

# Pound in Your Pocket

Financial wellbeing of further and higher education students in  
Northern Ireland

# Introduction

## The Pound in Your Pocket, NUS-USI

I am very pleased to present to you arguably the largest and most comprehensive survey ever conducted on student finance in Northern Ireland.

This ambitious project involved NUS-USI conducting research on a very diverse range of areas, and was challenging but extremely worthwhile. We have examined both further and higher education, including people taking part in apprenticeships, to ensure that the broadest possible picture can be viewed regarding the challenges facing anyone undertaking vocational or academic courses.

The aim of this research is to create a detailed picture of the financial situation of students in Northern Ireland. It also provides a very significant evidence base on a wide range of topics in relation to student finance.

The challenge for government of ensuring tuition fees remain low while also ensuring higher education is adequately resourced is a significant balancing act, but is one which must be maintained to ensure that people can still afford to go to universities, and also that universities can continue to deliver the highest standard of education.

While Northern Ireland students have low tuition fees and the best deal in the UK on EMA, many students are still facing very significant financial hardship, as the results of this survey highlight. It is here that we draw an important distinction: Whereas much debate and literature has, importantly, focussed on the funding of further and higher education institutions, *The Pound in Your Pocket* is about putting the spotlight on the funding of students and the consequences of getting this wrong.

The large cuts made to financial support for nursing and midwifery students have had a very damaging impact on many students' lives and this report clearly illustrates this impact. There are significant equality issues around the cut to

nursing and midwifery support as many of these students have dependents and are mature students and these cuts have a devastating impact upon them.

It is very important that decision-makers take note of our findings in relation to students who have dependents and mature students. It is important that student support reflect the needs of everyone who studies in FE or HE, and is responsive to the financial challenges that they face.

Widening access and participation are areas that we believe are crucial and this report will hopefully provide a context to illustrate how important it is that strong financial support is provided to students, not just to encourage them to commence courses, but also to ensure they can afford to continue their studies through to completion.

Northern Ireland has a very unique socio-political landscape, and unique pressures are placed upon on public finances here, due to the cost of maintaining a divided society.

NUS-USI wants government to address the cost of maintaining a divided society to ensure that more money is available for student support and to deliver the best quality education system and public services possible. Government must look to the future and invest to build a better future for everyone. Tackling the divisions that exist in our society will not only unlock extra resources, but will deliver the stability needed to grow our economy. The stability of a shared future will help attract more jobs to Northern Ireland and will deliver more employment opportunities for students when they complete their course.

Northern Ireland's further and higher education funding landscape is also rather different from other parts of the UK because here, DEL administers all HE and FE funding, whereas elsewhere, the Higher Education Funding Council for England, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales and the Scottish Funding Council do this. The potential impact of an organisation like these, separate from government, may merit examination from a Northern Ireland perspective, because these

organisations provide high level funding for student projects and also carry out significant work on widening access and participation.

We hope that this large and detailed research project can help shape and inform decision-making and public discourse on student finance here for a long time to come. This valuable piece of research should demonstrate to decision makers and society the challenges facing students trying to make ends meet in this difficult economic climate, with a backdrop of rising heating, food and transport costs.

One of the extremely worrying developments in recent years has been the impact that payday loans can have on students' lives. This report looks at the issue of payday loans and also examines the impact that debt can have on student's wellbeing.

A key challenge for government has to be how they can reduce the level of high-interest debt amongst students, and the problems that can accompany this type of debt. It is important that government examines further options for supporting and assisting students in most need, so that every possible support is in place to ensure that they don't feel driven towards these high-interest, high-risk loans.

The burden of debt is extremely difficult to address because people can feel like it's almost impossible to turn the situation around.

The big challenge for decision makers is to ensure that in these times of economic uncertainty, with increased living costs and the problems that debt can cause, they can ensure that the system encourages people to commence or continue in training or study. Government must understand that a student support system that is not responsive enough to the needs of students could be catastrophic for students, and for the universities, colleges and employers that depend on students for their future and upon which the recovery of the Northern Ireland economy depends.

The study has also examined the impact on students of having to work significant hours per week, alongside studying, to make ends meet.

This can have a very detrimental impact on students as regards having enough time to allocate to completing their course, as evidenced by the level of worry students have shown in the survey results on this issue.

It is also extremely important that government understands that a significant number of students do not receive any financial support from their family. This is an issue which must be given consideration, as many students are in a very difficult financial situation because they are estranged from their family, or their family simply cannot afford to provide them with support.

Government needs to see any resources that are devoted to keeping tuition fees low, and providing enhanced student support, as an investment in the future. Students are the future of our society, as our future business leaders and political leaders. They are central to the future stability and prosperity of Northern Ireland. Our economy simply cannot develop without people being encouraged to, and being able to afford to, commence vocational or academic courses, to deliver the skills essential to match the needs of employers.

Retention of students in courses is another crucial element that must have more emphasis and focus placed upon it by decision-makers. Having to leave a course due to financial reasons can have a very worrying long-term impact on someone's life. They are left without that qualification and without the potential career plans and opportunities that they had envisaged while they were studying their course. They are also left with the burden of debt accrued while studying, which may take many years to pay off. Government must realise that it's far better for that person, and for the economy too, if they are provided with the financial support to complete their studies, rather than being left with nothing other than debt.

The extremely important issue of hidden course costs must also be tackled to help ensure that students can afford to complete their courses. This is a significant challenge for vocational and STEM courses, particularly because of the cost of course material and equipment. The survey

examines on the impact of hidden course costs, and it is important that this matter is addressed as soon as possible to ensure that students do not face any unexpected outgoings in completing their course.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank every student that took part in the survey and acknowledge the importance of their role in making this survey as large and as insightful as it is. This report provides an opportunity for the views of students on the financial situation they face to be heard by decision-makers and the public. I want to pay tribute to all of the people within students' unions, education institutions and other organisations who helped us to promote the survey, without whom our task would have been virtually impossible. I also wish to express my gratitude to the staff at NUS who have worked with NUS-USI to create this research project and deliver its findings.

NUS-USI will be working along with students' unions and students to put pressure on government keep tuition fees as low as possible and deliver the highest possible level of student support to reflect recent increases in living costs here. We will also be working with students' unions to apply pressure to address hidden

course costs and to encourage government to tackle the cost of division in Northern Ireland, to free up extra public money to invest in students.

I hope you enjoy reading our summary report and I want to thank you for taking the time to consider the financial landscape for students in Northern Ireland. This report shines a light on some of the significant problems facing students in trying to make ends meet, and it's important that people are provided with the strongest possible financial support to encourage and enable them to commence or complete FE and HE courses. Government must invest in students – in doing so they are not only helping students but also investing in our economy and in future generations too.

Rebecca Hall  
NUS-USI President



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# Overview

Between December 2013 and February 2014, NUS-USI conducted an online survey of further and higher education students in Northern Ireland to better understand students' experience of financial support and the sources of income they use to pay for living expenses, as well as examine the extent to which financial considerations affect their wellbeing. A total of 3245 valid responses were received.

This report presents headline statistics from the key areas explored in the survey. These are:

- **Student wellbeing:** how do financial considerations affect students' lives?
- **Financial competence:** to what extent are students capable of navigating finance?
- **The cost of study:** what expenditure do students incur to study?
- **Student support system:** what do students receive from the student funding system? What sources of information, advice and guidance are used to find out about these entitlements?
- **Meeting the costs:** What sources of financial support and/or income do students have beyond those provided by the student support system? To what extent are these sources needed to meet the costs of study? What role do family and friends play in student support?
- **Student debt:** what types and levels of debt do students take on during their studies?

The analysis of this data has been conducted primarily through the lens of student wellbeing. As such, the relationship between financial factors and wellbeing indicators are core to the narrative as we seek to understand what impacts on student wellbeing and the nature of that impact.

Responses from sub-groups of interest have been aggregated and presented for comparison. These include further education and higher education students, postgraduates, part-time and full-time students and 'young' and 'adult' students. Due to the different financial support available to them, responses from student parents and disabled students, as well as students who are funded via the NHS are also presented, both separately and within the general analysis.

Consideration has also been given to respondents' gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation, as well as their background such as whether they live in an interface or peace-line area and using the POLAR 3 methodology, which describes the number of people within a postcode area who progress to Higher Education. These represent an important proxy for understanding the effect of socio-economic background on student experiences of financial support.

## Methodology

The questionnaire was designed by the NUS Policy Unit and consisted of multiple-choice questions (with closed and multiple responses), as well as open text boxes where respondents were able to elaborate on what they valued about the financial support they received and any changes they would make to the student support system. Where questions asked participants to respond to a statement (such as 'I feel able to concentrate on my studies without worrying about finances'), responses were given on a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree, with a neutral central option.

## Quality control

Quality controls were built in to the questionnaire design at a number of stages:

- Respondents who reported themselves as ineligible to take part in the survey, for example because of their nationality, were filtered out at an early stage;
- Routing was built into the survey to minimise errors. For example, only students who indicated that they had dependent

children were asked questions about childcare expenses;

- In questions asking students to express an opinion about how the support system works, options were presented to respondents in a randomised order to minimise bias.

## Self-completion

Eligible students were invited to complete the questionnaire online. It has been suggested that online surveys provide a good opportunity to ask questions that might require the respondent to check documents. Whilst the questions were designed so that respondents did not have to recall items, the survey format allowed respondents to check any relevant information if necessary. The online method also provided a level of perceived anonymity that we hoped would encourage participation in the survey, which examined some sensitive financial issues.

## Informed consent

A detailed consent form, providing information about the aims of the study, the use of the data and the content of the questionnaire, was the first compulsory element of the survey.

Individuals, who did not consent, by positively answering four separate questions, were not allowed to progress with the survey.

Respondents were offered the chance to be sent a copy of the final report via e-mail.

## Sampling

Mixed recruitment methods were used to pursue a large sample. E-mails were sent to verified students through NUS databases. The e-mail targeted students studying in further or higher education institutions in Northern Ireland, such as universities, further education colleges, sixth form colleges and apprenticeship providers, and included a mix of part-time and full-time students.

The online survey link was also directly promoted to students by students' unions. A briefing was produced for students' unions to support them in promoting the survey. In addition, the online survey link was promoted

directly to students by their institutions and a range of organisations.

## Weighting

Responses have been weighted where possible. Where the weighting factor applied would introduce instability into the results we have not applied a weight. Figures are only shown where we are confident that the results are internally reliable. Caution is advised when making national comparisons on these groups.

## Sample Profile

The research consisted of 3,245 online interviews conducted between 19<sup>th</sup> December 2013 and 24<sup>th</sup> February 2014.

All institutions in Northern Ireland collected over 100 responses, which ensures a consistency across institutional types and local systems of support.

Considering the profile of valid responses:

Level: 884 respondents were undertaking an FE qualification, 1,897 were undergraduates and 464 were postgraduates.

Gender: 1,917 women responded (59 per cent of the sample), 1061 men (33 per cent) and 267 (eight per cent) did not specify their gender or defined in a way other than 'man' or 'woman'.

Age: 589 respondents (18 per cent) were aged 16-18; 522 (16 per cent) were aged 19; 1,313 (41 per cent) were aged 20-24 while 536 (17 per cent) were aged 25 or over.

Diversity:

- 1,439 (44 per cent) of respondents identified as disabled and/or specified they had at least one known disability
- 131 (four per cent) identified as a Black or minority ethnicity.
- 212 (seven per cent) identified as Lesbian, Gay or Bisexual while 289 (nine per cent) did not choose to identify.
- 20 (one per cent) of respondent's gender identity was not the same as that assigned at birth.

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# Key Findings

The full report has many findings, but for the purposes of this summary we have distilled them to just ten that we regard as key.

