

**INDEPENDENT
HIGHER
EDUCATION**

2025 SURVEY AND STATISTICS

**Understanding the
UK's independent higher
education sector**

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**Independent Higher Education (IHE)
is the UK membership organisation
and national representative body
for independent providers of higher
education, professional training
and pathways.**

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Introduction

This edition of the Independent Higher Education Survey comes at a time of significant transformation for the higher education sector. The evolving regulatory environment under the Office for Students (OfS) – including the registration pause, the introduction of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE), changes to Degree Awarding Powers (DAPs), and modifications to graduate visa regulations – is reshaping the landscape for higher education providers.

This 2025 survey represents the most comprehensive examination of independent higher education providers to date, drawing on official Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data for 2023/24 alongside sector-wide survey responses. The analysis examines student demographics and growth patterns from 2018/19 to 2023/24, including the balance between mature and young students, full-time and part-time provision, international and domestic student composition, and widening participation. It also explores academic provision, including subject specialisation, programme portfolios, and the distribution of undergraduate and postgraduate study, alongside international education strategies, post-Brexit recruitment patterns and transnational delivery models.

The analysis draws on HESA official statistics covering 94,490 full person equivalent (FPE) students at independent providers and 2,786,490 FPE students at traditional universities, combined with the 81 responses to the survey. Together, this data reflects the breadth of the sector, from large multi-programme providers to small and specialist institutions.

The independent higher education sector has long been characterised by rapid evolution, with providers demonstrating agility and responsiveness to student demand. In the context of sustained regulatory and policy change, this analysis captures not only a snapshot of providers' size, shape and characteristics, but also examines how recent transformation has affected student access, programme innovation and sector sustainability since the previous survey in 2019.

The Independent Higher Education Survey remains the only comprehensive examination of this part of the higher education landscape. We are grateful to the independent providers who participated in the 2025 survey, helping to highlight the priorities, challenges and opportunities facing the sector as it continues to expand its contribution to UK higher education.

Executive summary

This report presents findings from the 2025 Independent Higher Education Survey, drawing on responses from 81 independent higher education providers, alongside official HESA data covering 94,490 students. Together, the findings highlight the scale, diversity and policy relevance of a sector that is already delivering flexible, professionally oriented and skills-focused provision for a wide range of learners. At the same time, the evidence points to a persistent mismatch between how independent providers operate in practice and the funding and regulatory frameworks within which they are expected to do so.

Growth and student demographics

Between 2018/19 and 2023/24, independent providers grew at a rate almost eight times faster than traditional universities, with particularly strong expansion in provision for mature learners and part-time students. The sector therefore serves a distinct student profile, shaped by later-life participation, professional study and flexible routes into higher education.

Flexible delivery and employer engagement

Survey respondents report widespread use of flexible delivery approaches, including part-time, online and work-based learning, alongside strong interest in expanding modular and credit-based provision. Planned provision exceeds current delivery levels, suggesting that capacity within the sector is constrained less by provider capability than by whether funding and regulatory frameworks support flexible delivery at scale. Providers also demonstrate high levels of employer engagement through industry partnerships, placements and professional networking, though access to employer-linked funding mechanisms remains limited.

Sector diversity and scale


The survey highlights the diversity of the independent provider landscape. Respondents vary significantly in size, mission, corporate form and regulatory status, and serve a wide range of student groups, including working professionals, career changers and learners from underrepresented backgrounds. Most providers operate at small or medium scale, with provision often designed to support a particular industry mission through a combination of specialist disciplines and more generalist subjects delivered within their industry context. Subject areas with the highest enrolments include specific professional disciplines, creative arts, law and business and management. This specialisation supports close alignment between curriculum design, industry engagement and career pathways.

Regulatory experience

Survey evidence indicates that regulatory burden is not experienced evenly across the sector. Smaller providers report higher compliance costs as a proportion of turnover, while increases in regulatory burden are reported across providers of all sizes. Requirements that may appear proportionate in isolation can therefore combine to place particular strain on organisations with limited administrative capacity. Regulatory engagement patterns vary by provider size and stage, with smaller providers more likely to report plans to apply for registration or progress through regulatory processes, often as part of longer-term strategic development.

Industry partnerships and regional skills engagement

Industry engagement is a defining feature of the sector: 78% of survey respondents report partnerships with industry, most commonly through placements or work experience (73%), professional networking or mentoring (64%) and input into curriculum design (59%). By contrast, engagement with regional skills infrastructure remains limited, with only 6% delivering skills bootcamps and 11% engaging with Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs). This highlights both the sector's strong industry orientation and an opportunity to better connect existing partnerships with regional skills policy.



The findings suggest that the independent sector has both the capability and the appetite to contribute further to skills development, lifelong learning and widening participation.

Policy priorities

Respondents' policy priorities reflect their experience of operating within regulatory and funding frameworks that do not always align with flexible, employer-engaged delivery models. The most frequently identified priorities focus on regulatory adaptation, more flexible credit-based funding, and clearer information and guidance for students and providers. These are not calls for preferential treatment or rapid expansion, but for policy frameworks that better enable provision already being delivered.

Overall, the findings suggest that the independent sector has both the capability and the appetite to contribute further to skills development, lifelong learning and widening participation. Realising that potential will depend on proportionate regulation, funding mechanisms that support flexible and modular delivery, and closer alignment between policy ambition and operational reality.

HESA demographic data

Data sources and methodology

To provide essential context for interpreting the survey findings, this section presents demographic data from HESA for the 2023/24 academic year. It offers a comparative overview of enrolment patterns, student demographics, and institutional characteristics across both independent and traditional higher education providers. The dataset includes 94,490 students enrolled at independent providers and 2,786,490 at traditional institutions.

The independent provider dataset reflects submissions from 73 HESA-reporting institutions, capturing the diversity of the sector – from large, multi-disciplinary organisations to niche, specialist providers. It's important to note that not all independent higher education providers are included, as reporting requirements are varied depending on partnerships and regulatory requirements.

Note: HEIDI Plus data is rounded to the nearest multiple of 5, and some variation in data completeness exists across providers, reflecting diverse reporting systems.

Student numbers

Independent higher education providers in the UK have experienced strong growth between 2018/19 and 2023/24, expanding at a rate 7.7 times faster than traditional universities and increasing their share of total UK higher education enrolment from 1.7% to 3.3%.

Growth has been particularly pronounced among mature learners and part-time students, where expansion has exceeded the sector's overall market share growth. This pattern indicates a strategic focus on learner groups and modes of study that have historically been underserved within the higher education system, and where independent providers have developed distinct strengths.

FIGURE 1

Overall student growth by sector: Independent providers vs traditional universities (2018/19 to 2023/24)

Sector	Student Numbers 2018/19	Student Numbers 2023/24	Growth	% Change
Independent providers	42,335	94,490	+52,155	+123%
Traditional universities	2,395,575	2,786,490	+390,915	+16%

FIGURE 2**Comparative student enrolment data: Independent providers vs traditional universities (2018/19 to 2023/24)**

Category	Independent providers			Traditional universities		
	2018/19	2023/24	% Change	2018/19	2023/24	% Change
Full-time	34,985	75,745	+117%	1,889,730	2,241,175	+19%
Part-time	7,350	18,745	+155%	505,845	545,310	+8%
Mature Students	22,140	55,885	+152%	888,690	1,146,825	+29%
Young Students	20,195	38,600	+91%	1,506,675	1,639,495	+9%

Taken together, these trends point to a sector that is growing not only in absolute terms, but also in areas of provision aligned with workforce participation, lifelong learning and flexible study. While independent providers continue to account for a relatively small share of total higher education enrolment, their rate of growth and concentration in specific learner segments signal a changing role within the wider system.



Student profile

Understanding who studies at independent providers reveals a different student profile than traditional universities – one characterised by maturity, international diversity, and varied educational backgrounds that reflect the sector’s distinctive mission and approach.

2.1 Age profile and mature learner focus

Mature learners (aged 21 or over at course commencement) represent 59% of enrolments in the independent sector, compared to 41% at traditional universities.

FIGURE 3

Age profile comparison: Percentage composition of mature vs young students at independent providers vs traditional universities (2023/24)

	Independent providers 94,485 FPE	Traditional universities 2,786,320 FPE
Young	41%	59%
Mature	59%	41%

In 2023/24, independent providers captured 4.6% of the total mature student market (21+) – nearly doubling their share from 2.4% in 2018/19. This demographic shift reflects growing demand for flexible, career-focused education.

FIGURE 4

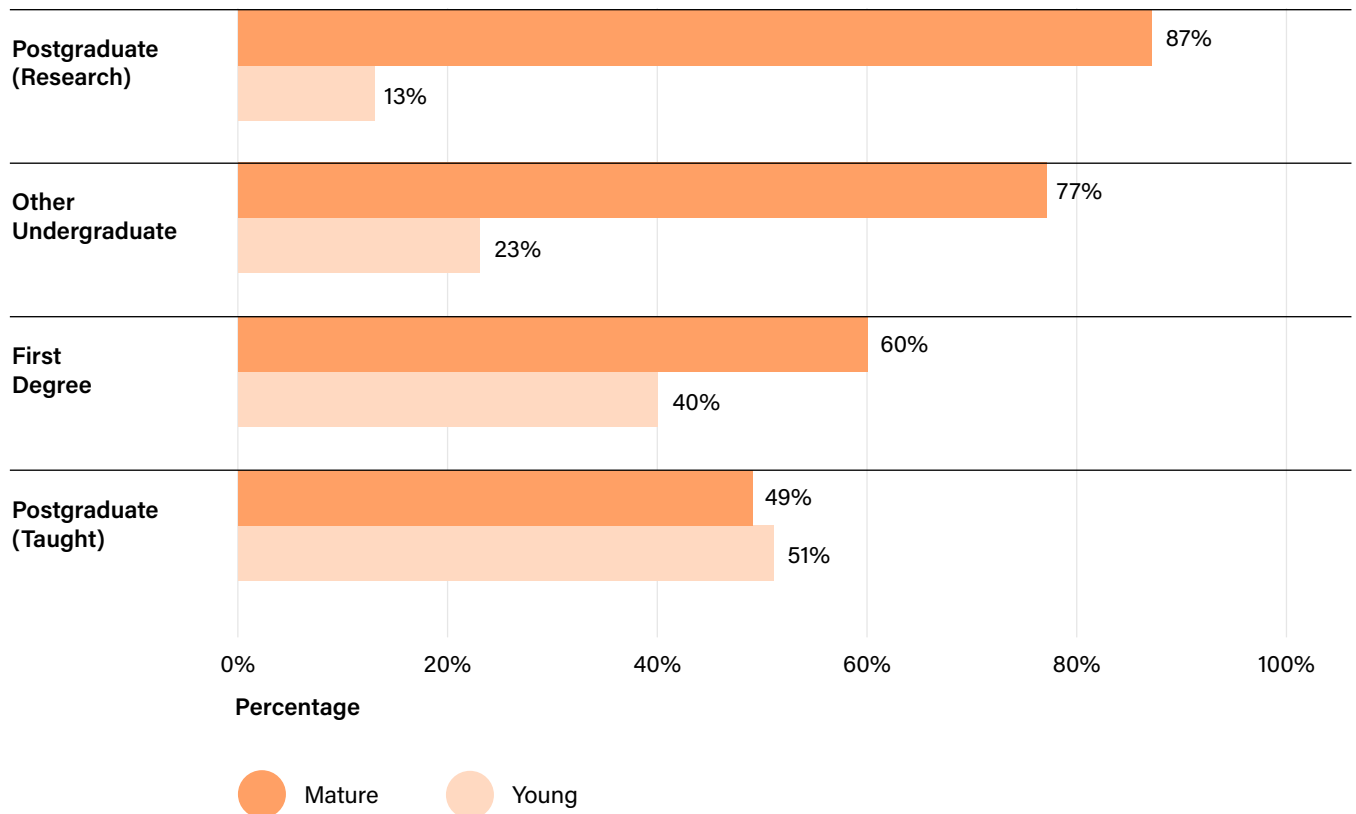
Percentage growth in mature and young student enrolment: Independent providers vs traditional universities (2018/19–2023/24)

Growth rate since 2019	Independent providers	Traditional universities
Young	91%	9%
Mature	152%	29%

At undergraduate level, independent providers serve a predominantly mature cohort: 63.0% of students are aged 21 or over at entry, compared to just 32.6% at traditional universities, highlighting their role in supporting adult learners pursuing first degrees or foundation qualifications while balancing work and family commitments.

FIGURE 5

Mature vs young student enrolment distribution by degree level: Independent providers (2023/24)



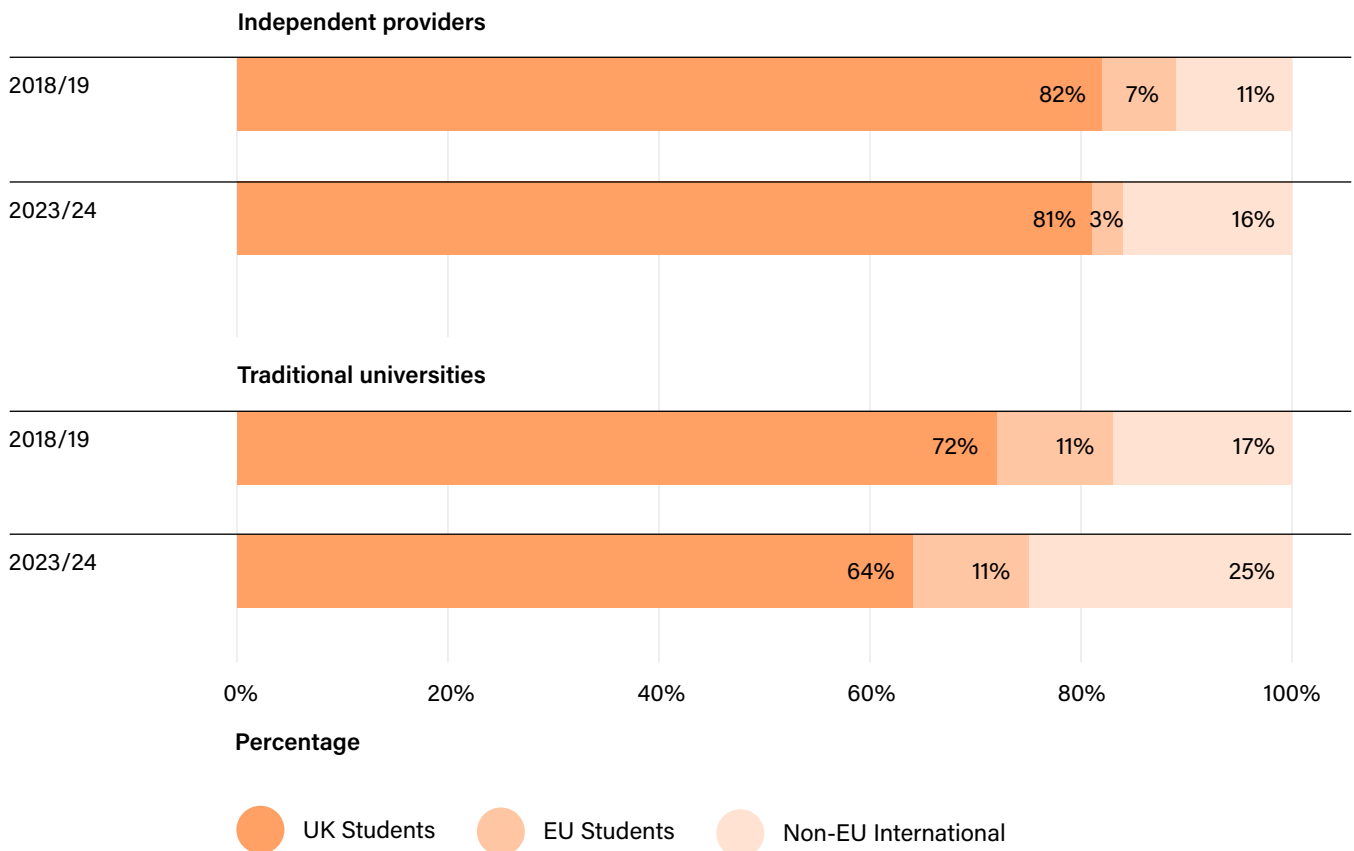
2.2

International student composition

Many independent providers faced significant challenges in recruiting EU students following Brexit, with EU enrolments declining immediately after Brexit. Providers that had historically depended on European markets had to expand recruitment and looked beyond the EU as well as to the domestic market. Over time EU students returned to the sector, matching pre-Brexit levels overall, but not necessarily to the same providers. At the same time recruitment strategies outside the EU returned positive results. Domestic student numbers doubled and the number of non-EU students almost tripled. The result for independent providers is much larger domestic and non-EU student populations, but a similar proportion of Non-UK to UK overall.

