



ANALYSIS OF 2021 DIFFERING PERCEPTIONS OF QUALITY OF LEARNING

QAA collaborative project | Final condensed report



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Analysis of 2021 Differing Perceptions of Quality of Learning (final condensed report)

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1. Introduction	2
1.1 Background	2
1.2 Areas of analysis and objectives	2
2. Methods	3
2.1 Sample	3
2.2 Surveys	5
2.3 Focus groups	6
3. Selected results	7
3.1 Highlighted overall analysis	7
3.2 Analysis by ethnicity groups	11
3.3 Analysis by subject area	20
3.4 Background	23
3.4.1 Intended meaning of background	23
3.4.2 Focus group responses: background	24
3.5 Independent learning	30
4. Other selected comments	35
5. Reflections	38
6. Recommendations	41
7. Concluding remarks	43
8. References	44
9. Appendices	45
Appendix A: Survey questions	45
Appendix B: Focus group questions	50

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Differing Perceptions of Quality of Learning is a collaborative, QAA-funded project about students' perceptions of the quality of learning and teaching in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. There were four universities in the collaborative partnership: the University of Portsmouth (UoP), the University of Nottingham, Solent University, and Manchester Metropolitan University.

Research carried out before the COVID-19 pandemic shows us that student experience at university can vary significantly. We know, for example, that certain student groups disproportionately miss out on being awarded certain degree classifications (currently referred to as the awarding gap, and formerly the attainment gap). There are also students who never really feel as though they 'belong' to their university community.

When it comes to higher education, an awarding gap has been observed between White, and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnicity (BAME) students (OFFA, 2015; Zwysen & Longhi, 2016; Richardson, 2012; Singh, 2011; Richardson, 2008; Broecke & Nicholls, 2007). In 2020 researchers argued that 'the attainment gap in Higher Education outcomes between under-represented ethnic minority groups and the white student body is a problem at a variety of institutions around the UK, requiring immediate and sustained interventions and actions' (Peterson & Ramsay, 2020, p. 34).

Given the disruptive nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, over the 2020/21 academic year, higher education institutions (HEIs) have had to adapt the way they deliver teaching, and students have had to adapt the way they learn. The awarding gap was clearly extant before the pandemic, and through this project we wanted to understand more about this area within the context of blended learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.2 Areas of analysis and objectives

The overall questions that were examined in the analysis were the following:

1. How was the students' experience of learning and teaching during the academic year 2020/21?
2. What are students' teaching and learning expectations for the next academic year?
3. Are there any statistically significant differences in the answers of students of different subject areas?
4. Are there any statistically significant differences in the answers of students of different ethnicities?

We wanted to use this analysis to achieve several objectives:

- (a) to gain a deeper understanding of the differing student perceptions of the quality of learning and teaching in the context of blended learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on how these perceptions differ by ethnicity and subject area
- (b) to help add evidence to the sector regarding tackling the awarding gap and help strengthen the voice of students of different ethnicities
- (c) to add to evidence being collected by partners in their existing institutional projects, which draw on BAME student networks and will be a valuable channel for student engagement
- (d) to enable staff to adjust mechanisms for engaging and teaching for the 2021/22 academic year
- (e) to identify staff development needs
- (f) to inform curriculum development for the academic year 2022/23
- (g) to inform policy, notably institutional work related to Access and Participation Plans (APPs).

2. Methods

Data was collected through surveys and focus groups.

2.1 Sample

We invited L4 and L5 students enrolled on the courses shown in Table 2 (which were/are intended to be campus-based) to participate in the survey and the focus groups. The rationale behind choosing these courses was that they are courses with comparatively good diversity in student ethnic backgrounds, and they are also courses that could be compared between the participating collaborative partners (this factor is necessary for data comparability purposes). Table 1 gives the demographic data of the sample of survey respondents. Table 3 gives the ethnicities and subject areas of the focus group participants.

Characteristic	Group	N=	% of total
Gender	Man	431	52
	Woman	395	47
	Non-binary	3	0.4
	Preferred not to say	6	1
Year	First-year	409	49
	Second-year	411	49
	Other	15	2
Fee status	UK	636	76
	EU	59	7
	International	98	12
	Preferred not to say	42	5
Ethnicity two-way	BAME	385	46
	White	432	52
	Preferred not to say	18	2
Ethnicity six-way	Arab	47	6 (12% of BAME)
	Asian	201	24 (52% of BAME)
	Black	92	11 (24% of BAME)
	Mixed	31	4 (8% of BAME)
	White	432	52
	Other	14	2
	Preferred not to say	18	2
Subject area	Health	236	28
	Business	252	30
	Other sciences	347	42

Table 1: Survey sample distribution

Courses that participated in the project	
University of Portsmouth BA (Hons) Accounting with Finance BA (Hons) Business and Management BEng (Hons) Civil Engineering BEng (Hons) Mechanical Engineering BN (Hons) Nursing (Adult) BSc (Hons) Computer Science MPharm (Hons) Pharmacy	University of Northampton BSc (Hons) Management BSc (Hons) Finance, Accounting and Management BSc (Hons) Industrial Economics BSc (Hons) Computer Science BSc (Hons) Nursing (Adult)
Manchester Metropolitan University BEng (Hons) Mechanical Engineering BSc (Hons) Computer Science BA (Hons) Business Management BSc (Hons) Adult Nursing	Solent University BEng (Hons) Mechanical Engineering BSc (Hons) Adult Nursing BA (Hons) Business Management

Table 2: Participating courses in the project

Ethnicity	Business Studies	Other Sciences	Health Sciences	N =
Arab	0	1	0	1
Asian British	2	0	0	2
Asian Chinese	0	1	1	2
Asian Indian	2	0	0	2
Asian Other	1	0	0	1
Asian Pakistani	0	0	2	2
Black African	0	1	1	2
Black Other	0	0	1	1
British	1	0	0	1
East African/Cypriot	0	0	1	1
Eastern European	2	0	0	2
Not given/Not known	2	2	2	6
White	2	6	2	10
Total	12	11	10	33

Table 3: Focus groups sample distribution

Analysis highlighted trends for the whole sample overall, by ethnicity, and by subject area. The three subject areas were: (i) Health Sciences (Pharmacy and Adult Nursing courses), (ii) Business Studies (Management, Accounting, Finance, Business etc., plus various permutations/combinations), and (iii) Other Sciences (Civil Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, and Computer Science). The ethnicity groups were: Arab, Asian, Black, Mixed, White, and Other students.

At selected stages in the analysis, Asian students are further split into two categories for direct comparison. One category encompasses *Asian: Chinese* and *Asian: Indian* students (from here referred to as CHN/IND

students), the other category encompasses *Asian: Bangladeshi*, *Asian: Pakistani*, and *Asian: Any other Asian background* students (from here referred to as BAN/PAK/OTH students). The rationale for this approach is based on prior evidence that there tends to be a difference between the two groups regarding the proportion of certain degrees that are awarded (Atherton & Mazhari, n.d.), and for this study – with practical considerations in mind – the groups were large enough for useful analysis and approximately equal in size (105 BAN/PAK/OTH and 96 CHN/IND students). It is clearly indicated when the analysis is according to this two-way split.

2.2 Surveys

The survey items were developed by the team at the UoP, with input from the whole partnership. Questions probed students’ perceptions of the quality of the learning and teaching they have experienced, drawing on and learning from the pulse surveys that were undertaken by some of the partners and the partners’ students’ unions in recent months (early 2021). The UoP engaged their students or student representatives with a pilot survey to ensure that the survey tool had been appropriately designed to capture the student voice. The pilot test survey was completed by 12 students/BAME ambassadors. Their feedback was positive and did not result in major structure or content changes; the main point of criticism was the lack of choice when selecting year of study – the options given were first/second/other, and a number of the pilot participants were third-year students (although the survey was not going to be delivered to third-year students).

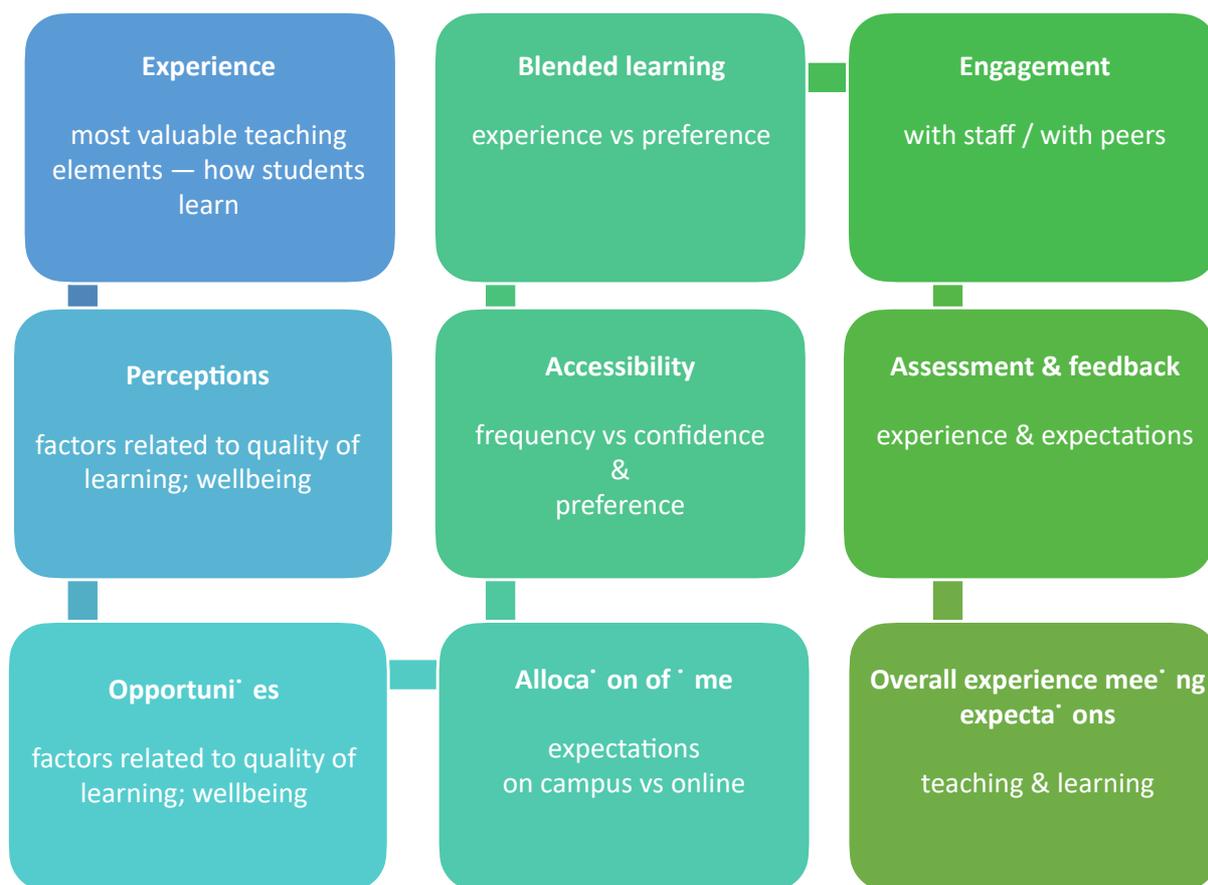


Figure 1: Core themes in the survey questionnaire

The questionnaire for each partner institution was designed on the JISC online surveys platform (formerly BOS). The UoP research team sent generic links for the survey to participating UoP course leaders and the main contacts for collaborative partners. Links were then sent primarily to institutions’ first-year and

second-year students of the participating courses, along with an email invitation. The email invited students to voluntarily participate in the project by completing the online questionnaire. Each institution organised the provision of incentives to students for their engagement with the survey.

The survey comprises 32 questions covering the following themes: demographic information; Teaching and Learning; Accessibility; Engagement and Expectations; Assessment and Feedback; and general questions about learning. It was designed by the project, and the version that was used to collect the data can be found in the appendices. Completing the survey took approximately 20 minutes. The survey was open from 10th May to 1st June 2021. Two courses started with a delay, and their closing date was 9th June.

Following the completion of the surveys and cleaning of the data, the survey data were: (i) presented to each participating university in summary reports, as produced on JISC online surveys, for a flavour of the results, and (ii) analysed using SPSS and Python (quantitative data) and NVivo (qualitative data) by the UoP research team for all partners, for a more in-depth analysis.

2.3 Focus groups

Follow-up focus groups were conducted during June 2021 to gain a deeper understanding of the survey results. At the end of the survey, students were asked if they would like to participate in the focus groups. Even though the process was random, the final distribution of participants was broadly representative of the different courses and ethnicities/backgrounds, so there was good diversity. Nine focus groups and one interview were conducted across the four universities, and one set of responses was submitted as typed answers. There were 33 focus group participants in total (see also Table 3).

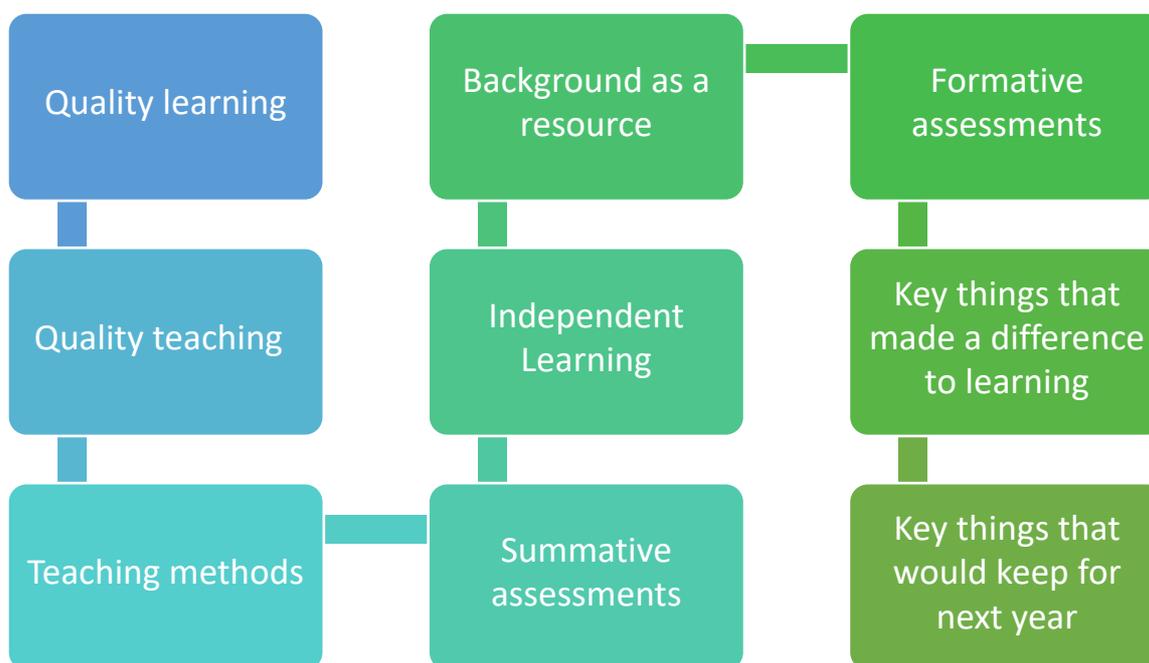


Figure 2: Core themes in the focus group questions

The focus groups were semi-structured. Given in the appendices are the questions which were used to initiate discussion. Each focus group lasted 45-60 minutes. The focus groups were run by institutions locally, and data was fed to the UoP team. The collected data were: (i) transcribed by someone external to the project and professionally unrelated to those involved (a sample was checked by the research team for accuracy), (ii) fully anonymised and (iii) then analysed on NVivo with thematic content analysis. Figure 2 shows the core themes in the main focus group questions.

3. Selected results

The report presented here is a shorter and more accessible version of a longer report. While this shorter report covers mainly those aspects of the data pertinent to the recommendations, the longer report comprehensively covers all aspects of the data collected in the surveys and focus groups.

3.1 Highlighted overall analysis

All ethnicity groups

- Recorded material (Figure 3) was valued by the majority of students from all ethnicity groups (range: 68-79%). Opportunities to ask questions were also valued by the majority (range: 50-83%).

