

Statistical bulletin

Coronavirus and higher education students: England, 19 February to 1 March 2021

Experimental statistics from the Student COVID-19 Insights Survey (SCIS) in England. Includes information on the behaviours, plans, opinions and well-being of higher education students in the context of guidance on the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

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1 . Main points

- Over a quarter (26%) of students reported feeling lonely often or always, compared with 8% of the adult population in Great Britain over a similar period.
- Almost two-thirds (63%) of students indicated that their well-being and mental health had worsened since the start of the autumn term 2020; this has remained stable since January 2021.
- Average life satisfaction scores for students have improved following a dip in January 2021 (8 to 18 January 2021) from 4.8 to 5.1 out of 10; this remains statistically significantly lower than the average life satisfaction scores for the adult population in Great Britain at 6.4 over a similar period.
- An estimated 85% of students said that they were currently living at the same address as they were at the start of the autumn term 2020.
- Of those students who have moved address since the start of the autumn term 2020, 43% are planning on returning to their original address before the end of the academic year and 55% are not planning on returning.
- Of all students, 15% said that they expected to stay with people who are not part of their current household for a period of two weeks or more, over the next two months.

The statistics presented are experimental statistics, so care needs to be taken when interpreting them. It is worth noting this survey has a relatively small sample size and low response rate. While this has been weighted and is comparable with previous findings, this has an impact on the level of certainty of this research.

Statistician's comment

"Students have continued to have a tough time into the new year, with covid restrictions curtailing the things they can do, with many reporting dissatisfaction with their academic and social experiences at university.

"Over a quarter are feeling lonely often or always, a significantly higher amount than the adult population. Nearly two-thirds still report a worsening of their well-being and mental health since the beginning of the autumn 2020 half term.

"Though their life satisfaction has improved slightly since January, similar to the adult population, students' life satisfaction remains far below the national adult average and students report experiencing greater anxiety than adults.

"We will continue to monitor student responses to better understand how they are feeling as restrictions are gradually lifted in the coming months."

Tim Gibbs, Public Services Analysis Team, Office for National Statistics

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2 . Student well-being and mental health

Almost two-thirds (63%) of students indicated that their well-being and mental health had worsened since the start of the autumn term 2020. This has remained stable since the last survey (8 to 18 January 2021) but at an elevated level compared with the 57% of students reporting the same in November 2020 (20 to 25 November 2020).

Students whose living arrangements had changed since the start of the autumn term 2020 indicated that their well-being and mental health had worsened (71%), which was statistically significantly higher than those whose living arrangements had stayed the same (62%).

A third (33%) of students reported being dissatisfied with their academic experience since the start of the autumn term 2020 and over half (57%) reported being dissatisfied with their social experience since the start of the autumn term 2020; this was a similar proportion as January 2021.

Over a quarter (26%) of students reported feeling lonely often or always. This compared with just 8% of the adult population in Great Britain over a similar period (Figure 1). This is the first time we have collected information on student loneliness.

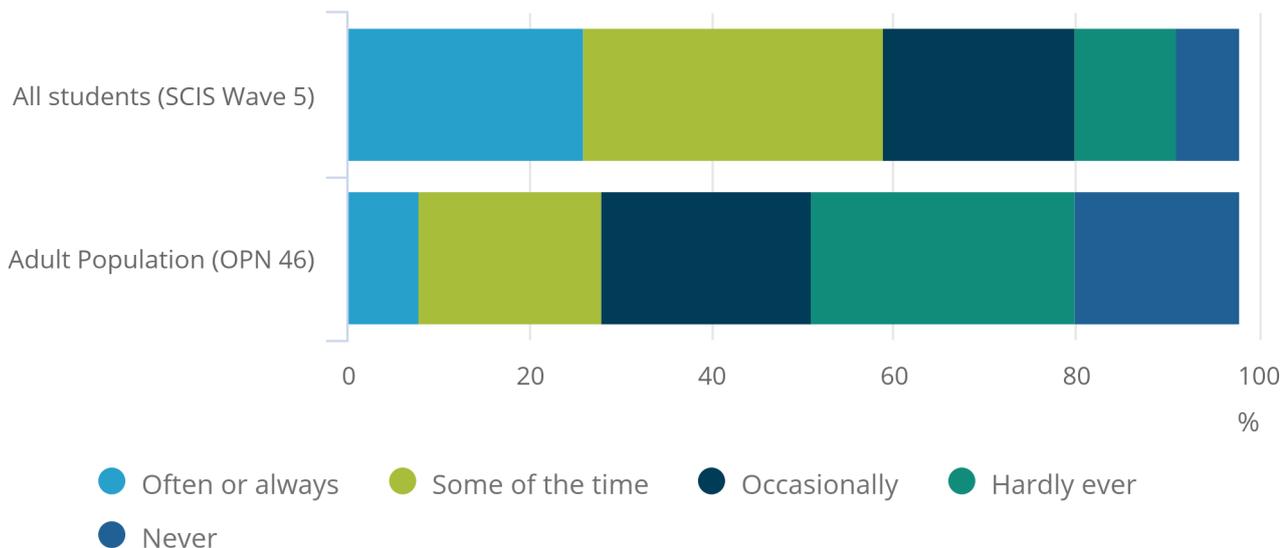
Loneliness was also more pronounced for younger students (aged between 16 to 29 years old) with a third (33%) reporting that they felt lonely often or always, compared with one in five (20%) students aged 30 years and over. In comparison, only 12% of the Great Britain population aged 16 to 29 years old felt lonely often or always.