Strategic diversification across Asia, Africa, the Americas and the Middle East helped offset declines in EU recruitment. Over the same period, UK student enrolment increased substantially, rising by over 50,000 students between 2018/19 and 2023/24. Together, these changes reflect a rebalancing towards domestic and more geographically diverse international cohorts in response to changing policy and market conditions.

FIGURE 6 Student domicile at enrolment: Independent providers vs traditional universities (2018/19 vs 2023/24)



Pathway provision

Survey data indicates continued stability in international recruitment across the sector. Among the 11 pathway providers responding to the survey (specialist institutions focused primarily on preparatory programs for international students) 46% report increases in international student numbers over the past year, closely mirroring the 48% of non-pathway providers reporting growth. This suggests that patterns of international recruitment are broadly consistent across different provider types. The resilience shown across both pathway and degree-awarding providers might suggest effective diversification strategies and strong international partnerships across this part of the sector.

2.3 Qualifications on entry

The entry qualification profile reveals the sector's role in serving students with diverse educational backgrounds. 45% of all students enter independent higher education providers with Level 3 qualifications, such as A-levels, BTECs, Access to HE diplomas, and their equivalents. Graduates with first degrees make up 25% of enrolments, drawn to independent providers for their specialised, industry-aligned credentials that build on undergraduate education with practical, career-focused skills. This substantial proportion of degree holders underscores robust market demand for targeted professional programmes. Students with other undergraduate qualifications – foundation degrees, HNCs, HNDs, and professional certifications – represent 8% of enrolments, demonstrating the sector's role in providing progression routes for holders of alternative credentials.

By prioritising career-focused undergraduate and professional qualifications, the sector equips learners with credentials that support workforce entry and directly respond to employer needs. Its institutional agility – serving school-leavers, graduates, professionals with alternative qualifications, and mature learners alike – strengthens UK higher education's capacity to meet diverse learner aspirations and adapt to evolving industry demands.

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3

Courses

3.1 Subject areas

Independent providers tend to specialise in a limited number of subject areas, concentrating a high proportion of provision within specific disciplines. While traditional universities typically maintain broad portfolios, rarely exceeding 30% enrolment in any single subject area, independent providers often commit between 50% and 95% of their capacity to areas of deep subject focus. This approach supports close alignment between curriculum design, industry engagement and career pathways, and enables the delivery of intensive, practice-based provision.

Across the sector, enrolments cluster around a small number of disciplines. Business and management accounts for the largest share at 36%, with growth of over 24,000 students between 2018/19 and 2023/24. Other prominent areas include law (18%), design and creative arts (17%), social sciences (7%) and engineering (6%). All remaining disciplines each account for 5% or less of total enrolments.

3.2 Levels of study

Independent higher education providers deliver undergraduate and postgraduate provision in proportions similar to traditional universities, with 71% of students enrolled at undergraduate level and 29% in postgraduate study. While the overall balance mirrors the wider sector, patterns within these categories differ.

First degrees form the core of provision, accounting for 59% of total enrolments and serving both school-leavers and mature students. Taught postgraduate provision has expanded significantly since 2018/19, increasing 4.6-fold and now representing 28% of total enrolments. Unlike traditional universities, where postgraduate cohorts are typically dominated by mature learners, independent providers report a near-even split between young and mature students. Postgraduate research remains limited at 0.5% of enrolments, though it continues to grow from a low base.

Other undergraduate qualifications, including foundation degrees and Higher National Certificates and Diplomas, account for 12.6% of enrolments and provide alternative routes into higher education for learners with vocational backgrounds or non-traditional entry profiles.

3.3 Course duration

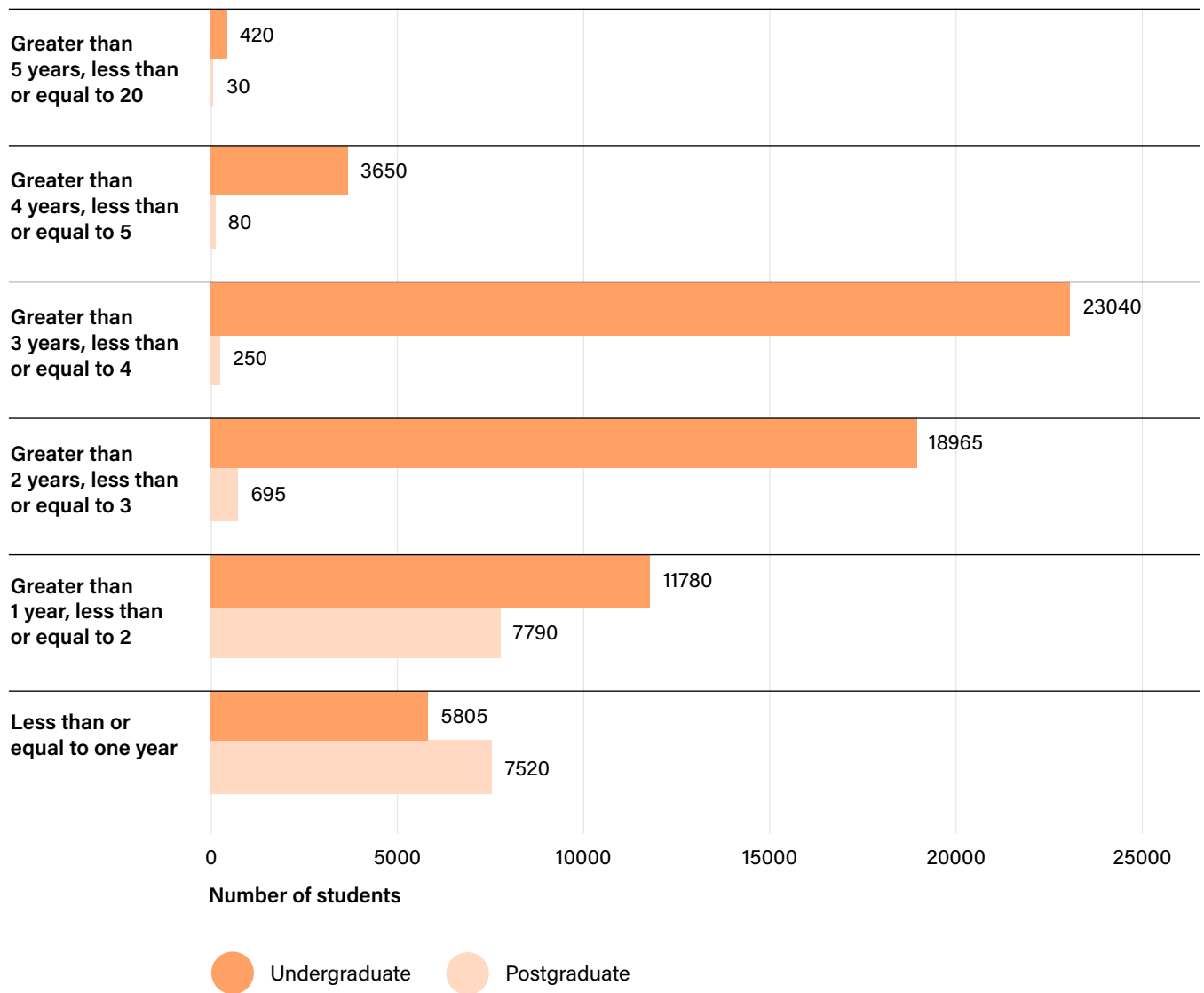
The majority of provision within the independent sector follows a similar model to the rest of the higher education sector. The greatest number of enrolments at undergraduate level are for three-year course models, and the greatest number of postgraduate enrolments are programmes of one year. There are, however, almost 12,000 students studying full-time on programmes greater than one year but less than two years. These courses include Accelerated Degrees and foundation degrees, all designed to get students into the workforce more quickly. Providers identified in the three-year undergraduate degree model also offer Accelerated Degrees with a foundation year, supporting students with lower tariff entry into and through their undergraduate programme in the same amount of time as traditional entry.

A significant number of students study full-time on courses of less than or equal to one year (5,800), with 70% of these studying 'other undergraduate' programmes primarily at Level 4 and 5.

Overall, the concentration on shorter and more focused programmes aligns with demand from learners seeking timely progression into employment or career change, particularly among mature students and those combining study with work.

FIGURE 7

**Expected length of course on entry: Student FPE, full-time only
(independent providers, 2023/24)**



4

Study patterns and modes

Beyond what students study, how they study reveals much about the sector's distinctive approach to flexible, accessible higher education that accommodates diverse life circumstances and professional commitments.

4.1 Full-time and part-time distribution

In the 2023/24 academic year, independent higher education providers saw 80% of their students enrolled full-time, while 20% pursued part-time study, underscoring a predominantly full-time cohort alongside strong provision for working learners.

Between 2018/19 and 2023/24, part-time enrolment grew by 155%, outpacing full-time growth of 117% which demonstrates particularly strong expansion in flexible learning provision. While part-time students represent 20% of the independent sector – matching proportions seen in traditional universities – this parity was achieved through significantly faster growth.

FIGURE 8**Part-time student growth: Independent providers vs traditional universities (2018/19 vs 2023/24)**

Sector	2018/19	2023/24	Growth	% Change
Independent providers	7,350	18,745	+11,395	+155%
Traditional universities	505,845	545,310	+39,465	+8%

4.2 Flexibility and working learners

Independent providers account for 22% of all new part-time places across UK higher education, despite representing less than 4% of total enrolments. This pattern reflects the sector's concentration on flexible study options, including online and weekend learning, particularly for mature learners combining education with employment or caring responsibilities.

Flexibility is especially evident in taught postgraduate provision, where 40% of students study part time. This delivery model supports working professionals seeking to enhance or update qualifications alongside ongoing employment and has contributed to recent growth in postgraduate enrolments.

Accommodation patterns further reflect how provision is integrated into students' existing lives. Among the 73% of students with recorded accommodation data, almost half live in their own residence (48%), while 21% live with parents or guardians. A further 26% live in other rented accommodation, typically within private rental markets rather than purpose-built student housing. Only small proportions of students live in private-sector halls (4%) or provider-maintained accommodation (4%).

Taken together, these patterns indicate a sector oriented towards learners who study while remaining embedded in their local communities, rather than relocating to campus-based residential environments.



IHE Survey findings

The 2025 Independent Higher Education Survey received 81 responses from a range of self-identifying independent higher education providers. Some of the data is presented below, while other data will be included in future publications on academic partnerships and international delivery.

5.1 Provider characteristics

This section provides an overview of the characteristics of survey respondents, including organisational size and regulatory status. The findings reflect provider-level responses to the survey and are intended to give context for the survey results that follow, rather than to provide a sector-wide profile, which has already been set out using HESA data.¹

¹ A note on student number metrics: Throughout this report, two different measures of student numbers are used. Official HESA data (sections 1-4) uses Full Person Equivalent (FPE), which counts each student once regardless of their mode of study. Survey responses in this section use Full-Time Equivalent (FTE), which weights part-time students as a fraction of a full-time student. Where providers have self-reported FPE figures, these are noted separately. FTE is particularly relevant when discussing institutional scale and capacity as it reflects the intensity of provision, while FPE offers a clearer picture of the number of individual learners served.

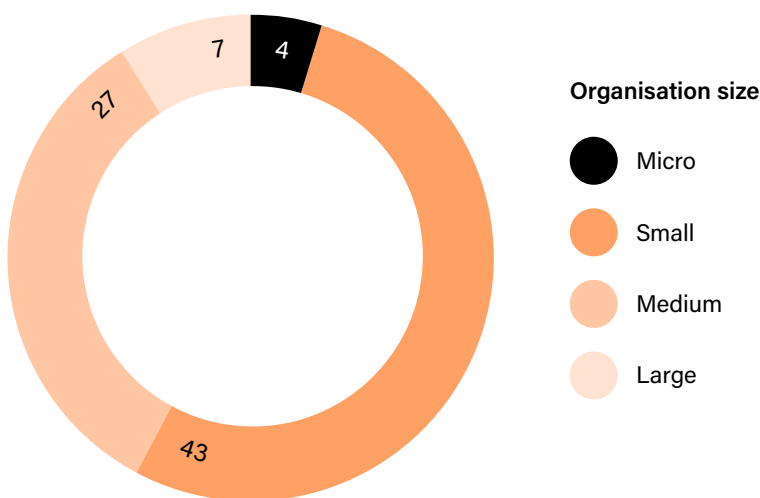
Organisation size

Survey respondents are predominantly small and medium-sized providers. A clear majority of respondents identify as small providers, with a further significant group describing themselves as medium-sized organisations. Only a small number of respondents classify themselves as large providers, while a very small minority identify as micro providers.

This profile reinforces a long-standing feature of the independent higher education sector: a landscape shaped by a high number of relatively small institutions, often operating with lean staffing models and highly specialist provision. While the survey is not student-weighted, this pattern aligns with wider evidence on sector composition and provides important context for understanding subsequent findings on delivery models, regulatory engagement and approaches to student support. In practice, organisational scale shapes both opportunity and constraint; it influences how providers design provision, respond to regulatory requirements and deploy limited capacity.

