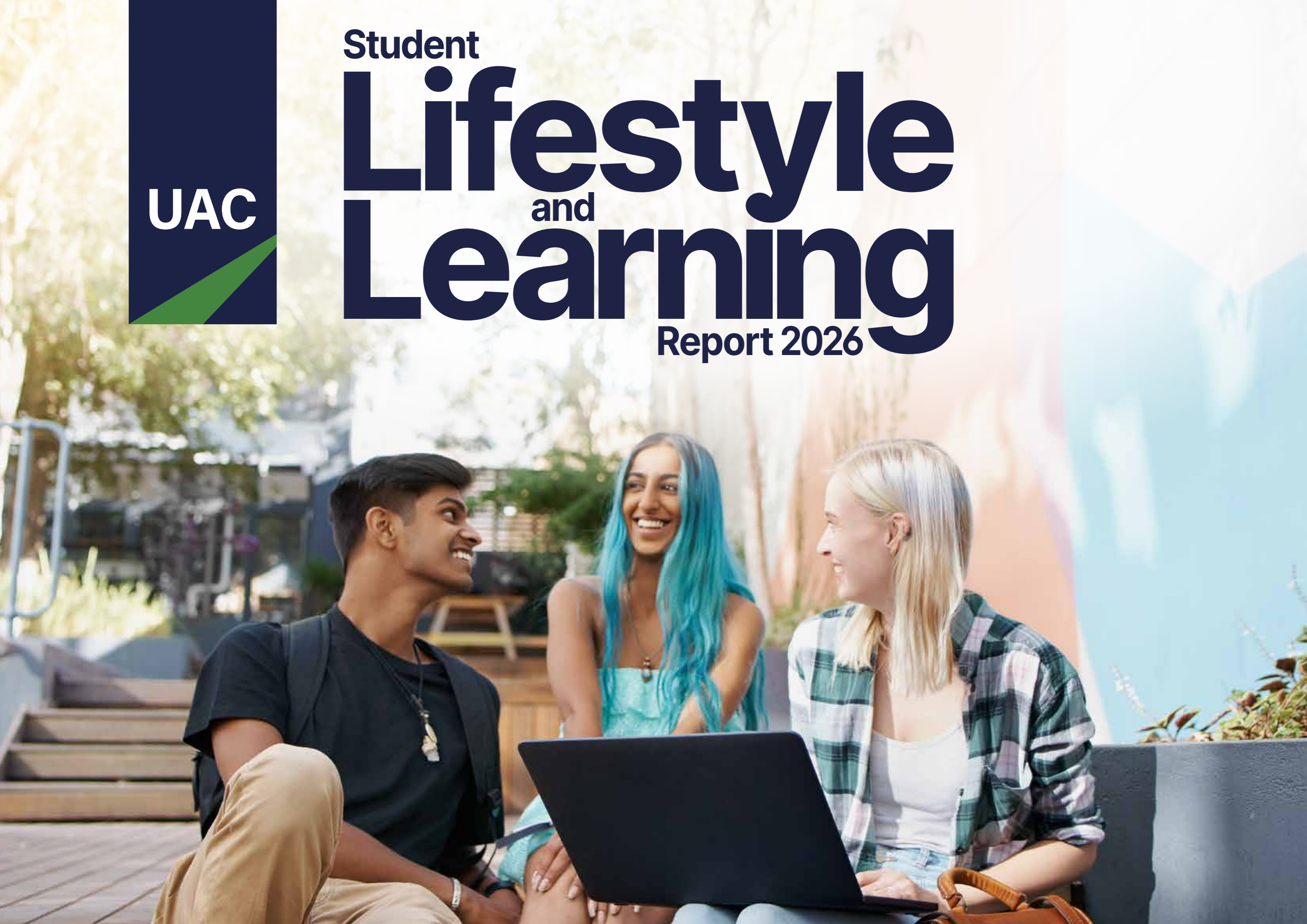


UAC

Student

Lifestyle and Learning

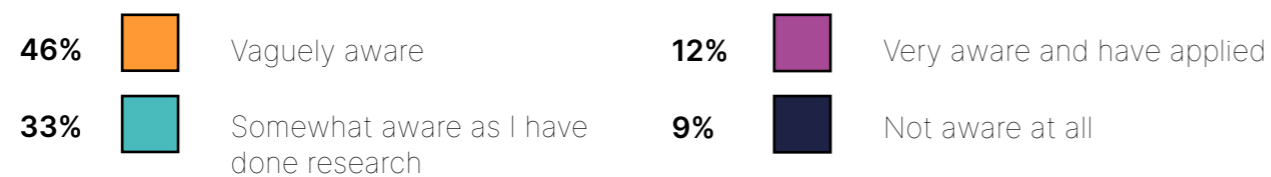
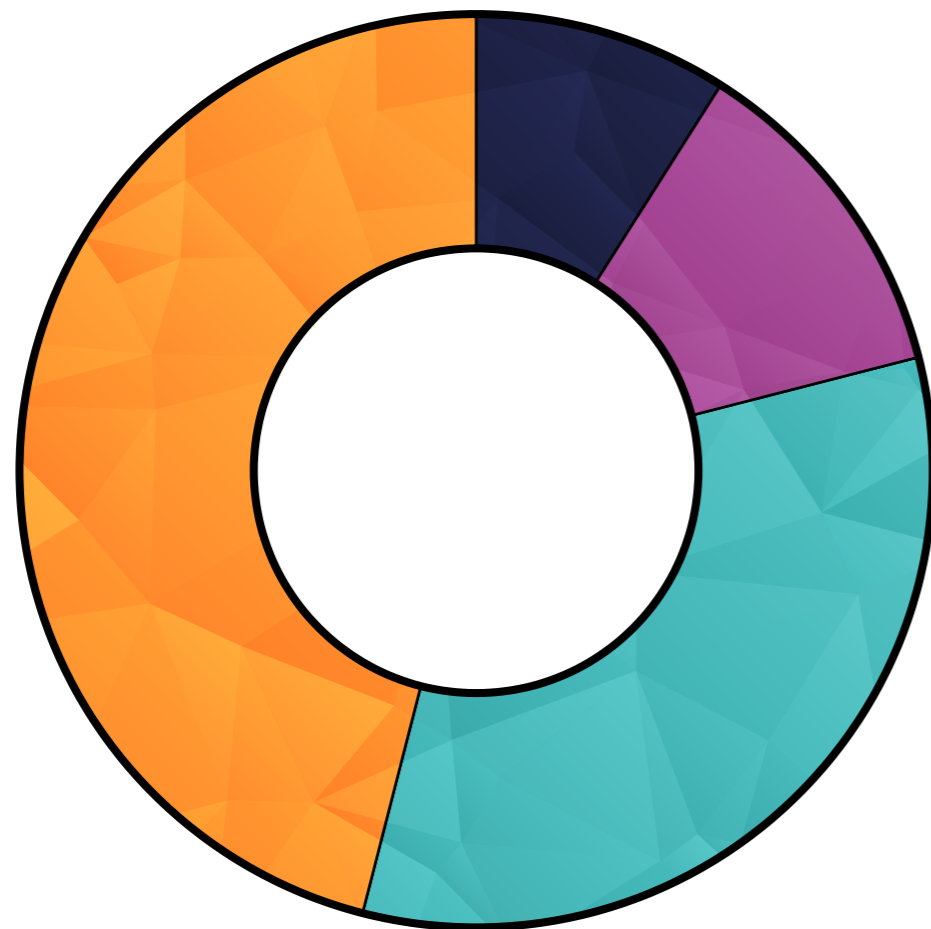
Report 2026



Do scholarships move the needle?

