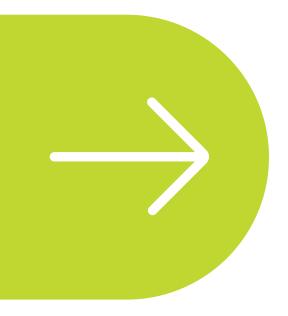


Finding Their Place

What students
(and parents) really
need from universities.

HIGHER EDUCATION EDITION

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WHAT IS THIS REPORT?







WHAT IS THIS REPORT AND WHY SHOULD I READ IT?

Going to university or college is a major life event for young people and their families. Everyone agrees it's a milestone of change and discovery, new independence, and a taste of adulthood.

But do we truly understand the needs, considerations, feelings and behaviours of students-to-be—and their parents or guardians—during this pivotal time?

Finding Their Place: Higher
Education Edition uncovers
surprising, strategic insights that
challenge traditional assumptions.
It reveals where student and
parental expectations diverge.
It identifies hidden gaps in the
support provided by universities.

Vitally, it highlights opportunities for you to enhance your student experience — from academic preparedness to financial planning, from commuter support to emotional resilience, from family commitment to social engagement.







A deeper understanding

Our findings fill a 'research gap'. As well as the first two months of university or college, our data covers the summer before higher education (May to August). We also reveal the why behind the what — exploring emotions, hopes and concerns. We gathered insights through both qualitative and quantitative methods to provide a holistic understanding — everything you need to build trust, ease anxiety, and create an exceptional student experience.



A new perspective

We spoke to both students-to-be and their families. With this dual lens, we're better able to understand relationship dynamics. We've gained insights into how everyone's thoughts, feelings and actions align, differ, and influence — in turn, allowing us to identify untapped opportunities for universities.



A practical guide

This isn't just interesting data. It's a set of actionable insights and recommendations designed for university marketing, admissions, student recruitment, student experience, and student support teams.

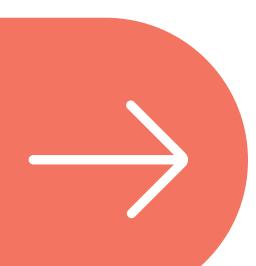
Our findings will help you:

Differentiate your institution with targeted, emotionally intelligent communications that resonate deeply with students and their families.

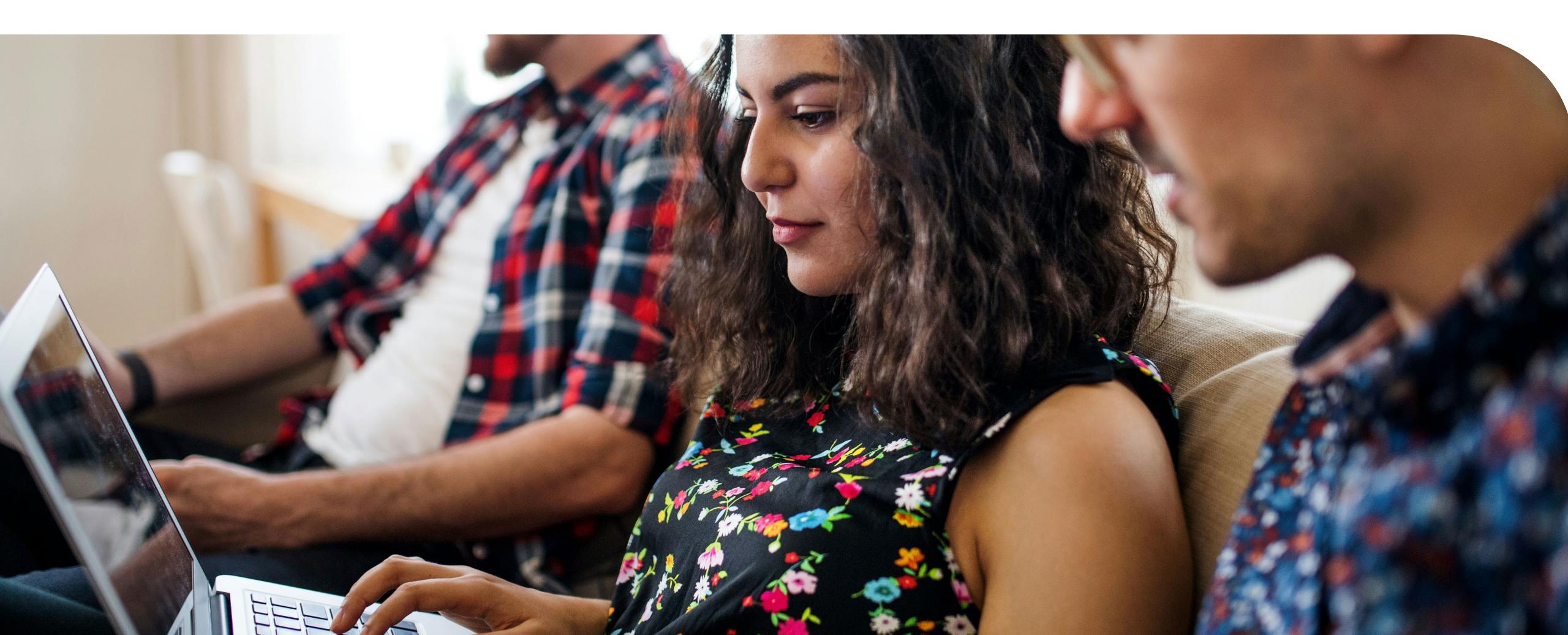
Build earlier, stronger connections with incoming students, boosting long-term retention and student satisfaction.

Close 'expectation and preparedness gaps' — with the right support, at the right time, in the right way, we can realign what students and their families expect university to be like (rightly or wrongly) and how ready they feel (rightly or wrongly) to deal with this perception.

Position your institution as one that truly understands and genuinely cares about the real student experience (not just the idealised version) — enhancing experiences and ensuring young people and their families feel supported in the areas that matter most to them.



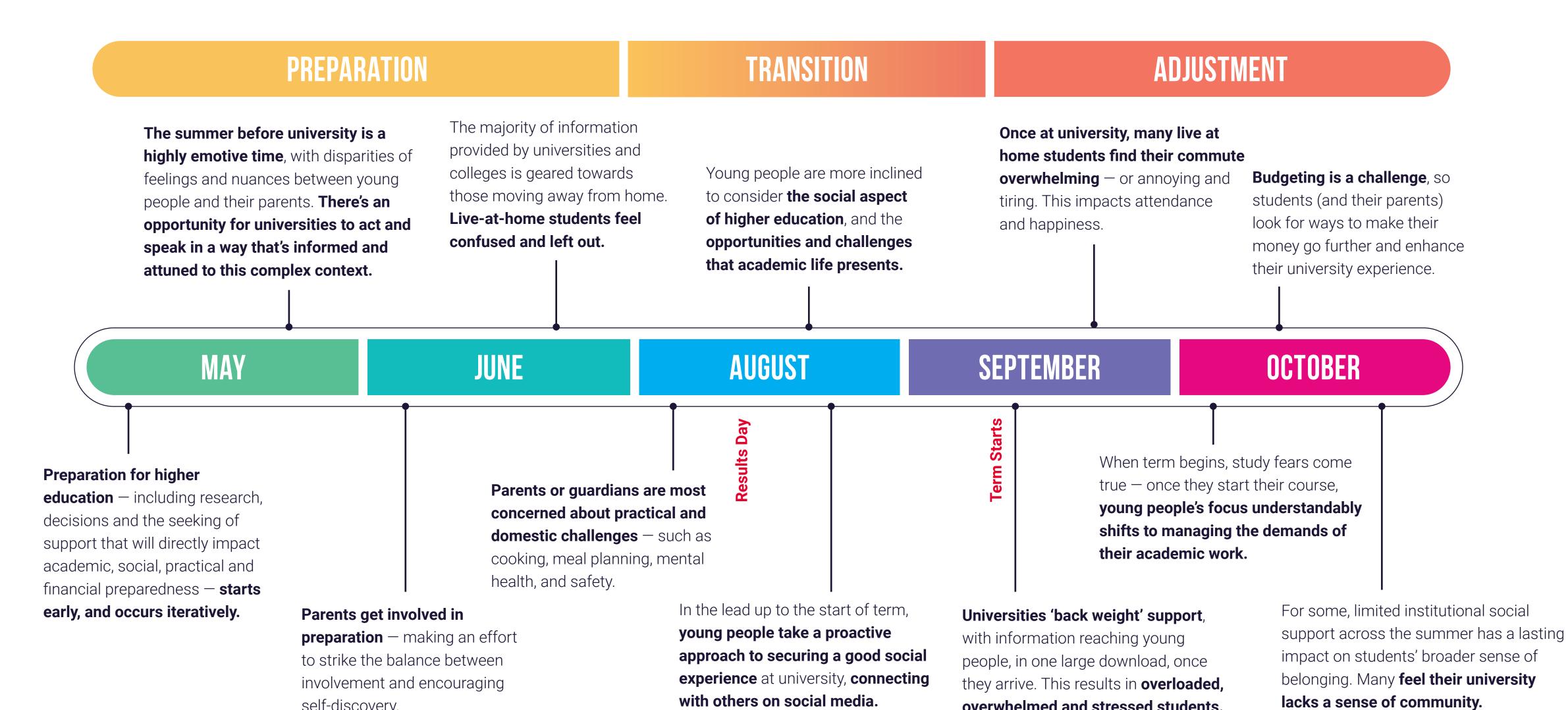
FINDINGS AT A GLANCE







THE JOURNEY TO HIGHER EDUCATION & OUR KEY INSIGHTS



overwhelmed and stressed students.

self-discovery.



WHERE UNIVERSITIES CAN MAKE THE GREATEST IMPACT

Address the full spectrum of student and parent needs - academic, emotional, financial, logistical, and social - to reflect the real challenges of preparing

for university life.

→ Shift the timing of support
Replace last-minute information
dumps with well-paced, bite-sized
guidance delivered earlier and
more frequently - in sync with how

students and families actually plan

and iteratively prepare.

Tune the tone of support

Attune to feelings and speak
with empathy so that messaging
is relevant and aligns with the
emotional landscape students
and parents are navigating to build trust and confidence.





OUR KEY FINDINGS







↓ OUR KEY FINDINGS

SUPPORT SHOULD COME IN MANY SHAPES AND SIZES

There's a big opportunity for universities to increase the scope of their support to better match the broad needs of students-to-be and their parents. This includes offering more academic, logistical, emotional, social and financial guidance.

A striking finding from our research was an apparent paradox. While 76% of students say they received support from their university or college during the transition to higher education, only 7% claim to feel "fully prepared" to start.



Feel "fully supported by their university"

25%

Feel "unsupported or neither supported nor unsupported"

23%



Only a quarter of students say they feel "fully supported" by their university. 23% of students feel unsupported or "neither supported or unsupported", and the majority — 52% — only feel "quite" supported.

The reason? While many universities do provide support, the information they give is often narrow in scope — with its impact limited by the way it's delivered, and when.







Early communications often focus on where students will live, but miss key moments to build confidence, connection and readiness.

Many students receive clear, early support when it comes to accommodation. In fact, 60% say they were provided with guidance or opportunities to visit university or private halls - support that's both timely and useful.

