



RESILIENCE CHALLENGED

THE IMPACT OF THE COST-OF-LIVING SITUATION ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION SPORT

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SUMMARY

Throughout the cost-of-living crisis, the higher education sport sector has shown resilience but challenges remain. We spoke to 2,334 students and 80 staff members from across 140 UK institutions.

65%

of students said the cost-of-living situation has had a **negative impact** on their ability to take part in sport and physical activity.

“ **HAVING TO JUST THINK MORE ABOUT THE FACT THAT BILLS ARE GOING UP...THAT DOES SOMEWHAT LIMIT YOUR ENGAGEMENT.** - student



88% of institutions reported that the cost-of-living situation has had some negative impact on students' engagement with sport and physical activity.

“ **STUDENTS ARE BEING FORCED TO CHOOSE BETWEEN TAKING ON MORE PART TIME WORK AND EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITY.** - staff



Half of students (52%) said that the cost-of-living situation has had a negative impact on their mental health.

70%

of students said that the cost-of-living situation has had a negative impact on their social life.

50%

of students with a disability said their physical health/fitness had suffered during the cost-of-living situation.

“ **YOU SEE A LOT MORE MONEY LEAVING THAN COMING IN.** - student



87% of students reported the amount of money they spend had increased in the last six months.

“ **THE COST-OF-LIVING CRISIS HAS HAD AN IMPACT ON EDI WITHIN SPORT, WIDENING THE PARTICIPATION GAP BETWEEN PEOPLE FROM HIGH AND LOW SOCIO - ECONOMIC BACKGROUNDS.** - staff

INTRODUCTION

The cost-of-living situation first hit the UK in 2021 and 2022 through record inflation. The situation had a wide-ranging impact as people across society found it harder to pay energy and food bills, as well as other necessities. It also affected people's engagement with sport and physical activity. Sport England reported in its 2022 Activity Check-In report that two-thirds of adults in England changed their physical activity and sport behaviour because of rising costs.¹

British Universities and Colleges Sport (BUCS) wanted to understand how higher education sport and physical activity have been affected by the cost-of-living situation and how students' engagement in sport and physical activity will be affected over the next few years. There was existing research on how students had been affected generally, but no research on how higher education sport specifically had been impacted. We therefore set out to understand this from both institutions' and students' perspectives. Ultimately, we found that the higher education sport sector has been resilient over the 2022-23 year but faces more tough times in the academic year to come.

In this report, we first explore the broader impact of the cost-of-living situation on students' lives. We then home in on their specific experiences with sport and physical activity, showing how some students have struggled to engage for various reasons and explaining why. Then we look at what members have put in place to support students to remain active, and what they plan to do in the 2023-24 academic year. Finally, we pull on this research to identify key themes from the research and implications for the coming years.

Once the research was complete, we consulted with BUCS staff and members to craft recommendations for both groups about how to help students remain active despite the financial challenges they are facing. We have included those recommendations at the end of this report.

We spoke to a variety of students and institution staff from a range of demographic and regional backgrounds to understand the different impacts of the cost-of-living situation. However, we recognise that the impacts of rising costs have been different across institutions, so not everything in this report will resonate with everyone. Because every institution operates in different circumstances, we also recognise that the recommendations will not be suitable for everyone, but we hope they will serve as thought starters for institutions grappling with the ongoing impact of the cost-of-living situation.

¹ Sport England, *Activity Check-In: Focus on – the impact of the cost of living*, 2022.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of the research was to understand the experiences of both students and members in higher education sport during the cost-of-living situation. We used a mixed method approach, beginning with desk research on the cost-of-living impact on sport and higher education students and then conducted quantitative and qualitative primary research, detailed below.

Using a mixed method approach allowed us to understand the breadth of sentiment through surveys with staff members and students, as well as gaining a deeper understanding from conversations with students and Sabbatical/Student Officers. We aimed to gain a well-rounded picture of the situation by speaking to both students and staff, as both have been impacted by the cost-of-living situation.

QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

We distributed a survey to all active BUCS students (i.e., those who have provided their details through the BUCS Play app) via email, and the survey was completed in April and May 2023. Of the 2,334 respondents, 84% were current BUCS participants, eight percent played non-BUCS sport, and eight percent did not play a sport in the 2022-23 academic year. The responses were generally representative of the BUCS student membership population in terms of gender, ethnicity, disability, type of institution (i.e., Russell Group, post-1992 or other traditional institutions), and region/nation of institution (all regions and nations were represented); the students came from 135 different institutions. When compared with 2021-22 Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA) data, the survey responses slightly underrepresented Black/Black British students, male students, and students with a disability. However, each of these groups was still large enough for analysis.

To understand the member perspective, we sent a survey to all BUCS institutions by email, which yielded 80 responses from 63 different institutions. The survey was open to responses through April and May 2023. All nations and regions were represented in this survey except for Northern Ireland. Of the participants, 49% were from post-1992 institutions, 19% were from Russell Group institutions, 31% were from traditional institutions (excluding Russell Group) and one percent from Further Education colleges.

See Appendices 1 and 2 for a further breakdown of participant responses to both the student and member surveys.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Following the surveys, we conducted focus groups with eight Sabbatical/Student Officers and a mixture of focus groups and interviews with eight students. We approached the Sabbatical/Student Officers through an email to the BUCS sabbatical network; participants included a fairly even gender split (five women and three men) and a good spread of institution locations. One Sabbatical Officer was from Northern Ireland, which helped overcome the lack of institutional responses from that nation in the survey.

We selected the students from survey participants who said they were happy to have further contact with BUCS. We had a wide pool to pull from and had an even balance of gender, ethnicity, level of study and institution location. Some of the students were also committee members of their sports clubs, which provided additional insight about how clubs have been affected.

We used the [Relative Insight](#) platform to aid our qualitative analysis. Relative Insight is a comparative text analytics software that helps analyse text data and drive enhanced contextual understandings of target audiences and trends. By comparing qualitative data, Relative Insight reveals differences and similarities in how people speak.

BACKGROUND

Before undertaking our own research, we reviewed existing research on how the cost-of-living situation has impacted students in higher education generally. We reviewed research published from spring 2022, when research first appeared on this topic, to March 2023, when we began our own research. We identified a few key themes, discussed below. This is not an exhaustive summary of existing research, and we note that sample sizes and make-up were different in each survey.

Students are very concerned about the cost of living and are changing their behaviours in response to it. Research shows that students have been just as concerned about the cost-of-living situation as the general population, if not more so. A survey conducted by Save the Student from May to August 2022 found that 82% of students were worried about making ends meet.² While the surveys cannot be directly compared, Student Minds surveyed students later that year and found that 83% were very/quite concerned about the cost-of-living and 59% of students said managing money was causing them stress often/all the time.³ Finally, a Russell Group survey provided another barometer of student concern in early 2023 when it found that 94% of its students were concerned about the cost-of-living crisis.⁴ This collection of survey results demonstrated that concern about the cost of living remained high throughout 2022 and early 2023.

Going into the 2022-23 academic year, this concern was reflected in the amount of money students, and those supporting them, spent before starting at university or college. According to UCAS, the amount of money students spent in preparation for the 2022-23 academic year was half that of previous years; however, student spending across the year was only down slightly, suggesting students felt the need to save money in case of further price hikes. This meant that students didn't purchase things they needed at the start of the year and later regretted this.⁵

Other research documented how students managed their money across the 2022-23 academic year. A National Union of Students survey carried out in October 2022 found that 96% of students made spending cutbacks, and three quarters had cut back on spending on socialising. That survey also found that 42% of students were living on less than £100 a month.⁶ A few months later, in January 2023, a Sutton Trust student poll found that 63% of students had spent less on food and essentials in 2022-23

² Save the Student, *Student Money Survey 2022 -- Results*, September 2022.

³ Student Minds, *Student Minds Research Briefing*, February 2023.

⁴ Russell Group Students' Union and Students' Union UCL, *Student Cost of Living Report*, March 2023.

⁵ UCAS, *Student Lifestyle Report 2023 (Chapter 1: Cost of Living)*, April 2023.

⁶ NUS, *Cost of living rise sees 96% of students cutting back*, July 2022.

than previous years, and 28% had skipped meals to save money.⁷ Similarly, the Russell Group survey found that a quarter of their students were going without food or necessities because they couldn't afford them. In addition, 55% of their students had stopped taking part in extra-curricular activities because they could not afford to participate.⁸

Students also reported that their mental health and wellbeing suffered. According to a Student Minds survey in November 2022, 41% of students said the cost-of-living situation had had a negative impact on their wellbeing. In early 2023, the Russell Group survey found that 72% of their students felt their mental health had suffered during the cost-of-living situation. Students also felt that money worries had an impact on their academic performance, with 54% of Russell Group students reporting they felt this had suffered due to the cost-of-living situation.⁹

Students received less help than others in society, and institutions had to step in.

Students were hard hit by the cost-of-living situation. The government student maintenance loan only increased by 2.3% against an inflationary rise of 11%; Save the Student found that the average student maintenance loan fell £439 short of covering monthly costs, almost £100 more than in the previous year.¹⁰ Furthermore, because of the way the energy bill support scheme was structured, 40% of students did not receive any kind of payment for energy bills.¹¹

In January 2023, the UK Government provided an additional £15 million pot for hardship grants and committed to increasing student loans and grants by 2.8% in the 2023-24 academic year.¹² There was some additional support in the devolved nations: Scotland applied a general rent cap that included students in halls while Northern Ireland increased the student hardship budget for higher education institutions by £2.8 million in 2022-23 and plans to increase the maximum student maintenance loans by 40% in 2023-24.¹³

Overall, however, institutions had to pick up the slack on supporting students. They chose to do this in different ways, including subsidised or free meals, energy support, one-off cost-of-living payments, hardship grants, food/warm banks and other support.¹⁴ Fifty-six percent of students received support from their university or college in the first half of the 2022-23 academic year, according to an Office

7 Sutton Trust, *Cost of Living 2023 – University Students*, January 2023.

8 Russell Group Students' Union and Students' Union UCL, *Student Cost of Living Report*, March 2023.

9 *Ibid.*

10 Save the Student, *Student Money Survey 2022 -- Results*, September 2022.

11 Sutton Trust, *Cost of Living 2023 – University Students*, January 2023.

12 Department for Education, *Press release: Cost of living boost for students*, January 2023.

13 Lewis, Anastasia (House of Commons Library), *How is the rising cost of living affecting students?*, December 2022.

14 *Ibid.*

for Students survey completed in January/February 2023.¹⁵ Students had mixed feelings about whether the support they received was sufficient: 44% of students agreed that their institution had done enough while 27% disagreed.

More students are working to cover their costs.

In addition to seeking help from institutions, more students took up jobs in 2022-23 to cover rising costs. Amongst undergraduates, there was a big increase in student employment from 45% to 55% of students.¹⁶ A January 2023 poll conducted by the Sutton Trust found that 27% of students said they needed to get a job or take on more hours during the year to support themselves because of the increasing cost of living, and 31% said they were doing more hours now than the previous year.¹⁷ But taking on more hours took its toll: 57% of students surveyed by Student Minds felt that balancing study and paid employment was causing them stress often/all the time,¹⁸ and 49% said in a March 2023 poll by Sutton Trust that they had missed at least one lecture due to paid work (with 37% missing lectures a few times or often).¹⁹

The cost-of-living has widened inequalities in the student body.

Like many crises, the cost-of-living situation has widened the inequalities between different groups in society as well as within institutions. A report from MillionPlus found that Black students, mature students, those living at home and/or commuting, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and those from low higher education participation areas were all more likely to struggle with financial hardship because of the cost-of-living increases.²⁰ The Office for Students found that international students were also particularly affected.²¹

It was against this backdrop of students struggling to make ends meet that we set out to understand the sport and physical activity experiences of students and members. Many of our findings echoed these reports and added a sport-specific lens.

15 Office for Students, *Studying during rises in the cost of living*, March 2023.

16 Neves, Jonathan and Rose Stephenson (Advanced HE and HEPI), *Student Academic Experience Survey 2023*, June 2023.

17 Sutton Trust, *Cost of Living 2023 - University Students*, January 2023.

18 Student Minds, *Student Minds Research Briefing*, February 2023.

19 Sutton Trust, *Cost of Living 2023 - University Students (paid work)*, March 2023.

20 Jones, Andrew (MillionPlus: The Association for Modern Universities), *Learning with the lights off: Students and the cost-of-living crisis*, September 2022.