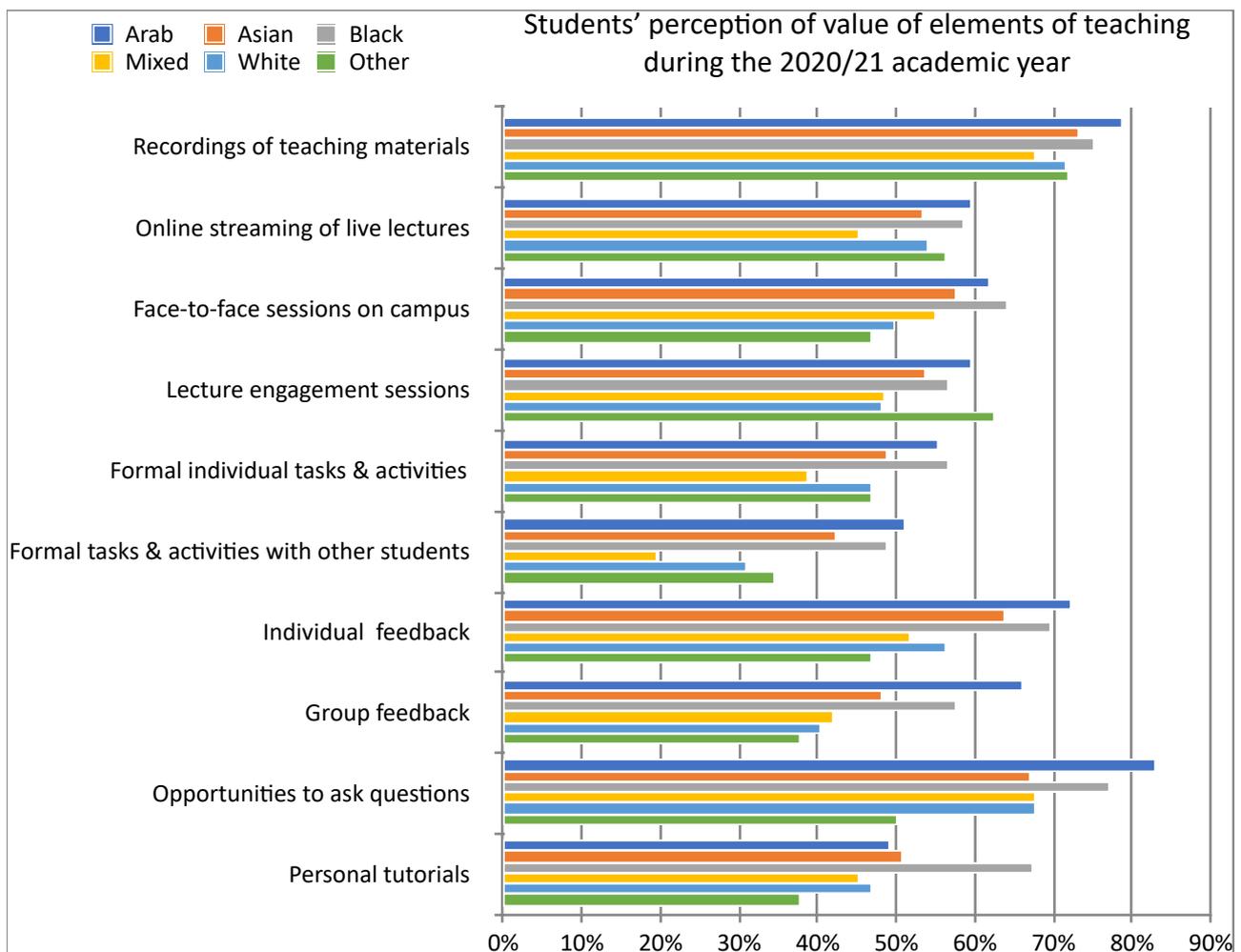


Figure 3: Percentage of students from each ethnicity group who thought that the above elements had been valuable or very valuable over the 2020/21 academic year

- Students of all ethnicity groups felt that formal tasks and activities with other students (Figure 3) contributed least to their experience of teaching in 2020/21 (range: 19-51%). Focus groups identified that while group work is an important aspect of university learning and development, when conducted online significant difficulties were encountered (lack of communication, timezone differences, accountability of contributions, etc.).

OPEN QUESTION Q18 - What aspect of the way in which staff have taught you in 2020/21 has prevented you from fully engaging in your study experience?

"Breakout rooms are a bad idea. I am telling you that for free. We would rather, or the majority of us, listen to the lecture and ask questions for the whole lecture than be told to go into breakout rooms and speak about nothing, because no one is willing to engage in the content."

#student 401 (Black or Black British: African, Business Studies)

FOCUS GROUP

"I really struggled with groups this year, but that is literally because my group mates just didn't communicate at all. I do think trying to put people in groups is really important because most of the time when I was struggling, it was other people on my course that helped me. Not that my lecturers didn't help, but it's obviously a lot easier to talk to your peers."

#student V (Not known, Other Sciences)

- There is greater scope for improving the value of personal tutorials (Figure 3) to students. During the 2020/21 academic year, only 53% of the whole sample thought that personal tutorials had been valuable/very valuable, although for Black students the proportion was relatively high, at 67%.

OPEN QUESTION Q30 - What does quality learning mean to you?

"That I am engaged with and listened to. Regular check-ups, like more one-to-one tutorials with a tutor, and setting up personal goals and checking we are staying on the right track. I want to feel listened to."

#student 710 (White, Health Sciences)

OPEN QUESTION Q32 - Additional comments

"I have felt like I have had no support throughout my time on the course and I'm only in year 1. Emails are rarely being replied to. I have had no tutorials or support regarding placement and assignments. I have struggled a lot with being able to pass the year, and I feel like I haven't learnt anything."

#student 144 (White, Health Sciences)

- Overall, students' experience of several elements related to assessment and feedback was poor, including receiving quality individual feedback from staff (44% agreed they had experienced this), opportunities for peer-to-peer feedback (35% agreed), and having opportunities to tailor assessments to students' own aspirations and interests (31% agreed).
- Students expected their frequency of engagement to typically be higher on campus than online. For all ethnicity groups, *working with teaching staff, not on coursework, online; participating in networks/communities/open courses external to programme, online; and discussing career plans with staff/advisors, online*, had particularly low expectations for frequency of engagement (Figure 4).

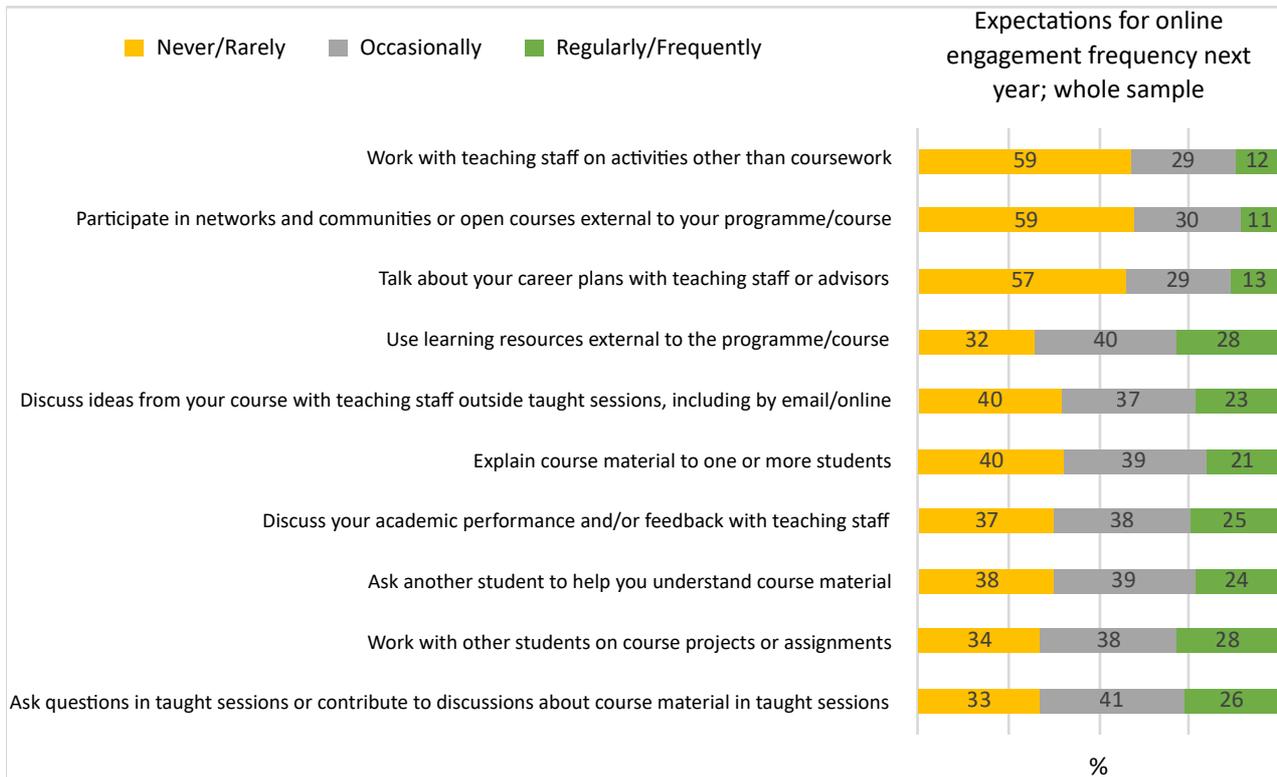


Figure 4: Expectations for online engagement frequency next year for all participants

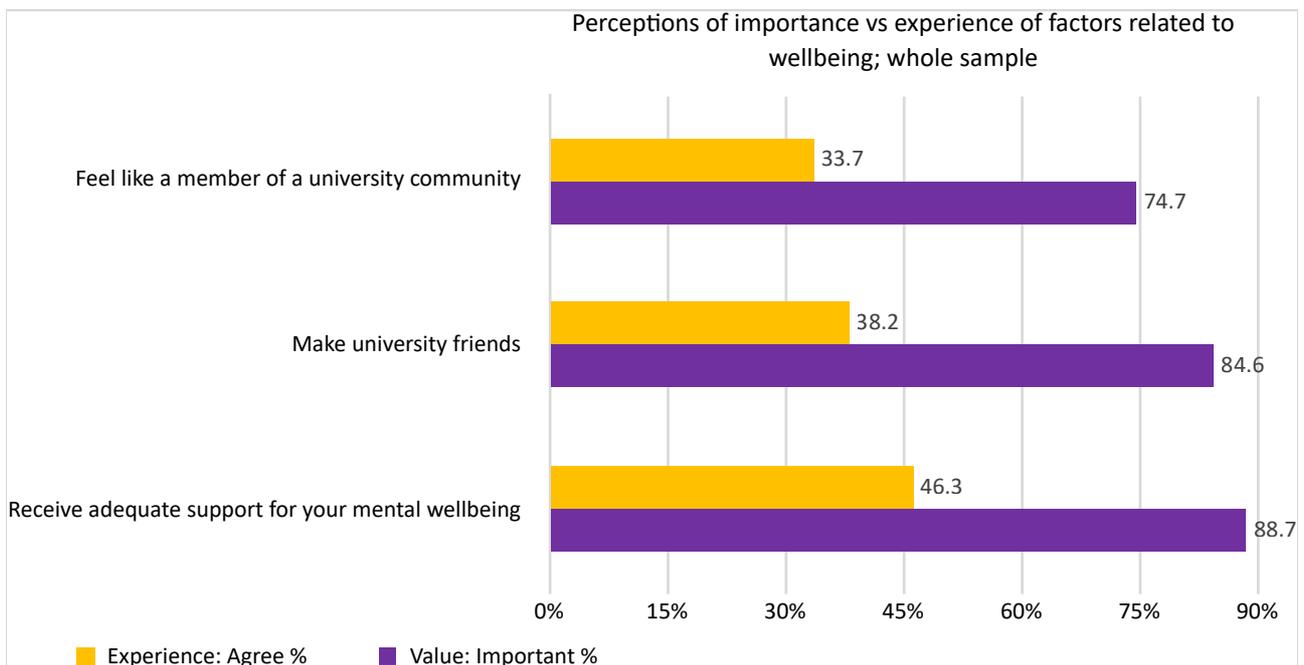


Figure 5: Proportion of all students who said that the above factors were important/very important (purple); proportion of all students who agreed/strongly agreed that they had experienced these factors (yellow)

- Factors related to wellbeing (Figure 5) are important/very important to the majority of students from all ethnicity groups (ethnicity group range: 69-97%), but the proportion of those who agree that they have had opportunities to experience them falls very short (ethnicity group range: 26-55%).

OPEN QUESTION Q17c - What works particularly well about face-to-face teaching?

“Engaging with students. It was hard studying a course I was never exposed to [before] in my life, and suddenly starting the course doing full remote learning, and not being able to fly to UK and meet people from university.

“It's a very isolating and discouraging feeling, as I feel lost and embarrassed to ask for help since I'm an amateur and will feel intimidated when asking for help. It felt like you either ask the questions you have in this specific session or the chance is gone. Same with marking and feedback issues; personal feedback was very limited and not really based on a proper marking criteria [...] making it difficult to understand where I went wrong [...]

“So, these are problems of remote learning, which could be avoided in face-to-face environments, where you can make friends in the same department, [and there are opportunities for] discussing [coursework with] teachers etc.”

#student 144 (Arab, Other Sciences)

- A number of students from all participating universities and subject areas expressed the sentiment that having to pay full fees during the 2020/21 academic year was not justified.

OPEN QUESTION Q32 - Additional comments

“Learning and teaching this year was great. After the first month the new learning system was great and really allowed me to greatly increase my learning ability by not stressing about transport or time getting to university, [I could] rather spend that time on extra learning. My only issue is that the university fees remain the same, and it seems hard to justify a nine-grand-a-year course when the campus is rarely visited or used.”

#student 201 (Asian or Asian British: Pakistani, Other Sciences)

“It is disgraceful that students are paying normal fees for this year, which in comparison to first year, pre-pandemic, has barely given me and other students 10% of what we should have gained this year. I do not feel that I have learnt anything in full quality.”

#student 260 (Asian or Asian British: Indian, Business Studies)

“I think the tuition fees should have been lowered. Even though the University claims that it is providing/[has] provided more than satisfactory resources and [a good] standard of education to justify the fees staying the same, it isn't. The fees were barely justifiable beforehand, and most people justify it through the experience they gain through University. COVID-19 robbed people of that opportunity, and while that isn't the University's fault, it is wrong of the University to keep the tuition fees the same.”

#student 472 (White, Business Studies)

OPEN QUESTION Q21 - What could the university do in terms of helping you better access the resources you need for your learning?

“Begin face-to-face teaching for those who want to access it, as it's completely unfair to students paying fees to be taught in such a way that [the university does] not care about students' individual learning, rather just the fact they claim they have taught it.”

#student 29 (Mixed White or White British and Black or Black British: African, Health Sciences)

- While the majority of participating students (82%) were frequently/regularly able to access a reliable internet connection with sufficient bandwidth for all their devices, when comparing ethnicity groups there was a range of 69-85%, and a number of open question responses highlighted issues with internet connection reliability or speed, both for staff and students.

OPEN QUESTION Q21 - What could the university do in terms of helping you better access the resources you need for your learning?

"I know it is not possible, but maybe help students pay for better WiFi, as I live in a house with five people, and it is so hard to get a good connection when everyone is using it."

#student 374 (Asian or Asian British: Indian, Other Sciences)

OPEN QUESTION Q18 - What aspect of the way in which staff have taught you in 2020/21 has prevented you from fully engaging in your study experience?

"Old lectures, bad WiFi signal from tutors, disruptive classes from outsiders, links not working, some lectures being cancelled last minute, just bad quality lecturers (not all but a few)."

#student 131 (White, Health Sciences)

3.2 Analysis by ethnicity groups

Statistical tests

The responder means for each question/question group were grouped by ethnicity, and each group of means was tested for normality using the Shapiro-Wilk test. P-values were generally less than 0.05, and there were no questions for which all ethnicity p-values were greater than 0.05; therefore, the data was deemed to be non-normally distributed. Bartlett's test was also applied to test for homoscedasticity, and where this was confirmed, the Kruskal-Wallis test was used. Where statistically significant differences were found between medians (of responder means, grouped by ethnicity), Dunn's test was applied – with Bonferroni's correction – to determine which groups' medians were statistically significantly different from each other.

