

# Student Lifestyle Report 2023



UCAS

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## Welcome to the UCAS Student Lifestyle Report for 2023.

Every year, we publish our research into the preferences and practices of a brand new generation of freshers. By surveying them on everything from spending habits to social media usage, we can understand what's driving their decisions and behaviours, and how student-focussed brands need to adapt to keep up.

The full report will be published in April 2023, but we're releasing it chapter-by-chapter each week from today.

## Methodology

We sent 3 surveys to students beginning their first year of higher education in the UK, collecting responses between 2nd and 15th November 2022. In total, 3,837 freshers completed the surveys, giving us a wealth of rich data from which to draw the following insights about behaviours and trends amongst current freshers across the UK.

Before we start our calculations, we adjust for imbalances in response rates across applicant groups to ensure that the results are truly representative of the student population.

Chapter One

# The Cost of Living



# Introduction

## Cost of Living – Real Estate

In few places is the rising cost of living going to make such an impact as in student accommodation. Rent makes up a huge part of student spending and many have to use multiple income sources to pay for it. Fortunately there's been a staggeringly impressive response and they've stepped up to the mark, and then some. But that doesn't mean we can rest on our laurels.

When we anticipate application volumes to skyrocket (which we do), the student accommodation sector is going to be a fascinating thing to watch. And whilst a booming student population points towards an exciting and thriving period for higher education, it also highlights a very real significant challenge when it comes to housing. Where are they all going to live?

The rising cost of living will inevitably lead to more students considering the option to live at home (although keep reading, because that's not quite as straightforward as it might seem), but accommodation providers will be doing everything they can to convince them otherwise.

Bills included, free wifi, campus proximity, state of the art facilities – all very enticing features. Also all very important to ensure a positive student experience, which is a pursuit that goes far beyond the student accommodation sector. It's these features that make the

difference when students are considering which direction to take in a crucial point in their lives and – alongside the cost of living – student expectations are rising too.

Over the next few years, demand will significantly outstrip supply. Now, more than ever, we need to support the next generation of students.

As accommodation providers work tirelessly to refine their offer and ensure that students have somewhere great to live, the UCAS mantra (Making Choices Clearer) has never been more poignant. My focus is going to be on developing true partnerships with accommodation providers, as well as brands and businesses beyond the sector, to ensure they're communicating everything they need to, to everybody who needs to hear it.



Ollie Wells  
Customer Success Director,  
Real Estate, UCAS



# Home Sweet Hometown

Every September, like clockwork, a mass migration takes place across the British Isles.

By plane, by train, by automobile – the best part of 3 million<sup>1</sup> undergraduates leave their hometowns behind, bound for university. And when we say ‘almost all’, we mean it. **In 2019, 90% moved away.**

But during COVID-19, when families pulled closer and lessons went digital, the number of students staying home rose sharply. And in 2021, even as we began to move away from the effects of the pandemic, still only 80% chose to move away. **Now it’s finally rising again – with 82% heading off to campus in 2023.** So is this a slow return to form, or a settling of the new normal?

Hometowns are, by their nature, places of familiarity, friends, and financial security – and in many other countries, staying there is the norm (75%<sup>2</sup> of students live at home in Italy). So, for this generation of freshers facing a cost-of-living crisis, what does the future hold?

What’s clear is that they’re still going to university in their droves. We remain on course to see one million applications for the first time this decade and the number of 18 year olds continues its demographic climb. The cost-of-living isn’t changing their plans at a fundamental level.

But on a practical level, a lot is changing. The family home is in the same fiscal position as the student home – and freshers are having to become more self-sufficient. They’re getting

less help from their parents – for purchases like textbooks, laptops, tablets, and entertainment – and more of them are taking part time jobs.

So it wouldn’t be outlandish to suggest that more students will stay at home from here on out. It’s an easier ride for them in many aspects, but it’s just not the university experience that most have planned for. Campus, halls, and house shares are a fundamental part of the appeal. So that seedling 2% rise, as a few more choose to move away again, could be the vanguard leading the way back to the pre-pandemic experience.