1. There are clear associations between financial support policy and practice, student wellbeing, socio-economic background and retention.
2. Financial difficulties are pushing many students to the brink of 'dropping out'. 35% of students surveyed have seriously considered leaving their course. Of these, 56% cited financial difficulties as the main reason.
3. 58% of students regularly worry about not having enough money to meet their basic living expenses such as rent or utility bills; with almost 70% concerned about future levels of debt, to the extent that 45% of students surveyed reported that they struggled to concentrate on their studies without worrying about finances.
4. Course related costs are prevalent, expensive, and often concealed; there is a clear association between high course costs and low wellbeing, as with high levels of accommodation and transport costs.
5. Almost half of all students surveyed work during term time, and a third of these are working over 17 hours per week alongside their course. For those working part-time employment, longer hours are associated with poorer wellbeing.
6. Older students, student parents, disabled students, students from Peaceline areas and students from low-participation neighbourhoods are amongst the worst off in both financial wellbeing and in their finances overall; and information about financial support is not clear to all students.
7. Even relatively small levels of debt (over £1000) in the form of bank loans, credit cards, or high risk borrowing like pay-day lenders are strongly associated with poor student wellbeing.
8. High debt levels and poor financial wellbeing are associated with a lack of formal financial education.
9. Access to financial support from the family has a significant association with both wellbeing and progression to further study.
10. Students in societies and clubs feel more able to manage their finances and call on the support of their peers and are less likely to have considered leaving their course.



# Student wellbeing

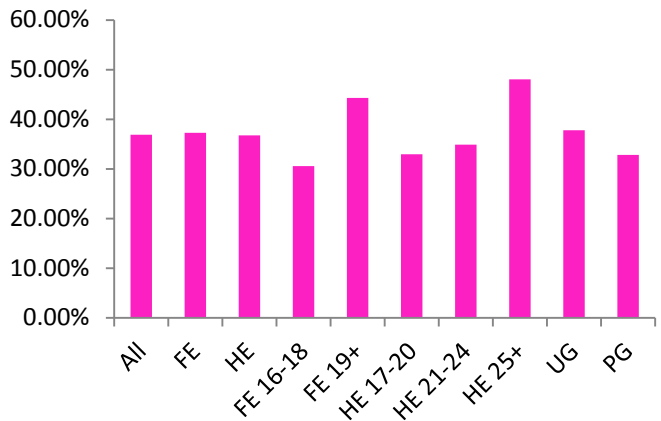
*How do financial considerations affect students' lives?*

## Financial difficulties and the risk of leaving the course

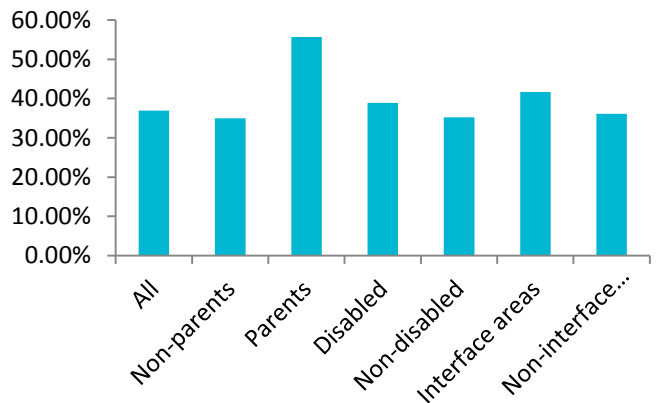
Over a third of all students (37%) have seriously considered leaving their course. This proportion was consistent across all groups: further education, undergraduate and postgraduate students; but was more pronounced with older students, where this figure rose to 48 per cent of HE students over 25 and 44 per cent of FE students over 19. This finding is possibly reflected in the proportion of student parents who had considered leaving their course, 56 per cent.

Respondents who indicated that they had seriously considered leaving their course were asked for what reason(s), and provided with a list of possible options. Overwhelmingly, when asked why they had considered leaving their course, the most common reason for all students surveyed was financial difficulties. Within FE, 52 per cent of students reported this and within HE 58 per cent.

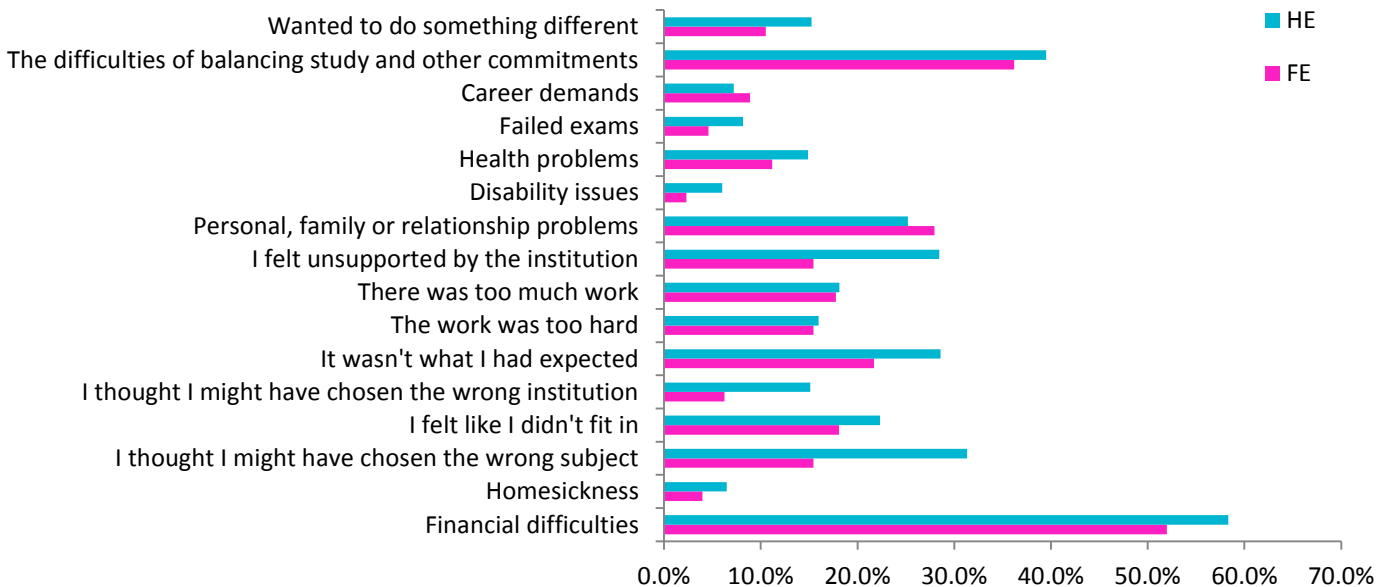
Have you ever seriously considered leaving your course? - by level and age



Have you ever seriously considered leaving your course? - diversity



Which, if any, of the following reasons, contributed to you considering leaving your course?



## Worries about cash-flow and basic living expenses

Overall, 58 per cent per cent of respondents across the sample agreed or strongly agreed that 'I regularly worry about not having enough money to meet my basic living expenses, such as rent and utility bills'.

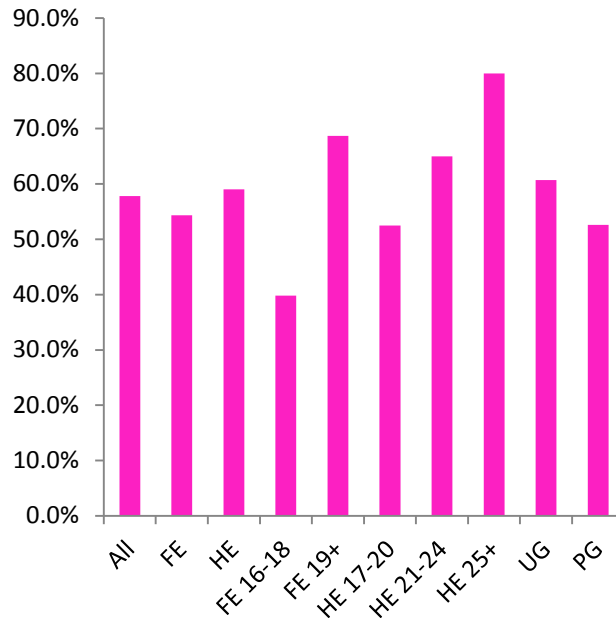
Within FE, four in ten (40 per cent) respondents aged between 16 and 18 years old on entry agreed or strongly agreed, compared to slightly more than two thirds (69 per cent) of respondents aged over 19 on entry.

For undergraduate respondents, 80 per cent of respondents aged over 25 on entry agreed or strongly agreed compared to 53 per cent of respondents aged between 17 and 20 on entry.

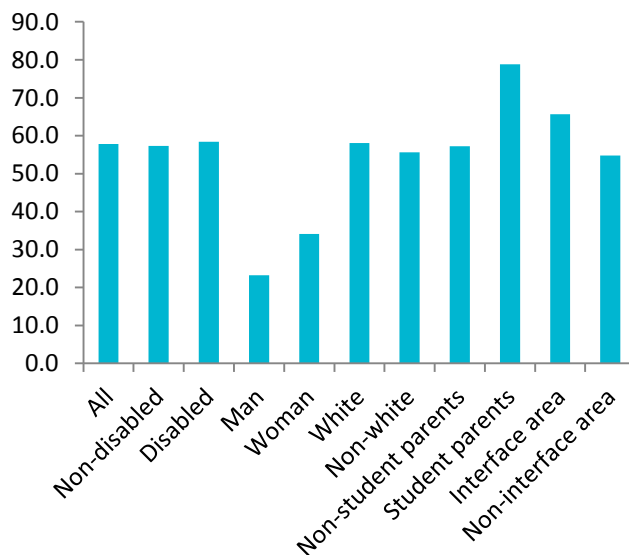
There were similar levels of agreement among postgraduate respondents; with 53 per cent agreeing or strongly agreeing that they regularly worried about not having enough money to meet their basic living expenses such as rent and utility bills.

Seventy-nine per cent of student parents and 66 per cent of those who lived in an interface area agreed or strongly agreed that they worried about not having enough money to meet basic living expenses such as rent and utility bills; as did 34 per cent of women, compared to only 23 per cent of men.

I regularly worry about not having enough money to meet my basic living expenses such as rent and utility bills - by level and age



I regularly worry about not having enough money to meet my basic living expenses such as rent and utility bills - diversity

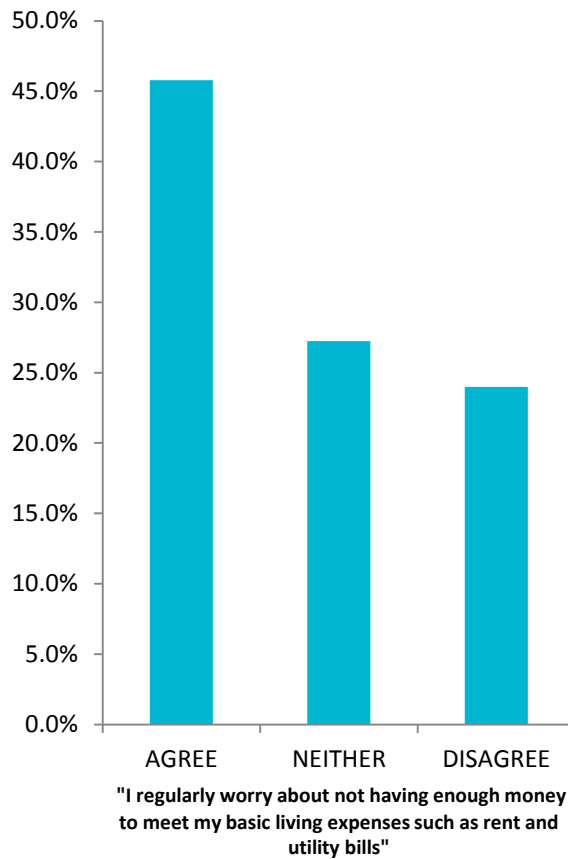


Reflecting the results for those from Interface areas, those from lower-participation neighbourhoods were significantly more likely to worry about cashflow, with 65 per cent of those from POLAR Quintile 1 (those from the postcodes with the lowest youth participation in Higher Education) agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement, a figure which declines from the responses of those from postcodes with higher rates of access to higher education.

