



University of the Free State
GRADUATE EXIT SURVEY:
Student Satisfaction Report
2018, 2020 and 2021 Graduating Cohort

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FREE STATE
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Executive Summary

The Student Satisfaction Report is based on data collected from the 2018, 2020 and 2021 graduating cohorts at the University of the Free State (UFS) through the Graduate Exit Survey (GES). It explores overall graduate satisfaction in all areas of academic and student life. The list below presents the most salient findings from the Report.

- More students are choosing to study at the UFS above its peer institutions, evidenced by a notable increase from 2018 to 2021 in the UFS being the first choice among the survey respondents.
- Approximately a third of graduates did not obtain their first-choice qualification, meaning that a significant number of students do not get to enrol in their preferred programmes.
- The vast majority of respondents (74% or more) are satisfied with regard to the UFS preparing them for their future, as well as with their overall educational experience and the UFS as a whole.
- The highest levels of satisfaction (80% or more) are indicated for the following variables:
 - Preparation for living on a world of many cultures (81% satisfied)
 - Overall quality of your educational experience (84%)
 - Faculty from which you receive your qualification (84%)
 - Quality of teaching (85%)
 - Subject expertise of academic staff (84%)
 - Your academic programme (84%)
 - Quality of course/modules (curriculum, 84%)
 - Relevance of curriculum (83%)
 - Level of intellectual stimulation in your modules (86%)
 - Your own level of academic effort/engagement (86%)
- While the majority of respondents are satisfied with most of the variables in the survey, the following variables show lower satisfaction levels (below 50%):
 - Tuition costs (47% satisfied)
 - Media, arts and culture (49%)
 - Sports associations for students (47%)
 - Financial assistance (48%)
 - Residence services (46%)
 - Services for international students (45%)
 - 'Day residence' facilities on campus (41%)
 - Cost of on-campus residences (35%)
 - Postgraduate student accommodation (38%)
 - Residence college system (38%)
 - Residence life (46%)
 - Cost of off-campus residences (e.g. Unilofts, CampusKey) (31%)
 - Cost of other off-campus accommodation (e.g. privately-owned student houses; 36%)
 - Performance of Student Faculty Council (46%)
 - Performance of student residence leaders (44%)

- Performance of the Student Representative Council (SRC; 40%)
 - Student leadership development programmes (44%)
 - Student representation in your faculty, department and classroom (49%)
 - Race relations on campus (49%)
- Overall, levels of dissatisfaction are low (below 10%), with only a few exceptions. The following variables show comparatively higher levels of dissatisfaction:
 - Tuition costs (20% dissatisfied)
 - Financial assistance (18%)
 - Cost of off-campus residences (e.g. Unilofts, CampusKey; 24%)
 - Cost of other off-campus accommodation (e.g. privately-owned student houses; 20%)
 - Performance of the SRC (20%)
 - Cost of campus food (18%)
 - Race relations on campus (17%)
 - The availability of tutors for consultation and tutorial services show higher levels of neutral responses, suggesting that not all students make use of tutorial services. These variables also had considerable increases in satisfaction from 2018 to 2021, suggesting an improvement in the tutorial experience of students.
 - High levels of neutral responses to the question about class size suggest that a significant share of students do not have enough experience of the classroom to answer this question.
 - Satisfaction levels with UFS101 increased significantly from 2018 to 2021, while both neutral responses and dissatisfaction levels decreased.
 - Very high levels of neutral responses for extracurricular activities suggest that students are not necessarily dissatisfied, but rather that they do not participate in these extra-curricular activities on campus and in their faculties.
 - Similarly, satisfaction levels are lower and levels of neutral are high for access and disability support, counselling services, health services, and sport services, with notable increases in satisfaction from 2018 to 2021.
 - Regarding financial assistance, dissatisfaction levels have increased from 2018 to 2021. It is concerning that this variable shows the highest level of increased dissatisfaction, among only 17 survey variables where dissatisfaction has increased since 2018.
 - Other variables showing notable increases in dissatisfaction (3% increase or more) are as follows:
 - Cost of on-campus residences
 - City residence system
 - Cost of other off-campus accommodation (e.g. privately-owned student houses)
 - Performance of student residence leaders
 - Student leadership development programmes
 - While satisfaction with internet reliability is high, the high levels of neutral for both this and the internet costs variable are a cause for concern given the importance this has for academic success in an online/hybrid learning and teaching environment.

- It is encouraging that satisfaction with residence services has increased notably.
- Very high levels of neutral responses for the career development office, central student admin services, services for international students, and student admin services in your faculty suggest sub-optimal use by students of these particular services.
- Students are increasingly more satisfied with on-campus residence services, as evidenced by increasing satisfaction levels from 2018 to 2021.
- While satisfaction with student leadership and governance is relatively low, it has increased consistently since 2018, indicating positive change.
- Dissatisfaction with the performance of the Student Representative Council (SRC) is relatively high and increasing, indicating a need for improvement in this area.
- There is room for improvement regarding cost of campus food, given the vast majority of UFS students who are considered to be food insecure.
- The high and increasing levels of satisfaction with feeling safe on campus is very encouraging.
- Feeling at home on campus also shows positive increases in satisfaction. However, the high level of neutral responses is concerning on this variable.
- Students having no opinion or being unsure about gender, race and student-staff relations on campus is a cause of concern.
- The higher levels of dissatisfaction on race relations on campus are particularly concerning.
- The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is also evident in the findings. For example:
 - High levels of neutral responses as regards preparation for employment/the world of work suggests a lack of knowledge/experience on the part of the respondents, which is understandable given that employment rates in South Africa plummeted during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - The noticeable decrease in neutral responses for counselling and health services could indicate that more students have used these due to the impact of COVID-19, including additional awareness of the availability of these services.
 - Dissatisfaction levels of internet costs decreased significantly, which could be due to the introduction of the GlobalProtect App during the COVID-19 pandemic, making free internet access available and easily accessible for all students.

1. Introduction

The current report is based on data collected from the 2018, 2020 and 2021¹ graduating cohorts at the University of the Free State (UFS) through the Graduate Exit Survey (GES). It explores overall graduate satisfaction in all areas of academic and student life.

The GES relates to several matters of strategic importance to the UFS (see section 2). This report is most relevant to the first goal of the current UFS Strategic Plan, which is to improve student success and wellbeing. One way to achieve this goal is to evaluate satisfaction levels of what undergraduates and postgraduates have experienced during their time at the UFS. As students are the most important stakeholder at any higher education institution, the proposed impact of the report is to give the institution insight into student satisfaction trends over a three-year period and to allow relevant UFS stakeholders such as management, faculties and departments to evaluate areas of strengths and possible areas for improvement. This is of utmost importance as the institution strives to improve student satisfaction to attract and retain excellent students. For this to be achieved, all of the services that contribute to student life as a whole have to be of good quality.

2. About the Graduate Exit Survey

The UFS conducts the GES yearly to obtain feedback from the recent class about their academic and campus experiences, as well as their plans for the future. GES encapsulates the different facets of the UFS Strategic Plan 2018-2022, such as graduate attributes, student health and safety, curriculum relevance, the pedagogic relationship between students and lecturers, and institutional culture as it relates to the student experience.

The survey respondents are graduates from all seven UFS faculties namely:

- Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences (EMS), including the Business School (BS)
- Faculty of Education (EDU), including Open and Distance Learning (ODL)
- Faculty of Law (LAW)
- Faculty of the Humanities (HUM)
- Faculty of Theology and Religion (T&R)
- Faculty of Health Sciences (HSC)
- Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences (NAS)

The survey is conducted online through web-based survey software where a self-administered questionnaire is sent to students once verified to graduate. It is important to note that the graduates responded to questions they were comfortable to answer and as a result, the total number of responses (sample size) vary based on the responses to particular questions being analysed. The Power BI, Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), and Microsoft Excel are used to analyse the data.

¹ The Graduate Exit Survey (GES) was not sent out to the 2019 cohort due the COVID-19 pandemic as there was no in-person graduations and there was uncertainty as to whether students would be able to access the web-based survey.

