



Settling In

October 2025

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Referencing

If you wish to reference this report, please use 'The University of Exeter's Students' Guild' as the author/organisation.

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Introduction

Survey Superheroes gathers monthly feedback from 1000 student volunteers regarding their opinions on a variety of pre-planned and developing issues in exchange for financial compensation.

The Student's Guild Insight Team uses this feedback to influence decisions by the University, inform our projects and empower students to create change for their community.

One of our key topics for October was Settling In. We wanted to find out:

1. How have students found their first few weeks at university this year?
1. How well do students feel they have settled into university this year?
3. How well do students feel they have settled into the city of Exeter this year?
4. How inclusive have students found university life to be?

This report will analyse the feedback given in relation to the above questions and provide recommendations for both the Student's Guild and the University of Exeter to action in order to improve students' settling in experience.

A focus group was also held to empower students to shape the recommendations in this report.

All text in quotations marks are comments provided by students showing their individual thoughts and opinions; they have been included as they largely reflect the quotes within the same topic

Summary

Majority of students have found their first few weeks at university to be fun but also tiring, with smaller groups finding it to be lonely or difficult. Being with friends and getting stuck into learning are what students have enjoyed most about the start of the year, as well as meeting new people. Conversely, they have struggled with heavy workloads, competing deadlines, and resulting stress.

Majority of students feel settled into university life, with social factors such as friends and societies being large drivers for this feeling. The absence of social connection is notable amongst the smaller population of students who don't feel settled, as is academic pressure.

Majority of students also feel settled into the city of Exeter saying that learning the environment or existing familiarity with it has helped them feel this way. Those who feel less settled are students who live at a distance or commute into the city, likely due to lack of opportunity to gain familiarity with it.

Finally, most students feel that they are treated respectfully, safe to be themselves and to speak freely at the university. Drivers for this include the friendliness of other students, being given opportunities by the university and the Guild to voice their opinions, and being part of a community. Those who don't feel this way cited a lack of community and connection as a key factor, as well as changes to guidance around protest.

Analysis

1. How have students found their first few weeks at university this year?

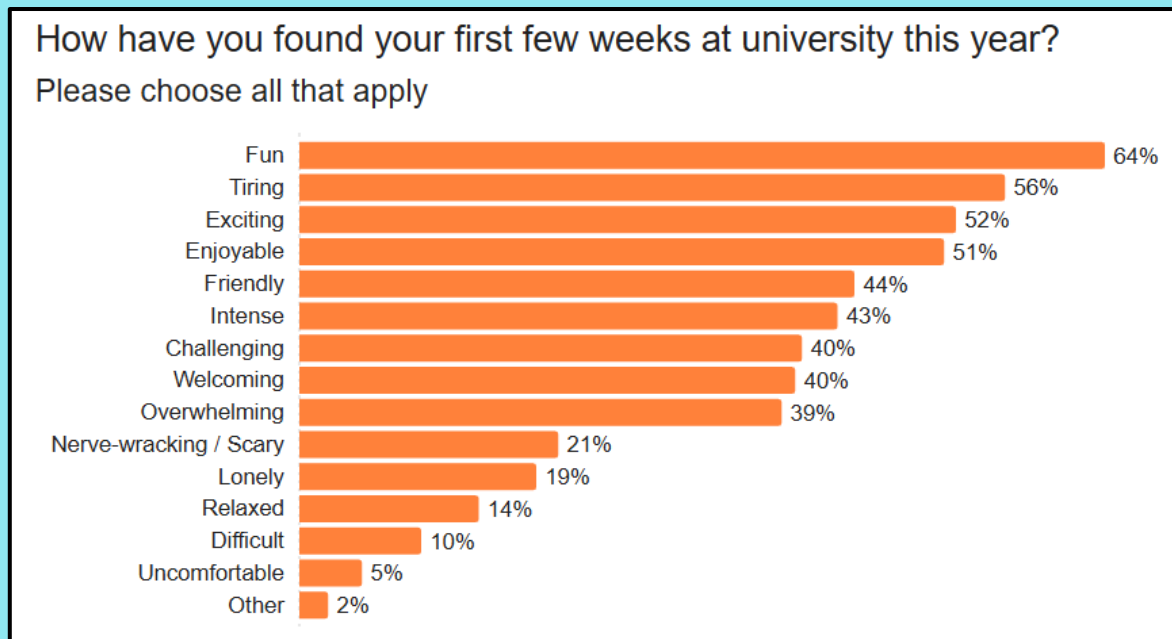


Figure 1 – Question 4: How have you found your first few weeks at university so far?

When students at the University of Exeter were asked about their first few weeks at university this year, a wide variety of responses were recorded (Fig. 1). The majority of students described their experience as fun (64%), although many also mentioned that it had been tiring in some way (56%) (Fig. 1). These are common feelings that can arise due to adjusting to a new environment, living independently for the first time, and meeting a lot of new people.

Other frequently mentioned words in their responses included exciting (52%), enjoyable (51%), and friendly (44%), which all reflect positive initial experiences (Fig. 1). However, a significant number of students detailed the start of their university experience as challenging (40%), intense (43%), and overwhelming (39%), which may reflect the challenges inherent in adapting to university life (Fig. 1).

A smaller percentage of students said they had found the start of university to be quite lonely (19%) and difficult (10%) (Fig. 1).

It is important to develop initiatives that target these students to ensure that all students feel comfortable and supported at the university. This could include increasing awareness of wellbeing services during the first few weeks of university to highlight the variety of support services available for new students.

Additionally, highlighting peer mentoring schemes, creating small group meet ups, and residential events, could help foster a more inclusive and welcoming atmosphere for students to get to know one another.

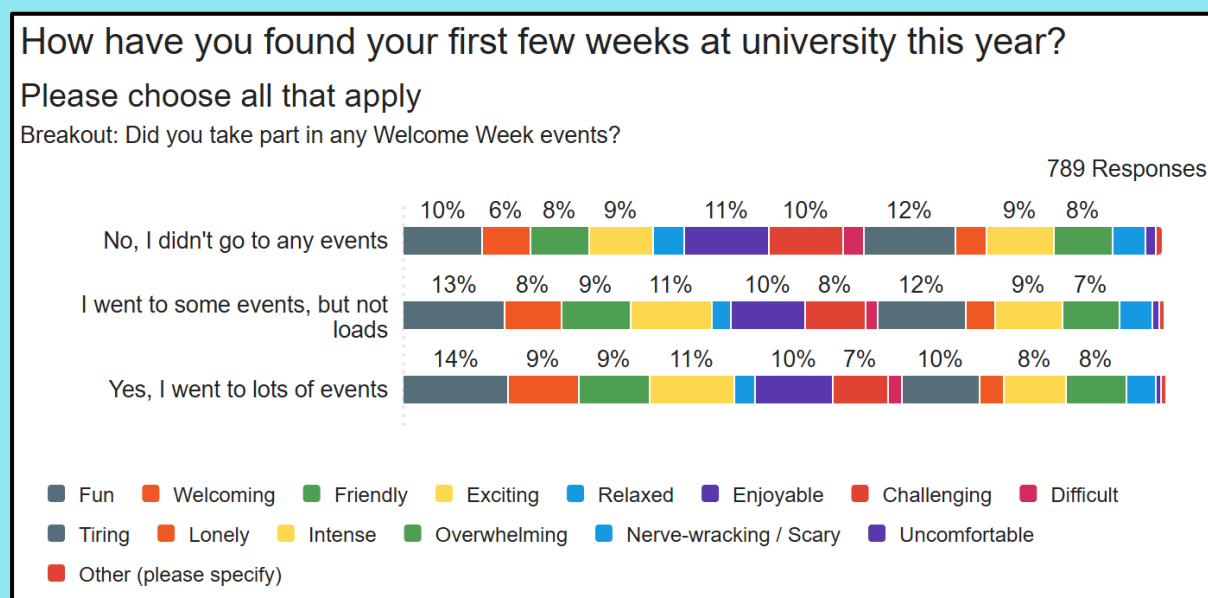


Figure 2 – Question 4: How have you found your first few weeks at university so far? (Breakout – Question 7: Did you take part in any Welcome Week events?)

When this statement was broken down by event attendance, a similar pattern of responses can be observed across most groups, although there were slight differences in percentages for certain categories such as fun, tiring, welcoming, and exciting (Fig. 2).

Among those who didn't attend any events, 10% stated that they found their first few weeks of university fun, compared to 13% of students who attended some events, and 14% of those who attended many (Fig. 2). This suggests a positive relationship between event participation and enjoyment during the first few weeks of university.

A similar pattern of responses can be seen regarding feeling welcome (Fig. 2). 6% of students who didn't go to any events described their experiences as welcoming, compared to 8% of those who went to some events and 9% who attended many (Fig. 2). Similarly, students who participated in university events were more likely to describe their initial weeks of university positively.

On the other hand, a higher percentage of students who did not attend any events reported finding their initial weeks of university to be more challenging (10%) in comparison to those who took part in events (7%) (Fig. 2). This may be due to the greater opportunities for connection, support, and a sense of belonging that event participation provides. However, it is essential to acknowledge and address

potential barriers that may prevent certain students from attending, such as anxiety, accessibility issues, or a lack of events that align with their interests.

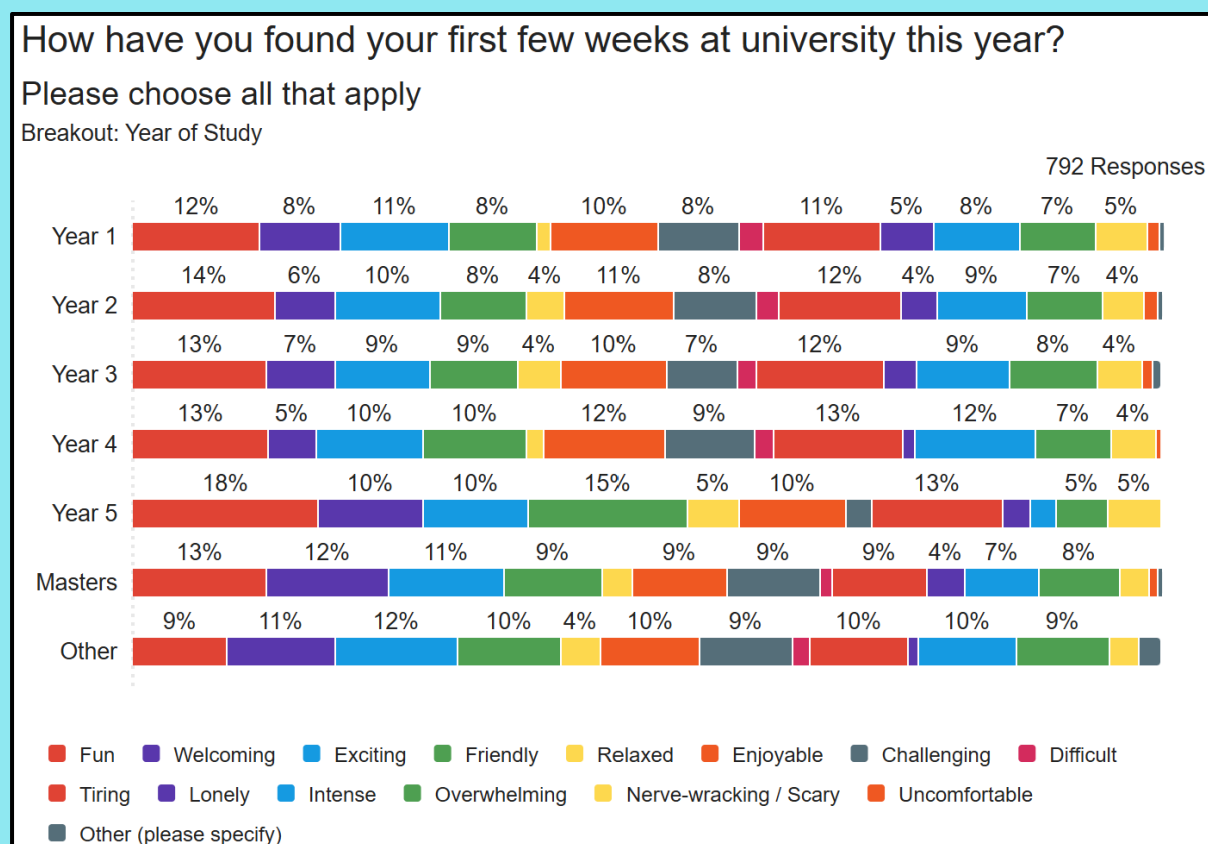


Figure 3 – Question 4: How have you found your first few weeks at university so far? (Breakout: Year of Study)

When examining this statement by year of study, a generally similar pattern emerged across most year groups (Fig. 3). A larger proportion of students described their experience at university fun and somewhat tiring so far (Fig. 3). Other common responses included it being exciting and enjoyable (Fig. 3).

Conversely, perceptions of feeling welcome varied slightly between different year groups (Fig. 3). Master's and fifth year students reported the highest levels of feeling welcome (12%, 10%), which may be due to their longer time at university (Fig. 3). For instance, students on longer programmes such as Medicine often remain in the same environment and community for longer periods of time, naturally creating a sense of familiarity and belonging.

Surprisingly, first year students reported feeling more welcome (8%) than second (6%) and third year students (7%) (Fig. 3). This may reflect the range of welcome activities and events targeted to support first year students during their initial transition to university.

In contrast, fourth year students reported the lowest levels of feeling welcome (5%), which may be due to most of these students returning from a year abroad or placement and may no longer be studying alongside the same peers as before, some of whom may have graduated (Fig. 3). This is a particularly valuable insight, as welcome initiatives are often geared towards first year students, while returning students may receive less attention. For students rejoining the university community after some time away, even if they are familiar with the environment, social dynamics and friendship groups may have changed, making it harder to reconnect and re-establish social circles.

Feelings of excitement were relatively consistent across all year groups, ranging from 9% to 12% (Fig. 3). The same applied for reports of finding the first few weeks fun, which ranged from 12% to 14%, with fifth year students being the exception of 18% (Fig. 3). This significant increase may reflect the enthusiasm and motivation associated with being in their final year of study, as students often seek to take full advantage of their final opportunities and experiences at university.

Perceived levels of challenge and fatigue were consistent across all year groups, with around 7% to 9% describing it as challenging and 9% to 13% as tiring (Fig. 3). These sentiments likely reflect the academic and social adjustments that accompany each stage of university life.

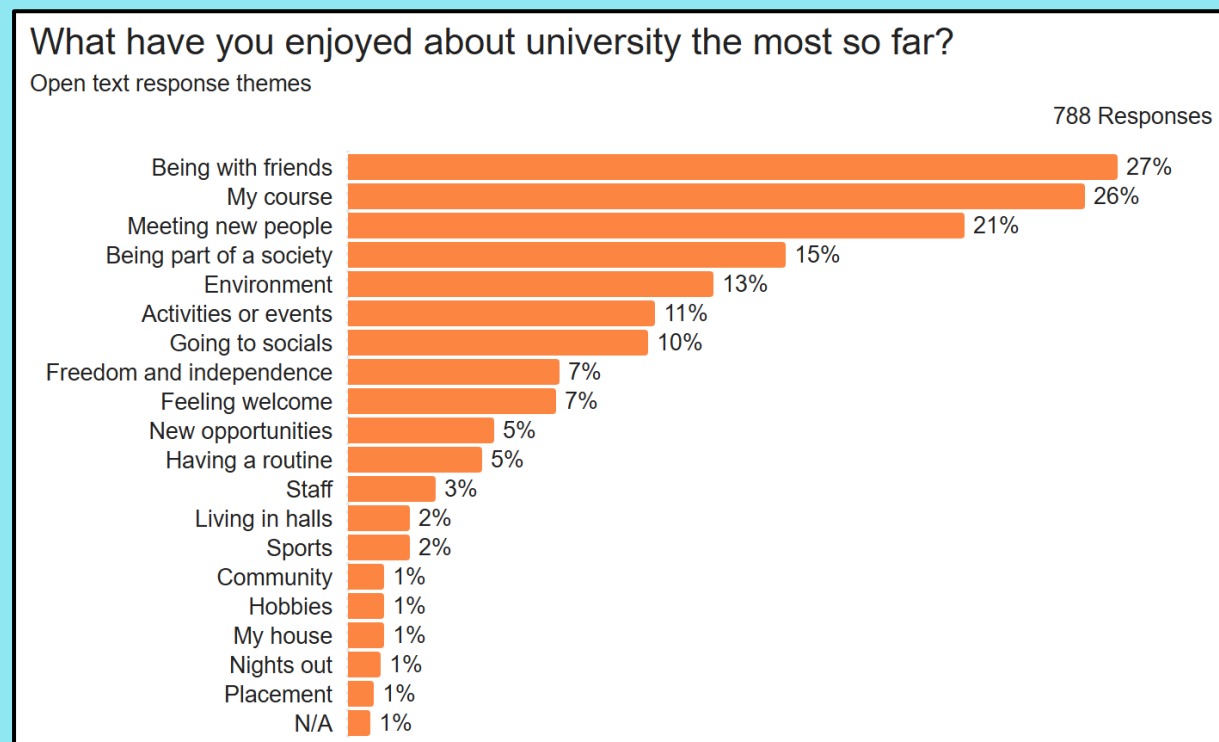


Figure 4 – Question 5: What have you enjoyed about university the most so far?

Students reported that spending time with friends was the most enjoyable aspect of their university experience so far, with 27% identifying it as a key highlight (Fig. 4).

"I have enjoyed coming back from my Year Abroad and meeting all my friends and talking about our experiences! It's been amazing to hear about the places they've been!" ~ Year 4, HAS student

"I have really enjoyed making new friends. Although it is very challenging, it can be great to get to know new people." ~ Year 1, ESE student

"The friends made. It has been great to become more independent and forming these friendships." ~ Year 3, HAS student

"I've enjoyed moving into my new house and seeing all of my friends again from 1st year and getting back into routine attending society events, doing sport and going to my lectures." ~ Year 2, ESE student

"Making new friends and spending time with them, going out with people, joining societies." ~ Year 1, HAS student

This was followed by meeting new people at 21%, suggesting that social connection plays a major role in students' positive experiences (Fig. 4). Furthermore, 15% of students mentioned being part of a society contributed significantly to their enjoyment, as it provides a sense of community and belonging (Fig. 4).

"Taking part in the societies- I have found this a great way to make new friends and connect with new people." ~ Year 1, HLS student

"I've made a lot of friends, there are a lot of people very similar to me that I would've never met at home. It's been really easy to talk to people and communicate when we're all in the same boat." ~ Year 1, HAS student

"I love the social side of uni, there are a lot of really great societies that are run really well and make it easier to meet people." ~ Year 4, HLS student

"The variety of societies to meet different groups and circles of people. The consistent events offered on the campuses, ensuring something is always on, even if you're not committed to a society. The good quality and inclusivity of events, i.e. Ramadan dinner, Diwali Fireworks." ~ Year 4, ESE student

"I enjoyed meeting people on my course, as well as the societies I joined. It is so easy to make friends at uni :)" ~ Year 1, HLS student

26% of students said that they've enjoyed their course the most so far (Fig. 4).