**"I regularly worry about not having enough money to meet my basic living expenses such as rent and utility bills" - POLAR 3**



**Have you ever seriously considered leaving your course? ■ Yes**



Overall, the potential impact of cashflow concerns on those who agreed with the statement was evident, when their responses to having considered leaving their course were drawn out.

For those that agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I regularly worry about not having enough money to meet my basic living expenses such as rent and utility bills" they were almost twice as likely to have seriously considered leaving their course.

## Ability to concentrate on studies

*'I feel able to concentrate on my studies without worrying about finances.'*

Overall, 45 per cent of all respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement, and did not feel able to concentrate on their studies without worrying about finances.

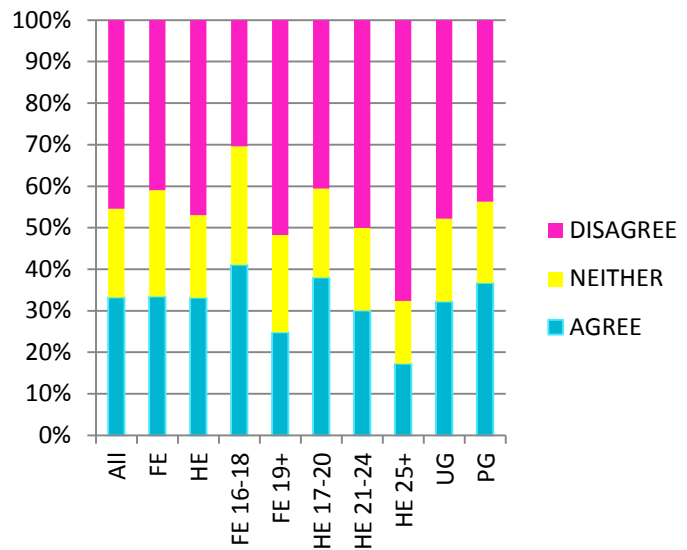
HE respondents were somewhat more likely to struggle in this respect than FE students, with 47 per cent of HE respondents either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statement, versus 41 per cent of FE students.

By far, though, this issue was experienced by older students from both HE and FE, with FE students over 19 (52 per cent) and HE students over 21-24 (50 per cent) significantly more likely to disagree with the statement than their younger peers.

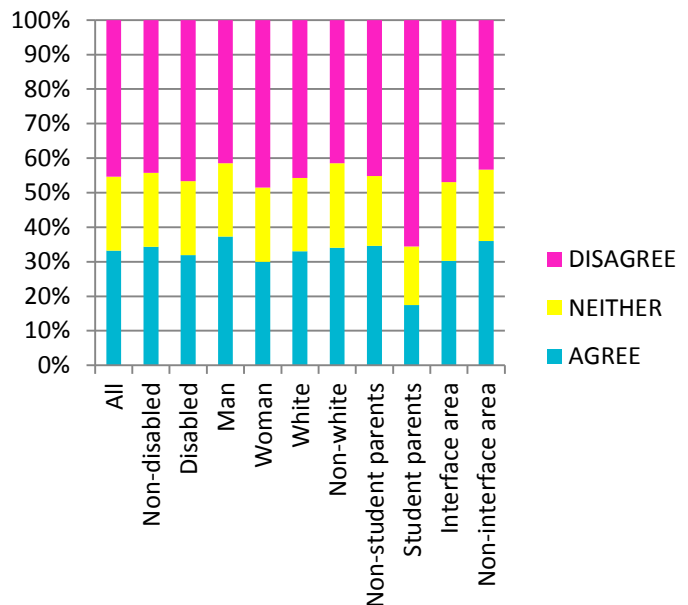
The group of students clearly struggling the most to focus on academic work as a result of financial stress is the HE over 25 group, more than two thirds (68 per cent) of whom put their performance at risk because of financial concerns.

Two thirds of all student parents (66 per cent) indicated that they did not feel able to concentrate on their studies without worrying about finances.

**"I feel able to concentrate on my studies without worrying about finances" - Level and age**



**"I feel able to concentrate on my studies without worrying about finances" - Diversity**



## Cultural capital

The research highlighted the role of context, of community and of the capital that comes with this. The impact of coming from a postcode with traditionally low-participation in higher education can be seen throughout these findings. Not limited to simply postcode analysis, as has already been seen, other groups of so-called 'non-traditional' students report consistently poor wellbeing, when compared to younger students who have taken a more traditional route in further or higher education.

The data suggests that parents are important predictors of financial wellbeing.

Students from low-participation backgrounds whose parents also had no HE qualifications were less likely to have a sense of financial control, with 76 per cent of them worried about their current financial situation, vs 70 per cent of their peers from high-participation postcodes.

In terms of basic living costs, 60 per cent of students from low-participation neighbourhoods struggle significantly more, with our responses indicating that they also worry about balancing commitments, and are more concerned about future debt.

But postcodes aside, the benefits of having parents who have attended university are clear for those from both low and high participation backgrounds. For those whose parents do not hold an HE qualification, they are significantly more likely to worry about their financial situation, struggle because of cash-flow, or concentrate on studies.

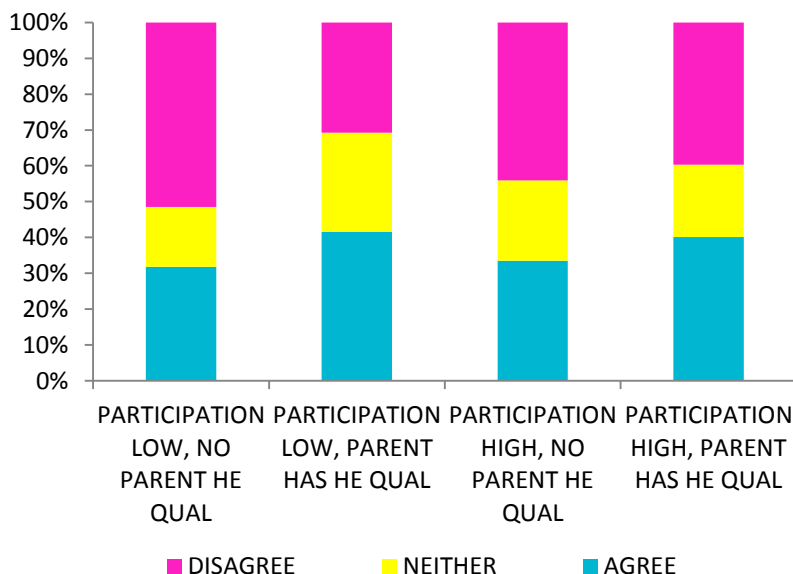
There is clear exposure here for students who do not have a background – either through their local communities or their families – in Higher Education, which is affecting their ability to navigate their finances.

The impact of this is demonstrated in their ability to concentrate on their studies. Only 32 per cent of those from low participation neighbourhoods, whose parents did not have an

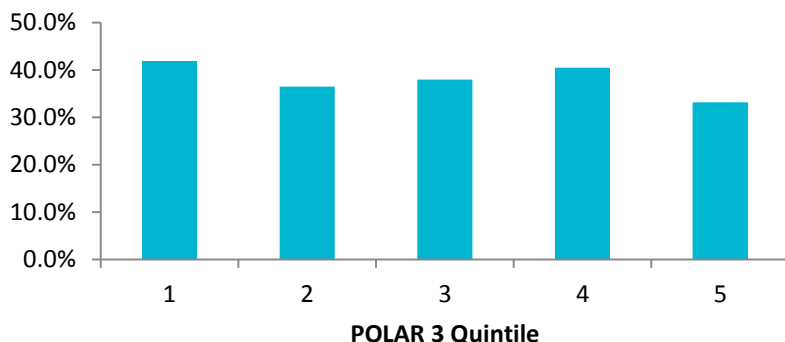
HE qualification reported that they were able to concentrate on their studies without worrying about finances, with one in two of them affected by concerns of finance, versus one in three of their peers from high participation neighbourhoods.

Ultimately, these students who lacked this kind of support – from family, friends and those with experience of higher education - were more likely to state that they had considered leaving their course: 42 per cent of respondents from POLAR Q1 reported that they had seriously considered doing so, compared to 33 per cent from POLAR Q5.

**I feel able to concentrate on my studies without worrying about finances. Parental HE qual and POLAR 3**



**Have you ever seriously considered leaving your course? - POLAR 3**



# Financial competence

*To what extent are students capable of navigating finance?*

## Formal training

We wanted to understand the extent to which students in Northern Ireland had been given information about personal finance as part of their formal education. Just under a third of respondents had.

## Managing finances

Formal training on personal finances is associated with respondents' ability to manage their finances, and to know where to seek help when they need it.

Overall, 61 per cent said they *'feel capable of managing my finances and budgeting'*, but nearly three quarters (73 per cent) of those who received formal training felt capable. Similarly, those without financial training were more likely to *'sometimes feel overwhelmed by my finances'* (71 per cent) compared to those with training (60 per cent).

In terms of seeking support and advice, those who had received training are also more confident of where to find support, with six in ten saying they *'both know where to find advice and guidance in relation to financial matters'* (59 per cent) and half saying that they *'know where to go if I encounter financial difficulties'* (52 per cent) compared to around a third who

had not received training (33 per cent and 32 per cent respectively).

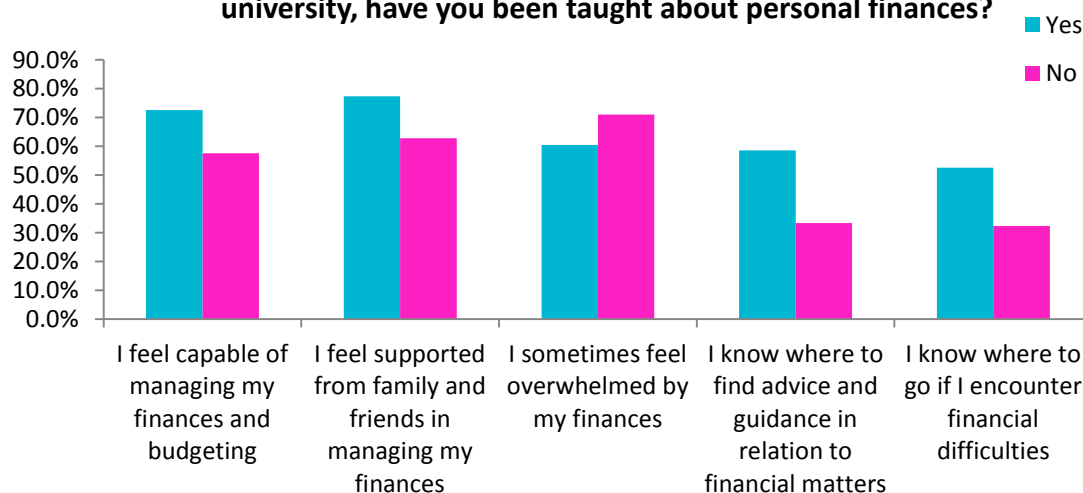
Compared to those who did not receive training, those who did were:

- less likely to feel they *'little control over their financial situation'* (47 per cent – with training; 54 per cent – without training);
- less likely to worry about their financial situation (68 per cent – with training; 80 per cent – without training);
- less likely to worry about being able to pay their bills (50 per cent – with training; 63 per cent – without training);
- more likely to understand their financial support entitlements (44 per cent – with training; 27 per cent without training);
- more likely to feel they can concentrate on their studies without worrying about finance (44 per cent – with training; 27 per cent – without training).

