VALUE OF HIGHER EDUCATION SPORT: INSIGHTS FROM THE COMPLETE UNIVERSITY GUIDE DATA

2025/2026

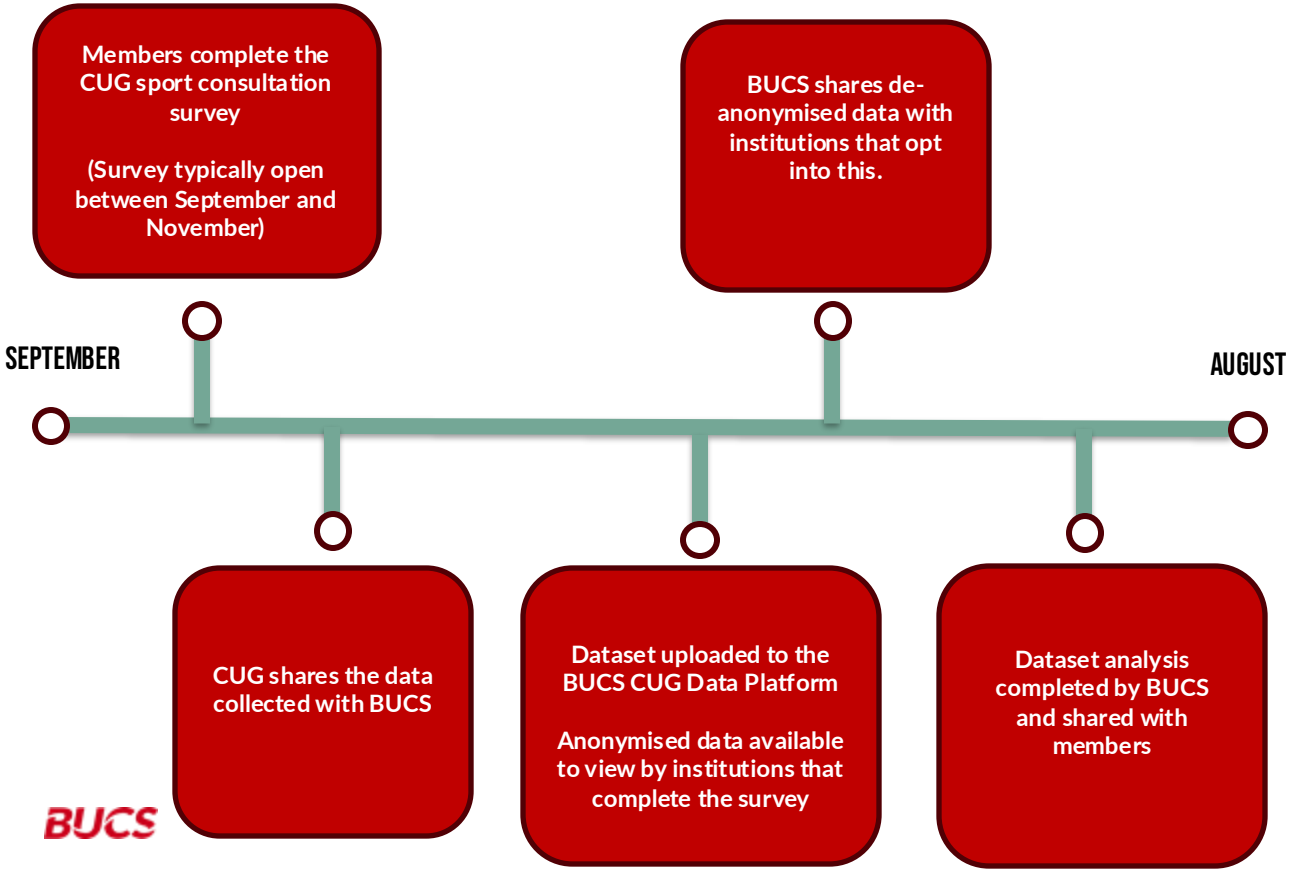
BUCS

SECTIONS

- Introduction and survey representation
- Financial pressures and institutional investment
- Student participation and sporting opportunities
- Volunteering, skills and student development
- The strategic value of sport within universities

SECTION 1:
INTRODUCTION AND SURVEY REPRESENTATION

BUCS X CUG RELATIONSHIP



BUCS has been partnering with CUG to collect data on sport and physical activity provisions within the higher education sector for the last six iterations of the survey.

The survey is split into two sections. Part 1 covers institutions' sports and physical activity offers, sports volunteering schemes, facilities and student scholarships. Part 2 of the survey deals with areas such as running costs, investment and strategy areas.

The survey was open between September and November 2025. When the survey closed, the CUG cleaned the data and sent it to the BUCS team.

The BUCS team uploads the data onto the BUCS x CUG data platform where institutions are able to benchmark their data against data from other institutions.

Following member feedback that access to de-anonymised data would aid benchmarking and internal advocacy, institutions that completed the survey have been given the opportunity to access de-anonymised information from the dataset.

