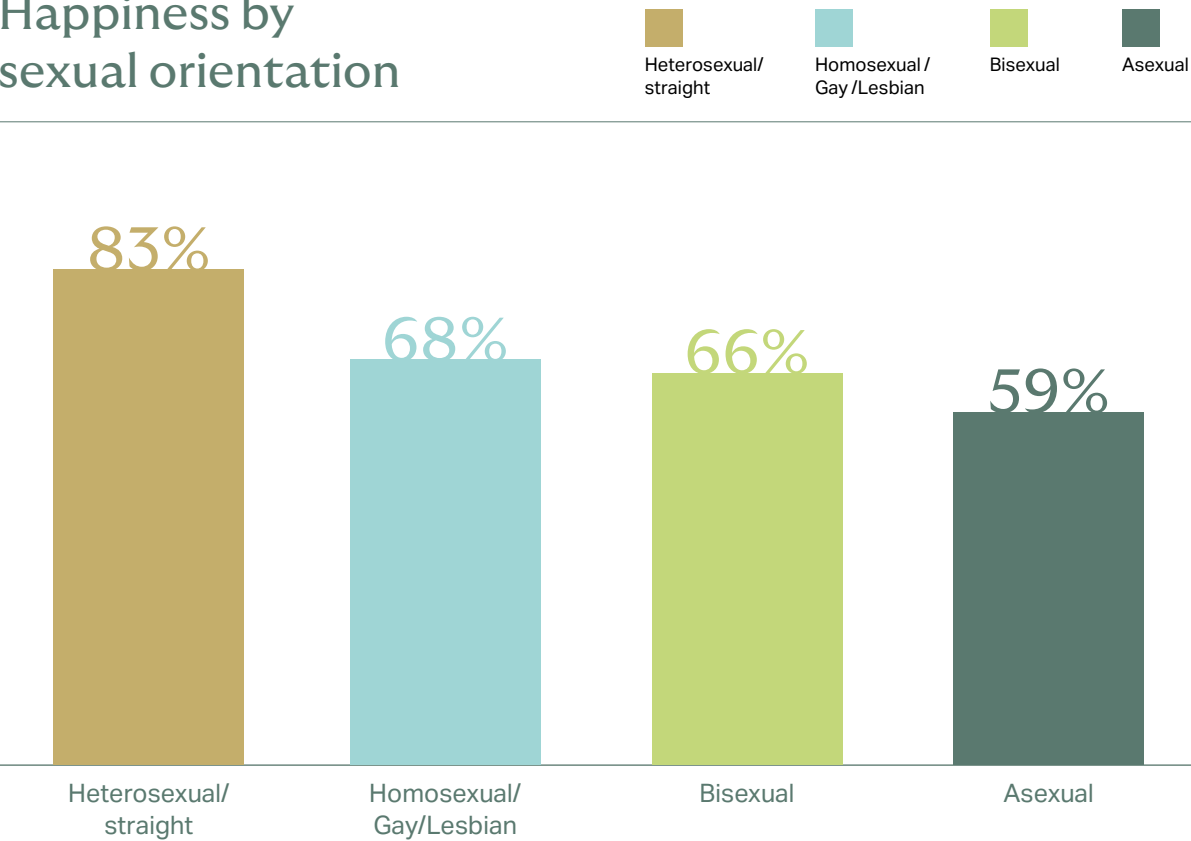
■ 73% say their college/ university provides the right level of mental health support

73%

up from 60% last year²



Happiness by sexual orientation



There's also strong regional variation in happiness among LGBTQ+ students, highlighting how universities in different locations have the opportunity to target mental health and wellbeing support for members of this specific community.

The data suggests this could already be happening – for example, although respondents studying in the East of England are most likely to say they have struggled with their mental health in the last 12 months³, they are also most likely to say their college/ university provides the right level of mental health and wellbeing support (88%).

However, those in Scotland, which also has one of the highest rates of poor mental health, are among the least likely to say this is the case (70%) – indicating an opportunity for institutions in the region.

77%

of the LGBTQ+ student community agree³ they have struggled with their mental health in the past 12 months

Percentage of LGBTQ+ students who agree they have struggled with their mental health by region³

