

COVID-19 and the University Experience

Introduction and background

University students have had a challenging year. Initial hopes that they would be able to experience 'normal university life' have not been realised. Many students spent large parts of their first semester at university studying from their bedrooms. With the current national lockdown, most have been unable to return to campus at all. Even when they were on campus, research from the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) at the end of November found that 53 per cent were receiving all their learning online. It must be remembered many of the benefits of the university experience come from participation in extra-curricular activities, work placements, and other enrichment activities including participation in university social life.

This report from the Sutton Trust focusses on 3 aspects of the student experience which are particularly pertinent at the current time – participation in extra-curricular activities, academic experience, and financial security and support. Findings are based on 2 new surveys of current UK undergraduate students carried out by Youthsight. The first polling of 904 students was carried out in November, with students asked about their experiences during the autumn semester. The second survey of 887 students was carried out at the beginning of February 2021, to reflect experiences of the national lockdown introduced in January. A second accompanying report, [The University of Life](#) (not summarised here) highlights how extra-curricular activities can help students to develop the skills which are valued by employers.

Key findings

Participation in extra-curricular activities during COVID

- In February this year, students were asked about their participation in activities since the start of the latest lockdown. Just 30 per cent of students have been taking part in any kind of student society, including sports.
- Continuing students (in second year and above, N=586) were asked in the autumn about their participation in student societies during that semester and during the same period in 2019. Since returning to university in September, only 36 per cent of this group of students had taken part in a student society or sport, an 18 percentage point fall compared to the same period in 2019. For non-sport activities, participation fell from 45 to 26 per cent.
- Thirty-seven per cent of students were not taking part in any activities, up 14 percentage points compared to the same period in 2019.
- Participation of first year students has also decreased. This year, 44 per cent of first year students reported taking part in a student society or sport, compared to 51 per cent of first year students polled before the pandemic.
- Participation in every type of activity examined here (extra-curricular activities, paid work, work experience, and study abroad), other than sports, fell by a similar amount between autumn 2019 and autumn 2020 across different types of institution. The only exception was for sport, where participation at Russell Group universities fell slightly more, by 12 percentage points (from 40% in 2019 to 28% in autumn 2020).
- Before the pandemic, working-class students were already less likely to be taking part in extra-curricular activities than their better off peers. This gap has now widened. During the autumn semester in 2020, 41 per cent of middle-class students in their second and third year took part in extra-curricular activities (a fall of 17 percentage points from 2019) compared to just 27 per cent of working-class students (a larger fall of 23 percentage points).
- Since January 2021, just 25 per cent of students from working class backgrounds have taken part in student



societies (including sports), compared to 33 per cent of middle class students.

- In autumn 2020 students in all years from better-off backgrounds were much more likely to have taken part in student societies including sports (4% vs 33%), although both groups were equally likely to take part in paid work (27% vs 28%).
- Participation has fallen further since the autumn term for all students. The proportion of students participating in a sports society has fallen from 18 to 13 per cent; the numbers of those participating in a student society (non-sport) has fallen from 29 to 23 per cent. The percentage of those undertaking paid work has, however, remained stable (26% to 27%).
- The proportion of students taking part in no activities of any kind since January 2021 remains higher for working class students, at 48 per cent, compared to 43 per cent of better-off students.

Factors influencing participation

- Before the pandemic, students living at home with their families were less likely to take part in student societies than their peers living away from home, as one might expect. Since the pandemic, this gap has narrowed. In January, 25 per cent of students living at home participated in student societies including sport compared to 35 per cent of those living away from home.
- Students were asked about the main barriers to participation in extra-curricular activities. The most common barrier, cited by 29 per cent of students, was a lack of social interaction putting them off participating online. Other commonly cited barriers included not wanting to spend more time online after lectures, and the fact that their activity of choice was not taking place.

Satisfaction with academic provision

- In the autumn semester, 68 per cent of students were satisfied with the academic provision at their university. However, 30 per cent were unsatisfied. Third years were the most likely to say they were unsatisfied (37%, compared to 29% of second years and 25% of first years). This may be because they have higher expectations during their final year when stakes are higher.
- Students studying at Russell Group institutions were more likely to be unsatisfied (35%) with the academic provision put in place by their universities than students at Post-1992 institutions (26%).
- There appears to be a strong correlation between satisfaction and study space. Eighty-five per cent of those satisfied with academic provision reported having sufficient study space, but only 61 per cent of those unsatisfied
- By February 2021, the percentage of those satisfied with the academic provision at their university had reduced from 68 per cent in the autumn to 59 per cent. By February, 39 per cent were unsatisfied with the provision on offer.

Impact of the pandemic on skills development

- In the autumn, students were asked whether they felt academic or wider 'life skills' (such as communication, motivation, confidence, resilience or leadership) had been

more negatively affected by the pandemic. Eighty-seven per cent reported negative impacts on their development of either one or both types of skills, with just 9 per cent saying neither had been negatively impacted. Thirty-four per cent of students said that the development of their wider social and non-academic life skills has been more negatively impacted, 18 per cent said the development of academic skills has been more negatively affected, and 36 per cent felt that both had been impacted equally. Students at Russell Group institutions were the most likely to say their wider development had been more negatively impacted than their academic development.

Financial strain

- In autumn 2020, fifty-four per cent of students said they had experienced some form of financial hardship during the semester. The most common issue was being unable to find a job at (27%), while 19 per cent said their parents are less able to support them financially. Sixteen per cent have had hours reduced, 9 per cent missed work due to self-isolating, and 6 per cent have lost a job.
- In February, students were also asked how difficult it was for them to cover their basic living and course expenses, for example their rent, food, or materials they need for study. Thirty-three per cent said it was difficult for them to cover basic living and course expenses, a figure that was higher for working class than middle class students (39% vs 30%). For students who do not receive enough from their families and their maintenance loan combined, there have been fewer options this year to supplement income, with a risk that some students are facing considerable financial hardship as a consequence.

Student concerns and available support

- The biggest concern expressed by students of all socio-economic groups in the February poll was not being able to gain the skills and experience needed for employment (77%). The second biggest concern was being unable to take part in university social life (70%). Seventy-one per cent were concerned about their mental health and wellbeing.
- In the autumn, 49 per cent of students were satisfied with the level of financial support on offer to those facing financial hardship. A higher proportion of working-class students reported being unsatisfied with support (29% vs 21% of middle-class students). Students at Russell Group institutions were unsatisfied with the financial support on offer and less aware of what support was available.
- Fifty-two per cent of students were happy with the pastoral help on offer from their university. However, twenty-eight per cent were unsatisfied, and 21 per cent were unaware of what support was on offer. While 56 per cent of students at Post-1992 institutions were satisfied with the support in place, this was lower at Russell Group universities (49%).

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/covid-19-and-the-university-experience-student-life-pandemic/>

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