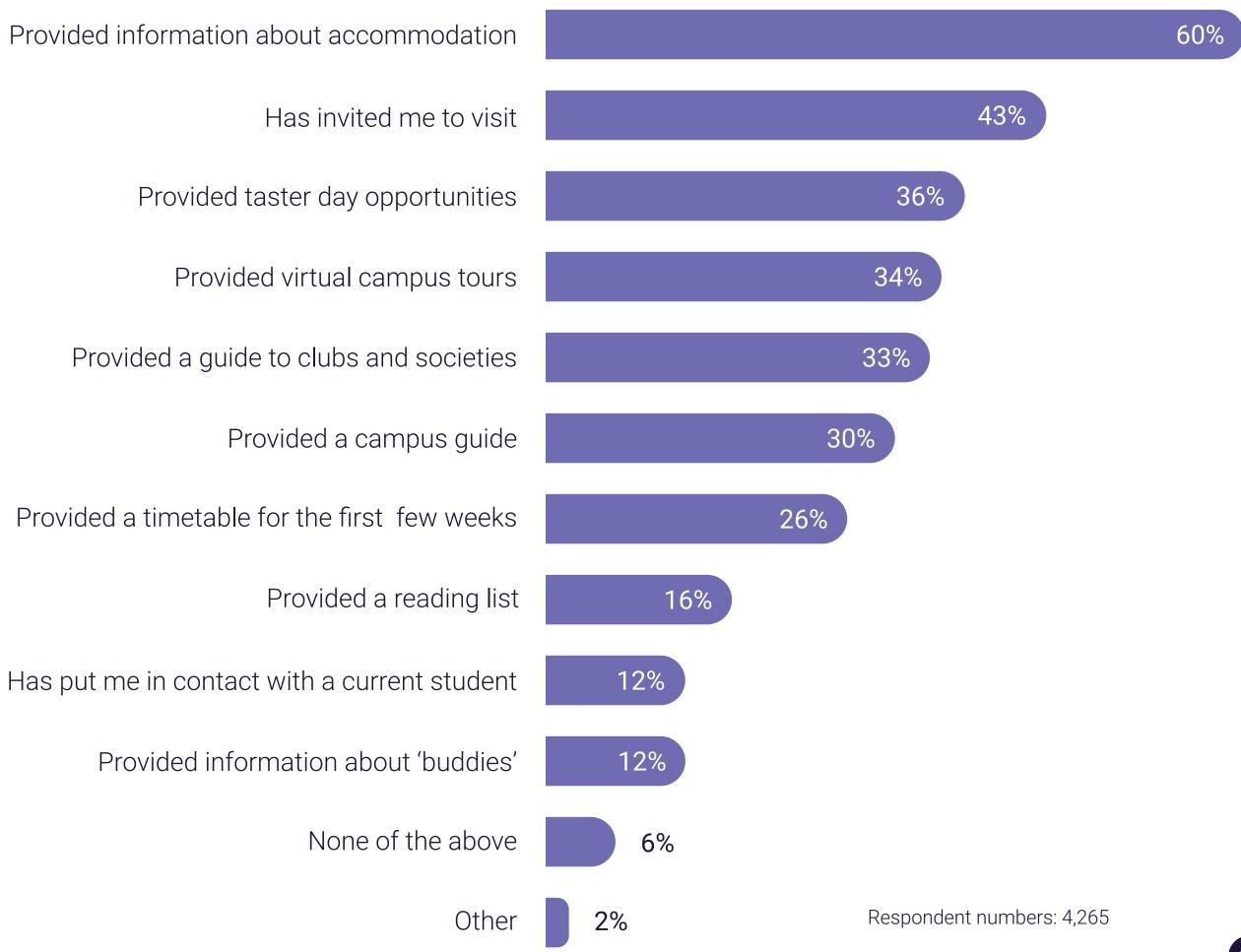
For many students, this comes at the right moment. After accepting their offer, they naturally turn their attention to living arrangements, researching their options and preparing for the move. But accommodation is only one part of the broader transition picture.

Far fewer students report receiving other types of preparation - such as academic guidance (only 16% were given a reading list) or peer connection opportunities (just 12% were put in touch with a current student).

This suggests a mismatch between the support students often receive, and the support they tell us they need most - from practical life skills to academic confidence and early connection-building.

By aligning content and timing more closely with students' emotional and practical concerns - and widening the scope of what "pre-arrival support" looks like - providers can help ensure students (and their parents) feel equipped, understood, and supported from the very start.

Which of the following has your chosen university or college done in advance to help you prepare for your studies?





PREPARATION STARTS EARLY-BUT SUPPORT DOESN'T ALWAYS KEEP PACE

Students often begin preparing for university life well in advance, thinking about everything from independence and budgeting to academic pressures and social life. While many providers offer a wide range of support, our findings suggest that the timing and delivery of that support can sometimes feel out of step with students' natural rhythms of preparation.

Aligning communications more closely with when students are actively thinking about specific challenges - and providing support in manageable, staged formats - could help students feel more confident and connected from the outset.







A big finding from our research is that students and their families start buying things for university far earlier than many organisations assume.

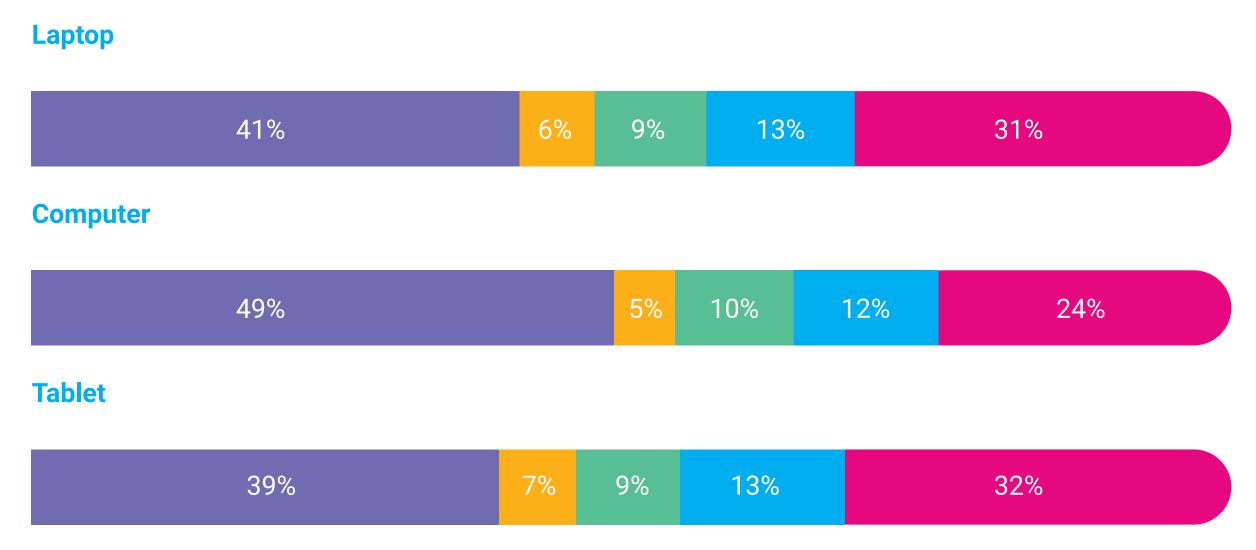
When it comes to purchasing essential tech items (such as laptops, computers, tablets, TVs, and headphones), most young people get what they need early in the year — even before May. Over 40% of families start buying cooking utensils, cooking equipment, crockery, cutlery and bedroom essentials earlier in the summer, too.

This purchase data reveals a broader truth about student

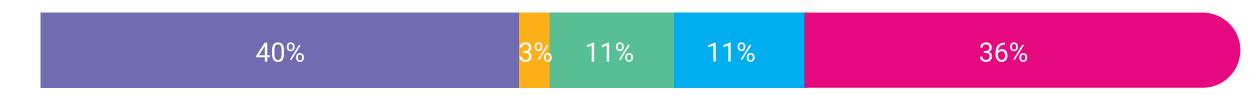
behaviour: preparation for higher education — including research, decisions, and the seeking out of support — begins early, and occurs iteratively.

That's why students who receive supportive communication from their university early, and then regularly over the summer, tend to feel calmer and more positive.

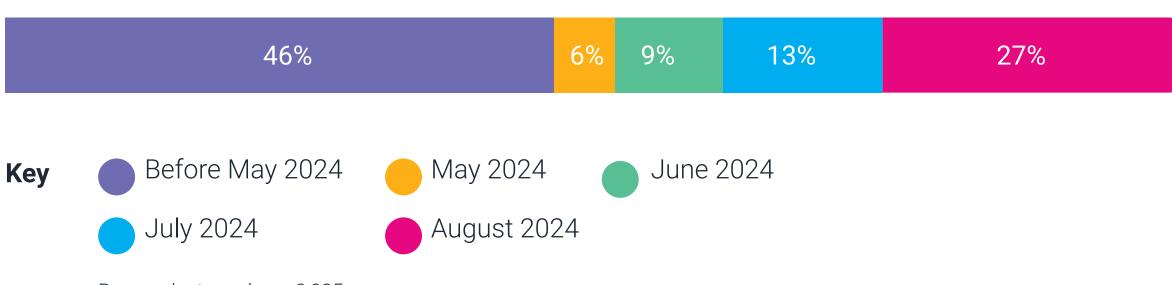
When did you start thinking about making those purchases?



TV



Headphones



Respondent numbers: 3,385







However, the timing of support often doesn't reflect when students are most actively preparing.

Our student respondents told us that institutions tend to 'back weight' support, with most information only reaching young people — in one large download — once they arrive at university.

This results in bewildered young people. Where the majority (75%) feel unprepared even at the point of packing.

Then, when they reach university, they feel overloaded and overwhelmed. Despite feeling happy and excited when they

start, 66% of students still have concerns.

Many feel stressed
(44% — an increase from 28%
pre-university), nervous (33%)
and uncertain (28%).
Significant numbers feel worried,
apprehensive and confused
(19%, 17% and 14% respectively).

"Feeling stressed about what I need to bring and what I shouldn't bring.

And then I also notice that the closer it gets to the date I leave, I feel like I'm packing more and more stuff that I don't actually need. So just mostly stress."

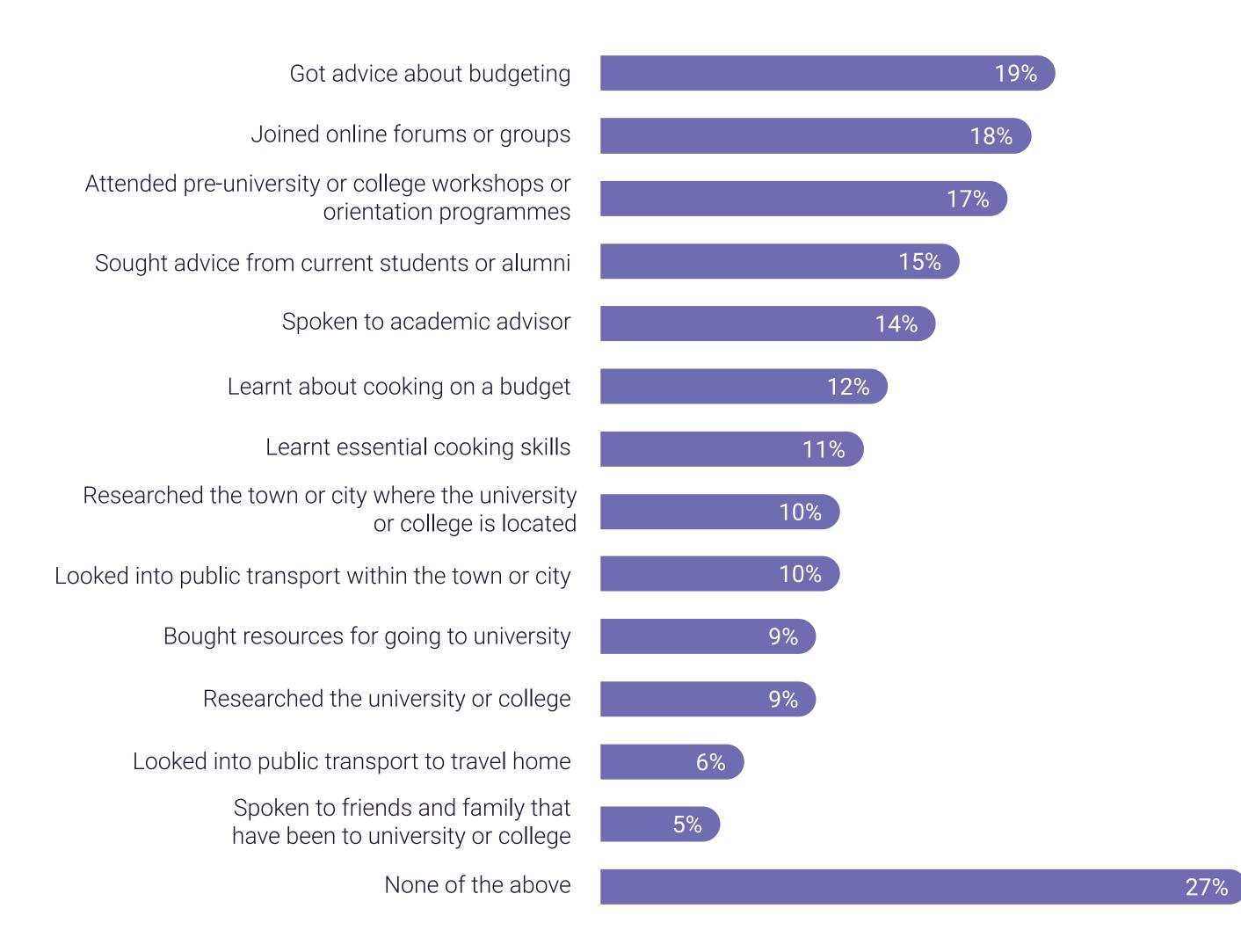
Student, Accommodation





Ultimately, young people retrospectively wish they'd sought out, or been given, more support — especially advice around budgeting, academic challenges and the social aspects of university.