This data is analysed by BUCS and reported back to the sector. Insights from the 2021/22 survey onward are available on the BUCS website BUCS British Universities & Colleges Sport (BUCS)

CUG SURVEY AND PLATFORM

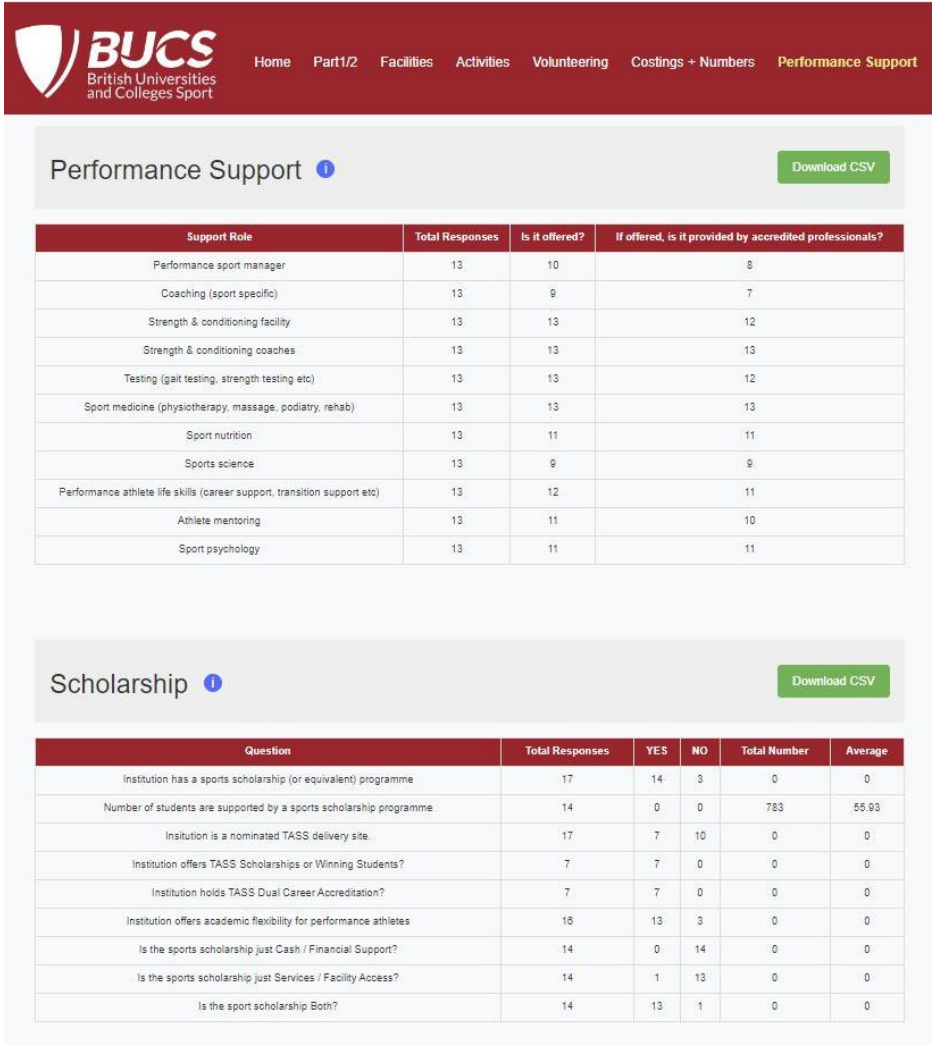
We work with a group of members to check and challenge the work we do with the data, improvements to data collection and overall offer to the members.

We have provided the opportunity to institutions that completed the survey to access de-anonymised information from the dataset. The level of data that is available to institutions is dependent on which sections of the survey they agree to share with their institution name attached. Opt-in questions for this are included within the survey.

The 2024/25 data is now available on the platform alongside the data from 2021/22 onward.

EXAMPLE
The screenshot on the right shows the performance support and scholarship areas. As you see, of the 17 institutions selected, 14 do have a sports scholarship programme and 3 do not. The 14 who do have a sports scholarship programme support 56 students on average and these scholarships are generally both cash and financial support as well as services/facility access.

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Support Role	Total Responses	Is it offered?	If offered, is it provided by accredited professionals?
Performance sport manager	13	10	8
Coaching (sport specific)	13	9	7
Strength & conditioning facility	13	13	12
Strength & conditioning coaches	13	13	13
Testing (gait testing, strength testing etc)	13	13	12
Sport medicine (physiotherapy, massage, podiatry, rehab)	13	13	13
Sport nutrition	13	11	11
Sports science	13	9	9
Performance athlete life skills (career support, transition support etc)	13	12	11
Athlete mentoring	13	11	10
Sport psychology	13	11	11

Question	Total Responses	YES	NO	Total Number	Average
Institution has a sports scholarship (or equivalent) programme	17	14	3	0	0
Number of students are supported by a sports scholarship programme	14	0	0	783	55.93
Insitution is a nominated TASS delivery site.	17	7	10	0	0
Institution offers TASS Scholarships or Winning Students?	7	7	0	0	0
Institution holds TASS Dual Career Accreditation?	7	7	0	0	0
Institution offers academic flexibility for performance athletes	16	13	3	0	0
Is the sports scholarship just Cash / Financial Support?	14	0	14	0	0
Is the sports scholarship just Services / Facility Access?	14	1	13	0	0
Is the sport scholarship Both?	14	13	1	0	0

WHO RESPONDED?

123 institutions responded to at least one section of the survey (79% of all BUCS member institutions)

Part 1 – 122 responders
Part 2a – 92 responders

Compared to the 2023-24, responses decreased by 4 to part 1 and 7 to part 2a.

