EVOLVING TRENDS IN STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

NATIONAL REPORT

2025

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CENTRE FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING (CTL)

Evolving Trends in Student Engagement: National Report

Compiled by the Centre for Teaching and Learning, University of the Free State

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List of Abbreviations

BUSSE	Beginning University Survey of Student Engagement
CHE	Council on Higher Education
CLASSE	Classroom Survey of Student Engagement
CPUT	Cape Peninsula University of Technology
HEI	Higher education institution
HEPS	Higher Education Practice Standards
HIP	High-impact practice
IIE	Independent Institute of Education
LSSE	Lecturer Survey of Student Engagement
MUT	Mangosuthu University of Technology
NMU	Nelson Mandela University
NSSE	National Survey of Student Engagement
NWU	North-West University
QAF	Quality Assurance Framework
RU	Rhodes University
SASSE	South African Surveys of Student Engagement
SPU	Sol Plaatje University
UCT	University of Cape Town
UFS	University of the Free State
UKZN	University of KwaZulu-Natal
UNIVEN	University of Venda
UP	University of Pretoria
UWC	University of the Western Cape
VUT	Vaal University of Technology
WIL	Work-integrated learning
WSU	Walter Sisulu University

Executive Summary

This report explores key trends in student engagement across South African higher education institutions (HEIs) before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on data from the South African Surveys of Student Engagement (SASSE), which included over 30 000 student responses, the report examines shifts in engagement through three central lenses: blended learning, relational engagement, and the use of institutional support services. It highlights how these dimensions influence student success and graduate employability, and offers actionable insights for institutional planning and quality enhancement.

Post-COVID-19, blended learning has become the dominant teaching approach, because it enhances flexibility and student autonomy. The data reveals increased engagement in higher-order and reflective learning, with students valuing structured course delivery and accessible digital materials. However, assessment practices and timely feedback require improvement.

Post-COVID, relational engagement among students has shifted in complex ways. While collaborative learning shows some improvement, particularly in group work, there has been a decline in peer-led study support and reduced student-staff interaction. Mental health challenges are widespread, with students relying more on informal support networks than institutional services. Qualitative feedback reveals lingering effects of isolation, which emphasises the need to rebuild social integration and strengthen relationally supportive academic environments.

Institutional support services are more widely used post-pandemic, particularly academic advising and well-being programmes. However, non-academic support, such as financial aid and administrative services, lags behind, which suggests the need for enhanced structures and simplified processes.

In terms of employability, students reported growth in academic competencies such as critical thinking and writing, but their exposure to practical work and job-related skills development remains limited.

The report recommends that HEIs (1) refine blended learning to include responsive assessment strategies, (2) emphasise building student-staff relationships, (3) enhance non-academic support, and (4) embed employability skills and experiential learning opportunities across curricula. These shifts are essential for cultivating student success in a rapidly changing educational and employment landscape.

1. Background and Introduction

Internationally, student engagement is widely recognised as a pivotal factor in supporting student success (e.g., Kuh et al., 2008; Whitt et al., 2008; Vinson et al., 2010; Zilvinskis et al., 2017). Similarly, the growing body of literature on student engagement enhances understanding of student success within the South African context (e.g., De Villiers & Werner, 2016; Schreiber & Yu, 2016; Strydom et al., 2017; Strydom & Loots, 2020).

Student engagement can be defined by two key components: firstly, what students do (the time and energy they devote to educationally purposeful activities), and, secondly, what higher education institutions (HEIs) do (the extent to which HEIs employ effective educational practices to induce students to participate in academically purposeful activities) (Kuh, 2001). **Figure 1** positions student engagement within the broader context of student success, where the interplay between student behaviours and institutional responsiveness acts as a mediator between the external and historic influences students enter higher education with (Strydom et al., 2017:6).

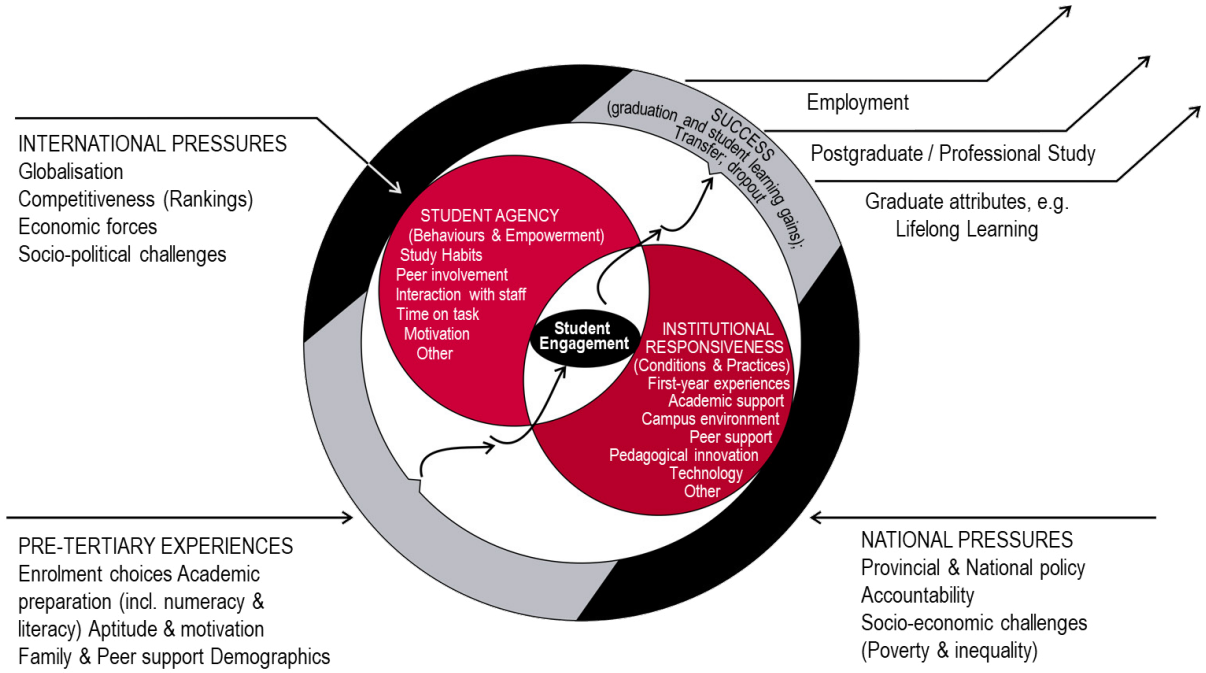

Figure 1: Positioning student engagement as a central mediator of students' educational journeys. Adapted from Strydom (2017: 6).

Student engagement in higher education is increasingly understood through multiple lenses: behavioural, cognitive, affective, social, and institutional. Behavioural engagement refers to students' observable actions such as attendance, participation, and involvement in both academic and extracurricular activities (Picton et al., 2018). Cognitive engagement involves the mental effort students invest in their learning, including critical thinking, deep learning, and self-regulation (Zepke, 2024). Affective engagement relates to students' emotional responses, such as motivation, sense of belonging, and enthusiasm for learning (Mahadeo & Nepal, 2023). Social engagement focuses on students' interactions with peers and faculty in building social capital and fostering a sense of community (Sá, 2023). These dimensions are interrelated and collectively influence academic success, well-being, and retention, which highlights the need for HEI to adopt holistic and inclusive engagement strategies.

The COVID-19 pandemic added complexity to this already nuanced picture. Recent post-pandemic research highlights a shift in how engagement is manifested and perceived. Jones and Bell (2025) found that students increasingly "tactically engage" in their studies by strategically navigating challenges such as financial constraints, mental health pressure, and digital access limitations. Their work underscores a growing disconnect between physical attendance and meaningful academic participation: students may be present but are disengaged, or absent yet actively learning online. These insights challenge pre-pandemic monitoring methods and reaffirm the need for more nuanced and inclusive understandings of engagement.

As HEIs seek to adapt, there is also a call for more relational approaches to student engagement. Owusu-Agyeman and Moroeroe (2023) argue that engagement is deeply shaped by social relationships between students and staff. Their study, conducted at a South African university, demonstrates that relational communication, pedagogy, and a culture of care, particularly from lecturers, significantly influence students' behavioural and cognitive engagement. This is especially important for first-generation students, those from rural areas, and students from low socio-economic backgrounds, for whom relational engagement plays a protective and empowering role.

Moreover, inclusive engagement frameworks, as outlined by Gulko et al. (2024), encourage HEIs to move beyond surface-level participation metrics. Engagement should be understood as occurring in a dynamic socio-ecological system that is shaped by students' social and cultural capital, institutional culture, and the broader political and economic environment. Gulko et al. (2024) argue that effective engagement requires co-responsibility from students, academic staff, and institutional leadership. The literature also points to the necessity of addressing structural inequalities that inhibit students' ability to engage, including digital divides, financial insecurity, and inflexible pedagogical approaches.

These theoretical advancements and post-pandemic realities are also reflected in practical discourse. Cox (2025) emphasises the need to reconceptualise engagement as "student success enablement" and urges HEIs to look beyond simple event attendance or learning management system log-ins. Instead, modern engagement frameworks should account for blended learning modalities, relational touchpoints, and personalised support structures. Institutions must build environments where students feel known, valued, and supported across multiple channels, whether virtual, face to face, or hybrid.

1.1 Surveys of student engagement in the South African context

Recent empirical work continues to validate the relevance of national and institutional engagement instruments in capturing these evolving dynamics. While originating before the pandemic, tools such as the South African Surveys of Student Engagement (SASSE) remain adaptable and robust in identifying key engagement drivers, especially when interpreted in light of contemporary challenges and priorities. Over the last decade, the University of the Free State (UFS) has supported 21 HEIs, including South African public and private HEIs and one Namibian HEI, to gather student engagement data with contextualised student engagement instruments based on the work done by George Kuh and his colleagues (Center for Postsecondary Research, 2025) on the American-based National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). **Table 1** provides an overview of the student engagement instruments used by the UFS.

Table 1: South African Surveys of Student Engagement (SASSE) instruments

Instrument name	Target group	Focus of measurement
Beginning University Survey of Student Engagement (BUSSE)	First-time-entering first-year students	Expected engagement
SASSE	Undergraduate students	Actual engagement
Lecturer Survey of Student Engagement (LSSE)	Lecturers	Perceived engagement of students
Classroom Survey of Student Engagement (CLASSE)	Module-level survey completed by the lecturer(s) of and the students in a module	Engagement between lecturers and students

1.2 The value of student engagement data in advancing graduate employabilit

While student engagement research continues to shape institutional practices, its relevance extends to broader quality assurance processes. The Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) prioritises evidence-based approaches to learning, teaching, and institutional accountability (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2022). Student engagement data, such as the data collected through the SASSE, plays an important role in the quality assurance processes of HEIs. Some examples of this include:

- Providing evidence for institutional quality assurance by providing institution-specific data on key indicators of educational quality, such as student engagement, academic challenges, and learning experiences.
- Alignment with the QAF's focus on learning and teaching quality through real-time feedback on how students interact with course content, academic staff, and their peers is essential for evaluating the effectiveness of teaching strategies. It also enables HEIs to include the student voice in evidence-based curriculum renewal.
- Supporting institutional reviews and accreditation by providing robust data on student experiences to justify quality claims.
- Addressing institutional priorities and transformation goals through a critical data-driven lens to examine disparities in student experiences, access to support services, and academic success.
- Institutional planning and resource allocation through data-driven decision making by identifying high-impact practices (HIPs) and targeted interventions.

Additionally, student engagement data can be a useful data point for HEIs to address the priorities set out by the Higher Education Practice Standards (HEPS) that are being developed by the CHE. **Table 2** summarises the alignment between student engagement data and the HEPS.

