



# Student Experience Research 2012

## Part 2: Independent Learning and Contact Hours

Student experience research to gain insight into the quality of the learning experience



national union of students



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# Forewords

# Foreword

Welcome to the second section of the NUS/QAA Student Experience Report which gives an overview of students' experiences of independent learning and contact hours. It is a pleasure to work with QAA to produce this research which we hope will be useful to students' unions, institutions, and the government in improving the quality of higher education in the UK.

I was glad to see that most students view independent learning as a key element of learning in a higher education setting. But students need support in order to give them the confidence to learn independently, and resources in order to enable them to get the most out of their independent study. Helping students to navigate the challenges of independent learning is one of the key tasks for both institutions and students' unions.

As the higher education sector readies itself for the introduction of the Key Information Set (KIS), I was pleased to see the finding that students already avidly engage with information around contact hours and care deeply not only about the quantity but the quality of contact they receive. It is my hope that the method of presentation of contact hours on the KIS will help students and prospective students to see information on contact hours as a way of better understanding the course, rather than simply being a case of more contact hours straightforwardly being assumed to mean better quality.

The information on students' expectations and experiences of independent learning and contact hours contained in this briefing will be invaluable to students' unions as they campaign for changes and work with their institutions to improve the way that learning and teaching happens at their institution. I look forward to seeing the positive changes that students' unions can make when equipped with this data.

Usman Ali  
Vice President (Higher Education)  
National Union of Students

# Foreword from QAA

**M**aking sure that students get the best possible educational experience they can is a vital part of what QAA does. Our aim is to meet students' needs and be valued by them. We do this by working with students as partners, responding to their views and needs, and protecting their interests. And we support higher education providers as they aim to meet and shape students' expectations.

Students play an active part in shaping our strategic direction, the judgments we make about higher education standards and quality, and in developing national guidance for higher education institutions. Our student Board member and Student Sounding Board influence QAA's policy direction, and we employ a student reviewer on all of our Institutional Review teams.

This year, we have taken student engagement to the next level by entering into a 12-month partnership with NUS that includes:

- research by NUS into the 21st century student's experience of UK higher education
- training and development to engage students in quality assurance
- bespoke support for 16 self-nominated students' unions that want to develop their quality agenda

In this, the second of four research reports, NUS has surveyed 5,000 UK higher education students on their experience of independent learning and contact hours. Further reports on the context for Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) subjects, and the first year student experience will follow.

The findings provide food for thought in our rapidly changing higher education environment. I trust these reports will stimulate debate and inform our thinking on the whole learning experience.

Anthony McClaran  
Chief Executive  
Quality Assurance Agency



# Executive Summary

This report focuses on the research outcomes of the 2011–12 NUS Student Experience Research in relation to students' perceptions of their independent learning and contact hours. This report is the second in a series of focused reports around student perceptions of their higher education experience. Other reports include: Teaching and Learning, Subject Differences and the First Year Experience.

The research consists of primary data from an online survey, a series of national focus groups, and an online discussion forum. The data collection period ran from November to December 2011.

### Independent Learning

- The vast majority of students were familiar with the term “independent learning”, but most had not had it formally explained to them as part of their experience at university. Nevertheless, independent learning was viewed by most students as part and parcel of university life.
- Students reported an average of 19.5 hours of independent learning per week; however, this number varied widely. A third of students said that their course required between 15-20 hours of independent learning.
- Nearly two thirds of students said that the amount of independent learning on their course was as expected. A quarter of students felt that it was more than expected.
- The provision of learning resources was seen as a key element of support for independent learning; without the necessary resources, students felt they could not undertake independent learning effectively.
- Students identified that class size was an important aspect of contact hours; smaller class sizes meant more access to staff which meant a better quality of contact hours.
- Most students (62.9%) said that their lecture contact time was as expected, but 23.5% said it was less than expected. There were similar figures for students' expectations of interactive group teaching sessions or tutorials; 60.2% said they were as expected and 25.8% said they were less than expected.
- The average number of contact hours varied greatly by subject area. Overall, students reported an average of 7 hours per week of lectures and 3.4 hours per week of interactive group sessions/tutorials.
- Most students (67.6%) were satisfied with the amount of lecture contact time, but there was clear demand for more interactive contact hours, with roughly a third of students saying that the amount of group tutorials, drop-in sessions and individual meetings were too few.
- 84.2% of students either agreed or strongly agreed that contact hours directly improves the quality of their learning experience/course.

### Contact Hours

- “Contact hours” was also a very familiar term for students and some students identified that a course's advertised contact hours had a major impact on their course choice.
- There was a split between students that defined contact hours in terms of classroom time (time spent in lectures/tutorials) and those whose definition included access to staff, such as office hours or email contact.
- When respondents were asked what improvements should be made to their course, 50.2% said there should be more interactive group teaching sessions or tutorials. The next most popular improvements were more individual tutorials and more contact time with the personal tutor.
- Students identified that lecturers could use contact hours to support independent learning to more or less effect. A good lecturer was seen as someone who could bring independent learning to life in their lectures.



# Methodology

The research consisted of a multi method approach combining the breadth of a national online survey, along with an in-depth qualitative approach through in-person focus groups at 8 locations nationally, followed by an online discussion group to validate the findings. These combined methodologies provided an holistic approach, creating synergy and allowing for exploration of issues to emerge through the various fieldwork activities.

Two initial 120 minute focus groups in Manchester on November 14th 2011 kicked-off the qualitative research strand as pilots and these were then examined and the discussion guide tweaked for improvements.

The focus groups then ran until November 23rd 2011, overall covering eight locations across the UK, and resulting in an ultimate total of 135 student respondents. Focus groups were video recorded and subsequently transcribed.

The sample sizes utilised are reflective of the student strata and were driven by HEFCE student data statistics, with a key focus on university type, year of study, age, and gender. Recruitment was purposive to this effect, building on a number of routes to students. Respondents were offered incentives to encourage participation and thank them for their time.

The online discussion group provided additional qualitative research and representation, where students got the opportunity to get involved in the research who might not practically be able to make a focus group or have the confidence, etc. Questions posed in this online group validated the findings of the online survey and focus groups.

All research was conducted in accordance with the MRS code of conduct.

The following documents can be downloaded by visiting: **[www.nus.org.uk/studentexperience](http://www.nus.org.uk/studentexperience)**

- Online Survey Sample Profile (Demographics)
- Institution Groupings Definitions
- Focus Groups Sample Frame
- Focus Groups Discussion Guide
- Online Discussion Group Discussion Guide

# Findings

## Independent Learning

In the online survey students were asked what they understood by the term 'independent learning'. 88% of students (n=4755) answered this question and the majority were familiar with this term. Figure 1 below shows the words used to describe independent learning.

For around a quarter of students (26%, n=713) independent learning was not explained to them but it is a term which is familiar to them. A few students (3%, n=80) mentioned that it was formally talked about in an induction or lecture/seminar and a similar proportion (4%, n=115) said that it is often referred to by lecturers and tutors about the importance of reading around the subject. In the majority of cases, while it may not have been formally explained to them, it is expected that independent learning is part of undertaking a university course.