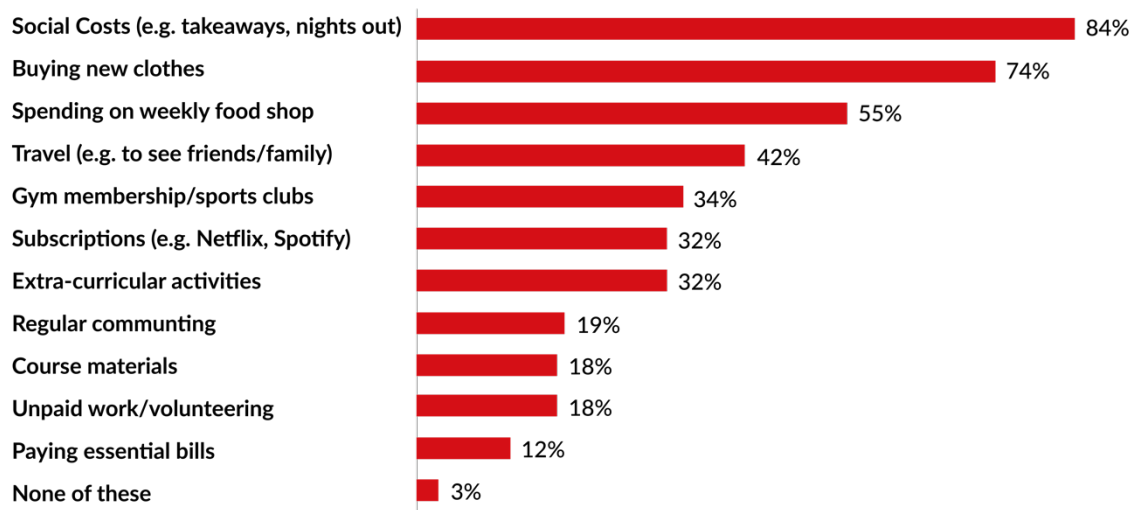
21 Office for Students, *Studying during rises in the cost of living*, March 2023.

THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Inflation has not fallen as quickly as experts expected. Instead, it has stubbornly remained and continues to affect energy and food prices particularly – both costs that higher education students, and indeed most people, cannot easily avoid. Students made clear in our survey that in spring 2023, inflation was still worrying them. Sixty-five percent of all students surveyed said they were concerned about the cost of living and over a quarter (27%) said they were very concerned. This is lower than other surveys earlier in late 2022 or early 2023 but still represents a high level of concern amongst students.

Students had not seen prices ease as predicted, but instead had seen price rises; 87% said the amount of money they spend had increased in the last six months. These statistics suggest that students are still feeling the impact of inflation and will likely continue to in the 2023-24 academic year. Students are cutting back on a range of things to save money, with socialising topping the list. The graph below shows what students are cutting back on.

Q. HAVE YOU CUT BACK ON ANY OF THE FOLLOWING IN THE LAST SIX MONTHS DUE TO THE COST-OF-LIVING SITUATION?

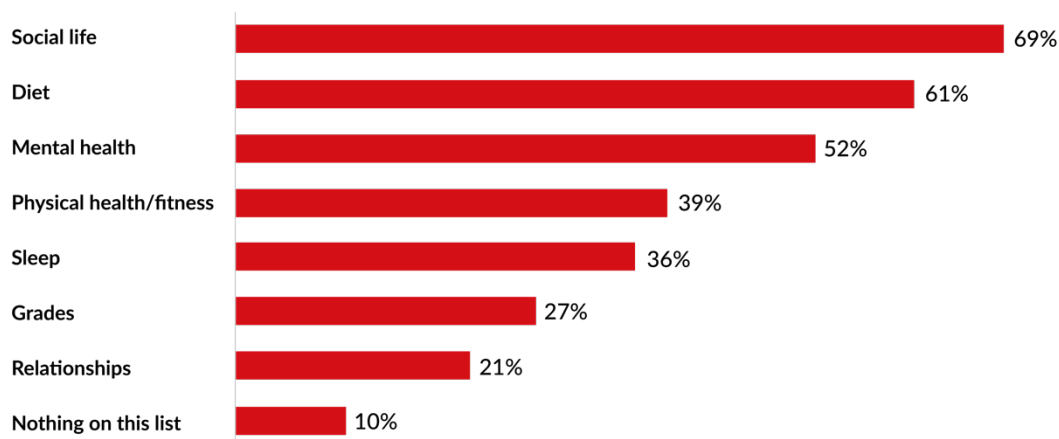


While some of these are nice-to-haves, others are more integral to the university or college experience. Cutting down on social, extra-curricular activities and sports costs meant that students might not feel part of the university or college community. This feeling of isolation is exacerbated by the high number of students commuting to their institution to save money by living at home or in off-

campus halls.²² From a BUCS perspective, it is important to note that over a third of students (34%) cut back on their spending on gym membership or sports clubs in the last six months and 18% cut back on unpaid work/volunteering. This is having a knock-on effect on the number of students volunteering for events and committee roles, which we will discuss later in the report.

Some of the areas students have cut back on have had a direct and negative impact on diet and social life, as displayed in the graph below. The fact that students reduced their social costs and extra-curricular activities might have had an impact on mental health: 52% of students said their mental health had suffered due to money worries in the 2022-23 academic year.

Q. HAVE ANY OF THE FOLLOWING AREAS OF YOUR LIFE SUFFERED DUE TO MONEY WORRIES IN THE 2022-2023 ACADEMIC YEAR? (N=2,334)



Over half of students said their social life, diet and mental health were all negatively impacted and over a third said their physical health/fitness and sleep were impacted; these statistics are particularly worrisome from a BUCS perspective as they can influence students' ability to engage in physical activity.

Indeed, 64% of students said that the cost-of-living situation had a negative impact on their ability to be physically active. It is worth noting at this point that our survey participants were amongst the most active students: 84% reported taking part in BUCS sport in the 2022-23 academic year and another eight percent took part in non-BUCS sport. Furthermore, 79% of those surveyed said they strongly agreed that they found sport and exercise enjoyable. This group is therefore highly motivated to be active and is perhaps the most likely to overcome cost barriers, so it is notable that even amongst this

²² A recent HEPI and Advanced HE survey found that students living with family, in non-university halls or on their own were the most likely to feel lonely. Neves, Jonathan aRose Stephenson (Advanced HE and HEPI), *Student Academic Experience Survey 2023*, June 2023.

group nearly two-thirds reported a negative impact on their ability to be physically active. They felt the knock-on impacts of not being as active in their mental health, physical health/fitness, and opportunities to socialise.

PAID WORK

To offset the impact of the cost-of-living situation, many students took up paid work. In our survey, 58% of students said they were engaged in paid work. While this helps with finances, it limits students' time to take part in sport: 58% of students with jobs said they had missed at least one sports practice because of paid work, and 34% said their paid work commitments kept them from taking part in sport or physical activity as much as they would like. Student committee members in our focus groups told us that they struggled to recruit new committee members because so many students were undertaking paid work. Others said they needed to be more flexible with practice and fixture attendance so students could attend work shifts.

"IT WAS REALLY, REALLY HARD FOR OUR COMMITTEE...FOR THE INCOMING YEAR TO GET ANYONE. LITERALLY, THE ONLY ROLE WE HAD [FILLED] WAS CHAIR AND THAT WAS IT FOR MY COMMITTEE FOR MONTHS UNTIL I HAD TO GO AND SEEK OUT PEOPLE."

-Undergraduate student, East Midlands

DEMOGRAPHIC DIFFERENCES

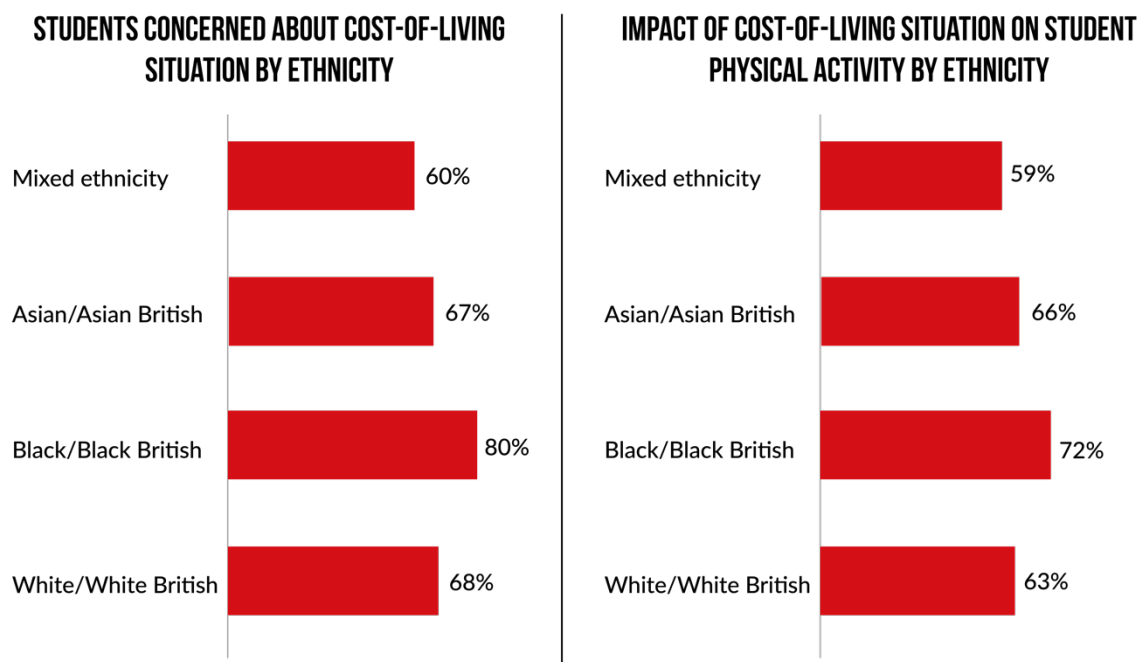
We noted two key types of differences in terms of the impacts of the cost-of-living situation: one was in different student demographics, and the other was in different institution demographics. Amongst students, we found that Black/Black British students and disabled students were particularly negatively impacted by the cost of living, echoing what other research found. Amongst institution demographics, we found that those at post-1992 institutions were more impacted than those at Russell Group institutions, and that students at high-ranking BUCS institutions were less likely to feel the effects of rising costs. We will explore each of these demographics below.

STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

We looked at two key indicators to understand which students were most likely to be impacted by the cost of living: how concerned they were about the cost-of-living situation, and how much of an impact they said the situation had had on their ability to be physically active.

ETHNICITY

The graph below examines the survey responses to the two indicator questions by ethnicity. Black/Black British students were more than 10 percentage points more likely to say they were concerned about the cost-of-living situation than any other group, with 80% saying they were concerned. They were also more likely to say their ability to be physically active had been impacted. They were six percentage points more likely to say this than the next-closest group (Asians/British Asians) and 11 percentage points more likely to say this than White/White British students.

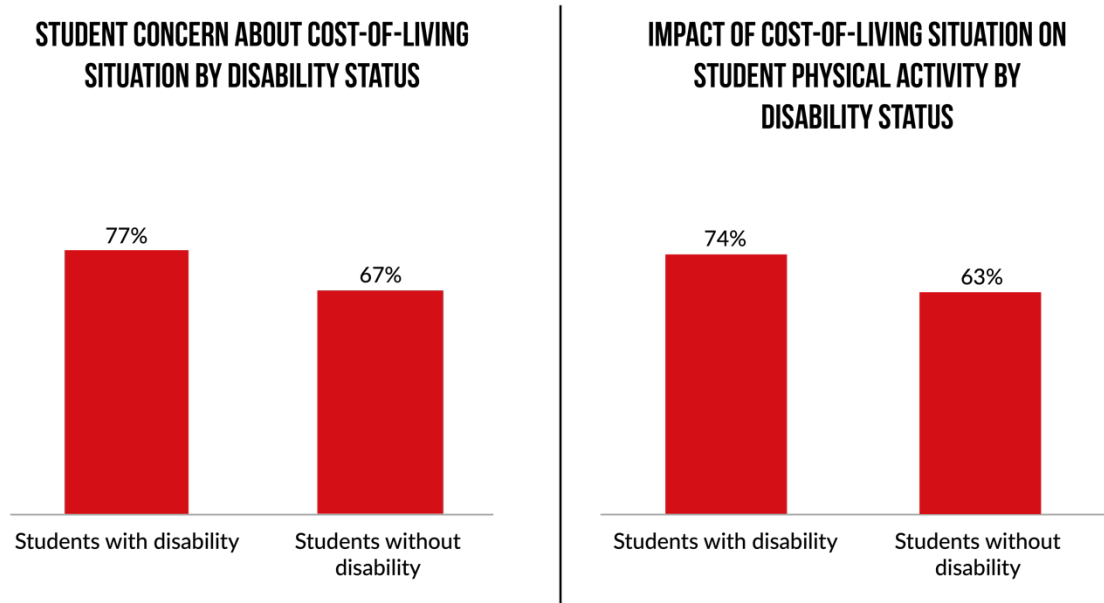


Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, students from Black/Black British backgrounds were also slightly more likely to say they had decreased spending on gym membership or sports clubs in the past six months. Thirty-eight percent of Black/Black British students reported doing this, compared to 35% of Asian/Asian British students, 33% of White/White British students and 30% of mixed ethnicity students. Combined, these statistics suggest that Black/Black British students might need additional support to re-engage with or continue physical activity and sport in the 2023-24 academic year.