Is there anything you wish you had done to prepare yourself for starting university or college but didn't?



Respondent numbers: 1,120





WENEED TO SPEAK AN EMOTIONAL LANGUAGE

Timing of support is important, but so is tone.

For support and advice to be impactful, it needs to consider the emotional state of students and their parents in the lead up to the start of term (and beyond).

The summer period is emotionally charged. Young people and their families are managing exam pressures, big decisions, competing advice and changing dynamics - all while feeling a mix of excitement, nervousness, anticipation and uncertainty.

The emotional landscape is complex -and not always shared

What feels exciting to students might feel daunting to their parents, and vice versa.

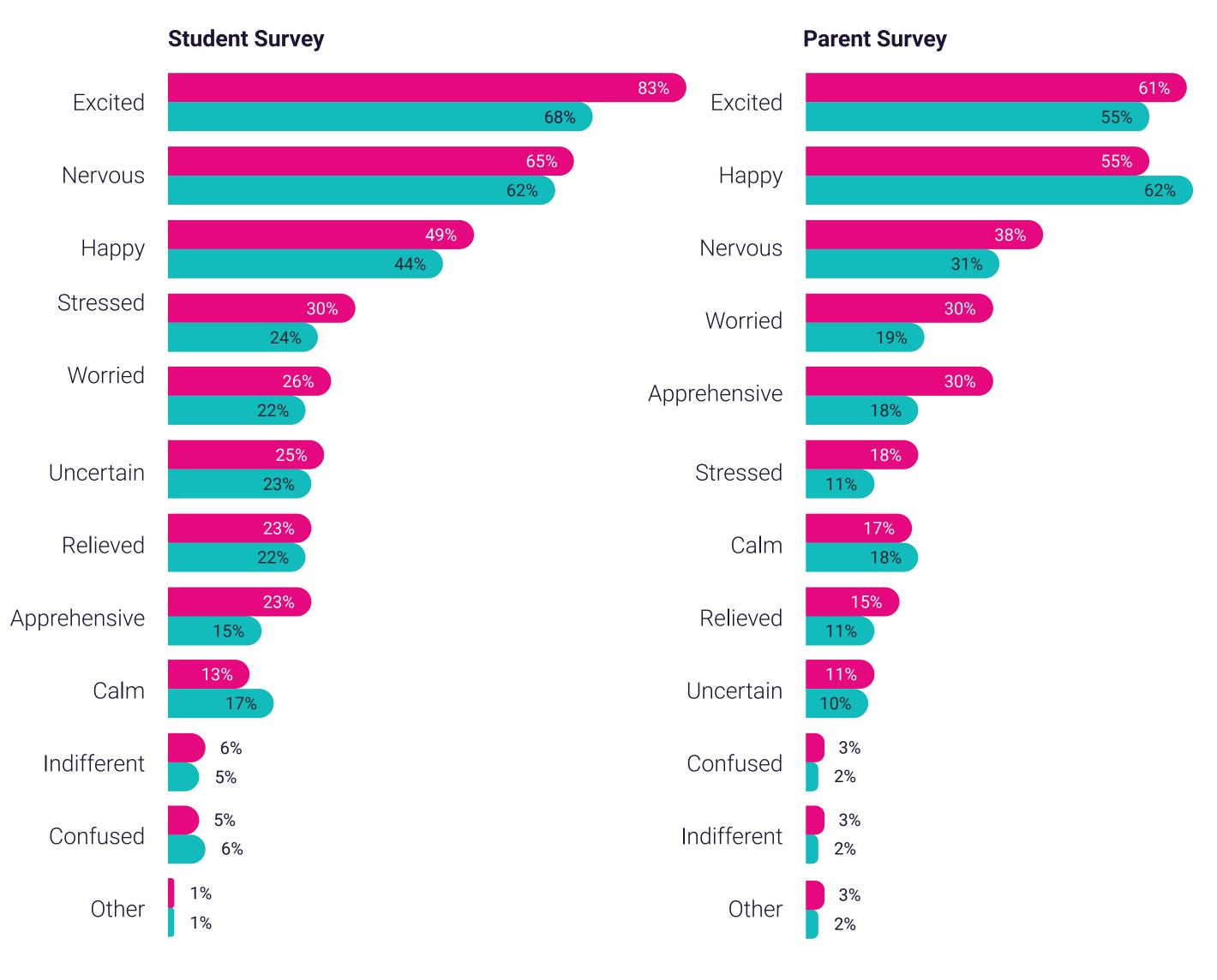
That's why it's essential that university communications feel timely, reassuring and emotionally intelligent. When messages speak to what students and families are really feeling - not just what they need to know - they're more likely to land, build trust and drive action.

Students: How are you currently feeling about going to university or college?

Parent(s)/Guardian(s): How are you currently feeling about them going to university or college in the autumn?

Key

- Student Accommodation
- Living At Home



Student Respondent – Student Accommodation: 3,030 Student Respondent – Living At Home: 1,080 Parent Respondent – Student Accommodation: 955 Parent Respondent – Living At Home: 285

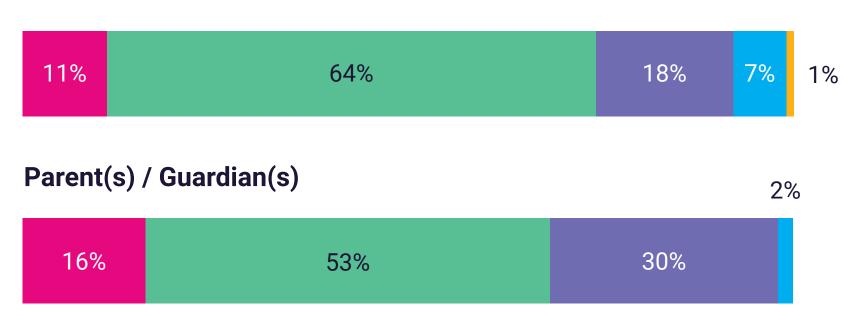


Most respondents had concerns about starting university or college, with many sharing worries well before term began.

Students: Do you have any concerns about starting university or college?

Parent(s)/Guardian(s): Do you have any concerns about them starting university or college?

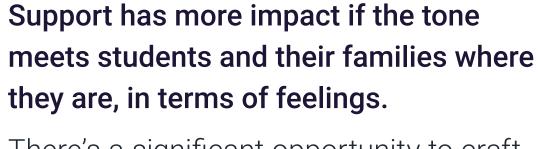






Student Respondent Numbers: 4,315
Parent/ Guardian Respondent Numbers: 1,290





There's a significant opportunity to craft communications that validate emotions — and align expectations with reality, easing students and their families through the transition from school to university.



ACADEMIC PRESSURE

Turning anxiety into achievement.





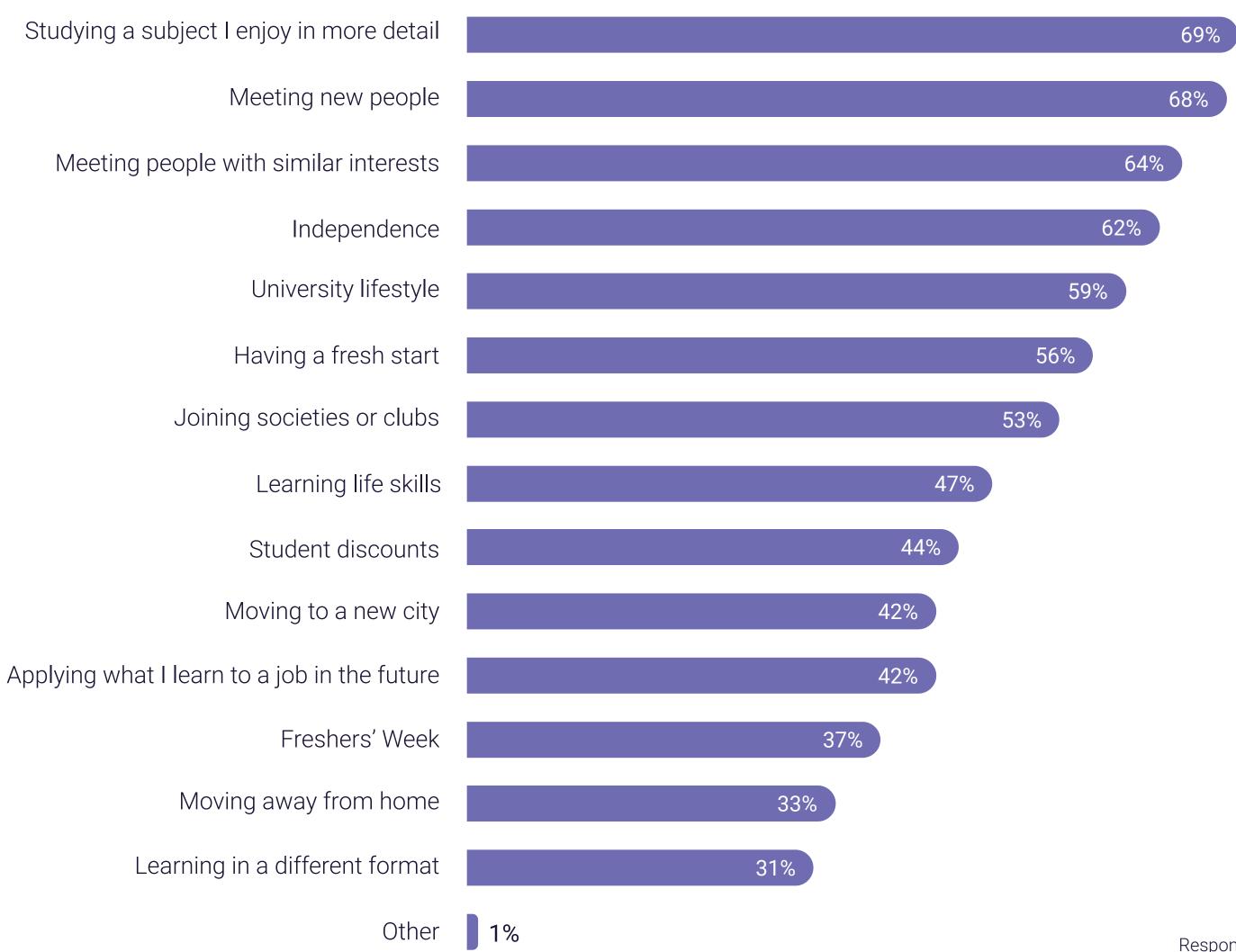
ACADEMIC ANTICIPATION BRINGS EXCITEMENT... AND NERVES

When we asked students-to-be what they're most looking forward to about university, "studying a subject I enjoy in more detail" was the top response. This was even ahead of social aspects like "meeting new people" and enjoying "university lifestyle".

We found that the majority of young people think carefully about the opportunities and challenges that higher-education study presents — and experience a range of emotions as a result.

Respondents were most looking forward to the social and academic opportunities at university.

Which, if any, of the following are you looking forward to about starting university or college?







"This is also very exciting because now I will be able to find people who think like me and are able to understand me more."

Student, Staying at Home



On the one hand, students feel excited about how undergraduate academic study will present them with the possibility of new beginnings, personal growth and the opportunity of meeting diverse people. They express pride, and an eagerness to start their studies.

But they also feel nervous. They're concerned about an increased workload, and the difficulty of sticking to deadlines (this is particularly true of students planning to live at home).

"So excited!
I love my subject
and I love my course
as it combines my 2
favourite subjects!"

