



# The Cost of Living and The Open University

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A report for Open University

July 2023

# Executive summary

The Open University (OU) commissioned Cebr to investigate the potential cost savings for young undergraduate students who pursue a degree at the OU compared to other higher education institutions, while also examining the benefits of an OU degree, both financial and non-financial. The principal analytical approach employs findings from a survey of 2,038 18-23-year-olds across the UK (1,720 when considering England only), conducted by Sapio, from which we draw conclusions on sentiments regarding the OU's education setup, along with the potential cost savings associated with pursuing a degree at the OU. The report also draws insights from various publicly available datasets, along with data commissioned separately by the OU, in conjunction with our survey findings, to conduct a review of financial and non-financial benefits of an OU degree.

## Key findings:

- **Students in England** can expect a **net benefit when enrolling at the OU**, with our estimates showing that on average **savings on tuition fees, a potential earnings uplift due to the ability to work alongside studying and lower spending on essentials outweigh the income loss from forfeiture of maintenance loans**.
- **The cumulative benefits can amount up to £6,555 for home students in England (on an annual basis for the 2023/24 academic year)**. This is also accompanied by the potential of a lower debt burden, further reinforcing the financial benefits of enrolling at the OU.
- This is corroborated by the findings from the survey, where **70.8% of students in England** believe that a learning arrangement akin to the OU's would **reduce their concerns over student debt**.
- **Expenditures are expected to fall by a fifth for students who swap to an OU education arrangement**, mainly due to reductions in housing and transportation expenditure.
- Swapping to an OU education arrangement can lead to an **average increase of 11.2 hours per week in work**, resulting in a **61% increase in earnings for university students in England currently in employment**.
- Our review also finds **strong employment outcomes and robust career progression amongst OU alumni**, further reinforcing the financial benefits of an OU degree.
- A majority of respondents stated that greater flexibility regarding where and when they studied, as provided by the OU, would **positively impact their overall wellbeing (85.5%) and their engagement with their course of study (72.2%)**.
- Alumni associate the OU with **being flexible, supportive, inclusive and academically strong**, underscoring the OU's commitment to providing accommodating, high-quality education to all students, that can have a transformative effect on wellbeing and personal development.

The report's findings highlight the significant cost savings that students can achieve by studying at the OU, which can help to mitigate the impact of the current cost of living crisis, and resultant affordability concerns, on students. Furthermore, our report demonstrates that students who pursue a degree at the OU can enjoy a flexible and high-quality learning experience, with strong employment outcomes and robust career progression. Overall, the findings of this report highlight the importance of exploring alternative education arrangements, such as those provided by the OU, to mitigate the impact of the current cost of living crisis on students. By embracing flexible and affordable learning arrangements, students can achieve their educational, career and personal goals without sacrificing their financial wellbeing.

# Executive summary

Estimated total benefit for English home students, per annum, by enrolling at the Open University in 2023/24

	England
Tuition Fee Support	£2,326
Maintenance Support <sup>1</sup>	-£7,595
Lower Essential Spending	£4,743
Earnings Uplift	£7,081
<b>Total Expected Benefit</b>	<b>£6,555</b>

<sup>1</sup> Enrolling at the OU means that OU students are limited, if not disqualified, from maintenance support. Although these, to varying extents, consists of repayable loans that need to be paid back, at the point of studying not having this type of support is considered a loss in terms of student incomes for the purpose of this study.

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# Open University Finances in Context

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# Majority of English OU students not eligible for maintenance support

To highlight the differing nature of support provided at the Open University (the OU) and at other typical universities, the first step of our analysis focuses on providing a comprehensive examination of tuition fee support and maintenance support in England, comparing the assistance available to English-domiciled students attending the OU with that available to home students attending traditional universities in England. It must be noted that while the below provides a high-level overview of support available to English students, the eligibility criteria, grant amounts, and application processes differ depending on individual circumstances.

## Tuition Fee Support:

- The OU: a part-time tuition fee loan is available to cover course fees. This loan is accessible to students studying at a course intensity of at least 25% of the full-time equivalent (FTE). The maximum part-time tuition fee loan from the Student Loans Company (SLC) is £6,935 in an academic year for an undergraduate at full-time equivalent level, subject to equivalent level qualification (ELQ) conditions. This loan adequately covers the entirety of the OU tuition fee.
- Typical full-time student on campus-based first degree: a typical full-time student on a campus-based first-degree course is also eligible for a similar provision, with a maximum full-time tuition fee loan of £9,250. This amount ensures full coverage of the tuition fee charged by conventional English universities.

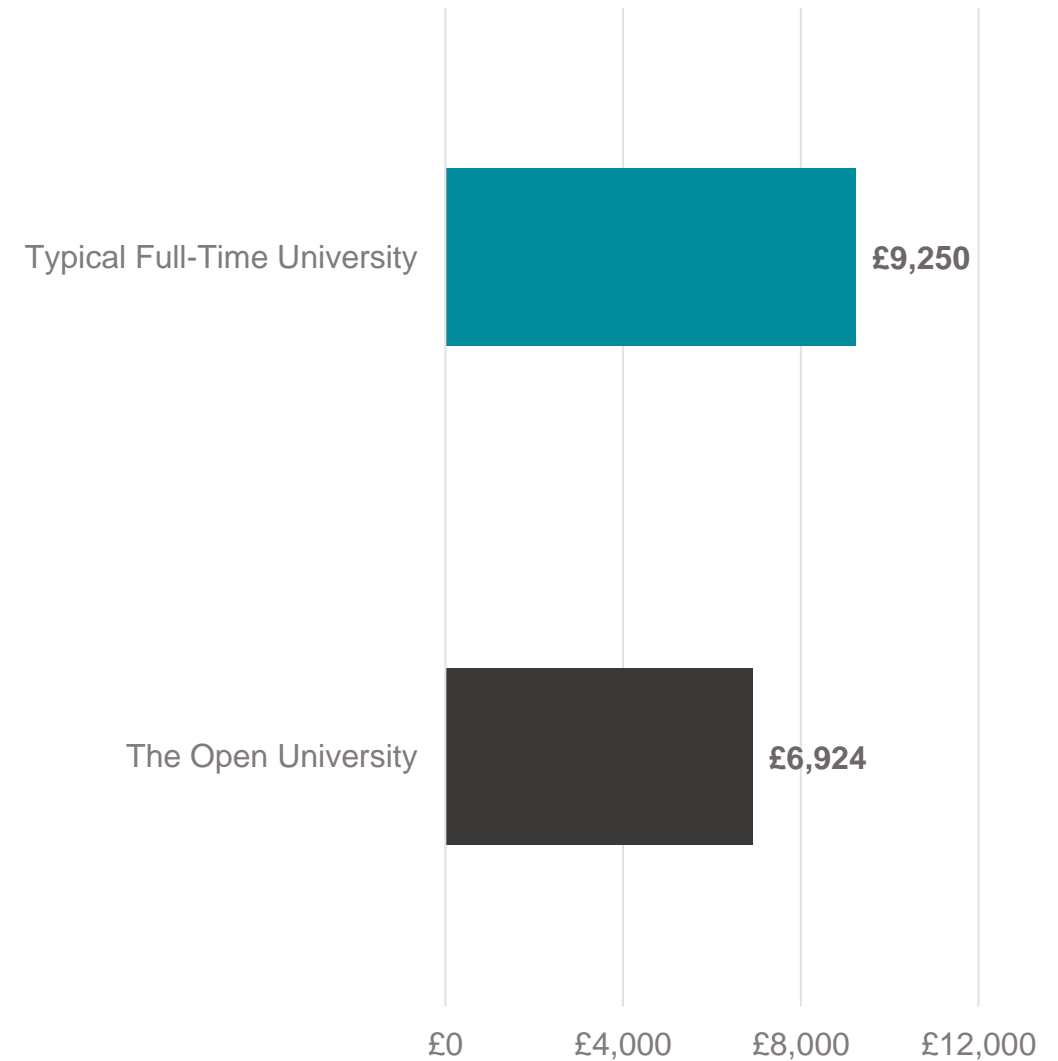
## Maintenance Support:

- The OU: OU students are classified as distance-learning students for funding support purposes. Consequently, OU students would only be eligible for a Maintenance Loan if they are unable to attend the course in person due to a disability.
- Typical full-time student on campus-based first degree: eligible for a repayable full-time maintenance loan. This loan is determined based on the student's term-time residence, household income, and age. For the 2023/24 academic year, this support can amount to up to £13,022 for new full-time students.