"I like the module choices and the support given for my disability was great." ~ Year 4, HAS student

"Being able to get into the full swing of things and learning. To be able to understand how I can use this course to my full advantage." ~ Year 1, HLS student

"Some of the lecture content is really great and the module tutors who are passionate make it enjoyable." ~ Year 1, ESE student

13% of students also highlighted the environment as an enhancing factor in their university experience (Fig. 4).

"The campus is wonderful, and finding new study spots is exciting!" ~ Year 1, HAS student

"Meeting up with friends again, exploring more of Exeter living in the city." ~ Year 2, ESE student

"There are many places to explore in the university, as well as its overall atmosphere as an academic institution." ~ Masters, HAS student

"How welcomed you feel and the fact the uni has some lovely quiet spots such as the solet zone in the forum or nature locations." ~ Year 1, ESE student

Finally, several students mentioned that freedom and independence (7%) were key sources of enjoyment (Fig. 4). For many, this represents the first time living independently, which can bring a strong sense of personal growth and self-reliance.

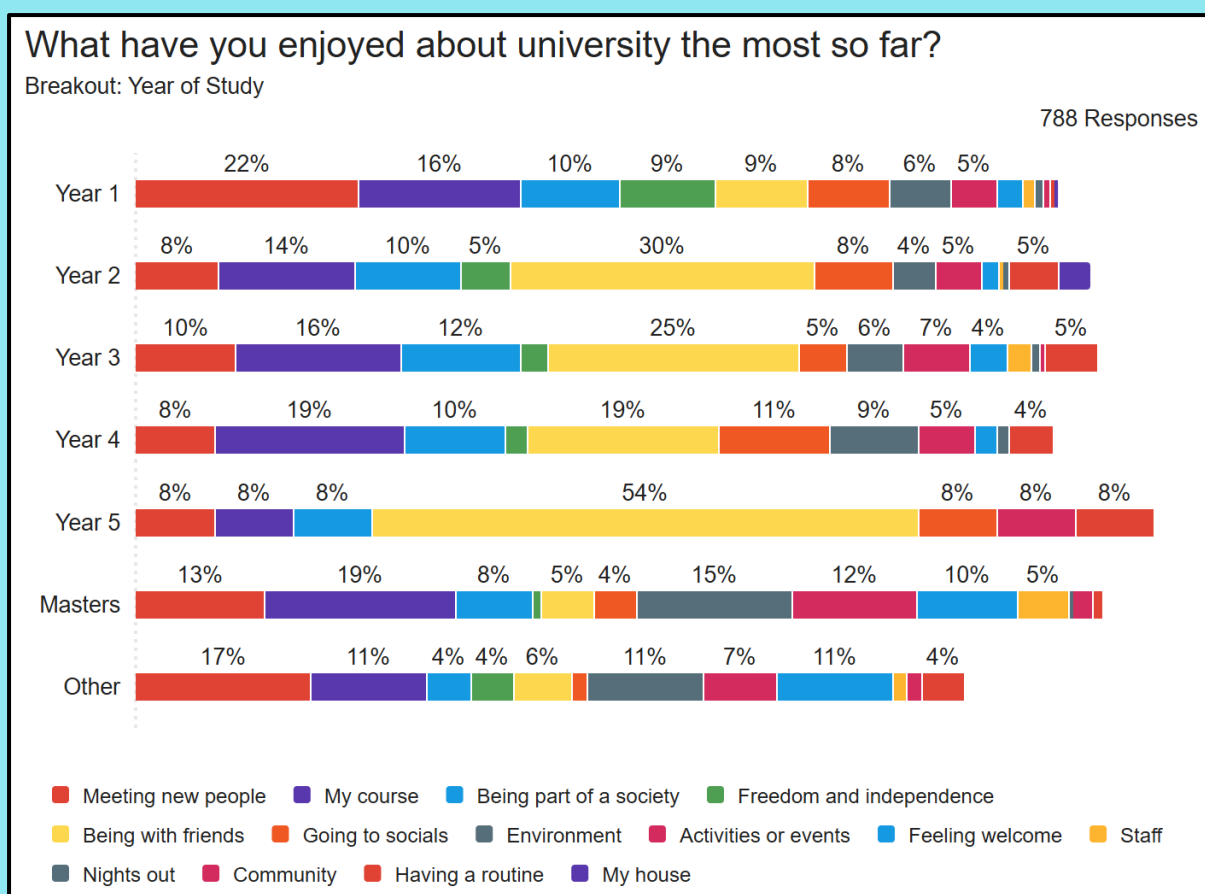


Figure 5 – Question 5: What have you enjoyed about university the most so far? (Year of study demographic breakout)

When examining students' responses by year of study, a variety of patterns emerge (Fig. 5). Meeting new people was reported as the most enjoyable aspect of university life by first year students (22%), compared to 8% to 10% in most other year groups (Fig. 5). 17% of "Other" students reported this as a significant contributing factor (Fig. 5). This difference may reflect the wide range of orientation activities and social events targeted towards first year students, as well as the fact that these students are experiencing university life for the first time and may be more open to meeting new people.

Course-related enjoyment was most frequently cited by fourth year and Master 's students, each at 19% (Fig. 5). This could result from students in later years of study focusing on modules that they are particularly interested in and dedicating more time to their studies compared to lower year students.

Being part of a society showed a fairly consistent pattern across most year groups, ranging between 8% to 12%, although "Other" students reported this less frequently (4%) (Fig. 5). This may include degree apprenticeship students, those attending virtually, or students on placement or a year abroad, who may face barriers to joining societies.

Being with friends was a significant factor mentioned by all year groups, although it was less mentioned by first year students, which is consistent with them forming their university community for the first time (Fig. 5). In contrast, it was most frequently mentioned by fifth year students (54%), likely reflecting the long period of time these students have spent at the university and the community of like-minded peers they have built (Fig. 5).

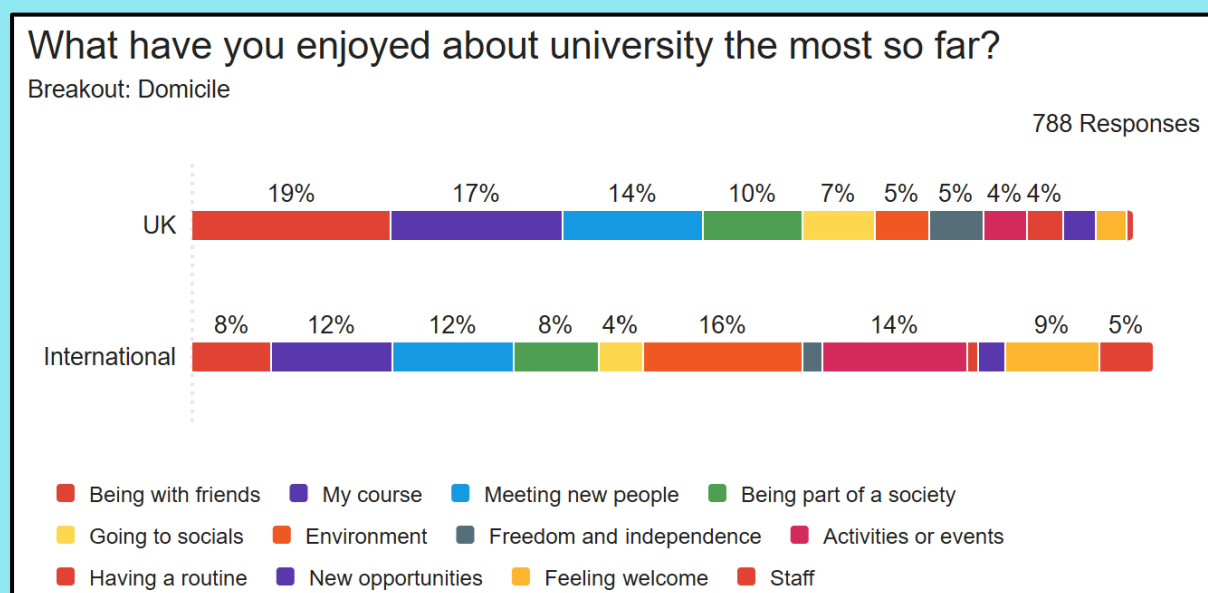


Figure 6 – Question 5: What have you enjoyed about university the most so far? (Domicile demographic breakout)

Responses differed notably based on student domicile (Fig. 6). UK-based students reported being with friends as a key factor, with 19% identifying this as important, followed closely by enjoyment of their course at 17% (Fig. 6).

In contrast, international students were less likely to highlight being with friends as an important factor to making a positive impression on their university experience (Fig. 6). Instead, higher rated factors included the environment (16%) and participation in activities or events (14%) (Fig. 6). This likely reflects that international students are generally less familiar with people when arriving at the university, so events and activities provide a valuable way to meet new people. Similarly, a welcoming environment might play an important role in helping international students feel more settled and included.

Being part of a society was rated similarly by both UK and international students, ranging from 8% to 10% (Fig. 6). However, attending socials was more frequently mentioned by UK students (7%), possibly due to greater familiarity with the local culture.

Feeling welcome was a factor reported by 9% of international students, which is slightly higher than among UK students (Fig. 6). Such findings highlight the

positive impact an inclusive and supportive environment can have on helping students settle more comfortably into a new country and university setting.

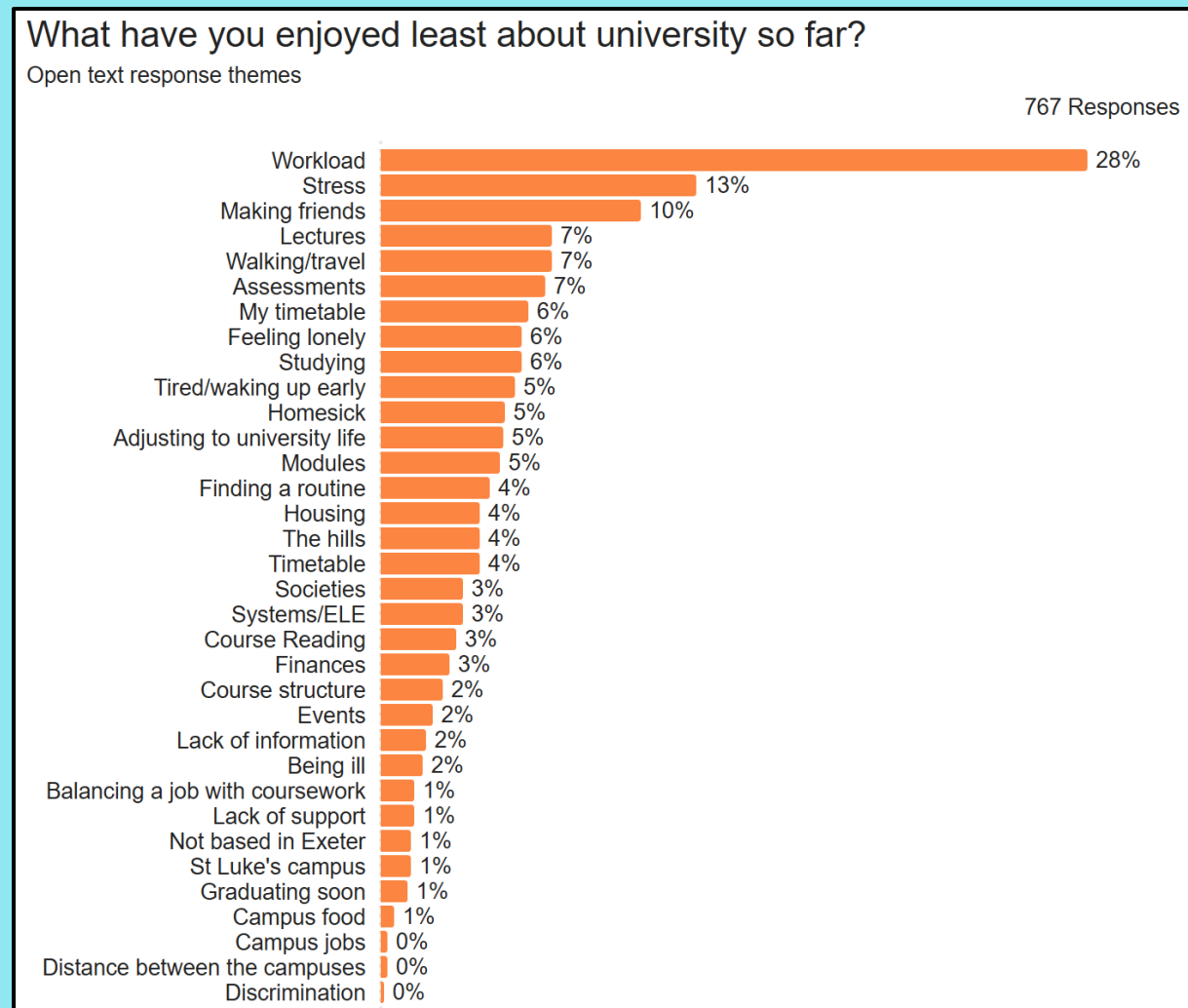


Figure 7 – Question 6: What have you enjoyed least about university so far?

When we students were asked what they had enjoyed the least about their university experience so far, the most frequently mentioned factor was the workload at 28% (Fig. 7).

"Trying to get my modules changed and then having to catch up whilst keeping on top of everything else; the pressure to do everything." ~ Year 2, HAS student

"Last week suddenly got really intense so was quite overwhelming, suddenly trying to adjust to the new workload." ~ Year 2, ESE student

"The amount of workload and assessments already to work on whilst still understanding the module and topics itself." ~ Year 3, HAS student

"The intensity, for a degree apprenticeship, I understand content is required to be crammed, yet I go some days without breaks and back to back lectures finding it hard to concentrate." ~ Other, INTO student

"From my experience, the organisation surrounding timetables, cleaning, and choosing modules has been fairly inconsistent. I am aware of a few students who were not able to access their timetable until Week 2, and some who are unable to complete the modules they need for their career because they were not fully informed about their decisions." ~ Year 1, HAS student

There was a notable gap between this and the next most popular response which was stress at 13% (Fig. 7).

"Getting overwhelmed/ intimidated by the work. Thinking I'm not good enough to be here." ~ Year 1, ESE student

"Due to complex personal circumstances, I have needed support from Wellbeing and Welfare and to change to temporary part-time study. As it is the start of the year, it has been incredibly difficult to get appointments and get the information I need because everyone is so busy. This has been so stressful and has left me feeling so overwhelmed. I think more provision for these services needs to be in place at busy times." ~ Year 2, HAS student

"The overwhelming stress of trying to keep up with the demands of my course, which leads to frequent burnout." ~ Year 3, HAS student

"How deadlines for larger placement year companies are either very soon or have already passed - the time pressure is stressful and I am unprepared for applications." ~ Year 2, HLS student

Interestingly, making friends also appeared as the least enjoyable part for some students (10%), which could be due to anxiety or pressure that can arise when meeting new people and forming friendships in a new environment (Fig. 7).

"The loneliness. I haven't met much people from my culture so it's a little difficult to navigate." ~ Masters, HAS student

"Sometimes I can find it very isolating here and I can feel excluded. As someone who is neurodivergent I have found it hard to meet people who understand me and acknowledge who I am." ~ Year 3, HAS student

"It can be lonely when there are so many people but no idea how to meet and connect with those who you would get on with." ~ Masters, HLS student

"Social aspects. Making friends has been super tricky so it has been very lonely." ~ Year 1, HAS student

Attending lectures and walking or traveling were both cited by 7% of students (Fig. 7).

"The transition from a levels where the work that needs to be completed is clearly dictated to you, to lectures and tutorials where there is less structure provided by lecturer on the work that needs to be completed." ~ Year 1, HLS student

"It's been difficult for me both time and cost wise. For example, I have to spend roughly £80 a week just on travel which is a lot (I am looking into cheaper alternatives and should be getting the bursary soon) but travel is still quite expensive for me. Also, as I commute, on the days I have an 8:30am lecture, I have to leave my house at 6am which has been a bit tricky to get used to. And on some days I don't get home until 9. It's quite tiring." ~ Year 1, ESE student

"Lectures have been difficult, I sometimes feel like I'm unsure what I'm supposed to be doing in my own time and lectures don't seem to give me direction always." ~ Year 1, HAS student

"I didn't enjoy the amount of problems I had with my timetable, it was very overwhelming to attend to my lectures but at the same time go to the clinic." ~ Year 2, ESE student

"The bus service isn't great for the area I'm living in so I either have to walk most of the way and pay £2.20 for a couple minutes journey up the hill or just walk the whole thing which is exhausting." ~ Masters, HLS student

Assessments were another frequently mentioned area of concern at 7%, likely due to the stress associated with deadlines, taking exams, and overall academic pressure at university. Timetabling was also identified as an issue by 6% of students (Fig. 7).

"Working out what my lecturers actually want from me in the coursework - sometimes on ELE it can be a bit vague, especially as a first year." ~ Year 1, HAS student

"Sometimes the assignment briefs or required criteria for assessments can sometimes be vague." ~ Year 3, HLS student

"There have been issues with timetable clashes, which I would have expected would not occur as students are paying to study a degree here. Additionally, some of these clashes impacted my welcome week as it meant I was unable to attend the sports fair as I have introduction lectures all throughout it." ~ Year 1, HAS student

"Academic stress, last-minute changes to timetables, deadlines still not up on ELE." ~ Year 3, HAS student

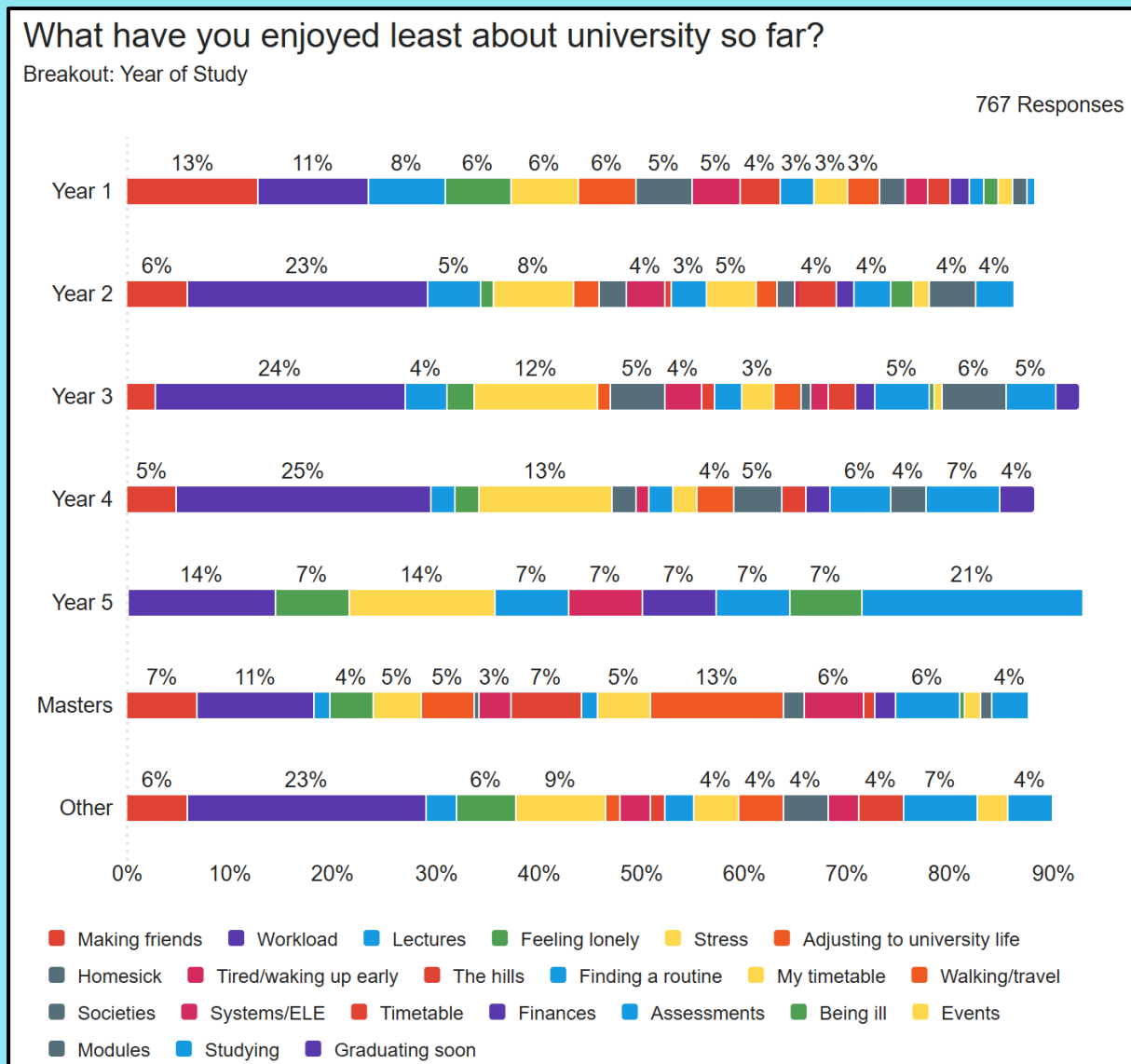


Figure 8 – Question 6: What have you enjoyed least about university so far? (Year of study demographic breakout)

When analysing responses by year of study, several patterns emerged (Fig. 8). Overall, workload was consistently listed as the most significant factor contributing to dissatisfaction across all year groups, with third and fourth year students citing this the most (27%) (Fig. 8). This result could be due to the heightened academic pressure associated with final year study, including dissertations and more advanced course content.

