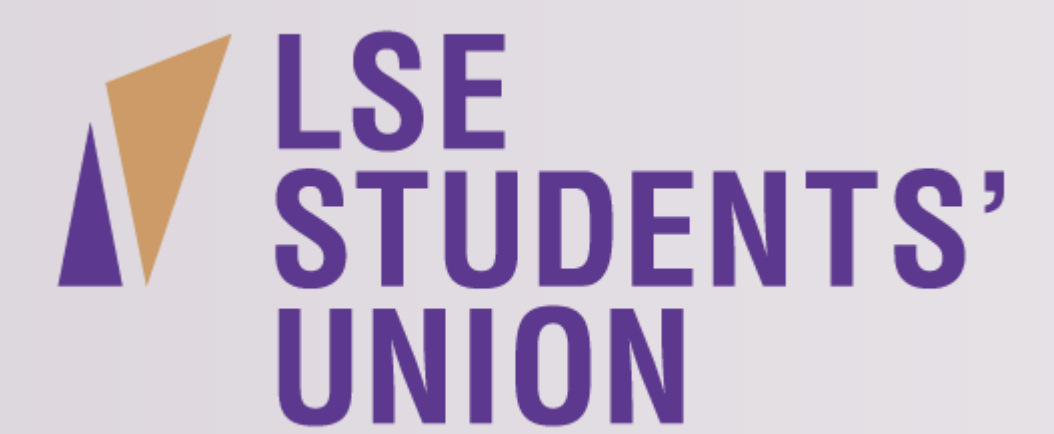


MPA Academic Performance & Community Belonging Amidst A Cost-of-Living Crisis

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Studying Amidst A Cost-of-Living Crisis

Adverse economic conditions have led to unprecedented increases in the price of basic necessities across the United Kingdom (UK). This has made it more difficult for students to perform academically, maintain their well-being, and integrate into their academic community.

In December 2022, the UK parliament reported the highest rate of food price inflation since September 1977 at 17.6% (2023). The impact of this budgetary challenge was captured by a survey by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) in early 2023. Findings showed that 49% of students were experiencing financial difficulty with more than three-quarters (78%) concerned about their academic performance amidst a cost-of-living crisis (Official for National Statistics, 2023).

These findings were concordant with a Russell Group Students' Union survey with 8,800 respondents. Researchers found that 94% of students were concerned about the crisis, 1 in 4 students were regularly missing meals as they could not afford them, and 72% of students reported that the crisis has negatively impacted their mental health (Russell Group Students' Union, 2023).

Do MPA students feel a “pinch”?

Limited research has been conducted on the impact of rising living costs among students at the London School of Economics, especially, the Masters of Public Administration (MPA) program at the School of Public Policy (SPP).

Thus, our project largely focused on the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on MPA student academic performance and community belonging within the larger SPP & LSE community. This work also scoped the ways in which MPA students have attempted to cope with these budgetary challenges throughout the academic year.

Findings and recommendations based on the MPA 2022-2023 cohort are likely to extrapolate well beyond the SPP and the greater LSE post graduate community based on its diverse profile. The MPA program boasts itself in welcoming talent from all over the world (35 different nationalities) with a wide array of academic training and professional experiences in the field of economics, engineering, and law to name a few. The average MPA student has three years' worth of work experience.

Research Methodology

We deployed a 20-question Qualtrics survey over a three week collection period (May 8 – 26, 2023) to better understand the impacts of the crisis and how MPA students coped with recent budgetary challenges throughout the 2022-23 academic year. The structured survey collected responses through multiple choice questions and 5-point Likert Scales. The survey was intentionally designed to be concise yet powerful to maximize participation.

Understanding that financial difficulty may be a sensitive topic of discussion, the project was also subject to an ethics and data management review in collaboration with LSE Ethics & Data Library teams. The survey design was purposeful in its intention to minimize the collection of personal and identifiable data and the safe keeping of survey responses to maintain the confidentiality of respondents and boost participation.

The survey was largely promoted through online communication channels such as the SPP specific social media groups. A small participation incentive provided by LSE Changemakers also helped with participant recruitment.