3. Sample

Table 1 indicates the response rate per year, and Table 2 indicates the demographics of the respondents. Response rates vary from 15% to 22%, while the majority of graduate respondents were African females between the age of 21 and 25.

Table 3 presents the graduate population of 2018, 2020 and 2021 compared to the GES sample, in order to establish how representative the sample is of the population regarding gender and race. In 2018 and 2021, male graduates were slightly overrepresented, while female graduates were slightly overrepresented in 2020. Regarding race, Africans were overrepresented in 2020 and 2021 and white graduates were underrepresented. However, the over- and underrepresentation is minimal, and the sample is therefore considered to be representative of the population.

Table 1: Response rate

Graduation year	Number of graduates	Number of respondents	Response rate
2018	8260	1246	15%
2020	9664	2139	22%
2021	10530	1592	15%
<i>Total</i>	<i>28454</i>	<i>4977</i>	<i>17%</i>

Table 2: Sample

Demographic variable	2018	2020	2021
<i>Race</i>			
African	66%	76%	82%
Coloured	5%	6%	6%
Indian	2%	1%	1%
White	25%	15%	17%
Other	1%	1%	1%
<i>Grand total</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>
n	1239	2126	1565
<i>Gender</i>			
Female	61%	70%	65%
Male	39%	30%	35%
<i>Grand total</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>
n	1230	2113	1571
<i>Age</i>			
Below 20	2%	3%	1%
21-25	50%	60%	45%
26-30	15%	16%	16%
31-35	10%	7%	9%
Above 35	23%	14%	29%
<i>Grand total</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>
n	1233	2124	1558

Table 3: Distribution of population versus sample

Demographic variable	2018 graduates	2018 GES sample	2020 graduates	2020 GES sample	2021 graduates	2021 GES sample
<i>Gender</i>						
Female	65%	61%	67%	70%	67%	65%
Male	35%	39%	33%	30%	33%	35%
<i>Race</i>						
African	66%	67%	75%	77%	79%	82%
Coloured	5%	5%	5%	6%	5%	5%
Indian	2%	2%	2%	1%	1%	1%
White	27%	26%	18%	15%	16%	12%

4. Student Satisfaction

4.1. Was the UFS your first choice?

Figure 1 below indicates that there has been a notable increase from 2018 to 2021 (7%) in the UFS being the first choice among graduates, which is encouraging since it suggests that more students are selecting the UFS above its peer institutions.

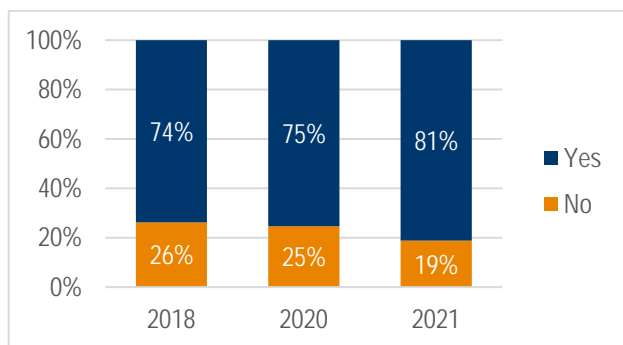


Figure 1: Was the UFS your first choice?

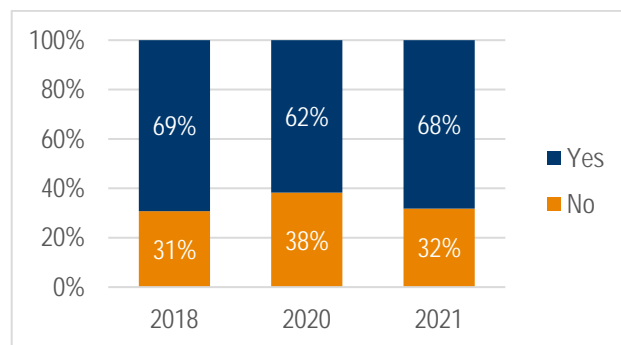


Figure 2: Was the programme for which you are receiving your qualification today your first choice?

4.2. Was the programme for which you are receiving your qualification today your first choice?

Figure 2 above indicates whether graduates are qualifying in their first choice, or preferred programme. The majority graduated in their preferred programme, with only slight changes observed throughout the three years. However, approximately a third of graduates did not obtain their first-choice qualification, meaning that a significant number of students do not get to enrol in their preferred programmes.

4.3. How satisfied are you with the way the UFS has prepared you for your future?

Dissatisfaction levels are below 10% for all the variables in

Figure 3 below, indicating that the vast majority of graduates are satisfied with regard the UFS preparing them for their future.

However, the proportion of neutral responses is notable, especially in 2020. For example, on *preparation for employment/the world of work*, 24% of respondents selected the 'neutral' option in 2018, which increased to 27% in 2020. Research shows that respondents selecting the neutral option most likely do not have an opinion on the issue or are unsure². High levels of neutral responses may therefore be attributed to a lack of knowledge/experience on the part of the respondents, suggesting that these graduates have not yet engaged in the world of work at the time of completing the survey. This assumption is supported by the fact that employment rates in South Africa plummeted during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the majority of these respondents were African graduates (n=416) from the Humanities (n=194) and, according to the GES Employment-based Report on the 2020 Graduating Cohort (2021), the highest

² Nadler, J. T., Weston, R., & Voyles, E. C. (2015). Stuck in the middle: The use and interpretation of mid-points in items on questionnaires. *The Journal of General Psychology*, 142(2), 71–89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221309.2014.994590>

Sturgis, P., Roberts, C., & Smith, P. (2014). Middle Alternatives Revisited: How the neither/nor Response Acts as a Way of Saying "I Don't Know"? *Sociological Methods & Research*, 43(1), 15–38. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0049124112452527>

rate of unemployment can be found among this group. Graduate employment rates improved significantly in 2021 (see GES Employability Report on the 2021 Graduating Cohort), explaining why neutral responses decreased significantly in 2021.

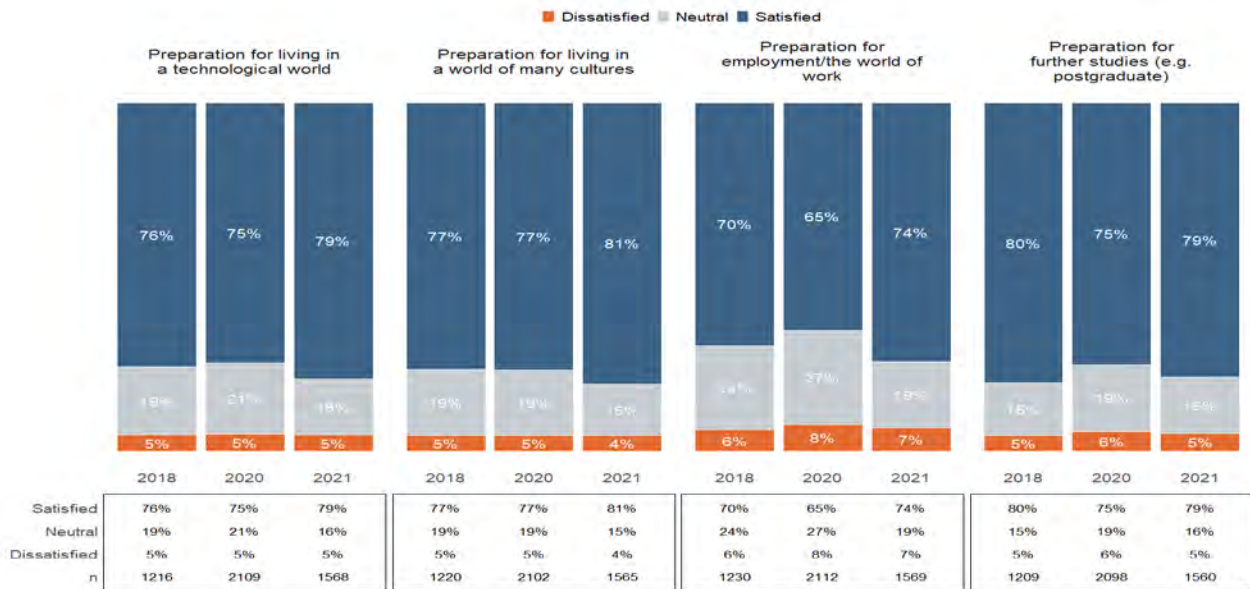


Figure 3: How satisfied are you with the way the UFS has prepared you for your future?