# Enrolling at the OU associated with tuition fee savings of a third and lower debt burden

- This slide investigates the comparative finances of undergraduate study at the OU, as compared to other typical English universities, with a particular focus on tuition fees, and presents analysis of typical full-time equivalent tuition fees for comparability. **To facilitate analysis, we will look exclusively at home fees, and examine comparisons between studying at the OU and studying at a university located in England.**
- Savings on tuition fees for home students are evident in England. These savings are substantial, reaching up to 34% in England, or £2,326. It is important to highlight that the figures presented for full-time university study represent the maximum home fee limits imposed. Actual tuition fees for English home students at specific universities may be lower than these capped values. Moreover, while we have presented analysis for typical full-time equivalent tuition fees for comparability, it must be noted that OU students will take a longer time to complete their studies.
- Moreover, in England, prospective home students of the OU are eligible for a tuition fee loan covering the entire tuition fee. This is accompanied by the advantage of reduced home fees upon enrolling at the OU, thereby resulting in a diminished debt burden for those who choose to pursue their education at the OU.

Full-time equivalent tuition fees for home students in 2023/24 in England

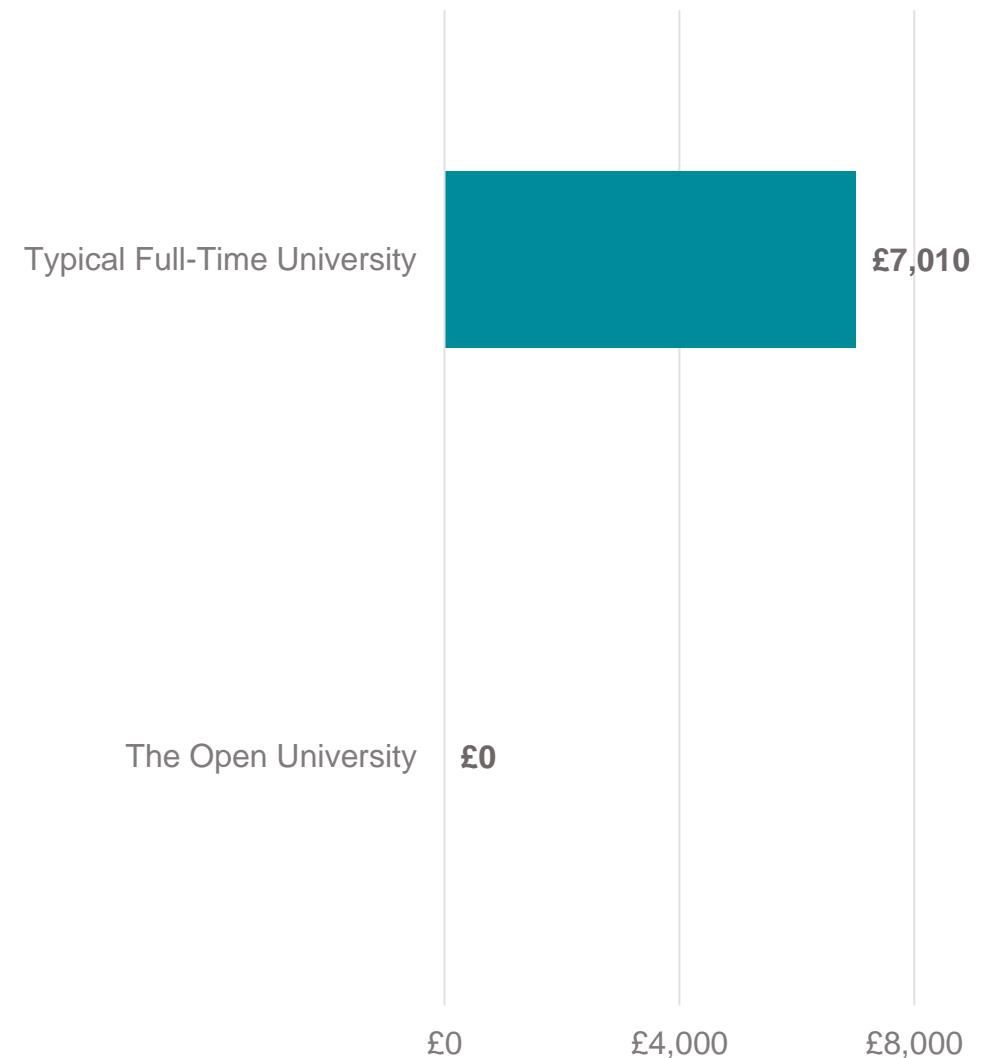


Source: The OU, Cebr analysis

# Savings on tuition fees also accompanied by forfeiture of maintenance support in England

- The analysis of maintenance support poses a challenge due to the variability in eligibility and the corresponding amount of support available to prospective students at both the OU and conventional full-time English universities. These variations are contingent upon individual circumstances. **Consequently, our analysis aims to derive a benchmark value for maintenance support in England by examining data published by the SLC on average maintenance support provision. To streamline the analysis, we again focus exclusively on comparisons for English-domiciled students between studying at the OU and attending a conventional full-time university situated in England.**
- Home students enrolled at the OU generally do not qualify for student-specific financial aid aimed at covering living costs. Conversely, home students undertaking full-time courses at conventional universities in England are eligible to receive a repayable loan. Consequently, enrolling at the OU represents an additional expense for English home students, as they must bear their living costs independently due to the absence of maintenance support. This cost can be quantified utilising data from the SLC. In particular, the average maintenance loan amount disbursed in England for the academic year 2021/22 stood at £7,010. Taking into account currently high rates of inflation in the UK and subsequent increases in support, this average amount is estimated to hit £7,595 for the 2023/24 academic year.

Estimated average maintenance support provision for home students in 2021/22 in England



Source: SLC, Cebr analysis

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# The Open University & the Cost-of- Living Crisis

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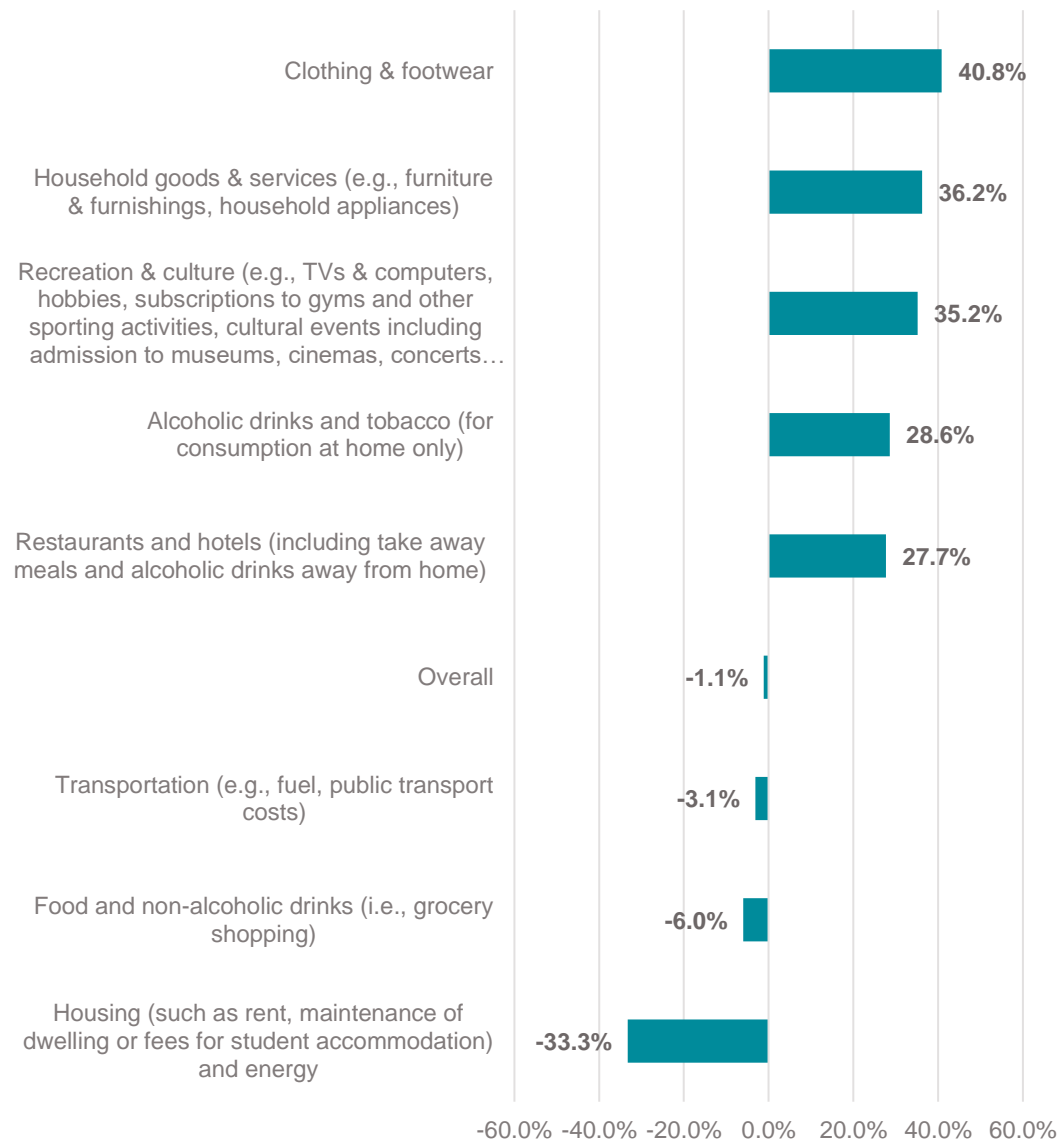
# Methodology