There’s positive news from NatWest’s Student Living Index<sup>3</sup> too. It shows that students, despite the cost-of-living, are better off this year too – with incomes up by 65%, against rising costs of only 29%, and rents 12% down. If anybody can take a bad situation and make something good out of it, it’s Gen Z.

It’s this tenacity in the face of adversity that earned them a second nickname during the pandemic – Generation Resilient. And whilst we shouldn’t assume that they can weather any and every storm, they’ve already proven themselves a stoic bunch, to say the least.

So time will tell whether 2024 sees the return of those mass migrations back to uni but, as far as we can see, they’ve already started.

<sup>1</sup> <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7857/#:~:text=In%202021%2F22%20there%20were,overseas%20students%20studying%20postgraduate%20courses.>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.savills.co.uk/blog/article/208565/commercial-property/how-different-european-countries-house-their-student-populations.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.natwest.com/life-moments/students-and-graduates/student-living-index.html>

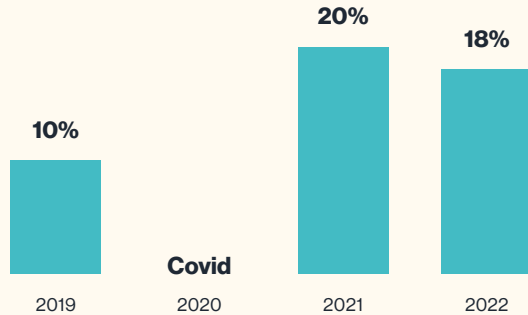
Figure 1.

## Respondent demographics

► We may already be seeing the impact in the number of students who decide to live at home (as well as a bounce back from covid).

Q: How often do you visit home? Those that answered 'live at home'. Respondents: 1,169

% of students living at home



74% aged 18-19



97% UK, 2% non-EU, 1% EU



65% female, 35% male

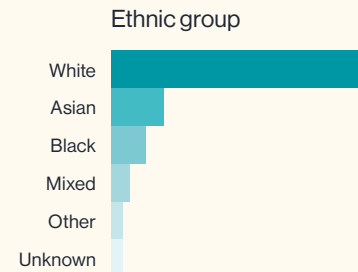
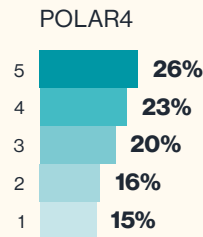


Figure 2.

## Students are increasingly bearing these costs alone as parents offer less monetary support.

Who paid for your...	% of parent(s)/guardian(s) paying for items in 2022	YoY change
Laptop/computer	30%	-5% (since 2018)
Tablet	21%	-8% (since 2018)
Textbooks and/or reading materials for uni	8%	-6% YoY (since 2021)
Entertainment services	52%	-3% YoY (since 2021)
Smartphone handset	32%	+3% YoY (since 2021)

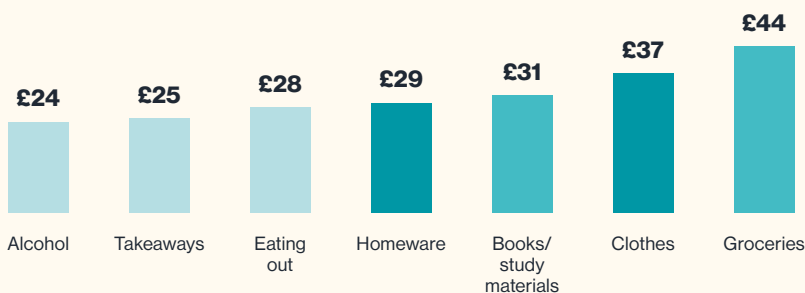
Figure 3. Q: During a regular week at university/college, how much do you spend on the following? Respondents: Approx 500

## Spend has dropped for the first time since 2019, returning to pre-pandemic levels.

**£76** Although the smallest spend per sub-category, fun makes up 35% of total spend

**£75** Essentials make up 34% of total spend

**£66** Lifestyle makes up 30% of total spend



Total spend in a typical week:

**£219**

2021 spend: £235  
2020 spend: £229  
2019 spend: £214

Figure 4. Q: Which of the following did you buy for university? Please select all that apply. Respondents: 1,035

**Spending across almost every category has decreased this year, often following a long-term trend.**

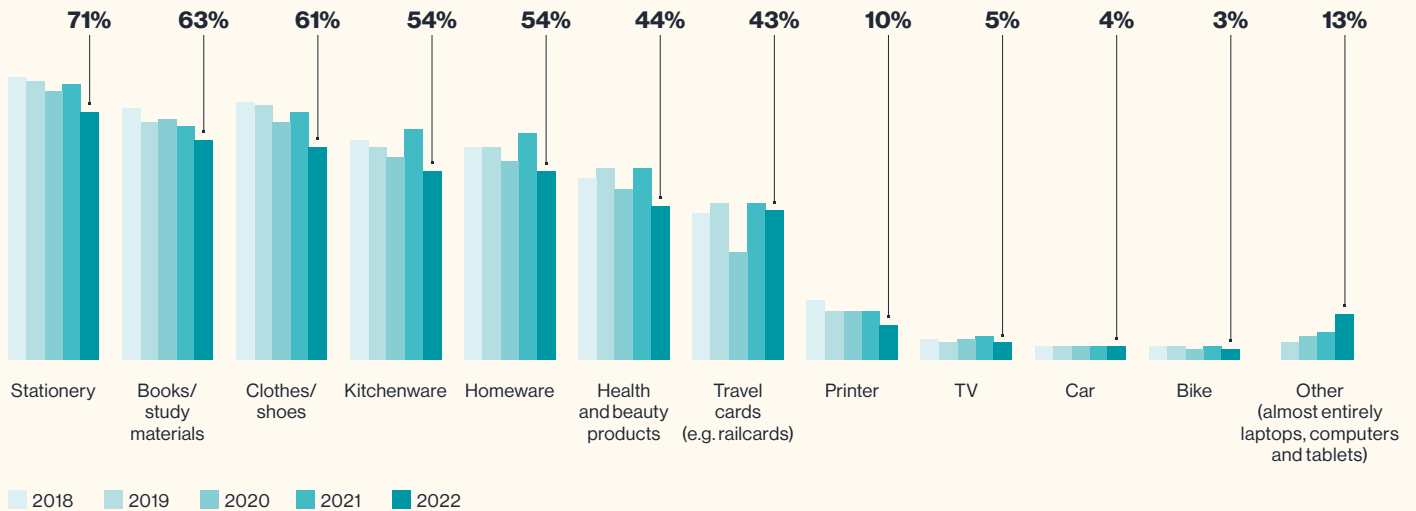


Figure 5. Q: Of the things above which you told us you bought before starting uni, how much money did the following people spend in total on these items? Respondents: Approx. 900

**This has led to a dramatic decrease in total spend before starting university in 2022.**

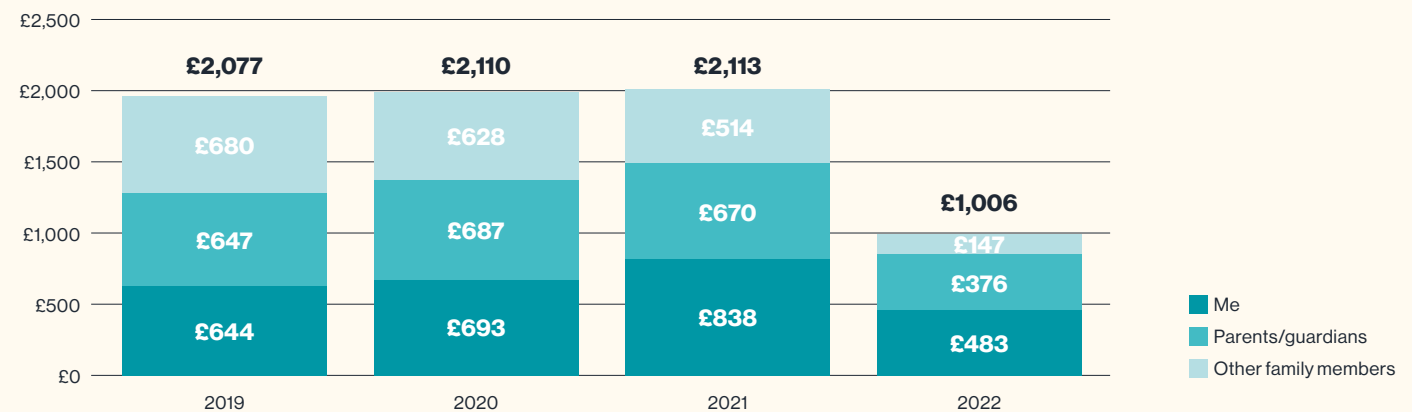
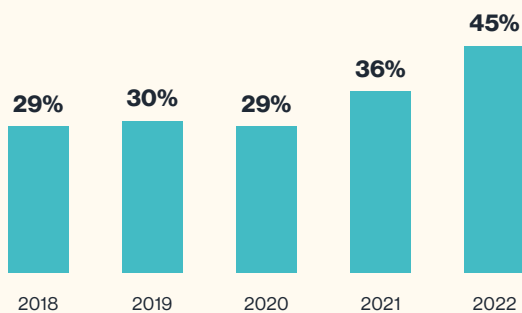