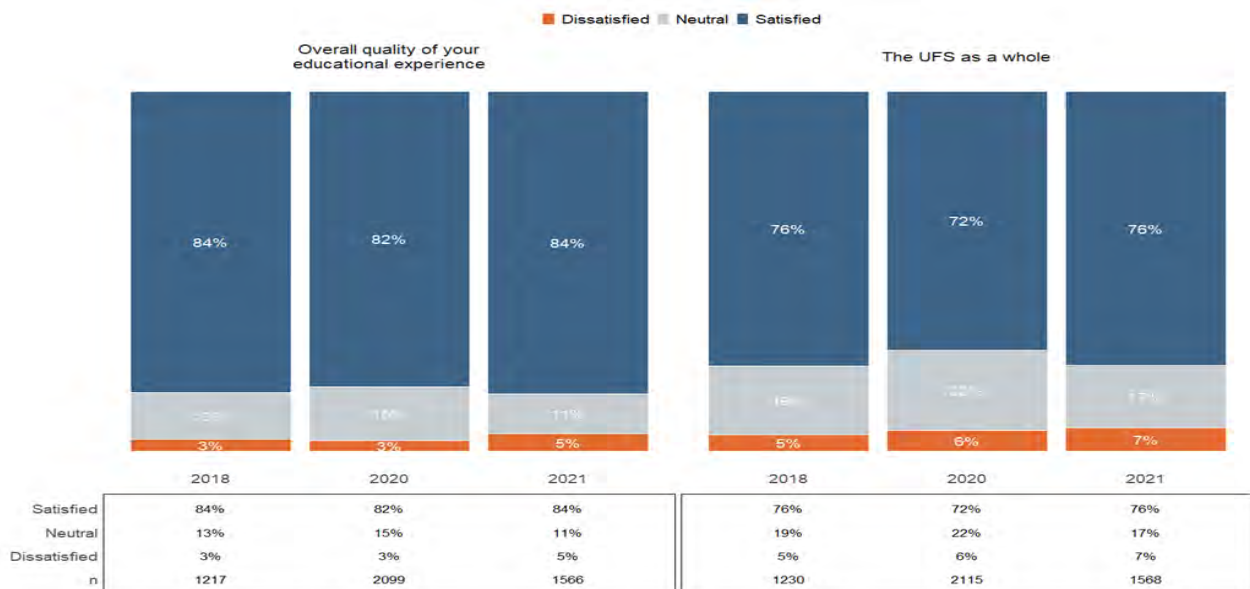


Figure 4: When you think about your entire experience as a Kovsie, how satisfied are you with each of the following?

4.4. When you think about your entire experience as a Kovsie, how satisfied are you with each of the following?

High levels of satisfaction is observed in Figure 4 (above) regarding *overall educational experience* and *the UFS as a whole*. However, *the UFS as a whole* was 22% neutral in 2020. It is important to note that the 2020

graduating cohort studied during the first year of immense disruptions associated with the COVID-19 lockdowns, probably influencing the student experience.

4.5. Academic life

Generally, dissatisfaction is below 5% for all the variables in Figure 5 below, satisfaction levels are above 80%, and there are no significant change among the three graduating cohorts, meaning that UFS graduates are very satisfied with the faculty from which they received your qualification, the quality of teaching, the subject expertise of academic staff, and their academic programmes.

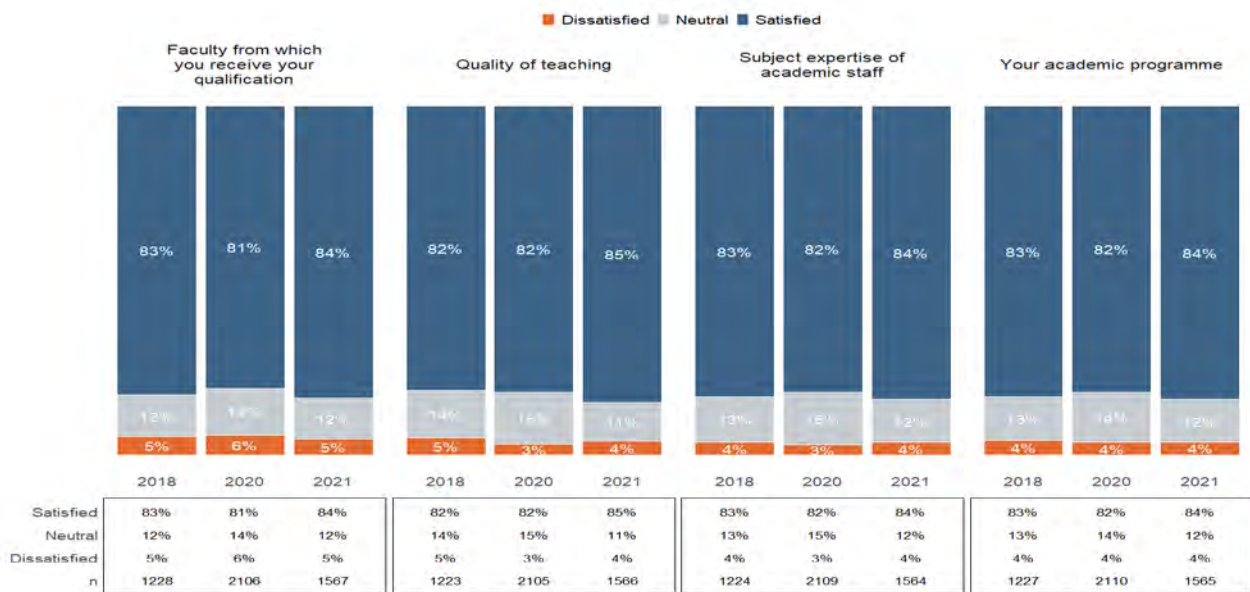


Figure 5: Academic life – faculty, teaching, subject expertise of staff and academic programme

