



ABCP
*ASSOCIATION OF BRITISH
CHINESE PROFESSORS*
全英华人教授协会

The Impact of COVID-19 on Chinese Applicants' Decisions to Pursue a University Degree in the UK in 2020-21 Academic Year

Results from an Online Survey
(Full Report, Public Version, 28th June 2020)

**ABCP (Association of British Chinese
Professors, 全英华人教授协会)**

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Preface

With the UK government's announcement of plans to cautiously ease out of lockdown, we are looking to the future with hope to get back to some level of normal life and business, and to rebuild our economy. However, for the higher education sector, going back to campus and starting a new academic year in the Autumn will be faced with much uncertainty and many challenges, brought about not least by the possible social distancing requirements should the COVID-19 pandemic drag on for a long period of time. The challenges also arise from the concerns of prospective students both home and overseas due to such uncertainty.

Among the international students, Chinese students make up substantial proportion in many British universities and colleges. Possible reduction in enrolments by Chinese students due to deferrals or withdrawals could have significant impact on the revenue of universities. To better understand the motivations, concerns, preferences and intentions of prospective students would be valuable for development of mitigation, marketing and educational plans for the 2020-21 academic year.

The ABCP (Association of British Chinese Professors) consistent of members who are professors and academics from about 100 UK HEIs, is naturally concerned with the impact of COVID-19 on the UK HE sector's financial health and internationalisation agenda. Recognising the urgent need to have a better understanding of how prospective students and their parents in China are thinking about the situation and their decision tendency for the 2020-21 academic year, we have been conducting a survey through the extensive network we have with many organisations and people in the UK and in China including internationalisation and student recruitment offices of HEIs in the UK and China, international student recruitment agencies in China, BUILA, UUKi, British Council, CBBC, and many individuals who are connected with the ABCP and share the same concerns.

Although there have been some similar surveys conducted by other organisations such as British Council, IDP, and QS, we have identified a gap in a more in-depth survey designed to gauge the motivation, concerns over COVID-19 safety and the general living environment, and views of online teaching and support available of prospective students and their parents. The survey was launched on 12th May 2020 at a Chinese survey platform WJX (<https://www.wjx.cn/m/76691001.aspx>), and lasted for 27 days until 7th June 2020. The total number of responses received is over 10,000, out of which 9648 were considered valid after a screening process and are used to compile this report.

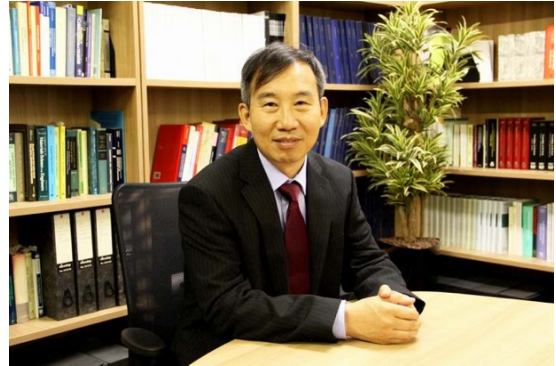
We have shared the results of the survey with relevant organisations in the UK earlier in June so that they can make use of the information to make more informed decisions. Now we are releasing a re-edited version of the report and making it available to the general public for free.

We hope you will find the report useful. If you have any questions on the results of the reports or have advice on what other surveys or services we should do from ABCP or are interested in discussing collaboration with ABCP, please feel free to contact us using the same email address shown above (contact@abcp.org.uk).

With best regards,



Professor Jianguo Lin FREng MEA
President, ABCP
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28th June 2020

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Executive Summary

In this report, we present our detailed analysis of results coming out of an online survey the ABCP organised between 12th May and 7th June 2020 on current and prospective Chinese applicants' intention to pursue tertiary education in the UK in the 2020-21 academic year. The survey comprises five parts: the impact of COVID-19 on applicants' decision to study in the UK; attitudes towards online learning option; support required during the application process; general motivation and expectation of study in the UK; and some basic demographic information including age, gender, degree programme studied, study subject, and status of their application or intention to apply. We also made the survey open to parents so some responses were from parents rather than applicants themselves.

In total we received 10,107 responses, and after a manual screening process 9,648 responses (95.5%) were considered valid. A detailed data analysis using multiple methods was conducted including some statistical tests to help understand significant differences of responses from different subgroups of respondents. The detailed results can be found in the main body of the report. Below we summarise our key findings and give some recommendations to UK HEIs.

Selected Key Findings

- About three in four (74.1%) of the respondents reported that COVID-19 had affected their plan to study in the UK. Respondents planning to study a postgraduate taught (PGT) degree programme were more likely to report such impact than their undergraduate (UG) peers.
- A majority of all respondents (57.5%) preferred postponing their study start until January 2021 to have a complete on-campus learning experience, but a significant portion of all respondents (each with a percentage between 36-38%) were also happy to go for two other options: starting in September 2020 as usual with or without online teaching elements.
- With online learning, more than half (56.7%) of all respondents were concerned about the access to digital learning resources, and about three in four (74.3%) were concerned about their ability to manage online learning, and to understand online content (71.2%). More than six in seven respondents (85.9%) considered it is important to have weekly video-based individual or small group sessions with the lecturer. Only about half of all respondents (49.9%) felt confident in joining online discussions in on remote online teaching and learning platforms.

- As for the application process, slightly less than two in three respondents (64.7%) expected a response within 3 days or one week after making an application, which is more so among UG respondents than their PGT peers.
- The two most important types of information and support during the application process include a clear admission guide (62.6%) and a clear application process (50.9%). UG respondents appeared to consider a clear application process important more than their PGT peers. Male respondents considered a clear application process important more than females. Female respondents were more interested in information on health care than males.
- The top four listed motivations for Chinese applicants to study in the UK universities are: 1) to improve their career prospects (66.6%), 2) to gain a more internationally recognised degree (56.1%), 3) to broaden their life experience (55.4%), and 4) to have a better study environment (49.9%).
- The top three listed important aspects for Chinese students to study in the UK are: 1) to have a local work placement opportunity (54.1%), 2) personal health and safety (44.7%), and 3) friendship with UK students (43.5%).

Selected Recommendations

Based on our understanding of the reasons behind those findings and how UK HEIs could reasonably respond to address some of the major concerns of current and prospective applicants from China, we make the following recommendations to UK HEIs:

- Offering a more flexible arrangement of blended teaching for 2020-21 academic year to accommodate needs of different subgroups of prospective applicants.
- Allowing multiple arrival dates of new students in 2020-21 academic year, particularly allowing late arrivals in January 2021.
- Enhancing communications with offer holders, current applicants and all students to keep them better informed about the NHS system in the UK and local medical and health care support students have access to.
- Providing more support to students on online learning, especially offering small-group video-based sessions to students when lectures are delivered via online teaching and providing more effective e-learning support.
- Introducing more local placement opportunities and extended research projects to students, especially to those who will arrive in the UK late in January 2021 for studying a PGT degree programme so that they can still have a complete experience of staying in the UK for a whole year.
- Considering conducting own surveys with offer holders, current applicants and students from China and other foreign countries to get a better local understanding

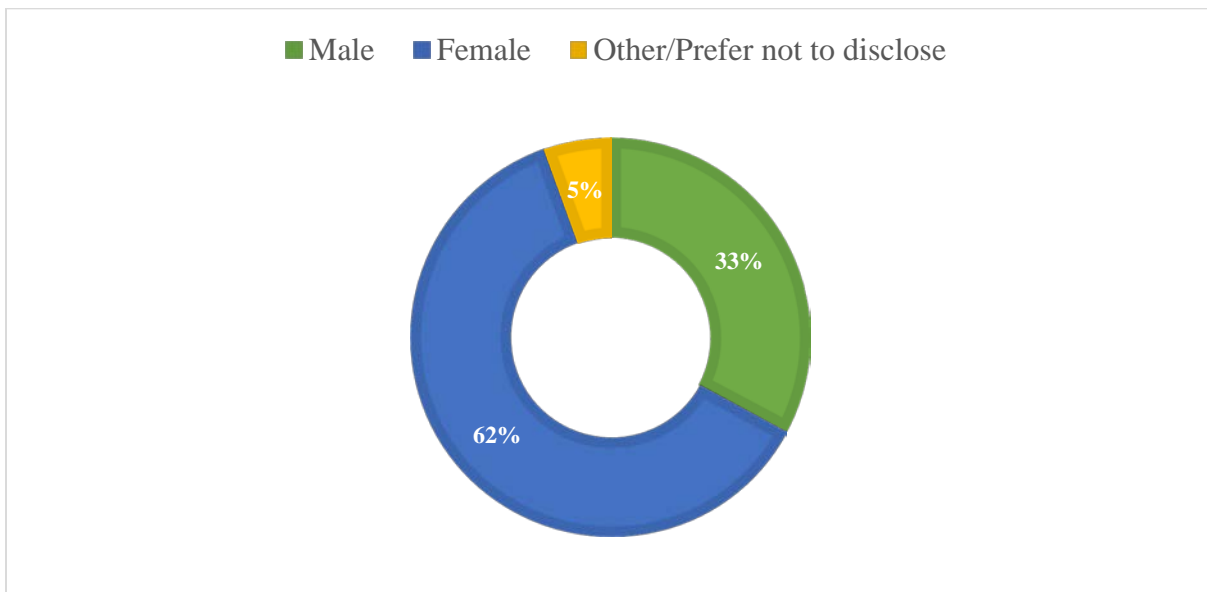
of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected their study plans and their main concerns and wishes.

We would like to highlight that although the survey targeted current and prospective applicants from China, we believe a lot of key findings apply to applicants from many other countries as well especially those from East and Southeast Asia in general. The recommendations above should therefore be applied to not only Chinese applicants and students, but also all overseas ones.

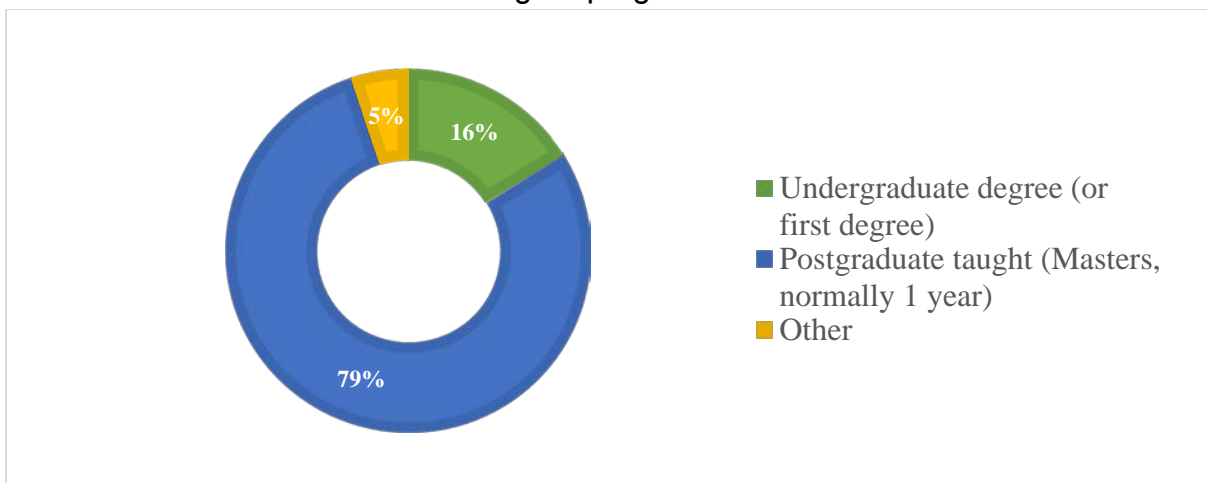
Part I. Demographics of Survey Participants

We received 10,107 responses and after a careful manual screening we identified 9,648 (95.5%) as valid responses. All results in this report are based on these valid responses. A majority of valid respondents were female (62%) and planned to study a postgraduate taught (PGT) degree programme (79%). Subject wise, around half (49%) of respondents planned to pursue a degree in social sciences¹. More than 3 in four (78.7%) respondents reported their age to be around 18-24, the expected age range for people who are interested in pursuing an undergraduate (UG) or a PGT degree. The detailed distributions of respondents for the four key factors are given below.

Gender

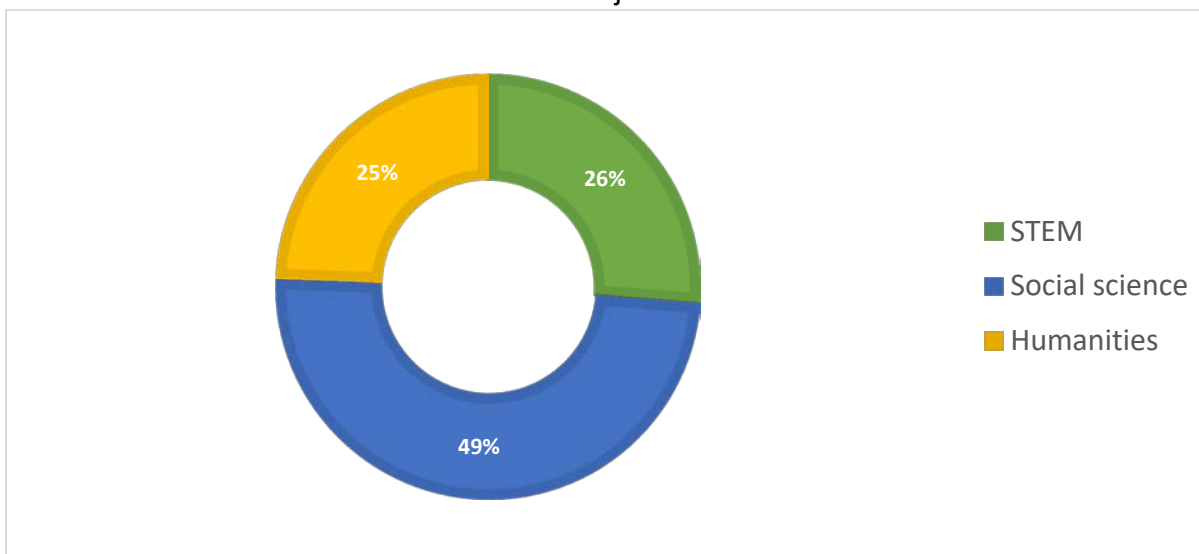
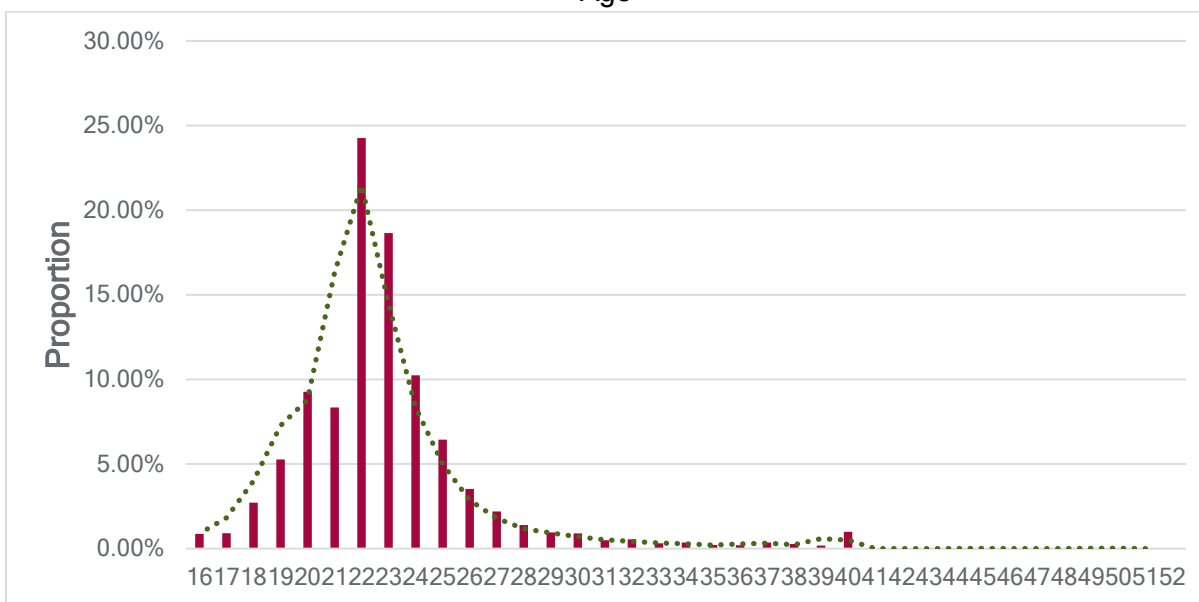


Degree programme



¹ The data on subjects is based on 5,628 responses (58.3% of all valid responses), which could be programmatically processed.