Considering level of study, there are no significant differences between those in further or higher education when asked about feeling *'supported by their family and friends in managing their finances'* (68 per cent overall agreed that they did feel supported). Nor are there significant differences between FE and HE when asked if they knew *'where to find advice and guidance'* – although just four in ten of all respondents (42 per cent) did feel they knew where to find it.

Over two thirds (72 per cent) of students in higher education report sometimes feeling *'overwhelmed by my finances'*, compared to just over half (59 per cent) of those in further education. However, it seems that HE students are more likely to *'feel capable of managing my finances and budgeting'* (64 per cent) than those in further education (59 per cent).

**As part of your formal education, for example at school, college or university, have you been taught about personal finances?**



### Impact on debt levels

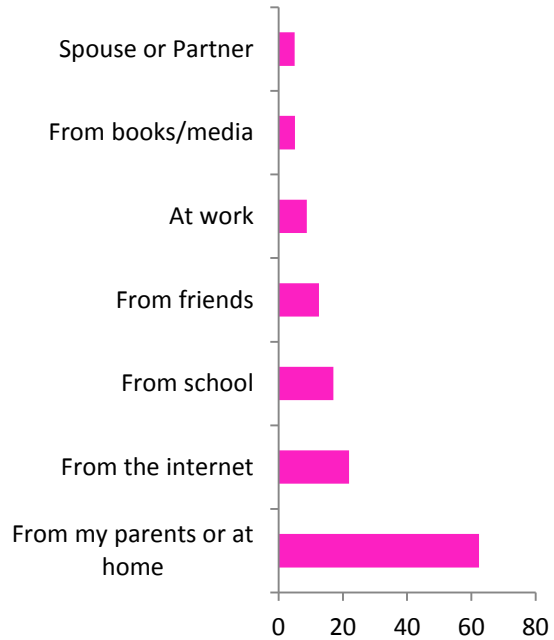
Formal financial education also seems to have an impact on levels of debt. We asked respondents their current level of debt *excluding* government student loans and mortgages. Most respondents (40 per cent) had between £1-£1000 of debt, followed by 28 per cent who had £1001-£5000 and 32 per cent with no debt.

One quarter (27 per cent) of those with a formal financial education had debt of £1001 or more, compared to 35 per cent of those who had not received a financial education.

### Learning about finances

The chart below shows where students learned about personal finances in addition to a formal setting. Two-thirds learned from their parents at home, one in five (22 per cent) from the internet.

**Thinking now about what you have learned about personal finance, where do you think that you learned the most?**



# The cost of study

*What expenditure do students incur to study?*

## Course costs

Across all groups, 61 per cent of students had paid for materials, activities or other costs associated with completing their programme of study (69 per cent of undergraduate respondents, 49 per cent of FE respondents, and 50 per cent of postgraduate respondents).

One in five (20 per cent) FE respondents spent between £25 and £49.99 on materials, activities and other costs associated with completing their study in the last academic term while one in four (27 per cent) undergraduate respondents had paid between £100 and £199.99 in the previous academic term.

## Course costs: relative prevalence

We took a census of what costs students were incurring, so we can see the relative prevalence of different kinds of cost. Seventy-two per cent of the course materials that respondents indicated they had paid for were course books, with other significant costs including printing (63 per cent), stationary (59 per cent), field trips (35 per cent), uniform costs (25 per cent) and travel to placements (22 per cent).

What things have you had to pay for during your course?



Thinking about materials, activities and other costs associated with completing your programme of study, how much have you spent, in total, in the last academic term?





### Course costs: transparency

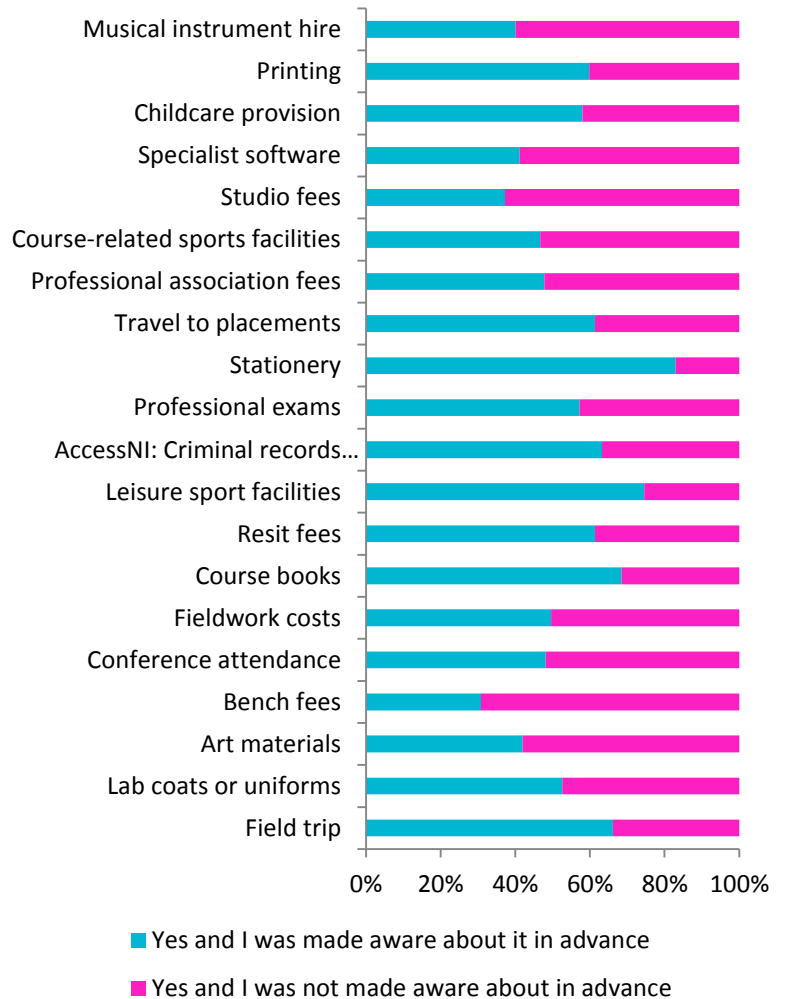
Within these costs, we asked whether they were known in advance. On average, just over a third of all reported costs were not known in advance. Some of the most 'hidden' costs were also some of the more expensive costs, with 69 per cent of those paying bench fees not having known about these costs in advance.

### Course costs: wellbeing

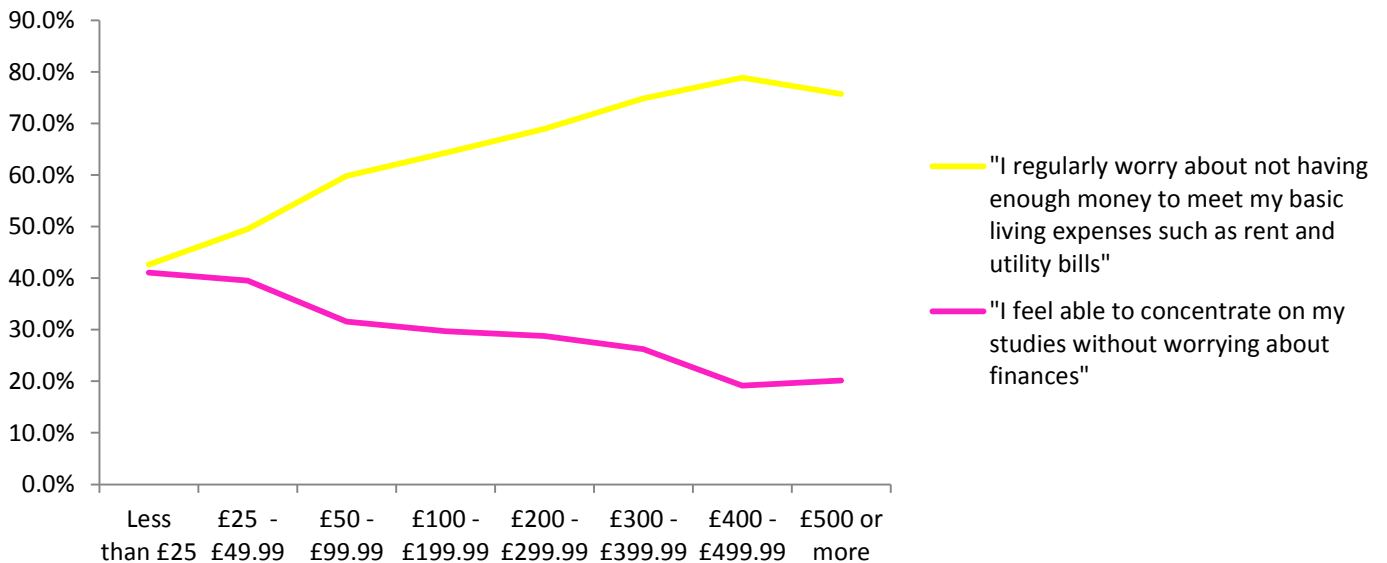
Forty per cent of respondents who paid less than £25 in the last academic year on costs associated with their course indicated that they felt able to concentrate on their course without worrying about finances. Respondents who had paid higher costs were considerably less likely to indicate that they felt able to concentrate, with the level falling to 32 per cent where costs were at a level of £50-£99.99 per term, and down to 26 per cent in the £300-£399 per term range.

Less than one in two respondents (43 per cent) who paid less than £25 in the previous academic term on course materials indicated that they regularly worried about not having enough money to meet basic living expenses such as rent and utility bills. This figure rose to 64 per cent where costs were at a level of £100-£199.99 per term, which is the amount that a quarter of HE students surveyed were paying.

### Course costs and how hidden they are



### Course cost expenditure and wellbeing



## Accommodation costs

Eighty-one per cent of FE respondents aged 16-18 on entry to their course did not pay monthly rent or a mortgage. In contrast, the majority of undergraduate and postgraduate students paid between £200 and £299 per month on monthly rent or mortgage.

A lower proportion of respondents (39 per cent), reporting no monthly rent or mortgage fees, indicated that they regularly worry about not having enough money to meet their basic living expenses than those who paid monthly rent or mortgage fees.

## Transport costs

Three quarters (75 per cent) of FE respondents had costs associated with travel. One in two of these costs were £20 or more. The vast majority (83 per cent) of undergraduate respondents paid travel costs, indeed 60 per cent paid over £20 per week.

We also asked how much time students spent travelling. Fifty-three per cent of all students reported spending 30 minutes or more on one journey to their place of study. Students from low-participation postcodes were more likely to spend longer travelling, with 63 per cent spending more than 30 minutes travelling to their place of study, compared to 49 per cent of their peers from higher participation postcode areas.

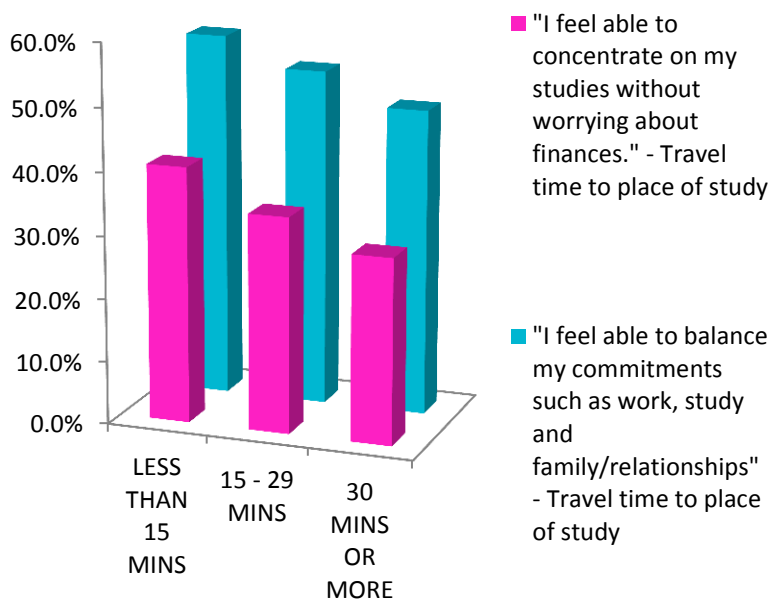
The cost of travel, both in cash and time, is putting strain on students' abilities to balance their commitments between work, study and family life, with 49 per cent of those who pay over £20 per week in transport costs reporting this. This strain shows in scores for managing cash-flow, with 64 per cent claiming that they regularly worry about not having enough money to meet basic living expenses. This group, too, indicated that they found it significantly more difficult to understand their financial support entitlements, which raises questions about their ability to access support for travel costs.

