

STUDENTS AND DRUGS SURVEY 2020-21

nus

Alcohol & Drug

Impact



STUDENTS
ORGANISING FOR
SUSTAINABILITY
UNITED KINGDOM

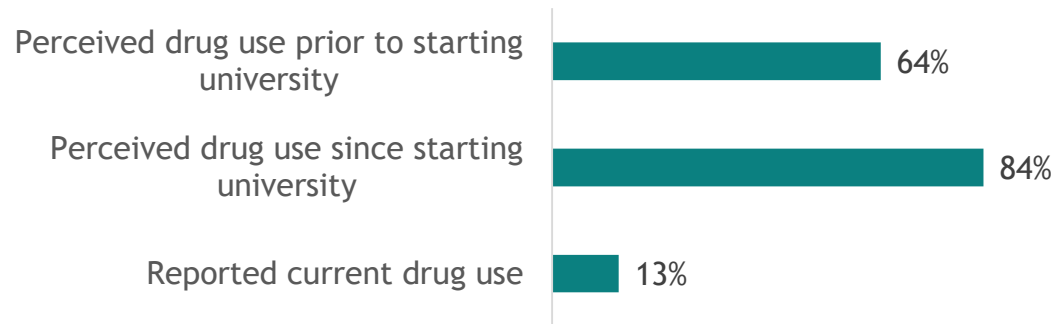
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SUMMARY

We asked students in higher and further education about their experiences of drug use. The 1500 respondents who completed an online survey from December 2020 to January 2021 told us...

Respondents overestimate student drug use...



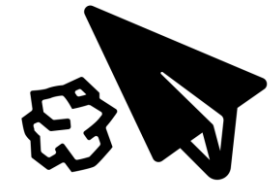
Top reasons behind drug use are...



57%
recreation



21%
Relieve stress



21%
Boredom

Despite perceptions of high levels of drug use, this isn't always seen as problematic or culturally embedded at their place of study...

57%

"I do not have a problem with students taking drugs recreationally."

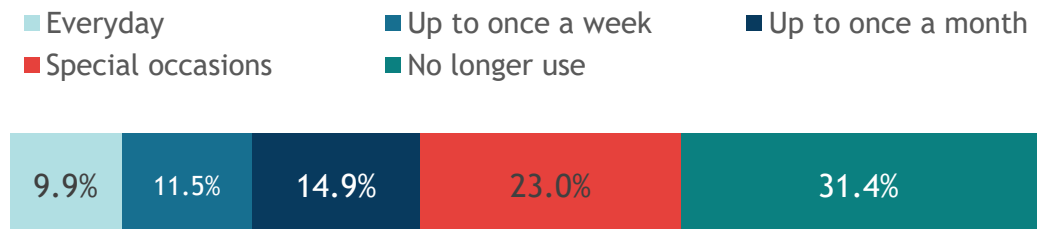
48%

"Student drug use isn't as problematic as is widely thought."

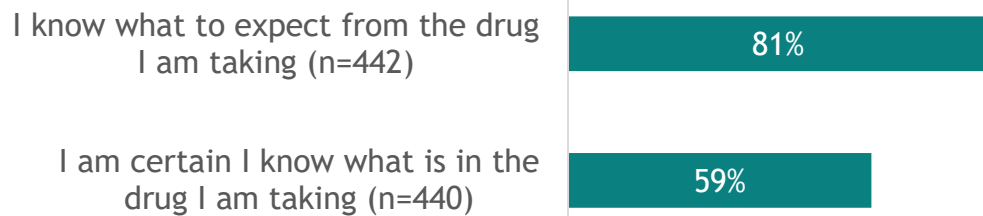
27%

"Taking drugs is part of university / college culture."

Cannabis is the most frequently reported drug used by respondents who currently use or have previously used drugs



The majority of drug users say they know what to expect from the drugs they use, however there is still uncertainty over what they contain...



Thinking about drugs and their place of study...



69% say they either don't know if their place of study has a drugs policy, or are aware but do not know what the policy says



59% say they feel confident that if they turned to their university for support with drug use that it would be dealt with appropriately. This falls to **40%** amongst respondents that currently use drugs.



49% say their university / college should not be punishing students who take drugs

Reflecting on the impacts of drug use, respondents who currently (or previously) use drugs...



17% say it has resulted in a missed lecture / seminar / class



41% say it helped them make new friends



15% say they took risks with their personal safety they would not have otherwise



19% say its improved a mental health condition but...
11% say it has made a condition worse



23% say they enjoyed the experience of sex on drugs

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

About the research

This report presents research completed as part of the Drug and Alcohol Impact programme. The programme is a whole-institution approach embeds social norms of responsible drinking on our campuses, and refocuses the conversation on drugs to be about reducing harm, and building healthier, safer, more productive student communities, involving action by local partnerships of students' unions, universities and community organisations. The programme includes an annual survey, designed to identify students' relationship with drugs at participating institutions as well as students across the UK more widely. The survey is intended to provide a means for understanding changes in attitudes and behaviours.

A total of 1505 responses were achieved in 2020-21 through promotion of the survey locally by universities and students' unions. The survey was mainly promoted by universities and students' unions participating in the Drug and Alcohol Impact programme however participation in the research was also opened to other universities and students' unions wishing to gather data on their students' relationship with drugs. Additionally the survey was also promoted by NUS to students in the TOTUM database.

When reading the results, it is worth bearing in mind the characteristics of the respondents, outlined in the following chapter.

Variations between students with different characteristics, such as gender or nationality, are also drawn out throughout the report. Significant differences are reported where base size is greater than 30, and are valid at confidence level of at least 95%.

About Drug and Alcohol Impact

Our student wellbeing programme Drug and Alcohol Impact embeds social norms of responsible drinking on our campuses, and refocuses the conversation on drugs to be about reducing harm, and building healthier, safer, more productive student communities.

The programme builds upon the success of Alcohol Impact, which since 2015 has supported 30 university and students' union partnerships to create lasting positive change around responsible alcohol consumption. Although progress has been made in improving drinking cultures on campus, there's still work to be done, and institutions are supported to build on and improve practices in this area.

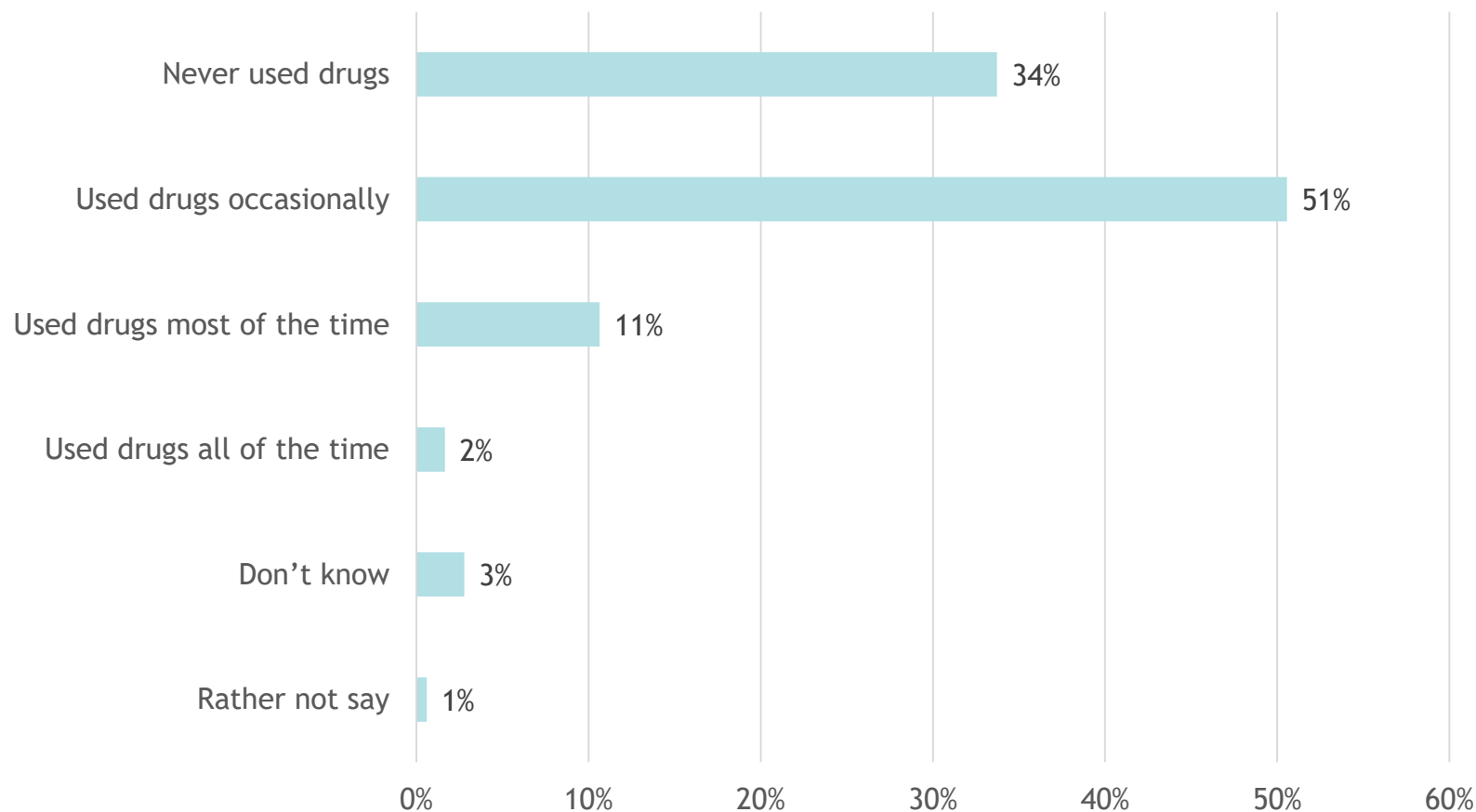
Drug and Alcohol Impact recognises that despite most universities taking a zero tolerance approach to drug use, many students still choose to use drugs. The programme supports institutions to explore their own students drug use and design bespoke interventions to identify, educate and reduce harm.

For more information visit our [website](#) or email hello@sos-uk.org

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Perceptions of student drug use and campus drug culture

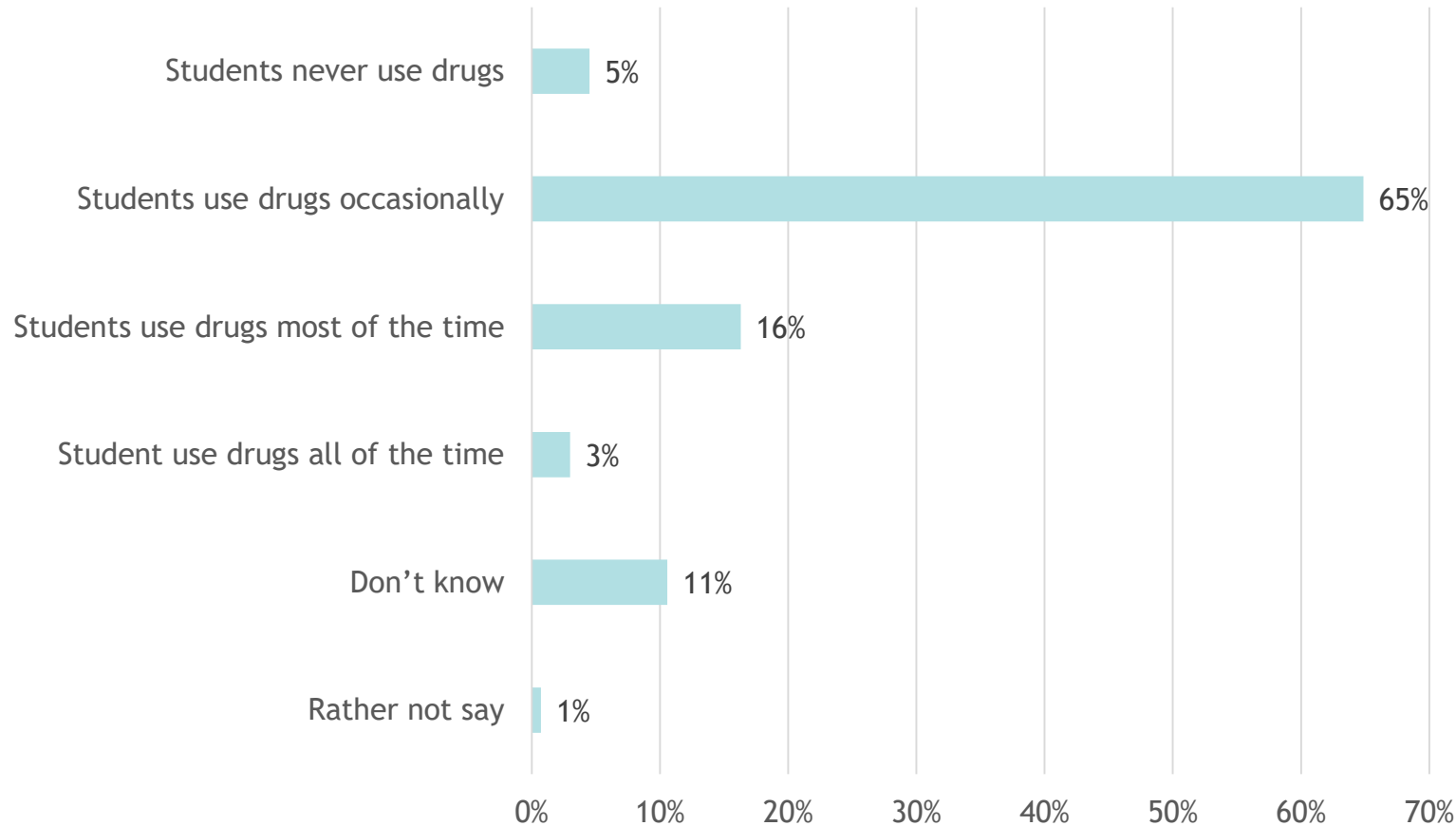
When asked to reflect on their perceptions of student drug use before starting university/college, half (51%) of respondents say they thought students used drugs occasionally.



- Respondents identifying as men are less likely than women to say they thought students used drugs most of the time prior to starting their studies
- Respondents who use drugs are more likely to say they had the perception that students used drugs 'most of the time' prior to starting their studies
- Respondents who identify as having a disability are more likely to say they had the perception that students used drugs 'most of the time' prior to starting their studies compared to those who do not consider themselves disabled

Q. Please select the phrase which best describes your perceptions: Before starting at university/college, did you believe that students... [Base: 1503 Balance: No response]

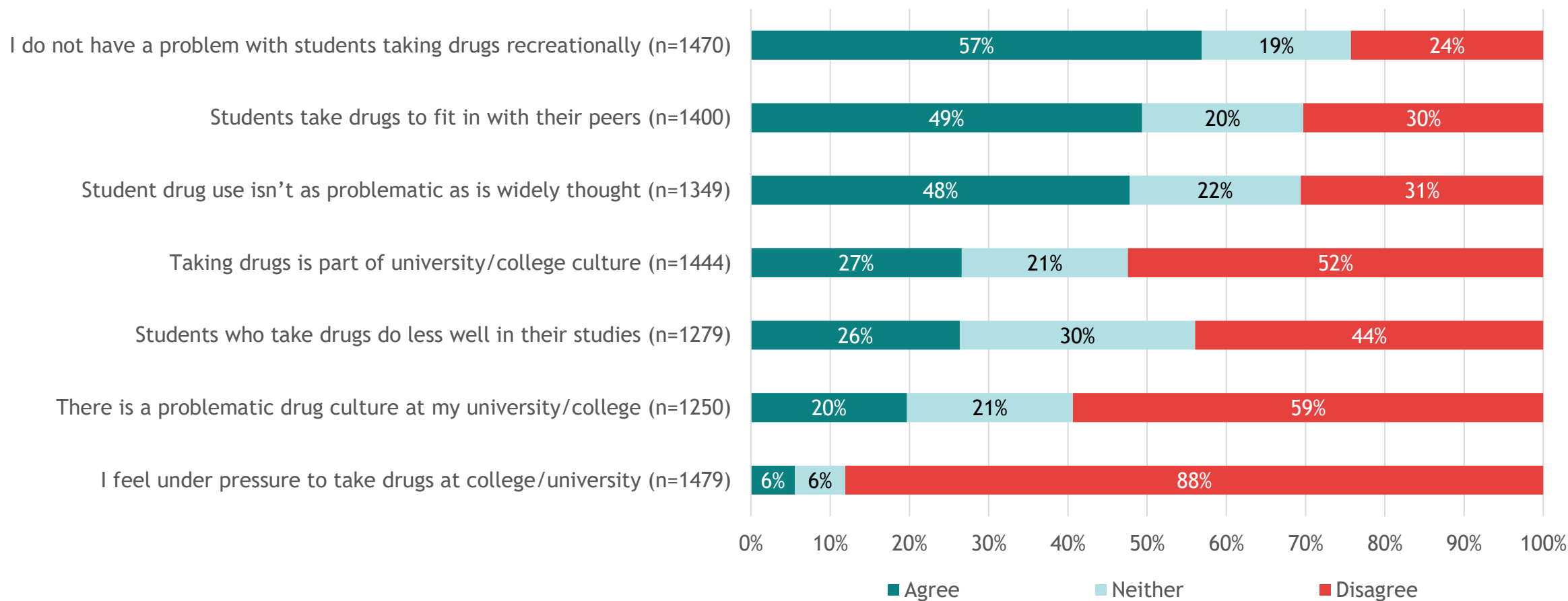
Now they're at university / college, two thirds (65%) of respondents, based on their experiences, say students use drugs occasionally.



- Respondents in their 3rd year are most likely to say that now they're at university, they think students use drugs most of the time.
- Respondents that use drugs are more likely than those that don't to say that now they're at university, they think students use drugs most of the time.

Q. And now you're a student at university/college, which of the following best matches your experiences of drug use? [Base: 1503 Balance: No response]

Over half of respondents (57%) say they don't have a problem with recreational drug use. A quarter (27%) say taking drugs is part of university/college culture, and 20% say the drug culture is problematic.



Q. To what extent, if at all, do you agree with the following statements? {Base: in brackets Balance: No response / don't know / rather not say}

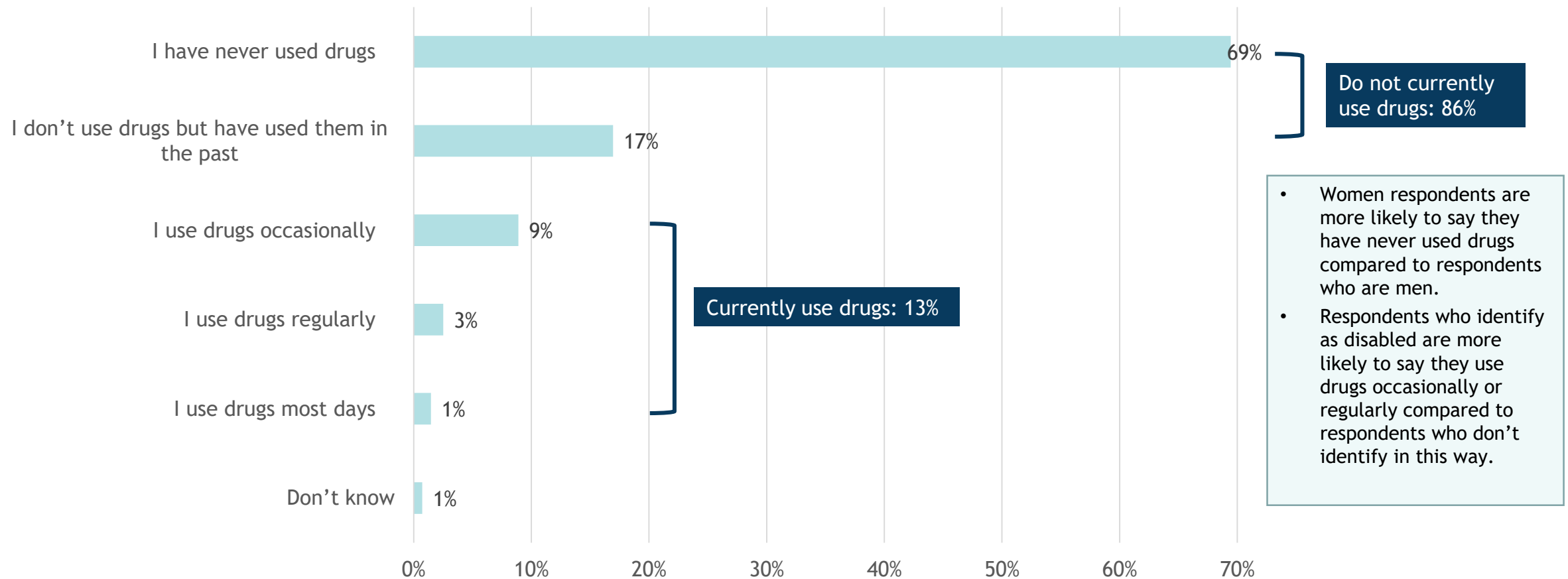
Attitudes and experiences towards drug use at university or college vary according to respondent characteristics...