- At a time of significantly elevated inflation, understanding the cost-of-living for students is an important aspect of evaluating the overall affordability and accessibility of higher education. Not least due to lower tuition fees and more flexible distance learning set-ups (and therefore more flexible accommodation and transportation), an OU education arrangement may provide young undergraduates with a stronger ability to weather current price pressures. This section will solidify this in a rounded manner, providing new statistics.
- Our analysis in this section draws from a survey of 1,720 current university students in England aged 18-23 at a non-OU university, conducted by Sapio. Our survey enquired about the amount students spend each week or month on a number of key spending categories, including living expenses, food and drink, and transportation. We then posed respondents with a counterfactual scenario whereby they were enrolled in a flexible learning arrangement that includes the following:
  - the ability to study when and where you want i.e., they would not have to reside in separate accommodation near their place of study or commute;
  - studying at around two thirds of the price of a full-time course at a traditional university;
  - having full access to all study resources.
- Respondents were asked to imagine how their spending would change as part of the above counterfactual. The average relative (in percentage terms) reduction in spend on different categories is then assumed to approximate the impact of switching to OU studying for this group. This deck will look at results for England only.
- Further analysis will apply the findings to official statistics available from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) on average weekly expenditure per person in student households across the same categories. In particular, the analysis focuses on average weekly spending for the average student. For this group, we nowcasted the latest official spending data (financial year to March 2021) based on categorised inflation rates for the interim period. We then applied the percentage changes revealed in the survey analysis to estimate the expected weekly savings across different categories from switching to an OU degree.
- Further survey questions aim to capture the income side of student finances. This is an important component to consider, given that the OU educational set-up typically provides students with the flexibility to work (longer hours). As such, we included questions querying students about their working status and the income they receive from this. Given that many OU students work full-time, we presented the above counterfactual to students once more, and asked whether individuals would opt to work longer hours under a flexible part-time learning arrangement and how much they expect they would earn doing so. Considering the average income among students alongside the number of hours worked, across both scenarios, the results will be presented as a financial gain that pursuing an OU degree may facilitate.

# Housing a key spending category seeing a large relative fall in England

- The ongoing cost-of-living crisis has undoubtedly had a significant impact on students. Research commissioned by the Russell Group Students' Union found that one in five students have considered dropping out because they could not afford to continue.<sup>2</sup>
- Given this finding, our survey aimed to assess the potential cost savings for students who switch to an OU education arrangement in England, which in turn provides strong evidence of the OU as an alternative to students who are currently struggling to weather current price pressures. We asked university students about their current expenditure on specific categories that cover different areas of student life, before asking them to estimate their expenses if they were to switch to a flexible learning arrangement similar to that offered by the OU.
- Our analysis found significant reported cost savings in the spending categories of housing and energy (-33.3%), transportation (-3.1%), and food and non-alcoholic drinks (-6.0%), with the first two highlighting the key benefits of the OU's education arrangement, namely not having to live nearby or commute to their place of study.
- However, our analysis also reveals that reported overall expenditure across the eight categories fell only slightly, by 1.1%, in England. The percentage drops in the aforementioned three non-discretionary spending categories were almost completely offset by increases in the other five discretionary categories. English respondents may have boosted their discretionary spending via their accrued savings, which otherwise may not have been possible, explaining why the overall expenditure value remains almost unchanged. If spending in categories that saw upticks were kept constant, overall expenditure across the eight categories falls by a much larger 14.1%.

Percentage change in following spending categories assuming swap to a flexible learning arrangement from full-time university in England



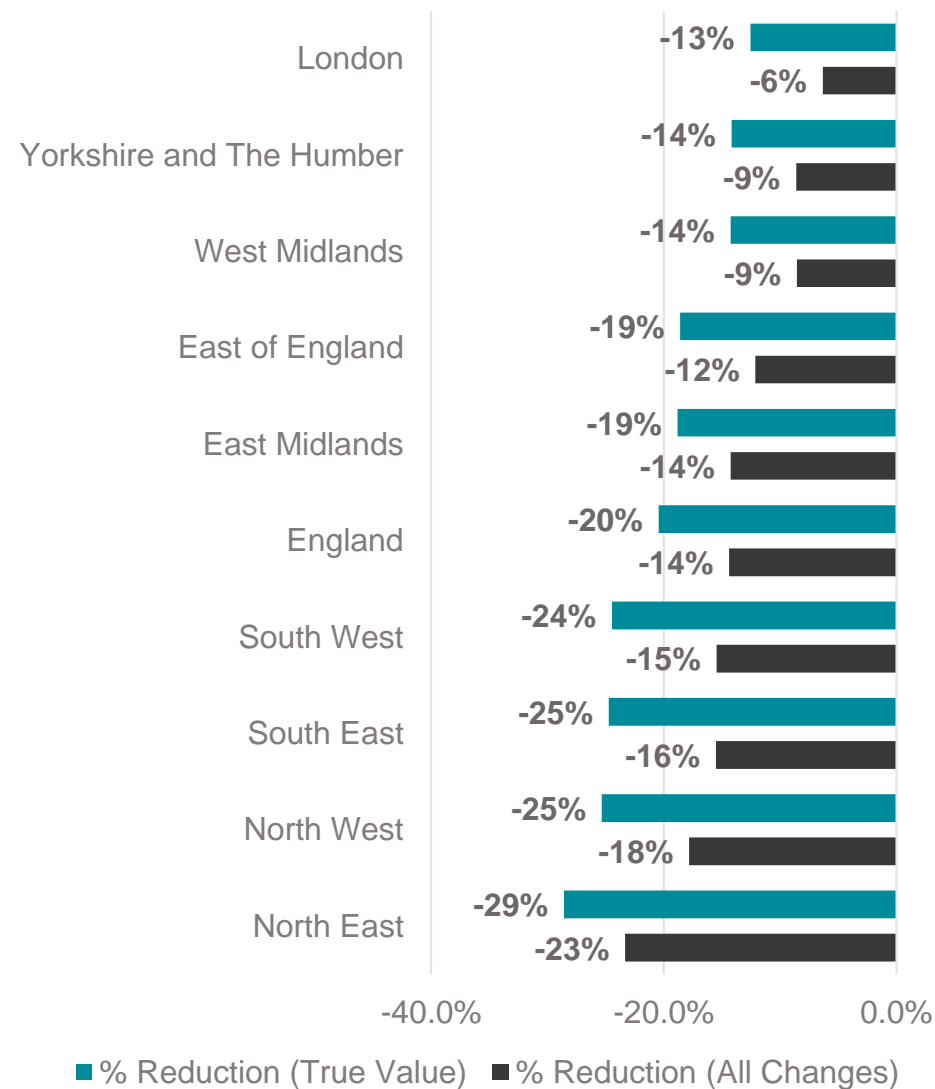
Source: Sapio, Cebr analysis

<sup>2</sup> Russell Group Students' Union: Student Cost of Living Report – Available [here](#).