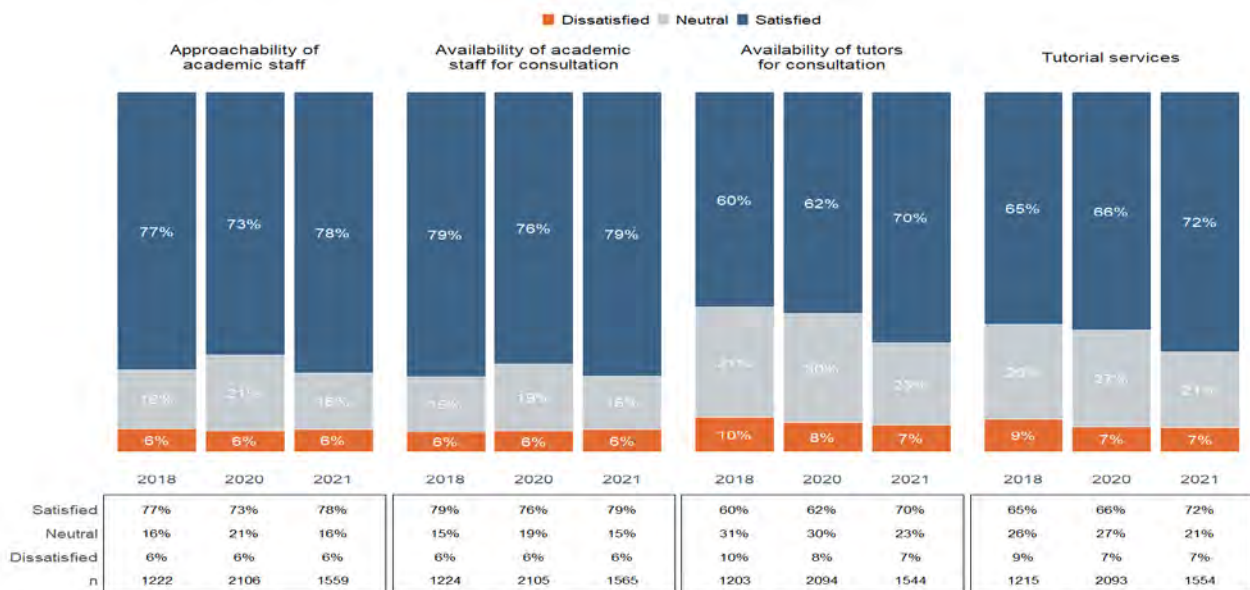


Figure 6: Academic life – academic staff, tutors and tutorials

In Figure 6 above, it is evident that the vast majority of graduates are satisfied with their interaction with academic staff, as well as with tutors and tutorial services overall. However, the *availability of tutors for consultation* and *tutorial services* have higher levels of neutral compared to the other variables. This suggests that not all students have made use of tutorial services. The majority of graduates who responded neutrally regarding the *availability of tutors for consultation* in 2018 were from NAS (n= 124), and in 2020 from NAS (n= 132) and Humanities (n=159). These variables also had considerable increases in satisfaction from 2018 to 2021, indicating an improvement in the tutorial experience of students.

High levels of satisfaction can be seen in Figure 7 below, especially with regard to the *quality and relevance of the curriculum*. Class size in 2018 was 23% neutral, increasing to 25% in 2020. The increase in 2020 may be due to the shift from face-to-face to online learning, but does not explain the high level of neutral responses in 2018. In line with the discussion in section 4.3, the high levels of neutral responses suggest that a significant share of students do not have enough experience of the classroom to answer this question.

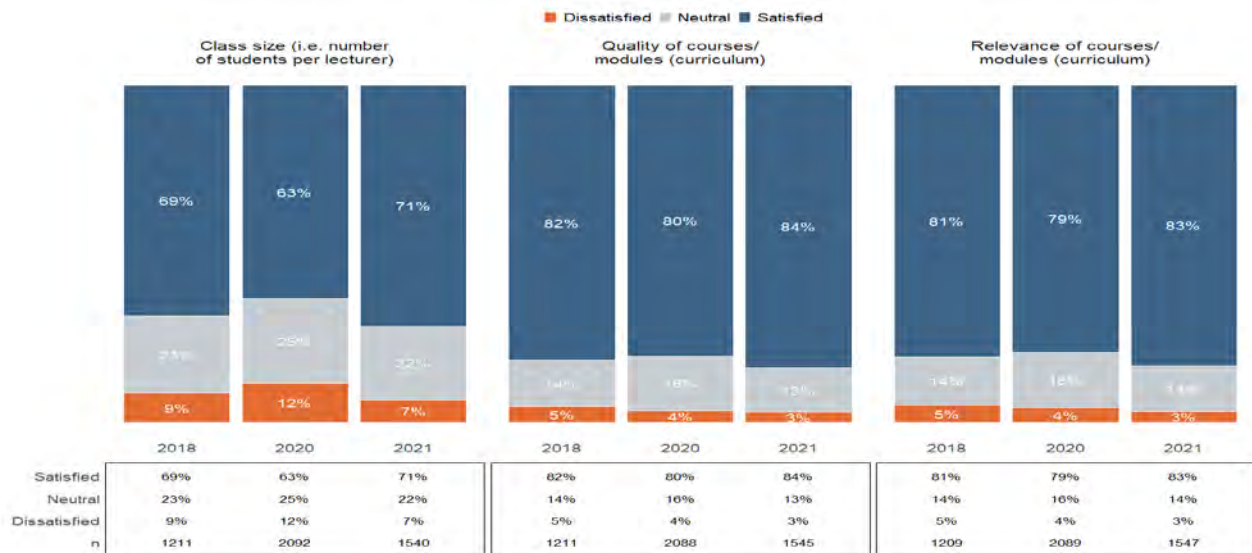


Figure 7: Academic life – class size and quality and relevance of curriculum

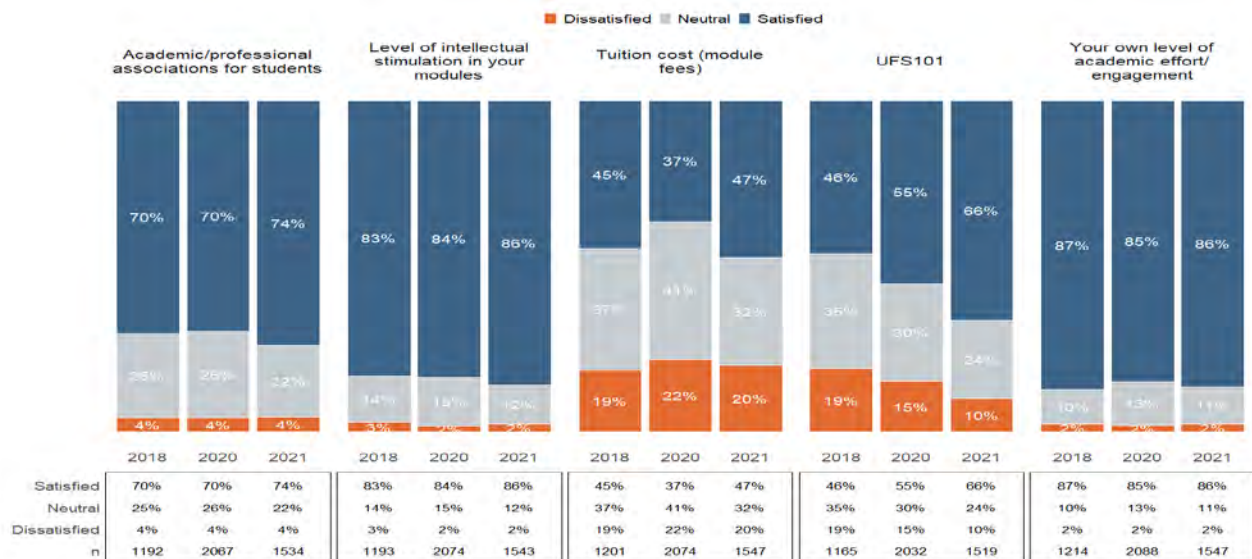


Figure 8: Academic life – academic associations, intellectual stimulation, tuition costs, UFS101 and own academic effort

In Figure 8 above, significant dissatisfaction and neutral levels can be seen regarding *tuition costs* across 2018, 2020 and 2021. In 2020, 22% of students were dissatisfied with tuition cost while 41% were neutral and only 37% of students (n= 758) were satisfied with tuition costs. It is safe to assume students are unhappy with tuition costs, evidenced by various protest actions starting with the #FeesMustFall movement in 2015. In addition, the majority of UFS students use bursaries and scholarships as funding to pay for university (59% in 2021).

In 2018, high levels of neutral (35%) and lower levels of satisfaction (46%) were found for *UFS101*. However, by 2021 satisfaction levels had increased significantly to 66%, while both neutral responses and dissatisfaction levels decreased. UFS101 moved online from 2020, providing students with more flexibility, which may have contributed to increased satisfaction.

Again, the higher levels of neutral noted with regard to *academic/professional associations for students* suggests a lack of experience with, or participation in, these types of associations.

4.6. Extracurricular activities

As presented in Figure 9 below, levels of satisfaction are comparatively lower across most variables, in particular with regard to *media, arts and culture; social/cultural and sports associations for students; and student social life in the faculty*. However, here are also very high levels of neutral across these variables, suggesting that students are not necessarily dissatisfied, but rather that they do not participate in these extra-curricular activities on campus and in their faculties. Regarding student social life in the faculty in 2018, the faculty of Humanities recorded the highest number of neutral responses (n= 226).