Where awareness meets action

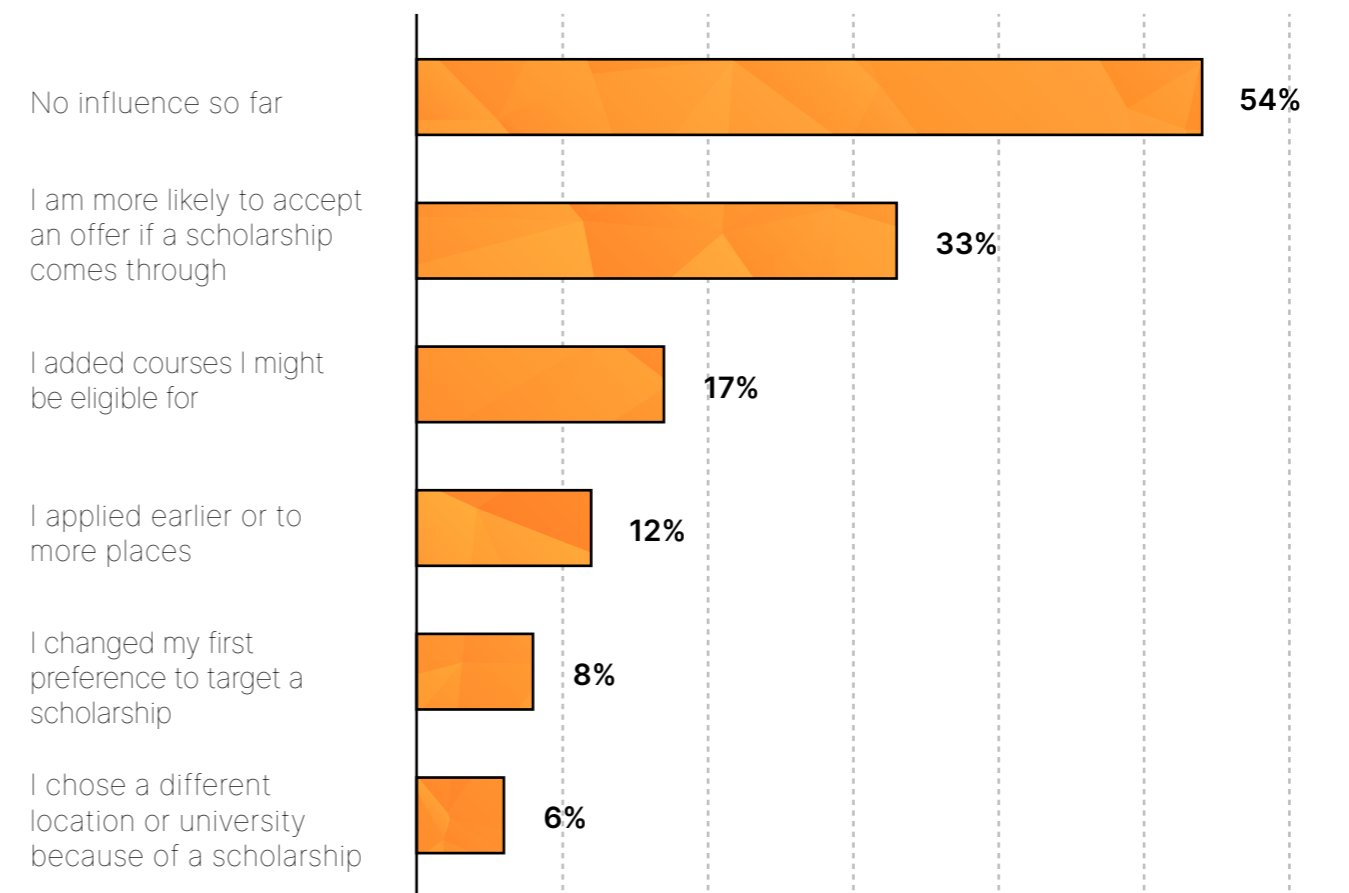
How aware are you of university scholarships?



‘Start researching early for scholarship applications’ Jali, 17.

When money moves preferences

Have scholarships influenced your choices in any of the following ways?



Nudging at the margins

Just under 1 in 10 students have not only heard of scholarships but acted on that knowledge by changing their first preference to target a scholarship.

For universities, clearer, earlier and more targeted scholarship information could make a meaningful difference to student decisions, particularly for those under financial pressure or from under-represented backgrounds.

For some, scholarships do change behaviour and operate on two levels:

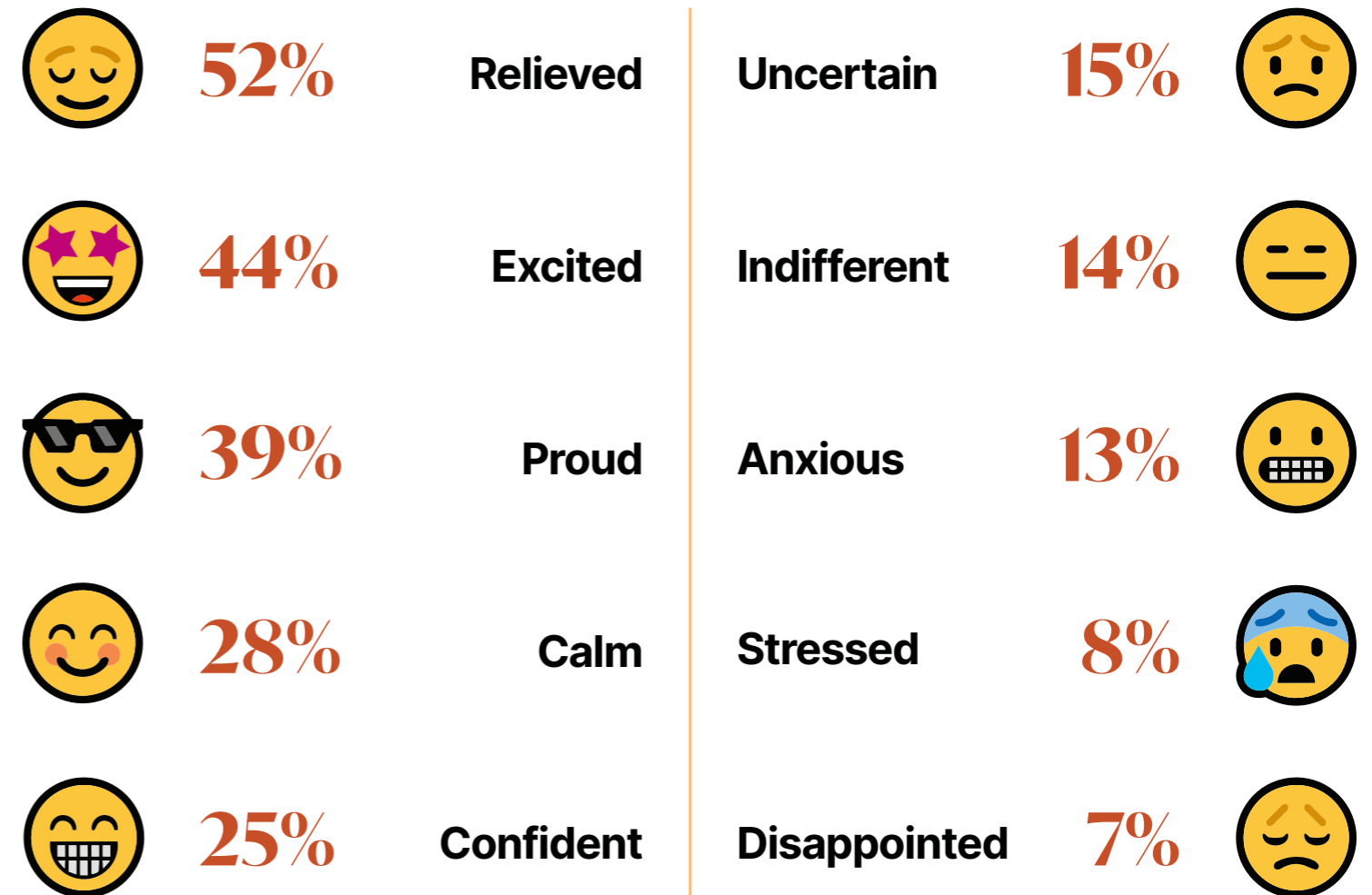
- As a safety net: making it easier to say yes to a course or institution once an offer is on the table
- As a strategic lever: nudging some students to reorder preferences, broaden their options or consider institutions they might not otherwise have chosen



Early decisions, lower heart rates

'I've got an early offer so I'm very pleased with myself and my future prospects.' Matt, 17

Which feelings best describe how you felt after your early offer outcome?