Figure 1: Over a quarter (26%) of students reported feeling lonely often or always, compared with only 8% of the adult population in Great Britain

Proportions of responses to the question “How often do you feel lonely?” for students at English universities and the adult population of Great Britain, English universities and Great Britain, February 2021

Figure 1: Over a quarter (26%) of students reported feeling lonely often or always, compared with only 8% of the adult population in Great Britain

Proportions of responses to the question “How often do you feel lonely?” for students at English universities and the adult population of Great Britain, English universities and Great Britain, February 2021



Source: Office for National Statistics – Student COVID-19 Insights Survey (SCIS) and Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (COVID-19 module)

Notes:

1. Estimates for “all students” are calculated from the Student COVID-19 Insights Survey (SCIS) for students at universities in England, between 19 February and 1 March 2021.
2. Estimates for the “adult population” are calculated from the [Opinions and Lifestyle Survey \(COVID-19 module\)](#) for adults in Great Britain, between 17 February and 21 February 2021.
3. Please note that these two surveys have different data collection methods, therefore they should not be compared directly but can be considered in reference to each other.
4. Percentages may not add to 100 as the response options of “Prefer not to say” and “Don’t know” have been excluded because of low counts.
5. All categories, apart from those who said they felt lonely occasionally, show statistically significant differences (based on non-overlapping confidence intervals) between the student and adult populations.
6. The upper and lower confidence interval limits for each bar can be found in the data file for this chart. The 95% confidence intervals highlight the degree of uncertainty around an estimate. Non-overlapping confidence intervals suggest a statistically significant difference between groups (See [Glossary](#)).

Between November 2020 and January 2021 there was a statistically significant deterioration in the average life satisfaction scores of all students (decreasing from 5.3 to 4.8 out of 10). Since then, students' average life satisfaction has significantly improved to 5.1 out of 10.

This trend is similar to that of the adult population as life satisfaction scores fell between November 2020 and January 2021 (decreasing from 6.7 to 6.4 out of 10) but have remained stable into February 2021 (6.4). This still remains statistically significantly higher than the student average.

Average anxiety ratings for students have remained largely unchanged since the end of November 2020, averaging a score of 5.2. Nevertheless, the current average anxiety score for students (5.1) remains statistically significantly higher than the rest of the general Great British population (4.1).

The trend for average anxiety ratings differs from the adult population of Great Britain over a similar period, where anxiety increased between November 2020 and January 2021 (increasing from 4.2 to 4.6 out of 10), before falling back to previous levels (4.1 out of 10) in February 2021.

More about coronavirus

- Find the latest on [coronavirus \(COVID-19\) in the UK](#).
- [Explore the latest coronavirus data](#) from the ONS and other sources.
- All ONS analysis, summarised in our [coronavirus roundup](#).
- View [all coronavirus data](#).
- Find out how we are [working safely in our studies and surveys](#).