FIGURE 9

Organisation size of survey respondents (provider count)



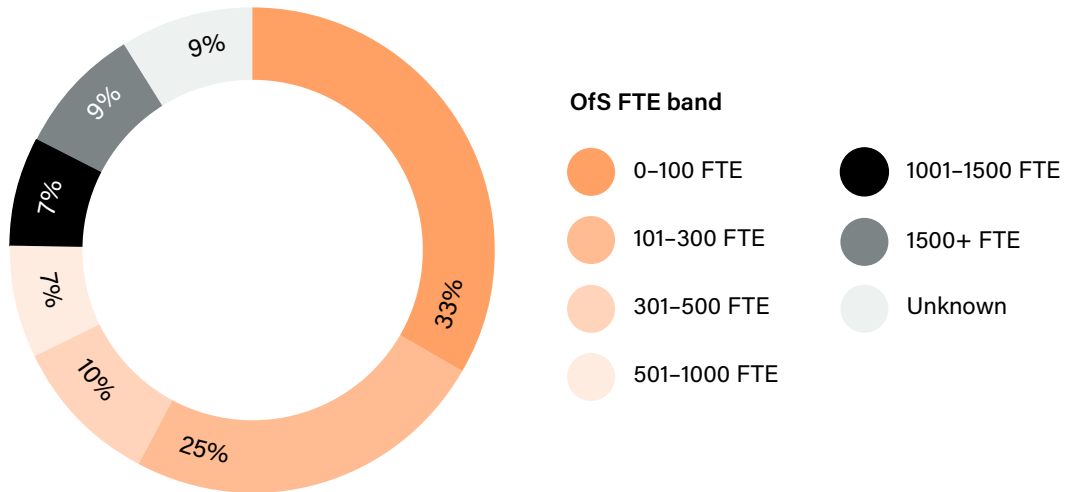
Where available, respondents' self-reported FPE figures indicate that many providers operate with modest overall student populations, even where delivery spans multiple modes or levels. This measure complements the FTE analysis used in OfS bandings and provides additional insight into the number of individual learners reached.

Provider size by OfS FTE band

Respondents were also asked to identify their size using OfS FTE bandings. Providers are distributed across a range of FTE categories, with the largest group falling in the bands below 100 FTE and the majority of respondents having less than 500 FTE students. There is representation across both smaller and larger bands, illustrating the diversity of institutional scale within the respondent cohort.

FIGURE 10

Self-reported OfS FTE bands of survey respondents



Regulatory status

Survey respondents report a range of regulatory positions in relation to the OfS. Many respondents are currently registered with the OfS, either as Approved (Fee Cap) providers or as Approved providers. Alongside this, a sizeable group report that they are planning to apply for registration, while a smaller number are currently in the application process.

This spread of regulatory status reflects differences in organisational maturity, growth trajectories and strategic priorities across the independent provider landscape. It also provides important context for regulatory experience and burden; in particular, it highlights the varied starting points from which providers engage with regulatory processes and compliance requirements.

FIGURE 11

OfS regulatory status of survey respondents [multiple responses permitted]

Regulatory status	Provider count
OfS - Approved (Fee Cap)	30
OfS - Approved	22
Planning to apply	21
Applied / in-process	3
Not currently regulated / not stated	9

Geographic distribution

Survey respondents are distributed across the UK, with the highest concentration in London (32% of respondents) and the South East (16%), reflecting the established presence of independent providers in these regions. Providers in the devolved nations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland represent 9% of the sample collectively, though this proportion should not be taken as representative of the devolved nations' independent provider population as a whole, given both the low sample plus variation in regulatory frameworks across the UK.

Overall, geographic location shows limited correlation with most delivery patterns or strategic priorities, suggesting that provider characteristics are shaped more by mission, size and subject specialism than by regional context. London-based providers report marginally higher rates of international student growth (58% compared to 44% elsewhere) and short-course provision (73% compared to 64%), likely reflecting proximity to international markets and professional training demand within the capital. However, employer engagement and flexible delivery models are consistent across regions, indicating that the sector's distinctive characteristics are evident UK-wide rather than concentrated in particular areas.

5.2 Institutional mission

Institutional mission offers a useful lens through which to understand the distinctive role independent providers play within the higher education system. How providers describe their purpose, focus and priorities helps to explain the kinds of provision they offer, the students they serve and the policy and regulatory issues that matter most to them. Survey responses therefore provide insight not only into institutional identity, but into how mission shapes practice across the sector.

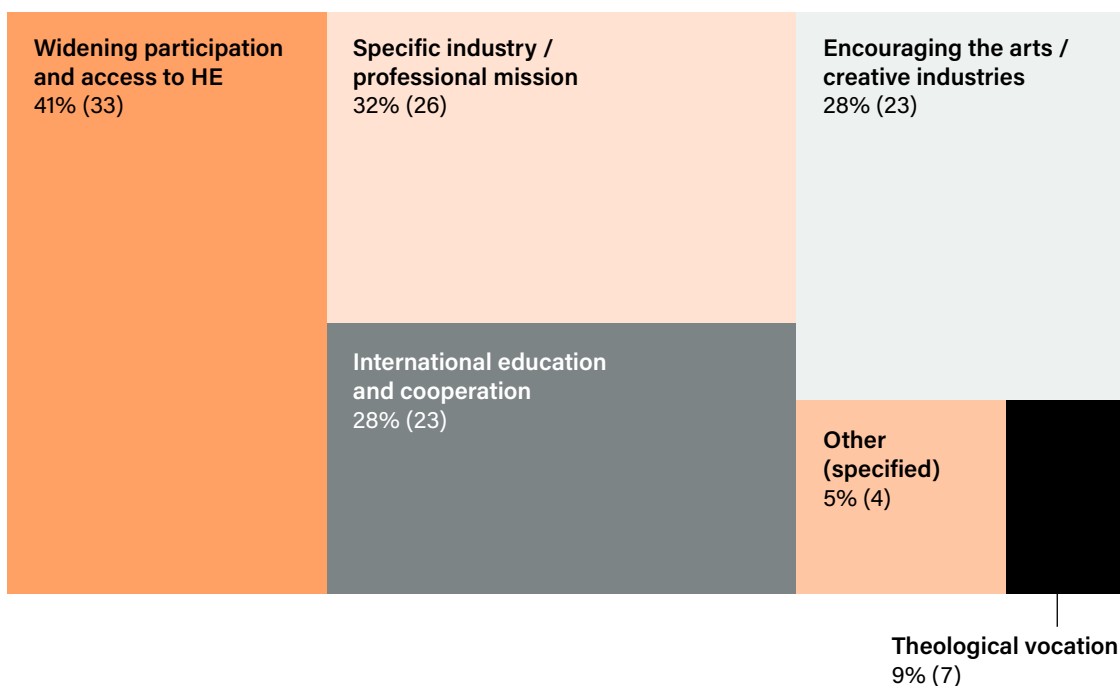
Mission themes

Survey responses indicate that many independent providers describe their mission in applied or professionally oriented terms, often alongside commitments to widening participation, international engagement or specialist subject areas. A strong emphasis on flexibility also features prominently, particularly in relation to meeting the needs of working learners and those pursuing non-traditional routes into higher education.

Alongside this applied orientation, respondents also highlight commitments to widening access and supporting progression for students who may be underrepresented in more traditional higher education settings. Taken together, these mission themes point to a sector that positions itself around responsiveness – to labour market needs, to employer demand and to learners whose circumstances require adaptable forms of provision.

FIGURE 12

Institutional mission themes reported by survey respondents [respondents could select a maximum of three options]



Open-text survey responses add further depth to these findings, reinforcing the applied and learner-focused orientation evident in the quantitative data. Although providers describe their missions differently, there are clear points of commonality across the responses. These include providers whose mission centres on:

- industry-aligned and professionally accredited provision, often developed in close collaboration with employers or professional bodies;
- supporting career changers and working adults, through flexible, part-time or work-integrated routes into higher education;
- widening access through specialist or locally rooted provision, including non-traditional pathways into higher education.

Across these orientations, mission is typically articulated in practical and operational terms, with a strong emphasis on what providers deliver and who they serve. This framing helps to explain later survey findings on delivery models, student composition and policy priorities, where flexibility and responsiveness feature strongly.

Framing implications

The mission profiles reported by respondents provide important context for understanding how independent providers engage with both regulation and policy reform. An emphasis on applied, professionally oriented and flexible provision shapes not only what providers deliver, but also how they interact with funding systems, regulatory requirements and student support expectations.

5.3

Academic provision and delivery models

Understanding how independent providers deliver their provision, and how this is changing, offers important insight into the sector's distinctive contribution. Delivery models shape not only the student experience, but also how providers engage with funding systems, regulation and employer partners. Taken together, the survey responses offer a snapshot of how providers are delivering provision now, and where they are looking to develop next.

Current delivery models

Survey respondents report a wide range of delivery models, reflecting the sector's diversity and flexibility. Alongside established modes such as part-time, blended and online delivery, a sizeable minority of providers also offer work-based learning, accelerated programmes and modular or credit-based approaches.

The survey data illustrates both the extent of existing flexible provision and the constraints under which it operates. 41 respondents report offering online or distance learning, 36 offer part-time provision, and 27 deliver evening or weekend learning. Work-based learning is offered by 19 providers, while 11 currently offer accelerated programmes. Modular or credit-based learning remains more limited, with 11 providers offering this provision; however, a further 18 respondents report plans to introduce or expand modular delivery. This gap between current and planned provision suggests that constraints are not primarily related to institutional capability or demand, but to whether existing funding and regulatory frameworks support modular and credit-based models at scale.

Rather than relying on a single dominant model, providers frequently combine multiple approaches, tailoring delivery to specific learner groups, subject areas or employer needs.

Taken together, these patterns point to a sector with substantial experience in delivering flexible and non-traditional forms of higher education. Rather than relying on a single dominant model, providers frequently combine multiple approaches, tailoring delivery to specific learner groups, subject areas or employer needs. Delivery models, student profile and approaches to support emerge as closely connected features of provider practice.

FIGURE 13

**Delivery models currently offered and planned by survey respondents
[multiple responses permitted]**

Delivery model	Currently offer	Plan to offer
Part-time learning	36	8
Block teaching (one subject / module at a time)	27	9
Condensed week / fewer study days	18	8
Evening and / or weekend learning	27	7
Online or distance learning	41	8
Blended learning	32	6
Accelerated programmes (e.g. 2-year degrees)	11	5
Integrated degree with foundation year (4 years)	12	5
Integrated degree with foundation year (accelerated)	8	[low]
Modular / credit-based learning	11	18
Work-based learning	19	7
Overseas / transnational delivery	10	7
Closed courses for corporate or external partners	6	8
Integrated degree with masters (accelerated)	[low]	5

Planned developments and direction of travel

Alongside current provision, respondents also indicate where they plan to expand or introduce new delivery models. 18 providers report plans to introduce or expand modular or credit-based learning, while 8 plan to develop work-based provision and 9 anticipate offering accelerated routes. These developments typically build on existing areas of strength rather than signalling a shift away from current practice; future growth is therefore likely to be shaped by established capacity and expertise, alongside the wider regulatory and funding environment.

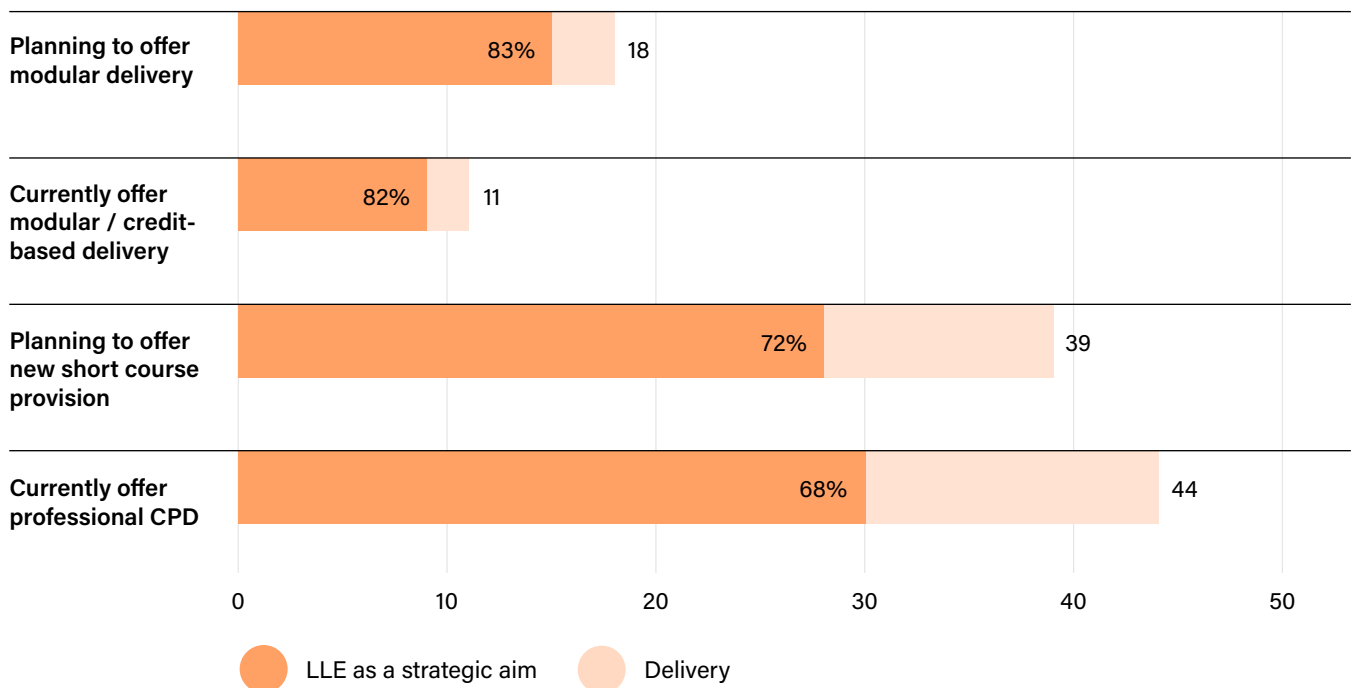
Patterns of delivery, both current and planned, underline the centrality of flexibility across the independent provider sector. Approaches that combine part-time study, online learning, work-based routes and modular provision place particular demands on funding structures, regulatory frameworks and student support arrangements. These relationships recur across the survey findings, particularly in relation to student profile, approaches to support and policy priorities.

Short courses, modular delivery and LLE readiness

The sector's established strength in short-course provision, alongside growing interest in modular delivery, indicates strong readiness for Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) participation. Over half of respondents (54%) currently deliver professional training or CPD short courses, with a further 19% planning to introduce such provision. Many providers are also already preparing for LLE in practical ways, including converting existing modules (23%), converting existing short courses into modules (17%), and developing new modules specifically for LLE (15%). Taken together, these findings indicate that 73% of respondents report at least one form of current delivery or planned activity aligned with the delivery model envisaged by the LLE.

Strategic positioning in relation to the LLE varies by delivery type. The connection between short-course delivery and LLE ambitions is evident. Among providers currently offering professional CPD courses, 68% identify LLE participation as either a short-term or long-term strategic aim, compared to just 27% of providers without professional short-course provision. This gap narrows substantially when planned provision is included: 72% of providers planning to expand short-course delivery also identify LLE as a strategic objective, with similarly high levels of LLE ambition reported among providers that currently offer, or are planning to introduce, modular or credit-based delivery.

FIGURE 14 LLE ambitions by short course and modular delivery status



Providers engaged in modular or credit-based delivery show even stronger orientation toward LLE. Among the 11 providers currently offering modular learning, 9 view LLE participation as a strategic aim. This rises to 15 out of the 18 providers planning to introduce modular provision. Taken together, these patterns indicate that the gap between current delivery and planned LLE participation is not primarily about

capability or institutional readiness, it's about whether the funding and regulatory arrangements enable providers to scale and formalise provision that they are already delivering or developing.

The concentration of LLE interest among providers with experience in flexible, modular and professionally oriented delivery suggests that policy frameworks designed to support LLE will find an established base of capable providers ready to participate. Being able to unlock this potential will depend on ensuring that LLE funding mechanisms, quality assurance requirements and credit transfer arrangements are compatible with the operating models that these providers have developed.