Statistically significant differences (at the $p < 0.05$ level) were found for the following question groups:

- Q10 (teaching elements that are valuable to learning, see also Figure 3) between the following ethnicity groups: White students against Black students ($p = 0.0132$)
- Q11 (experience of aspects of learning, excluding *I would prefer to be in a primarily face-to-face learning environment*) between the following ethnicity groups: White students against Arab ($p = 0.0000$), Asian ($p = 0.0033$), and Black students ($p = 0.0445$); and Mixed students against Arab students ($p = 0.0003$)
- Q12 (experience of aspects of teaching) between the following ethnicity groups: White students against Arab ($p = 0.0262$), Asian ($p = 0.0054$), and Black students ($p = 0.0060$)
- Q13 (perceptions of importance of opportunities related to learning) between the following ethnicity groups: Black students against Asian ($p = 0.0014$), White ($p = 0.0001$), and Other students ($p = 0.0152$)
- Q15 (experience of opportunities related to learning) between the following ethnicity groups: White students against Arab ($p = 0.0010$), Asian ($p = 0.0078$), and Black students ($p = 0.0003$)

- Q16 (experience of factors related to wellbeing) between the following ethnicity groups: White students against Asian students ($p = 0.0006$)
- Q24 (expectations of frequency of engagement in activities, online vs on campus) between the following ethnicity groups: White students against Arab ($p = 0.0004$) and Black students ($p = 0.0002$); and Other students against Arab students ($p = 0.0186$)
- Q26 (impact of assessments and feedback) between the following ethnicity groups: White students against Arab ($p = 0.0072$), Asian ($p = 0.0004$), and Black students ($p = 0.0002$)
- Q31 (meeting overall expectations for learning and teaching, see also Figure 6) between the following ethnicity groups: White students against Arab ($p = 0.0009$), Asian ($p = 0.0131$), and Black students ($p = 0.0025$); and Mixed students against Arab students ($p = 0.0153$).

These tests confirm the general trends seen in the data: that the experience of Arab, Black, and – to some extent – Asian students has been significantly different from White, Mixed and Other students (among others, see Figure 6). Mixed and Other students feature less frequently than White students in the above analysis; this may be due to the Bonferroni correction being conservative: it tends to under-report statistical significance when the null hypothesis is false (higher type-II error rate).

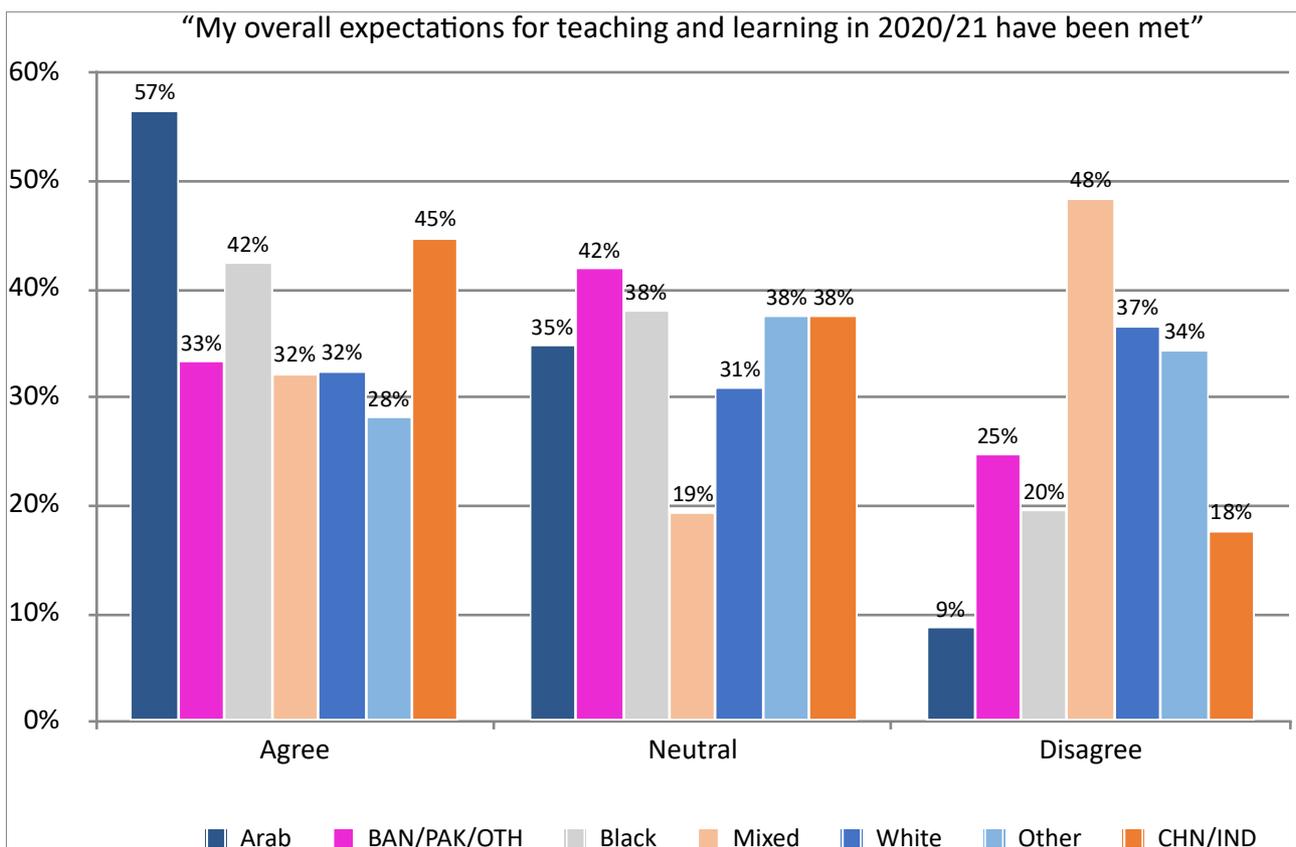


Figure 6: Proportion of each ethnicity group who agreed, expressed neutrality, or disagreed that the overall experience of teaching and learning had met their expectations over the 2020/21 academic year. Asian students have been split into two groups mentioned in section 2.1. Arab, Black and CHN/IND students have had the best experience, while Mixed, White and Other students have had the worst experience.

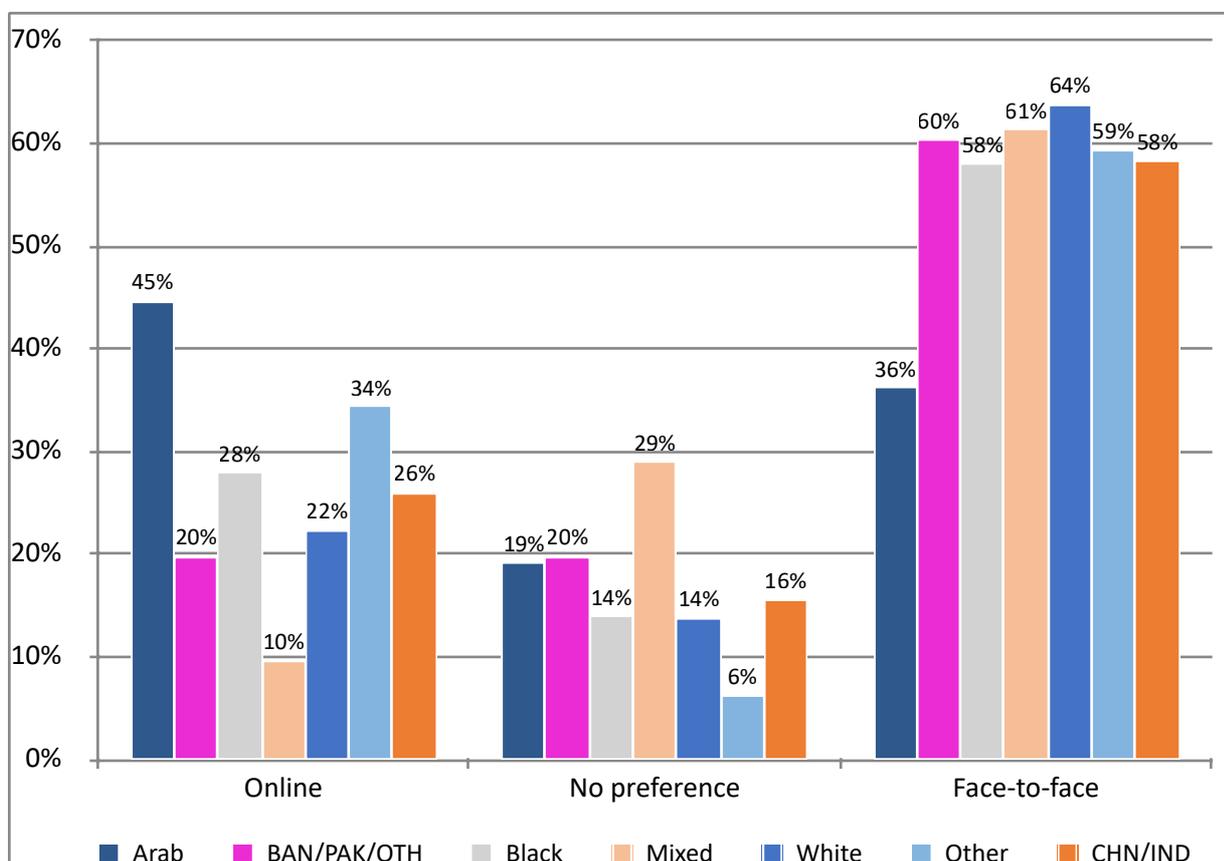


Figure 7: Proportion of each ethnicity group preferring online, face-to-face, or having no preference for mode of study in the next academic year

The majority of students in most ethnicity groups prefer face-to-face teaching (Figure 7); the majority of Black (58%), CHN/IND (58%), PAK/BAN/OTH (60%), Mixed (61%), White (64%) and Other (59%) students prefer face-to-face teaching. The exception to the trend are Arab students, of whom only 36% prefer face-to-face teaching. In contrast, among Arab students the most popular teaching mode is online (45%). The students who prefer online teaching the least are Mixed students (10%). Pearson's chi-squared test identified statistically significant differences at the $p < 0.05$ level for Arab students ($\chi^2 = 14.4582$, $p = 0.0007$) and Mixed students ($\chi^2 = 6.7462$, $p = 0.0343$).

Ethnicity group summaries

Careful consideration of ethnicity group sample size is required when attempting to extrapolate results to larger populations. This is particularly the case for Other and Mixed students, and to a lesser extent Arab students.

Arab students

- Arab students generally had a good experience in terms of teaching and learning — better than all other ethnicity groups.
- The role of staff is important: getting time (even if remotely) with, feeling connected to, and communicating with staff are all highly valued, as is the opportunity to ask questions and discuss feedback with staff. Individual feedback was somewhat lacking from staff, and Arab students criticised the lack of feedback on summative exams.
- Online teaching/learning seems to work well for many Arab students: online is the most popular mode (45%) for Arab students, recordings are valued, access to resources when needed has been good, and they feel better able to contribute to discussions online. Many of the Arab students who prefer online

studying are in Other Sciences (there are 14 Arab students in Other Sciences who prefer online, of 47 total Arab students, 29 of whom are in Other Sciences).

OPEN QUESTION Q21 - What could the university do in terms of helping you better access the resources you need for your learning?

“Online teaching is good because we can pause [videos] whenever and go back to them whenever, but this should be combined with face-to-face [teaching], as without face-to-face the year has been so miserable, antisocial and has prevented us completely from being able to discuss the course with lecturers or peers.”

#student 782 (Arab, Health Sciences)

- More Arab students have been able to develop a sense of belonging, while other ethnicity groups have generally not. More also had opportunities for peer-to-peer feedback.
- Frequency of use of resources when needed is not particularly high, neither is confidence, except for use of the online library.
- Expected frequency of engagement online and on campus is generally very high, and any cases that are low are consistent with other ethnicity groups.
- Wellbeing is considered important by many, although compared to other ethnicities this importance is relatively low. Despite lower perceptions of importance, experience of aspects related to wellbeing is the highest among ethnicity groups (although still low in absolute terms).

OPEN QUESTION Q21 - What could the university do in terms of helping you better access the resources you need for your learning?

“The grace period was very helpful, although sometimes I did feel like I needed more time to deal with things. Perhaps a bit more leniency/understanding from teachers in this, and if they could provide good feedback towards work if applicable. In terms of isolation: a solution perhaps could be organising 'department community' virtual meet-ups? As well as extra work sessions (or spread out sessions) if possible throughout the week for labs/content help. [It] could be help from assistants, teachers or even from confident students who are [...] familiar [with the content]. Oh and I find the 'anonymous' question method actually helpful in lectures, [it] makes me less intimidated when asking a question through the chat.”

#student 385 (Arab, Other Sciences)

Asian students

- Asian students had a moderate experience of teaching and learning (CHN/IND better than BAN/PAK/OTH students).
- Communicating with and feeling connected to staff and students is important, although the emphasis is on the importance of students over staff. Asian students particularly value making university friends. They also value opportunities to ask questions and discuss feedback with staff. Asian students had a better experience of staff feedback than most, but this was still poor in absolute terms. They highlighted the need for personalised and high-quality feedback that shows them how to improve.

- Face-to-face teaching is preferred, like other ethnicity groups (except for Arab students). Elements of teaching and learning this year are moderately valued, and experience of teaching and learning opportunities has been moderate, compared to other ethnicities. Having sufficient access to online resources was highly valued.
- Asian students had a good experience of assessments, often comparable with Black and Arab students.
- Frequency of use of resources when needed is not particularly high, neither is confidence. These are comparable to other ethnicity groups.
- Expectations of time spent engaging in activities on campus and online is moderate. Activities in which they would never or rarely engage are consistent with other ethnicities. For independent personal study, Asian students expect to spend much more time online than on campus. Independent learning was highlighted as a characteristic of quality learning (particularly for CHN/IND students), although it was felt that it should not replace quality teaching.

OPEN QUESTION Q30 - What does quality learning mean to you?

"Learning that allows me to feel confident and inspires me to continue wanting to learn outside the set uni timetable."

#student 356 (Asian or Asian British: Indian, Other Sciences)

"Having access to quality teaching."

#student 809 (Asian or Asian British: Indian, Health Sciences)

- Wellbeing is considered important by many, and compared to other ethnicities this importance is moderate/high. Experience of these factors compared to other ethnicity groups is moderate, but low in absolute terms.
- Differences exist between CHN/IND students and BAN/PAK/OTH students:
 - Expectations for online engagement are better among CHN/IND students. Expectations of frequency of engagement with peers online was greater for CHN/IND students, and a greater proportion of CHN/IND students had access to the library resources, services and support that they needed. CHN/IND students would also expect to discuss feedback more frequently with staff online. CHN/IND students also more frequently had use of the time, space and resources to engage in independent learning than BAN/PAK/OTH students.

OPEN QUESTION Q32 - Additional comments

"I think it would be expected that teaching online would be hard for everyone, and I did find that I wasn't learning as much from lecturers, however I found resources that either lecturers provided on Moodle or ones I found myself were really good, and I felt I learnt much quicker using those resources."

#student 774 (Asian or Asian British: Chinese, Other Sciences)

- Expectations for on-campus engagement are better among BAN/PAK/OTH students: when on campus, they expect to spend more time working with staff on non-coursework activities; they also expect to more frequently use external learning resources on campus.

- The learning and teaching expectations were met for a greater proportion of CHN/IND students (see Figure 6). CHN/IND students also expressed a slightly greater preference for online studying, compared to BAN/PAK/OTH students (26% vs 20%, respectively — see Figure 7).

OPEN QUESTION Q32 - Additional comments

"I feel like there was no way to adequately deliver a good teaching or learning experience during COVID. I might as well have been doing a course on Udemy, or something, but with [...] additional extra support."

#student 179 (Asian or Asian British: Pakistani, Other Sciences)

Black students

- Black students had a moderate-to-good experience of learning and teaching.
- Communicating with staff on campus and with students online are particularly important to Black students; feeling connected to students is highly valued, while feeling connected to staff is moderately valued. Despite their emphasis on the value of communicating with students, opportunities for peer-to-peer feedback have been poor. The opportunity to ask questions is also important. Opportunities to discuss feedback with staff were highlighted most frequently in relation to feedback in the open questions. Experience of assessments and feedback was generally good, compared to other ethnicity groups, especially for individual feedback from staff (54% agreed they had experienced this).

OPEN QUESTION Q17c - What works particularly well about face-to-face teaching?

"Being able to ask questions in real time. Zoom meetings are recorded so people may not feel comfortable asking questions."

#student 837 (Black or Black British: African, Health Sciences)

- Teaching elements have also been highly valued over 2020/21 – particularly personal tutorials (compared to other ethnicities), as well as opportunities related to learning. Experience of teaching has been comparable to Arab students, with the exception of Black students' backgrounds being valued as an enriching resource for learning, the experience of which is worse than for Arab students (see also Figure 10).