Sweet stress relief

27,926

students applied for an early offer through UAC's Schools Recommendation Scheme

Half of students (52%) who received early offers felt relieved. Only small proportions felt anxious (13%), stressed (8%) or disappointed (7%). Early entry doesn't erase all Year 12 pressure, but it clearly takes the edge off for many.

Is uni worth it?

The Year 12s of 2025 still see university as a powerful way to change their lives, but they are looking at degrees with a more critical eye. Their answers reveal a group that believes strongly in the benefits of higher education while also counting the personal and financial costs more carefully than before.

Degrees that must deliver

Finding a job is the biggest concern of this group of high school leavers. Against this backdrop, they continue to attribute real value to a degree. When asked what they see as the main benefits of completing university, 76% pointed to better job or career opportunities and 73% highlighted earning a qualification that gives them options.

Clarify careers, please

Students care deeply about employment outcomes, but their understanding of those outcomes is patchy. A third of students (33%) felt they knew the basics and 42% said they mostly understood, while just 8% said they knew the outcomes in detail. In other words, the majority are making big life decisions with incomplete information.

A study of debt

Just under 4 in 10 students say cost is a significant factor in their decision to attend. More than half intend to proceed and deal with HECS later. A small minority will be shielded by family support.

The upside

Degrees of motivation

What do you think are the main benefits of completing a university degree?



'Getting a degree qualifies me for my dream career in speech pathology.' Elise, 18

68%

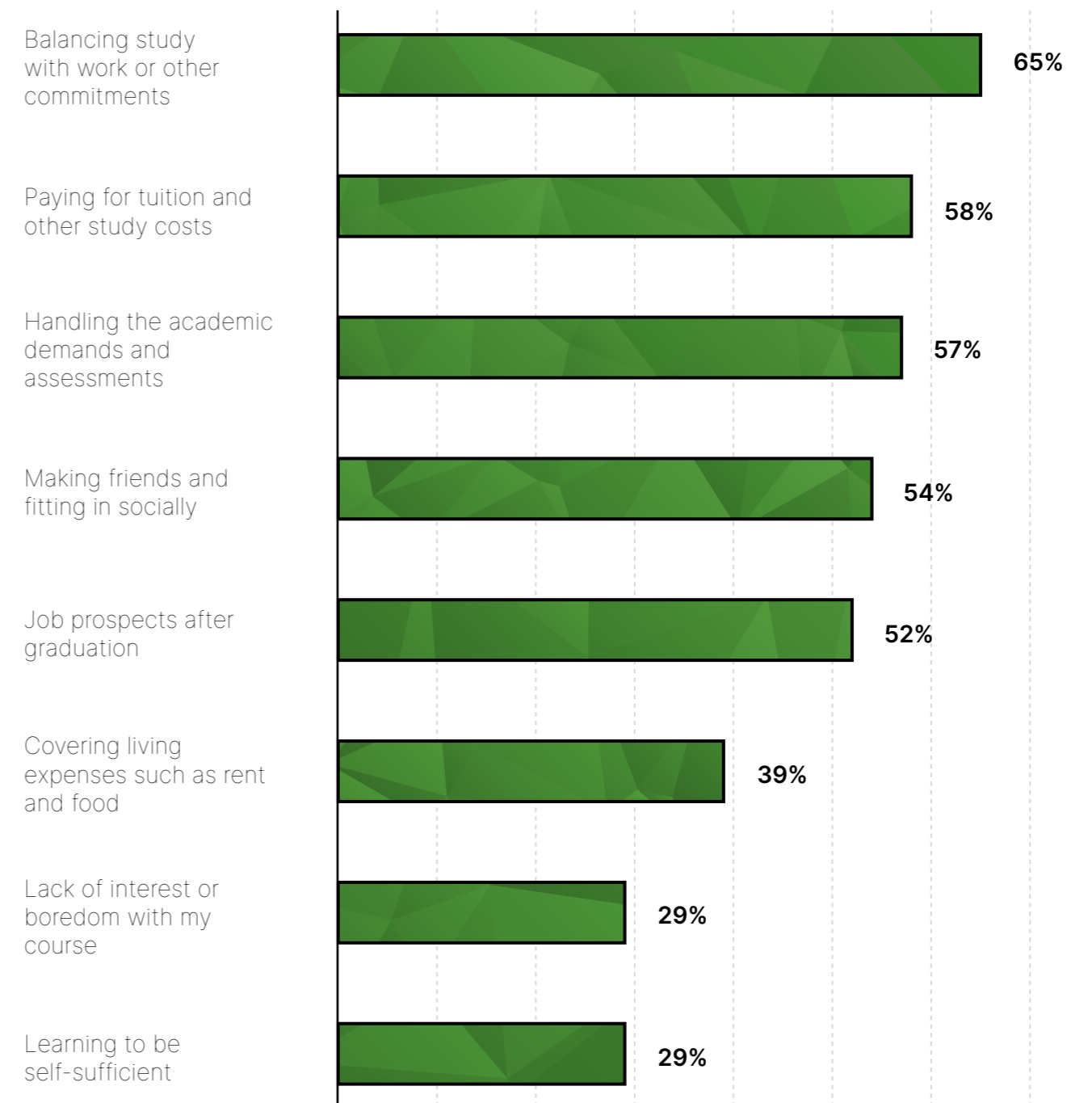
of respondents see themselves taking a second university degree

Belief in the value of a degree remains strong. Three-quarters (76%) of students pointed to better job or career opportunities, and 73% highlighted having a qualification that keeps their options open. Seventy-one per cent said improving their skills and knowledge was a key benefit. Almost half (49%) associated a degree with higher lifetime earnings, and many (42%) also linked it to making their family proud.

The juggle is real

'Year 12 was challenging. I'll have to prioritise balance at uni.' Jiya, 17

When you think about going to uni or college, are you concerned about any of the following? (top 8 responses)



Decision mode

School leavers struggle to find key information about courses and institutions. They are combing through official websites, talking to teachers and families, scrolling social media and experimenting with AI tools to piece together a picture of their options.

This chapter looks at where students go for information, what they feel is missing and which factors actually tip the scales when they decide what and where to study.

Lost on the job market

Employment outcomes continue to loom large. Sixty-nine per cent of students say graduate employment outcomes are among the most important factors when choosing a course.

Spoilt for choice – and using it

Students aren't passively locked onto a single pathway. When asked how many different courses they've seriously considered:

- 45% have considered three or four
- Another 9% have considered five or more
- Only 9% have focused on one course alone.

Students are actively comparing options across institutions, locations and modes of study, and expect universities to compete on information, value and support.

Where to find students

Top social trends

- 1. Instagram dominates again.** Instagram remains the default platform for school leavers. Usage has lifted to 86%, making it the clearest channel for scale in student recruitment.
- 2. Snapchat snaps back.** Snapchat has bounced back this year after a long slide, lifting from 40% to 47%. It is still well below its 2021 level, but the rebound signals renewed relevance and a creative opportunity.
- 3. TikTok tears upward.** TikTok has overtaken YouTube and reached 60% usage among school leavers. The story is sustained momentum, rising from 43% in 2021 to 60% in 2026, making it the fastest climber among the major platforms.
- 4. YouTube keeps sliding.** Although remaining a major platform at 54%, the direction of travel is clear. Usage has eased each year from 69% in 2021 to 54% in 2026, pointing to softer engagement and students retreating from the channel.
- 5. WhatsApp gains momentum.** WhatsApp has climbed to 29% and shows the strongest growth in the second tier. Since first appearing in the trendline in 2022, it has risen from 14% to 29%, suggesting the shift towards private messaging shows no sign of slowing.
- 6. The Pinterest bubble bursts.** Pinterest peaked at 30% in 2025, then fell to 25% in 2026. After several years of growth, this looks like a reset and not where marketing dollars are best spent.

