Transforming the pre-arrival experience

How the first national Pre-arrival Academic Questionnaire (PAQ) can shape and influence national policy, institutional practice and the student experience.

Michelle Morgan, Dean of Students, University of East London

Jonathan Neves, Head of Research & Surveys, Advance HE

explorance
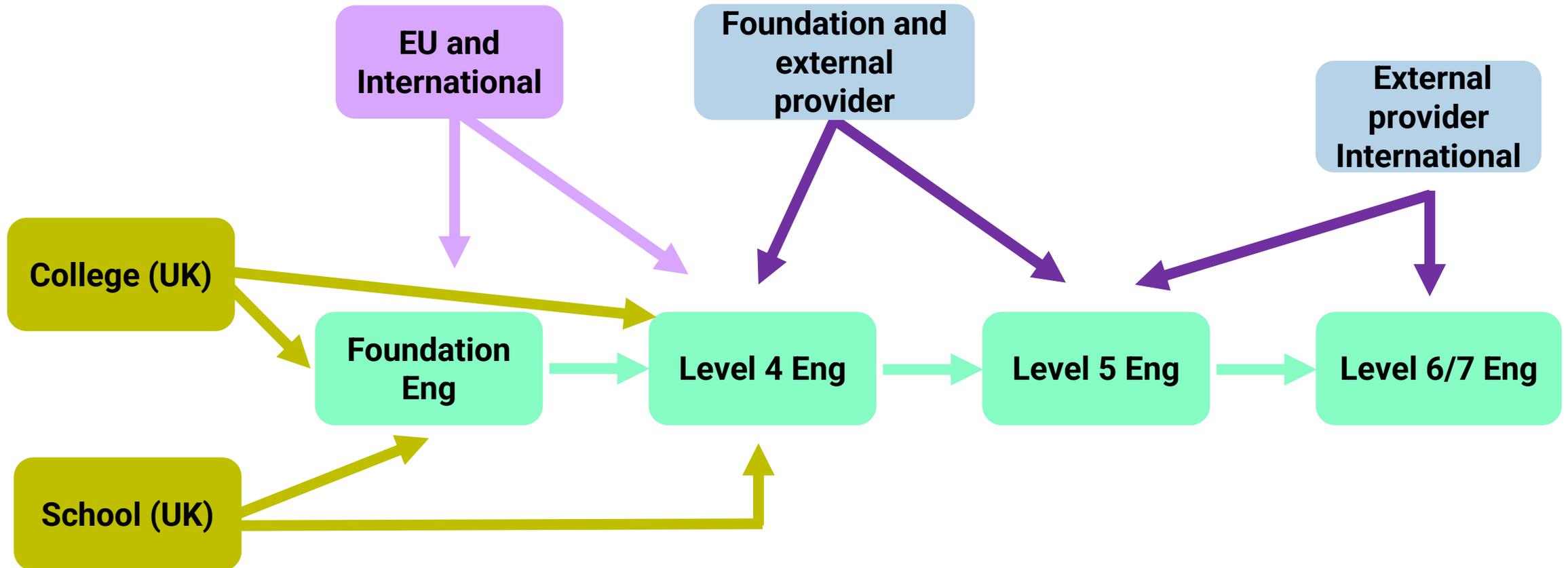
Student Voices
in Higher Education

Aims and objectives

- Origins and rationale of the PAQ

- Purpose and scope of the National Pilot
   Phase 1 and 2
   Timelines

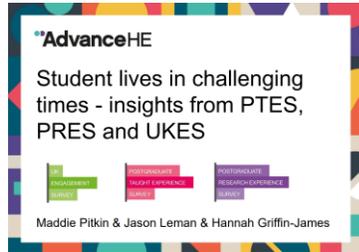- Phase 1 approach and sector benchmarking

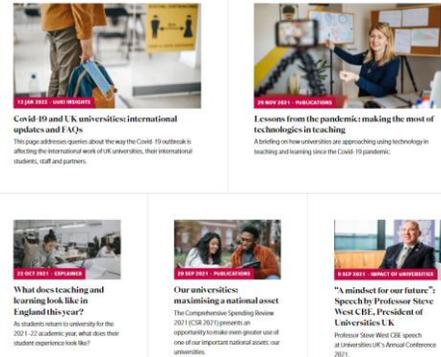- Headline findings

Origins and rationale of the PAQ

Where do our students come from in England?

The importance of supporting student transitions

Student lives in challenging times - insights from PTES, PRES and UKES

Maddie Pitkin & Jason Leman & Hannah Griffin-James

Student Surveys | Advance HE (advance-he.ac.uk)

Covid (universitiesuk.ac.uk)

TURBOCHARGING THE FUTURE

The Interim Report of the UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission

Turbocharging the future (upp-foundation.org)

UCAS
DATA AND ANALYSIS

Data and analysis | | UCAS

Students' perceptions of belonging and inclusion at university

February 2022

Belonging-and-inclusion-survey-Wonkhe-Pearson-Feb-22.pdf
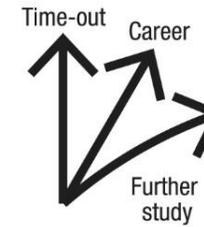
First Contact and Admissions

Pre-arrival

Arrival and Orientation

Introduction to Study at University

Re-orientation and Reinduction

Outduction

Time-out · Career · Further study

Improving the Student Experience - Official Website

Rationale of the PAQs

- A meaningful pre-arrival/arrival course activity that provides a parity of initial academic experience for all students across courses.
    - CL critical to encourage engagement

- It is designed to get students reflecting on how they studied and how they expect to study.

- To provide staff across academic and professional support spheres with vital information that will assist them in developing and evolving their provision in real time to bridge the perceived and actual skill and knowledge gaps of students.

- Students get feedback within 3 weeks of starting with headline findings and advice.

Survey comprises of 7 themed sections

Previous study qualifications

Previous study experience

Motivations and expected challenges of study

Student expectations

Current learning expectations

Attitudes towards the level of study being

undertaken

Biographical/ demographic details

AdvanceHE

University of East London

Jisc

Stops assumptions being made

Formalised through the 11 University, £2.7m HEFCE funded Postgraduate Experience Project

(called Entry to Study Survey)

Postgraduate_Experience_Report_Final.pdf

Bridging_the_gap_between_secondary_and_tertiary_education-Morgan_2020.pdf (improvingthestudentexperience.com)

Financial_concerns_and_working_intentions_of_incoming_Level_4_university_students-_implications_of_C19.pdf (improvingthestudentexperience.com)
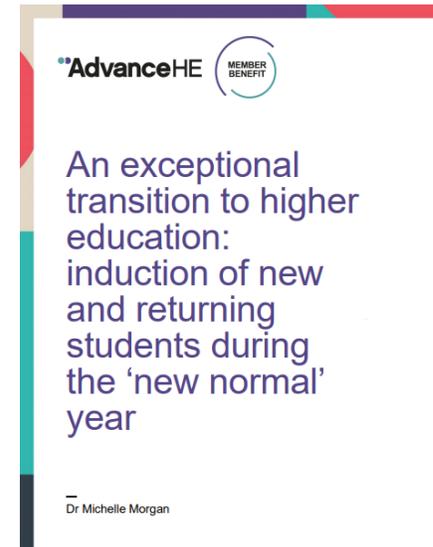
An exceptional transition to higher education: induction of new and returning students during the 'new normal' year | Advance HE (advance-he.ac.uk)
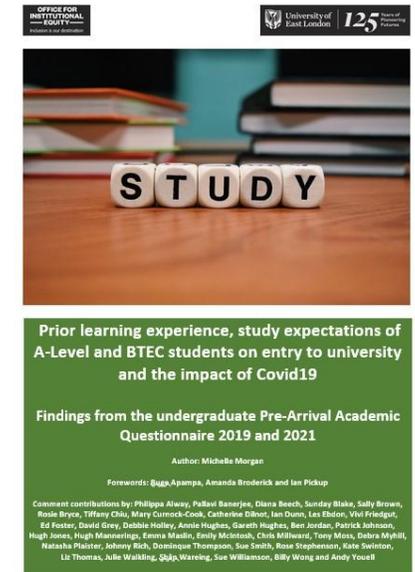
Prior learning experience, study expectations of A-Level and BTEC students on entry to university and the impact of Covid19 | Advance HE (advance-he.ac.uk)

J

Purpose and scope of the National Pilot

Phase 1 and 2

explorance

Student Voices
in Higher Education

Purpose and scope of the National Pilot PAQ Project

There are a range of overarching objectives for this OfS EOO Innovation funded project.

- **To establish consistency** in how the sector collects and acts upon information from students upon arrival around their learning styles, expectations, challenges and requirements.

- **To drive dedicated activity at local level** to close the gap between expectations, requirements and the actual experience upon arrival.

- **To provide robust data-led evidence** to enable institutions to address inconsistencies in how different groups of students (for example by social background, qualification type, geography and demographics) begin their learning and develop a platform to progress to good outcomes.

- **To create a fuller understanding** across the sector of the Pre-arrival experience, providing evidence for wider policy making and cross-sector activity.

- **Support providers** in delivering a range of practical outcomes across different student groups, including improved wellbeing and belonging, improved continuation and attainment. Earlier and preventative intervention should further contribute to higher progression to further study or employment.

