



2024-25



STUDENT ACTIVE WELLBEING SURVEY

The impact of sport and physical activity on
higher education student outcomes



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FOREWORDS

Professor Amanda Broderick

Chair of the Board of Directors, British Universities and Colleges Sport (BUCS)

I would like to thank all those institutions and students that have supported this edition of the Student Active Wellbeing survey, and commend the findings shared in this report.

As a University Vice Chancellor I am acutely aware of both the financial challenges facing higher education in the UK, and of the array of challenges facing our students including rising cases of mental ill health and the impact of the cost of living.

This survey demonstrates the power and potential of sport, active wellbeing and participation to combat these twin challenges, and adds further weight to the body of research that evidences students with higher levels of health and wellbeing achieve higher academic results. At the University of East London we have recognised this by making health gain as a prerequisite of learning gain a primary objective of our institutional strategy.

We are not alone in this, and a number of institutions are explicit about the centrality of sport and physical activity to their strategic goals of building inclusive communities and enhancing students' wellbeing.

Whether it is active campus initiatives, improved access to gyms, or informal or formal sport, **the results of this survey should further encourage institutions to place the health and wellbeing of students at the heart of university strategy.**

Will Roberts

CEO, BUCS

Students make up a significant proportion of the UK population and as such, it is critical that all of us concerned with the health and prosperity of the nation better understand the views of students with regards to active wellbeing.

Through this Active Wellbeing Survey, BUCS has gained insight into the views of a broad range of students from across the UK helping us to understand how they perceive wellbeing in relation to their health, happiness and productivity whilst at university. **Students recognise that active wellbeing - whether through sport, attending the gym or taking part in recreational activities - plays an important role in supporting their performance, as indicated by their perceived attainment and employability.**

It is our hope that decision-makers within higher education can recognise in these results **the fundamental role that sport and active participation plays in a happy, healthy and high performing student.** These are outcomes we surely all want for as many students as possible and supports the business case for the provision of active wellbeing and participation opportunities on campus for students.

Stew Fowlie

COO, Scottish Student Sport

SSS is delighted to have teamed up with BUCS on this important project, the results of which evidence the importance of sport and active wellbeing to various key aspects of student life.

It is clear that, **by investing in active campuses and organised activity, institutions can help their students do better physically, mentally, socially and academically** - creating a sense of belonging that can otherwise be hard to find.

There remains a need to **better understand the inactive student population and to enable their easy engagement with sport and active wellbeing**. A holistic approach to this is vital, and we look forward to supporting work to achieve that goal.

Regular activity must increasingly be seen not as a nice-to-have, but as a key priority within modern campus life. **We therefore urge leaders in colleges and universities to place sport and active wellbeing at the centre of every student's experience**. In so doing, campuses can become ever more vibrant, inclusive, and salutogenic places - much to the benefit of students, staff and the wider community.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PARTICIPANTS



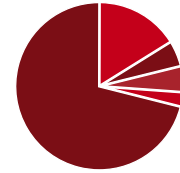
7,740 Students



145 Institutions



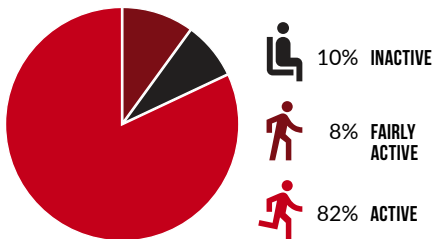
62% Female 36% Male



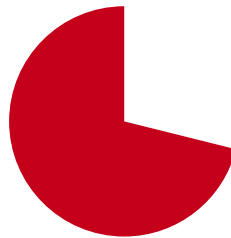
16% Asian
5% Black
5% Mixed
3% Other
71% White

ACTIVITY LEVELS

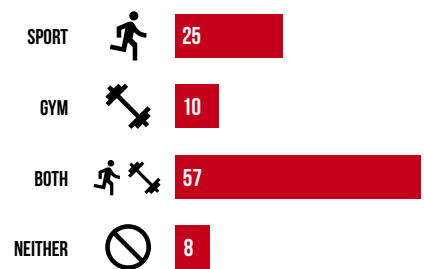
Activity levels of the survey participants



Of those who are active, 72% take part in university sport.



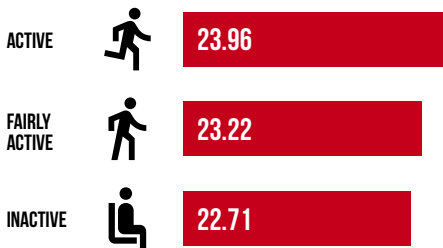
Active students' types of activity (%)



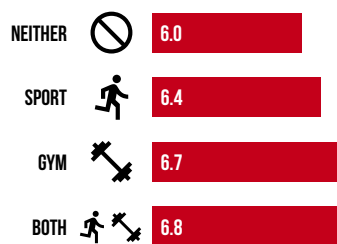
"Joining these activities really reduced my loneliness because it's really created a sense of community."

MENTAL WELLBEING

Mental wellbeing by activity levels (out of 35)



Average happiness scores by activity type (out of 10)

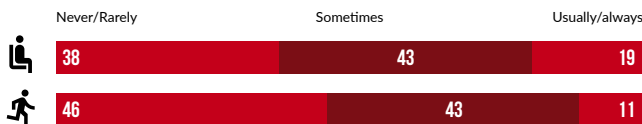


"Since going to the gym, I've actually got to know a lot more people and we have this common interest."

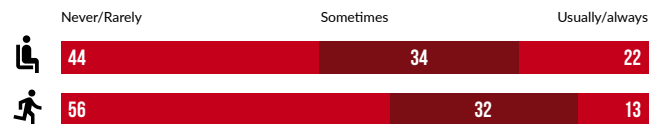
"Every time when I leave the club, I feel very relaxed and it seems like all of my stress has gone with my sweat."

SOCIAL INCLUSION (%)

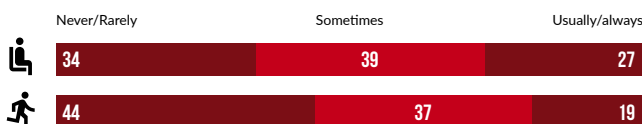
"I feel left out."



"I feel isolated from others."



"I feel that people barely know me."



"I feel that people are around me but not with me."



BACKGROUND

The Student Active Wellbeing Survey 2024-25 was funded by Sport England and undertaken in collaboration with Scottish Student Sport. The survey aimed to understand how university sport and physical activity impact student outcomes such as wellbeing, social inclusion, skill development and perceived attainment and employability. We collected data from 7,740 students, including both active and inactive students from 145 universities and colleges across the UK.

Sport and physical activity have the power to improve student wellbeing, strengthen social cohesion, and increase sense of belonging, all of which can have positive impacts on student retention, attainment and graduate employability. Against the backdrop of the current financial crisis in the higher education sector, proving the value of sport and physical activity has become more important than ever. We hope that the evidence contained in this report will continue to fuel crucial investment in university sport and physical activity.

This survey is a continuation of the work done through the British Active Student Survey (BASS), collected in 2017-18 and 2019-20. This survey had not been run in five years. The intervening time was an eventful one, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis and a financially difficult period for the higher education sector. BUCS and its members therefore felt there was considerable value in collecting this data again to understand the current student situation. Where relevant, we have compared findings in this report to findings in BASS 2019-20. However, it is useful to remember that this is a completely refreshed cohort of students with a different demographic make-up (e.g., the 2024-25 survey has a much higher sample of students at Scottish institutions than the 2019-20 survey).



METHODOLOGY

Participants

The study targeted higher education students across the United Kingdom, focusing on both active and inactive students. A total of 7,740 students participated in the survey. The survey was distributed to all BUCS students. Higher education (HE) institutions provided additional support to disseminate the survey link to their students, particularly aiming to reach inactive students. Despite attempts to collect data from inactive students, the respondent population is skewed toward active students so should not be seen as an accurate depiction of how many students in higher education are active. However, we still received sufficient responses from inactive and fairly active students to provide comparisons between groups. Furthermore, the significant response from active students allowed us to do a comprehensive review of the demographics of university sports club members.

Survey

The primary data collection tool was an online survey created using SurveyMonkey. The survey included a variety of closed questions designed to capture a comprehensive understanding of students' demographics, sport and physical activity behaviours, wellbeing, skill development and perceived attainment and employability.

Procedure

1. Survey distribution: The survey link was sent to all BUCS students, members and student officers via email and advertised on BUCS social media. Universities also supported the dissemination by sharing the survey link through their internal communication channels, such as student portals, emails, and social media platforms. Special efforts were made to target inactive students to ensure a diverse and representative sample.
2. Focus groups: To gain deeper insights into specific student experiences, BUCS conducted two sets of focus groups:
 - Commuter students: Four commuter students participated in focus groups to discuss their unique challenges and experiences.
 - International students: Five international students were involved in focus groups to explore their specific experiences and needs.

Data analysis

Quantitative data from the survey were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics to identify trends and patterns in student experiences. Qualitative data from the focus group discussions were analysed using thematic analysis to identify common themes and insights. T-tests and Z-tests were used to test the statistical significance of some data.

DEMOGRAPHICS

- 7,400 completed responses (7,740 partial responses).
- Responses came from 145 institutions.
- 62% of respondents were female, higher than the HE population (57%).¹
- Respondents ranged in age from 18 to over 65, but the vast majority were between 18 and 24 (87%). The most common ages were 19 (22%), 20 (20%) and 21 (13%). Our sample is younger than the general HE population (37% of the HE population are 20 and under compared to 58% in our sample).²
- 20% of respondents had a mental or physical health condition, which is close to the overall HE rate of 18%.³ When asked if their health condition affected their day-to-day activities, 4% of respondents said no, 13% said a little and 4% said a lot.
- White, White British or White Welsh respondents made up 71% of the sample, in line with the HE population (70%).⁴
- Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh respondents were slightly overrepresented in our sample (16%) compared to the HE population (14%).⁵
- Black, Black British or Black Welsh respondents were underrepresented in our sample (5%) compared to the HE population (9%).⁶
- Respondents from mixed or multiple ethnic groups made up 5% of the sample, in line with the HE population (5%).⁷
- The majority of respondents reported being heterosexual/straight (76%). 11% reported being bisexual, and 4% reported being gay men or lesbians.
- The majority of respondents were based at institutions in England (81%). 15% were from institutions in Scotland and 4% were from Wales. Two respondents were from Northern Ireland.
- 84% of respondents were enrolled in undergraduate degrees and 14% were enrolled in postgraduate degrees. The majority (97%) were full-time students.
- 19% of respondents were international students.
- 48% of respondents lived off-campus, 36% lived on-campus, and 15% lived in their family home.
- Respondent IMD deciles by nation, based on home postcode (lower is more deprived):

| | England | Scotland | Wales |
|------------------|---------|----------|-------|
| IMD Deciles 1-3 | 23% | 17% | 12% |
| IMD Deciles 4-7 | 38% | 41% | 48% |
| IMD Deciles 8-10 | 38% | 42% | 40% |

¹ HESA (2025). [Who's studying in HE? | HESA](#)

² [Ibid.](#)

³ [Ibid.](#)

⁴ [Ibid.](#)

⁵ [Ibid.](#)

⁶ [Ibid.](#)

⁷ [Ibid.](#)

ACTIVITY LEVELS AND SPORT PARTICIPATION

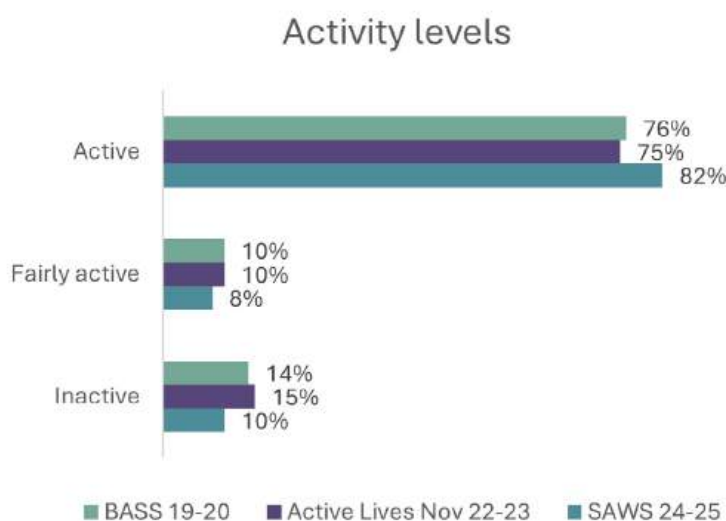
Summary

- 82% of survey respondents were active, 8% were fairly active and 10% were inactive.
- Men in the sample were more likely to be active than women.
- People from White/White British/White Welsh and Mixed/multiple ethnicity groups are the most likely to be active.
- 72% of respondents took part in university sports clubs.

