



Covid-19 and the University Experience



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KEY FINDINGS

- Covid-19 has had a profound impact on education since March 2020, not least on universities. Institutions have had to make substantial changes to academic provision in order to cope with the pandemic, including closing facilities, social distancing measures, and blended teaching during autumn 2020, with most courses moving fully online in early 2021. This has had significant impacts on teaching and learning, but also on the wider university experience, an important part of developing the skills needed by graduates.

Extra-curricular participation and life skills

- Participation in extra-curricular activities this academic year is substantially down on normal. 39% of students reported taking part in student societies or sport in the autumn term, and this has fallen further since Christmas to just 30%. Almost half (47%) of students reported taking part in no wider enrichment activities at all this term.
- Comparing participation by continuing students in autumn 2020 to autumn 2019 before the pandemic, participation in student societies or sport was down 18 percentage points, from 54% in 2019. Students were also less likely to have taken part in work experience (down 6 percentage points), or paid work (down 5 percentage points), while numbers of those studying abroad were less than half of the previous year. The number of students not taking part in any activities was up 14 percentage points from 2019.
- The participation gap has widened during the pandemic. 44% of middle-class students took part in student societies last term compared to just 33% of students from a working-class background. Participation had fallen more from 2019 levels for working class students during the autumn 2020 term.
- More students are also now living at home during the pandemic, with rates rising from 34% in January 2020 before the crisis, to 43% in the autumn 2020 semester, and up again to 58% in February 2021.
- Those from less well-off backgrounds are more likely to be living at home. 64% of those from a working class background have spent this term living with their family, up from 50% in the autumn. Students living at home are less likely to take part in extra-curricular activities, with just 25% of the students living at home in autumn semester taking part, compared to 32% of students living away from home.
- 87% of students reported barriers to participation in extra-curricular activities last term, including online

activities. 29% who were put off by a lack of social interaction during online activities, and a further quarter (24%) cited “zoom-fatigue” as a barrier; not wanting to spend more time online after completing lectures and course content virtually.

- The overwhelming majority of students (87%) felt their development had been negatively impacted by pandemic restrictions. More students (34%) felt their development of non-academic life skills (such as communication, motivation, confidence, resilience or leadership) has been more negatively impacted, compared to academic skills (18%).
- More students reported being unsatisfied with provision for activities beyond the classroom (36%) than were unsatisfied with academic provision (30%).

Support and financial resources

- The biggest current worry for students is being able to gain skills and experience needed for employment, with 76% saying they are fairly or very worried. This was followed by being able to take part in university social life (71%), concerns about their mental health/well-being (70%) and classes being online rather than face to face (64%).
- Over half (54%) of students experienced financial issues during the autumn semester, such as being unable to find a job (27%), having reduced hours (16%), or their parents being less able to support them (19%).
- A third of students (33%) said it was currently difficult for them to cover their basic living and course expenses. This figure was higher for working class (39%) than middle class (30%) students.
- While just under half of students were satisfied with the financial support provided by their university, 28% reported not being aware of what support was available. Similarly, 52% were happy with the pastoral support provided, but 21% were unaware of the support on offer.
- 1 in 10 students reported not having adequate internet access to complete their university work and assessments, which has doubled since April last year. Almost a quarter (22%) do not have adequate study space.
- Given the challenges students are facing this year, there is real concern that drop-out rates may increase. 10% of working-class students said it was unlikely that they would complete the year, compared to 6% of middle-class students. Of those who were worried about not completing the year three quarters indicated that the pandemic was significantly or somewhat negatively impacting their chances of completing the year.

INTRODUCTION

University students have faced a challenging year. While there was originally a great deal of optimism that students would be able to experience 'normal university life', with some COVID-safe adjustments, as students returned to campus and outbreaks of the virus took off in student populations, it quickly became apparent this would not be feasible. Instead, many students spent large parts of their first semester at university studying from their bedrooms. And now, with another national lockdown, most students have been unable to return to campus at all.¹

Even when students were on campus, research from the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) at the end of November found that over half (53%) of students were receiving all their learning online, something only about a fifth of students expected back in June 2020.² Perhaps unsurprisingly, there has been a large amount of pushback from students, with protests and rent strikes on campuses across the UK.³

The academic experience has clearly looked very different for students this year. But higher education is much broader than just what happens in the lecture hall, with the benefits of the university experience coming from participation in extra-curricular activities, work placements and other enrichment activities, as well as meeting new people and participating in university social life.

As outlined in an accompanying report to this brief,⁴ these activities can help students to develop valuable 'life skills', such as communication, resilience, confidence, motivation and leadership; skills which previous Sutton Trust research has shown are highly valued by employers.⁵ But many of these skills are not developed sufficiently by a student's core academic course alone. For example, just 24%

of graduates felt their course helped them to develop leadership skills, compared to 43% of graduates who took part in student societies.

But this year, with limits on in person activities, the risk of "Zoom fatigue" after a long day of lectures and students perhaps apprehensive about taking part in social activities with new people online, access to these activities is likely to look very different. This brief explores the participation of undergraduate students in these activities during the pandemic, looking at barriers to participation and how this is influenced by the socio-economic background of students.

With many activities (both course related and extra-curricular) having moved online, students need access to a workspace, a suitable device and adequate internet connectivity to be able to participate. However, Sutton Trust research during the first lockdown found that in April, a quarter of students (23%) did not have an adequate study space, 6% did not have access to computers or devices needed for learning or assessment, and 5% did not have sufficient internet access.⁶

Financial resources also play a significant role in making the most of the university experience, and students are of course impacted by what is happening in the wider economy. With a drop in many of the sectors students would typically work in alongside their studies, such as in the

catering and hospitality industries,⁷ along with many families struggling financially, the wider economic repercussions of the pandemic may have impacted the affordability of higher education for many.

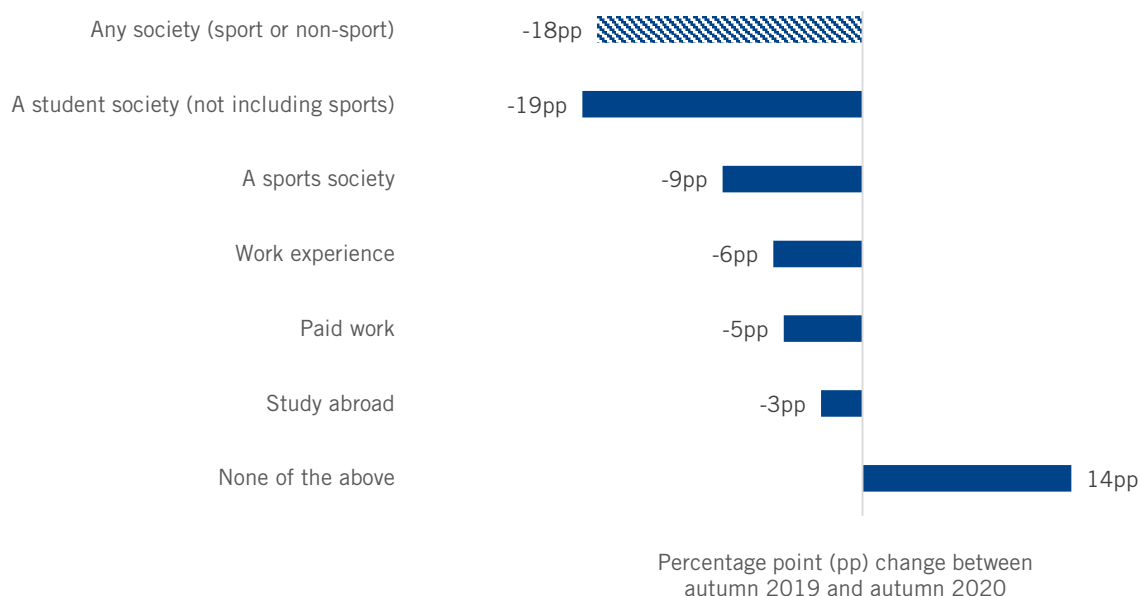
Findings here are based on two new surveys of current UK undergraduate students carried out by Youthsight. The first polling of 904 students was carried out between the 13th and the 16th of November, with students asked about their experiences during the autumn semester. The second survey of 887 students was carried out between the 5th and the 12th of February 2021, to reflect circumstances since the national lockdown introduced in January.⁸

EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES DURING COVID

Patterns of participation

In February this year, students were polled about their participation in activities since the start of the latest lockdown. Just 23% of students have been taking part in a student society (not including sports), 13% in a sport society (with 30% taking part in at least one society of all types overall), 27% have done paid work, 8% have carried out work experience, and just 2% reported studying abroad. Almost half of students, 47%, said they had not done any of these activities this term. With almost all university activities now having to take place online, activities which are taking place will look very different to a normal year.