# Student expenditures can fall by up to 20% in England by swapping to an OU degree

- After obtaining the percentage falls in expenditure from our survey, we then applied these figures by region to the nowcasted expenditure data from the ONS on individuals classified as 'Students' according to their socioeconomic status. This enabled us to generate updated expenditure estimates based on the assumption that students had enrolled in the OU's education arrangement. It should be noted that our methodology is constrained by the availability of region-specific expenditure data for individuals classified as 'Students.' Nevertheless, our findings provide a reliable reflection of regional trends as we obtained region-specific relative falls through our survey.
- When implementing all the relative changes across all eight spending categories, including the upticks seen in five of the eight categories, we find that, for England in general, overall expenditure is expected to fall by 14.4%, with all English regions seeing relative falls in expenditures.
- We also sought to determine the 'true' value of cost-savings associated with taking up the flexible learning arrangement provided by the OU, by only accounting for relative falls seen in the non-discretionary spending categories of housing & energy, transportation and food & non-alcoholic beverages, as outlined in the overall results. Our findings suggest, looking at England in general, expenditures are expected to fall by a fifth. On a regional basis, students in London are expected to see the lowest relative fall in expenditure, by 12.5%, while students in the North East are expected to see the largest relative fall, at 28.6%.

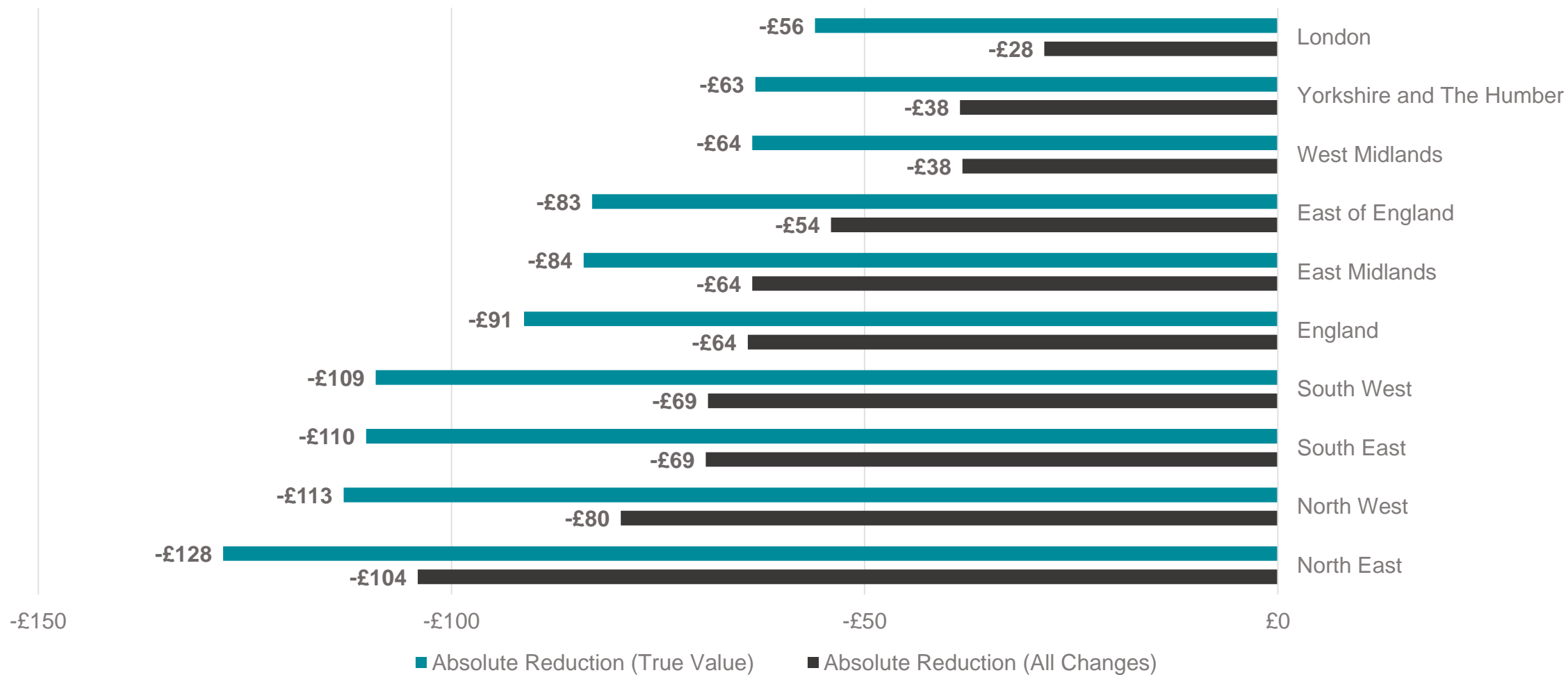
Percentage change in overall expenditure across all eight spending categories assuming swap to a flexible learning arrangement from full-time university, by English region



Source: Sapio, ONS, Cebr analysis

# Average English university student expected to save up to £91 a week upon switching to an OU degree

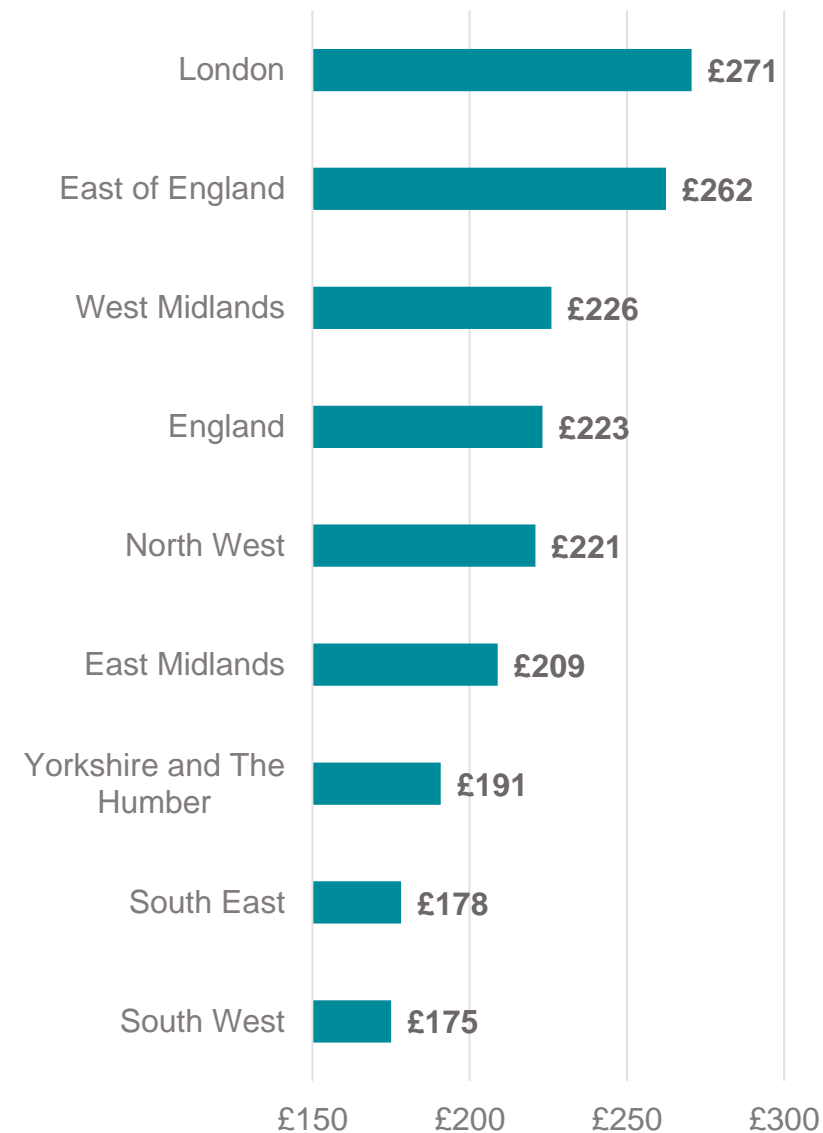
Absolute change in overall expenditure across all eight spending categories assuming swap to a flexible learning arrangement from full-time university, by English region