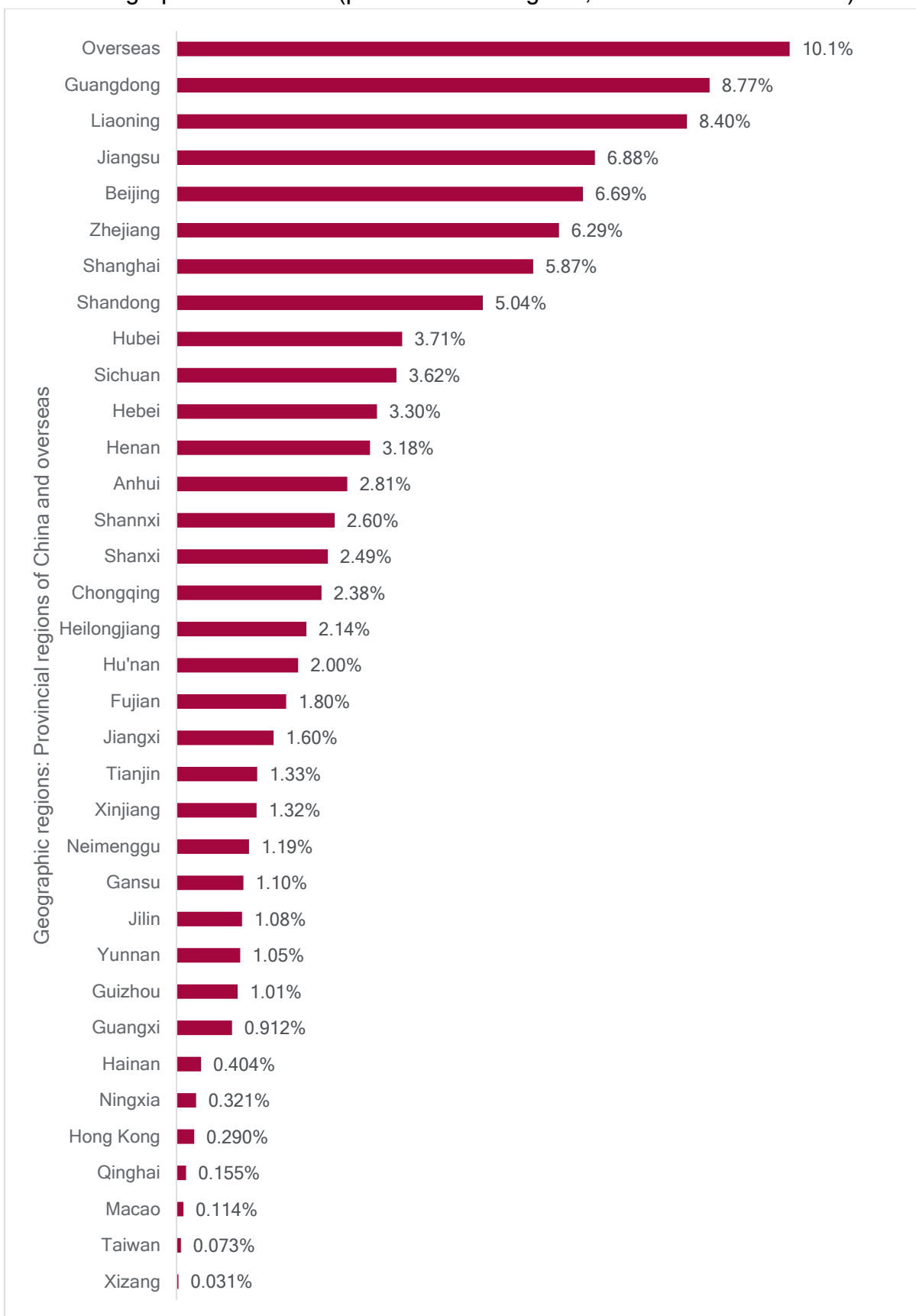
Subject

Age²

The survey platform also automatically collected IP addresses from respondents and converted them to geo-locations. Most (89.9%) respondents were from the mainland of China, but we also received some responses from people living overseas (10.1%) most in the UK (8.9%), and a small number (46) from the Greater China regions including Hong Kong (28), Macau (11) and Taiwan (7). A detailed distribution of geo-locations of all respondents is shown on the next page.

² A very small number of respondents reported an age older than 40. Examining their overall responses we could see they seemed mature applicants who planned to study a degree to improve their career perspectives in subjects such as management. Some however may be parents and mis-reported their own age as their child's age. Due to the tiny portion of such responses, we do not expect the results are significantly impacted by any errors that may have been introduced by these responses. In addition, one valid respondent decided not to disclose his/her age.

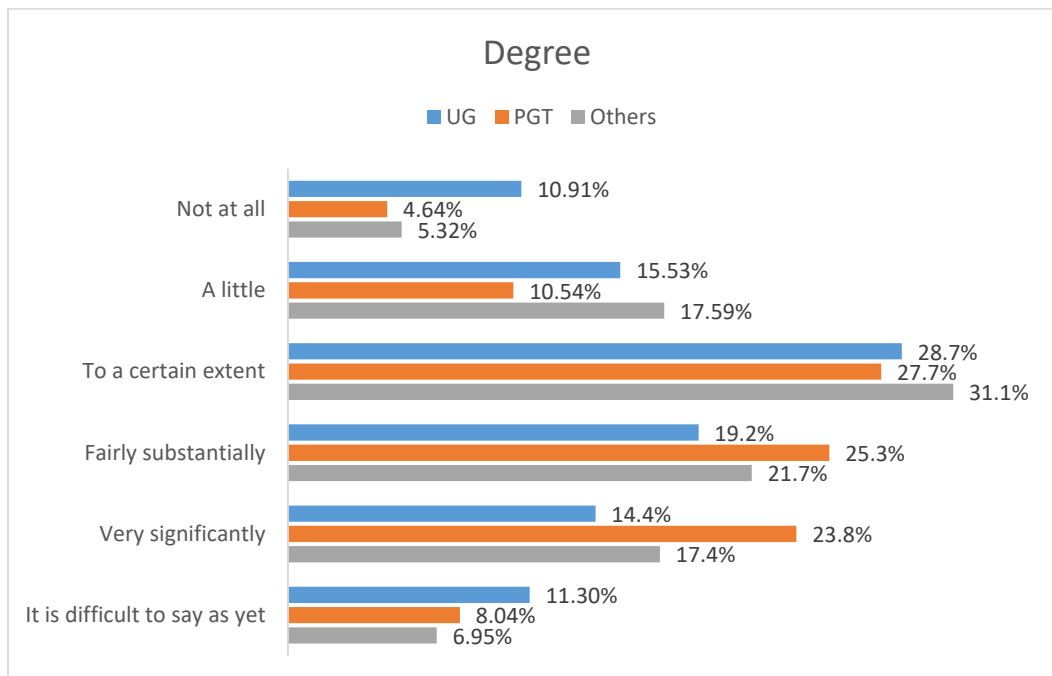
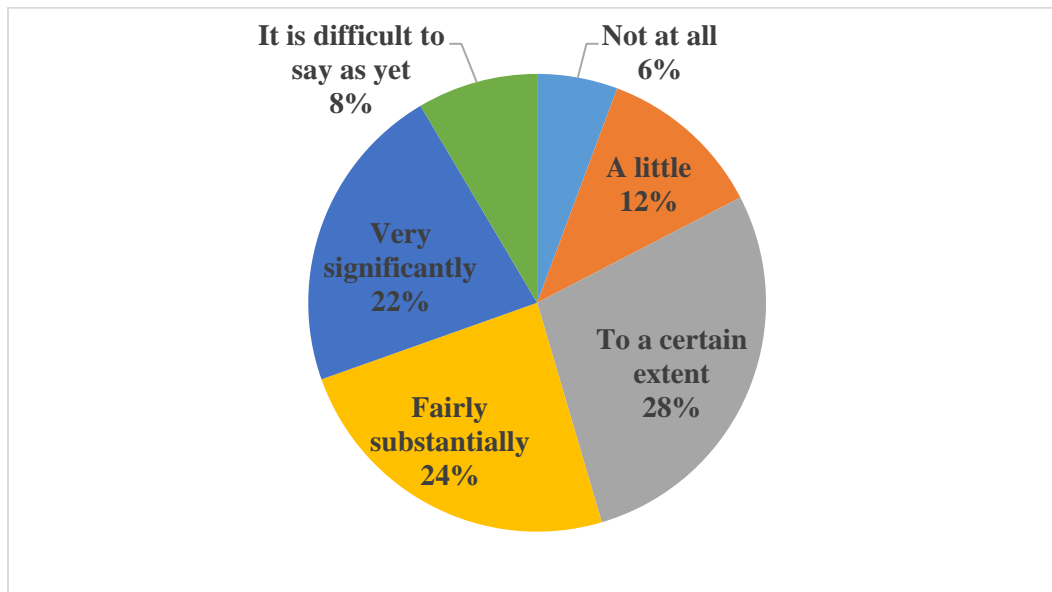
Geographic distribution (provinces and regions, based on IP addresses)



Part II. Impact of COVID-19

Question: Overall, to what extent have your plans to study in the UK been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic?

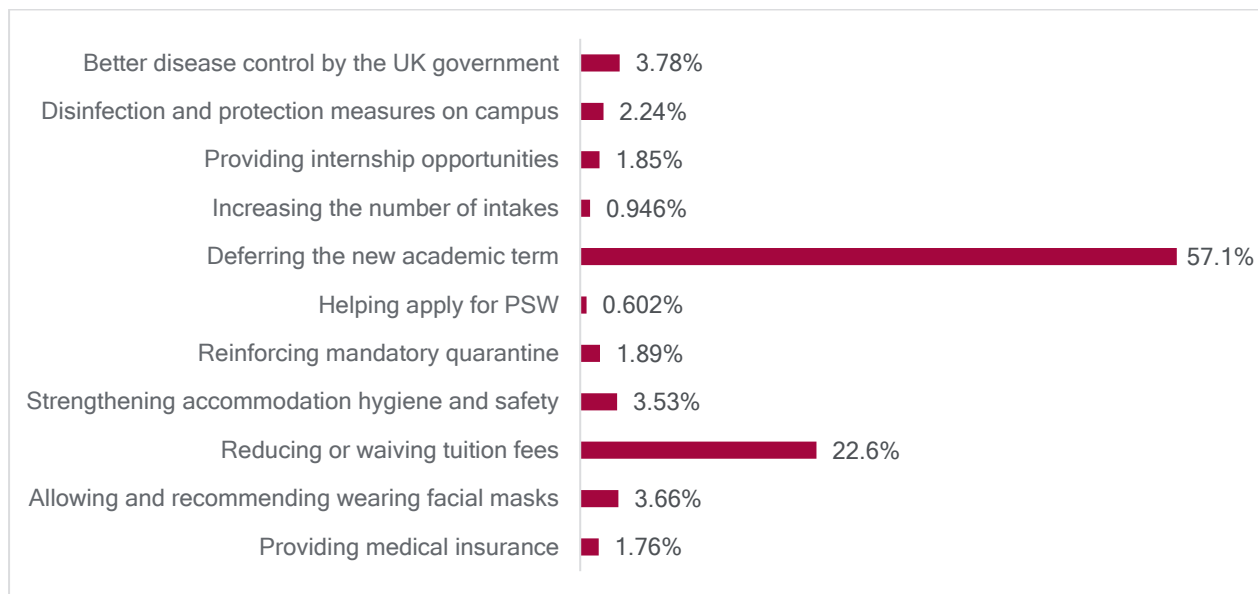
COVID-19 affected almost 3 in 4 (74.1%) respondents' plan to study in the UK, especially for those who planned to pursue a PGT degree (76.7% vs. 62.3% for UG respondents). The following charts show the overall distribution of different opinions of all respondents and those who planned to pursue different degree programmes ("Others" = postgraduate research or visitors).



Question: Please use the space below to comment on how your plans have/have not been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and to suggest any services and support that could be provided by the UK university to help you plan your application.

This question is open-ended and almost all (98.7%) respondents entered some free texts. We analysed the frequencies of relevant keywords in such free texts and conducted a qualitative analysis of the free-formatted texts including at least one frequently appeared keyword. This gives a sample size of 5,011 responses (51.9%) for further analysis. Note that our analysis does not cover all responses and the qualitative analysis was conducted by a single person so there are likely unintended human errors. We therefore do not base our recommendations and key findings on analysis of answers to this question, but used it as a useful reference.

Out of these 5,011 responses, we identified 2,325 recommendations and wishes and classified them into 11 categories, whose distributions are shown below. The top two recommendations/wishes are clearly dominating: deterring the new academic term (57.1%), and reducing or waiving tuition fees (22.6%).