While the sample size for the Black/Black British group was much smaller than the White/White British sample (n=132 for Black/Black British students), these results have been corroborated by other studies of both student and general UK populations so we are confident they are meaningful. NB: Our survey included an “other ethnicity” option, but we have not included it in the analysis in this section because the sample was too small to provide meaningful data.

DISABILITY

During the COVID pandemic, people with a disability were particularly hard hit in their opportunity to take part in physical activity and sport. Unfortunately, the cost-of-living situation has only exacerbated this inequality. Students with a disability were much more likely to score poorly on our two key indicators, as seen in the graph below. Students with a disability were 10 percentage points more likely to be concerned about the cost-of-living situation than those without and 11 percentage points more likely to say the situation had had a negative impact on their opportunity to be physically active.



Students with a disability were also more likely to have a job, meaning that they had less time to take part in sport (69% of students with a disability said they had a job in the 2022-23 academic year compared to 57% of students without a disability). Furthermore, amongst students with a job, students with a disability were 11 percentage points more likely to say they had missed at least one sports practice because of work (68% versus 57%). These statistics, combined with the fact that three quarters of students with disabilities have seen their physical activity impacted by the cost-of-living situation, suggest that they will need more support to be physically active in the 2023-24 academic year.

Students with disabilities were more likely to say the cost-of-living situation had impacted a range of areas in their lives, particularly grades, sleep, diet, mental health, and physical health/fitness. The mental health gap is especially concerning, with over two-thirds of students with a disability reporting a negative impact on mental health compared to just under half of students without a disability. This

data suggests that students with a disability would benefit from more mental health support at their institutions. These and other differences between students with a disability and students without a disability can be seen in the table below.

What areas of your life, if any, suffered due to the cost-of-living situation?	Students with disability (n=221)	Students without disability (n=2028)	Difference
Mental health	69%	49%	+20%
Sleep	51%	34%	+17%
Grades	39%	25%	+14%
Physical health/fitness	50%	38%	+12%
Diet	69%	60%	+9%

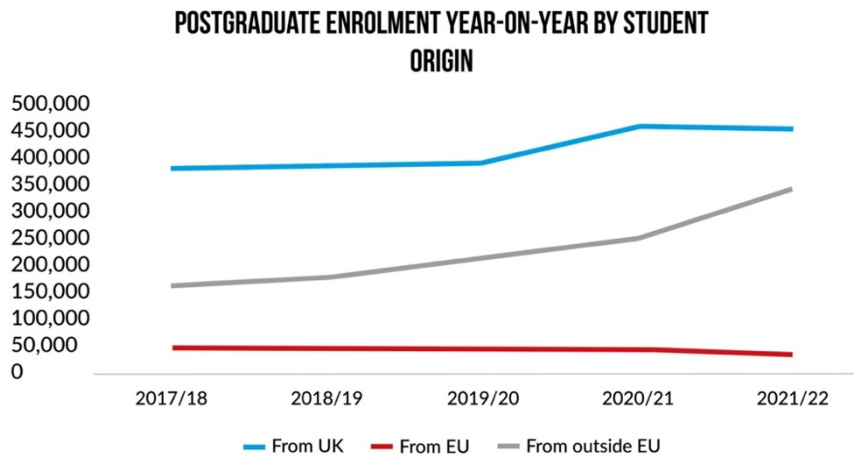
As with the ethnicity data, we recognise that the sample size for students with a disability is much smaller than the sample size for students without a disability, but our findings are in line with other research, including Activity Alliance’s 2023 survey about physical activity and people with disabilities.²³ We are therefore confident in the trends identified.

INTERNATIONAL POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

International students generally expressed concerns about the cost-of-living situation, but international postgraduate students were more likely to say it affected their ability to be physically active (70% of international postgraduate students said this compared to 52% of international undergraduates). International postgraduate students have traditionally been a difficult group to engage in sport, even before the cost-of-living crisis, exacerbated by the fact that they typically only attend one year of higher education compared to undergraduates’ three or four years. However, due to institutions’ recruitment strategies, they are a quickly growing group that deserves attention. The graph on the next page demonstrates enrolment trends based on student origin and how quickly the international (non-EU) group is growing compared to others.²⁴

²³ Activity Alliance, [Annual Disability and Activity Survey](#), June 2023.

²⁴ HESA, [Changes over time: HE student enrolments by domicile](#), January 2023.



International postgraduate students struggled more than other groups with the cost-of-living situation, further exacerbating their lack of engagement with sport and physical activity. They were twice as likely as the average survey participant to say they had under £100 per month in disposable income (18%). They told us in focus groups and interviews that they had not expected the cost of living to be so high, nor had they expected it to be so difficult to get a job when they arrived. They were also limited in how much money they could earn to offset costs, because visa requirements limit international students to a maximum of 20 hours of work per week.

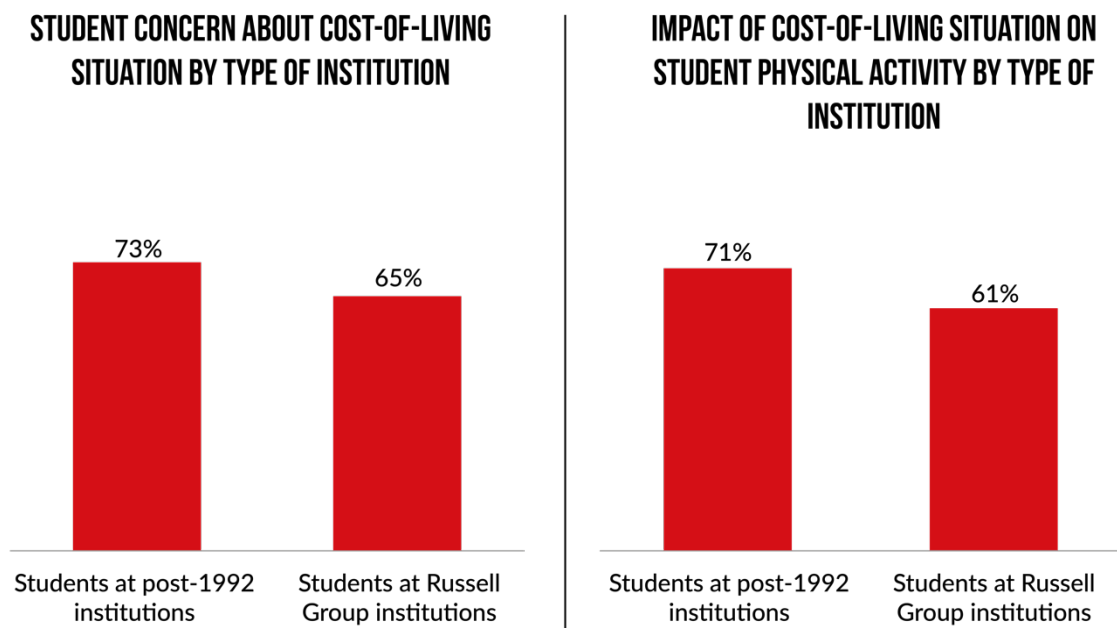
The fact that international postgraduate students were less likely to have much disposable income was reflected in their engagement with sport and physical activity. They were nine percent less likely to take part in BUCS sport than the average sport participant and six percent more likely to say their ability to be active has been negatively impacted by the cost-of-living situation. International postgraduate students were also more likely than the average survey participant to say that their reduction in physical activity had resulted in fewer opportunities to meet people and make friends (43%). The International postgraduate students we spoke to touched on several other reasons for not engaging with sport, including the short duration of their stay in the UK (usually one year), cultural differences, and a mismatch with the BUCS year if they study from January to December. These issues deserve a greater review but are not in the scope of this research.

INSTITUTION DEMOGRAPHICS

We found that certain institution demographics made a difference in the impact of the cost-of-living situation on students' engagement with sport and physical activity. While the region/nation of the institution didn't make much of a difference, whether the institution was a post-1992 or Russell Group institution and where it ranked in 2022-23 BUCS points table did matter.

TYPE OF INSTITUTION

We found that students at post-1992 institutions were more likely to be impacted by the cost-of-living situation than their counterparts at Russell Group institutions. Looking at our two key indicators, students at post-1992 institutions were eight percentage points more likely to be concerned by the cost-of-living and ten percentage points more likely to say the cost-of-living situation had impacted their ability to be physically active, as displayed in the graphs below.



Students at post-1992 institutions were also 17 percentage points more likely to have a job than those at Russell Group institutions (68% versus 51%) and amongst those with jobs, post-1992 students were eight percentage points more likely to say they missed at least one sports practice during the 2022-23 academic year due to paid work (62% versus 54%). Finally, students at post-1992 institutions were 13 percentage points more likely to say they had reduced spending on gym memberships or sports clubs in the past six months (43% versus 30%). All these factors combined suggest students at post-1992 institutions might need more support to remain in sport (or re-engage with it) in the 2023-24 academic year. As we will discuss in the next section, post-1992 members were more likely to offer free activities than Russell Group institutions. Based on the student data presented here, it has not fully levelled up students in post-1992 institutions, but it likely reduced the inequalities between the two types of institutions.

Similar to student demographics discussed above, we found that students at post-1992 institutions were more likely to report that the cost-of-living situation had a negative impact on different areas of

their lives, particularly grades, relationships, sleep, mental health and physical health/fitness. It is possible that these negative impacts could lead to a decrease in performance level and an increase in injury susceptibility in future seasons. The table below shows these differences when comparing students at post-1992 institutions to Russell Group institutions.

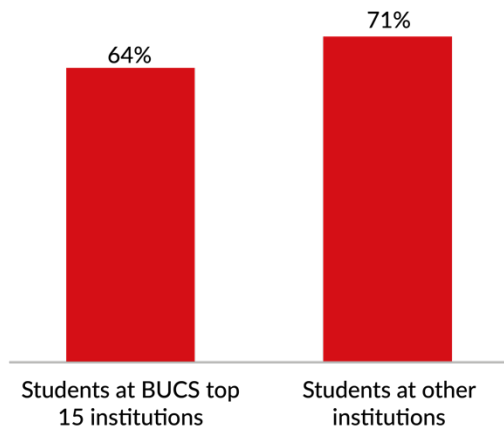
DESCRIPTION	STUDENTS AT POST-1992 INSTITUTIONS (N=602)	STUDENTS AT RUSSELL GROUP INSTITUTIONS (N=1055)	DIFFERENCE
Grades	37%	20%	+17%
Sleep	45%	30%	+15%
Relationships	27%	17%	+10%
Mental health	58%	48%	+10%
Physical health/fitness	46%	37%	+9%

NB Not all institutions fell into the post-1992 or Russell Group designation, so not all survey participants are represented in the table above.

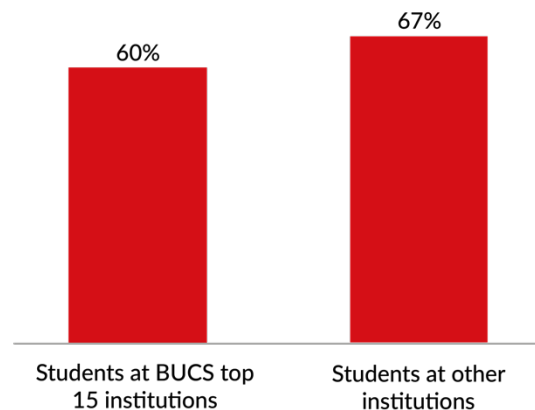
BUCS RANKING

The other institution demographic where we saw a difference in our key indicators was BUCS ranking. We used the top 15 point scorers in the 2022-23 season as a proxy and looked at survey responses from students who attended those institutions compared to all other student responses. We found that students in the top 15 were less likely to be concerned about the cost-of-living situation and less likely to say the situation had negatively impacted their engagement in physical activity (both are different by seven percentage points). The differences between these two groups were smaller than other demographic differences, but still noticeable. Students at top 15 institutions were also less likely to have reduced spending on gym membership and sports clubs: only 27% had reduced this expenditure in the past six months compared to 37% of students at other institutions.