Figure 6. Q: Is there anything you did not buy for uni that you now wish you had bought? (Answer: YES). Respondents: 1,020

**Which may explain the large increase in the % of students wishing they had purchased something before university.**



Is there anything you did not buy for uni that you now wish you had bought? (Answer: YES)

- Laptop/Computer**  
 'A better laptop with more storage for my coursework'  
 'A smaller laptop, to carry around and use in lectures'  
 'Good Laptop that will serve me throughout my study years'
- Kitchenware**  
 More kitchenware – can opener, steak knife, scissors, airfryer'  
 An air fryer was mentioned over 20 times
- Clothes/Shoes**  
 'Warmer winter clothing (gone north for uni)'  
 'More clothes, especially for my course which has a lot of outdoor practical'
- Printer**  
 'I wish I had gotten printer and a scanner which would help me in university for some documents I might need to print out'
- Homeware**  
 Decorative items for my room'  
 'Homeware – cushions, lamp, throw blankets, decoration'  
 'Some decor for the accommodation so it felt more homely'





# The Penny-wise Pioneers

Whichever way you cut it, students are spending less money before they get to campus.

In almost every category we track, pre-uni spending is down on last year – stationery, books, clothes, homeware, printers, TVs, bikes. But in many cases last year was an anomaly, an excited reaction to the reopening of the world, and the high street. Student spending on these items has been on a slow journey south for years.

And whilst there are plenty of real-time reactions to the increased cost-of-living, which do result in less net spending, the main change is that they're banking their money for term time. And banking it in a big way, with pre-uni **purchases down from £2,113, to £1,006.**

Almost half arrived on campus this year without investing in something they needed, and more still have their eyes on a purchase they've been lining up for a while.

But in real terms, once they're at university, **week-to-week spending is only down by £16.**

Over a 36 week study year, that means they're still splashing almost **£8,000 per annum.**

And as well as keeping tighter pre-uni purse strings, they're getting savvier with making savings too. More of them are using discount platforms (+9%), budget supermarkets (+5%), and SIM-only phone plans (+3%). It's yet another Gen Z tale of playing the cards they've been dealt – and playing them well.

The Student Money Survey<sup>4</sup> says so too – it paints an entrepreneurial picture of up to 20 different revenue streams currently being used by students. Part-time jobs, self-employment, paid surveys, stocks and shares, and cryptocurrencies all play an important role in boosting student income. And almost a third have their own business or side hustle, alongside their studies.

There's also centralised help on the way. Rents at Scottish uni halls are currently frozen, Northern Irish maintenance loans are increasing by 40%<sup>5</sup>, and all UK tuition fees are fixed for the next two years, as part of a £15 million<sup>6</sup> hardship fund.