Student, Leaving Home



A 'GAP' BETWEEN EXPECTATION AND PREPAREDNESS OPENS

Academic nerves result in over half (54%) of students saying they're concerned about "how well prepared I will be for university-level study".

When asked what feelings they expect to experience in their first few weeks at university, students' top responses are "adjusting to a new environment" (72%), "settling in" (64%) and "learning how to manage my study time" (55%).

Whether or not their academic expectations are exaggerated or not, students-to-be feel unprepared, and unsupported, for university study. They lack awareness of, or simply don't have access to, information that could calm their worries.

54%

of students say they're concerned about how well prepared they will be for university-level study.

"Very very very nervous because of how much is changing in such a short time."

Student, Leaving Home







ACADEMIC ANXIETIES AREN'T SHARED BY FAMILIES

The contrast between young people and their families is stark. 42% of students express concerns about "finding the course too difficult" — but just 26% of parents and guardians share this anxiety.

While 79% of students say that a good outcome of going to university would be "to obtain a degree" — an academic focus — only 61% of parents or guardians say the same.

Parents of students living at home are more likely to express worries about study challenges. But only 31% of parents and guardians overall feel concerned about their young person's academic preparedness.

This lack of awareness of young peoples' academic anxieties might explain why, come August (after results day), 86% of parents or guardians feel their dependents are "fully" (31%) or "quite" (55%) prepared for higher education.

Sadly, only 58% of students say the same — with only 7% saying they're "fully" prepared.

420/0

of students express concerns about "finding the course too difficult".





One explanation for these family 'academic blind-spots' is the fact that most students in our study (67%) were the first young person in their family to go to university.

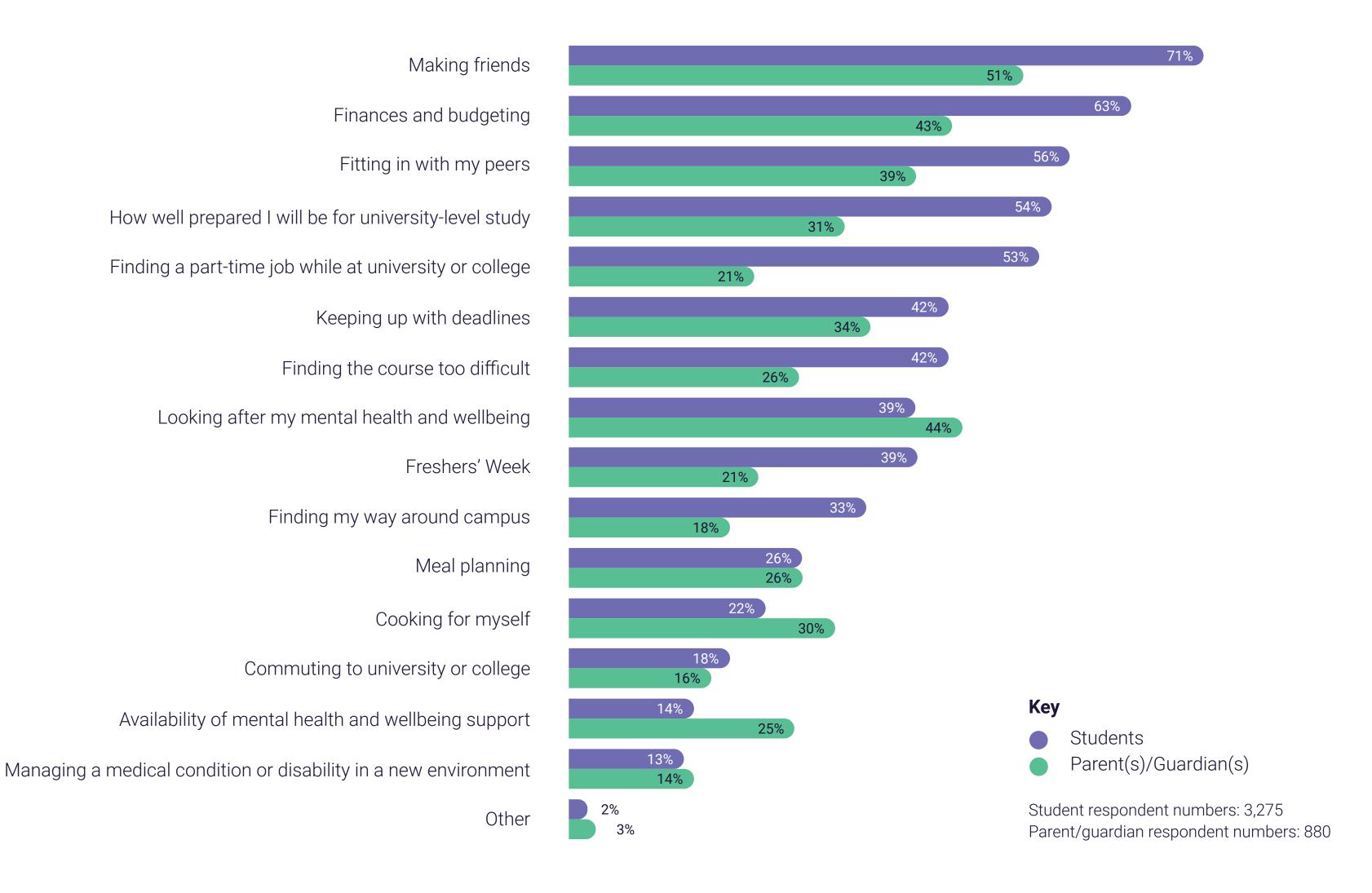
A student's academic nerves might not be recognised simply because a family hasn't helped a young person transition to higher education before.

Parents or guardians may not have gone to university themselves, and even if they did (60% of our respondents had), the experience of higher education is likely to be significantly different across generations.

Both parents or guardians and students had a variety of concerns about the transition to university, though the intensity and focus differed.

Students: Which if any, do these concerns relate to?

Parent(s)/Guardian(s): What other concerns, if any, do you have about them going to university or college?









THE STRESS OF MANAGING STUDIES IMPACTS THE STUDIES IMPACTS THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

When term begins, study fears come true.

While feelings of happiness increase from pre-university levels (by 8%) and social anxieties drop, new students also report more stress, uncertainty, and confusion (jumps of 16%, 4% and 8%). This coincides with an increase in concerns about keeping up with deadlines.

The pressure of university study is clearly high. When asked how they spend their time outside of classes, the top answer young people give is "studying" (78%) — above "relaxing" (74%) and socialising (56%).

Nearly half (47%) of students claim that managing their studies becomes their top dilemma during their first term.

of students report "studying" as their top answer for how they spend their time outside of class.



With such a busy studying schedule, most students (67%) don't take up a new hobby once they start university. The 33% that do tend to take up exercise-related activities, listing "stress relief" as a motivation (alongside health, fitness and the social aspect).

With deadlines and study always on the mind, even casual social events like "movie nights" — enjoyed by 69% of students as an opportunity to socialise/connect with friends — also tend to be valued in terms of "de-stressing" (61% of students agree).

Feeling unprepared for higher education study doesn't just cause anxiety pre-university. For many young people, it's a real issue that directly impacts their student experience upon arrival.

69%

take part in activities such as movie nights to socialise/connect with new friends.









THE HIDDEN VALUE OF PRE-UNIVERSITY ACADEMIC ADVICE

Academic confidence starts early - and there's more we can do

Many students would benefit from earlier, clearer academic support to help ease the transition into university-level study.

Actions like sharing reading lists, timetables, or connecting offerholders with current students or buddies are still relatively uncommon - with just 16%, 26%,

and 12% of students receiving this kind of information, respectively.

Yet these are exactly the types of support that students find most valuable in hindsight. There's a clear opportunity for universities to make academic preparation feel more accessible, visible and timely - helping students feel more confident, informed and ready to thrive from day one.



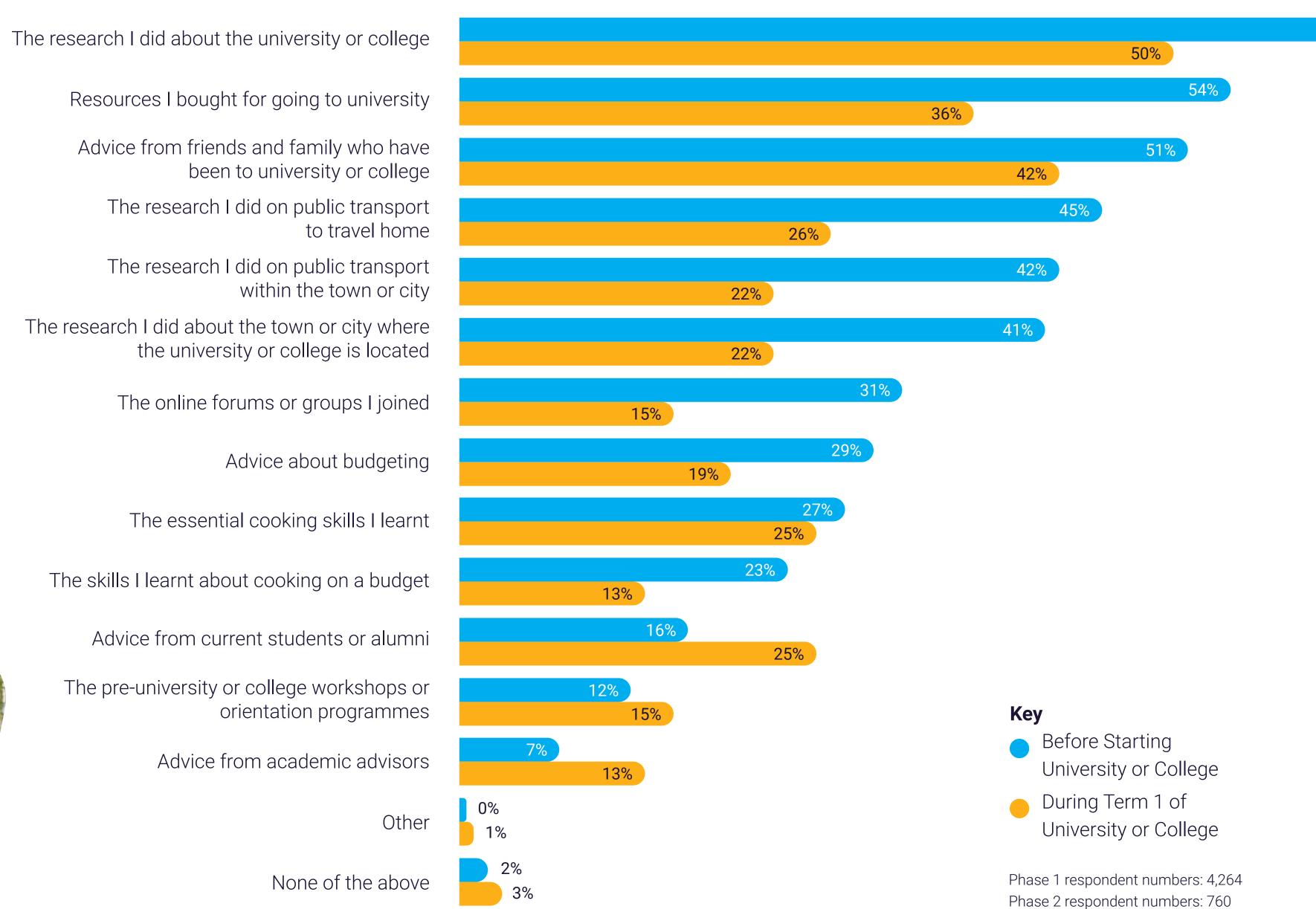
64%

After starting university, respondents found the advice from university advisors, current students, and alumnito be more valuable.

What, if any, of the following activities have you done to prepare yourself for university or college?

Which, if any, of the following preparation were useful?







SO WHAT CAN YOU DO?

→ Build tailored 'academicreadiness' campaigns

Develop communication programmes for students-to-be focused specifically on academic preparation. Tailor messages by subject or faculty to reassure students about their academic journey and help foster early connections.

