

# COVID-19 Student Experience Survey

## About this study

This study was carried out by Hertfordshire Students' Union to assess the student experience during COVID-19, and the impact the pandemic has had on student's education and wellbeing. Data was collected via an online survey with a total of 1522 responses.

Of all responses, 67% were Undergraduate, 30% were Postgraduate, and 3% were Foundation level. 44% were in their first year, 22.5% were in their second, and 33.5% were in their final year. 58% identified as female; 41% as male; 1% identified in another way or preferred not to say. Asian students were our largest response demographic with 41% of responses, followed by White students with 36.50%, and Black students with 12.50% of responses.

All data is analysed by both student demographics and Schools.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Academic experience

All students, regardless of their demographic information and across all Schools, stated that their grades and marks were their top concern for the next academic year if all teaching was to be online. There was, however, significant differences across Schools both regarding how satisfied students were with online learning and how willing students would be to return to campus for the next academic year. Creative Arts students were significantly less satisfied with online learning, likely due to issues accessing specialist equipment and workspaces whilst working from home. ECS students were significantly more satisfied both with the range of online teaching materials and styles and with the consistency of teaching quality across modules than the School-wide average. Perhaps due to the high satisfaction, 33% of ECS students would prefer online teaching for the next academic year, second only to Law at 43%. Education students reported the lowest understanding of the Safety Net Policy across Schools, however they also reported higher than average access to adequate equipment and workspaces. HSK students listed “Going on placement” as one of their top concerns for the next academic year, and only 38% of students reported that they were able to continue with their placement as expected during COVID-19. Despite this, HSK students were generally in line with, or slightly above, School-wide averages in regard to

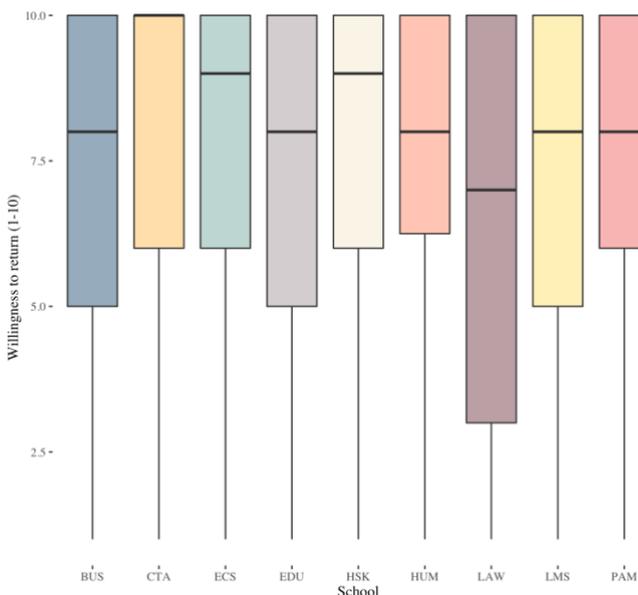


Figure 2. If the University were to start face to face teaching in September, on a scale of 1 to 10, how willing would you be to return to campus?

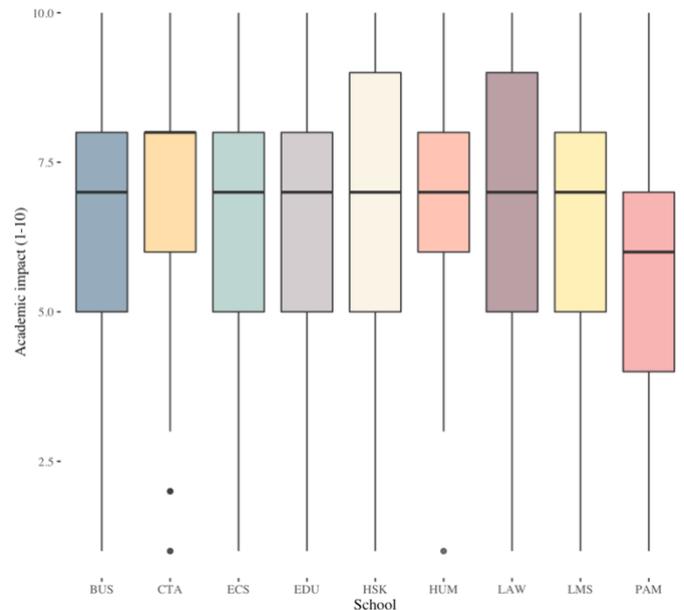


Figure 1. Overall, on a scale of 1 – 10, 1 being not at all impacted, 10 being significantly impacted, how impacted do you feel your academic situation has been by Covid-19?