Like the online survey, in the focus groups the majority of respondents were familiar with the term 'independent learning'. Specific definitions ranged from 'learning independently', to 'personal/self-directed study', to 'finding information yourself', 'reading/researching

around subject', 'beyond the reading list', 'work outside of course', 'non-taught hours', 'what you do when you're not in lectures', 'taking teaching to the next stage', to specifically 'reading week' and 'placements'. Hence for the majority, independent learning was seen as part and parcel of university life.

*"It would be funny if it wasn't on your radar. You should expect it because you're going to university".*

*(Male, Russell Group, 1st Year)*

As a term, independent learning was generally regarded positively, as an example of the wider benefit of independence that you gain when going to university, putting the student in control. This sentiment can be seen in this quote:

*"I think it's much more beneficial this way. There is a freedom of learning, you are learning for yourself, not for an exam. If you just learn for an exam you might not remember what you learnt after the exam, but you will remember what you learnt yourself".*

*(Male, Russell Group, Masters)*

Over three-quarters of students (76.9%, n=3729) expect the amount of independent learning to increase

Figure 1: Question 43. What, if anything, do you understand by the term 'independent learning'? (n=4755)



to some extent throughout the rest of their course as shown below in chart 1.

A slightly higher proportion of law and written arts students (81.9% and 81.1% respectively) expect the amount of independent learning to increase to some extent throughout the rest of their course compared to the national average (76.9%).

In the online survey students reported that on average their course required 19.5 hours of independent learning per week. The average number of hours varied widely, however, with almost a third (31.9%, n=1539) saying that their course required 15-20 hours of independent learning per week.

A third of students (32%, n=1600) reported that roughly 51-75% of their course is independent learning, and just over a quarter (26.8%, n=1337) 76-100% and 27.5% (n=1370) said that 26-50% of their course was learning independently.

79% (n=307) of historical & philosophical studies students and 74% (n=194) of written arts students reported to have more than 50% of their course as independent learning as shown in chart 2 on the next page. Just 45% of Engineering and Technology students (n=171) and 43% of Medicine & Dentistry

(n=84) reported that more than 50% of their course was learning independently.

In terms of student expectations, almost two-thirds of students (63.9%, n=3097) felt that the amount of independent learning was as expected and just over a quarter (28.2%, n=1366) felt that it was more than expected, as shown in chart 3 on the next page:

Student expectations of the amount of independent learning was consistent between the various courses but with a slightly higher proportion of education and medicine students stating that it was more than expected (34%, n=107 and 33%, n=147 respectively).

When the focus groups turned their attention to their experiences of independent learning, more difficulties were voiced by some respondents. One was what they perceived as unnecessary independent learning, when they felt that lecturers had pointed them in the wrong direction and wasted their time.

*“Sometimes our lecturers give us reading and say, “Do this for the seminar”, and I’ll have done it, I get to the seminar and I find it’s not even relevant. It wasn’t relevant for the entire module”.*

*(Female, Russell Group, 2nd Year)*

**Chart 1: Question 50. To what extent, if at all, do you expect the amount of independent learning to increase throughout the rest of your course? (n=4848)**

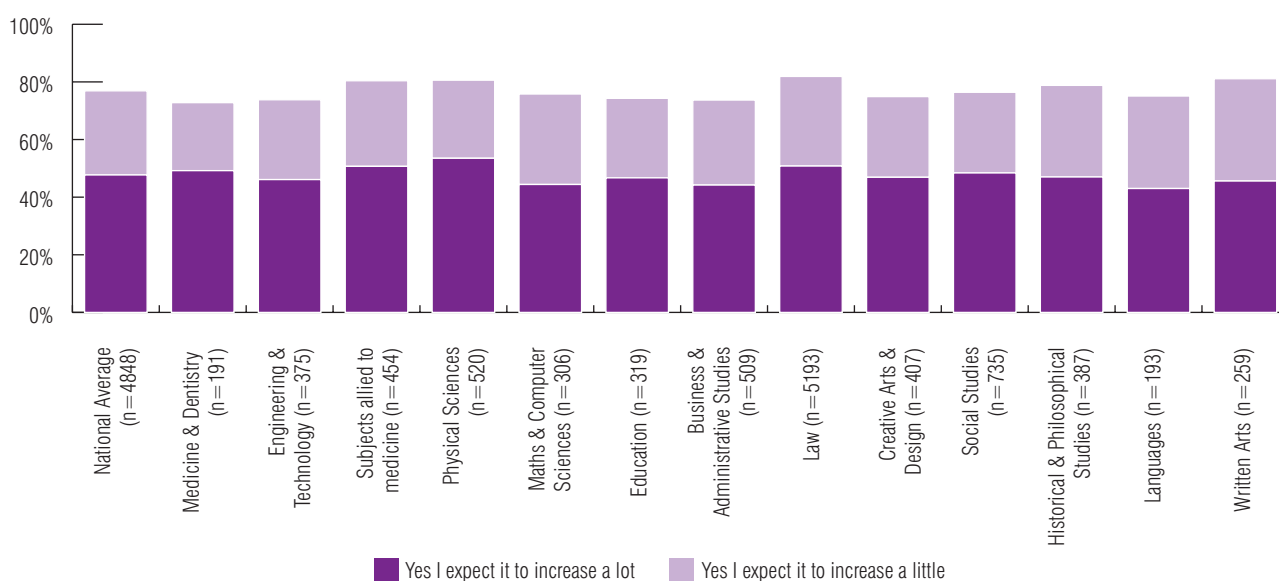


Chart 2: Question 45. At this stage in your course roughly what percentage of your course is independent learning? (n=4939)