<p>Taking drugs is part of university/college culture</p>	<p>Students take drugs to fit in with their peers</p>	<p>I do not have a problem with students taking drugs recreationally</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respondents who use drugs are more likely to agree compared to those who don't use drugs • Respondents who identify as disabled are more likely to agree compared to those that don't identify in this way 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respondents who have never used drugs are more likely to agree compared to those that currently use drugs • Women respondents are more likely to agree compared to men respondents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respondents who are men are more likely to agree compared to women respondents • Respondents in higher education are more likely to agree than those studying in further education • UK respondents are more likely to agree than international student respondents
<p>Students who take drugs do less well in their studies</p>	<p>There is a problematic drug culture at my university/college</p>	<p>Student drug use isn't as problematic as is widely thought</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respondents who have never used drugs or have used drugs in the past are more likely to agree than those who currently use drugs • International student respondents are more likely to agree than UK respondents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3rd year respondents are more likely to agree than 2nd and 1st year respondents • Women respondents are more likely to agree compared to men 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respondents who are men are more likely to agree than women respondents • Respondents who use drugs are more likely to agree compared to those who don't use drugs • Full time • UK respondents are more likely to agree than international student respondents

Q. To what extent, if at all, do you agree with the following statements?

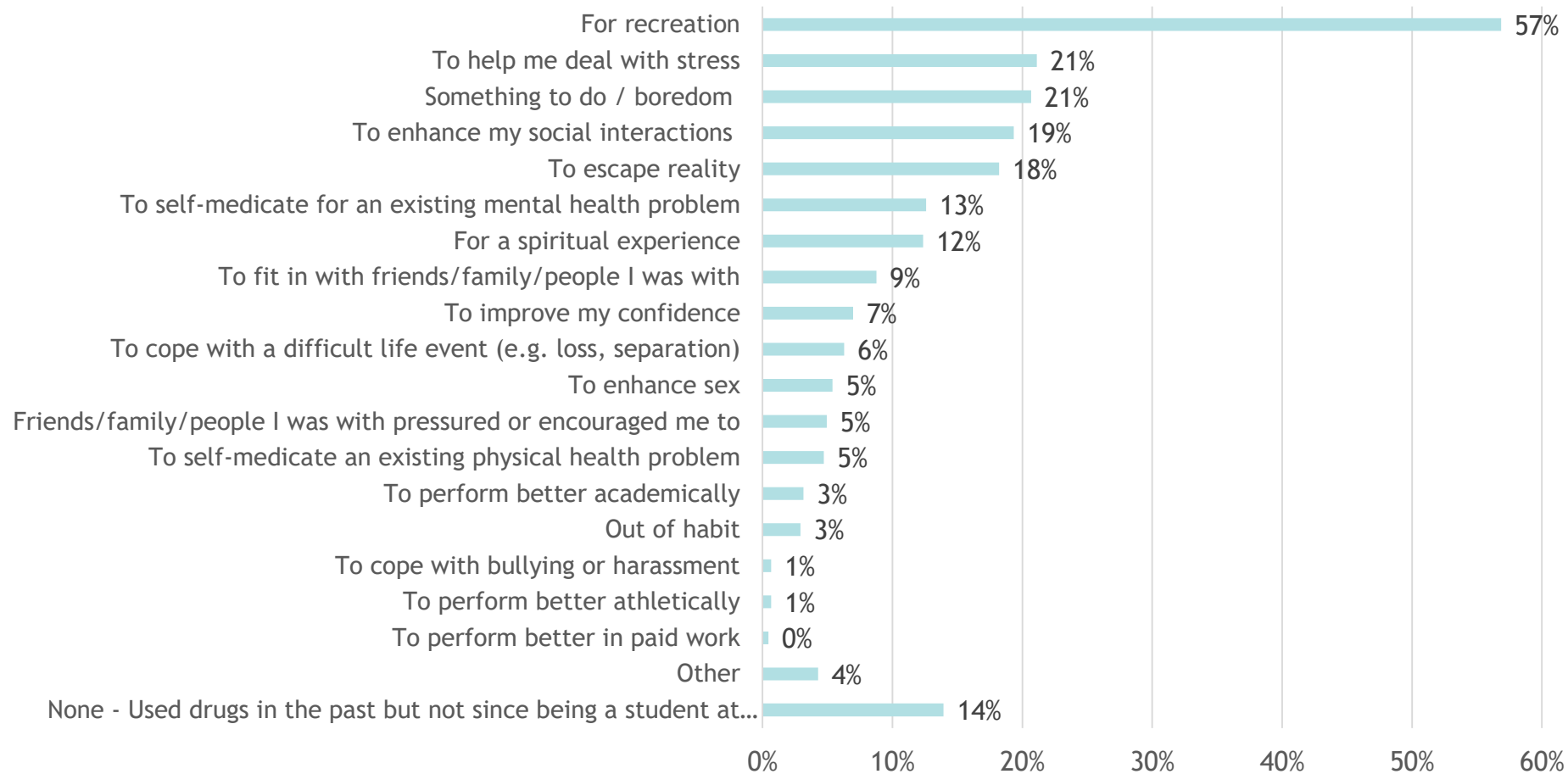
Student drug use

The majority of respondents (86%) do not currently use drugs. 13% say they are using drugs currently, with 1% using drugs most days.



Q. Which of the following best describes your current frequency of drug use? [Base:1505 Balance: No response]

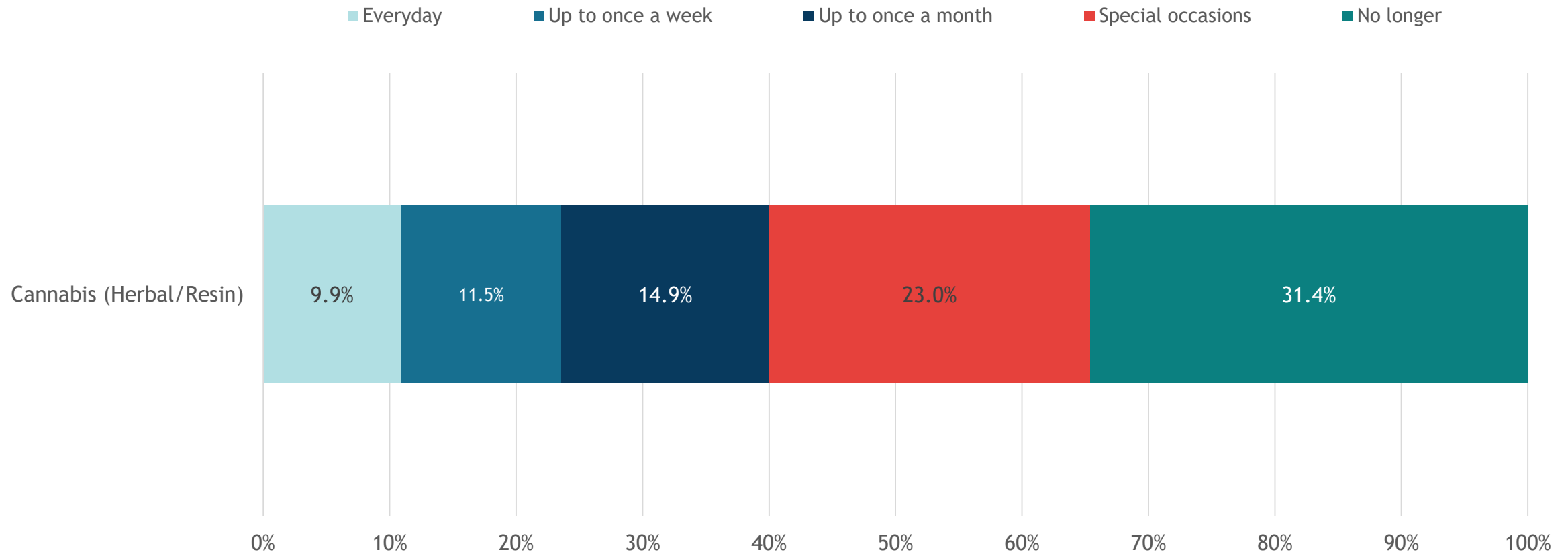
Over half (57%) of respondents who said they currently use, or have used drugs in the past whilst they were students say they do so for recreation.



- Respondents who live in halls or with friends are more likely to say they use or have used drugs for recreation compared to those living with family or parents.
- Respondents aged 18-22 are more likely to say they use or have used drugs as something to do / out of boredom compared to older respondents.

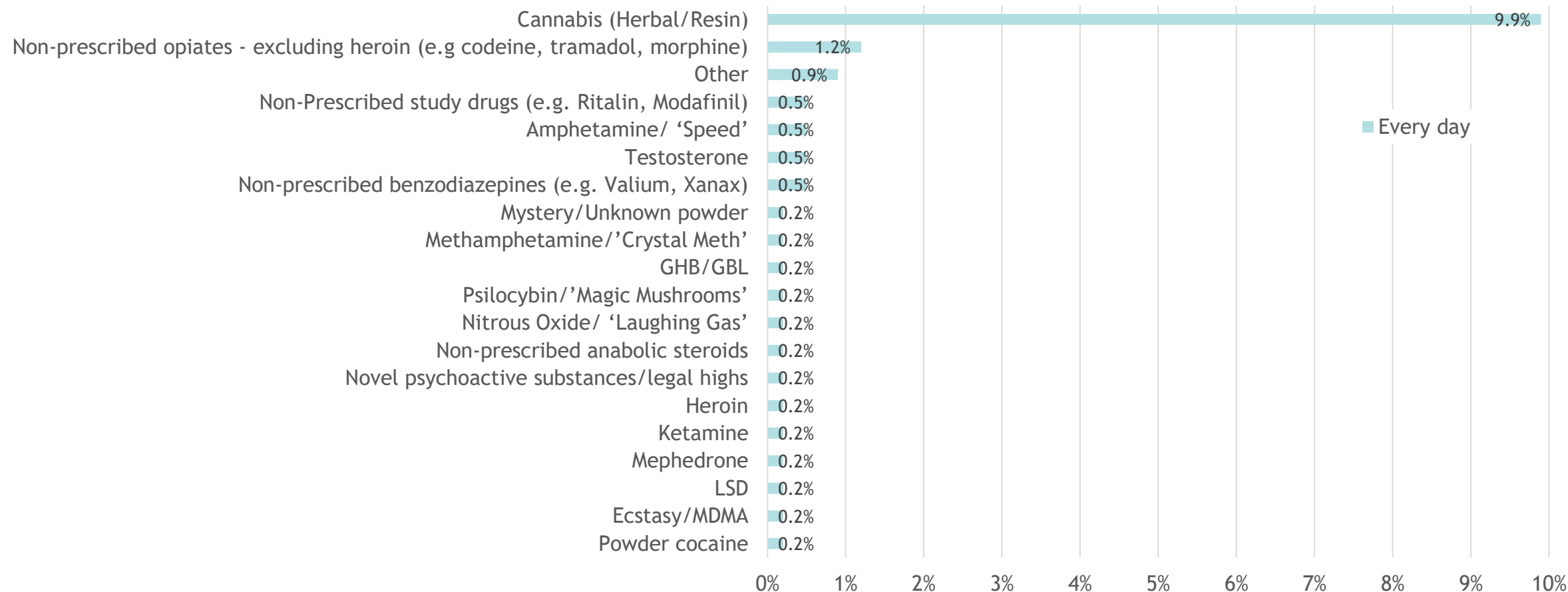
Q. Which of the following best describes why you use / have used drugs? [Base: 445 Balance: No response, and never have used drugs]

Cannabis is the most frequently used drug, as reported by respondents who currently use or have previously used drugs.



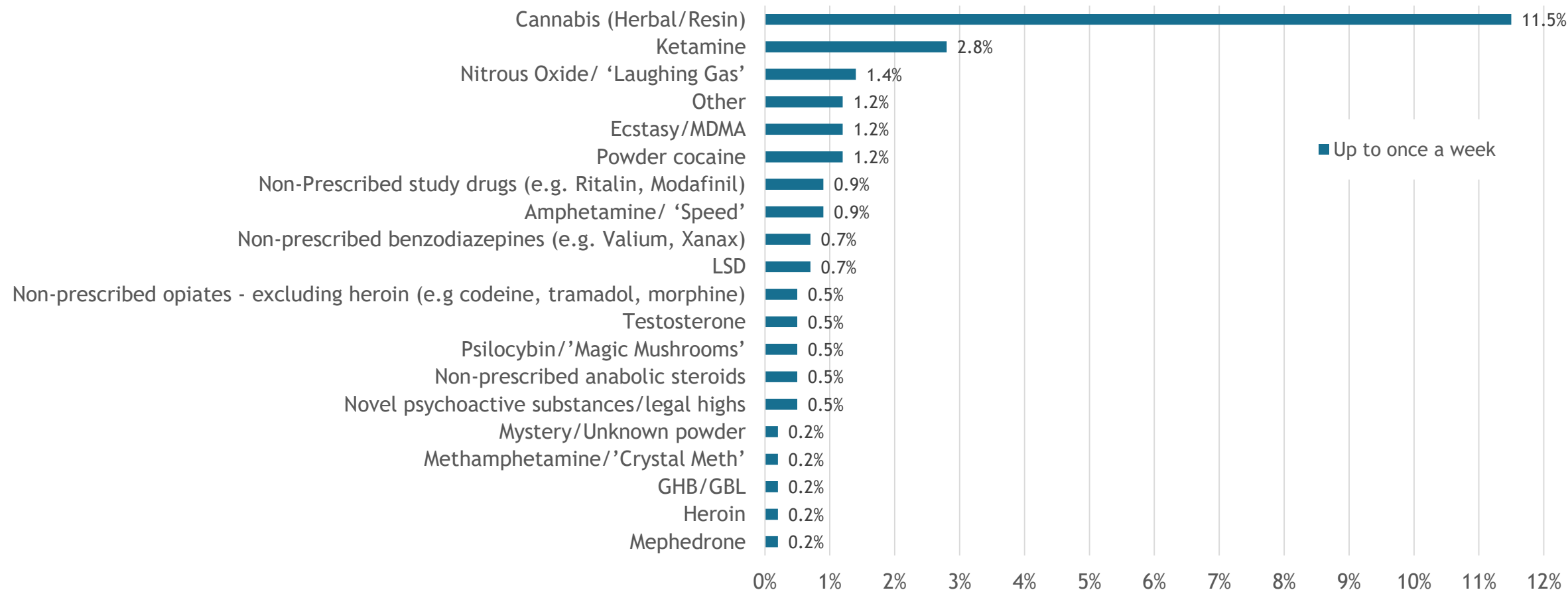
Q. Still thinking about your time at university/college, which of the following best describes your frequency of particular drug use? [Base: 444 Balance: No response, and never have used drugs]

When looking at drugs that are used **every day**, cannabis is the most frequently reported drug (9.9%), followed by non-prescribed opiates (excluding heroin) (1.25%).



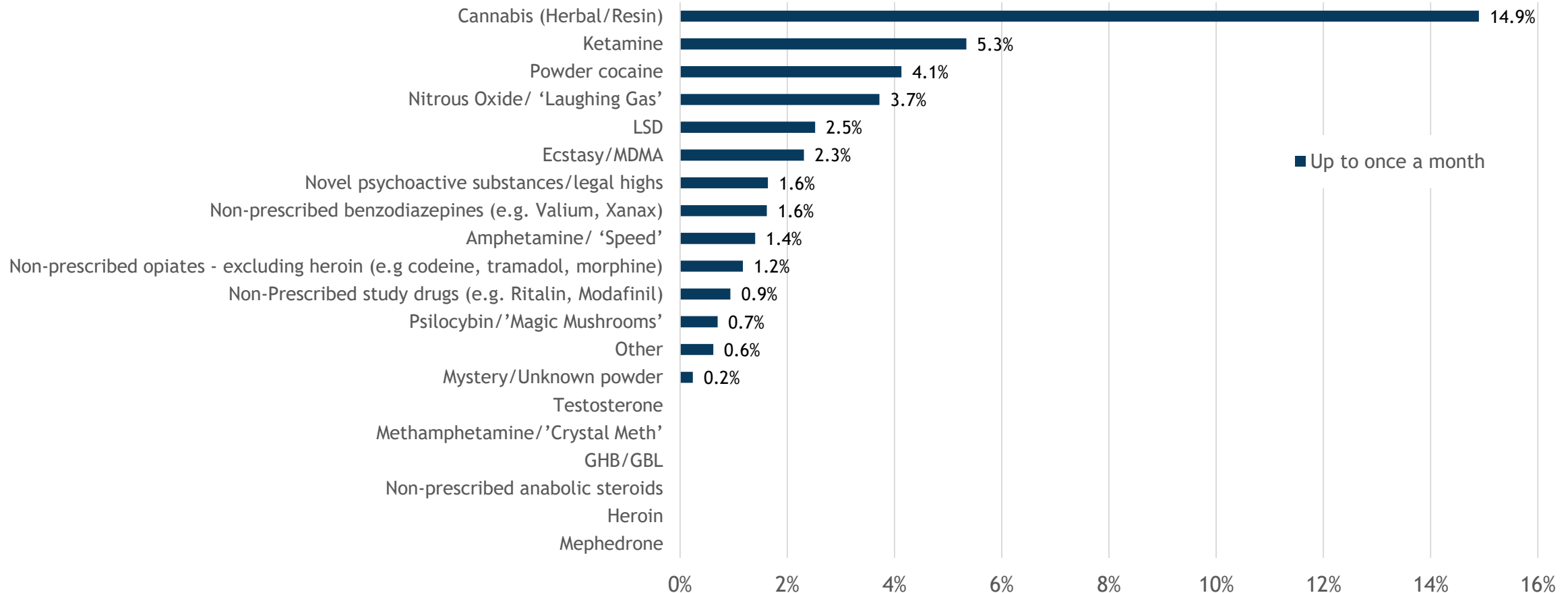
Q. Still thinking about your time at university/college, which of the following best describes your frequency of particular drug use? [Base: c.438 Balance: No response, and never have used drugs]

Cannabis is also the most frequently used drug for those that use less than every day but up to once a week (11.5%). Ketamine (2.8%) is the second most frequently used drug on this basis.