above, School-wide averages in regard to satisfaction with online learning. Satisfaction with online learning was slightly below average in Humanities, however students were also significantly more likely to report being satisfied with their access to support from academic staff during this time. Law students reported feeling that they had been “significantly impacted” academically significantly higher than the School-wide average, and higher than any other School. Students also reported a significantly lower understanding of the Safety Net Policy compared to the average. PAM students were significantly more likely to report being satisfied with online learning provisions; however, they also had the second lowest satisfaction score in regard to changes to exams and assignments being communicated clearly to them.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Wellbeing

Students wellbeing during COVID-19 varied widely between demographics and between Schools. International students and Disabled students were significantly more likely to report being negatively financially impacted by COVID-19, including struggling to afford things such as accommodation, food and bills and tuition. BAME, Disabled and Mature students reported a negative impact on their mental health at significantly higher rates than the student-wide average. Students from all Schools reported a negative impact on their mental health from COVID-19, ranging from the lowest in ECS at 37% to the highest in Humanities at 67%. Furthermore, feedback from students revealed that many are concerned about their physical health and safety if teaching was to occur on campus for the next academic year. BAME students in particular were significantly more likely to report this as a concern, with more than 2 in 5 BAME students reporting this. However, these concerns

were not limited to BAME students. A range of students reported wanting additional measures to be in place on campus next year for their physical safety such as mandatory mask wearing, extra hygiene facilities, and allowances to be made for students who commute to avoid having to travel during rush hour. Students, particularly carers, were concerned about putting high-risk and vulnerable friends and family at risk by returning to campus.

### Looking forward to the next academic year, what are you most concerned about?

Top three concerns by demographics.



## KEY FINDINGS

**Negative financial impact from COVID-19** was felt most strongly by our International and Disabled students. International students report struggling to pay for food, bills, and accommodation costs, as well as the cost of tuition. Disabled students experienced a “Very negative” financial impact from COVID-19, their employment has been negatively impacted, and they report struggling to afford accommodation costs.



Students are concerned about **health and safety on campus** for the next academic year. BAME students in particular are significantly more concerned; more than 2 in 5 BAME students are concerned about their physical health on campus next year.



Students have both experienced a **negative mental health** impact from COVID-19 and are concerned about their mental health for the next academic year. In particular, BAME, Disabled and Mature students note this as a top concern.



Students, particularly carers, are concerned about putting **high-risk and vulnerable friends and family** at risk by coming onto campus. Students that are high-risk themselves are concerned about their physical safety on campus.



There were **significant differences between Schools** and modules in the academic student experience, from academic impact and student satisfaction, to access to equipment and workspaces.



Students part of certain demographics have been impacted by COVID-19 to different extents and in different ways, particularly those with **Protected Characteristics**. Students most impacted include BAME, Mature, Disabled and International students and carers.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Reinstate the COVID-19 Relief Fund to provide support for all students, to continue indefinitely;
- Ensure that this is advertised to students consistently;
- Ensure that International and Disabled students know that they are eligible for this support;
- Implement more International student-specific funding and advertise this to students widely.

- Make mask wearing in campus buildings mandatory, regardless of time limits to ensure clear and consistent rules for students;
- When planning for the next academic year, take into account student demographics that are high-risk, or more concerned than others, such as BAME, Disabled, Mature students and Carers and commuting students, and the impact this may have on their ability to have equal access to their education.

- Ensure that the decreased waiting list for the Wellbeing Service are clearly advertised to students;
- Create a COVID-19 mental health toolkit for all student-facing staff, to help them know how to support and signpost students facing additional worries regarding mental and physical health, financial issues, placements and caring responsibilities;
- Carry out targeted communications with students from demographics that have reported a more negative impact on their mental health, sending check-in emails and signposting support clearly.