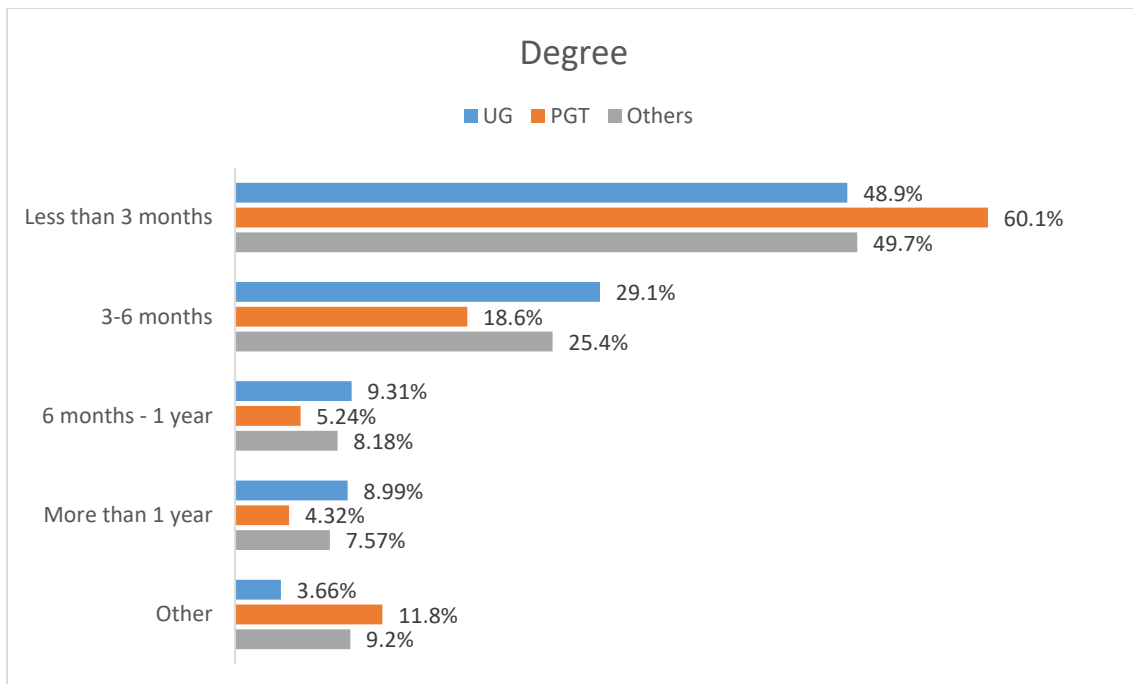
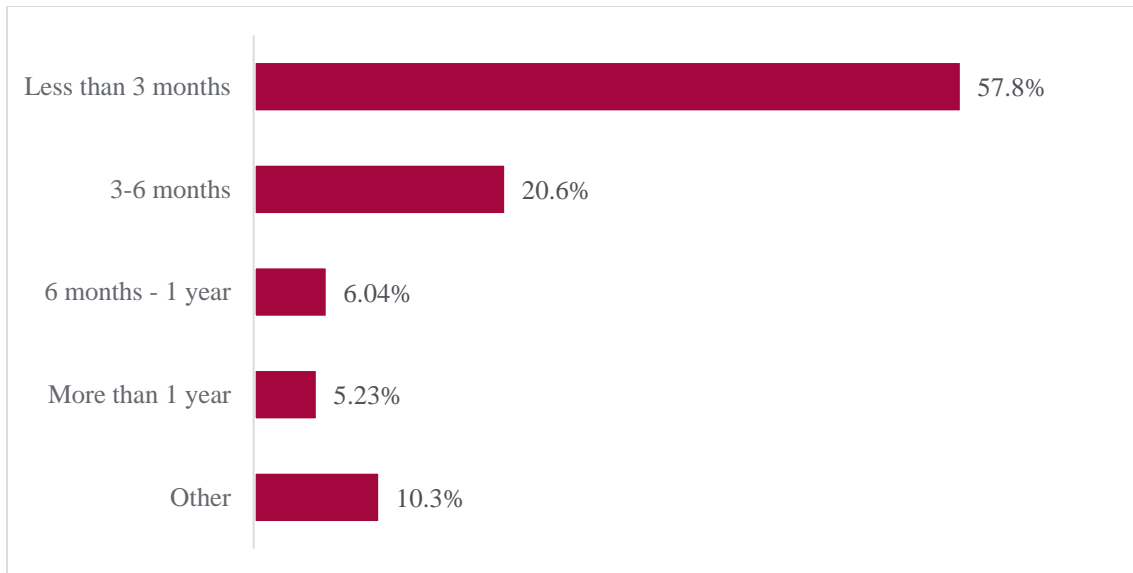


In addition, we also identified 2,807 expressed concerns and classified them into 13 categories, whose distributions are shown below. Among all the concerns, nearly one in four (25.3%) concerns are about online teaching: 18.2% about the benefit-cost ratio of online teaching may not be high enough, and 7.13% about the quality of online teaching. Other major concerns include: increased difficulties in applying for study (13.7%), personal safety (11.0%), difficulties in receiving a visa (9.94%), problems around English language tests (8.34%), health (6.95%), being unable to start study in time (6.06%), uncertainty of graduation (5.70%), hostile attitude towards Chinese (5.34%). A number of respondents (3.53%) were considering having a gap year to manage the uncertainty. As a whole, the concerns expressed are broad and cover many aspects.

Part III. Attitudes towards Online Learning

Question: Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is possible that your university would decide to deliver part of the curriculum online. How long would you accept online provision before you would consider cancelling or deferring your study?

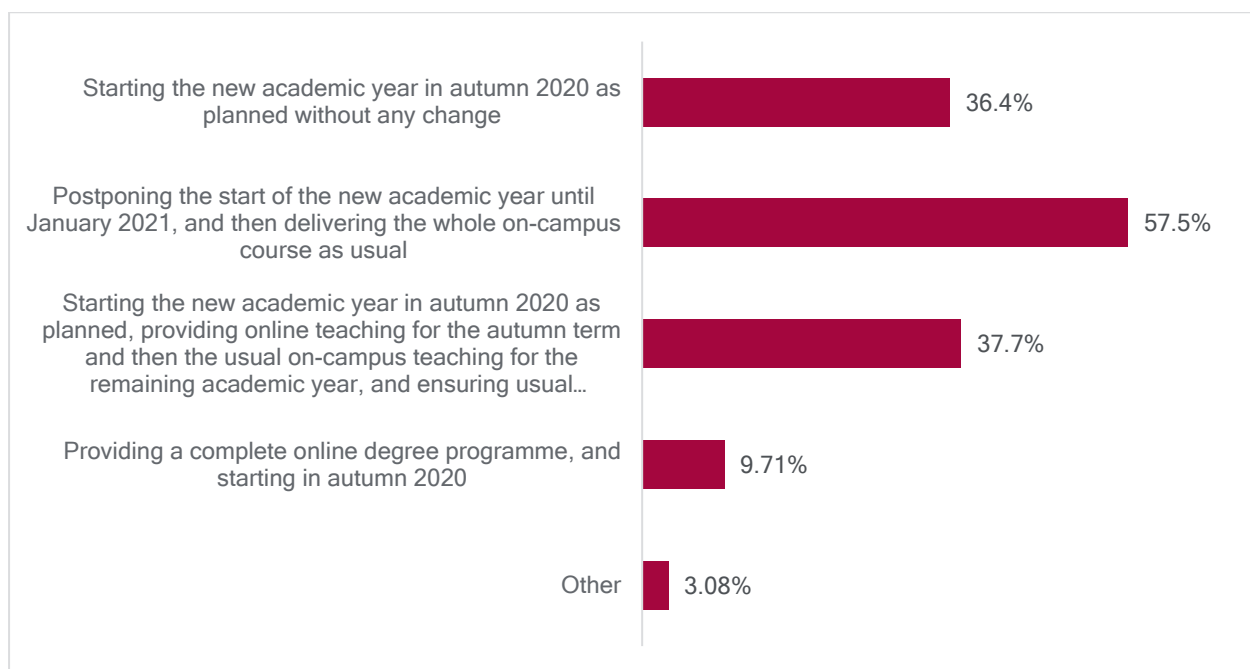
Over half of all applicants (57.8%) preferred a shorter period of online learning (less than 3 months), which is favoured even more among PGT respondents than among UG respondents (60.1% vs. 48.9%).



994 respondents (10.3% of all) also chose to fill in free-formatted texts for this question. Among those, 833 respondents (8.63% of all) could accept no online teaching or online teaching up to two months, including 621 (6.44% of all) said they could not accept any online teaching, 175 (1.81% of all) said they could accept online teaching if it will run for no longer than one month, and 37 (0.383% of all) said they could tolerate for until two months.

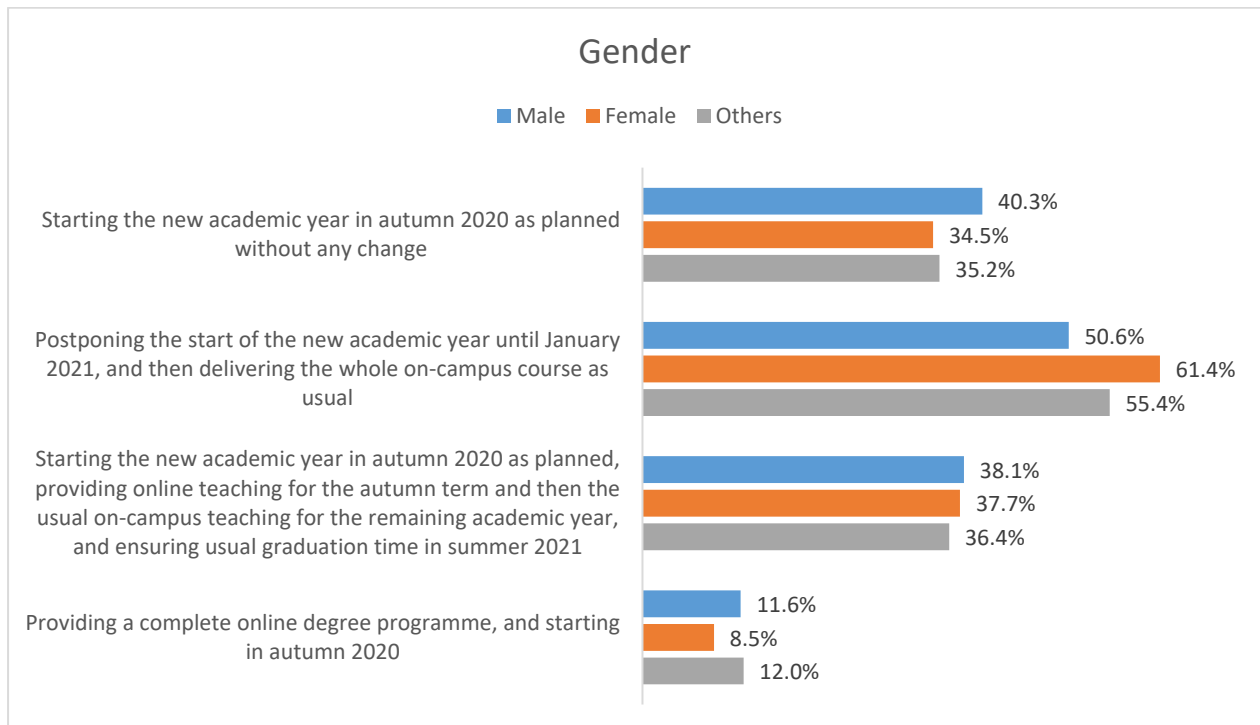
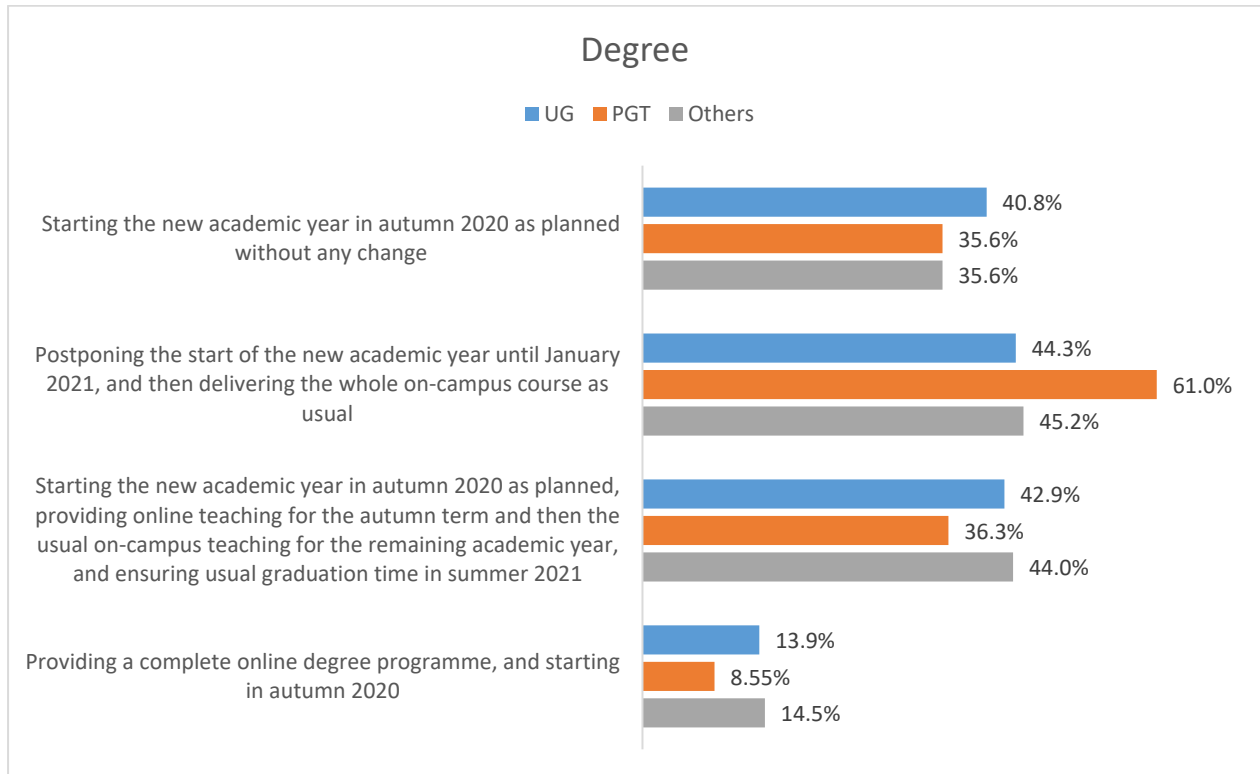
Question: If you are not planning on postponing or cancelling your study plan in the UK in 2020-2021 academic year, which of the following teaching arrangement plans would you accept?

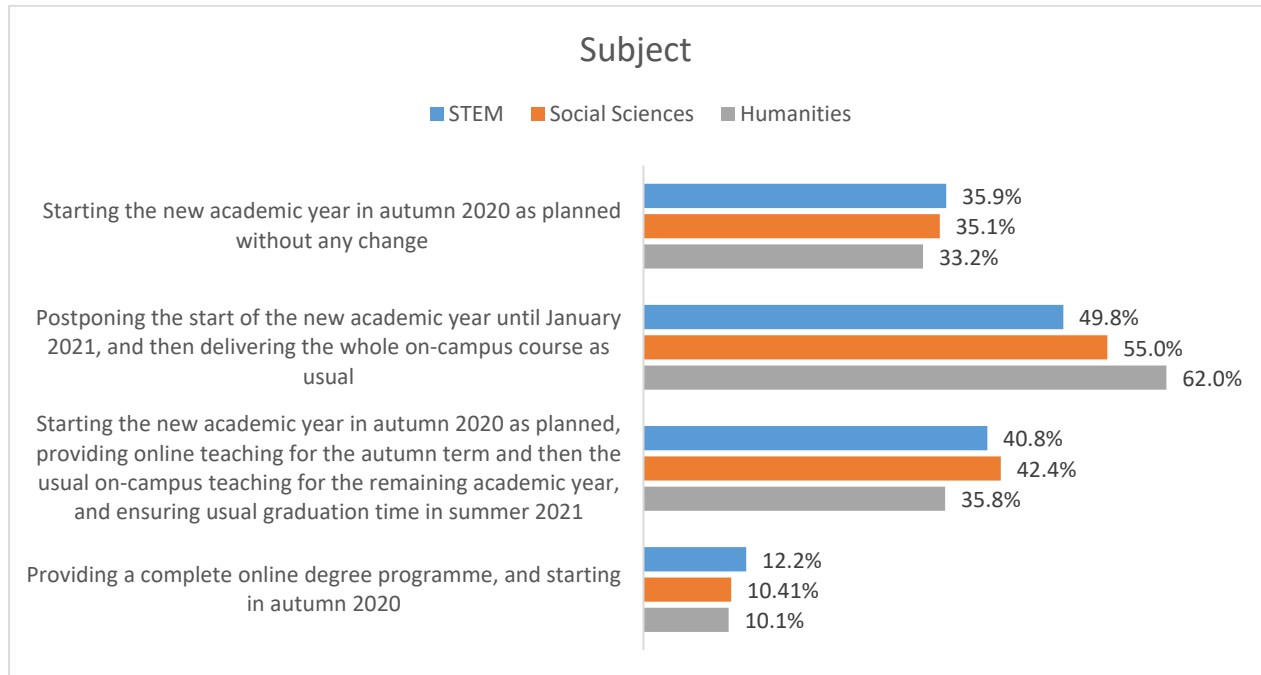
A majority of all respondents (57.5%) preferred postponing their study start until January 2021 to have a complete on-campus learning experience, but a significant portion of all respondents (each with a percentage between 36-38%) were also happy to go for two other options: starting in September 2020 as usual with or without online teaching elements.



