

COVID-19 AND LEARNING FOR SUSTAINABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

2020-21



STUDENTS
ORGANISING FOR
SUSTAINABILITY
UNITED KINGDOM

About this research

The data presented in this report was captured as part of the annual Sustainability Skills Survey. Questions focused on students' experiences with engaging with opportunities (formal and informal) related to sustainable development during the COVID-19 pandemic were included in the survey.

The 2020-21 online survey was completed in October and November 2020 by students across the UK studying in higher education. Over 8300 respondents completed the survey, which was promoted on a national basis through the TOTUM student cardholders database and also through local promotions by universities and students' unions.

The survey was incentivised with a £1000 prize draw and was promoted as a 'skills survey', making no mention of sustainability, to avoid attracting only respondents with a prior interest in the subject. Additionally, the terms 'sustainability' and 'sustainable development' were not used until the final section of the survey to avoid influencing respondent understanding.

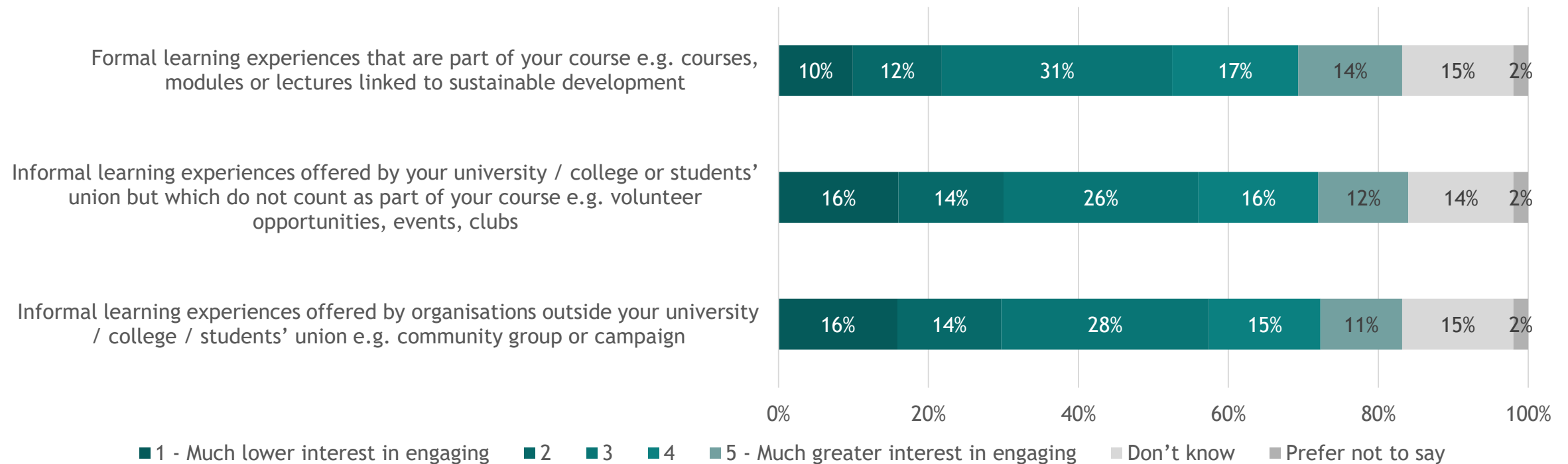
The survey results have been weighted according to gender to reflect available statistics for students in Higher Education available through the Higher Education Statistics Agency. A full breakdown of respondent characteristics can be found in section 2.

Throughout the report, where analysis has revealed statistically significant differences between groups of respondents, these have been outlined.

Significant differences are reported at 99% confidence level unless specified otherwise.

What impact has COVID-19 had on students' interest in engaging with learning experiences linked to sustainable development?

- 22% of respondents say they have a lower interest in engaging with *formal* learning experiences as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- This rises to 30% when respondents consider *informal* experiences either within or outside the university or students' union.
- However 31% say the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a greater interest in *formal* learning experiences linked to sustainability.
- 28% say their interest in *informal* opportunities at university has increased, and 26% say their interest in engaging with these opportunities in their local communities has increased.



What are the reasons for lower interest in engaging with learning experiences linked to sustainable development?

Respondents who identified a *lower* interest in engaging with learning opportunities on sustainability were asked to identify why. The first 350 responses were analysed to reveal themes including a struggle to engage with online learning, mental and physical health difficulties linked to the pandemic and a perception of a lack of opportunities with these experiences harder to participate in on a virtual basis.

Reason for lower interest in learning experiences	Count
Difficult to work at home / online / alone	111
Mental health impacts of covid / and in relation to virus	80
Less opportunities now / hard to do things virtually	76
Generally less engaged / motivated in learning	70
Change in priorities / focused on other areas of life due to pandemic	61
Lack of support / coverage from institution / only focusing on 'essentials'	23
Living at home/change in living circumstances so lower interaction with extra-curricular	3

“Don’t want to do any in person things that may lead to infection. Feel like I don’t have the time to do lots of optional stuff. Also emotionally exhausted from mental health affected by COVID.”