REGION/NATION	% RESPONDERS BY REGION/NATION
EAST	6%
EAST MIDLANDS	7%
LONDON	17%
NI	2%
NORTH EAST	4%
NORTH WEST	10%
SCOTLAND	11%
SOUTH EAST	12%
SOUTH WEST	8%
WALES	7%
WEST MIDLANDS	8%
YORKSHIRE	8%

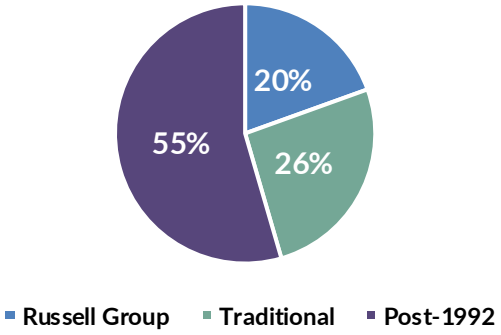
REGION/NATION	% OF RESPONDERS BY NO. OF BUCS MEMBER INSTITUTION IN THE REGION/NATION	
EAST	67%	+1
EAST MIDLANDS	83%	-1
LONDON	76%	-1
NI	100%	0
NORTH EAST	100%	0
NORTH WEST	78%	-2
SCOTLAND	88%	0
SOUTH EAST	93%	+2
SOUTH WEST	74%	-4
WALES	100%	0
WEST MIDLANDS	90%	+1
YORKSHIRE	59%	0

The survey responses showed a good representation of institutions across regions and nations.

The table on the right shows the representation of BUCS member institutions in terms of total members in each region/nation. The coloured boxes show the change in the number of responses by region/nation compared with the previous year. Response numbers increased in East, South East and West Midlands; remained consistent in Northern Ireland, North East, Scotland, Wales and Yorkshire; and decreased in East Midlands, London, North West and South West.

SUMMARY OF RESPONDERS

RESPONDERS BY TYPE OF INSTITUTION



This corresponds to:

79% of all BUCS member institutions (no change).

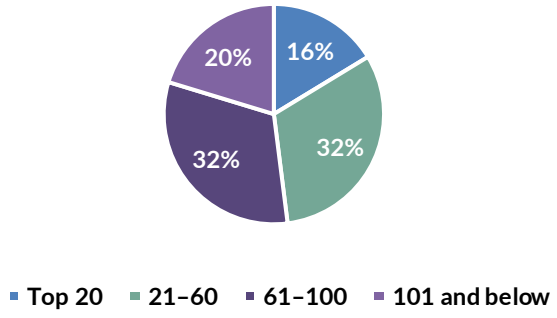
100% of BUCS Russell Group institutions (no change).

87% of BUCS Traditional institutions (+3 percentage points).

91% of BUCS Post 1992 institutions (+8 percentage points).

The chart above shows the spread of respondents by type of institution. Post-1992 institutions continue to make up the largest proportion of respondents (55%), followed by traditional institutions (26%) and Russell Group institutions (20%). The overall profile is very similar to last year, with only small changes in the proportion of respondents from each institution type.

RESPONDERS BY BUCS RANKING



This corresponds to:

100% of BUCS Top 20 institutions (no change).

98% of BUCS 21-60 institutions (+2 percentage points).

98% of BUCS 61-100 institutions (no change).

60% of BUCS 101 and below institutions (+3 percentage points).

The chart above shows the spread of respondents by BUCS points ranking. Representation remains particularly strong across the top 100, with all Top 20 institutions and 39 of the 40 institutions in both the 21–60 and 61–100 ranking bands represented. Institutions ranked 101 and below account for 20% of respondents. Overall, the distribution of respondents by BUCS ranking is very similar to last year.

SECTION 2:
FINANCIAL PRESSURES AND INSTITUTIONAL INVESTMENT

CONTRIBUTION TO THE WIDER SPORTING ECOSYSTEM



Workforce (across 69 institutions)

2,262 full-time equivalent positions

Spending

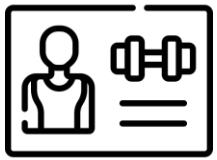
Annual spending on sport (running costs)
(across 63 institutions - all available 2024/25 responses)

£148,259,408.85

Planned facilities investment in the next 5 years (across 54 institutions)

£148,982,306





Gym Memberships (across 69 institutions)

218,597 full gym memberships (student and staff)



Volunteers (across 109 institutions)

27,700 participants in sports volunteering programmes per annum



Classes (across 117 institutions)

89,774 available slots for students per week across 4,330 classes



Athletes (across 102 institutions)

5,879 athletes supported through scholarships

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CHALLENGES FACED OVER THE LAST FIVE YEARS

The following analysis should be viewed against a period of sustained financial pressure across higher education. Following Covid-19 and the cost-of-living crisis, universities are now managing significant financial sustainability challenges, driven by rising costs, recruitment uncertainty and pressure to reduce expenditure. These pressures are increasingly being felt within university sport and physical activity provision.

35.8% of English HE providers reported a deficit in 2024/25

42.7% of higher education providers in England were forecast to report a financial deficit in 2025/26.

£218.2m spent by institutions on restructuring in 2024/25, up 20.7%

Impact on university sport

•Rising **staffing, facility, travel and operational costs** alongside tighter institutional budgets.

•Pressure to reduce or prioritise provision, with some institutions reporting **fewer participation opportunities and a more limited sporting offer**.

•Greater need for sport departments to demonstrate their contribution to **student recruitment, retention, wellbeing, attainment and the wider student experience**.

Office for Students Financial Sustainability Report 2026: Source BUCS's Demonstrating the value of higher education sport work

ANNUAL SPENDING AT INSTITUTIONS SINCE 2022/23...

Total annual spend on sports (including staffing, consumables etc - not capital investment)
Direct institution comparison (across 42 institutions)



Annual spending on sport has increased steadily across the three years, rising by 3.3% in 2023/24 and a further 2.8% in 2024/25. Rising staffing and operating costs may be contributing to this increase, so higher expenditure does not necessarily indicate increased sport provision. Of the 42 institutions with comparable data, 20 reported an increase in annual spending between 2022/23 and 2024/25, six reported a decrease and 16 reported no change.