Technical Delivery

- Institutional access to the survey
  - Similar to PTES, PRES
    - Downloaded template that is locked
    - Text and logos can be added
    - Questions can be added at the end
    - Benchmarking provided to participating institutions

- Student access
  - Applicant student ID is requested
    - An institutional check
    - Enable extra student characteristic data to be added

Timeline of the National Pilot PAQ Project

Outline timescales (year 1)

- *April – June 2025: Confirm institutional participation*
- *April - July 2025: Confirm question sets, ethics, methodology – through working and advisory group*
- *August 2025: Survey set up*
- *September – November: Survey window wave 1*
- *November – topline institutional data received*
- January/February – benchmarking data
- January 2026 onwards – working group members receive anonymised datasets for own analysis
- January 2026 onwards – call for participation for year 2
- April 2026: Sector reports produced. Institutional case studies
- May 2026: Wave 1 dissemination event

Year 2 timings will broadly match this into 2026/2027

Membership of the Steering Group

- Chair Les Ebdon (Professor Sir), Chair of the Advisory Group (National Policy)
- Buge Apampa (Professor), Pro-Vice Chancellor Education and Experience, University of East London (L&T and EDI)
- Ruth Arnold (International and Education Charities)
- Graeme Atherton (Professor), Associate Pro-Vice Chancellor for Regional Engagement at the University of West London and Vice Principal, Ruskin College Oxford (National Policy, former Director NEON)
- Diana Beech (Dr), Director of the Finsbury Institute and former CEO of London Higher (National Policy)
- Natasha Dhumma, National Union of Students
- Owen Gower (Dr), Director for the UK Council for Graduate Education (Postgraduate Policy)
- David Grey, UKAT (National Personal Tutoring and Academic Advising)
- Kat Heywood (Dr), Head of Business Intelligence Data Analytics, Jisc
- Ben Jordan, UCAS, Head of Policy (Recruitment and Data)
- Charles Knight, Director, Educational Excellence, Advance HE
- Nick Hillman/ Rose Stephenson, Higher Education Policy Institute (National Policy)
- Gareth Hughes Student Minds Mental Health Charter (Student and Staff Mental Health)
- Omar Khan (Dr), Chief Executive Officer TASO (Evaluation and Policy)
- Sue Williamson, Director and CEO of the Schools, Students and Teachers Network (National Policy and L+T)
- Johnny Rich, Chief Executive of the Engineering Professors' Council (Widening Access and National Policy)
- Jenny Shaw, HE External Engagement Director, The Unite Group
- Brooke Storer Church (Dr), Chief Executive, GuildHE (Policy)

Membership of the Working Group

- Liz Austin (Professor) Student Voices, Evaluation and Student Engagement
- Sue Beckingham, Generative AI, L&T
- Sunday Blake, GuildHE, Widening Access, Belonging
- Mark Bennett, Director (FindAUniversity Ltd) PGT Recruitment and Support
- Tiffany Chiu (Dr), Inclusion
- Rachel Ditchfield, Director, Savanta
- Vivi Friedgut, Founder and CEO Blackbullion, Finance
- Wendy Garnham (Professor), Widening Participation Transitions and Secondary Teaching
- *Thandiwe Gilder, Advance HE PAQ Project Researcher Also on the SG*
- Debbie Holley (Professor), L&T, Technology
- Patrick Johnson, Legal and EDI
- Deborah Johnston (Professor), Disability
- Rose Luckin (Professor), Generative AI
- Emma Maslin, Senior Policy and Research Officer at AMOSSHE, Commuter students
- Emily McIntosh (Dr), Collaboration and Co-creation
- *Michelle Morgan (Dr), Transitions, PAQ, Wellbeing Also on the SG*
- *Jonathan Neves, Head of Research & Surveys, Advance HE Also on the SG*
- Lydia Pell, Student Minds Assessor and Clinical Supervisor, Mental Health
- Liz Thomas (Professor), Widening Access and Student Success
- Paul Wakeling (Professor), Postgraduate Taught Research and Policy
- *Dominic Walker (Dr), Business intelligence and Surveys consultant, Data analytics, Jisc*
- Billy Wong (Professor), Access and Participation

AdvanceHE

University of East London

Jisc

Phase 1 approach and sector benchmarking

explorance

Student Voices
in Higher Education

Participation

15 UG institutions – **5,548** responses
13 PGT institutions – **2,285** responses
Flexibility on institutional delivery

Ethical approval

Obtained via UEL for sector experts to do deep dives in their areas

Completion approaches

Pre-arrival activity
Post-arrival in-class activity

All students

Benchmarking

Same approach as PTES and PRES

Easily view similarities and differences

Key demographic and (anonymised) institutional comparisons

Benchmarks aligned with APP, continuation and NSS/PTES

University of East London

Jisc

Participating institutions

Institution	Type	Region
Arts University Bournemouth	Small & Specialist	SW
Aston University	Pre-92	WM
Bath Spa University	Post-92	SW
Courtauld Institute	Small & Specialist	London
Leeds Trinity University	Small & Specialist	NE
Liverpool Hope University	Small & Specialist	NW
Norland College	College	SW
Royal Agricultural University	Small & Specialist	SW
SOAS	Pre-92	London
Southampton Solent University	Post-92	SE
UCEN Manchester	Small & Specialist	NW
University of Bradford	Pre-92	NE
University of East London	Post-92	London
University of Portsmouth	Post-92	SE
University of Worcester	Post-92	SW

Challenges and lessons learned

- Very high level of initial interest despite timescale challenges

- Institutions reported challenges to turn initial interest and verbal confirmation into final approval at senior level

- In some cases, there was evidence that the PAQ was being understood as a sector-survey activity similar to NSS, with blockage cited around marketing departments and not enough time being available.

- There were also some institutions who are undergoing major strategic challenges and were unable to prioritise taking part in the PAQ this year, but expressed an intention to take part in year 2.

- Through lobbying by the project team and invaluable advice from Professor Sir Les Ebdon, we confirmed participation with 15 institutions.

Headline findings

Participants backgrounds and living arrangements point to a wide range of support being needed
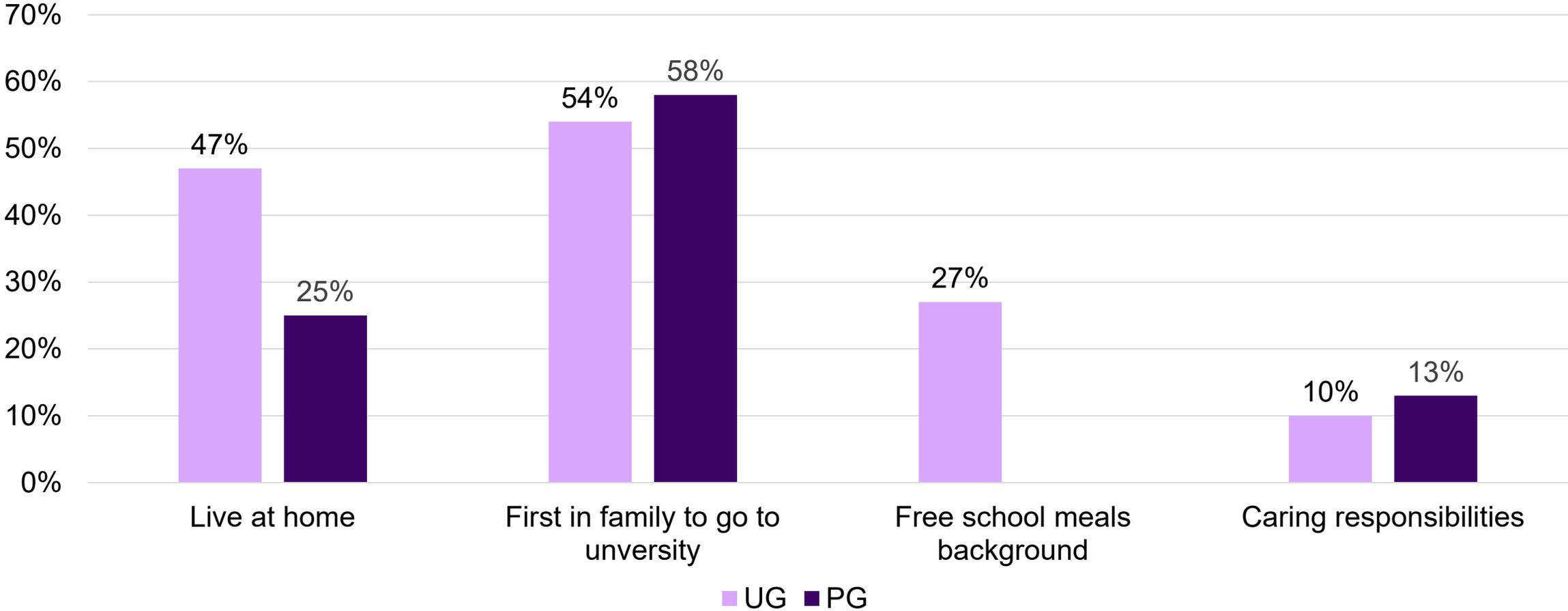
Bar chart showing percentages for UG and PG participants:

Category	UG	PG
Live at home	47%	25%
First in family to go to unversity	54%	58%
Free school meals background	27%	
Caring responsibilities	10%	13%

Legend: UG (light purple), PG (dark purple)

AdvanceHE

University of East London

M

Jisc

Entry into study

UG Route into study

	UCAS	All	CG	1U
No, got first choice and did not go through clearing	82.7%	78%	83%	70%
Used clearing as did not apply thru main UCAS cycle	**5.8%**	**12%**	**8%**	**20%**
Yes, as did not get the grades for my first choice	4.9%	4%	4%	3%
Yes, as declined original offer and used clearing to find a new course	6.6%	6%	5%	7%

Year achieved highest entry qualification for UG study

	All	CG	1U
2025	**55%**	**65%**	**39%**
2024	17%	17%	19%
2023	8%	6%	**12%**
2022	4%	3%	**7%**

Visits to universities by applicants before choosing and starting their course

	All UG	1U		All PGT	1U
0	**29%**	**42%**		**71%**	**73%**
1	21%	21%		16%	14%
2	21%	19%		7%	8%
3	15%	11%		5%	4%
4+	14%	6%		1%	1%