The situation isn't perfect, and the enterprise of students may do nothing more than maintain the disposable income levels of a pre-pandemic age, but there is plenty to admire. At this rate they're on course to sweep aside the outdated student stereotypes and, simultaneously, transform themselves into a new workforce with higher financial literacy, greater entrepreneurial spirit, and bundles of resilience.

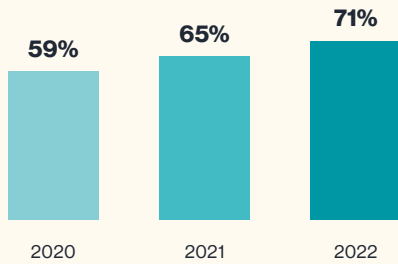
<sup>4</sup> <https://www.savethestudent.org/money/surveys/student-money-survey-2022-results.html#key>

<sup>5</sup> <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/how-is-the-rising-cost-of-living-affecting-students/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/cost-of-living-boost-for-students>

Figure 7. Q: Are there any items that you currently have your eye on but haven't yet purchased? (Answer: YES). Respondents: 1,013

And the increase in those who are have restrained themselves from purchasing something they want.



► POLAR Q1 are most likely to want something (80%), and Q5 least likely (63%)

- 1 Clothes/Shoes
- 2 Laptop/Computer
- 3 Tablet
- 4 Health & beauty products
- 5 Headphones
- 6 Books
- 7 Laptop/Computer accessories | Phone
- 8 Kitchenware
- 9 Bag
- 10 Games console

Figure 8.

Use of discount sites is also increasing – 89% use at least one of these student discount sites (vs 80% in 2020 and 2021).



**UCAS saw a +7%pts year-on-year increase**

Men are less likely to use a discounter, with 17% saying they do not use any of these sites.

Figure 9. Q: What type of phone plan are you on? Respondents: 1,167

Instead, costs may be cut on airtime plans – SIM only plans are increasing in uptake, rising to a high of 26% this year, whilst monthly contracts fell to a low of 58%.

What type of phone plan are you on?

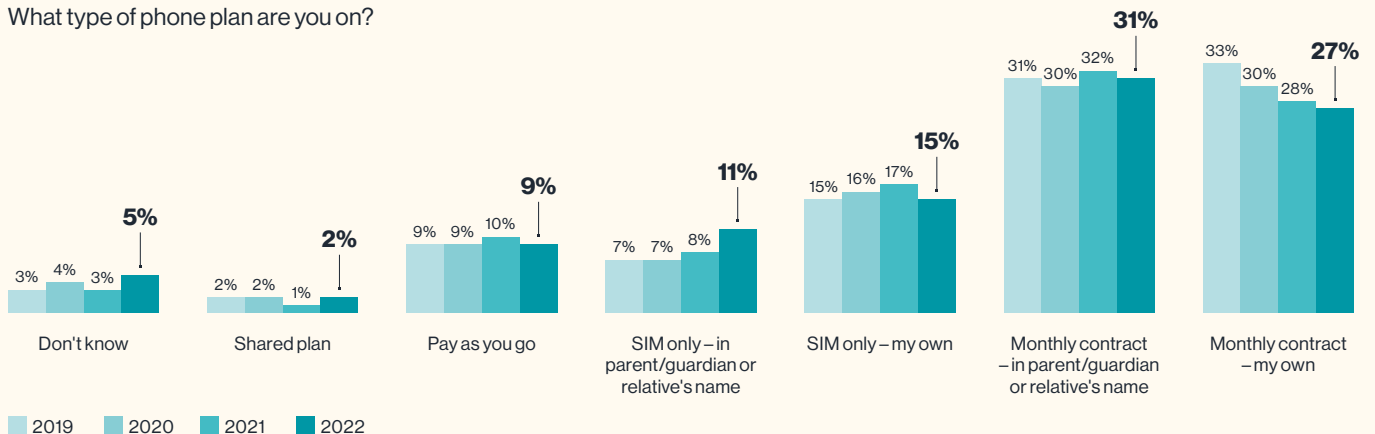




Figure 10. Q: When you're at university or college, where do you buy groceries from? (Please tick all that apply). Respondents: 1,013