Activity levels of respondents

We used Sport England's methodology to capture and categorise respondents' activity levels. In line with the UK Chief Medical Officers' guidelines, inactive means doing less than 30 minutes of activity per week; fairly active means doing 30-149 minutes of activity per week; and active means doing 150+ minutes of activity per week.

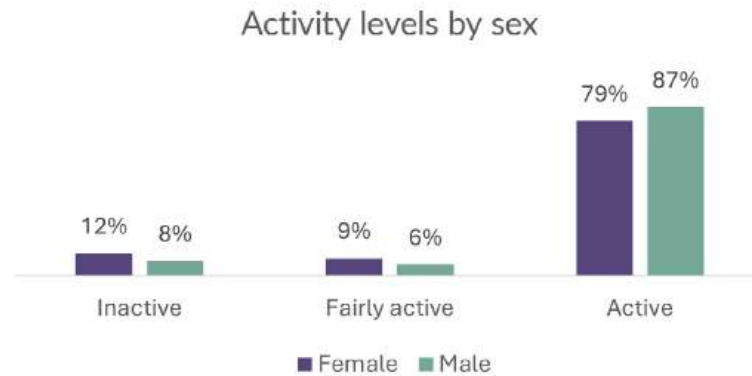
Our respondent sample approximated the HE population captured in the latest Sport England Active Lives survey, though active students were slightly over-represented and inactive students were slightly under-represented.⁸ This survey sample is also slightly more active than the one from BASS 19-20. Despite the skew toward active respondents, the sample sizes are robust enough to make comparisons between the three activity levels throughout the report.



⁸ Sport England (2025). Active Lives Adult Survey November 2022-23. [Active Lives | Sport England](#)

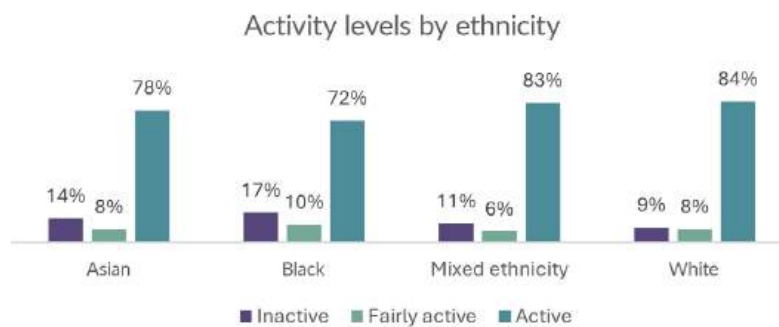
Activity levels by sex

Female respondents are eight percentage points less likely to be active than male respondents, and four percentage points more likely to be inactive. This differs from the Active Lives figures for men and women in higher education, where there is no difference between the two. It also differs from the BASS 2019-20 data, where male respondents were only 5 percentage points more likely to be active than female respondents and two percentage points less likely to be inactive.



Activity levels by ethnicity

White/White British respondents and respondents from mixed or multiple ethnic groups were the most likely to be active, followed by Asian/Asian British respondents and Black/Black British respondents. All ethnicity groups in our sample were more likely to be active than the equivalent samples in the Active Lives survey. Throughout the report, we will use fully inclusive terms for ethnicity in the text of the report (e.g. Black/Black British/Black Welsh/Caribbean/African) but will use the short terms White, Asian and Black in graphs to save space. The terms in the graph are referring to the same populations as what is denoted in the text.



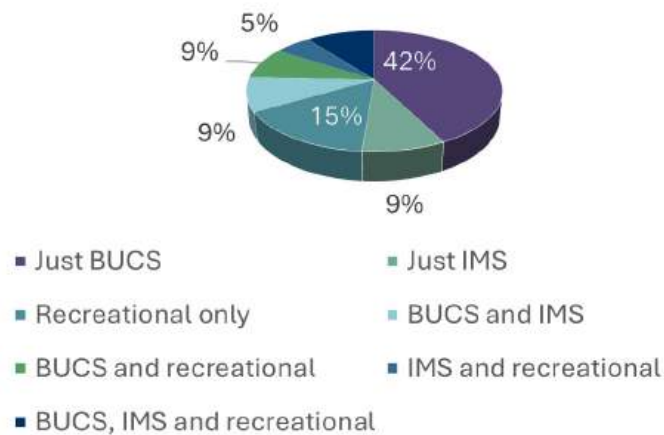
Type of activity

We classified active students into four activity groups: those who took part in just gym, those who took part in just sport (either in or outside of their institution), those who took part in both gym and sport, and those who took part in neither. Overall, 82% of respondents took part in sport; this broke down to 57% doing both gym and sport and 25% doing just sport. Ten percent of respondents just took part in gym and 8% took part in neither. We will use these activity categories throughout this report to analyse the findings.

University sport participation

Of the respondents who took part in sport, 72% took part in university sport. We asked respondents whether they took part in BUCS, non-BUCS (IMS) or recreational sport. Many students participated in multiple types of sport, with the majority taking part in BUCS sport. Seventy percent of respondents took part in BUCS sport, which breaks down to 42% doing only BUCS sport, 9% taking part in BUCS and IMS sport, 9% taking part in BUCS and recreational sport, and 10% taking part in BUCS, IMS and recreational sport. In addition, 15% of respondents took part only in recreational sport, 9% took part only in IMS, and 5% took part in IMS and recreational sport. This data is illustrated in the graph below.

University sport participation by type



In addition to what level of sports respondents took part in, we also looked at which sports they played. The boxes below show the most popular BUCS and IMS sports and the percentage of respondents who played them.

TOP 3 BUCS SPORTS

1. Rugby Union (12%)
2. Football (11%)
3. Hockey (9%)

TOP 3 IMS SPORTS

1. Football (10%)
2. Hockey (7%)
3. Netball (7%)



WHO'S TAKING PART IN UNIVERSITY SPORTS CLUBS?

Summary

- *Respondents at Welsh and Scottish higher education institutions are more likely to be members of university sports clubs than those at English institutions.*
- *Men are more likely to be university sports club members than women.*
- *Respondents from White/White British/White Welsh and Mixed/multiple ethnicity groups are the most likely to be members of university sports clubs.*
- *Undergraduate students are much more likely to be members of university sports clubs than postgraduates.*
- *Respondents from more deprived areas in England are less likely to be members of university sports clubs.*
- *When looking at intersectionality, fewer than 50% of Black/Black British/Black Welsh/Caribbean/African and Asian/Asian British/Asian Welsh women are members of university sports clubs.*

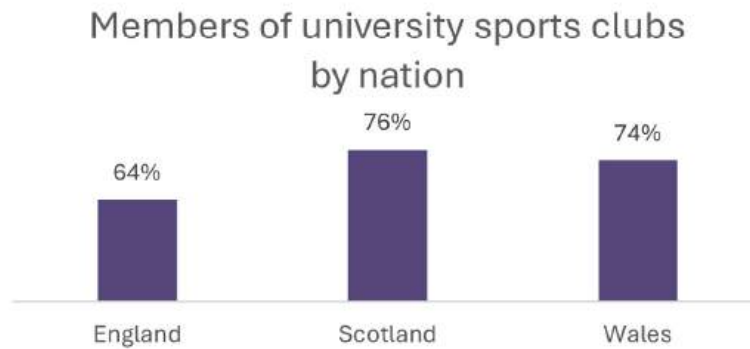
Understanding sports club membership trends

As noted previously, our survey respondents are more active than the general university student population; this is also reflected in the percentage of respondents who are members of a university sports club. This survey over-represents members of university sports clubs so the overall rate of membership should not be taken as a representative figure. However, this over-representation allows us to take a deeper look at the demographic of sports club members. In this section, we will look at the national picture and understand which groups are over- and under-represented in these clubs. We've analysed this data by university nation and region as well as by respondent demographics including gender, ethnicity, and disability. We define university sports club members as respondents who are members of BUCS, IMS and/or recreational sports clubs based at their institution.

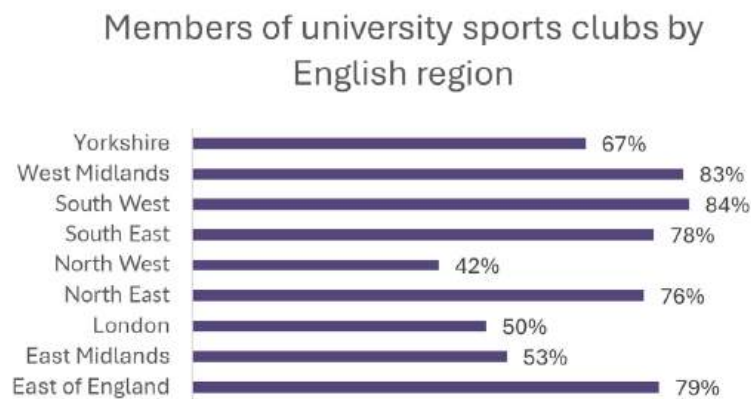
Every higher education institution will have its own unique demographic breakdown of sports club members. This analysis provides an opportunity for institutions to benchmark their own membership against the national picture. Members can also use the [BUCS report on data collected through the Complete University Guide](#) to benchmark more general information such as number of student sports clubs and cost of membership.

Sports club membership by nation and region

Scotland had the highest rate of university sports club members, with 76% of respondents enrolled at Scottish institutions saying they were members of these clubs. Wales had the second highest rate of membership, though the sample size from Wales was much smaller than the other sample sizes and active students were over-represented in the Welsh sample (90% of the Welsh sample was active compared to 82% for the survey overall). The Welsh data should be considered in this context. Students at English institutions were the least likely to be members of university sports clubs at 64%.



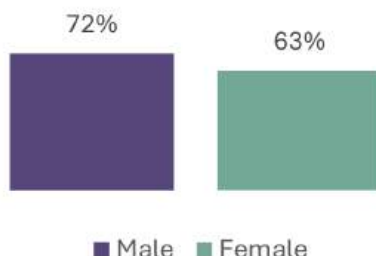
There was also variance in university sports club membership based on the English region. The North West had the lowest rate of membership at 42% while the South West had the highest rate at 84%.



University sports club membership by respondent demographic

We also looked at the demographic make-up of respondents who took part in university sports clubs. We found that women were nine percentage points less likely to take part in clubs than men.

Members of university sports clubs by sex



In terms of ethnicity, white respondents were the most likely to be members of university sports clubs. Members of mixed or multiple ethnic groups were slightly less likely to be members of clubs, and Black/Black British/Black Welsh/African/Caribbean and Asian/Asian British/Asian Welsh respondents were significantly less likely to be members of sports clubs. Overall, Black/Black British/Black Welsh/African/Caribbean students were 16 percentage points less likely to be sports club members than White students and Asian/Asian British/Asian Welsh students were 23 percentage points less likely to be.