83%
Scotland

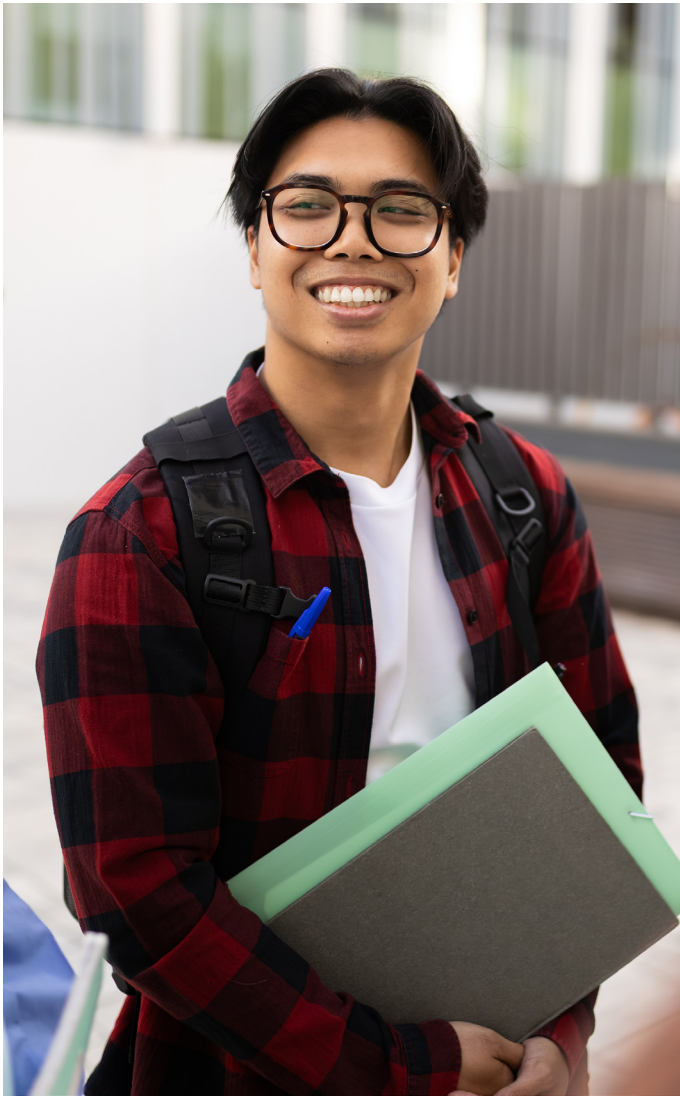
81%
North East

84%
East of England

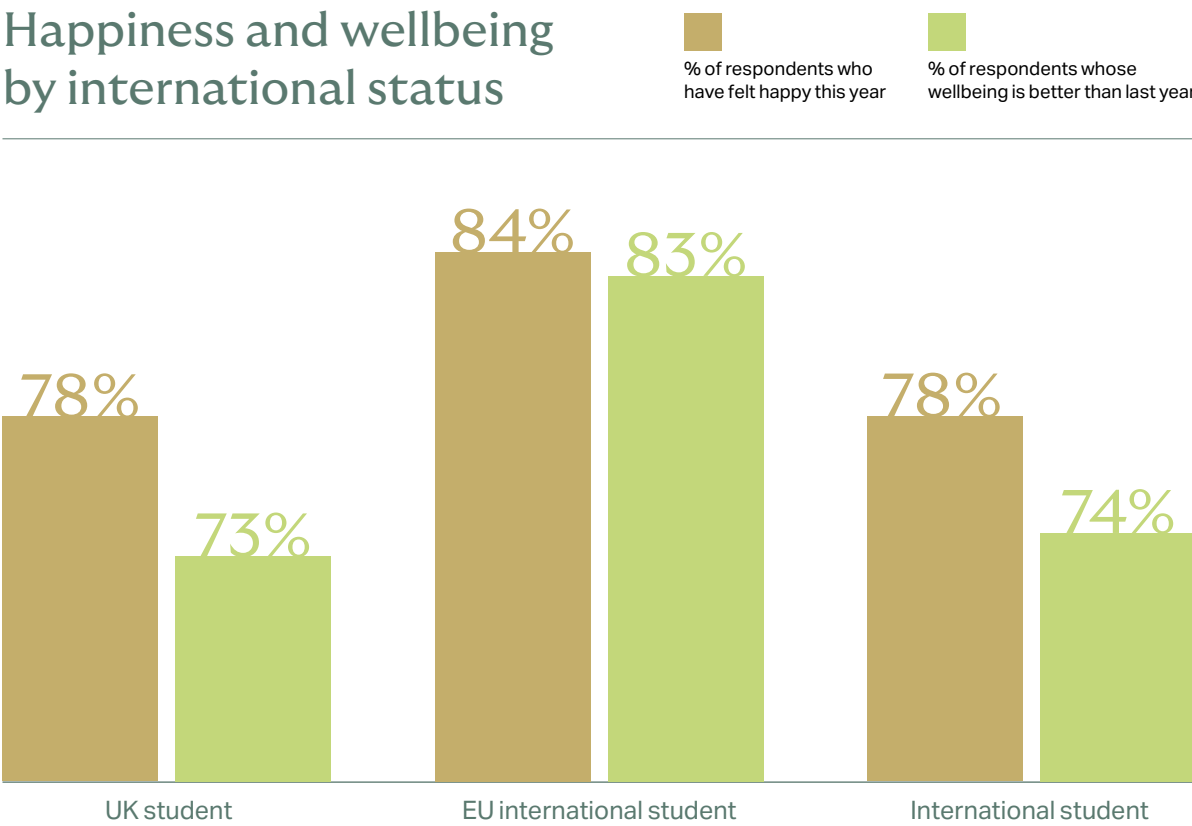
80%
Wales

68%
London

International students



International students report similar levels of happiness to UK citizens, with EU international students studying in the UK reporting the highest levels of both happiness and wellbeing.



The survey results suggest that universities are successfully supporting students, regardless of their international status – creating a broadly inclusive and balanced student experience.

However, looking closer at some of the responses, international students are reporting concerns around cost of living, studying, and loneliness that are impacted by their international status.

For example, there are limits on financial help international students can receive, with the expense of living in the UK proving a shock for some. Meanwhile, the language barrier can make it challenging to make new friends or communicate effectively both in a social setting and academically.



While these are challenges that are to an extent to be expected when it comes to studying in a different country, some students suggest more could be done to help cultural integration between students and to ease the language barrier. And with money worries proving a big issue across the board, perhaps more could be done to help international students prepare for the cost of living in the UK before they arrive.

With international students an important source of income for universities, this is perhaps an area to explore further to help improve the student experience for those studying in the UK from overseas.

“ It has been very stressful dealing with the high living cost here in the UK.

“ I am constantly worried about money and as I am a full time international student, I cannot apply to all jobs.

“ There is not many grants that the university can do for my finances because of my status as an international student. But they can work out payment plans to help me cope, but I would still have to work to pay off the university fees.

In their

“ The cultural background of students living here is quite diverse. Maybe they can organise some activities to improve mutual understanding.

“ As an international student, my English is sufficient for everyday communication, but it is sometimes not strong enough for in-depth academic discussions. I may miss some details or struggle to express myself clearly, which can occasionally be frustrating, although I am doing my best to improve my English through practice.

own words

“ Loneliness has impacted my happiness, being an international student alone in the UK, but I have a strong support network back home.

The mental health contradiction

drivers of mental health

wellbeing support

While students report feeling happier overall, our survey also shows that more students are struggling with their mental health.

Around half (49%)¹ of students agree their mental health has worsened in the past 12 months, up from 43% last year².

This is seemingly contradictory, but a closer look at the data reveals the number of students who say they have accessed professional support for their mental health has also gone up – 49%¹ in 2025 compared to 41%² the previous year. This suggests students are feeling better able to seek out mental health support, which in turn could help explain why students report feeling happier, despite mental health struggles.

This is backed up by over half of students (56%) agreeing their university/college provides the right level of mental health and wellbeing support – up from 49%² in 2024. Crucially, more students agree they know how to access support – two thirds (65%)¹ now agree compared to 56%² last year.

“

The wellbeing team are extremely supportive, patient, and understanding, and are always willing to help students, regardless of the issue.

“

I have found it extremely helpful with responsive staff and services... I feel confident that support is available and easy to access.



However, 61% worry their mental health will worsen in the next 12 months¹.

With the data suggesting that mental health and wellbeing support from universities does have a material impact on happiness levels, it's crucial for institutions to deliver a high standard of support for students.

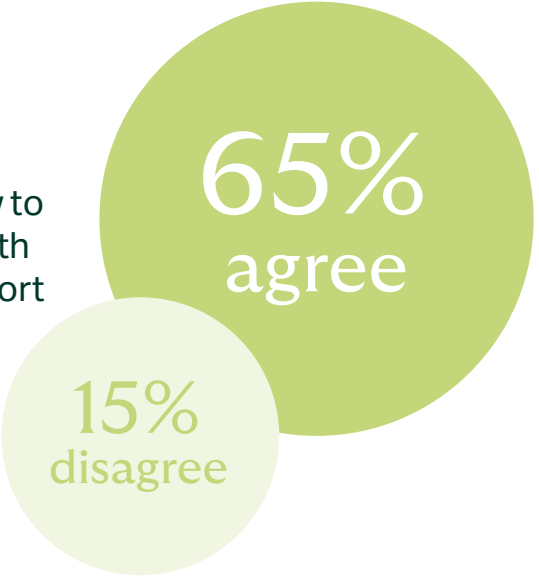
Just 23% of students strongly agree their university or college provides the right level of mental health and wellbeing support, and only 26% strongly agree they know how to access it. These figures are higher than last year, showing clear progress, but also a growing challenge for institutions to respond to.

61%
of students worry their
mental health will worsen
in the next 12 months¹



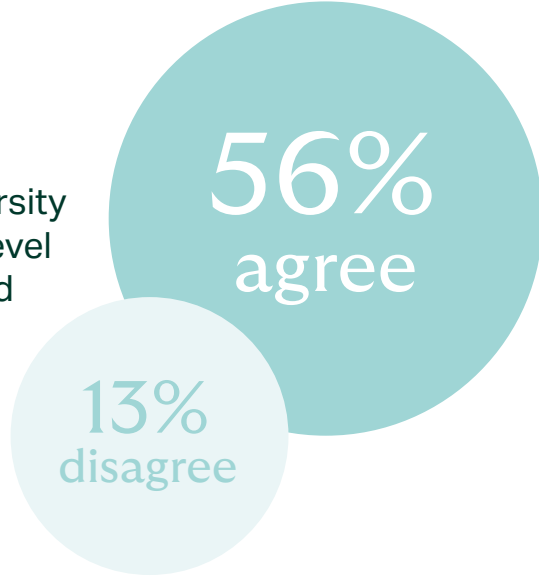
Signposting support

Students know how to access mental health and wellbeing support at their college/university



Wellbeing provision

Their college/university provides the right level of mental health and wellbeing support



“ They have been good but I found accessing them very confusing.

“ People are caring and try hard with the resources they have... Signposting could also be more clear.

“ There are almost too many resources... Amazing offerings, but need better ways to facilitate the use of them

49%
of students agree their
mental health has worsened

Opportunities to enhance support

Understanding who is most affected and raising awareness of the drivers behind mental health decline could also be of benefit – giving universities and colleges areas to target to further support their students’ mental health.

For example, many members of the LGBTQ+ community struggle with their mental health – 77% this year, with no improvement on last year. This suggests there is work to be done with this group in particular, and universities and colleges could perhaps engage more with this community to explore how targeted support could be improved.

Taking a closer look at the drivers of declining mental health reveals a pattern – loneliness and a lack of socialising are both in the top five, suggesting that human connection is key to supporting mental health. Could universities and colleges be doing more to bring students together and facilitating connections? With money struggles also having an impact, are there ways that some social events could be held free of charge?

■ Only 32% of LGBTQ+ students strongly agree their college/university provides the right level of mental health and wellbeing support.