Making friends was mentioned most often by first year students (13%) and was less prominent among other years (Fig. 8). Adjusting to an unfamiliar environment and having fewer established connections may explain why creating social connections featured more strongly in this group's responses compared to students who have been at the university for a longer period of time.

Notably, feelings of loneliness were reported at similar rates (7%) by both first and fifth year students (Fig. 8). For those in their first year of university, this may relate

to being away from home and living independently for the first time. Among fifth year students, loneliness may stem from academic pressure.

Reports of stress mainly increased with each academic year, a predictable trend given the heavier workload and pressure of preparing for postgraduate life (Fig. 8). Surprisingly, the responses from master's students did not follow this pattern and instead accounts of stress decreased among this year group (5%) (Fig. 8). This may be due to the confidence that comes with greater amounts of academic experience.

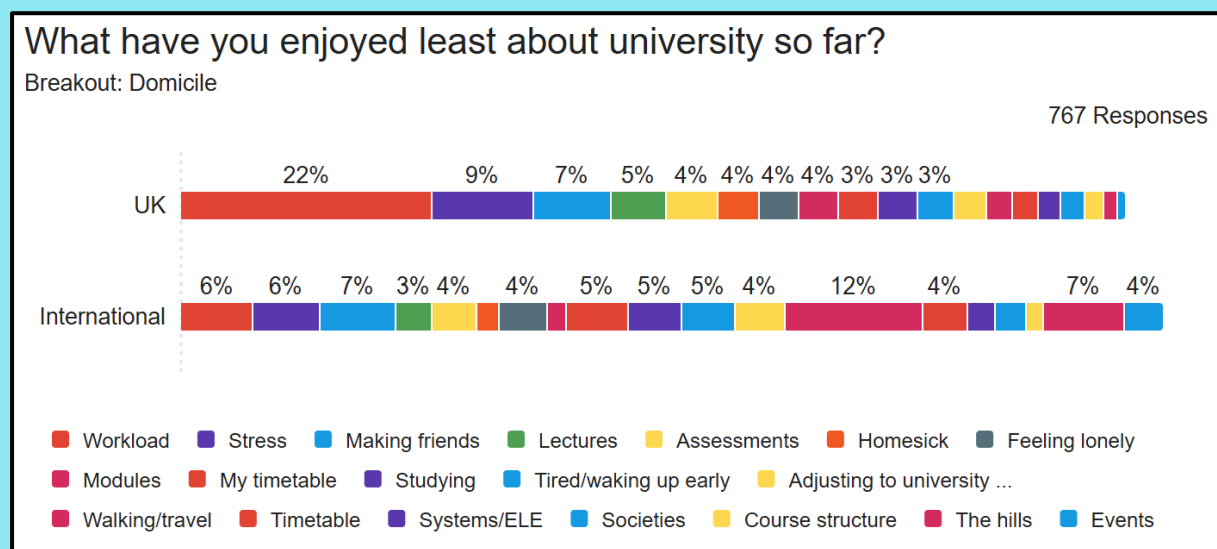


Figure 9 – Question 6: What have you enjoyed least about university so far? (Domicile demographic breakout)

UK students mentioned workload a lot more frequently than international students, with a 16% difference between the two groups (Fig. 9). Stress was also mentioned more by UK students, showing a 4% difference (Fig. 9). In contrast, making friends was mentioned at the same rate (7%) among both domicile groups (Fig. 9).

Overall, UK students were more likely to highlight academic or course-related troubles as contributing factors to their dissatisfaction. International students, on the other hand, tended to reference more logistical difficulties, such as walking or travelling to lectures and seminars (13%), and issues related to the hilly Exeter landscape (8%), which can impact accessibility and convenience (Fig. 9).

These differences in responses could be attributed to varying experiences and priorities of each group. UK students, being more familiar with the academic nature, may focus more on course demands, while international students might be more affected by practical and environmental adjustments associated with settling into a new country and culture.

2. How well do students feel they have settled into university this year?

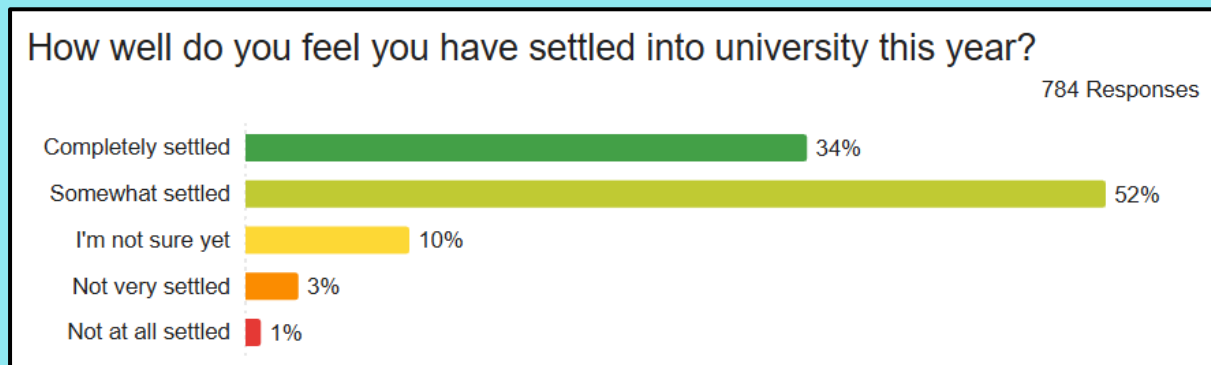


Figure 10 – Question 17: How well do you feel you have settled into university this year?

We then asked students how they felt they had settled into university this year. The vast majority of students reported feeling somewhat to completely settled, with 52% indicating that they feel somewhat settled and 34% feeling completely settled (Fig. 10). A small proportion of students expressed uncertainty about how settled they felt, which may be influenced by factors such as adjusting to a new environment or balancing academic and social demands (Fig. 10). Only a minority of students (4%) reported feeling not very or not at all settled (Fig. 10).

Although this percentage is significantly lower than those who do feel settled, it remains important to ensure that all students feel included and integrated within the university community. To address this, initiatives such as anonymous feedback surveys, feedback cafes, and other engagement opportunities should be considered to better identify and respond to the challenges that individuals who are struggling to settle in face. Such efforts would help strengthen students' overall sense of belonging and wellbeing at the University of Exeter.

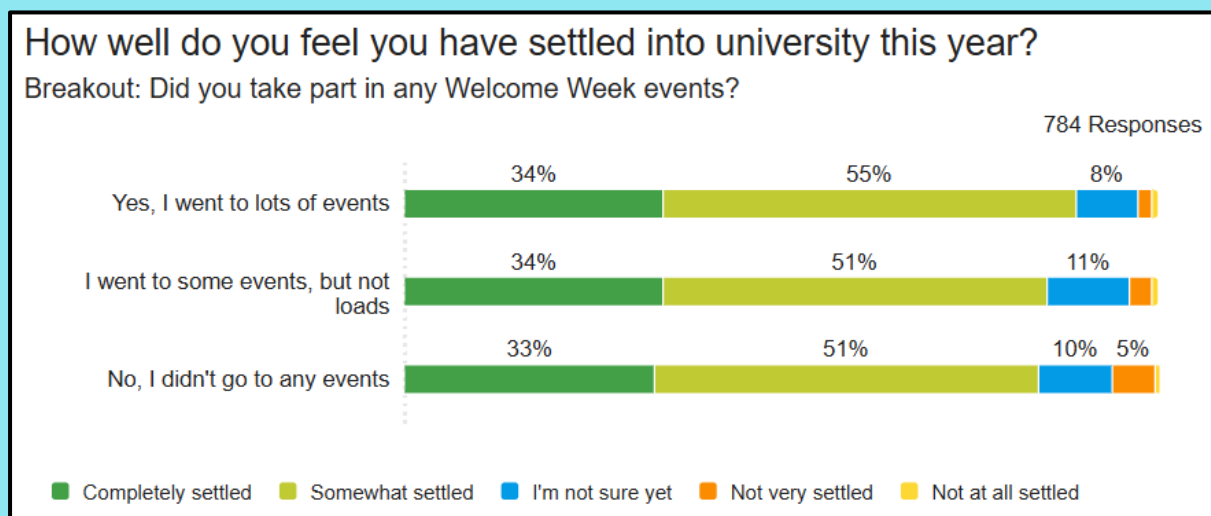


Figure 11 – Question 17: How well do you feel you have settled into university this year? (Breakout - Question 7: Did you take part in any Welcome Week Events?)

When assessing the link between event attendance and how well students have settled into university, the data suggests that attendance had limited impact on overall feelings of being settled (Fig. 11). The proportion of students who felt completely settled differed by only 1% between those who attended some events and those who did not go to any (Fig. 11). However, there was a 4% increase in students feeling somewhat settled among those who attended a lot of events compared to those who did not attend any (Fig. 11).

Uncertainty about feeling settled was slightly higher among students who went to some events (11%), which may indicate that occasional participation does not always lead to a stronger sense of belonging (Fig. 11). Conversely, students who did not attend any events were more likely to report not feeling very settled (5%), which could be due to fewer opportunities for social connection and integration into the university community (Fig. 11).

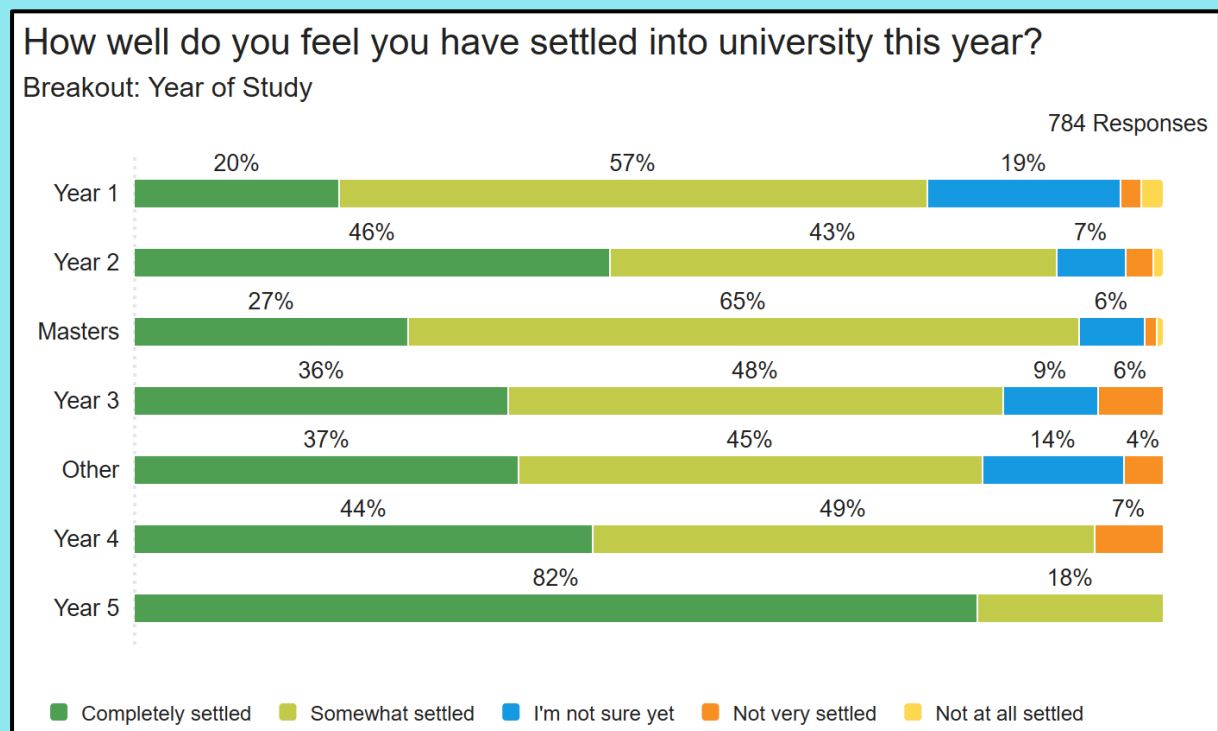


Figure 12 – Question 17: Did you take part in any Welcome Week events? (Breakout: Year of Study)

When examining how students feel at the university based on year of study, a large majority across all year groups reported feeling somewhat to completely settled (Fig. 12). Notably, fifth year students reported the highest level of feeling completely settled (82%), which is approximately 40pp higher than other year groups (Fig. 12). This may be attributed to the fact that these students have spent the most time in the same university environment and have likely established a strong community of like-minded individuals.

On the other hand, the highest proportion of students expressing uncertainty was seen among first year students (19%), likely reflecting the challenges attributed to adjusting to university life (Fig. 12). “Other” students also reported a high uncertainty level (14%), which could be due to spending less time on campus or facing barriers to joining societies or integrating socially (Fig. 12).

Interestingly, fourth year students reported the highest percentage of students not feeling very settled (7%) (Fig. 12). This is surprising, as one might expect that students rejoining after three years might have a similar sense of belonging to fifth year students, however many fourth year students are returning from placements or a year abroad. This suggests that while the environment remains familiar, their previous social communities may no longer be present. This combination of disrupted social connections along with the challenges of reintegrating can make settling back in more difficult for these students.

This finding is particularly notable as belonging initiatives are usually targeted at first year students, emphasizing that fourth year students may also benefit from additional support to help them reestablish confidence and social connections within the university community.

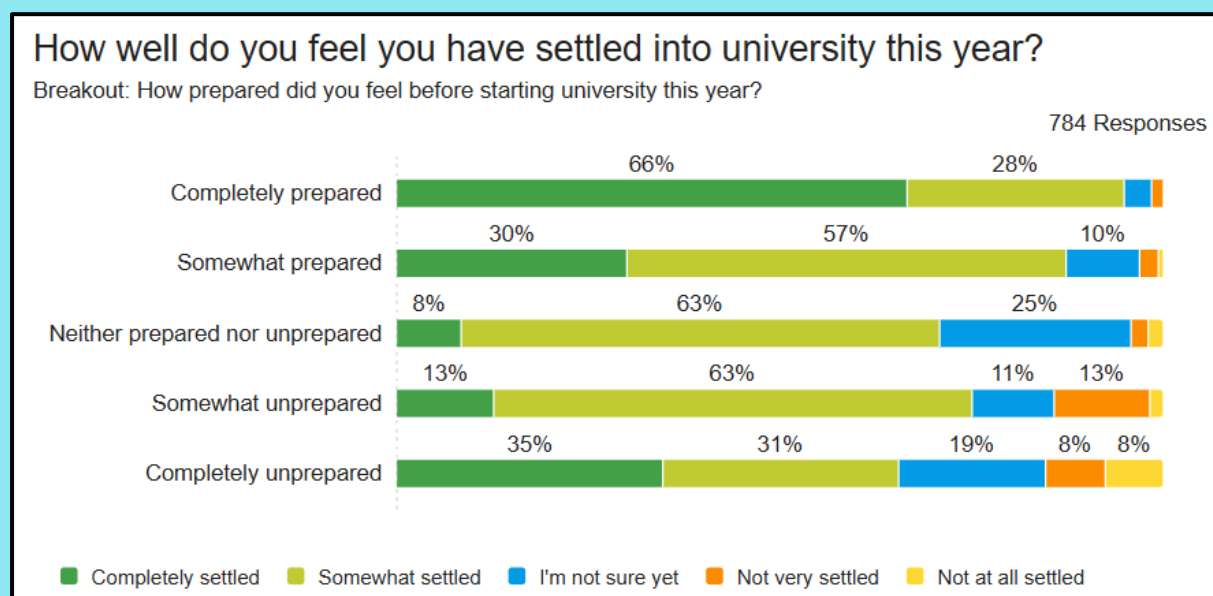


Figure 13 – Question 17: How well do you feel you have settled into university this year? (Breakout – Question 1: How prepared did you feel before starting university this year?)

When assessing the link between the level of preparation before starting university and feeling settled after enrolment, a clear pattern of responses emerges (Fig. 13). Students who cited feeling completely prepared prior to starting university had the highest rate of agreement with feeling settled (94%) (Fig. 13). In contrast, only 66% of students who felt completely unprepared stated that they felt settled (Fig. 13). This group also had the highest proportion of students who

reported not feeling settled (16%), closely followed by somewhat unprepared students (13%) (Fig. 13).

These results could be due to the challenges that unprepared students face in adapting to the new academic and social environment. Students who arrive with less knowledge of university expectations, study skills, or support systems, may struggle to form a sense of belonging and struggle to find resources to turn to in times of need. Improving the advertisement of services and resources available in the weeks leading up to the start of university through platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, emails, and website updates may increase the audience these updates reach. Additionally, scheduled activities and events in Welcome week may help with attendance and awareness of information available.

Students who felt neither prepared nor unprepared had the largest proportion of respondents expressing uncertainty regarding their settled status at university (25%) (Fig. 13). This finding aligns with previous data in this survey, where students with mixed commitments expressed ambiguous self-assessments. Similarly, a high level of uncertainty was also reported among unprepared students, suggesting that perceived preparedness plays a key role in shaping student's emotional and social adjustment to university life (Fig. 13).