→ Introduce early 'peer mentorship' initiatives

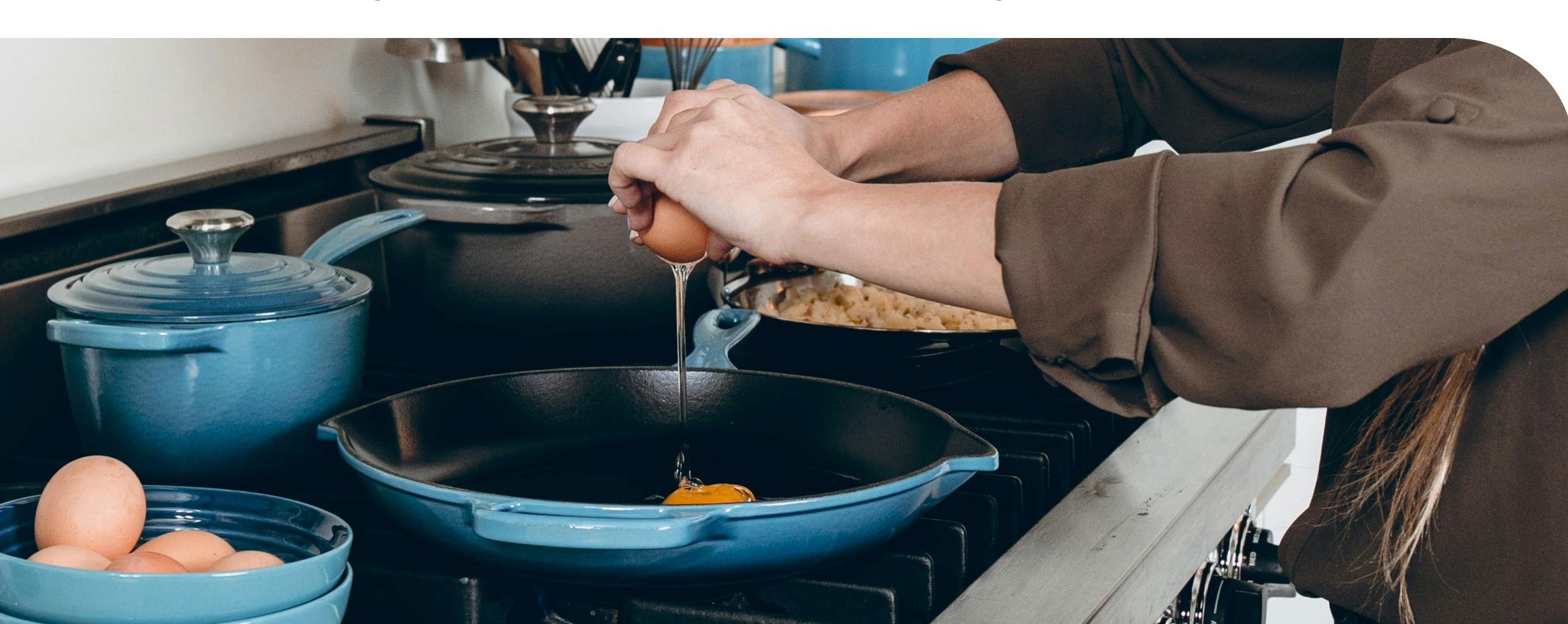
Promote dedicated academic mentorship programmes that pair students-to-be with trained second- or third-year mentors from the same course or subject area. Market these programmes as academic and wellbeing initiatives, with peer mentors providing study advice and emotional support.





HOME TRUTHS

Dealing with domestic and wellbeing worries.

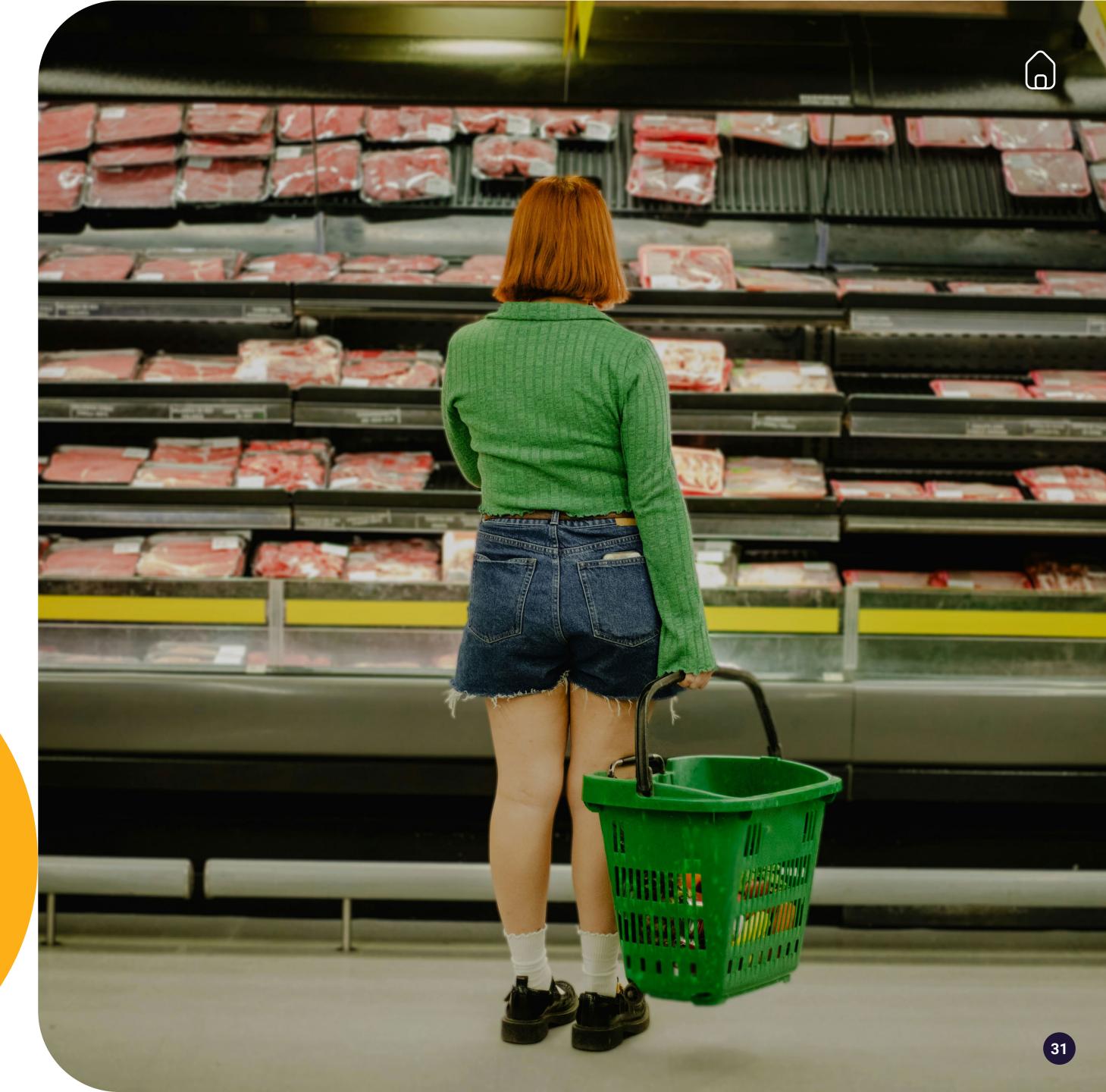


Parents and guardians worry about the life skills and safety of students-to-be — so get involved in preparation for higher education by giving domestic guidance.

There's an opportunity to acknowledge how collaborative and emotional this process is, with practical, relevant support that resonates with everyone's feelings.

"Being independent, learning to manage your own life, which we're all experiencing with the whole thing about food, budgeting, making friends, you know, standing on their own two feet."

Parent/Guardian Respondent



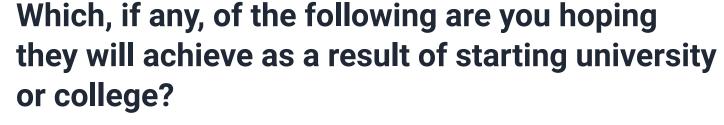


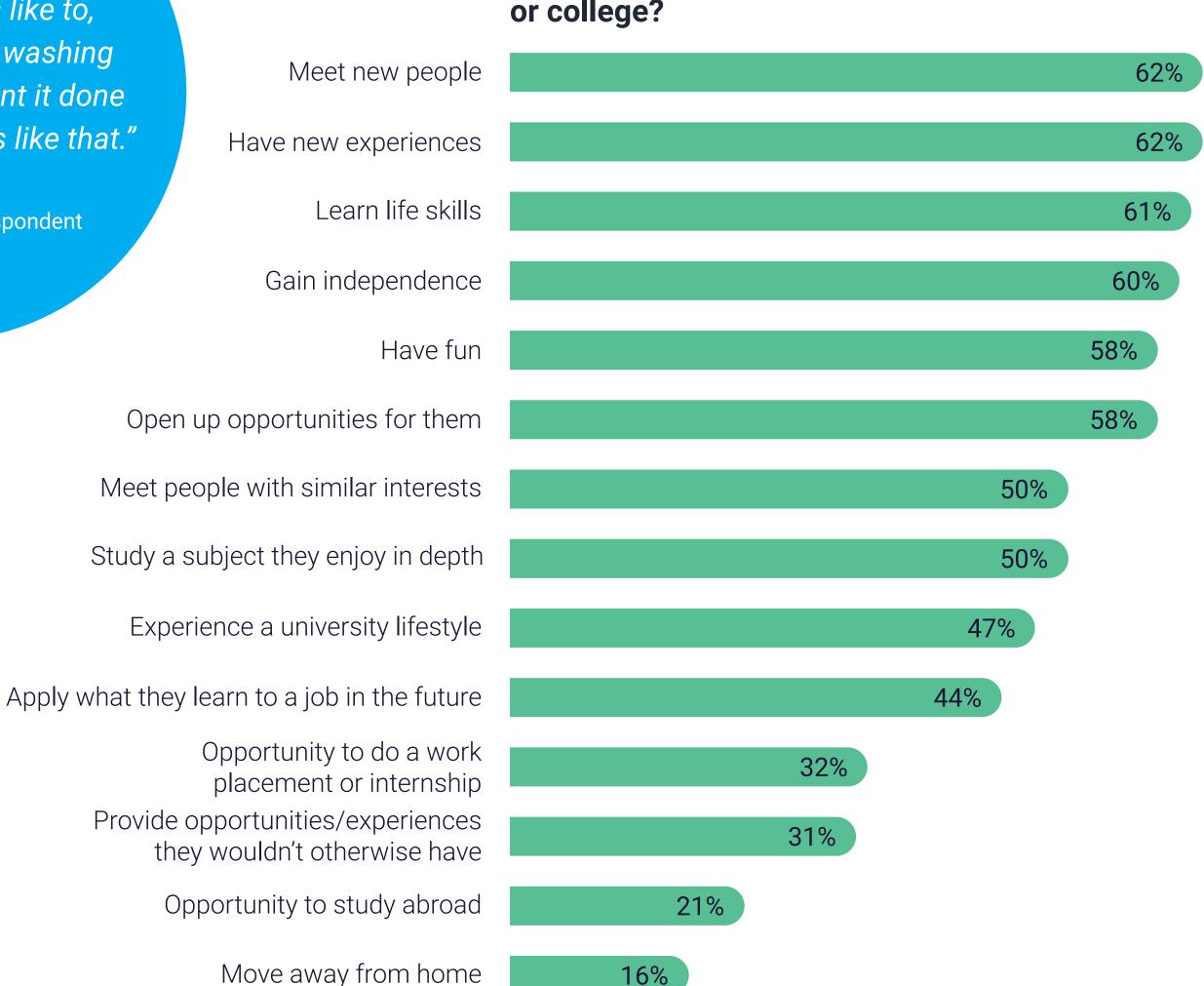


PARENTS ARE PREOCCUPIED WITH THE PRACTICALITIES

"He needed to sort of find out what it's like to, you know, get the washing done when you want it done and silly little things like that."

Parent/Guardian Respondent





16%

None of the above

Families might not share their young person's concern for academic readiness.

But parents have many other areas of 'preparation focus' that present opportunities for support. We found that parents are primarily concerned with the practicalities of their young person living away from home.

They worry about their young person's domestic ability,

such as cooking, meal planning, and budgeting. 32% of parents or guardians with students living away from home wonder "whether they will eat a healthy diet".

At least 60% of families express hope that students-to-be will "learn life skills" and "gain independence".

Respondent numbers: 1,290

PREPARATION IS A FAMILY AFFAIR

Driven by these concerns, parents and guardians get involved in preparation for university from an early stage.