5.4 Student profile

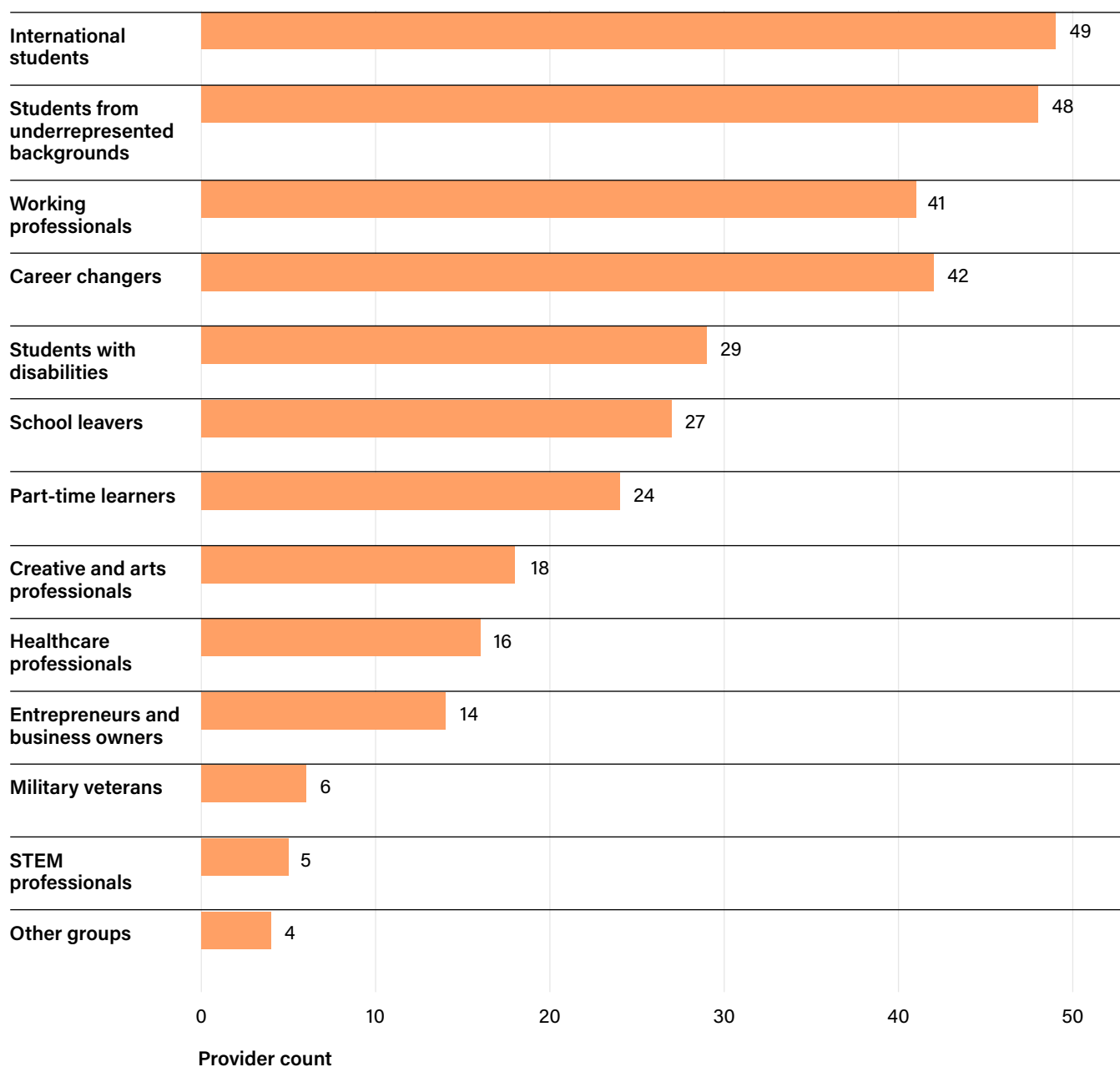
Who independent providers serve, and who they are seeking to reach, shapes almost every aspect of delivery. Student profile influences modes of study, curriculum design and approaches to engagement, as well as the types of support that providers prioritise. The survey responses therefore offer insight into the learner groups that are currently prominent within the independent provider sector, alongside those that feature in providers' recruitment priorities.

Survey respondents report serving a wide range of student groups, with a strong emphasis on learners combining study with work or other commitments. Working professionals and career changers are among the most frequently cited groups, alongside part-time learners and students from underrepresented backgrounds. A significant number of providers also report serving school leavers.

Student profile influences modes of study, curriculum design and approaches to engagement, as well as the types of support that providers prioritise.

FIGURE 15

**Student groups reported as prominent or a focus for future recruitment
[multiple responses permitted]**

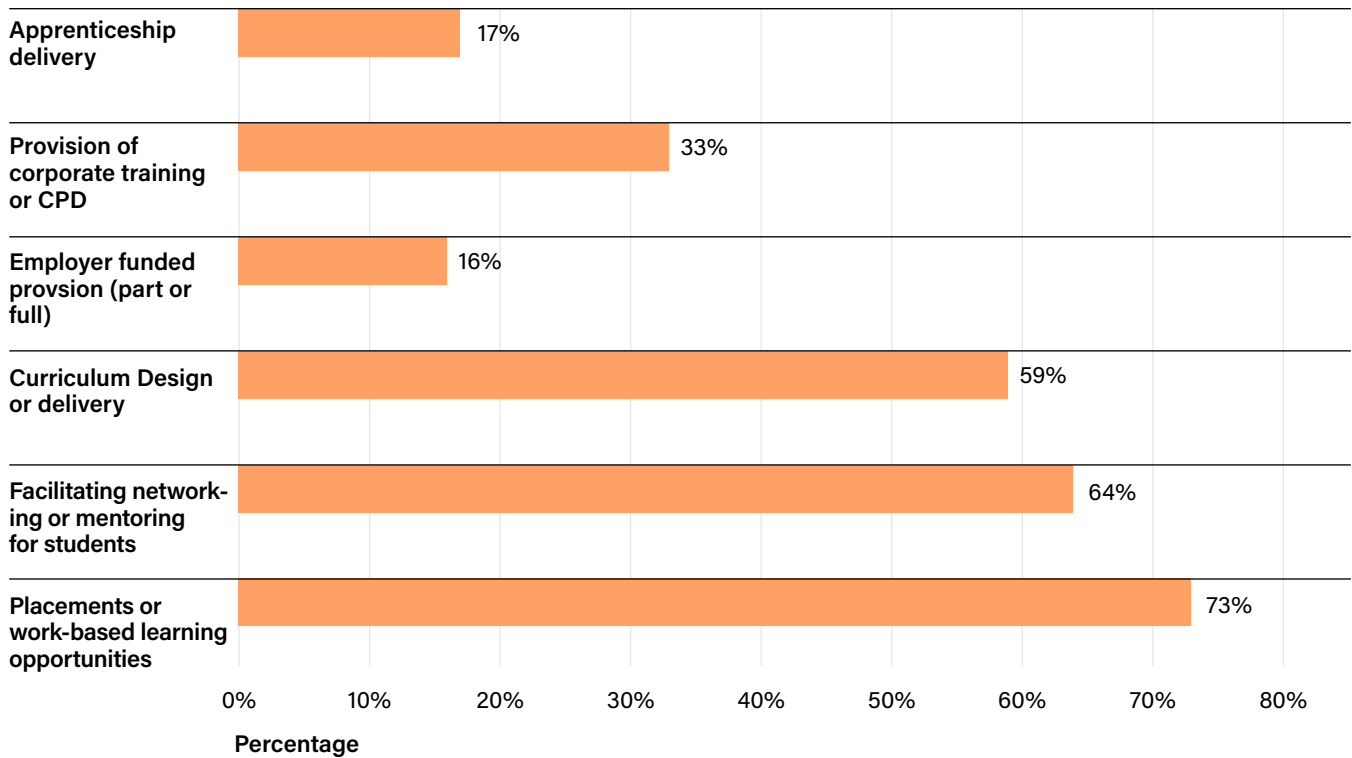


Employer engagement and workforce alignment

The prominence of working professionals and career changers within respondent student profiles is matched by strong employer engagement across the sector. Overall, 78% of providers have partnerships with industry, with over half of these working specifically with partners in their specialist subject area. The majority of partnerships involve placements or work experience (73%), networking or mentoring for students (64%), or curriculum design (59%). This helps explain why 29% of survey respondents said they would expand provision if there were more ways for employers to co-fund courses, including through modular delivery, and if the skills levy were extended to

cover professional training. With so many providers having one foot in industry, it is disappointing that engagement with regional skills bodies remains limited: only 6% are running skills bootcamps and only 11% have engaged with LSIPs.

FIGURE 16 Forms of employer engagement reported by survey respondents



However, this extensive employer engagement does not translate into equivalent access to employer-linked funding mechanisms. Only 13 providers (16%) report offering full or partial employer-funded provision, and just 14 (17%) deliver apprenticeship provision of any kind. This contrast points to a sector with well-developed employer-facing delivery models and established industry relationships, but limited access to funding mechanisms that support employer-linked education at scale.

The gap between employer engagement and funded provision has direct implications for sustainability and growth. Providers maintain industry partnerships, facilitate work placements and design professionally oriented curricula, but must do so largely within student fee-funded models. This limits the extent to which employer demand can be converted into expanded provision, particularly for working professionals seeking to upskill or reskill while remaining in employment.

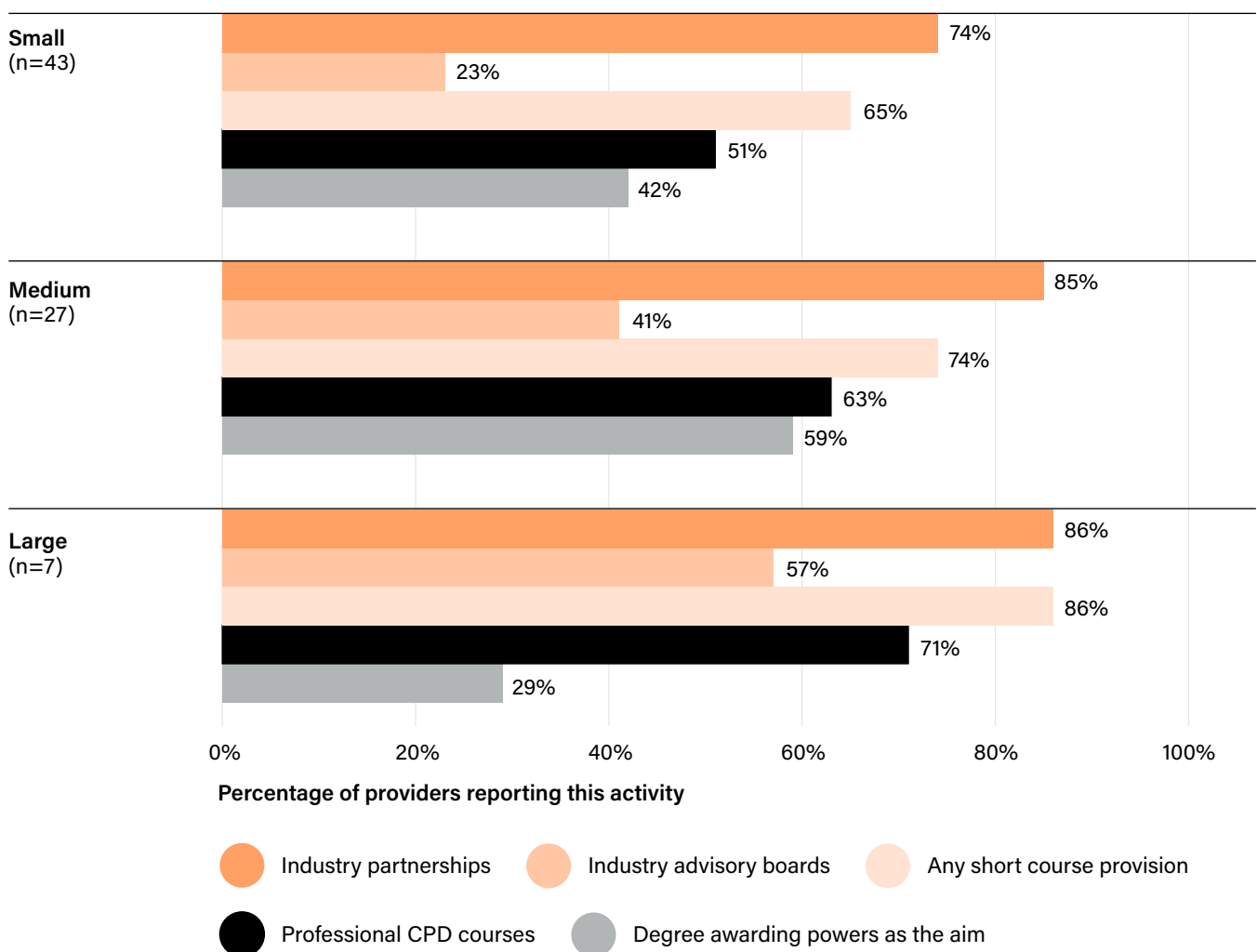
Collectively, responses point to a sector that plays a significant role in supporting learners who do not fit a traditional full-time undergraduate profile. The prominence of working professionals and career changers, alongside a substantial proportion of providers reporting part-time learners, highlights the extent to which independent providers operate at the intersection of higher education, skills and lifelong learning.

Organisational size and delivery capacity

Patterns of provision and employer engagement vary systematically by organisational size, though not always in predictable ways. Larger providers demonstrate higher rates of formal employer engagement: 86% of large providers report industry partnerships compared to 74% of small providers, while 57% of large providers maintain industry advisory boards compared to 23% of small providers. This likely reflects the administrative capacity required to establish and maintain formal governance structures and partnership agreements, as well as perhaps the brand appeal of larger providers.

Short-course provision follows a similar pattern, with 86% of large providers, 74% of medium providers and 65% of small providers reporting some form of short-course delivery. Professional CPD provision specifically is offered by 71% of large providers, 63% of medium providers and 51% of small providers. These patterns suggest that while short courses are widespread across the sector, capacity to deliver at scale or across multiple formats increases with organisational size and administrative infrastructure.

FIGURE 17 Delivery capacity and strategic aims by organisational size



Degree Awarding Powers (DAPs) as a strategic objective show a different pattern. Medium-sized providers are most likely to identify DAPs as an aim (59%), compared to 42% of small providers and 29% of large providers. This suggests that medium providers are most commonly in an expansion phase where institutional autonomy becomes strategically important, while small providers may not desire the scale and burden associated with DAPs (or indeed not be currently in a position to command the resources and desire to go through the process) and large providers have often already achieved awarding powers or operate successfully within more secure validated models.