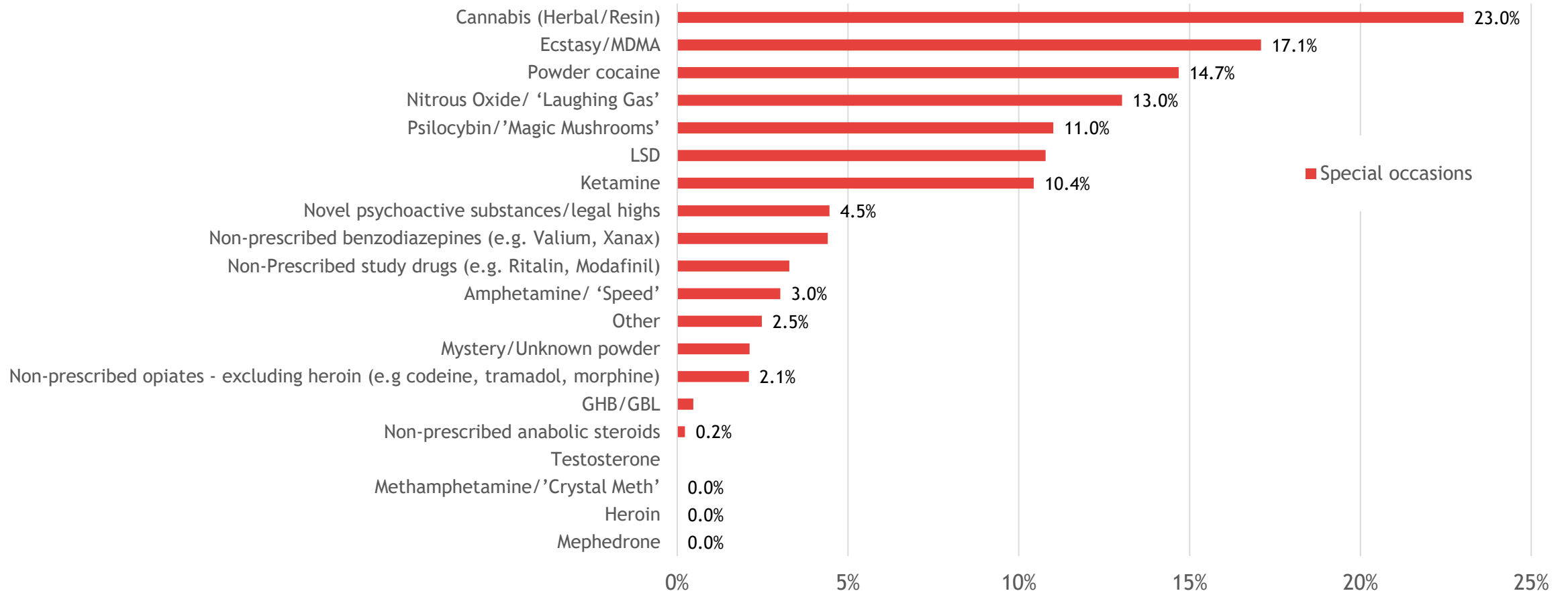
Q. Still thinking about your time at university/college, which of the following best describes your frequency of particular drug use? [Base: c.438 Balance: No response, and never have used drugs]

Cannabis (14.9%) is the most frequently reported drug on an ‘up to once a month’ basis, followed by ketamine (5.3%) and powder cocaine (4.1%).



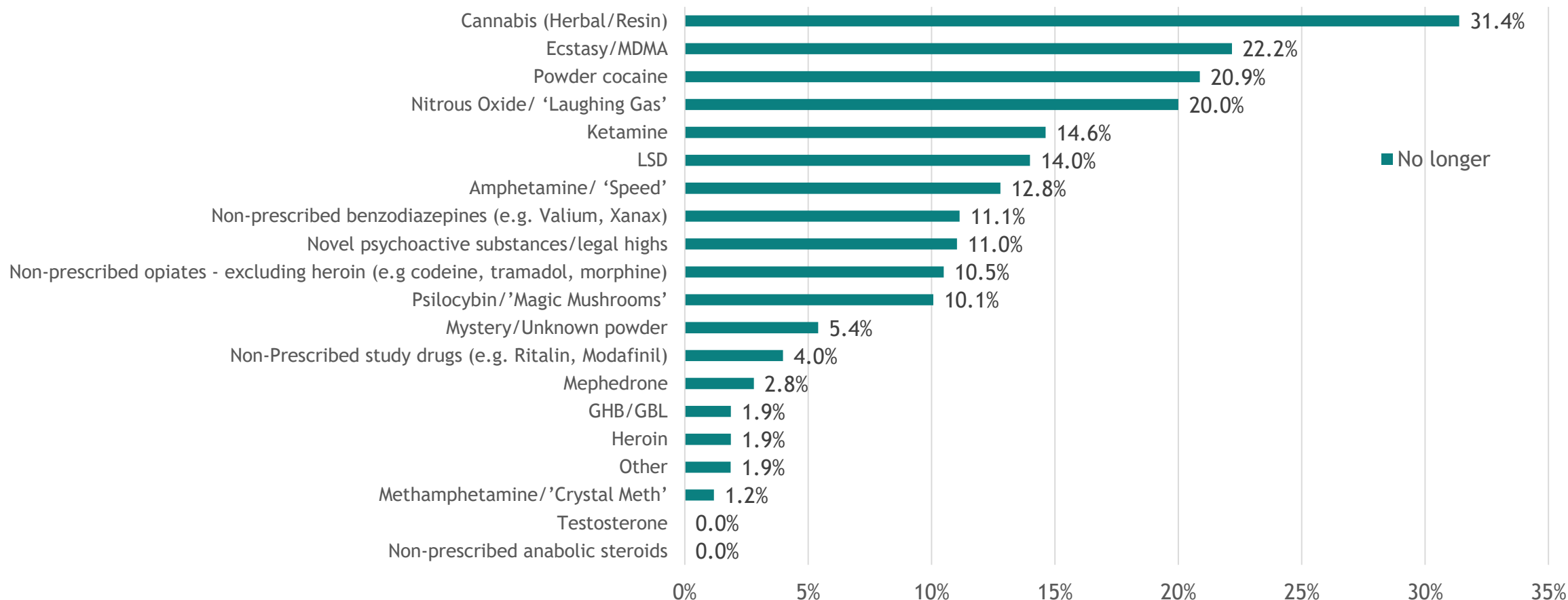
Q. Still thinking about your time at university/college, which of the following best describes your frequency of particular drug use? [Base: c.438 Balance: No response, and never have used drugs]

23% of those that currently use or have used whilst a student say they use cannabis on 'special occasions'. 17% say they use ecstasy on this basis.



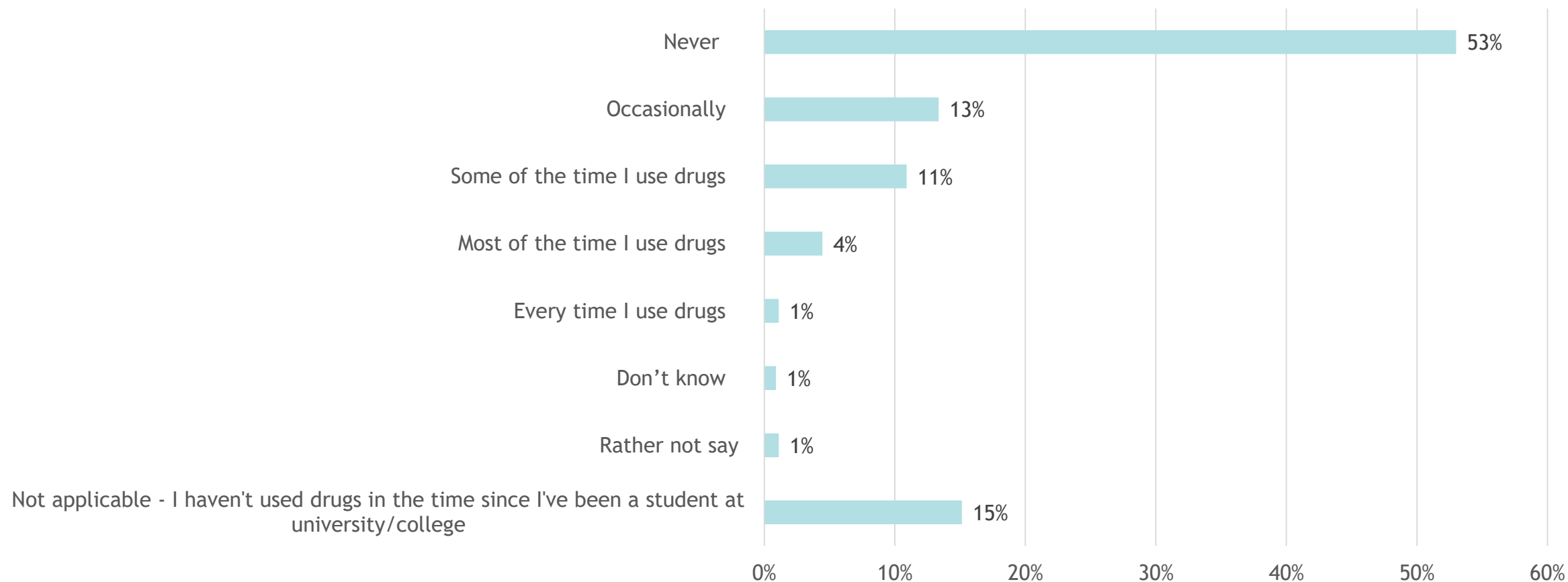
Q. Still thinking about your time at university/college, which of the following best describes your frequency of particular drug use? [Base: c.438 Balance: No response, and never have used drugs]

31% of respondents who said they currently use, or have used drugs in the past whilst they were students say they have used cannabis in the past but no longer do. 22% say this about ecstasy.



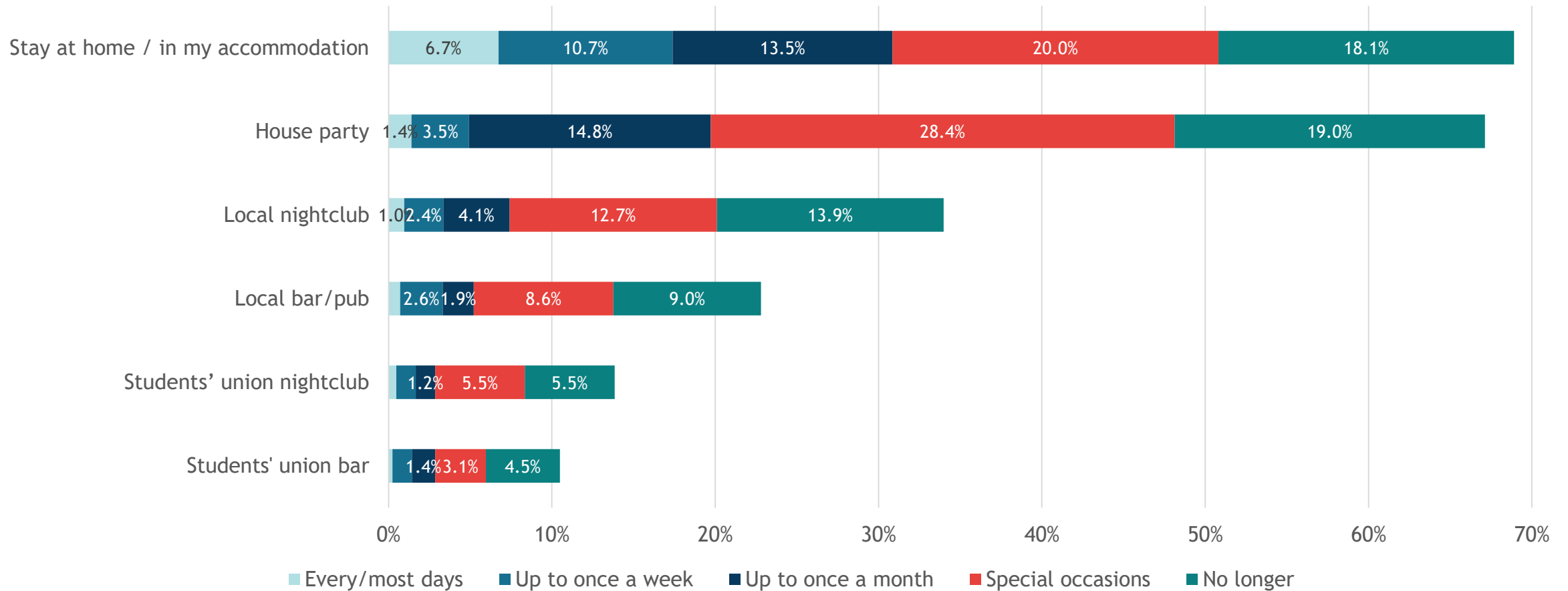
Q. Still thinking about your time at university/college, which of the following best describes your frequency of particular drug use? [Base: c.438 Balance: No response, and never have used drugs]

Half (53%) of respondents who currently use or have used drugs whilst a student say they have never used two or more drugs at the same time. 13% of these respondents use two or more drugs occasionally.



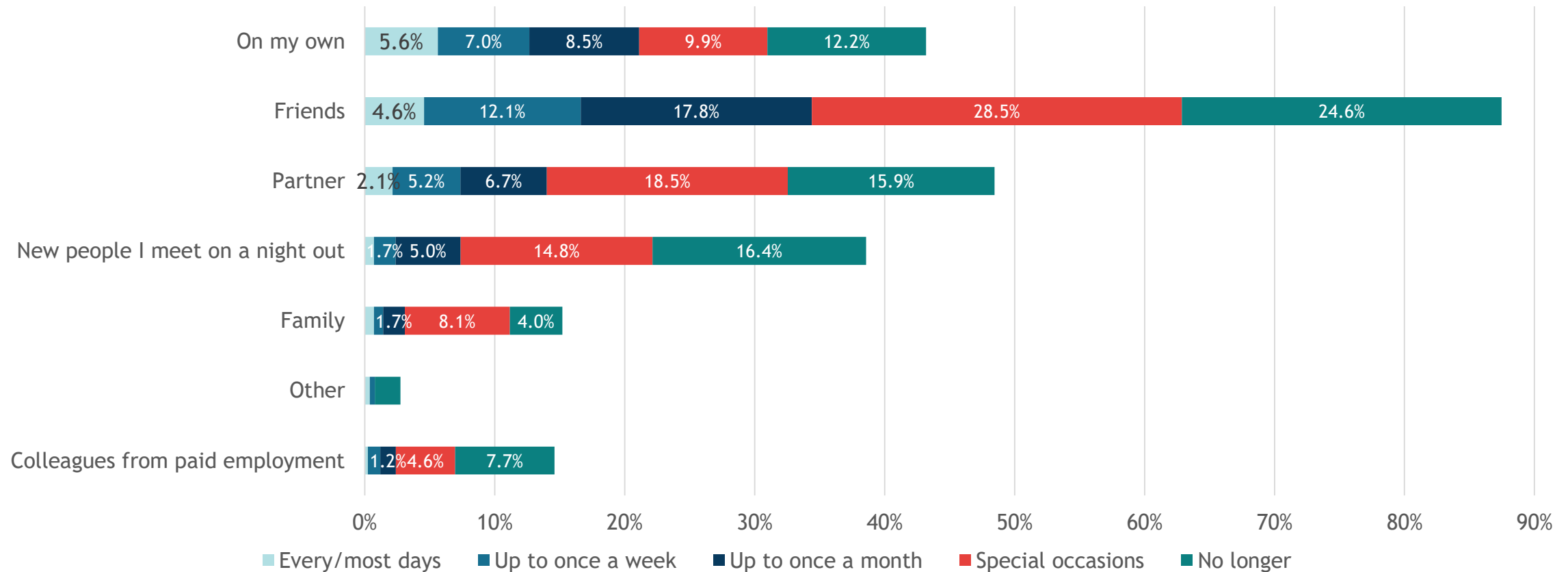
Q. Thinking about your time at university, approximately how often, if at all, do you use two or more drugs at one time? [Base: 449 Balance: No response and never have used drugs]

Drug use is most prevalent in respondents' homes or accommodation with 31% of respondents saying they use drugs here up to once a month or more often. 20% of respondents say they use drugs up to once a month or more often at house parties.



Q. Thinking of the time since you have been at university, approximately how often do you tend to take drugs in each of the following places? [Base: c.430 Balance: No response and never have used drugs]

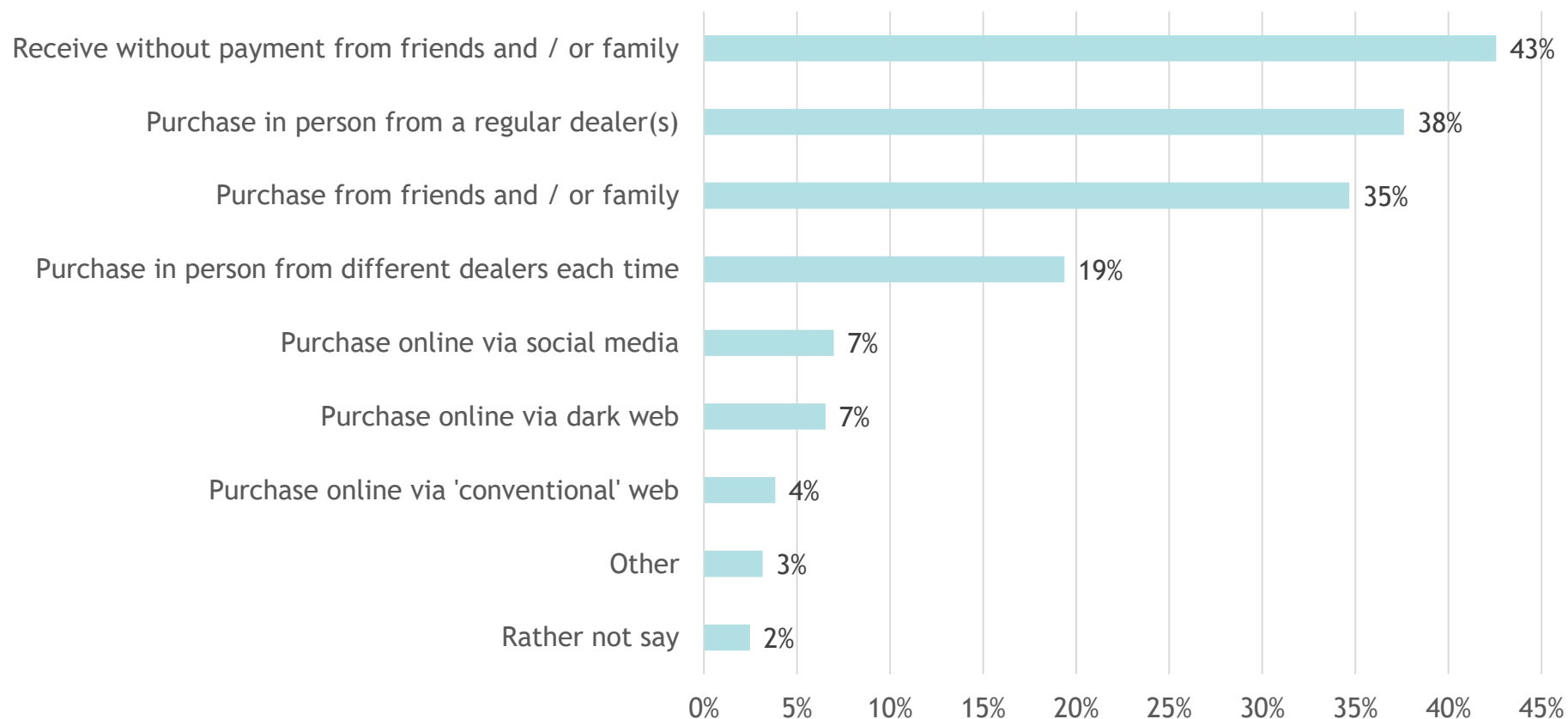
Respondents most commonly report taking drugs with friends on special occasions (29%). 6% of respondents say they take drugs on their own, every or most days.