Hours of social scrolling

58%

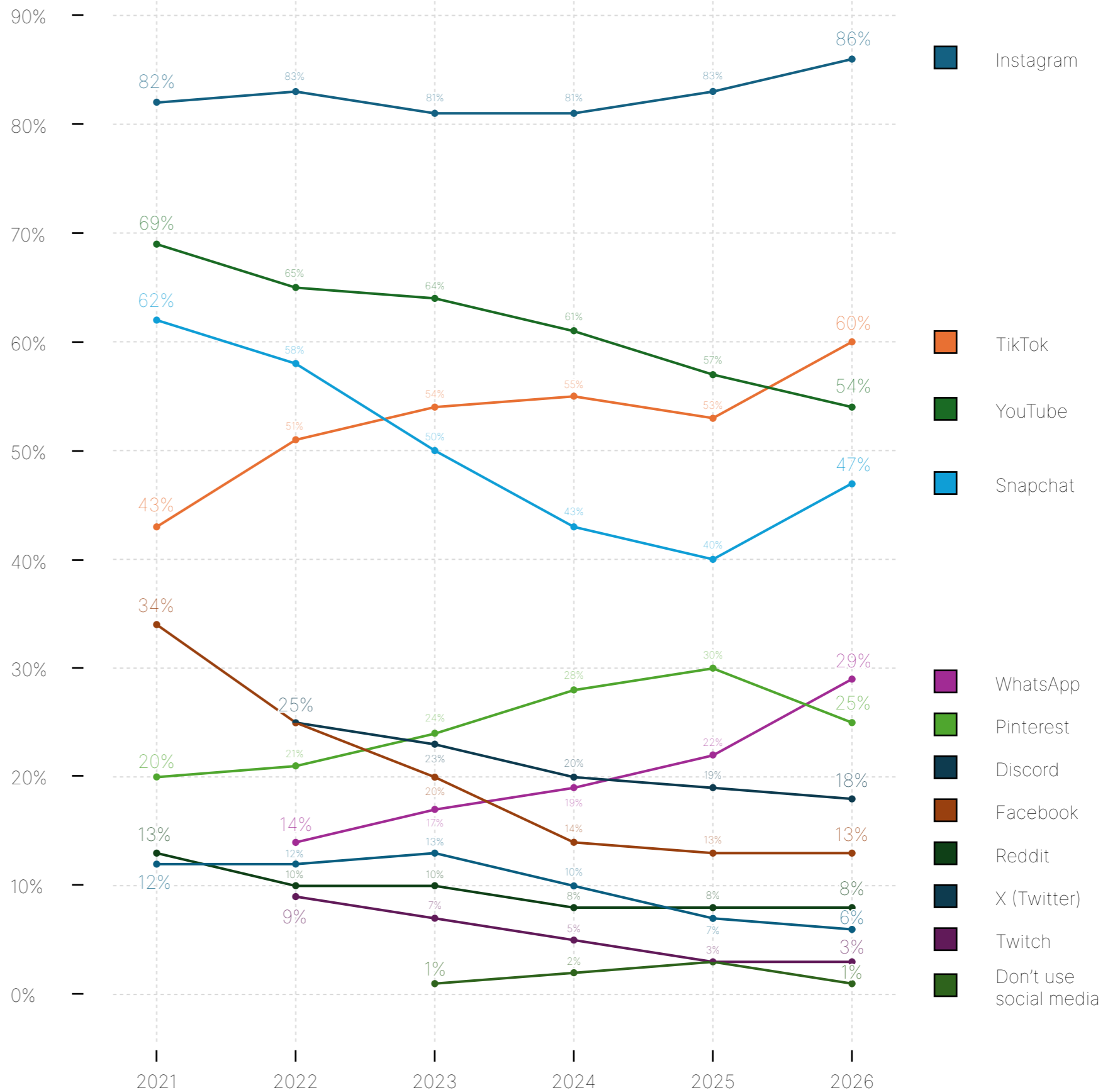
of respondents spent 3 hours or more per day on social media

Eighty-six per cent of respondents use Instagram, 60% use TikTok and 54% use YouTube. Snapchat usage has bounced back to 47%, and WhatsApp continues to grow, now used by 29% of students. Only 1% of the cohort say they do not use social media at all.

For universities, this means that institutional messages about courses and campuses are arriving alongside a flood of other content, opinions and algorithms.

'I only use Instagram to speak with those important to me.' Dante, 17

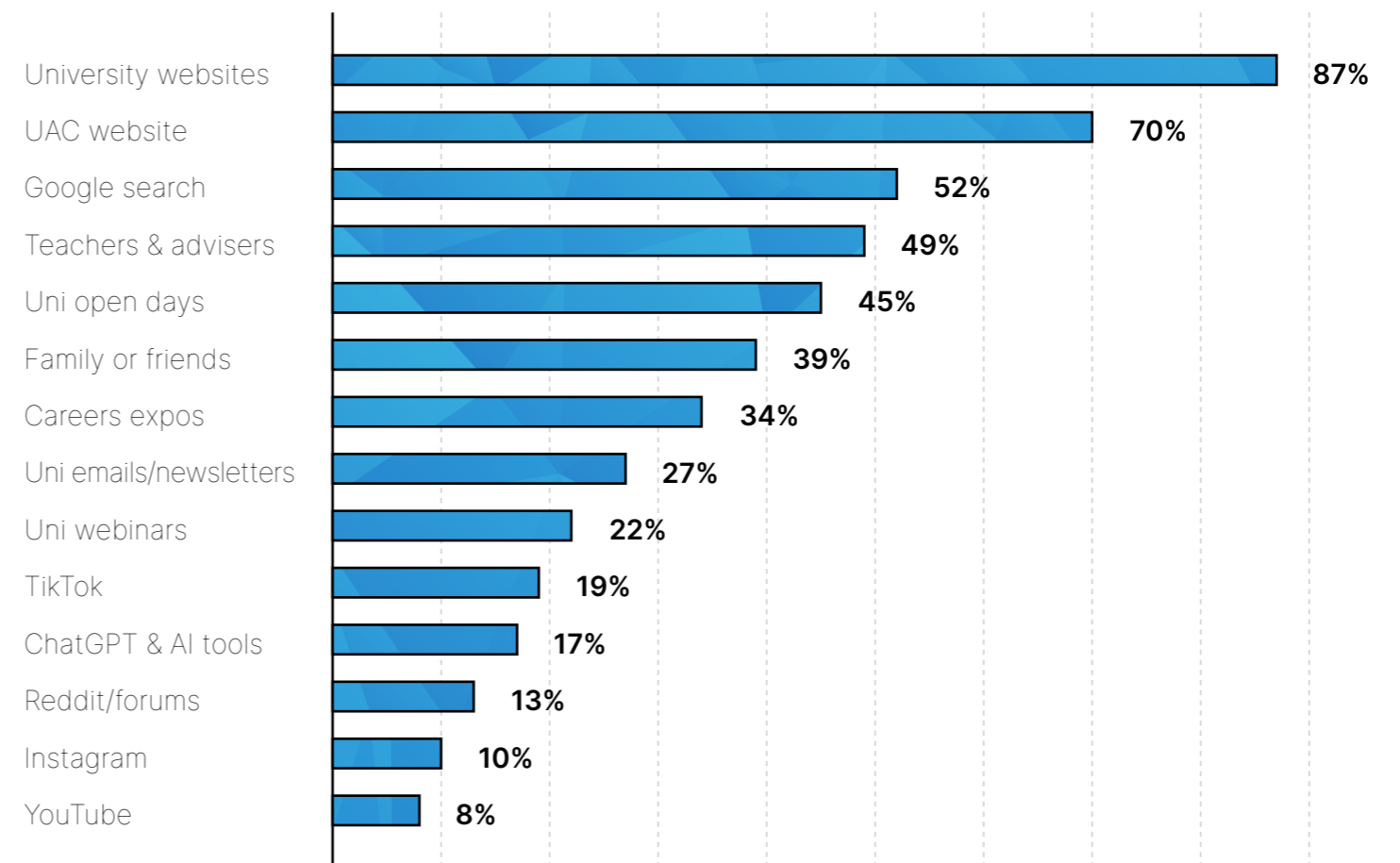
What are your most-used social media platforms?



