

EC Students' Association

Student Life Survey Report

April 2024

Introduction

This year's Student Life Survey is the latest iteration of a survey that EC Students' Association has run each year for several years, previously called the Housing and Finance Survey. While many of the questions remain the same as in previous years, focusing on aspects of student life including housing, finances, and travel, this year, we expanded it to include some questions on belonging and general Edinburgh College experiences.

The survey was open for a total of six weeks, launched during the February break and closed at the start of the Easter holidays. In total, we had 629 responses, which is the highest return rate we've had for a survey for a number of years. Students were asked to take part via several different platforms, including our fortnightly newsletter, our Class Reps channel, our website, and our Discord server. We also offered an incentive of a £50 voucher prize draw for students who completed the survey.

We're very grateful to the team of Learning Development Tutors (LDTs) who played a huge part in promoting the survey by allowing students to complete it during class time. That was hugely helpful in spreading the word amongst the student body to those who might not normally engage in this kind of feedback activity.

The survey's results are an important insight into some of the challenges facing the student community. We asked questions on a wide range of topics, divided into the following sections:

- Section One: [Housing](#)
- Section Two: [Finances](#)
- Section Three: [Digital Resources](#)
- Section Four: [Travel and Transport](#)
- Section Five: [College Life](#)
- Section Six: [A Deeper Dive – Younger Learners](#)
- [Conclusion](#)

Most of all, it provides us with the evidence to back up many of the conversations we have had with individual students throughout the year, showing the reality of student life in 2024.

Executive Summary

The aim of our annual Student Life Survey is to understand the key challenges that are facing students today. It differs from student surveys run by the College, because it delves into aspects of student life that go beyond their learning, teaching, and support experience at College. We ask students about a range of issues, including housing, finance, digital resources, travel, and transport. We also have explored some of the broader aspects of College life, including the sense of belonging at Edinburgh College, and to what extent students engage with College activities beyond their course.

For the first time, we collected our respondents' demographic data, and we hope gathering this information will assist with projects across the College, to understand how students' identities, such as gender, ethnicity, disability and caring responsibilities, impact on their experiences more broadly. This report takes examines the experiences of the 16-19-year-old demographic in greater depth.

Some of the key headlines:

- Most respondents feel safe and happy in their current living situation
- Most respondents have access to a digital device that they can use for online learning
- Most respondents feel that they belong at Edinburgh College
- Most respondents feel that Edinburgh College is a welcoming place
- Most respondents feel positive about the College's facilities

These statistics are very encouraging and there is much to celebrate, given that this survey has taken place during an academic year that has been subject to disruption from strike action.

Many of the resources that students want to see more of already exist for Edinburgh College students, for example, through the advice provided by the Guidance and Wellbeing teams, and via online resources such as JobZone and the EC Students' Association website. Promoting these services more widely to students, and also perhaps to staff, so they can signpost these vital resources and information to students, will be a key learning from this report.

Despite the overall positive narrative indicated by the above statistics, parts of the report still make for sobering reading, particularly when students are expressing themselves about some of the challenges they are facing. The students' quotes are evidence that Britain's cost of living crisis, including an acute housing shortage, is ongoing:

"The commute is killing me as I am studying full time, I am in an open learning course, and I am working part time. My studies are in Sighthill, and I live and work in North Berwick. I am getting £151 from bursary for my travels, if I had gone with the student housing, I wouldn't be able to afford it and food."

Difficulties with finances, precarious living situations and long commutes are damaging students' mental health, wellbeing, and their ability to study. These heart-breaking stories are just a small snapshot (drawn from 629 students) of the vast range of challenges students across the College are juggling alongside their studies. There will be students who chose not to fill out the survey or refrained from answering certain questions and sharing their struggles.

The Student Life Survey has been an important piece of research that has had encouraging results, but also emphasises that the importance of the College and the Students' Association working together to allow students, especially the most vulnerable amongst them, to thrive in their learning and beyond.

Who took part in our survey?

For the first time, we asked our respondents to share demographic information with us on their gender, age, ethnicity, whether they identified as disabled, and whether they were a parent or young carer. This decision was made so that we could explore whether different groups' experiences change according to their characteristics (see [section 6](#) for a focus on respondents aged 16-19).

These results also show which students are more likely to take part in survey activity, and give us areas to focus on when promoting the survey more widely in future years.

The headlines from our demographic information are:

- 57.9% of respondents are female.
- 64.9% of respondents are white (Scottish/Irish/British). The next highest ethnicity is white (other background) with 15.9%.
- 48.3% of respondents are aged 16-19. The next largest age group was 20-25 with 18.4% of respondents.
- 26.7% of respondents identify as being D/deaf or disabled, or have a long-term health condition, including mental health conditions.
- 22.3% of respondents are parents or carers (this includes young carers)
- The survey respondents were studying mainly at our largest campuses, Granton (30%) and Sighthill (16%).
- 82% of respondents had an EH postcode.

The demographic evidence we gathered will be referenced throughout this report when we want to explore certain statistics further.

Section One: Housing

“Quite confusing and stressful trying to decide over expensive but nice or cheap but not nice.”

The first section of the survey focused on housing, as we know this is a big challenge facing students in Scotland's cities. In fact, according to recent research by the National Union of Students Scotland, 12% of students in Scotland have experienced homelessness while studying.¹

As expected, students' living situations and conditions vary hugely, as shown in Fig 1.

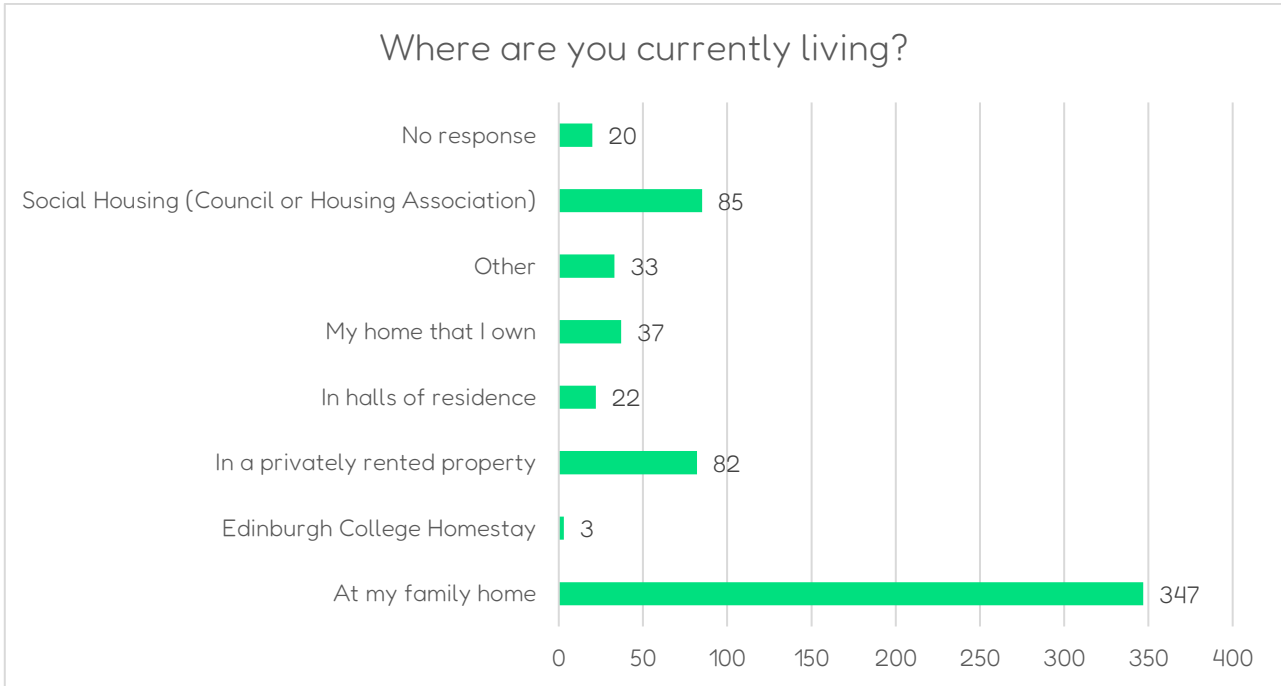


Figure 1: Where are you currently living?

