

Widening participation in the Covid: more urgent but more difficult

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Access before pandemic

- Applicants from most advantaged quintile 3/4 times more likely to participate in HE than those from most deprived quintile...
- ... but good progress: access gap (in selective universities) halved by 2025 / closed by 2040 (England): closed across all HE by 2030 (Scotland)
- Unresolved questions: strategies (no fees, targeted support...), target groups (individuals - communities, class / age / gender...)

Chronology of Covid

- First wave: schools, FECs & HEIs (almost completely) closed
- School exams replaced by teacher grades
- HEIs partially re-open at start of 2020-21 (but major problems)
- Second wave: HEIs closed again (now 'opening' in England - not fully open until summer term?)
- School exams abandoned again

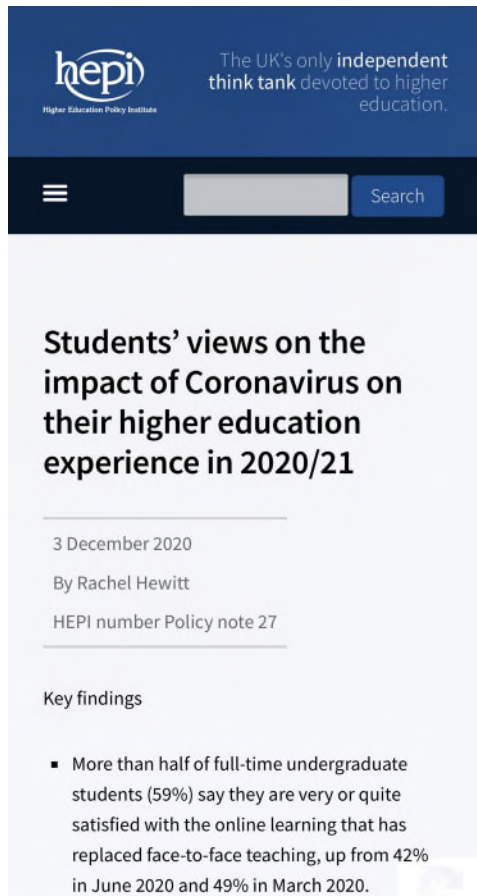
Government responses

- Main focus on relieving student hardship (lack of PT income, access to computers...)
- No direct support for HEIs (England) - 'independent institutions' mantra
- Fee rebates resisted (England) - but (some) concessions on hall fees
- Limited direct institutional support (Scotland)
- More flexibility for international students
- BUT no retreat on Brexit damage

Impact reports

- HEPI: *Students' views of the impact of Coronavirus on their higher education experience in 2020/21* (December 2020)
- Sutton Trust: (i) *Covid-19 and the University Experience*, (ii) *The University of Life* (both February 2021)
- OfS: *Gravity Assist: Propelling higher education towards a brighter future* (February 2021)

HEPI & OfS



The image shows a screenshot of the HEPI website. At the top left is the HEPI logo (Higher Education Policy Institute) and the tagline 'The UK's only independent think tank devoted to higher education.' Below this is a dark navigation bar with a search box and a 'Search' button. The main content area features the article title 'Students' views on the impact of Coronavirus on their higher education experience in 2020/21', the date '3 December 2020', the author 'By Rachel Hewitt', and the reference 'HEPI number Policy note 27'. Under the heading 'Key findings', a bullet point states: 'More than half of full-time undergraduate students (59%) say they are very or quite satisfied with the online learning that has replaced face-to-face teaching, up from 42% in June 2020 and 49% in March 2020.'

hepi
Higher Education Policy Institute

The UK's only independent think tank devoted to higher education.

Search

Students' views on the impact of Coronavirus on their higher education experience in 2020/21

3 December 2020

By Rachel Hewitt

HEPI number Policy note 27

Key findings

- More than half of full-time undergraduate students (59%) say they are very or quite satisfied with the online learning that has replaced face-to-face teaching, up from 42% in June 2020 and 49% in March 2020.



The image shows the cover of a report titled 'Gravity assist'. The title is in large, bold, yellow font. Below it, the subtitle 'Propelling higher education towards a brighter future' is in white. The central graphic is a circular emblem with a teal background and a white circuit-like pattern. At the bottom, the text 'Report of the digital teaching and learning review' is in white, followed by 'Sir Michael Barber' and 'February 2021'.

Gravity assist


Propelling higher education towards a brighter future

Report of the digital teaching and learning review

Sir Michael Barber
February 2021

Sutton Trust

RESEARCH BRIEF | FEBRUARY 2021

 Covid-19 and the University Experience

THE SUTTON TRUST

Rebecca Montacute and Erica Holt-White

KEY FINDINGS

- Covid-19 has had a profound impact on education since March 2020, not least on universities. Institutions have had to make substantial changes to academic provision in order to cope with the pandemic, including closing facilities, social distancing measures, and blended teaching during autumn 2020, with most courses moving fully online in early 2021. This has had significant impacts on teaching and learning, but also on the wider university experience, an important part of developing the skills needed by graduates.