Finding the perfect fit

Searching far and wide

Where did you look or go for information about course options?



Don't neglect face to face

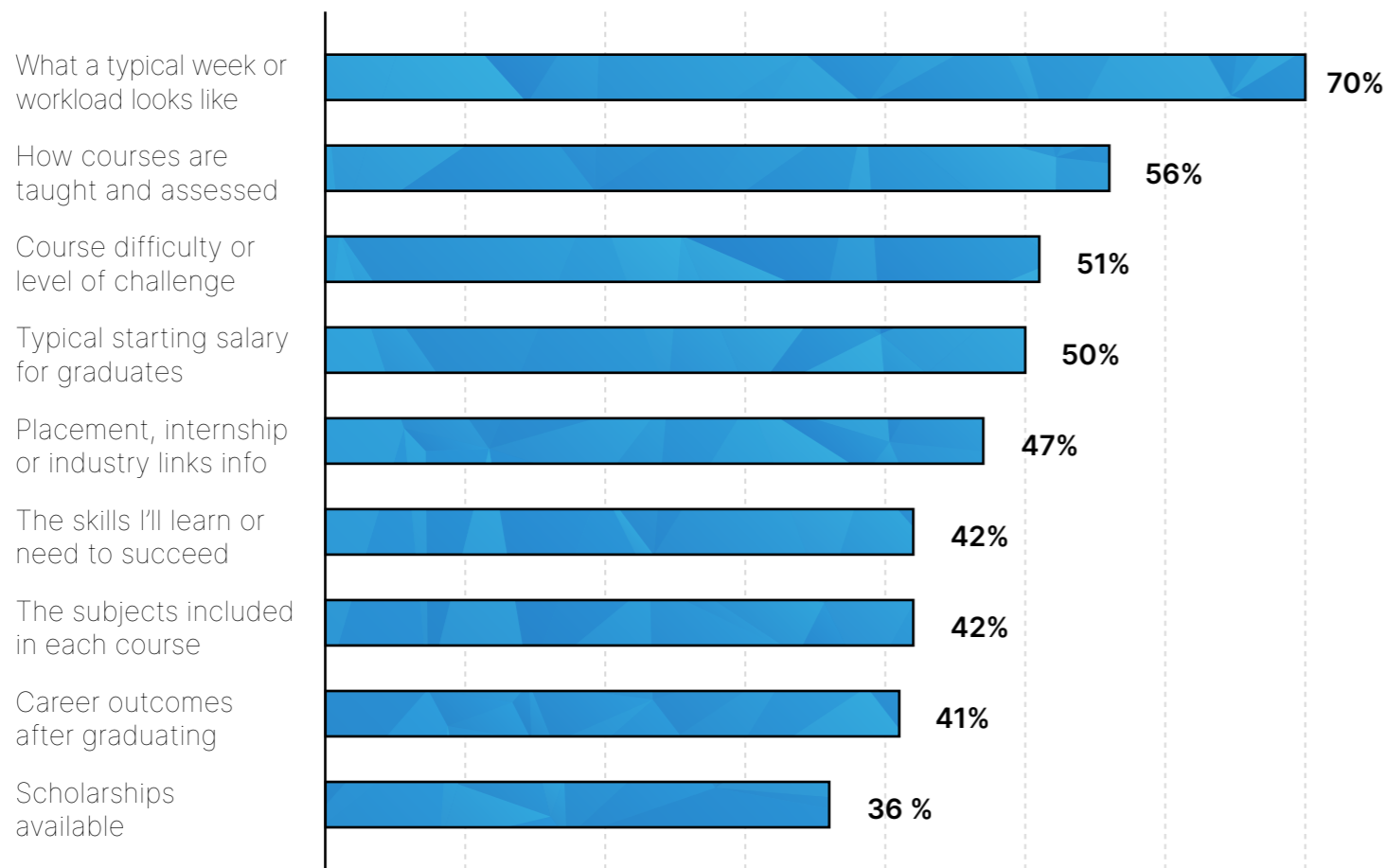
Online research certainly dominates the information landscape, but face-to-face methods underpin a lot of course decision-making. Teachers and careers advisers are trusted sources of course information for 49% of this group, as are family and friends (39%). Public events play their part too. Uni open days are valued by 45% of students, and 34% use careers expos to find their calling.



Help me decide

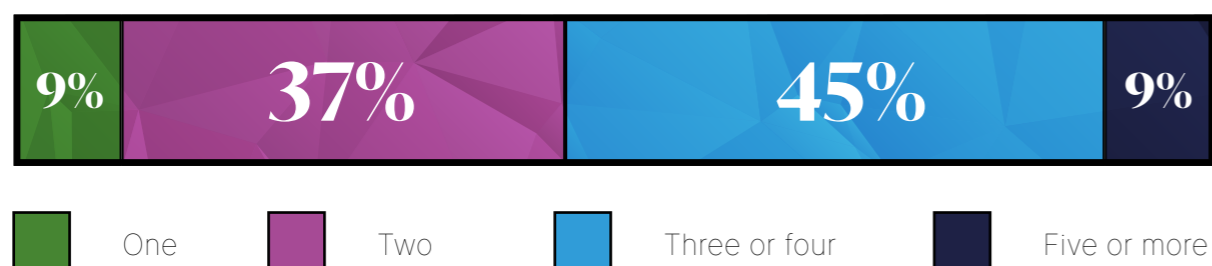
'At unis interstate you can see online what your timetable would look like. We need this in NSW.' Kai, 18

What course info is missing to help you make confident study choices?



'I was set on one course but I did more research into career outcomes and salaries and I changed to a broader degree that would give me more options.' Lily, 18

How many different courses have you seriously considered?



■ One
 ■ Two
 ■ Three or four
 ■ Five or more



Passion first, jobs follow

Which factors are most important to you when choosing a course? (top 8 responses)

82% Interest or passion for the subject matter

Employment outcomes for graduates **69%**

49% Work experience/ internship opportunities

Quality of teaching **46%**

42% Entry requirements/ selection rank

Flexibility of timetables/study modes **32%**

29% Reputation with employers in this field

Global uni rankings **24%**



Reputations on alert

Which factors are most important to you when choosing an institution? (top 8 responses)

67% Courses on offer

Reputation of the uni/college **59%**

57% Location and proximity

Vibe and campus culture **55%**

53% Transport and commute

Facilities (labs, studios, clinics etc.) **47%**

42% Cost to attend

Strong industry links **35%**

On and off campus

Cost of living pressures touch almost every aspect of the uni class of 2026's plans. They are thinking about how to earn money, where they can afford to live and what they can realistically pay for while studying. For many, the financial side of higher education feels just as daunting as the academic side.

This chapter looks at how students currently support themselves, where they expect to live when they start studying and how confident they feel about the practicalities of moving out.

The price of independence

Even for those who dream of moving out, the practical side feels overwhelming. When asked what they felt least confident about, 62% of students named managing rent and bond. Nearly half, 46%, were unsure how to make and stick to a weekly budget.

Others worried about getting around a new area, staying safe, dealing with housemates, cooking most meals, setting up utilities and finding a local GP. These are the everyday skills that turn independence from an idea into a reality, and many students feel underprepared.