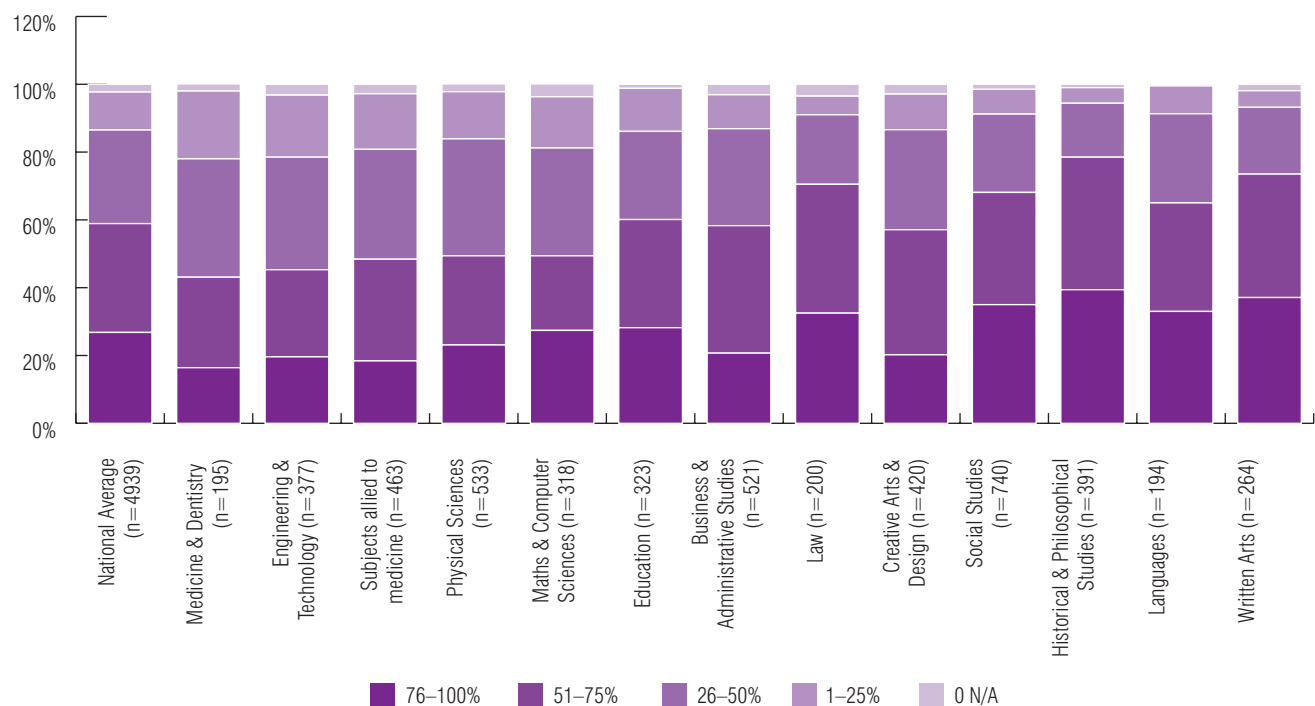
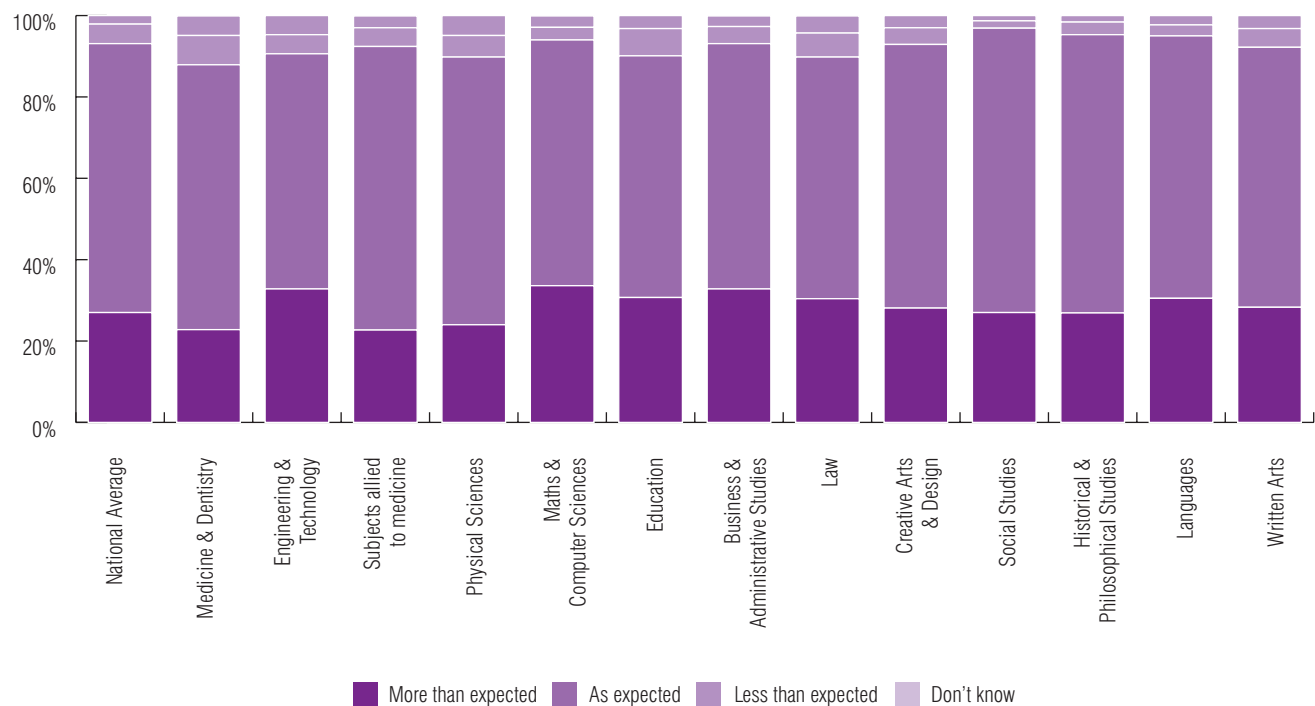


Chart 3: Question 47. Is this amount of independent learning? (n=4846)



Another challenge that some respondents faced was unrealistic expectations on the part of their lecturers when it came to independent learning, especially when lecturers didn't take into account the time pressures that they were under in other courses.

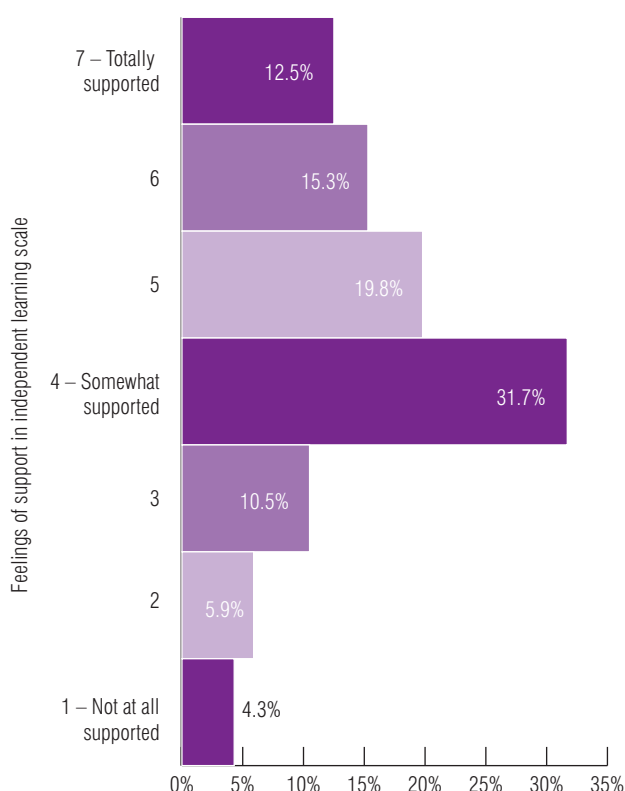
*"I know for one of the units, one lecturer said to do eight hours for every hour that you're at that lecture. It's a full week and barely any sleep... Sometimes they'll pressure you too much and you'll panic".*

*(Female, University Alliance Group, 2nd Year)*

## Support for Independent Learning

Referring to the online survey, when asked how supported students feel in their independent learning, opinions were mixed. Almost a third (31.7%, n=1538) felt somewhat supported, 12.5% (n=605) totally supported and 4.3% (n=208) felt that they were not at all supported as shown in chart 4 below:

**Chart 4: Question 48: How supported, if at all, do you feel in your independent learning? (n=4858)**



When expectations of independent learning were discussed in the focus groups, some challenges started to emerge. Although most respondents were prepared for independent learning being intrinsic to their university experience, some did express that they had lacked support in getting them started with this new way of learning.