- Ensure students are aware of what their rights are if they do not want to return to campus due to health concerns;
- Ensure that there are adequate online learning provisions available for those who are higher risk or who have members of their household or family who are higher risk.

- Ensure that there are detailed action-plans created regarding what would happen if another lockdown occurs, including the content and delivery of modules, and students' access to academic and pastoral support. Communicate this clearly to all students;
- If teaching has to return to exclusively online in the future, ensure that there are funds available for students who need access to specialised equipment as part of their course.

Carry out an Equality Impact Assessment into the impacts of COVID-19 on the high-risk groups identified in this report, to ensure that all students have equal access to and opportunities within their education.

## INTERNATIONAL & HOME STUDENTS

55.50% of responses were from Home/UK students; the remainder were from International and EU students.

There were some significant differences between the responses of International and Home students. International students, for example, were consistently more positive across all online learning related questions, reporting on average 19% higher satisfaction than their Home student counterparts.

However, this trend did not continue into the questions regarding financial impact. International students were significantly more likely ( $p = <0.01$ ) to report COVID-19 having a negative financial impact on them:

- 43% reported that COVID-19 had a negative impact on their ability to pay for food and bills, 18% higher than Home students
- Nearly half (47.50%) reported that they were having difficulties paying for accommodation, which is more than double that of Home students
- 43% reported having issues affording tuition fees, which is greater than 3x higher than Home students reported

Whilst Home students were less likely to report financial worries, they reported a bigger impact of COVID-19 on their mental and physical health by 16% and 14% respectively.

International students also faced other concerns, reporting feeling 13% more concerned about their ability to commute if campus reopens. They were also 2x more likely to report having caring responsibilities than Home students. International students' biggest concerns were regarding grades and marks, getting a job, and paying rent. Getting a job and paying rent did not feature in the top concerns for Home students, whose biggest concerns were grades and marks, all teaching being online for the next academic year, and being told they couldn't return to campus.

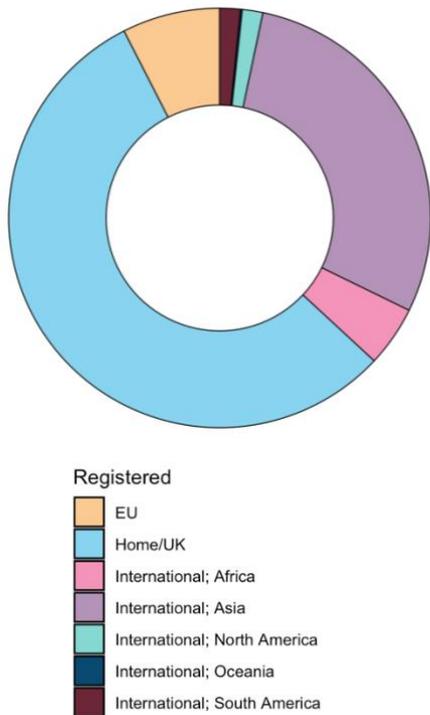


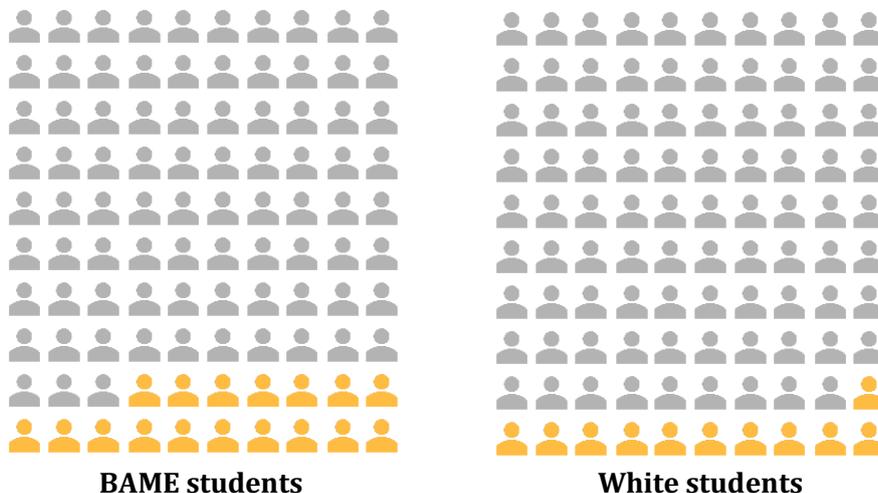
Figure 3. What is your ethnicity?