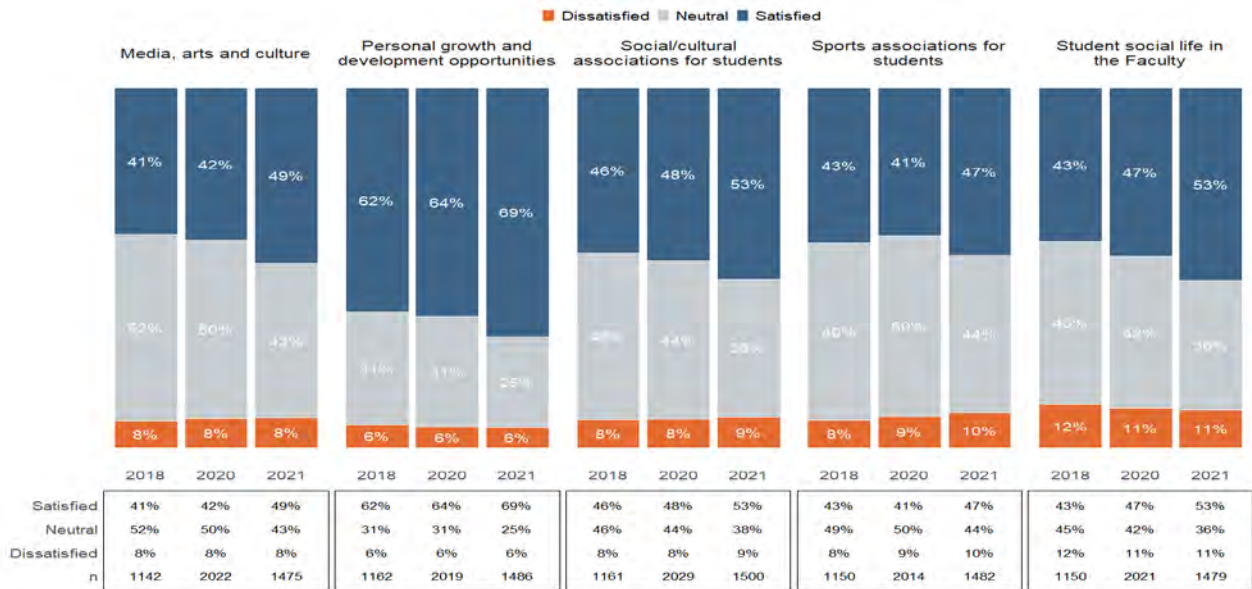


Figure 9: Extracurricular activities

4.7. Services and support provided by the UFS

Similar to Figure 9, Figure 10 below shows lower satisfaction levels and high levels of neutral across all variables – *access and disability support, counselling services, health services, and sport services* – with notable increases in satisfaction from 2018 to 2021 across the board. The levels of neutral could be due to the lack of use by students of these services. The noticeable decrease in neutral responses for *counselling and health services* could indicate that more students have used these due to the impact of COVID-19, including additional awareness of the availability of these services.

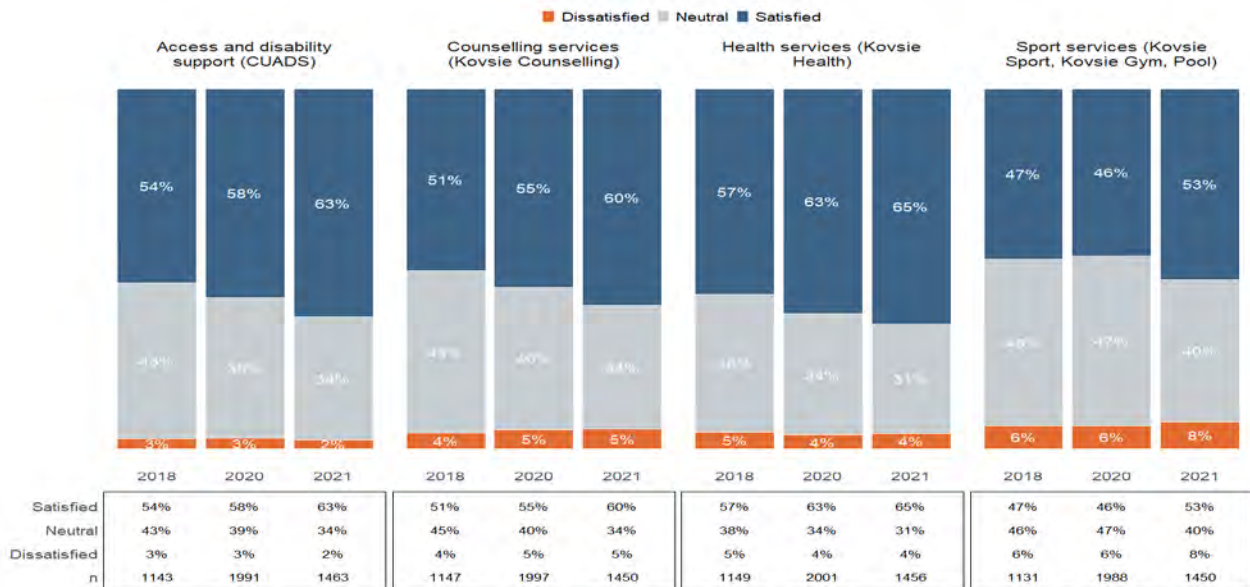


Figure 10: Services and support – access and disability, counselling, health and sport

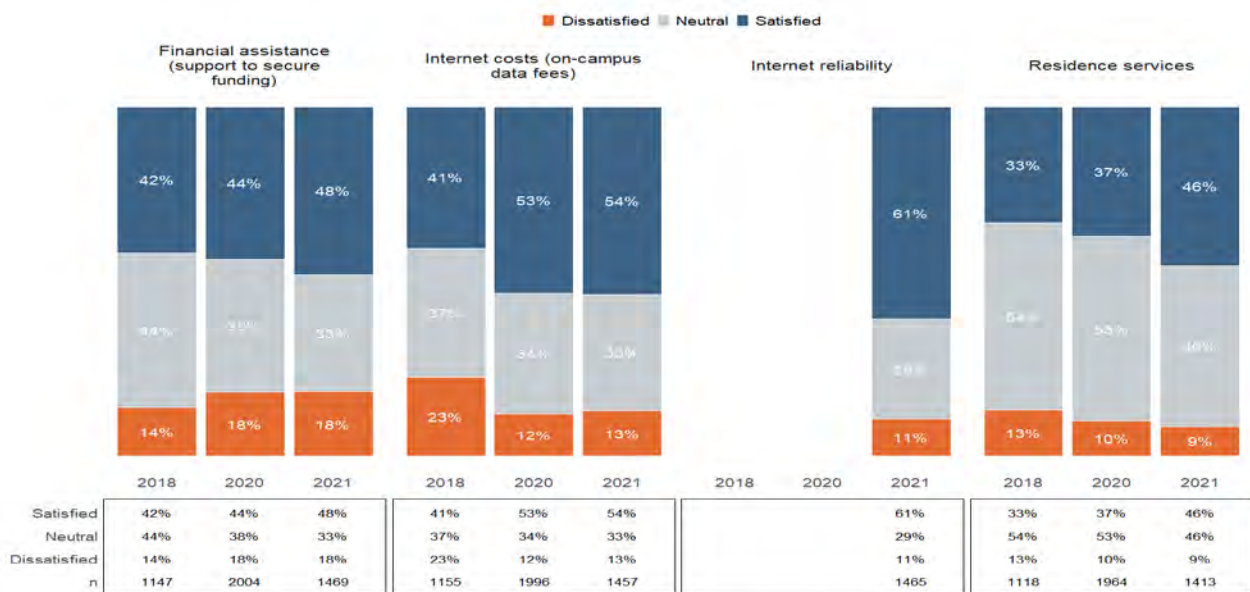


Figure 11: Services and support – finances, internet and residence services

Regarding *financial assistance*, dissatisfaction levels were comparatively high and have increased from 2018 to 2021 (see Figure 11 above). It is concerning that this variable shows the highest level of increased dissatisfaction, among only 17 survey variables where dissatisfaction has increased since 2018. However, while satisfaction levels are relatively low (below 50%), these have also increased. The high levels for neutral do not align with the fact that the majority of UFS students make use of financial assistance, and would therefore be assumed to require support to secure funding.