OPEN QUESTION Q21 - What could the university do in terms of helping you better access the resources you need for your learning?

"Ensure the library is always open, having a space away from home with no distractions was missed this year."

#student 594 (Black or Black British: Caribbean, Other Sciences)

"Explain how to use certain resources, such as the library, better."

#student 433 (Black or Black British: Caribbean, Business Studies)

"Make the library more accessible during remote learning."

#student 578 (Black or Black British: African, Other Sciences)

- Experience of learning opportunities has been particularly good, relative to other ethnicities, for receiving personal support/guidance with learning, as well as having sufficient access to library content, services and support; however, increased access to university library buildings, and increased clarity of their university's library website were both highlighted in the open questions as things that could be improved.
- Expected engagement was generally high for on-campus activities and moderate for online activities. Expected engagement was lower than Asian and Arab students for working with students on course projects/assignments, despite the emphasis by Black students on the value of communicating with other students.
- Black students value wellbeing the most among the ethnicity groups, but experience of opportunities related to wellbeing is only moderate/high in relative terms, and low in absolute terms.

Mixed students

- Mixed students had a poor experience of learning and teaching – the worst among all ethnicity groups, and statistically significantly different from Arab students. Mixed students are particularly against online learning without face-to-face elements (only 10% prefer online).
- Importance of on-campus and online communication is high for Mixed students, although moderate compared to other ethnicity groups. This is also the case for the importance of feeling connected to students and staff.

OPEN QUESTION Q18 - What aspect of the way in which staff have taught you in 2020/21 has prevented you from fully engaging in your study experience?

“Some staff have really tried this year, but some have just told us to watch certain videos or are harder to reach on email when you have a question, so you don't always feel like you have a decent opportunity to talk to them.”

#student 147 (Mixed White or White British and Asian or Asian British, Health Sciences)

OPEN QUESTION Q32 - Additional comments

“I have struggled consistently throughout this year, and it is so hard to communicate your struggle and frustrations through an email or teams one-to-one. When throughout not being able to attend university I was expected to still attend placement at a hospital with no previous clinical skills, which left me feeling disheartened and I questioned my continuation of the course. I feel as though staff are reluctant to reach out and actually provide proper help and support for students who are really struggling, which only makes students less inclined to ask for help when every time I have been ignored.”

#student 29 (Mixed White or White British and Black or Black British: African, Health Sciences)

- The value of teaching elements to Mixed students during 2020/21 has been low or moderate, as is their experience of other factors related to teaching. For Mixed students, quality teaching is engaging and facilitates understanding; however, they were often the lowest scoring ethnicity group for impact of aspects related to teaching. Proportions of Mixed students experiencing engagement and a sense of belonging amongst students was extremely low (10% agreed they experienced this), and for all other factors related to teaching, fewer than half agreed they had experienced them.

OPEN QUESTION Q18 - What aspect of the way in which staff have taught you in 2020/21 has prevented you from fully engaging in your study experience?

“Though it’s not anyone’s fault due to the pandemic, the sole thing that has prevented me from fully engaging and benefitting from my study experience is the lack of face-to-face learning, which makes me feel less connected and belonging as a university student.”

#student 830 (Mixed White or White British and Black or Black British: African, Health Sciences)

- The value and experience of opportunities related to learning was moderate. Having sufficient access to both the online and on-campus resources that they need was highly valued by Mixed students, as well as knowing where and how to locate additional resources that are useful to their learning. Despite the relatively high value placed on developing a sense of belonging to peers on the programme/course, their experience was particularly poor for this factor. The experience of other factors related to learning was also particularly low (and again, statistically significantly different from Arab students); Mixed students were particularly uninspired or unmotivated to seek out material and learning opportunities beyond their courses.
- Expected engagement is much higher on campus compared to online, and the proportion of Mixed students expecting to never or rarely engage in online activities is particularly large, both in absolute terms and compared to other ethnicity groups. For independent personal study, Mixed students expect to spend much more time online than on campus. Mixed students expect to engage much less in unsupervised study with peers and supervised group seminars/workshops when online, compared to on campus.
- Compared to other ethnicity groups, moderate importance is attributed to factors related to wellbeing (although this is still high in absolute terms). Experience, however, is very poor – both in relative and absolute terms – especially for making university friends and feeling like a member of a university community.

White students

- White students had a poor experience of learning and teaching – comparable to, although not as bad as, Mixed students. White students' overall experience of teaching and learning was statistically significantly different from Arab, Asian and Black students. 64% of White students would prefer a face-to-face study mode, while 22% would prefer online.
- Online communication is less important than on campus, and feeling connected to staff is more important than feeling connected to students. Feeling connected to staff is very important to White students, compared to most other ethnicities.
- The value of teaching elements to White students during 2020/21 has been low or moderate, and is statistically significantly different from Black students. White students' experience of other factors related to teaching is also low or moderate, and is statistically significantly different from Arab, Asian and Black students. Among ethnicity groups, White students were the least motivated to seek learning opportunities beyond their course. For White students, responses to open questions identified quality teaching as teaching that provides support and guidance; however, their experience of receiving personal support/guidance with their learning was low.

OPEN QUESTION Q18 - What aspect of the way in which staff have taught you in 2020/21 has prevented you from fully engaging in your study experience?

“When one lecturer did all his first module pre-recorded, and everyone said it was hard to engage and be motivated just watching pre-recorded slides every day. So for his second module he ignored the feedback and then did all pre-recorded sessions again and didn’t even make any effort. We were given old recordings of past lectures; it was hard to hear and there is background noise and coughing and talking.”

#student 313 (White, Health Sciences)

- For the impact of learning, responses from White students were again statistically significantly different from Arab, Asian and Black students.
- The value of opportunities related to learning was moderate, but statistically significantly different from Black students. Having sufficient access to the online resources that they need was highly valued by White students. Their experience of these same opportunities was low, and statistically significantly different from Arab, Asian and Black students.
- Experience of assessment and feedback was poor, and comparable to Other and Mixed students. Again, White students’ responses were statistically significantly different from those of Arab, Asian and Black students.
- Despite their generally negative experience, frequency of use of resources when needed and confidence in using them is generally high, particularly for computing hardware and software; however, notable exceptions are: the time, space and resources to engage in independent learning; further resources beyond what the university provides; and the online resources of the university library.
- Expected engagement frequency is higher on campus compared to online. Additionally, the activities in which White students expect to never or rarely engage are consistent with most other ethnicity groups. Expected engagement frequency is statistically significantly different from Arab and Black students. For independent personal study, White students expect to spend much more time online than on campus.
- Compared to other ethnicity groups, high importance is attributed to factors related to wellbeing (moderate for feeling like a member of a university community). Experience, however, is poor – both in relative and absolute terms.

Other students

- Other students had a moderate-to-poor experience of teaching and learning. 59% of Other students would prefer a face-to-face study mode, while 34% would prefer online.

OPEN QUESTION Q32 - Additional comments

“I feel the year has been very difficult. I have not felt motivated. Online learning is clearly not a substitute for actual classes. I could have learned online without paying anything. Moving to [university] for the academic year to study exclusively online was expensive and pointless...”

#student 717 (White: Gypsy or Traveller, Other Sciences)

- The importance of on-campus communication with students is more important than online. The value of time spent communicating with others in external networks and communities is high (similar to Black and Asian students). Communicating with and feeling connected to staff is more important than to students.
- The value of teaching elements during 2020/21 has been moderate. The most valued elements are recordings of teaching materials, online streaming of live lectures, and lecture engagement sessions. Experience of other factors related to teaching is also moderate. Engagement and a sense of belonging amongst students, and background being valued as an enriching resource for learning were the two worst factors in terms of experience for Other students.
- Opportunities related to learning were of moderate importance, except for those related to interacting with other students, for which importance was low. For perceived importance of these opportunities, Other students were statistically significantly different from Black students. Experience of these opportunities was generally very low – Other students had the least positive experience of all but one of these opportunities.
- Other students are the least comfortable of all ethnicity groups using the technology, and they are the most polarised when it comes to feeling more comfortable online than in a face-to-face class (agree: 47%; disagree: 44%).
- Experience of assessment and feedback was poor, and comparable to White and Mixed students.
- Frequency of use when needed and confidence using resources is generally low. Frequency of use when needed is particularly low for online library resources; resources beyond what is provided by their university; and the time, space and resources to engage in independent learning. Confidence is often lower than, although comparable to, other ethnicity groups.
- For Other students, expected engagement frequency is similar to White students. It is higher on campus than online. Like White students, expected engagement frequency is statistically significantly different from Arab students. Other students expect to spend much less time engaged in lectures, and much more time in unsupervised study with peers, on campus compared to online.
- Although still moderate/high in absolute terms, the importance attributed to wellbeing was the lowest among ethnicity groups for Other students. Experience of factors related to wellbeing is very poor; it is comparable to that of Mixed and White students.

3.3 Analysis by subject area

Summary of findings and statistical significance

Overall, the perceptions, experiences, and expectations of students of different subject areas often differed significantly. For example, Health Sciences students were more likely to give positive responses or express agreement throughout the survey, when compared to Business Studies and Other Sciences students. Although the majority of students in all subject areas would prefer face-to-face studying (Figure 8), Health Sciences have the greatest proportion of students among the subject areas that would prefer online studying (Health Sciences 29%, vs 25% Other Sciences and 18% Business Studies). Business Studies also has the greatest proportion of students who would prefer face-to-face studying (68%). These trends are reflected in Figure 9; Health Sciences had the greatest proportion of students who agreed that their expectations had been met for teaching and learning, while Business Studies had the greatest proportion of students for whom expectations had not been met. It is worth noting that Health Sciences students are those who experienced the most actual blended learning during the 2020/21 academic year, as they were allowed by government regulations to return to campus in January, while other students had to continue to study only online.

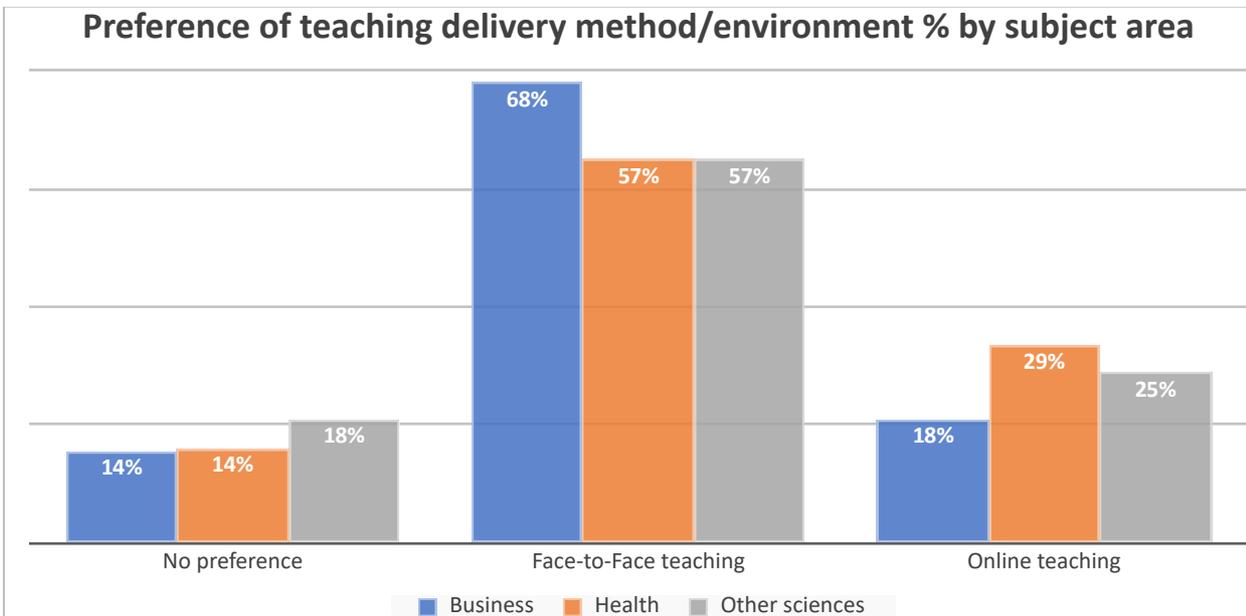


Figure 8: Preference of teaching delivery method/environment % by subject area

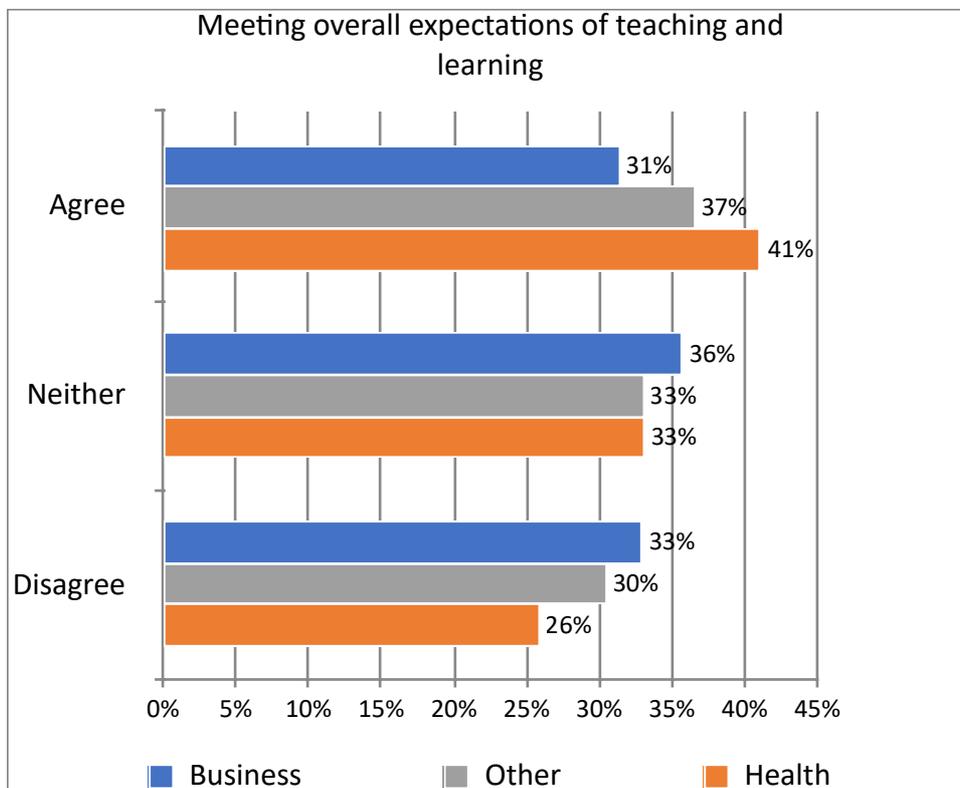


Figure 9: Proportion of students from each subject area who agreed, were neutral, or disagreed that the overall experience of teaching and learning had met their expectations over the 2020/21 academic year

The Kruskal-Wallis test that was conducted on the median values of responder means grouped by subject area indicated that statistically significant differences exist when comparing certain question groups. The results indicated a significant difference between subject areas in the median scores of: teaching elements that are valuable to learning (Q10; $p = 0.0000$), experience of aspects of learning (Q11; $p = 0.0058$), experience of aspects of teaching (Q12; $p = 0.0075$), frequency of access to resources when needed (Q19; $p = 0.0218$), importance of communication (Q22; $p = 0.0002$), and expected frequency of engagement — online vs on campus (Q24; $p = 0.0058$). When considering the data alongside post-hoc tests (Dunn's test,

with Bonferroni's correction), it is clear that students who are enrolled on Health Sciences courses had a better experience, when compared to those on Business Studies or Other Sciences courses. Dunn's test identified the following statistically significant differences for the aforementioned questions specifically between the following subject areas ($p < 0.05$):

- Q10 (teaching elements that are valuable to learning) between Health Sciences and Business Studies ($p = 0.0000$), and Health Sciences and Other Sciences ($p = 0.0003$)
- Q11 (experience of aspects of learning, excluding *I would prefer to be in a primarily face-to-face learning environment*) between Health Sciences and Business Studies ($p = 0.0046$)
- Q12 (experience of aspects of teaching) between Health Sciences and Business Studies ($p = 0.0252$), and Health Sciences and Other Sciences ($p = 0.0127$)
- Q19 (frequency of access to resources when needed) between Health Sciences and Other Sciences ($p = 0.0174$)
- Q22 (importance of communication) between Health Sciences and Other Sciences ($p = 0.0002$), and Other Sciences and Business Studies ($p = 0.0140$). For the latter, it is Business Studies students who attributed significantly more importance than Other Sciences students to aspects of communication
- Q24 (expected frequency of engagement, online vs on campus) between Health Sciences and Other Sciences ($p = 0.0290$).