Serve it up

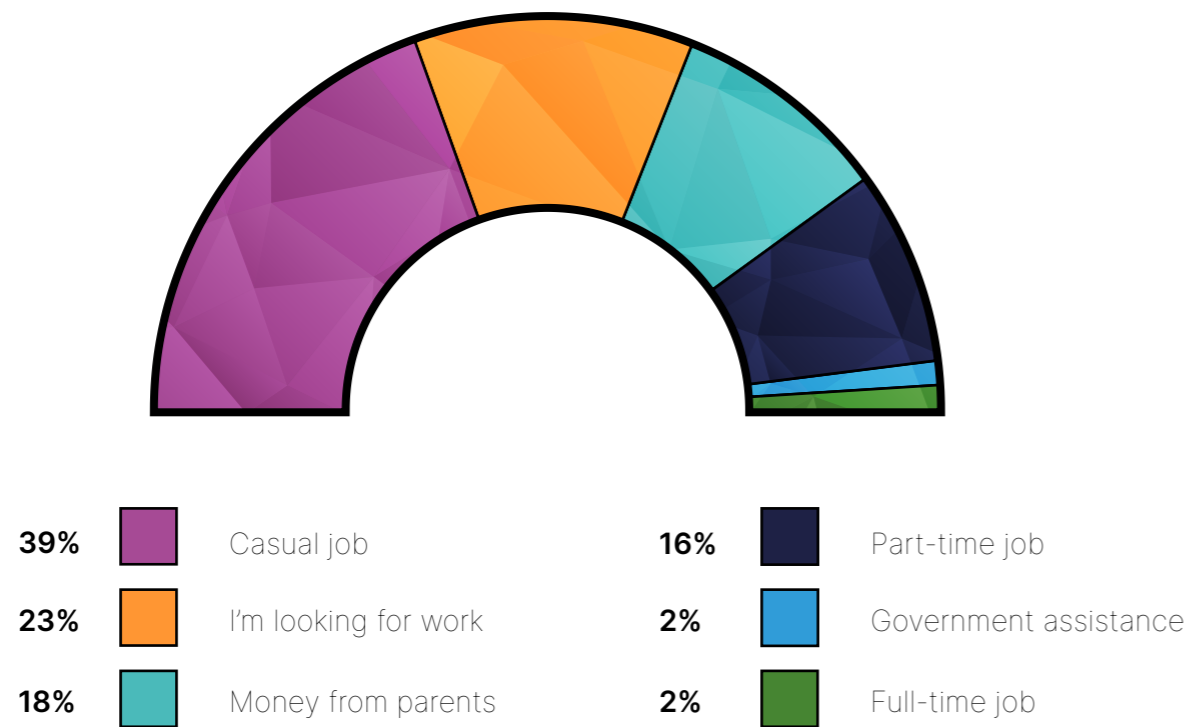
Sixty-three per cent of students said they wanted employment services on campus, making job-related support their most desired on-campus service. Timetabling and class selection support, and industry partnerships or work experience opportunities both came in at 58%. Half of respondents wanted study-skills classes to ease the academic transition, and 46% were interested in one-to-one career coaching.



Getting by

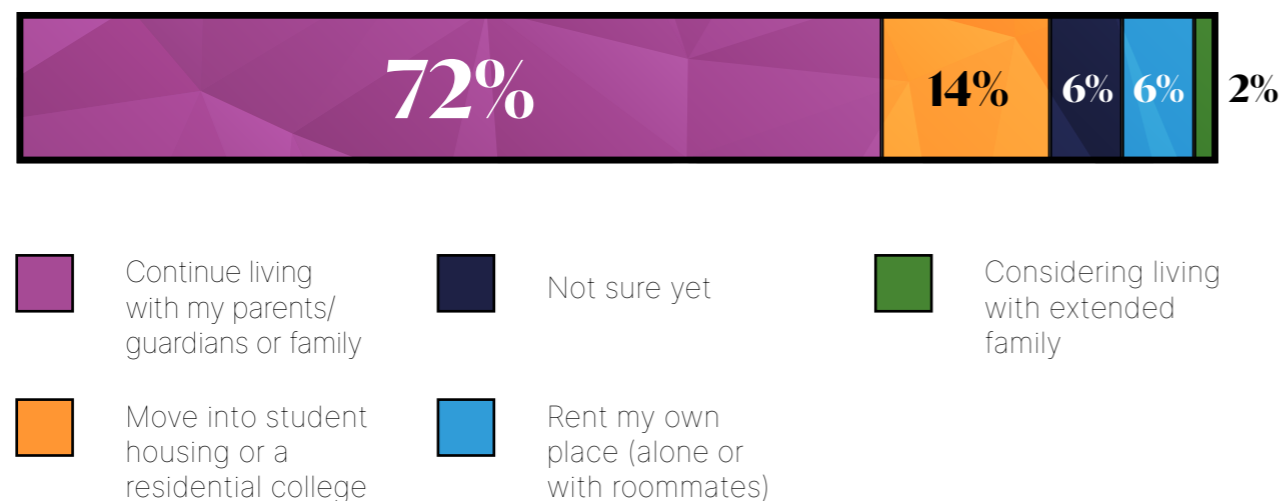
'I'll be working to become financially independent.' Nunu, 18

What's your main source of income?



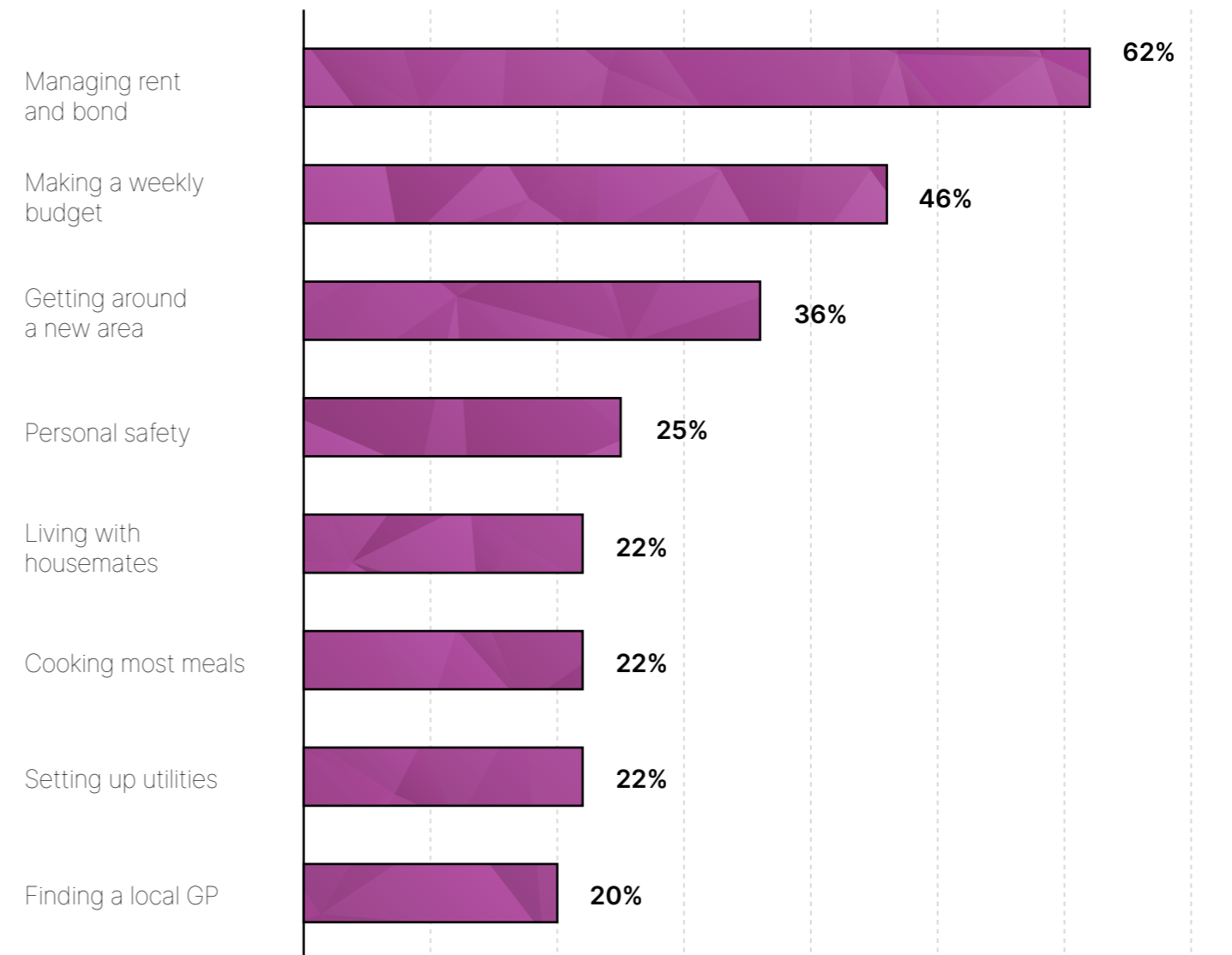
'I'll live with my parents for the first year or two of uni before moving out.' Remy, 17

What type of living arrangement do you expect to have when you start studying?