AdvanceHE   University of East London   Jisc

Reasons for no visits- all UG respondents

Legend: 1U, CG, All

Reason	1U	CG	All
I had to study at the nearest institution to where I lived due to caring responsibilities	10%	8%	9%
I wanted to study close to where I lived	36%	37%	36%
Only institution nearest to where I live that did the course I wanted to do	12%	14%	13%
It is the only institution in the country that does this course	2%	2%	2%
I could not afford to visit any institutions	6%	9%	8%
I came through clearing as I had not thought about studying a degree before and I did not have time to visit this institution before starting	8%	8%	8%
I did not get my 1st choice so came through clearing and did not have time to visit this institution before starting	1%	2%	2%
A family member/friend recommended this institution to me	15%	13%	14%
I am an international student but I looked at the institution online	21%	14%	17%
I am an international student and it was recommended by an agent	5%	3%	4%
I looked at the institution through social media	18%	18%	18%

AdvanceHE   University of East London   Jisc

Reasons for choosing the course

UG

Course focused

Course modules — All 48%, CG 46%, 1U 50%
Course specific facilities/resources — All 47%, CG 45%, 1U 50%
Course links with industry — All 36%, CG 34%, 1U 41%
Employment prospects — All 34%, CG 33%, 1U 37%
The university's reputation in the subject area — All 31%, CG 31%, 1U 31%
Teaching and assessment methods — All 25%, CG 22%, 1U 29%
Open day/visit/interview experience — All 23%, CG 30%, 1U 10%
Unconditional offer based on predicated grades — All 12%, CG 11%, 1U 12%

Legend: All, CG, 1U

PGT

Multiple reasons

Reputation
Locality
Facilities
Cost

Overall reputation of the institution — All 62%, CG 51%, 1U 68%
Location of institution in the UK — All 51%, CG 43%, 1U 55%
Course content — All 46%, CG 41%, 1U 48%
Reputation in chosen subject area — All 43%, CG 40%, 1U 45%
Good teaching methods — All 40%, CG 31%, 1U 45%
Reputation of department — All 27%, CG 26%, 1U 28%
Graduates from this institution have a good career and employment... — All 25%, CG 20%, 1U 28%
Institutional facilities — All 24%, CG 15%, 1U 29%
The cost of the course was lower compared to other institutions — All 20%, CG 20%, 1U 20%

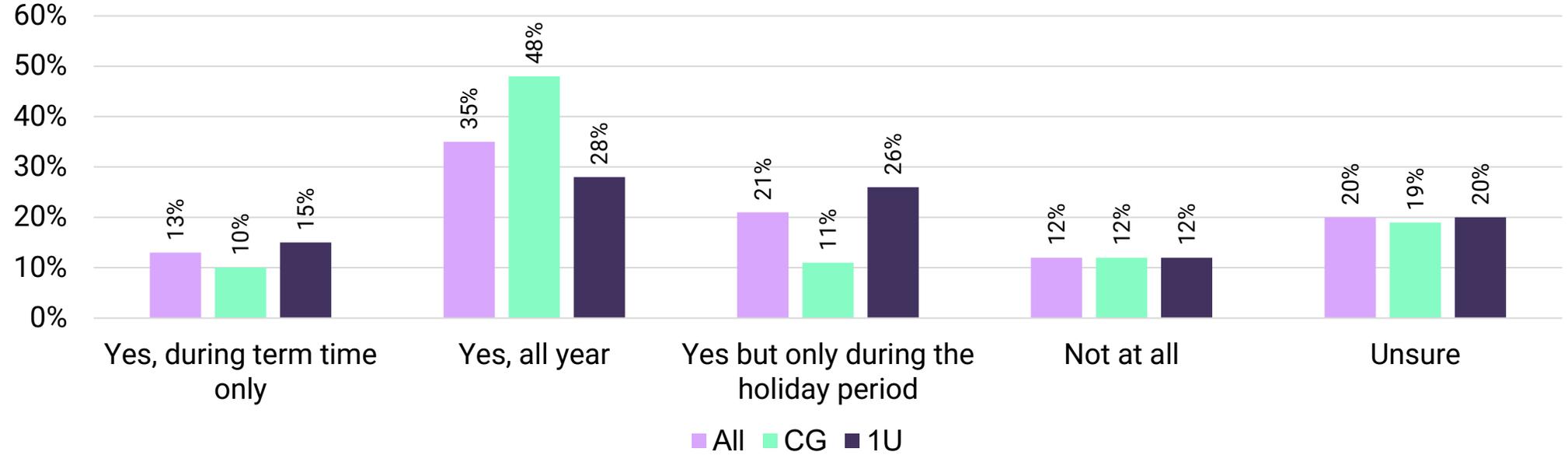Legend: All, CG, 1U

AdvanceHE

University of East London

J

Jisc

Paid work intentions during study
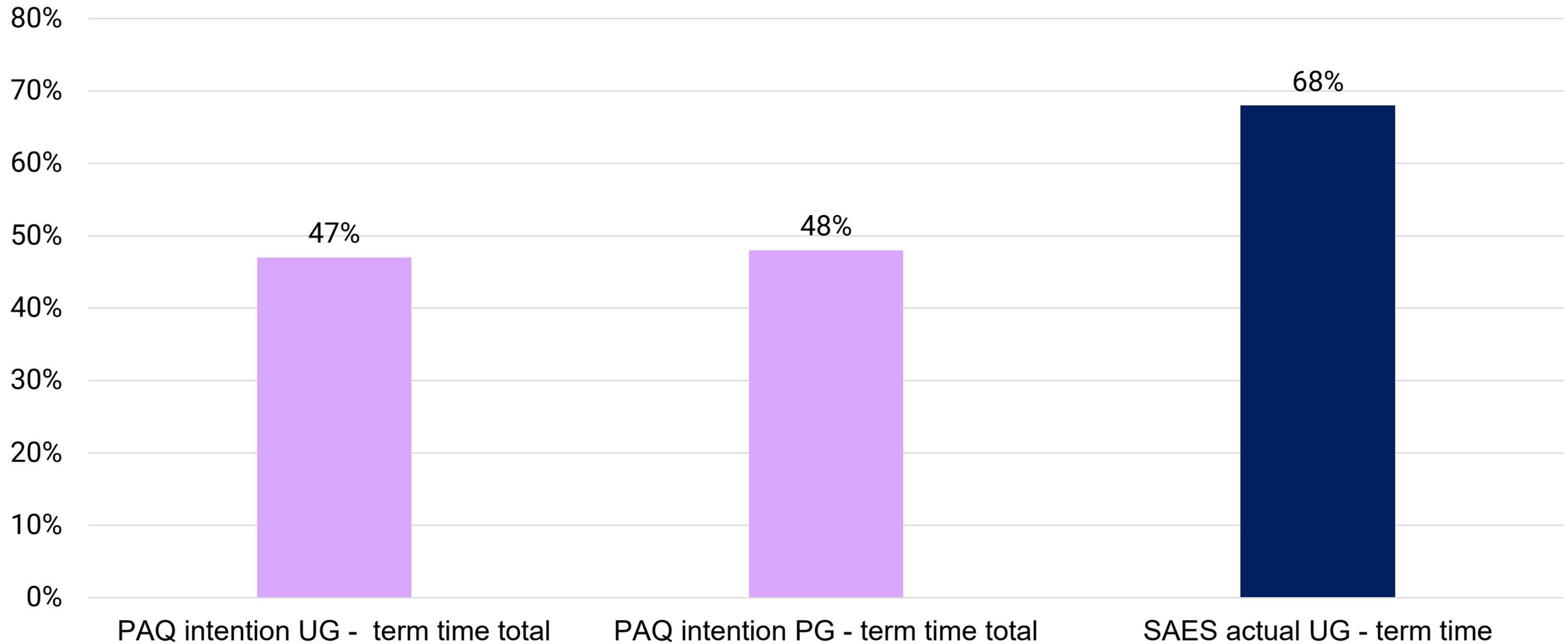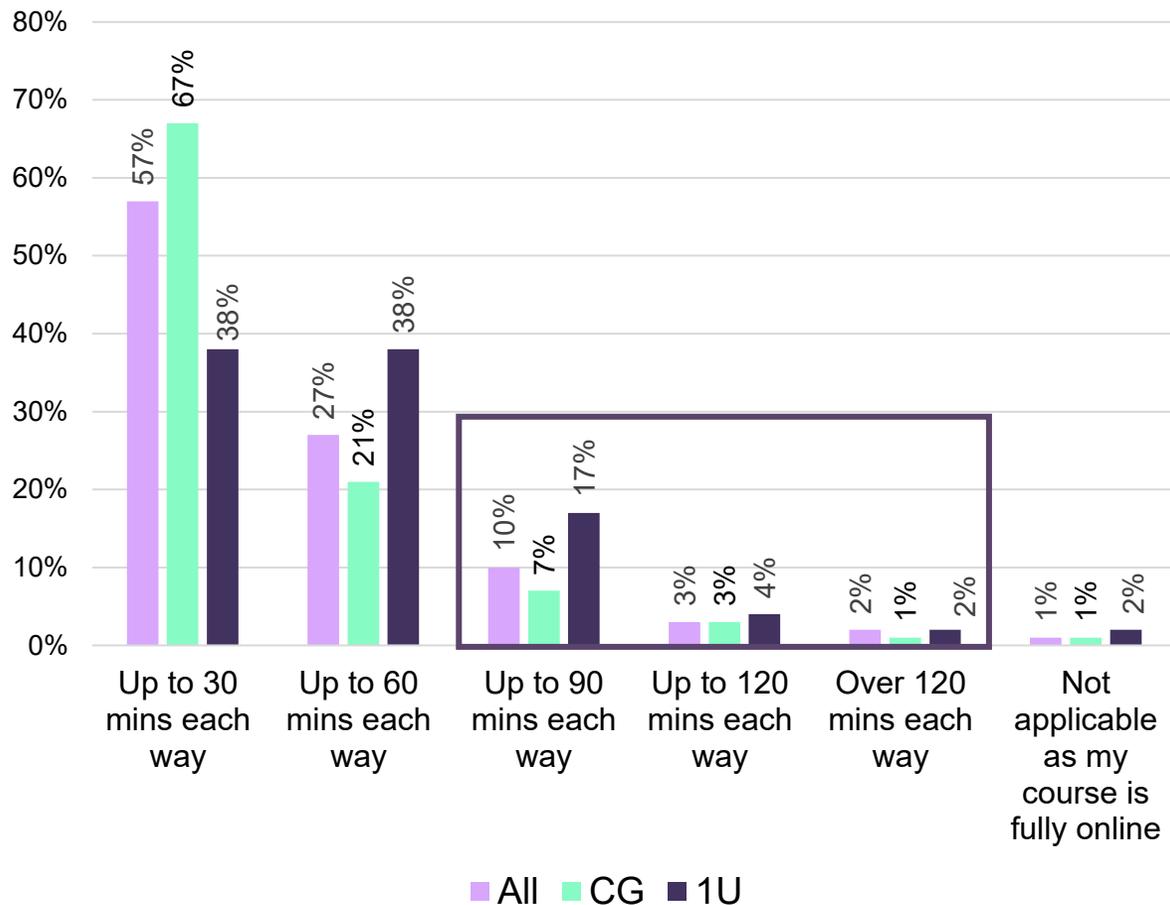
Based on wider sector data, paid work intentions on entry may end up being underestimated