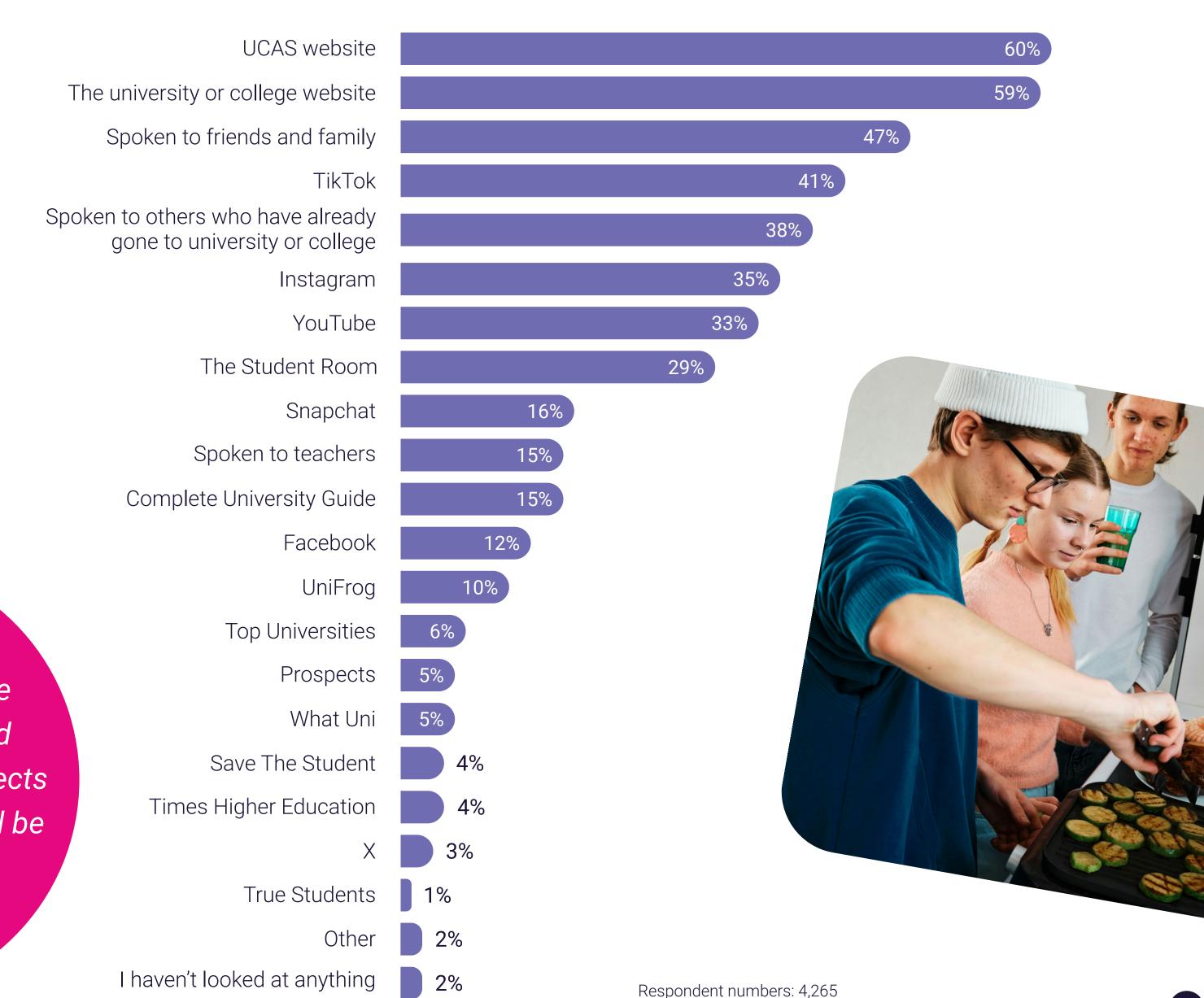
From open days to applications, from student loans to emotional support, from part-time job advice right up to helping young people move into student accommodation (95% help with the move; 87% travel by car), parents spend time and effort providing advice. This ranges from guidance about cooking, housework and budgeting, through to offering emotional support and encouragement. Special effort is made to strike a balance between involvement and encouraging self-discovery.

As domestic duties are daunting and a common source of apprehension for young people, students-to-be appreciate this inperson, practical guidance — they're more likely to turn to friends and family for domestic advice than research on social media.

"My parents...
We've been having little
conversations here and
there about different aspects
of my uni life and how it'll be
different."

Student, Living at Home

Which of the following resources have you used in your preparation for university or college?





BUT WHO SUPPORTS THE (EMOTIONAL) SUPPORTERS?

Parents and guardians view their young people's transition to university as a crucial part of personal growth and the development of autonomy.

Unsurprisingly, emotions run high as their dependent prepares to leave home. Families go through an intense mix of feelings. Many express excitement, pride and relief. But many others feel anxious and are more likely than their dependents to worry about homesickness.

Some have concerns about their young person's ability to make friends, and the pressures to fit into a party-centric culture at university. Mental health is a big concern (44% of parents list it as such) — with families significantly more worried than their dependents about the availability of suitable support (25%).

"It was so stressful to leave him knowing he was at his probably most vulnerable and I was probably ringing more or just texting more to check that you're OK and have you made friends."

Parent/Guardian Respondent





"I was a bit worried about her safety. So we had a chat about moving to a city. I mean that was a deliberate choice."

Parent/Guardian Respondent

"She struggles with making friends...

It's really overwhelming for her.

And that was what

I was most nervous about."

Parent/Guardian Respondent



Many parents and guardians (particularly those with dependents staying in accommodation) also express concern about their young person's physical safety while at university. Half of parents with students in accommodation and 47% of those with students living at home worry about their young person navigating a new area, or a new city entirely.

Concerns about young students, particularly females, being on their own in unfamiliar environments are common. Many families mentioned planning to use, or using, tools like location tracking for reassurance.

All of these concerns, worries and preoccupations present universities with significant opportunities to offer valuable support not just to students, but to their families as well.





SO WHAT CAN YOU DO?

→ Create a practical life-skills digital hub

Build a dedicated, accessible online resource offering essential domestic guidance. Consider bite-size, iterative, shareable and 'group-chat friendly' content to compliment the collaborative way young people and their families prepare for university together.

→ Host family-focused webinars and Q&A events

Schedule and market a series of targeted webinars and live Q&A sessions specifically designed for parents and guardians.

Cover topics like student safety, campus wellbeing support, and practical home-life management.

→ Develop dedicated parent and family channels

Create parent-focused communication channels and market them as a supportive resource throughout the student transition journey. Provide timely guidance and reassurance, and use social media to facilitate families helping each other.



MONEY ON THE MIND

Mastering budgets to maximise experience.



Financial concerns are among the biggest sources of stress for students and their families. Many young people enter higher education without the tools or knowledge to manage their money.

There's an opportunity to help students budget confidently and balance work with study — closing perceived 'financial gaps' and laying the foundations for a fulfilling university experience.

"I've never had to fully budget for myself before, so I expect there will be a bit of a learning curve here."

Student, Accommodation







BUDGETING: A DRAIN ON THE BRAIN FOR EVERYONE

Students and parents might not see eye-to-eye when it comes to academic and domestic worries.

But there's one topic everyone is concerned about — money. 63% of students have financial concerns ahead of university — including anxieties about balancing budgets and juggling study with a part-time job. Many parents — 37% of those with students in accommodation, and 40% of those with students living at home — share their young person's money concerns.

They express worry about financial matters and most, if able, expect they'll need to provide their young person with financial support across various areas.

To lighten the financial burden and ensure their young person can enjoy a well-rounded experience, they're prepared, on average, to contribute 59% of their dependent's university expenditure. This is a significant recognition of the substantial costs associated with life in higher education.

Most parents and guardians were in the position to support their young person financially. They expected to provide financial support across various areas.

In which of the following areas, if any, do you think you will support them financially?







FIRST TERM FINANCIAL WOES EXPOSE A SUPPORT GAP

Despite parental support

– and despite spending
less per week in their first
term than expected — over
half (58%) of young people
still worry about money
when university begins.

It's the most common concern during the first term, and 40% of students report facing challenges with budgeting after moving away from home.

When asked what they wished they'd sought additional advice about, the top answer from students is "budgeting"

While many universities offer some form of financial support before term starts, students don't always perceive it as helpful. 29% of students used preuniversity money management advice, and only 19% say it proves helpful once they've settled in..

This suggests a need to review not just the content of financial guidance, but also how and when it's delivered - ensuring it feels relevant, timely and easy to act on. 40%

of students report facing challenges with budgeting after moving away from home.

Only

29%

of students feel the support they receive for monetary matters before university or college is valuable.





Since starting uni, most respondents had some level of concern, primarily relating to financial and academic pressures.

Now that you've started university or college, do you have any concerns?





A PUSH FOR PART-TIME WORK AND A '£40 FINANCIAL GAP'

Before arriving at university, many students consider ways to finance a positive, social higher education experience.

Often, they decide to look for a job as term starts — 68% say they intend to balance their studies alongside part-time work. But this proves difficult. Firstly, awareness of, and access to, university job centres and careers centres is low (only 7% and 2% of students claim to have used these services). Secondly, while most young people have worked prior to starting higher education, a third of students haven't had a job before (with more students who plan to live at home lacking this experience).

This career 'greenness', combined with a tough economy and a competitive jobs market, results in only a quarter of students securing part-time work (or continuing with their previous employer) during term time.

Of those who do snag a job, the majority work in hospitality (32%) and retail (31%) — having found their positions through online jobs boards and advertisements, or recommendations from friends.

660/0 say they intend to balance their studies alongside part-time work.







Even if they do overcome the odds and secure a job, working students still have money worries. Those in part-time positions report a gap of £40 per week between what they earn and the amount they think they need to support themselves.

The others — unable to find parttime work but still influenced by financial and time constraints resolve themselves to working full-time during the holidays. Clearly, there's an opportunity here for universities to offer more financial support and advice.

This includes information and guidance on shopping on a budget, or finding and securing part-time work (whilst balancing this with studies and a healthy social life).





How much do you earn per week from your part-time job? How much do you think you need to earn per week to support yourself?

Amount needed to earn per week

£139

Amount earned per week

£99



SO WHAT CAN YOU DO?

→ Provide proactive financial literacy initiatives

Run early budgeting workshops (online and in-person) and offer students tools, templates and calculators. Link to UCAS resources or adapt them to fit your brand. Highlight financial literacy resources early in the recruitment process, personalised for different living arrangements and financial situations (for example, students with caring responsibilities).

→ Get creative with visible on-campus employment and work-study guidance

Promote your university's part-time employment opportunities. Tailor communications by subject, and explain how students can balance a job with their specific academic responsibilities. Make sure that all communications about part-time work give detailed, realistic guidance through authentic student testimonials.

→ Consider affordability as a competitive advantage

Make transparent and proactive financial planning a central feature of your recruitment marketing strategy. Promote available scholarships, bursaries, hardship funds, and financial support mechanisms. This will showcase your university's commitment to student wellbeing, increasing its appeal to both young people and their families.





FORGOTTEN COMMUTERS

Supporting students who stay home.







Living-at-home students feel overlooked. There's an opportunity to tailor support to tackle their commuting concerns and ensure that logistical challenges don't disrupt a positive higher education experience.

"It was a lot busier than
I expected and I am a
little nervous about
future commutes."

Student, Living At Home





THERE'S MORE SUPPORT FOR THOSE MOVING AWAY FROM HOME

Students planning to live at home actually feel less prepared for university or college than those moving into accommodation (54% vs 61%).

This is despite the fact that they're more likely to receive ongoing and more accessible support from their family, and experience less financial pressure.

This suggests that university support is less evident, or less accessible, to living-at-home students. They do feel that the majority of information provided is geared towards those moving away from home, and this makes it hard for them to prepare properly.

Most respondents felt prepared to start university or college, though some still had concerns as the start of term approached.

How prepared do you feel to start university or college?

Student accommodation



Living at home





Respondent Numbers - Student Accommodation: 3,050 Respondent Numbers - Living At Home: 1,080





of students reported
"looking into public
transport to travel home".