Extra-curricular participation and life skills

- Participation in extra-curricular activities this academic year is substantially down on normal. 39% of students reported taking part in student societies or sport in the autumn term, and this has fallen further since Christmas to just 30%. Almost half (47%) of students reported taking part in no wider enrichment activities at all this term.
- Comparing participation by continuing students in autumn 2020 to autumn 2019 before the pandemic, participation in student societies or sport was down 18 percentage points, from 54% in 2019. Students were also less likely to have taken part in work experience (down 6 percentage points), or paid work (down 5 percentage points), while numbers of those studying abroad were less than half of the previous year. The number of students not taking part in any activities was up 14 percentage points from 2019.
- The participation gap has widened during the

activities. 29% who were put off by a lack of social interaction during online activities, and a further quarter (24%) cited “zoom-fatigue” as a barrier; not wanting to spend more time online after completing lectures and course content virtually.

- The overwhelming majority of students (87%) felt their development had been negatively impacted by pandemic restrictions. More students (34%) felt their development of non-academic life skills (such as communication, motivation, confidence, resilience or leadership) has been more negatively impacted, compared to academic skills (18%).
- More students reported being unsatisfied with provision for activities beyond the classroom (36%) than were unsatisfied with academic provision (30%).

Support and financial resources

- The biggest current worry for students is being able to gain skills and experience needed for employment, with 76% saying they are fairly or very worried. This was followed by being able to take part in university social life (71%), concerns about their mental health/wellbeing (70%) and classes being online rather than face to face (64%).
- Over half (54%) of students experienced financial issues during the autumn semester, such as being unable to find a job (27%), having reduced hours (16%), or their parents being less able to support them (19%).
- A third of students (33%) said it was currently difficult for them to cover their basic living and course expenses. This figure was higher for working class (38%) students than for middle class (30%) students.


suttontrust.com

THE UNIVERSITY OF LIFE

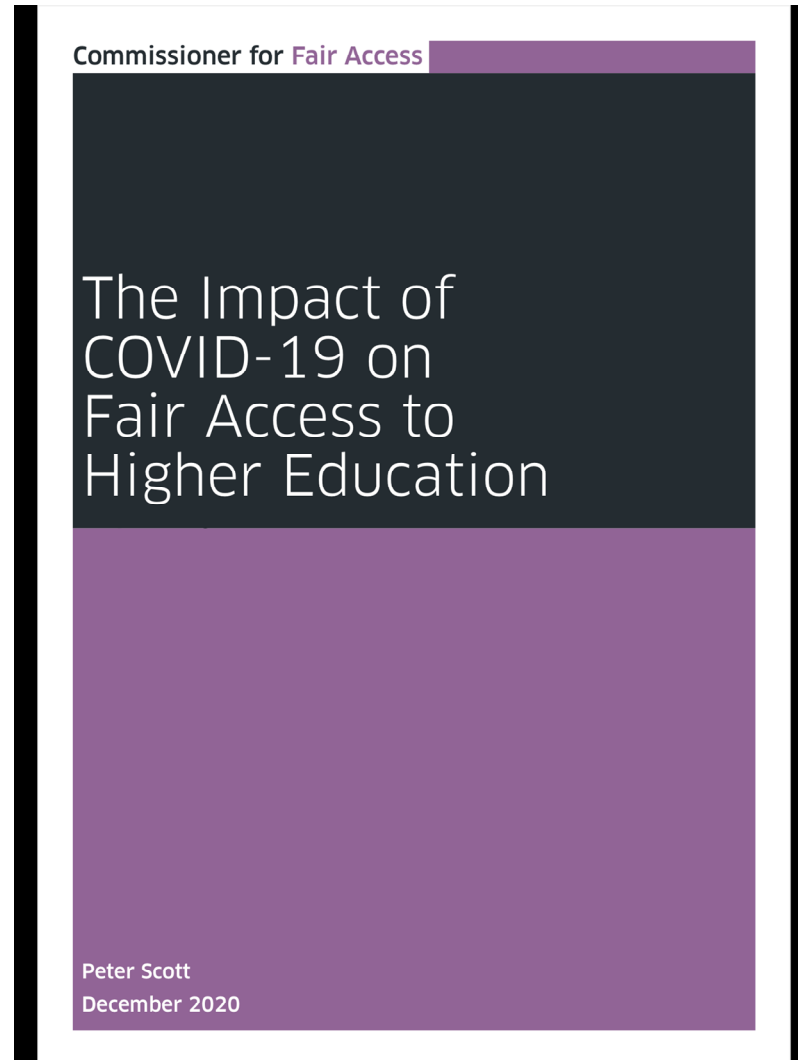
Employability and essential life skills at university