Commute to campus

All UG

	Up to 30 mins each way	Up to 60 mins each way	Up to 90 mins each way	Up to 120 mins each way	Over 120 mins each way	Not applicable as my course is fully online
All	57%	27%	10%	3%	2%	1%
CG	67%	21%	7%	3%	1%	1%
1U	38%	38%	17%	4%	2%	2%

All ■ CG ■ 1U

All PGT

	Up to 30 mins each way	Up to 60 mins each way	Up to 90 mins each way	Up to 120 mins each way	Over 120 mins each way	Not applicable as my course is fully online
All	49%	30%	10%	4%	3%	4%
CG	59%	20%	7%	2%	4%	8%
1U	44%	36%	12%	4%	2%	2%

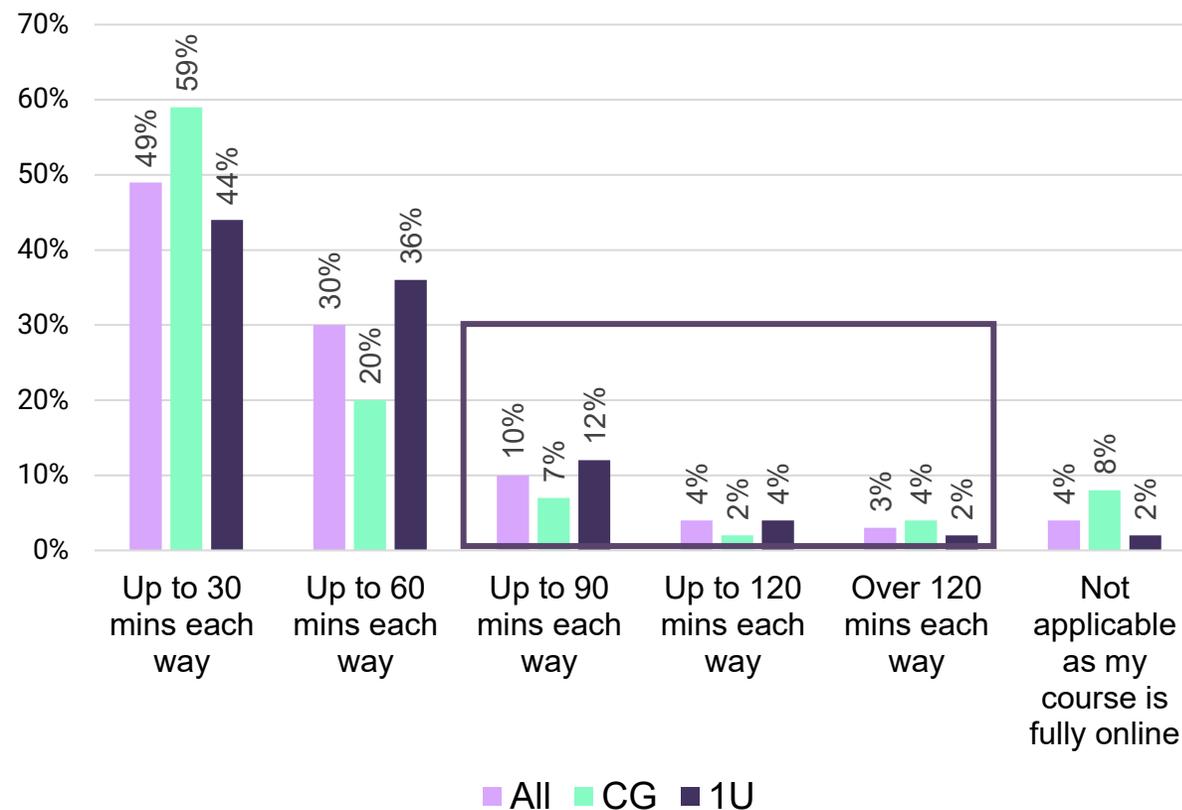All ■ CG ■ 1U

Commuter Students at Kingston University

Dr Barry Avery, Dr Rebecca Lees, Dr Dan Russell

18/19

Not local at all

All UG

Halls students get grades 5% higher compared to those living at home

Students travelling for more than 90 minutes (on average) get grades 9% lower

77% of students who travel 30 minutes or less pass all their modules on first attempt

AdvanceHE

University of East London

J

Jisc

Student Working Lives (HEPI report 195)

Professor Adrian Wright, Martin Lowe, Dr Mark Wilding and Mary Lawler from the University of Lancashire

The commuter paradox
Commuter students face distinct time pressures, undertaking more paid work and travel per week on average and spending the same amount studying as their non-commuting counterparts.
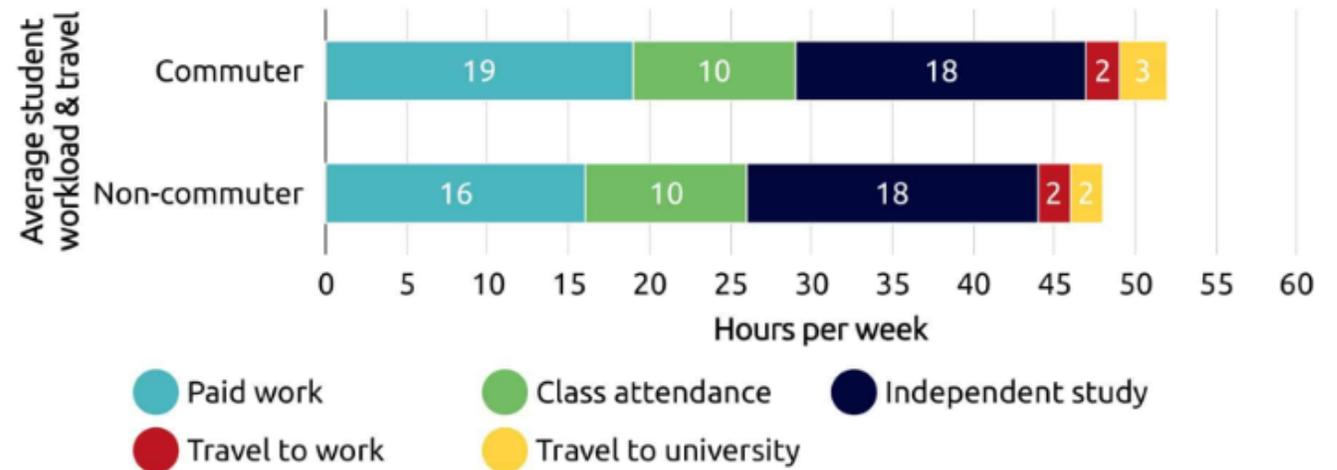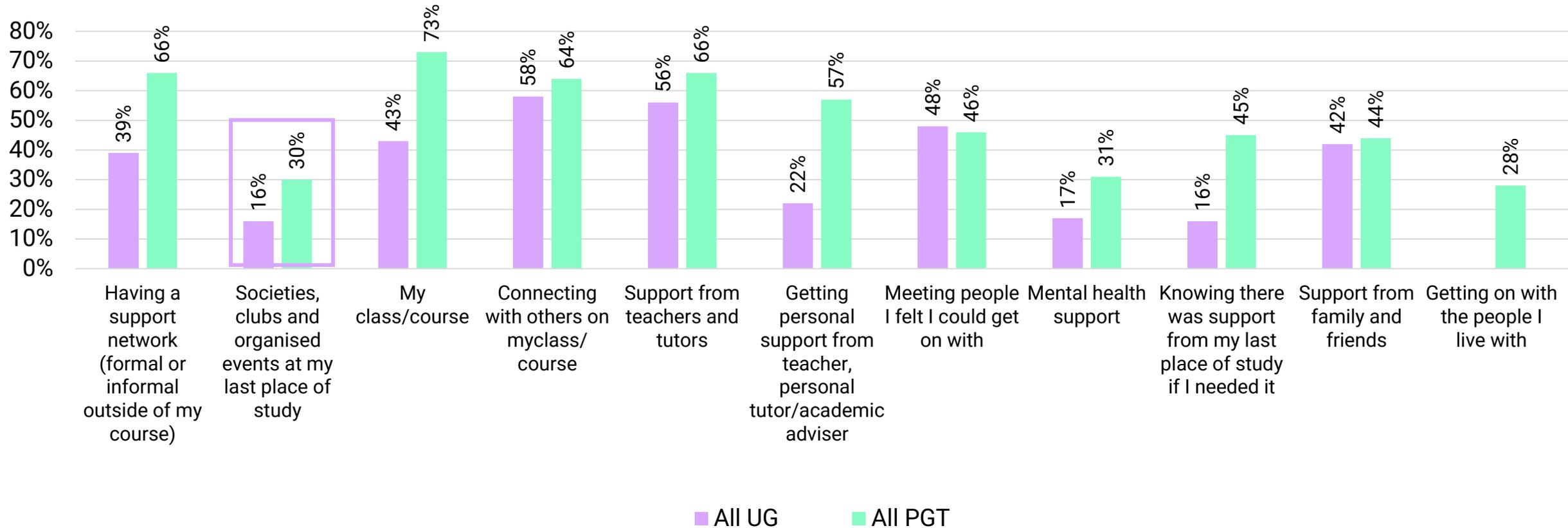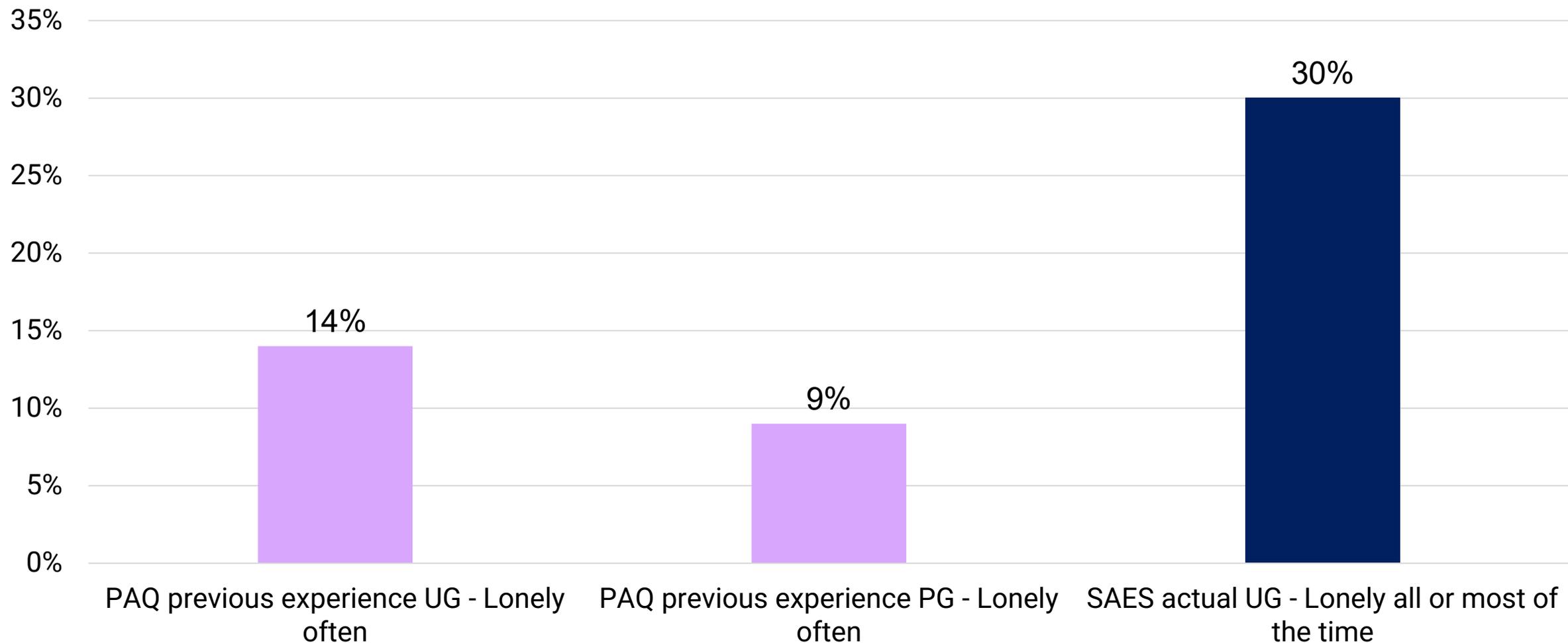