Table 2: Alignment between Higher Education Practice Standards (HEPS) and student engagement data

HEPS	Student engagement data	Relevant instruments
Modes of Learning and Teaching Provision	Provides insight into student experiences in face-to-face, online, and blended learning environments, including access to resources and engagement levels.	SASSE CLASSE
Institutional Agency and Identity, Leadership, Management, and Governance	Student perceptions of institutional support and campus climate that can inform governance decisions.	SASSE LSSE
Learning, Teaching, and Assessment	Quality learning experiences, e.g., academic challenges, student-staff interaction, and effective teaching practices, are measured.	SASSE LSSE CLASSE
Programme and Module Design, Review, and Improvement	Incorporates the student voice in curriculum enhancements through student feedback on how they engage with coursework, assessment methods, and HIPs.	SASSE CLASSE
Transitions into Higher Education	Examines first-year students' expectations and experiences to highlight gaps in orientation, academic support, and social integration.	BUSSE SASSE
Experiential Learning	Measures student participation in internships, community engagement, work-integrated learning (WIL), and research projects.	SASSE LSSE
Student Administration	Assesses student access to and experience of academic and support services.	SASSE

1.3 The value of student engagement data in advancing graduate employability

In its *Framework for Institutiona*l Audits, the CHE (2021:9) defines student success as follows:

> *... for the individual student, [student success is defined] as the attainment of graduate attributes that are personally, professionally and socially valuable; for the institution, it refers to students' academic persistence in completing their studies, academic results that reflect equity of success in terms of race, gender, and disability, as well as their achieving credible results within a minimum time to completion; successful entry into employment or some other form of economic activity and/or successfully progressing to postgraduate studies.*

This definition of student success thus includes employability as a metric of institutional success. Supporting students to successfully navigate the world beyond graduation is especially important in a country with a youth unemployment rate of 45.5% (Statistics South Africa, 2024). South African student engagement data shared in a recent publication by the CHE on student success during COVID-19 showed that less than a quarter of students engage in practical work experience while studying and that there are equity gaps in participation in WIL with 20% fewer African students participating in WIL than white students (CHE, 2023). This report is one example of how student engagement data helps to develop an evidence-based understanding of whether students are developing employability skills. This understanding can inform employability strategies on institutional and national levels. Student engagement data can play a key role in improving graduate employability in the following ways:

- Identifying skills gaps in experiential learning opportunities such as internships, WIL, and community engagement and employing strategies to close these gaps.
- Assessing the extent to which students are developing key employability skills and graduate attributes such

as critical thinking, problem solving, communication, and teamwork and aligning curricula and teaching strategies with the development of these skills.
- Determining the level of student participation in leadership roles, cultural and social campus events, student organisations, and other co-curricular activities that are essential for developing well-rounded graduates.
- Providing employers with employability strengths and evidence of students' preparedness beyond academic qualifications.

2. Exploring student engagement in the post-COVID era

South African higher education has faced significant disruptions over the last decade. These include the #FeesMustFall student protest movements, the COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing loadshedding, the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence, and, most recently, a decline in government funding for higher education. While each of these disruptions highlights the pressing need for a data-driven understanding of student success, the focus of this report is specifically on student engagement before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Examining this period aims to shed light on how student engagement patterns have shifted and to provide pivotal insights to navigate future challenges.

Three key themes emerge from post-COVID student engagement research: the integration of blended learning, shifts in relational engagement, and the increased utilisation of institutional support services. These themes reflect how HEIs and students have adapted to the challenges posed by the pandemic. Blended learning has proven to be a transformative approach that fosters flexibility and inclusivity in learning environments. At the same time, relational engagement has undergone noteworthy changes, with peer interaction improving while student-lecturer connections have declined. Lastly, there has been an increase in students' reliance on institutional support services, which emphasises the importance of maintaining robust systems to promote academic and personal success. Together, these themes provide a nuanced understanding of the evolving landscape of student engagement in the post-COVID era.

2.1 Blended learning for flexibility and enhanced student engagement

The pandemic accelerated the adoption of online learning and required rapid transitions from face-to-face instruction to fully remote online instruction. Naturally, this rapid transition was challenging for academics and students alike. Some of the prominent challenges in fully online teaching in the South African higher education context include a lack of equitable access to technology due to the highly pronounced digital divide in the country. Many students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, struggled with limited or no access to devices, reliable Internet connectivity, and high data costs, which hindered their participation in fully online learning (Du Preez & Le Grange, 2020). Staff also experienced challenges in rapidly transitioning to emergency remote teaching with minimal training and pedagogical support (Woldegiorgis, 2022).

Blended learning, which integrates online and face-to-face learning modes, has emerged as a key teaching approach post-COVID. Instead of returning to pure face-to-face teaching after the pandemic, many HEIs encouraged integrating effective digital practices developed during COVID-19 into their traditional face-to-face teaching strategies. To this end, blended learning has become the new norm in higher education. It offers students greater flexibility and enhanced access to learning materials.

Studies indicate that blended learning capitalises on the flexibility of online platforms while retaining the interpersonal benefits of in-person interactions. Research by Joshi et al. (2023) highlights that the combination of these modalities encourages active participation, self-directed learning, and collaborative interaction, which

results in improved academic outcomes. Similarly, Thahir et al. (2023) emphasise that the adoption of blended learning aligns with the demands of the digital era by supporting diverse learning preferences and enabling more meaningful educational experiences.

Crucially, the flexibility of blended learning supports varied student needs by offering synchronous and asynchronous components that cater to different schedules and learning preferences. Mehta et al. (2024) found that many students now prefer this model, as it combines the structured environment of face-to-face sessions with the convenience of digital resources, which fosters deeper engagement and academic satisfaction. These findings suggest that blended learning represents a balanced approach that enhances engagement in both traditional and digital contexts.

2.2 Relational engagement post-COVID

During the pandemic, the rapid shift to remote teaching and learning disrupted how students interact with their peers and their lecturers. Many students reported feeling isolated and disconnected, with diminished peer collaboration and challenges in working in group settings (Özüdoğru, 2021). Additionally, the lack of face-to-face interaction led to challenges in receiving timely feedback and mentorship from academics, which further exacerbated the social challenges during that time (Al-Maskari et al., 2022).

Fitria et al. (2022) highlight the vital role that lecturer-student interaction plays in academic achievement and perceived learning and note that high-quality interactions, characterised by emotional and academic support, boost engagement. However, the pandemic's push towards remote learning disrupted these dynamics, with many students reporting a loss of personal connection and reduced opportunities for real-time feedback from lecturers (Loots et al., 2023). Following the COVID-19 pandemic, students in higher education also experienced a notable increase in loneliness and a decline in well-being, both of which negatively impacted their engagement. The abrupt shift to online learning and the reduction in face-to-face interactions diminished students' sense of belonging and social support, which led to heightened academic anxiety and persistent feelings of isolation (Bonsaksen et al., 2022). These changes resulted in lower motivation, increased study burnout, and a deterioration in both academic and relational engagement, with many students continuing to experience moderate to severe depressive symptoms and anxiety even after the return to in-person activities (Hendrick et al., 2023; Ouzia et al., 2023).

On the other hand, peer interaction has seen a positive trajectory in post-COVID settings. The shift to blended formats created opportunities for diverse peer collaborations in virtual group settings, which enhanced collective problem solving and mutual support (Peimani & Kamalipour, 2021). Cradduck et al. (2022) also found that students adapted well to digital platforms for peer communication, which fostered new forms of engagement beyond the traditional classroom. This dual trend accentuates the need to adapt teaching approaches to restore and strengthen lecturer-student relationships while maintaining the benefits gained from peer engagement and the shift to blended modes of delivery.

2.3 Enhanced utilisation of institutional support services

During the pandemic, students needed more support than ever to face mental, social, financial, and academic challenges (Bouchey et al., 2021). With the increased reliance on support services, many HEIs moved their support online (Ardekani et al., 2021).

The post-COVID period has seen an increase in students' utilisation of institutional support services, including learning support, mental health resources, and campus events that address critical issues. Dunn-Coetzee et al. (2021) highlight that the pandemic compelled HEIs such as Stellenbosch University to innovate rapidly and expand virtual support services to maintain engagement during lockdowns. These adaptations not only sustained critical services but also laid the groundwork for improved accessibility and interaction post-pandemic. Similarly, increased participation in well-being programmes and support events, which have proven essential in fostering students' sense of belonging and motivation, has been observed post-COVID (Rajan et al., 2024). The enhanced quality of these interactions has strengthened students' academic and emotional resilience (Pham & Chau, 2024). Institutional support in fostering holistic student success needs to be sustained and evolved moving forward.

The following sections present comparative data on pre- and post-COVID student engagement indicators, which are structured around the key themes discussed in the literature: blended learning, relational engagement, and the utilisation of institutional support services.

3. Methodology

The data shared in this report is a comparison of pre- and post-COVID SASSE results. National data from the 2019 SASSE for the pre-COVID results were compared by aggregating all data from HEIs that participated in SASSE in 2019. For the post-COVID results, all participating HEIs' 2023 data was aggregated. In 2021, SASSE introduced a qualitative question asking students *"What has been the most important factor contributing to your learning and development at this institution?"* In 2022, this was replaced with *"What one change would most improve the educational experience at this institution?"* A thematic analysis of responses was conducted to gain deeper insight into student experiences. It is important to note that the 2021 data was collected during the pandemic, while the 2022 responses reflect the transition out of the pandemic; this offered a comparative perspective on evolving student needs. **Table 3** provides an overview of the sample included for the quantitative and qualitative data shared in this report.

Table 3: Sample

Year	Number of student responses	Participating HEIs
2019 (quantitative data)	4 461	• Independent Institute of Education (IIE) • Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT) • North-West University (NWU) • University of the Free State (UFS)
2023 (quantitative data)	8 859	• North-West University (NWU) • University of Cape Town (UCT) • University of the Free State (UFS) • University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) • University of Venda (UNIVEN) • University of the Western Cape (UWC) • Vaal University of Technology (VUT)
2021 (qualitative data)	11 035	• Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) • Nelson Mandela University (NMU) • Sol Plaatje University (SPU) • University of Cape Town (UCT) • University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) • University of Pretoria (UP) • University of the Free State (UFS) • University of the Western Cape (UWC) • Walter Sisulu University (WSU)
2022 (qualitative data)	5 192	• Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) • North-West University (NWU) • Rhodes University (RU) • Sol Plaatje University (SPU) • University of the Free State (UFS) • University of Venda (UNIVEN) • Vaal University of Technology (VUT)
2023 (Mental Health and Well-Being topical module data)	3 353	• University of the Free State (UFS) • University of Venda (UNIVEN) • University of the Western Cape (UWC)
	32 900 students	**15 HEIs**

4. Insights from SASSE

Figure 2 compares the student engagement indicators between the 2019 (pre-COVID) and 2023 (post-COVID) SASSE data. The student engagement indicators are divided into four themes: academic challenges, learning with peers, experiences with staff, and campus environment, with a number of indicators that make up each of these themes.

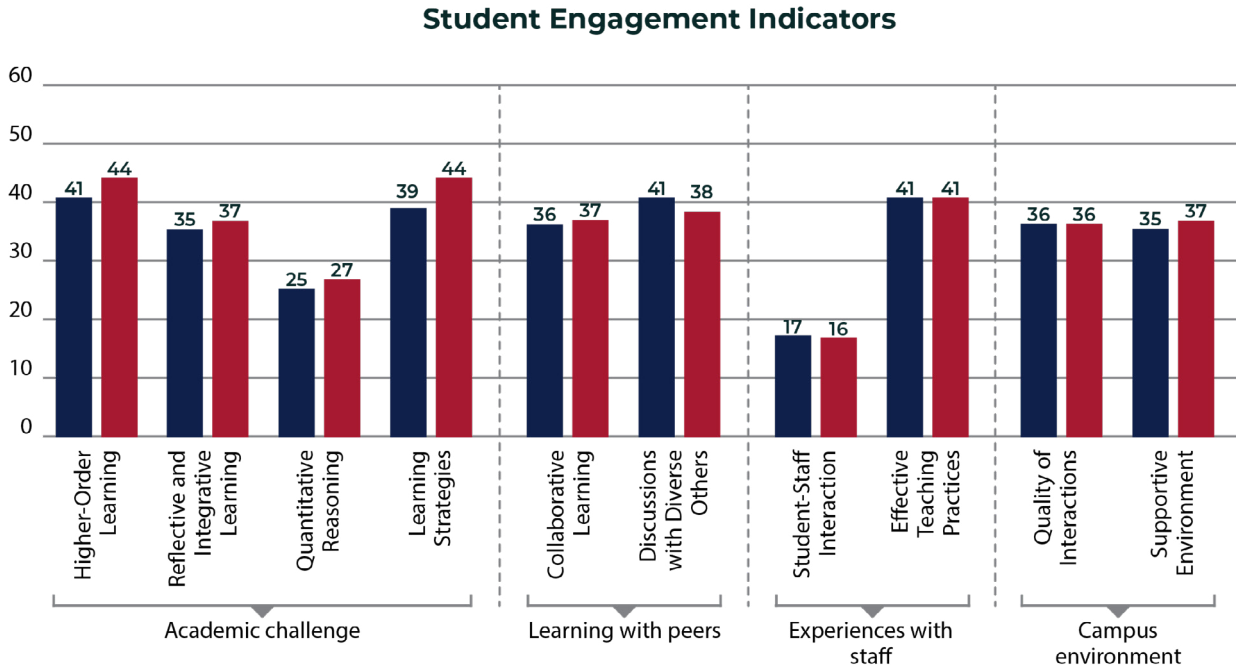

Figure 2: Comparison of SASSE indicators in 2019 vs 2023

In each of the four themes, a shift in student engagement can be observed post-COVID. Generally, there has been an increase in the academic challenge indicators. This suggests that students engage more deeply with their learning in a post-pandemic environment. One possible reason for this is the adoption of blended learning practices by HEIs post-COVID. This is explored in more detail in **Section 4.1**.