# Three-fifths of respondents pursue employment while at university in England, earning an average of £223 per week

- Our survey also enquired on the employment status of current university students. Many students juggle their current university education with employment, in a bid to either improve their finances, gain adequate work experience for future employment, or a mix of both. An OU degree, with its flexible learning arrangement, offers students the opportunity to exploit this further, given that the OU educational set-up typically provides students with the flexibility to work longer hours if desired. Consequently, on top of the cost-savings detailed in the previous slides, there is also the potential for gain on the income side of student finances.
- In order to capture this, our survey enquired on the current employment situation of respondents. Of the 1,720 respondents residing in England, 1,024, or 59.5% are currently pursuing some form of employment while studying at university. Of those currently in employment, nine-tenths (91.2%) are in part-time employment, with the remainder (8.8%) in full-time employment. Conversely, two-fifths of all respondents (40.4%) are currently not working.
- It is worth noting that our English sample contains a mix of both full-time (84.8%) and part-time university students (15.2%). In comparison, the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) reported the split for all UK students as 74.7% and 25.3%, for full-time and part-time university students, respectively, for the 2021/22 academic year.
- Amongst respondents who stated that they are currently pursuing some form of employment alongside university, we enquired on their hourly earnings from their current employment. Using these responses, in conjunction with the reported hours per week worked, we were able to map out the average weekly earnings for those currently pursuing employment.
- Currently, students engaged in employment in England demonstrate an average weekly earnings figure of £223. It is important to note, however, that there exists significant regional disparity in this regard. Specifically, London exhibits the highest average weekly earnings at £271, while the southern regions of South East and South West saw the lowest average weekly earnings figure, at £178 and £175, respectively.

Average weekly earnings for respondents currently pursuing employment, by English region



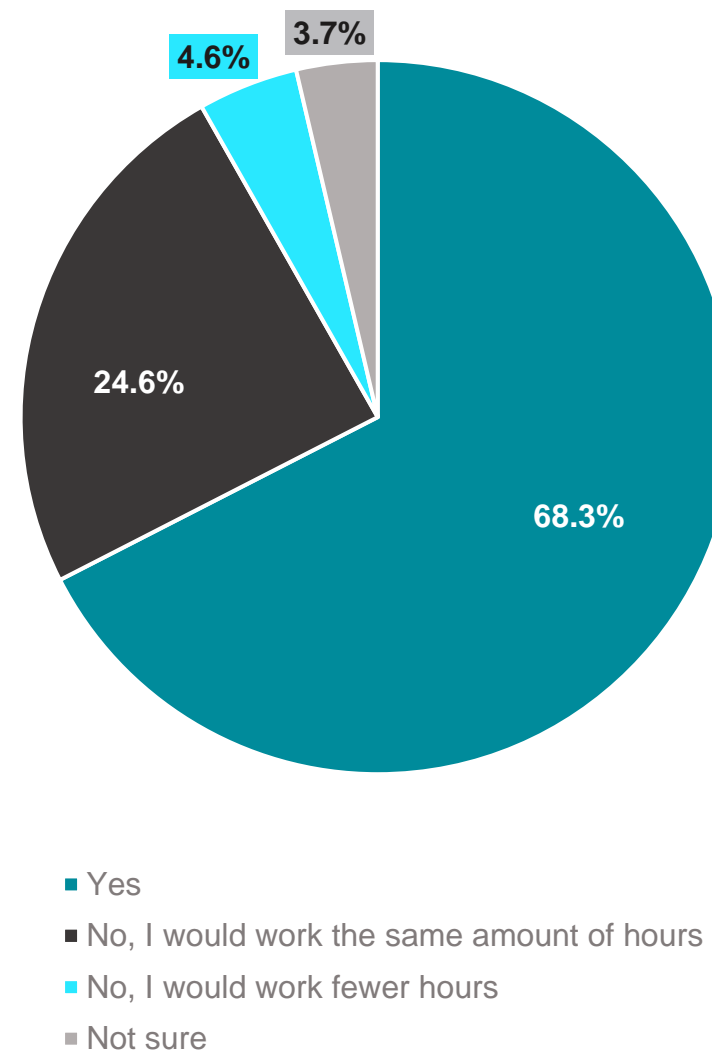
Source: Sapio, Cebr analysis

Note: We are unable to provide data on average weekly earnings for the North East ( $n = 38$ ) due to sample size limitations.

# More than 70% of respondents would work more hours under OU arrangement, regardless of current working status

- We proceeded to enquire with respondents on their thoughts on working if they were to take up the flexible learning arrangement provided by the OU.
- Of the 1,024 respondents in England who are currently working, 699 respondents, or slightly more than two-thirds (68.3%), stated that they would work more hours if they were in an education arrangement akin to the one provided by the OU. A quarter (24.6%) reported wanting to work the same number of hours, while 4.6% would work fewer hours. Lastly, 3.7% were unsure on their working arrangement under the counterfactual scenario.
- Meanwhile, we also queried the 696 respondents who are currently not in employment on whether they would opt to work if they were pursuing their degree under the flexible learning arrangement. 524 students, or 75.9% of the above sample, stated that they would opt to work under such an arrangement, while 8.3% reported that they would not opt to work despite relatively lower time commitments to their education. 15.8% of this segment stated that they were unsure about whether they would opt to work.
- In total, looking at the entire sample of 1,720 respondents in England, 1,227 respondents, or 71.3% of the entire sample, believed that they would either start work or work longer hours. This segment of the sample were also queried on the number of additional hours they would work, on top of their current hours (zero or otherwise), with our findings suggesting that the average increase in the number of hours amounting to 11.2 hours per week.
- For those who are currently working and stated that they would work more hours under a flexible learning arrangement (i.e., 699 respondents), we also queried on their expected increase in earnings, with these respondents reporting that they would expect their earnings to increase by 17.2%, on average.

Share of respondents in England currently working, on whether they would work more hours under a flexible working arrangement