## Tesco leads the way for grocery shopping, but budget supermarkets are in a clear 2nd place, and use is increasing

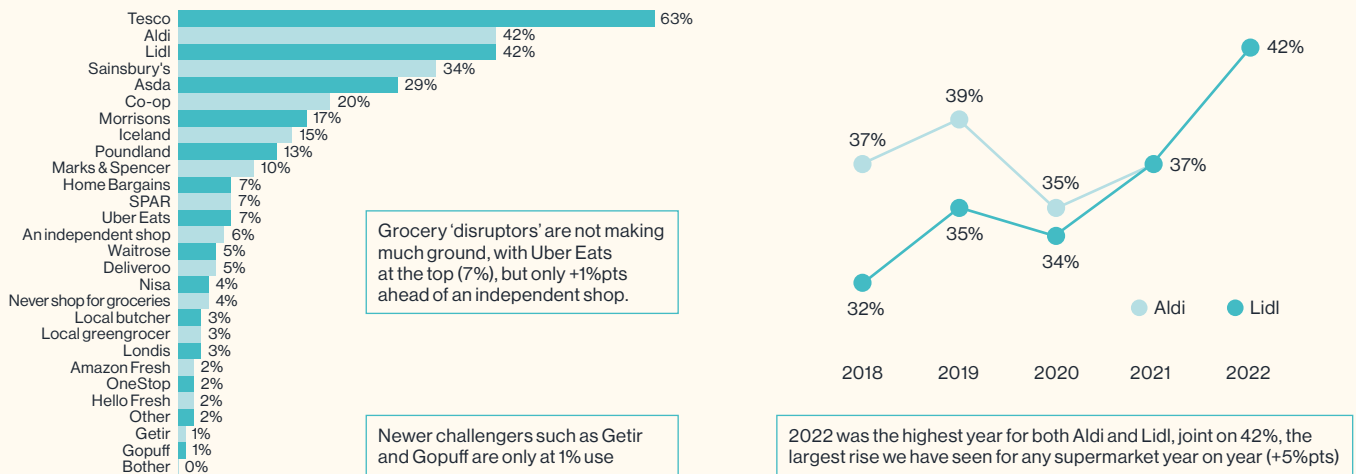


Figure 11. Q: What factors are important when choosing which takeaway to order? Respondents: 1,046

## Cost is by far the most important factor when choosing a takeaway, and deals/discounts was the only other factor to increase YoY