Regarding the learning with peers theme, there was a slight increase in collaborative learning but a decrease in discussions with diverse others. Additionally, there was a decline in student-staff interactions. Taken together, this shift shows the persisting challenges in relational engagement post-COVID, which is explored in more detail in **Section 4.2**.

The increase in the supportive environment indicator shows how HEIs strengthened their support offerings during and post-COVID. This is also aligned with the student engagement trend identified in the literature around students relying more on student support services post-COVID than they did pre-COVID. This shift is explored in more detail in **Section 4.3**.

4.1 Blended learning and student engagement post-COVID

Universities in South Africa, like many other HEIs worldwide, have turned to blended learning as a "new normal" teaching approach post-COVID (Universities South Africa, 2022). The literature indicates that blended learning, if implemented effectively, holds advantages for learning, including encouraging students to more actively participate in their learning (Joshi et al., 2023), supporting diverse learning methods (Thahir et al., 2023), and offering flexibility to support varied student needs and schedules (Mehta et al., 2024). But what does a comparison of pre- and post-COVID data reveal about the effects of moving to more blended learning approaches on student engagement?

Figure 3 shows a comparison of 2019 and 2023 SASSE data on effective teaching practices. Effective teaching practices, as a student engagement indicator, demonstrates the extent to which lecturers use clear explanations in their teaching, organise their course structure, provide feedback to students, and employ active learning strategies. These practices are examples of engaged pedagogy that enhances student participation and academic success. The data shows that students reported increased engagement in effective teaching practices post-COVID, most notably in the extent to which lecturers explain course outcomes and requirements (4% increase), and the extent to which courses are presented in an organised way (3% increase). These results suggest that the blended learning environment students are learning in post-COVID has enhanced structured course delivery, accessibility of learning materials, and varied instructional methods, while a slight decline in feedback timelines indicate ongoing challenges in adapting assessment practices to a blended approach.

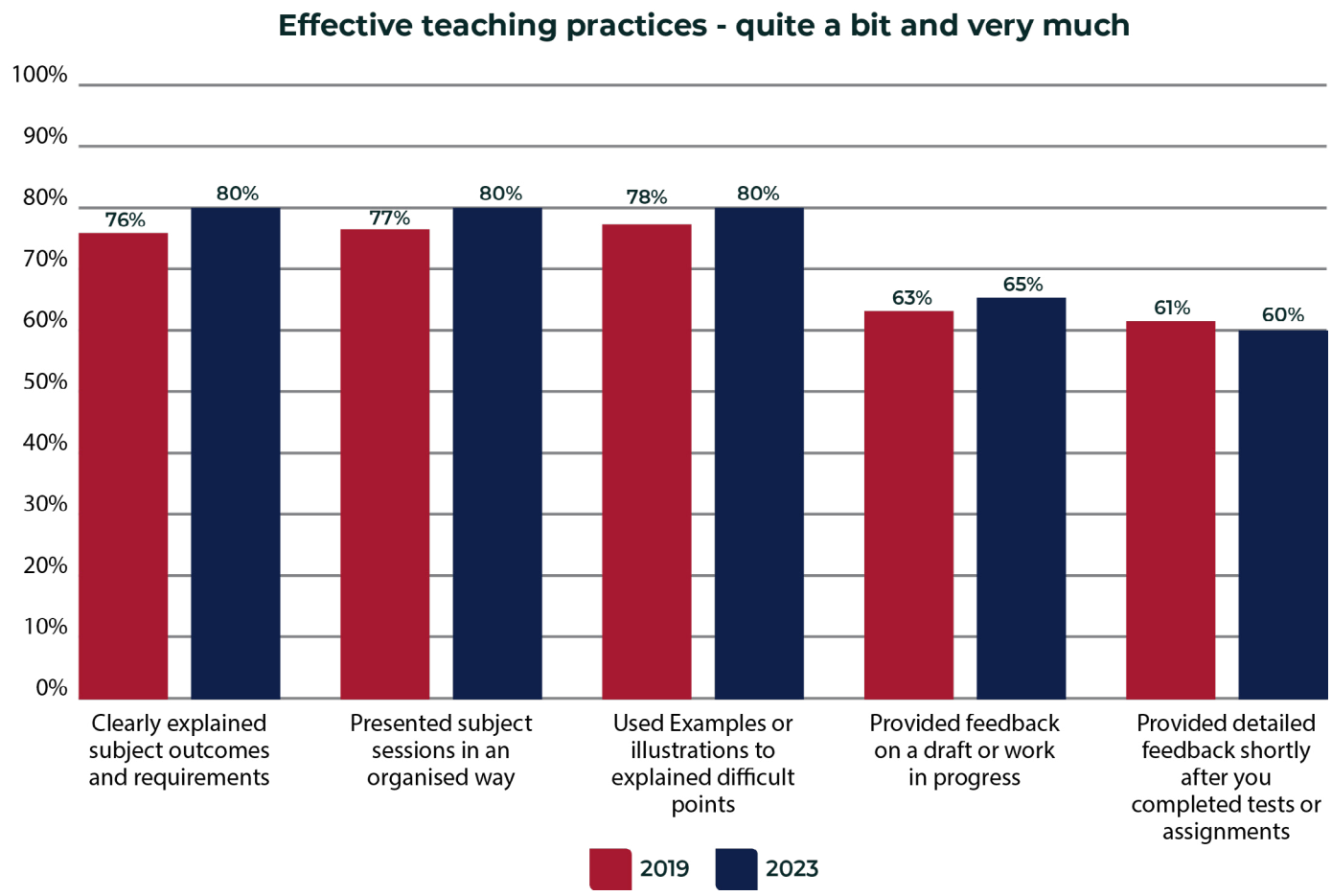

Figure 3: Comparison between 2019 and 2023 data on the effective teaching practices indicator

In addition to how students experience teaching practices, SASSE data also reveals how the shift to blended learning in a post-pandemic environment influenced how students learn. **Figure 4** is a comparison between 2019 and 2023 data on the student engagement indicator of higher-order learning. This indicator reflects the extent to which students engage in critical and analytical thinking in their studies, and to which extent they need to demonstrate deep cognitive engagement rather than rote learning or passive memorisation in their studies. The data shows that post-COVID, more students reported engaging in higher-order learning in their studies than pre-COVID.

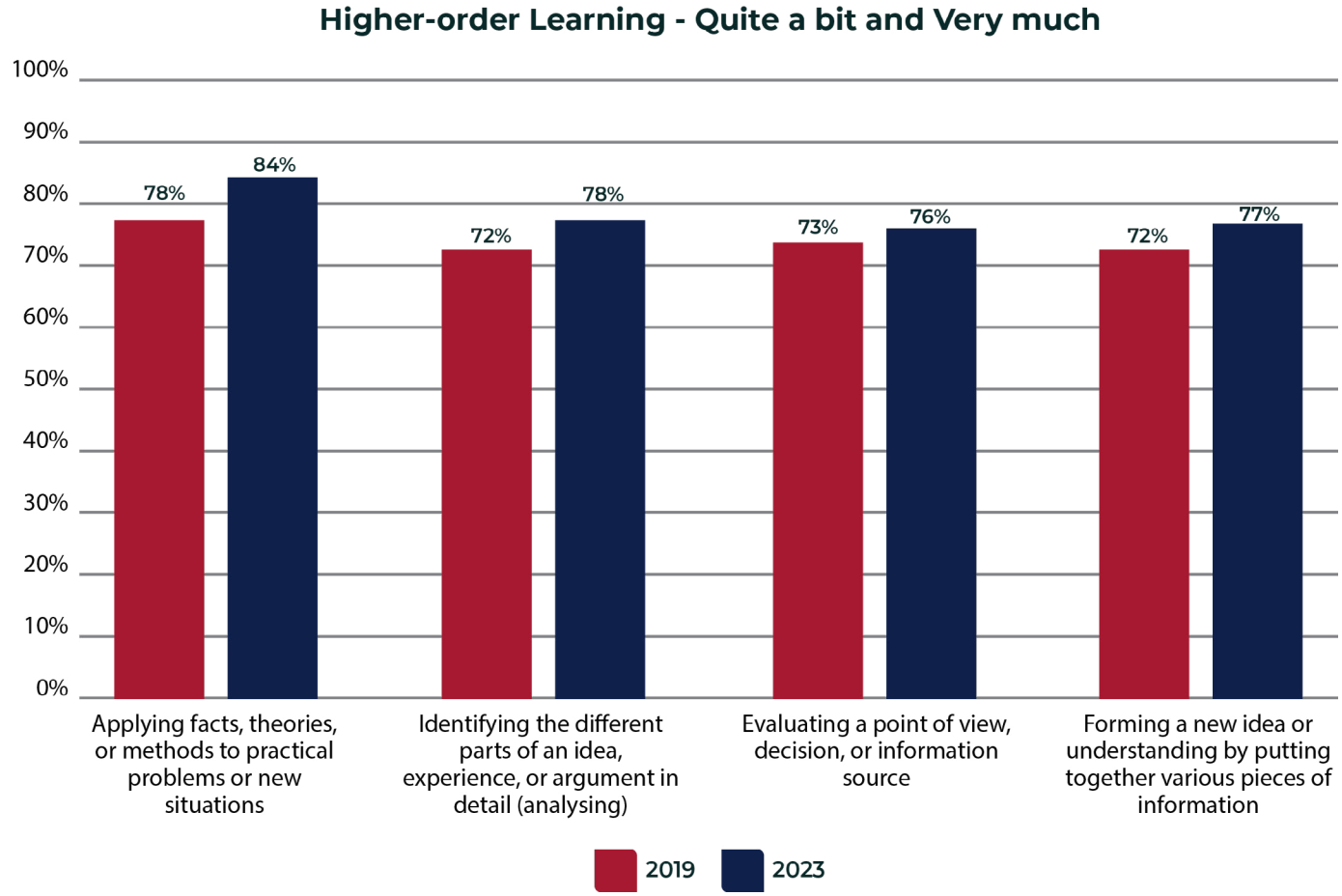

Figure 4: Comparison between 2019 and 2023 data on the higher-order learning indicator

Figure 5 is a comparison between 2019 and 2023 data on reflective and integrated learning. The reflective and integrative learning indicator shows the extent to which students connect prior knowledge to new learning, consider diverse perspectives, and apply learning to real-world contexts. This type of engagement fosters critical reflection and interdisciplinary thinking. The results show that post-COVID, students engage in activities that cultivate reflective and integrative learning to a greater extent than pre-COVID.