When we asked where they are currently living, over half (55.2%) stated that they were living “at my family home”. This is perhaps to be expected, given that the largest group to complete the survey were aged 16-19.

13.5% of respondents were living in Social Housing (Council or Housing Association) and 13% said they were living in private rented accommodation.

We followed up by asking whether they felt happy and safe in their current living situation. For this, 80% said they felt happy, and 93% said they felt safe.

¹ Broke Students, Broken System, National Union of Students Scotland report, February 2024, pp.27-36 https://www.nus-scotland.org.uk/brokestudents_brokensystem (accessed 19 April 2024)

Unfortunately, there were some students that said they felt neither happy, nor safe in their current living situation. The reasons behind this vary, as shown below:

- students being frustrated they are still living with their parents and there being no alternatives available to them
- disliking the area in which they live
- safety concerns, with incidents of violence and theft cited by several students
- difficulties with neighbours
- unhygienic housing conditions (including damp/mould, causing illness)
- the price of property rentals
- noise and overcrowding at home

It is concerning that 39 respondents said they did not feel safe in their current living situation. Delving further into this data showed that over half of the respondents who did not feel safe at home identified as women. It is also worth noting that 4 of the 18 people who identified as non-binary or genderqueer said they did not feel safe at home. This demonstrates the continued need for us to support female students as well as students in the LGBTQ+ community about their rights and the support available to them.

Q: Do you feel safe in your current living situation?

A: No. I haven't come out to my parents.

Of those who felt unsafe at home, 31% said they lived in social housing. Often these students emphasised the temporary status of their housing, and the feeling that they had little say or control over where they lived.

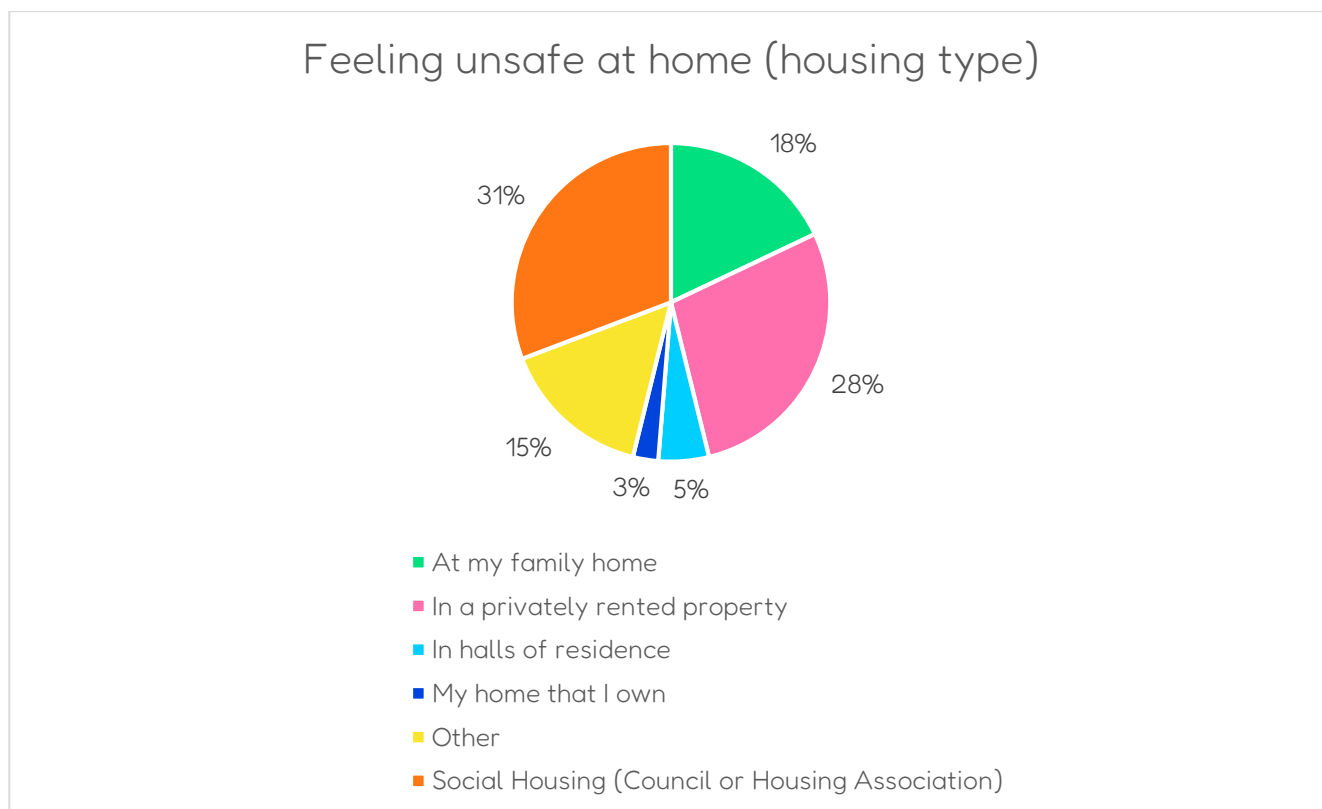


Figure 2: Feeling Unsafe at Home - Housing Type

Sadly, there are a number of students who are experiencing incredibly challenging scenarios at home. Three students were referred to our safeguarding team on the basis of comments around experiencing domestic abuse, being stalked and being around 'someone who hurts you'. The following are direct quotes from respondents and illustrate the varied and concerning difficulties they are currently experiencing in their home lives.

Living Precariously

“

“I am paying a lot of money for a small room in a shared house, for transports and bills, I am working a lot in order to keep up with the living cost and complete my college course.”

“I'm feeling really disheartened about where I'm living right now. I applied for a council house, but I haven't received any response yet. It's hard to stay positive when there's so much uncertainty. I just want to find a place where I feel settled and comfortable.”

Safety concerns

“I'm not safe since I moved into the property last year, I've been attacked twice by locals in the area, one time I even bled a lot. I reported this to the police, they have my case numbers to prove it.”

“It's not a very great area so we had some very bad incidents going on here. If I could, I would move somewhere else.”

“There has been break-ins to the accommodation before, with parcels being stolen, make me fearful that someone will be able to break into my flat and room”

Struggling to study

“As a carer I find it difficult at times to be relaxed at home, I also don't have a lot of space nor privacy to myself to get work done.”