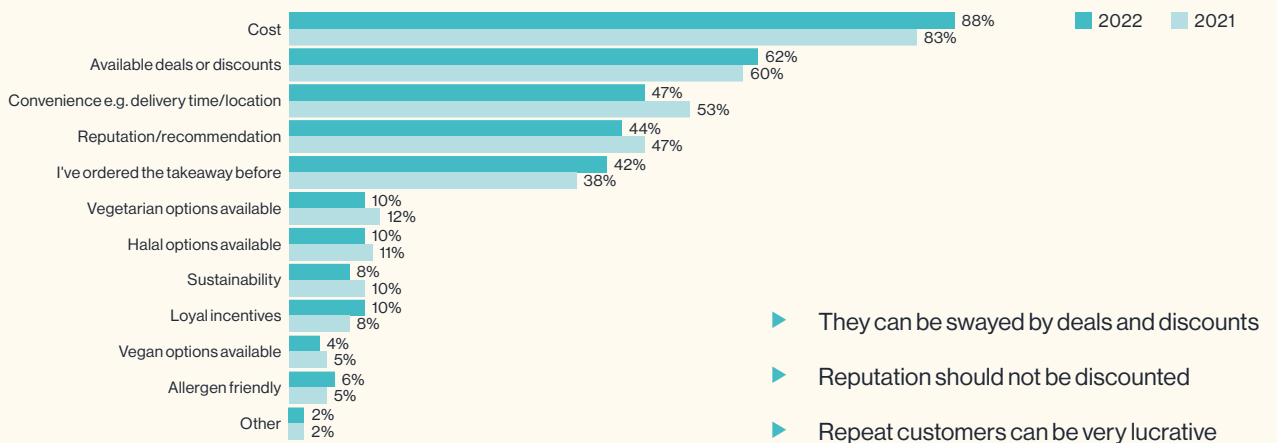


Figure 12. Q: How often do you get a takeaway? Respondents: 1,169

## This may go some way towards explaining why frequency of takeaways orders is decreasing

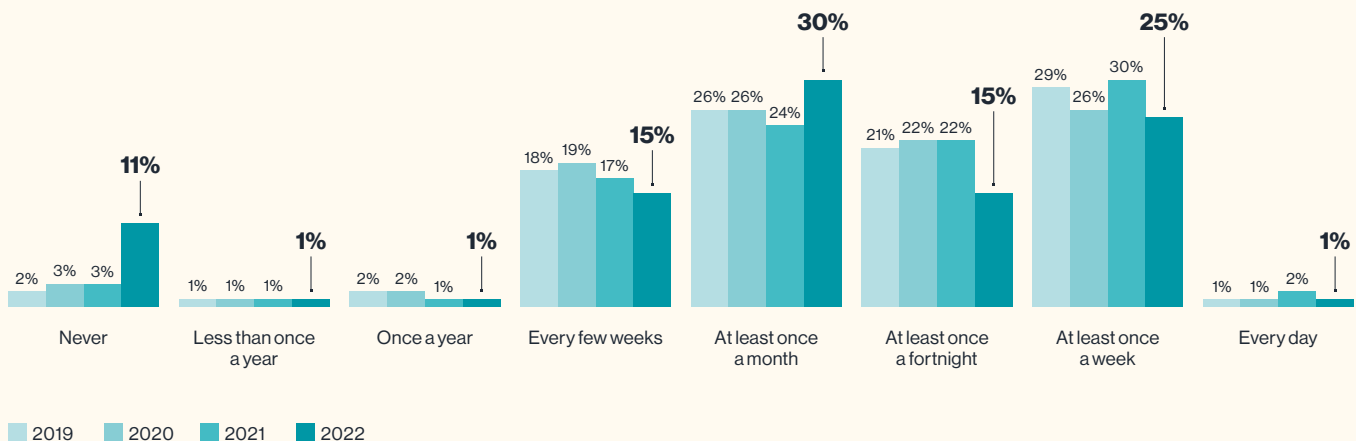


Figure 13. Q: Since moving to university, have you had to cut back on any of the following items because of the cost of living? Respondents: 1,142

### And almost half of students say they have cut back on takeaways due to the cost of living

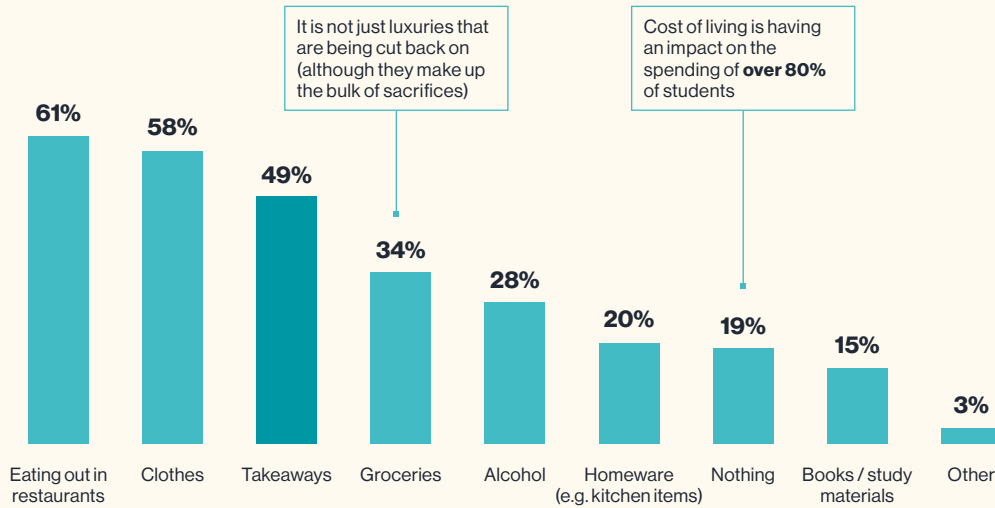


Figure 14. Q: During a typical week at uni, how often do you do the following? Respondents: 1,172