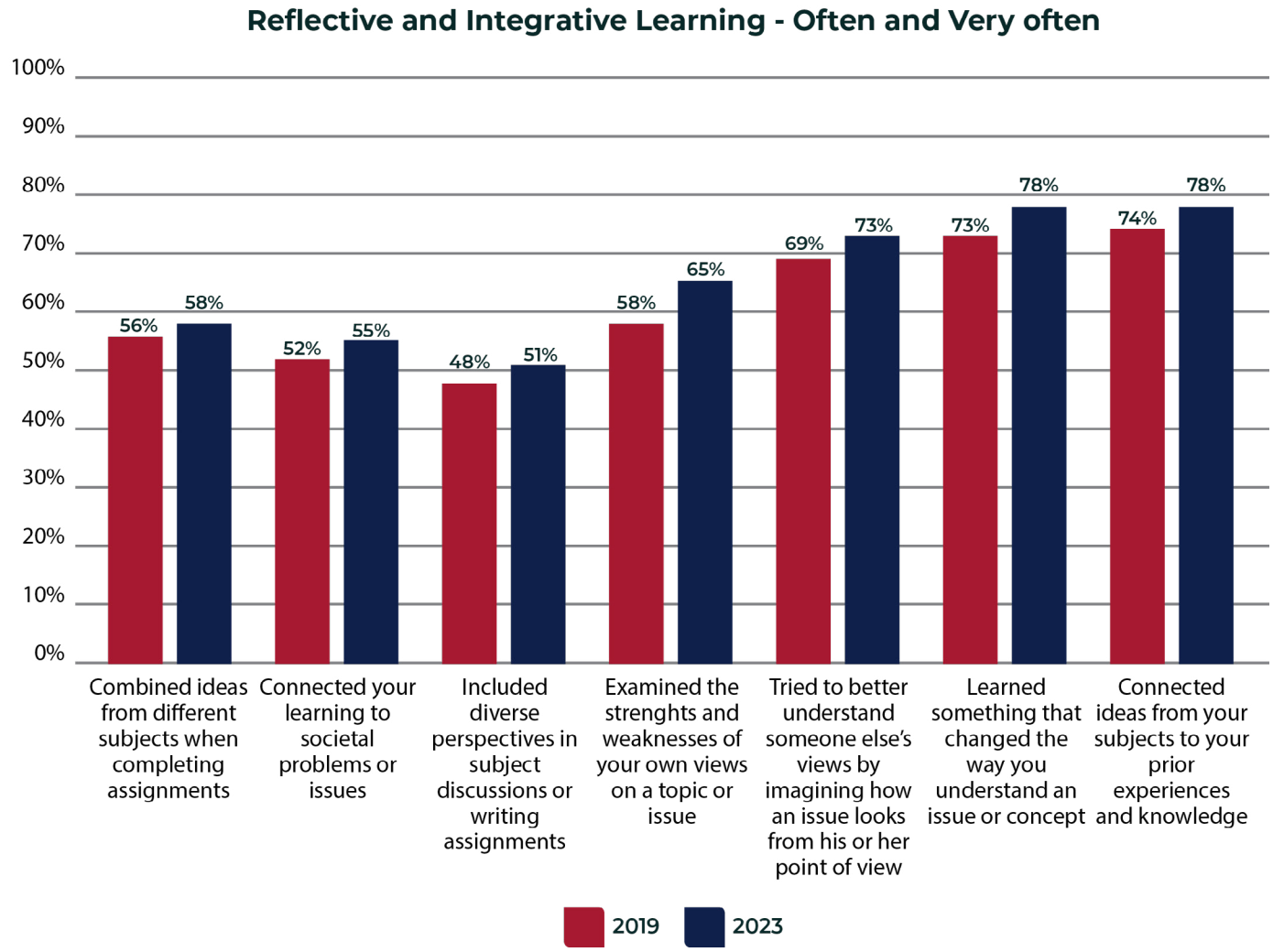

Figure 5: Comparison between 2019 and 2023 data on the reflective and integrative learning indicator

Qualitative data gathered in 2021 and 2022 further elaborates on students' experiences of transitioning to a blended teaching and learning environment. The following quotations are illustrative of students' preference for a combination of face-to-face and online learning:

> *"Online and face-to-face tutorials because from face-to-face classes I can get an enough time to ask where I don't understand and during online classes I have enough time to view the recording after class and repeat it again and again to understand it better."*

> *"To have more face-to-face learning but also make recorded lectures or downloadable PDFs of the work content available to students."*

> *"Another thing, is to offer a blend of in-person and online course options, to provide flexibility to students to accommodate learning preferences, especially after the COVID pandemic. We experienced online learning, adjusted to it, and then it was taken away. Perhaps offer an online option for students to also watch live lectures online, not just a recording later on."*

> *"For students like myself I was very pleased that the university was already using a blended approach, hence it wasn't challenging for me to cope when all institutions had to move from face-to-face learning to online learning because I had already received training on how to use [the university's learning management system]."*

"Having class online has taught me to be responsible for my own actions because I don't have someone there to remind me to do something. Having class face to face has taught me to be appreciate the small things like being able to go to class while other students cannot."

"Hybrid learning would really help a lot. Face-to-face classes are really exhausting, considering that one must study the previous night and do all relevant chores. Attending some classes in the comfort of our homes would really help."

4.2 Relational engagement post-COVID

The shift to remote teaching and learning during the pandemic created challenges for students in terms of interacting with their peers and their lecturers as they were suddenly isolated and had to adapt to online and electronic media for communication. Post-COVID, many HEIs shifted to a blended approach, which retained some elements of online teaching but with the added benefit of face-to-face interaction. With this shift, one would expect an improvement in relational engagement, especially because students should now experience the benefit of both online and face-to-face interaction. This section explores student engagement data on relational engagement to better understand student interactions with their peers and lecturers.

Figure 6 compares collaborative learning in 2019 and 2023. The collaborative learning engagement indicator reflects the extent to which students actively engage in peer discussions, group work, and shared problem solving, which are all aspects of relational engagement but also contribute to academic success. A slight improvement in results related to reaching out to and asking peers for help to understand course content is observed post-COVID. A greater improvement is seen in group work, with 7% more students indicating that they actively engage in group work projects post-pandemic. On the other hand, the extent to which students explain module content to their peers and engage in study groups to prepare for exams or discuss course content declined post-pandemic.

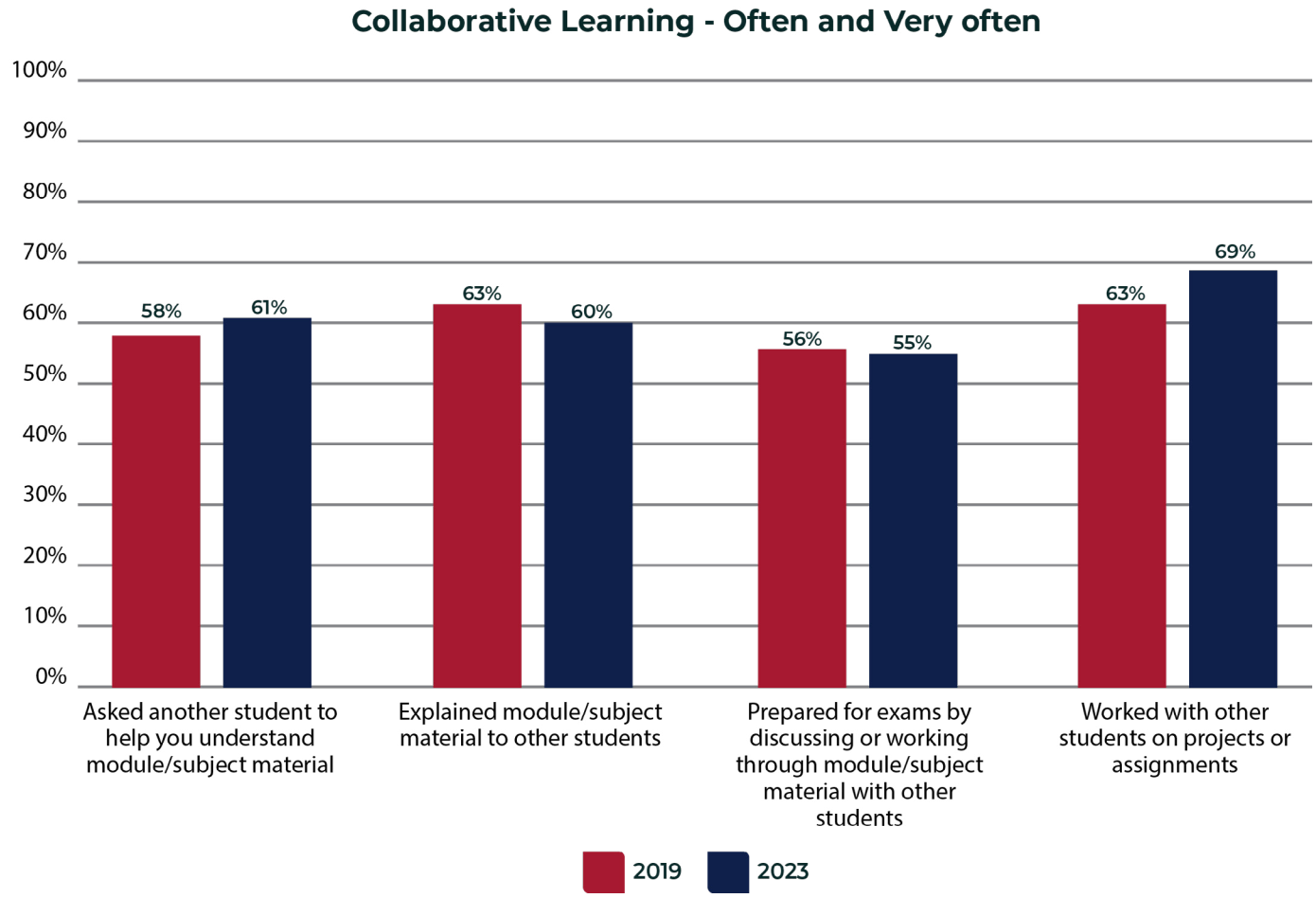

Figure 6: Comparison between 2019 and 2023 data on the collaborative learning indicator

Figure 7 shows a comparison of student engagement with diverse others in 2019 and 2023. Discussions with diverse others as an engagement indicator explores the extent to which students actively engage with peers from different backgrounds, cultures, and perspectives. As with collaborative learning, this indicator reflects relational engagement, but these types of interactions also foster critical thinking, inclusivity, and an appreciation for diversity, which are important factors in academic success during the student years but also in adapting to the world of work. The results show that post-COVID, students engage slightly less with people of races or ethnicities other than their own, as well as with students with differing political views. Engagement with peers with differing religious beliefs remained constant pre- and post-pandemic. There has been a slight increase in students' engagement with peers from different economic backgrounds. Taken together, student engagement with diverse others has not changed notably post-COVID.

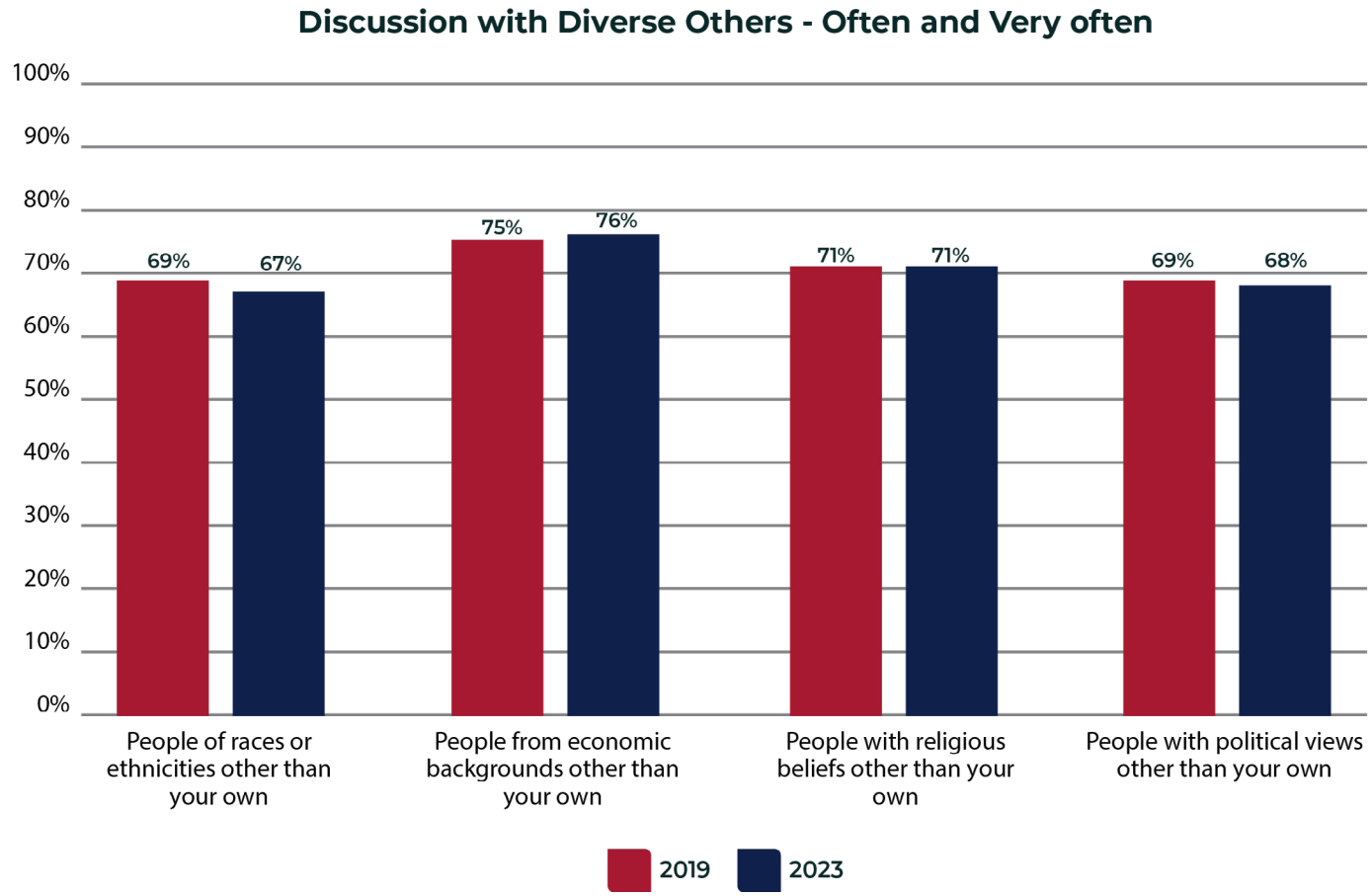

Figure 7: Comparison between 2019 and 2023 data on the discussions with diverse others indicator