Figure 1. Changes in continuing students' participation in extracurricular activities - autumn 2019 vs autumn 2020



Source: Youthsight student polling, 13th - 16th of November 2020

Participation has fallen considerably throughout the pandemic, both when comparing the autumn to participation pre pandemic, and now when looking at the impact of the latest lockdown. To look at changes in participation compared to rates pre-pandemic, 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 (see Figure 1).⁹ Since returning to university in September, only 36% 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 even further, from 45% to 26%. Students were also less likely to have taken part in work experience (down 6 percentage points from 19% to 13%), and rates of reported studying abroad were 2%, compared to 5% in 2019. A large proportion of students, 37%, were not taking part in any activities, up 14 percentage points compared to the same period in 2019.

As well as continuing students, participation of first year students this year was also compared with first years polled in January 2020,¹⁰ before the pandemic, who were asked what they had done so far at university. Again, there were falls in participation in all activities. This year, 44% of first year students reported taking part in a student society or sport, compared to 51% of first year students polled before the pandemic. 1 in 5 (20%) had taken on paid work, compared to 25% in January 2020, 8% reported having done work experience, compared to 21% in January 2020. In 2020, 41% reported taking part in none of these activities, a much higher proportion than 29% in January 2020.

The pandemic has clearly had a considerable impact on student's experiences at university this year, even outside of their core academic course.

Policies in place during the pandemic are likely to have differed between institutions, with universities and student unions making decisions on how to interpret regulations and how

best to respond to a rapidly changing context, potentially with variation in the activities that could or could not take place. However, despite this participation in every type of activity examined here, other than sports, fell by a similar amount across different types of institution (Russell Group, Pre-1992 and Post-1992 universities)¹¹ from autumn 2019 to autumn 2020. The only exception to this was for sport, where (looking again only at continuing students to allow for comparisons across years), participation at RG universities fell slightly more, by 12 percentage points (from 40% in 2019 to 28% in autumn 2020), compared to 7 percentage points at Post-1992 institutions, from a lower base of 20% in 2019, to 13% in 2020.¹²

Before the pandemic, students from working class backgrounds (C2DE) were less likely to take part in many of the activities examined here, an issue explored in more detail in the accompanying report to this brief. For the second and third year students polled here, back in autumn 2019, 58% from middle class backgrounds (ABC1) were taking part in a student society or a sport activity, compared to a lower proportion, 42% of working-class students.

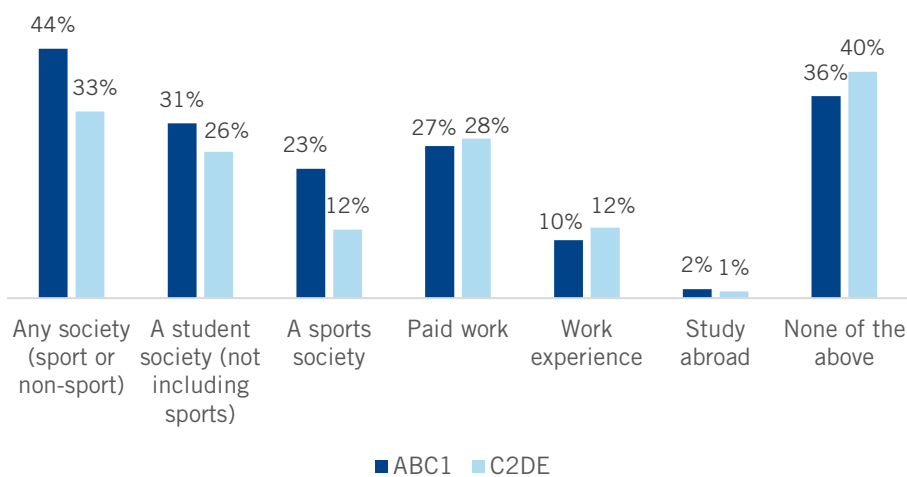
However, even though working-class students were already less likely to be taking part than their better off peers, the participation gap has been widened by the pandemic. During the autumn semester in 2020, 41% of middle-class students in their second and third year took part in these activities (a fall of 17 percentage

points from 2019) compared to just 27% of working-class students (a larger fall of 23 percentage points). Potential reasons for this drop off and the widened participation gap are explored later on in this section.

Interestingly, while similar proportions in both groups took on paid work alongside their studies in 2019 (36% of ABC1 and 34% of C2DE), this figure fell by 7 percentage points, to 29%, for better-off students during the pandemic, but stayed the same for working class students (34%). It may be that students from working class backgrounds are less able to shoulder a loss in income, while middle-class students were more able financially to opt out, perhaps due to labour market conditions, or to allow themselves to focus on learning during the crisis. Our accompanying report shows that graduates from lower socio-economic backgrounds who worked while at university were slightly more likely to say they did so to cover their basic living costs (50% vs 46%) and were less likely to say they did so to have extra money to spend outside of their living expenses (33% vs 37%) than those from better-off families.¹³

Looking at participation in autumn 2020 for all students (including those in their first year), similar differences between socio-economic groups were seen. Students from better-off backgrounds were much more likely to have taken part in student societies including sports (see Figure 2, 44% vs 33%), although both groups were equally likely to take part in paid work (27% vs 28%).

Figure 2. Students' participation in extracurricular activities in autumn 2020 by socio-economic group



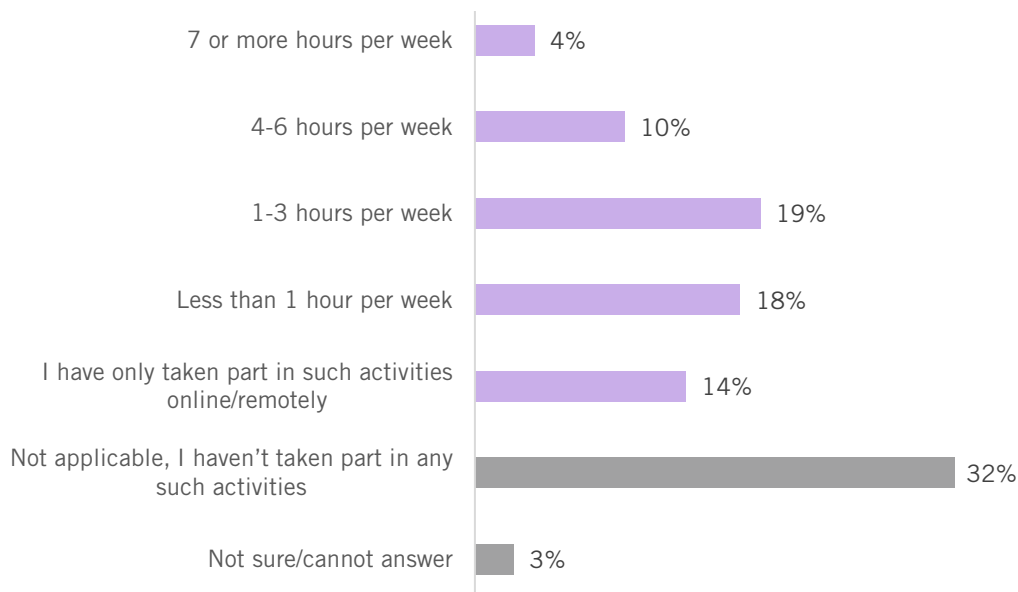
Source: Youthsight student polling, 13th - 16th of November 2020

All students (including first years) were asked about the hours per week they had spent on extra-curricular activities in the autumn 2020 semester (see Figure 3). 14% had only taken part in activities online and had not done any in person, about 1 in 5 (18%) had done less than an hour a week, a further 19% 1-3 hours per week, and only a small proportion were spending a considerable amount of their time on these activities, with 10% spending 4-6 hours and just 4% spending 7 hours or more on these activities each week.