**STUDENT CONCERN ABOUT
COST-OF-LIVING SITUATION
BY INSTITUTION'S BUCS RANKING**



**IMPACT OF COST-OF-LIVING SITUATION ON
STUDENT PHYSICAL ACTIVITY
BY INSTITUTION'S BUCS RANKING**



The differences seen in these two groups could be due to a range of reasons, including student demographics (for instance, students going to these institutions might have picked them based on their focus on sport, and therefore are more motivated as individuals to play sport regardless of cost) or institution choices around investment in sport.

Sabbatical/Student Officers and institution staff also told us performance athletes and those on sports scholarship were relatively well protected from the impact of the cost-of-living crisis (through free accommodation, membership and other support), and it is likely that many of the institutions in the top 15 have more performance athletes than other institutions due to their reputations for sport provision. Without a full review of what top 15 institutions have done to support students to stay physically active versus what others have done, it is hard to draw firm conclusions from this analysis. However, it does suggest that investment in sport is a protective factor for student engagement in sport and physical activity.

INSTITUTIONS' EXPERIENCES

The same issues around inflation that are affecting students, such as increases in energy and food costs, are also impacting member institutions. They are also feeling the squeeze of the current situation, with more pressure being put on budgets as well as recruitment and retention of students. Against this challenging backdrop, they are seeing the impacts of the cost-of-living situation on students' engagement with physical activity and sport. Generally, these effects are negative. When asked about the impact the cost-of-living situation on student engagement with sport and physical activity, 65% of institution representatives said this has been a negative impact, with 23% reporting there had been both a positive and negative impact. With only 11% reporting a neutral impact and just over one percent reporting a purely positive impact, institutions have clearly felt the impact regardless of their size or type.

The following information is representative of institutions across multiple regions/nations. However, in quotes from staff in the following sections, we have not included the institution's region/nation to protect participant anonymity. Instead, we have provided the speaker's job title and type of institution.

IMPACT IN 2022-23 ACADEMIC YEAR

When looking at where institutions have felt the impact most, 50% reported that they had seen more students missing BUCS sport practices/fixtures. This is consistent with what was reported within the student survey, where 58% of survey participants said that they had missed at least one sports practice due to their paid work commitments. Paid work commitments are one reason why students missed sports practices, while some students were likely missing fixtures because of the cost of transport and accommodation.

Forty-five percent of institutions reported fewer students signing up to BUCS sport than previous years, though this varied by institution. This sometimes correlated with an increase in sign-ups for casual sports. Institutions recognised these sports as a more affordable option and therefore boosted their provision.

“[WE HAVE] SEEN A MASSIVE REDUCTION IN BUCS CLUB MEMBERS, BUT AN INCREASE IN CASUAL SPORTS OFFERINGS OF THE SAME SPORT WHERE THEY CAN TURN UP WHENEVER THEY WANT (NO WEEKLY COMMITMENT) AND PLAY WITH THEIR FRIENDS FOR FREE/CHEAPER.”

-Sport Development Officer, post-1992 institution

“SOMETHING THAT WE’VE DONE TO TRY AND COMBAT THAT COST OF BEING ABLE TO THEN PARTICIPATE IN SPORT STILL, WE’VE DONE A LOT MORE AROUND CAMPUS SPORT. WE’VE NOT NECESSARILY BEEN A UNIVERSITY THAT’S HAD CAMPUS SPORT IN THE PAST SINCE WE ARE FAIRLY SMALL BUT INCREASING THAT PROVISION HAS HELPED A LOT MORE PEOPLE GET INVOLVED WITH SPORT ON CAMPUS THIS YEAR.”

-Sabbatical Officer, post-1992 institution

On the other hand, some institutions have seen a decrease in students signing up to non-BUCS sports practices/fixtures than previous years: 39% of survey participants reported seeing this in 2022-23. Post-1992 institutions were more likely to report that students were less engaged in BUCS sport than Russell Group institutions. Sixty-two percent of post-1992 institutions reported fewer students signing up to BUCS sport in 2022-23 compared to only 13% of Russell Group institutions. Similarly, 67% of post-1992 institutions said they had seen an increase in students missing BUCS practices/fixtures compared to 33% of Russell Group institutions. This data chimes with the differences we discussed in the student survey section of the report, with students at post-1992 institutions more likely to report that the cost-of-living situation had had a negative impact on their ability to be physically active than those at Russell Group institutions.

Institutions also reported that fewer students were signing up for gym memberships or attending active wellbeing opportunities in 2022-23 compared to previous years (39% and 31% of institutions said this, respectively). We know that sport and physical activity are beneficial for both physical and mental wellbeing; if students are not able to afford gym memberships and active wellbeing opportunities as an outlet for the stresses of higher education, especially with the additional pressure of the cost-of-living situation, this is likely to have a significant impact on student wellbeing. Indeed, where students had reported a negative impact on their ability to be physically active, 65% had seen a negative impact on their mental health. This can cause even further pressures on student wellbeing services at institutions, thus highlighting the importance of physical activity as both a preventative and reactive strategy for student wellbeing concerns.

One significant negative effect of the cost-of-living situation has been increasing transport costs. Institution staff, Sabbatical/Student Officers and students all raised concerns about both the affordability and availability of travel. They told us that transport pressures came from several directions: hire costs for vehicles rose precipitously alongside the cost of fuel, but the cost of public transport rose at the same time. Train strikes also made it harder to rely on public transport, and in rural areas public buses were sometimes cancelled at the last minute, meaning that students could not rely on them.

“THERE HAS BEEN A HUGE IMPACT ON FACILITATING TRAVEL TO AWAY BUGS FIXTURES, FROM ACCESSING TRANSPORT TO BEING ABLE TO AFFORD TO DO SO.”

-Director of Sport, post-1992 institution

“TRANSPORT COSTS IN PARTICULAR HAVE BEEN A BARRIER - THE TRAIN STRIKES REDUCE OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS TO USE PUBLIC TRANSPORT AND COACH HIRE IS MUCH, MUCH MORE EXPENSIVE, MEANING SELF-FUNDED GROUPS ARE LIKELY TO REDUCE THEIR LEVEL OF ACTIVITY.”

- Performance Sport Coordinator, Russell Group institution

“COST OF TRAVEL (COACHES, TRAINS AND FUEL) HAS ALSO RISEN SO FOR US AS AN ORGANISATION TO COVER THIS WOULD COST US SIGNIFICANTLY MORE. BEING A STUDENTS' UNION, WE RELY ON THE UNIVERSITIES BLOCK GRANT, WHICH WILL NOT INCREASE IN THIS AREA, THEREFORE MAKING IT HARD FOR US TO FURTHER SUBSIDISE TRAVEL FOR THE STUDENTS, ULTIMATELY MEANING THE COST LANDS ON THEM.”

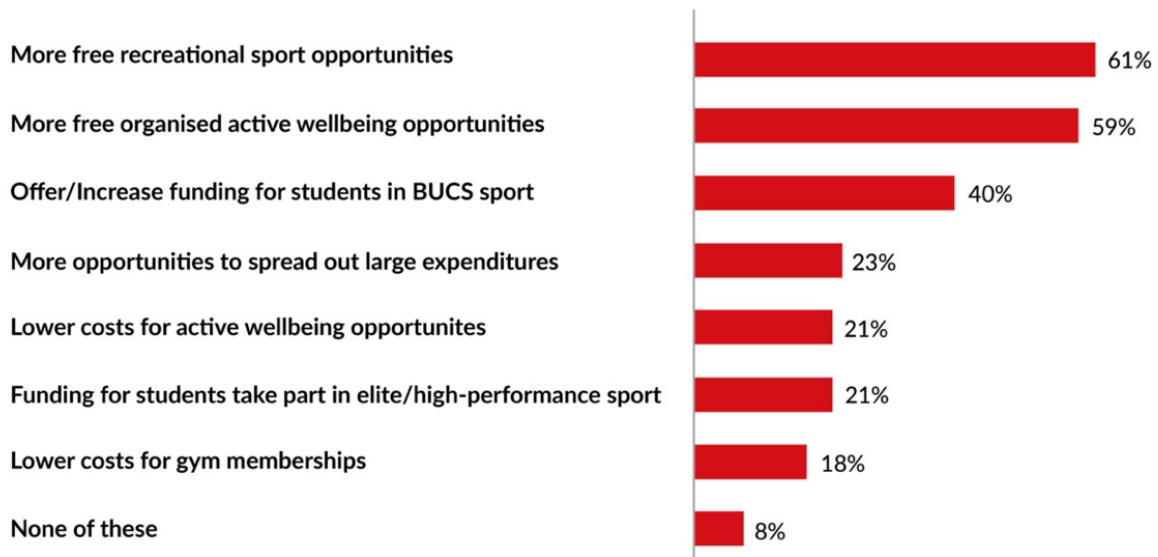
-Student Opportunities Manager, traditional institution

In situations where an institution was not able to afford to fund the transport costs associated with sport, costs ultimately fell to students, making it harder for students on limited income to take part.

INSTITUTION RESPONSES TO THE COST-OF-LIVING SITUATION

In response to the cost-of-living situation, institutions have taken numerous actions. The graph on the next page demonstrates the range of actions taken. Only eight percent of survey participants said they had taken none of the options listed in our survey, indicating many institutions were doing their best to support their students. Post-1992 institutions were more likely to free recreational sport and active wellbeing opportunities than Russell Group or other traditional institutions.

ACTIONS TAKEN IN THE 2022-2023 ACADEMIC YEAR BY MEMBER INSTITUTIONS IN RESPONSE TO THE COST-OF-LIVING SITUATION



In September 2022, MillionPlus (the Association for Modern Universities, a group made up of post-1992 institutions) conducted a report looking at students and the cost-of-living situation. These institutions educate 46% of all undergraduates, including a disproportionate number of students at risk of financial hardship. They found that factors indicating whether students were likely to struggle with finances included age, ethnic group and socio-economic classification.²⁵ The MillionPlus research also highlighted the link between financial difficulties, mental health problems and pressure to quit school.²⁶ These connections could help explain why post-1992 institutions were more likely to offer free recreational sport and active wellbeing opportunities, using sport and physical activity to improve student mental wellbeing and retention.

While institutions focused on providing free or inexpensive physical activity and sport opportunities this year to increase engagement, some told us this effort wasn't always successful. In many cases, institutions believed this was because students had to spend more time in paid work.

“EVEN WHEN WE DO OFFER FREE SESSIONS, WE GET MINIMAL ATTENDANCE, LARGELY DUE AGAIN TO ADDITIONAL EMPLOYMENT IN STUDENT SPARE TIME.”

–Student Opportunities Manager, traditional institution

²⁵ Jones, Andrew (MillionPlus: The Association for Modern Universities), *Learning with the lights off: Students and the cost-of-living crisis*, September 2022.

²⁶ Jones, Andrew (MillionPlus: The Association for Modern Universities), *Learning with the lights off: Students and the cost-of-living crisis*, September 2022.

BARRIERS TO SUPPORTING STUDENTS

We asked institutions what barriers they experienced when supporting students to maintain involvement in physical activity and sport during the cost-of-living situation. These included high and constantly rising travel costs as well as financial pressures on students and institutions. Some institutions noted that increased student employment was also having an impact on engagement, as we have previously noted.

“STUDENTS CANNOT AFFORD MEMBERSHIP FEES AND ARE HAVING TO WORK MORE HOURS TO COVER THEIR LIVING COSTS, SO REDUCING THE AMOUNT OF FREE TIME FOR SPORT AND ALL ACTIVITY.”

- Sport Coordinator, post-1992 institution

“STUDENTS ARE BEING FORCED TO CHOOSE BETWEEN TAKING ON MORE PART TIME WORK AND EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITY.”