32%



“ My uni has a lot of great things to do to make time here at university residency much better – a calendar of activities scheduled by the university is set up for each month with events and trips and also a free movie ticket each month, and an emergency food cabinet for students in need.

Drivers of mental health decline

53% agree¹ they have been socialising less

54% agree¹ they feel lonely most of the time

58% agree¹ they have spent less time following passions in the arts, such as music, drama, comedy etc

54% agree¹ social media is affecting their mental health

58% agree¹ money struggles are impacting their wellbeing

With many universities and colleges already offering a range of ways to support students, a closer look at the reasons why mental health is declining could help make these services even better.

Another area to be aware of is the increased use of AI technology as a mental health support tool.

84% of students who use AI to support them with their mental health agree they have felt happy in the past year¹ compared to 71% who disagree that using AI in this way has made them happier⁵. While 85% of respondents who use AI as a source of wellbeing support or guidance say their wellbeing is better compared to last year, vs 60% who disagree⁵.

While AI tools can offer immediate support and help students articulate how they're feeling, they are not a substitute for professional mental health care. AI platforms may provide inaccurate or overly generic advice, lack safeguarding or crisis escalation mechanisms, and risk encouraging self diagnosis or over reliance on technology at the expense of human connection. There are also ethical considerations around data privacy and how sensitive mental health information is stored or used.

Universities and colleges may acknowledge the role AI can play in early support or self reflection, while ensuring students clearly understand its limitations and are actively encouraged to access regulated, in person mental health services when issues are complex, persistent or urgent. it's important for universities and colleges to continue clearly signposting their in-person mental health and wellbeing support services so students know they can access professional one-to-one help if they need it.



84%

of students who use AI to support them with their mental health agree they have felt happy in the past year¹

Interview with Ayotunde



Background

Ayotunde is a Nigerian postgraduate student studying Mental Health Nursing (M.Sc.) at Oxford Brookes University. He’s been living in the UK for about three years, having previously gained a PhD and worked in Nigeria, and hopes to contribute in a meaningful way to mental health services in the UK once he graduates.

Mental health and support services

Unsurprisingly given his degree, Ayo is passionate about supporting mental health. While he describes his course as challenging and at times intense, he is proactive in looking after his own mental health and prioritising happiness – believing that you create your own joy. As a result, he views the demanding sides of his degree as a natural and important part of the learning process, contributing to both his personal and professional growth.

In Ayo’s experience, academic pressure doesn’t necessarily erode student wellbeing when it’s balanced with the right kind of support. He points to the university’s approach to student support as an example – highlighting that support systems at Oxford Brookes are proactive, with staff making

efforts to check in on students and arrange meetings where necessary, particularly if there has been limited recent face-to-face time.

He also works as a student representative, and has seen first-hand how these systems work. He notes that the university support services make frequent referrals to both internal and external services when needed, and that they take student issues very seriously – in fact he believes the university is willing to go to significant lengths to support students. That said, he also says that, despite these efforts, it’s not always possible to fully understand what his peers may be experiencing beneath the surface, and that many feel under a lot of pressure.

The importance of financial discipline

Ayo is self-funding his masters, and he also works part-time. He acknowledges that costs are very high, whether it’s rent, food, transport, energy bills or anything else, but says he takes a highly disciplined approach to his financial management to make sure he can live within his means. He budgets carefully and is careful not to overspend. He’s also reluctant to get into any kind of debt, and only recently started using a credit card.

An important part of his financial wellbeing is his mindset. Ayo stresses the need to avoid comparing himself to others, particularly through social media, as he believes this can lead to dissatisfaction with what you’ve got and always wanting more, which he says can have a negative on mental health as well as leading to you putting yourself under unnecessary financial strain.

Discussions around finances

On the subject of social media, Ayo agrees that digital habits can be an important factor that influence student wellbeing. He believes that social media in particular drives loneliness among students and is essentially a waste of time – saying it “keeps you busy doing nothing”. He feels strongly that people should be careful with their use of social media if they want to prioritise their wellbeing.

However, he views AI as a useful tool within postgraduate study. He uses it to support a range of tasks such as brainstorming and organising his ideas, which help improve both his efficiency and productivity. However, he stresses the importance of maintaining a balance – saying that overdependence on AI has a negative impact on both critical thinking and creativity skills.

Future plans

Looking ahead, Ayo’s immediate priority is to successfully complete his M.Sc. programme. After that, he hopes to find employment where he can contribute to mental health services in the UK, while also exploring opportunities in leadership, innovation, and international development.

Overall, he’s found his experience as an international student to be richer than he expected. It has been both demanding and transformative, and above all, worthwhile – despite challenges along the way. He’s optimistic about the future – demonstrating that, for him at least, student happiness and wellbeing is flourishing.

Case Study



04

The underlying issue – money worries

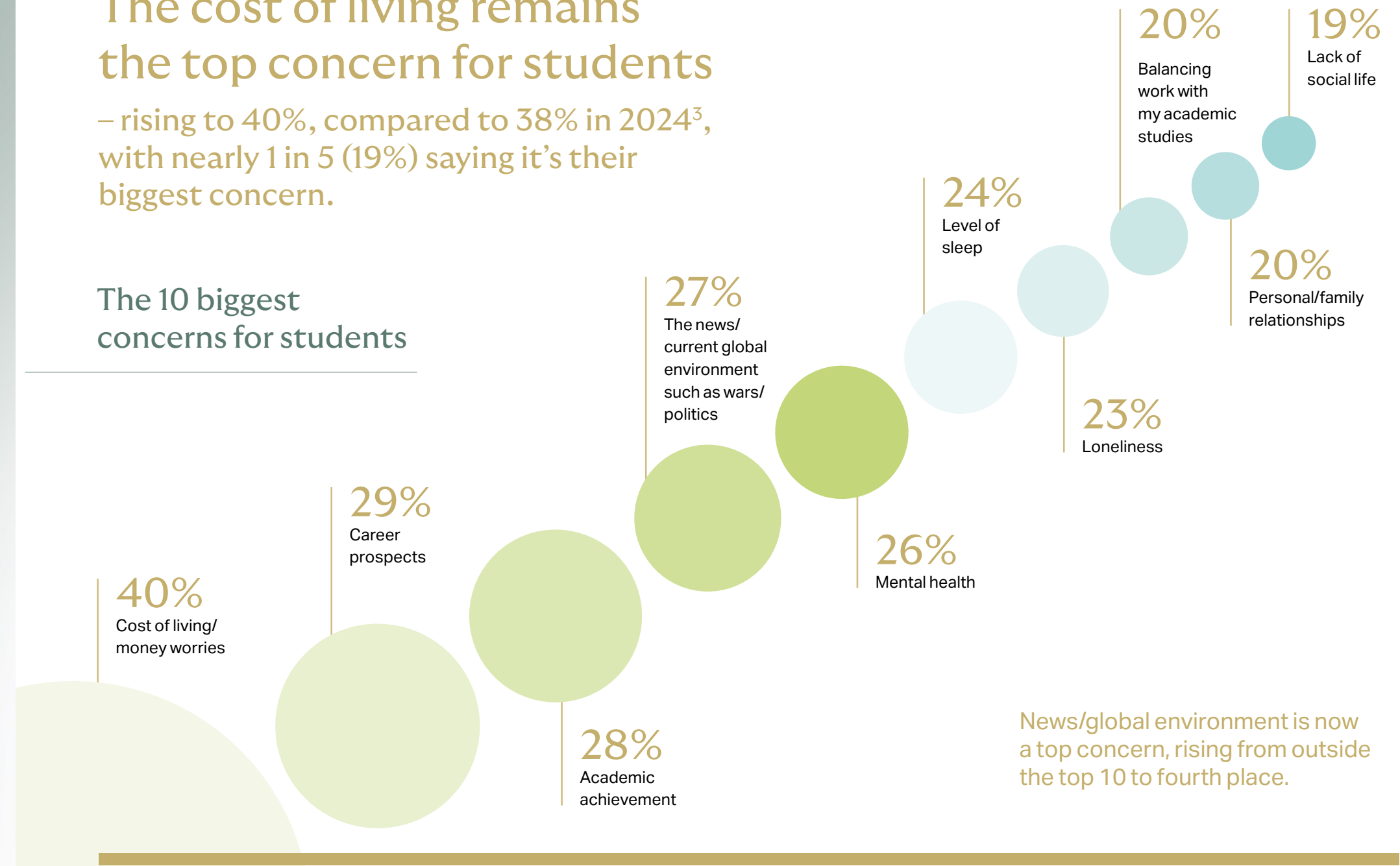
cost of living

financial pressures

The cost of living remains the top concern for students

– rising to 40%, compared to 38% in 2024³, with nearly 1 in 5 (19%) saying it’s their biggest concern.