Dissatisfaction levels of *internet costs* decreased significantly from 23% in 2018 to 13% in 2021, which could be due to the introduction of the GlobalProtect App during the COVID-19 pandemic, making free internet access available and easily accessible for all students. The *internet reliability* variable was only introduced in 2021 due to the importance this has for academic success in an online/hybrid learning and teaching

environment. While satisfaction with this variable was high in 2021 (61%), the high levels of neutral for both this and the *internet costs* variable are a cause for concern.

The very high levels of neutrality across residence services can be attributed to respondents who do not make use of on-campus residence services. It is, however, encouraging that satisfaction with residence services has increased notably from 2018 to 2021.

Figure 12 below show very high levels of neutral across all variables – *career development office*, *central student admin services*, *services for international students*, and *student admin services in your faculty*. These levels of neutral could be due to the lack of use by students of these particular student services. While there are high levels of neutral, there have been encouraging increases in satisfaction through 2018 to 2021, in particular as regards *services for international students*.

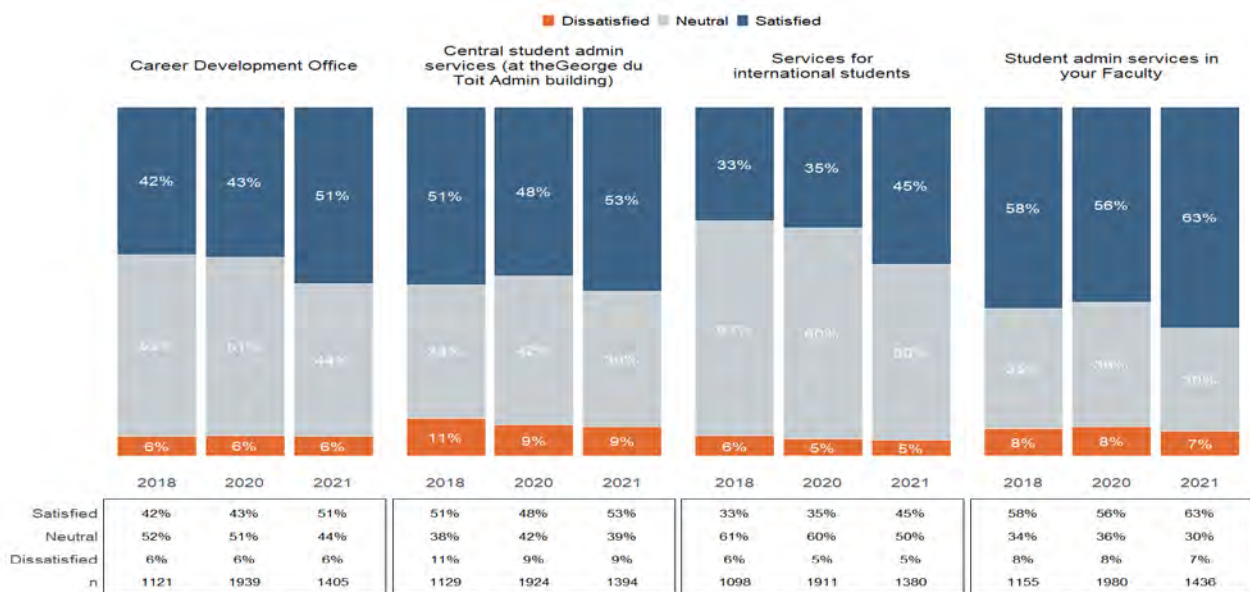


Figure 12: Services and support – career development, administration, and services for international students

4.8. Student accommodation

Generally, there are very high levels of neutral across all variables concerning on-campus accommodation (see Figure 13 below). These levels of neutral could be due to the lack of use by students of these services, supported by the fact that on-campus residence students are the minority of the student population at the UFS. Despite this, students are increasingly more satisfied with on-campus residence services, as evidenced by increasing satisfaction levels from 2018 to 2021 on all of these variables. However, there is also a notable increase in dissatisfaction with regard to the *cost of on-campus residences*.

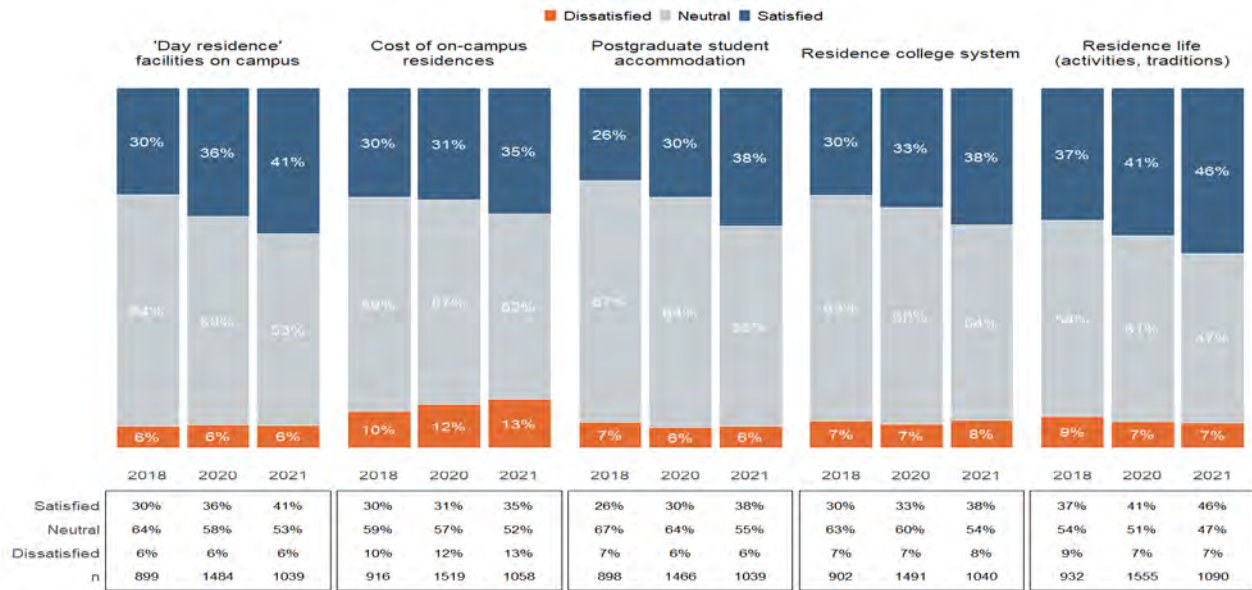


Figure 13: Student accommodation – on campus

Figure 14 (below) again shows high levels of neutral across all variables, indicating that many of the respondents do not make use of off-campus residences. Dissatisfaction regarding the *cost of off-campus residences* such as Unilofts and CampusKey remained high in 2018, 2020 and 2021, at 22%, 25% and 24% respectively. In 2020 the majority of dissatisfied graduates were African ($n=375$) age 21-25 ($n=332$). Dissatisfaction with the *city residence system* and *cost of other off-campus accommodation (privately owned)* also increased. Overall, these results suggest that students' concerns with the cost of tuition (see section 4.5, Figure 8) extend to both on- and off-campus accommodation costs as well.