Rebecca Montacute, Erica Holt-White and Alice Gent

February 2021

 THE SUTTON TRUST

Impact on fair access



CWA special report

- *The Impact of COVID-19 on Fair Access to Higher Education* (December 2020)
- Consultation with all HEIs & colleges (& other bodies, e.g. SFC, NUS, UCU) in Scotland
- 17 (19) HEIs / 12 (22) colleges responded (some detailed)
- 10 follow-up Zoom / MS Teams meetings

Main topics

1. Outreach & access
2. Digital divide / poverty
3. Online learning
4. Student experience
5. Mental health
6. Financial hardship
7. School exams, grades & contextual admissions
8. Articulation
9. Targets
10. Staff

Outreach & access

- ‘Already hard-to-reach pupils have become harder to reach’
- ‘Inability to engage face-to-face and demystify university life’
- ‘Online activities cannot replace campus visits, open days & residential events’
- ‘Online is a problem. Summer schools are needed to counter perceptions that X is...inaccessible for people from lower-income backgrounds’
- BUT: ‘Moving online offers opportunity to scale and increase reach’

Digital poverty

- Three areas of concern: (i) computers: (ii) connectivity; (iii) space
- ‘It’s more than digital exclusion. It’s loneliness, lack of individual support’
- ‘Access to equipment & broadband are the most obvious issues... Arguably they are easiest to solve’
- ‘Using technology for recreation [social media] and technology for [online] learning are very different’

Online learning

- ‘NOT a level playing field’
- ‘Care experienced & estranged students need face-to-face interaction’
- ‘A particular challenge to LGBT+ students who face learning in a hostile environment’
- BUT: ‘Move to online... may provide opportunities to contribute positively to reducing inequalities and enhancing access’
- ‘It has the potential to produce greater parity of experience among students [especially in more rural and remote communities]’

Student experience

- ‘Flight from halls in favour of self-contained alternatives, increased learning difficulties following enforced shift to blended learning, isolation, requests for interruption of studies... eroding sense of belonging to University’
- ‘Essential to provide study space for those who need to get out of the home environment which may not be conducive for study – or even a happy place to be’

Mental health

- ‘While the demand for counselling had been increasing in pre-Covid days, it’s now gone through the roof’
- ‘COVID-19 has had a high or medium impact on their mental health and well-being’
- ‘Loss of focus... missing the social aspects of class... Zoom is mentally draining’
- BUT mental health already its own pandemic before Covid...
- ... and some students feel relieved from stress of campus attendance

Financial hardship

- 50% of students report money worries which have increased their sense of anxiety
- University X: hardship payments - £50K to £1.6m, University Y: 'explosion of demand'
- Hardship funds used to pay for food, utilities – and even funeral expenses
- 'Relatively small sums available [hardship funds] for each student in need totally insufficient to replace lost income'
- BUT 'a benefit of more online delivery has been students have greater flexibility to take part-time jobs – provided jobs are available'

Exams – and contextual admissions

- 2/3 cohorts of pupils will not have taken formal exams – ‘issue for retention in HE environment’
- ‘Usual opening-up of attainment gap during summer holidays has been made worse by longer shut-downs and intermittent attendance’
- ‘Negative perceptions of the year ahead among some secondary school pupils’ [especially among 16-year-olds, i.e. GCSE / N level]
- BUT ‘there is inherent value in establishing stability concerning contextual admissions... need to be established as best practice before metrics are altered’

Articulation (college > university)

- ‘Increased intake into universities by school leavers may lead to fewer students from HN courses’
- ‘If more students are admitted to university and there is no increase in places, access students will suffer’
- HN applicants used to fill gaps in years 2/3
- More applicants qualify for university entry, diverting HN applicants – but universities may struggle to meet their needs

Targets

- University A: share of entrants from SIMD20 areas likely to decline from 11 to 9.5%
- ‘Target more challenging because of reduced outreach’
- ‘Difficult to convert applicants from deprived communities with online outreach... pool of qualified SIMD20 applicants will remain limited, or decline if one of the Covid impacts is to widen attainment gap’
- Can metrics discover the ‘newly impoverished’?
- BUT ‘while developing other metrics [FSM] important in future, current areas of deprivation worst affected by pandemic and must remain immediate priority’

Staff

- Staff commitment: driving to top of hill to get mobile reception to teach students, meeting off-campus for tutorials...
- Insufficient time / resource for switch to online learning
- Increased 'emotional labour' (especially female staff)
- Staff left to sort out 'difficulties' on individual basis, limited recognition of systemic problems / blamed if quality issues raised by students
- Maximising resources for teaching, research leave cancelled
- Covid emergency as cover for restructuring?

Unresolved issues

1. Enforced shift to blended learning: turbo-charging reform or ‘back to normal’?
2. Re-evaluating the campus experience – like the high street & the office?
3. State responsibility for [emergency] funding – future of fees (England), planned student numbers (Scotland)?
4. Post-Covid internationalisation in a climate emergency?