*"What I've found since I've been at university is I'm not sure to what extent I'm supposed to do my own research. I'm not sure what they expect of you. Some topics are endless".*

*(Female, 1994 Group, 1st Year)*

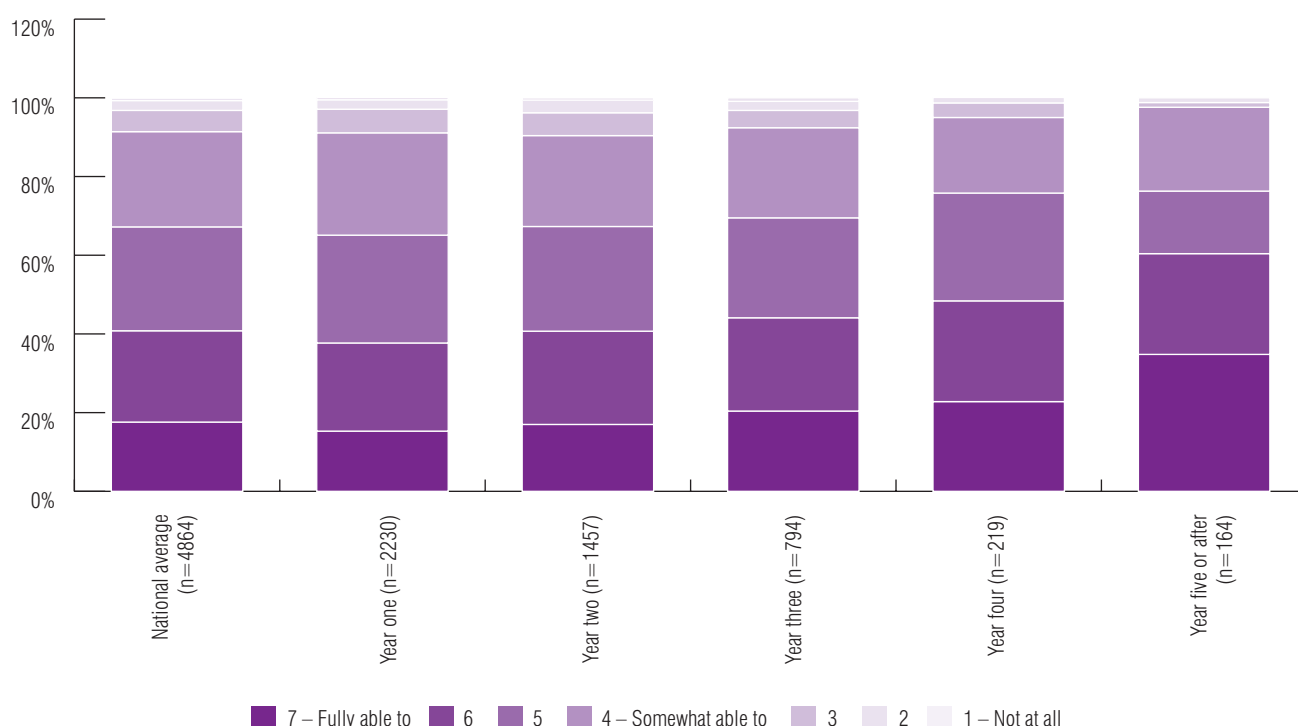
As shown in chart 5 on the next page, the national average shows that the majority of students (91.5%, n=4459) felt that they are able to learn independently to some extent. The percentage of students who said they were 'fully able to' increased with year of study, from 15.3% (n=341) for year one, to 34.8% (n=57) for year 5 or after.

As per the online survey findings, it can be seen in the focus group findings that respondents felt increasingly able to independently learn as they progressed through their years of study. More 1st and 2nd years asked for more support and guidance with independent learning than those in later years.

Some respondents though described ways that they had managed to get around this problem of a lack of independent learning support and this came in the form of peer support, a central theme right across the research findings. With the help of classmates on their course they discussed the course content and anything that was confusing them, finding that sharing thoughts in this way was incredibly helpful for their independent learning. It can even be used in a team effort to distribute the independent learning workload, as can be seen in this quote:

*"I like the fact that for some of our lectures they tell us to read an article from a journal and then report about it in the seminar. Everybody would know about 30 or 40 journals. If the whole class does it then it helps everybody out". (Male, Guild HE, 2nd Year)*

Chart 5: Question 46. To what extent do you feel you are able to learn through independent learning? (n=4875)



Such peer support comes in various forms: face-to-face discussions via course societies, pub visits to discuss the course, or online discussions, organised either by the university or by students themselves, which we know from other areas of this research can work well for students. An example of this peer support for independent learning is shown in this quote:

*“Maths is normally taught and there is not much self-study, but because the lecture wasn’t that good for that module, me and my friends started looking online for resources and references, books, software, to do the job. It worked really well and I think I’m used to it now”.*

*(Male, Russell Group, 2nd Year)*

In the focus groups some respondents went so far as to describe independent learning as good preparation for working life after university. They felt that this kind of learning reflected the independence and learning that was required in the workplace, as can be seen here:

*“Yeah, at the end of the day you’re going to get a job and your bosses aren’t going to be coasting you along. I think everything is a stepping stone to the*

*next step to be honest. This is all gearing us towards the first job... Independent study is good in a sense, but it’s a bit of deep end at the beginning”.*

*(Male, Russell Group, 1st Year)*

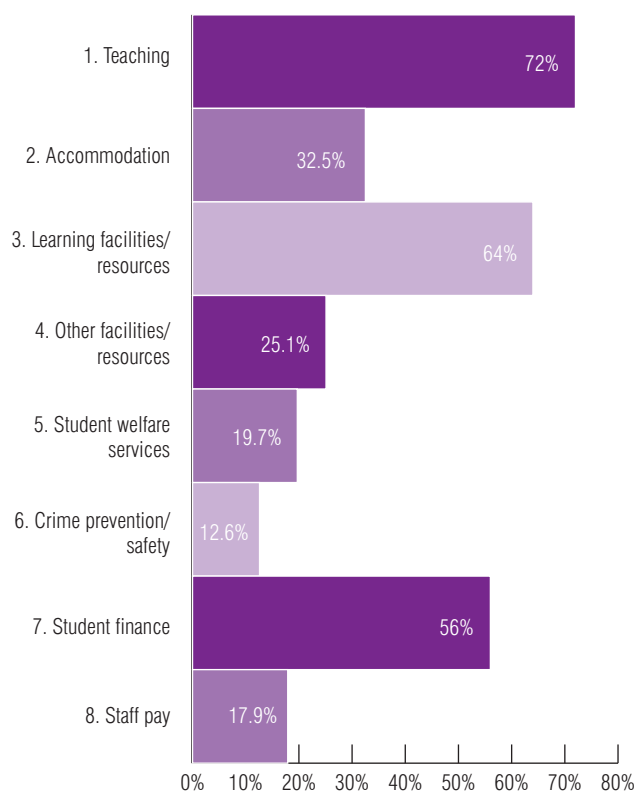
The major issue that relates to independent learning that came through both in the online survey and focus groups was resource provision.