The 10 biggest concerns for students



Despite higher overall happiness levels, financial pressures weigh heavily on even more students this year.

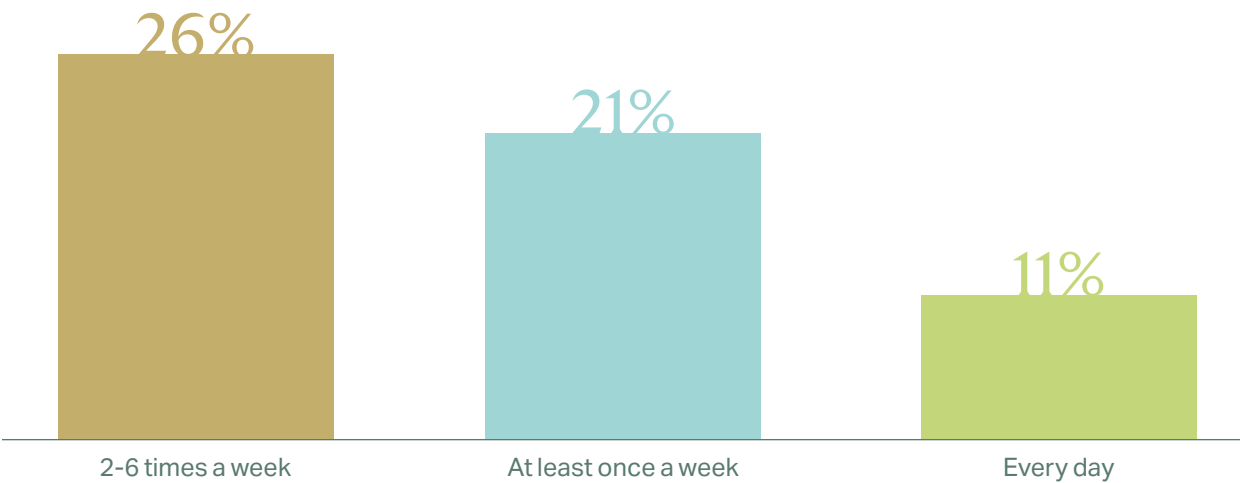
A trend that’s unlikely to change as the economic landscape continues to be volatile, and suggesting that perhaps student debt is becoming increasingly normalised.



Worryingly, over half (52%)¹ now report they have struggled to afford food and essentials, an increase from 43%³ in 2024, and over a quarter (26%) of them struggle to buy food between 2 and 6 times a week.

As a result, financial pressures are having a noticeable impact on students' wellbeing and overall university experience. Over half (58%)¹ say money struggles are affecting their wellbeing, while two thirds (67%)¹ report going out less socially due to the rising cost of living, up significantly from 54%² last year.

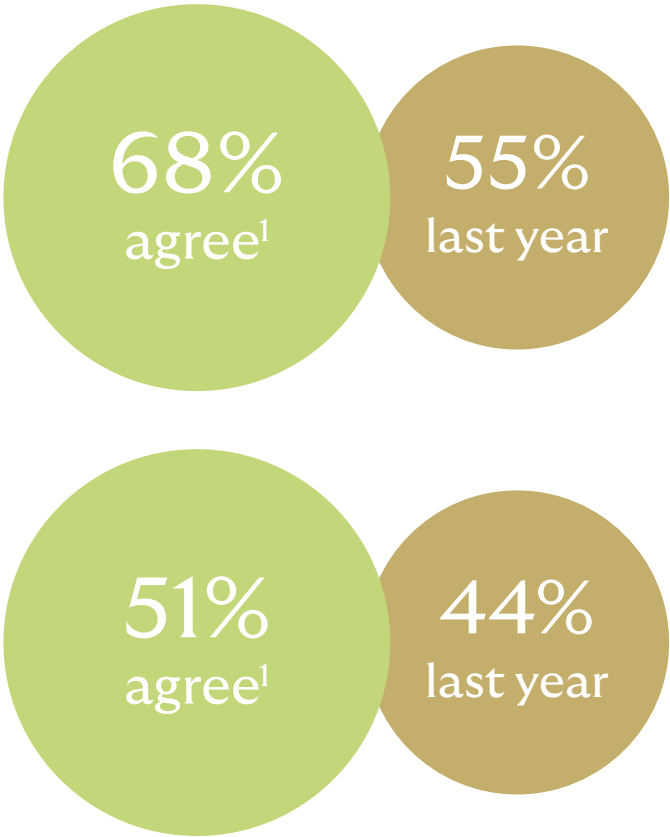
How often have you struggled to afford food and essentials?



Anxiety about future financial stability is also on the rise. Concerns about student debt (62%*)¹, changes to student loan policies (60%*)¹, and worries about turning to a parent/carer for financial support (63%)¹ have all increased significantly since last year, up from 47%, 49% and 50% respectively². Perhaps most strikingly, 46%¹ of students have considered dropping out altogether to enter a full-time job, apprenticeship or similar scheme, up from 38% in 2024².

Unsurprisingly, more students are taking on part-time jobs to ease financial pressure, but this comes at its own cost. 50%¹ report struggling to balance work with academic and social commitments, while 42%¹ say they have missed lessons or lectures in order to take on paid work.

The cost of living means they are more likely to get a part-time job or increase the hours they work while at university/college



They have taken on a part-time job to ease financial pressure



The growing need to earn money forces a trade-off between financial security and engaging fully in student life.

It's therefore increasingly important for universities and colleges to engage with students in this area, perhaps to provide guidance on how to effectively manage their finances in education, or offering support on how to balance work without compromising the quality of their learning, to ensure higher education remains worthwhile.

“ Sometimes I feel like a hamster on a wheel when I have to keep up with not only my studies but also bills and day-to-day expenses.

“ It is difficult to be happy when you are always worried about finances.

“ Until I found work I was extremely overwhelmed and considered dropping out because of money.