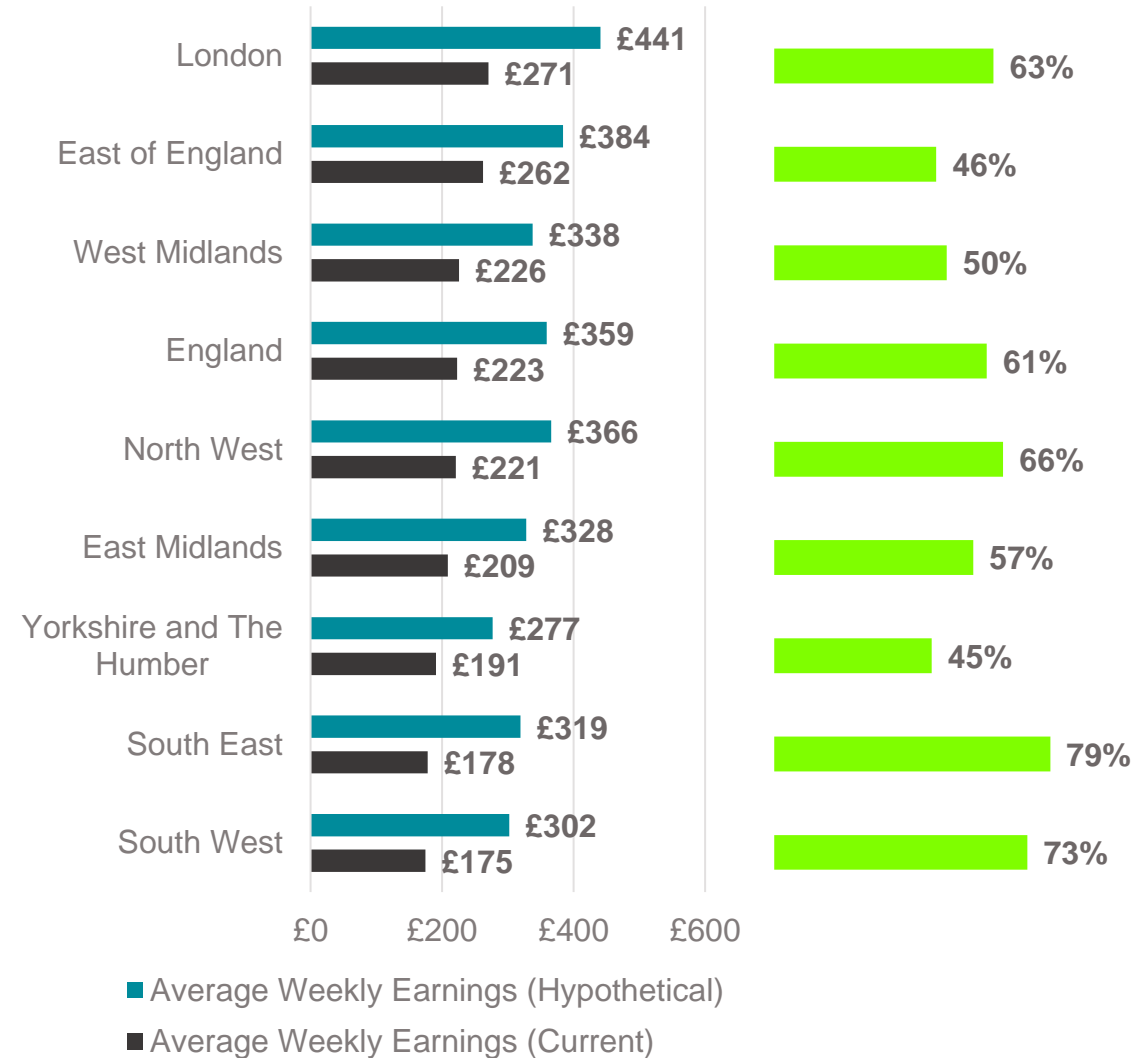


Source: Sapio, Cebr analysis

# Average English university student could earn £136 a week more under OU arrangement

- The survey findings regarding the impact of flexible learning arrangements on hours and earnings provide valuable insights into the potential earnings uplift associated with pursuing a degree through the OU. Regional differences also highlight variation in the expected benefits of pursuing an OU degree.
- On average, employed university students in the England who choose to switch to flexible learning can anticipate a significant 61% increase in earnings, equivalent to a weekly uplift of £136. These findings shed light on the potential financial advantages of embracing flexible learning arrangements and increasing working hours.
- Regional analysis reveals notable variations in the expected earnings uplift. The South East exhibits the most substantial relative growth, with a projected increase of 79%, or £141 per week. Conversely, Yorkshire and the Humber show the weakest growth, with earnings expected to rise by 45%, or £86 per week.
- In London, university students anticipate a 63% growth in earnings. In absolute terms, this translates to an increase of £170 per week, surpassing the England-wide increase of £136 per week. This disparity is partly due to the higher existing earnings in the capital. Consequently, students in London pursuing flexible learning arrangements are expected to reach a weekly income of £441, the highest figure across all regions.
- It is important to note that while there are potential earnings boosts and cost-savings associated with studying at the OU, these advantages may be offset by the loss of financial support when transitioning from full-time to part-time study, as outlined in slide 7, due to the ineligibility for maintenance loans in England for distance-learning students.

Average weekly earnings, current and under hypothetical scenario of enrolling in flexible learning arrangement, by English region



Source: Sapio, Cebr analysis

Note: We are unable to provide data on average weekly earnings for the North East (n = 38) due to sample size limitations

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# Net Financial Benefits of the Open University

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# OU degree associated with strong employment outcomes

- Another useful gauge of the net financial benefits associated with pursuing a degree at the OU is via graduate outcomes. Data from the Department for Education (DfE) on graduate outcomes find that 85.4% of OU graduates ventured into sustained employment, further study or both, for those who graduated from the OU in 2017/18. This share dipped slightly but still remained strong, at 83.7% and 82.3%, for graduates from the graduating cohorts of 2015/16 and 2013/14, respectively.<sup>3</sup>
- Looking at employment outcomes in particular, the share of graduates from the OU who were in sustained employment stood at 61.3%, 67.1% and 70.3%, for those who graduated in 2017/18, 2015/16 and 2013/14 respectively.
- The OU themselves commissioned a study of its alumni to track employment outcomes, as part of its Employability of Qualifiers Survey.<sup>4</sup> The study found that the share of OU graduates in employment after graduating has increased steadily over time, excluding for 2020, which marked the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2017, the share of OU alumni who were employed stood at 74%, with this share having increased to 77% in the latest iteration of the study, conducted in 2022. Indeed, case studies published as part of the OU's Employability of Qualifiers Survey also point to the relative success an OU degree has had on graduates' employment outcomes post-graduation, with multiple cases citing achieving career goals and better preparedness as a direct outcome of studying at the OU.
- More importantly, the share of OU alumni unemployed and looking for work has remained in the narrow range of 3% to 4% in the each year between 2017 and 2022 (both inclusive), reinforcing the positive impact a OU degree has on employment outcomes.

Alumni reflections on employment outcomes post graduation from the OU

*“Without the OU I wouldn't be doing the job I am now. The OU made it possible to pursue a degree by offering a flexible study method.”*

*“The method of learning at the OU set me up really well for the way things are now... so a client can email me a job, I can read it, know what they want and deliver that.”*

*“My OU study has had a massive impact on getting to where I am today. I wouldn't have the job I have now without this qualification on my CV. When I had the interview it was one of the things they mentioned – they really liked my cv and that I was prepared to spend my own time learning something outside of work. It was a big selling point. In my industry we can't know everything and that ability to learn and figure things out..... it shows I have a level of autonomy to figure things out. It played a big part in me getting the job I have now.”*

Source: OU's Employability of Qualifiers Survey 2022

<sup>3</sup> Department for Education: LEO Graduate Outcomes 2019/20 – Available [here](#).