The postponed start in January 2021 was especially favoured by PGT (61.0%, comparing with 44.3% among UG respondents) and female respondents (61.4%, comparing with 50.6% among male respondents). Subject wise, respondents planning to study a degree in humanities preferred the postponed start in January 2021 much more than those planning to do a social sciences or STEM degree (62.0% vs. 55.0% and 49.8%), which may be related to a different perspective of the job market (new recruitments for social sciences or STEM degree holders may be more arranged in summer, the traditional end of an academic year).

The detailed bar charts showing how this question was answered by different subgroups of respondents are shown on the next two pages.



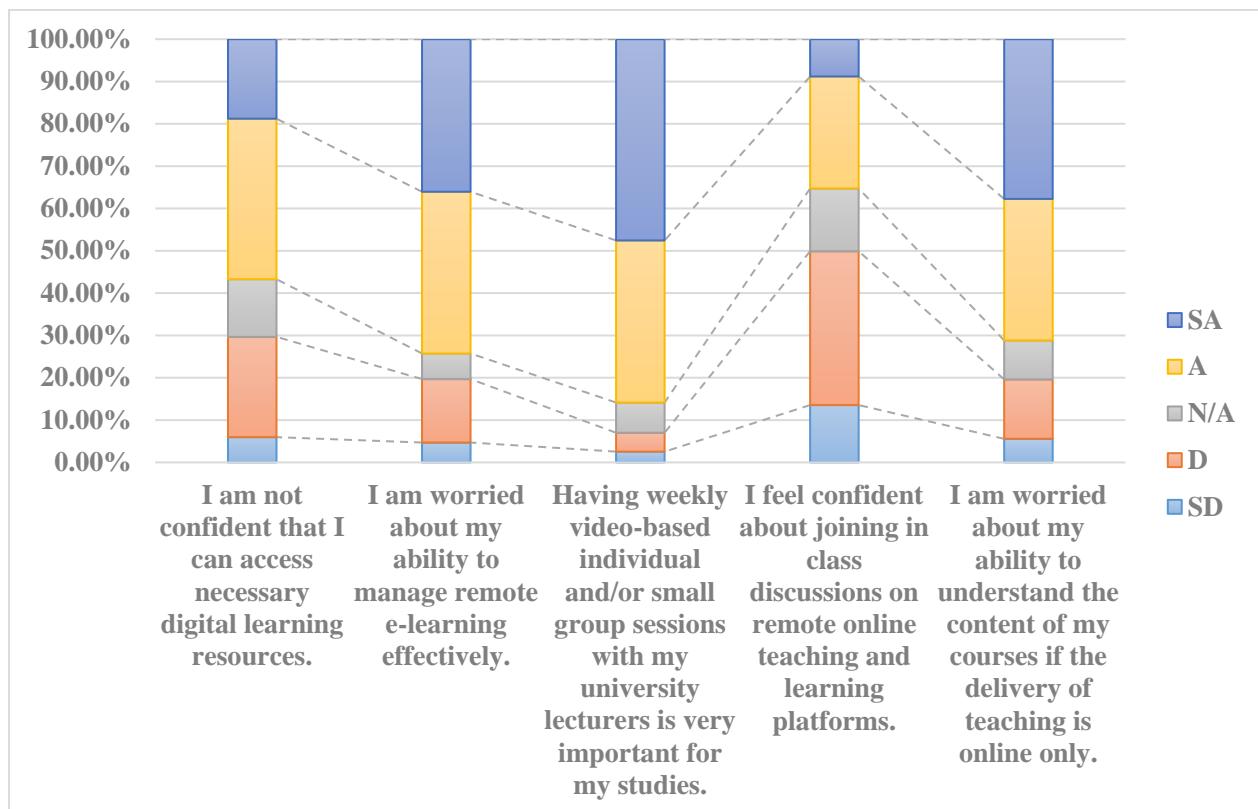


279 respondents (2.89% of all) chose to fill in free-formatted text for this question. Their opinions are quite diverse and do not significantly change the results presented above based on the extreme majority of all respondents.

Question: What are your views about learning online with a UK university during the COVID-19 pandemic? Please indicate the extent to which you agree with each of the following statements using one of the five options.

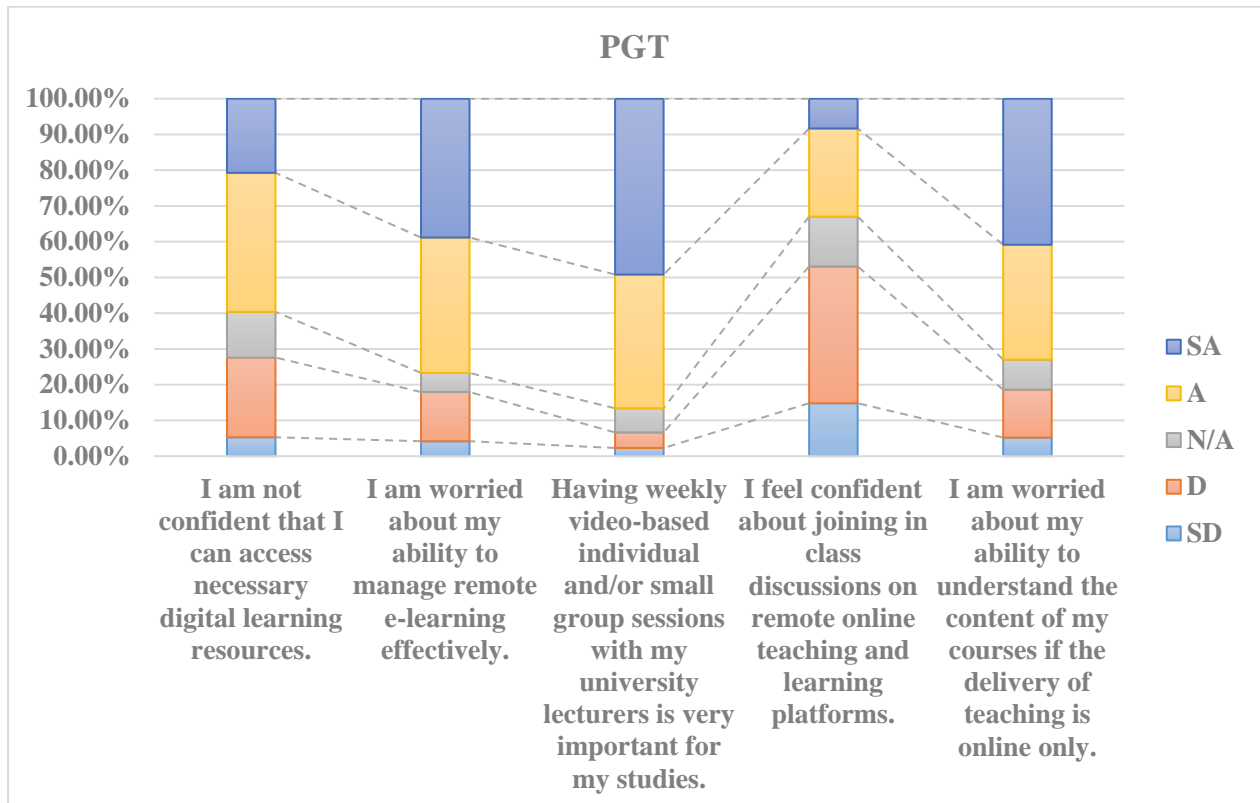
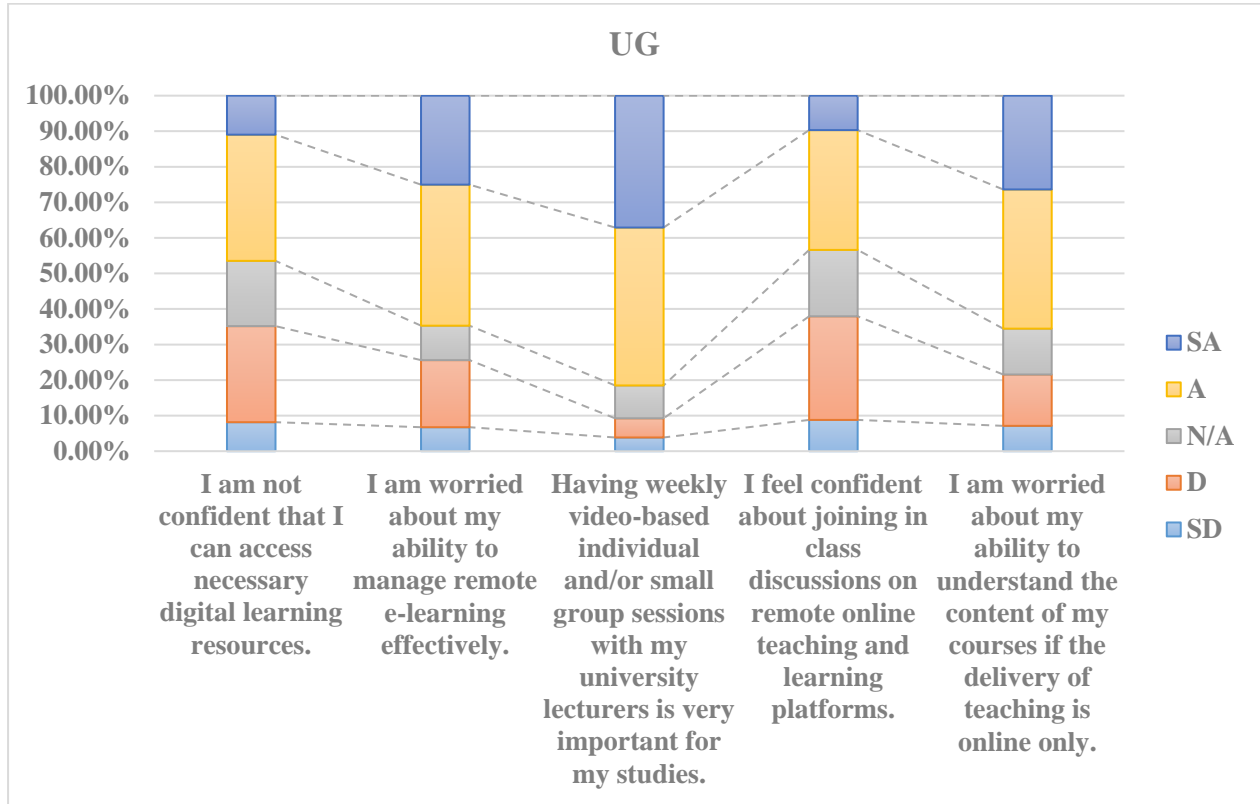
Strongly Disagree = SD; Disagree = D; Agree = A; Strongly Agree = SA; Not Applicable = N/A