Student debt levels are rising

47%

have applied for credit through overdrafts, credit cards, or loans

60%

are more likely to take on debt due to rising costs

62%

are concerned about their level of student debt

05

Expectation versus experience

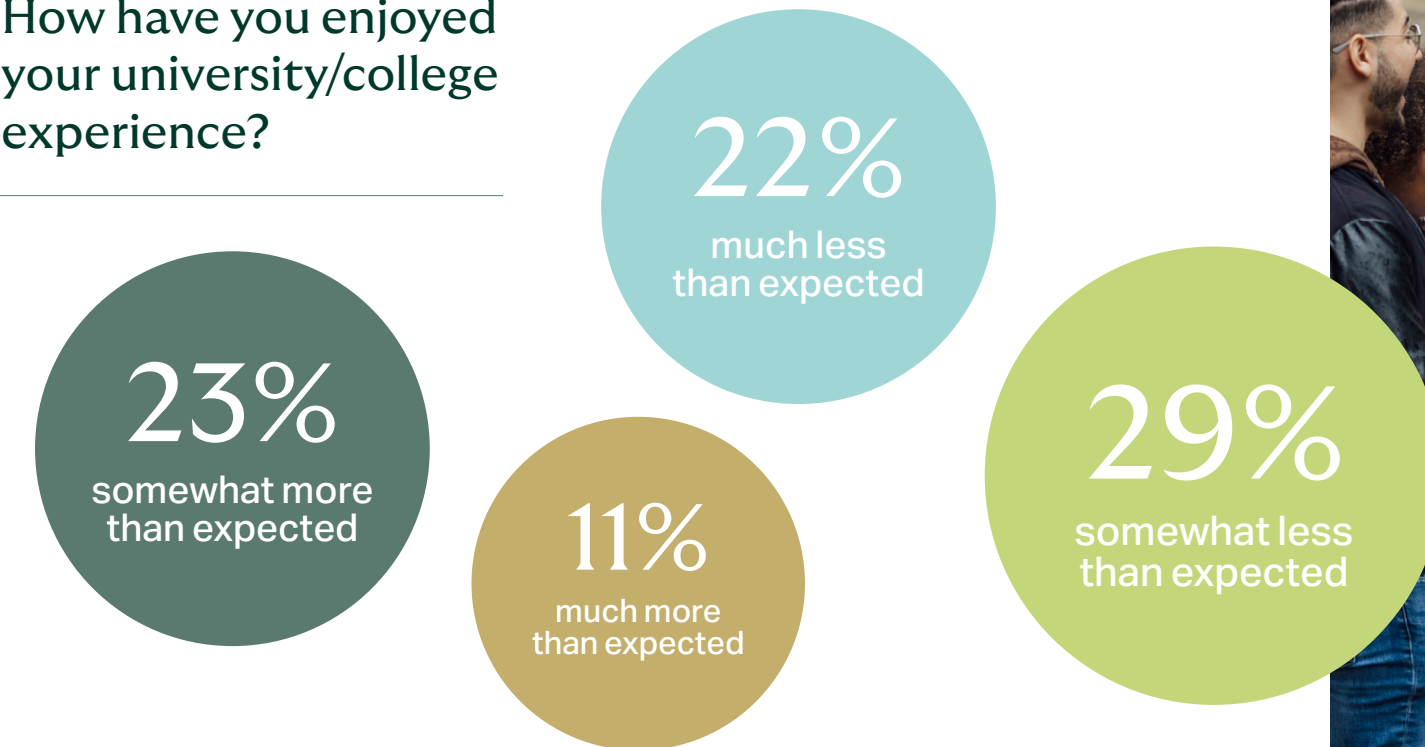
accommodation troubles

financial strain

Our survey indicates a growing disparity between students’ expectations of university/college life and their lived experience.

In 2025, just over half of students (51%)¹ say they have enjoyed their university/college less than expected – a significant rise from 33% in 2024².

How have you enjoyed your university/college experience?



This is perhaps unsurprising considering the increasing financial strain students feel under

especially when taking into account the drop in reported happiness and wellbeing between the further education and higher education stages.



“ Before starting university, I wish I had known how important it is to balance academics with personal wellbeing. University can sometimes feel overwhelming, and it’s easy to focus only on studies and forget to take care of your mental health. I also wish I had known earlier about the different support services available, such as wellbeing and academic support, because they can really help when things start to feel stressful.

Key factors impacting mental health



Mental health

63% who agree³ their mental health has worsened say they have enjoyed their university/college experience less than expected





Money worries

59% who agree³ they have struggled with affording food and essentials have enjoyed their university/college experience less than expected





Loneliness

63% who agree³ they feel lonely most of the time say they have enjoyed their university/college experience less than expected



But this could also represent an opportunity for universities and colleges to engage with students sooner to help prepare them for university/college life.

For example, perhaps mental health issues could be communicated in advance as young people move between secondary, further and higher education to give universities and colleges the chance to intervene as early as possible. Targeted support could then pay particular attention to helping new students understand how to cope with money worries, mental health and loneliness to try and close the gap between expectation and reality.

Shared living



Student living arrangements can make a significant difference



Accommodation troubles

59% of students who agree³ they have had troubles with their accommodation say they have enjoyed their university/college experience less than expected

Around half (52%) agree³ they have had troubles with their accommodation, and that they have struggled with shared living (51%)³ – both up from 39%² in 2024.

With just over 2 in 5 students (41%) living in halls of residence between September and December 2025, this represents a significant proportion of students whose experience might be affected simply by their living arrangements. What's more, just 22% of respondents strongly agree they know how to access mental health and wellbeing support in their accommodation.

■ 92% of students feel physically safe on their university/college campus³



Encouragingly, students are feeling physically safer in their accommodation. 72%* agree³ they feel safe when living in their student accommodation, up from 58%² in 2024.

This shows that accommodation providers are delivering a strong foundation for safe and secure environments, although there is still room for improvement, over a third (35%**)³ of students agree they have had possessions stolen from their accommodation.

This insecurity could also be having an impact on the student experience, in turn leading to more students enjoying university less than they expected. By continuing to address safety, universities can help narrow this gap, potentially improving students' overall experience, mental health, and security.



Interview with Rihanna



Background

Rihanna is a first-year student at the University of Liverpool, studying Criminology and Spanish, and is planning on spending her third year abroad in Latin America. Rihanna has a history of mental health struggles, so she was in touch with the university's wellbeing support team before she joined. Estranged from her parents, Rihanna's degree is funded by a full student loan and part-time work to enable her to live and study independently.

The student experience

Rihanna wasn't entirely sure what to expect from university life, but she had a loose idea based on the experience of an older close friend, who formed a tight-knit friendship group that's still going strong 20 years later. Rihanna thought that perhaps the same would happen for her but, despite being sociable, she's found the social side of university a lot harder than she expected.

She puts this down to the culture of going out and drinking heavily, which she's not interested in, so she feels quite disconnected from the typical student social life. She feels this is how many students form their friendships in those first few weeks, Freshers' Week especially, but this didn't happen for her.

She does have friends on campus, but not a close group she regularly spends time with outside of class. Instead, she leans on her strong friendships from home, staying in close contact and even meeting up regularly with a friend who's studying at Manchester. She admits she feels that new university friendships "won't be the same" as those she already has, and this has perhaps made her less likely to put the effort into making new ones. However, as she doesn't feel particularly lonely, she's happy as she is.

What has been better than expected is her course, Rihanna is enthusiastic about her degree, and finds it interesting and the teaching to be great. She says this has been what's made university such a positive experience for her so far.

Campus life and support

With her mental health history, Rihanna was proactive about seeking support before starting university. This was made easy by the university sending out a Google Form asking new students to specify if they needed any help, and she did so. Since then, she's been supported by both the university's wellbeing team and via her GP, describing the university support as "great".

One of her biggest concerns was actually living in shared accommodation, as she likes things to be neat and tidy and had heard horror stories about "the kitchen situation". However, she says this has turned out better than she expected and she's very lucky in the flat she lives in.

She gets on well with her flatmates, and although she doesn't go out with them, they often cook for each other in the flat, watch films and chat – sometimes having supportive conversations around mental health. A few of her flatmates have shared that they struggle at times, though it tends to come in waves, and they can be there for each other when needed.



Interview with Rihanna

Financially independent

With no family to fall back on, Rihanna is fully financially independent. Her student loan covers her rent, but doesn't leave much extra, so she works several part-time jobs to support herself.

This includes online tutoring in the evenings for Key Stage 3 age children, working flexible shifts at the university, and part-time work at Anfield Stadium. She appreciates how flexible her university job is, as it allows her to work around her studies – with the students choosing the shifts they want to do that most suit them. That said, she admits that if a longer, better-paid shift comes up that's at the same time as a class, she'll sometimes choose the shift for the extra income.

She doesn't spend much on going out, instead saving her money for hobbies and holidays. And while the cost of living makes everything expensive, she is well-practised at budgeting and looking after herself financially.

She doesn't let herself worry about how to repay her student loan in future, seeing it more as a future tax that doesn't feel real at the moment. This helps her keep a positive outlook and she feels generally optimistic about the future, despite not yet having any plans for after graduation.

While aware that the graduate job market is tough at the moment, Rihanna is again not letting it worry her, saying that a lot can change in a few years. For now, she's staying positive.