<sup>4</sup> The Open University's Employability of Qualifiers Survey 2022

# Career progression within current field, higher earnings and changing careers the most widely quoted benefits

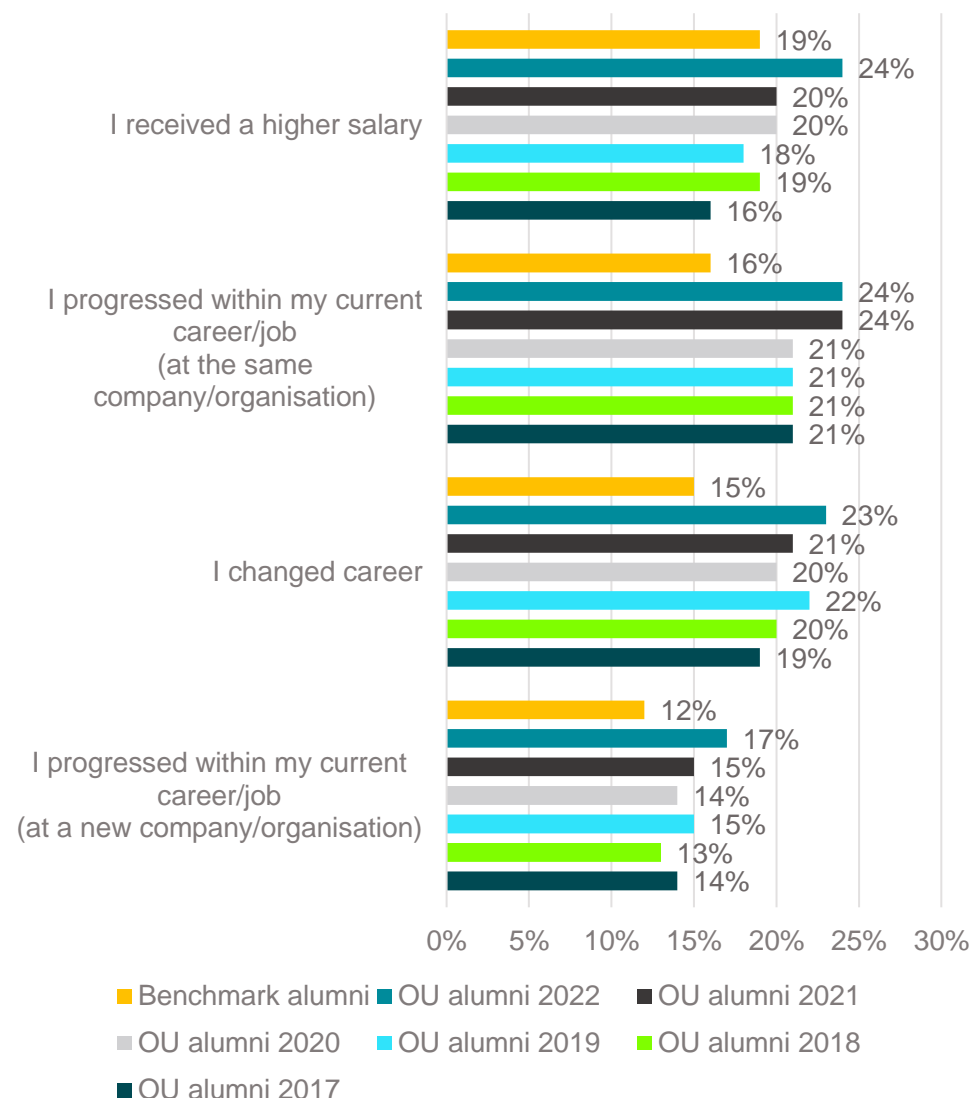
- Our study aimed to investigate the career progression of alumni from the Open University (OU) and determine whether pursuing a degree with the institution has a positive impact on their professional development. To shed light on this issue, we analysed data from the OU's Employability of Qualifiers Survey.<sup>5</sup>
- Our analysis revealed that OU alumni reported a range of positive outcomes as a result of their studies. Among these, for 2022 alumni, the most commonly reported were career progression within their current field (24%), changing to a new career (23%), and earning a higher salary (24%). Notably, the data also showed a statistically significant increase in the number of alumni reporting higher salaries in 2022. These findings suggest that pursuing a degree with the OU can have a net positive impact on one's career prospects, with many alumni reporting career advancement and financial benefits as a result of their studies.

## Alumni reflections on employment outcomes post graduation from the OU

*He feels he achieved his goals having found a job before he finished his course. Within a short period of time, he was promoted to management level. This allowed him to apply the knowledge and skills he was learning at the OU, which led to a new role, a higher salary and improved self-confidence.*

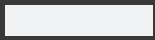
*The respondent focused on selecting modules relating to software development as he wanted to get a job in this area. He started out wanting to do a degree because he thought this was needed to secure a software development role. Initially he transferred into an IT role in the company he was working for and was able to develop this over time, building on the practical experience he was gaining and his study experience.*

Share of respondents reporting developments in their career progression post graduation from the OU, by year



Source: OU's Employability of Qualifiers Survey 2022

<sup>5</sup> The Open University's Employability of Qualifiers Survey 2022



# Non-financial Benefits of the Open University

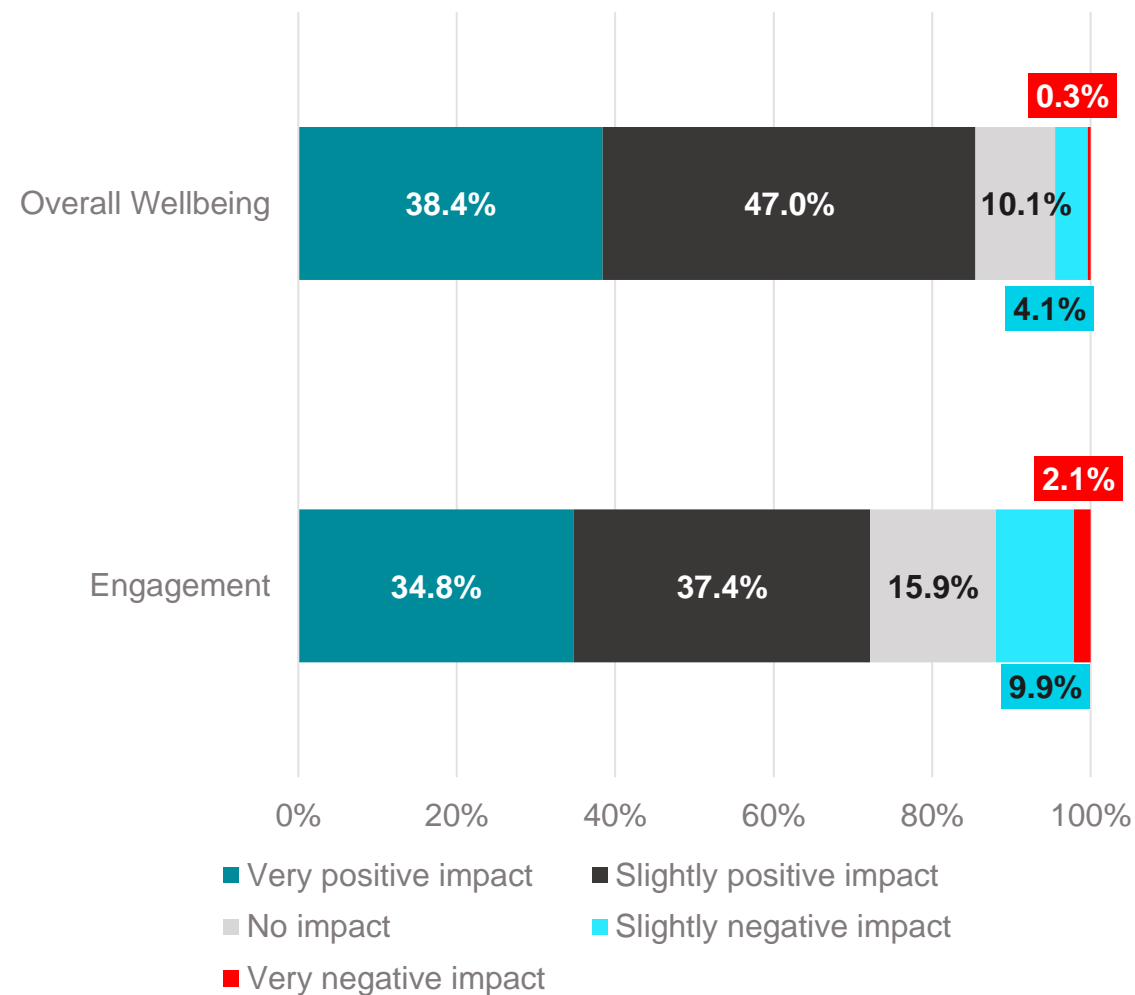
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# Respondents believe that greater flexibility has overwhelmingly positive impact on their wellbeing and engagement

- Apart from investigating the financial benefits of studying at the OU, we also sought to determine the potential non-financial benefits to the student experience by enrolling at the OU.
- Accordingly, our survey included questions asking current university students on their opinions on how greater flexibility regarding where and when they studied would impact 1) their overall wellbeing, and 2) their engagement (this includes their participation and interest in learning activities, and general attendance) in their current course of study.
- The results are overwhelmingly positive, with 85.5% of respondents in England stating that greater flexibility will positively impact their overall wellbeing. Meanwhile, a slightly lower, yet still strong share of respondents in England, at 72.2%, reported that a greater flexibility would positively impact their engagement in their current course of study.
- These results come at a time where the cost-of-living crisis has affected students disproportionately more. Indeed, seven in ten students reported that their mental health has suffered due to the ongoing cost of living crisis, while over half of respondents are seeing their academic performance suffer due to the cost-of-living crisis, according to research commissioned by the Russell Group Students' Unions.<sup>6</sup>
- Elevated cost pressure is evidently affecting students' wellbeing as they struggle financially, and the arrangement provided by the OU does present itself as a viable alternative for struggling students, by boosting wellbeing and overall engagement via greater flexibility in terms of where and when one can study.