Members of university sports clubs by ethnicity



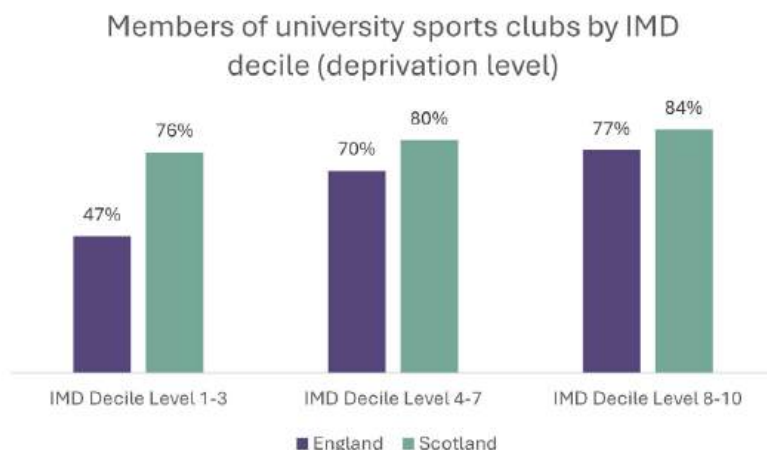
We asked respondents if they had a physical or mental health condition expected to last 12 months or longer, and if so, how much this affected their day-to-day activities. We found that having a health condition in itself did not affect university sports club membership, but those who said their health condition impacted their day-to-day activities a lot were 19 percentage points less likely to be members of sports clubs than respondents without a health condition.

Respondents who were postgraduates were 30 percentage points less likely to be members of sports clubs than undergraduate respondents.

Members of student sports clubs by level of study



We assessed deprivation levels by asking respondents for their home postcodes and then using the English, Scottish and Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) deciles to categorise respondent deprivation levels. Deciles 1-3 indicate higher levels of deprivation while deciles 8-10 indicate lower levels of deprivation. The Welsh sample was not large enough for robust analysis. IMD decile did not have a significant effect on university sports club membership in Scotland but it had a major impact on students in England. English respondents in the lowest deciles were 30 percentage points less likely to be members of a university sports club than their counterparts in the highest deciles.



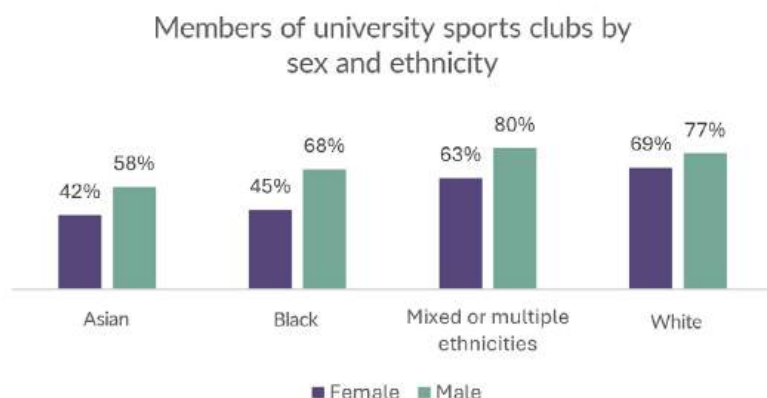
We also looked at sports club membership for commuter and international students and have included these findings in a [later section](#).

INTERSECTIONALITY

In some instances, demographics can intersect to compound individuals' disadvantages. Where the data was sufficient, we looked at demographic intersections to identify the groups least likely to be part of university sports clubs.

Ethnicity and sex

Looking at the intersectionality between sex and ethnicity revealed that fewer than half of both Asian/Asian British/Asian Welsh women and Black/Black British/Black Welsh/African/Caribbean women were members of university sports clubs. In both cases, their male counterparts were much more likely to be part of these clubs. The graph below provides more detail.

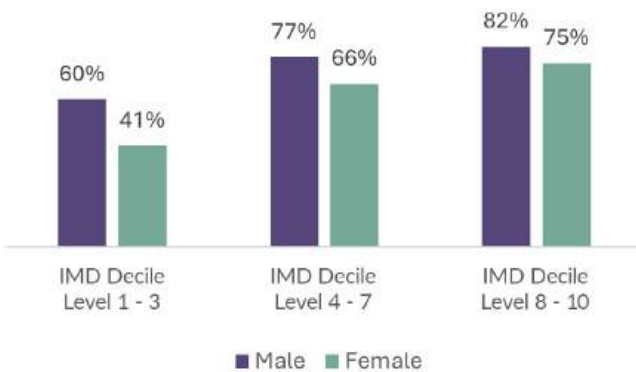


Deprivation level and sex

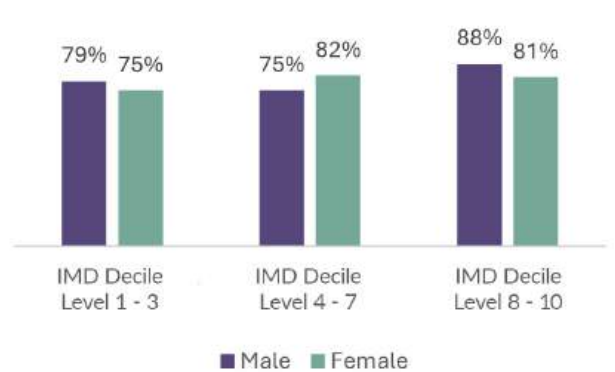
We also looked at the intersections between deprivation levels and sex. We looked at these by nation because England and Scotland have different deprivation measurements. We did not have enough responses from Wales to do this in-depth analysis.

In England, we found that women from deprived areas were 34 percentage points less likely to be members of a university sports club than their counterparts from less deprived areas. They were also nearly 20 percentage points less likely to be part of these clubs than their male counterparts in the same deprivation deciles. In Scotland, however, sex had a much smaller impact on sports club membership.

Members of university sports clubs by sex and deprivation levels in England



Members of university sports clubs by sex and deprivation levels in Scotland



A CLOSER LOOK: COMMUTERS AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

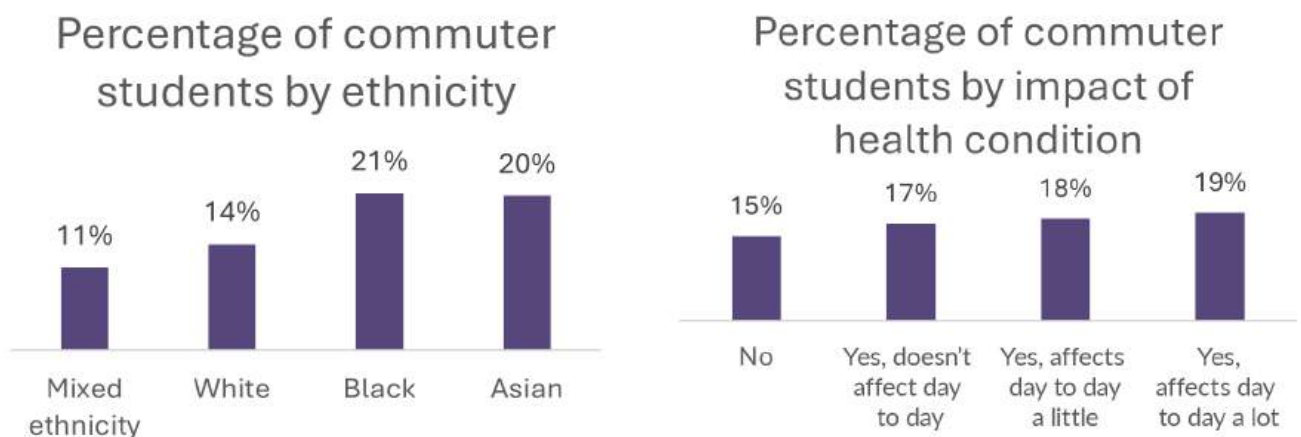
COMMUTER STUDENTS

Demographics

Commuter students are a growing population and therefore an important group to understand in the context of higher education sport. Depending on the definition used, sources estimate that commuters make up anywhere between 18%⁹ and 46% of the higher education population.¹⁰ Commuter students have a different experience of higher education than residential students and can feel less of a sense of belonging at their institution. Data shows that they have lower attainment, continuation and graduate outcomes than their residential counterparts.¹¹ We know that sport and physical activity can have a positive impact on these indicators, so we set out to better understand commuter students' experience of university sport and physical activity.

In our survey, we received 1,196 responses from commuter students. We defined this as students living in their family home.¹² The following analysis is based on this sample.

Demographically, the commuter students in our sample were likely to be slightly older than the general survey population, with an average age of 24.2 (compared to 21.5 for all survey respondents). They were more likely to be from Black/Black British/Black Welsh/African/Caribbean or Asian/Asian British/Asian Welsh ethnic backgrounds than White or Mixed ethnicity backgrounds. Commuter students were also slightly more likely to have a health condition that affected their day-to-day activities considerably. The graphs below show the full findings.



Commuter students were also slightly more likely to be from Scotland than England or Wales (18% of respondents at Scottish institutions commuted compared to 15% of those at English institutions and 9% of those at Welsh institutions).

⁹ This figure comes from the Save the Student 2024 National Student Accommodation Survey and amalgamates the percent of students who said they lived with parents and who lived in their own property. It is a narrow definition of the term commuter student. Save the Student (2025). [National Student Accommodation Survey 2024 - Results - Save the Student](#).

¹⁰ This figure comes from a 2024 survey of 1200 students and let students self-define as commuters. Blackbullion (2025). [Student Money & Wellbeing 2024. Student-Money-Wellbeing-2024-Blackbullion.pdf](#)

¹¹ Kenyon, S. (2 February 2025). [Shaping higher education for commuter students | Wonkhe](#).

¹² We note that this definition could exclude some students who commute from private rented accommodation or include some individuals whose family homes are close to their institution. We have therefore also engaged commuter students in qualitative research to better understand the different situations they are in.

In all three nations, commuter students were more likely to come from more deprived areas. This was most pronounced in England, where commuter students were more than twice as likely as non-commuter students to fall into the most deprived group (IMD deciles 1-3): 43% compared to 19% respectively. The table below shows the average IMD decile of commuter students versus non-commuter students in each nation. We have presented this by nation because each nation has a slightly different decile system. All three nations use a 1-10 decile system, with 1 being most deprived and 10 being least deprived.

| | Commuter average IMD decile (1-10) | Non-Commuter IMD decile (1-10) |
|----------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| England | 4.7 | 6.4 |
| Scotland | 6.1 | 6.8 |
| Wales | 6.9 | 6.5 |

Activity levels and engagement in sport

Commuter students were slightly less likely to be active than their non-commuter counterparts. Seventy-five percent of commuter students were active compared to 83% of non-commuters. There was a much bigger difference, however, in the percentage of students engaged in university sports clubs. Only 40% of commuter students were engaged in university sports clubs compared to 71% of non-commuter students.

Understanding the complex barriers for commuter students

We held focus groups with four commuter students to better understand their experiences at university, including their involvement in sport and physical activity. The students came from Scotland, South East England, London and North West England. Two were male and two were female. One was a postgraduate student and three were undergraduates. Two were members of sports clubs at their institutions and two were not, but all students had positive feelings about being physically active.

Speaking to the students, it became clear that the type of transport they used and the length of their commute were both relevant. The students who drove tended to have shorter commutes (30-40 minutes) and had more flexibility around what time they travelled. One student described her commute as a welcome opportunity to mentally prepare at the beginning of the day and decompress on her way home. The students who relied on public transport tended to have longer commutes (1-2 hours) and were limited by train and bus times. Their journeys often required multiple types of transport (e.g. train and bus), which added stress and time to the commute.

“One hour 45 is way too much and I didn’t realise before I joined how hard it would be. I thought, oh, it’d be so easy...It definitely adds stress because it’s a long commute.” -mature commuter student in North West England

The stress and time of commutes took away from sport and physical activity that students wanted to be involved in.

“If I was like 5 minutes away...[if] I lived on the campus, I would take part so much more. I would go to the gym as much as possible. I would do sports that I never tried before...like netball or something like that. I would join societies and stuff like that.” -mature commuter student in North West England

Students who drove to their university tended to spend more days per week on campus, likely because of the relative convenience of the journey compared to those who used public transport. This factor had the knock-on effect of meaning that they were around campus for more physical activity opportunities, and they described fitting in fitness and sport opportunities between classes.

“Typically I’ll have lectures 4 days a week anyway, so I’m kind of already always in with the gym membership. I always, if I have time in the middle of the day, I get like a free badminton court that I often just play with a friend.” -driving commuter student in South East England.