### Recommendation no. 1: Financial impact.

Reinstate the COVID-19 Relief Fund to provide support for all students, to continue indefinitely; to ensure that this is advertised to students consistently; ensure that International and Disabled students know that they are eligible for this support; to ensure the International student specific funding is expanded.

## B A M E & W H I T E S T U D E N T S

### Who is being significantly impacted academically?



BAME students reported greater satisfaction regarding questions about online learning by an average of approximately 9%, however they also reported a higher significant negative academic impact from COVID-19 by 4.50%. One BAME student reports:

*"I am extremely worried if this all will leave a reasonable impact on my results for first semester. [...] I have tried my best but still failed to create the specific studying mode and environment at home".*

White students were 10% less satisfied with efforts to replace/recreate campus-based learning in the switch to online teaching. There were little to no differences between BAME and White students' access to software and materials and having a suitable place to work.

BAME students reported significantly higher rates of negative financial impact by 10% ( $p = <0.01$ ) and on their ability to pay for food and bills by 11.50% ( $p = <0.01$ ).

BAME and White students have been impacted differently and have differing concerns about the potential for returning to campus. BAME students are significantly more likely ( $p = <0.01$ ) to have concerns regarding their physical health if on campus next year, and would prefer online only learning by 15.50%. They also report greater concern about commuting to campus by almost double. One BAME student, when asked what changes they would like to see for learning in September, said:

*"Less contact hours so that commuters do not have to come in as much. Travelling in this climate is not safe especially for those who have underlying health issues".*

Concerns over physical safety for BAME students in particular is understandable given the recent discovery of and media attention to the higher risk of COVID-19 to BAME individuals.

**42.50%**

of BAME students are concerned about their physical health

## MATURE AND NON-MATURE STUDENTS

20.5% of our responses were from Mature students (defined as being aged 26 or above).

Mature students reported significantly higher ( $p = <0.01$ ) rates of caring responsibilities at 37.5%, which is more than double that reported from Non-mature students. One Mature student wrote of the difficulties this brings, saying that it is “difficult to maintain effective [...] communication [with University staff and students] whilst at home caring for my own children”. Another reports issues with having to home-school their children whilst completing their degree.

22.5% less Mature students had access to software than non-mature students, and were 22% more concerned about their academic outcomes next year if all teaching is online. Despite this, 41% of Mature students would rather teaching be online next year, perhaps partly due to high caring responsibilities.

Mental health was one of the top three biggest concerns for Mature students, a factor which did not feature in the top concerns for Non-mature students. Non-mature students were most concerned about their grades and marks, all teaching being online next year, and being told they couldn't return to campus.

Non-mature students were consistently less satisfied with online learning, communication from the University, and the quality and range of their online courses.

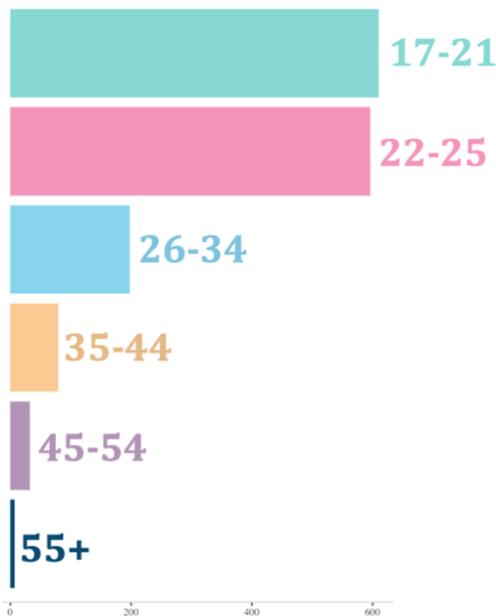


Figure 4. How old are you?

