Statistical bulletin

Coronavirus and higher education students: England, 8 January to 18 January 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.

Table of contents

1 . Main points

- Of those students who travelled to stay with family or friends over the winter break, 40% have since returned and 60% have not yet returned to their term-time address.

- Of those students who provided complete travel information, 33% travelled to stay with family or friends over the winter break and 37% stayed in their accommodation; the remaining 30% were already living at their usual non-term address or family home, or in 'other' accommodation.

- Almost two-thirds (63%) of students indicated that their well-being and mental health had worsened since the start of the autumn 2020 term.

- A statistically significantly higher number (63%) of students reported a worsening in their well-being and mental health, compared with 57% reporting the same in the previous student survey (20 to 25 November 2020).

- Average life satisfaction scores of students decreased by 9% from 5.3 to 4.8 out of 10, between 20 to 25 November 2020 and 8 to 18 January 2021.

- A greater proportion of students reported being dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their academic experience since the start of the autumn term (37%), compared with 29% reporting the same at the end of November 2020 (20 to 25 November 2020).

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. 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

"The most recent data collected from the Student COVID-19 Insights Survey (SCIS) show a further decrease in students' average life satisfaction scores, with almost two-thirds of students reporting a worsening of their mental health and well-being.

These numbers are not surprising considering the new lockdown measures in place and the fact that many students have not yet returned to their university town or city. This is also reflected in the academic experience scores, with the number of students reporting dissatisfaction showing an increase since the last report."

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

Follow the Public Services Analysis team on Twitter: @HughStick

2 . Students travel over the winter break

In December 2020, a student travel window lasting from 3 to 9 December 2020 allowed students who had been living away from home to return home at the end of term if they chose to do so. Updated guidance following the national lockdown on 5 January 2021 recommended that students only return to face-to-face teaching if they are on courses that are most important to be delivered in-person, to support the pipeline of future key workers.

Of those students who provided complete travel information, 33% travelled to stay with family or friends over the winter break and 37% stayed in their accommodation; the remaining 30% were already living at their usual non-term address or family home, or in 'other' accommodation. The proportion of students living at their usual non-term address or family home, or in "other" accommodation increased from 30% at the start of the autumn 2020 term to almost half (49%) after the winter break (Figure 1).

Of those students who travelled to stay with family or friends over the winter break, 40% have since returned to their term-time accommodation and 60% have not yet returned (Figure 1). Of those students who travelled to stay with family or friends for the winter break and have not yet returned to their term-time accommodation, 14% said they were not planning to return this term and a further 32% did not know when they would be returning.

Figure 1: Of those that travelled to stay with family or friends, 60% have not yet returned to their term-time accommodation

Estimates of students' movement between the start of the autumn 2020 term and January 2021, England, 8 January 2021 to 18 January 2021

Notes:

1. The questions used to deduce current living arrangements after the winter break were: "Which of these best described your accommodation arrangements at the start of the autumn term 2020?" (chosen from a list of accommodation types), "What did you do for Christmas?" and "Have you returned to your term time accommodation?".

2. Only those students who provided complete information to all three questions about their living arrangements and travel over the winter break are included. To note, 97% of students provided complete travel information.

3. Those who responded living in "my usual non-term accommodation or family home" or "other" as their accommodation arrangement at the start of the autumn 2020 term are not asked follow-up questions about their travel over the winter break, as they are assumed to have remained where they are over the winter break.

4. Estimates are rounded so may not sum to 100%.

Download the data

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 . Students 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 2020 term, which is significantly higher than the 57% of students reporting the same in the previous student survey (20 to 25 November 2020). Statistically significantly more students whose term-time living arrangements had changed since the start of the autumn term, indicated that their well-being and mental health had worsened (73%) compared with those whose living arrangements had stayed the same (62%).

The average life satisfaction score for all students was 4.8 (out of 10) in January 2021, which is [significantly lower than the life satisfaction of the general population](#) in Great Britain (6.4) in a similar period (Figure 2).

Average life satisfaction scores of students decreased by 9% from 5.3 to 4.8, between 20 to 25 November 2020 and 8 to 18 January 2021. This compared with a smaller decrease (4%) in the average life satisfaction of the general population from 6.7 to 6.4, over a similar period.

Between the end of November 2020 and the middle of January 2021, average anxiety scores, for the general population, increased from 4.2 to 4.6 (out of 10). Over the same period, average anxiety ratings remained unchanged for students but still remained statistically significantly higher (5.2) than the rest of the population (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Students reported a lower level of life satisfaction than the general population in Great Britain in January 2021

Average ratings of life satisfaction, feeling that the things done in life are worthwhile, happiness and anxiety for students and the general population, English universities and Great Britain, January 2021

Notes:

1. Estimates for "all students" are calculated from the Student COVID-19 Insights Survey (SCIS) between 8 January 2021 and 18 January 2021, and represent students studying at English universities.

2. Estimates for the "general population" are calculated from the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (COVID-19 module) between 7 January 2021 and 10 January 2021, and represent the Great British population.

3. Please note that these two surveys have different data collection methods, therefore should not be compared directly but can be considered in reference to each other.

4. 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.

[Download the data](#)

A greater proportion of students reported being dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their academic experience since the start of the autumn term (37%), than the 29% reporting the same at the end of November 2020 (20 to 25 November 2020). Of those who were dissatisfied with their academic experience, the most common reasons were learning delivery (75%) and quality of learning (71%).

Over half (56%) of students reported being dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their social experience since the start of the autumn term. The most common given reasons that students were dissatisfied with their social experience were limited opportunities to meet other students (86%) and limited opportunities for social or recreational activity (85%).

4 . Coronavirus and higher education students data

Coronavirus and higher education students, England
Dataset | Released 27 January 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

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 if they are on courses that are most important to be delivered in-person to support the pipeline of future key workers.

University students

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

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 8 January 2021 and 18 January 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 2.7%. 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.

The estimates are adjusted (weighted) to ensure they are representative of students at English universities. 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 the student population in different regions of England and is representative of sex.

Uncertainty in the data

Out of the 100,000 invites sent there were 2,698 complete responses, giving us a response rate of 2.7%. 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 November to 8 November, 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.