Most of the commuter students we spoke to, however, had additional barriers beyond the logistics of commuting. For instance, two of the commuter students raised cost as a barrier to taking part in more university sport and physical activity. As noted earlier, commuter students are more likely to be from more deprived areas so concern about cost is not a surprise.

“I mean again, it’s cost, isn’t it? They run like a few free classes and like I said, I take advantage of those. But yeah, I would definitely go to the gym a lot more.” -mature commuter student in Scotland.

Another commuter student based at a London university explained how being a woman had thrown up an additional barrier to taking part in sport. She showed up to her university’s free basketball sessions to take part for fun. She was the only woman there and the male players made her feel unwelcome. They refused to pass the ball to her and teased the team she was on about losing because “the girl” was playing on their team. She resourcefully set up her own taster sessions for women only and has spent the past year building participation in these sessions. Had she not done this, she would have quit her involvement in university sports.

Two of the commuters we spoke to were also mature students and neurodivergent. These two factors put up additional barriers to their involvement in sport and physical activity. They talked about how university gyms could be particularly difficult places for both mature and neurodivergent students. As mature students, they felt socially out of place. They felt they stuck out in this environment because most people in the gym were fit and young. Their neurodivergence meant that they had issues with the physical environment of the gym. They found fluorescent lights, mirrors and crowded spaces, all common in gyms, over-stimulating and unpleasant.

The intersectionality of disability, age, sex and commuting made one commuter student feel like she didn’t belong in the space:

“Universities are very much set up for the like 18- to 25-year-olds and after that feels like a bit of an afterthought. Everything after that, like disability and like being a female and everything like that, feels like an afterthought. So you’ve got this core group of students that the universities cater for and then they kind of try and it feels to me a bit scrambling like they’re trying to scramble around to kind of accommodate everybody else’s needs.” -mature commuter student in Scotland.

Another commuter student put it even more bluntly:

“I feel like a great big outsider and a couple of times I have thought about dropping out because I feel like an outsider and my attendance has not been perfect because of that feeling...that I’m different to the other students in the class because I’m older, mainly because I’m older, but also because I commute and everyone else was on campus. Yeah. And I just feel like less than, like a second-class student compared to everyone else.” -mature commuter student in North West England.

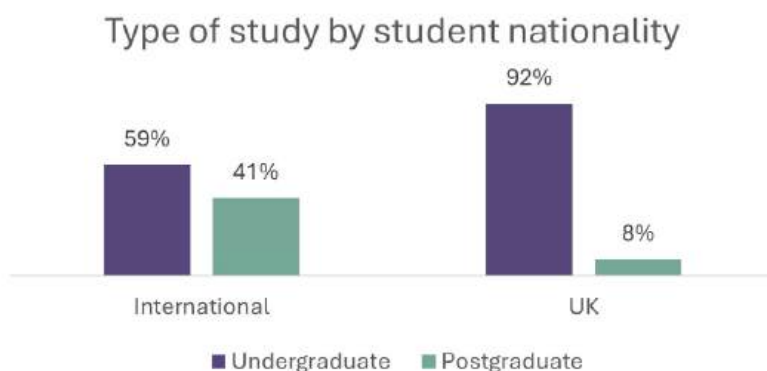
From these discussions with students, it became clear that the term “commuter” can obscure several different factors that prevent students from engaging, or engaging as much as they want to, in sport and physical activity at their universities.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

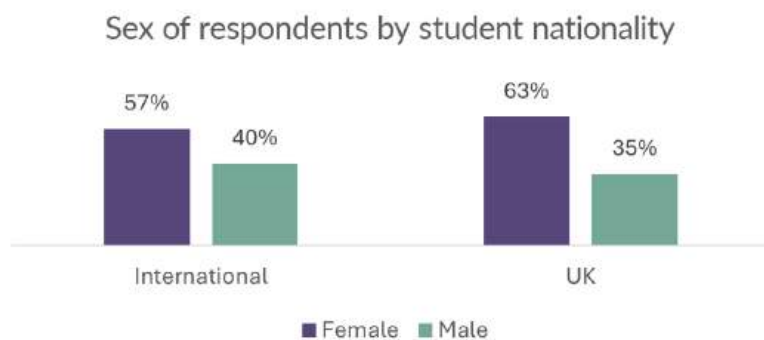
International students are an important part of the higher education community and make up 26% of the student population.¹³ Because they are a large group with unique needs, similar to commuter students, we wanted to better understand who they are and how they are engaging with sport and physical activity. The following data is based on responses from 1,461 international students.

Demographics

International students in our sample were much more likely to be postgraduates than UK students. Forty-one percent of international students were postgraduates, compared to 8% of UK students in our survey. This trend is similar to the overall international student population in the UK.¹⁴ In keeping with this data, international students were on average two years older than UK students (23 years old compared to 21 years old, respectively).



International students in our sample were also more likely to be male than the UK sample, though there were still more women than men responding. The graph below provides the detail.



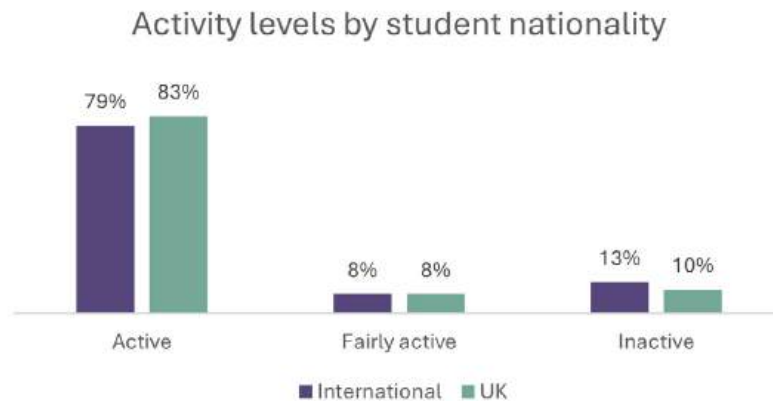
International students were also slightly less likely than UK students to have a health condition: 13% said they had a mental or physical health condition compared to 21% of UK students.

¹³ HESA (2025). [Where do HE students come from? | HESA](#)

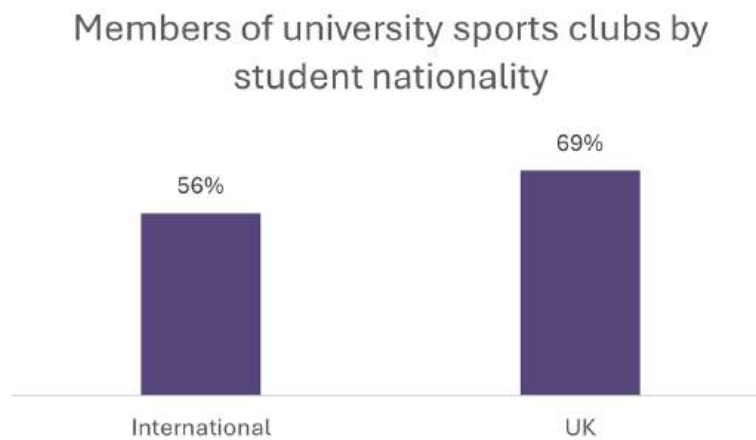
¹⁴ Ibid.

Activity levels and sports club membership amongst international students

International students were slightly less likely than UK students to be active, and slightly more likely to be inactive. However, these differences were only three to four percentage points.



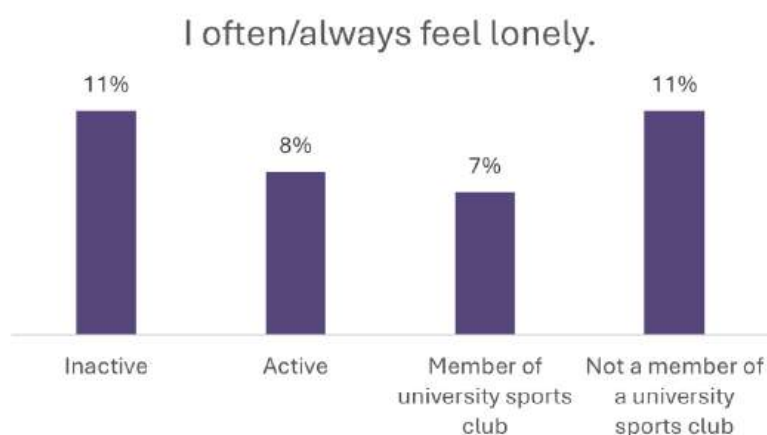
On the other hand, the difference in university sports club membership between international and UK students was more noticeable. This gap is largely explained by the fact that so many international students are postgraduates. Across the whole sample, postgraduates were 30 percentage points less likely to be members of university sports clubs than undergraduates. When we compared international undergraduates to UK undergraduates, we found that there was only a seven percentage point gap between these groups (72% of UK undergraduate students were members of a university sports club compared to 65% of international undergraduate students).



Benefits of being active: wellbeing and social inclusion

Loneliness is a well-documented issue for many students in higher education and is slightly worse for international students. According to the Higher Education Policy Institute and Advance HE's 2024 Student Academic Experience Survey, 29% of international students studying in the UK said they felt lonely most or all of the time compared to 24% of UK students.¹⁵ Furthermore, international students can struggle with social inclusion because of cultural differences and language barriers.

Our data did not show significant differences between international and UK students in terms of loneliness or social inclusion, but importantly it did show that being active had an equal and sometimes greater impact on international students than UK students. This suggests that physical activity is an important factor in universities' toolkits to help embrace and retain international students. The graph below shows that being active and being a member of a university sports club have a similar impact on international students' loneliness levels: students who are active and/or members of a university sports club are three to four percentage points less likely to say they are often or always lonely compared to international students who are inactive and/or not members of a university sports club.



We conducted focus groups with five international students to better understand their experiences. The students came from institutions in London, South West England and Scotland. Three were female and two were male. Three of the students were studying postgraduate courses and two were studying undergraduate courses. Four were taking part in sport or physical activity and one was not due to time limitations. All of them expressed interest in being active. Those who took part in sport or physical activity identified this as a way to build community and fight loneliness.

*"Joining these activities really reduced my loneliness because **it's really created a sense of community** and it is place where I can meet some new friends and also some chance to practise my oral English."*
-Undergraduate student in London

"Since going to the gym, I've actually got to know a lot more people and we have this common interest and it just kind of spirals into a lot more different topics to talk about...I find that a lot of my friends who join sports teams and are actually active end up having much stronger social lives."-Undergraduate student in London

Some institutions offered free sessions, which removed another barrier that international students can face.

"Sometimes our university offers these 'give it a go' sessions where we don't necessarily have to pay for them, but we can still give it a try. So I've met a few, like really nice people there and it's just been nice to get to know different people."-Undergraduate student in London

¹⁵ Advance HE and Higher Education Policy Institution (2024). [Student Academic Experience Survey \(SAES\) | Advance HE](#).

The student who did not take part in sport due to time pressures had previously played sport. He said he wished he had time for sport while studying because he thinks it would have helped him settle in to life in the UK.

*"I would have met people that were willing to...have conversations about how to settle in, how to figure out things, and show me around basically because I mean, **I have to figure out things all by myself right now.**"* -Postgraduate student in London who doesn't take part in sport

International students also highlighted wellbeing as a benefit of being active. This is a valuable datapoint since moving to a new country and adjusting to a new culture can have a negative impact on wellbeing.

"I do find Rifle club a good way to help me relax. While I'm doing my studies, I can go there after school and like shoot around, which is pretty relaxing." -Undergraduate student in Scotland

*"Every time when I leave the club, **I feel very relaxed and it seems like all of my stress has gone with my sweat.** Another feeling is a sense of achievement."* -Undergraduate student in London



PERSONAL WELLBEING

Summary

- 18–24-year-olds in higher education had better scores in life satisfaction, life worthwhileness and happiness but worse scores in anxiety compared to 16–24-year-olds not in education.
- Respondents who were inactive had the worst personal wellbeing scores and active respondents had the best scores.
- Respondents who took part in both gym and sports had the best scores, followed by those who took part only in sports.