Participation for many of these activities has fallen further since autumn this academic year (see Figure 4), when 29% of students were taking part in student societies (down further by 7 percentage points), 18% were taking part in a sports society (now dropped by 6 percentage points), and 39% doing any type of society overall (down 10 percentage points). 11% were currently doing work experience, down by 3 percentage points from last semester, and the proportion of students doing no activities has risen, from 38% to 47%. Rates of study abroad (already very low) and paid work have however not changed since the autumn. Participation is also likely to look very different for the activities which are currently able to take place, for example sports societies will not be able to meet collectively under the winter's lockdown regulations, so may instead for example be doing one to one meet ups for training or training activities organised online and carried out individually.

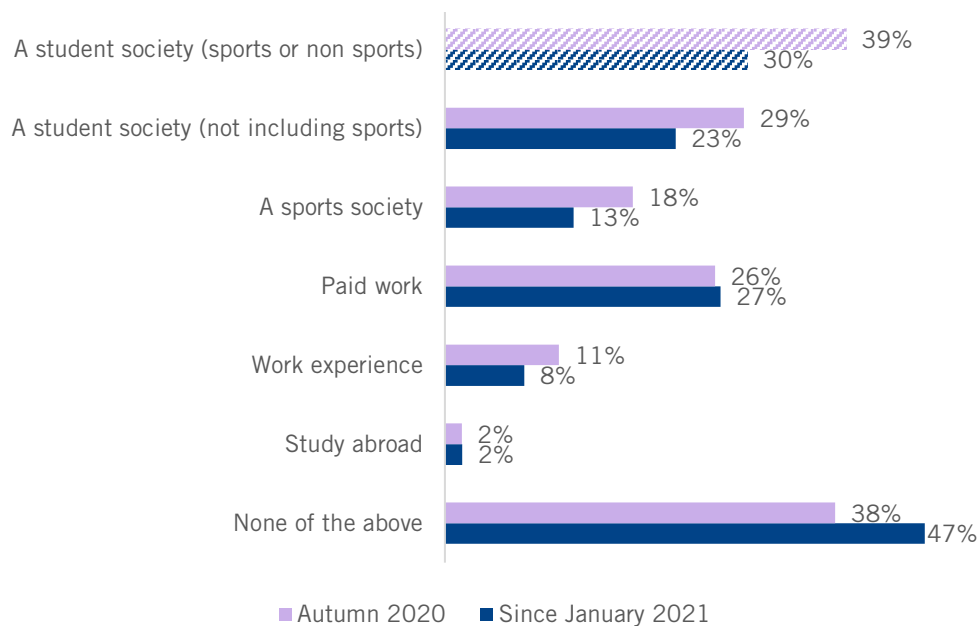
The socio-economic gap in participation has remained during the latest lockdown, although has closed slightly for some activities, with participation falling across socio-economic groups. Since January 2021, just 25% of students from working class backgrounds have taken part in student societies (including sports), compared to 33% of middle class students. Rates of paid work have remained similar (28% for ABC1 vs

Figure 3. Average hours per week students spent doing in person extra-curricular activities during autumn 2020



Source: Youthsight student polling, 13th - 16th of November 2020

Figure 4. Students' participation in extracurricular activities – autumn semester 2020 and since January 2021.



Source: Youthsight student polling, 13th - 16th of November 2020 and the 5th-12th of February 2021

29% for C2DE), but the proportion of students taking part in none of these activities remains higher for working class students, at 48%, compared to 43% of better-off students.

FACTORS INFLUENCING PARTICIPATION

Living at home

Rates of living at home have increased over the course of the crisis. Before the pandemic, in January 2020, just 34% of students were living at home with their

families.¹⁴ Although students were encouraged to return to campus during the autumn 2020 semester, a large proportion of students, 43%, reported living at home. And since January 2021, with students told to remain with their families if they had returned there over Christmas, the percentage doing so has risen further, now standing at 58% (see Figure 5).

Before the pandemic, those from working class backgrounds were already much more likely to live with their families than those from

better-off backgrounds (41% of C2DE vs 28% of ABC1). This gap has remained stable throughout the crisis, even as the number living at home overall has risen. 50% of working class and 37% of middle class students were living at home during the autumn semester, rising again to 64% and 53% respectively since January 2021.

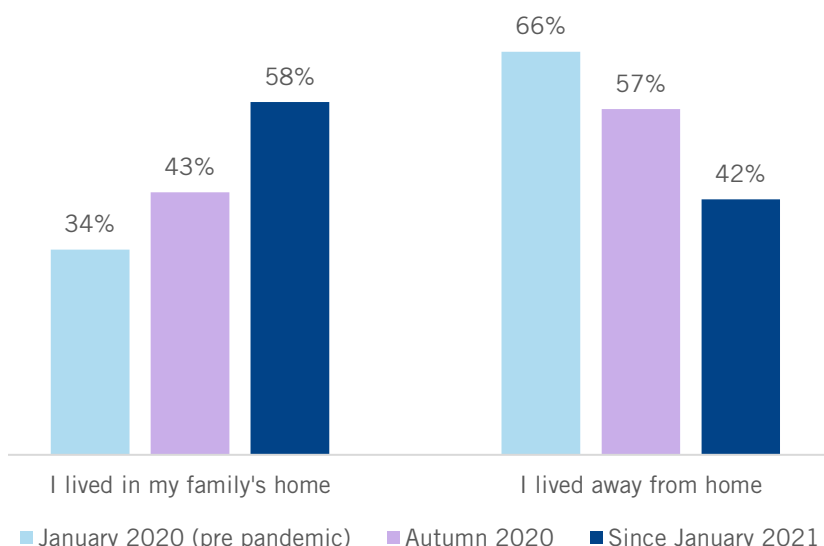
Previous Sutton Trust research found differences in rates of living at home by ethnicity pre-pandemic, with for example British-Pakistani students 6.3 times and British-Bangladeshi students 6.6 times more likely than their white peers to stay at home and to study nearby.¹⁵ During autumn 2020, 54% of BAME students were living at home, compared to 40% of white students, a gap which remained stable as more students moved home over Christmas, with 69% of BAME students and 54% of white students living at home since January 2021.

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. 33% of graduates who lived at home having taken part at some point at university vs 67% of those who lived away from home.¹⁶ During the autumn 2020 semester, this gap narrowed: 25% of students living at home took part in student societies or sport, compared to 32% of students living away from their families. The same pattern has been seen since January, with 25% of students living at home participating compared to 35% of those living away from home.

Other barriers

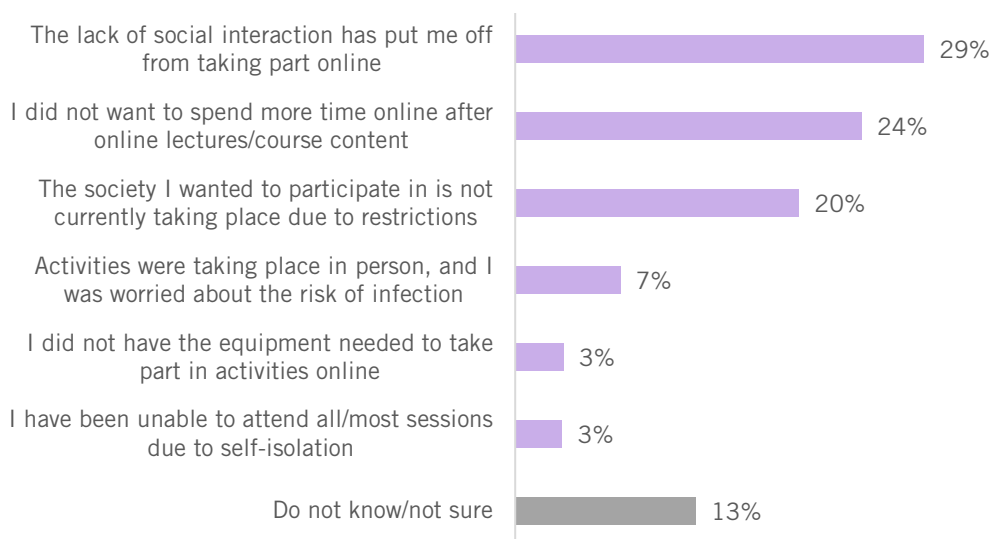
Students were asked whether they had encountered any barriers to their participation in extra-curricular activities in the autumn semester (see Figure 6). Most (87%) reported encountering barriers to participation, with the most common barrier cited by 29% of students being the lack of social interaction putting them off from taking part online. A further 24% did not want to spend more time online after completing lectures and working online during the day, and for 20% the activity they wanted to take part in was not taking place due to restrictions.