Q. Approximately how often do you tend to take drugs with the following people? [Base: c.430 Balance: No response and never have used drugs]



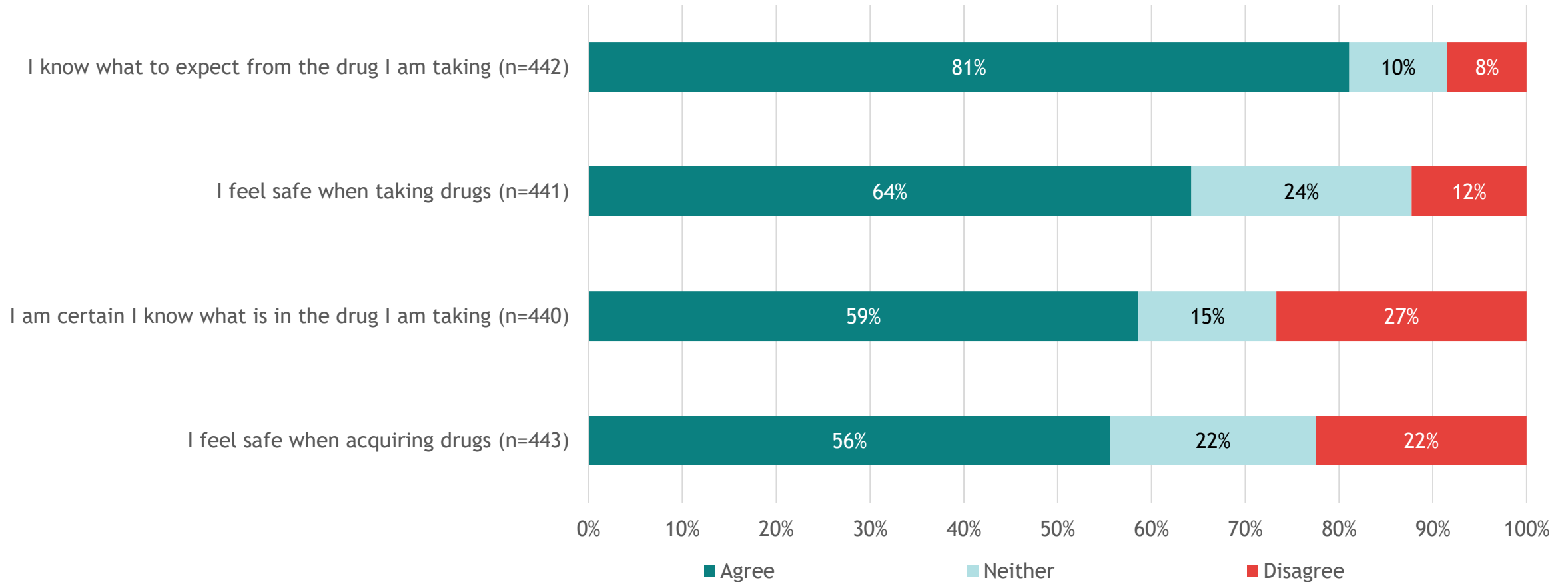
The most common method of procuring drugs is through friends/family without payment (43%), followed by in-person purchases from a regular dealer(s) (38%).



- Respondents who are international students are more likely compared to UK students to say they receive drugs without payment from friends and / or family

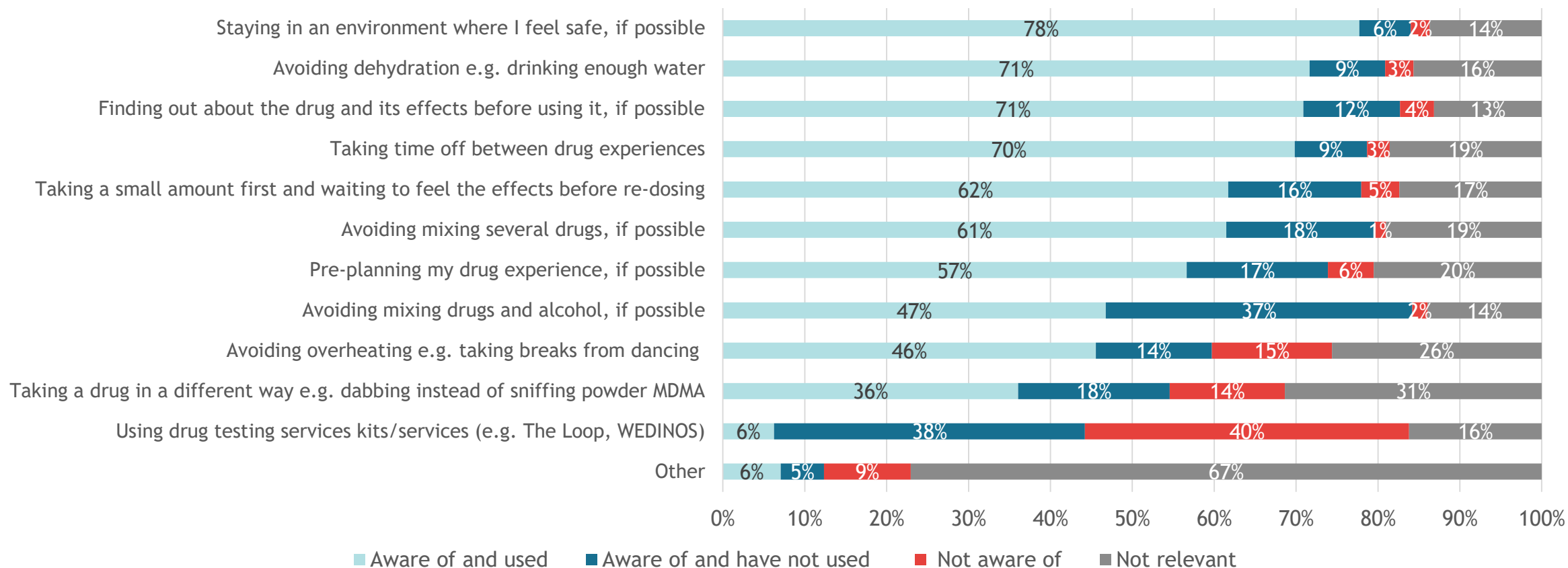
Q. Thinking of your experiences since you started university, which of the following describes where or how you acquire drugs? [Base: 444 Balance: No response and never have used drugs]

Most respondents (81%) agree they know what to expect from the drugs they take, however only 59% agree that they are certain about what is in the drugs they take. Almost two thirds (64%) say they feel safe when taking drugs.



Q. To what extent, if at all, do you agree with the following statements? [Base: in brackets Balance: No response and never have used drugs]

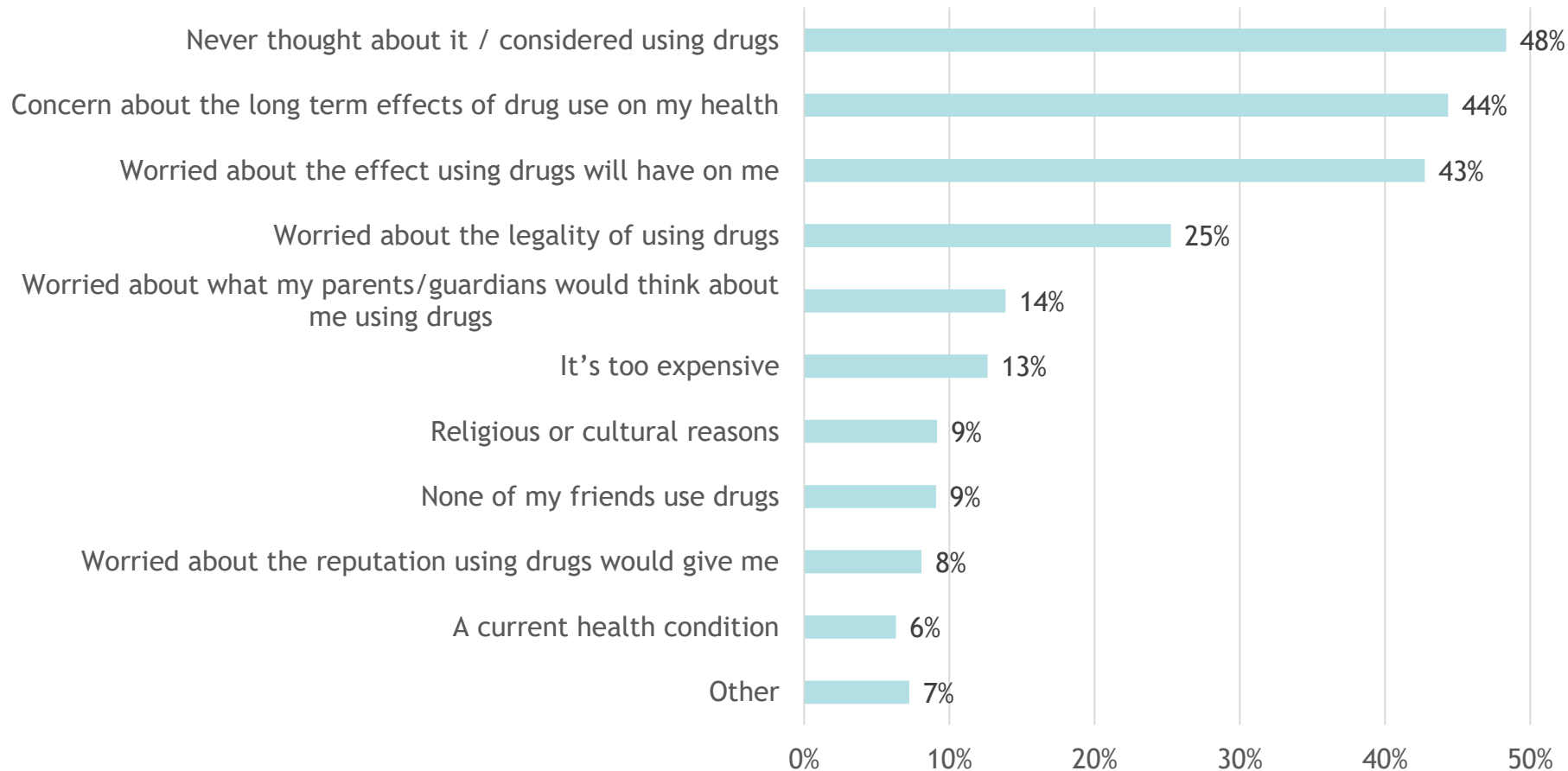
The most common approaches used by respondents to reduce harm when taking drugs include staying in a safe environment (78%), avoiding dehydration (71%) and finding out about drugs before using them (71%).



Q. Which of the following steps, if any, are you aware of/do you take to reduce the potential harm caused by taking drugs? [Base: c.434 Balance: No response and never have used drugs]

Non-drug users

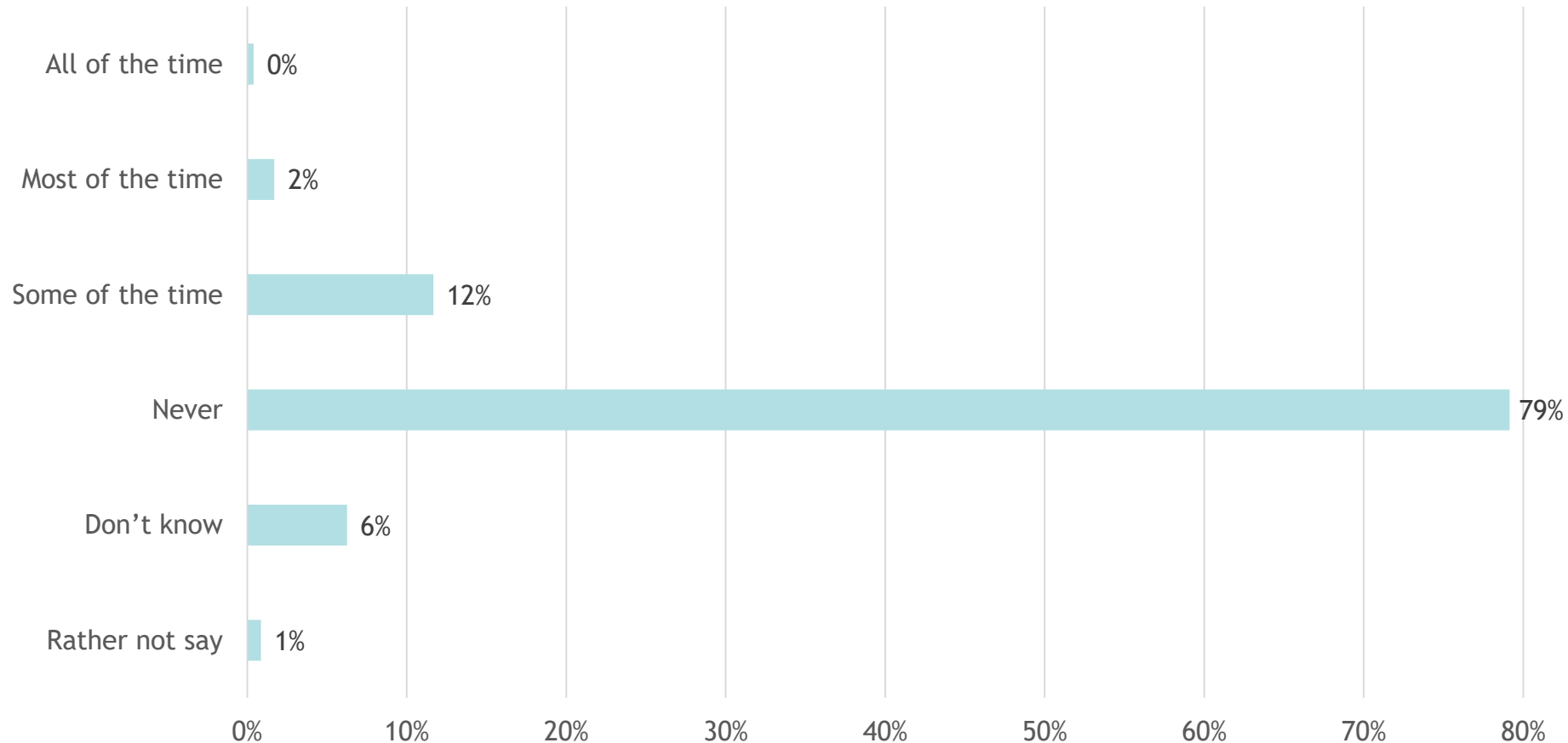
For those that don't currently and never have used drugs, almost half (48%) say it is not something they have ever thought about. 44% say they don't take drugs because of concern about health impacts.



- Younger respondents (18-22yrs) are more likely to say they don't use drugs as they're worried about what their parents/guardians would think
- Women respondents are more likely to say they are worried about the effect using drugs will have on them compared to men.
- International respondents are more likely to state that religious or cultural reasons have influenced their decision not to use drugs than UK respondents.
- Respondents who do not identify as disabled are more likely to say they have never considered taking drugs than those that do identify in this way.

[What would you say are your main reasons for not using drugs or stopping using drugs? Base: 1299 Balance: No response, and currently use drugs]

Most non-drug users (79%) say they have never felt pressure to use drugs when socialising with friends at university.

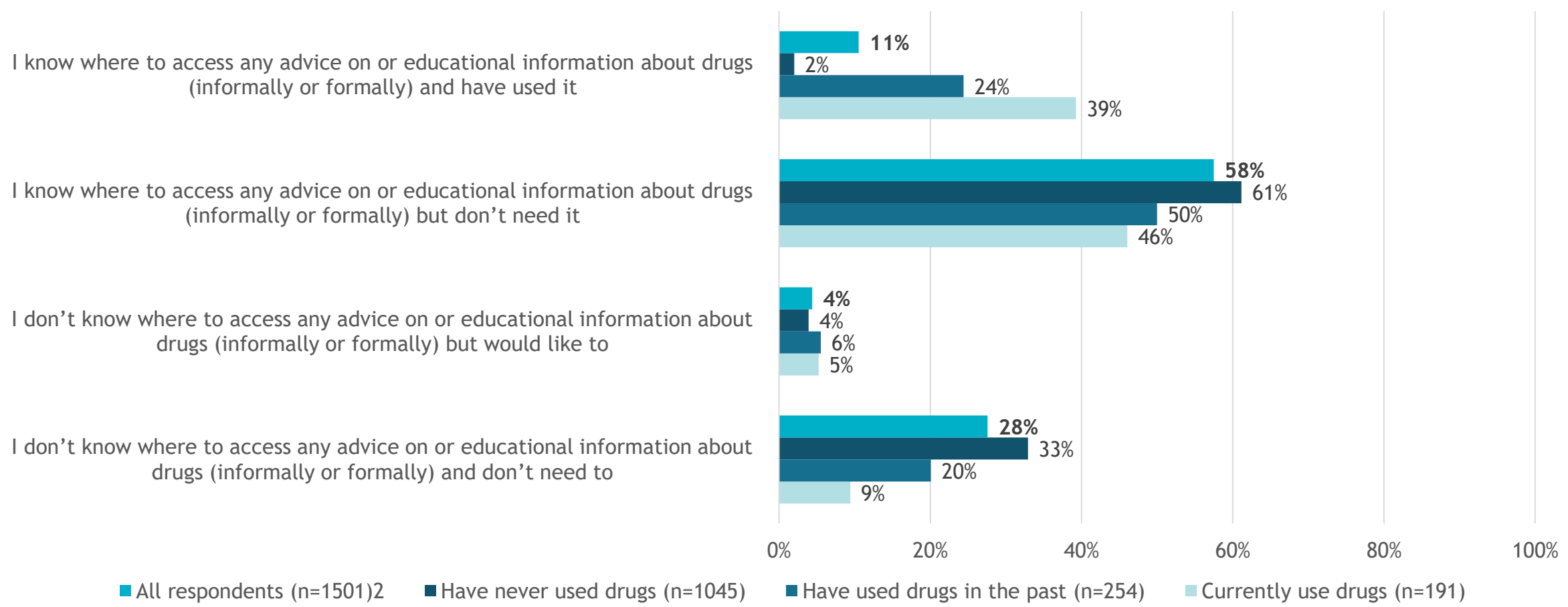


- Respondents who don't currently use drugs but who have done so in the past are more likely to say they have felt pressure most and some of the time when socialising at university compared to those who have never used drugs.
- UK respondents are more likely to say they never feel pressure to use drugs when socialising compared to international respondents.

[Q. Thinking about the most recent university term, when you were socialising with other students, how often did you feel that your friends expected you to use drugs? Base: 1295 Balance: No response / Currently use drugs]

Drug advice and support

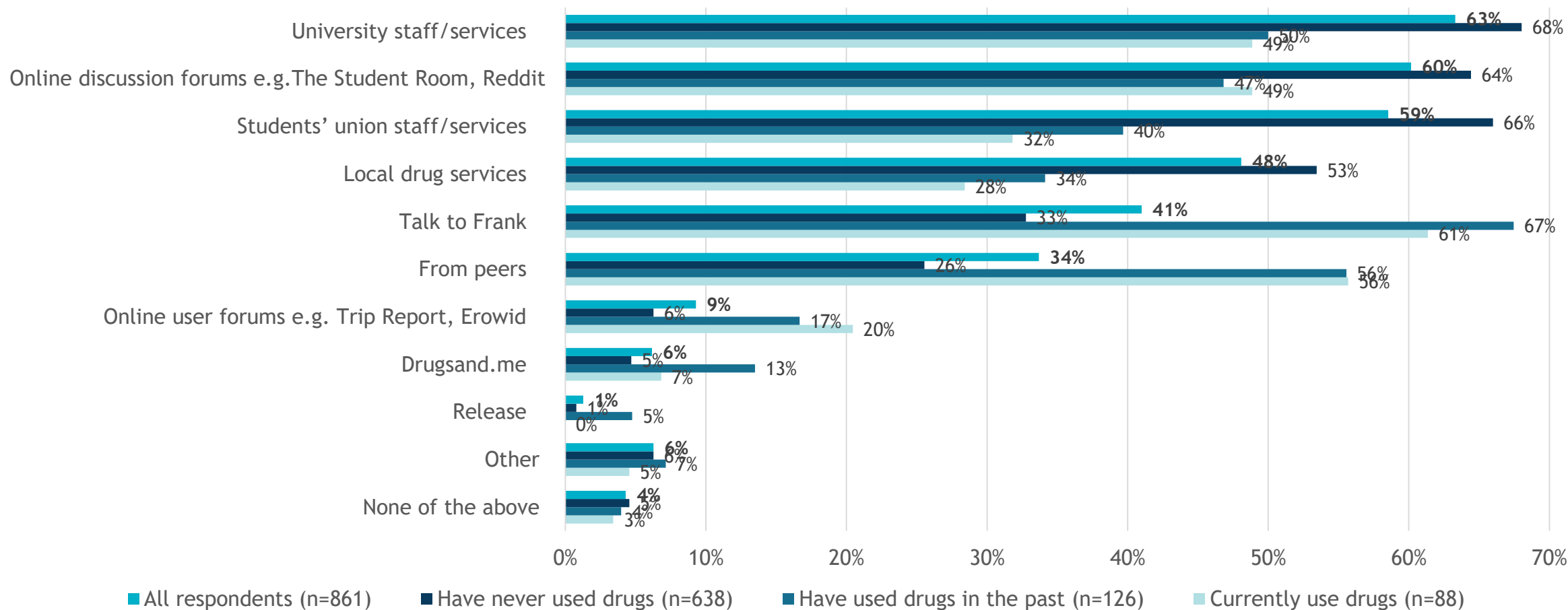
Overall, 58% of respondents say they know where to access advice and educational information about drugs, either formally or informally, but don't need it. 4% would like advice or information but don't know how to access it.