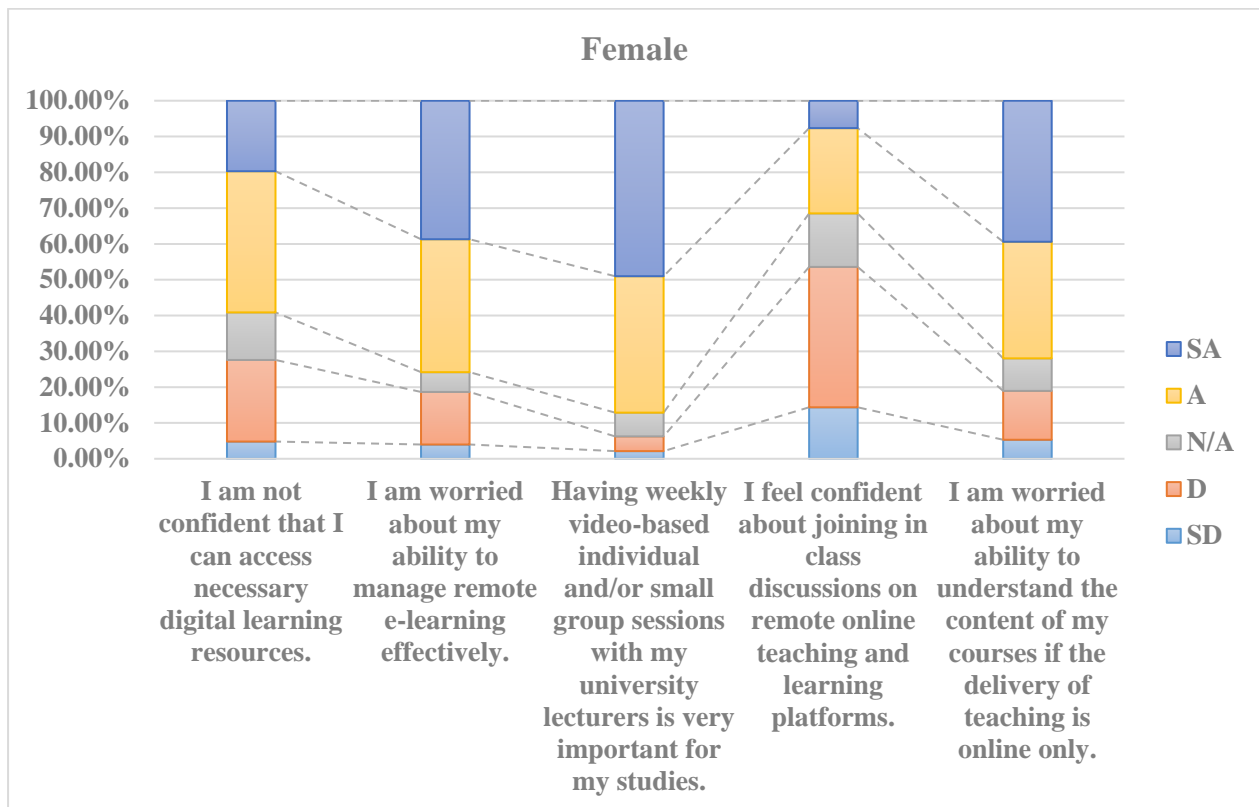
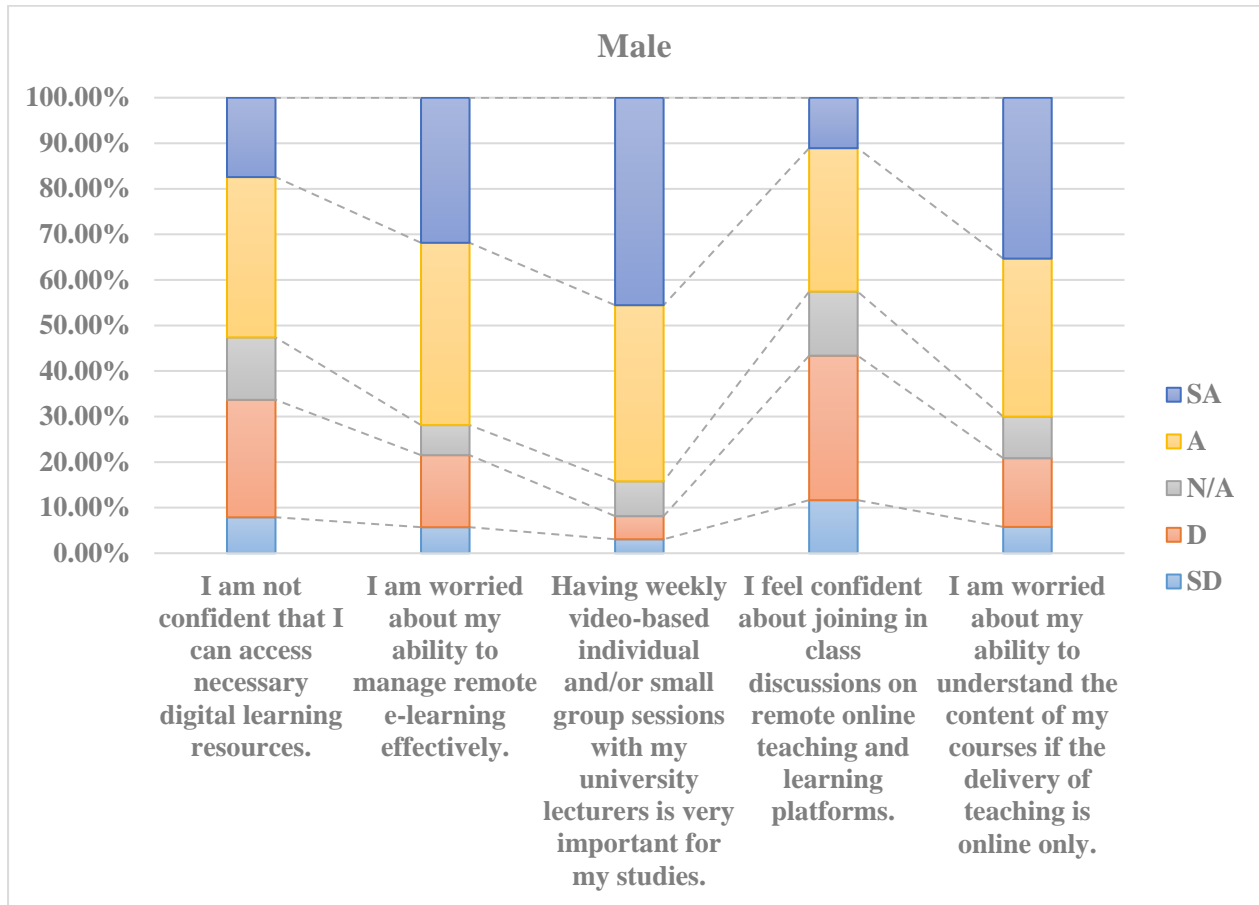
With online learning, more than half (56.7%) of all respondents were concerned about the access to digital learning resources, and about three in four (74.3%) were concerned about their ability to manage online learning, and to understand online content (71.2%). An extreme majority of all respondents (85.9%) considered it is important to have weekly video-based individual or small group sessions with the lecturer. Only about half of all respondents (49.9%) felt confident in joining online discussions in on remote online teaching and learning platforms.

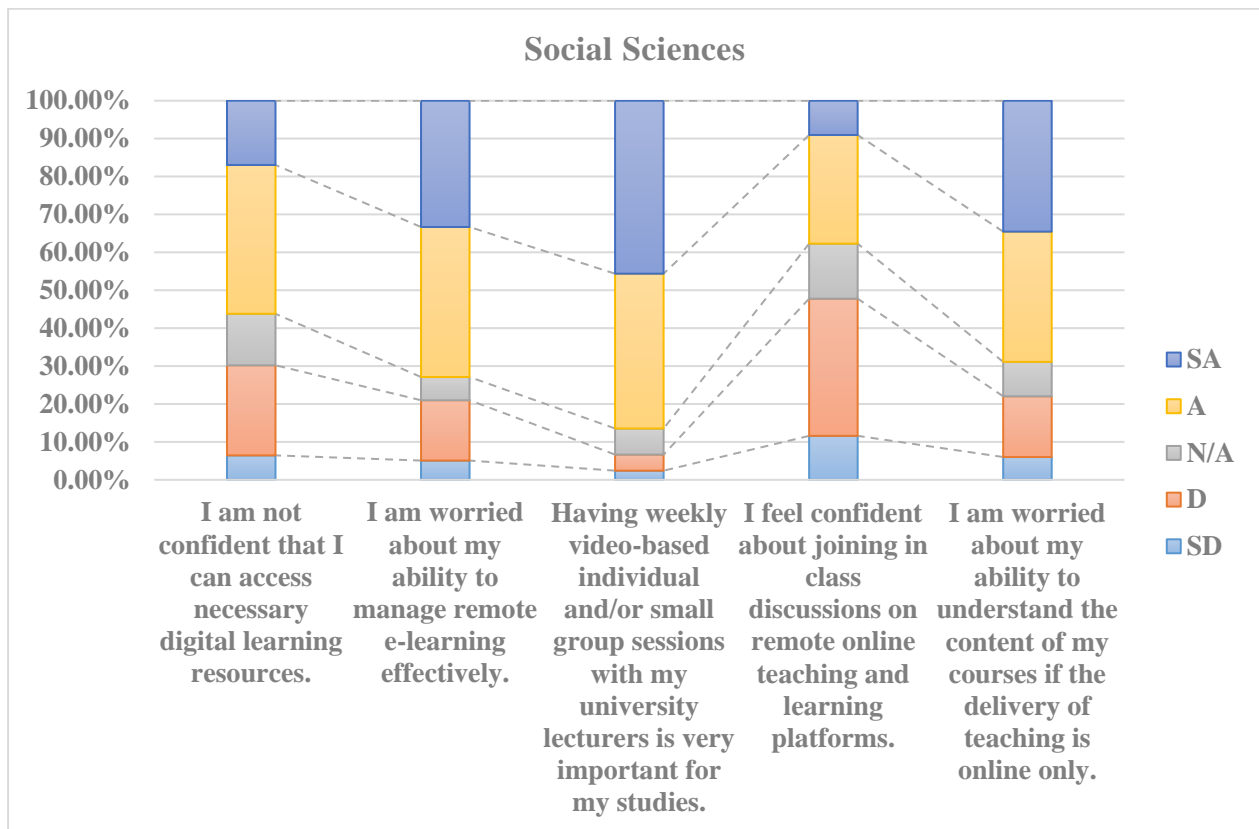
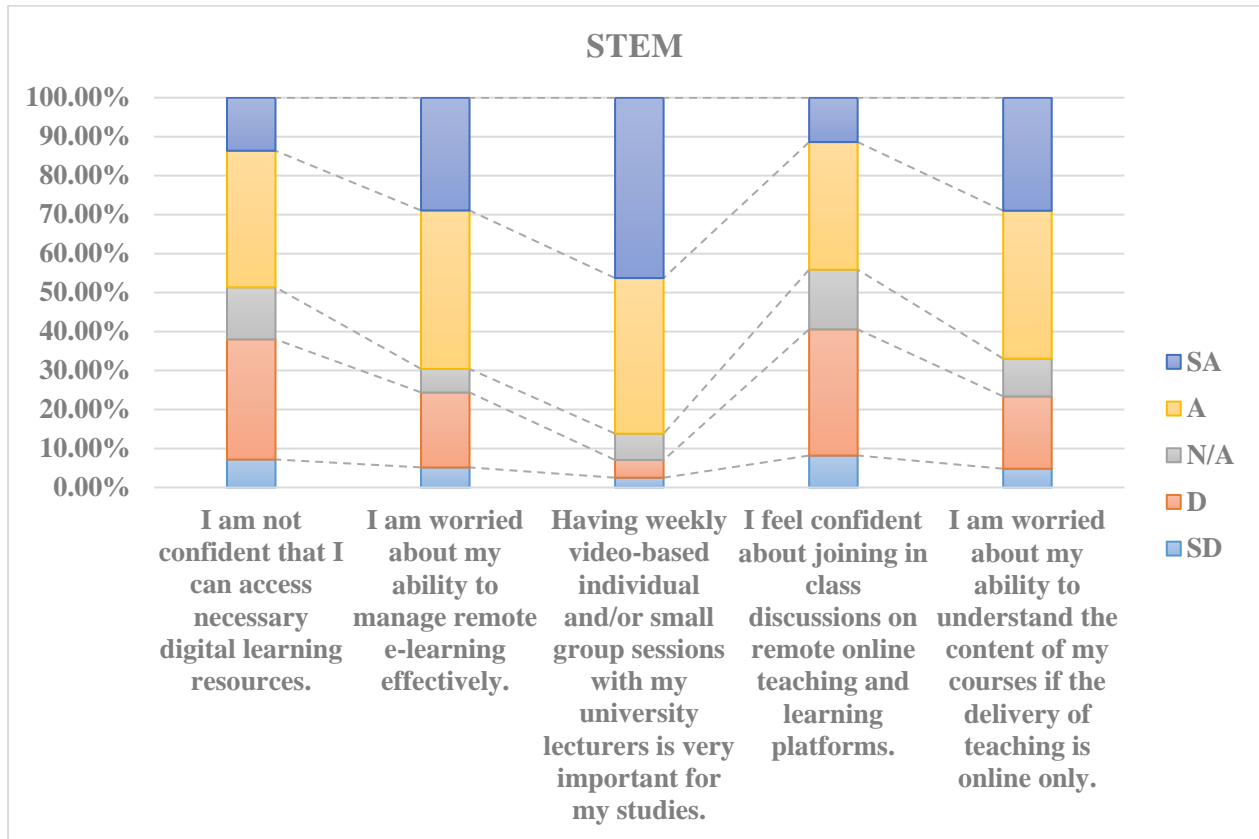


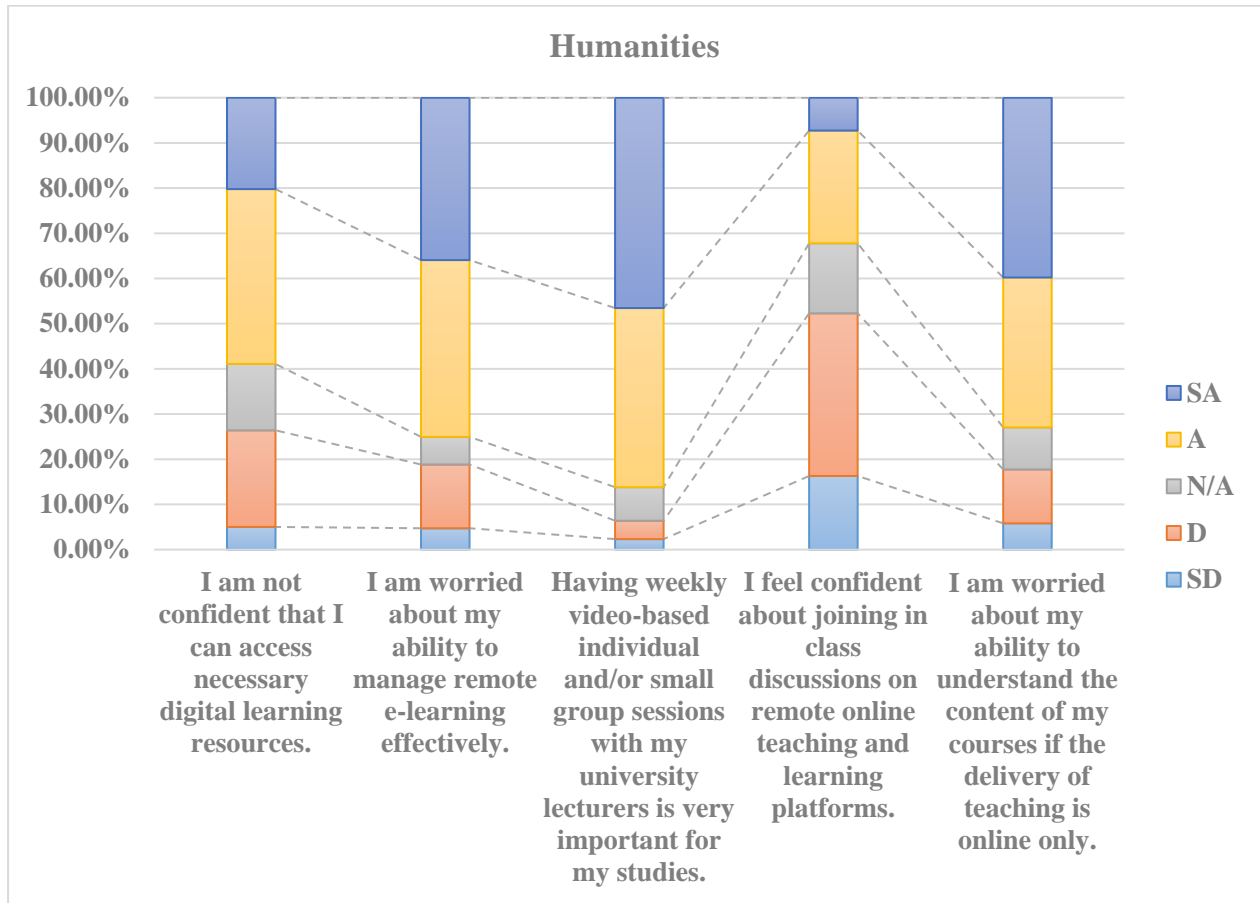
Comparing PGT and UG respondents, the former had more concerns on online teaching and learning (access to digital learning resources - 59.6% vs. 46.5%, ability to manage online learning - 76.7% vs. 64.7%, understand online content - 73.0% vs. 65.5%). Comparing female and male respondents, the former had slightly more concerns on online teaching and learning (access to digital learning resources - 59.1% vs. 52.6%, ability to manage online learning - 75.8% vs. 71.9%, understand online content - 72.0% vs. 70.0%). Subject wise, respondents who planned to study a humanities and social sciences degree had more concerns online teaching and learning (access to digital learning resources - 56-59% vs. 49%, ability to manage online learning - 73-75% vs. 70%, understand online

content - 69-73% vs. 67%). The corresponding bar charts reflecting differences between the different subgroups are shown below.