In the online survey students were asked to imagine they were given a limitless budget to improve their university and were asked to rank the areas according to where they would spend the money. Focusing on 1-3 (the most important) as shown in chart 6 opposite, teaching and learning facilities/resources were ranked as most important.

In the survey students were told ‘Teaching’ included more contact hours and wider range of/better qualified lecturers/tutors, whereas ‘Learning facilities/resources’ included study areas, facilities for practical work, books/periodicals/journals, and computers/internet access/IT support. It can be seen that where students would allocate the most money includes contact hours and the resources to be able to learn independently.



Chart 6: Question 78. Finally, please imagine you are given a limitless budget to improve your university. How would you allocate it? Please rank the following 8 areas where 1 is most important and 3 is the least important (n=2491)



Right from the outset focus group respondents defined independent learning in terms of work that they did in the library. It was therefore a major obstacle to this work if they found that the university library didn't house enough of the required reading material. This issue of lack of course resources came to light repeatedly throughout the focus groups.

For instance, when focus group respondents completed the 'Me Maps' creative exercise, this issue of resource provision became evidence. Respondents were asked to populate a blank sheet of concentric circles (where they were already marked in the middle) with who they saw as key figures in their learning experience – so the most important were to be placed closest to them in the middle, moving out and reducing in importance to the outer circles. 'Librarians' often featured on these maps. In fact a pattern emerged which echoed the

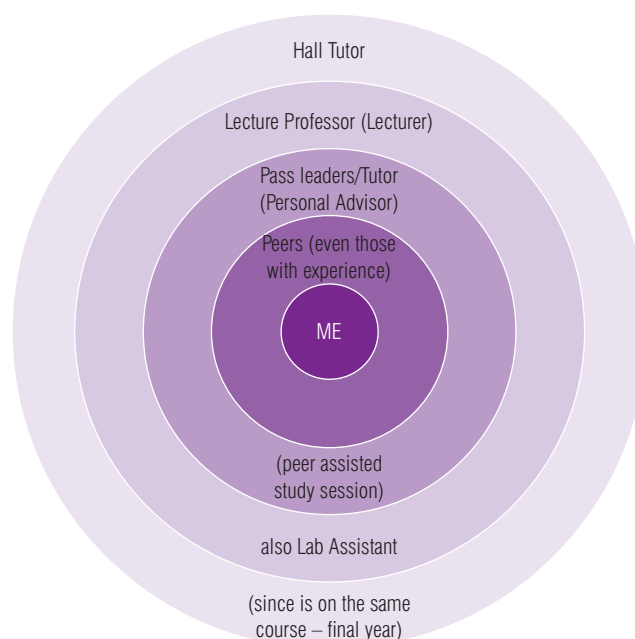
previous finding that independent learning increased as students progressed through their university years. It was common to see 'Librarians' feature on the periphery of 1st or 2nd Year student maps, along with the sentiment that although they don't currently make use of such figures regularly, they can see a time when they will as they move through university and their need for independent learning increases. As such they are reassured to know that such staff are there, as is illustrated in the following quote:

*"Things like student services, NUS, SU, academic staff, research fellows. Those sorts of people are on the periphery. You might not interact with them on a daily or even weekly basis, but you know they are there if you need them".*

*(Female, Russell Group, 1st Year)*

The 'Me Map' creative exercise also revealed more evidence of the importance students put on peer support in their learning experience, as has been previously explored. The majority of maps showed course class mates alongside or close by the central figure of the student, as can be seen here:

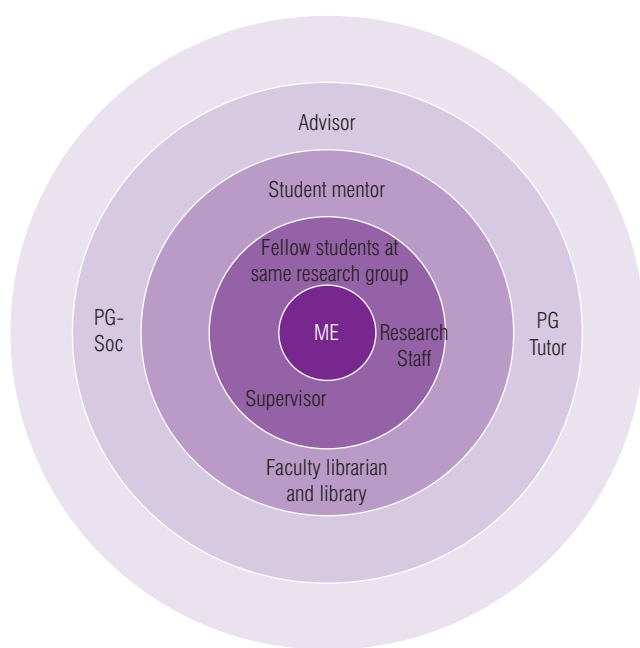
Figure 2: Map of those involved in Quality University Learning Experience



Whereas students in later years, i.e. Post Graduates, plotted librarians closer to themselves, because of the amount of independent learning that their course required of them and therefore the reliance they had on such staff, as can be seen here:

We know that in the context of independent learning and contact hours, students can support each other with their independent learning, discussing the course amongst their peer group, and in doing so broadening their understanding and clarifying any confusion. And when they feel that there is a lack of contact hours with teaching staff, holes can be plugged with this kind of peer support.

**Figure 3: Map of those involved in Quality University Learning Experience**



## Contact Hours

Respondents were asked in the focus groups how, if at all, they defined 'contact hours'. Even before this section of the focus group, some respondents had spontaneously referred to contact hours in their conversations and it was clear that, like independent learning, this was a term that they were educated in and used in everyday language. In answer to the specific definition question, some respondents talked about contact hours being significant criteria for their judgement of their course and something that was central to their course choice. Specifically university prospectuses were referred to as laying out courses in terms of their contact hours, as a key course selling point.

Definitions reveal a split between those respondents who regarded contact hours in terms of classroom time ('course time', 'time spent in lectures/seminars') and those who defined it in terms of access to staff (some specifically 'one-to-one time', or 'office hours'/'out of hours contact', 'email contact').

What is particularly interesting from these definitions is that the idea of access to university staff is broad and even encompasses email contact to some students. This reflects a wider finding across the focus groups as students felt accessibility to their staff was of central importance to their learning experience. As this definition shows, however, students generally have realistic expectations of how this access would work in practice. They realise that staff are juggling a lot, and not just teaching, but others things like research. As such students can be satisfied by email contact if this is all that is possible.

Such a broad definition of contact hours can also be seen in the online discussion group, where respondents often referred to accessing their teaching staff via emails.

*"My course tutors are very accessible, they all know our names and understand our visions very well. We have personal tutorials once a week which are very useful and there is almost always someone around*

*to help you out or offer support and if not, they are easily accessible via email and will reply asap”.*

*(Male, Non-aligned, 1st Year)*

It was also interesting to see that in this initial definition discussion of contact hours, focus group respondents linked their definitions with smaller class sizes. This was due to the fact smaller classes meant more access and time with the staff. Like the emphasis that they put on staff access right across the focus groups, smaller class sizes was another key feature of a high quality university learning experience.