### In fact, they are mostly likely to be eating home cooked meals on a regular basis, with takeaways and restaurants less frequently used

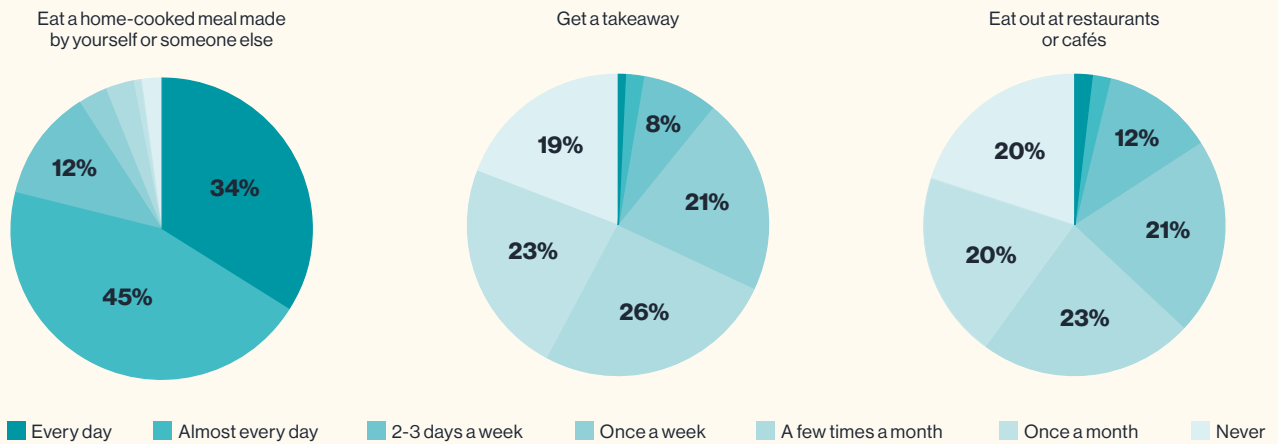
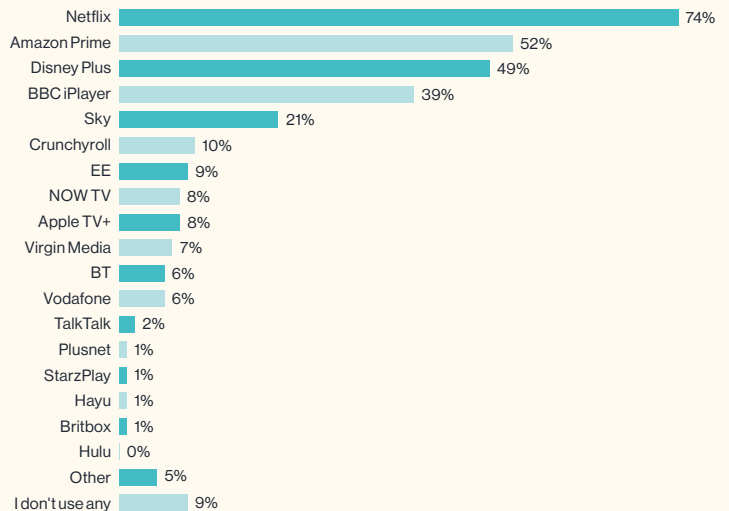
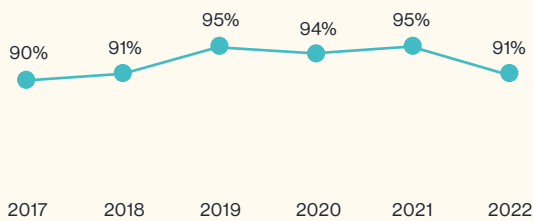


Figure 15. Q: Which of the following entertainment services, if any, do you use? Respondents: 1,035

### There may be signs that video streaming could be affected by cost of living, with 2022 the lowest proportion using at least one service since 2018

Proportion using at least one video streaming service



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