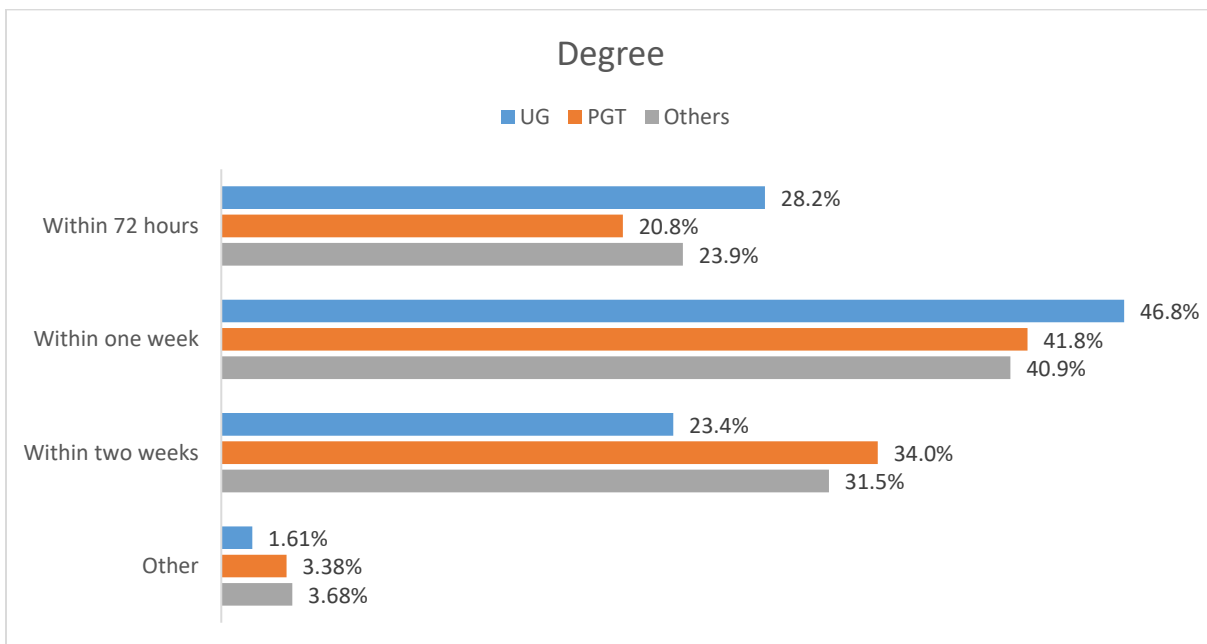
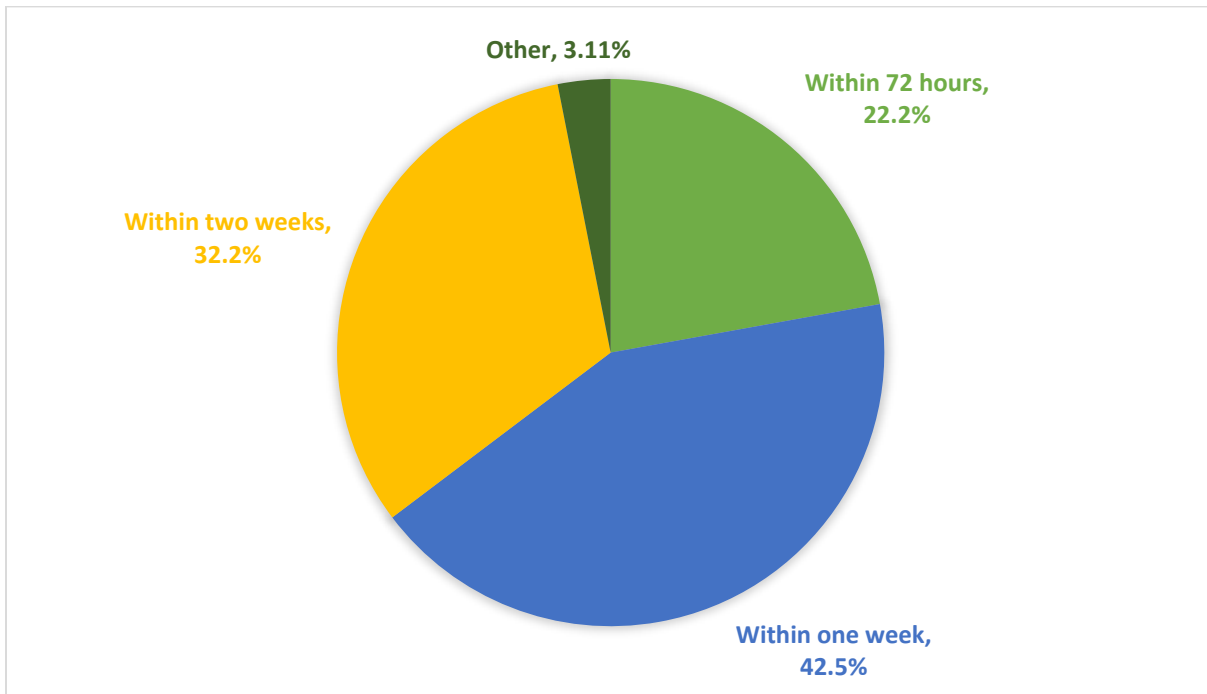


379 respondents (5.45% of all) chose to fill in additional free-formatted texts for the question. The responses are quite diverse and do not significantly change the above results reflected from the extreme majority described above.

Part IV. Support in Applicant Process

Question: After you have submitted your application, when will you expect to receive a response from the university's administration office?

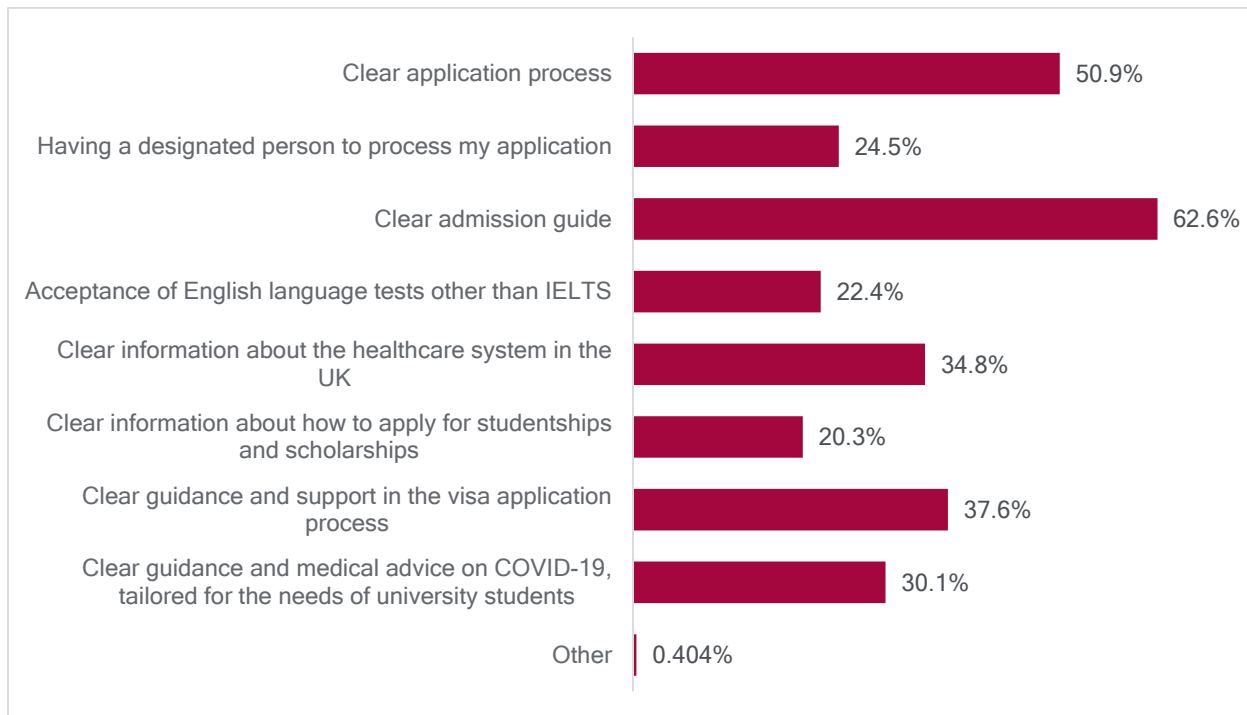
Slightly less than two in three respondents (64.7%) expected a response within 3 days or one week after making an application, which is more so among UG respondents than their PGT peers (75.0% vs. 62.6%).



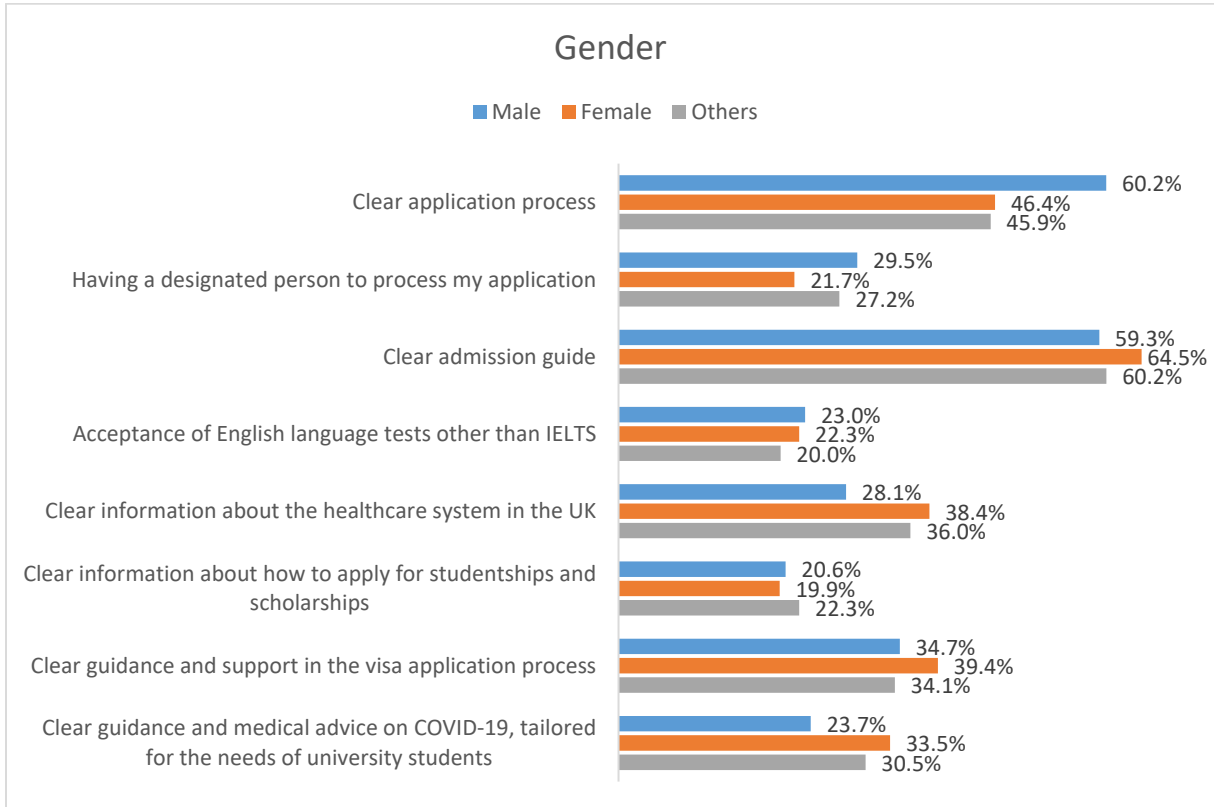
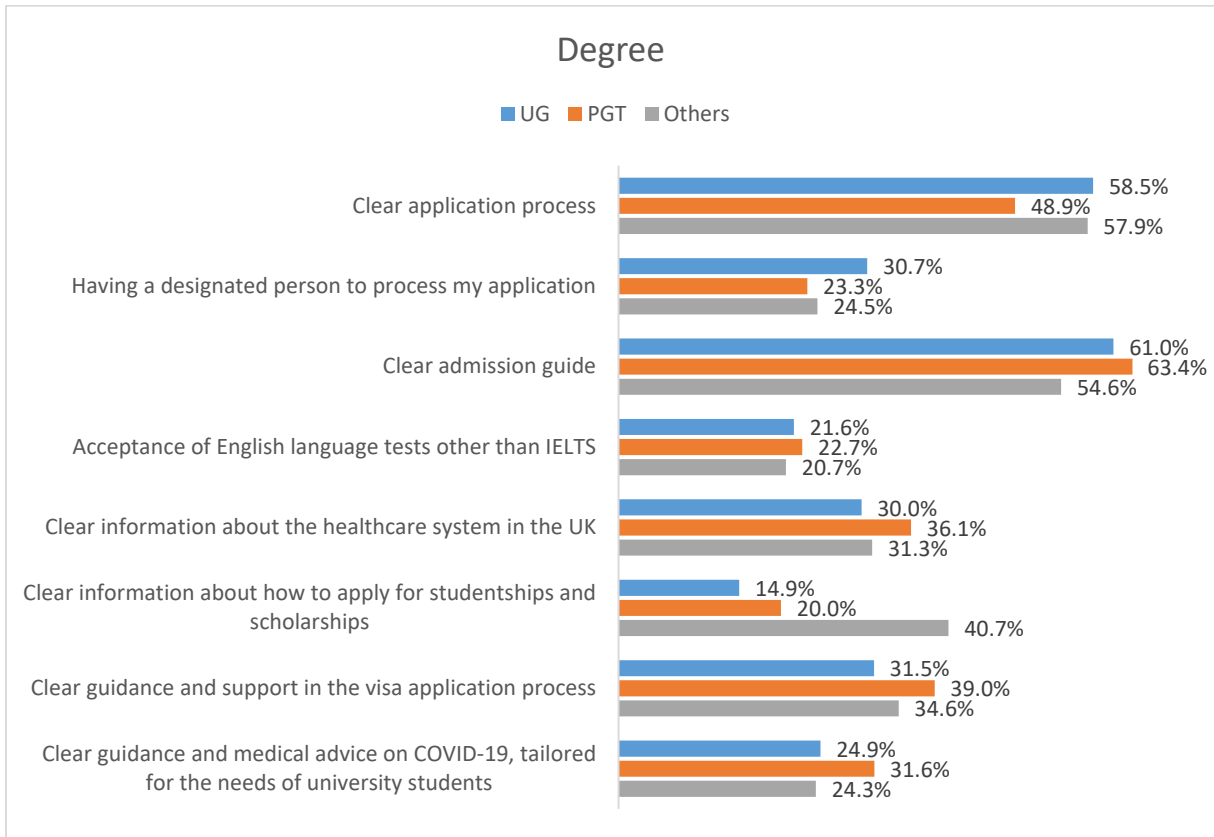
299 respondents (3/10% of all) chose to fill in free-formatted text for the question. Most such responses are aligned with the overall results reported above: 134 respondents would like responses within one month, and 61 ones up to two months.