Figure 5. Where students were living pre pandemic (January 2020), during the autumn 2020 semester and since January 2021



Source: Youthsight student polling, 17th – 22nd of January 2020; 13th - 16th of November 2020, and 5th and the 12th of February 2021

Figure 6. Issues preventing participation in student societies during the pandemic



Source: Youthsight student polling, 13th - 16th of November 2020

A small proportion (3%) said they did not have the equipment needed to take part online, although if scaled to the entire student population, this would equate to thousands of students being unable to take part due a lack of equipment. Students from working-class and middle-class backgrounds were similarly impacted by these barriers.

Access to resources

Students were also asked how sufficient their access to resources was for their university work and assessments, resources which would also be needed to take part in any extra-curricular activities remotely.

Students were polled here about this issue in autumn 2020, with comparisons back to findings from previous Sutton Trust research in April of the same year.¹⁷ When looking at these comparisons, it is important to keep in mind that whether students were living at home or on campus will likely impact on their access to these resources, and on how easily universities can provide them.

Almost a quarter of students (22%) reported not having adequate study space to work in during the autumn semester, a very similar proportion (23%) to those who said the same in April. Similarly, having sole access

to a laptop, computer or tablet to work on has also stayed stable, at 6% throughout. However, 10% of students reported in autumn not having adequate internet access to complete their university work and assessments, a proportion which has doubled since April, when the figure stood at 5% (see Figure 7). The reasons for this difference are not clear. It may reflect changed circumstances in terms of the nature of teaching and learning between spring and autumn. Online classes and lectures are likely to be playing a more important role than they were at the beginning of lockdown, as universities have become more used to online provision, but students may not have adequate internet access to stream them online. With almost all students currently learning remotely, it is of significant concern that many students have been reporting they do not have adequate internet access for the needs of their course.

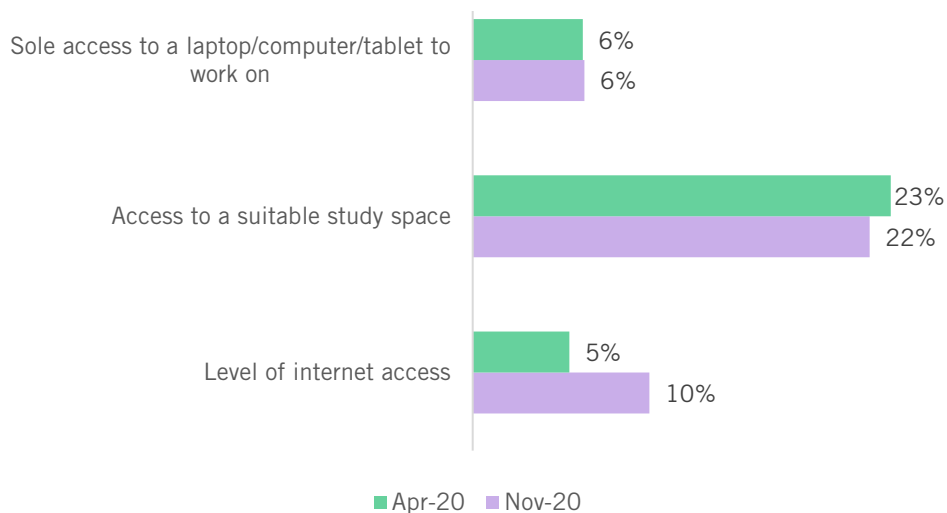
Looking at access by socio-economic background in autumn 2020, working class students were not substantially more likely to report inadequate study space than their better-off peers (24% vs 21%), although those who had attended private schools (a proxy measure for family wealth) were less likely to report inadequate study space (just 15%). Differences in access were also seen by ethnicity; while 27% of BAME students reported having insufficient study space to complete their university work, just 20% of white students said the same.

SATISFACTION WITH PROVISION AND SUPPORT

Academic provision

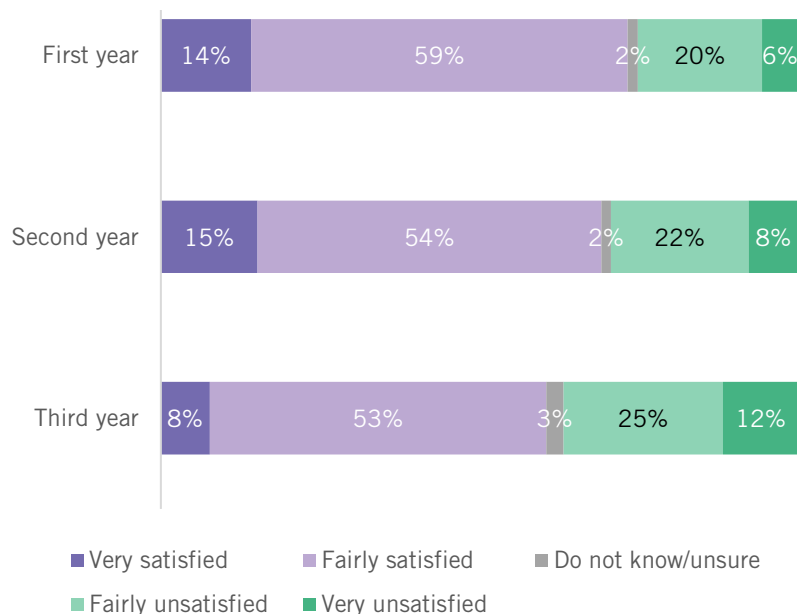
Despite the challenges that have been facing universities this year, in the autumn semester, most students (68%) were satisfied with the academic provision their university had put in place. However, a considerable proportion, just under a third (30%), were unsatisfied. Third years were the most likely to say they were unsatisfied (37%, compared to 29% of second years and 25% of first years; see Figure 8), perhaps because they have higher expectations during their final year when stakes are higher, or because they are more concerned about a lack of time to catch up on any missed content compared to stu-

Figure 7. Percentage of students with insufficient access to resources needed to complete their university work or assessments, November and April 2020



Source: Youthsight student polling, 3rd – 8th April and 13th - 16th of November 2020

Figure 8. Satisfaction with academic provision in autumn 2020, by year of study



Source: Youthsight student polling, 13th - 16th of November 2020

dents in other years of study. 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%).¹⁸

There was a strong relationship between workspace availability and satisfaction with academic provision, perhaps reflective of barriers some students face accessing provision online. While 85% of those satisfied with academic provision reported having sufficient study space, only

61% of those unsatisfied with this provision said they had sufficient study space.

Things have however worsened in the latest lockdown, with most students now unable to access any face to face provision. In February 2021, while a majority of students were still satisfied with academic provision offered by their university, this had reduced from 68% in the autumn to just 59%; with 39% unsatisfied with the provision on offer. This will be a real concern if students remain unable to return to campus this semester.

Provision for extracurricular activities

In the autumn semester, there appeared to be less satisfaction with provision put in place for extra-curricular activities (such as student societies, sports, and other similar activities) than academic provision (42% compared to 68%). A sizeable proportion, 36%, of students were unsatisfied with extra-curricular provision in place during the autumn semester (see Figure 9).

However, students were also much more likely to be unsure of their views on this type of provision than academic content. Looking just at the views of those with a clear opinion on extracurricular activities (N=703), 54% said they were satisfied with provision, compared to 46% who were unsatisfied.