Table 1: Workload including travel for commuter and non-commuter students

Despite attending fewer classes, commuters achieved stronger academic results, although for both groups, performance declined once working hours exceeded 10. This suggests that while commuters generally outperform their peers, both groups are susceptible to the effects of increased working hours.

What was important in helping to settle in at your last place of study

Category	All UG	All PGT
Having a support network (formal or informal outside of my course)	39%	66%
Societies, clubs and organised events at my last place of study	16%	30%
My class/course	43%	73%
Connecting with others on myclass/course	58%	64%
Support from teachers and tutors	56%	66%
Getting personal support from teacher, personal tutor/academic adviser	22%	57%
Meeting people I felt I could get on with	48%	46%
Mental health support	17%	31%
Knowing there was support from my last place of study if I needed it	16%	45%
Support from family and friends	42%	44%
Getting on with the people I live with		28%

■ All UG   ■ All PGT
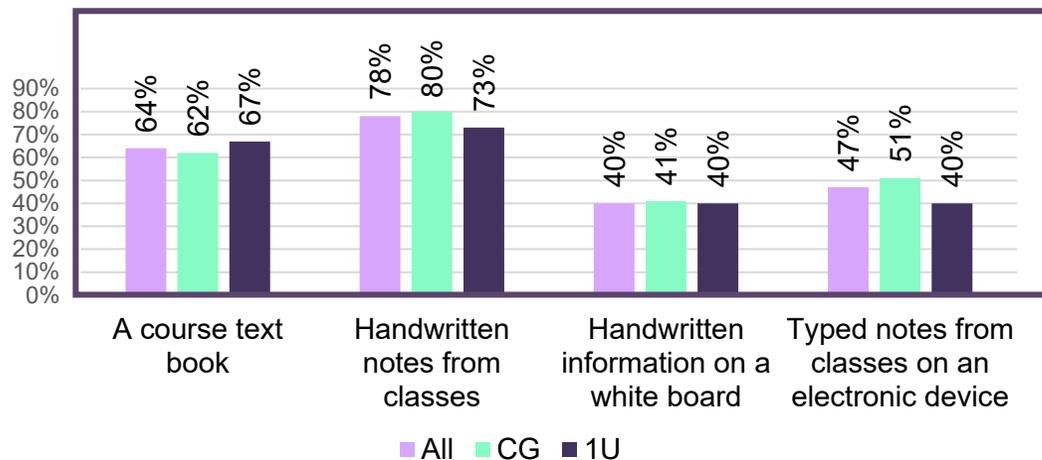
University of East London

Jisc

More students may end up feeling lonely upon entering HE than in their previous studies

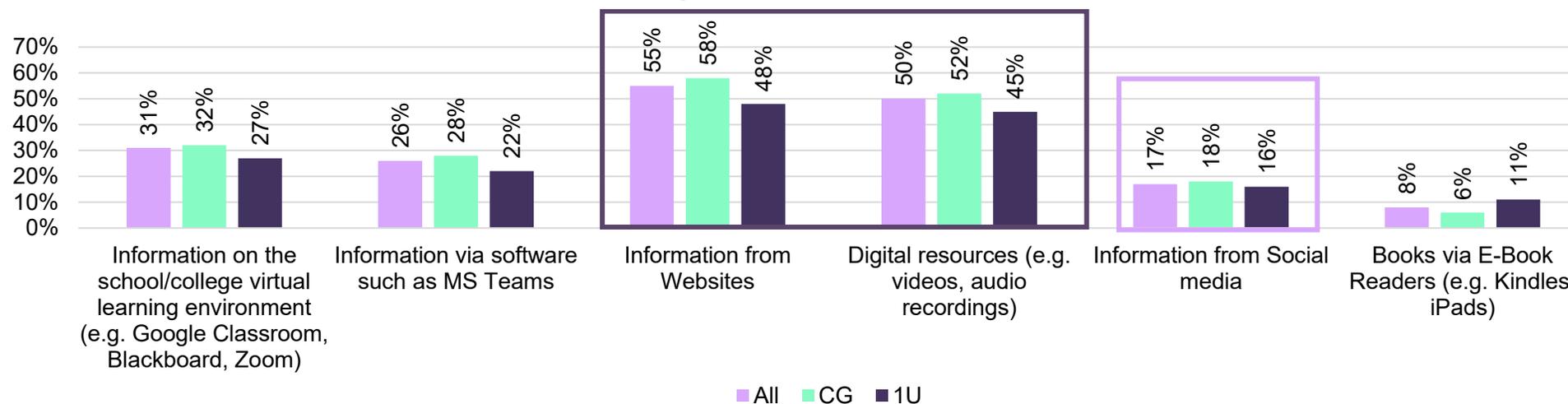# UG Prior learning experiences — Accessing information

Course textbooks and notes

	All	CG	1U
A course text book	64%	62%	67%
Handwritten notes from classes	78%	80%	73%
Handwritten information on a white board	40%	41%	40%
Typed notes from classes on an electronic device	47%	51%	40%

Library materials and handouts

	All	CG	1U
Hard copy handouts of book chapters and information	36%	38%	33%
Electronic handouts of book chapters and information	28%	31%	24%
Hard copy books in the school/college library	24%	23%	28%
Electronic books in the school/college library	15%	14%	17%

Digital materials

	All	CG	1U
Information on the school/college virtual learning environment (e.g. Google Classroom, Blackboard, Zoom)	31%	32%	27%
Information via software such as MS Teams	26%	28%	22%
Information from Websites	55%	58%	48%
Digital resources (e.g. videos, audio recordings)	50%	52%	45%
Information from Social media	17%	18%	16%
Books via E-Book Readers (e.g. Kindles, iPads)	8%	6%	11%