“My home is quite away from the college. I don't have my own space to do my studies as I have three sons with not enough rooms, and we are living together with my husband in small house.”

“I am not in a situation, that I miss anything, but it require real hard work, full time student, full time worker, I can barely spend time with my wife or my baby.”

Scotland's housing shortage

“I struggled to get a flat due to so many people looking and people renting over Fringe, I didn't get my flat until two days before I was kicked out of my previous accommodation.”

“The housing market in Scotland is a joke right now. Near impossible to find somewhere to live in the cities (at least in the central belt).”

”

The refugee experience

Some students studying at Edinburgh College are currently refugees facing a uniquely challenging set of circumstances, as explained below.

"I am a refugee from Ukraine, and I am not sure how it will going on in the future. My family is still in Ukraine. I can't afford rent. And I have a very high level of stress. In the house where I live, my room is very small and there is no place to put a table for lessons. The host family who took me in are tired of my presence and want me to move. Council doesn't help me with this, and I don't have enough money to rent an apartment. I don't know where I'll live even in a couple of weeks."

One respondent answered the survey in Ukrainian, and their answers when translated reveal the stress their family is facing. One key theme with our refugee students is the uncertainty around where life will take them next. The College's safeguarding team offers support to unaccompanied young people, and our ESOL team also offer bespoke support to many of the students facing similar challenges, but this is potentially an area where the College and EC Students' Association could highlight the support for refugees that is available outwith the College, such as from the Scottish Refugee Council.

The image shows a digital translation interface with two examples. Each example consists of a source language dropdown (set to 'Ukrainian - detected'), a bidirectional arrow, and a target language dropdown (set to 'English').

Example 1:
Ukrainian: У моїй країні війна і я не знаю що буде з нами.
English: There is a war in my country and I don't know what will happen to us.
Below the Ukrainian text is a smaller version: U moyiy krayini viyna i ya ne znayu shcho bude z namy.

Example 2:
Ukrainian: Ми живемо в тимчасовому житлі і не знаємо як може скластися ситуація зі мною і моїми дітьми.
English: We live in temporary housing and do not know how the situation with me and my children may turn out.

The above comments are a snapshot of the various reasons why some respondents do not feel happy with their living situation. Many of the concerns are reflected in the [finances section](#), and in the other quotes included throughout this report. While circumstances vary for each individual, this survey

feedback demonstrates the importance of having easily accessible information about the existing support structures that are available for students to draw on if they are feeling vulnerable or overwhelmed.

Other questions in this section of the survey indicate that:

- 13% of respondents said it was challenging or stressful to arrange where they live
- 77% said they would be happy to live in the same place next year if they stay on at College

"I found it hard to find a place of residence in time before college as I had no idea where to look."

We asked two questions about the information and advice provided by the College around options for housing. 68.5% of respondents said they felt they had enough information about housing options available when they decided to come to college. 40% said they would be interested in receiving housing advice in the future, suggestions included:

Guidance

- On what it's like to live alone
- On how much you would expect to pay for rent, bills, groceries, and general costs of living
- More open discussion on housing worries e.g. in LDT classes

Information

- On prices of accommodation and location
- On how social housing works, e.g. how to apply for a council house
- Websites to find local student accommodation
- Lists of affordable accommodation close to College campuses
- Job opportunities available and suitable for students

Advice

- How to access cheaper housing
- How to deal with council tax
- Advice on tenants' rights
- How to get a mortgage
- How to get help with lowering the cost of bills

It is worth noting that some of the suggestions are services already supplied by the College:

- The [JobZone](#) supplies information about jobs available in the area as well as CV building tools and advice
- The Guidance team also supply information, online tools and support around careers, with information available on their [College webpages](#)
- EC Students Association has detailed support and signposting information on the [Housing section of our website](#)

There perhaps is some work to be done to highlight the systems that are already available to students via the College and the Students' Association. For example, when emailing students towards the end of the academic year, it would be good to draw their attention to the JobZone. Information on housing could be promoted at the start of the academic year.

Section Two: Finances

"Not earning enough money to live in Edinburgh. Ridiculously expensive houses and prices in general."

For this section, we wanted to build a picture of where students are with their money and finances. The cost-of-living crisis continues to put a strain on students financially as well as mentally.

When asked about their employment status, the responses ranged, with the highest proportion of students said they were not working (45%) or were in part-time work (39%).

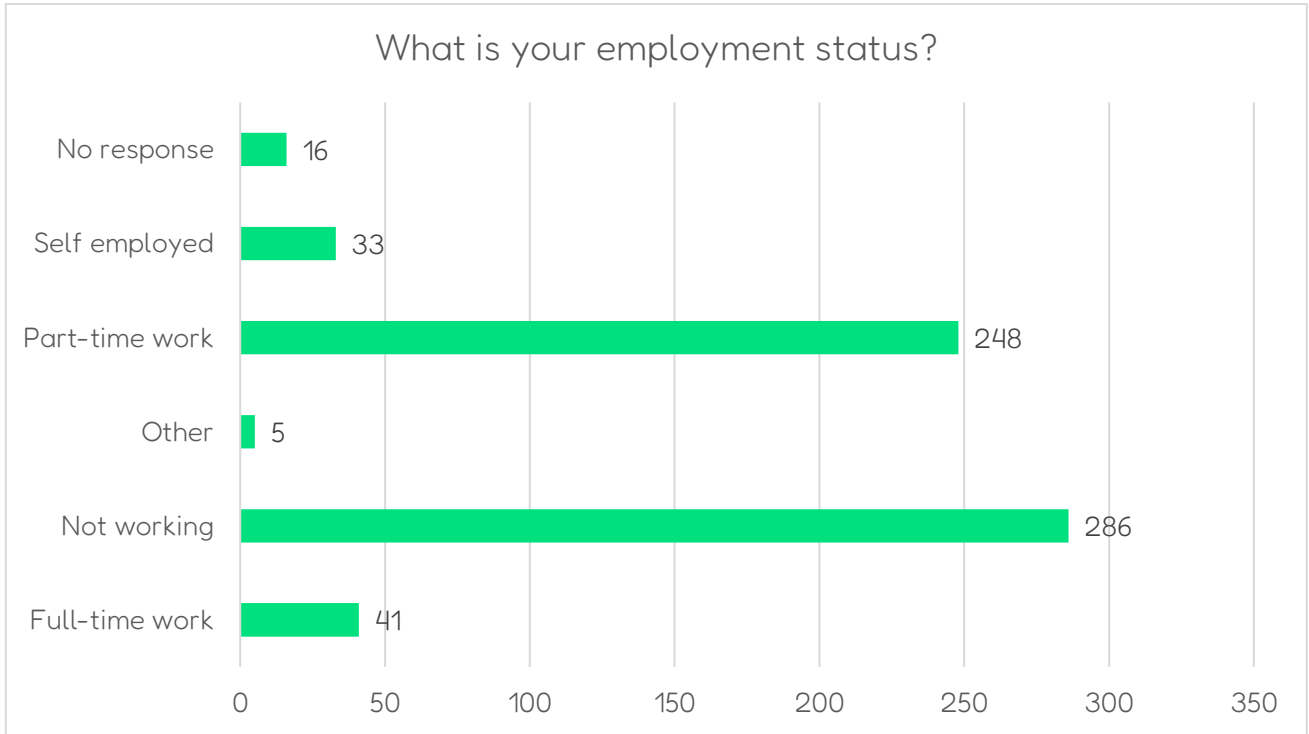


Figure 3: Employment Status

"Being a student I do not have a high payslip, so I do not [have] options to rent a flat myself."