*“I wouldn’t call my lectures contact time because we’re in such a huge group... I barely know some of my lecturer’s names. They say it once at the beginning of the year and then you don’t always hear it because there are so many people in the room.”.*

*(Female, Non-aligned, 1st Year)*

*“You want to be at school, at tutorials or seminars. They are a lot better because it is a smaller group, and you can have a better relationship with your lecturers. You have more contact time and it is more personal if it feels like you care about them and they care about you. They also seem to be more interested”.*

*(Female, Million + Group, 1st Year)*

This contact hours section of the focus groups led to discussions around value for money, with some respondents even defining the term in these financial terms, as show below:

*“I think contact hours represent value for money. If I am only in for three hours a week, why should I pay so much money? You want to be at uni and interacting with lecturers”.*

*(Female, Million + Group, Masters)*

Some respondents had even worked out the value for money of their course based on factors like contact hours down to hourly rates units.

Focusing primarily on lecture and interactive group teaching sessions/tutorial contact hours, around three

fifths (62.9%, n=3066) said that their lecture contact was as expected and a fifth (23.5%, n=1146) felt that they was less than expected. Similarly, 60.2% (n=2888) said that their interactive group teaching sessions/tutorials contact hours were as expected and a quarter (25.8%, n=1239) said that they were less than expected.

Students’ expectations of contact hours compared to their experiences of them were discussed next in the focus groups, which led to a split between those were disappointed in the actual contact hours they received and those that were generally satisfied. The sense of disappointment isn’t surprising considering the emphasis that students put on contact hours. It is arguable that those who were overall happy with their contact hours had based their expectations on things like the course prospectus, which their university had then stayed true to and even at times exceeded. Certainly there is a clear need for universities and colleges to be transparent with contact hours when it comes to their prospectus materials because students will hone in on this detail.

Clearly contact hours is a key element of the higher education learning experience. In fact, many focus group participants stated that they had identified contact hours when choosing a course, and they clearly continue to judge their course in relation to contact hours as they move forward.

The average number of contact hours per week varied between the various contact types. As shown below in figure 8, students reported to have an average of 7 hours of lectures per week (n=4613) and just 3.4 hours of interactive group teaching sessions/tutorials (n=4401).

As shown in chart 7 on the next page, 67.6% (n=3337) felt that their lecture contact hours were about right. For interactive contact hours such as group tutorials, drop-in sessions and individual meetings around a third of students felt that the number of contact hours was too few (27.2%, n=1334, 24.1%, 1162, 30.9%, n=1492 respectively) indicating a demand for more interactive contact hours.

Chart 7: Question 26. For each of the following, on average how many hours a week do you have at this stage of your course? (n=4807)

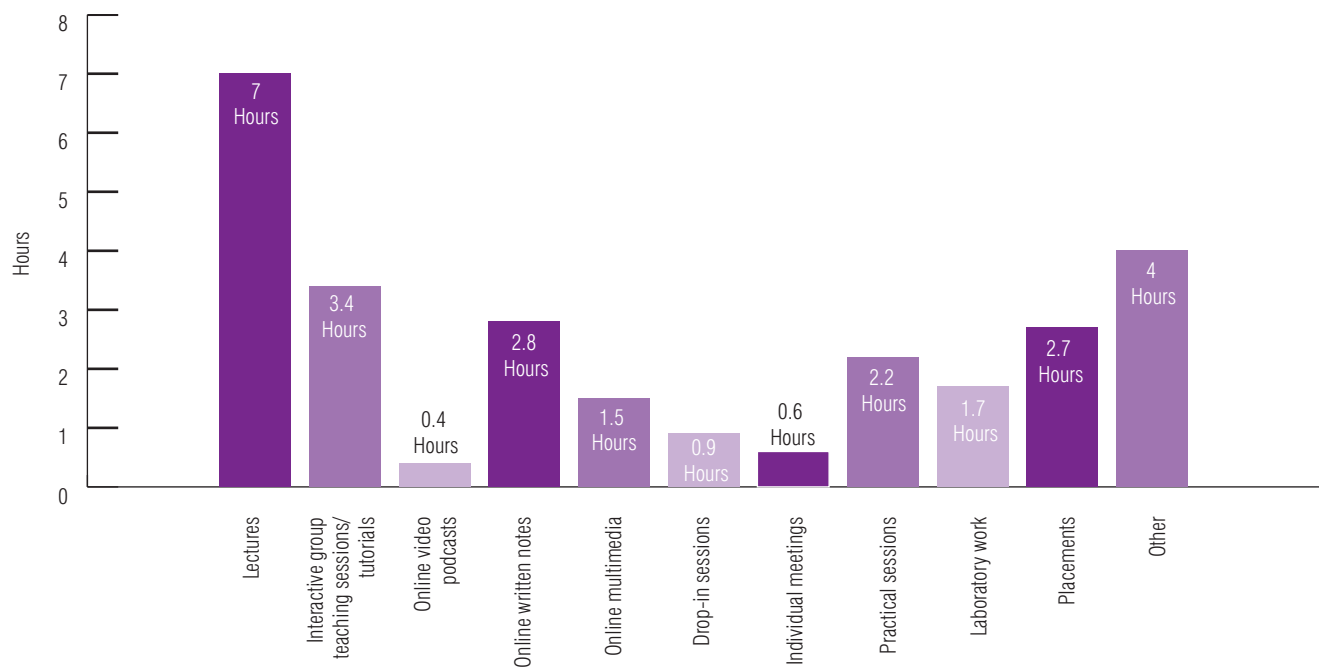
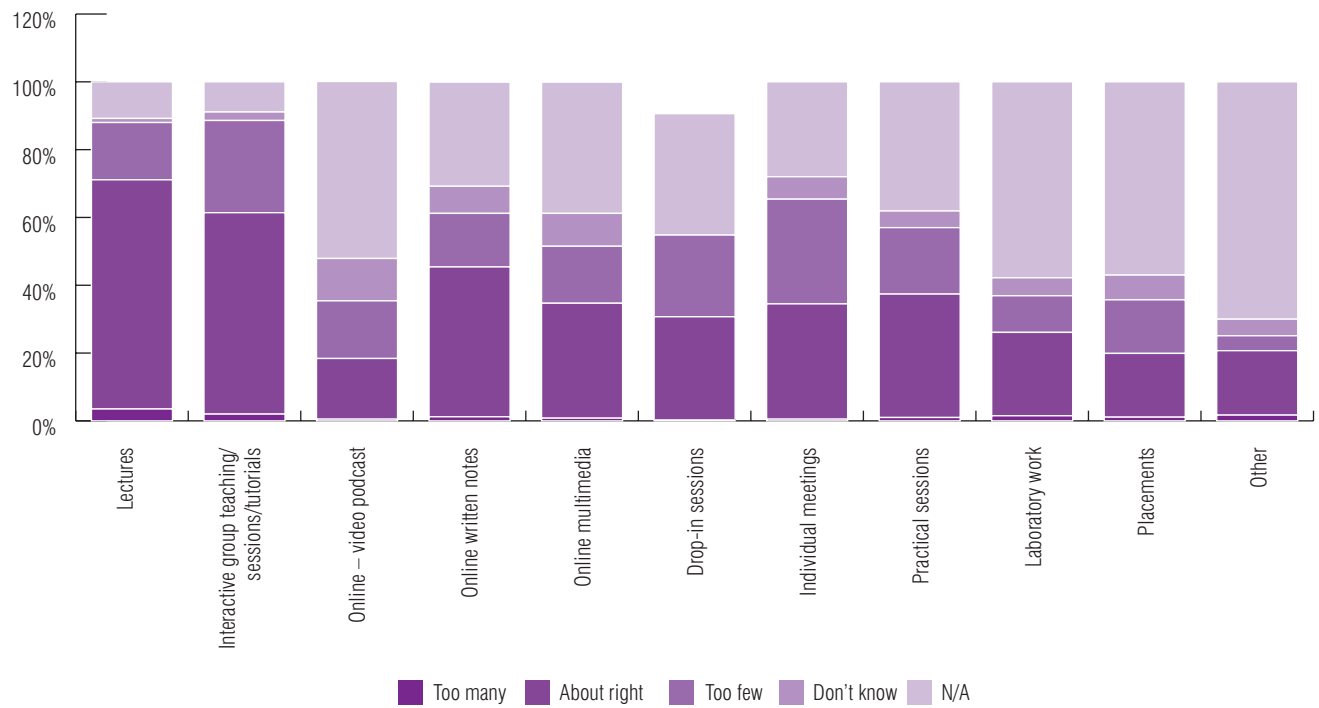