'I'm worried about managing too many expenses at once.' Lucas, 17

Which of these do you feel least confident about?



One foot in the workplace

Most Year 12 school leavers are already showing up to work. When we asked about their main source of income, the largest group, 39%, said they worked in casual jobs alongside school. A further 23% were actively looking for work, hoping to secure income before or as they begin tertiary study. Eighteen per cent relied mainly on money from parents, while 16% had part-time jobs. Only a small minority named government assistance or full-time work as their main income.

Uni fuel

'I'm excited to learn how to live and thrive in a new environment and grow towards the person I aim to be.'
Claudia, 18

When you think about starting uni or college, what are you most excited about?



What follows passion?

Students are most excited about pursuing their passions at uni or college in 2026. Passion has topped the list every year since the survey began in 2021.

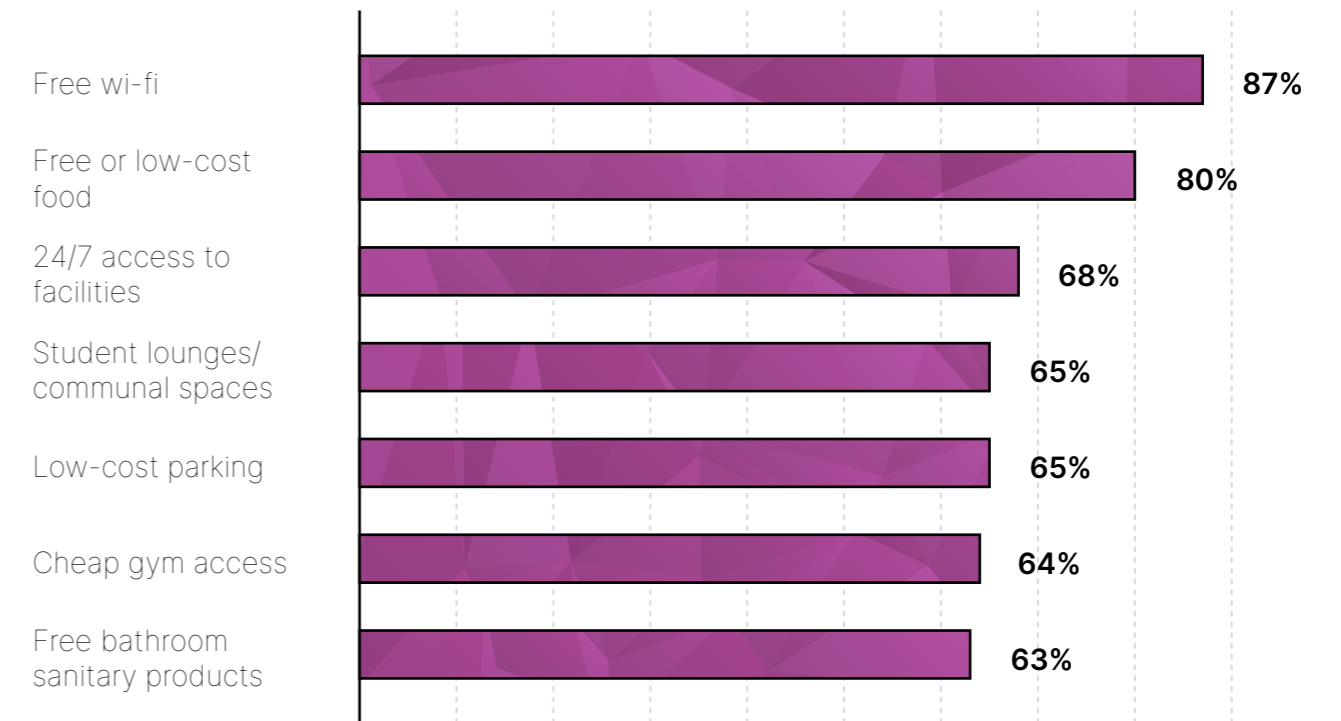
Meeting new people follows passion, with 68% of respondents eager to expand their social circles. Sixty-six per cent were excited about social life more broadly, from events to everyday conversations between classes.

Independence is another strong drawcard. Sixty per cent of students said they were looking forward to being more independent, and 55% were keen to learn new life skills.

Almost half, 49%, said they were excited about networking for future career goals, while 40% focused on the appeal of studying at a tertiary level.

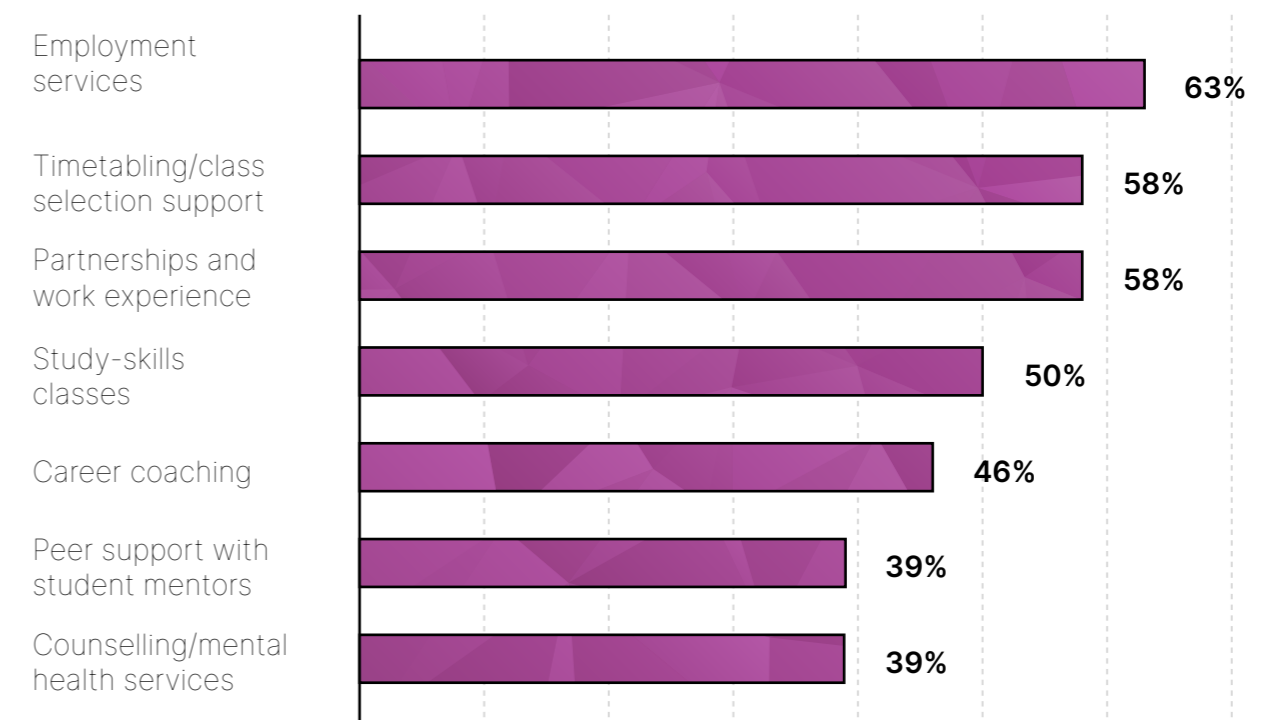
'Many universities have done a great job with their facilities.' **Rawan, 17**

What types of facilities would you like at your campus?