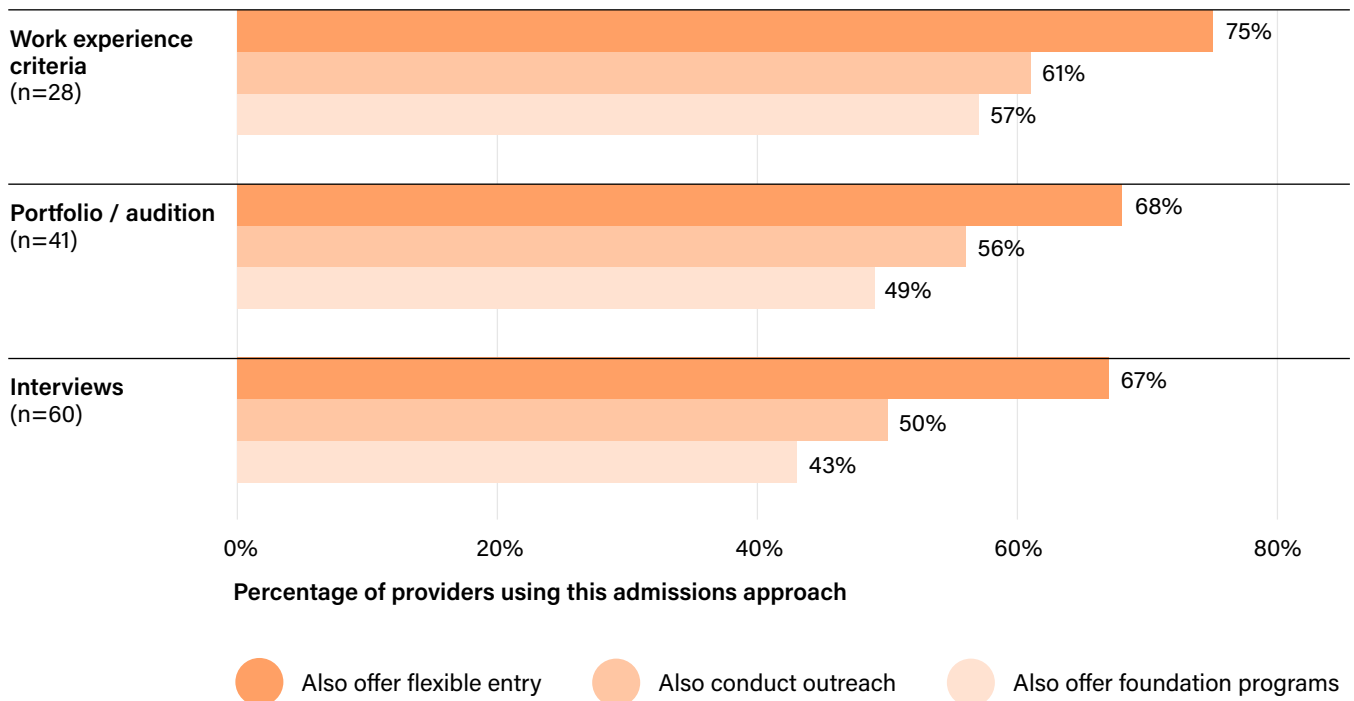
Organisational size influences both what providers can deliver and what they prioritize strategically. Smaller providers demonstrate significant capability and ambition but may face constraints in formalising employer relationships or scaling provision. Medium and large providers benefit from economies of scale and administrative infrastructure that enable more diverse delivery portfolios and the capacity to maintain formal governance structures such as industry advisory boards. These differences reflect variation in administrative capacity rather than differences in institutional commitment or quality of provision.

Organisational size influences both what providers can deliver and what they prioritize strategically.

Admissions approaches and widening access

Providers' approaches to student recruitment reflect the non-traditional learner profile described previously and demonstrate strong alignment between admissions criteria and widening participation activity. Survey responses indicate widespread use of contextual and alternative admissions approaches: 74% of providers use interviews as part of their admissions process, 51% use portfolios or auditions, and 35% consider work experience alongside or instead of traditional academic qualifications.

These admissions approaches correlate strongly with formal widening access activity. Among providers that assess work experience as part of admissions, 75% also offer flexible or alternative entry requirements, and 61% engage in outreach events or community engagement. Providers using portfolio or audition-based assessment show similar patterns, with 68% offering flexible entry routes and 56% conducting outreach. This alignment suggests that contextual admissions practices are not isolated decisions but part of broader institutional commitments to widening participation.

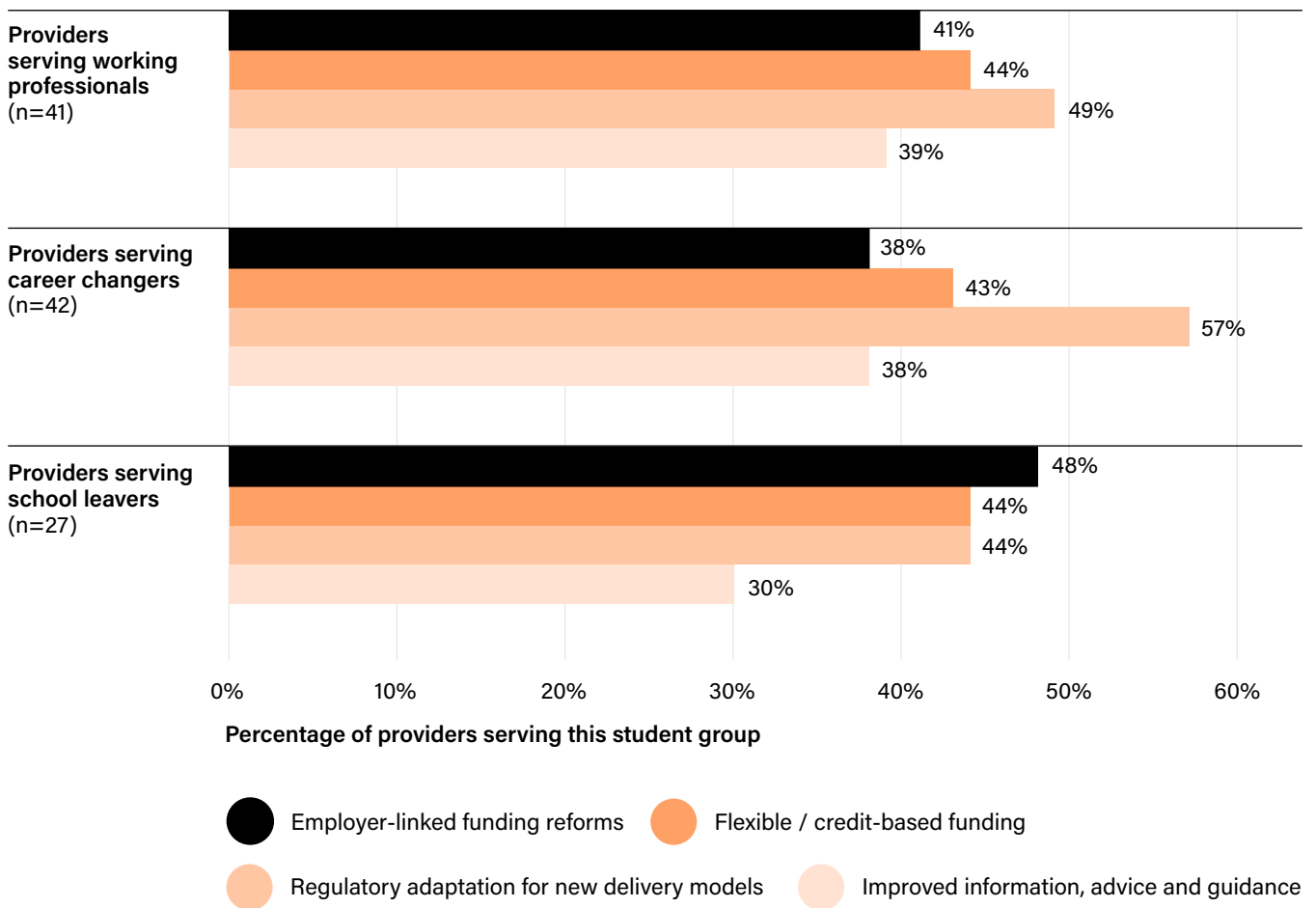
FIGURE 18**Correlation between admissions criteria and widening access activities**

Overall, 58% of respondents report offering flexible or alternative entry requirements, 46% conduct outreach events, and 40% operate foundation or access programs. The prominence of these activities, combined with the sector's concentration on mature learners and working professionals, indicates that widening participation is embedded within institutional practice rather than pursued as a separate or supplementary activity. For many independent providers, flexible admissions and alternative entry routes are central to their core mission rather than an additional requirement imposed externally.

Patterns in student profile are also reflected in respondents' policy priorities. Providers serving working professionals and career changers show a stronger tendency to prioritise employer-linked funding, flexible credit-based funding and regulatory adaptation to support new delivery models, as illustrated by differences in the prevalence of these priorities across respondent groups.

FIGURE 19

Selected policy priorities by student profile



Student profile also intersects closely with delivery models and approaches to support. Providers serving learners who balance study with work or caring responsibilities are more likely to combine flexible delivery with targeted academic, pastoral and employability support, including careers guidance, mentoring and academic skills provision. These patterns are consistent with the delivery models described previously and point to the close relationship between who providers serve, how they deliver provision, and the forms of support they prioritise.

5.5 Regulatory oversight and burden

Regulatory oversight is a central feature of the operating environment for independent higher education providers, but it is experienced in different ways across the sector. Survey responses point to a regulatory landscape shaped by variation in organisational scale, stage of development and strategic trajectory, rather than a single, uniform pathway into regulation.

Regulatory compliance costs

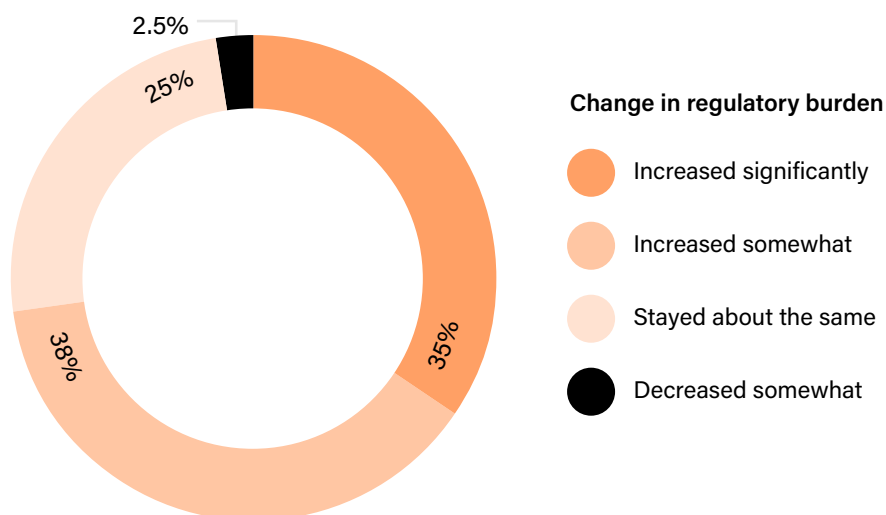
Survey responses suggest that regulatory compliance costs fall more heavily on smaller providers. Around a third of respondents report compliance costs above 6% of annual turnover, with 15% of respondents reporting costs above 10%. Smaller providers are more likely to report higher compliance costs as a share of turnover, reinforcing the regressive effect of compliance activity in organisations operating with lean staffing models and modest turnovers. In practice, smaller providers can end up spending a much larger share of their capacity on compliance, reducing the time and resource available for delivery and improvement.

Changes in regulatory burden over time

The cumulative effect of regulatory change is evident in providers' assessments of how burden has evolved. 73% of respondents report that regulatory burden has increased either "significantly" (35%) or "somewhat" (38%) over the past three years. Only 25% report that burden has remained about the same, and just 2.5% indicate it has decreased somewhat.

FIGURE 20

Reported changes in regulatory burden over the past three years



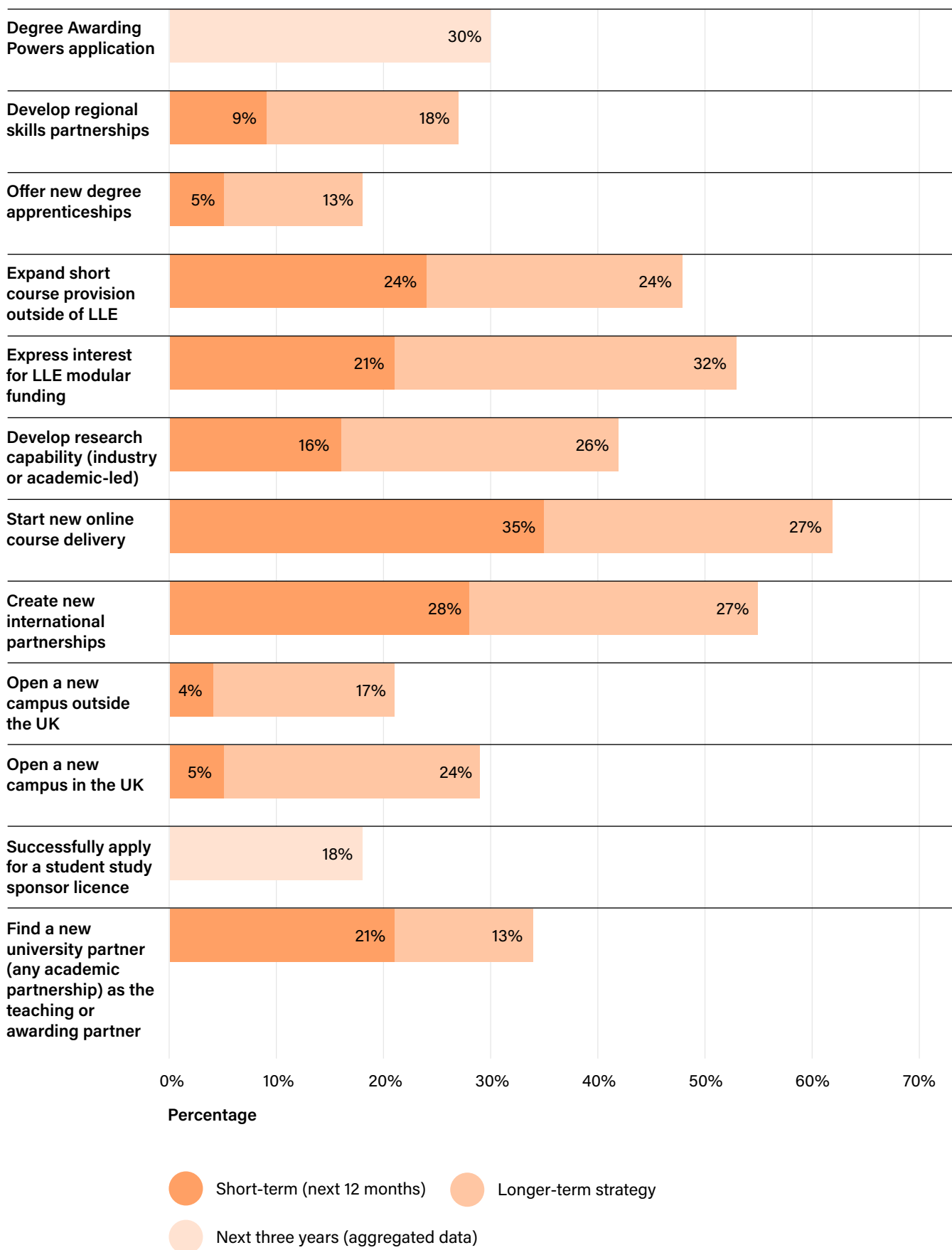
These findings indicate that regulatory intensification is widespread and affects providers across all size categories. While the proportional cost burden falls more heavily on smaller organisations, the experience of increasing regulatory requirements is shared across the sector. This suggests that recent policy and regulatory developments have produced a sustained upward pressure on compliance activity, rather than a one-off adjustment followed by stabilisation.