Despite the differences described above, there is no statistically significant difference in the responses regarding the overall experience of teaching and learning over the 2020/21 academic year between different subject areas (Q31, Figure 9). This result essentially shows that while experiences and perceptions of elements related to various aspects of teaching and learning were in general better for Health Sciences students, their experience of the 2020/21 academic year was still comparable to Other Sciences and Business Studies students, that is, somewhat unsatisfactory. This indicates that in its current form remote teaching cannot fully replace face-to-face learning effectively.

3.4 Background

3.4.1 Intended meaning of background

In the survey questionnaire, students were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement: *The teaching on my course this year has valued my background and recognises it as a resource that enriches my learning experience* (Figure 10). Focus group participants were also posed the question: *Just over a third of students agreed that, based on their experience of teaching on their course, their background is valued and recognised as a resource that enriches their learning experience. If you agree, how do they do this? If not, how do you feel your background could be better valued and recognised as a resource that enriches your learning experience?*

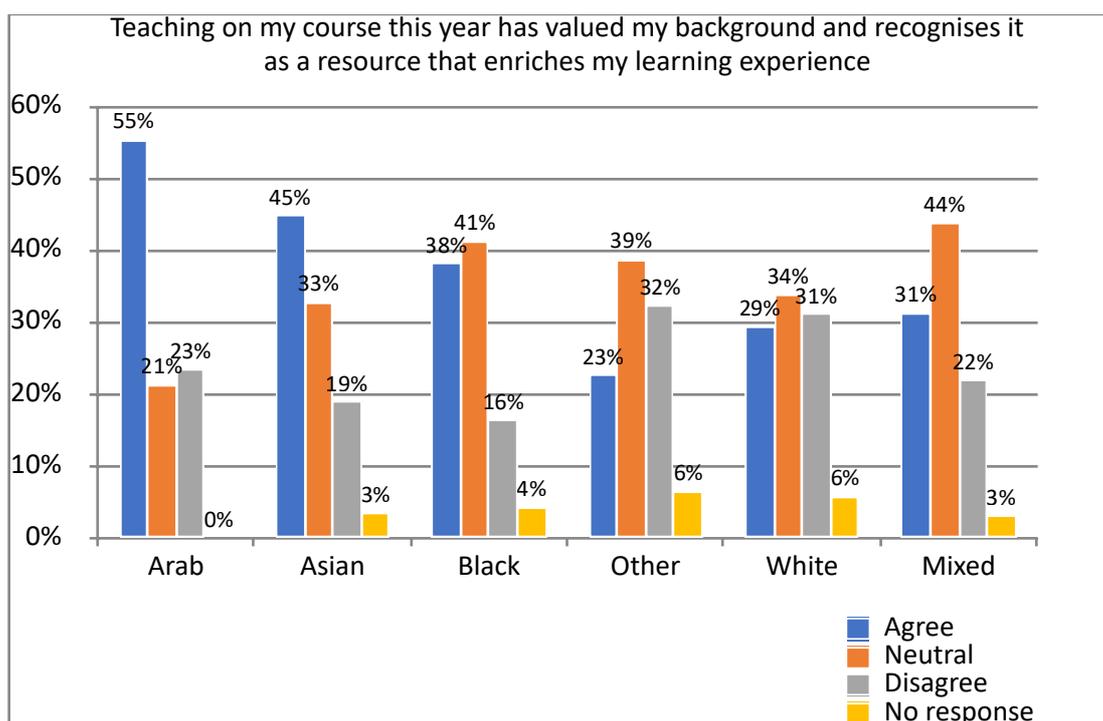


Figure 10: Proportion of student responses to the above question, by ethnicity group

Intended meaning

The initial focus group question was left intentionally broad and non-specific, so as not to lead students to a particular answer through the wording of the question. Researchers expected that students might reflect on socio-economic background, ethnicity, nationality, gender, etc.; however, when the meaning was not immediately clear to students, further, more leading questions were sometimes required to elicit answers.

Student interpretations

(More detail can be found in section 3.4.2.)

Occasionally students required clarification as to what the researchers were looking for, and after researchers gave examples relevant to themselves, some students gave examples of how they thought their background might be better recognised in teaching. Often the first response of many students was that their background was not relevant to teaching, or that it was impossible to accommodate, given the size of some cohorts. Lack of recognition was not seen as an issue by many.

When no clarification was needed, the majority of answers tended to focus on educational background, but this tended to be in relation to students' own learning (i.e., how easy/hard they found some parts of the

course, depending on whether they had covered the material before, or what types of assessments they had been exposed to in secondary education, particularly assessments that involved a research element), rather than necessarily the teaching they received at university.

Aside from educational background, some ideas raised by students included: incorporating more material related to international economies in Business Studies courses; drawing on the professional backgrounds of some of those in the Health Sciences cohort; or universities taking into account that not all students would have the same access to education, due to differing socio-economic backgrounds. Diversity of student backgrounds was also seen as advantageous for learning from peers and during group work, rather than necessarily as a resource in teaching.

Reflections

Considering that in the survey question over a third of students overall (34% — see Figure 10, above, for individual ethnicities) said that they neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement, it is possible that the intended meaning was unclear to some students. This speculation is also supported by the clarification required in some focus groups regarding background. While this was not raised in the pilot survey feedback, student interpretations may become clearer if/when feedback is sought from them following publication of this report.

It should perhaps be considered in hindsight that, despite being anonymous in the report, students may not have always felt comfortable discussing their background openly among their peers, even in the context of a focus group, and focus groups may not have allowed students the space to discuss potentially sensitive issues.

3.4.2 Focus group responses: background

Health Sciences

Health Sciences students in particular identified the importance of recognising students' background in learning and teaching. They also identified diversity as a way to learn from their peers.

FOCUS GROUP

"I feel that students' background is very valuable. It enriches [...] learning by acknowledging that at university level there is a diversity of backgrounds, education and work experience, and these can be called upon to give true insight into [a] real life situation."

#student X (Not known, Health Sciences)

Students thought that diversity is relevant and their backgrounds are sometimes recognised. One example given concerned the ethnicity-specific risk and treatment associated with hypertension.

FOCUS GROUP

"I've seen in our second year [...] in pharmacy there's some medication [...], for example [to treat] hypertension. If [the patient is of] Black ethnicity, it means that they should have this certain sort of medication that other ethnicities do not have...we know [...] Black, [...] Asian, and some other ethnic minorities are more susceptible to other sorts of conditions that the Caucasians [...] are not susceptible to."

#student J (Black African, Health Sciences)

One student highlighted being able to relate more to, or have increased empathy for, minority ethnicity patients when on placement.

FOCUS GROUP

"I'm from a diverse background [...], if I was the patient, [...] I know how I would [...] want to be treated, which is why when we are learning, we [...] were always taught to remember [...] the patient's background and then [give] them the best care."

#student AD (Asian Pakistani, Health Sciences)

However, there is scope for improving the recognition of student backgrounds, as some aspects are not well recognised and utilised, particularly professional experiences.

FOCUS GROUP

"I'm a support worker, so I'm sort of hoping that because there are some drugs that I used to help administer [that it might be relevant to the teaching], but the teacher never really would ask for things like that."

#student J (Black African, Health Sciences)

Other Sciences

The background of students from Other Sciences was generally not seen as relevant to their teaching.

FOCUS GROUP

"...but it is an applied Math subject, and essentially everything comes down to you working with machines that do things in a particular way and you have to think like that. But people still spot different things and think about it differently. I have never really thought it was that important."

#student Y (White, Other Sciences)

Educational background was occasionally mentioned in relation to certain advantages that students might have with course material that had already been covered at school or college.

FOCUS GROUP

"...my background has never really been brought up this past year. So I'm not really sure. I would imagine it would be because I came from doing a diploma in Engineering at college, but some of my peers have come from doing Maths or Physics A levels. So at least I've always, at least personally, I've always thought that having that whole year of doing a diploma in specialised subjects for Engineering, and then going to a degree, where I'm already relatively familiar with at least some of the concepts and some of the modules has kind of always given me a bit of an edge in understanding the new topics. So I guess I think having a background in the chosen field is definitely a valuable resource."

#student W (Not known, Other Sciences)

The content of their courses was generally perceived to be independent of factors such as student backgrounds. However, there was one reference to the wider relevance of diversity beyond university.

FOCUS GROUP

“There are a few things, for example, Google have changed their AI to take better photos of people with darker skin. There are a few real examples of it, but again it [computer science] is not really a subject about interacting with humans [...] so it is just not really relevant.”

#student Y (White, Other Sciences)

Additionally, the same student identified the benefits of having greater diversity among students.

FOCUS GROUP

“We did a group project this year where we were in second year, so we had a group for the whole year and our group was really diverse. People from lots of different backgrounds, and that was great. You could see that made a great difference as there was [...] a real diversity of thought.”

#student Y (White, Other Sciences)

Others highlighted the relevance of students' educational and socio-economic backgrounds to their access to education, especially during the pandemic when access to some resources, such as university libraries, has been limited.

FOCUS GROUP

“...depending on your class background you might not have access to those sorts of things if you're studying from home. Again, then with COVID things like libraries weren't ever accessible. So I think that's the only other thing. Anybody's background I think should have been maybe considered a little bit more. I know they did as much as they can because it's so hard when you have so many students with such a range of different accessibilities to learning.”

#student V (Not known, Other Sciences)

Business Studies

Many students did not see the relevance of background to their teaching, unless it was related to the head start that some students' educational background can give them in their first year. Some thought that the lack of recognition of their background was not really an issue, while others thought that it would be almost impossible to recognise and utilise the backgrounds of students in lectures, due to the large number of students.

FOCUS GROUP

“I don't agree [that background is valued], but at the same time I don't see how my background would be relevant to my teaching experience or my learning experience.”

#student M (Not known, Business Studies)

FOCUS GROUP

“Exactly, I think the same: that background is not very important when it comes to teaching. Maybe I'm missing something, but I don't see how your background — for example where you're from or whatever — can enhance the teaching you get. The knowledge is universal so it doesn't matter if you're from Europe, Asia or whatever; the teaching stays the same because the knowledge is the same. So I don't see how it would enrich the teaching process. Of course [with] student life or whatever, it would matter, but when it comes to teaching in classes I don't think that's important at all, to be honest.”

#student N (Eastern European, Business Studies)

“I do not know. It is not like college where everyone knows everyone. During lectures there are a lot of people, so we do not know everyone's background and story. In college and school however, you would know this. Even if it was someone I had not spoken to, I would know this, even if it means having heard about it from someone else. I would say that in college they [the staff] knew everyone as well. In university, [...] there are a lot of students in one class, so it is hard for everyone to know everyone.”

#student D (Asian British, Business Studies)

However, it was frequently mentioned – especially compared to other subject areas – that there was scope for having a greater appreciation for either professional or international backgrounds.

FOCUS GROUP

“In the first year we were just very much concerned about the UK. I had the same clear concern [that content was too UK-centric] because everything was in pounds and everything was related to [the] UK economy, but in second year, the background shifted and became more global.”

#student F (Asian Indian, Business Studies)

“...but this global approach should be incorporated from the start... our courses are not five years long. You only have three years.”

#student E (Asian Indian, Business Studies)

FOCUS GROUP

“...in first year I was just focusing on UK government. It had me thinking, what if I do not want to stay in [the] UK and I want to go back to my country or I want to go to another country and explore more. Like you said, it should be like, involved from the first year.”

#student F (Asian Indian, Business Studies)

“I would say for international students, they are learning how to prepare accounts based on UK accounting standards and perhaps they might want to become an accountant in their own country. This is probably not maximising their learning.”

#student C (Asian British, Business Studies)

Diversity was also seen as a good way to learn from peers.

FOCUS GROUP

"I was in a seminar recently about international business, talking about business ethics. There were some international students and it was interesting because their countries have a different view on business ethics. So it's interesting to have that, [to] listen to them."

#student Q (White, Business Studies)

However, there were one or two students who had come to the UK specifically for the UK experience; they had no expectation for their background to be recognised, and did not see the lack of recognition as an issue.

FOCUS GROUP

"I absolutely understand that...because I'm moving to a foreign country, they don't have to explain everything to me. They of course taught me the basics of some UK grading, etc., but I don't expect them to also explain everything to me. I'm not a child any more, and I don't find it problematic, for example, that they don't take my background into account because I didn't want them to take my background into account, to be completely honest with you. I just don't care where everyone is from or whatever. It wasn't taken into account - and I didn't expect them to take it into account."

#student N (Eastern European, Business Studies)

"...when we moved to the country, we're coming for an international education and we're coming into the UK to study [the] UK. If you are coming to do accounts, you're coming to study the UK tax system..."

#student M (Not known, Business Studies)

One student highlighted the importance to them of knowing that there were others from a similar background to them in the university community, so that they felt as though they belonged there.

FOCUS GROUP

"So I finish school when I was obviously 16. Average grades, you know, nothing high or low. Same in college. But I [...] was quite unsure if I wanted to go into full-time education, meaning university. And I think especially with my school that I went to, it was really rare. And especially the postcode that I lived at, very few, very, very few young people would actually attend university. So [...] I was very hesitant. So obviously receiving any kind of like appreciation or being included in these, you know, whether seminars or lectures, [...] it was really, really important for me to stay because [in] my first year I was very hesitant. Did I want to continue? Did I not? And obviously I did work full-time on top of that in case that, you know, if I chose to stop education. But I didn't [stop], and I did carry on and I didn't regret it. And I think how we can improve feeling [...] included is [important], because it's very, very hard, especially when everything has gone online."

#student B (British, Business Studies)

One student highlighted that the difference between their educational background and university had allowed them to develop in their approach to independent learning.

FOCUS GROUP

"I come from an Indian school, and I come from an international background. When we were studying in our education system, we were slightly spoon-fed and pampered. Everything was just given to us. When I came into university during my first semester, I was like, okay, no one is going to ask me if I need anything. I am just to have to do it myself and if I need clarification, I am going to have to ask them. It is just when you come from such different backgrounds and when you come from a different level of education and a different culture, the university really helps put you into a more independent and mature position, because then you learn how to do things by yourself. You learn how to take initiative. You know if you mess up, if you are not on a good time management schedule, and you are not able to sort of prioritise your work very well, eventually the workload becomes such that it forces you to get the hang of it. Even if you do not like it at some point, you know that you are going to have to change the way you work because that is going to help you eventually. If I compare how I was when I joined back in September 2020 and how I am now, I think I am so different. I was really dependant on a lot of things before and now I am super independent. If I need something I can ask someone myself. It changes you a lot for the better, and it teaches you how you would be in the corporate world, how you would be when you would really go out there, because not everyone is going to hold your hand. Therefore you [are] just going to have to learn to do it yourself."

#student E (Asian Indian, Business Studies)

3.5 Independent learning

Aspects of independent learning were investigated both in the surveys and focus groups. In the surveys, students were asked how many hours they would expect to spend in a typical week on a number of activities, including *independent personal study* and *unsupervised study with peers*. They were also asked how frequently they had used, when needed, and how confident they had felt using *the time, space and resources to engage in independent learning*, as well as *further resources beyond what is provided by the university*.