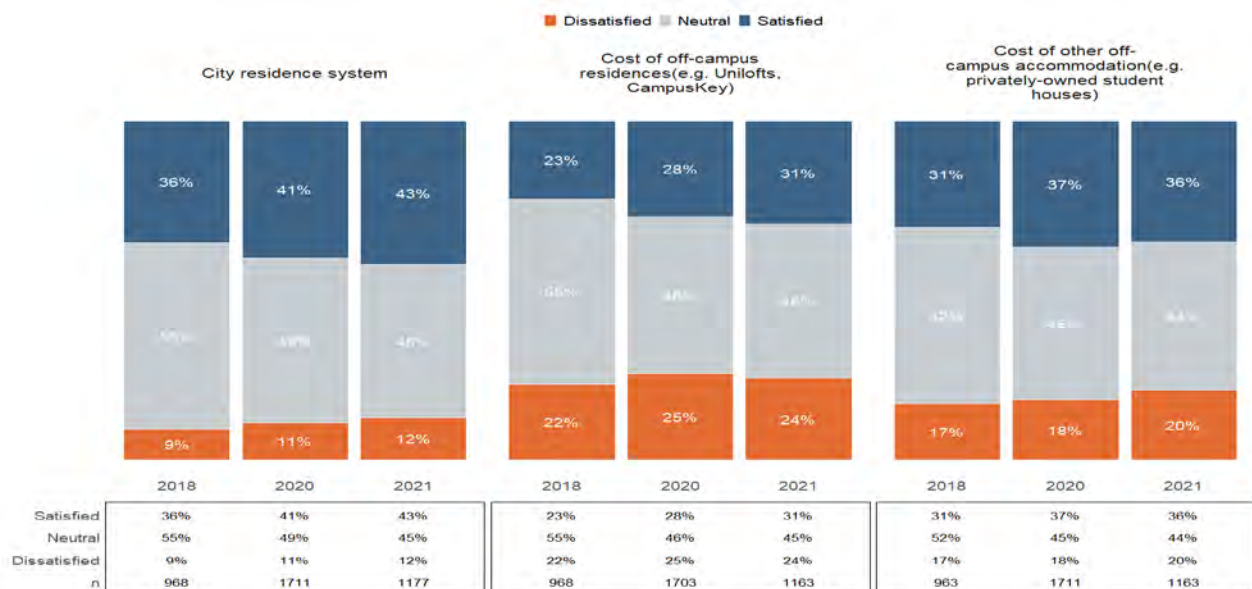


Figure 14: Student accommodation – off campus

4.9. Student leadership and governance

Figure 15 below illustrates satisfaction with student leadership and governance and very high levels of neutral can be seen across all variables. A reason for this can be that many students do not engage in the UFS student leadership actively, do not show general interest in, or may not even be aware of the activities of student leadership. Satisfaction has, however, increased consistently across all variables since 2018, indicating positive change. Nevertheless, it must be noted that dissatisfaction with the performance of the Student Representative Council (SRC) is relatively high and increasing (up to 20% in 2021), indicating a need for improvement in this area.

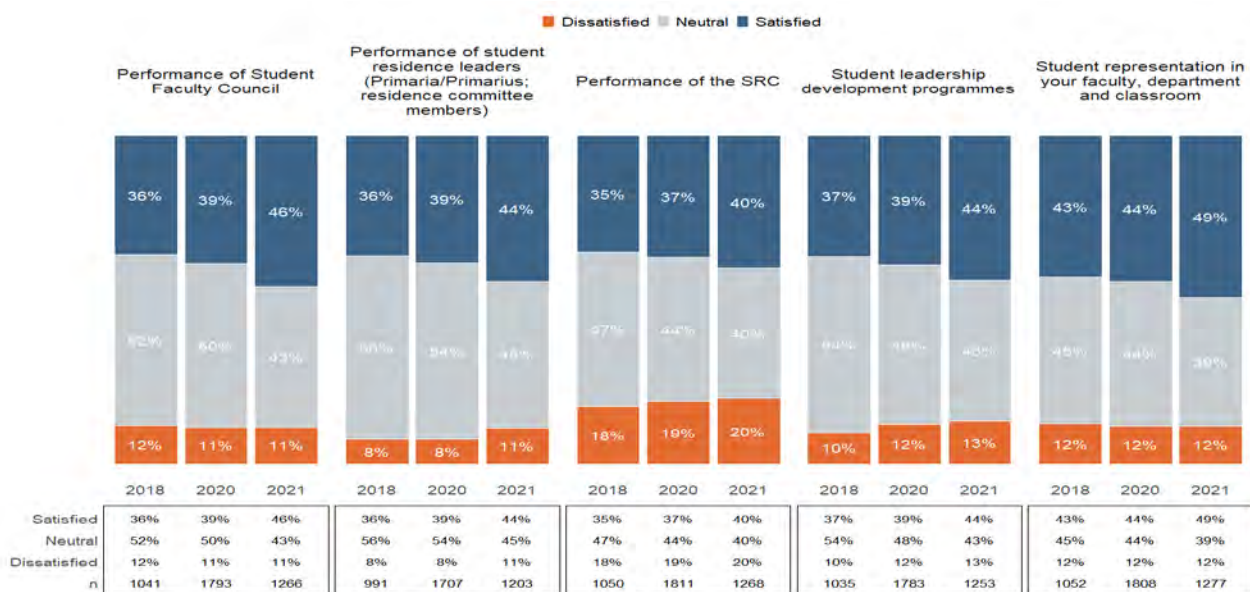


Figure 15: Student Leadership and Governance

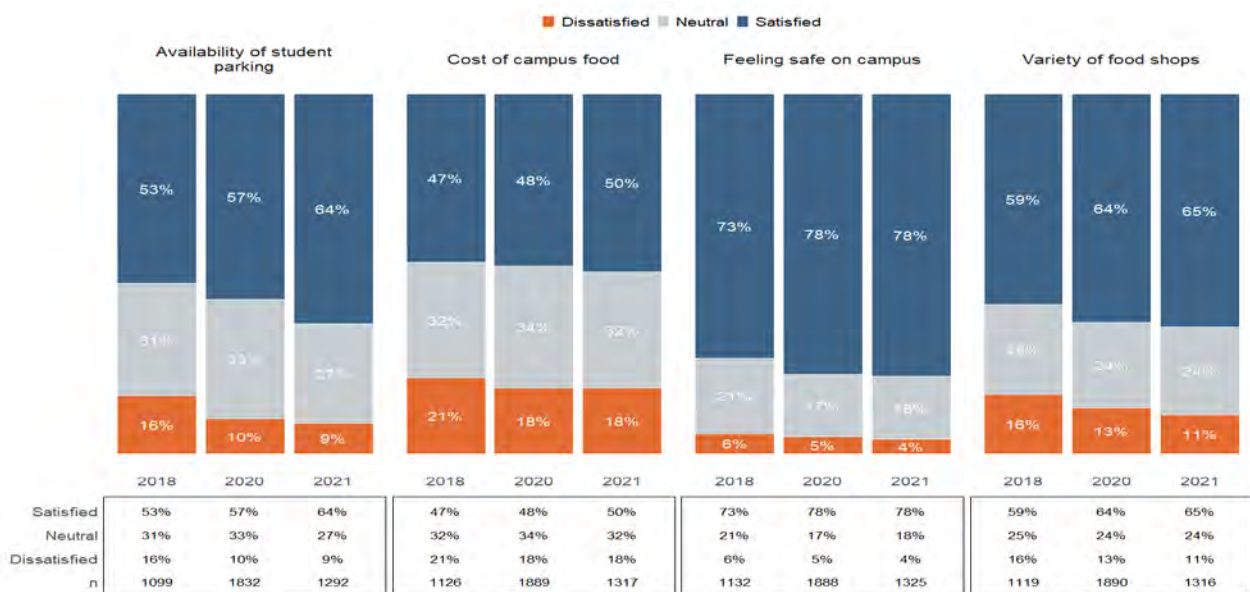


Figure 16: Being on campus – parking, food and feeling safe

4.10. Being on campus

Across all of the variables shown in Figure 16 above – *availability of student parking*, *cost of campus food*, *feeling safe on campus*, and *variety of food shops* – dissatisfaction levels has decreased since 2018. Dissatisfaction decreased most notably in *availability of student parking*, which may be attributed to the shift to online classes since 2020, alleviating parking concerns. However, there is room for improvement regarding *cost of campus food*, given the vast majority of UFS students who are considered to be food insecure. The high and increasing levels of satisfaction with *feeling safe on campus* is very encouraging.