AVERAGE GYM MEMBERSHIP PRICES HAVE INCREASED FOR BOTH STUDENTS AND STAFF

Average Gym Membership Cost	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Student - Full Membership	£153.71	£158.09	£166.36
Staff - Full Membership	£219.16	£219.11	£235.12

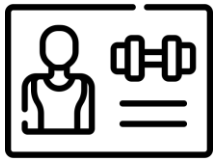
Average full gym membership prices have continued to rise, reaching £166.36 for students and £235.12 for staff in 2024/25. Since 2022/23, this represents an increase of 8.2% for students and 7.3% for staff. The largest annual increases occurred in 2024/25, following relatively modest changes in the previous year.

While the list of institutions who responded to this question year on year was broadly similar, there were a few differences and this could contribute to the increases (i.e. some institutions who answered the question in 2023/24 did not do so in 2024/25 and vice versa, so the data is not directly comparable).

IN THESE TOUGH FINANCIAL TIMES, WHERE HAS THE IMPACT BEEN FELT?

	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
 **Classes** (average number of bookable instructor-led group exercise classes available per week)	41 classes	→ 38 classes	→ 37 classes
 **Scholarships Being Offered** (percentage of institutions that run a sports scholarship programme)	83% of institutions	→ 82% of institutions	→ 83% of institutions
 **Scholarship Athletes** (average number of students supported by a scholarship per institution)	56 athletes	→ 53 athletes	→ 58 athletes

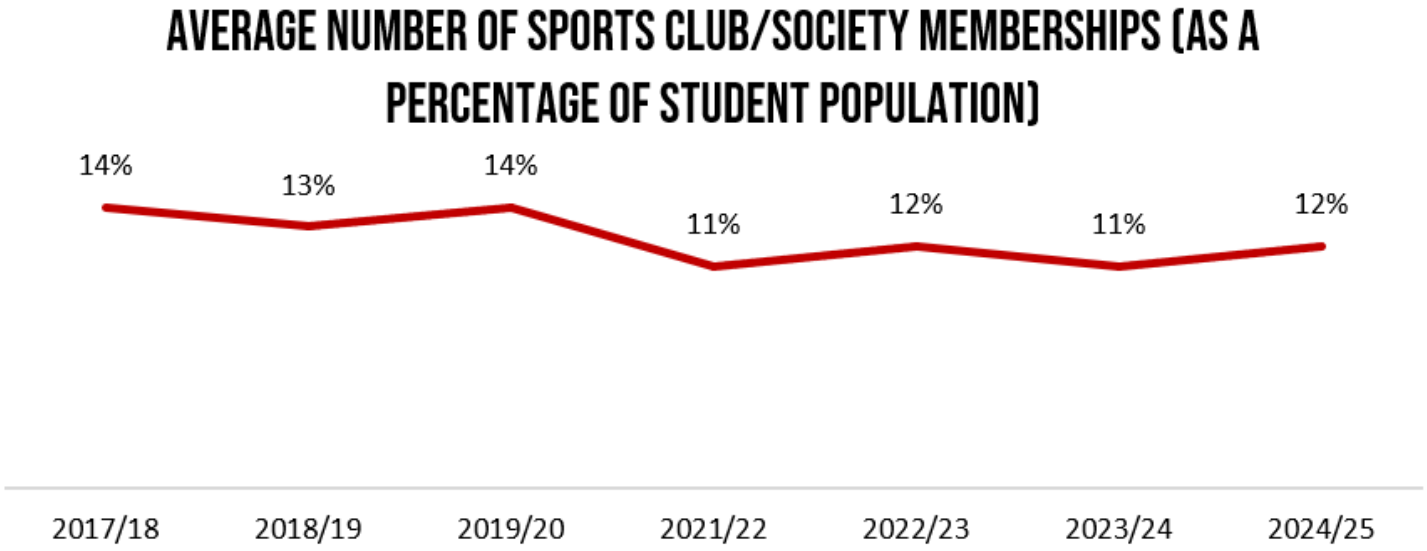
IN THESE TOUGH FINANCIAL TIMES, WHERE HAS THE IMPACT BEEN FELT?

	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	
 **Gym Memberships** (average number of student full memberships per institution)	**3,182** full gym memberships	→ **3,055** full gym memberships	→ **3,168** full gym memberships	Average gym memberships increased by 4% in 2024/25, reversing the previous year's decline and remaining close to 2022/23 levels.
 **Workforce** (average total FTE positions per institution)	**39** full-time equivalent positions	→ **38** full-time equivalent positions	→ **33** full-time equivalent positions	Average workforce levels fell again in 2024/25, from 38 in 2023/24 to 33 FTE positions per institution, continuing the downward trend.
 **Volunteers** (average number of participants taking part in sports volunteering programmes each year)	**239** volunteer participants per institution	→ **239** volunteer participants per institution	→ **249** volunteer participants per institution	Average volunteer participation increased from 239 in 2023/24 to 249 per institution, potentially reflecting greater reliance on volunteers as paid workforce capacity falls.