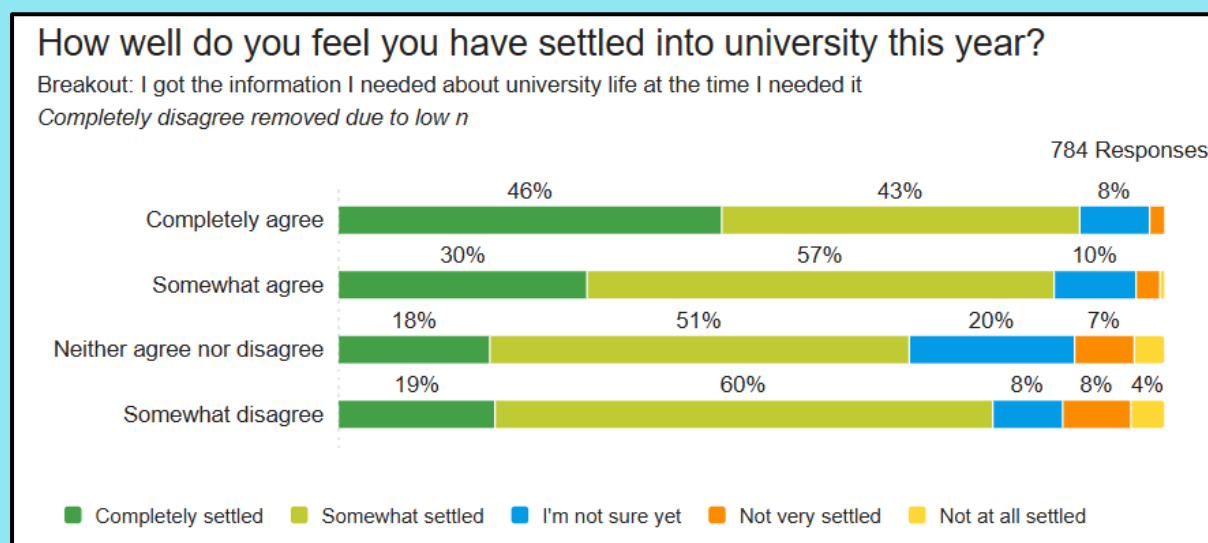


Figure 14 – Question 17: How well do you feel you have settled into university this year? (Breakout – Question 2: How much do you agree with this statement: I got the information I needed about university life at the time I needed it?)

Overall, the majority of students agreed that they had the information they needed before starting university life, although some variation in responses was observed between different groups (Fig. 14). The highest percentage of students who reported not feeling settled was observed among those who disagreed that they had sufficient information prior to starting university (12%) (Fig. 14).

As previously mentioned, students who neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement showed the highest level of uncertainty regarding how settled they felt

(20%) (Fig. 14). This pattern further highlights the importance of ensuring that clear, accessible, and well-advertised information is provided to incoming students. Targeted initiatives focused on determining the information that students felt was missing, improving communication, and signposting services available could help students feel more informed, and subsequently more settled.

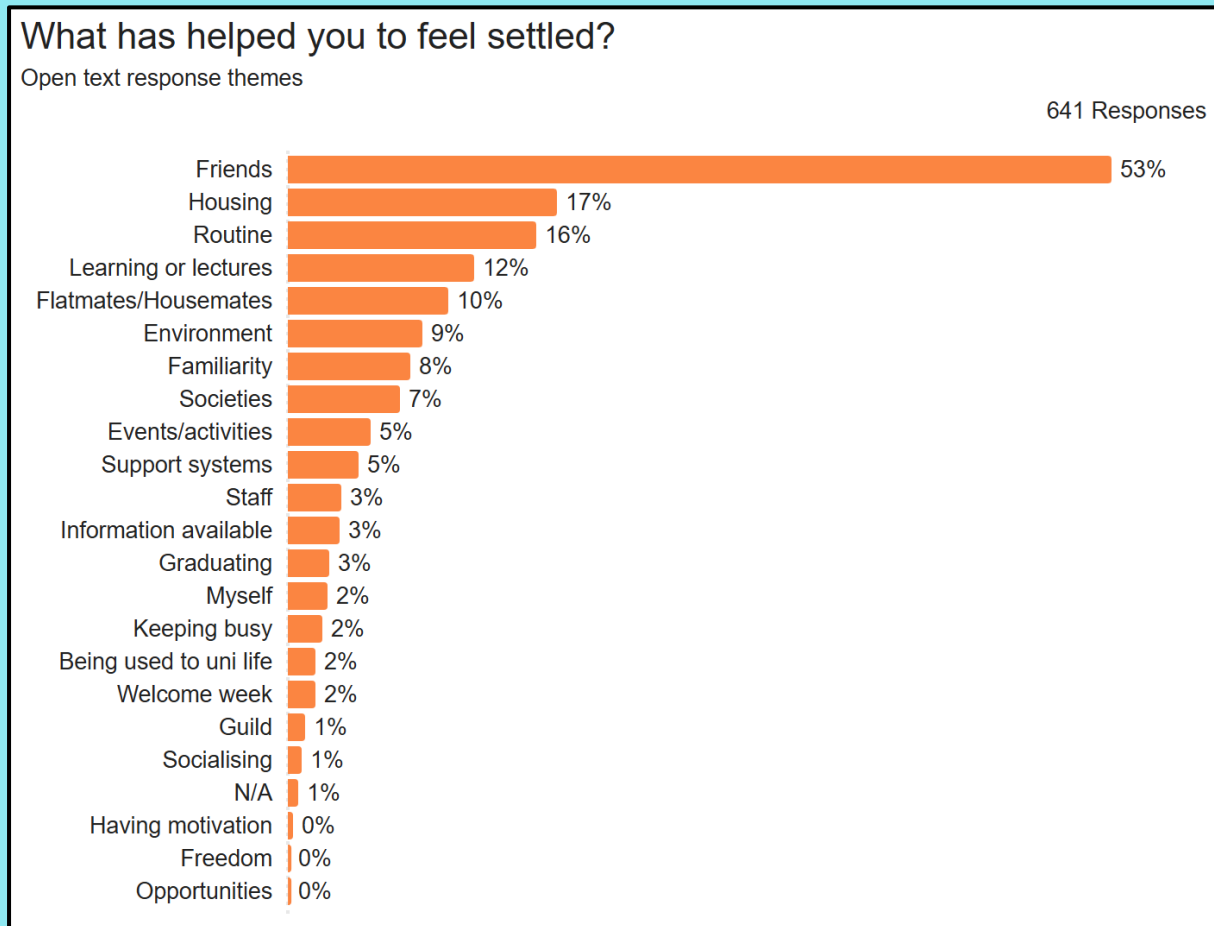


Figure 15 – Question 17a: What has helped you to feel settled?

When students were specifically asked about what helped them feel settled at university, the most popular response mentioned was friends at 53% (Fig. 15). A noticeable gap can be seen between this and the second most popular response, highlighting the strong role social connections play in student's sense of belonging.

"Living with friends, being very familiar with the city and the uni, lecturers that I know." ~ Year 4, ESE student

"Already knowing the campus, living with the same people I did last year and knowing the faculty of my department." ~ Masters, HAS student

"Getting comfortable with my flatmates and spending time exploring campus to find my bearings." ~ Year 1, ESE student

"Living on the campus. Walking around to feel the sense of belongingness. Met people from the same home country." ~ Masters, INTO student

"Decorating my room, studying at the library and study spaces, going to the gym, attending society socials." ~ Year 4, HLS student

"Fully organising room, becoming familiar with locations on campus to know where my lectures are." ~ Year 1, HAS student

Students also frequently referred to factors related to their environment, such as housing at 17%, flatmates/housemates at 10% or the physical environment itself at 9%, as elements that helped them feel more settled (Fig. 15). This could be due to the importance of having a stable and comfortable living environment that fosters both positive social interactions as well as personal wellbeing.

"I have been at Exeter a long time now and I know my friends, people on my course and my lecturers. I feel very settled into my routines at university." ~ Year 4, HAS

"Finding the people that I had common interests with (volleyball, bfs) or finding people who speak Russian and cultural societies :)" ~ Year 1, HLS student

"Seeing friends again, living with lovely housemates, getting back into my favourite society." ~ Year 3, HAS student

"Seminar groups or lectures are great for making friends who get your academic struggles." ~ Year 2, ESE student

"Moving into the same house as second year, with the same group of friends - made the transition very easy." Year 3, HAS student

"My friendship group and as its my third year I feel better prepared this year compared to previous years." ~ Year 3, HLS student

On the other hand, having a routine to follow was cited by 10% of students as helping them feel settled, possible due to the routine providing structure, a sense of accomplishment, and predictability during the transition to university life (Fig. 15).

"Knowing the city well and having a stable routine, having existing friends at uni, and knowing what to expect from my course." ~ Year 2, ESE student

"Meeting friends on my course and going to society events. I think it became a lot easier once my course started and I was able to establish somewhat of a routine." ~ Year 1, HAS student

"Getting involved in societies and meeting people with similar interests really helped me feel settled. Building a routine with my studies, social life, and fitness also helped me settle in." ~ Year 3, ESE student

"Just getting a stable daily schedule (eating, sleeping, studying, socialising) removes a lot of the erraticness of having flexible class times in uni (although classes do often get scheduled at weird times or clash for some people, so I'm not entirely sure how feasible that is)." ~ Year 3, HAS student

Academic-related factors were also mentioned, including learning/lectures at 12% and staff at 3% (Fig. 15). These findings suggest that engaging with academic activities and having supportive staff members positively contribute to student's sense of belonging.

"All the information about lectures and seminars has been super clear, so it is easy to plan other events around it." ~ Year 2, HAS student

"Having questions answered, being able to plan out learning because I have all calendar / module info." ~ Other, ESE student

"Introductory lectures, getting to know my way around, just getting stuck into the module content." ~ Year 2, HLS student

"Information on where to turn to was accessible. The myexeter app really helps with finding the location of my lectures. I expected to have trouble with that but the map feature is very helpful." ~ Masters, ESE student

"Lecturers going through an introduction instead of just getting right into lectures and induction days." ~ Year 1, HAS student

Other factors related to socialising and meeting people were also cited, such as engagement with societies at 7% and events/activities at 5% (Fig. 15). These opportunities likely help students meet like-minded people and develop friendships, reducing feelings of loneliness and improving their sense of belonging. Overall, this data shows that social connection, environment, and stability help students feel more settled at university.

"Joining badminton society has helped me settle in as I have met lots of new people with the same interest as me." ~ Year 1, ESE student

"Ensuring I have a lot of events to go to, this kept me busy and eased me into uni." ~ Masters, HAS student

"Finding a really nice group of friends and having common interests with a lot of people I meet in societies I partake in." ~ Year 1, ESE student

"Making new friends at society events, along with support from old friends and family." ~ Year 1, HAS student

"Meeting with people I know, going to events I enjoy, getting stuck in with my university work." ~ Year 4, HLS student

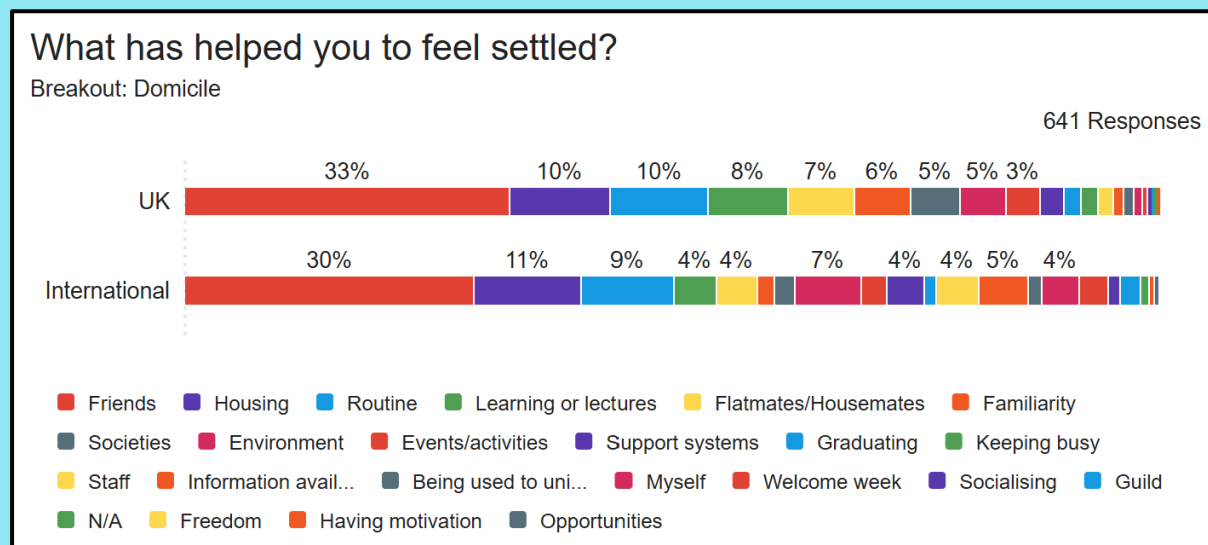


Figure 16 – Question 17a: What has helped you to feel settled? (Breakout: Domicile)

When breaking down responses based on domicile, a similar pattern of responses can be observed between the two groups of students (Fig. 16). Similarly to Fig. 15, friends were the most frequently mentioned element helping students feel settled, with a slightly higher percentage reported by UK based students (33%) (Fig. 15).

Flatmates/Housemates were mentioned 3% more by UK based students than by international students (4%), while the environment was reported 2% more by international students as a factor contributing to feeling settled (Fig. 16).

Learning and lectures were also mentioned more by UK based students (4% more), which could be due to greater familiarity with the UK education system, allowing these students to engage more confidently with their studies early on. In contrast, international students may require additional time to adapt to new teaching styles and assessment formats before feeling academically settled. These findings suggest that while social connections remain a key factor to helping students feel settled at university, academic and environmental factors may vary slightly based on domicile. Providing additional academic support or an academic orientation in the initial weeks of university may help these students feel settled earlier.

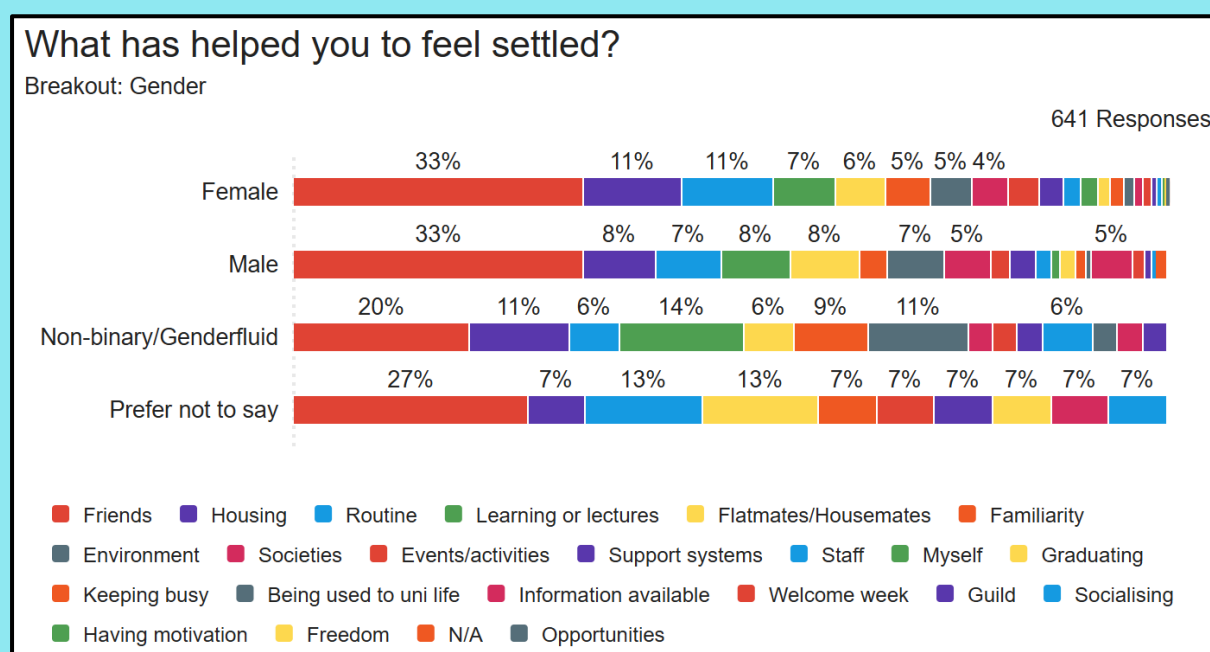


Figure 17 – Question 17a: What has helped you to feel settled? (Breakout: Gender)

Looking at gender demographic groups, we can see that friends remain the highest cited factor contributing to feeling settled at university (Fig. 17). The pattern of responses closely follows the general trend of responses in Fig. 15, with housing and routines being highly mentioned factors (Fig. 17). Learning/lectures were mentioned most by non-binary/genderfluid students (14%), which could possibly be due to these students being more engaged with their studies (Fig. 17). Flatmates/housemates were also significant elements to improving sense of belonging, with them being most mentioned by students who preferred to not say their gender (Fig. 17).