-Head of Sport and Physical Activity, Russell Group institution

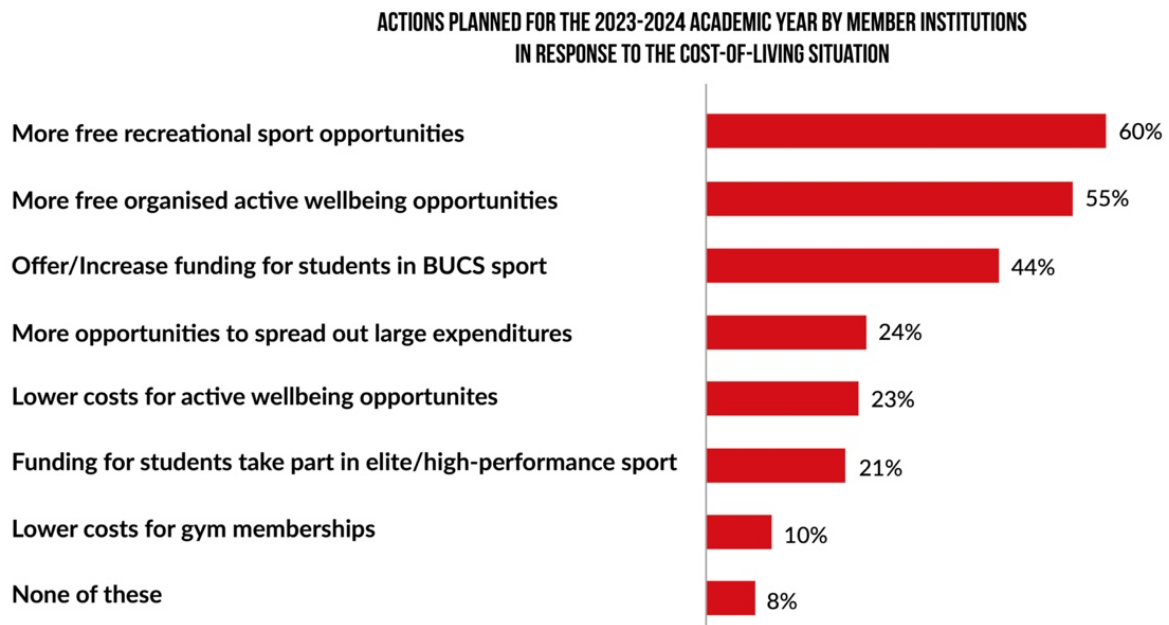
Student work commitments have also impacted on the number of students taking up volunteering opportunities. One-off opportunities are more popular because students don't have to make a long-term commitment that could clash with work or study.

“WE HAVE HAD A REDUCED AMOUNT OF STUDENTS SIGN UP FOR VOLUNTEERING PROGRAMMES DUE TO WORK COMMITMENTS, HOWEVER MORE STUDENTS HAVE SIGNED UP FOR ONE-OFF OPPORTUNITIES.”

-Volunteer and Outreach Manager, Russell Group institution

ACTIONS INSTITUTIONS PLAN TO TAKE IN THE 2023-24 ACADEMIC YEAR

Looking ahead to the 2023-24 academic year, institutions are generally planning similar actions to what they did in 2022-23, as demonstrated in the graph below.



Like students, institutions are experiencing rising costs and tightening budgets. Many survey participants told us they were limited in what they could do to support students because of these pressures. These difficulties are reflected in the quotes below:

“SPORT IS DUE TO SHRINK BECAUSE OF THE COST-OF-LIVING CRISIS. BUDGETS ARE SHRINKING, AFFILIATION FEES AND ACCOMMODATION FEES (TRANSPORT) ARE RISING, MAKING IT LESS AND LESS POSSIBLE TO BE ABLE TO FACILITATE THE NUMBER OF SPORTS WE WANT, PARTICULARLY IN CENTRAL LONDON WHERE WE DO NOT HAVE OUTDOOR FACILITIES (COST OF HIRING IS GETTING HIGHER).”

-Sport Development Administrator, traditional institution

“OPERATIONAL AND STAFFING COSTS HAVE HAD AN IMPACT AND WILL CONTINUE TO DO SO ON FUTURE INVESTMENT AND DELIVERY.”

-Head of Sport, Russell Group institution

“THE COST TO PROVIDE SOME ELEMENTS OF OUR SPORT PROGRAMME HAVE NEARLY DOUBLED...WITH A BUDGET THAT HAS ALSO BEEN CUT.”

-Deputy Head of Sport, post-1992 institution

Going forward these pressures are likely to continue for institutions, and there may be fewer funding pots or bursaries to support students. This is likely to continue to have an impact on the quality and cost of the offer that institutions can provide.

"I THINK WE HAVE A SMALL AMOUNT OF MONEY FOR NEXT YEAR. WE'RE A BIT WORRIED ABOUT THAT. I DON'T KNOW WHAT OTHER UNIVERSITIES ARE EXPERIENCING, BUT THERE'S BEEN SO MUCH THROWN INTO HARDSHIP FUNDS AND COST OF LIVING RESOURCES THAT FOR NEXT YEAR, WE ARE NOW LIKE, "WHERE'S THE MONEY?"

-Sabbatical Officer, Russell Group institution

"IN TERMS OF OUR MEMBERSHIPS, THAT MEMBERSHIP I WAS TALKING ABOUT FOR COMPETITIVE SPORT, HOW IT'S £200 BASE COST, WE'VE KEPT THAT OVER THE PAST THREE YEARS, I THINK. WE HAVEN'T INCREASED COSTS, BUT WE ARE GOING TO ABSOLUTELY HAVE TO INCREASE IT BY AT LEAST £15 FOR NEXT YEAR BECAUSE OF THE COST OF TRANSPORTATION."

-Sabbatical Officer, Russell Group institution

BUCS ENTRIES

The responses to the survey questions from both the students and institutions demonstrate the negative impact that the cost-of-living situation is having on students' engagement with sport and physical activity. We heard this in more detail when conducting focus groups and interviews with students and Sabbatical/Student Officers. These first-hand experiences point to reduced engagement and participation in competitive sport.

However, the BUCS data tells a slightly different story. In the 2022-23 season both walkovers and voids were lower when compared to the 2021-22 season. One exception to this positive data was that the lower BUCS competitive sports tiers (i.e., those outside of the Premier and first tier) reported a higher percentage of walkovers than those at the top. Since these lower tiers often receive less institutional funding for travel and accommodation, we suspect that this is an impact of the cost-of-living situation.

The upcoming 2023-24 season has seen a year-on-year increase of over 80 teams signing up to the BUCS competitive sport league structure. We saw notable increases in team entries in women's football, rugby league and volleyball. We did not see large increases or decreases by sport, institution or type of institution. Similarly, the trend of increasing submissions held true across Scottish, Northern, Midlands, Western and South Eastern conferences. This data contradicts some of what we heard in our research, so we explored what was going on in more depth.

We found that although the absolute number of BUCS team entries have risen from the 2022-23 season to the 2023-24 season and this raw data looks promising, there may be some decline when looking at these in context of enrolment data. HESA enrolment figures have not yet been released for 2022-23, but the trend from the previous year was a 4% increase in student population (with a higher-than-normal increase in 2020-21).²⁷ Assuming this increase has remained steady, we can see that the increase in BUCS teams going into 2022-23 (3.3%) did not keep up with student population growth, and the increase going into 2023-24 has dropped even further (1.7%). This could be an indication of the effects of the cost-of-living situation.

Overall, however, the BUCS team entries are still rising year-on-year, demonstrating resilience. We do not have definitive data on why this is the case beyond student population numbers rising, but we do have some hypotheses. First, this resilience in BUCS entries might be due to the value institutions put

²⁷ Bolton, Paul (House of Commons Library), [Higher Education Student Numbers](#), February 2023.

on competitive sport. This is a key element of some institutions' recruitment and retention strategies, discussed in BUCS' position statement [The Value of University Sport and Physical Activity](#).²⁸ Second, if institutions drop out of a BUCS league, it can be very difficult to rebuild the sport and runs the risk of angering students (both current and future). The cost of dropping out, therefore, is often greater in the long-term than remaining in the league. Third, students, club committee members and institutions all told us that they were able to use savings, funds and grants left over from the COVID pandemic in the 2022-23 academic year. In addition, institutions saw increases in hardship funds and other support available to students. These pots and savings helped bolster participation during hard times.

Generally, however, they said that COVID funding had been depleted and, in many cases, institutions will be unable to provide the same level of support in the 2023-24 academic year. We therefore think there is a possibility that some institutions and sports could struggle to fill the team entries they have submitted once the 2023-24 season begins. With the cost-of-living situation set to have an ongoing effect, there may be a point in the future where some students' budgets no longer stretch to allow for engagement in competitive sport.

We heard a lot around travel costs as a significant barrier to taking part in BUCS matches. Institutions supported travel to and from fixtures in many ways that differ across the BUCS competitive structure. When the institution is unable to fund travel to fixtures, this falls onto the clubs and students as part of the club to fund this. It is common that further down the tiered structure of the BUCS competitions, the less funding clubs receive from their institution. With the high costs associated with travel, this may be a factor causing the increased rate of walkovers at the lower levels of competition.

Student clubs have an important role to play in keeping costs down where possible, but they also struggled. We heard that clubs had built up budget reserves from previous years and have used these reserves to fund aspects of the clubs such as travel. However, this has led to some clubs being run at a deficit, which is not a sustainable model. If the level of travel costs remains consistent going into future academic years, this could mean an increase in frequency of walkovers and clubs not being able to play matches, which could also filter through into the higher tiers.

²⁸ Mayne, Vince and Julie Brunton (BUCS), [The Value of University Sport and Physical Activity](#), 2020.

KEY THEMES

We considered all the qualitative and quantitative research and identified cross-cutting themes that have affected student engagement with sport and physical activity in higher education. These themes are discussed below.

Everyone has been squeezed – and continues to be.

While previous crises, particularly the COVID pandemic, hit people and institutions unevenly, the cost-of-living situation has hit nearly everyone in society. In higher education sport, this includes students, institutions, student unions, and clubs. Institutions did their best to provide additional funding for students where possible, but these were predominantly and understandably targeted at pressing needs such as heating and food rather than sport. While some institutions will be able to carry on with hardship funding in the 2023-24 academic year, we heard from others that they have now run down most of their supplemental funding and are unsure what more they can provide in the 2023-24 academic year, despite the fact that students continue to face inflation pressures. Similarly, students told us that they had exhausted their savings this year and were worried about what they would do in the upcoming academic year.

“PEOPLE ARE GETTING REALLY FATIGUED AND I KNOW ESPECIALLY THAT NEXT YEAR EVERYONE’S RENTS HAVE GONE UP AND THAT’S ONLY IMPACTED THEM NEXT YEAR.”

-Undergraduate student, North West

“YOU SEE A LOT MORE MONEY LEAVING THAN COMING IN, AND ESPECIALLY BECAUSE I DID AN APPRENTICESHIP BEFORE THIS. THAT WAS LOTS OF MONEY, AND NOT MUCH MONEY GOING OUT, ESPECIALLY DURING THE PANDEMIC, AND NOW IT’S BEEN A COMPLETE SWITCH AND A DIFFERENT MINDSET, I GUESS, OF, “OH, I’M A STUDENT, I DON’T HAVE MONEY TO SPEND ANYMORE.”

-Undergraduate student, East Midlands

Some protective factors help students stay involved in sport.

There were protective factors that helped students stay engaged in sport. These included sport-specific measures from institutions as well as situational elements that helped students save money. Students who lived at home were able to save money on rent but had the increased cost of commuting, which was particularly difficult if they had to pay for public transport. Those who lived

near campus but had parents close by generally had the best of both worlds and had more disposable income. One student explained this in more detail:

“EVERYTHING JUST GOT MORE EXPENSIVE. I'M LUCKY BECAUSE MY MOM COOKS FOOD SO I'M ABLE TO BRING IT FROM HOME TO UNIVERSITY. IF NOT FOR THAT, I WOULD SAY IT WOULD BE TOUGH BECAUSE THE UNIVERSITY HAS A COUPLE OF FOOD STALLS, SMALL, LITTLE SUPERMARKETS, BUT IT'S JUST ONE OF THEM ONES WHERE IT'S LIKE- THERE'S NOT A WIDE RANGE OF VARIETY WHEN IT COMES TO FOOD.”

-Undergraduate student, South East

Like commuting from home, having a job was another double-edged sword. Students with jobs felt more comfortable about spending money, and those without jobs noted the limitations. One student who was actively job searching told us the following:

“I DO WANT TO BE GOING BACK TO THE GYM. IT IS SOMETHING I WANT TO KEEP UP DOING, BUT IT'S JUST NOT FEASIBLE RIGHT NOW [BECAUSE I DON'T HAVE ANY INCOME].”

-Undergraduate student, Scotland

On the flip side, however, balancing work, studying and sport is difficult. More students are working than ever before, and they are working for longer hours. In our survey, 58% of students reported having a paid job. Most worked under 20 hours per week (37%) or irregular hours (17%), but seven percent reported working more than 20 hours per week, with some reporting working full-time hours. Counter to our expectations, the majority of those working over 20 hours per week were undergraduates. This echoes a trend reported elsewhere of students working more hours than in previous years.²⁹ Students told us in the focus groups and interviews that they noticed others dropping out of matches to work, and one student told us he was planning to quit his sport next year due to the pressures of working and studying. Others spoke about work having to come first, and this having a knock-on effect on how much they engaged with sport.

²⁹ Neves, Jonathan and Rose Stephenson (Advanced HE and HEPI), *Student Academic Experience Survey 2023*, June 2023.