Regulatory status and strategic development

Survey responses across several areas help to contextualise regulatory engagement patterns. Regulatory status varies markedly by provider size, with smaller providers more likely to report planning to apply for OfS registration or being in the application process, while medium and larger providers are more frequently already registered.

FIGURE 21

Strategic goals (short and long-term objectives)



Regulatory status varies by organisational size. Among small providers, around half are either planning to apply for OfS registration or are in the application process, while medium and larger providers are more likely to be already registered. This pattern suggests that regulatory engagement reflects differences in organisational capacity and development stage, rather than a single, linear route into regulation.

All 21 providers planning to apply for OfS registration identify at least one major strategic objective with direct regulatory implications, whether Degree Awarding Powers, LLE participation, apprenticeship development, or international partnerships requiring student sponsor licensing. This correspondence indicates that regulatory engagement is pursued instrumentally to enable planned provision, rather than as compliance-driven box-ticking, or in response to external pressure. Providers planning registration are significantly more likely to pursue Degree Awarding Powers (81% compared to 37% of registered providers), LLE participation (62% vs 45%), and apprenticeship development (48% vs 29%), confirming that the timing of regulatory engagement reflects strategic readiness and planned expansion rather than any differences in commitment to quality or standards.

Implications for capacity and student support

The interaction between regulatory burden, organisational capacity and student support provision is particularly evident when compliance costs are considered alongside service delivery expectations. Providers delivering flexible, modular or work-integrated provision to non-traditional student groups operate within complex compliance environments while managing limited administrative and financial resources. For smaller providers, higher compliance costs reduce capacity for development and investment.

Understanding how regulatory frameworks interact with institutional scale, delivery context and strategic trajectory is therefore essential to interpreting providers' experiences and future plans, and provides important context for any policy priorities.

5.6 Barriers to expansion and growth constraints

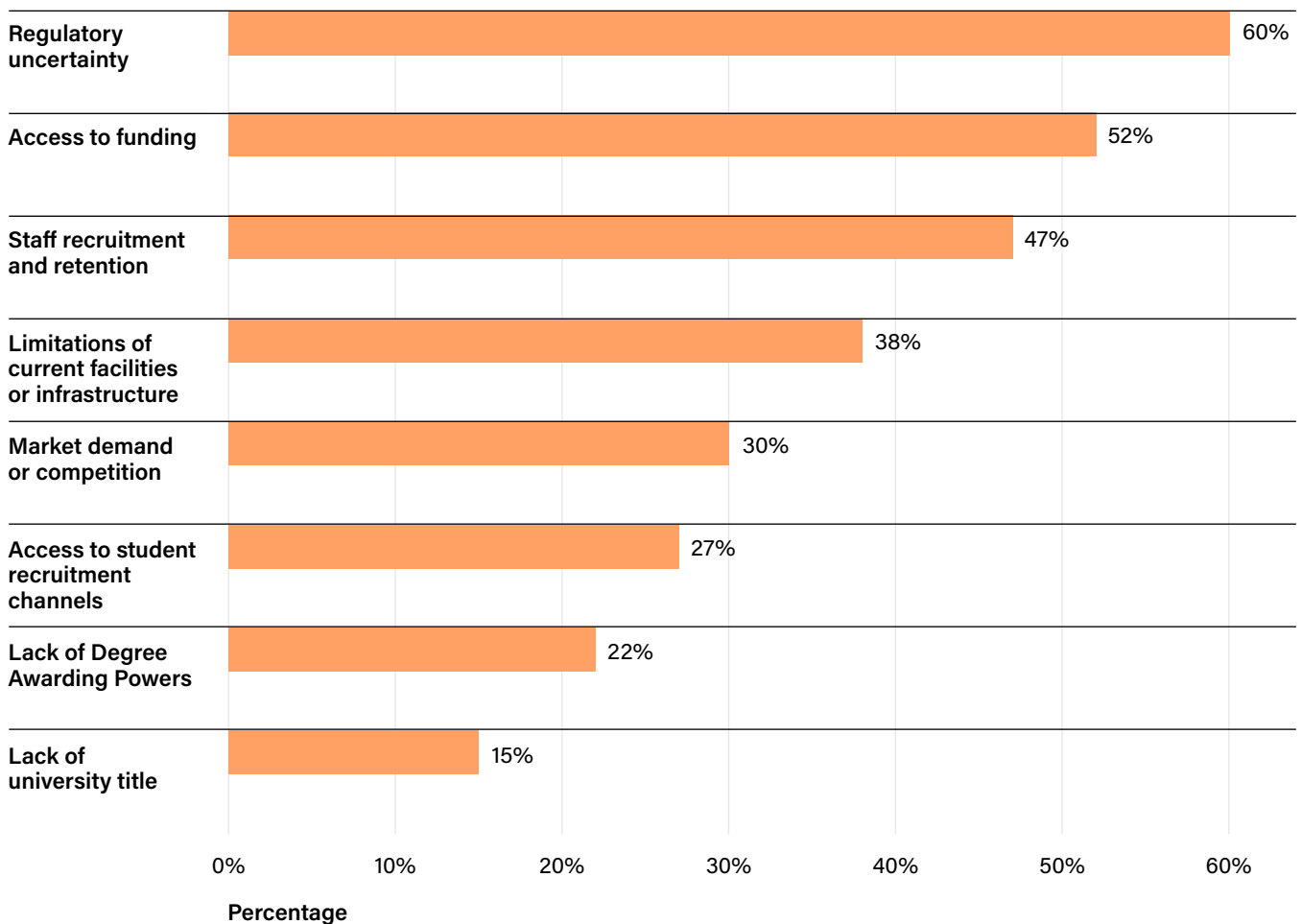
While many providers report plans to expand delivery models, increase student numbers or develop new provision, they also identify substantial barriers that constrain their ability to realise these ambitions. Survey responses indicate that obstacles to growth are primarily structural and systemic, rather than related to market demand or institutional capability.

Regulatory uncertainty emerges as the most frequently cited barrier, reported by 49 respondents (60%). This likely covers concerns about the stability and predictability of regulatory requirements, the time and resource intensity of compliance processes, and uncertainty about whether planned provision will align with future regulatory expectations. For providers considering investment in new delivery models,

infrastructure or partnerships, regulatory unpredictability represents a material constraint on decision-making.

Access to funding is identified as a barrier by 42 respondents (52%), reflecting the challenges of operating outside established public funding streams or within models that do not accommodate flexible, modular or employer-linked provision. While most providers access student fee income through the student finance system, many operate either partly or entirely on private fee income or depend on narrow funding routes which leave little scope for diversification or scale.

FIGURE 22 Barriers to expansion identified by survey respondents [multiple responses permitted]



Staff recruitment and retention is reported as a barrier by 38 providers (47%), pointing to challenges in competing for academic and professional staff within a constrained labour market. Smaller providers and specialist institutions may face specific difficulties in offering competitive terms or career progression opportunities compared to larger, more established organisations.

Physical and digital infrastructure limitations affect 31 respondents (38%), reflecting the resource intensity of expanding provision, particularly where this involves investment in facilities, learning technology or student support systems. For providers operating with modest capital reserves, expansion may be constrained by the availability of suitable premises, IT infrastructure or specialist equipment and facilities.

Notably, market demand and competition are identified as barriers by only 30% of respondents, suggesting that appetite among learners is not the primary constraint on growth. Similarly, limitations related to formal status, such as lack of Degree Awarding Powers (22%) or university title (15%), are reported less frequently than structural barriers around regulation and funding. This pattern indicates that expansion is shaped more by the operating environment than by market conditions or institutional prestige.

Expansion is shaped more by the operating environment than by market conditions or institutional prestige.

Financial sustainability and fee income dynamics

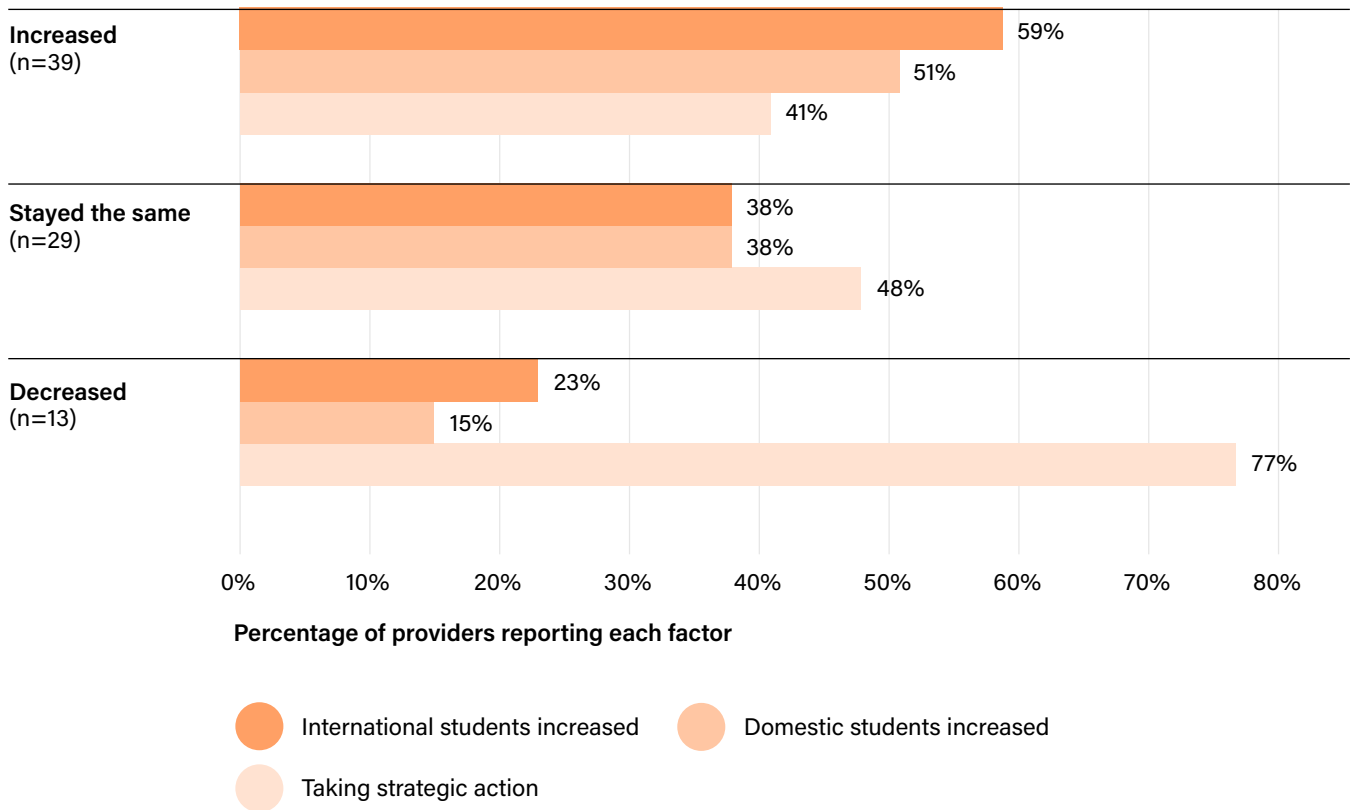
Survey responses reveal clear patterns linking fee income changes to broader institutional health and strategic responses. Just under half of respondents (48%) report that fee income has increased over the past year, while 36% report stable income and 16% report declines.

While many providers report stable recruitment over the past 12 months, a notable minority report declines in both domestic and international recruitment. Looking ahead to 2025/26, providers are more optimistic, with a majority expecting growth in domestic and international student numbers. In response to financial pressure, most providers report taking active steps to improve their financial position, most commonly through diversifying income streams, while relatively few report considering structural retrenchment such as campus closure, mergers or reducing course provision.

Fee income growth is associated with international student recruitment success. Among providers reporting increased fee income, 59% also report growth in international student numbers, compared to just 23% of those experiencing fee income decline. Domestic student growth shows a similar but less pronounced pattern, with 51% of providers with rising fee income also reporting domestic growth, compared to 15% of those with declining income.

FIGURE 23

Fee income changes and associated institutional factors



Providers experiencing declining fee income are more likely to be taking strategic action to improve their financial position (77%, compared to 41% of those with growing income), indicating active institutional responses to financial pressure. This group also shows higher rates of reserve depletion and debt accumulation: 38% report decreased reserves compared to 10% of providers with growing fee income, while 23% have taken on debt compared to 8% of those experiencing growth.

The connection between financial pressure and workforce changes is also evident. Among providers with declining fee income, 31% report making redundancies, compared to 5% of those with growing income. These patterns suggest that a minority of providers face acute financial pressure requiring immediate action, while the majority report stable or improving financial positions linked to recruitment outcomes.

Taken together, these findings indicate that financial sustainability within the independent provider sector is closely tied to recruitment performance. Providers facing declining income respond actively through strategic interventions, though this often involves difficult decisions around staffing and drawing on financial reserves. The relatively small proportion reporting declining income (16%) suggests that most providers have successfully navigated recent challenges, though the intensity of pressure on those experiencing decline underlines the importance of diversified income streams and strategic financial management.

Collaboration as a strategic priority

Survey responses suggest that collaboration is being approached as a practical route to financial resilience and operational capacity. When asked which forms of collaboration would be most beneficial, respondents prioritised shared services and student recruitment activity over more structural forms of partnership. Shared services arrangements covering functions such as HR, finance and IT were identified by 47 providers (58%), indicating strong appetite for back-office collaboration that could reduce costs and strengthen operational capacity without requiring changes to governance or academic delivery.

Survey responses suggest that collaboration is being approached as a practical route to financial resilience and operational capacity.

Academic partnerships for joint teaching or articulation agreements were selected by 38 providers (47%), pointing to interest in curriculum collaboration and student progression pathways that could support growth without requiring providers to develop provision independently. Marketing and recruitment collaboration was identified by 36 providers (44%), reflecting recognition that coordinated approaches to recruitment could improve reach and reduce individual marketing costs.

By contrast, research partnerships were selected by 15 providers (19%), while multi-institutional trusts or corporate structures were selected by 11 providers (14%). Overall, respondents appear to view collaboration primarily as a means to improve efficiency and expand reach, rather than as a route to fundamental restructuring.