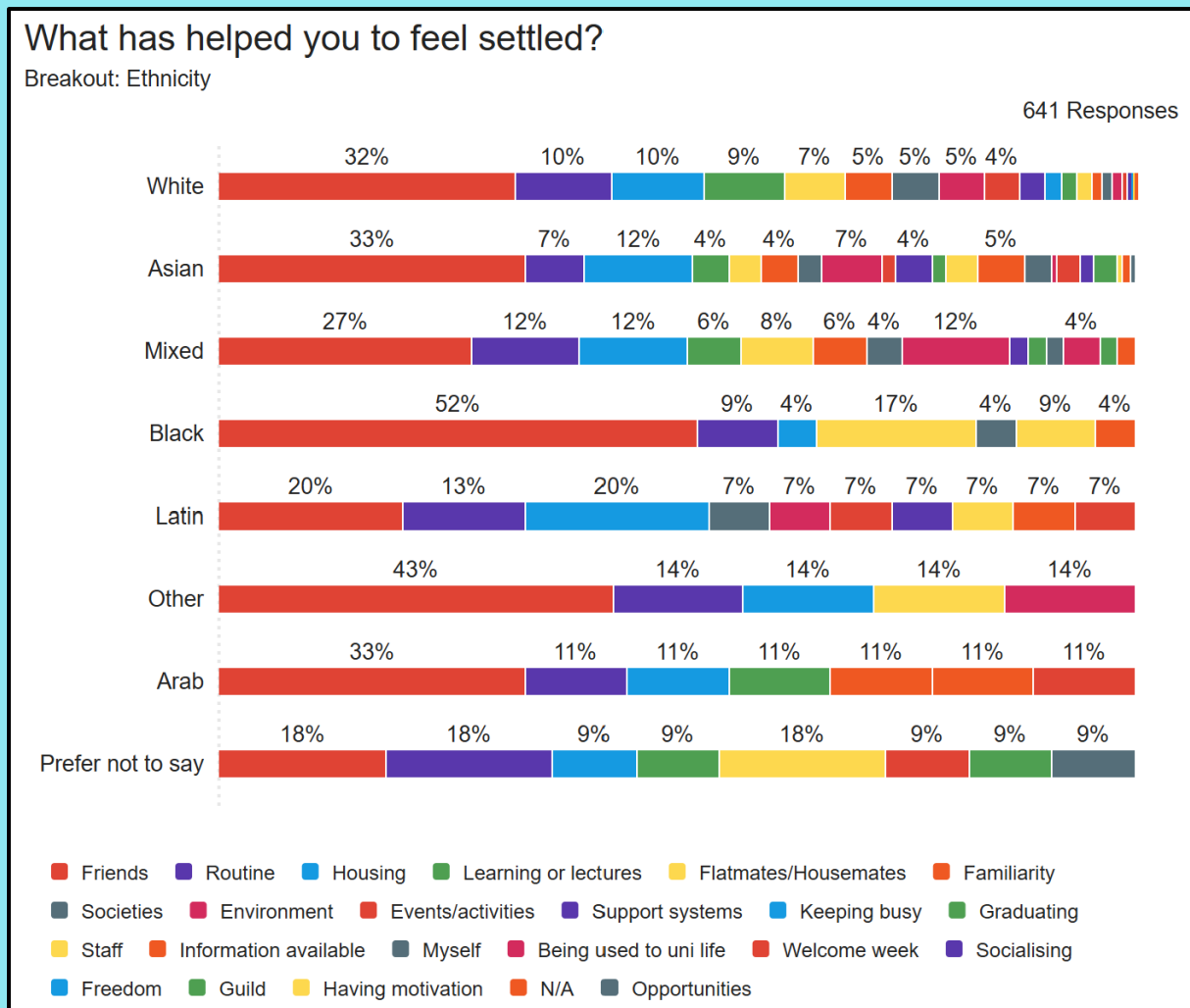


Figure 18 – Question 17a: What has helped you to feel settled? (Breakout: Ethnicity)

Black students reported friends as the most significant factor contributing to feeling settled (52%) a higher proportion than students from any other ethnic group (Fig. 18). This was closely followed by students from “Other” ethnicities (43%) (Fig. 18). Students who preferred to not disclose their ethnicity most frequently reported having a routine (18%) as helping them feel settled (Fig. 18).

Housing was also a commonly cited factor across groups, though it was the most popular among Latin students (20%) (Fig. 18). Additionally, Black students and those who preferred to not state their ethnicity cited their housemates/flatmates most frequently as helping them feel settled at university (Fig. 18).

Overall, the results suggest that while social relationships, particularly friendships and interactions with housemates, are central to helping students feel settled across all ethnic groups, the specific factors that contribute further can vary by background. For some students, such as Black and Latin students, the social and environmental aspects of university life appear especially important, whereas for others, such as those who preferred to not disclose their ethnicity, personal structure and routine play a larger role.

These differences highlight the importance of developing inclusive and flexible support strategies that recognise diverse experiences and pathways to belonging within the student community.

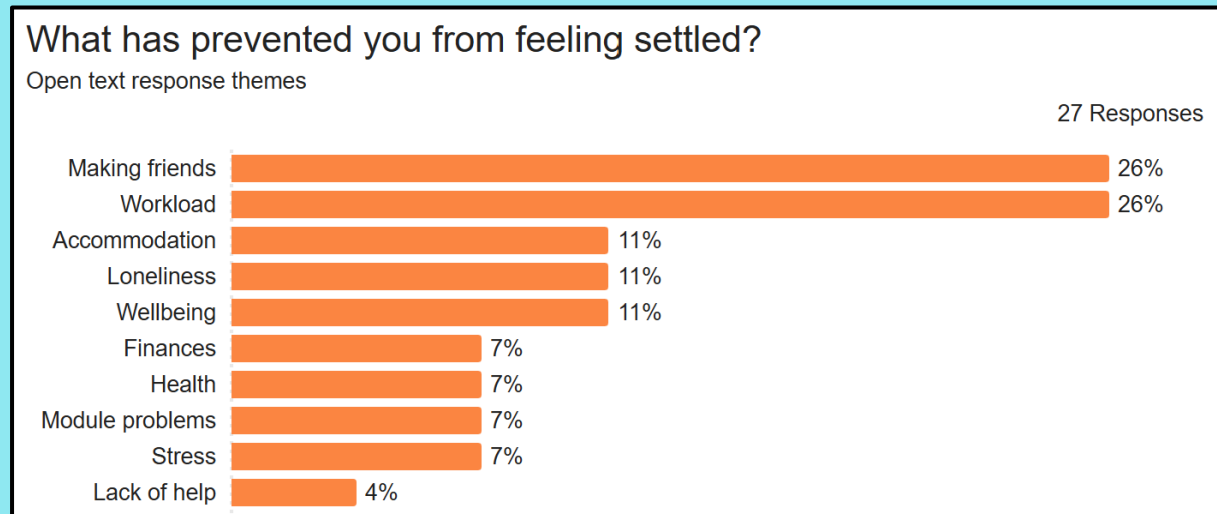


Figure 19 – Question 17b: What has prevented you from feeling settled?

While friends were mentioned as a highly contributing factors to feeling settled at university, they also appeared as a significant factor contributing to not feeling settled at 26% (Fig. 19). This suggests that the quality and dynamics of friendships can strongly influence student's overall sense of belonging. Positive relationships may foster inclusion and comfort, whereas difficulties forming or maintaining friendships can heighten feelings of isolation.

"I've struggled to make friends, and so don't feel particularly part of things. I also dislike the drinking culture that others around me are involved with. It makes it difficult to know where to go or how to meet people that are similar to me, and it's not the nicest feeling to not have found people yet. I am also unsure about what is expected of me academically." ~ Year 1, HLS student

"Heavy workload, readjusting after a year abroad when most friends have graduated." ~ Year 4, HAS student

Workload was another frequently mentioned factor, also at 26%, indicating that academic pressure can negatively impact student's ability to feel settled (Fig. 19).

"I've had a lot of stress managing work and my part-time job and applying for post grad study/jobs. It is a bit too much and has made me quite homesick." ~ Year 3, ESE student

"I just have so much to do. I am constantly trying to catch up on work and I haven't even given myself a break." ~ Year 2, ESE student

11% of students also spoke about loneliness and wellbeing impacting their ability to feel settled, particularly in relation to mental health (Fig. 19).

“Loneliness, too much free time, homesickness.” ~ Year 1, HAS student

“I’ve been injured, so I’m in pain and homesick, whilst also struggling in my classes.” ~ Year 1, HAS student

Other students reported issues with their accommodation or their modules, suggesting that while the environment and course structure can be positive influences for some students, they can also act as barriers to other’s adjustment (Fig. 19). Finances were mentioned by 7% of students, which suggests that financial insecurity or stress may limit participation in social or academic activities, further hindering students’ sense of belonging (Fig. 19).

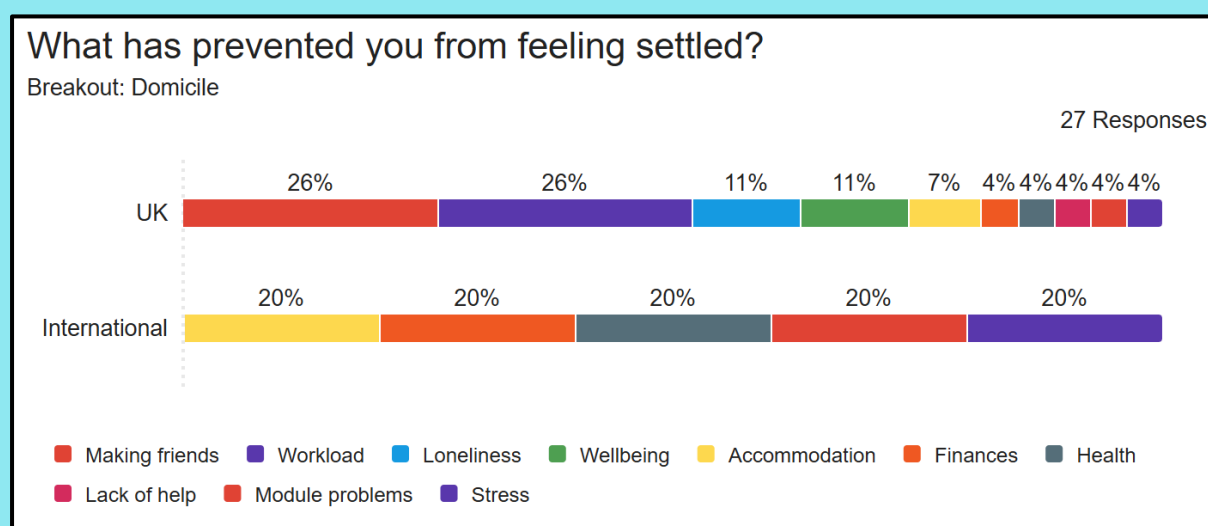


Figure 20 – Question 17b: What has prevented you from feeling settled? (Breakout: Domicile)

Overall, when examining responses by domicile, it is evident that the factors influencing student’s sense of settlement differ notably between international and UK-based students (Fig. 20).

International students’ responses were more evenly split with accommodation, finances, health, module problems, and stress cited as the main barriers to feeling settled at 20% each (Fig. 20). This suggests that practical and academic adjustment issues may be particularly prominent for students transitioning from abroad. Accommodation difficulties could reflect challenges such as finding suitable housing, navigating housing contracts, or adapting to different living standards. Similarly, issues related to modules may indicate difficulties with understanding academic expectations, potential language barriers, or adjusting to different teaching and assessment styles.

On the other hand, UK-based students' responses were more diverse, indicating a wider range of factors affecting their sense of belonging. The most frequently cited issues were making friends and managing workload at 26%, alongside other less commonly mentioned elements (Fig. 20). The emphasis on social integration suggests that even domestic students, despite being familiar with the cultural and institutional context, may struggle with forming meaningful connections in a university setting. Meanwhile, the prominence of workload concerns suggests perceived academic pressure as a key barrier to feeling settled.

The distinction between the barriers each group faces highlights the need for tailored institutional support strategies.

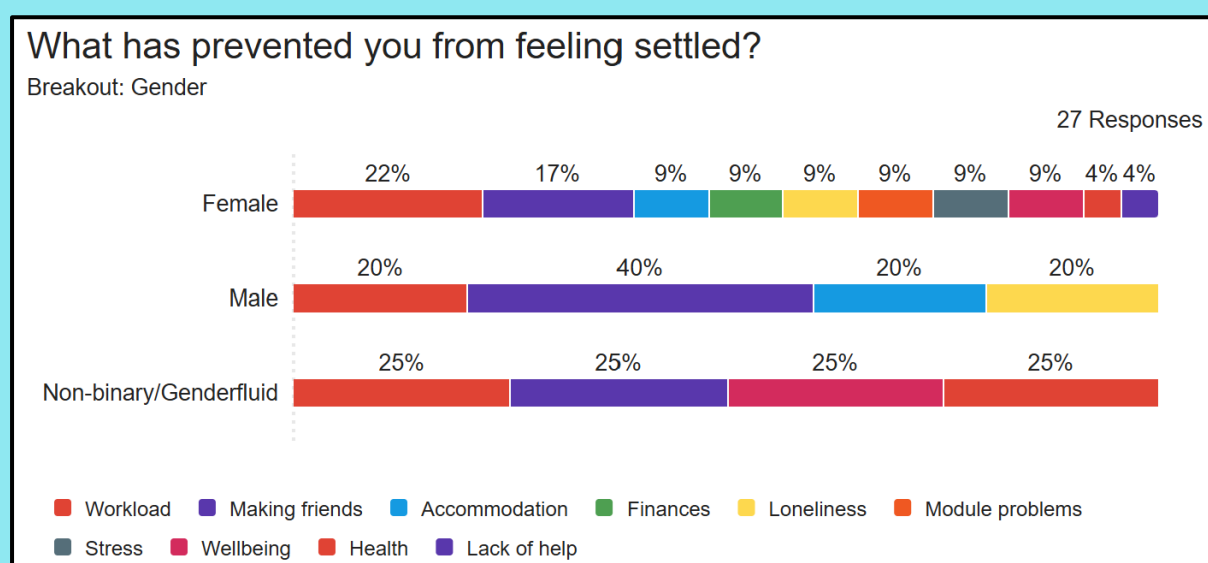


Figure 21 – Question 17b: What has prevented you from feeling settled? (Breakout: Gender)

Across all gender groups (female, male, and non-binary) making friends was consistently identified as a, if not the, most common barrier to feeling settled at university (Fig. 21). However, the overall pattern of responses showed greater similarity between female and male students than between these groups and non-binary students, suggesting that whilst social integration is a shared challenge comma the underlying experiences and contributing factors may differ across gender identity (Fig. 21).

Female students were the only group to report module problems (4%) alongside workload challenges (22%) (Fig. 21). This suggests that academic pressures and university structure may have a larger impact on female student's sense of stability. While male students also reported workload as a major concern, a significant emphasis was also placed on loneliness, which appeared more prominently among male students (20%) than female students (9%), as well as trouble making friends (40% compared to 17%) (Fig. 21). This could suggest that male students experience greater difficulty in establishing close social connections, reinforcing the relationship between loneliness and the challenge of making friends as key barriers to settling in.

In contrast, non-binary/gender-fluid students highlighted wellbeing and health more prominently than male or female students (25% each) (Fig. 21). The significance of well-being as a barrier may reflect feelings of exclusion, lack of representation, or limited visibility of inclusive spaces within the university setting, although further research or outreach is needed to find out the specific challenges these students face on a day-to-day basis.

3. How well do students feel they have settled into the city of Exeter this year?

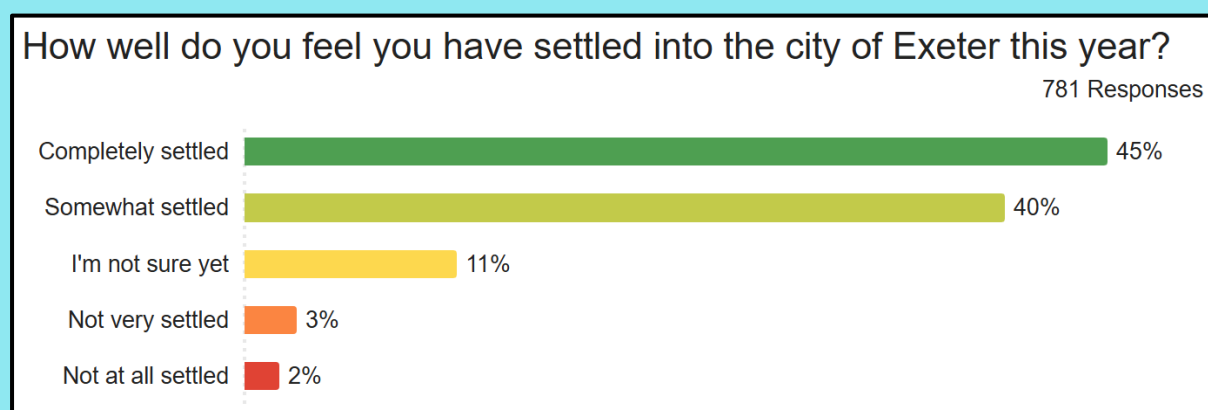


Figure 22 – Question 18: How well do you feel you have settled into the city of Exeter this year?

The majority of students feel settled in Exeter this year, with 45% stating that they feel completely settled and a further 40% stating that they feel somewhat settled (Fig. 22). The overall positive response suggests that most students have successfully adapted to university life in their surroundings.

In contrast, 11% of respondents expressed uncertainty about whether they feel settled, which may be partly explained by the demographic composition of the sample (Fig. 22). For example, most of the respondents could have been first year students, who may not yet have had sufficient time to establish routines, build friendships, and adjust to academic expectations.

A small minority of students (5%) reported feeling not settled in Exeter (Fig. 22). While this proportion is relatively low, it remains important to consider the potential challenges contributing to these feelings. Possible explanations could include difficulties with some of the factors listed in previous questions such as accommodation, social isolation, wellbeing, or feeling homesick. Addressing these barriers through schemes such as enhanced pastoral care, peer mentoring, early well-being signposting, and more incorporation of the university with the city, could improve the experience of less settled students and foster a stronger sense of belonging.

What has helped you to feel settled?

Open text response themes

659 Responses

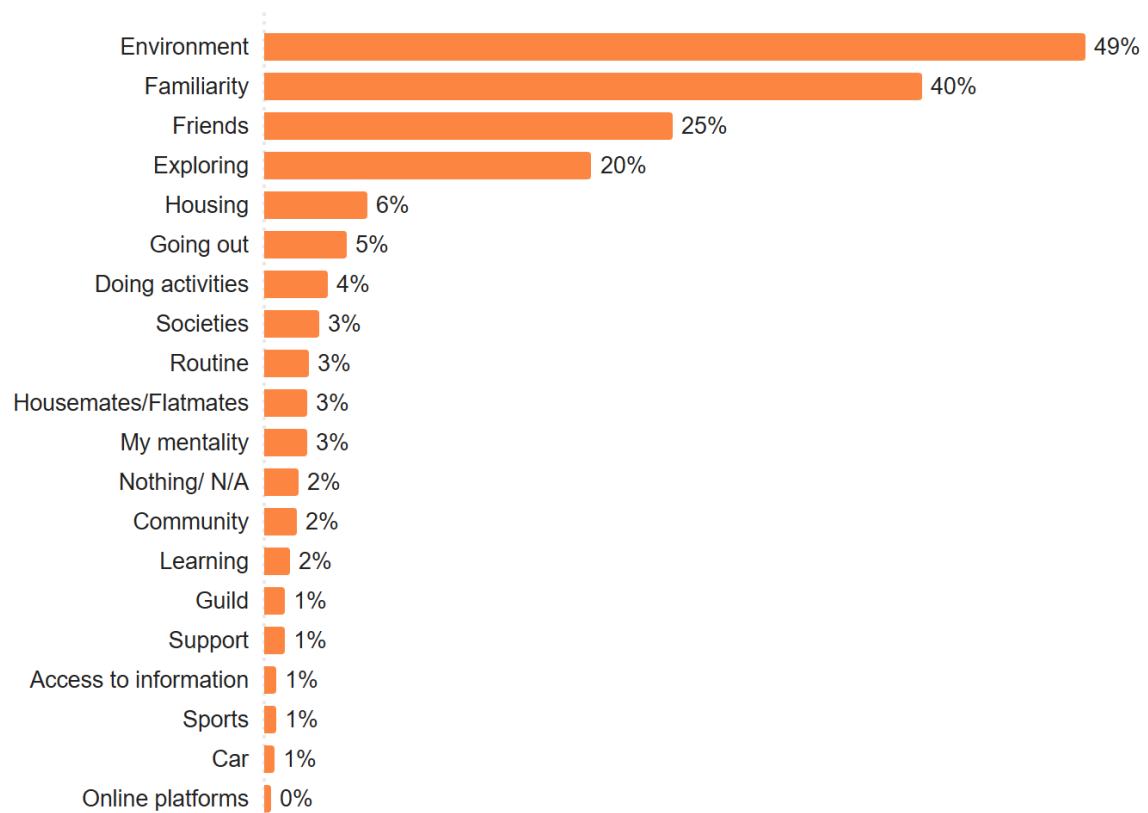


Figure 23 – Question 18a: What has helped you to feel settled?