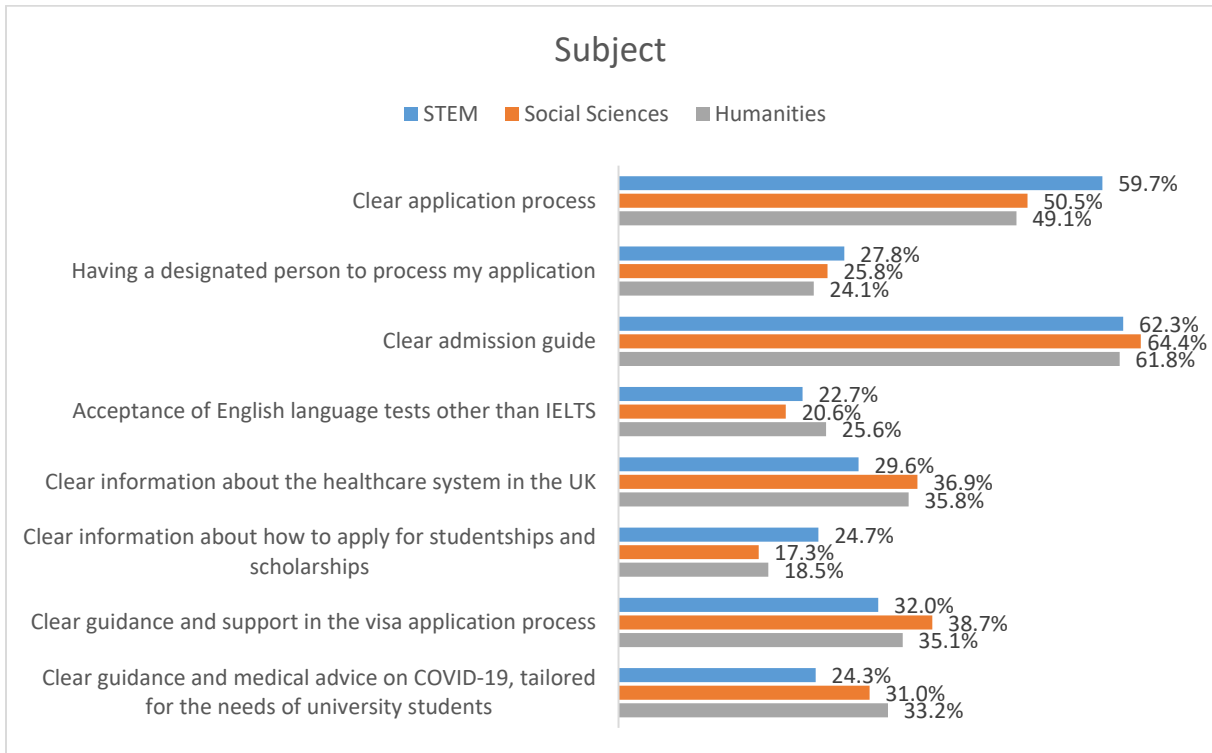
Question: The following statements are about the support and guidance that UK universities may provide for foreign students. Please tick up to three items that are most important to you.

The two most important types of information and support during the application process include a clear admission guide (62.6%) and a clear application process (50.9%). UG respondents appeared to consider a clear application process important more than their PGT peers (58.5% vs. 48.9%). Male respondents considered a clear application process important more than females (60.2% vs. 46.4%). Female respondents were more interested in information on health care than males (38.4% vs. 28.1%).



Detailed bar charts visualising differences of responses from different subgroups are shown on the next two pages.



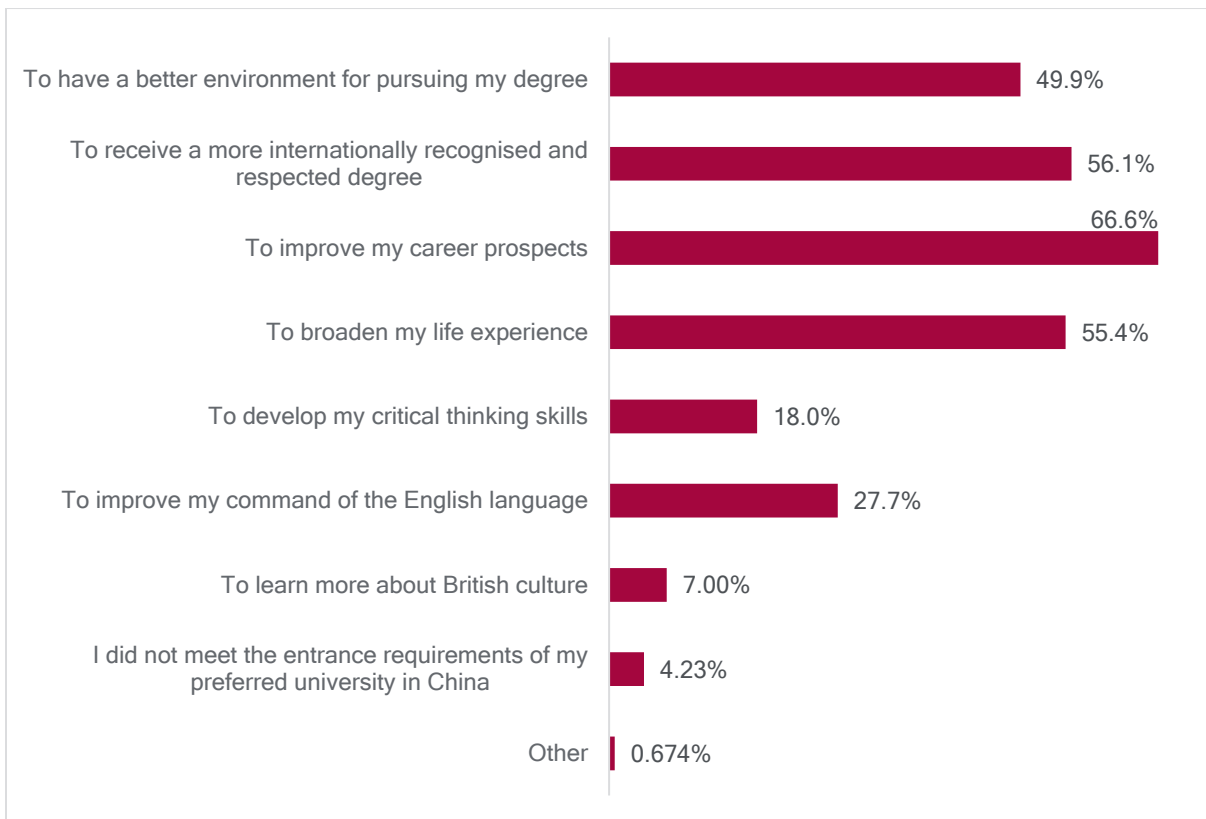


39 respondents (0.404%) also filled in free-formatted text for this question. Such a small number of responses do not make any difference to the results described above, so we do not cover the responses here.

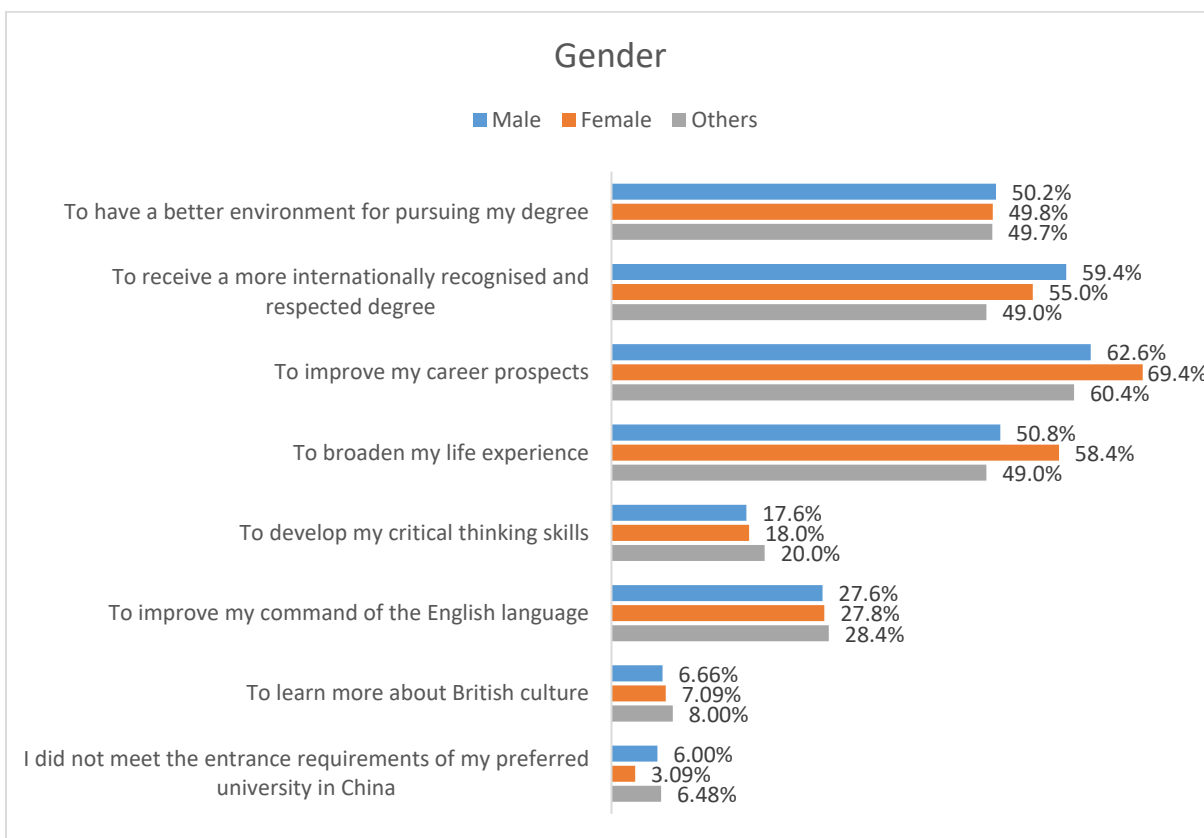
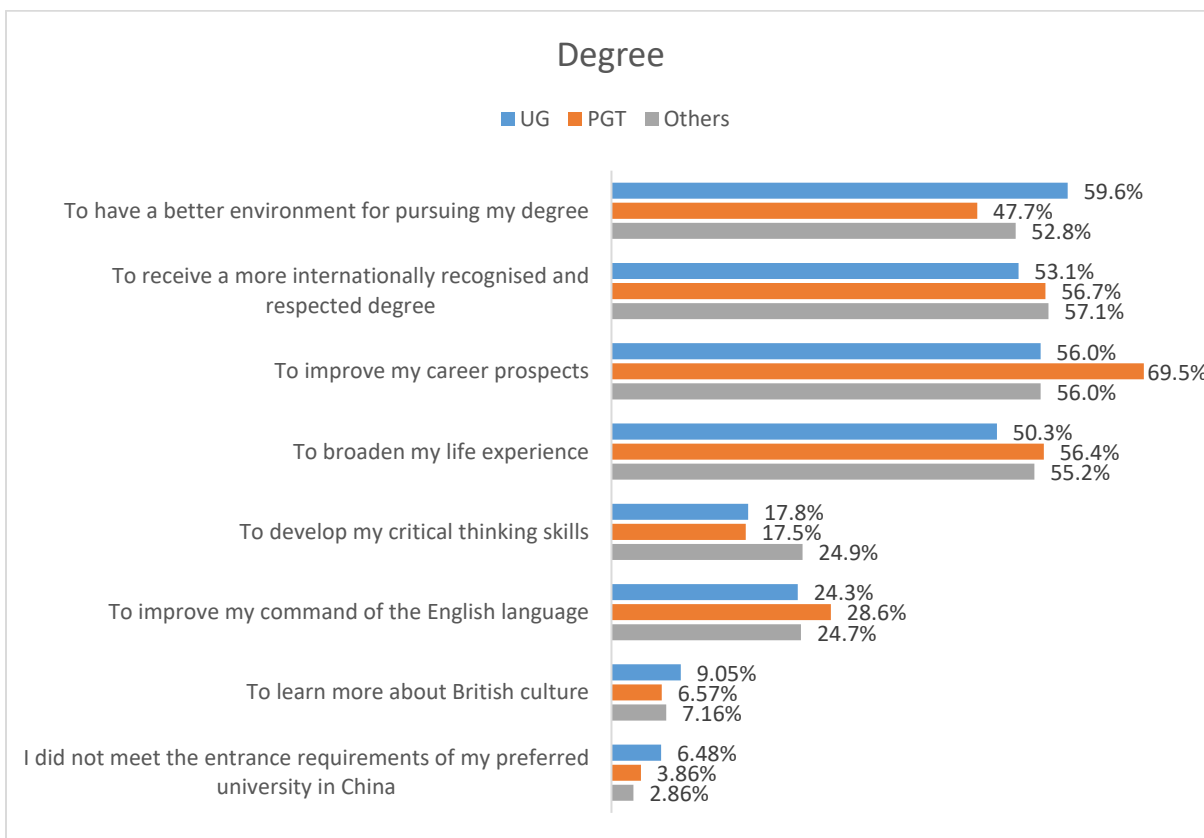
Part V. Why Study in the UK?

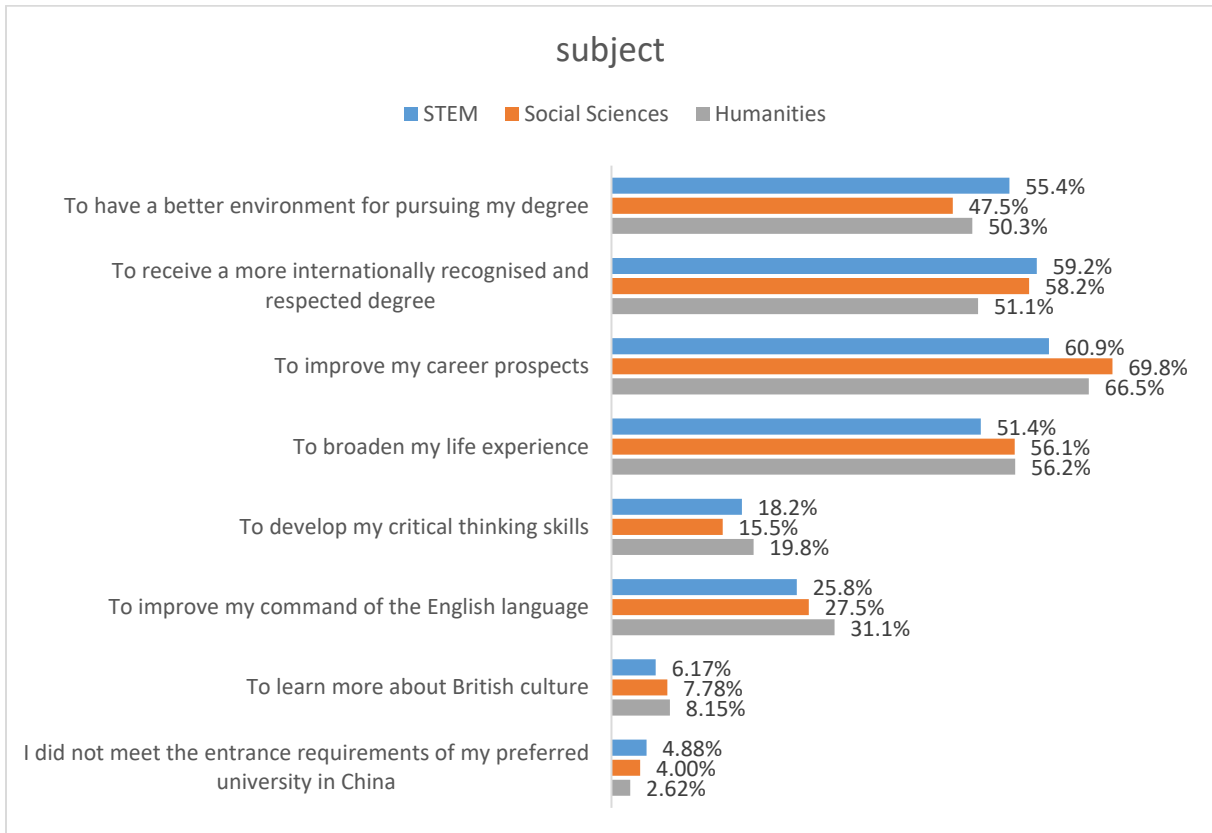
Question: What are the most important reason(s) for you to consider studying in the UK (please choose up to 3 reasons)?