Q. Which of the following statements best describes your access to advice on drugs? Base: 1501 Balance: No response]

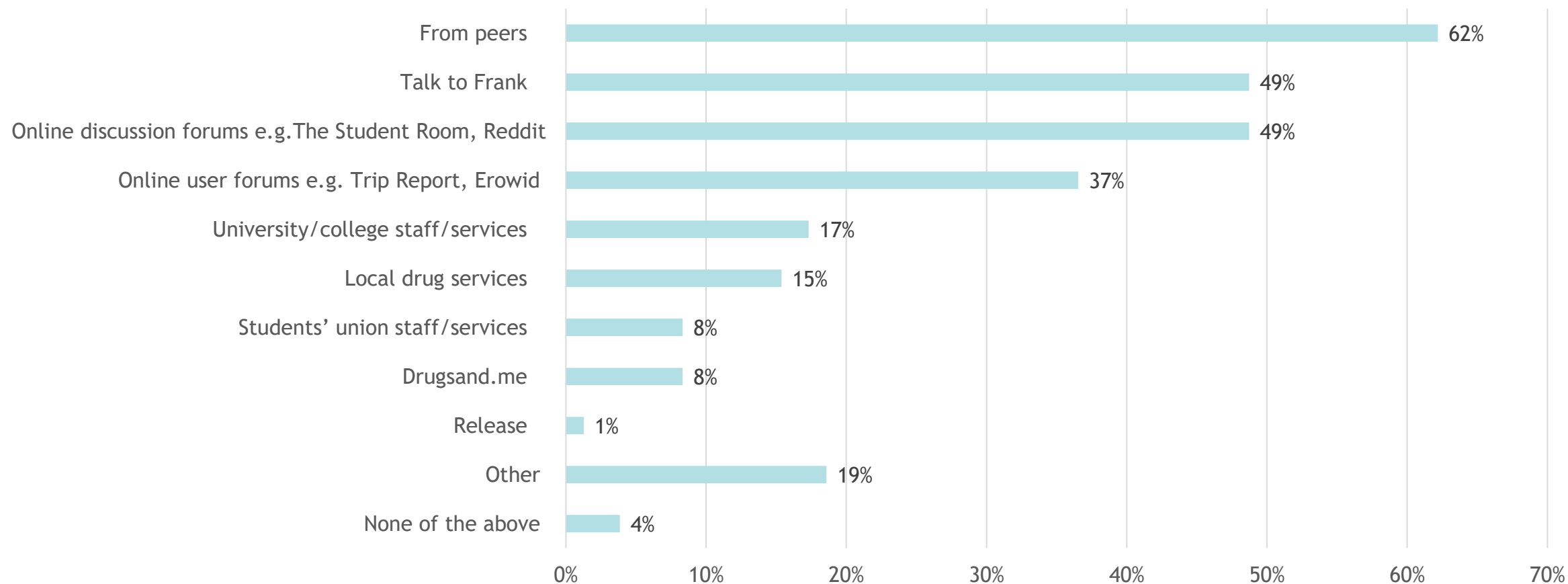


For those that are aware of advice and information but have not used it, university staff / services have high levels of awareness with 63% of respondents aware of this option. Online discussion forums also have high levels of recognition (60%).



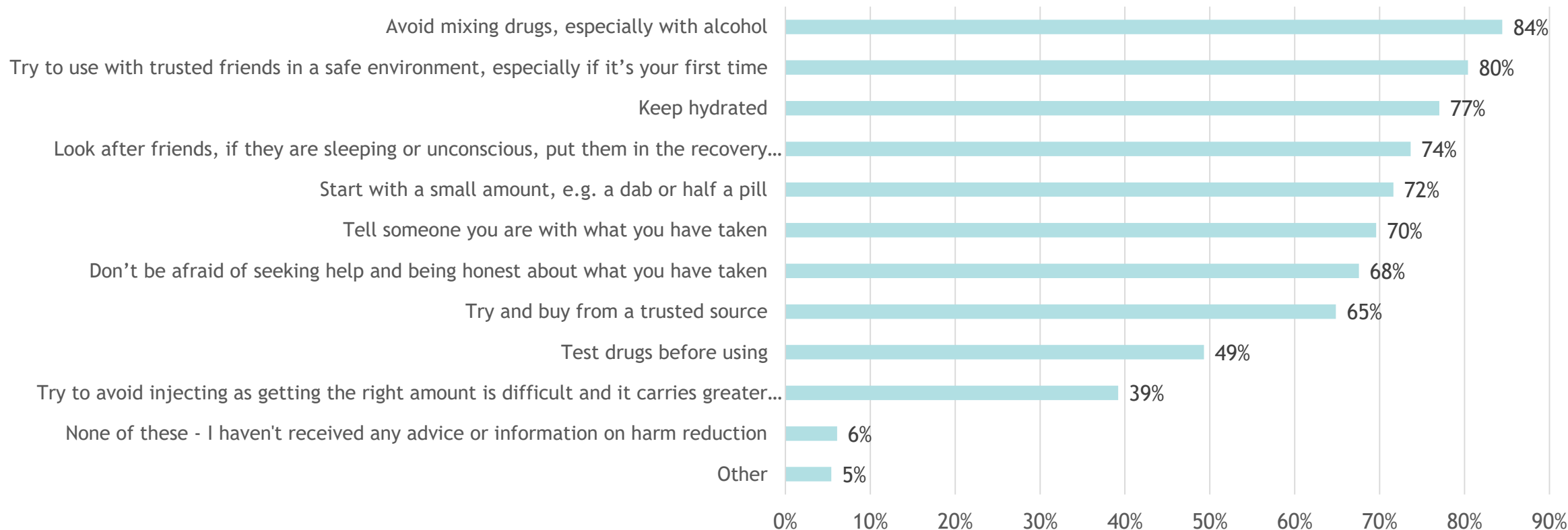
[Q. Which of the following sources of advice and information about drugs have you heard of? Base: In brackets Balance: No response, and used drug advice and information or not aware of drug advice and information]

Respondents who have accessed drug advice and information most commonly report their peers as the source (62%). 49% also say they have used the Talk to Frank service, or online discussion forums.



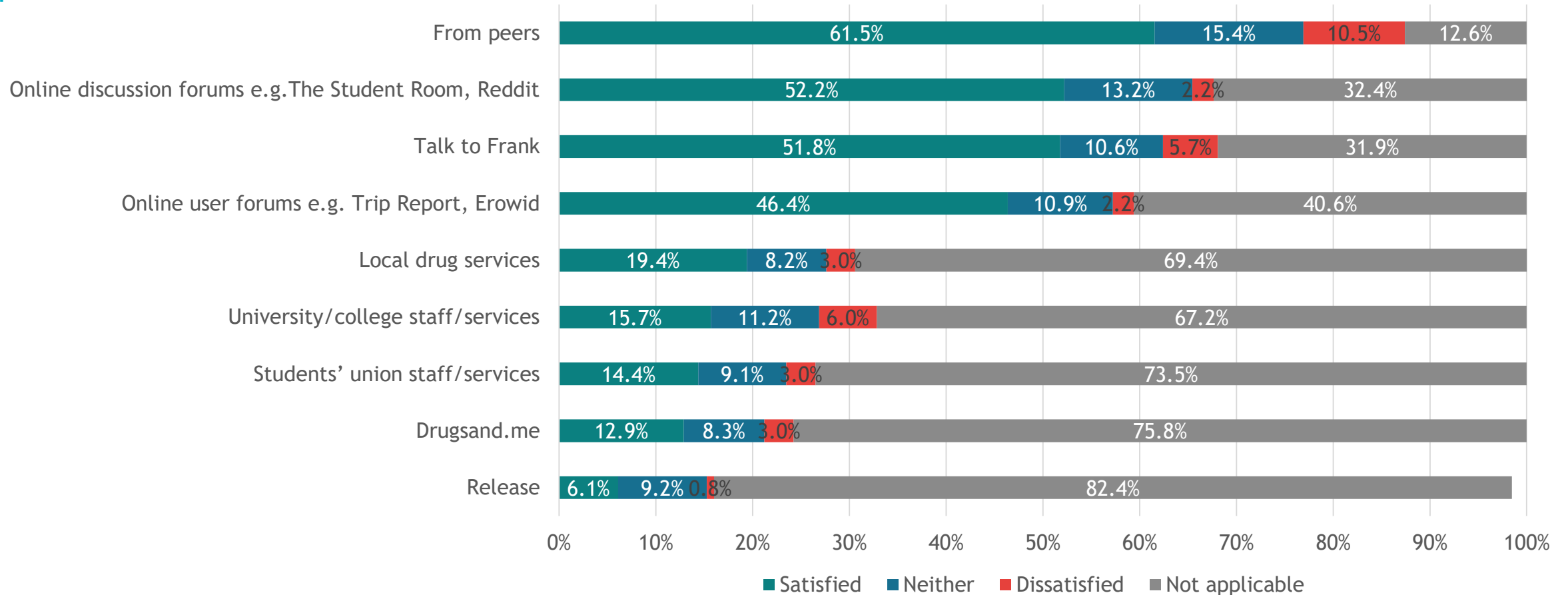
[Q. Which of the following best describes where you access drug advice and information? 156 Balance: No response, and not aware of or not used drug advice and information]

When thinking about the advice and information received, respondents who have accessed this say harm reduction strategies covered include avoiding mixing drugs, especially with alcohol (84%) and taking drugs in a safe environment with trusted friends is also common with (80%).



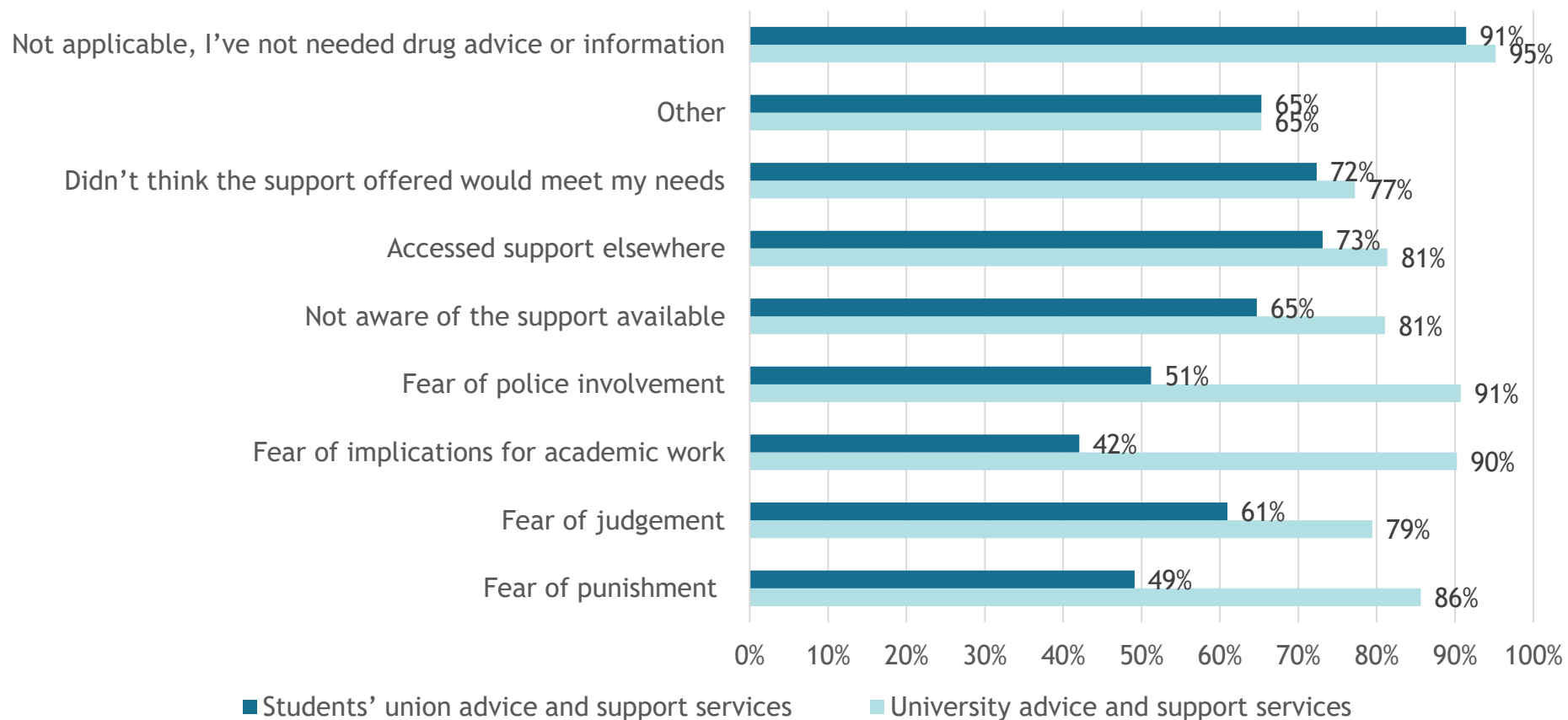
[Q. Harm reduction is a set of practical strategies aimed at trying to reduce the harm that people do to themselves or others from their drug use. Thinking about your experiences of accessing drug advice and information, did it include any of the following harm reduction actions? Base: 1295 Balance: No response / Not accessed drug advice or information]

Respondents that have accessed drug advice and information, when considering formal services, around half are satisfied with their experience e.g. 52% who accessed Talk to Frank are satisfied. Satisfaction rates are lower when considering university and students' union provision.



[Q. How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the standard of advice or information provided? Base: c.140 Balance: No response, and not aware of or not used drug advice and information]

Reasons given by respondents who had accessed drug advice and information but not those offered by their place of study include not needing advice and information, or not thinking the support would meet their needs.

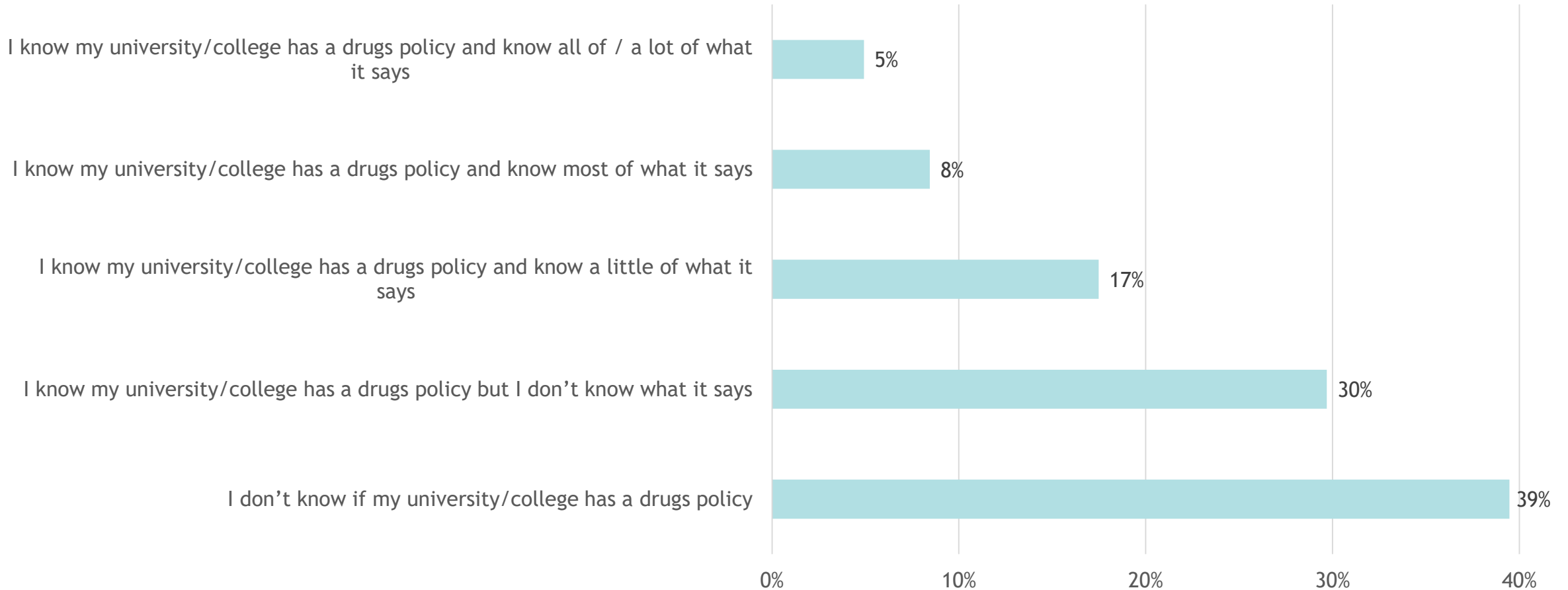


Other reasons given include finding sufficient support elsewhere, or finding adequate advice elsewhere.

Q. You said you have used drug information and advice services but not those offered by your university or students' union. Which of the following reasons best describes why you haven't used drug information and advice services offered by your university or students' union? [Base: Balance: No response and not accessed drug advice and information]

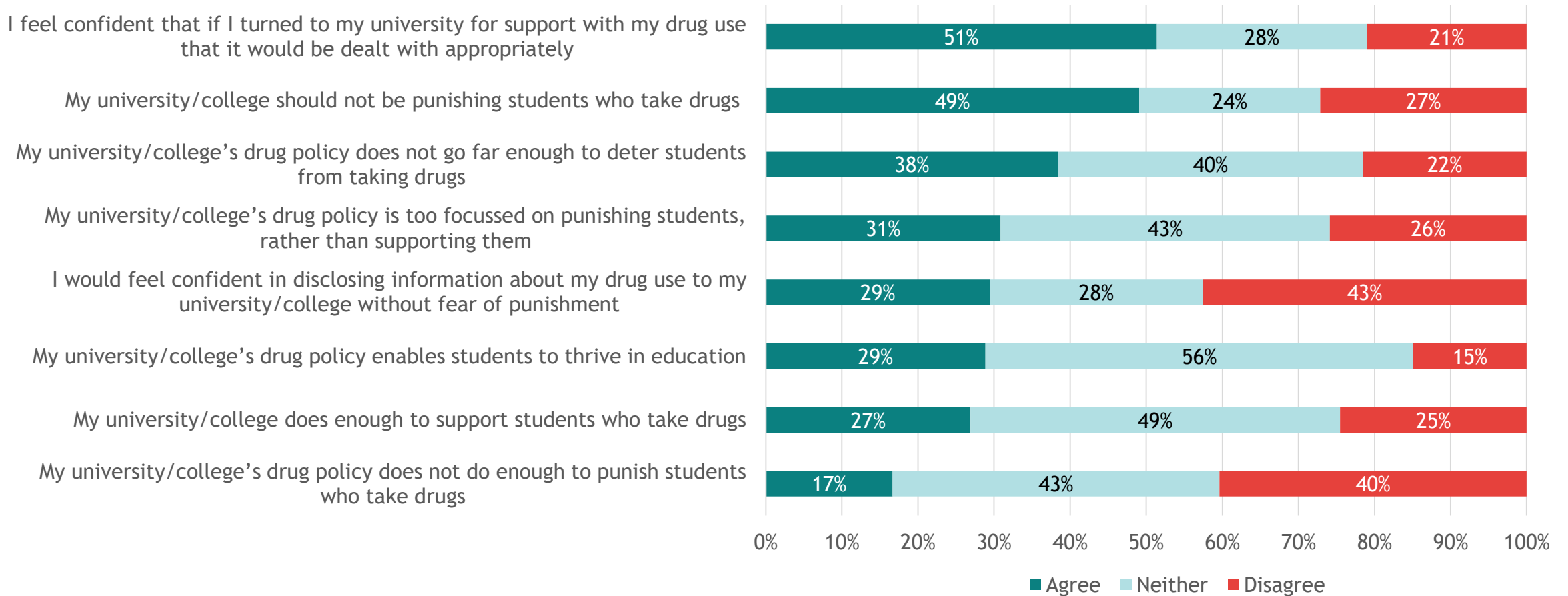
University/college drug policy

Respondents show low levels of awareness of the details of their institution's drugs policy, and 39% do not know if their institution has a drugs policy.