When students were asked what factors made them feel more settled in Exeter, a similar pattern of responses emerged that closely mirrored the factors influencing belonging at the university (Fig. 23). However, the environment stood out as the most frequently cited factor, mentioned by 49% of respondents (Fig. 23).

"I've settled in very well in the city this year and feel comfortable and connected to the community." ~ Year 3, ESE student

"Knowing the city pretty well over a few years, but also managing to see things and go places I haven't been before!" ~ Year 4, HAS student

"My accommodation this year is actually next to town so i get to explore it a lot more than i did last year since i was at duryard . hyping myself up to do more to insure that i am ready for majority of things that will happen at uni and starting gym as soon as i arrived gave me a stable routine." ~ Year 2, ESE student

"Making the time to go shopping in town and walk around it. Also making the effort actually visit other places apart from my house and campus which isn't always easy to do." ~ Year 3, HAS student

"The university's guidance on local transport, nearby essentials and events helped me get familiar with the city quickly. Having supportive friends and flatmates made it feel like home even faster. Not to forget, the city's calm and scenic atmosphere has made the transition much easier." ~ Masters, HLS student

This was followed by familiarity at 40% and friendships at 25% (Fig. 23). These results suggest that both the physical and social environments play key roles in helping students feel comfortable and integrated within the city.

"I've been living here for over a year now and didn't leave over the summer, just moved apartments so I'm settled." ~ Other, HLS student

"Exploring more with friends, knowing where more things are compared to last year." ~ Year 2, ESE student

"Having been here for one year already, it feels far more familiar than last year, when it was all new. So, knowing nice places, good dog walks, where shops are, how the public transport works etc all helps." ~ Year 2, HLS student

"Knowing the area (from living here previously), going out with friends and acquaintances." ~ Year 4, ESE student

"I've lived in the city since second year and done a lot of exploring though OODS and with friends in third term." ~ Masters, HAS student

The frequent mention of Exeter's environment (49%) may reflect the city's welcoming atmosphere and scenic landscape (Fig. 23). Features such as green spaces, cafes and restaurants, and a compact city centre likely contribute to students' positive perceptions, offering a balance between a vibrant social life and a peaceful green environment.

Similarly, familiarity with the local area (40%), whether through having lived in the area previously or through spending multiple years studying at Exeter, appeared to enhance student's sense of belonging (Fig. 23). Students in their second or third year may feel more settled simply because they have had more time to form connections and adapt to living in the city.

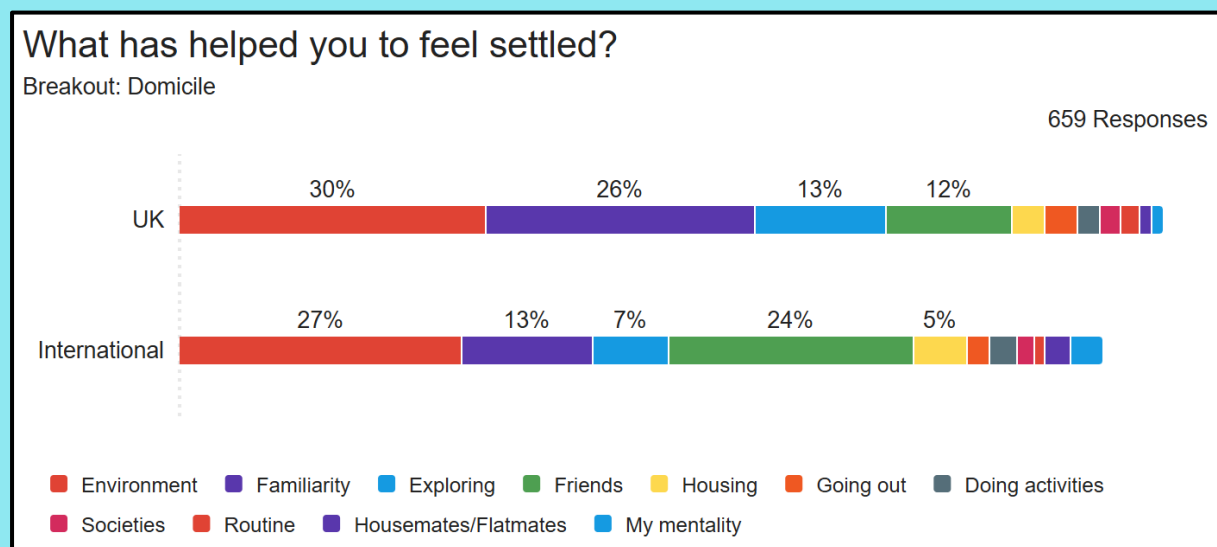


Figure 24 – Question 18a: What has helped you to feel settled? (Breakout: Domicile)

Both the UK and international students followed the general pattern of responses with environment and familiarity emerging as the most frequently cited factors contributing to feeling settled in Exeter (Fig. 24). These findings suggest that the city's welcoming atmosphere is a key element to supporting student's sense of comfort and belonging regardless of domicile.

Exploring the local area was also highlighted by many students, indicating that engagement with the city's surroundings, such as visiting cafes, the quay, or local attractions, plays a crucial role in helping students settle in (Fig. 24).

On the other hand, friends were mentioned more frequently by international students than by UK-based students as a factor helping them feel settled (Fig. 24). This may be because social connections are vital for international students who may lack preexisting local networks or family support in the area. Creating social connections can provide emotional stability, a sense of community, and a form of support, crucial elements to helping a person adapt to a new cultural and academic environment.

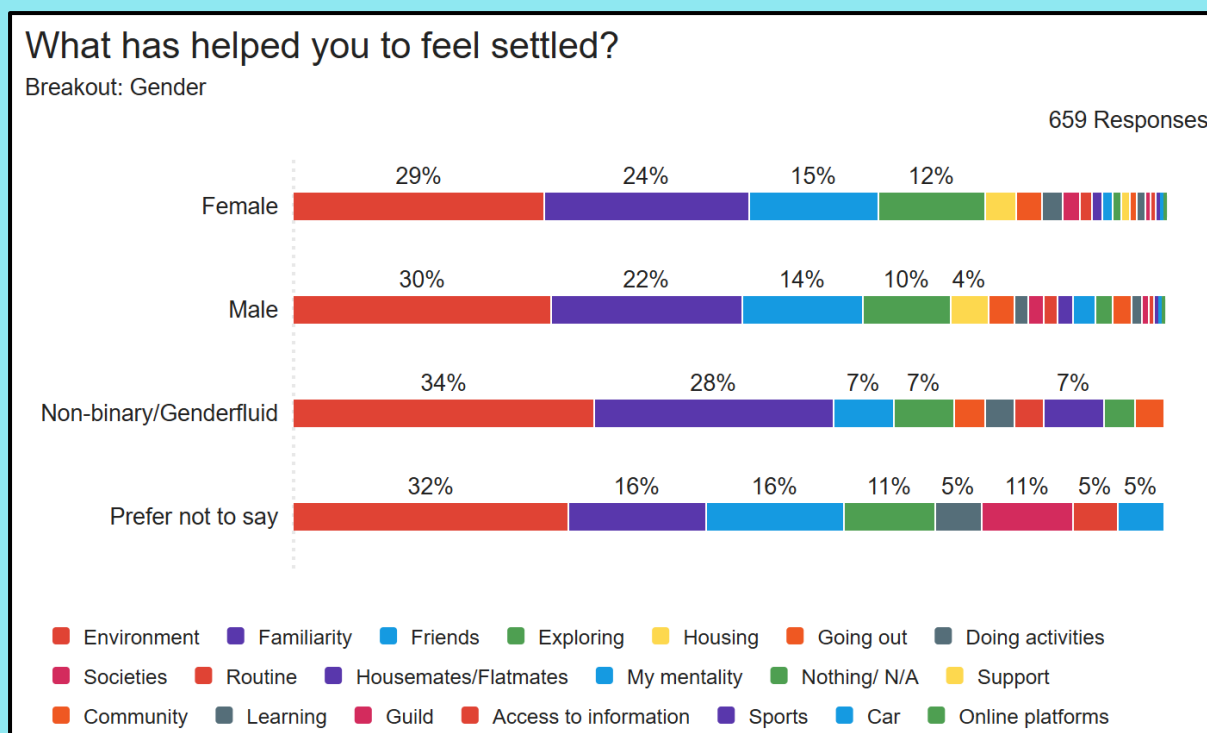


Figure 25 – Question 18a: What has helped you to feel settled? (Breakout: Gender)

When examining the data by gender, a similar pattern of responses emerged, with environment, familiarity, and friends identified as the top-rated factors helping students feel more settled in the city (Fig. 25). Exploring the local area was also frequently mentioned across all gender groups (Fig. 25). The percentage of students citing the environment as a large contributing factor did not differ substantially between genders, with variation of no more than about 5% (Fig. 25). This suggests that the physical and social environment of Exeter is consistently valued across the student body, regardless of gender identity.

Some notable differences emerged among specific groups. Students who preferred to not disclose their gender mentioned familiarity significantly less often (16%) than other respondents (Fig. 25). In contrast, this group placed greater emphasis on societies (11%) and participation in activities (5%) as crucial factors contributing to their sense of belonging (Fig. 25). This data may suggest that students who prefer to not share their gender identity value structured social settings, such as clubs or societies more, as they provide a safe and inclusive space for connection.

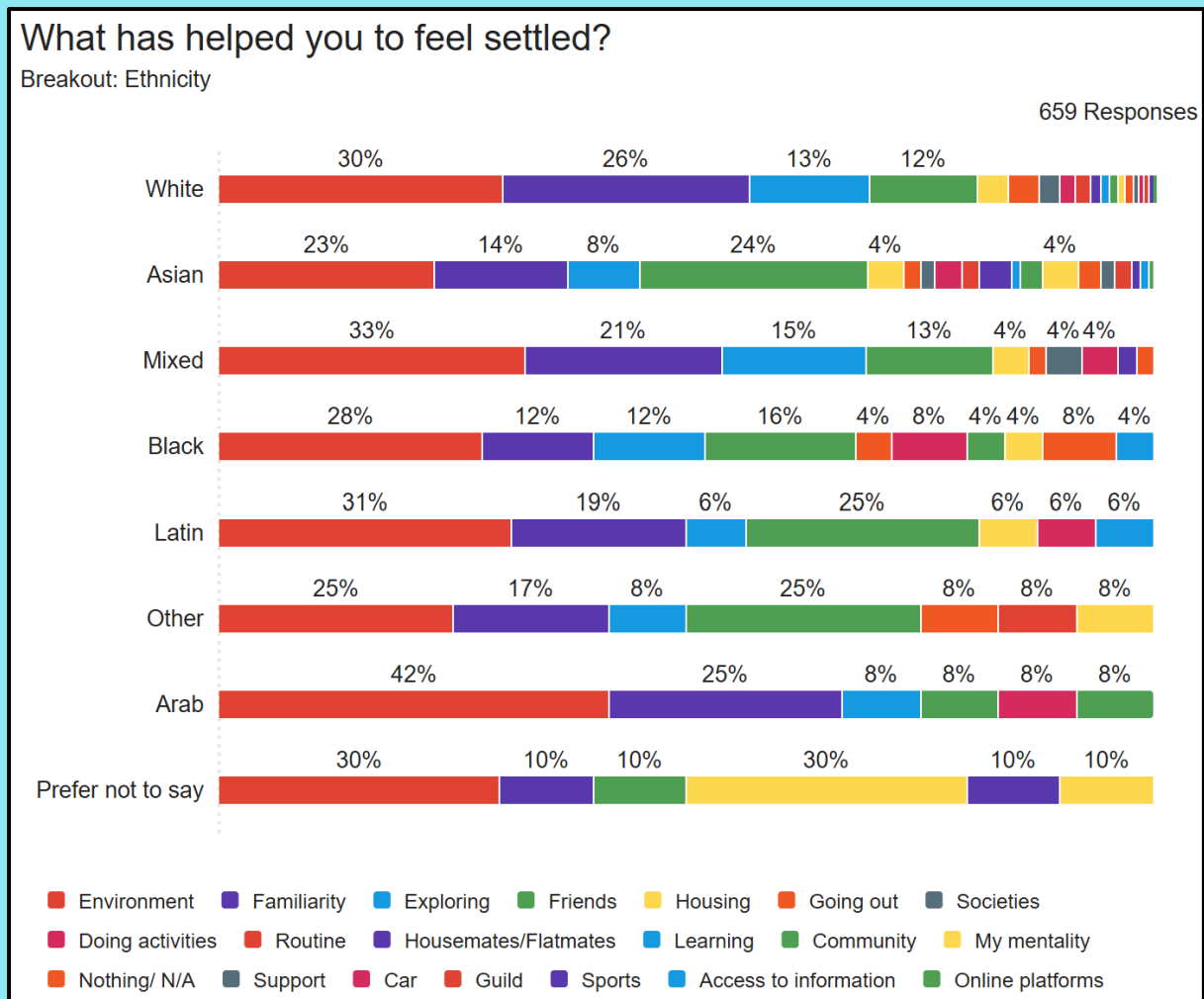


Figure 26 – Question 18a: What has helped you to feel settled? (Breakout: Ethnicity)

Students who preferred not to disclose their ethnicity reported housing (30%) as a highly significant factor influencing their sense of settlement (Fig. 26). In contrast, more commonly mentioned factors such as familiarity (10%) and friends (10%) appeared far less often in their responses, suggesting that for these students' practical stability may play a more central role in fostering a sense of belonging (Fig. 26).

Arab students most frequently cited the environment (42%) as contributing to their sense of belonging, followed by familiarity (25%) (Fig. 26). On the other hand, Latin, Asian students, and those from other ethnic backgrounds most commonly mentioned friends as a crucial factor in feeling settled (Fig. 26). This highlights the importance of social relationships and community networks for these groups, which may help counteract potential feelings of cultural distance.

Notably, some respondents also mentioned mentality or mindset as an element influencing their ability to feel settled (Fig. 26). This could reflect a more internalised approach to adapting to university, where personal resilience, motivation, and positive attitude are key to navigating new environments and challenges. These findings suggest that student's sense of belonging is shaped

not only by external conditions but also by individual coping strategies and attitudes towards integration.

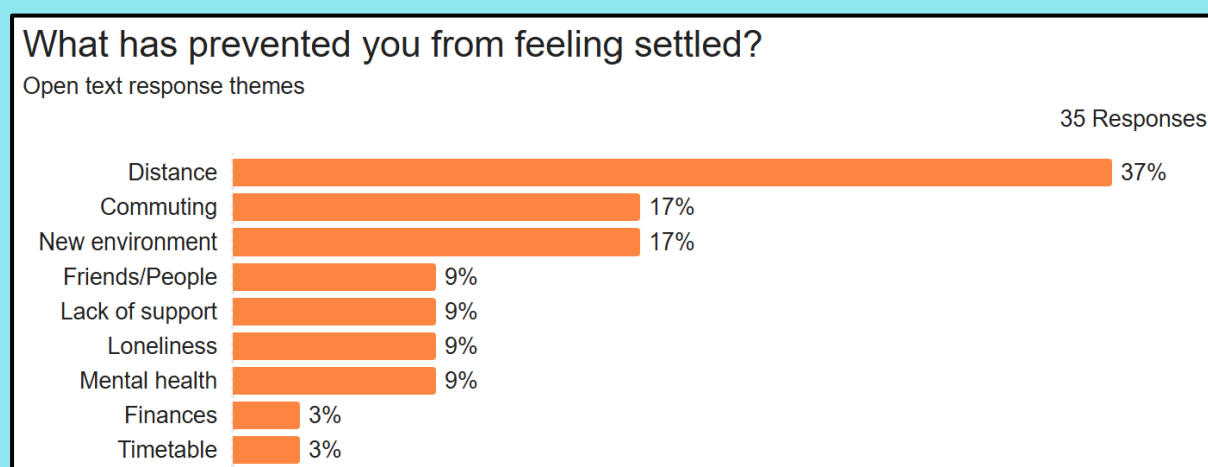


Figure 27 – Question 18b: What has prevented you from feeling settled?

When asked about the main barriers to settling in, 37% cited distance in their answers (Fig. 27). This includes the distance between St Luke's and Streatham campuses for students whose courses are split across both sites, distance from non-campus-based accommodation, and distance from home. The second most cited answer was also related to distance, including commuting difficulties for students living outside of Exeter. Long travel times and limited flexibility for attending last-minute scheduled activities or social events may make it harder for these students to fully integrate into university life.

The environment was mentioned by 17% of students (Fig. 27). This may reflect natural feelings of homesickness when spending time away from home for the first time. For others, moving to university might be the first time they are living in a new city, so adjusting to an unfamiliar environment and navigating a new area can be initially challenging and delay the process of feeling settled.

Wellbeing (9%) and making friends (9%) were also frequently cited challenges (Fig. 27). These two factors could potentially be connected, as feelings of loneliness and isolation can arise from struggles in making or maintaining friends.

While mentioned less often, financial struggles were reported by 3% of respondents, highlighting that money-related concerns remain a barrier for some students (Fig. 27).

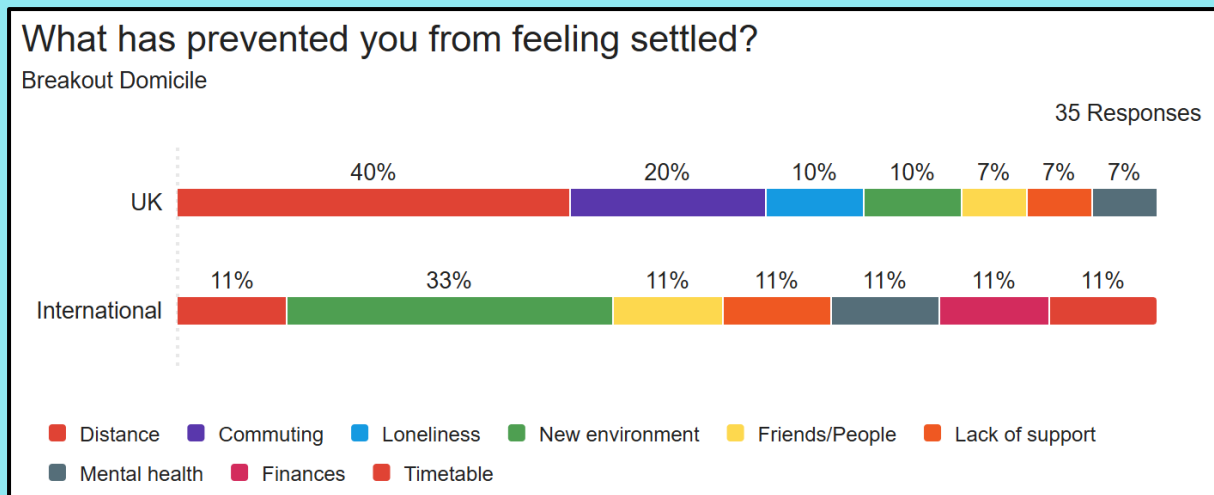


Figure 28 – Question 18b: What has prevented you from feeling settled? (Breakout: Domicile)

Based on domicile, we can see that UK-based students struggle with distance more frequently (40%) than international students (11%) (Fig. 28). This may reflect that some UK students commute from home, making travel to campus and social activities more challenging. On the other hand, the new environment was more frequently cited by international students (33%) (Fig. 28). This could relate to additional adjustments involved in moving to a different country, such as adapting to a new culture, language, climate, and academic system, all of which can initially make settling in more difficult. It also highlights the need for continued peer support and cultural activities and events throughout the year to foster a sense of belonging.