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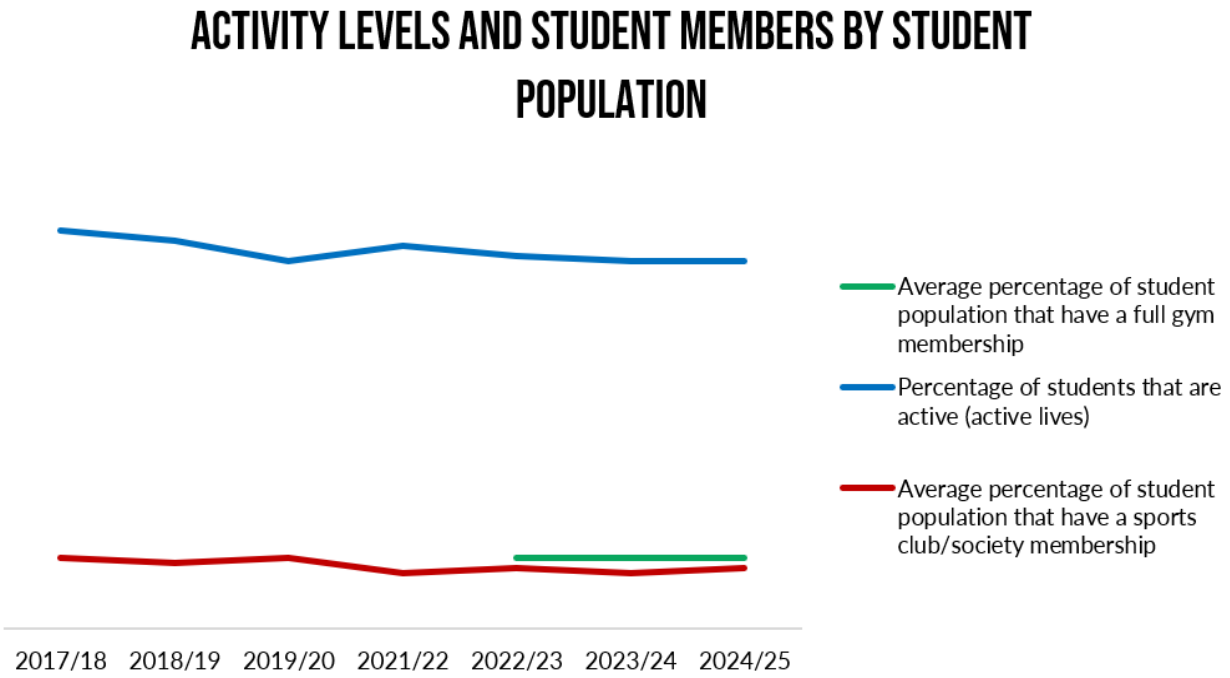
SECTION 3:
STUDENT PARTICIPATION AND SPORTING OPPORTUNITIES

STUDENT SPORT CLUB/SOCIETY MEMBERSHIPS REMAIN BELOW PRE-PANDEMIC LEVELS



The average number of sports club/society memberships as a percentage of student population has not recovered to pre-pandemic levels. This is likely an impact of the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, with the findings from the BUCS research on this topic centring around students having less available time and money to invest in sport.

HOW DOES THIS COMPARE TO STUDENT GYM MEMBERSHIPS AND ACTIVITY LEVELS?

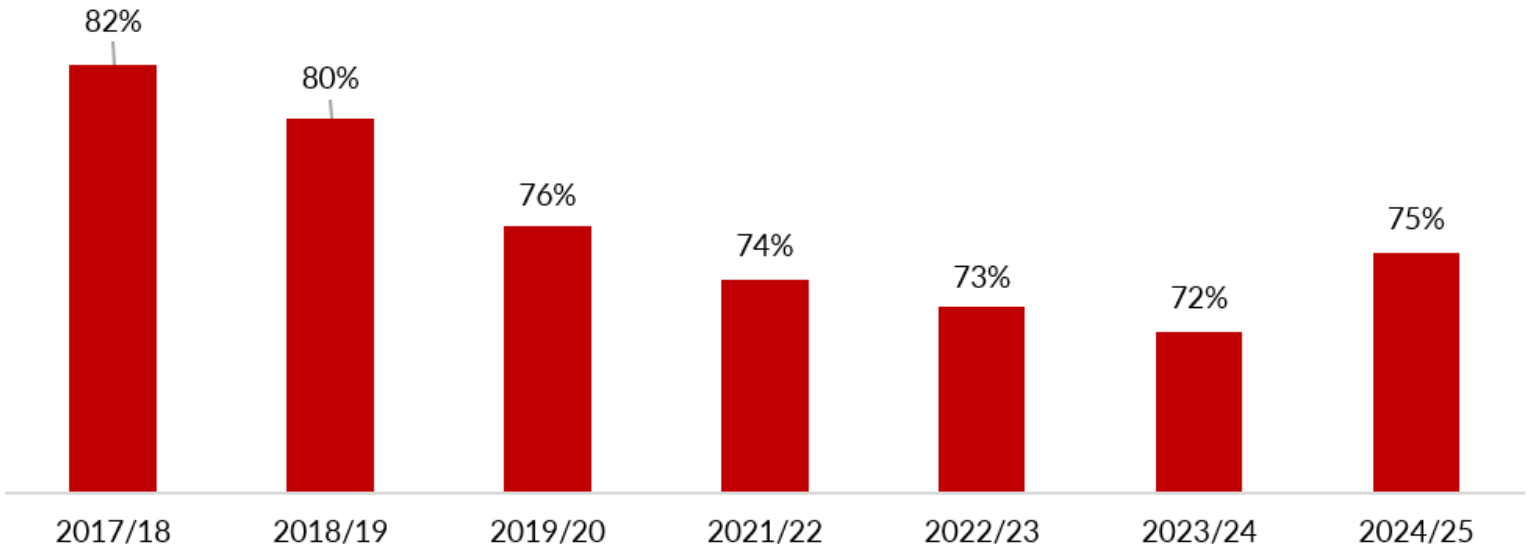


This graph shows the average number of sports club/society memberships as a percentage of student population against percentage of student population that have a full gym membership and percentage of students that are active (using the Sport England Active Lives data). These datasets track in a similar direction, indicating that students are becoming generally less active, rather than students moving away from student sport clubs/society to an alternative sport offering.