[Q. How much, if anything, do you know about the policy/policies your university/college has on drugs? Base: 1505 Balance: No response]

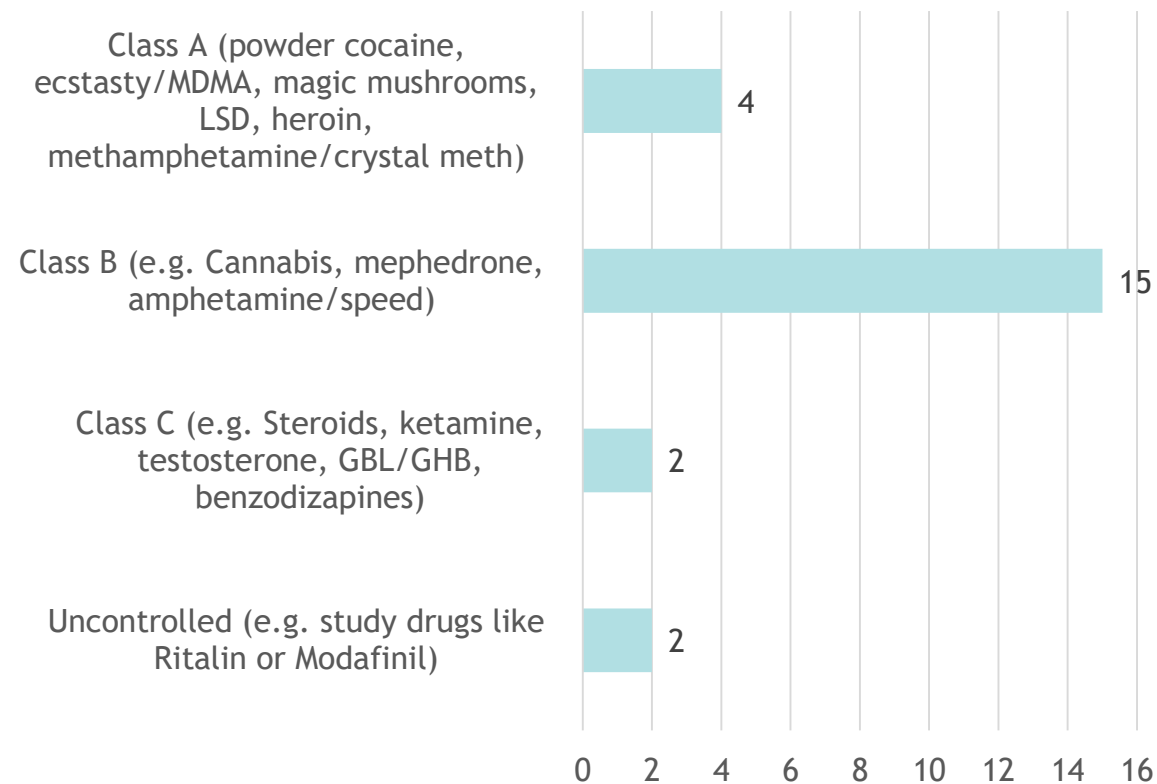
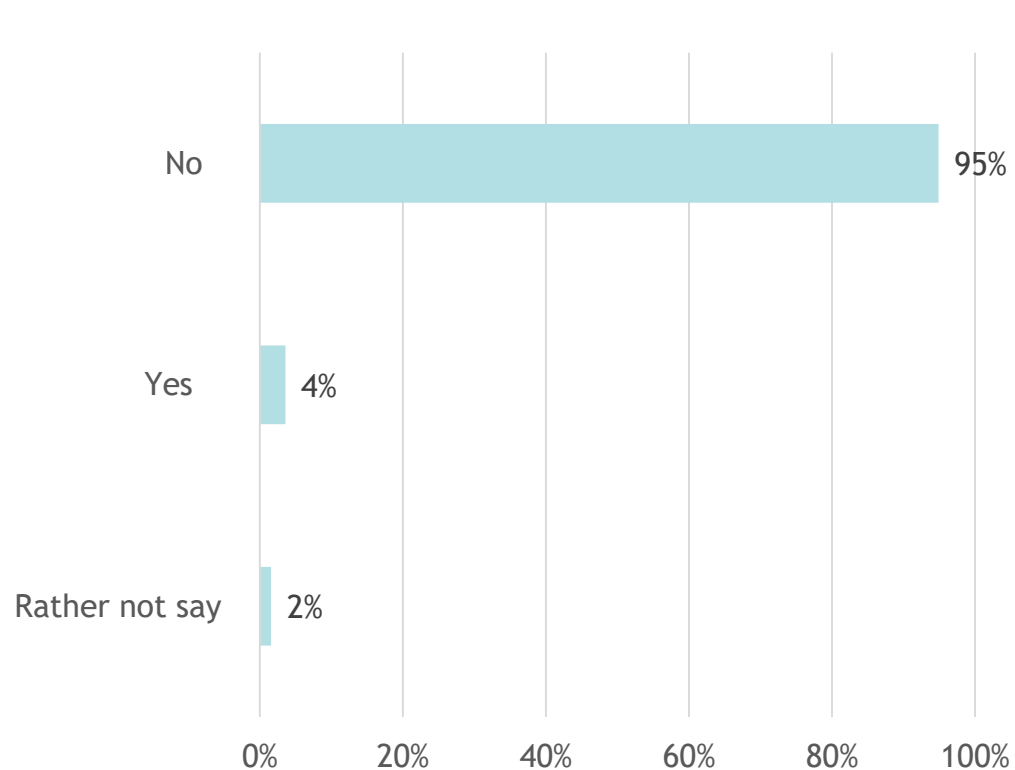
Half of respondents (51%) feel confident that their university would deal with their drug use appropriately if they required support. A similar proportion (49%) agree their institution should not be punishing students who take drugs.



Q. To what extent, if at all, do you agree with the following statements? [Base: c.1470 Balance: No response]

Impacts of drug use

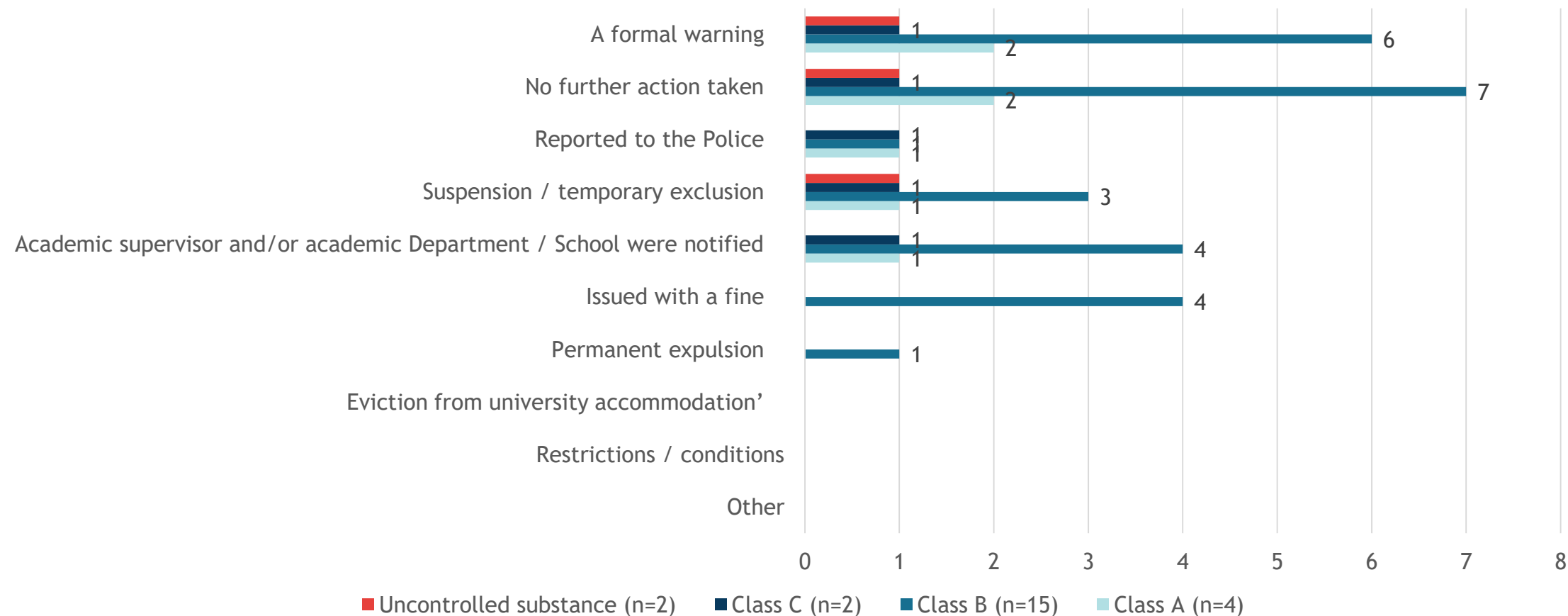
The majority of respondents who currently use or have used drugs in the past (95%) haven't been found in possession of drugs. For the small proportion (16 respondents) that have, this was most commonly a class B drug.



Q. Have you ever been found in possession of drugs whilst at your institution? [Base: 449
Balance: No response and never used drugs]

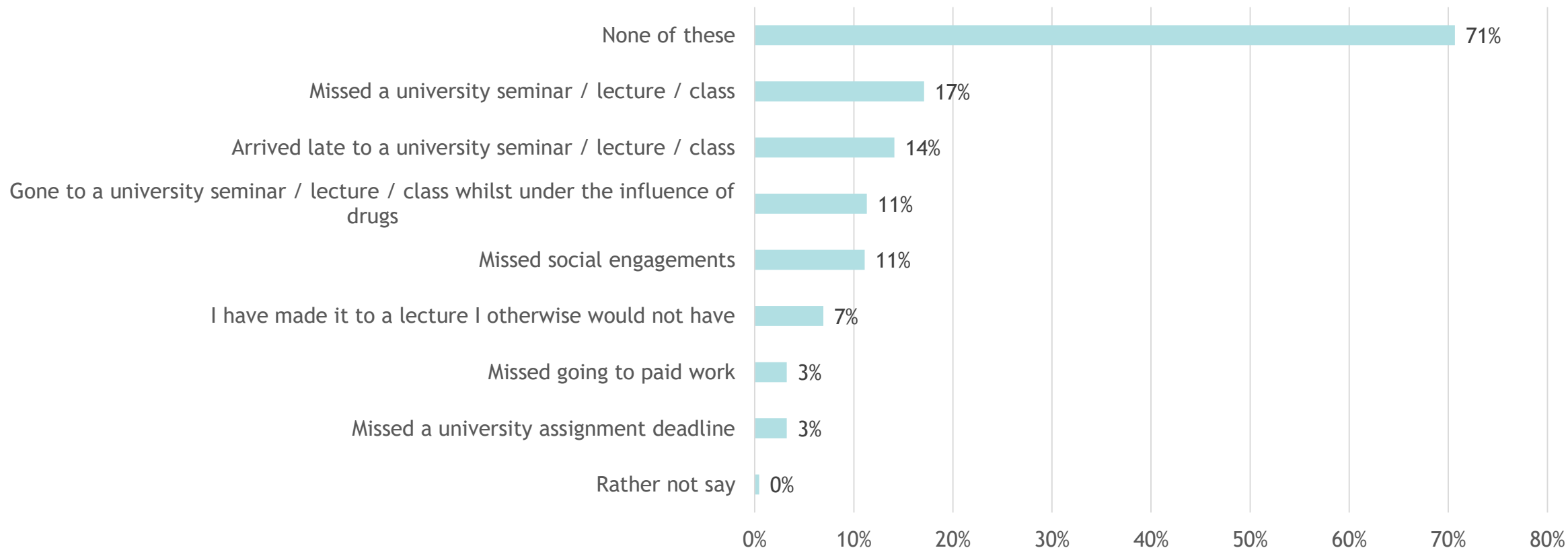
Q. What class was the drug in question? [Base: 16 Balance: No response and never used drugs]

Formal warnings or no further action are the most commonly reported course of action taken against the small number respondents who have been found in possession of drugs.



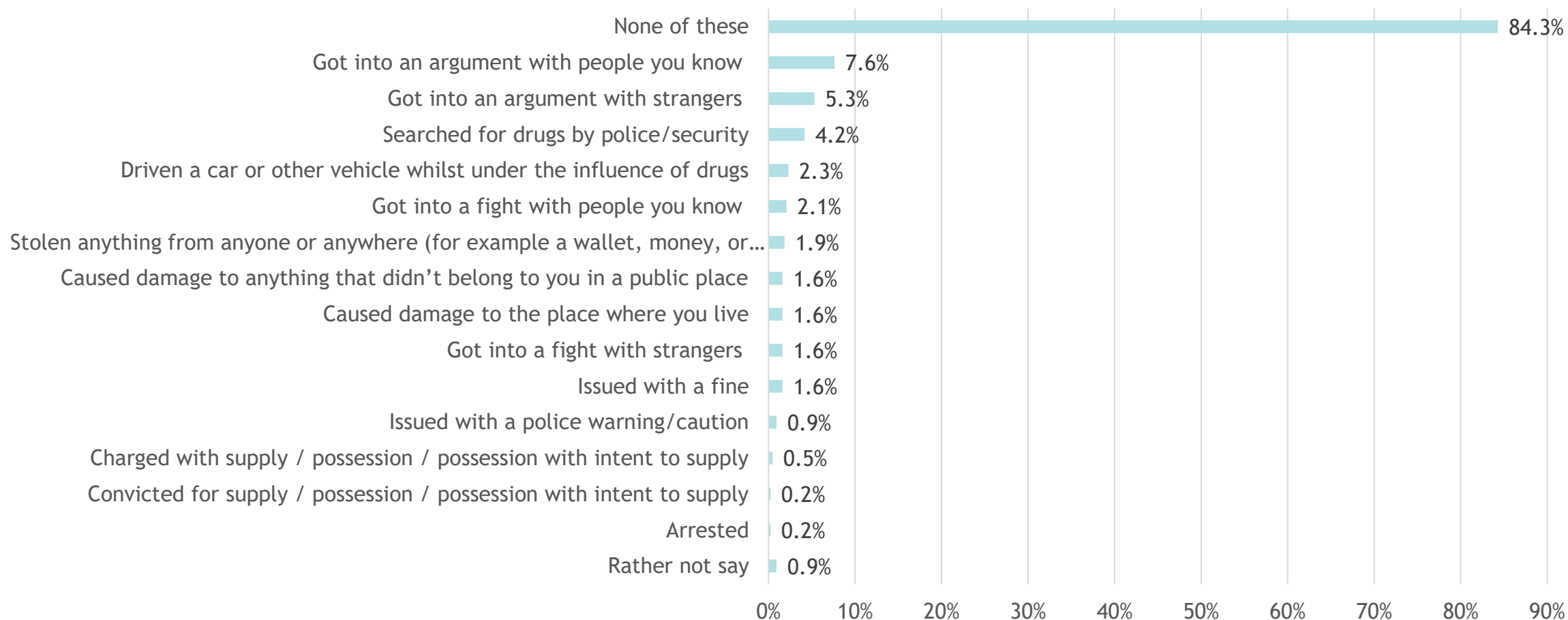
Q. Which of the following best describes the outcome you experienced when found in possession of drugs? [Base: See legend Balance: No response and not found in possession of drugs]

Amongst respondents who currently or have previously used drugs, the most commonly reported academic impacts are missing (17%) or arriving late (14%) to seminars, lectures or classes. 11% report missing social engagements and 3% report missing paid work.



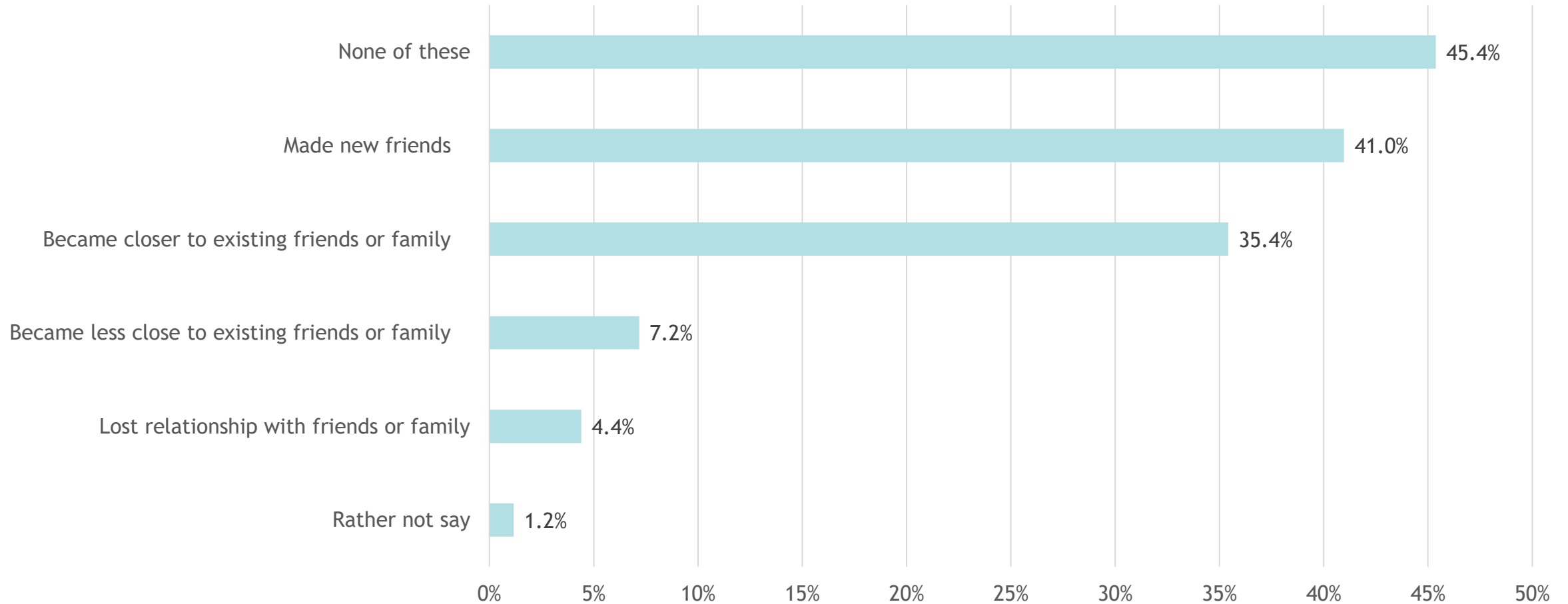
Q. Which of the following have you experienced since you have been at university / college as a result of taking drugs? [Base: 443 Balance: No response and never used drugs]

Amongst respondents who currently or have previously used drugs, getting into an argument with people they know (8%) or with strangers (5%) are the most commonly reported impacts related to crime and anti-social behaviour.