Figure 8 shows a comparison of student-staff interaction pre- and post-COVID. The student-staff interaction engagement indicator demonstrates the extent to which students engage with their lecturers for feedback, mentorship, and academic support. While students' interactions with their peers show mainly slight improvements post-COVID, their engagement with academic staff notably decreased post-pandemic. The only item in this indicator that shows an increase is the item on discussing course topics, ideas, or concepts with a lecturer (increase of 11%). It should be mentioned that this item was changed in 2021. Previously, the item read: "Discussed module/subject topics, ideas, or concepts with a lecturer outside of class." The new wording as shown in **Figure 8** thus enquires about discussions in a broader sense than just in a class setup, which can explain the increase. The other items related to this indicator remained constant, but the engagement scores decreased for all of them. This means that students interact with their lecturers to a lesser extent post-COVID than they did pre-COVID. Talking with lecturers about career plans decreased by 4%, collaborating with academic staff on activities other than academic work decreased by 5%, and discussing academic performance decreased by 2%.

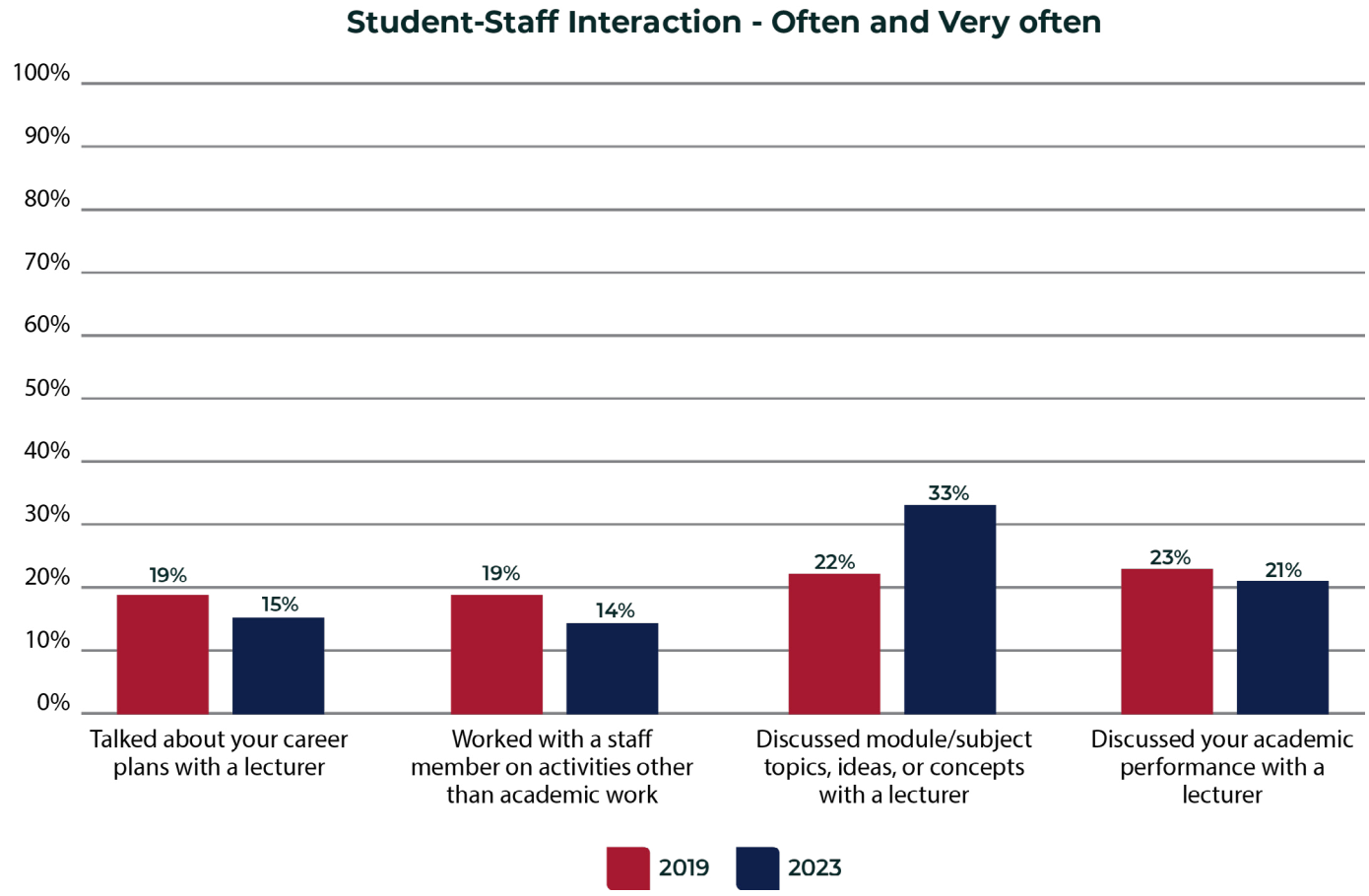

Figure 8: Comparison between 2019 and 2023 data on the student-staff interaction indicator

Figure 9 illustrates a comparison of pre- and post-COVID data on students' quality of interactions with lecturers and peers. The preceding sections discussed a shift in students' engagement with their peers and lecturers. While there has been an improvement in some aspects of students' collaborative interactions with other students, student-staff interaction declined. The quality of interactions indicator demonstrates the extent to which students experience meaningful, supportive, and constructive engagement with others. The decline in the quality of interactions with both peers (from 83% to 80%) and lecturers/academic staff (from 68% to 63%) suggests that students may be experiencing weaker relational engagement post-COVID. This highlights the ongoing need to foster meaningful student connections and strengthen student-staff engagement.

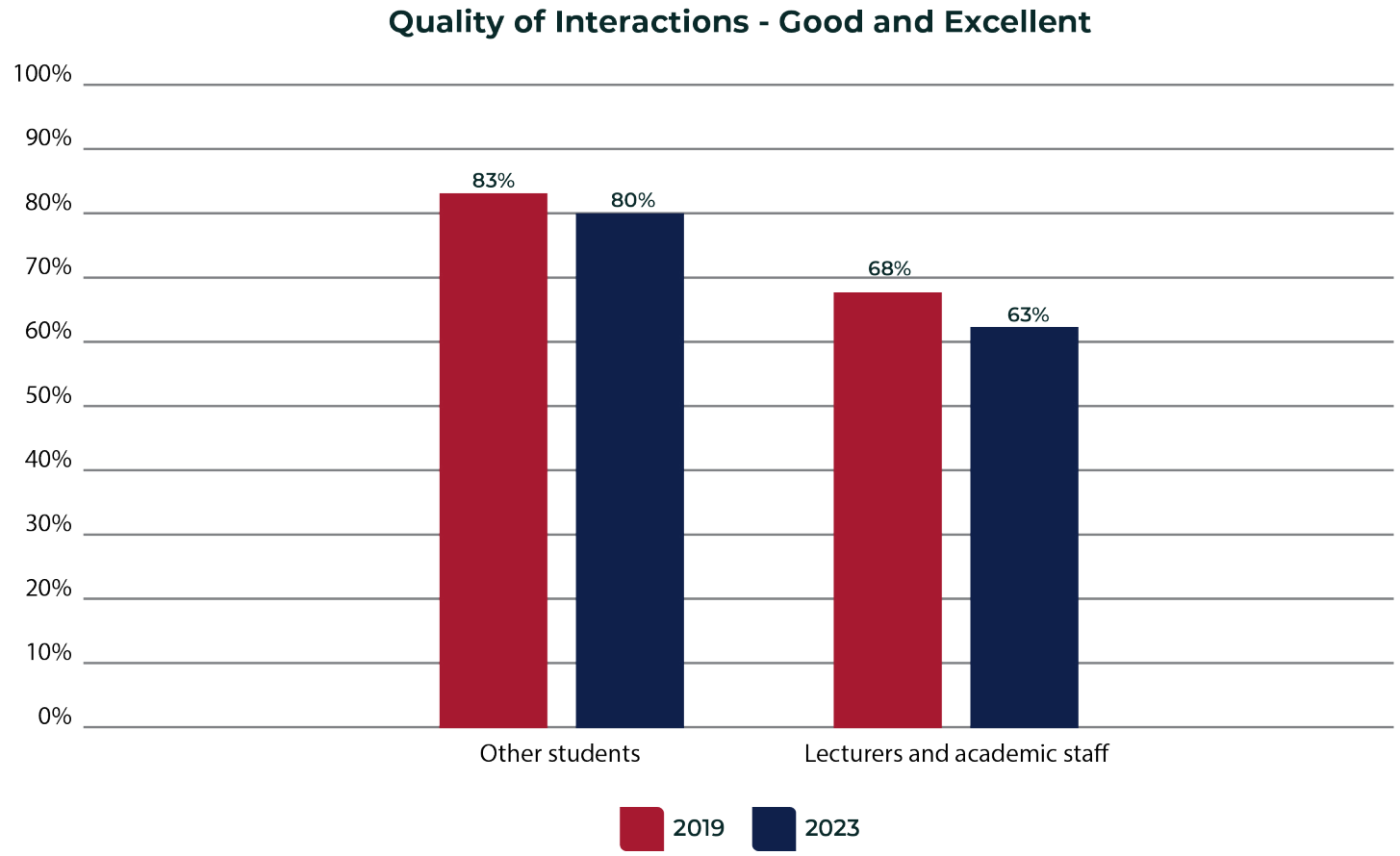

Figure 9: Comparison between 2019 and 2023 data on the quality of interactions with peers and lecturers indicator

In 2021, topical modules were added to the SASSE to explore specific themes in more depth. A topical module is an optional short survey that is added to the core engagement survey. One of these topical modules is the Mental Health and Well-Being module. This topical module aims to provide a more in-depth understanding of how students experience stress, access support, and manage their mental health during their studies. It relates closely to relational engagement by highlighting the importance of supportive student-staff interactions and campus relationships in fostering student well-being. **Figure 10** is an overview from the Mental Health and Well-Being topical module administered in 2023 (post-COVID), which shows the main challenges students experienced during the academic year. Students reported significant challenges across multiple aspects of their university experience. Financial difficulties were the most common, with 82% finding them difficult or very difficult, followed by mental or emotional exhaustion (76%), employment (70%), and academic demands and sleep (both at 66%). Mental health (64%) and loneliness (56%) were also key concerns. While nearly half struggled with physical health (47%) and homesickness (49%), relational issues such as romantic relationships (43%), relationships with peers (32%), and family relationships (41%) were also notable stressors. Although fewer students reported difficulties with discrimination or harassment (15%), more than a third still found it difficult to fit in at university (38%), which highlights the need for holistic, relationally supportive environments.