**"I regularly worry about not having enough money to meet my basic living expenses such as rent and utility bills" - Weekly travel spend**



Time spent travelling also has an impact on balancing relationships and on concentrating on studies. Only 30 per cent of those spending more than 30 minutes travelling to their place of study reported being able to concentrate on their studies adequately; 48 per cent in this group reported that they were not able to balance their commitments between work, study and family – these compared with those whose journeys were less than 15 minutes are 41 per cent and 58 per cent respectively.

**Impact of travel time on wellbeing**



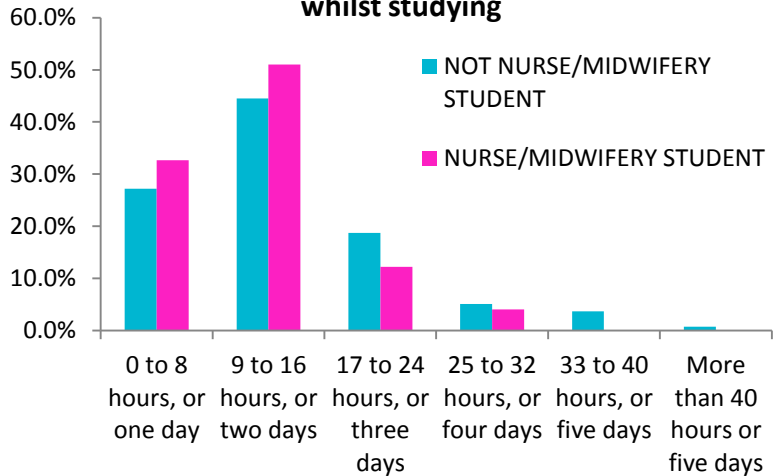
**Time spent in a single journey to place of study**

## Nursing and Midwifery Students

Nursing and Midwifery students in particular fair significantly worse than those of other subjects.

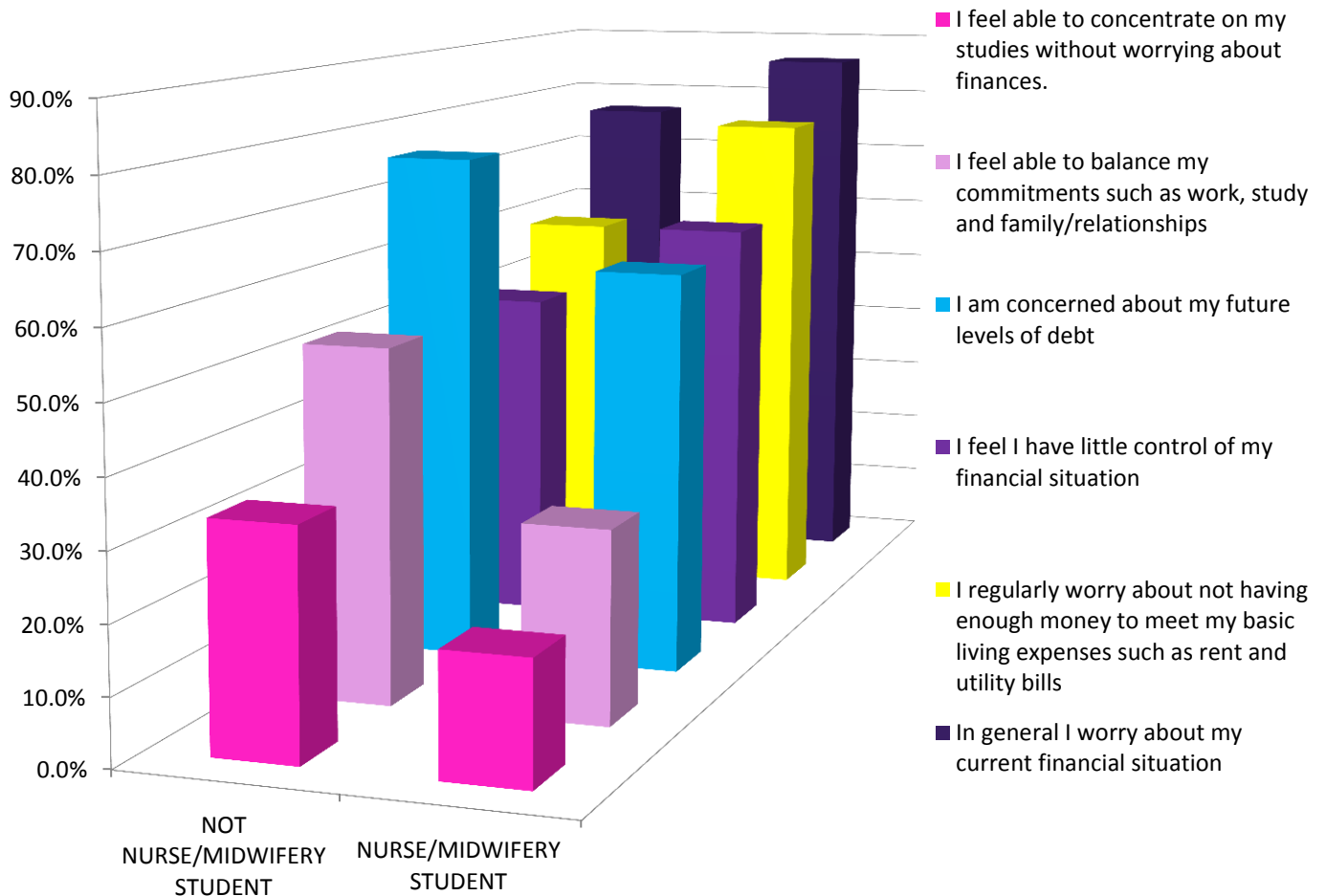
For these students debt levels are higher, worries and wellbeing more significant, with 77% regularly worrying about not having enough money to pay the bills, whilst unable to take on as much part-time work as their peers to compensate.

**Nursing and Midwifery students, working whilst studying**



**How many hours a week do you work during term time?**

**Nursing and midwifery wellbeing**



# Student support system

*What do students receive from the student funding system? What sources of information, advice and guidance are used to find out about these entitlements?*

## Government and institutional support

Across the sample, one in three (33 per cent) respondents agreed that they *'find it easy to understand what financial support I am entitled to'*. Students in Higher Education were more likely to disagree (49 per cent) with the statement compared to students in Further Education (43 per cent).

Only a quarter of respondents (25 per cent) agreed that it was *'completely clear'* how much financial support they would receive before they started their course; slightly less than half (48 per cent) said it was *'somewhat clear'* and another quarter (23 per cent) said it was *'not at all clear'*.

Students in further education were less clear about their financial support before they started their course – just a fifth of FE respondents were completely or somewhat clear. Postgraduate students were the most clear, with just over a third (37 per cent) reporting this.

Adult FE students were more likely (37 per cent) to say that they were *'not at all clear'* on their financial support before they started their course compared to younger FE students (15 per cent).

## Grants and Student Loan

Among undergraduates (excluding NHS students), seven in ten receive a student loan for living costs. Of these students, 87 per cent had a loan debt of more than £1,000. Slightly less than four in ten (39 per cent) indicated their loan was between £1,000 and £4,999. Thirteen

per cent had a maintenance loan in excess of £12,000. While 73 per cent of full-time students had a maintenance loan, just five per cent of those studying part-time did (NB: small base for part-time students at this question n=88).

Six in ten undergraduates (excluding NHS students) were in receipt of a Maintenance Grant.

## Discretionary support

Twenty per cent of Higher Education students had applied for discretionary funding from their institution, while 15 per cent of those in Further Education had done so.

Fourteen per cent of undergraduates received an institutional bursary or scholarship, 17 per cent of postgraduates did so while seven per cent of students in Further Education received a bursary or scholarship.

Students who had applied for discretionary support were more likely to report worrying about their financial situation (93 per cent) than those students who had not applied for discretionary funding (71 per cent). Similarly, discretionary support applicants were more likely to worry about meeting their rent and utility bills (83 per cent) than those who had not applied for support (51 per cent). They are also less likely to feel able to balance their *'commitments, such as work, study and family/relationships'* (42 per cent) than those who had not applied (54 per cent). Only 17 per cent of discretionary support applicants felt able to concentrate on their studies without worrying about finances compared to 37 per cent of those who had not applied for funding.

## Support mode and frequency

Respondents were asked which one way they would prefer to receive support. Clear preferences were expressed for support in the form of cash across all groups.

In FE, slightly more than half (52 per cent) selected *'a cash allowance to cover costs'* as their preferred mode of support. The next most popular option among FE students was *'loans to cover living costs'* (11 per cent) and the

provision of '*free transport to and from course*' (ten per cent).

In HE, than two thirds (66 per cent) of respondents selected '*a cash bursary*' as their preferred method of financial support; 13 per cent selected '*a fee discount*' and just three per cent selected '*a discount on services provided by your university or college*' (19 per cent selected a combination of two or more of these options).

Groups differed considerably on the question of payment frequency, with young FE students strongly favouring weekly payments (53 per cent) and adult FE students favouring monthly (33 per cent) and to only a marginally smaller extent weekly (30 per cent). Respondents in HE expressed a clear preference overall for monthly payments (50 per cent). The next most popular option was termly payments (22 per cent), although this was more favoured by younger respondents (17-20: 27 per cent; 21-24: 21 per cent) compared to those aged 25+ (10 per cent).

# Meeting the costs

*What sources of financial support and/or income do students have beyond those provided by the student support system? To what extent are these sources needed to meet the costs of study? What role do family and friends play in student support?*

## Family Support

Slightly less than half of respondents (45 per cent) indicated that they received support from their family, such as from their spouse, partner, parents or other relatives. The types of support received by family ranged from financial support, accommodation and living support, childcare, transport and food and groceries. Postgraduates were significantly more likely to receive this kind of support (49 per cent) than undergraduates (43 per cent). Forty-five per cent of students in FE received support in some way from their family.