FIGURE 24

Types of collaboration identified as beneficial by survey respondents [multiple responses permitted]

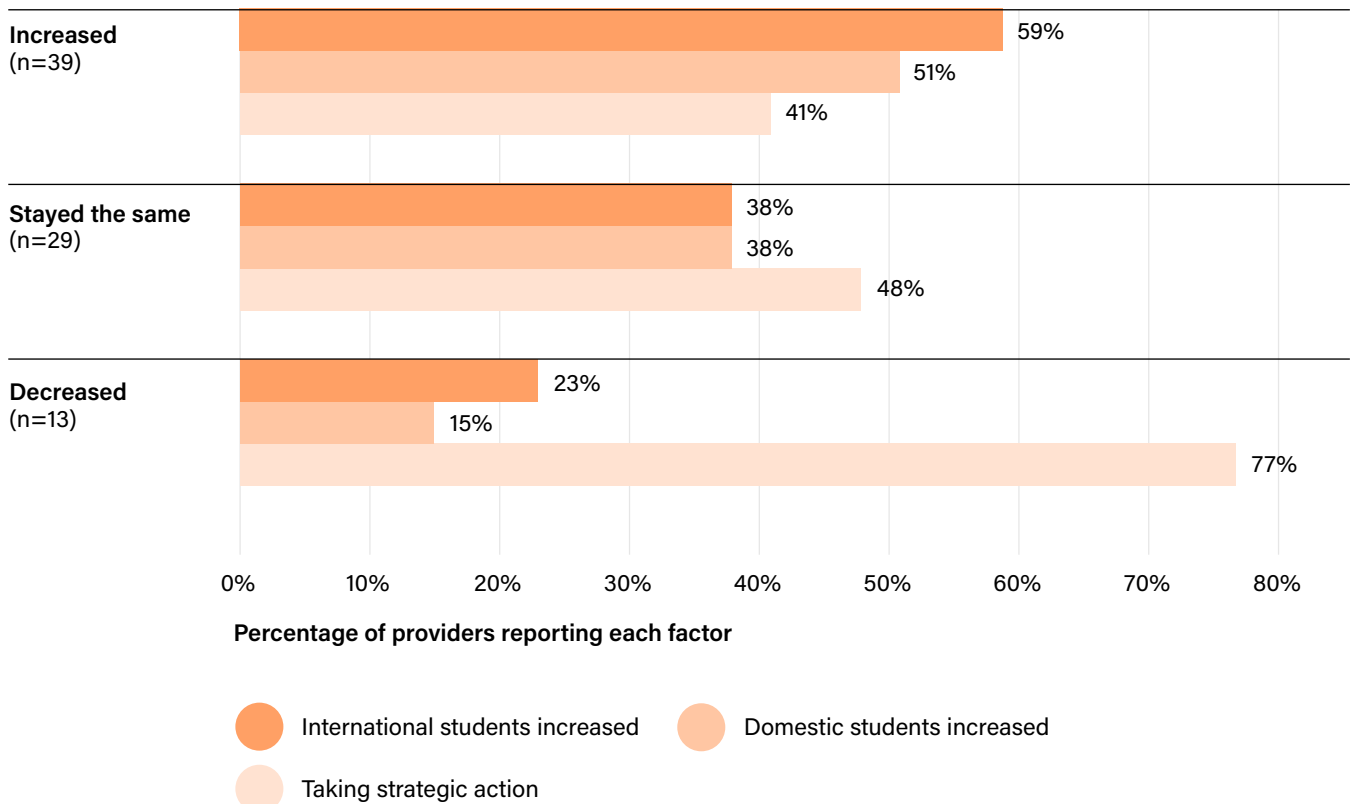
Type of collaboration	Provider count	% of respondents
Shared services (HR, finance, IT)	47	58%
Academic partnerships (joint teaching / articulation)	38	47%
Marketing and recruitment collaboration	36	44%
Research partnerships	15	19%
Multi-institutional trusts / corporate structures	11	14%
Other	8	10%

The barriers to expansion and financial sustainability findings suggest that independent providers operate in an environment characterised by demonstrated capability, learner demand, and clear growth ambitions, but where structural and systemic constraints limit the translation of these factors into scaled provision. The close correspondence between the barriers identified here and the policy priorities discussed in the following section underscores how reform objectives emerge directly from operational experience.

5.7 Policy priorities and future plans

Respondents' policy priorities closely reflect their existing delivery models, student profiles, strategic constraints and the barriers to expansion identified in the previous section. The most frequently selected proposals – regulatory adaptation to support new delivery models (38 respondents), more flexible credit-based funding (30), and improved information, advice and guidance for students (28) – correspond directly to areas where providers report both established practice and constrained capacity. These are requests for policy frameworks that better support provision already being delivered.

FIGURE 25 Policy proposals identified as priorities for expansion [respondents could select up to three options]



The prominence of regulatory adaptation as the top priority (47%) aligns directly with the finding that 60% of providers identify regulatory uncertainty as a barrier to expansion, and that 73% report regulatory burden has increased over the past three years. Providers are not seeking reduced quality oversight, rather they want regulatory frameworks that accommodate the delivery models they already operate, such as part-time, modular, work-based and online provision, in a proportionate way which recognises size, capacity and situation.

Flexible credit-based funding, selected by 37% of respondents, reflects the challenges providers face in operating outside established funding mechanisms. As noted in Section 5.4, employer engagement is extensive but employer-funded provision remains limited, while 52% of providers cite access to funding as a barrier to expansion. The emphasis on credit-based funding therefore represents a call for mechanisms that support the modular, stackable and flexible delivery models already being developed, not necessarily a request for additional volume of traditional student loans.

Employer-linked funding and skills provision

Employer-linked funding reforms illustrate the alignment between policy priorities and operational realities. While working professionals and career changers feature prominently within respondent student profiles, and 79% of providers report industry partnerships, only 16% offer employer-funded provision and 17% deliver apprenticeships. 19 providers (23%) prioritise expanded employer co-funding, 16 (20%) support extension of the apprenticeship levy to cover professional training, and 14 (17%) prioritise the introduction of technical awarding powers at Levels 4–5.

The gap between high employer engagement and low employer-funded provision points to a structural issue

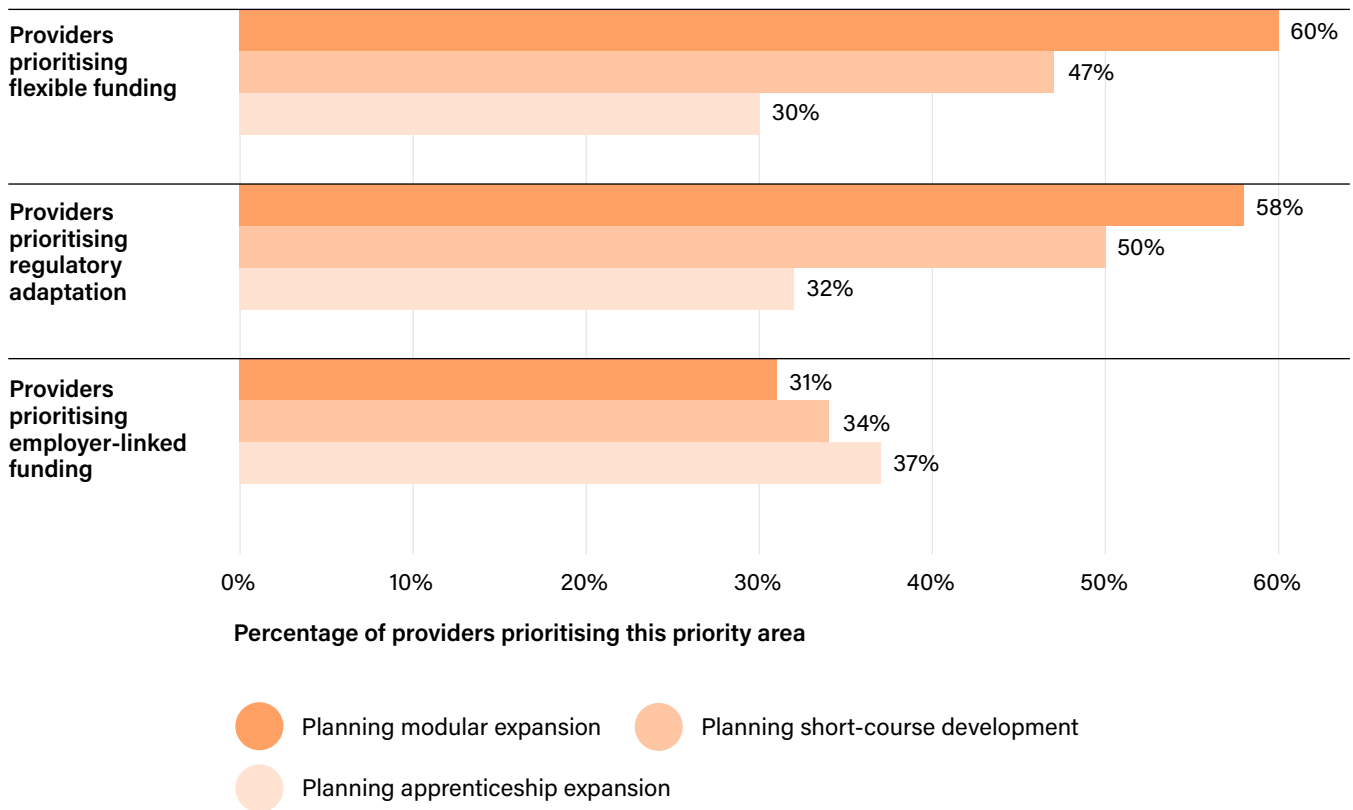
Together, these findings indicate demand for mechanisms that connect employer engagement to sustainable funding, rather than continued reliance on traditional student fee models. The gap between high employer engagement and low employer-funded provision points to a structural issue: providers have the relationships, the delivery capability and the demand, but lack the funding routes to convert these into scalable provision.

Alignment between priorities and planned expansion

Respondents' policy preferences align closely with their stated strategic objectives. There is substantial overlap between providers' planned expansion activities and their policy priorities, particularly in relation to flexible funding mechanisms and regulatory adaptation.

FIGURE 26

Overlap between strategic expansion plans and policy priorities



Providers who prioritise flexible funding and regulatory adaptation are frequently those planning to expand modular learning, short courses, apprenticeships and work-based provision. This pattern reflects the close relationship between intended changes to delivery models and the policy frameworks providers see as most important to enable that expansion.

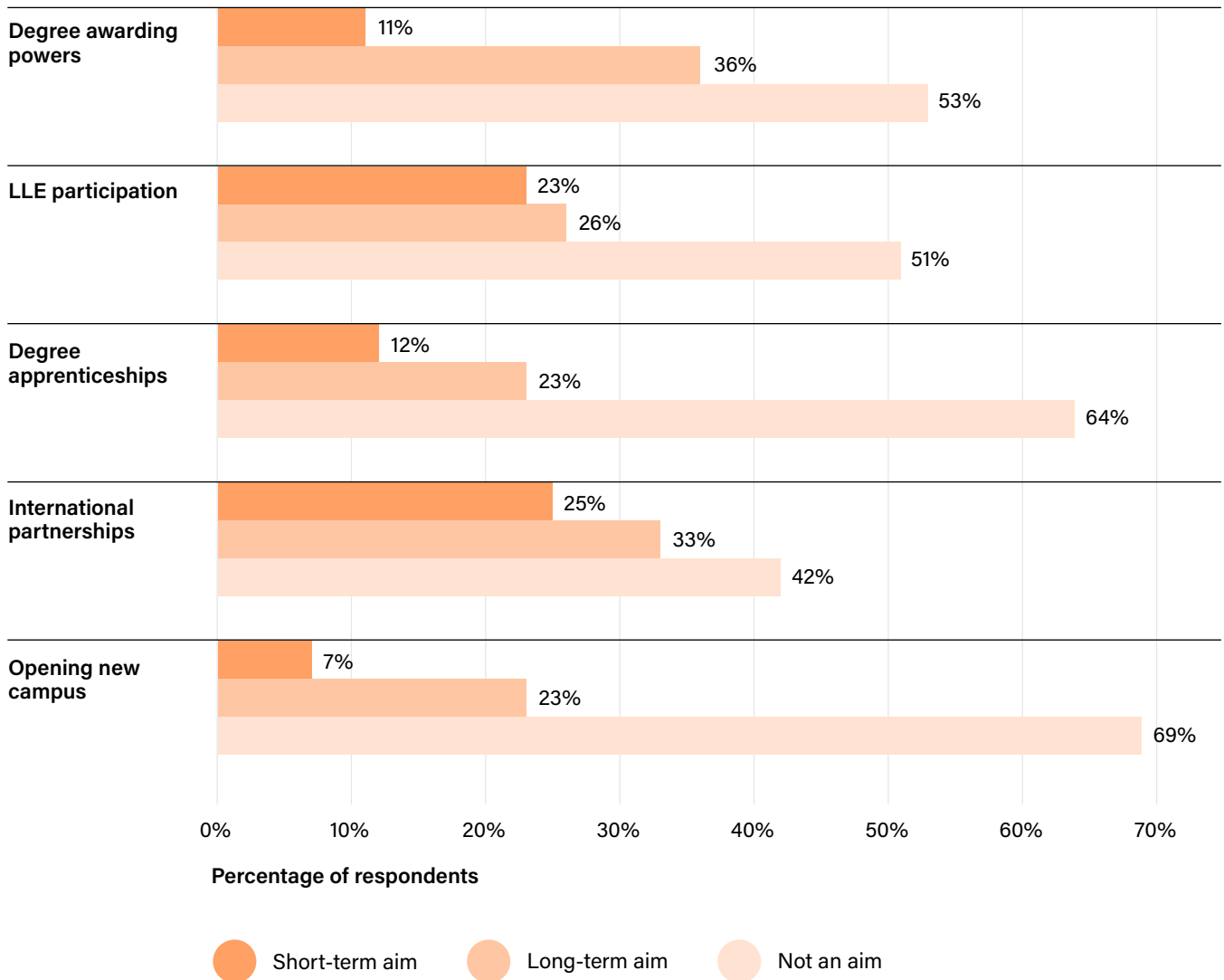
Strategic objectives and institutional development pathways

Survey responses reveal distinct patterns in providers’ short-term and long-term strategic objectives, with clear connections between current provision, regulatory status and future ambitions. Degree Awarding Powers remain a priority for a significant minority, with 11% identifying this as a short-term aim and 36% as a long-term objective. However, over half (53%) do not currently view Degree Awarding Powers as an institutional aim, reflecting the diversity of provider missions and the viability of validated or partnership models for many organisations.

Interest in LLE participation is substantial, with 23% identifying this as a short-term aim and 26% as long-term, indicating that nearly half the sector (49%) views LLE as relevant to their strategic development. This aligns closely with the sector’s strengths in short-course provision and flexible delivery. Degree apprenticeships are identified as an aim by 35% of respondents (12% short-term, 23% long-term), though the majority (64%) do not currently view this as a strategic priority.

FIGURE 27

Strategic objectives by timeframe



Correlations between current provision and strategic aims

Strategic objectives are closely connected to providers' current regulatory status and existing provision. Among the 21 providers planning to apply for OfS registration, 81% identify Degree Awarding Powers as either a short-term or long-term aim, compared to 37% of providers already registered. This reinforces that regulatory engagement and institutional development are being pursued in parallel, rather than as separate or sequential steps.

Providers currently delivering short courses are also more likely to view LLE participation as strategic. Among providers offering short-course provision, 62% identify LLE as a strategic aim, compared to 36% of providers without short-course provision. This suggests that LLE is widely understood as a route to scale existing flexible delivery, rather than a wholly new operating model.

The connection between apprenticeships and LLE is particularly pronounced among the 14 providers currently offering apprenticeship provision, 79% identify LLE participation as a strategic aim, compared to 43% of providers without apprenticeship provision. This indicates that providers with experience in work-integrated and employer-linked delivery are especially likely to see LLE as a natural extension of their current capability and a lever for growth.

Taken together, the survey findings point to a sector that is actively seeking to respond to policy priorities around lifelong learning, skills and flexibility.

Taken together, these patterns suggest that strategic development within the independent provider sector builds on existing strengths in flexible delivery and employer engagement, with regulatory milestones such as OfS registration and Degree Awarding Powers viewed primarily as enablers of planned expansion rather than ends in themselves.

Summary: policy as response to lived experience

Taken together, the survey findings point to a sector that is actively seeking to respond to policy priorities around lifelong learning, skills and flexibility. However, respondents consistently identify regulatory design and funding structures as key constraints on their ability to do so at scale. Policy reforms that support flexibility, proportionality and employer engagement therefore appear central to enabling independent providers to realise their existing capacity and contribute more fully to wider system objectives.