“BECAUSE EVERYTHING’S GOT MORE EXPENSIVE, [I’M] MORE KEEN TO WORK, SO LESS KEEN TO TRAIN AND I DIDN’T FEEL LIKE THERE WAS WORTH PLAYING NEXT YEAR IF I WASN’T GOING TO GIVE IT THE RIGHT AMOUNT OF TRAINING TIME.”

- Undergraduate student, North West

“IN COMPARISON TO LAST YEAR, I WAS COACHING TWO TEAMS, PLAYING THREE TIMES A WEEK HAVING A GAME AS WELL. WHEREAS THIS YEAR, I’M JUST TRAINING TWICE A WEEK, GOING TO GAMES, AND DOING AS MUCH AS I CAN BECAUSE WORK DOES COME FIRST AND I AM EMPLOYED, THAT’S WHAT I’M THERE TO DO.”

-Undergraduate student, East Midlands

“I KNOW FOR A FEW OF THE TEAM SPORTS THAT I’VE BEEN INVOLVED IN, PEOPLE WERE HAVING TO TAKE ON EXTRA SHIFTS AT WORK AND EVERYTHING SO THEY COULDN’T MAKE CERTAIN GAMES.”

-Sabbatical Officer, Northern Ireland

“THE BIGGEST THING WE’RE SEEING IS THAT THERE’S LESS PEOPLE ATTENDING NIGHTS OUT, OR SOCIALS, OR EVEN TEAMS BEING ABLE TO BE FILLED ON BUGS AWAY DAYS AND THINGS LIKE THAT, JUST BECAUSE PEOPLE ARE HAVING TO WORK OR THEY’RE DOING THEIR DISSERTATION IN THE EVENING BECAUSE THEY’VE BEEN WORKING ALL AFTERNOON.”

-Sabbatical Officer, East of England

Jobs that paid well and were limited to manageable hours, often within the institution a student attended, were the most protective when it came to ensuring students could work and take part in sport.

Institution factors also played a role in how much students remained engaged in sport and physical activity. Unsurprisingly, students at institutions that did not focus on sport did not feel well-supported during the cost-of-living situation. We used the Relative Insight qualitative analysis tool to look at differences between students who said the cost-of-living situation had negatively impacted their ability to be physically active versus those that said the situation had had little or no impact. When asked what support they had received from their institutions to take part in the sport over the last year, those who said there had been little or no impact were 9.5 times more likely to use the word “subsidised” and 7.2 times more likely to use words relating to finance, such as expenses, cash and

budget. This data suggests that students who received support from their institution to continue taking part in sport were less likely to see their physical activity impacted.

Students who struggled with money felt their institution did not fully appreciate the numerous costs they had to pay to play sport, and how much all the costs had risen. Basic costs included travel (sometimes even for home fixtures/practices), kit, club membership, BUCS membership, gym membership (sometimes required for club participation), and accommodation for away games. Depending on the institution, these costs could come to hundreds of pounds and were often required in one payment at the start of the year. Similarly, students were not fully aware of all the outgoing costs that universities had to cover, and how those prices had risen because of inflation.

“IT’S A LOT OF MONEY...YOU PAY THE £90 [MEMBERSHIP], YOU HAVE TO GET SHOES...THOSE SHOES ARE LIKE, FOR ME, I’M SIZE 12, SO I’M PAYING £90 PLUS. THERE’S TRAVELING COSTS AS WELL. IF YOU DON’T MAKE IT WITH THE TEAM, YOU’RE GOING TO HAVE TO PAY FROM YOUR OWN POCKETS. IF YOU DO MAKE IT WITH THE TEAM, THERE’S FOOD TO BUY IF YOU DON’T BRING HOMEMADE FOOD. THERE’S A LOT OF COSTS AND I JUST DON’T THINK THE UNI REALISES THAT.”

-Undergraduate student, South East

“OUR CAMPUS IS IN THE CITY CENTRE AND YOU’D HAVE TO TRAVEL ABOUT 20 MINUTES OUT TO THE [SPORTS FACILITY] TO PLAY ANY SPORT...OUR NUMBERS HAVE DECREASED A GOOD BIT, AND PART OF THAT’S PROBABLY COST OF LIVING JUST WITH THE TRAVEL.”

-Sabbatical Officer, Northern Ireland

Whether and how much institutions defrayed these costs for students depended on how central sport was to their institutional strategy. Sabbatical/Student Officers and sports staff we spoke to noted that this fact pre-dated the cost-of-living situation but was exacerbated by stretched budgets.

“I THINK ALMOST ALL OF OUR UNIVERSITIES HAVE THE MENTALITY THAT SPORT ISN’T AS BIG OF A PRIORITY AS SAY GETTING NOBEL PEACE PRIZES OR GETTING FUNDING FOR PHD STUDENTS. IT’S AN EVER-GOING BATTLE FOR FUNDING, IN GENERAL, I’D SAY, ON TOP OF THAT.”

-Sabbatical Officer, North West

“GREATER INCREASE IN COST OF DELIVERY OF STUDENT SPORT, ALONGSIDE GREATER SENIOR LEADERSHIP TEAM PRESSURES TO STAY WITHIN BUDGET HAS MEANT FEWER ADDITIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS TO PARTICIPATE IN COMPS, AND REDUCED HOLISTIC SPORTING OFFER CLOSER DOWN TO A BARE BONE MODEL.”

-Institutional Administrator, London

“SPORT IS NOT A STRATEGIC PRIORITY FOR THE UNI AND...WE'RE NOT VERY CASH OR ASSET-RICH AS A UNI. I KNOW THEY'RE TRYING THEIR BEST, BUT IT MEANS THAT IF WE ARE TRYING TO DEVELOP FACILITIES OR ANYTHING FOR SPORT, WE HAVE TO FIGURE OUT VERY CREATIVE WAYS TO DO THAT. THAT OFTEN MEANS THAT ALL OF OUR FACILITIES ARE TIED UP IN EXTERNAL FUNDERS THAT HAVE PRIORITIES AND REQUIREMENTS THAT WE THEN NEED TO ATTACH TO THOSE FACILITIES.”

-Sabbatical Officer, Yorkshire

Students are making value assessments

While the situation has affected nearly everyone, some are impacted more than others. Some students have simply been priced out of sport altogether, or have to take up jobs to make ends meet and cannot fit sport into their timetable. As we explained earlier, Black/Black British and students with a disability are overrepresented in this group.

However, students with more disposable income talked about making choices rather than dropping out of sport altogether. Often, they chose to cut down on socialising and nights out, including social events tied to sport. When we asked students in our survey what costs they had cut in the last six months, social costs were at the top of the list at 84%. In focus groups and interviews, students told us they were thinking hard about sport social events. These decisions in turn affected how engaged they were in the sport.

“THE COST-OF-LIVING SITUATION DEFINITELY IMPACTED THE AMOUNT OF SOCIAL EVENTS THAT WE, AS A [SPORT] TEAM, DO BECAUSE IT'S JUST MORE EXPENSIVE. I THINK IT'S IMPACTED SOCIALLY.”

-Undergraduate student, North West

Students have always made these value assessments when considering what to take part in during higher education, but this process is more pronounced against the backdrop of rising prices. Sabbatical/Student Officers told us they were fielding more queries from students about what they were paying for and why it was worth it.

"ALL OUR SPORTS CLUB MEMBERS HAVE A SPORT EXERCISE MEMBERSHIP THAT THEY USE SPORT AND EXERCISE FACILITIES, WHICH HAS BEEN PREVIOUSLY SEEN AS AN EXCELLENT DEAL...YOU GET YOUR GYM, YOU GET YOUR TRAINING FEES, YOU GET ALL YOUR FIXTURE COSTS. I'VE ALWAYS SEEN IT AS A VERY BIG POSITIVE THING, BUT...THIS YEAR WHEN WE WENT TO GO CHASE CLUBS FOR IT, THERE WERE A LOT OF COMPLAINTS COMING BACK THAT THEY DIDN'T FEEL LIKE THEY WERE GETTING VALUE FOR MONEY."

-Sabbatical Officer, Scotland

"COMPARED TO LAST YEAR, I'M BUYING LESS KIT, GOING ON LESS SOCIALS, AND JUST THINKING MORE ABOUT LIKE, "OH, CAN I AFFORD TO GO TO PRESIDENT'S DINNER? CAN I AFFORD TO GO TO CAPTAIN'S DINNER?" PERSONALLY, HAVING TO JUST THINK MORE ABOUT THE FACT THAT BILLS ARE GOING UP...THAT DOES SOMEWHAT LIMIT YOUR ENGAGEMENT, I THINK. IT CERTAINLY HAS SOMEWHAT LIMITED MINE."

-Sabbatical Officer, Yorkshire

"THE QUALITY OF EXPERIENCE IS REALLY, REALLY IMPORTANT. THAT IS WHAT WE ARE SEEING AT [MY INSTITUTION], IS THAT EVEN IF PRICES AREN'T GOING UP TOO HIGH, THE QUALITY OF EXPERIENCE IS PEOPLE DON'T THINK THEY'RE ACTUALLY GETTING VALUE FOR MONEY ANYMORE...IT'S LESS A CASE THAT I'M SEEING OF PEOPLE BEING OUT-PRICED BUT MORE PEOPLE BECOMING AWARE OF, "WHAT ARE WE PAYING FOR?" IF PRICES ARE GOING UP IN LINE WITH COST OF LIVING, THEY'RE STILL LIKE, "I DON'T UNDERSTAND WHAT I'M GETTING FOR THIS."

-Sabbatical Officer, Yorkshire

Students in our focus groups also spoke about wanting value from their investment. They stressed that the presence of coaches made a difference in their experiences. Some had opted out of BUCS sport to take part in community clubs where they had access to coaches, while others suggested they and their teammates would be willing to pay a bit more if the institution would help them hire coaches. They felt that coaches were key to helping them improve and enjoy the experience of playing sport.

“WHEN I SAW NO COACH AND NOT A GOOD ENVIRONMENT...I SKIP SOME SPORTS AND GO TO MY SHIFTS OR SOMETIMES TO GIVE TIME TO STUDY. IT'S NOT WORTH IT TO PLAY HERE IN THIS ENVIRONMENT. NOW, I'M PLAYING IN [COMMUNITY CLUB], IT'S TOTALLY DIFFERENT, WITH THE PROPER COACH.”

-Postgraduate student, Yorkshire

“[MY INSTITUTION] COULD HAVE APPROACHED THE [CLUB] PRESIDENT TO APPROACH THE TEAM AND SAY, “HEY, LOOK, EVERYONE NEEDS TO PAY £2, £3 EXTRA TO PAY FOR A COACH, OR PAY A £20 EXTRA FOR A COACH FOR A SEASON.” THEN I THINK THAT I PERSONALLY WOULD'VE PROBABLY BEEN ABLE TO BUDGET THAT IN BECAUSE THE VALUE TO ME IS WORTH THE ONE NIGHT OUT YOU MISS OR WHATEVER.”

-Undergraduate student, North West

Transparency and fairness matter to students.

Students were quick to identify things that they thought were unfair and this affected how they felt about higher education sport. This issue was not new during the cost-of-living situation but was exacerbated by it.

“YOU GO TO THE UNIVERSITY AND YOU THINK YOU HAVE ACCESS TO THE FACILITIES, BUT NO, IT'S ALL OF THE SPORTS FACILITIES THAT ARE BLOCKED OFF, WHICH I DIDN'T EVEN CONSIDER UNTIL I FOUND OUT ABOUT IT.”

-Undergraduate student, East Midlands

Sabbatical/Student Officers had a clearer understanding than students of why things were the way they were but had to spend a great deal of time explaining this to students, particularly in the 2022-23 year when students were impacted by the cost-of-living situation. They found that transparency was helpful in keeping students “on-side”, but tackling this issue on an individual basis each time they were contacted was not feasible.

“WHEN YOU DON'T HAVE A COACH THERE OR WHEN THE COACH IS ALREADY WORRIED ABOUT THE D1 TEAM AND YOU'RE NOT GETTING REALLY ANY ATTENTION, YOU'RE LIKE, YOU'RE GOING TO START DOUBTING YOURSELF WHETHER YOU'RE PERFORMING THE BEST YOU CAN.”

-Undergraduate student, South East

Through our survey of institutions, we saw that institutions were doing quite a lot to help students stay engaged in sport and physical activity. However, students were not always aware of the work that institutions are doing. They complained that their institutions weren't doing enough and they did not understand the value institutions were adding despite price increases. Even if funding levels cannot be changed, increased transparency will help change students' perceptions of how fair funding decisions are. Both club committees and institutions have roles to play in ensuring this transparency exists.