Generally, there are high levels of neutral across all variables shown in Figure 17 below, which is probably due to the lack of use by students of services. Despite this, the majority of respondents were satisfied with *availability of other (non-food) shops*, *availability of bookstores*, and *variety of recreational activators on campus* in 2021.

Feeling at home on campus also shows positive increases in satisfaction. However, the high level of neutral responses is concerning on this variable, and the majority of graduates who indicated 'neutral' in 2021 were female (n= 249) and African (n=284).

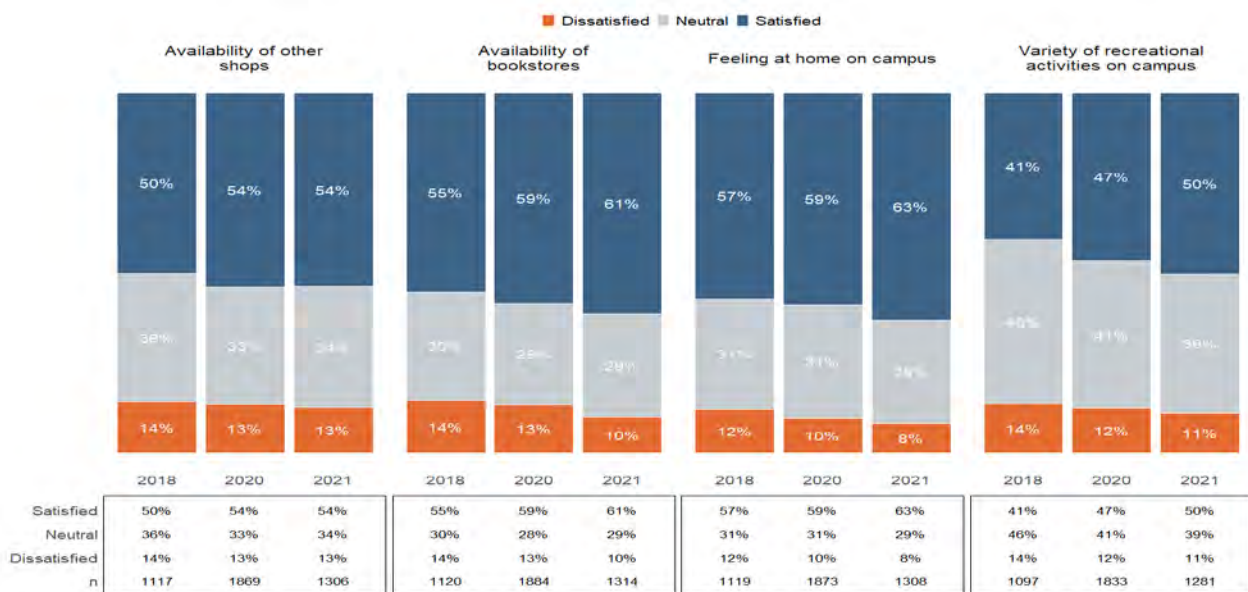


Figure 17: Being on campus – shops, recreation, and feeling at home

With regard to *gender*, *race* and *student-staff relations on campus*, Figure 18 (below) again shows very high levels of neutral. Students having no opinion or being unsure about relations on campus is a cause of concern. The higher levels of dissatisfaction on *race relations on campus* are particularly concerning. Despite the decrease in dissatisfaction for this variable (from 23% in 2018 to 17% in 2021), there is still room for improvement given that race relations form an integral part of institutional culture. The majority of graduates who were dissatisfied with *race relations on campus* were from the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences (n= 97).

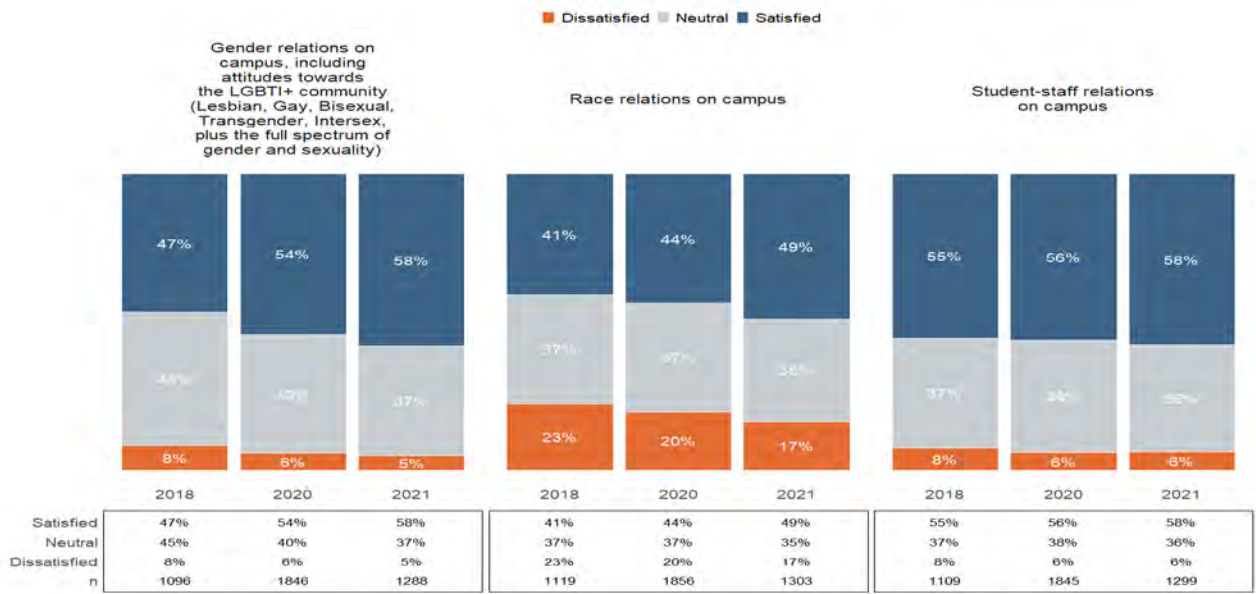


Figure 18: Being on campus – campus relations

5. Conclusion

This report analysed data collected through the UFS GES to explore graduate satisfaction in all areas of academic and student life at the University. Generally, satisfaction among UFS students is high, with a few notable exceptions. The highest levels of satisfaction are shown with regard to key areas of academic life, e.g. the overall quality of the educational experience, quality of teaching, quality and relevance of the curriculum, and the academic programme overall.

Areas showing lower levels of satisfaction, and higher levels of dissatisfaction, are cause for concern. These are mostly related to finances, i.e. financial assistance/support services, tuition costs, and the cost of off-campus accommodation. Students are also notably less satisfied with the performance of the SRC and with race relations on campus. The latter is particularly concerning, given that race relations form an integral part of institutional culture.

High levels of neutral responses are also shown in the findings. Research shows that respondents selecting the neutral option most likely do not have an opinion on the issue or are unsure, indicating a lack of knowledge/experience on the part of the respondents. For example, where a student did not make use of a particular service, higher levels of neutral responses are expected. This is particularly relevant with regards to extracurricular activities, the services of the career development office, and tutorial services. High neutral responses for class size and internet costs and reliability is also concerning, since this suggests a lack of class attendance, and because the use of the internet is critical for academic success in an online/hybrid learning and teaching environment.

The impact of COVID-19 is also apparent in the findings. For example, a noticeable decrease in neutral responses for counselling and health services could indicate that more students have become aware of and have made use of these services due to the impact of the pandemic.

While the high levels of satisfaction on most variables is encouraging, there are areas for improvement. Raising awareness around particular services, such as career development and extracurricular activities, could increase use and satisfaction in these areas. The UFS should also pay particular attention to financial issues, i.e. the provision of financial assistance, tuition costs, and the cost of accommodation. Given the level of food insecurity amongst UFS students, the cost of food on campus should also be considered an area for improvement.

Finally, it is most concerning is that students seem to have no opinion or are unsure about feeling at home on campus, and about gender, race and student-staff relations on campus. These issues speak to students' sense of belonging and to institutional culture, which could impact a student's decision to enrol and to stay at the UFS, and should therefore be addressed as a matter of urgency.

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