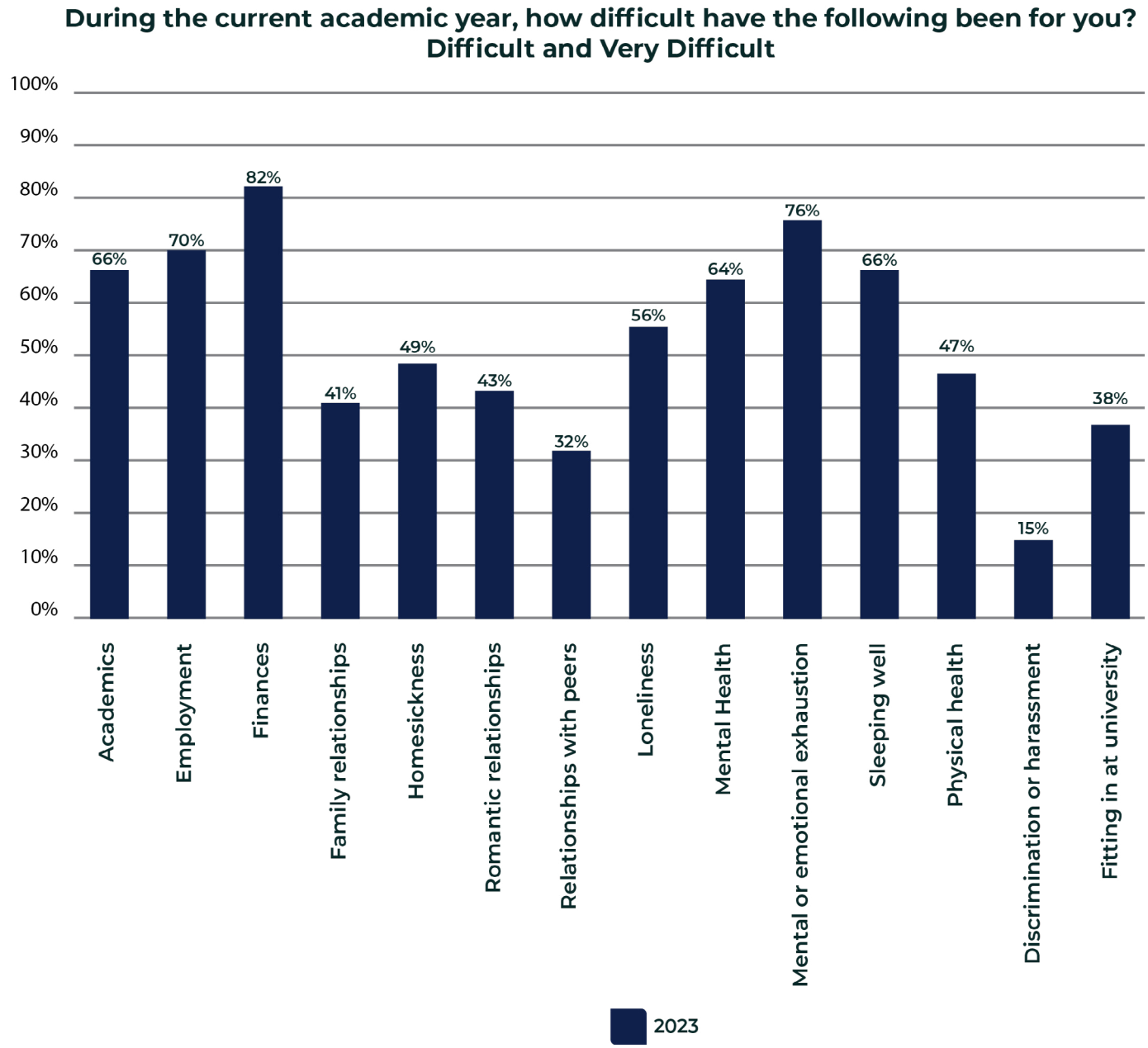

Figure 10: Student difficulties during the 2023 academic year

Figure 11 indicates the extent to which different sources of support helped students with their mental health and well-being. Students identified informal support networks as the most helpful, with 75% citing their family and 71% their friends as significant sources of support. Significant others or romantic partners were also mentioned by 58%, followed by other students (48%) and lecturers (40%). In contrast, formal institutional support structures such as academic advisors (32%), counselling services (29%), and student services staff (29%) were perceived as less supportive. This highlights the critical role of relational and peer-based connections in student well-being and suggests a need for HEIs to strengthen trust and accessibility in their formal support systems.

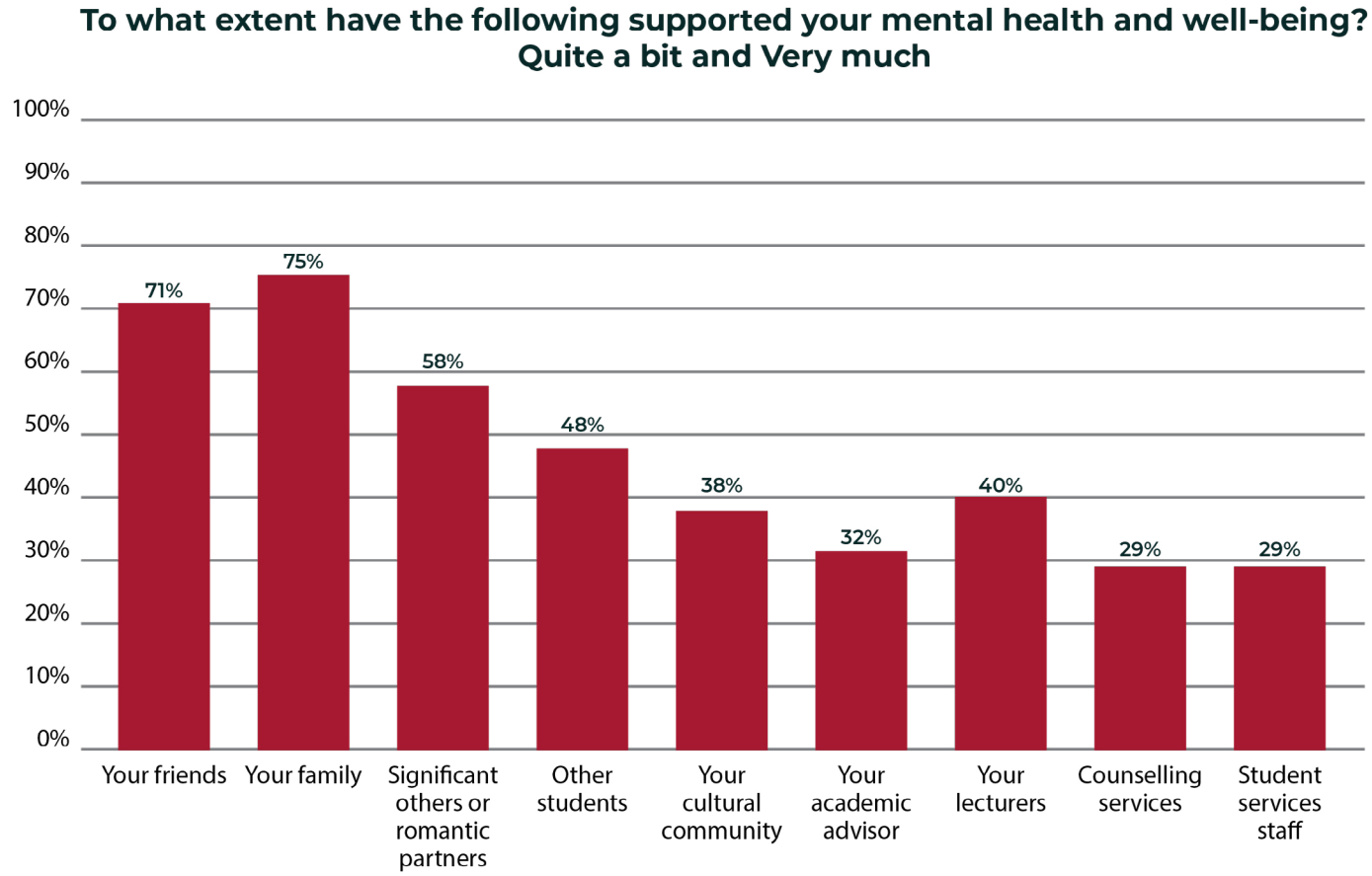

Figure 11: Mental health support during the 2023 academic year

Qualitative data gathered in 2021 and 2022 further elaborates on students' relational engagement experiences of transitioning to a post-pandemic environment. The following quotations are illustrative of students' need for social integration and the importance of relational engagement:

> *"I entered my first year during COVID [2021], where learning was entirely online [distance learning]. When I got onto campus during my second year, I was completely overwhelmed and disoriented. I had never had an orientation so I never quite integrated. In my final year of my undergraduate, I feel as though I'm always lost, and I have not managed to make any friends."*

> *"Unfortunately for me, I happened to enter university at the height of the COVID pandemic. And as a result, my entire first year and most of my second was administered online. So, I missed out on a lot of experiences and events that normal students would have had. I never got to enjoy orientation week and I never got to meet classmates normally or even make friends properly."*

> *"I feel like I only really know a couple of my peers. This makes it feel like we're alone through our studies and it's hard to ask people you don't know for help on sections, or to brainstorm topics together."*

> *"Study groups have been an important factor contributing to my studies. When I am starting with those doing the same modules as me, it is much easier to get help from them on what I am struggling with at that moment, as I don't have to wait for the lecturer. It also helps to understand all that the lecturer taught in class."*

"The important thing that I learned is to work with others in order to find solutions on a problem. It is important because as a group of people we come with different ideas in order to tackle the problem or something which is not simple enough to be tackled by an individual."

"Working with different groups of people, it is important to me because I now know how to communicate with different personalities and understand other people from different backgrounds and cultures better."

"If I felt more like I was a part of a community, a massive family, then I would be better. I would feel less alone. Of course, my loneliness could just be a result of my inability to make friendships with my peers, but I think that is where the system should come in. To catch all the kids that stumble and fall through the crevices."

4.3 Student interaction with support services post-COVID

The pandemic necessitated a renewed focus on student support services to support students in different spheres of their lives, including an increased need for mental health, social, financial, and academic support. Student engagement is the interaction between creating an environment in which students have access to educationally beneficial activities and resources (institutional perspective) and students' active participation in these activities and the utilisation of these resources. This section explore students' utilisation of and satisfaction with support services post-pandemic to understand whether the increase in student support service utilisation spans beyond the crisis situation during the pandemic.

The supportive environment engagement indicator is a reflection of the extent to which students believe that their institution provides academic, social, and personal support. **Figure 12** provides a comparison between pre- and post-COVID results. Generally, scores on the items in this indicator improved notably after the pandemic. The biggest increases are seen in students utilising learning support services (increase of 8%), attending campus activities (increase of 8%), attending events that address important issues (5%), and HEIs providing support for students' overall well-being (increase of 4%). There was a slight decrease in two items in this indicator, namely providing opportunities to be involved socially (decreased with 1%) and helping students to manage their non-academic responsibilities (decreased with 1%). The results show that students generally rely more on student support services than before COVID-19, and that they are generally also more involved in campus activities than before the pandemic. However, non-academic support remains a challenge post-COVID as this item not only shows a slight decrease, but is also the item with the lowest score overall in this indicator (even pre-pandemic). Non-academic support includes assistance with financial aid, time management, balancing work and studies, and navigating administrative processes. Through the delivery of and/or an enhanced emphasis on, for example, financial literacy workshops, mentorships programmes to help students manage their responsibilities more effectively, and the simplification of administrative processes, HEIs can see an improvement in this area.