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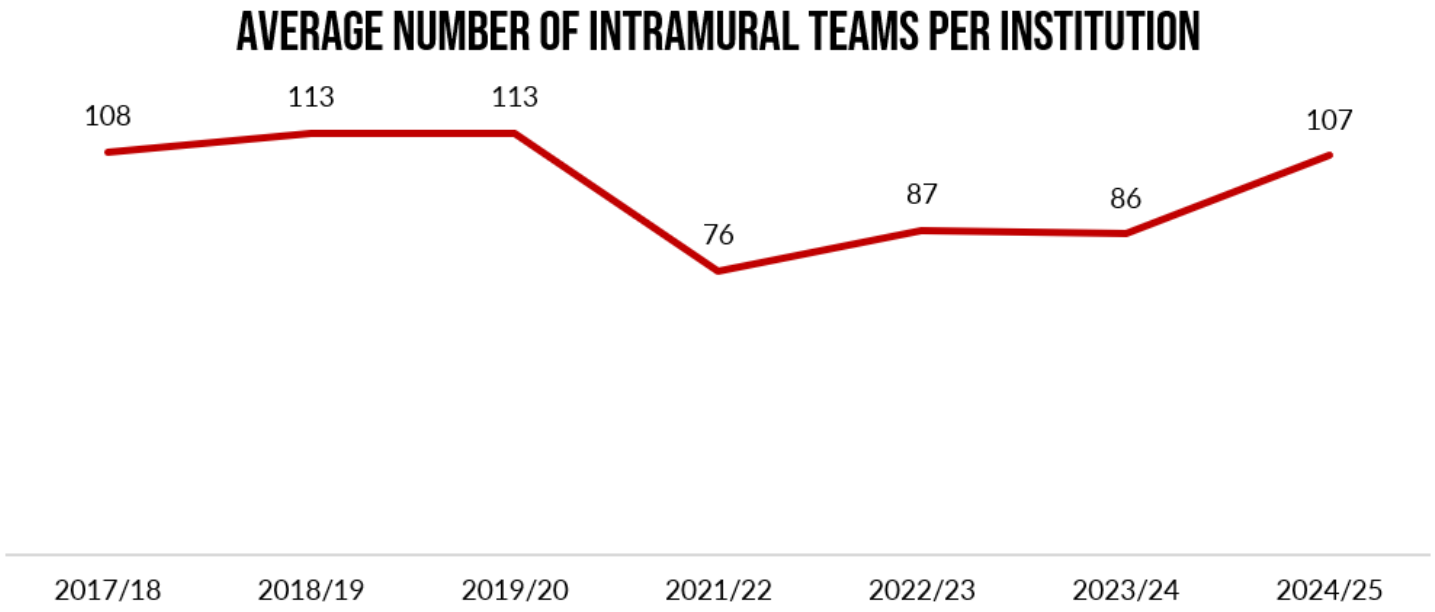
INTRAMURAL SPORT PROVISION HAS INCREASED SLIGHTLY, REVERSING A LONG-TERM DECLINE

PERCENTAGE OF INSTITUTIONS THAT OFFER INTRAMURAL COMPETITIONS



There has been a steady decrease in institutions offering intramural sport from 82% in 2017/18 to 72% in 2023/24, but the past year has seen an increase.

INTRAMURAL TEAM NUMBERS INCREASED SHARPLY IN 2024/25, RETURNING CLOSE TO PRE-COVID LEVELS



In line with intramural provision shown on the last slide, the average number of intramural teams per institution increased from 86 to 107 year on year, a rise of 24%. This represents a significant recovery, with numbers now approaching pre-COVID levels (113 teams). However, it remains to be seen whether this increase will be sustained in future years.

BUCS SPORTS MOST COMMONLY OFFERED SOCIALLY (2024/25)

Sport/activity	Number of universities offering social provision	Number of universities offering BUCS provision	Difference
Climbing	88 (71.5%)	65 (52.8%)	+23
Dance (other)	88 (71.5%)	43 (35.0%)	+45
Weightlifting	81 (65.9%)	51 (41.5%)	+30
Athletics	79 (64.2%)	99 (80.5%)	−20
Powerlifting	71 (57.7%)	64 (52.0%)	+7
Bouldering	69 (56.1%)	44 (35.8%)	+25
Equestrian	66 (53.7%)	68 (55.3%)	−2

Social provision is more widespread than BUCS competition provision in five of the seven sports shown, particularly dance (+45 institutions) and weightlifting (+30). This matters because BUCS competition data alone would understate how widely these activities are offered across the sector. The gaps may also highlight sports where there is scope to explore whether students want additional competitive pathways, or whether existing competition formats and entry requirements are limiting participation.

SPORTS MORE COMMONLY OFFERED THROUGH BUCS PROVISION (2024/25)

Sport/activity	Social	BUCS	Difference
Athletics	79	99	+20 BUCS
Pole vault	17	31	+14 BUCS
Triathlon	33	41	+8 BUCS
Trampolining	50	56	+6 BUCS
Cycling	49	54	+5 BUCS

Athletics is more commonly offered competitively, with 20 more institutions reporting BUCS/competitive provision than social provision.

Some sports have strong provision across both formats. Athletics, climbing and equestrian are frequently offered socially and competitively, providing different routes into participation.

PARA-SPORT PROVISION IS GROWING, WITH SOCIAL AND RECREATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES MORE WIDESPREAD THAN BUCS COMPETITION

Most common parasport offering	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Wheelchair Basketball	28%	31%	30%
Para-Swimming	18%	20%	23%
Para-Athletics	15%	17%	19%
Boccia	15%	17%	19%
Adaptive Rowing	9%	12%	13%

Type of para-sport	Percentage
% of institutions offering at least one social/recreational para-sport	54%
% of institutions offering at least one BUCS/competitive para-sport	33%

Para-sport provision has generally increased since 2022/23, particularly para-swimming (18% to 23%), para-athletics (15% to 19%) and adaptive rowing (9% to 13%). Wheelchair basketball remains the most commonly offered para-sport (30%).