“With formal education it is harder to get involved with the material when it is all presented online. Regarding non-formal learning experiences it is difficult to be engaged with when the primary issue concerning me currently is the COVID-19 epidemic over the importance of sustainable development.”

Motivation in general is lower during this time, the lack of in-person lectures has made me feel less engaged with the university

“I have struggled with motivation to learn about the core content of my course, thus any extra learning offered by the uni is harder to motivate myself to do.”

“Due to not being able to meet people in person for example student union has impacted my interest as I prefer to meet in person and having to do things virtually is hard for me. So tasks involved with student union would be harder as it would need to be done virtually.”

“People and myself have all found that it has become much harder to concern ourselves with sustainable development when a virus that could have been stopped at ground zero has torn apart the world we realistically live in.”

“Online courses are less engaging for your lessons let alone a non essential lesson. It’s not as easy to speak up and feel included in a group project when your sat at home behind a screen.”

What are the reasons for greater interest in engaging with learning experiences linked to sustainable development?

Respondents who identified a *greater* interest in engaging with learning opportunities on sustainability were asked to identify why. The first 350 responses were analysed to reveal themes including a struggle to engage with online learning, mental and physical health difficulties linked to the pandemic and a perception of a lack of opportunities with these experiences harder to participate in on a virtual basis.

Reason for greater interest in learning experiences	Count
Pandemic highlighted impact of 'our' actions / scale of issue and need to change	116
More spare time due to pandemic / chance to reflect / learn more than previously	69
Pandemic restrictions contributing (both positively and negatively) to sustainability	53
Desire for things to change / be better post pandemic	42
Pandemic increased motivation to do things to 'help' / learn more	40
Been able to find out more about opportunities through online events / do more through things being online	23
University offered opportunities / formal learning covered more	9

“COVID-19 raised awareness to how bad everything can go in just a matter of days and from that people have started to think more about the future and future generations to come (i.e. sustainable development).”

Engaging, working and learning online has opened my eyes in terms of opportunities available without having to attend any place. I will never see the world as I saw it pre pandemic times. I found it's much easier to connect internationally to any professionals and also managed to volunteer this year much more than ever before.

“I think the shock of something like this happening made you stop, think and appreciate how lucky we are and how important it is to preserve the world we live in.”

“With the increased use of single use plastic products (masks, gloves etc.) it got me wondering how we can increase availability of necessary protective equipment (at fair prices) without contributing so much to plastic pollution.”

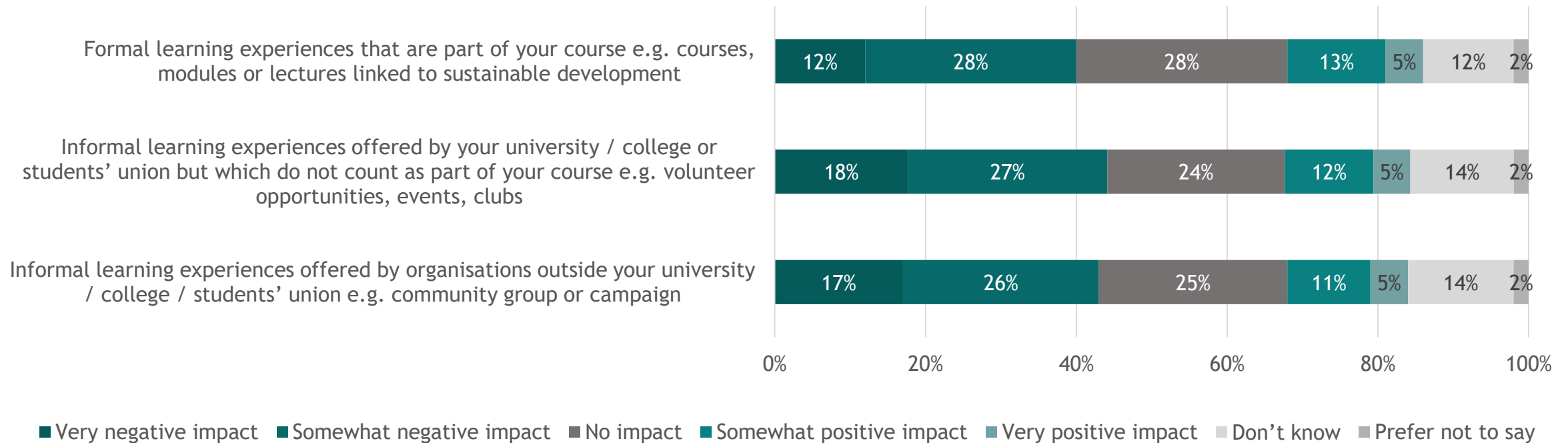
“The impact of COVID-19 has definitely enhanced the injustices seen throughout the world including poverty, classism, elitism, racism and climate change.”