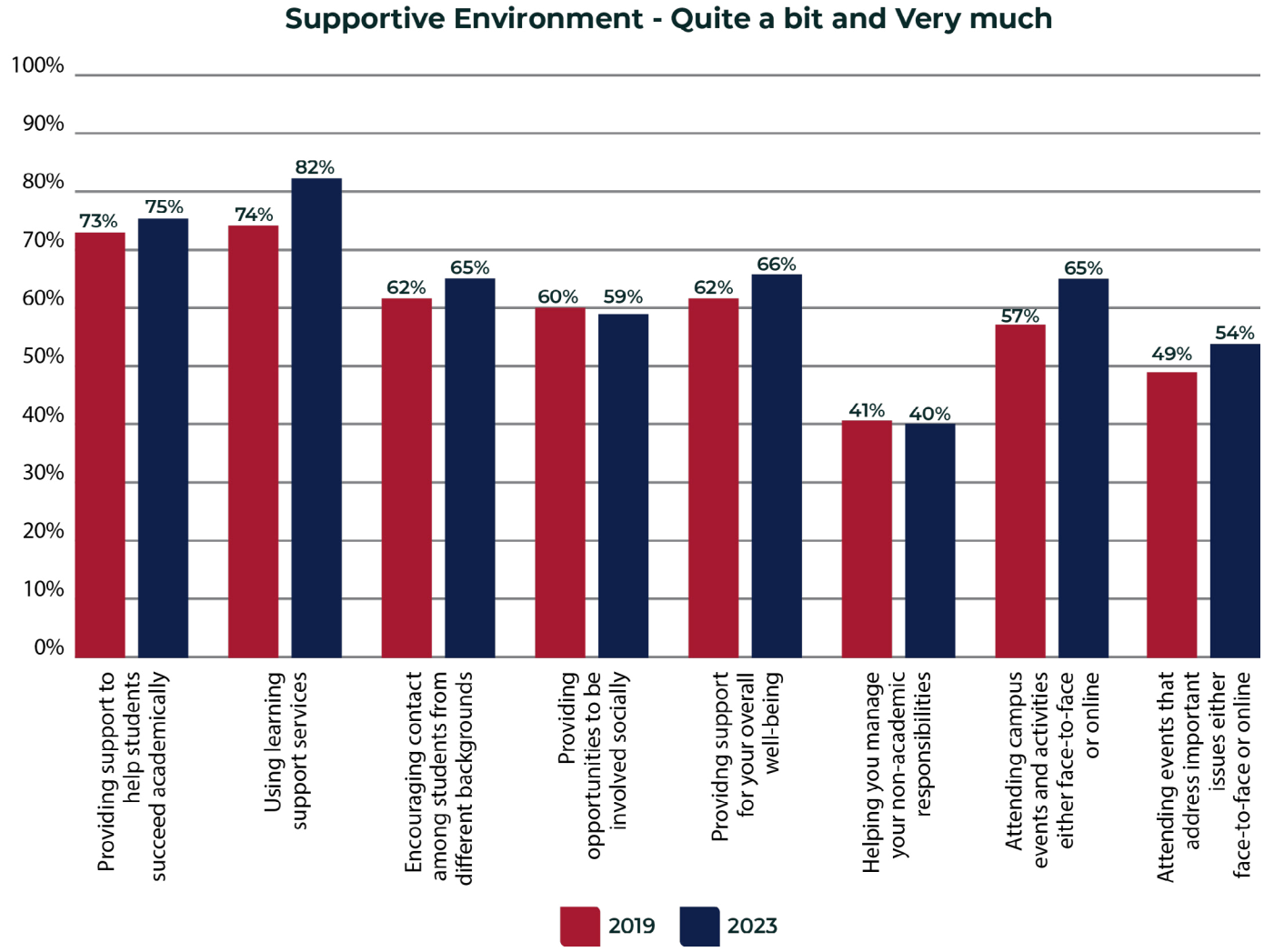

Figure 12: Comparison between 2019 and 2023 data on the supportive environment indicator

Figure 13 presents a comparison of pre- and post-COVID data on students' quality of interactions with support services. The previous section highlighted the items in this indicator related to students' interaction with their peers and their lecturers. The focus is on the extent to which students experience meaningful engagement with various areas of support that HEIs offer. Notable increases are observed in the quality of students' interaction with peer learning support (e.g., tutorials), as well as student support services (e.g., academic advising, disability support, career services, etc.). Other administrative services, which refer to non-academic institutional processes and support structures such as financial aid or bursary services, residence administration, student records management, and general communication channels, declined with 5% post-pandemic. This corresponds with the preceding section in which students reported a decline in their post-pandemic engagement with non-academic support.

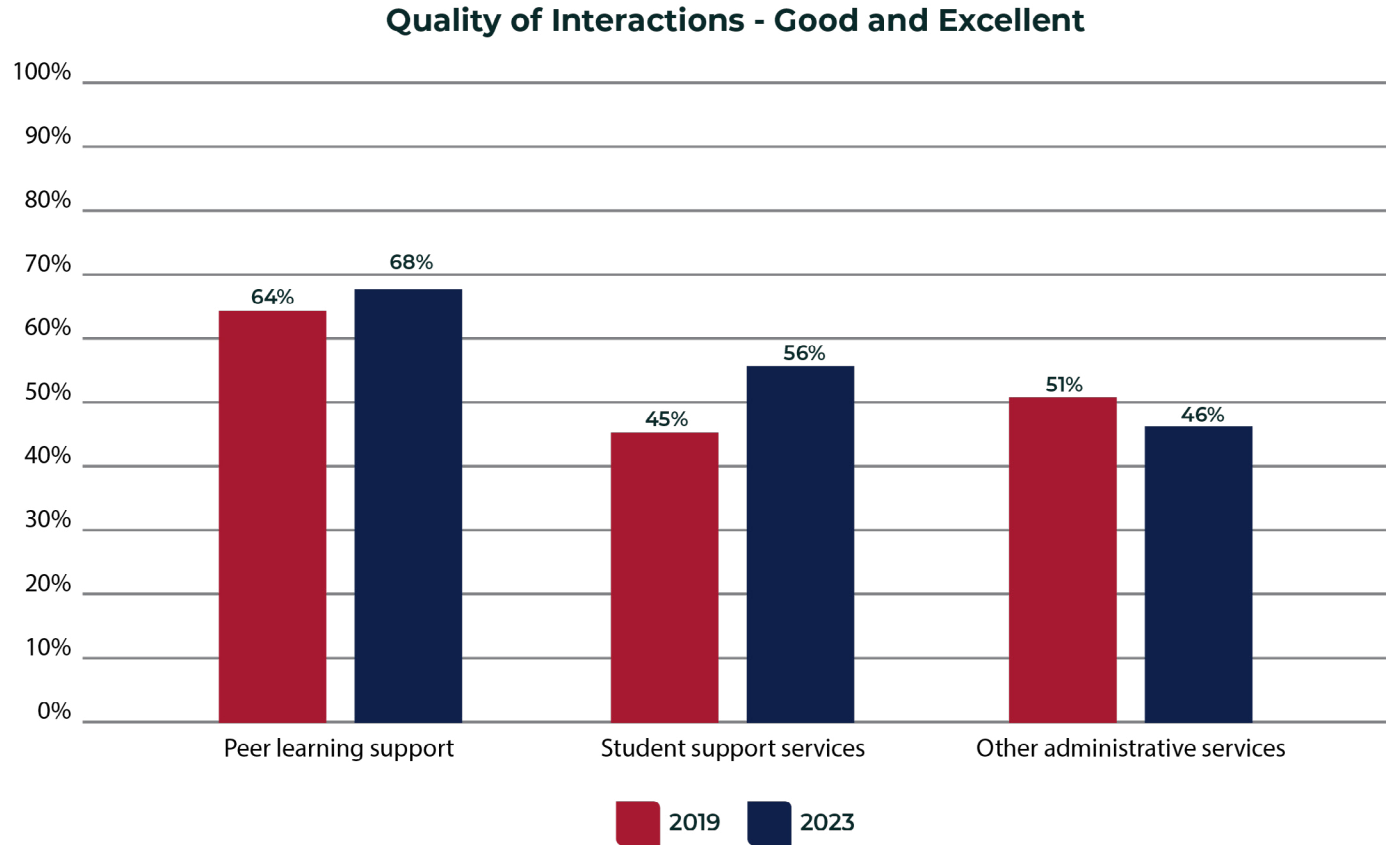

Figure 13: Comparison between 2019 and 2023 data on the quality of interactions with support services indicator

HIPs refer to educational experiences that require significant student effort, foster deep learning, and promote engagement. These practices are associated with improved student success. **Figure 14** shows that post-pandemic, students' participation in HIPs associated with student support increased. Post-COVID, more students participate in a first-year experience programme (4% increase), consult academic advisors (5% increase), and make use of peer learning support (e.g., tutorials, with a 9% increase). While more students make use of peer learning support such as tutorials, the portion of students who are appointed as tutors (or explained material as a tutor to other students), remains constant pre- and post-pandemic.

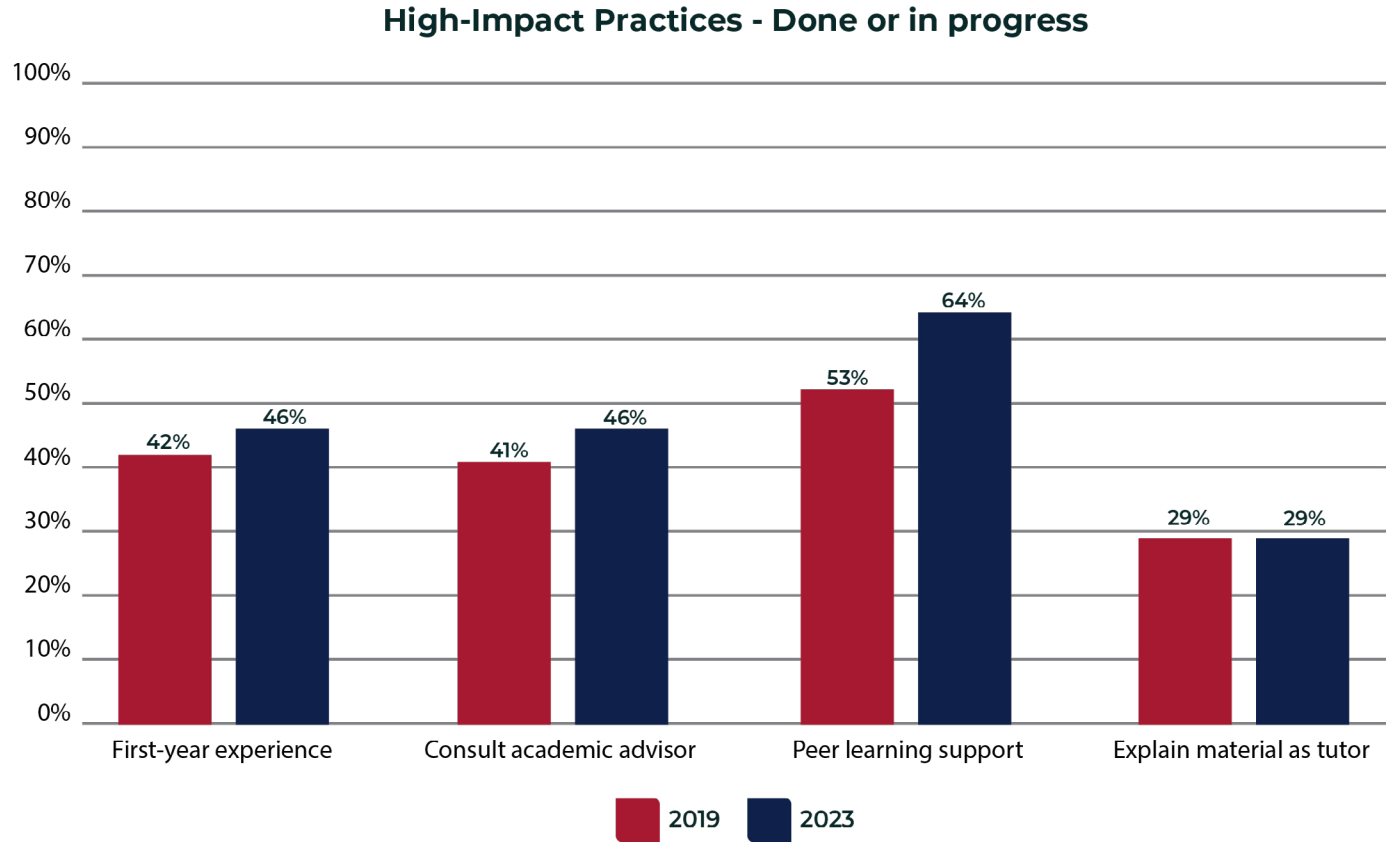

Figure 14: Comparison between 2019 and 2023 data on participation in HIPs related to student support

The results in this section show that not only do students generally utilise support services offered by HEIs to a greater extent than they did pre-COVID, they also experience these services more positively, as shown in the increased quality of interactions with support services. The qualitative data expands on the premium that students place on student support services during and at the end of the pandemic:

> *"I think mostly the tutorials that I often attend and care of the tutors and lecturers [contributed to my learning]. I think it's important because encourages students to do better in their studies and it gives them support."*

> *"[What contributed most to my learning is] being a class rep, joining [a community development and experiential learning initiative], and my application getting accepted for becoming a peer educator. Getting free access to therapy."*

> *"If I had to choose just one change that would improve the educational experience at [my institution], I would say that it would be to increase the number of student support services available. This could include additional academic advising, tutoring, and mental health support. The university is already doing great work in these areas, but there is always room for improvement."*

> *"Having a tutor [contributed to my learning]. The person helped us thoroughly."*

> *"Access to resources like [the] library, they allow us as students to deepen our knowledge and explore different perspectives."*
> *"It has been a challenging year but working together with my peers, discussing with lectures, seeking help from academic advisors and attending tutorials have been the most important factors contributing to my learning."*

4.4 Employability insights

Student engagement data provides insight into the extent to which students have developed the graduate attributes required to be successful in the workplace. It also provides data on the HIPs students participate in during their studies that help them to be better prepared for employment. This section discusses two key data points from the SASSE to highlight these insights. **Figure 15** is a comparison of students' self-reported perceived gains pre- and post-COVID. The perceived gains indicator measures students' self-reported development in key job-related skills or attributes.