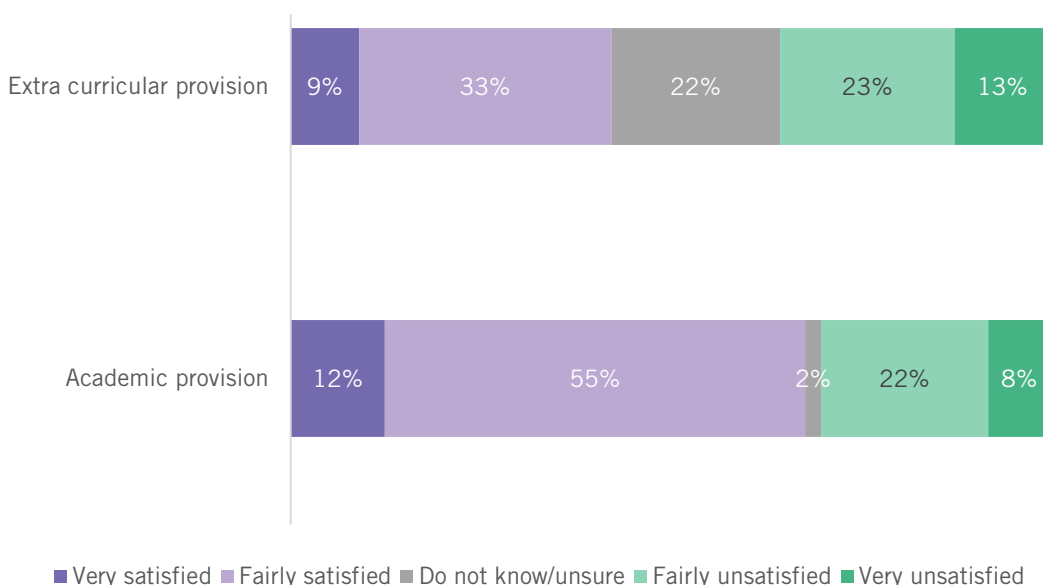
As with the findings for academic provision, students at Russell Group institutions were also more likely to be unsatisfied by the provision for extra-curricular activities on offer at their university in the last semester (44% unsatisfied, compared to 31% at Post-1992s). However, a higher proportion of students at Post-1992 institutions were unsure of their views on this provision (26% compared to 16% at Russell Group universities), likely to be reflective of the lower rates of participation in these types of activities at Post-1992 institutions overall (for example, before the pandemic, while 75% of graduates from Russell Group universities had taken part in student societies at university, this figure was 64% of those who attended Post-1992s).

IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

The considerable issues facing both students and universities alike this year are also likely to impact on how well students develop skills while studying.

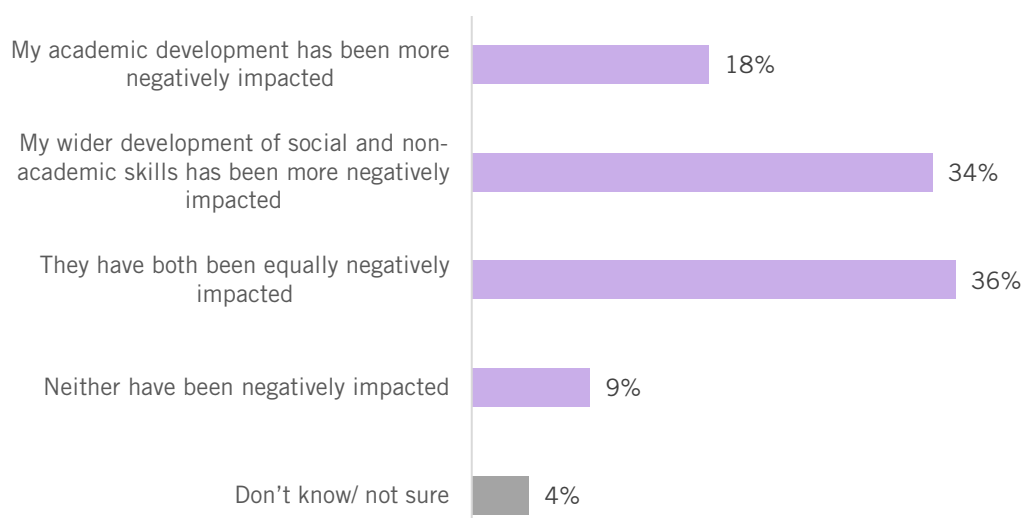
In the autumn, students were asked whether they felt academic or wider 'life skills' (such as communication,

Figure 9. How satisfied students are with academic and extra-curricular provision by their universities during autumn 2020



Source: Youthsight student polling, 13th - 16th of November 2020

Figure 10. The impact of the pandemic on academic and life skill development for students



Source: Youthsight student polling, 13th - 16th of November 2020

motivation, confidence, resilience or leadership) had been more negatively impacted by the pandemic. 87% reported negative impacts on their development of either one or both of these types of skills, with just 9% saying neither had been negatively impacted (see Figure 10). While 34% of students said that their development of wider social and non-academic life skills has been more negatively impacted, 18% said their development of academic skills have been more negatively affected, and 36% that both had been impacted equally.

Third year students were more likely to say their academic development had been more heavily impacted than their non-academic skills (20% vs 11% of first year students). In contrast, 39% of first year students said their social and life skill development was more negatively impacted, compared to 32% of third years. Interestingly, students at Russell Group institutions were the most likely to say their wider development had been more negatively impacted than their academic development: 41% of students at these universities compared to a lower proportion (31%) at Post-1992 institutions.¹⁹

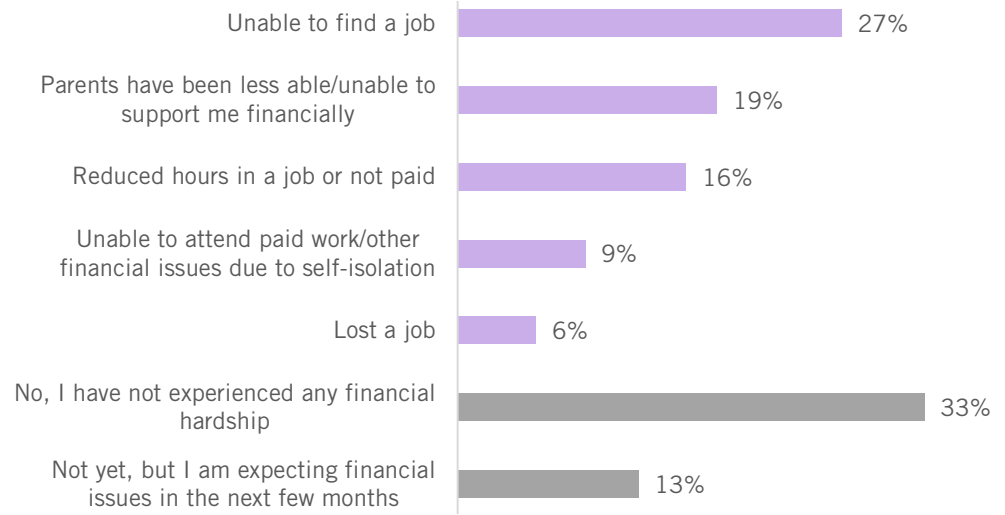
FINANCIAL STRAIN

The pandemic has had a considerable impact on the economy, with some of the sectors students often work in, such as hospitality or retail, heavily affected by closures and subsequent job losses.²⁰ Students' finances may also have suffered for other reasons, for example if their parents' economic situation has changed due to the pandemic, making them less able to support them financially during their studies.

Given these challenges, it is perhaps unsurprising that in the autumn, over half (54%) of students said they had experienced some form of financial hardship during the semester (See Figure 11). The most common issue reported was being unable to find a job at 27%, while 19% said their parents are less able to support them financially, 16% have had hours reduced, 9% missed work due to self-isolating and 6% have lost a job. A further 13% had not experienced any financial hardship yet, but expect so over the next few months.

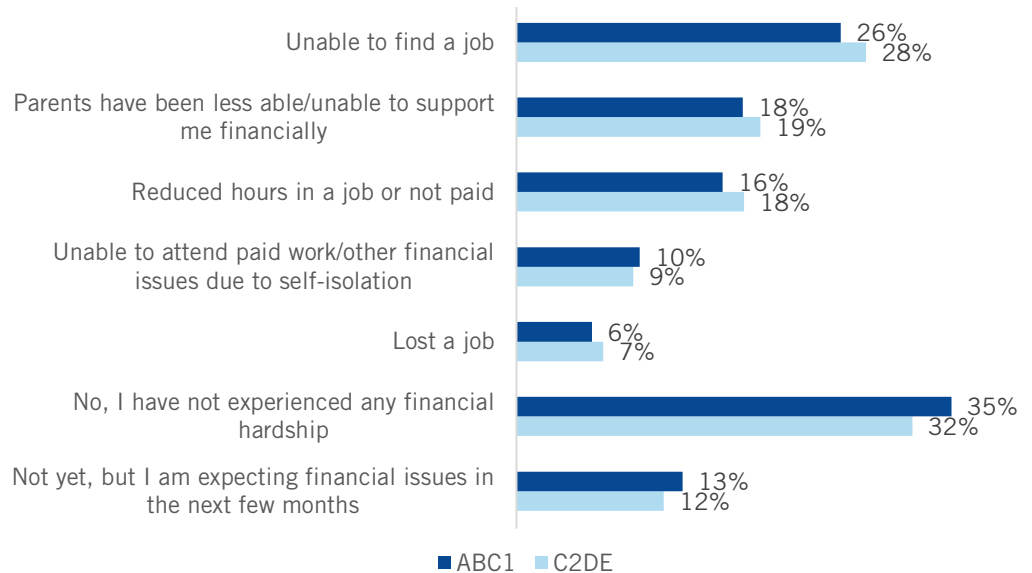
A similar question was asked in April this year, and the instance of some of these sources of financial hardship have reduced since then. While 24% of students reported reduced hours in a job or not being paid in April, in the autumn this was 16%. Similarly, while 10% of students reported having lost a job in April, this was only 6% in November. However, this could be a consequence of fewer students having a job to lose, which seems likely given a high proportion of students reported being unable to find a role in November. First year students were the most likely to say they have not been able to find a job (34%) compared to 22% of second years and 27% of third years, so have been the most heavily impacted by a reduction in vacancies. Working class students were slightly more likely to have already experienced financial issues in the autumn than those from middle-class backgrounds (57% compared to 52%, see Figure 12, although they were only slightly more likely to have