“We have already seen the environmental impact of a few months of lockdown, habitats are renewed with life, water is clearer and nature is growing back. With more care put into society small things even like this can be sustained.”

“It gave me time to think about what I want for a career and I want to be in a role where I can positively impact society as a whole; sustainable development is one way of fulfilling that.”

What impact has COVID-19 had on students' ability to engage in learning experiences linked to sustainable development?

- 40% of respondents the COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on their ability to engage with *formal* learning experiences linked to sustainability.
- This rises to 45% when respondents consider *informal* experiences either within their university or students' union and 43% when considering learning experiences in the local community.
- 18% say the COVID-19 pandemic has had a positive impact on their ability to engage in *formal* learning experiences linked to sustainability.
- 17% and 16% say their ability to engage in *informal* opportunities at university and in the local community respectively has increased as a result of the pandemic.



How has COVID-19 negatively impacted respondents' ability to engage with learning experiences linked to sustainable development?

Respondents who noted that the COVID-19 pandemic had negatively impacted their ability to engage with learning opportunities on sustainability were asked to identify why. The first 350 responses were analysed to reveal themes including a perception of decreased opportunities overall, negative experiences with online learning in general, and a lack of exposure to opportunity to discuss and interact with others when participating in online experiences.

Reason for greater interest in learning experiences	Count
Lower availability of learning experiences overall	112
Negative online / preference for in person	106
Online means less discussion / interaction / understanding others' perspectives	89
Mental/physical health	49
Living circumstances prevent	17
Competing priorities e/g/ work, core course material, family	19

"It is not as easy to go into uni and engage with the students union where you can find a group of likeminded people that also want change. It's also harder to learn online so it just isn't as easy to engage."

"Personally, due to lack of social interaction because of Covid, my enthusiasm for learning has dwindled. I was much more proactive pre-covid in seeking meetings, organisations, groups and protest which supported sustainability,"

"You can't go out and learn practical skills, you can't get involved with volunteering or helping to improve communities."

"In my school a lot of non essential clubs have been axed so that they can potentially stop the spread of covid. Which I find ridiculous as sports teams are still able to meet and engage in physical contact, whereas clubs such as drama society and eco society have to either close or limit their members."

"Doing everything remotely means that you have to be more proactive and actively seek out these kinds of resources, which I'm not as likely to do if I'm not being confronted with it every day."

"Again, having to socially distance has made it much more difficult to communicate and engage. Some activities regarding sustainable development have stopped all together to prevent the spread of COVID."

"I am no longer surrounded by people who suggest/show me new resources that I otherwise would not discover by myself."

How has COVID-19 positively impacted respondents' ability to engage with learning experiences linked to sustainable development?

Respondents who noted that the COVID-19 pandemic had positively impacted their ability to engage with learning opportunities on sustainability were asked to identify why. The first 350 responses were analysed to reveal themes including increased availability of time to engage with opportunities linked to sustainability or the issue itself more generally. Respondents also reflected that online learning / opportunities had increased their ability to engage. Also reported was a greater awareness of the need to engage with sustainability.

Reason for greater interest in learning experiences	Count
More time to engage with opportunities / the issues	90
Online led to greater engagement	85
Greater awareness of need to engage	69
More motivated to get involved with things generally	35
Strong belief in their ability to contribute to solutions	16
Formal learning incorporated the issues	15
Given a focus on education and engaging in more things / get most out of experiences	8

Even though covid has taken attention away from climate change, it has also allowed people more time to think/ see the negative affects. A lot more people are online due to covid and so more things are being discussed and people are creating projects with their free time about climate change i.e. a podcast I listen to started in lockdown about climate change.

Being stuck in during covid-19 has given me more time to look at and study different things, I enjoy learning new things so this has a great interest to me

Coronavirus has shown that we can come together globally so I think we should be able to come together globally to promote sustainable development across all countries.

"I have been positively impacted from reading and learning more and have a desire to help our society more."

"It has become a larger part of the curriculum and discussions. also the shift to online i feel has made lecturers re-assess their module content in order to get it ready for online delivery. before they may have continued with the same content each year and this may have prompted reflection on its appropriateness. i feel there has been new amendments to content pointed out by lecturers on account of covid, and more space for questions and answers in online lectures than there ever were in person in lecture halls."

"Although COVID 19 had a bad impact, being at home has helped me figure out ways I can contribute to sustainable development and start thinking about the ways to do so, something I probably wouldn't have time to do if it weren't for the pandemic."

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