“WE WANT OUR PLAYERS TO FEEL LIKE THEY'RE ACTUALLY PUSHING TO SOME POINT WHERE THEY'RE SUCCEEDING. NOT THAT THEY'RE BEING HELD BACK, WHICH WE HAVE HAD LIKE WE'VE HAD SOME OF THAT AND WE'VE TRYING TO REALLY, REALLY HEAR THEM AND THEN WORK ON THAT AND BE VERY TRANSPARENT ABOUT IT TOO.”

-Undergraduate student and incoming club committee chair in East Midlands

“IF YOU WERE A PERFORMANCE ATHLETE... YOU'D PAY A LUMP SUM AT THE BEGINNING OF THE YEAR OF £200, WHICH WHEN YOU SAY OUT LOUD IS A LOT OF MONEY FOR A STUDENT. IT ENDS UP EQUATING TO ALMOST £1,000 WORTH OF VALUE, WHICH IS WHAT I KNOW NOW. I'M TRYING TO PUSH TO STUDENTS THAT IT'S WORTH IT WHEN YOU LOOK AT OVERALL COSTS.”

-Sabbatical Officer, North West

Transparency about choices around funding is also important. There might be good reasons why limited funding is disbursed in certain ways, but students who don't understand the reasoning see it as unfairness or favouritism.

“WE TEND TO ALTERNATE BETWEEN HOME AND AWAY GAMES. THAT’S £10 EVERY OTHER WEEK JUST TO PLAY A SPORT WHEN I’M PAYING FOR MEMBERSHIP ON TOP OF THAT. I’M SURE THE UNIVERSITY HAS A LOT OF MONEY, AND THEY DO IT FOR OTHER SPORTS AS WELL, WHICH IS QUITE INTERESTING. THEY BOOK COACHES FOR HOME GAMES FOR OTHER SPORTS, BUT NOT FOR ULTIMATE. I GUESS THAT’S BECAUSE WE’RE A SMALLER SPORT, BUT EQUALLY I’D WANT THE SAME THING TO APPLY UNIVERSALLY.”

-Undergraduate student, East Midlands

“I DON’T KNOW IF IT’S WITH ALL UNIS BUT ESPECIALLY FOR OUR UNI, THEY’RE VERY RELUCTANT TO PUT MONEY INTO OTHER CLUBS UNLESS IT’S LIKE A D1 [DIVISION 1] CATEGORY. UNLESS IT’S D1 VOLLEYBALL, BASKETBALL, FOOTBALL...NETBALL, YOU WON’T SEE ANY OTHER RESOURCES OR MONEY GOING ANYWHERE ELSE.”

-Undergraduate student, South East

“IT SOUNDS BAD BUT IF THE PERFORMANCE ATHLETE IN A CLUB NEEDS HELP, THEN I THINK THE CLUB’S MORE INCLINED TO HELP THEM AS COMPARED TO A 15-PLAYER BECAUSE YOU’VE GOT THE HEAD COACH AS WELL WHO’D BE MORE ON THE CLUB’S CASE AS WELL TO MAKE SURE IT’S HAPPENING.”

-Sabbatical Officer, North East

Sense of belonging and culture have been damaged during the pandemic and the cost-of-living situation.

Students play an important role in maintaining club culture across the years. Usually, first year students learn from older students how to run committees and events, and their first year is an opportunity to experience the exciting possibilities of being part of a sport. They then step up to manage this process and the culture and sense of belonging are carried on. During the COVID pandemic, however, this cycle was disrupted. BUCS sport and most other higher education sport was halted and students in their first year did not experience all the great things that sport can offer, particularly making friends, socialising and building a sense of belonging. This had a particular impact on those who were not the most motivated by sport itself, but wanted to play sport for the social side of things.

“THE HANGOVER OF COVID HAS HAD A REAL EFFECT IN TERMS OF DESTROYING THE CONTINUATION OF THE CULTURE AROUND OUR SPORTS TEAMS. WE STILL SEE THAT THE PEOPLE WHO DO GET INVOLVED IN THE SPORTS TEAMS, THEY’RE SOME OF OUR MOST ENGAGED, OUR MOST ACTIVE STUDENTS.”

-Sabbatical Officer, Yorkshire

“WHEN I WAS A FRESHER, I USED TO REMEMBER ALL OF THESE EVENTS THAT WE WOULD GO TO AND ALL OF THE OLDER STUDENTS WOULD BE ABSOLUTELY GASSED ABOUT THEM. THEN LAST YEAR WHEN I WAS COMING OUT TO MY FINAL YEAR...NO ONE KNEW HOW GREAT THE AU SOCIAL NIGHTS WERE BECAUSE OF THAT LACK OF UNDERSTANDING AND THAT LACK OF LEGACY.”

-Sabbatical Officer, North West

Since COVID pandemic restrictions were lifted, institution staff and student committees have worked hard to rebuild this culture. The 2021-22 academic year was the crucial “return to sport” year and many students were keen to return. But when the cost-of-living situation hit in the 2022-23 academic year, rising costs made it more difficult for students to engage. Furthermore, students who had not had the full higher education sport experience due to the COVID pandemic and had not had a chance to build connections and a sense of belonging questioned the value of taking part now that costs were prohibitive.

One institutional strategy to overcome cost issues was to offer free participation and active wellbeing opportunities. These are crucial for mental and physical health and serve an important role for students. However, these free options do not contribute to sense of belonging nearly as much as taking part in intramural or competitive sport.

“YOU CAN’T REALLY REPLACE THAT BELONGING ASPECT THAT YOU FIND WHEN YOU’RE IN A TEAM AND YOU ARE COMPETING AT A LEVEL. WHEREAS THE STUFF THAT WE OFFER GENERALLY ISN’T COMPETITIVE, YOU’D BE WITH DIFFERENT PEOPLE EACH WEEK AND IT DOESN’T REALLY CREATE A MASSIVE COMMUNITY.”

-Sabbatical Officer, East Midlands

Sabbatical/Student Officers and student club committee members we spoke to recognised this breakdown in culture and sense of belonging. They particularly felt the impact when recruiting for committee or event volunteers. The decision to volunteer now involves a different value assessment

for students: they are busier with paid work, looking at rising costs of participation, and not motivated by a culture of participation that existed prior to the COVID pandemic that they have not experienced for themselves.

“THESE STUDENTS THAT WE HAVE RIGHT NOW, AT LEAST THE THIRD YEARS, THEIR ENTIRE UNIVERSITY TIME HAS BEEN AFFECTED BY [COVID]. THERE’S NONE OF THAT LEGACY IMPACT THAT THEY’RE ABLE TO PUT ONTO NEW COMMITTEES AND EXISTING STUDENTS...ON TOP OF THE EFFECTS FROM COVID, YOU’VE ALSO GOT THE FACT THAT YOU HAVE TO PAY THINGS TO DO STUFF. IT’S JUST EXPONENTIALLY AFFECTED IT, I WOULD SAY.”

-Undergraduate student, North West

“SENSE OF BELONGING HAS BEEN REALLY PROMINENT THIS YEAR BECAUSE WE’VE HAD QUITE A FEW EVENTS THAT HAVE GONE BACK UP IN FULL FORCE THIS YEAR AFTER COVID...WE’RE REALLY TRYING TO MAKE THESE EVENTS REALLY, REALLY BIG AND THEY DO PROVIDE THAT SENSE OF BELONGING. OUR MOST RECENT ONE WAS THE [COMMUNITY 10K]...WE USED TO HAVE OVER 2,500 STUDENTS PARTICIPATING IN THAT AND WE COULD BARELY GET 500 [THIS YEAR] BECAUSE EVEN THOUGH WE MANAGED TO GET A 50% DISCOUNT ON TICKETS...THEY STILL DON’T SEE THE DISCOUNT AS MUCH AS IT IS AS ENOUGH TO RELATE TO THAT SENSE OF BELONGING AS BEING PART OF THE UNIVERSITY.”

-Sabbatical Officer, North West

“IT WAS REALLY, REALLY HARD FOR OUR COMMITTEE THIS YEAR...THE INCOMING YEAR [2023-24] TO GET ANYONE. LITERALLY, THE ONLY ROLE WE HAD FOR MYSELF WAS CHAIR AND THAT WAS IT FOR MY COMMITTEE FOR MONTHS UNTIL I HAD TO GO AND SEEK OUT PEOPLE.”

-Undergraduate student and committee member, East Midlands

“THERE ARE EVENTS THAT WE WANT TO GO TO AS A TEAM. THEY’VE JUST GOT A LOT MORE EXPENSIVE. AT THE END OF THIS YEAR, THERE WAS A FIGHT NIGHT TOURNAMENT...[AND I] WANTED TO GO AND IT WAS JUST REALLY, REALLY EXPENSIVE AND I DIDN’T GO TO THAT BECAUSE I WAS LIKE, I JUST CAN’T JUSTIFY SPENDING MONEY ON THAT. THEN WE HAD AN END OF YEAR DINNER WITH EX-ALUMNI. THERE WAS A LOT OF CONTENTION OVER HOW MUCH THAT WAS GOING TO BE, WHICH I THINK WOULD HAPPEN EVERY YEAR BECAUSE EVERYONE’S OBVIOUSLY TRYING TO SAVE MONEY BUT I THINK IT’S ESPECIALLY BECOME TRUE NOW BECAUSE PRICE HAS JUST GONE UP FOR EVERYTHING.”

-Undergraduate student, North West

To overcome these challenges, students and staff have put in extra work to educate incoming students. In terms of events, this means explaining the event and what it could look like with high levels of engagement, so that students are excited about taking part. Ultimately, if they come to a great event, this will help change their value assessment about whether it is worth taking part.

“IT’S THE EDUCATION ASPECT AROUND WHAT ACTUALLY IS [THE EVENT] AND HOW TO GET PEOPLE HYPED FOR IT BECAUSE AS WE WERE SAYING AROUND COVID, THE LOSS OF KNOWLEDGE AND LOSS OF MEMORY FROM THAT TIME IS THAT YOU HAVE TO GO BACK TO 2019 TO REMEMBER AN ON-CAMPUS [EVENT] AND MOST PEOPLE DON’T REMEMBER IT. IT’S REALLY AROUND THAT KIND OF EDUCATING AND HELPING PEOPLE UNDERSTAND WHAT’S INVOLVED IN IT.”

-Sabbatical Officer, Yorkshire

“I THINK I’VE HAD MORE COMMITTEE ISSUES THIS YEAR THAN PREVIOUS YEARS, JUST IN TERMS OF MORE PEOPLE STEPPING DOWN, MORE PEOPLE ASKING TO EITHER RANK OTHER PEOPLE, ALL THIS KIND OF STUFF. IT’S THE WORKING TOGETHER ASPECT THAT’S BEEN REALLY CHALLENGING FOR A LOT OF CLUBS. I THINK THAT’S BEEN EXACERBATED BY THE PRESSURES FROM THE FINANCIAL SIDE OF THINGS WITH COST OF LIVING AS WELL.”

-Sabbatical Officer, Yorkshire

For committee roles, the education process is slightly different. It’s about integrating incoming students into the club, so they feel part of something, then educating them about the importance of committee roles and how to do them. This is a more intensive process than what might have been needed previously but will be crucial to club success in the long term.

“WE HAVE A FRESH NEW GROUP AND WHAT TO DO WITH THEM BECAUSE THEY HAVE HAD COVID AND THEY’RE NOT VERY MUCH INTEGRATED INTO WHAT WE USED TO BE. THAT IS THE JOB WE HAVE NOW TO DO IN TERMS OF MAKING SURE THEY’RE SUPPORTED AND EQUIPPED SO THAT WHEN WE ARE GONE, AND I LEAVE IN A YEAR, WHOEVER TAKES OVER THE CLUB, JUST KNOWS WHAT THEY’RE DOING, AND IT CAN STILL KEEP RUNNING.”

-Undergraduate student and committee member, East Midlands

It will take time to rebuild club culture in situations where it has faltered, but it will be valuable in the long-term as it will provide a much stronger foundation for continued club growth.

CONCLUSION

The picture of the higher education sport sector presented in this report is of a resilient sector, but one that will likely face tough challenges going forward. Institutions, clubs, and students alike have found creative solutions to rising costs and stagnant budgets, which helps to explain why BUCS numbers have not fallen in absolute terms. But inflation remains stubborn and many funding pots have been exhausted, suggesting that the 2023-24 year will not be smooth sailing. We have included recommendations on the next page to help BUCS and institutions think about how they can maintain student engagement in sport and physical activity.

BUCS has students in higher education at the heart of everything it does, so we wanted to let an undergraduate student in the South East have the last word. He spoke for many of us in the sector when he said:

“COST OF LIVING, COVID, EVERYTHING. IT’S JUST BEEN ONE HELL OF AN EXPERIENCE, I GUESS.”