Figure 11. Experience of financial hardship due to coronavirus, November 2020



Source: Youthsight student polling, 13th - 16th of November 2020

Figure 12. Experience of financial hardship due to coronavirus by socio-economic background



Source: Youthsight student polling, 13th - 16th of November 2020

experienced each individual source of financial hardship.

Students were also asked whether their maintenance loan and any money they receive from their families is enough to live on when at university (see Figure 13). In autumn semester 2020, 41% of students said it was not enough to live on, with 49% saying it was enough, and 10% unsure. Comparing this to polling of students pre-pandemic in January 2020, those saying their loan is enough to live on has stayed the same, at 49%. The proportion of students saying their loan is not enough to live on has decreased, from 46% to 41%, while the proportion of students saying they are unsure has risen from 6%

in January 2020 to 10% in November 2020. This perhaps reflects the greater amount of financial uncertainty students are facing this year, with the impact of the pandemic on their finances across the year perhaps not yet clear, as well as the greater number of students living at home with their families, saving on some costs. Many of those who say that loans and money from their family are not enough to live on would, in a normal year, often rely on paid work to make ends meet. However, as shown above, for many this option will not be available this year.

Students from lower-socio economic backgrounds were less likely to answer positively that their

maintenance loan was enough to live on (46% for C2DE vs 52% for ABC1), although this was largely due to differences in those saying they were unsure (11% vs 7%), rather than those who were sure it was not enough (43% vs 41%).

In February, students were also asked how difficult it currently was for them to cover their basic living and course expenses, for example their rent, food, or materials they need for study. A considerable proportion (33%) said it was difficult for them to cover these basic living and course expenses, a figure that was higher for working class than middle class students (39% vs 30%).

While most students are still able to cope financially, and for some this year university may actually have been more affordable (for example for those able to live at home with their families and who have been given rent rebates), for students who do not receive enough from their families and their maintenance loan, there have been fewer options this year to supplement income, with a real risk that some students are facing considerable financial hardship as a consequence.

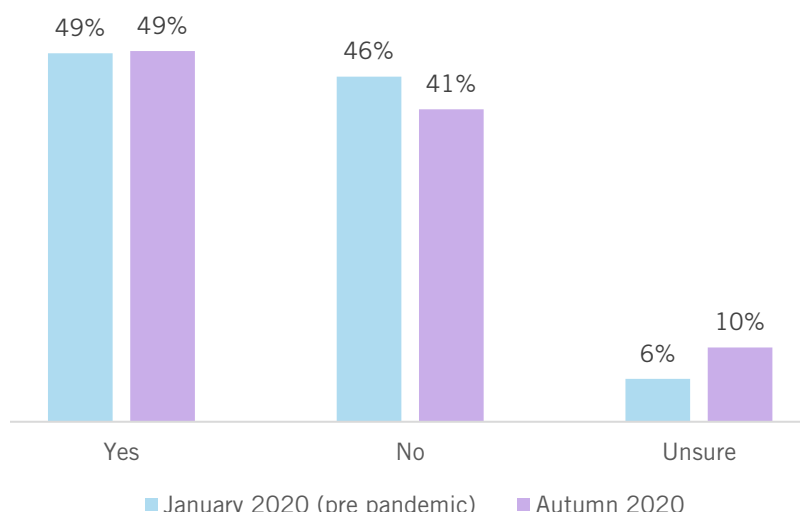
STUDENT CONCERNS AND SUPPORT AVAILABLE

In February 2021 students were asked about a variety of issues related to their academic experience, their ability to take part in university social life, extra-curricular activities, mental health concerns, financial issues and opportunities to develop employability.

The biggest current worry for students is being able to gain the skills and experience needed for employment, with 76% saying they were fairly or very worried. This was followed by being able to take part in university social life (71%), concerns about their mental health and wellbeing (70%), classes being online rather than face to face (64%), extracurricular activities being online (54%), concerns about having the resources needed to work remotely (53%), and the cost of living while studying this year (49%).

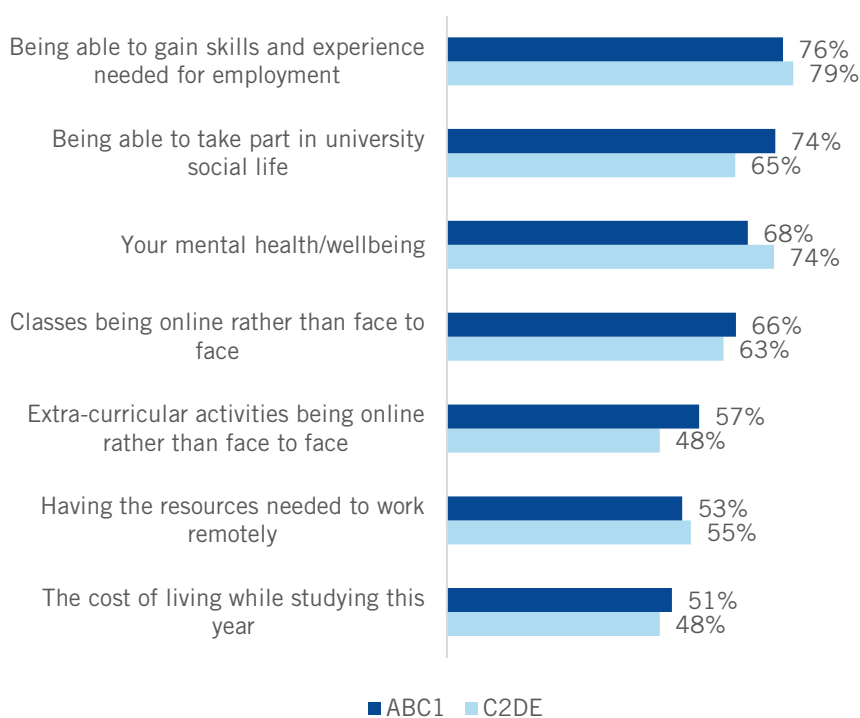
Students from working class backgrounds were more likely to be concerned about their mental health/wellbeing than middle class students (74% vs 68%), whereas students from better off backgrounds were

Figure 13. Is your maintenance loan and/or the financial support you receive from your family enough to live on while at university?



Source: Youthsight student polling 17th – 22nd January 2020, 13th - 16th of November 2020

Figure 14. Student worries at the start of 2021, by socio-economic background



Source: Youthsight student polling, 5th - 12th of February 2021

more likely to be worried about being able to take part in university social life (74% vs 65% of C2DE), and that extra-curricular activities would be online rather than face to face (57% vs 48%; see Figure 14).

Financial support

Given the strains on students during the pandemic, support provided by universities (both financial and pastoral) could help to determine whether students under strain are

able to continue their studies, and so will play a vital role in keeping retention rates up.

In the autumn, students were asked how satisfied they were with their university's support for anyone encountering financial hardship during the crisis. Just under half (49%) were satisfied with the level of support on offer, a figure which has gone up from just 36% in April 2020.²¹ In April, there was also a high proportion of students (33%,

see Figure 15) were unaware of what support was on offer, with this figure having fallen by the autumn to 28%. This is a welcome improvement, and perhaps reflective of universities now having had more time to put additional support in place and communicate this to students. However, about a quarter of students (23%) remained unsatisfied with provision, and while this has come down slightly from 30% in April, it suggests there is still more universities could do to support students financially during the crisis.