Social and recreational provision is more widespread than competitive provision, with 54% of institutions offering at least one social para-sport, compared with 33% offering a BUCS/competitive para-sport.

SECTION 4:
VOLUNTEERING, SKILLS AND STUDENT DEVELOPMENT

OFFICIATING AND COACHING ARE THE MOST WIDELY OFFERED VOLUNTEERING OPPORTUNITIES (2024/25)

Rank	Training / volunteering opportunity	Institutions offering it	% of respondents
1	Officiating	93	76.2%
2	Coaching	92	75.4%
3	Fitness instruction / sport activators	85	69.7%
4	Non-sport volunteering (media, marketing, etc.)	77	63.1%

Officiating (76%) and coaching (75%) are the most commonly offered opportunities, followed by fitness instruction and sport activation (70%). Non-sport volunteering is also widespread, offered by nearly two-thirds of institutions (63%).

...AND THEY ARE ALSO THE MOST WIDELY FINANCIALLY SUPPORTED OPPORTUNITIES

Rank	Training / volunteering opportunity	Institutions providing financial support	% of respondents
1	Officiating	74	60.7%
2	Coaching	72	59.0%
3	Fitness instruction / sport activators	53	43.4%
4	Non-sport volunteering (media, marketing, etc.)	41	33.6%
5	Volunteering in schools / colleges (sport)	35	28.7%

Financial support is concentrated on officiating and coaching, with around six in ten institutions supporting students financially to undertake these opportunities. Support is less widespread for other volunteering roles.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT IS LESS WIDESPREAD THAN PROVISION ACROSS ALL VOLUNTEERING OPPORTUNITIES: 2024-25

Opportunity	Offered	Support
Officiating	76.2%	60.7%
Coaching	75.4%	59.0%
Fitness / activators	69.7%	43.4%
Non-sport roles	63.1%	33.6%

While around three-quarters of institutions offer officiating and coaching opportunities, only around six in ten provide financial support. The gap is wider for fitness instruction and sport activation (70% offered vs 43% supported) and non-sport volunteering (63% vs 34%), suggesting financial support is more concentrated on officiating and coaching.

OFFICIATING PROVISION HAS INCREASED, ALONGSIDE GROWTH IN NON-SPORT AND SCHOOL-BASED VOLUNTEERING OPPORTUNITIES: 2022/23–2024/25

📈 **Officiating has seen the largest increase in provision outside academic courses.**
The proportion of institutions offering officiating opportunities rose from 69% to 76%, alongside an increase in financial support from 55% to 61%.

🎓 **Academic opportunities are diversifying.**
Non-sport volunteering and volunteering in schools and colleges have both become more common within academic courses, while coaching remains the most established opportunity.

SECTION 5:
THE STRATEGIC VALUE OF SPORT WITHIN UNIVERSITIES

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY PROGRAMMES FOR DISENGAGED STUDENTS HAVE INCREASED IN 2024/25, BUT REMAIN SLIGHTLY BELOW PRE-PANDEMIC LEVELS

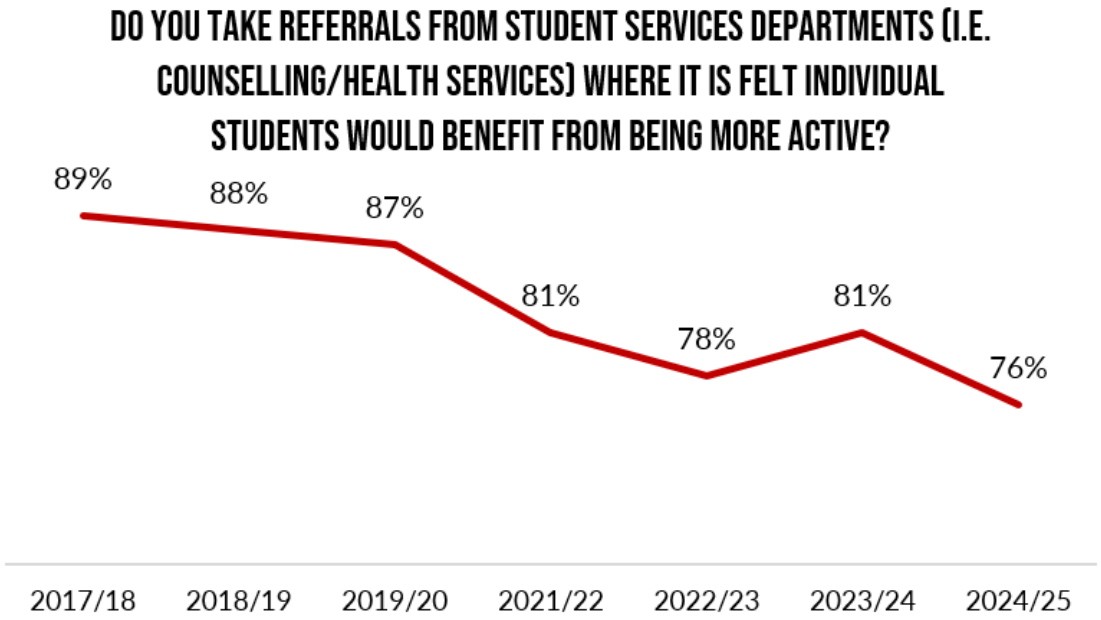
PERCENTAGE OF INSTITUTIONS THAT OPERATE A SPECIFIC PHYSICAL ACTIVITY PROGRAMME TO INCREASE PARTICIPATION OF THOSE WHO ARE DISENGAGED FROM SPORT/ACTIVITY