We asked students what kind of funding they received. As shown in Fig. 4, the largest group (45%) were funded by Edinburgh College funding, for example via a bursary, Education Maintenance Allowance, or childcare funding. This suggests that the largest group is also in Further Education.

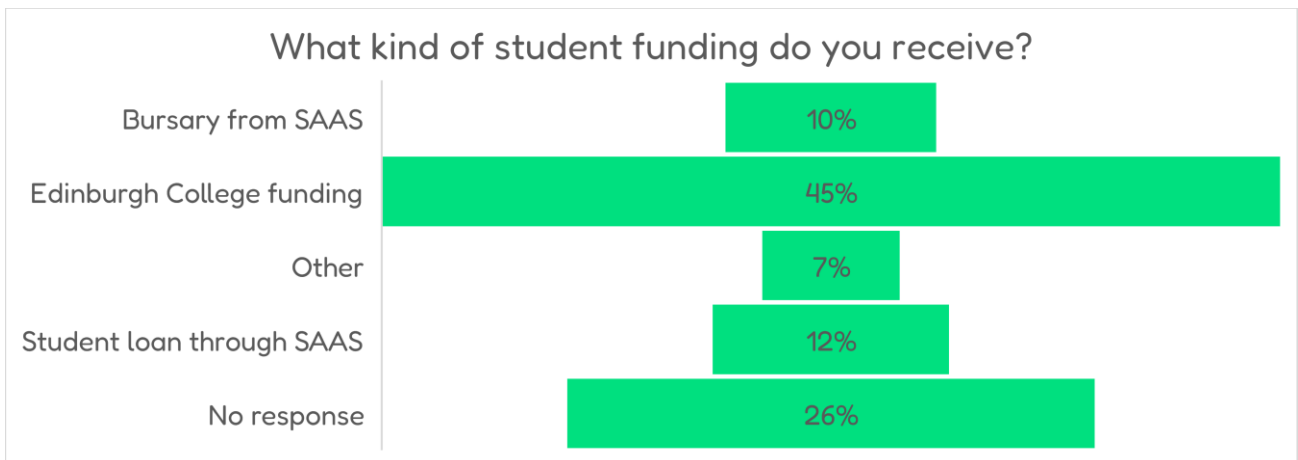


Figure 4: Student Funding

"Unfortunately, the prices are incredibly high and still growing so even with full SAAS and part time income it's so challenging to find accommodation"

When asked about their average monthly income after taxes, more students (37%) said they earned between £0-600 pounds per month than those who took home £601+ per month (34%).

We know that money worries feature highly on students' list of concerns, so we explored this further by asking "From a scale of 1-10, how much stress do money and finances cause you?" For this, a score of 1 equalled 'least stressed' and 10 equalled 'most stressed'. As you will see from Fig. 5, we received responses on every point of the scale, but the highest scoring values were 7 and 8 out of ten, which equates to them feeling stressed about money and finances. 77 people (12%) said they felt the 'most stressed' (10 out of 10).

"Can't afford to put on my heating on."

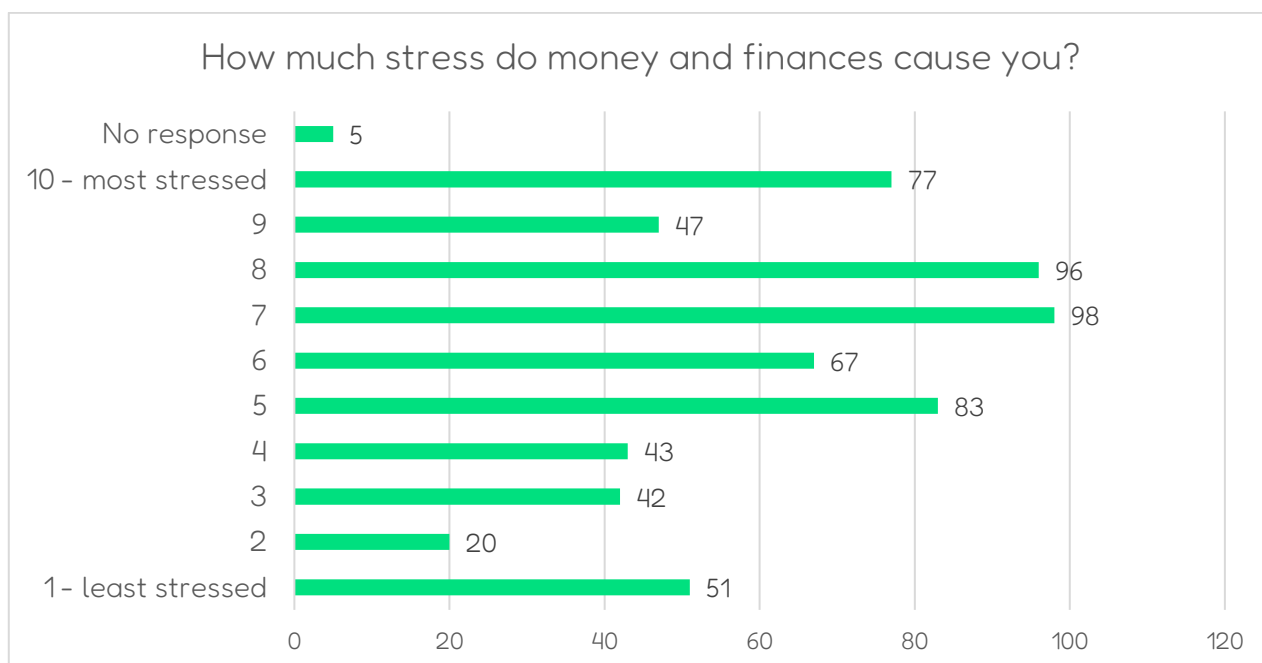


Figure 5: Financial Stress

"I'm struggling with mental health and scared of financial circumstances."

Of the 77 people who said they felt '10 out of 10 stressed':

- 62% were female
- 32% identified as D/deaf, disabled, or having a long-term health condition (including mental health conditions)
- 31% were aged between 16-19
- 27% were parents or carers (including young carers)
- 49% were not working
- 40% were receiving their student funding from Edinburgh College
- 29% had an average monthly income of between £0-300 after tax
- 71% said they were never able to save money

We asked students what the most important aspects of managing their finances were, and the following all ranked highly on their list of priorities:

- Staying within a budget
- Saving more money each month
- Reducing grocery costs
- Knowing where to get student discounts
- Reducing household bill costs e.g. gas, electricity

When it came to saving money each month (see Fig. 6) 54% of respondents said they were either never, or only occasionally able to save money.