The perceived gains indicator shows consistent or improved student-reported development across most skills, with notable increases in critical thinking (85% to 89%) and writing effectively (77% to 81%), which suggests that post-COVID learning environments strengthened key academic competencies. However, gains in job-related knowledge and skills remain relatively low (67% to 69%), which indicates a potential need for greater emphasis on career preparation and applied learning experiences in HEIs' curricula. These self-reported scores reflect students' perceptions of their own development in the academic environment they experience. However, research shows that employers often report gaps in graduates' skills (Griesel & Parker, 2009; Vezi-Magigaba & Utete, 2023; South African Graduate Employers Association, 2024), particularly in critical thinking, communication, and job-related competencies. This discrepancy highlights the need for stronger collaboration between HEIs and industry to ensure that curricula are aligned with workplace expectations in order to equip students with both the academic knowledge and practical skills needed for employment success.

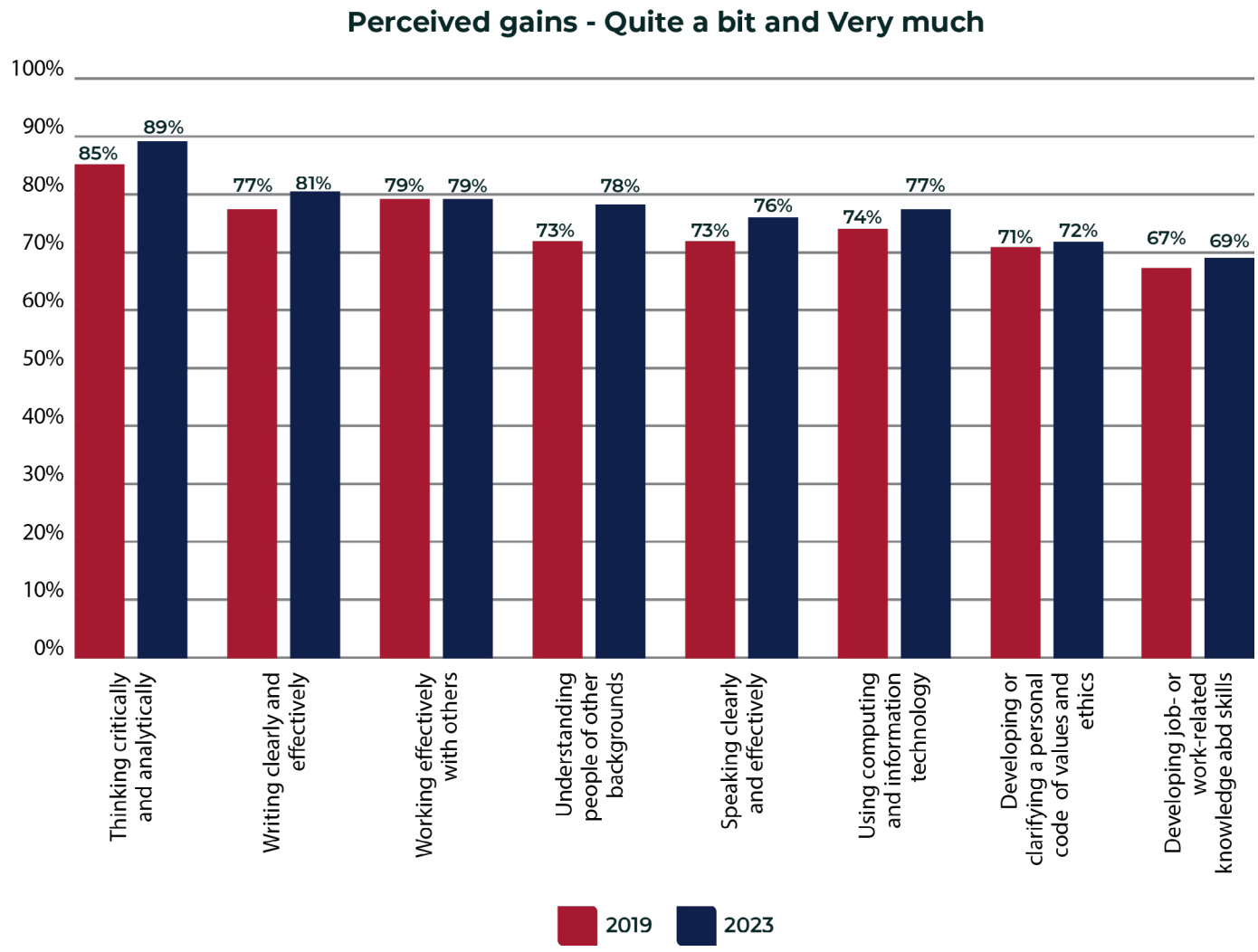

Figure 15: Comparison between 2019 and 2023 data on the perceived gains indicator

Figure 16 compares students' pre- and post-COVID participation in HIPs related to employability. Increased participation in leadership activities (4%), student societies (4%), international perspectives (1%), and academic literacy activities (2%) are observed post-pandemic. There was a decline in practical work (2%) and research with staff (3%), while numeracy activities remained constant at 15%. Even with slight increases post-pandemic in some of these HIPs , less than 30% of students reported having participated in HIPs related to the development of job-related skills. This data emphasises areas of improvement for HEIs. Targeted efforts to increase opportunities for participation in these activities and encouraging students to participate in these activities could improve participation in these practices.

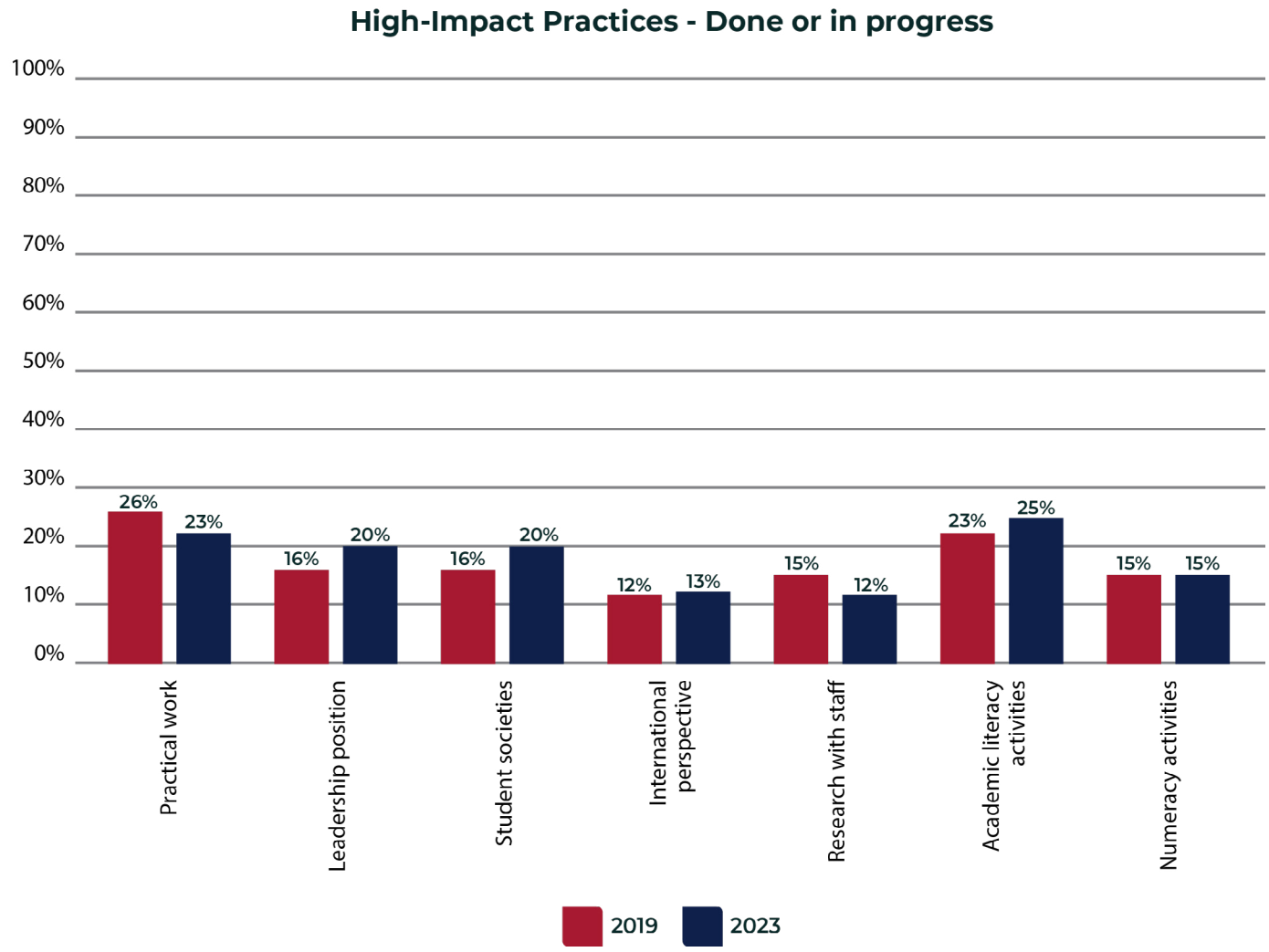

Figure 16: Comparison between 2019 and 2023 data on participation in HIPs related to employability

5. Conclusion

This report examined post-COVID student engagement trends in South African higher education using SASSE data. The findings highlight key shifts in blended learning, relational engagement, and student support services, as well as ongoing challenges in aligning HEI experiences with employability outcomes.

The integration of blended learning has resulted in higher levels of engagement in higher-order and reflective learning, which reinforces its effectiveness as a teaching strategy. However, challenges remain in assessment and feedback practices, which require further refinement. Relational engagement trends are mixed, with peer collaboration improving but student-staff interaction declining, which raises concerns about the loss of mentorship and academic guidance in blended learning spaces. Similarly, discussions with diverse others have not increased, which highlights a need to strengthen cross-cultural engagement. Institutional support services are being utilised more, particularly for academic and well-being support, but gaps remain in non-academic assistance, such as financial aid guidance and administrative processes. Addressing these gaps through financial literacy workshops and streamlined administrative support can enhance student retention and success. From an employability perspective, students report strong perceived gains in critical thinking and writing skills, but job-related knowledge and workplace preparedness remain areas for improvement. Given the ongoing skills gap reported by employers, HEIs must strengthen partnerships with industry, expand WIL, and embed employability skills into curricula.

The findings in this report reinforce the importance of using student engagement data to inform institutional decision making, quality assurance, and student success strategies. Moving forward, HEIs should focus on:

- Enhancing blended learning approaches to sustain and expand the benefits of flexible learning while improving assessment and feedback mechanisms.
- Rebuilding student-staff engagement through innovative teaching strategies, mentorship programmes, and structured interaction opportunities.
- Strengthening non-academic support structures to assist students in navigating financial, administrative, and personal challenges.
- Aligning graduate attributes with workforce needs by fostering industry partnerships, increasing experiential learning opportunities, and embedding employability skills into HEIs' curricula.

By acting on these insights, HEIs can create a more responsive learning environment that fosters academic success, holistic development, and career readiness, which will ultimately ensure that graduates are well-equipped for the evolving demands of the world of work.

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