The top four listed motivations for Chinese applicants to study in the UK universities are: 1) to improve their career prospects (66.6%), 2) to gain a more internationally recognised degree (56.1%), 3) to broaden their life experience (55.4%), and 4) to have a better study environment (49.9%).



There are some notable differences, e.g., improving career prospects is more common among PGT respondents than their UG peers (69.5% vs. 56.0%), UG respondents cared more about a better study environment than their PGT peers (59.6% vs. 47.7%), and respondents who planned to study a humanities degree programme were less motivated by career prospects than their peers in STEM and social sciences (55% vs. 64% and 70%). There are also some observable patterns between male and female respondents but the differences are less significant. The following bar charts show the differences for the three factors more clearly.

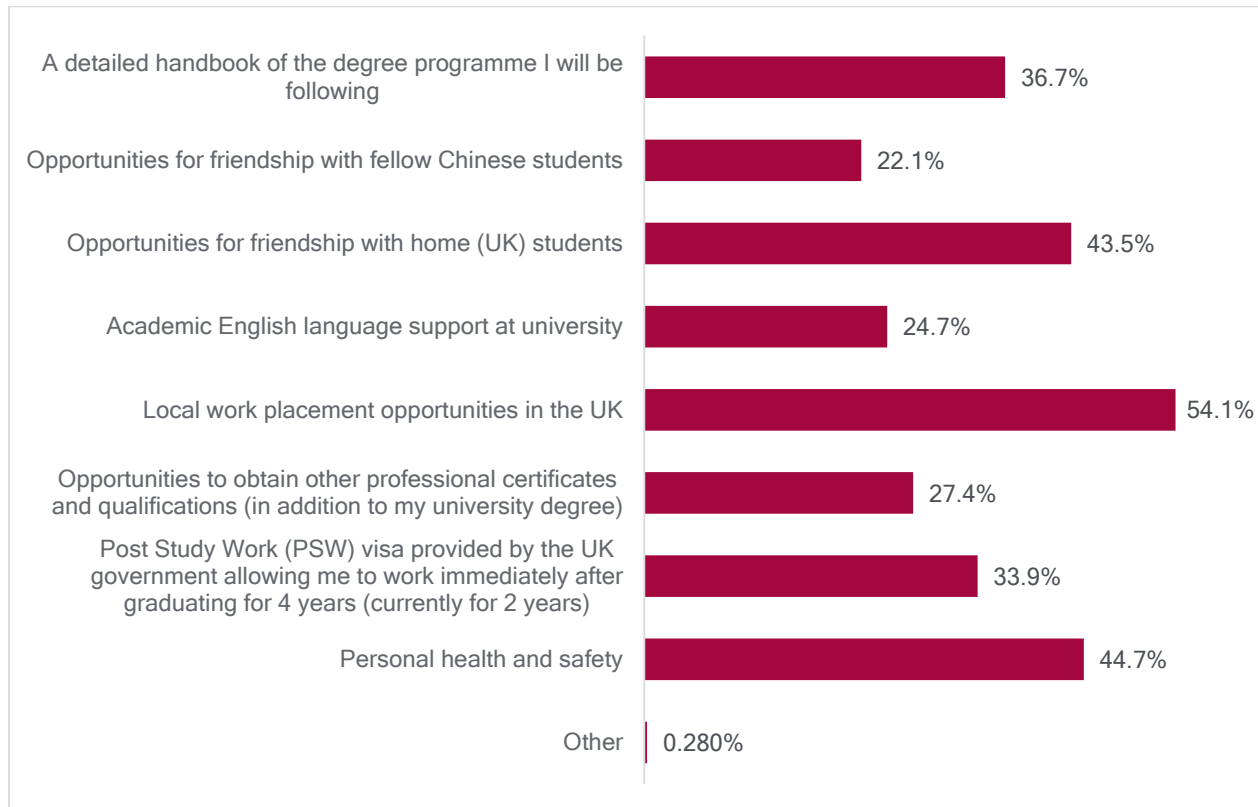




68 respondents (0.705%) also filled in free-formatted text for this question. Such a small number of responses do not make any difference to the results described above, so we do not cover the responses here.

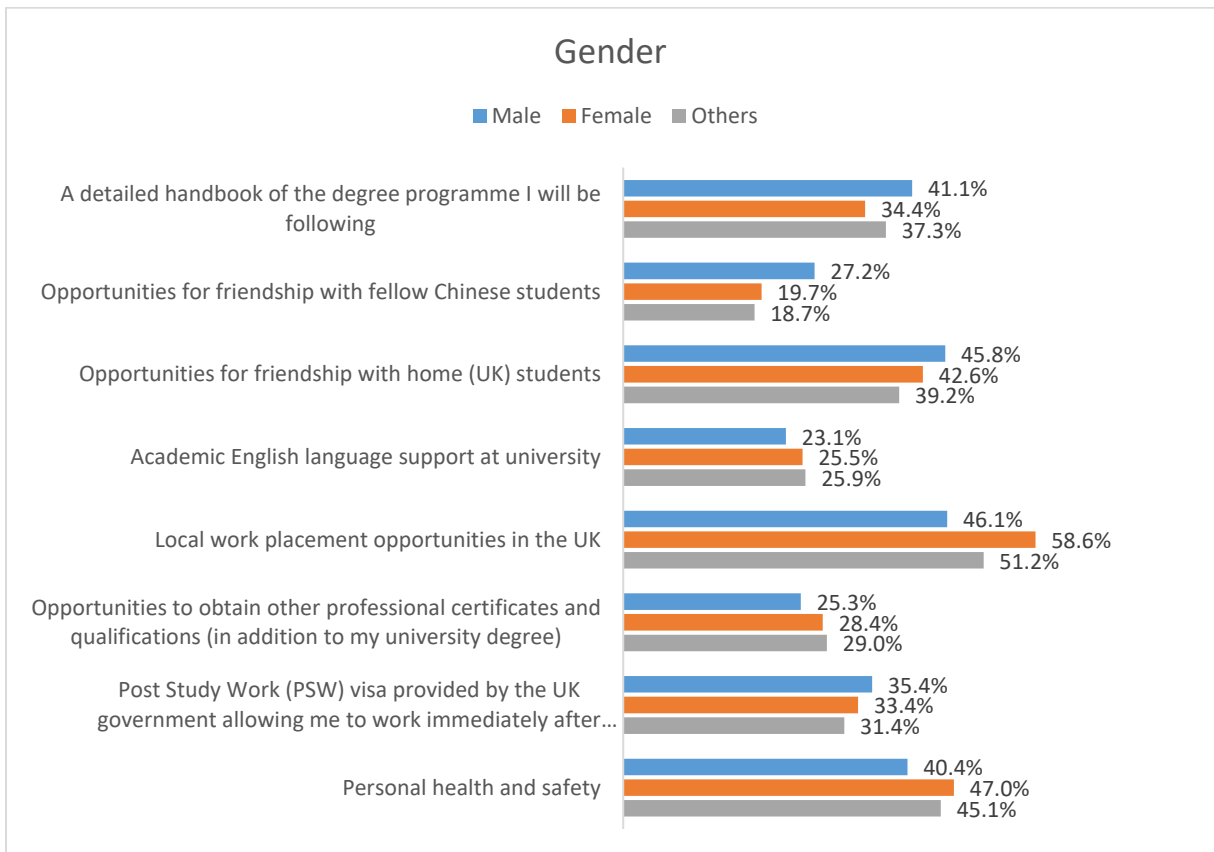
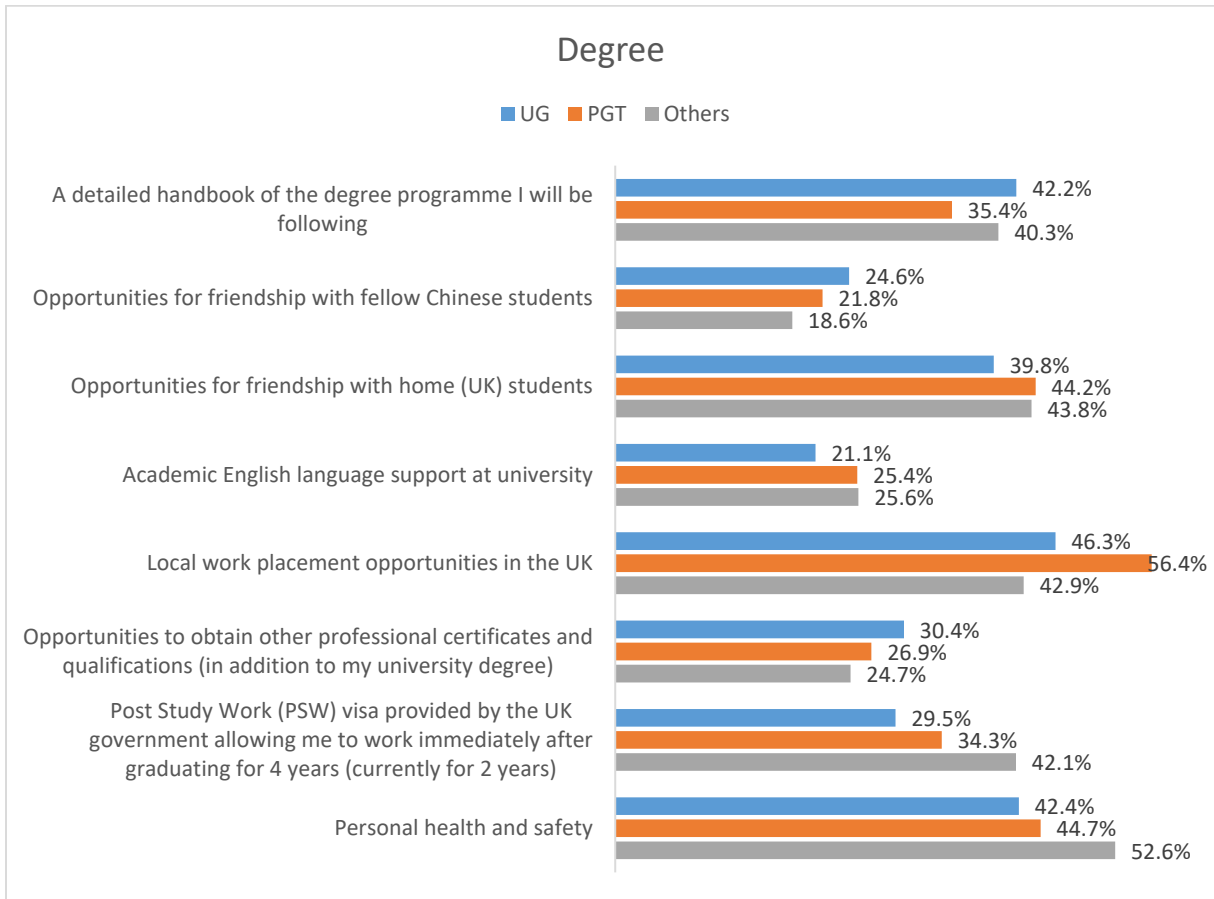
Question: Which of the following aspects are most important for your study and life in the UK? Please tick up to three.

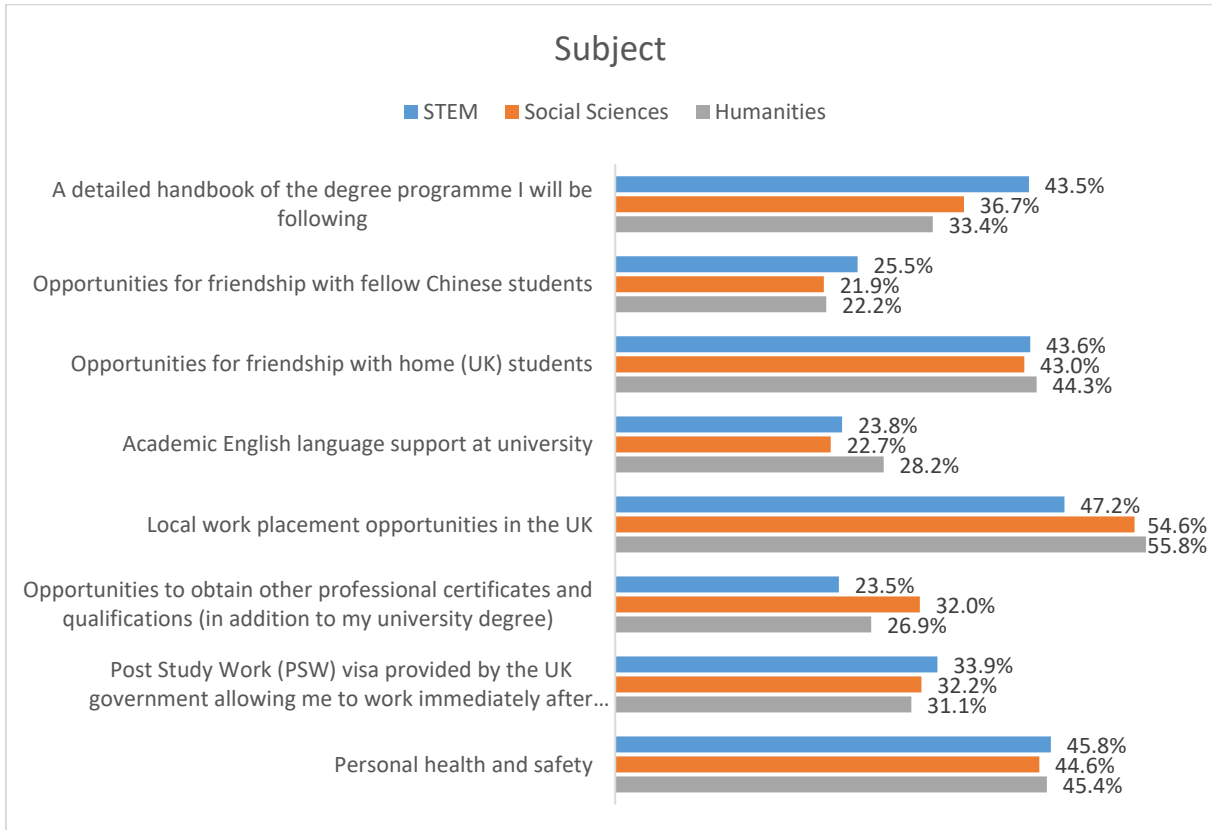
The top three listed important aspects for Chinese students to study in the UK are: 1) to have a local work placement opportunity (54.1%), 2) personal health and safety (44.7%), and 3) friendship with UK students (43.5%).



PGT respondents were much more interested in local work placement opportunities than their UG peers (56.4% vs. 46.3%), and females thought so more than males (58.6% vs. 46.1%). There are also some observable differences among respondents planning to study different subjects, but the differences are less significant.

Bar charts visualising differences between responses of different subgroups are shown on the next two pages.





27 respondents (0.280%) also filled in free-formatted text for this question. Such a small number of responses do not make any difference to the results described above, so we do not cover the responses here.

[END]