2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2021/22
91%	92%	89%	83%

2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
86%	84%	89%

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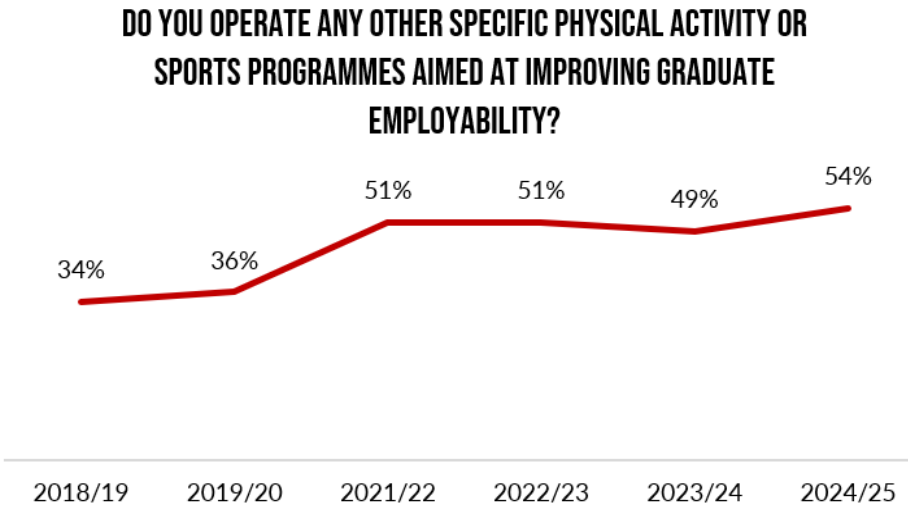
FEWER INSTITUTIONS ARE ACCEPTING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY REFERRALS FROM STUDENT SERVICES

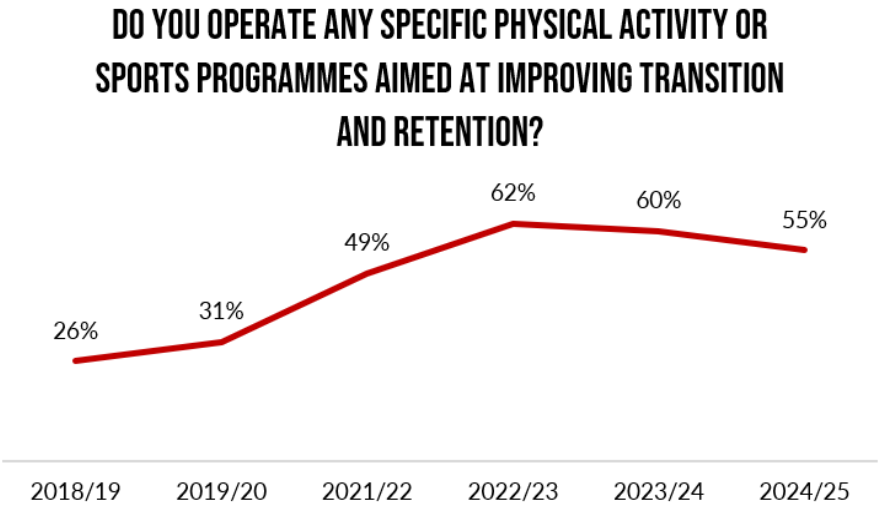


The proportion of institutions accepting referrals from student services for students who could benefit from increased physical activity has declined from 89% in 2017/18 to 76% in 2024/25. However, more than three-quarters of institutions still offer this support.

Financial pressures may be contributing to the decline, with institutions potentially reducing or discontinuing these programmes to manage costs. Given the established physical and mental health benefits of sport and physical activity, this trend is worth monitoring to understand its potential impact on student wellbeing.

MORE INSTITUTIONS ARE USING SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY TO SUPPORT GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY, BUT FEWER ARE SUPPORTING STUDENT TRANSITION AND RETENTION





Sport and physical activity programmes are increasingly being used to support wider university priorities compared with pre-pandemic levels. The proportion of institutions offering programmes aimed at improving graduate employability has risen from 34% in 2018/19 to 54% in 2024/25. Programmes supporting student transition and retention have also increased over the longer term, from 26% to 54%, although provision has declined from its peak of 62% in 2022/23. These findings highlight the wider contribution of sport and physical activity to institutional priorities, while showing that recent trends differ across these areas.

MOST INSTITUTIONS HAVE A SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY STRATEGY, BUT FEW INCLUDE IT IN THEIR CORPORATE STRATEGY

	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
	Yes	Yes	Yes
Do you have a strategy for sports and/or physical activity for your institution?	74%	71%	71%
Does sport and/or physical activity feature as a specific term in your institution's corporate strategy?	30%	27%	28%

KEY FINDINGS

1. Higher education sport makes a substantial contribution to the wider sporting ecosystem.
Across responding institutions, sport supports thousands of jobs, volunteers and scholarship athletes, alongside significant operational spending and facilities investment.

2. Financial pressures remain an important consideration, with costs increasing.
Annual sport expenditure rose by 2.8% in 2024/25 among 42 comparable institutions, while average full gym membership prices increased by 8.2% for students and 7.3% for staff.

3. Student sport participation shows signs of recovery but remains below pre-pandemic levels.
Sport club memberships and intramural provision increased in 2024/25, although both remain below their pre-pandemic levels.

4. Institutions provide diverse sporting and volunteering opportunities, but gaps remain.
Para-sport provision has generally increased, while financial support for volunteering is less widespread than the opportunities offered.

APPENDIX

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