### Recommendation no. 2: Mental health.

Ensure that the decreased waiting list for the Wellbeing Service are clearly advertised to students. Create a COVID-19 mental health toolkit for all student-facing staff, to help them know how to support and signpost students facing additional worries regarding mental and physical health, financial issues, placements and caring responsibilities. Carry out targeted communications with students from demographics that have reported a more negative impact on their mental health, sending check-in emails and signposting support clearly.

## COMMUTER AND NON-COMMUTER STUDENTS

79% of our responses were from commuter students (defined as living off campus). Commuter students reported consistently higher satisfaction than non-commuter students for every online learning question. Higher rates of satisfaction may partly be due to the time and financial constraints of having to commute to campus being lifted.

Commuting students were significantly more likely ( $p = <0.01$ ) to report that they would be concerned about their ability to travel to campus if teaching was in person next year, and were significantly more likely to say that they would prefer online learning to continue ( $p = <0.05$ ) at 30.50% compared to 21% of non-commuters.

Commuters and non-commuters have the same top concerns: grade and marks, all teaching being online, and being unable to return to campus

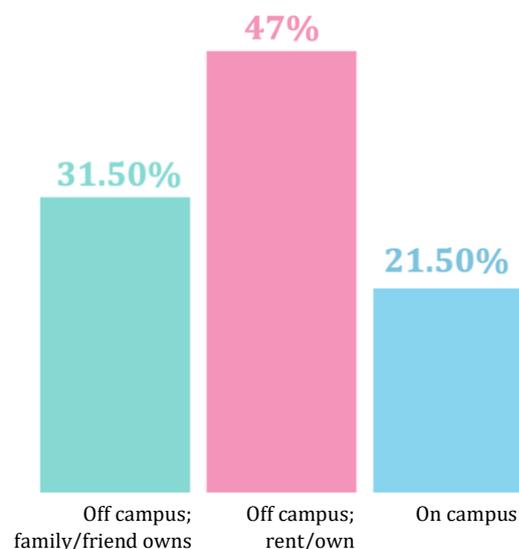


Figure 5. In the UK, I live...

## DISABLED AND NON-DISABLED STUDENTS

Disabled students were significantly ( $p = <0.05$ ) less likely to “Strongly agree” that they were able to access help and support from their lecturers and tutors than non-Disabled students, with only 20% reporting this. Disabled students were also significantly ( $p = <0.01$ ) less likely to have understood what was expected of them in regard to assignments, coursework and exams, 11% lower than non-Disabled students.

Overall, Disabled students reported more significant financial impacts from COVID-19. 23% of Disabled students reported that they had experienced a “Very negative” financial impact due to COVID-19, significantly ( $p = <0.05$ ) higher than non-Disabled students. The same trend was observed when asking about employment, with 36% of Disabled students reporting a “Very negative” impact, significantly ( $p = <0.01$ ) higher than their non-Disabled peers. Disabled students were significantly ( $p = <0.01$ ) more likely to report that COVID-19 had a “Very negative” impact on their ability to pay for accommodation at 22%.

Nearly 1 in 4 (23%) of Disabled students reported that COVID-19 had a “Very negative” impact on their mental health, significantly ( $p = <0.05$ ) higher than Non-disabled students. Mental health also featured in the top three concerns for the next academic year for Disabled students, but not for non-Disabled students.

Disabled students also experienced issues in regard to community and communication. Less than half (42%) felt as confident as they did prior to the pandemic when communicating with their course peers, significantly ( $p = <0.05$ ) lower than non-Disabled students. They were also significantly ( $p = <0.05$ ) more likely to “Strongly disagree” that they had been able to participate remotely in social activities with their peers. It is therefore not surprising that more than double Disabled students reported that they “Strongly disagree” that they still feel part of a University community, significantly higher ( $p = <0.05$ ) than non-Disabled students.