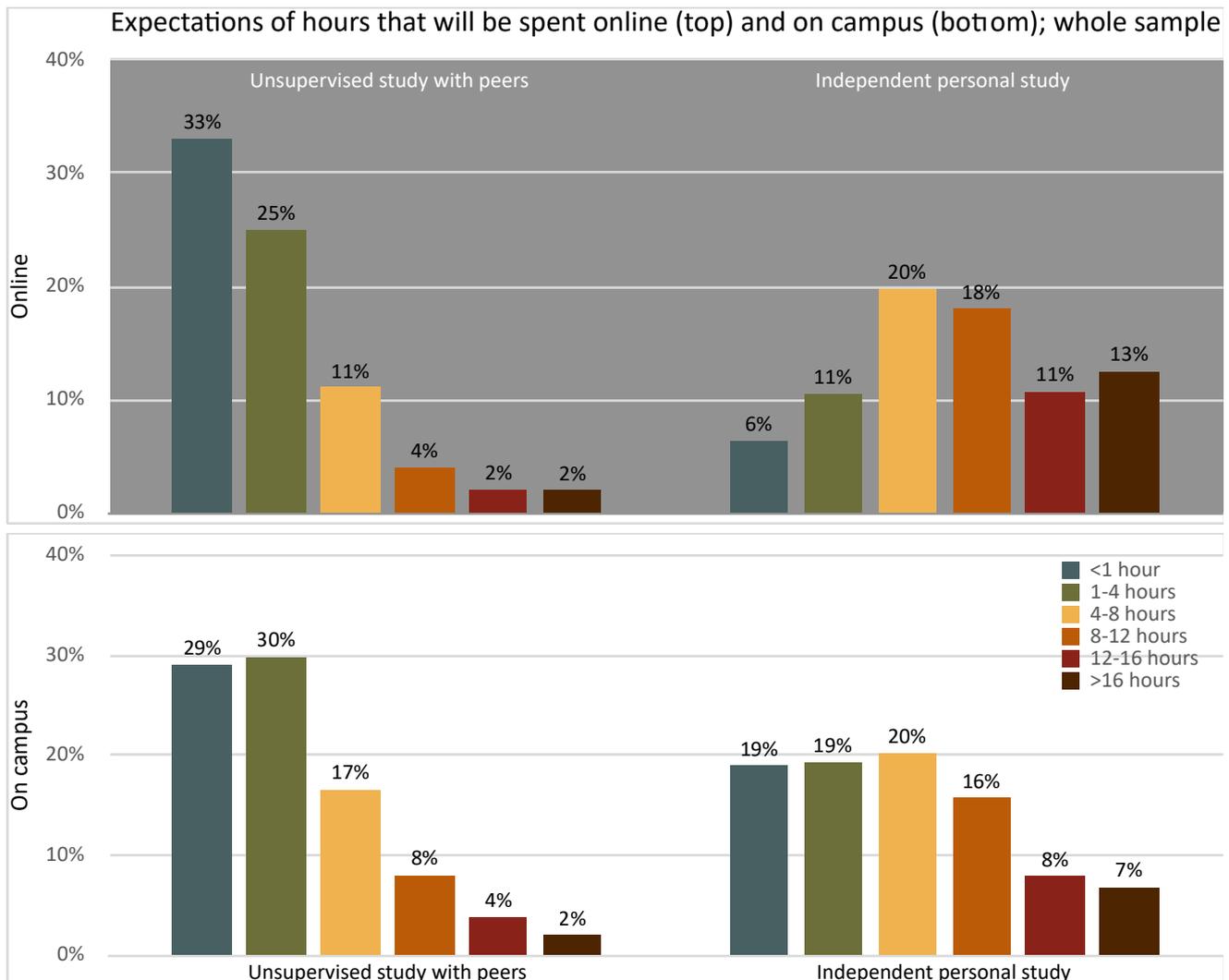


Figure 11: Proportion of all students expecting to spend various hours on unsupervised study with peers and on independent personal study, comparing online (top) and on campus (bottom). Percentages are of the whole sample (835), not of those who responded to the question, and hence do not sum to 100%

Expected engagement is higher online than on campus for independent personal study, while it is higher on campus than online for unsupervised study with peers (Figure 11). This perhaps reflects the lack of interaction with peers online, and how independent personal study replaces this in an online environment.

FOCUS GROUP

"The recorded lectures [are] the number one thing that should continue, because like I said, it's a very, very, very valuable thing for us. The second thing [...] that you can keep [...] is [...] independent learning, because by posting pre-recorded lectures and some hands-on materials we can consolidate our knowledge, especially during consolidation week and Christmas and Easter holidays. The third thing I personally would say, some formative assessment, especially during this pandemic, because the formative assessment is also very good and is also very precious to us as well."

#student L (Asian Chinese, Health Sciences)

Over the 2020/21 academic year, the majority of most ethnicity groups (Figure 12) were frequently/regularly able to use the time, space and resources to engage in independent learning, except for Other students; only 50% of Other students were able to frequently/regularly do this when needed. Among ethnicity groups, Black students had the greatest proportion (73%) who had a good level of confidence using this resource, followed by Arab students (66%), Asian students (60%), White students (59%), Other students (59%), and Mixed students (58%).

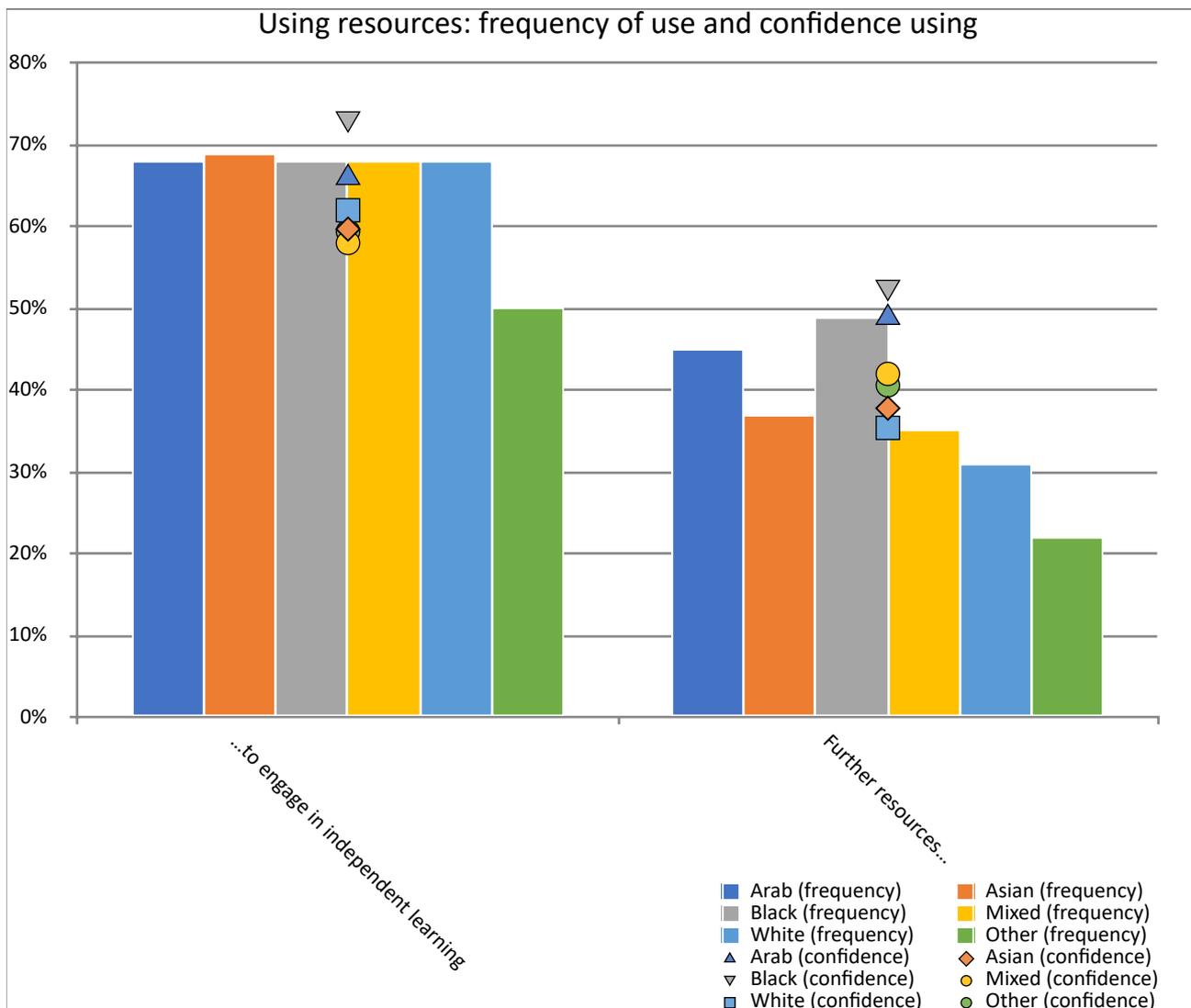


Figure 12: Proportion of each ethnicity group who said that they frequently/regularly used the above resources (bar chart); proportion of each ethnicity group who said they had a good level of confidence using these resources (plotted shapes)

Frequency of use of further resources beyond what the university provides (Figure 12) is low for all ethnicity groups, especially for Other (22%), White (31%), Mixed (35%), and Asian students (37%). For Black and Arab students, the proportion of students who were able to frequently/regularly use these resources was higher, although still low in absolute terms (49% and 45% respectively). Confidence is also low in absolute terms, but is again higher for Black (52%) and Arab students (49%). White students had the lowest confidence (35%), followed by Asian (38%), Other (41%), and Mixed students (42%).

Among the eight resources investigated (see extended report for more detail), the strongest correlations (Spearman's rho) between frequency of use and confidence exist for these two aforementioned resources. A moderate positive correlation exists for *the time, space and resources to engage in independent learning* (rho = 0.572, p = 0.000). A strong positive correlation exists for *further resources beyond what is provided by the University* (rho = 0.685, p = 0.000).

Focus group and open question responses highlighted the importance of independent learning to students' university experience. Some thought that this is a skill that students should develop on their own, others thought that teachers should be a catalyst for independent learning, or that the university should provide more guidance regarding independent learning to help students as they transition from secondary to higher education. Assistance for the transition to online learning was also highlighted as something that would be useful to some students. Other responses highlighted the role of independent learning in preparing students for the workplace, and others highlighted that independent learning should not be relied upon as a substitute for quality teaching.

On the transition from secondary to higher education, and the transition to online learning:

OPEN QUESTION Q18 - What aspect of the way in which staff have taught you in 2020/21 has prevented you from fully engaging in your study experience?

"The start of the year was a rough transition period, primarily because it felt like not many people knew what they were doing with the online learning. This made it difficult to learn in the first month. However, once that period was over I felt that learning online was overall much better than face-to-face learning mostly due to ease of access to teachers and the learning materials and all the lectures being recorded, which could be seen later."

#student 717 (Asian or Asian British: Pakistani, Other Sciences)

FOCUS GROUP

"So [if] we're given, [...] a hint or [...] guidance into where to get the resources, or even given the resources — that's even 10 times better. [...] If we have the resources [...] and we're given, like, assurance that if we need help, we can contact lectures — because I have had lecturers who have been irritated and agitated that [...] I am contacting them. I should be more independent, but sometimes you just [...] genuinely need help. [...] I remember even in my first year, when I was [new to doing an] assignment, [...] I was emailing lecturers, they would tell me to be more independent. But I'm so new to doing assignments. I did A-levels at college, so I never, ever did any assignments. And when I started uni that was the first time I did an assignment, and I had no guidance, I had no friends, I had nothing. And when I was emailing the lecturers, they weren't even helpful, no one was helpful, so I was thrown too much into the deep end."

#student AD (Asian Pakistani, Health Sciences)

FOCUS GROUP

"This year has been entirely independent learning, more or less, effectively. I feel like in first year especially, it needs to be a lot more guided because in first year [...] you are not used to the idea of having to read around the subject, because you do not have to do that in A-level. [At] A-level you can just go into all the lessons and you will be fine."

#student AC (White, Other Sciences)

FOCUS GROUP

"It is quite different from college, in that we do not get as much help or support from lecturers. It is through emails mostly, especially nowadays, so we have to learn a lot of the content ourselves. Not just using the resources that we get from university, but we would learn using YouTube, our own research a lot of times, and it does help when considered in the context of the workplace as well. A lot of times we will have to make our own decisions, and university does help us with that..."

...I think for me, the gap between university and college was quite big. You think you would get the same amount of help as college, but it is very different. I think they could make smaller groups and teach each group. Putting everyone in smaller groups would help. They should try teaching people based on their preferred method. For example, they could say we are going to teach this way, and everyone who wants to attend that can do so. They could have one session to go over slides and one session to go over worksheets so that students can then choose which one they prefer and attend that particular session."

#student D (Asian British, Business Studies)

FOCUS GROUP

"It's been pretty good in terms of encouraging us in self-teaching. I think a lot of people who maybe disagreed on the survey forget that at university you're supposed to be more independent [...and] they don't get everything spoon-fed to them, because that's definitely how I felt in my first year. I was wondering why I was struggling, and when I reflected, it was literally because I wasn't doing anything by myself, because I was so used to in my A-Levels basically being hand-held across the finish line. So I think maybe right at the beginning, especially in first year, really hammering on the importance of: at the end of the day it's your degree and you have to put in the work to get the results that you want. A lot of people won't understand that, and maybe it won't be til it's maybe too late and they'll think oh, I actually had to put in the work myself as well. That's not really the responsibility of the university staff and more like an individual decision you have to make yourself in terms of your relationship with your learning."

#student V (Not known, Other Sciences)

On the importance and nature of independent learning:

FOCUS GROUP

"I think [independent learning] is super important. It is because it is in your time, it is flexible, and you know how you want to manage your time, at the end of the day. I think it helps you facilitate that learning, because you are not under pressure. If you just study the module today, and you have like 10 minutes to spare, you can still go over your notes whenever you want because that is outside your classroom. You can do [it] whenever, as it is not a fixed schedule, and [the] same goes [for] exam preparation. If you have [...] study leave and you have an exam tomorrow, but you are ready for that exam, then you can study something else that day. This is because it is your time and that is devoted to you, you can do whatever you want with it. So I feel like independent learning is really important, and over the course of your degree you sort of understand how to utilise that so that you can get the most out of it."

#student E (Asian Indian, Business Studies)

On the value of independent learning in self-development:

FOCUS GROUP

"In India we live in a joint family, so everything has been done for us, and even at school everything is already done for us, and we just have to learn it. In university it becomes more of your choice [to do the work when] teachers are giving you work and lectures. It depends on you. If you want to perform well, you have to be independent. You have to learn more, you have to [do] your reading hours, you have to be doing your readings on time, you have to cover the lectures [ahead of time] if you want to. It does not depend on the teacher. The teachers are not going to force you to do anything, and it becomes more of your choice. It becomes more about your perspective in terms of what you want to do in your life. I believe that with independent learning it is all on you now. Once you get to university, whether or not you study is up to you, and if you do not, then that is reflected via your grades. Therefore yes, I think independent learning is important."

#student F (Asian Indian, Business Studies)

On independent learning in relation to quality learning and teaching:

OPEN QUESTION Q30 - What does quality learning mean to you?

"Taking my own initiative to build upon the teaching and areas that interest me, however it should not be done [as a] replacement [for] poor teaching."

#student 29 (Mixed White or White British and Black or Black British: African, Health Sciences)

OPEN QUESTION Q29 - What does quality teaching mean to you?

"Delivering insightful and relevant information which is applicable to the assessment or tasks at hand and to a degree whereby it is fully understood by students, but also in a way that can lead students in the right direction for independent and self-learning."

#student 3 (White, Business Studies)

On preparation for the future:

FOCUS GROUP

"Independent learning is meant to be preparing us for after uni, where we're actually working on our own, because [...] obviously teamwork and working with other people is just as important, but the point is that you're meant to understand the content yourself and be able to do it."

#student O (Asian Other, Business Studies)

"Independent learning is a skill, and it is important as when we go into the workplace there are projects whereby we would need to learn independently. It is all about working alone and getting information on your own."

#student C (Asian British, Business Studies)

4. Other selected comments

Collected below are some selected comments of students' experiences over the 2020/21 academic year.

On ways of using recordings:

FOCUS GROUP

"I always put the [recording] to 2x [speed], because [at the beginning] the lecturer just goes over the learning objectives and introduces everybody [...], then when the lecture begins, I will [put it] back to normal, and then [...] if I feel like I know something I will put it to 1.5x and I will just listen [to] skim over the information. If I feel it's important, I will rewind and go back to normal speed."

#student AD (Asian Pakistani, Health Sciences)

On final-year exams:

OPEN QUESTION Q27 - In your opinion, what assessments worked particularly well? What kinds of assessment would you like to have more frequently in the coming year?

"24-hour exams, because it is ample time to assess a student's proper understanding without time pressure and ensures it isn't just regurgitating revision notes. Given that many students have not sat in person exams for a couple of years now, final year exams in person would be difficult and stressful especially as they are so important."

#student 248 (White, Business Studies)

OPEN QUESTION Q32 - Additional comments

"As a second year student I have now adapted [...] to online learning. Being a third year student next year I won't have the time to re-adapt with the workload. Keeping lectures and exams the same for final years is vital."

#student 237 (White, Business Studies)

On engaging with online teaching:

OPEN QUESTION Q18 - What aspect of the way in which staff have taught you in 2020/21 has prevented you from fully engaging in your study experience?