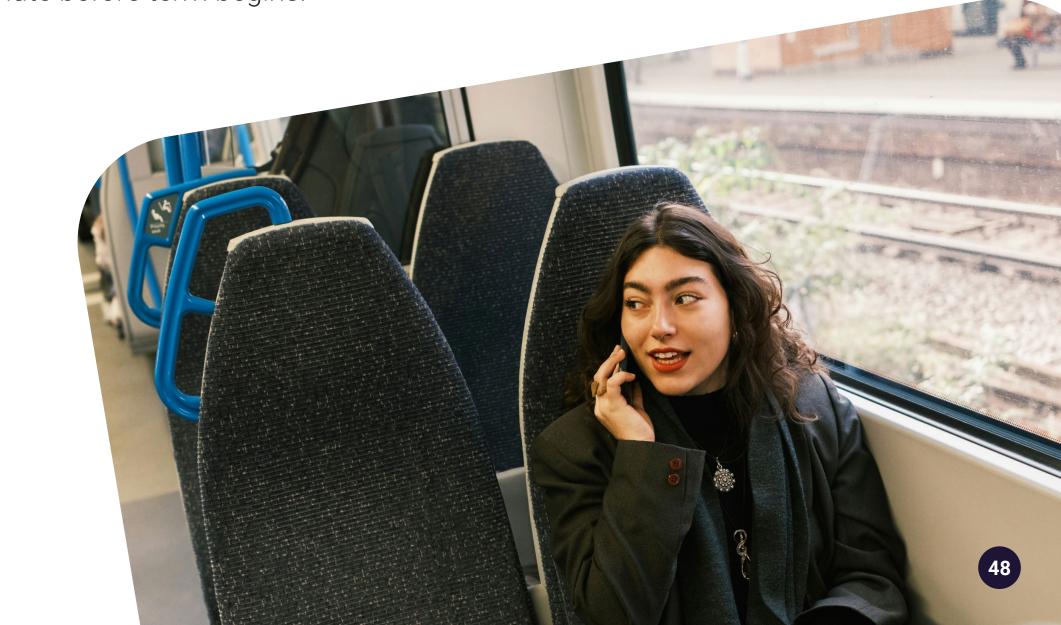


COMMUTING CONCERNS ARE OFTEN OVERLOOKED

Interestingly, live-athome students' sense of unpreparedness seems to stem from a lack of support around specific logistical challenges. This includes organising their commute.

Many feel nervous about travelling in new environments. They find the challenge of navigating their way around campus and making sense of bus schedules particularly stressful.

Accordingly, 45% of students reported "looking into public transport to travel home.
42% "looked into public transport within the town or city" of their university. Some practise their commute before term begins.





A LACK OF LOGISTICAL SUPPORT IMPACTS THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

When term begins, many live-at-home students find their university commute overwhelming, annoying and tiring.

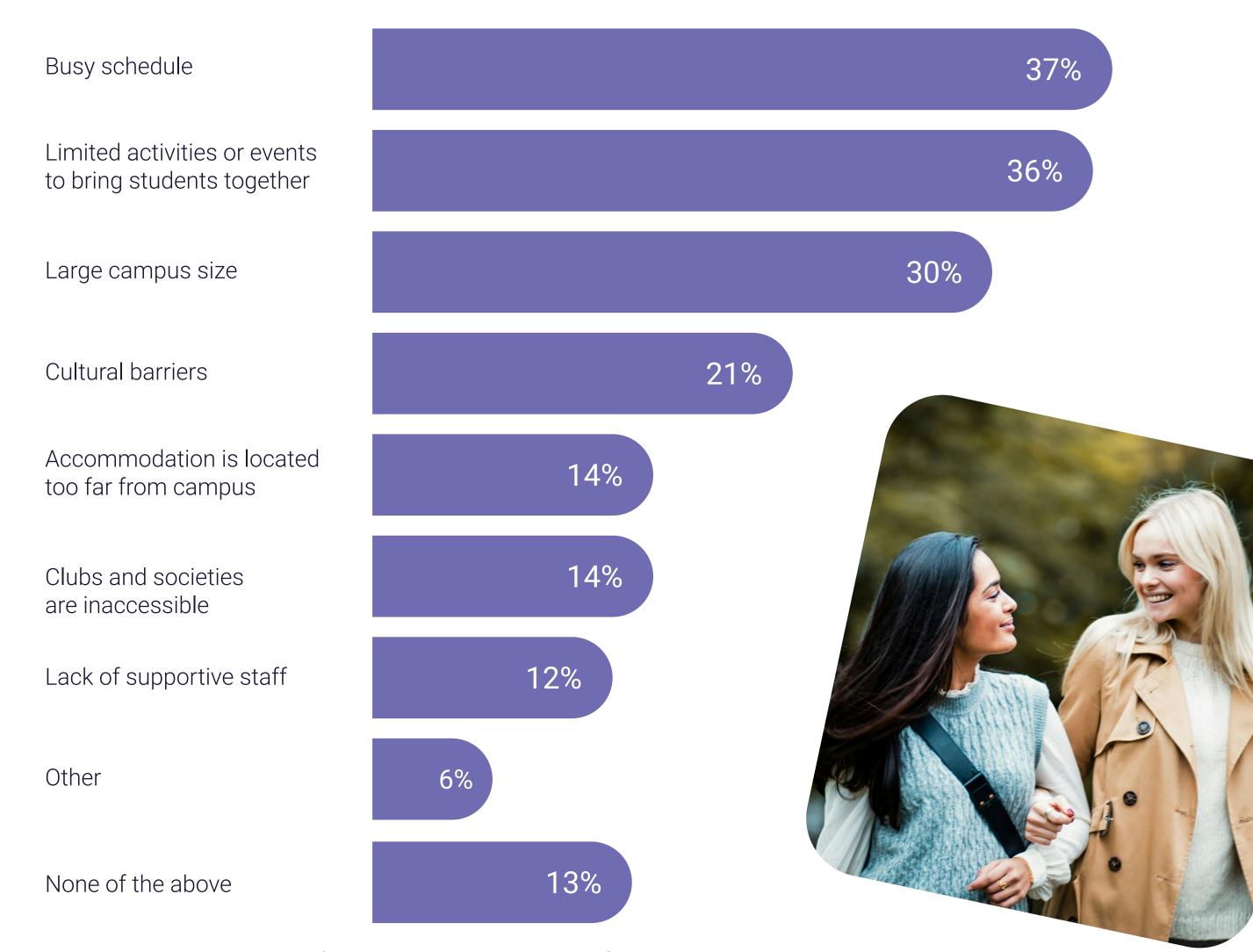
Those who didn't practice their commute beforehand wish they'd done so, to reduce their stress and increase their confidence.

There is a mismatch between the preparation students did around public transport (45%) and how useful it proved once they arrived (26%) — suggesting that the support they did find, or were provided with, lacked sufficient information.

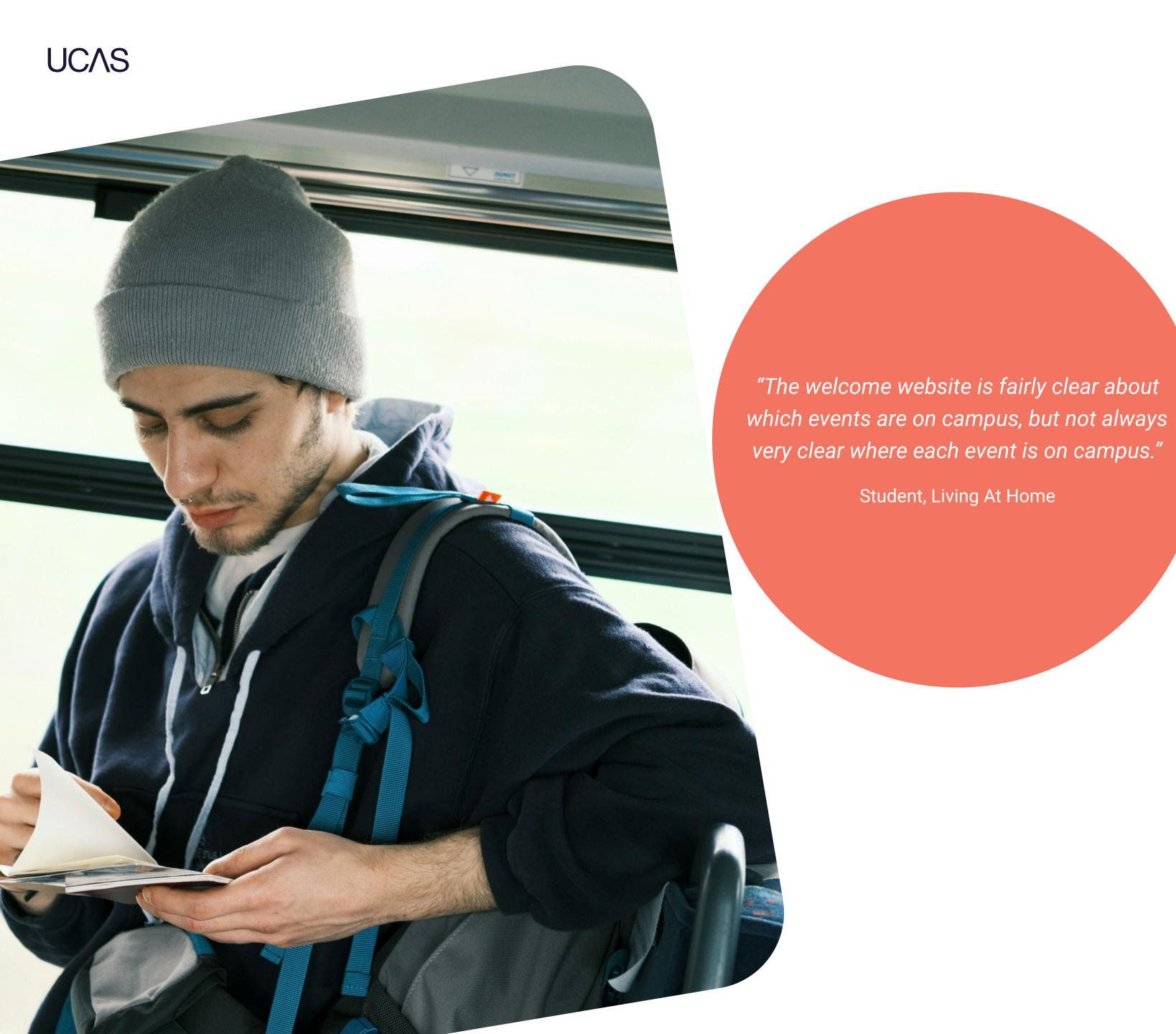
This commuting confusion directly impacts attendance at course introductions, tours and welcome fairs.

Some live-at-home students miss these events as their commute feels prohibitively time-consuming and expensive. Others are frustrated by timetables that don't account for travel, leaving them with busy schedules and making it hard to settle into their course. Many say event locations — even activities that are compulsory — aren't communicated clearly to those living off campus.

What factors do you believe contribute to a lack of community at your university or college?



Respondent Numbers – Those that felt there was a limited, or no sense of community at their university or college: 150





Student, Living At Home

In turn, commuting issues directly impact student happiness. The top barrier to students' sense of community is a busy schedule. Without proper support, logistical challenges can hinder students' ability to connect — even if they want to get involved.

There's evidently an opportunity for universities to offer more support with the logistical challenges students face. This is especially true for those who opt to live at home, who currently feel that they aren't communicated with sufficiently.

Respondent numbers: 150



SO WHAT CAN YOU DO?

→ Create a dedicated commuter student welcome programme

Launch and promote commuter-specific group chats, online forums, and virtual meet-ups — and organise commuter-friendly in-person orientation events. Design and market welcome packs tailored to students who plan to live at home, with specific logistical guidance such as travel discounts, campus navigation tips, and parking information. Use segmented email campaigns to make sure this practical information doesn't get lost in broader communications.

→ Make sure your commuter support is visible

Highlight commuter-specific resources prominently across your university website, recruitment campaigns and university campus. A commuter-positive stance could form a central part of your university's inclusive student experience strategy.







CONNECTION CRISIS

Combating social anxiety.



Social anxiety is unavoidable. But early, structured connection can positively impact young people's confidence and sense of belonging.

There's an opportunity to build communities before term begins to create happier, more resilient students.

"I'm excited to have a fresh start and meet new people. I am also excited to explore a new city."