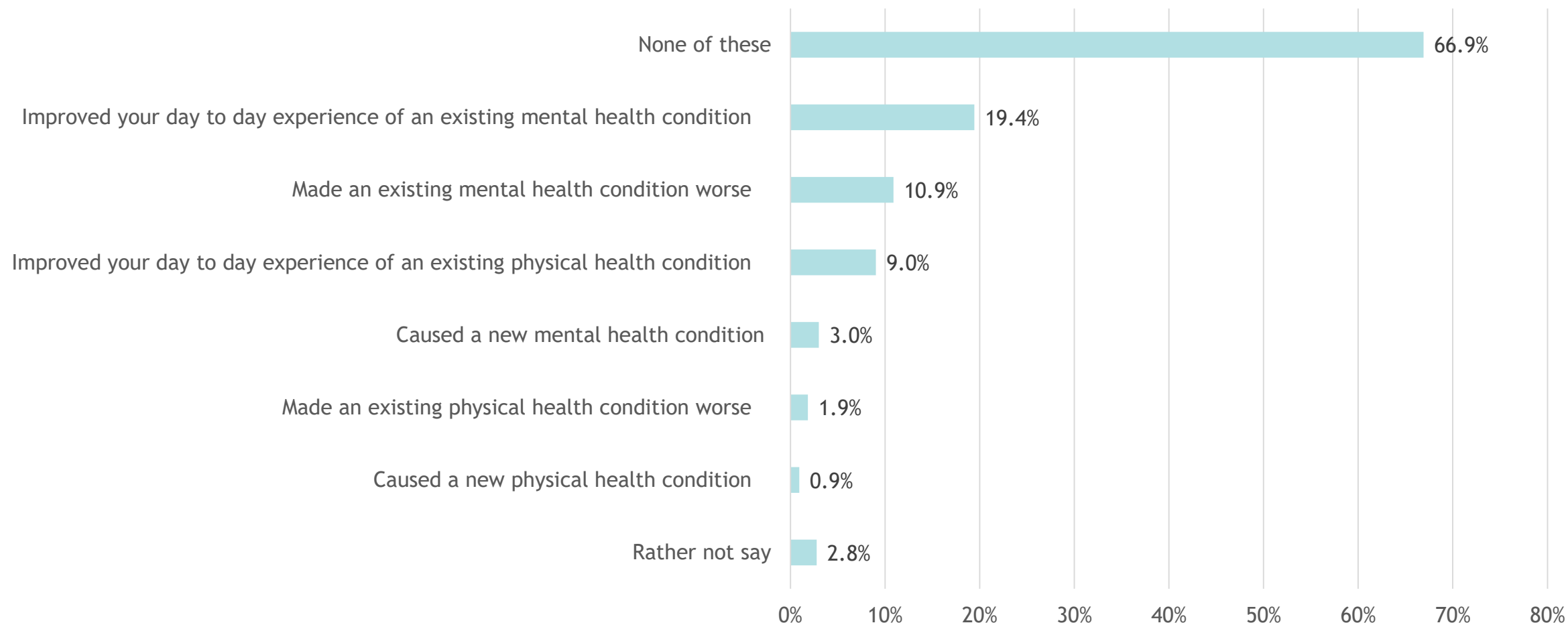
Q. Which of the following have you experienced since you have been at university / college as a result of taking drugs? [Base: 443 Balance: No response and never used drugs]

Amongst respondents who currently or have previously used drugs, 41% say this has led to making new friends or becoming closer to existing friends or family (35%).



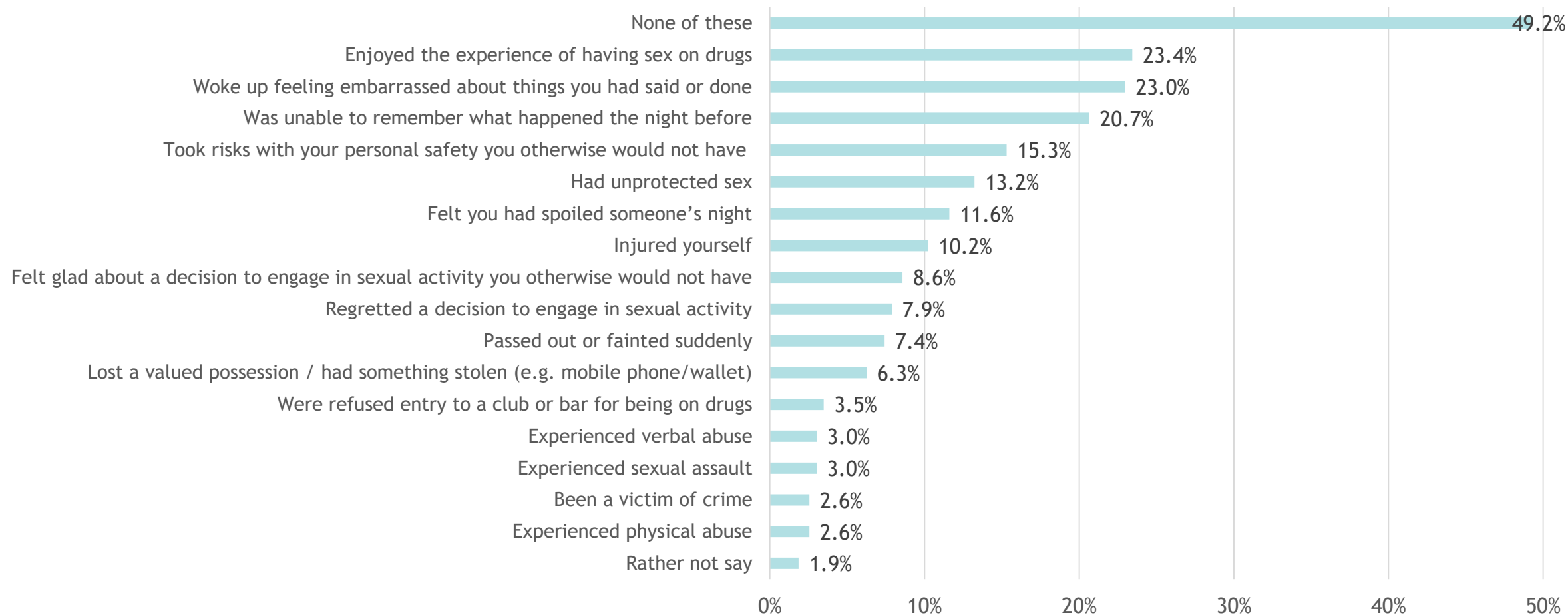
Q. Which of the following have you experienced since you have been at university / college as a result of taking drugs? [Base: 432 Balance: No response and never used drugs]

Amongst respondents who currently or have previously used drugs, 19% say this use has improved an existing mental health condition. However 11% say it has made a mental health condition worse.



Q. Which of the following have you experienced since you have been at university / college as a result of taking drugs? [Base: 432 Balance: No response and never used drugs]

Amongst respondents who currently or have previously used drugs, 23% say they have enjoyed the experience of having sex on drugs, and 23% also say they've woken up feeling embarrassed about things they've said or done whilst using drugs.

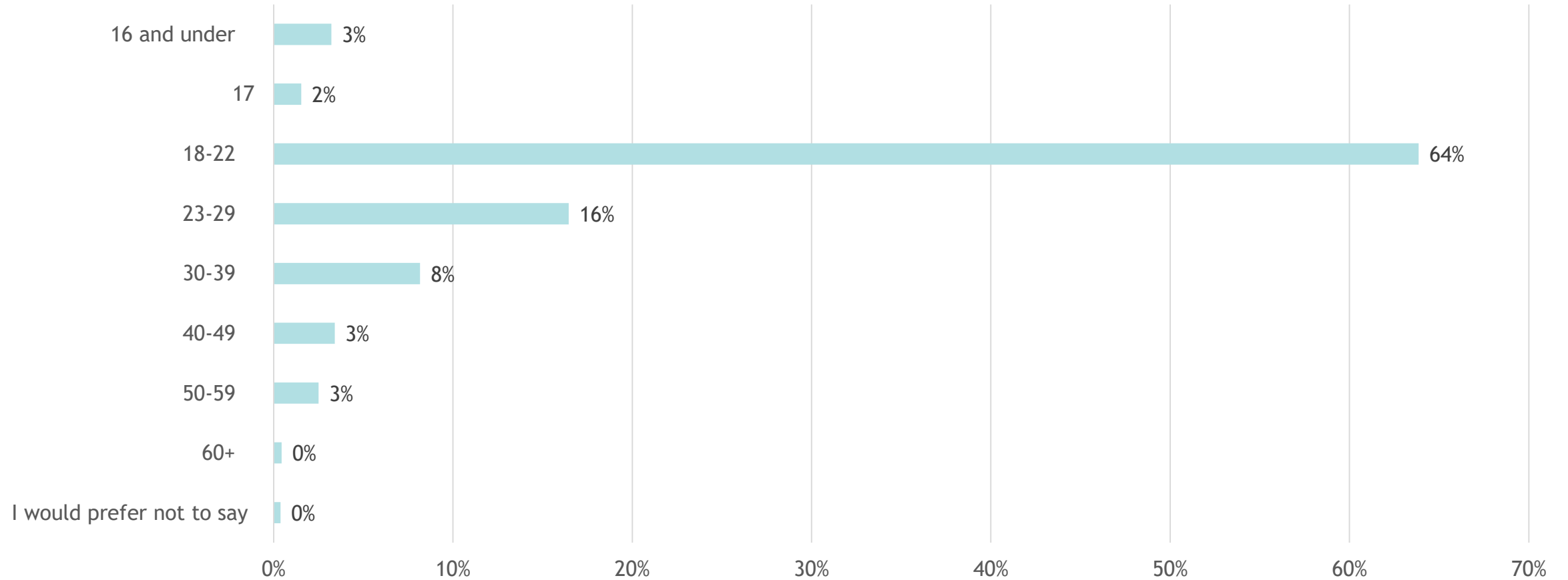


Q. Which of the following have you experienced since you have been at university / college whilst using drugs? [Base: 431 Balance: No response and never used drugs]

The respondents

The respondents

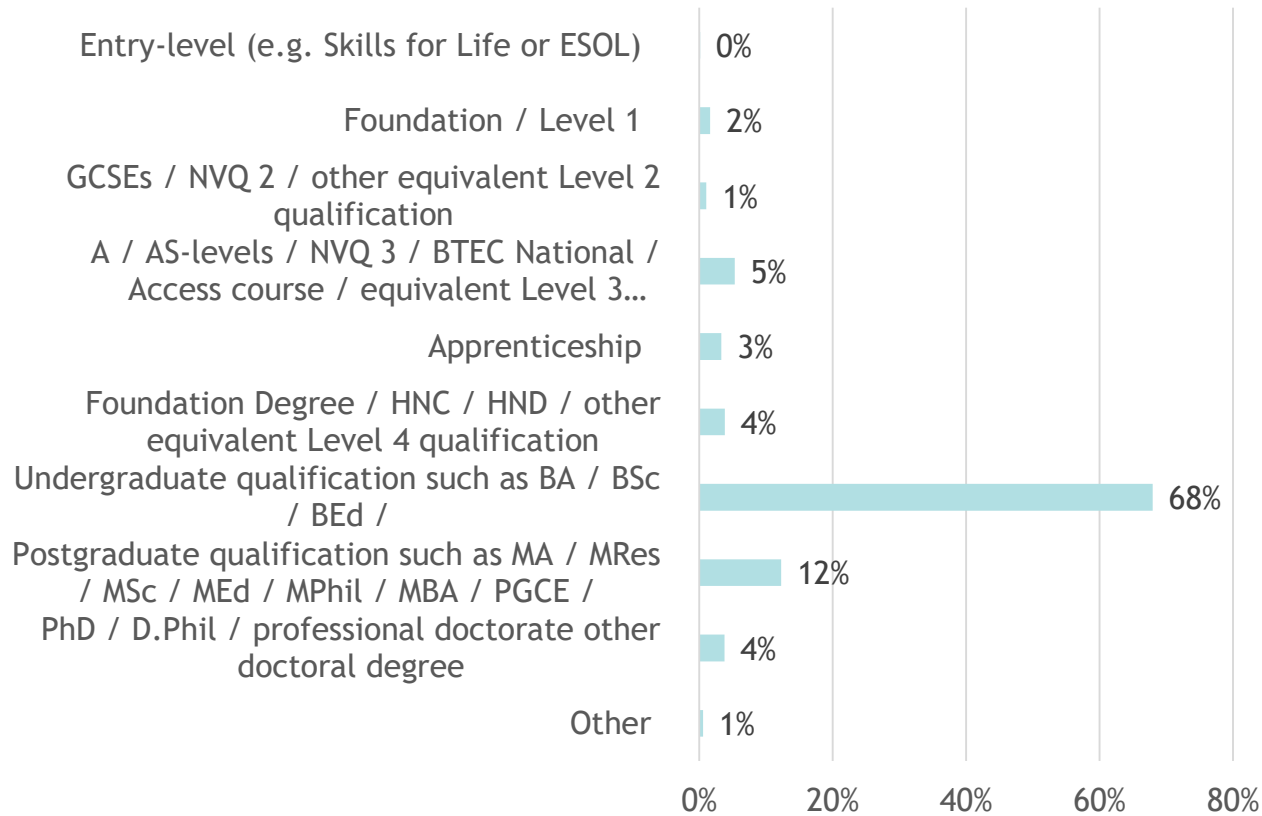
AGE



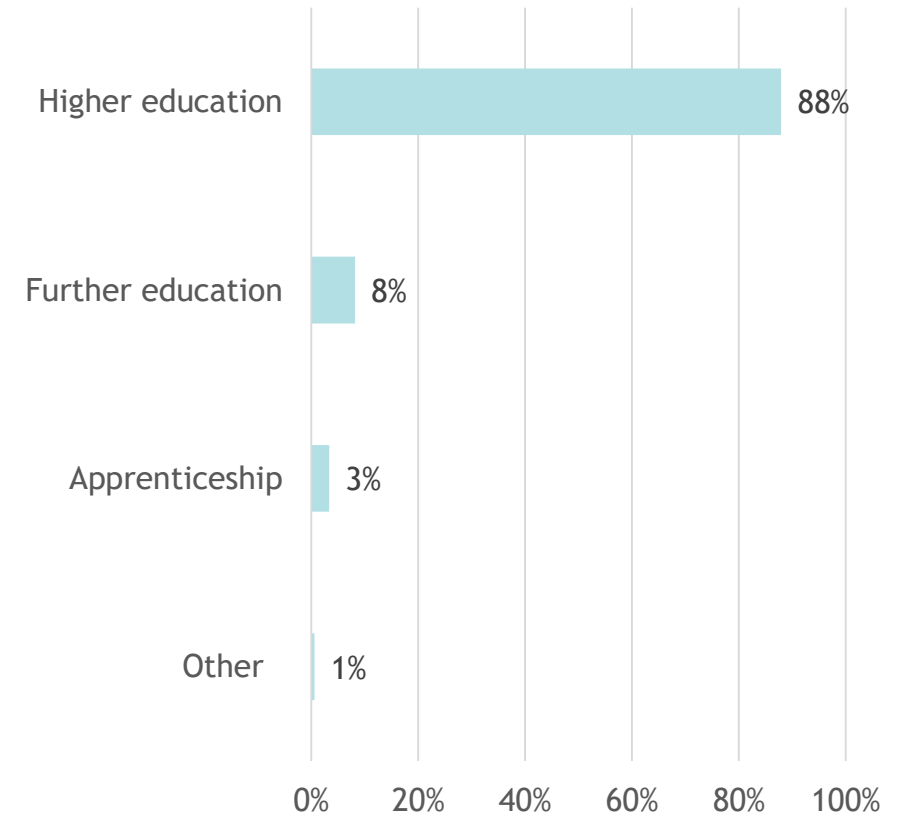
[Base: 1555 Balance: No response]

The respondents

STUDY LEVEL

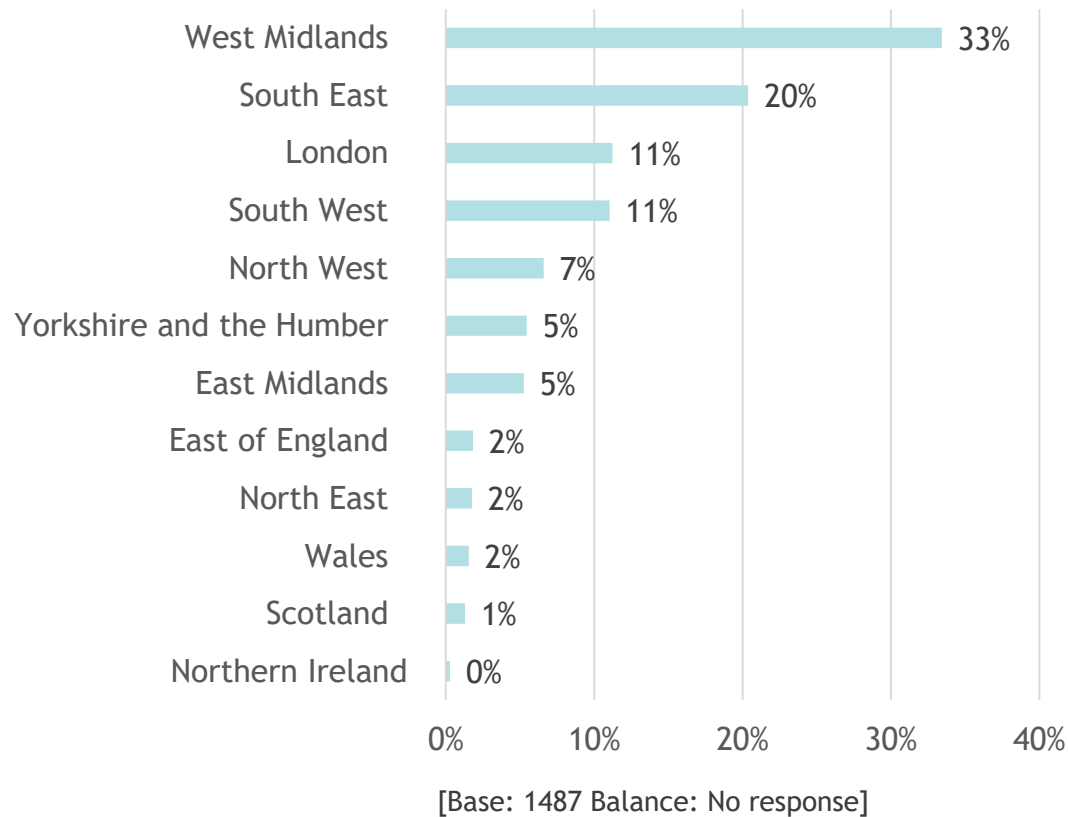


[Base: 1505 Balance: No response]