'I hope my uni supports campus life and builds skills for future careers.' **Myah, 18**

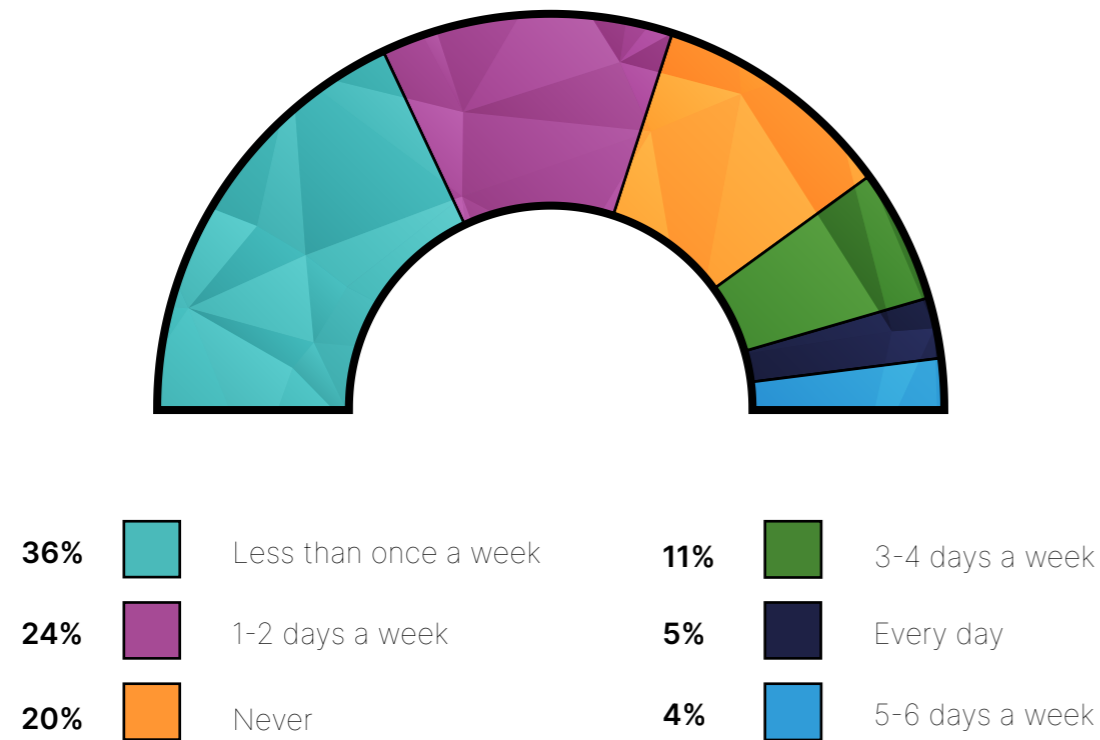
What types of services would you like to be available at your campus?



The AI adoption arc

'AI does my menial tasks that I loathe.' Huynh, 17

In the last month, how often did you use any AI tools?



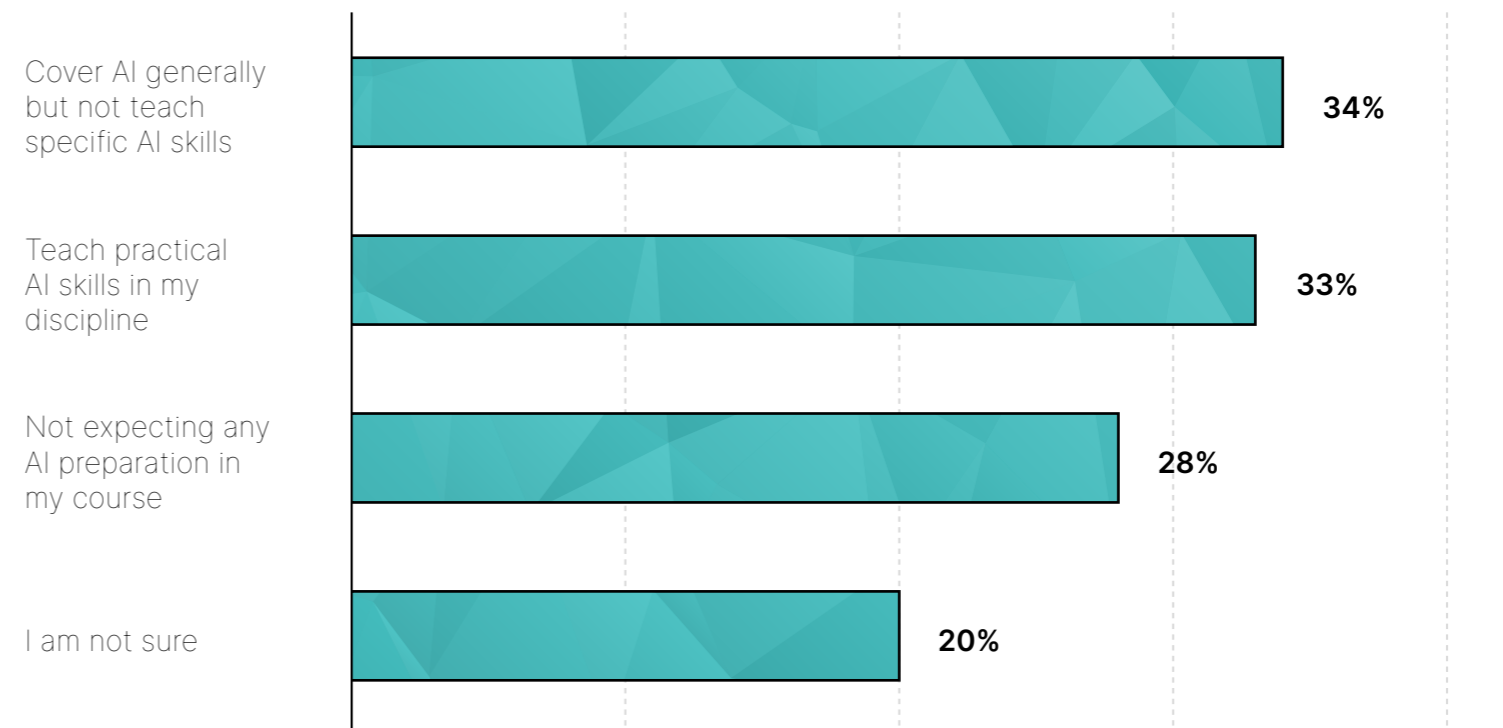
Everyday AI: an uneven spread

AI tools are already present in students' lives, but usage is uneven. Around one in four students use AI tools at least once or twice a week, while one in five students haven't used them at all in the past month. For universities, this means incoming cohorts will comprise both early adopters and complete beginners, and course design will need to cater for that spread.

For educators and leaders, the challenge is to meet students where they are. That means providing baseline AI literacy for those who have little experience, deeper, discipline specific training for those who need to integrate AI into professional practice, and clear guidelines about what counts as acceptable use in learning and assessment.

'I expect to be warned about how AI applies to my studies.' Nat, 18

How do you expect your course will try to prepare you to work in an AI-enabled world?



The noisy AI detractors

More than a quarter of students did not expect any AI preparation in their course at all. That group either saw AI as something they would have to pick up on their own or as something not yet central to their chosen field.

A noisy minority (5% of the commenters on this question), wrote variants of 'I hate AI': showing that the AI love-in isn't universal.

One-fifth of students (20%) were simply not sure what to expect. Across the board,

students expressed interest in understanding how AI would affect their future work and what responsible use would look like, but they did not have a clear sense of how universities plan to address this.

For institutions, this mix of expectations matters. Courses that are silent on AI risk being seen as out of date, while those that mention AI without offering real skills may leave students disappointed. Clear communication about where and how AI is built into curricula will become increasingly important in student decision making.

Continue the discussion

If you would like to discuss any of the findings or information presented in this report, please contact:

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E: media@uac.edu.au
P: 0436 459 603

What we do and why we do it

UAC is a not-for-profit organisation that processes university applications for students seeking admission to most undergraduate and many postgraduate courses at participating higher education institutions in NSW and the ACT.

In the application process, UAC assesses eligibility, facilitates offers from universities and calculates the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) for NSW Higher School Certificate students.

Our centralised platform simplifies the admissions process for students, schools and participating institutions, ensuring a more efficient and accessible experience.

We care about learning and we're passionate about helping people access their potential through education. It's why we exist and it's why we'll continue to deliver platforms and services that meet the needs of all communities.