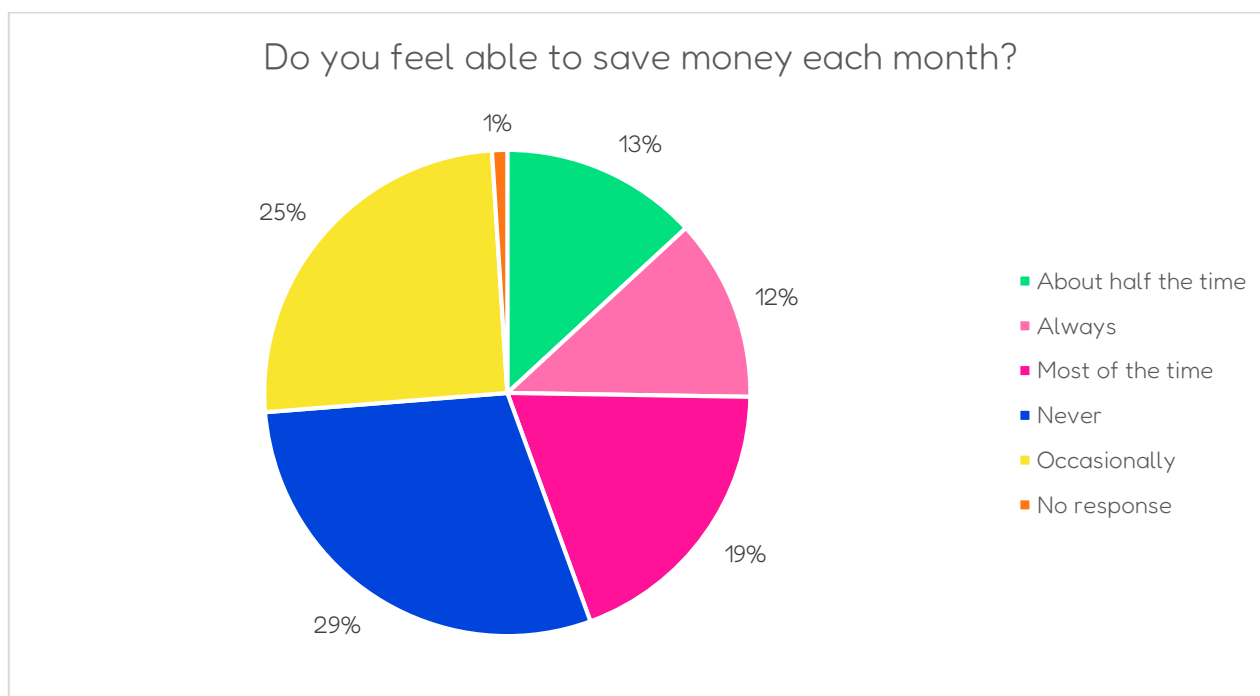


Figure 6: Saving Money

We asked whether students felt the College provided enough information about finances and funding, 63% said yes, and 34% said no.

- 68% said they would like to receive an information booklet about budgeting and money-saving tips
- 28% said they would like a free workshop during lunch break about budgeting and managing finances
- Other suggestions for information about finances and funding were:
 - A workshop about paying off debts and avoiding high interest loans
 - More information on job opportunities for students
 - Job preparation workshops, e.g. CV writing, preparing for interviews
 - Information provided online or in a small tutorial video
 - People to talk to about financial stress and anxiety
 - Information about support through the summer when student loans aren't available

Supporting students with information about finances will be an area of focus for the Wellbeing team and EC Students' Association as part of the Student Mental Health Agreement going forward.

Section Three: Digital Resources

This section explores our respondents' access to digital resources. The majority of the survey respondents (90%) had access to a device to allow them to take part in online learning, such as using Moodle and Teams.

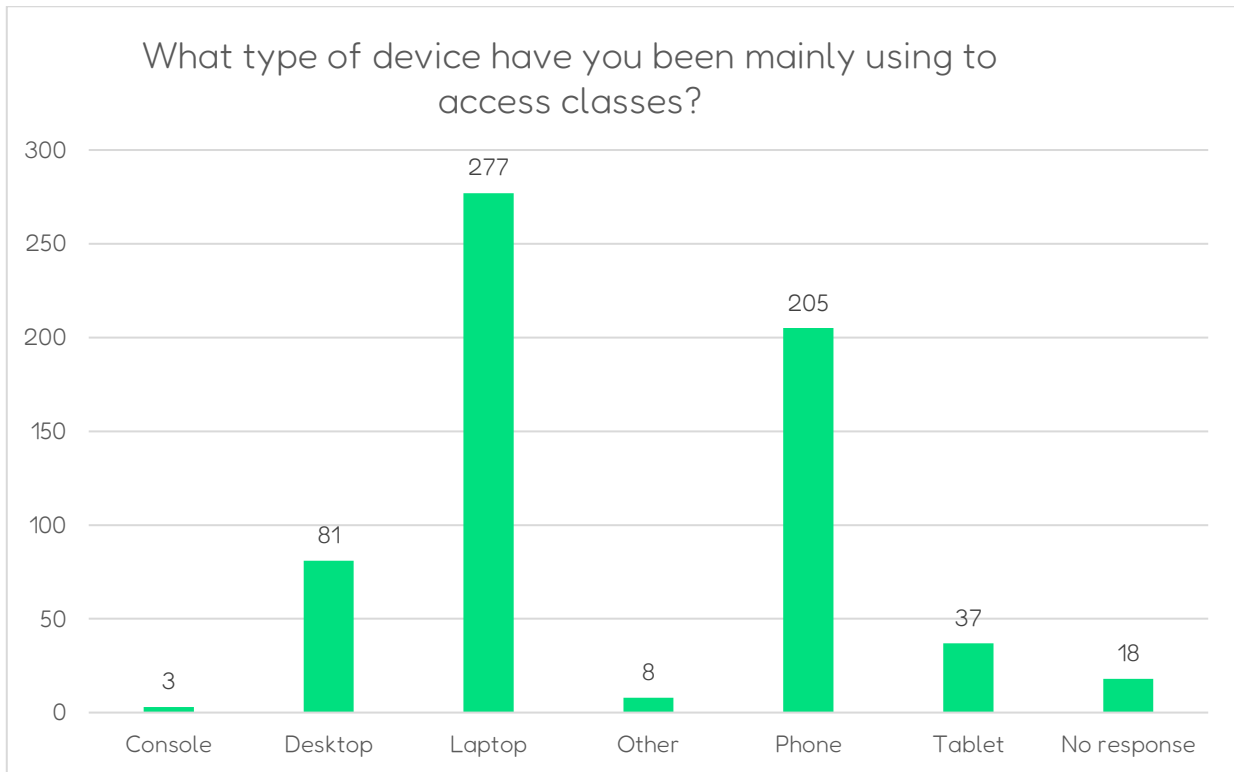


Figure 7: Digital devices for College

There is quite a variety of devices being used by students to access college classes, as shown in Fig. 7. While the laptop is still the most used device, there are a large number of students (33%) using their phones as primary means of accessing classes.

88% of students said they didn't have to share this device with anyone else in their household during college hours.

The above figures are encouraging as it shows that digital poverty is not a huge concern among the survey respondents. The high proportion of students using their phones to access online learning is something worth considering, especially as this trend is growing among our younger learners. This is backed up by data gathered from our Class Reps, who have said that their preferred means of communication with College is via MS Teams, rather than by email.

45% of respondents aged 16-19 are mainly using their phones to access online learning

We welcome the use of apps such as the the MyEC App and the MS Teams messaging, which is easily accessible via mobile phone, as this seems to be the most effective way of communicating with students. The prevalence of phone usage also shows the importance of PCs being available at College for when students need to focus on a larger or more complicated piece of written coursework.