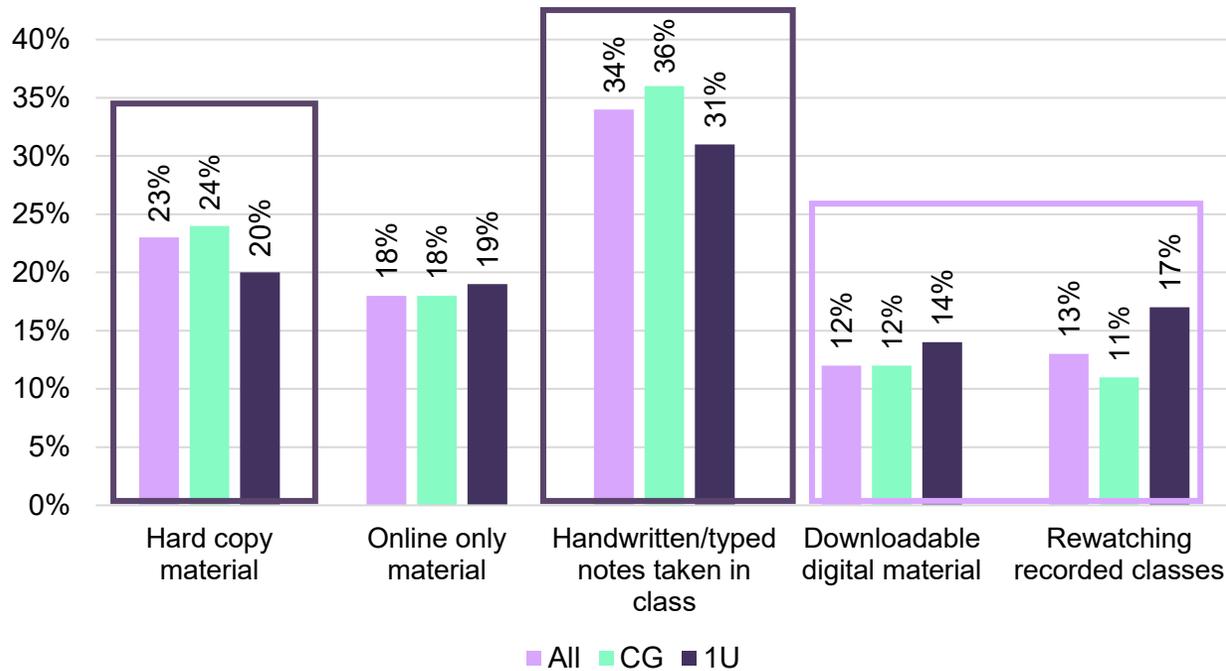AdvanceHE — University of East London — Jisc

Prior learning experiences

Learning material type preference for absorption
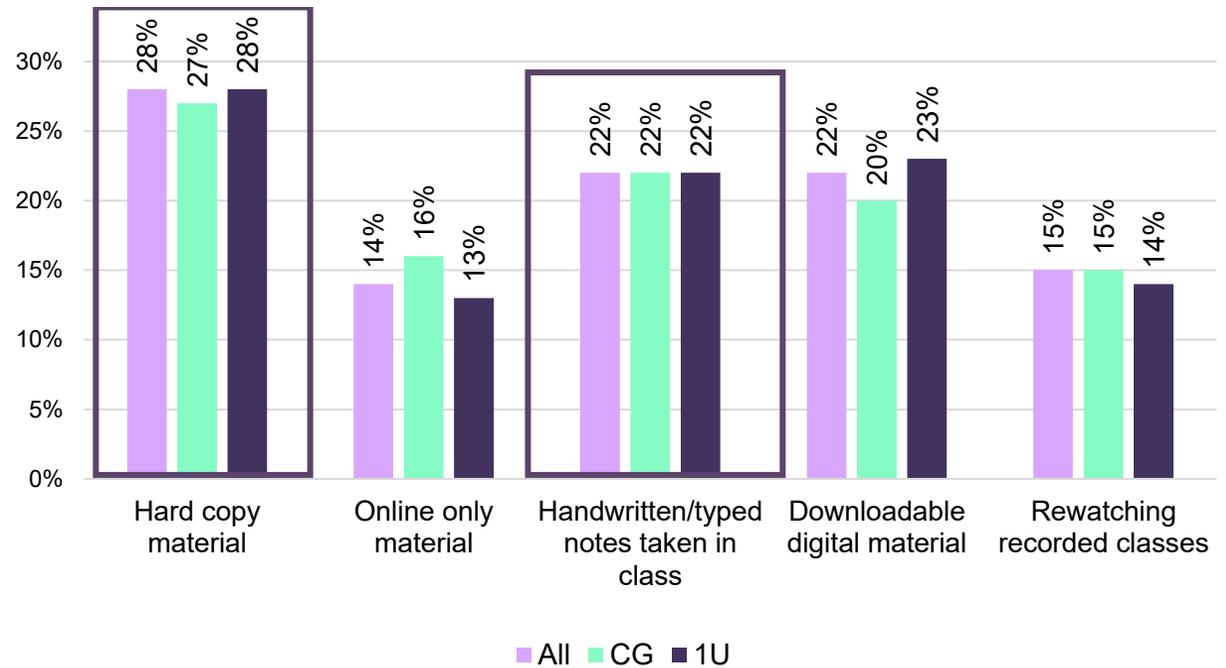
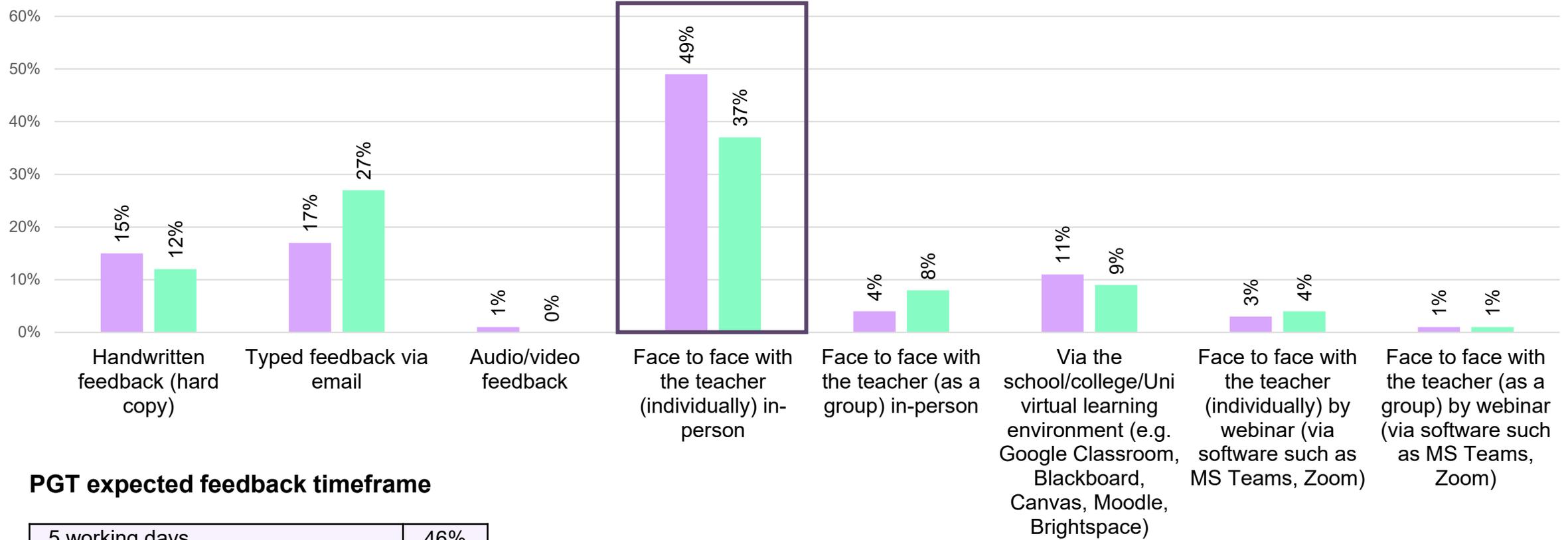### All UG
Preference highest for hard copy and notes

All PGT
Preference highest for hard copy and notes

- No notable discipline differences

Feedback preference

PGT expected feedback timeframe

5 working days	46%
2 weeks (10 working days)	36%
3 weeks (15 working days)	10%
4 weeks or more (20 working days+)	8%

Chart values — ■ All UG ■ All PGT:
- Handwritten feedback (hard copy): 15%, 12%
- Typed feedback via email: 17%, 27%
- Audio/video feedback: 1%, 0%
- Face to face with the teacher (individually) in-person: 49%, 37%
- Face to face with the teacher (as a group) in-person: 4%, 8%
- Via the school/college/Uni virtual learning environment (e.g. Google Classroom, Blackboard, Canvas, Moodle, Brightspace): 11%, 9%
- Face to face with the teacher (individually) by webinar (via software such as MS Teams, Zoom): 3%, 4%
- Face to face with the teacher (as a group) by webinar (via software such as MS Teams, Zoom): 1%, 1%

AdvanceHE   University of East London   Jisc

C19 impact   All UG - 74% affected by Covid 19

Negative experiences of Covid 19

|	
Loss of social engagement with friends at school or college	54%
Loss of a structured learning environment	53%
Worry about lost learning and knowledge gaps	42%
Lack of self-discipline	36%
Online fatigue	36%
Loss of belief in my own study capability	28%
Lack of appropriate IT facilities (e.g. computer, laptop)	17%
Lack of access to specialist software	9%

Positive impact of Covid 19

Learning at home provided flexibility	42%
Increased my digital skills	34%
Learning at home reduced my social anxiety	24%
Was provided with appropriate IT facilities (e.g. computer, laptop, iPad)	16%
Benefited from alternative assessments not previously available to me	11%