What's driving students to study?

social experience

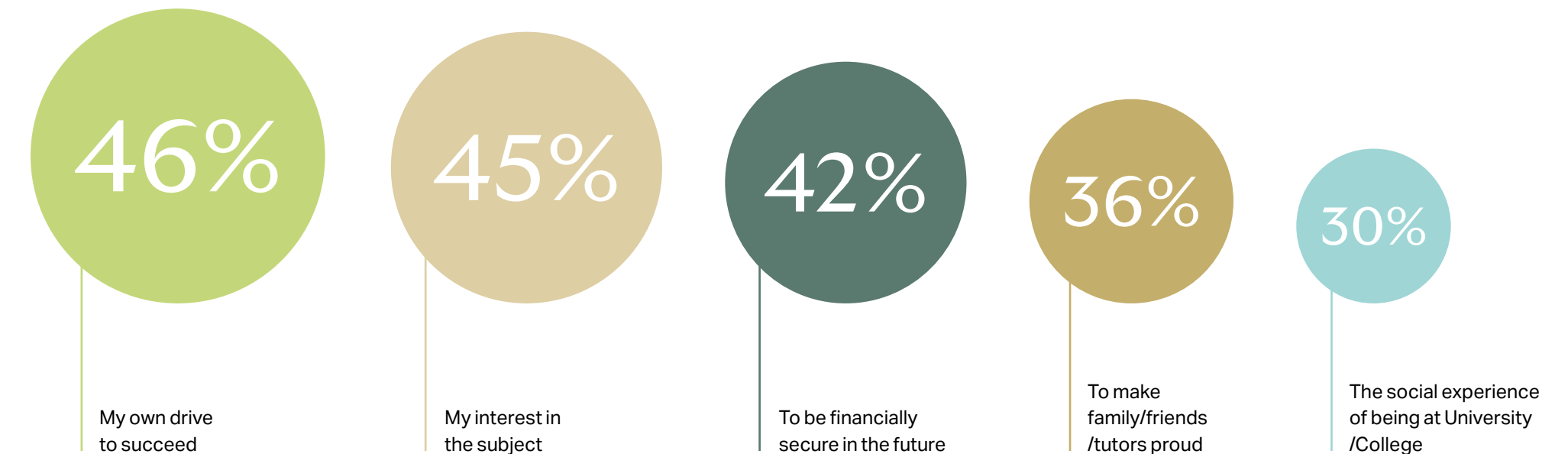
connection

Despite the challenges they're facing, students are highly self-motivated to study.

Their own drive to succeed and interest in their chosen subject are the top two motivating factors for students to choose university or college, with future financial security coming in third.

This is encouraging, suggesting that, despite considerable money worries, students are still motivated primarily academically. Financial security is undoubtedly a key driver, with just over 2 in 5 students (42%) citing it as a motivation, but the data paints a picture of students who are driven to study for a range of reasons – both academic and more personal.

Top five motivations to study



The wider, more human, experience is increasingly important for students.

The social experience of being at university/ college is now included in the top motivations at 30% – higher than last year, when it didn’t make the top five.

“ I have been rather upset at having to decide between spending time with friends at university or being able to afford meals/rent for myself.

“ College life can be emotionally challenging when one feels lonely.

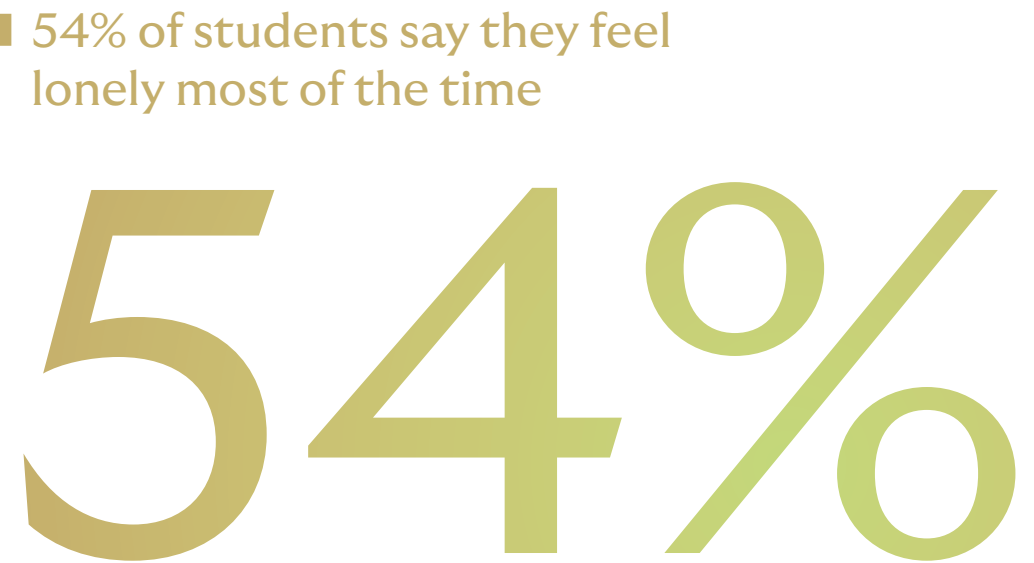
However, social connection among universities and colleges is also increasingly fragile, with over half of students feeling lonely most of the time.

It’s important for educational institutions to be aware that loneliness is clearly linked to wider challenges for students, including financial stress, poorer mental health, and reduced enjoyment of university life.

For example, 63%¹ of students who go out less socially due to the cost of living agree they feel lonely most of the time, and 66%¹ of students who have spent less time following their passions feel likewise.

This suggests that loneliness is to an extent being forced upon students due to intense financial pressure, which in turn means they have less money and/or time to pursue their interests and spend time with others.

This has a clear knock-on effect when it comes to wellbeing. Students who feel lonely are more likely to say their student experience has not met expectations, and experience mental health concerns.



Ways in which



A photograph of three diverse university students walking outdoors on a path. On the left, a blonde woman in a light blue denim jacket over a yellow shirt carries a green and red book and holds a white smartphone. In the center, a woman with dark curly hair and glasses wears a white sweater and carries a blue book. On the right, a man with a beard and white headphones around his neck wears a red and white striped shirt. They are all smiling and looking towards the right. The background is a blurred green landscape with a warm, golden light suggesting sunset or sunrise.

Connection could be the key to student happiness

Fostering more connected student communities could be the key to improving both student wellbeing and their overall experience.

With socialising and meeting new friends cited as the top two drivers of student happiness, our research highlights a clear opportunity for universities to focus on building stronger student communities through social connection, inclusive environments and accessible activities.

While universities are successfully delivering safe environments, many students are lacking a sense of belonging, at a time when financial pressures and mental health challenges are intensifying.

“ Despite my university having programmes for making friends, I do not think there is enough... Loneliness makes me feel less prepared for the future.

“ Struggling with a lack of social life and feeling like I don't have close friends has had a noticeable impact on my overall happiness. It often leaves me feeling isolated and disconnected, which can make everyday challenges feel heavier than they should.

A technologically changing world

academic performance

artificial intelligence

AI is reshaping the university/college experience.

From how students engage with their studies to who they turn to for wellbeing support – creating another challenge for students, colleges and universities alike.

With the majority of students driven to study for academic and career reasons, AI comes with both benefits and potential threats. Over half (54%)¹ report using tools such as ChatGPT to improve academic efficiency, up from 45% in 2024², showing just how quickly these technologies are becoming embedded in learning.

■ 54%¹ use AI as an efficiency tool

54%



However, this shift is not without tension.

Two in five students (40%)¹ believe AI has had a negative impact on their academic performance, while 60%¹ are concerned it could replace aspects of teaching.