Share of respondents in England on the potential impact of a flexible learning arrangement on the following aspects



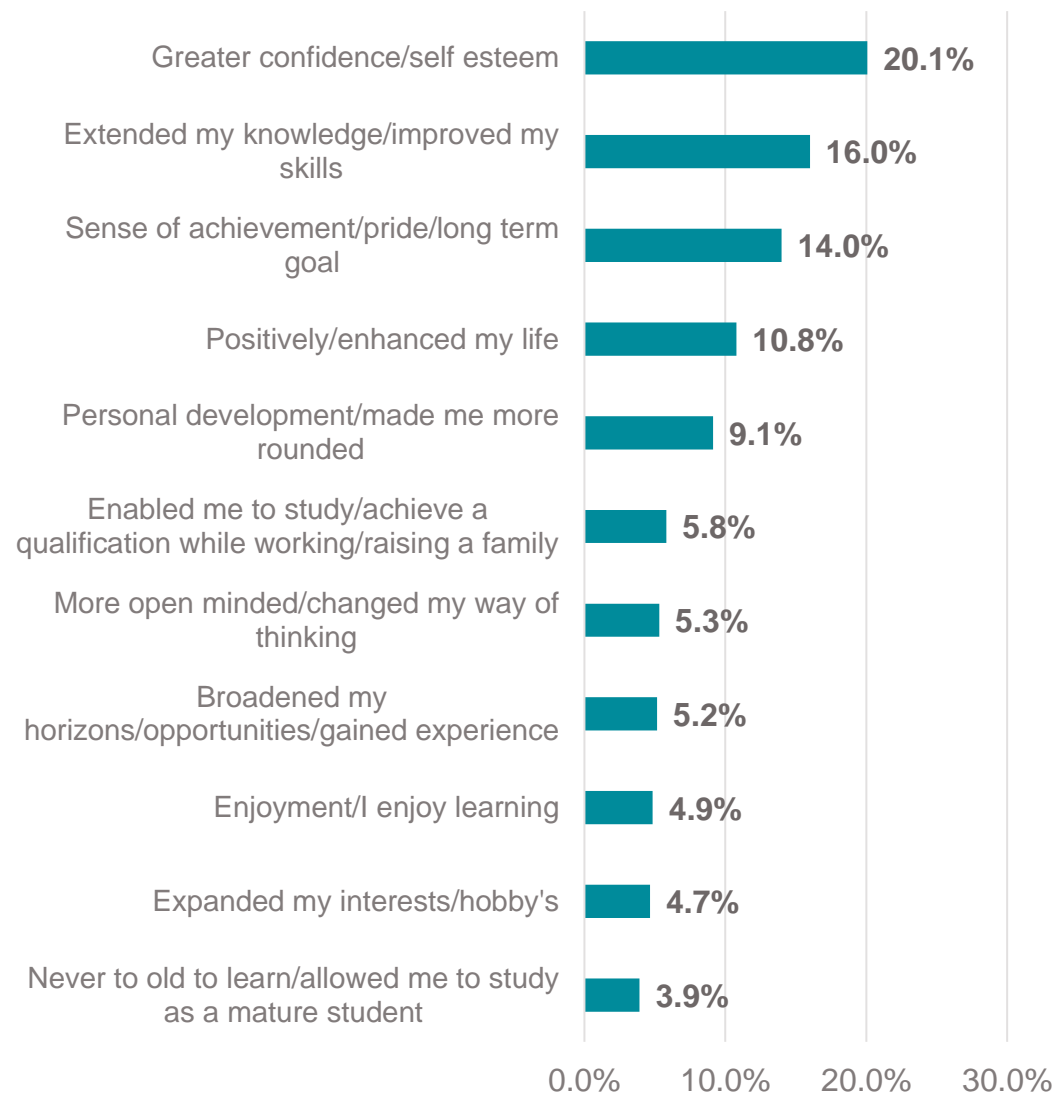
Source: Sapio, Cebr analysis

<sup>6</sup> Russell Group Students' Union: Student Cost of Living Report – Available [here](#).

# Evidence from OU alumni finds strong non-financial benefits associated with studying at the OU

- The OU conducted a comprehensive multi-audience programme of brand tracking, which included potential students, current students (including active and passive withdrawals), staff, alumni, and employers. The latest results, released in June 2022, provide valuable insights into alumni's perceptions of the university.<sup>7</sup>
- As part of the study, alumni were asked to choose the most relevant word that they think is associated with the OU. The results indicate that the OU is strongly associated with being flexible, supportive, and academically strong. This finding underscores the OU's commitment to providing accommodating, high-quality education to all students, regardless of their circumstances.
- The study also explored how studying at the OU has impacted alumni's lives. A significant proportion of respondents reported that studying at the OU had boosted their confidence (20.1%), provided a sense of achievement (14.0%), had a positive impact on their lives (10.8%), and aided in their personal development (9.1%). These results demonstrate that the benefits of studying at the OU extend beyond financial gains, as evidenced by the positive impact on alumni. These can have a transformative effect on individuals, not just in terms of their career prospects, but also in their personal growth and wellbeing.

Share of respondents on how studying at the OU has impacted them and their lives



Source: OU Alumni Tracker 2022

<sup>7</sup> OU Alumni Brand Tracker 2022.

# External data corroborates the idea of the OU being a strong education solution

Share of respondents on the whether they agree with the following, by type of learning

- External data from the National Student Survey (NSS) corroborates our findings pertaining to the non-financial benefits of distance learning, compared to non-distance learning, with the OU falling under the former.<sup>8</sup> As illustrated in the table on the right, students in distance learning set-ups are more likely to hold positive sentiments on six out eight analysed scales, while also attaining a higher share of students who are satisfied overall with the quality of their course.
- The only two scales in which distance learning students see a lower share are those of learning community and student voice. The questions in these scales enquired with students on whether they felt part of a community of staff and students, and whether the students' union effectively represents students' academic interests. However, it must be noted that distance learning set-ups have a natural disadvantage pertaining to these questions, given the remote nature of education provision. As such, it makes sense that students in distance learning set-ups see lower shares of agreement within these two scales.
- Moreover, the flexible learning arrangement provided by the OU could play a significant role in resolving the challenges recently highlighted in the OU's Insight of the Week.<sup>9</sup> With over half of the population feeling worn out and around one in two feeling bored, the OU's flexible learning options could provide an opportunity for individuals to pursue their personal interests and hobbies while still upskilling themselves. The ability to study at one's own pace and in a way that suits their schedule means that students can balance their studies with their personal commitments, leading to a more fulfilling and engaging learning experience. Furthermore, the lower tuition fees of the OU make it a more accessible option, particularly for those who may be struggling financially due to the impact of the pandemic.
- For the significant minority (29%) who see personal development as a priority, the OU could be an ideal solution. With its diverse range of courses and flexible learning options, students can choose to study subjects that interest them or align with their career goals. This could provide a much-needed sense of purpose and direction for those feeling lost or disengaged. The OU's commitment to providing accessible education means that individuals from all backgrounds can benefit from higher education, potentially leading to greater social mobility and opportunities for personal growth.

NSS Scale	Distance Learning (% Agree)	Non-Distance Learning (% Agree)	Difference (percentage point)
The teaching on their course	83.1%	79.9%	3.2%
Learning opportunities	81.5%	79.3%	2.3%
Assessment and feedback	81.2%	67.8%	13.4%
Academic support	77.8%	73.7%	4.1%
Organisation and management	78.7%	69.4%	9.3%
Learning resources	82.6%	80.8%	1.8%
Learning community	51.4%	69.1%	-17.7%
Student voice	56.7%	67.1%	-10.4%
Overall satisfaction	84.5%	75.8%	8.7%

<sup>8</sup> WONKHE: NSS Data 2022: the sector is bursting at the seams – Available [here](#).

<sup>9</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> February Insight of the Week

Source: NSS, Cebr analysis

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