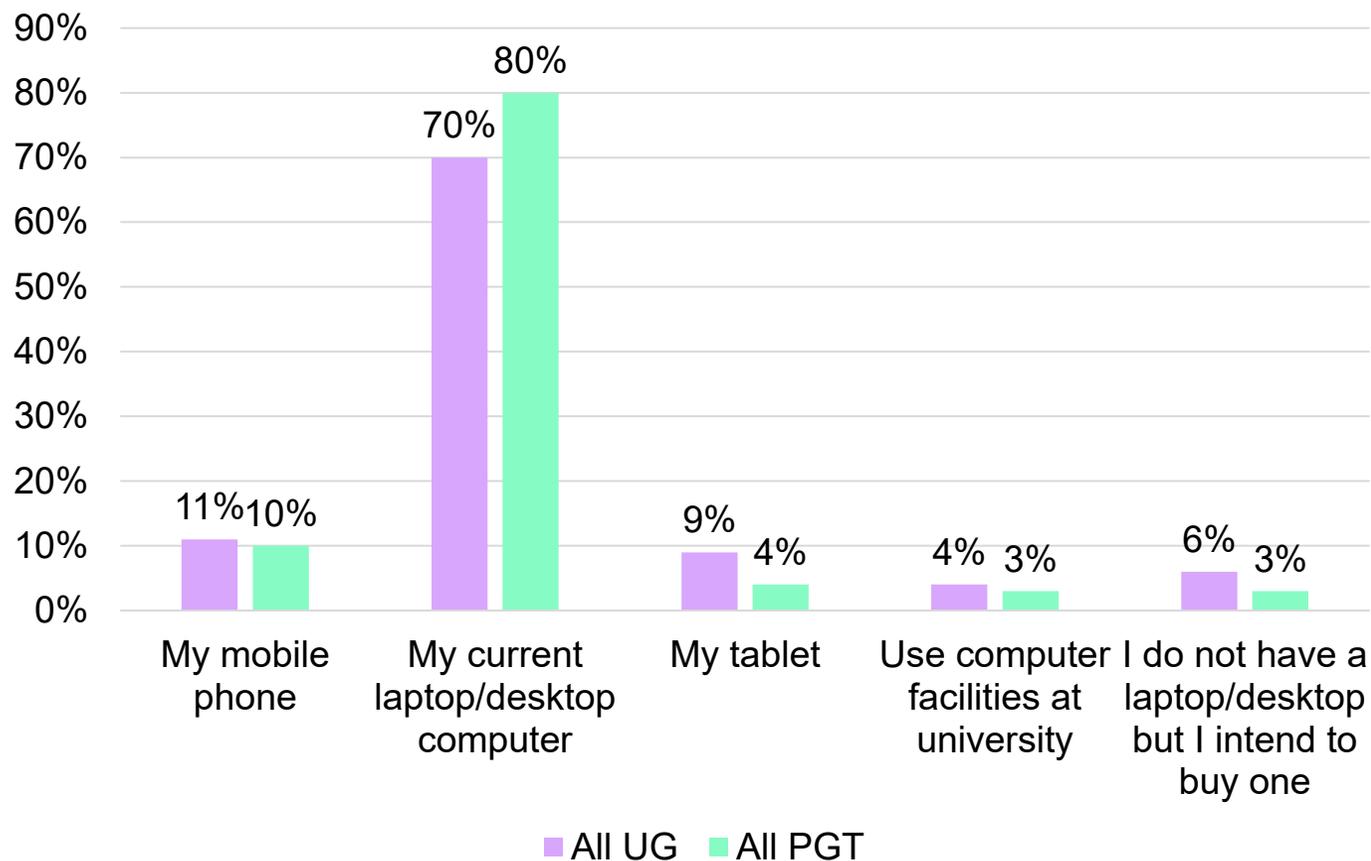AdvanceHE

University of East London

Jisc
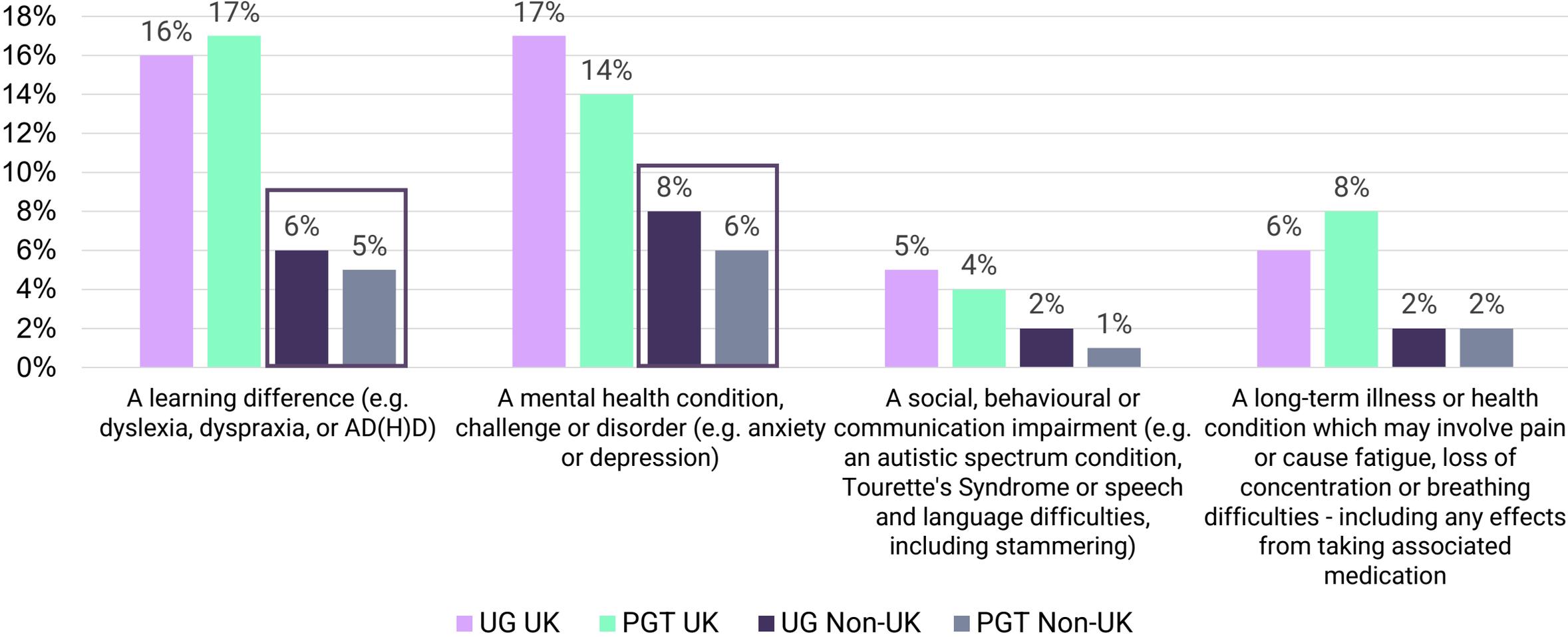
Priorities for the coming year

Top 5 = Academic side of University life, Balancing study and work, Planning for the future, Making friends and My mental health
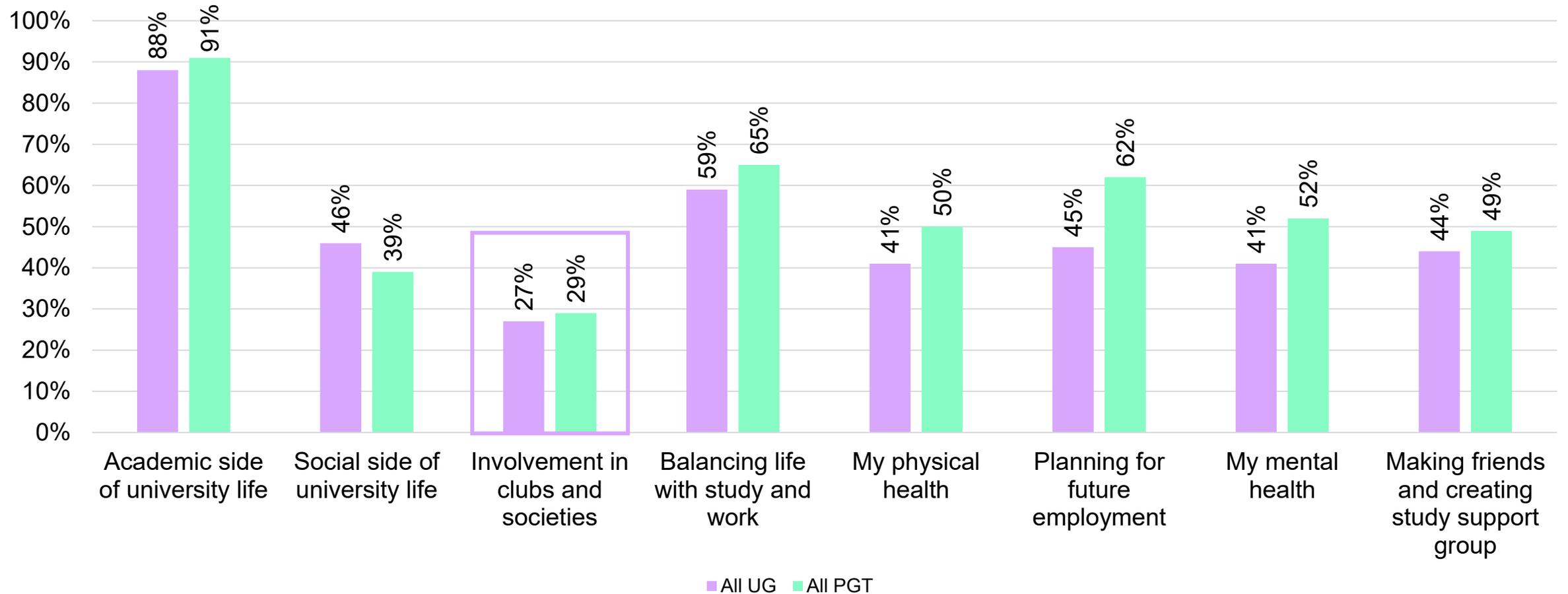
Tech for study and Gen AI