Loneliness was mentioned by 10% of UK students, suggesting that even those who remain relatively close to home can struggle with social connection (Fig. 28). This may be due to challenges making friends or limited involvement in university life.

Meanwhile, making friends and a lack of support were mentioned more frequently by international students (11% compared to 7% among UK students) (Fig 28). This points to the potential need for more targeted social and wellbeing initiatives for international students, especially those who may remain in Exeter during the holidays. Initiatives include peer support programmes, cross-cultural events, or initiatives that encourage interaction between international and home students. Strengthening these connections could help feelings of isolation and enhance overall sense of belonging.

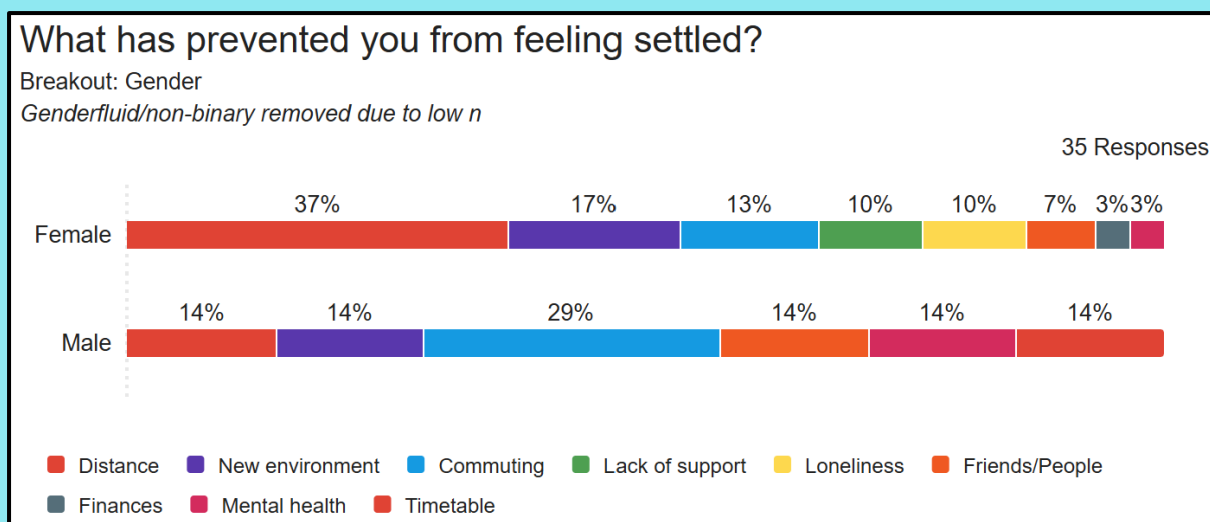


Figure 29 – Question 18b: What has prevented you from feeling settled? (Breakout: Gender)

Female students (37%) reported the distance as a negative factor far more frequently than male students (14%) (Fig. 29). This notable difference could suggest that female students are more affected by logistical barriers such as travel between campuses or distance from accommodation. It may also indicate that distance has a greater perceived impact on their ability to engage fully with academic and social activities, perhaps due to safety concerns or differences in commuting habits.

The new environment was mentioned at similar levels across both gender groups, 17% by female students and 14% by male students, indicating that adjusting to a new setting poses a comparable challenge regardless of gender (Fig. 29).

A large gap emerges in relation to commuting, which was mentioned by 16% more by male students than female students (Fig. 29). This could imply that male students are more likely to live off-campus or further away from university, making commuting a more prominent concern for them.

Interestingly, friends were mentioned double the amount by male students (14%) compared to female students (7%) (Fig. 29). This may suggest that male students experience greater difficulty forming or maintaining friendships, or that they place higher emphasis on social networks when reflecting on their sense of belonging. Alternatively, it could suggest that female students are generally more successful in establishing positive peer relationships early on, potentially through greater engagement with student societies or social events.

4. How inclusive have students found university life to be?

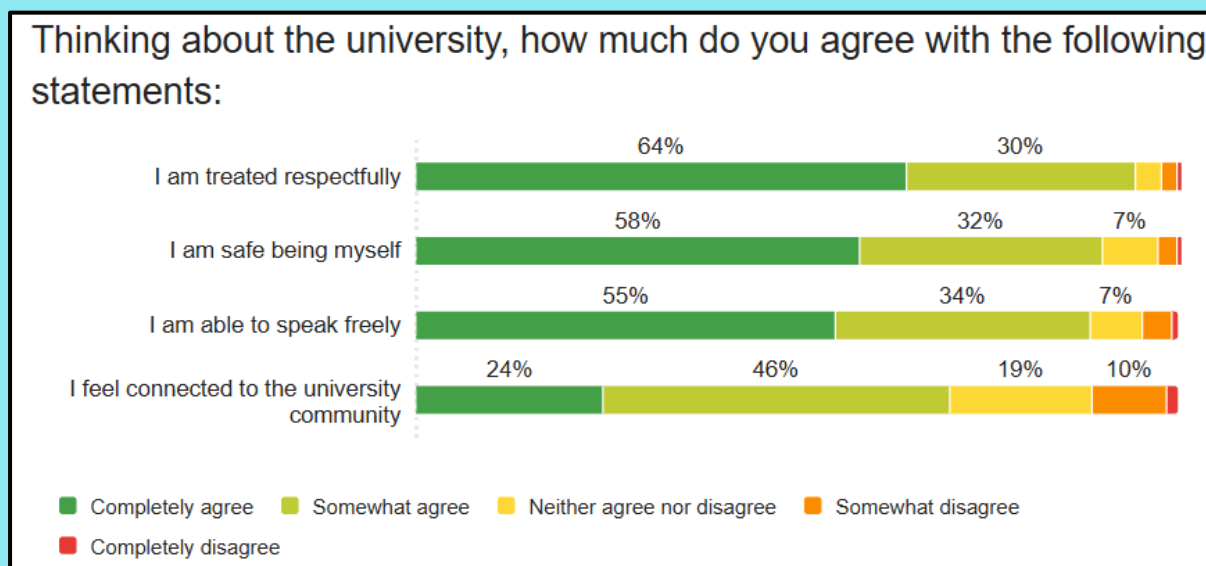


Figure 30 – Question 19: Thinking about university, how much do you agree with the following statements

Overall, the vast majority of students reported feeling accepted at the university (Fig. 30). An overwhelming 94% of students feel that they are treated respectfully, with 64% completely agreeing and 30% somewhat agreeing with the statement (Fig. 30). This shows that, overall, students perceive the university environment to be welcoming and inclusive, suggesting that institutional policies regarding equality and respect are generally effective. However, the small proportion of students who do not share this view should not be overlooked, as even isolated experiences of disrespect can have substantial negative effects on wellbeing and belonging.

Similarly, 90% of students agree that they feel safe being themselves at university (Fig. 30). However, 7% neither agree nor disagree with the statement, suggesting a level of uncertainty or inconsistency in experiences of safety and self-expression. This implies that feelings of inclusivity are not experienced equally across all social or identity groups.

A further 89% of students reported that they feel able to speak freely on campus, which aligns with general sentiment of openness and acceptance (Fig. 30). Nonetheless, this finding still leaves a minority who may feel constrained in voicing their opinions, a result that could point to concerns about social judgement.

While many students feel accepted and welcomed at the university, a noticeably smaller proportion feel connected to the university, with only 70% agreeing with this statement (Fig. 30). This marks a significant drop in satisfaction compared to the measures of respect and acceptance. A high level of uncertainty was also reported (19%), with a further 10% disagreeing with the statement (Fig. 30). This suggests that while the university generally fosters a positive environment, a

considerable amount of students may struggle to develop a deeper sense of belonging or emotional connection. Strengthening community-building initiatives and promoting inclusive extracurricular involvement could help address this gap

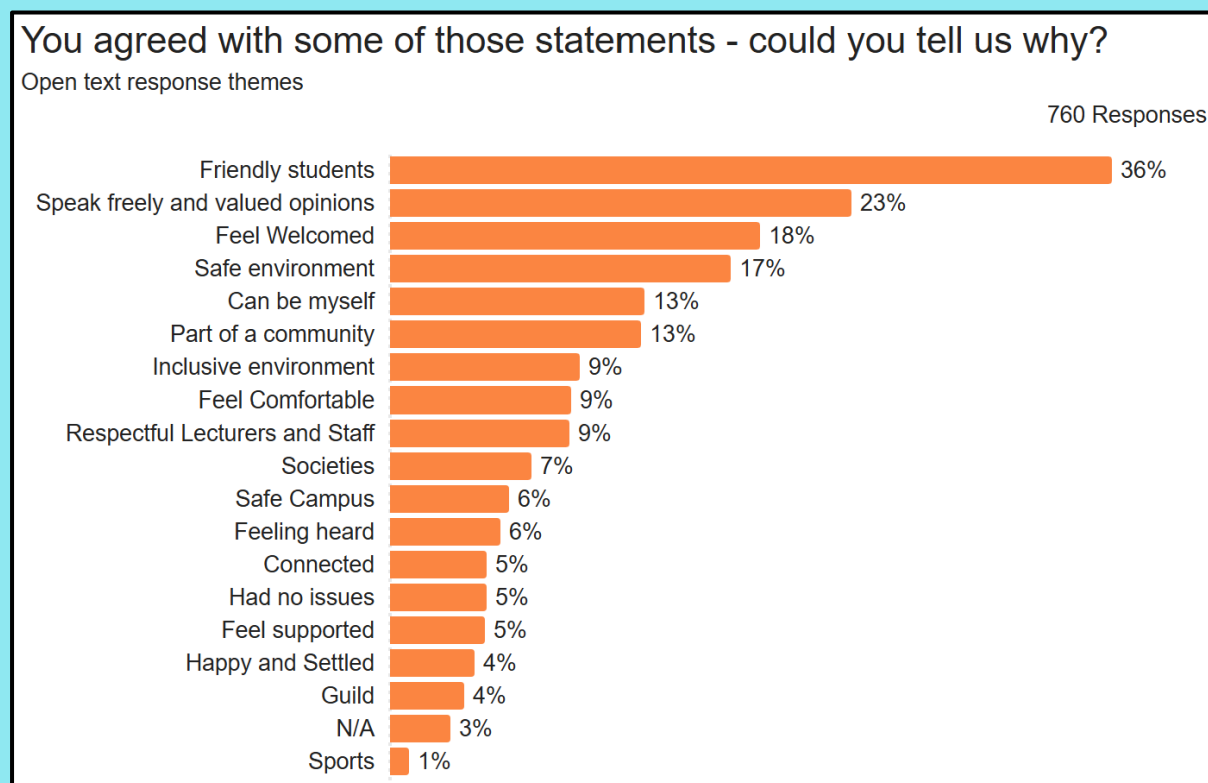


Figure 31 – Question 19a: You agreed with some of those statements - could you tell us why?

When asked why they felt the way they did in regard to the questions asked in Figure 32, 36% of students said that meeting and talking to friendly students has made the largest positive impact on their university experience so far (Fig. 31). This highlights the crucial role that peer relationships play in shaping student's sense of belonging and confidence at university.

Many students (23%) also mentioned that feeling their opinions were valued through surveys like this and other forms of feedback initiatives, contributed to their sense of being respected and able to speak freely (Fig. 31). This suggest that when the university actively listens to students, it fosters a culture of openness and mutual respect.

Feeling welcome was cited by 18% of students (Fig. 31). This could be attributed to Welcome week activities and the numerous events organised during the first few weeks of university. These events appear to play a crucial role in helping new students integrate into the university community, particularly by providing early opportunities to form social connections.

Additionally, 17% of students stated that the safeness of the environment was a large contributing factor to their ability to feel respected and to be themselves (Fig. 31). This might suggest that feelings of safety are closely linked to emotional

comfort and a broader sense of belonging, rather than just the absence of physical danger.

A smaller proportion of students (9%) mentioned the respectful attitudes of lecturers and staff as an important factor, underscoring the power that everyday interactions with academic and professional staff can have on student's overall perception of acceptance (Fig. 31).

On the other hand, 7% of students mentioned societies as a positive factor (Fig. 33). While a smaller proportion of students mentioned this answer, it still points to the value of extracurricular and social activities in helping students create a community of like-minded peers, express themselves, and feel part of the university culture.

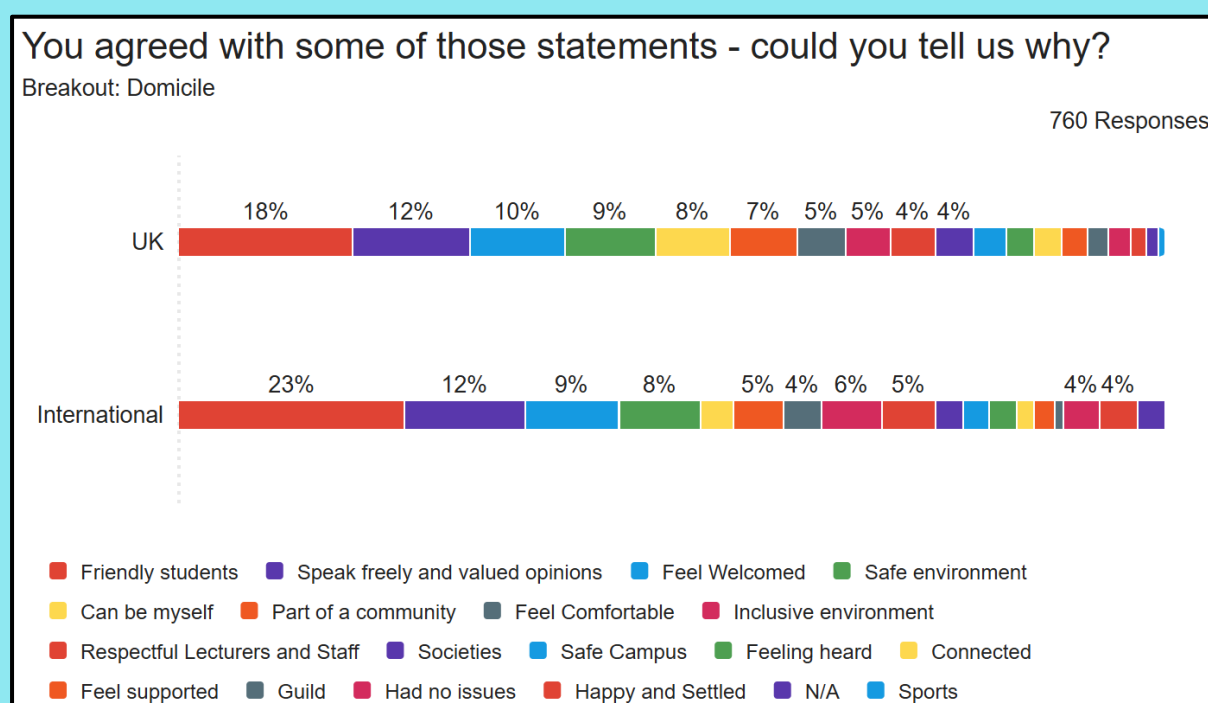


Figure 32 – Question 19a: You agreed with some of those statements - could you tell us why?
(Breakout: Domicile)

Analysing responses based on domicile reveals broadly consistent patterns across both UK-based and international students (Fig. 32). Overall, friendly students emerged as the most frequently cited factor for both groups, mentioned by 18% of UK students and 23% of international students (Fig. 32). The slightly higher proportion among international students (5% difference) may suggest that positive peer interactions play a particularly important role in their sense of belonging, potentially compensating for the additional cultural, environmental, and social changes these students face when moving to university.

Following the general pattern of responses observed in Figure 31, speaking freely and valued opinions were the second most frequently mentioned factor across both demographic groups (Fig. 32). This consistency suggests that open

communication and mutual respect are highly valued aspects for university life for all students at the university. It also suggests that while some international students may face cultural or language barriers, institutional environments which promote, and value freedom of expression appear to benefit all students equally.

A similar percentage of responses for “Feeling welcome” was recorded, indicating that both UK and international students perceive a generally positive and welcoming atmosphere at the university (Fig. 32).

A slight difference was observed for the statement “Can be myself”, which was mentioned by 8% of UK-based students, slightly higher than among international students (Fig. 32). This suggests that while both groups feel somewhat comfortable expressing themselves, domestic students may experience a stronger sense of cultural familiarity within the university environment and the city of Exeter. For international students, cultural adaptation and potentially different social norms may somewhat limit this feeling, even with otherwise supportive settings.

Overall, the responses reveal a largely shared perception of positive social dynamics and perceptions of inclusivity across domiciliary groups, with subtle variations reflecting distinct social experiences and adjustments to new environments for international students.

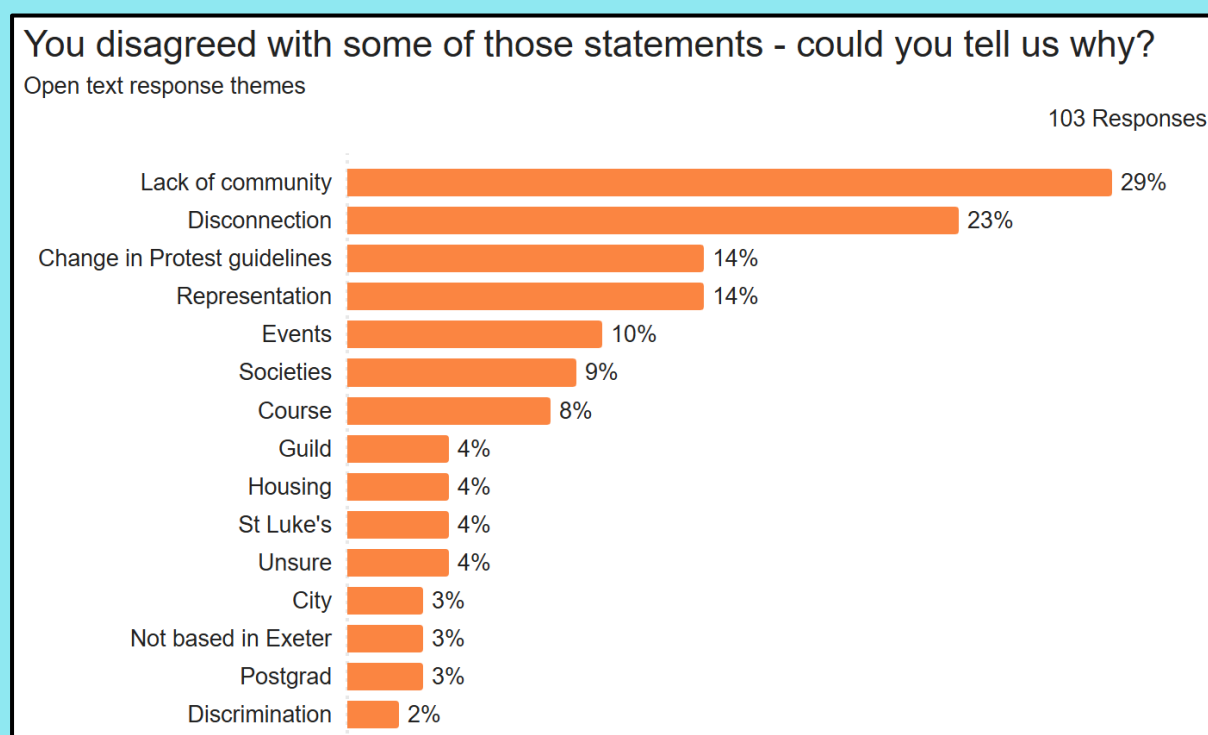


Figure 33 – Question 19b: You disagreed with some of those statements – could you tell us why?