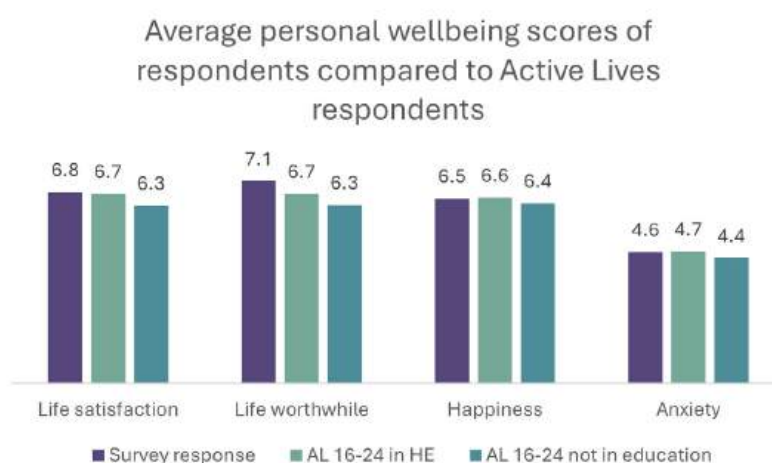
Measuring personal wellbeing

We measured personal wellbeing using four indicators from Sport England’s Active Lives survey so we could make national comparisons. Respondents were asked to rank the following statements on a scale of 0 to 10:

- How satisfied with life are you nowadays?
- To what extent are the things you do in your life worthwhile?
- How happy did you feel yesterday?
- How anxious did you feel yesterday?

Personal wellbeing scores for respondents compared to Active Lives

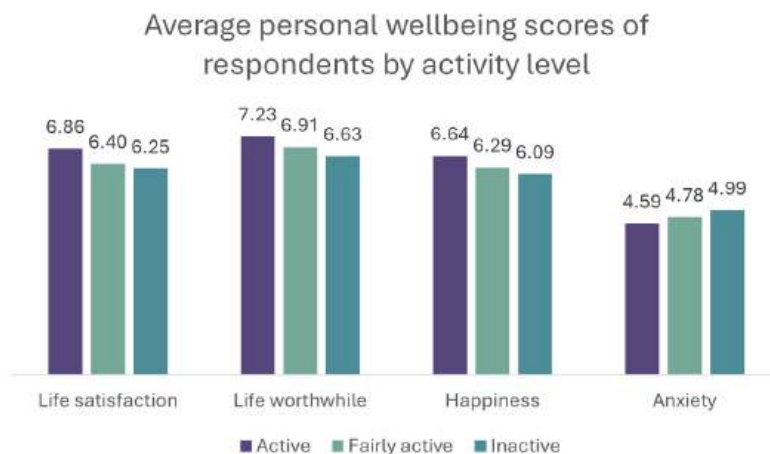
Respondents’ average scores for life satisfaction, happiness and anxiety were similar to the responses of 16–24-year-olds in higher education in the Sport England Active Lives 2022-23 survey, while their scores for life worthwhileness were slightly higher. Students in higher education in both our survey and the Sport England Active Lives survey scored better than people aged 16-24 who were not in education in life satisfaction, life worthwhileness and happiness but 16–24-year-olds not in education had better anxiety scores (lower is better for anxiety scores).



*We have compared our data to 16–24-year-olds because 87.5% of our respondents were in this age group. Sport England uses the 16-24 age bracket compared to our 18-24 age group so that might account for some of the differences.

Personal wellbeing by activity level

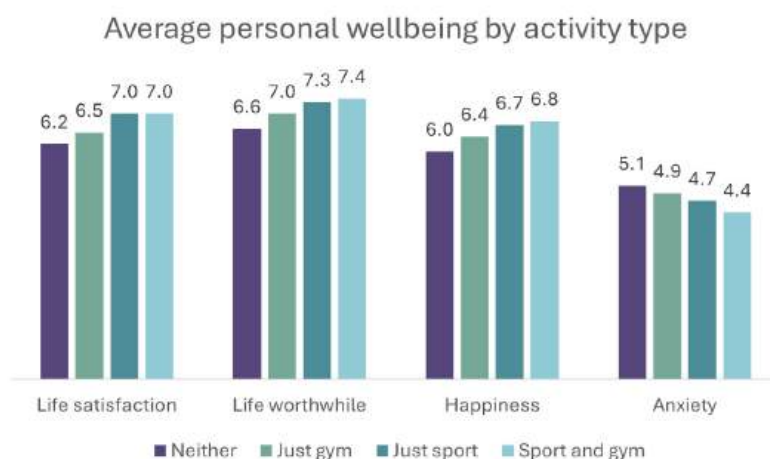
Personal wellbeing scores were worst for inactive students across all four indicators (life satisfaction, life worthwhile, happiness and anxiety). They were slightly better for fairly active students and best for active students, suggesting that some activity is good for personal wellbeing but meeting the activity guidelines is even better. The biggest gaps between active and inactive respondents were seen in life satisfaction (0.61) and life being worthwhile (0.60). The difference between active and inactive students was statistically significant for all four indicators.¹⁶ The graph below shows the breakdown of scores across indicators and activity level.



*Anxiety is negatively scored – a lower score is better.

Personal wellbeing by activity type

Amongst active students, we compared personal wellbeing scores based on respondents' type of activity. We looked at those who only went to the gym, those who only took part in university sports clubs, and those who took part in both gym and sports club activities. Across all the indicators, respondents who took part in neither sport nor gym only had the worst scores. Respondents who only took part in gym scored slightly better, followed by those who took part only in sports clubs. Those who did both gym and sports club activities scored the best. The table below shows the breakdown of scores across indicators and activity type.



¹⁶ Significance at 99.9%.

MENTAL WELLBEING

Summary

- *Mental wellbeing is higher amongst the current student respondents than amongst those who responded to the 2019/20 BASS survey.*
- *Mental wellbeing is highest amongst active students.*

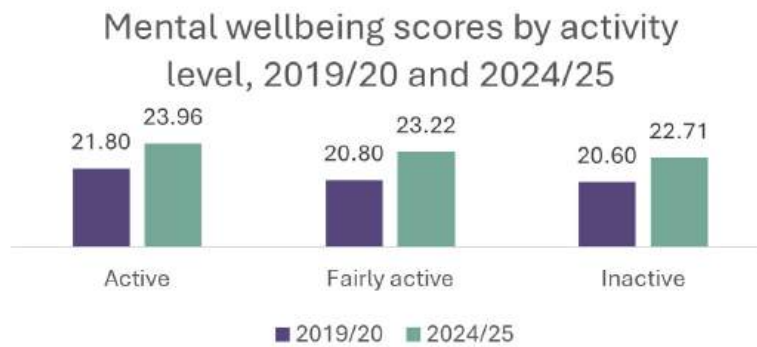
Measuring mental wellbeing

We used the Shortened Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWEBS) to measure respondents' mental wellbeing.¹⁷ This scale asks questions around optimism about the future, relaxation, dealing with problems, and how close the respondent feels to other people. The mental wellbeing score across all respondents was 23.69; this is lower than the mental wellbeing score of 16–34-year-olds reported in the 2021 Health Survey for England (the most recent and relevant data for comparison), which is 25.7.¹⁸ There was a similar gap between scores in the 2019/20 BASS survey mental wellbeing scores and the 2011 Health Survey for England.

Mental wellbeing by activity level

Like personal wellbeing, mental wellbeing correlated positively with activity levels. Active respondents had the highest score (23.96 out of 35) while inactive respondents had the lowest (22.71).

We found that this group of respondents had higher mental wellbeing scores than the respondents in the 2019/20 British Active Student Survey, regardless of activity level. Mental wellbeing scores increased by over two points for every activity level. The difference in average mental wellbeing scores between active and inactive respondents was statistically significant.¹⁹ The graph below shows the full comparison between the 2019/20 survey and this survey.



¹⁷ Tennant, R., Hiller, L., Fishwick, R., Platt, S., Joseph, S., Weich, S., Parkinson, J., Secker, J., & Stewart-Brown, S. (2007). The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS): Development and UK validation. *Health and Quality of Life Outcomes*, 5, Article 63. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1477-7525-5-63>

¹⁸ NHS (2023). Health Survey for England 2021 (part 2). [Loneliness and wellbeing - NHS England Digital](#)

¹⁹ Significance at 99.9%.

SOCIAL INCLUSION AND LONELINESS

Summary

- *Between 40% and 50% of respondents said they “never” or “rarely” felt socially excluded based on four indicators.*
- *However, around one-fifth of respondents “often” or “always” felt that people barely know them and that people were around them but not with them.*
- *Active students were 14 percentage points more likely to have a sense of belonging with their institution than inactive students.*
- *Students who take part in neither sport nor gym are twice as likely to say they are “often or always” lonely compared to students who take part in both.*
- *Across all four indicators, more respondents selected “never” or “rarely” and fewer selected “often/always” than in the BASS 2019/20 survey.*
- *Respondents who were active were most likely to say they “never” or “rarely” felt socially excluded based on all four indicators.*
- *Like active respondents, respondents who took part in both sports and gym activities were most likely to say they “never” or “rarely” felt socially excluded based on all four indicators. Those who just played sports were the second most likely to respond this way across all four indicators, those who just took part in gym were less likely to respond this way, and those who took part in neither were the least likely to respond this way.*
- *Active students were eight percentage points more likely to say they had a chance to engage with a wide cultural group of students at their institution than inactive students.*
- *Respondents who were active were least likely to say they “often/always” felt lonely.*
- *Active respondents who only took part in gym activities were twice as likely to say they “often/always” felt lonely as those who took part in sport.*
- *Loneliness levels for 16 to 24-year-olds are much higher in our survey sample than national data collected in 2021.*
- *Active students were 5 percentage points less likely to say the “often or always” felt lonely than inactive students.*

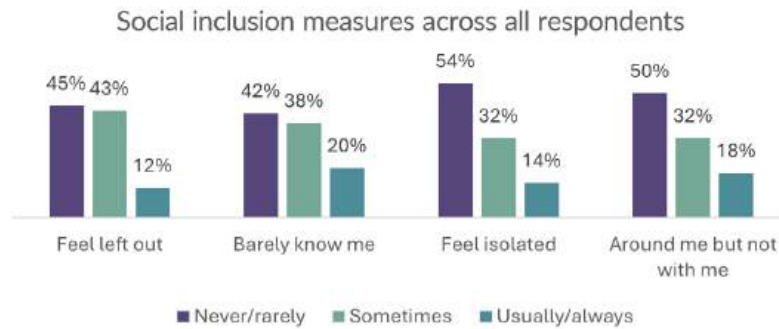
Measuring social inclusion

We measured social inclusion using the PROMIS²⁰ Social Isolation Form 4a. Respondents were asked to respond to four statements using a 5-point Likert scale (never, rarely, sometimes, often, always). The statements were:

- I feel left out.
- I feel that people barely know me.
- I feel isolated from others.
- I feel that people are around me but not with me.