Main technology expect to use to access learning materials at university

Bar chart categories (All UG, All PGT):
- My mobile phone: 11%, 10%
- My current laptop/desktop computer: 70%, 80%
- My tablet: 9%, 4%
- Use computer facilities at university: 4%, 3%
- I do not have a laptop/desktop but I intend to buy one: 6%, 3%

■ All UG ■ All PGT

Experience of Gen AI
(e.g. ChatGPT, Grammarly, Claude, Microsoft Copilot, QuillBot, Dall-E, Adobe Firefly, DeepSeek, Midjourney, Canva AI)

- All UG: Yes 61%, No 39%
- All PGT: Yes 71%, No 29%

■ Yes ■ No
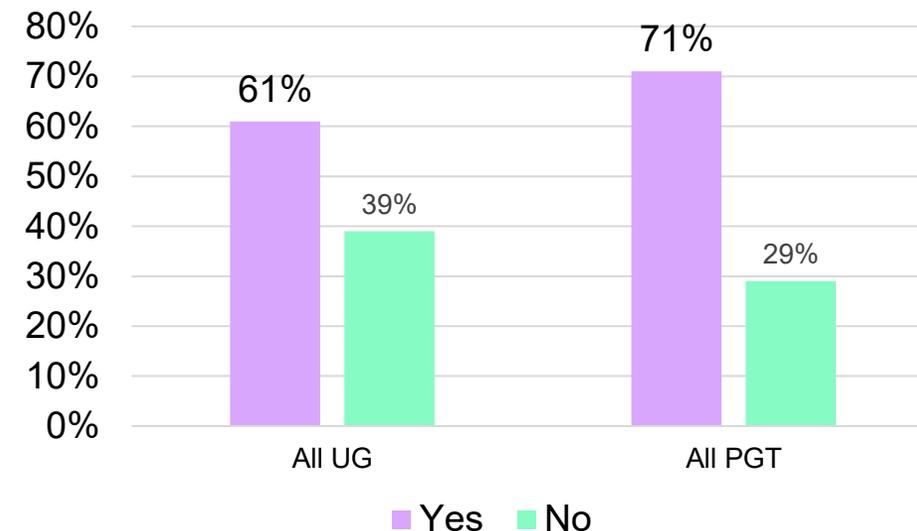
- Grammarly and ChatGPT- highest use

- Reasons for use
  - *improve writing by correcting spelling or grammar mistakes*
  - *explore topics of interest, summarise information or text*
  - *explain concepts.*

Type of mobile and data package

UG Note : PGT findings are very similar

	All	CG	U1
Android	27%	25%	31%
iOS	73%	75%	68%
I do not have a phone	0%	0%	0%

	All	CG	U1
Up to 10 GB	13%	13%	11%
Up to 15 GB	6%	6%	7%
Up to 20 GB	9%	10%	8%
Over 20 GB	22%	22%	23%
Unlimited	28%	26%	33%
I do not know	21%	23%	18%

Type of phone by Domicile status

	UK	Non-UK
Android	27%	48%
iOS	72%	52%

Unlimited data package

	UK	Non-UK
UG	35%	**22%**
PGT	33%	**17%**

Age of mobile phone
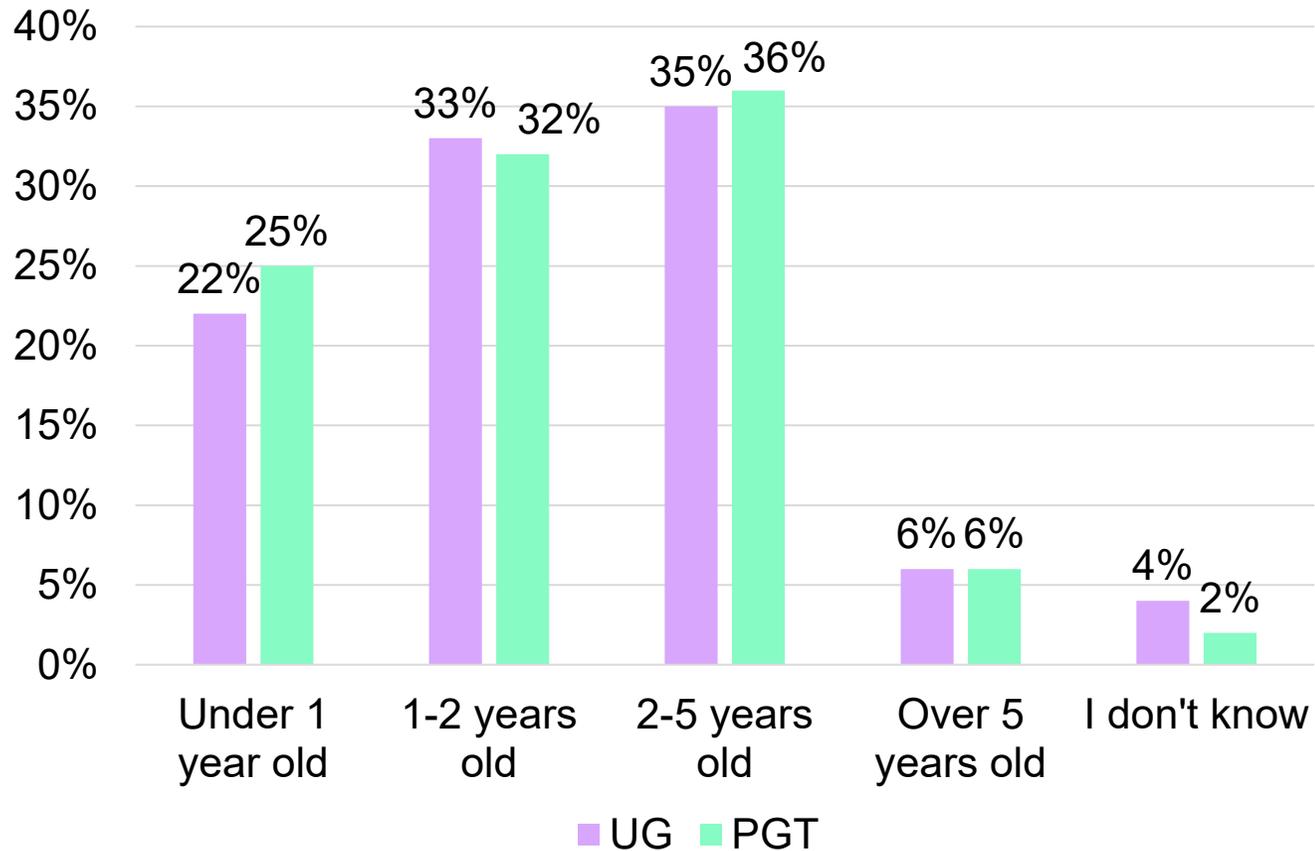
Issues with phones over 2-3 years old

Significantly hinder participation in modern virtual learning environments (VLEs) due to:

<u>Performance and Software Incompatibility</u>
- App Incompatibility: Older phones may no longer support the latest operating system (iOS or Android) updates.
- Lag and Slow Processing
- Limited Storage

<u>Technical Limitations (Video/Audio/Battery)</u>
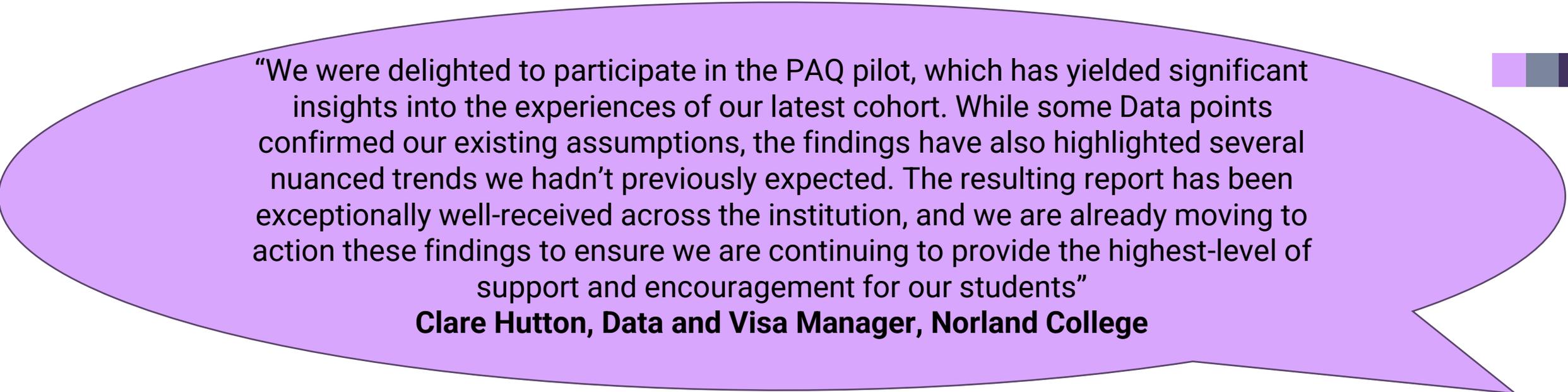
<u>Impact on Learning Experience</u>

Knowing these facts, what would you do to change information, guidance and advice and activities across:

First contact and admissions processes?
Pre-arrival?
Arrival and orientation?
Induction to study?

University of East London

"We were delighted to participate in the PAQ pilot, which has yielded significant insights into the experiences of our latest cohort. While some Data points confirmed our existing assumptions, the findings have also highlighted several nuanced trends we hadn't previously expected. The resulting report has been exceptionally well-received across the institution, and we are already moving to action these findings to ensure we are continuing to provide the highest-level of support and encouragement for our students"
Clare Hutton, Data and Visa Manager, Norland College

If you are interested in taking part in phase 2 please contact:

Jonathan Neves, Advance HE
Jonathan.neves@advance-he.ac.uk

Thank you

Michelle Morgan   Dean of Students, UEL

m.morgan@uel.ac.uk

Jonathan Neves   Head of Research & Surveys, Advance HE

jonathan.neves@advance-he.ac.uk

explorance

Student Voices
in Higher Education