“Lectures are tough to engage with and often rarely run through without many people interrupting which, when online, makes it hard to follow along. Assignments are unclear and often feedback given is unhelpful and doesn't give students a platform to build upon their work, as the feedback is so brief and holds very little actual guidance. Lectures are often all in one day, making it difficult to focus looking at a computer all day.”

#student 29 (Mixed White or White British and Black or Black British: African, Health Sciences)

OPEN QUESTION Q27 - In your opinion, what assessments worked particularly well? What kinds of assessment would you like to have more frequently in the coming year?

“In one of my modules, we had to do a quick presentation to show the lecturer that we were on the right path. After the presentation, each group member had to review each other on how well [they had] contributed to the presentation, showing that if you put a lot of time and contribution in the project you will get a better grade than the other ones, which I personally enjoyed as it gives a better understanding to the lecturer who marked it.”

#student 600 (Asian or Asian British: Pakistani, Other Sciences)

OPEN QUESTION Q18 - What aspect of the way in which staff have taught you in 2020/21 has prevented you from fully engaging in your study experience?

“As for the aspects of teaching I am totally enjoying it, and above all I am satisfied with the teaching of all lecturers. However, as a foreign student I found [it] extremely difficult [...] that I have to [...] listen [to] and understand a non-English lecturer speaking English with the accent from his country....I respect all of them and I know that they [are] trying really hard. However, [...] this make[s] me struggl[e] with my studies.”

#student 479 (White, Business Studies)

OPEN QUESTION Q32 - Additional comments

“I believe that online worked somewhat well, but I think there is a huge benefit in being able to see your peers and get some hands-on learning. Integrated online learning and face-to-face seems like it would be ideal for everyone, especially with the pre-recorded lectures helping students like myself, who don't catch on as quickly, get the chance to grasp the work independently before coming into class and being thrown in and not understanding. Furthermore, group chats have definitely helped my year out. Being able to make friends and see people is so important, and I don't think we realize that enough. My social skills have tanked and it has greatly hindered my mental health feeling alone, as we're all first years and have no one we really know as we haven't met anyone really.”

#student 810 (Black Other, Health Sciences)

OPEN QUESTION Q21 - What could the university do in terms of helping you better access the resources you need for your learning?

"A revised, student-approved/friendly layout of the VLE, which is consistent with all units, before or during the start of the semester. A navigation video at the start of the year addressing key areas of the VLE/unit we would need access to."

#student 64 (Asian or Asian British: Bangladeshi, Other Sciences)

OPEN QUESTION Q18 - What aspect of the way in which staff have taught you in 2020/21 has prevented you from fully engaging in your study experience?

"Not all lecturers appear confident with using the online teaching systems, a lot of time can be wasted trying to work out how to use them. Additional training for them in these systems might be advantageous. Also different learning styles like Kahoot, videos and interactive resources would be beneficial to students (like myself) who don't learn well from lots of reading and lots of speaking. Perhaps incorporate more small breaks from the computer screen."

#student 143 (White, Health Sciences)

On the year overall:

OPEN QUESTION Q32 - Additional comments

"The pandemic was difficult, and although I felt as if everyone had [their] own struggles and we were all dealing and trying to cope, I felt as students we [were] unfairly left to fend for themselves. At the beginning there [were] a lot of mix-ups, but also a lot of support; towards the end the support started to fade away."

#student 306 (Mixed White or White British and Black or Black British: Caribbean, Health Sciences)

OPEN QUESTION Q32 - Additional comments

"Overall, the pandemic was always going to effect my learning experience as well as the teaching experience, and hence I was prepared to have to do more independent studying, as in my opinion learning online is more challenging than face-to-face. Some teachers have provided better quality of teaching than others and have been able to sympathize with us students and therefore have done the utmost to help us, however some teachers seemed to be unprepared [for] teaching online, and hence at times learning was [...] more difficult, motivation overall [...] is hindered when you don't have a quality teaching experience, as you don't feel the want to learn."

#student 230 (White, Business Studies)

5. Reflections

This section presents a collection of the reflections of a number of members of the research team from the universities in the collaborative partnership.

(i) Reflections on the project and initiatives and practices at the University of Portsmouth:

Research showed that students of different ethnicities had different expectations of university prior to the pandemic at the University of Portsmouth, and so we asked ourselves the question, would this be the same of their expectations during the pandemic? And then what would their perceptions of their experiences be? Some students had not expected to work so hard and independently for good degree outcomes pre-COVID-19. What surprised us in this research was how so many students were uncomfortable with the self-directed, independent learning process, which in our 'Blended and Connected' model at Portsmouth was of a flipped learning approach, when it was mediated through more online processes. However, the students, who in the previous research had expected to easily gain good degree outcomes without much independent learning, were not necessarily from the same ethnic backgrounds as those who struggled with self-directed learning in this research.

It would be a useful exercise to spend some time working with students to gain a shared understanding of what exactly 'Blended and Connected Learning' and independent, self-directed learning are, and embedding that in our induction and transition processes.

Having spent much time and effort to develop a 'Blended and Connected' approach to teaching, learning and assessment, where a real focus was on creating a sense of belonging and 'connectedness' for our students — whether they were on campus or online as part of the blend — it was disappointing to find that students did not perceive that 'connectedness' in terms of feeling like a member of a university community. They did not value as much the opportunities to work with their peers or perceive that this worked well when undertaken online. In the future we still have work to do to develop this sense of belonging, both online and face-to-face, which is something that we are working on in our Being, Belonging, Becoming working group, which will be charged with the task of taking forward actions from this project by our Student Experience Committee.

The importance attributed to personal tutoring by the students was good to see, as we introduced a new Personal Tutoring and Development Framework during the pandemic, which already planned for a blended approach to tutoring sessions; however, the results show that we still have work to do to ensure that staff and students fully embrace it. Personal tutors are at the heart of the student experience, and they are best placed to respond to students in a personalised way about their experience and to understand their background and requirements. We have developed a Personal Tutoring Curriculum which should be used more, to ensure timely, focused and flexible communication with students.

(ii) Reflections on the project and granularity of analysis and action:

In designing and carrying out this collaborative project, the four partners have reflected not only on the experiences of our students, but also on our own experiences as University leaders equipped to act on the data. As a project team, we do not reflect the ethnic diversity of our student populations. While we acknowledge this on the project webpage, we need to give greater thought to how we deal with the disconnect that this creates in our use of the project data. This may be a small study, but it has captured voices by ethnicity and discipline across four different institutions — there is a recipe to be constructed from this. From the starting point of the current culture of each partner, we need to use the intelligence from the project to advocate for granular-level interventions that focus not solely on ethnicity, but upon ethnicity in a disciplinary context, to better understand effective support measures — for example, for Black

students in Business Studies, or Asian students in Health Sciences. A key step is for institutions to equip their subject areas to be proactive and responsive at the cohort level. But there is more too. If the project had been larger and longer, we might have explored the impact of institutional cultures and investigated how student perceptions differed, not only by ethnicity and discipline, but also by institution. How are our institutional cultures and values, our staffing profiles, our policy norms, intersecting with ethnicity and discipline to affect the perceptions and experiences of our students, and hence their educational outcomes.

We design our courses to enable collaborative working amongst our students, positioning this as a key professional competence. This small partnership, brought together for this QAA-funded project, has enabled us as a staff group to hone our own collaborative working skills, and in so doing to better understand the strengths and limitations of our own networks by ethnicity in particular — this in itself has been an invaluable insight into the additional barriers that stand in front of the ambitions of many of our students.

(iii) Reflections on the project, connectedness, recordings and the dangers of putting people in boxes:

For the members of the research partnership, studying differing perceptions of learning and teaching of ethnically diverse students has been a truly fascinating and insightful experience. Engaging in this type of research has always been about embracing and maximising the potential that the diversity of others can bring to our individual and collective experiences, with the aim of fostering a collaborative approach to an enriching education.

Collaboration and togetherness also seem to be important for the students who participated in this project. Our findings suggest that wanting to be and feel well, make friends and be part of something bigger, such as a community, are at the forefront of what our ethnically diverse first- and second-year undergraduate students see as the most important enabling factors on their higher education journey; a wish-list that probably is not very different from what we all value as human beings — things that help us survive and thrive.

In terms of resources for learning and teaching, we had perhaps underestimated the value and potential of videos and recorded material. Students transformed something that could be seen as a passive way of learning into a resource for active learning. Some of us may have seen our own children growing up fully immersed in the digital world and watching videos for hours. We may have been concerned that this was far too passive. However, the resourcefulness and inventiveness of students' learning with and from the recordings (as shared during our focus groups) was surprising. Students described how they routinely sped up sections and transformed the recordings into flexible and valuable resources for active learning. Their strategies are certainly worth exploring further, also in the context of flipped and peer-assisted learning and the opportunities these bring. EVOLI, a video tagging tool, for example, may open up new opportunities for engaging with video resources in a more focused and interactive way with peers and tutors. Furthermore, students, not just staff, can also be makers of recordings. This can be utilised more for authentic learning through a combination of a range of authentic, active, collaborative and inquiry-based learning strategies, including problem-based learning, for example. Additionally, the type of recorded material will affect the way that it is used, for example, pre-recorded material is likely to be used differently by students compared to recordings of live material (the former more likely in flipped learning, the latter more likely for revision or for accommodating a busy schedule). However, regardless of the type of recording, it is important that they are produced to a high standard, both in terms of digital quality and content. There is certainly a lot to think about and consider.

Students, while recognising the value of professional networks and communities, noted that they don't seem to have harnessed these fully for their learning and development. The same applies for the opportunities that open learning presents. Both of these approaches help students to build bridges to others, including those in industry and communities that stretch beyond the boundaries of their courses. It

may be useful for educators to identify ways to connect a course and its modules with internal and external networks and communities, bring in elements of open learning, and scaffold and support such opportunities within the curriculum. Such approaches could boost students' confidence and highlight the importance of self-organised learning and the opportunities these present, both within and beyond their courses, to help them develop as professionals and become life-wide and lifelong learners. Furthermore, it will also create a path that leads progressively to greater autonomy, increased connection with peers within and beyond their courses, and reduce over-reliance or dependency on their tutors.

This study also reminds us of the dangers of adding labels or categories to individuals, by putting them into specific boxes. In this case students' learning styles come to mind. We all have the capacity to learn in different ways and get better at the strategies and tactics we use. That also applies to ethnically diverse students. It is of course extremely valuable to be aware of and alert to learning differences, including of ethnically diverse students; we must design varied and flexible approaches to learning, teaching, support and assessment that help all students engage meaningfully in their learning, feel stimulated, motivated and connected with themselves, others, the subject and the world around them. Exploring such opportunities with students has the power to transform current students' experiences. There is a proverb that says "variety is the spice of life." The same can be said for learning and teaching.

(iv) Reflections on the perception of quality vs quality itself, and balancing the demand for both:

While the NSS results for the sector show lower satisfaction for non-White ethnicity groups compared to White students, this project has shown a broadly different trend. Therefore certain practices in place at the four collaborative partner universities participating in the project can serve as examples of good practice regarding non-white ethnicity groups. Recommendations and suggested actions have emerged from the positive trends among these students, several of which have been discussed in the reflections above. While many focus on differences in experience, the reflections below focus on the concept of perceptions.

Not every experience described by students was positive, and indeed it was a difficult year for students, academics and other university staff. Consequently, students expressed some additional criticism towards various teaching and learning practices. While we need to encourage students to be partners in collaborative learning (and research), and student-centred approaches are a necessity, it is worth wondering whether the 'novice' (i.e., the student) should be regarded as the 'expert' when it comes to assessing academic and pedagogical practices (Ball, 2012; Holligan & Shah, 2017; Staddon & Standish, 2012). Such an approach may undermine the professionalism of academics and promote the 'mechanisation of knowledge' (Lyotard, 1984). It also reflects a higher education that is not confident in what it offers, and whose aims are merely externally orientated (Staddon & Standish, 2012, p. 639). Recent research clearly argues that academics often struggle to do what is best for students' education, while at the same time keeping them satisfied (Sidiropoulou, 2020). As Luke (2005) argues, the invisible power of the manufacture of consent can empower or disempower academics, regardless of (a) the ethical implications of a misalignment of approaches that may exist between different stakeholders, and (b) the battle of core and external values.

For example, when students participating in this project valued their experience of 'formal tasks and activities with other students' less than other ways of learning, it does not mean that formal group learning practices do not have pedagogic value, or that we should stop doing what students do not value. Maybe the message here would be to aim to keep students satisfied and appreciating their constructive feedback, but staff should maintain their pedagogical vision and teaching and learning principles, while adapting carefully to new situations. Yes, we should use tools better, yet with the aim of making students satisfied *and* educated. Perhaps the ideal situation would be one in which students develop more positive perceptions, even if the quality remains the same, because they would better understand the pedagogical value of certain practices (where practices are of good quality, of course). Universities have a mission to convey the right messages to students, and even though better quality and experience are at the centre of this, perception of quality should not be regarded as synonymous with quality. They are closely linked, but they

are not the same, and therefore academics should perhaps not only change what they do (if they need to change), but also how they do these things. They should aim to help their students understand more about the way in which they are taught.

6. Recommendations

The recommendations below were synthesised through a combination of the data analysis given in the extended version of this report and the reflections of the members of the research partnership (see section 5).

Summary of key recommendations:

1. **Conduct further research that is sufficiently granular** in its analysis to identify the subtle differences and similarities between groups of students of different ethnicities, as well as between ethnicities within academic disciplines.
2. **Investigate possible causative links between observations made in this research and variables within the student experience** (e.g., student domicile status, whether students are in employment while studying, or whether they commute to campus, etc.).
3. **Integrate external networking and community opportunities into course programmes from the start**, in order to increase students' feelings of connectedness and sense of community, while giving them opportunities to develop skills and contacts they may need in the future.
4. **Encourage student participation in policy and co-creation activities**, as well as collaborative research with other stakeholders.
5. **Develop flexible approaches to provision of personal tutorials** to reflect the changing nature of the needs of students as they engage in blended learning.
6. **Improve the delivery/implementation of remote/online formal group activities and assessments**, as well as giving students the skills they need to effectively engage with these activities.
7. **Further explore the potential of utilising recorded material**, including the role of students as both users and creators of recorded material.

(i) Considerations for further research

- A post-focus group evaluation was filled in by eight students from the UoP. Feedback from students about their experience of participating in the project was mostly very positive, with some positive, and occasional neutral sentiments expressed. Most students appreciated the chance to have their voice heard, as well as the opportunity to hear the opinions of other students. They also improved their understanding of certain aspects of their courses through their participation. In light of this, as well as other responses to open questions indicating that students appreciate opportunities such as these to have their voice heard, it is clear that this type of project is a valuable endeavour. Universities should continue in their efforts to gather student views and opinions, group them in meaningful ways, and take meaningful steps to benefit from the information and subsequent analysis.
- We chose courses to maximise BAME response rates. When adopting this approach, it may be useful to cross-reference to literature on disciplinary cultures/pedagogies to understand 'norms', expectations and characteristics, in order to deepen understanding of differences surfaced by ethnicity.

- How does stage of study affect results? We did not target final-year undergraduates due to the NSS and because they were focusing on their final exams. Independent learning and ‘background as a resource’ are themes that may have particular resonance with final-year students completing capstone projects.
- Data analysis by ethnicity should be sufficiently granular to enable understanding of the expectations and experiences of students of different Asian and Black heritages. While this was possible for certain groups of Asian students in this research, sample sizes meant this was not feasible for Black students in our sample. Careful experimental design is required to ensure that sample sizes of different ethnicity groups are large enough for meaningful data analysis, while at the same time ensuring that sampling is sufficiently random to be considered representative.
- It is important to understand shared as well as different perspectives.
- It is worth doing a detailed unpicking of attitudes towards recordings. Do the Arab, Asian and Black students value recordings most for reasons of confidence, convenience (perhaps because they are more likely to be in paid employment?), study patterns (watching again alone or with peers?), or language/ accent barriers? This may involve conducting more specific focus groups.
- The greater satisfaction of Arab students is worth further research, to understand if this is about career plans, domicile status (i.e., international or home students), or being on a vocational course. Additionally, we need to understand why Arab students have been more satisfied with teaching and learning, and why 45% prefer online. Is this about international students on remote study last year? Is this because the alternative was deferral? Or is it about combining study and employment?