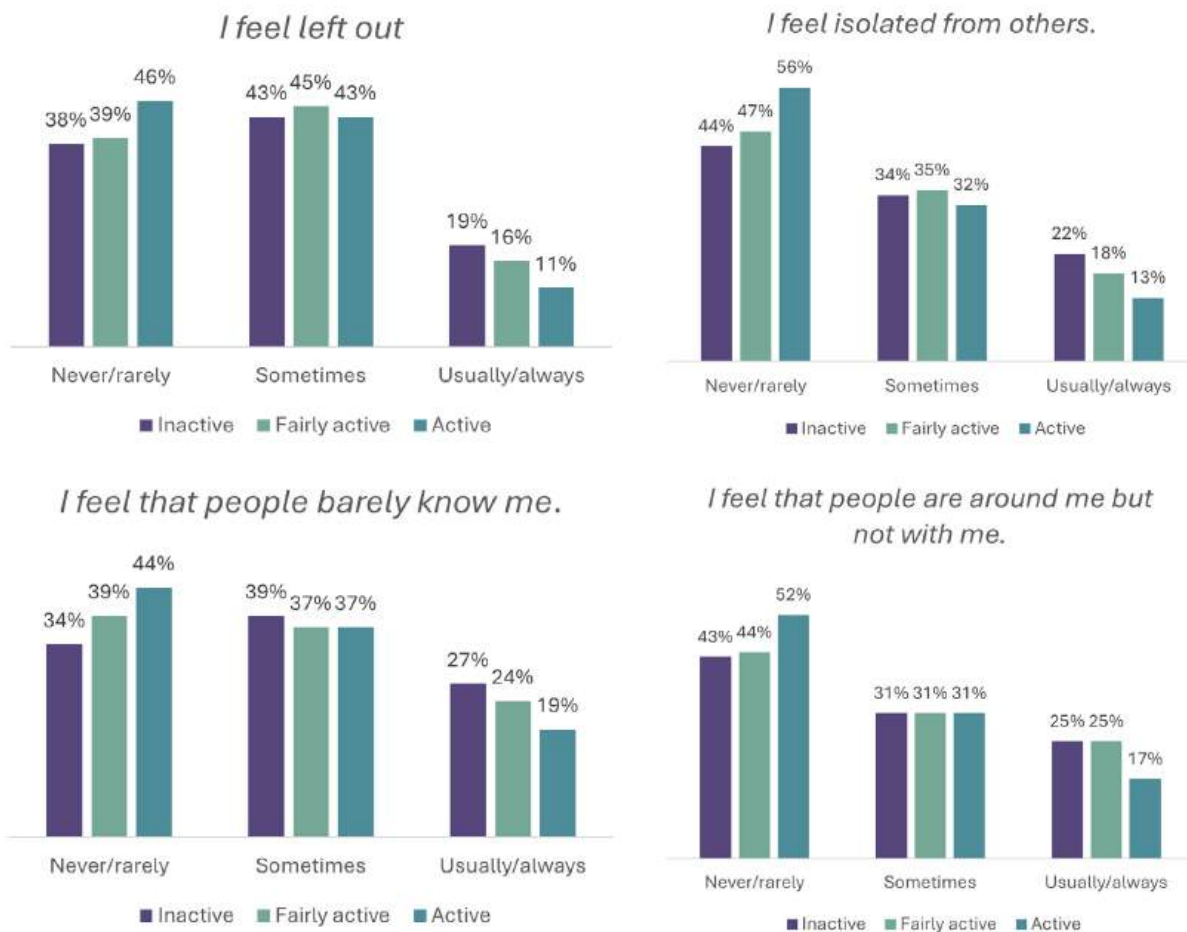
²⁰ Health Measures (2023). [PROMIS](#)

Across all four indicators, “never/rarely” was the most common answer option; between 40 and 50 percent of respondents selected these choices. Respondents were most likely to select often/always for the statements “I feel like people barely know me” (20%) and “I feel that people are around me but not with me” (18%). Across all four indicators, more respondents selected “never” or “rarely” and fewer selected “often/always” than in the BASS 2019/20 survey, indicating an improvement in social inclusion.



Social inclusion by activity levels

Across all four indicators, active respondents were most likely to say they “never” or “rarely” felt excluded and least likely to say they “usually” or “always” felt excluded. Fairly active respondents scored second highest in social inclusion on all indicators and inactive respondents scored lowest. The graphs below show the four indicators in more detail. There is an 8 to 10 percentage point gap between active and inactive respondents answering “never” or “rarely” for all four indicators. There is a statistically significant difference between active and inactive students who “never/rarely” feel this way across all four indicators.²¹

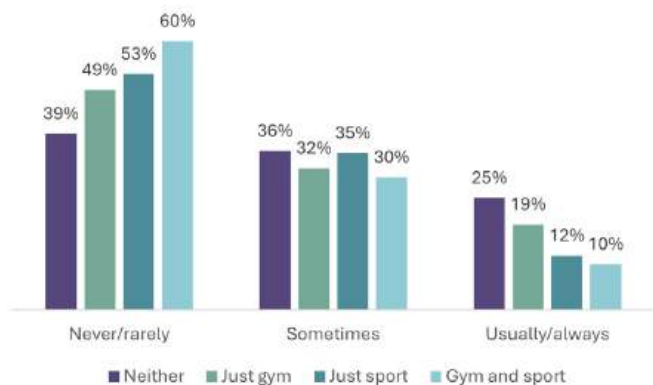


²¹ Significance at 99.9%.

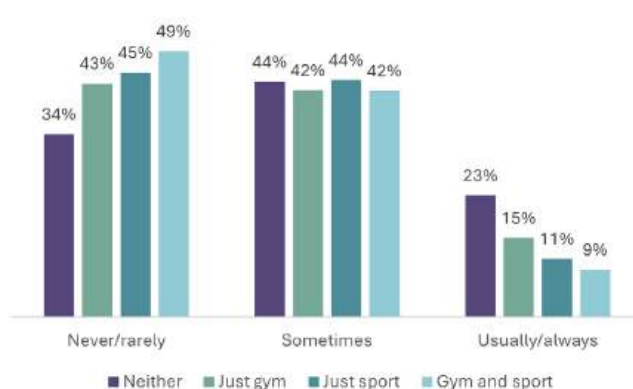
Social inclusion by activity type

Respondents who took part in both gym and sport were the least likely to say they “usually” or “always” felt excluded across all four indicators, and most likely to say the “never” or “rarely” felt this way. Respondents who took part in neither gym nor sport had the lowest scores of social inclusion across all indicators, and those who took part in just sport or just gym fell in the middle. In terms of those saying they “never” or “rarely” felt excluded, the smallest gap between respondents taking part in gym and sport and those taking part in just gym was 7% (“I feel left out”) and the biggest gap was 11% (“I feel isolated from others”).

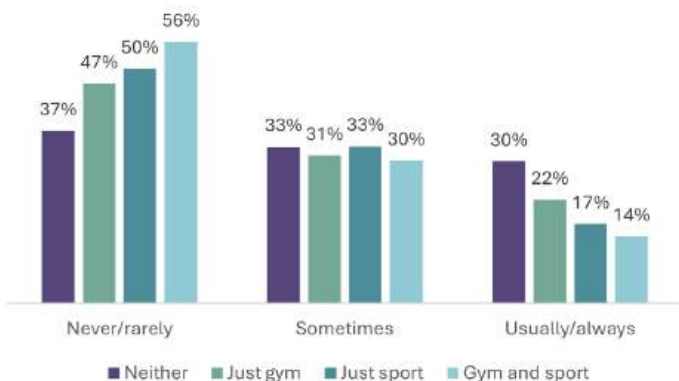
I feel isolated from others.



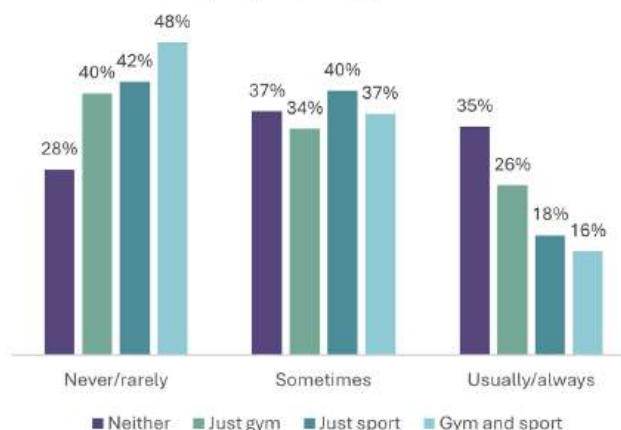
I feel left out.



I feel people are around me but not with me.

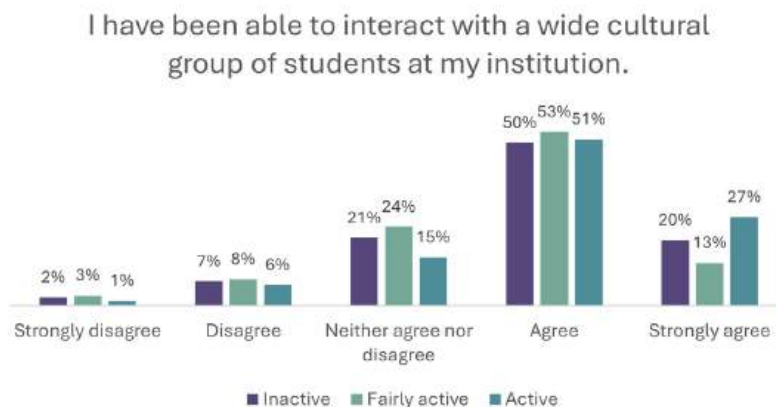


I feel people barely know me.

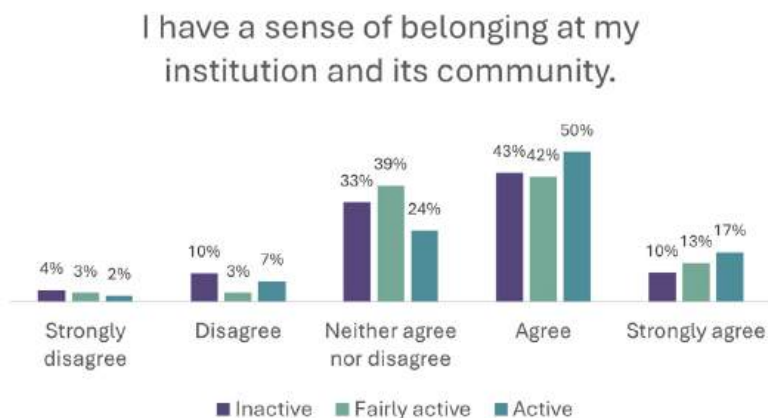


Social networks and sense of belonging

We asked respondents if they had been able to interact with a wide cultural group of students during their time in higher education. Active respondents were more likely to agree or strongly agree with this statement (78%) compared to fairly active (66%) and inactive respondents (70%). Amongst active respondents, there was no difference based on what types of activities respondents took part in (just gym, just sport, both or neither). By comparison, 84.5% of students who responded to our 2023-24 BUCS student survey agreed that taking part in sport had allowed them to interact with a wide cultural group of students. The difference between active and inactive students is statistically significant.²²



We also asked respondents if they had a sense of belonging at their institution as an indicator of social inclusion. Active respondents were more likely to agree or strongly agree that they felt they belonged at their institution (67%) compared to fairly active respondents (55%) and inactive respondents (53%). The difference between active and inactive respondents is statistically significant.²³ Similar to the previous question, there was no difference based on what types of activities respondents took part in (just gym, just sport, both or neither). Comparatively, 93.5% of students who responded to our 2023-24 BUCS student survey agreed that taking part in sport gave them a sense of belonging to their institution and its community.



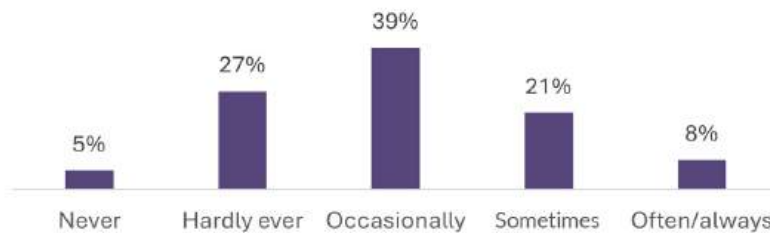
²² Significance at 99.9%.

²³ Significance at 99.9%.