Section Four: Travel and Transport

A larger proportion of respondents than expected (33%) have not been on campus for teaching this academic year, which reflects the prevalence of online learning at Edinburgh College. It also indicates that this group of students is potentially highly engaged in online activity, suggesting that they are more likely to receive and connect with our communications, and complete the survey.

As explained in '[who took part in our survey](#)' section, the campus-by-campus split of respondents, from highest to lowest, was Granton > Sighthill > Milton Road and Midlothian.

We asked students to share how they travelled to campus, and as Fig. 8 suggests, of the 400 people who answered this question, the bus is the most frequently used travel option, followed by those who drove their car alone and walking.

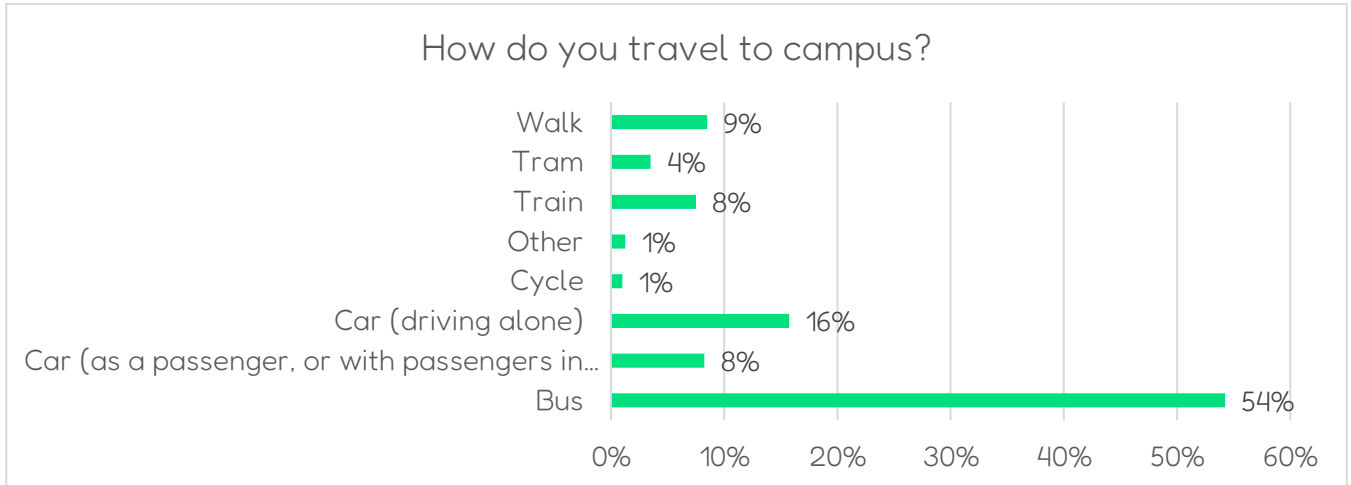


Figure 8: Travel to Campus

Parking space shortages are often cited in feedback from students, and the data gathered here suggests there is scope to encourage students to choose sustainable modes of transport when coming to College, such as opting to walk, cycle or lift-share with other students.

Section Five: College Life

For the first time in this annual survey, we asked students more about how they feel about Edinburgh College life more generally, to get a better understanding of the social connections that students make and the general reputation of the College among students.

The results were highly positive here, with 89% agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement “as a student, I feel like I belong at Edinburgh College”.

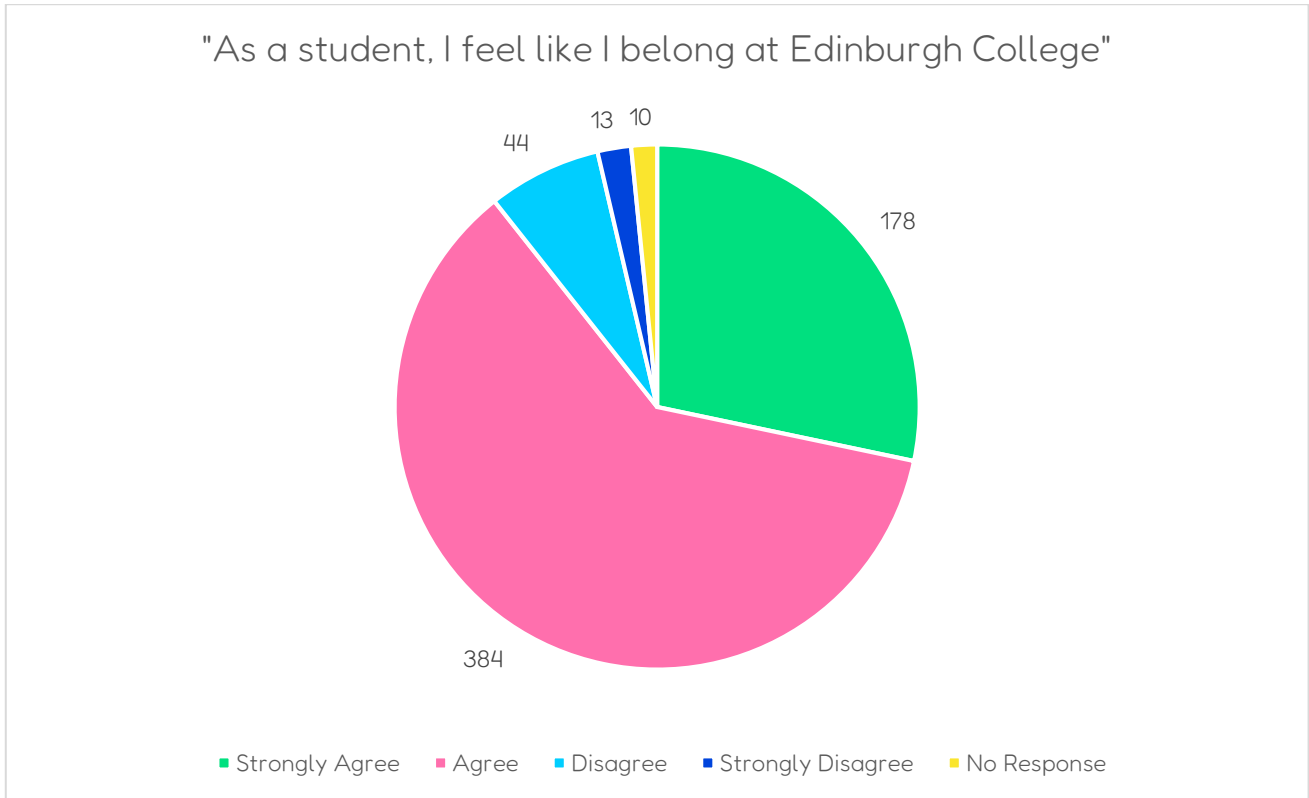


Figure 9: Sense of Belonging

This is further supported by there being 94% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that Edinburgh College is a welcoming place.

There is a strong indication that most students feel most connected to their curriculum areas, e.g. their course or their class (see Fig. 10).