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MEMBERS

We recognise that our members vary in size, resources and how they administer sport and physical activity. We have included a range of recommendations so members can choose what works best for their individual contexts. We have given some examples in the recommendations below but again realise that the examples provided will not work in every situation.

1. FIND WAYS TO BRING A SENSE OF BELONGING AND SPORT CULTURE INTO NON-COMPETITIVE PROGRAMMES, INCLUDING ACTIVE WELLBEING PROGRAMMES.

Sense of belonging is key to staying engaged with sport and physical activity, but non-competitive offers can be seen as “add-ons” rather than at the heart of the institution’s offer. There are many ways of helping participants in active wellbeing programmes feel like they are part of something larger; one institution has had success rebranding their active wellbeing programmes to look and feel like the sports programmes, including using the school mascot and colours and renaming the programme. We note that other institutions have found that sport branding is off-putting to casual participants, so this is not a one size fits all solution. Whatever solution an institution pursues, it should feel inclusive and give all students a sense of being part of something larger.

2. PROVIDE CLEAR INFORMATION TO STUDENTS REGARDING THE INSTITUTION’S SPORT PATHWAY.

Institutions and club committees should work together to ensure that students have an awareness of and are signposted to the full range of sports and physical activities offered at their institution. This can help students who face barriers such as cost when wanting to take up top-level competitive sport to stay engaged with sport and physical activity through activities such as intramural sport and free active wellbeing opportunities. Since the cost-of-living situation has impacted students in different ways, this widened awareness will support students to move to different parts of the overall sporting pathway as and when it is possible for them to do so.

3. IDENTIFY AND SHARE BEST PRACTISE FOR INCREASING TRANSPARENCY AROUND COSTS ASSOCIATED WITH SPORT.

Students are quick to notice and question rising costs associated with sport and physical activity at higher education institutions. In our research, we found that when staff provided an explanation of this rise, students generally felt appeased and were more understanding. This is best practice and institutions should seek out opportunities to have these conversations with students. It is important to share all aspects of the financial commitment to sport with current and prospective members (e.g., including kit, membership, travel and other associated costs) in an open, honest and consistent manner,

so students can make informed decisions. For instance, members could provide templates for clubs to post at sports fairs that require the clubs to publish specific, standardised information about their membership costs so students can easily compare costs. Some members have said that students don't acknowledge financial information they are given, so we recommend working with club committees to identify best practice. We also encourage members to share with one another what has worked best for them in this area.

4. FIND MORE AND CREATIVE WAYS TO DEMONSTRATE THE VALUE OF OPPORTUNITIES TO STUDENTS.

Students told us they were frustrated when their institutions raised membership costs without providing additional value. In some cases, institutions had to do this just to cover their own rising costs, but in other cases they were able to offer additional value that students overlooked. Whenever possible, institutions should shout about discounts or savings they are making for their students. One way to do this is by showing students how much they would pay for the same service outside of the institution (this is often higher because it is not subsidised). Another is to think creatively about how to market new offers; for example, if an institution offers the [UNiversal Gym](#) programme, they could describe this as providing 33% increased value because students are able to attend a gym 12 months of the year rather than eight months. Finally, institutions should talk about the value of sport for students outside of the financial value. We know that employers are looking for graduates with skills that are acquired and proven through involvement in sport (e.g., resilience, teamwork, and achieving goals) and we should use this fact to market sport to students and add to the value proposition.

5. ADD FINANCE/BUDGET GUIDANCE AND BEST PRACTISE INTO CLUB COMMITTEE TRAINING.

During club committee training, institutions should include training on finances and budgets as standard to help clubs maintain good financial practices. Some institutions offer this as an e-module, which allows club committee members to refresh their knowledge as needed. The financial aspect of the training should provide the necessary autonomy for students to learn new skills in this area, while safeguarding against any mistakes that could cause lasting damage to the club.

6. PROVIDE SUPPORT TO STUDENTS WHO HAVE STRUGGLED MOST.

Our research found that students with disabilities and those from Black/Black British backgrounds were the most negatively impacted by the cost-of-living situation. Institutions should prioritise efforts to support these groups to take part in sport and physical activity. For instance, they could offer a certain number of free or heavily discounted gym passes for members of these groups. Make sure any support is clearly advertised and wherever possible advertised directly to students who qualify (e.g. through email). Charities like [Activity Alliance](#) and [Sporting Equals](#) provide resources on how to best

engage these groups in sport. [Living Black at University](#), a report by Unite Students about racism in student accommodation, has helpful recommendations that apply to the wider higher education experience.

7. REDUCE THE STIGMA ASSOCIATED WITH HARDSHIP FUNDS.

Where possible, remove the term “hardship funds” and instead refer to “access funds” or similar to reduce stigma. Changing this terminology can encourage more students to apply. To help remove barriers in the use of these funds, ensure communication about eligibility is clear, make students aware of application deadlines as early as possible to allow suitable time to pull necessary information together and, wherever possible, provide funding upfront rather than as a reimbursement to help those most in need.

8. UTILISE ALL AVAILABLE INFORMATION TO DEMONSTRATE VALUE OF SPORT TO INSTITUTIONAL LEADERSHIP.

The funding environment for higher education sport is tight, and the cost-of-living situation has only worsened this situation. Wherever possible, consider the larger challenges and context of your institution and fit sport and physical activity into that conversation. For instance, active wellbeing aligns well with the needs of stretched student wellbeing departments and can inherently show the value of sport and physical activity. Sport departments can also offer placements for students in tangential areas, e.g., sports journalism or physiotherapy, offering valuable hands-on experience. Demonstrating the value of sport can protect from future reductions in funding. BUCS' [Value of University Sport and Physical Activity](#) position paper offers more proof points of the value of sport and physical activity in higher education and can be used for advocacy.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BUCS STAFF

SHORT TERM

1. PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR MEMBERS TO SHARE BEST PRACTICE CASE STUDIES ON THE COST-OF-LIVING SITUATION.

While every institution is different, members can benefit from understanding what others are doing. The BUCS Insight team will support information-sharing by collecting case studies from members and storing these in an accessible location (e.g. the BUCS website). Case studies will cover a wide range of topics but potential focuses will include: transport cost reduction strategies; finding ways of increasing student belonging in non-competitive physical activity; and models of financial support that have seen student engagement in sport remain high during the cost-of-living situation.

2. SUPPORT MEMBER INSTITUTIONS TO MINIMISE BUCS IN-SEASON FINES.

The Competitions and Events team understand the impact fines can have on operational budgets for our members. The BUCS office wants to ensure that we support our members in incurring minimal fines throughout the season as they engage in our offers. Although we already have all fines and their related costs detailed within our rules and regulations, we will now build a fines (including associated sanctions) guidance document that will assist all staff and members in their understanding of what fines may be applicable to them throughout the season, and significantly, how the BUCS office can help mitigate against incurring fines. The guidance document and associated fines information will be released prior the first fixture in the season.

3. PUBLISH EVENT DATES AND TIMING AS EARLY AS POSSIBLE.

The BUCS Events team will commit to publishing event dates, registration and competition times and locations at the earliest opportunity so that participants can book accommodation and transport as soon as possible. Booking earlier can help participants reduce their costs, sometimes significantly.

MEDIUM TERM

4. FORM A WORKING GROUP TO ADVISE AND DIRECT THE BUCS EXECUTIVE ON ADJUSTMENTS WITHIN THE DELIVERY PROGRAMME THAT CAN ASSIST WITH ALLEVIATING COST.

This group will consider possible adjustments to league, knockout and event delivery that could alleviate member costs for BUCS competitions, including (but not limited to): changes to league structure, changes to the knockout programme, and changes to sports events. The group will consider

how the BUCS office can work with regions to provide guidance on block fixture booking and regionalising their own structures (within existing capacity limitations). The group will consist of a range of BUCS staff and member representatives.

5. FACILITATE CONVERSATIONS ON HOW SENSE OF BELONGING CAN BE INCREASED IN ACTIVE WELLBEING OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH AN ACTIVE WELLBEING ADVISORY GROUP.

BUCS is setting up an Active Wellbeing advisory group to facilitate conversations amongst members on this topic. As part of this group, BUCS staff and members will identify best practice and strategies for increasing sense of belonging within active wellbeing opportunities. Conversations in this advisory group will be shared more widely with all members.

6. MONITOR AND UNDERSTAND THE ONGOING COST-OF-LIVING SITUATION AND ITS IMPACT THROUGH THE 2023-24 SEASON.

The cost-of-living situation is an ongoing and evolving issue, with its impact all but certain to continue within the 2023-24 academic year and BUCS season. To monitor how the ongoing impact is felt across member institutions and students, the BUCS Insight team will collect additional data in spring 2024. The team will identify any changes from the data collected in this report and communicate it to members.

LONG TERM

7. IDENTIFY AND PILOT REGIONAL SOLUTIONS TO SUPPORT THE STUDENTS MOST AFFECTED BY THE COST-OF-LIVING SITUATION.

Black/Black British students and students with disabilities were hit hardest by the cost-of-living situation. BUCS staff and members will consider how to help these students re-engage with sport and physical activity. The Insight and Development teams at BUCS will work together to realise this goal in the long term.

APPENDIX 1: DEMOGRAPHICS OF STUDENT SURVEY

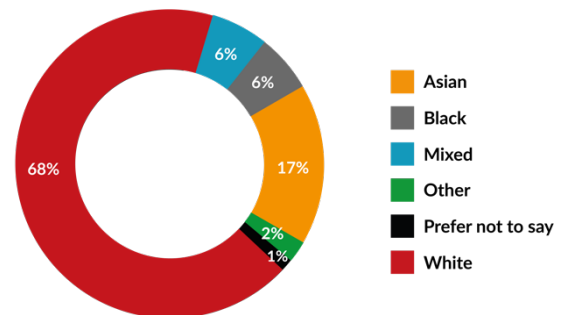
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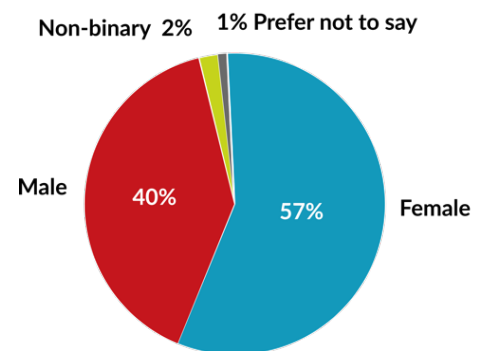
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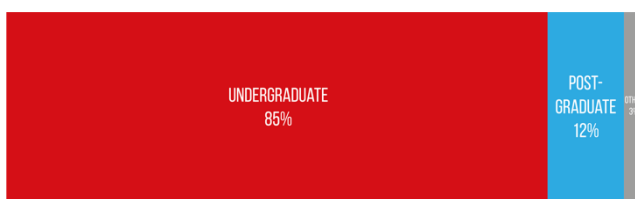
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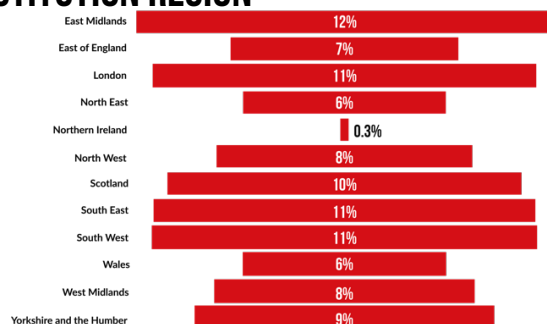
GENDER



STUDENT STATUS

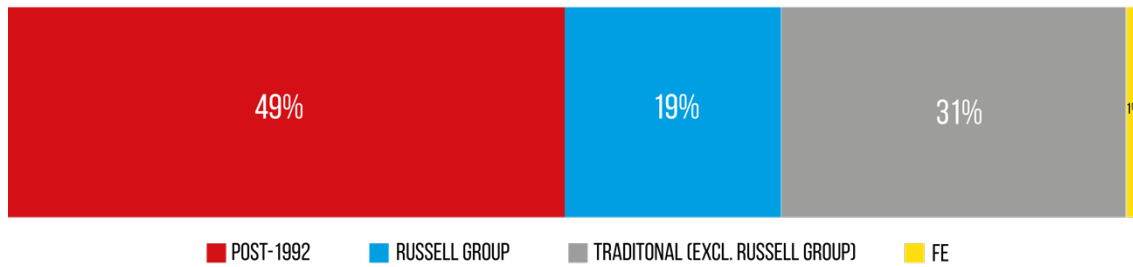


INSTITUTION REGION



APPENDIX 2: DEMOGRAPHICS OF MEMBER SURVEY

TYPE OF INSTITUTION



INSTITUTION REGION