Loneliness

We measured loneliness by asking respondents how often they felt lonely in the previous week. The most common answer was “occasionally”. Eight percent of respondents said “often/always”, which is slightly lower than the 9.9% who answered this way in BASS 2019/20. On the other hand, however, loneliness levels are much higher amongst our survey respondents compared to the most relevant comparison (the 2021 Health Survey for England). The difference between active and inactive respondents who felt lonely often/always was statistically significant.²⁴ In that survey, 22% of the 16-34 population said they never felt lonely compared to 5% in our survey.²⁵

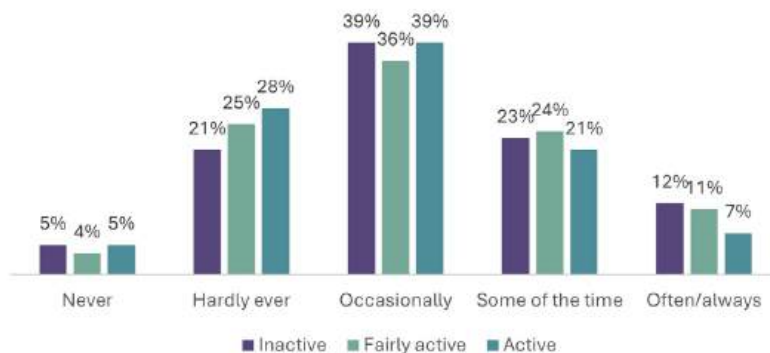
Loneliness scores across all respondents



Loneliness by activity level

Respondents who were inactive, fairly active or active showed no significant differences in “never” feeling lonely but active students were less likely to say they “often/always” felt lonely. This suggests that being active reduces loneliness.

Loneliness by activity level

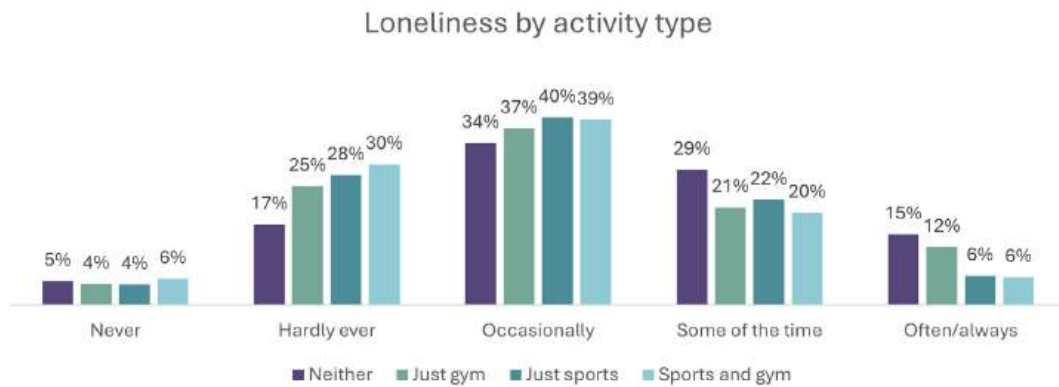


²⁴ Significance at 99.9%.

²⁵ NHS (2023). Health Survey for England 2021 (part 2). [Loneliness and wellbeing - NHS England Digital](#)

Loneliness by activity type

Taking part in sport had a positive impact on respondents' loneliness levels. Those who took part in both sports and gym were more likely to say they "never" felt lonely. Respondents who only took part in gym activities were twice as likely to say they "often/always" felt lonely than those who took part in sports (either alongside or without taking part in gym activities). Respondents who took part in neither gym nor sport were more likely to say they "often/always" felt lonely.



IMPACT OF VOLUNTEERING

Summary

- *Coaching, either at a higher education institution or outside of it, was the most common volunteer role.*
- *The biggest impact of volunteering was a strengthened sense of belonging in a student's institution.*
- *Volunteers predicted slightly higher grades than other students surveyed.*

Trends in student sports volunteering

Volunteering provides students with an opportunity to develop leadership skills and support their sport teams and communities. Our volunteer sample size was 1,545 respondents.

Of these respondents, volunteers were more likely to be undergraduates, UK students, male and from White/White British/White Welsh/White Other or mixed ethnicity backgrounds. Having a health condition did not have an impact on the rate of volunteering. Here is a full breakdown of the rate of volunteering amongst different groups:

Male: 23%

Female: 19%

White/White British/White Welsh/White Other - 22%

Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups - 21%

Asian/Asian British/Asian Welsh - 15%

Black/Black British/Black Welsh/African/Caribbean - 13%

No health condition: 21%

Health condition has a small impact on day-to-day life: 21%

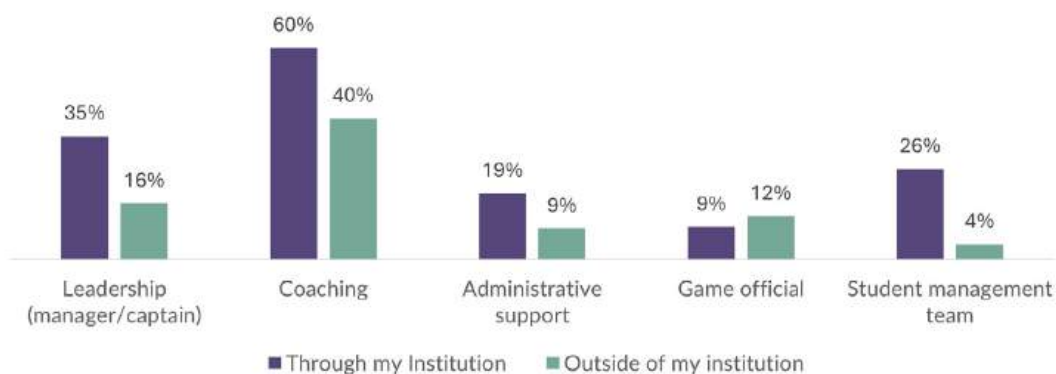
Health condition has a big impact on day-to-day life: 20%

Undergraduate: 21%

Postgraduate: 15%

UK students: 22%

International students: 15%



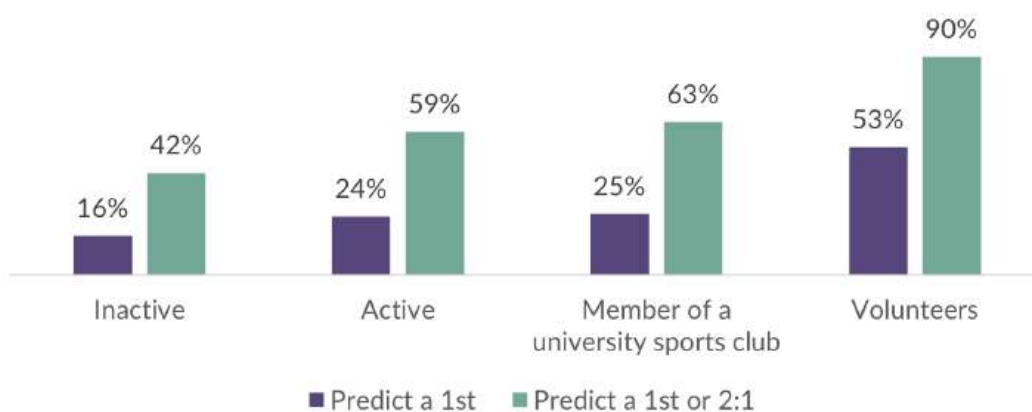
Coaching was the most common volunteering role amongst survey respondents. Generally students were most likely to volunteer through their institution, with the exception of being a game official. The graph below shows more of the types of volunteering students took part in and whether this was at their institution or elsewhere.

Volunteering had a positive impact on students' sense of belonging to their institution. Seventy-four percent of volunteers agreed they have a sense of belonging at their institution, which was higher than inactive respondents (53%), active respondents (65%) and members of university sports clubs (70%).

The majority of volunteers in our sample were both active and members of sports clubs. Therefore, most volunteers had the wellbeing benefit felt from being both active and part of a university sports club.

In most other wellbeing metrics in the survey, such as mental wellbeing, levels of life satisfaction and levels of happiness, volunteers did not have additional positive benefits above those who were active and part of university sports clubs.

Those that volunteered were more likely to predict a 1st or 2:1 from their degree than those who were inactive, active or members of a university sports club.



ATTAINMENT, SKILLS AND EMPLOYMENT

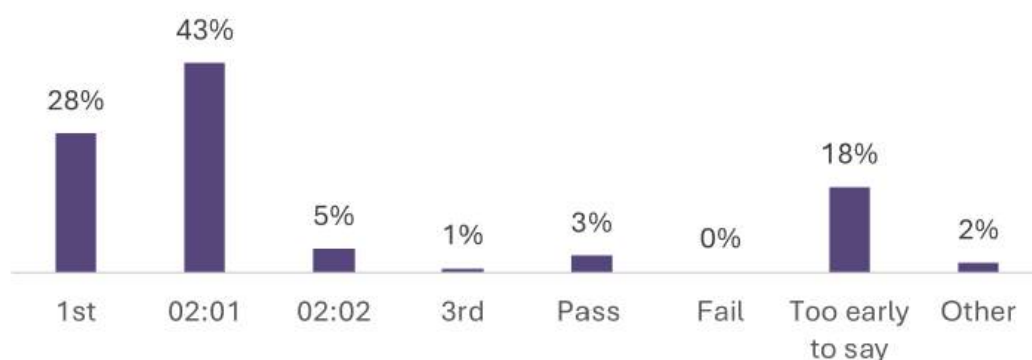
Summary

- The majority of undergraduate final-year respondents (71%) predicted they would get a 1st or 2:1.
- Activity level does not correlate clearly with predicted attainment.
- Respondents taking part in sport are slightly more likely to predict a 1st or 2:1 compared to those who take part in gym or those who don't take part in sport or gym.
- Only 34% of respondents were "very confident" or "extremely confident" they would find employment within six months of graduating.
- Confidence in future employment does not correlate clearly with activity levels, though inactive respondents were twice as likely to say they were "not at all confident" as active students.
- Respondents who took part in both gym and sport were slightly more likely to be "extremely confident" about finding employment within six months of graduating.
- Active respondents were slightly more likely to say their time in higher education had improved their ability to find employment, but type of activity did not affect respondents' responses.

Attainment

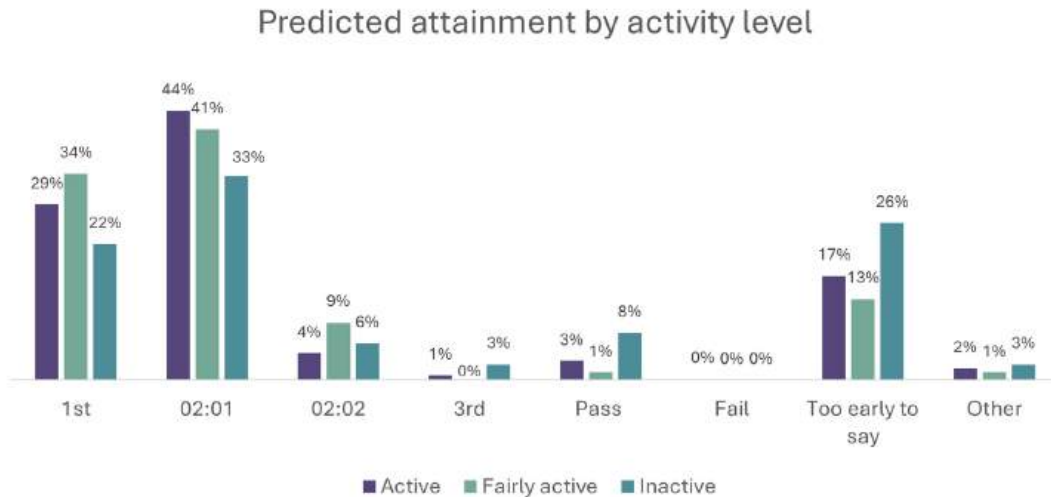
We measured attainment through final-year undergraduates' predictions of their final grade. We ran the survey in November and December so believe that most undergraduates would have a firm idea of their final grade by this point in the year. However, we also included a "too early to say" option in case respondents were unsure. The data is based on responses from 1,393 undergraduates who were in their final year. As shown in the graph below, most students predicted they would earn a 1st or 2:1 while 18% felt it was too early to say what grade they would earn. This was much higher than the predictions in the BASS 2019/20 survey, where 58% of respondents predicted a 1st or 2:1. In that survey, however, 34% of respondents said it was too early to say what their final grade would be.