At the end of the collection period, the survey yielded a response rate of 28% (65 respondents).

Respondent Demographics

Of the 65 respondents: 85% were MPA Year 1s, 65% identified as female, 55% were 25-30 years old (range: 18 – 42), and were predominantly Asian and Caucasian.

52% of respondents reported discussing the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis weekly among their peer groups. When asked about their level of concern regarding the crisis (Fig 1), 85% of respondents reported being personally concerned about increased living costs and 90% of students reported greater difficulty managing their budgets. Our survey also showed that MPA students use a mix of parental support, individual savings, part-time work, scholarships and loans to finance their education.

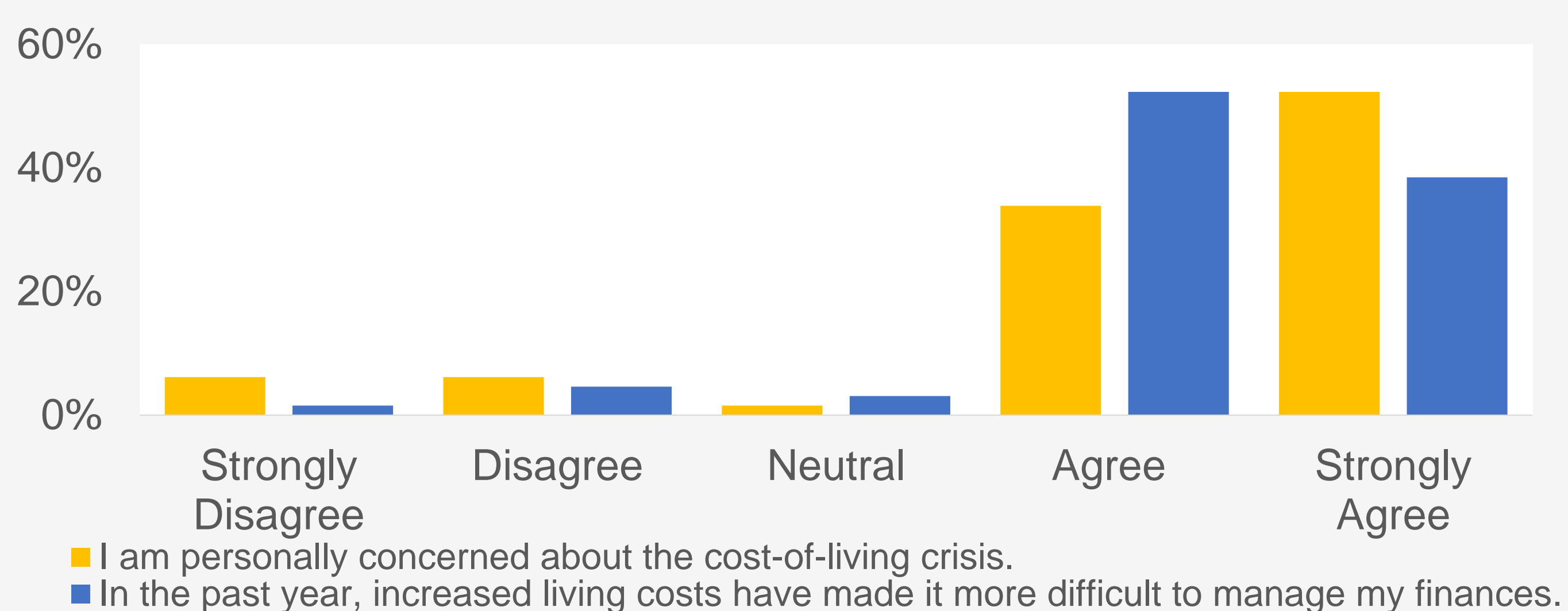


Figure 1: Level of Concern Regarding Cost of Living

Adapting to Increased Living Costs

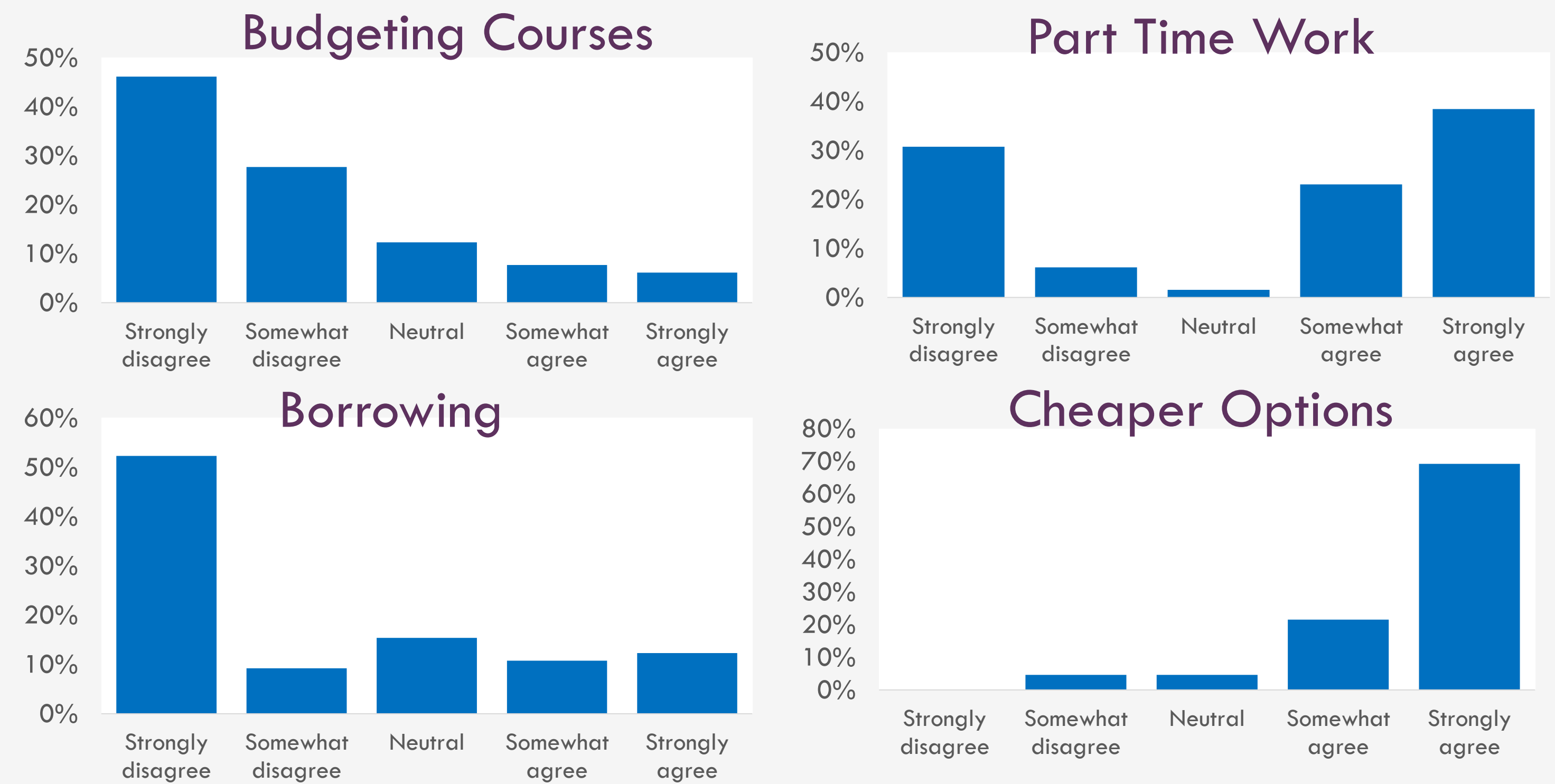


Figure 2: How are MPA students managing their budgets?