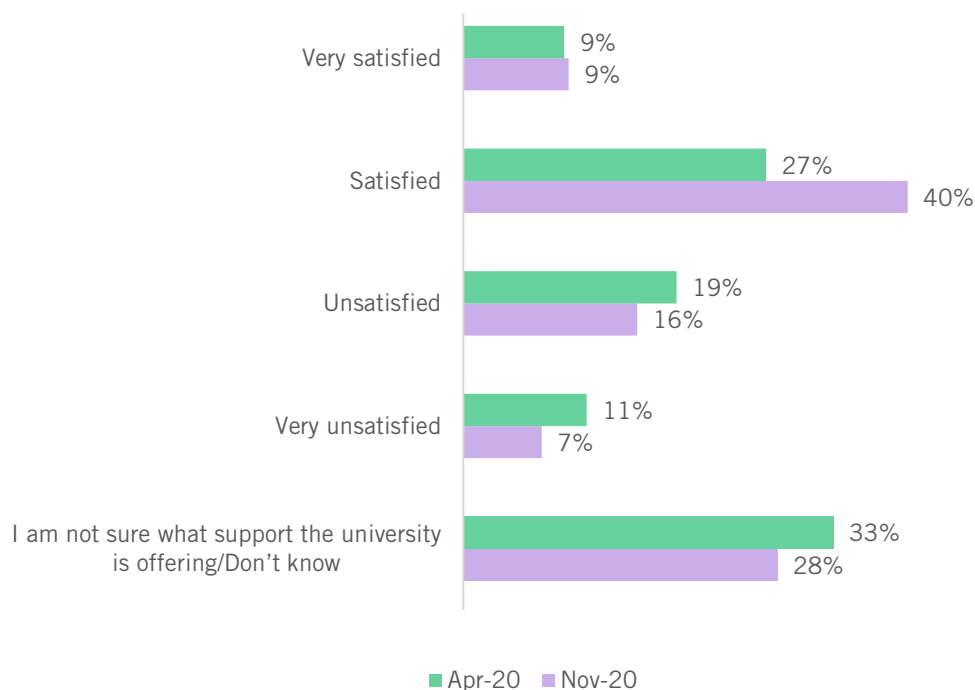
Satisfaction also differed between groups of students, with a higher proportion of working-class students being unsatisfied with support (29% vs 21% of middle-class students), perhaps reflective of a greater need for support in this group, who may be less likely to call on family members for financial help. Middle class students were more likely to be unsure of what was on offer (27% compared to 22%), perhaps also reflecting a lesser need for this type of support. BAME students were also more likely to be unsatisfied by the support on offer (27%) than white students (21%).

More students at Russell Group institutions were unsatisfied with the financial support on offer (27% compared to 22% those at Post-1992 institutions)²² and were also more likely to be unsure of the support on offer (28% compared to 23% of those at post-1992 institutions),²³ suggesting these universities could look to do more to improve and communicate their support to students.

Pastoral support

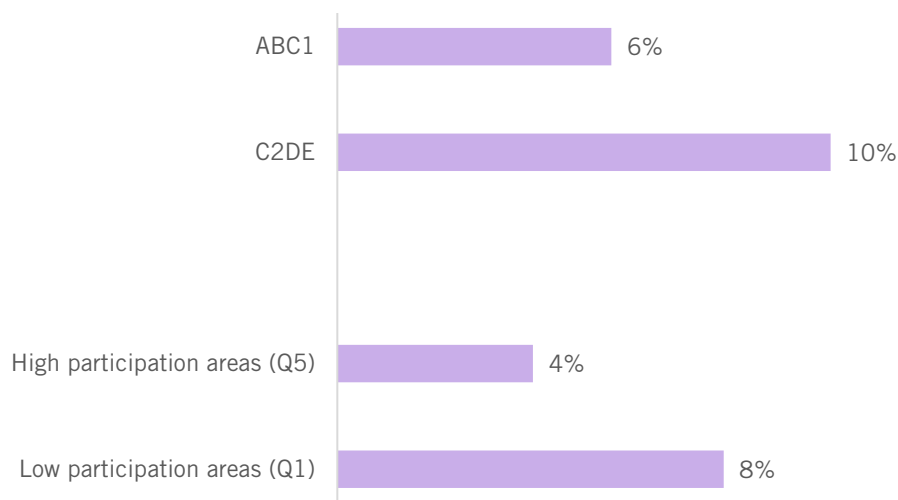
About half of students (52%) were happy with the pastoral help (support for students' physical and mental welfare) on offer from their university. However, as with financial support, a sizeable proportion (28%) were unsatisfied, and 1 in 5 (21%) were unaware of what support was on offer. Students have faced a challenging set of circumstances this academic year, with the likelihood that many more may need this type of support than in a usual year. Universities should look to bolster this support, and ensure all students are aware of what is on offer to support their mental and physical health during the pandemic.

Figure 15. Satisfaction with support in place for students experiencing financial hardship due to the pandemic, November 2020



Source: Youthsight student polling, 3rd – 8th April 2020 and 13th - 16th of November 2020

Figure 16. Percentage of students saying it is unlikely they will complete this academic year, by socio-economic background and POLAR group



Source: Youthsight student polling, 13th - 16th of November 2020

There were also differences in satisfaction between students at different institution types. While 56% of students at Post-1992 institutions were satisfied with the support in place, this was lower at Russell Group universities, at 49%.²⁴

Interestingly, while in Post 1992 institutions awareness of both financial and pastoral assistance was similar, at Russell Group institutions, students appear to be more aware of the pastoral support available to them than support available financially, with only 14% unsure of the pastoral

support on offer compared to 28% of those asked about financial support.

Impact on retention

Given the challenges students are facing this year, there is a real concern that drop-out rates may increase following the pandemic. In autumn 2020, a small proportion of students (6%) said it was unlikely they would complete the year, comprising 1% who said it was very unlikely they would finish, and a further 5% saying it was fairly unlikely.

Pre-pandemic, dropout rates were

usually about 6%.²⁵ While these figures do not give overt cause for concern at this point compared to retention rates pre-COVID, some students will have already dropped out before the surveying period, and it is not clear what proportion of those saying it is unlikely they will complete the year will actually drop out.

Long before the pandemic, there have been retention gaps between students from different socio-economic background and different ethnicities. Here, 1 in 10 (10%) of working-class students said it was unlikely that they would complete the year, compared to a lower proportion (6%) of middle-class students (see Figure 16). There were also differences by POLAR group, with 8% of those from areas with historically low rates of progression to HE (Q1) saying they were unlikely to finish, compared to just 4% of students from areas with the highest rates (Q5).

Students who said it was unlikely they would complete the year were then also asked whether the pandemic had affected their view. A considerable proportion (40%) said it had significantly, a further 34% said it had a somewhat negative impacted their view, and 21% said it slightly negatively affected it. In all, just 3% said it had not negatively impacted it at all.

DISCUSSION

Across every educational stage, the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic have been considerable, with students and universities alike under significant strain in the face of extensive disruption. Findings in this brief show that the negative consequences of the pandemic for students extend beyond their core academic learning, with many of the activities that undergraduates would normally undertake outside of their course severely disrupted, even during the periods of this year when students have been allowed on campus. This disruption also appears to be affecting poorer students the most, and many students are also struggling financially due to the economic impact of the crisis.

As discussed in an [accompanying report](#), the activities students take on outside of their core academic work can help them to develop a range of life skills, such as communication,

resilience, confidence, motivation and leadership; skills which previous Sutton Trust research has shown are highly valued by employers.²⁶ There is however a risk that due to the pandemic many students are missing out on the ability to develop these skills alongside their studies.

But these activities are important, and lower levels of participation should be of significant concern, with the potential for a considerable negative impact on students' skills development in the long term. Recent research has indicated there is a wage premium associated with reported development of life skills.²⁷ Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds especially, who have fewer opportunities to develop these important skills at school,²⁸ are now missing a vital chance to develop them at university, something likely to impact on their future employability and social mobility.

There are few easy answers, with significant challenges in allowing these activities to take place even under reduced restrictions. Some activities will simply be unable to take place until social distancing rules can be loosened. For those which can take place but only remotely, trying to engage students online after a long day of lectures will continue to be an issue. Universities and student unions should do all they can to help, from ensuring all students have the resources they need to participate, to looking at creative ways for activities to take place in person, for example if students are able to return to campus later this year, allowing them to use outdoor spaces, or providing additional funding to enable them to rent larger spaces so activities can take place with adequate social distancing. And after the pandemic, efforts to encourage students to take part in these activities should be seen as a priority in the recovery within universities, so students have a chance to make up for this lost time.