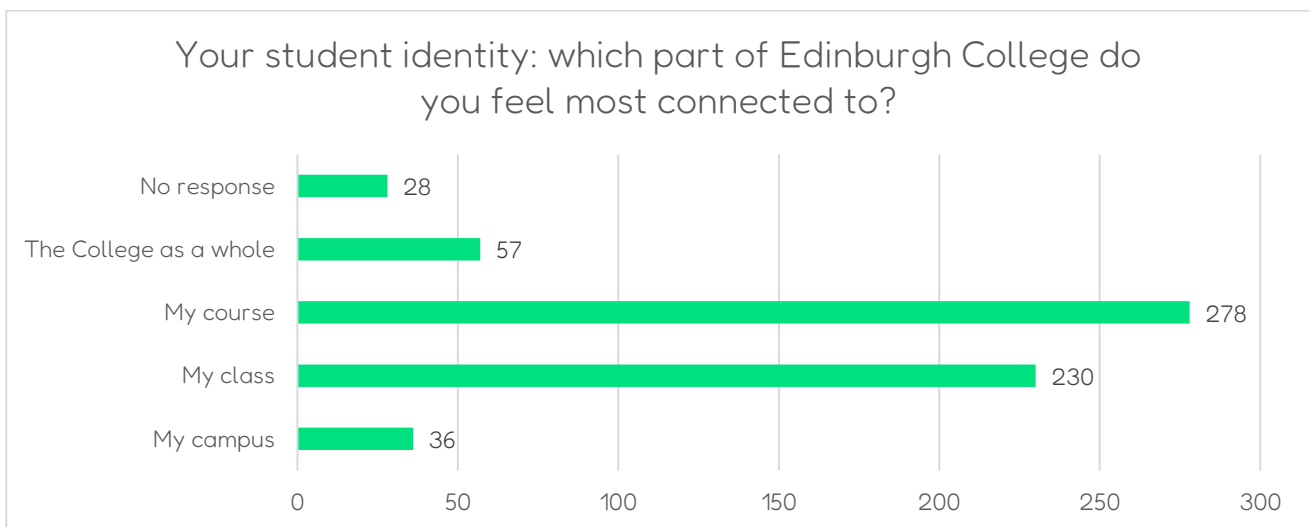
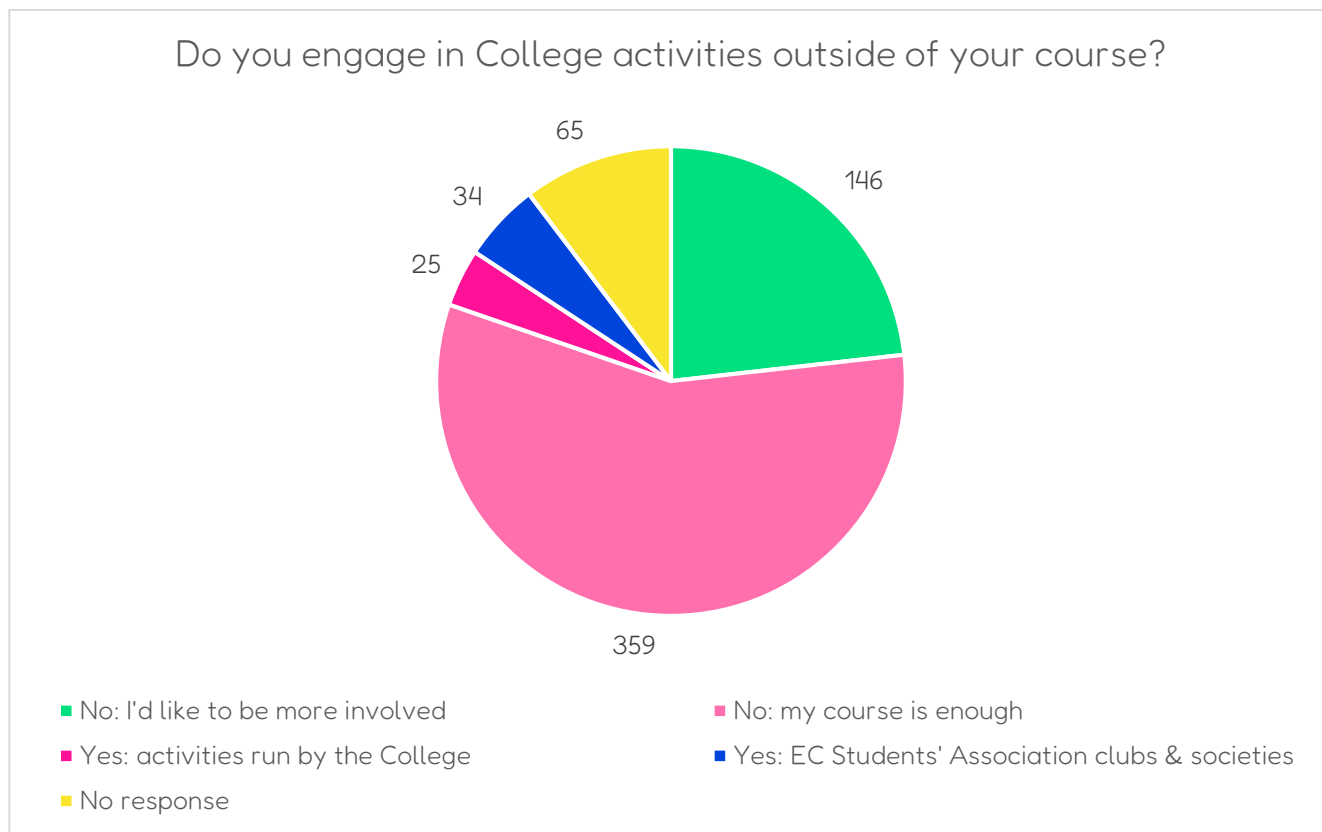


Figure 10: Student Identity

44% said they feel most connected to their course, 37% were most connected to their class. Only 6% felt most connect to their campus, and 9% to the College as a whole.

We asked respondents to share with us whether they engaged with college activities outside of their course, and only a small proportion said that they were involved either in EC Students' Association's Clubs and Societies (5%), or activities run by the College (4%).



Overall, 23% said they would like to be more involved, which shows potential for increased engagement with student in on-campus activities. A large proportion of respondents (57%) said their course was enough for them.

When asked to rate the College's facilities on a scale of 1-5, with one being 'awful' and 5 being 'brilliant', the answers were broadly positive, as shown below, with the largest group of respondents ranking the facilities 4 out of 5.

Ranking	Number of respondents	Percentage
1 = awful	5	1%
2	26	4%
3	200	32%
4	244	39%
5 = brilliant	143	23%
No response	11	2%

Students at Granton and Midlothian were more likely to rate their campus' facilities as 4/5, while more Milton Road and Sighthill students voted their campus at 3/5.

Section Six: A Deeper Dive – Younger Learners

EC Students' Association have been working with the College's EDI Lead, as part of the College's Equality Outcome, to improve the success rate of students aged under 19. As such, we thought it would be useful to do a deeper dive on the data from this group of respondents, who made up 48% of the total survey respondents. This could be a reason why their responses broadly fall in line with overall survey findings.