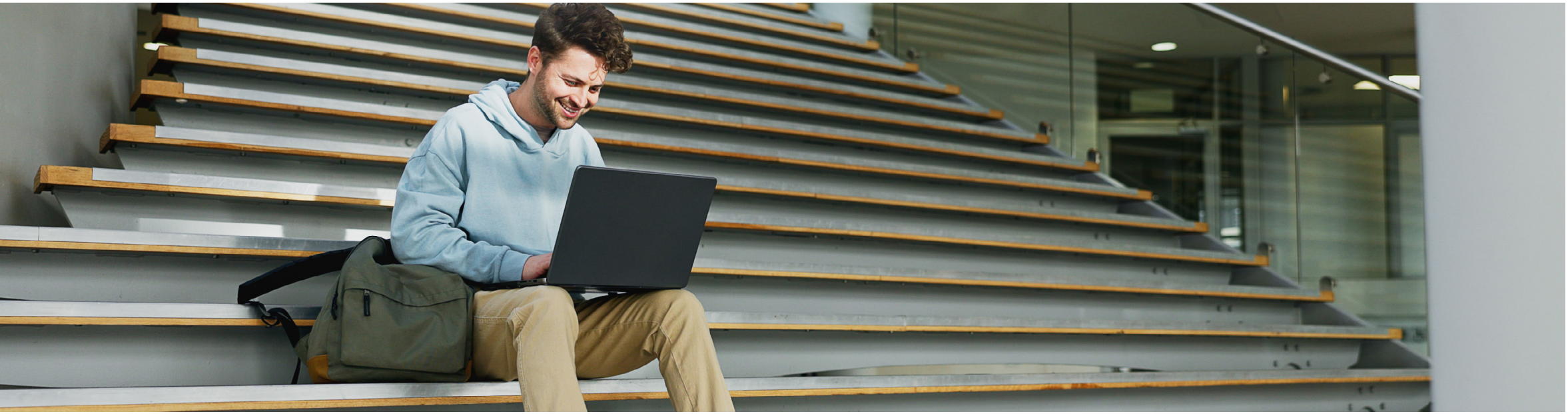
This is important for universities to note. With the cost of living already putting pressure on students – with many forced to choose between work shifts and attending classes to make ends meet, and nearly half (46%)¹ saying they have considered dropping out altogether to enter full-time work – it’s crucial that the academic standard of teaching remains high to make sure a university degree is always a compelling choice for young people.

After all, those who feel AI has harmed their performance are much more likely to say they have enjoyed university/college less than expected (65%¹ vs 41%³), highlighting how AI use can compromise both academic performance and overall student satisfaction.

Engaging with the topic of AI and being clear about how it is (or should) be used across teaching and learning is a vital step for universities and colleges, helping to allay fears that academic qualifications are at risk of dilution by artificial intelligence, and preventing AI from becoming a potential barrier to student recruitment.

40%

students say using AI has had a negative impact on their academic performance



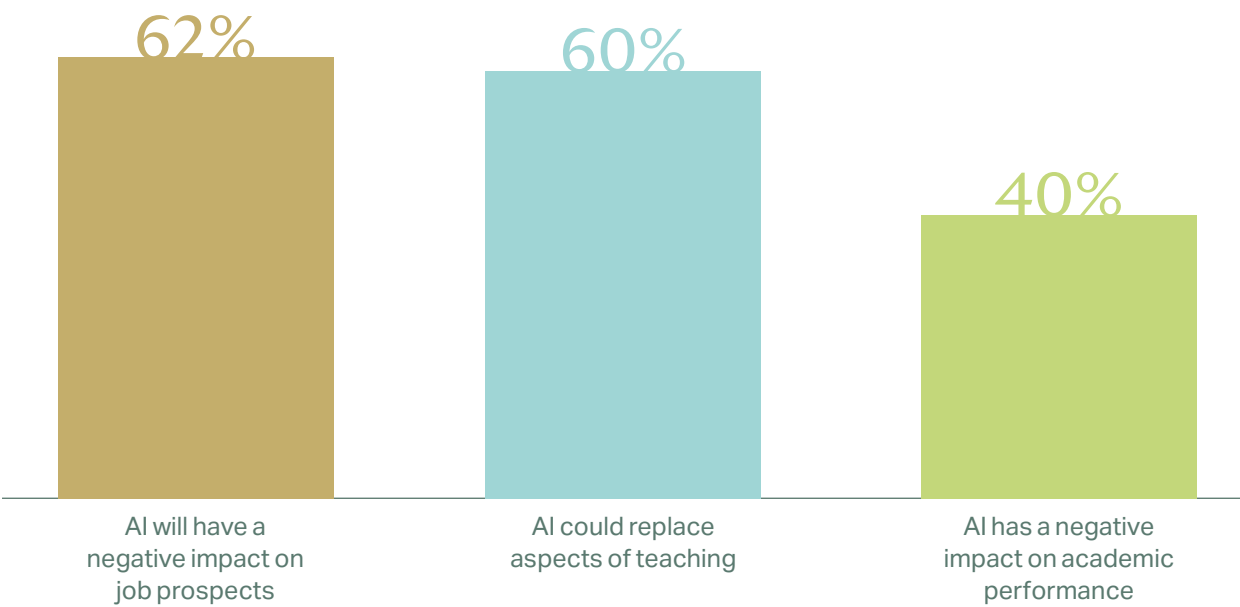
How students are using AI technology

Meanwhile, AI technology is increasingly being used as a mental health support tool.

45%¹ agree they have used AI to support them with their mental health, and the same percentage have used AI as a source of wellbeing support or guidance.

It also seems to be proving effective – 84% of students who use AI to support them with their mental health agree they have felt happy in the past year¹, while 85% of respondents who use AI as a source of wellbeing support or guidance say their wellbeing is better compared to last year.

Student concerns about AI



Overall, the survey results point to a student experience that’s increasingly shaped by technological change.

AI is clearly embedded in student life, for better or for worse, and supporting students to use AI in a way that enhances, rather than undermines, their studying will be key for universities to help improve both wellbeing and the overall student experience. This may even prove helpful when it comes to future job prospects – enabling students to understand how to make the most of it as a tool, rather than something to fear.

Interview with Rosita



Background

Rosita is a PhD student in Public Health at City St. George University of London. She's currently in her third year and revising her thesis on migrant worker health ahead of final submission. She's looking forward to returning to her native Taiwan when her PhD is completed and is applying for academic jobs there, having found her time in London to be isolated with an intense focus on her studies.

The student experience

While more isolating than she expected it to be, Rosita says that PhD life is inherently lonely by its nature. Her research is fully funded and independent, and she doesn't attend classes like undergraduates and other postgraduates do, with the majority of her time spent writing on her own.

This isolation does have an impact on Rosita's mental health – sometimes she can find it depressing to be working so intensely every day on her thesis, and it can feel relentless,

especially when receiving rounds of feedback. But her research group is supportive, she can message them at any time, and she always keeps in mind how long she has left to finish and how much funding she has left, which enables her to focus and carry on. In fact, she often feels that she doesn't have time to feel lonely or think about her mental health because her workload is so intense, which comes with its own pros and cons.

The language barrier

Rosita does have friends she can talk to that she's met at academic events or through her research group, but as an international student, she finds the language barrier can be a problem. This is one of the reasons she hasn't taken up any of the university's mental health support services, saying she would find it challenging and uncomfortable to talk to a stranger about something so personal like her mental health in a different language, even though she doesn't have much of a local network of friends to talk to in the UK.

Communication challenges

While she speaks highly of her accommodation – saying it's better than she expected – she does think London itself is part of the problem. The weather aside (which was a shock for her), the sheer size of London makes it hard for her to build any sense of belonging here. This can make the isolation worse, especially for international students. She thinks this, coupled with her own intense focus on finishing her thesis, means it can be all too easy to go for a long time without speaking to people, which could have an impact on mental health.

She thinks this could generally be the case when it comes to international students. In her student accommodation, she says about two thirds are undergraduates and the rest postgraduate and there's a real mix of cultural backgrounds. She believes the university could do more to organise events that encourage people from different nationalities and cultures to get to know, and understand, different cultures better – promoting mutual understanding and easier mixing.

This could be true of any student who is lonely, and she thinks the university could be more proactive in offering quick mental health check-ins, perhaps via email, rather than waiting for students who are struggling to reach out. Rosita believes that often those most in need of help are the ones who are least likely to ask for it, and she points out how easy it is to lose communication skills when you're on your own for long periods of a time, saying it's almost as if you forget how to speak.

AI as a tool to help

Luckily for Rosita, she has found AI like ChatGPT to be a real help when it comes to navigating the language barrier. Three years ago, when she was applying for her PhD, she was worried about how to find a proof reader to help with her English writing, but she says now ChatGPT is the perfect tool to help. She advises caution, "if you put garbage in, you get garbage out", but as a tool she's found it very helpful.

She doesn't use it for mental health support, but she says it can help her understand herself better when it comes to her writing, thought patterns, and the ideas and research she's working on. It has saved her significant time and also helps her meet the rigorous written standards of her supervisor.