Chart 8: Figure 9 Q27 – For each of the following, please rate how appropriate, if at all, your amount of contact hours are? (n=4936)



Half of students (51.5%, n=2443) strongly agreed that contact hours directly improves the quality of their learning experience/course and 32.7% (n=1549) slightly agreed indicating that overall 84.2% agree that contact hours directly improves the quality of their learning experience/course.

## Quality Learning and Teaching

When thinking about the learning and teaching experience at university the lecturers/tutors teaching skills were by far seen as the most important with 90.6% (n=4527) of students saying they were important to some extent. The next most important factors were interactive group teaching sessions/tutorials (83.4%, n=4244) and library support (78.3%, n=2400). A breakdown of the results is shown in chart 9 below.

While not rated as the most important, the number of lectures (70.8%, n=3501) and the contact time with tutor (73.5%, n=3675) were still rated as very important to the learning and teaching experience at university.

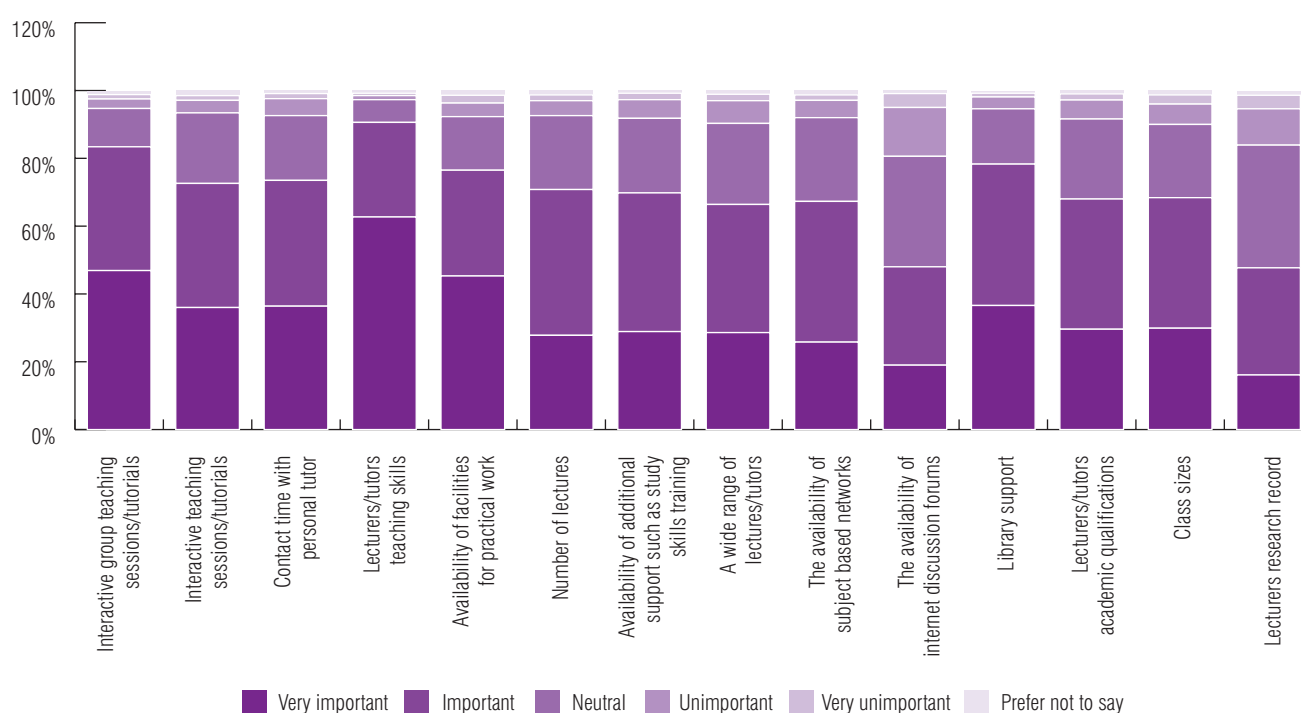
## Enhancing Learning and Teaching

At various points in both the online survey and focus groups students were asked to articulate their views on any potential improvements that could be made to their university/college learning experience. Some of these improvements are related to our subject matters, independent learning and contact hours.

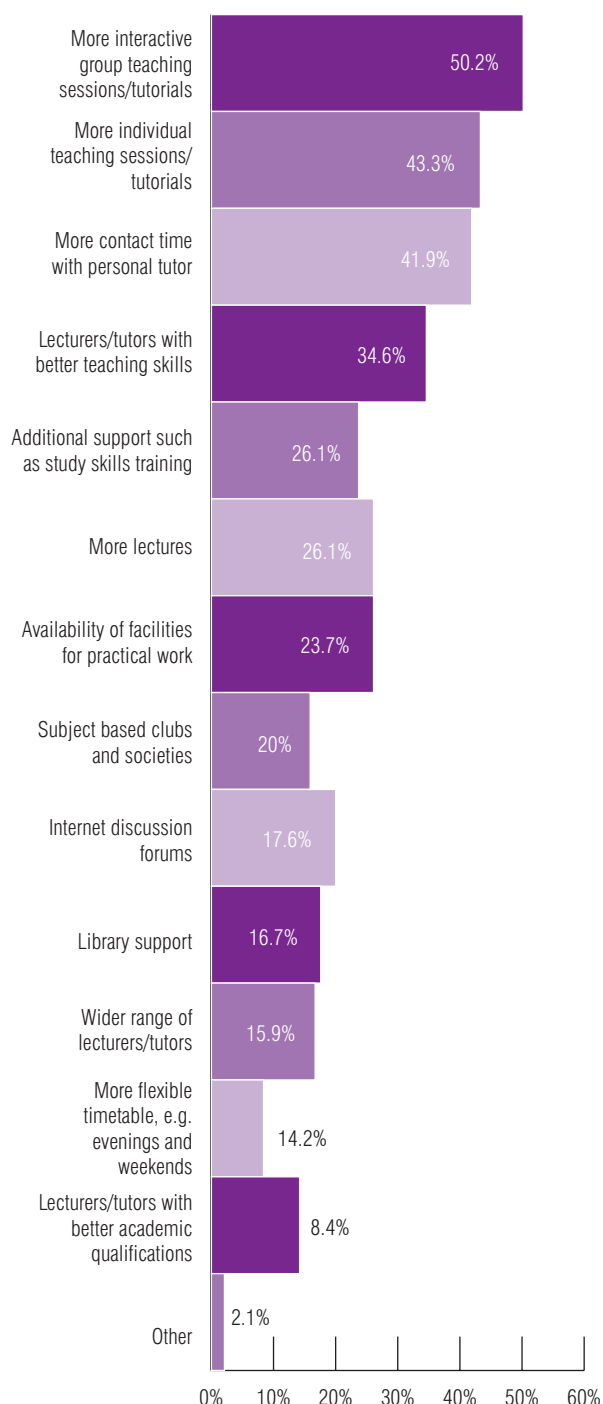
These findings were evidenced consistently in the online survey, as can be seen in the enhancing learning and teaching, when respondents were asked what improvements should be made. More interactive group teaching sessions/tutorials were most popular (50.2%, n=2229). The next most popular improvement to learning and teaching was more individual teaching sessions/tutorials (43.3%, n=1922). This was followed next by more contact time with personal tutor (41.9%, n=1862).