## CARERS AND NON-CARER STUDENTS

21.5% of students reported having caring responsibilities when surveyed. The top three ethnicity respondents from carers were Asian or Asian British (Indian), White (UK), and Black or Black British (African). Responses from the highest ethnicity, Asian or Asian British (Indian), were nearly three times greater than that of the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest (White UK) at 35% compared to 12%. Furthermore, 44% of carers were registered as an International Student (Asia). The large proportion of carers identifying as Asian or Asian British (Indian) and being registered as an International student (Asia) may be due to the fact that intergenerational co-residences are common in Asian households<sup>1</sup>. As lockdown commenced and students returned to their family homes, they may have taken on additional caring responsibilities for elderly relatives within their households.

Students who have caring responsibilities were also significantly more likely to be disabled ( $p < 0.01$ ). It is important to take into account how these intersecting demographics may cause additional barriers to academic success and wellbeing within these groups.

Carers are more concerned about their ability to commute to campus next year and would prefer online teaching to continue compared to students without caring responsibilities. This may partly be due to concerns about those they are caring for being vulnerable or shielding.

When planning for the upcoming year, provisions need to be made for students who are shielding, or who are part of households that are shielding, to ensure that they can still access their education in a way that prioritises their and their family's safety and wellbeing.

### Shielding, vulnerability and student concerns:

*"My dad is vulnerable, I don't want to be the reason to make him sick. I am planning to socially distance myself until [there is a] vaccine".*

*"I live with my mother who is high risk to Covid-19. I do not at all feel like my money spent on the course is being valued by the University with this online program however it scares me to be forced to come back into the University if the pandemic is still an ongoing threat. I do not wish to put my mother at risk."*

### Recommendation no. 3: Provisions for high-risk students and carers.

Ensure that there is adequate online material available for those who are high-risk or who have members of their household or family who are high-risk; carrying out an Equality Impact Assessment to ensure these groups of students have equal access to and opportunities within their education. Ensure that students are aware of their rights if they do not want to return to campus due to health concerns.