Overall, despite some tough times throughout her PhD, Rosita is feeling optimistic about the future – she's looking forward to returning to Taiwan and working there, and she's grateful for the government funding that has enabled her to study without any financial worries.

Life after education

feeling positive

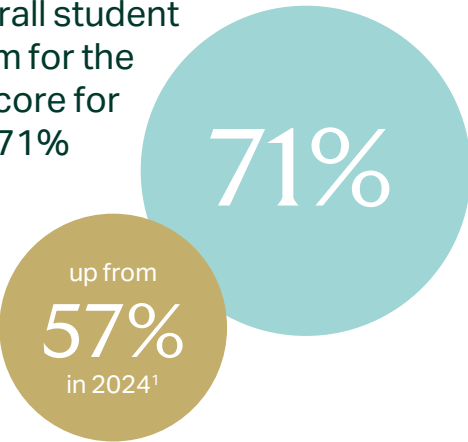
future opportunities

Overall, the majority of students are feeling positive about life after education.

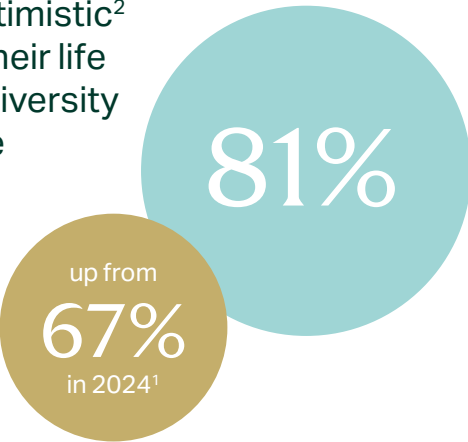
With 81% expressing optimism and 38% feeling very optimistic. This confidence is even higher among those using AI for wellbeing support, suggesting that tech may be playing a role in boosting students' outlook and resilience.

Students are feeling increasingly optimistic about life after university/college,

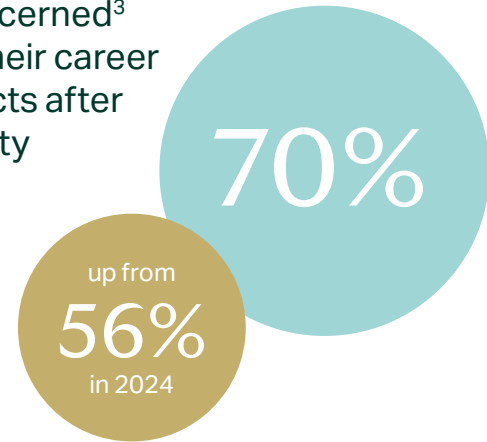
The overall student optimism for the future score for 2025 is 71%



Feel optimistic² about their life after university /college



Are concerned³ about their career prospects after university /college



90%

of students who use artificial intelligence as a source of wellbeing support or guidance feel optimistic about their future vs 70% of those who disagree

However, the majority of students are still facing uncertainty.

Encouragingly, students see practical work experience as a potential solution.



While just over three in five (61%)³ students agree they have a clear career path in mind, and nearly half (48%)³ are prepared for their financial future – both higher than last year – many remain concerned about their career prospects, especially with the rise of AI. This reveals a tension between student ambition and anxiety as they look to the future, despite feeling optimistic, they remain aware of potential challenges ahead.

Most students (73%)⁴ say their course allows them to take a year out for an industry placement⁴, including 40% who will or have taken up the placement, and of which, nearly all (99%)⁵

believe that doing so will positively impact their job prospects, with over three quarters (78%) saying it will definitely help.

This highlights how students view real-world experience as vital to bridging the gap between education and employment, helping them feel more optimistic about the future. Universities and colleges could take advantage of this and offer tailored guidance and support to access work experience – perhaps pushing more students to embrace the opportunities provided by a year in industry before they leave education.

70%

of students³ are concerned about their career prospects – up from 56% in 2024¹.

62%

of students³ worried AI will negatively impact their future opportunities – up from 46% in 2024¹



“Employers don't really seem to care much about volunteering or grades, and getting paid work experience seems to be the most important thing.”

“I'm looking forward to getting a full-time job that gives me fulfilment and enough pay to feel more financially secure.”

“I'm excited to see where my skills and experience can take me, and I feel motivated by the idea of re-entering the workforce with a stronger sense of direction and confidence.”

impact of AI

money worries

career prospects

wellbeing support

Summary

Overall, our study shows that while student happiness and optimism continues to rise

so too do the challenges and mental health struggles that students face – potentially undermining their higher education experience.

Underlying money worries are a major concern for students, with more than ever feeling the pressure of making ends meet. This is compounded by the impact of AI, which is affecting both how students study, and their confidence in their career prospects.

But one of the biggest challenges comes from increased levels of loneliness among students, with a lack of social connection making financial anxiety and general wellbeing worse. Unsurprisingly, therefore, more students are reporting mental health struggles and more expect their mental health to decline in the next 12 months.

However, this is balanced by a greater provision of mental health and wellbeing support among universities, many of whom are providing an excellent level of support that's clearly working in light of the higher happiness and optimism scores. In the same vein, students are using AI as a mental health and support tool as well, showing how changes in technology are also working to the benefit of students, who are proactively seeking ways to help themselves.

Now universities and colleges have the opportunity to continue to build on that much-needed support, and to enhance it further by fostering a greater sense of belonging among student communities. By finding new ways to help bring students together, educational institutions could help alleviate some of the core challenges facing students today, promote greater happiness and wellbeing, and help the student experience live up to expectations.



References

Section 1 - The rise in student happiness and wellbeing

- ¹Student Happiness Index 2024
- ²'Very happy' and 'Somewhat happy' responses combined.
- ³'Much better' and 'A little better' responses combined.
- ⁴'Very unhappy' responses.

Section 2 - What factors are having an impact?

- ¹'Very happy' and 'Somewhat happy' responses combined.
- ³'Much better' and 'A little better' responses combined.
- ³'Strongly agree' and 'Somewhat agree' responses combined.

Section 3 - The mental health contradiction

- ¹'Strongly agree' and 'Somewhat agree' responses combined.
- ² Student Happiness Index 2024
- ³ Much better' and 'A little better' responses combined.
- ⁴ 'Very unhappy' and 'Somewhat unhappy' responses combined.
- ⁵ Somewhat disagree and strongly disagree responses combined.

Section 4 - Student safety

- ¹'Strongly agree' and 'Somewhat agree' responses combined.
- ² 'Every day', '2-6 times per week' and 'Once a week' responses combined.
- ³ Student Happiness Index 2024
- ^{*}Among students in higher/postgraduate education

Section 5 - Expectation versus experience

- ¹'Much less than expected' and 'Somewhat less than expected' combined.
- ² Student Happiness Index 2024
- ³ 'Strongly agree' and 'Somewhat agree' responses combined.
- ^{*}Among students who lived in privately rented or owned accommodation or in halls of residence
- ^{**} Among students who are not considered a distant learner

Section 6 - What's driving students to study?

- ¹'Strongly agree' and 'Somewhat agree' responses combined.
- ² Student Happiness Index 2024
- ³ 'Strongly disagree' and 'Somewhat disagree' responses combined.

Section 7 - A technologically changing world

- ¹'Strongly agree' and 'Somewhat agree' responses combined.
- ² Student Happiness Index 2024
- ³ 'Strongly disagree' and 'Somewhat disagree' responses combined.

Section 8 - Life after education

- ¹Student Happiness Index 2024
- ² 'Very optimistic' and 'Somewhat optimistic' combined.
- ³ 'Strongly agree' and 'Somewhat agree' responses combined.
- ⁴ 'Yes, and I did/will do this' and 'Yes, but I did/will not do this' responses combined.
- ⁵ 'Yes, definitely' and 'Yes, somewhat' responses combined.



Get in touch

T: +44 (0)333 234 1198

E: studentwellbeing@howdeninsurance.co.uk

howdenbroking.com/studentwellbeing

Howden UK Brokers Limited is authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority No. 307663. Registered in England and Wales under company registration number 02831010. Registered Office: One Creechurch Place, London, EC3A 5AF. Calls may be monitored and recorded for quality assurance purposes.

HUBL-CC-EDU-269-0626-V3