That said, students identified that independent learning can be used by lecturers to more or less effect. One difficulty that some respondents had was when

Chart 9: Question 23. Thinking about the learning and teaching experience at university how important, if at all, are the following? (n=5086)



**Chart 10: Question 58. What, if anything, would improve the quality of the teaching and learning experience at your university? (n=4440)**



lecturers relied too much on independent learning to the detriment of their lectures. Students were very keen that lectures should be used as much as possible for lecturer-led new information, plus any potential opportunity for discussion. As per the online survey, teaching skills are of central importance when it comes to student views of quality teaching. A good lecturer was seen as one who was a good communicator, who could bring their independent learning to life, in an interactive and engaging way. This point is illustrated in the quotes below:

*“Some of my lecturers will start the lecture and get three or four slides in, and then they’d be like “Oh it’s on WebCT, go and read it in your own time”. It’s like why’d I bother to come in? Most of the time you want more information but they’ll just sit there and read it out and not be interested in it”.*

*(Female, Non-aligned, 1st Yr)*

*“Communication with the students. Interaction rather than just talking to the students. Communication skills, like the way of explaining. We have lectures on dull things, and it is just speaking. They are not easy to follow. But there are some lectures that are really good where the lecturers have hand movements, moving around the lecture theatre, making eye contact with the students. Getting them to follow you. That makes a good lecturer”.*

*(Male, Russell Group, 2nd Year)*

The second ranked element of teaching enhancement in the online survey, interactive group teaching sessions/tutorials, can also be clearly seen in the focus groups. Smaller groups/seminars/practicals/interactivity were repeatedly highlighted as something respondents wanted more of. These were the ideal form of contact hours. Examples ranged from simple “little tests” at the end of lectures, to sophisticated interactive equipment offered by some universities, as described here:

*“We’ve got an interactive clicker thing. They’ll put up a question and see how many people know the answer. That’s better in a way because you don’t have people who are worried about putting their hand up and feeling embarrassed. They’ll put this*

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*on in the lecture to check your understanding. It's multiple choice and you get two minutes to work it out. If there are people who get it wrong then the lecturer will go through it with you, if a lot of people get it right then they'll move on".*

*(Male, 1994 Group, 1st Year)*

It was also interesting to see that in this discussion, small groups/seminars/practicals were linked to peer support, which we already know from their independent learning discussion, is of central significance to their learning experience. Such smaller groups for contact hours were regarded as being an environment conducive with making class mates.

*"The seminars are great for tying up loose ends and for preparing you for further lectures as well... I've found that seminars are great for getting to know people on your course. You get to talk to people that you wouldn't necessarily get to meet".*

*(Male, Russell Group, 1st Year)*

# Conclusions



The findings presented here demonstrate that students care deeply about the way their learning is structured. They expect to undertake independent learning as part of their higher education course, but may need guidance in order to feel confident learning independently. Students also place a high value on not only the number of contact hours but the quality of their contact with lecturers and other teaching staff. The evidence in this report clearly shows that students are very engaged with their learning; however, institutions and the sector at large need to provide resources and support for students on the issue of independent learning as well as providing transparent information on contact hours so that students can make informed choices about where they study.

### Independent Learning

Most students are familiar with the concept of independent learning, yet few have had it explained to them by their institution, as part of the induction process or otherwise. This leads to a disparity in students' understandings of independent learning, where not all students have the same conception of independent learning, and neither do they have a shared conception with teaching staff at their institution. Nevertheless, the research shows that, in general, students expect independent learning to be an integral part of their higher education experience, and most find the amount of independent learning to be as expected.

However, students cannot be expected to make the leap to learning independently without guidance. The research highlights the fact that not all students feel fully supported in their independent learning and some would have liked more support and guidance. There is some evidence that as students progress through their years of study they feel more able to learn independently, suggesting that a process of acculturation to independent learning occurs during a student's course of study. It is interesting to note, however, that students who did not receive enough support from their lecturers found innovative ways to learn independently, turning to their peers for support.

Students also highlighted the importance of having the learning resources necessary in order to undertake

independent learning, even going so far as to indicate that learning facilities and resources were one of the top things they would invest in to improve their university. This highlights the fact that expectations of students cannot be set in a vacuum; institutions need to be aware of the resources they provide to students and whether those are adequate for the level of independent learning that is expected.

### Contact Hours

In the area of contact hours, this research confirms what we know from previous research. Contact hours are incredibly important to students and students pay close attention to the information on contact hours in course prospectuses. The vast majority of students feel that contact hours directly improve the quality of their learning experience.

The inclusion of contact hours in the new Key Information Set (KIS) will provide a standard way of presenting information on contact hours which will tell students what proportion of the course will consist of scheduled learning and teaching hours, guided independent study, and placement or study abroad—which should enable prospective students to make more informed comparisons.

However, some students have a broader conception of contact hours that relates to their ability to access staff, through smaller class sizes, one-to-one meetings, and even via email. The research has also identified a clear demand for more interactive contact hours, such as group tutorials, drop-in sessions, and individual meetings, showing that perhaps not all contact hours are created equal. This type of information is not included in the KIS but institutions may want to seek ways of providing this information to students via their prospectuses.

Students gave a clear indication of how their learning experience can be enhanced through the effective use of independent learning in conjunction with certain types of contact hours. In order for independent learning to be effective, students identified that their lecturers need to be skilled in how to incorporate independent learning into their courses. This is related

to the issue of library resources as students identified that an improvement in library resources would enhance their learning experience by facilitating their independent learning. When it comes to contact hours, interactive group teaching sessions, smaller seminars, or tutorials were identified as the ideal type of contact hours which would lead to enhancement of their learning experience.





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