3 . Student movement

[Guidance](#) released on 5 January 2021 recommended that students only return to face-to-face teaching during national lockdown restrictions if they are on courses that are most important to be delivered in person, to support the pipeline of future key workers. Updated guidance came into effect on 8 March 2021 enabling university providers to resume in-person teaching and learning for students who are studying practical or practice-based subjects. Students were surveyed prior to the updated guidance coming into effect.

Current living arrangements

Of all students, 85% said that they were currently living at the same address as they were at the start of the autumn term 2020. 14% said that they are currently living in a different address to the one they lived at the start of the autumn term 2020. Of those who have moved address since the start of the autumn term 2020, over half (51%) are now living with parents, guardians or family members when they had not previously.

Of those who have moved address since the start of the autumn term 2020, 43% are planning on returning to their original address before the end of the academic year and 55% are not planning on returning. Of those planning on returning, 46% said they would do so in March, 35% said April or later and 16% did not know when they would return.

Travel

Only around one in five (21%) students said that they had moved between households for a period of two weeks or more at least once since the start of the autumn term 2020 despite students being [permitted to travel](#) to stay with family or friends for the winter break in early December 2020. Of those who had moved between households since the start of the autumn term, almost half (47%) did so more than once but 16% had moved more than twice.

A quarter (25%) of all students reported that they left home to go out to do paid or voluntary work in the last seven days. Of those, 69% were in direct contact roles, that is, roles that are in person with patients, clients, residents, service users or customers on a day-to-day basis.

Over a quarter (28%) of all students are planning on travelling or commuting regularly or occasionally between their current address and university over the next two months to, for instance, attend lectures, seminars or use facilities.

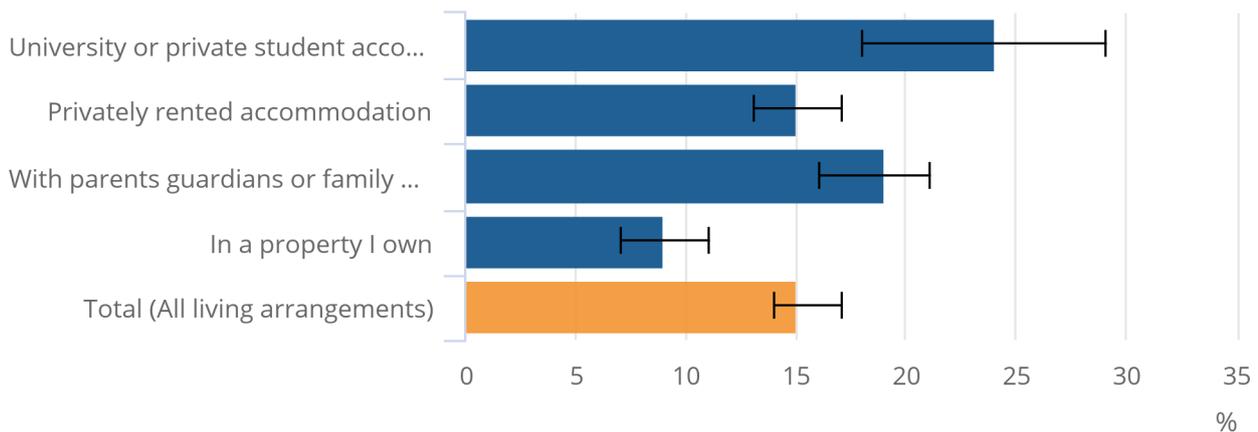
Of all students, 15% said that they expected to stay with people who are not part of their current household for a period of two weeks or more over the next two months (this period covers the Easter break). Almost a quarter (24%) of those currently living in university or private student accommodation expected to stay with people outside their current household over the next two months. This is statistically significantly higher than the total for all students (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Almost a quarter (24%) of students living in university or private student accommodation expect to stay with people outside their current household over the next two months

Proportion of students expected to move between households for two or more weeks over the next two months by current living arrangement, English universities, February 2021

Figure 2: Almost a quarter (24%) of students living in university or private student accommodation expect to stay with people outside their current household over the next two months

Proportion of students expected to move between households for two or more weeks over the next two months by current living arrangement, English universities, February 2021



Source: Office for National Statistics (ONS) – Student COVID-19 Insights Survey (SCIS)

Notes:

1. The question asked: “Thinking about the next 2 months; do you expect to stay with people that are not part of your current household for a period of 2 weeks or more?”.
2. Current living arrangements refers to the address the respondent was living in at the time of answering the survey.
3. The error bars show 95% confidence intervals highlighting the degree of uncertainty around an estimate. Non-overlapping confidence intervals suggest a statistically significant difference between groups (See [Glossary](#)).