When students were asked why they disagreed with the statements in Figure 30, 29% attributed it to their response to a lack of community (Fig. 33). This suggests that while many students feel safe and respected, some still experience a difficulty

in finding a sense of belonging within the wider university community. The perceived lack of community may stem from limited opportunities for meaningful socialisation or challenges with engaging with the university outside of academic commitments.

Disconnection was also cited by 23% of students, reinforcing this theme (Fig. 33). This disconnection could reflect both social and structural barriers, including the separation between both campuses, difficulties balancing social and academic requirements, or a lack of representation. Together, these findings show that while acceptance and respect are generally high, deeper integration and emotional connection to the university remain areas for improvement.

The change in protest guidelines was highlighted by 14% of students as a reason to why they feel they cannot speak freely on campus (Fig. 33). This suggests that some students see the university's policies as limiting, which could contribute to feelings of caution when discussing sensitive topics.

A lack of representation, reported by an additional 14% of students, underscores the ongoing challenges in ensuring that all student identities, backgrounds, and perspectives are reflected across university campuses (Fig. 33).

While many students reported societies and events as positive factors, some students highlighted them as barriers, 9% and 10%, respectively (Fig. 33). This could be due to feelings of exclusivity or limited accessibility. These insights reveal that while student-led activities can foster connection for many, they may also unintentionally alienate others, highlighting the need for a wide range of activities.

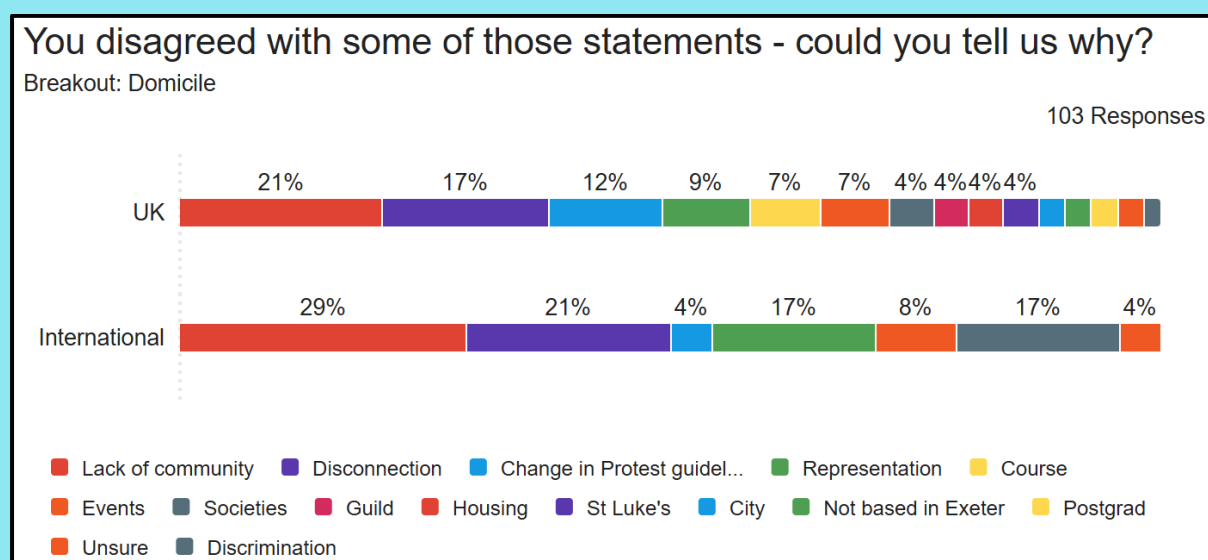


Figure 34 – Question 19b: You disagreed with some of those statements – could you tell us why? (Breakout: domicile)

When students were asked why they disagreed with feeling respected and connected to the university (Fig. 34). A lack of community was highly mentioned by both international students (29%) and UK-based students (21%) as a barrier

(Fig. 34). Notably, this element was mentioned by 8% more international students compared to UK students, highlighting that international students may face additional challenges when finding a community of like-minded peers. This may include cultural and language barriers, or general challenges of settling into a completely different environment.

Disconnection was mentioned 4% more frequently by international students than by UK students, further highlighting a gap in overall sense of belonging experienced by international students at the university (Fig. 34). This finding suggests that despite the presence of inclusive initiatives, some international students may still feel culturally or socially isolated. Factors such as language barriers, limited social networks, or cultural differences may contribute to feelings of disconnection.

Conversely, UK students cited the change in protest guidelines more than double the amount as international students (Fig. 34). This difference may reflect differing levels of engagement with the university's policies UK-based students may be more familiar with the UK political climate and may feel more confident discussing these matters. Because of this, these students may be more invested in changes in their rights to protest and activism.

Representation was reported 8% more by international students than UK-based students, further supporting the idea that the lack of visibility and recognition could be strongly linked to the feelings of disconnection international students face.

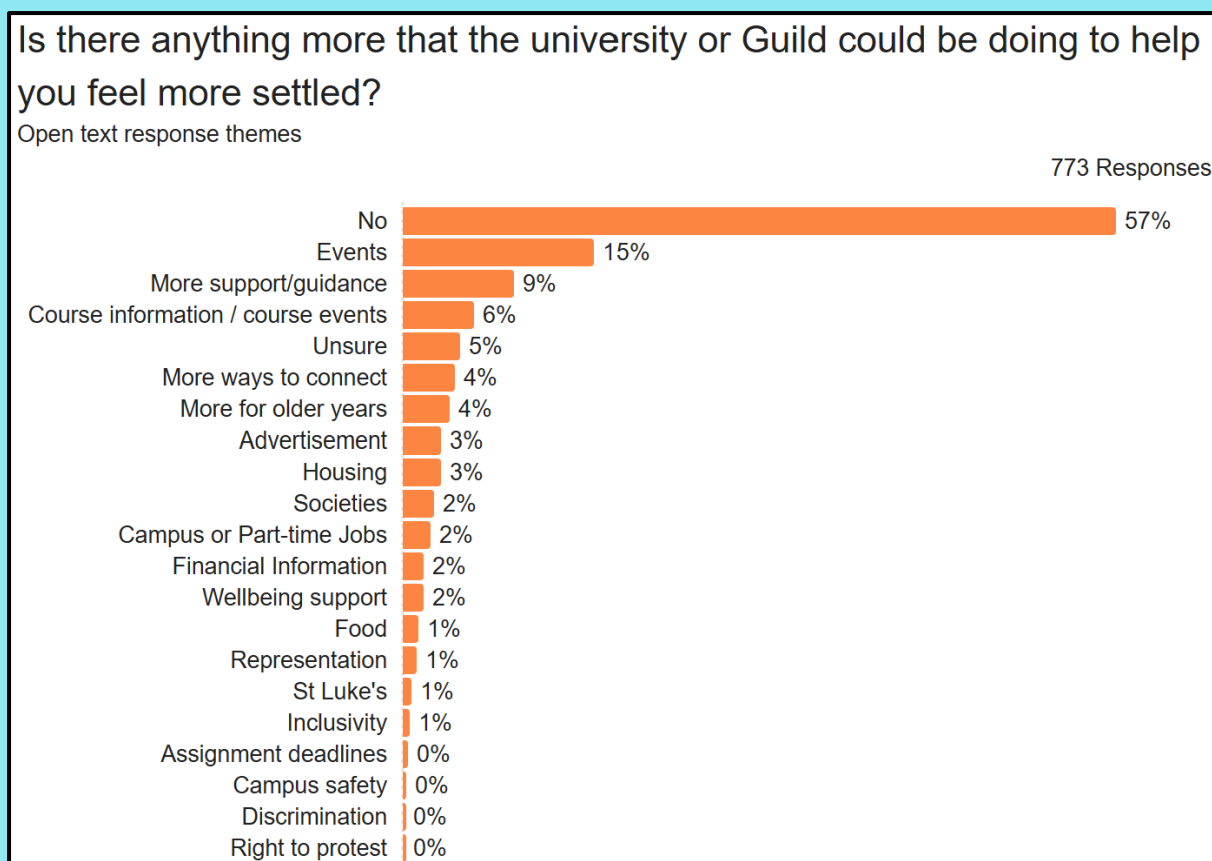


Figure 35 – Question 20: Is there anything more that the university of Guild could be doing to help you feel more settled?

57% of students reported that they don't think there is anything additional that the Guild could do to help them feel more settled at the university (Fig. 35). This suggests that the majority of students are generally satisfied with the Guild's current support, events, and services. It may also indicate that the current range of resources are effective at meeting most student's needs. On the other hand, this finding could reflect a lack of awareness among some students about the Guild's services and the support available.

Events were mentioned by 15% of respondents, highlighting that opportunities for socialising and community-building remain central to helping students feel settled (Fig. 35). Frequent, diverse, and inclusive events can help maintain engagement throughout the year.

More support and guidance were cited by 9% of students, suggesting that while many feel adequately supported, a notable minority would benefit from clearer signposting or a wider range of services available (Fig. 35). This could include 1-1 support, academic help, wellbeing resources, or practical help for students at university. Strengthening the Guild's reach through better advertising and communication may be a partial solution to these concerns.

Conclusion

1.How have students found their first few weeks at university this year?

In summary, students' experiences during their first few weeks at the University of Exeter were broadly positive, with most describing them as fun, exciting, and friendly (Fig. 1). While the overall response was vastly positive, many students also found this initial period tiring and challenging, which could be attributed to adjusting to new academic and social environment (Fig. 1).

Engagement in Welcome Week and university events was generally associated with greater enjoyment and a stronger sense of belonging, while those who did not participate in any events reported more challenges and feeling less welcome (Fig. 2). Students who attended only a few events expressed higher uncertainty regarding feeling welcome, highlighting that full engagement is needed to achieve the benefits of event participation (Fig. 2).

Analysis based on year of study and domicile revealed that first-year students benefited most from transition-focused support, whereas returning and international students experienced unique challenges relating to reintegration and adaptation to university life (Fig. 3, 5, 6).

While social connection and course enjoyment were the most valued aspects of university life, workload and stress emerged as common concerns, particularly among UK students and those in later years of study, findings that strongly reflect the higher workloads in later years of university (Fig. 4, 7, 8, 9).

These insights highlight the importance of inclusive, ongoing support systems, beyond initial Welcome week activities, to ensure all students can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally at the University of Exeter.

2.How well do students feel they have settled into university this year?

The majority of students reported feeling somewhat to completely settled into university life (Fig. 10), with social connections, preparedness, and event attendance emerging as the strongest contributors to a positive transition (Fig. 10, 13).

Friendships, routines, and supportive living environments were key to fostering belonging, while preparedness before arrival and access to clear information significantly influenced confidence and comfort during the initial weeks of university (Fig. 13, 15).

Differences between groups highlighted varying experiences, although social connections were highly mentioned by all groups (Fig. 16, 17, 18). International students were more affected by practical and academic adjustment challenges, while UK-based students were more likely to cite social integration and workload pressures (Fig. 20).

Gender-based differences also revealed unique wellbeing needs, particularly among male and non-binary students (Fig. 21). The data suggests that while most students adapt successfully, a minority continue to face barriers such as loneliness, financial stress, and academic pressure (Fig. 19).

Overall, these insights highlight the need for sustained, inclusive, and targeted interventions that promote early preparedness, strengthen community ties, and ensure that all students can feel settled at the university.

3.How well do students feel they have settled into the city of Exeter this year?

Most students at the University of Exeter reported feeling settled into the city of Exeter (Fig. 22), with strong relationships observed between familiarity, environment, and social connection (Fig. 23).

The environment and friends were the most significant contributors to feeling settled, while for others this was a significant barrier (Fig. 24, 27). Barriers such as distance, lack of support, and wellbeing challenges were also highly reported (Fig. 27). Demographic differences reveal that international students face more practical and adjustment-related challenges, whereas UK-based students tend to struggle more with distance and commuting-related issues (Fig. 28). Gender-based patterns also suggest varying experiences of travel related issues and wellbeing (Fig. 29).

4.How inclusive have students found university life to be?

Overall, the majority of students at the University of Exeter reported feeling accepted, respected, and safe within the university community (Fig. 30), indicating that institutional policies around equality and inclusivity are broadly effective.

However, while a large percentage of students feel respected and safe to be themselves, a smaller proportion feel genuinely connected to the university, revealing a notable gap between feelings of respect and deeper emotional belonging (Fig. 30).

Peer relationships emerged as the strongest positive influence on student experience (Fig. 31), particularly among international students, who placed a slightly greater emphasis on friendliness and social interaction as elements for belonging (Fig. 32).

Conversely, barriers such as lack of community, disconnection, and limited representation were most frequently cited by those who disagreed with the positive statements (Fig. 33), especially by international students (Fig 34).

This data points to a need for long-term efforts to strengthen community relationships, promote diverse representation, and ensure that inclusivity extends beyond respect and safety to create a positive university experience for all students.

Recommendations

How have students found their first few weeks at university this year?

- The Guild and the university could explore more ways to help returning students feel welcomed back into the university environment at the start of the academic year
 - This could include expanding the re-freshers fair or hosting some events specific to returning students during Welcome Week
 - Could also include running events for specific returners, such as those coming back from a year abroad, to help them make new connections
- The Guild and the university could explore ways to help students manage the workload at the start of the year
 - Ensure timetables are sent out in enough time to give students the ability to plan their weeks
 - Run workshops early in the year focused on how to manage academic workload
 - Could also include advice on how to manage stress and mental health support

How well do students feel they have settled into university this year?

- The Guild and the university could explore more targeted initiatives to help certain demographic groups feel settled
 - For international students, there could be more cultural or inter-cultural mixers to foster connection
 - For international and 4th year students returning from years abroad or placement, there could be a buddy-scheme so that they are able to make friends or find support from other students who have been in the same situation as them
- The Guild and the university could explore increasing academic support for international students that focuses on understanding how the grading system works and practical skills such as essay writing
- The Guild and the university could work to break down barriers possibly preventing male students from seeking support for loneliness
 - Could also run more events tailored to male students to help them create connections

How well do students feel they have settled into the city of Exeter this year?

- The Guild and the university could work with local transport services to provide better transport to students to and from campus
 - They could also provide a guide to local transport to ensure that students know what is available to them
- The Guild and the university could create resources and host events to help students manage feelings of homesickness

How inclusive have students found university life to be?

- The Guild and the university could explore more targeted initiatives to help certain demographic groups feel settled
 - For international students, there could be more cultural or inter-cultural mixers to foster connection
- The Guild and the university could work to improve communications around protest guidelines and freedom of speech to ensure students feel comfortable voicing their opinions on campus

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Focus Group Recommendations

As part of a new approach this year, we ran a focus group of 13 students who were given the opportunity to explore our data and provide their insight on the topic of Settling In. This was so that we might gain more context for our data and so that they could provide student designed recommendations.

These recommendations come in the form of 'How might we' statements that students created from issues they identified through our data and their own experience.

How might we help students feel less overwhelmed at the start of the year?

- More time at the start of term before setting assignments to allow international students to get used to the grading system and students generally to transition more into university life
- More clarity on which modules will be held on which campus to reduce travel time
- More clarity in assignment briefs

How might we help students feel less lonely/make more connections?

- Host more purposeful events that foster interaction beyond going over introductions
- Offer society tasters year-round to give students the opportunity to discover new societies throughout the year
- Work with accommodation services to host more events in accommodation buildings to give those who live together the chance to socialise
- Host more events where students can study together, especially during busy academic periods

- Host more PGR specific events to help them foster a sense of community

How might we help students settle into campus life more?

- Better signage/create a digital map of how to navigate campus
 - Also include accessibility specific version
- Work with local serviced to provide frequent, affordable, easily accessible transport to and from campus

Demographics

Our panel of 1000 students is demographically representative of the University of Exeter's student population but, due to varying response rate on a month-to-month basis, the demographics of this data change survey-to-survey.

The demographics of this report's respondents are illustrated below.

*PNS = Prefer not to Say

Category	Panel Total	Response Total	Category	Panel Total	Response Total
Faculty			Gender		
ESE	363	289 (80%)	Female	721	590 (81%)
HAS	379	316 (83%)	Male	236	177 (75%)
HLS	248	195 (78%)	Non-Binary/ Genderfluid	31	27 (87%)
INTO	10	5 (50%)	PNS*	12	11 (91%)
Campus			Identification with Gender Assigned at Birth		
Streatham	831	677 (81%)	Yes	946	760 (80%)
St Luke's	142	108 (76%)	Sometimes	22	17 (72%)
Distance	27	20 (74%)	No	23	19 (82%)
Domicile			PNS*	9	9 (100%)
UK	739	616 (83%)	Ethnicity		
International (EU)	47	33 (70%)	White	625	536 (85%)
International (Rest of World)	214	156 (72%)	Latin	13	12 (92%)
Mode of Study			Black	36	22 (61%)
Full-Time	951	766 (80%)	Asian	240	166 (69%)
Part-Time	49	39 (79%)	Arab	12	10 (83%)
Study Level			Mixed	51	39 (76%)
			Other	11	11 (100%)

1 st Year	250	198 (79%)	PNS*	12	9 (75%)
2 nd Year	228	194 (85%)	Sexual Orientation		
3 rd Year	172	143 (83%)	Gay	18	13 (72%)
4 th Year	54	45 (83%)	Lesbian	24	23 (95%)
5 th Year	13	11 (84%)	Bisexual	142	118 (83%)
Masters	220	163 (74%)	Pansexual	18	15 (83%)
Other	63	51 (80%)	Asexual	19	15 (78%)
			Queer	30	25 (83%)
Age Bracket			Heterosexual	636	501 (78%)
Under 20	553	460 (83%)	Other	2	2 (100%)
21-30	396	303 (76%)	Unsure	23	19 (82%)
31-40	35	30 (85%)	PNS*	88	74 (84%)
41-50	15	12 (80%)	Disability Status		
51+	1	0 (0%)	No known disability	647	513 (79%)
Widening Participation			Learning disability	110	93 (84%)
Parent	17	13 (76%)	Physical disability	45	36 (80%)
Carer	21	21 (100%)	Mental health condition	190	163 (85%)
Care experienced or care leaver	4	3 (75%)	Other	23	19 (82%)
Estranged from family	12	10 (83%)	PNS*	56	46 (82%)
Refugee or asylum seeker	1	1 (100%)			
None of the above	945	757 (80%)			