Student, Accommodation







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Reported making friends as their top concern when starting university - more than any other priority.



MEETING NEW PEOPLE IS EXCITING FOR EVERYONE

The number one preoccupation of young people going to university is "making friends" (71% of our research respondents expressed this focus).

This trumps all thoughts of academic, financial, practical and logistical challenges.

The vast majority of students-to-be anticipate that "meeting new people" will be a key activity in the first few weeks of term.

Many say they're excited at the prospect (68%), and are keen to "meet people with similar interests" (64%). Those living in student

accommodation list "joining societies or clubs" as something they're most looking forward to.

Meanwhile, those living at home consider the potential to build new social connections as a key draw of university.

Families share this social sentiment. Along with 70% of students, 58% of parents agree that finding new friends — and exploring personal identity through social experiences — would be a good outcome of going to university or college.





Respondents expected the first weeks of university to involve social and academic activities.

What activities do you think the first few weeks of going to university or college will involve?





BUT IT'S ALSO FRAUGHT WITH FEARS OF REJECTION

Despite these positive hopes, the majority of students (56%) explicitly state that they're worried about "fitting in with my peers".

It's a concern especially pronounced among students moving into accommodation.

Parents and guardians share this social anxiety. Over half (51%) feel anxious about their young person making friends. But sadly, many families struggle to communicate and support students with social challenges. Only 36% of students say they got advice from parents about "meeting new people".









STUDENTS ACTIVELY TRY TO PREPARE WITH SOCIAL MEDIA

Despite these worries, young people opt for a proactive approach.

They take positive actions to try to secure a good social experience at university.

58% connect with others digitally before starting higher education — a number which rises to 62% among students moving into accommodation. Meanwhile, 31% join relevant online forums or groups.



Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and Whatsapp play a key role in creating a sense of community pre-university.

Our data suggests they're vital in supporting incoming students to create friendships.

30% of young people use social media to connect with others going to their university, of those, 29% created a new account specifically for the task.

24% use it to find others studying the same subject as them (20% of students in our survey explained they'd started a group chat with others on their course). 23% start following societies they're interested in.

The vast majority of young people (65%) say they take these social steps simply "so that I know someone" or "recognise a friendly face" (51%) when they arrive at university. But some students consider their future mental health, potential homesickness, and the challenges of entering a new environment.

Their attempts to connect with others before term starts is so that they have "someone to reach out to if I feel nervous" (22%).

30%

of young people use social media to connect with others going to their university.



"I joined group chats in advance.

Some general ones, some course specific ones, and some commuting ones."

Student, stay at home





PRE-ARRIVAL CONNECTION MATTERS - BUT IT'S NOT REACHING ENOUGH STUDENTS

Students are open to early connection - but the support to make it happen is limited

Students show a strong willingness to connect before they arrive on campus. However, the support structures to enable this are not yet widespread.

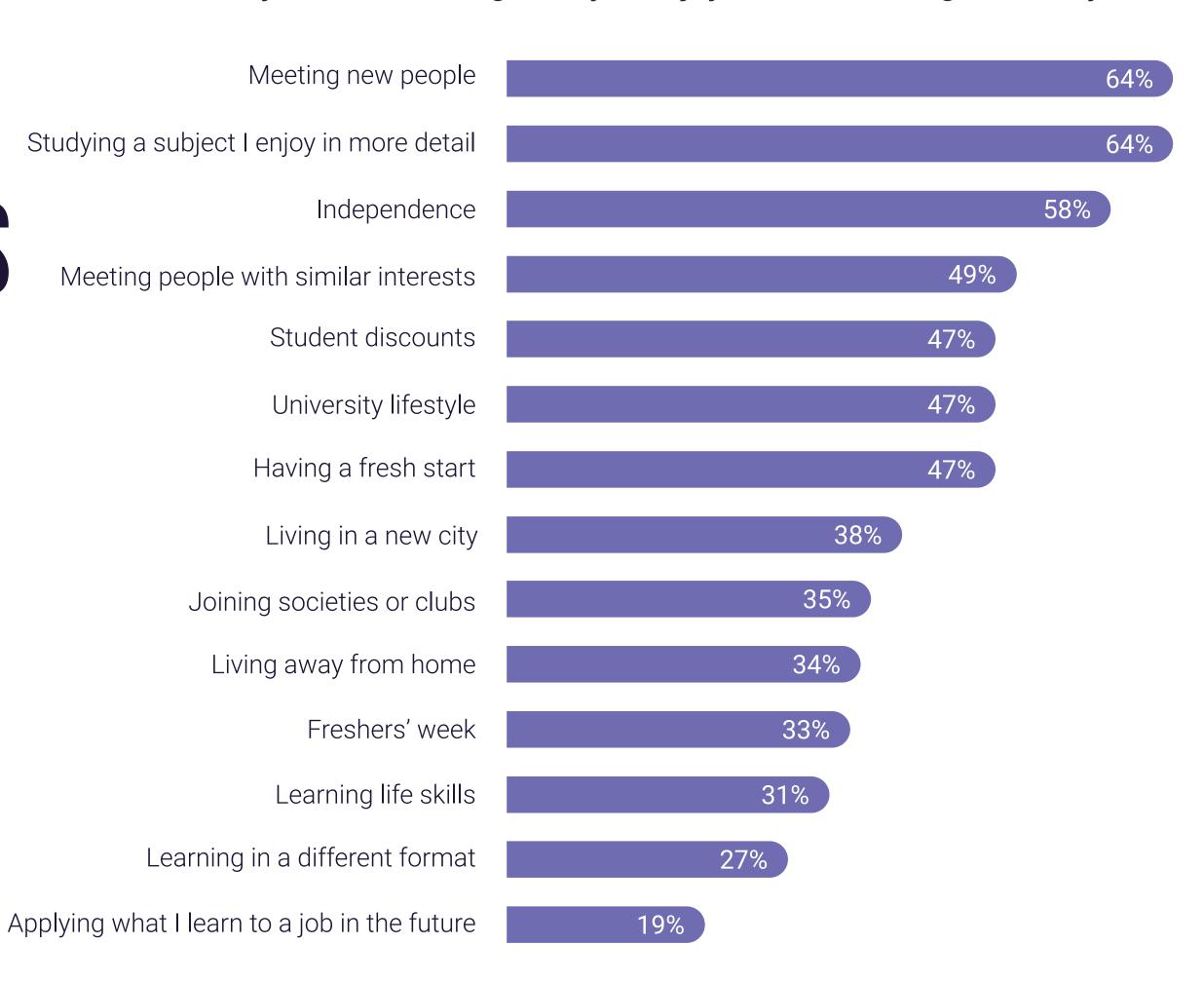
Only 12% of students say they were given information about a university 'buddy' scheme, or were put in contact with a current student.

Just 12% take part in pre-university workshops or orientation events, and only 16% find preparation advice from current students or alumni.

Even fewer (7%) actively seek out buddy schemes themselves - highlighting an opportunity for universities to raise awareness and make early social integration feel easier and more accessible.

Respondents said they had enjoyed a mix of social and academic activities since starting university.

Which, if any, of the following have you enjoyed since starting university or college?







STUDENTS DIVE IN WHEN THEY GET THERE

Young peoples' proactive social approach continues when they reach university.

A third attend freshers week, diving into social and course activities like freshers' fairs, society events, 'buddy' matching, and nights out. It's clear that young people appreciate the meet-ups arranged by their university and other organisations.

Social media continues to be important once term starts. Its role shifts slightly, from a way to discover new connections to being the best way to stay in contact with flatmates and friends. Meanwhile, from afar, parents encourage their young person's socialising, suggesting that students join clubs or societies.

To stay in touch with new friends, student respondents used social media, messaging apps, and other online platforms.

How have you been staying in touch with your new friends?







BUT COMMUNITY CONCERNS CONTINUE

These meet-ups and activities certainly help with young peoples' anxieties.

Broadly, social worries decrease amongst students once university is in full swing. Happily, many young people report forming new friendships — primarily through their academic course, through flatmates, and through clubs and societies.

But many struggle to make a connection. After being in higher education for two months, only 64% of students say they have enjoyed "meeting new people".

Only 49% say they have met "people with similar interests".42% still list "making friends" as a key concern, and 35% continue to worry about "fitting in with my peers". Many (38%) experience homesickness and loneliness. 18% retrospectively wish they'd joined online forums or groups, and 17% wish they'd attended workshops or orientation programmes.

38% of students experience

homesickness and loneliness.

"It has been a bit lonely getting used to not having my family around. For a while I hadn't met all of my flatmates and it felt awkward to speak with them."

Student, Accommodation



The absence of early social connection may be shaping students' long-term sense of belonging

When students don't feel supported to connect before they arrive, it can influence how they experience university life more broadly.

Just 24% say they "feel a strong sense of community at my university." A further 20% feel neutral, while 10% report only a limited sense of community - and 4% say they don't feel one exists at all.

These findings highlight the importance of visible, inclusive social support before and after arrival - helping students feel part of university life from the outset.





A BIG OPPORTUNITY TO PROVIDE MORE 'SOCIAL GLUE'

Over a third of students (36%) feel that their university offers only limited opportunities to bring students together - before, during, and after their first term.

Only 15% of students found activities such as 'the pre-university or college workshops or orientation programmes', as well as 'the online forums or groups I joined' useful once they had started university.

This suggests a clear opportunity to strengthen long-term social connection - by offering consistent, inclusive activities that go beyond the first few weeks and help students build a genuine sense of belonging.

"It's quite overwhelming and isolating, particularly as my flat isn't very social." Student, Accommodation





SO WHAT CAN YOU DO?

→ Introduce structured but authentic digital communities

Create moderated online communities, virtual ice-breaker events, peer-led group chats, and early online meet-ups.

Market these as crucial tools for building confidence, easing anxieties, and helping young people make meaningful connections.

Gather authentic stories from current students who've overcome initial social concerns, and use them to emphasise the real-life positive impact of engaging with your resources.

→ Build on-campus safe spaces and champion structured peer support

Promote designated 'safe spaces' and structured peer support groups. Don't wait for students to arrive on campus — celebrate and use these resources during the recruitment process, open days and tours.

Connect these initiatives with your DEI policies to create a comprehensive commitment to student wellbeing and community integration.

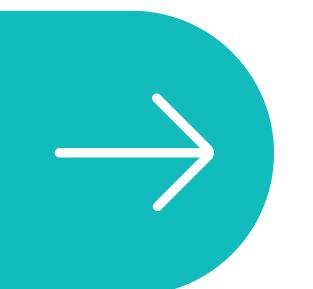
→ See everything through a 'social lens'

Events marketed purely as ice-breakers or 'meet and greets' can be intimidating.

Instead, see all pre-arrival activity
(be it support for finance worries,
or commuter concerns, or academic
pressure) as a chance for young people
and their families to safely and securely
share contact information and start to
feel part of a community.







> METHODOLOGY







METHODOLOGY

The students participating in the research were aged 18 and 19 and began university or college in Autumn 2024.

The parents and guardians involved in the research were those of students who started university or college in Autumn 2024.

The students involved in the online community and the parents or guardians who took place in the focus groups were recruited during the surveys.



Students Survey Phase 1

4,320 first-year undergraduate students completed our survey. It took place between the 27th of August and the 11th of September 2024.

Students Online Community

14 participants who were moving into student accommodation, and 7 participants who were going to be living at home participated in our online community. It took place between the 12th of September and the 4th of October 2024.

Parents Survey

1,290 parents and guardians of first-year undergraduate students completed our survey. It took place between the 25th of September and the 25th of October 2024.

Parents Focus Groups

6 parents and guardians of students who had moved into student accommodation took part in our focus groups. They took place between the 19th and the 20th of November 2024.

Students Survey Phase 2

1,155 first-year undergraduate students completed our survey. It took place between the 5th and 18th of November 2024.

For the student surveys, respondents were diverse in terms of gender, age, country, and ethnicity, as well as across the POLAR4 quintiles.

The student survey responses are weighted up to be representative of the population who are eligible to receive the survey.





READY TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE?



CONTACT YOUR CUSTOMER SUCCESS DIRECTOR/MANAGER

About how you can use these insights to inform your marketing strategy.



Some more detailed, actionable marketing and engagement ideas — responding to the findings of this report — can also be found in our dedicated

Finding Their Place: Higher Education Action Plan.