4 . Coronavirus and higher education students data

[Coronavirus and higher education students](#)

Dataset | Released 10 March 2021

Experimental statistics from the Student COVID-19 Insights Survey. Includes information on the behaviours, plans, opinions and well-being of higher education students in England in the context of guidance on the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

5 . Glossary

University students

Students included in this study are studying on Foundation to Postgraduate level programmes at universities in England.

Statistical significance

The statistical significance of differences has been determined by non-overlapping confidence intervals. A [confidence interval](#) gives an indication of the degree of uncertainty of an estimate, showing the precision of a sample estimate. The 95% confidence intervals are calculated so that if we repeated the study many times, 95% of the time the true unknown value would lie between the lower and upper confidence limits. A wider interval indicates more uncertainty in the estimate.

National lockdown

From 5 January 2021, government guidance in England advised people to stay at home and avoid meeting others they do not live with, except for specific purposes. Guidance recommended that students only return to face-to-face teaching during national lockdown restrictions if they are on courses that are most important to be delivered in person to support the pipeline of future key workers. [Updated guidance](#) came into effect on 8 March 2021 enabling university providers to resume in-person teaching and learning for students who are studying practical or practice-based subjects. Students were surveyed prior to the updated guidance coming into effect.

6 . Measuring the data

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) is conducting a survey analysing student behaviour during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. This survey is called the Student COVID-19 Insights Survey (SCIS).

The survey was conducted between 19 February 2021 and 1 March 2021, using an online survey tool and all answers were self-reported. A total of 100,000 students in English universities were invited to take part via their email address held by National Union of Students (NUS) with an email sent from the NUS, with a response rate of 2.8%. We would like to thank and acknowledge the important role the NUS had in conducting this survey.

7 . Strengths and limitations

Strengths

An important strength of this survey is that it allows for timely estimates to be produced. In addition, the National Union of Students (NUS) sample frame provides good coverage of students across English universities.

Estimates in this report are based on weighted counts that are representative of the population of students studying at universities in England, population totals are taken from the [Higher Education Statistics Agency \(HESA\) 2019/20 estimates](#). Of the responses received, a disproportionate number of female students responded, and responses also varied by region. To address this, we apply weighting to ensure the sample is representative of sex and is representative of the student population in different regions of England.

Limitations

The estimates for this current survey are adjusted (weighted) by sex and region but are not currently weighted by age. Age does not appear to be very representative of the student population in this survey. Respondents to the survey were much more likely to be 30 years and over (51%) compared with the population of students in the UK (20%). Future waves of the survey will attempt to provide statistics which are weighted to be representative of age.

Uncertainty in the data

Out of the 100,000 invites sent there were 2,759 complete responses, giving us a response rate of 2.8%. The experimental statistics presented in this bulletin contain [uncertainty](#). As with all survey data based on a sample, there is an element of uncertainty as they are susceptible to respondent error and bias. In some cases, we have used confidence intervals to determine whether differences across periods and between students and the general population of Great Britain, are statistically significant.

8 . Related links

[Coronavirus and university students, 12 October to 18 October 2020, England](#)

Dataset | Released 5 November 2020

Experimental statistics from an initial pilot of the Student COVID-19 Insights Survey. Includes information on the behaviours and well-being of university students attending three English universities in the context of guidance on the coronavirus (COVID-19).

[Coronavirus and university students, 3 to 8 November 2020, Great Britain](#)

Dataset | Released 18 November 2020

Experimental statistics from a pilot of the Student COVID-19 Insights Survey. Includes information on the behaviours and well-being of university students attending four British universities in the context of guidance on the coronavirus (COVID-19).

[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) latest data and analysis](#)

Web page | Updated as and when data become available

Latest data and analysis on the coronavirus (COVID-19) in the UK and its effect on the economy and society.

[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) roundup](#)

Article | Updated as and when data become available

Catch up on the latest data and analysis related to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) latest insights](#)

Interactive tool | Updated as and when data become available

Explore the latest data and trends about the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic from the ONS and other official sources.