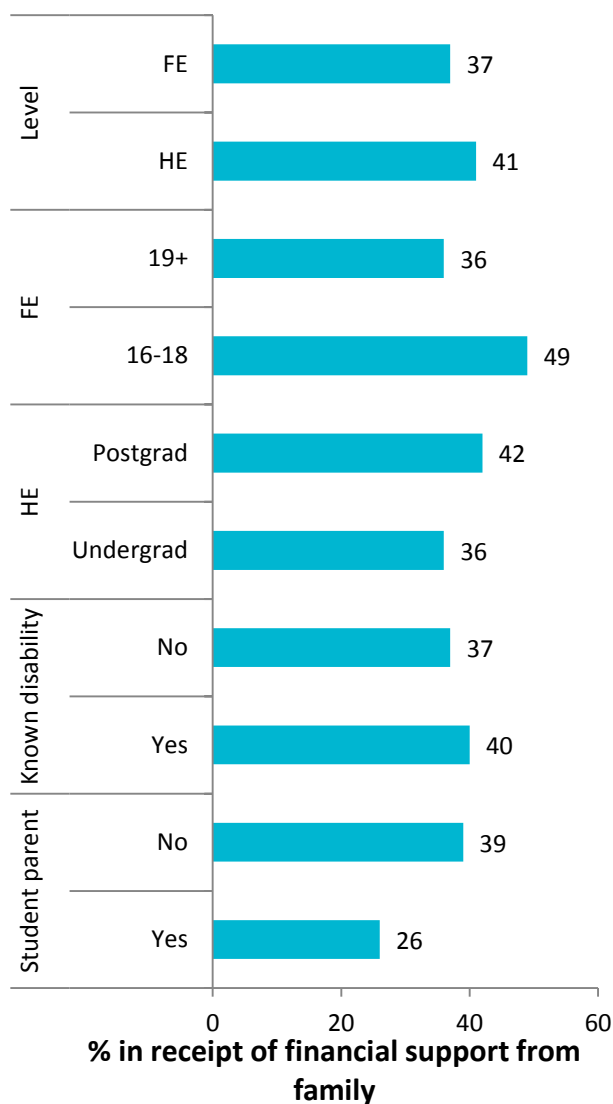
Only 36 per cent of student parents indicated that they received support from their family compared to 45 per cent of students who were not student parents. FE students aged 19+ are also less able to access family support (38 per cent) compared to their younger counterparts (51 per cent).

## Family support and progression

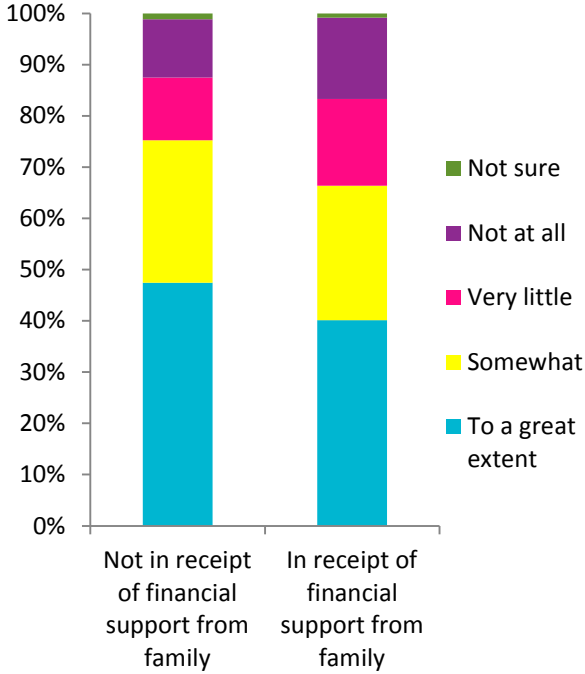
Ability to draw on family sources of support had a significant bearing on their decision to progress to their current level of study or not. Almost half (48 per cent) of respondents who reported that they were in receipt of no family support – financial or otherwise - indicated that financial considerations affected their decision to progress to their current level of study to a great extent, compared to four in ten (40 per cent) of those who were in receipt of family support.

## Family support and wellbeing

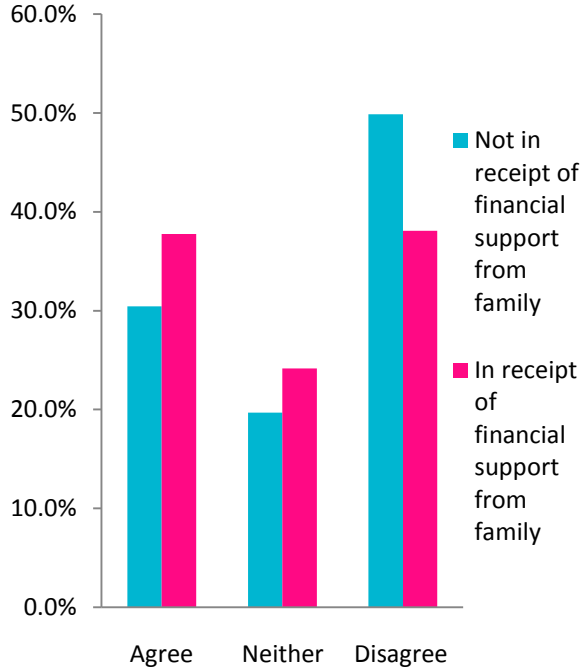
Sixty-two per cent of respondents who did not receive family support indicated that they regularly worried about not having enough money to meet basic living expenses such as rent and utility bills. This compares to 53 per cent of students who were in receipt of family support; and 30 per cent of respondents who received no family support reported that they did not feel able to concentrate on their studies without worrying about finances, compared to 37 per cent of respondents who were in receipt of family support. Seventy-nine per cent of those not in receipt of family support worried about their financial situation, compared to 70 per cent in receipt of family support.



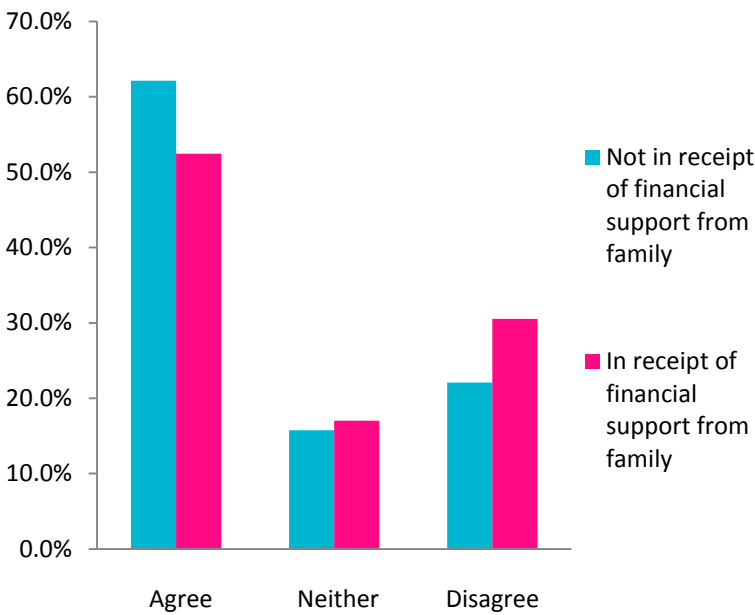
**"To what extent, if at all, did financial considerations affect your decision to progress to your current level of study?"**



**"I feel able to concentrate on my studies without worrying about finances"**



**"I regularly worry about not having enough money to meet my basic living expenses"**



## Taking part – support from students through sports, activities, clubs and societies

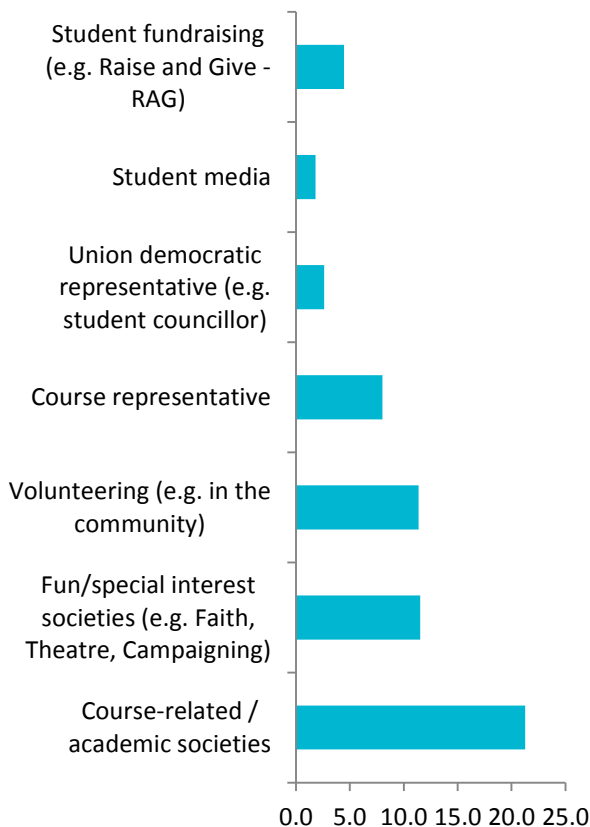
*How do students participate? What barriers exist? Does participation contribute to financial wellbeing?*

Provision of sports, activities and societies are a key part of many students' unions and form a central part of many students' experience at their place of study. Our research found that around one in four (24 per cent) students in Northern Ireland participates in sports clubs, activities or societies at their place of study, as part of their students' union.

### Which activities?

We also asked respondents which activities they were involved in. 21 per cent are in academic societies while 11 per cent volunteer in their local community through their students' union, and are in special interest societies (these figures are not mutually exclusive).

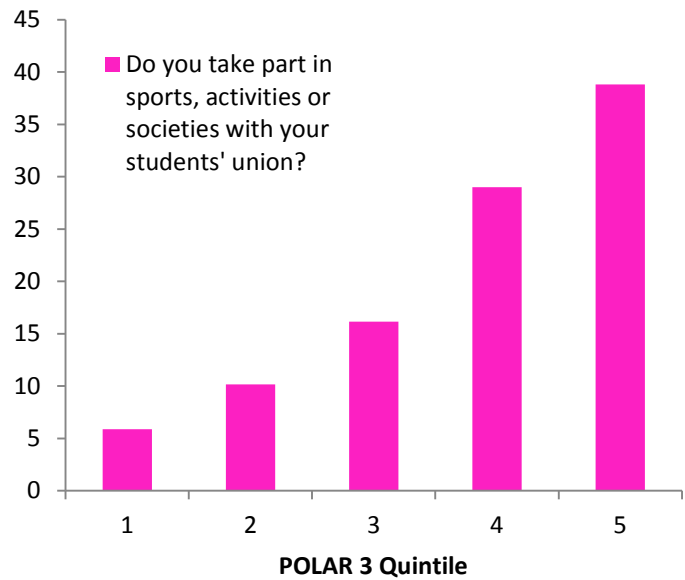
### Are you involved in any of the following ways with your students' union?



## Who participates?

Within our sample, we found that those from higher participation postcodes were significantly more likely to take part in activities with their union.

### Do you take part in sports, activities or societies with your students' union?

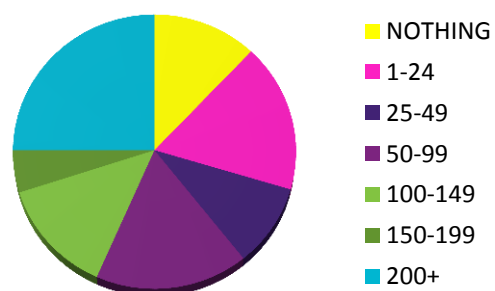


Around eight in ten students (84 per cent) from the higher POLAR groups (3-5) participate while only 16 per cent of those from the lower POLAR quintiles (1 and 2) do.

### Barriers to taking part

Those who do not participate in clubs, activities or societies were asked for the main reason they did not. 54 per cent said there was 'not enough time', a fifth (21 per cent) were 'not interested' 12 per cent said that there was 'not enough information' and 9 per cent said it was 'too costly'.