(ii) Considerations for policy

- We should be careful not to over-categorise student views by ‘forcing them into boxes’. This is particularly the case regarding so-called ‘learning styles’; while it is important to implement varied and flexible approaches to learning, teaching, support and assessment that help all students engage meaningfully in their learning, we should also recognise that all students have the capacity to learn in different ways, and they have the capacity to improve at the strategies that are used.
- Findings seem to suggest that students want to receive support for their wellbeing, make friends and be part of a university community, but with an over-reliance on the course/module to provide this. There is perhaps a great opportunity to rethink teaching strategies to incorporate networking and communities etc. outside the programme. In this way, there are opportunities for peer-to-peer learning beyond the course boundaries, but not as an add-on — rather a more integrated approach. Modelling such approaches in academic development programmes etc. would be helpful so that colleagues experience this. The value of these external opportunities would need to be explained to students at the outset.
- Universities should recognise the part that academic discipline (i.e., course) plays in student perspectives of teaching and learning, and design both services and approaches to teaching that respect these.
- Value for money concerns may be addressed by a relentless focus upon enabling strong relationships between students and staff.
- Students should be encouraged to become partners in policy and contributors to co-creation activities. We should also encourage them to engage in collaborative research activities with other stakeholders in the future. Their contributions would be credited. Through these activities we can show their feedback matters and how it is making a valuable contribution.

(iii) Considerations for practice

- Both staff and students need support to develop skills for online engagement.
- Recordings of teaching materials are valuable to students, but the potential of this resource is still to be maximised. The inventive and resourceful strategies identified in focus groups in relation to recordings are worth exploring further. EVOLI, a video tagging tool, for example, may open up new opportunities for

students to engage with video resources in a more focussed and interactive way with peers and tutors. The role of students, not just staff, as makers of recordings could also be utilised more for authentic learning, through a range of authentic, active, collaborative and inquiry-based learning strategies — including problem-based learning, for example.

- With an emphasis on staff-student relationships, universities should consider how students are allocated to staff, and if there is merit in deliberate matching to facilitate relationship-building (e.g., shared heritage) where staff diversity does not match student diversity.
- Students felt that formal tasks and activities with other students were among the aspects of teaching over the 2020/21 academic year that have contributed the least to their experience. This finding is worrying, considering that collaborative group work is a key professional activity. Might this feed forward into graduate outcomes? Focus group and open question analysis indicates that the negative view of group work is mainly associated with the difficulty of conducting it remotely and online. Given the changing nature of the workplace, the way in which universities implement remote collaborative working, and the way in which students engage with it, may be aspects that need addressing.
- Disseminate the report to interested students and staff who participated in the project. Some focus group participants specifically requested to be informed of the results, and we would like student and staff feedback on the report.
- It is evident that personal tutorials have not played as important a role as they could or should have over the 2020/21 academic year. Universities should focus on providing personal tutorials that encourage resilience, emotional intelligence, and emphasise the health and wellbeing of students. In a blended learning environment, it is necessary for personal tutorials and other pastoral care services to be equally as flexible in terms of delivery. Universities still have a duty of care for their students, even when they are not on campus. Students may be away from campus, either due to reasons of choice or necessity (such as self-isolation, visa conditions, etc.). Regardless, flexible personal tutoring should be a valuable resource for all students, and should appropriately focus on distance learners.
- Organise regular department- or course-level virtual social events to help remote students feel more connected.
- Have the option during remote lectures for anonymous questions to be asked in the session chat. This will increase engagement for students who feel embarrassed or intimidated asking questions when they are identifiable.
- Ask students about how we can value their backgrounds in teaching to get their ideas to use in the classroom. These ideas could be gathered anonymously online.
- We need to better explain to students what blended learning is exactly, especially that it is not all online learning. We also need to explain to students about independent and self-guided learning, both in our induction and transition processes.

7. Concluding remarks

During this collaborative, QAA-funded research project, we investigated the differing student perceptions and experiences of teaching and learning in the 2020/21 academic year, in the context of blended learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our aims included: gaining a deeper understanding of these perceptions and experiences; adding evidence to the sector regarding tackling the awarding gap; giving an opportunity for students to have their voices heard; and identifying areas of staff, curriculum, and policy development for subsequent academic years. We used surveys and focus groups to gather the data, and analysed it according to ethnicity group and subject area.

Analysis revealed both differences and similarities between ethnicities and subject areas — some have been more surprising than others. Most notably we found that Black, Arab and certain groups of Asian students had a significantly different experience of the 2020/21 academic year compared to White, Mixed and Other students. Black, Arab and Asian students typically had a better experience, and for Arab students the most popular mode of study was online (unlike all other ethnicity groups, the majority of whom preferred face-to-face studying). Additionally, we found that students who were enrolled on courses in Health Sciences (one of the three subject areas) also had a better experience. The causes of these differences require further investigation, although we would hypothesise that for Health Sciences students, the greater on-campus time compared to other subject areas (as permitted by government regulations) may be a significant contributing factor. It is interesting to note that there are differences by ethnicity within subject areas; for example, the positive experience of the academic year and preference for online studying among Arab students is largely due to those on Other Sciences courses (not Health Sciences, as might be expected from the above analysis).

Recordings of teaching materials were found to be particularly valuable to the majority of students over the 2020/21 academic year, and we believe that there is further scope for maximising the potential of this resource in the future. However, students felt that formal group work did not contribute as much to their experience of the year as it could have. Focus groups and open question responses indicate that this is largely due to the difficulties of conducting such work remotely and online. The implementation of group activities is something that universities need to improve, and students need to be equipped with the skills required to engage effectively. This is especially so, in light of the evolving nature of the workplace towards a more flexible, work-from-home format, as well as the benefit that engaging in group work can have on students' wellbeing.

Student experience of factors related to wellbeing was poor in the 2020/21 academic year, especially compared to the value that students put on aspects such as making friends, developing a sense of community, and receiving adequate mental health support. By taking a flexible approach to delivering personal tutorials and other pastoral care services (reflecting the flexible or blended nature of teaching delivery), as well as integrating external networking opportunities and communities into course programmes from the start, this gap between expectations and experiences of wellbeing may be narrowed.

While our results have provided fertile ground for a number of recommendations, our findings have been thought-provoking; they have raised more questions and identified further areas for research and exploration. Our hope is that by presenting our findings and highlighting some of the more surprising results, other institutions will realise the value of this type of research, and they will be encouraged to conduct similar research of their own.

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9. Appendices

Appendix A: Survey questions

ABOUT YOU AND YOUR PROGRAMME/COURSE – DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

How would you describe your gender?

Where do you consider your permanent home to be? [countries]

What is your fee status? [Home, EU, International]

How would you describe your ethnicity? (Please choose one option that best describes your ethnic group or background):

Where have you been living (for the majority of the time) since the beginning of this academic year?

- On-campus university accommodation
- Off-campus university accommodation
- Private student/non-student accommodation
- My family home in the UK

- My family home in Europe (excluding UK)
- My family home overseas (excluding Europe)
- Staying with friends (or other) in the UK
- Staying with friends (or other) outside the UK
- I would rather not say
- Other

What year of your programme/course are you in?

TEACHING & LEARNING

Q10. How valuable to your learning have these elements of teaching in your programme/course been during this academic year (if applicable)? [Very valuable, Valuable, Average Value, Limited Value, Not valuable]

- Recordings of teaching materials (audio with slides, video with slides or annotations)
- Online streaming of live lectures
- Face-to-face sessions on campus (workshops, seminars, lectures)
- Lecture engagement sessions (live and interactive online sessions)
- Tasks and activities set by teaching staff to complete on your own
- Tasks and activities set by teaching staff to complete with other students
- Individual feedback on tasks you completed on your own
- Group feedback on assignments by teaching staff
- Opportunities to ask questions (email or other)
- Personal tutorial sessions

Q11. To what extent do you agree with these statements about your learning experience in the current academic year? [Definitely Agree / Agree/ Neither agree or disagree / Disagree / Definitely Disagree]

- I am enjoying it
- I feel more comfortable online than I would in a face-to-face class
- I feel better able to contribute to discussions online
- I am comfortable using the technology
- I feel I am learning well
- I would prefer to be in a primarily face-to-face learning environment
- I don't feel I am missing out as a result of studying online
- I feel that online studying provides all aspects of studying, although in a different mode
- I feel my voice is heard when I give feedback on my course
- I feel motivated to complement my learning through further resources beyond what is provided
- The course inspired me to join a professional network/community or an open course.

Q12. To what extent do you agree that the teaching you have experienced this year does the following?

Teaching on my course this year has...

- engaged me in learning that is meaningful and relevant to me.
- enabled me to access course content that stimulates learning and allows participation in learning activities.
- allowed me to demonstrate my knowledge and strengths during assessments.
- promoted my engagement and my sense of belonging amongst students.
- valued my background and recognises it as a resource that enriches my learning experience
- motivated me to seek learning opportunities beyond the programme/course

Q13. How important do you think that the following experiences are/can be to the quality of your learning?

- get time, albeit remotely, with academic staff when you need it
- receive personal support/guidance with learning
- study with fellow students
- discuss academic work with fellow students
- develop a sense of belonging to peers on the programme/course
- have sufficient access to the on-campus materials and equipment that you need
- have sufficient access to the online resources that you need
- have sufficient access to the library content, services and support that you need
- knowing where and how to locate additional resources that are useful to your learning
- knowing where to find additional learning opportunities
- have sufficient support to develop your digital/technological competencies
- make good contacts or network for your future career

Q14. How important do you think that the following experiences are/can be to your wellbeing?

- receive adequate support for your mental wellbeing
- make university friends
- feel like a member of a university community

Q15. To what extent do you agree that your study experience this year gave you the opportunity to do the following:

- get time, albeit remotely, with academic staff when you need it
- receive personal support/guidance with learning
- study with fellow students
- discuss academic work with fellow students
- develop a sense of belonging to peers on the programme/course
- have sufficient access to the on-campus materials and equipment that you need
- have sufficient access to the online resources that you need
- have sufficient access to the library content, services and support that you need
- know where and how to locate additional resources that are useful to your learning
- have sufficient support to develop your digital/technological competencies
- make good contacts or network for your future career

Q16. And to what extent do you agree that your study experience this year gave you the opportunity to do the following:

- receive adequate support for your mental wellbeing
- make university friends
- feel like a member of a university community

Q17. Given the ongoing coronavirus situation and the likely safety measures required for face-to-face teaching (social distancing, etc.), which of the following teaching delivery methods do you prefer?

- I prefer face-to-face teaching
- I prefer online teaching
- I have no preference

[If selected no preference] **Q17a. Is there anything that works particularly well, or that you particularly enjoy, about face-to-face teaching or online teaching? (open question)**

[If selected online teaching] **Q17b. What have you enjoyed/most valued about online teaching? (open question)**

[If selected face-to-face teaching] **Q17c. Is there anything that works particularly well, or that you particularly enjoy, about face-to-face teaching? (open question)**

Q18. What aspect of the way staff have taught you in 2020-21, if any, has prevented you from fully engaging and benefiting from your study experience? (open question)

ACCESSIBILITY

[Note: To provide context to your responses about your perceptions of the quality of teaching, we need to ask some questions about your situation and conditions related to studying from home]

Q19. Please indicate how frequently you have had access when needed during the current academic year to the following, when studying from home [Regularly, frequently, occasionally, rarely, never]:

- A reliable internet connection with sufficient bandwidth for all my devices
- Adequate computing devices (or other hardware) to complete all my work
- All the software I needed to complete my work
- The required camera/microphone
- The Virtual Learning Environment
- The online resources of my University's library
- Time, space and resources to engage in independent learning
- Further resources beyond what is provided by the University [please specify]:

Q19a. If you used further resources beyond what is provided by the University, please specify. (open question)

Q20. Please indicate how confident you have felt in using the following, during the current academic year [Very confident to not at all confident; 5-point scale]:

- My internet connection
- My computing devices (or other hardware) required to complete all my work
- All the software I needed to complete my work
- The required camera/microphone
- The Virtual Learning Environment
- The online resources of my University's library
- Time, space and resources to engage in independent learning
- Further resources beyond what is provided by the University

Q21. What could the university do in terms of helping you better access the resources you need for your learning? (open question)

ENGAGEMENT AND EXPECTATIONS

Q22. How important to your quality of learning are the following?

- The amount of time you spend communicating with academic staff online
- The amount of time you spend communicating with academic staff face-to-face, on campus
- The amount of time you spend speaking to other students on your course, online
- The amount of time you spend speaking to other students on your course, face-to-face and on campus
- The time you spend communicating with others outside your course/programme/university in networks and communities?

Q23. In the coming academic year, and in a normal study week, how many hours do you typically expect to spend on the following? [ranges: less than 1 hour, 1-4 hours, 4-8 hours, 8-12 hours, 12-16 hours, greater than 16 hours?]

Separate answers for: On campus (when government guidance allows it) / Online

- Lectures
- Supervised group seminars/workshops
- Individual time with teaching staff/supervisor
- Unsupervised study with peers
- Independent personal study

Q24. In the coming academic year, and in a normal study week, how often do you typically expect to do the following? [Regularly, frequently, occasionally, rarely, never]

Separate answers for: On campus (when government guidance allows it) / Online

- Ask questions in taught sessions or contribute to discussions about course material in taught sessions
- Discuss ideas from your course with teaching staff outside taught sessions, including by email/online
- Discuss your academic performance and/or feedback with teaching staff
- Work with teaching staff on activities other than coursework
- Work with other students on course projects or assignments
- Explain course material to one or more students
- Ask another student to help you understand course material
- Talk about your career plans with teaching staff or advisors
- Participate in networks and communities or open courses external to your programme/course
- Use learning resources external to the programme/course

Q25. Overall, how important to your learning is it to:

- feel connected to the staff on your course?
- feel connected to other students on your course?

ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK

Q26. Please tell us to what extent you agree/disagree with the following statements:

This year...

- the teaching prepared me well for my assessments.
- the online assessments provided valuable learning opportunities.
- there was a good and balanced variety of assessment types.
- I was given the opportunity to tailor assessments to my own aspirations and interests.
- I received quality written and/or verbal feedback from teaching staff.
- I had opportunities for peer-to-peer feedback from other students.
- I was encouraged to self-evaluate and reflect on assignments.

Q27. In your opinion, what assessments worked particularly well? What kinds of assessment would you like to have more frequently in the coming year? (open question)

Q28. What would be the most useful way to get feedback on your work in the coming academic year? (open ques' on)

OVERALL

Q29. What does quality teaching mean to you? (open ques' on)

Q30. What does quality learning mean to you? (open ques' on)

Please tell us to what extent you agree/disagree with the following statements:

Q31. My overall experience of my programme/course in 2020-21:

- met my expectations for quality of teaching.
- met my expectations for quality of learning.

Q32. If you have any addi' onal comments about your overall student experience of learning and teaching in the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic, please write them here. (open ques' on)

Appendix B: Focus group ques' ons

1. What does quality learning mean to you? What does quality teaching enable you to do? Most of the students who agreed that they are enjoying their learning experience feel that they are also learning well. There is a correlation between these two: enjoyment and learning. **Are there elements that are not so enjoyable, still valuable to your learning? Does the content have to challenge you to be engaging/effective?**

2. Recordings of teaching materials (audio with slides, video with slides or annotations) are the most valuable teaching element (73% agreed they were valuable – the highest percentage by far when compared to other teaching elements). **Why is the recording the most valuable teaching method? How relevant is the teaching method to quality of teaching?**

3. Just over a third of students agreed that, based on their experience of teaching on their course, their background is valued and recognised as a resource that enriches their learning experience. **If you agree, how do they do this? If not, how do you feel your background could be better valued and recognised as a resource that enriches your learning experience?**

4. The vast majority of students indicated that, during the current academic year, they have had access when needed to the following when studying remotely: time, space and resources to engage in independent learning. Additionally, 62% of the students feel very or quite confident in using these resources, and the rest of the students feel less or not confident. **What do you understand by 'independent learning'? Is independent learning important to you? How does your university help you to become/develop as an independent learner?**

5. Which assessments have you learnt the most from, and why? Which assessments have you learnt the least from, and why? **Do you ever do assessed tasks (these may be called formative assessments) which do not count towards your grades? If you do, how do they help you learn?** What sort of tasks are they? How do they work? Does everyone do them?

6. Most students feel that the quality of both learning and teaching met their expectations this year. **What are the 3 key things that made a difference to your learning? What aspects of this year's learning and teaching experience would you keep for next year? And Why?**