Respondents' predicted attainment level



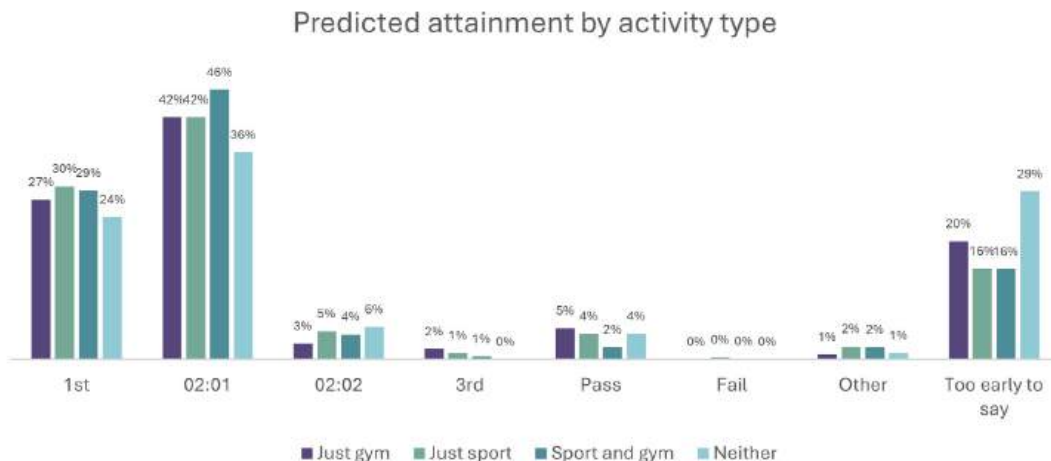
Attainment by activity level

Active students were more likely than inactive students to predict they would get a 1st, but fairly active students were the most likely to predict this grade. Active students were more likely to predict they would get a 2:1 than fairly inactive students and inactive students. Inactive students were more likely to choose the “too early to say” option than active and fairly active students. This data should be interpreted with caution as the inactive and fairly active sample sizes for this question were small (117 and 83 respectively).



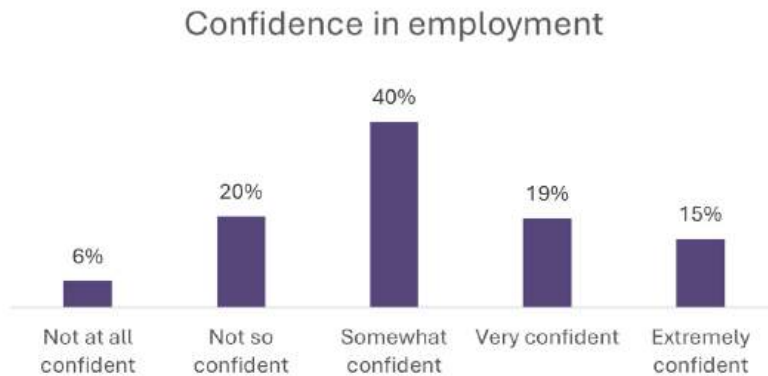
Attainment by activity type

Respondents who took part in sport, whether alongside gym or not, were slightly more likely to predict a 1st. Respondents who took part in both sport and gym were more likely than others to predict a 2:1. Respondents who did not participate in sport (those who took part in just gym and who took part in neither sport nor gym) were more likely to select the “too early to say” option.



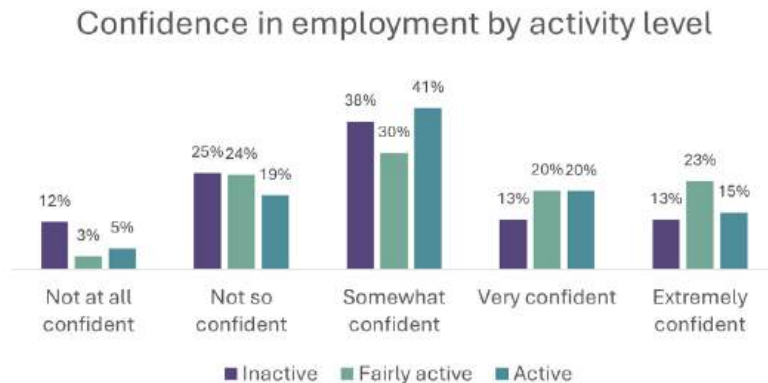
Employment

We asked students who were in their final year of study to rate how confident they were that they would be employed within 6 months of graduating. Confidence rates were low compared to BASS 2019/20: in that survey, 61% of respondents were “fairly confident” or “very confident”. Our survey used slightly different terminology in the answer options (both were 5-point Likert scales) so the equivalent is respondents choosing “very confident” and “extremely confident”. This total comes to only 34%. This total is also surprising given the reality of student employability: according to the most recent HESA data on graduate outcomes, 82% of graduates are currently in employment (including those in part-time and full-time employment and those who are engaged in both employment and studying).²⁶



Employment by activity level

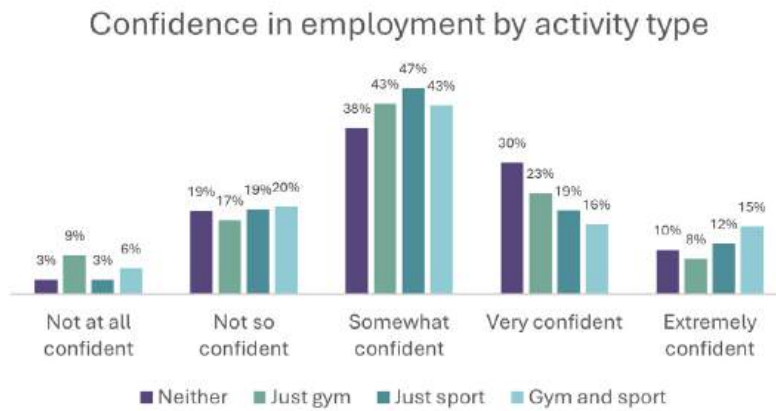
Inactive students are more likely than fairly active and active students to say they are “not at all confident” or “not so confident” about being employed within six months of graduating. However, fairly active students are the most likely to be “extremely confident”, followed by active students.



²⁶ HESA (2024). Graduate Outcomes 2021/22: Summary Statistics. [Graduate Outcomes 2021/22: Summary Statistics - Summary | HESA](#)

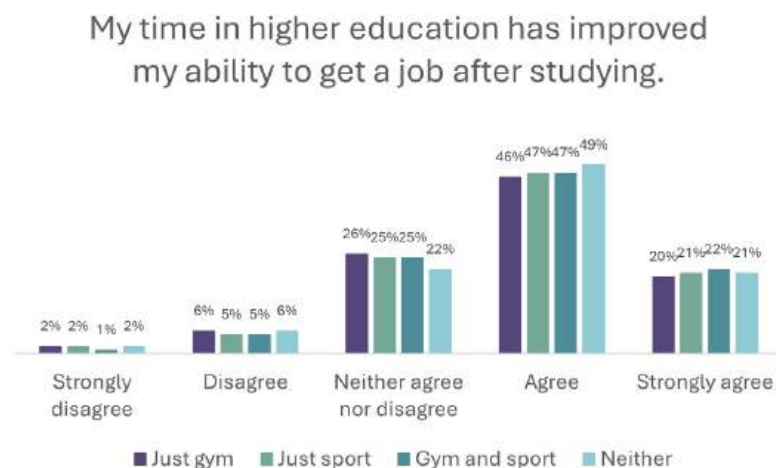
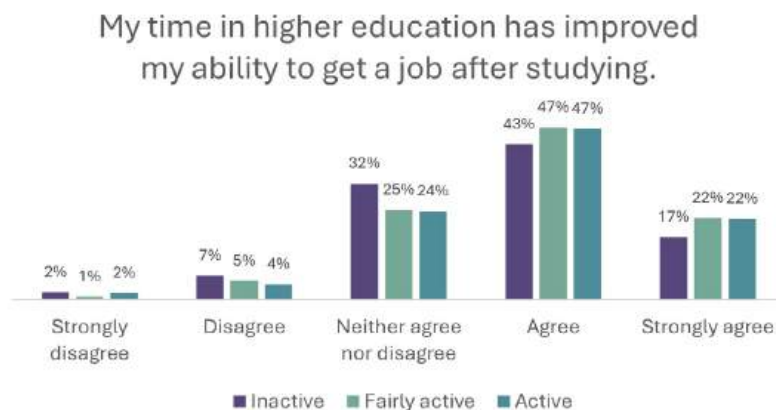
Employment by activity type

Respondents who take part in just gym activities are the most likely to say they are “not at all confident” about being employed within six months of graduating. Those who take part in both gym and sport are the most likely to say they are “extremely confident” of employment.



Preparation for employment

While active respondents were not more confident about finding employment, they were slightly more likely to agree or strongly agree that their time in higher education had improved their ability to get a job after studying than inactive respondents (69% for active respondents compared to 60% for inactive respondents). Amongst active students, however, type of activity had no impact on whether respondents felt that their time in higher education had improved their ability to get a job.



CHOOSING AN INSTITUTION

Summary

- When choosing to study at an institution, sport and physical activity provision factors into the decision less than academic factors and the reputation of the institution.
- Within sport and physical activity provision, students value the range and quality of sport and physical activity facilities the most.



The role of sport and physical activity in choosing an institution

When choosing an institution, sport and physical provisions typically influence the student's decision less than academic, geographical and reputation factors. It does hold more influence though than the availability of extracurricular activities other than sport. This is typically true across all students, regardless of activity level or sport club membership. This graph outlines the average ranking position of each factor, with 1 being the most important.

When looking specifically at what within a sport and physical activity students value when selecting an institution, the most impactful factors are the range and quality of the sport and physical activity facilities. How important these areas are increases if the student is 'active' and further increases if they are a sport club member. The availability of sport scholarships and the institution's sporting reputation are of the lowest importance. This indicates that generally students care less about the outward sporting reputation of the university and more what facilities are present that they can make use of. This graph illustrates the percentage of students that rated each area as extremely or very important.



CONCLUSION

This survey provides a snapshot of student experiences of sport and physical activity across UK higher education and how involvement in these activities influences student outcomes. Our findings demonstrate a clear correlation between activity levels and student wellbeing and social inclusion. **Students who are active are more likely to have positive wellbeing and feel included, with those taking part in sport (as opposed to gym) even more likely to feel this way.** Wellbeing and inclusion both contribute positively to student retention rates, providing a clear reason for continued investment in higher education.

The connection between activity levels and perceived employability and attainment is less clear, though active students were more likely to say their time in education had improved their ability to find a job after graduating.

Our review of the demographics of university sports clubs shows that some groups are missing out on the benefits of sport. In particular, Asian women, Black women, students from more deprived areas, commuter students, and students with a health condition that has major impacts on their lives are all less likely to take part in these sports clubs than the general student population. We encourage institutions to use this national-level data to benchmark their own student populations and think about how to target and engage students from these groups. **These inequalities do not exist in a vacuum and many can be seen in wider UK population trends, but time at university, where sport and physical activity are often cheaper and easier to access, provide a crucial opportunity to reengage these groups.**

In addition to reviewing sports club demographics, we also highlighted the experiences of commuter students and international students. We felt that it was important to look at commuter students because they are a large and growing part of the UK higher education population. Because university life, including sport, was largely set up to fit the needs of residential campuses (though this is not the case everywhere), sports departments should consider how to engage commuter students in their provision. When speaking to commuter students in focus groups, it became clear that type and length of commute matter so we encourage institutions to identify the commuting patterns of their own student population when thinking about how to engage them. We also found that **the term “commuter student” could cover a range of intersectional barriers** because commuter students are more likely to come from certain groups (e.g. commuter students are more likely to be from more deprived areas, have long term health conditions, and/or be older than non-commuters).

International students are a key part of many institutions' recruitment goals. Many of our international student respondents were postgraduates and were less likely to access sport, but the focus group conversations demonstrated that **those who took part in sport and physical activity felt the benefits in terms of mental wellbeing and sense of belonging.** Again, sport has an important role to play in supporting this student population.

At a time of financial insecurity in many higher education institutions, we aimed to present data that demonstrates the value that sport and physical activity can play in achieving higher education outcomes. **We hope that these findings will continue to fuel the existing conversation about the value of higher education sport.**