No single proposal dominates responses; instead, priorities are distributed across a small number of closely related reforms, with over half of respondents selecting at least one option linked to funding flexibility or regulatory adaptation. This distribution indicates broad consensus that current frameworks do not adequately support the forms of provision independent providers deliver, and that targeted reform could unlock substantial capacity across the sector.

6

Policy implications

The survey findings highlight a number of recurring themes that cut across provider characteristics, delivery models, student profile, regulatory experience and policy priorities. Taken together, these themes provide insight into how independent providers currently operate within the higher education system and the conditions that shape their capacity to adapt and grow.

6.1 Scale, diversity and system contribution

The survey confirms that the independent provider sector is marked by substantial organisational diversity, with a predominance of small and medium-sized providers operating at relatively modest scale, but with a clear potential and appetite for growth. While institutional size varies, respondents collectively deliver provision across a wide range of modes and serve diverse learner groups, including those often underrepresented in more traditional higher education pathways.

This combination of scale and diversity underpins the sector's contribution to system-wide objectives around flexibility, skills and lifelong learning. Independent providers frequently occupy specialist or professionally oriented niches and are often able to respond quickly to emerging learner and employer needs. At the same time, the findings underline that this contribution is delivered largely by organisations operating with limited administrative and financial capacity, a factor that shapes how policy and regulatory frameworks are experienced in practice.

6.2 Flexibility as a defining feature of provision

Across delivery models, student profile and policy priorities, flexibility emerges as a defining feature of independent provider provision. Survey respondents report extensive experience of delivering part-time, blended, online and work-based learning, alongside growing engagement with modular and credit-based approaches. These models align closely with the needs of working professionals, career changers and other non-traditional learners who feature prominently within the student populations served.

The prominence of flexibility within respondents' policy priorities reflects these operational realities. Requests for regulatory adaptation and more flexible funding mechanisms correspond closely to the challenges of delivering provision that does not conform to traditional full-time models. Together, the findings suggest that flexible delivery is part of day-to-day provision for many independent providers, rather than something that takes place on an exceptional or temporary basis.

6.3 Regulation, sequencing and organisational development

Survey responses indicate that regulatory engagement is closely intertwined with wider organisational development. Providers at earlier stages of regulatory engagement are often simultaneously pursuing strategic objectives with direct regulatory implications, including new partnerships, delivery models or funding routes. This pattern suggests that the timing of regulatory engagement reflects differences in organisational capacity and the stage of institutional development.

Differences in regulatory status by provider size further reinforce this interpretation. Smaller providers are more likely to report planning to apply for registration or progressing through the application process, while medium and larger providers are more frequently already registered. Taken together with evidence on delivery complexity and student support provision, these findings point to the importance of understanding regulatory experience in relation to scale, context and organisational trajectory.

6.4 Policy priorities and system alignment

The policy priorities identified by survey respondents are closely aligned with existing delivery models, student profiles and strategic objectives. Calls for regulatory adaptation, flexible funding and employer-linked reforms reflect a desire to build on established strengths, rather than to pursue untested forms of expansion. The

alignment between policy preferences and planned institutional development suggests that respondents view policy frameworks as a key factor shaping the extent to which their existing capacity can be expanded, scaled or fully realised.

Survey evidence indicates that many independent providers are already operating within core higher education infrastructure and accountability systems. Around three-quarters of respondents (74%) submit data to HESA either directly or through partner arrangements, and two-thirds are members of the OIA. Over 60% engage with QAA quality assurance processes, while more than half report operating student representative systems and formal module evaluation. These findings suggest that independent providers are engaging with established sector mechanisms for quality assurance, student voice and student protection, even where organisational capacity is constrained.

Despite this integration, access to public funding remains highly uneven: over half of respondents report receiving no public funding at all, and access to innovation, research or targeted funding streams is limited. This combination of system integration without funding parity shapes how policy and regulation are experienced across the sector. Providers participate in data collection, maintain quality standards and protect student interests through established mechanisms, but do so largely through private fee income rather than public investment.



Providers participate in data collection, maintain quality standards and protect student interests through established mechanisms, but do so largely through private fee income rather than public investment.

The barriers to expansion identified by respondents – with regulatory uncertainty (60%) and access to funding (52%) cited most frequently – reinforce this pattern. Constraints on growth are primarily structural and systemic, rather than related to market demand (cited by only 30%) or institutional status. This indicates an environment in which demand exists, capability is established and ambitions for growth are present, but where policy and funding frameworks limit the extent to which these factors can be translated into expanded provision.

At the same time, the survey highlights variation in how enabling current frameworks are perceived to be across different institutional contexts. This variation underscores the importance of policy approaches that recognise diversity of scale, delivery model and organisational capacity within the independent provider sector.

Conclusions and next steps

The findings within this survey point to a sector that plays a distinctive and increasingly important role within the higher education system, while operating within policy and regulatory frameworks that do not always reflect its scale, structure or modes of delivery.

7.1 Independent providers as a material part of the system

The survey demonstrates that independent providers constitute a diverse but substantial component of the higher education landscape. While many operate at small or medium scale, collectively they deliver provision across a wide range of subjects, modes and learner groups, including those often underrepresented in traditional higher education pathways. Their contribution is integral to system objectives around participation, skills and lifelong learning.

Recognition of this contribution requires policy frameworks that reflect not only student numbers, but also the nature of provision and the learners served. Measures of scale based solely on full-time risk under-representing the activity and impact of providers delivering part-time, modular or work-integrated provision.

7.2

Flexibility, lifelong learning and skills

Independent providers are closely aligned with policy priorities around flexibility, lifelong learning and employer engagement. The survey shows that flexible delivery models form a routine part of provision for many respondents, alongside growing interest in modular learning, short courses and apprenticeship delivery. These models support learners combining study with work, managing career transitions or entering higher education through non-traditional routes.

Policy priorities identified by respondents reinforce this alignment. Calls for flexible funding mechanisms, regulatory adaptation and employer-linked reforms reflect existing delivery models and strategic objectives. Targeted policy reform therefore has the potential to support growth in areas where providers are already active and capable.

7.3

Proportionate regulation and organisational capacity

The findings highlight the importance of proportionate regulatory approaches that recognise variation in organisational scale, capacity and stage of development. Smaller providers are more likely to be planning to apply for registration or progressing through regulatory processes, often alongside other significant organisational developments. This pattern reflects differences in capacity and institutional development, as opposed to any differences in commitment to quality or standards.



The findings highlight the importance of proportionate regulatory approaches that recognise variation in organisational scale, capacity and stage of development.

Regulatory frameworks that are sensitive to organisational context, while maintaining consistent expectations around quality and student protection, are more likely to support sustainable sector development. In particular, the sequencing and resourcing of regulatory engagement remains a critical issue for providers operating with limited administrative capacity.

7.4 Industry partnerships and employer engagement

Survey responses indicate that independent providers are strongly embedded in employer and industry networks. Overall, 78% of providers report partnerships with industry, with over half of these working specifically with partners in their specialist subject area. The most common forms of partnership involve placements or work experience (73%), networking or mentoring for students (64%), and collaboration in curriculum design (59%). This level of engagement reflects the applied and professionally oriented missions reported elsewhere in the survey and supports provision that is closely aligned to labour market demand.

This employer-connected operating model also helps explain why 29% of survey respondents report that they would expand provision if there were more ways for employers to co-fund courses, including through modular delivery, and if the skills levy were extended to cover professional training. At the same time, engagement with regional skills infrastructure remains limited: only 6% of respondents report running skills bootcamps and only 11% report engagement with Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs). This suggests an opportunity to strengthen the connection between independent providers' industry partnerships and wider place-based skills policy.

7.5 Implications for policy development

Taken together, the findings point to a sector that is ready to contribute more fully to system objectives around skills, flexibility and lifelong learning, but which experiences current policy and regulatory frameworks as either more or less supportive depending on institutional context.

Policy approaches that recognise diversity of provision, support flexible delivery models and apply regulation proportionately to organisational context are likely to be most effective in unlocking existing capacity.

As higher education policy continues to evolve, the independent provider sector offers valuable insight into how flexibility, employer engagement and widening participation can be delivered in practice. Ensuring that policy frameworks are responsive to this diversity will be central to the sector's ability to contribute sustainably and at scale.

Annex A – Respondent profile

Survey participation

The 2025 Independent Higher Education Survey received responses from 81 self-identifying independent higher education providers, of which 76 were IHE member institutions.² Responses reflect provider-level characteristics and practices and are not weighted by student numbers.

Organisational size

Respondents are predominantly small and medium-sized providers:

- 91% of respondents identify as small or medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)
- 58% identify as small organisations
- 9% identify as large organisations

This reflects a sector characterised by a high proportion of smaller providers operating at relatively modest scale.

Student numbers and institutional scale

Based on self-reported student number bands:

- 58% of providers report fewer than 300 students
- 33% report fewer than 100 students
- A minority operate at larger scale, with just under one quarter reporting more than 500 students

Student number data are presented for descriptive purposes only and reflect a mix of Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) and Full Person Equivalent (FPE) reporting.

² <https://ihe.ac.uk/our-members>

Regulatory status

Respondents report a range of regulatory positions:

- 73% are registered with the OfS, with the majority of the remainder planning to apply
- 23 providers report plans either to apply for OfS registration or to change regulatory category
- 70% have not previously applied to the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)

In addition:

- 17% are regulated and receive funding through Skills England, via ESFA or other skills funding routes
- 16% are currently on the Apprenticeship Provider and Assessment Register (APAR), with a further 7% planning to apply

Degree Awarding Powers and partnerships

Respondents report varying levels of autonomy and partnership working:

- 17% currently hold Degree Awarding Powers (new or taught)
- 45% plan to apply for new or taught Degree Awarding Powers within the next three years
- 33% are the teaching partner in a subcontractual partnership
- 48% are engaged in validation partnerships

Student groups served

Providers report serving diverse student populations:

- 60% report international students as a dominant student group
- Among these providers:
 - 54% also identify students from underrepresented groups as dominant
 - 48% identify career changers as a dominant group

This reflects a strong overlap between international recruitment and widening participation or lifelong learning missions.

Modes of delivery

Respondents report a high prevalence of flexible and non-traditional delivery models:

- 50% offer part-time provision
- 38% deliver teaching during evenings and weekends
- 26% condense teaching into fewer study days to support working students or those with caring responsibilities
- 57% offer online or distance learning
- 45% offer blended learning
- 26% deliver work-based learning

Short courses and modular provision

Engagement with short courses is widespread:

- 62% of providers currently offer short courses
- A further 12% plan to offer short courses in future
- Only around 20% of short courses currently carry academic credit
- 44% of providers offering short courses provide progression routes into higher education, either within their own provision or elsewhere

Employer and industry engagement

Employer engagement is a defining feature of the respondent group:

- 78% report having partnerships with industry
- Over half of these work with partners directly linked to their specialist subject areas
- The most common forms of engagement are:
 - Placements or work experience (73%)
 - Professional networking or mentoring for students (64%)
 - Input into curriculum design (59%)

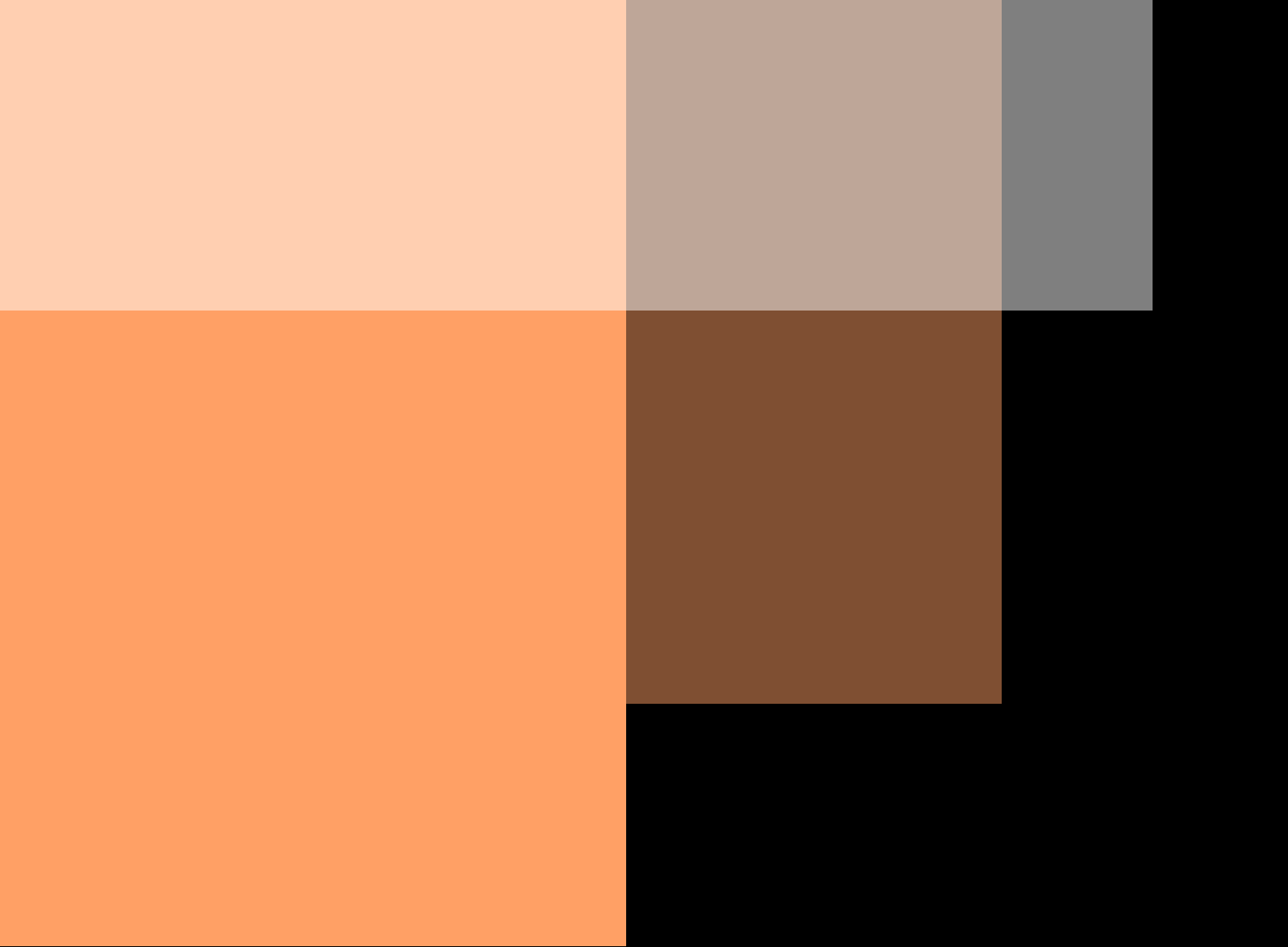
Despite this, engagement with regional skills structures remains limited:

- 6% report delivering skills bootcamps
- 11% report engagement with Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs)

Financial and operating context

Respondents report operating under increasing financial and regulatory pressure:

- 75% report that their regulatory burden has increased over the past three years
- 80% do not consider the current funding model in England to be financially sustainable
- Almost 90% report taking action to improve their financial position, most commonly through:
 - Diversifying income streams (72%)
 - Exploring additional investment (41%)



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