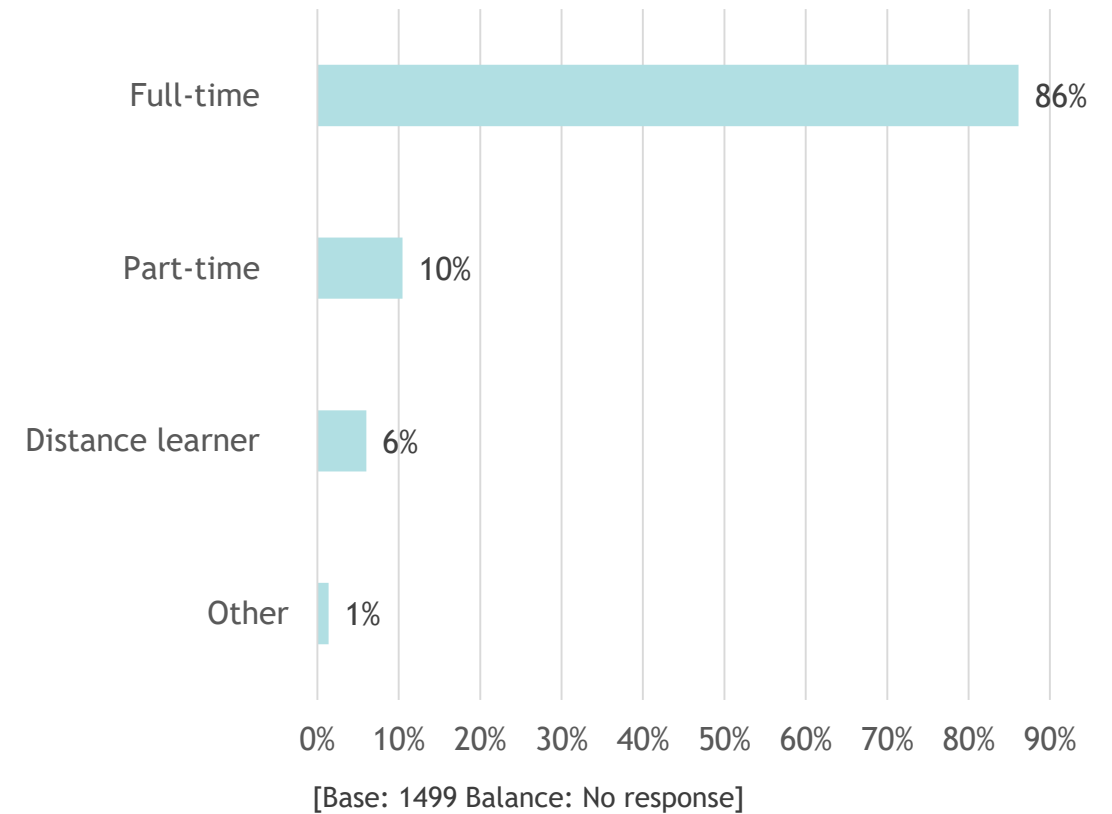


The respondents

STUDY LOCATION

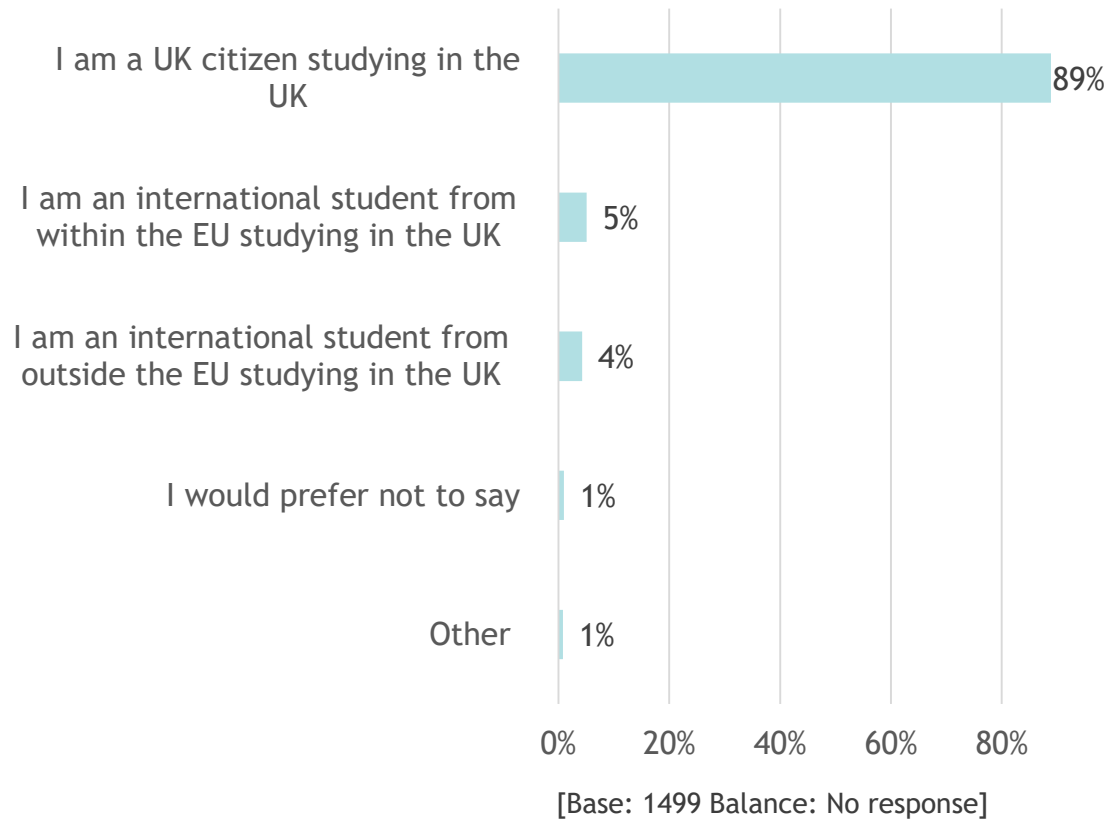


STUDY TYPE

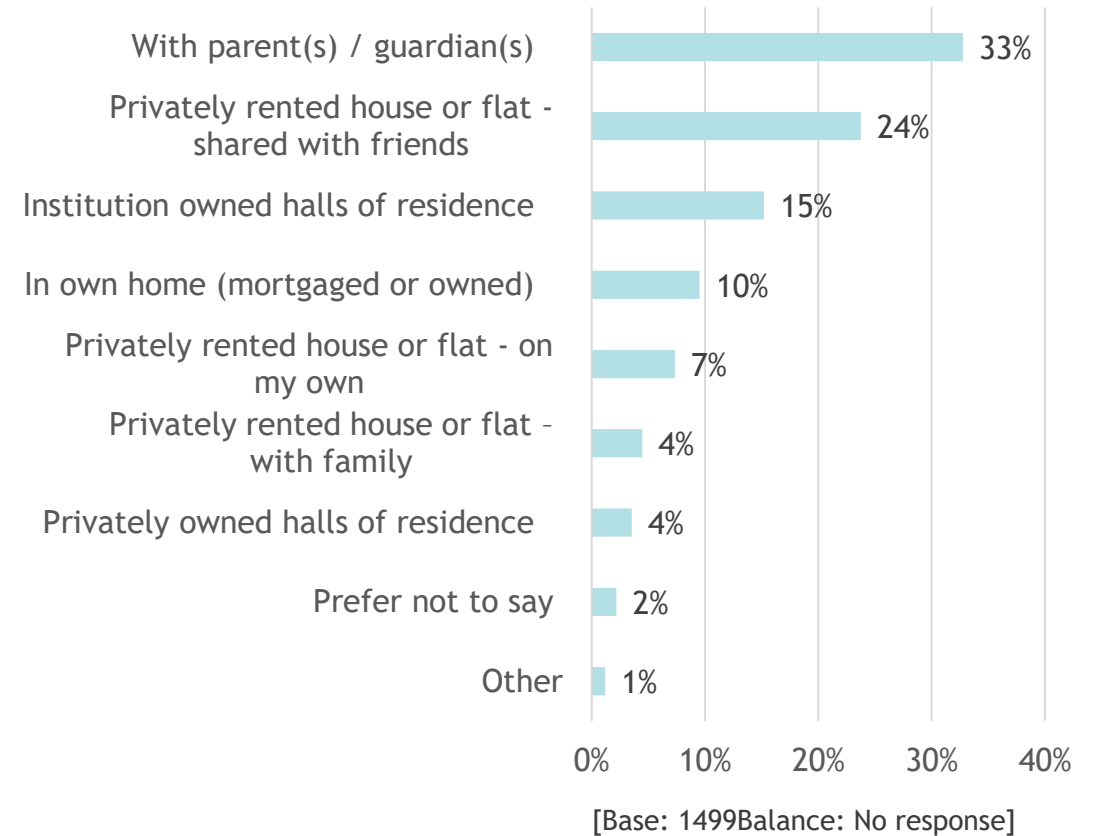


The respondents

NATIONALITY

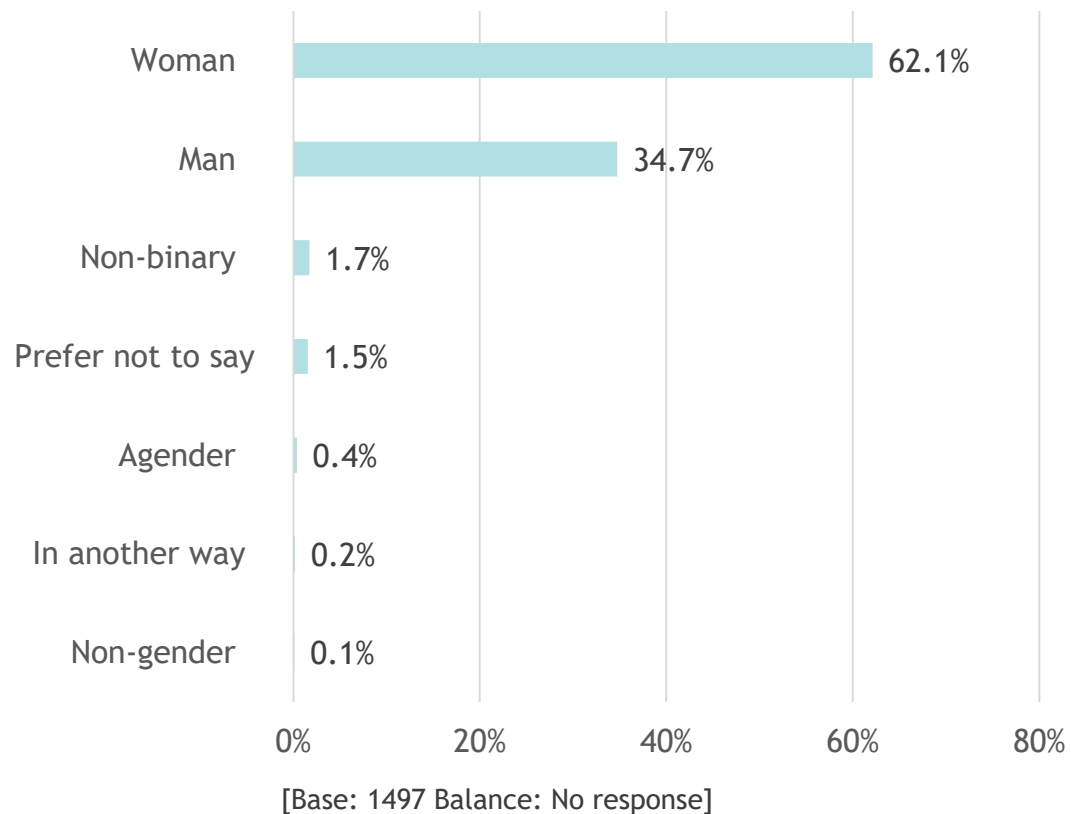


ACCOMMODATION TYPE

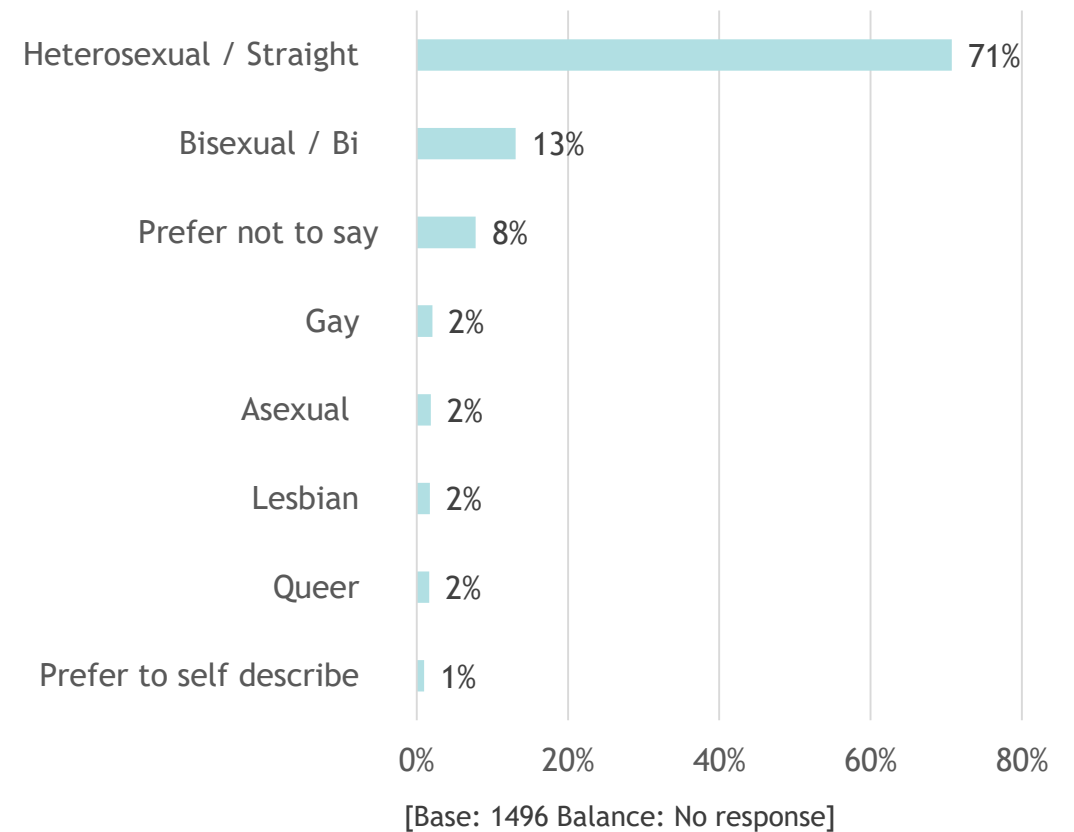


The respondents

GENDER IDENTITY

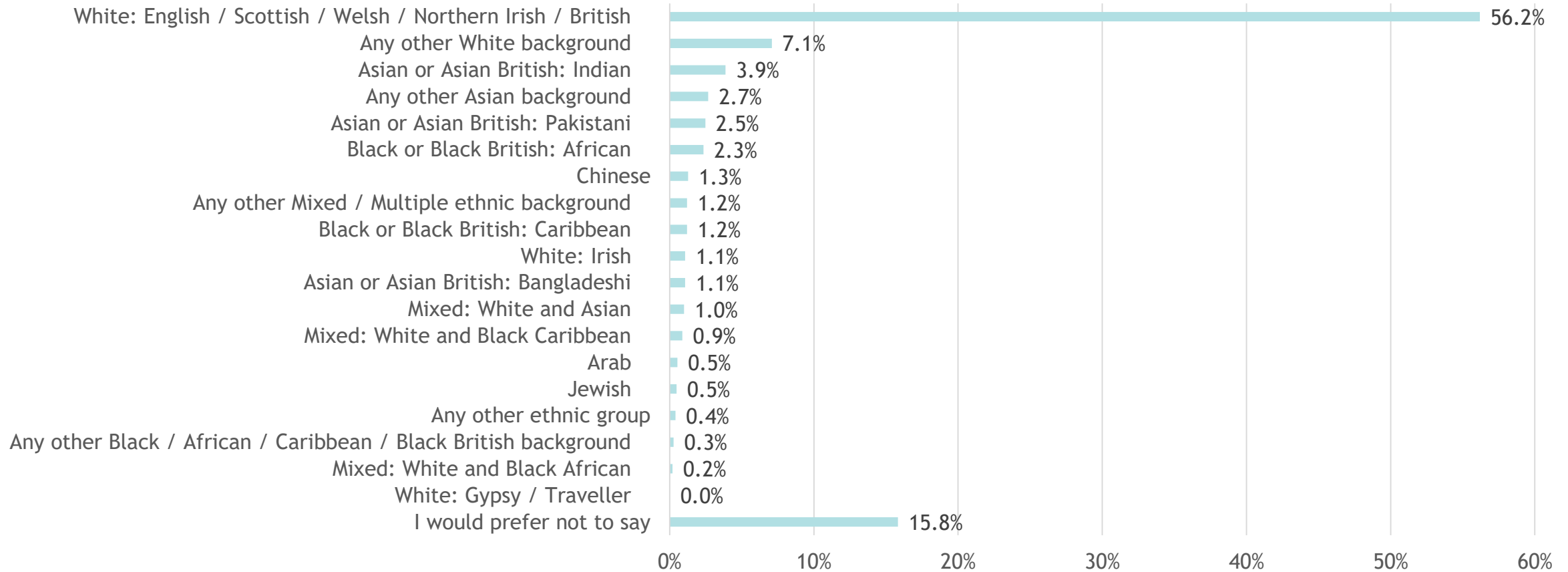


SEXUALITY



The respondents

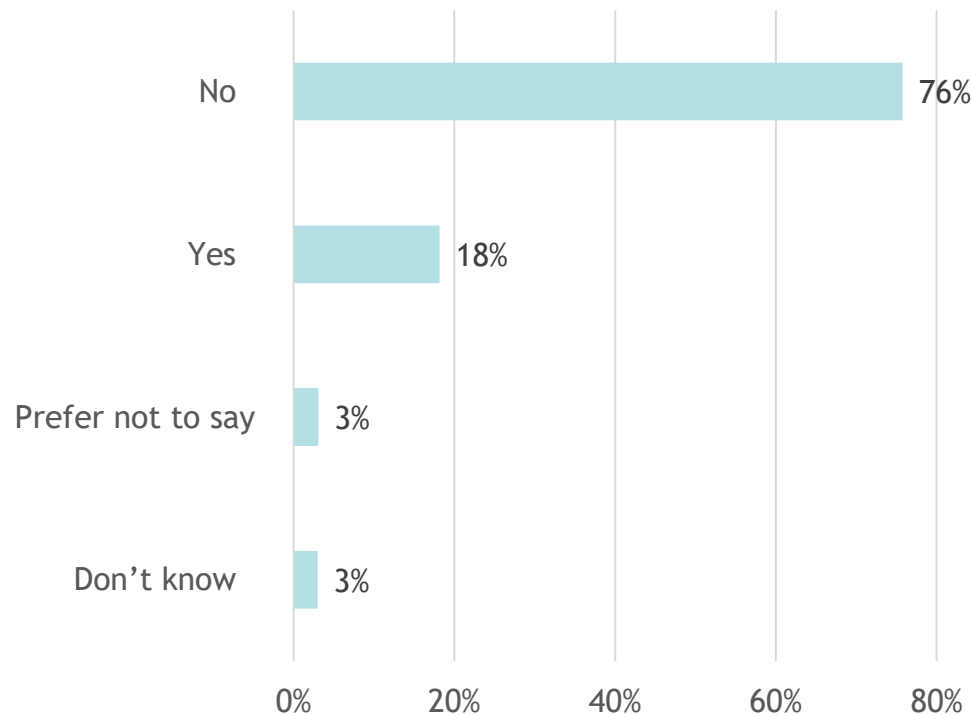
RACE / ETHNICITY



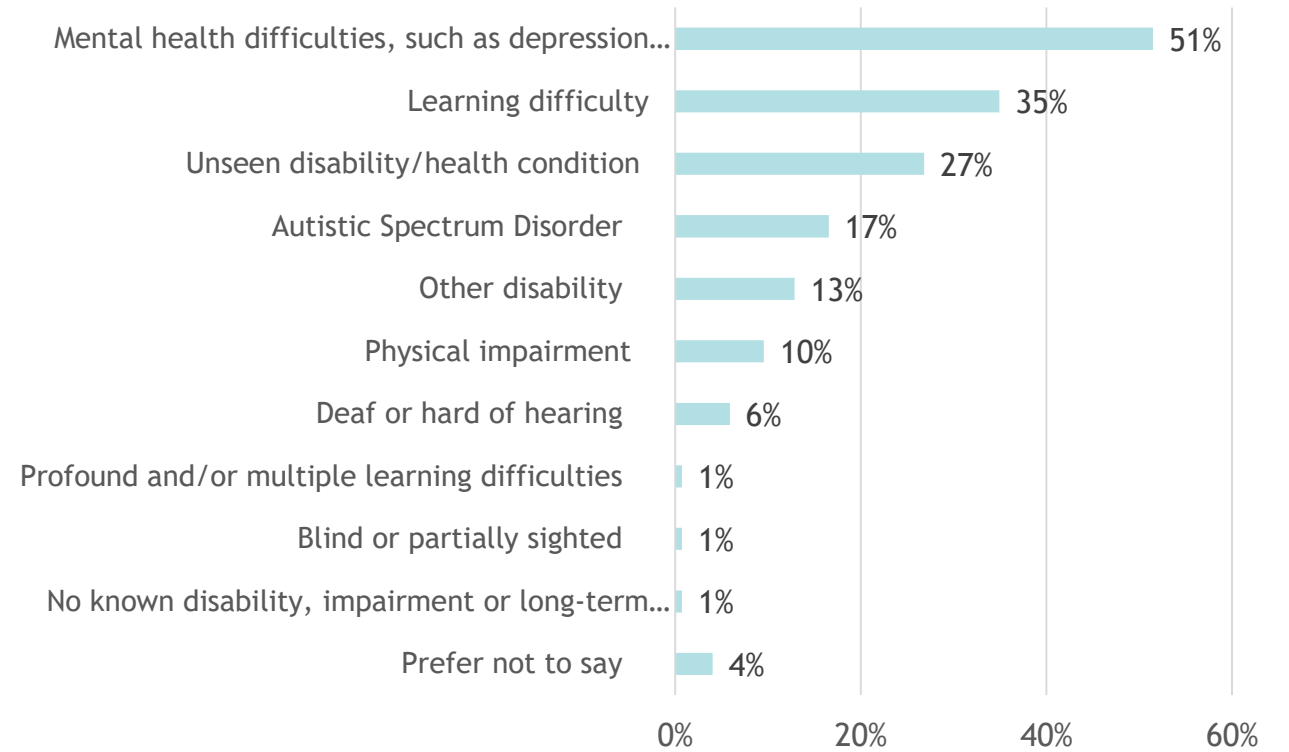
[Base: 1497 Balance: No response]

The respondents

DISABILITY



[Base: 1498 Balance: No response]



[Base: 292 Balance: No response and do not identify as having a disability]

For more information about our drugs and alcohol research and programmes, please visit our [website](#) or email hello@sos-uk.org