Faced with increased living costs, our survey characterized how MPA students have coped with recent budgetary challenges (Fig 2). Our findings show that 62% of surveyed MPA students were not borrowing more to meet funding shortfalls. Rather, 91% of respondents reported opting for cheaper options for daily expenses, 76% of respondents budgeted expenses more closely, and 61% of students reported working more part-time hours. Our survey also examined the effect of these responses on the MPA student experience in the 2022-23 academic year (Fig 3).

Rising Costs & MPA Student Experience

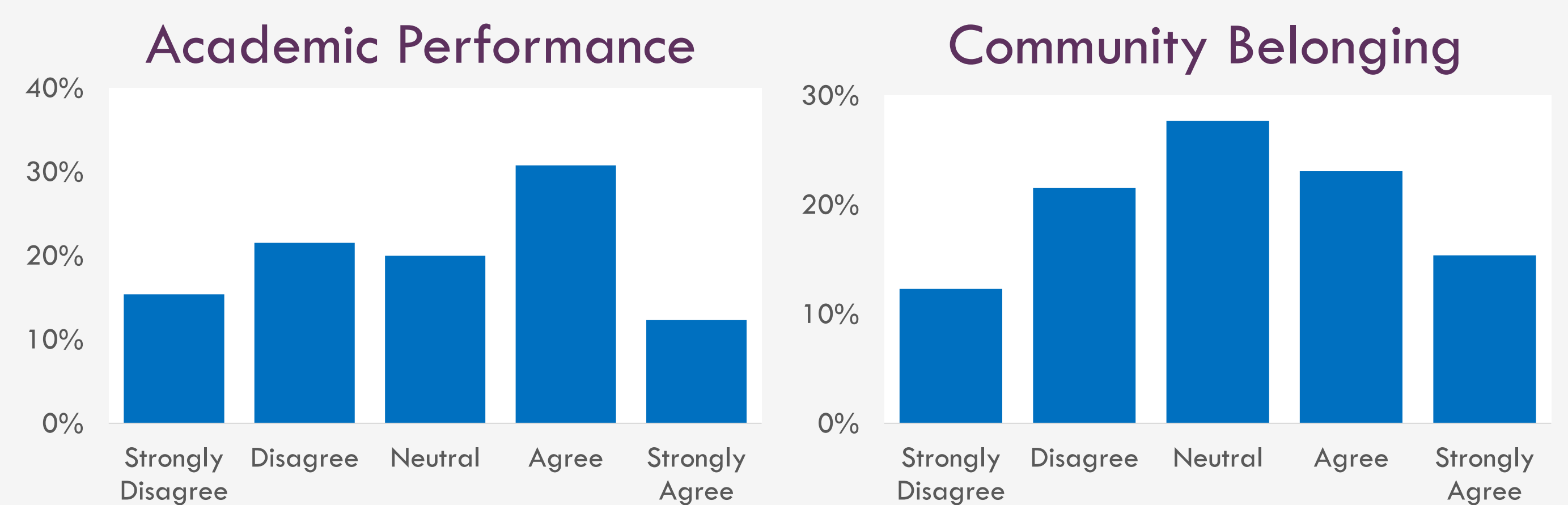


Figure 3: Impact of Increased Living Cost on the MPA Student Experience

Of the surveyed students, 38% reported that increased living costs has made it more difficult for them to perform towards their desired academic standards. This was also reflected by students reporting difficulty attending academic support sessions (45%) and professional development activities (47%).

Similarly, 43% of students reported that increased living costs has affected their perceived integration into the SPP & LSE academic community with students reporting reduced participation in extracurricular activities (63%) and LSE-led socials (52%) in the 2022-23 academic year.

Recommendations

Focus on Promoting LSE Support Schemes

- LSE & SPP should place a greater emphasis on promoting and expanding access to existing support schemes such as hardship funds, catering offers, part time work or budgeting information sessions offered through LSE Life.

Offer alternatives for scheduled in-person activities

- LSE & SPP should review its student activity programming and delivery to offer greater flexibility for students to take advantage of learning and/or networking opportunities especially for those that are working part-time.

Continue cost-of-living impact studies

- LSE & SPP should continue to monitor student well-being and conduct in-house research to better connect those in need with available resources.

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