## COMMUNICATION AND COMMUNITY

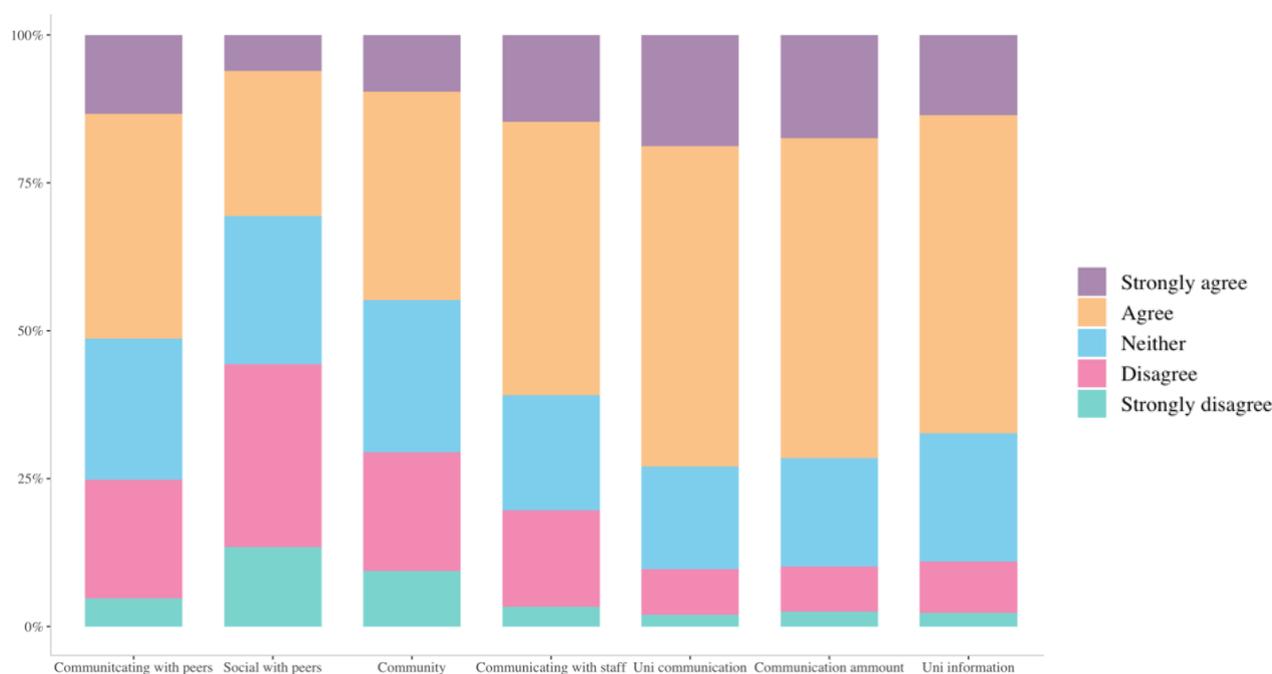


Figure 6. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Students were generally satisfied with communication from the University throughout this time, with 73% agreeing that the communication was clear and understandable, 72% agreeing that the amount of communication they received was right, and 67% agreeing that they were able to find information from the University when they needed it. One student wrote that “the University adapted well and kept a constant line of communication”. However, 20% of students reported feeling less confident communicating with academic staff than they did prior to the pandemic. One student reports feeling “less confident in communicating with University staff”, as they “feel [staff] are already dealing with so much” and fear “being ‘annoying’ or asking unnecessary questions”.

Students were largely less satisfied with and confident in the social and community aspects of University when surveyed. 25% of students feel less confident communicating with their course peers, and 30% do not feel part of the University community. These both may at least partly be explained by the fact that 44% of students did not agree that they had been able to participate remotely in social activities with their course peers. One student reports that they “could not interact a lot with other students”, and states that this “affected [their] mental health”. Another reports that “Interaction with peers has been very difficult”, and someone else wrote that they “feel disconnected from [their] class cohort and peers”. The lack of daily interaction and regular social activities which facilitate a feeling of community and social bonding may leave students feeling less socially confident and may increase loneliness.

## SAFETY AND HEALTH ON CAMPUS

Results from this survey show that many students are concerned about health and safety upon returning to campus. Even though the survey did not specifically ask students to leave comments about this, many mentioned this in responses to other questions. Overall, 12% mentioned at least one keyword pertaining to campus health and safety (such as masks, testing, social distancing, hygiene and cleaning, etc) in their response to the survey question which actually asked about potential online learning provisions for the next academic year.

Whilst so far UK Universities are largely not requiring face masks to be worn on campus for the next academic year, students from our survey do report that they would like this measure to be introduced.

With high levels of mature, BAME and carer students – all demographics which may be at higher risk or be more concerned about this risk – and with evidence that our students specifically are concerned about this, we recommend that facemasks should be made mandatory, and for the extra difficulties that these students may face in accessing their education to be taken into account.

### *What provisions do students want?*

*“Continue learning on campus with optional attendance, and for **the lectures to be recorded** do those who are in higher health risk.”*

*“Less contact hours so that **commuters** do not have to come in as much. Travelling in this climate is not safe especially for those who have underlying health issues.”*

*“We should follow all guide lines and we should maintain **social distancing 2m**. Avoid all unnecessary meetings.”*

*“**Testing** students especially international students.”*

*“Mandatory **face masks** for all students and teaching staff on university premises.”*

*“**Masks** be made compulsory should the virus continue to exist.”*

*“**Face mask** and sanitizers to be made compulsory for everyone.”*

*“Less time on campus or compulsory **masks & gloves** to be worn.”*

*“Social distancing measures i.e. smaller classes, canteen staff wearing appropriate **PPE**, extra cleaning measures of toilet facilities.”*

### Recommendation no. 4: Health and safety.

Whilst masks have been made mandatory in some contexts on campus, students would benefit from **clear and consistent** rules regarding mask-wearing. We therefore recommend that the time limit of 15 minutes is removed. When planning for and carrying out teaching for the next academic year, take into account student demographics that are high-risk, or more concerned than others, such as BAME, Mature students and carers and commuting students, and the impact this may have on their ability to have equal access to their education.