### Expenditure on student activities (£)





## Views on taking part

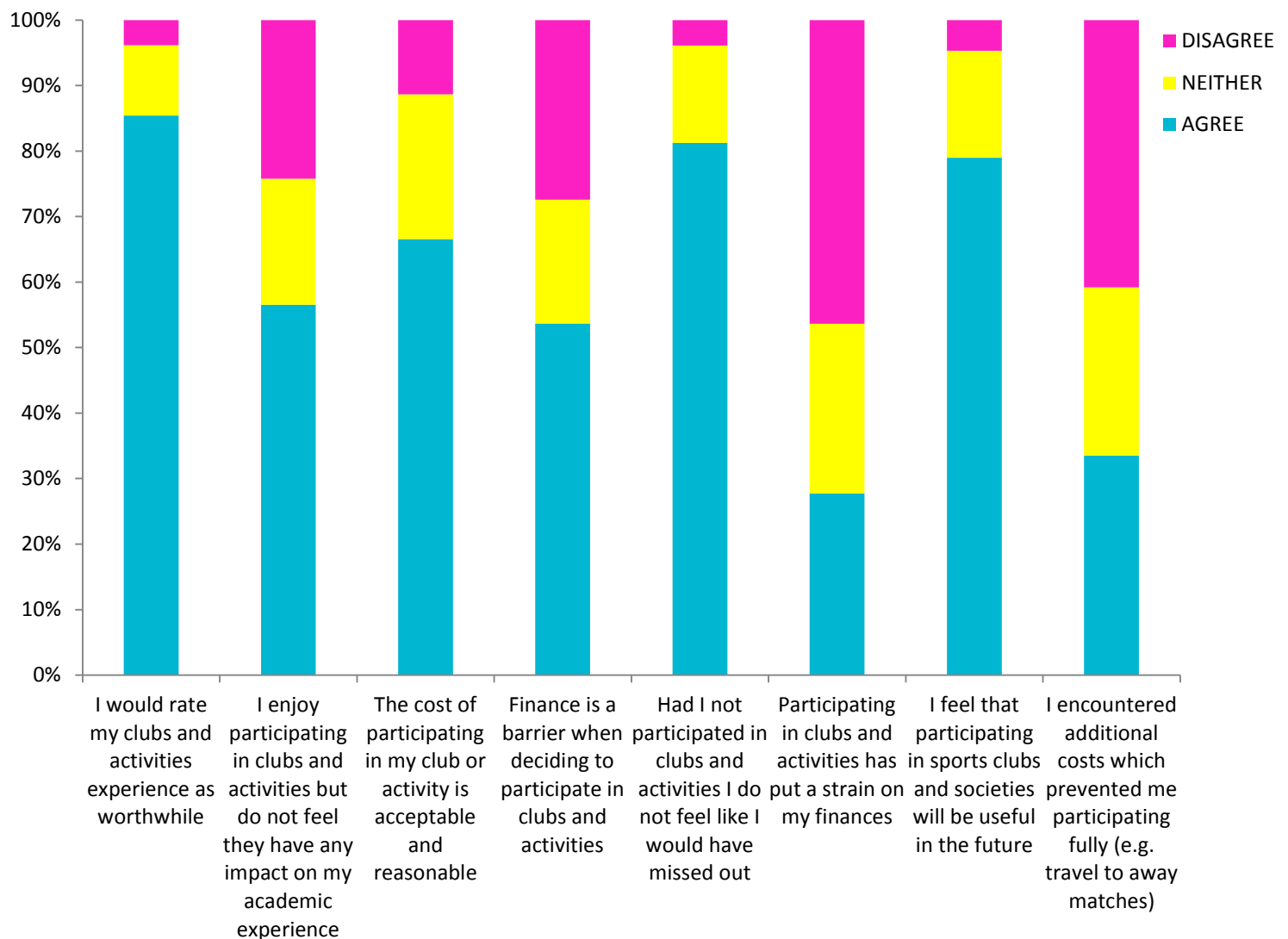
Our study shows that students who participate value their experience of sports, clubs and activities from their students' unions: almost nine in ten respondents rate their experience as 'worthwhile'; eight in ten believe if they had not participated they would feel like they missed out; and the same proportion (79 per cent) feel that their experience of participating 'will be useful in the future'.

We asked how much respondents had spent on participating in the previous academic term (first term, 2013/14) – a quarter (25 per cent) of respondents spent more than £200, although 12 per cent spent nothing and 18 per cent spent up to £24.

Just over half (53 per cent) of those who do participate said that 'finance is a barrier when deciding to participate in clubs and activities.'

That said, it seems that once students have decided which society to join, finance is less of a barrier: only 11 per cent of respondents who take part disagreed that the cost of participating was acceptable and reasonable while under a third (27 per cent) said that 'participating in clubs and activities has put a strain on my finances'.

Views on participation



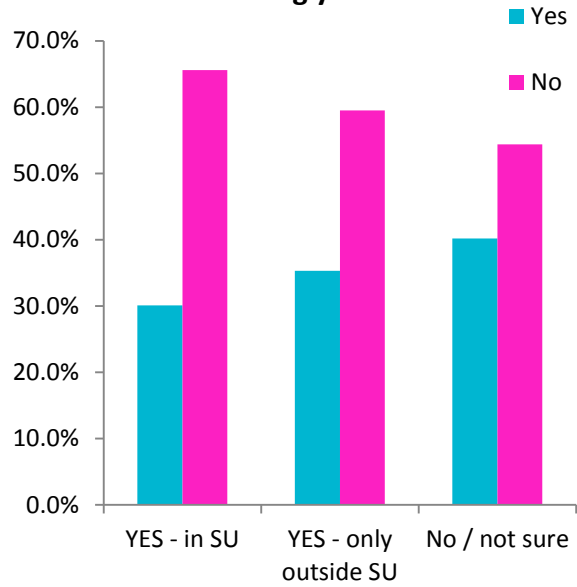
### Benefits of taking part

Our evidence suggests that those in student organisations benefit from the close social support of their peers. Students who took part in activities were less likely to report that they had seriously considered leaving their course (30 per cent) than those who did not take part in SU activities (40 per cent).

Across most wellbeing indicators, students who take part in SU activities are in better shape: overall they feel better about the future, about finding information about their support, about concentrating on their studies without worrying about finance, and about paying bills and cash-flow.

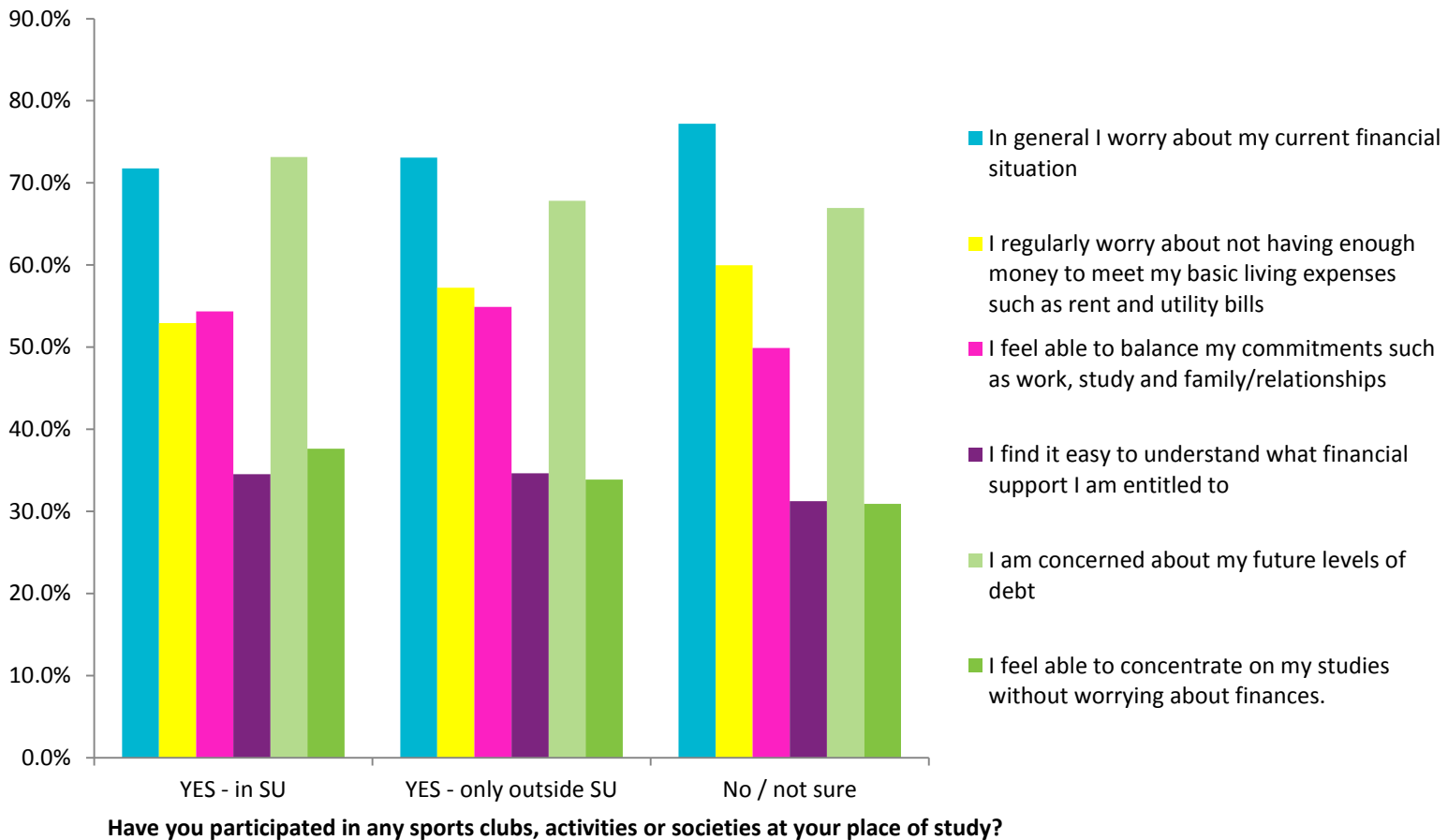
These findings resonate with theories of social capital, whereby communities provide supportive and stable environments, which could in this context counter the cultural capital problems addressed previously. One thing to consider here though is the profile of participants in clubs and societies though.

### Have you ever seriously considered leaving your course?



### Have you participated in any sports clubs, activities or societies at your place of study?

### Wellbeing and participation in SU activities



## Employment

Almost half of all students surveyed work during term time, and a third of these are working over 17 hours per week alongside their course.

Across the survey sample, 27 per cent of FE respondents, 38 per cent of postgraduate respondents and 31 per cent of HE respondents indicated that they worked during term time and holidays. A further 8 per cent of FE students, 11 per cent of undergraduate students and 14 per cent of postgraduate students stated that they worked in term time only.

### Working time

Respondents who indicated that they worked during term time and/or term time and holidays were asked how many hours they worked during term time.