Demographics for 16-19s

- The respondents aged 16-19 were more evenly balanced in terms of gender, with 51% female and 45% male
- 27% of 16-19s said they identified as D/deaf or disabled, or had a long-term health condition (including mental health conditions)
- 8% of this group said they were a parent or carer (includes young carers)

At a glance

Key Findings	16-19-year-olds	Overall data
Live at their family home	83%	55%
Not currently working	51%	45%
Receiving their student funding from Edinburgh College	46%	45%
Taking home between £0-£600 per month after taxes	47%	38%
Can save money each month 'most of the time'	27%	19%
Happy with their living situation	89%	80%
Feel safe in their current living situation	98%	93%
Take the bus to College	31%	34%
Are on campus three days per week	47%	46%
Are studying at Granton campus	31%	30%
Have access to a device for online learning	89%	91%
Mainly using their phones to access classes	45%	33%
Agreed or strongly agreed that they belonged at Edinburgh College	89%	89%
Agreed or strongly agreed that Edinburgh College is a welcoming place	95%	94%
Would like to be more involved with college activities	20%	23%

Perhaps most significantly, because a high proportion of this group live at their family home, they seemed to generally be less worried about their housing, and there was less financial pressure on this group. For example, their focus tends to be around how they can save money, rather than paying off debt, or reducing the costs of household bills or groceries. They also seemed to be less interested in housing advice and broadly felt that the College had provided enough information on these topics.

Where there was stress, this was usually when people were living at home with their families, due to overcrowding and tensions at home, with some students feeling it was really the only option available to them, or unsure of whether they will be allowed to stay.

"Insecure in legitimacy of whether I'm wanted there or not, don't feel respected... don't know if I'll be allowed to stay here for as long as I'd hoped."

Overall, this age group tended to feel positive towards the College, with 89% saying they agreed or strongly agreed that they belonged at Edinburgh College, and 95% agreed or strongly agreed that Edinburgh College is a welcoming place. They also felt broadly positive about the facilities, as shown in Fig.11.

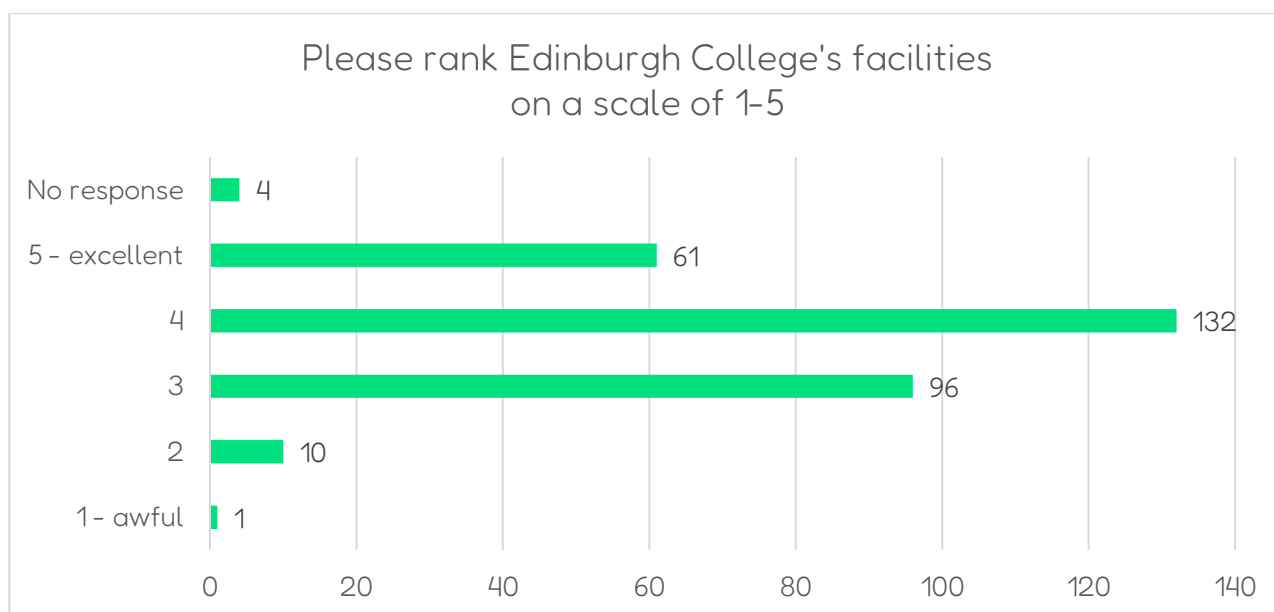


Figure 11: 16-19s Facilities Ratings

One in five 16-19-year-olds said they would like to be more involved with College activities, so that would be a good area for EC Students' Association to focus on promoting our clubs and societies to in future years.

Focus Group Findings

As part of our research into the experience of younger learners, in April 2024 we conducted a focus group with five Class Reps from this demographic. Overall, our findings echoed what was discovered in this survey, that our younger students tend to feel happy at College, although some can find the transition from school to College life challenging, as they can be unsure what to expect from College life. Because the age range at College is so diverse, it can be trickier to make connections with other students, highlighting the importance of icebreakers early in the academic year.

The students we spoke to felt they would be keen to get more involved in activities targeted at their younger age group, and this demographic is going to be a key area for EC Students' Association to focus their clubs and activities on in the coming academic year.

Student Life Survey: Conclusion

This survey, which was completed by 629 students over the course of February–April 2024, is an extensive piece of research that gives a snapshot of life experienced by students, beyond their day-to-day studies at Edinburgh College.

This report has focused on the overall insights, but having collected demographic data, we can now also drill down into the experience of specific groups of students, such as the experiences of the 16-19s demographic we have explored in section 6.

Largely, the survey respondents feel positive about Edinburgh College: they feel it is a welcoming place to which they feel a sense of belonging, and they ranked the facilities highly. This is encouraging data, and we hope to celebrate and harness the positive feeling among the student community in the coming months. It is worth noting that as with all surveys, the respondents are a self-selecting group and so students who feel more positive towards the College may be more likely to spend time completing surveys like this one.

As the data has shown, students are facing challenging situations, both in their housing, and in their finances, as the cost-of-living crisis continues. While some respondents feel that enough information and support is provided and available, there is scope to provide more information to students, using different platforms, so that as many people access it as possible. Recognising the diversity of lived experience, particularly among vulnerable groups such as refugee or LGBTQ+ students, will be important going forward, to ensure we are offering tailored support to those who need it.

Signposting the information and support that is already available to students, such as our Wellbeing Team, the Guidance Services and online resources through our website, is an important part of both Edinburgh College's and EC Students' Association's responsibility. We are also committed to building links with the wider charity sector, to ensure students know what support is available to them beyond the College campuses.

In a reality where students are struggling to make ends meet, where student funding cannot cover the cost of rent and bills, or when students cannot afford to heat their homes, the importance of jobs for students comes sharply into focus. Preparation for the world of work has been highlighted numerous times in different sections across this survey, showing the importance of services such as Edinburgh College's JobZone site, which lists jobs that might be of interest to students, as well as the careers guidance that is offered to many students as part of their course.

The findings of this report will inform the work of the new Student Mental Health Agreement, which is being launched in May 2024. The report will also be circulated to, and inform discussions with:

- Edinburgh College Board of Management
- Learning, Teaching & Student Experience Committee
- Senior Management Team
- EC Development Trust
- EC Students' Association Board of Trustees

The report will be made available to students via the Students' Association's website. Comparisons with data from previous years will also be published online.

The Edinburgh College community is responsible for providing as many opportunities, information, resources, and support sources as possible, to empower students in all areas of their lives, and to encourage them to grow in confidence in the face of the frequent challenges life can throw at them. We are in a strong position to build what is already being provided, as well as the College's positive reputation among students, to work together and make sure students can thrive both in and outside of College.