There are also some opportunities to learn from the current crisis. In future, the shift to remote activities does give an important opportunity for universities to look again at opening up accessibility of extra-curricular activities for more students, including those (such as students living at home, as well as students

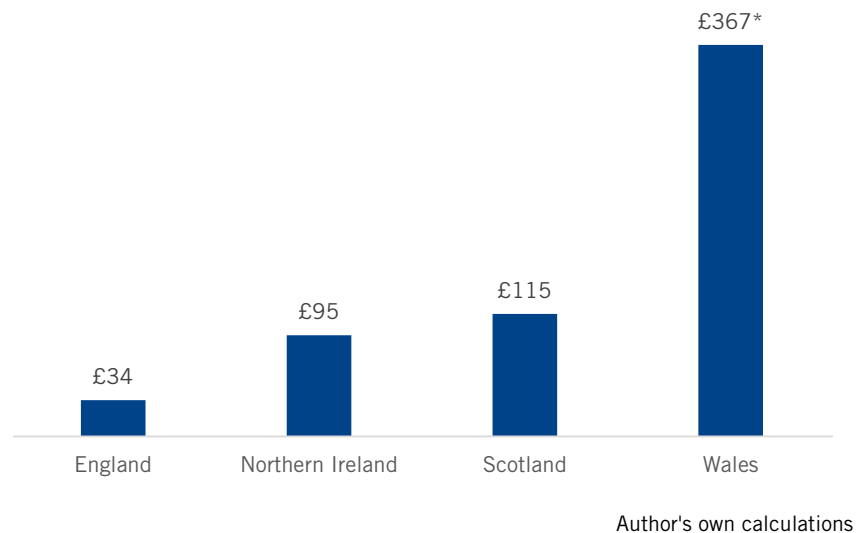
with certain disabilities or with caring responsibilities) perhaps less able to spend evenings on campus. The pandemic has shown for many activities that remote participation is possible. Universities and student unions should, where possible, take lessons learnt this year to ensure remote options are retained in future years wherever possible.

Throughout the Sutton Trust's research in response to the pandemic, we have highlighted a lack of access for many young people to the resources needed to take part in learning and other activities remotely. It is concerning that the proportion of university students reporting inadequate internet access has actually increased since earlier this year, perhaps now as a result of increased expectations from universities and demands on bandwidth. Steps should urgently be taken by both universities and by government to ensure all students have the resources needed for their studies, particularly with the potential of social distancing and blended learning continuing into autumn 2021.

Similarly, it is also concerning that such a high proportion of students do not have an adequate study space, even when they were able to access their university during the autumn semester. With more students than usual living with their families this year, and with it currently unclear whether students will be able to return to campus, it will be difficult for universities to help with this issue directly. However, when students are able to return, universities could help by providing as many COVID secure workspaces for students on campus as possible, for example re-purposing teaching rooms when they are not in use, and prioritising access for students who do not have adequate study space at home. And indeed, some institutions have already put this type of system in place.²⁹

Many students are facing financial issues due to the pandemic, from being unable to find paid work, to their families being less able to support them, with working class students particularly impacted. Many of these students have also been left to pay rent for accommodation they have been unable to use. Some institutions and student housing providers have given refunds, but this is variable between providers.³⁰

Figure 17. Additional per student funding provided to universities for financial hardship



The government in England have now put in place additional financial support for students, with £70 million being given to universities via the Office for Students. As well as this, government have also suggested universities use the £256 million available in existing student premium funding for hardship funding. However, this money was for other purposes, including widening participation, much of which may have been difficult to re-purpose. Additionally, the government had already suggested this funding is used for several other purposes related to the pandemic, including emergency funding for student counselling and support for digital access.³¹

The £70 million of new funding given to English HE institutions specifically for student hardship equates to roughly £34 per student (see Figure 17), compared to £5.6 million in Northern Ireland, or roughly £95 per student; £30 million in Scotland, roughly £115 per student; and £50 million in extra funding in Wales, roughly £367 per student (although it should be noted that funding in Wales is made up of an announcement of £40 million solely for financial hardship, and £10 million divided between hardship funding and additional mental health support).³² While the funding announced in all nations is welcomed, all should continue to monitor the level of need from students as reported to HE providers, and England in particular should look to provide additional support for students above that already announced. Doubling the current additional funding for hardship available to £140 million would bring England to a comparable level of additional support with other UK nations.

The university experience has clearly looked very different for students this year. For first years, these challenges have also come on top of a long period out of learning because of school closures in the first lockdown. There are concerns that the rate of students dropping out of their courses could rise due to the pandemic.³³ However, we do not yet know exactly how the crisis will impact on retention rates. While some early data on non-continuation rates suggests it is in line with previous years, potential flaws in this dataset have been highlighted, with warnings that rates may actually be much higher than can be currently be conclusively seen.³⁴ It is concerning that findings here show the pandemic has negatively affected the views of most of those students who think it is unlikely they will finish the academic year. Universities should be taking active steps, where possible, to intervene early with any students at risk of dropping out of their course, and the impact of the pandemic on retention rates should be carefully monitored.

This academic year is proving difficult for everyone across higher education, and it looks like the months ahead will continue to be challenging, even as the vaccination programme rolls out. While the pandemic is ongoing, universities and government should continue to assess their emergency response, and look to fill immediate needs, such as a lack of financial support, tackling any early signs of retention issues and doing what is possible to make extra-curricular activities, as well as learning, accessible as far as is practically possible. In the longer term, it is vital to keep in mind the wide-ranging impacts of the pandemic on this generation of students, beyond their core academic course. If some activities are impossible while the pandemic is ongoing, everything possible should be done to allow current undergraduate students increased access to these activities during the rest of their degrees. Building these skills are a crucial foundation for future employability and social mobility prospects.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) **The government and universities should look urgently at providing additional financial support for students in England.** Many students are experiencing financial hardship due to the pandemic, for example due to the loss of part time work or their families being less able to support them. Recent announcements are welcome, but government funding commitments are still unlikely to be enough to meet the scale of the challenge for these students.
- 2) **Universities should ensure all students have adequate access to the resources they need while lockdown continues and when they reopen, both to study and to take part in extra-curricular activities.** This includes devices, adequate internet access, and where possible, providing COVID-secure study spaces for students without adequate study space at home.
- 3) **Universities should spread awareness of the financial and pastoral help available to students.** While awareness of such support has improved since earlier this year, many students are still unaware of the help on offer from their universities.

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8. YouthSight surveyed current undergraduate students, with polling taking place online through their student omnibus. The student omnibus is weighted to be representative by Gender, Course Year and University Group (Russell Group, Post-1992 and Pre-1992 institutions).
9. Historical data on participation pre-pandemic from polling done in January 2020 (included in the accompanying report - R. Montacute, E. Holt-White and A. Gent (2021) The University of Life - Employability and essential life skills at university. Sutton Trust. Available at: www.suttontrust.com/our-research/the-university-of-life-skills-employability-students) is available, but this data could not be used for this comparison as it asked students about participation in their whole time at university so far (rather than only in one semester), figures that are likely to be higher than during one semester only for students in 2nd and 3rd year. Using this data would therefore likely have overestimated the extent of any fall in the autumn semester. For that reason, and to allow comparisons over time for the same group of students, here students were asked about their participation in autumn 2020, and to look back on their participation in autumn 2019. Due to the nature of this question, first years could not be included as they had not been at university pre-pandemic.
10. January 2020 data is from R. Montacute, E. Holt-White and A. Gent (2021) The University of Life - Employability and essential life skills at university. Sutton Trust. Available at: www.suttontrust.com/our-research/the-university-of-life-skills-employability-students. This comparison does use historical data from pre-pandemic polling in January 2020, which is possible for first year students only, as reflecting on their whole university experience up to that point would only have included the autumn 2019 semester. Data from these students is then compared to first year students in autumn 2020.
11. Differences are primarily examined between RG and Post-1992 universities, as these are two clearly distinctive categories of institution, but as Pre-1992s are a more variable group (some being more like the Russell Group and others more like Post-1992s), they are not included in the main comparisons in this briefing, but information on Pre-1992s is included as footnotes throughout.
12. From Pre-1992s, the fall was 12 percentage points, from 30% to 18%.
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24. This figure was 47% in Pre-1992 universities
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