The majority of FE and HE respondents who worked during term time and/or term time and holidays worked 8 hours or less a week: 36 per cent of FE and 46 per cent of undergraduate students reported working between 0 to 8 hours (or one day a week) and within FE, 16 per cent worked between 9 and 16 hours (or two days), for HE this was 18 per cent. A small minority worked 17-24 hours a day (6 per cent) and a slightly higher proportion of postgraduate

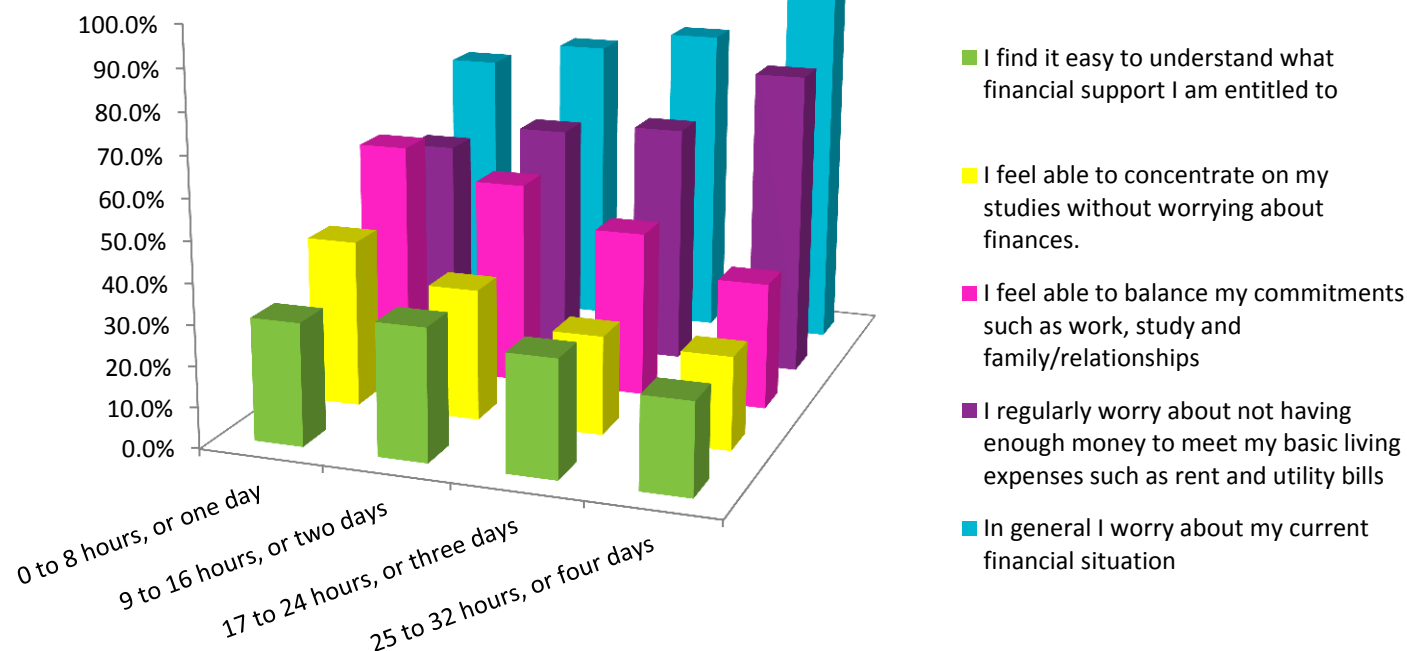
students (13 per cent) reported working 25 to 32 hours a week. A very small minority worked over 33 hours per week (2 per cent) but once again, it was most likely postgrads (5 per cent) to be working such hours on top of study.

### Hours worked and wellbeing

For those working in part-time employment (0-32 hours per week) alongside their studies, longer hours are associated with poorer wellbeing. A number of the indicators in particular show this:

- 23 per cent of those working 25 to 32 hours per week were able to concentrate on studies; compared to 41 per cent of those working 0-8 hours per week;
- Only 32 per cent of those working 25 to 32 hours felt able to balance relationships, work, family and study; compared to 58 per cent of those working 0-8 hours;
- Although we cannot determine the direction of causality; that 76 per cent of those working 25 to 32 hours per week regularly worry about having enough money to pay the bills suggests that cash-flow concerns are driving students to work longer hours to meet the gap, and there is some indication that those working longer hours tend to understand their financial entitlements less (23 per cent) than those working shorter hours (33 per cent).

The impact of working part-time alongside study



# Student debt

What sources of financial support and/or income do students have beyond those provided by the student support system? To what extent are these sources needed to meet the costs of study? What role do family and friends play in student support?

## Borrowing for living costs

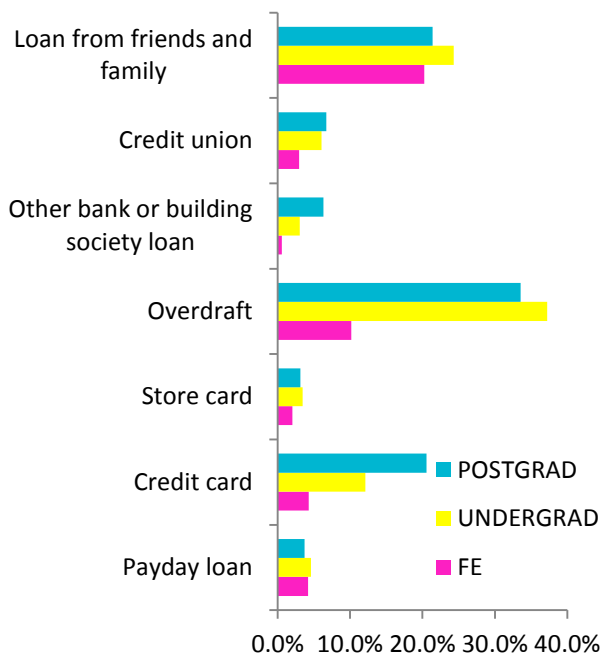
We asked respondents to tell us about what they have borrowed in forms other than government loans and mortgages.

Overdrafts were the most common type of debt incurred, with over a third of undergraduates surveyed (37 per cent) and slightly fewer postgraduates (34 per cent) surveyed reporting that they had taken on this type of debt since beginning their current course of study.

Loans from family and friends were also common with one in four undergraduates (24 per cent) reporting this, with similar proportions from postgraduates and FE students. However postgraduates were more likely (21 per cent), than their undergraduate counterparts (12 per cent) to have taken on credit card debts.

A small minority (5 per cent) of respondents had taken on a form of high risk debt such as payday loans, cash-a-cheque or a doorstep loan.

Have you taken on any of the following kinds of debt since you began your current course of study?

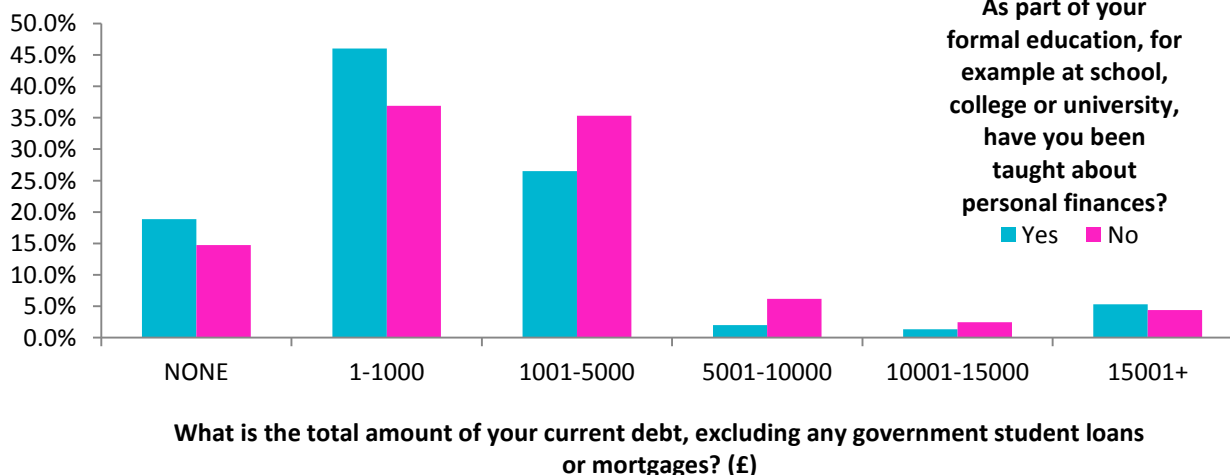


## Financial education and debt

Formal financial education also seems to have an impact on levels of debt. We asked respondents their current level of debt *excluding* government student loans and mortgages. Most respondents (40 per cent) had between £1-£1000 of debt, followed by 28 per cent who had £1001-£5000 and 32 per cent with no debt.

One quarter (27 per cent) of those with a formal financial education had debt of £1001 or more, compared to 35 per cent of those who had not received a financial education.

Financial education and overall debt



### Levels of debt

We asked students what the total amount of their current debt is, excluding any government student loans or mortgages. When split by POLAR quintile, we found that those from lower participation backgrounds are twice as likely to be carrying debts of £5,000 - £10,000 as those from high-participation areas. They are also significantly less likely to be carrying smaller debts of under £1000 and less likely to have no debt whatsoever.

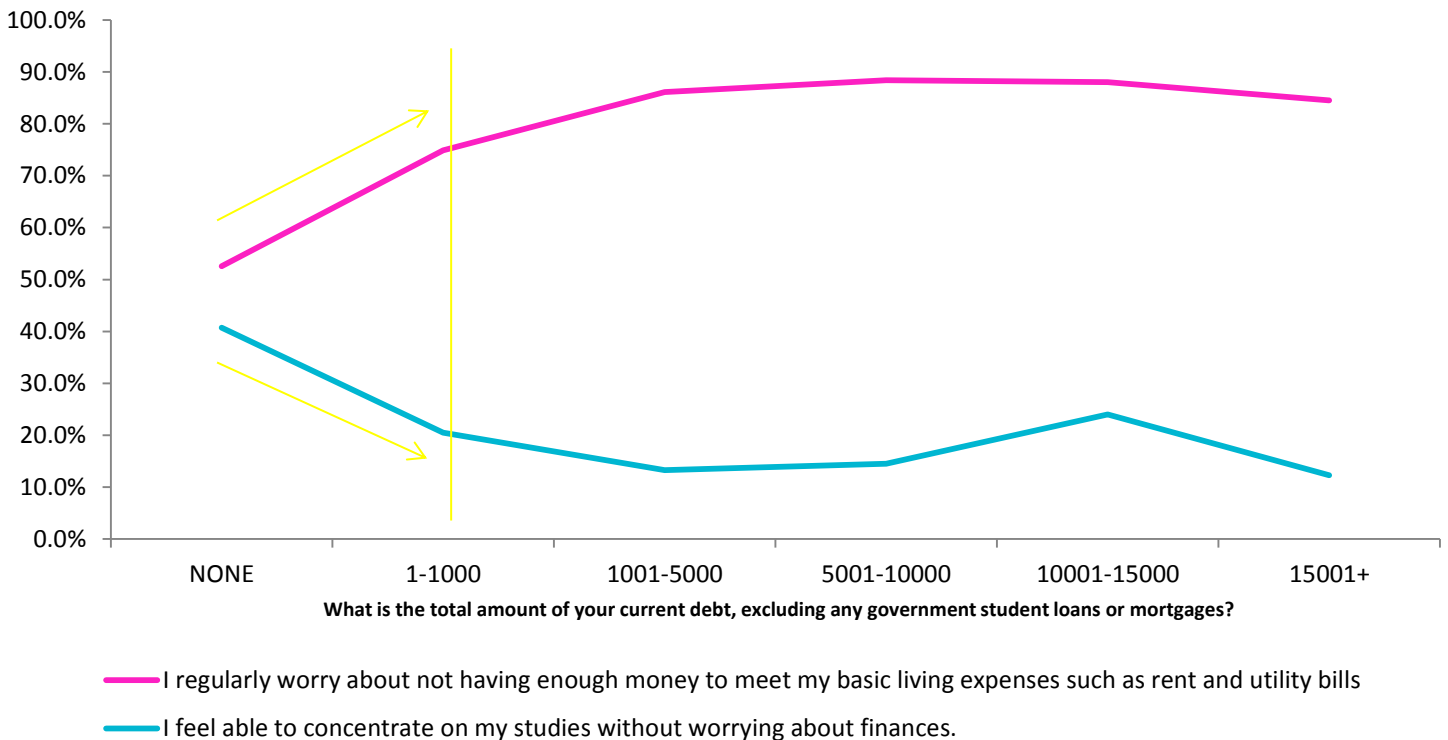
### Debt and wellbeing – a conclusion

Respondents with a greater level of debt were more likely to agree or strongly agree that they regularly worried about not having enough money to meet their basic living expenses.

Similarly, the greater the level of debt, the less likely a respondent was to agree or strongly agree that they felt able to concentrate on their studies without worrying about finances. Indeed, with only £1000 debts, students’ wellbeing suffers significantly.

The vertical line on the graph below indicates the point at which students, who reported this level of wellbeing, were found to be twice as likely to have seriously considered leaving their course, and this finding forms a conclusion to the findings of *The Pound in Your Pocket*, as the ultimate result of inability to access support, of high costs, of cash-flow problems and insufficient income is stress, worry and non-completion.

**Key wellbeing indicators by current level of debt (excluding government loans and mortgage debt)**



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